SHAKESPEARE’S CHAUCERIAN ENTERTAINERS

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of JACOB ALDEN HUGHES find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Michael Hanly, Ph.D.
Since this project represents the culmination of a rather long and sometimes meandering journey (as any good schooling should!), many thanks are in order. That’s putting it mildly, really. Regrettably, I can’t succinctly express my full gratitude to everyone who deserves it. I see the unbroken line of my education stretch back into the 1980s, and many positive influences deserve better recognition than I can give them here. Regardless, they have my thanks! Concerning my doctoral committee, any gratitude I could extend in words seems inadequate. I owe this project’s inception and my decision to study Shakespeare and Chaucer in graduate school to Michael Delahoyde, who has been ever present at all stages of my work. I’m very grateful to (and for) my committee chair, Will Hamlin, for his meticulous reading, indispensable commentary, and attentiveness to my every challenge throughout my time at WSU. And many, many thanks are in order to Michael Hanly, who has always been there should I knock on his door these past seven years, whose insights always challenged me to more rigorous scholarship. I was very lucky to have such a supportive and accessible committee. I’m also grateful to my reader “on the outside,” Steve Cary, for poring over these many pages and answering last-minute distress calls. Thanks to my family, who have weathered more than their share over these past few years, but remained supportive of my madness. I especially appreciate my life partner, Victoria Howells, for putting up with seven years of my graduate school anxiety amidst her own. I’m running out of synonyms for gratitude. So, on with it.
SHAKESPEARE’S CHAUCERIAN ENTERTAINERS

Abstract

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Chair: William Hamlin

As has been established by scholars Ann Thompson and E. Talbot Donaldson, Shakespeare was heavily influenced by the medieval poet Geoffrey Chaucer. Shakespeare continually references Chaucer throughout his career, borrowing many of the poet’s plots, quotations and characters. However, unlike with many of his other sources, Shakespeare engages and grapples Chaucer’s themes and ideas.

“Shakespeare’s Chaucerian Entertainers” identifies characters throughout the bard’s canon who process and engage Chaucer’s ideas on theater, authorship and performance. Through the likes of Prospero, Feste, Falstaff, Duke Theseus from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and even Aaron from *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare recognizes and demonstrates how Chaucer’s poetry is relevant to drama and theatricality. By conveying this relevance through his plays, Shakespeare teaches his audience to better observe his meaning by addressing Chaucer’s. Therefore, key Shakespearean ideas emerge out of Chaucerian methods.
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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memories of Bonnie Longan, Harrison S. Hughes, and Bobbie Marlow.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

It is perhaps inevitable that Shakespeare and Chaucer, the two greatest artistic forces in early English literature, have faced comparative scholarly treatment over the past century. However, with an increasing number of exceptions since the 1980s, this treatment has been generally focused on what noted Chaucerian E. Talbot Donaldson refers to as “source hunting” (Chaucerian Shakespeare 1). For the most part, these source studies set out to identify particular Chaucerian references in the bard’s plays and poetry. Of the many potential subjects a literary scholar might write on, most audiences would find reading about quotes or the origins of plot devices just as entertaining and illuminating as consulting a dictionary: occasionally useful and educational, but hardly “cover-to-cover” reading.

For scholars, these references serve many potential uses from aiding dating techniques to providing a broader social and cultural context for literary works. As such, the meticulous efforts of “source hunters” have been invaluable. Nevertheless, when encountered in a source study, these references often seem empty and displaced from the plays or poems in which they originally appear. What difference does it make to readers, for example, whether they recognize Duke Theseus in A Midsummer Night’s Dream was drawn from Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale? As Donaldson wryly notes, “recognition of a source and understanding of its effects are two different matters” (1).

The distinction Donaldson makes between these tasks—recognition and understanding—highlights the more general purpose of the present study: to understand the potential effects of Shakespeare’s references to Chaucer. But as a rule, Chaucerian influence is abundant throughout
Shakespeare’s canon and cannot be isolated to a particular period or group of plays. It might be tempting to suggest that he borrows from Chaucer randomly, or at the very least when it is topically convenient. However, Shakespeare owes more to Chaucer than a few borrowed plots and quotations; he frequently implements Chaucerian characterizations (or caricatures even) and thematic patterns that are relevant to his own art. Far from random, Shakespeare reflects on Chaucer’s influence in his plays. More specifically, Shakespeare frequently, though often subtly, draws attention to his Chaucerian influence through characters who can be considered entertainers or stage managers. And very often these Chaucerian entertainers, when we examine the root of their poetic influence, stem from Chaucer’s own discussions of art and entertainment. So one level of Shakespeare’s interest in Chaucer is vocational, from an artist’s perspective. In these instances, we glimpse how the bard was reading his chief literary ancestor. These glimpses alone often help illuminate Shakespeare’s meaning. Yet in a deeper, more significant layer, at other points Shakespeare expects his readers to recognize the Chaucerian themes buried under the surface of his drama, the poetic bedrock on which they stand. Chaucerian entertainers invite reader participation through this recognition process. That is, they signal more than just Shakespeare’s familiarity with his sources, but rather the ideas attached to them.

The idea of a Chaucerian entertainer developed from prior research where I examined how Shakespeare was an expert reader of Chaucer. That project identified three Shakespearean characters who were clearly tied to Chaucer’s works, and argued that since they were all artists of some kind, Shakespeare was processing Chaucer through a looking glass. In effect, Shakespeare’s ideas and concerns with authorship reflect Chaucer’s. Intending to expand on that line of inquiry for a much larger project, I eventually realized that Shakespeare’s use of Chaucer-influenced author-type characters had less to do with self-identification than it does with
medium: poetry is directly relevant to Shakespeare’s understanding of dramaturgy. Not that Shakespeare eschews the influence of other poets—far from it, actually. What struck me is that Shakespeare repeatedly consults Chaucer when exploring ideas that are explicitly relevant to theater or performance.

But why would Shakespeare the playwright so actively implement his influences from Chaucer the poet where theater is concerned? On one hand, it is reasonable to speculate that Shakespeare saw Chaucer as a kind of kindred spirit. Their common cultural heritage is undoubtedly a factor. But Chaucer’s works, especially The Canterbury Tales, are filled with theatrical potential, and rely to some degree on that medium’s artifice. Further, Chaucer frequently calls attention to narrative artifice in general. Alice Miskimin elaborates:

The literal levels involve the audience of thirty-odd performers within the fiction, enacting the struggle for control over one another in verbal contests, which the narrator reenacts ironically for the outer audience, breaking the illusion by frequent asides. Chaucer the Pilgrim takes his audience into his confidence…. His comments and apostrophes, like Dante’s warnings to the reader to attend the allegoria, in effect call attention to the artifice itself. (Miskimin 109)

In this case, Miskimin refers to Chaucer’s artifice as narrator; he steps outside the structure of the story to speak directly to his readers or listeners. However, that technique is very similar to the functions a chorus serves as the audience’s direct emotional conduit to the stage. As a dramatist, it is unsurprising that Shakespeare would recognize when Chaucer calls attention to theatrical artifice in particular. And Shakespeare’s Chaucerian entertainers do just that in the bard’s own plays: they call attention to theater’s artifice. Their purposes for doing so are manifold and
largely context-dependent, but Shakespeare nevertheless repeats this pattern throughout his career.

The perennial challenge to this line of inquiry, of course, involves establishing viable interpretations of Shakespeare’s reading of Chaucer. Further, this task can never be divorced from source studies entirely. So, my method here has been to establish the themes, characters, or ideas in question as stemming from Chaucer’s influence, and then to discuss their significance in Shakespeare’s plays. As such, the primary evidence is mostly limited to Shakespeare’s dramatic works and Chaucer’s poetry, though relevant other texts feature where applicable. Further, many, but not all, of the textual interpretations of key passages I offer up belong to other critics. While this is a regular practice in literary criticism, it bears mentioning here because the connections I make between Chaucer and Shakespeare did not so much emerge from a blank reading of the two authors in parallel, but an accumulated awareness that evolved through both Shakespearean and Chaucerian scholarship. Therefore, perspectives from specialists on both authors feature prominently.

The secondary, but no less important challenge is defining “Chaucerian entertainers.” Generally, the phrase applies to professional entertainer characters in Shakespeare’s drama that have some relationship with Chaucer’s literature. More particularly, these characters often quote or paraphrase Chaucer, or echo the poet’s themes. Others have direct antecedents in Chaucer’s works; they are parallel characters, sometimes only in name, other times in narrative function, or even both. Chaucerian entertainers signal certain patterns in Shakespeare’s thought trajectory, which usually concern theatricality or authorship as a vocation. So, in short, these characters must be presented as literal or metaphorical performers or artists of some sort—stage managers,
directors, actors, jesters, etc.—and they must have a significant relationship to Chaucer’s influence. And a surprising number of roles share these characteristics in Shakespeare’s plays.

In his poetry, Chaucer was of course prone to embedding his own author characters interested in the conceits of literature as entertainment. The purposes of these characters range from overt satire to more subtle didacticism. Though he makes several autobibliographic appearances throughout the rest of his poetic canon, Chaucer frames his *Canterbury Tales* as a literary competition calling for the “Tales of best sentence and moost solaas” (798), or best at instruction and entertainment. In their way, the Canterbury pilgrims are all performers, offering many different genres of tales and modes of storytelling. Chaucer all but invites his readers to ask how the tales fit their tellers, which not only highlights genre questions, but examines performance as a social process. For example, the Knight tells a romance with the trappings of the courtly love tradition, but struggles to set a high standard for the rest of the pilgrims to follow: he is the highest member of their social ladder, after all. Even Chaucer himself has a tale to offer—*Sir Thopas*—which ironically turns out to be rather awful. But Donaldson warns against reading the pilgrims too historically:

I am under the impression that many readers, too much influenced by Chaucer’s verisimilitude, tend to regard his famous pilgrimage to Canterbury as significant not because it is a great fiction, but because it seems to be a remarkable record of a fourteenth-century pilgrimage. A remarkable record it may be, but if we treat it too narrowly as such there are going to be certain casualties among the elements that make up the fiction. (*Speaking of Chaucer* 1)

Specifically, we might fail to see elements of his fiction pertaining directly to Chaucer’s authorship. Chaucer the pilgrim is a character created by Chaucer the poet. Though they share
much, only one is a fictional character invested with thematic purpose. Because even though a significant aspect of the competition that frames The Canterbury Tales is to tell entertaining stories, they must also be instructive. Entertainment tends to function close to the surface; instruction, according to medieval aesthetic tradition, must occur more deeply, and be by its nature less accessible. D. W. Robertson Jr. points out this crucial aspect of medieval reading and aesthetics, the Augustinian principle that obscurity “stimulates the desire to learn” (53). An audience that attempts to read Chaucer the pilgrim literally will only find a bumbling fool and nothing else, which is an interpretation that is irreconcilable with Chaucer’s reputation. Of course, it is also possible to simply miss the joke.

Shakespeare owes much to Chaucer in how he embeds his own author figures. From the playwright’s perspective, this characteristic might well have been the most interesting literary technique Chaucer had to offer Shakespeare. Alice Miskimin asserts, “Chaucer's discoveries as a poet, and his originality, lie not in narrative—plots, myth making, invention—but in voices, and in the controlling of language so that voices other than his own are made to speak” (31). In this respect, Shakespeare is more of a Chaucer scholar than an admirer. He recognizes Chaucer’s relevance while translating that meaning into his own art. Shakespeare’s use of Chaucer is more than mimetic recollection; it is active and intentional.

And Donaldson’s warning against reading Chaucer too literally should extend to Shakespeare as well. Unsurprisingly, Shakespeare’s Chaucerian entertainers—apart from a few overt instances that help us link them specifically with Chaucer—usually operate with such subtlety. Though Shakespeare is not a product of medieval patristic exegesis, he nevertheless attends to meaning beyond what is immediately observable. As Harold Goddard points out, Shakespeare at least once echoes this sentiment himself in The Taming of the Shrew: in the
induction to that play, a huntsman notes that “the better dog” is one who “pick’d out the duldest scent” (Ind.i.24-25), a hint for his audience to “keep alert for something they might easily miss” (Goddard I 73). Shakespeare’s references to Chaucer are only the first scents that lead us into a much more revealing hunt.

Though we should regard Shakespeare’s use of Chaucer as ultimately idiosyncratic in comparison to his contemporaries, the bard’s use of the poet is in many ways inextricably linked to his age. A century prior to Shakespeare, Chaucer was appreciated as a religious reformer rather than a poet. A variety of anti-Popish poems were mistakenly attributed to him (Buxton 224), misleading 15th-century audiences from his authentic works. Furthermore, Chaucer was often deemed too difficult to read in his original vernacular, so his works were read in either contemporary English or Latin translations. John Buxton posits, “His poetry was as obscure as Beowulf is to the majority of readers today: a monument whose greatness they preferred to take on trust rather than to investigate” (224). The same may have held true for the Elizabethan period, but Chaucer’s use of classical themes and characters, exemplified in Troilus and Criseyde, fit well with an England that considered itself in a renaissance.

Even considering that most medieval writers had long since gone out of vogue, Chaucer was still the major figure in vernacular English literature. Theresa M. Krier points out that English Renaissance writers frequently expressed a genuine gratitude toward Chaucer (2), and were willing to aggressively “engage with specific works, to grapple with him, to acknowledge that he elicits one’s own invention and discovery of poetic authority” (3). Donaldson notes of Shakespeare, “Until Marlowe and Spenser almost in his own time, there were no poets in English besides Chaucer who had anything to teach him, though he was willing to plunder Lydgate and Gower for bits and pieces of lore” (The Swan at the Well 5). If we extend Donaldson’s plunder
metaphor, Shakespeare nearly emptied Chaucer’s coffers! Thompson insists, “The sheer quantity of the material involved implies that Shakespeare did not merely use Chaucer for a plot or two (as he did some authors) but knew him so well that he recalled his work (often unconsciously, one would imagine) in virtually every play” (59). Moreover, Chaucer’s works were reprinted severally throughout Shakespeare’s life, and a number of editions would have been available to him (Donaldson 5): Thynne’s was released in 1532, revised again in 1542 and 1550 in the “booksellers” edition; Stowe’s in 1561; and Speght’s in 1598, revised in 1602 (Miskimin 239). Thus, Shakespeare likely had access to one or more of these editions during his career.

But despite this apparent ease of access to Chaucer’s work, many critics have disputed the extent to which Shakespeare read the poet. Anne Thompson notes, Ben Jonson’s assertion that Shakespeare had “small Latine and lesse Greeke” has led to a history of heated scholarly debate over Shakespeare’s indebtedness to classical sources, which tend to surface in Shakespeare’s drama more obviously (1). Further still, Tudor grammar school education presents a problem for some, as vernacular literature was not a part of the curriculum (Thompson 2). Even still, based on internal evidence in the plays, Shakespeare was widely read. It is unreasonable to assume that a canon as rich and varied as Shakespeare’s could entirely be the product of grammar school education. Thompson, somewhat exasperated, concludes:

there is no sure way of ascertaining when, how, and in what variety a middle-class schoolboy might have come across English books; for the most part we are thrown back upon the internal evidence of the plays themselves. (2)

Part of this early reticence to affirm Chaucerian allusions in Shakespeare’s canon stems from the source hunters’ methods. Prior to Anne Thompson’s 1978 work, Shakespeare’s Chaucer: A Study in Literary Origins, scholarly discourse on Shakespeare’s use of Chaucer was
focused on the incidents rather than their patterns or significance. Further, without scholarly consensus regarding Shakespeare’s indebtedness, the academic climate could not foster broader conclusions about these allusions’ effects. For example, Nevill Coghill, in “Shakespeare’s Reading in Chaucer” (1959), discusses disputes over apparent Chaucerian sources in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at length rather than addressing his central argument: that Shakespeare’s play connects thematically with Chaucer’s poetry. While he provides a chart which outlines various connections between ideas, phrases, and themes (Coghill 98-99) this catalogue does little to explain these connections’ significance or meaning. Despite these studies’ foundational nature, they seem of limited use. Regarding these works, Thompson notes the reticence of Geoffrey Bullough—author of the influential *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*—an attitude “largely due to the shortcomings of the source-hunters themselves who have failed to realize that pin-pointing sources is not an end in itself: ‘their pursuit should be the first stage in an investigation of Shakespeare’s methods of composition’” (Bullough qtd. in Thompson 15).

But questions about the significance of Shakespeare’s relationship to Chaucer have persisted for a long time. Perhaps the earliest piece of comparative Shakespeare-Chaucer scholarship that alludes to a broader relationship between the authors is an anonymous article that appeared in the *Quarterly Review* in 1873, generally assumed to be by H. W. Hales (Donaldson 1). Hales considers the aesthetic similarities between Chaucer and Shakespeare rather than simply noting textual parallels. He goes so far as to say that Shakespeare and Chaucer are so similar that despite the differences between their primary media, “in spirit there is a remarkable likeness and sympathy…. Chaucer in many respects is a lesser Shakespeare” (Hales 58). His assessment of Chaucer’s talents aside, Hales recognized a more ‘spiritual’ relationship
between the two authors. This attitude toward Chaucer’s spirit is a distant echo of Edmund Spenser. Patrick Cheney points out that Spenser called his attempted mirroring of Chaucer’s style “traduction,” which was “a Pythagorean principle of metempsychosis through which Chaucer’s ‘spirit…survives’ in him (qtd in Cheney 278). Spenser was deeply fascinated with Chaucer’s poetry, and miming the poet’s Middle English and, according to Judith H. Anderson, his self-aware narrative style (89). As Cheney points out, while Spenser and Shakespeare to some extent revived Chaucer’s spirit through their works, “they represent radically different ways of positioning the author’s cultural authority” (278). Like Spenser’s and other Renaissance writers’ usage of Chaucer, Shakespeare’s references to the poet acknowledge indebtedness to his authority; Krier notes how this process is in part an attempt to reciprocate Chaucer’s artistic generosity (6). Yet Shakespeare never expresses this gratitude openly or explicitly. He grapples with and engages Chaucer on his own terms, eschewing flattering imitation.

The chief work to begin examining the nature of Shakespeare and Chaucer’s shared spirit, as well as the significant aesthetic connections between them, is E. Talbot Donaldson’s *The Swan at the Well*, published in 1985. Prior to this book, Donaldson and Judith J. Kollman collected essays culled from a summer seminar on Chaucer and Shakespeare held in 1981—titled *Chaucerian Shakespeare: Adaptation and Transformation*—signaling a shift toward scholarship that focuses on the implication of Chaucerian sources in Shakespeare. This trend continued in *The Swan at the Well*, wherein Donaldson generates a kind of academic call to arms for continued “Chaucespeare” studies, based on a long accumulating stockpile of Shakespeare-Chaucer connections. Further, Donaldson distinguishes his position from those source hunters who insist on “static” meanings in the bard’s works, scholars who “have been primarily Shakespeareans and only incidentally Chaucerians” (2). To some degree echoing Thompson’s
frustration, he asserts “that Shakespeare read Chaucer's poetry with understanding and great care, more carefully, perhaps, than some of his critics” (4). Donaldson and his colleagues essentially opened the way for deeper character and thematic analyses, which effectively comprise not only the shared “spirit” between Shakespeare and Chaucer, but the playwright’s indebtedness to the poet for his dramaturgy.

My work here is envisioned as a response to Donaldson’s call, though three decades have passed since he made it. Even considering all the findings made up to this point, there is much more to be said about their meaning. Further, contrary to Donaldson’s suspicions, there are new source discoveries to be made. But since source studies have limited scope, scholars are tasked both with establishing the credibility of a source while at the same time discussing its purposes. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare had multiple ideas in mind when he actively drew from Chaucer. There is no real way to know his exact intentions. Therefore, some educated speculation is at times necessary to conduct deeper analyses on this subject. But the significance of a particular literary pattern can, of course, be separate from the author’s intentions for it.

Nevertheless, the pattern of Chaucerian entertainers throughout Shakespeare’s canon seems to indicate no small degree of intentionality. Though every Chaucer-influenced character functions differently, they all address theater as a medium. Further, they also frequently address the exegesis of art, or how the audience “amends” them. Chaucer empowers Shakespeare to call attention to his own artifice, and to understand its effects and implications. Understanding the poet empowers audiences to better understand Shakespeare.

Because Shakespeare’s use of Chaucer is universal throughout his career, the structure of this work proceeds thematically rather than chronologically. And since Chaucer’s influence on Shakespeare’s dramaturgy is the central concern here, I have mostly excluded Shakespeare’s
non-dramatic poetry from the discussion. However, the lyric content of his speeches remains fair game. Generally, each chapter concerns a Chaucerian entertainer’s function and meaning within the framework of a Shakespeare play. In a broader scope, I first attempt to establish Shakespeare’s processing or interpretation of Chaucer’s relevance to drama and the theater, since that connection is the most crucial to the overall premise of Chaucerian entertainers. Prospero from *The Tempest* is widely regarded as Shakespeare’s stage analogue, and he stands as a prime representative of the Chaucerian entertainers for two main reasons: first, he closely paraphrases Chaucer in his most famous speech and strongly resembles his character analogue from *The Franklin’s Tale*. Second, he uses the conditions of his medium—theater—to comment on the consequence of reader, or audience, participation. Further, Prospero explores his legacy as a writer, ultimately breaking his staff and drowning his books—acts that mirror Chaucer’s retraction. The latter reasons illustrate how Shakespeare processes Chaucer’s methods.

Similar to Prospero, Aaron from *Titus Andronicus* is both a functional actor and stage manager, though his primary artistic concern is with tragedy. Like Prospero, he is concerned with legacy. But instead of renouncing his craft after being captured, Aaron rails at being unable to commit more crimes, to carve on dead men’s skin sorrows as “on the bark of trees” (V.i.138-139), to commit “ten thousand more” such acts (V.i.145). Near his first appearance in the play, Aaron mysteriously alludes to Chaucer’s incomplete poem, *The House of Fame*. While this invocation may be interpreted as incidental, it nevertheless signals artistic self-awareness. In the poem, “Geffrey” dreams he is carried by an eagle to a glass temple containing visages of famous personages. Chaucer and the bird converse on the roles of poets as they fly. Aaron, not coincidentally, is deeply preoccupied with his own role as an artist. Further still, Aaron is especially concerned for the fate of his bastard son, a literal and possibly metaphorical
representation of his work that will potentially survive him. While Aaron’s connection to Chaucer can only be linked to one reference, this single incident has broader implications for Titus Andronicus. Specifically, despite his apparent nihilism, Aaron uses theatrical art as a vehicle to maintain his mischief. Once more, Shakespeare uses a Chaucerian entertainer to examine audience complicity and interaction.

In A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Shakespeare borrows both plot elements and characters directly from Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale. Like his Chaucerian analogue, Duke Theseus is a controller or producer of entertainments, a master of revels in his own right. He commands Philostrate to rouse Athenian youths so that he and Hippolyta may wile away the hours prior to their wedding night. Shakespeare’s Theseus also develops into a kind of literary critic by the end of the play, who provides some generally favorable perspective on the dramatic arts. Perhaps an ars dramatica for Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night’s Dream explores theatrical conventions and audience responses to them. Chaucer’s Duke Theseus is responsible for considerable pomp and spectacle, but in the form of militaristic pageantry. Chaucer explores spectacles within the context of social sanctions and expectations. His duke must arbitrate Palamon and Arcite’s conflict over their mutual love, and uses a public event to both refocus the two knights’ violence and to publicly affirm his own power. But as the gods intervene, Duke Theseus is forced to resolve his influence with forces beyond his control. Similarly, though on a far less grim note, Shakespeare’s Duke Theseus is challenged by the plights of the young lovers in his kingdom, which are spurred on as entertainments for the fairy royalty. Both Dukes are faced with reconciling their authority with higher powers, and staged performances serve an important structuring of order.
My final two chapters feature Chaucerian entertainers who challenge ideas of genre and address matters of authorial identity. Shakespeare explores the boundaries of comedy in *Twelfth Night*, using Feste the “allowed fool” as his primary conduit to Chaucer’s own explorations of the same issue throughout “the surprise group” of *The Canterbury Tales*. Slighted by Malvolio, Feste dons the likeness of “Sir Topas” while speaking to the steward at a mad house. He uses a Chaucerian character as a disguise. Further still, that disguise originates in Chaucer the pilgrim’s own *Tale of Sir Thopas*. Feste by this point has already indirectly alluded to Chaucer by mentioning Cressida, one of his most famous characters, showing that the clown is familiar with the poet’s work. Feste’s conversation with Malvolio addresses the themes of masking, ‘counterfeiting’ and identity central to *Twelfth Night*. However, this discussion calls attention to how, like Chaucer does with his pilgrim’s poem, Feste in some respects gives himself the worst role of the antics acted out against Malvolio. In Chaucer’s *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, Chaucer’s pilgrim recites 206 lines of silly blather—an intentionally bad poem, included for the sake of parodying English metrical romances and even pretentious knights. When Feste dons the Sir Topas likeness, Shakespeare both alerts us to his familiarity with Chaucer and to the more important fact that Feste represents the authorial stand-in as a caricature. The double-layered disguise of Topas on Feste brings Shakespeare’s joke into stark relief. Comedy is stretched to the brink of bearable extremes (as Malvolio is trapped in a hut, pleading his sanity), just as Chaucer wants us to recognize his bad poetry as a parody, stretched to the bearable extremes of our patience. But Chaucer’s influence here is not limited to *Sir Thopas* and its surrounding tales. Shakespeare also challenges the boundaries of comedy when the play’s representative of “cakes and ale”—Sir Toby Belch—emerges with a nasty head wound as a result of his antics. This may
even echoe the ending of *The Miller’s Tale*, where John the Carpenter falls from his tub and breaks his arm amidst the otherwise harmless fabliau ribaldry.

My final chapter attempts to answer for Chaucer’s conspicuous absence throughout Shakespeare’s canon, especially in his history plays. The great comic wit Falstaff perhaps quotes and echoes Chaucer directly more than any other Chaucerian entertainer. Apart from his other historical influences, most notably Sir John Oldcastle, Falstaff shares many characteristics with both Chaucer the poet and his pilgrim. While not an allegory per se, Falstaff nevertheless represents a surrogate and eventually a rejected father figure, beloved at first, yet ultimately discarded. But even if Hal rebukes Falstaff, it is less convincing that Shakespeare does. The fat knight localizes concerns over rejection that are relevant for Chaucer historically and all entertainers more generally. In the second tetralogy, Falstaff’s role as a corrupter of youth and a subversive wit clash with the jingoism and self-righteousness exhibited by many of his contemporaries. His death and absence resonates in *Henry V*, and not unlike the ending of Chaucer’s age with the poet’s own disappearance, we are left with a deep sense of loss.

Ultimately, Shakespeare recognizes and demonstrates how Chaucer’s poetry is relevant to the theater. This relevance extends beyond high-flown speeches and flowery, reverdie language. It extends beyond narrative borrowings, plot devices, and the names of characters. Its significance is exegetical: Shakespeare teaches his audience to better read him through understanding Chaucer. The poet’s spirit survives in Shakespeare’s methods more than in his language. We will likely never know how or if Shakespeare considered himself on an artistic continuum with Chaucer, either culturally, aesthetically, or nationally. What does seem clear is that he read and understood Chaucer, and expected at least some portion of his audience to have
done the same. Or, to put it another way, broad literacy will make us all “better dogs” where art is concerned.
CHAPTER TWO

THE BOUNDARIES OF INSTRUCTION AND ENTERTAINMENT IN *THE TEMPEST* VIA *THE FRANKLIN’S TALES* AND CHAUCER’S RETRACTION

Perhaps more than any other Shakespeare play, *The Tempest* is a theater vehicle. When staged, the play is often a dazzling spectacle, replete with a wide variety of special effects and—somewhat uncharacteristically for Shakespeare—detailed stage directions. Harold Goddard notes, “the opening scene of *The Tempest*—the shipwreck—is like an overture throughout which we catch echoes, like distant thunder, of the themes that dominated the historical and tragic music dramas of Shakespeare’s earlier periods” (*II* 278). Goddard’s idea might help explain why *The Tempest* frames the Shakespearean canon so well (and perhaps why it appears as first play in the First Folio for that matter): *The Tempest* is in many respects a play about stagecraft and its effects. To emphasize this particular theme in no way diminishes the importance of its others, forgiveness foremost among them. In fact, the opposite case proves to be true. Shakespeare, by highlighting the artifice of stagecraft and its effects on an audience, incorporates the practical aspects of staging a play into its meaning. He conveys the central themes of *The Tempest* through an exploration of theatrical conventions.

But Shakespeare asks his audience to recognize more than just Prospero’s penchant for staged performances. Readers who are familiar with *The Franklin’s Tale* will recognize similarities between Shakespeare’s wizard and Chaucer’s Magician, who is a skilled illusionist. If the *modus operandi* of *The Tempest* regards self-reflexivity of the stage, Shakespeare uses his Chaucerian entertainer—Prospero—to expands the meaning of his medium. Though Shakespeare’s concern with Chaucer revolves around his poetry and literary reputation, the
bard’s reading of *The Franklin’s Tale* suggests that Shakespeare was attuned to how Chaucer used the *idea* of entertainment and even special effects to explore the functions and limits of instruction as entertainment. But these limits are narrower than just special effects. At some point, the performance or poem must end. This is the moment when the author relinquishes control over meaning to the audience. Beyond his similarities with the Franklin’s Magician, Prospero echoes the authorial sentiments found in Chaucer’s retraction. Through his Chaucerian references, Shakespeare calls on his audience to recognize how his sources are relevant to *The Tempest*’s meaning.

In terms of exploring the effects and significance of artifice, *The Tempest* is hardly an isolated example in Shakespeare’s canon. Notably in *Henry V*, the Chorus almost sheepishly calls attention to the fact that grand battles cannot be staged hyper-realistically, and therefore the audience must fill in the gaps with their imaginations: “‘tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings” (Prologue 28). It is obvious to theater audiences that they are about to view theater, so an explanation for this “apology” lies beyond the obvious. One chilling possibility here is that the audience has to imagine great deeds where there are none. Naturally, one such comment alone would not necessarily signal such a reading, but a greater pattern observed throughout that play lends weight to that interpretation. Other examples abound. In *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron the Moor speaks directly to the audience frequently, showing us the mechanisms behind his gruesome art using stage language and characterizing his evil deeds as his enduring works. Iago takes particular glee in crafting a horrific spectacle in *Othello*, and like Aaron speaks directly to the crowd. The functions of these characters would not necessarily always have to do with winking at the audience or commenting on the stage itself. But, to say that Shakespeare often has the stage on his mind throughout his dramatic canon seems to be a bit of an understatement. Jaques’s
famous speech in *As You Like It*—“All the world’s a stage” (II.vii.139)—seems an especially representative, if clichéd example. Goddard notes that it’s a speech “he must have rehearsed more times than the modern schoolboy who declaims it” (*I* 285).

Shakespeare is hardly bucking convention when he makes these self-aware theatrical ploys—variations on the practice were common throughout the Early Modern period and the Middle Ages. Understandably, they could be used to varying artistic effects. Venue was in many respects a canvas for stage directors and playwrights, so it makes sense that they would incorporate the canvas into the overall production. Regular audiences would be acculturated to recognize these signals. In many respects, the self-reflexivity of the stage and the importance of venue and “metadrama,” had been a part of the English theatrical tradition since the Middle Ages.

Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* relies on a similar type of framing mechanism for its own ‘venue.’ The poet quickly establishes himself within the narrative framework as an observer. Chaucer’s host—Harry Bailly—calls for “Tales of best sentence and moost solaas” (798) in the General Prologue: or, as the intent can be translated, tales with the best instructive capabilities and entertainment value. While E. Talbot Donaldson notes that the Host’s unqualified self-appointment as *de facto* literary critic is cause for comedy throughout the tales (1061), Chaucer nevertheless seems to take the challenge seriously within his own work, as did other medieval poets. In other words, Chaucer the poet is as concerned with this idea as his pilgrims are. The pilgrims are engaged in the same artifice as Chaucer himself is as author of *The Canterbury Tales*.

The idea of “sentence and solaas” is in many ways at the heart of the medieval aesthetic tradition. D. W. Robertson explains in his chapter on “The Aesthetics of Figurative Expression”
that medieval art and its composition was dominated by Augustine’s notion of scriptural obscurity, discussed in On Christian Doctrine. Robertson explains,

This obscurity, says St. Augustine, was divinely ordained to overcome pride by work, and to prevent the mind from disdaining a thing too easily grasped. It stimulates a desire to learn, and at the same time excludes those who are unworthy from the mysteries of the faith. But it is also pleasant. St. Augustine’s account of the manner in which pleasure arises from obscurity reveals an aesthetic attitude which becomes typically medieval. (A Preface to Chaucer 53)

Meaning, therefore, must be grasped by overcoming obscurity, not by stating the obvious. Medieval writers strove to embed several layers of understanding into their works, each successively more revealing. Ideally, these revelations led to a better understanding of how the artist’s work was relevant to heaven’s divine ordinance. As Robertson puts it, poets would “mingle details of an iconographic nature with other details which produce an effect of considerable verisimilitude” (242). Medieval artists could present a work that when read on the literal level shared little resemblance with Church teachings, but could nevertheless convey lessons through a well-considered use of familiar symbols. However, for this exegetical effect to work, readers had to be active and aware participants in the process. So, the Host’s contest in The Canterbury Tales is more broadly applicable to medieval art in general, and references the core components of its artifice. And Chaucer’s seemingly oblique, multi-faceted artistic approach to the Tales is (or can be) revealed through reader participation.

Robertson’s general theory of aesthetics falls under the theoretical heading of patristic exegesis. Augustine’s and the other Church Fathers’ influence on medieval writers was paramount. Donaldson explains, “if...it is true that all serious poetry written by Christians during
the Middle Ages promotes the doctrine of charity by using the same allegorical structure that the Fathers found in the Bible, then it follows that patristic exegesis alone will reveal the meaning of medieval poetry” (Speaking of Chaucer 134). While Donaldson rejects the notion that good medieval poetry is such “single-minded” allegory, he admonishes, “it would still be foolish to ignore the influence of the patristic tradition” (134). More to the point, this tradition strongly informed how medievals approached art; at the very least, audiences would have been conditioned to search for and recognize iconographic or symbolic significance hidden beneath the literal layer.

This influence was certainly not lost on Chaucer in The Canterbury Tales. It has been severally noted that the structure of the Tales itself is an allegorical representation of a person’s process through life. The poem begins in the reverdie tradition, a re-greening of the world in springtime. The end of the Tales, however controversial, is crepuscular. Chaucer’s famous retraction even makes sense within this allegorical framework. Significantly, he makes a plea regarding reader participation and Christian charity:

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

Therefore, any good that readers take from his text should be credited to Christ. Furthermore, he calls for readers to focus on the intent of his message, paraphrasing St. Paul’s insistence,
“whatever was written…was written for our instruction” (Romans 15.4). Though it could be argued that Chaucer’s point was isolated to The Parson’s Tale, he may also be calling for readers to extend that logic to all his writing or even art in general. The sentiment also appears in The Nun’s Priest’s Tale: “For Seint Paul seith that al that written is, / To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis; / Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille” (3441-43). Any good that comes from reading must be looked for. Otherwise, art’s true purpose will be lost on the observer. So, in effect, it is also the readers’ responsibility to participate in the act of meaning. Just as Chaucer implicates and comments on all levels of society in his Tales, so too his readers are held responsible for their deepest levels of meaning. Whereas some aspects of “solaas” can be found on the literal level (though not all, as Robertson points out via Augustine), “sentence” must be mined.

While medieval aesthetic understanding (or even medieval aesthetic literacy) had largely disappeared during Shakespeare’s time, the artistic impacts and implications of audience responsibility survived in some respects. Shakespeare and Chaucer shared an understanding—at least on some level—of how their audiences contribute to art. Perhaps the most significant locus of this shared concern between Chaucer and Shakespeare is in medieval drama. Though by Shakespeare’s time medieval plays were seldom performed, some aspects of their legacy survived into the Elizabethan period. Notably, drama was more than just a public spectacle, but served as a kind of cultural adhesive, edifying moral and civic ideals. Though Elizabethans would not have been trained to read layers as medievals were, Shakespeare’s audiences were nevertheless part of a national dramatic tradition that called attention to the artifice of venue for artistic effect.

While the earliest medieval drama in Europe was largely liturgical and performed in Latin, developments in the Church throughout the 12th and 13th centuries led to the
Establishment of the Corpus Christi feast (Johnston 4). During these feasts, annual cycles of biblical plays were staged and performed throughout the day for the general public in the vernacular. Though permeated with an air of festivity, these plays were far from idle entertainments. Meg Twycross explains,

There was no such thing as casual theatregoing: each of these plays was the centerpiece of a special occasion for a close-knit community. The mystery plays were at the same time a religious festival and a tourist attraction: their players could draw on a charge of heightened religious emotion and civic pride which we can never recreate. (26)

Twycross goes on to note that while medieval plays were not generally written for the theater, they nevertheless took advantage of their respective venues in significant ways: “They were put on in the city streets, in churches, on playing fields, in college halls and in private houses and they exploited each of these venues in its own distinctive way” (26).

A key and lasting development of medieval drama concerned the ways in which venue was employed for artistic effect. Shakespeare’s stage—often well-equipped for sophisticated productions and comparatively large audiences—nevertheless owed much to the spectacles of late medieval plays such as The Castle of Perseverance. But apart from showmanship, English playwrights understood art’s potential for social commentary. The idea was not to alienate audiences from their present state of mind, but rather to seize that state as a didactic opportunity. The medieval plays staged in fields, homes, and public spaces made effective artistic use of the available space, drawing attention to the production’s immediate surroundings. In this respect, such plays were immersive experiences. But much unlike modern cinematic entertainments that promise immersion through what ultimately often amounts to sensory deprivation or overload,
medieval plays rely on the social and religious contexts in which they are performed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this reliance is well-documented. Richard Beadle points out that play texts of the Corpus Christi cycle in York are riddled with “pregnant metadrama” (101). In one particular example, he describes a play transition after the Resurrection, where one of the characters in the play text calls for the party to move along, on account of the proceeding pageant wagons: “Here may we note melle of more at this tyde, / For prosesse of plaies that précis in plight” (The Travellers to Emmaus 40.191-2). The presence of the other wagons cues the end of the current play, but rather than attempt to artificially blend this change through stage trickery, the playwrights instead blend the idea of actor and character. The same principle applies to the audience members, who are in no way passive observers. Beadle contends, “The text is essentially a performance script, never intended as reading matter, and it repeatedly insists on the presence of an audience, who are thereby drawn to participate almost physically in the illusion, finding themselves implicated in the events portrayed” (101). Audience presence and participation is crucial to the experience, integral to the plays’ meaning.

Though for medieval audiences the stories represented on stage were undoubtedly familiar on the literal level, their full import could only be accessed through the show’s experience. Essentially, “you had to be there.” But simply “being” was only part of the whole aesthetic. As Robertson contends, medieval art operates on multiple exegetical levels, and the stories themselves ultimately reflect some aspect of divine Christian charity. So, when confronted with the crucifixion and self-sacrifice of Christ—one of the chief events upon which the whole religion is founded—the meaning might initially seem self-evident. How far would Augustine or any other sensitive reader have to dig to reach the meaning of that moment? On the surface, caritas is obvious in this story, regardless of its context: the veritable interpretive
bedrock which cannot be mined through. As it turns out, the York Realist seems to have found a way.

In *The Crucifixion of Christ*—performed by the Pinners guild—serves as a stunning example of both exegetical layering and how medieval dramatists made effective symbolic use of venue. Because, as Beadle argues, Christ spends most of the play affixed to the cross and silent, “the sight-lines afforded to most of the audience mean that the focus of attention falls chiefly on the soldiers, who are not shown to be aware of their victim in any subjective sense” (211). As with other plays in the cycle shown during the Corpus Christi feast, a pageant wagon would be used to transport major set pieces between stations, but the acting would largely occur on the turf around the wagon wherever it happened to park. This means that the audience and the actors would effectively share a space. While this fact is part of the practical make-up of the production, this shared space between the audience and the actors—notably excepting Christ—is essential to the play’s allegorical significance. Christ’s crucifixion would especially resonate on a physical level with medieval audiences. Clifford Davidson points out that medieval people were no strangers to brutal public executions (7). Methods such as “hanging by the hands” were intended to de-humanize people by exposing them to extreme pain, but Christ successfully transcends this brutal physical reality (9). However, the banality and the specificity of the manner in which the executioners undertake their task implicate the routine drudgery undertaken by craft people (15):

II Miles: Yis, here is a stubbe will stiffely stande,

Thurgh bones and senous it schall be soght.

This werke is wele, I will warande.

I Miles: Saie, sir, howe do we thore.
This bargayne may not blynne.

III Miles: It failis a foote and more,
The senous are so gone ynne.

IV Miles: I hope that marke amisse be bored.
II Miles: Than muste he bide in bitter bale.
III Miles: In faith, it was overe skantely scored;
That makis it fouly for to faile.
I Miles: Why carpe ye so? Faste on a corde
And tugge hym to, by toppe and taile.

(35.102-114)

Ultimately, as Beadle contends, the relationship between the audience and the soldiers (or rather workmen) becomes one of identification. While they orate their task in a gruesome accounting (as if we—the audience—could not see what was happening), the soldiers hardly seem like distant Romans at all. They appear as English workmen setting about completing an everyday job. Their easy colloquialisms and casual language underline the horror of the situation, but they also bring the soldiers closer to their audience; they have much in common, including their weary day-to-day routine. But why include such pedestrian characters when bedecking actors in faux armor and antique mannerisms would serve a grander spectacle? These factors are not meant to obscure the brutality of the scene, but to highlight Christ’s suffering. And Christ’s suffering results from his treatment at the hands of common, everyday people, not distant antique Romans or dehumanized caricatures of brutal soldiers. The details of his stretching and pinning to the cross are drawn out in gruesome detail, so when Christ makes his appeal to “Al men that walkis by waye or strete” (35.252), and bids them take heed of his numerous injuries, the
audience is essentially forced to face the price of salvation. Christ demands that they respond to his sacrifice, to remember his suffering: “And fully feele nowe, or ye fine, / Yf any mourning may be meete, / Or myscheue measured vnto myne” (35.256-258). The use of the Pinner’s instruments, “hammeres and nayles large and lange” (35.30) is tortuous and destructive. Christ’s meditative detachment and spirituality directly contrast with the soldiers’ physicality and ignorance. Perhaps surprisingly to a modern audience, this is a far from idyllic portrayal of a craft in action. As Christians, audience members would recognize their culpability in Original Sin. After all, it is humankind’s fall from Paradise and resulting imperfection that Christ must suffer to redeem. Even if Christ’s fall is fortunate in the sense that it, within Christianity’s mythological framework, assumes his resurrection, the soldiers’ behavior and their identification with the audience as a whole allegorically prefigures the fall of man. This cycle is emblematic of the physical and symbolic cycles of the Corpus Christi pageants as a whole—Christ is the alpha and omega of the entire production. Effectively, this aspect of the play’s meaning would be entirely lost without the presence of an audience who are incorporated into the performance space. Ralph Blasting argues that the “platea,” or area surrounding the pageant wagon, is used to provide a contrast between the action occurring outside the set and the iconography of the wagon (127). He notes that this focus on action occurring on the wagon creates tension, emphasizing the liminal boundary the street or turf represents (129). This liminal boundary serves as symbolic space, where the actions of the drama and the actions and even spiritual being of the audience mingle freely. Notably, in The Crucifixion of Christ, Jesus is crucified in the street (133).

Though we cannot fairly apply patristic exegesis to Shakespeare, its impacts on him and his exemplars are relevant. And while it is certainly true that Shakespeare’s classical influences for the most part preceded Christianity altogether—and furthermore that pairing instruction and
entertainment is not unique to medieval Christian Europe—Shakespeare nevertheless is attuned to Chaucer’s concern for “sentence” and “solaas.” Chaucer explicitly connects instruction with theatrical entertainments in *The Franklin’s Tale* by way of his Magician, whose illusions figuratively set the stage for the moral quandary posed before Dorigen, her husband Arveragus, and her suitor Aurelius. Though the Magician’s initial motivations in the tale appear to be financial, he participates in the final acts of release by absolving Aurelius from his debt. He is on one hand an entertainer and on the other a teacher: his actions serve as both entertainments and lessons. Shakespeare is keenly aware of Chaucer’s Magician and of his didactic purpose. He recognizes Chaucer’s commentary on instruction and entertainment and translates its relevance into an early modern English theatrical setting. Not unlike how Akira Kurosawa culturally transposes *Macbeth*’s narrative into his film *Throne of Blood*, Shakespeare actively incorporates elements of Chaucer’s poetic self-awareness into his theater. Prospero—as other Shakespearean stage managers and/or actors are wont to do throughout his dramatic canon—does more than closely model a key speech after his literary ancestor, but seems directly descended from the Magician’s literary function.

The textual connections between Prospero and Chaucer’s Magician are abundant, and their most noted parallel—Prospero’s revels speech—has received modest critical attention (e.g. Robertson 725; Ross 156; Simons 56; Hillman 428). To celebrate and sanctify Ferdinand and Miranda’s betrothal, Prospero calls forth a masque of goddesses. The wizard’s penchant for theatricality prefaces the procession: “I must / Bestow upon the eyes of this young couple / Some vanity of mine art” (IV.i.39-41). But after realizing he is about to be murdered, Prospero snaps out of his temporary revelries, and he waxes with booming Shakespearean tone:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors
(As I foretold you) were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air,
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (IV.i.148-158)

These most famous of Shakespearean lines, however, are conspicuously Chaucerian in a number of respects. The Magician in The Franklin’s Tale claps his hands (as Prospero will later in his Epilogue), dissipating the magical illusions he used to entertain Aurelius:

And whan this maister that this magyk wroughte
Saugh it was tyme, he clapte his handes two,
And farewel! al oure revel was ago,
And yet remooved they nevere out of the hous,
Whil they saugh al this sighte merveillous,
But in his studie, ther as his bookes be,
They seten stille, and no wight but they thre.

(F 1202-1207)

Although the context somewhat differs for these speeches, Shakespeare clearly references Chaucer’s “oure revel was ago” in his “Our revels now are ended.” Reference is the key idea
here: Shakespeare is not merely borrowing a Chaucerian turn of phrase, as some critics have cautiously implied. Notably, both wizards call an end to an entertainment as a distraction while ultimately setting the stage for the present entertainment’s ethical progression and conclusion. Richard Hillman insists that the similarities between Chaucer’s Magician and Shakespeare’s Prospero amount to more than mere echoes. The relationship between them is contextual (426).

Unsurprisingly, this shared context between Prospero and the Magician regards how they use their respective powers. Hillman characterizes their chief magical “events” as “mirror-images”: Prospero’s spell subjects a group of people to shipwreck while the Magician, by hiding coastal rocks, prevents such a catastrophe (428, cf. Simons 56). Regarding these “odd parallels,” Simons further notes “in The Tempest magic (at least Prospero’s magic) is used to protect chastity whereas in the tale magic is enlisted in an attempt to arrange an adulterous liaison” (56). In The Tempest, control is soon conflated with artifice as Miranda pleads, “If by your art, my dearest father, you have / Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them” (I.ii.1-2). The wizards both control others’ perceptions, indirectly and directly. For example, the Magician casts unspecified illusions, through what the Franklin describes vaguely as “apparence or jogelrye” (1265), explaining “I ne kan no termes of astrologye” (1266). Less direct, however, are the effects of others’ emotional and intellectual responses. Miranda perceives danger in her father’s storm and begs him to stop. And while Dorigen and Averagus ultimately experience the opposite feeling from Miranda regarding the Magician’s feat, they nevertheless are pitched into a moral quandary regarding Dorigen’s rash promise to marry Aurelius should he succeed at making the rocks vanish. Like a well-staged concert, Prospero and the Magician are able to extend their powers beyond instantaneous reaction, but instead direct emotion and thought.
But, both magic-users’ motivations and the precise intentions of their illusions are initially hidden from plain view. Prospero tells Miranda that he is motivated by revenge, and the Magician is somewhat mercenary. Shakespeare has Prospero explain the treachery of his brother Antonio, providing sufficient motivation for a revenge-killing should it occur. Chaucer’s magician is initially an ambiguous figure. He is hired help, more or less, and the ultimate effect of his power would have been unsavory. Hillman notes, “the magician is an influence through almost half of the Tale and...his function goes well beyond doing the job he has been contracted for” (427). He continues, pointing out that Chaucer’s magician and Prospero share a kind of “prescience.” The Magician greets Aurelius and his brother thus:

“I knowe,” quod he, “the cause of youre comyng.”

And er they ferther any foote wente,

He tolde hem al that was in hire entente. (1176-78)

Hillman cuts to the core of the relationship between Prospero and the Magician in regards to prescience, art, and control:

Thus he possesses from the first an aura of authority and superiority linked with a knowledge, not merely of the secrets of nature, but of men’s minds. The impression is sustained by his self-assurance and assumption of control—qualities demonstrated, in part, through details that have correlatives in The Tempest. He almost casually produces his visions, then dispels them when he “Saugh it was tyme” (1203), evincing a sense of the scheduling and managing of events akin to Prospero’s. (427)

This “scheduling and managing” that Prospero and the Magician share connects them both through their shared auxiliary occupation as entertainment producers. Further, Prospero and the
Franklin’s Magician are both practitioners of natural, not diabolical magic (428). The Magician is described as a “philosophre” (1572, 1585, 1607), which might conflate the roles of entertainer and teacher—sentence and solas.

Within the context of writing Prospero, Shakespeare was likely sensitive to the connection between teachers and entertainers (a conflation that remains to this day; most popular instructor review web pages include criteria for how entertaining a particular instructor was in front of class). But the Magician is linked with a more particular cultural trend in England associated with Chaucer’s rise to prominence as a poet. The Middle Ages in England and elsewhere in Europe saw its share of entertainment trends. Minstrels, who were common throughout medieval court scenes, served as “jongleurs” (or “jesters”—general entertainers who often boasted wide ranges of skills, including but not limited to music, poetry, acrobatics and even magic tricks (Jones and Ereira 38). The role of the court poet, though in many respects far removed from the ribaldry of old jesters and more sophisticated than the troubadours, developed as a part of this tradition. Once vernacular language became an acceptable vehicle for sophisticated art after the 14th century, court poets like Chaucer eventually emerged as new kinds of entertainer. In *Medieval Lives*, Terry Jones summarizes this trend from an entertainment perspective:

> The old minstrels looked shabby and outdated. The situation was rather like that of the mid-twentieth century, when the old vaudeville comedians—with their distinctive repertoire of hand-me-down material culled from many years of touring music halls—found themselves displaced by the university-educated satirists of the television age who wrote their own fresh material every week. (57)
Paul Strohm suggests that Chaucer seems to imagine his audience both as listeners and as readers, perhaps suggesting that the poet himself wondered at his role in this respect (5). When he apologizes for the language in *The Miller’s Tale*, Chaucer references both readers and listeners: “whoso list it nat yheere. / Turne over the leef and chese another tale” (3176-77). Regardless, this text and other instances like it reveals that Chaucer is more than just worried over how his words will be received, but how they are interpreted in performance.

This is not to say that the Magician serves as a stand-in for Chaucer. Rather, the conflation of occupations—scholar, teacher, poet, entertainer, magician—is significant to Shakespeare’s conception of Prospero and *The Tempest* as a whole. The connections between these occupations need not be absolute for Shakespeare to be sensitive to them. Shakespeare’s stage “magic” might share a great deal with any illusions a Chaucerian wizard would cast. As Hillman insists, “the key element is surely not the magical display itself, but the role of the magician” (427)—excepting, of course, where magic is artifice that the audience is supposed to recognize. They key elements are entertainment and the role of the entertainer, especially when that role concerns staging or performance.

Prospero’s own penchant for showmanship is well-documented. Stanley Wells notes, “As the controlling agent of the play in which he has his being, Prospero himself resembles the narrator of a romance story” (362). He goes on to explain, “Frequently and deliberately Prospero tries to create a sense of awe, mystery, and wonder in the minds of those he aims to influence.” Marjorie Garber points out that Prospero is often regarded “as a figure for the artist as creator— as Shakespeare’s stand-in, so to speak, or Shakespeare’s self-conception, an artist figure unifying the world around him by his ‘so potent art’” (852-53). This kind of authorial self-conception should not be taken at face value—and Shakespeare almost certainly identifies (though not
entirely) with Chaucer from an artistic perspective and shared cultural legacy. Northrop Frye—only ironically according to Bloom—likened Prospero to “a harassed overworked actor-manager, scolding the lazy actors, praising the good ones in connoisseur’s language, thinking up jobs for the idle, constantly aware of his limited time before his show goes on, his nerves tense and alert for breakdowns while it is going on” (qtd. in Bloom 669). The importance of this observation, however, cannot be overstated. Though Frye might be joking, Shakespeare constructed Prospero purposefully—there is no accident that he strongly resembles a stage manager, and that his island—replete with its special effects, fantastical creatures and dramatis personae—strongly resembles a stage.

Prospero’s role as a showman extends to the physical metadrama of The Tempest, and it seems that Shakespeare to at least some degree wants his audiences to notice. While it would be easy to tangle the practical concerns of the stage with the edifying significance of highlighting its artifice (i.e., is every stage direction an argument?), Shakespeare would be operating well within English theatrical tradition. Just as the medieval minds who conceived of the Corpus Christi pageants aimed to entertain audiences while calling attention to the significance of their surroundings, Shakespeare employs a related set of dramatic and practical devices in The Tempest.

One such key moment that highlights the artifice of the stage occurs in the third scene of Act III, where Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio and the other members of court who have wrecked on Prospero’s island encounter a banquet placed by dancing forest shapes. Prospero is present for the event, but remains invisible to his enemies. When the castaways approach the food, Ariel appears as a harpy and through what the stage directions refer to as a “quaint device” disperses the banquet. Several practical mysteries as to how the scene is played out persist, but John C.
Adams suggests that the “quaint device” might refer to some new form of staging technology (412). Even still, more than one technique could be used here. The stage directions seem to call for the use of a special staging effect, regardless of how it works. And though he is present, Prospero remains silent for much of the scene. Adams argues that Prospero serves a practical function, to help with directing the special effects from a position where he could see:

“Shakespeare placed Prospero ‘on the top’ partly to witness the confounding of his enemies but primarily to co-ordinate the highly intricate stage-business which marks the turning-point and is the chief spectacle of *The Tempest*” (419). If Adams’s supposition is correct, Shakespeare demonstrates a penchant for practical stage directions that can serve both his art’s meaning and the material concerns of staging.

Prospero’s overseeing special effects from on high yields greater significance than just the practical concerns Adams notes. If indeed he is involved with the directing of these actions, Prospero must remain plausibly invisible to his enemies while visible to the audience for the purposes of speaking. Robert Weiman explains that this particular type of scene—with one actor set apart from the stage’s *platea* (or plain)—invites the audience to observe a kind of “double image” (191-92). Though Prospero is “unlocalized” as Weiman puts it, he nevertheless remains a part of the play. Since the stage directions indicate that Prospero enters on top—probably from a balcony as Adams suggests (413)—the audience could likely observe his signals to the other players, and moreover would at the very least adopt the appearance of a person in charge of the proceedings below. Using a balcony would carry metadramatic significance in its own right: the action in part takes place away from the stage. Prospero even offers his praise to Ariel’s performance, and remarks on his captivated audience:

Bravely the figure of this harpy hast thou
Perform’d, my Ariel; a grace it had, devouring.

Of my instruction hast thou nothing bated

In what thou hadst to say; so with good life,

And observation strange, my meaner ministers

Their several kinds have done. My high charms work,

And these, mine enemies, are all knit up

In their distractions. They now are in my pow’r…. (III.iii.83-90)

On a literal level, Prospero refers to the distracted castaways, but his blending of roles might cause more than one audience member to flinch in self-recognition. The lines of the stage and the audience are blurred, if only temporarily. Prospero exerts power over the audience’s imaginations just as much as he does those of the castaways. Shakespeare ensures that the audience understands—in no uncertain terms—that Prospero is directing the action of this sequence in both senses.

After showcasing his directorial talents at the end of Act III, Prospero unveils his pageant to Ferdinand and Miranda. Whereas he mesmerized his enemies in the prior act, here Prospero successfully distracts himself and his allies! Ultimately, artifice is the thing that captures the conscience of Prospero in his revels speech. While he, Ferdinand and Miranda are almost hypnotized by the pageant, plots against the wizard’s life continue to fester behind the scenes. This element is true both dramatically and metadramatically: the audience is well aware of the pending danger, and perhaps for once on Prospero’s island the action is taking place away from the present theatrical diversion. It seems unlikely, considering what matter Shakespeare has already given the audience to consider, that the pageant itself is actually intended to be entertaining to a real audience. In some ways it might be like attending a modern arena rock
concert where in one segment the band watches an episode of The Lawrence Welk Show on TV: the experiences are not transposable and the material is outdated anyhow. Instead, the revelry ends: special effects are nice, but limited in scope and power. The play’s final acts of forgiveness, and Prospero’s retirement, prove far more resonant.

The themes of forgiveness between The Franklin’s Tale and The Tempest are linked, perhaps oddly, by the wizard-entertainers. Neither illusion—at least at first glance—seems to evoke forgiveness as a theme in either work. An uncharitable reading of Dorigen might actually place blame on her rash promise, and some readers might initially expect the tale’s moral to revolve around the significance of this act. On the same hand, The Tempest could have easily manifested itself as a straightforward revenge play. But Shakespeare’s relatively subtle genre signals indicate otherwise. While there is real tension caused by both Prospero’s plotting and that of his enemies, the staged environment does not thematically well suit a murder spree. Helen Cooper notes, “It is Prospero’s island, not Milan or Naples, that occupies the stage in The Tempest” (111). So at least in this respect, the audience might not automatically anticipate a tragedy. But Prospero is well aware of the genre in which he is operating. As stage (magical?) director, he decides on the venue in which the drama takes place. For example, according to Hillman, Prospero’s island strongly resembles the medieval idea of the hortus conclusus—the enclosed love-garden ubiquitous throughout the Romance genre and also present in The Franklin’s Tale (428). Miranda and Ferdinand conduct their courtship in this confined space, and the garden even harbors serpents—Prospero’s would-be assassins (and like a good director, he was responsible for their casting and performances!). In the structure of the hortus conclusus, the audience is provided with both a genre signal and a clear idea that the stage environment and its venue are appropriate to the setting of the play. Prospero wants his island to resemble a stage,
just as he wants his tale to resemble a romance. The romance genre’s array of special effects is not limited to the *hortus conclusus*. Cooper explains:

> At the end, the ship turns out to be undamaged, and waiting offstage to take the various castaways back to Naples, helped along by the ‘calm seas, auspicious gales’ that the mage Prospero will ensure as his final act of enchantment. But it is the rotting dinghy in which he was abandoned, ‘no tackle, sail, nor mast’, that alerted the original audiences to a set of resonances and traditions of particular richness. (113)

But while the signals are typical of romances—often notably executed through special effects—their manifestation is still Chaucerian. Chaucer alludes to a similar paradise in *The Franklin’s Tale*. Hillman notes this “man-made imitation of Eden” (428):

> And craft of mannes hand so curiously Arrayed hadde this gardyn, trewely, That nevere was ther gardyn of swich prys, But if it were the verray paradys. (909-12)

In this scene, according to Hillman, Aurelius effectively operates as the garden’s figurative serpent: “Aurelius casts himself precisely in that role when he attempts to seduce Dorigen and, to the extent of eliciting her ‘rash promise,’ succeeds” (428). Aurelius adopts the Devil’s poise, though he is not lost. His condition needs rectifying. Hillman explains:

> Our sense is rather of deep spiritual confusion. To resolve that confusion requires a miracle—the miracle, ultimately, of grace. (429)

From a Robertsonian perspective, the grace—which initially appears as a series of forgiving acts by Aurelius and the Magician (who releases Aurelius from his financial bond)—ultimately
reflects divine forgiveness. These acts of forgiveness translate as financial sacrifice (which might make a good degree of sense coming from the Franklin), but forgiveness through sacrifice is allegorically significant as a Christian act. Of course, the act in question involves Christ’s crucifixion, which in its literary context is a public spectacle, just as it is in the *Corpus Christi* cycle of pageants. The chief acts of suffering and release play out in front of an audience.

In addition to (public) sacrifice, suffering and release figure prominently both in *The Franklin’s Tale* and *The Tempest*. Ultimately, the willingness to suffer openly moves those who possess the power to forgive. Hillman notes that the voluntary suffering of Averagus and Dorigen eventually leads to harmony (429), or salvation, as we might read it. This process in which they partake is significant to the progression of *The Tempest*:

The ideal that was at first a matter of words and form has gained reality, depth, meaning. The Franklin’s earlier formulation presented in terms of “learning”—

Lerneth to suffre, or elles, so moot I goon, / Ye shul it lerne, wher so ye wole or noon” (777-78)—has been embodied in their lives. Both the process and the achievement—patience through hardship, freedom through patience, reunion after alienation—are fundamental, not only to *The Tempest*, but to all Shakespearean romance. (Hillman 429-30)

So, suffering is educational in a sense, but it ultimately results in release if acted on properly. Also, it must be performative somehow. Aurelius is prepared to live a life of suffering for his hurtful act, and in conveying this willingness secures “release” from the Magician. The term is also notably significant for Prospero’s behavior at the end of *The Tempest*. Ariel points out that his enemies “cannot budge till your release” (V.i.1). Prospero orders this release, and even calls for his own in the epilogue (Epil.9). It is no coincidence that the wizards are responsible for these
performative acts of suffering and release; they are responsible for the shows in the first place. Their positions as moral testers likens them to what William Hamlin refers to as “god-surrogates”: “They function to prompt or prod conscience when conscience fails to prompt itself” (116). But, the wizards’ spectacles of redemption (Prospero’s storm; the Magician’s vanishing rocks) are the key ingredients to their respective works’ meaning. Hillman explains:

both miracles prove the necessary means of redemption, putting characters painfully but profitably to the test. In both works, that redemption calls forth a generous response from the imposer of the experience, the magician himself.

(429)

Hillman’s assessment covers Shakespeare and Chaucer’s relative motivations well: it makes sense for Shakespeare to reference The Franklin’s Tale regarding releases, forgiveness, and even the spectacle accompanying those acts. But Prospero’s final moments in The Tempest go much further than reconciliation. He goes so far as to relinquish his power. In Act V, Prospero summarizes his magical deeds, which in many respects match the feats of Shakespeare as an author:

I have bedimm’d
The noontide sun, call’d forth the mutinous winds,
And ‘twixt the green sea and azur’d vault
Set roaring war; to the dread rattling thunder
Have I given fire, and rifted Jove’s stout oak
With his own bolt; the strong-bas’d promontory
Have I made shake, and by the spurs pluck’d up
The pine and cedar. Graves at my command
Have wak’d their sleepers, op’d, and let them forth

By my so potent art.

(V.i.41-50)

But recognizing that his plans must come to a head, Prospero announces his effective retirement from magic-making:

I'll break my staff,

Bury it certain fadoms in the earth,

And deeper than did ever plummet sound

I'll drown my book.

(V.i.54-57)

Many critics have been tempted to read these speeches and Prospero’s epilogue as Shakespeare’s professional farewell. Given the similarities the playwright shares with Prospero, on the surface this reaction seems reasonable. Stanley Wells notes nothing especially mournful about Prospero’s announcement (368), and Garber argues that “it is we, not the playwright, who seem to need a ceremonial occasion to say good-bye” (870). Ultimately, Prospero’s relinquishment of powers signals full forgiveness—he has no need of retaliatory power. However, Shakespeare’s stage metaphors still apply. Even if Shakespeare is not laying down his pen, Prospero figuratively is. So, the operative question is, what happens to the play when the playwright lays down his pen? The simple answer, of course, is that the play ends. But given the context of Shakespeare’s theatrical tradition, the borders between audience and stage are blurry. Up to the end of the play, Prospero has chiefly been a master of artifice. His miracles and magic set the stage for the proceeding action and drove the cast to their actions. His island environment was carefully constructed (it seems) for his purposes, and spirits and even nature itself bent its will to
his designs. But after he snaps out of his revelry from his own mesmerizing pageant for Miranda and Ferdinand, Prospero realizes the more important matters at hand worthy of his consideration. A similar moment of processing (or analysis) occurs after the Magician discontinues his show for Aurellius and his brother. Chaucer leaves an impression of emptiness: “They seten stille, and no wight but they thre” (1208). There is a moment of uncomfortable inaction and an impression of silence. As it turns out, entertainment alone can distract an audience only for so long. The dispelling of their respective illusions incites a kind of existential terror and responsibility to digest art. Shakespeare’s speech conflates the stage and the world; with actors and audience members (not unlike his medieval dramatist exemplars). Though the masque was relevant to the marriage discussion at hand, Prospero nevertheless has would-be murderers to contend with. Chaucer’s Magician has pressing matters to attend to as well. And Shakespeare’s conflation of the stage and the world in Prospero’s revels speech draws the metaphor further towards the audience. There is a very important reason the revels must come to an end for Shakespeare’s audiences. Prospero’s realization should mirror theirs. The acts of interpretation and analysis are only possible after the sensory experience has passed. Entertainment must cease (if briefly) for instruction to occur. In his epilogue, Prospero even calls on the audience to release him from the stage, or his plan will fail:

Now my charms are all o’erthrown,
And what strength I have’s mine own,
Which is most faint. Now ‘tis true,
I must be here confin’d by you,
Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
Since I have my dukedom got,
And pardon’d the deceiver, dwell
In this bare island by your spell,
But release me from my bands
With the help of your good hands,
Gentle breath of yours my sails
Must fill, or else my project fails,
Which was to please. Now I want
Sprits to enforce, art to enchant,
And my ending is despair,
Unless I be reliev’d by prayer,
Which pierces so, that it assaults
Mercy itself, and frees all faults,
As you from crimes would pardon’d be,
Let your indulgence set me free. (Epil.1-20)

Prospero’s project, “which was to please,” is well in line with his commitment to special effects and setting the stage. But the ultimate act of release is placed upon the audience. This release presumably occurs via applause (“With the help of your good hands”), or a clap, which is also—perhaps not coincidentally—how the Magician in *The Franklin’s Tale* dispels his illusion (Ross 156). Whereas Shakespeare makes audience appeals via epilogue variously throughout his dramatic canon, one wonders why Ariel à la Puck is not the one asking for release. In other words, Prospero as speaker of the epilogue is significant.

While throughout *The Tempest* and *The Franklin’s Tale* the themes of penitence and release are linked, it is curious that Prospero (unlike the Magician) includes himself within the
framework of restitution at all. Although he does indeed use magic—though to no harmful
effect—Prospero is not asking forgiveness for or release from any wrong he has committed on
the audience. Nor is he making a cheesy plea from the actors to go home for the night.
Prospero’s final lines are, “As you from crimes would pardon’d be, / Let your indulgence set me
free.” The analogy is penitential and seems somewhat non-sequitur to the message that the
audience needs to snap out of its own revelries and think about what just proceeded. The moment
also does not seem to have a direct analogue in *The Franklin’s Tale*. While there is nothing
especially odd about the absence of such an obscure parallel (why should the Magician ask for
forgiveness?), it is interesting because an analogous plea occurs elsewhere in *The Canterbury
Tales*: Chaucer’s Retraction. There are no narratological parallels between the Retraction and
*The Tempest*, and while a sentimental reading of the epilogue in *The Tempest* might suggest a
metaphorical career ending, Shakespeare is not operating with the same seemingly genuine tone
as Chaucer. Though the interpretations on what might have been his final writing are varied,
Chaucer’s final words resonate with Prospero’s last pronouncements in *The Tempest* in ways that
call attention acts of audience participation and interpretation.

In terms of its literary context within *The Canterbury Tales*, the Retraction immediately
follows *The Parson’s Tale*. The latter is a tract on penitence and not a tale at all whereas the
former is Chaucer’s final word on the subject from his own perspective. The Parson’s Prologue
and Tale serve as an effective thematic closing to *The Canterbury Tales*. After the Manciple
finishes telling his fable, which began sometime in the morning, the Parson’s Prologue opens to
a chilly late afternoon:

   By that the Maunciple hadde his tale al ended,

   The sonne fro the south lyne was descended
So lowe that he nas nat, to my sighte,

Degrees nyne and twenty as in highte.

Foure of the clokke it was tho, as I gesse,

For ellevene foot, or litel moore or lesse,

My shadwe was at thilke tyme....

(1-7)

This distortion of time makes sense if *The Canterbury Tales* is read allegorically as a representation of a person’s progression through life, or even the world (e.g., Benson 4). The tales begin with themes of rebirth and regrowth, otherwise known as the *reverdie* tradition:

> Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
> The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
> And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
> Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
> Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
> Inspired hath in every holt and heath  
> The tender croppes, and the yonge sonne  
> Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,  
> And smale foweles maken melodye,  
> That slepen al the nyght with open ye  
> (So priketh hem Nature in hir corages),  
> Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages…

(1-12)
The final prologue contrasts directly with the poem’s opening lines. Spring has ended and winter is approaching. The pilgrims’ journey is ending, though we are not sure how far along they are on the way to Canterbury. The Host demands a good yarn from the Parson: “Telle us a fable anon, for cokkes bones!” (29). The Parson rebukes the demand in favor of something better: “Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest, / Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?” (35-36). He promises to instead “telle a myrie tale in prose / To knytte up al this feeste and make an ende” (46-47). The Host is humbled: “he addresses the Parson respectfully for the first time in a polite request that he tell his ‘meditacioun,’ and he asserts his authority for the last time only in urging haste, for the sun is about to set on the pilgrims forever” (Benson 21).

Artistically, the Retraction is logically situated within this literary framework. In this respect, it serves as a kind of epilogue to The Canterbury Tales, calling attention to what matters most at the end of life. So here, the themes of penitence and forgiveness are displayed unambiguously. But the overall effect is subtler, and within this subtlety lies the connection between Prospero’s epilogue and Chaucer’s Retraction.

Prospero and Chaucer both list their accomplishments prior to renouncing their powers as entertainers. As mentioned above, Prospero metaphorically catalogs his deeds in terms of special effects: raising the dead, setting fires, and rousing howling winds. We never actually see Prospero perform these deeds. Chaucer, in a similarly vague fashion, lists and begs for his accomplishments as a writer:

Wherfore I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes; and namely of my translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns: as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the XXV. Ladies; the
As with Prospero—but maybe just for modern readers—we never see or hear all of these accomplishments. His allusions to “many another book” are vague, and the “Book of the Lion” remains a mystery. The effect—at least partially—in both works is to account for a life beyond the readers’ ken. Furthermore, both Prospero and Chaucer categorically reject the tools of their art. Prospero drowning his books in the epilogue serves as a kind of categorical rejection of earthly vanities present in the theater. *The Tempest*, after all, is chock full of special effects. However, the material realities of the theater, at least for Shakespeare, seem to reach beyond concerns of a life well-lived to an art well-crafted. When Prospero breaks his staff and drowns his books, he is releasing the audience’s imagination. They must find meaning in the story; the tale can only take them so far along this journey. This is also the case with Chaucer’s tales. Life’s journey must end alone, and Chaucer takes leave from his book. As with Shakespeare and with medieval dramatists, Chaucer emphasizes reader participation in the Retraction:

> Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse. / And if ther be any thyng that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defeate 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 entente. (1081-83)
As mentioned earlier, the reader is responsible for her/his moral benefit. The book has to end before this reckoning can be made. Chaucer’s life allegory holds firm, as judgment occurs after death. The Retraction is also Chaucer’s way of calling attention to his artifice. The reader will look up from the book as the story ends; the audience member will leave the theater after the show stops. The benefit of analysis must come after.

Entertainment alone is insufficient to instruction or conveying the meaning of art, and *The Tempest* logically recalls Chaucer to explore this point. Prospero’s invocation of the Franklin’s Magician has as much to do with working out an imaginative construct concerning theatricality as it does acknowledging some form of narratological indebtedness to Chaucer. The challenge of Chaucer’s tales is to tell one with the best “sentence and solas,” instruction and entertainment. But instruction is incomplete without students, and they are artistically acknowledged in Chaucer’s and Shakespeare’s works. They are co-authors of any moral benefit or instruction that is conveyed. When Prospero breaks his staff and drowns his books, he is effectively laying down his artifice—which is both the power of magic and the power of imagination as inspired by the theater. Chaucer’s retraction works similarly; we can’t be sure if who we’re reading is just another Chaucerian caricature, a mask adopted by the poet to be used as a mouthpiece.

Shakespeare’s romances generally focus on restoration and forgiveness: the resolutions of *The Winter’s Tale*, *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, and even *The Two Noble Kinsmen* feature such endings. In this respect, Shakespeare’s referencing *The Franklin’s Tale* makes sense. The real question regards how this pattern of forgiveness manifests itself in the two works. The wizardly powers Prospero shares with the Magician are in some respects genre-motivated (wizards as featured caricatures of the romance), but the focus on illusions and other sensory displays is strongly
embedded within entertainment tradition. As mentioned before, Shakespeare is as much focused on this tradition and how it functions as he is upon the morally edifying nature of *The Tempest*. The two—instruction and entertainment—are linked. Shakespeare does not just draw attention to the artifice, but to the signals and expectations of the genre as a whole. The matter of forgiveness is heavy, and it is impossible for special effects alone to carry it. Just as Shakespeare signals genre, he signals Chaucer. If his exploration of these themes were rooted entirely within the framework of expectations on romance, Chaucer’s Magician and *The Canterbury Tales* would be irrelevant to him in general. We should expect less resonant and connective references to Chaucer if Shakespeare had merely been borrowing isolated lines from the poet. Here, reader participation is essential: Shakespeare seems to count on his audience recognizing Chaucer in *The Tempest*—just as Chaucer would have expected his medieval audiences to recognize the complex Christian iconography that informed his own poetry—to understand their shared literary context regarding entertainment/teacher figures and forgiveness. Of course, enjoying the play doesn’t rely on this recognition, but the act of recognition becomes an important part of the dramaturgy. Shakespeare invokes Chaucer, who might well be one of Prospero’s phantoms, and his genre and authorial signals bridge the dramatic gap between the magic-making and implied visual effects of Chaucer’s Magician and the staged visual effects of Shakespeare’s play.
Unlike some of his colleagues in Shakespeare’s canon, Aaron cannot be classified as a Chaucerian entertainer because of any specific link he shares with one of Chaucer’s characters. So unlike Prospero, Aaron shares no direct antecedent with anyone in particular within Chaucer’s poetic canon. However, he is worth examining in the context of Chaucerian entertainers for two main reasons. First, Shakespeare shows us that Aaron is familiar with Chaucer’s *House of Fame*. Second, he embodies the spirit of an entertainer who takes pride in his work and is concerned with his authorial legacy. On their own, these two connections might seem minimal. But Aaron’s familiarity with Chaucer’s work connects directly with his own anxieties over legacy.

In many respects Aaron is Prospero’s opposite regarding his attitudes toward art. While Prospero insists on the importance of stepping back from his artifice—breaking his staff, begging the audience to set him free—Aaron suffers the opposite fate. He is imprisoned in the ground with his head exposed. Since he is never killed within the scope of *Titus Andronicus*, he is never fully silenced. So his readership of Chaucer contributes only part of the Chaucerian entertainer’s pattern. Whereas Prospero and Chaucer recognize the limitations of instruction and entertainment and place responsibility on the audience for art’s analysis, Aaron implicates the audience in consuming and purveying a particular type of art: bloody revenge plays.

Shortly after Aaron the Moor makes his first appearance, he cautions Chiron and Demetrius against moving on Lavinia out in the open with an initially puzzling and obscure reference to Chaucer’s poem, *House of Fame*:
The Emperor’s court is like the house of Fame,
The palace full of tongues, of eyes, and ears;
The woods are ruthless, dreadful, deaf, and dull.

(II.i.126-127).

The sentiment is clear enough: the woods make a better venue for villainy than does a place like the Emperor’s court. But Aaron’s choice of simile is oddly specific. Critically, there is some ambivalence as what “House of Fame” Aaron is referring to. Some suggest that this is a reference to Fame’s house mentioned in Ovid’s Twelfth Book of *Metamorphoses*, or perhaps even to Virgil’s *Aeneid* (Bevington 979; cf Benson 987). It is also arguable that Shakespeare is recalling the phrase from memory, and “the house of Fame” simultaneously connects to his readings of Ovid, Virgil, and Chaucer alike. But there is compelling evidence to suggest that Aaron is particular to Chaucer. May A. Klipple insists that Aaron is actually referring to the palace of Fame, a particular location in Chaucer’s third book of *House of Fame* (11). Here, Chaucer describes Fame as a being with many eyes, tongues and ears, presiding at an imperial palace:

Y saugh, perpetually ystalled,

A femynyne creature,

That never formed by Nature

Nas such another thing yseye.

…

And therto eke, as to my wit,

I saugh a gretter wonder yit,

Upon her eyen to beholde;
But certeyn y hem never tolde.
For as feele eyen hadde she
As fetheres upon foules be,
Or weren on the bestes foure
That Goddis trone gunne honoure,
As John writ in th'Apocalips.
Hir heer, that oundy was and crips,
As burned gold hyt shoon to see;
And, soth to tellen, also she
Had also fele upstondyng eres
And torges, as on bestes heres;
And on hir fet woyn saugh y
Partriches wynges redely.

(1364-67; 1377-1392)

Chaucer’s description of the “femynyne creature” is a jumble of details; it is a monster better described as the sum of its parts rather than an integrated whole. This is a particularly grandiose, if facile, reference given that Aaron is simply cautioning Chiron and Demetrius from drawing unwanted attention. Locating Aaron’s reference on one specific episode versus Chaucer’s whole poem (or Ovid’s or Virgil’s for that matter) brings up more questions than it answers. But there seem to be very few cases where Shakespeare cites Chaucer lightly. While there may be no deeper meaning intended for Chiron and Demetrius, Aaron’s literacy (however anachronistic it may be to the play’s setting) provides us some additional clues to Chaucer’s influence on Titus Andronicus.
Chaucer’s poem is rife with its own interpretive pitfalls and critical ambiguities, however. Critics generally agree that *The House of Fame* was written sometime between 1379 and 1380, after the poet concluded his trip to Italy in 1378 (Fyler 347). Italian influence on the poem itself is also widely recognized—Chaucer invokes and responds to Ovid, Virgil, Boethius, Dante, and a range of other classical and medieval authors. Otherwise, there is little critical consensus as to what this seemingly incomplete and early work means. Wilbur Sypherd regards *House of Fame* as descending from French love-vision literature (13). John M. Fyler argues that the poem is Chaucer’s “fullest exploration of the poet’s position and responsibilities, the sources of his knowledge, and the limits of his vision” (348). The latter explanation seems most relevant to Shakespeare and Aaron, though elements of the other explanations might apply depending, of course, on how Shakespeare himself read the poem. In the poem’s narrative, the author’s poetic stand-in “Geffrey” (729) recounts his dream where he finds himself transported to a temple decorated with images of famous personages from antiquity, replete with records of their deeds. As with Shakespeare’s setting in *Titus Andronicus*, Chaucer chooses a setting alien to England, both temporally and geographically. But Chaucer never specifies his dream-location; Geffrey is confounded by the rich nobility of his surroundings in the temple, and resolves to exit so that he may find someone who can help him:

“A, Lord,” thoughte I, “that madest us,
Yet sawgh I never such noblesse
Of ymages, ne such richesse,
As I saugh graven in this chirche;
But not wot I whoo did hem wirche,
Ne where I am, ne in what contree.
But now wol I goo out and see,
Ryght at the wiket, yf y kan
See owhere any stirying man
That may me telle where I am.”

(470-479)

For both authors, their respective settings are alien and allegorical in tandem. Chaucer’s dreamscape is a receptacle of self-reflection where he is able to interact with authors and literature itself. Shakespeare uses Imperial Rome with fictional characters to establish a political archetype; the old Roman honor-tradition of Titus is contrasted with Aaron’s world of “policy” (II.i.104) and even stagecraft. Shakespeare’s loose interpretation of Rome provides his audience with a conceptual framework for the stage. Though correlations are present, for both authors, between literature and history of antiquity, contemporary connections to Shakespeare’s and Chaucer’s own concerns are also prevalent. For Chaucer, fame is rooted textually—celebrity deeds are recorded and recounted through both oral and written media:

Of this hil, that northward lay,
How hit was written ful of names
Of folks that hadden grete fames
Of olde tyme, and yet they were
As fresh as men had written hem here.

(1152-1156)

Chaucer’s emphasis is on the writing; though the deeds of these famous personages are ancient, they are as fresh as they are written. The poet’s implications are somewhat dire—those famous
folk are only so glorious as their names are written. Chaucer assumes a mantle of responsibility on himself, though he is careful to note that authors themselves grasp for fame:

And eke in ech of the pynacles
Weren sondry habitacles,
In which stoden, al withoute—
Ful the castel, al aboute—
Of alle maner of mijnstralles
And gestiours that tellen tales
Both of wepinge and of game,
Of al that longeth unto Fame.
(1193-1200)

Many minstrels and story-tellers, in both somber and jocular manners, not only tell of fame but seek it as well. For the medieval author, fame seekers were regarded as prideful. Therefore, the deadliest of sins accompanies matters of authorial legacy.

After considering Chaucer’s account, Aaron’s reference to the house of Fame being filled with tongues, eyes, and ears in Titus Andronicus makes more sense—these body parts are the tools of authors and audiences. Furthermore, the play tends toward literalizing the metaphorical implications of body parts, so Aaron’s choice of simile works. Chaucer’s palace of Fame houses a being that is literally made up of these parts. Apart from Fame itself, Fame’s palace is additionally populated by great artists, musicians and minstrels (cf. Sypherd 12). In other words, Fame’s palace is full of entertainers!

Aaron’s warning to Chiron and Demetrius gains a few more layers through this reading. It is not just that the emperor’s palace is home to the forces of Rumor, but that these tongues,
eyes and ears are capable of transmitting and understanding deeds as text. It should come as no surprise that Lavinia is able to identify her rapist mutilators through the very means Aaron warns about. When young Lucius drops his books on the ground, Lavinia directs her father’s and uncle’s attention to a copy of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a book of special significance to the characters in this play—it was a gift to young Lucius from his mother (IV.i.42)—and to Shakespeare himself. Lavinia is able to identify her case alongside Philomela’s, and supplies her rapists’ names by writing them down in the sand as Marcus instructs. Here, literature helps point to the truth and text is liberating. Titus recognizes this power and declares:

I will go get a leaf of brass,
And with a gad of steel will write these words,
And lay it by. The angry north wind
Will blow these sands like Sybyl’s leaves abroad,
And where’s our lesson then?

(IV.i.102-106)

Much like the names etched on plaques in Chaucer’s poem, Titus wishes to commit them beyond passing remembrance. Oddly enough, the names “Tytus” (1467) “Lavinia” (458) and “Chiron” (1206) all appear in Chaucer’s poem.

The depth of Aaron’s warning and his understanding of textual legacy helps characterize an otherwise shadowy figure in Shakespeare’s play. Much ink has been spilled on Aaron’s role in *Titus Andronicus*, and yet the Moor remains a slippery figure to characterize. In some respects he is the play’s principal villain, beguiling Tamora and Titus into bloodier conflict. An ungenerous reading of Aaron (and Shakespeare) might simply characterize him as a pot-boiling bystander, conceived through racial stereotyping. But, Aaron defies stereotyping. He is eloquent,
even professionally inclined in his evil undertakings and participates in a tradition of seemingly unmotivated villainy. However, he does not fit in neatly with the schema Shakespeare establishes for his fictional Rome. Aaron breaches the barrier of the “fourth wall,” interacting as much with the material world of the stage as he does with the imaginative world of the play itself. In this respect, he shares much with Prospero as an entertainer. Aaron sees the world as a stage and can effectively manipulate both its material conditions and the people’s behavior who inhabit it, acting as a director and stage manager. Significantly, Aaron frequently includes the audience in his work, calling attention to his artifice. As with Prospero, Aaron implicates the audience in the acts being performed on stage. However, as I will argue, his ultimate purpose differs significantly from Prospero’s.

While other characters in Titus Andronicus are relatively immersed in their own surroundings, Aaron stands apart both literally and metaphorically. The other characters see the world as it should be: Saturninus complains that as first son he should trump his younger brother’s claims to the throne; Tamora laments Titus’s “irreligious piety” (I.i.130) at the killing of her son; Bassianus vocalizes his suit for Lavinia’s hand; and Titus (with his own essentialist worldview) cuts off his own hand in hopes that the gesture will move Saturninus to spare his sons. Aaron manipulates these characters, whose actions ultimately drive the tragedy. For example, he advises Chiron and Demetrius on raping Lavinia and directs them to a hole where they can dump the corpse of Bassianus. Chiron announces, “Drag hence her husband to some secret hole, / And make his dead trunk pillow to our lust” (II.iii.129-130). Marjorie Garber points out how the metaphorical conditions of the stage are literalized:

The salient point here is not that Shakespeare was capable of so graphic and nightmarish an image of female sexuality…but rather that the play—and the
stage—opens up to become a living metaphor, a dream landscape all too aptly representing the key events that have just taken place: the marriage of Saturninus and the lustful Tamora, the murder of Bassianus, and the rape of Lavinia. This imaginative use of the stage as a figure for the psyche, a geographical literalization of illicit/desire, may hark back in some ways to medieval theater practice and the “hell mouth” of the early stage. (78-79)

More than just alluding to hell mouths, geographical literalization was a common tool employed by medieval dramatists for instructive effect. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, medieval playwrights blended the stage world of the play with the space occupied by the audience. The instructive effect was often to implicate the audience in the drama’s proceedings.

While the material conditions of the stage do not mandate a director-caricature, Aaron nevertheless seems to better evade other explanations as to his overall motivation. Taken as a character at face-value in the play, his exact aims are unclear. He initially indicates that advancement is the chief aim of his villainy: “Away with slavish weeds and servile thoughts! / I will be bright, and shine in pearl and gold” (II.i.18-19). However, this ambition seems to break down, as Aaron never really prioritizes his own positional advancement, nor is he deluded about the prejudice he faces due to the color of his skin. Emily Bartels points out, “Aaron himself recognizes his color difference as alien and ultimately alienating, lamenting (according to report) to his baby son” (446). Near the end of the play, a Goth soldier reports Aaron’s complaint: “Did not thy hue betray whose brat thou art, / Had nature lent thee but thy mother's look, / Villain, thou mightst have been an emperor” (V.i.28-30). Bartels muses, “Aaron's motives… are as slippery and obscure as are his chances of realizing a change in status” (445).
Aaron’s blackness is conspicuous and significant in Shakespeare’s fictional Rome. This
classic characteristic gives him a quality of otherness unattainable by any other character in the play,
setting him apart both physically and metaphorically, save from his own son. Emily Bartels
provides context:

While blackness and Mohammedism were stereotyped as evil, Renaissance
representations of the Moor were vague, varied, inconsistent, and contradictory….
To complicate the vision further, the Moor was characterized alternately and
sometimes simultaneously in contradictory extremes, as noble or monstrous, civil
or savage. (434)

Indeed, Aaron seems to embody all of these characteristics at some point or another in the play.
He deftly adopts this stereotype at certain junctures while at others he abandons it. Aaron seems
to embody contradiction itself, a Janus-faced disguiser.

But again, the motivations behind this type of affect are not manifestly clear. Clarence
Boyer argues for a partial socio-political explanation: except for poisoning, Aaron exhibits all of
the “worst” traits of a Machiavellian villain: he uses others for his own ends and instructs them
in committing atrocities (Chiron and Demetrius; Tamora); he murders anyone in his way (the
nurse); he is an “egotist,” a “cynic,” and an “atheist”; and finally he resists un-Machiavellian
traits such as lust (104-105). However, in that Aaron never actualizes any material gain from his
machinations, he could be considered a failed Machiavellian in the context of Boyer’s argument.
For this flaw, Aaron would be in good bad-company amongst villains both in Shakespeare and in
the plays of other Elizabethan dramatists: Lorenzo’s plotting earns Hieronimo as a deadly enemy
in The Spanish Tragedy; in King Lear, the Bastard Edmund’s machinations are foiled by his
wronged brother Edgar; and Barabas in Marlowe’s The Jew of Malta outmaneuvers himself
while trying to juggle wealth, governorship, and vengeance. Though these characters are analogous to Aaron, the Moor lacks even their level of motivation. He has more in common with Iago in that respect, and according to Bartels, “the possibilities of advancement, though initially at issue, drop quickly from view, leaving villains whose villainy becomes its own cause” (445-446).

Aaron does not necessarily abandon his ambitions, however. While his behavior cannot be easily explained as advancement-envy, Aaron nevertheless remains focused on his craft and sensitivity to the power of text throughout the play. So Aaron is not simply an author-type figure who conforms to a broader tradition of Elizabethan hero-villains who delight in their own destructive potential. Rather, he situates better with characters dedicated and professionally motivated to the art of dramatic tragedy. Shakespeare takes advantage of his venue to great effect, developing Aaron as an entertainer who seems aware of his audience. The Moor manipulates the artifice of the stage, producing what Bertholt Brecht identified as alienating effects (192): Aaron re-frames the familiar trappings of the stage into something altogether foreign and—in this play—horrifying. But in doing so, he indicts the audience for their consumption of his art.

As a tragedian, Aaron takes on a number of theatrical roles, ranging from stage director to writer. His most striking manipulation of the stage occurs in the forest. While going about his work, Aaron speaks in terms of “plots,” a wordplay theme common throughout Titus Andronicus according to Garber (77):

The forest walks are wide and spacious,
And many unfrequented plots there are,
Fitted by kind for rape and villainy.
The idea of space in the imaginative world of the play blends with both the material stage and the story-plot itself. Garber points out that “plots” is a “doubled word…signifying both land and scheme” (78). Additionally, “fitted” is a multifold term associated both with the teleology of crime for the play world and the material “plot” of the stage. Garber notes, “The stage is set for the playing out of these various fantasies of vengeance, and, as if in a nightmare, the stage itself becomes that ‘other scene’ that literalizes what lies below the surface” (77).

In terms of “setting the stage,” Aaron has a number of chores to attend to in the forest. First, he must plant the bag of gold—a simple enough task, but one that he sees fit to explain in the opening lines of the act’s third scene: “Let him that thinks of me so abjectly / Know that this gold must coin a stratagem, / Which cunningly effected will beget / A very excellent piece of villainy” (II.iii.4-7). Here, Aaron is concerned for his professional credentials, and turns to the audience to communicate his point, to assure us that his stratagem won’t disappoint, that it will result in an “excellent piece of villainy.” One cannot help but think of the term “piece” artistically; even Shakespeare uses the word to reference art in Twelfth Night, when Orsino calls for more music: “Now, good Cesario, but that piece of song, / That old and antique song we heard last night” (II.iv.2-3). With Titus Andronicus, the audience knows that they are viewing a tragedy, but Aaron has a professional reputation to maintain. So does Shakespeare, but he is being didactic: Aaron is giving the audience what they came for, and letting them know it.

Aaron continues working enthusiastically until he is interrupted by Tamora. While his tone from the previous lines seems enthusiastic, Tamora marks Aaron as “sad,” asking him the matter (II.iii.9). He waxes eloquent:

Madam, though Venus govern your desires,
Saturn is dominator over mine:
What signifies my deadly standing eye,
My silence, ‘an my cloudy melancholy,
My fleece of wooly hair that now uncurls,
Even as an adder when she doth unroll
To do some fatal execution?
No, madam, these are no venereal signs.
Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand,
Blood and revenge are hammering in my head.

(II.iii.30-39).

Aaron’s melancholia might well assist in marking him as an artist, and his pronouncement “Blood and revenge are hammering in my head” indicates that he is focused on thinking. Though it may seem clichéd to say so, Aaron’s mind is on his work, and Aaron is using his artifice as an outlet for his thinking. But racial stereotyping might be involved with his affected posture. Emily Bartels, in her study of Shakespeare’s representations of Moors, provides insight:

Aaron is the one character in this play whose malignant differentness is consistently recognized and easily categorized by all, including himself and his allies. His references to his distinctive physical attributes—his “woolly hair” (II.iii.34) and his “treacherous hue” (IV.ii.117)—evoke a stock image of the black man, and his intention to “have his soul black like his face” (III.i.205) reinforces the idea culturally linked to that image, that blackness is not merely skin-deep.

(442)
Eldred Jones offers an alternative explanation. Shakespeare possibly parodies the idea of melancholy in the form of Aaron, playing on popular stereotypes of the time, relating to the humor of melancholy itself (178). When Aaron claims that Saturn is the “dominator” over his desires, he strikes the pose of the popular revenger common to the genre during the period. Saturn—along with the moon and Mercury—was popularly associated with the melancholic. But, as Jones suggests, he is indeed only posing. He is savvy enough to use popular theatrical conventions and racial stereotypes to his advantage. As Jones contends,

In temporarily assuming the pose of melancholy, Aaron thus chooses a plausible disguise. His blackness and his race make this easy. He uses these to excuse another of the traits of melancholy—the pursuit of vengeance. (179)

So, Aaron is sensitive to the specific conditions of his existence. Gillian Kendall points out, “Of course, the world Aaron inhabits is one of ‘vengeance’ and ‘blood and revenge’ (II.iii.38,39)—the world of the revenge tragedy” (310). Aaron’s hyperconsciousness effectively bleeds into the play’s proceedings. At the very least, he already has revealed through Chaucer the power of Fame.

In adopting a melancholic pose for Tamora, Aaron has adopted another theatrical convention: acting. Jones continues,

The ebullience and panache which he displays throughout the play are certainly not typical of the melancholy villain of Elizabethan tragedy. Yet in his rejection of Tamora’s advances…he makes himself out to be just this. (178)

But Aaron is not the only actor in this scene. Deborah Willis suggests that “male initiative” (39) is necessary for the carrying out of the forest plot, as Tamora may otherwise falter in her aims. Aaron’s acting doubles as directing, fueling the Queen’s motivation: “Postponing erotic union
with Tamora until their revenge plot is completed, [Aaron] stages a version of coitus interruptus, intensifying her experience of shame and heightening her desire for retaliation when Bassianus and Lavinia confront and mock her for her adulterous behavior” (39). The key term here is “stage.” Clarence Boyer adds that though Tamora is technically the protagonist of her revenge subplot, Aaron “directs the entire action and she falls in with his plots” (104).

It is worth noting that Aaron’s manipulations affect another kindred author-type: Titus. The interactions between Aaron and Titus eventually result in perhaps the most striking blend of the metaphorical and the literal in the entire play: the lopping off of Titus’s hand as a gesture to Saturninus to spare his sons. Titus equates the use of his hands with work throughout the play, and he is alluded to as an artificer in his own right. Saturninus at one point calls him “father of my life” (I.i.253). Bassanius calls Lavinia, the daughter of Titus whose beauty is famed, “Rome’s rich ornament” (I.i.52), implying that Titus is the artist who created her. But Titus is not above retracting his life’s works. In the play’s first act, Titus slays his son, Mutius. When his surviving sons and brother protest, Titus replies callously “Nor thou, nor he, are any sons of mine, / My sons would never so dishonor me” (I.i.295). Worse still, he denies Mutius entrance into the family tomb, which Titus earlier called “sacred receptacle of my joys” (I.i.92). Even now, Titus is primarily concerned with his reputation, and disowns those things that are inextricably his—literal retractions of his children. Bassanius emphasizes, “With his own hand [he] did slay his youngest son” (I.i.418), highlighting not only Titus’s zeal for Saturninus, but further underscoring the major member of the writer—the hand. Eventually, in response to Lavinia’s rape and dismemberment, the pending execution of his sons, and his own dishonor; Titus wishes for his hands to be lopped off: “Give me a sword, I’ll chop off my hands too, / For
they have fought for Rome, and all in vain” (III.i.72-73). Essentially, Titus expresses the wish to take back his service in a literalized manner. In many respects, Titus takes leave from his texts.

Ultimately, Aaron co-opts Titus’s ‘ornaments.’ He stages Lavinia’s rape; he orchestrates the capture and framing of Titus’s two surviving sons; and he convinces Titus to sever his own hand as a plea for mercy to the emperor. In the latter incident, Titus disturbingly blends metaphor with reality: “Lend me thy hand, and I will give thee mine” (III.i.187). Gillian Kendall, in her discussion of metaphor in Titus Andronicus, argues that Titus’s offering of his hand to Aaron sounds like a “greeting between old friends,” but in a perverted, doubled context:

The reality of the situation undermines the language that describes it. When literal and figurative intertwine so closely, one might be tempted to say that meaning becomes indeterminate, that physical violence means in an absolute way that language cannot. The existence of the severed hand, however, is itself the result of Aaron’s manipulation of language. Moreover, the bloody hand on the stage reminds us that meaning remains to be arrived at, however indeterminate speech may be.

(301)

Effectively, Aaron is left with a prop—a rending of Titus’s hand from the play-world which transfers it into the stage world—once more calling attention to Aaron’s role as stage manager. The audience is continually assured that mischief will be maintained, whether they like it or not. However, in the context of revenge tragedy, Aaron’s performance meets or more likely exceeds audience expectations.

Aaron’s co-opting of Titus’s life and works compares with how playwrights often manipulate the biographical facts of their subjects’ lives to create meaningful narratives. Aaron
conveys the story and heightens the tragedy to dramatic effect throughout the play. He is also responsible for bridging the gap between imaginary ancient Rome and the audience. But his own concerns are too intertwined with the events of the play for him to be a truly objective observer and mover. Foremost, Aaron seems chiefly concerned with his artistic output, his notion of authorship, and his success as a tragedian. And Shakespeare eventually invests him with a true motivation within the realm of the play. Tamora gives birth to Aaron’s son, which triggers a series of events that draw forth Aaron’s true motivations as a tragedian and author. Despite his apparent nihilism exhibited earlier in the play, Aaron refuses to allow Chiron and Demetrius to kill his newborn son, and even kills the nurse responsible for the child’s delivery. When Aaron describes his son as “heir,” (IV.i.92), we have to wonder at what the child will inherit. Later in the play, in exchange for his child’s life, the Moor promises to tell Lucius a tale of “wondrous things,” otherwise he’ll declaim, “Vengeance rot you all” (V.i.55,58). Aaron has been made to ascend a ladder, which in a twist of prop-mechanics characteristic of the play, serves as a pulpit for his performance:

    Twill vex thy soul to hear what I will speak:
    For I must talk of murthers, rapes, and massacres,
    Acts of black night, abominable deeds,
    Complots of mischief, treason, villainies,
    Ruthful to hear, yet pitiously perform'd.
    And this shall all be buried in my death,
    Unless thou swear to me my child shall live.
(V.i.62-68)
Aaron in many respects references the process of telling tragedies. Even the telling of *Titus Andronicus* would apply to Shakespeare in this respect. The real significance is Aaron’s promise that all these tales will be buried unless his son lives. While obviously his son will not tell these tales, he nevertheless represents Aaron’s living ornament as Titus’s children did. When Aaron finally relates the play’s events to Lucius, he explains his various theatrical roles, including as a player—“I play’d the cheater for thy father’s hand” (Vi.i.112), for example—and concludes that all of his evils lead to his own laughter, confirmation that his goals are self-gratifying. Though Aaron is an entertainer, he’s playing for enjoyment’s sake. His only regret is that he couldn’t accomplish “a thousand more” (V.i.124). Chillingly, he literalizes the authorial method of the tragedian:

> Oft have I digg’d up dead men from their graves,
> And set them upright at their dear friends’ door,
> Even when their sorrows almost was forgot,
> And on their skins, as on the bark of trees,
> Have with my knife carved in Roman letters,
> “Let not your sorrow die, though I am dead.”
> (V.i.135-140)

Metaphorically, dead skin can be taken as parchment, and “digg’d up dead men” are the subjects of tragedy, exhumed again and again to relive their horrors on the stage (literally the case in Shakespeare’s plays based on historical figures). Aaron highlights the principle medium of tragedy. Titus’s ornaments are not his only targets of theatrical objectification, and he lets the audience know it. Though Lucius demands that Aaron be silenced—“Sirs, stop his mouth, and
let him speak no/more” (V.i.151)—Aaron is buried up only to his neck, leaving his powers of speech intact:

Set him breast deep in earth and famish him,
There let him stand and rave and cry for food.
If any one relieves or pities him,
For the offense he dies. This is our doom.
Some stay to see him fast’ned in the earth.

(V.iii.179-183)

Despite banning anyone from taking pity on him—an odd command since the Moor is at the mercy of Lucius—Aaron in no respect is hobbled as a tragedian. He still has the power to tell tales and manipulate should anyone stop to listen.

Though this may seem like a technicality, it is significant that Aaron never dies within the scope of the play. His and his son’s survival is in keeping with his authorial concerns and goals. Moreover, other voices aside from Aaron’s seem effectively mute at the end of the play. Titus has died after his own grand theatrical ploy; Lavinia is dead; Saturninus and Tamora are dead; Chiron and Demetrius are dead; Lucius offers little perspective or comfort—Aaron is the most qualified survivor left to tell the tale. According to Kendall: “the dominant voice at the end of the play really seems to be that of Aaron, who has proven to be not only the most evil character but time and time again the most difficult to silence” (316). Lucius calls for him to be buried up to his chest and starved, but Aaron’s most powerful asset is his voice: “Ah, why should wrath be mute and fury dumb? / I am no baby, I, that with base prayers / I should repent the evils I have done” (V.iii.184-186). Aaron maintains his unrepentance, and reiterates his regret that he could not “perform” more (V.iii.188). Kendall explains: “The play thus ends not simply with the
ordering of the state—an ending common in Shakespeare’s tragedies—but with a focus on Aaron that leaves him forever awaiting his punishment, forever speaking, the state forever fragmented…The violence of Titus Andronicus promises never to cease” (316).

So at least in one respect, Aaron—“the chief architect and plotter of these woes” (V.iii.122)—has etched his name onto the plaques in Fame’s house. His motivations, even though they do not fit neatly into the structure of ancient Rome, seem clear from an artist’s perspective. His regret at being unable to perform further evils mirrors the artistic impulse to tell further tales, which is frequently reflected at the end of Shakespeare plays. Often, these appear as a promise to recount the events of the drama that just unfolded. Horatio in Hamlet exemplifies this impulse:

You from the Polack wars, and you from England,
Are here arrived, give order that these bodies
High on a stage to be placed to the view,
And let me speak to th’ yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc’d cause,
And in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall’n on th’ inventor's heads: all this can I
Truly deliver.

(V.ii.376-386)
Horatio’s speech applies not only to the tragedy that unfolds in *Hamlet*, but to *Titus Andronicus* and other plays as well. This tendency is somewhat autobibliographic; Shakespeare implicitly nods to his prior accomplishments. Similarly, we hear Prospero’s accounting of his magical deeds in *The Tempest*, which at least in terms of grave-opening is similar to Aaron’s own paean.

I have bedimm’d
The noontide sun, call’d forth the mutinous winds,
And ‘twixt the green sea and azur’d vault
Set roaring war; to the dread rattling thunder
Have I given fire, and rifted Jove’s stout oak
With his own bolt; the strong-bas’d promontory
Have I made shake, and by the spurs pluck’d up
The pine and cedar. Graves at my command
Have wak’d their sleepers, op’d, and let them forth
By my so potent art.

(V.i.41-50)

Prospero delivers this speech right before ending his career as a magician, and subsequently begs the audience to set him free from his bonds. The metaphorical author of *The Tempest* takes leave and allows the audience to process—or retell—the spectacle they have just witnessed. These moments throughout Shakespeare’s canon serve as interpretive conduits between the stage and the audience. In short, the author prompts the audience to think about what they have just witnessed.

Though *Titus Andronicus* is too early a work for Shakespeare to have been thinking in terms of his own career bibliographies just yet, Shakespeare applies this narrative framework
through Aaron to call attention to tragedy’s artifice. Namely, as “chief architect and plotter,” Aaron represents or enacts the artistic duties of Elizabethan tragedians. So, the sentiment applies to writers and fame in general. And Aaron’s referencing *House of Fame* significantly augments the effect. But beyond Aaron’s singular and obscure reference to this Chaucerian poem, further influence on his artistic motives is traceable to Chaucer’s own autobiobibliographic tendencies.

While Chaucer frequently embeds a version of his own persona throughout his poems, he is also prone to discussing his prior works, though not necessarily for self-promotion. In the introduction to the *Man of Law’s Tale*, the Man of Law provides a sort of back-handed compliment to Chaucer’s poetry:

I kan right now no thrify tale seyn
That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly
On metres and on rymyng craftily,
Hath seyd hem in swich English as he kan
Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man;
And if he have noght seyd hem, level brother,
In o book, he hath seyd hem in another.

(46-52)

He then proceeds to list specific works, but ironically gets the titles to some of them wrong. Worse, in his description of “Sentes Legende of Cupide” (62) the Man of Law makes noticeable omissions and botches his description of Medea in particular. Rodney Delasanta argues that these conspicuous omissions and misreadings paint the Man of Law as fussy, prudish, and wrong (292). The Man of Law goes on to dismiss poetry altogether and promises a tale in prose (despite the tale itself proceeding in poetry). Effectively, Chaucer’s autobiobibliography amounts to
much more than self-promotion. He orients the Man of Law as an opposing spirit: the lawyer’s view of the world is very different from that of the poet. Chaucer has effectively co-opted himself to help orient readers ideologically. In other words, Chaucer lets everyone know where he and the Man of Law stand; it is of course up to the readers to decide on the significance of this disparity. Perhaps more to the point, Chaucer relies on reader participation for the moment’s effectiveness. If they were not familiar with Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women* or the rest of the Man of Law’s list, the complete effect of Chaucer’s critique would fall short.

As I mentioned in my previous chapter, Chaucer’s retraction exemplifies the importance of reader participation. At the outset of the retraction—immediately following the end of the Parson’s tale by the textual signal “Heere taketh the makere of this book his leve”—Chaucer insists that anyone who found any good in his work should instead thank Christ and blame the poet for all else. “For” he continues, “oure book seith, ‘Al that is written is written for oure doctrine,’ and that is myn entente” (1082). Further, *The Parson’s Tale* calls for outward repentance:

> Penitence, with certyne circumstances, is verray repentance of a man that halt himself in sorwe and oother peyne for his giltes. / And for he shal be verray penitent, he shal first biwaylen the synnes that he hath doon, and stidefastly purposen in his herte to have shrift of mouthe, and to doon satisfaccioun….(85-86)

This mode is effectively adapted by Chaucer’s retraction through his autobibliography:

“Whaterefore I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes; / and namely of my translaciouns and enditynges of
worldly vanities, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns….” (1084-1085). Chaucer answers the call for penitence within the framework of his own literature.

A similar tactic is observable in both prologues to the *Legend of Good Women*. Essentially, Chaucer is in trouble with the love god and his Queen Alceste for his negative depiction of women in *Troilus and Criseyde* and his translation of “Romauns of the Rose” (G 255). While the love god is enraged, Queen Alceste points out, “Whil he was yong, he kepte youre estat… / He hath maked lewed folk to delyte / To serven yow, in presynge of youre name” (G 400; 402-403). She proceeds to list past works, including “the Hous of Fame” (G 405). So Chaucer must redeem himself through literature, and composing *Legend of Good Women* becomes an assignment given by Alceste and the love god. Much later on, Chaucer even indicates boredom with the task:

But for I am agroted heer-biforn

To wryte of hem that been in love forsworn,

And eek to haste me in my legende,

Which to performe god me grace sende,

Therfor I passe shortly in this wyse;

Ye han wel herd of Theseus devyse

In the betraising of fair Adriane,

That of her pite kepte him from his bane.

(VIII 2455-2461)

Robert O. Payne argues that by employing a narrator, Chaucer lends *Legend of Good Women* a kind of schema from which the rest of the poem can be read (202). In other words, the presence of Chaucer’s stand-in purposefully highlights the poetic artifice. Though it has been supposed
that Chaucer wrote the *Legend of Good Women* as a royal commission from Queen Anne (his boredom and the dedication in the F prologue coincide with this theory), the moment likely owes more to literary convention than to history (Benson 587).

In medieval literature, authors frequently made use of the palinode, a form of retracting a previous work, so there is some precedent to the convention. But Chaucer’s autobibliographies do not fit neatly into this tradition, especially when taken in context of the larger work. Moreover, Aaron’s behavior seems to preclude the palinode’s influence: he adamantly refuses to repent! Nevertheless, Shakespeare constructs Aaron’s identity by inventing a back-story; his past evil resonates in the present play. With that framework in mind, it is worth considering that what Chaucer does whenever embedding his own persona into a poem has a similar narratological effect. In other words, Chaucer invests the autobibliographic impulse into his own poetic persona (as a poet), and Shakespeare does the same by investing Aaron with characteristics of a tragedian who is also preoccupied with his previous works. So the aim here is not to formulate a direct connection between Aaron’s speech and all or any of these pieces, but instead to discuss the significance of their resonance. In particular, these resonances indicate that Aaron is widely read—enough so that he can play on the autobibliographic form—and sensitive to his own authorship. While he never identifies Aaron as the *de facto* narrator of *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare nevertheless invests him with theatrical powers. This type of framing mechanism inherently calls attention to the artifice in question. Chaucer inserting himself as poet-narrator of *House of Fame, Legend of Good Women*, and as a pilgrim in *The Canterbury Tales* in some respects provides the audience with an “outside looking in” perspective. Perhaps more significantly, Chaucer’s narrative presence is stabilizing, as Payne suggests. Readers cannot get too lost in the fictional Canterbury, nor are they joining Chaucer’s flight with the Eagle in *House
of Fame. The overt presence of a tale teller implies that the audience are either readers or listeners. Their role is defined by implication. Further, the audience has a responsibility mandated by this orienting perspective. They are participants in processing meaning, neither passive observers or active characters. And yet, despite how alienating the surface of the artifice can be, the audience are just as much a part of the poetic or theatrical scenery as the actors are. When Chaucer’s or Shakespeare’s characters speak to their audiences directly, the effect both draws readers and listeners in through one respect and pushes them away in another. The audience in this way is defined by the authors.

Even lacking any specific Chaucerian context for implicating the audience, Shakespeare was hardly alone in highlighting artifice for dramatic purposes. As Brecht famously noted, the Elizabethan theater was full of alienating effects. Margot Heinemann explains that the venues were relatively informal, comprised of mixed classes amongst audience members, “close to both ‘beer-gardens and collages’ and using the language of both” (208). She supplements:

Since illusion was impossible anyway, with daylight performances, boys playing girls and so on, it was easy to include direct address to the audience, narrative and commentary; and the action could move freely from one place or country to another on the unlocalised stage, so that remote as well as immediate causes could be represented and distant opponents brought into confrontation.

(208)

Ultimately, these limitations had been a condition of English theater for centuries, in some form or another. As has been mentioned before, medieval dramatists were adroit in incorporating the venue’s assumed surroundings into their play texts (cf. Beadle; Davidson; Twycross). Dramaturgically, these alienating effects could manifest themselves in ways very similar to
Brecht’s own productions: songs and dumb shows break the action, scene changes might be indicated by placards, the crowd could drink beer and take the pose of entertained observers, and actors—often due to busy schedules, playing roles of different genders, and taking on multiple roles in a single production—performed to represent rather than to become (Heineman 232-33; cf Parker).

Representation that leads to alienation is probably the core ingredient leading to dialectical interpretation in alienating—or rather “epic”—theater for Brecht. He says, “A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar” (192). Brecht uses Galileo to illustrate his example: he “was amazed by this pendulum motion [of a swinging chandelier], as if he had not expected it and could not understand its occurring, and this enabled him to come on the rules by which it was governed” (192). Theater must amaze the public in the same way, by alienating the familiar. Brecht referred to this strategy as “dialectical materialism” (193). Alienation calls attention to the theatrical artifice. Actors must appear as if they are acting. Stage directions may be announced aloud, and/or scene changes might be made visibly apparent. The audience (and the actors) must be free from being swallowed up by the characters (194). Actors must make their attitudes and interpretations of characters apparent versus becoming the characters themselves. Ideally, this principle serves to prompt the audience to interpret characters and situations rather than simply, and to Brecht’s view slavishly, consume them. Of this type of acting, Brecht explains, “The laws of motion of a society are not to be demonstrated by ‘perfect examples’, for ‘imperfection’ (inconsistency) is an essentially part of motion and of the thing moved” (195).

This particular reading of alienating performances makes sense in regards to Aaron’s role as a tragedian. Shakespeare represents the familiar—in this case, the popular conception of the
tragedian—through the ultimate unfamiliar: Aaron. Harold Bloom goes so far as to argue that Shakespeare’s grim production actually serves to parody other works of the era, seeking to exorcise the “ghost of Christopher Marlowe” (78). As mentioned before, *Titus Andronicus* is in good company amongst bloody revenge tragedies. However, in terms of characterization, Aaron shares his role as a character-tragedian with other notable revengers in Elizabethan dramatic tradition. Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy* avenges the death of his son by luring the murderers into performing a dramatic production, where he kills them with real weapons. Here, the actual stage does serve as an appropriate set-piece in itself. However, using the stage as a site for carrying out a revenge plot is a striking tactic, especially given the irony of viewing a pretend murder being conducted on a supposedly pretend stage, ensconced in all of the trappings of the material, non-play world stage at hand. While to some this may seem no more incredible than performing “on location,” using the “real” world as a set piece, and non-props as props, the actualization of Hieronimo’s plot requires the audience to acknowledge some perceptual dissonance: the once immersive play-world is now simultaneously alienating and engrossing. This phenomenon is reflected in Hieronimo’s niggling attention to detail:

*Castille*  
How now, Hieronimo, where’s your fellows,
That you take all this pain?

*Hieronimo*  
O sir, it is for the author’s credit
To look that all things may go well.

(IV.iii.1-4)

Therefore, Shakespeare’s stage-managers are not alone, but part of a larger Elizabethan theatrical tradition.
Attention to the artistry of revenge manifests itself in a variety of tragedies, and often in the form of staged productions. Aaron shares some of his most notable characteristics with Marlowe’s Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*—who Clarence Boyer characterizes as sharing an affinity with Aaron in their “spirit of delighting not only in successful revenge or superior cunning, but in seeing the victim suffer” (103). More significantly, Sara Deats and Lisa Starks identify Barabas as a playwright, Marlowe’s mouthpiece through whom the dramatist explores both the pleasures and the perils of staging (379). Deats notes Marlowe’s dramatic context, careful to point out the conflict between puritanical detractors of the theater and its more liberal defenders. As in the late 20th-century, controversy in the late 16th-century raged over violent forms of entertainment. Some of the arguments are essentially the same: viewing violence normalizes and breeds more violence (Deats and Starks 376). Thus, Marlowe expresses anxious ambivalence through his mouthpiece Barabas, who simultaneously displays an enjoyment for theatricality and the dangers thereof, as he is killed by a counter scheme concocted by his nemesis, Ferneze, which is also staged.

Marlowe’s aims via Barabas, as argued by Deats and Starks, and Shakespeare’s through Aaron are undoubtedly connected. Barabas serves as a stage master and actor at multiple junctures throughout *The Jew of Malta*. In the final act, he even goes so far as to construct the platform he thinks Ferneze will drop Calymath into (V.v). However, at this point, Barabas loses his artistic detachment, and is caught in his own ruse, and is “ousted by a superior playwright” (Deats and Starks 386). Deats concludes: “From a metadramatic perspective, therefore, Barabas's dazzling although doomed productions and performances not only stress the simultaneous pleasure and peril of dramatic art, but also illustrate the power of the theatre, showing how drama may not only reflect but also actively construct what is perceived as reality” (387). In a similar
manner to Shakespeare, Marlowe constructs his commentary by highlighting the vagaries of
dramatic spectacle itself. By altering audience perceptions—breaking past the play-world into
the stage world—the dramatist, through the play, “both acknowledges and interrogates the
potency of its own medium” (Deats 388).

While he shares many characteristics with his fellow early modern purveyors of inter-
play tragic drama, Aaron’s particularly literary concerns set him apart. Barabas and Hieronimo
put on good theater, to be sure, but they are only circumstantial tragedians who are ultimately the
subjects of their respective plays. Aaron’s career is theatrical tragedy. In the play’s penultimate
event, Titus even takes a page out of Aaron’s book and feeds Tamora and Saturninus the bodies
of Chiron and Demetrius. Like Barabas and Hieronimo, Titus brings the spectacle of his own life
to the brink and then into the abyss. But Titus is not as much an author in this moment—though
one must appropriately nod to the culinary arts—he is a performer. Though Aaron is
conspicuously absent for this scene, he nevertheless has in many ways directed the chain of
events that leads to the deaths of Titus and the rest. As he has been for the entire play, Titus
remains a performer and sometimes prop. He snuffs out what is arguably his finest work—
Lavinia—just before he dies. Aaron strives for the opposite in every respect, bargaining for the
life of his child. Perhaps significantly, Aaron promises to withhold his tale from Lucius unless he
can secure an oath for the child’s safety. In this moment, Aaron blurs the fate of his heir and his
knowledge, or his autobibliography.

Perhaps ironically, Titus Andronicus has given Shakespeare much post-mortem critical
trouble in his known dramatic canon. Bloom laments, “It matters only because Shakespeare, alas,
undoubtedly wrote it” (86). Garber points out that the play has been so reviled over time that
many critics are more comfortable regarding the play as a Shakespearean “stepchild rather than a
legitimate heir” (75). The mind boggles at the use of “heir” to describe *Titus Andronicus*: Aaron was successful in his efforts in a metadramatic sense! Isaac Asimov suggests that the whole affair is so bloody and overdone, that Shakespeare might well have been disgusted by and with revenge tragedy altogether (391). But the play’s literary heritage seems to undermine the suggestion that Shakespeare, as Bloom suggests, is trying to exorcise Christopher Marlowe. Reading Ovid is treated as both liberating and enriching, even being regarded and remembered as a “gift” by young Lucius (and not nostalgically—he carries Ovid with him). Chaucer’s inclusion, on the other hand, is less direct and yet entirely relevant to Aaron and the history of the play itself. Chaucer’s career is significant to Shakespeare’s both from an objective and subjective perspective, so extending that significance onto Aaron’s construction as an artist is not much of a stretch. Chaucer and Aaron are concerned with literary reputation, and their point of contact is *House of Fame*. More than that, Aaron’s identity perpetually centers on his career as a near-literal tragedian. But Shakespeare might not indeed be as concerned with the reputation of *Titus Andronicus* as he is with the legacy of revenge tragedy and its adherents as a whole.

Like Chaucer’s final, unfinished line from his poem—“But he semed for to be / A man of gret auctorite….” (2157-8)—Shakespeare’s final perspective on Aaron and *Titus Andronicus* seems ambiguous. Harold Bloom concludes, “The Elizabethan audience was at least as bloodthirsty as the groundlings who throng our cinemas and gawk at our television sets,” but the play was a “howler,” composed for the “more discerning,” who should “wallow in it self-consciously” (79). If the implication here is that *Titus Andronicus* lampoons an entire genre, Aaron’s own final question is still troubling: “why should wrath be mute and fury dumb?” Tragedy, for all of its messiness, is a legitimate art form. On the other hand, Aaron is a
questionable if effective spokesperson for the genre. His own concern with fame regards both the potency of his legacy and the quality of his reputation as an evil-doer:

    Ten thousand worse than ever yet I did
    Would I perform if I might have my will.
    If one good deed in all my life I did,
    I do repent it from my very soul.

    (V.iii.187-190)

So at least in this one respect audience members should be exceedingly self-conscious when viewing the likes of *Titus Andronicus*. Regardless of his other aims, Shakespeare demands that we look to Aaron’s catalyst: without an audience, a stage master remains unemployed.
A Midsummer Night’s Dream is widely regarded as Shakespeare’s fantastical comedic masterpiece. Harold Bloom insists that it is Shakespeare’s “first undoubted masterwork, without flaw, and one of his dozen or so plays of overwhelming originality and power” (148). In several respects, A Midsummer Night’s Dream explores the themes of artistic relevance and entertainment, of composing what might become masterpieces. Aptly, Stanley Wells remarks, “there is a sense in which the entire play is about the power of the imagination” (64); it is an Ars Poetica for Shakespeare. As such, there are several sources, perspectives and imaginative constructs at work. The play’s Chaucerian elements are relatively subtle, and so too are the impacts of its chief Chaucerian caricature, the managerial Duke Theseus. Though he is often regarded as a poetic exemplar—Chaucer was no dramatist—the poet’s influences on A Midsummer Night’s Dream nevertheless center on theatricality and its trappings in particular. Specifically, Chaucer’s Knight tells a tale characterized heavily by chivalric spectacle, a mode the poet was familiar with first-hand. Shakespeare is sensitive to Chaucer’s commentary on spectacle as a means of social control, a theme Shakespeare transposes through his own Duke Theseus in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. In this manner, Chaucer’s influence on Shakespeare demonstrably spans beyond the text of his poetry into the realms of spectacle, audience, and the organizational chaos that characterizes direction and stage management. A Midsummer Night’s Dream and The Knight’s Tale both dwell on the significance of spectacle as a distraction, yet they also address its limitations. Directors and stage managers can only accomplish so much, and are at the mercy of external forces as much as the audience’s imaginations. This particular
character of Chaucer’s influence might indicate that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is also a kind of *Ars Dramatica* for Shakespeare.

Regarding Chaucer-Shakespeare source studies, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* arguably receives the most scholarly coverage after *Troilus and Cressida*, “the happiest hunting-grounds in this particular quest for sources” (Coghill 88). Most point out the numerous surface connections between the two works, largely revolving around the Duke Theseus character. Thompson suggests that Shakespeare’s Theseus is very similar to Chaucer’s “not only in his current situation and the things we are told about him such as his love of hunting and his recent conquest of Thebes…but also in his role as the slightly aloof spectator, judge, and figure of authority” (87).

These allusions may not stem from Chaucer alone. Thompson cautions, “One snag…that critics have usually overlooked is the possibility that Shakespeare might have drawn his ‘Chaucerian’ material from the lost *Palamon and Arcite* play put on by the Admiral’s Men in 1594” (92). Neville Coghill points out a source noted by H.R.D Anders that potentially reveals a different basis for the seeming *Knight’s Tale* material found in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: the Richard Edwards play *Palamon and Arcyte* was performed in 1566 at Christ Church College, Oxford for the Queen (89). However, the seemingly most damning evidence Anders proffers concerns Theseus and his ducal titles: Chaucer anachronistically refers to Theseus as a “duke.” Thus, Anders supposes that the memorable Oxford spectacle—which was attended by Queen Elizabeth and involved three spectators being crushed to death by a falling stone wall (Coghill 89)—provides a more viable and contemporary source than Chaucer. Though Anders’s supposition is important, Shakespeare reading this account and being familiar with Chaucer are not mutually exclusive. Thompson asserts that “since Shakespeare’s usual habit seems to have
been to look up several available versions of any single story it is likely that he would have used
the play and the poem together if he used the play at all” (92). This echoes Donaldson’s
sentiment that Shakespeare really did not have many others to look to in terms of poetic
exemplars (The Swan at the Well 5). Thus, Anders’s supposition should not be regarded as
evidence against Shakespeare’s reading of Chaucer, but instead shed light on potential sources
additional to The Knight’s Tale.

Though Shakespeare’s attention to The Knight’s Tale is not solely focused on Duke
Theseus, his presence and function as an entertainer (or at least impresario) are perhaps the most
significant parallel to Chaucer’s work. Both the Chaucerian and Shakespearean models of the
character indicate that he is a capable ruler, conqueror, and adjudicator. However, his role as a
master of ceremonies, associated with theater, music, and other courtly entertainments, is more
significant to Shakespeare’s purposes. In The Knight’s Tale, Duke Theseus uses theatricality and
spectacle as a means of social control, establishing a dynamic of spectators and performers, with
some characters occupying both roles in tandem in order to regulate reactions and control
outcomes.

In many ways, A Midsummer Night’s Dream is a play about putting on entertainments.
All of the principle action serves as a form of amusement for the upper-class characters. Oberon
drugs Titania into loving Bottom, sending Puck to stir up mischief just as Duke Theseus sends
Philostrate to “Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments” (I.i.13). The lovers—Lysander,
Demetrius, Helena, and Hermia—serve as objects of entertainment for Puck. The mechanicals—
Bottom, Quince, Starveling, Snout, Snug, and Flute—actualize the theater atmosphere that
Theseus establishes early on in the play with a touching, yet “so bad it’s good” performance of
Pyramus and Thisbe, whose parody closely hearkens unto Chaucer’s Tale of Sir Thopas
(Donaldson 3, 8-9, etc). Finally, Puck submits an apology for the performance, and begs for applause:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumb’red here
While these visions did appear.

…

Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.

(Epilogue 423-26, 437-38)

This conclusion is odd, especially in light of Duke Theseus’s prior caution to the mechanicals for their performance:

No epilogue, I pray you; for your play needs no excuse. Never excuse; for when the players are all dead, there need none to be blam’d.

(V.i.355-357)

Despite his allusion to dead actors, Theseus seems relatively pleased, if not impressed with the performance, declaring it “very notably discharg’d” (V.i.360-361). The “players” could on one hand refer to the dead Pyramus and Thisbe on the stage, yet the term itself implies actors more generally. Garber insists on the presence of a “fourth wall”: “An actor playing Theseus watches an actor playing Bottom play the part of Pyramus, and feels secure in his own comparative reality” (Garber 237). Further, this admonishment by Duke Theseus aligns with his prior perspectives on theater. Considering poor performances, Duke Theseus concludes, “The best in this kind [actors] are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them”
(V.i.211-212). Duke Theseus the literary critic insists that reader or auditor participation is a necessary component in the imaginative process.

Of any characters associated with revelry in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Duke Theseus hardly seems like an entertainer. Both Bottom and Puck better fit that billing. Puck speaks directly to the audience during the epilogue, and Bottom at least seems to when he awakens from his episode as an ass:

> I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass, if he go about t’ expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had—but man is but a patch’d fool, if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballet of this dream. It shall be called “Bottom’s Dream,” because it hath no bottom; and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke. Peradventure, to make it the more gracious, I shall sing it at her death.

(IV.i.204-219)

Bottom muses on both the imaginative process and the artist’s method of making his imagination relevant to others. He is even sensitive to timing: “I shall sing it at her death” indicates that his dream might serve as inspiration for an occasional play! If, as Goddard suggests, “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a kind of fugue with four voices” (Goddard *I* 77), with action centering on Theseus and Hippolyta, the young lovers, the fairies, and the mechanicals, the same might apply to entertainment perspectives. Bottom and the mechanicals are in charge of staging and theatricality, with Bottom performing double-duty for Oberon’s enjoyment. The young lovers
serve as entertaining distractions for the fairies (in what one would hope in no way resembles contemporary reality television programs). The fairies themselves are reserved for the delight of Shakespeare’s audience. Finally, Duke Theseus serves as the play’s literary critic and, more significantly, manager and producer. He makes the call for revelry at the very start of the play:

Go, Philostrate,

Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments,
Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth,
Turn the melancholy forth to funerals:
The pale companion is not for our pomp.
(I.i.11-15)

But, Duke Theseus, aside from his role as a character in Shakespeare’s play, never actually contributes to entertainments’ artifice, aside from providing a venue (Athens and his court). He is perpetually an organizer and an audience member.

Yet audiences and players are conflated in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, as they are in other Shakespeare plays showcasing Chaucerian entertainers. As mentioned before, Bottom and Puck speak directly to the audience, as do Aaron in Titus Andronicus and Prospero in The Tempest, along with many other characters throughout Shakespeare’s canon. While Duke Theseus does not make a habit of addressing Shakespeare’s audience, and in a number of ways competes with Puck and Bottom as the play’s impresario, he nevertheless is the play’s most significant Chaucerian allusion.

Shakespeare’s Duke Theseus seems to conflate art and control. Immediately after he calls on Philostrate to stir the Athenian youths to merriment, Egeus brings his suit to the Duke, which involves the love-tangles of four Athenian youths. He admonishes Hermia to listen to her father:
To you your father should be as a god;
One that compos’d your beauties; yea, and one
To whom you are but as a form in wax,
By him imprinted, and within his power
To leave the figure, or disfigure it.

(I.i.47-51)

Since Hermia is essentially Egeus’s creation, she must be subjected to her father’s artistic intentions. In some respects, her marriage to Demetrius would be a showcase, and the grim implication of her “figure” involves her body. Further, her behavior reflects on her father the artist. At this point in the play, Theseus fails to recognize the organic chaos that characterizes all performance art. In the end he finally accepts all outcomes, but at the play’s outset he seems uptight and managerial. Perhaps this effect stems from his late campaign, though even in this moment Duke Theseus alludes to his eventual transformation: “Hippolyta, I woo’d thee with my sword / And won thy love doing thee injuries, / But I will wed thee in another key” (I.i.16-18).

Especially toward the beginning of Shakespeare’s play, this character portrait of Duke Theseus corresponds closely with his Chaucerian counterpart from The Knight’s Tale. And, as Thompson suggests, the commonalities they share extend beyond relatively minor details, such as their ducal titles (87). While both the Shakespeare and Chaucer Theseus characters are their narratives’ chief authority figures, the more significant connection regards their penchant for staging entertainments that ultimately serve as vessels of social control. Both in Chaucer and Shakespeare, Duke Theseus channels action into an entertainment medium. However, for both of them, their authority eventually quakes in the face of supernatural intervention. Their shared trajectory of character development involves seizing these interventions as opportunities, which
at some points could be considered both didactic and entertaining. In both narratives, Duke Theseus comes to better realize the boundaries of his authority while still maintaining his gravitas.

In terms of social control—or at least the pretense of it—Duke Theseus of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* resonates with the broader context of Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* revolving around the portrait of the Knight. Chaucer’s tale fits the teller just as Shakespeare’s spectacle fits the entertainer. As the first pilgrim assigned a tale, the Knight is under a lot of pressure. He is the ranking member in the medieval social ladder, tasked with setting the standard for subsequent tales. His diction is characterized by “an air of stately and unhurried dignity,” as Benson puts it (6), and the Knight certainly takes his time. Digressing into a series of asides, frequently involving detailed depictions of the primary action’s setting rather than the action itself, the Knight seems more concerned with appearances and procedure than he does with the philosophical ramifications of Palamon and Arcite’s competition over Emelye. Significantly, the Knight is concerned with spectators and performers, and frames his principle characters with this relationship in mind. Chaucer’s Duke Theseus reflects the Knight’s own anxiety over control. Rather than adjudicating Palamon and Arcite’s conflict based on reason, the Duke instead devises a grand tournament, replete with festivities and a crowd of interested onlookers, whose responses become the chief concern. Thus, the tale’s chief authority figure uses chivalric spectacle to maintain order and control as a kind of stage manager. All of this is wrapped up in how the Knight, as the highest ranking member of the Canterbury pilgrims, is at least implicitly responsible for setting a standard for all tales subsequent to his.

While Chaucer’s Knight seems virtuous, his social position affects how the audience might read him. Donaldson describes the Knight as one of the “good people” on the pilgrimage,
and stresses that audience opinion of him should coincide, at least in some degree, with Chaucer’s (8). In response to the pilgrim’s sometimes questionable glorification of his fellow itinerants, Donaldson explains, “It is the nature of the pilgrim to admire all kinds of superlatives, and the fact that he often admires superlatives devoid of—or opposed to—genuine virtue does not inhibit his equal admiration for virtue incarnate.” Donaldson goes on to say that the “pilgrim’s ready appreciation for the virtuous characters is perhaps the greatest tribute that could be paid to their virtue, and their spiritual simplicity is…enhanced by the intellectual simplicity of the reporter” (8). But Chaucer’s pilgrim is at times a very poor judge of character. So, if we accept Chaucer the poet’s apparent criticism apart from his pilgrim’s commentary—assuming that Chaucer the pilgrim is genuinely sincere in his reactions to the other pilgrims—then all of the Canterbury company should be subject to a critical lens. Chaucer’s audience should experience a degree of cognitive dissonance, for example, when his surrogate describes the vile Summoner as a “good felawe” (A 650). The Friar receives comparative treatment: “Unto his ordre he was a noble post” (A 214), and “Ther nas no man nowher so vertuous” (A 251), despite representing the stereotype of the “hypocritical friar well-known in medieval satire” (Benson 6).

Similarly, Chaucer the pilgrim is impressed with the Knight, though the dynamic between the two is necessarily different from either the Friar or the Summoner. Unlike those two, the Knight far surpasses him in social station, necessitating that Chaucer’s pilgrim remain polite regardless of his feelings. However, the pilgrim never indicates any overt complaint he has with the knight, and seems to be even a little awestruck by this “worthy man” (A 43). He describes the Knight as loving “chivalrie” (45), seeming to indicate his sense of duty. However, the pilgrim could just mean “horsemanship”, or possibly “prowess” as Benson suggests (24). And though his clothing is “bismotered with his habergeon” (A 76), we should wonder why the Knight’s attire is
“nat gay” (74), as his armor is never really described. Chaucer’s ambiguous portrait of the Knight invites suspicion.

Despite the insistences of Donaldson and Benson, some scholars dispute Chaucer’s seemingly idyllic portrait of the Knight. In Chaucer’s Knight, Terry Jones highlights the evolution of fourteenth-century compulsory military service by nobles. According to Jones, knights were not required to be members of the gentry until after the eleventh-century, as the Anglo-Saxon term “cniht” simply means “youth”, or “follower” (4, 5). The term gradually excluded all but the landed elite after William the Conqueror began using it to describe nobles in his army. However, as military technologies advanced, so did the cost of maintaining knightly accoutrements, putting great pressure on the lesser gentry (Jones 6). The Hundred Years’ War exacerbated the situation. Thus, an increasing number of nobles were trying to find ways of avoiding calls to arms. Jones explains,

In order to offset this growing unpopularity, the kings of England tried to make knighthood more attractive by elevating its social status yet further. This they did with a sort of window-dressing technique, instituting fancy and elaborate rituals and coats-of-arms and by the founding of the Orders…The gulf between the ‘gentil’ knight and the ordinary man-at-arms thus widened visibly during the fourteenth century, so that, by the time Chaucer was writing, ‘gentil’ knighthood had become a jealously-guarded privilege. (7)

Thus, the institution of knighthood itself was truly borne out of an appeal to prestige and spectacle. And though Jones postulates that Chaucer’s Knight fits the portrait of a mercenary—partially due to the economic pressures indicated by his raiment, his questionable military record,
and the institution of the Indenture System (7-29)—the tale itself reflects the value system of the landed elite that prioritizes appearances and process.

Just as Shakespeare begins A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Chaucer’s Knight starts by telling a tale that should focus on Duke Theseus. The Knight enumerates his deeds in detail and presents a relatively contained moral at the story’s outset: Creon of Thebes treats his enemies’ bodies disrespectfully, and will not allow the women to tend to their men (The Two Noble Kinsmen borrows this motivation). Upon hearing these women’s lament, Theseus, like any good chivalric knight, conquers Thebes in response. The Knight even states that his tale could end here: “what nedeth wordes mo?” (A 1029). However, he instead moves on to tell the tale of Palamon and Arcite, Theban knights captured by Theseus, refused ransom, and locked in a tower overlooking a beautiful garden where Hippolyta’s sister, Emelye, frequently visits. The Knight juxtaposes two enclosed spaces—the hortus conclusus, and the tower:

The grete tour, that was so thikke and strong,
Which of the castel was the chief dongeoun
(Ther as the knyghtes weren in prisoun
Of which I tolde yow and tellen shal),
Was evene joynant to the gardyn wal
Ther as this Emelye hadde hir pleyynge.

(A 1056-1061)
The garden and the prison share a partition, so Chaucer seems to juxtapose the confines of real physical imprisonment with the emotional snares of love. While this compressed space makes sense in terms of the romance genre, Chaucer is focused on the voyeuristic aspects. Palamon and Arcite pass their days watching Emelye, not entirely unlike watching a television program or a
staged production. For Duke Theseus, watching is a form of useful distraction from non-sanctioned activities.

On the morning that Palamon spots Emelye, he receives leave from the guards to pace the upper reaches of his prison, and the Knight describes the view in grand terms:

Bright was the sonne and cleer that morwenynge,
And Palamoun, this woful prisoner,
As was his wonne, by the leve of his gayler,
Was risen and romed in a chamber an heigh,
In which he al the noble cite seigh…. (A 1063-1066)

Palamon can see the entire city, and conversely, he is upon a large enclosed stage himself. Rather than consigning them to a dungeon, Duke Theseus ensures that all of Athens can see Palamon and Arcite’s tower. Thus, Theseus establishes an interchangeable spectator-performer relationship between the occupants inside the tower and those outside. The knights are spectators to the performing city below, while the reverse is also true.

The Knight is a savvy manipulator of romance genre conventions, compressing time and space to dramatic effect. He conveniently orders the ‘stage’ so that Palamon and Arcite are in direct view of Emelye. Thus, he instills his own need to control the spectacle at hand (the tale itself) into Theseus, who unwittingly sets in motion the principle action. The romance genre lends itself well to the Knight’s manipulations, and even invites visualizing of the space. Just as the two knights can observe Emelye, so too can the audience frame the spectators and their object in a single scene. In an episode from a manuscript of Boccaccio’s *la Teseida*, Palamon and Arcite can be seen in their tower, spying on Emelye from above, and yet contained within a single frame. Axton argues that Chaucer is interested in three essential elements of drama and
theatricality, specifically, “the importance of specialised place, of specialised verbal performance, and of spectacle….Implied in all three is the notion of audience or spectators” (87). While the knights’ argument is presumably concealed within the tower, venue and spectacle become the tale’s central themes.

But these venues for control start breaking down very early on in both Shakespeare’s and Chaucer’s works. In Shakespeare’s play, the lovers flee to the forest, with Lysander and Hermia planning on elopement, Demetrius in pursuit of them, and Helena chasing Demetrius. The Athenian youths’ actions have effectively crossed the boundaries of Theseus’ control, and the forest provides an enclosed space for the fairies to observe the humans. Juxtaposing the state of midsummer madness with a kind of Hortus conclusus, Oberon and Puck dispense the magical pansy juice on their human targets and Titania, but the order gets bungled. Lysander falls for Helena, so the fairies later adjust the potion for Demetrius. Chaos ensues with an entertaining shake-up of couples. Puck characterizes the confusion as spectacle to Oberon:

Captain of our fairy band,

Helena is here at hand,

And the youth, mistook by me,

Pleading for a lover’s fee.

Shall we their fond pageant see?

Lord, what fools these mortals be!

(III.ii.110-115)

Rather unlike his restrictive devotee Duke Theseus, Oberon lets the action play out, though without letting it go too far. His response to Puck is “Stand aside” (III.ii.116), insisting his lieutenant observe.
The fourth performative group of the play—the mechanicals—also figure significantly into the fairies’ schemes. While they too are technically under Duke Theseus’s jurisdiction, Bottom becomes the conduit between the fairy world and Athens. Puck transforms Bottom into an ass while the mechanicals are rehearsing in the forest, who flee at the sight of their changed friend: Quince shouts, “Thou art translated” (III.i.118-119). Quince’s malapropism signals a (temporary) venue change for Bottom. Coincidentally, Shakespeare, through his Chaucerian entertainers, in some respects ‘translates’ Chaucer to the stage, just as Bottom promises to translate his dream into a play. Shakespeare places Bottom at the locus of the artistic process, which falls outside the purview of Duke Theseus.

Though Oberon co-opts Theseus’s subjects for his own amusement, his chief focus is on Titania over possessing of the changeling child. While the circumstances surrounding this conflict are unclear, chaos for the mortals continues until it is resolved. When the jig is up, Oberon orders “May all to Athens back again repair, / And think no more of this night’s accidents / But as the fierce vexation of a dream” (IV.i.67-69). As Oberon relinquishes control of the lovers, Duke Theseus and his hunting train appear on the scene. He is effectively restored as the play’s de facto manager, but the forest’s effects on the lovers remain.

Chaucer’s Theseus is undermined and restored in a very similar manner. As in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Duke Theseus’s authority first buckles under the behavior of love-stricken youths. Arcite’s ransom is bought by Perotheus, a friend of the duke’s, which while technically sanctioned sets the stage for the poem’s later events. The freed knight bewails being removed as an audience member to Emelye in her garden:

Allas, that evere knew I Perotheus!

…
Oonly the sighte whome that I serve,

Though that I nevere hir grace may deserve,

Wolde han suffised right ynough for me.

O deere cosyn Palamon,” quod he,

“Thyn is the victorie of this aventure.

Ful blissfully in prison maistow dure—

In prison? Certes nay, but in paradys!”

(A 1227, 1231-237)

Basically, Arcite argues that Palamon has better seats. Both are imprisoned spectators, and cannot rightly hope to achieve the love of Emelye. Arcite seems to accept this dynamic, declaring Palamon the victor “of this aventure” (A 1235), emphasizing his own banishment. Palamon cries the contrary, insisting that Arcite, being free, can actually pursue her.

Ultimately, the knights’ dispute is governed in terms of the theater-environment that Duke Theseus has established. Arcite privileges “sighte” and spectatorship. Though Palamon cries that he will never be able to participate in the show that is Emelye’s life, he earlier emphasizes the importance of seeing Emelye first, as if his prior awareness of her privileges him. A similar conflict often applies to modern day fan circles, where participants measure each others’ value based on either the time they’ve invested in or the love they feel for a shared person or object of affection. In any case, neither knight seems convinced that he will marry Emelye; rather, the dispute concerns who has the right to love her. Furthermore, neither man should hold the other at odds for loving the same woman in their position as spectators, but as spectators they have invested emotional capital into the imagined relationship. In modern terms, it is almost as if two fellows are arguing over who loves a particular celebrity more than the other: both are
without hope of ever establishing a relationship with their icon. Realistically, Palamon and Arcite have about has much chance of getting together with Emelye as an ordinary person does with Penelope Cruz or Betty White. However, Chaucer’s readership is aware of the genre at hand, and can predict the impending conflict between the kinsmen. Thus, Palamon and Arcite are not simply spectators—they are spectators being watched by yet another audience, one that Duke Theseus constructs and occupies in the same manner as he does in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Secure within his comparative reality (as Garber would have put it), the Knight carefully establishes the acceptable borders of the performances in his tale. These “performances” should encompass those actions expected of the characters, dominated by decorum, the expectations of the genre, and whatever the primary mover of the action in this tale—Duke Theseus—demands. Even though the Duke’s initial set begins to fail, it is at his own discretion that he releases Arcite. Theseus is not omniscient, and therefore cannot predict the knights’ eventual fight in the forest. For now, however, the Knight reigns in his characters and discusses each of their arcs in an orderly manner. Once he has finished describing the respective paths of Palamon (still in prison) and Arcite (in anguish), he prompts the audience to decide who has the worse plight between them: “Yow loveres axe I now this questioun: / Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamoun?” (A 1347-48). While his rhetorical intention may be to render the characters indistinguishable, the prompt still invites comparison. More significantly, the Knight constrains the boundaries through which his rhetorical question can be considered.

Despite the Knight’s invitation to juxtapose the two characters, he tells little of Palamon’s remaining time in incarceration, and instead focuses on Arcite’s misery in exile. While Palamon’s condition arguably remains in the status quo, Arcite’s removal as a spectator proves
unbearable. He disguises himself and enters into the court of Theseus. Arcite pontificates on his identity change:

   And yet dooth Juno me wel moore shame,
   For I dar noght biknowe myn owene name;
   But ther as I was wont to highte Arcite,
   How highte I Philostrate, noght worth a myte.

   (A 1555-58)

In other words, Arcite takes up acting. Unable to play his own role safely at the court, he dons one “noght worth a myte,” but at least he can see Emelye again, and is even a supporting cast member. Interestingly, Philostrate is the name of Duke Theseus’s master of revels in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. The significance of this connection, especially in regards to the spectacle that Arcite will help incite, is not likely lost on Shakespeare. Arcite privileges sight yet once more, this time framed in terms of battle-language:

   Love hath his firy dart so brennyngly
   Ystiked thurgh my trew, careful herte
   That shapen was my deeth erst than my sherte.
   Ye sleen me with youre eyen, Emelye!

   (A 1564-67)

Love and the pains of love are metaphorically oriented in terms of Emelye’s gaze. Her name even contains a syllable for “eye.” Despite her apparent power over Arcite, she is utterly objectified. For the male characters, Emelye is a thing to be seen and heard, but never really interacted with.
Just as Arcite’s role in the Knight’s production changes, so does Palamon’s. He manages to escape from prison, finds his way to a forest, and overhears Arcite’s tale. Palamon confronts Arcite, whom he calls a “false traytour” (A 1580), and the two agree to a duel. Arcite observes the chivalric code, and leaves to obtain Palamon some armor and proper weaponry. Considering that the audience is hearing a Knight’s tale, such observances initially make sense. However, Palamon is described as “wood, with face deed and pale” (A 1578)—he is out of his mind with anger. Why then delay the fight? Palamon swears:

And though that I no wepene have in this place,
But out of prison am astert by grace,
I drede noght that outher throw shalt dye,
Or thow ne shalt nat loven Emelye.
Chees which thou wolt, or thou shalt nat asterte! (A 1591-95)

As with the forest scenes in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the pun on “wood” and “wode” suggests madness as a condition of the environment. Arcite is similarly incensed, and draws his sword “fiers as a leon” (A 1598). Though the Knight describes both as furious, the duel is postponed until Palamon can receive proper battle array—a hypocrisy regardless, as no higher authority is present to sanction the match, and armor seems like a needless accoutrement when fighting to the death on supposedly equal terms. In donning gear, Palamon and Arcite implicitly anticipate (or at least plan for) an audience. Otherwise, this equipment seems like an unnecessary layer. Even within the unsanctioned environment of the forest, the Knight ensures that appropriate procedures are observed. Perhaps for the tale-teller, describing the details of these niceties implies that the governing rules of chivalric combat are self-maintaining to his audience. The Knight is unwilling to relinquish control over the pilgrims’ interpretation.
In a scene that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* suggestively echoes, Duke Theseus and his hunting train happen upon the angry knights before their fight resolves. In apparent wish-fulfillment for both Palamon and Arcite, Emelye is also present. This is the crowd both of them seemed to have anticipated. Theseus encounters the knights fighting “as it were bores two” (A 1699), conflating them with the initial object of his sport: he had been out boar hunting! The Duke is furious, and seems more worried about competition procedure (and spectacle) than bloodshed:

> Namoore, up peyne of lesynge of youre heed!
> By myghty Mars, he shal anon be deed
> That smyteth any strook that I may seen.
> But telleth me what myster men ye been,
> That been so hardy for to fighten here
> As it were in a lystes roially.

(A 1707-1713)

Duke Theseus will kill anyone who landed a stroke in the present conflict, and wonders why the knights are fighting so hard *as if* they were in “lystes roially”—a significant observation from the primary producer of theatrics and entertainments in this poem (A 1713). The implication of this *as if* statement is that the knights are fighting as if they had the Duke’s sanction, that they were part of the show. If modern law enforcement officials were also fight managers, they might exude a similar tone should they happen upon two professional boxers fighting in full regalia on the street.

With order seemingly restored, Palamon confesses the knights’ mutual love for Emelye, and exposes Arcite’s true identity, accepting whatever punishment Theseus intends to mete out.
Though the Duke determines that the two will be executed, the women of his train cry in protest:

“The queene anon, for verray wommanhede, / Gan for to wepe, and so dide Emelye, / And alle the ladyes in the compaignye” (A 1748-50). Theseus capitulates, and decides to hold a tournament—a festival spectacle—instead. The Duke is effectively swayed by the prospective crowd members. Curiously, Emelye’s weeping is mentioned secondary to Hippolyta’s. Logically, her woe as the wooed should be paramount. Thus, Emelye remains a reactionary spectator, interacting with the knights only in that they are part of the spectacle. Just as Palamon and Arcite utterly objectify Emelye, she does the same to them. The audience/spectator dynamic runs parallel.

Despite the relatively isolated nature of the dispute, which should logically conclude after a series of single-combat contests, Duke Theseus sets up the competition as a grand tournament, and the knights even bring in the god’s involvement—Palamon to Venus, and Arcite to Mars. The entire conflict has been blown entirely out of its original proportion, exacerbating the emphasis on spectacle, just as the knights were doing by donning their armor in a forest where no one was watching. Theseus, however, ensures that the proceedings will be conducted in the most lavish manner possible. The Knight carefully describes the venue:

I trowe men wolde deme it necligence
If I foryete to tellen the dispense
Of Theseus, that gooth so bisily
To maken up the lystes roially,
That swich a noble theatre as it was
I dar wel seyen in this world ther nas.
The circuit a myle was aboute,
Walled of stoon, and dyched al without.

Round was the shap, in manere of compass,

Ful of degrees, the heighte of sixty pas,

That whan a man was wet on o degree,

He letted nat his felawe for to see.

(A 1881-92)

Chaucer’s use of the word “theatre” here is significant. The concordance shows that the term “theatre” is only used three times throughout the entire Chaucer canon, two of which appear in *The Knight’s Tale*. Axton suggests that Chaucer may have conceptualized his theater based on the arena in Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, which mentions “500 rows of seats, raked so that no man impedes the view of the man behind him” (85), a depiction that clearly emphasizes line of sight and the direction of gazes. This use suggests that the following proceedings promise only surface substance; the bedecking of lists and decorating of the world’s finest venue suggests that this has all been conducted before and to a similar effect. Duke Theseus never allows, even from the beginning, Palamon and Arcite to resolve their disputes on their own terms, or outside of Athenian view. Again, he conflates surveillance with entertainment.

But Duke Theseus and Chaucer’s Knight do not draw on spectacle from a cultural vacuum. Fourteenth-century historical context better illuminates the relationship between chivalry and spectacle, and provides an additional backdrop from which Chaucer draws his notions of theatricality. John Ganim, in *Chaucerian Theatricality*, explains, “The court of Edward III represented a highly self-conscious attempt to appropriate knightly chivalry to royal protocol, in ways that were publicly accessible rather than hermetic” (7). He goes on to note that these public features of chivalry were often reflected in poetry of the time, and *The Canterbury
Tales is no exception. Therein, “the references to ceremonial theatricality are part of complex thematic statements about power and control, usually, but not always, political” (Ganim 8). As clerk of the king’s works, Chaucer was responsible for construction of the scaffolding for a tournament held by Richard II in 1390, so he would have been acutely familiar with contemporary tournament forms (Cowgill 671). Cowgill argues that Chaucer holds the joust in low regard in the Knight’s Tale (675). His conclusions are due in part to Chaucer’s depictions preliminary to the big fight, as the jousting seems subordinated to the melee, paired with more “effeminate” activities: “That al that Monday justen they and daunce, / And spenden it in Venus heigh servyse” (2486-87) vs. the “grete fight” that is to come (2489). According to Cowgill, the joust essentially represents a newfangled and glitzy component to chivalry directly connected to the Hundred Years’ War, with that particular mutually destructive conflict as the object of Chaucer’s ire. However, Chaucer was well connected with nobles heavily embroiled in the Hundred Years’ War, most notably John of Gaunt and the courts of Edward III and Richard II. While this may have given him greater perspective, Chaucer would have been forced to exercise extreme caution in writing anything remotely resembling criticism of his patrons. Thus, Chaucer’s subtle insistence that the Duke’s arena is really a theater invites his audience to wonder at the substance behind the colorful yet brutal proceedings.

For all involved, the competition between Palamon and Arcite over Emelye is subordinated and wrapped into their martial prowess. In this respect, the two are interchangeable, and far more grim than Shakespeare’s lovers. R.H. Nicholson points out that even the romance in the Knight’s Tale is dominated by Theseus, who really should not be the tale’s central character (193). As Theseus “unwittingly” brings together the “cast” (Nicholson 19), he has the final say in who marries whom. Though the results of the tournament will decide Emelye’s spouse (after
Arcite is killed, in full public view, by the Furies no less), Theseus has sanctioned the venue. The marriage can only take place through his ordinance. Therefore, it is easy to wonder whether Theseus was swayed by his wife’s tears, or convinced that such emotive conviction could be exploited as a part of chivalric spectacle’s self-edifying and self-justifying morality. Even the tournament circle itself may also be a metaphorical representation of medieval theater in the round, though a mode that Chaucer likely never considered working in (Axton 85). Medieval theater in general was liturgical with an inherent moral. In sanctioning and constraining the venue, Duke Theseus doesn’t simply exert his imbued social control, but broadens his domain to non-secular morality. “Love” is at stake, but the agency of the lovers is never taken under consideration, and Theseus has no wisdom to impart other than determining a proper arena so that the men in question can very officiously bash each other’s brains out. “Love” becomes another territory that Duke Theseus sets out to conquer.

Since his reputation is at stake, and ultimately his power, Theseus fusses over his theater’s details:

Was noon in erthe, as in so litel space;
    That geometrie or ars-metrike kan,
    Ne portreyour, ne kervere of ymages,
    That Theseus ne yaf him mete and wages
    That theatre for to maken and devyse.

(A 1896-1901)

Everyone who is skilled in theater craftsmanship is involved on this project, and Theseus seems to micro-manage. This attention to detail makes sense when considered in the context of Theseus as host, but is framed better when his reputation relies on how well he can put on a show. All of
Athens is roused for the spectacle, and the Duke hosts a myriad of noble personages. These notables aren’t just spectators, but participants themselves:

> An hundred lords hadde he with hym there,
> Al armed, save hir heedes, in al hir gere,
> Ful richely in alle maner thynges.
> For trusteth wel that dukes, erles, kynges
> Were gadered in this noble compaignye,
> For love and for encrees of chivalrye.

(A 2179-2185)

The chivalry-loving lords are themselves a part of the show, and curiously subordinated to the drama of the main event that centers on Palamon and Arcite. Even set in Athens, imagined in the Middle Ages, *The Knight’s Tale* is adorned with considerable glitz. The spectacle ultimately serves as the tale’s primary framing mechanism. Theseus provides numerous courtly entertainments: minstrels, gifts, singers, dancers, hawks and hounds along with jousting and other events that precede the main show in this multi-day festival (A 2199-2208).

But just as order breaks down in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at the hands of higher powers, the gods intervene in *The Knight’s Tale*. Palamon prays to Venus for deliverance, while Arcite appeals to Mars. The two gods are at an impasse, but the dispute is ultimately resolved by Saturn, who will send a Fury to help dispatch Arcite. When the momentous battle finally concludes in Arcite’s favor, Theseus issues him his reward—Emelye—and the crowd goes wild: “Anon ther is a noyse of peple bigonne / For joye of this, so loude and heighe withalle / It semed that the lystes sholde falle” (A 2660-62). There is no pretense that the event was anything other than a spectacle. Since Arcite and Palamon are relatively indistinguishable, the ultimate outcome
of the fight is unimportant. This is especially true for Emelye. Though she prays to Diana, asking to marry the knight who loves her best, Emelye remains a trophy and audience member who has no actual input in the proceedings. Meanwhile, the Duke strains to retain control over even the audience’s reaction, just as he does with Hippolyta and Emelye in the forest.

As Theseus calls an end to the event, he reasserts his own dominion over the proceedings: “I wol be trewe juge, and no partie” (A 2657). However, he again loses control when the gods become involved. Duke Theseus is rendered powerless to the will of the gods much as his counterpart is in A Midsummer Night’s Dream when Oberon decides to involve himself in the mortals’ love plights. All of the gods fulfill their servants’ respective requests. Mars grants Arcite victory in battle, but Venus grants Palamon victory in love. Further, Arcite is wounded in full public view, and Duke Theseus is rendered powerless to the will of the gods. Venus asserts her authority on love over the secular authority. The duke resists at first. Even in the face of Arcite’s brutal wounds, Theseus declares, “that Arcite shal nat dye; / He shal been heeled of his maladye” (A 2705-06). But this platitude seems more like a publicity stunt to preserve the notion that nobody was harmed in the production of the show, as Arcite is clearly egregiously wounded:

His brest tobrosten with his sadel-bowe.

As blak he lay as any cole or crowe,

So was the blood yronnen in his face.

Anon he was yborn out of the place,

With herte soor, to Theseus paleys.

(A 2691-95)

Though Theseus may be in denial, the swift sweeping off of Arcite’s barely living body suggests that the brutality is adversely affecting the crowd. Despite the Duke’s reassurances, the knight
dies, leaving Emelye the trophy in a vacuum. On his deathbed, Arcite bequeaths his prize to Palamon. Duke Theseus, ever the showman, adroitly seizes the opportunity to produce a new theater for Arcite’s funeral:

And at the laste he took conclusioun
That ther at first Arcite and Palamoun
Hadden for love the bataille hem bitwene,
That in that selve grove, swoote and grene,
...
He wolde make a fyr in which the office
Funeral he myghte al accomplice.

(A 2857-60; 28863-64)

Rather than let the forest grove act as a kind of cover for the dead knight, Theseus has it cut down—“to hakke and hewe / The okes olde, and leye hem on a rewe / In colpons wel arrayed for to brenne” (A 2865-67)—providing Theseus with both a pyre and a clear space from which Arcite’s funeral can be watched. The dead knight’s train passes through Athens, richly adorned, to the report of “sorweful cheere” (A 2897). It is odd that Theseus is so honoring a former adversary, and not an entirely famous one at that. The Duke isn’t so much paying homage to Arcite as he is perpetuating the spectacle. Even in death, Arcite is a player in Theseus’s production, and is exploited to get a reaction out of the crowd. Theseus makes an appeal to fame, concluding:

And gladder oghte his freend been of his deeth,
Whan with honour up yolden is his breeth,
Than whan his name appalled is for age,
For al forgeten is his vassellage.

Thanne it is best, as for a worthy fame,

To dyen whan that he is best of name.

(A 3050-56)

Ultimately, Duke Theseus accepts the *deus ex machina* solution, declaring, “I rede that we make of sorwes two / O parfit joye, lastynge evermo” (A 3071-72). However, this “lasting joy” seems both desolate and randomly appropriated. There is no significant difference between Palamon and Arcite to warrant any real worry over who gets the girl; their prospective relationships with Emelye are equally meaningless. However, Duke Theseus takes advantage of the potential for spectacle, and relocates the drama to a public forum. He showcases a large number of combatants and associated side attractions, a far cry from the knights’ duel in the forest. Like any good sporting event, the stakes include a prize: Emelye. The Duke’s reputation would no doubt benefit from an occasion to display his wealth and power on such a grand scale. There isn’t any more at stake here, in terms of depth, than there is with a contemporary professional wrestling grudge match. Duke Theseus is the catalyst that sets the theatrical boundaries for the action in question, and serves more as a master of revelries than as a ruler. With the possible exception of his handling of Creon, Theseus only arbitrates conflicts or makes decisions based on the entertainments in question. Despite the impending death of Arcite, the Knight describes the festival with the language of intoxicating summer revelry:

Greet was the feeste in Athens that day,

And eek the lusty seson of that May

Made every wight to been in swich pleasaunce

That al that Monday justen they and daunce,
And spenden it in Venus heigh servyse.

(A 2483-87)

Essentially, Chaucer’s Knight has his audience listening to a tale about watching people, a significant dynamic that Shakespeare picks up on and employs in his play.

Shakespeare’s response to Duke Theseus suggests a sophisticated understanding of Chaucer’s methods, especially regarding his notions of theatricality. James Andreas points out that Shakespeare was influenced by Chaucer’s setting in terms of “the Matter of Thebes” (49). He explains that Thebes thematically is the seat of classical comedy and tragedy—Antigone, Oedipus, and Theseus himself—instilling Shakespeare’s drama with thematic complexity. So, the common artistic thread here is theatricality. Shakespeare is not as much responding to “the Matter of Thebes” as he is examining Chaucer’s own take on it. And while almost every event in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is light and comic compared with *The Knight’s Tale*, a darker subtext persists throughout. For example, Duke Theseus refers to his conquest of the Amazons only days prior to their marriage: “I woo’d thee with my sword / And won thy love doing thee injuries” (I.i.16-17).

Developmentally speaking, Shakespeare’s Duke Theseus eventually loosens his grip on authority while Chaucer’s seems more opportunistic. Nevertheless, the characters are somewhat interchangeable, and Shakespeare’s might function comfortably in *The Knight’s Tale* for the most part. However, Donaldson surmises, “[Shakespeare’s] Theseus seems to me somewhat less mature, less philosophical, and a good deal more skeptical than the first” (*The Swan at the Well* 32). Since Shakespeare’s Theseus doubts the tale of the lovers, he refuses to acknowledge the influence of supernatural forces, according to Donaldson. This seeming difference in attitude serves as an excellent example that illustrates Shakespeare’s position as a responder to Chaucer.
Though Chaucer’s Theseus does recognize higher powers, he does so with the benefit of direct observation. The furies burst forth and kill Arcite on the field. Even Donaldson points out that Theseus is then reticent to comment on where Arcite’s spirit has gone, remarking that at least he is in a better place and he died famous. Such sentiments are purely crowd-pleasers. Shakespeare’s Theseus could be imagined deriving the same conclusions were he forced to comment on such a grave situation. The closest he ever comes to leveling such a decree is when he pontificates on Hermia’s options: death or marriage to Demetrius. Regardless, Donaldson notes that both Theseus characters are the “most fully responsible” (The Swan at the Well 32) in both narratives. Shakespeare comments on what Theseus is “fully responsible” for.

As is true with his counterpart in The Knight’s Tale, Shakespeare’s Theseus is linked to the administration and organization of revelry with its associated responsibilities of managing the reactions of his subjects. Though both Theseus characters admonish the “lunacy of lovers” as Donaldson puts it (The Swan at the Well 32-33), they ultimately attempt to frame this lunacy in the form of entertainment. Whereas Chaucer’s Theseus organizes Palamon and Arcite’s quarrel into a theatrical sporting event, Shakespeare’s Duke seems to regard the lovers’ misadventures in terms of merriment. At the outset of the play, Theseus calls for Philostrate (the pseudonym adopted by Arcite in The Knight’s Tale) to “Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments” (I.i.13). Though he is distracted by administrative miscellanea involving the quarrel of Egeus and Demetrius against Lysander, Oberon and Puck effectively stage the entertainments, both for Theseus and Shakespeare’s audience. As in The Knight’s Tale, supernatural forces compel action outside of Theseus’s control, who then can respond only by incorporating it into further crowd-pleasing revelry. Since the lovers’ antics are not as grave as Palamon and Arcite’s, Shakespeare’s Theseus instead invites them to join in on his wedding ceremonies. The love matters between
Lysander, Demetrius, Helena and Hermia settle without the duke’s intervention, and no divine imperative is obvious to Theseus. Instead of focusing on trials by combat—an option probably open to the duke at the outset of Lysander’s and Demetrius’s quarrel—the magical events in the forest actually serve to better sort the situation than secular authority. We end up with a comedy rather than a sententious bloodbath.

The rites of summer and re-greening are at stake in both works, and Shakespeare’s play seems to insist that his audience not take these matters as seriously as Chaucer’s Knight does. Both authors’ spectacles start in May, and Chaucer’s Knight is very specific about the date of Palamon’s escape: “It fel that in the seventhe yer, of May / The thirde nyght” (A 1462-63). Upon discovering the lovers whilst hunting, Shakespeare’s Theseus surmises, “No doubt they rose up early to observe / The rite of May” (IV.i.132-33). The folly of lovers, in both cases, can be attributed to midsummer madness. “Midsummer Night” normally occurs in late June, and its festival atmosphere permeated with superstition cultivates a sense of otherworldliness and enchantment, and when paired with the heat results in a state of altered consciousness “when people are most apt to imagine fantastic experiences” (Asimov 17; cf. Garber 218). For Chaucer, Palamon’s escape is the final catalyst for the ensuing lunacy and its accompanying festivities. Shakespeare responds to this point, and goes so far as to frame Chaucer’s theater-like spectacle in terms of actual theatricality. Just as Chaucer’s Theseus co-opts Palamon and Arcite for a tournament, Shakespeare’s Duke schedules a triple-wedding. For Chaucer’s work, the effect is a disturbing blur between a jubilee and a violent spectacle that unintentionally leads to Arcite’s death. For Shakespeare, the event really is a show: a wedding, replete with Bottom’s performance of Pyramus and Thisbe, which while concluding (and playing out) tragically,
nevertheless amounts to an unqualified good time. Shakespeare indicates that while theatricality can have consequences outside of the director’s intentions, the results need not be so glum.

Shakespeare invites juxtaposition with his spectacle in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Knight’s Tale*, echoing the poet as Theseus commands, “Away with us to Athens. Three and three, / We'll hold a feast in great solemnity” (IV.i.184-185), a near-match for Chaucer’s “With muchel glorie and gret solemniteit” (A 870). Both statements occur in conjunction with Theseus and Hippolyta’s wedding ceremonies, furthering the blur between Chaucer’s and Shakespeare’s respective spectacles. Prior to Bottom’s show, Theseus and Hippolyta converse about poetry. In the following speech, Theseus privileges the imagery brought forth by poets:

> The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
> Are of imagination all compact.
> . . .
> And as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing
> A local habitation and a name.
> (V.i.7-8, 14-17).

The Duke’s association of poets and lovers with madmen is interesting in the context of Shakespeare’s reading of Chaucer, exacerbated by the theater setting. Theseus himself is derived from one such “local habitation”—*The Knight’s Tale*. Chaucer’s imagination of Theseus is not an “aery nothing” to begin with, considering the character was derived from Greek sources.
Hippolyta replies, placing the imaginative responsibility on the audience, or collective understanding. Poetry and drama are therefore edified through audience reactions and interaction:

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigur'd so together,
More witnesseth than fancy's images,
And grows to something of great constancy;
But howsoever, strange and admirable.

(V.i.23-27)

Stanley Wells points out that “Theseus allows himself to be governed by reason, whereas Hippolyta knows that illusion and the imagination have an even more important part to play in human affairs” (68). Thus, spectacle is sustained through audience understanding. Shakespeare is an audience member to Chaucer, and Hippolyta’s argument is realized through Shakespeare’s treatment of the poet and his Theseus in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. However, Hippolyta’s supposition has a darker side that Shakespeare recognizes through his adoption of Chaucer’s Theseus. When the minds of audience members are “transfigur’d” together, a collective interpretation trumps perhaps an individual and correct one.

Despite its grisly ending, Chaucer’s Knight’s tale is at least on the surface edifying, but has darker implications when examined more closely. Chaucer’s Miller helps to illustrate these, as he serves as the only real textual respondent to the Knight, mocking genre and form his social superior presents. The Miller demands that he be allowed to “quite” (A 3127) the Knight in place of the Monk, telling a fabliau that deliberately mocks romance conventions (Benson 8). Axton points out that the tale’s principal characters “construct a special set for the climactic action.”
(94). He goes on to explain, “In all but one of the extant contemporary plays of Noah’s flood the audience witnesses the building and provisioning of the ark by Noah and his family” (Axton 94). The Miller catches on to the Duke’s stage construction, and responds in kind with a socially lower form relative to the Chivalric procession. In essence, both productions privilege spectacle and audience at the end, though at the conclusion of The Miller’s Tale, the set breaks as John the Carpenter cuts the cords supporting his tub in the rafters: “And doun gooth al” (A 3821). The Carpenter suffers a nasty and unfunny injury: “For with the fal he brosten hadde his arm” (A 3827). Finally, the Carpenter is laughed at by his neighbors, whose enjoyment comes at John’s expense. Even though he survives, the Carpenter nevertheless seems to suffer unnecessarily within the framework of a spectacle, as Arcite does. Theseus, however, retains the pretensions of his mode (just as the Knight does), despite the gods’ involvement and the challenges made to his authority. When stripped down to their component parts, both tales share the same sort of ending, except that Chaucer’s Miller has no authority to reassert: the pilgrims laugh (save, of course, for the Reeve), and the story-telling competition resumes naturally without artificial attention to social order. And Chaucer is careful to cover himself. He insists that since the Miller is such a “cherl” (A 3182), his tale can be dismissed. However, Chaucer also pontificates, “Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys” (A 3181), indicating that those offended should take responsibility and avoid the tale. The subtext admonishes those who stand to be offended the most, possibly in this case any “gentils” who happen upon his writing.

In both works, stagecraft fails as a mechanism of control, but the controllers retain some semblance of authority. Theseus, though undermined by the gods, uses Arcite’s funeral as yet another excuse for a spectacle, whereby he maintains the attention of his subjects. Nicholas, though with burned buttocks due to outside intervention, manages to paint the Carpenter as mad.
Chaucer then, in the end, seems to be subtly critiquing the process-bound, spectacle-driven ceremonies practiced by the gentry. Further, he relies on his audience to detect the subtlety, especially since the Canterbury pilgrims—save for the cartoonish Miller—must play along like good sports as a result of medieval social hierarchy. Even still, much cheering of common folk features in The Knight’s Tale, and it would be otherwise easy to overlook the poem’s more disturbing elements (as it would be to overlook the Miller’s bouts of insight).

As usual, Shakespeare is not as much concerned with mimicry or mockery of Chaucer as he is using a Chaucerian character to help illustrate or work through an intellectual conundrum. Duke Theseus must establish his place amongst the other voices and perspectives in the play. Even from the play’s outset from a performance art standpoint, these voices are at odds, and confusion reigns. But the play does not end on primacy. No one of the four major voices—authority, love, supernatural, or common—wins over the others. Rather, starting in Act IV, they harmonize. Goddard points us to Theseus and Hippolyta’s conversation just prior to discovering the sleeping lovers, which he mentions is sometimes characterized as a digression:

*Theseus:* …My love shall hear the music of my hounds.
Uncouple in the western valley, let them go.
Dispatch, I say, and find the forester.
We will, fair queen, up to the mountain’s top,
And mark the musical confusion
Of hounds and echo in conjunction.
*Hippolyta:* I was with Hercules and Cadmus once,
When in a wood of Crete they bay’d the bear
With hounds of Sparta. Never did I hear
Such gallant chiding; for besides the groves,
The skies, the fountains, every region near
Seem all one mutual cry. I never heard
So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.

*Theseus*: My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind;
So flew’d, so sanded; and their heads are hung
With ears that sweep away the morning dew;
Crook-knee’d, and dewlapp’d like Thessalian bulls;
Slow in pursuit; but match’d in mouth like bells,
Each under each. A cry more tuneable
Was never hollow’d to, nor cheer’d with horn,
In Crete, in Sparta, nor in Thessaly.
Judge when you hear.

(IV.i.106-127)

Goddard expounds:

This a digression! On the contrary, it is as nearly perfect a metaphor as could be conceived for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* itself and for the incomparable counterpoint with which its own confusions and discords are melted into the “sweet thunder” of a single musical effect. How can British fairies and Athenian nobility be mingled with decency in the same play? As easily as the “confusion” of hounds and echoes can make “conjunction.” How can the crossings and bewilderments of the four lovers lead to their happy reunion at the end? As easily as discord can contribute to harmony in music. How can the foolish and awkward
pranks of rustics adorn the wedding celebration of a great duke? As easily, to turn
things the other way around, as a fairy dream can enter the head of an ass or as
animals who are like bulls can emit sounds that are like bells—as easily as
thunder can be sweet. (I 75-76)
The play’s four perspectives harmonize: an essential happening for a successful show at any rate.

Shakespeare’s Duke Theseus seems far less sinister in hindsight than Chaucer’s, and he manages to combine the best of both worlds in terms of entertainment: he maintains his authoritative position and uses it to praise the mechanicals’ performance, which is clearly a good time if not good theater. His call halting the epilogue is commendable, ensuring the play not overstay its welcome but also insisting that it needs no excuse. As with Shakespeare’s Theseus from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Chaucer’s Knight eventually loosens his own tight grip on the tales’ proceedings. His subsequent interferences are generally good-natured: The Knight interrupts the dreadful Monk’s tale and helps reconcile the Host and the Pardoner. Though he at first seems to flail with his authority, telling a very long tale that details his own Theseus’s struggles with authority and spectacle, his later actions lack the ham-handedness of the duke. Even if they do not harmonize as such, the Knight manages to fit in with the rest of the pilgrims. He helps foster the proceedings rather than stifle them. Authority, then, reasonably harmonizes with the pilgrimage’s other voices. As with both Shakespeare’s play and Chaucer’s poetry, the harmonies are hardly idealized, but they overcome their apparent mutual-exclusion. Especially, of course, if our imaginations amend them.
CHAPTER FIVE

AUTHORIAL MASKS AND GENRE AMBIGUITY IN TWELFTH NIGHT

AND CHAUCER’S SURPRISE GROUP (AND ELSEWHERE)

The very first lines of Twelfth Night form a vomit metaphor. Count Orsino insists,

If music be the food of love, play on,
Give me excess of it; that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.

(I.i.1-3)

Further on in Act I, the surfeiting metaphor persists, and while less concerned with vomit, nevertheless significantly addresses the theme of excess as it pertains to the whole play. Olivia asks Feste, the jester, “What’s a drunken man like, fool?” (I.v.130). The clown replies,

Like a drown’d man, a fool, and a madman. One draught above heat makes him a fool, the second mads him, and a third drowns him. (I.v.131-133)

Feste links the ideas of identity and excess in complex ways that persist throughout the whole of Twelfth Night and seem to form its central theme. Stanley Wells points out “the title of Shakespeare’s last romantic comedy probably alludes to the topsy-turvydom traditionally associated with the last day of the Christmas revels” (177). Despite the cross-dressing implications of the holiday that apply to Viola and Feste’s disguise as Sir Topas, the idea that by January 6th everyone is exhausted from partying seems more prevalent. Though the mood throughout most of the play tends to prize reveling, the consequences of that behavior never end well here. Instead, the revelers—along with the Puritanical party pooper Malvolio—all either end up with gruesome head wounds, broken friendships, or humiliation. The only character who
seems above these consequences is Feste, the professional entertainer attached to Olivia’s household. Though he never serves as the action’s chief architect, he uses his skills as a jester to make insights into other characters’ behavior and, additionally, enact revenge on his chief enemy for a slight to his professionalism.

Other than a reference to Sir Thopas and an allusion to Troilus and Criseyde, there is nothing Shakespeare obviously owes to Chaucer in this play. Beneath its crust, however, the Chaucerian ore runs deeply. Blossoming out from his telltale Thopas reference, Shakespeare processes a whole series of related Chaucer-influenced ideas through his own mouthpiece for the play, Feste. While the clown serves as one of Shakespeare’s most illuminating Chaucerian entertainers, the key themes Shakespeare explores are by no means limited to the jester’s activities. Rather, the various disguises and roles—or masks—characters adopt and the impacts of their behavioral excesses resonate more broadly with The Canterbury Tales as a whole.

Foremost, Shakespeare seems interested in how Chaucer embeds caricatures of himself, often self-parodies, throughout the tales. Feste also has a penchant for adopting others’ personae for comedic and didactic effect. While Shakespeare does not owe this method solely to Chaucer, the references to Sir Thopas help establish a convincing provenience. And Shakespeare hardly ever seems to make “throw away” allusions to Chaucer, but instead uses his understanding of that poet’s texts to help him process some other complex series of ideas in his own works, most often regarding theatricality. The connections between Chaucer and Twelfth Night are no exception to this pattern: performance is at the core of the identity related issues in both works, but Shakespeare and Chaucer also explore performance as a theatrical construct, some aspects of which are treated ambiguously (though similarly) by both authors.
The inroad to Shakespeare’s Chaucerian ideas in *Twelfth Night* is not precisely located on *Sir Thopas*. Rather, the tales prior to and surrounding *Sir Thopas* that comprise Fragment VII—which are sometimes referred to as a “literary group” based on the wide representation of genres and the fact that Chaucer parodies a few of them in both *Sir Thopas* and *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (Benson 15)—strongly inform Shakespeare’s play. Given their pattern of reactions and frequent interruptions throughout the prologues and tales themselves, it is unlikely that Shakespeare would think of these pieces as completely distinct. Chaucer showcases his pilgrims as performers, and uses them to dissect various genres and performance styles.

Chaucer shows his penchant for dramatic convention in Fragment VII. With his botched *Sir Thopas* and prose *Tale of Melibee*, Chaucer sets in motion a pattern of interruptions and unanticipated responses on the part of his pilgrims. The shockingly violent conclusion of the Prioress’s tale leaves the pilgrims stunned: “Whan seyd was al this miracle, every man / As sobre was that wonder was to se” (B2 1880-81). This somber and ambiguous response spurs the Host to call on Chaucer the pilgrim, who he characterizes as a “popet” and “elvyssh” (B2 1891, 1893). Oddly, the Host adds, “For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce” (B2 1894), given what we hear about the Pilgrim’s chatty nature in the *General Prologue*. Larry Benson points out that the tales in Fragment VII could be called the “surprise group” because “so many of its tellers defy Harry Bailey’s (and the readers’) expectations” (16).

The pattern of Fragment VII culminates with *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, whose teller the audience knows almost nothing about. The Monk refuses to continue after the Knight interrupts his listing of tragedies, which the Host remarks are “nat worth a boterflye” (B2 3980). Harry Bailey then rudely turns his attention to the Nun’s Priest, demanding he tell “swich thing as may oure hertes glade” (B2 4001), but adding “Be blithe, though thou ryde upon a jade” (B2 4002).
Therefore, the only detail Chaucer furnishes about the Nun’s Priest is his poor horse (presumably supplied by the Prioreess), perhaps inviting a semi-autobiographical reading of Chauntecleer’s hen-peckedness (cf. Benson 18). Regardless, this non-portrait cannot invite scrutiny, unlike so many of the other pilgrims, including Chaucer himself. Donaldson explains,

Aware that in the personality of the satirist will always exist grounds for rebutting the satire, Chaucer carefully gives us nothing to work on in the character of the Nun’s Priest: there is no portrait of him in the General Prologue, and the introduction to his tale reveals only the most inoffensive of men. But in one important respect he is very like his creator: he can survey the world as if he were no part of it, as if he were situated comfortably on the moon looking at a human race whom he knew and loved wholeheartedly but whose ills he was immune from. This is the same godlike detachment that characterizes the incident in the telling of Sir Thopas….

(Chaucerian Poetry 1108)

Whereas Chaucer’s Sir Thopas is purposefully presented as bad-yet-enjoyable poetry, The Nun’s Priest’s Tale is both good poetry and enjoyable without abandoning the delightful mock-heroism of Thopas. Had Chaucer tallied the final results in the Host’s rather subjective literary competition that frames The Canterbury Tales, the Nun’s Priest might well have been the winner. His tale exhibits some of the best characteristics of both sentence and solas—instruction and entertainment. The tale opens with a grim scene of poverty:

A povre wydwe, somdeel stape in age,

Was whilom dwelling in a narwe cotage,

Biside a grove, stondynge in a dale.
This wydew, of which I telle yow my tale,

Syn thilke day that she was last a wyf,

In pacience ladde a ful simple lyf,

For litel was hir catel and hir rente.

(B2 4010-17)

The initial impression of the world are colorless: “No wyn ne drank she, neither wit ne reed; / Hir bord was served moost with whit and blak” (B2 4032-33). But these dour “whit and blak” scenes transform into a vivid and colorful beast fable upon the entrance of Chauntecleer:

His comb was redder than the fyn coral,
And batailled as it were a castel wal;
His byle was blak, and as the jeet is shoon;
Lyk asure were his legges and his toon;
His nayles whiter than the lyle flour,
And lyk the burned gold was his colour.

(B2 4049-54)

Donaldson writes, “Chauntecleer is made the best rooster that ever lived, so that his death amid the teeth of Dan Russel—if it had occurred—could have provided a tragic episode every bit as significant to mankind as the death of Hector” (Chaucerian Poetry 1106). Chauntecleer’s value seems performative, centered on his art: “In al the land, of crowyng nas his peer” (B2 4040).

Chauntecleer is an ideal courtly lover and learned reader, who exemplifies both traits through his dazzling argument on the significance of dreams. Part of this discussion’s effect is not only to highlight Chauntecleer’s value but the tellers’ as well. Chauntecleer is a creation of the Nun’s Priest, just as the Nun’s Priest is a creation of Chaucer. And the authors let their
creations do the talking for them. Whereas the Nun’s Priest has been entirely silent for the duration of *The Canterbury Tales* up until his own, he nevertheless enters the conversation through commentary on prior tales. Donaldson explains,

> The *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is full of what seem to be backward references to the preceding tales, so that it is sometimes taken as a parody-summary of all that has gone before. The reason for this is probably less that Chaucer had the other tales in mind as he wrote (indeed, he could have written the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* without having any thought of the others) than that in it he employs comically all the rhetorical devices that were a part of his own poetical inheritance.

(*Chaucerian Poetry* 1107)

The sum of Chaucer’s poetical inheritance, of course, does not fully account for the tale’s packaging and telling. The tale’s “cluster of morals,” as Benson puts it (18), are perspective-dependent, but seem related to “crowyng” in one form or another, often in its excesses. Even the Nun’s Priest, like all medieval authors, would have to be cautious about his own crowing. Ultimately, the heroic rhetoric is undermined by the characteristics of the morals.

Rhetorically and philosophically packed as it is, *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* remains accessible: a feat that none of the prior tale tellers in Fragment VII really achieve. *The Prioress’s Tale* is too brutal; *Sir Thopas* is a narrative and poetic mess (though intentional and hilarious); Melibee lacks “literary qualities…and any real imagination” (Donaldson 1101); *The Monk’s Tale* is boring. In his tale’s conclusion, the Nun’s Priest echoes a sentiment which will appear later in Chaucer’s own voice at the end of the Canterbury tales:

> Taketh the moralite, goode men,

> For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,
To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;

Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.

(B2 4631-34)

While instruction and entertainment is a pervasive theme throughout the tales, the Nun’s Priest offers a conclusion that might well serve as a veritable ‘slam dunk’ in the Host’s competition. So, Chaucer might be winking at his prior Thopas failure by giving us The Nun’s Priest’s Tale through a teller who also cannot outwardly “crow”; even the name “Chauntecleer” is a slightly enhanced version of the poet’s name. This forced anonymity both undermines and highlights the competitive premise of authorship that scaffolds The Canterbury Tales. There is, of course, more at stake than free dinner. Since all that is written is written to instruct Christian doctrine, the pilgrims all seek to convey universal relevance through their performances, even if many of them fail badly.

Though not all tales strictly match the teller, most of their prologues reveal the individual motivations and idiosyncrasies of their respective pilgrims. If, as John Ganim suggests, The Canterbury Tales is a kind of self-defining creation with its “air of performance” supplied by not only its principle author, but also the Host, then it follows that the pilgrims serve, at least to some degree, this theatrical framing mechanism for the larger work. Their individual performances resonate strongly throughout, and prove essential not only to their own tales, but to each others’. For example, the vile Pardoner insists that his tale will best be told at an alehouse, where he can “bothe drynke and eten of a cake” (VI 322), but this insistence spurs an immediate and negative reaction from his audience, the pilgrims: “Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye! / Telle us som moral thing, that we may leere / Som wit, and gladly heere” (324-26). The pilgrims respond to the Pardoner’s venue as much as his character. While he agrees to tell a moral tale, it is
undermined and contradicted by his introductory confession: the Pardoner famously sermonizes against greed while fully admitting his own obsession with money (among other sins). His exemplum ends abruptly and the tale segues with an uncomfortable epilogue. Bafflingly, the Pardoner attempts to sell his relics, targeting the Host first, who explodes with rage:

“Nay, nay!” quod he, “thanne have I Cristes curs!

Lat be,” quod he, “it shal nat be, so theeche!

Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech,

Though it were with thy fundament depeint!

But, by the croys which that Seint Eleyne fond,

I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond

In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.

Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;

They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!”

(947-955)

“This Pardoner answered nat a word” (966). While the exact reasons for this severe breakdown are ambiguous, the Host’s outburst silences the Pardoner, who seems caught off guard. No longer simply a judge or master of ceremonies in this moment, the Host must become a performer in his own right, to assert his opposition to the Pardoner as strenuously as possible. In regards to the Host’s sense of proportion, a former student of mine once said “methinks the Host doth protest too much.” That is, Harry Bailey’s response is not as much reactionary as it is a constructed presentation. Regardless, the question is of degree rather than kind: the Host’s histrionics cause the Knight to step in and repair the social damage, inciting the Pardoner and Harry Bailey to kiss and make up. This moment amounts to another social performance, which
based on the structure of *The Canterbury Tales* is indivisible from the Pardoner’s tale that preceded it. Not unlike the metadramatic aspects of medieval drama, the pilgrims’ performances are both context dependent and venue-attentive, relying on interplay between the environment and the people within it. Ganim points out that there are numerous “levels of fiction above and beyond our reading of them” to *The Canterbury Tales*, namely the tales themselves and their framing mechanism (37). The literary competition at times dominates (or even consumes) certain tales, while at others—especially in the case of *The Parson’s Tale* and Chaucer’s retraction—it falls away. Ganim continues,

> At times, we are even made aware of the gap between the role the pilgrims assume on the pilgrimage and their behavior in “real life.” At other times, we are aware of a marked contradiction in their ability or suitability to a particular tale or discourse. This sophisticated metanarrative awareness, which seems so redolent of modernist literature, again has an analogue in the popular theater, in which characters call into question other actors’ suitability for their roles and mediate between the everyday experience of the audience and their consciousness of watching a play, often doing so by literally joining the audience, leaving the play area, or questioning the fiction of the performance….

(37-38)

So Chaucer’s rhetorical maneuvering in the “surprise group” amounts to much more than a winking acknowledgment that he is, in fact, the author of *The Canterbury Tales*. At the very least, Chaucer’s self-awareness shows us his culpability in not just the frame, but the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. And this implication prefigures the outlook behind the retraction regarding instruction and entertainment: “For oure book seith, ‘Al that is writen is writen for oure
doctrine,’ and that is myn entente” (1083). In this particular respect, the audience of readers—just like Chaucer’s pilgrims or even crowds gathered at a medieval play—become participant observers in the exchange of tales.

But even further still, Chaucer’s embedded self-awareness provides us with an invisible literary critic in its own right which allows the poet to comment on and play with convention. More particularly, it helps highlight the importance of theatrical artifice to *The Canterbury Tales* in general. The Host’s authority as artistic judge—even presiding over a competition as low stakes as getting free dinner—is highly questionable. As he frequently demonstrates (or fails to, as the case may be), Harry Bailey’s role as master of ceremonies often strains credulity. His explosion in the face of the Pardoner’s relatively innocuous if vile gesture is hardly the only blemish on his reputability. To be fair, *The Canterbury Tales* would hardly be as much fun without the Host in his self-appointed role. On the same token, Chaucer the Pilgrim serves a similar function as narrator. He too, according to Ganim, is a kind of master of ceremonies. More in particular, Ganim connects this role to popular medieval folk plays, “in which a character who is both participant and stage director clears a space for the production and comments on the action for the audience, as well as taking part in the action” (36). In this manner, Chaucer the Pilgrim adopts the poise of the medieval Fool. Ganim expounds,

> The Fool provides an unacknowledged source even for Chaucer’s narrator in the earlier poems. His desperate desire to please is one that has most persuasively been ascribed to Chaucer’s own experience as a commoner in the service of his noble betters. In a typically sophisticated way, Chaucer throws his own relative lack of sophistication in an ironic and slightly comic light. (36)
Ganim provides contemporary folk analogues to Chaucer’s own brand of Fool, citing the Waterstock play, whose fool insists “I’ll do my duty to please you all” (qtd. in Ganim 36), which Feste—the professional fool—echoes in the last line of *Twelfth Night*: “And we’ll strive to please you every day” (V.i.408). When his telling of *Sir Thopas* is interrupted, Chaucer the Pilgrim seems to be upset on these particular grounds. The Pilgrim complains,

“Why so?” quod I, “why wiltow lette me
Moore of my tale than another man,
Syn that is the beste rym I kan?”

(B2 2117-19)

Unlike the Monk, who at his own interruption grumbles “I have no lust to pleye” (B2 3996), the Pilgrim wants to continue, upset at not having fulfilled his performance.

Granted, *Sir Thopas* could have easily overstayed its welcome. *Sir Thopas* proves unbearable. Donaldson points out that Chaucer’s tale is “206 inexorable lines describing the non-adventures of an unusually uninteresting knight” (8), highlighting that the poem is widely understood as a “superlative parody.” Benson notes that the tale has no source—unsurprising, considering that it is interrupted—and yet “almost every line has its parallel in one or another of the popular minstrel romances, brief oral works that rely on audience reaction” (16-17). Though the form is old-fashioned in Chaucer’s time, Benson suggests that the poet is very familiar with the genre, and even “seems affectionate” towards it (17). The audience should be clued in during the tale’s prologue, as Chaucer’s character is apologetic after the Host commands him to tell a tale: “‘Hooste’, quod I, ‘ne beth nat yvele apayd, / For oother tale certes kan I noon, / But of a rym I lerned longe agoon’” (1897-99). The pilgrim does not wish for his host to be displeased, yet is enthusiastic about getting to tell a tale. Eventually, the Host stops the tale mid-sentence:
“Namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee,”
Quod oure Hooste, “for thou makest me
So wery of thy verry lewednesse
That, also wisly God my soule blesse,
Myne eres aken of thy drasty speche.
Now swich a rym the devel I biteche!
This may wel be rym doggerel,” quod he.
“Why so?” quod I, “why wiltow lette me
Moore of my tale than another man,
Syn that it is the beste rym I kan?
“By God,” quod he, “for pleynly, at a word,
Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!
Thou doost noght ells but despendest tyme.
Sire, at o word, thou shalt no lenger ryme.

(B2 2109-2122)

The Host unceremoniously decries the poem as not being worth a turd, and then bids Chaucer to tell something in prose, as his rhyming is unbearable. The Host performs comical damage control on its excess. So the invisible critic here, who is preparing for the culmination of the surprise group in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, glances at the comical excess of a particular literary form in the process. But at what point would the joke have faltered into actual excess rather than the performance of excess? For some, *Sir Thopas* might be too long already. Chaucer the Pilgrim, as The Fool, is mitigated by the self-appointed master of ceremonies: Harry Bailey
adopts a role similar to that of the modern “straight man” when he rudely, if mercifully, interrupts.

Significantly, Chaucer the poet writes Chaucer the pilgrim as genuine. The pilgrim performs *Sir Thopas* without a smirk, even if the poet is laughing. But as a mouthpiece on entertainment, performance, and literature, Chaucer the pilgrim lets the poet comment with effective subtlety. Critical readers at least on some level recognize Chaucer’s pilgrim as a literary construct rather than an autobiographical recreation, and it is ironic—though not just irony for its own sake—that Chaucer gives “himself” the worst poem. The badness of *Sir Thopas* helps signal or reinforce Chaucer the pilgrim’s performance as a Fool, which helps open any number of important interpretive doors for readers of *The Canterbury Tales*.

This veritable cocktail of Chaucerian literary special effects—the subtle masking adopted by an author/Fool, the exploration and excoriation of literary and performance genres, the effects of excess, and, regarding performance (or self-presentation) and authorial representation, identity—imbue and inform Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. While it would be incorrect to suggest that Shakespeare owes all of the above-mentioned literary devices to Chaucer alone, he nevertheless once more provides a facile Chaucerian reference which, when further examined, blossoms and reveals a much more complex interaction. The principle Chaucerian connection to this play, of course, is *Sir Thopas*, as Feste dons the likeness of “Master Topas” the curate, but the resonances run deeper. The roles and identities of the Fools in *Twelfth Night* and *The Canterbury Tales* are of chief concern to the idea of Chaucerian entertainers.

In *Twelfth Night*, Feste is described as a “corrupter of words” (III.i.36). An entertainer for Olivia’s father, he has just returned from an apparently long hiatus, possibly induced by creative burnout. Harold Bloom says, “He carries his exhaustion with verve and wit, and always with the
air of knowing all there is to know, not in a superior way but with a sweet melancholy” (244), a near-echo of Stanley Wells, who contends, “He is the artist at the heart of the play, the creator and entertainer who has constantly to strive to make contact with his audience, and who relies on his ability to do so for his very living” (184). Feste’s investment in his professional identity manifests itself most clearly in his initial interactions with Malvolio. As the clown is attempting to jostle Olivia out of her self-imposed misery and mourning for her dead brother, Malvolio snaps,

I marvel your ladyship takes delight in such a barren rascal. I saw him put down the other day with an ordinary fool that has no more brain than a stone. Look you now, he's out of his guard already. Unless you laugh and minister occasion to him, he is gagged.

(I.v.83-88)

Malvolio will pay dearly for this slight to Feste’s reputation and professional ethic. Malvolio insults both the jester’s intelligence and the professional company he keeps. These aspects of his affront are the most significant, as Feste’s intelligence and talent as a performer are apparently well understood, and the clown is understandably invested in his reputation.

Though both Feste and Chaucer’s pilgrim share an affinity for entertaining and pleasing their audiences—a trait they each share with their respective creators—they lack much else in common. Chaucer’s self-parody is a far cry from the clever Feste. At first glance, the clown’s Chaucerian influence might be overlooked altogether. Roger Warren and Stanley Wells note that the topaz gem was regarded as a cure for madness, and therefore the name “Topas” is less relevant as a literary allusion (192). But aside from the reference to Sir Thopas, the other overt Chaucerian signal we have to connect Feste with Chaucer’s work is the clown’s mention of
Robert Henryson’s *Testament of Cresseid*. In an exchange of banter with Viola, Feste offers “Cressida was a beggar” (III.i.55), a reference specific to Henryson’s sequel. While it is possible Shakespeare was aware of Henryson’s authorship, *Testament* was widely attributed to Chaucer throughout the 16th century. Alice Miskimin connects the misappropriation to William Thynne’s 1532 collected works of Chaucer, where the editor appended Henryson’s poem at the end without crediting its author (208). But, even the *Sir Thopas* connection is not entirely exclusive to Chaucer. John Lyly’s *Endymion* features “Sir Tophas,” a character who in the context of that play, according to David Bevington, is “a vehicle for a thoroughly English satire directed at social climbing, affected Petrarchan posing, infatuation with one’s beard and fashion of dress, sonneteering, affectations of learning, and other mannerisms of the courtly hanger-on” (14). Many of these characteristics certainly apply to Malvolio, so the reference even makes some sense in context. Regardless, Shakespeare’s familiarity with Chaucer is well-established, so even if aspects of Tophas from *Endymion* influence the portrayal of Malvolio or the dark room episode as a whole, these are not in mutual exclusion with *Sir Thopas*. Rather, Shakespeare seems interested in processing Chaucer’s Fool mask, and exploring the extremes of comedy in a variety of ways. Even if Feste and Chaucer’s pilgrim do not share much in common personally, they nevertheless figure into the broader themes associated with the role of fools, and Shakespeare extends this exploration to the boundaries of comedy, theatricality, and identity. This is not to say that Shakespeare’s references to Chaucer here are any more subconscious than they appear elsewhere. Rather, once again, Shakespeare uses Chaucer to help process a larger issue, so recognition and reader participation are essential. In other words, Shakespeare produces this effect intentionally, and provides his audience with subtle Chaucerian cues.
The initial Chaucerian clues in *Twelfth Night* come out in an exchange of wit between the clown and Viola. Mentioned earlier, Feste jokes about Viola suggesting that he save his money, or spend his coins all in one place: “I would play Lord Pandarus of Phrygia, sir, to bring a Cressida to this Troilus” (III.i.51-52). Feste has identified himself as an actor and as Cressida’s uncle, who served as a “go-between” for the lovers (Barton 458). The scene, in part, serves to highlight Viola’s role. Disguised as Cesario, she operates as a go-between for Orsino, upholding the courtly love tradition that Chaucer frequently establishes throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, yet with inverted gender roles (Box 47). Feste’s awareness of *Troilus and Cressida*, and therefore of Chaucer in general, is clear. The clown’s allusion might otherwise seem throw-away, but following their conversation, Viola comments on the role of fools:

> This fellow is wise enough to play the fool,
> And to do that well craves a kind of wit.
> He must observe their mood on whom he jests,
> The quality of persons, and the time;
> And like the haggard, check at every feather
> That comes before his eye. This is a practice
> As full of labor as a wise man's art;
> For folly that he wisely shows is fit,
> But wise men, folly-fall'n, quite taint their wit.

(III.i.60-68)

Essentially, Feste is clever at veiling the complete capacity of his wit. He has to be careful of the company he keeps and cautiously weigh his words’ impact. Moreover, these traits suggest that Feste knows more than he should. While in part, this can be explained by the clown’s penchant
for observance and sensitivity to the motivations of those around him, and yet his invocation of *Troilus and Criseyde* frames the scene between him and Viola. Moreover, Feste’s powers of observation and sensitivity are a part of his craft, which Viola describes in terms of labor and a “wise man’s art.”

Chaucer significantly employs similar methods. In developing the caricature of his narrator, Chaucer the pilgrim, Chaucer the poet may veil his underlying meanings and the full capacity of his wit, made accessible only to very close readers and maybe even only close acquaintances. This aesthetic coincides well with general medieval readership—according to Patristic Exegesis—in that for meaning to be worthwhile, it must be worked for. In addition to this matter, however, Chaucer had more pragmatic concerns. He was a famous, widely-read person in his time, and without a plausible explanation for some of his more controversial tales, the poet might well have found himself in bad sorts among his social betters. As Terry Jones points out in his partially speculative but compelling book *Who Murdered Chaucer?*, the poet had already survived numerous political upheavals in his lifetime prior to the regicide of Richard II, and the reign of Henry IV was hardly friendly to poets: “Everything had changed and—from the poet’s point of view—for the worst” (118). Viola recognizes the roles and implicit dangers of being a professional fool, and it is not unreasonable to assume Shakespeare recognized the dangers for playwrights and other artists in his own time. Months after its showing on the eve of the Essex Rebellion, Queen Elizabeth famously acknowledged that she recognized herself as the titular monarch from *Richard II* (Baker 845). The reticence of Chaucer’s pilgrim makes sense from this perspective and likely resonated with Shakespeare.

However, Chaucer’s masking tactics carry their own appeal, relevant to both Feste and Shakespeare. In Chaucer the pilgrim’s tale, *Sir Thopas*, the Host charges the narrator to liven up
the mood after the Prioress’s ghastly fare. Again, one might expect that the great poet would assign himself at least a passable tale for the Harry Bailey’s contest. So, the irony of this interrupted tale would not be lost on Chaucer’s readership, as he has already established a reputation as a poet, and the conclusion of The Nun’s Priest’s Tale in some regards serves as a punch-line to that joke. Further, in portraying himself as an inept poet, Chaucer softens the fact that the noble Thopas is a buffoon. He employs a similar method in the prologue to The Miller’s Tale, warning his audience that the Miller is a “cherl” (A 3182), that “He nolde his wordes for no man forbere” (A 3168), advising that anyone easily offended should “Turne over the leef and chese another tale” (A 3177). Thus, the poet exonerates himself from any offensive material that he presents as well as any nasty parallels the nobility could be offended by between The Knight’s Tale and the Miller’s “quite” (A 3135): “Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame; / And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game” (A 3185-86). Chaucer adroitly moves between his masks in an attempt at avoiding direct criticism for his tales that are potentially offensive to the right (or wrong) sort of observant reader. Miskimin asserts, “Chaucer's distinctive achievements as a poet are to be found in his discoveries of means of concealment of himself, of art that seems to be artless” (30).

Feste, like Chaucer, is a professional masker himself. Joseph Summers claims that in terms of the multiplicity of maskers in Twelfth Night, “Feste is the one professional among a crowd of amateurs; he does it for a living” (134). Feste’s persona serves to protect himself and his own identity while penetrating the masks of others around him. Summers indicates that the roles and their associated disguises donned by the other characters typically are ill-suited to them (133). For some, such as Viola, their eventual revelation is liberating. But for others—namely Malvolio—the effect can be devastating. The steward, who has insulted Feste egregiously on a
professional level, is pierced the most deeply by the fool’s wit: his mask is utterly crushed.

Malvolio is a pretender in the extreme, a household servant with no hope of ascending to a noble station, especially within the context of the strict Tudor-era hierarchy. Regardless, Malvolio sees himself as a part of “an aristocracy of taste and leisure…ruled by [his] mistaken notions of the proper role of an upper-class gentleman” (Summers 132). Malvolio’s aspirations ascend above his sense and understanding of his appropriate place in society (Garber 529). Thus, Maria easily hatches her plot to fool the steward, tricking him into believing that Lady Olivia has sent him amorous correspondence. Malvolio’s faults as a character are the same as his strengths: Goddard notes, “he is gravity—dignity, decency, decorum, servility and severity in the cause of ‘good order,’ carried to the third degree and beyond—and as such fair game for his tormentors” (298). In being so immovable, and so consistent, as set in his fantasies as he is in his severe sense of order, he is an easy target for Maria’s trick. More significantly, Feste pierces the steward’s masked persona more completely than any other character in the play, and adopts an overtly Chaucerian tactic to accomplish his ends. Feste cracks Malvolio’s mask by donning the likeness of “Sir Topas the curate” (IV.ii.2). In identifying himself as a modification of Chaucer’s “Thopas,” Feste (and Shakespeare) signals the trajectory of his satirical intentions. Thopas could be considered as a kind of pretender knight, foolishly and incompletely copying the chivalric modes of his exemplars. J.A. Burrow points out that aside from his name deriving from the Topaz gem—which could symbolically indicate effeminacy and/or androgyny, in any case being “a type of superlative excellence”—the prefix “sire” is consistently attached to the foolish knight, an affectation that Chaucer eschews in his other works when referring to knights: “Except in Thopas, Chaucer avoids prefixing sire to a knight’s name, thus following contemporary French practice, which confined the usage to wealthy bourgeois” (918). Malvolio
is much the same—perhaps best considered as a part of a wealthy bourgeois class due to his status as Lady Olivia’s Steward—and perhaps similarly severe and serious about his social position as a gentleman as Sir Thopas is. Benson notes that the “satire in Sir Thopas may be social as well as literary, since Thopas is something of a would-be gentleman, who works just a bit too hard at observing the proper forms of romance knighthood” (17). Feste’s adoption of this particular Chaucerian mask necessarily cues his relationship to Chaucer the pilgrim; as with the poet’s own mask, Feste adopts his persona to pierce pretentions and subtly satirize behind a carefully crafted guise. Sir Toby admits, “The knave counterfeits well; a good knave” (IV.ii.19), not just referring to Feste’s effective disguise—Maria even observes to him, “Thou mightst have done this without thy beard and gown, he sees thee not” (IV.iii.64-65). Maria might be implying that the “text” of the situation matters more than the visual aspects of the fool’s performance. Just as Chaucer the pilgrim subtly critiques his fellows on the basis of their own socially and philosophically contradictory behaviors, Feste performs the very same. Though Feste is a world-weary and shrewd performer while Chaucer the pilgrim is an amiable buffoon, both serve the same didactic purpose in the context of their respective works: to pierce social and artistic pretension.

The significance of Feste’s adoption of the Topas persona is manifold: not only is the fool playing a part for the sake of Malvolio, challenging the steward’s identity, but his mask is derived from Chaucer the pilgrim’s own tale. Thus, the Chaucerian mask begets the Shakespearean one, though with an additional layer of complication. Shakespeare’s audience would not necessarily recognize Sir Thopas as the tale told by Chaucer the pilgrim. Indeed, the pilgrim is never identified specifically as Chaucer in The Canterbury Tales. However, Shakespeare is reading the narrator as Chaucer, recognizing Chaucer’s masked authorial
presence: a supposedly foolish poet telling a tale about a foolish knight. Feste tells, or acts, his own version of *Sir Thopas*, not so much corrupted in content but altered for Malvolio’s sake. In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare employs Thopas as a kind of literary trope, used as Chaucer used him. For Malvolio, identity is as much at stake as it is for both Chaucer the pilgrim and Sir Thopas himself. The steward pretends nobility, calling Toby and Maria “idle shallow things” *(III.iv.123-24)*, and yet his supposedly improved element fails to garner him reprieve or any sort of consideration beyond what the pranksters provide. Feste mines the cracks in the steward’s presumed identity as Olivia’s betrothed. Malvolio makes frequent appeals to Olivia, crying, “Sir Topas, Sir Topas, good Sir Topas, go to my lady” *(IV.ii.23-24)*, to which Feste replies, “Talkest thou nothing but of ladies?” *(IV.ii.25-26)*. While on the surface Feste seems to be simply playing games with the steward, he actually serves to highlight Malvolio’s key character defect and mask. In the face of the fool’s performance, Malvolio’s noble façade crumbles. Importantly, however, the steward he never once concedes that he is mad. Harold Goddard maintains that “Malvolio keeps his head during his confinement in darkness” *(299)*, the authentic portion of his identity firmly intact. Thus, “Sir Topas” is only a mirror to Malvolio’s pretentions—the foolish knight paired with the identity of a curate, a religious and moral authority as Malvolio also presumes himself to be. Feste asks him, “What is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning wild-fowl?” *(IV.ii.50-51)*, and Malvolio immediately makes a spiritual and moral pronouncement: “That the soul of our grandam might happily inhabit a bird…I think nobly of the soul, and no way approve his opinion” *(IV.ii.52-56)*. Again, Feste counters his pretention:

Fare thee well. Remain thou still in darkness. Thou shalt hold th’ opinion of Pythagoras ere I will allow of thy wits, and fear to kill a woodcock lest thou dispossess the soul of thy grandam. Fare thee well.
 Initially it seems as if Feste tells Malvolio that he will eventually agree with Pythagoras, as the steward will go mad from his incarceration. However, in reading Ovid, Shakespeare surely better understood the concept of metempsychosis than Malvolio. Pythagoras asserts an appreciation of the souls of living things; Malvolio corrupts this intention, much in the same manner as Gratiano in *The Merchant of Venice*, instead assuming, yet again, the superiority of his own “element.” Feste suggests that Malvolio should adopt the *opinion* of Pythagoras, not necessarily his doctrine. The fool has already been called a “corrupter of words,” and as usual he employs his art to illuminate a personal flaw, just as he did with Olivia. Thus, Feste is able to exact his complete professional revenge, and exercise upon Malvolio, though doubtfully for the steward’s improvement, the art that he so deftly applies to Olivia when attempting to draw her out of her state of mourning. In the likeness of Topas, Feste serves as a mirror to Malvolio, which as an object also functions as a “corrupter of words.”

Later in the scene, Feste holds a three-way conversation between his own persona, Topas, and Malvolio, in effect bringing both Shakespeare’s and Chaucer’s masks together on stage, albeit via a singular personality. Fools are multiplied on fools. Or, if Shakespeare is considering the surprise group as a whole, this episode mirrors Chaucer’s contrast between himself as the writer of *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* and the goofy burbler of *Sir Thopas*. After Feste feigns leaving, he readopts his authentic persona, and draws Malvolio’s attention by singing a song—his veritable performance calling card. Recognizing Feste as one might recognize a song by hearing just the first few measures, Malvolio cries,
Good fool, as ever thou wilt deserve well at my hand, help me to a candle, and pen, ink, and paper. As I am a gentleman, I will live to be thankful to thee for it.

(IV.ii.80-84)

Though they both live in the same household, if Feste is a kind of author stand-in somewhat analogous to Chaucer’s pilgrim, the request also makes sense metaphorically. Furthermore, Malvolio is speaking in terms of providing Feste a commission—“I’ll requite thee in the highest degree” (IV.ii.118-19)—resuming his pretention of nobility. Feste brings back the Topas persona, chiding Malvolio for his “vain bibble babble” (IV.ii.96-97), then rebuking the fool’s own persona for colluding with a madman: “Maintain no words with him, good fellow” (IV.ii.99). Sir Topas denies Feste and Malvolio the right to speak, an interesting insistence from this persona, considering that Chaucer’s Sir Thopas is interrupted by the Host for being a waste of time. However, Malvolio apparently hasn’t read Chaucer, and certainly doesn’t heed the fool’s veiled advice. Stanley Wells affirms, “Shakespeare makes it clear that he ends no wiser and no better than he had begun” (183). He remains in the dark room until the end of the play, despite even Sir Toby’s reticence about maintaining the ruse any longer: “I would we were well rid of this knavery” (IV.ii.67-68), which according to Garber “signals the beginning of the end of the revels” (532). Toby’s commentary is not just reflective of his worry over getting in further trouble with Olivia, but a statement about the world of masks and jests leading to a “surfeiting,” the theme asserted by the opening lines of the play (I.i.2)—of revelry and disguises.

As I mention earlier, Chaucer’s Sir Thopas even goes too far, surfeiting in a way as well. The Host cries, “Namoore of thi this, for Goddes dignitee” (B2 2109). Chaucer does not simply parody the knight Thopas in terms of character behavior, but also in narrative form. Shakespeare achieves the same effect with Twelfth Night in many respects. In terms of Malvolio’s abuse, the
comedy ceases to function, as the joke at Malvolio’s expense is carried too far. Bloom argues that his treatment “passes into the domain of sadism” (237). However, Malvolio is not the only character who pays for excess. Both Sir Toby and Sir Andrew receive bloody coxcombs; head injuries are of questionable comedic effect and seem gruesome in light of the happy reunion about to take place. As Sir Andrew offers to help Toby, the play’s arch-reveler lashes out: “Will you help?—an ass-head and a coxcomb and a knave, a thin-fac'd knave, a gull!” (V.i.206-207). This scene is devastating not so much due to what is said but who says it: this behavior is especially disappointing coming from Sir Toby, who early on takes his stand against Malvolio’s Puritanism, the play’s robust champion of “cakes and ale” (II.iii.114-116). Also, despite Sir Andrew’s idiocy, he really is a lot of fun, and does not seem to overly mind (or notice) that much of the humor surrounding him is at his expense. Toby’s rant cannot be reduced to a humorous jab either—he uses too many words to insult Andrew, and his tone is further sobered by his gushing wound. Harsh words and brutal wounds push the performances in this scene over the boundaries of enjoyable comedy. Just as the holiday Twelfth Night indicates the end of Christmas festivities, the party is over for Shakespeare’s revelers.

Chaucer does not limit his own exploration of comedic excess to Sir Thopas, and Shakespeare might have some Chaucerian inspiration for linking unfunny wounds to the boundaries of acceptable humor or fun. Though it lies outside of the surprise group that seems so relevant to Twelfth Night’s Feste, The Miller’s Tale parallels Toby and Andrew’s plight in the way of wounds. Regarding the teller, The Miller appears so drunk he might be drowned, to adopt Feste’s metaphor, but the artifice behind the telling and performance of his tale serves so completely to “quite” (3119) the Knight’s that we might wonder if he is “but mad yet” or even just turned into a fool. Whether we should credit the Miller more than his creator for the deftness
of his tale is debatable, but we also might wonder why Robyn makes an autobiographical cameo to knock down Nicholas’s door (3466), a talent he is credited with in *The General Prologue* (550-551). Chaucer has already warned us to “Turne over the leef and chese another tale” (3177), and the Miller warns us that he’s drunk on the Host’s ale (3140). The Miller’s fabliau is both comedic and sexually charged. Nicholas, a clerk of Oxford, covets his old carp landlord’s young wife, Alisoun, and they plot to fool the old man into thinking that God will send a second flood by night. Nicholas convinces the carpenter to hole up in a tub lashed to ceiling rafters, which will float upon the water. The two lovers consummate their relationship, but are later interrupted by a feckless would-be wooer of Alisoun (reminiscent of Sir Andrew in many ways), Absolon. Nicholas and Alisoun play a lewd joke on the fellow, who retorts by stabbing Nicholas in the buttocks with a hot iron ploughshare. Nicholas screams “Help! Water! Water! Help, for Goddes herte!” (A 3815), startling the carpenter, who cuts the cords of his tub, tumbling to the ground and breaking his arm. Regardless of the poem’s sauciness, a broken arm seems like too brutal a wound to end a comedy with. Chaucer could have easily made the scene slapstick by leaving out the gorier details. Had the carpenter simply tumbled down and bonked his head, the fun would have persevered. However, this scene calls attention to the expectations of comedy itself. Does comedy necessitate that someone always be hurt in some way? Malvolio’s mistreatment is analogous to the carpenter’s in terms of pushing the extremes of comedy. Like the steward’s treatment at the hands of “Sir Topas,” the carpenter is laughed at by onlookers, and never allowed to explain himself. Garber insists, “At this point *Twelfth Night* almost moves beyond the bounds of comedy and toward another kind of accountability, another kind of moral inquiry” (533). Chaucer examines the extremes of comedy and the presumed expectations held by the audience regarding both on the teller (in this case the Miller) and his
tale. Shakespeare engages this point for the whole of his play, exploring how excess can actually serve to turn comedy rancid. But Chaucer might be even more specific in his criticism. Ganim suggests that *The Miller’s Tale* “includes as well as refers to numerous examples of medieval theatrical practice” (39). More specifically, Nicholas’s scheme calls on John’s skills as a carpenter to fashion an escape from the flood, “just as the directorial committee in charge of the mystery play of Noah might have approached their own carpenters” (Ganim 39). Ganim refers to a compelling pattern endemic of Chaucer that I argue Shakespeare recognized:

I should like to suggest Chaucer’s allusions to the mystery plays (and I think some such case could be made for *Sir Thopas*) comprise an acknowledgment of his own difficult relation to popular literary forms, a relation not merely of disdain. Moreover, the allusions to such works as the plays raise some serious aesthetic issues belied by the lightheartedness of Chaucer’s references to them. (39)

Shakespeare seems to have already illustrated his ambiguity toward spectacles of pain in *Titus Andronicus*, a play where he references Chaucer in the context of fame. Though a far cry from the brutal violence of *Titus Andronicus, Twelfth Night* nevertheless pushes at the boundaries of comedy to the point where the audience might eventually have to ask themselves, “why are we laughing anymore?” or worse, “what is there to laugh at anymore?” Perhaps that is the audience’s necessary epiphany. In any case, as a career pattern, Shakespeare seems interested in processing what Chaucer the poet had to say about contemporary literary forms, and even drama in particular, using theater as a vehicle. For both authors, elements of practical dramaturgy especially invite scrutiny: physical comedy relies chiefly on visualization, but the comedy in both *The Miller’s Tale* and *Twelfth Night* is undermined by how we visualize its outcomes (i.e. bleeding injuries).
Malvolio echoes these questions in his final scene, which in some ways mirrors the punch-line effect Chaucer’s Nun’s Priest has on the surprise group. The steward demands to know the meaning of his recent treatment, and Fabian explains the joke. Olivia exclaims, “Alas, poor fool, how have they baffled thee!” (V.i.369). Hearing his cue—and perhaps taking umbrage at Olivia’s careless use of the word “fool” given the present company—Feste reveals himself:

Why, “some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrown upon them.” I was one, sir, in this enterlude—one Sir Topas, sir, but that’s all one. “By the Lord, fool, I am not mad.” But do you remember? “Madam, why laugh you at such a barren rascal? And you smile not, he’s gagg’d.” And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges. (V.i.370-377)

In Trevor Nun’s 1996 film adaptation, Ben Kingsley plays the scene with effective emotional brutality, mocking Malvolio by wearing the steward’s toupee as he descends the stairs, a ridiculous prop that nevertheless served to hide advancing age. Though Feste’s revelation is played for the benefit of Malvolio, the masks have been doffed, and the “whirligig of time” has seen the dark joke to its fruition. So we have two Thopas disguises—which perhaps at first seem like two unnecessary over-veilings of the respect authors—which after a progression of text and performances that call into question the limits of comedy or the boundaries of an enjoyable performance, reveal a troubling cluster of philosophical questions. In both works, some of these questions regard performances and pretentions, such as Malvolio and Chauntecleer’s crowing and their eventual consequences: recognizing one’s own talents and capacities is good, but at what point is this behavior deleterious? Both Chaucer the pilgrim and Feste’s commitment to the Fool’s role addresses issues of professional ethic, and the Nun’s Priest is deeply committed to “sentence and solas,” but when should entertainers doff their motleys? Themes regarding
excesses of self-presentation pervade throughout: both Viola and Feste maintain their respective disguises against reason; Orsino poses as a courtly lover and refuses to back off when Olivia rebukes him; the Miller tells a sophisticated tale against his type but adds the disturbing detail of John’s broken arm; Chaucer the pilgrim rambles on with Sir Thopas until he is interrupted; Sir Toby carries on his antics until he gets hurt. At what point does a behavior—or a performance—become excessive? Brevity isn’t necessarily the soul of wit, but then again, over-speaking, over-working, or over-acting can lead to self-sabotage: meaning crumbles or changes altogether.

Shakespeare seems chiefly to rely on Chaucer as a kind of mimetic trigger for generating ideas or pattern recognition rather than a source from which to mine narratives, though he is not above borrowing these from the poet either. Regardless, Shakespeare exhibits a complex understanding of Chaucer’s methods, one that Harold Goddard recognizes within this play:

We can imagine the Elizabethan gentleman swarming to Twelfth Night and paying for the privilege! It is almost as if the dead man were expected to pay an entrance fee to his own funeral and enjoy the proceedings. The poet just holds the mirror up to nature and gets a more devastating effect than the fiercest satire could achieve. It is the Chaucerian method. Indeed, Twelfth Night makes one wonder whether justice has been done to the indebtedness of Shakespeare to the spirit of his great predecessor as distinguished from his indebtedness to him in a narrower sense…Shakespeare does something similar to what Chaucer does…so sweetens the medicine he is administering to his victims…that they swallow it as if it were the most refreshing draught.

(296)
Goddard’s paean to Chaucer sits well next to Viola’s for Feste. Both Shakespeare and Chaucer identified with “the allowed fool” in their own ways, especially since they were each expected to fulfill that role, either as poet or dramatist, or even both.
CHAPTER SIX

CHAUCER LOST AND FOUND IN SHAKESPEARE’S HISTORIES

Without context or provenience, there really is no good reason to wonder why Shakespeare never directly references Chaucer in his known canon. Apart from a mention in the prologue of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* as a source, Shakespeare seems to avoid Chaucer’s persona entirely, despite his clear narrative indebtedness to the poet for at least the former play and *Troilus and Cressida*. And to be fair, Shakespeare might not have had anything to do with the prologue of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* at all; John Fletcher is as likely a culprit if not more so. That play’s dual authorship notwithstanding, Shakespeare never mentions any number of sources he likely drew from, both accounted for and otherwise. As a dramatist, he was not obligated to cite his every source, nor would that practice be sustainable in any case. To suggest otherwise would be ludicrous. And yet, it is hardly fair to say that Shakespeare lacked any sort of autobiographical impulse. Some of his most significant exemplars do feature in his plays in one form or another. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in book form, features importantly in *Titus Andronicus*, and John Gower—Chaucer’s colleague and author of *Confessio Amantis*—appears as a chorus character in *Pericles*. A Gower also appears in *Henry IV Part Two* as a member of the King’s party, reporting news and subsequently invited to dinner by Falstaff in Act II (McNeal 87); a soldier in *Henry V* shares the same name. John of Gaunt, Chaucer’s brother-in-law and his most notable patron, receives one of the most dazzling speeches in the canon, in *Richard II*, despite his relatively small part compared to his son, Henry Bolingbroke. Justice Shallow mentions a “Scoggin” in *Henry IV Part Two*, likely the moralist Henry Scogan, tutor to Henry IV’s children (Gross 636), and dedicatee of Chaucer’s envoy. Shakespeare seems very familiar with the two
courts most crucial to Chaucer’s life—those of Richard II and Henry IV—including both major and minor figures who characterize Chaucer’s “narrow aristocratic circle” among the *dramatis personae* and at least mentioning others: John of Gaunt, Henry Scogan, and John Gower were among his key audience members (Loomis 169-170). From an artistic standpoint, Donaldson even suggests that Chaucer was Shakespeare’s only meaningful English poetic influence (*Chaucerian Shakespeare* 5). So, given Shakespeare’s fascination with the late 14th and early 15th centuries, the poet’s fame, and the most auspicious opportunity he would every have to include at least a passing reference or stage cameo to England’s most important poet, Chaucer’s absence—in not just any form, but all forms—seems glaringly conspicuous. Assuming that the idea of a Chaucerian Entertainer is a viable and to some extent real construct, then the notion that Shakespeare missed such a fruitful opportunity to engage Chaucer in a series of plays set in the poet’s own time is not only highly suspect, but unlikely.

The implication here, then, is that Chaucer does indeed feature in Shakespeare’s history plays, though the locus of his influence is cleverly disguised. While Shakespeare surely recognizes Chaucer as an exemplar—possibly his only significant exemplar in English—he does not seem interested in paying homage to him as he does with Ovid and Gower. Chaucer’s methods are much more relevant to Shakespeare, especially as they pertain to professional entertainment. Just as Feste from *Twelfth Night* is indebted to Chaucer’s fool(ish), bumbling stand-in—Chaucer the pilgrim—as well as the poet’s effective use of self-masking, Shakespeare invests Falstaff with analogous Chaucerian influences.

While Feste operates as the voice and mechanism of professional entertainment in *Twelfth Night*, theatrics and wordplay are Falstaff’s ancillary vocation. And whereas Shakespeare’s Chaucerian commentary in *Twelfth Night* explores the tools and uses of comedic
entertainment (in other words, it is as much a play about comedy as anything), Falstaff’s antics are inseparable from his socio-cultural context. The setting of *Twelfth Night* is not as important as it is for the Henriad. This historical context bridges Shakespeare’s Early Modern period and the playwright’s understanding of Chaucer’s Middle Ages, and Falstaff serves as a kind of Chaucerian conduit or lens through which we can read the plays’ central themes. More specifically, Falstaff represents a kind of Chaucerian echo. He represents a part of Shakespeare’s literary origins, voiced indirectly by quotations, affectations and, at points, stark resemblances to “the father of English poetry.” As such, Falstaff is the most overtly “Chaucerian” of Shakespeare’s Chaucerian entertainers. However, Shakespeare’s own self-conception as an entertainer is bound up in Falstaff as well. The fat knight could be viewed as a locus in which Shakespeare and Chaucer interact.

It is crucial to acknowledge that while Falstaff severally echoes Chaucer, his characterization is not solely indebted to the poet. Falstaff’s connections to the historical Lollard Sir John Oldcastle and career soldier Sir John Fastolf have been long-established (cf. Bloom 274). Oldcastle’s name was initially borrowed for the anonymous *Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* and—proving offensive to that knight’s descendants—was later dropped for Shakespeare’s Henriad. Fastolf was co-opted in the first part of Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* plays. Regardless, Falstaff is not a simple embodiment of any one real person, nor is he likely a direct allegorical representation of a historical figure. He is larger than life and complex. Falstaff evades easy characterization, being neither wholly commendable nor objectionable. Critically, he often evades moderate readings. Harold Bloom ardently insists,

> Time annihilates other Shakespearean protagonists, but not Falstaff, who dies for love. Critics have insisted that this love is grotesque, but they are grotesque. (272)
Bloom’s bardolatry aside, it seems unlikely that Shakespeare would invest so many speaking lines in Falstaff if he was either boring to write for or a simplistic paragon of vice. Writers and readers can both love characters and approach them with great moral ambivalence. Chaucer’s Wife of Bath—who Donaldson in Swan at the Well points out has much in common personally with Falstaff, especially in the way of wit (131)—evokes similarly varied responses. Donaldson points out a shared trait between these two larger-than-life characters that might illuminate their appeal to some and distastefulness to others:

although others may find what they do reprehensible, they find their occupations fully justified because they are their occupations, and they find them congenial. Their ideas of the world may be at variance with other people’s ideas, but they are at home with them, and do not intend to alter their styles for anyone. (Swan at the Well 130)

These subversive qualities uniquely empower Falstaff with a perspective otherwise beyond our reach as readers. We can only ever take Falstaff as he is. So, Falstaff’s role as a Chaucerian lens, or echo, is in no way at odds with any of his other characterizations. Sir John is ever overlapping.

Though Falstaff continues as a Chaucerian representative throughout the remaining Henry plays in the overall tetralogy, the shadows of Chaucer’s poetry creep into Shakespeare’s drama prior to Falstaff’s direct involvement. In Richard II, Chaucer is indirectly infused throughout the play via the frequent use of the term “pilgrimage.” Henry Bolingbroke mentions that he and his foe Mowbray are “like two men / That vow a long and weary pilgrimage” (I.iii.49) in regards to their conflict, which is distinguished from his later pontification that he will “make a voyage to the Holy Land” (V.vi.49). It is unclear why Shakespeare uses “pilgrimage” for “voyage,” though he may be distinguishing between Henry’s initial
metaphorical use of the term and his later literal yet unrealized intention. John of Gaunt uses the term in a similar manner when begging Richard to shorten his son’s banishment, fearing that his advanced years will preclude a reunion: “Thou canst help time to furrow me with age, / But stop no wrinkle in his pilgrimage” (I.iii.230). Henry responds to his father’s insistence that banishment can be “a travel that thou takest for pleasure” (I.iii.262): “My heart will sigh when I miscall it so, / Which finds it an inforced pilgrimage” (I.iii.263-64).

Aging, banishment, and suppression do not necessarily match up neatly with pervasive themes in *The Canterbury Tales*, or in a thematic manner that Shakespeare finds meaningful enough to indicate that he was thinking of those works. However, those themes may be biographically relevant to Chaucer himself. Perhaps significantly, the term “pilgrimage” is used only by Chaucer’s patrons—Richard II, John of Gaunt and Henry IV. Coincidentally, Terry Jones points out that as a literary figure, Chaucer’s relationship to those three nobles may very well have been considerably governed by aging, a kind of banishment, and potential suppression of his works leading up to his eventual retraction (*Who Murdered Chaucer?* 63-68). Chaucer’s biographical associations can be derived from his works without necessarily consulting historical records. In the *Complaint of Chaucer Unto his Purse*, the poet appeals directly to King Henry IV, and it seems as if he is in dire straits:

O conqueror of Brutes Albyon

Which that by lyne and free eleccion

Been verray kyng, this song to yow I sende,

And ye, that mowen alle oure harmes amende,

Have mynde upon my supplicacion.

(22-26)
Chaucer grandiosely implies that Henry is the rightful bearer of the crown, despite his succession by coup and the death of Richard. Chaucer was a member of Richard II’s court, but it seems as if he has at least initially succeeded in surviving the transition, though he was having dire financial woes. Benson suggests that Chaucer’s *Complaint* may indicate that the grants originally approved by the new king may not have been paid (xxv).

Chaucer’s most prominent court connections maintain their presence, to a degree, through the remaining Henry plays, but Falstaff also draws from and alludes to *The Canterbury Tales* directly. Among them, the two *Henry IV* plays contain the most significant allusions to Chaucer’s works. But Shakespeare does not simply pile Chaucerian sources into Falstaff’s massive frame; he puts Chaucerian methods into action through him.

Falstaff’s initial antics highlight him as a kind of a professional analogue to both Chaucer and Shakespeare, though initially obliquely. In *Henry IV, Part One*, Poins reports “pilgrims going to Canterbury” (I.ii.126), a connection noted by Thomas McNeal (89). Poins suggests that Hal, Falstaff, and company should don “vizards” (I.ii.128) and rob the pilgrims at Gadshill. Hal is at first reluctant, but agrees after Poins promises a better ruse on Falstaff: rob him after he loots the pilgrims. Ultimately, the pilgrims get the short end of the deal. Despite Hal’s reservations, we later learn he does not have problems with taxation through government channels. Falstaff predicts Hal’s eventual hypocrisy: “There's neither honesty, manhood, nor good fellowship in thee, nor thou camest not of the blood royal, if thou darest not stand for ten shillings” (I.ii.139-141). Ultimately, Hal plays along with Poins, duping Falstaff into dropping his spoils. The exchange of funds here is representative of the royal tax collection process: the pilgrims are figures without agency who pay taxes, collected by Falstaff, and reaped by the heir-apparent. The same analogy, strangely, applies to the artistic process of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. 
Tales. Regardless of the stories’ authenticity, Chaucer depicts himself collecting tales from his fellow-pilgrims, and sets them to record for the entertainment of others. Loomis points out that Chaucer’s audience was primarily aristocratic (169)—a fact surely not overlooked by Shakespeare. Thus, Chaucer’s tale-telling is analogous to Falstaff’s own antics: an entertainment enjoyed, and possibly exploited, by royalty.

Falstaff’s own stories are often trumped-up exaggerations, or flat-out lies, but even still his presentation is wholly entertaining and self-aware. Past the surface of the matter, Falstaff addresses a perennial question in literary art: is fiction a lie? In Chaucer’s General Prologue, the poet takes care to mention that whenever a story bears repeating, the teller has the responsibility of reporting the facts as closely as they were spoken to him:

\[
\text{For this ye knowen also wel as I,}
\]
\[
\text{Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,}
\]
\[
\text{He moot rehearse as ny as evere he kan}
\]
\[
\text{Everich a word, if it be in his charge,}
\]
\[
\text{Al speke he never so rudeliche or large,}
\]
\[
\text{Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrew,}
\]
\[
\text{Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.}
\]

(A 732-39)

Certainly Falstaff’s tall tales do not meet this criterion, and he is mocked by Hal for his exaggerations: “These lies are like their father that begets them; / gross as a mountain, open, palpable” (II.iv.225-26). However, the fat knight responds wittily, praising his own instinct for not killing the heir-apparent. Effectively, Falstaff is not so much a liar as he is a “bullshitter.” Even though Bardolph and Peto later reveal that the knight hacked his sword with a dagger, his
story seems so obviously exaggerated and contrived that one wonders how seriously Falstaff actually expected Hal and Poins to take him. This tongue-in-cheek pontification on the verity of Falstaff’s claims echoes Chaucer’s scheme in the General Prologue: the poet does not expect his audience to actually treat the work as history, but as a tale. When Chaucer warns that the speaker who fails to memorize whomever he is quoting entirely may “feyne thyng, or fynde words newe,” he is actually paying homage to the creative process. Falstaff, as Shakespeare’s authorial response to Chaucer, answers this claim via theatricality. The entire post-Gadshill spectacle is a show, replete with exaggerated language; costumes (the vizards); and even makeup in the form of blood, as Bardolph bemoans that Falstaff made the would-be thieves “tickle our noses with spear-grass to make them bleed, and then to beslubber our garments with it and swear it was the blood of true men” (II.iv.309-11).

Falstaff’s own operation as a dramatist, similar in philosophical bearing to Chaucer’s handling of truth in the General Prologue, hearkens unto the poet’s caricature of himself in The Canterbury Tales. “Chaucer the pilgrim,” as critics such as E.T. Donaldson would identify the character, appears as a kind of bumbling, rotund, “wide-eyed,” simple-minded and jolly fellow, a depiction very similar to his own characterization in the Prologue to the Legend of Good Women (Speaking of Chaucer 2). His tale of Sir Thopas is described as “nat worth a toord” by the Host, who interrupts its telling (B2 2119). Similarly, Hal does not seem impressed by Falstaff’s antics. Yet Hal calls for further performance—just as the Host does—asking Falstaff to “stand for my father, and examine me upon the particulars of my life” (II.iv.376-77), whereupon Falstaff responds by preparing his stage, props, and makeup: “this chair shall be my state,/this dagger my sceptre, and this cushion my crown” (II.iv.378-79), even calling for another cup of sack “to make my eyes look red, that it may be thought I have wept” as he plays Hal’s father (II.iv.385). The
entire presentation seems absurd, yet serves to highlight more subtle issues and establish
Shakespeare’s skillful blending of fiction within fiction—just like Chaucer’s telling of Sir
Thopas. Despite our understandable suspicion of the Hostess’s credentials as a drama critic, she
praises Falstaff’s performance: “O Jesu, he doth it as like one of these harlotry players as ever I
see!” (II.iv.395-96). Isaac Asimov notes that Falstaff employs “exotic words and farfetched
similes often drawn from nature” (353-354), taking a euphuistic tone—balanced sentences
characterized by contrast. Shakespeare depicts Falstaff as a capable actor, instilling him with
linguistic flourishes so that both his staged and real audiences see that the fat knight puts on a
good show. Effectively, Falstaff uses the drama to defend himself after Hal turns the tables,
forcing him to switch roles. While Falstaff’s interpretation of the King assumes that the fat
knight is the only point of virtue in Hal’s unruly lifestyle, Hal’s own projection of his father
demands the fat knight’s banishment, to which Falstaff responds:

But to say I know more harm in him than in myself, were to say more than I
know. That he is old, the more the pity, his white hairs do witness it; but that he
is, saving your reverence, a whoremaster, that I utterly deny. If sack and sugar be
a fault, God help the wicked! if to be old and merry be a sin, then many an old
host that I know is damned: if to be fat be to be hated, then Pharaoh’s lean kine are
to be loved. No, my good lord; banish Peto, banish Bardolph, banish Poins: but
for sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, true Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff,
and therefore more valiant, being, as he is, old Jack Falstaff, banish not him thy
Harry’s company, banish not him thy Harry’s company: banish plump Jack, and
banish all the world.

(II.iv.466-480)
Hal’s chilling reply is “I do, I will” (II.iv.481), and the production halts as Bardolph reports that a sheriff and his entourage are approaching. Falstaff demands that the performance continue, crying, “Play out the play: I have much to say in the behalf of that Falstaff” (II.iv.484-485), maintaining his displaced defense. He will never get the opportunity; the play never resumes.

Like Chaucer the Pilgrim, Falstaff is silenced amidst an artistic defense. Chaucer laments his own interruption:

“This may wel by rym doggerel,” quod he [the Host].

“Why so?” quod I, “why wiltow lette me
Moore of my tale than another man,
Syn that it is the beste rym I kan?”

(B2 2115-18)

Chaucer the Pilgrim is eventually asked to tell something else: “Sire, at o word, thou shalt no lenger ryme. /…/ Or telle in prose somewhat, at the leeste” (B2 2122-24). Chaucer’s stand-in is naïve and bumbling, both through his interactions with the other pilgrims and his attempt at a tale (Donaldson, Speaking of Chaucer 1-2). Falstaff, though instilled with wit, suffers from a similar plight, since no one will take him seriously as he attempts to defend his position through art. While we do hear defensive soliloquies from him, he never attempts to reassert his value in Hal’s presence. Rather, Falstaff is prone to introspection and self-justification. The only defense for both stand-ins is, ironically, through art, and both are interrupted amidst their critiquing.

Aside from Chaucer’s literary self-defense, the lampooned chivalric elements in Sir Thopas importantly link with Falstaff. As with some of his other tales, Chaucer satirizes the chivalric and romance traditions through the Thopas character. Larry Benson suggests that beyond the clear literary satire, Chaucer may have been satirizing Thopas’s behavior as a
“would-be gentleman, who works just a bit too hard at observing the proper forms of romance knighthood” (17). Aside from his pretentiousness, Thopas does not seem like a particularly chivalrous or skilled knight. For example, he neglects to bring his armor while afield, and after encountering a giant, Thopas boasts,

      Tomorwe wol I meete with thee,
      Whan I have myn armoure;
      And yet I hope, par ma fay,
      That thou shalt with this lancegay
      Abyen it ful sowre.

(B2 2007-2012)

The giant throws stones at Thopas, who retreats but never returns. Though he goes through the general motions of chivalry, Sir Thopas never really follows them through. He seems more caught up in the pomp than in the practice.

   Falstaff himself is a poor-behaving gentleman, and as such, serves a similar purpose to both Chaucer the Pilgrim and Sir Thopas. Marjorie Garber points out the parallel Shakespeare sets up between the lower-class characters and the antics of the nobility: “The Gads Hill caper is another version of Hotspur's rebellion, another kind of anarchy and robbery; both are the result of the failed kingship of Henry IV and his usurpation of the throne” (316). Harold Goddard’s assertion pairs well with Garber’s, as he claims,

      The hypocrite has always been a favorite subject of satire. Henry IV is one of the most subtly drawn and effective hypocrites in literature, in no small measure because the author keeps his portrayal free of any satirical note. But not of any ironical note.
Thus, Shakespeare, like Chaucer, avoids direct satire, and instead operates using characters either easily dismissed for their vices or confirmed by their limited virtue. Even Falstaff himself is an example of how badly a noble can behave and still retain his station. In his own defense, Falstaff pays homage to this particular strategy, considering the royal target involved. While he in no way seems shy about bantering with Hal, Falstaff’s only genuine defense comes in the form of his thinly veiled performance. As is likely the case with his bullshitting session prior to the mini-play’s performance, one wonders to what extent Falstaff expects his audience to ignore his embedded messages—the knight’s depiction of his own character is comically exaggerated.

Chaucer, on the other hand, exaggerates his mask’s ineptitude, and far enough to reach the point where his audience will understand the joke: the author of the *Canterbury Tales* is a skilled poet, unless we believe his earlier assertion about telling the tales as accurately as he heard them, and yet his tale is interrupted for being sub-par. Shakespeare creates a similar literary habitat for Falstaff, but the knight is never allowed to completely reconcile his clown persona with his inventive one. All of the accoutrements for a poor production are present, and Falstaff’s performance is interrupted, yet the audience understands or at least trusts that Shakespeare is a skillful playwright, and in a self-reflexive manner presents a simultaneously skilled and bumbling Falstaff as a kind of mirror not just to Chaucer’s own foolish caricature, but to the author himself. To a degree, Shakespeare wears this dual-faced mask—one for Falstaff the clown, the other for Falstaff as the creator within it.

Falstaff’s theatricality is not just significant in terms of how Shakespeare identifies with him as a performer and author—he is, at least in part, a caricature bred of Shakespeare’s artistic response to Chaucer the Pilgrim. Shakespeare instills part of Chaucer’s methodology and
physicality in Falstaff. In the prologue to *Sir Thopas*, the Host says of Chaucer, “He in the waast is shape as wel as I” (B2 1890), indicating that both are overweight. The most revealing self-referential instances come from some of Chaucer’s other poems. In *Lenvoy De Chaucer a Scogan*, the poet suggests that he is “hoor and rounde of shap” (31), or old and fat. Gross notes that since Scogan was only 30 at the time, Chaucer can be referring only to himself (1087). In *House of Fame*, the giant eagle complains that “Geffrey” is “noyous for to carye” (574). Finally, in *Merciles Beaute*, Chaucer puns, “Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat” (27). Falstaff, one of Shakespeare’s best-loved characters, is legendary for his rotundity, and Bardolph confirms this notion: “Why, you are so fat, Sir John, that you must needs be out of all compass, out of all reasonable compass, Sir John” (III.iii.21-23). Apart from their shared girth, old age also figures prominently in Chaucer and Falstaff’s character portraits. In the first *Henry IV* play, Prince Hal—while aping his own father—refers to Falstaff as “that old white-bearded Sathan” (II.iv.463). Furthermore, Falstaff describes himself as a meddler, an “apple-john” (III.iii.4). We can assume a similar depiction of Chaucer the Pilgrim, as he bustles about the pilgrim’s company at the tavern, learning about his fellow travelers on the evening of the pilgrimage.

Perhaps due to their social natures, both characters consort with dubious individuals and nobles alike, crossing class boundaries in terms of the associations that they keep. “Company, villanous company, hath been the spoil of me” (III.iii.9-10), laments Falstaff, though the audience may find his remark ironic. Chaucer’s busybody interactions with the vileSummoner, whom he describes “As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe, / With scalled browes blake and piled berd, / Of his visage children were aferd” (A 626-628), seem contradictory in nature. The pilgrim concludes that the Summoner is ultimately “a gentil harlot and a kynde; / A bettre felawe sholde men noght fynde” (A 647-48), despite his sinister behavior. Whilst drunk, the Summoner
“Thanne wolde he speke no word but Latyn” (A 638), and not very well, for “A fewe termes hadde he, two or thre, / That he had lerned out of som decree” (A 639-40), seeming like a nastier version of Pistol. Chaucer is grouped in the General Prologue with questionable company: “There was also a Reve, and a Millere, / A Somnour, and a Pardoner also, / A Maunciple, and myself—ther were namo” (A 542-44), perhaps paralleling, and possibly accounting for Falstaff’s own seedy associates.

Reputation may be what is at least partially at stake for Shakespeare in his self-conception via Falstaff. Though Falstaff is verbose, witty, and has a penchant for entertainment and productions, his audience seems largely low-born at this point in his life, save for Hal. According to what he would have us believe in his soliloquy against Shallow being a liar in Henry IV Part Two, Falstaff was familiar enough with John of Gaunt to pun on the elder Lancaster’s name, albeit at the expense of Shallow: “I saw [Shallow getting beaten], and told John a’ Gaunt he beat his own name, for you might have thrust him and all his apparel into an eel-skin” (324-325). Chaucer also puns on Gaunt’s name in The Book of the Duchess: “A long castel with walles white” (1318), referring to “Lancaster” and his wife Blanche (Wilcocksen 976). And Shakespeare makes a similar “castle” pun in Henry IV Part One when Hal calls Falstaff “my old lad of the castle” (I.ii.41-2), a reference to Sir John Oldcastle (Baker 891).

Regardless of his station, Shakespeare’s involvement with the theater and its professionals was likely perceived as a low-brow cultural pursuit. In his sonnets, Shakespeare disparages his own profession: “Alas, ’tis true, I have gone here and there, / And made myself a motley to the view, / Gor’d mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear (110.1-3).

There are further significant links between Falstaff’s and Chaucer’s associations. One level of these is literary, as Falstaff invokes a character from The Nun’s Priest’s Tale in the
context of complaining about his company. After he discovers that his pocket has been picked, Falstaff sends the Hostess out to find the culprit. When she returns, he calls out to her, “How now, Dame Partlet the hen? Have you inquir’d yet who pick’d my pocket?” (III.iii.52-53). The footnote to the Riverside edition simply states “traditional name for a hen,” alluding to Falstaff’s mockery of the Hostess’s “agitation and flutter” (Baker 911), but McNeal recognizes its Chaucerian origin (89): Falstaff’s gibe is not so much a simple barnyard reference but a literary one. Chauntecleer, the noble rooster in The Nun’s Priest’s Tale is infatuated with one of his seven wives, “Of whiche the fairest hewed on hir throte / Was cleped damoysele Pertelote” (B2 4059-60). Chauntecleer has a disturbing dream about being eaten by a Fox, and Pertelote dismisses his concerns outright, despite the Rooster’s educated insistence of its significance (Benson 18). The Hostess replies indignantly to Falstaff’s own concerns, and repeats “Sir John” in a nagging fashion no fewer than seven times in her next thirteen lines of dialogue (54-72).

Significantly, in the prologue to the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, the Host refers to the nun’s priest as “sir John” (B2 2810). Furthermore, in the same manner Chaucer’s Pertelote denies Chauntecleer’s dream-visions, the Hostess reject’s Falstaff’s accusations of thievery:

> Why, Sir John, what do you think, Sir John? Do you think I keep thieves in my house? I have search’d, I have inquir’d, so has my husband, man by man, boy by boy, servant by servant. The tithe of a hair was never lost in my house before.

(III.iii.54-58)

Essentially, Falstaff’s invocation of this particular reference from Chaucer serves to highlight his unjust treatment on the part of the Hostess—she dismisses his plight out of hand, like Pertelote. Ultimately, Chaucer’s Pertelote proves incorrect, and Chauntecleer is temporarily captured by a fox, though he is able to save himself using his wit. Thus, while Falstaff suggests that he is being
henpecked, identifying with Chauntecleer’s plight, his reference also indicates that he is fond of 
the Hostess: “He loved hire so that wel was hym therwith” (B2 4066).

Falstaff’s self-identification with Chauntecleer may also serve to explain his behavior 
towards his other Eastcheap companions. Benson describes Chaucer’s Chauntecleer as “learned 
as well as courtly” (18), certainly first amongst the other chickens. While Falstaff’s mannerisms 
surely are not the courtly ideal, his parallel context must be considered. Chauntecleer is noble, 
wonderful to listen to, and first amongst the chickens, but he is still a chicken. Falstaff, by the 
same token, exhibits great wit and intelligence, and is enjoyable to listen to and be around.

Harold Goddard points to Falstaff’s apparent irresistible allure as a companion (176), noting 
Bardolph’s lament at the fat knight’s death in Henry V: “Would I were with him, wheresome’er 
he is, either in heaven or in hell” (II.iii.7-8). However, if the mock-heroic parallel can be carried 
through to Falstaff, his physicality seems to precede any virtue, just as Chauntecleer’s precludes 
the Rooster from being noble. While he may well be first among the rogues at Eastcheap, 
Falstaff still projects the image of a failed noble, a testament to both the shortcomings of the 
chivalric system and the potential of those who abuse it. Yet on the other hand, are the values of 
Falstaff and Chauntecleer diminished a priori due to their natures? Chauntecleer is a chicken, 
and Falstaff is fat, but their virtues are both independent and corroborate with their vices, 
praiseworthy when they deserve it and mocked for the same, yet never once should either 
character’s shortcomings overpower his virtues. The same applies for the reverse. Falstaff could 
hardly serve effectively piercing social commentary, or even just fun, by being a conformist.

In the Nun’s Priest’s mock heroic form, the audience should be tempted to overlook any 
uncomfortable parallels that the animals share with humans. Larry Benson notes that “Chaucer 
delicately maintains the balance between the two, combining the elements of courtly discourse
with occasional sharp reminders that the characters are, after all, only chickens” (18). However, Chaucer embeds a literary safety valve in the form of the mock heroic. If his motives are questioned by noble patrons, the poet can simply default to Benson’s assumption in his own defense. Falstaff serves a similar purpose. Should his subversion turn too many heads, the author can simply default to the position that “it is just Falstaff and his companions, after all.” Garber notes the parallels between the interactions of the Boar’s Head ruffians and Henry’s own court, pointing specifically to Falstaff’s tale-telling after the Gadshill incident and its subsequent mock theatrical performance:

Henry IV does, in a way, “counterfeit” the person of a king (“person” in this sense is nicely related to persona, or mask, as well as to “body”). Falstaff’s imaginary men in buckram are the “low” and comic counterparts of the many men marching in the King’s coats, and Falstaff’s lie is in a way no more a lie than Henry’s claim to the crown. Men in costume are men in costume, whether they are encountered in the tavern, on the highway, on the battlefield, or, indeed, on the stage.

(317)

For Chaucer, the form of the mock heroic in The Nun’s Priest’s Tale is manifested, and masked, in barn animals. And again, perhaps beyond coincidence, “Chauntecleer” is an anagrammatical amplification of “Chaucer.” Shakespeare’s audience, depending on their familiarity with The Canterbury Tales, may well have made this association at least subliminally. In any case, for Shakespeare, the lower-class characters and Falstaff as their leader mirror the main action and actual concerns of the nobles. They are operating as Shakespeare’s barnyard animals.

As a writer, Chaucer had to exercise great caution in regards to any critiques he embedded in his works. Patronized by John of Gaunt and Richard II, Chaucer’s political
connections were strong, and he depended on them for his sustenance, as evidenced in his appeal to Henry IV in the *Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse*. *The Canterbury Tales* depicts members of the clergy, nobility, middle class, and peasantry at varying moral gradations, ranging from the commendable clerk to the vile Friar. His own caricature, Chaucer the Pilgrim, allows the poet to move among his characters in such a way that we get to know them almost as well as Chaucer the Poet does. The Pilgrim is impressed, perhaps for all of the wrong reasons, with many of his company, and his often flattering descriptions are questionably praiseworthy, aimed at careful readers. For example, when the Monk decries the Benedictine Rule, declaring it “nat worth an oystre” (A 182), the Pilgrim reports, “And I seyde his opinion was good” (A 184), going on to explain that it is foolish to go mad with study. However, the monk is an “outridere” (A 166), and an owner of greyhounds—he does not go mad with study, but does not study at all. The Pilgrim is impressed with the Monk, who is not very impressive as a monk. Chaucer’s pilgrim mask partially obscures his poetic countenance, though not completely. For Chaucer’s message to take hold, he could not have utterly subsumed his own identity in his pilgrim.

Falstaff presents a similar problem, though his conception is more complex in many respects. Not only is Shakespeare using Falstaff—the entertainer, tale-teller, and faux theater performer—as a mask, but he is fashioning that mask in the likeness of Chaucer. However, in *Henry IV Part One* there is mainly circumstantial evidence, though very compelling, in suggesting such a link. The Gadshill caper, Falstaff’s philosophical motives in connection with *Sir Thopas* and his identification with Chauntecleer from *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, physical characteristics, and the similarity in company that they keep seem at least subliminally to connect Falstaff and Chaucer the Pilgrim. On their own, these thematic instances certainly point towards a Shakespearean mindfulness of Chaucer, situated in the poet’s own historical context.
In terms of *Henry IV Part One*, Shakespeare’s use of Chaucer could have been relatively self-contained, especially as it seems to primarily draw on themes from *The Canterbury Tales* exclusively.

However, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* are not the only works that connect in some meaningful manner with Falstaff. The fat knight expands his Chaucerian invocations to some of the poet’s other works, and incorporates them in such a way as to indicate a direct connection between the two. For example, in *Henry IV, Part Two*, Falstaff laments his financial situation after the Chief Justice refuses him a loan:

I can get no remedy of this consumption of the purse; borrowing only lingers and lingers it out, but the disease is incurable…. ’Tis no matter if I do halt; I have the wars for my color, and my pension shall seem the more reasonable. A good wit will make use of anything. I will turn diseases to commodity.

(I.ii.235-237, 244-248)

Falstaff’s woes significantly echo the *Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse*, both in tone and intention. Chaucer, in his last known piece of writing, levels his own appeal to Henry IV, pleading “Have mynde upon my supplicacioun” (26) to the King directly. Falstaff commands his page, “Go bear this letter to my lord of Lancaster, this to the Prince, this to the Earl of Westmorland” (I.ii.237-239), seeking similar aid from noble company. He likens his money troubles to a terminal illness, staved off only for a short while.

Chaucer’s gravity concerning his “supplicacioun” shares Falstaff’s tone. Chaucer himself was reliant on his government pensions, as were all civil servants. In 1390 he was robbed by highwaymen at “le Foule Oke” in a forest near Kent, “a short way from London in the direction of Canterbury” (Crow and Olson 477-489), though inconsistencies in the record blur
whether he was robbed only once or three times, possibly also in Surrey (Crow and Leland xxv). Crow and Leland assert that the records unanimously affirm that Chaucer was blameless and those responsible were punished (xxv), but he may have lost up to twenty pounds of the King’s money and his own. After Henry deposed Richard II, Chaucer’s previous royal annuities were apparently renewed, plus an additional forty marks a year for life, though Crow and Leland note that Chaucer’s Complaint “suggests that the grants approved by the new king had not yet been paid” (xxv). Like Falstaff, Chaucer attempts to turn his misfortune into something profitable.

Shakespeare understands Chaucer’s treatment of his financial woes, and uses “disease” in a complex metaphorical sense. Though Chaucer describes his purse as a lady, she has “been lyght” (3). Falstaff’s wordplay with disease extends our understanding of “lyght” to consumption, and since Chaucer’s financial woes endanger his life, the disease metaphor seems applicable to the poet. Regardless of Chaucer’s attitude toward his lady’s sickness, he pleads, “Beth hevy ageyn, or elles moot I dye” (14). Thus, Chaucer’s money troubles could be seen as a terminal illness unless they are treated. Chaucer and Falstaff enact supplication—which will hopefully lead to healing—through writing.

This relationship between disease and commodity, commodity and writing is especially reinforced when the Page reports, upon Falstaff’s request, a physician’s opinion of the fat knight’s health based on a urine sample: “He said, sir, the water itself was a good healthy water, but for the party that ow’d it, he might have moe diseases than he knew for” (I.ii.3-5). Falstaff retorts, “I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men” (I.ii.9-10). Falstaff’s disease—his wit—is also the source of his authorial impetus. Falstaff shares this disease with Chaucer and Shakespeare, in terms of their characters and livelihoods. Authors are
indeed sources of wit in others, and Falstaff’s remark may be serving as a double-entendre, a signal that we should see Falstaff as a kind of artist.

Aside from his connections to Chaucer’s poetry, Shakespeare also incorporates elements of significant biographical information. He quixotically connects Falstaff to some of Chaucer’s acquaintances via Master Shallow, who apparently knew Falstaff as a youth. Though the fat knight warns us of Shallow’s liberal exaggerations, “how subject we old men are to this vice of lying” (III.i.304), Shakespeare provides us with some insight into Falstaff’s company as a youth. Notably, he seems familiar with John of Gaunt, Chaucer’s great patron and brother-in-law. Though Shallow pretends, as Falstaff puts it, to have “been a sworn brother to him” (III.ii.321), as Chaucer was, Falstaff himself seems to have been more familiar:

I’ll be sworn ‘a [Shallow] ne’er saw him [John of Gaunt] in the Tilt-yard, and then he burst his head for crowding among the marshal’s men. I saw it, and told John a’ Gaunt he beat his own name, for you might have thrust him and all his apparel into an eel-skin.

(III.ii.321-326)

Falstaff’s wordplay with the meaning of “gaunt” does not simply suggest a familiarity between the two, but more significantly points to Falstaff’s previous reference to commodity. As noted earlier, Falstaff is convinced that his wit is his saving grace financially. It is not unreasonable to conclude that Falstaff, like Chaucer, was patronized (or tolerated) by John of Gaunt for his wit.

In conjunction with his pronouncements on knowing John of Gaunt, Shallow mentions an incident between Falstaff and a man named Scoggin: “I see him break Scoggin’s head at the court-gate, when ‘a was a crack not thus high” (III.ii.29-30). The footnote to the Riverside edition reads “Shakespeare was perhaps thinking of John Scogan, the court jester to Edward IV
and hero of a jestbook popular in the later sixteenth century” (Baker 946), a sentiment echoed by S.B. Hemingway (qtd. in McNeal 91). However, according to McNeal, Shallow is most likely referring to Henry Scogan (91). Laila Gross notes this Scogan as the likely recipient of Chaucer’s *Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan* (636). McNeal contends “that Shakspe [sic] took the name *Skogan* from the poems relating to the man at the back of Speght’s *Chaucer*—that we may now drop the court jester to Edward IV for good and all” (92). Scogan was the tutor of Henry IV’s children, and he wrote a moral ballad for them that quotes the entirety of Chaucer’s *Gentilesse* (Gross 636). Shallow’s allusion to Falstaff’s conflict with Scoggin, no matter how exaggerated, makes greater sense when regarded in the context of Chaucer’s own work. In his envoy, Chaucer skewers Scogan for offending Venus:

> But now so wepith Venus in hir spere
> That with hir teeres she wol drenche us here.
> Allas! Scogan, this is for thyn offence;
> Thow causest this diluge of pestilence.

(11-14)

It makes sense that Falstaff would embattle himself with Scoggin over moral issues; by his nature, Falstaff challenges the boundaries of morality. Falstaff is better equipped for verbal sparring than a physical altercation anyhow.

Additional to the Chaucerian pattern of his other associations, Falstaff’s interactions with women suggest a telling parallel with Chaucer’s own attitudes. Shakespeare may have derived this connection from Chaucer’s apparently forced *The Legend of Good Women* in the Prologue by “Queen Alceste.” As Shaner and Edwards explain, any allegorical connection between Chaucer’s life and his prologue is a matter of debate (1061). Regardless, Chaucer’s
poetry is ambivalent toward women: *Troilus and Criseyde*, *Against Women Unconstant*, and *The Complaint of Mars* are particularly notable examples. Falstaff suffers from a similar predicament. After he has died, the boy reports of Falstaff, “’A said once, the dev’l would have him about women” (*Henry V* II.iii.35-36), and that they are “dev’ls incarnate” (31-32). This may indeed reflect Chaucer’s own apparent equivocation about women, as projected in several of his works. Though Chaucer may well have only loosely allegorized or even fabricated the conversation with Queen Alceste from *The Legend of Good Women*’s prologue, Shakespeare may have incorporated this aspect of Chaucer’s mask into Falstaff nonetheless.

Despite their poetic affinities, initially it seems that Chaucer and Falstaff share little in common biographically. A character sketch of Falstaff reveals that he is essentially an aristocrat in his own right, though his specific titles are in question. He is frequently referred to as “Sir John,” and we see him (somewhat) engaged in combat and responsible for rallying troops. Chaucer, on the other hand, was a civil servant, whose role was primarily of the administrative middle class, though he was closely connected to the court and relied on the patronage of noble personages. Donaldson, however, cautions us against assuming that Chaucer the pilgrim, Chaucer the poet, and Chaucer the man were the same person:

> The fact that these are three separate entities does not, naturally, exclude the probability—or rather the certainty—that they bore a close resemblance to one another, and that, indeed, they frequently got together in the same body.

> But that does not excuse us from keeping them distinct from one another, difficult as their close resemblance makes our task.

*(Speaking of Chaucer 1)*
Judging by Shakespeare’s use of his own masks, the bard is just as perceptive a Chaucer critic as Donaldson. While Loomis objects, “But Shakespeare wears no mask; he is not there at all” (174), her assertion is somewhat mitigated by the fact that Chaucer is never specifically named in the tales except in the prologue to *The Man of Law’s Tale* (B1 47), and even then his name is never connected specifically to the narrator. Donaldson even identifies this chronicler as “presumably someone called Geoffrey” (*The Swan at the Well* 7), yet critical consensus identifies Chaucer as the narrator: rightly so, as “Geoffrey” is named in other works, such as *House of Fame*. It is perfectly plausible that Shakespeare learned how to mask himself from Chaucer’s example, especially considering that his masks are closely associated with Chaucerian references (such as Feste’s adoption of the Sir Topas personality in *Twelfth Night*). Falstaff, therefore, seems a likely mask for Shakespeare, even coded in the syllables of their names in the form of “Fal-staff” and “Shake-speare” (Bloom 273), and a locus for his identification as a masked author vis-à-vis Chaucer.

So both Chaucer and Shakespeare are represented in the Henriad, though perhaps in the same massive body: Shakespeare’s mask with a Chaucerian face. Goddard acknowledges that the complexity of Falstaff’s character leads to a potentially dualistic interpretation of his behavior:

> Which is he? A colossus of sack, sensuality, and sweat—or a wit and humorist so great that he can be compared only with his creator, a figure…livelier than life? One might think there were two Falstaffs.

(II.175)

Furthermore, Goddard argues that this complexity may account for Falstaff’s girth (176), suggesting that Shakespeare implies more than one Falstaff could inhabit the same body.
So, why would Shakespeare invest so much of Chaucer, the greatest English poet that preceded him, into the problematic Falstaff? On one hand, Chaucer the pilgrim keeps questionable company himself, interacting with even the vilest members of the Canterbury pilgrimage. Benson notes, “Perhaps Chaucer the pilgrim—cheerful, tolerant, but no fool—is closer than has been thought to Chaucer the man, who may even have relished an occasional rascal,” though the character is deeply complex and avoids simple characterizations (6). Chaucer the pilgrim, on the other hand, may not have simply relished rascals: he may have been one. He interacts with everyone, crossing class boundaries just as Falstaff does.

Despite the compelling links between Falstaff and Chaucer’s mask, the fat knight’s rejection scene at the end of *Henry IV, Part Two* throws a disturbing pall over their connection. It must be noted, that Falstaff’s caricature, if indeed inspired by Chaucer’s self-conception, must be distinguished from Chaucer the poet. There is no way of knowing the full extent of Shakespeare’s familiarity with Chaucer’s biography—the only records of Shakespeare’s sources are alluded to in the plays themselves. Unfortunately, that means there is no way to gauge whether Shakespeare distinguished between Chaucer’s mask in his poetry and the man himself. Donaldson, however, cautions against assuming that Shakespeare’s understanding of Chaucer was limited: “Shakespeare himself provides the final indication of the way Shakespeare read Chaucer, and that way is with full appreciation of his complexity” (*The Swan at the Well* 2). Thus, Shakespeare himself is a Chaucerian, concerned with the complexities of the poet’s meaning, but also incorporates that concern into his own art.

Falstaff is a locus where Chaucer and Shakespeare interact, where their masks meet. If an understanding of Falstaff is extended to his representation as this locus, Chaucer’s retraction and the rejection scene are inextricably linked with Shakespeare’s treatment of Sir John. When
an ecstatic Falstaff rushes in to see his friend’s coronation, the moment is “one of the most devastating in any of Shakespeare's plays” (Garber 357). Hal, now Henry V, proclaims, “I know thee not, old man” (V.v.47). If Chaucer the pilgrim can appropriately be read as a component of Falstaff, he too has been rejected as an otherworldly literary relic, a Munchausen, a “defaute of myn unkonnynge” (Retraction I 1082) in Chaucer’s words. Chaucer the Pilgrim is subsumed as one of many “translacions and editynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns” (I 1085). The England of *Henry IV Part Two* is “drooping” (I.i.3). Richard’s regime, which apparently valued literacy and learning, and, significantly, Chaucer, is replaced with the rule of the Henrys:

One way of mapping the decline is to notice how much of this play is written in prose. Almost every scene in verse is followed immediately by a longer one in prose, full of topical humor, bawdy puns, sexual innuendo and braggadocio, and endless discussions of how much things cost. The prose world is swallowing up the world of poetry.... (Garber 348)

Though it seems as if Falstaff is no poet (neither is Chaucer the pilgrim, really), his wit carries him far, until he is silenced at the end, unable to respond to his own banishment, nor sufficiently employ his bullshitting skills on the now angry Shallow. Falstaff’s theatrics, his words, have ceased, and despite the play’s epilogue, we never see him again. Harold Bloom gravely suggests “The greatest of all fictive wits dies the death of a rejected father-substitute, and also of a dishonored mentor” (Bloom 272). Chaucer’s world, as Garber puts it, is being swallowed by prose. Though the new King tells Falstaff to “Leave gormandizing” (V.v.52), Goddard notes Henry “turns to his attempt to swallow France” (I 211). This consumption language survives in *Henry V*. Exeter delivers Henry’s message to the King of France, insisting,
Deliver up the crown, and to take mercy
On the poor souls for whom this hungry war
Opens his vasty jaws; and on your head,
Turning the widows’ tears, the orphans’ cries,
The dead men’s blood, the privy maidens’ groans,
For husbands, fathers, and betrothed lovers,
That shall be swallow’d in this controversy.

(II.iv.104-109)

Significantly, Chaucer the pilgrim is swallowed by Chaucer the poet’s retraction, and, historically, Chaucer the man also quickly fades from the record.

The relationship between Chaucer, Falstaff, and Shakespeare is complex and tangled. While we can speculate that the bard feared, or felt, rejection in his own artistic circle, and incorporated Chaucer’s own self-rejection, there is no positive biographical source to draw upon. However, if we view Falstaff as Shakespeare’s mask, representative of his response to Chaucer’s persona, more than a modicum of anxiety simmers in the fifth act of Falstaff’s final play. Even the knight’s reported death scene is suggestive of Chaucerian themes:

'A parted ev’n just between twelve and one, ev’n at the turning o’ th’ tide; for after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his finger’s end, I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and ‘a babbl’d o’ green fields.

(Henry V II.iii.12-17)

This depiction seems to match Donaldson’s perception of Chaucer’s “outmoded” popular conceptualization as a “wide-eyed, jolly, roly-poly little man who, on fine Spring mornings, used
to get up early…and go look at daisies” (Speaking of Chaucer 2). Falstaff himself was, and still is, one of Shakespeare’s most beloved conceptions. Is Shakespeare, like Chaucer, retracting the fat knight, anticipating the problems he will cause in Henry V?

Falstaff’s death is more significant than a convenient killing-off. During the battle of Agincourt, Fluellen points out several superficial similarities between Alexander the Great and King Henry. But among the facile references to rivers and places starting with the letter “M”, Fluellen and Gower argue over comparisons on how Alexander and Henry treated their closest friends. Fluellen insists Alexander “did in his ales and his anger, look you, kill his best friend, Clytus” (IV.vii.37-39). Gower protests that their king “never kill’d any of his friends” (IV.vii.41), but Fluellen makes a chilling retort:

as Alexander kill’d his friend Clytus, being in his ales and his cups; so also

Harry Monmouth, being in his right wits and his good judgments, turn’d away the fat knight with the great belly doublet. He was full of jests, and gipes, and knaveries, and mocks—I have forgot his name.

(IV.vii.44-50)

Even late into the play, Falstaff’s rejection haunts Henry’s motives. This additional acknowledgment of Henry’s responsibility for Falstaff’s death, according to Goddard, is “Shakespeare's last judgment on the rejection of Falstaff” (I 249). Goddard contends that this moment, and Henry’s entrance immediately following where he declares he was never angry “Until this instant” (IV.vii.56), doubly confirms that the king’s behavior has been calculated and ruthless (I 251). So Falstaff is a public sacrifice to Hal’s own performance apotheosis, which he announces at the beginning of Henry IV, Part One:

And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
My reformation, glitt’ring o’er my fault,
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
I’ll so offend, to make offense a skill,
Redeeming time when men think least I will.

(I.ii.212-217)

In some respects, Falstaff sowed the seeds of his own destruction. Hal was an excellent understudy to Falstaff’s theatrics, but the future king’s aims in his methods were distinct from his mentor’s. For all of his faults, Falstaff is a generally fun-loving reprobate, and the audience has to wonder, at least on some level, why they are better off with a man who swallows countries instead of sack. But if Falstaff is a sacrifice to Henry’s rise, what are we losing, specifically? What is aspect of Falstaff’s rejection is Shakespeare casting judgment on, exactly?

Regarding his portrayal of Falstaff in his film *Chimes at Midnight*, Orson Welles commented,

> the film was not intended as a lament for Falstaff, but for the death of Merrie England. Merrie England as a conception, a myth which has been very real to the English-speaking world, and is to some extent expressed in other countries of the Medieval epoch: the age of chivalry, of simplicity, of Maytime and all that. It is more than Falstaff who is dying. It’s the old England dying and betrayed. (qtd. in Lyons 262)

While Welles’s notion of “Merrie England” is anachronistic to Shakespeare, considering Chaucer’s echoes in Falstaff’s character, the playwright might well be on the same relative track as Welles. Nostalgia aside, Shakespeare’s sensitivity to the late 13th and early 14th centuries
would necessarily contrast Chaucer’s presence and subsequent disappearance. Though far from idyllic, Richard II’s reign maintained a living “father of English poetry.” Henry IV’s rule signaled a drastic change and long following period of strife, one that Chaucer was almost entirely absent for. His disappearance parallels Falstaff’s own in *Henry V*, and one cannot help but wonder if Chaucer was also regarded as too subversive to further comment on current affairs, as Terry Jones wonders in *Who Murdered Chaucer?*.

Significantly, Falstaff is related to another famous subversive disturber and corrupter. A number of critics have noted parallels between Falstaff’s reported death scene in *Henry V* with Plato’s telling of the death of Socrates (Bloom 292, cf. Cubeta). Paul M. Cubeta points out that the Hostess, who has had a troubled relationship with Falstaff in the past, provides a “Christian charity starkly missing in Falstaff’s monarch” in her comforting of the knight in his final moments (181). Further,

> Her ministrations may also be reminiscent of those of Socrates’ friends at the onset of the death of their companion, condemned as another alleged villainous, abominable misleader of youth and a threat to the established political order….

(181)

Cubeta notes that the Hostess’s telling of Falstaff’s death—“I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone; then I felt to his knees, and so up’ard and up’ard, and all was as cold as any stone” (II.iii.23-26)—perhaps recalls Thomas More’s own recollection of Plato’s account in the *Phaedo* in his “Remembrance of Death” from *Four Last Things*: “lying in thy bedde,…thy nose sharpening, thy legges coling, thy fingers fimbling,…all thy strength fainting…and thy death drawying on” (Cubeta 181; *The Workes of Sir Thomas More* 77).

Shakespeare adopts a decidedly English interpretation of Socrates’ death, and even transposes
“Arthur” for “Abraham” (II.iii.9-10), which Garber contends as “a splendidly ‘English’ malapropism for the biblical phrase ‘in Abraham's bosom’ (Luke 16:22)” (397). It is uncertain whether Shakespeare would have associated Chaucer as a corrupter of youth, but the parallels between Falstaff, Chaucer, and Socrates do not strain credulity, given their close provenience. In any case, barring any specific link between Chaucer and Socrates, both Falstaff and the philosopher are rejected teachers. While their methods may be to some extent outdated or outmoded, something culturally tangible is indeed being lost in this exchange of lives for power. It seems that all three—Falstaff, Chaucer, and Socrates—leave us when we would least want them to, but when it is most convenient for their respective potentates.

While it is tempting to jump to a specific “point” in Shakespeare’s use of Falstaff as a Chaucerian-fashioned mask, the bard may not have reached any definitive conclusion himself, either in regards to Falstaff or Chaucer. Though not above borrowing some narrative elements from his exemplars, Shakespeare does not so much emulate Chaucer’s work as he reacts to it. This trend could indicate that Shakespeare attempts to come to terms with his understanding of Chaucer, rather than simply incorporating convenient plot devices and show off his breadth of reading. And just as Chaucer retracts what we regard as his best work, Shakespeare allows Falstaff to be rejected. But the lesson—or at least sentence versus solas—is embedded in those rejections. The audience is responsible for giving meaning to the loss of Chaucer and the loss of Falstaff. It is entirely possible that Shakespeare feared his own eventual rejection, that he might be filtering the anxieties of authorial reputation and his legacy as a writer through his understanding and perception of England’s greatest poet. Nevertheless, the audience must reconcile the likes of Falstaff, who is reflective of both the best and worst of both worlds in terms of wit and reputation. The same applies to readers of Chaucer. Can we actually divorce
Falstaff and *The Canterbury Tales* of their respective vices? It seems impossible to understand or experience their virtues without considering what these vices imply. How could Chaucer lampoon medieval social norms without his flawed pilgrims? How could Shakespeare address the complexities of honor without Falstaff? As Donaldson suggests, “although others may find what they do reprehensible, they find their occupations fully justified because they are their occupations, and they find them congenial” (*Swan at the Well* 130). Whatever good can be found in a character like Falstaff must be searched for in the entire scope of his behaviors, not just individual qualities. These virtues and vices are not unharmonious in the least. Thus, there is no dissonance in Shakespeare’s appreciation of Chaucer, though there may well be in his reckoning of Chaucer’s self-conception as an author, who just happens to be a living part amongst a greater cast of characters.
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