In Search of Pity:

Chaucerian Poetics and the Suffering of Others

by

Jessica N. Hines

Department of English
Duke University

Date:_____
Approved:

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David Aers, Co-Supervisor

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Sarah Beckwith, Co-Supervisor

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Valeria Finucci

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Thomas Pfau

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

In the opening scene of Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*, the marquis Walter is confronted by his subjects who beg him with "meeke preyere" and "pitous chere" to marry and produce an heir. In this moment, they seek from Walter something he is reluctant to give. Walter, an avid hunter and a confirmed bachelor, exclaims, "Ye wol...myn owene peple deere, / To that I nevere erst thoughte streyne me." Despite his lack of desire to constrain himself in marriage, however, Chaucer writes that the meek prayers and piteous appearance of Walter's people "made the markys herte han pitee." He subsequently vows to marry. The force of "made" is important here for it suggests that pity acts in such a way that it compels the pitier to act counter to his or her desires. In the moment of experiencing pity, traditional power structures such as those of social status temporarily reverse. Walter, who typically wields power over his people, comes under their power as his pity transforms his desires and overcomes his will.

My dissertation, *In Search of Pity: Chaucerian Poetics and the Suffering of Others*, considers the development and transformation of the language of pity in medieval English literature and culture through a study of the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer. I argue that Chaucer reformulated trans-European pity discourses for an English audience, and, in the process, made pity into a central ethical and aesthetic concern in English literature. The *fin'amor* tradition, Passion meditations, hagiographies, political treatises

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about common profit, all were concerned with the ways in which pity was formed and the effects it had on those who felt it. Chaucer drew on these traditions to craft his poetry, and he was one of the earliest English vernacular poets to make extensive use of the language of pity. He refers to it more than 200 times throughout his poetry and does so in a wide variety of contexts. Pity is the primary virtue of Criseyde in *Troilus and Criseyde*; it is one of Chaucer's keywords for describing the sorrowful lives and deaths of female martyrs in the *Legend of Good Women*, and it is Walter's response to his people in the *Clerk's Tale*. *In Search of Pity* traces how Chaucer's fascination with pity developed out of larger medieval conversations about the ethical and affective work of responding to the suffering of others.

In my dissertation, I show how individual discourses offered distinctive accounts of the formation and effects of pity. A pitying woman in *fin'amor* might come to love her male lover as in the *Roman de la Rose*; a pitying ruler might offer a pardon for offenses, such as in Richard Maidstone's *Concordia*. The common thread in medieval treatments of pity, however, was an understanding that it contained the possibility for suspending or obliterating traditional power structures that schematized gender and social status. This capacity is foreign to our contemporary conception of pity. Today, pity frequently suggests a contempt for its object. This association is so culturally embedded that in "Compassion: the Basic Social Emotion" Martha Nussbaum spends most of her essay discussing the historical emotion of pity, but she changes her vocabulary when writing

about the contemporary. She notes that pity "...has acquired nuances of condescension and superiority to the sufferer that it did not have formerly," and thus she "...shall switch over to the currently more appropriate term 'compassion' when...talking about contemporary issues." Medieval pity with its challenge to the social order is a lost concept. In my research, I am thus interested both in rediscovering the nature of that concept and in charting the ways power was represented in early accounts of pity. Through an examination of the function of power in medieval pity, I contend that we can better understand how pity has come to suggest superiority or disdain for its object.

Chaucer is central to rediscovering the forgotten concepts attached to pity. He wrote more about pity than perhaps any other fourteenth-century English author, and the scope of his influence on English literary representations of pity can be seen in Robert Henryson, John Lydgate, and William Shakespeare. I show how Chaucer's incorporating distinct treatments of pity from *fin'amor*, Passion meditation, hagiography, and political treatises brought to the fore the modes and effects of pity's work in challenging power structures. In doing so, I argue that Chaucer is also one of the first authors to explore the limitations and dangers of pity. In my dissertation, I show that this exploration culminates with the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Parson's Tale* in a disavowal of any pity that is not explicitly linked to acts of charity. This disavowal is unusual. Pity in works such as Maidstone's *Concordia* or even the *Roman de la Rose* is enthusiastically embraced. But by reading Chaucer's poetry alongside Christine de

Pizan's critique of the *Roman de la Rose* and Julian of Norwich's revision of affective meditation on the Passion, I argue that Chaucer is participating in a developing critique of pity taking shape across Europe. The difference between Chaucer and Christine de Pizan or Julian of Norwich, however, is that his critique addresses pity not within one medieval discourse such as *fin'amor* or Passion meditation but across many. In critiquing pity across discourses, I argue that Chaucer develops the pity discourse in England and reformulates it to include a new examination of its limited social power.

Contents

Acknowledgements

Preface. *Pitee*/Pity: In Search of a Concept

Words, moreover, have both spatio-temporal and conceptual contexts. We learn through attending to contexts, vocabulary develops through close attention to objects, and we can only understand others if we can to some extent share their contexts. (Often we cannot.)

—Irish Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection"

      Pity in late medieval England was undergoing a process of transformation and

expansion—both in terms of meaning and in terms of use. From its earliest moments in

the English language, pity, or *pitee*,[1] had referred to responses to the suffering of others.

In the final centures of the Middle Ages, however, understandings of the scope and

mode of that response were changing. Etymologically rooted in the Latin *pietas* meaning

piety and devotion as well as, in post-classical Latin, compassion or mercy, *pitee* had

entered into English only gradually and via a winding linguistic path.[2] First recorded in

the Cotton Nero text of the *Ancrene Riwle* early in the thirteenth century, *pitee* originally

referred to an inner virtue of anchoresses. As outlined by the *Ancrene Riwle*, *pitee* was a

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[1] The *MED* cites nine different spellings of pity in Middle English including: *pite, piti(e), pitte, pittie, pete(i), peti(e, peite, puite* and (Cornish) *bite*. Throughout this text, I have used the spelling *pitee* because it is the one used most frequently by Chaucer.

[2] See the *OED*'s etymology for pity.

virtue focused on an inner devotion to Christ's suffering.[3] Drawing on the concept of

inner and outer anchoritic virtues outlined in the twelfth century by Aelred of Rievaulx,

pitee in English began as a term with a highly particular context. *Pitee* described a

virtuous response to the suffering of another; specifically, it referred to anchorites' inner

affective and devotional responses to the crucifixion.[4]

By the late fourteenth-century, however, *pitee* had lost this specificity. *Pitee* still

referred to a response to suffering, but not necessarily an anchorite's inner response to

Christ's suffering. Over the course of 125 years, *pitee* had become a word for affective

and ethical responses to suffering in multiple different discourses. It accrued not just one

meaning, but meanings. In texts such as the short Marian lyric "Hayl Mari, / Hic am

sori," *pitee* was an act of mediation, a response of divine mercy in the face of humanity's

earthly suffering.[5] In works such as *The Metrical Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester*, *pitee* was

an affective sorrow and an act of clemency, a response of kingly mercy in the face of

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[3] The Cotton Nero A.XIV text of the *Ancrene Riwle* (N-text) dates from approximately 1225-40. In his study of the *Ancrene Riwle* manuscripts, E. J. Dobson describes the Cotton Nero text as, "...an innovating manuscript... written by a fussy and interfering scribe, constantly archaizing the accidence, attempting to improve the syntax, word-order, and sentence construction (almost invariably with unhappy results), and padding out the phrasing [of the original]." The insertion of *pitee* was one such improvement (although not, I think, an unhappy one); the N-text is the only *Ancrene Riwle* text that refers to *pitee*. See E. J. Dobson, "The Affiliations of the Manuscripts of *Ancrene Wisse*," 133.

[4] Specifically, the N-text lists the Aelredian virtues of inner devotion to Christ as "heorte þeauwes. deuociun. reofulnesse. merci. pite of heorte. luue. edmodnesse. oðre swuch uertuz." Mabel Day *The English Text of the Ancrene* Riwle," p. 167, ii.17-19.

[5] Karen Saupe, ed., "Hayl Mari, / Hic am sori," 129.

tyrannized suppliants.[6] Indeed, by the final decades of the fourteenth century, *pitee*

referred to a wide range of responses to suffering. In English love poetry that grew out

of the French courtly tradition, *pitee* was the affective (and often sexual) response of the

beloved woman to her lovesick lover.[7] In English chivalric discourse, *pitee* was a central

virtue of knights who would seek to protect others from suffering via chivalric conduct.[8]

Concurrent with this expansion in meanings of *pitee* was an expansion in its use.

A partial record of this trend exists in the *Middle English Dictionary*. Prior to 1375, the

MED lists 19 uses of the word *pitee*; between 1375 and 1400 it lists 54.[9] And a

consultation of some of the major works of English literature prior to the mid-fourteenth

century such as the *Prick of Conscience*, *Wynnere and Wastoure*, *The Owl and the*

Nightingale, *Sir Orfeo*, *Cursor Mundi*, and the *South English Legendary* includes a total of 45

references to *pitee*, whereas post-1375 there are 156 uses of *pitee* in the works of the *Pearl-*

poet, William Langland, and John Gower alone.[10]

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[6] William Aldis Wright, ed., *The Metrical Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester*. I have particularly in mind an encounter between King Arthur and the Scots, lines 3663-3702.

[7] See, for example, Chaucer's early short poems including: "A Complaint to His Lady," "Lack of Steadfastness," "Merciless Beauty," and "Womanly Noblesse."

[8] For example, see the importance of *pitee* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. *Pitee* is one of the "fyft fyue" on Gawain's shield, the five social virtues: "Þe fyft fyue þat I finde þat þe frek vsed / Watz fraunchyse and felaȝschyp forbe al þyng, / His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer, / And pité, þat passez alle poyntez, þyse pure fyuve / Were harder happed on þat haþel þen on any oþer." Quoted from Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 651-55.

[9] In citing these figures, I have followed the dates given by the *MED*.

[10] *Prick of Conscience* uses *pitee* or a derivative once; *Wynnere and Wastoure* and *The Owl and the Nightingale* never refer to *pitee*; *Sir Orfeo* uses *pitee* once; *Cursor Mundi* uses *pitee* 35 times; the *South English Legendary* uses *pitee* eight times. In choosing my representative texts, I selected works that appear in two or more manuscripts. I also worked to select texts from diffrent genres and written in diverse locations. I have

Geoffrey Chaucer's writing career takes shape amidst this transformation and expansion of English writings about *pitee*, and, I would argue, his poetry can help us to understand how and why it took place. More than any other English poet at the end of the fourteenth century, Chaucer was fascinated by *pitee*. He refers to *pitee* or one if its derivations 231 times throughout his work.[11] This number is astonishingly high when we compare it to his English contemporaries, even those who make substantial use of the language of *pitee*. William Langland writes about *pitee* 17 times in the B Version of *Piers Plowman*.[12] The *Pearl*-poet uses it 12 times throughout his poetry.[13] And John Gower, a member of Chaucer's coterie, uses it 127 times in his English vernacular poetry.[14]

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calculated uses of *pitee* based on the standard critical edition. In cases with large variances in the manuscript tradition, I have calculated uses of *pitee* according to the manuscript with the most references to *pitee* (i.e., for *Cursor Mundi*, this total comes from MS Cotton Vespasian A.iii). In collecting this data, I have consulted the following: James H. Morey, ed., *Prik of Conscience*; Warren Ginsberg, ed., *Wynnere and Wastoure* in *Wynnere and Wastoure and The Parlement of the Thre Ages*; N. R. Ker, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale*; Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, eds., "Sir Orfeo" in *The Middle English Breton Lays*; Rev. Richard Morris, ed., *Cursor Mundi (The Cursur o the world*; Carl Horstmann, ed., *The Early South-English Legendary*. In the total for the *Pearl*-poet, I have included every mention of *pitee* or a derivative in the *Pearl*-poets work. In the case of Langland, I have cited here all mentions of *pitee* in the B Version of *Piers Plowman* (the version that most frequently refers to *pitee*). For Gower, I have counted only references in his English works. See more on his use of it in his French and Latin works in footnote 15.

[11] I mean all spellings of *pitee* as well as his uses of *pitous* and *pitousli*. This tally was calculated using John S. P. Tatlock and Arthur G. Kennedy, eds., *A Concordance to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*.

[12] In C, he uses *pitee* 13 times and *pitously* three; in the B version, he refers to *pitee* 14 times and *pitously* three times, and in A, he uses *pitee* seven times, *pitous* once, and *pitously* twice. Calculated from Joseph Wittig, ed., *Piers Plowman Concordance*.

[13] In making this tally, I have followed the concordance compiled by Barnet Kottler and Alan M. Markham, *A Concordance to Five Middle English Poems*.

[14] Because the focus of my research is on the transformation of English writing about *pitee*, I have only listed figures for *pitee*'s use in Gower's English poetry. His interest in *pitee*, however, continues in both his French

We can attribute some of this difference in use to the sheer enormity of Chaucer's own poetic output. Of the three poets I have mentioned, only Gower's body of work is comparable in size.[15] A close study of the distribution of Chaucer's language of *pitee*, however, indicates that Chaucer not only wrote more poetry than his contemporaries, he wrote more about *pitee* throughout his poetry than did other late medieval English poets.[16] He wrote about *pitee* from the earliest moments in his writing career to the last, from the *Book of the Duchess* to the *Parson's Tale*.[17] And, moreover, of Chaucer's approximate 50 surviving works, only 16 contain no mention of *pitee* at all.[18]

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and Latin poetry. He uses the language of *pité* (and its derivates), 75 times throughout his French poetry. Gower also makes extensive use of the language of *pietas* in works such as the *Vox Clamantis*; in *Vox Clamantis*, he refers to *pietas* or a derivate 40 times. More so than *pitee* or *pité*, however, I am wary of *pietas* as synonymous with *pitee*, particularly because whether *pietas* means something like *pitee* or, instead, something like piety, varies greatly based on context. See my discussion on this topic in chapter two. In making these calculations for Gower, I have consulted J.D. Pickles and J.L. Dawson, eds., *A Concordance to John Gower's Confessio Amantis*; John Gower, "John Gower: In Praise of Peace" in *The Chaucerian Apocryphya: A Selection*; R. F. Yeager, Mark West, and Robin L. Hinson, eds. *Medieval Texts and Studies : A Concordance to the French Poetry and Prose of John Gower*; and John Gower, *Vox Clamantis* in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, 3-313.

[15] In saying this, I include not only Gower's English writings, but also his French and Latin texts.

[16] It is, again, only Gower who is comparable here. Even with Gower, however, his writing about *pitee* tends to be relatively confined. He writes a great deal about *pitee*, but almost entirely within single sections of his work. See, for one such example, Book II of *Confessio Amantis* in which *pité* is a remedy for envy.

[17] I will have more to say about dating the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Parson's Tale* in my final chapter. Here I follow Derek Pearsall in dating the *Book of the Duchess* to no later than 1372 and the *Parson's Tale* to the 1390's; see Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, especially pp. 47-94.

[18] Poems that do not mention *pitee*: *Parliament of Fowls, Treatise on the Astrolabe, Miller's Tale, Reeve's Tale, Cook's Tale, Shipman's Tale, Manciple's Tale, Complaint of Venus, To Rosemounde, Chaucers Wordes unto Adam His Owne Scriveyn, The Former Age, Truth, Fortune, Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan, Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton, The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse*. Considering the ubiquity of *pitee*, particularly in the *Canterbury Tales*, the places where Chaucer omits the language of *pitee* are as interesting as his inclusions. For example, Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, one of his richest considerations of *pitee*, is immediately succeeded by three of the five *Canterbury Tales* that do not refer to *pitee*. This change in language can almost certainly be attributed to part of the tale-telling "quyting" that drives the action of so many of the *Canterbury Tales*.

The expansiveness of Chaucer's treatment of *pitee* can partially be understood as the product of his interest and participation in the larger literary cultures of late medieval Europe. Eustache Deschamps in the mid-1380s praised Chaucer as the "grant translateur."[19] Although Deschamps likely had Chaucer's translation of the *Roman de la Rose* in mind, he could just as easily have been referring to any number of Chaucer's works.[20] Chaucer translated frequently from French, Anglo-Norman, Italian, and Latin texts and was an active participant in the poetry and poetic conversations taking place across Europe—a fact over which no small amount of scholarly ink has been spilt.[21] Chaucer's writing about *pitee* is a testament to that participation. When he writes of *pitee* in the *Romaunt of the Rose*, he translates from the French *pitié*.[22] And when he writes

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[19] Citation taken from the edition of Deschamps' *ballade* in praise of Chaucer printed in Caroline F.E. Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion*, III, 16ff. The dating of Deschamps' *ballade*, which was sent to Chaucer via their mutual friend Lewis Clifford, has been been debated; see Roy J. Pearcy, "Chaucer, Deschamps, and *Le Roman de Brut*" in *Arts: The Journal of the Sydney University Arts Association* 12 (1984), 35-59.

[20] Exactly what Deschamps' *ballade* suggests either about Deschamps' regard for Chaucer or Chaucer's European reputation has been debated by literary critics. Recently, Paul Strohm in *Chaucer's Tale* has suggested that "...although Deschamps's ballade to Chaucer is sometimes cited as evidence of Chaucer's international reputation, I am inclined to take it in a different sense, but still an important one: as evidence of [Lewis] Clifford's loyalty and partisanship...". Strohm further questions whether or not Deschamps had in fact read any of Chaucer's poetry; both citations are taken from page 192 of *Chaucer's Tale*. My interest here, however, is less in what Deschamps' poem suggests about Chaucer's reputation than it is in pointing to the importance of translation to Chaucer's work and to the fact that this importance was recognized by Chaucer's contemporaries.

[21] See, for example, Ardis Butterfield's *The Familiar Enemy*, which argues for reading Chaucer and late medieval English literature in context of French and Anglo-Norman literatures and cultures. On Chaucer and Italy, see David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, particularly chapter one "Chaucer in Florence and Lombardy." The importance of reading all European literatures in a trans-European mode is also an essential claim of *Europe: A Literary History, 1348-1418*, ed. David Wallace 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[22] There has been a great deal of debate as to whether or not the translation of the *Roman de la Rose* known as the *Romaunt of the Rose* was in fact written by Chaucer. For a summation of this discussion see *Romaunt of the*

about the piteous nature of the *Clerk's Tale*, he translates from French, Italian, and Latin

accounts of the popular Griselda legend.[23]

More than direct translation, however, when Chaucer writes about *pitee* he draws

on the particular vocabulary and generic conventions of multiple European poetic

discourses in which etymological cousins of *pitee*, such as *pitié*, *pietas*, and *pietà*, were

central terms.[24] His language of *pitee* in works like the *Book of the Duchess* and *Troilus and*

Criseyde speaks to his participation in the poetics of late medieval love poetry and the

fin'amor tradition.[25] His language of *pitee* in the *Knight's Tale* and *Clerk's Tale* indicates his

interest in the language of common profit discourse.[26] And his language of *pitee* in an

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Rose, *Variorum Chaucer Series* vol. 7, ed. Charles Dahlberg (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999). I follow contemporary consensus in taking Fragment A of the *Romaunt* to be written by Chaucer.

[23] See my discussion of this topic in chapter two.

[24] *Pitee* has a long and rich etymological history, as do *pitié*, *pietas*, and *pietà*; a topic about which I will have more to say throughout the following chapters. The *OED* describes pity's etymology as: "< Anglo-Norman *pité*, *pittee*, *peté*, *peti*, Anglo-Norman and Old French *pitet*, *pitee*, *pitié* (Middle French *pité* , *pitié* , French *pitié*) compassion (*c*1100), piety (15th cent.; rare) < classical Latin *pietās* (see piety *n.*). In branch II. probably after Middle French *pieté* piety *n.* The sense of Latin *pietās* 'piety' was in post-classical Latin extended so as to include 'compassion, pity' (Vetus Latina), and it was in this sense that the word first appears in Old French in its two forms *pitié* and *pieté* . Gradually these forms were differentiated, so that *pieté* , which more closely represented the Latin form, was used in the original Latin sense, while *pitié* retained the extended sense. In Middle English, both pity *n.* and piety *n.* are found first in the sense 'compassion', and subsequently in the sense 'piety', and the differentiation in sense is not complete until the 17th cent."

[25] Chaucer's sources for the *Book of the Duchess* include Jean Froissart's *Le Paradys d'Amours* and Guillaume de Machaut's *Le Dit de la Fonteinne Amoureuse*. *Troilus and Criseyde*, in addition to drawing on the poetics of love in Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, also indicates Chaucer's familiarity with such seminal *fin'amor* texts as the *Roman de la Rose*, particularly in Pandarus' speeches.

[26] Chaucer's alterations to his source texts, Boccacio's *Teseida* and Statius' *Thebaid*, draw out the importance of the *commune bonum* in Theseus' encounter with the Theban woman. See my discussion of this in chapter one. One of his major additions to the Griselda legend is also his insistence on Griselda's ability to work toward the *commune bonum* in her political dealings; see my discussion in chapter two.

"ABC" and the *Legend of Good Women* attests to his fascination with the culture of saintly

intervention in the hagiographic tradition.[27]

Within a larger European context, Chaucer's interest in *pitee* is conventional. He

uses the vocabulary of the works he translates, and he draws on the language of the

genres in which he writes. But to refer to Chaucer as conventional is misleading. Much

has been written on Chaucer's generic hybridity, his interest in and ability to mix and

experiment with poetic genres and conventions.[28] In *pitee*, that hybridity is housed

within a single word. *Pitee* signals Chaucer's participation in multiple different poetic

traditions: *fin'amor*, common profit, hagiography, Passion meditation, and chivalric

discourse. I would argue that, in part, Chaucer makes such substantial use of *pitee*

precisely because of the expansiveness of its meanings both within and outside of the

English language. It is a central term for describing affective and ethical responses to the

suffering of others in multiple different discourses. Chaucer, ever experimental, ever

playful, was fascinated by a term that could simultaneously refer to a woman's

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[27] The "ABC" is a translation of Guillaume de Deguileville's hymn to the Virgin Mary in *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine*. Chaucer in the *Legend of Good Women* draws on the structures and themes of hagiographies of female saints such as those found in the *Legenda Aurea* to reframe Ovidian narratives.

[28] Kathy Lavezzo provides a summation of recent critical discourses around Chaucer and hybridity; see her chapter "England" in *Chaucer: Contemporary Approaches*, 47-66. I use the term hybridity here with some caution despite its recent cache in literary studies. It is a term that has largely come into usage in literary studies via postcolonial theory. In postcolonial theory, the term "hybridity" is often used not only to signal different forms of mixing (literary, but also racial and cultural), but a contamination of purity, specifically a carnivalesque challenge to understandings of cultural and racial purity in colonial interactions. While I think in Chaucer we do indeed see a deliberate mixing of different genres, discourses, and ethical systems (ones that are often "carnivalesque" in tone and scope) the stakes of this mixing are not the stakes of the postcolonial. Chaucer is not challenging colonial and/or racial purity. However, because I do see Chaucer as engaged in challenging literary and cultural purities of particular medieval genres and discourses, I have chosen to use the term here.

willingness to engage in sexual conquest and ease the suffering of her male lover (as in

the *fin'amor* tradition), as well as a saint's willingness to aid a suffering Christian

penitent (as in the hagiographic tradition).

While there have been studies of *pitee* in Chaucer, perhaps most notably those by

Douglas Gray, Felicity Riddy, Jill Mann, and, most recently, Anne Schuurman and

Cristina Maria Cervone,[29] there has yet to be a sustained, book-length study of the role of

pitee in Chaucer. And yet, understanding *pitee* is an essential element to understanding

Chaucer. *Pitee* not only appears more than 200 times throughout Chaucer's poetry, it

appears in significant contexts. *Pitee* is in fact central to Chaucer's considerations of the

nature of suffering and how to respond to it. We can see this in the ways Chaucer

associates *pitee* with acts of mercy, virtue, and *gentilesse*—as in the *Knight's Tale* when the

suppliant Athenian and Theban women seek "somdrope of pitee" through Theseus'

gentilesse.[30] *Pitee* also serves as a central element of the Parson's account of contrition.

Not only does the Parson list it as an attribute of Christ, but *pitee* is also critical to the

Parson's soteriology—humankind's salvation being made possible through Christ's

"pitee of mannes soule" (315). It is, moreover, a central aspect of the refrain, "pitee

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[29] See Douglas Gray, "Chaucer and 'Pite,'" in *J.R.R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller: Essays in Memoriam*; Felicity Riddy, "Engendering Pity in the *Franklin's Tale*" in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature*, 54-71; Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, especially pp. 32-39 and 134-68; Anne Schuurman, "Pity and Poetics in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," in *PMLA* 130.5 (2015): 1302-1317; and Cristina Maria Cervone, "'I' and 'We' in Chaucer's *Complaint unto Pity*" in *Readings in Medieval Textuality*, 195-214.
[30] *The Riverside Chaucer*, 915. All subsequent references to Chaucer's work are from this edition and are cited parenthetically within the text by line number.

rennethe soone in gentil herte," which Chaucer repeatedly uses throughout his work to celebrate and critique medieval models of *gentilesse* and social relation.[31] A close, in-depth study of *pitee* in Chaucer thus shows that Chaucer was continually engaged in thinking about the complexity of *pitee* as a multi-faceted mode of responding ethically and affectively to suffering.

In his analysis of more than 100 keywords of twentieth-century culture and society, Raymond Williams extends both a caution and a justification for the analysis of individual words and their meanings:

> … while I am sure that no word ever finally stands on its own, but must be returned to its general and relational uses and to the language-system of which it is a part, I am sure also that to pick out a word of a problematical kind and to consider, for the moment, its own internal structure, is one necessary way of considering the active interrelations of words in sentences and in the larger system of the language itself.[32]

Pitee, while not one of Williams' keywords, is, I would argue, one such word of the "problematical kind" in Chaucer—and indeed in the culture and society of late medieval England and Europe as a whole. For Williams, to speak of a word as being of a problematical kind means to understand a word's meaning and use within a culture as difficult and, at times, unclear. It is also to acknowledge that within that word a problem of its meaning is "inextricably bound up with the problems it [is] being used to

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[31] References occur in the *Knight's Tale*, line 1751; *Merchant's Tale*, line 1986; *Squire's Tale*, line 472; and the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, lines F.503 and G.491.
[32] Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, 20.

discuss."[33] I contend that *pitee* in Chaucer operates as precisely the kind of term outlined and analyzed by Williams, being difficult or ambiguous in its meaning and speaking to a larger problem within the culture itself.

A few questions then arise: Why haven't other literary critics engaged in a sustained study of the problematical nature of *pitee*? In what sense can we say that the meaning of *pitee* is difficult or ambiguous in Chaucer, and what larger problems within Chaucer's culture are these problems of meaning also a part?

To the second set of questions, which form the bulk of my project, it is worth considering as a preliminary investigation the difficulty in making distinctions between associated words or family resemblance terms—a term borrowed from Ordinary Language Philosophy to speak of a group of words in which we can see a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities."[34] A comparison of definitions of four such words (*pitee*, *compassioun*, *merci*, and *reuthe*) from the *MED* shows the overlapping similarities:[35]

> Pite: 1. (a) A disposition to mercy; the quality of being merciful; mercy, clemency, leniency, 2. (a) A feeling of pity aroused by the suffering, distress, grief, etc., of another, sympathy, commiseration, 3. (a) Sorrow, grief; misery, distress; also, remorse, 4. Godliness, reverent and devout obedience to God, righteousness; devotion (to duty); piety

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[33] Ibid., 13.

[34] Ludwig Wittgenstein and G. E. M. Anscombe, *Philosophical Investigations*, 67.

[35] In the interest of brevity, I have limited the definitions quoted above to the first four definitions given for the noun form of the word.

Compassioun: 1. The sharing of suffering with another, commiseration., 2. Sympathy, compassion; haven ~ of (unto), sympathize with, feel sorry for (sb. or someone's troubles); (b) compassion along with a desire to help, pity; of God: solicitude, 3. Involvement in a disease or affliction.

Merci: 1. (a) Pardon for a sin or an injury, forgiveness, mercy, 2. *Theol.* Atonement, propitiation, 3. (a) Clemency toward a prisoner, an enemy, etc.; mercy, 4 (a) Pity, compassion

Reuthe: 1. (a) Pity, compassion, sympathy; also, mercy, 2. (a) Sorrow, grief, 3. (a) An occasion or cause of pity or sorrow; a sad event or situation; something pitiful

In many cases, the *MED* uses family resemblance terms to define one another. *Pitee* is defined as mercy, *compassioun* as pity, *merci* as pity and compassion, and *reuthe* is defined as pity, compassion, and also mercy. And yet, even as the *MED* makes evident the interconnections between these words, these definitions also reveal the often subtle distinctions between each word—and thus subtle differences in modes of responding to suffering. *Reuthe* may be defined in terms of pity, compassion, and mercy, but neither *compassioun* nor *merci* share *reuthe*'s association with sorrow or grief. Similarly, *merci* may be understood as showing compassion or pity, but its primary meaning is with the giving of pardon. Granting pardon, with its implications of forgiving a wrong, is not a necessary condition of feeling *pitee* or *compassioun*. And *pitee* and *compassioun* may seem to be nearly the same term, but *pitee* shares an important connection with piety and devotion that *compassioun* does not. In the overlaps between these terms and in the subtle distinctions between them we can see an ongoing medieval conversation about how to respond to suffering: with sorrow or pardon, devotion or compassion.

This point about the relations between such terms as *pitee*, *compassioun*, *reuthe*, and *merci* brings me back to my first set of questions—namely the lack of in-depth, book-length study of *pitee*. Many such studies that I have cited above have been interested in *pitee* in one of two ways: as an individual word without attention to family resemblance terms or as a word tangentially related to the analysis that is the primary focus of study.[36] My own commitments to a study of *pitee* as a keyword can perhaps best be explained in a brief reflection on my understanding of the relationship between word and world. Returning to Williams, embedded within his work is an understanding that the world of a given culture and its language are not two distinct and separate entities, but are intimately bound together. A study of distinctions and differences in language matters, therefore, because:

> ...the variations and confusions of meaning are not just faults in a system, or errors of feedback, or deficiencies of education. They are in many cases, in my terms, of historical and contemporary substance. Indeed they have often, as variations, to be insisted upon, just because they embody different experiences and readings of experience...[37]

Distinctions, then, between words are not arbitrary, but are indicative of "variations and confusions" within the world of the culture itself. Such differences between words are in fact the embodiment of differences in experience.

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[36] Mann's *Feminizing Chaucer* falls into the latter category attending as it does to the link between pity and *pietas*. Riddy's "Engendering Pity in the 'Franklin's Tale'," Gray's "Chaucer and 'Pite,'" and Schuurman's "Pity and Poetics in the *Legend of Good Women*" fit into the former.

[37] From pages 21-22, Williams goes on to add: "What can really be contributed is not resolution but perhaps, at times, just that extra edge of consciousness."

Putting the issue even more strongly, J.L. Austin in "A Plea for Excuses" contends that:

> ...our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth making, in the lifetimes of many generations....When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not merely at words (or 'meanings', whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena.[38]

Utilizing the language of embodiment that speaks to the real and material connection between word and world, Austin articulates distinction as a perception of phenomena and phenomenological difference. Austin, more so than Williams, is interested in people's conscious choices in making distinctions.[39] When people make distinctions, they are seeking for the best language to represent their particular reality—the particular set of life experiences, the phenomena, that they encounter. In an examination of *pitee* as connected to and yet distinct from such words as *compassioun*, *reuthe*, and *merci*, I argue that we can sharpen our perception of a particular reality within which Chaucer lived and in which he participated. And we can see him attending to and making distinctions between *pitee* and other forms of responding to the suffering of others.

This brings me back to where this preface began. I suggested that not only was Chaucer fascinated with *pitee*, but that he deployed this language in significant contexts

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[38] J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses" in *Philosophical Papers*, 24.
[39] Both in *Keywords* and elsewhere, Williams is interested in patterns of thought and experience that are both conscious and unconscious; see especially "Structures of Feeling," in *Marxism and Literature*, 128-135.

and that his use of it indicates his interest and participation in larger European literary traditions and discourses. Moreover, I indicated that his interest in the language of *pitee* helps us to understand the growing trend of English writings about *pitee* at the turn of the fourteenth century. There is, however, a particular challenge in writing about *pitee* in Chaucer. Chaucer writes three times more about *pitee* than he does about *reuthe*, 1.5 times more about *pitee* than *merci*, and more than ten times about *pitee* than *compassioun*.[40] But Chaucer does not offer a single account of *pitee*. As we saw in the *MED* definitions and as will become apparent in examining Chaucer's poetry, it is not always clear that *pitee* is distinct from *reuthe* or *compassioun*. Moreover, if we consider every example of *pitee* in his poetry, it is not always evident that we are speaking of the same feeling at all; are we, for example, to understand that May's *pitee* in the *Merchant's Tale* is the same as Christ's *pitee* for humanity in the *Parson's Tale*? Rather than offer a definition of *pitee* in Chaucer, this project works to examine Chaucer's own experiments with and explorations of the meanings of *pitee* in medieval literature and culture.

　　As much as possible, I have tried to organize the following four chapters along four of the distinct lines of exploration I see Chaucer taking up in his poetry. The first chapter "*Gentil* Hearts, Pitiful Feelings: Medieval Anthropologies and Social Relation" takes up the question of Chaucer's investigations into *pitee*'s role in how we as humans

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[40] Chaucer writes about *pitee* or a derivative 231 times; he writes about *reuthe* or a derivative (*reutheless*, *rewe*) 84 times, *merci* or a derivative (*merciable*, *merciful*) 173 times, and *compassioun* 19 times.

relate to the world around us. Following Chaucer's deployment of the refrain "Pitee renneth soone in gentil herte," this chapter also lays the ground for such questions as: is *pitee* an emotion, and what role does *pitee* play in responding to the suffering of others?

The next chapter, "Facing Pity: Responding to Suffering in the *Clerk's Tale*," considers Chaucer's version of the popular medieval Griselda legend: the *Clerk's Tale*. This chapter, in addition to investigating the role of the language of *pitee* in the European common profit tradition, looks in-depth at one of Chaucer's critiques of *pitee*. In particular, it studies Chaucer's examination of how *pitee* can be manipulated and abused by those in power.

In chapter three, "Pity and Ethics in *Troilus and Criseyde*," I read *Troilus and Criseyde* in context of its sources and analogues, such as Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* and contemporary allegories of love such as the *Roman de la Rose*. I show that *pitee* in the poem operates within two distinct ethical systems: *fin'amor* and Christian ethics. I argue that within these systems and within *Troilus and Criseyde pitee* functions as a good habit that is developed through processes of cognitive reflection and that is realized in action.

In my final chapter, "The Consolation of Poetry: Chaucer's Pitiful Aesthetics and the End(s) of Poetry," I consider the ethical and emotional consequences of aesthetic works that inspire *pitee*. I read Chaucer's own meta-narrations on *pitee* and aesthetics in one of his early poems, the *Book of the Duchess*, and two of his final works, the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Parson's Tale*. Placing Chaucer in context of other late medieval

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authors like Julian of Norwich and Christine de Pizan, I argue that over the course of his writing career Chaucer becomes increasingly skeptical of *pitee* as a poetic aesthetic. Of particular concern to Chaucer is the way aestheticized *pitee* risks encouraging a delight in the suffering of others that fails to acknowledge the realities of that suffering.

Having given this introduction, it now seems right to begin the actual task of looking in-depth at Chaucer's writing about *pitee*. Before doing so, however, I want to offer a brief note on pity in its contemporary context. Because, as a literary scholar writing in the twenty-first century about *pitee*, I have found that to contend with Chaucer's engagement with *pitee* is also to contend with pity in its contemporary understanding and use.

If *pitee* as a response to suffering in Chaucer was connected to *gentilesse*, mercy, contrition, and virtue, contemporary culture understands pity much differently. A comparison of the definitions of pity in the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests as much. The *OED* defines the noun form of pity as "tenderness and concern aroused by the suffering, distress, or misfortune of another, and prompting a desire for its relief; compassion, sympathy."[41] The *OED* associates pity explicitly with compassion and sympathy. And its meaning as desiring another's relief from suffering suggests a genuine concern for another person—a seemingly selfless act of tenderness and care for another.

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[41] "pity, *n*." definition 2.a.

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Complicating matters, however, the *OED* defines the verbal form of pity as "to feel pity for; to be sorry for" and adds, in a small note post-definition, "In modern use sometimes implying disdain or mild contempt for a person as intellectually or morally inferior."[42] The *OED*'s separation of this addendum about pity's relationship to condescension from the main body of the definition creates a visually striking image. Written in a font several sizes smaller than the rest of the text on the page, the *OED* visually represents this association with condescension as removed from the ordinary definition of pity in English. Within the *OED's* definition, we can see the tenuous place pity occupies in modern usage. It means compassion and a desire to relieve the suffering of another, but it can also suggest disdain or contempt. And while the *OED* describes this contempt or disdain as only an occasional implication, we need only read the news to see that pity is often—if not always—associated with a disdain for its object.[43] Pity then often comes to mean both a compassion that wants to ease suffering, as well as a disdain for the one suffering. The close alignment of compassion and disdain in pity paints a bleak picture of the way contemporary culture thinks about and responds to the suffering of others.

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[42] "pity, *v.*" definition 1.
[43] For a recent example of this, see Cornel West's recent article in *The Guardian* "Pity the sad legacy of Barack Obama" published Jan. 9, 2017.

And such a complex series of associations in contemporary culture has complicated philosophical and literary studies of pity. In perhaps the most influential recent study of pity, Martha Nussbaum articulates the difficulty of writing about pity:

> A brief note on terms: When I use the words "pity" and "compassion," I am really speaking about a single emotion. The analysis I shall offer focuses on an experience that remains remarkably constant from Sophocles to the present day, even though many terms in many languages have been used to name it. Such variation reveals some real, subtle difference in the understanding and the experience of the emotion itself; but on the whole the philosophical tradition is in such vigorous conversation that the terms are frequently heard as translations of one another, and are thus pulled toward one another in meaning. I shall use the term "pity" when I am talking about the historical debate, since that is the term generally used in English to translate both Greek *eleos* and French *pitié*; but since, from the Victorian era onward, the term has acquired nuances of condescension and superiority to the sufferer that it did not have formerly, I shall switch over to the currently more appropriate term "compassion" when I am talking about contemporary issues.[44]

Nussbaum's own explanation of her use of the terms pity and compassion shows that as much as these words might refer to a "single emotion" and pull toward one another in meaning, pity and compassion for Nussbaum pull apart as much as they pull together. The language of pulling, pulling away and pulling together, is critical here. Nussbaum highlights a close relation between pity and compassion. We can almost imagine them connected by a rope. Tied completely together they cannot be entirely separated, but even as their meanings "pull" toward each other along the metaphorical rope, they also pull away. In a linguistic tug-of-war, Nussbaum articulates a tension between the

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[44] Martha Nussbaum, "Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion," 27.

linguistic contexts of the past and the linguistic contexts of the present. While pity seems

to pull toward compassion when Nussbaum speaks historically, pity pulls away from

compassion in her consideration of pity's present use. In its sense of condescension in

fact, pity pulls so far away from its association with the "single emotion" that is the

object of her study that Nussbaum changes her vocabulary. She uses the "more

appropriate term" compassion when speaking of pity in its present use.

In medieval studies, this challenge of writing about pity has been most

influentially discussed by Sarah McNamer in *Affective Meditation and the Making of

Medieval Compassion*.[45] In this text, McNamer considers the particular differences

between words associated with medieval compassion, and she positions herself

explicitly as studying the late medieval period as a critical moment in the history of

compassion; one, in fact, overlooked by Nussbaum.[46] She notes the difficulty in

distinguishing between medieval terms associated with compassion such as *compassioun*,

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[45] McNamer is, however, by no means the only critic to attend to this difficulty. For an even more recent example, see A.S. Lazikani's discussion in *Cultivating the Heart: Feeling and Emotion in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Religious Texts*. Of particular note is Lazikani's clarification of her preference for the word compassion in discussing the *Ancrene Wisse* and the *Wooing Group*: "It would be incorrect to suggest that 'pity' and 'compassion' are clearly distinguished in medieval vocabularies. But the term 'compassion' is preferred in this chapter, first for the pertinence of its etymology [Lazikani is dealing particularly with a phenomena she describes as co-feeling], and second due to the unhelpful connotations carried by 'pity' in its modern usage. Feeling pity suggests an affective disengagement from the sufferer: the pitier only observes, and is unable to feel the suffering as her own. Both premises are in discordance with compassion in these thirteenth-century texts." Lazikani goes on to detail her own interest in the compassionate work of the texts she considers, describing compassion in these texts as an affective experience of co-feeling in which one shares affective space with another person. Lazkikani's antecedent here is Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. In Lazikani, see especially chapter three "Co-feeling: Compassion in *Ancrene Wisse* and the *Wooing Group*." Above quoted from pg. 73 of *Cultivating the Heart*.

[46] Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*, pg. 4 and fns. 39 and 42.

pitee, and *reuthe*. These words seem to pull together and are often used "synonymously,"

but:

> From the late fourteenth century on, however, *pitee,* in both religious and secular texts and contexts, does seem to designate a cognitive and social structure that differs from the emotion that is my primary focus. *Pitee* is often structured vertically; it suggests condescension from a superior to an inferior and relatedly often appears in the sources as an emotion that men perform—"as" men—toward women.[47]

McNamer does not investigate in detail this difference in structure between *pitee* and

compassion, the primary focus of her study. Her note, however, indicates that the reason

she leaves an investigation of these different structures out of her argument lies in the

fact that *pitee* seems to be a different emotion than what she studies and, moreover, that

at the heart of this difference is a "condescension from a superior to an inferior" that

carries gendered associations.[48]

While my study will engage with what Nussbaum referred to as terms

"frequently heard as translations of one another, and are thus pulled toward one

another in meaning," my primary focus, limited in scope far more than Nussbaum's or

McNamer's, attends to the variations in terms that reveal "some real, subtle difference in

the understanding and the experience" of pity itself. And, in this attention, I would

question the degree to which these associations of condescension could be said to appear

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[47] Ibid., pg. 212, fn. 43.
[48] McNamer cites her antecedents here as Riddy, "Engendering Pity in the 'Franklin's Tale'"; Strohm, "Queens as Intecessors," in *Hochon's Arrows;* Gray, *"Chaucer and 'Pite'"* and Mann's comments on *pitee* in *Feminizing Chaucer*, especially 134-142.

in Chaucer. It is my hope that the following pages show that there is limited evidence in Chaucer's poetry and in the poetry of his contemporaries that associations with condescension occurred in English literature at the turn of the fourteenth century—although the question of *pitee* and gender and vertical power relations is a fascinating one to which I will repeatedly return.

I have titled this project *In Search of Pity: Chaucerian Poetics and the Suffering of Others*. In naming it as such, I am gesturing to the ways that this project seeks out the meaning(s) of *pitee* in Chaucer's poetry. In attempting to understand what Chaucer means when he writes about *pitee*, I contend that we can better understand the conversations around the concept of *pitee* taking shape in medieval European culture, and I would argue that this work allows us to better understand medieval discourses around suffering and affective and ethical responses to suffering.

This title, however, also refers to the fact that in seeking out the meanings of *pitee* in Chaucer's poetry I am engaged in searching for a lost concept.[49] While our language may seem to be the same, medieval *pitee* and contemporary pity are so conceptually different that they function as different concepts. No matter its definition or generic iteration, I see no evidence in Chaucer or other medieval texts that *pitee* suggests disdain or condescension. But this is an essential component of contemporary pity. This project

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[49] My thinking and writing about *pitee* as a lost concept has been shaped and influenced by Cora Diamond's essay "Losing Your Concepts."

thus attempts to seek out the meanings and conceptual understandings of medieval

pitee.

And I believe that there is immediate cultural relevance in the current moment to

do so. To seek out the meanings Chaucer or other medieval thinkers ascribe to *pitee* is to

be taken out of our contemporary understanding of pity and think alongside the

medieval. It is not the case that medieval *pitee* was an inherent social good; that because

it was not understood as contemptuous or disdainful that it always operated in ways

medieval writers and thinkers considered ethically sound. Certainly a central

component of my project will be to show the various ways Chaucer and his

contemporaries critiqued or challenged *pitee*. Chaucer and other medieval writers,

however, were thinking of responses to suffering, affective and ethical, differently than

we do in the contemporary. As much is evident in the distinctions between pity and

pitee. To think alongside Chaucer and medieval authors, then, involves an imaginative

work of considering what alternative forms and responses to suffering have existed,

could exist, or should exist. It is to allow ourselves to be challenged by other modes of

thinking of suffering.

I am not simply advocating, however, for responses to suffering that are

unmarked by contempt or disdain. Rather, I am interested in the ways that

contemporary pity's association with contempt or disdain is indicative of contemporary

understandings of suffering. I would in fact suggest that pity is not an outlier. Pity is not

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an unusual and unpleasant form of contemporary conceptions of suffering. Pity is our

word that points to a very real and central aspect of our understanding of suffering and

responses to it: namely, the belief that there is a divide between those who suffer and

those who do not. I would suggest that in contemporary pity this divide is characterized

by the shamefulness of suffering and the moral righteousness of responding. And in this

division there is an unwillingness, even an inability, to move affectively, ethically,

thoughtfully across the division between those who suffer and those who do not.

Indeed, if the current political climate in the United States suggests anything, it is that

there is a contemporary assumption that the terms of that division could never change;

that chance and fortune could never intervene and bring any person into the state of

suffering. Pity is, in this sense, a failure of understanding—a failure to understand the

lives and conditions of others, but also the precarity of our own circumstances.[50]

There is cultural importance in asking what non-disdainful, non-contemptuous

forms of responding to suffering have looked like and could look like. I recently

attended a political rally in which a woman near me carried a sign stating: "Make

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[50] My account of contemporary pity has been shaped by contemporary American politics, but the language of the above discussion has been heavily influenced by two works. Perhaps most basically, I have in mind Aristotle's account in the *Rhetoric* of ἔλεος (*eleos*), a term often translated as pity. Precarity is essential to Aristotle's account of *eleos*: "Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon." See *Rhetoric,* II.8. I am also influenced here by Simone Weil, who works in an Aristotelian vein, particularly her essay "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force." See especially her discussion of failures of love and justice: "...the sense of human misery is the pre-condition for love and justice. He who does not realize to what extent fortune and necessity hold in subjection every human spirit cannot regard as fellows creatures nor love as he loves himself those from whom chance separated him by an abyss." Weil, "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force," 35.

America Compassionate Again." I found that my eyes were repeatedly drawn to her

throughout the afternoon, and, as the event drew to a close, I approached and asked

about her sign. "What does that mean to you, 'Make America Compassionate Again?'"

After looking at me for a moment, she answered, "I think it probably means the same

thing as your shirt." Startled, I looked down. That day I had worn a shirt stating "Silence

= Death." As a political slogan, "Silence = Death" has its roots in queer AIDS activism of

the late 1980s. The slogan, printed on posters and distributed widely, was meant to

remind readers of the deadly cost of silence and provoke them to political action.[51]

"Silence = Death" was, and still is, a brutal reminder that the silence and inaction of the

American people and American politicians in the face of the AIDS epidemic led to the

deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and the loss of an entire LGBTQ generation.[52]

Unprepared for the woman to make that particular comparison, I mumbled my thanks

for her response and wandered off quickly. In the weeks that have followed, I've found

myself returning again and again to this exchange. I hadn't thought to ask if the woman

understood the reference. I'd like to think she did. At the very least, I'd like to think that

in equating "Make America Compassionate Again" and "Silence = Death" she was

speaking to the hope that we could imagine a better form of relating to suffering than

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[51] Posters typically printed the following words under the slogan: "Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Center for Disease Control, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Vatican? Gays and lesbians are not expendable...Use your power...Vote...Boycott...Defend yourselves...Turn anger, fear, grief into action."
[52] And this, of course, does not even begin to address the international death rate from AIDS and the effects of colonial and postcolonial rule on the shape of the AIDS epidemic.

those that are currently available to us. I'd like to think that she was attesting to the importance of communication in responding to suffering, in speaking with and working to acknowledge and understand the reality of others. I'd like to think that she was speaking to the stakes of this communication; that she acknowledged that communication is always at the risk of falling apart or failing, but that it is in some sense better than the alternative—to never speak at all.

I began my preface with a quotation from Iris Murdoch's essay "The Idea of Perfection": "Words, moreover, have both spatio-temporal and conceptual contexts. We learn through attending to contexts, vocabulary develops through close attention to objects, and we can only understand others if we can to some extent share their contexts. (Often we cannot.)."[53] I began with this quotation because it speaks in many ways to the two primary levels of this project. Fundamentally, *In Search of Pity* is engaged in a close and detailed study of a word, of the spatio-temporal and conceptual contexts of *pitee* at the moment of its earliest development in English literature and culture. At the same time, this project is one about understanding. Murdoch in this passage is engaged in explaining a process she describes as "grow[ing] by looking."[54] This process is one of careful attention in which a person learns by looking with "a just and loving gaze" at a

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[53] Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 32.
[54] Ibid., 31.

particular "individual reality."[55] What a person learns is the particular context of an

individual reality. And, by examining with a "just and loving gaze," that process is

ideally one of growth in which a person comes to better understand what constitutes a

particular reality. Words are one of the primary sites of this learning and attention.

Words carry within themselves the particular contexts, spatio-temporal and conceptual,

of the people who speak them. Words are shaped and changed within the context of

learning and attending to others. And words operate as a sharing of contexts. Through

words, we can come to understand something about another person. As the final portion

of Murdoch's statement makes clear, however, words make evident the precarity of this

understanding. Understanding rests on the extent to which we can share the context of

others. And any person who has ever tried to communicate through words will be

aware of the incredible difficulty of communicating self and context in language. Often

we cannot understand the words of others; often we cannot communicate effectively

ourselves. Often we cannot understand the individual reality of others; often we cannot

make our own understood. Whether or not the woman I met at a rally understood me or

I understood her, there was a reason her sign read "Make America Compassionate

Again" and not "Make America Pity Again." I suspect it has a great deal to do with a

recognition of the absolute necessity of the struggle, even with its frequent failure, to

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[55] Ibid., 34. Murdoch's antecedent here is Simone Weil's work on attention, perhaps most famously discussed in *Gravity and Grace*.

understand others, and the realization that the contemporary concept of pity leaves no

room for that model of understanding.

1. *Gentil* Hearts, Pitiful Feelings: Medieval Anthropologies and Social Relation in Chaucer

Quis igitur digne miretur nobilitatem huius animalis colligantis in se ipso mortalia immortalibus, et rationabilia coniungentis irrationabilibus, ferentis in sua natura omnis creaturae imaginem?
—Nemesius, *Premnon Physicon*[1]

Omnis autem proprietas et motus consequitur aliquam formam secundum conditionem ipsius, sicut formam nobilissimi elementi, puta ignis, consequitur motus ad locum nobilissimum, qui est sursum. Forma autem nobilissima in inferioribus est anima, quae maxime accedit ad similitudinem principii motus caeli. Unde et motus ipsam consequens simillimus est motui caeli: sic enim est motus cordis in animali, sicut motus caeli in mundo.
—Thomas Aquinas, *De Motu Cordis*[2]

This chapter considers *pitee,* its function and operation, through the lens of a

central Chaucerian phrase: *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte*. Tracing Chaucer's use of this

phase across his poetry, I attempt to chart Chaucer's understanding of how *pitee*

operated internally within the individual who felt it, as well as his understanding of

how *pitee* operated externally in the interrelation between persons. In thinking about

both the internal and external operation of *pitee*, this chapter thus also works to

understand Chaucer's conception of human nature and human life. While not offering a

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[1] Nemesius, *Premnon Physicon*, p. 22, I.9: "These things considered, who is able to commend sufficiently the nobility of this *living-creature*? Behold, he bindeth together in *himself* things *mortall* and *immortall*; and knitteth up in *One*, things *reasonable* and *unreasonable*. In his owne nature, hee beareth the *image* of all *creatures*, and from thence is rightly called *A little world*." George Wither, trans. and ed., *The Nature of Man*, 8.
[2] "But it is important to note that every property and movement is a result of a form in a particular condition. So as a result of the form of a subtle element like fire, there is motion to a subtle place, namely upwards motion. Now the most subtle form on earth is the soul, which is most like the principle of the motion of the heavens. Thus, the motion that results from the soul is most like the motion of the heavens. In other words, the heart moves in the animal as the heavenly bodies move in the cosmos." Latin text and translation taken from "On the Motion of the Heart," tr. G Gregory L. Froelich, 15.

single, exhaustivee account of either Chaucer's concept of the human person or his social theories, it instead works to make apparent Chaucer's multi-faceted explorations of humanity. And it works to place Chaucer's interest in *pitee* within a larger social context. Pointing to the multiple ethical, political, and theological discources in which Chaucer was participating in his writing about *pitee*, I thus situate Chaucer's various uses of *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* within larger medieval conversations about the relationship between the passions and the will and discources about the shape and function of social hierarchies.

For a consideration of Chaucer's understanding of both human nature and social relation, *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* serves as an ideal starting point. This phrase appears only four times in Chaucer's work, in the *Knight's Tale, Merchant's Tale, Squire's Tale*, and the *Legend of Good Women*,[3] but it resonates throughout his poetry. Close variants appear in the *Man of Law's Tale, Parson's Tale*, and the *Complaint Unto Pitee*.[4] And the key terms of the line, particularly the language of gentility and the heart, are frequently connected to *pitee*. A consultation of Chaucer's poetry alongside the *Chaucer Concordance* in fact shows that in context of the 231 times Chaucer writes about *pitee* he references the heart 87 times and *gentil, gentilly*, or *gentilesse* 31 times.[5] This

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[3] References occur at lines 1751 in the *Knight's Tale*, 1986 *Merchant's Tale*, 472 *Squire's Tale*, and F.503 & G.491 in the *Legend of Good Women*.

[4] See the *Man of Law's Tale* line 660, the *Parson's Tale* line 467, and the *Complaint Unto Pitee* lines 10-15.

[5] I am here talking specifically about *pitee* and not family resemblance terms such as *compassioun, reuthe*, or *misericordia*. See my introduction for a discussion of my focus on *pitee* as a distinct term. *Pitee* appears 122

interconnection of *pitee*, the heart, and *gentilesse*, moreover, appears throughout

Chaucer's poetry including the *Book of the Duchess*,[6] *Anelida and Arcite*,[7] *Gentilesse*,[8] and

the *Parson's Tale*,[9] so that we can see that Chaucer meditated on the particular

interrelation of these concepts throughout his writing career. Indeed, in many ways *pitee*

renneth soone in gentil herte serves as a constant refrain, lingering behind and within

much of Chaucer's poetry.

When it comes to understanding Chaucer's examinations of human nature and

human social relation, moreover, *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* proves particularly

revelatory. In the case of Chaucer's examination of human nature, this line tells us a

great deal about how Chaucer understood the interrelation between the body and the

will, the senses and the passions. His metaphorical language of running, the centrality of

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times, *pitous* 56 times, and *pitousli* 53. It is also worth pointing out that these figures do not account for *pitee*'s connection to terms closely related to *gentilesse* such as *noble* or *estaat*. Indeed, *noble* appears 10 times within the context of Chaucer's discussion of *pitee* and *estaat* appears five times. If we include any language that references social status such as lord (29 times) or lady (26 times), *pitee*'s connection to the languages of social hierarchy only grows.

[6] The narrator explains his response to the Knight: "And whan I herde hym tel thys tale / thus pitously, as I yow telle, / unnethe myght y lenger dwelle, / hyt dyde myn herte so moche woo" (710-13).

[7] "For hit ful depe is sonken in my mynde, / With pitous hert in Englyssh to endyte / This olde storie...." (8-10).

[8] "The firste stok, fader of gentilesse— / What man that desireth gentil for to be / Must folowe his trace...This firste stok was ful of rightwisnesse, / Trewe of his word, sobre, pitous, and free...." (1-9).

[9] I am particularly interested in the Parson's treatment of *gentilesse* and *pitee* in his discussion of *superbia* (lines 463-47) about which I will have more to say in chapter four. The link between *pitee* and the heart is repeated elsewhere in the *Parson's Tale*, however, including in his long treatment of relieving of avarice through *misericorde* and *pitee*: "The speces of misericorde been, as for to lene and for to yeve, and to foryeven and relesse, and for to han pitee in herte and compassioun of the meschief of his evene-Cristene, and eek to chastise, there as nede is" (809).

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the heart, the temporal importance of *soone*, the implications of *gentil* for an

understanding of inherited and acquired virtues—these formal and linguistic qualities

are indicative of Chaucer's response to and participation in medieval anthropological

debates. In the case of Chaucer's understanding of social relation, this phrase articulates

a process of relation in which the feeling of *pitee* arises in response to an awareness of

the suffering of another within those who are *gentil* (a word of incredible social

complexity that suggests potentially both noble birth and a developed nobility of

spirit).[10] *Pitee* thus details a mode of relating to others that is particularly grounded in

the language and politics of social hierarchies. In the coming pages, I want first to

discuss *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* as it relates to Chaucer's anthropology and then

turn to social relation. In moving in this way, I hope to show how foundational the

anthropological function of *pitee* is to its social function. *Pitee* manifests socially because

of how it operates within the person who feels it.

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Beginning with *pitee*'s anthropological function, I want to first clarify what I

mean when I talk about Chaucer's anthropology. When I speak of *pitee*'s anthropological

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[10] The *MED* defines *gentil* in its adjectival form in five ways, with the first two definitions capturing the complexity of the words meaning: "1. (a) Of noble rank or birth, belonging to the gentry, noble; -- often implying character or manners befitting one of gentle birth; -- also used of Christ; *sup.* the gentileste, the noblest, the noblest men; (b) ~ blod, noble ancestry; also, persons of noble ancestry; ~ boren, high born; ~ hous, a noble family; ~ kinrede, noble stock or family; ~ name, an illustrious name. 2. (a) Having the character or manners prescribed by the ideals of chivalry or Christianity; noble, kind, gracious, etc.; (b) courteous, polite, well-bred, charming; graceful, beautiful, handsome; (c) used ironically." *Gentil* thus refers to inheritance, social status based on wealth and lineage, virtuous character (both divine and chivalric), good-breeding.

function, I am attempting to denote in shorthand the complicated nexus of various parts (psychological, bodily, spiritual) and processes (sensorial, passionate, rational) brought together in the operation of the human person and, consequently, in the human experience of *pitee*. Simultaneously, anthropological gestures to what will be critical in my argument, namely the connection of these individual and personal parts and processes to the world outside of the individual: the social, material, and metaphysical world. In other words, when I speak of Chaucer's anthropology or even medieval anthropological debates, I mean precisely "[t]he study or description of human beings or human nature..." described by the *OED*, with the understanding that the subject under consideration is "[t]he...study of the human organism, conceived of as a union of body and soul, including human anatomy and physiology...and the study of sensation and perception."[11]

On the most basic level, in utilizing the language of anthropology, I am attempting to think across various dichotomies—that between mind and body, interior and exterior, passion and reason. In recent years, these dichotomies have been troubled in a variety of critical fields within humanistic study.[12] I am particularly interested in recent conversations around emotions and feeling in the Middle Ages, as well as those

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[11] From the *OED*'s definitions 1 and 2.a. of anthropology respectively. From definition 2a, now obsolete, I've omitted the language of scientific study and phrenology.
[12] Although the challenge and debate over these dichotomies is far older than their recent conversations, a survey of them is outside the limits of this chapter.

around the body, its operation and permeability.[13] These two conversations have the most immediate relevance to a consideration of *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* being fundamentally concerned with the line's basic components: feeling and the body.

Recent conversations about medieval emotions and feelings have actively worked to trouble dichotomies between passion and reason, emotion and cognition. In describing the surge of interest in the study of emotions, feeling, and the passions throughout academia, Sarah McNamer describes why "emotions are here to stay":[14] "Not only because they are so fundamental to human experience, but because their exclusion from so many branches of academic study has been predicated on prejudices that we now recognize as such—chiefly the reason/emotion dichotomy itself, with the privileging of the former reinforced by its association with 'the masculine'."[15] I will have more to say about gender in my discussion of *pitee* and social relation, but I want now to attend to a central component of McNamer's argument: that the task of emotion study in the academy and a spur to its longevity is emotion study's work in correcting an imbalance constructed by the reason/emotion dichotomy.[16] With her interest in correcting this balance, McNamer's writing tends to makes extensive use of the language

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[13] Other critical conversations engaged in troubling these dichotomies (or at least attempting to think across them) with which I do not engage here include: new materialism, object oriented ontology, neuroscience, and phenomenology.

[14] And, indeed, interest in emotions has only escalated since McNamer published this piece in 2007.

[15] McNamer, "Feeling" In *Middle English: Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature*, 1-2.

[16] While McNamer does not discuss it, this dichotomy does indeed have a particular history; for a text that considers some of the early history of this dichotomy and its deployment in the academy, see David Konstan's *Pity Transformed*.

of emotion and draws on concepts that emphasize the import and value of emotion

(such as "emotives" or "emotional communities").[17] At the same time, McNamer and

concepts such as emotive and emotional communities, draw to the fore the interrelation

of emotional processes with rational, cognitive, and social practices. William Reddy's

work on emotives speaks to a relationship between the cognitive and social nature of

speech acts and the ways in which emotions are formed and shaped. Defining an

emotive as a type of utterance that "do[es] things in the world," he explains that

emotives are "themselves instruments for directly changing, building, hiding,

intensifying emotions."[18] In a related vein, Barbara Rosenwein's writing on emotional

communities works to show how emotions have been and are tied into processes of

social formation, as well as the construction and shaping of cultural values and norms.

She defines emotional communities as "...groups—usually but not always social

groups—that have their own particular values, modes of feeling, and ways to express

those feelings....[e]motional communities are not always 'emotional.' They simply share

important norms concerning the emotions that they value and deplore and the modes of

expressing them."[19] These emotional communities she grounds in recent neuro-scientific

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[17] McNamer does so in "Feeling," but also in her book *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*.

[18] Reddy defines emotives multiple times throughout his work, including *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*. This definition is taken from a slightly earlier article, "Against Constructionism: The Historical Ethnography of Emotions," 331.

[19] Rosenwein has defined emotional communities several times throughout her career. This definition is taken from her most recent book *Generations of Feeling*, 3.

studies of social behavior and practice—a critical move that grounds emotional practice in cognitive operation as well as social interaction.[20]

      While I value the work these and other such studies have done in considering the complexity of medieval emotional practices, I find myself agreeing with Fiona Somerset that more than the language of emotion (or emotive or emotional communities) feeling speaks most closely to how processes such as *pitee* were experienced in the Middle Ages. Drawing on Raymond Williams' conception of "structures of feeling," Somerset argues for the use of the language of feeling to describe medieval affective life and practice: "I chose the term 'feeling,' as opposed to 'emotion' or 'affect,' to reflect the pervasive close interactions between emotion and cognition, from sensation of externals through to action in response, that the modern semantic range of 'feeling' largely reflects."[21] Williams' "structures of feeling" explicitly engages in challenging the cognition/emotion dichotomy; as he writes, "We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical

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[20] See, for example, her section "What are emotions?" in the introduction to *Generations of Feeling* wherein Rosenwein considers recent neuroscientific conversations about how socialization affects emotions, pp. 1-3.
[21] Somerset's interest in feeling is precisely because of the way it more clearly gestures to the social work of emotion: "My term 'structure of feeling' draws on the work of Raymond Williams…Wiliams's description of structures of feeling is deeply sensitive to the relationships between as well as within social groups and to the ongoing process by which any human understanding of emotion develops in tension with lived experience, as well as with cultural norms articulated through both social practice and written texts. In these ways it seems well suited to the study of lollard writings—more so, finally (although I have learned much from them), than the work of historians of emotion who seek to analyse 'emotional communities,' 'emotional scripts' or 'emotives' deployed with 'emotional regimes' and 'emotional refuges.'" See *Feeling Like Saints*, 181-82.

consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity."[22] Indeed, what

an examination of *pitee* in Chaucer shows is the interaction between emotion and

cognition—the ways in which thought is felt and feeling is thought. *Pitee renneth soone in*

gentil herte speaks to ways feeling and thought together embed and nurture *pitee* in the

hearts of those who experience it. *Pitee* is itself a felt and thought anthropological

process.

 And this brings me to the body. In recent decades, critical theorists have worked

to think outside dichotomies between the mind and body and the interior and exterior.

Actor-network theory as explicated by Bruno Latour proposes understanding bodies as

incorporated in an intricate network of actants, human and non-human. Assemblage

theory, rooted in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, sees the world itself as a

sequence of assemblages in which things, persons, and powers are intertwined and

mutually formulating.[23] In medieval studies, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has proposed the

concept of the "open body," in which what constitutes a body is a conglomeration of

multiple human and non-human parts.[24] drawing on the phenomenological work of

Edmund Husserl, Elizabeth Fowler has proposed a reconsideration of medieval

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[22] Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," 132.

[23] See Latour's *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari did not articulate one single vision of assemblage theory and its assocation with the body, but scholars such as Manuel A. Vásquez in "On the Value of Genealogy, Materiality, and Networks: A Response," 664-5 and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 23-4 have argued for the importance of considering the body within the context of assemblage theory.

[24] Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*, 7. Bildhauer writes in reference to Cohen's *Medieval Identity Machines*.

experientiality (particularly sense perception) that more closely considers the ways

phenomena shaped and constituted human subjectivity.[25]

There is a great diversity among these theories, coming both from a range of

theoretical traditions and with distinct critical aims, but what is significant is their

interrelation. Theorists from Latour to Fowler speak to and argue for an interconnection

between the human person and the exterior world. The extent of this interconnection

varies greatly. Cohen's "open body" attempts to broaden the scope of human

subjectivity to that which exists beyond the human person (including social structures

and the phenomenal world), whereas Elizabeth Fowler's model attempts to consider

how those things beyond the human person (including social structures and

phenomena) constitute the nature of human corporeal and subjective experience. At

stake in these theories, however, is an understanding of the nature of what it is to be an

embodied person. It is to be *in* and *of* the world—in some sense for Cohen it is to *be* the

world. To be shaped and molded by others—other persons, things, and powers—and to

ourselves mold them. My task in the rest of this chapter will be to work to understand

how Chaucer himself understands what it means to be *in* and *of* the world as an

embodied person.

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[25] "The Proximity of the Virtual: A.C. Spearing's Experientiality (or, Roaming with Palamon and Arcite," in *Readings in Medieval Textuality*.

When I speak about the anthropological function of *pitee*, then, I am working to gesture to the ways *pitee* in Chaucer relies on a particular model of the human that defies atomisation. *Pitee*'s operation, as exemplified in *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte*, takes shape in the interrelation within the human person of the psychical and bodily, the affective and the cognitive, the interior and exterior. That *pitee* operates this way in Chaucer is itself the product of larger medieval understandings of the human person as fundamentally *relational*. Relational in the sense that the human person can be understood in terms of how it relates to others (i.e, that social element with which this chapter will conclude), but also relational in terms of how the human person relates to the cosmos itself. To be human is to be connected fundamentally to every other cosmological element. This interrelation and interconnection is reflected within the human person on the level of psychic life and bodily experience. It is not merely then that *pitee* happens to operate in the nexus of numerous human processes and parts, but that the interrelation of these processes and parts in *pitee* is itself connected to the interrelation and interconnection of the human person and the cosmos.

To understand more clearly how this interconnection works and the stakes of this relational anthropology, I want to look closely at *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte*. While critics have proposed various sources for *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* including Dante's *Commedia* ("Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende" [Love, which is

rapidly kindled in the gentle heart])[26] and Ovid's *Tristia* ("Quo quisque est maior, magis

est placabilis irae / Et facile motus mens generosa capit" [The greater a man is, the more

his wrath is appeasable; a noble mind is easily capable of kindly impulses]),[27] Chaucer's

proverb is more an amalgam of various sources than it is a response to a single source.

In addition to Dante and Ovid, close analogues appear in the *Roman de la Rose* in *Pitié*'s

and *Franchise*'s appeal to *Dangier* for mercy on behalf of the Lover,[28] and, in a poem

roughly contemporaneous with Chaucer's work on the *Canterbury Tales,* Richard

Maidstone in *Concordia* writes of Richard II: "Sed, super hec, pietas compassio veraque

cordis, / Dignificans animum, vos probat esse probum."[29] Indeed, *pitee renneth soone in*

gentil herte is a testament to Chaucer's understanding of the particular language and

intellectual conversations around *pitee*, the heart, and gentility circulating in European

literary and philosophical circles in the fourteenth century.

    The longevity of this language and Chaucer's contribution to it are attested by

the fact that, as research by B. J. and Helen Whiting indicates, *pitee renneth soone in gentil*

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[26] *Commedia* 5.100; from Dante's underworld encounter with Paolo and Francesca.

[27] Ovid, *Tristia*, 3.5.31-32.

[28] See lines 3247-3317.

[29] "Above all this, your piety and empathy, / Heartfelt, which show your mind, proclaim your probity." Richard Maidstone, *Concordia*, lines 405-6; translation by David R. Carlson. I do not mean to suggest that Chaucer read the poem—although the relationship between Maidstone and John of Gaunt suggests that Chaucer and Maidstone were at least somewhat connected; see Maidstone and Gaunt's relationship described by David R. Carlson in his introduction to the *TEAMS* edition of *Concordia* and by Elizabeth Salter in *English and International* (pages 62 and 68). Rather, as I discuss above, I want to draw attention to a shared cultural language around *pitee*, nobility, and the heart in late fourteenth-century England. See Lynn Staley's reading of Maidstone's *Concordia*, which she connects conceptually and linguistically to Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*, in *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II*, 188-195.

herte came into proverbial usage in English post-Chaucer.[30] It is the particular language

and metaphors that Chaucer uses that mark *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte*'s unique

contribution to the European literary and philosophical tradition. In one succinct line,

Chaucer both acknowledges a wide-ranging set of medieval and classical literary and

philosophical discourses and lays out his own account of *pitee*. But what is particularly

unique or compelling about this language? What is the significance of *renneth* and of this

running being soon? of its locus within the *gentil herte*?

The compelling nature of this Chaucerian proverb becomes clear if we look at its

individual, formal and linguistic parts. Consider *renneth*. The polysemic nature of the

verb *rennen* speaks to *pitee*'s highly mobile and fluid nature. A study of five of the 27

definitions of *rennen* in the *MED* shows that the action of *rennen* is one of rapid

movement—a movement that can rush, flow, draw, pierce:[31]

> 1a. (a) Of humans: to run, move quickly on foot; also of angels, centaurs, devils,
> monopodes, etc.; ~ and (other) rennen, go on foot and (or) ride; (b) comen ~,
> comen (gon) renninge, to come (go) running; ben runnen, to have run or gone; (c)
> used *fig.* or in *fig.* context, esp. of humans; of the mind, thought: shift its
> direction, direct attention (to sth.);gon renninge; also, *ppl.* renninge as adj.:
> wandering; (d) to run in contest or sport, race on foot; also *fig.*; ?also, play; ~ at
> the bal, play hockey; (e) in proverbs and prov. phrases

> 9.(a) Of a river, stream, brook, etc.: to flow along a course or channel, take its
> course; also *fig.*; ~ on baften, flow against the stream; ~ oute (outright), issue; ~ in
> (of, with), flow with (blood, etc.); *ppl.* renninge, flowing, running; (b) of large
> bodies of water, the tide: to flow, stream; also, extend; ~ in turn, part; ~ over,

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[30] *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly before 1500,* 243.
[31] The following definitions are taken from *rennen* v.1 in the *MED*.

overflow (banks); (c) of waves: to roll; (d) of the Deluge, a torrent: to flow; rush; ~ over, inundate (the world). wound: to bleed; (d) of a sore, an infected place: to discharge fluid, suppurate; of the eyes: discharge rheum; (e) of the body: to void fluids; of the eyes: produce tears, weep; (f) *surg.* to produce a discharge.

12a. (a) To proceed in time, continue, carry on, be operative; proceed in a sequence or in an activity; of one's destiny: draw toward a crisis; ~ amis, act improperly or sinfully; ~ arrere, fail; ~ bi cours, of an aposteme: proceed in its course of development; ~ bi five, be composed or arranged to contain five corresponding elements; ~ for chaunce, operate for (someone's) good fortune [for pun cp. 6.(a)]; ~ upon a whele, go on continuously in an activity; *ppl.* renninge, pertaining [quot.: c1400(?a1387)]; (b) to occur; of a plea: be brought; renninge bi yer, recurring every year; ~ to, occur, be encountered; (c) to exist; (d) to move or change in time; ~ in (on, in-to), move into (a condition), advance in (age);~ of, proceed from (sb.), descend from; *ppl.* renninge as adj.: changeable; *ppl.* runnen, advanced (in age); of age five yeres runnen, five years old.

18. (a) Of a thought, an impression, an emotion: to be present (in one's mind); ~ in thought (minde, remembraunce); (b) in impers. constructions; (c) ~ in (to) herte, of pity, Christian faith: to be present or inspired in (one's) heart.

25. (a) To pierce (sb.); ~ in, ?penetrate (armor); ~ thurgh, run (sb.) through; also, pierce through (someone's heart); (b) to skewer (fruit, etc. on a spit); also, impale (oneself on a sword); (c) to hit (a ball); propel (a projectile).

The *MED* connects *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* to meaning 18: to be present or inspired in one's heart. These other related definitions, however, give greater dimension to the nature of that presence and inspiration. Read figuratively, *renneth* here can speak to a motion of running *pitee*, of *pitee* flowing through the body, of it piercing the heart of the pitier. If we consider definition 12a., we can see that *rennen* is closely associated with sequential movement, of the continual advancement of time. That *pitee renneth*, then, suggests a sequential movement in which *pitee* flows, upswelling rapidly (perhaps even violently) in the heart of the pitier. And *renneth* in many ways suggests a swift, perhaps

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even uncontrolled or uncontrollable movement. Notice how often the meanings of

rennen slide into excess. Waters overflow in definition 9; time draws onward to a crisis in

12. That *rennen* also suggests a sequential movement, however, is important. For in this,

we can begin to see the importance of order, of right-ordered thought and feeling,

within the experience of *pitee*.

As much is evident in Chaucer's use of this proverb in the *Knight's Tale*, wherein

Chaucer is at pains to detail the careful, sequential running of *pitee* in Duke Theseus'

heart. Chaucer writes of *pitee renneth soon in gentil herte* in the wake of familial conflict.

Against the laws of Theseus the conquering lord of Thebes, the cousins Palamon and

Arcite engage in brutal battle with each other in a contest that is only interrupted by

Theseus himself. Having halted the battle, Theseus, on listening to their explanations for

their combat, reminds the cousins that they are doomed to death by their own admission

and according to his laws that govern Thebes (1742-47).

Hearing this, the women of the Athenian court appeal to the mercy of Theseus,

seeking from him a justice tempered with mercy:

> And on hir bare knees adoun they falle
> And wolde have kist his feet ther as he stood;
> Til at the laste aslaked was his mood,
> For pitee renneth soone in gentil herte.
> And though he first for ire quook and sterte,
> He hath considered shortly, in a clause,
> The trespas of hem bothe, and eek the cause,
> And although that his ire hir gilt accused,
> Yet in his resoun he hem bothe excused,
> As thus: he thoghte wel that every man

>Wol helpe hymself in love, if that ke kan,
>And eek delivere hymself out of prisoun.
>And eek his herte hadd compassioun
>Of wommen, for they wepen evere in oon....
>(1758-1771)

They weep and plead with him, falling on their knees before him to beg mercy, "[t]il at the laste" Theseus' "mood" was calmed. In "mood" we begin to see the complicated nature of Chaucer's anthropology. Meaning potentially "the seat of emotions, feelings," "anger, wrath...battle fury," or even "wish, desire; will," *mood* attests to ways in which processes of feeling and volition are intertwined.[32] Indeed, as the passage goes on to describe, the movement of *pitee* is a motion of the body, feelings, and reason. *Pitee* runs into Theseus' heart, a motion that alters him bodily and emotionally. He "quook and sterte" with ire. He then considers, quickly and briefly, but also deeply and carefully, Palamon's explanation, the appeals of the women, and his own ire. His ire speaks to the cousins' guilt; his *resoun* excuses them. Embodying a process of feeling as thought, thought as felt; in this passage, we see the movement of *pitee* running in Theseus' heart. It is a running, swift and flowing, circulating through his body, easing his quakes and starts until "his ire is thus agoon" (1782). This running draws together in a dialogic process of careful contemplation his emotions and his reason until he reaches a point of heartfelt compassion. And while this movement is incredibly complex—there is not a single part of Theseus not involved in the feeling of *pitee*—it is also carefully ordered. He

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[32] *MED*, meaning 2.a., 7.a., 7.b., and 5.a.

feels ire, witnesses the appeals of the women, is moved by *pitee*, reasons through what he hears, and responds with a compassionate heart.

Importantly, his initial response of ire to the sight of Palamon and Arcite's battle is not dismissed. Indeed, his ire is entirely just. It recognizes the guilt of the cousins, and it has a vital role in the process of responding to the men and women before him with both mercy and justice. In turn, it is his *resoun* that draws attention to the validity behind Palamon and Arcite's battle, and it is *pitee* that gives him the time to "consid[er] shortly" what a merciful and just response would be to what he has witnessed. A merciful and just response will prove not only to arise out of a careful and ordered response of *pitee*, but will, in and of itself, attempt to restore social order. Theseus' judgment will thus work to uphold the laws of Thebes, even as it acknowledges the validity of Palamon and Arcite's passions and the pitiable state of the Athenian women.

While I will have more to say on *pitee* and social order later in this chapter, that the movement of *pitee* is one of swift but sequential motion matters when we consider the function of *soone* as a modifier of *renneth*. That *pitee* not only *renneth*, but *renneth soone* amplifies the swiftness of the movement of *pitee*. *Pitee* here is a rapid, immediate response to the pitiable. Theseus witnesses the Athenian women's pitiable begging and

is immediately affected. In fact, Theseus is *affected* in affects truest etymological sense.[33] His *mood* is influenced by another; he is moved by someone else.

This influence takes the shape of sensorial perception. The passage describing the pleading of the Athenian women is sensorially rich. The women "wepe;" they see the "blody woundes wyde and soore" of Palamon and Arcite and "alle crieden, bothe lasse and moore" (1749, 1755-56). They cry aloud for mercy, and, in a visually compelling movement, these royal women, used to abasing themselves before no one, fall to "hir bare knees" and are to the very point of kissing the feet of Theseus (1758-59). It is these aural, visual, and tactile details that Theseus reads and interprets as signs of suffering. These drive *pitee*'s running. What we see, then, is that *pitee* is itself contingent on a sensorial hermeneutic, one that is able to quickly interpret suffering as suffering. Theseus responds with *pitee* because he recognizes and acknowledges the weeping, pleading, kneeling women so close to him as enduring pain.

Closely aligned with the *Knight's Tale*, the *Squire's Tale* elaborates on the source of this hermeneutic capacity. In a brief scene shortly before the tale's aborted conclusion,

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[33] From the *OED* "affect, v. 2": "Etymology: Middle French, French *affecter* to have a physical or moral effect on (15th cent.; compare Anglo-Norman *affeeter* to affect, change (late 13th cent.)), to apply or assign (something) for a particular use (1551) and its etymon classical Latin *affect-*, past participial stem of *afficere* to produce a physical effect on, to influence, to cause (a person) to be endowed with or to enjoy favour with, to cause (a person) to be involved in (disgrace, etc.), to visit with (death, torture, punishment, etc.), to produce a harmful effect on, to cause to suffer, to cause harm to, to cause (a person) to be affected by (an emotion, etc.), to stir, to move strongly, to cause (an activity, etc.) to approach completion, to make substantial progress with, in post-classical Latin also to strive after (12th and 13th centuries in British sources), to burden or assail with (13th cent. in British sources), (in passive) to be disposed in some way towards (13th cent. in a British source), to be well disposed, devoted (from 14th cent. in British sources), to be minded to (15th cent. in a British source) < *af-* , variant of *ad-* (see af- *prefix*) + *facere* to do, make..."

the princess Canacee is "pleyyng in hir walk" when she hears a "pituos voys" begin to

cry so loudly "That all the wode resouned of hire cry" (410, 412-13). Seeking to

understand why the falcon "be in this furial pyne of helle" (448), Canacee speaks to her

and offers aid, claiming, "If that I verraily the cause knewe / Of youre disese, if it lay in

my myghte, / I wolde amenden it er that it were nyght..." (466-468). Overcome, the

falcon swoons and, nestled in Canacee's lap, agrees to tell her tale. She explains that she

will do so prompted by Canacee's nature:

> That pitee renneth soone in gentil herte,
> Feelynge his similitude in peynes smerte,
> Is preved alday, as men may it see,
> As wel by werk as by auctoritee;
> For gentil herte kitheth gentillesse.
> I se wel that ye han of my distresse
> Compassion, my faire Canacee,
> Of verray wommanly benignytee
> That Nature in youre principles hath set.
> (472-487)

In her works of compassionate response, Canacee has shown herself to have a *gentil herte*

one rapidly moved to *pitee*. Just as the *werk*[s] (experiences) of others and the testimony

of *auctoritee*[s] prove that *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte*, Canacee in her work of

compassion proves her own *gentilesse*. "[G]entil herte kitheth gentillesse;" Canacee's *pitee*

manifests in her feeling and responding to the suffering of the falcon with a desire to

amend that pain, as well as in her feeling an echoing counterpart (a *similitude*) of the

falcon's own pain. Further, it makes known her *gentil herte*. These actions in *pitee* are, in

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turn, identified by the falcon as the hallmarks of *gentilesse*. What Canacee shows is *pitee,* and what her *pitee* reveals is her *gentil herte*.

Canacee's *pitee*, moreover, relies on a hermeneutic capacity for reading suffering as suffering. Indeed, "[f]eelynge his similitude in peynes smerte" speaks to Canacee's ability to recognize the suffering of the falcon and feel some counterpart "peynes smerte" to the falcon's suffering. Canacee thus must be able to recognize the suffering of the falcon well enough to see that it is suffering and to experience a corresponding pain.

And it is here that we see the importance of *gentil.* The falcon locates Canacee's capacity to read suffering in this way within her *gentil herte* and "verray wommanly benignytee." Canacee's compassion, the falcon says, manifests out of Canancee's true and *wommanly* "benignytee," her good will and kindly feeling. This *benignytee* has been set in Canacee's principles by Nature. This conversation about the inset nature of Canacee's *benignytee* makes explicit an implication within the proverb *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte*; the capacity to respond quickly in *pitee* is innate within the *gentil*.

This is not to say, however, that because Nature set "verray wommanly benignytee" in Canacee's principles or that because *gentil* ancestry implies an innate *gentilesse* that *benignytee* or *gentilesse* are entirely inherited traits. Indeed, the falcon's speech in the *Squire's Tale* speaks to the rich set of medieval debates around how natural inheritance and human agency contribute to the development of both positive and negative human traits. These debates work to articulate the nature of the role of human

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agency and natural inheritance in the development of virtues and vices. In the process, those participating in these debates often attest to the role of lineage in such processes as virtue formation, even as they argue for the importance of human agency in the acquisition of such virtues.

In the late thirteenth century, in Reason's discourse on Fortune in Jean de Meun's continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*, the intricacies of this balancing act are well represented. Reason says, "Et cil qui d'autrui gentillece, / Sans sa valor et sans proece, / En vuet porter los et renon, / Est-il gentil? ge dis que non." [And is he who wants to carry off the praise and renown of another person's nobility, when he has neither the worth nor the prowess of the other, is he noble? I say no.][34] Speaking to the limitations of inherited nobility, Reason's speech articulates a view that neither identifying oneself as noble nor pointing to one's noble ancestors makes a person *gentil*. This is not a meritocratic speech, however, but something much more complex. Shortly after uttering these words, Reason goes on to add:

> Certes, qui son engin adrece
> A bien la vérité comprendre,
> Il n'i puet autre chose entendre
> Qui bonne soit en gentillece,
> Fors qu'il semble que la proece
> De lor parens doivent ensivre;
> Sous itels fais doivent-il vivre
> Qui gentis hons vuet resembler,

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[34] *Roman de la Rose*, lines 18755-8. This and subsequent translations by Charles Dahlberg, *Romaunt of the Rose*.

> S'il ne vuet gentillece embler,
> Et sans deserte los avoir
>
> Certainly, if one puts his wits to a good understanding of truth, he who may have the quality of nobility can understand nothing other than that people should follow their parents' prowess. He who wants to be like a noble man must always live under this burden if he does not want to steal his nobility and have praise without deserving it.[35]

As Maurice Keen's study of this passage draws to the fore, Reason's view of the relationship between inherited nobility and that acquired through individual agency is multifaceted.[36] For the person who would be *gentil* must seek to emulate, i.e., he must choose to pursue "gentillece." This choosing, however, takes shape within the context of the individual's possession of a noble lineage and is fostered by the noble examples of ancestors. Lineage does not determine "gentillece" here; rather, lineage provides a set of structures and examples that may—or may not—result in virtue acquisition.

A quarter of a century later, Dante in the *Convivio* expresses a related but distinct view: ""Sì che non dica quelli de li Uberti di Fiorenza, né quelli de li Visconti da Melano: 'Perch'io sono di cotale schiatta, io sono nobile'; ché 'l divino seme non cade in ischiatta, cioè in istirpe, ma cade ne le singulari persone, e, sì come di sotto si proverà, la stirpe non fa le singulari persone nobili, ma le singulari persone fanno nobile la stirpe.'"[37]

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[35] Ibid., 18792-99.

[36] Maurice Keen, *Chivalry*, 159-161.

[37] "...[T]herefore let not any scion of the Uberti of Florence or of the Visconti of Milan say, 'I am noble'; for the divine seed does not fall upon a race, that is a stock: for as will be proved, the stock does not make the several individuals noble, but the individuals ennoble the stock." Dante, *Convivio*, trattato IV, c. xx; translation my own.

Dante, like Jean de Meun's Reason, speaks to the centrality of individual human agency

within nobility. Indeed, Dante's articulation of the relationship between inheritance and

agency attests to the importance of individual nobility in the *construction* of nobility. The

nobility are made noble through the ennobling works of individuals working to make

the stock itself "noble". As with Jean de Meun, however, this is not a meritocratic model

of nobility. Dante articulates the slow, generational acquisition of nobility. Nobility is

inherited, not via an innate, non-agential inheritance, but through the gradual build-up

of individual, noble agent's actions over time.

Chaucer's own writings on inheritance and agency, particularly his writing on

nobility and *gentilisse,* speak to the influence authors like Jean de Meun and Dante had

on his thinking. In texts such as the short poem, *Gentilesse*, Chaucer draws on the

language and metaphors of de Meun and Dante to explore the role of noble inheritance

in human nature and action. In "Gentilesse," Chaucer utilizes the language and imagery

of "stok" to trace the roots and origins of virtue: "The firste stok, fader of gentilesse — /

What man that desireth gentil for to be / Must folowe his trace, and alle his wittes dresse

/ Vertu to love and vyces for to flee" (1-4). Chaucer speaks to the importance of a

particular human action in acquiring virtue: a person who would be virtuous must

"folowe [the firste stock's] trace, and alle his wittes dresse." In other words, those

desiring to be *gentil* must walk in the first stock's footsteps; they must work to follow his

example, embodying his habits and ways of life.[38]

As Chaucer goes on, he lays out the fruits of "[t]his firste stok." "This firste stok

was," he writes, "ful of rightwisnesse, / Trewe of his word, sobre, pitous, and free, /

Clene of his gost, and loved besinesse..." (8-10). And Chaucer makes clear that "but his

heir love vertu as dide he / He is noght gentil, thogh he riche seme" (12-13). Chaucer

locates the trappings of *gentilesse* not within *riche* attire, but in noble, virtuous habits.

Indeed, as the final stanza suggests, certain "richesse[s]" may be inherited (i.e., the riches

of material wealth), but no one may inherit or "[b]equethe" the riches of "vertuous

noblesse" (17).

In his reading of *Gentilesse*, Bruce Holsinger notes, ""Gentilesse" thus articulates

in a more complex way the sentiments behind a widely cited egalitarian proverb from

this period—'Whanne Adam dalfe and Eve span, / Who was Þanne a gentil man?'—that

was featured in the Blackheath sermon of John Ball, one of the leaders of the Rising of

1381."[39] In his reading of the final stanza, Holsinger examines how the "coupleting

conventions of rhyme royal" in the poem work to suggest that the "outward

accouterments of a blood-based nobility" are the "tokens of an outward nobility that

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[38] V.J. Scattergood has argued that "stok" could be a reference to a tree trunk used by the royal house; see *The Shorter Poems*, 486. Howard Schless argues that Chaucer means the first race of nobles; see "Chaucer and Dante," in *Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature*, 150-3. Aage Brusendorff argues that Chaucer means Adam; see *The Chaucer Tradition*, 254-8. I take Chaucer to be in line with Dante here, meaning that it is unlikely that Chaucer means either the first race of nobles or Adam.
[39] Bruce Holsinger, "Lyrics and Short Poems," 200.

may or may not (in Chaucer's day, we would suspect, mostly not) correlate to an inner

gentilesse."[40] In reading "Gentilesse" alongside "Whanne Adam dalfe and Eve span, /

Who was Þanne a gentil man?," Holsinger speaks to the egalitarian strain present within

Chaucer's poem. Chaucer attests to the disconnect between outer trappings of noble

birth and inward *gentilesse*.

With his gesture to the ways Chaucer's "Gentilesse" is "more complex" than

"Whan Adam delved... ," however, Holsinger also alludes to, but does not elaborate, the

challenging politics of the poem. As G.A. Rudd notes, "[The poem] is more a reminder

that the gentry should live up to their title, than a call for meritocracy."[41] Rudd situates

the poem within the context of Chaucer's likely audience—those for "whom such social

standing [a *gentil* one] was potentially within reach."[42] Chaucer is not reminding the

impoverished that outer trappings do not make *gentilesse*; rather, he reminds those like

himself who could acquire them about the limitations of these trappings. In this

reminder, Chaucer grounds the acquisition of *gentilesse* in the action of loving. He who

desires to be *gentil*, must "love vertu" as much as his ancestor, "[t]he firste stok," had (1,

12). Chaucer thus grounds *gentilesse* in the pursuit of love and the fleeing of vice: "[w]hat

man that desireth gentil for to be / Must folowe his trace, and alle his wittes dresse /

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[40] Ibid., 200.
[41] Rudd indeed goes on to say that the poem is "a long way from the egalitarian, not to say revolutionary cry of John Ball and the peasants of 1381, who used the ditty, "Whan Adam delf and Even span / Who was thanne the gentleman?" G. A. Rudd, "Gentilesse" in *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 36.
[42] Ibid.

Vertu to love and vyces to flee" (1-3). He grounds *gentilesse* in personal agency. Striking about that choice, however, is how deeply embedded it is in inheritance. The choice of loving virtue and fleeing vice is a choice of returning back, of embodying the life and practices of the first stock. It is an act of learning about the life and example of that stock. *Gentilesse* is the legacy left by *gentil* ancestors from which the would-be *gentil* can choose to follow or deviate.

Re-reading again the falcon's words to Canacee in the *Squire's Tale* with "Gentilesse" in mind, we can see what is praiseworthy in Canacee's piteous *gentilesse*. It is not that she has some Nature-endowed "verray wommanly benignytee" that merits praise; rather, her acts of gentility and her acts of pity attest to her desire for *gentilesse* and her love of virtue. Her *compassion* and her *pitee* are praiseworthy because they are fitting to her *gentil herte*. Indeed, this is a central element of Chaucer's proverb. *Pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* speaks to a fitting match between feeling and acting in *pitee* and a quality, *gentilesse*, that is naturally given, but not necessarily innately followed.

It is precisely this quality of the Chaucerian line that makes Chaucer's use of it in the *Merchant's Tale* so fascinating. Drawing on and heavily ironizing the *fin'amor* tropes surrounding the lovesick lover seeking mercy from the distant beloved, Chaucer details a set of exchanges between the "faire fresshe" May (743), her elderly husband Januarie, and Damyan, a squire in Januarie's court who is overcome with lovesickness for May. In two bedside encounters, May attends to both men. In the case of the first, she listens to

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Damyan's pleas for her mercy (1942); in the second, she is the focus of Januarie's

plesaunce (1959). The sexual politics at play in these scenes have been well-attested by

scholars.[43] We see May's lack of power in the face of Januarie's sexual desires. While

lying in bed together Januarie, awakened by coughs, demands she undress and allow

him "som plesaunce"—a plesaunce which may or may not be "paradys or helle" for

May (1959, 1964).

This scene of marital "plesaunce" makes May's choice to "love [Damyan] best of

any creature" (1984) all too sympathetic. As Damyan makes clear, May has the power of

life and death over him. If she discloses his love for her to Januarie that means his death

(1942-43), and, moreover, it is only her love that could cure his lovesickness (1934-1941).

It is with these sexual dynamics at play that Chaucer introduces *pitee*. After her

encounters with both Damyan and Januarie, Chaucer describes how perhaps by some

chance of "destynee," "aventure," or "constellacion" (1967, 1969) May came to love

Damyan:

> But sooth is this, how that this fresshe May
> Hath take swich impression that day
> Of pitee of this sike Damyan
> That from hire herte she ne dryve kan
> The remembrance for to doon hym ese.
> 'Certeyn,' thoghte she, 'whom that this thyng displese
> I rekke noght, for heere I hym assure
> To love hym best of any creature,
> Though he namoore hadde than his sherte.'

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[43] See, for example, David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination*, 151-59.

> Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!
> Heere may ye se how excellent franchise
> In wommen is, whan they hem narwe avyse."
> (1977-1988)

It is the *pitee* of a *gentil herte* and the "excellent franchise / In wommen" that has led May

to consider carefully "narwe avyse" and decided to "love hym best of any creature."

Readers of the *Roman de la Rose* would be unsurprised that it is *pitee* and *franchise* who

have opened May's heart to love for Damyan. In the *Roman*, *Franchise* and *Pitié* had

worked tirelessly together in aid of the Lover's pursuit of the Rose.[44] Again, as in the

Squire's Tale, Chaucer suggests that there is something innate in women's nature that

makes them inclined to "excellent franchise"—at least when they "hem narwe avyse."

And again, it is May's *gentil herte* that is seen as the spur to her piteous actions.

As scholars such as J.A. Burrow and John Zedolik have rightly noted, however,

May's *pitee*, her *franchise*, and her *gentil herte* are overlaid with irony.[45] The good actions

of *pitee* and generosity marked by the Chaucerian proverb *pitee renneth soone in gentil*

herte are acts of adultery; her love has already been pledged to Januarie. Moreover, by

locating May's moment of loving decision directly following her encounters first with

the lovesick, pitiful Damyan and then the crude, lusty Januarie, we are reminded of the

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[44] 3247-3317.

[45] J.A. Burrow, "Irony in the Merchant's Tale," 49-59. Burrow's article considers not only the function of irony in *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte*, but also the work of literary allusions and the larger function of irony in the tale. John Zedolik, "'The Gardyn is Encolsed Al Aboute': The Inversion of Exclusivity in the *Merchant's Tale*, 490-503; Zedolik argues that the tale uses images of enclosure to ironize Januarie's mastery of May and emphasize the comedic inversion of their relationship.

harsh realities of May's role as sexual object in her household. Hers may be a *gentil herte*, but this is no distant, unsullied beloved. To use an image from the *Roman de la Rose*, May is no untouched rose in a tower,[46] but she is a woman whose sexual experiences at the hands of her cruel and crude husband Chaucer has been at pains to detail.

The irony of this passage works precisely because Chaucer draws on the corruptions of *pitee* in the French *fin'amor* tradition. *Pitee* might be aligned with the *gentil herte*; it might be the product of an innate womanly generosity. It might even speak to a choice to love and act in mercy toward the suffering of the dying Damyan. Chaucer, however, reveals the power dynamics and sexual exchanges inherent within the work of *gentil pitee* in *fin'amor*. Chaucer here describes *pitee* as a trait and action worthy of praise. And it is worthy of praise precisely because *pitee* is the fitting and corresponding action to the *gentil herte*. In this scene, however, Chaucer makes very clear what is being praised—the sexual openness of a young woman vulnerable to the sexual abuses of her much older and more powerful husband.

What these scenes in the *Squire's Tale* and the *Merchant's Tale* draw to the fore is the importance of *gentil* in *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte*. *Gentil* makes questions of inheritance and agency of central importance to the question of the movement and

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[46] The rose itself, however, in Jean de Meun's continuation of the *Roman*, will not go untouched; see lines 22501-22608 of the *Roman de la Rose*.

development of *pitee*. To what extent does *gentil* describe a Nature-endowed trait? To what extent does it describe a desire for and pursuit of *pitee*?

The complexity of Chaucer's explorations of these questions continue to be of real and immediate relevance as we turn to the heart—the bodily locus of the activity of *pitee*. In the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, the God of Love asks Chaucer if he can tell if the woman who has given to Chaucer "so lytel penaunce...be wif or mayde / Or queen, or countesse, or of what degre" (G. 487-89). Before Chaucer can respond, however, the God of Love begins to answer his own question: "But pite renneth sone in gentil herte; / That mayst thow sen; she kytheth what she is" (G. 491-92). The woman, who Chaucer and his readers will soon learn is the Ovidian figure Alceste, has not given her name. The God of Love, however, indicates that her granting of light penance has revealed something important about her identity. In doing so, she has, like Canacee in the *Squire's Tale*, "kytheth what she is." Her actions in *pitee* have revealed what she is: a woman of *gentil herte*. Subsequently, although Chaucer has not been able to discern her particular identity, he does attest to the fact that he can "se well she is good" (G. 494). It is not just that her actions are good, but that "she is good." Her actions speak to and make visible her interior goodness. Alceste does not just have the trappings of *gentilesse*, but a heart of *gentilesse*.

Alceste is *gentil* in a very concrete and bodily way. Her heart is literally *gentil*; as wife of Admetus she is queen of Pherae, and, as daughter of King Pelias of Iolcus, she is

descended of *gentil* stok. Her piteous, *gentil* actions attest to that inherited gentility. We might see echoes here of Dante: "…for the divine seed does not fall upon a race, that is a stock: for as will be proved, the stock does not make the several individuals noble, but the individuals ennoble the stock."[47] Her *pitee* and *gentil* actions continue the practices and traditions of ennobling her stock.

More than this, Chaucer's *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* asks us to think through the nature of the relationship between various anthropological processes: internal and external. Eric Jager's study of the medieval imagery around the "book of the heart" is a salient reminder that when medieval persons wrote and spoke of the actions of the heart, such as impressing images and binding them in the heart, these words had allegorical and literal significance.[48] In much the same way, when Chaucer writes of *pitee*'s running in the *gentil herte*, he describes on a conceptual level both the nature of the action of *pitee* within a person, as well as an actual bodily reaction. *Pitee* moves; it runs in the heart. We can picture it flowing andcirculating through the chambers of the heart, moving from the heart to the rest of the body.

In fact, Chaucer details it as a part of a circulatory flow from the external, sensorial world through the body and back out into the world. In the *Legend of Good*

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[47] Dante, *Convivio*, trattato IV, c. xx.
[48] See *The Book of the Heart*, especially Jager's discussion in the introduction of the various metaphors and allegories for the heart's functions. As Jager's text suggests metaphorical images of the heart and its function speak both to a complex theoretical imagining of that function as well as a description of the heart's concrete function.

Women, we can see the latter part of this process. Alceste has pitied Chaucer, and this *pitee* has been made visible: she has given him little penance, and Chaucer has been able to see her goodness made manifest. Her *pitee* thus affects Chaucer's condition and makes visible—through good action—her *gentil herte*. The start of *pitee* is given its fullest articulation in the *Knight's Tale*. Although Theseus "first for ire quook and sterte," he begins to consider all he has learned about the causes and state of the "trespas" of Palamon and Arcite, and he thinks on the weeping of the women and "eek his herte had compassioun." In thinking about what he has learned and perceived, Theseus' ire is done away with and "pitee renneth soone in gentil herte" (1782, 1761). He thus looks up "with eyen lighte" and speaks words of mercy (1783).

I have already gestured to the importance of sensorial perception in the experience of *pitee*. *Pitee* arises out of a human person's interaction with the external world. *Pitee* further relies on a sensorial, hermeneutic capacity for reading and interpreting what the senses say; it is the outcome of the sensorial perception of the suffering of another. The heart is the locus of this hermeneutic work. It is at the center of a circulating movement in which multiple anthropological processes are thought, felt, and made manifest.

To understand the anthropological, social, and ethical consequences of the heart as the center of *pitee*, I want to conclude this part of my chapter by returning to contemporary critical discourses on the body. Caroline Walker Bynum in *Christian*

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Materiality has argued that the medieval body should be studied as a subset of

materiality. Bynum conceptualizes studies of the medieval body as an aspect of the

study of what she calls medieval "Christian materiality." In "Christian materiality,"

Bynum suggests, matter is defined as *living*:

> I...resituat[e] understanding of body (*corpus*) where medieval theorists
> themselves located such understandings—in conceptions of matter
> (*materia*)...[They] understood "body" to mean "changeable thing:" gem, tree, log,
> or cadaver, as well as living human being. Understood in medieval terms, to
> explore "the body" was to explore stars and statues, blood and resin, as well as
> pain, perception, and survival.[49]

Bynum's work moves counter to anthropologies and cosmologies that see a distinction

between living and non-living, body and object. Here, Bynum suggests, the body (its

perceptions and feelings), the cosmos, and all that populates it from the stars to gems,

are all founded in *materia*. Bynum argues that medieval scholars considered matter itself

to be changeable: "[T]he natural philosophers of the Middle Ages understood matter as

the locus of generation and corruption....[T]he basic way of describing matter...was to

see it as organic, fertile, and in some sense alive."[50]

Bynum's work in *Christian Materiality* is, in no small measure, a response to

contemporary post-human conceptions of the body and materiality—particularly those

that, in attempting to understand the relation between the human and the non-human,

engage in a human colonization of the non-human world. Bynum's perception of

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[49] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 32. See too her discussion on this topic on pages 261-65.
[50] Ibid., 30.

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Christian materiality, for example, seems to me to serve as a rich response to questions

such as the following posed by Jeffery Jerome Cohen in *Medieval Identity Machines*:

"What if corporeality and subjectivity—themselves inseparable—potentially included

both the social structures (kinship, nation, religion, race) and the phenomenal world

(objects, gadgets, prostheses, animate and inanimate bodies of many kinds) across which

human identity is spread?"[51] Rather than subsuming all of the world under the umbrella

of human corporeality and subjectivity, by redirecting the conversation to *materia*,

Bynum preserves the unique *materia* of the non-human even while gesturing to the

intimate interconnection of human and non-human.

Rich as Bynum's work on *corpora* and *materia* is, however, the challenge upon

reading *Christian Materiality* is to understand the nature of the interconnection between

"the body" and what would be, conventionally, labeled as non-body: stars, statues,

blood, resin, pain, perception, and survival. To put the matter differently, it is to ask

what anthropology, but also what cosmology is at play in medieval texts that engaged in

thinking about the body as *materia*.

Consider a text such as Nemesius' *Premnon Physicon*. The *Premnon Physicon*,

published after 390 A.D., was widely circulated in the Middle Ages as *De Natura*

Hominis. Attributed to Gregory of Nyssa, its influence can be seen in such thinkers such

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[51] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 12.

as Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas.[52] The text begins with a description of the

human person as microcosm. After detailing his conception of the human as composed

of intellectual soul joined to a body of the four elements—the basic units of matter—

Nemesius then begins to consider how humanity is connected to and yet distinct from

all other of God creatures: "Quis igitur digne miretur nobilitatem huius animalis

colligantis in se ipso mortalia immortalibus, et rationabilia coniungentis irrationabilibus,

ferentis in sua natura omnis creaturae imaginem?"[53] Shared with plants, each person is

able to grow and generate; like animals, each has voluntary motion, passions, sensation.

Connecting humanity to such incorporeal, intellectual beings as angels is the human

person's reason and the ability to pursue virtue. These interconnections Nemesius

describes as a joining [*colligantis*] and connecting [*coniungentis*] within this living

creature [*huius animalis*] man.

Of essential importance to Nemesius, however, is the ways this model of person

as microcosm attests to the import of the right-order of the human person. Indeed, this is

the particular struggle of humanity. For God in his mercy takes into account the burden

imposed on the rational soul by a body that is made of elements and possessed by the

irrational desires of beasts. It is for this reason that each person should endeavor to a

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[52] For an account of Nemesius legacy in scholastic theology, particularly in medieval psychological theory, see E. Ruth Harvey, *The Inward Wits*, 2-3 and 63 fn. 4.

[53] "These things considered, who is able to commend sufficiently the nobility of this *living-creature*? Behold, he bindeth together in *himself* things *mortall* and *immortall*; and knitteth up in *One*, things *reasonable* and *unreasonable*. In his owne nature, hee beareth the *image* of all *creatures*, and from thence is rightly called *A little world*." Nemesius, *Premnon Physicon*, I. 9, p.22; translated by George Wither, *On the Nature of Man*, 2.

right rule over himself and of those (such as plants and animals) lower in the order of creation: "Now then, if our part which is reasonable doth beare rule over our unreasonable-parts, which are within us; seemeth it not much more probable, that our reasonable-part should have dominion over such unreasonable-things as are without us? and that such things were ordained to serve our necessities? especially seeing it is according to the law of Nature that the unreasonable shold be subject to the reasonable, as hath been declared by those things which are in our selves?"[54]

Drawing on Aristotelian and Galenic models of the human, Nemesius speaks to and locates the movement of the human body and person within the larger movement of the divinely ordered cosmos. This movement and ordering he foregrounds on what is essential and relational between human persons and the cosmos. Essential in that they share something of their essences, a material grounding; relational in that Nemesius describes the world based on how each of its different parts relate to one another and to the divine.

I have spent time unpacking Nemesius' picture of the human not only because of the compelling case E. Ruth Harvey makes for its centrality to medieval psychological theory,[55] but because it lays bare the stakes of many medieval anthropologies and cosmologies. Medieval anthropologies, such as those of Aquinas, Dante, and Chaucer

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[54] Withers, *On the Nature of Man*, 63-64. From *Premnon Physicon*, I.6.
[55] E. Ruth Harvey, *The Inward Wits*, 2-3.

with which I will conclude the first part of this chapter, are working to articulate the

relationship between the human person and the cosmos. The interest in order, both

within the human psyche and within the larger world, is an interest in detailing how

humanity relates itself to other persons, as well as to plants, animals, and God. And it is

not just an interest in order and relation, but, within the medieval world-view, these

discussions about order and relation are always teleologically oriented toward *right-*

order. This means that conversations about order are fundamentally bound up with

questions of politics (right-ordered relations towards other persons), ethics (right-

ordered behavior), and theology (right-ordered relation towards the divine).

This has important consequences for the ways discourses on the motion and

function of the heart develop in medieval philosophy and literature. Conversations

about the motions of the heart are (almost always) also conversations about the right-

order and relation of human politics, ethics, and theology.[56] Before returning to Chaucer,

I want to turn to two brief examples, works by Aquinas and Dante, to show the shape

these conversations took and to underscore what was at stake for medieval thinkers

when they wrote about the heart.

Throughout his theology, Thomas Aquinas writes repeatedly about the heart, its

motions and relations to the soul. In his *Quaestiones Disputatae de Anima*, explaining the

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[56] I say almost always with the understanding that the task of someone such as a physician is not always to be primarily engaged with or explicitly occupied in contemplation of politics, ethics, or theology. As the great number of medieval thinkers who wrote theology, physiology, and psychology from Avicenna to Aquinas suggests, however, there was a great deal of overlap between these fields in the Middle Ages.

motion of the heart is essential to the claims Aquinas wants to make about how the soul

is united to the body.[57] In the *Summa theologiae's* treatise on the passions, Ia2ae, qq.22-48,

Aquinas repeatedly attests to the affect of the passions on the body—especially on the

heart.[58] In a letter written in the early 1270s to a Master Phillip,[59] Aquinas in *De Motu*

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[57] Art. 9; see in particular the *sed contra* and his response: "Sic ergo inter animam secundum quod est motor et principium operationum et totum corpus, cadit aliquid medium; quia mediante aliqua prima parte primo mota movet alias partes ad suas operationes, sicut mediante corde movet alia membra ad vitales operationes: sed secundum quod dat esse corpori, immediate dat esse substantiale et specificum omnibus partibus corporis. Et hoc est quod a multis dicitur quod anima unitur corpori ut forma sine medio, ut motor autem per medium." [So it is that the soul, by means of the heart, moves the other members of the body to perform their vital operations. But since the soul gives to the body its act of existing, it immediately gives to all parts of the body their substantial and specific mode of existing. And this is what many assert, namely, that as a form the soul is united to the body without an intermediary, but that as a mover it is united to the body through an intermediary.] Text and translation St. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Anima*, tr. John Patrick Rowan.

[58] See, for example, his discussion of the effect of anger on the blood and spirits of the heart in I-II, q. 48, art. 2 c, 962 b: "Respondeo dicendum quod, sicut dictum est, corporalis transmutatio quae est in passionibus animae, proportionatur motui appetitus. Manifestum est autem quod quilibet appetitus, etiam naturalis, fortius tendit in id quod est sibi contrarium, si fuerit praesens, unde videmus quod aqua calefacta magis congelatur, quasi frigido vehementius in calidum agente. Motus autem appetitivus irae causatur ex aliqua iniuria illata, sicut ex quodam contrario iniacente. Et ideo appetitus potissime tendit ad repellendum iniuriam per appetitum vindictae, et ex hoc sequitur magna vehementia et impetuositas in motu irae. Et quia motus irae non est per modum retractionis, cui proportionatur frigus; sed magis per modum insecutionis, cui proportionatur calor; consequenter fit motus irae causativus cuiusdam fervoris sanguinis et spirituum circa cor, quod est instrumentum passionum animae. Et exinde est quod, propter magnam perturbationem cordis quae est in ira, maxime apparent in iratis indicia quaedam in exterioribus membris." [I answer that, As stated above (I-II:44:1), the bodily transmutation that occurs in the passions of the soul is proportionate to the movement of the appetite. Now it is evident that every appetite, even the natural appetite, tends with greater force to repel that which is contrary to it, if it be present: hence we see that hot water freezes harder, as though the cold acted with greater force on the hot object. Since then the appetitive movement of anger is caused by some injury inflicted, as by a contrary that is present; it follows that the appetite tends with great force to repel the injury by the desire of vengeance; and hence ensues great vehemence and impetuosity in the movement of anger. And because the movement of anger is not one of recoil, which corresponds to the action of cold, but one of prosecution, which corresponds to the action of heat, the result is that the movement of anger produces fervor of the blood and vital spirits around the heart, which is the instrument of the soul's passions. And hence it is that, on account of the heart being so disturbed by anger, those chiefly who are angry betray signs thereof in their outer members.] Text and translation from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. and tr. Aquinas Institue.

[59] The letter is addressed to a Master Philip. Pierre Mandonnet argues that he was a professor of medicine in Bologna and afterwards in Naples, but, as Ignatius Eschmann observes, this has not been proven. Mandonnet sets the date of composition at 1273, but Eschmann prefers 1270 -71. P. Mandonnet, O.P., *Dea*

Cordis examines in careful detail the motions of the heart. This matter is of central importance to Aquinas as he endeavors to show how the movement of the heart is both natural and flows from "some particular nature within the animal."[60] Drawing primarily on the works of Aristotle, Aquinas' work is grounded in a physiological account of the motion of the heart and its effect on the bodily and psychological life of the human person. It is also fundamentally, however, a letter about human agency and the intersection between what is natural [*naturalis*] and what is willed [*voluntas*].

As much is apparent in Aquinas's meditation on how the motion of the heart both is and is not like the movement of the heavenly bodies in the cosmos. Aquinas writes:

> Omnis autem proprietas et motus consequitur aliquam formam secundum conditionem ipsius, sicut formam nobilissimi elementi, puta ignis, consequitur motus ad locum nobilissimum, qui est sursum. Forma autem nobilissima in inferioribus est anima, quae maxime accedit ad similitudinem principii motus caeli. Unde et motus ipsam consequens simillimus est motui caeli: sic enim est motus cordis in animali, sicut motus caeli in mundo.

> Sed tamen oportet motum cordis a motu caeli deficere sicut principiatum deficit a principio. Est autem motus caeli circularis et continuus, et hoc ei competit inquantum est principium omnium motuum mundi: accessu enim et recessu corpus caeleste imponit rebus principium et finem essendi, et sua contintuitate conservat ordinem in motibus, qui non sunt semper. Motus autem cordis principium est omnium motuum qui sunt in animali; unde Philosophus in tertio De partibus animalium dicit quod "motus delectabilium et tristium et totaliter

écrita authentiques de St. Thomas d'Aquin, 105, n. 18. I.T. Eschmann, O.P., "A catalogue of St. Thomas's works" in *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 419.

[60] Aquinas, *De Motu Cordis*, tr. Gregory Froelich, 5: "...particulari natura animalis intriseca...".

omnes sensus hinc incipientes videntur," scilicet in corde, et ad hoc terminari. Unde ad hoc quod cor esset principium et finis omnium motuum qui sunt in animali, habuit quemdam motum non circularem sed similem circulari, compositum scilicet ex tractu et pulsu.... [61]

Aquinas' assertions here rely on a belief in the union of the body and the soul with the heart as the site of that union (a position he reiterates in *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 17, art. 9, ad 2).[62] He attends to the motion of the soul first because, as he states, "...igitur motus

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[61] "But it is important to note that every property and movement is a result of a form in a particular condition. So as a result of the form of a subtle element like fire, there is motion to a subtle place, namely upwards motion. Now the most subtle form on earth is the soul, which is most like the principle of the motion of the heavens. Thus, the motion that results from the soul is most like the motion of the heavens. In other words, the heart moves in the animal as the heavenly bodies move in the cosmos. Nevertheless the heart's motion is not exactly like the heavens', in the same way that what follows from a principle is never exactly like the principle itself. Now as the principle of all the motions in the universe, the motion of the heavens is circular and continuous. For the approach and departure of a heavenly body coordinates with the beginning and end of existence, and by its own continuous movement it preserves the order among moving things that do not exist forever. The motion of the heart, however, is the principle of all movements in the animal. This is why the Philosopher says in the third book of *On the Parts of Animals*, "the movements of pleasure and pain and of all the senses seems to arise there," namely in the heart, and they also end there. Thus, in order for the heart to be the beginning and end of all motions in the animal, it had to have a movement that is like a circle, but not exactly circular, composed namely from a push and pull." Quoted from Ibid., 15-17

[62] "...in his quae ad intellectum et voluntatem pertinent, primum invenitur id quod est secundum naturam, ex quo alia derivantur, ut a cognitione principiorum naturaliter notorum, cognitio conclusionum; et a voluntate finis naturaliter desiderati, derivatur electio eorum quae sunt ad finem. Ita etiam in corporalibus motibus principium est secundum naturam. Principium autem corporalis motus est a motu cordis. Unde motus cordis est secundum naturam, et non secundum voluntatem, consequitur enim sicut per se accidens vitam, quae est ex unione animae et corporis. Sicut motus gravium et levium consequitur formam substantialem ipsorum, unde et a generante moveri dicuntur, secundum philosophum in VIII Physic. Et propter hoc motus iste vitalis dicitur. Unde Gregorius Nyssenus dicit quod sicut generativum et nutritivum non obedit rationi, ita nec pulsativum, quod est vitale. Pulsativum autem appellat motum cordis, qui manifestatur per venas pulsatiles." [In things pertaining to intellect and will, that which is according to nature stands first, whence all other things are derived: thus from the knowledge of principles that are naturally known, is derived knowledge of the conclusions; and from volition of the end naturally desired, is derived the choice of the means. So also in bodily movements the principle is according to nature. Now the principle of bodily movements begins with the movement of the heart. Consequently the movement of the heart is according to nature, and not according to the will: for like a proper accident, it results from life, which follows from the union of soul and body. Thus the movement of heavy and light things results from their substantial form: for which reason they are said to be moved by their generator, as the Philosopher states (*Phys*. viii, 4). Wherefore this movement is called 'vital.' For which reason Gregory of

cordis est naturalis quasi consequens animam, inquantum est forma talis corporis, et principaliter cordis" [...the motion of the heart is a natural result of the soul, the form of the living body and principally of the heart].[63] In his initial consideration of how the motions that result from the soul, such as the motion of the heart, is most like the motion of the heavens, Aquinas see the roots of the likeness in the soul's "*forma... nobilissima*." Gregory Froelich translates this as most subtle form, but it also means "noblest form" in the sense of noble as "highest rank." It is the highest form on earth ("*in inferioribus*"). Utilizing an Aristotelian language of the properties of motion, Aquinas describes how those nobler forms move upward. The soul, as the noblest form, moves in an upward motion that mirrors that of the most upward bodies in the cosmos—heavenly bodies. The soul, and therefore the heart, follow directly from the motion of the heavens. This heavenly motion is itself the principle of all the motions in the universe.

Not quite a microcosm, it is not that the human is a "little world" here, rather, Aquinas speaks to the innate ordering of the heart. The heart follows on the natural, divinely composed, construction of the universe. As such, the heart moves according to its form and in accordance with the way all motion operates. In richly poetic language,

Nyssa [Nemesius, *De Nat. Hom*. xxii] says that, just as the movement of generation and nutrition does not obey reason, so neither does the pulse which is a vital movement. By the pulse he means the movement of the heart which is indicated by the pulse veins.] Quoted from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, tr. and ed. Aquinas Institute, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 17, art. 9, ad 2.
[63] St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Motu Cordis*, tr. Gregory Froelich, 17.

Aquinas further testifies to the great nobility of the soul and therefore the heart, its

motions, and the entire human person. Its nobility makes its motion most like in the

entire cosmos to that of the heavenly bodies.

In Aquinas' subsequent consideration of the limits of this simile—the heart's

motion is not exactly like that of the heavens [*oportet motum cordis a motu caeli deficere*]—

Aquinas does not diminish the nobility of the soul. Instead, he details the consequences

of the human heart's earthly existence. The motion of the heavenly bodies is circular

[*circularus*] and continuous [*continuus*], and in this continuous circling, their movement

establishes the beginning and being of existence. The ultimate consequence of this

movement is the conservation [*conservat*] of all order among non-eternal beings.

Beginning with his turn to Aristotle's *On the Parts of Animals*, the rest of *De Motu Cordis*

is concerned with considering the movement of the heart, which is not a continuous

circle but a "push and pull" [*tractu et pulsu*]. This push and pull is of particular

importance to understanding a major difference between the motion of the heavens and

the motion of the heart. The heavens are not moved by anything in any way, neither

essentially nor *per accidens* [*per se neque per accidens*]. The *anima sensitiva*, sensitive soul,

the soul that pertains to sense perception,[64] however, is not moved essentially but is

moved *per accidens*. Thus, "different types of sensations and emotions arise in it" [*unde*

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[64] For a detailed consideration of the operation of the *anima sensitiva* and the movements of the soul known as the passions, see Robert Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions*, especially pp. 13-29.

proveniunt in ipsa diversae apprehensiones et affectiones].[65] The world that is accessible to the senses affects the human person. In this way: "the heart's movement varies according to the different emotions and sensations of the soul" [*motus autem cordis variatur secundum diversas affectiones et apprehensiones animae*].[66]

For Aquinas, this understanding of the human heart determines how we understand the relationship between sensorial apprehensions [*apprehensione diversa*], feelings [*affectione*], and volition. Aquinas notes: "Now although some change occurs in the heart's motion because of different sensations and feelings, nevertheless such change is involuntary, for it does not come about through the command of the will" [*Licet autem aliqua variatio accidat in motu cordis ex apprehensione diversa et affectione, non tamen illa variatio motus est voluntaria, sed involuntaria, quia non fit per imperium voluntatis*].[67] This means that things like sensorial experience and feelings are not unnatural or meant to be done away with. They are a part of what it is to be human. In an argument he will elaborate in greater detail in the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas further argues that there is a point at which volition does relate to these involuntary motions of the heart. That is the point at which either a person's desires affects his/her experience of the world, and thus the heart's motion (for example, a desire for vengeance kindles anger), or at the moment

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[65] St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Motu Cordis*, tr. Gregory Froelich, 25.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., 27.

of determining response to sense apprehension and feeling.[68] By connecting and elaborating processes of volition and the heart, Aquinas thus places the heart at the root of natural and volitional human actions. It is thus essential to any field concerned with action and the will including ethics, politics, and theology.

At the end of the thirteenth century, Dante also takes up the issue of the heart's motion and its relation to human actions and willing in *Vita Nuova*—unsurprising as Aquinas was a major source for Dante's philosophy and theology. Like Aquinas, for Dante the heart was the place where body and soul join. Consider the first chapters in *Vita Nuova*. In which Dante not only records, but interprets and reflects on his own memories impressed into the book of his heart. The place of the heart in this first entry in Dante's book of his memory [*del libro de la mia memoria*] has been carefully explored by Eric Jager, who has argued for the importance of Dante's role as scholastic glosser of his own heart-text.[69] The value of Jager's insight is evident when we consider Dante's

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[68] In *De Motu Cordis*, Aquinas elaborates, "...unde in passionibus animae, puta in ira, formale est, quod est ex parte affectionis, scilicet quod sit appetitus vindictae; materiale autem quod pertinet ad motum cordis, puta quod sit accensio sanguinis circa cor." [This is why in the passions of the soul, such as anger, there is a formal part that pertains to a feeling, which in this example would be the desire for vengeance. And there is a material part that pertains to the heart's motion, which in the example would be the blood enkindled around the heart.] Quoted from St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Motu Cordis*, tr. Gregory Froelich, 20. In the *Summa Theologiae*, the bulk of Aquinas' treatment of the question of the work of the passions in relation to moral good and evil occurs in Question 24 of the *Prima Secundae*. Contra what he labels as the positions of the stoic and the peripatetic, Aquinas wants both to argue for the centrality of the will in directing human moral action, and also to argue for the import of the passions as intrinsic to human nature. Passions, in Aquinas, have utility in acts of volition. Aquinas subsequently places human passions under the command of the will, even as he is clear that the motions of the passions are the motions of the sense appetite and not the motion of the will itself.
[69] Dante Aligheri, *Vita Nuova*. tr. Andrew Frisardi, I.1. Jager's discussion of Dante as glosser occurs on pages 74-77 of *The Book of the Heart*.

description of his first encounter with Beatrice. Drawing on the tropes of *fin'amor*, Dante

describes what happens to his heart at the moment when she "first appeared before [his]

eyes":

> In quello punto dico veracemente che lo spirito de la vita, lo quale dimora ne la secretissima camera de lo cuore, cominciò a tremare sì fortemente che apparia ne li mènimi polsi orribilmente; e tremando, disse queste parole: «Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur mihi». In quello punto lo spirito animale, lo quale dimora ne l'alta camera ne la quale tutti li spiriti sensitivi portano le loro percezioni, si cominciò a maravigliare molto, e parlando spezialmente a li spiriti del viso, sì disse queste parole: «Apparuit iam beatitudo vestra». In quello punto lo spirito naturale, lo quale dimora in quella parte ove si ministra lo nutrimento nostro, cominciò a piangere, e piangendo, disse queste parole: «Heu miser, quia frequenter impeditus ero deinceps!».

> At that time, truly, I say, the vital spirit, which dwells in the innermost chamber of the heart, started to tremble so powerfully that its disturbance reached all the way to the slightest of my pulses. And trembling it spoke these words: "Here is a god stronger than I, who comes to rule me." At that time the animal spirit, which dwells in the high chamber to which all the spirits of sensation carry their perceptions, began to marvel, and speaking especially to the spirits of vision it said: "Your beatitude [or bliss] has now appeared." At that time the natural spirit, which dwells where our food is digested, started to cry, and crying it spoke these words: "What misery, since from now on I will often be blocked [in my digestion]!"[70]

From that moment on, Dante writes, "...I swear that Love dominated my soul" [...*dico che*

Amore segnoreggiò la mia anima].[71] This domination, literally Love's rule over Dante as a

segnore, a lord, corresponds with the motions of the heart. The "vital spirit" trembles and

causes disturbances to Dante's "furthest pulses." This trembling is such that it speaks. It

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[70] Dante, *Vita Nuova*, tr. Andrew Frisardi, II.1.
[71] Ibid.

tells of a god who has come to rule the vital spirits. The animal spirits, associated with

sensorial apprehension, "marvel" and attest to Beatrice's beatitude, and, finally, the

natural spirit in the stomach speaks to its future blockage. Exhibiting typical signs of

lovesickness such as heart palpitations and interrupted digestion, Dante connects these

bodily motions with Love's domination of his soul.[72]

Speaking to what will be a continued reflection not just in the *Vita Nuova* but in

the *Commedia* on the nature of earthly and beatific love, Dante goes on to detail his

second and final encounter with Beatrice. After describing Beatrice's blessedness, Dante

describes a horrific dream in which a figure he identifies as Love, *Amor*, feeds Beatrice

Dante's heart. In his sonnet gloss of this passage, Dante says:

> A ciascun'alma presa, e gentil core,
>> nel cui cospetto ven lo dir presente,
>> in ciò che mi rescrivan suo parvente
>> salute in lor segnor, cioè Amore.
>> Già eran quasi che atterzate l'ore
>> del tempo che onne stella n'è lucente,
>> quando m'apparve Amor subitamente
>> cui essenza membrar mi dà orrore.
> Allegro mi sembrava Amor tenendo
>> meo core in mano, e ne le braccia avea
>> madonna involta in un drappo dormendo.
>> Poi la svegliava, e d'esto core ardendo
>> lei paventosa umilmente pascea:
>> appresso gir lo ne vedea piangendo.

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[72] Galen had famously diagnosed a wealthy Roman wife with lovesickness for the dancer Pylades after conducting the "pulse test" in which he found that her pulse became irregular and her expression and color changed after hearing about Pylades. Mary Wack notes that excesses of leisure and pleasure allowed digestive fluids to collect and turn to black bile a process that caused melancholy; *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The 'Viaticum' and its Commentaries*, 61.

> To all besotted souls, my counterparts,
>> to whom these verses come with a petition
>> to write me what you think of my rendition:
>> greetings in Love, the lord of open hearts.
>> Already nearly over by a third
>> were all those hours lit up by stars till morning,
>> when Love appeared before me without warning.
>> I shudder thinking what his presence stirred.
> It seemed that he was overjoyed in keeping
>> my heart in hand, his arms a gentle bed
>> for someone draped in silk—my lady sleeping.
>> He woke her. And, respectfully, he fed
>> that burning heart to her, who shook with dread.
>> Then, as he turned to leave, I saw him weeping.

The rest of the *Vita Nuova* can be understood as an attempt to understand the role of Dante's passions and will, the work of Love and the work of the divine, in the motions and affects of Dante's heart. And this first sonnet establishes the stakes of Dante's investigation of these topics. As numerous scholars have suggested, the sexual and eucharistic connotations of this dream are evident, as is the centrality of Dante's grief and the violence of the scene Beatrice.[73] Not apparent is what is and is not within Dante's, Love's, or Beatrice's volition in the poem. What do we make of the language of Love's respectful feeding? Beatrice's shaking dread? Love's weeping? Certainly Dante details himself as greatly anguished by this dream, even as he seems to have welcomed Love with an open heart.

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[73] See, for example, Francis J. Ambrosio's discussion of the eucharistic connotations of this scene in *Dante and Derrida*, pages 25-27; Ambrosio also works to unpack the relationship between Dante's Amor and Dante's own will, see pages 28-35. An acknowldgment of the sexuality adherent in this scene is also at the heart of Etienne Gilson's critique of Pierre Mandonnet's account of this sonnet; see *Dante and Philosophy*, 20-21.

As a careful reader of Aquinas, Dante is aware that the interplay of the natural forces of the heart's motion and the role of the will in responding to and shaping feeling are such that a person is not simply a set of involuntary motions of the heart or unwilled feelings. Dante must work, then, to interpret who the players are within his dream and in what sense he is ethically bound to respond to their work. As the *Vita Nuova* develops, it becomes increasingly evident that Love is a projection of Dante's "own need, his enthrallment to the passion of his own desire, and indeed of his own will to power."[74] With this realization, Dante, then, must come to terms with his *libido dominandi*; and he must work to recognize his own role in feeding his heart to the shaking Beatrice. As this sonnet suggests, a person who does not work to create order between the motions of the heart and the will, he will inevitably create suffering: both his own and others.

It is within the context of these medieval conversations that we can better read and understand Chaucer's *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte*. Chaucer's discourse on the heart's motion is neither as systematically engaged as Aquinas', nor as extensive as Dante's own prosimetric treatment. But Chaucer would, at the very least, have been familiar with the *Vita Nuova*, and *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* is engaged in the same sort of consideration about what the motion of the heart says about the nature and volition of those who feel it. The language of *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* speaks to an ordered set of processes within the human person in which both what is natural and

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[74] Ambrosio, *Dante and Derrida*, 27.

innate intersects with that which is volitional in the experience of pitying. As Aquinas and Dante together suggest, this ordering is important because it speaks to the relationality inherent in what it is to be human. Aquinas' meditation on the motion of the heart speaks to the ordering of the human person and the ordering of the cosmos; Dante's reflections on the motions of his heart and its effects considers his own internal order and disorder and how it speaks to his relation to the world beyond his heart. Chaucer's work on *pitee* and the *gentil herte* makes this relationality explicit. *Pitee* is inherently a relational concept; moreover, with the focus on *gentil*, Chaucer reminds us that there is always some sort of ordering (interior and social) in the experience of the heart's motion and the experience of *pitee*. In the last section of this chapter, then, I will work to articulate what models of social order *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* speaks to. As I have already suggested, this consideration of the social order will also ask what the teleology of Chaucer's social ordering is.

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The challenge of discussing social order in *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* is that there is no one single model of social order in Chaucer, but several. When situating *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* within the context of social order in Chaucer, we encounter the many different models and forms of social organization and hierarchy present in his poetry: from Theseus' ducal rule, to marital order, to the social organization dictated by the God of Love. When I gestured in my preface to the challenge inherent in writing

about an author so generically rich and exploratory as Chaucer, I meant too that

Chaucer's models of human life and praxis are themselves diverse and explorational.

Consequently, his models of how people relate to others, including how they relate

within social hierarchies to one another, participate in this poetic, generic exploration.

This is, indeed, a central contention of Paul Strohm in *Social Chaucer* that the rapidly

changing world of fourteenth-century England made for a society confronted by new

paradigms, and Chaucer, at the fringes of gentility, was particularly attuned to and

interested in exploring those changes.[75] And we can understand David Wallace in

Chaucerian Polity to be engaged in the related argument. When he articulates the

importance of considering guild structure in Chaucer's work, he gestures to the

multiplicity of models of social order and hierarchy with which Chaucer was familiar

and with which he engaged in his poetry.[76]

The diversity of Chaucer's models of social order is apparent if we turn to each of

the four places he uses *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte*. All four texts, the *Legend of Good

Women* and the *Knight's*, *Merchant's*, and *Squire's Tales*, explore different models of social

order. I want to begin by looking in careful detail at the model of social order and rule

apparent in the *Knight's Tale*. The *Knight's Tale* offers the longest and most detailed

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[75] Strohm is especially interested in the question of Chaucer's audience, attending closely to both a study of the particular society Chaucer addresses in his work and to Chaucer choices in addressing particular social groups in his work; see particularly chapter 3 of *Social Chaucer* on this topic.
[76] David Wallace, "'From Every Shires Ende': English Guilds and Chaucer's *Compagnye*" in *Chaucerian Polity*, 83-104.

consideration of this proverb and its relation to social order. From there I want to then examine the other poems together as a way of returning to my earlier discussion of gender and social order in Chaucer. I move forward in this way for two reasons. First, because I would suggest the *Knight's Tale* can help us see precisely how *pitee* challenges and reifies social hierarchies. Secondly, because the gender implications of the operation of *pitee* help us to understand the stakes of *pitee*'s operation in Chaucer and late medieval discourse. As I hope to show, we are back to a consideration of right-order, specifically how a society is right-ordered. In looking closely at one example of social right-ordering with which Chaucer was particularly interested, the relationship and hierarchies between men and women, we can see the consequences these social orders had on perceptions and understandings of women. To put the matter differently, we can see how women are shaped in Chaucer's poetry by his anthropologies and social hierarchies.

The *Knight's Tale* begins by detailing the nature of the tale's social order via a description of the figure at the top of the tale's human social hierarchy: Theseus. Chaucer describes Theseus as a "lord and governour, / And in his tyme swich a conquerour / That gretter was ther noon under the sonne" (861-63). Linking these two capacities, *governour* and *conquerour*, through rhyme, Chaucer speaks not only to Theseus' aptitude for lordship, but also his ability to bring new lands and territories under his rule. Working in tandem with one another, Theseus's skills as a conqueror and

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as a lord make it so there was no greater governor "under the sonne." His greatness is

exemplified by the "[f]ul many a riche contree" he "hadde wonne" (864). Chaucer, in

keeping with his antecedents, attests to the vastness and richness of those lands under

his governance.[77] Theseus' greatness as a lord and governor here is attested in his ability

not only to maintain what he has, but to acquire other lands that add to the wealth and

scope of his kingdom.

Greatly abbreviated in Chaucer, however, is an essential component of two of

Chaucer's antecedents, Boccaccio's *Teseida* and Statius' *Thebaid*, namely Theseus' war

with the Amazons. A war that takes up the entirety of Book I of the *Teseida* is reduced to

less than 20 lines in the *Knight's Tale* detailing how Theseus conquered the land of

"Femenye" with his "wysdom and his chivalrie" (865-66). As Alastair Minnis has

suggested, the ultimate effect of this reduction in the *Knight's Tale* is that Theseus'

encounter with the Theban women has a larger impact both on the tale itself and on the

depiction of Theseus' character than they do in either Boccaccio or Statius.[78] While we

are made aware of Theseus' conquering of the Amazons and thus his lordship and

governance over a kingdom of warrior women, the war with the Amazons is quickly

eclipsed by Theseus' encounter with the women of Thebes who appeal to him for aid in

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[77] See both Dante Aligheri, *Inferno*, 12.7 and Giovanni Boccaccio, *Tesseida*, 1.1-56, as texts Chaucer would
have read and which describe Theseus' governance.
[78] Alistair Minnis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Chaucer*, 64.

their struggles under the tyrannical rule of Creon, current lord of Thebes who is "[f]ulfild of ire and of iniquitee" (940).

David Wallace has argued for the significance of Chaucer's elision of much of Book I of the *Teseida*. Boccaccio describes at length both the Amazons and their queen Hippolita, a "duchessa" (a duchess and thus, as Wallace points out, of equal rank with Theseus[79]) who is not only beautiful and courageous but "savia e ben costumata, e per natura / nell'armi ardita e fiera oltre misura" [wise and polite, and by nature zealous in arms and fierce beyond measure].[80] Wallace draws attention to Chaucer's "erasure" of Hippolyta from the *Knight's Tale*, noting the "downgrading of 'duchessa' Hippolita to a silent, subordinate, and alien bit player in the Athenian regime."[81] Wallace's purpose here is not, however, a discourse on gender roles in the Athenian regime. Rather, building on Lee Patterson's work on Chaucer's involvement with English magnate politics,[82] Wallace argues that Chaucer's downgrading of Hippolita is "dictated by Chaucer's decision to explore the possibilities and limitations of one-man rule within a context of magnate rivalry. His *Knight's Tale* thus sets out to imagine a world in which a masculine monarch—moderate rather than tyrannical—elects to rule without benefit of queenly or wifely counsel."[83] Indeed, as Wallace suggests, the "silencing" of Hippolita is

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[79] David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 106
[80] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Teseida*, I.125; translation my own.
[81] Ibid., 107.
[82] Ibid., 107.
[83] Ibid., 108.

itself the consequence of Theseus' work as an un-tyrannical ruler who engages in a

careful self-rule in which every aspect of his life from his emotions to his statecraft are

carefully reined in and scripted for the sake of the common good.[84]

Wallace speaks at some length on the shape this common good takes in terms of

the amatory politics of chivalry present both in Theseus's history and in the contest for

Emelye of Palamon and Arcite. At stake in Wallace's consideration is the way amatory

politics do or do not contribute to *felaweshipe*—that mode of social organization so

essential to the entire project of the *Canterbury Tales*.[85] Caught up in their amorous

pursuit Palamon and Arcite undo their longstanding *felawshipe*, and Chaucer's Theseus

eschews a marital *felawshipe* of co-rule in favor of one-man rule.[86]

Building on Wallace's work, in considering the complicated nature of the models

of social rule and social hierarchies at play in the *Knight's Tale*, I would argue that *pitee*

and its role in self-rule and social ordering is essential. For it is both the site at which the

common good is learned and negotiated, and it is that feeling that both complicates and

solidifies the nature of Theseus' role as one-man lord and governor.

Consider his first encounter with the Theban noble women who come to plead

for Theseus' aid against the tyrant Creon (961). In a scene that will be repeated some 800

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[84] Ibid., 108-119.

[85] From the General Prologue: "Bifil that in that seson on a day, / In southwerk at the tabard as I lay / Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage / To caunterbury with ful devout corage, / At nyght was come into that hostelrye / Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye, / Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle / In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle, / That toward caunterbury wolden ryde" (19-27).

[86] Ibid., 110.

lines later, the women approach the victorious Theseus as he makes his way back to

Athens from his conquering of the Amazons. In a scene that makes clear the abjection of

the Theban women who, before the Theban war, had all been "a duchesse or a queene"

(923), the women dressed in all black, with a great "waymentynge," kneel in the road

blocking the passage of the horse-mounted Theseus. They describe to Theseus their

fallen state and their great loss. Not only have they lost their husbands and sons to war,

but Creon has piled the bodies of the dead in a heap and left them to be neither

"yburyed nor ybrent" but to be consumed by hounds (946-47). The women then "fillen

gruf and criden pitously, / 'Have on us wrecched wommen som mercy, / And lat oure

sorwe synken in thyn herte'" (949-951). Falling face down on the ground, these women

seek from Theseus an act of mercy: that he allow their sorrow to sink into his heart.

Theseus is so moved that:

> This gentil duc doun from his courser sterte
> With herte pitous, whan he herde hem speke.
> Hym thoughte that his herte wolde breke,
> Whan he saugh hem so pitous and so maat,
> That whilom were of so greet estaat;
> And in his armes he hem alle up hente,
> And hem conforteth in ful good entente...
> (952-958)

Theseus dismounts from his horse and sinks to the ground with the women. He visibly

embodies the action they have asked from him. Their sorrow has sunk into his heart,

and thus, with *pitee* moved within him, he sinks to the ground with them. This action

both requires that he lower himself—no longer the conquering knight atop his destrier—

and that he raise the women up. He gathers them in his arms and "conforteth" them in "ful good entente."

In this scene, Chaucer makes visually explicit the negotiation of social hierarchies at play. Theseus enters astride his horse at the head of his victorious party of loyal subjects and conquered Amazons, the picture of governor and lord. The Theban women were of the highest social rank, but have been brought to their knees in the dirt, without the support of husbands or kin. They are, in their sorrow, brought even lower before Theseus and the Athenians very eyes as they fall facedown in the dirt at Theseus' feet.

These are indeed the social hierarchies and power dynamics that naturally arise out of conquest; it is precisely this element of Theseus' Amazonian conquest that Chaucer's erasure of Book I of the *Teseida* leaves out. The women, however, seek an alternative to this social dynamic; they plead that Theseus both acknowledge who they are, what they have lost, and their sorrow. Theseus, in turn, dismounts and thus removes himself from his role as conquering knight and joins the women in the dirt and in their sorrow. They are all—for the moment—on equal ground.

In her reading of the *Knight's Tale*, Jill Mann in *Feminizing Chaucer* has argued that this scene and Theseus' subsequent encounter with the Athenian women who plead for mercy for Palamon and Arcite is indicative of the "levelling and unifying" nature of *pitee*. She suggests that in these scenes we can see how *pitee* was understood to have the

"power to overturn and obliterate the relationship between conqueror and suppliant."[87]

And the great insight of Mann's argument, it seems to me, is precisely that in this initial

exchange between Theseus and the Theban women Chaucer shows us this exact

dynamic. Theseus is no longer the conquer in this moment, the women no longer

suppliants; rather, in this moment of *pitee* they are united in a shared sorrow for and

acknowledgment of the fallenness of they who "weren of so greet estaat."

As Felicity Riddy argues, however, "Pity as a social virtue sanctifies hierarchy,

since it is predicated on the difference between higher and lower, or between weaker

and stronger: it is a mode of relationship with one's inferiors."[88] Riddy contends that

Chaucer makes an explicit connection between a blood-based gentility, and thus a high

social status, and *pitee*. [89] *Pitee*, as described by Riddy, is precisely that capacity for

relating to one's social inferiors. In the *Knight's Tale*, *pitee* is how the conquering Theseus

relates to the suppliant women. Indeed, Riddy's comment reminds us that while Mann

has spoken of a potential power within the moment of *pitee* for social change and

challenge, this moment is entirely made possible in the *Knight's Tale* by the very

existence of Theseus' social power over the Theban women. Only because he sits astride

his horse at the head of his conquering army can he dismount and join the Theban

women.

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[87] Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, 187.
[88] Felicity Riddy, "Engendering Pity," 57. Riddy here takes issue with Douglas Gray's assertion that *gentilesse* is a nobility of the soul and not a nobility of blood.
[89] Ibid., 63, fn. 22.

This does not, however, invalidate Mann's reading, but complicates it. *Pitee* is a response to the suffering of others; it is a response that acknowledges the suffering of another as suffering. *Pitee* is thus that which operates in the gap between the one who suffers and the one who does not (or who does not suffer in the same way). *Pitee* does not occur between those who share the same suffering. And *pitee* speaks to a need for the pitier to respond to that suffering, perhaps, as with the case of Theseus, with whatever power they have to alleviate that suffering.

More than this, in the case of the *Knight's Tale* at least, inherent in the act of *pitee* is an effort to maintain and restore social order and social hierarchies. Theseus responds to the Theban women recognizing that their suffering is the result of an upheaval in the social order. It is a result of the war on Thebes and a collapse of social hierarchies. This social upheaval has manifested in these women's fall from "so greet estaat." Theseus' efforts in this scene are an effort to resolve the suffering that has arisen through this social disorder and upheaval. His efforts begin with his kneeling on the ground with the women, a physical move that literally puts him on the same level as the Theban women. These *gentil* women have a *gentil* claim—one that Theseus acknowledges, and as he kneels, he acknowledges their social fall as well as their still present inner nobility and *gentilesse*.

Further, Chaucer is at pains to show that what Theseus brings to Thebes is a restoration of right-ordered and just rule.[90] The comparison Chaucer invites between the chivalric governance of Theseus and the tyrannical rule of Creon further underscores Theseus' role as just ruler in the tale. And it is his *pitee* that is essential to marking his model of rule over and against the tyrannical Creon as capable of bringing to Thebes order. Creon "fulfild of ire and iniquitee" (940) had left the bodies of his dead enemies in a heap to rot and be eaten by dogs. This act the spokesperson of the Theban women describes as a "vileynye" (942). She equates his actions not only with malicious abuse, but with lowborn acts. Creon, now lord of Thebes, disrupts the social order. Ruled by his ire, he commits acts of gross maliciousness that are not acts fitting to a lord. In contrast, Theseus is a lord for whom *pitee renneth soon in gentil herte*. This means that not only is he able to set aside such feelings as either perturbation over the disruption of his victory procession (906) or, later, his ire over the actions of Palamon and Arcite (1782), but his *pitee* attests to the correspondence between his virtuous capacity for *gentilesse* and his noble-born status as a *gentil* lord. Theseus' is a right-ordered rule; it both makes and maintains social order (overturning the rule of Creon, responding to the fight between

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[90] I am at pains here not to overstate the enthusiasm with which Chaucer embraces the order imposed by Theseus. Charles Muscatine had argued that Theseus is the figure in the poem who perceives "man's proper life in submission to the perfect harmony of the universe" and serves as the vanguard of Chaucer's "political insight;" *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, 181 and 194. I would agree that part of Chaucer's investment in the tale is an investigation of right-order and rule, but I am reluctant to classify Theseus as an uncomplicated marker of this order. Nor am I inclined to see in Theseus a cypher for Chaucer's own politics. My readings in this vein have been influenced by Elizabeth Salter, *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and the Clerk's Tale*, 9-36, and David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination*, especially pp. 175-95.

Palamon and Arcite), and it is one in which both the virtue of *gentilesse* and the social

status of *gentilesse* are aligned in his pitying heart.

This model of rule and hierarchy, however, is not one of autonomous sole rule.

In Theseus, Chaucer gives us a model of rule and hierarchy in which the just ruler is

responsive to others. Both in condensing the encounter between Theseus and the

Amazons and dwelling on Theseus' encounters with the Theban women, Chaucer

makes evident how essential *pitee*, and thus responsiveness, is to Theseus' lordship of

"wysdom and...chivalrie" (865). Theseus is moved, affected, his emotions and desires

shaped and changed by his encounters with his suppliants and his subjects. He responds

with *pitee* to the Theban women and thus works to overcome the tyranny of Creon. He

later responds to the Athenian woman with *pitee* and is lenient to Palamon and Arcite.

And it is here that we return to the heart because the motion inherent in the

model of rule present in the *Knight's Tale* is one of circulation. Both when Theseus

encounters the Theban women on his return to Athens and later when they become his

subjects, in the relationship between them, the women's feelings (sorrow, grief,

desperation) sink into him and, in this sinking, he pities them. This *pitee* shapes and

changes his own feelings and desires so that his judgments about how best to rule (to

conquer Creon, forgive Palamon and Arcite) are changed in response. In turn, Theseus

acts in response to these changes and works to change the conditions that caused the

women's sorrow, grief, and desperation.

It is not, however, that in his *pitee* and responsiveness social hierarchies are obliterated. On the contrary, this model of rule relies on the maintenance of particular social roles and powers; Theseus' *pitee* only affects the social order because he is at the top of the social hierarchy. But it is the motion of the heart that helps us to understand the depth and complexity of this model of rule. In his study of the political uses of body metaphors in the Middle Ages, Jacques Le Goff showed that centrality of the heart within the human body lent itself to political metaphor in the Middle Ages; the heart was "king" of the body and so the king was the "heart" of the body politic.[91] Chaucer does not have much to say about the motion of the heart, nor how it relates to the body politic, but what he does have to say is telling. *Pitee renneth soone in gentil herte*. The heart here, at least the *gentil herte*, is sensitive to the suffering of others. It is affected by the pitiful it witnesses. This model, embodied by Theseus in the *Knight's Tale*, presents us with a model of political rule in which the just, *gentil* ruler is also a piteous ruler, one whose relationship to his subjects is ordered and structured, but also interconnected and circuitous.

Once we leave the *Knight's Tale*, however, and consider the models of social order inherent in the *Merchant's Tale*, the *Squire's Tale*, and the *Legend of Good Women*, the relative stability of the meaning and model of *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* is called

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[91] Jacques Le Goff, "Head or Heart? The Political Use of Body Metaphors in the Middle Ages," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, 21-23.

into question. I have already gestured to some of the ways Chaucer destabilizes and challenges our understanding of this phrase through shifts in genre and tone. Rather than treat each poem individually and thus potentially mire myself in the ways in which these texts differ wildly both from the *Knight's Tale* and each other, I want to conclude this chapter by considering these three texts together. While they are all quite distinct, they share a common interest: an investment in the *wommanly* quality of *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte*.

Pitee's womanly quality, its association with the feminine, is a recurring theme in Chaucer and in medieval poetry. *Pitee* in the Marian lyric poems of late medieval Italy and France was the great virtue of Mary and the great hope for humanity. Poems such as Chaucer's "An ABC," a translation of the popular mid-fourteenth-century text by Guillaume de Deguilleville's *Le pelerinaige de la vie humaine*, suggest that through Mary's *pitee* the sinful may be restored to the divine way: "I wot it wel, thow wolt ben oure socour, / Thou art so ful of bowntee, in certeyn, / For whan a soule falleth in errour / Thi pitee goth and haleth him ayein" (65-69). And *pitié* is essential for the Lover in overcoming the *dangier* of the Beloved, her resistance and disdain for the Lover, in the *Roman de le Rose*.[92] This particular allegorical representation has echoes in the *plaintes* of Machaut and later Alain of Chartries, and it almost certainly lingers behind Chaucer's

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[92] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la Rose*, lines 3247-3317; see as well the near disaster of *Pitié's* defeat in the second siege of the rose, lines 15388-15486.

short poem "A Complaint Unto Pitee."[93] *Pitee renneth soone in gentil herte* operates in these three texts not quite within either the context of Marian poetry nor within the conventions of the French courtly tradition exhibited either by the *Roman de le Rose* or Machaut. The *Merchant's Tale* most closely aligns with pity in the *fin'amor* tradition (although May herself seems to have little *daunger)*. And the *pitee* of Alceste most resembles the *pitee* of Mary, or perhaps another saintly intercessor, but, Chaucer makes clear that her service is for the God of Love and *not* a Christian God. Canacee's "wommanly pitee," in turn, speaks to a gendered capacity for *pitee* that transcends the bounds of amorous relations and operates outside of a Christian intercessory ethic— although Canacee does serve as witness to what the falcon desires to "confessen" (494).

Chaucer's generic combination makes complex understanding the gendered-social order inherent in Chaucer's treatment of *pitee* in these texts. But part of what is being negotiated when Chaucer writes about a womanly *pitee* that *renneth soon in gentil herte* is the proper order between the genders. This is most evident in the *Legend of Good Women*, a fact I will have more to say about in my final chapter. It is enough to say here, however, that Alceste's *pitee* and her actions in *pitee* are an attempt to correct a gendered social disorder caused by Chaucer's poetry. The God of Love in the Prologue to the *Legend* accuses Chaucer of being his "fo," a descriptor amplified in Prologue G where Chaucer is his "mortal fo" (F.322, G.248). Chaucer has become his foe because he has

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[93] See, for example Machaut's *Plus dure qu'un dyamant* and Chartier's *Le Belle dame sans merci*.

translated heresy against the God of Love (i.e, translated the *Roman de la Rose*) making

"wise folk" from Love withdraw (G.257). Chaucer has, moreover, written tales,

particularly the story of Criseyde that have, as the God of Love describes it in Prologue

F, made "men to wommen lasse triste" (F.333). This transgression against women

receives lengthier treatment in Prologue G where the God of Love chastises Chaucer for

failing to attend to the many stories of good women, of "clene maydenes" and "trewe

wyves" (G. 282), and he accuses Chaucer of only telling stories of women's

"wikednesse" (G. 269).

It is apparent in both versions of the Prologue that the God of Love accuses

Chaucer of an imbalanced representation of women—an imbalance with serious

consequences. In the one case, it leads men to trust women less, and a lack of trust

impedes amorous social relations between men and women. In the other, it creates an

erasure of women's goodness, particularly an erasure of all the goodness of clean

maidens and true wives of which it "is pite for to rede, and routhe, / The wo that they

endure for here trouthe" (G. 286-87). In both cases, it is not just that the value of women

is degraded, although that too is surely present, but that the lack of "triste" in women

creates an instability in male-female sexual relationships.

Alceste, however, interrupts the God of Love to urge *pitee*. She suggests that

Chaucer "wrot the Rose and ek Crisseyde / Of innocence, and nyste what he seyde" (G.

344-45). Chaucer, having been made aware, can thus remedy his transgression by

making stories, as the God of Love will "devyse, / Of women trewe in lovynge al here

lyve" (G. 427-28). This, the text suggests, will correct a gender imbalance (men will see

examples of true women and thus see their worthiness of trust) and, subsequently, will

work to restore social order between men and women.[94]

May's *pitee* in the *Merchant's Tale* also works to restore a gender imbalance. In

this tale, however, what is explicitly being negotiated is the power hierarchy between

men and women. While I have already gestured to some of this power negotiation, it is

worth reiterating because Chaucer skillfully and disturbingly lays bare the gendered

hierarchy at stake in *fin'amor*. May, the beloved woman, is brought to the bedside of her

would-be lover Damyan. Damyam had been while dancing with May, "so ravysshed on

his lady May / That for the verray peyne he was ny wood" (1774-75). This "verray

peyne" has driven him to his bed and near death. May, in turn, "[h]ath take swick

impression that day / Of pitee of this sike Damyan / That from hire herte she ne dryve

kan / The remembrance for to doon hym ese" (1978-1981).

The ease May can offer is her love and her sex. Like the women in the *Knight's*

Tale, we are made aware in this exchange of the power dynamics at play in this scene

through bodily placement. Damyan has been drained of all his bodily power and

reclines ill in bed, prostrate before May. May stands over him, and it is only in loving

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[94] Although I would caution as the *Legend* unfolds that there is reason to question whether this social order is restored or even to be desired, a matter I will return to in my final chapter.

him, in eventually coming to lie alongside him in sexual conquest, that she can begin to acknowledge and ease his suffering. May, like Theseus, is a just and *gentil* ruler who will act for the common good, the preservation and ease of Damyan's life and suffering.

As the irony with which Chaucer proclaims, "Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!" (1986) reminds us, however, the common good of *fin'amor* entails the beloved woman relinquishing any power she has over the her lover. May in pitying Damyan, in acknowledging the validity of his suffering and working to ease it, acknowledges that a social disorder has taken place. Damyan had been a squire, a, to use Januarie's description, "gentil man" (1924). His strength has been sapped; he has through love been driven to the point of madness. And May not only is stronger than he, but she has the power of life and death over him. As Damyan's words inform May, should she make known Damyan's condition and its cause than he is dead (1942-43). What May's love promises to do is to reverse this disorder, removing May from a position atop Damyan in their social hierarchy and love relations.

In her reading of the ways *pitee* is predicated on social hierarchy, Felicity Riddy draws attention to the overlap in the French courtly tradition, as manifested in the *Roman de la Rose* and in Chaucer's poetry, between the social order associated with gender and the social order associated with social status. In the *Roman de la Rose*, the allegorical figure of *Dangier* is figured as a peasant with a club, who battles to keep *Pitié*

and the Lover away from the the interior of the garden.[95] As the image draws out, this is

a sight of gender and class encounter. And in this encounter, the Beloved in her

resistance to the Lover is figured as a revolting male peasant. To use Chaucer's words,

the Beloved is a "vilayn...withouten pitee, / Frendshipe, love, and al bounte" (2183-4).

Riddy glosses this characterization as follows:

> The woman's sexual disdain, her power to withhold herself, is an affront to the male-female hierarchy, which is expressed symbolically as an affront to the social hierarchy. The image of the woman as threatening peasant points to an area of anxiety, to a male sense that the ritualised reversals of courtly experience—which are engineered by him—are nevertheless at the same time humiliating and dangerous.[96]

Pitee renneth soone in gentil herte for Riddy further underscores the class implications

within Chaucer and the *Roman*'s meditations on pity: "If 'pitee renneth soon in *gentil*

herte', then it follows that pitilessness is the attribute of the 'villein', of the non-gentle."[97]

Riddy's reading of *pitee* here is in service of a discussion of the gender and social politics

of *pitee* in the *Franklin's Tale*, a text I will not be considering here other than in context of

its interruption to the *Squire's Tale*. When we begin to consider whether or not this

characterization works in either the *Merchant's* or *Squire's Tales*, or the *Legend of Good*

Women, we are confronted with both its strengths and limitations. All of the women who

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[95] *The Romaunt* (fragment 2), describes *Dangier* in this way: "With that sterte oute anoon daunger, / Out of the place where he was hid. / His malice in his chere was kid; / Full gret he was and blak of hewe, / Sturdy and hidous, whoo hym knewe...." See *The Riverside Chaucer*, "Romaunt B," lines 3130-34.
[96] Riddy, "Engendering Pity in the *Franklin's Tale*," 59.
[97] Ibid.

exhibit the womanly quality of *pitee* in these texts are *gentil*, and as the proverb makes

clear, these women's *pitee* is an attribute of the *gentil*.

But if there is a shared quality of these poem, beyond their shared interest in

womanly *pitee*, it is that their models of social order and rule are unstable. May's *gentil*

pitee is overlaid with irony. The *Legend of Good Women* is famously incomplete and, as I

will argue in my final chapter, offers a highly questionable account of the virtues of

feminine *pitee*. And, the *Squire's Tale*, which promises a celebration of female *gentilesse* to

rival that of the *Knight's Tale's*, is interrupted by the Host and Franklin, culminating in

the Host's exclamation: "Straw for youre gentillesse!" (695).

I would suggest that this shared quality can be understood both in terms of

pitee's operation in Chaucer and medieval literature, as well as in terms of the nature

and character of women as understood in the Middle Ages. *Pitee* as depicted in response

to the suffering of others is affective in the most etymologically rich sense of affective;

pitee is a movement of feeling, thought, and body in response to the suffering and

sorrow of another.[98] We are reminded here of what Aquinas had to say about how the

motion of the heart is and is not like the motion of the heavenly bodies. A primary area

of difference is that the heart, as the connecting point of soul and body, is moved by

external forces—by sensorial perceptions, impressions from others, the feelings and

desires of other people. It is not, however, that the heart and those feelings attached to it,

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[98] See the etymological note for "affective, adj." in the *OED.*

such as *pitee*, operate involuntarily. Rather, the role of the human will is to make choices

based on the various motions, feelings, thoughts, and experiences of the heart. *Pitee*, in

these Chaucerian texts, runs through the *gentil herte*, but we are constantly reminded

that the goods willed by this motion might have limited, perhaps even chaotic ends.

May's adultery, Alceste's charge to Chaucer, even Canacee's *gentilesse*—these are the

many and varied outcomes of *pitee*. We are reminded in these texts that *pitee* may be a

good attached to the maintenance of social order. *Pitee* in the *Merchant's Tale* restores

Damyan to wellness and signals May's *gentilesse*. *Pitee* in the *Squire's Tale* offers the

falcon consolation and relief for her despair. And, in the *Legend of Good Women*, womanly

pitee allows Chaucer to right his wrongs against Love and women. But Chaucer leaves

us on unstable ground, asking whether the social order restored in these tale's is a social

order worth maintaining.

And we should not be surprised that *pitee* is particularly attached to women in

these texts. Women and womanly *pitee* were associated with a particular openness to

others, with a capacity for movement and being moved. Indeed, a hard pitiless woman

was a common trope in the poetic traditions in which Chaucer was immersed, and these

hard women were depicted as cruel and unnatural. Guillaume Machaut in "Plus dure

qu'un dyamant" had written,

> Plus dure qu'un dyamant
> Ne que pierre d'aÿmant
> Est vo durté,
> Dame, qui n'avez pité

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De vostre amant
Qu'ociés en desirant
Vostre amitié.[99]

And Pandarus in *Troilus and Criseyde* likely has this sort of rhetoric in mind when he

says to Criseyde:

Wo worth the faire gemme vertulees!
Wo worth the herbe also that dooth no boote!
Wo worth that beaute that is routheles!
Wo worth that wight that tret ech undir foote!
And ye, that ben of beaute crop and roote,
If therwithal in yow ther be no routhe,
Than is it harm ye lyven, by my trouthe! (II.341-350)

A woman who is *routheless* is unnatural, like a "gemme vertulees" or a healing herb

without benefit.

In turn, the *Squire's Tale* gives us a full articulation of the womanly activity of

pitee's operation. Returning to the falcon's praise of Canacee, the falcon has this to say of

Canacee's *pitee*:

That pitee renneth soone in gentil herte,
Feelynge his similitude in peynes smerte...
For gentil herte kitheth gentillesse.
I se wel that ye han of my distresse
Compassion, my faire Canacee,
Of verray wommanly benignytee
That Nature in youre principles hath set.
(479-487)

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[99] "Harder than a diamond / Or a stone of adamant / Is your hardness / Lady, who has no pity / For your lover / Whom you kill for desiring / Your Love." Original text from "Plus dure qu'un dyamant" lines 1-7, printed in *Œuvres de Guillaume de Machaut*. Translation my own.

This compassion, which the falcon connects to the running of *pitee* in Canacee's heart, is the product of Canacee's "verray womanly benignytee." Remembering that this is not simply an inherited or ingrained capacity, but one that is developed and habitually acquired, we can also see the falcon connecting *pitee* to a particular womanly capacity. That capacity is for "[f]eelynge his similitude in peynes smerte." To phrase the matter differently, it is a capacity for affective response—for being moved by the feeling of others. We are reminded here of the importance of *franchise*, openness, in the allegorical figuration of engendering love in the heart of the Beloved in the *Roman de la Rose*. *Franchise* and *Pitié* work hand in hand as keys to overcoming *Dangier* and approaching the rose. The mark of the feminine *gentil herte* is a capacity for pity and openness—the hope and succor of the lover. It is also a mark of potential instability; a fact underscored in the ironic tone of Chaucer's treatment of May's *gentil herte*, which is, Chaucer suggests, perhaps too easily moved.

It with this turn, or return, to gender that I want to conclude. In thinking about Chaucer's use of *pitee renneth soone in gentil herte*, I have often found myself tracing connections rather than disconnections, attending to the likeness and accord between texts and concepts rather than their dissimilarities and discord. In doing so, I have spoken less of the stakes of the Chaucer's or the later middle ages understanding of *pitee* or the heart or *gentilesse* than I would like. While subsequent chapters will attempt to address this gap, my focus in the final pages of this chapter on *pitee* and gender has been

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attempt to gesture precisely to those stakes. At stake in a woman's *pitee* that *renneth soone*

in gentil herte is the danger of sexual politics and negotiation, a capacity for generous

franchise, an ability and willingness to be moved by others. In his explorations of *pitee* as

a concept, Chaucer brings these elements to the fore. And, it is my contention, that we

can understand the rest of Chaucer's poetry as exploring, challenging, and celebrating

remarkably dangerous and generative medieval concept.

2. Facing Pity: Responding to Suffering in the *Clerk's Tale*

For Mercy has a human heart
Pity, a human face
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

—William Blake, The Divine Image

"...Who that woll maister be,
He mot be servant to pité."

—John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*

In the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer describes the Clerk as a

gaunt, studious man whose speech is short and quick but "Sownynge in moral vertu..."

(307). Concerned that such a man will not tell a sufficiently entertaining tale, the Host

entreats the Clerk:

> For Goddes sake, as beth of bettre cheere!
> It is no tyme for to studien here.
> Telle us som myrie tale, by youre fey!
> For what man that is entred in a pley,
> He nedes moot unto the pley assente.
> But precheth nat, as freres doon in Lente,
> To make us for our synnes wepe,
> Ne that thy tale make us nat to slepe.
> Telle us som murie thyng of aventures...
> (7-15)

Reminding the Clerk that he has entered into a communal "pley" whereby he now owes

his fellow pilgrims a "myrie tale," the Host encourages the Clerk to be of "bettre cheere"

and tell a tale of "aventures." With incredible deftness, the Clerk weaves together his

own scholarly interests with the Host's request. He declares that he will tell "…a tale

which that I / Lerned at Padowe of a worthy clerk…Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat

poete..." (26-31). And indeed, he constructs a rich and rhetorically complex version of

the Griselda story told by Petrarch in his *Historia Griseldis*. Focused as it is around a

woman's decades long suffering, the Griselda story would seem a poor choice for a

"myrie tale."[1] But all does seem to reach the requested "myrie" conclusion. After

spending years thinking her children dead and believing herself to have been set aside

by her husband Walter, Walter tells her that all of these sorrows have been a part of an

elaborate test. Griselda is subsequently reunited with her children and restored to her

position as wife. And "[t]hus," the Clerk declares, "hath this pitous day a blisful ende"

(1121).[2]

In this chapter, I want to consider *pitee*, its formation and expression in Chaucer's

Clerk's Tale. It is *pitee* that the Clerk repeatedly invokes at the tale's conclusion, and it is

pitee, I argue, that drives much of the tale's narrative action. A close examination of *pitee*,

its operation and structure in the *Clerk's Tale* in fact reveals *pitee* to be at the heart of both

Walter's testing and Griselda's suffering. But to understand why *pitee* is so important in

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[1] Petrarch himself relates that friends wept on reading Petrarch's account of Griselda. See *Seniles XVII*;
printed in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*. Vol. 1, 110.
[2] For a reading of the relationship between the figure of the Clerk and his tale, see Carolyn Dinshaw,
Chaucer's Sexual Poetics, especially 135-36.

the *Clerk's Tale*, we must first consider the poem as a work of translation. In my preface, I

suggested a short list of terms with which *pitee* was associated in Middle English: *pitee*,

merci, *compassioun*, *reuthe*. In order to understand the singular importance of *pitee* in the

Clerk's Tale, such a list of family resemblance terms will have to be extended to include

the vocabulary of Chaucer's source material. For in a study of Chaucer's relationship to

his source material we can see that one of Chaucer's major alterations to the Griselda

legend is in fact the insertion of the language of *pitee* and the amendment of the

language of suffering in the tale.

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Chaucer's account of the marriage of the Lombard Marquis Walter and his

patient wife Griselda relies primarily on two sources: Petrarch's *Hisotria Griseldis* and an

anonymous French translation of Petrarch, *Le Livre Griseldis*.[3] As Thomas J. Farrell and

Amy W. Goodwin have shown, these stories, as well as Chaucer's own, reflect a "broad

pattern of response" at the end of the fourteenth century to the story of Griselda.[4] The

Griselda story was first recorded in 1352 as the final tale in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, with

some evidence that Boccaccio himself was drawing on popular folk legends.[5] Petrarch's

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[3] See J. Burke Severs, *The Literary Relations of Chaucer's Clerk's Tale*; as well as Farrell and Goodwin's own discussion of the topic in the introduction to the *Clerk's Tale* in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*.
[4] *Sources and Analogues*, 101.
[5] Other studies have also linked the Griselda legend to various folk traditions. For a fuller discussion of these links, see *Sources and Analogues*, as well as Elizabeth Salter, "*The Clerk's Tale*" in *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and the Clerk's Tale*.

translation of Boccaccio into Latin followed in 1373, and several French accounts might

have been familiar to Chaucer, including the *Livre* and another by Philippe de Mézières.[6]

Many critics have discussed what versions of the Griselda story Chaucer had in

mind when crafting his own tale, debating how best to understand Chaucer's

relationship to other Griselda accounts. These debates over whether or not Boccaccio or

Philippe de Mézières were sources for the *Clerk's Tale* are valuable examinations of

Chaucer's relation to European literary circles, but this sort of source study is not my

focus.[7] My interest in the various translations of the life of Griselda resides in the

particular language of *pitee* and related terms in these accounts. As such, this is not a

study of the sources or analogues of the *Clerk's Tale*, but rather a consideration of the

particular sources for and divergences in vocabulary among the tale and its sources and

analogues.[8] Examining the language used in three of these Griselda accounts,

Boccaccio's, Petrarch's, and *Le Livre Griseldis*, will expand the list of terms associated

with *pitee*. And, perhaps even more critically, it will show those places wherein Chaucer

changed the vocabulary of suffering in the tale.

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[6] For further discussion of whether or not Chaucer read Mézières' version, see *Sources and Analogues*, as well as Severs' *The Literary Relations of Chaucer's Clerk's Tale* and Anne Middleton, "The Clerk and his Tale: Some Literary Contexts."

[7] See Jessica Harkin, "Chaucer's Clerk's Tale and Boccaccio's Decameron"; *Sources and Analogues*; Amy W. Goodwin's "The Griselda Game"; and Thomas J Farrell's, "Source or Hard Analogue? 'Decameron X, 10' and the 'Clerk's Tale.'"

[8] For more on this set of distinctions between sources and analogues, see Peter G. Beidler "Just Say Yes, Chaucer Knew the *Decameron*," and Farrell, "Source or Hard Analogue," particularly pp. 350-351.

The narrative structure of the Griselda legend varies little in Chaucer from contemporary French, Latin, and Italian accounts. In all, a marquis is induced to marry by the request of his people; he subsequently tests the patience of his wife Griselda whom he chooses from among the poorest of his subjects. He first pretends to murder their children and then to set her aside so he can marry a younger, more genteel, wife. The story ends with the revelation that Walter has not murdered their children, nor does he plan to take a new wife. His actions have been a test of Griselda's patience—a test Griselda has passed in spectacular fashion.

But we can begin to tease out the differences among Chaucer, Boccaccio, Petrarch, and the *Livre* even within the initial encounter between Walter and his people. In Chaucer's version, *pitee* is an essential element of this encounter. Walter's people, worried over his tendency to indulge all his time and thought in his own "lust present," (80) confront him and plead with him to take a wife. The spokesperson who had previously been shown "favour and grace" (102) by Walter, explains why the people have dared to make their request:

> O noble markys, youre humanitee
> Asseureth us and yeveth us hardinesse,
> As ofte as tyme is of necessitee,
> That we to yow mowe telle oure hevynesse.
> Accepteth, lord, how of youre gentillesse
> That we with pitous herte unto yow pleyne,
> And lat youre eres nat my voys desdeyne.
> (92-98)

The spokesman associates Walter with several important qualities: nobility, humanity, and *gentillesse*. All of these qualities mark Walter as someone to whom they can appeal with their struggles and complaints. And they themselves approach Walter with "pitous herte." A phrase that directly invokes the connection between *pitee* and the heart so central elsewhere in Chaucer's poetry, "pitous herte" makes critical use of the adjectival form of *pitee*. "Pitous" signifies both that which is pitiable and that which affects *pitee*. A "pitous herte," then, can feel *pitee*, as well as cause others to *pitee*.

Indeed, their "pitous herte" and complaints invoke *pitee* in the Marquis' heart: "Hir meeke preyere and hir pitous cheere / Made the markys herte han *pitee*" (123). While brief, Chaucer here gives an account of the very moment in which *pitee* forms. The "meeke preyere" and the "pitous cheere" of the people *make* Walter have *pitee*. The language of making suggests that *pitee* was created in his heart—that it had not previously existed and was generated by external forces. This formation of *pitee* was not something willed by Walter. Indeed, *pitee* seems beyond Walter's will to control. As he protests, "Ye wol...myn owene peple deere, / To that I nevere erst thoughte streyne me" (143-44). Now that he feels *pitee*, however, he is moved to consider marriage and thereby "been in servage" (147).

In this exchange, Chaucer carefully details the formation of *pitee* in Walter's heart. It was with "pitous herte" that Walter's people dared to approach him, but it was the force of their "meeke preyere and hir pitous cheere" that led to Walter's *pitee*. *Pitee*

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forms in response to their meek prayers and their visible, "pitous," facial expressions.

Chaucer thus establishes a connection between the ability to feel *pitee* and one's capacity

to respond to another. A person is moved to *pitee* through what another shows in words

and expression. And what we see here is the inherently relational nature of *pitee* in the

Clerk's Tale. In feeling *pitee*, one relates to and then responds to the visible sign of

another's suffering.

But what is the nature of that relation? A brief turn to Stanley Cavell's discussion

of the connection between knowing and acknowledging helps to clarify both the precise

nature of the relationship between pitier and pitied in the *Clerk's Tale*, as well as the

stakes attendant in Chaucer's conception of *pitee*. Cavell, in his reading of what a person

means when they say "I know you are in pain," writes:

> I might say here that the reason "I know you are in pain" is not an expression of
> certainty is that it is a response to [an exhibiting of another's pain]; it is an
> expression of *sympathy*… But why is sympathy expressed in this way? Because
> your suffering makes a *claim* upon me. It is not enough that I *know* (am certain)
> that you suffer—I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a
> word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what "(your or his) being in
> pain" means. Is.[9]

While writing in a different idiom, we can see *pitee* in the *Clerk's Tale* operating in much

the same way. *Pitee* functions as a response to a claim made by another's suffering in the

form of an acknowledgment of that suffering. The claim placed on Walter by his people

is quite literal. More than flattery, the spokesperson's attention to Walter's nobility,

[9] Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 263.

gentilesse, and lordship reminds him of the responsibility he has as lord over his people. And what his people claim from Walter is a recognition of the validity of their appeal as his people and an acknowledgment of his role in responding to their suffering. This claim is fulfilled in Walter's *pitee*. Walter might not *know* himself the suffering of his people (in that he has not experienced it), but, moved by *pitee*, he *acknowledges* the suffering that has been expressed: "Ye wol...myn owene peple deere, / To that I nevere erst thoughte streyne me" (143-44).

    Pitee, its creation and relation to expression, is crucial to the narrative action of the scene. Indeed, it is not clear that Walter would have turned from his present lusts and listened to his people's appeals without the compelling force of *pitee*. And yet, no other versions of the Griselda story use the language of *pitee* here nor any family resemblance term. Boccaccio's tale offers no explanation for why Walter's people feel they can approach the marquis. Nor does it explain why Walter feels compelled to marry despite his previous resolution never to do so.[10] Petrarch and the *Livre Griseldis*

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[10] "La qual cosa a' suoi uomini non piaccendo, piú volte il pregaron che moglie prendesse, acciò che egli senza erede né essi senza signor rimanessero, offerendosi di trovargliel tale e di sí fatto padre e madre discesa, che buona speranza se ne potrebbe avere e esso contentarsene molto. A' quali Gualtieri rispose: " Amici miei, voi mi strignete a quello che io del tutto aveva disposto di non far mai..." (X.X.4-5) [...but his vassals, brooking it ill, did oftentimes entreat him to take a wife, that he might not die without an heir, and they be left without a lord; offering to find him one of such a pattern, and of such parentage, that he might marry with good hope, and be well content with the sequel. To whom: " My friends, " replied Gualtieri, " you enforce me to that which I had resolved never to do.."]. Translation taken from *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccacio*, tr. J. M. Rigg. Quotations of Boccaccio taken from *Decameron* in *tutte le opera di Giovanni Boccaccio*. All subsequent citations are from these editions and are noted parenthetically by day, book, and line number.

both emphasize the *humanitas* of Walter as that which allows his people to approach

him, but neither work describes Walter as pitying.[11]

Chaucer's differences from his sources drastically change the power relations of

this scene. For Chaucer also describes Walter's *humanitas*—"O noble markys, youre

humanitee / Asseureth us..." (92-93)—but he expands on it. Walter's "humanitee"

assures his people that they can appeal to him in their necessity, but it is his

"gentillesse" that they complain to with "pitous herte" in order that their appeals might

be accepted. Here, as we have seen him do elsewhere in his poetry, Chaucer connects

the language of *humanitee* with the language of *gentillesse* and *pitee*. The acceptance of his

people's complaints thus are not the result of a common humanity, but are rather the

product of having a particular virtue, one associated with a particular social status, that

disposes him to be moved to feel *pitee* for them. We are made aware then, from the

beginning of Chaucer's account, that *pitee* is reliant on social structures of power and

authority.

If we move beyond this first encounter, we can begin to see other major

connections and differences among the versions of the Griselda story, particularly

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[11] Petrarch writes, "...Tua, inquit, humanitas, optime marchio, hanc nobis prestat audaciam; ut et tecum singuli quociens res exposcit devota fiducia colloquamur..." (lines 72-74) ["...Because of your kindness, O great marquis, we dare, whenever the need demands it, to approach you individually and speak in firm confidence..."]; the *Livre* authors says, "Ton humanité, sire marquis, nous donne hardiesse que, toutesfois que besoing nous fait, parlions a toy feaublement et hardiement; et veez cy que je te veul dire de par tous tes hommes et subgez" (lines 20-23) ["Your kindness, lord marquis, gives us courage so that anytime that we have need, we speak to you loyally and boldly; and see here that I wish to speak to you on behlad of all of your men and subjects"]. Citations and translation taken from *Sources and Analogues* unless otherwise noted. Subsequent citations cited parenthetically by line number.

around the expression of suffering. It is important here to remember the function of the face as a sign of a pitiable state, as well as the centrality of a *pitous* face to inducing *pitee*. For ,while other versions of the tale do not detail the *pitous* faces of Walter's people, all show a sustained focus on the face and on facial expressions.

As much is evident in the varying descriptions of Griselda's face. Boccaccio, Petrarch, and the *Livre* repeat multiple times that Griselda never changes her countenance no matter what happens to her. In Boccaccio, Griselda's unchanging countenance is mentioned four different times and is reiterated at the conclusion of the tale: "Chi avrebbe, altri che Griselda, potuto col viso non solamente asciutto ma lieto sofferir le rigide e mai piú non udite prove da Gualtier fatte?" (X.x.68).[12] Petrarch mentions it in lines 160, 261, 326, and the *Livre* in lines 178, 213, 250, 336.

And this fascination with Griselda's face also appears in Chaucer. In the moment when Walter tells Griselda that he is setting her aside for a younger, nobler wife, Chaucer gives the following description:

> "The smok," quod he, "that thou hast on thy bak,
> Lat it be stille, and bere it forth with thee."
> But wel unnethes thilke word he spak,
> But wente his wey, for routhe and for *pitee*.
> Biforn the folk hirselven strepeth she,
> And in her smok, with heed and foot al bare,
> Toward hir fadre hous forth is she fare.

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[12] "Who but Griselda had been able, with a countenance not only tearless, but cheerful, to endure the hard and unheard-of trials to which Gualtieri subjected her?"

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> The folk hire folwe, wepynge in hir weye,
> And Fortune ay they cursen as they goon;
> But she fro wepyng kepte hire eyen dreye,
> Ne in this tyme word ne spak she noon.
> (889- 900)

In this scene, Walter sends Griselda away, allowing her to retain only her smock. While his actions seem callous, he departs "for routhe and for *pitee*." Griselda herself retreats back to her father's home, with no weeping or speech. No visible facial expression of sadness, no spoken expression of unhappiness. Her own incredible patience is met with the people following her, cursing Fortune and weeping.

In unpacking the significance of Griselda's face in this scene, Ralph Hanna's work on patience provides useful insight: "the external visible act most strikingly associated with patience is simply unswerving and silent endurance, passive bearing-up under all hardship, even to the point of death."[13] If silent endurance serves as the sign of patience, then a lack of expression is patience embodied. But, as Chaucer's tale goes on to illustrate, lack of expression makes evident the inherent dangers involved within being patient. If we take expression in verbal or bodily form to be necessary for the formation of *pitee*, then the truly patient who endure silently and without expression will never make another have *pitee*.

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[13] Ralph Hanna, "Some Commonplaces of Late Medieval Patience Discussions: An Introduction," 68. For more on patience in the *Clerk's Tale* see Robin Waugh's *The Genre of Medieval Patience Literature*. Of particular interest in Waugh is her argument for Griselda's patience as an active challenge to Walter's power. This passage also shares interesting resonances with Job. For more on Griselda and Job see Giuseppe Mazzotta. *The World at Play in Boccaccio's Decameron*; Martin McLaughlin, "Petrarch's Rewriting of the Decameron X.10"; and Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*.

Indeed, the passage above illustrates this very fact. Walter feels *pitee* for the first

time since the beginning of the tale and does so in response to one of the few requests

Griselda makes:[14]

> "…Naked out of my father's house," said she,
> "I came, and naked moot I turne agayn.
> Al your pleasance wol I folwen fayn;
> But yet I hope it be nat youre entente
> That I smoklees out of youre paleys wente.
>
> Ye koude nat doon so dishonest a thing,
> That thilk wombe in which youre children leye
> Sholde biforn the peple, in my walking,
> Be seyn al bare; wherefore I yow preye,
> Lat me nat lyk a worm go by the weye.
> Remembre yow, myn owene lord so deere,
> I was youre wyf, though I unworthy were
>
> Wherfore in gerdon of my maydenhede,
> Which that I broghte, and noght agayn I bere,
> As voucheth sauf to yeve me, to my meede,
> But swich a smok as I was wont to were,
> That I therwith may wrye the wombe of here
> That was youre wyf. And heer take I my leeve
> Of yow, myn owene lord, lest I yow greve." (871-889)

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[14] And here my reading of *pitee* in the *Clerk's Tale* disagrees with that of Larry Scanlon. Scanlon writes, "The Clerk makes Walter fully aware of the effect of his cruelty, remindg us more than once of his pity (IV, 894, 1050). Such pity also characterizes the initial agreement with his people…The pity of the initial, prudent Walter cannot be separated from that of the subsequent capricious Walter. Nor can it be separated from the pity the tale expects from his audience, the pity that Petrarch reports moved one of his cultivated readers to tears. This is a pity like the sympathy Chaucer recommends to readers in the *Parson's Tale*, a downward identification which affirms the very social boundaries it crosses." While I think Scanlon is right to be sceptical of any boundary crossing by *pitee* in the tale, his reading here very much relies on understanding Walter to be pitying throughout the tale. Scanlon's point that this makes Walter's cruelty more horrifying is true, but, I would argue, even worse is the fact that Walter, recognizing that *pitee* can be manipulated, makes a particular effort to ensure he never feels *pitee*—and thus never risks ending his cruelty prematurely. See Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power,* 184.

With its appeal that Walter remember the intimacies she has shared with him, including

the loss of her virginity and the birth of their children, Griselda's extraordinary speech

chastises and challenges Walter. Griselda has given Walter an incredible amount, and

they have shared a great deal. Here, even though Griselda does not "grucche" or

"stryve" against Walter's actions, she expresses clearly her personal experience with

Walter. And she makes clear the shame attached to dismissing her while she is

smockless. She will be laid bare and depart "lyk a worm." While keeping the terms of

her agreement with Walter, Griselda's speech generates the conditions under which

Walter experiences and responds to her with *pitee*.[15]

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[15] Of the above passage, Carolyn Dinshaw writes, "[*Griselda*] exploits the symbolic power of the biblical echoes in her next comment: ''Naked out of my fadres hous,' quod she, / 'I cam, and naked moot I turne agayn' (871-72), associating her trials with those of Job, the paradigmatic Christian 'preved' by God. Not only the Clerk adumbrates the symbolic value of Griselda's experience in his narrative, explicitly mentioning Job, for example...Griselda reads *herself* symbolically...[But] [w]hen she asks that Walter provide her with a smock so that her 'wombe' . . .will be hidden from the people...we hear the woman speaking from inside the allegorical image, as it were. . . . she reveals the sense of having been used. Griselda's demand that she not go smockless ('Ye koude nat doon /146/ so dishonest a thyng' [876]) is aggressive—very different from her accomodating tone in Petrarch and the *Livre* —her language vivid and biting ('Lat me nat lyk a worm go by the weye'), her tone even vaguely threatening ('Remember yow, myn owene lord so deere, / I was youre wyf. . .'). Griselda reads herself as allegorical image and thereby 'authorizes' us to read her allegorically, but at the same time she gives us a sense of what it feels like to be made into a figure of speech, what is left out when she is read *translative*. . . . the particularity of Griselda's experience—her bodily pain, suffered because her wifeliness is being tested—and her acerbic words to Walter make this clear and poignant." *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 146-47. I quote this long passage in Dinshaw, because, while it is very close to my own reading, my account of this scene differs in important ways. I agree that in her speech Griselda demands that both Walter and we as readers regard her as a human being with particular life experiences and particular pains and not just a figure out of religious exempla. However, I find Griselda here not aggressive, biting, or threatening. Instead, her speech is very carefully and diplomatically structured to be appeasing to Walter, reminding him that the shame he casts on her would be his shame as well. Of central importance is that while she reveals her own pain, Griselda's rhetorical strategy relies much more on a consideration of Walter's possible future shame than it does on any revelation of her sorrow.

While the structure of events remains the same, Chaucer strikingly omits a

critical detail from his description in this scene: Walter's weeping. Boccaccio, Petrarch,

and the *Livre* all describe Walter as weeping or desiring to weep while responding to

Griselda's request for clothing.[16] The *Livre* in particular constructs a rich and visually

dramatic image:

> Lors ploura forment de pitié le marquis si que a paine contenir se povoit; et ainsi, en tournant son visaige, en parler tout troublé, a paine peust dire, Doncques te demeure celle que tu as vestue." Et ainsi se party celle sans plourer; et devant chascun se devesti, et seulement retint la chemise que vestue avoit, et la teste toute descouverte et deschausse s'en va. Et en cest estat la suivent plusieurs, plourans et maudisans fortune, et elle seule ne plouroit mie ne ne disoit mot. (335-341)[17]

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[16] Petrarch: "Habundabant viro lacrime, ut contineri amplius non posset. Itaque faciem avertens, Et camisiam tibi unicam habeto, verbis trementibus vix expressit, et sic abiit illacrimans. Illa, coram cunctis sese exuens, solam sibi retinuit camisiam, qua contenta, nudo capite pedibusque nudis, egreditur; atque ita prosequentibus multis et flentibus fortunamque culpantibus, siccis una oculis et honesto veneranda silencio, ad paternam domum remeavit. [Tears welled up in the man; he could no longer be contained. Turning his face, Walter said in a trembling voice, 'I grant you a single shift,' and left weeping. She stripped herself in front of all; content in just her shift, she left with naked head and naked feet. Many followed her, lamenting and blaming Fortune; with dry eyes and in noble silence, the venerable woman returned alone to her paternal home]" (325-330).; Boccaccio: "Gualtieri, che maggior voglia di piagnere avea che d'altro, stando pur col viso duro, disse: 'E tu una camiscia ne porta' Quanti dintorno v'erano il pregavano che egli una roba le donasse, ché non fosse veduta colei che sua moglie tredici anni e piú era stata di casa sua cosí poveramente e cosí vituperosamente uscire, come era uscirne in camiscia; ma invano andarono i prieghi; di che la donna, in camiscia e scalza e senza alcuna cosa in capo, accomandatigli a Dio, gli uscí di casa e al padre se ne tornò con lagrime e con pianto di tutti coloro che la videro. [There was nought of which Gualtieri was so fain as to weep; but yet, setting his face as a flint, he made answer: 'I allow thee a shift to thy back; so get thee hence.' All that stood by besought him to give her a robe, that she, who had been his wife for thirteen years and more, might not be seen to quit his house in so sorry and shameful a plight, having nought on her but a shift. But their entreaties went for nothing: the lady in her shift, and barefoot and bareheaded, having bade them adieu, departed the house, and went back to her father amid the tears and lamentations of all that saw her]" (X.x.46-47).

[17] "Then the marquis wept so hard from pity that he could hardly contain himself; and so turning away his face and in a very troubled voice, he was barely able to say 'Then stay in that which you are wearing.' And so she departed without crying; and before everyone she undressed; and only kept the shift that she was wearing, and with her head completely uncovered and shoeless, she goes off. And in this state several follow her, weeping and slandering fortune, and she alone neither wept nor said a word."

Griselda, surrounded on all sides by weeping, stands alone silent and without tears

wearing only her shift. Walter weeps so strongly that he can barely contain himself.

Thus, in order to seem unmoved, he must turn his head away ("...je te supplie que...")

(332). The author of the *Livre* constructs the entirety of the scene around the place of the

face and expression in social communication. Griselda, and all of Walter's people, would

be able to read his emotions in a moment if they could see his face. They would know

that Walter acts reluctantly.

It is notable then, that the author of the *Livre* here uses the language of *pitié.*

Walter's nearly uncontainable weeping stems from his *pitié*. Moreover he wants to hide

his expression of that *pitié* by turning away his face. The inclusion of *pitié* is one of only

two instances of the language of pity being used, not just in the *Livre*, but in all other

versions of the tale.[18] A comparison between the usage of "*pitee*" and "pitié" in these

scenes, however, indicates important differences between the *Livre*'s *pitié* and Chaucer's

pitee. The Marquis in the French version weeps so hard from *pitié* that he can barely

speak to grant Griselda's request for her smock. After he tells her that she can stay in her

current clothing, she departs without crying and removes everything but her smock

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[18] The other instance, also in the *Livre*, describes the sergeant coming to murder Griselda's daughter: "Lequel sergent quant il fut retournez a son seigneur et lui raconta la response de sa femme et lui presenta sa fille, [il fut] meu de grant pitie... [When the sergeant returned to his lord and told him of his wife's response and prsented him with his daughter, he was moved to great pity.]" (204-205). This is a fascinating moment in the *Livre*, notable in particular for the fact that Chaucer never describes this particular servant as pitying Griselda. I suspect this omission relates to Chaucer's greater focus on the link between facial expression and the ability to feel pity. Alternatively, the sergeant, not being *gentil* might simply not have a *pitous* heart.

before returning to her father's house. Chaucer omits Walter's weeping from his version, effectively removing any association between Walter's *pitee* and his own ability to express his feeling of *pitee* through tears.

Indeed, Chaucer's description of Walter and his actions in this scene make it difficult to understand anything about Walter's internal feeling and thought. Walter does not weep. His speech is not described as troubled or constrained by *pitee* as in the *Livre*. Rather, Chaucer describes Walter's speech and his actions as follows: " 'The smok,' quod he, 'that thou hast on thy bak, / Lat it be stille, and bere it forth with thee.' / But wel unnethes thilke word he spak, / But wente his wey, for routhe and for *pitee*" (889-892). Chaucer's terse "quod he," with its lack of descriptors, limits the tools with which Chaucer's readers could understand Walter as conflicted or troubled by his actions. It is not until after Walter grants Griselda only her smock that Chaucer describes him as experiencing "routhe" and "pitee." Chaucer transitions directly from Griselda's request to Walter's response. This direct transition not only largely eliminates the space in which other accounts detailed Walter's response, but it also limits our understanding of his inner state—especially his experience of *pitee* and *reuthe*.

Walter's reasons for leaving are difficult to interpret, and so at this juncture I want to turn to a brief consideration of *reuthe*. Often translated into modern English as pity, *reuthe* shares many similarities in meaning and use with *pitee*, but *reuthe* has an

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older history in English distinct from that of *pitee*.[19] Used from the early thirteenth

century in homilies and later in texts such as the *Owl and the Nightingale*, the *Vices and*

Virtues, and the *Ancrene Riwle*, *reuthe* also carried associations with sorrow or grief in

addition to meaning pity or compassion.[20] While we might read the combination of

reuthe and *pitee* in the above passage from the *Clerk's Tale* as a compounding of

synonymous words, the inclusion of *reuthe* suggests a sorrow and grief in Walter not

implicit in his feeling *pitee*.

But Walter does not display his sorrow. He leaves scarcely having finished

speaking. And, unlike in other accounts where he hides his face or leaves because his

weeping reveals his inner pain, Chaucer's Walter has not revealed any pain. He

therefore does not need to leave to hide it. Why then does Walter leave "for routhe and

for *pitee*"?

To understand why, I want to return to Chaucer's account of Walter's *pitee* for his

people. Many critics have attended to the place of *pitee* in navigating social structures

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[19] *Reuthe* likely comes from the Old Norse. As the *MED* notes, it is comparable to the Old Icelandic hygð, meaning sorrow, and it has "vowels and diphthongs influenced by OE hrēow...[meaning] [s]orrow, distress; penitence, repentance; regret. Also: an instance of such a feeling."

[20] In homilies such as those printed in *Old English Homilies of the twelfth century: from the unique ms B. 14. 52 in the library of Trinity College Cambridge*, edited, with introduction, translation and notes by Rev. R. Morris, *rewthe* is frequently used with reference to Christ. In the *Owl and the Nightingale*, see lines 1445, 1497; in *Vices and Virtues*, *reuthe* appears repeatedly, particularly with reference to the crucifixion; and in the *Ancrene Riwle* (across all versions) *reuthe* is the dominant term for any response of regret or sadness. This association is also a central component of medieval passion lyrics, see, for example, "Why have ye no reuthe on my child?" printed in *Middle English Marian Lyrics*, edited by Karen Saupe. For assocation with sorrow or grief see *MED* meaning 2.

and power dynamics in the late fourteenth century.[21] Jill Mann perhaps most notably does so in writing on what she terms the "dynamic" quality of *pitee* in Chaucer wherein "cause instantaneously re-creates itself as effect" so that the piteous or pitiable in one person results in a response of *pitee* in another. For Mann, the nature of *pitee* is "levelling and unifying...[with] power to overturn and obliterate the relationship between conqueror and suppliant."[22] *Pitee*, as exercised in Walter's exchange with his people, seems to operate in much this way. Walter's people, as suppliants, come before Walter with meek prayers and "pitous cheere;" Walter, their ruler, feels *pitee*, and he subsequently acquiesces to their request that he marry despite his own prior resistance.

The power dynamic between ruler and suppliant, rather than being overturned or obliterated here, however, is at best only temporarily suspended. Walter assents to marry, but insists that he alone choose his wife. He dismisses a request from his people that they be the one's to choose for him from amongst the "gentilleste and of the meeste / Of al this land" (131-132). Furthermore, he makes his agreement conditional on their swearing that they will "neither grucche ne stryve" (170) against his choice of wife. Rather, they will worship her (166). In assenting to his people's request, Walter accepts but then asserts his power by amending the terms of his people's supplication. Not only will he choose his own wife, but, in making them swear to "neither grucche ne stryve"

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[21] Felicity Riddy, "Engendering Pity in the 'Franklin's Tale'"; Paul Strohm, "Queens as Intecessors," in *Hochon's Arrows.*

[22] Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, 187. The focus of Mann's discussion here is the *Knight's Tale*. Mann's account of *pitee* in the *Knight's Tale*, however, serves as a useful foil for discerning Chaucer's model of *pitee*.

against her, he limits the means by which they might appeal his decision should they prove dissatisfied with his choice. While this request might on the surface seem a reasonable means of limiting complaint, it is important to recall the very conditions that made possible Walter's initial agreement: the meek prayers and piteous countenance of his people.

To understand the import of Walter's response to *pitee*, I want to examine the etymological link between *pitee* and piety or *pietas*. Charting the etymological development of pity, the *OED* describes pity's relationship to piety:

> The sense of Latin *pietās* 'piety' was in post-classical Latin extended so as to include 'compassion, pity' (Vetus Latina), and it was in this sense that the word first appears in Old French in its two forms *pitié* and *pieté* . Gradually these forms were differentiated, so that *pieté* , which more closely represented the Latin form, was used in the original Latin sense, while *pitié* retained the extended sense. In Middle English, both pity n. and piety n. are found first in the sense 'compassion', and subsequently in the sense 'piety', and the differentiation in sense is not complete until the 17th cent.[23]

The etymological connection between pity and piety provides a powerful contrast between *pitee*'s associations in the pre-modern context and pity's context in the contemporary. If in its contemporary context pity suggests contempt or disdain, etymologically it is associated with *pietas* and thus with compassion, devotion, and sense of right conduct.

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[23] See also this account in the OED of the etymology: "Anglo-Norman *pité*, *pittee*, *peté*, *peti*, Anglo-Norman and Old French *pitet*, *pitee*, *pitié* (Middle French *pité* , *pitié* , French *pitié*) compassion (*c*1100), piety (15th cent.; rare) < classical Latin *pietās* (see piety n.). In branch II. probably after Middle French *pieté* piety n."

But in what sense can pity be understand to connect to these facets of *pietas*?

Tzachi Zamir's understanding of pity might be of use here. Discussing Othello's falling

in love with Desdemona when he encounters her pity, Zamir argues,

> Pity is a noninstrumental relation to people in which actions and states are
> empathetically read in relation to the formative circumstances that caused them.
> It is thus a virtue that makes people at least as important as their deeds. Othello
> falls in love when he encounters pity directed at him, when, for a change, he is
> not being used but is understood, becoming the focal point of another's reality.[24]

Although Zamir's interest is in *Othello* and Shakespeare's conception of pity, his

articulation of pity as a way of relating to another is useful when considering pity as it

relates to *pietas*. To pity sincerely requires recognition of the other as more than an

instrument for use. Moreover, pity is a willingness to read another in relation to his/her

circumstances; we might understand this as a willingness to read another with charity.[25]

Such a reading with charity brings us back to a discussion of knowing and

acknowledging. As Karla Taylor in *Chaucer Reads the Divine Comedy* argues, pity and

compassion operate as modes of understanding, as ways of interacting with and

responding to another in which understanding of the other is enhanced. Pity helps to

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[24] Tzachi Zamir, *Double Vision*, 156. He here considers III.iii and IV.ii in *Othello* in making his claims.
[25] Remembering here Augustine's injunction to read texts with charity in *De Doctrina Christiana*, especially
his injunction on the reading of Holy Scriptures that draws on 1 Cor 8:1, "Now concerning those things that
are sacrificed to idols: we know we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up: but charity edifieth."

bridge the gap between the limitations of human knowledge and the ability to fully know another person.[26]

I do not want to make too much of this here, *pietas* had undergone centuries of change in meaning and usage before the fourteenth century. Chaucer certainly would have had *pietas* in mind, however, when writing of the meeting between Walter and his people because of Petrarch's use of *pietas* in this scene. Petrarch explains that the Marquis yielded to his people's request because: "Moverunt pie preces animum viri [Pious prayers moved his soul]" (91). Subtly different from Chaucer's account, where the people come to Walter with "pitous hertes" and "[h]ir meeke preyere and hir pitous cheere / made the markys herte han *pitee*" (97, 141-142), in Petrarch the Marquis's heart is moved by the *pie preces* of his people. With Petrarch's description of their prayers as pious, we can see the connection between *pietas* meaning both duty and devotion, as well compassion and mercy. The people come to the Marquis dutifully with devotion and appeal to his compassion for their concerns.

Having thus considered the relationship between pity and *pietas*, I want now to turn the relationship between Walter and Griselda, looking first at the set of oaths they exchange. Walter, exercising his right to choose his own bride, selects one from amongst the poorest of his own people. He chooses Griselda as his bride, drawn to her

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[26] Taylor also discusses pity as a bridging the gap between our fallible human modes of knowing and certain divine truths, see pp. 203-207.

"wommanhede" and virtue (239-49). But his choice is conditional on her assent to a

particular set of demands:

> I seye this: be ye redy with good herte
> To al my lust, and that I frely may,
> As my best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
> And nevere ye to grycche it, nyght ne day?
> And eek whan I sey 'ye,' ne sey nat 'nay,'
> Neither by word ne frowning contenance?
> Swere this, and here I swere oure alliance.
> (351-57)

The agreement relies on a readiness to follow all his lust with a good heart. Here, I want

to examine to the way that Walter's "lust" speaks to a desire to control Griselda's

expression. She will laugh or "smerte" as he thinks best. In a repetition of the conditions

he placed on his previous agreement with his people, she will never "grycche."[27]

Moreover, whereas Walter in his previous agreement had limited his people's space for

complaint only to the area of his choice of wife, he eliminates Griselda's space for

complaint entirely.

Most disturbingly, however, Walter requires Griselda's agreement in all things,

in both her verbal and bodily expression. Her words and her expression must always be

in accord with each other, and they must always be in accord with Walter's will. The

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[27] Wendy Harding also attends to the connection between the exchange between Walter and his people and the agreement between Walter and Griselda. Harding argues, "This uneasy negotiation of power in the first part of the tale prepares for the conditions Walter imposes on Griselda...Missing from [the agreement with Griselda] is the idea of mutual consideration noramlly at work in contracts between man and wife or lord and vassal. In claiming unlimited mastery over his wife Walter exaggerates the vertical gap between ruler and ruled to grotesque limits. He dispenses with the illusion of parity normally provided by the discourse of *pity* in the lover's wooing of his lady or in the lord's relation with his vassal." Quoted from "The Function of Pity in Three Canterbury Tales," 169.

extremity of Walter's desire to control Griselda can be traced to his previous encounters

with his people. Walter's *pitee*—that which led to his earlier acquiescence—was

produced by their meek prayers and "pitous cheere." With the terms he presents to

Griselda, Walter attempts to prevent the precise conditions that led to his earlier

capitulation to his people. Griselda will never be able to confront him with complaints

or demands, no "grycching," and she will never be able to induce *pitee* in Walter

through her "pitous cheere"—unless he commands it of her. [28]

   Griselda, however, does not challenge these demands. Rather, filled with wonder

at Walter's words and "quakynge for drede," Griselda extends Walter's power over her,

altering the terms of the agreement:

> Lord, undigne and unworthy
> Am I thilke honour that ye me beede,
> But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I.
> And heere I swere that nevere willyngly,
> In werk ne thoght, I nyl yow disobeye,
> For to be deed, though me were looth deye.

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[28] In comparison, I have excerpted the oaths exchanged between Walter and Griselda in Petrarch and the *Livre*. Petrarch: "...an volenti animo parata sis ut de omnibus tecum michi conveniat, ita ut in nulla unquam re a mea vountate dissencias et, quicquid tecum agere voluero, sine ulla frontis aut verbi repugnancia te ex animo volente mihi liceat [...your willing spirit is prepared never to dissent from my will in any thing which concerns you and me; whether you will permit me to do whaever I wish with you, wthout any reesistance in your face or your words, with a willing spirit?]" (154-157). *Livre*: "...se de bon cuer et plain [vouloir] tu es preste et le veulx, et que tout me loise, et puisse faire avec toy si que jamis en quelconque maniere tu ne contrediras a ma voulenté et que tu vueilles et te plaise [quanqu'il] me plaira [...if with a good heart and free will you are ready and willing, and that all be permissible to me, and I be able to do with you anything without you even contradicting my will in any manner, and that you desire and be pleased with whatever pleases me]" (115-118). The *Livre* makes no mention of Griselda's face in the oaths. Petrarch's oath does limit her facial expression and her words. Considering the tone and intention of Petrarch's account, which privileges more strongly than other accounts a favorable comparison between Griselda's willing obedience and the soul's willed obedience to God, however, Petrarch's passage implies less cruelty in Walter's actions than does the *Livre* or Chaucer.

(358-364)

Beginning with a reminder of the lowness of her social position in relation to Walter's, Griselda swears not just to match her expressions and her words to Walter's, but that "as ye wole yourself, right so wol I." She pledges to unite her very will to his. Griselda swears that she will never willingly in her actions or her thoughts disobey Walter. Walter had previously extended his control only to what Griselda might outwardly display. Under Walter's previous conditions Griselda could have thought how she liked as long as it was not revealed through her outer expression. With Griselda's addendum, her outer expressions and her inner thoughts can never disobey Walter. Griselda swears to reflect Walter's will inwardly in her thoughts and feelings and outwardly in her actions and expressions. And such strictures will keep him from ever knowing or coming to understand Griselda as a person. She will only ever be an instrument to be used for his own pleasure, his own "lust" (80, 717). All of this is orchestrated through Griselda's own alterations.[29]

Walter declares these terms "ynogh," (365) and it is to these terms that he holds her throughout the rest of the tale. Walter conducts a series of cruel tests designed to indicate the unity between what she expresses and her inner state. In these tests, he

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[29] Jill Mann notes, "Griselda's unquestioned obedience to her husband is not the simple result of her marriage vow, but something that she takes upon herself with the unique promise that is the special condition of her marriage." Quoted from Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 146.

constructs elaborate plots to make it seem as if he had both of their children murdered.

And yet, after the second faked murder:

> He waiteth if by word or contenance
> That she to him was changed of corage,
> But nevere koude he fynde variance.
> She was ay oon in herte and in visage,
> ...For which it semed thus: that of hem two
> Ther nas bot o wyl, for as Walter leste,
> The same lust was hire plesance also.
> (717)

The *semed* of line 715 is of critical importance. This assessment of Griselda's responses,

which underscores the constant unity between her heart and her visage, follows directly

on an account of the certain knowledge Walter has of her inner state. The tale describes

that Walter wondered all the more on Griselda's patience and her willingness to endure

the seeming murder of her children:

> ...and if that he
> Ne hadde soothly knowen therbifoore
> That parfitly hir children loved she,
> He wolde have wend that of some subtiltee
> And of malice, or for cruel corage,
> That she hadde suffred this with sad visage.
> (688-93)

In this moment, Chaucer attends to the utter incomprehensibility of Griselda's

willingness to suffer with "sad visage." David Aers has articulated the cultural context

that would have objected to Griselda's passive acceptance of her children's murder.[30]

And it is important to note that even Walter, who has been categorized as acting with

cruelty and evil intent towards Griselda, reacts with disbelief at her willingness to suffer

with a steadfast and firm expression that indicates no inner emotional turmoil.

Walter's wonder at Griselda's lack of expression, moreover, has its roots in a

particular knowledge. He "soothly know[s]" that she does indeed love fully and

perfectly her children. The importance of this knowledge and Walter's certainty in it is

such that it is immediately reiterated in the subsequent lines: "But wel he knew that next

hymself, certayn, / She loved hir children best in every wyse" (694-95). The repetition of

Walter's knowledge of Griselda's love of her children acknowledges that despite Walter

always seeing in her a unity of "herte and in visage," Walter *knows* that Griselda loves

her children. This love ought to make her speak, act, and bodily express her love

differently than in a "sad visage." Walter senses that within Griselda there must exist a

separation between her inner state and her outer expression. Walter wonders at her

"pacience" and her "sad visage" because he knows her inner state ought to disrupt the

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[30] See chapters 1 and 2 in *Faith, Ethics, and the Church.* See also Ralph Hannah on Patience: "Augustine makes the central contribution to this discussion for he sees clearly that triumphant endurance of pain is a great virtue but that some triumphs are not worth suffering for. The later medieval citation-version of Augustine puts the matter most succinctly 'not suffering, but a good cause makes a martyr.' In addition, Augustine introduces the usual theological standard for measuring the value of a cause, the eighth beatitude 'blessed are they who suffer persecution for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' by investing the *justitia* of the beatitude with the full weight of connotation he normally associates with the word *caritas*, Augustine redefines the nature of the virtuous cause—it becomes the cause of God alone. Consequently, suffering for a cause which is not god is viewed through the Middle Ages as less than meritorious, as indeed sinful—a fictive patience." Hanna, "Some Commonplaces of Late Medieval Patience Discussions: An Introduction," 70.

constancy of her patience and her "sadnesse." And it is here that we are brought back to

the concepts of knowing and acknowledging. For we see Walter's particular cruelty. It is

a cruelty based in a failure to acknowledge. Walter does not fail to *know* (to be certain of)

Griselda's suffering, but he fails to *acknowledge* and respond to her suffering.

It is with this distinction between inner state and outer expression that I now

want to turn to the final scene of the tale. Griselda, childless and cast aside by Walter, is

confronted with the young "tendre mayden" (1039) Walter claims to be taking as his

second wife. In response to her, Griselda offers once again her patience, but also a

warning to Walter that such a maiden might "nat adversitee endure / As koude a povre

fostred creature" (1042-43). This warning keeps to the terms of the agreement between

herself and Walter. It is not "grycching" but a reminder of the relevant facts of Griselda's

social status and Walter's related power over her.

Subsequently, such a reminder leads Walter not just to see, but to "rewen" and to

respond to the suffering of Griselda (1050). Walter responds with the revelation that he

never had their children killed and that, in fact, the young maiden set to be his bride is

his and Griselda's daughter and not his future wife. This revelation ends in Griselda's

physical collapse:

> Whan she had this herde, aswowne doun she falleth
> For pitous joye, and after hire swownynge
> She bothe hire yonge children to hire calleth,
> And in hire armes, pitously wepynge,
> Embraceth hem, and tendrely kissynge
> Ful lyk a mooder, with her salte teeres

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> She bathed bothe hire visage and hire heeres.
>
> O which a pitous thyng it was to se
> Hir swownyng, and hire humble voys to heere! (1079-87)

The repetition of the word *pitous*, with its sense of being both that which is pitiable and that which affects *pitee*, overwhelms the passage with pathos.[31] Chaucer makes Griselda's love for her children evident as she displays the full depths of her inner joy and love. And indeed, as we might expect from the way *pitee* and *pitous* operated in Walter's initial interaction with his people, those who witness the sight respond to Griselda's state either with their own piteous weeping, or, in the case of Walter, in his moving to slake her sorrow and reunite their family in good cheer.

On the surface, this reconciliation suggests a disruption of the social order like that noted by Jill Mann. Griselda's reminder of her social status leads Walter to feel *rewthe* and to respond to this feeling with a revelation. His revelation of her children's lives and her renewed status as wife resolves in a piteous scene where the gathered community pities and then celebrates the restoration of both the children to their family and also Griselda to her married status.

And yet, this scene occurs *without* violating Griselda's sworn oath to Walter. Walter in his revelation allows, even wills, Griselda to "[t]aak [her children] agayn"

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[31] Helen Cooper writes of this scene: "The strength of that embrace reflects the force of the emotions [Griselda] has been supressing; and it is not an image of overwhelming delight and relief, but of the extremity of suffering." This embrace is also one of the human reactions detailed by Elizabeth Salter, which conflicts with the exemplary nature of the tale's exemplary frame. See Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 138; Elizabeth Salter, "The Clerk's Tale," 50 & 62.

(1068) and orchestrates the entire scene so that he "hire gladeth and hire sorwe slaketh" (1107). Griselda's pitiable state offers no threat to Walter's social position. He has harnessed the potential power of *pitee* to generate social disruption. Subsequently not only has he maintained his own social status, but has constructed a "blisful ende" to a "pitous day" that silences his detractors in a peaceful unity in which he is cast as the benevolent orchestrator of happiness (1121).

This blissful end, which Elizabeth Salter's essay on the *Clerk's Tale* reminds us rings patently false in the face of Walter's cruelty and the tale's supposed religious frame, ultimately suggests the futility of any sustained social disruption invoked through *pitee*.[32] Even if *pitee* can obliterate or level social structures, it can also be manipulated and subverted by those in power limiting its sustainability. The conclusion to the *Clerk's Tale* thus speaks less to a celebration of the leveling power of *pitee* in the face of social hierarchies and more to a despair about the futility of a sustained social change arising out of *pitee*.[33]

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At the beginning of this chapter, I considered the various sources and analogues of the *Clerk's Tale*. This served not so much to trace the direct sources of Chaucer's account as it did to piece together the particular fourteenth-century vocabulary

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[32] Ibid.

[33] We might think here of Lynn Staley's insistence on the "political despair" inherent within the structure and telling of the *Ccanterbury Tales* as a whole. See Lynn Staley, "Chaucer and the Postuers of Sanctity," 182.

associated with the Griselda story. In doing so, my work was to clarify the significance

of Chaucer's distinctions and divergence from the common language of the Griselda

legend, particularly in relation to his focus on *pitee*. Having articulated that *pitee* in the

Clerk's Tale becomes a locus for both social disruption and manipulation which is unlike

that present in other versions of the Griselda story, I want now to consider the historical

contexts and sources for Chaucer's representation of *pitee*. As before, my aim in this

consideration is not to engage in a study of Chaucer's sources, nor is it to make a

particular historicist claim as to texts or authors to whom Chaucer is responding

directly. On the contrary, in engaging with possible sources and historical contexts for

Chaucer's understanding of *pitee* in the *Clerk's Tale*, I want to situate Chaucer as

engaging in a particular political discourse on *pitee*. Returning to the exchange between

Walter and his people, a scene that I have argued is central to understanding the way

pitee operates in the rest of the tale, we can see how *pitee* and responses to the pitiable

connect explicitly to one another in the discourse on lordship and common profit in the

Clerk's Tale.

At the conclusion of their appeal to Walter to marry, his people ask that he

"[b]oweth [his] nekke under that blisful yok / Of soveraynetee, noght of servyse..."

known as wedlock (113.115). Invoking the trope of marriage as a form of sovereignty or

service, they address Walter's fear that his marriage will result in his being ruled rather

than ruler.[34] In Walter's response, notably happening after his people's "meeke preyere"

and "pitous cheere" make his heart have *pitee*, Walter complains:

> "Ye wol," quod he, "myn owene peple deere,
> To that I nevere erst thoughte streyne me.
> I me rejoysed of my liberte,
> That seelde tyme is founde in mariage;
> Ther I was free, I moot been in servage." (141-147)

And yet, while to a certain extent Walter rehearses standard tropes about marriage and

service, Walter's social position and power mark him as "free" and not in "servage." As

a Marquis, he is not a slave or a serf. His condition and rank is "free." This is in direct

contrast to Griselda's status as the daughter of a bondsmen.

Such a distinction has a dramatic impact on the way the language of freedom

and lordship develops after Walter responds with *pitee* and marries. Having spent years

testing his wife, Walter in front of an open audience makes a speech in which he

explains that he must set Griselda aside for the good of his people. Walter explains:

> Certes, Grisilde, I hadde ynogh pleasance
> To han yow to my wyf for youre goodnesse,
> As for youre trouthe and for youre obeissance,
> Noght for youre lynage, ne for youre richesse;
> But now knowe I in verray soothfastnesse
> That in greet lordshipe, if I wel avyse,
> Ther is greet servitute in sondry wyse.
>
> I may nat doon as every plowman may.
> My peple me constreyneth for to take

---

[34] See also Chaucer's treatments of "maistrie" in both the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* (to which the *Clerk's Tale* explicitly responds) as well as the *Franklin's Tale*.

Another wyf, and crien day by day…
(792-801)

The interconnection between this passage and the earlier exchange between Walter and

his people is striking. Walter claims that Griselda's goodness, *trouthe*, and *obeissance*

were enough and that he was pleased to have her as a wife despite her lack of riches or

lineage. And yet, even though he is pleased, his people cry all day to him to seek another

wife of a higher lineage and more wealth. Walter explains why he must respond to these

cries—why he is *constrained* to do so. He constructs a narrative wherein when he first

chose to marry Griselda he did so only because of her various virtues, but he has since

learned something new ("now knowe I in verray soothfastnesse"). Walter now knows

that in "greet lordshipe" is "greet servitute." Expounding on his specific meaning, the

seeming paradox of how a great lord must also be in great servitude, Walter continues

to describe his condition: "I may nat doon as every plowman may. / My peple me

constreyneth for to take / Another wyf…." Using the same language of service and

constraint to talk again about marriage, Walter casts himself as constrained not by his

wife, but by his people's reaction to her. His people bind him in servitude, not because

he is a feminized man whose wife is his master, but rather, because he now recognizes

that a great lord attends to the good of his people, to the common profit of a community.

He does not rule as he did prior to his people's request that he marry: "… on his lust

present was al his thoght…Wel ny alle othere cures leet he slyde, / And eek he nolde—

and that was worst of alle— / Wedde no wyf, for noght that may bifalle" (80-84). His

enjoyment then was all for his present life and was filled with hawking and hunting, no wife, and no planning for the future. He "rejoysed of [his] liberte" (145). He now hears the cries of his people, plans for their future, and does not act according to his own "lust." Walter listens to them. In this sense, he cannot act as the plowman does, but must act thinking toward his people's needs. Walter thus narrates himself as attending to and obeying the demands of common profit.

In relation to these sets of negotiations and exchanges in which Walter engages, I want now to consider the place of *pitee* in public discourse. It is in the first exchange between Walter and his people that he was made aware of and acceded to the demands of common profit. The people, concerned for their futures if Walter did not marry and produce heirs, appealed to him that he marry. Despite his prior reluctance to marry and his desire to attend only to his present "lust," Walter says to his people, now I "...se youre trewe entente / And truste upon youre wit, and have doon ay; / Wherfore of my free wyl I wole assente" (148-150). His ability to "se" their true intent and trust their discernment follows directly on his ability to hear and see their "meeke preyere and hir pitous cheere." *Pitee*, once made in the marquis' heart, leads him to this recognition of common profit and "greet lordshipe."

Such a relationship between *pitee* and "greet lordship" has precedence in the political language of the late fourteenth century. In his essay "The Literature of 1388 and the Politics of Pity in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," Andrew Galloway examines what he

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terms "the menacing and unreliable nature of pity as a political and legal instrument" in

Gower's *Cronica tripertita* and *Confessio Amantis*.[35] Contending that *pitee* in these texts

functioned as an unreliable and menacing force for political and legal power, Galloway

draws on the discourses surrounding the Merciless Parliament of 1388 with particular

focus on the language surrounding *pitee* and *pietas*.

In his account of the historical and political context surrounding 1388 and its

subsequent developments leading up to Richard II's deposition in 1399, Galloway

mentions Henry Knighton's *Chronicle* as the source identifying the 1388 parliament as

the Merciless Parliament; it is the "parliamentum sine misericordia."[36] While Galloway's

primary focus does not lie in a close analysis of the particular language identifying the

parliament as "merciless," I want to do so here. Knighton identifies the parliament as

sine misericordia, a phrase he and others have translated as merciless. And, lthough he

never says so explicitly, Galloway in his reading intends for *misericordia* to be associated

with *pitee*, particularly the dialogue surrounding *pietas* and *pite* in Gower. Certainly

common usages of *misericordia* indicate the validity of such associations. The first entry

for *misericorde* (the anglicized form of *misericordia*) in the *MED* in fact defines *misericorde*

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[35] Knighton, *Knighton's Chronicle, 1337-1396*, 68.

[36] Ibid., 414. Galloway also says of Knighton: "The rubricator of Knighton's manuscript at a later point
entitles it 'the parliament that worked wonders'...but this name is more commonly used by others (including
Knighton in his own text) for the parliament of 1386 which impeached Michael de la Pole. Given his
generally pro-Appellant posture and sources, and his evidently reliable contact with wider sources than
many chronicles, Knighton seems indeed to be capturing a common if rather anti-Appellant name for the
parliament." Galloway, "Literature of 1388 and the Politics of Pity in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," 80.

as "the quality of compassion, mercy, pity." And later in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer

proffers a related definition as a part of the *Parson's Tale*:

> thanne is misericorde, as seith the Philosophre, a vertu by which the corage of a
> man is stired by the mysese of hum that is mysesed. upon which misericorde
> foloweth *pitee* in parfournynge of charitable werkes of misericorde and certes,
> thise thynges moeven a man to the misericorde of jhesu crist... (804)

The Parson explicitly connects *pitee* and *misericorde* in acts of being "stired" and

responding to people that are "mysesed." The language is vague: what is it to be

"mysesed," and how can we identify people who are? A consideration of *pitee* in this

passage offers clarification. Taking the Philosopher here to be Aristotle, we can consider

the definition of pity he offers in the *Rhetoric* "a feeling of pain caused by the sight of

some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it."[37] The

Parson's Tale builds on Aristotle in theologically complex ways. Earlier the Parson had

described acts of *pitee* and *misericorde* as working in the "rescowynge" and "releevynge"

of "eveneCristen." When a person responds to the "mysesed," they respond through

pitee and *misericorde* to the distress of a fellow Christian—a person with whom they are

in a shared community. Moreover, it moves them in the direction of Christ. While

distinct terms, *pitee* and *misericorde* are represented as belonging to the same type of act

of responding to another, of responding with charity towards a member of a shared

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[37] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, II.8.

community. This language of response and community connects explicitly to discourses of common profit and good lordship in Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*.

Such a connection draws not only on the language of *misericordia* and *pitee*, but it brings us back to the language of *pietas.* As I discussed earlier, Chaucer would have had the language of *pietas* in mind while composing the *Clerk's Tale* because of its prominence in Petrarch's account. *Pietas* also held a prominent place late fourteenth-century political discourse on lordship. Written in the wake of Richard II's conflict with the city of London in August 1392 wherein the king attempted and eventually succeeded in forcing the city to loan him money in a lavish public ceremony,[38] Richard Maidstone's *Concordia* describes the reconciliation of Richard II and London. In the poem, after the people of London engage in a fantastical march through the city, an angel descends bearing holy tablets that he gifts to the city's warden. The warden then delivers a speech in praise of the qualities befitting kings. All of these qualities are held by Richard: "nobilitas generis, virtus proba, formaque pulcra, / Gracia, prosperitas, ingeniumque sagax."[39] Among these impressive traits, Richard's *pietas* is highest of virues:

> Sed super haec pietas, compassio veraque cordis,
> Dignificans animum, vos porbat esse probum.
> Spes etenim populi potior fit, et ad pietatem
> Qua datur his venia, regis et ira cadit.

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[38] For more on the Metropolitan Crisis of 1392 and Richard Maidstone's connection to it, see David R. Carlson's introduction to *Concordia.*

[39] "Innate nobility, great bravery, good looks, / Grace and prosperity, and wit and wisdom too." Latin text and translation quoted from Richard Maidstone, *Concordia,* with a verse translation by A.G. Rigg, ed. David R. Carlson, 403-404. Subsequent quotations from *Concordia* are cited parenthetically by line.

Significant satis hoc tabulae quas cernitis istae,
Quas regi pia plebs obtulit ecce pio.
Ora ut inspiciat has, rex cum tangitur ira,
Mortis et ut Christi mox velit esse memor;
Parcat et ignaris, veluti rex celicus ille
Hostibus indulgens, semper inultus erat.[40] (405-414)

Maidstone's depiction of the *pietas* of a king toward his pious people in many ways

echoes the scene between Walter and his people in Petrarch and Chaucer. And,

considering what I have argued about Walter's manipulation of *pitee* in the *Clerk's Tale*, it

is difficult not to see in Chaucer an echo of what Galloway reads as dangerous about

Maidstone's *pietas*. For Galloway argues that Maidstone depicts not just *pietas*, but a

dangerous form of *pitee*, royal *pitee*, which is "a sign of violence held back" and "a direct

expression of power."[41]

I want to note two elements in Maidstone's *Concordia*, however, that suggest that

Chaucer's *pitee* in the *Clerk's Tale* functions differently from that of Maidstone. In

attending to the distinctions between words made in *Concordia,* it becomes evident that

the *pietas* Maidstone describes differs in important ways from the *pitee* of Chaucer or, in

fact, the *pius preces* of Petrarch. *Pietas* in the *Concordia* aligns with "[q]ua datur hiis

venia," i.e., the act of giving pardons. *Pius preces* in Petrarch and *pitee* in Chaucer,

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[40] "Above all this, your piety and empathy, / Heartfelt, which show your mind, proclaim your probity. / The people's hope is greater still, when royal wrath / Subsides and turns to mercy, pardoning them all. / These tablets that you see are symbols of all this: / Your faithful people give them to their faithful king. / They beg the king, when touched by wrath, to look upon / These tablets and reflect upon the death of Christ; / And spare the ignorant, as heaven's king once did, / Forgiving enemies, and always unavenged."
[41] Andrew Galloway, "The Politics of Pity in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," 93.

however, do not mean the act of giving pardons. Richard, moreover, is placed in direct

comparison with Christ, the heavenly king who spares the ignorant and forgives

enemies ("Parcat et ignaris, veluti rex celicus ille / Hostibus indulgens"). Chaucer

explicitly avoids such comparisons. Walter is not Christ and his people do not need

forgiven.[42] The *pietas* of Maidstone, then, differs fundamentally from the *pitee* of

Chaucer.

Secondly and most importantly, the comparison with *pietas* in Maidstone helps to

clarify an important facet of the way *pitee* and its association with *pietas* operates in

Chaucer. Walter's experience and avoidance of *pitee* is couched in Chaucer, not in

expressions of lordly pardon, but within a discourse of mutual, communal obligation.

Walter's *pitee* is contingent on his ability to recognize a communal need for the future of

his people. Moreover, Walter's account of "greet lordshipe" aligns itself explicitly with

"greet servitute," with a necessary bowing of his individual will to the service of

communal needs and wills. In aligning *pietas* with the granting of pardon, Maidstone's

pietas functions in a mode distinct from that within the language of common profit

found in Walter's speech in the *Clerk's Tale*. To have royal *pietas* means to be willing to

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[42] Chaucer writes: "For sith a womman was so pacient / Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oght / Receyven al in gree that God us sent; / For greet skile is he preeve that he wroghte. / But he tempteth no man that he boghte, / As seith Seint Jame, if ye his pistel rede; / He preeveth folk al day, it is no drede. / And suffreth us, as for our excercise, / With sharpe scourges of adversitee / Ful ofte to be bete in sondry wise; / Nat for to knowe oure wyl, for certes he, / Er we were born, knew al oure freletee" (1149-60). For alternative views, see Elizabeth Kirk, "Nominalism and the Dynamics of the *Clerk's Tale*" in *Chaucer's Religious Tales* ed. C. David Benson and Elizabeth. Robertson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 1990), 111-20; Stepsis, Robert ""Potentia Absoluta" and the "Clerk's Tale"" *The Chaucer Review* 19.2 (1975), 129-46.

pardon. Consequently, the other has committed some offense requiring pardon, i.e., as

in the *Concordia* failing to loan money to the king.[43] To have *pietas* is to be willing to

pardon.[44] Unlike the *pietas* of Maidstone, or Galloway's characterization of it in relation

to royal power, the *Clerk's Tale* situates *pitee* as part of a dialogic exchange centered

around common profit. Pardon is not required because no wrong has been committed.

Instead *pitee* acknowledges and identifies with the needs of another.

But comparing *pietas* in Maidstone and *pitee* in Chaucer also elucidates the

particular bleakness of Chaucer's account of *pitee* and "greet lordshipe." Here, when

Walter manipulates *pitee*, he does not do so as a monarch offering pardons or acts of

mercy. Rather he manipulates the language of service and common good in order to

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[43] Although we might debate whether or not this act requires pardon, the point stands that Maidstone's *Concordia* indicates that it does.

[44] This discourse is certainly familiar, but perhaps one of the most interesting discussions on this topic comes in Seneca's *De Clementia*, with which Chaucer might have been familiar In *De Clementia*, Seneca advises Nero to have *clementia*, which entails giving pardon even to enemies. Seneca makes clear that this is an act that is for the good of Nero, the good of the state, and which indicates a devotion to right action. Perhaps most interestingly considering what I have said about *misericordia*, Seneca adds, "Ad rem pertinet quaerere hoc loco, quid sit misericordia; plerique enim ut virtutem eam laudant et bonum hominem vocant misericordem. Et haec vitium animi est. Utraque circa severitatem circaque clementiam posita sunt, quae vitare debemus; per speciem enim severitatis in crudelitatem incidimus, per speciem clementiae in misericordiam. In hoc leviore periculo erratur, sed par error est a vero recedentium... [At this point it is pertinent to ask what *misericordia* [pity] is; for many praise it as a virtue and they say a good man pities. And this is a defect of the mind. Both of these stand around severity and clemency, which we ought to set apart; lest under the species of severity we fall upon cruelty, or under the species of mercy we be led into pity. It is less danger to make the latter error, but both errorslead us away equally from the truth.] Seneca, *De Clementia*, II.iv.4; translation is my own. On Chaucer's familiarity with Seneca see Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* and, Barbara Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the Roman Antique*. Certainly Senecan ethics and philosophy had an influential role on the philosophy, theology, and politics of the Middle Ages; see Marcia L. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages* and Beryl Smalley, *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century* as seminal works on this topic.

fulfill his own individual desires. His is a particular kind of tyranny.[45] In following his

desires he limits the possibility for any community organized around ideals of common

profit to exist. As David Aers has argued, "Chaucer's work represents society as a

composite of *inevitably* competing groups motivated by individualist forms of material

self-interest....In this vision all claims to be pursuing an allegedly *common profit* are

exposed to a sceptical examination which subverts the very notion of a unified society

and a harmonious common profit...."[46] Walter, after all, fabricates his narrative in which

he has learned "greet lordshipe." He professes that because his people constrain him to

set aside Griselda he "may nat doon as every plowman may." And yet, Walter's people

do not plead with him to choose a new wife. Indeed they do not complain about her in

any capacity. Instead, they love her.[47] In direct contrast to Walter's claims, "swich

murmur was among [Walter's people] comunly" about Walter's "crueel herte" and

murderous ways that they who had loved him before now hated him (724-731). His

setting aside Griselda arises out of his own desire to tempt Griselda more and "Full to

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[45] For more on Chaucer and Lombard models of tyranny, see David Wallace, "Italy" in *A Companion to Chaucer*.

[46] Paul Strohm's discussion of the changes occurring in social hierarchies during the late fourteenth century is also helpful here: "Lords were no less lords under the new system. Indeed, the social gulf between lords and members of the gentry retained for service under the new system might well have been greater than that between lord and knightly tenant under the old. But the singularity of the relation of the gentleperson in service to the lord he served was inevitably diminished under the new system. Emphasis on the voluntary and contractual nature of the new association worked against the exclusivity of the vertical ties that bound a person in service to his lord, and encouraged a new perception of horizontal ties of affinity to those sharing one's own class, rank, and social objectives." Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 14.

[47] See lines 400-413.

han experience and loore / If that she were as stidefast as bifoore" (788-789). His

discourse of "greet lordshipe" becomes a part of his cruel tempting of Griselda.

In fact, if there is any figure in the *Clerk's Tale* who explicitly works for common

profit, it is Griselda:

> Nat oonly this Grisildis thurgh hir wit
> Koude al the feet of wyfly hoomlinesse,
> But eek, whan that the cas required it,
> The *commune profit* koude she redresse.
> Ther nas discord, rancour, ne hevynesse
> In all that land that she ne koude apese,
> And wisely brynge hem all in reste and ese.
>
> Though that hire housbonde absent were anon,
> If gentil men or othere of hire contree
> Were wrothe, she wolde bryngen hem aton;
> So wise and rype wordes hadde she,
> And juggementz of so greet equitee,
> That she from hevene sent was, as men wende,
> Peple to save and every wrong t'amende.
> (428-441)

Not only does the Clerk use the particular language of "commune profit" in his

description, but Griselda's ability to arbitrate, her "juggementz," are of such

righteousness and impartiality that she seems "hevene sent...[p]eple to save and every

wrong t'amende." We are reminded here of the language of pardon offered in

Maidstone. Rather than offering pardon for a particular wrong, however, Griselda

operates restoratively, mending any fracture within the community. In Griselda's

preternatural judgment and ability to act for the common profit, she becomes like a

political savior, divinely commissioned.

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And yet, Walter circumscribes Griselda's potential to save the people and bring

about amends. John A. Pitcher has noted, "Griselda's political acumen, in the Clerk's

account, presupposes a sphere of autonomy and independence that supports the free

expression of criticism, a position that Walter denies to Griselda."[48] Even more than

denying free expression of criticism, however, Walter's denial of expression and

Griselda's refusal to act counter to Walter's will suppresses the possibility of common

profit being achieved. In the Envoy's caution at the end of the tale, he tells wives not to

be like Griselda lest they, being too patient, be devoured by Chichevache. Instead, he

advises that they should be like Echo who is never silent:

> But evere answereth at the countretaille.
> Beth nat bidaffed for youre innocence,
> But sharply taak on yow the governaille.
> Emprenteth wel this lessoun in youre mynde,
> For commune profit sith it may availle.
> (1189-1194)

Here, the Envoy connects common profit explicitly with expression. Echo always speaks,

always expresses.[49] Excessive patience and lack of verbal or bodily expression do not

add to the common profit, but may detract from it.

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[48] John A. Pitcher, *Chaucer's Feminine Subjects*, 106; we are reminded here as well of David Wallace's reading of Griselda as the object of Walter's attention and gaze: "Griselde's suffering begins when she becomes the object of the tyrannical gaze […] Griselde contains the effects of Walter's gaze, and later of his acts, within herself." Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity,* 291.

[49] However, while Echo may never be silent and is always able to speak, what she expresses is only ever an echo of another's speech.

Nowhere is this clearer then in the picture of communal "harmony" at the tale's

end. The "blisful ende" becomes possible only when the "pitous" nature of day, of

Griselda and the community's patient suffering under Walter's manipulations, can be

acknowledged. Such an acknowledgment, however, relies on Walter's decision to

remove the conditions that made such suffering possible—Griselda's silent,

expressionless patience.

3. Pity and Ethics in *Troilus and Criseyde*

"If the sentimental tourist can delight in the sorrow of the other, it can only be because he feels no responsibility toward the other's happiness."

—Vivasvan Soni, *Mourning Happiness*

"...the sense of human misery is the pre-condition for love and justice. He who does not realize to what extent fortune and necessity hold in subjection every human spirit cannot regard as fellows creatures nor love as he loves himself those from whom chance separated him by an abyss."

—Simone Weil, "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force"

In the opening lines of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer argues for the ethical importance of matching feeling to poetic form: "...[w]el sit it, the sothe for to seyne, / A woful wight to han a drery feere, / And to a sorwful tale, a sory chere" (I.12-14).[1] Playing on *wel* meaning appropriately or fittingly done, as well as fortunately accomplished, Chaucer establishes an ethics for the composition of sorrowful tales.[2] A tale is accomplished *wel* when, like a sorrowing person with a dreary companion, it is written with a "sory chere," a sorry expression. Chaucer, weeping as he writes, provides an

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[1] My discussion of ethics here has been shaped by Eleanor Johnson's argument for the interrelation of ethics and form in medieval literary theory; see particularly the introduction and chapter two in *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages*.

[2] The Middle English term *wel* has a wide semantic range. The *MED* notes: "The word wel has meanings that persist regardless of the word it modifies, and where broad categorizations of its semantic range are possible, it has been so defined. But it is more commonly used to indicate the successful accomplishment of the action indicated by the verb it accompanies, and its meaning in such cases is largely contextual." Here, I principally refer to definitions 1a. and 7a. in the *MED*.

ethical service to lovers by functioning as a "sorwful instrument" that helps them to

"pleyne" (I.7, 10-11). He offers himself as the medium through which lovers can express

their "peyne" (I.6).[3]

The ethical imperatives of sorrowful tales, however, are not limited to the work

of the tale's teller. Chaucer's argument in Book I for the fittingness of particular

authorial "chere[s]" develops into an appeal for readers to respond with *pitee*: "But ye

loveres, that bathen in gladnesse, / If any drope of pyte in yow be, / Rembreth yow on

passed hevynesse / That ye han felt, and on the adversite / Of othere folk..." (I.22-26).

Appealing to lovers, particularly those that currently "bathen in gladnesse," Chaucer

asks that if they have "any drope of pyte" they remember past "hevynesse." Linking the

experience of feeling pity with the action of remembrance, Chaucer suggests that if the

ethical service he provides is to match his *chere* with the sorrowful nature of his tale then

the service his readers might offer is to be stirred by *pitee*.

But what is it to be stirred by *pitee*? How is *pitee* formed and expressed? And how

does *pitee* relate to the poem's treatment of ethics? In the rest of this chapter, I want to

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[3] While compelling arguments have been made for the importance of distinguishing between Chaucer the author and Chaucer the narrator, particularly in *Troilus and Criseyde*, too little attention has been paid to the ways Chaucer the poet and the narrator are intimately bound together. As Elizabeth Salter argues, "Chaucer's changing purposes, or, to put it more positively, his capacity for change, give [*Troilus and Criseyde*] some of its most remarkable characteristics. But this is a matter of authorial responsibility, and we miss the creative excitement at the heart of the matter if we continue to think in terms of a poet-narrator arbitration as the over-all controlling and justifying device. For here may be the first time in English literature when the poet goes some way toward an acknowledgment, both to himself and to his public, of the controversial and troublesome part he finds himself bound to play in the handling of his received 'matere.'" Quoted from "*Troilus and Criseyde:* poet and narrator," 233. See as well A.C. Spearing's discussion of this issue in *Medieval Autographies* and *Textual Subjectivity*.

consider *pitee*, its formation and relation to ethics, in *Troilus and Criseyde*. It is *pitee* that

Chaucer invokes from the poem's inception, and it is *pitee*'s relation to virtue that lies at

the heart of the poem's consideration of ethical action.

Pitee serves a unique function in *Troilus and Criseyde*. In *Troilus*, Chaucer

challenges his readers to consider who they *pitee* and how they come to *pitee* them. This

challenge takes shape in the opening lines of the poem within Chaucer's connection of

pitee to acts of remembrance. He asks his readers to *pitee* Troilus and Criseyde, but he

also asks that they remember their own past "hevynesse" and the adversities they have

witnessed in the lives of others. In this act of remembrance, Chaucer details what it is to

pitee. Chaucer's description of pity and its associated actions here is neither conclusive

nor exhaustive; he will soon go on to ask that lovers who *pitee* "preieth" and "biddeth"

and "have of hem compassioun" (I.29, 36 &43, 50). This first stanza, however, offers a

crucial rendering of the relationship between the suffering of others, *pitee*, and

responding to suffering. If a person has the capacity to *pitee*, he or she is able to

participate in this act of remembrance.

The form that this remembrance takes is of particular importance because it

maps out a relationship between pitier and the pitied. A remembrance in *pitee* will mean

an ability to reflect on one's own past sufferings. It will be to recall what it is to suffer

and to relate the suffering of another to one's own. To remember in *pitee* will be to recall

moments of witnessing someone pitiable.

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The complexity of *pitee* here becomes evident if we consider the ways literary critics have described *pitee*. In my preface, I suggested that few have considered *pitee* closely and/or at length. And, particularly in the case of *Troilus and Criseyde*, when critics do discuss *pitee*, many have taken to referring to it as a process of "compassionate identification" or "affective sympathy."[4] But it is worth considering in-depth what it means to describe *pitee* as compassionate identification. For, as I hope to show in the following pages, there are serious social and ethical consequences attendant in considering *pitee* as a form of affective sympathy.

We can get some sense of these consequences by returning once again to Jill Mann's *Feminizing Chaucer*. In her chapter "Female Betrayal," Mann touches on the "womanly quality of pity."[5] In a consideration of Criseyde's pity for Troilus, Mann argues that "...if Criseyde's 'slydynge corage' is the ugly face of human changeability, its benign face is 'pite'... Criseyde's 'pite' leads to Troilus's happiness, her 'slydynge corage' to his betrayal."[6] But what does Mann mean in her alignment of Criseyde's *pite* with her changeability, her "slydynge corage"?

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[4] These terms are quoted from Phillipa Hardman, "Chaucer's Man of Sorrows: secular images of pity in the 'Book of the Duchess', the 'Squire's Tale', and 'Troilus and Criseyde,'" 205, and Owen Boynton, "The Trouthe/Routhe Rhyme in Chaucer's 'Troilus and Criseyde,'" 224.

[5] Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, 134.

[6] Ibid., 616.

In an analysis of *The Knight's Tale* that she links to *Troilus*,[7] Mann extols "the

leveling, unifying nature of pity, its power to overturn and obliterate the relationship

between conqueror and suppliant."[8] This leveling and unifying power takes place

within an openness to change exhibited by Theseus himself as he changes from violent

anger to yielding pity. For Mann, this yielding to pity is critical. In this yielding, *pitee's*

ability to dismantle hierarchies of power is enacted. This change in power, moreover,

results from an internal change within the pitier: "'Pitee' is not merely the extension of

succor to the weak by the strong, it is a willingness to submerge strength in weakness in

an act of imaginative identification. It is, as Robin Kirkpatrick puts it, 'the ability to

respond with all one's being to another being.'"[9] For Mann, this imaginative

identification means that a man (exemplified by Theseus) willingly submerges himself

in *pitee* and thinks with and acts from the perspective of a woman (exemplified by his

suppliants).

In Chaucer's discussion of *pitee* as enacting remembrance of "passed hevynesse /

That ye han felt" and the related remembrance of "the adversite / Of othere folk" (I. 24-

26), he describes a process that looks a great deal like "imaginative identification." This

resemblance breaks down, however, if we compare Chaucer's appeal to his readers

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[7] "If Criseyde's 'pitee' leads to a tragic pattern of events, Theseus's 'pitee' works constantly in the opposite direction, towards justice and harmony." Ibid., 139.

[8] Ibid., 135.

[9] Ibid., 139. Mann quotes from Robin Kirkpatrick's essay on the *Clerk's Tale*, "The Griselda Story in Boccaccio, Petrarch and Chaucer," 231. For an alternate reading to Mann's account of power reversal, see Paul Strohm, "Queens as Intercessors," 95-120.

alongside his source material, Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*.[10] Chaucer's appeal to lovers is preceded by a moment of self-identification as the servant to the servants of the God of Love who does not dare to Love "for myn unliklynesse" (I.16). The opening stanzas of *Il Filostrato* stand in stark contrast. Boccaccio also appeals to lovers, asking for their prayers and attention in reading the sorrowful life of Troilo, but he does so in a much different context—as a lover to a particular lady who he has lost:

> Adunque, o bella donna, alla qual fui
> e saró sempre fedele e suggetto,
> o vaga luce de' begli occhi in cui
> Amore ha posto tutto il mio diletto;
> o isperanza sola di colui
> che t'ama piú che sé d'amor perfetto,
> guida la nostra man, reggi lo 'ngegno,
> nell 'opera la quale a scriver vegno.
>
> Tu se' nel tristo petto effiigiata
> con forza tal, che tu vi puoi piú ch 'io;
> pingine fuor la voce sconsolata
> in guisa tal che mostri il dolor mio
> nell 'altrui doglie, e rendila si grata,
> che chi l'ascolta ne divenga pio.
> Tuo sia l 'onore e mio si sia l 'affano,
> s'e' detti alcuna laude acquisteranno.
>
> And so, O beautiful lady, to whom I have been, and always shall be, faithful and subject; O lovely light of those beautiful eyes in which Love has paced all my delight; O sole hope of him who loves you more than himself—with perfect love, guide my hand, direct my creative power, in the work which I am about to write.

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[10] For more on Chaucer's relationship to *Il Filostrato* see R.K. Root, *The Textual Tradition of Chaucer's "Troilus"* and C.A. Owen, Jr., "The Significance of Chaucer's Revisions of 'Troilus and Criseyde,'" 1-5.

You are pictured in my sad heart with such force that you can do more there than I can; impel my disconsolate voice in such a way that it may express my sorrow in another's pain, and make it so pleasing that whoever hears it may become [piteous]. If these words acquire any praise, let the honor be yours and the labor mine.[11]

The language of *pitee* found in Chaucer appears also in Boccaccio, but Chaucer has made extensive alterations. The servant of the servants of Love in Chaucer is in Boccaccio the always faithful and constant subject (*sempre fedele e suggetto*) to the beautiful lady (*bella dona*). She is to whom Boccaccio's appeal is written, and it is her aid in writing that he seeks. He asks that she drive his disconsolate voice from him so that his sorrow might appear in the guise of another's woe (*pingine fuor la voce sconsolata / in guisa tal che mostri il dolor mio / nell 'altrui doglie*). And, moreover, he asks that this happen in such a pleasing way that others are moved to pity (*e rendila si grata, / che chi l'ascolta ne divenga pio*).

In the metaphor of dressing his sorrow in another's woe, Boccaccio imaginatively assumes the emotions and identity of another. The failed lover with his disconsolate sorrow puts on the guise of another's sorrow. He imagines and reenacts the sorrowful love story of Troilus in the process of writing. The poem will be an attempt to write—and embody by writing—the sorrow of another. Boccaccio indicates, however, that this is a process benefiting everyone other than Troilo, the person whose woe he is putting

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[11] Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Filostrato*, trans. Nathaniel Edward Griffin and Arthur Beckwith Myrick, I.4-6. All subsequent references to Boccaccio's work are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically within the text by part and stanza number. Translations are also cited by part and stanza number and are quoted from *Troilus and Criseyde, with Facing Page Il Filostrato*: *Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, ed. Stephen A. Barney. The bracketed [piteous] in the second to the last line of the translation is my own substitution.

on. Boccaccio wants to be the object of others' pity. If his readers are moved to pity, he wants to be the object of their prayers to Love; Boccaccio wants them to *act* in response to his suffering (*e se nel core avvien che voi sentiate / destarsi alcuno spirito pietoso, / per me vi priego che Amor preghiate*). Boccaccio does not make a claim that the pity that arises out of his dressing in another's sorrow has any other object than himself.

Chaucer leaves out entirely the narrative of the disconsolate lover. He instead expounds on the ways he has never experienced anything like Troilus and Criseyde's sorrows, so much so that he needs the aid of Tisiphone to have an appropriately "sory chere" (I.14).[12] Chaucer does not put on the guise of another's woe or seek *pitee* for himself. He makes a careful distinction between Troilus and Criseyde's unique experience and his own situation.

Chaucer also has altered the process by which *pitee* forms. It does not arise from the pleasing sorrow of poetry; it seems to be a quality inherent in the reader. Chaucer does not have the ability to bring *pitee* to life with his verse; rather, he asks his readers to respond to his verse by remembering and praying "[i]f any drope of pyte in yow be" (I.23). The reader, to respond to the poem with the particular actions of remembering and praying, must come to the work with *pitee* already within themselves.

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[12] Chaucer's invocation of Thesiphone is difficult to interpret. For more on this topic see D.W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer*, 474-75, and Jane Chance, *The Mythographic Chaucer*, 114-15.

Chaucer maintains from Boccaccio, however, the expectation that if *pitee* is present within the individual then they will *act* in *pitee*. And it is in the actions of *pitee* that we can see it functioning not as an imaginative identification with the other, but, as in the *Clerk's Tale*, as an acknowledgment of the alterity of another's sorrow. The following stanzas from *Troilus* are almost entirely unique to Chaucer[13] and are worth quoting in their entirety:

> But ye loveres, that bathen in gladnesse,
> If any drope of pyte in yow be,
> Rembreth yow on passed hevynesse
> That ye han felt, and on the adversite
> Of othere folk, and thynketh how that ye
> Han felt that Love dorste yow displese,
> Or ye han wonne hym with to gret an ese.
>
> And preieth for hem that ben in the cas
> Of Troilus, as ye may after here,
> That Love hem brynge in hevene to solas;
> And ek for me preieth to God so dere
> That I have myght to shewe, in som manere,
> Swich peyne and wo as Loves folk endure,
> In Troilus unsely aventure.
>
> And biddeth ek for hem that ben despeired
> In love, that nevere nyl recovered be,
> And ek for hem that fasly ben apeired
> Thorugh wikked tonges, be it he or she;
> Thus biddeth God, for his benignite,
> So graunte hem soone owt of this world to pace,
> That ben despeired out of Loves grace.

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[13] Lines 22-28 correspond roughly to Boccaccio's I.6, but they are considerably changed from Boccaccio because of Chaucer's identification as servant to the servants of Love.

> And biddeth ek for hem that ben at ese,
> That God hem graunte ay good perseveraunce,
> And sende hem myght hire ladeis so to plese
> That it to Love be worshop and plesaunce.
> For so hope I my sowle best avaunce,
> To prey for hem that Loves servauntz bem,
> And write hire wo, and lyve in charite,
>
> And for to have of hem compassioun,
> As though I were hire owne brother dere,
> Now herkneth with a good entencioun,
> For now wil I gon streght to my matere...
> (I.22-53)

Several differences from Boccaccio are apparent. The lovers whose *pitee* Chaucer appeals

to are those that "bathen in gladnesse" (I.22)—a state distinct from the "double sorwes

here / Of Troilus in lovynge of Criseyde" (I.54-55). And when they are asked to

remember they are asked to do something other than identify. They are asked to recall

and acknowledge both their *hevynesse* and the *adversite* of others. Those readers who will

remember are reminded that this is an analogous relationship between their own pasts

and the sorrows they will be reading. The suffering of Troilus and Criseyde is not the

readers' suffering; the readers' suffering will need to be remembered and then related to

the unique experiences of Troilus and Criseyde.

Fundamentally connected to this acknowledgment of the alterity of another's

suffering are the actions Chaucer solicits from his audience during his appeal to their

pitee. He asks them if they have *pitee* to "remembreth," "preieth," "biddeth," and

"have...compassioun...for hem" (24, 29, 36, 43, 50). The repetition of the call for action,

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followed quickly by the indication that this action is done for those that "...ben in the cas / Of Troilus..." (29-30) serves as a reminder for whom both the *pitee* and its corresponding actions are directed.

That this model of *pitee* is the one operative in *Troilus* can be seen in two characters Chaucer describes as having a close connection to *pitee*: Hector and Criseyde. One of Chaucer's great innovations in *Troilus* is to make his audience aware of Criseyde's precarious social position in Troy.[14] She is alone and a widow, marked as a traitor because of her father's defection to the Greek camp. She knows that many Trojans judged that Calkas "...and his kyn at-ones / Ben worthi for to brennen, fel and bones" (I.90-91). Faced with this threat to herself, Criseyde determines that her only recourse is to seek aid from Hector. Approaching Hector in her widow's habit, she falls "...[o]n knees...biforn Ector adown / With pitous vois, and tendrely wepynge, / His mercy bad, hirselven excusyinge" (I.110-12). Criseyde's humble supplication is made even more striking in comparison with Chaucer's description of Criseyde in the preceding paragraph: "Nas non so fair, forpassynge every wight, / So aungelik was hir natif beaute, / That lik a thing inmortal semed she, / As doth an hevenyssh perfit creature / That down were sent in scornynge of nature" (I.101-105). This angelic, immortal seeming creature is humbled before Hector. She approaches him on her knees, making clear that,

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[14] For additional discussion of this topic, see David Aers, "Criseyde: Woman in Medieval Society," 177-200.

although she seems divine, she is not the one in power. It is Hector who can choose

whether or not to *pitee* her and show mercy. It is Hector who has power over her life.

Hector is "pitous of nature" (I.113), possessing an innate quality of *pitee*. Hector's

piteous nature means that he "saugh that she was sorwfully bigon, / And that she was so

fair a creature; / Of his goodness he gladede hire anon" (I.114-16). Out of this

gladdening, Hector promises that, "...[a]s fer as [he] may..." (I.123), he will ensure

Criseyde can dwell in joy and live with the honor and protection she enjoyed before her

father abandoned her. In seeing Criseyde he recognizes the sorrow of her situation and

sees that she does not deserve that sorrow, being "so fair a creature." Hector's *pitee* relies

on recognizing and acknowledging the unique position of suffering in which Criseyde

finds herself, and it also relies on his willingness to respond to her as a person inhabiting

unique circumstances. His *pitous* nature and this recognition operate together so that in

his goodness he responds with an act of charity. He offers her what she cannot garner

for herself—social safety.

Operative in Hector's *pitee* for Criseyde is an important understanding of what it

means to relate to others. To *pitee* someone as Hector does is, once again, to engage in "a

noninstrumental relation to people in which actions and states are empathetically read

in relation to the formative circumstances that caused them. It is thus a virtue that makes

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people at least as important as their deeds."[15] To *pitee* sincerely requires recognizing the other as more than an instrument for use. And *pitee*, moreover, functions as a willingness to read another in relation to their circumstances. As Karla Taylor in *Chaucer Reads the Divine Comedy* argues, *pitee* and compassion operate as modes of understanding, as ways of interacting with and responding to another in which understanding of the other is enhanced. *Pitee* helps to bridge the gap between the limitations of human knowledge and the ability to fully know another person.[16]

Criseyde's *pitee* for Troilus operates in a similar manner although the particular power structures at play in Troilus and Criseyde's relationship differ from those between Criseyde and Hector. As in Chaucer's description of Hector, Criseyde has a special capacity for *pitee*. Troilus, having run afoul of the God of Love, laments that he has fallen in love with Criseyde—specifically that he "beset were on swich oon that sholde / Know al thi wo, al lakked hire pitee! / But also cold in love towardes the…" (I.521-523). Troilus continues in this surety of Criseyde's lack of *pitee* and her coldness towards him until Pandarus forces him to confess the name of his beloved. Pandarus believes that he can aid Troilus' pursuit of love, and he knows this is the case once he discovers that Troilus loves Criseyde.

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[15] Tzachi Zamir, *Double Vision,* 156. Zamir here considers *Othello*, particularly scenes III.iii and IV.ii.
[16] *Chaucer Reads "The Divine Comedy*, 203-7. She also discusses pity as bridging the gap between our fallible human modes of knowing and certain divine truths.

Criseyde's virtue makes Pandarus certain that Troilus' woe may be amended.

Pandarus counsels Troilus to "be of good cheere!" (I.879) because Criseyde is "of good

name and wisdom and manere...and ek of gentilesse" (I.880-81). Moreover:

> And also thynk, and therwith glade the,
> That sith thy lady vertuous is al,
> So foloweth it that there is some pitee
> Amonges all thise other in general;
> And forthi se that thow, in special,
> Requere naught that is ayeyns hyre name;
> For vertu streccheth naught hymself to shame.
> (I.897-903)

Pandarus is sure of Troilus' gladness because "thy lady vertuous is al." A comparison of

this passage to Boccaccio clarifies the exact nature of her virtue. In *Il Filostrato*, Pandaro

too assures Troilo that no lady is more worthy and great-souled than Criseida (II.22), but

he cautions that she is more chaste than other ladies—a troublesome quality easily

overcome by Pandarus' speaking to her (II.23). Pandarus in *Troilus*, however, does not

speak of Criseyde's chastity as a quality to overcome. He counsels that because the lady

is virtuous Troilus needs to "...requere naught that is ayeyns hyre name." Pandarus, in a

feat of rhetorical maneuvering, marks Criseyde's virtuous nature as that which is likely

to make her gladden Troilus even while that nature also makes possible the ruining of

her virtuous reputation.

More than a change to the representation of virtue and chastity, however,

Chaucer's primary transformation of Boccaccio's text occurs is his insertion of *pitee* into a

discussion of feminine virtue. *Pitee*, as detailed by Pandarus, is an integral part of female

virtue. While Troilus has lamented that Criseyde knows his woe and "lakked hire pitee," Pandarus charges that because Criseyde "vertuous is al" it logically follows that "...there is some pitee / Amonges all thise other in general." Following a simple syllogism, because Criseyde is entirely virtuous (with the inverted syntax of "vertuous is al" also suggesting that she possesses all virtues) she must have "some pitee" since *pitee* is a virtue and she holds all other virtues. What makes the syllogism possible is the identification of *pitee* as a virtue.

To understand what it might mean for *pitee* to be a virtue, particularly a virtue of Criseyde's towards Troilus, her *pitee* needs to be considered within two important contexts. The first is the particular ethical system in which her *pitee* is a virtue in Pandarus' speech, namely *fin'amor* or "fyn lovynge."[17] The second is Criseyde's status as a virtuous pagan.

In the first case, Pandarus describes Criseyde as embodying feminine virtue, particularly the virtues associated with *fin'amor*. And in his encounter with Criseyde, Pandarus extols the consequences of Criseyde's embodying this model of virtue. He explains that "...[t]he goode, wise, worthi, fresshe, and free....The noble Troilus, so loveth the, / That, but ye helpe, it wol his bane be....Doth what yow lest to make hym lyve or deye" (II.317-322). Criseyde, aware of the tenuous nature of her social position hesitates

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[17] Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, Prologue F. 544.

to risk her reputation, but Pandarus grounds her refusal to show "...that noble gentil

knyght....youre frendly cheere" (II.331-32) in terms of cruelty and a lack of virtue:

> If ye be swich, youre beaute may nat strecche
> To make amendes of so cruel a dede;
> Avysement is good byfore the nede.
>
> Wo worth the faire gemme vertulees!
> Wo worth the herbe also that dooth no boote!
> Wo worth that beaute that is routheles!
> Wo worth that wight that tret ech undir foote!
> And ye, that ben of beaute crop and roote,
> If therwithal in yow ther be no routhe,
> Than is it harm ye lyven, by my trouthe!
> (II.341-350)

Pandarus' speech relies on the language of *fin'amor* to make a claim about what it means

for a beautiful woman to be virtuous.[18] A woman who is *routheless* is not only cruel she is

like a "vertulees" gem, a healing herb without benefit, and a person who will crush

others under her foot. She acts against what ought to be her proper nature. A beautiful

woman's virtue ought to be her *routhe*.[19] Within the ethics of *fin'amor* described by

Pandarus, for a woman to act ethically well, i.e., to act without cruelty and with virtue,

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[18] As Ardis Butterfield argues, "It is profoundly important to be aware of the sheer density of reference in this love language…this is a tightly circumscribed language, with a relatively small vocabulary." Because of the density of reference, Butterfield argues that the language and poetry of loving in late medieval Europe (particular in French, English, and Anglo-Norman) ought to be understood more as "a nodal cluster of ideas and linguistic phrases, core creative pools of verbal inspiration, fluid memorial 'sources' (in the classical and French meaning of fountain) in which many poets drank." Quoted from *The Familiar Enemy*, 265. For an example of this we might compare Pandarus' explication of *pitee* here to the allegorical figure of Pity in the *Roman de la Rose* who engages in battle against Resistance to aid the lover.

[19] *Rewthe* is often glossed as pity, but *rewthe* had a distinct association with sorrow that pity often lacked. Here, Pandarus particularly wills Criseyde to sorrow for Troilus and be moved to show him a "freendly cheere."

she must have *routhe*. To act unethically, the woman will not have *routhe* and "...than is it

harm ye lyven" (II.350).

The effects of Pandarus's speech can be read in Criseyde's response upon seeing

Troilus. Criseyde sits in her chamber and "...every word gan up and down to wynde..."

(II.602) of what her uncle had said. At this moment Troilus passes under her window:

> Criseyda gan al his chere aspein,
> And leet it so softe in hire herte synke,
> That to hireself she seyde, "Who yaf me drynke?"
>
> For of hire owen thought she wex al reed,
> Remembryng hire right thus, "Lo, this is he
> Which that myn uncle swerith he moot be deed,
> But I on hym have mercy and pitee."
> And with that thought, for pure ashamed, she
> Gan in hire hed to pulle, and that as faste,
> Whil he and alle the peple forby paste,
>
> And gan to caste and rollen up and down
> Withinne hire thought his excellent prowesse,
> And his estat, and also his renown,
> His wit, his shap, and ek his gentilesse;
> But moost hire favour was, for his distresse
> Was al for hire, and thoughte it was a routhe
> To sleen swich oon, if that he mente trouthe.
> (II.649-665)

Criseyde sees Troilus and recognizes him as the man about whom her uncle spoke. This

recognition takes the form of an act of remembrance in which she connects her current

vision of Troilus' "chere" with her uncle's claim that Troilus would die unless she

"...have mercy and pitee." Once she has recognized as much, she begins to "...caste and

rollen up and down / Withinne hire thought..." Troilus' qualities ranging from his social

position and reputation to his "shap" and "gentilesse." What she favors most in him is his "distresse" which is "al for hire."

Critics have read this scene with a focus on Chaucer's use of *fin'amor* conventions, noting particularly Criseyde's power over Troilus (she has the power "to sleen swich oon" as he) and her pleasure in the fact the Troilus' distress is "al for hire."[20] Criseyde's *pitee* and love toward Troilus are depicted as having the power to increase or diminish his suffering and possibly prevent his death. And the poem makes clear the potential for that power to be abused. If Criseyde finds favor in the fact the Troilus feels such great distress for her, will she work to ease that suffering? Will she choose to relinquish the power she has over him in his distress, particularly a distress she enjoys?

These are the power dynamics constructed by "fyn lovynge." A woman has the power to ease the intense suffering and distress of the male lover, perhaps even save him from death by engaging in intercourse and/or admitting love for him.[21] And *pitee* is a virtue within *fin'amor* that arises in response to the suffering of others. Indeed, within

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[20] See especially Louise O. Fradenburg's discussion of the eroticization of violence in "'Our Owen Wo to Drynke': Loss, Gender, and Chivalry in *Troilus and Criseyde*," 88-106 and Carolyn Dinshaw's treatment of Criseyde in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*.

[21] Troilus seems to be suffering from lovesickness; see his self-diagnosis of his "wonder maladie" in Book I, particularly lines 395-420. If a man suffers from lovesickness, intercourse was one of the classic cures. Indeed, despite sexual ethics that might have argued against indulging sexual desire, medieval medical ethics indicated the importance of aiding the person suffering from lovesickness—up to and including intercourse. As Mary Wack's studies of lovesickness make clear, however, other treatments were available, even if they were not always the most effective; see "Lovesickness in 'Troilus,'"55-61. In addition, as Richard F. Green discusses, faking lovesickness was possible and a known phenomenon; see "Troilus and the Game of Love," 201-20. Indeed, Diomede himself in the latter books of *Troilus* illustrates the ability to fake lovesickness.

this tradition it is a virtue that engenders love in the woman for her suffering male lover and prompts her to intercourse. Love will thus always be contingent on the *pitee* of the beloved and the suffering of the lover. Not only then will love be in a constant state of instability—will love end when suffering ends? can there be love without *pitee*?—but success in loving will always depend on the particular way the beloved pities and exercises her power over the lover.[22]

In order to examine the ways Chaucer troubles the nature of these gendered power dynamics, I want to consider Chaucer's innovation in his depiction of *gentil* loving: his focus on the beloved's interior processes of *pitee*. One of Criseyde's distinguishing characteristics is her inclination to slow and careful deliberation, and Criseyde's *pitee* and love for Troilus take shape within her deliberations. Criseyde is a virtuous lady, one of *gentilesse.* And, as becomes evident in her coming to *pitee* and feel *routhe* for Troilus, she is one with the virtue of *pitee*.

Rather than telling us that "pitee renneth soone in gentil herte," however, Chaucer shows us the process by which her *pitee* develops. Immediately after Pandarus leaves, Criseyde retreats "streght into hire closet" where she sits down "...stylle as any ston, / And every word gan up and down to wynde / That [Pandarus] had seyd, as it

com hire to mynde..." (II.600-602). This scene of intense isolation in which Criseyde is completely closed off physically and mentally provides a glimpse into Criseyde's careful and thoughtful interiority. Just as she will later "rollen up and down / withinne hire thought" Troilus' good qualities, she winds "up and down" every word of her conversation with Pandarus; her inner activity unreflected by her stony, still exterior.[23]

This decision to deliberate leads her to glimpse Troilus through her window. As she sits "allone and thoughte thus" (II.610), she hears the crowds below celebrating Troilus's victory. At that moment, she looks out the window and spies "his chere" (II.649). This moment of sudden love, happening seemingly by chance, depends entirely on Criseyde's inclination to deliberation.

The very moment when Criseyde pities and loves Troilus is cast not as a sudden move to *pitee* but as an act of careful deliberation that responds to emotion, but which is also the product of her will and reason. She remembers again her conversation with her uncle, recognizes who Troilus is and the charge to *pitee* him, and then "gan in hire hed to pulle" (II.657) and to "caste and rollen up and down" (II.659) all that she knows about him. She considers all her thoughts and feelings for Troilus, her shame at her uncle's charge of cruelty, her responses to his prowess, her respect for his *estat* and *gentilesse*, as well as her favor for his distress. She finally determines Troilus' features make "it...a

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[23] We are reminded here of Troilus' accusation that Criseyde is cold and does not look on him with a loving *chere*. As Chaucer vividly reminds us, it is more than possible that a person's inner experience is not reflected in their external demeanor.

routhe / To sleen swich oon, if that he mente trouthe" (II.664-65). The care and

thoroughness of her consideration, underscored by her savvy assessment that her

judgment of Troilus depends conditionally on the "trouthe" of his claims, makes evident

the incredible deliberative process that manifests in Criseyde's coming to love Troilus.

If it were not already evident that Criseyde does not suddenly love and *pitee*

Troilus, however, Chaucer interrupts the narrative:

> Now myghte som envious jangle thus:
> "This was a sodeyn love; how myght it be
> That she so lightly loved Troilus
> Right for the firste, syghte, ye, parde?"
> Now whoso seith so, mote he never ythe!
> For every thing a gynnyng hath it nede
> Er al be wrough, withowten any drede.
>
> For I sey nought that she so sodeynly
> Yaf hym hire love, but that she gan enclyne
> To like hym first, and I have told yow whi;
> And after that, his manhod and his pyne
> Made love withinne hire for to myne,
> For which by proces and by good servyse
> He gat hire love, and in no sodeyn wyse.
> (II.666-679)

Chaucer defends this scene of love and *pitee* against a tradition of reading Criseyde's

behavior with suspicion.[24] This was no "sodeyn love," nor did she love "lightly." He

explains that this is a beginning—the moment when Criseyde began to "enclyne / To

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[24] This includes earlier medieval treatments of Criseyde in Boccaccio and Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie*. It is also worth noting that this particular misreading of Criseyde described by Chaucer is coded as "envious." Envy being one of the deadly sins, Chaucer suggests that reading Criseyde' love as "sodeyn" is a deadly sin.

like hym first." It is a part of the "proces" and "good servyse" by which Troilus's "manhod and his pyne" began to make love "myne" its way within Criseyde. Criseyde's loving proceeds from this moment.

If *pitee* is a virtue, what does this mean in the context of these stanzas? *Pitee* as a virtue operates here as the recognition of the suffering of another and the choice to act in response to that suffering. In the case of Criseyde, the virtue of *pitee* is intermingled with a process of deliberation in which that recognition arises and in which she then determines the best action in response to the urging of *pitee*. She chooses to prevent the "sleen" of such a one as Troilus (II.665). We can, moreover, see this process repeated throughout the rest of the poem. Criseyde chooses to *pitee* time and again, acting to ease Troilus' suffering. Troilus does the same for Criseyde, and Pandarus does so for both of Troilus and Criseyde.[25]

This has important implications for contemporary studies of the language and history of *pitee*/pity. Chaucer describes *pitee* as a virtue, but almost every contemporary study of either *pitee* or pity describes it as an emotion.[26] What ought to be striking, then, about Chaucer's conception of *pitee* is the way in which it is both intimately connected with the emotions and not an emotion. Criseyde feels *rewthe*; she takes pleasure in

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[25] Examples include both Criseyde's being persuaded to consummate her relationship with Troilus, as well as Pandarus' response to Troilus and Criseyde's forced separation in Books IV and V. For Chaucer's use of the word *pitee* see: IV.361-8, IV.789, IV.824, IV.847, V.555.

[26] Examples include Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Making of Medieval Compassion*; David Konstan, *Pity Transformed*; and, most recently, Anne Schuurman, "Pity and Poetics in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," 1302-1317.

Troilus' distress. Her heart softens. Emotions are an important part of the deliberation

process. They are, however, only a single part. Criseyde considers her emotions, the

facts she knows about Troilus, and then she acts. It is a dialogic process in which

emotion and deliberation operate together in order to determine how to act.[27] The

danger of reading *pitee* as only an emotion here would be to downplay that, for Chaucer,

to *pitee* is to respond to the suffering of another with not only emotion, but also

deliberation and action.

To encounter a model of *pitee* as a virtue is also to contend with what is troubling

about contemporary understandings of either medieval *pitee* or contemporary pity as

imaginative identification and affective sympathy. Such readings belong to a long

tradition of privileging affective responses to suffering over active. To clarify both the

form this tradition takes as well as the consequences of privileging affective responses to

suffering, I want to consider briefly an early and influential representation of pity as a

process of identification: Adam Smith's 1759 work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. While

not the only text within this tradition, it ties together most systematically a relationship

between imagination, identification, and pity.[28] Smith explicates fellow-feeling in a

discussion of what happens when we witness another's suffering:

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[27] For a helpful discussion of the relationship between emotions and actions, see David Schalkwyk, "Is Love an Emotion?", 99-130. See also William Reddy's concept of the "emotive" in which emotions are navigated and formed rather than only felt; first discussed in *The Navigation of Feeling*.

[28] For a genealogy of these concepts, see James Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy*: *the Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema*.

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation…By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies…when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels…[29]

This imaginative identification entails a process of fellow-feeling in which one not only feels with others, but imaginatively places oneself in the other's circumstances to such an extent that the other's feelings are "adopted" and made "our own." The feelings of the other become not theirs but ours. While Smith is interested in a larger discussion of sympathy, which he describes as "denot[ing] our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever," pity he notes is particularly that "fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others."[30]

What difference does this conflation of pity and identification with another's suffering make, however, to readings of identification in Chaucer? As critiques of this mode of relating to the suffering of others suggests, how we conceive of relating to others—if we identify with them, especially if we do so imaginatively—has crucial implications for understanding ethical action. As Vivasvan Soni notes, in these processes of identification: "The focus of ethical action, then, is no longer the situation of the suffering protagonist (other) but the life of the one who witnesses the suffering

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[29] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I.i.2.
[30] Ibid., I.i.5.

(self)...."[31] Soni goes so far as to read identification as antithetical to pity. Pity he

associates with a mourning of the other that relies on a recognition of their otherness.[32]

In contrast, "[t]his [sentimental] identification, unlike pity, can give rise to pleasure

regardless of what the other feels. Sentimental identification in the absence of pity leads

only to self-congratulation at one's capacity for affective communion...."[33] Identification

is, fundamentally, a process of narcissistic self-congratulation, and moreover, one that

requires only feeling with others. It does not call for action on the part of the spectator.

As *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* suggests, when one has imaginatively identified with

the other and felt what they feel that is the end of ethical action.

Chaucer's virtue of *pitee* provides a powerful corrective to modes of thinking of

pity as either identification or as entirely affective. Chaucer's conception of *pitee* as a

virtue requires that affective response is never separated from action. To *pitee* is to

always feel emotions in response to the suffering of others (to feel *wo*, *reuthe*, *peyne*), but

it is also to acknowledge the alterity of the other's sorrow and to act in response to his or

her suffering.

But what are we to make of Chaucer's treatment of *pitee* in the poem in light of

the dramatic turn at the poem's conclusion? I have argued for *pitee* as an important

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[31] Vivasvan Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 308.
[32] Soni's antecedent is Jacques Derrida's *The Work of Mourning*.
[33] Vivasvan Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, 320.

virtue in *Troilus*, but does this virtue fall victim to Chaucerian irony as Troilus's spirit

laughingly reflects on his earthly life—a life shaped by pitying and being pitied?

The final reference to *pitee* in the poem reflects the limitations of *pitee* as a

response to suffering. In Book V, Troilus, begins to despair over Criseyde's return and

writes to her frequently and "ful pitously" (V.1584). He reminds her of their "trouthe"

and his trueness (V.1587, V.1585). Criseyde is finally moved to reply to him: "...Criseyde

upon a day, for routhe / I take it so—touchyng al this matere, / Wrot hym ayeyn..."

(V.1587-1589). The ambiguity of Chaucer's language casts doubt on Criseyde's motives

for replying. Perhaps she acted out of "routhe," but Chaucer indicates that this is his

own interpretation of her actions.

Criseyde's letter provides the only other evidence for her motive in writing

Troilus: "Youre lettres ful, the papir al ypleynted, / Conceyved hath myn hertes pietee. /

I have ek seyn with teris al depeynted / Youre lettre, and that ye requeren me / To come

ayeyn, which yet ne may nat be" (V.1597-1601). This final reference to *pitee*, Criseyde's

"pietee" for Troilus, follows the pattern described in other parts of the poem. Criseyde

details how she has recognized Troilus' suffering and responded by writing to him.

What she does not do is return to Troy. Her virtue of *pitee* might lead her to recognize

and respond to Troilus' suffering through action, but it does not require her to act in a

particular way. As the rest of Criseyde's letter suggests, she has deliberated carefully,

turning over in her mind the appropriate course of action: "Grevous to me, God woot, is

youre unreste, / Youre haste, and that the goddes ordinaunce / It semeth nat ye take it

for the beste. / Nor other thyng nys in youre remembraunce, / As thynketh me, but only

youre plesaunce" (V.1604-1608). Criseyde details a careful deliberation in *pitee*, one that

the jagged syntax of her letter suggests was painful. She has determined to act by

sending her letter but not returning to Troy.

In this moment Chaucer shows the limits of *pitee* as a response to the suffering of

others. To act in *pitee* is not necessarily to alleviate suffering. On the contrary, *pitee* only

guarantees an acknowledgment of the suffering of others that resolves in action. That

action might ease the suffering of others, but it is unlikely to alleviate it completely.

It is with this understanding of the limits of *pitee* that I want now to turn to the

end of the poem. Chaucer's concluding lines are comprised of a series of "shifts and

turns."[34] Troilus' woe and weeping over his earthly suffering transform in death as his

"light goost ful blisfully is went," travelling into the eighth sphere (V.1808-9). Looking

down onto "this litel spot of erthe" he began to "despise / This wrecched world, and

held al vanite...And in hymself he lough right at the wo / Of hem that wepten for his

deth so faste, / And dampned al oure werk that followeth so / The blynde lust, the which

that may nat laste" (V.1815-1824). Casting all earthly "lust" including the desire to

mourn his death as blind, Troilus sees that human desires should instead be "on heven

caste" (V.1825).

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[34] E. Talbot Donaldson, "The End of Chaucer's 'Troilus'," 1.

Troilus' abrupt rejection of "this wrecched world" marks a turn from *pitee*.

Chaucer began "thise woful vers" with weeping (I.7); Chaucer concludes with Troilus'

laughter at the "wo / of hem that wepten for his deth..." (V.1821-22). And Chaucer ends

not with a repetition of the call for lovers to *pitee*, but with a charge to "...yonge, fresshe

folkes, he or she, / In which that love up groweth with youre age, / Repeyreth hom fro

worldly vanyte" (V.1835-1837). Again calling on his readers to act, he asks them to

"repreyreth hom," turning their minds from worldly vanity and returning to a heavenly

home. Young lovers should "casteth" their hearts on the image of God:

> And loveth hym that which that right for love
> Upon a crois, oure soules for to beye,
> First starf, and roos, and sit in hevene above;
> For he nyl falsen no wight, dar I seye,
> That wol his herte al holly on hym leye.
> And syn he best to love is, and most meke,
> What nedeth feynede loves for to seke?
> (V.1842-1848)

Ending his charge to readers with a call to affective meditation on the Passion of Christ,

Chaucer asks that these young would-be lovers love Christ who is the proper end of

love. It is he who is "best to love" for he has never been false and has through his love

bought "oure soules."

In these final lines of Book V, Chaucer has entered into a debate in medieval

theology over pagans' capacities for virtue. Augustine in the *City of God* had been

skeptical of pagan virtues; pagan virtue did not have a true good, i.e., God, as at its end

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and thus could never be true virtue.[35] Aquinas had argued that pagan virtues were

indeed virtues and directed toward a penultimate good even if that good was not God.[36]

Unlike Augustine, whose *City of God* functioned as a defense of Christianity against

accusations that it caused the fall of Rome, or Aquinas, who was engaged in providing a

systematic account of Christian theology, Chaucer in *Troilus* writes neither a defense of

Christianity nor systematic theology. Chaucer is actively engaged in poetic composition

in the vernacular. Specifically, he retells in English the familiar story of Troilus and

Criseyde.

As contemporary scholarship about "vernacular theology" and the relationship

between poetry and theology suggests, Chaucer's work as a vernacular poet shapes his

participation in theological debates. Since his earliest use of the phrase "vernacular

theology," Nicolas Watson has asserted the political importance of writing about

religion in the vernacular.[37] I hesitate to label the ending of *Troilus* as "vernacular

theology" for several reasons, not the least because the political implications of Chaucer

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[35] *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, especially 19.25. For a fuller discussion of Augustine's treatment of pagan virtue as well as how critics have interpreted his position see Jennifer Herdt's discussion in "The Theater of the Virtues," 111-29.

[36] See Aquinas' treatise on the virtues in the *Summa Theologiae*, especially I-II.65.2.

[37] Watson in a 2006 article considering the use of the concept of "vernacular theology" has defended this assertion, "...writing about religion in the vernacular is a political act (in a more specific sense than that in which writing in general is political); and that, because this is so, all vernacular writing about religion is *connected*, part of a single field or arena of discourse." Quoted from "Cultural Change," 128. Watson's antecdent for the discussion of vernacular theology is Bernard McGinn's *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism—1200-1350*.

writing in the vernacular differ so widely from the political acts that were the original

focus of Watson's study.[38]

Chaucer's vernacular poetry, however, does shape the language within which his

consideration of *pitee* develops. Chaucer writes of *pitee* not *pietas* nor *misericordia*. That

Chaucer writes of *pite* not *pietas* matters because, as J. L. Austin has argued,

> ...our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found
> worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth making, in the
> lifetimes of many generations...When we examine what we should say when,
> what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not merely at
> words (or 'meanings', whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the
> words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen
> our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena.[39]

Utilizing the language of embodiment that speaks to a real connection between word

and world, Austin emphasizes the deliberateness underlying the distinctions between

words. Distinctions are not a contingent side effect of language, but are the product of

human actions. They occur in language when people make them. Chaucer, as an English

poet, is actively engaged in developing an English vocabulary, distinct from that found

in Latin, for ethical responses to others' suffering.

Beyond vernacular composition, moreover, Chaucer engages in re-telling a well-

known narrative. This act of re-telling allows a careful attention both to the paradoxes

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[38] Watson's interest in his 1995 article was in Arundel's Constitutions; see "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409," 822-64. Ardis Butterfield has argued for the importance of situating Chaucer in relation to French traditions; see in particular her treatment of *Troilus* and its relationship to Boethian translation theory in *The Familiar Enemy*, 296-304.

[39] "A Plea for Excuses," 182.

inherent within the narrative itself, as well as the larger paradoxes occurring within

related theological discourses. These paradoxes arise in trying to reconcile pagan virtue

ethics to a Christian ethical system. [40] Chaucer describes Criseyde as the pinnacle of

pagan virtue. And yet, as the end of the poem suggests, all her actions and thoughts are

directed toward worldly vanity and not Christ of whom she has no knowledge. This

raises questions as well about the *pitee* Chaucer invokes from his readers. Does Chaucer

condemn *pitee* felt for pagans because it is directed toward worldly vanity and not

Christ? Is *pitee* only ethically directed when Christocentric?

The poem began with the language of *pitee*; it ends with the language of mercy.

In the final ten lines of the poem, mercy becomes the dominant term referring to

responses to human suffering:

> And to that sothfast Crist, that starf on rode,
> With al myn herte of mercy evere I preye,
> And to the Lord right thus I speke and seye.
>
> Thow oon, and two, and thre, eterne on lyve,
> That regnest ay in thre, and two, and oon,
> Uncircumscript, and al maist circumscrive,
> Us from visisble and invisible foon
> Defende, and to thy mercy, everichon,
> So make us, Jesus, for thi mercy, digne,
> For love of mayde and moder thyn benigne.
> Amen.
> (V.1860-1870)

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[40] See Alastair Minnis' consideration of this issue in *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, particularly chapter four.

From the one, whole, and triune God, Chaucer seeks mercy. He prays for mercy from

Christ who "starf on rode," appealing to Christ to "[d]efende" and have "to thy mercy,

everichon." Chaucer asks that Christ "make us…for thi mercy" deserving of "thyn

benigne."

This focus on mercy contrasts sharply with the final lines of *Il Filostrato*. Pity

serves as Boccaccio's final descriptor of his poem. Calling the poem "canzon mia

pietosa," my piteous song, he describes how love has drawn the poem unnaturally

(*contra naturam*) from his sorrowful soul (IX.1.1-5). Chaucer excises the language of *pitee*

from his final lines. Chaucer has shifted into a reflection on the Passion and Christian

ethics; Boccaccio's poem concludes with a second appeal that others speak to his *bella*

dona about his suffering. The ethical system at play at the end of *Il Filostrato* is still that of

fin'amor.

Chaucer has marked a change in his treatment of ethical systems by a change in

his language. The language of *pitee* is dominant when describing *fin'amor* but when he

turns to the Passion, his language shifts from the language of *pitee* to that of mercy.

Why? *Pitee* was a prominent part of the vocabulary of Passion meditation. Lyrics

frequently referred to Christ's Passion as an act of *pitee* and called for humanity to *pitee*

Christ. [41]

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[41] Two such examples include the final stanza in the short lyric "The Penitent Hopes in Mary": "For he that dude his body on Tre / Of oure sunnes have piete, / That weldes Hevene boures...". Quoted from *Medieval English Lyrics*, pg. 71, lines 1-3. See as well the opening lines of an evening prayer found in Ashmole 61 (item

That Chaucer elects to speak of Christ's mercy, but not his *pitee*, suggests that he

is making a distinction between *pitee* and mercy on a theological level. A comparison for

the definitions of *pitee* and *merci* in the *MED* shows that there was grounds for doing so*:

> Pite: 1. (a) A disposition to mercy; the quality of being merciful; mercy, clemency, leniency, 2. (a) A feeling of pity aroused by the suffering, distress, grief, etc., of another, sympathy, commiseration, 3. (a) Sorrow, grief; misery, distress; also, remorse, 4. Godliness, reverent and devout obedience to God, righteousness; devotion (to duty); piety[42]

> Merci: 1. (a) Pardon for a sin or an injury, forgiveness, mercy, 2. *Theol.* Atonement, propitiation, 3. (a) Clemency toward a prisoner, an enemy, etc.; mercy, 4 (a) Pity, compassion[43]

Pitee carried associations with piety, as well as feelings of sorrow that *merci* did not.

Merci was associated with pardon and forgiveness, and, of particular importance here,

the theology of atonement. The differences between these two terms are subtle but real.

Chaucer with the shift from *pitee* to mercy makes a theological argument about

the limits of *pitee* and the limitlessness of divine mercy in responding to human

suffering:

> Thow oon, and two, and thre, eterne on lyve,
> That regnest ay in thre, and two, and oon,
> Uncircumscript, and al maist circumscrive,
> Us from visible and invisible foon

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12): "Jhesus Lord, well of all godnes, / For thi grete pety I thee pray: / Forgyffe me all my wykidnes / Wherwith I have grevyd thee todey." Quoted from "Item 12, An Evening Prayer" in *Codex Ashmole 61*, pg. 71, lines 50-51.
[42] "Pite, n."
[43] "Merci, meaning 1."

Defende, and to thy mercy, everichon...
(V.1863-1867)

Just as Chaucer began by appealing for the *pitee* of his readers, Chaucer ends by praying

for the mercy of Christ. The recipient of this mercy, however, is much more expansive. It

encompasses not just lovers, but all humanity. As Chaucer's repeated reference to the

Passion reminds us, Christ's mercy has a more universal power in its response to

suffering. Christ's mercy has already bought "oure soules" while "upon a crois"

(V.1843), extending to humanity the promise of paradise, a place free from suffering,

that had been previously foreclosed by humanity's sinful nature. *Pitee* might be a virtue,

but it cannot end suffering. Only Christ's mercy can promise that much.

This does not mean, however, that because *pitee* is not able to eliminate suffering

that it has no value as a response to human suffering or that Chaucer marks it as such.

While Christ's mercy promises an end to suffering, that end is only attainable after

death. Troilus is only able to laugh at the woe of others upon dying. *Pitee*, as Chaucer

has articulated it, is still an important virtue because it acknowledges and responds to

the alterity of others' suffering while still on earth.

To conclude, I want to return to the opening lines of *Troilus*. As I have argued,

Chaucer advocates in these lines a process like modern understandings of *pitee* as either

imaginative identification or affective sympathy, but it is not. Chaucer's conception of

the virtue of *pitee* as requiring both recognition and action functions differently than

either of these models of relating and responding to the suffering of others. I still feel

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that there are a few things to be said about the similarity between Chaucer's

representation of *pitee* in the opening lines of the poem and identification and fellow-

feeling. When I say that *pitee* requires recognizing the alterity of others in Chaucer, I do

not mean that the recognition of the sheer otherness of another's suffering precludes a

recognition of a common human suffering. The distinction is subtle, but important. This

recognition requires acknowledging that the suffering itself is specific and unique to the

individual, but that the condition of suffering itself is common to all. As Simone Weil

writes, "...the sense of human misery is the pre-condition for love and justice. He who

does not realize to what extent fortune and necessity hold in subjection every human

spirit cannot regard as fellows creatures nor love as he loves himself those from whom

chance separated him by an abyss."[44] To *pitee*, as Chaucer instructs his readers at the

beginning of *Troilus*, is to remember and respond to the knowledge of a shared

experience of suffering.

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[44] Simone Weil, "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force," 35.

4. The Consolation of Poetry: Chaucer's Pitiful Aesthetics and the End(s) of Poetry

Art draws away from this reality [the reality of My Lai and Auschwitz], because it cannot represent this suffering without subjecting it to aesthetic form, and thereby to the mitigating catharsis, to enjoyment. Art is inexorably infested with this guilt. Yet this does not release art from the necessity of recalling again and again that which can survive even Auschwitz and perhaps one day make it impossible. If even this memory were to be silenced, then the 'end of art' would indeed have come. Authentic art preserves this memory in spite of and against Auschwitz.

—Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*

Let every one of you please his neighbour unto good, to edification. For Christ did not please himself: but, as it is written: The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell upon me. For what things soever were written, were written for our learning: that, through patience and the comfort of the scriptures, we might have hope.

—Romans 15:2-4

The turn of the fourteenth century marked a period of great debate about the aesthetic and ethical ends of poetry. Of these debates, perhaps the most famous was that around the *Roman de la Rose*. In a multi-year epistolary battle known as the *querelle de la rose*, Christine de Pizan, Jean Gerson, the Col brothers, and Jean de Montreuil argued the ethics of including vulgarity and misogyny in poetic work. In a letter from Christine de Pizan to Jean de Montreuil written ca. June-July 1401, de Pizan writes about her response to a prose treatise on the *Roman de la Rose* written by de Montreuil:

> ... mais meue par oppinion contraire a voz dis et accordant a l'especial clerc[1] subtil a qui vostre dicte espistre s'adrece--, vueil dire, divulguer et soustenir manifestement que, sauve vostre bonne grace, a grant tort et sans cause donnéz si perfaicte louenge a celle dicte euvre, qui mieulx puet estre appellee droicte oysiveté que œvre utile, a mon jugement.[2]

> ...I, stirred up by an opinion that runs counter to your writings, concur with the preeminent, shrewd cleric to whom the letter in question is addressed and wish to state, proclaim, maintain publicly that, with all due respect, it is most wrongly and without justification that you have given such unalloyed praise to the work in question [*Roman de la Rose*], which may in my judgment more appropriately be labeled pure idleness than useful work.[3]

Christine de Pizan acknowledges that in the *Roman de la Rose* there are moments of considerable charm wherein "...tres sollennellement parler de ce qu'il veult dire—et par moult beaulx termes et vers gracieux bien leonimes."[4] But for de Pizan the idleness (*oysiveté*) of the text is exemplified by both Reason's inappropriate speech, as well as Genius's speech against unfaithful wives.[5] De Pizan laments that "Et sans faille plus plaisanment et trop plus doulcement et par plus courtois termes s'en feust passé, et qui mieulx plairoient mesmes aux amans jolis et honnestes, et a toute autre vertueuse

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[1] This cleric is unnamed although Nicolas de Clamanges has been suggested as a probable candidate, being a member of Jean de Montreuil's coterie and of comparable social rank, See Erick Hicks, and Ezio Ornato, *Jean de Montreuil et le débat sur le Roman de la Rose*, 50 and Pierre-Yves Badel, *Le Roman de la Rose au XIV siècle*, 412.

[2] *Le Débat sur le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Erick Hicks, p. 12, lines 19-25.

[3] Translations from the *Debate of the Romance of the Rose*, edited and translated by David F. Hult, 51.

[4] "...there is quite serious treatment of what [Jean de Meun] wants to express, with very beautiful terms and in elegant verses with rich rhymes." Ibid., 52. David Hult notes the significance of de Pizan's term *leonime*, which was particularly associated in the French tradition with *ars poetica*; Ibid., 52, fn. 9.

[5] Ibid., 58. Christine de Pizan's full rebuttable of this antifeminist literature would be in *The Book of the City of Ladies*.

personne."[6] Building on an ironic reference to idleness (*oysiveté*), personified in the *Roman* as *Oiseuse*, gatekeeper to the garden, de Pizan condemns the garden and the poem as that which not only does no useful work, but which also cannot appeal to virtuous persons despite the charm of its form.[7] The ethical failure of the poem's idleness is exemplified in the fact that not only does the beauty of its form fail to correspond to the inelegance of its subject matter, but this ill-pairing of form and matter actively harms others. De Pizan thus sets the terms of the debate with her opening sally. Her respondents now have to consider whether or not the poem's form and subject matter are inharmoniously aligned and whether or not this misalignment represents an ethical failure.[8]

The *querelle de la rose* itself grew out of discussions taking place in university circles about the precise relationship between ethics and poetry.[9] Medieval philosophers from John of Salisbury to William of Conches had argued over how to classify poetry:

[6] "And without any doubt he could have accomplished what he wanted more graciously, more gently, and with a more refined vocabulary, which would have particularly appealed to elegant and honorable lovers, as well as to every other virtuous person." Original french quoted from: Christine de Pisan et al, *Le Débat sur "Le Roman de la Rose"*, 20 & 281-284. Translation from *Debate of the Romance of the Rose*, 61.

[7] Joseph L. Baird and John R. Kane connected *oysiveté* to the character of *Oiseuse*; see their discussion on this topic in *La querelle de la Rose*, 47.

[8] Jean Gerson's treatise against the *Roman de la Rose* dating from May 1402 aligns with de Pizan's argument, as does Pierre d'Ailly's *The Devout Soul's Garden of Love*. Jean de Montreuil's writing on the subject including a letter to a lawyer dated ca. July-August 1401 (pp. 63-64 in the *Debate of the Romance of the Rose*) and a prose treatise written to a great poet in 1402 (perhaps Deschamps or Bovet, pp. 103-5 in the *Debate of the Romance of the Rose*) challenge de Pizan and Gerson's critiques.

[9] Minnis notes, "The classification of poetry had always been a problem for philosophers." Quoted from *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, 279. He cites two studies, *Classical and Medieval Literary Criticsm: Translations and Interpretations* edited by Alex Preminger, O. B. Hardison, and Kevin Kerrane and O. B. Hardison, Jr.'s *The Enduring Monument: A Study of the Idea of Praise in Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice*, as his antecedents for this claim.

could it best be classified as a part of ethics, grammar, logic, or rhetoric? [10] Some

philosophers such as one anonymous commentator on Horace classified poetry as either

a part of ethics or logic, John of Salisbury classified it as belonging to grammar, but

others, such as Hermann the German, insisted that it belonged to logic.[11] Even these

distinctions were not clear-cut, however. For when Hermann the German argued that

poetry was a part of logic, he did not mean to suggest that it did not have ethical

implications. On the contrary, medieval categorization systems mapped interrelation not

separation. Ethics, logic, grammar, and rhetoric represented categories, but these

categories were all connected to each other.[12] The immediate result of this was that even

those philosophers who categorized poetry as a part of logic also acknowledged its

entwinement with ethics.

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[10] While Jessica Rosenfeld's assertion is correct that "In a common medieval classification system that divides knowledge into three branches—logic, ethics, and physics—poetry was quite consistently placed in the category of ethics," the term "consistently" is misleading. Quoted from *Ethics and Enjoyment in Late Medieval Poetry*, 5. For a thorough discussion of the complexities of sorting poetry into particular categories, see Alastair Minnis and A.B. Scott's *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, particularly chapter vii "Placing the Poetics." James Simpson also has a helpful footnote on this topic on pages 230-231 of *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*.

[11] For John of Salisbury see *Matalogicon*, I.XVII pp. 51-52. For both the anonymous commentary and excerpts from Hermann the German's translation of Averroes' *Middle Commentary* on Aristotle's *Poetics*, see *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, 32-36 and 289-313.

[12] See for example William of Conches who delineated the interrelation of grammar and logic: "Alternatively, to remove all dispute, the category to which grammar belongs may be called logic applied through the medium of words (*logica sermocinalis*). One form of logic is that which works through reason, the other that which works through words. So this name 'logic' is applied equally to the two, a name which, in line with the use of *logos* among the Greeks, applies equally to speech (*sermo*) and to reasoning. Logic which works through words contains within its scope the *trivium*. But logic which works through reason embraces dialectic, rhetoric, and sophistic (*sophistica*), not grammar." From his Commentary on Priscian's *Institutions*, quoted from *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, 131.

All of these texts, moreover, can be understood to grapple with poetry's aesthetic

dimension. The discussion in the *querelle* around *oysiveté* and *utile* resonates with the

language of Horace's *Ars Poetica*. In the *Ars Poetica*, Horace had argued that a poet must

harmoniously align form and subject, writing with *dulce* and *utile*, sweetness and

utility.[13] The force of Horace's argument is that the poet should aim to give pleasure

both in the craft of a poem's form and in the richness of its intellectual engagement. And

scholastic discussions of the *Ars Poetica* such as those of the anonymous commentator

discussed above and Hermann the German were engaged in considering the

relationship between aesthetic enjoyment and the intellectual and ethical uses of poetry.

Chaucer's poetic career takes shape in the midst of this cultural debate. While it

is impossible to tell when Chaucer's writing career began, his first major work, the *Book

of the Duchess*, was written no later than 1372,[14] and he died in 1400[15] making his final

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[13] "Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci, / lectorem delectando pariterque monendo" [He who joins
the instructive with the pleasing, carries off every vote, by delighting and at the same time admonishing the
reader] (343-44). Text and translation from "Ars Poetica," 462, lines 344-45. For more on Horace and the *Ars
Poetica's* medieval legacy, see essays 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10 in Karsten Friis-Jensen et al, *The Medieval Horace*.
Particularly interesting is essay 5 "Horace and the Early Writers of Arts of Poetry," which argues that the
Ars Poetica continued to be an important treatise despite the proliferation of other arts of poetry in the Early
Middle Ages. Rita Copeland also details the reception of the *Ars Poetica* from late antiquity through the
Middle Ages with a particular focus on John of Garland, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, and Matthew of Vendôme's
treatments of the concept of invention; see *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages,* 168-78.
[14] Chaucer's earliest writings were almost certainly in French, for an argument for reading Chaucer as a poet
in the French poetic tradition, see Ardis Butterfield's *The Familiar Enemy*. On the topic of the start of
Chaucer's writing career as well as the composition of *The Book of the Duchess* see Derek Pearsall, *The Life of
Geoffrey Chaucer*, 47-94. Pearsall dates the *Book* to shortly after Blanche's death from the plague in 1368; Colin
Wilcockson in his introductory notes for *The Book of the Duchess* in the *Riverside Chaucer* places its latest
possible date as 1372.

works such as the *Legend of Good Women*, the *Parson's Tale*, and the *Retraction* products of

the 1390s.[16] Chaucer's writing career thus comes to a close just as the *querelle de la rose*

begins. And both Chaucer's final works and the *querelle* can be understood as the

products of centuries of debate about the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in

poetry. Indeed, the literary and philosophical cultures of Europe at the end of the

fourteenth century can largely be understood to ask how poetry, concerned as it is with

the production of aesthetic objects, can and cannot do ethical work.

Before I discuss how *pitee* becomes a central figure in this cultural preoccupation

with poetic ethics and aesthetics, I want to establish first what I mean by ethics and

aesthetics. When I refer to ethics, I mean both "[t]he branch of knowledge or study

dealing with moral principles" and "[m]oral principles, or a system of these."[17] To put it

more broadly, by ethics I mean that which is preoccupied with the determination of

right action. Importantly, action in the Middle Ages is concerned not just with the

external, but with the internal. Indeed, as many medieval philosophers understood,

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[15] The last mention of Chaucer in the historical record is June 5, 1400. The date of his death, October 25, 1400, comes from the engraving made on his fifteenth-century tomb. See Pearsall's discussion in *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 273-76.

[16] I will have more to say on the dating of these texts shortly. For now, I have located the composition of these three texts in the 1390s in large part because, even if those critics who date these texts earlier are correct, Chaucer was clearly revising and thinking about all three in the 1390s.

[17] *OED*, meanings 1.b. and 1.a., respectively.

much of ethical life and ethical action occurs internally.[18] The result is that ethics

concerns the rightness of all action—both that which is internally constituted and that

which resolves in external acts.

A discussion of medieval aesthetics, however, presents an immediate and

obvious challenge. The particular language of aesthetics does not appear in English until

the late eighteenth century. And, while its etymological roots are in the Greek

αἰσθητικός meaning "of or relating to sense perception, sensitive, perceptive,"[19] it is so

inextricably bound up with Kantian and post-Kantian conceptions of judgment that

applying it retroactively to the premodern past can seem a particularly crude

anachronism.[20] But the concept of aesthetics can be useful in thinking about the

relationship between poetry, sense perception, and enjoyment in the Middle Ages.

Eleanor Johnson in her book *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages* makes extensive

use of the language of aesthetics when discussing the work of medieval poetry. She

explains that "[b]y 'aesthetic' I mean that which is perceptible to the sense, and, by

extension, I mean the literary devices, forms, topoi, tropes, and styles by which a work

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[18] This is indeed the central ethical argument and assumption of Augustine's *Confessions*. See Eleanor
Johnson's discussion of this topic in *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages*, 1-4. Alcuin Blamires
suggests theorizing the difference between inward-focused ethics and outward conduct by making a
distinction between ethics and morality (a distinction Blamires maps onto Christian and Aristotelian
practices respectively); see *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*, 7-8.
[19] *OED*, etymology of "aesthetic."
[20] I am thinking particularly here of Kant's argument that our faculty of judgment is that which allows us to
experience beauty and understand that beauty as part of an ordered, teleological world; Kant's most
sustained reflection on this topic occurs in the *Critique of Judgment*.

engages with its readers' sense perception."[21] This definition of aesthetic is incredibly

capacious. Aesthetic here encompasses literary forms because they are perceptible to the

senses, but it implies that the range of aesthetic could apply to anything perceptible to

the senses. Excised from Johnson's definition is a discussion of judgment, particularly

judgments of whether or not a work of art is beautiful. Johnson focuses her definition on

what the work of art does to the reader on the level of sense perception via the vehicle of

form. What is helpful about Johnson's definition, however, is that it points to the

sensorial and perceptive underpinnings of aesthetics. Aesthetic objects, including

poetry, are perceived and experienced via the senses.

What seems to me lacking in this definition is the element of judgment that was

so fundamental to Enlightenment discussions of aesthetics. I would like to preserve

judgment as an aspect of aesthetics not because of a desire to embroil myself in a

discussion of taste or a debate of the objectivity or subjectivity of art, but precisely

because sense perception in the Middle Ages was never treated as a value neutral

occurrence. Sensorial experience was subjected to processes of diligent scrutiny. Perhaps

the most well known example of this is in the obsessive questioning of the validity of

visionary experiences, such as those of Margery Kempe or Bridget of Sweden. Were

these "aesthetic" experiences the work of God or of Satan? Only a studious examination

of one's own heart, within the careful guidance of the church, allowed the visionary to

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[21] Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory*, 3.

judge their experience as godly or demonic. And it is important to note that this act of

judgment is not just an individual but also a communal judgment. The individual

visionary's analysis of her own experience was placed within the context of the larger

Christian community's analysis and understanding of visionary experience. In this way,

we are far removed from contemporary considerations of the "subjective" or "objective"

work of aesthetic judgments—for the individual aesthete here is not the isolated, solitary

subject of the post-Enlightenment era, but rather an individual deeply embedded at

even the most fundamental level in communal practices of judgment.

The importance of judgment and sensorial experience matters if we return to a

consideration of the aesthetic experience of art, particularly poetry, in the Middle Ages.

As the *querelle* and scholastic debates suggest, poetry is a sensorial experience. Horace's

language of the sweetness (*dulce*) of good art conjures the sense of taste; de Pizan's

discussion of the richness and beauty of Jean de Meun's form reminds her readers that

the pleasure of poetry is sensorial. This sensorial experience is not value neutral,

however. Indeed, that is why there are so many commentaries on the *Ars Poetica* and

why the *querelle* occurs. That sensorial experience is not value neutral is why de Pizan

writes that the *Roman de la Rose* "...mieulx puet estre appellee droicte oysiveté que œvre

utile, a mon jugement." She enjoys much of what her senses tell her about the poem, but

her *jugement* tells her that this enjoyment is idleness (*oysiveté*), not utility (*utile*). And of

course, explicit in both Horace and de Pizan is an understanding that the primary way

in which to judge poetry as good poetry is in charting its ability to give enjoyment. This

judgment of poetry's capacity to produce enjoyment relies not just on the beauty of a

poem's form, but on the relationship between its form and content. For a poem to be

enjoyable it must be both *dulce* and *utile*.

At this point, it will be clear that when I speak of aesthetics I do not speak of a

process that is distinct from ethics, but rather one that is fundamentally bound up with

ethics. Whether this sort of reasoning has any place in contemporary understandings of

either ethics or aesthetics is not the purpose of this chapter—although I hope to speak to

the value in understanding them in this way. I do want to suggest, however, that this is

how many medieval philosophers and poets understood ethics and aesthetics. That in

fact one of the ways of understanding the *querelle de la rose*, university debates about the

categorization of poetry, and Chaucer's final works is as products of thinking of the

work of aesthetics as entwined with ethical work. That Christine de Pizan's judgment

about her aesthetic experience is indicative of a larger cultural attitude wherein

sensorial, aesthetic experience is bound up with ethics in the moment of judgment about

that experience.

I have spent some time considering these concepts and their place within

medieval culture because I contend that only in understanding the work of aesthetics

and ethics in this way can we comprehend Chaucer's fascination with *pitee* as a response

to poetry. Chaucer explores this topic in multiple texts throughout his career including

the *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*,[22] *Anelida and Arcite*,[23] *Troilus and Criseyde*,[24] the *Legend of Good Women*, and the *Parson's Tale* and *Retraction*. In this chapter, I will focus on the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Legend of Good Women* with concluding remarks about the ramifications of the *Parson's Tale* and the *Retraction* on an understanding of the arc of Chaucer's work. I have chosen these texts because they are particularly strongly connected. Not only are the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Legend of Good Women* two of Chaucer's longest and most explicit reflections on *pitee* and poetic response, but they also feature sustained reflections on the same "olde stories" (*LGW* F.98). The narrator of the *Book* draws on the examples of Phyllis, Medea, and Dido when speaking to the Black Knight about suicide (lines 721-41), and the Black Knight himself declares that his lady White was as good as "the noble wif Lucrece" (1082). Phyllis, Medea, Dido, and Lucree all receive their own tale in the *Legend*. And the *Legend*, the *Parson's Tale*, and the *Retraction* all share the same purpose: penance. The *Legend* is given to Chaucer as penance by Alceste;[25] the *Parson's Tale* is a penitential manual, and the *Retraction*

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[22] The *House of Fame* is particularly interesting on this topic because of its close association with two of the women discussed in both the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Legend of Good Women*: Dido and Ariadne. For *pitee* and poetic response in *Fame* see lines 174-192 in particular.

[23] See the invocation: "For hit ful depe is sonken in my mynde, / With pitous hert in Englyssh to endyte / This olde storie, in Latyn which I fynde..." (8-10).

[24] I am thinking here especially of the appeal to lovers that "bathen in gladnesse" that if "any drope of pyte in yow be, / Remembreth yow on passed hevynesse / That ye han felt, and on the adversite / Of othere folk, and thynketh how that ye / Han felt that Love dorste yow displese, / Or ye han wonne hym with to gret an ese" (I.21-28).

[25] The exact reason why such penance is necessary changes significantly between Prologues G and F. I am especially interested in G in the greater focus on Chaucer's failure to find and write: "Som story of wemen that were goode and trewe?" (G. 272).

includes a prayer that Christ, Mary, and all the "the seintes of hevene" grant Chaucer

"grace of verray penitence, confessioun and satisfaccioun to doon in this present lyf"

(1088-89). And although penance is not a central focus of the *Book of the Duchess*, the

Black Knight's defiant exclamation, "Repentaunce? Nay fy!...Shulde y now repente me /

To love? Nay, certes..." (115-17), is one of the most striking moments in the poem.

      These texts also span the length of Chaucer's career. As I briefly mentioned, the

Book was likely composed no later than 1372, and it is the earliest of Chaucer's major

works. The composition of the *Legend of Good Women* was a lengthier process. Early

versions of the text, including one of the Prologues, were likely composed in the 1380s

with some of the legends produced earlier. The Prologue was also later revised, with

some critics dating this later revision to the late 1390s making it one of Chaucer's final

works. Certainly it was one he thought about recurrently throughout the 1380s and 90s.[26]

And, although there is some debate as to whether or not the *Parson's Tale* and the

Retraction were Chaucer's final written works, Chaucer clearly meant them to be read as

an end to his writing career.[27] Thus these four texts with their interest in poetry and *pitee*

in many ways speak not only to the arc of Chaucer's thought on poetic *pitee*, but also

speak to the arc of the entirety of Chaucer's poetic career.

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[26] Sheila Delany in *The Naked Text* summarizes the critical debate on this topic, see pp. 34-43.
[27] Siegfried Wenzel summarizes the early debates on this topic in his notes in the *Riverside Chaucer*. Whatever the case, however, Chaucer himself clearly meant these texts to be read as the end of his poetic career.

In all of these, Chaucer considers the ends of poetry by asking what sort of aesthetic or ethical work is done as a result of *pitee*. In the *Book of the Duchess*, he considers whether or not *pitee* can provide consolation, and, if it can, he asks how and for whom it does so. In the *Legend of Good Women*, he considers the ways feeling *pitee* for someone, especially a woman, effects judgments about her character, asking whether or not *pitee* makes it easier to judge a woman to have been a good woman. I suggest that one set of answers Chaucer provides to these questions can be read in the *Parson's Tale's* treatment of *pitee* and the *Retraction's* reflections on poetry. In the *Parson's Tale*, *pitee* can provide consolation, but only when it resolves in charitable action. In the *Retraction*, we see how Chaucer's *pitee* and poetry have done insufficient aesthetic and ethical work. A different form of writing and a reorientation of the teleological work of both poetry and *pitee* is needed in order to best please God and edify our neighbors.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

In addition to being Chaucer's earliest major work, the *Book of the Duchess* also represents Chaucer's earliest sustained engagement with the concept of *pitee*.[28] Almost certainly written in response to the death of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster,[29] it is not

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[28] Considering the prevalence of pity in French courtly poetry, it is likely that at least some of Chaucer's early French and Anglo-Norman poetry talked about pity.

[29] I say likely only because it would be impossible to prove this claim. There is ample evidence to suggest this connection in the poem itself, with its well-noted pun on "White," and in the *Legend of Good Women*, which refers specifically to a poem he wrote called "the Deeth of Blaunce the Duchesse" (F.418). John Stowe's note in the Fairfax manuscript also indicates that the poem was written for Blanche's widower John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. For additional discussion of this topic see Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 82-93.

surprising that the poem makes such extensive use of the language of *pitee*. In the poetry

of Guillaume de Machaut and Jean Froissart, two of the poets whose works served as

sources for the *Book of the Duchess*, *pitee* and consolation were fundamentally entwined.

Machaut's *Le Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne* and *Le Dit de la Fonteinne Amoureuse*, as well

as Froissart's *Le Paradys d'Amours*, all consider the nature of pity as a remedy against

grief or as a consolation for loss.[30] Comfort (*confort*) in *Le Paradys* is coded as showing

pitié, from the dreamer's appeal to the *pitié* of *Plaisance* and *Esperance* to Morpheus's

granting of sleep out of love and *pitée*.[31] Machaut's *Behaingne* stages a contest between

two forms of grief—a lady's grief for a love lost to death and a knight's grief for a love

lost to inconstancy—which resolves in the knight's loss being judged the greater because

it is also a loss of *pitié*.[32] And the *Fonteinne Amoureuse* details a long response to a piteous

complaint and the piteous tale of Alcyone and Ceyx.[33]

     In the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer operates within this tradition of French

courtly poetry. His contribution to this tradition, however, is a reformulation of *pittee*

and consolation. While I will have more to say later about Chaucer's most evident

alteration to this tradition, namely the poem's work as a consolation for the bereaved

John of Gaunt, I want to begin here by considering a more subtle addition of Chaucer's

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[30] There is no one source of the *Book of the Duchess*. Other works by Machaut including *Remede de Fortune* and *Le Dit du Lyon* also influenced the *Book*. For a discussion of the complexity of speaking of a source for many of Chaucer's dream visions, not only the *Book*, see B. A. Windeatt's *Chaucer's Dream Poetry*.
[31] Jean Froissart, *Le Paradys d'Amours*, particularly lines 562-630.
[32] Guillaume Machaut, *Le Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne*, lines 1265 and following.
[33] Guillaume Machaut, *Le Dit de la Fonteinne Amoureuse*, especially lines 459-795.

to this tradition. More than any of its source texts, the *Book of the Duchess* engages in a sustained consideration of the effects of *pitee* on those who experience it—both the pitier and the pitied.

The Book's consideration of the effects of *pitee* is built into the poem's narrative frame. The narrator for lack of sleep is overcome by "so many an ydel thoght" (4) that nothing is "leef" or "looth" to him, but:

> Al is ylyche good to me—
> Joye or sorowe, whereso hyt be—
> For I have felynge in nothyng,
> But as yt were a mased thyng,
> Alway in poynt to falle a-doun;
> For sorwful ymagynacioun
> Ys alway hooly in my mynde.
> (9-15)

These lines, closely follow the opening verse of Froissart's *Le Paradys*:

> Je sui de moi en grant merveille
> Comment je vifs quant je veille,
> Et on ne poroit en veillant
> Trouver de moi plus traveillant,
> Car bien saciés que par veillier
> Me viennent souvent travillier
> Pensées et merancolies
> Qui me sont ens au coer liies
> Et pas ne les puis deslyer,
> Car ne voeil la belle oublyer
> Pour quele amour en ce traveil
> Je sui entrés et tant je veil.[34]

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[34] "Le Paradys d'Amour" in *Œuvres de Froissart*, 1, lines 1-12.

I can only be amazed that I am still alive, when I am lying awake so much. And one cannot find a sleepless person more tormented than myself, for as you well know, whilst I am lying awake sad thoughts and melancholy often come to torment me. They bind my heart tightly, and I cannot loosen them, for I do not want to forget the fair one, for love of whom I entered into this torment and suffer such sleeplessness.[35]

Chaucer's major change from Froissart is the omission of *la belle*. The narrator of the *Book* "can not telle why" he cannot sleep, but holds it to be an eight year's long "sicknesse" for which there is but one physician. There has been considerable debate over the nature of this sickness and the physician who could cure it. As its resonances with Froissart suggests, perhaps this is an allusion to the unresponsive mistress of *fin'amor*. [36]

This reference, however, Chaucer leaves deliberately vague. The passage's focus and culmination instead lie in the revelation that "sorwful ymagyncioun" has so entirely consumed his mind that he has "felyng in nothyng." More than the tormented melancholy of Froissart, Chaucer's narrator is lost, "mased," dazed and bewildered in an affective wasteland. Every experience whether it be a joy or sorrow registers for him as alike. This state in which he is unable to judge between affective states is intertwined with a disorder in his cognitive processes. His imagination should be able to draw on a range of sensorial perceptions in order to produce mental pictures (*imagines* or *phantasmata* in medieval cognitive theory), which would allow him to think and feel

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[35] Translation from B. A. Windeatt, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry*, 41.

[36] W. Owen Sypherd, "Chaucer's Eight Years' Sickness," 240-43 and Roger Loomis, "Chaucer's Eight Years' Sickness," 178-80, both read the sickness in this way. There was also the tradition of Christ as physician, see Mark 2.17: "Jesus hearing this, saith to them: They that are well have no need of a physician, but they that are sick. For I came not to call the just, but sinners."

along a wide range.[37] Instead only "sorwful ymagynacioun[s]" fill his mind. We are

given to understand that it is this disorder on the level of affect and cognition that has

driven the narrator to "have gret wonder...How that I lyve..." (1-2).

It is this state of disorder and sleeplessness that prompts the narrative action of

the poem. On a night where he realizes that he will not be able to sleep he reads a book,

a "romaunce." The content of this *romaunce* is the tragedy of Alcyone and Ceyx, a legend

described in detail in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and in the *Ovide moralisé*. In the act of

reading, he seeks to "read and drive the night away" (49). The consolatory potential of

poetry can be read elsewhere in medieval literature.[38] Boccaccio in the *Decameron*, with

which Chaucer might have been familiar,[39] thanks the pleasing discourses (*piacevoli*

ragionamenti) that rescued him when he was overcome by unrequited love,[40] and

Machaut in *Fonteinne Amoureuse* describes the act of writing poetry as a delight and

consolation to himself (*pour moi déduire et soulacier*), with *déduire* suggesting not only a

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[37] For more on the role of imagination in medieval thought see Alastair Minnis, "Medieval Imagination and Memory," 237-74, as well as Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*. Karnes also offers a critique of Minnis' account of imagination, particularly medieval suspicion of imagination.

[38] Several critics have discussed literature's consolatory and/or therapeutic potential in the Middle Ages; most influential is Glending Olson's discussion of *confabulatio* as therapeutic in *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages*, 82-89. See as well James Simpson's discussion of the *dit* as a genre of poetry that was particularly engaged in therapy for suffering lovers, "Chaucer as European Writer," 55-86.

[39] See Peter G. Beidler, "Just Say Yes, Chaucer Knew the Decameron," 25-47, as well as Thomas J Farrell, "Source or Hard Analogue? 'Decameron X, 10' and the 'Clerk's Tale,'" for fuller considerations of Chaucer's relationship to the *Decameron.*

[40] *Decameron*, Proem 4.

delight in the poetic act of writing and reading with others, but also a shared sexual enjoyment.[41]

And indeed the act of reading poetry does console the narrator. After he reads the story of Alcyone, of whose tale he says "...certes it were a pitous thing / To telle her hertely sorowful lif..." (84-85), he is inspired to pray to someone, perhaps Morpheus or Juno "or som wight elles" (244) for sleep. His prayers are granted, and he falls asleep "ryght upon [his] book" (274). In his reading the piteous story of Alcyone and gleaning from it advice on praying to a deity for sleep, the narrator here offers, as James Simpson phrases it, "a comically bad gloss on the Ovidian narrative...apparently having entirely missed the story's emotional force and sense."[42] More astonishing, however, is that the narrator has not in fact missed the emotional force and sense of Alcyone and Ceyx's tale. His reading of the "romaunce" moves him so much both cognitively and affectively that he no longer has "felynge in nothyng" (11). In describing the incredible sorrow of Alcyone who fears her husband Ceyx's death, the narrator inserts himself into the tale, saying:

> Such sorowe this lady to her tok
> That trewly I, that made this book,
> Had such pittee and such rowthe
> To rede hir sorwe that, by my trowthe,
> I ferde the worse al the morwe
> After to thenken on hir sorwe.

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[41] *Fonteinne Amoureuse*, 1.

[42] James Simpson, "Chaucer as European Writer," 67.

(95-100)

Pitee, as I have argued elsewhere, does not always refer to a purely affective state. In Chaucer it is frequently marked as a virtue, and thus it is as tied into processes of cognition and moral habituation as it is to affective experience. *Rowthe* in Middle English, however, is closely associated with feelings of sorrow or grief.[43] The combination of *pittee* and *rowthe* here signifies changes in the dreamer's emotional and cognitive state. He feels and recognizes sorrow and grief in reading her sorrow, and these feelings are bound up with a long-term experience of contemplating his reading: he "ferde the worse al the morwe / After to thenken on hir sorwe." The ambiguity of the final line of the stanza—in what ways did the narrator fare the worse on the morrow?— are challenging to interpret, particularly when combined with the narrator's seeming misreading of Ovid. What this passage makes evident, however, is that the narrator is capable of understanding the poem, experiencing *pitee*, and recognizing *pitee* as *pitee*.

And here Chaucer raises a specter that will haunt the rest of the poem. In this passage Chaucer asks us to consider the effects of poetry on its readers. In this passage, we see that not only does poetry provide sleeping advice, but it also remains a lingering presence in the cognitive and affective lives of its readers. That the effect of the Ovidian romance on the narrator is such that he fared "the worse al the morwe" suggests that the

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[43] See definition two in the *MED*: "(a) Sorrow, grief; mid (with) ~, sorrowfully, wretchedly, lamentably; (b) remorse, regret, contrition; pl. expressions of remorse; haven ~ of, to be sorry for (sins); (c) lamentation; maken ~; (d) a lament, complaint; also, special pleading."

aesthetic experience of poetry is not always pleasant. And this unpleasantness is such

that, even though the narrator's reading of the poem undoes eight years of insomnia, he

still identifies himself as faring "the worse al the morwe." Even the results of a decent

night's sleep cannot shake the effects of reading Alcyone's piteous sorrow. We are left to

wonder, then, if, even as his reading grants him immediate consolation in the form of

sleep, it offers a long-term consolation. Does his *pittee* and *rowthe* for Alcyone affect

enough his "sorwful ymagynacioun[s]" and "felynge in nothyng" that his insomnia and

despair come to a permanent conclusion?

This meditation on the effects of poetry continues into the dream and the

narrator's encounter with the Black Knight. The narrator falls asleep pitying Alcyone,

contemplating how her sorrowing weeping was a "pittee...to here" (107). He awakens in

his dream to poetry and *pitee*. "Smale foules" make "a gret hep" so that he is startled

from his sleep (295). This "gret hep" we are told is one of incredible harmony, with

every bird inspired to sing and "[t]o fynde out mery crafty notes" (318-19). This bird

song holds resonance with poetic composition[44] and transitions into an overt poetic

allusion. The narrator sees that he has awakened in a chamber "[f]ul wel depeynted"

with "bothe text and glose, / Of al the Romaunce of the Rose," and with the windows all

"yglased" with "al the story of Troye" (322-334). And even when a hunting call pulls

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[44] For a consideration of the history of bird song and poetic composition from the Middle Ages onward, see Elizabeth Eva Leach's *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages*.

him from his poetic bower, he is drawn by a "whelp" to the Black Knight, a scene that is

likely a poetic allusion to Machaut's *Le Dit dou Lyon*.[45]

The culmination of this poetic cacophony is the poetic composition of the Black

Knight himself. While the narrator stands still, hiding and listening, the Knight "with a

dedly sorwful sound...made of rym ten vers or twelve / Of a compleynte to hymselve"

(462-464). The effect of this poetic complaint is such that the narrator exclaims that it is:

> The moste pitee, the moste rowthe,
> That ever I herde; for, by my trowthe,
> Hit was gret wonder that Nature
> Myght suffre any creature
> To have such sorwe and be not ded.
> (465-469)

Echoing his earlier comment on the pitiful nature of Alcyone's sorrow ("But doun on

knees she sat anoon / And wepte that pittee was to here" (106-7)), the narrator elaborates

his visceral response to the Knight's complaint. It is the most pitiful, the most ruthful,

rhyme that he has ever heard; a statement emphasized by Chaucer's oft-repeated rhyme

of *routhe* and *trouthe*. Indeed, the implication here is that the Black Knight's suffering is

even greater than Alcyone's, causing as it does the narrator to wonder "...that Nature /

Myght suffre any creature / To have sorwe and be not ded."

This moment in which the narrator secretly observes an intensely private scene

of lament belongs to a long tradition in medieval literature.[46] In his study of this

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[45] B. A. Windeatt in *Chaucer's Dream Poetry* makes this connection; see pg. 65 and following.

tradition, A.C. Spearing has argued that in these poems the narrator's spying on lovers serves as "the means by which private experience is brought into the public sphere" and the audience becomes voyeur to the voyeur.[47] This particular voyeuristic experience is often coded as pleasurable. In *Fonteinne Amoureuse*, for example, Machaut's narrator describes overhearing a person speaking of his "meschief," his misfortunes, who he strains to hear because "...la / Parole, quant je l'entroÿ, / Moult durement me resjoÿ."[48] The unfortunate person's speech gives the narrator so much pleasure, in fact, that the narrator feels himself lifted out of his depression. He proceeds to transcribe very happily (*je l'escri joieusement*) the very piteously (*piteusement*) delivered complaint (*complainte*) he overhears.[49] In these lines, Machaut rhymes *joieusement* and *piteusement* and underscores the connection between pitiful speech and pleasure.

Traces of both this larger tradition and Machaut's own particular account can be found in the *Book of the Duchess*. The narrator of the *Book* happens to overhear a "compleynte," and, like the narrator of the *Fonteinne*, he is moved to record these complaints. In a departure from the tradition and Machaut, however, Chaucer's narrator

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[46] *Troilus and Criseyde, Le Roman de la Rose, Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne,* and Lydgate's *Complaint of the Black Knight* to name a few.
[47] A. C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur*, 1.
[48] *Fontaine amoureuse*, 44, lines 194-198.
[49] Ibid., 46, lines 232-234.

does not overtly express pleasure in the knight's complaint. Indeed, we are left to wonder why he stayed.

The most likely explanation seems to be that *pitee* itself kept the narrator listening to the knight:

> Ful pitous pale and nothyng red,
> He sayd a lay, a maner song,
> Withoute noote, withoute song;
> And was thys, for ful wel I kan
> Reherese hyt; ryght thus hyt began...
> (459-474)

These lines, which immediately follow on his description of the Black Knight's complaint as the most pitiful and ruthful thing he has ever heard, expand on the complaint's nature. Every part of the knight's person and song is coded as piteous. His face is drained of color, "ful pitous pale." His pitiful rhymes are revealed to be a lay, "a maner of song," that is "[w]ithoute noote, withoute song." It is a song without melody or harmony, the antithesis of the bird song to which the narrator had awakened. In many ways, this complaint more closely resembles a groan than a song.

And this haunting lament so captivates the narrator that he cannot move. It is only when the Black Knight becomes "war" of him "at the last" (514-15) that the narrator is shaken from his quiet observation. What follows is an exchange that takes up the bulk of the poem and which is prompted by an appeal made by the narrator:

> Me thynketh in gret sorowe I yow see;
> But certes, sire, yif that yee
> Wolde ought discre me youre woo,

> I wolde, as wys God helpe me soo,
> Amende hyt, yif I kan or may.
> Ye mower preve hyt be assay;
> For, by my trouthe, to make yow hool
> I wol do al my power hool.
> And telleth me of your sorwes smerte;
> Paraunter hyt may ese youre herte,
> That semeth ful sek under your syde.
> (547-557)

In this speech, the narrator explicitly connects the act of description ("discre me youre

woo") with consolation ("I wolde...Amende hyt..."). The narrator indicates that, if he can

gain a particular knowledge of the exact nature of the knight's woe, then he can amend

it and can begin to do all in his power "to make [him] hool." Moreover, he suggests that

the Knight might ease his heart in the act of telling his sorrows to the narrator.

The Black Knight reads this as a gesture of generosity and friendship even as he

indicates that a recitation of his woe could offer no consolation:

> "Graunt mercy, goode frend," quod he,
> "I thanke the that thow woldest soo,
> But hyt may never the rather be doo.
> No man may my sorwe glade,
> ...
> May noght make my sorwes slyde,
> Nought al the remedyes of Ovyde,
> Ne Orpheus, god of melodye,
> Ne Dedalus with his palyes slye;
> Ne hele me may no phisicien,
> Noght Ypocras ne Galyen;
> Me ys wo that I lyve hourse twelve.
> But whooso wol assay hymselve
> Whether his hert kan have pitee
> Of any sorwe, lat hym see me.
> Y wrecche, that deth hath mad al naked

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Of al the blysse that ever was maked..."
(559-78)

While thankful for the offer, the knight indicates that nothing could gladden him:

nothing aesthetic (neither Ovidian remedies, nor orphic melodies) and nothing physical

(neither invention, nor physician). But he does offer himself as a test for determining if

someone has the capacity for *pitee*. Echoing the narrator's earlier promise that the Black

Knight could prove the narrator's willingness to help "be assay," the knight indicates

that the very act of seeing him is a form of "assay"—a test or examination, but also an

attack or assault. With this language, the knight stages the act of looking at and

attempting to *pitee* him as a difficult, perhaps even violent, challenge. The knight

suggests that if the narrator will undergo this challenge then he should do so by testing

himself to discover his capacity for *pitee*.

The narrator, however, has already detailed his capacity for *pitee*. He has pitied

Alcyone, and he responded to the Black Knight's complaint with immediate *pitee*. The

rest of the exchange, then, reads as a test of the particular form and effects of the

narrator's *pitee* as well as its potential to provide consolation. The knight, after all, does

not indicate that the narrator's *pitee* will in any way amend or console his grief. He does,

however, indicate that there is something "fendly" about a man who cannot have

"rowthe / And pitee" of his "sorwes smerte" (592-94).

The narrator is eager to test himself and prove he is not a fiend by hearing the

knight's story and offering potential remedies. The knight, prompted by the narrator,

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thus begins his account of why his "song ys turned to pleynynge" (599). He does so, however, not with the specific account of his loss, but with a complaint against the cruelty of Fortune. In language that draws heavily on the French courtly tradition, the knight describes how he has been checkmated by Fortune. Every good in his life has been turned to bad ("laughtre to wepynge," "glade thoghtes to hevynesse," (600-601)), and he now finds that he has "more sorowe than Tantale" (709). [50] Tantalus, being the mythical figure of Tartarus who most encapsulates the pursuit for and eternal denial of things remembered and desired, perfectly represents the painful torment of the Black Knight who is haunted by the knowledge that he will never again enjoy the company of his lady.

So moved is the narrator by this account that he says "whan I herde hym tel thys tale / Thus pitously, as I yow telle, / Unnethe myght y lenger dwelle, / Hyt dyde myn herte so moche woo" (710-713). The knight's tale fills his heart with so much woe that he cannot stay silent; the pitiful nature of the story compels him to action. He subsequently chastises the knight to show some self-pity:

> "A, good sir," quod I, "say not soo!
> Have som pitee on your nature
> That formed yow to creature.
> Remembre yow of Socrates,
> For he ne counted nat thre strees
> Of noght that Fortune koude doo."

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[50] See, for example, Machaut's *Remede de Fortune*: "en grief plour est mué mon ris" [my laugter is turned into mourful weeping]. *Remède de Fortune*, line 1198.

(714-19)

This passage, with its resonance with the description of the death of Socrates in the

Roman de la Rose,[51] presents Socrates' indifference to fortune as a consolatory example.

He did not care "thre strees" for anything Fortune could do. The narrator connects

Socrates' ability to discount the vagaries of fortune to a recognition of the nature of

human existence. With his appeal that the knight have some *pitee* on his "nature / That

formed yow to creature," the narrator implies that the nature of human life, the nature

of creatureliness, is to be at the whims of Fortune. Socrates did not attempt to deny or

reverse Fortune, but instead learned not to attach importance to the acts of Fortune. The

narrator suggests that for the Knight also to act in this way would be an act of self-pity, a

recognition of his human nature and its entwinement with Fortune.

This brief foray into medieval stoic philosophy, however, is cut short when the

Black Knight refuses the example of Socrates: "No...I kan not soo" (720). And the

narrator, rather than expanding or developing the example of Socrates, changes tactics

and exempla. He introduces a series of examples drawn from the poetic tradition of

Ovid and the *Roman de la Rose* in which he counsels against the dangers of suicide:[52]

> "Ne say noght soo, for trewely,
> Thogh ye had lost the ferses twelve,

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[51] *Roman de la Rose*, lines 6212-22. Minnis locates medieval commentaries on the death of Socrates within a tradition stretching back to Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*; see *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, 50-54.
[52] All but Samson and Delilah appear in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and many of these are in the *Heroides* as well. Benson in his notes to the *Book of the Duchess* points to Phyllis' hanging likely coming from the *Roman*, and Samson and Delilah are fascinating figures in Jaloux and Genius' speeches in the *Roman* as well.

And ye for sorwe mordred yourselve,
Ye sholde be dampned in this cas
By as good ryght as Medea was
That slow hir children for Iason;
And Phyllis als for Demophon
Heng hir-self, so weylaway!
For he had broke his terme-day
To come to hir. Another rage
Had Dydo, quene eek of Cartage,
That slow hir-self for Eneas
Was fals; a whiche a fool she was!
And Ecquo dyed for Narcisus.
Nolde nat love hir; and right thus
Hath many another foly don.
And for Dalida died Sampson,
That slow him-self with a pilere.
But ther is no man alyve her
Wolde for a fers make this woo!"
(722-741)

The narrator exchanges philosophical exemlpum for poetic exempla, and, in the process,

the work of the exempla changes. These figures like Medea, Dido, and Echo, unlike

Socrates, are not meant to be imitated. They committed suicide out of extreme sorrow

and in the process were damned. And, drawing on the language of chess play, the

narrator makes evident how foolish he thinks such decisions are. No "fers," no chess

piece, no woman, is worth risking damnation; in fact: "...ther is no man alyve her /

Wolde for a fers make this woo."

The narrator's advice is bungling. He compiles exempla on exempla without

much thought or connection; Medea, after all, did not commit suicide, and Sampson did

not die from sorrow over Delilah. And the dismissive tone with which he compares the

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knight's loss to the loss of a chess piece is, at best, a moment of thoughtless callousness. This advice is, however, sound within a particular medieval ethic. Sorrow uncontrolled and uncontained was thought to lead to the sin of despair and suicide.[53] And the narrator offers the consolation of what he sees poetic exempla to teach: woe can and should be contained.

These exempla and this consolation prove inadequate to the Black Knight. He responds to the narrator, saying: "'Why so?' quod he, 'hyt ys nat soo. / Thou wost ful lytel what thou menest; / I have lost more than thow wenest'" (742-744). The knight narrates a moment of critical misunderstanding. He explains that the narrator's poetic exempla do not apply to the knight's life, nor does his assertion that no man would "for a fers make this woo!" And this is because the narrator has failed to understand the nature of the knight's loss.

Striking in this passage is what the narrator has and has not failed to do. His *assay* of his own capacity for *pitee* has proved fruitful. He pities the Black Knight, and he goes so far as to encourage the Black Knight to self-pity. What he has failed to do,

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[53] See Alexander Murray's discussion of despair and suicide in "The Sin of Despair" in *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, 369-95. D.W. Robertson describes the Black Knight's despair as a particular kind of foolishness: "If we turn our attention to the *Book of the Duchess*, it is apparent at once that one character in it, the Black Knight, regards the loss of Blanche as the loss of a gift of Fortune. He is introduced, much like the persona 'Boethius' in the *Consolation*, in a condition of despair arising from the loss of Blanche as a sensible object, and this loss is attributed specifically to the operations of Fortune. In Boethian terms, this kind of sorrow, although it occurs spontaneously in all of us, is actually a kind of foolishness. Chaucer is careful to make his Knight a beardless adolescent who gave himself up to 'love' in 'idleness' before he ever saw Blanche." See, D. W. Robertson, "The Historical Setting of Chaucer's Book of the Duchess," 174.

however, is to understand the depth of the knight's loss. This successful *pitee* and this failure of understanding are intertwined. Because, while he has successfully pitied the knight and has, in *pitee*, sought to console the grief of the knight through philosophy and poetry, he has failed to understand how his actions in *pitee* fail to console. The Black Knight suggests that this failure in pitiful feeling and action is a failure in understanding. He does not know what the knight has lost and therefore has acted poorly.

The following scene is one of attempted understanding. The narrator expresses his bafflement over the knight's charge: "Thou wost ful lytel what thou menest; / I have lost more than thow wenes," and he asks, "Loo, [sey] how that may be?" (746). This asking prompts the knight to clarify the source of his pain, and he subsequently details concretely and thoroughly his love and loss.

The knight's elaboration of his coming to love and then coming to lose love serves as the knight's attempt to make the narrator understand his woe. The question at the poem's conclusion, however, is what consolation an understanding of loss offers. After a lengthy description of his life and love, rich in the details of his lady's character and beauty as well as his happiness with her,[54] the narrator asks: "Sir...where is she

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[54] The most obvious antecedent for the description of White is in Machaut's *Le Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne* —although many aspects of Chaucer's description are conventions in the *dits amoureux* tradition and in *fin'amor*. Notably, the tone of the *Book of the Duchess* is strikingly different from that of *Behaingne*. The knight's description of his lady in Machaut lingers over her physical appearance, and the reminder that the body he details is still alive, if removed from the knight's presence, gives it vibrancy. The knight's

now?" (1298). The narrator, seemingly having not registered any of the knight's

indications that the lady has died, has still failed to understand the nature of the Black

Knight's loss. This failure of understanding prompts one of the most poignant

exchanges in the poem:

> "...Bethenken how I seyde here-beforn,
> 'Thow wost ful lytel what thow menest;
> I have lost more than thow wenest.'
> God wot, allas! Ryght that was she!"
> "Allas, sir, how? What may that be?"
> "She ys ded!" "Nay!" "Yis, be my trouthe!"
> "Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhe!"
> (1304-1310)

Reminding the narrator to think more carefully about what he has heard, the knight

explains that it was she, White, that he lost. The narrator's continued failure to

understand is painful. Surely the nature of the knight's loss should be obvious to even

the least subtle reader by this point.

And yet, the narrator's "how" effectively echoes the question at the heart of all

grief: How? How did this loss happen? How did such happiness turn into grief? And

the knight's blunt response—"she ys ded!"—verbalizes the reality at the center of that

loss. Death is what happened. Death brought about loss; it was what turned all laughter

into weeping and all gladness to heaviness. The narrator's shock, the Black Knight's

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description in the *Book* details physical and spiritual virtues at length, but, especially when placed in the context of both the poem's end and the death of Blanche, the description reads as a work of memorial representation and mourning rather than vibrant celebration.

swearing "by [his] trouthe," the repeated rhyme of *trouthe* and *routhe*, heightens the pathos of the scene.

It sets the stage, moreover, for the abrupt end of the poem's contemplation of grief. The narrator, after learning and finally understanding the nature of the knight's loss, offers no exempla, asks no more questions. Rather, he ends with a simple statement: "Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhe!" These, the final words the narrator speaks to the knight and the final lines of dialogue in the poem, speak to the sorrowful nature of the knight's loss. "[H]yt ys routhe." *Routhe* with its close association with sorrow and grief, as well as *pitee* and compassion, speaks to the kind of consolation offered at the end of the poem. The consolation the narrator offers is one of understanding and acknowledgment of the depth and sorrow of loss.

The return of the hunt, the Black Knight's silence, and the abrupt end to the dream vision, however, offer no indication as to whether or not the *pitee* and *routhe* of the narrator offer any consolation to the knight.[55] There is nothing in the poem to indicate that *pitee* has done anything to ease the knight's grief. The only affective or cognitive change that has occurred in the encounter between the Black Knight and the narrator is the narrator's coming to *pitee* the knight. Indeed, what the end of the poem seems to suggest is that there is a limit to what *pitee* can do in the face of loss. There is a

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[55] This has prompted several critics to argue that this is not a poem of consolation see, for example: Phillip C. Boardman, "Courtly Language and the Strategy of Consolation in the Book of the Duchess," 567-79, Michael D. Cherniss, "The Boethian Dialogue in Chaucer's Book of the Duchess," 655-65, and Joerg O. Fichte, "The Book of the Duchess—A Consolation?," 53-67.

level of grief that cannot be appeased or consoled, only acknowledged. And whether

that acknowledgment is worthwhile is a matter on which the end of the poem is silent.[56]

Complicating this reading, however, is the poem's status as a work of poetic

consolation. It was likely written in response to the death of Blanche, Duchess of

Lancaster, and presented to her grieving husband, John of Gaunt. Several critics have

discussed the *Book of the Duchess* as a work of consolation, detailing the sort of

consolatory encouragement Chaucer might have intended it to have. R.M. Lumiansky

has argued extensively for the consolatory and elegiac nature of the poem, as has Reid

Hardaway.[57] Others have suggested that the poem might have served a simultaneously

didactic and consolatory function for Gaunt. A.C. Spearing, for example, argues that the

Ceyx and Alcione story in particular might have served as an encouragement for Gaunt

to come to terms with Blanche's death.[58] While important questions have been raised as

to how close Gaunt and Chaucer actually were and, consequently, whether Chaucer

would have presented this to Gaunt or been solicited by Gaunt to write it, evidence

within the poem and within the manuscript tradition points to its close connection to

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[56] In a consideration of whether or not the *Book of the Duchess* sees language and art as consolatory for personal grief, David Aers has suggested that in the end "art, rhetoric and language are finally consumed by the dreadful reality [of grief] that they have tried to control and make tolerable;" See "Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess:* An Art to Consume Art," 205.

[57] R.M. Lumiansky, "The Bereaved Narrator in Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess,*" 5-17, reads the poem as consoling the Narrator and the Knight. Reid Hardaway, "A Fallen Langauge and the Consolation of Art in the *Book of the Duchess,*" 159-77, reads Chaucer as seeing the potential in language to transform painful memories into aesthetic experiences and sees the *Book* as foreshadowing Freud's psychoanalytic method.

[58] *Medieval Dream Poetry*, 53-58.

Blanche's death. [59] So that, at the very least, this poem is invested in addressing and acknowledging the depth of Gaunt's loss and grief. But the difficulty in reading the *Book of the Duchess* as a work of consolation is in some sense the difficulty presented by the end of the poem. We have only Chaucer's writing, but not Gaunt's response. Like the Black Knight, we have from Gaunt only silence.

If I have made overmuch of the silence of the Black Knight and Gaunt, it is because I think this silence is important to understanding Chaucer's treatment of *pitee* in the rest of his work. In my previous chapter, I argued for Chaucer's exploration of *pitee* in *Troilus and Criseyde* as revealing *pitee*'s limitations, but also its possibilities. *Pitee* can seek to alleviate suffering but it cannot in and of itself affect an end to suffering. And *pitee* is also that which makes possible a recognition of a common human suffering. Within his explorations of *pitee*'s possibilities and limitations, however, I want to argue that Chaucer returns again and again to the problem of what *pitee* does for its object. Does it offer consolation for suffering? Does it alleviate loss or grief?

In his poems, Chaucer's interest in these questions appears most clearly in his consideration of *pitee* and aesthetics. In many ways, the questions I have been raising about the end of the *Book of the Duchess* are aesthetic questions: can aesthetic objects provide consolation; does *pitee*, when aroused in response to aesthetic objects such as Ovid's or Chaucer's poetry, do anything for the object of *pitee*?

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[59] See Derek Pearsall's discussion of this in *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 82-93.

And these are questions with a long history—a history in which Chaucer participated actively. Book I of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, which Chaucer translated in the decade following his writing of the *Book of the Duchess*,[60] had suggested that poetry cannot provide consolation. While the *Consolation* begins with the poetic muses surrounding Boethius as his consoling companions,[61] Philosophy's first act upon appearing to Boethius is to dismiss the poetic muses from his side:

> Quis, inquit, has scenicas meretriculas ad hunc aegrum permisit accedere, quae dolores eius non modo nullis remediis fouerent, uerum dulcibus insuper alerent uenenis? Hae sunt enim quae infructuosis affectuum spinis uberem fructibus rationis segetem necant hominumque mentes assuefaciunt morbo, non liberant.

> Who let these chorus girls in here to approach a sick man's bedside? They have no cures for what ails him. Indeed, what they offer will only make his condition worse! What we want is the fruits of reason, while all they have is the useless thorns of intemperate passion. If he listens to their nonsense, he will accustom himself to depression instead of trying to find a cure.[62]

Philosophy accuses the muses of both artifice and prostitution; they do not offer consolation for Boethius' grief, but instead nourish his sorrows with sweet venom (*dulcibus venenis*). And this venom in turn destroys the fruits of reason (*fructibus rationis*), thus making men captive to the malady of grief. Philosophy subsequently appoints

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[60] Derek Pearsall has suggested that the *Boece* was written between 1381 and 1386, perhaps simultaneously with *Troilus and Criseyde*.

[61] He says of the muses: "Gloria felicis olim uiridisque iuuentae, / solantur maesti nunc mea fata senis." Metrum 1, 7-8.

[62] Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Prosa 1. Translation from *The Consolation of Philosophy* translated by David R. Slavitt.

herself as doctor to Boethius' grief, and she offers him knowledge of herself, knowledge

of Philosophy, as the only real consolation.

Chaucer was clearly greatly influenced by Boethius, but he was also a poet. One

way of understanding this is to consider the larger role of poetry in the *Consolation*. The

opening rejection of musaic poetry is not a rejection of all poetry as poisonous. Rather,

part of Boethius' education will be to recognize poetry that is the work of philosophy

and not the work of the strumpet muses—philosophy written in poetic form that does

not destroy the fruit of reason. The amount of poetry may drop away as the *Consolation*

progresses, after all, but poetry remains an important part of the work's structure until

the very end.[63] Lady Philosophy offers, however, even at this early stage, a guide for

recognizing the work of poetry constructed by these strumpet muses. It does not nourish

the fruit of reason, but provokes the "infructuosis affectuum spinis," the unfruitful

thorns of the *affectus*. *Affectus* carries a range of meanings; Chaucer in the *Boece* translates

it as "talentz or affeccions" (1.pr.1.59), which is suggestive of *affectus*' association with

desire. We can also understand by *affectus* that poems are aesthetic. Through sense

stimuli they arouse desire and pleasure. More broadly speaking, *affectus* speaks to a state

of mind that is aroused in someone by another's influence. As the *Consolation* advances,

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[63] Consider the final poem of the *Consolation* (metrum 5, Book 5), which speaks beautifully of the necessity of turning one's soul, like one's face, heavenward. Metrum 5 is rich in poetic allusion, including to the opening lines of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and its lesson—that our bodies teach us by their position how to direct our souls—is taught poetically through the formal punning on *figura* meaning both bodily form and a figure of speech.

it becomes evident that the problem of this type of poetry with its affective provocation is that it does not allow a proper reflection or consideration of the state of one's own soul, nor does it require that one situate one's own self within the context of providence.[64]

Not all of Chaucer's poetry would seem to fit into the philosophical poetic model of the *Consolation*. Indeed, while much of Chaucer's poetry is philosophically rigorous, it is also overtly interested in arousing pleasure and in moving readers affectively without encouraging them to situate themselves within a providential context. And it is here that we encounter the problem of my second question. In considering what *pitee* aroused by aesthetic objects does for the object of *pitee*, there was reason within medieval considerations of *pitee* and aesthetics to be skeptical of *pitee*. Boethius' antecedent in the *Consolation* for his critique of the work of poetry on the *affectus* (and particularly his accusation of the muses as theatrical strumpets) was Augustine's meditation on the theater in Book III of the *Confessions*. The passage that contains the most verbal echoes with prosa 1 of the *Consolation* is 3.2.2:

> rapiebant me spectacula theatrica, plena imaginibus miseriarum mearum et fomitibus ignis mei. quid est quod ibi homo vult dolere cum spectat luctuosa et tragica, quae tamen pati ipse nollet? et tamen pati vult ex eis dolorem spectator et dolor ipse est voluptas eius. quid est nisi mirabilis insania? nam eo magis eis movetur quisque, quo minus a talibus affectibus sanus est, quamquam, cum ipse patitur, miseria, cum aliis compatitur, misericordia dici solet. sed qualis tandem misericordia in rebus fictis et scenicis? non enim ad subveniendum provocatur

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[64] The final poem of the *Consolation* is, after all, a reminder of our proper orientation toward heaven.

auditor sed tantum ad dolendum invitatur, et actori earum imaginum amplius favet cum amplius dolet. et si calamitates illae hominum, vel antiquae vel falsae, sic agantur ut qui spectat non doleat, abscedit inde fastidiens et reprehendens; si autem doleat, manet intentus et gaudens lacrimat.

I was captivated by theatrical shows. They were full of representations of my own miseries and fuelled my fire. Why is it that a person should wish to experience suffering by watching grievous and tragic events which he himself would not wish to endure? Nevertheless he wants to suffer the pain given by being a spectator of these sufferings, and the pain itself is his pleasure. What is this but amazing folly? For the more anyone is moved by these scenes, the less free he is from similar passions. Only, when he himself suffers, it is called misery; when he feels compassion for others, it is called mercy. But what quality of mercy is it in fictious and theatrical inventions? A member of the audience is not excited to offer help, but invited only to grieve. The greater his pain, the greater his approval of the actor in these representations. If the human calamities, whether in ancient histories or fictious myths, are so presented that the theatregoer is not caused pain, he walks out of the theatre disgusted and highly critical. But if he feels pain, he stays riveted in his seat enjoying himself. [65]

Like Boethius, Augustine is concerned about the way aesthetic objects, here theatrical spectacle, stir up particular states of mind in their viewers. Indeed, as he articulates it, the goal of theater is to stir its audience to grief when viewing tragic scenes. As he explains in the 3.2.3, it is not that this stirring to grief, this compassion or suffering with another (*cum aliis*), is inherently wrong. Rather, the problem of compassion in theater is that this act of compassion is always connected to pleasure. The problem is that pleasure is felt in theater precisely because one feels grief, and the more effectively a performance stirs grief in fictitious sufferings the more pleasurable it is. What Augustine so effectively demonstrates and what Boethius' own critique of poetic consolation

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[65] Augustine, *Confessions*, III.2. Translation from *Confessions* translated by Henry Chadwick, III.2, pg. 56.

elaborates is that because aesthetic work is always fundamentally connected to pleasure

it invites a particular kind of self-indulgence. In the case of aesthetic *pitee* it creates and

encourages an attitude toward suffering that is maddeningly paradoxical. No good can

come to the object of *pitee* via aesthetics because the point of arousing *pitee* in aesthetic

work is not to grieve for the other, but to feel pleasure in one's own experience of grief.

It is at this point that I want now to turn to Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*,

which I read as carefully and thoughtfully engaged in exploring precisely the issues

around *pitee* and aesthetics raised in Augustine and Boethius. Extraordinary in Chaucer

is that he translates these issues into the highly gendered generic form of hagiography.

Hagiography was one of the most popular forms of medieval narrative, and

hagiographies about female saints, especially virgin martyrs, enjoyed a particular

popularity.[66] At the heart of these female saints' hagiographies was a detailed narration

of their suffering. Chaucer himself had written such a hagiography, the *Second Nun's*

Tale, a version of the legend of St. Cecilia in which Cecilia was first boiled in a bath

before being decapitated. Unsurprisingly, this suffering was often coded as something

that arouses sorrow, *rewthe*, or compassion in those who see it or read of it. In the *Second*

Nun's Tale, Chaucer himself describes how the sight of martyred Christians moved one

Roman official to weep for *pitee* of the saints.[67]

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[66] See Sherry L. Reames' introduction to *Middle English Legends of Women Saints* for a thorough recounting of the history and social contexts of hagiographies about female saints.
[67] See lines 378 and 401.

The women of Chaucer's hagiography in the *Legend of Good Women* are not

Christian martyrs, however, but mythographic figures drawn from Ovid.[68] There were

precedents for writing hagiographies of secular women. Boccaccio had written a version

of one, *De claris mulieribus*, with which Chaucer seems to have been familiar.[69] But both

the oddities of the genre (a hagiography about pagan women) and the challenges of

Chaucer's own writing style (the fabled Chaucerian irony) make it difficult to

understand the mode of Chaucer's writing.[70] In many places, the *Legend of Good Women*

reads like a satire, in others it seems to be a critique of hagiography, and some of it reads

like neither satire nor critique.

This poses challenges for interpreting Chaucer's treatment of *pitee* in the poem

because one of the few interpretive clues Chaucer gives to his readers is that these tales

ought to inspire *pitee*, compassion, and *routhe*. Each of these tales includes one or more of

these terms when it discusses responding to the suffering of these women. And the

Prologue codes Chaucer's writing of the *Legend* as the product of Alceste's *pitee* for

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[68] Many of Chaucer's legends were likely drawn from the *Heroides*. There is some debate as to the form of *Heroides* to which Chaucer had access; see Benson's note on this in the *Riverside Chaucer*, pg. 1059.

[69] Critics such as Amanda Holton in *The Sources of Chaucer's Poetics* and Isabel Davis in *Chaucer and Fame: Reputation and Reception* read Chaucer as having likely been familiar with *De Claris*, but earlier critics had raised questions about this assertion; see Benson's account of the critical history of this debate in the *Riverside Chaucer*, pg. 1059.

[70] Sheila Delany's reading of the *Legend* in *The Naked Text* argues for the irony of Chaucer's project, even as she argues for the importance of taking Chaucer's hagiographical frame seriously: "In fact, I would maintain about these references or allusions [to hagiography in Chaucer's work], as I shall argue about the *Legend* itself as a whole, that the hagiographical matrix frames Chaucer's ironic project, that the notion of holiness stands as foil to the events and persons he portrays. It is not disrespect for hagiography but, on the contrary, precisely respect that enables the secular poet to use the genre as a touchstone, albeit a distant and unobtrusive one." Sheila Delany, *The Naked Text*, 62.

Chaucer. The God of Love and Alceste confront Chaucer with a series of poetic sins for which he should do penance, and Alceste charges him with the task of writing "a glorious legende / Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves, / That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves" (F.483-485). This penance, the God of Love informs Chaucer, is slight, "But pite renneth soone in gentil herte" (F.503). Alceste assigns a light penance to Chaucer, not because he deserves it, but because she herself, a model of gentility, is inclined quickly to *pitee*.

In her recent article "Pity and Poetics in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," Anne Schuurman has challenged what she sees as readings of the text that depend on "the denial or deconstruction of the text's pity" (1303). She categorizes these readings as belonging to a long tradition of suspicion about pity ranging from Augustine to Nietzsche to Richard F. Green.[71] Schuurman, via a reading of Augustine's *Confessions* 3.2, situates this suspicion in terms of "affective interference" in fictions: "Augustine, however, does not just want to discern true pity from false; he is also suspicious of affect's tendency to elude volition. Fictions nonetheless provoke real tears, and this feels to Augustine like manipulation, a dangerous confusion not only of reality and illusion

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[71] "Thus Richard F. Green, for example, in arguing that Chaucer's attribution of 'trouthe' to virtuous women carries real moral and political weight, must separate this weight from the 'illusory benefits' for women wrought by 'the late-medieval cult of womanly 'pitee,'...[a cult] which Chaucer certainly helped promulgate' (4). In other words, Chaucer gives to women's cause with one hand ('trouthe') but takes away with the other (pity). Green writes, 'If Chaucer really deserves to be called 'all womanis frend,' it is clearly not for any mere sentimentalization of defenseless womanhood...I hope I have been able to show that he could at least go a little further than well-meaning sympathy' (19)." Quoted from Anne Schuurman, "Pity and Poetics in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," 1303.

but also of conscious intention and nonvolitional affective response."[72] Schuurman's

challenge then, contra Augustine and other suspicious readings of pity including Green

and "dry-eyed Chaucerians,"[73] is to show that: 1.) those suspicious of pity have

misunderstood what pity is (i.e., something inherently imitative and mimetic), and 2.)

show that aesthetic production is not manipulative, but rather tied into processes of

performance and imitation.

    Schuurman's second point is a familiar one although rendered slightly

unfamiliar by the connection she makes between aesthetics and pity: "And yet the

shared elements of conventionality and imitation in artistic creation and piteous feeling

that Chaucer pushes to an extreme, self-reflexive limit in both prologue and legends

raise the possibility, contra Augustine, that there is, in fact, no deception involved in

performing pity because all expressions and feelings of pity are performances, all

language is rhetorical, and all rhetoric is imitative."[74] Schuurman's language of imitation

and performance has a particular resonance with contemporary critical theory,

particularly deconstructionist and post-structuralist modes of reading. In Schuurman's

discussion of rhetoric as imitative we can see echoes of Jacques Derrida's discussion of

mimesis and the free play of language.[75] In her language of performance, we can see the

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[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid., 1312-13.
[75] I am thinking in particular here of Derrida's interest in "Double Session" in imitation and the work of the mime who "imitates nothing that in any way preexists his operation: neither an act…nor a word;" see the

legacy of Judith Butler's work on performance and performativity, as well as Eve

Sedgwick's use of these terms in her work on affect.[76]

I point to these resonances because I see in Schuurman a particularly postmodern

reading of a premodern text, a fact she underscores in her reading of Chaucer "go[ing]

as far as any postmodern antirealist in making this inadequacy [of *logos*] the basis for

constructing a kind of textual hall of mirrors."[77] One of the central assumptions of

Derrida, Butler, Sedgwick, and "postmodern antirealist[s]," however, is that there is no

reality outside of imitation, no reality outside of what is performed. That indeed one of

the reasons performance and imitation are not manipulative is because there is no truth

being obscured.[78] There is no reason to assume that this is Chaucer's understanding of

either reality or language—and many reasons to assume that it is not. And while

Schuurman does indicate that for Chaucer there is a reality outside of imitation, surely

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translation by B. Johnson in *Disseminations*, p. 198. Schuurman cites her antecedent here as Ernesto Grassi, *Rhetoric as Philosophy*, particularly on "the problem of rhetoric;" see Anne Schuurman, "Pity and Poetics in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, fn 38. Her interest in the language of imitation, however, marks her as more in line with deconstructionist modes of reading than it does with Grassi.

[76] Judith Butler famously first expounds on the concept of performativity in the last chapter of *Gender Trouble*, and she expounds on queer performativity in *Bodies that Matter*. Eve Sedgwick explicitly connects performativity to affect theory in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*.

[77] Anne Schuurman, "Pity and Poetics in the *Legend of Good Women*," 1313.

[78] This assumption is absolutely central both to Derrida's claim in "Double Session," as well as Butler and Sedgwick's work on queer performativity. Indeed, what makes the concept of performativity so valuable in the contemporary context is precisely that it points to gender norms as culturally constructed and not reliant on external truth claims.

the fact that there is a reality outside of imitation would always prompt questions about

whether or not that reality is being represented without deception or manipulation.[79]

I have spent some time drawing out the implications of Schuurman's thought

here because it connects in crucial ways to her arguments about the nature of *pitee*.

Schuurman grounds her discussion of *pitee* firmly within current critical discussions in

the history of the emotions, particularly the work of Sarah McNamer in emphasizing

"the performative dimensions of affective piety."[80] McNamer's argument, which I have

discussed previously, is that the generic texts of affective meditation "are quite literally

scripts for the performance of feeling—scripts that often explicitly aspire to performative

efficacy, [and that are] designed to be enacted by the reader."[81] Schuurman argues that

"the generic designation claimed by Chaucer for his secular legends, also fits well this

model of emotion scripts for the performance of feeling."[82] And, most importantly,

Schuurman links these emotion scripts in hagiography to processes of identification and

imitation in which one is lead to imagine one's own salvation through the examples of

the saints. For Schuurman, these processes of imitation and identification, when paired

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[79] "If there is a straightforward didacticism in Chaucer's playful simulacra, it can only be in the prompting of another sort of contemplation, not simply of the suffering of good women in love, but of the radical human contingency that is manifest in imitation, a contingency that locates the reality of being outside ourselves and beyond language and representation;" quoted from Anne Schuurman, "Pity and Poetics in the *Legend of Good Women*," 1313.

[80] Ibid., 1306.

[81] Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*, 12.

[82] Anne Schuurman, "Pity and Poetics in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," 1306.

with Chaucer's poetic work in the *Legends*, challenge the dichotomy of authentic and

fake and the fantasy of:

> "the self-contained individual"...by playing up the conventionality of piteous
> expression, thereby decoupling authenticity from originality and reframing it as
> an effect of imitation. For Chaucer, the art of feeling pity maps onto the art of
> writing poetry because both involve performed sincerity that is not insincere for
> being performed, a kind of authentic inauthenticity: what Jean Baudrillard
> would consider "la vérité qui cache qu'il n'y en a pas" ("the truth that conceals
> that there is no truth"), a truth that undoes the binary by which sincerity and
> fakery are defined against each other.[83]

For Schuurman, because *pitee* is inherently imitative and performative it challenges the

model of human as a self-contained individual and the sincerity/fakery binary. If *pitee* is

imitative then our interior affects are not original to us, but come to us through our close

relation with others.[84] If *pitee* is performative then we come to feel emotion not through a

spontaneous and authentic moment, but through a process of gradually learning an

emotion script.

Part of what is so compelling about Schuurman's argument here, as well as that

of her immediate antecedent, Sarah McNamer, is that it contains important insights into

medieval thought. Schuurman and McNamer are right to point out that the model of the

human person present in medieval *pitee* discourses is not that of the "self-contained

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[83] Ibid., 1307. Schuurman's quote from the post-structuralist Jean Baudrillard is from *Simulacra and Simulation*.

[84] "In a similar vein, recent studies of affect and politics have posited imitative, 'infectious' transmissions between people as a way of understanding the semiconscious and hard-to-track modes by which collectivities are made and unmade;" Ibid., 1305. Schuurman's antecedent here is Lauren Berlant's introduction in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*.

individual," and they are right to note that medieval *pitee* does not map onto

contemporary models of emotion as spontaneous, authentic, and outside the bonds of

reason.[85]

However, there are real limitations to this mode of critical discourse. Medieval

pitee was a response to suffering that was developed through careful habituation and

processes of deliberation, a process alluded to in McNamer and Shuurman's work on

the performative nature of emotions. Notably missing from these accounts, however, is a

discussion of the passions, will, and reason. In medieval anthropology and theology,

what are now identified as emotions were known as the passions. The passions were

defined in medieval scholasticism as "motions of the sense appetite" and were activated

and shaped over time "by reason and will."[86] And the work of activating and shaping

the passions over time by reason and the will was understood as a process of moral

habituation in which a person, with God's help, attempts to move into a life of good

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[85] In fact, what I find most valuable about McNamer's intervention in particular is her work in challenging the reason/emotion dichotomy, a dichotomy that she maps in *Affective Meditation* and in her chapter "Feeling" in *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, 241-57. Even in critiquing this dichotomy and its gendered implications, however, McNamer preserves the emotion/reason dichotomy and its gendered associations. What is valuable for thinking across this dichotomy, however, is precisely the medieval conception of the interrelation of the passions, will, and reason that I elaborate below which requires that one think outside of such a dichotomy. I would also suggest that an attempt to critique the gender associations that have been attached to the reason/emotion dichotomy might also begin by thinking across affective and cognitive processes.

[86] See Thomas Aquinas' treatise on the passions in the *Summa Theologiae* Ia2ae, qq.22-48 for one such articulation. Robert Miner's *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions* provides a particularly rich introduction not only to Aquinas on the passions, but to the larger medieval conversation about the work of the passions.

habits known as the virtues. This moral habituation, moreover, always has a teleological

scope: the aim of shaping the passions is to bring oneself into closer alignment with God.

Relatedly, Schuurman and McNamer's critical discourses make it difficult to talk

about medieval models of *pitee* that were *not* mimetic, imitative, or identification based.

While there were certainly many models of medieval *pitee* that functioned as a process of

imitation or identification, particularly in the tradition of affective meditation on the

Passion,[87] there were also thinkers who were critical of this mode of relation. Writers

such as Julian of Norwich, Christine de Pizan, and, I would argue, Chaucer, who offer

critiques of medieval conceptions of *pitee* as imitative. And it is not that these authors

simply discard *pitee* entirely, but they are engaged in thinking critically and carefully

about what a non-imitative, non-identificatory *pitee* would look like.

I also find this language around "performative" incredibly limiting for talking

about medieval *pitee*. While McNamer and Schuurman celebrate the "creative power of

imitation...to produce genuine feeling,"[88] this celebration ignores that the goal of any

medieval "emotion script" or "performed sincerity" was not, or was not only, the

production of feeling—genuine or otherwise. Affective *pitee* for Christ was not the end

of meditation on the Passion, but rather *pitee* for Christ had salvific ends, as did *pitee* for

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[87] *The Book of Margery Kempe* functions in this category, as do Lollard devotional practices exemplified in the such persons as Margery Baxter and Sir John Oldcastle. See Sarah Beckwith's *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* for a more thorough investigation of these models of imitative and identificatory devotion.

[88] Anne Schuurman, "Pity and Poetics in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," 1307.

saints in hagiography. To respond affectively to the Passion, or to use the medieval

terminology, to respond *passionately*, is an attempt to achieve greater intimacy with God.

The teleological scope of *pitee* is obscured in McNamer and Schuurman; it is, quite

simply, not a topic in which they are interested.[89] This matters because what brings

authors like Julian, de Pizan, and Chaucer together is that they are invested in asking not

just how to generate *pitee*, but asking what the ethical and theological work of *pitee* is.

What should *pitee* do both for the person who feels it and for the person for whom it is

felt?

I have placed Chaucer within a particular late medieval context, a group of

writers and thinkers who were engaged in thinking critically about models of medieval

pitee that were imitative or identificatory. This was a trend occurring across multiple

pitee-related discourses. Julian of Norwich's *Showings* is a critical re-writing of the

tradition of affective meditation on the Passion. She describes how she had longed to

suffer compassionately with Christ: "For I wolde that his paines ware my paines, with

compassion and afterwarde langinge to God."[90] Julian does not receive this form of

compassionate relation to God, however, but a series of challenging visions detailing

images of both the nature of Christ's suffering and her own mode of relating to God. Her

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[89] See Anne Schuurman, "Pity and Poetics in the *Legend of Good Women*," 1307. And also, see Sarah
McNamer's explication of her interest in considering "the history of devotion as an aspect of the history of
emotion rather than another way around" as seeking to offer "a new narrative for a familiar cultural
transformation"—one which requires "setting theology to one side theology to one side;" quoted from
Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion, 6-7.
[90] Julian of Norwich, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, p. 67, lines 3-4.

pursuit of compassion, of suffering with Christ, is constantly frustrated, with all sights

of suffering transforming into visions of wholeness and joy.[91] It is not that Julian never

acknowledges or contemplates the Passion, however, but rather that she shows that the

intense pursuit of feeling identificatory compassion with and for Jesus can actually be a

distraction that leads to self-absorption wherein all of God's pain becomes her pain. And

her visions subsequently detail a series of reflections on modes of compassionate

relation that do not detail identification.[92] In a completely different mode, Christine de

Pizan was thinking critically about gender alongside identificatory and mimetic

exempla. *The Book of the City of Ladies*, written in part as a response to the *fin'amor*

discourse and the *Roman de la Rose*, considers how male authors have manipulated

affective response to stories of women as bad exempla. In her construction of the City of

Ladies, she underscores the importance of using Reason, Rectitude, and Justice to think

carefully and critically about mimetic exempla with which women have been presented,

while underscoring the importance of a process of self-examination and self-compassion

in understanding her own worth and identity as a woman.[93]

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[91] I am thinking in particular here of Julian's showing of the Lord and the Servant, but as much could be said about any of her other showings including that of the dried and suffering crucified Christ, as well as that of Jesus as mother.

[92] The master and servant and the Jesus as mother showings are inherently non-mimetic.

[93] The structure of *The Book of the City of Ladies* itself encourages this reading with Christine de Pizan beginning with a narration of the shame she feels as a woman after reading Matheolus' *Lamentations* and then moving on to the slow building and filling of the City of Ladies with worthy exempla thanks to the assistance of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice.

Chaucer's contribution to this tradition in the *Legend of Good Women* is his careful consideration of the adequacy of *pitee* as a mode of relating to the grief and suffering of others in hagiographic exempla. He does this by considering the effects of poetry and *pitee* on judgments about the virtue and character of women. Charged by Alceste with writing "a glorious legende / Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves, / That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves" (F.483-485), one of the ways Chaucer codes women as "goode wymen" is by marking their lives and legends as pitiful.

Each legend marks the pitiful nature of the woman's life and death slightly differently. The legend that makes the lightest use of the language of *pitee* or any of its family resemblance terms is that of Cleopatra. In its one use of the word *routhe*, however, Chaucer makes an important connection between a woman's *trouthe* and the *routhe* of her situation. He describes how Cleopatra after the suicide of Marc Antony fled to Egypt "for drede and for destresse":

> But herkeneth, ye that speken of kyndenesse,
> Ye men that falsly sweren many an oth
> That ye wol deye if that youre love be wroth,
> Here may ye sen of wemen which a trouthe!
> This woful Cleopatre hath mad swich routhe
> That ther is tonge non that may it telle.
> (665-670)

The *trouthe/routhe* rhyme was one Chaucer deployed repeatedly throughout his poetry

including other legends, the *Book of the Duchess*, and *Troilus and Criseyde*.[94] Part of

Chaucer's fascination with this rhyme lay in the ways *routhe* could serve as evidence of

trouthe.[95] In the Cleopatra legend, Chaucer explicitly details *routhe* as that which proves a

woman's *trouthe* with the implication that this one woman's *routhe/trouthe* challenges the

conventions, particularly masculine conventions, about women's *unkyndenesse*.

The problem here, of course, is a perpetual one in exempla. It is unclear if

Cleopatra is an exception to the rule or evidence of a larger capacity for *routhe/trouthe* in

women. In considering what sort of example Cleopatra is and thus what sort of example

the women who follow who are, the term *kyndenesse*, particularly when connected to

routhe, is significant. Cleopatra's *routhe* is such that no tongue can tell it; it is beyond the

capacity to relate in language (although Chaucer will of course make some effort).

Kyndenesse, with its association not only with acts of courtesy or constancy in love, but

also with a closeness based on kinship, suggests that part of what marks Cleopatra's

routhe/trouthe as worthy of admiration is that it fits into a schema of behavior

recognizable to men.

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[94] I only touch on Chaucer's use of it here, for a fuller consideration of it in *Troilus and Criseyde* see Owen
Boynton, "The Trouthe/Routhe Rhyme in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde."
[95] Richard F. Green explicitly locates the patterns of betrayal throughout the legends within the context of
larger cultural changes around *troth* taking shape in the late medieval period. See his article on this
"Chaucer's Victimized Women," 3-21, as well as his fuller examination of *trouthe* and *troth* in *A Crisis of
Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England*.

In this first instance, when Chaucer singles out his address to men "that falsly sweren" and those that "speken of kyndenesse," Chaucer sets a precedent for how the *trouthe* and the *routhe* of the good women he describes ought to be recognized. Their laments and grief will be proof of their goodness, of their *trouthe*. It will also be a *routhe* that is a product of a known and legitimate form of suffering. When I say legitimate I mean that it will be recognizable that their actions are good, are true. And it is worth remembering Cleopatra closely as well because although Chaucer will later address women directly in the *Legend* this first example, the one that sets the tone for the rest of the narrative, is spoken to men and serves as an interpretive lens through which men can understand the suffering, *routhe*, and *trouthe* of the women who follow as legitimate and worthy of praise.

Thus when we reach the legend of Dido, we can read Chaucer's address to women with the context of his first address to men in mind. The story of Dido, perhaps more than any other of the legends, draws heavily from Ovid's *Heroides*. The tragedy of the Dido of the *Heroides* was that she was a terrible reader. She failed to understand that Aeneas' leaving was inevitable despite every story he told her about his destiny.[96] And Chaucer's account of Dido encourages women to be good readers. After detailing how

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[96] In her study of Dido in the Middle Ages, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and Medieval Aeneid*, Marilynn Desmond discusses *Heroides 7* as a poem invested in dramatizing "the thematics of reading as interpretation" so that the poem itself is invested in exploring how female readers read the *Aeneid*, how Ovid has read the *Aeneid*, and how Dido has failed to read the narrative of the fall of Troy. Quoted from Marily Desmond, *Reading Dido*, 32.

Dido's *rewthe* for Aeneas' pain led her to accept his pledges of *trouthe* and become his

wife,[97] Chaucer comments,

> O sely wemen, ful of innocence,
> Ful of pite, of trouthe and conscience,
> What maketh yow to men to truste so?
> Have ye swych routhe upon hyre feyned wo,
> And han swich olde ensaumples yow beforn?
> Se ye nat alle how they ben forsworn?
> (1254-1259)

The irony, of course, is that the very quality of being "ful of pite, of trouthe and

conscience" is here that which makes women susceptible to trusting men despite

examples.

Part of what makes women like Dido "goode wemen" is this quality of *pitee* and

routhe.[98] In every one of Chaucer's legends the women described are the epitome of *pitee*,

routhe, and trust. In cases where Chaucer's source material, moreover, suggested that

there was a limit to womanly *pitee* such as the legend of Philomela or Medea, the

moments in which Philomela's *pitee* or Medea's *pitee* might be said to fail are excised

from the text. But part of what Chaucer lays out, much as he did in *Troilus and Criseyde*,

is the double bind *pitee* places on women. *Pitee* is a valued feminine virtue, one of the

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[97] Whether or not Dido and Aeneas wed is ambiguous in both the *Aeneid* and *Heroides 7*. H.A. Kelly contextualizes Chaucer's definitiveness on their marriage in relation to medieval rules against clandestine marriages; see Part III "Clandestine Marriage," particularly chapters 6 and 8, in *Marriage in the Age of Chaucer*. Most critics read the marriage as described by Chaucer as constituting a valid marriage, with Sheila Delany in *The Naked Text* being a notable exception; see Isabel Davis' account of the history of this critical discussion in *Chaucer and Fame: Reputation and Reception*, 1-7.
[98] This tradition of reading Dido as the epitome of *pitee* and *routhe* brings us back to Augustine, who had felt such *pitee* for Dido.

ways women are marked as good women, and yet, it is a dangerous virtue for a woman.[99] Like Dido, *pitee* for the wrong person can lead women to place their trust in those who will betray them.

This then raises the question of what Chaucer's female readers are meant to do with his examples: should they still *pitee*, but with greater discernment and less trust? Is it even possible to have *pitee* and distrust for someone simultaneously? This passage, if nothing else, suggests that it would be considerably safer for women to be less innocent and less piteous. It also suggests that women court danger if they read these exempla with an eye to imitating feminine *pitee*.[100]

And yet, in the legend of Philomela, Chaucer reminds us how important *pitee* is in establishing the truth of a story as well as the virtues of its main actors. *Pitee* is something that assures us of narrative *trouthe* and virtuous character. There are two figures in the legend who weep and shake piteously: one whose tale is told, Philomela, and one who tells a tale, Tereus. Philomela, having been taken by her brother-in-law Tereus to a cave so that he can rape her in secret, first realizes she is in danger when he bids her to rest. She asks him, "Where is my sister, brother Tereus?" (2315). Chaucer then describes how she "...wepte tenderly / And quok for fere, pale and pitously, / Ryght as the lamb that of the wolf is biten" (2316-2318). The simile, translated from the

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[99] See my discussion of this in chapter 2.
[100] And this focus on women as the targets of his exempla marks the greatest departure from Augustine. Augustine's concerns take shape around compassion and *pitee* in general; Chaucer's major innovation in re-telling the Dido legend here is to focus on the specific ethical consequences of aesthetic *pitee* for women.

Metamorphoses, highlights the pathos of the moment.[101] Philomela, the lamb, is utterly

powerless before the cruelty of the wolf. The grotesqueness of Tereus' actions are

underscored by her appeal to him as brother as well as the repeated cries for her sister.

The unusual leve of Tereus' cruelty is apparent in the fact that, despite the

piteous sight of the pale, shaking, and weeping Philomela, he does not *pitee* her and

stop, but moves forward with his planned violence. Tereus is perfectly capable of

recognizing what is pitiable; he simply chooses to ignore it here. We see that he is in fact

fully capable of identifying the sensorial markers of *pitee* and mimicking them later in

the tale when he describes the fake death of Philomela to her sister Procne: "And

pitously he wep and shok his hed, / and swor hir that he fond hir sister ded; / For which

this sely Progne hath swich wo / That mygh hire sorweful herte brak a-two" (2344-2347).

His piteous behavior lends believability to his story. Like the pitiful Philomela, he gives

signs of real suffering: weeping, shaking his head, swearing the truth of what he has

seen. And indeed "[s]ely" Procne, *sely* meaning innocent and good as well as wretched

and pitiable here, never doubts Tereus' story. She reads his sorrow as sorrow, and,

affected by his piteous weeping, she believes her sister to be dead. For Tereus,

engendering Procne's *pitee* and subsequently sharing in grief with her is an important

part of his establishing the truth of his narrative.

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[101] *Metamorphoses* VI.527-28: "illa tremit velut agna pavens, quae saucia cani / ore excussa lupi nondum sibi tuta videtur."

And we are reminded too by Chaucer's omissions in the conclusion of the legend of the importance of *pitee* in judging Philomela or Procne as "sely," pitiable, or good. In his account, Chaucer removes any discussion of Procne and Philomela's grotesque cannibalistic revenge: "The remenaunt [of the tale] is no charge for to telle" (2383). The specter of this omission, however, says more than its inclusion could have. And in this omission we can see how essential *pitee* is to judging a person to be good. In their Ovidian revenge, neither Philomela nor Procne show *pitee* toward Tereus. And, indeed, the brutality of their actions is such that it is not particularly easy to feel *pitee* toward them. In the omission of these details we are brutally reminded that for a woman to be a good woman, to be the sort of woman included in Chaucer's hagiography, she must be easily pitiable.

And this womanly piteousness also serves an important aesthetic function in the legend of Philomela—a fact that Chaucer is careful to elucidate. In his attention to affective response and aesthetic detail in the legend, Chaucer renders an already horrible story even more repulsive. He begins this tale differently than he does every other. He starts be detailing the effect of this story on him as writer and reader, and he goes so far as to label it a "foule storye" (2239). He describes how after reading the story: "Myne eyen wexe foule and sore also. / Yit last the venym of so longe ago, / That it enfecteth hym that wol beholde / The story of Tereus, of which I tolde" (2240-2243). Describing the story of Tereus (and it is notable here that it is Tereus' story and not Philomela's), he

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details it as infectious. The foulness of the story spreads from the page into the body of those who read it. Chaucer's eyes "wexe foule and sore also" despite how long ago this story took place. And yet, he renders it with artful poetic detail: the metaphors of Philomela's rape, herself as the bitten lamb and the eagle-smitten dove; the parallel structure of her piteous state before Tereus and then his piteous state before Procne. These details heighten the pitiful nature of the legend even as they give pleasure in the artfulness of the rendering of suffering.

And this brings us back to Augustine's concern about the aestheticization of pity. Because pity, perhaps more than any other of its family resemblance terms, demands that we think of the person on the other side of pity. Pity etymologically derives from *pietas*, meaning in post-classical Latin compassion or pity, but originally meaning dutiful or right conduct. *Pietas* is thus associated not just with *pitee*, but with piety. In thinking of *pitee*'s etymology we are reminded that the concept and language of *pitee* is derived from the concept of duty to some higher good. So that the language of *pietas*, pity, and piety invite a kind of slippage in which what it means to respond to others with pity is to respond to them with dutiful feeling and action. And, moreover, that it is right and dutiful to respond to the suffering of others in pity. Augustine reminds us of the complexity of this action when pity is rendered subject to aesthetic form. The audience seeks out artistically rendered grief in pursuit of a moment of catharsis and that seeking out of grief subjects pity to enjoyment.

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But as both Augustine and Chaucer make evident, this subjection of pity to

enjoyment has ethical consequences. To understand this, we might think of Love's

particular critique of Chaucer and the penance Alceste assigns him. The two prologues

offer slightly varying accounts of Chaucer's disserve to Love. In both, Love charges

that Chaucer with his "translacioun" (F.324, G. 250) has slandered and hindered the

servants of Love and has through his translation of the *Roman de la Rose* caused wise

folks to withdraw from Love. The version in F then details how Chaucer's treatment of

Criseyde has made "...men to wommen lasse triste, / [women that] ben as trewe as ever

was any steel" (F.333-34), but G is considerably more expansive.[102] The God of Love

demands: "Why noldest thow as wel [han] seyd goodnesse / Of wemen, as thow hast

seyd wikednesse? / was there no good matere in thy mynde, / Ne in all thy bokes ne

coudest thow nat fynde / som story of wemen that were goode and trewe?" (G.268-272)

It is not that Chaucer has only written a text that has led other men to trust less and to

make poor judgments of the trueness of women, but he has been a poor reader. He has

not read or has failed to recall the stories written by authors "Cristene and hethene" (G.

309) that detail the lives of "clene maydenes" and "trewe wyves" (G.282). And so the

[102] Of the two versions of the prologue of the *Legend of Good Women*, the G version exists in only one
manuscript Cambridge Gg.4.27 and was likely composed after F. Sheila Delany details the relationship
between the two prologues and argues for the priority of F; see *The Naked Text*, 34-43. I write about both F
and G, but am particularly interested in Prologue G's focus on Chaucer's mistreatment of women—a
considerable departure from his writing in F.

God of Love gives Chaucer a clue as to how to recognize and remember the stories of

good and true women:

> How clene maydenes and how trewe wyves,
> How stedefaste widewes durynge alle here lyves,
> Telleth Jerome, and that nat of a fewe,
> But, I dar seyn, an hundred on a rewe,
> That it is pite for to rede, and routhe,
> The wo that they endure for here trouthe.
> (282-287)

Stories of clean maidens and true wives will be a "pite for to rede." These women will

endure a great deal of woe for their *trouthe*, and, in doing so, will deserve the *routhe* of

their readers.[103]

Chaucer's legends subsequently act as a penance by gathering together old

stories that are a "pite for to rede" about women whose *trouthe* makes them deserving of

routhe: "For to hyre love were they so trewe / That, rather than they wolde take a newe, /

They chose to be ded in sondry wyse, / And deiden, as the story wol devyse" (288-91).

Chaucer rights his wrong against Love, against women, by re-writing stories of good

women to make them as pitiful as possible and by choosing women to describe who are

as pitiful as possible. And Chaucer makes clear what the ultimate sign of a woman's

pitiability is: to suffer intensely and to die painfully. It is to be burned, have their throats

slit, drown. And so Chaucer erases any detail that complicates that *pitee* or suffering,

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[103] We are reminded here too that this is exactly what made Criseyde not a good or true woman. She did not needlessly endure a great deal of woe for her *trouthe*; she acted with a care to her own well-being.

such as Medea's or Philomela's revenge. Without these details it is considerably easier to read suffering as suffering. Consequently, this makes it easier to *pitee* the women described and judge them to be a good woman. For within the criteria of goodness laid out by Love, a good woman is a suffering woman. A good woman is a dead woman.[104]

This, Chaucer suggests, is the end result of the way hagiographies entwine *pitee* and aesthetic form. The aesthetic form of hagiography relies on coding the suffering of its martyrs, particularly female martyrs, as extreme. And the response of *pitee* in readers is one of the hallmarks of recognizing that an author has correctly coded its subject as both suffering and as someone whose suffering is undeserved. The sufferer is a good person who chooses to undergo suffering because of principled choice. Aesthetic enjoyment of a well-written martyrdom relies on soliciting *pitee* from its readers.

Indeed, in the conclusion of the *Legend* we can see that Chaucer was thinking critically about the ethical consequences of this aestheticization of suffering women and *pitee*. He ends the *Legend of Good Women* with the story of Hypermnestra. In the legend, Hypermnestra, having warned her husband Lynceus of her father's murderous attentions, is subsequently abandoned by him:

> This sely woman is so weik—Allas!—
> And helples, so that or that she fer wente,
> Hire crewel fader dide hire for to hente...
> For whan she saw that gon awey was he,

> and that she myghte nat so faste go,
> Ne folwen hym, she sat hire doun ryght tho,
> Til she was caught and fetered in prysoun.
> This tale is seyd for this conclusion—
> (2713-2723)

Repeating the description of Hypermnestra as a "sely woman," Chaucer connects this

sely nature to a particular kind of weakness. Hypermnestra cannot follow Lynceus, and

she cannot outrun her father. She is therefore caught and trapped in prison. Just like

elsewhere in his poetry, just as Chaucer is about to gloss his own purpose in writing,

however, he breaks off.[105] While critics have argued that Chaucer simply grew bored and

abandoned the project at this point, it seems to me much more likely that Chaucer

deliberately leaves "this conclusion" uncompleted.[106] In leaving the conclusion

incomplete, Chaucer suggests that there is no suitable conclusion for these stories, no

gloss that would make clear the purpose of the *Legend* itself. And we are left frustrated

with the knowledge that in collections of exempla such as the *Legend*, or Ovidian

narratives, or even medieval hagiographies, perhaps there is no other purpose than to

pitee and enjoy the suffering entrapment of women who are too "sely" and too "weik" to

get away. Indeed, there is nothing to be glossed, nothing for good women to imitate.

These exempla are purely objects of a particularly cruel kind of aesthetic pleasure.

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[105] I am thinking in particular here of the end of the *House of Fame*.

[106] Going back at least to Thomas Lounsbury and maintained by R. K. Root in *The Poetry of Chaucer*, literary critics have conjectured that Chaucer grew bored with the project. Carolyn Dinshaw goes a step farther to describe the *Legend* itself as "downright boring;" quoted from *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 74. For counter narratives, see Robert Worth Frank, Jr., *Chaucer and "The Legend of Good Women"*, esp. pp. 189-210, Sheila Delany, *The Naked Text*, and Carolyn P. Collette, *Rethinking Chaucer's "Legend of Good Women."*

The challenge here is to discern if this is only a critique of hagiography or if the *Legend* belongs to a larger critique in Chaucer of pitiful aesthetics. The fact that the *Legend* itself was a text to which Chaucer repeatedly returned throughout the last 20 years of his life is suggestive of the importance he attached to the themes and questions it explored. It also suggests that the questions and critiques he raises around *pitee* and aesthetics in the *Legend* stayed with him throughout the end of his writing career.

To show the shape these questions and critiques had on Chaucer's poetry and his concept of *pitee*, I want to conclude my discussion of *pitee* and poetry in Chaucer by considering Chaucer's final treatment of *pitee*, the *Parson's Tale*, in conjunction with the *Retraction. Pitee* in the *Parson's Tale* represents a fundamental departure from any of Chaucer's earlier treatments of *pitee*. It is *pitee* rendered in a non-poetic form,[107] and it is *pitee* tied exclusively to the consolation of charitable action. In turn, the *Retraction* engages in a consideration of the forms of writing that please God and edify others—a consideration which connects the *Retraction* to Chaucer's larger considerations of the ethical and aesthetic ends of *pitee* and poetry.

The *Parson's Tale* begins with a conversation about poetic composition. The Host asks the Parson for a fable, and, in response, the Parson draws on Paul's advice in the

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[107] It is worth noting that Chaucer writes about *pitee* in prose form two other times, in the *Boece* and in the *Tale of Melibee.* While both treatments of *pitee* are brief, both texts represent serious reflections on consolation and the merciful actions of those in power.

letters to Timothy about the dangers of fables.[108] Fables in 1 and 2 Timothy are defined

as opposed to truth and godliness, fables "furnish questions rather than the edification

of God which is in faith."[109] And the Parson casts fables as counter to "soothfastnesse"

(33-34). He thus asks, "Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest, / Whan I may sowen

whete, if that me lest?" (35-36). Reminiscent of Boethius' language of the fruits of reason

withering from the sweet venom of poetry, the Parson uses an agricultural metaphor to

describe the fruitlessness of fable in contrast to the fruitfulness of the tale he will proffer.

The wheat he will sow will consist of "moralitee and vertuous materee," a "myrie tale in

prose / To knytte up al this feeste and make an ende" (38, 46-47). Generically he names

his tale a "meditacioun," one that will yield to the company a "plesaunce leefful, as [he]

kan" (55, 41).[110] Gleaning that the host asks for fable in pursuit of pleasure, the Parson

reformulates pleasure to map onto the genre of prose meditation and the subject of

morality and virtuous matter.

That this "myrie tale in prose" proves to be a penitential manual is something of

a surprise—especially as it flagrantly fails to meet the Host's request that the *meditacion*

be told quickly and "in litel space" (71). But the Parson in the tale itself makes clear what

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[108] See 1 Tim. 1.3-4, 4.6-7, and 2 Tim 4.2-4

[109] 1 Tim. 1.4

[110] Thomas H. Bestul argues for the importance of considering the *Parson's Tale* in relation to the tradition of medieval meditative literature; see "Chaucer's Parson's Tale and the Late-Medieval Tradition of Religious Meditation," 600-619; this context is particularly useful because the aim of the meditative tradition is also to orient oneself toward Christ and the eschatological vision.

the "whete" of his matter is and exactly how his penitential meditation will be

"fructuous" as the Host requests (71). The Parson explains:

> Manye been the weyes espirituels that leden folk to oure Lord Jhesu Crist and to the regne of glorie. Of whiche weyes there is a ful noble wey and a ful covenable, which may nat fayle to man ne to womman that thurgh synne hath mysgoon fro the righte wey of Jerusalem celestial; and this wey is cleped Penitence of which man sholde gladly herknen and enquere with al his herte to wyten what is Penitence, and whennes it is cleped Penitence, and in how manye maneres been the acciouns or werkynges of Penitence, and how manye speces ther been of Penitence, and whiche thynges apertenen and bihoven to Penitence, and whiche thynges destourben Penitence.
> (78-82)

The task of his writing is precisely that laid out by Paul in the letters to Timothy: to lead

other to Christ and the reign of glory. The fruit of his tale will be a clear and infallible

way to the city of God. And the pleasure of hearing this tale, a tale that has been

described as stylistically "frequently uninspiring and awkward," derives from its

eschatological focus.[111] The use and the pleasure of the *Parson's Tale* lies in its laying out

a map that sinful men and women can follow that will lead them back onto the heavenly

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[111] Siegfried Wenzel, following Lee Patterson, writes in his explanatory notes in the *Riverside Chaucer*, "Stylistically, the tale is frequently uninspiring and awkward, with faulty or incorrect transitions (c.g., X.916, 939) and blatant errors (870, 1073, perhaps 679, 692)" (956). See Wenzel's further discussion of Chaucer's style in the tale in "The Source for the 'remedia' of the *Parson's Tale*," 433-53; here he pays particular attention to the relationship between the style of the *Parson's Tale* and one of Chaucer's sources the *Summa virtutum de remediis anime*, itself influenced by Peraldus' *Summa de virtutibus*. Arvind Thomas reads the *myrie* nature of the tale as arising out of the Parson's mingling of genre-specific styles in a "rhetorically enabled mirth—one that enlivens the penitential subject matter of the tale in ways that are eclipsed when we focus exclusively on the Latin sources translated by Chaucer;" see "What's *Myrie* about the Prose of the *Parson's Tale*?," 421. And Krista Sue-Lo Twu argues for the *Parson's Tale* as a carefully constructed translation; "Chaucer's Vision of the Tree of Life: Crossing the Road with the Rood in the *Parson's Tale*," 341-78.

path. Indeed, we are looking at a Chaucerian reformulation of Horace's *Ars Poetica* in which to write *dulce* and *utile* is to write eschatologically.

The fittingness of choosing the way "cleped Penitence" to narrate to the Canterbury pilgrims at the end of their journey has been elaborated by Lee Patterson.[112] In context of thinking of the generic transition from poetic fable to prosaic penitential meditation at the end of the way to Canterbury, Chaucer through the Parson offers an account of the limits of the aesthetic and ethical ends of poetry. The poetic tales that preceded could not provide a way to Christ, a conclusion supported by reading the *Parson's Tale* alongside the *Retraction*, but this is expressly the end of works written in the penitential genre.[113]

Pitee within this new formal and generic context transforms; it gains a christocentric focus and culminates in charitable action. This transformation is the product of the eschatological focus of penitential literature in general and the *Parson's Tale* in particular because all forms of *pitee* are re-written with reference to Christ's salvific *pitee*.[114] In one of his meditations on contrition, the Parson explains:

> The fifthe thyng that oghte moeve a man to contricioun is remembrance of the passioun that oure Lord Jhesu Crist suffred for oure synnes. For, as seith Seint

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[112] "The 'Parson's Tale' and the Quitting of the *Canterbury Tales*,'" 331-380.

[113] For a discussion both of the penitential genre and a reading the *Parson's Tale* as a sort of prologue to his *Retraction*, see Richard Newhauser, "The Parson's Tale and its Generic Affiliations."

[114] In recent years, critics have examined the particular orthodoxy of the Parson, situating his tale in context of lollard heretical movements and religious censorship at the end of the fourteenth century. See in particular, Frances McCormack, *Chaucer and the Culture of Dissent: The Lollard Context and Subtext of the Parson's Tale* and Karen A. Winstead, "Chaucer's *Parson's Tale* and the Contours of Orthodoxy," 239-259.

Bernard, "Whil that I lyve I shal have remembrance of the travailles that oure Lord Crist suffred in prechyng: his werynesse in travaillyng, his temptaciouns whan he fasted, his longe wakynges whan he preyde, hise teeres whan that he weep for pitee of good peple, the wo and the shame and the filthe that men seyden to hum, of the foule spittyng that men spitte in his face, of the buffettes that men yaven hym...and of al the rememnant of his passioun that he suffred for my synnes, and no thyng for his gilt." (255-60)

The Passion in the Parson's account is suffered for humanity's sins. These sins themselves are defined in terms of a disordering of humanity's inner faculties, and this "disordinaunce and this rebellioun oure Lord Jhesu Crist aboghte upon his precious body ful deere..." (265). This account of the Passion, which has no immediate antecedent in Chaucer's sources, describes how if Christ had not "spared us so debonairly in oure folies that if he ne hadde pitee of mannes soule, a sory song we myghten alle synge" (315).[115] Christ's *pitee* and Passion account for humanity's salvation, but it is salvation of a particular kind. Christ's *pitee* restores order to humanity's faculties—a reordering that will make humanity capable of recognizing and remembering Christ's Passion. It is in remembering Christ's Passion and meditating on his suffering that humanity can make sense of salvation history and be moved to contrition.

The relationship between contrition and the Passion is striking because the focus is not on *pitee* for Christ. Indeed, that is never suggested despite the rich tradition

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[115] See the discussion of this lack of antecedent in *Sources and Analogues* and in Wenzel's editorial notes in the *Riverside Chaucer*.

Chaucer could have drawn from in crafting this example.[116] While the quotation, cited as being from Bernard, details Christ's suffering, [117] the focus in this passage is on Christ's suffering as an act in *pitee* and on the ways it should remind humanity of the anthropological and salvific consequences of that *pitee*. Contrition here subsequently springs from recognizing Christ's *pitee* as altering every aspect of human life, and this moment points ahead to the Parson's later assertion that "the lawe of Jesus crist is the lawe of pitee" (885).

The Parson's account of human *pitee* is equally interesting because it takes shape within the meditation on the seven deadly sins. *Pitee* is the relief of Avarice.[118] The Parson explains that *pitee* and *misericorde* relieve Avarice precisely because the failure of the avaricious man is a failure of *pitee* and *misericorde* to the needful. He explains that the avaricious man "... deliteth hym in the kepynge of his tresor, and nat in the rescowynge

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[116] Indeed, texts like the *Meditationes vitae Christi* marked compassion for Christ as the beginning of meditative practice and spiritual intimacy.

[117] The *Pricke of Conscience* also cites this quote as belonging to Bernard of Clairvaux.

[118] While it is important that every person have *pitee*, the Parson says, "Ther is no thing moore convenable to a man of heigh estaat than debonairetee and pitee" (467). This quote, which Chaucer translates from Peraldus' *Summa de vitiis*, references Seneca's *De Clementia* in which Seneca advises Nero on the import of *clementia* to just rule. Locating this quotation in a larger conversation about tyranny and its opposite, *rex pietosus*, in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, J.D. Burnley suggests that, in the language of pity and piety during this time, "[t]he distinction between the tyrant and his opposite is re-defined in terms of affectivity rather than reason...." This, Burnley suggests is what is at stake in Chaucer's translating *clementia* as *pitee* rather than clemency (curiously, Burnley also implies that this alteration is inadvertent). Perhaps it is for this reason that Gower locates *pitee* as the remedy to wrath in the *Confessio Amantis*. What Burnley does not consider is that the bulk of Chaucer's consideration of *pitee* is in the treatment of Avarice— *pitee* in fact requires a reorientation, re-directing oneself from delight and possessiveness toward an outward *releeving* of fellow Christians. *Pitee* would be an especially important state for those of "heigh estaat" to develop because they would have the most earthly treasures and, as evidenced by the scriptural tradition of Christ's confrontation the rich young man, most inclined to keep it. Quoted from J. D. Burnley, *Chaucer's Language and the Philosophers' Tradition*, 100.

ne releevynge of his eveneCristen" (803). Siegfried Wenzel has argued for the *Summa Virtutum De Remediis Anime*'s treatment of avarice as the source of this passage.[119] The connection between avarice and *pitee* is striking here because it explicitly connects the act of *pitee* and *misericorde* for Christ with *pitee* and *misericorde* for one's *eveneCristen*:

> Certes, the avricious man sheweth no pitee ne misericorde to the nedeful man, for he deliteth hym in the kepynge of his tresor, and nat in the rescowynge ne releevynge of his eveneCristen. And therfore speke I first of misericorde. Thanne is misericorde, as seith the Philosophre, a vertu by which the corage of a man is stired up by the mysese of hym that is mysesed. Upon which misericorde folweth pitee in parfournynge of charitable werkes of misericorde. And certes, thise thynges moeven a man to the misericorde of Jhesu Crist, that he yaf hymself for oure gilt, and suffred deeth for misericorde, and forgaf us oure originale synnes, and therby relessed us fro the peynes of helle, and amenused the peynes of purgatorie by penitence, and yeveth grace wel to do, and atte laste the blisse of hevene. The speces of misericorde been, as for to lene and for to yeve, and to foryeven and relesse, and for to han pitee in herte and compassioun of the meschief of his eveneCristene, and eek to chastise, there as nede is. (803-809)

Pitee and *misericorde* here rely on a complicated process of recognizing one's distance from the "mysesed." The Parson, likely referencing Aristotle here and potentially Aristotle's definition of *pitee* in the *Rhetoric*, describes *misericorde* as a virtue in which one is "stired up" by the sight of the *mysesed*.[120] Those with *misericorde* and *pitee* recognize the suffering of others as suffering and respond through "parfournynge of charitable werkes of misericorde." They see a need that must be filled and recognize that they are able to

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[119] Siegfried Wenzel, "The Source for the 'remedia' of the *Parson's Tale*," 433-53.

[120] Aristotle's definition of pity is "a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it;" quoted from *Rhetoric* II.8. See H. A. Kelly's *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy from Aristotle to the Middle Ages* for a consideration of Chaucer's connection to Aristotle.

fill it through charitable action. This action is associated with communal action and a movement to *pitee* Christ. The *pitee* for ones *eveneCristene* and for Christ is constituted by a communal and charitable action.

Chaucer's final reference to *pitee* in the *Parson's Tale*, and thus his final reference to *pitee* in the arc of his work, underscores the connection between *pitee*, charitable action, and consolation: "the thridde partie of Penitence is Satisfaction, and that stant moost generally in almesse and in bodily peyne. now been ther three manere of almesse: contricioun of herte, where a man offreth hymself to God, another is to han pitee of defaute of his neighebores, and the thridde is in yevynge of good conseil and comfort…." (1030). What it is to make satisfaction for one's sins, the final step in making one's way to the city of God, is largely constituted in alms and bodily pain. *Pitee* for one's neighbor is constituted as one of "three manere of almesse." *Pitee* becomes entirely about amelioration and reformulated in terms of the eschatological vision.

Pitee is absent from the *Retraction*, but I would argue that the *Retraction* is essential for understanding the arc of Chaucer's treatment of *pitee*.[121] Quoting from Romans 15:4, Chaucer writes,

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[121] Elizabeth Fowler discusses how Chaucer evokes conventional "social persons" in the *Retraction* and thus "presents us with a process of ethical deliberation;" quoted from Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character*, 90. In the process of doing so, she reads the *Retraction* as a serious ethical work. For readings of the *Retraction* as playful or ironic, see G. Gust, *Constructing Chaucer*, 113-120; George R. Petty, Jr., "Power, Deceit, and Misinterpretation: Uncooperative Speech in the *Canterbury Tales*," 413-423; and Peter W. Travis, "Deconstructing Chaucer's Retraction," 135-158.

Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any thyn in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al with and al goodnesse. And if ther be any thyng that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defute of myn unkonnynge and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyd bettre if I hadde had konnynge. for oure book seith, "Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine," and that is myn entene. (1081-83)

Chaucer's reference to Romans is complex. In Romans, the reference to what is written refers explicitly to the scripture, in particular the Passion narrative: "Let every one of you please his neighbour unto good, to edification. For Christ did not please himself: but, as it is written: The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell upon me. For what things soever were written were written for our learning: that, through patience and the comfort of the scriptures, we might have hope" (Romans 15:2-4). By connecting his "litel tretys" to the work of scripture, we are brought back to the prologue of the *Parson's Tale*.[122] The Parson reformulated the pleasure of hearing and telling tales away from the pleasure and "draf" of fable and toward the pleasure and fruit of the way to Christ and glory. This takes the form of a penitential treatise that seeks to teach its readers about an infallible way to Christ. With the quotation from Romans, Chaucer codes his purpose in

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[122] Charles A. Owen, Jr. has questioned whether or not the *Retraction* was meant to serve as an end to the *Canterbury Tales*, arguing based on both manuscript and language evidence that: "Chaucer could not have written the Retraction as it stands if he intended it to bring both the *Parson's Tale* and *The Canterbury Tales* to an end. The language of the Retraction makes perfect sense if it is seen as bringing an independent work, the *Treatise on Penitence*, to an end;" quoted from "What the manuscripts tell us about the *Parson's Tale*," 28. While his readings of the manuscripts certainly illustrate that the structure and state of the *Canterbury Tales* was not canonically set in the century following Chaucer's death, there is ample evidence in the *Retraction* itself that Chaucer uses the *Parson's Tale* and the *Retraction* to reflect on his poetic career and the work of poetry in general.

the *Parson's Tale* and other works of "moralitee" and "devocioun" as pleasing his

neighbor, his reader, "unto good, to edification."

In aligning it with the scriptures, moreover he gives it a consolatory focus. The

end of scripture in Romans is to give hope—a salvific and eschatological hope. Chaucer

implies that this too is the end of his non-retracted writings. Chaucer's writings in the

Parson's Tale and the *Retraction*, then, serve as his final entry into medieval debates about

ethics and aesthetics in poetry. The pleasure of poetry is transformed into a pleasure

unreliant on poetic form. The pleasure of writing described in the *Parson's Tale* and the

Retraction is a pleasure in the knowledge of one's salvation. And what it means to write

ethically is also transformed because he explicitly connects ethical writing to doctrinal

work: an edification of humanity's sinful nature and the way to Christ.

And continuing in this vein, we can read the Parson's work on *pitee*, charity, and

consolation into the work of the *Retraction*. In the *Parson's Tale* and *Retraction* we can see

Chaucer continuing in the penitential work of "verray penitence, confessioun, and

satisfaccioun" (1089). He writes for the good of his neighbor, for those who read and

might be *mysesed*. But in looking for *pitee* in the *Retraction*, its most notable presence is

within the texts that Chaucer retracts: "...the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the

book of the XXV. Ladies; the book of the Duchesse; the book of Seint Valentynes day of

the Parlement of Briddes; the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne; the

book of the Leoun; and many another book, if they were in my remembrance, and many

a song and many a leccherous lay, that Crist for his grete mercy foryeve me the synne"

(1085-86). Chaucer retracts here are all forms of *pitee* for whom the act of *pitee* is not

ameliorative: the *pitee* of the *Book of the Duchess*, the *Legend of Good Women*. He retracts

those texts wherein *pitee* is not associated with the consolation of charity. What is left are

those works, including the *Parson's Tale*, wherein *pitee*, consolation, and charity are

bound together. Moreover, what remains at the end of the *Retraction* are those texst

wherein *pitee*, consolation, and charity are bound together toward a particular end—

moving closer to Christ and the eschatological vision.

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I began this chapter with a quote from Herbert Marcuse's 1978 text *The Aesthetic*

Dimension:

> Art draws away from this reality [the reality of My Lai and Auschwitz], because
> it cannot represent this suffering without subjecting it to aesthetic form, and
> thereby to the mitigating catharsis, to enjoyment. Art is inexorably infested with
> this guilt. Yet this does not release art from the necessity of recalling again and
> again that which can survive even Auschwitz and perhaps one day make it
> impossible. If even this memory were to be silenced, then the 'end of art' would
> indeed have come. Authentic art preserves this memory in spite of and against
> Auschwitz.[123]

In this text, the last of Marcuse's career, Marcuse argues for the revolutionary potential

of art: "It seems that art as art expresses a truth, an experience, a necessity which,

although not in the domain of radical praxis, are nevertheless essential components of

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[123] Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, 55-56.

revolution."[124] Counter to earlier marxist readings of the work of art, Marcuse's focus on art as expressive of experience attempts to relocate the revolutionary nature of art from the product of proletarian expression to intrinsic to the nature of art itself.[125] It is in the expression of experience that art is revolutionary. We can understand the stakes of Marcuse's claim about art and experience not just as a corrective to certain forms of marxist thought, but as a challenge to twentieth and twenty-first century aesthetic cultures if we consider his reflection on the work of art in relation to suffering. For Marcuse, art always subjects suffering to aesthetic form and thus to enjoyment. And yet, it is important that art, "authentic art," continue to depict this suffering because it preserves the memory, the experience, of that suffering. By "authentic art" Marcuse means precisely that which is capable of and interested in expressing "a truth, an experience." It is in the expression of the experience of suffering that art is able to hope to make suffering impossible, and it is this hope that makes social and political revolution possible: "Thus art corrects its ideality: the hope which it represents ought not to remain mere ideal. This is the hidden categorical imperative of art. Its realization lies outside of art."[126]

In beginning and ending with Marcuse, I was engaged in an act of self-provocation. The first part of Marcuse's meditation on the guilt of art seemed to me

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[124] Ibid., 1.
[125] Marcuse's work in *The Aesthetic Dimension* can be read as a rejection of Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechancial Reproduction."
[126] Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, 69.

immanently relevant to much of this chapter, including not only Chaucer's own explorations of the aesthetic and ethical ends of art, but also Augustine's own critique of theatrical *pitee*. The second half, however, was a constant challenge to my own reading. When I talk about the end of Chaucer's art, do I mean to suggest that the end of Chaucer's writing about *pitee* is "the end of art"? To put the matter differently, does Chaucer, in leaving behind aesthetic representations of suffering, abandon artistic composition and thus the possibility that art can yield any social change—in Marcuse's terms, any revolution? My narrative does conclude with the end of Chaucer's writing career, an end I explicitly connect to the end of his representation of pitiful suffering. And I have often found myself invested in precisely this conclusion. I have labeled this a self-provocation, however, because Marcuse challenges me to think of how the end of Chaucer's poetry and *pitee* operates much more complexly. Because what I have tried to show in my reading of the *Parson's Tale* and the *Retraction* is not that Chaucer's poetry or his *pitee* has ended, but that he has reformulated both. Chaucer, drawing on both the language of fourteenth-century debates around the aesthetics and ethics of poetry as well as the scriptural language of the ends of biblical writing, marks as poetic that which is *dulce* and *utile*, that which in form and subject has its *telos* in the eschatological vision. He marks as *pitee* that which is aligned with Christ's own salvific *pitee*; it is charitable, ameliorative, communally-driven, christocentric.

While the disparities between Marcuse and Chaucer are obvious—I struggle to imagine Chaucer celebrating revolution—the connection between them is startling. [127] They both advocate a reformulation of the nature of art through a re-articulation of the ends of art. Art operates in the mode of hope for some end that must be achieved outside of art itself. Both Chaucer and Marcuse, then, are engaged in reconsidering the ethical work of aesthetic objects. Aesthetic objects challenge their readers to reach out for a reality beyond their current life. Aesthetic objects challenge their readers to hope for, but also to live for, an end to suffering.

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[127] Chaucer's reference to Jack Straw in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* (3394) is hardly a favorable representation of revolution.

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Biography

Jessica Hines was born in Frankfurt am Main, Germany in 1988. She received a Bachelor of Arts in English, Latin, and Women's Studies *summa cum laude* from Sewanee: The University of the South in 2010. In 2017, she completed her graduate work in English at Duke University where she held a Graduate Fellowship, Julian Price Fellowship, and John Lievsay Fellowship.