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LITERARY NEGATION AND MATERIALISM IN CHAUCER

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LITERARY NEGATION AND MATERIALISM IN CHAUCER

A Dissertation Presented

by

MICHELLE ANN BROOKS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Department of English

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ABSTRACT

LITERARY NEGATION AND MATERIALISM IN CHAUCER

FEBRUARY 2022

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After the rediscovery of Aristotle's works on natural science in the thirteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer's late fourteenth-century world saw a new interest in materialism with an awareness that materiality also implies loss. "Literary Negation and Materialism in Chaucer" explores the ways particular moments of negation—the imagined absence of a person, thing, or condition—operate in Chaucer's work and the ways Chaucer deploys such moments as part of a larger pattern of negation that broke with the poetics that preceded him. My methodology grows out of discussions about form, philosophy, science and technology, economics, translation, and materialism. I integrate this interdisciplinary framework with a cross-genre approach to Chaucer's long narrative poetry, prose manuals, framed tales, dream visions, lyrics, and philosophical dialogues. In chapters examining the power of literary language to generate material repercussions even when it seems to negate them, I argue that Chaucer's techniques of negation serve to withdraw certain material referents in order to explore the potential of imaginative literature to fill in what is missing and locate a pathway for abundance and recuperation. "Literary Negation and Materialism in Chaucer" foregrounds an overlooked

current in Chaucer's work which can serve as a starting point for a "negative turn" to reshape a field confronting issues of canonicity and equity.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

An unusual act of negation lies at the heart of the contract between the lady Dorigen and the squire Aurelius in *The Franklin's Tale*. Dorigen demands that Aurelius perform the seemingly impossible task of emptying the Brittany shoreline of its vast rock formations.

“Looke what day that endelong Britayne
Ye remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,
That they ne lette ship ne boot to goon –
I seye, whan ye han maad the coost to clene
Of rokkes that ther nys no stoon ysene,
Thanne wol I love yow best of any man;
Have heer my trouthe, in al that evere I kan.” (992-998)

Dorigen's entry into this agreement is not simply a response to the temporary absence of her seafaring husband Arveragus; rather, it arises from a deeper dread over what the rugged rocks represent. As Dorigen expresses just prior to this scene, the “grisly feendly rokkes blake” that occupy the coastline confront her with the uncomfortable inseparability of creation from destruction (868). Dorigen reasons that because the rocks “destroyeth” (876) the bodies of men, they reveal an aberrance of God's “fair creacion” (870). However, at the time the tale was composed in the late English Middle Ages, the role of material destruction within the process of creation was endorsed by newly accepted ideas in natural science. Dorigen's lament is mobilized by a confrontation with what it means to exist with an awareness of immanent loss.

Fixating on negating the rocks helps Dorigen to negotiate her concept of reality, to process loss, and to use language to intervene in the material landscape around her. Moments like this example from *The Franklin's Tale* demonstrate how negation can also

be a valuable critical analytic for studying medieval attitudes about nature and how a poet like Geoffrey Chaucer imagined literary language's ability to make and unmake the world. As I will discuss, a fourteenth century model of Aristotelian materialism informs Chaucer's representation of Dorigen's drive to negate. More broadly, this dissertation looks at the writing of Geoffrey Chaucer and considers the ways his poetry and prose confront questions about materiality, epistemology, and ontology. As I argue, Chaucer's techniques of negation serve to withdraw certain material referents in order to explore the potential of imaginative literature to fill in what is missing.

Like Dorigen's rumination over destruction as a part of nature, medieval and modern thinkers have turned to negation to conceptualize oppositional relationships between ideas, from apophatic Pseudo-Dionysian theology to Theodor Adorno's negative dialectic. Discourses of negation have long shaped language, literary movements, and structuralist and poststructuralist critical milieus, including notions about subject formation. More recently, critical race, gender, and new materialist theorists have redeployed past uses of negation to counteract distorted, colonial categories of difference and to rewrite the cultural histories that were erased as a result. A study of negation is thus relevant to Chaucer given his status as one of the first poets to write in Middle English and can serve as an initial step for responding to the ways that Chaucer's body of work has upheld an exclusionary English literary canon.

As Elina Gertsman has observed, the field of Medieval Studies has largely overlooked the subject of negation because of our "predisposition to positive truths."¹

¹ Elina Gertsman, *The Absent Image: Lacunae in Medieval Books*, 1st edition (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2021), 11. See also Elina Gertsman, "Phantoms of Emptiness: The Space of the Imaginary in Late Medieval Art," *Art History* 41, no. 5 (November 2018): 800–837.

Her recent study on the late medieval visual “culture of emptiness” represented in images from scientific, theological, and poetic manuscripts demonstrates one way that negation permeated all areas of thought and aesthetic expression and invites more exploration of this topic.² Beyond the field of Art History, other medievalists have just begun to discuss the symbolic potential of absence, gaps, and physical space in paleography, architecture, and philosophy.³

To contribute to an emerging “negative turn” in medieval literary studies, this dissertation responds to Gertsman’s call to “look at other kinds of voids and their signification in other media, other contexts, and other publics.”⁴ There are, however, areas that remain open for investigation that are beyond the scope of this project. For instance, my close examination of the formal characteristics of Chaucer’s writing does not carry over into a comprehensive linguistic study of Middle English syntax.⁵

² Gertsman, *The Absent Image*, 7.

³ For other medievalists examining negation, see Andrzej Piotrowski, “Architecture and the Iconic Controversy,” in *Medieval Practices of Space*, ed. Barbara A Hanawalt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 101–27, see page 6; Daniel Wakelin, “When Scribes Won’t Write: Gaps in Middle English Books,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 36 (2014): 249–78; Valerie Allen, “Airy Something,” in *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen et al., 340 pp. vols. (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2015), 77–104.

⁴ Gertsman, *The Absent Image*, 11.

⁵ Although I analyze patterns of negative language in Chaucer’s writing, this project does not conduct a linguistic study of Middle English syntactic negation. For this work, see Otto Jespersen, *Negation in English and Other Languages* (København, A. F. Høst, 1917), 5; Tauno F. Mustanoja, *A Middle English Syntax*. (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1960), 339–40; Yoko Iyeiri, “Multiple Negation in Middle English Verse,” in *Negation in the History of English*, ed. Ingrid Tieten-Boon van Ostade, Gunnel Tottie, and Wim van der Wurff, viii, 333 pp. vols., *Topics in English Linguistics*: 26 (Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998), 121–46. For excellent linguistic analyses of negation in Chaucer’s work, see Yoko Iyeiri, “Negation in Different Versions of Chaucer’s *Boece*: Syntactic Variants and Editing the Text,” *English Studies* 91, no. 8 (December 2010): 826–37; Yoko Iyeiri, “Cognitive Aspects of Negation in *The Tale of Melibee*, *The Parson’s Tale*, and *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*,” in *Chaucer’s Language: Cognitive Perspectives*, ed. Yoshiyuki Nakao and Yoko Iyeiri (Osaka: Suita, 2013), 5–25, especially 5–6, 9–10.

Moreover, though I survey possible philosophical contexts for poetic negation, I do not examine the theological dimensions of creation, transubstantiation, or material mutability.

Before I go further, I need to clarify the way I define negation, which I use to identify acts of voiding as well as extended descriptions of imagined loss or absence of a person, thing, or condition. I also use the term to classify Chaucer's extra-poetic choices when they go beyond the conventional Middle English use of negative particles. Though the ways in which Chaucer's writing represents negation tend to intersect and overlap, they can be roughly categorized as linguistic, contractual, and generic. Dorigen's response to the rocks comprehensively demonstrates all of these dimensions of negation. Emphatic linguistic negation reveals her desire for Aurelius to ensure that "*nys no* stone ysene" to "*ne* lette ship *ne* boot to goon" thus establishing the negative conditions of her contract (996, 994, emphasis mine). The fallout from the agreement undoes the generic conventions of the Franklin's attempt to tell a Breton lay by introducing elements of the fabliau. In this way, as these categories show, negation is not as much a fixed state as it is a temporary removal. Moreover, it can be (although not always is) affirming and amplifying. Whether or not the departed object is reinstated is less important than the ways negation initiates a process of change, wherein change is creative and recuperative.

Historical Context

Chaucer's late fourteenth-century world was marked by many forms of negation, locally by the Black Death's wiping out half of England's population, and geopolitically from the loss of territory in France throughout the Hundred Years War and Catholicism's lack of centrality during the Papal Schism. Among these broader contexts, Chaucer himself went through a period of personal loss around the time that he served as

controller of the customs at the port of London.⁶ Sometime around 1377, his twelve-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, became a nun in London at St. Helen's Bishopsgate, which was walking distance from Chaucer's Aldgate residence.⁷ His mother, Agnes, also lived nearby. Though his family was close-at-hand, over the course of three years (1379-81), Chaucer began "losing women in droves."⁸ The most significant of these losses was the marital estrangement from his wife, Philippa de Roet. In 1379, Philippa moved over one-hundred miles away from Chaucer's London residence and relocated to Lincolnshire. Paul Strohm notes that this was a "long-term separation" that lasted until Philippa's death in 1387.⁹ Though the couple were not living together during this time, a third child, Lewis, was conceived, suggesting that Philippa did occasionally see her husband. Born around 1381, Lewis is generally thought to be Chaucer's biological son; however, he was likely not raised by his father. Despite the arrival of a son, 1381 proved to be a difficult year. First, Chaucer's mother, Agnes, died, and later, his daughter Elizabeth was transferred from her abbey in the city of London to a nunnery in an outer borough.¹⁰ These personal ruptures quickly gave way to political ones. As Marion Turner has observed, the losses of Chaucer's family members coincided with "the Rising of 1381,

⁶ Chaucer's controllership lasted from 1374 through 1386.

⁷ Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*, 205, 207. According to Turner, St. Helen's was less than a mile away from Chaucer's Aldgate apartment and could be reached on foot in five minutes.

⁸ Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*, 210, 211.

⁹ Paul Strohm, *Chaucer's Tale: 1386 and the Road to Canterbury* (New York: Viking, 2014), 42. Marion Turner affirms Strohm's claim, though slightly shifts his timeline by suggesting that Philippa "does not seem to have lived regularly with [Chaucer]: [John of] Gaunt paid her allowance to her in Lincolnshire between 1378 and 1383, where she could either have been attending Constance at one of Gaunt's manors or staying with her sister Katherine at her Lincolnshire manor, Kettlethorpe." Marion Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 210.

¹⁰ Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*, 209, 210.

with its traumatic violation of boundaries and destruction of certainties.”¹¹ The departure of Chaucer’s family, however personally difficult, corresponds to what Turner identifies as the author’s “period of intense reading, translating, and writing.”¹² It was during this time that Chaucer began “[o]ne of his core endeavours”: translating Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, “the single text that did more to change and shape Chaucer’s patterns of thought than any other.”¹³ Though not singularly responsible for Chaucer’s poetic and intellectual development, the sudden absences of his wife, children, and mother cannot be entirely abstracted from his literary activity. It also likely contributed to an acute awareness of negation in his writing.

Negation as a Representational Mode in Chaucer’s Writing

Chaucer’s literary works employ linguistic, contractual, and generic negation to interrogate the new culture of late medieval positivist materialism in England. These three classifications regularly intersect and overlap, but each distinctly contours the texts in which they appear. The most ubiquitous type is linguistic negation which identifies any statement with a negative structure, including negative grammatical constructions of verse and prose, that depict the subtraction of an object, condition, or person. In *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*, Chaucer’s description of a phenomenon called the “fortunate ascendant” relies upon listing all of the conditions that are not present:

he be *not* retrograd, *ne* combust, *ne* joyned with *no* shrewe in the same signe; *ne* that he be *not* in his discencioun, *ne* joined with *no* planete in his discencioun, *ne* have upon him *noon* aspect infortunat; and than sey thei that he is well. (2.4.50-56, emphasis mine)

¹¹ Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*, 211. The rebellion spread to London and lasted four days, breaching Chaucer’s immediate geographical and professional domains.

¹² Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*, 197.

¹³ Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*, 197. In addition to the *Boece*, between 1382 and 1386, Chaucer also worked on *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Drawing from patterns of linguistic negation, the second classification, contractual negation, forms interpersonal oaths between characters that trigger interpretive conflict and even cancellation. Dorigen's vow to love Aurelius if he removes the rocks is later cancelled by Aurelius who pledges to "*never* repreve / Of *no* biheste" (1537-38). In this example, a contract constructed out of negative linguistic structures for the voiding of a physical structure is annulled with still more contractual negative terminology. Finally, with the third type, generic negation, Chaucer eliminates one form to bring something new into being. Chaucer's Boethius translation crosses boundaries of genre by stripping metrical verse from its source material to produce an all-prose text. However, because references to that negated verse—words like "vers," "ditees," "moedes or prolacions"—do remain, Chaucer seems to be utilizing generic negation to explore loss as a starting point for change (*Boece* 1.m1.2, 5, 3; 2.p1.46).

Other critics have read Chaucer's work through a lens of negation. The most central of these is Lee Patterson, who discusses economic exchange in *The Merchant's Tale* and *The Shipman's Tale*, arguing that late medieval "English mercantile culture" represented the "very absence of ideology."¹⁴ Drawing on Augustine, Patterson suggests that the merchant class's reliance on a commercial system which "is itself founded on nothingness" reveals the "*indigentia* or lack entailed by man's alienation from the order

¹⁴ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 333.

of natural perfection.”¹⁵ In other words, English merchants lacked a central identity because they appropriated the interests and attributes from the aristocratic and clerical classes. This derivative ideology of commerce compelled the merchant class to endlessly work to recover an identity that never existed. Patterson thus identifies a version of negation that is self-nullifying by showing us how Chaucer’s Merchant and Shipman characters are caught in economic systems that sever them from the order of nature.

Yet while Patterson maps the cultural factors that might have contributed to Chaucer’s interest in negation, few have considered the ways particular moments of negation operate in Chaucer’s poetry or the ways Chaucer deploys such moments as part of a larger pattern of negation that broke with the poetics that preceded him. Yet it is not clear that many other poems besides Chaucer considered negation’s productive potential, and in particular its use in “making” literature, as directly as Chaucer.

Beyond allusions to humankind’s inability to overcome its self-imposed lack, Chaucer’s techniques of negation prove more creative, more expansive in terms of the range of human expression and the potential for change within the natural world. Likewise, my interest in Chaucer’s use of negation, and the ways I approach it, grow out of interdisciplinary discussions about form, translation, medieval philosophy, science and technology, economics, and materialism. In particular, my reading approach builds on

¹⁵ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 355. In *The City of God*, Augustine wrote that an order which bases value in spurious “utility” rather than the quality of nature impacts humankind on two levels. First, due to the “wide difference between a rational consideration...and the constraint of need,” an economic system denies the “position of each thing in the scale of importance, on its own merits” in favor of self-interested desire. Second, this denial of the natural order (and of God) becomes an act of self-negation that brings humankind closer to being “less real.” Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. David Knowles, trans. Henry Scowcroft Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 448, 572. For more on the Augustinian theologians who argued that an object’s economic value originated in human need, which was disconnected from that object’s intrinsic value, see Patterson 353-354.

strategies of close-reading taken up by “New Formalist” studies. This methodology urges a return to form by incorporating historicist practices into the interpretive strategies of earlier formalists to think about literary form, style, and genre as historical material.¹⁶ As Thomas Pendergast and Jessica Rosenfield point out, medievalists have long insisted “on a necessary, encompassing relationship among form, history, and interpretation.”¹⁷ However, the topic of negation remains unexplained, prompting a renewed “mode of formal inquiry” of medieval texts and manuscripts.¹⁸ This dissertation takes up such a task and directs its inquiry at the intersection of matter and negation in Chaucer’s writing.

Theories of Negation and Materialism (Medieval and Modern)

Chaucer did not invent, wholesale, a new technique of negation, which had deep theological and philosophical roots. Classical and medieval thinkers sought to conceptualize the fluctuations of matter in the world around them as a way to determine why things happened. Discussions about ways “things” (both present and imagined) contributed to constructions of nature surfaced repeatedly in natural philosophy, which consisted of “those disciplines that dealt with change and motion in corruptible things: the material world of humans, animals, plants, and minerals as well as events in the

¹⁶ Ingrid Nelson, *Lyric Tactics: Poetry, Genre, and Practice in Later Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 4, 24-25. Marjorie Levinson, “What Is New Formalism?,” *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (2007): 558–69. Heather Dubrow, *A Happier Eden: The Politics of Marriage in the Stuart Epithalamium* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 268-270.

¹⁷ Thomas A. Pendergast and Jessica Rosenfeld, eds., *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 6.

¹⁸ Arthur Bahr et al., (ed. and introd.) “Medieval English Manuscripts: Form, Aesthetics, and the Literary Text [Special Issue],” *Chaucer Review* 47, no. 4 (2013): 343–476, 349.

sublunary heavens.”¹⁹ Materiality, however, could not be adequately explored without an established concept of negation. Questions like “why is there something instead of nothing?” and “does a void (or vacuum) dimension exist?” informed how philosophers wrote about the material presence of bodies.²⁰

With the rediscovery of Aristotle’s works on natural science in the thirteenth century, the later Middle Ages saw a new interest in materialism. Yet the philosopher acknowledged that materiality also implies loss. Aristotle identified how the destruction of any body—human or non-human—generates a new substance or state of being and vice versa: “the passing-away of one thing is the coming-to-be of another thing, and the coming-to-be of one thing the passing away of another thing.”²¹ In this statement from *On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away*, Aristotle determines that to understand how things change, one must account for a negation, or “passing-away,” of matter.

¹⁹ Kellie Robertson, *Nature Speaks: Medieval Literature and Aristotelian Philosophy*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc, 2017), 11. For more work on medieval materialism in literature, see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: On Difficult Middles* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Sarah Kay, *The Place of Thought: The Complexity of One in Late Medieval French Didactic Poetry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Inventing with Animals in the Middle Ages,” in *Engaging With Nature: Essays on the Natural World in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Lisa J. Kiser (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 39–62; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2015); Sarah Kay, *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

²⁰ Pierre Maurice Marie Duhem, “Void and Movement in the Void,” in *Medieval Cosmology: Theories of Infinity, Place, Time, Void, and the Plurality of Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 369–413. Medieval debates about the possibility of a void or vacuum go back to fifth-century BCE theologians and philosophers. Early definitions by the Greek atomists and Plato characterize the void as “the existence of something that was not a body, but that was homogeneous and indefinite, in which three dimensions could be traced, and in which bodies were placed and moved” (370).

²¹ Aristotle, “On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away,” in *On Sophistical Refutations [and] On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away*, ed. E. S. Forster and David J. Furley, The Loeb classical library, no. 400 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 191 (I, 3).

Aristotle identified two main types of material change. The first, alteration, or accidental change, “occurs when the substratum, which is perceptible, persists, but there is change in its properties, which are either directly or intermediately contrary to one another.”²² In other words, alteration describes any modification to an object in quality, size, quantity, or place, such as when a hare sheds its gray fur and becomes white for the winter or when a stack of coins are knocked over and scattered into new positions.

Aristotle also observes that a second type, substantial change, has taken place

when the thing as a whole changes, nothing perceptible persisting as identical substratum (for example, when the seed as a whole is converted into blood, or water into air, or air as a whole into water).²³

Substantial change involves a process of destruction and creation, such as when a planted acorn becomes an oak tree. In this classification, the initial thing is no longer recognizable after the change as it has become wholly new in substance and appearance. Though substantial change most directly incorporates a sense of negation, both definitions emphasize what Kellie Robertson has called Aristotle’s interest in “becoming over being” that accepts change as fundamental to nature.²⁴

Countering the embodied inquiry of natural philosophy, negative theology was another popular way in the late Middle Ages to think about matter. Rather than contemplating the change and motion of objects in the material world, however, the tradition of negative theology endeavored to deny any earthly concern that obscured divine truths. During Chaucer’s time, the sixth-century work of Pseudo-Dionysius the

²² Aristotle, “On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away,” 201 (I, 4).

²³ Aristotle, “On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away,” 201 (I, 4).

²⁴ Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, 59.

Areopagite was translated into Latin and Middle English. Pseudo-Dionysius's writing taught the practice of *apophasis*, a language of denial. Apophasis negates the descriptors and names for God by injecting doubt with a series of open-ended, corrective statements which "unsay" or nullify a subject's status as an entity so the contemplative may "unhiddenly know" that "which itself is hidden from all those possessed of knowing amid beings."²⁵ This apophatic process of rejection aids the meditator in moving beyond their perceptions of matter and even beyond language to affirm the exceptional presence of God.

Though likely widely read, apophatic texts about the pursuit of humankind's transcendence from matter did not discourage fourteenth century natural philosophers from continuing to think about the material world. Some, like Nicole Oresme, regarded negation not as an intellectual-spiritual tool for denial, but as the initial stage for generating something new. In his commentary of Aristotle's *On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away*, Oresme calls matter's power for change its "*potentia*" (potency), or what Carolyn Walker Bynum describes as the "basic dynamism lurking in matter."²⁶ It is this dynamism, this potential for change, which troubled distinctions between categories of matter, that paved the way for incorporating "the living and the inanimate in one physics."²⁷

²⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius, Colm Luibhéid, and Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), see 138 from *The Mystical Theology*. Patrick J. Gallacher, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1997).

²⁶ See Book 2, Chapter 15 of Nicole Oresme, *Quaestiones Super De Generatione et Corruptione*, ed. Stefano Caroti, vol. 20, Bayerische Akademie Der Wissenschaften (Munich: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften Munchen, 1996), 295. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 239.

²⁷ Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 236.

Like their philosophical counterparts, late medieval poets also reflected on the slippage between categories of matter and on the broader process of material change.²⁸ Because “how one understood the world determined how one could write poetry about it,” authors like Jean de Meun, Guillaume de Deguileville, Geoffrey Chaucer, and John Lydgate personified Lady Nature in new ways and reimagined the instrumental motifs of earlier writers to comment on new developments in natural philosophy.²⁹ Beyond figurative representations of nature, according to Christopher Cannon, literary form was also considered a type of matter, making a text’s spelling, “the written shape that unspools on any page,” and “the layout, the sequence, the ordinance” a part of the material world.³⁰ Though not equivalent, different types of objects like an oak tree and a book could change in a similar way. Belief in such parallels spurred a “growing confidence that species could be transmuted,” and accounted for a rise in alchemical texts.³¹

²⁸ Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 256.

²⁹ Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, 31-32, 54-71. Robertson identifies several figures of nature commonly used by late medieval poets, such as the scale, the book, and the ax to comment on beliefs about how the physical world worked. Robertson positions Aristotle’s model of nature as “a series of immanent causes, a serial process that imagined the Creator’s hand at work within the earthly design rather than imposing it from without” as a response to Augustine’s Neoplatonic version of the world in which “physical entities are an emanation of God’s self-contemplation; thus, nature is imagined to be working from a transcendent plan whose reality was always located elsewhere.”

³⁰ Cannon also suggested that medieval poets “understood a poem or an essay as an object.” Christopher Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12, 2. For how fourteenth-century religious mystics similarly adopted an “Incarnational poetic” that viewed “language, embodiment, and cognition as mutually interrelated,” see Cristina Maria Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation: Middle English Writing and the Leap of Love*, 1st ed, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 21, 14, 48. According to Cervone, the many possible meanings generated by metaphor, used by writers like Julian of Norwich and Walter Hilton, revealed the “superabundance” within the formal attributes of language. Through writing’s superabundance, a reader could derive an embodied experience by imagining Christ, the “crucial midpoint” that joined humanity with God.

³¹ Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 251.

Chaucer explores the material and literary fecundity of negation most crisply in *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. The appearance of the Canon and the Yeoman characters, who are absent from the *General Prologue*, rupture the framed tale form of *The Canterbury Tales*.³² Initiated by a series of negations, the text and its characters all undergo a process of change. This break in literary structure relates to the Yeoman's pursuit of alchemical change—the belief that one thing can be converted into another thing—which relies upon a relaxing of categories of matter. The legitimacy of alchemy is less important than how the Yeoman draws upon its rhetorical power to “multiplie” (VIII.669). Where it fails as a science, it succeeds as a literary method.

This amplification of narrative prompted by the Canon's departure is but one example of how Chaucer demonstrates the ways material absence can mobilize poetic expression. The Yeoman, who was never meant to tell a tale, only takes on the role of narrator because his lord, the Canon, has “fledde away” out of “sorwe and shame” that the Yeoman “wolde telle his pryvetee” (701-02). The Canon with his Yeoman intercept the group of travelers five miles away from Canterbury and provide a suspicious account of their origin. Most likely, both men, who are failed alchemists, intend to con the pilgrims with promises of transforming base metals into gold for a high price. The Yeoman, with echoes of the Pardoner, offers a peek behind what the Canon's story might have been had the Host not queried after the Canon's shabby physical appearance. Sensing that his cover is about to be blown, the Canon quickly disappears, freeing up his Yeoman, initially threatened to “spek no words mo,” to “tellen al” and “not spare” any details (693, 716, 718). Remarking repeatedly that his lord “is goon,” the Yeoman tells

³² An order that the Miller had already destabilized in his response to *The Knight's Tale*.

not one, but two tales (705, 718, 902).³³ The first tale is an autobiographical recounting of the Yeoman's seven years working for the Canon and the second tale is a multipart story about a canon who repeatedly swindles a priest by falsifying alchemical outcomes.

In his first story about his time with the Canon, the Yeoman mainly discloses his own obsession with the accoutrements of alchemy—its tools, substances, and practices—and how in pursuit of them, he has lost all of his earthly possessions for the promise of the philosopher's stone (gold transmuted from base metals) (722, 867, 852). When the Yeoman describes the objects required for alchemical labor, he details a long, jumbled list of pigments, containers, fluids, powders, herbs, and metals: "Unslekked lym, chalk, and gleyre of an ey, / Poudres diverse, assches, donge, pisse, and cley, / Cered pokkets, sal peter, vitriole, / And diverse fires maad of wode and cole" (806-809). The Yeoman admits to his disorganized speech, apologizing that "I by ordre hem nat reherce kan" and then repeating "I ne kan nat sette hem in hir kynde" (786, 789). Indeed, even the syntax of his metacommentary, in which the second quote transposes the words "kan," "nat," and "hem" from the first, reflects the same lack of organization of his list. This admission corresponds to the Yeoman's role in further throwing the *Tales* out of order as well as his participation in a discipline centered around the slippage of matter.

Not only does the Yeoman treat the tools of alchemy in this manner, but he also begins to confuse the principal characters of both of his stories with his departed companion. His second tale collapses these divisions when he asks, "This chanon was my lord, ye wolden weene?" (1088). Initially, it might seem as if the question is posed rhetorically—claiming the man in the second tale as distinct from the canon whom he

³³ Or three tales, if we include the Yeoman's introductory narrative about the Canon when he first meets the pilgrims (616-626).

served. He goes on to directly appeal to “Sire hoost” to state that “It was another chanoun, and nat hee / That kan an hundred foold moore *subtiltee*” (1089-1091, emphasis mine). This denial in the form of a comparison, however, undermines the clear-cut categorization that the Yeoman seeks because he uses the same language to describe his companion in the Prologue: “my lord kan swich *subtiltee*” (620, emphasis mine). The Yeoman’s transference of *subtiltee/subtilitee* reveals his difficulty distinguishing the overlapping descriptions of the man with whom he greets the pilgrims from those men he has constructed in his two stories. Though the Canon from the Prologue is physically gone, he is poetically “multiplied” into two additional canons, first, into a reconstruction of the Yeoman’s “lord” and then into a “false chanoun” (901, 1022). In this literary exercise of negation, the withdrawal of one canon generates two more canons.

The *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* is but one example of many in Chaucer’s body of work that “Literary Negation and Materialism in Chaucer” investigates. No study to date has addressed a formal theory of negation across Chaucer’s corpus. With scant exceptions, the same can be said of later English literary periods. Scholars of the Romantic period situate negation within John Keats’s notion of “negative capability.” In Keats’s ballade “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” for instance, a medieval knight responds to loss by conjuring up a beautiful, yet fleeting experience with a fairy woman.³⁴ Keats believed in the aesthetic potential of negating one’s own thoughts and feelings through

³⁴ For the ways Romantic medievalism helped nineteenth-century authors comment on the legal and political concerns of their time, see Clare A. Simmons, *Popular Medievalism in Romantic-Era Britain*, Nineteenth Century Major Lives and Letters (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011).

self-erasure.³⁵ A poet who could accept what he cognitively lacked could open a space to tap into an unlimited array of truths. As “La Belle Dame” transitions from its initial unnamed speaker to the knight who recounts a story to him, Keat’s nineteenth century voice recedes beneath medieval poetic figures and tropes. If negation is mentioned at all outside of Romantic aesthetics, it is isolated to scholars of Modernist poetry and drama who write about T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Samuel Beckett.

Aside from literary analysis, critical theorists have conceptualized negation in psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, race, gender, and affect studies. Though not specifically interested in poetry or a poet’s frame of mind, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan included negation into his schema of the unconscious which he believed “is structured like a language.”³⁶ According to Lacan, a subject comes into being by identifying itself via external signifiers, the field of the “other.” Because its ability to conceptualize itself depends on recognizing that which is outside of it, the subject experiences its own existence as a state of lack.³⁷

Theodor Adorno extended Lacan’s approach to negation as a way to analyze the individual psyche by applying it to the historical and logical processes of dialectical thinking. Rather than a subject understanding itself by means of an other, a “negative dialectic” seeks out difference by reflecting on a thing’s “nonidentity,” which is “its

³⁵ Beth Lau, “Jane Austen and John Keats: Negative Capability, Romance and Reality,” *Keats-Shelley Journal: Keats, Shelley, Byron, Hunt, and Their Circles* 55 (2006): 81–110, 84. Amanda S. Auerbach, “Negative Capability: A Capable Cognitive Act,” *Literary Imagination* 19, no. 3 (November 2017): 212–25, 214.

³⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 20.

³⁷ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 204–206.

relation to that which it is not.”³⁸ According to Adorno, a negative orientation corrects traditional philosophical argumentation because it helps to reveal the potential of any object by looking at the ways it exceeds the limits of dialectical thinking.

Jacques Derrida draws Adorno’s ideas about negation and nonidentity into his practice of deconstruction, which renounces the absolute presence of any thing (the transcendental signified). Deconstruction explores the *différance* between signs, the play of absence and presence that occurs across linguistic representation.³⁹ For Derrida, no system of language functions without absence and therefore meaning can never deliver the unmediated presence that it promises. This is due to the differential relation of a sign to that which it signifies because a sign will always be other to the thing it claims to represent. The supplement “occupies the middle point between total absence and total presence” because, as it fills and accumulates, it also “marks a determined lack.”⁴⁰

In a rejection of deconstruction’s Eurocentrism and exclusive focus on textuality, more recent movements incorporate negation to highlight the material conditions of subjects whose realities and histories have never been recognized or given the space to be written on their own terms. Contemporary practitioners of race and gender studies redeploy negation as a tool to call out the erasure and silencing perpetuated by a dominant, white culture that strips nonconforming subjects of their history, language, and

³⁸ Theodor W Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 163.

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denial,” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1992), 73–142.

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1st American ed (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 157, see 144-159.

humanity.⁴¹ Anti-racist critique in the work of Kim F. Hall and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas upholds a tradition of black feminism to dismantle western, colonial discourses by actively decentering whiteness to recover the texts and histories of people of color whose “blackness is a sign of absence.”⁴² Likewise, the “negative turn” in queer and feminist affect theory has also helped to foreground the negative histories of marginalized subjects by critiquing cultural frameworks of positivity that actively produce suffering.⁴³

These recent responses to deconstruction share an interest in materialism, which is to say an interest not only in the ways matter asserts itself but also in the “thingness” of textual abstractions. Discussions in “thing theory” influenced by Arjun Appadurai and Bill Brown consider the social existence of material objects beyond human subjectivity and investigate the role of literature to reflect on the agency of inanimate matter.⁴⁴ Other

⁴¹ Henry Louis Gates Jr., “‘Race,’ Writing, and Difference,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 1–20, 1; José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers Of Color And The Performance Of Politics* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1999), 95.

⁴² Gates Jr., “‘Race,’ Writing, and Difference,” 12; Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 265. In his study of blackness and the Middle Ages, Cord Whitaker also addresses the conceptualizations of blackness as “deficiency” the metaphor of which vacillates between “lack or presence,” Cord J. Whitaker, *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 9, 13. See also Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, 1st Edition (New York: NYU Press, 2019); Mary Rambaran-Olm, M. Breann Leake, and Micah James Goodrich, “Medieval Studies: The Stakes of the Field,” *Postmedieval* 11, no. 4 (December 1, 2020): 356–70, 362; Jonathan Horng Hsy, *Antiracist Medievalisms: From “Yellow Peril” to Black Lives Matter*, Arc Medievalist (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2021).

⁴³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (North Carolina, UNITED STATES: Duke University Press, 2006); Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 13, 52. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), 75, 17; J. Halberstam, “Unbecoming: Queer Negativity/Radical Passivity,” in *Sex, Gender and Time in Fiction and Culture*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 173–94, 175; Elizabeth Stephens, “Bad Feelings,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 30, no. 85 (September 2015): 273–82.

⁴⁴ Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Ethnohistory Workshop, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 2003). Bill Brown, ed., *Things* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2004). Arjun Appadurai, “The Thing Itself,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 15–21.

work in materialism by Donna Jeanne Haraway and Val Plumwood maintains a focus on objects, but also seeks to disrupt claims of humanist exceptionalism that separate human from non-human forms of life. The anti-dualist, ecological feminist work of “new materialism” advocates for the interdependence of all matter by rejecting the “otherness and negation” enforced by western constructions of race, class, and gender.⁴⁵ Seeing human identity as continuous with nature can begin the process of dismantling oppressive social hierarchies.⁴⁶

The major intervention of these race, gender, ecology, and new materialist movements is a necessary reconciliation of negation with matter. This shift acts as a corrective to the separation of the negative from material realities by previous discussions in critical theory. Such a correspondence also exists in the writing of Chaucer and in late medieval philosophy.

The Structure of this Dissertation

Like *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, many of the texts under consideration in “Literary Negation and Materialism in Chaucer” raise questions about the relationship between negation, writing, and materiality by showing ways that poetic creation is optimally performed when responding to absence. I take up a cross-genre approach to Chaucer's long narrative poetry, prose manuals, framed tales, dream visions, lyrics, and philosophical dialogues. Recent discussions that think about medieval genre not as pure

⁴⁵ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

⁴⁶ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 32, 36; Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, N.Y: Routledge, 1991), 35.

categories, but rather as permeable assemblages in which “lived experience and written form are mutually constitutive,” make a case for moving beyond single-genre inquiry.⁴⁷

Each chapter throws into relief the power of literary language to generate material repercussions even when it seems to negate them. A negative mode of critical analysis of Chaucer’s work necessitates reading across verse and prose writing to coax out a comprehensive poetics. As such, bringing together Chaucer’s verse texts and prose translations at times requires pairing late and mid-career texts with early compositions. I thus organize this dissertation to follow a thematic development of Chaucer’s work rather than a chronological one.⁴⁸ Coupling texts not often read together also allows for more insights into the cultural contexts that shaped Chaucer’s materialism. Bridging *The House of Fame* with concomitant accounting records from the London customs house, for instance, helps to illustrate the ways that official, economic structures of writing directly informed Chaucer’s poetry and vice versa. Moreover, given that Chaucer’s all-prose texts—the *Boece* and *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*—are both translations that showcase Chaucer’s skill as a translator, they also document departures from his source texts thereby uncovering moments of literary decision-making. These instances of deviation often reveal that Chaucer’s linguistic and generic negotiation is integral to his writing process. Finally, focusing on Chaucer’s verse and prose texts can bring more attention to the author’s lesser-known works and make a case for their literary import. This practice

⁴⁷ Ingrid Nelson and Shannon Gayk, “Introduction: Genre as Form-of-Life,” *Exemplaria* 27, no. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2015): 3–17, 5.

⁴⁸ In a chronological study, the relative sequence would be as follows: *The House of Fame* (late 1370s), the *Boece* (1382-86), *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* (1391-92), and *The Franklin’s Tale* (1392-95).

can be further extrapolated into building a more equitable pedagogy and scholarly methodology for Chaucer that centers under-studied characters, histories, and texts.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter Two looks at *The Franklin's Tale* as an exploration of the material impact of language on human relationships. The characters of *The Franklin's Tale* use negation to frame contracts as an unsuccessful tactic for avoiding or extricating themselves from worldly obligation. The knight Arveragus's and lady Dorigen's marriage vows negate all traces of bodily and economic conditions codified by traditional oaths and, instead, promise what they will *not* do. The tale's two subsequent contracts obligate Dorigen to commit adultery with the squire Aurelius if he removes the rocks from the coastline and stipulate that a clerk will void the rocks if Aurelius pays him "not less than" one thousand pounds. Aurelius and the clerk cancel both of their agreements due to a lack of repayment. Though the marriage contract remains intact, it only persists because Dorigen and Arveragus reverse their language of negation and submit to those marital conventions they tried to avert. None of the characters are able to bypass the material effects of language.

I carry this connection between contractual negation and materiality into Chapter Three, where I consider poetic motifs of absence in *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*. Chaucer transforms scientific discourse to withdraw the presence of his son Lewis, the text's addressee, to imagine a poetic reconfiguration of planetary bodies. Translating Latin manuals, such as Pseudo-Messahalla's eighth-century *De Compositone et Operatione Astrolabii* and Iohannes de Sacrobosco's thirteenth-century *Tractatus de Sphaera*, Chaucer composed his Middle English prose treatise to teach Lewis the operation of the medieval

astrolabe. Like *The Franklin's Tale's* cancelled contracts, the narrative-pedagogical contract of the *Treatise* also undergoes a process of negation that highlights the relationship between language and matter.⁴⁹ The *Treatise* takes this relationship a step further by drawing the universe into poetic narrative. Chaucer uses literary language to repattern the material as a way to imagine cosmic reconciliation.

In Chapter Four, I shift my attention from poetry to accounting in order to examine the ways that the dream vision, *The House of Fame*, explores the materiality of literary writing through an economic lens. Read alongside accounting records overseen by Chaucer when he served as controller of the London wool customs, *The House of Fame* draws upon an economic methodology to assess the value of poetry. As it attempts to reconcile the value of poetic production with the fluctuations of fame, the text structures several key scenes like a medieval account ledger. Though accounting seems adequate enough to evaluate certain elements of literary labor, Chaucer ultimately shows the limits of such an assessment. However close it comes to upholding the value of literature in the face of external negating forces, the poem nonetheless seems overinvested in a fantasy in which poetic creation can escape the worldly economy.

Like *The House of Fame*, the other texts discussed in my opening chapters reflect resistance to some aspect of change in the natural world and mount varying linguistic responses to negate material experiences. Chapter Five departs from this resistance to examine the ways the *Boece* consolidates materiality with writing (ontology with epistemology). Boethius's prisoner, who has lost all of his worldly possessions and standing, presents an ideal case study for showing that it is possible to gain a true

⁴⁹ Jenna Mead, "Authority and Seduction in Chaucer Narratives," PhD diss., (University of Melbourne, 1989), 148.

understanding of blissful plenty in the midst of negation. Under the guidance of Lady Philosophy, the prisoner disengages from a mournful approach to lack so he may learn to see the continuity that underlies all change. Indeed, the *Boece*'s formal concerns further elucidate Philosophy's message. By converting all of Boethius's verse passages from *The Consolation of Philosophy* into Middle English prose, Chaucer immerses his reader in a material environment in the middle of its own process of change, which retains remnants of poetic matter. Chaucer's act of translation—epitomized by a lack of verse—serves as a constant reminder of the *Boece*'s coexistence with the other voices within the vast *Consolation* commentary tradition. The text thus encourages not a rejection of, but rather an engagement with, negation via the process of material change.

Chapter Six closes the dissertation with a critical reflection on the current state of Chaucer Studies and proposes the ways a negative turn might help reshape a field debating issues of canonicity and equity. A critical methodology of negation can serve as a starting point for revising approaches to the reification of racial difference and sexual violence in Chaucer's poetry and his life records. More importantly, a critical orientation towards that which has been erased or excluded can draw attention to understudied texts and authors as well as redirect resources to marginalized scholars and students.

One may say that "Literary Negation and Materiality in Chaucer" first examines negative language as a mode of expression to negotiate material conditions, next considers absence as a poetic representational strategy, then identifies ways negation might assign and revoke value to and from literary labor, and, finally, observes how Chaucer transforms lack into a subject of inquiry and a necessary stage within a broader schema. This final shift embracing negation shows material change to be comforting and

sustaining. More importantly, it shows how negation can provide a pathway for abundance and recuperation. On the broadest level, my dissertation offers an important and previously overlooked current in Chaucer's work. With this, it shows the ways that negation has always shaped poetic thought and the ways poetic thought is at the heart of the fourteenth-century's intellectual explorations.

CHAPTER 2

MARRIAGE AND MEANING:

PRODUCTION BY NEGATION IN *THE FRANKLIN'S TALE*

“Sire, I releesse thee thy thousand pound,
As thou right now were copen out of the ground,
Ne never er now *ne* haddest knowen me,
For, sire, I wol *nat* taken a peny of thee
For all my craft, *ne noght* for my travaille.” (1613-1617, emphasis mine)

In this culminating moment from *The Franklin's Tale*, an unnamed clerk releases the squire Aurelius from the debt he incurred when hiring the clerk to conjure away the rocks on the Brittany coast. The clerk's moment of debt release is an act of showy magnificence, with the clerk not merely declining his payment but also rejecting any attempt at compensation. Yet the clerk's self-aggrandizement draws attention away from the most striking part of this section of text: this very act of debt cancellation is simultaneously an act of debt creation. Up until the very moment, the tale has *never specified* the exact amount that Aurelius owes. Only when the clerk promises to “releesse” the squire of this “thousand pound” do we learn the exact terms of the contract. The squire's debt is not the sole thing being canceled, and in this same section of Chaucer's poem, the clerk's *ne never*, *ne, not*, and *ne noght*, negates more than an outstanding bill. Negation, which I discuss more fully below, provides a way for the clerk to reject all possibility for payment. Negation also eliminates the value of the clerk's own work, for which he now will not take a penny.

In this chapter I consider this tension between the Franklin's investment in negation and at the same time the way he imagines negation as a form of literary production. As I will argue, *The Franklin's Tale* highlights the complicated way that

language works as a generative tool even in moments when it seems to negate itself. As I will further argue, Chaucer deliberately uses the act of marriage as a forum to consider the effects of production-by-negation. Marriage, a classic example of J. L. Austen's performativity, seems to epitomize a quintessential act of linguistic construction. Through a scripted, recited linguistic exchange two people clearly "do something" with words, their vows changing their own physical identities and constructing new worldly truths. Yet in the case of this tale, the main characters Dorigen and Arveragus enact their vows through a type of linguistic negation, a negation structurally amplified as the tale progresses.

Readers who have commented on *The Franklin's Tale* often focus on the marriage contract between Dorigen and Arveragus as the focal point of the narrative. In the most cited reading of *The Franklin's Tale*, G. L. Kittredge holds up Dorigen's and Arveragus's marriage as Chaucer's ideal which resolves debates in the so-called "Marriage Group" of *The Canterbury Tales*: *The Merchant's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and *The Clerk's Tale*.⁵⁰ Several other readings of *The Franklin's Tale* uphold the perspective that the tale reflects Chaucer's true position on marriage by suggesting that the marriage is an

⁵⁰ G. L. Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," *Modern Philology* 9.4 (1912): 435–67. The foundational reading of marriage in the *Franklin's Tale* which argues that the tale's consolidation of love and *gentillesse* is the solution to the "marriage group" debate in *The Canterbury Tales*.

exemplar that possesses an ideal balance of mutual love, generosity, respect, and freedom between husband and wife.⁵¹

Other readers interpret the depiction of Dorigen and Arveragus's marriage not as an ideal, but as inequitable. Elizabeth Robertson, for example, identifies a disconnect between private mutuality and public subordination for Dorigen and Arveragus that reflects contradictions in medieval marriage theories and practices.⁵² Cynthia Gravlee advances Robertson's analysis by claiming that mutuality is totally absent, arguing that instead of examining the topic of marriage itself, Chaucer deploys marriage as a vehicle to explore contradictions in rhetoric and truth.⁵³ Ben Parsons shifts the marriage-as-proxy discussion in the direction of literary genre by suggesting that *The Franklin's Tale* asks its audience to evaluate competing ethical ideologies represented by two literary

⁵¹ Lindsay A. Mann, "'Gentilesse' and *The Franklin's Tale*," *Studies in Philology* 63 (1966): 10–29. Considers the marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus as an exemplar of *gentilesse* due to its ability to compromise between courtly and religious virtues. Kathryn Jacobs, "The Marriage Contract of *The Franklin's Tale*: The Remaking of Society," *The Chaucer Review* 20.2 (1985): 132–43. Reads the marriage contract as a societal ideal based in values of mutual submission, generosity, and self-denial. Kathryn Jacobs, "The Marriage Contract of *The Franklin's Tale*: The Remaking of Society," *The Chaucer Review* 20.2 (1985): 132–43. Offers a feminist reading of Dorigen's interpretive agency, and sees the marriage as ideal because it depends on her freedom of choice. Mark N. Taylor, "Servant and Lord/Lady and Wife: *The Franklin's Tale* and Traditions of Courtly and Conjugal Love," *Chaucer Review* 32.1 (1997): 64–81. Looks at French courtly anti-adultery poetry and argues that Chaucer is defending the marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus from adultery (Aurelius). Believes that the marriage is balanced, full of mutuality, and steadfast to truth. Cathy Hume, "'The Name of Soveraynetee': The Private and Public Faces of Marriage in *The Franklin's Tale*," *Studies in Philology* 105.3 (2008): 284–303. The marriage in *The Franklin's Tale* is set up by Chaucer as an ideal based in mutual respect and secrecy which complies with medieval norms of behavior articulated in letters and advice literature from the period.

⁵² Elizabeth Robertson, "Marriage, Mutual Consent, and the Affirmation of the Female Subject in the *Knight's Tale*, the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, and the *Franklin's Tale*," in *Drama, Narrative and Poetry in the Canterbury Tales*, (Toulouse, France: PU du Mirail, 2003), 175–93.

⁵³ Cynthia A. Gravlee, "Presence, Absence, and Difference: Reception and Deception in *The Franklin's Tale*," in *Desiring Discourse: The Literature of Love, Ovid through Chaucer*, (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna UP, 1998), 177–87.

traditions in which a dishonest clerk, a marker of the fabliau genre, unsettles the virtuous marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus, an emblem of the lay.⁵⁴

More recently, critics have eschewed evaluating the marriage altogether by asserting that it is neither ideal nor flawed, but a device that goes beyond exemplarity to comment on other systems of medieval society. Leah Otis-Cour, Steele Nowlin, and Darragh Greene aptly demonstrate the ways the tale surpasses the subject of marriage to model alternative modes of agency in language and behavior.⁵⁵ Conversely, both Shannon Godlove and Eleanor Johnson locate a lack of agency where Dorigen's status is concerned to draw attention to male sovereignty imposed in all areas of English geopolitics and medieval law.⁵⁶

A critical shift away from the marriage-as-ideal or marriage-as-flawed debate opens up interpretive possibilities for *The Franklin's Tale*. These readings identify

⁵⁴ Ben Parsons, "No Laughing Matter: Fraud, the Fabliau and Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*," *Neophilologus* 96.1 (2012): 121–36.

⁵⁵ Leah Otis-Cour, "True Lover/False Lover, 'franquise/dete': Dichotomies in the 'Franklin's Tale' and Their Analogue in Richard de Fournival's 'Consaus D'amours,'" *Chaucer Review* 47.2 (2012): 160–86. Argues that the representation of the marriage "is neither a utopian aspiration nor a hypocritical arrangement in which lack of maistrie is given mere lip service," but a demonstration of a dichotomy between the true lover (Arveragus) and the false lover (Aurelius), encouraging reciprocity in marriage, 166. Steele Nowlin, "Between Precedent and Possibility: Liminality, Historicity, and Narrative in Chaucer's *The Franklin's Tale*," *Studies in Philology* 103.1 (2006): 47–67. Examines narrative and liminality to show how *The Franklin's Tale* argues beyond the exemplum of an ideal marriage to produce alternatives to behavior and language. Darragh Greene, "Moral Obligations, Virtue Ethics, and Gentil Character in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review* 50.1 (2015): 88–107. Claims that *The Franklin's Tale* subverts the Breton lay's generic expectations as a way to favor human agency. The pattern of releasing others from oaths reflects an opting-out of deterministic principles of behavior bound by an incoherent deontological paradigm of moral obligation.

⁵⁶ Shannon Godlove, "'Engelond' and 'Armorik Briteyne': Reading Brittany in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 51.3 (2016): 269–94. The question over Dorigen's sovereignty and freedom between Arveragus and Aurelius stands for the imperial interests of England and France over Brittany during the Hundred Years' War. Dorigen closely represents Brittany, the duchy caught between two countries, because her autonomy in marriage is undermined by the desires of two competing men's imposed obligations on her. Eleanor Johnson, "Objects of the Law: The Cases of Dorigen and Virginia," in *Medieval Women and Their Objects* (University of Michigan Press, 2017), 201–28. Studies the contractual language in *The Franklin's Tale* and *The Physician's Tale* to show how women are deprived of power and made objects of exchange by male-dominated legal interpretation.

alternative representations of the marriage to suggest that there is more at stake. In my own approach to the tale, I thus return to the subject of marriage itself in order to consider its verse-level structures and fluctuations. The text draws attention to a connection between marriage and negation, which are conspicuously linked in the tale's opening lines and which also lay bare its categories and structures.⁵⁷ Because the marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus serves as the narrative center from which all events stem, my discussion focuses on the original marriage contract. In particular, I will devote close attention to the formal marriage vows that make up the contract because it is the language of the oaths that shapes the events that follow. While it is definitely worth asking what Chaucer imagines his characters can and can't do as agents, it is also valuable to ask what the tale itself has to say about the ways these characters use and relate to language. Indeed, I suggest that through Dorigen and Arveragus's linguistic use of negation, Chaucer reimagines marriage. Not only does Chaucer's process of negation construct the marriage, but it also shows the material impact of language on human relationships. The forging of two subsequent agreements in the tale—first, by Dorigen and Aurelius, and second, by Aurelius and the clerk—threaten to undo the marriage in the story and also

⁵⁷ My discussion of Chaucer's negativity is informed by a medieval tradition of negative theology that draws on the sixth-century work of Pseudo-Dionysius and the mystic practice of *apophasis*, the negative language of denial employed to negate the attributes and names for the transcendent (God) by injecting doubt with a series of open-ended, corrective statements. Through this process, *apophasis* "unsays" or nullifies a subject's status as an entity. See Pseudo-Dionysius, Colm Luibhéid, and Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987). Michael Sells explores key classical and medieval apophatic texts and argues that the language of *apophasis* subverts standard syntax and grammatical rules; see Michael Anthony Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Kenneth Burke shows the parallels between negative theology and language and the ways in which our system of language communicates meaning through "a principle of negativity in its very essence." Burke explains that a signifier will always relate to its signified "in terms of *what it is not*." Therefore, he argues, negation persists across all linguistic expression because it always underscores our use of words. The power of affirmation and denial in dialectical thinking is often triggered by an act of negation. See Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 18, 22.

throw the narrative into crisis. The characters of *The Franklin's Tale* use negation to frame the three contracts to avoid or extricate themselves from worldly obligation. All, however, are unsuccessful.

In this chapter, I identify Chaucer's investment in negation as a mode for literary production. Next, I study the affirmative vocabulary of the rite of marriage according to the Sarum use in the late fourteenth century to contextualize the uniquely negative language in the marriage vows from *The Franklin's Tale*. Finally, I read all three contracts in the tale as agreements embedded in negative language—the marriage, a love pact, and a financial transaction—and contend that Chaucer's textual process of negativity can answer why the marriage is upheld at the close of the tale while the other two contracts are cancelled.

In its most basic structure, a marriage ceremony models a process for the coming together of two distinct entities into a partnership that redefines the bride and groom's former individual attributes. The marriage in *The Franklin's Tale* depicts not the erasure of individuality by a shared identity, but the union of individuals who maintain that individuality through negation.

Reframing Marriage out of a Language of Negation

Although I opened this paper with the tale's culmination, I could have just as easily opened with the tale's first fifty lines. This opening part of the tale contains the introduction of the couple's courtship and eventual marriage vows, which take place so quickly that we do not learn their names until after the wedding has occurred. In this way, *The Franklin's Tale*, unlike the other tales of the marriage group, which take time to explore the various paths to marriage, shifts the narrative focus to the actual terms of the

marriage contract. The Clerk's Griselda and the Merchant's May get married later in their respective stories, and the Wife's unnamed old crone does not marry until her tale's conclusion.

But the opening lines don't merely draw attention to the terms of marriage; they also embed this marriage in a language of negation. These introductory lines contain almost double the number of negatives of any other marriage group tale.⁵⁸ Even setting aside the comparisons to the other marriage themed tales, a look at commonplace fourteenth-century marriage vows throws into sharp relief Chaucer's interest in the effects of linguistic negation on the marriage contract. Most brides and grooms drew their vows from the Sarum Rite, a popular offshoot from Roman rites and common in late medieval England.⁵⁹ In the rite of marriage according to the Sarum use, the groom states:

I N. take the N. to my wedded wyf to haue and to holde fro this day
forwarde for bettere for wers for richere for pouerer: in sykenesse and in
hele tyl dethe vs departe if holy chyrche it woll ordeyne and therto y plight
the my trouthe.⁶⁰

The bride then replies:

I N. take the N. to my wedded housbonde to haue and to holde fro this day
forwarde for better: for wors: for richer: for pouerer: in sykenesse and in
hele: to be bonere and buxum in bedde and atte borde tyl dethe vs

⁵⁸ The ratio of negative language to total words in *The Franklin's Tale* is on par with the other tales from the marriage group (just over two percent). By contrast, *The Franklin's Tale* contains seventeen negative words in its opening fifty lines. The next highest amount of negation is contained by the *Merchant's Tale* with nine, then *The Wife of Bath's Tale* with seven, and finally, *The Clerk's Tale* at five.

⁵⁹ Rosemary O'Neill, "Wedding Vows and Marriage Contracts in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*," Unpublished, 2017. As O'Neill points out, while there is variation across manuscripts documenting late medieval marriage vows, all versions of the rite of marriage according to the Sarum use are underscored by a sense of "contractualism" that emphasizes "establishing and performing the consent of the parties." The formalized exchange of vows serves as verbal indicators that bride and groom are freely entering into a marriage. The vows also establish an agreed upon intent to honor the contractual conditions articulated in their spoken agreement.

⁶⁰ A. Jeffries Collins, *Manuale ad usum percelebris ecclesie Sarisburiensis* (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1960), 47-48.

departhe if holy chyrche it wol ordeyne and therto I plight the my
trouthe.⁶¹

By repeating each list of bodily and financial categories twice, the rite reinforces what the couple *will* do in the marriage. These terms use affirmative language to a generative effect and model mutual exchange in mirroring one another in structure and content. Affirmative language, therefore, defines the intention of each party to sustain their union.

As wedded “wyf” and “housbonde” vow that their contract will endure “for bettere for wers,” they mutually acknowledge the dialectic pairs that conceptualize property in terms of the physical wellness of the body. These conceptualizations build the marriage bond around material conditions of the body (“in sykenesse and in hele”) and economic status (“for richere for pouerer”).

In contrast to the vows of the Sarum Missal, Dorigen and Arveragus use linguistic negation to express the terms of their marriage contract. Rather than affirm, their oaths stipulate things that they will *not* do. First, Arveragus swears to Dorigen:

That *nevere* in al his lyf he, day *ne* nyght,
Ne sholde upon hym take *no* maistrie
Agayn hir wyl, *ne* kithe hire jalousie,
But hire obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al,
As any love to his lady shal,
Save that the name of soveraynetee,
That wolde he have for shame of his degree. (746-752, emphasis mine)

Here, negation marks a shift that rewrites the marriage rite’s structure and message. Arveragus’s vow embeds negativity into the affirmative phrasing of the conventional rite through the accumulation of negative particles *nevere*, *ne*, and *no*. Furthermore, Chaucer deploys the conjunction *ne*, nor, in place of particles *and*, *to*, and

⁶¹ Collins, *Manuale Sarum*, 48

for to underscore a grammatical disruption of the connective structure that makes up the marriage rite.

With his pledge to “take *no* maistrie / Agayn hir wyl,” Arveragus forfeits mastery over his wife. In doing so, the statement brings Dorigen’s autonomy front and center and thus advances an emphasis on the separate interests of each individual, emphasized by the alternative titles of “lovere” and “lady.”⁶² The lines also force linguistic division into the language of affirmative symbolic union. For instance, the word “take” echoes the vocabulary of the marriage rite’s opening of “I N. *take* the N. to my wedded wyf.” However, rather than following the verb “to take,” with the second person pronoun “thee” and Dorigen’s name, Arveragus attaches it to the negative particle “no,” and thus splits the subject of the sentence (Arveragus) from its object (Dorigen), thereby detaching speaker from addressee. In place of union between bride and groom is now a union between the verb “to take” and its negation. Thus, Arveragus commits not to Dorigen herself, but to *not* taking mastery over her. This distinction creates an interpretive event that defies the traditional limits of marital union and establishes each individual’s relationship to language.

The final portion of Arveragus’s vow asserts that he shall conceal his obedience to Dorigen in the “name of soveraynetee.” Most readings of these lines agree that Arveragus claims the “name of soveraynetee” as a public show of power over Dorigen’s

⁶² As David Raybin suggests, Arveragus’s vow to take no mastery over Dorigen recognizes her “freedom of choice” that acknowledges Dorigen as an autonomous actor who makes interpretive decisions (79). Raybin, David. “‘Wommen, of Kynde, Desiren Liberte’: Rereading Dorigen, Rereading Marriage.” *The Chaucer Review* 27. 1 (1992): 65–86.

will.⁶³ However, because Arveragus also forfeits some of his own autonomy in his vow, it's equally as possible that this move asserts his *own* independence. Since he has just negated his claim to mastery over Dorigen, it follows that the "name of soveraynetee" reflects his desire to preserve his own individual, sovereign status.

Dorigen answers Arveragus's vow with more negativity: "'Ye profre me to have so large a reyne, / *Ne* wolde *nevere* God bitwixe us tweyne, / As in my gilt, were outhur werre or stryf'" (755-757, emphasis mine). Using negative language, she states that God cannot send anything that causes conflict between them. "Ne" and "nevere" produce double negation to emphatically assert that Dorigen will *not* cause "werre or stryf" between herself and Arveragus.

However, rather than simply mirroring back the groom's terms as modeled in the rite of marriage, Dorigen advances the singularity highlighted in Arveragus's vow. This shift away from marital union in favor of linguistic differentiation is taken up in Dorigen's reply which acknowledges that Arveragus offers her a vast range of freedom. And, with her subsequent use of the singular pronoun "my" rather than "our" to assign fault to herself alone, she attempts to enter into a spiritual union while at the same time maintaining physical autonomy. John Donne's image of the "twin compasses" in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" best captures Dorigen's attempt to live out both experiences of marriage: on one hand, she recognizes the "sublunary" status of her and

⁶³ Shannon Godlove, "'Engelond' and 'Armorik Briteyne': Reading Brittany in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 51.3 (2016): 269–94. Godlove argues that Arveragus "agrees to abstain from exercising mastery in the relationship . . . except that he wishes to retain the *title* of sovereign in the marriage, that is, to be seen as the authoritative partner who is willingly obeyed," 281. Hume also writes that Arveragus will renounce mastery in private, and at the same time, retain the reputation of sovereignty to publicly uphold an ideal of male dominance. Hume, "'The Name of Soveraynetee,'" 285. Likewise, according to Gravlee, though Arveragus gives up mastery in private, he wants his sovereignty publicly acknowledged to preserve his masculine status. Gravlee, "Presence, Absence, and Difference," 180.

Arveragus as separate individuals, and on the other, the spiritual conditions of “two souls...which are one” (26, 13, 21).⁶⁴

Indeed, even the descriptors that Dorigen selects seem to disrupt the conceptual unity of marriage. The pair of terms she selects, “werre or stryf,” introduce a set of conditions in the marriage contract that calls to mind the descriptors from the rite of marriage according to the Sarum use which map opposing pairs that range from bliss to suffering: “for richer: for pouerer,” “in sykenesse and in hele,” and so forth. As Dorigen homes in on her own self-management and responsibility, she refrains from taking on the whole pair and instead commits to one side of the marital contract. Her linguistic expression of her marriage vows, therefore, mirrors her negative stance. Chaucer rewrites this in two striking ways. First, Dorigen’s pair does not invoke material experiences that define bodily status or economic wealth. Second, they do not employ an opposing structure. “Werre or stryf” describes two states of one extreme: discord. For the three ranges of oppositions of prosperity and lack in the rite of marriage, syntax coheres with semantic meaning to symbolically represent the coming together of two different individuals. Dorigen’s pair, on the other hand, articulates two synonymous states, sets them in formal opposition to one another using the correlative conjunction, “outher” (“either”)/“or,” and negates them.

Contractual Impediments

It is no surprise that a negative marriage contract is almost immediately represented by a rocky coastline that serves as Dorigen’s first lived experience of her marriage. As an extension of her one-sided vow, the first scene featuring the newly-wed

⁶⁴ John Donne, “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” in *The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 62–64.

Dorigen depicts, not time spent with her husband, but Dorigen alone negotiating Arveragus's absence.

Left alone by Arveragus, who has journeyed to England, a woeful Dorigen is moved to a "castel faste by the see" in an effort by friends to ease her suffering (846). Frequent walks along the bank bring little comfort, however, because the ships sailing along the coast only remind her of her husband's absence. Directly in her view below the bank are large, unsettling rocks. While a plain imperceptibly transforms into a hill and a shoreline recedes into a sea, rocks are clear markers of boundaries. Because they seem to be physical barriers that divide Brittany from the sea, the rocks induce a lament over the dangers they pose to men on ships, specifically, to the voyaging Arveragus:

". . . thise grisly feendly rokkes blake,
That semen rather a foul confusion
Of werk than any fair creacion
. . .
An hundred thousand bodyes of mankynde
Han rokkes slayn, al be they nat in mynde" (868-878).

Within the violence caused by the "grisly" rocks lies an unsettling contradiction in the nature of creation because the rocks are the work of the same God who created mankind. Dorigen can't think about the rocks in any terms but negation, claiming she "*ne* kan the cause *nat* yknow," leaving to clerks the task of discerning answers about God's will (887, emphasis mine). Nevertheless, she concludes that the rocks should be "sonken into helle" (892). Though the result of introspective ruminating, this musing to see the rocks submerged eventually finds its way into a more formalized request.

Dorigen's admission that the rocks exceed her comprehension places her into contact with what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen calls the "inhuman agency" that stone possesses via its "geological and indigenous history" that breaches the limits of taxonomy and

temporality.⁶⁵ The stones are confusing to Dorigen because, as with their ““blake”” color that lacks any hue, they cannot be absolutely conceptualized as ““fair”” or ““foul.””

Dorigen’s characterization of the rocks as neither “fair” nor “foul” invokes her marriage vow which also ruptures conventions of opposing pairs. Indeed, as we discover, Dorigen’s contemplation on the rocks comes to represent a material manifestation of the negative construction in her marriage vows with Arveragus.

Dorigen’s friends perceive the excessive “discomfort” caused by the rocks and relocate her to the perceived safety of a garden. Though she has moved to a new setting, Dorigen swiftly infuses the garden with the rocks’ disorienting agency, motivating her to take action to be rid of them. Dorigen is compelled to take steps that go beyond mere contemplation of the rocks. It is in this new setting controlled by the “craft of mannes hand” in which the squire Aurelius makes romantic advances towards her. She first refuses him, but then responds with a proposition that draws from her preoccupation with the rocks:

“Ye remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,
That they *ne* lette ship *ne* boot to goon—
I seye, whan ye han maad the coost so clene
Of rockkes that ther *nys no* stoon ysene,
Thanne wol I love yow best of any man;
Have heer my trouthe, in al that evere I kan.” (993-998, emphasis mine)

⁶⁵ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2015), 47, 200. According to Cohen, the ancient rocks in *The Franklin’s Tale* contain narrative traces of the Britons. Therefore, Dorigen responds with “terror and enchantment” because she is at once unwillingly entangled with the rocks and also alienated by the rocks’ “erratic” qualities (47). Cohen reads the clerk’s voiding of the rocks as an attempt to neutralize them, which “banishes” their historical agency (200). Because the rocks in their absence continue to exert influence far after the clerk voids them, I differ with Cohen’s particular reading of *The Franklin’s Tale*. However, in his examples from other medieval narratives, Cohen does go on to say that stone is not always so easily managed. Most intriguing are Cohen’s observations that stone’s inscrutability enmeshes it with the human and the inhuman through its refusal to comply with “taxonomic distinctiveness” (23).

Dorigen takes great care to explain the precise results that she expects for the rocks: that each stone must be gone, that ships must pass freely, and that not a stone may be seen. If Aurelius can remove the rocks from the coast, then she will “love” him “best.” Gerald Morgan argues that Dorigen’s promise, ultimately about recovering Arveragus, is not binding precisely because it “excludes the possibility of fulfillment.”⁶⁶ In contrast, Richard Firth Green believes that the contract, if not legally binding, would have been socially expected to be upheld in medieval culture. With this contract, Green notes, Dorigen locks herself into an impossible situation because to honor her oath to Aurelius means she has effectively broken her marriage vow to Arveragus to be a “trewe wyf.”⁶⁷

In either case, mounting negative language enables Dorigen to construct a contract that lacks any affirmative binding commitment. In addition to building another contract out of negativity, each party swiftly dismisses the request to remove the rocks as an impossibility, seemingly invalidating the contract in the instant it is agreed upon. In the scene’s final exchange, Dorigen and Aurelius conclude that the feat cannot be accomplished, with Dorigen admitting that ““wel I woot that it shall *never* bityde”” and Aurelius agreeing that ““this were an impossible!”” (1001, 1009, emphasis mine). In much the same way as Dorigen and Arveragus construct a marriage out of vows that articulate what they will not do, Dorigen and Aurelius enter into a contract that asserts what could not possibly happen.

⁶⁶ Gerald Morgan, “Boccaccio’s *Filocolo* and the Moral Argument of the *Franklin’s Tale*,” *The Chaucer* 20.4 (1986): 285–306, especially 207, 295. Morgan also writes that Dorigen’s promise serves as proof of her faithfulness to her marriage vow. This point is debatable because, as discussed, the marriage vow itself is constructed out of negation.

⁶⁷ Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 308, 329, 332. Green believes that Dorigen’s “rash” promise to Aurelius marks a test in her commitment to her *trouthe*.

Though Aurelius falls into accord with Dorigen's final retraction, he later finds a way to make possible the "impossible" and holds her to her pledge. To assist Aurelius in fulfilling his vow, Aurelius's brother recalls certain French clerks in Orleans who at feasts are known to have made "'diverse apparences'" of objects such as "'water and a barge'" and "'a castle, al of lym and stoon,'" who then "'voyded it anon'" (1140, 1144, 1149, 1150). The image of a ship in the water and a lime and stone structure connect clerks of this type to the erratic inscrutability of the rocks and to Dorigen's request to clear them from the coast. From this example, Aurelius's brother reasons that a clerk "may make, / To mannes sighte, that all the rokkes blake / Of Britaigne weren yvoided everichon" (1157-59).

When the brothers arrive in Orleans, they meet a clerk who greets them in Latin. The request to remove the rocks is never brought up; rather, the clerk claims to already know the cause of Aurelius's visit. In his home, the clerk demonstrates his skills in the natural sciences and his ability to construct and "void" visual illusions of a hunt, hawking, tournaments, and even Aurelius dancing with Dorigen. This clerk's illusions serve as a reminder of the images of a ship in the water and a stone structure, allying him with the rocks' ineffability.

The demonstrations give way to dinner and then to negotiations over the sum that Aurelius will pay to the clerk. The clerk's "straunge" manner occupies the agreement with heavy negative speech, making it difficult to constrain the contract into a straightforward articulation of his price (1223). The terms break down under the phrasing of repeated negation over what the clerk is "not" willing to do for a sum he will "not" have. Phrases like "lasse than" and "that somme" obscure the exact figure of the clerk's

“gerdon” and sustain the negativity of the tale’s first two contracts. The clerk invokes a number of one thousand pounds of gold, but only in the context of what lesser amount he will “not” accept: “Lasse than a thousand pound he woulde *nat* have, / *Ne* gladly for that somme he wolde *nat* goon” (1224-25, emphasis mine). Though the clerk states a quantifiable value for payment—one thousand pounds—negative adverbs *nat* and *ne* retroactively revoke the offer for anything less than one thousand. The one thousand pounds is twice emphasized, but at the same time, it is connected to the clerk’s unwillingness to go with Aurelius to Brittany.

The pervasive negative language works to both create and revoke the value of the one-thousand-pound debt and to undermine any certainty about the specific terms of the contract. Both participants perform the formalities of negotiating an agreement. However, by avoiding any concrete terms that might bind each party to specific compensation for the clerk’s service, Aurelius and the clerk actively negate the meaning of that agreement. And if we rely on the clerk’s final answer, the arrangement is rejected. Aurelius answers the clerk with what sounds like a refusal of the base sum, “[f]y on a thousand pound!” followed by an assurance that the undetermined debt will be paid (1227, 1231). This is later concluded with the clerk’s final response of “Nay” and a formal vow (1234). In spite of this uncertainty, it is somehow enough to convince the clerk of the incentive to travel to Brittany with Aurelius.

Rather than settling his debt with the clerk once the coast is cleared of the rocks, Aurelius confronts Dorigen to pressure her to honor her agreement by rehearsing her oath back to her: “Ye woot right wel what ye bihighten me; / And in myn hand youre trouthe plighen ye / To love me best—God woot, ye seyde so” (1327-29). Aurelius’s reminder

reverses the structure and inverts the content of Dorigen's original statements which spend four lines describing the removal of the rocks and one final line promising to "love Aurelius best." Conversely, Aurelius's nearly thirty lines of dialogue in this confrontation recapitulate his desire for Dorigen and her obligation to him. It is only in one last line that he acknowledges that "'the rokkes been aweye'" (1338). His speech reiterates Dorigen's promise back to her, but it does so by populating its demands with the language of independence—"'[a]vyseth yow,'" "'vouche sauf,'" "'[d]ooth as yow list,'" "'[i]n yow lith al'"—which insinuates that Dorigen holds the power to decide whether or not to honor her oath (1320, 1334, 1335, 1337).

However, Aurelius does more than invert the order of the original vow and demand that Dorigen make her choice. His repeated reminders to Dorigen that "'well ye woot what ye han hight'" and his careful listing of the pledge's terms qualifies the illusion of choice by conforming Dorigen's oath to a specific version desired by Aurelius (1323). In other words, instead of using negative language or invoking the negation of the rocks themselves, Aurelius constructs his statements out of affirmative language to hold Dorigen to "loving him best." This act of affirmation, then, aims to fix Dorigen's obligation, while avoiding the risk of conceding that both parties had also agreed that the agreement itself was "impossible." This passage brings us to the conceptual limits of Dorigen's choice and Aurelius's interpretation but withholds resolution of the two.

Rather than choose, Dorigen suspends herself in a space of deliberation that marks a return to negative language. Dorigen's verbal and physical reactions to Aurelius's declaration simultaneously reveal her inability to accept the rocks' absence and the concomitant ramifications of their negation on her contract with the squire:

. . . she astoned stood;
In al hir face *nas* a drope of blood.
She wende *nevere* han come in switch a trappe.
“Allas,” quod she, “that evere this sholde happe!
For wende I *nevere* by possibilittee
That swich a monstre or merveille myghte be!
It is agayns the proces of nature.” (1339-1345, emphasis mine)

Her “astoned,” or stunned, expression links her body to the (now absent) stones, serving as a reminder of her connection to the now-voided rocks. With the obligation of adultery with Aurelius now a reality, Dorigen must confront her limited choices resulting from her vow.

That Dorigen is both “astoned” and her face is drained of blood also suggests death, or non-being. Indeed, every contract Dorigen makes drives her deeper into negation, and once the rocks are gone, contemplation of suicide initially appears as the only option left to her. For two days Dorigen ruminates over examples from Jerome’s *Against Jovinianus* about maids and faithful wives who kill themselves rather than face dishonor. But again, just as the rite of marriage as an original text is negated and redeployed, so are Dorigen’s textual examples cited, resisted, and unfulfilled.

As the ultimate act of self-destruction, death by suicide seems to be a logical end point of Dorigen’s negation. Midway through the complaint, Dorigen, caught between “deeth or ells dishonor,” decides that suicide is better than losing her honor. Once again, Dorigen deploys another set of opposites—“death” or “dishonor”—only to rupture the dialectical opposition of the pair .

“. . . it is bet for me
To sleen myself than been defouled thus.
I wol be trewe unto Arveragus,
Or rather sleen myself in som manere.” (1423-1425)

Imagery inviting us to anticipate Dorigen's death builds throughout her complaint, and in the places of *ne* and *no* appears the verb *lese* and *lose*. Accordingly, the repetition of language early in her speech draws attention to loss: “yet have I levere to *lese* / My life than of my body to have a shame, / Or knowe myselfen fals, or *lese* my name” (1360-1362, emphasis mine). The inevitability of loss on some level threatens to negate several facets of Dorigen's identity. The verb *lese*, to lose, appears twice in the passage and refers to the multiplicity of things Dorigen stands to forfeit: her will, her life, her physical virtue, and her reputation. However, with the return of the singular pronoun “my” from the marriage vow, Dorigen exhibits resistance to the loss of her “wyl.” Dorigen's contemplation of suicide brings her to the brink of self-negation, but at the same time it preserves life by resisting a textual precedent mandating that women should accept death over defilement.

The Reconciliation of Negativity

Ultimately, Dorigen does not commit suicide; rather, Arveragus returns home on the third day and intercedes. He orders Dorigen to be sent out with a squire and a maid to adhere to her oath with Aurelius: “Ye shul your trouthe holden” (1474). At the same time, he legitimizes Dorigen's commitment to her contract with a list of things she should *not* do:

“ . . . *never*, whil thee lasteth lyf *ne* breeth,
To *no* wight telle thou of this aventure—
. . .
Ne make *no* contenance or hevynesse” (1482-3, 1485, emphasis mine).

Arveragus's instruction ensures that Dorigen expresses none of the physical or verbal showings that might liken her condition to those “woful maydens” from the

stories of *Against Jovinianus* (1375). Negation continues to be the means by which Arveragus and Dorigen negotiate their marriage.

When Dorigen departs, it is uncertain where Arveragus had bid her to go, but it seems that Dorigen intends to return to the garden to hold her “trouthe.” Arveragus’s earlier description of Dorigen’s trip to ““swich a place anon”” points to an unknown space, setting up a scene with Aurelius that lacks a clear spatial orientation (much like the present-absent rocks) (1489). However, she never actually makes it all the way to her destination. That both the “gardyn-ward” Dorigen and Aurelius never arrive at their destination infuses their exchange with an undefined potentiality (1505).

It is at this interstice of not quite arriving at the space in which the second agreement was made—“[a]mydde” (in the middle of) the town—that Aurelius intercepts Dorigen (1502). The squire is so overcome that Dorigen has been sent by Arveragus to uphold her *trouthe*, “[t]hat fro his lust yet were him lever abyde” (1522). He is seized for a moment to “wondren on this cas,” and recognizes that the oath between himself and Dorigen exceeds its own terms (1514). Just as Dorigen refuses to be reduced to the wives who slay themselves, Aurelius the squire resists his “lusty” observances and chooses to, instead, “doon a gentil dede” by withdrawing his desire for Dorigen (937, 1543).⁶⁸ Dorigen’s errand moves Aurelius to stay his desire and to cancel the contract by completely revoking Dorigen’s obligation:

“I yow relese, madame, into youre hond
Quyt every serement and every bond
That ye han maad to me as heerbiforn,
Sith thilke tyme which that ye were born.

⁶⁸ Susanna Fein characterizes the result of Aurelius’s encounter with Dorigen as nothing short of a “conversion” that transforms the squire into a “new being” who becomes “whole in the Boethian sense.” Susanna Fein, “Boethian Boundaries: Compassion and Constraint in the *Franklin’s Tale*,” in *Drama, Narrative and Poetry in the Canterbury Tales*, (Toulouse, France: PU du Mirail, 2003), 195–212, see 212.

My trouthe I plighte, I shal yow *never* repreve
Of *no* biheste, and here I take my leve,
As of the trewest and the beste wyf.” (1533-1539, emphasis mine)

Aurelius returns to the negative language from the original agreement to now pledge that he shall “*never* repreve / Of *no* biheste,” never again condemn Dorigen to hold to her promise. This time, instead of employing negation to construct an obligation, Aurelius redirects it to lift “every serement and every bond,” every assurance and binding promise, into Dorigen’s “hond.” Discharging control over her pledge back to Dorigen recognizes the autonomy first emphasized in her marriage contract. In fact, this statement sounds a great deal like Arveragus’s vow to “take no maistrie,” which uses negation to allocate power to Dorigen as a sovereign individual. And yet, by commanding his wife to return to her suiter, Arveragus seems to seize the very “maistrie” that he previously ceded.

Once Aurelius releases Dorigen from her obligation, Dorigen returns to Arveragus. The final image gives an illusion of marital harmony:

Arveragus and Dorigen his wyf
In sovereyn blisse leden forth hir lyf.
Never eft *ne* was ther angre hem betwene.
He cherisseth hire as though she were a queene,
And she was to hym trewe for everemoore. (1551-1555, emphasis mine)

The first line of the passage opens with the couple’s names, which do not appear in the original vows. In supplying their names, the passage inscribes Dorigen and Arveragus into the modes of address of the rite of marriage. We are thus left with an imposition of resolution for the marriage that flattens the couple’s original vows of negativity under the structures of the rite of marriage. Though the marriage contract remains intact, it only persists because Chaucer reappropriates Dorigen’s and

Arveragus's linguistic negation, submitting them to the marital conventions they tried to avert. The line, "*Never* eft *ne* was ther angre hem between," recalls Dorigen's original pledge that "*Ne* wolde *nevere* God bitwixe us tweyne, / As in my gilt, were outhere werre or stryf" (756-757, emphasis mine). The phrasing echoes the negativity of *never* and *ne* but inverts them. It also drops the singular pronoun *my* to indicate a loss of autonomy. It is significant that Dorigen no longer utters her own intentions, but rather that the Franklin overtakes her voice. Finally, the last statement, "And she was to hym trewe for everemoore," betrays a final, undermining judgment against Dorigen that marks her as a rehabilitated but untrue wife.

Intriguingly, the marriage is the only contract not forgiven by the close of the tale. Instead, it is the clerk's act of forgiveness to cancel his contract with Aurelius that produces the social reconciliation upon which *The Franklin's Tale* concludes. When Aurelius reveals to the clerk that he is unable to make payment, he attempts to deliver not one thousand pounds, but instead, "fyve hundred pound" along with a request for more time to pay off "the remenaunt" (1573, 1575). The clerk rejects this proposal and revokes the entire debt in a single statement:

"Sire, I releesse thee thy thousand pound,
As thou right now were copen out of the ground,
Ne never er now *ne* haddest knowen me,
For, sire, I wol *nat* taken a peny of thee
For all my craft, *ne noght* for my travaille." (1613-1617, emphasis mine)

This use of negation to cancel the debt finally declares a coherent value, allowing for the clearing of debt in an act of generosity. The clerk is now free to pursue "a gentile dede" in the interest of social reconciliation to the same degree as the other characters

(1611).⁶⁹ By clearing Aurelius from paying the one thousand pounds, he forgives any fee for his “craft,” or skill, as well as his “travail,” his physical labor and passage to Brittany. Though the clerk sustains his use of negative language and retains his patterns of refusal, his stance is a far cry from his “straunge” negotiations in Orleans that cryptically alluded to what he would *not* do for an amount he would *not* accept. In fact, in this moment of the contract’s undoing, the debt’s precise one-thousand-pound value is finally confirmed.

The final two contracts are canceled due to physical obstacles that complicate repayment. For the contract between Dorigen and Aurelius, the reappearance of Dorigen’s husband creates a disincentive for Aurelius to hold her to her vow. For the agreement between Aurelius and the clerk, Aurelius’s lack of gold prompts the clerk to wipe away the debt. Even though the marriage contract endures, it persists at the expense of the autonomy that Dorigen and Arveragus intended with their original linguistic negation. With this conclusion, Chaucer seems to be interrogating a desire to avoid worldly obligation in social contracts, ultimately suggesting that it is impossible to bypass the material effects of language.

⁶⁹ The clerk’s shared qualities with the ineffable rocks make him capable of resisting the “clerkly” tendencies toward greed and deceit (1611-12). In doing so, he seemingly makes an interpretive choice to subvert the behavior exemplified in the *Miller’s Tale* and *Reeve’s Tale* in a way that asserts his irreducibility to a typifying literary class.

CHAPTER 3

POETICIZING THE UNIVERSE: SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE AND LITERARY

ABSENCE IN *A TREATISE ON THE ASTROLABE*

In the editorial notes to her translation of the twelfth-century *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Betty Radice muses over Heloise's "peculiar" choice of "Astralabe" for the name of her baby.⁷⁰ Given the intellectual and literary partnership between Abelard and Heloise, Radice is not at all surprised that Heloise took inspiration from the astrolabe, which in Greek means "star-catcher" or "star-taker." This small, circular instrument made of thin brass plates imported to Europe from the medieval Islamic world enabled astronomers to simulate the daily rotation of the sky, measure the altitude of any object, and tell time. The astrolabe's ability to represent celestial movement on a portable instrument places the sensible universe into the hands of a human observer. By naming their son Astralabe, Abelard and Heloise are thus making the daring suggestion that their son, rather than being another manifestation of God's power, is instead a mobile center of the universe.

Geoffrey Chaucer, though not an astronomer, also thought of his son when he translated several Latin manuals on the device and produced his own late fourteenth-century vernacular composition titled *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*. Although Chaucer's *Treatise* goes far beyond considering the astrolabe's imaginative name, it nonetheless emphasizes the user's own power to place himself at the world's center. Early in the text, Chaucer walks his reader through the intricate parts of the astrolabe and demonstrates how the device's negative spaces ground the device's mechanics. First, Chaucer draws on

⁷⁰ Michael Clanchy, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. Betty Radice, Rev Ed (Penguin, 2003), see page 253n28.

traditional vocabulary to describe the main body of the astrolabe, the outer metal disk that contains a set of attached, stacked circular latitude plates: “The moder of thin Astrelabye is thikkeste plate, perced with a large *hool*, that resceiveth in hir *wombe* the thynne plates” (1.3.6, emphasis mine). To manipulate the plates, one places a thumb in a ring that’s attached to the main body known as the “mother.” And, as the word “wombe” suggests, we are presented with a network of cavities that consistently evoke empty space.⁷¹

Chaucer then goes on to mention the two protruding pin holes attached to the edges of the rotating bar found on the back of the astrolabe that function to “[r]esceyve the stremes of the sonne by day, and eke by mediacioun of thin eye to knowe the altitude of sterres by night” (1.13.4-6). In other words, one can measure altitude by lining up an object, like a star, through the sighting holes, and then read off the altitude in degrees on a scale around the edge. The sighting holes bring contact with more empty spaces: by day the holes exist to be filled in by the light of the sun, and by night they are to be occupied by the human eye. As an embodied act produced out of the negativity of the astrolabe, peering into the pin holes integrates the human body of the user with the physical objects in the sky. Taken all together, the “wombe,” the hollow at the center, the ring, and the holes at the edges of the astrolabe, bring its operator into regular contact with negative spaces that open to the celestial universe.

While Chaucer demonstrates his awareness of the mechanics of the astrolabe in his writing, over the last fifty years, criticism on *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* has paid less

⁷¹ For analysis of Chaucer’s use of Arabic vocabulary for the astrolabe, see Gila Aloni and Shirley Sharon-Zisser, “Geoffrey Chaucer’s ‘Lyne Oriental’: Mediterranean and Oriental Languages in the ‘Treatise on the Astrolabe,’” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 16, no. 2 (2001): 69–77. For a discussion of the feminine terminology assigned to the device, see Jenna Mead, “Reading by Said’s Lantern: Orientalism and Chaucer’s *Treatise on the Astrolabe*,” *Medieval Encounters: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Culture in Confluence and Dialogue* 5, no. 3 (1999): 350–57.

attention to the device's material structure, falling more generally into two main approaches. The first approach reads the *Treatise* literarily for insight about Chaucer as a poet, and the second approach linguistically observes the text as evidence of the technical writing strategies employed by Chaucer as a translator.

In the first approach, literary critics put the *Treatise* into the service of Chaucer's other, more widely-known literary works. Many scholars, such as J. D. North, argue for the relevance of Chaucer's knowledge of science and astronomy by identifying its embeddedness in Chaucer's poetry.⁷² Likewise, drawing on the cultural history of astronomy, others have considered the Arabic origins of Chaucer's presumed source material to contextualize the *Treatise* within Mediterranean and East Asian discourses found in specific *Canterbury Tales*, including those told by the Prioress, the Squire, and the Man of Law.⁷³ In perhaps the most expansive study on the astrolabe's impact on Chaucer's poetry, Marijane Osbourn claims that Chaucer wrote the *Treatise* at the same time as *The Canterbury Tales*.⁷⁴ Her pivotal reading of the *Squire's Tale*, for instance, makes a case for a "disguised" correspondence between the story's mechanical horse of brass and an astrolabe that reveals Chaucer's allusion to the actual celestial date during

⁷² Phillip Pulsiano, "The Twelve-Spoked Wheel of the *Summoner's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 29, no. 4 (June 1995): 382–89. J. D. North, *Chaucer's Universe* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, 1988). Nicolas de Linna and Sigmund Eisner, *The Kalendarium of Nicholas of Lynn* (London: Scolar Press, 1980). J. D. North, "Kalenderes Enlumyned Ben They: Some Astronomical Themes in Chaucer" (Parts I-III). *Review of English Studies* 20, no. 78 (May 1969): 129–54, 257–83, 418–44.

⁷³ See Lawrence Besserman, "Chaucer, Spain, and the Prioress's Antisemitism," *Viator* 35 (2004): 329–53. Marijane Osborn, "Learning How to Use the Astrolabe While Finding Chaucer's Meaning," *Al-Masaq* 13 (2001): 1–13. Dorothee Finkelstein, "The Celestial Origin of Elpheta and Algarsyf in Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*," *Euroasiatica* 4 (1970): 3–13.

⁷⁴ Marijane Osborn, *Time and the Astrolabe in The Canterbury Tales* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 32.

which the constellation Pegasus stretches across the sky.⁷⁵ Building on this argument, Osbourn suggests that Chaucer used an astrolabe to “create secular time-related structures” within the entirety of *The Canterbury Tales* and asserts that the treatise pinpoints a date which constructs the “the form of the pilgrimage” as a “a single day passing as the Pilgrims move along the way to Canterbury.”⁷⁶ However pivotal to *Canterbury Tales* studies, Osbourn’s book nonetheless overlooks the *Treatise* as a text worthy of literary consideration in its own right.

Not all critics agree that the *Treatise* should be grouped with Chaucer’s literary works. Seth Lerer, for example, suggests that constructing Chaucer as a public poet of fiction confines him to the “wiles” of literary language, and recommends that we, instead, see him as a private, “domestic” writer of doctrine.⁷⁷ Lerer reads the *Treatise* as an ideal locus of Chaucerian paternal self-definition via his son Lewis, the *Treatise*’s presumed reader, as the recipient of an antique medieval father-son inheritance. Through this father-son instructive frame, Lerer draws attention to Chaucer’s “paternalism,” and argues that this instruction is itself the product of a philosophical genealogy traced back to Macrobius. For Lerer, then, Chaucer’s authorial identity is shaped through this intimate process of parental dissemination.

⁷⁵ Osborn, *Time and the Astrolabe in The Canterbury Tales*, 52, 48. See “The Steed of Brass and Chaucer’s Astrolabe,” 34-54.

⁷⁶ Osborn, *Time and the Astrolabe in The Canterbury Tales*, 5-6. As a result of this simultaneous composing of a literary text and scientific treatise, Osborn claims that the celestial timekeeping functions of the astrolabe inform Chaucer’s ordering of the tales by means of astronomical-metaphorical language, termed *chronographiae*, which is spoken by characters in the *Tales*, 13, 31-32. For Osborn’s detailed explanation of medieval practical astronomy, see pages 11-31.

⁷⁷ Seth Lerer, “Chaucer’s Sons,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 906–15, see pages 912, 913. Highlighting Chaucer’s negativity in the *Treatise* as a literary mode pushes back on the exclusively masculine model of literary genealogy such as the one articulated by Lerer.

Indeed, others writing about the *Treatise* also look beyond its direct impact on how to read Chaucer-the-poet in order to determine how the text functions within the development of Middle English translation.⁷⁸ By looking at the linguistic and stylistic choices in the *Treatise*, scholars such as John Hagge, Edmond Basquin, and Karen and Thomas Jambeck suggest that the text models medieval technical writing in the vernacular.⁷⁹ Furthering this approach, still others claim that the *Treatise* not only exists as an example of Middle English translation, but also as a vehicle for Chaucer to pursue a *theory* of vernacular translation. They argue that by translating Latin astrolabic source material, Chaucer ranks English among the authoritative, learned languages, and calls attention to translation as a model for knowledge production. Indeed, as Andrew Cole points out, the *Treatise* expresses Chaucer's emerging theory of translation in which he "regards his English to have as much subtlety and truth value as Latin."⁸⁰ Jenna Mead supports Cole's assertion and suggests that, alongside its scientific pedagogy, the *Treatise*

⁷⁸ See Lynne Long, "Medieval Literature Through the Lens of Translation Theory: Bridging the Interpretive Gap," *Translation Studies* 3, no. 1 (2010): 61–77. Andrew Cole, *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Richard McDonald, "Exploring Chaucer's Theories of Language: 'Englyssh Suffissant' and 'Slydengness' of Tongue," *In-Between: Essays and Studies in Literary Criticism* 7, no. 1 (March 1998): 31–48. Carol Lipson, "'I N'am But a Lewd Compiler': Chaucer's 'Treatise on the Astrolabe' as Translation," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen: Bulletin de La Société Néophilologique/Bulletin of the Modern Language Society* 84, no. 2 (1983): 192–200.

⁷⁹ See John Hagge, "The First Technical Writer in English: A Challenge to the Hegemony of Chaucer," *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* 20 (1990): 269–89. George Ovitt Jr., "History, Technical Style, and Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe*," in *Creativity and the Imagination: Case Studies from the Classical Age to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Mark (ed.) Amsler, 218 pp. vols., Studies in Science & Culture: 3 (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1987), 34–58. Sigmund Eisner, "Chaucer as a Technical Writer," *The Chaucer Review* 19, no. 3 (1985): 179–201. Edmond A. Basquin, "The First Technical Writer in English: Geoffrey Chaucer," *Technical Communication* 28 (1981): 22–24. Thomas J. Jambeck and Karen K. Jambeck, "Chaucer's 'Treatise on the Astrolabe': A Handbook for the Medieval Child," *Children's Literature* 3 (1974): 117–22.

⁸⁰ Andrew Cole, "Chaucer's English Lesson," *Speculum* 77, no. 4 (October 2002): 1128–67, see page 1153.

lays out a linguistic “cosmology” of the vernacular.⁸¹ Likewise, Christine Chism suggests that the linguistic potential of the *Treatise*’s translation project actually serves the greater function of constructing a “theoretical model for experimental knowledge production itself.”⁸² Most recently, Jamie Taylor reads Chaucer’s “vernacular imaginary” as an ideology of communal “Englishness” in the *Treatise*’s Prologue in which a loving parent guides the technical learning of a child.⁸³

While scholars who read the *Treatise* literarily and linguistically point to the text’s impact on understanding Chaucer’s poetry and Chaucer’s theories of translation, I am more interested in the way that both perspectives may work more comprehensively for the text: how *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* itself constructs a poetic field imagined out of the structure of the astrolabe, the laws of astronomy, and Middle English translation. My approach draws from Lisa Cooper’s recent work on the *Treatise* which identifies a relationship between Chaucer’s narrative and technical writing by considering Caroline Levine’s New Formalism.⁸⁴ Cooper reads the *Treatise* as an active component in a moving network that consists of literary form, medieval astronomy, the physical instrument of the astrolabe, and the user’s body. Cooper’s methodology of integrating

⁸¹ Jenna Mead, “Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Treatise on the Astrolabe*,” *Literature Compass* 3, no. 5 (2006): 973–91, see page 985.

⁸² Christine Chism, “Transmitting the Astrolabe: Chaucer, Islamic Astronomy, and the Astrolabic Text,” in *Medieval Textual Cultures: Agents of Transmission, Translation and Transformation* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2016), 85–120, see page 86.

⁸³ Jamie Taylor, “‘A Suffisant Astrolabic’: Childish Desire, Fatherly Affection, and English Devotion in the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 39, no. 1 (2017): 249–74, see pages 250–51. Taylor suggests that the Prologue’s construction of childishness and fatherly love sets up a political allegory that reveals a desire for English subjects to form a united nation around a sovereign as their vernacular community comes into being, 255–57.

⁸⁴ Lisa Cooper, “Figures for ‘Gretter Knowing’: Forms in the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*,” in *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form*, ed. Jessica Rosenfeld and Thomas Prendergast (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 99–124.

New Formalism with medieval theories of science coaxes out two valences of the text—the textual and the material—that situates Chaucer’s written computations, when performed on the astrolabe, as “a kind of stable container.”⁸⁵

Likewise, I also draw on Christopher Cannon’s generic and historical approach to the *Treatise* which identifies a progression from grammar-school writing to literary style. Cannon argues that by transitioning from Latin to English, Chaucer modifies traditional pedagogical techniques that “could be recruited for more poetic ends.”⁸⁶ Cannon refers to two specific instances of “striking” literary imagery in the *Treatise* but concludes that they “are unrepresentative of Chaucer’s general practice in the *Treatise* as a whole.”⁸⁷ What I would like to argue, instead, is that the *Treatise*’s grammar-school form does not preclude its literary production. Rather, the deployment of negative language from translated to non-translated material blurs the distinction that separates Chaucer’s role as

⁸⁵ Cooper, “Figures for ‘Gretter Knowing,’” 112.

⁸⁶ Christopher Cannon, *From Literacy to Literature: England, 1300-1400*, 1 edition (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 110. Cannon coins the term “grammaticalization” to describe the practice of fourteenth-century poets who committed to writing in English after having learned grammar in Latin. Cannon believes that this process “elevated grammar into something like a ‘literary technique’...of allegory, metaphor, and image,” 12. For more on Latin grammar and vernacular translation, see the epilogue in Katharine Breen, *Imagining an English Reading Public, 1150-1400* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) and Russell A. Potter, “Chaucer and the Authority of Language: The Politics and Poetics of the Vernacular in Late Medieval England,” *Assays: Critical Approaches to Medieval and Renaissance Texts* 6 (1991): 73–91. For more information on the increase in vernacular translations in female monastic communities, see Linda Olson, “‘Swete Cordyall’ of ‘Lytterature’: Some Middle English Manuscripts from the Cloister,” in *Opening Up Middle English Manuscripts: Literary and Visual Approaches*, ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Maidie Hilmo, xxxii, 392 pp. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2012), 291–354.

⁸⁷ Cannon, *From Literacy to Literature*, 105. Cannon repeatedly describes Chaucer’s work in the *Treatise* as producing “a whole narrative with a beginning, middle, and an end” that possesses a “narrative depth...usually described by literary criticism as ‘realism’” (108, 109). The narrativity Cannon rightly observes contradicts denial of its literary status. While Cannon’s study is a vital contribution to the larger topic of literacy in fourteenth-century England, it robs the *Treatise* of literary status in its strict categorizing of the text as one type of composition at the expense of any other.

translator and poet by chronicling the process in which literary narrative is brought into being.

This chapter builds on the analysis of Cooper and Cannon by arguing that the *Treatise* exists beyond the aim of teaching the technical use of the astrolabe.⁸⁸ Instead, Chaucer invites his reader to reimagine the cosmos in poetic terms by building into his writing frequent moments of linguistic negation and recurring motifs of material absence. As I argue, negative language provides insight into the *Treatise* in two ways. First, it makes perceivable the moments in which Chaucer mediates between the roles of translator and poet. By tracking shifts in negative language, we can observe when Chaucer is performing the technical task of adapting the content of his Latin sources and when he transitions to the *narrative* act of composing independent material. And second, freed from the task of adhering to existing content, Chaucer deploys negative language to represent the irregularities of the observable universe normally overlooked by a positivist scientific discourse. In this narrative mode, negative language helps to foreground a lack of conformity in nature by drawing attention to interruptions in planetary movement and focusing on gaps in time that reveal it to be an unreliable metric. Next, I locate metaphors of absence in the device's technical vocabulary of holes and in Chaucer's writing out of the character of Lewis. Lastly, I look at two passages from the *Treatise* featuring the highest concentration of negative language and show how they produce a poetic reconfiguration of planetary bodies. By reading the *Treatise* as a meaningful composition

⁸⁸ Regarding the text's influence on later production of the device, Catherine Eagleton suggests that diagrams in Chaucer's *Treatise* informed future constructions of astrolabes after the text was in circulation. Catherine Eagleton, "'Chaucer's Own Astrolabe': Text, Image and Object," *Studies in History & Philosophy of Science Part A* 38, no. 2 (June 2007): 303–26.

in its own right, we can see imaginative possibilities that go deeper than just the text's impact on Chaucer's other poetic texts or on his theories of translation alone.

The Textual Mechanics of the *Treatise*

In many ways, Chaucer's *Treatise* follows a tradition of other instruction manuals on the astrolabe. The *Treatise*'s short Prologue sets forth Chaucer's intention to produce a text with five parts with a clear development from practical to theoretical learning. The Prologue maps out a pedagogical strategy that enables the astrolabe's operator to first understand the device and later to comprehend its relationship to the larger workings of the universe. The first part explains "the figures and the membres" of the astrolabe itself, the second part teaches the "verrey practik" of applied calculations on the device, the third part contains the "tables of longitudes and latitudes" of fixed stars, the fourth part supplies principles of the "moevyng" of celestial bodies, and the fifth part introduces astronomy's "generall rewles of theorik" (P.66, 70, 78, 88, 103). Out of these five divisions, however, just two are complete, leaving us with a Prologue and Parts One and Two, suggesting that Chaucer never finished his writing.⁸⁹

Despite providing just a portion of the intended whole—thirty-two copies of the *Treatise* survive—the *Treatise* is thought to have been Chaucer's second most widely copied and circulated text behind *The Canterbury Tales*. In order to grasp the literary dimensions of the *Treatise*, I will lay out Chaucer's translation strategies by reviewing how he adapts two of his main sources. These strategies are perhaps best introduced using Chaucer's opening pledge in the Prologue to "shew" his reader "under the full light

⁸⁹ Accompanying editions of the *Treatise* are Supplementary Propositions. These additional calculations for measuring the heights of towers and forecasting tides are of dubious authorship and will not be reviewed here.

reules and naked words in Englissh, for Latyn canst thou yit but small” (P.25-27). In this statement, Chaucer expands a strictly technical objective that brings into focus a larger project of linguistic access by making available to a new set of Middle English vernacular readers the information contained in Latin astrolabe treatises.

Chaucer is thought to have drawn from two main sources: Pseudo-Messahalla’s eighth-century *De Compositone et Operatione Astrolabii* and Iohannes de Sacrobosco’s early thirteenth-century *Tractatus de Sphaera*.⁹⁰ In fact, two-thirds of Chaucer’s *Treatise* bears its most recognizable influence from *De Compositone et Operatione Astrolabii*, misattributed to the early Egyptian-Jewish astronomer Masha’allah Ibn Athari, who is often referred to as “Messahalla.” It is thought that Chaucer had access to a Latin translation of Pseudo-Messahalla’s Arabic text. In one excerpt from *De Compositone et Operatione Astrolabii* on determining the location of a planet, Pseudo-Messahalla writes:

Loca planetarum poteris in alio modo inuestigare, et verius. Sume altitudinem planete quum est iuxta lineam medii celi, *et serua eam*. Item, sume ad eandem horan ascendens per aliquam stellarum fixarum, *et hoc serua eciam cum hora*; posthec vide quum ille planeta incipiat descendere a linea meddii celi, et sume eius altitudinem quum sit equalis altitudini prius sumpte ante lineam medii celi; et iterum in eadem hora sume ascendens et horam per aliquam stellum fixam; deinde sume medium inter ascendens primum et secundum per almuri in limbo; et readus qui ceciderit tunc super lineam medii celi, in illo est planeta. (2.34, emphasis mine)

You may find out the places of planets in another manner, and with greater exactitude. Take the altitude of the planet when it is near the line of mid-sky, and *keep note of it*. Also at the same hour take the ascendant by any

⁹⁰ Sigmund Eisner notes that, at times, Chaucer faithfully preserves his original material, but is also just as likely to expand that material “at almost every point” (196). While Chaucer accurately renders the content of Messahalla in the treatise, he also “amplifies each description” with additional text not in his source. Sigmund Eisner, “Chaucer as a Technical Writer,” *The Chaucer Review* 19, no. 3 (1985): 179–201, see 196, 190. Likewise, Lisa Cooper makes reference to three personal anecdotes that Chaucer uses to infuse narrative into the technical information of his source material. Cooper suggests that the anecdotes represent the formal structure that shapes the information communicated by the text, which comes mostly from translations of Messahalla and Sacrobosco. However, the personal narratives are moments of new material in which Chaucer breaks from his sources. Cooper, “Figures for ‘Gretter Knowing,’” see 112, 116.

of the fixed stars, and *keep account of this also* with the hour; later on, observe when the planet begins to descend from the line of mid-sky; and again at the same hour take the ascendant and hour by hour by some fixed star. Take the mean between the first and second ascendants by the muri on the rim; then the degree which will then fall upon the line of mid-sky is where the planet is. (2.34, emphasis mine)⁹¹

Chaucer faithfully renders Pseudo-Messahalla's instructions for finding the first and second ascendants of a star or planet. However, Chaucer also alters his source's instructions by building in two noticeable moments of negative language:

Tak the altitude of this sterre whan he is on the est syde of the lyne meridionall, as nye as thou mayst gesse; and tak an ascendent anon right by som manere sterre fix which that thou knowist; *and forget not the altitude of the firste sterre ne thyn ascendent*. And whan that this is don, aspye diligently whan this same firste sterre passith eny thyng the south westward; and cacche him anon right in the same nombre of altitude on the west syde of this lyne meridional, as he was kaught on the est syde; and tak a newe ascendent anon-ryght by som maner sterre fix which that thou knowist, *and forget not this secunde ascendent*. And whan that this is don, rekne than how many degrees ben bitwixe the firste ascendent and the secunde ascendent; and rekne wel the myddel degre bitwene bothe ascendentes, and set thilke myddel degre upon thyn est orizonte; and wayte than what degre that sitte upon the lyne meridional, and tak there the verrey degre of the ecliptik in which the sterre stondith for the tyme. (2.17.1-23, emphasis mine)

As he reproduces the steps for taking a first and a second ascendant, in place of Pseudo-Messahalla's wording to "keep note" of those measurements, Chaucer, instead, writes that the reader should "forget *not*." By rejecting Pseudo-Messahalla's affirmative vocabulary in favor of the word "forget" (with the opposite meaning of "to keep"), paired with the negative adverb "not," suggests a preference for negative language. In other words, while Pseudo-Messahalla's text communicates what the reader should do, Chaucer favors telling his reader what should *not* be done.

⁹¹ *Chaucer and Messahalla on the Astrolabe, Early Science in Oxford*, v. 5 (Oxford: University Press, 1929), 227, 184-185. Latin translation is R.T. Gunther's.

In addition to linguistic negativity, Chaucer's passage also loosens the strict scientific discourse of Pseudo-Messahalla. For instance, the first line from the quote in *De Compositione* tells its reader that the steps that follow shall aid in finding the location of a planet with "exactitude," or *verius*. This technical vocabulary conveys the expectation for precise astrolabe measurements and orderly movements of the stars and planets. Chaucer's version, however, dispenses with this by telling his reader to "gesse" an altitude reading "as nye as thou mayest." With an emphasis on estimating and judging on the part of the astrolabe's operator, Chaucer negates the exactness in Pseudo-Messahalla's writing to suggest that the instrument and the cosmos are in fact irregular and cannot always be accurately predicted.

Chaucer introduces negativity into Pseudo-Messahalla's material as well as into the work of his second major source, Iohannes de Sacrobosco. Sacrobosco's *De Sphaera* gives an overview of the spheres that make up the heaven and the earth and explains the basic movement of planetary bodies. *De Sphaera* was the most widely used astronomy textbook between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Chaucer draws on some of this elementary material as a foundation for the more technical instructions for the astrolabe. Though direct correspondence between Sacrobosco's text and Chaucer's *Treatise* is limited to just three sections, it is one of the few texts that Chaucer cites by name, referring to it as the "Tretys of the Speer" (1.21.82-83).⁹² The following passage from *De Sphaera*, for example, is adopted by Chaucer, and, as with Pseudo-Messahalla, is subject to the installation of negative language. Sacrobosco writes:

Horum autem circulorum quidam sunt maiores, quidam minores, ut sensui patet. Maior enim circulus in sphaera dicitur qui, descriptus in superficie spere super eius centrum, sphaeram dividit in duo equalia; mino

⁹² Eisner, "Chaucer as a Technical Writer," 197.

ero qui, descriptus in superficie spere, eam non dividit in duo equalia sed in portiones inequales.

Inter circulos vero maiores primo dicendum est de equinoctiali. Est igitur equinoctialis circulus quidam dividens speram in duo equalia secundum quamlibet sui partem eque distans ab utroque polo. Et dicitur equinoctialis quia, quando sol transit per illum, quod est bis in anno, scilicet in principio Arietis et in principio Libre, est equinoctium in universa terra. Unde appellatur equator diei et noctis, quia adequate diem artificialem nocti, et dicitur cingulus primi motus.

Unde sciendum quod primus motus dicitur motus primi mobilis, hoc est, spere none sive celi ultimi, qui est ab oriente per occidentem rediens iterum in orientem...

Secundus motus est firmament et planetorum contrarius huic ab occidente per orientem iterum rediens in occidentem...

Dictur etiam cingulus primi motus quia dividit primum mobile, scilicet speram nonam, in duo equalia distans a polis mundi. (85-87)

THE EQUINOCTIAL.—Of the great circles we must first mention the equinoctial. The equinoctial is a circle dividing the sphere into two equal parts and equidistant at its every point from either pole. And it is called “equinoctial” because, when the sun crosses it, which happens twice a year, namely, in the beginning of Aries and in the beginning of Libra, there is equinox the world over. Wherefore it is termed the “equator of day and night,” because it makes the artificial day equal to the night and ‘tis called the “belt of the first movement. THE TWO MOVEMENTS AGAIN.—Be it understood that the “first movement” means the movement of the *primum mobile*, that is, of the ninth sphere or last heaven, which movement is from east through west back to east again... The second movement is of the firmament and planets contrary to this, from west through east back to west again... THE NORTH AND SOUTH POLES.—’Tis called the “belt of the first movement” because it divides the *primum mobile* or ninth sphere into two equal parts and is itself equally distant from the poles of the world. (123-124)⁹³

As with Pseudo-Messahalla, Chaucer renders the bulk of Sacrobosco’s content.

However, in this case, he places the sections in a new order—first introducing the equinoctial circle, then the north and south poles, and finally, the first movement. Though

⁹³ Lynn Thorndike, *The Sphere of Sacrobosco and Its Commentators* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1987), 1. The three sections from Chaucer’s *Treatise* that mostly closely follow *De Sphaera* are 1.17, 1.21, and 2.39. Latin translation is Thordike’s.

the material is faithfully rendered, its reordering opens up to Chaucer's own material which features negative language:

The myddel cercle in wydnesse, of these 3, is clepid the cercle equinoxiall, upon which turnith evermo the hevedes of Aries and Libra.... This same cercle is clepid also Equator, that is the weyer of the day; for whan the sonne is in the hevedes of Aries and Libra, than ben the dayes and the nightes ylike of lengthe in all the world. And therfore ben these 2 signes called the equinoxiiis. And all that moeveth withinne the hevedes of these Aries and Libra, his moevyng is clepid northward; and all that moevith withoute these hevedes, his moevyng is clepid southward, as fro the equinoxiall. *Tak kep of these latitudes north and south, and forget it nat. By this cercle equinoxiall ben considred the houres of the klokke; for evermo the arising of 15 degrees of the equinoxiall makith an houre equal of the klokke.* This equinoxiall is clepid the gurdel of the first moevyng, or ellis of the firste moevable. And note that the firste moevyng is clepid moevyng of the firste moevable of the 8 speer, which moevyng is from est to west, and eft ageyn into est. (1.17.14-40, emphasis mine)

The main revision appears halfway into the passage in which Chaucer supplements the information on the equinoctial circle with his own original content that defines the angle of any body that moves within it and its conversion to the hours on a clock. Just before this, Chaucer signals his original content by reminding the reader to “Tak kep of these latitudes north and south, and *forget it nat.*” Once again, the reminder to “forget not” marks Chaucer's break from his source material. In this example, more than a comment to retain specific calculations, the reminder forces a reflective moment upon the *purpose* for understanding spherical movement, asserting that the content is included to be in service to measurements on the astrolabe. Not only does the negative imperative “forget it *nat*” remind its audience to commit the information to memory for application on the device, but it reinforces Chaucer's pattern of deploying negative language in the very moment that his writing departs from his sources.

As I have shown, when translating the treatises of the past, Chaucer introduces negative language when he deviates from his sources. In fact, Chaucer heightens negative language even further in sections of the *Treatise* with no counterpart in Pseudo-Messahalla or Sacrabosco. In passages that translate sources, Chaucer engages in meta-representation that uses negation to draw the reader's attention to the written content itself, whether that be translated material or new writing. In contrast, shifts in usage from translated content to source-less material is likewise reflected in the subject matter that negative language addresses. In other words, rather than deploying it as a mechanism for translation purposes, Chaucer implements negative language to generate his source-less writing. In sections of original material, negative language integrates written content with its object (the cosmos). This occurs first by shaping the representations of the observable universe, and second, by highlighting irregularities in commonly held principles about planetary movement which blurs the boundaries of scientific "exactitude." In a conclusion not attributed to any source, for example, Chaucer writes:

Set the centre of the sterre upon the est orisonte, and loke what degre of eny signe that sitt upon the same orisonte at that same tyme. And understond wel that with that same degree arisith that same sterre. And thys merveylous arisyng with a straunge degre in another signe is by cause that the latitude of the sterre fix is either north or south fro the equinoxiall. But sothly the latitudes of planetes be comounly rekened fro the ecliptyk, by cause that *noon* of hem declyneth but fewe degrees out fro the brede of the zodiak. And tak god kep of this chapitre of arisyng of celestiale bodies; for truste wel that *neyther* mone *ne* sterre, as in our embelif orisonte, arisith with that same degre of his longitude saaf in oo cas, and that is whan they have *no* latitude fro the ecliptyk lyne. (2.19.1-18, emphasis mine)

This passage describes the complex calculations for measuring the correspondence between the distance of a star rising over the horizon and a zodiac degree

that is in ascendance with that star.⁹⁴ Rather than simply reserving negation to remind the reader of valuable information to commit to memory, Chaucer disburses negative language—*noon*, *neyther*, *ne*, and *no*—throughout the passage to structure vital explanatory content. In particular, negation accounts for exceptions in the rising of celestial bodies. Though he opens with a rule of correspondence, Chaucer places emphasis on the *lack* of conformity to the rule. Each negative illustrates the conditions that disrupt alignment: a small variance in latitude as well as a total lack of latitude.

Structures of Absence in the Device

Just as negative language produces narrative out of the absence of source material, so is the *Treatise* informed by a deeper sense of negativity within the astrolabe itself in which its network of parts is ordered by the relationship to the large hole in its center. Very early in Part One of the *Treatise*, Chaucer acknowledges this negativity in a step by step description of the astrolabe's components. First, Chaucer introduces the ring fastened to the top of the "moder," the thickest plate, and goes on to describe the thin plates that fit inside its cavity as "compowned for diverse clymates" (1.3.3-4). On the top of the thin plates, Chaucer explains, lies the rete, a disk with cut-outs with the likeness of "a nett or of a web of a loppe," that rotates over the plates to simulate positions of fixed stars and the sun's path (1.3.5).

Chaucer then gives an overview of the reverse side of the astrolabe by detailing the line dividing the "moder" in half, explaining that the

lyne, fro the forseide ring unto the centre of the large *hool* amidde, is clepid the south lyne, or ellis the lyne meridional. And the remenaunt of this lyne down to the bordure is clepid the north lyne, or ellis the lyne of midnight. (1.4.4-8, emphasis mine)

⁹⁴ Because this ascendancy will either have a positive latitude or a negative latitude, the points on the zodiac will either appear earlier or later, except when the planet is on the ecliptic.

The line runs from the top of the “moder” straight through the center of the hole and down to the bottom. To clearly distinguish both segments of the line, Chaucer uses the hole as a reference point: above the hole, the line is called the “south lyne,” and below the hole, the line is called the “north lyne.” In the next section, the hole again features as the main point through which a perpendicular line of the same length crosses. The line that starts from one edge through the hole is called the “est lyne,” and the line that begins from the hole to the opposite edge is called the “west lyne” (1.5.5, 8).

In concert with a pin that constrains each part, the hole grounds a collection of individual components by transforming them into the intricate moving network of a single device. Therefore, the large hole in the center encodes a negativity that makes possible its operation. It does so by acting as the focal point of the astrolabe’s structure by housing a “grete pyn” that “streynith all these parties to-hepe” (1.14.7, 6).

This opening of the hole in the material object thus makes mechanical unity possible and leads to the astrolabe’s other, and perhaps most intriguing, function. As the primary orienting force that thematically joins the device with the celestial spheres it represents, the hole becomes the text’s central metaphor. Indeed, as Lisa Cooper points out, the *Treatise* frequently invites its reader to imagine blank spaces by provoking an erasure of formal and geographical limits.⁹⁵ Though she does not specifically

⁹⁵ Cooper, “Figures for ‘Gretter Knowing,’” 117. See also Alfred Hiatt, “Blank Spaces on the Earth,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 223–50, 224. Hiatt’s study on cartography from the classical period to the eighteenth century analyzes the representation of blank spaces on maps which invited the mapping of unmapped land as well as the “projection of the self onto the map,” 223. The impulse to fill empty spaces with text later brought about European colonial activity to enter, explore, and occupy. See also Kathy Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000–1534*, 1 edition (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006). Taylor’s “‘A Suffisant Astrolabie.’” points out that Lewis’s Oxford-centric astrolabe signifies a universalization of the geographically-isolated Oxford during the Schism and the Hundred Years War, placing it “onto a global stage via the mobility of technology and translation,” 271.

acknowledge the hole in the device, Cooper does suggest that Chaucer treats the object of the astrolabe as a portal through which the *Treatise's* reader can imaginatively shift between the terrestrial realms and the heavens. Her first example explores “the *Treatise's* attention to the hierarchies of the cosmos” in a description of the “diverse ascensiouns of signes in diverse places” (2.26.3).⁹⁶ Cooper argues that by expanding the reader’s attention to spaces beyond one’s “own horizon to ‘thilke cuntrey’ at the equator,” Chaucer moves “from the astrolabe to the sphere, from the flat to the round, from the closed to the open” (2.26.12).⁹⁷ The second example modulates that openness with a procedure that uses the astrolabe as a compass by taking

thin Astrelabie with bothe hondes sadly and slighly, and let the sonne shyne through bothe holes of thy rule, and slighly in thilke shynying lat thine Astrelabie kouche adoun evene upon a smoothe ground, and than wol the verrey lyne meridional of thin Astrelabie lye evene south, and the east lyne wol lye est, and the west lyne west, and north lyne north, so that...hast thou the 4 quarters of the firmament. (2.29.17-28)

In response to this passage, Cooper writes that the exercise invokes someone “clinging to his astrolabe for dear life just before he sets it down so that it may...act as a weighty brass anchor, tethering him to his place in the cosmos.”⁹⁸ I would add that this second example hinges upon the mechanical holes in the astrolabe which make possible the *Treatise's* journeying between the earth and the “firmament.”⁹⁹ Indeed, even the negative space evoked by the word “hool” is informed by semantic fluidity that at once confronts us with a sense of absence and a sense of *whole*-ness. For the reader of the

⁹⁶ Cooper, “Figures for ‘Gretter Knowing,’” 118.

⁹⁷ Cooper, “Figures for ‘Gretter Knowing,’” 117, 118.

⁹⁸ Cooper, “Figures for ‘Gretter Knowing,’” 118.

⁹⁹ Cooper, “Figures for ‘Gretter Knowing,’” 118. Cooper characterizes this as the “continual, oscillating movement between spaces, places, and times.”

Treatise, therefore, the “large hool” comes to not only signify the impact of absence and wholeness in calculations performed on a material instrument, but also produces an opening through which a reimagined world may be glimpsed.

Absence as Narrative Production in *The Miller’s Tale*

Rather than suggesting that the *Treatise*’s sole value resides in its impact on other poems, I would like to show that Chaucer’s other work can actually enhance our understanding of the representational strategies of the *Treatise*. For example, *The Miller’s Tale*, like *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*, is pervaded with holes that transform absence into a state of “gretter knowing” (*Treatise* 68). One of those holes from the tale, in fact, belongs to an astrolabe, making the *Miller’s Tale* the only other work by Chaucer that makes explicit reference to an astrolabe. This “astrelabie” is owned by Nicholas, a clerk, and serves as a vital component to Nicholas’s self-representation as an astrologer (3209). The tale’s action, like the astrolabe in Nicholas’s possession, is oriented around encounters with holes that generate symbolic openings through which narrative unfolds. Moreover, as the holes move from passive transmissions of information to dynamic absences with which characters actively engage, the tale dramatizes a similar shift in Chaucer’s use of negative language in the *Treatise* as it adjusts between translation and narrative.

From the outset, the tale indicates Nicholas’s expertise in astrology when we learn that “al his fantasye / Was turned for to lerne astrologye” and that men often consulted with him to predict “what sholde bifall” (3191-92, 3197). Accordingly, Nicholas uses a hole to begin his deception of John the carpenter so he can sleep with Alison, John’s wife. After Nicholas feigns illness in his room for two days, The Miller sends his “knaves”

to check on him. The servant knocks on Nicholas's locked door and cries out for him, but it is "al for noght" as "he herde nat a word" in reply (3439). In one of the planks of the door, the servant discovers a space through which he can peer:

An *hole* he foond, ful lowe upon a bord,
Ther as the cat was wont in for to crepe,
And at that *hole* he looked in ful depe,
And at the laste he hadde of hym a sight.
This Nicholas sat evere capyng upright,
As he had kiked on the newe moone. (3440-3445, emphasis mine)

The hole in the door provides its observer with a negative space from which to gain a "ful depe" gaze that fills up his field of vision (not unlike a sighting hole in an astrolabe). It is this sight of Nicholas gazing straight up at the ceiling that leads John to conclude that the clerk "'is falle, with his astromye / In some woodnesse or in som agonye'" (3451-52).

Nicholas's staged scene draws John into a secret conference inside his chamber and reveals the cause of his condition. Nicholas invents a story about a flood he has forecasted by means of "astrologye" that will "dreynt" the entire world (3514, 3520). All the while, the astrolabe, prominently displayed on the shelf "couched at his bedded heed," covertly authenticates Nicholas's claims and convinces John to quickly begin preparations to survive the flood (3211).

The initial hole sets up the flood ruse that fools John by taking the form of an inert absence made from a modification of the carpenter's home—a hole in a door. Once Nicholas's plan is underway, however, more forceful collisions with holes orient the action of the tale's final lines. The next two holes take on a different function: while they are also brought about by a structural absence in the house—an open window—to trick the wooing of parish clerk Absolon, the final set of holes are put out that window and

belong to the bodies of Alison and Nicholas. The interaction between Absolon and the two embodied holes puts him into direct physical contact with them, a considerable escalation from the passive act of receiving information by gazing through a door-hole. As a result, the entanglement between Absolon and the holes of Alison and Nicholas joins the characters together, orienting them, like the hole of an astrolabe, into a single moving network.

The use to which Alison and Nicholas put the bedroom window exploits its permeability of inner and outer by placing their “holes,” the physical openings to their bodies, outside. That both scenes take place in the blackness of night further emphasizes absence by revoking Absolon’s sense of sight.¹⁰⁰ Not only does the pitch-black night provide the backdrop for these pivotal scenes, but it is also an ideal time when one would use an astrolabe.

First, a wooing Absolon stands at the window, the primary point of access between the house’s interior and its exterior, and requests a kiss from his paramour. Alison then “at the *wyndow* out...putte hir *hole*” to fool Absolon into kissing “hir naked *ers*” (3732, 3734, emphasis mine). This encounter with Alison’s hole causes Absolon to quickly shift from blissful ignorance to disgust over the knowledge that his kiss was not delivered upon the mouth of his beloved. From this point on, Absolon determines that he will “sette nat a kers” on “paramours” (3755). Thus, through her intimate abuse on

¹⁰⁰ Osborn, *Time and the Astrolabe in The Canterbury Tales*. Osborne considers the timing of this Monday evening and suggests that Nicholas’s erroneous astronomical prediction has inadvertently caused a “quartering of the night” scheduled according to the planetary hours and has invoked planetary influence (Venus, the moon (Alisoun’s buttocks), and Mars), 179, 183-87. This produces a chaotic outcome for each character that aligns Nicholas with Theseus in *The Knight’s Tale* in which all events, however scheduled, are “beyond the grasp of both protagonists attempting to seize control,” 188.

Absolon's sensibilities, Alison shows her hole and the open window to be more than voids, but rather orienting forces that draw the characters' bodies together.

Next, with the intention of humiliating Absolon a second time, Nicholas "up the *wyndowe* died" and "out his *ers* he putteth pryvely" (3801-3802). This final trick is thwarted by a canny and vengeful Absolon who, inviting a second kiss from Alison, "was redy with his iren hoot, / And Nicholas *amydde* the *ers* he smoot" (3809-3810, emphasis mine). The hot iron serves as a violent presence that occupies absence by being thrust in the middle of Nicholas's hole, "*amydde* the *ers*."

By burning Nicholas, Absolon triggers the final scene culminating from this series of mounting entanglements with holes: Absolon kissing Alison's hole, Absolon jamming the hot iron in Nicholas's hole, Nicholas crying out for water, which, finally, wakes John, who mistakes the calls as the arriving flood and violently tumbles from the rafters in his tub. This climactic spectacle shows that each of the seemingly-unregulated actions that occur are precipitated by holes which integrate the body of each character into a single synchronic narrative system.

Lewis: Chaucer's Textually Absent Son

We can draw the way that Chaucer dramatizes dynamic collisions with holes in the *Miller's Tale* into a reading of the *Treatise*. Chaucer constructs a similar textual hole in the *Treatise* with the withdrawal of the central figure of Lewis. When read in the strict context of a scientific composition, Lewis's gradual departure from the text can pose some interpretive challenges because of the way Chaucer establishes Lewis as an overt presence in the very first line of Prologue: "Lytle Lowys my sone, I aperceyve wel by certeyne evydences thyn abilitie to lerne sciences touching nombres and proporcions"

(P.1-3). This statement immediately conveys the pedagogical aim of teaching Lewis, presumably Chaucer's own son, how to use an astrolabe. It also suggests that Lewis is Chaucer's most overt narrative invention in the text when compared to Chaucer's sources, who never define a named addressee.

Whether Lewis was Chaucer's actual son and intended audience, or simply a rhetorical device has been widely debated.¹⁰¹ Real or imagined, Lewis does frame the entire text. In fact, Lewis actively populates the Prologue and Part One when Chaucer explicitly addresses him as "Lowys" and "my sone" (P.1, P.28, P.50, 1.6.3). After Part One, Section Six, however, the words "Lowys" and "sone" no longer appear, and Lewis

¹⁰¹ The identity of "lyte Lowys" has drawn considerable attention from readers of the *Treatise*. Some believe that Lewis did indeed exist and was either Chaucer's actual child or the child of a close friend. Of those who believe that Lewis is a historical figure, and Chaucer's actual son, biographer Derek Pearsall does not shy away from considering Lewis as either a late product of Chaucer's marriage or of an assault of Cecily Chaumpaigne, see Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), 216. Many critics are reluctant to present the Chaumpaigne option alongside other possibilities. More recently, J. Allen Mitchell accepts Lewis as Chaucer's young son for the purposes of exemplifying Mitchell's own "medieval child" motif, but does not interrogate Lewis' identity or engage with the debate over his maternity, see J. Allan Mitchell, *Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2014). Others are less concerned about the authenticity of Lewis' existence and choose to interpret Lewis in terms of the broader aims of the treatise to address an English reading audience. Andrew Cole reads Lewis as Chaucer's stand-in for paternal "authorial reflexivity," see Cole, "Chaucer's English Lesson," 1165n150. Lisa Cooper reads Lewis as a "generally implied reader," see Cooper, "Figures for 'Gretter Knowing,'" 120n3. Jamie Taylor claims that Lewis is the "rhetorical and ideological center" of the *Treatise's* representational strategy by arguing that Chaucer's narrative of paternal love for a child functions to shore up an "English" communal identity and the "stakes of writing in English," 250, 259. Taylor locates counterparts to Lewis in Chaucer's other literary children, Sophie, Virginia, Maurice, to suggest that these characters all in some way "perform ideological work in the service of future- and fantasy oriented...sense of communal devotion," see Taylor, "'A Suffisant Astrolabe,'" 259. For more writing on Lewis and the text's audience, see Stefania D'Agata D'Ottavi, "Between Astronomy and Astrology: Chaucer's 'Treatise on the Astrolabe' and the Measurement of Time in Late-Medieval England," in *Medieval and Early Modern Literature, Science and Medicine*, ed. Rachel Falconer and Denis Renevey (Tübingen: Narr Verlag: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature, 2013), 49–66. Edgar Laird, "Chaucer and Friends: The Audience for the 'Treatise on the Astrolabe,'" *Chaucer Review* 41, no. 4 (April 2007): 439–44. Edward J. Milowicki, "Chaucer, Astronomy, and Astrology: A Courtly Connection," in *Courtly Arts and the Art of Courtliness*, ed. Keith Busby and Christopher Kleinhenz, xiv, 788 pp. vols. (Cambridge, England: Brewer, 2006), 477–88. Milowicki intriguingly suggests that Chaucer named Lewis after the son of Charles V of France.

begins to recede.¹⁰² Chaucer does make mention of positioning a disembodied “thombe” here or directing “thyn eye” there in subsequent instructions for the device (1.13.5, 1.18.17, 2.2.2, 2.23.38-42, 2.29.17). He also includes reminders to “forget not” specific pieces of information (1.6.3, 1.17.31, 2.2.12, 2.17.5, 2.17.14, 2.22.14). Thus, while Lewis diminishes as an active figure, we are partially aware of him via references to body parts, physical actions, and cues about memory.

In Part Two, Lewis loses status as an embodied, thinking figure and completely disappears like the rocks in *The Franklin’s Tale*. The resulting effect makes clear that from our entry into the text, Chaucer uses the textual void left by Lewis’s absence, like the hole in the astrolabe and the holes in *The Miller’s Tale*, to orient the other written components of the *Treatise*. To perceive this, one may read Lewis’s appearance and disappearance like a literary metaphor in the context of the text’s cosmological imagery.¹⁰³ As one might do when interpreting a Middle English poem, for instance, we can read the word “sone,” son, in the *Treatise’s* opening line, as invoking “sonne,” sun, and vice versa. I would like to suggest here that the text’s first line, “Lowys my sone,” acts as a figurative rising of the sun within the *Treatise’s* fictive universe. In fact,

¹⁰² Beyond viewing Lewis as a pedagogical “audience persona” is the astute (and largely un-cited) observation that Lewis is not an absolute presence in the text: “[o]nce Little Lewis has learned what an astrolabe is, he is no longer necessary, and like the Fool in *King Lear* he disappears,” see Eisner, “Chaucer as a Technical Writer,” 181. In other words, Eisner argues that at first, Lewis is foregrounded for teaching purposes, but then vanishes once the material has been sufficiently introduced. This matters for two reasons. First, Eisner’s literary comparison to Shakespeare is telling because it locates Lewis in the literary—as both a fictive reader and a character in the “plot” of the treatise as a teaching text. Second, Eisner identifies this as a linear process: first Lewis is present to aid in transmitting information, and then he is dropped when no longer needed. Eisner’s observation supports my claim that Lewis is at once a presence and an absence.

¹⁰³ By sustaining the second person narrative, spectral remnants of Lewis do persist through pronoun use of “thei” and “thee.” However, these pronouns only make reference to Lewis who is no longer explicitly addressed.

although the appellation “Louis/Lewis” is of unknown origin, the OED hypothesizes that it may derive from the French *lever* or Latin *levāre*, meaning “to raise,” suggesting that Lewis’s name itself carries with it a sense of the sun’s upward movement.¹⁰⁴ Chaucer subsequently mirrors the falling of the sun/son with Lewis’s receding and disappearance. Therefore, the process into absence that Lewis undergoes textually reenacts the sun’s movement from visible to unseen, from day to night.

In another example, Chaucer reinforces a connection between Lewis and the sun in his description of the planetary hours. Chaucer writes that “the arising of the sonne” sets the cycle of the unequal hours into motion and explains that the moment that “my sonne gon” marks the end of one cycle (2.12.1-2, 36). By attaching a possessive pronoun to the sun, the wording of the phrase “my sonne” is identical to the Prologue’s very first line, “Lowys my sone.” And while the sun “risith” on the “morwe” to begin a new solar day, Lewis does not return, effectively vacating the *Treatise*, and leaving behind a textual opening (2.12.36, 37). Moreover, because Chaucer makes Lewis the *Treatise*’s central figure—as the occasion for writing, the named addressee, the imagined reader, the impetus for vernacular translation, and the basis of the prose style—the hole that Lewis’s absence leaves in the text structures the comprehensive whole of the *Treatise*. With the added relationship between *levāre* and Lewis’s name, Lewis is our linguistic link to the sun used to mobilize the text’s moving network in the same way as the material hole in the mechanical astrolabe and the fictional holes of the *Miller’s Tale*.

¹⁰⁴ “Lewis, n.1,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, n.d.), <http://www.oed.com.silk.library.umass.edu/view/Entry/107743>. “Levator, n.,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, n.d.), <http://www.oed.com.silk.library.umass.edu/view/Entry/107640?redirectedFrom=levator&>.

Chaucer's Warning on the Ascendant: Reconfiguring Time

The heightened literary “endityng” of the *Treatise* represents the cyclical break of Lewis’ disappearance to make way for a more overt poetic presence (P.43). Occupying this absence is a literary process of negation that continues to draw the normal principles that govern the universe into narrative. For instance, in Part Two, Chaucer issues a warning concerning a set of practical measurements for time telling that involves discovering the altitudes of celestial bodies. Directly after a section on calculating the ascendant, the degree a planet or star is ascending on the eastern horizon, Chaucer includes the following advice:

But natheles this rule in generall wol I warne the for evere: *Ne* make the *nevere* bold to have take a just ascendent by thin Astrelabie, or elles to have set justly a klokke, whan eny celestial body by which that thou wenyst governe thilke thinges be nigh the south lyne. (2.3.63-68, emphasis mine)

A potential error prompts Chaucer to caution that the astrolabe’s measurements may not always be “just,” or precise, despite a presumption of “exactitude” by the *Treatise’s* source material. The reason for the warning is due to the possibility for the astrolabe to yield the wrong ascendant. If a celestial body is too close to the meridian during certain times of the day, its altitude will not change enough for the astrolabe to take an accurate altitude reading.

Use of double negation in the phrasing of “*Ne* make the *nevere* bold” heightens the text’s instructive tone to an emphatic charge that not only conditions Chaucer’s alert of the possibility for error, but asserts his own influence to foreground irregularity above the “rule in generall.” In fact, Chaucer draws special attention to an abnormality that causes entire gaps in time:

more over, by experience I wot wel that in oure orisounte, *from xi of the klokke unto oon of the klokke*, in taking of a just ascendent in a portatif Astrelabie it is to hard to knowe—I mene *from xi of the klokke before the houre of noon til oon of the klokke* next folewyng.” (2.3.75-81, emphasis mine)

It is on Chaucer’s own authority that one should avoid taking a reading on the astrolabe or setting a clock between the hours of eleven and one in his latitude. Twice stating the times represented on a clock, “from xi of the klokke unto oon of the klokke,” impresses the warning into a poetic mode of repetition. However, the repetition that emphasizes this two-hour span, intriguingly, uses the very measurements of time on the clock that cannot be known during that gap. Essentially, with negation and repetition, Chaucer stops time in the middle of the day. Chaucer, then, does not always submit to or model the laws of the material word in the *Treatise*. Rather, at times, he subjects the planetary bodies to the text’s governance. The arresting of time in these moments relocates the text into a poetic temporality. Within this reconfiguring of the laws of the universe, time goes from a reliable force precisely reflected on clocks and astrolabes to a literary device under the influence of language’s rhythms.

Poeticizing the Universe in Chaucer’s “Speciall Declaracioun”

The passage in Part Two, Section Three works to repattern the cosmos with poetic repetition that marks the stopping of time. By producing a gap in structural movement, this cessation of chronological time generates an opening for narrative content that is perpetually in motion. Part Two, Section Four, a section independent of source material, features a pause in all forward momentum in which Chaucer makes what he calls a “speciall declaracioun” on the ascendant.¹⁰⁵ Chaucer uses negative language to break

¹⁰⁵ The “ascendant,” in contrast to this textual moment of stasis, refers to the degree of a planet that is ascending on the eastern horizon.

from scientific principles to reimagine the movement of the universe as poetic expression. To do so, Chaucer adopts the language of mobility, charting celestial bodies that “ascendith” in space in a perpetual journey across the sky, (2.4.8, 21, 22, 25), that “passe...above or bynethe” (2.4.28-29), and that are “fallyng” in “discencioun” (2.4.30, 53, 54).

Assigned to the flux of the ascendant is either a “fortunat or infortunat” astrological significance, which may refer to the zodiac sign or astrological house that a planet enters (2.4.33). Chaucer explains that the “fortunat ascendant,” believed to influence human lives, signals an auspicious planetary position advantageous for selecting times for undertakings (2.4.6). He then writes that one can identify a planet in a fortunate ascendant if

he be *not* retrograd, *ne* combust, *ne* joynd with *no* shrewe in the same signe; *ne* that he be *not* in his discencioun, *ne* joynd with *no* planete in his discencioun, *ne* have upon him *noon* aspect infortunat; and than sey thei that he is well.” (2.4.50-56, emphasis mine)

A fortunate ascendant, therefore, is determined by observing a planet that does not present unfavorable signs like planetary east to west movement, being blocked by the sun, and an accompanying malignant planet. This extended taxonomy employs the largest concentration of negative language in the text—ten negative particles in just six lines. Negation infuses the passage’s progression with a measured disbursal of *ne*, *no*, *not*, and *noon* across the short clauses (averaging two per line).

In addition to regulating the syntax of the passage, negation generates its meaning. To signal a fortunate ascendant, the passage avoids affirmative descriptions in favor of listing the conditions not present. Essentially, the definition of the fortunate ascendant is shaped out of *absence*. Semantic negation, then, seems to nullify the

planetary movement that Chaucer's special declaration had just set into motion. For example, twice the passage tells us that the planet in the fortunate ascendant must *not* be "joined" with another planet. The negation that forms a state of not-joining evokes not a harmonic cosmic assemblage, but rather, planets driven apart, moving independently of one another. This planetary detachment continues the *Treatise's* literary activity of breaking governing patterns.

And yet, just as Chaucer makes us aware of an interruption in planetary symmetry, he synchronizes the language into its own poetic cadences. Each conjoining negative unit triggers a transition from one negative clause to the next. This series of six phrases give rise to a poetic mode by following a two-part pattern. First, the initial two clauses contain a negative adverb before a verb, as with "*ne combust*." Next, the following four clauses combine a verb, preposition, and noun set between two negative adverbs (which may be followed by another prepositional phrase), such as "*ne joined with no planete in his discencioun*." Along with the two-part structure, an interlacing of the phrases "*ne joined*" and "*in his discencioun*," each appearing twice, bridge the first half of the passage with the second half, and forge a reconciliation in line fifty-three where they appear together. This suggests that the passage forms a harmonious whole that can be read like a poem.

Second, this sense of formal reconciliation is reinforced by rhythm. While the full passage does not sustain a strict metrical schema, it does scan like poetry by offering a predominant pattern that can be marked. In particular, the first three lines, "*he be **not** retro- / **grad**, ne **combust**, ne **joyned** with no / **shrewe** in the **same signe**," carries six metrical feet of two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable, ending upon a*

trochee with the word “signe.”¹⁰⁶ Lastly, the rhythmic patterning is enhanced by instances of assonance with the vowel sounds of “he be” appearing in the first and middle lines. The arrangement of internal rhyme in the final clause “and than **sey thei** that **he** is / well” functions as a coda that resolves the aural components distributed throughout the passage.

The poetic structure of this short passage thus reconfigures the ascendant into the melodic structures of language by suspending chronological time and repatterning planetary movement. Within this space of suspension, negation displaces the positivism of technical writing to make the irregular motion of the universe perceivable through poetic rhythms. In the same way that the *Miller’s Tale* represents a network of unregulated bodies that collide into synchronization—echoing the mechanical unity of the astrolabe’s unique components—Chaucer’s description of the ascendant employs narrative to draw together bodies moving independently of one another to make up a coordinated whole. In this way does Chaucer’s anti-manual encode the cycles, paths, and motions of the planets as literary narrative and demonstrate that a scientific treatise can also do literary work. As Chaucer’s writing mediates across translation and narrative, negative language in the *Treatise* delivers its reader to the center of a poeticized rearranging of the objects in the sky. Images of ascending, descending, falling, and unjoining are drawn together and pulled into the *Treatise’s* own reimagining of the material universe.

¹⁰⁶ By featuring some stressed and unstressed syllables and half-line structures, this short description of the fortunate ascendant contains some qualities of alliterative verse, and thus pushes this section of the treatise further into a literary mode. For instance, the negative particles disbursed within the passage are both stressed and unstressed. Additionally, divisions in clauses resembling caesuras appear at the center of some of the lines, serving as a formal pause or junction. For a recent study on the development and decline of alliterative verse, especially the systems of Middle English alliterative writing, see Ian Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse: The Pursuit of a Medieval Meter*, 2017.

CHAPTER 4

“TO MAKE BOOKYS, SONGES, DYTEES”:

POETIC ACCOUNTING IN *THE HOUSE OF FAME*

As a prayer for the power to write, the proem to Book Two of *The House of Fame* addresses the poet’s anxieties to represent his dream in writing:

O Thought, that wrot al that I mette,
And in the tresorye hyt shette
Of my brayn, now shal men se
Yf any vertu in the be
To tellen al my drem aright. (2.523-27)

Through the text’s speaker (and Chaucer’s fictional counterpart), Geffrey, Chaucer reflects on the way Thought writes, or records, everything experienced in his dream which it shuts into the treasury, or storehouse, of his brain.¹⁰⁷ Ruth Evans has suggested that the “metaphor of the brain as a ‘tresorye’” alludes to the “portable chests” that contained the English “royal archives...often referred to as a *thesaurus*—treasure or treasury.”¹⁰⁸ The royal archives preserved important economic records like “the

¹⁰⁷ Ruth Evans, “Chaucer in Cyberspace: Medieval Technologies of Memory and *The House of Fame*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer: The Yearbook of the New Chaucer Society* 23 (2001): 43–69, see 59–61. Evans suggests that the passage is drawing from a spatial model of memory attributed to Aristotle. Evans goes on to explain that the passage “represents dreaming as writing, copied down by the mind” in accordance with a medieval model that envisions memory as a book (59). Evans concludes that Chaucer is chiefly concerned about “vernacular literature as a question of aesthetics and literary representation—how to do justice poetically to what is impressed upon the memory” (61). For more readings on the proem as a model of memory, see Robert R. Edwards, *The Dream of Chaucer: Representation and Reflection in the Early Narratives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 5–6; M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066-1307* (Oxford; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1993), 173–74; Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 33–45.

¹⁰⁸ Ruth Evans, “Chaucer in Cyberspace,” 59–60.

Domesday Book, the Exchequer rolls, [and] the writs and charters” of the crown.¹⁰⁹

Accordingly, the Latin word *thesaurus* signifies both the valued documents themselves (the treasure) as well as the place where treasure is deposited (the treasury). With its proem, *The House of Fame* connects writing with the precious economic documents of the English government.

The “tresorye” of Geoffrey’s mind imbues Thought’s words and the resulting tale of his dream with a quantifiable, commercial value. Like *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*, which is concerned with the linguistic-poetic potential of negative space in physical objects, *The House of Fame* sets up a persistent question: how does poetry—an art produced by an invisible labor (writing)—have value?¹¹⁰ The text responds to this by adopting economic systems to measure poetry as a form of labor and production. As it does this, *The House of Fame* reveals a close correspondence between the writing practices of literature and accounting by structuring acts of narrating and evaluating like commercial bookkeeping: reckoning, quantifying, taxonomizing, balancing, and auditing. Subjecting poetry to the scrutiny of accounting treats the work of writing as a form of material labor, one worthy of compensation. Likewise, as it attempts to acknowledge the physical and mental exertion of writing, *The House of Fame* evaluates narrative language through a variety of material objects (a treasury, books, bodies, and engravings) and substances (smoke, wind, and air) to assign values to literary output.

¹⁰⁹ F. A. C. Mantello and A. G. Rigg, eds., *Medieval Latin: An Introduction and Bibliographical Guide*, Later Reprint edition (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 203. In her reading of the passage on the ambiguity of the word *thesaurus* in Fitz Neal’s twelfth-century *Dialogus de Scaccario*, Brigitte Bedos-Rezak explains that the Master uses the word *archa* to mean “chest or strongbox containing relics, jewels, and documents,” noting “its similarity to the terms *archia*, *archiva* (sg. *archium*, *archivum*; from the Greek *archeion*, “governmental property”), already used in ancient Rome to designate collections of important records...to have encouraged semantic association of the words in Latin.”

¹¹⁰ Mantello and Rigg, *Medieval Latin*, 203.

This chapter considers the ways that *The House of Fame* brings together the representational structures of literature and accounting in search of numerical and aesthetic balance. I adopt Steele Nowlin's approach to the text that advocates for reading the poem in reverse order.¹¹¹ Drawing upon New Economic Criticism, I start with Book Three to examine Fame's transactive verdicts, I then move to Book Two to analyze the eagle's audit of Geoffrey's poetic labor, and conclude with Geoffrey's Book One exploration of the wall engravings in Venus' temple. Working backwards in this manner opens up the correspondence between literature and accounting by showing how, when harnessed by an external auditor (as in Books Three and Two), poetic accounting can offset or negate the utility of a literary commodity and the value of its attendant authorial labor. This demands some other strategy for identifying values more resistant to revocation, which the reader-poet Geoffrey attempts to execute in Book One in the form of creative production. In true dream-vision fashion, Book One comes the closest to an artistic ideal, briefly suspending the material economy and allowing literary creation to take place free from outside scrutiny.

Narrative Economics, Chaucer as Controller, and the Medieval Account Book

Chaucer's integration of economics with narrative reflects his own dual professional experiences navigating the representational systems of accounting and poetry. Inspired by his shift out of the English court and into the customs between 1374 and 1386, Chaucer used his mid-career poetry to situate himself as an authentic producer in both the literary field of court as well as the clerical civil service. Poems like *The*

¹¹¹ Steele Nowlin, "'Gooth yet Always under': Invention as Movement in the *House of Fame*," in *Chaucer, Gower, and the Affect of Invention* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2016), 36–68, 39. Nowlin justifies this order of analysis by claiming that Book One presents a moment of invention "that the rest of the poem works to unpack."

Parliament of Fowles (with its explicit ties to parliamentary process) and *The Legend of Good Women* (with its open negotiation of source material) each speak to one of these concerns. But only one poem, *The House of Fame*, dated around 1380, explicitly brings clerical service to bear on poetic creation and contemplates the relationship between them. On the one hand, its otherworldly setting seems to take it out and above the London streets that necessarily occupy Chaucer's time and energy. On the other hand, the poem itself takes up the concerns of civil service.¹¹²

Robert Meyer-Lee's recent discussion of *The House of Fame* reframes the poem through the socio-economic conditions that produced it and reads it against Chaucer's job as controller of the London customs house collecting taxes for the wool trade. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's nineteenth-century concept of the "literary field," which addresses conditions of literary production and reception, Meyer-Lee suggests that *The House of Fame* performs an axiological interrogation on literary discourse, noting Geoffrey's controller-like movement "among and around all positions, describing and accounting for...structure and value."¹¹³ *The House of Fame* thus serves as a meeting point for Chaucer to prove that both roles are mutually legitimizing. Meyer-Lee's analysis does an admirable job of opening up this poem's economic and clerical concerns. But as I will

¹¹² Critics such as Kellie Robertson and Ethan Knapp have considered the impact of working in the civil service upon the writing of late medieval poets to show that civic and literary cultures should be considered together. Robertson reads *The Legend of Good Women* in conjunction with Chaucer's enforcement of labor laws as justice of the peace in Kent. Kellie Robertson, *The Laborer's Two Bodies: Labor and the "Work" of the Text in Medieval Britain, 1350-1500*, First Edition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Ethan Knapp analyzes Thomas Hoccleve's work as a clerk in the Office of the Privy Seal to highlight the "influence of extrapoetical forms" from Hoccleve's daily bureaucratic work upon his literature (19). See Ethan Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse: Thomas Hoccleve and the Literature of Late Medieval England* (University Park, Pa: Penn State University Press, 2001).

¹¹³ Robert John Meyer-Lee, "Literary Value and the Customs House: The Axiological Logic of the *House of Fame*," *Chaucer Review* 48, no. 4 (2014): 374-94, 391.

argue, there is more to be said about the narrative and economic structures that frame the poem, specifically, the formal and imaginative dimensions of the medieval account book.

At this stage in the development of English commerce, the account ledger had yet to transition to a double-entry bookkeeping structure (already in use in places like North Africa and Italy). The chief feature of a double-entry account book is its “bilateral form” used for “putting the debits beside the credits, either on two opposite pages or on the same page divided vertically into two columns.”¹¹⁴ If kept up to date, a display of both profits and losses would reflect a current view of a merchant’s financial status.

The advancement of double-entry bookkeeping did not become widespread in Europe until after Luca Pacioli’s 1494 *De Computis et Scripturis*, which lays out a systematized double-entry technique.¹¹⁵ Prior to 1494, Italian merchants informally experimented with double-entry; however, their account books reveal no uniformity. It is possible that some fourteenth-century English accountants had awareness of it; however, the technique was not widely used. In his study on medieval accounting, Raymond de Roover dispels the possibility of formalized English double-entry bookkeeping in the fourteenth century, writing that “no methodic arrangement is apparent” in extant account books from England or Scotland.¹¹⁶ This suggests that during Chaucer’s time, single-entry bookkeeping served as the preferred mode of accounting, and may have even influenced other modes of writing.

¹¹⁴ Raymond de Roover, “The Development of Accounting Prior to Luca Pacioli According to the Account-Books of Medieval Merchants,” in *Studies in the History of Accounting*, ed. A. C. Littleton and B. S. Yamey (London: Richard D. Irwin, 1956), 116.

¹¹⁵ de Roover, “The Development of Accounting,” 114–74, see 116.

¹¹⁶ de Roover, “The Development of Accounting,” 173. de Roover further comments that the single-entry records of prominent ironmonger and credit broker Gilbert Maghfild were “merely intended as an aid to a faulty memory.”

Unlike the double-entry practice, single-entry bookkeeping records accounts “in paragraph form.”¹¹⁷ With its written text passages, single-entry books share much with literary books because they often “resembled little journals or financial diaries, listing expenditures along with sundry other information, sometimes developing little narratives around the expenditure.”¹¹⁸ It is thought that Chaucer, as controller of the wool customs house, performed the hand writing and sealing of more than one thousand single-entry accounting documents annually and participated in audits at the Exchequer up to two times a year.¹¹⁹ Because wool was England’s principal export and one of its main revenue sources (averaging £24,600 over ten years), Chaucer was expected to ensure accurate reporting of transactions by keeping “counter-rolls,” independent duplicate lists which cross-check the documentation produced by collectors.¹²⁰ This responsibility not only informed the way that Chaucer assessed the world around him, but how he represented it in writing. As an actual inventory approved by Chaucer shows, accounting for the wool trade takes on some distinctly narrative qualities:

Particule compoti Nicholai Brembre et Johannis Organ collectorum
 customarum et subsidiorum lanarum pellium lanutarum et coriorum in
 portu Londonie videlicet de exitibus eorundem customarum et

¹¹⁷ de Roover, “The Development of Accounting,” 131.

¹¹⁸ John M. Ganim, “Double Entry in Chaucer’s ‘Shipman’s Tale’: Chaucer and Bookkeeping before Pacioli,” *The Chaucer Review* 30, no. 3 (1996): 294–305, see 295. Ganim makes a convincing case for Chaucer’s allusion to a double-entry structure in *The Shipman’s Tale*, arguing that Chaucer knew about the early Italian practice and set up parallel accounts in his poem to represent the merchant and the monk, written and (ultimately settled) upon the body of the merchant’s wife, see 298–303. However, Ganim also intriguingly observes that the merchant in the story uses a single-entry accounting technique, perhaps to comment on the merchant’s uncertain financial state and domestic relations.

¹¹⁹ Meyer-Lee, “Literary Value and the Customs House,” 381.

¹²⁰ Geoffrey Chaucer, “Introduction: Chaucer’s Life,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), xx. According to Benson, the wool tax was such a large source of money that customs collectors “were making the king large loans on the security of the revenue from the customs.” This added to a heavy accountability upon Chaucer’s already vast oversight to ensure the accuracy of all records and collections.

subsidiorum a festo Sancti Michaelis anno viii^o usque festum Sancti Michaelis proximo sequens per visum et testimonium Galfridi Chaucer contrarotulatoris eorundem customarum et subsidiorum regis ibidem.

In navi Willelmi Canesson x^{mo} die Octobris [1384].

De Nicholao Marchaunt indigena M_iCCCl pelles

lanute in iiii fardellis

C. xiiii li. xv d.

De Willelmo Burdon indigena M_iDCCCl pelles

C. xix li. v s. v d.

lanute in v fardellis

Summa pallium indigenarum M_iM_iM_iCC

C. xxxiii li. vi s. viii d.

Probatur. Exitus sigilli

iiii d.¹²¹

Particulars of account of Nicholas Brembre and John Organ, collectors of customs and subsidies of wool, woolen fells, and leather in the port of London of the same customs and subsidies from the feast of Saint Michael in the 8th year until Michaelmas on the next following feast of Saint Michael by the view and testimony of Geoffrey Chaucer, controller of the aforesaid customs and subsidies of the kingdom.

Exports of William Canesson on the 10th day of October [1384]

From Nicholao Marchaunt, 1,350 native	Customs 14 pounds 15 denarii.
wool fells in 4 sacks	

From William Burdon, 1,850 native	Customs 19 li. 5 s. 5 d.
wool fells in 5 sacks	

Sum of native fells 3,200	Customs 33 li. 6 s. 8 d.
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Approved. Departure seal	4 d.
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Taken at face value, this financial literacy would seem to share little with

Chaucer's poetic strategies.¹²² Each entry records transaction details of exported goods and the customs tax paid to collectors. In the total at the bottom, we learn that William

¹²¹ Four rolls survive that contain inventories performed by collectors of the wool custom and subsidy during Chaucer's time as controller. This example is an excerpt from a 1384 "Particulars of Account" that records the collectors, merchants, raw materials, and documents amounts applied for the export duty on wool, hides, and wool fells (skins with wool attached). See Martin Michael Crow, Clair Colby Olson, and John Matthews Manly, *Chaucer Life-Records* (Oxford: Clarendon P., 1966), 194, Membrane I. For more records pertaining to Chaucer's role as controller, see pages 148-270. The materials pertaining to the wool quay begin on page 170.

¹²² These "new literacies" are termed by Andrew Galloway as "late medieval documentary mercantilism." Andrew Galloway, "The Account Book and the Treasure: Gilbert Maghfield's Textual Economy and the Poetics of Mercantile Accounting in Ricardian Literature," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 33 (2011): 65-124, see 69.

Canesson exported 3,200 wool fells and paid an export duty of 33 pounds, 6 shillings, and 8 pence.

Yet a narrative mode of expression contextualizes the entire economic account document.¹²³ It is the extended paragraph at the top that provides the names of the officials and sets the terms: Nicholas Brembre and John Organ collected customs within a single Exchequer fiscal year, which starts on Michaelmas in the eighth year of King Richard's reign (September 29th, 1384) and ends on the following year's Michaelmas (September 29th, 1385).¹²⁴ The description of the scope of the customs also appears in the paragraph, applying the tax to not only raw wool, but also to wool fells (skins with the fleece attached to it) and to leather. The formal approval of Geoffrey Chaucer in the penultimate line reflects his oversight power as controller, and with the phrase, "view and testimony," the embeddedness of Chaucer's name in the extended description can also be read as authority, or authorship, of the economic narrative.¹²⁵

While literary and economic discourses seem to operate in separate spheres, as the customs document shows, there are considerable logical and imaginative correspondences between them. Kurt Heinzelman has identified two main interconnected

¹²³ In the medieval English account book, "debt, not profit, is the exclusive language." Galloway, "The Account Book and the Treasure," see 73, 93.

¹²⁴ The Exchequer fiscal year began on Michaelmas and Richard II took the throne on June 22nd, 1377, so the Michaelmas in the eighth year of his reign occurred on September 29th, 1384. Baker, Robert L. "The English Customs Service, 1307-1343: A Study of Medieval Administration." *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 51, no. 6 (1961): 3-76, see 30. More generally, Michaelmas was known as one of the four "quarter days" of the year, which were commonly used to mark quarters for legal purposes, such as settling debt.

¹²⁵ The London customs document is a clear example of single-entry practice due to its isolated recording of transactions. Though it provides a total of sums collected on a particular day, it does not offer a sense of the current standing of accounts. Andrew Galloway has suggested that English accounting in the fourteenth-century preferred single-entry bookkeeping due in part to a preoccupation with debt to manage social and economic obligation. Galloway, "The Account Book and the Treasure," see 73.

economic and poetic experiences. The first, “imaginative economics,” describes “the way in which economic systems are structured, by means of the imagination, upon what are essentially fictive concepts—including, ultimately, ‘the economy’ itself.”¹²⁶ In other words, communication about economic matters relies upon figurative language, like the terms “customs” and “subsidies,” which uses a vocabulary of ritual and aid to naturalize enforced duties paid to the crown. The second type, “poetic economics,” describes how “literary writers use this fictive economic discourse, this body of systematized knowledge, as an ordering principle in their own work.”¹²⁷ This refers to the consolidation of a fictive economic vocabulary in literary compositions. As an example of single-entry accounting, the London customs document integrates economic practices with basic narrative forms. Likewise, *The House of Fame* brings together Chaucer’s work producing narratives across the spheres of economic storytelling and poetic accounting. *The House of Fame* blends literary expression with single-entry accounting’s narrative style to scrutinize poetry’s value. Chaucer, the accountant-poet, coheres both representational systems in *The House of Fame* in which the imaginative dimensions of economics shape the language of poetry to explore poetry’s value through an economic

¹²⁶ Heinzelman, Kurt. *The Economics of the Imagination*. 1st edition. Amherst: Univ of Massachusetts Pr, 1980, 11. Heinzelman points out that the term “the economy” and other signifiers, such as “labor” and “cost,” operate as metaphors that require interpretive activity to understand. Heinzelman and other economic critics of the 1970s and 1980s form the basis of a later call to bring together the disciplines of economics and literary studies by Mark Osteen and Martha Woodmansee, who name their approach “New Economic Criticism.” Osteen, Mark, and Martha Woodmansee, eds. *The New Economic Criticism*. 1 edition. London: New York: Routledge, 1999, see 35-40 for suggested applications of their approach. The fourth approach they promote—which this chapter will address—is criticism that attends to the “metatheoretical operations” of “economic storytelling...and their relations to other forms of narrative accounting,” 40.

¹²⁷ Heinzelman, Kurt. *The Economics of the Imagination*, 11-12.

perspective. The narrative potential that emerges from *The House of Fame* affirms the labor of accounting, and at the same time, stages an accounting of poetic labor.

Seeking Balance at Fame's Court: Single-Entry Narrative Accounting

Serving as an unlikely venue for narrative accounting, the turbulent scene at Fame's court is often cited as the dramatic center of *The House of Fame*. At this point of the poem, Geoffrey has been deposited by the eagle at Fame's dwelling, which is located "[b]etwixen heaven and erthe and see" (2.715). Book Three thus opens with Geoffrey's journey into the main hall of the house of Fame. Sheila Delany views the scene as nothing more than a flurry of unstable "permutations of desire, merit, and reward" to show that Fame offers "no reliable guide to factual truth."¹²⁸ More recently, critics have expanded on Delany's work by reading how Fame's judgments subvert renown, poetry, logic, justice, and authority from the heights of divine glory to arbitrary, worldly standing.¹²⁹ Laurence Eldridge suggests that the ultimate outcome of the court scene marks the moment in which Geoffrey's journey has failed.¹³⁰ It is also, as Nick Havely

¹²⁸ Sheila Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 87-88.

¹²⁹ See Robert M. Jordan, "Lost in the Funhouse of Fame: Chaucer and Postmodernism," *The Chaucer Review* 18, no. 2 (1983): 100-115, 112; Christopher Baswell, "Writing the Reading of Virgil: Chaucerian Authorities in the *House of Fame* and the *Legend of Good Women*," in *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the Aeneid from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer*, *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature*: 24, xiii, 228 pp. (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 1995), 240; Mary C. Flannery, "Chaucerian Fame," in *John Lydgate and the Poetics of Fame* (Boydell and Brewer, 2012), 13-37, see 34. For more on how Fame's "multitudinous judgments" simultaneously comply with and mock logic by enacting the multiple outcomes of changing circumstances and time, see Kathryn C. Lynch, "The Logic of the Dream Vision in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," in *Literary Nominalism and the Theory of Rereading Late Medieval Texts: A New Research Paradigm*, ed. Richard J. (ed.) Utz, viii, 256 pp. vols., *Medieval Studies* (Medieval Studies): 5 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1995), 179-203, see 195, 197.

¹³⁰ In terms of encountering new tidings of love, Eldredge concludes that the scene at Fame's court falls short of Geoffrey's pursuit of an education because "among the suitors to Fame only two groups, the sixth and seventh, have anything to do with love, and even those two have the most dubious of connections." See Eldredge, "Chaucer's *House of Fame* and the *Via Moderna*," 118.

points out, at this juncture in the poem that Fame's injustice shifts Book Three to end on "a disturbingly nihilistic note."¹³¹

What these readings on the judgement scene overlook, however, is that Fame's so-called unstable decisions are in fact stable. In the mode of a single-entry account ledger, Chaucer shows how Fame's narrative judgements represent a series of transactions, and, perhaps optimistically, arrive at a state of account balance. The rulings of Fame and their publication to the world by Aeolus reenact the process of poetic creation as narrative is converted into matter to be circulated and known in public discourse.

Mirroring the basic structure of an accounting document, the scene at Fame's court illustrates the coming together of two parties negotiating "recompensacioun" (1549, 1557). In this case, Fame's supplicants form one half of the exchange by appealing to her for compensation for their service, and, in return, Fame forms the other half by dispensing judgements. As Geoffrey observes, large crowds enter the main hall crying "[a] larges, larges," demanding what they believe Fame owes them (3.1309). In order to convince Fame "to paye" them, groups of petitioners present bids to her in the form of verbalized narratives of their deeds. Nine "sondry" groups in all ask Fame for varying levels of renown for their actions—good, virtuous, and wicked—and in some cases, desiring no recognition at all (3.1529). The requests fall into four larger categories: good fame for good works (groups one through three), anonymity for good works (four

¹³¹ Nick Havely, "I Wolde...Han Hadde a Fame': Dante, Fame and Infamy in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," in *Chaucer and Fame, NED-New edition, Reputation and Reception* (Boydell and Brewer, 2015), 43–56, see page 52.

and five), good fame for idleness (six through eight), and wicked fame for treacherous acts (nine).

Though Geffrey observes that Fame's judgements do not correspond with what has been requested of her—"somme of hem she graunted," "somme she werned," and "some she graunted the contraire / Of her axynge"—a basic numerical accounting of all nine verdicts shows that not only does Fame equally distribute and repeat only three types of verdicts, but the collective sum of those verdicts reach a balance (3.1538, 1539, 1540-41).¹³² Indeed, Fame herself does not assess each individual's deservedness for fame on a case by case basis; rather, she serves sorted groups of petitioners "in comune," or together (3.1548).¹³³

The first set of petitioners provide a clear example of the way that Fame assigns her three categories of verdicts and how they balance one another out. The three initial groups of requests center around gaining good fame for good works, but result in three different rulings—first Fame denies, then doles out ill fame, and finally, awards good, but more than deserved, fame. Taken together, Fame's first three assessments could seem unstable; however, the aggregate sum of the decisions offset one another and arrive at balance.

Group one asks Fame to grant "good fame" as "ful recomensacioun" for "good werkes" (3.1555-57). Rather than giving good or bad fame, Fame refuses any form of recognition, answering that not only shall they get "good fame non," but that

¹³² By categorizing Fame's nine decisions, it is possible to assign a number value to each one. Each type of verdict appears three times. By assigning the following, it is possible to arrive at a zero balance: negative one (-1) for each instance that Fame grants bad or worse fame (groups two, seven, and nine); zero (0) each time that Fame grants anonymity or no fame (groups one, four, and eight); positive one (1) when Fame grants good or better fame (groups three, five, and 6).

¹³³ Flannery, "Chaucerian Fame," 16.

“‘[n]o wyght shal speke of yow, ywis, / Good ne harm, ne that ne this’” (3.1560, 1565-66). In denying them reputation, Fame disallows them any public recognition.

After granting *no* fame to group one, a second company approaches desiring the same as the previous group, “‘graunte us now good fame / [a]nd lat oure werkes han that name’” (3.1609-10). To this request, Fame diverges from her last judgement, delivering a more severe fate than the withholding of reputation:

“...Y graunte yow
That ye shal have a shrewed fame,
And wikkyd loos, and worse name,
Though ye good loos have wel deserved.” (3.1618-21)

Rather than outright denying them renown for their virtuous deeds as before, Fame acknowledges their deserving good fame, but dispenses “wikkyd loos,” a dishonorable reputation, and therefore, a negative outcome.

Following the second group, a third company approaches Fame claiming that they “‘han ful trewely / Deserved fame ryghtfully’” (3.1661-62). They do not explicitly ask for “good” fame, but with the use of “trewely” and “rightfully” they imply that their acts have been just and virtuous. Fame accepts this interpretation, stating that their “‘goode works’” shall “‘be wist’” (3.1666). This is the only case of a positive outcome in this first set of petitioners showing Fame granting *more* fame than deserved, “‘ye shul han better loos’” than “‘worthy is’” (3.1667, 1669).

This third positive decision functions to “countrepese” (counter-weigh) the second negative value, placing Fame into balance (3.1750). Taken together, the first three verdicts begin with a zero value (no fame), drop to a negative value (bad fame), and finally, increase to return to zero with a positive value (good fame). Over the course of

the judgement scene, the remaining six groupings witnessed by Geffrey continue fluctuating in this manner and, with the ninth group, again stabilize to a zero value.

Fame's judgements are numerically stable; however, as momentary utterances, they are confined to her audience in the palace. In this way, the narrative language of Fame's verdicts carries no immediate value in the material world until they can be converted and circulated to earth. To "wexen" her verdicts to the world, Fame enlists Aeolus, the warden of the wind, to disseminate six judgments of good and ill fame (those with positive and negative value) (3.1652). As Fame bids, Aeolus employs a pair of clarions called "Laude" and "Sklaundre" to convert the goddess's speech into air that he trumpets to the earth. With the exception of the three decrees of no fame, Aeolus plays Laude, a trumpet of gold, to disseminate good fame, in equal measure to Sklaundre, made of black brass, to spread ill fame (3.1678, 1637).¹³⁴ Once the verdicts travel out of Fame's palace, they are animated and evenly spread "throughout every region" (3.1641). The substances equally distributed through the air by Laude and Sklaundre convert Fame's intangible judgments into meaningful narrative, carrying their values into the material world.

¹³⁴ Like Chaucer's writing, which bridges poetry and accounting, the trumpets also inhabit dual roles: as musical instruments they represent an artistic, musical apparatus, and as utilitarian clarions, they function strictly for messaging/announcing.

While generally interpreted as an “empty” medium of the atmosphere, I contend that the air trumpeted by Aeolus is anything but empty.¹³⁵ The black smoke with a foul stench issued from Sklaundre manifests violent medieval military technologies of gunpowder and canons. The uncontrollable smoke blown from Sklaundre is the color of molten lead, “[b]lak, bloo, grenyssh, swartish red,” which spreads an odor that “stank as the pit of helle” (3.1647, 1654). Sklaundre’s violent blast weaponizes the air, like the explosion of a fired cannon ignited from gunpowder, “[a]s swifte as pelet out of gone / Whan fyr is in the poudre ronne” (3.1644-45). This trumpet translates verdicts of bad fame to “every wight” prompting a collective shouting of reports of “shame” (3.1808, 1655).

On the other hand, Laude’s sweet “breth” crashes like “thunder” that is powerfully heard and smelled (3.1684, 1681). Alluding to sacramental rituals and religious processions, perhaps even to chrism oil and the rosary, Laude’s breath carries the same scent “as men a pot of bawme helde / Among a basket ful of roses” (3.1686-87). The intense smell of the oil and roses transmits Fame’s judgments of praise as elements of religious and mortal life that evoke good reputations, giving “every man” on earth the power to “wene” about those purported to have performed just deeds (3.1777).

The two social values of the trumpets—one positive and one negative—balance each other out and result in transient equilibrium of public discourse. As a final

¹³⁵ Robert Epstein, “Sacred Commerce: Chaucer, Friars, and the Spirit of Money,” in *Sacred and Profane in Chaucer and Late Medieval Literature, Essays in Honour of John V. Fleming* (University of Toronto Press, 2010), 129–45, see 134, 141. Epstein suggests *the Summoner’s Tale* exposes normally-obfuscated economic processes between convents and their lay associates to demonstrate how the contemplation of money as an immaterial, abstract concept offers a “more advanced understanding of the social and natural worlds,” 142, 130. To address the underlying logic of the fart’s problem of “divisibility and measurement,” Epstein mentions the practice of “money of account,” writing that, “like money, the fart seems to be pure abstraction, the echoing of empty air,” 141.

settlement of balance for Fame's judgements, Chaucer provides measurable confirmation that Aelous's trumpeting of sound, scent, breath, and smoke converts the judgments to inhabit "every tonge" to be known and deliberated by "every wight" (3.1656, 3.1626, 1682, 1767, 1808) equally across "all the world aboute" (1807).

The Eagle's Audit of Poetic Labor

Fame's court shows how air can be a substance that promotes balance, however fleetingly. Expanding on the subject of air, the golden eagle articulates his own theory while aloft with Geoffrey. Geoffrey's flight in the claws of the golden eagle in Book Two turns the quantifying tools of accounting upon poetry to address the impossibility of justly assessing literary labor when only considering material output. As they soar through the heavens, the eagle delivers a scientific lecture about the way that sound travels to Fame's dwelling, explaining that "'every speche, or noyse, or sound'" is "'eyre ybroken,'" and suggesting that the words themselves are a medium of the physical world (2.783, 765).¹³⁶ Though the eagle assigns material value to speech and language, viewing every form of expression as a quantifiable object, his use of "eyre ybroken" also connotes the emptiness of air.

The intersection between the material world and a sense of emptiness impacts the eagle's own accounting of Geoffrey's status. Like Fame with her petitioners, the eagle seems to promote a state of balance when he points out that Geoffrey's labor participates

¹³⁶ Lynch discusses the Eagle's numerous logical errors in his articulation of Aristotelian theories of physics. See Kathryn C. Lynch, "The Logic of the Dream Vision," 191, 194. Many critics have focused on this scene as an articulation of medieval theories of materiality, motion, and sound. See Rebecca Davis, "Fugitive Poetics in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 37 (2015): 101–32. Nowlin, "'Gooth yet Always Under.'" Neil Cartlidge, "Ripples on the Water? The Acoustics of Geoffrey Chaucer's *House of Fame* and the Influence of Robert Holcot," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 39, no. 1 (2017): 57–98.

in both poetic and accounting spheres. As such, the eagle sets Geoffrey's accounting and literary books as equivalent items:

“For when thy labour doon al ys,
And hast mad thy rekenynges,
In stede of reste and newe thynges
Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon,
And, also domb as any stoon,
Thou sittest at another boke.” (2.652-57)¹³⁷

Here, the eagle accuses Geoffrey of a tedious life in which, by day, he completes his “labour” as an accountant only to return home to sit at “*another* boke” by night. Like Chaucer at the wool customs house, Geoffrey devotes all of his days to his ““rekenynges”” and all of his nights to his literary writing, ““In thy studye, so thou writest”” (2.653, 633). The bird thus reproaches Geoffrey for trading in one book—the reckonings done in account ledgers—for a second one—possibly Geoffrey's own poetry—rather than sleeping or experiencing “newe thynges.” Not only do both activities involve books, but both also involve “rekenynges,” a direct reference to Chaucer's record-keeping duties as controller and at the same time an allusion to narrative accounting.

More broadly, the text uses the character of the eagle to consider the implications of evaluating poetry by drawing upon accounting's other function as a “tool of management or control” by governing authorities.¹³⁸ Though the core objective of single-entry bookkeeping is the balancing, or settlement, of accounts, a second function, the oversight power to scrutinize the books themselves, ultimately assesses the utility of the

¹³⁷ In addition to this overt passage about reckoning, Alfred David has identified two other references to the customs house: the first being the naming of St. Lenard, patron saint of prisoners, as a nod to Chaucer's exhausting labor as controller, and the second being the frantic movement of the tidings in the House of Rumor as a reference to “the sailors, pilgrims, couriers, and pardoners...from the wharves of London,” 335, 339. Alfred David, “Literary Satire in *The House of Fame*,” *PMLA* 75, no. 4 (September 1960): 333–39.

¹³⁸ de Roover, “The Development of Accounting,” 118, 151.

records and the success of its practitioner. *The House of Fame* attempts to reckon the value of poetry and the ways the stages of writing poetry as a craft and labor can be measured, and ultimately evaluated. As an auditor, the eagle reconstructs Geoffrey's labors and attempts to settle any discrepancies. Indeed, single-entry bookkeeping, in which "each transaction was considered separately," necessitated regular audits because accounts were not kept current.¹³⁹ A party's account book would have recorded every exchange but, as a document in isolation from all other accounts, would not offer a transparent method for knowing one's present overall financial state.¹⁴⁰ This level of oversight requires an audit to analyze all past transactions and make corrections.

After repeated assurances that no harm shall come to Geoffrey as he dangles from the bird's claws, the eagle sets the terms of settlement, explaining that Jupiter, the god of thunder, has recognized that Geoffrey has "'long trewly / ...served so ententyfly'" (2. 615-16). Because Geoffrey has labored "'[w]ithoute guerdon,'" or reward, he has arranged a trip to the house of Fame in the interest of rectifying this imbalance with "'som recompensacion / Of labour and devotion'" (2.619, 665-66). This declaration to "'with som maner thing the quyte'" seems like a simple exchange of payment but develops into a series of passages that audit the material value of Geoffrey's writing, body, and labor (2.670). Notably, rather than deeming Geoffrey to be eminently worthy of reward, this audit diminishes him.

With his comparison of books that seem to arrive at equivalence, the eagle ruptures the balance of Fame's court once he turns to audit Geoffrey's "labour." As he

¹³⁹ de Roover, "The Development of Accounting," 116.

¹⁴⁰ Ganim, "Double Entry in Chaucer's 'Shipman's Tale,'" 300.

details how Geoffrey will be compensated, the Eagle assigns and deducts value from Geoffrey's poetic labors by questioning the quality of his written output. Due to the "anomalous standing of writing as work," the eagle's representation of literary creation as a product of labor raises some problems in a fourteenth century context.¹⁴¹ According to Kelly Robertson, labor in the fourteenth century was thought of as two categories: a legal definition of labor as a material reality written as laws imposed upon the body and "an 'imaginary' of labor," represented as abstract and immaterial in religious and literary texts.¹⁴² The eagle conflates the two by judging the value of Geoffrey's poetic labor on the sole basis of Geoffrey's deteriorating bodily conditions.

His endless writing and extreme self-denial cause Geoffrey's "hed to ake" (2.632). Indeed, Geoffrey's body shows many other signs of physical impairment. He works until he is "domb as any stoon," mute and unmoving, and appears "daswed," dazed (2.565, 658). Geoffrey's self-denial thus moves the eagle to point out to Geoffrey that "thyn abstynence is lyte" (2.660). The eagle's description of Geoffrey's "abstinence" as physically self-negating becomes doubly negative because Geoffrey's practice of it is "lyte," or of little worth.

¹⁴¹ Robertson, *The Laborer's Two Bodies*, 3, 9. To consider a literary text as a product of labor adds a layer of irreconcilability to this model because a fictional narrative does not produce the same tangible evidence of use or benefit as the act of plowing, for instance, which can be visibly measured on the body of the laborer, the soil, and its commercial production. Furthermore, a poetic text that reflects on the value of literary labor would employ the same language used to define and police labor, and, as Robertson aptly points out, expose the "instability of social identities and the problems attendant on trying to textualize them," (73). According to Robertson's reading of "Geoffrey's" unsuccessful defense of his own literary work in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer demonstrates the impossibility of validating one's own literary labor or proving the social value of literature. As justice of the peace in Kent and enforcer of labor laws (appointed after serving as controller of the customs), Chaucer gained firsthand knowledge that the unstable power of a justice to force an individual to defend her own labor can move in both directions, and was often redeployed to dismantle the very authority figures who wielded it.

¹⁴² Robertson, *The Laborer's Two Bodies*, 8, 9.

Next, the eagle gives an itemized report of Geffrey's creative work, designating them into material groupings of "'bookys, songes, dytees, / In ryme or elles in cadence'" (2.623-24). In the first line, the eagle's strict use of plural referents suggests a sizeable output of poetic work on Geffrey's part. The eagle does this without numerical quantifications; instead, his terminology references poetry's "ryme" and metrical units of "cadence," but does not go into further description.

The three literary categories break down Geffrey's labor. The eagle starts with the broadest definition, "bookys," which could refer to any number of collections of poetic or prose writings, then moves to "songes," standalone poetic narratives, and concludes with "dytees," short verse units. As the eagle drills down into the poetic "matter" of Geffrey's writing as smaller and smaller units, each item becomes more ephemeral: from the substantial heft and material value of a large book volume, to poetic songs sprawled on several leaves, to brief ditties that may not exist on physical parchment at all.¹⁴³

This order sets up Geffrey's writing as a diminishing material commodity. Against these material standards, the eagle makes clear that Geffrey is no "grete poete" (3.1499). By refraining from referring to an individual title, the eagle reduces scores of discrete poetic and prose works into three broad categories, judging all three groupings as nothing more than a reflection of Geffrey's unremarkable skill which he performs "'[a]s thou best canst'" (2.624).

¹⁴³ While we do not get many clues about the specific content of Geffrey's existing "songes" and "dytees," the fact that they could be imagined as shorter poetic compositions which are not merely read, but also voiced, sung, and recited, speaks to a momentary literary and embodied experience of language.

Absent Authorship and Invisible Literary Labor in Venus' Temple

When placed in the role of evaluator, Geoffrey proves more engaged than the eagle and more open to a work's imaginative dimensions. The extended contemplation of Geoffrey's dream of Venus' temple also confronts the tangible output of an author's labor; but in this case, it draws attention to the invisible imaginative work of written authorship. Geoffrey encounters a series of engravings in the temple of glass depicting the Aeneas narrative. Based on the poetry of Virgil, the work of an unnamed creator showcases an elevated form of narrative artistry, prompting Geoffrey to reflect that "sawgh I never such noblesse / Of ymages, ne such riches" (1.471-72). Unlike the eagle who subtracts value with vague groupings of Geoffrey's literary work, Geoffrey's quantifying activities of each distinct piece in the temple add value to the anonymous artist's engravings.

Geoffrey explicitly acknowledges the author's absence: "not wot I whoo did hem wirche" (1.474). Lacking any information about the identity of who made the engravings, Geoffrey records the story of the images in a manner that quantifies the labor that produced them. Twice he defines the panels as work, first using "werk" to introduce the scene and "wirche" to conclude it (1.127, 474). Geoffrey's approach also differs from the eagle's because his aim is to analyze labor through the context of its representation of a narrative (its merit) rather than just examining the output and bodily effects of the labor (there is no author-body present to scrutinize). Unlike the eagle's audit, this scene presents both categories of labor—the material and the imaginary—by using the metaphor of sight to make visible an invisible literary labor. The text does this by transforming the poetic narrative of Aeneas into a series of objects that Geoffrey can count and evaluate. With his attention to the engravings' literary aesthetics, Geoffrey surpasses

the eagle's audit of labor by integrating material "werk" with the imaginary definitions of labor and wrapping it into his own creative process.

One way that Geoffrey does this is by marking the divisions between the panels as he follows the story, introducing each new tableau with "next that sawgh I" or "saugh I grave" (1.162, 451). Used twenty-four times in Book One, the verb "saw" firmly establishes Geoffrey's active seeing of the temple walls as visual labor.¹⁴⁴ Recalling Chaucer's *per visum* authorization on the London wool customs document and the proem praying for others to "se" the tale of the dream, Geoffrey performs an extensive narrative accounting of the images on the temple walls. Not only does the repetition of "saugh" help the reader to follow the development of chronological time in the Aeneas story and stage Geoffrey's movement around the temple, but it also, like an accounting record, quantifies the number of discrete scenes (about twelve total). These divisions break the text's poetic narrative into material parts. Geoffrey considers each crafted segment of the larger story as the product of dedicated labor, distinguishing his accounting from the eagle's "bookys, songes, dytees" definitions for Geoffrey's work. Indeed, the repeated verb phrase, "was grave," explicitly connects the story to the active work of carving that produced the images (1.157) In sum, the seeing performed by Geoffrey accounts for the temple-author's artistic labor and at the same time foregrounds Geoffrey's own work of visual observation.

Ultimately, Geoffrey uses accounting in a new way. Rather than serving as a final stage in a narrative process of judgement, as it does with the eagle and Fame, accounting initiates Geoffrey's own creative production. Geoffrey enfolds the visual quantifying labor

¹⁴⁴ "See" also appears six times.

and his response to the artistic content into his own narrative work by foregrounding the material labor of an absent author to perform an act of poetic creation. Before following the engraved narrative as it continues from Carthage to Italy, the text pauses to remain with the suffering Dido. Geoffrey imagines how she might express the pain of being deserted by Aeneas after his false pledges of love:

“Allas, is every man thus trewe,
That every yer wolde have a newe,
Yf hit so longe tyme dure,
Or ells three, peradventure?
As thus: of oon he wolde have fame
In magnyfyng of his name;
Another for frendshippe, sayeth he;
And yet ther shal the thridde be
That shal be take for delyt,
Loo, or for synguler profit.” (1.301-10)

Perhaps compelled by the absence of the temple’s artist to shore up his own authorial status with an overt act of self-attribution, Geoffrey declares that Dido’s complaint appears “As me mette redely / Non other auctour allegge I” (1.313-14). By emphasizing that these lines originated in his dream and citing no author but himself, Geoffrey attests to his mental labor and poetic invention. The dual contexts of the absent artist and the new construction of Dido’s loss provide the space for Geoffrey to make known the labor of his own writing.

Dido’s complaint reconfigures Aeneas’ story to focus on his successive relationships with three women. As she counts from wife number “oon” to the “thridde,” she concludes that Aeneas is a false seducer who exploits his alliances with Crusa, Dido, and Lavinia for personal fame. Rather than follow Aeneas’ military feats, as initially announced by the brass plaque, moving from “Troy contree...Unto the strondes of Lavyne,” this revised list compresses the narrative of the engraved images (1.145-48).

More importantly, by not immediately following Aeneas to his next adventure in Italy, Geoffrey redirects attention to the spaces between the *Aeneid*'s narrative structure to comment upon the consequences of Aeneas's actions. In this way, focusing on Dido's loss (in her own words) pushes further into events to which the engravings do not attend to acknowledge the casualties that enable Aeneas's story to move forward.

As Dido accounts for each of Aeneas' lovers, she defines how he uses each transaction to net him a material gain: first "fame," next "frendshippe," and lastly, personal "profit." Assuming that Dido moves in chronological order, she refers to herself in the second description. Of the three items listed, "frendshippe," or alliance, seems the least exploitive. Though the term does not overtly accuse Aeneas of taking advantage of Dido, Geoffrey's earlier narration of the couple's exchange of love makes a point to mention that Dido "leyde on hym al the dispense," or expenditures of money (1.260). Therefore, it can be concluded that Dido uses an economic vocabulary to comment on how Aeneas misuses his personal relationships for his own financial benefit.

Of course, as the author of this passage, Geoffrey also employs Dido's economic speech to not only comment on personal relationships in the *Aeneid*, but to comment on literary relationships as well. Through Dido, the text shows that poetic creation is best expressed when responding to absence. In the case of Dido, her complaint results from losing Aeneas and losing her reputation. For Geoffrey, Dido's loss inspires the composition of her speech, which is initially provoked by attempts to quantify and recover the absent artist of the engravings.¹⁴⁵ Geoffrey's imagining Dido's complaint

¹⁴⁵ In Geoffrey's description of the images, he recounts a sequences of losses: the "loste" Troy, Aeneas' wife "ylost" while fleeing, his "lost" drowned ships and companions, Dido's "lorn" reputation, and Aeneas' "loste" helmsman (1.150, 183, 234, 346, 434).

(along with narrating the images of the temple walls) shows the work of writing to be a quantifiable form of labor and production. The temple scene does more than position poetic writing as an economic act that assesses value. Rather, it demonstrates that it is possible to reassign the sequential positive and negative logic of value by showing how loss can be creative.

Coda: Ghost Currency

In the same manner as Geoffrey's creative accounting of the absent author's labor, an accounting practice known as "ghost currency" blends the material and imaginative aspects of economic discourse. However, lacking the material qualities of tangible "treasure" and the need for a physical "treasury," ghost currency's centrality to medieval accounting provides an example of absence *as* value.

The system of ghost currency is a practice at the heart of accounting in the late fourteenth century which relies on a symbolic unit of measurement that no longer exists as physical money. In the London custom's document, for example, the units of currency owed by the merchants include the pound, the shilling, and the penny, but it would not have been possible for them to pay the tax with that specific configuration of coins (xxxiii li. vi s. viii d., or 33 pounds, 6 shillings, and 8 pence). This is because in 1384, the denominations of "li" for pound and "s" for shilling were purely "money of account," abstract financial measurements used for accounting purposes only.¹⁴⁶ According to J. L.

¹⁴⁶ See J. L. Bolton, *Money in the Medieval English Economy, 973-1489* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 29, 52.

Peter Spufford distinguishes between what he calls "money of account" (a measure of value) and coins (a medium of exchange). The system of pounds and shillings as money of account was in use as early as the seventh century across western Europe which established "a system of counting coins, rather than a system of money" in which a "shilling meant a dozen coins, and a pound meant a score of dozens." Peter Spufford, *Money and Its Use in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 411-414, especially 411. See also John F. Chown, *A History of Money: From AD 800* (London [u.a.: Routledge, 2001), 17-19.

Bolton, there was no pound or shilling coin in circulation in England prior to 1489. Only the penny, the groat, the noble, and the angel were minted as physical coins during Chaucer's time. The pound and shilling were purely denominations of account used to make the reckoning of account easier. Rather than keeping track of a fee of 8,000 pence, the customs collectors thus relied on units of account to simplify their records.

The pound and the shilling also occupy a second and more theoretical category of "ghost money" or "ghost currency," an economic concept for financial measurements with no correspondence to real or actual pieces of coinage that carry the vestige of monetary cultures which have long since disappeared. The English ghost currency of Chaucer's time had origins in the ancient coins struck by Roman Emperor Constantine in 312 A.D., which included the pound and the shilling. Later, during Charlemagne's monetary reforms of 790-802 A.D., a new, heavier silver pound weight was created. This silver pound weight was then divided into twenty shillings, and the single shilling was further divided into twelve pence—forming most currency values as they were known in the fourteenth-century. Because Charlemagne minted only pennies during his reforms, the pound and the shilling were thus displaced to "ghost" status.¹⁴⁷

In his mid-fourteenth-century treatise on trade and currency, French scholar and economist Nicole Oresme turns to this Roman history of coins to argue for the

¹⁴⁷ See Diana Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought* (Cambridge; New York; Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 86. According to Wood, "The notion that money is...useless for anything other than to be a measure of exchange developed in the medieval period into the 'ghost money' used for accounting. This was the value usually considered artificial, because it did not coincide with the actual currency in circulation."

stabilization of contemporary currency values.¹⁴⁸ To do so, he praises the forethought of early rulers who assigned “ancient names of coins...such as pound, shilling, penny, half-penny, *as*, *sextula*, and the like.”¹⁴⁹ To shore up his own fourteenth-century economy, he argues that “although we now apply these names differently...they must not be changed to no purpose.”¹⁵⁰ In other words, though certain currency measurements, such as “pound” and “shilling,” no longer exist as physical coins, their values should be symbolically preserved in order to sustain economic stability.

By recording coins that had not been minted for over one thousand years, the legibility of the London customs document thus depends on values that exist “only in the mind and in writing.”¹⁵¹ Through ghost currency’s decline as a material object, its conversion to the immaterial sets a standard that is preserved in accounting practices. Because it shapes how value is understood, the transformation of ghost currency from

¹⁴⁸ Oresme’s *De moneta* is one of the earliest known treatises on trade and currency. In it, Oresme argues against the debasement of coins—the reduction of a coin’s weight or precious metal content—by French kings, reporting that it causes “innumerable perplexities, obscurities, errors, and insuperable difficulties...in accounts of expenditure and receipts.” In addition to administrative chaos, debased coinage also completely destabilizes the basic function of money. For Oresme, currency “est instrumentum artificialiter adinuentum pro naturalibus diuiciis leuius permutandis,” “is an instrument artificially invented for the easier exchange of natural riches.” Therefore, debasement harms money’s fundamental capacity to serve the common good because it undermines the way money facilitates trade and exercising its primary function of being “useful to the civil community, and convenient, or rather necessary, to the business of the state.” Oresme’s main distinction is that currency is not a commodity in itself. Nicole Oresme, *The De Moneta of Nicholas Oresme, and English Mint Documents*, Medieval Texts (London, New York: Nelson, 1956), 21.35, 1.4, 1.5. For an overview of Oresme’s treatise see Lianna Farber, *An Anatomy of Trade in Medieval Writing: Value, Consent, and Community* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2006), especially 32-37. For more analysis on the subject of debasement in *De moneta*, see Joel Kaye, *Economy and Nature in the Fourteenth Century: Money, Market Exchange, and the Emergence of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), especially 155-56. For more on all of the functions of money—its role as a measurement of value, a medium of exchange, a standard of value, a store of value, and a standard of credit—see Odd Inge Langholm, *Economics in the Medieval Schools: Wealth, Exchange, Value, Money, and Usury According to the Paris Theological Tradition, 1200-1350*, Studien Und Texte Zur Geistesgeschichte Des Mittelalters, Bd. 29 (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1992), 192.

¹⁴⁹ Oresme, *The De Moneta of Nicholas Oresme, and English Mint Documents*, 4.9.

¹⁵⁰ Oresme, *The De Moneta of Nicholas Oresme, and English Mint Documents*, 4.19, 11.18.

¹⁵¹ For more on ghost money, see Diana Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, 76-78.

physical object to widely-used accounting symbol contributed to socio-economic stability in the late fourteenth century. Therefore, even the most concrete of numerical sums (like the amount of an export tax paid by a merchant) recorded on an account ledger gestures to absence, suggesting the imaginative pliancy of economic value. The notations for the pound and the shilling use the idea of a material coin's value as a measure of exchange and add a fictive layer to accounting documentation. Here, the sign (the thing it names: "pound" or "shilling") represents monetary worth, but the material referent itself (the coin) does not exist.

Where does this leave accounting? Can the metaphorical status of ghost currency offer any insights? In *The House of Fame*, narrative accounting leads Geoffrey to poetic creation inspired by absence and loss. Indeed, Fame herself pays those who seek renown with a type of social ghost currency that can be measured which is lost in the air as quickly as it is gained. Though Fame's accounting reaches balance, it is nonetheless out of sync with the narratives conveyed to her. Like Fame, the eagle ignores the specific attributes of Geoffrey's narratives in order to devalue Geoffrey's labor. By focusing on abstracted material output, his audit arrives at a numeric *imbalance*, diminishing Geoffrey's poetry beyond the state of ghost currency into something that does not even have a value. The comparisons end with Geoffrey's own act of accounting in Venus's temple, which draws upon the structures of evaluation but joins the process of evaluating with creation. Geoffrey's version of accounting evades the retroactive application of numerical value, but only as it applies to literary participation. This move to avoid the material realities of language raises the question of whether Geoffrey's dream about poetic activity performed in isolation is actually attainable. This topic will be taken up in

chapter four's examination of Chaucer's translation of Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Rather than escaping the worldly economy, the *Boece* advocates for accepting material change along with all of its attendant losses in search of a more sustaining form of plenitude.

CHAPTER 5

PROSE TRANSLATION AND MATERIAL CHANGE:

THE SUSTAINING “PLENTE” OF LACK IN THE *BOECE*

The previous chapters have explored the ways that Chaucer's writing consistently shows negation, lack, and absence to be poetically productive. *The Franklin's Tale* and *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* negate material experiences to show the potential for poetry to reimagine alternatives that open space to create new things or to envision different relationships between things that exist. In the first of these works, Chaucer places the voiding of rocks from Brittany's coast at the story's center, yet their absence produces a series of contracts with imagined worldly consequences and exchanges. In the second of these, Chaucer introduces his son Lewis as the occasion for the *Treatise*. Yet he slowly withdraws Lewis's presence, replacing it with a poetic reimagining of the universe. *The House of Fame* takes up the consequences of material absence explored in the first two texts and turns attention upon the work of poetic production itself. Through varying acts of reckoning, Geoffrey, Fame, and the Golden Eagle position invisible authorial labor as an economic act with value that can be quantified and, at times, negated. In each text, Chaucer thus shows poetic creation to be best performed when responding to absence.

Although also concerned with the act of writing and the experience of loss, the *Boece* takes a different approach to negation. As it responds to conditions of loss and lack with literary production, Chaucer's translation of *The Consolation of Philosophy* negates standard conventions of poetry and replaces all of Boethius's Latin verse passages with Middle English prose.¹⁵² Yet this negation of standard meter is, in the end, restorative.

¹⁵² The traditional structure of a prosimetric text consists of alternating segments of prose (*prosa*) and verse (*metrum*).

Nor is it just a matter of tearing up one thing to build something new. This transformation of genre and form becomes itself a deeper reflection on the meaning of material change in which destruction initiates generation.¹⁵³ On one level, Chaucer's approach to adapting the *Consolation* shows how the act of translation can be infused with lack, such as the perceived loss of the "original" text. Chaucer exceeds this sense of lack, however, with the structural amplification of prose writing and with glosses that integrate the multitudinous voices of the commentary tradition. On another level, Philosophy's message reinforces Chaucer's literary methodology as she guides Boethius's "prisoner" to shed his worldly attachments and consent to change. By examining and reinterpreting his experience of material lack ("lak," "nede"), the prisoner can receive God's blissful "plente" that exists in the world.¹⁵⁴ In both cases, the text considers how states of lack and plenty are ultimately necessary phases in a broader process of change.

Boethius, Chaucer, and Aristotle's Natural Philosophy

A translation of Boethius's *Consolation* was a good vehicle for Chaucer to explore the material dimensions of language. As previously discussed, Chaucer's other work draws on Aristotelian natural philosophy. The *Boece* is no exception, in part

¹⁵³ According to Aristotle, the destruction of any body in nature generates a new substance or state and vice versa: "the passing-away of one thing is the coming-to-be of another thing, and the coming-to-be of one thing the passing away of another thing." Aristotle, "On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away," in *On Sophistical Refutations [and] On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away*, ed. E. S. Forster and David J. Furley, The Loeb classical library, no. 400 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 162–329, (I 3).

¹⁵⁴ "God" in the *Consolation* functions as an omnipotent and prescient figure for introspection according to Neoplatonic philosophy and post-Augustinian Christianity. While God serves as a source of consolation, the text makes no specific appeals to Christ. John Marenbon has attempted to parse the intersection of Christianity and pagan Platonism in the text. Though Marenbon makes a case for a Christian Boethius (arguing that all men of his class during this period were Christian), the relationship between the prisoner and Lady Philosophy in the *Consolation* seems "designed to remove the opportunity to find" overt "confrontation between Christianity and philosophy." John Marenbon, *Boethius* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 155, 157, 162.

because of Chaucer's interest in Aristotle's model of material change, but also because Boethius's *Consolation* integrates Aristotle's teachings, which Chaucer preserves.¹⁵⁵ As I suggest above, the work itself explicitly sets up the ways language can construct and deconstruct the world, and Boethius himself used his writing of the *Consolation* to puzzle out the potential for language to shape his own physical circumstances.

Born around 480, Boethius was a student of Neoplatonic philosophy, especially the work of Porphyry, whose commentaries on Aristotle's logical works became a "part of the curriculum" around the third century.¹⁵⁶ Boethius's study of the Neoplatonists inspired an ambition to translate all of Aristotle's Greek texts into Latin.¹⁵⁷ He managed to fully translate Aristotle's *On Interpretation*; write commentaries for *On Interpretation*, the *Categories*, the *Topics*; and compose glosses for the *Prior Analytics*.¹⁵⁸ Once sentenced to be executed, the grim reality of the discontinuation of his life's work likely set Aristotle at the forefront of Boethius's mind as he wrote his *Consolation* during his imprisonment.¹⁵⁹ Incorporating ideas from Aristotle's other works, such as *On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away*, about that which persists when things go out of existence, may have provided some inspiration as Boethius produced his final and most important text.

¹⁵⁵ Marenbon, *Boethius*, 139-142. Marenbon offers an excellent analysis on the discussion of Aristotelian necessity between Philosophy and the prisoner in 5.P3 and 3.P6.

¹⁵⁶ Marenbon, *Boethius*, 12.

¹⁵⁷ Marenbon, *Boethius*, 18.

¹⁵⁸ Marenbon, *Boethius*, 18.

¹⁵⁹ Marenbon, *Boethius*, 141-142, 152, 154. Marenbon notes that because Boethius's project to translate all of Aristotle was prematurely terminated, he integrated reminders of Aristotelian ideas and arguments throughout the *Consolation*.

Chaucer's formal choices in his translation of the *Consolation* accentuate the Aristotelian themes of material change already at work in Boethius's text. As previously mentioned, a thirteenth century resurgence of Aristotle's translated works resulted in his ideas forming much of the medieval university curriculum, the "implications" of which interested late fourteenth-century writers like Chaucer.¹⁶⁰ This is no less the case for the *Boece*, which contributes to a sense of an Aristotelian "program of becoming" characterized by matter's inclination for change.¹⁶¹ Medieval poets considered literary form, such as a text's layout, spelling, and the arrangement of words to be a type of matter.¹⁶² This meant that a translation like the *Boece* could formally reflect the correlation between textual change and the change that occurs in the material world.

Eleanor Johnson has observed that the *Boece*'s prose makes "ideation sense-perceptible" via sonic patterns of alliteration, stresses, and cadences.¹⁶³ Johnson argues that these formal conventions are far less predictable than the metrical verse of Chaucer's Boethian rime royal poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*, which guides its reader to "expect

¹⁶⁰ Kellie Robertson, *Nature Speaks: Medieval Literature and Aristotelian Philosophy*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc, 2017), 44.

¹⁶¹ Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, 32. Aristotle, "On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away," in *On Sophistical Refutations [and] On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away*, ed. E. S. Forster and David J. Furley, The Loeb classical library, no. 400 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 201 (I, 4).

¹⁶² As a material object, a literary text belonged to the natural world. Besides the more apparent materials that make up a medieval manuscript (parchment, ink, illumination substances, and coverings), the creation and arrangement of words was also considered to be a tangible part of the text. Christopher Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12, 2.

¹⁶³ Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 61.

clauses to end at line ends, and sentences at stanza ends.”¹⁶⁴ Dropping meter in the *Boece* thus allows Chaucer’s prose to disrupt endings for which a reader might be prepared.¹⁶⁵ The syntactical variability of its writing more fully immerses its reader in a material environment that is in the midst of its own ongoing process of change.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, the *Boece*’s prose form replicates the destabilizing effect of worldly alteration at the same time as it brings Chaucer’s process of translation into view.

Translating the *Consolation*

In 510, Boethius, known until this point as a philosopher, joined the civil service as a ceremonial consul. In 522, he was appointed to the position of Master of Offices to Ostrogothic King Theodoric’s court in Ravenna.¹⁶⁷ Boethius joined court during a political climate permeated by religious tensions between the eastern and western leaders of the Roman empire. King Theodoric’s conflict with the eastern emperor in Constantinople and with the Roman pope fostered an atmosphere of “paranoia” at the

¹⁶⁴ Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory*, 86. One of several examples of *Troilus and Criseyde* cited by Johnson on page 84 is the “parsable” dialogue of Pandarus and Criseyde that maintains rhyme and meter: “I, what?” quod she, “by God and by my trouthe,” / I not nat what ye wilne that I seye.” / “I, what?” quod he, “That ye han on hym routhe, / For Goddes love, and doth hymn ought to deye!” / “Now than thus, quod she, “I wolde hym preye / To telle me the gyn of his entente. / Yet wist I nevere wel what that he mente” (3.120-26).

¹⁶⁵ During this time, vernacular translators often converted Latin verse into prose on the basis that prose alone could convey clarity, rationality, and truth. See Caroline D. Eckhardt, “The Medieval Prosimetrum Genre (from Boethius to *Boece*),” *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 16, no. 1 (1983 Spring 1983): 21–38, see 34n19. For analysis on how the prose portions of the *Consolation* could be viewed as the “higher, more demanding medium than poetry” for “the rational mode of cognition,” see also Elaine Scarry, “The Well-Rounded Sphere: The Metaphysical Structure of the *Consolation of Philosophy*,” in *Essays in the Numerical Criticism of Medieval Literature*, (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1980), 91-140, especially 103-104.

¹⁶⁶ Packed into the prose syntax, the glosses extend each line of prose and further disrupt regularity.

¹⁶⁷ Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. David R. Slavitt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), xii. Constantinople ruled the eastern part of the Roman Empire, while the Ostrogoths ruled the western part, xi.

western court.¹⁶⁸ Rumors about Boethius's disloyalty to Theodoric spread after he defended a senator accused of corresponding with eastern officials. He was imprisoned in Pavia in 524, during which time he wrote the *Consolation*, and was then executed later that year.¹⁶⁹

Like Boethius, Chaucer, too, negotiated an identity that straddled intellectual meditation and public service. This likely made translating the *Consolation* an appealing opportunity to push away from traditional courtly poetry and forge something new that lies outside of it. As discussed in the previous chapter, Chaucer shifted out of the English court in 1374 when he was appointed controller of the London customs house, during which time his writing aimed to legitimize his roles as court poet and civil servant.¹⁷⁰ During the years that he was translating the *Boece*, Chaucer joined the commission of Peace for Kent (1385) and was elected to Parliament to represent Kent the next year.¹⁷¹ It would be impossible not to acknowledge the parallels with Boethius's own political trajectory as Chaucer's political and legal stature continued to grow. Chaucer enforced the law, tried criminal cases, and would later watch "as his fellow justices became objects of similar inquiry at the hands of the Lords Appellant."¹⁷² Navigating official spaces at the same time as he immersed himself in translating the *Consolation* into English perhaps

¹⁶⁸ Theodoric was an Arian Christian, and the eastern emperor was a Trinitarian. *The Consolation*, xii.

¹⁶⁹ *The Consolation*, xii-xiii.

¹⁷⁰ Robert John Meyer-Lee, "Literary Value and the Customs House: The Axiological Logic of the House of Fame," *Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 48, no. 4 (2014): 374–94, 391.

¹⁷¹ Chaucer also resigned from the customs in 1386 once a permanent deputy was installed.

¹⁷² Robertson, *The Laborer's Two Bodies*, 58.

added a dimension of significance to the instabilities of worldly power and the role of self-reflective literary production.¹⁷³

Chaucer's Middle English *Boece* is thought to have been composed between 1382 and 1386 and survives in ten manuscripts. The translation's main sources include a Vulgate Latin version of Boethius's sixth-century *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Jean de Meun's fourteenth-century Old French translation called *Li Livres de confort de philosophie*, as well as Latin commentaries and interlinear glosses. The commentary Chaucer is thought to have used is by fourteenth-century Dominican commentator Nicholas Trevet. The interlineated glosses that likely appeared in manuscripts of the *Consolation* used by Chaucer were authored by ninth-century monk Remigius of Auxerre.¹⁷⁴ Chaucer might have had access to separate manuscripts of each major work, or, according to Tim Machan, it is also possible that "Chaucer's Latin manuscript had both interlinear Remigian glosses and a complete copy of Trevet's commentary, either appended after the *Consolatio* or intercalated with it."¹⁷⁵ Intriguingly, though Chaucer is described as a very faithful translator, he produces his Middle English text by unpredictably switching between Latin and Old French sources, supporting the theory of

¹⁷³ For more on Chaucer's translation of the *Boece* as a tool to intervene in the broader political turmoil of the late fourteenth-century, see Inchol Yoo, "The Politics of Chaucer's *Boece*," *Medieval and Early Modern English Studies* 18, no. 2 (August 8, 2010): 361–84, especially 361–62. Yoo determines that Chaucer's translation served to express his "royalist concerns about king Richard's attempts to empower himself excessively, with a view of preventing the king from degrading into a tyrannical ruler."

¹⁷⁴ Tim William Machan and A. J. Minnis, eds., *Sources of the Boece*, The Chaucer Library (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 9.

¹⁷⁵ Machan and Minnis, *Sources of the Boece*, 11.

a composite source text.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Chaucer had a composite Latin text and, alongside it, a manuscript of Jean de Meun's Old French translation, which was regarded as part of the commentary tradition.¹⁷⁷

Chaucer's clear access to faithful texts of the *Consolation*, and his commitment to accuracy, both make his choice to strip away Boethius's verse all the more striking. Philosophy's prosimetric alternation between meters and prose sections profoundly contributes to the meaning of the *Consolation* by responding to the needs of the prisoner as he journeys from Book One through Book Five. Philosophy uses prose to convey truths about the order of the universe. She turns to verse to mollify her student's emotional reactions to the revelations of a previous prose section and, at times, to mentally prepare him for what is to come in the next prose lesson.

Book One opens with a meter and switches to prose in the next section. This changes in Books Two through Five, which each commences with a prose opening and then turns to verse. The final part of Book Five contains no verse at all and, instead, concludes with a lengthy prose section. The significance of verse and prose is not only felt in terms of their order and configuration. The proportion of verse to prose also communicates a sense of transformation, mirroring the progression of the prisoner. As Elaine Scarry has observed, "the ratio of poetry to prose gradually diminishes as one progresses to the higher books: in book 1 the ratio is approximately one to two; in book 5,

¹⁷⁶ A. J. Minnis and Tim William Machan, "The *Boece* as Late-Medieval Translation," in *Chaucer's Boece and the Medieval Tradition of Boethius* (Cambridge England; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1993), 167–88, see 179; Minnis and Machan, *Sources of the Boece*, 12; Szilvia Malaczkov, "Geoffrey Chaucer's Translation Strategies," *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 9, no. 1 (2001): 33–44, see 43.

¹⁷⁷ Minnis and Machan, "The *Boece* as Late-Medieval Translation," 173.

one to five.”¹⁷⁸ This suggests that the prisoner has grown more equipped to receive and understand the reason of Philosophy’s remedies in the text’s later stages. The steady reduction of the size of the verse sections, then, participates in a rhetorical progression that formally mirrors the prisoner’s mental development.

By stripping all poetic embellishment from its original, Chaucer’s Middle English translation converts all metered passages into prose. Without the distinctive contrast of alternating verse and prose sections, Chaucer’s version draws attention to its difference from Boethius’s text. Not many readers address this genre change, with the most noteworthy being Johnson’s recent formalist analysis of the *Boece*’s all-prose style. Johnson responds to two main approaches that treat the text as either a replication of Jean de Meun’s translation or as a method for overcoming the limitations of English to reproduce Boethius’s original Latin verse. Ultimately, Johnson determines that Chaucer’s conversion of Boethius’s metrical sections to prose

is a deliberate formal and stylistic choice, rooted in a desire to experiment with the aesthetic possibilities of prose form, and with how prose aesthetics might produce ethically transformative assent on its own, independent of metrical action.¹⁷⁹

Here Johnson focuses on the aesthetic possibilities of Chaucer’s choices with her conclusion being that prose aesthetics can produce “assent” (that of the imagined narrator

¹⁷⁸ Scarry, “The Well-Rounded Sphere,” 103-104. Scarry connects the *Consolation*’s form and content, arguing that it produces “an aesthetic corollary to the metaphysical reality of God: it is Boethius’s attempt to gain the gift of godlikeness by participating in simple unity of form and substance,” 93.

¹⁷⁹ Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory*, 57. The prose style throughout the whole text, termed “aesthetic prose” by Johnson, takes on heightened ornamentation as alliteration, rhythm, and imagery that is equally as arresting as its source, 55-57. The style in the *Boece* derives from an integrated prose practice that consolidates Latin and Middle English prose theories by ornamenting its syntax with alliteration and with cadencing that uses *cursus* endings, 57. Johnson’s overall conclusion draws together a dialectical construction between the *Boece* and Chaucer’s extended Boethian poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*, arguing that “the *Boece* should be read as the prose and the *Troilus* the meter of a single, unified stylistic project, in which Chaucer reinvents how Boethius’s prosimetric *Consolation* renders meaning aesthetically available,” 91.

and/or reader) that is ethically transformative. Although I do not take up the aesthetics of Chaucer's formalist engagements, my analysis nonetheless builds on Johnson's by considering the effects of translation decision-making. In other words, the transition from verse to prose produces more than an ethically transformative assent because it solicits a reader to perceive change in the text. And while this would be meaningful in any text, it takes on a particular meaning in a text that invites the reader to not mourn what has been lost, but to instead embrace the renewal that comes out of material lack.

Even without a focus on negation, Chaucer's tendency to strip down the *Consolation* is conspicuous from the opening, which not only omits all references to sources but also reflects the shifting currents of translation practice in fourteenth-century England. Unlike *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*, which provides introductory material that lays out Chaucer's translation choices, the *Boece* "eschews the framing material omnipresent in the commentary tradition" of the *Consolation*, which typically delves into Boethius's biography and primes its reader to negotiate "dialogic voices and perspectives," "Neoplatonic ontology," and the reconciliation of "free will and predestination."¹⁸⁰ Without his own prefatory remarks, Chaucer leaves only his translation infused with a range of glosses throughout to interpret the transformation from prosimetry to all-prose.

Though there is no written account by Chaucer laying out his translation choices, Chaucer was no stranger to medieval conventions of translation. Prior to translating the *Boece*, Chaucer regularly adapted the work of Latin, Italian, and French authors into

¹⁸⁰ Melinda Nielsen, "Putting Boethius into Chaucer's *Boece*: The Ethics of Authorship in the *Boke of Comfort*," *The Chaucer Review* 54, no. 4 (October 7, 2019): 441–63, 441.

Middle English.¹⁸¹ One such author is Jean de Meun, who provided Chaucer with material for his Middle English *The Romaunt of the Rose* and, later, the *Boece*. Unlike the *Boece*, Jean's Old French translation of the *Consolation*, *Li Livres de Confort de Philosophie* (1305), does include a preface that discusses methods of vernacular translation.¹⁸² This preface, a dedication to King Philip IV, might provide some context for the task of translating the *Consolation* into a vernacular language. Jean addresses a specific request from the king as well as the potential reaction of a general audience:

Et por ce que tu me deis—lequel dit je tieng pour commandement—que je preisse plainement la sentence de l'auteur sens trop ensuivre les paroles du latin, je l'ai fait a mon petit pooir si comme ta debonnairete le me commanda. Or pri touz ceulz qui cest livre verront, s'il leur semble en aucwis lieus que je me soie trop eslongniés des paroles de l'auteur ou que je aie mis aucunes fois plus de paroles que li auteur n'i met ou aucune fois mains, que il le me pardoinnent. Car se je eusse espons mot a mot le latin par le françois, li livres en fust trop occurs aus gens lais et li clers, neis moiennement letré, ne peussent pas legierement entendre le latin par le françois. (7-18)¹⁸³

And because you told me—and I take your words as command—to express completely [plainly] the meaning of the author without following the Latin words too closely, I have done that within the limits of my power, just as your gentleness commanded me to do. Now I beg those who will see this book, if it seems to them that in some places I have strayed too far from the author's words, or that I have at times put in more words than the author wrote or at times fewer, that they forgive me. For if I had transcribed word for word [verbatim] the Latin into French, the book would have been too obscure for the lay people and for less literate clerics, who could not easily understand the Latin from the French.

¹⁸¹ Chaucer translated the Latin works of Ovid, Virgil, and Boethius; the Italian works of Petrarch, Dante, and Boccaccio; and the French writing of Jean de Meun and Guillaume de Lorris. Among the texts accepted to be partial or full translations are *The House of Fame*, *The Romaunt of the Rose*, *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, the *General Prologue*, *The Knight's Tale*, the Prologue to *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, *The Franklin's Tale*, *The Clerk's Tale*, and *Troilus and Criseyde*.

¹⁸² Machan and Minnis, *Sources of the Boece*, 7-8. Extant manuscripts of Jean's translation of the *Consolation* feature two mixed form versions and one all-prose version. With regard to the preface to *Li Livres de Confort*, Machan and Minnis argue that Jean describes translation methods not actually executed in the text itself. For more on Jean de Meun's translation, see Machan and Minnis' extensive analysis in their Introduction, 6-9.

¹⁸³ V. L. Dedek-Héry, "Boethius' *De Consolatione* by Jean de Meun," *Mediaeval Studies* 14 (1952): 165–275, see 168.

In this passage, Jean clearly articulates the translator's challenge to balance rendering the Latin words into a vernacular language while simultaneously transmitting Boethius's *sentence* as clearly as possible. Translation, specifically, how to best convey the sense (*sensus*, *sententia*) of a Latin text was a debated topic in the late Middle Ages.¹⁸⁴ By the fourteenth century, groups like the Lollards favored more "open translation," which involved "a certain amount of textual exposition and extrapolation," like glossing and commentary.¹⁸⁵

Jean's preface describes the activity of *expositio sententiae* that also likely occupied Chaucer's translation as he negotiated shaping a Middle English lexicon while maintaining the fundamental meaning of his Latin source.¹⁸⁶ The decision to strip away metrical verse is never overtly acknowledged in the *Boece*. However, there is self-referential evidence in other texts by Chaucer that recognizes the all-prose translation to be one of the highest accomplishments of his literary career. Though Chaucer does not append a preface or dedication to his translation of the *Boece* to articulate his writing strategies, he does mention the text by name in the *Legend of Good Women*, where he uses it as a commentary on the act of making. In one early scene, Alceste defends the God of Love's accusations of "heresy" against Chaucer's poetic output by listing a group of texts that have "furthred wel [Love's] law in his makynge" (F 412-13). After citing Chaucer's other poetry, such as *The House of Fame*, *The Book of the Duchess*, *The*

¹⁸⁴ Minnis and Machan, "The *Boece* as Late-Medieval Translation," see 168. For an excellent discussion of translation theory as it evolved over the course of the Middle Ages, see pages 168-173.

¹⁸⁵ Minnis and Machan, "The *Boece* as Late-Medieval Translation," 173.

¹⁸⁶ Minnis and Machan, "The *Boece* as Late-Medieval Translation," 173.

Parliament of Fowls, *The Knight's Tale*, “many a ympne,” and other unnamed “balades, roundels, virelayes,” she goes on to “speke of other holynesse” (of other pious work), remarking that “He hath *in prose translated* Boece” (F 422-25, emphasis mine).¹⁸⁷ In qualifying the *Boece* as a “prose” translation, Alceste assigns holiness to the *Boece* on account of its form. Indeed, even the verb “translated” sets the *Boece* apart from the rest of the texts cited in the defense. For every other description, Alceste uses the verb “to make,” suggesting a distinct composition process characterized by creation of a text (“makynge,” “maked,” “made,” “maad,” “maad”) (F 413, 415, 417, 427, 430). The *Boece* is the only work not assigned this same process of “makynge.” The vocabulary in *The Legend of Good Women* very clearly acknowledges the *Boece*’s “unmaking” of the *Consolation*’s verse form. But rather than diminishing the meaning of the source text, stripping away meter reenacts its own type of transformation via the translation process. In doing so, the *Boece*’s own formal properties prompt a deeper reflection on the experience of material change for its reader.

The concept of translation carries meaning beyond the act of converting a text from one language to another. Alceste’s statement that “[h]e hath in prose translated

¹⁸⁷ Alceste mentions two other texts in this passage, *The Second Nun’s Tale* and a lost adaptation of Origen’s Life of Mary Magdalene: “And maad the lyf also of Seynt Cecile. / He made also... / Orgene upon Maudeleyne” (F 426-28). *The Second Nun’s Tale* may itself be another example of Chaucer shifting the form of his sources—though, in the reverse direction of the *Boece*—from prose to verse. In this case, then, “makynge” might be a word used to describe a text in which its final output is poetry. Sherry L. Reames analyzes several possible Latin sources of the Cecilia legend for *The Second Nun’s Tale*, which are all prose texts. She ultimately suggests that “[g]iven all the evidence available now, it seems reasonable to conclude that Chaucer probably compiled the “Second Nun’s Tale” from two sources: (1) a copy of the complete *Legenda aurea* chapter on Cecilia, which he translated closely in lines 85-344, summarized in lines 345-48, and consulted occasionally later on; and (2) a manuscript of the Franciscan abridgment, differing in some details from the best one we have, which he translated closely from line 349 on.” Sherry L. Reames, “A Recent Discovery Concerning the Sources of Chaucer’s ‘Second Nun’s Tale,’” *Modern Philology* 87, no. 4 (1990): 337–61, see 346. For Reames’s original study with her initial conclusions, see Sherry L. Reames, “The Sources of Chaucer’s ‘Second Nun’s Tale,’” *Modern Philology* 76, no. 2 (1978): 111–35.

Boece,” therefore, does not end with an acknowledgement of Chaucer’s changing the *Consolation* from Latin into Middle English. Rather, “translation” also incorporates “the Latinate sense of conveying and the metaphorical sense of revitalizing.”¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, because Alceste qualifies this multivalent sense of “translated” with the prepositional phrase, “in prose,” she thus connects the metaphorical translation (of literary matter) with Chaucer’s formal choices. In this case, the successful translation of the *Boece* depends upon its formal transformation from a mixed-form text to an all-prose text.

More recently, scholars have turned to modern translation theories that decenter the source text and account for the literary context within which translations emerge.¹⁸⁹ Though *fidelity*, how strictly or accurately a translated work conforms to an original author’s text, has traditionally been a standard for evaluating the success of a translation, as Jean’s preface shows, it assumes that a translation is reducible to adherence to a single exemplar. Rather than solely judging a translation according to fidelity, translation theory asks us to consider the “‘author’ and the ‘translator’ as mutually participating in a textual system of citation and traces without ‘originals.’”¹⁹⁰ This system highlights how translation continues to evolve through a constant process of decision making at all stages

¹⁸⁸ Russell A. Peck, “The Ideas of ‘Entente’ and Translation in Chaucer’s *Second Nun’s Tale*,” *Annuaire Mediaevale* 8 (1967): 17–37, see 22. Deriving from the Latin antecedent *translatius* (*transfere*), beyond literary translation, “translate” thus indicates a transformation from death or dormancy to life which coincides with a change from the human to the divine.

¹⁸⁹ Lynne Long draws on polysystems theory which “locates translated literature within the context of a culture’s literary system, which is itself part of a wider group of systems making up that culture.” Long identifies the nascent vernacular polysystem of late fourteenth century England as highly dependent upon translations of Latin texts. Lynne Long, “Medieval Literature Through the Lens of Translation Theory: Bridging the Interpretive Gap,” *Translation Studies* 3, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 61–77, 65.

¹⁹⁰ Kathleen Davis, *Deconstruction and Translation* (Manchester, England: St Jerome Publishing Ltd.; University of Ottawa Press, 2001), 45.

of interpretation that can draw in multiple authors and translators.¹⁹¹ Indeed, editors Ralph Hanna and Traugott Lawler address these additional layers of translation in their explanatory notes to the *Boece* in *The Riverside Chaucer*. Hanna and Lawler note their use of parentheses to designate each gloss and acknowledge that many of Chaucer's glosses actually derive from other commentaries. The editors further discuss their use of "italics to indicate extra textual phrases and sentences not paralleled in either the Latin or the French" sources, which I retain in this chapter.¹⁹² Within these italicized glosses, they point out, many are "from Trevet" and "the remainder" they accept to be "Chaucer's original efforts at annotating the text."¹⁹³

Translation theory can therefore help to see Boethius's "original" text not as a fixed referent, but as a porous vehicle for the "citations and traces" that shaped Chaucer's fourteenth century literary context. This perspective resituates the *Boece* into a product of decision-making informed by the many authors, translators, and readers of the *Consolation*. Lynn Long, for example, has commented that Chaucer often uses the phrase

¹⁹¹ Jacques Derrida has discussed the double-bind inherent in any act of translation. A translator who attempts to maintain what Derrida calls *property*, "the words needed to explicate, clarify, and teach the semantic content and forms of the text to be translated," will necessarily defy the standard of equivalence in its *quantity* "to the original, apart from any paraphrase, explication, explicitation, analysis," and vice versa. Jacques Derrida, "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?," trans. Lawrence Venuti, *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (2001): 169–200, 179. Likewise, in her discussion on Derrida and translation, Davis cites the impossible "aporetic duty" of translation decision-making because such decisions "obviously cannot take place fully outside the rules and norms of a specific context...but they nonetheless must go beyond, rather than owe themselves fully to the limits of an already established order." Davis, *Deconstruction and Translation*, 93. As a result of this impasse, Michelle Warren determines that modern theory must imbue a translation with its own independent value from its source text. Michelle R. Warren, "Modern Theoretical Approaches to Medieval Translation," in *A Companion to Medieval Translation*, ed. Jeanette Beer and Simon Armitage (Leeds, England: Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 165–74, 165. For more foundational writing on translation theory, see Walter Benjamin, "The Translator's Task," trans. Steven Rendall, *TTR: Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction. Etudes Sur Le Texte et Ses Transformations* 10, no. 2 (1997): 151–65; Lawrence Venuti, "Translating Derrida on Translation: Relevance and Disciplinary Resistance," *The Yale Journal of Criticism: Interpretation in the Humanities* 16, no. 2 (2003): 237–62, 268.

¹⁹² Chaucer, "Explanatory Notes: *Boece*," 1005.

¹⁹³ Chaucer, "Explanatory Notes: *Boece*," 1005.

“that is to seyn” in his many bracketed glosses “to make clear that the comment is his own even if by way of Nicholas Trevet’s work.”¹⁹⁴ First, what is notable about Long’s observation is that, through his phrasing and punctuation, Chaucer, in the way a modern editor’s influence might appear in an academic citation or footnote, more overtly makes known his interpretive presence in the glosses, which he distinguishes from the material of the *Consolation*.¹⁹⁵ For instance, in a meter about how God is the source of all things, Chaucer injects several glosses by adding more concrete terms to accompany the figurative language used for God and his governance. The “ryghtes or the lawes of the heye thonderere” is followed by “(that is to seyn, of God)” and reemphasized a second time with “the cause that hath yeven hem beinge (that to seyn, to God)” (4.m6.2-3, 58-60). Another set of glosses in the meter seem both to clarify the meaning of the *Consolation*’s imagery and to intensify a sense of creation and destruction: “the thinges that ben now contynued by stable ordenaunce, thei sholden departen from hir welle (that is to seyn, from hir bygynnyng), and failen (that is to seyn, tornen to noght)” (4.m6.50-54). In all four cases, the glosses feature Chaucer as a supportive guide appearing in the text to define terms that cut through metaphoric language, promoting a specific interpretation for the meter.

Second, by signaling his authorship through his glosses, Chaucer emphasizes his text’s relationship to other iterations of the *Consolation*. With the accumulation of other

¹⁹⁴ Long, “Medieval Literature Through the Lens of Translation Theory, 70. Long sees a dual purpose for Chaucer’s “interpolation of commentary” which “enrich the translator’s own knowledge of the content and...enhance access and understanding for readers of the vernacular,” 70-71.

¹⁹⁵ Rita Copeland suggests that for Chaucer’s body of work, the *Boece* takes on a type of critical status because it “performs the function of an academic reference place of the *Consolatio*.” Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 143.

translations in Chaucer's glossing, we can see how translations and translators are coextensive with other versions, commentaries, readers, and interpretations. If the glosses are intended to be read *as* glosses—as additional, explanatory content—it can be concluded that the *Boece* neither replaces nor replicates Boethius's text. Chaucer's text coexists with the *Consolation* and all other versions as a vernacular amalgamation of Boethius's writing channeled through 800 years of commentary, most of which appears in prose. The verbosity of the *Boece* is thus the product of integrating the different perspectives and languages of readers like Jean de Meun, Nicholas Trevet, and Remigius of Auxerre, which Chaucer presents as prose in one text.

Reconsidering the “Songs” in Chaucer’s All-Prose Translation

And yet, there is some question over just how formalized Chaucer's formal choices really are. Though the reference in *The Legend of Good Women* paired with Jean's preface may help place the *Boece* within a translation tradition of the later Middle Ages, they cannot confirm anything about the translation process itself. Missing a document authored by Chaucer in which he introduces the *Boece* leaves too many unanswerable questions to draw any concrete conclusions. This absence, however, may provide an opportunity in terms of how we approach the text. A. J. Minnis and Tim William Machan have considered the *Boece*'s “lack of a preface (in contrast with Chaucer's three other extant prose translations),” along with its “alternate translations, and its sometimes awkward deployment of the glosses,” and conclude that “[h]e never applied the finishing touches and made the final revisions necessary to turn what seems to be a penultimate draft into a finished work.”¹⁹⁶ Though a broader discussion of

¹⁹⁶ Minnis and Machan, “The *Boece* as Late-Medieval Translation,” 183.

translation irregularities is beyond the scope of this chapter, the possibility that the *Boece* reflects a translation not fully crafted can “suggest translation in the very process.”¹⁹⁷ Considering the *Boece* as an in-progress translation in the midst of formal adjustments heightens the visibility of ongoing change in the matter of the text. As I will discuss, Minnis and Machan’s theory is supported by conspicuous inconsistencies of textual markers that seem to destabilize the fixed divisions between verse and prose sections. These observations about Chaucer’s translation shows how the textual material itself serves as a rearticulation of Philosophy’s message that worldly change, even when experienced as great lack, gives way to plenitude.

Before even beginning the text, medieval readers of the *Boece* were confronted with a haphazard set of textual markings which depended on differing levels of scribal intervention. Most *Boece* manuscripts lack a uniform *ordinatio* schema.¹⁹⁸ Some feature attempts by scribes and “editorially minded readers” to write in “Metrum” and “Prosa” designators or numbers to adhere to the *Consolation*’s structure while others were content to leave out the rubrics altogether.¹⁹⁹ Because of this, Machan theorizes that “variations in rubrication do make sense if one posits that the archetype of all authorities had no

¹⁹⁷ Minnis and Machan, “The *Boece* as Late-Medieval Translation,” 184.

¹⁹⁸ Several studies on the *Boece* manuscripts make claims about its rubrics, however, none provide concrete evidence or cite specific manuscripts. Eckhardt, for instance, erroneously describes the presence of divisions in the *Boece*, explaining that they “identify parts of *Boece* as ‘Metre I,’ ‘Prose I,’ ‘Metre II,’ ‘Prose II,’ and so forth.” Eckhardt, “The Medieval Prosimetrum Genre,” 21. In his edition of the *Boece*, Machan points out two other scholars who have made unverified claims, writing that “Seymour and Hanna assert that the ‘original format’ of the *Boece* included rubrication, though they offer no evidence in support of this claim (1955:44).” Tim William Machan, ed., *Chaucer’s Boece: A Critical Edition Based on Cambridge University Library, MS li.3.21, ff. 9r-180v*, Middle English Texts 38 (Heidelberg: Winter, 2008), xxxvi.

¹⁹⁹ “The *ordinatio* schemes vary from Latin rubrics and headings of varying lengths to Latin rubrics alone, to English rubrics, to the sequential numbering of proses and meters, to no rubrics at all.” Machan, *Chaucer’s Boece*, xxxv.

rubrics at all.”²⁰⁰ The likelihood of the lack of any rubrication in a single source manuscript presents yet another way that the *Boece* invited its reader to respond to a material environment by participating in the constant process of change. It also suggests that those who interacted with the text made different choices in reaction to the unguided interpretive task set before them.

If the all-prose form of Chaucer’s translation represents the changeable material world, the omission of uniform names and numbers for meter and prose sections further draw the reader into the sense of lack that can result from change. Surprisingly, though the *Boece* has no consistent “Metrum” or “Prosa” rubrication and does not possess a conventional meter, Chaucer does not completely abandon all reference to verse. Indeed, because all other markers have gone, any reference he does make to poetry is made more conspicuous on a page without verse. Chaucer does this by retaining a vocabulary that refers to the melodic quality of Philosophy’s meters even as he strips them of their metrical and verse structure. Words like “vers,” “ditees,” “moedes or prolacions” (melodies and harmonies), “song,” “dite,” “subtil soong,” and “songe,” suggest that these persistent remainders of poetic experiences are felt though the verse has been formally negated (1.m1.2, 5; 1.m1.3; 2.p1.46; 3.p1.1, 2; 3.p1.46; 3.m2.1; 4.p6.373). As with the lingering apostrophic calls in the *Treatise* to the departed Lewis’s disembodied eye, hands, and thumb, Chaucer’s language in these passages contradicts the very prose out of which it is written. He thus further represents how the fluctuating material indicators which shape the prisoner’s experiences can seem to point only to lack.

²⁰⁰ Machan, *Chaucer’s Boece*, xxxvi.

This calling out of lack is most apparent in the prose passages that expressly name themselves as verse, a labeling that happens with the very first lines of the work. The text opens with a mournful prisoner describing the act of committing his experiences into poetry:

Allas! I wepynge, am constreyned to begynnen *verse* of sorwful matere, that whilom in florysschyng studie made delitable *ditees*. For lo, renynge muses of poetes enditen to me thynges to ben written, and drery *vers* of wretchidnesse weten my face with verray teres. (1.m1.1-6, emphasis mine)

These self-reflexive statements dramatize the turn from one form of poetic output to another. First, the prisoner states that he is compelled by the poetic muses to create the sorrowful verse that presently appears in the text. He concludes that “drery vers” is more appropriate to his wretched circumstances than the pleasing poetry, or “delitable ditees,” he used to write in days of former prosperity. As the prisoner’s material circumstances have declined, he suggests, so must his “verse of sorwful matere” change from the ditty, or lyric, to elegiac poetry.²⁰¹ This discussion about poetic form, however, is flawed because, in his attachment to the material world, the prisoner can only see loss in the change of his condition rather than the continuity that underlies all change.

In his resistance to change, the grief-stricken prisoner fixates on the pain of loss as he states that the “drery *vers* of wretchidnesse weten my face with verray teres.” His physical tears, qualified as “verray,” or truthful and appropriate, tangibly manifest his

²⁰¹ According to Anna Crabbe, Boethius’s shift to elegy from the ditty, translated from the Latin *carmina*, a term often used to reference a lyric, signals a downgrade of poetic form to the “lowest possible rung of the poetic ladder.” Crabbe goes on to suggest that this scene uses poetic form to reflect Boethius’s wretchedness, drawing on Classical literature in which “[d]irges and laments come in for particular criticism...where they are to be given only to women and to the wicked.” Anna Crabbe, “Literary Design in the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*,” in *Boethius: His Life, Thought, and Influence*, ed. Margaret Gibson, Basil Blackwell, and Henry Chadwick, xxv, 451 vols. (Blackwell Publishing, 1981), 237–74, see 248n67, 249, 249n75.

misery expressed by his verse. Early on, he reports that he is “wepyng,” but by the end of the passage, and through the process of composing his new elegiac verse, he embellishes the condition of weeping with an expanded description of the constituent matter of weeping: tears and a wet face.²⁰² And yet, in the *Boece*, the prisoner is not speaking in verse. Recasting this meter into prose doubly emphasizes the lack of a “drery vers” form brought on by the loss of the prisoner’s material prosperity.

Another example appears in Book Three in which references to Philosophy’s use of song draws attention to the lack of a verse form in the text. However, in this instance, lack is recast as generative. It also reflects Chaucer’s ongoing decision-making as he negotiates between sources. Chaucer’s Middle English version makes lack more noticeable than Jean’s French translation by more closely rendering certain words of Boethius’s Latin. The Latin verse, “...placet arguto / Fidibus lentis promere cantu” (it pleases me to say / With my pliant strings in sharp song) (Machan, 3.m2.5-6), becomes “me plaist a dire par chant sutil” (it pleases me to sing a subtle song with delightful sounds) (Machan, 3.m2.1), which Chaucer translates as, “It liketh me to schewe by subtil soong, with slake and delytable sown of strenges” (3.m2.1-2).²⁰³ Here, Chaucer deploys the French syntax, but in prose significantly extends the length of the lines with words and descriptors. By referencing a stringed instrument, he also recovers the Latin imagery. Invoking the music of plucked strings (omitted from the French) in writing that no longer exists in verse pushes harder on the physicality of music and at the same time, aggregates components from his copies of Jean and Boethius. Unlike the wet tears produced by the

²⁰² This correspondence also appears in the first stanza of *Troilus and Criseyde* in which Chaucer figures the verse themselves as weeping: “help me for t’endite / Thise woful vers, that wepen as I write” (I.6-7).

²⁰³ Machan and Minnis, *Sources of the Boece*.

prisoner in the text's opening, these lines do not directly express grief or lack. Instead, Philosophy's recuperative words focus on the image of played strings perceived by the senses as "slake" (gentle of sound) and "delytable" (sensuously appealing). By Book Three, Chaucer's prose alludes to verse and song to foreground the benefits of material change.

Philosophy and her Message of Material Change

Reflecting Chaucer's prose translation methodology, Lady Philosophy's rehabilitation of the prisoner in the *Boece* depends on conveying the sustaining plenitude of material change. Philosophy appears to the prisoner to help him redirect his mind from the loss of his material attachments (fame, wealth, power) toward the sovereign good of God. To process the "manye entrechaungynges" always taking place in the physical world, Philosophy directs the prisoner to "withdrawe thy nekke fro the yok (*of erthely affeccions*)" (2.m3.16-23, 3.m1.13-14). However, Philosophy's process of easing the prisoner's mourning over lost material possessions and status encounters some resistance. In one early exchange, the prisoner admits that he "wel desired to have matere of thynges to done (as who seith, I desired to have matiere of governaunce over comunalities)" (2.p7.3-6). He claims, however, that his acts of public service are immune to material change because, even if he passes away, "virtue stille sholde nat elden...(*for whiche men myghten speken or wryten of his gode gouvernement*)" (2.p7.6-7, 10-12). Though the prisoner denies that his ethical deeds were motivated by "the covetise of mortel thynges," Philosophy disagrees, branding his example as evidence of earthly aspirations for "glorie and renoun" (2.p7.3-6, 19). As Philosophy addresses the prisoner's account of his motivations, she also aims to correct his broader expectation for his "virtue" to endure

through the people and writing that he believes will memorialize him. As she explains, in the terrestrial world, there are endless opportunities for glory to decline and be forgotten: differences in language and interest between nations, fluctuating views over what is worthy of praise, the decay of written accounts, and death (2.p7.53-55, 72-77, 90-91, 45).

With these illustrations of worldly change, Philosophy gets to the heart of the prisoner's primary obstacle to achieving relief from his grief: his desire for an unchanging world. Like the speaker in Chaucer's lyric, *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, the prisoner is overly entangled in the material attachments of a "world" that was once "stedfast and stable," but

...[n]ow it is so fals and deceivable
That word and deed, as in conclusioun,
Ben nothing lyk, for turns up-so-down
Is al this world for mede and wilfulnesse,
That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse. (1-7)

Here, the speaker laments that the "lak" of correspondence between words and human actions signals a broader loss of "al" social stability because language exclusively serves "mede and willfulnesse," or "gifts, bribes, and misdirected human will" (6).²⁰⁴ As a result, humankind consigns itself to a persistent state of lack. The prisoner in the Boece, likewise, seems to desire a stability that does not actually exist in the material world.

²⁰⁴ Chad G. Crosson, "A Language for Ethics and Eloquence: Political and Linguistic Order in Chaucer's *Lak of Stedfastnesse*," *The Chaucer Review* 53, no. 2 (March 15, 2018): 213–34, 221. When used to pursue worldly desires, words become "like any common good" that "can be bought or sold," 221. See also Liam O. Purdon, "Chaucer's *Lak of Stedfastnesse*: A Revalorization of the Word," in *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Lois Roney, xxii, 318 vols. (Syracuse University Press, 1989), 144–52, especially 146-149.

To lead her student to a place where he may embrace earthly change, Philosophy offers a more sophisticated solution than the wholesale rejection of the material.²⁰⁵

Indeed, her message aims to show the prisoner that his desire for an unchanging material world has obstructed him from discerning God's "plente." With the right mindset, the prisoner can learn that to experience change, especially loss, is to perceive the presence of God in the natural world. Thus, what the prisoner initially perceives as the "grete apparailes and array that me lakketh, that ben passed away from me," he shall come to see as evidence of the change and creation unfolding all around him (1.p4.62-63).

Philosophy offers the prisoner a way forward from the perceived losses he attributes to his recent misfortunes. With the image of a pre-commercial community, Philosophy's fifth meter in Book Two adopts the commonplace style of poems devoted to the Golden Age to illustrate some of the ways that lack can lead the prisoner to blissful plenitude. The meter describes an ancient society's conditions of lack and places them in contrast to the destruction and attachment of contemporary culture, encouraging the prisoner to discontinue his mourning over the loss of participation in such a system.

Philosophy presents two variants of lack. On one level, she employs lack to romanticize the "firste age of men" by idealizing its "[b]lisful" state of un-knowing and

²⁰⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum's work on medieval resurrection suggests that "Western Christianity did not hate or discount the body," Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 11. In fact, in Bynum's earlier book, she argues that religious men and women who fasted did so in search of abundance: "It is a choosing of lack that induces God to send plenty: rain, harvest, and life," Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 32.

acceptance of material change (2.m5.1).²⁰⁶ On the other, Philosophy designates modern lack as “the anguysschous love of having” caused by the cycle of desire and grief of attachment to perishable material resources (2.m5.30-31). Though Philosophy also seems to be lamenting the days past, by connecting these two versions of lack as two chronological points linked by the passage of time, she also introduces the possibility to return from an anguished condition of lack back to a state of blissful lack. Allegorically, the two communities model a path for the prisoner to follow. If he can disengage from the modern version of lack—the consumption of the Roman Empire—and return to the first age’s version of lack—acceptance of material change—Boethius may grasp true blissfulness.

Philosophy credits the blissful lack of this first age to what is *not* known to it, specifically, attachment to technology and global commerce. Because excessive consumption is (yet) unknown to it, the former folk “ne destroyeden ne desseyvede nat himself with outrage” because they acknowledge the perishability of nature by experiencing material change as a source of comfort (2.m5.3-5). To further emphasize change as sustaining, Philosophy uses a language of plenitude to talk about how this age meets basic physical needs like sleep and “hungir” (2.m5.6). Words like “holsom,” “apayed,” “metes,” and “slaken” identify the nourishment derived from the immediate natural environment. The former folk eat the “accornes of ookes,” drink from “rennynge waters,” and find shelter under the “schadwes of the heye pyn-trees” (2.m5.6, 17, 18).

²⁰⁶ For more about Chaucer’s “skepticism of the primitivist principle—that vice originates in technological and economic development” and his suspicion of “nostalgia, both as a mode of historical understanding and as a psychological condition,” see Nicola Masciandaro, “‘Cause & Fundacion of Alle Craftys’: Imagining Work’s Origins,” in *The Voice of the Hammer: The Meaning of Work in Middle English Literature* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 59–106, especially 94-99.

These images ascribe sustenance to the constant change occurring in nature. The acorns, which contain the seeds of the oak tree, make possible substantial change and continued life. Likewise, it is the continual movement of running water in streams that enables it to support growth and survival. Finally, the protective shadows cast by the pine trees signify the passing of time as sunlight moves over the course of a day.

Buttressing Philosophy's speech are lengthy textual glosses added by Chaucer, which provide further specification on the tangible matter and techniques for producing goods that satisfy modern pleasures and vanities, like winemaking and silk-dying, of which the first age lacks knowledge:

They ne coude nat medle the yift of Bachus to the cleer hony (*that is to seyn, they could make no pyement or claree*), ne they coude nat medle the bryghte fleeces of the contre of Seryens with the venym of Tyrie (*this to seyn, thei coude nat deyen white fleeces of Syrien contre with the blood of a maner schellefyssche that men fynden in Tirie, with whiche blood men deyen purpre*). (2.m5.6-15)

Philosophy mentions spiced wine and fabric colored with dye from Syria.

Chaucer's glosses name the precise substances extracted from plants and animals that produce wine and stain silk.²⁰⁷ Like the extended description of the strings, these prose glosses broaden the scope of the meter and integrate earlier commentaries to elongate each line, making them "pregnant with words."²⁰⁸ The first gloss lists the vegetative ingredients that sweeten wine: "pyement" (a spice) and "claree" (an aromatic herb). The

²⁰⁷ Chaucer's glosses perform the rhetorical technique which Geoffrey of Vinsauf calls amplification, including *repetition*, taking "up again in other words what has already been said," and *description*. Margaret F. Nims, trans., *Geoffrey of Vinsauf: Poetria nova, Revised edition*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2010), see 26-38 (III.A.1-7). For the prose counterpart to the *Poetria nova*, see Roger P. Parr, trans., *Documentum de Modo et Arte Dictandi et Versificandi: Instruction in the Method and Art of Speaking and Versifying*, Mediaeval Philosophical Texts in Translation, no. 17 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1968), 45-50, 55-64).

²⁰⁸ *Poetria nova*, 35 (III.A.7).

second gloss clarifies that the secretions of sea snails, “the blood of a maner schellefyssche,” make up the source for “purpre” dye. These commodifications of resources highlight a shift away from the sustenance enjoyed by the first age. Not necessary for basic survival, the luxury of sweet wine and the symbolic aesthetics of purple silk indict the consumption of a modern society too attached to the material world.

In addition to the prose translation in the *Boece*, Chaucer also adapted Boethius’s meter into a standalone poem called “The Former Age.” With its emphasis on lack, the lyric offers a more static representation of nature than the *Boece*. “The Former Age” seems only able to imagine the former folk in terms of poverty. Though the people also eat the fruit of trees, “mast” (acorns or beechnuts), “hawes” (berries), and “apples,” these provisions are described as “skars and thinne” (7, 37, 7, 36). Instead of the moving, running water depicted in the *Boece*, there is a still, “colde welle” from which to drink. Absent is any mention of the comfort provided by the shadows of trees or any sense of time passing in the material world. This is likely to emphasize that any sense of “seurtee” experienced by the past age is lost, replaced by the “sorwe” of the current age (45, 32).

Because of its focus on poverty rather than change, “The Former Age” cannot propose a way to recuperate or recover. Though it works to more directly blame the corruption of the present age on the “covetyse, / Doublesnesse, and tresoun” of “tyraunts” who rule from their “paleis-chaumbres,” it ultimately presents no solution (61-62, 33, 41).²⁰⁹ The lyric verges on imagining an age free from all oppressive forms of authority, “No lord, no taylage, by no tyrannye,” but the final stanza, with echoes of the prisoner’s tear-filled eyes in *Boece* Book One, ultimately concludes with a lament: “Allas, allas,

²⁰⁹ Andrew Scott Galloway, “Chaucer’s *Former Age* and the Fourteenth-Century Anthropology of Craft: The Social Logic of a Premodernist Lyric,” *ELH* 63, no. 3 (September 1, 1996): 535–54, see 548.

now may men wepe and crye!” (54, 60). As Andrew Galloway has suggested, with the “knowledge of how to wield rhetoric,” a sign of its embeddedness in the current age, the poetic voice also implicates *itself* by “producing a pervasive, self-indicting irony.”²¹⁰ This ending produces a heightened sense of despair by means of its disconnect between the two points in history.

Unlike “The Former Age,” the *Boece*’s prose restructuring of the meter *does* present a path forward for those like the prisoner who are consigned to the modern age’s condition of lack that results from material attachment. Before the close of the meter, Philosophy states her hope that those in the current time might “torne ayen to the oolde maneris,” and thus signals to the prisoner that if he can reflect on the benefits of change rather than mourning material losses, he, too, may recuperate a sense of blissfulness.

If not from material pleasures like high office or wealth, then *how* might the prisoner access blissful “plente”? Only by embracing change may the prisoner move closer to God. As Philosophy explains, for the prisoner to ““knowe the cleernesse of verray blissfulnesse,”” he must “fully byhoolden thilke false goodes and torned [his] eyen to the tother syde” (3.p2.46-50). The path to blissfulness, then, begins with a process of acknowledging the constraints of material attachment, and finally, opening oneself up to material change. Once the prisoner makes peace with change, he frees his mind to accept God, the source of “al the plente of the lif interminable” (5.p6.40-41).

With its three scenes of material change, Meter Six of Book Four best epitomizes how abundance is inseparable from destruction. After depicting imagery of the heavenly

²¹⁰ Galloway, “Chaucer’s *Former Age* and the Fourteenth-Century Anthropology of Craft,” 538.

movements and the inclination of the elements, a final example describes the flourishing growth that results from the changing seasons:

By thise same causes the floury yer yeldeth swote smelles in the first
somer sesoun warmynge; and the hote somer dryeth the cornes; and
autumpne comith ayein hevy of apples; and the fletynge reyn bydeweth
the wynter. (4.m6.28-34)

In 4M6, Philosophy envisions plenty as a material yield of corn and apples as well as sensory experiences: “swote smelles” and the feel of warmth, heaviness, and cold dew.

However, without also knowing lack, one cannot have a true understanding of plenty. Therefore, Philosophy makes clear as she continues her explanation that

This attempraunce norysscheth and bryngeth forth alle thynges that
brethith life in this world; and thilke same attempraunce, ravysschyng,
hideth and bynymeth, and drencheth undir the laste deth, alle thinges
iborn. (4.m6.34-39)

In accordance with an Aristotelian model of generation and corruption, the plenty of God is witnessed both in the creation and movements of things in nature and in their destruction—the “ravysschyng” (stealing), “hideth” (disappearance), “bynymeth” (taking away), and “drencheth” (drowning) that occurs because of the physical world’s “attempraunce,” or its constituent matter. Therefore, the fullest expression of plenty does not just consider abundance. To receive God’s plenty, the prisoner must accept Philosophy’s expansion of what lack represents in her broadened definition of plenty, which means embracing the loss that makes change possible. This message is underscored by Chaucer’s translation, which makes the lack of meter perceivable to its reader. With a prose textual environment that is itself as variable as the changes occurring in nature, the *Boece* thematically points to the “plente” derived from change as a pathway for creation and recuperation.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: NEGATING CHAUCER?

MOVING CHAUCER STUDIES FORWARD

it is often loss that generates a new direction
Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

This dissertation has explored the ways that Chaucer's linguistic, contractual, and generic techniques of negation withdraw matter to show the potential of literature to fill in what is missing. The late medieval rediscovery of Aristotelian natural philosophy prompted clerks and writers to consider negation as fundamental to ontological presence and the nature of change. Though Chaucer's texts often depict characters who resist loss and use a language of negation to attempt to avoid material change, they also demonstrate that acceptance of lack can lead to abundance and recuperation.

Such an argument is founded on practices of close reading, materialism, new formalism; reading texts across generic boundaries; and the study of medieval science, technology, economics, and philosophy. This interdisciplinary focus throws into relief the ways attitudes about imaginative "making" permeate many areas of medieval thought and thus give context to the literature of the late Middle Ages that positioned itself as an active participant in these questions of ontology and renewal.

Yet such an orientation to the negative does not need to remain sealed off in the past but comes to bear on current movements in racial and gender justice. In addition to Chaucer's literary techniques of negation, a wider negative approach can lay bare how negation operates within Chaucer to produce racism and misogyny. A future version of this project will need to distinguish between discourses of negation that cover up inequality by upholding a traditional version of Chaucer studies and a critical

methodology used by feminist and race scholars seeking transformation in Chaucer's texts, Chaucerian scholarship, and institutions.

Recent conversations in the field have emphasized Chaucer's more misogynistic and racialized moments of negative production (the annihilation of Syria in *The Man of Law's Tale* and ensuing solidification of the Roman empire comes to mind) along with negation of people, topics, and histories that has scaffolded scholarship that ignores or silences attempts to identify and call out these structures. Such conversations have in turn pushed readers to question if it is possible to ethically read, write about, and teach Chaucer.²¹¹ As I reflect now on these scholarly conversations, I recognize that in many ways they deploy Chaucer's own strategies of negation to intervene in the material realities of inequality. The movement toward racial justice and the wider political awareness around gender equity, including Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, have shone a spotlight on the disproportionate impact of social disparities on vulnerable groups, which have been further exacerbated by COVID-19. At a time when the lines that make up the traditional literary canon are being necessarily reassessed and redrawn to recover excluded voices and erased histories, a negative turn in critical race, feminist, and new materialist praxes shows the importance of negation to help begin to reshape medieval studies.

Because he was one of the first poets to write in Middle English and to translate well-known Latin and French works into fourteenth-century English, Chaucer was

²¹¹ Ruth Evans, "On Not Being Chaucer," Presidential Lecture at The New Chaucer Society Expo 2021, Online, July 22, 2021; Sarah Baechle and Carissa M. Harris, "The Ethical Challenge of Chaucerian Scholarship in the Twenty-First Century," *Chaucer Review* 56, no. 4 (October 2021): 311–21; Samantha Katz Seal and Nicole Sidhu, "New Feminist Approaches to Chaucer: Introduction," *Chaucer Review* 54, no. 3 (July 2019): 224–29.

integral to the creation and preservation of a white supremacist literary canon. By choosing to write in the vernacular rather than in French or Latin, Chaucer legitimized and popularized English as a poetic language. As such, his work played a significant role in shaping the history of England and establishing a standard for all literature in English that followed, cementing Chaucer's place as one of the "great authors" (along with Shakespeare) that college students must study.

This elevation of Chaucer within the English curriculum has become a renewed topic of debate about the poet's canonicity and biography. This debate reveals structures of negation that can be used to respond to racism and misogyny in his work and biography. Medieval feminist scholars have spearheaded these conversations by examining Chaucer's engagement with misogyny and rape in his work and stressing the importance of turning attention to the scholarly and editorial blind spot of Cecily Chaumpaigne's rape charge.²¹² A May 4, 1380 deed of release documents Chaumpaigne having

remisise, relaxasse, et omnino pro me et heredibus meis imperpetuum quietum clamasse Galfrido Chaucer, armigero, omnimodas acciones, tam de raptu meo.²¹³

remitted, released, and entirely quitclaimed on behalf of myself and my heirs in perpetuity Geoffrey Chaucer, esq., all manner of actions related to my rape.

²¹² For an excellent literature review that traces the "feminist Chaucerian movement" from the 1970s through the present, see Seal and Sidhu, "New Feminist Approaches to Chaucer: Introduction," 225-227.

²¹³ Anna Fore Waymack, "Close Rolls Quitclaim," chaumpaigne.org, May 4, 1380, <http://chaumpaigne.org/the-legal-documents/may-4/>. English translation is Fore Waymack's.

It is impossible to know the exact circumstances surrounding the rape charge other than the fact that Chaucer paid Chaumpaigne a sum to make the charge go away.²¹⁴ Despite interpretive ambiguity surrounding the term *raptu*, Christopher Cannon has pointed out that an accusation of *raptu*, or *raptus*, did always “involve physical coercion” which could “be implicitly threatening in clearly sexual terms.”²¹⁵ What matters is that beneath the legal terminology of the document, we can hear Chaumpaigne’s first-person voice naming Chaucer in the same instant as it dismisses the charge. The word *raptus*, deriving from *rapere*, means to violently deprive or destroy, and rearticulates the possibility of a sexual assault and the taking of a woman’s maidenhead.²¹⁶ The negative language reveals the possibility that Chaucer was the perpetrator of some form of physical destruction against Chaumpaigne.

Curiously, some scholars acknowledge the legitimacy of the legal document but refuse to contextualize the rape charge within a broader dialogue about Chaucer or his writing. Just this year, Jill Mann has stated that “there cannot be absolute certainty” about the *raptus* charge, Jennifer Wollock has ceded to the “enigmatic” and “unclear” nature of the record, and A.S.G. Edwards has concluded that “the issue remains unresolvable in

²¹⁴ Henry Ansgar Kelly, “Meanings and Uses of Raptus in Chaucer’s Time,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer: The Yearbook of the New Chaucer Society* 20 (1998): 101–65, 147.

²¹⁵ Christopher Cannon, “Raptus in the Chaumpaigne Release and a Newly Discovered Document Concerning the Life of Geoffrey Chaucer,” *Speculum* 68, no. 1 (January 1993): 74–94, 88.

²¹⁶ Kelly, “Meanings and Uses of Raptus in Chaucer’s Time,” 129–130. Kelly further identifies linguistic connections between *raptus* and Chaucer’s use of the word *reve* to depict the rape of virgins in *The Legend of Good Women* and *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*.

any conclusive way.”²¹⁷ Though the quitclaim seems to be a lightning rod for those who fear the tarnishing of Chaucer’s reputation, it is only in facing the accusation that we can reckon with Chaucer’s legacy. While I have argued that Chaucer deploys literary negation to creative and recuperative ends, to only adhere to Chaucer’s artistic representations would be insufficient. The deed of release is a documented instance of erasure in Chaucer’s personal life which, at the same time, features Chaumpaigne both revoking the charge of rape and marking Chaucer with it.²¹⁸

In the spirit of solidifying Chaumpaigne’s place in Chaucerian history, Samantha Katz Seal’s and Nicole Sidhu’s introduction to their 2019 special issue of the *Chaucer Review* calls for situating Chaucer within our current moment by moving “past the inherently male systems and institutions of linearity” that have survived via “artificial, arbitrary distinctions of historical distance.”²¹⁹ Building on this feminist work, the most recent 2021 issue of the *Chaucer Review* expands the topic of sexual violence with discussions of race. Guest editors Sarah Baechle and Carissa M. Harris argue that to ethically study and teach Chaucer, we must confront how

Chaucer and his works played a fundamental role in promoting colonialism and white supremacy in British-occupied territories, uses that merely echo the ideologies latent in the exploration and reification of

²¹⁷ Jill Mann, “Chaucer Today (Letters to the Editor),” *TLS. Times Literary Supplement*, July 23, 2021, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/chaucer-today/>; Jennifer Wollock, “Calls to Cancel Chaucer Ignore His Defense of Women and the Innocent – and Assume All His Characters’ Opinions Are His,” *The Conversation*, July 19, 2021, <http://theconversation.com/calls-to-cancel-chaucer-ignore-his-defense-of-women-and-the-innocent-and-assume-all-his-characters-opinions-are-his-152312>; A. S. G. Edwards, “Chaucer Today (Letters to the Editor),” *TLS. Times Literary Supplement*, July 23, 2021, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/chaucer-today/>.

²¹⁸ Notably, as Cannon writes, the word *raptu* was written on the deed that was copied on “sheets of parchment used to record the ‘closed’ or sealed letters sent by the king.” Another more public memorandum omitted the term *raptus* and instead released Chaucer from unspecified charges. Cannon, “Raptus in the Chaumpaigne Release and a Newly Discovered Document Concerning the Life of Geoffrey Chaucer,” 74, 93.

²¹⁹ Seal and Sidhu, “New Feminist Approaches to Chaucer: Introduction,” 228, 227.

racial difference in Chaucer's poetry and underpin his laureation as the Father of English Poetry."²²⁰

Baechle and Harris cite numerous strategies for accomplishing such a task, including contextualizing *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale* with discussions about medieval rape law and supplementary readings that include the Chaumpaigne case documents (313).²²¹ In their essays within the special issue, Jonathan Hsy and Heather Blurton advocate for a reevaluation of non-European figures in *The Canterbury Tales* and identify tropes about Jews that can provide a frame for rereading present day categories of race.²²²

There is resistance, however, to these conversations about gender and race. Scholars like A.S.G. Edwards oppose what they see as threats of Chaucer's erasure from university courses from which "Chaucer could die of neglect."²²³ Edwards further attributes Chaucer's disappearance to what he believes is an ideological attack by Katz Seal and Sidhu who aim "to expunge him from both canon and curriculum."²²⁴ Some of Edwards's concerns stem from the real effects of shrinking Humanities budgets, layoffs (increased during the pandemic), and the failure of administrations to replace retiring professors who teach Chaucer with medieval specialists, if they fill those vacancies at all. Edwards, however, voices broader resistance to change. What he views as erasure could

²²⁰ Baechle and Harris, "The Ethical Challenge of Chaucerian Scholarship," 313.

²²¹ Baechle and Harris, "The Ethical Challenge of Chaucerian Scholarship," 313.

²²² Jonathan Hsy, "Chaucer's Brown Faces: Race, Interpretation, Adaptation," *The Chaucer Review* 56, no. 4 (2021): 378–96; Heather Blurton, "Retelling the *Prioress's Tale*: Antisemitism, Racism, and Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales*," *The Chaucer Review* 56, no. 4 (2021): 397–412.

²²³ A. S. G. Edwards, "Gladly Wolde He Lerne? Why Chaucer Is Disappearing from the University Curriculum.," *TLS. Times Literary Supplement*, no. 6170 (July 2, 2021): 7–8, 8.

²²⁴ A. S. G. Edwards, "Chaucer Today (Letters to the Editor)," *TLS. Times Literary Supplement*, July 23, 2021, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/chaucer-today/>.

be more accurately described as an expansion of scope of what institutions teach. Applying a negating vocabulary—“remove,” “die,” “neglect,” “elimination,” “disappearance,” and “expunge”—in response to programs that aim to diversify the curriculum, reveals an ineffective desire to preserve a white canon that betrays a sense of ownership over a singular version of Chaucer.²²⁵ Sierra Lomuto has spoken about similar reactions by white scholars in medieval studies motivated by a drive to commodify, control, and own ideas and discourses.²²⁶ At the core of this lexicon of ownership is a refusal to let go of the status quo and institutional mores, upholding Chaucer as a symbol of a wider erosion of institutional norms.²²⁷ Edwards fails to acknowledge that a compelling case can be made for new methods of teaching Chaucer that enhance efforts to decolonize the curriculum, which could expose a wider swathe of students to his work and stimulate an interest medieval literature. Therefore, I am less interested in looking backward to what might be lost than I am in solutions and strategies for how to move forward.

Edwards is responding to calls by other scholars to decenter Chaucer, many of whom also deploy a negative orientation, but to different effect. These feminist and

²²⁵ Edwards, “Gladly Wolde He Lerne?”, 7-8; Edwards, *Chaucer Today* (Letters to the Editor).

²²⁶ Sierra Lomuto, “*Antiracism or Appropriation?: Performing Diversity Work in Medieval Studies*” Presentation given at RaceB4Race™: Appropriations Symposium in Tempe, AZ on January 17th and 18th, 2020 (Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SuzQ5A85Jo>. In her talk, Lomuto cites Paula Ioanide’s discussion of the ontology of whiteness and its relationship to property, see Paula Ioanide, “Defensive Appropriations,” in *Antiracism Inc.*, ed. Paula Ioanide, Felice Blake, and Alison Reed, Why the Way We Talk about Racial Justice Matters (Punctum Books, 2019), 83–108, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hptff.8>.

²²⁷ Edwards, “Gladly Wolde He Lerne?”, 7-8; Jennifer Wollock, “Calls to Cancel Chaucer Ignore His Defense of Women and the Innocent – and Assume All His Characters’ Opinions Are His,” *The Conversation*, July 19, 2021, <http://theconversation.com/calls-to-cancel-chaucer-ignore-his-defense-of-women-and-the-innocent-and-assume-all-his-characters-opinions-are-his-152312>.

critical race critics embrace negation as a language for change that commits to confronting Chaucer's life and work in a contemporary context. In her recent lecture titled, "On Not Being Chaucer," Ruth Evans considers new modalities for overturning a colonial, white, Chaucerian canon.²²⁸ Rather than causing Chaucer's erasure, the negative particle "not" in her title does the work of signaling that there is still much left to study that lies around the edges of what has been heretofore defined as "Chaucer." Evans foregrounds scholars of color who are actively reformulating the future of international Chaucer Studies by interrogating the institutional hierarchies that enabled canon formation, revisiting the archives to make visible erased non-white presences, and looking outside of the institution to counter the coding of Humanism as white and male. The name of her talk gives explicit credit to poet David Dabydeen's essay "On Not Being Milton" in which his negative title refers to his "denial" to imitate the "educated" English verse forms of Milton and Chaucer and his intention to write poetry in his "native idiom" of Guyanese Creole.²²⁹ This refusal to reproduce dominant racist literary norms demonstrates how members of excluded groups can recover indigenous languages to enact a "reversal of colonial history."²³⁰ By drawing attention to Dabydeen's poetic aims, written in 1989, Evans acknowledges the suppressed histories bound up in Chaucer's literary forms, suggesting that traditional approaches to Chaucer *are* political, and also

²²⁸ Ruth Evans, "On Not Being Chaucer," Presidential Lecture at The New Chaucer Society Expo 2021, Online, July 22, 2021.

²²⁹ David Dabydeen, "On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England," in *Tibisiri: Caribbean Writers and Critics*, ed. Maggie Butcher (Sydney/Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1989), 121–35, 123, 129.

²³⁰ David Dabydeen, "On Not Being Milton," 129.

recognizes that these conversations have been ongoing for more than thirty years.²³¹ In addition to drawing attention to the suppressed non-white voices within Chaucer's texts, she also recommends foregrounding adaptations of Chaucer from authors like Patience Agbabi and supporting the *Refugee Tales*, a literary social justice project produced by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group to end indefinite detention in the U.K.²³²

Examining Chaucer's techniques of negation, therefore, is an apt starting point for responding to contemporary concerns about the eradication of Chaucer and to appeals to address white supremacy in the pursuit of different and more equitable futures for Chaucer studies. A published version of this dissertation and all subsequent projects will need to more centrally address strategies to decenter a long-established image of Chaucer as an uncomplicated literary figure, traditional approaches to his work, and his constitutive place in the canon. Doing so could bring attention to understudied texts, characters, and counternarratives about non-white, non-Christian, non-Europeans. Negation can contribute to this aim as a methodology for confronting the logic of difference constructed in the Middle Ages that informs and enforces modern notions of race, gender, sexuality. Drawing on a negative methodology to analyze Chaucer can also expand the study of sexual violence, racism, anti-Semitism, and ableism in his work suppressed by past scholarship and also revisit the biases inherent in strands of critical theory that use discourses of negation to imagine whiteness as invisible thereby shaping ideas about subject formation and race.

²³¹ Since 1989, critical language has evolved to avoid overstating a false opposition between "learned" and "indigenous" languages. Despite advances in how we talk about race, white scholars today must not appropriate (and thus neutralize) the anti-racist work of scholars of color.

²³² For a scholarly and pedagogical shift in Chaucer Studies and later Medieval Studies, we must continue to boost the work of contemporary authors of color, including Agbabi, Gloria Naylor, Zadie Smith, Frank Mundo, Avie Luthra.

Reading Chaucerian Futures

In a *Treatise* section on the “ascenciouns of signes in diverse places,” a fleeting reference to “thilke folke” that “dwellen” near the equator can demonstrate the potential benefits of a negative turn in Chaucer studies (2.26.3, 15, 13). In this explanation, as Lisa Cooper aptly points out, Chaucer encourages his son, Lewis, “to think beyond his own horizon to ‘thilke cuntrey.’”²³³ However, as Cooper further argues, this consideration of other places around the globe merely functions as a way to imagine the astrolabe as a “tether” that reinforces an English observer’s “place in the cosmos.”²³⁴ Cooper is correct to suggest that Chaucer has little interest in “hem that dwellen there,” but rather that he seeks to instrumentalize unknown regions of the world to explain how astronomers can calculate altitudes of signs in the entire zodiac (1.26.12-13). It is our responsibility as readers to address this passage’s self-referentiality by extrapolating upon what is missing.

A negative critical approach to reading this example must attend to what is not described and the discriminatory attitudes that it might uphold. Despite recognizing that certain groups live in “diverse places,” Chaucer denies any further distinctiveness to “these foreside peple” (2.26.3, 21). Other than their climate and proximity to astronomical phenomena, no specific geographies are named nor are their inhabitants bestowed with any basic human features or histories. Also notably absent is any concept

²³³ Lisa Cooper, “Figures for ‘Gretter Knowing’: Forms in the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*,” in *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form*, ed. Jessica Rosenfeld and Thomas Prendergast (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 99–124, 117.

²³⁴ Cooper, “Figures for ‘Gretter Knowing,’: Forms in the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*,” 118.

of race or racial difference.²³⁵ A text that poetically harmonizes spaces of absence in the astrolabe and the cosmos and projects them onto a father-son narrative contains yet another lacuna where the stories of the people living in those distant lands *should* be.

We must not simply draw attention to such absences, but rather, also locate and study other texts that transform those gaps. Broadly, this *Treatise* passage alludes to regions of Africa, South America, and islands in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. By mapping these places, we can seek out stories by authors who center the lives of the indigenous populations inhabiting the spaces overlooked by Chaucer.

We can look beyond the temporal and spatial confines of the Middle Ages to begin this process. In her 2015 *Binti* series, for instance, Nnedi Okorafor fleshes out a part of the *Treatise*'s ill-defined world and revises the astrolabe itself. In an act of “restorying,” Okorafor develops the genre of Africanfuturism to reconstruct how we think about African identity, race, colonization, and gender.²³⁶ The work situates a young Himba woman, Binti, in a specific place, Namibia. Binti possesses a futuristic version of an astrolabe that serves as an official repository for her personal data. The presence of the astrolabe connects the books to a medieval past that would be recognizable to scholars and students of Chaucer.²³⁷ Okorafor, however, reinterprets the device as a medium of

²³⁵ Jonathan Hsy analyzes “brownness” in *The Canterbury Tales* and in adaptations arguing that the poet does seem to allude to certain places of origin for characters coded as possibly non-white but that these references are concealed and activate “racial speculation.” My aim is to show that Chaucer’s absences can sometimes provide direction. Hsy, “Chaucer’s Brown Faces,” 384.

²³⁶ Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, 1st Edition (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 10.

²³⁷ Okorafor bases an alternative future for the astrolabe on the tenth-century figure Miriam al-Asturlabi. Little is known about her. She was the daughter and apprentice of her father, an astrolabist, in what is now known as Syria. She became renowned for her skill in making astrolabes and is thought to have crafted one for a king. Likewise, Binti is also the daughter of an astrolabe maker and, at the start of the series, is in line to take over his shop.

surveillance that represents limitations imposed by others onto Binti. In the final book, the astrolabe breaks from lack of use:

I knew it was pointless trying to turn it on, reset it, shake it, smash it against my leg. My astrolabe was dead. I whimpered as it crossed my mind that maybe even the chip inside it was now unreadable. This would mean that I'd just lost my entire identity. (233-34)²³⁸

The destruction of her astrolabe might mark the loss of the official record of her life, but it also frees Binti. Instead of relying on an inherited, patriarchal version of her history, she must depend on a set of newly discovered ancestral abilities to safely guide her across the universe and back. What Chaucer perceived as a “tether” to affirm his place in the universe, Okorafor presents as a constraint to be broken, modeling the potential in seeking out alternatives beyond a Western, scientific tradition.

Though technology drives the narrative of the series, Binti's ancient Himba culture is equally foregrounded, specifically the tribe's practice of coating their skin and hair with a mixture made from the clay of their ancestral land (*otjize*) for protection from the sun. By telling a story that repeatedly emphasizes its character's wearing the earth of her homeland, Okorafor privileges those individuals and places that Chaucer never names. The story expands its scope, moving outward from Africa into space and sending Binti to another planet to attend university (where she mixes more *otjize* from the mud on Oomza Uni). In the final chapters of the series, Binti is killed. However, her loss of life is not permanent, nor does it bring about the end of Binti's story. Rather, her mobility across space “experiencing, collecting, becoming more” brings her back to life as a being that bridges difference between life forms (332).²³⁹

²³⁸ Nnedi Okorafor, *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*, 1st Edition (New York: DAW, 2019).

²³⁹ Okorafor, *Binti*.

By undoing the finality of death, Binti and her multifaceted existence can be read as a metaphor for Chaucer. In negating one authorized version of Chaucer, we bring “more” to the field, both in terms of the texts we study and those who study them. First steps must include answering the flawed logic behind reactionary attacks claiming Chaucer’s cancelation. We must also support (publish, hire, and fund) scholars from underrepresented groups who are taking on the long overdue task of bringing in new perspectives to change the consensus on Chaucer’s work. In this, we can send new messages about *who* belongs in Chaucer studies and in the academy.

While arguing for an understanding of negation in Chaucer’s writing and its role in the making of poetry, “Literary Negation and Materialism in Chaucer” offers a new account of literature’s impact on the world and its intersection with the history of intellectual thought. In this, it provides a way to build new futures in Chaucer studies by contextualizing Chaucer’s legacy as one upholding white supremacy and contributing to narrow definitions of what “great” literature must look like. Medievalists can push against Chaucer’s status as the “Father of English Literature” and respond to declarations of Chaucer’s death or erasure to unpack what this mantle symbolizes to marginalized scholars and what it communicates to students. In doing so, Chaucerians can redefine what it means today for authors to transform language, literary arts, and political discourse about injustice and human rights.²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰ Leah Asmelash, “Poetry Is Experiencing a New Golden Age, with Young Writers of Color Taking the Lead,” accessed October 17, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/poetry-popularity-rising-gorman-kaur-vuong-cec/index.html>.

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