

Unfinished Quests from Chaucer to Spenser

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Abstract

Late medieval English texts often represent unfinished quests for obscurely significant objects. These works create enchanted worlds where more always remains to be discovered and where questers search for an ur-text, an authoritative book that promises perfect knowledge. Rather than reaching this ur-text, however, questers confront rumor, monstrous babble, and the clamor of argument, which thwart their efforts to gather together sacred wholeness. Yet while threatening, noise also preserves the sacred by ensuring that it remains forever elsewhere, for recovering perfect knowledge would disenchant the world. Scholarship on medieval noise often focuses on class: medieval writers tend to describe threats to political authority as noisy. These unfinished quests, though, suggest that late medieval literature's complex investment in noise extends further and involves the very search for the sacred, a search full of opaque language and unending desire. Noise, then, becomes the sound of narrative itself.

While romance foregrounds questing most clearly, these ideas appear in a variety of genres. Chapter 1 shows that in the *House of Fame* rumor both perpetuates and undermines knowledge, so sacred authority must remain beyond the poem's frame. Chapter 2 juxtaposes the *Parliament of Fowls* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, in which lists replace missing quest-objects, the philosopher's stone and certainty about love. Chapter 3 centers on *Piers Plowman*, which becomes encyclopedic as one attempt to "preve what is Dowel" leads to another, and Will never definitively learns how to save his soul, the knowledge he most wants. Chapter 4 turns to Julian of Norwich's search for divine "mening" and her confrontation with an incoherent fiend, an anxious moment that aligns her with these less serene contemporaries. Chapter 5 argues that Thomas Malory's

elusive, noisy Questing Beast at once bolsters and undermines chivalry. The final chapter looks ahead to Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*, where the Blatant Beast, a sixteenth-century amalgam of the fame tradition and the Questing Beast, menaces Faery Land yet, as a figure for poetry, also contributes to its enchantment. In trying to locate and maintain the sacred, these unfinished quests evoke worlds intensely anxious about “auctoritee.”

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Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter 1 Names and Frames in the <i>House of Fame</i> | 38 |
| Chapter 2 Chaucer and the “Slydynge Sciences” of Alchemy, Poetry, and Love | 76 |
| Chapter 3 Langland’s Lifetime Writing Plans | 112 |
| Chapter 4 Julian of Norwich and the Muttering Fiend | 153 |
| Chapter 5 The Questing Beast and the Noise of Adventure | 188 |
| Chapter 6 Spenser’s Medieval Monster | 227 |
| Bibliography | 265 |

Introduction

To look for a lost collar button is not a true quest. – Auden

1.

As the *Parliament of Fowls* opens, Chaucer laments that something eludes him:

“The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne, / Th’assay so hard, so sharp the conquerynge,
 / The dredful joye alwey that slit so yerne” (1-3). We might wonder what “craft” the poet
 has in mind, and given his adaptation of “ars longa, vita brevis” we might guess the craft
 of writing poetry, but in the next line he declares, “All this mene I by love” (4). Soon he
 remarks that he is reading a book and hoping to find a “certeyn thing”: “Nat yore / Agon
 it happede me for to beholde / Upon a bok, was write with letters olde, / And therupon, a
 certeyn thing to lerne, / The longe day ful faste I redde and yerne” (17-21). What is this
 “certeyn thing”? Because Chaucer has explained that by “dredful joye” he means love,
 the “thing” may concern love, but he does not elaborate. Soon the poet puts aside this
 nighttime reading, Macrobius’ commentary concerning Cicero on “commune profyt”
 (47), and observes that he has found some unsought “thyng” but still lacks what he
 wanted: “For bothe I hadde thyng which that I nolde, / And ek I ne hadde that thyng that I
 wolde” (90-91). A dream follows in which birds gather on Valentine’s Day to choose
 their mates, and a rivalry emerges among three tercel eagles for a single formel. The
 competition provokes a noisy parliament in which the other birds, eager to get on with
 choosing their own mates, offer her advice. But the female eagle, unwilling to decide
 among her suitors, receives a dispensation from Nature to defer her choice to next year.
 The avian parliamentarians, finally released from the frustrating delay, burst forth
 together in song, and the vision ends. In the poem’s last stanza, Chaucer, indecisive like

the formel, wakes and says that he plans to take himself to still other books so that he may dream something to help him fare better: “I hope, iwis, to rede so som day / That I shal mete som thyng for to fare / The bet, and thus to rede I nyl nat spare” (697-9). Here at the poem’s close, he recalls that mysterious “thyng” for which he had been searching, and he has neither found nor defined it. Unwilling to quit looking, though, the poet plans to take himself to other books.

I began this dissertation by asking what contributes to Chaucer’s unfinished quest for an imprecisely defined object in the *Parliament*. The poem itself offers some answers. Like many of Chaucer’s works, this dream vision includes an imperfect authority figure. Nature, somewhat like the eagle in the *House of Fame* or Harry Bailly in the *Canterbury Tales*, has only partial authority over the various voices in the poem (Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry* 125). In Alan of Lille’s twelfth-century formulations of Nature, which Chaucer draws on, the goddess is “God’s deputy,” but in Alan’s *De planctu naturae*, humanity has severed its reason from Nature (Wetherbee, *Platonism* 188, 196). In the *Parliament*, Nature and reason seem even further apart, for Nature herself remarks that if she “were Reasoun,” then she would advise the formel to accept her highest-ranking suitor (632). In Chaucer’s cosmos, reason and love do not necessarily coincide, and Nature allows the eagle to defer her choice. In the *Parliament* the will and the intellect conflict, in other words, so no perfect authority is at hand (Lynch, *Chaucer’s Philosophical Visions* 87). The poet looks for “certeyn” knowledge, a perfect authority that would allow his quest to finish. Before waking, though, he does collect many viewpoints on love, and the poem becomes a small encyclopedia on the subject. Not only does Nature weigh in, but also Cicero, Macrobius, Alan of Lille, Jean de Meun, Dante, Boccaccio, and the courtly love

tradition. The poet seeks, then, a perfect authority and finds a proliferation of imperfect authorities. The dreaming poet learns much but ends nearly as he begins, looking to books for something he cannot quite name.

Both these varying views on love and the birds' parliament itself make this dream vision a noisy poem. Noise fills medieval literature: animal sounds, demonic babble, rebels' clamor, mystics' laughter, rumor, debating, farting. This noisiness arises at least in part from the medieval fascination with the fallen world. In *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Band & Beyond*, Hillel Schwartz comments that "having disrupted the stillness, noise is forever conditioned by nostalgic yearnings for a calm that is no more, pleadings for a peace to be restored, oracles of a harmony yet to come" (20). These yearnings and pleadings are especially loud in late medieval England. The frequency with which noise appears in its literature speaks to the anxiety that language is ultimately unreliable and authority remote. In addition to noise, the medieval imagination consistently turns to questing, whether religious pilgrimage, chivalric adventure, or intellectual voyage, and this dissertation brings together these two preoccupations. Often quests and noise appear in the same text, such as the *Parliament*, where the noisy avian congress has some relationship to the dreamer's unfinished search, or even in the same figure, such as the noisy Questing Beast. Medieval questers aim to discover unfallen language, which helps explain why their journeys encounter noise and refuse to end.

Admittedly, asked to list medieval quest narratives, few people would mention the *Parliament of Fowls*. The holy grail story and chivalric romance more generally perhaps come to mind first, and in Chapter 5 I examine an enigmatic monster that seems like the grail's unholy double, the Questing Beast in Thomas Malory's *Works*. Chapter 6 explores

this monster's Spenserian progeny, the Blatant Beast, also the object of an unfinishable hunt. To address spiritual quests, I devote a chapter to Julian of Norwich's pursuit of divine "mening" in her revelation, and a chapter to *Piers Plowman* and the search for Dowel, Truth, Charity, and Piers himself. To further explore the connection between language and questing, I examine two works by Chaucer in addition to the *Parliament*, the *House of Fame* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, poems centrally concerned with language's potential for deception. These texts offer different responses to an unfinishable search for authority in a world full of dissonance (some genres seem more anxious to keep out the noise than others), but each quester looks for unfallen language and instead encounters opaque language or outright noise.

These works tend to imagine their quest-objects as a hidden, authoritative text that has become fragmented and unrecoverable. In her study of Leviticus, Mary Douglas defines the holy as "completeness" (54), something pure that does not blur categories. Sacrality, we might say, is free from ambiguity, even if in a fallen world people can never perceive the sacred unambiguously. Late medieval questers seek "completeness" but discover only pieces of a sacred ur-text, whether the philosopher's stone's true name, the "French book" with which Malory authorizes his stories, or reports of Dowel. In the *Parliament*, the poet looks for this book as he begins and is still looking when he wakes in the final stanza. Questers' efforts to find these sacred texts, however, often take them further from their goal: attempts to "preve" in *Piers Plowman* produce more attempts; rumor creates more rumor; adventure generates more adventure; etymologizing the philosopher's stone results in more etymologies. Noise thwarts these quests by making

the ur-text uninterpretable, and perhaps even implies that such a text does not exist at all, that the noise of rumor always gives way to merely more noise.

On the one hand, then, noise threatens to end the quests, but on the other hand noise generates them to begin with by keeping more perfect knowledge always elsewhere. Harold Bloom remarks that “romance thrives on incomplete and imperfect knowledge, since full knowledge destroys enchantment” (*Genius* 649). The imperfect knowledge in the works I examine (though not all are romances) arises from an enchanted world, a world full of half-perceived significance. Lacking the perfect knowledge that the ur-text promises, these works represent worlds where fuller knowledge always waits elsewhere, and thus stories continue indefinitely. Like noise, narrative itself is the product of a fallen world, for narrative happens in time, not in God’s eternal present. The muttering fiends, barking monsters, and cackling birds are reminders of the fallen world and the impossibility of escaping narrative. Quieting the noise would end the tales and allow the ur-text to emerge clearly but disenchant the world. An enchanted world relies on noise to keep fuller knowledge at bay and maintain the enchantment. Rather than imagining noise as merely good or bad, these texts represent noise with an always double nature that both threatens and preserves enchantment, the possibility for a sacred ur-text.

2.

What is a quest? Quests emerge from desire, and to the extent that desire drives stories, the idea of the quest can quickly become amorphous.¹ Partly because the Middle Ages imagined life as exile and pilgrimage, searching propels narratives in various medieval genres. The impetus to quest, so readily identifiable with the Middle Ages,

owes much to the sense of an aging world where people are cut off from an idyllic past and now experience imperfect and multiple desires. The fallen world creates the conditions for questing, for in the Golden Age, desire did not send people on impossible adventures, or even anywhere at all. As Friend explains in the *Romance of the Rose*, no one traveled much then: “the first men...did not know what sailing was. Whatever seemed to them to be worth seeking, they found all of it in their own land” (146-47). In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid, enormously influential on Jean de Meun and medieval writers more generally, offers a similar description of the unfallen world:

no wood had yet been hauled
 down to the limpid waves, that it might sail
 to foreign countries; and the only coasts
 that mortals knew in that age were their own...
 Earth of itself—and uncomelled—untouched
 by hoes, not torn by ploughshares, offered all
 that one might need: men did not have to seek:
 they simply gathered mountain strawberries
 and the arbutus' fruit and cornel cherries;
 and thick upon their prickly stems, blackberries;
 and acorns fallen from Jove's sacred tree. (6-7)

In the Golden Age, “men did not have to seek,” but now that desire has become imperfect, people are discontented with what they find around them and incessantly seek various things, both necessities like food that once sprung up nearby and less necessary things like goods from other shores. Chaucer reproduces these sentiments in his short

poem “The Former Age”: “Yit nas the ground nat wounded with the plough, / But corn up-sprong, unsowe of mannes hond...No ship yit karf the wawes grene and blewe, / No marchaunt yit ne fette outlandish ware” (9-10, 21-22). The absence of ships and “outlandish ware” in the Golden Age suggests that travel was unnecessary and that people had simpler desires, and even that they hardly needed anything at all. This description of a time without trade also echoes, however distantly, anxieties about language that inform the *House of Fame*, which describes words exchanged for other words and the loss of any original utterance. Change and exchange are symptoms of a declining world, where value has become uncertain and negotiable.

Especially in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer explores the variety and power of desire. In the *General Prologue*, he describes many of the pilgrims’ ambitions: the Knight loves “trouthe and honour, fredom, and curteisye” (46); the Prioress may wish she were a lady in a chivalric romance; the Monk enjoys hunting; the Clerk wants books; the Franklin delights in food and drink; the Doctor of Physik loves gold; the Wife of Bath angles for another husband, and so on (Cooper, *English Romance* 304 and *Oxford Guide* 36). The tales themselves expand this investigation of human desire’s multiplicity. In the *Knight’s Tale*, Arcite’s dying speech asks what people want: “What is this world, what asketh men to have?” (2777). His story may imply answers: they want victory in love and in war. The ensuing tales, though, answer his question in other ways. In the *Miller’s Tale* and other fabliaux, no one need wonder what people want: everyone is after the same thing. The *Wife of Bath’s Tale* reformulates the question by asking what women want, and her tale offers a precise answer. In several tales the characters want money: the *Friar’s Tale*, *Pardoner’s Tale* (also a pursuit of death), and the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*,

where the search for the philosopher's stone involves the alchemist's lust for gold. Some tales, like the Second Nun's and the Parson's, center on the desire for salvation, which also motivates Will's wandering in *Piers Plowman*.

But sometimes Chaucer and his characters, a bit like Arcite, cannot quite name what they desire, an uncertainty that motivates the search for the "certeyn thing" in the *Parliament*.² One of my central observations is that questing in late medieval literature involves interpreting. Chaucer's dream visions, Julian's revelation, *Piers Plowman*, and Malory's grail and anti-grail stories are all about reading. Not only imperfect desire but also imperfect language fills the fallen world.³ Chaucer's quest for a "certeyn thing" might be for a sure or a particular thing: his quest object seems to be a pun, and this kind of opaque language is typical of unfinished quests. Questers, whether knights, alchemists, or baffled poet-personas, become readers and try to decipher the fallen world, a place full of uncertain names. In his *Libre de contemplació*, the encyclopedist Ramon Llull explains that unfamiliar words exercise the interpreter: "since the rational soul cannot be satisfied in this world and desires its fulfillment, for this reason man delights more when he hears new or strange words, for he has the impression that by means of such words he can better arrive at that which he desires than by the words that he is accustomed to hear, in which and through which he cannot find fulfillment for his soul" (qtd. in Franklin-Brown 160). The passage seems to say that new or strange language both allows access to something that could lead to "fulfillment" and prevents that access. The "new or strange words" are still fallen language, but they startle us out of the complacency that customary words induce and offer the delightful prospect that knowledge waits just ahead. Llull's formulation contains the logic that propels many quest narratives, where opaque language

both incites a journey to know more and limits that journey. In the fallen world, interpretation becomes not simply a quest but an endless one.

3.

Because allegory promises to circumvent the problems with deteriorating language, it offers a useful way to think about language's role in unfinished quests. Allegory draws attention to its terms in the way that Llull describes and imagines its characters and readers as endless questers for knowledge.⁴ Allegory is a search for transcendent language and aims to recapture, or at least gesture toward, an unfallen world, and the unfinished quests in Chaucer, Langland, Julian, Malory, and Spenser, whether obviously allegorical or not, all reflect this attitude toward language. In two cases, the quest-objects are puns: in the *Parliament*, the dreamer pursues a "certeyn" thing, which might be a "sure" or a "particular" thing, and Palomides hunts the "questing" beast, where "questing" means both "barking" and "seeking." Similarly, the philosopher's stone remains hidden amid obscure terms, and no one can fully explain Dowel. The fact that the quest-objects draw attention to their opacity implies that transparent language would end the quest. In his study of medieval "autography," A.C. Spearing argues that medieval texts written from an "I" perspective often defer their endings, even a text like *Troilus and Criseyde*, which attaches a Christian conclusion to a pagan tale: "What Derrida calls "the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire" for a "transcendental signified" is deflected so far as the story of Troilus is concerned, though Chaucer adds, from outside the world of that story, some concluding stanzas addressed to the triune God of Christianity" (116). First-person narration can postpone resolution by implying that perceiving the world never ends, but often in other

late medieval texts the desire for a “transcendental signified” is also “deflected” yet overwhelmingly present. The “exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire” for a “transcendental signified” sounds like a description of allegory, the experience of a fallen world, and even of cultural production in the later Middle Ages more generally.

Because the fallen world separates people from any “transcendental signified,” medieval questers gather fragments of knowledge. Allegory works by relating parts to a whole and encourages a compilation aesthetic: we might think of allegories that name elements of a person or of the cosmos.⁵ Walter Benjamin compares allegorists to collectors:

in every collector hides an allegorist, in every allegorist a collector. As far as the collector is concerned, his collection is never complete; for let him discover just a single piece missing, and everything he's collected remains a patchwork, which is what things are for allegory from the beginning. On the other hand, the allegorist— for whom objects represent only keywords in a secret dictionary, which will make known their meanings to the initiated—precisely the allegorist can never have enough of things. With him, one thing is so little capable of taking the place of another that no possible reflection suffices to foresee what meaning his profundity might lay claim to for each one of them. (*Arcades* 211)

Benjamin's analogy draws together several ideas about allegory: its attention to language, obscurity, and secret knowledge; its tendency to remain incomplete; and its ability to become encyclopedic.⁶ Benjamin's analysis might describe early twentieth-century culture more than the Middle Ages, but he uses a passage from Huizinga's *The Autumn of*

the Middle Ages to illustrate the collector's mentality.⁷ Huizinga explains that "medieval men were accustomed to disposing in a will of even the most trivial of their possessions separately and in great detail," and goes on to list the everyday items that a certain "poor woman" mentions in her will, and then draws these conclusions: "Is this not a very trivial example of the frame of mind that postulated every case of virtue to be an eternal example and that saw in every fashion a divine ordinance? The adhesion of the mind to the particularity and value of each single thing is what dominates the mind of the collector and the miser like a disease" (278). The will is a list, and for the medieval testator, each item has particular significance, an attitude that reflects an allegorical view of the world. Chaucer's alchemists might also serve as an example of Benjamin's argument, for they literally have a "secret dictionary," both in their catalogue of terms for the philosopher's stone and the lists of ingredients for their alchemical recipes. Their "profundity," moreover, ascribes significance to each item in these lists, significance known only to the "initiated." As we will see, the collectors in this study, forever seeking an underlying order, are always missing a piece, and their collections remain a "patchwork."

The metaphor of a forever incomplete collection can account for a number of other features in fourteenth and fifteenth-century English literature. Lists, encyclopedias, and multi-voiced works like the *Canterbury Tales* are all favorite medieval forms, and works in this period stand out for their untidy structures. Chaucer's penchant for lists attests to this aesthetic, as does his tendency to invite readers to compare his juxtaposed narratives. Both his work and Langland's rely on juxtaposition and an assemblage of not obviously related material.⁸ How do Conscience's roles compare in *Piers Plowman*? Why

do Piers or any other of the characters in Langland's poem appear when they do? As Chaucer explores spaces in his dream visions such as the Houses of Rumor and Fame or Venus' temple and Nature's park, he asks us to consider their relationship. Similarly, he provokes us to wonder why he sets one Canterbury tale next to another. Malory, too, employs this aesthetic, suggestively setting tales within or beside one another. If we imagine these authors as rewriting diverse material to suggest a lost or absent wholeness, they begin to resemble allegorists searching for an underlying order.

Rather than distilling quest-objects into transparent language and finishing their searches, protagonists in these texts wander in noisy worlds gathering pieces of wisdom and information, fragments that do not quite add up to the lost wholeness that they seek. The quester becomes a compiler. Searching for an authority on love in the *Parliament*, Chaucer translates, summarizes, or borrows from Cicero, Jean de Meun, Boccaccio, Dante, and Alan of Lille. Late medieval texts evidence an interest in their own fragmentary nature by sending readers to other books, something Chaucer does explicitly or implicitly in the *Parliament* and elsewhere. Morton Bloomfield observes that reading *Piers Plowman* "is like reading a commentary on an unknown text" (32), an observation that could describe the experience of reading other late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century texts. In a gesture something like Chaucer's reliance on "Lollius" in *Troilus and Criseyde*,⁹ Malory occasionally evokes a "French book" from which he claims to draw his romances. Chaucer's alchemists, looking for the philosopher's stone's true name, pursue a hidden text with particular zeal. These instructions to seek out other books seem to imply that reading is always incomplete, that some more authoritative text awaits always elsewhere. Medieval literary theory often describes fiction as a pleasing wrapper

for a wholesome kernel,¹⁰ but as these examples suggest, medieval literary practice just as often sets both characters and readers searching for elusive significance.¹¹

In his essay “Unpacking my Library,” Benjamin also meditates on collecting and access to a lost world, and his comments here help us further illuminate allegory’s fascination with names and language:

I am not exaggerating when I say that to a true collector the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth. This is the childlike element which in a collector minglest with the element of old age. For children can accomplish the renewal of existence in a hundred unfailing ways. Among children, collecting is only one process of renewal; other processes are the painting of objects, the cutting out of figures, the application of decals—the whole range of childlike modes of acquisition, from touching things to giving them names. To renew the old world—that is the collector’s deepest desire when he is driven to acquire new things. (*Illuminations* 61)

Benjamin links collecting to the search for a vanished or imaginary world, a search for renewal that, if we read this passage next to his other comments on collecting, never ends, for the collector’s “collection is never complete.” Fascinatingly, Benjamin lists “naming” among the children’s games that can “accomplish the renewal of existence.” Allegorists, collectors, and children all name things to evoke another world.¹² Old books—fragments of a vanished world—allow the collector to grasp at a lost moment much as allegorical names adumbrate a far-off truth.

These texts imagine quests moving toward a reintegration or “renewal” that never occurs, and this irresolution leaves open the possibility for always more interpretation or

more adventure, more talking or more wandering. The *Parliament*'s dreamer could read through whole libraries in search of something certain about love, and both Will and Julian could continue to read the book of the world until the apocalypse, the final unveiling. These authors respond to Boethius' explanation of humanity's inability to comprehend the unity that God sees. For Boethius' god, history and time do not so much lie open as spread out in a continuous present (117). From a human perspective, history and time continue to unfold, and more knowledge and experience always remain to encounter.¹³ Partly for this reason, late medieval literature not only collects facts but also whole ways of thinking. In his study of Dante and the medieval encyclopedic tradition, Giuseppe Mazzotta describes humanity's imperfect knowledge when he observes that for Dante, "the world is not and cannot be limited to the absolute measure of one's own life and one's own theoretical constructions of it; there always exist other realms of discourse just beyond one's own experience" (*Dante's Vision* 30). Here Mazzotta is commenting on canto XV of the *Inferno*, in which Dante meets Brunetto Latini, a former teacher who represents a kind of knowledge that Dante must transcend. According to Mazzotta, Dante's teacher confines his conversation to their biographies and misses their lives' larger significance (30). After meeting his teacher, Dante explains his appearance there with Virgil by saying that "along this road he leads me home" (54). Brunetto assures Dante, "By following your star / you cannot fail to reach a glorious port" (55-56). As Mazzotta explains, "the extensive discrepancies between their respective vocabularies ('glory' is certainly earthly fame for Brunetto, but for Dante it has an irreducibly theological resonance; 'home' is Florence for one and heaven for the other, etc.) point primarily to the *limit* of personal experience in the act of knowledge" (29, original

emphasis). Brunetto ends his conversation by recommending his work to Dante, which further emphasizes that the teacher does not understand the limits of his own knowledge. Dante reads the world allegorically and reinterprets Brunetto's language to lead himself toward another idea. The world elsewhere, another way to describe "other realms of discourse just beyond one's own experience," fascinates the medieval imagination. Partly these quests cannot finish because that would mean arriving in heaven or a rediscovered Eden, a place where the intellect and the will have become perfect and quests therefore unnecessary. Late medieval narrative consistently imagines a fallen world where something else, some new adventure or knowledge, always waits just ahead.

As the examples from Dante and Benjamin show, allegory draws attention to its own language even as it wants to move beyond it. "Allegorical fiction," Maureen Quilligan explains, "is aimed at leading the reader out of the fiction, to a place where he can view himself in relation to his world, seen again in its eternal dimensions; only there, outside himself, in touch with the Other, is man happy" (153). Here we might again think of Dante's *Commedia*, a poem ambitious to view the world's "eternal dimensions" and humanity's relationship to them. For a contrast to allegory, Quilligan offers Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire* as an example of a work without a "sacred pretext" that sends its reader nowhere: "*Pale Fire*, in refusing to lead its reader out of the labyrinth, is not an allegory, yet in it Nabokov tell us something *about* allegory. In an absurd world, allegory is impossible, and an allegorical reader is necessarily insane" (153-54, original emphasis). Quilligan's comments on Nabokov help us think about why some late medieval quests not only do not finish but also do not precisely name their objects.¹⁴ Because the quests aim to find a way out of language's labyrinth, their objects resist naming: like Llull's

“strange words” these quest-objects promise fuller knowledge somewhere ahead. Even if they do not go so far as Nabokov in positing an “absurd world,” none of the texts in this study fully allow their characters a perspective outside language’s labyrinth. These questers hope to escape language, but the texts they inhabit seem skeptical of any such escape. Julian and Langland, for instance, would like to lead us to that place where we can view ourselves and see the sacred other, but ultimately even they emphasize that they can only lead their readers in that direction.

Objects of uncertain significance also help allegory entice readers into its “labyrinth.” The unexplained “certeyn thing” at the *Parliament*’s opening has analogues in other medieval poetry. In his study of medieval dream visions, J. Stephen Russell offers several examples of unexplained moments near the beginning of medieval poems:

Guillaume shows us his dream-self basting his sleeves with the silver needle as the birds sing to underscore the total conflation of text and persona here and to reinforce the sense of enigma and intrusion already felt by readers at the opening of the poem....Like parallel opening enigmas in may other dream visions—the whelp (*Book of the Duchess*), the “huyl” (*Pearl*), the “shroudes” (*Piers Plowman*), and the daisy (*Legend of Good Women*)—this image shouts its meaningfulness but remains silent on its meaning. It is an image, sure enough, but one presented to demonstrate to its readers that the ritual drama of this text is, so far, beyond the ken of the uninitiated. (118)

Each of these obscure phrases leads readers deeper into the dreamer’s world.¹⁵ As in Benjamin’s comments on collecting and allegory and Llull’s interest in arcane

vocabulary, here, too, we find obscure language linked to the promise of more knowledge. To fit these enigmatic moments into a larger scheme, readers must try to bridge the gap between these words and some hidden referent. But in the *House of Fame*, language only leads to more language, and even in *Piers Plowman*, which wants to abandon defining for doing, one explanation for Dowel often leads simply to another.

Lacking a complete collection, a harmonious whole, medieval questers experience the fallen world's disarray as noise. In his "Introduction to Medieval Noise," Jeffrey Cohen offers useful definitions of the word:

noise itself is inimical to language, to purities of expression and ungarbled syntax. Jacques Attali, the foremost theorist of the phenomenon, defines noise in a manner reminiscent of the anthropologist Mary Douglas's famous definition of "dirt" as "matter out of place": "Noise...does not exist in itself, but only in relation to the system within which it is inscribed... [Noise is] experienced as destruction, disorder, dirt, pollution, an aggression against code-structuring messages. In all cultures, it is associated with the idea of the weapon, blasphemy, plague." Noise is body, monster, materiality, the other, the sound of all those differences that seem to have been excluded but inhabit the heart of identity. (269)

Questers in late medieval literature experience noise in several of these forms. Often works represent noise as a literal din: the Questing Beast makes a strange barking noise; the *House of Fame* describes the rumble of words become noise in the upper atmosphere; squawking, debating birds inhabit the *Parliament of Fowls*; and Julian confronts a fiend's incoherent muttering. Here we also find noise figured as monstrous, demonic, and "an

aggression against code-structuring messages.” The fiend that attacks Julian even uses noise as a “weapon.” In each case, noise contributes to the world’s dissonance and impenetrability. In this sense, Langland’s Will and Chaucer’s alchemists also confront noise, a “disorder” that defies their efforts to find a hidden code. “Excluded” yet at “the heart of identity,” noise is central and peripheral, something that the ordering impulses in medieval culture continually but not quite successfully repress.

The texts this dissertation examines are all noisy, but as we have seen they also owe something to allegory, a “code-structured message” that aims to recover unfallen language, the opposite of noise and rumor. Rumor and allegory both predicate an ur-text, but where allegory gestures toward this original utterance rumor moves away from it. Despite its emphasis on imperfect knowledge, allegory tries to describe an ordered system. Often an allegorical quester on an educational journey gathers terms, ideas, and experiences that all adumbrate some hidden knowledge.¹⁶ We might think of Langland’s Will, who investigates the parts of his own soul and much of his culture in an effort to learn how to synthesize divine justice and mercy. Angus Fletcher likens allegory to research: “The pilgrim’s progress is a kind of research project, taking all life for its boundaries. With all the irrationality of daemonic agency per se, this is the very kind of agency necessary to discover a cosmic order. The hero is a conquistador; he arbitrates order over chaos by confronting a random collection of people and events, imposing his own fate upon that random collection” (67). Allegory looks for a more truthful text, a “cosmic order,” and that search involves a desire for power: the “hero is a conquistador.”¹⁷ Benjamin’s word “acquisition” resembles a gentler version of the vocabulary that Fletcher uses to describe allegory. These scholars argue that reaching for

some older, more unified, or more transcendent existence requires “domination”: both the collector and the allegorist are trying to order the world, an effort that involves assigning names (Honig 28-29). Fletcher’s analysis perhaps brings to mind Dante or his Neoplatonist forebears more readily than late medieval allegorists, for none of the texts in this study manage the domination that Fletcher associates with the allegorist. Will incessantly demonstrates “curiosity about the order of things,” and his “research project” does take “all life for its boundaries,” but he does not quite achieve the triumph over chaos that Fletcher describes. If Will discovers a cosmic order, he only glimpses it. Rather than conquistadors, collectors such as Will or Chaucer’s alchemists become more like collectors who cannot complete their collections.

4.

Despite his attention to language’s imperfection and his interest in endless interpretive difficulty, Chaucer’s quests do not all end unresolved. He largely avoids Arthurian romance, but the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, one of his few gestures toward the genre, recounts a successful quest for a quite specific “thyng”: “What thyng is it that women moost desiren” (905). Although this quest-object begins as something imprecisely defined, as Helen Cooper observes (*English Romance* 49), eventually the question’s answer does become clear and the knight’s quest decidedly does finish. First he collects possible answers to the question: “Somme seyde women loven best richesse, / Some seyde honour, somme seyde jolynesse, / Somme riche array, somme seyden lust abedde” (925-227), but finally he hears the life-saving argument: “Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee / As wel over hir housbond as hir love, / And for to been in maistrie hym above” (1038-40). Finding the correct answer amid several possibilities could not happen

in the dream visions or the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* or *Piers Plowman*. In those works, the collecting never ends, and in the *House of Fame* and the *Parliament*, the dreaming Chaucer never quite seems to learn or to divulge the name of his quest-object. The Wife's story includes an authority figure to judge the knight's case and his answer's appropriateness, an authority that these other texts have only to a lesser degree. The tale ends with a reintegration, an attempt to settle the question and end the quest, but in doing so draws attention to its own fantasy. When compared to the interminable, baffling quests in other late medieval stories and to her own *Prologue*'s complexity, this quest's definitive resolution suggests that only a perfect authority can end a quest, and the Wife sets her tale in a fairy land of long ago, perhaps suggesting that only there are such authority and resolution possible.

Chaucer's other foray into chivalric romance, the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, does threaten to become an interminable quest, but with hardly any object at all, save perhaps its protagonist's longing for the elf queen. In a parody of romance's tendency toward endlessness, the tale moves from one episode to the next: the hero rides through a forest, conceives a passion for the elf queen, encounters a giant and retreats, prepares to meet him again the next day, and then the poet catalogues the hero's arms, begins listing chivalric worthies, and so forth. *Sir Thopas* requires interruption to end, and in comparison the *Wife of Bath's Tale* arrives at a tidy conclusion. The interpretive struggles of medieval dreamers, the mystic Julian, or even Malory's knights hoping to learn their fates in battle are neither as aimless as *Sir Thopas* nor as conclusive as the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. The story of Sir Thopas' desire for the elf queen may never end, but there is no danger that he will learn anything, whereas the dream vision questers especially assemble

long catalogues of knowledge. And though the knight in the Wife's tale finds an aphorism to save his life and end the story, no concise wisdom could conclude the *Parliament* (and even in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* the aphorism's simplicity draws attention to itself), which emphasizes love's complexity, or the *House of Fame*, which ends by reducing knowledge to rumor. Similarly, the alchemists could scarcely accept the elixir's true name were they to stumble upon it, for no doubt that word too would require etymologizing. They might endorse the communication program of another group of mad scientists, the academy of Lagado in *Gulliver's Travels*, which advocate using "things" rather than words to communicate. Among other advantages, this scheme nearly promises to reverse the Tower of Babel's effect: objects would "serve as an universal language to be understood in all civilized nations, whose goods and utensils are generally of the same kind, or nearly resembling, so that their uses might be easily comprehended" (213). Often medieval texts imagine perfect communication as wordless, an attempt to escape the material and contingent aspects of language, but the alchemists and Swift's scientists hope to transcend language's imperfections by embracing the material world.

The Wife of Bath's *Prologue* also illuminates the texts in this study, for there she demonstrates how much interpretation depends on the interpreter. Read selectively, Paul supports the Wife in her aim for sovereignty in marriage (129-130), and the gospels, she points out, do not forbid octogamy (32-33). Her differences with clerks are not likely to cease, for she and they can interpret the same texts to different ends. In the Wife's tale, meaning is a secret waiting for someone to find, but in her prologue meaning is less certain, or even requires manufacture. Heterogeneous medieval encyclopedias especially rely on this idea. Mary Franklin-Brown explains that "the reader's task, in constructing a

coherent representation of the world from the encyclopedic text, is to sift through dissonant voices, and his own subjectivity is constructed in the space of a mosaic of citations” (308). The Wife of Bath is not reading a particular encyclopedia, but she does construct her own subjectivity from a “mosaic of citations.” This kind of reading practice images interpretation as quest, often an unfinishable quest, because readers respond differently.¹⁸ At least broadly speaking, the works in this dissertation share her prologue’s emphasis on the reader’s interaction with the text. Allowing for a range of reader responses, though, does not legitimate any interpretation, and medieval literature often stresses interpretive difficulty. Writing on Dante, Mazzotta argues that reading the “grammar” of “history” requires constant reinterpretation: “This ambiguity of the letter does not mean that the letter is useless or superfluous. On the contrary, it means that the letter is the necessary envelope, the metaphor that must be continuously questioned and interpreted” (*Dante* 158-59).¹⁹ The Wife’s *Prologue* illustrates these principles also. She finds the letter both useful and ambiguous, and while she enjoys her interpretive jousting, she also recognizes its importance in the world. Even if the text cannot divulge truth, or even because it cannot, the debate matters enormously, for it is a contest over authority. She does not worry that the world seems confusing, full of ambiguous language, but takes this fact as given. In contrast to, say, the alchemists in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, who find themselves in a similar predicament, she revels in language, and uses it for her own ends. For the Wife of Bath, authority is not something mysterious to be endlessly pursued in old books; instead, authority is an argument.

Because the problem of authority is so important to these poems, the *House of Fame* offers a good place to begin exploring the late medieval fascination with unfinished

quests. The eagle who carries him to Fame's hall promises the poet that he will "here, / When we be come there I seye, / Mo wonder thynges, dar I leye, / And of Loves folk moo tydynges" (672-75). In this sense the dreaming poet both succeeds and does not: he produces a poem, but when he finally learns a "tydyng" at the end of the poem he declines to communicate it: "Folk can syng hit bet than I," he shrugs (2138). Meanwhile the poet confronts the world's perplexing multiplicity and learns that fame and rumor threaten to reduce knowledge to mere sound. Ostensibly, Chaucer's quest is for more poetic material, but the poem also describes a search for authority. If the poem were to name the man of great authority who approaches at its close, he could hardly retain that authority, arriving as he does after such a skeptical treatment of fame and knowledge. Chapter 1 argues that in this dream vision a series of frame devices contributes to the unending interpretive quest. In a number of instances, the poem brackets unstable language with appeals to authority, an arrangement that leaves us wondering how effectively the frame contains its contents. Chaucer positions Dido's Ovidian lament over Aeneas inside a more Vergilian rendition of the story, for instance, and we can only access Dido's story through a series of frames. Ultimately the *House of Fame* suggests that reading always occurs in a frame.

Chaucer is persistently interested in the failure to finish reading, and Chapter 2 moves from his manipulation of frames to his fascination with lists. The *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* offers another example of an interminable quest for an imprecisely defined object, the philosopher's stone, and I explore how this tale mirrors some of the *Parliament's* concerns. Chaucer's lists contain the tension between order and disorder that preoccupies medieval exegetes trying to make sense of the world. And like the

dreaming Chaucer, the alchemists are readers. To help them on their quest they read “Arnold of Newe Toun” (1428), “Hermes” 1434), “Senior” (1450), and discover various names for the philosopher’s stone: “Titanos” (1454), a term that is “the same” as “Magnasia” (1455), and this substance is “a water that is maad...Of elementes foure” (1459-60). But finally they learn from Plato that Christ, or perhaps the philosophers themselves, will not allow anyone else to discover the philosopher’s stone. Here, as in other medieval texts, written authorities both facilitate and impede the search. The alchemists imagine that they have a sharply defined quest-object, but it turns out to have so many definitions that they look in vain for its true name, for not only does one book lead to another but also the terms for the philosopher’s stone seem designed to keep its true name secret. Where in the *Parliament* Chaucer learns several ways to understand love, the alchemists discover many names for the philosopher’s stone. But the two quests also have interesting dissimilarities. As the dreaming poet considers love’s different forms he nonetheless gathers considerable knowledge, whereas the alchemists only collect interchangeable definitions for their quest-object. The dreaming Chaucer finds new ways to see the world, but the alchemists merely quarrel over their recipes and misty terms.

Chaucer’s unfinished quests and their emphasis on audience participation have analogues elsewhere in fourteenth and fifteenth-century English literature. Chapter 3 expands the focus on lists to the encyclopedia, and links Langland’s lifelong writing project to the unfinished searches in Chaucer’s poetry. In *Piers Plowman*, Will begins by wondering how to save his soul, but after a series of questions and answers, he also has trouble naming just what he desires (Barr 165-66). The poem charts Will’s discovery of

various definitions for Dowel, a search complicated partly because Wit, Thought, Clergie, and Imaginatif all explain the term differently. Like Chaucer, Langland imagines an unfinished search for knowledge in a world full of authorities. Every effort to “preve” a definition for Dowel creates more conversation. But *Piers Plowman* seems more tantalizingly near a complete collection, to use Benjamin’s metaphor, than Chaucer’s poetry, perhaps because its authority figure, Piers, who always seems just ahead of Will waiting somewhere for him to catch up, has more authority than the guides Chaucer imagines for himself. Eventually Will learns that Dowel has some relationship to both Truth and Charity, and finally the term must be lived rather than defined, as if escaping language is the only solution. But the poem ends with the Antichrist’s triumph and the beginning of a pilgrimage to find Piers Plowman, who can reduce the various answers Will finds into love alone. The fact that Will cannot escape language and rejoin Piers suggests that interpretation must always continue in the fallen world, and the poem reaches encyclopedic proportions yet lacks the knowledge it wants most.

Chapter 4 turns from Langland’s generically hybrid poem to late medieval mysticism and approaches unfinished quests through Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Divine Love*. Julian shares her contemporaries’ attention to the world’s noisiness but at the same time fixes her sight on a “gret deed ordained of oure lorde” (223) that will dispel the confusion. She concentrates her *Revelation* on a divine “mening” that she cannot fully delineate. To that end, she closes her text by declaring that her book “is not yet performed” (379). In contrast to some male mystics, Julian does not construct a hierarchical relationship between herself and her reader; instead, she remains as much in the middle of an interpretive process as any of her “evenchristen” (151). As Julian

interprets and reinterprets her revelations, she gathers opposites, contrasting pairs that point toward the cosmos' organization. Like Chaucer and Langland, Julian involves her readers in an unending process of figuring things out. Her spiritual journey moves toward a heavenly harmony as she acquires greater knowledge: "And then shalle none of us be stered to sey in ony thing: 'Lorde, if it had ben thus, it had ben wele.' But we shalle alle sey with one voice: 'Lorde, blessed mot thou be, for it is thus, it is wele. And now we see verily that alle thing is done as it was thin ordinance, or ony thing was made'" (379).

Here Julian imagines the apocalypse, when all shall become clear, as a choric celebration of divine love. She presents the obstacle to her quest for the universe's harmony as noise. Near the end of her text, a threat to her interpretive process emerges in the form of a muttering fiend who makes a "bodely jangeling" that nearly causes Julian to despair. The fiend's incoherence, which would overwhelm her language, implies that the world is incoherent, that it merely "jangles," too. Julian's expectation of fuller knowledge imagines that humanity is in the middle of a narrative, a narrative that she can only partly make sense of but that nevertheless has a larger coherence. The muttering fiend's assault suggests that there is no narrative. To continue her exploration of God's book she must pray over her attacker, replace his "jangeling" with her own intelligible speech. Where Julian, somewhat like Langland, nearly despairs, Chaucer preserves his wide-eyed wonder at the cosmos' variety and mysteriousness. Although Julian often seems less troubled by the world's confusion than Chaucer or Langland and writes in a different genre, this moment of unintelligibility in the *Revelation* reveals their shared attention to the world's impenetrability.

Unfinished quests for obscure objects also appear in chivalric romance, even if there they take a different form because knights do not look for knowledge quite as dreamers and mystics do. Chapter 5 turns to Thomas Malory's *Works* and the Questing Beast, a mysterious, barking creature that eludes Arthur's knights and who has some "grete sygnyfycasion" that never becomes clear (II: 717). One of the Beast's functions, however, seems to involve announcing the kingdom's disintegration, for Malory uses the "noyse" to describe both the Beast's barking and the rumors of Lancelot and Gwenyver that begin the combination of events that culminate in the war with Mordred. The monster's noise contrasts with knights' laconic speech and their insistence on truth and order. The noisy Beast also seems like a figure for the fissures in Malory's own text, the "hoole book of Kynge Arthur" (III: 1260). Because the Questing Beast story remains unexplained, it makes us realize that more of this complete book is always elsewhere, never perfectly assembled. Meanwhile, however, the Beast offers opportunity for limitless adventure, which relies on marvels and uncertain signs. Ultimately, the Beast embodies a tension in chivalry between a desire for stable language on the one hand and a desire for adventure on the other.

The final chapter examines the Questing Beast's return as the Blatant Beast in Book VI of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. In his hybridity and noise, Spenser's slanderous monster also emerges from representations of fame. As the embodiment of slander more narrowly, the Beast threatens privacy by wounding characters' inner selves. And as the embodiment of a noisy mob, he threatens aristocratic lineages, which Book VI explores in a series of fair unknown or foundling stories, and he breaks into monasteries, where he "searched all their cels and secrets neare" (xii.24). The Beast not only obscures

by slandering, then, but also reveals by uncovering secrets. But in addition to threatening Faery land, the monster also resembles the poet, who also makes “many a forged lie” (xii.33) (Hardie 402-3). As a revealer of secrets, the Beast disenchants the world, but as a figure for the poet and his fabrications, he perpetuates its enchantment. This doubleness ultimately aligns the monster with fallen language itself, which also both reveals and conceals. As Book VI ends, the Beast leaps out of the fiction to attack the poet himself. Calidore, the knight of courtesy, cannot permanently subdue the monster because the unreliable language this creature represents creates space for interpretation: the poet cannot control his reception and remains vulnerable to slander. Destroying the Blatant Beast would mean eliminating interpretation and retrieving an unfallen language.

Although these writers share assumptions about the fallen world’s confusion and a search for authority, they respond differently to the world’s clamor. Chaucer and Langland’s texts are noisy throughout, but Julian and Malory confine the noise to discrete moments. Where Chaucer tends to find the world’s confusion funny, Langland seems more anxious to try to resolve the dissonance, even if the effort must largely fail. Both poets think about how narratives make sense of the world, but Langland worries more than Chaucer about assembling the correct narrative, even if he knows that his human intellect cannot perceive the divine story. Noise intrudes less on Julian and Malory’s texts, even if these writers, too, finally show that a fallen world always lets in confusion. Julian, like many mystics, largely refuses to admit noise into her meditations, and she shares Langland’s yearning for a master narrative. But as she draws divine “mening” from her revelations she endures an assault by a muttering demon whose “jangling” would overcome her efforts, and for a moment her world becomes as confusing as

Chaucer or Langland's. Malory knows what narrative he prefers—chivalry—and he tries to keep out incoherence, even if he must eventually let in the “noyse” that destroys Arthur's kingdom. Unlike Spenser, though, he ends with a last vocation of the ur-text, the “hoole book of Kynge Arthur” (III: 1260). Book VI of the *Faerie Queene* closes with the Blatant Beast emerging from the realm of fiction to attack the poet, an image more of dismemberment than wholeness. Altogether, the range of vehicles that these authors use to represent their noisy world underscores just how pervasively noise and the threat to order preoccupy the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a threat that, if Spenser is any indication, persists into the sixteenth century.

We might also bring these texts' relationship to noise into focus by contrasting them again with Dante's *Commedia*. These authors remain wandering amid the fallen world's dissonance, but Dante ends his quest, which begins amid the corrupt, sometimes indecipherable speech in Hell, by experiencing heavenly harmony. His poem charts a course from the incoherent language in the *Inferno* through the poets inhabiting *Purgatorio* to *Paradiso*'s angelic choruses. Chaucer and Langland create noisy quests from the beginning, and, for the most part their journeys only get noisier. Book VI of the *Faerie Queene*, too, sees the Blatant Beast's terrain expand. Noise interrupts Julian and Malory's quests less often, but in their texts noise presents an intermittent threat that nonetheless never quite disappears. Of these four, Julian perhaps seems the most like Dante, but in contrast to Dante noise erupts quite late in her book, which may qualify the harmony that her ending achieves shortly thereafter. If we can say that Dante's allegory, certainly a text that “takes all life for its boundaries” and searches for a “cosmic order,” reflects its author's ambitions for Henry VII's empire,²⁰ then perhaps we can also say that

these later texts mirror England's fractured authorities and its writers' un-Dantean analysis of that condition. All of these writers create encyclopedic, lifelong works, but only Dante's has a clear trajectory and endpoint.

5.

In his essay "Poems Without Endings," John Burrow argues that "The absence of an ending in a text will naturally appeal to this general taste for the fragmentary, but it may also make a more specific appeal, as *The House of Fame* certainly does, to the modern suspicion of "closure." What we like is openness" (35). Burrow obliquely accuses medievalists of ahistoricism, of reading their own "modern" concerns into works that no one used to find unfinished: "I know of no readers of Chaucer before our own century who expressed views such as I have just illustrated—that the poems in question are either complete or better off incomplete" (34). The "poems in question" include the *Squire's Tale*, the *Cook's Tale*, the *Legend of Good Women*, and the *House of Fame*. Partly Burrow claims that medievalists risk failing to distinguish between incompleteness and irresolution, and he goes on to say that he is "concerned that modern Chaucerians may be losing their capacity to reckon with the accidental and the contingent" (36). The "accidental and the contingent" are very medieval concerns to begin with, and no doubt Burrow's down to earth suggestion has weight. He might diagnose my focus on unfinished, late medieval quests as symptomatic of the modern "taste for the fragmentary," which he traces to the Romantics (34). Perhaps for Burrow the incomplete Questing Beast story, for instance, would appear "accidental and contingent," more a byproduct of Malory's composition method or forgetfulness than a remarkable comment on chivalry, romance, and narrative structure.

Whether possibly unfinished like the *House of Fame* and the Questing Beast plot, ongoing like *Piers Plowman*'s revisions or Julian's *Revelations*, or polished and apparently finished like the *Parliament*, these works all represent a search for an authoritative text, but questers can only collect its pieces, and this tension between fragmentation and unreachable wholeness creates a sense of "openness." If quests from Chaucer to Spenser fail to finish for reasons beyond the accidental and contingent, then they might owe their incompleteness to this unfinishable search for authority. The "openness" that missing authority creates seems to me a particularly medieval openness (a version of which Spenser inherits), for as much as these works try to locate perfect authority and fail, they also mystify it. Opaque language, sprawling structures, and competing voices make reading these works an endless project if one is searching for a single, trustworthy perspective. They reproduce a worldview that posits an unknowable truth that we must nevertheless try to understand, a view that seems to derive from Boethius' sense of diversity within unity. God's "knowledge of a never changing present," for Boethius, contains the range of human experience, which otherwise may seem indecipherable (116). To reflect and perpetuate this worldview, medieval quests cannot finish. The *House of Fame*'s ending keeps authority elsewhere, as if to preserve it from language, and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* ends with a similar gesture. Other late medieval texts have related strategies and reasons for concealing authority. Chivalric adventures can continue indefinitely, for they require, or even depend on, mysterious motivations, but that same mystery protects the "aristocratic self," the questing knight. Susan Crane explains that "enigmatic signs work to mystify the aristocratic self by enlarging its signature but at the same time resisting close scrutiny" (17).²¹ The mystery

helps preserve aristocracy. Although this dissertation everywhere indulges a “taste for the fragmentary,” it seems to me that certain parts of medieval culture did have a complex investment in a “openness” and in endless interpretive quests. Concealing authority creates both the openness and rigidity characteristic of many late medieval texts.

But at the same time that the fallen world’s incoherence obscures and thus preserves authority, noise also resists authority. When scholars discuss medieval noise, they tend to show how authors link noise to class. In these analyses, courtly writers figure resistance to medieval class structures as mere babble.²² I try to extend the idea that noise resists order to some of medieval literature’s other noisy moments, where the resistance takes different forms. The desire for perfect language, in some sense allegory’s central desire, is a desire for a single perspective. Noise resists ordering impulses—the desire for stable authority and a single perspective—and often reflects the challenges to sacred authority in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England. This idea perhaps emerges most clearly in the *House of Fame*, where the “grete swogh” in Fame’s hall seems to keep at bay the man of great of authority who approaches at the poem’s end (1031). This dream vision resists representing sacred authority, perhaps a reflection of Richard II’s inability to assert sovereignty. Noise briefly but powerfully resists order in Julian’s *Revelation* when the fiend raises the possibility that the world does not make sense, that divine justice and love do not reconcile. And in Malory, the noisy Questing Beast undermines chivalry’s desire for order and reliable language.

Writing on Tolkien, Auden explains that “To look for a lost collar button is not a true quest: to go in quest means to look for something of which one has, as yet, no experience; one can imagine what it will be like but whether one’s picture is true or false

will be known only when one has found it” (40). Auden’s definition brings further into focus the connections between the fallen world, questing, and the resistance to completion: quests necessarily search for something imprecisely understood, “something of which one has, as yet, no experience.” Unfinished searches from Chaucer to Spenser never leave the space of the quest with its uncertain distinction between “true and false.” These stories remain in their own noisy middles. Auden goes on to argue that “man is a history-making creature for whom the future is always open” (40).²³ Boethius would agree that the future looks open from a human perspective. On the one hand the idea implies that questers enjoy considerable freedom, but on the other hand the open future obscures knowledge and allows authority to remain mysterious. Unfinished quests for imprecisely defined objects emerge from this tension, and they offer the pleasures and frustrations of piecing together incongruent parts, studying ambiguous language, and reading in search of “something of which one has, as yet, no experience.”

Notes

¹ Evelyn Birge Vitz argues that desire is “a preoccupation of *all* literature,” but especially medieval narrative because there it is “virtually the *sole* characterological principle (3, original emphasis). One reason for the medieval fascination with desire as a primary “characterological principle” might involve the period’s interest in the fallen world.

² In her study of medieval frame fictions and the *chanson d'aventure*, Judith Davidoff makes this point: “One may wander in search of a specific goal like Odysseus or Parzival or pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. Or the goal may be more diffuse as in the case of man after the Fall” (41).

³ John Fyler explains this connection: “Love and poetry both signify the fallen state of the world—love in its post-Edenic doubleness, but also its earthly manifestation as unsatisfiable desire; poetry because, as the *House of Fame* most clearly shows, language is always at a remove from the reality it uncertainly attempts to reveal” (*Language and the Declining World* 66-7).

⁴ “In a world after the Fall,” Suzanne Akbari writes, “both vision and language are imperfect mediators, open to deception. Yet, paradoxically, as pseudo-Dionysius recognized, they represent the only possible approaches to knowledge... The transparent mediation between subject and object, between reader and meaning, is the unreachable goal of language; in particular, it is the goal of allegory” (6-7).

⁵ Angus Fetcher offers examples of how allegory relates parts to a whole: “When each part of the human body is made to stand for a particular part of the body politic, the subdividing process shows the most obvious kind of unity in diversity; both bodies are being anatomized, and the parts of both are found to correspond isomorphically to each other. In a typical modern work, *The Plague*, by Camus, the analogy is drawn between a plague of rats carrying bubonic infection and the plague of an invading military occupation (the Nazi occupation of Oran) and its accompanying political diseases. Traditional theory would describe this analogical symbolism as the gathering of many little metaphors into the scope of one larger unifying figure which is also a metaphor” (70).

⁶ Collecting and reading culminate in the medieval fascination with encyclopedias. The scholastic encyclopedists may have influenced later writers like Chaucer and Boccaccio, (Franklin-Brown 70) and even Malory’s condensation of the vast, thirteenth-century Arthurian cycles might owe something to the encyclopedic tradition. Mary Franklin-Brown finds discord characteristic of scholastic encyclopedists, “compilers” who “assumed that objects in the world carried symbolic meaning—a meaning that alone justified the writing of encyclopedias. (11)

Like allegorists, scholastic encyclopedists find significance in everything. To hold “that objects in the world carried symbolic meaning” is to hold that the world is an allegory, something that requires interpretation and through which some transcendental order allows a glimpse of itself.

⁷ For an analysis of Benjamin’s collector as a figure for modernity, see Abbas, “Walter Benjamin’s Collector: the Fate of Modern Experience.”

⁸ J.A. Burrow argues that this formal quality particularly “Ricardian”: “The Ricardian poem will usually have a more sharply and dramatically articulated structure [than the French], with the constituent parts marked off and enclosed; but the relationship between these parts, their bearing upon each other, may be left for the reader to discover” (63).

⁹ Lisa Kiser finds this idea at work in much of Chaucer: “Lying behind most of the action described or reported in Chaucer’s works is the implication that in the recent or distant past something ‘really happened’ that his narrators are trying to recover” (2). We find an example of this dynamic especially in *Troilus and Criseyde*, a “nonreferential work in the sense that its fictional premise is that the text faithfully reproduces another text, which in turn supposedly reflects historical events (whose ‘truth’ turns out to be unrecoverable)” (56).

¹⁰ Copeland and Melville explain the origins of the idea’s popularity in the Middle Ages: “The use of the word *integumentum* is generally associated with the Chartrian school, and especially with Guillaume de Conches and with the commentaries on the *Aeneid* and on Martianus Capella attributed to Bernardus Silvestris...As used by Guillaume de Conches and “Bernardus,” as well as by Abelard and later John of Garland, to describe the poetic fictions of ancient authors (especially pagan myths), it points to a veil, and is usually taken to suggest a covering under which ancient poets and philosophers chose to conceal moral and scientific truths. The term *involucrum* (a wrapping) normally suggests the same idea of a fictive disguise for truths” (169).

¹¹ In different ways, scholars explain that medieval texts make pilgrims or questers of their readers. Peter Travis argues that this model is especially appropriate to longer

medieval works such as mystery play cycles that address salvation: “The pilgrimage model can be shifted from literary protagonist to literary reader so as to serve as a general pattern of the progress of the individual through the reading experience...As Bernadine pilgrim the reader is drawn into this middle world of verbal and visual space and must read these images (sacred or profane) as both likenesses and unlikenesses, as appealing guises masking his own features and projecting his own errant progress toward judgment” (“Affective Reading” 213). Mazzotta makes a similar point about Dante: “For Dante the ambiguities of language are crucial for our quest: they force us to interpret, to undertake itineraries that inevitably lead us to a self-disclosure” (*Dante* 12). These comments share an attention to middles, to the space between Eden and the Apocalypse, which is to say the space of the fallen world.

¹² Bernhard Bischoff describes a related medieval collecting habit, vocabulary lists that occasionally include secret languages: “They might rather be regarded as a symptom of a naive curiosity which manifests itself also in the collecting—it is a kind of collecting—of foreign and strange alphabets which can be observed in manuscripts from the eighth century on and continued to post-mediaeval times. The collections often include real as well as invented alphabets without discrimination, amongst them, e.g., the alleged alphabet of the kingdom of Prester John” (213). On similar languages, also see Schnapp, “Virgin Words: Hildegard of Bingen’s Lingua Ignota.” This medieval interest in an inaccessible ur-text and imaginary or secret languages eventually seems to become the seventeenth-century search for a universal language. See Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*.

¹³ Chaucer might owe this sensibility to both Boethius and Ovid. Commenting on the *House of Fame*, Fyler observes that “Chaucer’s message in all this is almost a Boethian one, but we are not offered Boethius’s recourse. In fact, the moral of the poem is Ovidian, and it is not simply to retreat from the complicated, deceitful, fascinating world” (*Chaucer and Ovid* 63-64).

¹⁴ And indeed, *Pale Fire* owes a debt to the *House of Fame* via Pope’s *Temple of Fame* (Fyler, “Chaucer, Pope, and the *House of Fame*” 157-58).

¹⁵ Robert Hanning comments on a similar phenomenon in Chrétien de Troyes: “R. Guiette, in an extremely compelling essay which can now be seen as the beginning, practically, of a school of romance criticism, discusses the ‘symboles sans senefiance’ of chivalric romance: the artifacts or incidents which should (or seem to) refer to some larger sphere of meaning, theological or otherwise, but are not explained. Guiette relates these meaningless symbols to the poets’ pleasure in making of their stories literary performances, deliberately free of symbolic meanings of a kind medieval man is often supposed to have lived with so easily. Guiette’s thesis is attractive, but I wonder if it cannot be modified a bit by assuming that there is a parallel between the incompleteness of perception of reality by the individual and the audience’s incomplete perception of the ‘world’ created by the poet” (192). Hanning’s argument that these objects without significance owe something to “the audience’s incomplete perception of the world” aligns with an allegorical model of reading, in which readers must interpret things only partly understood.

¹⁶ Quilligan explains that allegory does not simply oppose a literal meaning with something beyond the literal. Instead, allegory is about the process of reading itself: “All

reading proceeds linearly, in a word-by-word fashion, but allegory often institutionalizes this fact by the journey or quest form of the plot, journeys which are, furthermore, extremely episodic in nature. It would be more precise to say therefore that allegory works horizontally, rather than vertically, so that meaning accretes serially, interconnecting and criss-crossing the verbal surface long before one can accurately speak of moving to another level ‘beyond’ the literal. And that ‘level’ is not above the literal one in a vertically organized fictional space, but is located in the self-consciousness of the reader, who gradually becomes aware, as he reads, of the way he creates the meaning of the text. Out of this awareness comes a consciousness not only of how he is reading, but of his human response to the narrative, and finally his relation to the only ‘other’ which allegory aims to lead him to, a sense of the sacred” (28-9).

¹⁷ Jeremy Tambling explains that for Fletcher, allegory involves an “an authoritarianism that is compulsive and that is fascinated by structure” (170).

¹⁸ As many critics have noticed, late medieval literature emphasizes the reader’s role in making meaning. See, for example, Minnis’ foundational study *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, where he argues that “Chaucer and Vincent (among other compilers) shared the principle of the reader’s freedom of choice (*lectoris arbitrium*). In the case of Vincent, this means that the reader can isolate and believe whatever things he wishes to believe: no attempt has been made to force the *auctores* to speak with one voice, and it is up to the reader to make his own choice from the discordant *auctoritates* offered him” (201).

¹⁹ Jeremy Lowe makes a similar point in his study of later medieval English works: “the need for judgement is seen to be the central quest of human life: to search for something that cannot be expressed or known completely” (11). Rosemarie McGerr finds this sensibility at work particular in the *demande d’amour*, a popular medieval genre: “In a way, the many versions of a *demande* merge to become a single narrative in which ultimate closure is endlessly deferred. The genre thus encourages both an appreciation of literary creation as one of ongoing revision of literary tradition and an appreciation of the reading process as one of continuous but provisional judgment” (34).

²⁰ For a concise summary of scholarship on Dante’s politics, see Joan M. Ferrante, “Dante and Politics” 186 and throughout.

²¹ Chivalry, as Auerbach argues in a similar vein, accomplishes this obfuscation by persistently refusing to refer to anything outside itself (136).

²² Cohen summarizes this strategy: “To rob members of the lower classes of their humanity through the removal of their language is, moreover, a common rhetorical strategy for medieval writers. Witness, for example, contemporary descriptions of the Rising of 1381, where the rebels are represented as an unruly mob whose demands for social change get lost beneath an animal like clamor that drowns their ability to signify. John Gower’s dream vision account of the revolt reduces its participants to an inarticulate mob: ‘They cried over and over in the great voices of monsters and in various ways made a variety of noises.’ Thomas Walsingham rendered them even less verbal, more animalistic: ‘words could not be heard among their horrible shrieks but rather their throats sounded with the bleating of sheep, or, to be more accurate, with the devilish voices of peacocks.’ ‘Noise,’ observes Susan Crane, ‘replaces speech,’ conveying the profound threat that the rebellion posed but reducing it into meaninglessness. Their racket

itself becomes the rebels' danger, hurled against the social and linguistic stabilities of the elites under attack. Given that most medieval texts were written by the culturally privileged, it is perhaps not surprising to find economic disparity treated as a fundamental difference in linguistic ability" (273-74). Also see Travis' comments on the *Summoner's Tale*: "Just as a fart cannot be "departed equally," neither, according to the dominant social classes, can the goods of this world. For Patterson, this scene provides a "brief allegory" of the seigniorial reactions to peasant demands articulated in the Uprising" (*Thirteen Ways* 328). Susan Crane also discusses noise in the context of the 1381 Rising ("Writing Lesson").

²³ Somewhat similarly, Mazzotta argues that for Dante, "the claim of total knowledge is a logical contradiction because it reduces knowledge to a static and sterile ensemble and excludes the possibility of augmenting it. This exclusion amounts to a misunderstanding of the openness of history and time" (*Dante's Vision* 31-32).

Chapter 1

Names and Frames in the *House of Fame*

1.

Images of the Virtues and Edward the Confessor's coronation lined Westminster's Painted Chamber, a room built in the thirteenth century during the reign of Henry III, to which his son Edward I added portraits of warlike leaders from Genesis, Exodus, and Samuel (Binski 6). By the third and fourth decades of the fourteenth century, the room served as parliament's meeting place (35), and parliamentarians would have seen its images of Alexander the Great, Judas Maccabeus, and many biblical prophets and kings. Paul Strohm explains that these paintings could encourage incompatible attitudes toward a monarch sitting in parliament, especially a vulnerable king such as Richard II: "Richard's opponents would have welcomed their emphasis on castigation of imperial pride. Richard's supporters might have taken heart from his appearance among such virtuous depictions" (*Chaucer's Tale* 158). By appearing amid the legendary company, Richard at once bolsters and erodes his authority. Although kings Henry and Edward no doubt designed the room to augment their prestige by associating themselves with exemplary figures, the arrangement allows viewers to consider the uncertain natures of fame and authority. The Painted Chamber does not offer a stable image of kingship both because the room invites addition, for monarchs could supplement the murals to reflect their own values, as Edward did when he added portraits emphasizing valor over piety, and because the room changes whenever a king enters the space, as Strohm implies.¹ This design draws on a version of a widespread late medieval aesthetic that asks readers to evaluate juxtaposed material but does not allow a single interpretation to emerge.

The Painted Chamber puts Richard (or any monarch) in a kind of frame, in a context that stresses how much onlookers interpret him. That context invites but does not determine the interpretations: Richard might appear better or worse for having sat in the Painted Chamber, but he cannot place himself outside the room's framing effect, safe from comparison. Rather than confer sacred authority on Richard, the chamber makes him a text that his subjects read. In or out of parliament and this illustrated room, Richard never enjoyed sacred authority, though later in his reign he struggled to produce it by commissioning works such as the Wilton diptych and Westminster portrait (Staley, *Languages of Power* 117, 139). Lynn Staley connects Richard's failure to create a language and image of sacred kingship to the search for authority in Chaucer's poetry: "Chaucer made himself into a poet whose rare quality could only have emerged from a world in search of stabilizing images of rule. The search, moreover, was a real one: the English court, particularly after Richard's declaration of his majority in 1389, soon after his humiliation at the hands of the Appellants, actively sought to produce a royal image as magically endowed as that of the French kings" (147).² The Painted Chamber emerges from a similar world, and far from producing an authoritative account or image of his kingship makes Richard an unstable text.

Chaucer would have seen the Painted Chamber when he sat in the 1386 parliament, probably some years after he wrote the *House of Fame*, but this early poem shares some of the Painted Chamber's concerns and perhaps some of its representational logic. The room seems designed to offer a powerful image of kingship and does not create this dream vision's sense of chaos, but they both at once celebrate and undermine authority. This chapter approaches the *House of Fame*'s search for authority through its

frames, which promote and complicate fame much as the Painted Chamber both solidifies and questions Richard's kingship. If frames encourage interpretation, which in turn threatens authority, then three figures in the poem particularly come into focus: Dido, powerless over her name and subject to various male interpreters; Geffrey, who declares that he knows best how he stands; and the unnamed figure who "semed for to be / A man of grete auctorite" at the poem's end, who remains offstage and thus preserves something of his authority from the House of Rumor and its desacralizing effect (2159). The first two of these three especially want to control their reputations, their names, but they do so with varying success, for all three figures appear in relation to some frame. Dido decries fame from amid Chaucer's retelling of the *Aeneid*; Geffrey defies fame amid the chaos of the Houses of Fame and Rumor; and the man of great authority arrives in the poem's last moment, on its very edge. In each of these instances, the correct name is elusive. Dido knows that she cannot control how others will speak about her; Geffrey's reputation is still uncertain, something he says he prefers given fame's unreliability; and we can only conjecture as to the man of great authority's identity.

The poem is full of other names, and they draw attention to the *House of Fame*'s language, a welter of allusion and technical vocabulary in which the poem seems to delight. The Proem begins with a list of dream categories, and Book I contains the *Aeneid*'s cast of characters and a catalogue of deceitful male lovers and the women they deceived. When "Geffrey" enters Fame's castle, he lists minstrels and magicians (1227-81), and in Book III, he catalogues poets and the people and places whose fame they support: "Stace," who "bar of Thebes up the fame," for instance, and "Virgile, / That bore hath up a longe while / The fame of Pius Eneas" (1460-61, 1483-85). At the same time

that the poem seems to revel in its network of proper nouns, however, these names suggest a desire to transcend language and access something more certain. The dream vision stages a quest for an unfallen, authoritative idiom, and the poet explores an encyclopedic range of authors in his search for that knowledge. Geffrey learns, though, that books produce more books, rumor produces more rumor, and because the authority the poem seeks lies outside language, the quest could go on indefinitely. Ultimately, the poem reaches for a name beyond its own borders, beyond language's frame. We might understand this unfinished search as a desire to confront authority without a frame, a desire that the poem finds impossible to fulfill. No one in the *House of Fame*—not Vergil, not Aeneas, not Homer, possibly not even Geffrey, especially not Dido—gets to control his or her name's reception.

The *House of Fame* might seem iconoclastic, because rumor undermines old books' authority and even unsettles all knowledge. In this vein, some commentators point to how Chaucer subverts knowledge and canonicity,³ for his dream vision looks skeptically at many ancient authorities by revealing the goddess Fame's distortions of the tidings that arrive in her hall. She dispenses verdicts so arbitrarily that even the eminence of poets like Vergil, Homer, Ovid, and Statius seems insecure, and the House of Rumor only intensifies this feeling. But the poem also shows that rumor does not merely dismantle authority but also produces it to begin with. Its noise is both fecund and threatening. Other scholars show that Chaucer preserves the possibility of truth despite the poem's thoroughgoing skepticism, for by not naming the man of great authority Chaucer saves him from the House of Rumor's linguistic corruption (Miller, "The Writing on the Wall" 112). And indeed, by rewriting its precursors so ostentatiously, the

House of Fame reads like an announcement of literary ambition. Chaucer may dismantle literary authority, then, but he also refuses to do away with the concept, and even prepares a foundation for his own fame.⁴

In his study *Rumour and Renown*, which traces representations of fame from Homer to Pope, Philip Hardie points out that often “critics read the *House of Fame* as moving from order to disorder, a movement that may owe something to the repeated return of cosmos to chaos in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*” (593). The poem certainly charts a trajectory toward disorder: Book I includes the *Aeneid*, however modified, but by Book III literature has become mere noise in the House of Rumor. But perhaps the *House of Fame*’s frames show that disorder and order, noise and knowledge, are intertwined from the start, “fals and soth compouned” (1029). Frames allow the *House of Fame* to occupy contrary positions on the nature of authority and fame, to at once perpetuate and undermine knowledge. We can see this idea especially in Chaucer’s reinterpretation of the *Aeneid*, which, by the dream vision’s end, seems to be both great authority and mere noise. By retelling this story, the dreaming poet both points to its uncertain foundation in rumor and contributes to Dido, Aeneas, and Vergil’s fame. In this poem, some text always frames knowledge: we can access only versions of this history. The *House of Fame* shows that reading in a fallen world means always seeing the text in a frame.⁵

2.

Literary frames take various shapes, but they all tend to complicate authority by subjecting it to the interpreter. As simply a way of seeing, frames inform all fiction; more narrowly, we tend to think of frames as a story within a story. Both senses of the word interest the *House of Fame*. J.A. Burrow observes that Ricardian poetry often relies on

frames and argues that “enclosing, or encapsulation, seems to be the chief characteristic of poetic form in the age. Several devices, none in itself peculiar to the period, combine to produce this effect. Chief among them...are the dream-vision, the framed story, and structural circularity” (*Ricardian Poetry* 62). This “encapsulation” appears in the *Gawain* poet’s work, *Piers Plowman*, much of Chaucer, and his fifteenth-century inheritors. The *House of Fame* uses all three strategies—“the dream-vision, the framed story, and structural circularity”—for even in its fragmentary state it ends with an appeal to authority that at least obliquely recalls the first line, where Chaucer prays, “God turne us every drem to goode!” Like the poet’s vocabulary, these forms announce themselves and foreground the poem’s language, unlike the *Parson’s Tale*, where straightforward prose points to a moral truth.⁶ The styles of the *Parson’s Tale* and the *House of Fame* complement their contents: both poems search for truth or “auctorite,” but the sermon is less anxious about finding that knowledge. (Even the *Parson’s Tale*, however, fits in a frame, for its teller’s voice, though it arrives last and renounces fiction, is one of many in the *Canterbury Tales*.) The *House of Fame* foregrounds its own shape and style and turns reading into an interpretive quest. Burrow argues that the reliance on frames or “encapsulation” in Ricardian poetry emphasizes the interpreter’s role, for “the relationship between these parts, their bearing upon each other, may be left for the reader to discover...What is the relationship between the Temple of Venus and the House of Fame? Or between Scipio’s dream and Chaucer’s dream of Venus and Nature in the *Parliament*?” (63). Burrow seems to imply that a relationship does exist between the Temple of Venus and the House of Fame and between Scipio’s dream and Chaucer’s dream of Venus and Nature but that the poet does not make those relationships explicit.

Readers can discover that the Temple of Venus concerns Dido and Aeneas' fame and that the various sections in the *Parliament* are all ways to understand love. The frames in the *House of Fame* that this chapter examines seem even more indeterminate, however. They, too, highlight the reader's role, but they draw attention to ways of seeing without allowing a single view to emerge, for in the end authority remains inarticulable.

Apart from the dream itself, the *House of Fame*'s most explicit frame appears in Book I: there Chaucer retells the *Aeneid*, and he lingers on Dido's suffering before returning to Vergil's account and remarking that Aeneas had to leave the queen. Chaucer frames an Ovidian reading of Dido with a Vergilian one. At issue in Chaucer's retelling are Dido and Aeneas' names. This story particularly suits Chaucer's exploration of fame and authority because irreconcilable accounts of its central characters' reputations offer him material for a frame narrative: rewriting the epic allows him to layer and juxtapose perspectives, a common Chaucerian technique and one that sends readers searching for a central viewpoint.⁷ Here Chaucer sets an epic inside a dream, and another version of the epic—an Ovidian account that focuses on Dido's perspective—in the innermost frame. When the poet enters Venus' temple, he sees the *Aeneid* depicted on the walls and begins to relate the story by adhering conspicuously to Vergil. Chaucer opens his account by deferring to Vergil's authority with a close translation of the epic's first lines and by remarking on the undertaking's difficulty:

I wol now synge, yif I kan,
 The armes and also the man
 That first cam, thurgh his destinee,
 Fugityf of Troy contree,

In Itayle, with ful moche pyne
 Unto the strondes of Lavyne. (143-48)

These lines introduce the *Aeneid*'s themes—labor, empire, war—and summarize its plot—the hero's trials and his fated arrival in Italy. Despite reproducing the epic's opening so carefully, Chaucer also gives us a sense here that he will offer his own version: the rhymes, the vernacular (Powrie 251), and the fact that he sees the story on the wall draw attention to Chaucer's hand.⁸ And although he preserves the epic's opening synopsis, his retelling does not dwell on these events, and these lines do not mention the moment that he will emphasize most, Dido's suffering. Although “Geffrey” and Aeneas seem similar at times, here the poem prepares us for an important difference between them, too: Aeneas will complete his quest and Geffrey's will remain unresolved.⁹

The *House of Fame*'s first lines also announce its themes. The poem's frames begin with its opening passage, which introduces the idea that no un-framed space, no perfect perspective, exists in the fallen world. In its first verses, the *Aeneid* tells its readers where its story will go, and Chaucer rehearses this trajectory when he translates that opening. The *House of Fame* offers no such roadmap in its first lines, but in another sense they do set up the rest of the poem, but with a roadmap unlike the *Aeneid*'s. The dream vision's opening uses a frame in which appeals to authority bracket confusion over dream theories.¹⁰ Chaucer begins the poem by hoping that dreams turn out well: “God turne us every drem to goode!” Soon after, he lists types of dreams and says that he cannot distinguish them: “Why that is an avision / And why this a revelacion, / Why this a drem, why that a sweven, / And noght to every man lyche even; / Why this a fantome, why these oracles, I not” (7-12). Apart from displaying his knowledge of dream theory

without applying it, here Chaucer announces that he does not know if his dream is true: it could be a “fantome” or a “revelacion.” Then he describes various possible sources for dreams: “As yf folkys complexions / Make hem dreme of reflexions, / Or ellys thus, as other sayn, / For to gret feblenesse of her brayn, / By abstinence or by seknesse, / Prison-stewe or gret distresse, / Or ellys by dysordynaunce / Of naturel acustumaunce” (21-28). The rhymes, anaphora, vocabulary, and lists draw attention to themselves: from the start, the poem presents itself as anything but transparent language. Chaucer offers several ways to name his dream and endorses none, but his vocabulary here establishes one of the poem’s main preoccupations, for naming becomes an increasingly central concern. Dido worries about her “name” failing to relate her true history, and the difficulty of finding the correct term for a dream involves a similar anxiety: words and things may not correspond easily, or at all. Dozens of lines into the poem, Chaucer returns to where he started, completing a frame by declaring that he cannot categorize his dream: “I of noon opinion / Nyl as now make mensyion, / But oonly that the holy roode / Turne us every drem to goode!” (55-58). Here Chaucer also introduces another of the poem’s interests: deferred or withheld knowledge. He does not “make mensyion” of his “opinion,” much as later he declines to reveal the tiding he discovers in the House of Rumor. Given this beginning, the poem seems unlikely to resolve much, no matter how long it continues.

After describing the *Aeneid*’s first few books, Chaucer departs from his source to lament Dido’s fate, and his deference to Vergil wanes even more clearly. Readers often note the Chaucerian modesty of “yif I kan”¹¹ in the translation of the epic’s first lines, and indeed, most of Chaucer’s poem does not maintain an epic posture: romance—concern for personal experience more than conquest—keeps tugging in another direction.

Dido's speech stops the epic impetus and would recall Aeneas to Carthage: ““Alas!” quod she, ‘my swete herte, / Have pitee on my sorwes smerte, / And slee mee not! Goo noght awey!”” (315-17). Chaucer begins this detour into romance by decrying Aeneas' treachery: “But let us speke of Eneas, / How he betrayed hir, allas, / And left hir ful unkyndely” (293-95). Then the poet adds some of his own material, even insisting that his recording of Dido's speech follows no source: “In suche wordes gan to pleyne / Dydo of hir grete peyne, / As me mette redely— / Non other auctour alegge I” (311-314). This departure from Vergil and any source contrasts with the opening, where Chaucer closely translates the *Aeneid*. In Chaucer's dilation, Dido decries Aeneas and Fame: “thorgh yow is my name lorn, / Alle myn actes red and songe / Over al thys lond, on every tonge. / O wikke Fame!” (346-49). Dido worries about her “name” and how well it will correspond to her life. Her denunciation prepares us for Book III and Fame's arbitrary judgments, but partly because Chaucer gives the queen a long speech, here we seem let in on the truth of the matter. Even though the poem eventually seems to argue that all language reduces to rumor and fame, for a moment it is as if the poet allows Dido to speak to us about the real situation. Dido encourages this interpretation when she opposes her sincerity to Aeneas' lies and says that “We wretched wymmen konne noon art” (335), and again when she declares that truth exists though often concealed: “O, soth ys, every thing ys wybst, / Though hit be kevered with the myst” (351-52). Dido seems to say that truth exists, even if “myst” threatens to obscure our view. Later, however, the poem describes truth not as “kevered” with falsehood but “compouned,” suggesting that we may have never had an uncompromised account of her or anyone else.

Here, though, in the deepest moment of the frames, Chaucer declares that he offers original material, and his announcement that he draws on no sources for Dido's speech, "Non other auctour allege I," perhaps even encourages us to believe that we get her actual words. The poet announces that he relies on no authority but his own to retrieve Dido's words, an unusual claim in Chaucer's day. *Troilus and Criseyde*, though, may include a similar moment: in Book I, the poet offers Troilus's song:

And of his song naught only the sentence,
 As writ myn auctour called Lollius,
 But pleinly, save oure tonges difference,
 I dar wel seyn, in al, that Troilus
 Seyde in his song, loo, every word right thus
 As I shal seyn; and whoso list it here,
 Loo, next this vers he may it fyden here. (393-399)

In this passage, Chaucer may imply that his exact translation comes nearer the original than Lollius's version, which offers only the "sentence" (Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* 131-32). In these two moments when Chaucer professes to bypass any sources, he seems at once to assert and complicate his own authority. He claims access to an ur-text—Dido's very speech or the exact words in Troilus' song—but when he presents those original utterances they seem as suspect as if he had allowed them to remain distanced by layers of attribution.

By remarking that he follows no author in transcribing Dido's words, Chaucer draws attention to his authorial presence and undermines any purely factual account of Dido, however true his claim to originality may be.¹² After the queen's speech, the poet

continues to foreground his own narration and departure from his source. He mentions that we might read accounts of Dido's death in Vergil and Ovid (378-79), and for over three dozen lines goes on to list other victims of male treachery (388-426).¹³ Chaucer's modifications of Vergil—his meditation on love's irrationality and pain, and his emphasis on the wandering over the fighting—make the epic more of a romance. In other words, Chaucer susses out the Chaucerian, or Ovidian, elements in Vergil. In doing so, he blurs the distinction between author and reader, something his dream vision will continue to do, especially in Book III, where we learn that all language reduces to rumor, which changes as it passes from person to person (2059-67). Chaucer in fact stresses the interpreter's role from the poem's start, where he asks that we figure out what kind of dream he has: "whoso of these miracles / The causes knoweth bet then I, / Devyne he" (12-14).¹⁴ Soon after, he again calls attention to the fact that we must interpret his dream, but this time he threatens anyone who reads incorrectly: "whoso...Mysdeme hyt, pray I Jesus God / That (dreme he barefoot, dreme he shod), / That every harm that any man / Hath had syth the world began / Befalle hym therof or he sterfe" (94, 97-101). The hyperbole here, combined with the confusing poem that follows, makes these lines read humorously, and with Chaucer's attention to reading elsewhere in the poem, they suggest that no perfectly true interpretation hides in his dream. Much as when Geffrey reads the *Aeneid* and draws attention to his own perception of the poem, the poet implies that readers at least partly reconstruct the text in their own images rather than unearth secret meanings.

In addition to Chaucer's authorial intrusions, the frame, too, obscures Dido's outcry, for we soon learn that we do not have such direct access to her history or to an

authoritative interpretation of it. The poet seems to be looking for a name that does not reduce to another name, a text that does not come from another text. The frame around Dido's story arises from conflicting authorities, ancient authors who represent her and Aeneas differently. We might say that Geffrey searches for Dido's story itself, an ur-text that does not derive from some other account, and indeed the poet alleges that he draws on no other author for that material. But even there, or especially there, the story remains framed by its author's own account as well as Vergil and Ovid's. Chaucer wants to read Dido's history but cannot escape accounts of that history. He remarks of Dido's suicide that readers can learn more of it from other authors: "Whoso to knowe hit hath purpos, / Rede Virgile in Eneydos / Or the Epistle of Ovyde, / What that she wrot or that she dyde" (377-79). Chaucer sends us to a text, "what that she wrot," via another text, Ovid's "Epistle." The rest of the story is elsewhere, Chaucer seems to say, and we can investigate it if we like. But if we do, we find conflicting reports and perhaps come to learn that the full story, the ur-text, is always elsewhere. Chaucer can only gesture toward the possibility of a true name as the poem closes.

Dido may proclaim her artlessness, then, but Chaucer artfully borders her speech with a conflicting account. He brackets the Ovidian lens with Vergilian authority, and marks this frame by beginning and ending his reflections on Dido with "but." The frame starts with a shift in perspective: "But let us speke of Eneas, / How he betrayed hir, allas, / And lefte hir ful unkyndely" (293-95). After Dido's lament, Chaucer remarks that we may read more of the matter in Vergil or Ovid, lists several unfaithful male lovers and their victims, then shifts his narrative again: "But to excusen Eneas / Fullyche of al his grete trespass, / The book seyth Mercurie, sauns fayle, / Bad hym goo into Itayle, / And

leve Auffrikes regioun, / And Dido and hir faire toun" (427-32). Chaucer's modifiers "ful" and "fullyche" seem to cancel each other out: Aeneas is entirely guilty of "grete trespass" and then, one hundred and thirty lines later, entirely acquitted. The "But...But..." structure also helps accomplish this effect. Burrow points out the importance of the word "ac," or "but," in *Piers Plowman*, where Langland uses it to arrange the series of arguments Will confronts (28). Here, too, Chaucer uses the word to introduce arguments on both sides of a question, and ultimately he does not allow an earthly authority to emerge any more fully than Langland does.

After Dido's speech and his catalogue of deceitful men and betrayed women, Chaucer completes the frame around Dido by returning to a straightforward, if cursory, rehearsal of the *Aeneid*. In this section, "and" replaces "but":

Tho saugh I grave al the aryvayle
 That Eneas had in Itayle;
 And with kyng Latyne hys tretee
 And alle the batayles that hee
 Was at himself, and eke hys knyghtis,
 Or he had al ywonne his ryghtis;
 And how he Turnus reft his lyf,
 And wan Lavina to his wif,
 And alle the marvelous signals
 Of the goddys celestials;
 How, mawgree Juno, Eneas,
 For al hir sleight and hir compass,

Acheved al his aventure. (451-63)

Here Chaucer speeds the story along (several more anaphoric “ands” begin lines preceding these), one event following after another as he propels us toward Aeneas’ achievement of his adventure. Where “but” suggests something like stasis, or circling around an idea, “and,” in this context at least, pushes the story toward its conclusion. Chaucer infuses the Dido sections with ambiguity, but this summary of the *Aeneid*’s later books seems designed to elide ambiguity. In Chaucer’s recapitulation of the epic’s final two thirds, language seems less unstable: the gods’ “mervelous signals” contrast with the ambiguous signs earlier in Chaucer’s version of the story and elsewhere in the *House of Fame*. And when Chaucer closes his summary by relating that Aeneas “Acheved al his aventure,” the perfunctory comment out-Vergils Vergil in establishing an imperial trajectory: the case seems more complex in the epic itself. Chaucer gives little sense of the symmetry between Turnus and Aeneas, for instance, or the problematic violence required to found Rome.¹⁵ Chaucer’s interests are clearly elsewhere, in matters appropriate to Venus’ temple, where he finds this story. His abbreviated account of the epic’s last eight books, then, intensifies the frame’s effect: Dido’s anguish stands out all the more from the rest of the narrative.

The pattern of departure and return in the *House of Fame*’s version of the *Aeneid* (Vergil’s account—Ovid and Chaucer’s emphasis on Dido—back to Vergil and Aeneas) not only pits epic against romance but also mimics the structure of romance, in which a quester sets out from a place of authority (a royal court, say), confronts uncertainty or danger, then returns home, perhaps resolidifying that authority. This pattern, too, asks readers to consider the relationship between a story and its frame. In Malory’s *Tale of*

Gareth, a familiar example of the “fair unknown” *topos* in chivalric romance, the kitchen hand leaves court and returns, no longer unknown, as Sir Gareth, his mysterious enemies defeated and identified. Elizabeth Edwards shows that this tale ends by connecting people and their names to create a “knowable” (*Genesis* 51) world. The return journey stabilizes language and reconfirms the court’s authority and this knight’s place in its company. As we have seen, names preoccupy the *House of Fame* also. In the dream vision’s treatment of the *Aeneid*, Chaucer starts from a place of authority: he begins by following Vergil closely, next unsettles the epic narrative with a sympathetic treatment of Dido’s plight, then moves to contain those energies (though not before releasing them) by returning to Aeneas and Vergil, away from Dido and Ovid. Does the disordered middle overwhelm the ordering impulse in the frames? By surrounding his plea for Dido with a more conventional retelling of the *Aeneid*, Chaucer questions then moves to uphold Vergil’s authority, but at the end of the dream vision’s first book we are left wondering to what extent the large interior eclipses the thin border.¹⁶ For the space of several dozen lines, Chaucer allows Dido’s plight to impugn Aeneas’ quest and Vergil’s authority. The epic creates a frame around Dido, and this strategy leaves the reader wondering whether the frame trumps the content or the content subverts the frame.

Even if the *House of Fame* had ended with a reassertion of Aeneas’ mission, Vergil’s authority would have suffered, but rather than end the poem Chaucer introduces yet another frame. He wanders outside the temple, sees a desert, and says that he is lost: “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” (471-75). His observation that the temple lies in a desert reminds us that the structure

frames the epic to begin with. And in fact, he had also mentioned being lost before entering the temple: “For certeynly, I nyste never / Wher that I was, but wel wiste I / Hyt was of Venus redely, / The temple” (128-31). It is as if Geffrey had wandered into the building hoping to learn something and, after rehearsing the *Aeneid*, still does not have an answer, and now finds himself in an nearly desolate landscape. This moment contributes to the sense that important knowledge waits somewhere nearby yet remains inaccessible, a sense that increases when the eagle arrives, when Geffrey refuses to divulge the tiding he finds in the House of Rumor, and again when the poem stops before identifying the approaching man who seems to have great authority. Soon after the poet leaves the temple, another book begins and the poem continues, which, in contrast to the *Aeneid*, suggests that a journey’s completion is not this dream vision’s main point. Chaucer’s travels lead not toward a certain destination and an imperial narrative’s completion but deeper into a baffling dream.¹⁷ Rather than provide narrative closure, the poem’s frames keep authority forever out of reach and help create an endless quest.

3.

Chaucer’s sources for the *House of Fame* rely on frame narratives, and these poems, too, create tension between the frame and its contents and prevent a single interpretation or stable authority from emerging. The *Aeneid* itself uses this technique. At Dido’s court Aeneas rehearses Troy’s fall and his band’s wanderings, and Books II and III create a long pause in his adventures to recall earlier adventures. As in Chaucer’s retelling of the epic in the *House of Fame*, the framed narrative subverts the epic trajectory, at least momentarily. By allowing Aeneas to narrate his own past, Vergil halts the momentum toward Italy and moves the perspective from a grand third-person view to

a first-person account that reveals Aeneas' vulnerability. W.R. Johnson shows that this narration offers a less-than-epic portrait of the hero, who seems at times "baffled, anguished, and compassionate" (52). Aeneas recounts a number of uncertain signs that confronted him and his troop as they fled Troy and took to the sea. Book II relates Sinon's deceitful story, then "another sign, more fearful still" (40) when the twin snakes swim ashore, the nighttime battle's havoc, and Aeneas' sudden and strange loss of Creusa. As Johnson notes, Aeneas never acts anything but a "brave warrior," yet the narration seems to emphasize his "complexities" rather than his glory (52). Book III describes more uncertainty, when, for instance, Aeneas and his crew stop and nearly found their city prematurely. Although the *Aeneid* eventually charts a more traditional epic course, at the end of Book III this frame material has taken up two books, thus far more space than the outer frame itself, Book I.¹⁸ Aeneas' account might serve both to show just how much he must overcome and to establish his concern for his fellow future colonists, but the length of his tale, one-sixth of the whole epic, perhaps allows the bafflement that Johnson observes to linger in the poem and continue to offer a counterpoint to more its warlike values.

In the *House of Fame*, Chaucer interrupts his retelling of the *Aeneid* with a long speech, but there Dido rather than Aeneas offers a perspective that troubles the epic.¹⁹ Both framed narrators describe their vulnerability and the empire's toll, but Chaucer's frame allows Dido to narrate her story and question the epic's values rather than assign that role to the hero. Instead of listening, as she does to the framed story in the *Aeneid*, Dido speaks. In some ways, this revision offers a deeper critique of the epic and of Aeneas than the framed narrative in the *Aeneid* itself, for Chaucer replaces the

protagonist's reflections with Dido's perspective to such an extent that the story becomes as much about her as Aeneas. Chaucer's version of the story literally centers on Dido. In contrast to her considerable speech, Aeneas, in Chaucer's version, says only, "Allas, and welaway!" (170), which he utters as he flees Troy. In so far as Chaucer has anything to put forth on Aeneas' behalf, he says it by deferring to his source: "The book seyth Mercurie, sauns fayle, / Bad hym goo into Itayle." Chaucer's deference to source material dampens his defense of Aeneas, making Dido's direct appeal all the more powerful.

But in the *House of Fame* Dido's voice nevertheless arrives only through Vergil, Ovid, the engraving in the temple of Venus, Geffrey's dream, and finally through Chaucer. This strategy attests to desire's disruptive force, something the *House of Fame* seems both willing to explore and anxious to contain, rather like the *Aeneid*. Frames allow this combination of exploration and containment, for Chaucer on the one hand devotes dozens of lines to Dido's speech and on the other hand layers that speech beneath a variety of male authorities—Vergil, Ovid, himself—and brackets it with Vergil's account of Aeneas' story. This arrangement emphasizes that frames try to direct interpretation, and in this case Dido becomes a text that men interpret. (Somewhat similarly, Troilus attempts to read the "texte" in Criseyde's eyes [3.1357].) When Dido laments that her name will suffer, she acknowledges this dynamic: she becomes a text that she cannot control. In the sense that questing and reading align, Dido is the object and impediment to male-centered quests: she is the object of Chaucer's interpretive efforts and an obstacle to Aeneas' arrival in Italy. In the *House of Fame*, she remains in place, sealed amid several frames, and the questing and reading eventually leave her behind. The impossibility of an un-framed Dido, then, emerges not only from Chaucer's

interest in conflicting, authoritative texts but also from the entanglement of gender, power, and knowledge.

In the *Romance of the Rose*, one of the many other poems that influence the *House of Fame*, Chaucer encountered both this frame technique and its ability to convey similar anxieties. Jean de Meun uses frames to allow opposing views of gender hierarchies to coexist, an irresolution that contributes to the poem's ongoing search for authority. In Friend's speech, descriptions of love in the Golden Age bracket the Jealous Husband's tirade. Before relating the Husband's views, Friend explains that "in the days of our first fathers and our first mothers, according to the evidence of the literature through which we learn of these matters, love was loyal and true, free from covetousness and rapine, and the world was a very simple place" (128). Then the Jealous Husband begins an invective designed to show just how profoundly the world has fallen from the days of "our first fathers and our first mothers." The Husband insistently tries to read his wife, to decode what he imagines to be her various deceits.²⁰ His vitriol, which emphasizes hierarchy and "covetousness," occupies much of Friend's speech, so much that the small descriptions of the Golden Age before and after seem easily lost. After finishing his rehearsal of the Husband's rant, Friend returns to a description of the idyllic past: "the ancients bore one another company without binding themselves in servitude, peacefully and without baseness; not for all the gold of Arabia or Phrygia would they have given up their freedom, for it would be wrong to sell it, even in exchange for all that gold" (145). As Sarah Kay observes, the Golden Age brackets "could be seen as containing and condemning" the Husband's hatred, or perhaps his lengthy speech exceeds its small borders (64-5). How much of the poem's perspective does the Jealous

Husband represent? While rewriting Dido, Chaucer may not have been thinking of these passages in the *Romance of the Rose*, but his and Jean's frame narratives have similarities beyond unsettling a unifying perspective. These frames at once open and close the possibility for a different intersection between gender and power.²¹ The *Romance of the Rose* recounts a time free of hierarchy, but while this unfallen world is possible to imagine, at the same time the poem suggests that it remains inaccessible.

Later something similar occurs in the Old Woman's speech, where an account of the Golden Age interrupts her advice, advice very much the product of a fallen world. Here the frame is reversed: a long speech about the inevitability of deceit in love surrounds an account of an unfallen world. She explains that "women are born free; the law has bound them by taking away from them the freedoms Nature had given them. For Nature, if we apply our minds to the question, is not so stupid as to create Marote simply for Robichon, nor Robichon for Mariete or for Agnes or for Perrete" (214). The Old Woman opposes human law to natural freedom, and she evokes a time when artificial hierarchies and bonds did not obstruct desire. Because culture has taken away women's freedom, she argues, in Ovidian fashion, that deceit has become necessary. Does the myth's placement in the middle of her advice about how to accomplish this deceit suggest that freedom has become impossible to recover, or does her description of the Golden Age "provide a rallying point, and a rationale, for women's discontent with their sexual predicament" (Kay 64-5)? Neither Friend nor the Old Woman, let alone Jean, explains how to interpret these moments. Jean's frames draw in readers much as Chaucer's frames do, as if inviting us to construct the text's position on these issues. Rather than hide a

secret the frame demands a response, and the range of available interpretations suggests that we are meant to take the poem's doubleness as symptomatic of the fallen world.

This doubleness appears to generate the *Romance of the Rose* itself: the fallen world has made love and language unstable. The fall engendered not only the deceitful forms of love that Friend and the Old Woman counsel but also poetry, for much of Jean's matter derives from the problems of love in a world full of imperfect language.²² Poetry seems nourished by the same ambiguity that makes love treacherous and language uncertain. Almost by definition, unsatisfied desire generates the love poem, and even narrative itself. The desire to leave one's "own land" that Friend describes as symptomatic of the fallen world, or merely the desire to know more, creates the conditions for a story by disturbing a status quo. As a "very simple place," an unfallen world is outside narrative altogether, because narrative occurs in human time rather than in a divine present (Scala 33). Appropriately, Friend qualifies his description of the idyllic past by noting that we can only know it through books, "the evidence of the literature through which we learn of these matters." The poem's comments on the Golden Age suggest that we cannot speak or write about this narrative-less place, or perhaps about anything else, without putting it into a narrative. The only access to this lost time, books, are the quintessential products of a fallen world, where narrative frames knowledge.

4.

Book III shows just what confronts Dido when she recognizes that she has lost control of her reputation. In the Houses of Fame and Rumor, language produces more language, a sequence that leads us away from whatever authority, original utterance, or

unfallen language that may exist. In the House of Rumor, Geffrey learns that all speech comes from other speech:

But al the wondermost was this:
 Whan oon had herd a thing, ywis,
 He com forth right to another wight,
 And gan him tellen anon right
 That same that to him was told,
 Or hyt a forlong way was old,
 But gan somewhat for to eche
 To this tydynge in this speche
 More than it ever was. (2059-67)

Language becomes a never-ending series of quotations, or misquotations. This description of rumor seems to describe Chaucer's retelling of the *Aeneid* earlier in the poem, where he adds to the "tydynge" of Aeneas and Dido that he finds on the temple walls. Here in Book III, though, the uncertain reputations in Book I have become outright noise, part of the "grete swogh" of "tydynge" "that rumbleth up and doun / In Fames Hous" (1031, 1026-27).

Both rumor and Chaucer's goddess of Fame reshape any original utterance, and we seem to have no access to Dido's story but through fame and rumor. The rumors, already perhaps distorted, travel to Fame's hall, where the goddess dictates their reception.²³ Interestingly, tidings travel from rumor's whirling wicker to Fame's hall: we learn first of Fame and then of rumor's workings, a sequence that underscores language's deterioration. The stories in the House of Fame are still coherent, though perhaps unjustly

famous or infamous. In the House of Rumor, the situation is even more chaotic. By placing rumor last in his narration, Chaucer implies that noise is at the root of knowledge. This strategy mimics the deteriorating effects of the declining world, and at the source of the deterioration, the origins of rumor itself, we find only more text, more quotation. As the source of all narrative, the House of Rumor contains something close to an ur-text, the moment before stories become altered by repetition. Geffrey's journey to the House of Fame is a privilege, a reward for his poetic service, and few other people get to see such "tydynge" before more rumor changes them and the goddess Fame judges them. In other words, few if any people hear the "tydynge" themselves but instead receive them filtered by Fame. But even what Geffrey describes in the House of Rumor comes from other books, other accounts or reports, namely Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The very place where rumor gets manufactured into more elaborate rumor, then, arrives already conditioned by another text. It is almost as if Chaucer goes to some lengths to show that he pieces together his vision from other books. Even the dreamer fails to encounter an ur-text, despite his journey to the source of fame itself. Chaucer's portrayal of this source shows that narrative is double—"fals and soth compouned"—from the beginning.²⁴

The vast reaches of fame and rumor in the *House of Fame* make the poem something of an encyclopedia or anti-encyclopedia. Several critics show that Chaucer's poem comes from a range of other books.²⁵ The *House of Fame* feels like an amalgamation of everything in Chaucer's mind (Buckmaster 286), and at the same time the poem everywhere points to incompleteness. The poem's welter of unsystematized learning strains against the poem's first and last lines, which gesture toward authority. The last line, with its mention of an approaching, unnamed "man of grete auctorite,"

seems to offer a similar hope. And although that closing gesture leaves the work in some sense unresolved, it also completes a frame, for the poem begins and ends with appeals to authority: “God turne us every drem to goode!” and “he semed for to be / A man of grete auctorite.” Similarly, in the opening frame the content takes up more space than the bookends, which gesture toward an authority in hopes of cancelling the confusion. Chaucer’s range of knowledge—dream theory, the physics of sound, poetry—pushes against the borders of the dream and seems to undermine both the poem’s structure and any claim to authority. The disproportionate sizes of the framed and framing material both in the opening passage and in the whole poem suggest that human experience is confused but that an end to confusion, authority, exists somewhere. Perhaps a kind of anti-encyclopedia, the *House of Fame* seems to argue that no text can entirely encompass all thought and experience. This deferral owes something to the poem’s fascination with finding, or being unable to find, correct names.²⁶

The *House of Fame* positions itself inside an ever larger frame than the dream and an even larger library than Book III: the poem imagines itself amid a continuing flow of texts. Chaucer imagines his dream as the beginning of a story or a reading adventure, for as the poem closes, the poet sends his readers to other books:

And as I alther-fastest wente
 About, and dide al myn entente
 Me for to pleyen and for to lere
 And eke a tydynge for to here,
 That I had herd of some contre
 That shal not now be told for me—

For hit no need is, redely;
 Folk kan synge hit bet than I;
 For al mot out, other late or rathe,
 Alle the sheves in the lathe. (2131-40)

Whereas in the *Parliament* Chaucer will take himself to other books in order to find what has eluded him, here he points his readers or listeners toward other sources—volumes perhaps not yet even written—to learn what he does not bother to divulge. “Folk kan synge hit bet than I,” he remarks with characteristic modesty. The poem has shown truth so difficult to name that once Chaucer does stumble upon some bit of information he declines to specify it. But even if “al mot out,” how will we recognize this particular “tydynge” among all the others? To finish reading Chaucer’s poem, we must read something else, even if we do not know exactly what. The *House of Fame* has been a prologue to an unspecified work. In some ways the *Aeneid* is just the opposite, a postlude to well-known story, the Trojan war. Virgil’s poem finishes a narrative, but the *House of Fame* seems to keep beginning and never quite ends: the dream vision starts uncertainly, idiosyncratically recounts the *Aeneid*, offers a lesson in medieval physics, describes the Houses of Fame and Rumor, and then gestures toward another development as a man of great authority approaches.²⁷

5.

Frequently, then, the *House of Fame* reaches for more stable language, but rumor and fame subvert these attempts. Does the poem imagine any way to escape its frames? Book II’s emphasis on experience also might seem, at least initially, like an alternative to libraries, old authorities, and untrustworthy language. After Book I’s display of bookish

knowledge, the eagle lifts Geffrey from the temple and the desert and offers him something he cannot find in a book. As a reward for sitting up late reading and writing, the poet will get to learn some “tydynges” of love, something outside his world of letters (675). The eagle offers the poet experience, which Chaucer often opposes to written authority. Geffrey’s guide purports to teach him about “the real world” (Boitani, *Chaucer* 205), and exults that he has managed to explain physics without recourse to language that would get in the way: “Telle me this now feythfully, / Have y not preved thus simply, / Withoute any subtilite / Of speche, or gret prolixite / Of termes of philosophie, / Of figures of poetrie, / Or colours of rethorike?” (853-59). Here in the middle of the poem another figure purports to speak about the nature of things directly in a long speech. Book I has perhaps made us suspicious of any such attempt, however, and Book III all the more so. But perhaps the eagle’s own jargon during his proofs suggests that language is not easily overcome, and this teacher is hardly concise, despite his claim to have eschewed “prolixite.”²⁸ Book II, then, does not avoid the problem of speaker’s viewpoint any more than Book I, where limited perspectives compromise claims to accuracy. And in any case, the eagle has taken Geffrey from one world of books—classical epic—to another—the Houses of Fame and Rumor.²⁹ Not long into Book III, we again find Geffrey amid an endless library.³⁰

A stronger claim to knowledge beyond fame arrives in Book III, and it also involves a frame structure. In the *House of Fame*’s opening sequence, its version of the *Aeneid*, and even in its first and last lines, authority or appeals to authority frame confusion. In the poet’s announcement that he does not expect to seek renown for himself in the House of Fame, Chaucer reverses this structure and punctures the confusion with a

moment of certainty and assurance. Between his visits to the houses of Fame and Rumor, Geffrey declares that he can best measure his own worth:

With that y gan abouthe wende,
 For oon that stood right at my bak,
 Me thought, goodly to me spak,
 And seyde, “Frend, what is thy name?
 Artow come hider to han fame?”
 “Nay, for soothe, frend,” quod y;
 “I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy,
 For no such cause, by my hed!
 Sufficeth me, as I were ded,
 That no wight have my name in honde.
 I wot myself best how y stonde;
 For what I drye, or what I thynke,
 I wil myselven wal hyt drynke,
 Certeyn, for the more part,
 As fer forth as I kan myn art. (1868-82)

To some extent, Geffrey positions himself outside Fame's influence both by insisting that he does not want fame and by announcing that he himself can best judge how he stands. Pope ends his revision of the *House of Fame*, the *Temple of Fame*, with a version of these lines. Burrow compares the position of this idea in the *House of Fame* to Pope's relocation of them in his reinterpretation: “Geoffrey's declaration of stoic, or Boethian, self-sufficiency struck a deep and memorably personal note, but it remains, in Chaucer's

poem as we have it, tantalizingly inconsequential. Pope saw that it could ‘more naturally’ go at the end, as a conclusion to the whole, and as such, in Pope’s urbanely moralized form, it works perfectly” (“Poems Without Endings” 29). When Pope concludes with the couplet, “Unblemish’d let me live, or die unknown / Oh grant me honest Fame, or grant me none!” (21), he moves “Geffrey’s declaration of stoic, or Boethian, self-sufficiency” from a framed to a framing position, from near the end of the poem to the end itself. As Burrow argues, if Geffrey’s declaration were to end the poem, we would read the work differently, for in that case we would be left with an ending that confidently rejects the preceding material, the workings of Fame.

In Chaucer’s poem the declaration stands more in the middle of things, but perhaps it is not entirely “inconsequential,” for Geffrey’s stoic remarks briefly, if not conclusively, interrupt Book III’s noise. The idea that he knows best how he stands suggests that some knowledge beyond fame exists, even if only in his own mind, safe from spoken or written language’s fallibility. Far from seeking fame, he seems to shun it, for after seeing the House of Fame, he knows better than to offer his name.³¹ Like Dido, Geffrey says that he knows the truth about himself and does not want others to read him, even if he seems more confident about safeguarding his name.³² The poet’s declaration here recalls an earlier confident moment in the poem, the poet’s account of Dido’s lament and announcement that he is going straight to the source and avoiding intermediary authors: “non other auctor allege I.” But there, too, the ensuing lines seem to overwhelm his brief self-reliance, for soon we see that access to Dido’s own words is not so straightforward. Chaucer’s frames allow us to see moments in the text like these as simultaneously powerful and marginal, a formula that prepares us for the unnamed man

of great authority at the poem's end, who seems essential to the poem yet relegated to its margins.³³

Although Chaucer does not fully present the man of great authority in the *House of Fame*, elsewhere he thinks about where to find such authority. In the link between the tales of *Thopas* and *Melibee*, Chaucer remarks that though the gospel writers differ in some respects, they essentially agree: “Al be ther in hir telling difference / For somme of hem seyn moore, and somme seyn lesse, / Whan they his pitous passioun expresse— / I meene of mark, Mathew, Luc, and John— / But douteless hir sentence is al oon” (948-52).³⁴ The gospels, conspicuously absent from the *House of Fame*, seem like an ur-text, books that do not owe their authority to other books. In retelling the *Aeneid*, Chaucer is concerned with something broadly similar to the gospel stories: the life of ancient figures in differing authoritative accounts. He shows that for Aeneas and Dido, however, the sentence of classical authors is not “al oon.” Chaucer’s comments on the gospel’s differences also contrast with his observations about the bearers of Troy’s fame: “But yet I gan ful wel espie, / Betwex hem was a litil envye. / Oon seyde that Omer made lyes, / Feynynge in hys poetries, / And was to Grekes favorable; / Therfor held he hyt but fable” (1475-80). Chaucer declines to weigh in on this dispute, but he repeats Homer’s name, increasing his fame. He does, though, add to the conversation about Dido, which suggests that conflicting accounts of a person can produce still more accounts, augmenting his or her fame. Chaucer may imply that the gospels owe their longevity not only to inherent worth, then, but also to their several authors, whose different accounts elicit interpretive arguments. In this sense, the *House of Fame* itself seems well-designed to elicit argument over meaning and thus become a famous text (Baswell 222).

Although the gospels' fame and their conflicting accounts may work somewhat like the stories by Homer or about Dido, in another way the gospels, Chaucer implies, contain a core that resists interpretation, something inherently true, a "sentence" that "is al oon." Chaucer seems unwilling to subject scripture to the Houses of Rumor and Fame, but the mystification of authority works somewhat similarly both in the gospels and in the lines that begin to mention the man of great authority that appears to arrive as the poem breaks off. The source of both authorities remains always "offstage," away from language's influence. The "sentence" of the gospels, their inherent, authoritative significance, is "al oon" even if their language differs. This perfect authority, fiction's opposite, has no frame, no narrator, even no language, like Augustine's holy silence.³⁵ In one way, the *House of Fame* seems to oppose language and authority, as if language is necessarily suspect and authority the remedy for that instability. In the fallen world, however, authority is always bound up in language, for even scripture's authority arrives through words.

The man of great authority, enigmatic and on the poem's margins, contrasts with Dido, subject to multiple male interpreters and at the center of the poem's frames. This figure has certainly elicited arguments over his identity, an important prerequisite for fame, but he does not suffer scrutiny the way Dido does. He hovers on the edge of the poem, but she speaks from within several frames. Dido's secret love becomes public, but he remains unknowable, and in fact we cannot even be sure that he has any authority at all: "he semed for to be / A man of grete auctorite." In some ways Dido also inversely mirrors the goddess Fame, another of the poem's authority figures and whose power to grant or withhold fame contrasts with Dido's helplessness in the face of loose talk. And

where the narrative frames Dido, Fame escapes containment and infiltrates language everywhere, and we might even say that the goddess provides the frames through which we see everyone and everything. In other ways, though, the two prominent female characters at either end of the poem are alike: Chaucer gives both large speaking parts, and in that way they contrast with the man of great authority, who does not speak at all, and with Geffrey, who does not want his name pronounced near the Houses of Fame and Rumor. Geffrey's attempt to separate himself from fame and rumor can only partly succeed, but Dido never bothers hoping for such immunity.

Critics once offered Richard II as a possibility for the man of great authority in the *House of Fame*, and while that reading and similar conjectures about the figure's identity have become far less common, the suggestion is interesting because in some sense Richard II is just the opposite of this mysterious authority. This authority figure's partial presence speaks, however indirectly, to Richard's interest in sacred kingship. Unlike Richard, the mostly absent, authoritative man in the dream vision does not suffer interpretation and thereby retains at least the possibility of authority. As his appearance in the Painted Chamber would imply, Richard II has entered the House of Fame and suffered accordingly, but the man of great authority remains forever on its threshold. His position, on the edge of things where rumor's noise cannot quite touch him, implies that sacred authority requires inspired language that will not merely give way to other language, and such words appear nowhere in the *House of Fame*. Chaucer's declaration of self-sufficiency, interestingly, seems to come closest, but the surrounding material qualifies that moment, as we have seen. The *House of Fame* shows that establishing authority means controlling interpretations, hardly likely in a world governed by fame

and rumor. The man of great authority who does not quite step into the poem's frame represents the possibility for sacred kingship, something Richard II could not achieve and that Chaucer suggests is impossible in the fallen world.

Notes

¹ Edward II had his father's life represented in the adjoining room, adding "contemporary England" to the images of kingship (Staley 114).

² Richard failed to imitate French kingship because, Staley argues, he "did not completely understand that Valois magic was firmly grounded in a vernacular culture that Charles carefully patronized and shaped. The Ricardian age is the first great age of formal English translation, but these texts do not proceed from the court" (147).

³ See, for instance, Kordecki, "Subversive Voices"; and Amtower, "Authorizing the Reader" 274.

⁴ See Ruffolo, "Literary Authority" 339; Powrie, "Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus*" 257; and Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England* 222

⁵ Jacqueline Miller observes that in this poem language seems like an obstacle to truth: "If a 'trouthe' that does not 'fayle' is to be discovered, it may not be in language. Neither words themselves nor those who speak them carry inherent authority, despite their seeming weight and power" (*Poetic License* 53).

⁶ Fyler explains that the medieval "discontent" over the "divorce between language and reality" produces "the *sermo humilis*, a plain style stripped of ornament and sophistical devices, which the Eagle comically claims to have used in his exposition of the theory of sound (HF 853-59). But the virtues of plain style and clear thought, as they appear in the *House of Fame*, are also undercut" ("Chaucer, Pope, and the *House of Fame*" 155).

⁷ Scholars tend to ask why Chaucer rewrites the *Aeneid* in the *House of Fame* at all, for Book I and its concern with love does not immediately cohere with the poem's examination of fame. For several reasons Chaucer's retelling of Vergil's epic makes sense in this context. Appropriately enough, Geffrey finds a story of Venus' son in her temple (Rudd, *Classical Tradition* 14), and Chaucer largely confines himself to retelling the parts of the *Aeneid* about love (Traversi 55). The epic also discusses fame and rumor (Minnis, *Oxford Guide* 164), making it a likely source for Chaucer to negotiate in a poem about these very subjects. Geffrey's journey to the Houses of Fame and Rumor parallels or parodies Dante's cosmic pilgrimage, so beginning with the poetry of Dante's guide makes an appropriate starting point for Geffrey as he searches for higher knowledge. Finally, and perhaps most centrally, the *House of Fame* explores how knowledge gets created and the experience of confronting opposed authorities. Sheila Delany argues that conflicting, authorized opinions—Vergil's and Ovid's—about Aeneas makes his story appropriate for such an exploration (37). Somewhat similarly, Niall Rudd observes that the contradictory attitudes in Book I "represent various and sometimes conflicting tidings about love, conveyed in one of the most celebrated of all love stories. That story, in which rumour plays a cardinal role, transmits the reputation of the participants—an

ambiguous reputation which, thanks to the quality of the poem, has ensured their lasting renown” (23). In different ways, these explanations also point to how Dido and Aeneas’ desire has destabilized language, and the *House of Fame* reminds us that in the fallen world love and words have both become imperfect.

⁸ Frames, which modify ways of seeing, seem appropriate to this visual poem. Marilynne Desmond observes that Chaucer often draws attention to his own gaze in the *House of Fame*, and this emphasis on his sight underscores the poem’s interest in interpretation (131).

⁹ Christopher Baswell points out similarities between the two characters: “Like his model Aeneas, Geffrey must make a descent before he can hope for any true visionary flight. If we leave him waiting attentively before an Authority who never speaks, the resolution is no more ambiguous than that of Aeneas who learned the truths of cosmogony and history, then left the Underworld through the gate of false dreams” (244). Also see Joyner, “Parallel Journeys in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*” (4).

¹⁰ Deanne Williams argues that the *House of Fame*’s “noisy opening illustrates the dynamic relation between text and commentary, central to medieval literary theory, that motivates Chaucer’s four dream visions” (147). In these works, the text seems able to generate endless commentary, and they figure reading as an attempt to sort through the comments and find the text itself. As the *House of Fame* ends, though, it encourages only more analysis. William A. Quinn points to how the poem’s close elicits “noisy” commentary: “Like the famous names inscribed on ice but still unspoken, this authority figure is and is not presented by the text. Chaucer admits he cannot name this person. This conspicuously explicit omission has only tempted readers to guess the identity of this ambassador of insight. Critical confabulation thus continues to amplify the noise of the text’s apparently truncated conclusion” (190).

¹¹ Here or elsewhere Chaucer’s voice seems hardly prophetic, and indeed he works to make his voice sound uninspired by adopting his customary posture of an inexperienced love poet and confessing his bewilderment of love and other subjects whenever he can (52, 128-9). Despite its interest in fame and rumor, Vergil’s vatic poem feels far less threatened by unstable language. James Simpson explains the *Aeneid*’s very different relationship to fame: “Virgil’s own work, articulated as if by an inspired voice, can afford to describe fame without incurring the danger of having been itself produced by Fame’s mendacity” (*Reform* 165).

¹² Robert Jordan notes the poem’s frames and argues that they contribute to how the poet inserts himself into the text: “Because of the enclosed form of the sections, narrative movement tends to be abrupt and spasmodic rather than smoothly flowing as the poem moves from one self-contained unit to the next” (111).

¹³ Karla Taylor shows that by putting himself so conspicuously into the story Chaucer both enhances and undermines its accuracy: “The narrator’s imaginative participation in his story is an important element in making us believe in the realistic inner love story. Yet it also compromises Chaucer’s pose in the frame as a historian, reporting events from a distanced, objective point of view” (46). Also see Desmond, who points out that “These classical women—Briseis, Oenone, Hypsipyle, Medea—are simply readerly formulations in the mind of the dreamer; they are not present in the *House of Fame*, or even in the temple of Venus. There is nothing in the narrative to suggest that these stories are painted

on the wall along with Virgil's *Aeneid*. In this instance, Ovid is in the eye of the beholder" (149).

¹⁴ Commenting on this remark that readers should figure out the dream for themselves, Powrie argues that the poem begins a series of deferrals: "This deferential gesture, commissioning the reader with hermeneutical responsibility, is part of a recurring pattern of displacement in the *House of Fame*. Chaucer's version of the Neoplatonic journey traverses something like an attic of curiosities, cluttered with artifacts of culture and fragments of narrative. Geffrey discovers an iceberg inscribed with narratives that melt away, a hall of beryl magnifying the statues of famous poets, a wicker labyrinth populated by storytelling pilgrims and shipmen. As Geffrey passes each artifact, the promised answer to his quest for 'tydynge' seems to be displaced perpetually" (258). Powrie contrasts Chaucer's approach with Alan of Lille's in the *Anticlaudianus*, which, she argues, is more interested in trying to control its readers' responses.

¹⁵ Vergil uses verb "condere" when Aeneas plunges his sword into Turnus' chest: "hoc dicens ferrum adverso sub pectore condit" (950). The verb also describes the act of building or founding. In the first few lines, we learn that Aeneas "multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem" (5). See Putnam, "Unity in Closure" 226.

¹⁶ As Delany remarks, "In Chaucer's version of the legend, then, we find the Ovidian love story framed in the larger context of Virgilian epic. Chaucer's inclusion of both sources suggests that Aeneas cannot be judged to be entirely right or entirely wrong" (55). And as Fyler argues, this tension already exists in the *Aeneid*: "In the *House of Fame* Chaucer's passivity reacts to a tension that is not simply between Vergil and Ovid, or between poetic truth and falsehood. Vergil seems at variance with himself; and the *Aeneid* makes unresolved and perhaps irresolvable claims on our belief and sympathy. Are we to admire Aeneas's truth to his mission, or attack his falsehood in leaving Dido?" (*Chaucer and Ovid* 39).

¹⁷ Other elements of the *House of Fame*'s frame techniques also suggest that Chaucer allows no escape from the fictional frame. Helen Phillips describes the importance of framing devices in fifteenth-century Chaucerian poetry. "Transition frames," for Phillips, "take the narrator from one state into another and mirror a reader's progress into the central fiction. The most celebrated is the dream, a transition from waking to sleep" (80-81). In these frames, the poem leads the reader deeper into the "fictional realm," the dream. Phillips contrasts this technique with "book frames," which take readers toward an "extrafictional world," a strategy "designed to turn attention outwards to the physical book, the completed volume the reader holds and peruses. Among these are references to the narrator's decision to write; requests to readers to receive and correct books; 'Go Little Book' envoys; and self-begetting' devices, by which the text is presented as an account of how it was itself written" (81). Especially because its dreamer never wakes, the *House of Fame* leads the reader deeper into the "fictional realm."

¹⁸ Vergil not only uses the frame story to qualify the epic's predominate values but also follows the *Odyssey* in devoting this proportion of the epic to the hero's recollections.

¹⁹ Chaucer's rearrangement of the narrative owes something to medieval storytelling conventions. As Boitani points out, "Chaucer gives us an English translation of the first lines of the *Aeneid* and then a summary which replaces the 'ordo artificialis' of the original with the 'ordo naturalis' characteristic of medieval narrative" (*Chaucer* 194).

²⁰ As Sylvia Huot argues, the *Romance of the Rose* figures writing and reading as male and the text as female (48).

²¹ Lesley Kordecki makes a somewhat similar observation: “Ultimately, the dreamer has the most to learn from Dido, the eagle, and Fame, the three subjectivities that are outside of human (male of course) control” (74). To some extent, my observations hew close to these, because I am also interested in how Chaucer’s poem looks for something beyond his own perspective or “control.” Kordecki concludes her analysis by arguing that Chaucer hopes to embrace these other perspectives: “Who is the authority in this place antithetical to authority? Chaucer cannot quite identify this man because he was still trying to become him, someone whose voice can carry the curious power of women and animals” (77).

²² Fyler explains this idea: “Love and poetry are both by their nature signs of the fallen state of the world—love because of its post-Edenic doubleness, but also its earthly nature as unsatisfiable desire: poetry because, as the *House of Fame* most clearly shows, language is always at a remove from the reality it uncertainly attempts to reveal” (“Love and the Declining World” 303-4).

²³ Boitani describes Fame’s name-giving power as inversely analogous to Adam’s in the garden: “Fame gives tidings their ‘duracioun’ and above all their ‘name’; and if ‘name’ means ‘reputation,’ there is no doubt that it also means what we all understand by ‘name’—nomen. Chaucer’s Fame imposes names like Adam in Genesis. But whereas he gave name to things, she gives name to words and tidings. Chaucer’s ‘Goddesse of Renoun’ is a Fame-Language” (“Chaucer’s Labyrinth” 215). Boitani’s description of Fame as Adam or anti-Adam shows that she contributes to the language’s decline by arbitrarily renaming every tiding.

²⁴ Steven Kruger argues that in the *House of Fame*, “the compounding of truth and falsehood leaves us in a middle realm, somewhere between the infallibility of divine idea and the deceptions of the physical world. This realm is strikingly like that of imaginative literature, capable of truthful instruction even as it “lies”” (“Imagination” 130). Also see Copeland, who explains that “Chaucer and other medieval poets did not simply accept the Platonic binary between truth value and representation, philosophy and rhetoric: rather, they worked with that binary, using rhetoric as the site from which they would negotiate the conflicting claims over the authority of knowledge and the power of representation” (125).

²⁵ Lisa Kiser points out that even in his reward for being a love-poet Chaucer does not escape the world of books: “In *The House of Fame*, the narrator’s heavenly journey ends, not with a lover, the love-deity, or the origin of Love, but rather with stories about lovers and the origins of the stories, the same step away from love’s reality toward textualization that we have come to expect from the poem’s ‘Chaucer,’ the nonloving reader” (31). Other critics also show that the *House of Fame* is a tissue of texts. See, for instance, Desmond 150; and Taylor 20.

²⁶ In her study of medieval frame narratives, Davidoff explains this deferral by comparing the *House of Fame* to the *Book of the Duchess*: “In the *Book of the Duchess* embedded framing fiction + core structures delayed fulfillment, but fulfillment was finally achieved; and even though the fulfillment was constantly put off, there is nothing about the content or the tone of that poem that suggests fulfillment will never come. In the *House of Fame*,

however, the situation is quite different; as the poem builds, the unconventional goings on and the transfer of the dreamer from one guide to another makes the audience far less sure that fulfillment will be reached” (123).

²⁷ Larry Sklute remarks that the man of great authority could make the poem longer but not more conclusive: “His appearance promises an extension of the narrative but not a conclusion, for what kind of authority could anyone in the House of Rumor claim that would bring the many unresolved elements of this poem to an appropriate end?” (46).

²⁸ Joseph Dane sums up an important tension in Book II: “Like Geffrey the epic poet...the eagle too finds himself trapped in the world of *words*. He cannot employ language to transcend language” (66, original emphasis).

²⁹ In a passage on the relationship of Book II to the surrounding material, Boitani explains the poem’s circular structure, which starts and ends with the poet somewhat lost: “From cave-temple-desert, the Flight leads us not to Heaven nor even to Earthly Paradise, but to castle-cave-labyrinth” (*Chaucer* 191).

³⁰ Frank Grady approaches the issue from a related angle: “for Langland, writing a masterpiece without ever having read one (in the memorable phrase of the teacher who introduced me to his poem), ‘not-dreaming’ means the life; for Chaucer, scandalously fluent in multiple literary traditions, it means the library” (19).

³¹ See Fyler, “Chaucer, Pope, and the *House of Fame*”: Chaucer “is, he says, content with his own valuation of himself, “As fer forth as kan myn art” (1882). His disclaimer acknowledges the central lesson of his vision, that language implicates its users in its possibilities for corruption” (156).

³² Alcuin Blamires makes a similar point: “Geffrey repudiates fame because subjecting yourself to it means that others hold your name or reputation in their hands. *His* ‘sufficiency’ lies in self-reliance, or reliance on his own art. Both passages [HF 1876-78 and Troilus 5.757-63] seem to suggest that, given the unattractive jangling and envy of malicious tongues, and given the shallow discordant opinions of so many people, you have to cling to your own assessment of your objectives in life and of your success in reaching them. Yet, both in *The House of Fame* and in *Troilus and Criseyde*, these breakaway moments seem isolated, and (in Simpson’s terms) the ‘chivalric’ ethos substantiating conventional awe of fame cannot be suppressed by the logic of ‘clerical’ or ‘prudential’ positions. The insights intimated by Geffrey and Criseyde just lapse, as though they were but a glimpse into an as yet unreachable alternative or future culture. In both cases they give way to renewed apprehension about the awesome power of the myth-making forces that build celebrity” (85, original emphasis).

³³ Robert J. Meyer-Lee sees this structure in the poem and in Chaucer’s work as wool controller: “The tidings/fame complex, positioned “Ryght even in myddes of the weye / Betwixen hevene and erthe, and see” (714–15), is at once marginal and central—as was Chaucer, in economic space as controller, both marginal and central in his position among wool merchants, customs collectors, and the crown. So too was Chaucer positioned in social space somewhere ‘even in myddes of the weye / Betwixen’ gentle, clerical, and mercantile” (390).

³⁴ In pairing *Sir Thopas* and *Melibee*, Chaucer may offer his own version of the “sentence is al oon” despite dissimilar language by telling two very different tales that both

nevertheless recommend prudence. See Fyler, “Doubling and the Thopas-Melibee Link” 141.

³⁵ Miller argues that this idea informs the *House of Fame*’s refusal to name the “man of grete auctorite” (*Poetic License* 71).

Chapter 2

Chaucer and the “Slydynge Sciences” of Alchemy, Poetry, and Love

1.

In the *House of Fame*’s first lines, Chaucer considers the origin of dreams: “For hyt is wonder, be the roode, / To my wyt, what causeth swevenes” (2-3). He goes on to suggest many possibilities without endorsing any: “folkys complexions” (21); dysordynance / Of naturel acustumance” (27-8); “devucion” (33); “contemplacion” (34); “spirites” (41). Steven Kruger remarks that here the poet discusses dreaming without trying to explain it: “while Chaucer’s narrator demonstrates a wide knowledge of dream theory, he consistently refuses to acknowledge his own learnedness...He refuses to organize dream lore into any coherent system, refuses to become a theorist” (57). Chaucer’s refusal to organize his learning into a “coherent system” reflects a Boethian belief in a clarity that he cannot see, and partly for this reason his works often present a vast accumulation of unsystematized learning. He “refuses to become a theorist” because more always waits for him to discover, just what the *House of Fame*’s last lines suggest. The *Canterbury Tales* themselves also demonstrate “a wide knowledge” that Chaucer does not mold into “any coherent system.” The tales articulate various understandings of the world, from the Knight’s stoicism to the Second Nun’s piety to the Parson’s repudiation of storytelling. Chaucer’s poetry refuses to view the world from a single perspective: perfect authority exists but always elsewhere.

The *Parliament of Fowls* and the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* especially share a focus on the idea that more always remains to be known, and like the *House of Fame*, these works consider the problem of authority, a problem that preoccupies Chaucer across his

career. Examining the *Parliament* and *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* side by side, however, also shows Chaucer imagining this endless search for authority differently. Scholars juxtapose these works to draw attention to their great catalogues but do not, to my knowledge, connect their unresolved searches. One is a dream vision from Chaucer's middle period, after all, and the other something of mock-saint's life from the *Canterbury Tales*. But like the *House of Fame*, both have difficulty defining what they seek, much less finding it, and in place of their missing quest-objects offer lists, which, like the earlier poem's frames, attempt to make sense of the world and draw attention to their artificiality. Kruger's comment applies equally well to these poems, for a "coherent system" is just what the dreaming Chaucer and the alchemists seek yet fail to find. The *Canon's Yeoman* catalogues materials that he and his colleagues combine in their efforts to locate the philosopher's stone, and he ends his tale by relating how they find only more names for their quest-object. The alchemists learn only that "the name of the privee stoon" (1452) is "Titanos" (1454), a term that is "the same" as "Magnasia" (1455), and this substance is "a water that is maad...Of elementes foure" (1459-60). In the *Parliament*, Chaucer hopes to learn a "certeyn thing" about love (19), but instead he encounters common profit, Venus' allure, Nature's fecundity, and the courtly ritual of three male eagles competing for one female eagle. Faced with several versions of love rather than the unifying vision of something "certeyn," the poet decides to continue his search as the poem closes. Commenting on the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, Donald Howard observes that "with most medieval quests the goal is so high that it is out of reach" (295), and in the *Parliament* the dreamer's inability to find certainty about love or anything else also owes itself to "a goal so high that it is out of reach." Both the dreaming Chaucer and

the alchemists look for harmony in the confusion they see around them, and both works inventory an array of learning yet lack what these questers most want to know.

Although the dreaming Chaucer dedicates his reading to learning more about the world and the alchemists prosecute a hopeless quest for gold, the dreamer's pursuit in the *Parliament* sometimes resembles the Canon's Yeoman's confession in other ways, too. Chaucer in fact uses the word "elvyssh" to describe both himself and the alchemists' profession.¹ The Canon's Yeoman refers to his craft as "this elvysshe nyce lore" (842), and in the *Prologue to Sir Thopas* Harry Bailly remarks that the Chaucer "semeth elvyssh by his contenaunce" (703). Chaucer's search for the "certeyn thing" leads him to old texts where he hopes to obtain some particular knowledge, research that may have something of the alchemists' zeal for ancient wisdom. Both alchemy and poetry are endless attempts to make sense of the world by using books, and the *Parliament* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* contain a number of local echoes that involve frustrated quests and reinforce this larger similarity. "Ascaunce that the craft is so light to leere?" the Canon's Yeoman asks (838), a question that sounds like the *Parliament*'s first words: "The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne." When the repentant alchemist goes on to complain that the Canon has exhausted their finances but not their hope, his description of seeking the elusive elixir also recalls the dream vision's opening:

He hath ymaad us spenden muchel good,
 For sorwe of which almoost we wexen wood,
 But that good hope crepeth in oure herte,
 Supposyng evere, though we sore smerte,
 To be releaved by hym afterward.

Swich supposyng and hope is sharp and hard;

I warne yow wel, it is to seken evere. (868-74)

The Canon's Yeoman's description of his work shares a sentiment and some language with the *Parliament*'s first stanza, where Chaucer conflates the crafts of poetry and love: "The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne, / Th'assay so hard, so sharp the conquerynge, / The dredful joye alwey that slit so yerne" (1-3). The adjectives "sharp" and "hard" may pair easily, but their occurrence in these two contexts is suggestive because both words describe pursuits that continue "evere" and "alwey." In another moment, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* uses the vocabulary in the dream vision's first few lines even more suggestively, for the "dredful joye alwey that slit so yerne" seems echoed in one of the Canon's Yeoman's sighs: "But that science is so fer us biforn, / We mowen nat, although we hadden it sworn, / It overtake, it slit awey so faste" (680-82). In both poems, a frustrated seeker conflicted about his own enterprise chases knowledge that tends to "slyde" away, a word that Chaucer rarely uses.² The poems rely on similar language to reflect this concern elsewhere, too. After the wrangling in the bird parliament, Nature declares that they have made little progress toward arbitrating the competition among the male eagles: "And in effect yit be we nevere the neer" (619). The Canon's Yeoman uses the same phrasing to describe his alchemical work when he says that despite his seven-year apprenticeship, he is "never the neer" the Canon's "science" (721). And this endless occupation, the Canon's Yeoman complains, "is a bitter sweete" (878) to its addicted practitioners; similarly, a "dredful joye" attends the "craft" that Chaucer describes in the *Parliament*'s first stanza. Both poems describe an unmasterable "science."

Given these similarities, what accounts for the *Parliament*'s exuberance and the

Canon's Yeoman's Tale's pessimism? Their genres and place in Chaucer's career might offer some answers. The former is a relatively early poem, and the later arrives late in the *Canterbury Tales*. Despite Chaucer's interest in looking for authoritative language, he seems to represent the problem differently at different moments, and Suzanne Akbari explains that his later poetry abandons his earlier works' search for truthful language: "The *House of Fame*...prepares the way for the *Canterbury Tales* by showing the limitations of language...Having demonstrated that truth cannot be expressed directly through language, whether literally or figuratively, Chaucer chooses to pursue the next best thing: verisimilitude, fiction that resembles reality" (210). Dream visions offer an excellent vehicle for demonstrating that "truth cannot be expressed directly through language," for dreams offer a ready comparison to fiction and demand interpretation. The *Canterbury Tales* seem to move away from the dream visions and even from fiction, ending with the Parson's prose and the poet's *Retraction*.³ "Asacrality" seems to accompany Chaucer's departure from the dream vision form, for the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is one of three moments in the *Canterbury Tales* that may parody transubstantiation, and one of the others, the *Prologue* to the *Manciple's Tale*, immediately follows.⁴ Also one of three autobiographical tales, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* especially exemplifies the "verisimilitude" to which Chaucer eventually turns, for the Canon's Yeoman seems anxious to tell the truth about the Canon's deceit.

When the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* ends with a list of the philosopher's stone's names, Chaucer revisits the idea that "truth cannot be expressed directly through language," but where the *Parliament* gestures toward love's richness and confusion and the *House of Fame* toward a great authority, the alchemists circle an empty center. The

Parliament and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* both represent acts of interpretation, and in Chapter 1, we saw how interpretation threatens sacrality: the approaching figure at the poem's end retains his authority only by remaining offstage. To preserve its authority, the philosopher's stone must do something similar, and its various names seem like so many rumors on their way to the House of Fame. But in the dream visions, Chaucer allows a perfect or sacred authority to remain forever incipient, just beyond the poem's frame. In the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, the philosopher's stone stays concealed only thanks to alchemists' ability to etymologize endlessly and to Christ's injunction against looking further into the subject. Where the dream visions seem to offer and withhold sacrality, in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* it seems to have vanished, and the Canon's Yeoman seems caught in a world of matter and words.

2.

In the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and the *Parliament*, an endless search for perfect authority produces catalogues. Listing becomes fiction-making in miniature, a way of organizing a bewildering world. We can see this idea at work particularly in the *Parliament*'s tree catalogue. After Scipio Africanus shoves the indecisive poet through the forbidding gate, he enters a forest, and an idealized list of trees announces its own artificiality and calls attention to how Chaucer perceives his surroundings:

The byldere ok, and ek the hardy asshe;
 The piler elm, the cofre unto carayne;
 The boxtre pipere, holm to whippes lashe;
 The saylynge fyr; the cipresse, deth to playne;
 The shetere ew; the asp for shaftes pleyne;

The olyve of pes, and eke the dronke vyne;

The victor palm, the laurer to devyne. (176-182)

The trees receive descriptions that link them to human industry and violence, as if the aging world has made nature harder to behold in itself. The anaphora, rhyme, comment on each tree, and invocation of the poetic tree-catalogue tradition all point to the way that the poet arranges what he sees. Chaucer fails to find the “certeyn thing” partly for the reason that he lists the trees so artfully. In a fallen world, perfect knowledge—whether of nature or of love—is inaccessible. Ways of seeing intervene.

The *Parliament*'s several other lists emphasize also the dreamer's incomplete understanding. Just before remarking that he does not know his own dream's origin, Chaucer imagines various sleepers dreaming of their occupations. Soon after describing the forest he arrives at Venus' temple and names personifications of love's attendants (Plesaunce, Lust, Curteysie, and so forth), including “other thre— / Here names shul not here be told for me” (228-29). Inside that building he finds painted stories of “maydenes swiche as gonnes here tymes waste” in the service of Diana, and, he says, “many a mayde of which the name I wante” (283, 287). After he leaves the temple the poet catalogues the birds in Nature's park. His observations about each fowl put them in relation to one another or to the human world: “The gentyl faucoun, that with his feet distractyneth / The kynges hand; the hardy sperhauk eke, / The quayles foo” (337-39). Together these catalogues invite the reader to peruse examples of love's devices (the array of personifications), its victims (the paintings in the temple), and its winners (most of the birds, who choose mates for another year). In effect, lists, some of which foreground their own incompleteness, comprise the entire poem, which resembles a great catalogue of love's

forms. Where the bird and tree catalogues try to glimpse Nature, the whole dream's discordant vision gestures toward the far-off harmony of Love itself. A tension governs these lists, then, which contain both a self-conscious artifice and a desire to see things as they are.

Chaucer may have in mind his Neoplatonic sources when he creates the *Parliament*'s lists. Although not a Neoplatonist like Bernardus Silvestris or Alan of Lille,⁵ his lists work similarly in that they give shape to abstractions like "nature" or "love," if somewhat less confidently. Lists—catalogues of constellations, mountains, trees, herbs, rivers, fish, birds—comprise much of the *Megacosmos* section of Bernardus' *Cosmographia*, an investigation of the whole universe. That naming makes sense of the world, and indeed the allegory opens with Nature declaring that Silva, "a formless chaos," "demands the shaping influence of number and the bonds of harmony" (67). Following Bernardus, Alan in his *De planctu naturae* describes Nature's garments with lists of birds, fish, and other animals. Both poems try to understand the world by labeling and ordering its parts, and these searches reflect what Angus Fletcher describes as allegory's daemonic drive to "discover a cosmic order," a pursuit that demands a "conquistador" who "arbitrates order over chaos" (67). Allegorists rely on lists because both lists and allegory organize the world with names. Chaucer's lists also try to make sense of the world, but the dreaming poet hardly resembles a conquistador, and if sacrality is wholeness, then the sacred seems nearer in the *Cosmographia* and *De planctu naturae* than in the *Parliament*.

Like the *Parliament*'s dreamer, the alchemists also amass much learning, even if they cannot discover the knowledge they want most. They, too, long for some

unmediated understanding but can only gather pieces of knowledge. The Canon's Yeoman lists things "apertenengyng" (785) to his craft, and his catalogue runs about seventy lines and includes "Poudres diverse, asshes, donge, pissee, and cley," among much else (807). They imagine that they might unearth an invaluable secret hiding in this ingredient list, if they could only interpret correctly. Richard Lanham's comment on the way that Rabelais' text invites allegory applies equally well to the alchemists' project: "We have a literal level of physicality, folk custom, shit, piss, words as things, as objects like building blocks or, more wonderfully, like frozen fish. Atop this level sit the strongest and most complex invitations to allegorize. But the two levels, often, either have very little to do with one another or deliberately clash" (172).⁶ The *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* also includes "a literal level of physicality," things that the alchemists imagine would allow them access to something transcendent, given the correct reading of the objects' relationships. The alchemists take the invitation to allegorize. For them, each item has some significance in a large, unperceivable scheme and in this way alchemy parallels the Neoplatonist catalogues, which also gesture toward some implicit organization in the nature of things (Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision* 238). But these "conquistadors" try in vain to impose order on chaos, and their hopeless project can only parody the demonic drive that Fletcher associates with allegory.

The *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* ends with another list, one that also contains the tension between language and truth. Plato tells his disciple that "the name of the privee stoon" (1452) is "Titano" (1454), which is "the same" as "Magnasia" (1455), which is in turn "a water that is maad...Of elementes foure" (1459-60). Pressed again, Plato declares that the philosopher's stone is so precious to Christ that he will not allow anyone to

discover it (1467-69). The alchemists' opaque vocabulary tries to point to a more fixed reality, to something "serious." Their idiom purports to reveal this quest-object to initiates, but since their pursuit has an unrealizable goal, the elixir's many names lead only from one definition to another. Here language multiplies in a parodic version of the way knowledge increases in the *Parliament*'s agricultural metaphor, where "olde feldes" (22) produce "newe corn" (23) just as "olde bokes" (24) engender "newe science" (25). The alchemists' project mimics the aesthetic of "accretion" in late medieval texts (Simpson, *Reform* 588), which often combine ideas without synthesizing them. Where the *Parliament*'s unsuccessful search allows an accretion of several perspectives on love, even if none prove definitive, the alchemical vocabulary accretes to no particular end. The search for the sacred in this list recalls the parody of transubstantiation earlier in the tale. By his showmanship and "cursed sleighe," the Canon deceives the priest into imagining that he has witnessed alchemical magic (1227). In both cases, the substitutions, whether of words or matter, produce nothing but more of the same, and these two moments share a sense of evacuated sacrality. In the one instance, the sacred is a trick of the hand, and perhaps the other reveals that the sacred is a trick of language, which keeps sacrality always at a remove.

Where the philosopher's stone and a "certeyn thing" about love demand perfect understanding to achieve, the lists in these poems draw attention to their own arrangement and thus imply that human knowledge is always fragmentary. Lanham distinguishes between "serious" and "rhetorical" worldviews, and this distinction can help us read these ambitious quests and their catalogues. *Homo rhetoricus*, for Lanham, "is not pledged to a single set of values and the cosmic orchestration they adumbrate" (5).

Where rhetoric delights in multiplicity, seriousness insists on a single truth. Separated from the “cosmic orchestration,” *homo seriosus* laments that the world “possesses no center” (8). In the *Parliament*, the dreaming poet seems to search for that missing center, but at the same time he also avoids endorsing a “single set of values,” one of the ways to understand love that he encounters, and thereby seems to recognize that the world is “rhetorical.” Because rhetoric does not allow access to a “single set of values,” more ways of knowing and arguing about the world always remain for a rhetorician to explore. Life becomes a great catalogue of worldviews, like the visions of love in the *Parliament* or like the *Canterbury Tales* themselves.⁷ The alchemists, on the other hand, imagine that they live in a “serious” world that will allow them access to the “cosmic orchestration,” to a world that possesses a center. Rhetoric, though, keeps getting in their way, for their research leaves them with only a list of definitions for their quest-object. Where the quarreling alchemists look in vain for the missing center, for the philosopher’s stone’s true name, the dreaming Chaucer enjoys his inquiry into “olde bokes” (24), an inquiry that promises to produce endless ways to interpret the world.

The “certeyn thing” and the philosopher’s stone thus begin to get lost amid catalogues. Rather than certain knowledge of love, the *Parliament* compiles the mediating influences of Cicero, Macrobius, Ovid, Alan of Lille, Boccaccio, Jean de Meun, and Dante, all with different glosses on the subject, a quandary that reflects medieval writers’ interest in rival textual authorities. Chaucer learns much, then, even if not exactly what he sought. We might say that rather than the text he reads only commentary. The alchemists, who learn only various definitions for the philosopher’s stone rather than its true name, might also complain that they read only commentary and

no primary text, which is to say that they confront rhetoric rather than truth.⁸ In their efforts to learn about love and the philosopher's stone, Chaucer and the alchemists could read whole libraries of commentary and never the "unknown text" itself, and so their reading lists expand indefinitely. Other medieval poems also submerge their main subjects in layers of explanation, lists that overwhelm any other direction the poem may have. Stephen Barney sees this phenomenon at work in Chaucer's own *Book of the Duchess*, for instance: "Something about the dream-vision form encourages lists...The Black Knight amplifies the lovely Lady White and her death by way of poetic amplification—lists—making her a metaphor for Beauty and Death, so that the principle of the lists, the lady herself, barely emerges (like the lady of *The Romance of the Rose*, whom we never see)" (219-20). The dream vision form may encourage lists because the genre is interested in imperfect access to knowledge, and that interest often results in a series of interpretations, a list. Barney's observation also helps illuminate the quest for the "certeyn thing" in the *Parliament*, which emerges no more clearly than the duchess from amid lists amplifying its meaning. Blanche and lady of the *Romance of the Rose* amid lists also have some affinity with Dido amid frames: all are figured as texts and the subject of much investigation, the site of important, elusive knowledge sought by male readers. The quest for the "certeyn thing" does not seem as strongly gendered as the searches in these other dream visions, but in each case a male poet tries to understand the nature of desire and love, and the poems foreground these interpreters and their fallibility.

Not only poets but also medieval glossators obscure their objects with explanations. Daniel Pinti describes how fourteenth-century Dantists wrote commentary that produced more commentary without arriving at "interpretive certainty," a practice

these exegetes sometimes acknowledge explicitly (324).⁹ If the *Parliament* concerns the inability to confront the text or the world directly, it is appropriate to find Chaucer reading commentary (Macrobius on Cicero) in the poem's opening stanzas, because commentary tries to explain while at the same time interposing itself between the reader and the text. Pinti argues that Chaucer recognizes this effect when he creates the gate's inscriptions in the *Parliament* (339). The gate purports to offer a "pleyn sentence" (126), but given its conflicting pronouncements that plainness does not seem clear. In some ways not only the gate but the entire poem participates in the commentary tradition that Pinti describes. The "certeyn thing" resembles the opacity in the gate's language, and the commentary on the phrase, the bulk of the poem itself, both conceals and reveals the knowledge the poet desires. The more perspectives on love that the dreaming poet gathers, the more complete his understanding may become. But commentary, no matter how lengthy, offers only imperfect access to its subject and therefore can go on endlessly.

3.

In both the *Parliament* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, the questers' frustrations add up to a longing for knowledge that remains always ahead, what Giuseppe Mazzotta calls "other realms of discourse just beyond one's own experience" (30). Mazzotta argues that for Dante, "the world is not and cannot be limited to the absolute measure of one's own life and one's own theoretical constructions of it; there always exist other realms of discourse just beyond one's own experience" (*Dante's Vision* 30). For both Chaucer and Dante, history and time lie open, so more always remains to be known. These poets share an interest in always looking for new ways of seeing and the conviction that a single formula cannot contain life's diversity, an idea that their first-person narration

emphasizes. The phrase “realms of discourse” aptly describes the different kinds of love Chaucer encounters in the *Parliament* and what he continues to seek in its last stanza. Until they uncover the name of the philosopher’s stone, the alchemists also face the prospect or the threat of endless “other realms of discourse.” But alchemy, the only “discourse” that could satisfy them, circumscribes their knowledge. The science postulates a secret hidden beneath the world’s appearances, but the matter the alchemists cook remains only matter, and the words they etymologize seem to point nowhere. Alchemy offers an endless opportunity for discussion and scholarship but no way out of its labyrinth.¹⁰

Despite their shared preoccupations with endless searches for knowledge, then, the *Parliament* and the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* represent reading differently, a difference that might involve their treatments of sacrality. The dreaming poet explores the ways people manufacture sense in a confusing world, whereas the alchemists insist on finding the truth (or getting rich). In the *Parliament*, Chaucer uses a proverb, one way of contriving clarity, to introduce another sense-making strategy, ritual activity:

For out of olde feldes, as men seyth,
 Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere,
 And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,
 Cometh al this newe science that men lere. (22-25)

Here Chaucer shows that readers and writers renew knowledge cyclically, like old fields yielding new grain. The agricultural analogy implies that knowledge is a human production and thus imperfect, as Akbari notes, rather than “transcendent and eternal” (196). Chaucer even draws attention to the very adage’s human construction: “as men

seyth.” The repetition and balance in these lines also highlight the sentence’s manufacture: the maxim, like the fields, is a product of human labor and suggests that human knowledge is provisional and requires ceaseless effort to maintain. Were the alchemists to craft an analogy about new science coming from old books, they might liken the project to mining rather than to farming: they search for a nugget of lore amid old texts. The *Parliament*’s panel-like structure—the exploration of different kinds of desire—suggests that Chaucer does not so much look for buried treasure as for a way to revise and renew knowledge. He emphasizes reading’s process as much as its goals.

In the *Parliament*, Chaucer’s reading, which leads him from one idea or text to another with no prospect of ending, suggests but seems to stop short of the alchemists’ descent into a “linguistic abyss.”¹¹ In the dream vision Chaucer imagines reading as a continuous search for “other realms of discourse” rather than as a doomed pursuit for trustworthy language. He highlights this desire by framing his dream with scenes in which he searches for something that he does not quite define and never locates:

Of usage—what for lust and what for lore—

On bokes rede I ofte, as I yow tolde.

But wherfore that I speke al this? Nat yoore

Agon it happede me for to beholde

Upon a bok, was write with letters olde,

And therupon, a certeyn thing to lerne,

The longe day ful faste I redde and yerne. (18-21)

Chaucer hopes to learn a “certeyn thing,” either a sure or a particular thing, and likens his readerly desire to a lover’s. The “certeyn thing” itself apparently involves love, for he has

just remarked on love's "dredful joye," but even that definition seems more suggested than supplied. He updates us on his investigation before he falls asleep and closes Cicero for the evening: "For bothe I hadde thing which that I nolde, / And ek I nadde that thing that I wolde" (90-91). This couplet retrieves the "thing" from the earlier stanza, and Chaucer observes that while he has learned something he did not look for, he has not found what he set out to learn. Because the *Parliament*'s later sections imagine love so differently, the "certeyn thing" seems like a thread that would unite the poem's disparate but related movements. The fact that the phrase appears near the opening and gets recalled just before the dream begins and again at its close, with Chaucer always in pursuit, encourages the feeling that certainty underlies his discordant vision. In the poem's last lines, Chaucer glances again at this mysterious "thing" that continues to elude him. After their parliament, the birds fly away and the poet wakes:

And with the shoutyng, whan the song was do
 That foules maden at here flyght awey,
 I wok, and othere bokes tok me to
 To rede upon, and yet I rede alwey.
 I hope, iwis, to rede so som day
 That I shal mete som thyng for to fare
 The bet, and thus to rede I nyl nat spare. (693-9)

The several explanations of love that he has gathered do not satisfy Chaucer, and he plans to take himself to still other books, ready to explore another "realm of discourse." Rather than "seriousness," he finds only rhetorical positions, ways of seeing his subject rather than the way of seeing it. His reading and dreaming will not end because they may help

him “mete some thyng for to fare / The bet,” and because “to fare better” is an aim for which he can always reach, here Chaucer continues to emphasize his reading process over its results.¹²

Like the formel eagle who has heard several arguments about love from her suitors and deferred her choice, the poet prefers to remain unattached. Her suitors claim priority from birth, ardor, and longevity of devotion, but like Chaucer she declines to choose from among kinds of love.¹³ Much as the formel preserves her (however qualified) independence, he refuses to become a monogamous reader. Chaucer’s failure to find a “coherent system” or “certeyn thing” leads him to imagine what more reading might have accomplished, what results from putting down a half-read book. When he wrote the *Parliament* he may have had in mind Dante’s Francesca, one of the eloquent shades in the *Inferno*. If Janet Smarr is correct that the *Inferno*’s fifth canto underlies the *Parliament*, from Francesca and Paolo, the adulterous lovers who began their romance where they left off reading of Guinevere and Lancelot, the poet perhaps does learn a lesson to “fare the bet”: keep reading. Smarr points out that the famous phrase “that day we read in it no further” “implies that if they had read longer in the tale of Lancelot, they might have realized how much disaster ensued for everyone involved,” and she goes on to suggest that “Chaucer’s narrator...chooses to keep reading, rejecting the example of that lustful pair in hell who thought too soon that they understood the lesson of the text” (119). For Francesca and Paolo, important wisdom awaits not so much in obscure terms or other books but on the next page. Although Chaucer somewhat resists education, always presenting himself as a love poet untutored in love, here he learns almost too well and never stops reading. He remains unattached both erotically and intellectually,

committed neither to a mate nor to a book, at once a reward and a fitting punishment for an addicted reader. His promiscuous reading contrasts with Paolo and Francesca's punishment, eternal embrace.¹⁴

Perhaps as much as perfect knowledge about love, the *Parliament*'s "certeyn thing" evokes both the interpreter's desire for coherence and acknowledgement of its impossibility. In his study of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, Peter Travis remarks on how often compulsion for unity motivates literary scholars: "Some part of us would like to believe that everything in criticism that rises must converge; some part of us suspects that all things that transcend the particular are forms of ideological cooptation" (*Disseminal Chaucer* 139). As a reader trying to understand old books, Chaucer becomes something of a critic himself, but allowing things to rise without insisting that they converge seems particularly Chaucerian, just what he does when surveying theories of love in the *Parliament* and dreams in the *House of Fame*, or when writing the *Canterbury Tales*. If the *Parliament* allowed its discussions of love to converge into a cohesive theory, the poet would become a "theorist." Instead, his quest to understand love produces answers that leave him intrigued but unsatisfied. Even if he will never resolve them, or because he will not, the incongruences that Chaucer confronts nourish his readerly desire.

An unwillingness to commit to a single view complements medieval reading practices that emphasize the interpreter as much as the text. Those practices, Travis explains, "tend to insist on the heuristic, even the therapeutic, value of the process of interpreting a literary work—even if that process involves a succession of corrective reinterpretations" ("Affective Criticism" 211). We might imagine Chaucer's journey through the *Parliament*'s dreamscape as such a quest. There he figures himself as a

reader researching love and even leaves his work open-ended to gesture toward an ongoing “succession of corrective reinterpretations.” Unlike the alchemists, the dreaming poet interests himself as much in the “process” of “reinterpretations” as in its results. The *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* describes a similar reading process, but everything goes wrong. Their search for the name of the philosopher’s stone resembles a “succession of corrective reinterpretations,” but little correction seems to happen, since one term for their quest-object leads to another in a potentially endless series of substitutions. We might think of the alchemists as frustrated readers determined to locate a kernel amid the chaff, or as Neoplatonists looking for nature’s essence beneath an untrustworthy world of appearances.¹⁵ They insist on locating “seriousness” or nothing. These baffled researchers want to ignore any process of endless reinterpretations and confront reality itself, but instead they find only imperfect language, a list of names. Perhaps both poems show us how often rhetoric and “seriousness” mingle. The searchers in these two works face the frustrations and delights of a rhetorical universe where ways of seeing always intervene, yet “seriousness” may exist, however distant and inaccessible. These questers all go on reading endlessly, the alchemists seeking the interpretation to end all interpretations and poet searching for more ways to understand love. But where the dreaming Chaucer wonders at the world’s rich confusion the alchemists curse it. They not only want to make sense of the world, after all, but also to get rich. Money, as much as knowledge, incites their readerly desire, whereas the dreaming poet has a will more uneducated than sinful.

In both the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* and the *Parliament*, the searchers cannot definitively distinguish true from false, and so must interpret. This effort exercises the will, a faculty that medieval writers persistently try to educate. But in a fallen world full

of imperfect human desire, this education cannot end, so neither can interpretation, and the “succession of corrective reinterpretations” could continue for a lifetime. (In a prelapsarian world, commentary presumably would not exist.) Chaucer, like his contemporaries always aware of the world’s fallenness, sometimes construes the very interpretive act, then, as an unfinishable quest for an imprecisely defined object. In the *Parliament*, the carefully wrought lists describe different ways to understand love, and by presenting his research as a series of catalogues that does not neatly cohere, Chaucer seems to acknowledge that he may enjoy only partial understanding of his subject. The dreaming poet in the *Parliament*, for all his characteristic modesty, recognizes that his faculties shape what he sees,¹⁶ and this recognition distinguishes him from the alchemists, whose wills operate so strongly that they interpret everything in relation to the philosopher’s stone. This monomania leads them to imagine that they might someday interpret correctly, avoid the commentary and get right to the text. They want to seize reality directly, to find something beyond their misty terms. Chaucer declines to insist that his research cohere while the alchemists try to unite their materials but fail.

4.

The dreaming Chaucer has more fun than the alchemists, too. He remarks that his delightful studies make time short: “To rede forth hit gan me so delite / That al that day me thoughte but a lyte” (27-28). Similarly, in the *House of Fame* he describes both the interpreter’s desire to make sense of things and the desire simply to interpret, pleasurable in itself: “I alther-fastest went / About, and dide al myn entente / Me for to pleyen and for to lere” (2131-33). He returns to this idea at the beginning of the *Parliament*: “Of usage—what for lust and what for lore— / On bokes rede I ofte” (15-16). Far from

enjoying their vocation, the alchemists can only gather themselves together after the most recent explosion. More than with the dreaming poet, they share a sensibility with Chaucer's other scholars, the perhaps myopic Clerk of the *General Prologue* and crafty Nicolas in the *Miller's Tale*. The former almost seems invested in learning as its own goal, for although he will gladly learn and gladly teach, his portrait may contain a hint that his intellectual pursuits require a certain parasitism.¹⁷ The Canon's Yeoman and the Clerk also both sacrifice their health to their studies. Meanwhile the Canon in the tale's second half uses his knowledge for fraud, and in the *Miller's Tale* Nicholas also exploits his reputation for abstruse learning to deceive. He declares that he cannot explain certain particulars of his flood survival plan because he "wol nat tellen Goddes pryvetee" (3558), a phrase he may have cleverly borrowed from the carpenter, who becomes convinced that Nicholas fell "with his astromye, / In some woodnesse or in som agonye / I thoghte ay wel how that it sholde be! / Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee" (3451-54). These lines could nearly fit at the end of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, where zealous seekers after obscure knowledge also receive a warning about prying into what divinity has declared secret.

The *Parliament*'s sense of play or game, however, also contributes to the poet's endless search. Chaucer's unfinished search in the poem brackets an unresolved debate, and a debate whose moderator is not notably effective. Critics have pointed out similarities between Nature in the *Parliament* and Harry Bailly in the *Canterbury Tales*.¹⁸ Both preside over an unruly, diverse crowd. Lanham comments on the role that game plays in Harry's governance: "Society must remain a game. Harmony depends on it" (70). As long as the pilgrims merely play, they can remain one company. As Lanham

notes, the Host's awareness of the importance of game might be one reason why he becomes so furious at the Pardoner's attempt to sell false relics (69). The Pardoner's intent shifts from telling a story to selling one. In the *Parliament*, too, harmony, such as there is, depends on play overcoming "seriousness." The male eagles thrill at the suggestion of fighting for the female eagle (540), but talking wins out. In one way, debate may seem like a centrifugal force, for people (or birds) disagree, and perhaps no definitive way exists to choose from among their positions. But looking at life as a game allows and even expects unreconciled arguments to coexist. If debaters see life as dramatic, as a kind of play, things need not get violent. They may, though, go on endlessly. After the tercel eagles make their pleas, the frustrated fowls cry out: "Whan shal youre cursede pletynge have an ende? / How sholde a juge eyther parti leve / For ye or nay withouten any preve?" (495-97). In Chaucer's rhetorical universe, we find much "pletynge" and very little definitive "preve." The *Parliament*'s birds occupy positions on love: the goose counsels that the tercel eagles, if necessary, look elsewhere for a mate; the turtle dove recommends undying fidelity; the cuckoo declares that since they cannot agree, all parties should remain single. Just as the Friar and the Summoner or the Miller and the Reeve necessarily remain at odds, a resolved debate among birds would be more anomalous than an unresolved debate. The fowls in the parliament will never agree not because they are unreasonable but because their natures will not permit them to behave differently.¹⁹ In the birds' debate, Marshall Leicester explains, "Chaucer is not primarily attending to distinctions between "natural" and "courtly" love, or between different social classes (though he is interested in these things), but to the breakdown of order and communication produced by the very existence of differing individual styles, regardless

of their specific directions” (26, original emphasis). In Lanham’s terms, this is to say that Chaucer is interested in rhetoric, another way to describe “differing individual styles.” In this way the conflicting perspectives on love in the *Parliament*—common profit, Venus’ allure, Nature’s fecundity, and the eagles’ competitive complaints—resemble the birds’ argument. If Chaucer is looking for a “certeyn thing” that would show underlying harmony in either case, his search will always remain unfinished.

The *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*’s ending, which offers several possibilities for the name of the philosopher’s stone, resembles a debate, for both alchemists and the *Parliament* share a faith in a far-off sacrality that birds or people can endlessly discuss. As debates, the *Parliament* and *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* share some important similarities but ultimately suggest different attitudes toward the sacred, much the way their lists operate. In his essay “*Il Cortegiano* and the Choice of a Game,” Thomas Greene distinguishes between the medieval and Renaissance game, and his distinction can help further explain these poems’ interest in unfinished searches: “the medieval *questione* is fundamentally deductive: one begins with certain norms, certain rules, which are taken for granted, and one then analyzes specific cases, specific problems or aberrations, in the light of these sacrosanct assumptions” (177). The *Parliament* ends with a *demande d’amour* about the formel’s choice of suitors, and this question invites opinions about the tercels’ worthiness. The question’s “norms” include the value of high birth, and longevity and ardor of devotion, values that the game does not threaten and that could be debated endlessly. Similarly, the *Franklin’s Tale* ends with an invitation to decide which character acted most generously: “Which was the mooste fre?” (1622). These questions ask us to analyze “specific cases” in the context of “sacrosanct” values such as generosity

or love, which the poems do not exactly ask us to define. In the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, the philosopher's stone's name is "sacrosanct," and its possible definitions or etymologies all "specific problems or aberrations." Although a *questione* does not necessarily result in a list, this deductive logic encourages collecting, which does produce lists, a series of "specific cases."

For Greene, "classical" games work inductively and do not posit anything sacrosanct. "In the classical game," he argues, "one begins with a certain praxis, with what is done, and out of that praxis one elicits the norms, inductively; that constitutes the game" (177). Classical games ask questions such as, What is the ideal state? What is the ideal courtier? What makes an effective ruler? The classical game begins with a "praxis" such as statecraft and then induces that the ideal state involves certain qualities. *The Prince*, though not exactly a game, uses this logic. Machiavelli describes an effective ruler by examining examples from antiquity and the present to derive a "norm." His text does not assume the principles of government but seeks them. Machiavelli and the courtiers in Castiglione all aim to "become a theorist," just what Kruger remarks that the dreaming Chaucer tries to avoid. These "classical" thinkers synthesize their observations, something Chaucer declines when he imagines the "certeyn thing" eluding him in the *Parliament* or authority remaining obscure in the *House of Fame*.

Greene makes a second, related distinction between medieval and classical games: "The medieval game, because it rests on the sacrosanct, can never legitimately overflow its boundaries. Although in a juridical sense, closure is difficult because there is always more to say, because the question is contrived to invite endless debate, nonetheless in a structural sense closure is tight, because the debate proceeds within

limits which by definition can never be called into question” (177). Although not a game, the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* uses this “medieval” logic. The question, What is the philosopher’s stone’s true name? “is contrived to invite endless debate,” for the name had to remain hidden to perpetuate the search,²⁰ and Plato invokes Christ to stop the otherwise endless debate. The birds in the *Parliament* debate within well-defined margins, but their talk could also continue indefinitely, and Nature must eventually intervene. To induce the “norms” of ideal courtiership, the classical game imagines a conversation among court members, a conversation that could continue forever, too, but one that, without a sacrosanct given, ranges across many topics. Presumably the medieval version would ask which state or courtier among several is best, just as the “classical” version of the *Parliament*’s game would ask what makes an ideal suitor. Both classical and medieval games could go on endlessly, then, but for different reasons. Deductive games produce lists; inductive games produce whole worlds.

Chaucer’s poetry seems to fit well into what Greene calls the “medieval” and “deductive,” but at the same time perhaps in the movement from *Parliament* to the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* we see the sacrosanct become slightly dislodged, even if the talk remains within the *questione*’s boundaries in both poems. In this late Canterbury tale, the sacred seems insecure, and the game threatens to fall apart until an authority enters to seal away the sacred again. To preserve the sanctity of the philosopher’s stone, alchemists must keep writing their arcane recipes and etymologies. The *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*’s describes a thoroughly material world, a place full of mere matter where sacrality becomes impossible and people resort to deceit and broken language. This emphasis on the material might also register a shifting intellectual climate, and scholars align the

Canon's Yeoman's Tale with modernity. Charles Muscatine argues that the tale “deals with....complacent faith in science that despises God,” and “In the light of later history, indeed, the poem is reactionary” (221). For Muscatine, the poem looks ahead and shudders. Lee Patterson also finds that the tale represents new knowledge emerging, but he shows that the tale’s attitude toward alchemy might be more complex: “alchemy provided...a way to be an intellectual. And with the translation of these texts into the vernacular—a process that begins in the late fourteenth century, we can see alchemy as one of the forces that undermined the clerical monopoly upon learning” (“Perpetual Motion” 54).²¹ The ideas that Muscatine and Patterson point out might both contribute to the poem’s asacral impulse. The “sacrasoanct” that Greene finds intrinsic to the medieval *questione* has become troubled in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*.

5.

The desire for sacrality is partly the desire to end the exhausting process of interpretation. As powerful as the desire to interpret might be the temptation to give up trying to make sense of the world. Chaucer often portrays himself as reluctant or inadequate to the task of making fiction and often begins only after getting pushed, cajoled, carried, or sentenced by authorities. An eagle lifts him through the heavens in the *House of Fame*; Scipio Africanus shoves him through the gate in the *Parliament*; and Cupid’s demands for penance generate the *Legend of Good Women*. Frank Kermode remarks on the necessity of interpretation in a way that reflects this Chaucerian predicament: “The desires of interpreters are good because without them the world and the text are tacitly declared to be impossible; perhaps they are, but we must live as if the case were otherwise” (*Genesis* 126).²² In the *Parliament*, Chaucer seems to say as much

when despite his initial unwillingness, he does enter the gate with its contrary inscriptions, even if he requires a push. He had stood paralyzed, “as betwixen adamauntes two / Of evene might, a pece of yren set” (148-49). By turning away or remaining immobile Chaucer would not only succumb to love’s fearful prospects but also declare the world to be impossible, abandon the project of interpretation, of thinking about the world at all.

In the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, too, Chaucer imagines the temptation to avoid interpreting not only in the list of names for the philosopher’s stone but also in the Canon’s Yeoman’s confession. Unlike the dreaming poet in the *Parliament*, the Canon’s Yeoman offers a kernel amid the chaff, a “certeyn thing,” even if that thing is not the philosopher’s stone but a moral for his tale.²³ He tries to turn his story into an exemplum, in effect exhorting his audience to take the fruit and leave the chaff. Addressing “worshipful chanons religious” (992), the Canon’s Yeoman protests that he means his tale to instruct: “To sclaudre yow is no thyng myn entente, / But to correcten that is mys I mente. / This tale was nat oonly toold for yow, / But eek for othere mo” (998-1001). He reinforces this warning at other moments in his tale as well (737, 874, 1306). Why does he insist so often on this point? On the one hand, he may anxiously disavow alchemy because he has not quite given up the fascinating search, as Glending Olson notes (231). But despite his apparent wish to repent, the Canon’s Yeoman also seems to have internalized the alchemists’ desire to find something sacred, a meaningful core that requires no further interpretation. The exemplum, as Travis explains, has proven threatening to criticism, for the genre leaves little for the critic to do: ideally, it cancels the need for interpretation by offering a clear moral (*Disseminal Chaucer* 125). It

explains itself. The Parson realizes this project more fully when he decides to sermonize rather than narrate a story, thus avoiding chaff altogether: “Why sholde I sownen draf out of my fest, / Whan I may sownen whete, if that me lest?” (35-36). The exemplum and the search for the philosopher’s stone both propose to find the “whete” and avoid the “draf.” After his disorienting apprenticeship to the alchemist, the Canon’s Yeoman would have the world make sense again, so he creates both a narrative and a moral for it.²⁴

In the *Legend of Good Women* Chaucer must create a series of exempla. Like the searches in the *Parliament* and the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, this task is endless, but its object is not so imprecisely defined, for he must find the same thing over and over because Cupid tells him what he must discover, namely legends of good women. Sometimes Chaucer requires a guide to help him begin his interpretive quests, but in the *Legend* a powerful authority tries on the one hand to end that quest by prescribing the poet’s reading and writing and on the other hand to perpetuate the quest by demanding that it continue indefinitely. Not at all blind, this Cupid imagines that he sees things quite clearly and accuses Chaucer of producing books that encourage mistrusting love: “Thow mayst it nat denye, / For in pleyn text, it nedeth nat to glose, / Thow hast translated the Romauns of the Rose” (G 253-55).²⁵ Cupid’s zeal for clarity and directness reflects the penance that Chaucer will perform. The God of Love reduces the complexity of the encyclopedic *Romance of the Rose* to an offense against love much as Chaucer will have to reduce his library’s richness to a catalogue of exempla. Alceste decides that Chaucer’s “penaunce” (G 469) will involve writing “a glorious legende / Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves, / That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves” (G 473-75). Chaucer, then, must make an endless list. But unlike the catalogue of love’s variety that forms the

Parliament, the sections in this list will look similar, and as the names in the list ending the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, these stories feel almost interchangeable.²⁶

As Cupid approves this punishment he tells Chaucer, “Let be the chaf, and write wel of the corn” (G 529), forcing the poet to take the advice that the Nun’s Priest offers at the end of his tale: “Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be still” (3443). There no one can hope to separate the fruit from the chaff, but in the *Legend* Chaucer must try to make these categories distinct. To do so he even prunes his sources, lamenting, for example, Procne and Philomela’s suffering without mentioning their revenge. Before he begins the legends, Chaucer comments on the necessity of believing old books, the only way to know the past: “Wel oughte us thanne on olde bokes leve, / There as there is non other assay by preve” (27-28). Books deserve “credence” but only for lack of other access to “olde thynges” (G 20, 18). The volumes in themselves are not inherently authoritative, Chaucer admits, just the best we have, and to “preve” is as difficult here as in the birds’ parliament. Chaucer must craft a case for each heroine and “preve” her exemplary status, for books, it turns out, do not provide such straightforward access to “the doctrine of these olde wyse” (G 19). Who, after all, is the historical Dido? Vergil and Ovid seem to disagree, and Chaucer offers a still different version. Cupid wants only fruit, or “seriousness,” but to provide that fruit Chaucer must call forth all of his chaff-producing, or “rhetorical,” powers.

Like the *Monk’s Tale*, the *Legend* threatens never to end, and both reiterate one idea in many different stories. But neither collection can sustain readerly desire as the *Parliament* can because the reader—whether poet interpreting his sources or the reading and listening audiences—always arrives in the same place, unlike the dreaming Chaucer

in the *Parliament* who roams through Venus' temple and into Nature's park and then looks forward to still more reading. Cupid's injunction that Chaucer must write of good women, which parallels Augustine's insistence that we read for charity,²⁷ ensures that more "realms of discourse" will always remain for the penitential Chaucer to explore, but those realms will look quite similar. As the God of Love, Cupid knows what he wants, and that certainty precludes chasing a vague "certeyn thing" about love.²⁸ This deity would not trouble himself with an imprecisely defined quest, though he does appreciate an endless one. Cupid's dictate, moreover, removes the fear of incomplete reading. Chaucer will not put down a book too soon, as Paolo and Francesca do, because he will simply quit reading when he has produced what Cupid demands. Rather than pursue something located always in another book as he does in the *Parliament*, now Chaucer must cease reading and rewriting quite deliberately, lest he continue a narrative too far and mention anything unbecoming to Love. But as Rosemarie McGerr remarks, this scheme of removing the need to interpret by simply believing old books only highlights the necessity to interpret (129). Like much of Chaucer's poetry, the *Legend* shows how much the reading will can shape the reception of books,²⁹ and once more Chaucer has created a textual universe in which almost everything is uncertain.

Like the *Parliament* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, the *Legend* resembles the medieval *questione* that Greene describes, for this game, too, can go on endlessly and remains within clear limits. And the game here also works deductively: Chaucer produces examples that conform to a rule: he provides examples of "goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves, / That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves." To keep reconfirming this sacrosanct given, he must manipulate his source material. Cupid tries to clarify the

interpretive process by directing the readerly will, but unsurprisingly the god of Love cannot elucidate matters, and perhaps even more explicitly than Chaucer's other dream visions, the *Legend* draws attention to a male reader interpreting women's experience. The exhaustion that some readers feel with this poem might reflect the exhaustion of the medieval *questione*, and even of the status of the sacrosanct, which here, as in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, requires a man of great authority—Cupid—to preserve.

In what may be the last list of his life, the catalogue of his works in the *Retraction* at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer records his poems even as he dismisses them. Sounding a bit like the penitent Canon's Yeoman who would turn his story into an exemplum and have the world make sense again, Chaucer retrieves St. Paul's comment that "al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine" (1083). In fact, both the Canon's Yeoman and Chaucer describe their crafts even as they disavow them and exhort audiences to read for exempla. But that doctrine may not prove easy to find. As Travis remarks, although Paul refers here to the Bible, often the Middle Ages broadened the statement's scope to include most writing (*Disseminial Chaucer* 158). And if all is written for our instruction, then the whole world demands interpretation, a lifelong effort. For Chaucer, to finish interpreting would mean attaining the vision of Boethius' god, eternally present and all-knowing.

Does Chaucer anywhere, then, offer an escape from language's labyrinth and the necessity of interpretation? When he represents birds' sounds in the *Parliament* Chaucer may offer an instance of something approaching the "transparent mediation between subject and object, between reader and meaning" (Akbari 7). Travis remarks on this moment:

“Kek kek! kokkow! quek quek!” go the goose, the cuckow, and the duck in *The Parliament of Fowls*. Of course, in obedience to Priscian, one should assert that each of these is a clear-cut instance of *vox literata inarticulata*—a “meaningless” animal sound that nevertheless can be represented by letters. However, on second thought it could be argued that each of these sounds is actually meaningful rather than meaningless. The onomatopoetic word “kek” is both a signifier (the *vox* representing the *sonus*) and a signified (the *sonus* itself). (*Disseminal Chaucer* 241)

If “‘kek’ is both a signifier...and a signified,” then the “certeyn thing” for which Chaucer searches in the same poem is in some ways the opposite of this “onomatopoetic word.” The “certeyn thing” refers to something the dreamer cannot quite name, while the bird sound refers to itself, as if it heals the rift in language that allegory posits. Suzanne Reynolds connects allegory to language more broadly: “In its earliest incarnation, *allegoria* is a trope, the means by which you say something other than what you mean (*tropus, quo aliud significatur quam dicitur*) as Donatus puts it in the *Barbarismus*....We might even say that in *allegoria*, the notion that signification operates *ad placitum* (by human imposition) reaches its logical conclusion” (135-36). Human language in the *Parliament* cannot easily merge sound and sense, but the birds have no trouble saying just what they “mean.” That Chaucer, so regularly interested in the avian world, should allow geese and cuckoos this synthesis rather than people feels appropriate: in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, the chickens are far more eloquent than the humans (Fyler, “Language Barriers” 450). Admittedly, “kek” is probably not the perfect language for which medieval questers long. In fact, it seems more like the noise that inhibits their search for

that perfect idiom, and here the birds' noise and the sacred comically collapse together. "Kek" points only to itself, whereas mysterious human words such as "certeyn thing" point beyond themselves to something uncertain, a gap that generates an interpretive quest.

Notes

¹ See Lee Patterson, "Perpetual Motion" 91-116; and Fyler, *Language and the Declining World* 178-79.

² Near the beginning of the tale, the Canon's Yeoman, again describing elusive knowledge, uses another form of the verb: "That slydynge science hath me maad so bare / That I have no good, wher that evere I fare" (732-3). The word appears more famously in *Troilus*, where Chaucer describes Criseyde as "Tendre-herted, slydynge of corage" (V.825).

³ In his essay "Dismantling the Canterbury Book," James Dean observes that the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* contributes to a movement away from fiction at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*.

⁴ Lynn Staley argues that "we approach the Canterbury community as not so much desacralized as "asacral." There are at least three moments in the tales where the sacrament of the altar appears to be invoked: the poisoned meal of bread and wine in the *Pardoner's Tale*, the conversion to be magically accomplished in the alchemist's crucible in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, and the Manciple's offer of wine to the drunken Cook in the prologue to the *Manciple's Tale*" (*Languages of Power* 140).

⁵ In the *Parliament* Nature begins her advice to the formel by differentiating herself from Reason: "If I were Resoun, thanne wolde I / Conseyle yow the royal tercel take" (632-33). Simpson comments on the importance of Nature's "were" here: "With this single subjective, Chaucer opens up a significant difference between himself and his Neoplatonic poetic and philosophical frames: passionate love may not be rational, but it is natural" (*Reform* 169). See also David Aers, who emphasizes the disorder Nature allows in the *Parliament of Fowls*, especially compared to Alan of Lille's Nature ("The Parliament of Fowls" 279-98).

⁶ Lanham offers various examples of this invitation and its problems: "Is the birth of Gargantua a parody of the birth of Christ? Is Pantagruel "*un geant socialiste*"? Some allegory seems undeniable. Eusthenes is force; Carpalian, quickness; Epistemon, good sense; Panurge—well, it gets a bit harder, but shrewdness for a start. And the papal satire of the cinquième livre cannot be mistaken. Or the topical allegory of the cakes and bakers. At the other extreme, some *merde* is nothing but *merde*" (172).

⁷ Writing on the many forms of desire in Chaucer, Helen Cooper describes the *Parliament*, which "makes such a variety its principal subject," as an "epitome" of the *Canterbury Tales* (*English Romance* 304).

⁸ Lanham figures the opposition between “seriousness” and rhetoric” in terms of a text and its commentary (177).

⁹ Pinti quotes a gloss on the opening of *Inferno* 3 from the early body of Dante commentary called the Anonimo Lombardo: “Because in hell no one is redeemed, here might be raised the question of Trajan, who was in hell for so long a time but nevertheless afterwards left on account of the prayers of Gregory. I put forth this unsolved question so that others may have something to say” (323). This commentator does explicitly what other commentary does implicitly, make space for comments on the comments.

¹⁰ Even the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*’s placement in the fragment suggests the possibility or the danger of endless discourse. The Canon’s Yeoman, after all, joins the pilgrimage to tell a tale about inconclusiveness. As Larry Sklute observes, the proposed scheme for the *Canterbury Tales*, two stories from each pilgrim, gets broken in order to include a story about “multiplicacion”: “The presence of fragment seven indicates that at the height of his constructional powers, Chaucer conceived a way to open a form that had been closed until then” (12). The tale expands possibility for more stories rather than shutting it down, something that need not have been the case. After the Pardoner reveals the secrets of his fraud, he tries to dupe the pilgrims, and concord only becomes reestablished uneasily. Like the Pardoner, the Canon’s Yeoman, who also tells a confessional, biographical tale, deals in objects that get sold as more than what they seem. The alchemist, though, doesn’t offer to transmute minerals for the pilgrims and presses his exemplum upon the company more sincerely than the Pardoner.

¹¹ Travis opposes affective criticism to deconstruction, the idea that “the meaning of a literary text tends to recede indefinitely into a linguistic abyss” (“Affective Criticism” 211).

¹² McGerr concisely sums up the poem’s interest in irresolution: “One might see the *Parliament of Fowls* as a poem about the difficulty of achieving one’s desired end—an idea the poem explores in reference to reading, loving, writing, and living in general” (85).

¹³ Critics often observe the parallel between Chaucer and the formel. Thomas Reed, for instance, writes that like the dreaming Chaucer, “we too are hard-pressed to understand the precise significance or relationship of the poem’s three major sections—the apparent anatomies of love embodied in the summary of the *Somnium Scipionis*, the Garden of Venus, and the Park of Nature. On one level, these three perspectives on love serve as our equivalent of the formel’s three suitors; we are to choose one as well, if not today, perhaps next year” (296).

¹⁴ Another scene of unfortunately unfinished reading appears near the beginning of Book II of *Troilus and Criseyde* when Pandarus interrupts his niece’s perusal of the *Thebaid* (178-112). Had she continued reading, Criseyde would have learned of the cannibalistic Tydeus, father of the man who will soon woo her. Pandarus, though, seems anxious that she put the book down. (I would like to thank John Fyler for pointing out this moment to me.)

¹⁵ The alchemists’ efforts to find a name buried in other names also place them in the tradition of medieval etymologists, who share something of allegorists’ desire to unveil the truth in language (Akbari 16).

¹⁶ Judith Ferster discusses this tension in the *Parliament*: “This, then, is Chaucer’s problem: If will does not operate, there can be no interpretation and in fact no participation in any experience. Yet if will does take part, experience may be prejudiced or even completely subjective, especially if one is without a guide” (55).

¹⁷ To study, the Clerk requires his friends’ support: “But al that he myghte of his frendes hente, / On bookes and on lernyng he it spente, / And bisily gan for the soules preye / Of hem that yaf hym wherewith to scoleyse” (299-302).

¹⁸ See, for instance, Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry* 125.

¹⁹ In beast literature and medieval debate poetry animals can act only according to their own natures, which often makes their positions both irreconcilable and impossible to decide among, as in the earlier avian debate poem *The Owl and the Nightingale* (c. 1200), for instance (Minnis, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer* 316)

²⁰ Patterson explains this idea: “Because the non-existence of the philosopher’s stone lured alchemy into a quest without a goal, it was forced to discover the endlessness of writing, to confront the nonidentity between language and that which it seeks to represent” (“Perpetual Motion 47-48).

²¹ Alchemy may align with an emerging scholarship in another, related way: “One notion,” Howard explains, “was that the ancients really had the secret but out of avarice had wrapped it in enigmas; perhaps there is just a glimmer of incipient ‘literary’ humanism in this idea that a superior knowledge was hidden in ancient texts” (296).

²² Medievalists often find Kermode’s vocabulary apt for describing fourteenth-century literature. See, for instance, Anne Middleton, “Narration and the Invention of Experience: Episodic Form in Piers Plowman” 169; and McGerr 8-9.

²³ Kiser argues that the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale* seems both more and less truthful than the other tales: “although we are given the illusion that this shapeless autobiographical narrative comes closer to representing the truth of an actual experience than any of the other life stories we have heard, we must admit that the experience purportedly recorded there remains mysteriously vague, its real-life referents shrouded by the occult terminology and the emotional disturbance that cloud this narrator’s relationship to reality. Indeed, *The Canterbury Tales’* most trustworthy portrayer of historical truth ends up being incapable of conveying it, and Chaucer thematizes this idea in the tale itself when he has the Yeoman argue against the futile search for hidden truth” (147).

²⁴ In the tale that follows, the Manciple does something similar but with even more interpretive violence when he also reduces his story to a cautionary one: “Kepe wel thy tonge and thenk upon the crowe” (362). This tidy warning cannot hope to sum up the disillusioned tale that it closes. Dean remarks that “The Manciple’s story is pseudomyth, a fable with no moral except perhaps the negative warning that one should be wary and cautious, especially when telling the truth” (753).

²⁵ In the *Prologue* to the *Legend* Chaucer remarks that Cupid sees well: “And al be that men seyn that blynd is he, / Algate me thoughte he myghte wel yse; / For sternely on me he gan beholde” (F 169-71). Florence Percival observes that medieval Cupids are “rarely blind” (90), and that “in the *Legend*, Love’s vision is not conspicuously more clear-sighted or less partial than that normally attributed to ‘blind Cupid’” (91-92).

²⁶ Fyler contrasts the *Legend* and the *Parliament* similarly: “although the *Legend* is explicitly a palinode for *Troilus*, it counters equally well the terms of the *Parliament*.

Both of the earlier poems are willing, as they approach the problems of earthly love, to allow paradox and ambiguity" (*Chaucer and Ovid* 96).

²⁷ Simpson makes this observation ("Ethics and Interpretation" 78-79).

²⁸ In some ways the exemplum genre imposes, or tries to impose, limits on both author and audience, but Sklute argues that the *Legend*'s form allows Chaucer more freedom than some of his earlier poetry: "Chaucer frees himself from the problem of authority, which seems to have concerned him from the beginning of his career, and from the problem of what truth poetry can demonstrate. He has also discovered...that a poet can create narratives that need not claim to represent truth and whose values need not be his own" (9). Chaucer allows an authority to arbitrarily define the truth before he begins writing in the *Legend*, and so moves away from the impossible goals that preoccupy him in the earlier dream visions.

²⁹ Travis remarks that this idea is a lifelong concern of Chaucer's ("Affective Criticism" 203).

Chapter 3

Langland's Lifetime Writing Plans

1.

Piers Plowman is an encyclopedic poem that lacks the knowledge it wants most. Will wonders how to save his soul, and his inquiry leads him to Jerusalem, an alehouse, a king's court, Hell, a hayfield, indeed through all the activity between the Prologue's tower and dungeon, but the poem ends with a pilgrimage to find Piers Plowman, an enigmatic authority who seems to embody the answers to Will's question. Other encyclopedic medieval allegories such as the *Romance of the Rose* and Dante's *Commedia* also survey libraries of ancient and contemporary lore while aiming at a remote goal, but where Jean de Meun's Amans plucks the rose and Dante glimpses the trinity, Will not only fails to find what he wants to learn but also has trouble naming that knowledge.¹ In place of this inaccessible truth Langland's poem catalogues learning. *Piers Plowman*'s collection of ideas shares something with the catalogues in the *House of Fame*, *Parliament of Fowls* and *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, but where Chaucer makes lists, Langland creates an encyclopedia.² These three works all imagine an unfinished search and pile up terms and ideas in place of missing knowledge. Like the alchemical inventories and the results of Chaucer's research into love and fame, the commentaries on salvation that Will collects arise from a half-frustrated desire to make sense of the world. And like love or the philosopher's stone, Will's goal has many definitions. But where these interpretive difficulties seem to offer Chaucer as much delight as anxiety, Langland rewrites a lifelong work.

Will begins his inquiry by asking how he might save his soul, and the poem is much about his efforts to learn exactly how (Alford, “Design” 35). ““Teche me to no tresor, but tel me this ilke— / How I may save my soule, that seint art yholden,”” Will begs Holy Church early in the poem (I. 83-84). In reply, she more than once advises him that truth is best of all treasures (I. 85, 137, 207). Will protests that he does not understand where knowledge of the truth comes from: ““Yet I have no kynde knowyng,” quod I, ‘yet mote ye kenne me betre / By what craft in my cors it comseth, and where”” (I. 138-39). Will’s conversations with the poem’s various personifications are usually requests to “kenne” “botre.” He often knows something but never everything, and the poem continues to negotiate this middle space of imperfect understanding and things half-perceived.³ At the beginning of Passus II, having failed to learn the truth Will asks Holy Church how to know the false. “Kenne me by som craft to knowe the false,” he pleads (II. 4). Then follow episodes with Meed, whom Holy Church defines in opposition to “Leautee” (II. 21), and Will learns how much of the world runs on reward rather than on loyalty, one medieval meaning of “treuthe.” In fact, the OED lists three definitions for “treuthe” important in *Piers Plowman*: “sincerity,” “reality,” and “loyalty” (Simpson, *Piers* 17). Although these denotations do not contradict one another, they do imply that Holy Church’s council “truthe is best” is not perfectly clear. The word’s very definitions frustrate the longing for a single truth, and the poem goes on to investigate the implications of this complex word through the ensuing narratives. Learning to distinguish true from false—in one sense the project of the whole poem—proves both imperative and impossible. The early scene in which Will asks how he might save his soul gets reprised near the end: ““Counseilleth me, Kynde, ‘quod I, ‘what craft be best to lerne?’”” (XX.

207). After thousands of lines scrutinizing political and religious institutions and his own mind, Will is still looking for the best craft, the knowledge that will allow him to save his soul (Carruthers 165).

From the start Will aims high, though not unusually so for a medieval thinker.

Piers Plowman exemplifies what Heiko Oberman calls the late medieval “hunger for reality and unmediated, dependable experience” (qtd. in Zeeman 158). Here we might also recall Donald Howard’s remark that “with most medieval quests the goal is so high that it is out of reach” (295). In its broadest outlines the endless search in *Piers Plowman* is not unique: quests for the philosopher’s stone and for knightly perfection, for instance, also produce incessant failure. Many medieval writers explore the barriers to “unmediated, dependable experience,” which center on humanity’s imperfection. In a fallen world, humans cannot achieve perfect knowledge or ideal behavior, and Will wants both. He asks questions whose answers would require perfect mental faculties to understand and a perfect will to execute. He tries to learn nothing less than the truth from Holy Church, and his human intellect cannot understand her answer. Laurie A. Finke sums up Will’s primary difficulty: “His question is Augustine’s: How can one distinguish the true or the divine in a fallen world” (61). Unable to distinguish the true, the poem circles an absent center, the “unmediated, dependable experience” for which Will yearns.

Rather than “unmediated, dependable experience,” Will faces layers of commentary, “endless monologues” that “answer every question but the one that Will has asked” (Finke 61). The characters that he meets do not simply expound salvation but a great deal of late medieval culture, for their theories generate more questions and more answers (61). The commentary produces more commentary, a common medieval

predicament. After Holy Church recommends truth to Will as the greatest treasure, he wants to know “by what craft...comseth” an understanding of truth, and this question leads to a discussion of falsehood, Meed’s proposed marriages, and the introduction of several more characters (I.139). This next episode deepens the analysis without clarifying it, for despite Holy Church’s aspersions on Meed the two rivals, both female authority figures who “function within the same discourse of desire and reward,” are not quite opposites (Steiner 43). The poem does not simply extol Holy Church at Meed’s expense, and the exact nature of their relationship remains for the reader to explore. Although Meed suffers a defeat at the King’s court and disappears from the poem, as an ideal church’s fallen counterpart she cannot really leave. After all, salvation, Will’s primary preoccupation, is a reward for doing well, which becomes the poem’s fixation after these opening movements. Even just a few Passus into the book, we are already far from Will’s initial question, or rather the poem has already begun to show us his question’s complexity. In one sense, Will’s search ends where it begins, but in another he learns much from these “endless monologues,” as if asymptotically approaching the perfection he seeks. Because he scours texts and scrutinizes authorities for a solution to a problem that defies human understanding, his unrealizable goal forces the search to become both all-encompassing and incomplete. His investigation becomes encyclopedic partly because its object at once resists definition and invites interpretation.

Although Will may not achieve a simple answer to his question of how to save his soul, does he make any progress toward his imprecisely defined goal? Morton Bloomfield argues that the quest object becomes more defined as the poem develops, and he predicts the search’s eventual success, even if the poem cannot represent that moment:

Piers Plowman ends, as it begins, with a quest. At the conclusion of the poem, the seeker is Conscience, who, unlike the questing Will at the beginning, knows what and whom he is seeking. Whether or not he finds Piers Plowman, the reader is not told, but he may at least assume that Piers can, and some day will, be found...More is known at the end than at the beginning—that there is a guide and principles to follow, that there are forces within men and within history working for Christian perfection—but the journey is not complete. *Piers* is a work whose artistic and moral claims on the reader reinforce each other. What is sought is a way to seek.

(3-4)

Will asks nearly the same question at the poem's end and beginning, but his investigation has produced a poem, a relentless attempt to distinguish true and false and learn how to save his soul. And despite the fact that he navigates so many contradictory authorities, or because of that fact, Will does take an education. At many points in the narrative Will might remark, as Chaucer does in the *Parliament*, that he has something that he did not want but not the thing that he does want. The searchers have not found St. Truth, but they have seen and heard much else. When Will learns to value Dame Study and asks her about Dowel, for example, she sends him to her “cosyn” Clergie and his wife Scripture (X. 149-52). At the end of Passus XI, Will upbraids Reason for ruling “alle beestes / Save man and his make” (XI. 369-70). Imaginatif appears and retorts that had Will remained silent, he might have understood more (XI. 411-15). This preoccupation with looking for something just ahead helps generate the poem's encyclopedic reach. In some sense all of this is to say that the poem is about education, and indeed, Will's progress follows a

medieval curriculum that sends students from the liberal arts toward theology (Alford, “Design” 46; Simpson, *Piers* 94).

In another way, though, *Piers Plowman* does not so much chart Will’s progress as his confusion. As important as any gains Will makes are his search’s frustrations. Conscience may be able to name whom he seeks, as Bloomfield notes, but Piers Plowman remains pointedly absent in the closing lines. Piers is an uncertain object of desire, never firmly outlined, in and out of the poem, partly because the desiring faculty itself, Will, often lacks a clear direction.⁴ As Nicolette Zeeman explains, Langland’s absorption of Augustine’s teaching on the will produces this effect: “Augustine is the psychologist of a labile and oscillating desire, a desire whose ends and objects can ever be partly apprehended or situated; this desire is only ever partly under the control of its subject, and its movement always occurs in relation to the mysterious purposes of an unknowable divinity” (30). Much of Will’s quest has been into his own soul, and at one point his inability to know himself initiates an inner dream. Scripture upbraids him: “*Multi multa sciunt and seipsos nesciunt,*” and Will sobs “for wo and wrathe of hir speche” (XI. 3, 4). Thus the will itself, the personification of the searching faculty, contributes to the poem’s endlessness.

Two ways, then, emerge for thinking about the poem’s trajectory: linear and circular.⁵ Benjamin’s analogy likening the allegorist to the collector who manages only a “patchwork” collection can reconcile these two views of *Piers Plowman*, the one emphasizing advancement and the other the poem’s absent center. Like a collector who cannot complete a collection, Will gathers “other realms of discourse,” whether new ways of looking at the world or at a single word.⁶ Because Will’s collection grows, he

moves toward a more perfect understanding; however, he cannot arrive at that knowledge on earth, so his collection will never allow him to rest. Each effort to understand Dowel or one of its related terms adds another piece to Will's collection. *Piers Plowman's* quotations and aphorisms form a patchwork that gestures toward an impossible wholeness. For Benjamin, the allegorist can never have enough of things, and indeed Langland collects sententiae with a mania for finding their underlying congruence. The resources of a single language would no more allow Langland to suggest an underlying harmony than would representing just one worldview. In this combination of progress toward greater understanding and a frustrated circling about something it can never articulate, *Piers Plowman* offers a compromise between impossible knowledge and turning away from the quest. For all of the exuberant conflict in the poem, temperance, after all, is one of its most lauded virtues.⁷

In broad terms, Langland shares these problems with other medieval writers. Thinking of Langland as a late practitioner of the medieval encyclopedist tradition can help make sense of his poem's simultaneous circular and linear trajectories. Franklin-Brown remarks that "the reverberations of the thirteenth-century encyclopedia-as-compilation were quite different from those of the *summa*; Parkes and Minnis have argued that they made possible such multivoiced, self-contradictory, centrifugal, and often frustrating texts as the *Roman de la Rose*, the *Decameron*, and the *Canterbury Tales*" (70). Langland's poem, as "multivoiced, self-contradictory," and "centrifugal" as these other texts, also looks much more like a "compilation" than a clearly structured "summa." *Piers Plowman*, too, might owe something to the "reverberations of the thirteenth-century encyclopedia-as-compilation" tradition. Like the efforts of other

medieval compilers, Langland's ever-expanding text cannot reach totality. Will can learn more but never enough. Medieval encyclopedists seek an underlying order, but as Franklin-Brown's study shows, their works do not achieve this unity and instead emphasize the reading process.

After a discussion of *Piers Plowman*'s allegorical quest and the always unfinished nature of allegorical interpretation, this chapter address Langland's encyclopedic aesthetic through the rich word "preve," a word that brings together the poem's desire for knowledge, its emphasis on different ways of knowing, and Langland's endless writing. As we will see, attempts to "preve" create more attempts to "preve," and the action has some relationship to the noise of rumor and the search for authority in the *House of Fame*. To "preve" in Langland somewhat resembles naming in Chaucer's dream vision: both poems show how unstable language demands that readers reshape texts and ideas. And like the *House of Fame*, *Piers Plowman* refuses to represent stable authority and offers no image of sacred rule. From the start, Langland is interested in this problem. Near the end of the Prologues' fable, a mouse declares, "For I herde my sire seyn, is seven yeer ypassed, / 'Ther the cat is a kitoun, the court is ful elenge'. / That witnesseth Holy Writ, whose wole it rede: / *Ve terre ubi puer est rex!*" (193-96). By poem's end, not only has Will failed to find a trustworthy political authority, but he has questioned and found wanting a range of spiritual authorities. Ultimately, writing the poem itself represents the fullest way for the poet to "preve what is Dowel."

2.

The poem's difficulty seems designed to exercise readers' interpretive faculties. Langland no more explains the precise relationship between Holy Church and Meed than

he explains how exactly we are to understand Truth, Dowel, or Piers. Bloomfield remarks that reading *Piers Plowman* “is like reading a commentary on an unknown text” (32), and Will might say the same of his own interpretive quest, and as we have seen so might the dreaming Chaucer in the *Parliament*, where the “unknown text” is the “certeyn thing” upon which the various treatments of love comment. But where in the *Parliament* Chaucer creates some of the dreamer’s uncertainty in the reader, *Piers Plowman* sustains that confusion over a long poem (Zeeman 62). Despite the work’s many genres, digressions, and voices, a certain minimalism allows Langland to achieve this effect. He rarely explains. Zeeman writes that where other medieval texts often “involve a whole paraphernalia of persuasive rhetoric and interpretive control,” Langland’s poem “simply narrates these processes, largely without comment, giving the reader no help to understand what is happening” (62). While the poem includes endless commentary, then, the poet offers little comment on those speeches himself. The *Parliament* also lacks the “persuasive rhetoric and interpretive control” that would allow readers to arrive at an easy interpretation of the poem, but the absence of those devices in a more secular work may be less surprising. Chaucer’s *Parson’s Tale* takes an opposite approach. Both that Tale and *Piers Plowman* are concerned with “doing well,” but the sermon, full of the “persuasive rhetoric and interpretive control” that Zeeman finds typical of much medieval religious writing, shares little of *Piers Plowman*’s anxiety. Although many late medieval texts represent the desire for “unmediated, dependable experience,” *Piers Plowman* intensifies this pursuit by insisting that its reader share its author’s bewilderment.⁸

Allegory especially emphasizes reading, for by drawing attention to their language, allegories contain their own commentary in the form of a narrative.⁹ Holy Church pronounces a sermon on truth that confuses Will, who begins to look elsewhere for answers. The episode comments both on the Church, which cannot quite offer access to the knowledge it purports to keep, and on the desiring faculty, which restlessly continues its search. Meed's ambiguous name (Reward, Recompense, Profit, Bribe) generates even more story (Simpson, *Piers* 41). Meed and False prepare to wed, but Theology disputes the union. The King asks that Meed marry Conscience, who objects. When Meed and Conscience argue over her meaning, Reason arrives to arbitrate. Whatever inherent nature Meed might have gets lost in language, or rather exists only in language: her name is a kind of pun that produces various ways of conceiving her. The plot surrounding "Meed," then, concerns the word's interpretation. Much of *Piers Plowman* involves working out definitions in this way. Whenever opaque language confronts Will—"Meed," "Dowel," "Charity," "Piers"—his narrative moves forward. Dowel creates even more plot than Meed, for nearly everyone is ready to supply a definition, so for the length of the poem's great middle section Will pursues the word as various characters work out its possible significances. These arguments both draw Will nearer to his goal and distance him from it. Confronting commentary on what he wants rather than the thing itself, Will suffers endless displacement, uncertain of the truth but surrounded by arguments.

The reading experience that Bloomfield describes—"reading a commentary on an unknown text"—complements what Lanham calls a rhetorical worldview. Lanham argues that certain poems create a "hole in the middle of experience," a gap that he finds "in the

Metamorphoses,” where “a mythic, almost primitively participated level of experience underlies a very sophisticated allegorical apparatus above, the second trying without marked success to interpret the first” (173-74). Lanham explains that Ovid offers his readers many ways to organize the long poem: “mock-heroic,” “Metempsychosis,” “Augustan master plot,” “genuine history of Augustan Rome,” “an act of literary criticism, a discussion of genre and an allegory of style” (61-2). None of these readings accounts for Ovid’s entire text, but we cannot dispense with any of them altogether. Each offers a way to organize the poem, a commentary on the text. In contrast to Vergil, Ovid does not offer “an external sanction,” (60-1), a self-justifying plot that seeks to “legitimize power” (61). Rather than the *Aeneid*’s imperial narrative, Ovid creates a series of episodes that emphasize the reader’s participation in creating meaning. As an example, Lanham offers Ovid’s Narcissus: “We hasten to make meaning: the Narcissus story seems immediately to allegorize a dangerous genesis of the self; the moment of metamorphosis as the moment of most intense wishing clearly allegorizes the poetic imagination and its transformational possibilities” (59). Ovid, however, “leaves the poem open, aleatory, waiting to be realized. Thus he stresses our own contribution” (59).¹⁰ One more quotation from Lanham will give a fuller sense of his argument’s stakes: “What a terrifying world the *Metamorphoses* is, anger and violence everywhere...There is no sense of justice in such a world because there is no sense, not because there is no justice. And because it cannot fall back on an antecedent logical structure, such a world cannot afford to stop being perceived. So Ovid’s poem must be a *carmen perpetuum*, a poem which embodies this necessity to go on” (59). Without an “antecedent logical structure” the world requires ceaseless interpretation, so Ovid’s poem cannot end.

The absent center or “hole” in the *Metamorphoses* (and, for Lanham, in all long “rhetorical” poems) aligns with Bloomfield’s “unknown text,” both descriptions of what Will seeks and can never find. Likening Langland to Ovid might seem jarring, for Langland does imply that the world has an “antecedent logical structure,” even if his poem cannot fully outline it. But *Piers Plowman* stacks “a very sophisticated allegorical apparatus” atop a “primitively participated level of experience,” and the explanations interpret that experience mostly without “marked success.” For instance, when Piers becomes angry and rips the pardon, we “hasten to interpret” the scene to bridge the plowman’s “behavior” to some “explanation.” The operation of the mental faculties themselves, in some sense the poem’s primary focus, offer a “primitively participated level of experience” that the poem asks us to interpret. And similarly, “Dowel” itself demands and defies interpretation. As in the *Metamorphoses*, we do not stand outside the experience *Piers Plowman* represents, an effect that both poems achieve partly through their swift transitions and juxtapositions. Langland at least broadly shares Chaucer’s Boethian worldview, which preserves an antecedent logical structure but places it outside the fallen world. Without access to that “external sanction,” *Piers Plowman* must go on endlessly because “the world cannot afford to stop being perceived.”

Lanham might say that Langland is a “serious” poet, someone invested in fixed reality, who nevertheless recognizes the force, even inescapability, of the rhetorical worldview, which offers no fixity. Rather than the “craft” that Will wants to learn, the poem represents various arguments. For Langland, knowledge, truth, and salvation may exist, but they are always elsewhere, and in their place are only rhetorical positions. Some, admittedly, are better than others: even before they usher in the Antichrist, the

friars and their claims do not seem to hold up to the other characters' arguments. If every argument were equally persuasive, Will would not need to struggle so much. Instead, he must try to distinguish between true and false, even if he cannot do so perfectly. The poem's tension and Will's anxiety arise from a desire to make the world "serious," in Lanham's phrasing. Will may know that he inhabits a rhetorical universe, but he would live in a serious one.

Langland's word for "seriousness" or for "unmediated, dependable experience" beyond "intermediate symbolism" is "kynde knowyng." This innate understanding would make Will's teachers no longer necessary and elide the layers of exegesis (Simpson, *Piers* 118). But at the poem's end we find the dreamer still lacking this natural knowledge and asking Kynde himself about the best craft to learn. For Will to understand innately what he yearns for and avoid intervening commentary he would need to retrieve an unfallen language, the "ur-text."¹¹ We might even say then that language itself is the "intermediate symbolism" that interposes itself between Will and what he wants. From the ambiguity in Dowel, for instance, a catalogue of ideas and arguments emerges (Carruthers 7). Because he cannot write about Dowel, Truth, or Charity without representing them, and the representation is not "unmediated, dependable experience," Langland turns to allegory. By saying one thing and referring to another, allegory intends to produce knowledge not bound by language, something that its reader will understand without needing to articulate. For instance, when the Samaritan likens the trinity to a candle and to a fist, he represents divinity by analogy, the only way anyone can. The Samaritan's words stand in for a mystery that they but gesture toward.

Metaphors, however, do not solve the problem of representing the ineffable but rather point to the difficulty of doing so. Somewhat paradoxically, the Samaritan's analogies use words in an attempt to transcend language. Suzanne Akbari explains that allegory always contains this tension: "by avoiding the limitations inherent in literal language, allegory creates meaning *within* the reader, bypassing the inevitable degeneration of meaning as it passes through the obscuring veil of language. The paradox, of course, is that it is this veil which makes the transmission of meaning—the revelation—possible" (9, original emphasis). By acknowledging both that words get in the way and that they can point beyond themselves, allegory at once sates and intensifies the medieval "hunger for reality and unmediated, dependable experience." Trying to use words to express something more than they can contain, *Piers Plowman* emerges from the paradox that Akbari describes. In asking for "kynde knowyng," Will wants to remove the "obscuring veil," something his poem cannot accomplish with merely human language, and so his work remains forever unfinished.

In adumbrating something transcendent that words cannot wholly reveal, allegory draws together some central medieval concerns: fallible human intellects, imperfect language, and a fallen world. As Quilligan comments, a division from something sacred motivates the desire to use language this way: "Allegory is a genre for the fallen world, but is a genre self-conscious of its own fallenness. In a prelapsarian world at one with God, there is no 'other' for language to work back to, for there has been no fatal division" (182). Allegory requires a divine referent to reach for. If that sacrality is either immanent, as in paradise, or illusory, as with alchemy, allegory collapses. In paradise one need not quest for knowledge, while in a post-lapsarian world an allegorical quest object will

always remain ungrasped. The *Pearl* poem especially highlights this “fatal division.” Like Will in *Piers Plowman*, the *Pearl* dreamer laments his separation from something valuable that resists reduction to one definition. Allegory allows the poet to suggest several interpretations for this quest-object: the dreamer’s daughter, the soul, a jewel, salvation, perfection, and innocence mingle into an order that the father can only partly apprehend. Paul Piehler remarks that medieval poets often do not allow their allegories to reduce to one idea: “Generally speaking, the allegorist’s aim is to include the maximum number of interpretations compatible and relevant to his main intention” (154). Because it refuses a simple connection between word and thing and instead suggests a relationship of significances, this strategy implies an underlying harmony, a never wholly interpretable sacrality beneath the fallen world’s confusion.

Allegorists aim to allow “the maximum number of interpretations” for the same reason that they favor puns. “For a pun always implies pattern,” A.V.C. Schmidt observes, “and even as it ‘defamiliarises’ ...it suggests a mysterious order in reality” (119). Puns and richly significant quest-objects not only link disparate ideas but also point to language as a less than transparent veil. Both allegory’s richness—its insistence on “the maximum number of interpretations”—and its attention to its own medium emphasize the interpretative process, just what *Piers Plowman* does for its readers. Here we might recall Ramon Llull’s argument that unfamiliar words exercise the interpreter’s desiring soul (Franklin-Brown 160). Spenser and Rabelais, for Lanham, “invoke a reality they cannot address directly” by using “arcane vocabulary and repetitive syntax of incantation” (176). Llull seems to sanction this strategy. He defends literary language, and we can see a similar sensibility at work in *Piers Plowman*, where the poet’s difficult

diction seems to promise access to more knowledge. If Langland also relies on this approach, we should expect terms like “Dowel” and “Piers Plowman,” for instance, to seem opaque. More than transparent language would permit, opacity allows us to imagine that we might find what our interpreting faculties desire. While “persuasive rhetoric and interpretive control” have their place in medieval spiritual writing, then, so do what Llull calls “new or strange words” that offer their readers “delight.”

Langland briefly allows his rich vocabulary to synthesize. Much like the distraught father in *Pearl*, Will tries to “work back to” some sacred otherness even if the attempt cannot succeed and language falls back into confusion at the poem’s end. First, though, *Piers Plowman* makes a supreme effort at “seriousness,” or direct confrontation with reality, in the sequences leading to Will’s awakening on Easter morning. As Passus XVIII triumphantly ends, the poem’s recurring terms gather such rich significance that they seem to unite. In Passus XIX, Conscience answers Will’s question “Why calle ye hym Cryst, sithenes Juwes called hym Jhesus” by explaining that “knyghte, kynge, conqueroure may be o persone,” a line whose alliteration emphasizes the words’ connections (XIX. 27).¹² Mary Carruthers argues that these synonyms point to an un fallen language: “Knight, king, conquerer; *filius Marie, filii David, filius Dei*, Jesus, Jesu, Christ; lawlessness, law, pardon; Dowel, Dobet, Dobest—all of these terms become linked as Conscience works out their significance in reference to Christ. Such is the nature of redeemed language” (152).¹³ In as much that the poem eventually identifies Piers with Christ (“*Petrus, id est Christus*” (XV.212)), we might add the plowman’s name to Carruthers’ list.¹⁴ The dreamer’s “patchwork” knowledge, to use Benjamin’s word, has become whole, his collection momentarily integrated (211). For a moment Will

seems to have accomplished his quest. As Carruthers' list shows, the catalogue of names points toward some underlying truth, and like the poem more generally, this implicit catalogue means to comprehend all history. The poem's "redeemed language" glimpses cosmic harmony, another way of defining what Will wants to understand. Meanwhile, to arrive at this brief intimation of the way things are, he must investigate the possible definitions for "Trewthe," "Dowel," "charite," "Piers," and the rest of the poem's significant, obscure terms, a lifelong labor that requires encyclopedic resources.¹⁵

In this moment near the end of *Piers Plowman* when Conscience works out the significances of Christ's names, everything that rises converges, unlike in Chaucer's dream visions or the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. It is difficult to imagine Chaucer crafting a scene in which so many terms align in order to suggest some larger truth. If anything, the *House of Fame* describes a grand convergence into confusion. Critics seem to agree that Chaucer is more comfortable than Langland with not knowing,¹⁶ a difference that manifests itself in the poets' understandings of language. Both writers think about fallen language, but where Langland sometimes uses ambiguity to suggest cosmic design and to gesture toward a more perfect idiom, Chaucer does not grasp at transcendent reality as incessantly. Partly the relative sizes of their dream-vision poems attest to this difference: Langland devotes far more lines, indeed his whole life, to looking for something he cannot quite name. The alchemists are more confident than Will in their powers to someday identify their quest-object, but their endeavor becomes repetitive and hopeless. And although Will might initially share their naïveté, he proves more educable, more aware of the world's fallenness. In the *Parliament*, Chaucer occupies a middle space between Will and the alchemists. Chaucer's search is not as futile as the alchemical

project, but he does not take his investigation across as many “realms of discourse” (to borrow Mazzotta’s useful phrase yet again) as Langland does. If Langland had written the *Parliament of Fowls* he would have fallen into an inner dream where Chaucer ends the poem.

Chaucer creates pedantic, imperfect guides like the eagle in the *House of Fame* and Scipio in the *Parliament*, but Piers, something like the “perfect Christian” (Simpson, *Piers* 70), seems to embody what Will hopes to learn. Partly because the plowman does not preach but live his ideals, he offers knowledge beyond the frustrations of endless commentary and imperfect language.¹⁷ Holy Church and nearly everyone else Will meets have much to say to him, while Piers provides an example rather than rules and rarely addresses Will. But Piers is absent for much of the poem, and, importantly, at the end.

J.A. Burrow comments on this figure’s indecipherability: “Certainly it is possible to mark the perimeter, as it were, of the Plowman’s significance by noting what Langland opposes him to—book-learning, for instance—but there remains within that perimeter an apparently irreducible core of mystery” (110-11). Like Dante, Will learns that knowledge alone cannot save.¹⁸ For all of *Piers Plowman’s* complexity, the poem keeps trying to insist on simple truths. In an important moment Clergie emphasizes that Piers rejects scholarship and relies only on two simple maxims: “For oon Piers the Plowman hath impugned us alle, /And set alle sciences at a sop save love one; / And no text ne taketh to mayntene his cause / But *Dilige Deum* and *Domine quis habitabit...*” (XIII. 124-128). Even out of context, these lines give a sense of the poem’s urge to clear away impediments to knowledge, the clutter of texts confusing important matters, and confront something true. Piers dismisses “alle sciences” except love, which is to say all human

learning, and in implicit contrast to other glossators takes no text to maintain his cause but two biblical passages. And although the Bible itself might seem like a linguistic labyrinth regardless of its expositors, Piers even takes one quotation from each testament as if to imply Scripture's underlying harmony.

In something of a Langlandian paradox, *Piers Plowman* is encyclopedic yet anti-intellectual,¹⁹ though Langland is anti-intellectual in a learned way and surveys many “realms of discourse” before abandoning them. But even if his work does participate in the fourteenth-century reaction against Scholasticism and its theological intricacies, one of the poem’s points seems to be that language and its difficulties are unavoidable. The catalogue of definitions for Dowel evidences this idea perhaps most obviously. Carruthers points out that although they disagree, all the characters assume that the word requires interpretation: “not even the bluntest of them tells him that Dowel means doing well and that’s the end of it” (10). Although the poem values anti-intellectualism, then, the matter cannot rest there for Langland, for he finds simple, perfect, wordless understanding impossible, however desirable. Piers, so often offstage, represents the wholeness that the poem longs for but cannot realize (Lowe 110).²⁰

3.

Much of *Piers Plowman* concerns separation and desire. Like Dante, the *Pearl* dreamer, and many other medieval pilgrims removed from their heavenly homes, Will figures himself as an exile. He is always moving and rarely where he wants to be, as the poem’s organization into passus, or steps, implies. Early in the C-prologue he sees a tower and explains that “Treuthe was thereynne” (15). Will can recognize but not enter Truth’s tower. Division of this sort structures the whole poem. Will remains forever on

the verge of new knowledge, a condition Dowel's proximity emphasizes. After the friars whom he meets in Passus VIII declare that Dowel is among them, for example, Will reasons that because even the just fall seven times a day and because "Dowel and Doyvele mowe ought dwell togideres," then Dowel "is outhere while elliswhere" (VIII. 24, 26). The phrase "outhere while elliswhere" could describe Will's quest-object for much of the poem. After debating the friars, soon Will comes upon Thought, who assures him that Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest "ben noght fer to fynde" (VIII. 79). In the opening of the next passus, Wit tells Will that "Sire Dowel dwelleth...noght a day hennes" (IX.1). Because Will searches for "kynde knowing" and because according to Holy Church that knowledge is in his "herte" (I.142), Dowel indeed must be near. But like Holy Church's declaration that truth is best and like much of the advice that Will receives, Wit's remark is neither incorrect nor perfectly illuminating. Will moves toward something, even if he cannot quite say what it is or where.

As ready as Will's teachers are to hold forth, they do not always pretend to have the answers that he seeks. They more than once refer him to an absent authority, a tendency that makes sense for a poem that begins and ends with a pilgrimage in search of knowledge. Deferring to Piers, for instance, Clergie declines to define the Dowel-Dobet-Dobest triad:

I have sevene sones, he seide, serven in a castel
 Ther the lord of life wonyeth, to leren hym what is Dowel.
 Til I se tho sevene and myself acorden
 I am unhardy, quod he, to any wight to preven it.
 For oon Piers the Plowman hath impugned us alle,

And set alle sciences at a sop save love one;
 And no text ne taketh to mayntene his cause
 But *Dilige Deum and Domine quis habitabit...*
 And seith that Dowel and Dobet arn two infinites,
 Whiche infinites with a feith fynden out Dobest
 Which shal save mannes soule—thus seith Piers the Plowman. (XIII. 120-30)

Clergie's "sevene sones" are probably the seven liberal arts (Simpson, *Piers* 130), and while Clergie does not dismiss their knowledge, he is not confident that they have settled anything. Even their comprehensive learning fails to find Dowel, because Piers has impugned all "sciences" except love. Although in a different way, again Will learns that Dowel is "outherwhile elliswhere," this time through a grammar exercise. Will comes upon many nouns—Clergie, Holy Church, Wit, Thought, etc.—but he cannot locate the verb Dowel, and in fact he cannot locate Dowel because it is a verb, as Clergie explains. Anne Middleton unpacks Clergie's word "infinites": "Aristotle defines infinity quantitatively, and associates it with imperfection... What is 'infinite' is that which always has something outside it that can be added to it. It is the very privation of wholeness, and in lacking determinate boundaries is unintelligible. Dowel and Dobet are in this sense of the term 'imperfect'" ("Two Infinites" 173). The "very privation of wholeness"—the desire for sacrality—motivates the quest from the beginning. Piers himself, whom the poem does eventually identify with the three lives, has few "determinate boundaries." The infinitive allows Langland to highlight the Dowel's "unintelligibility." "To do well" does not even imply a particular agent as a declined verb

might. Instead, it is as if the term itself moves from any attempt to stabilize it. Until Will realizes that he cannot locate “doing well” and must embody it, Dowel will continue to elude him. After thirteen passus, Will is still trying to learn how to “save mannes soule.”

In a moment that perhaps best exemplifies Langland’s interest in continuous movement toward “other realms of discourse just beyond one’s own experience,” Will, following Clergie’s own example, abandons even theology, and an event that some critics compare to Dante’s separation from Virgil.²¹ In both instances, pilgrims take leave of a tradition that had deeply informed their journeys. As the banquet breaks up Conscience “carped loude” and declares that he will make a pilgrimage with Patience: “‘Frendes, fareth wel,’ and faire spake to Clergie, / ‘For I wol go with this gome, if God wol gyve me grace, / And be pilgrym with Pacience til I have preved moore’” (XIII. 180-83).

Before he decides to undertake the pilgrimage, Conscience replies to Clergie’s comment about the grammar of Dowel by deferring: “I can noght heron...ac I knowe wel Piers. / He wol noght ayein Holy Writ speken, I dar wel undertake. / Thanne passe we over til Piers come and preve this in dede” (XIII. 131-33). Conscience cannot explain Clergie’s remark, and Clergie cannot definitively expound Dowel and must cite Piers, who is not there. Somewhere an explanation exists, but meanwhile one “realm of discourse” gives way to another.

When Clergie and Conscience decline to explain Dowel they use the verb “preve,” one of Langland’s favorite words and one that encapsulates some of his anxieties about knowledge, particularly the poem’s sense of moving toward greater understanding even as it circles an absent center. “Preve” occurs first in its least difficult form. In the prologue Will rails against “iaperes and iangeleres, Iudas children” by

commenting, “That Poul precheth of hem I wol nat preue it here” (35, 38). Here “preve” signifies something like “demonstrate” and would involve a citation. Often the poem alliteratively links “preve” to both preaching and Paul, or textual authority, some of the most common and perhaps easiest ways to “preve” (easy in that simply the citation itself seems to constitute the proof). But while “preve” can often translate to “prove” or “show,” the poem allows it an even larger range of meaning. Conscience looks forward to when Piers will come and “preve” Dowel “in deed.” As Middleton notes, the poem maps the conflict between authority and experience that the Wife of Bath foregrounds (“Narration” 99). In its various definitions, the small word “preve” contains this debate. On the one hand, to “preve” requires citation; on the other hand, to “preve” demands living an exemplary life, embodying truth in addition to retrieving or glossing Biblical passages. When Chaucer uses the word in connection with one of his favorite lines, he invokes these two ways of knowing. In the *Squire’s Tale*, the falcon thanks Canacee for her sympathy: “That pitee renneth soone in gentil herte, / Feelynge his similitude in peynes smerte, / Is preved alday, as men may it see, / As wel by werk as by auctoritee” (479-82). *Piers Plowman’s* third and fourth visions, and especially the raucous banquet scene, contain a high concentration of the verb. In this transitional moment as Will leaves Clergie and his formidable learning, concern over how best to confirm knowledge, whether “by werk” or “by auctoritee,” registers forcefully.²²

Sometimes Langland shows important knowledge waiting not in another institution or interlocutor but simply on the next page. At the end of Passus III, Meed defends herself against Conscience by quoting Solomon: “thei that yyven yiftes the victorie wynneth, / And muche worship haveth therwith, as Holy Writ telleth— /

Honorem adquiret qui dat munera” (III. 334-36). As if to suggest an argument’s sequential steps, the alliteration on “w” in line 335 follows from the last stress in 334. Meed’s formulation does not deter Conscience, though, and he rebuts by finishing the verse:

Hadde she loked that other half and the leef torned,
 She sholde have founded felle wordes folwyng therafter...
 And if ye seche Sapience eft, fynde shul ye that folweth,
 A ful teneſſel text to hem that taketh mede:
 And that is *Animam autem aufert accipientium* (341-42; 348-50).

Had Meed continued to read, she would have learned that a gift-giver doesn’t simply acquire honor but also bears away the soul of the receivers. Conscience’s refutation imitates Meed’s, where the sound supports the sense. Lines 348 and 349 interlock wonderfully: “seche” and “Sapience” nearly alliterate with “shul,” flanked by “fynde” and “folweth,” which anticipate “ful” at the beginning of the next line. The syllables emphasize the connection that Conscience wants to make between one “leef” (or one line) and the next.²³ Earlier in the Meed sequence, she defines herself as rightful reward, but Conscience points out her other uses. Similarly, here he shows that she has not read far enough in the book of Wisdom. In both cases Meed has a valid but not final argument.

This episode shares something with Dante’s rendering of Francesca and Paolo’s decision to quit reading too soon and with Criseyde’s in Book II of Chaucer’s *Troilus*. But where in these scenes the unread material remains implicit, in *Piers Plowman* another character immediately exposes the incomplete reading. Chaucer and Dante leave a key passage for readers to find, whereas Langland reveals the missing text. But when he

explains Meed's inadequate reading, he increases rather than lightens our work. Although Conscience may carry the argument, the poem allows Meed's position to stand also. Gifts may endanger the receiver yet honor the giver. And while Conscience can help us interpret Meed, by the poem's end he too proves fallible. Where Meed, Criseyde, Francesca, and Paolo might have found some clarifying information had they continued reading, Will's relentless studies result in more confusion. On the one hand, then, the competitive quoting between Conscience and Meed shows that more reading improves understanding, but on the other hand the episode presages later moments where delving further into textual authority solves little. Perhaps understandably, Imaginatif has had enough of "prevying," and he scolds Will for meddling with poetry: "ther are bokes / ynowe To telle men what Dowel is, Dobet and Dobest both, / And prechours to preve what it is, of many a peire freres" (XII. 17-19). Besides, Imaginatif goes on after Will protests that he would stop writing could anyone locate Dowel, "Poul in his pistle... preveth what is Dowel: / *Fides, spes, caritas, et maior horum...*" (XII. 29). Will does not deny Imaginatif's claims, yet they too seem inadequate, if for no other reason than that a pair of friars has already insisted on Dowel's meaning and received thorough rebuttal (VIII. 18-19). We might think of Imaginatif's argument as part of the patchwork, neither incorrect nor complete.

Much of Langland's poem works this way, as a series of "Contra!", another word he enjoys.²⁴ When he argues with other characters and both parties marshal biblical quotation, the structure of the debate between Meed and Conscience gets replayed more complexly.²⁵ After Scripture points out, for example, that "Poul preveth it impossible—riche men have hevene" (X. 335), Will claims to "preve" the opposite. He quotes Paul

and Peter against Scripture: ““*Contra*,’ quod I, ‘by Crist! That kan I repreve, / And preven it by Peter and by Poul bothe: / That is baptized beth saaf, be he riche or povere” (X. 343-45). The last stress in the first two lines here set up the alliterative pattern in the following line, as if to link the steps of Will’s argument. Undaunted, Scripture, of course, rebuts. The point partly seems to be that another “leef” always waits to be turned: Will, after all, quotes scripture against Scripture. Far from ending discussion by producing definitive proof, to “preve” by quotation prolongs controversy because written authorities do not always agree. Here we might see further why Langland cannot finish writing. The difficulty of reading the Bible results in Langland’s virtual rewriting of it, for one part needs to be quoted in order to fulfill or contradict another part. To avoid the dangers of incomplete reading, *Piers Plowman* sprawls across much of the Bible and of church history, and the poem’s irregular shape reflects this desire to include everything.²⁶

When Piers draws on textual authority, however, he does not expose himself to contradiction as easily as the other characters. In the B-text, Clergie remarks that Piers needs only two simple quotations to “mayntene his cause”; in the C-version, this verb changes to “preve,” and Clergie instead says that Piers “no tixt ne taketh to preue this for trewe / Bote *Dilige Deum et proximum*, and *Domine, quis habitabit*” (XV. 136). In so far as it can mean “explain,” to “preve” has some relationship to exegesis. Will can dispute with Study, Imaginatif, and nearly everyone else, and the more Will or anyone else in the poem tries to “preve” their points, the more layers of commentary intervene. Piers represents the possibility of avoiding this tangle of endless glossing, and when he takes a text to “preve” his arguments, no one offers to “repreve” his conclusions. Piers alone can

“preve” the simple truths that the poem pursues; for everyone else, efforts to “preve” anything introduce more complications.

If to “preve” always involved citing written authority, the poem would abandon the verb after depleting the resources of Study and Clergie, but instead it persists through the *Vita*. Not only quotation but also reason or logic can “preve” an argument. In Passus V, Reason himself preaches and “preved that thise pestilences was for pure synne” (13). The word appears similarly elsewhere in the poem. Patience remarks that he never knew a rich man who “when he drow to the deth, that he ne dradd hym sarrore / Then eny pore pacient, and that preue Y be resoun” (C XV. 286-87). These efforts to “preve” do not allow for much rebuttal, but like quotation, human reasoning does not offer definitive arguments. When she argues with Truth late in the poem and defends the possibility of pagan salvation, Mercy avers that “veynm fordooth venym—and that I preve by reson” (XVIII. 152). Mercy can support her point, but, as so often in *Piers Plowman*, it must be reconciled with other views. The word also occurs in exhortations against hypocrisy, when language threatens to fall loose from deeds. The doctor at the banquet may be able to “preve” outlandish arguments using his logical training, but he does not align his words and actions, which constitutes a failure to “preve” his religious precepts upon himself. Will complains that the cleric “parfourneth yvle / That he precheth, and preveth noght” (XIII. 79-80). Similarly, much earlier Reason exhorts “prelates and preestes”: “That ye prechen to the peple, preve it on yowselve, / And dooth it in dede—it shal drawe yow to goode” (V. 42-43). Here Reason sets preaching against “preving,” speech against action, and insists that they coincide for the clergy.

The failure of every estate to “preve” upon itself the demands of a more just social order helps motivate *Piers Plowman*’s enormous scope. Not only do clerics suffer Langland’s criticism but also much of late fourteenth-century English society, and the poem becomes an encyclopedic satire. Wanting to know how to save his soul requires Will to catalogue his obstacles,²⁷ a project that involves describing much of his culture. At the same time that Will satirizes, though, something unknowable eludes him, and a certain tension exists between satire and searching.²⁸ Does the dreamer know enough, and is his will perfect enough, to castigate all humanity? The intellect and the will combine to allow judgment, and the education of these faculties comprises the poem’s narrative. Will’s education remains incomplete, yet in satirizing he presumes to judge. Partly this conflict results from Langland’s combination of dream vision, in which the confused dreamer requires an education, and estates satire, in which the satirist does not so much receive an education as offer one.²⁹ The poem’s allegorical and satirical elements both contribute to its encyclopedic range because allegory and satire each can take all knowledge for their subjects. The word “preve” and the contexts in which it appears outline this problem’s complexity.

Although many characters enthusiastically “preve” various notions, credible and contrived, neither logical exercises, Biblical citation, nor simply avoiding hypocrisy can satisfy the poem’s desire for certainty. The narrative constantly sets one idea against another, and often to “preve” means not so much to demonstrate by way of reason or citation as to test or to refine a concept to prove its validity. This strategy can become dangerous, though. Study censors those who dare to remark of the “Trinite [how two slowe the thridde], / And bryngen forth a balled reson, taken Bernard to witnesse, / And

puten forth presumpcion to preve the sothe. / Thus thei dryvèle at hir deys the deitee to knowe" (X. 53-56). Despite its incessant longing for knowledge, the poem defends neither information for its own sake nor reckless speculation.³⁰ Although to "preve" anything about the deity would be sinful, the mental faculties do require testing. To examine Thought, Will decides to "pute forth som purpos to preven his wittes, / What was Dowel fro Dobet, and Dobest from hem bothe" (VIII. 122-24). Conscience requires a more extended trial. "I shal dwelle as I do, my devoir to shewe," Clergie says to him, "Til Pacience have preved thee and parfit thee maked" (XIII. 213, 215). Although Conscience enters the poem during the pivotal banquet scene and becomes increasingly important, he never becomes "parfit" and fails the dreamer during the climactic battle with the antichrist. Immediately afterward, though, Conscience begins the pilgrimage to find Piers, suggesting a close identity with Will himself, constantly striving to "preve" or to become "preven."

Sometimes the attempt to "preve" seems less attenuated. To "preve" can involve abandoning both textual authority and logical argument for experience, the way of knowing that the poem desires most. *Piers Plowman* does not value all knowledge equally, and ultimately the knowledge that Will wants does not involve "discourse" at all, but "kynde knowing." The Samaritan's explanations of the trinity rely on the word: "Right so, redily, reson it sheweth, / How he that is Holy Goost Sire and Sone preveth" (XVII. 155-56). Donaldson translates "preveth" here as "fulfills" (293). The "Holy Goost" completes the trinity in a way that transcends the proofs that reason and quotation offer. Piers makes a similarly unimpeachable argument during banquet-scene, where in place of Clergie's B-text comment that Dowel and Dobet "arn two infinites," the C-Text

has it that the plowman “preueth by puyre skile inparfyt alle thynges— / *Nemo bonus*— / Bote lele loue and treuth, that loth is to be found” (XV. 136-38). Conscience awaits a time when “Piers come and preve this in dede,” where “this” seems to refer to Dowel (XIII. 133). Here and elsewhere “preve” alliterates with Piers, one of the few figures who can definitively “preve” anything. To “preve” in these ways seems more difficult than to “preve” by citation or even by reason, partly because the certainty that the characters hope for either hasn’t occurred or requires Piers himself to accomplish. Departing the banquet scene the plowman declares, “Byfore perpetuel pees Y shal preue that Y saide, / And avowe before God, and forsaken hi neuere, / That *Disce, doce, dilig Deum* / and thyn enemy helpe emforth thy myhte” (C XV. 140-43). Again Piers “shal preue” his ideas. Frequently this proof seems about to be accomplished rather than complete, but that fact does not imply that Piers cannot effectively “preve in deed,” but rather that the business of doing well cannot cease.

An especially tenuous effort to “preve” an argument gives us additional insight into the word’s importance. During the banquet, Patience calms Will by saying that the doctor “hath dronken so depe he wole devyne soone / And preven it by hir Pocalips and passion of Seint Avereys / That neither bacon ne braun ne blancmanger ne mortrews / Is neither fissh ne flessch but fode for penaunts” (XIII. 90-94). Here Langland satirizes the subtleties of scholastic quibbling, which can even “preve” that penitents should eat savory meat. But although we would not accede to the drunken doctor’s claim, his performance shows to what extent argument, rather than indisputable proof, underlies ways of seeing the world. His proof is dangerous not because he might manipulate the fasting requirements but because he shows that knowledge is a human creation. While

“seriousness” may exist in *Piers Plowman*’s world, however far away, “rhetoric” predominates. Even when efforts to “preve” seems less disputable elsewhere in the poem, the action does not so much solidify knowledge as draw attention to its manufacture, and partly for this reason Will’s endless search for “kynde knowynge” so often returns us to this word. Many characters, after all, try to “preve” something, and they do not so much find proof as make it. The word’s noun form might roughly equate to knowledge, and because there are many ways to know, there are many ways to “preve.” The various uses of the verb show that proof requires assembly, whether by reason, citation, or living example. Because to “preve” is as difficult as it is imperative the effort does not end and makes possible a vast accumulation of knowledge, even if that knowledge is mostly provisional. And because any attempt to “preve” an idea requires exploring such a large array of authorities, the word promotes the poem’s encyclopedic breadth. Although “preve” abounds, partly because of this very fact it cannot fix knowledge, and a blank remains in the middle of the encyclopedia.

4.

The word “preve” might preoccupy Langland not only because epistemology interests him but also because poetry does. Making verse combines the many definitions of “preve.” Will wants knowledge “prevable” by citations from written authority, by reason, and by experience. His efforts to write a poem demand all of these resources. Langland’s text is a citational web: he “speaks Bible” in Bloomfield’s phrasing (37). In the C-text’s autobiographical passage, Reason also sanctions the poet’s endeavor. After an argument Will convinces Reason that it is no sin for him to labor in his vocation: “‘Y rede the,’ quod Resoun tho, ‘rape the to bigynne / The lyif þat is louable and leele to thy

soul”” (V. 102-3). We might also say that Will’s encounters with various argumentative figures “preve” his ideas, refine them in verbal combat. But perhaps most importantly, when Will counters Imaginatif’s claims that “ther are bokes / ynowe To telle men what Dowel is, Dobet and Dobest” (XII.17-18), his defense of poetry implies that making verse brings him closer to Dowel:

I seigh wel he seide me sooth and, somwhat me to excuse,
 Seide, ‘Caton conforted his sone þat, clerk though he were,
 To solacen hym som tyme—as I do whan I make:
Interpone tuis interdum gaudia curis.
 ‘And of holy men I herde,’ quod I, ‘how thei outhervile
 Pleyden the parfiter to ben in [places manye].
 Ac if ther were any wight that wolde me telle
 What were Dowel and Dobet and Dobest at the laste,
 Wolde I neuere do werk, but wende to holi chirche
 And there bidde my bedes but whan Ich ete or slepe.’ (XII. 20-28)

Although Langland sometimes alliterates on relatively unimportant words, here he twice places the alliterative emphasis on the conditional “wolde” and in lines that surround the subjunctive “were.” Much of the poem gestures toward this hypothetical space, the narrative always moving toward something not quite realized. And when Will says that should someone explain the three lives to him he “wolde nevere do werk,” the “do” recalls the Dowel, Dobet, Dobest sequence from the previous line. The alliteration and the defense itself imply that making a poem—“doing work”—relates to Dowel itself. We

might say, then, that Will's making allows him not only to talk about the good but to pursue it actively.

But first the defense unfolds tentatively, and Will organizes his argument around the possibility that other realms of discourse remain to consider. The apology begins by admitting that Imaginatif has a point. The phrase that opens Will's speech, "somewhat me to excuse," seems particularly Langlandian because it allows Will to craft a provocative argument without claiming to offer clarity. Then Will protests that poetry allows him some solace amid his cares. Emily Steiner argues that Langland "quotes Cato to remind us that poetic composition is a first foray into a realm of learning that may, in the end, prove to be redemptive...The quotations from Cato also show that learning is key to the poet's imagining of a 'life' not strictly his own" (103). Just as Cato offers a platform for later instruction to medieval students, so the poem may prepare Will for something else. The turn to the argument's next phase also has a similar mixture of caution and confidence. Will solaces himself with making, but—"ac"—if anyone would satisfactorily define the three lives, he would cease his work and head to church. "Ac," Burrow observes, is another favorite word of Langland's, one he relies on to articulate his "divided mind" (28), and here the conjunction forms the pivot of Will's argument. Langland always finds more to contemplate.

The argument's second half also imagines other realms of discourse. Both parts of the defense, we might say, are in the subjunctive. After Will protests that poetry is recreation, he asserts that his poem is "werk," a word underscored by alliteration and by its placement just before the caesura.³¹ What Kermode calls a "fiction" offers a way to think about Will's endless writing project and his imprecisely defined quest-object. For

Kermode, a fiction is a provisional understanding that allows revision (perhaps something “preven,” in *Piers Plowman*’s terms), a view to which he opposes myth, which claims more truth (*Sense* 39). Middleton extends Kermode’s idea to Langland’s poem: “Will...declares himself a writer for whom the business of writing is *finding things out*. He identifies himself as a maker not simply of verse but of fictions, in opposition to those modes of discourse which display truth as myth” (“Narration” 169, original emphasis). Middleton’s phrasing is particularly useful: Langland thinks of his poetry as “finding things out,” not as “having found” them out. Will pursues other realms of discourse, new “fictions,” and his pursuit results in a poem that takes all of life and history for its borders.

Admittedly, even if *Piers Plowman* often seems unwilling to assert anything definitively, the poem is theologically conservative.³² The principle of “redde quod debes,” give what you owe, governs much of the poem’s final movements, and scholars take this maxim as an affirmation of semi-Pelagian theology, which emphasizes the importance of both grace and works.³³ In the poem’s vision, a reformed church would help promote living well, and Langland satirizes his church’s human imperfections to improve rather than to abolish the institution. His skepticism scours the world he can see but not the one he cannot. But as Middleton argues, Langland “declines to make the mythic claims on belief that belong to the cosmic fictions which are his models” (“Narration” 170). We might say that Holy Church begins by offering Will a “myth,” a sermon about Truth. But Will does not end his inquiry there, and treats her pronouncement more as a “fiction,” something he can use to keep searching, than as a truth that would absolve him of the need to continue thinking. Were Langland merely to

embrace his models’ “mythic claims,” his poem would be neither so long nor so confusing. A myth would circumscribe Langland’s writing project, but instead the poem’s boundaries become indefinite.

Writing facilitates seeking, then, and seeking is imperative because to decline would be slothful, even if Will cannot fully learn “kynde knowyng” (Adams 91). Thus Will’s defense must answer the accusation that making poetry detracts from praying. If someone would explain the three lives to him, Will says, then, “Wolde I neuere do werk, but wende to holi chirche / And there bidde my bedes but whan Ich ete or slepe.” Meanwhile he does not “bidde” his “bedes” and instead makes a long poem. This “werk” contrasts with the play with which “holy men” relax. Schmidt highlights Langland’s contrast between play and work in Will’s defense of poetry: “In saying that the saints merely ‘played’, he has left open to himself the option of claiming that to make poetry, which is more *strenuous* than merely reading it, is to do something more *meritorious* than even the saints do when they are relaxing and not praying” (18, original emphasis). Will may read incessantly, but Schmidt helps us understand why the dreamer never stops writing either. Composing verse more actively interprets his world and his faith than repeated devotions or unending reading. Not only must Will do well but as well as possible. Anything less would constitute a sin of omission.³⁴ Rewriting the world, the poem’s work, requires constant interpretation, which exercises the intellect and the will without satisfying them with something certain. That struggle, we might say, tries to “preve” these faculties. This practice aligns with the medieval emphasis on affective reading, which elevates the text’s influence on the reader above locating some truth in the

pages (Travis, “Affective Criticism” 211).³⁵ Rather than reread the Bible as if its truths were self-evident, Langland nearly rewrites the book.

But to argue that the poem-in-process at least partly becomes the proof it seeks is not to say that Will has found some long-sought answer. Writing is important for Will because it allows him to strive without ceasing, hardly an optimistic conclusion for him to reach.³⁶ The work ends anticipating another pilgrimage, the search for Truth as imperative as ever. Burrow connects the poem’s fascination with “preve” to Will’s defense: “‘Preve’ is a pregnant word in *Piers Plowman*. A friar may be able to ‘preve’ what Dowel is in words; but, unlike Piers himself, he will not undertake to ‘preve this in dede’, demonstrate it in action (XIII.132). Not that Langland does either; but the words of his poem do represent a strenuous effort to pay more than lip-service to the ideal” (93-94). Like Schmidt, Burrow highlights Will’s “strenuous effort.” With “the words of his poem,” which is to say in the effort of making poetry rather than any particular claim that Will or the other characters espouse, Langland aims at the ideal. Will’s poem may dwindle into a mere “bok,” one more textual authority amid many, as Imaginatif argues, but the process of writing cannot become similarly devalued. The poem, in other words, does not in itself offer the answers Will wants, much less salvation, but his act of writing attempts to “preve in deed” the ideals to which the poem aspires.

In the *Confessio Amantis*, John Gower concludes his rehearsal of Zoroaster’s disastrous career with a proverb: “And ende proveth every thing” (6.2383). The end of Zoroaster’s story helps us read the rest of it. The end of *Piers Plowman*, however, does not make sense of the middle, does not “preve” anything except that more needs to be “preven.” As D. Vance Smith writes, at its end, Langland’s poem, unlike many medieval

texts, “does not reveal the teleology of the poem’s beginning, disclosing the end toward which everything has been directed” (49). Instead, the ending is another beginning, or another middle, from where we look back at an dizzying accumulation of provisional knowledge and ahead to fuller understanding. Though the two activities converge in the Middle Ages, where in the *Parliament* Chaucer imagines himself endlessly reading, Langland imagines himself endlessly writing.

Notes

¹ Importantly, though, soon after Dante sees the trinity his faculties fail him, and he says that he cannot recall the sight.

² Although Langland does not use the term “encyclopedia,” he writes into a medieval encyclopedic tradition. “The word *encyclopedia*,” Franklin-Brown points out, “is not classical or medieval; it is a coinage of the Renaissance... Ancient and medieval writers nevertheless produced a number of texts that look encyclopedic...No term in classical or medieval Latin united all these texts, and only them, into a discrete genre. The word that comes closest to describing most of these books, *florilegium*, is also a modern coinage” (8, 9).

³ Ryan McDermott explains the importance of what he calls the poem’s “dynamic middle,” which the poem returns to even as it ends (206).

⁴ Jessica Barr writes that Will “continues searching, even when he has accumulated an impressive list of answers and it is no longer clear what exactly he wants to learn” (165-66).

⁵ Baldwin notes these two interpretations: “Middleton (1982b) sees the discontinuous narrative of the poem as based on a series of conflicts, first verbal battles with himself, and then at the end of the poem, more literal conflicts with the Devil; Burrow (1993) on the other hand sees the narrative circling around the truth” (120). The poem seems to chart a progression, as the manuscript divisions into Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest suggestion, but, as Burrow maintains, something unknowable lies at the poem’s center. The uncertainty as to whether Will moves in a circle or a line contributes both to his confusion and to the readers’.

⁶ Benjamin in fact connects collecting and learning: “Collecting is a primal phenomenon of study: the student collects knowledge” (210).

⁷ At the beginning of Passus XX, before Will falls asleep for the last time, Need appeals to the virtue: “So Nede, at gret need, may nymen as for his owene, / Withouten conseil of Conscience or Cardynale Vertues— / So that he sewe and save *Spiritus Temperancie*” (20-22).

⁸ Simpson ends his study of the poem by likening *Piers Plowman*, in “its testing and revaluation of textual authority,” to the *House of Fame* (*Piers* 220). The *Parliament* makes an interesting analogue to Langland’s poem for similar reasons.

⁹ See, for instance, Frye 90; Quilligan 53; and Kasten 15. Steiner makes this point in a different way: “For Langland, the origin of narrative is the desire for salvation, and the purpose of narrative is to explore that same desire” (182). The poem proposes something that demands explanation, whether a difficult piece of language or a theological dispute, and offers a narrative “to explore” or to comment on that problem.

¹⁰ Later Lanham makes a similar point: “We all want to confront reality directly, and we all confront an intermediate symbolism. In literary terms, we want to read the text and find ourselves doomed to read commentators on the text, and then the commentators on those commentators. The text exists no more than reality does, just out there” (177).

¹¹ Carruthers sees this idea as the poem’s fundamental concern: “Verbal ambiguity, mistaken meaning, pun, hidden connotation, extreme compression or expansion of ordinary syntax—such devices are the hallmarks of Langland’s language, and they define the situations which his characters face over and over again in the poem. I believe that this analysis of words as ambiguous tools of thought, capable not only of revealing a true cognition but also of generating a corruption of understanding, is the basic concern of the poem: *Piers Plowman* is an allegory which devotes its primary energies to redeeming its own *littera*” (4-5).

¹² Conscience’s explanation of Christ’s names alliterates on a hard “c” for five lines and repeats the words “knyght,” “kyng,” “conquerour,” and “called.” In his study of Langland’s running alliterative lines, Schmidt remarks that “there is real relief when the *k* alliteration ceases,” and he speculates that for this passage “prose may have done as well” (*The Clerkly Maker* 57). The “flat, dry, didactic lines” (61) that Schmidt finds here Carruthers argues reflect the lack of tension in unfallen language, which is essentially non-literary: “Earthly experience is by nature tensive and dramatic, *in enigmate*, but redeemed rhetoric cannot includes these values, since it is precisely in the tension, the approximateness, of earthly speech to truth that falseness lurks” (150).

¹³ Bloomfield argues something similar: “In using several languages or in writing acrostics, a poet is indicating his desire to pass beyond the limitations of his medium and at the same time indicating his belief, possibly subconscious, in the magic power, in a literal sense, of language” (37). Eamon Duffy notes another version of this tradition, “the extraordinary catena of divine names so often turned to magical use, and much in evidence in the Charlemagne prayers. This list, in which God is described as ‘Egg, Calf, Serpent, Ram, Lion, and Worm’, seems the least likely of candidates for orthodox liturgical origin. In fact, it is a hymn dating back at least to the eleventh century, and occurring in a variety of liturgical contexts” (283).

¹⁴ Even the name “Piers Plowman” contributes to this inclusiveness by evoking both Peter and a medieval plowman (Barney, *Allegories* 88).

¹⁵ Anima also has many names, and Will meets this faculty (in some sense his soul) after he has travelled deep into his own mind. Here too he finds the union of his disparate parts.

¹⁶ See, for example, Burrow, *Langland’s Fictions* 2, 28; Simpson, *Piers* 18; and Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory* 248-49.

¹⁷ His mistrust of many of the Church's institutions made the plowman popular in the sixteenth century: "Piers has become the elusive symbol of the leader of the true church whom many in the Reformation were to adopt as their own" (Donaldson 503).

¹⁸ A.V.C. Schmidt identifies this idea as the one of the poem's main points: "That Truth (=God) can only be 'known' by being lived, with its implied warning of the danger of mere knowledge, is the central doctrine developed through the figure of Piers Plowman" (414 n.85). For a discussion of Dante and the peril of equating knowledge and virtue, see Mazzotta, "Ulysses: Persuasion versus Prophecy" 351.

¹⁹ In partly dismissing book learning, Langland may participate in the later Middle Age's reaction against scholasticism. Kane describes this late medieval "anti-intellectualism": "the fullest expression of anti-intellectualism came with Ockham and his teaching of the inaccessibility of God to the human intellect: God's *potentia absoluta* lay outside revealed truth. The concept was pervasive because it gave a kind of relief to fourteenth-century perplexity" ("Perplexities" 85-86). In *Piers Plowman*, any divine plan does seem to lie "outside revealed truth," but this fact hardly gives relief to the poem's "perplexity." Also see Adams, "Langland's Theology" 107.

²⁰ David Aers explains how Langland rethinks tradition without abandoning it: "The poet whose vision consistently returns to the quest for individual salvation in its fully social and institutional context seems compelled, by his own poetic movement, to conclude with an individualistic pilgrimage which perhaps could indicate the total abandonment of the official church to the social and spiritual forces he has grasped so vividly and opposed so strenuously. Deprived of an ideological and institutional framework, the lonely Conscience is left to initiate a search for the lost Ploughman and the Grace he may mediate to the present world. This act of faith is a fitting symbol for the poet's own refusal to short-circuit the central dialectic between inherited ideologies and creative imagination, courageously choosing total engagement with the ambivalence and tensions his culture inspired, and evolving a form of writing brilliantly able to mediate and explore these in all their fluid complexity" (*Chaucer, Langland* 37).

²¹ For a discussion, see Simpson, *Piers* 134-35.

²² The poem intensifies the importance of Will's decisions here in other ways as well. At the beginning of Passus XII, Imaginatif establishes Will's age: "I have folwed thee, in feith, thise fyve and fourty wynter" (3). Dante undertakes his journey at thirty-five and Will at forty-five, "the peak of 'middle life,' the time of critical decision," but the point seems similar (Schmidt, *The Vision of Piers Plowman* 454, n.3).

²³ Later in the poem when Piers tears the pardon, he does so "for pure tene" (VII.115), and here the word's adjective form reinforces the strength of Conscience's attack.

²⁴ He uses it against the friars who claim that Dowel dwells with them (VIII. 20) and in his debate with Scripture in Passus X. In the *Confessions* Augustine offers this passage on indecision: "For I ask them [the Manichees] whether it is good to delight in reading from the apostle, or if it is good to take pleasure in a sober psalm, or if it is good to discourse upon the gospel. In each case they will reply 'good'. What then? If all these offer equal delight at one and the same time, surely the divergent wills pull part the human heart while we are deliberating which is the most attractive option to take? All are good and yet are in contention with each other until the choice falls on one to which is

then drawn the entire single will which was split into many” (150). *Piers Plowman* everywhere concerns the divided will pulled toward different versions of the good.

²⁵ This idea shares something with Middleton’s observation about the poem’s organization around episodes of verbal combat. See “Piers Plowman and the Invention of Experience,” 96-7 and throughout.

²⁶ Medieval encyclopedists often structure their works more as an irregular collection rather than as a neatly arranged list. Franklin-Brown argues that scholastic encyclopedias, “like libraries, become “heterotopias” of knowledge—that is, spaces where many possible ways of knowing are juxtaposed” (7-8).

²⁷ Bloomfield connects the poem’s interest in education, encyclopedism, and satire: “But no quest for perfection can mean anything unless it centers on the hindrances to perfection in this world, and hence the large and important element of satire in the poem. The hero is seeking for perfection and does not know how it may be found. He is in very essence a child of God who is hoping for enlightenment—an *ingenu*. Hence this is the reason why Langland also thought of his poem as partly an encyclopedic satire. In this genre the innocence of the hero provides the motive force for the action and satire. It is an ideal medium both for presenting the dilemma of Will and for criticizing the cupidity and sins of his age” (150).

²⁸ Reynolds explains the opposition: “Integumental or allegorical reading is generically opposed to the satiric mode of writing: the one treats the texts as a covering for secrets, the other works by open and naked reprehension” (146). Satire relies on effective communication, while allegory works by indirection.

²⁹ Simpson sees a related tension between justice and mercy, a problem that the poem continually negotiates (*Piers* 116).

³⁰ When Will exclaims that he wants to know everything, he suffers a reprimand from Anima: “All the sciences under sonne and alle the sotile craftes / I wolde I knewe and kouthe kyndely in myn herte! / ‘Thanne artow inparfit,’ quod he, ‘and oon of Prides knyghtes!’” (XV. 48-50).

³¹ Simpson finds this passage “a radical defence of the existence of one more book (the book of *Piers Plowman*), amongst the ‘bokes ynowe’ in the world; unlike the very many medieval books that present themselves as passive transmitters of truth, as simply providing ‘of remembraunce the keye’ (Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*, F.26), Langland (or at the very least Will as poet) defends his poem as actively recovering the truth” (*Piers* 122). The progressive sense of the action seems important here: Will is “recovering” knowledge; he has not already recovered it.

³² For a discussion of the relationship between Langland’s theology and Lollardy, see Simpson, *Piers* 200-1.

³³ See, for instance, Baldwin 273; and Simpson, *Piers* 75-76.

³⁴ Langland worries about his susceptibility to sloth, perhaps resembling Dante when he acknowledges his propensity toward another deadly sin, pride. As he climbs Purgatory, Dante feels some foreboding: “Greater is the fear, which fills my soul with dread, / of torments lower down, those heavy loads— / I can almost feel their weight upon me now” (*Purgatorio* XIII, 136-38).

³⁵ Lowe explains that many late fourteenth-century texts demand “our dynamic, affective participation in what we see and read, but this is not merely a search to articulate a

version of the Truth. That is a lapse into relativism. Instead, the need for judgement is seen to be the central quest of human life: to search for something that cannot be expressed or known completely" (11, original emphasis).

³⁶ Simpson qualifies his interpretation of the Passus XII's early verses by emphasizing the poem's interest in process: "This is not to say that it is a defence of the poem as creating original truths, a defence to which Langland as a religious poet would be unwilling to commit himself. The passage does, nevertheless, defend poetry as an irreplaceable way of recovering truth" (*Piers* 122).

Chapter 4

Julian of Norwich and the Muttering Fiend

1.

As Dante descends into Hell, he encounters increasingly corrupt language.¹ Guileful rhetoricians relate their histories to attract his sympathy, notably Francesca in canto V, and later Ulysses, who defends his own quest for knowledge. Elsewhere infernal speech has eroded in other ways, and in canto XXI we learn that demons signal each other with farts (137-39). Two instances of hellish babble perhaps communicate even less. Plutus' exclamation upon seeing Virgil and Dante, "Pape Satàn, Pape Satàn, aleppe," seems only partly intelligible (VII.1), and farther down in Hell Nimrod, whom medieval writers believed to have built the tower of Babel, shouts "Raphèl mai amècche zabi almi" (XXXI. 65). Jeffrey Cohen comments on this moment's importance: "Linguistic differences were fundamental to medieval imaginings of race, a category of separation that yawned even wider when compounded by difference of religion," and Nimrod's "nonsensical declarative announces his absolute exclusion from Christian comprehension" (271).² Dante's whole poem, of course, builds toward just that comprehension. His journey becomes a quest for a perfect idiom: among the saved, language communicates the cosmos' workings to Dante, but among the damned, language tempts and confuses him. In *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante argues that language, which neither angels nor animals require, is particular to humanity (Shapiro 49),³ but as Cohen shows, language is important for Dante because it defines not only humanity but also the Christian community. Thus language deteriorates as Hell deepens, until in its pit

three traitors stop Satan's mouths. If Christ is God's incarnate word, then evil must be nonsense, and, in Hell's lowest regions, silence.

Dante's poetry can provide a context for the anxieties around communication that inform Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*, a text begun later in the same century. Language's power to mark "exclusion from Christian comprehension" is no less important for Julian, who also searches for heavenly speech and represents Hell's forces as incoherent. Near her book's close, a fiend attacks her twice. In his first assault, he chokes Julian with his "pawes" and displays his "whit teth" as he gives her a "shrewde loke" (333). When commentators discuss Julian's ideas about evil, they tend to focus their analyses on this first encounter with the fiend, perhaps because here she describes his features and his violence.⁴ But his second appearance is also important because there he assails Julian with noise. He tries "to stere" her "to dispere" with his babble:

the feende came againe with his heet and with his stinch, and made me
fulle besy. The stinch was so vile and so painfulle, and the bodely heet
also dredful and traveylous. I harde a bodely jangeling, as it had been of
two bodies, and both to my thinking jangeled at one time, as if they had
holde a perlement with greate besines. And all was softe muttering, and I
understode not what they said. And alle this was to stere me to dispere, as
methought, seeming to me as they scorned biding of bedes which are said
boistosly with mouth, failing devout intending and wise diligence, the
which we owe to God in oure prayer. And our good lorde God gave me
grace mighty to trust in him, and to comfort my soule with bodely speech,

as I shulde have done to another person that had been traveyled.

Methought that besines might not be likened to no bodey bisines. (341)

Like the scene of his initial attack, this passage emphasizes the fiend's body: his "heet," "stinch," and "jangeling." The noise, though, provokes the strongest reaction from Julian. Like Nimrod's speech, the fiend's "jangeling" sets him apart from the Christian community, and indeed he can only parody the "biding of bedes." Julian drowns out this "jangeling" by comforting herself "with bodey speech," praying aloud to avoid hearing the fiendish "muttering," or, in the Paris manuscript, "whystrynn" [whispering]. But before she manages to call on divine aid, this noise nearly causes her to "dispere." Why are the fiends (he seems to multiply) so threatening if she "understode not what they said"?

We might begin to answer this question by looking at some similar confrontations in medieval texts. Although Julian scarcely mentions her biography and has not received sainthood, her encounter with the fiend has analogues not only in Dante but also in hagiography, where holy women often confound less articulate pagans and demons. Cohen likens Dante's confrontation with Nimrod to a scene in the *Canterbury Tales*, where a saint reduces her tormentor to incoherence: "The pagan judge Almachius in Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale* is unable to reply coherently to Saint Cecilia's questioning, allowing her to transform him from agent of authority into a figure of madness staring at nothing and an object of her gaze" (271). Almachius demands to know Cecilia's "religioun" and "believe," and she replies, "Ye han bigonne youre questioun folily, / ... that wolden two answeres conclude / In o demande; ye axed lewedly" (428-30). Soon after she accuses the judge of being "confus in thy nycetee" (463). Better versed in rhetoric, Cecilia controls the debate, and Almachius, she points out, "ne mayst but oonly

lyf bireve” (482). After suffering torments for days, her linguistic mastery only increases, and “she gan to preche” (539). The *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, which follows and in some ways reverses the *Second Nun’s Tale*, offers another moment where incoherent language marks exclusion from the Christian community. As they pursue a secret that promises to make them rich, the alchemists become lost in their own argot and, like Almachius, worship a stone.

When they are not debating tyrants, saints are often beset by demons who then lose their authority and eloquence much as Almachius does. St. Margaret’s battle with the dragon follows this pattern, a story available in Middle English (Petroff 105). In John Mirk’s account of Margaret’s life she subdues the dragon and, after he begins to whine, rebukes him: “HOLDE THI JANGLYNG, FENDE, AND TELLE ME ANONE WHATE YS THINE LYNAZE, AND WHAT BEN THIN WEKYS” (*Middle English Legends* 141). Like the fiend in Julian’s text, the dragon jangles, and initially has no clear identity: Julian’s attacker also seems to have no name, making him even more threatening to the well-ordered medieval universe (Dale 131). Unlike the evil presence in Julian’s account, however, the dragon can speak intelligibly. Margaret turns his noise into coherence, and he goes on to explain his demonic “lynage”: the saint gains control by forcing the dragon to become intelligible. Something similar happens in an account of St. Frideswide, an Anglo-Saxon saint whose life is recorded in a fourteenth-century manuscript. When she overcomes a devil, he too creates a clamor: “HEO MADE THE CROYS, AND HE FLEY AWEY WITH NOYSE AND GRETE CHESTE” (*Middle English Legends* 28). But this “noyse” arrives only after he has tempted her with “an croune of rede golde” and a speech outlining his own attractions (28). Like Margaret’s dragon, this demon mostly speaks intelligibly, if deceitfully, though unlike the

dragon, he resorts to noise only after offering temptations, a trajectory that suggests that nonsense hid beneath his words all along.

Survivors often emerge empowered from demonic assaults. Umiliana and Verdiana, two thirteenth-century Italian saints who may owe their stories to the popular legend of St. Margaret, “submit to being enveloped bodily by their snakes while maintaining a high level of self-consciousness, never permitting the snakes to be more than peripheral to their life of prayer and meditation” (Petroff 105). Even though the fiend’s heat, stench, and noise nearly overtake her, Julian also permits incarnate evil only a “peripheral” place in her account. These scenes’ brevity does not imply any insignificance, for the stories show just how readily their protagonists manage to dismiss evil, and Elizabeth Petroff observes that frequently holy women suffer demonic attacks only to grow stronger. During her encounter with the fiend Julian, too, maintains “a high level of self-consciousness,” for she immediately summons divine reinforcements and routs her attacker. “As a result of such encounters with evil,” Petroff goes on to explain, “all the women are transformed, gaining the ability to ‘read’ the events of the world around them. Having survived such encounters, the saintly woman takes harassment less seriously and can even be amused by events that frighten others” (105). Julian’s text nearly conforms to this pattern also. She learns to laugh at the fiend, and his muttering soon gives way to her increased ability to “read the events of the world,” to her discovery that love was God’s meaning. Hell’s forces also menace Richalm von Schöntal, a thirteenth-century abbot who “stressed the advantages of silent reading in his account of devils forcing him to read aloud, for he complained that this robbed him of inward understanding” (Green 15). Devils disrupt Richalm’s reading and interfere with

understanding, and again intelligible speech muffles them, though at the expense of reading well. The abbot is reading a book and the saints the world, but here as in hagiography, the body and its noise impede the spiritual quest.

The twelfth-century abbot Guibert of Nogent's account of the Devil's attack on his mother combines many of these ideas: the emphasis on the fiend's body and his victim's, the importance of intelligible prayer, and the sufferer's increased understanding after the assault. Guibert relates that the "Adversary himself" crushed her to the point that "her voice could not utter a single sound. Unable to speak but free of mind, she could only implore the help of God. And suddenly, from the head of her bed, a spirit, undoubtedly a benevolent one, began to cry out in a voice as affectionate as it was clear, 'Holy Mary, help!'" (40). These tactics resemble the fiend's first attack on Julian, and here, too, intelligible prayer overcomes the demonic attacker. Guibert's mother receives help from a benevolent spirit, who calls for Mary's intercession, drives out the Devil, and then says, "See to it that you are a good woman!" (41). Guibert recounts that "Those parting words of her deliverer...she kept engraved forever in her memory" (41). This experience helps reconcile Guibert's mother to widowhood (Clark 180), and eventually she experiences prophetic visions. Julian's attacker, then, arises from a tradition of demons that choke, lie, and babble in their efforts to overcome the faithful. But she evokes these demons only in their most incoherent form—the fiend that assaults her never speaks clearly—and only near the end of her book, where the hellish noise seems uncomfortably near the closing celebration of harmony and divine love.

The fiend does not manage "to stere" Julian "to dispere," and scholars admire her "serenity," a calm that emerges from her conviction that all shall be well.⁵ Julian, after

all, dwells little on the fiend or Hell's other torments, insists on a loving deity, and ends her text by declaring that “love was his mening” (379). Some scholars thus find Julian’s use of Hell less threatening than in other medieval texts. Steven Fanning argues that Julian’s assertion “all shall be well” means to soften the fear of Hell, in contrast to sterner medieval writers, and she indeed does not dwell on punishments that await sinners in the afterlife. Wolfgang Riehle explains that for Julian, sin “causes more pain than hell (457-58), so that she, like most other mystics, gives no description of hell” (230). Salvation interests her more than damnation. Nicholas Watson remarks that Julian, Chaucer, and Langland share a concern with how to access truth, but he argues that Julian’s “optimistic and intimate expectation of knowledge that is to come...distinguishes the *Revelation of Love* from most other products of the late medieval ‘age of anxiety’” (63). In addition to considering Julian’s text alongside other examples of demonic babble, we might think of Chaucer’s noisy *House of Fame* or *Piers Plowman* and its competing voices, texts that insistently confront unintelligibility. Julian allows such “jangeling” to trespass on her meditations less often than these contemporaries, and rather than foreground dissonance, she focuses more on the hope that everything will become clear. Julian makes a familiar medieval distinction between human and divine perception, one that those poets would also endorse, even if they focus more on the chaos that people see rather than the harmony that God sees: “And I saw truly that nothing is done by happe ne by aventure, but alle by the foreseeing wisdom of God. If it be hap or aventure in the sight of man, our blindhede and our unforsight is the cause” (163). She contrasts “the foreseeing wisdom of God” with the fallen world’s “happe” and “aventure,” and she trusts that humanity’s “unforsight” will eventually give way to firmer knowledge.

But even if Julian is confident that the noise will eventually dissipate, for an important moment incoherence erupts in her text, and when she relates the fiend's "jangeling," she describes, however briefly, what Hell sounds like, and what a mind searching for knowledge might feel there. The threat that the world does not make sense, a possibility that the fiend seems to embody, preoccupies her more than infernal physical torments, and in this way her text does register Hell's power. The fiend's "jangeling" is a briefer but no less intense version of the noise in Langland and Chaucer's works, and rereading Julian with this scene in mind, we can see the threat of incoherence emerge elsewhere, a threat she frequently suppresses. Communication is a central problem in the *Revelation*, and because Julian tries to interpret God's "mening" (a word she uses often), an unintelligible antagonist is an especially appropriate adversary. As Michelle Karnes notes, Julian imagines interpretation as a quest (356). Speech and language are nearly as important to her quest as sight, so she must dispel the fiend for her spiritual journey to continue, lest she become unable to interpret her revelations, converse with her God, divine his "mening," and allow that meaning to pass from her to her "evencristene" (another important word in her vocabulary).⁶ The fiend's jangling insinuates that Julian's interpretive efforts are hopeless, and her confrontation with him reveals that she, too, is a product of the "the late medieval 'age of anxiety'."

2.

In this chapter, I try to map the muttering fiend's place among other incoherence that Julian confronts. Although she overcomes the fiend and his noise, elsewhere she acknowledges interpretative difficulties, a kind of noisiness in that they, too, challenge her efforts to read the world by interposing themselves between her and the knowledge

she most wants. The fiend, in other words, gives expression to a concern with interpretation that fills the *Revelation*. Julian thinks about the medium through which she tries to know God, for instance, and at times seems intent on removing that medium. “Meane” becomes one of the most important words in her vocabulary:⁷

the custome of our prayer was brought to my mind: how that we use, for unknowing of love, to make meny meanes. Then saw I sothly that it is more worship to God, and more very delite, that we faithfully pray to himselfe of his goodness and cleve therto by his grace, with true understanding and stedfast beleve, then if we made all the meanes that hart may thinke. For if we make all these meanes, it is to little and not ful worshippe to God. (143)

Here Julian seems quick to propose clearing away the clutter of “meny meanes,”⁸ and just before this passage she indeed has an unmediated vision of Christ: “I conceived truly and mightly that it was himselfe that shewed it me, without any meane” (135). In some sense Julian’s quest succeeds immediately: her vision reveals God “without any meane.” But as this revelation ends, she says that she cannot offer the reader the full extent of her vision: “But the goostely syght I can nott ne may shew it as openly ne as fully as I would, but I trust in our Lord God almighty that he shall of his godnes and for your love make yow to take it more ghostely and more sweetly then I can or may tell it” (157). Julian draws attention to language itself as a “meane,” a medium that, while imperfect, the fiend’s noise would overwhelm and render opaque.

Although Julian briefly manages to thrust aside all “meanes” in her first revelation, much of her text thinks about how she might know God, a problem she must think through continuously. She goes on to discuss “meanes” more thoroughly:

For God of his goodenes hath ordained meanes to helpe us full faire and fele. Of which the chiefe and principal meane is the blessed kinde that he toke of the maiden, with all the meanes that gone before and come after, which belong to our redemption and to our endless salvation. Wherfor it pleaseth him that we seke him and worshippe him by meanes, understanding and knowing that he is the goodness of all. (143)

Julian establishes the importance of “meanes” by explaining that Christ is the “principal meane” through which God makes himself known. Another fourteenth-century English mystic, Richard Rolle, also imagines Christ’s suffering body as a text: “by body is lyke a boke written al with rede ynke...Now, swete Jhesu, graunt me to rede upon þy boke, and somewhate to undrestone þe swetnes of þat writynge, and to have likynge in studious abydynge of þat redyng” (qtd. in Green 45-46). For Richard and Julian, Christ’s wounds incite a desire to know more. Where “meanes” sometimes get in the way, here they are the way. The “meane” intercedes between Julian and God’s “mening” even as it allows access to that meaning. Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross discuss these terms’ significance: “Julian’s showing has made the bleeding head resonate as an image in new and unusual ways; it *means* both the exaltation of the Trinity and the humility of the incarnation, but it can only do so because it is liberated from the *means* or hermeneutic repertories which clogged the arteries of contemporary devotional writing” (63-4, original emphasis). Although Julian may differentiate herself from the conventions of

contemporary devotional writing, she does seem entangled in other “hermeneutic repertories.” She wants to remove the “mean” between herself and the divine, but at the same time she recognizes its necessity. The *Revelation* presents both a text (or a vision) and Julian’s ongoing analysis of that text, a structure that seems to imply that a “meane,” the very site where interpretation happens, is unavoidable. In the fallen world, “meanes” and God’s “mening”—noise and sacrality—are entangled.

Julian’s approach to “meanes” stands somewhere between the *Cloud* author’s and Langland’s. Langland, with his poem’s crowd of competing voices, lets in more of the world’s noise than Julian, and she in turn lets in more of the world’s noise than the *Cloud* author, who would shun language almost entirely. What Julian calls the “meny meanes” that we make “for unknowing of love,” those things that interpose themselves between us and God, the *Cloud* author describes as the “cloud of unknowing.” To begin to find one’s way through this cloud, he author recommends a “naked entent direct unto God” that eschews language as much as possible: “And yif thee list have this entent lappid and foulden in o worde, for thou schuldest have betir holde therapon, take thee bot a litil worde of o silable; for so it is betir then of two, for even the schorter it is, the betir it acordeth with the werk of the spirite” (37). Short prayers focus the mind, whereas long prayers can become a mere form: “And rather it peersith the eres of Almyghty God than doth any longe sauter unmyndfuly mumlyd in the teeth. And herfore it is wretyn that schort preier peersith heven” (65-6). The words “unmyndfuly mumlyd in the teeth,” alliterative and full of syllables, emphasize the anatomy required for a long prayer, the physicality that the mystic wants to avoid along with excess language.⁹ Here mangled prayers threaten contemplation, as in Julian’s text, where the fiend’s muttering sounds

like “biding of bedes which are said boistosly with mouth.” Despite the danger of unmindful prayer, language is an important “meane” for the *Cloud* author even if it can easily become distracting. He recommends holding onto a single syllable, for this small syllable is a vehicle for his pupil’s “entent” to pierce heaven. To eliminate life’s distractions further, he advocates another cloud, the cloud of forgetting, so that between the mystic and the divine lies the cloud of unknowing, and between the mystic and the world lies the cloud of forgetting. With these short prayers and obscuring clouds, the *Cloud* author hopes to transcend fallen language.

Although Julian quickly shouts down the fiend’s muttering, she does not mistrust language to the extent that she reduces prayer to one syllable. Like all mystics, she knows that language cannot describe her experience of the divine, for even when she does perceive God’s intentions, she explains that she cannot always perfectly communicate them. Denys Turner explains that “apophaticism,” speaking about divinity with the knowledge that words are ultimately inadequate, can result in pared down language or a profusion of metaphor:

God is not an object of a particular kind of talk in the way that a number is the object of mathematical discourse, for God is not an object. And since all talk is about objects, all language fails of God. So you can either just stop “prattling about God” altogether, as Eckhart advises, or else do the opposite and make sure that you do *not* cull back the variety of talk about God to some restricted, pious, or “appropriate” domain. It is the same apophaticism either way, for if by way of speech nothing goes, everything

does: in the matter of talk about God, if every word fails, every word should be tried. (25, original emphasis)

Two ideas here are particularly interesting in the context of unfinished quests for authority or sacrality, what Julian calls God’s “mening”: apophaticism can encourage reduced or proliferating language, and “all language fails of God.” As Turner shows, varied approaches toward apophaticism ensure that mystics present their shared mistrust of language differently.¹⁰ The *Cloud* author aims to pare down his medium, and Julian uses it to suggest God’s richness: “I saw verily that oure Lorde was nevyr wroth nor nevyr shall. For he is God, he is good, he is truth, he is love, he is pees; and hys might, hys wisdom, hys charyte, and his unyte sufferyth hym nott to be wroth” (64). Julian evokes a splendor that defies representation, and her repetition gestures toward the perfect symmetry of the divine plan. For Julian, words are a “meane,” things with which to approach divinity but not to trust unreservedly. Where the *Cloud* author would insist that nearly “every word fails” in talking about God, she chooses to try every word. The episode in which the fiend tries to choke Julian registers this faith in language because if successful, her adversary would silence her (Banchich 336), and this assault presages speech’s importance in his second appearance, when she uses her voice to pray over his “jangeling.”¹¹ For Julian, more always remains to say about God and his book of creation, and her quest remains unfinished, her book “not yet performed” (379) partly because she refuses to “cull back the variety of talk about God.”

Turner explains that “all language fails of God” because “God is not an object,” an idea that creates the conditions for an ongoing mystical journey, endless desire without an object. If God is not an object, and “all talk is about objects,” then God is

uninterpretable. Because fallen human language (what Turner here calls “all talk”) is fallible, sacrality must lie well beyond it. Words do not stick to the deity. To be uninterpretable is to remain permanently mysterious, a position of vast power. We might compare the unanalyzable god Turner describes to figures in Chaucer and Langland that become objects of interpretation. *Piers Plowman* involves constant argument about Dowel and Piers, but the plowman’s wisdom ultimately lies beyond words and beyond the poem, away from scrutiny. Like Piers and Dowel, Dido and Blanche attract endless comment, but neither has anything like authority. If God is not an object, they are emphatically objects of interpretation, and not on the move like Piers at the end of his poem but situated in piles of lists and frames. These examples suggest that sacrality is immune to interpretation and that the interpreter’s position is also powerful. Authority figures escape commentary or do the commenting. Julian’s writing registers the power of gendered interpretive positions especially in the move from her early to later work. Staley observes that in the Long Text Julian “removed all references to her own gender. She thereby substantially altered her self-presentation in the Long Text. Rather than the female visionary who serves as a medium for revelation and who is then transcribed or given form by another, she represents herself as both text and exegete” (*Powers of the Holy* 173). The object of Julian’s interpretation, then, is not so much her god (who, as Turner explains, is uninterpretable) as her own vision, a “meane” that she trusts contains hints of a divine plan. On the one hand she allows herself to become a text to be read, another “evencristen” through whom divinity speaks, but on the other hand she also reads that text herself, taking for herself the interpreter’s considerable power. Julian refuses to

mistrust language entirely perhaps because she recognizes how much power interpretation offers, a power she at once declines and asserts.

In another strategy that both eschews and claims authority, Julian further distinguishes herself from the *Cloud* author and underscores her own incomplete quest by declining to present herself as a teacher.¹² In the *Vision Shown to a Devout Woman*, she disclaims a teacher's authority in the same moment that she emphasizes that she is a woman: "Botte God forbade that ye shulde say or take it so that I am a techere. For I meene nought so, no I mente nevere so. For I am a woman, lewed, febille, and freylle. Botte I wate wele, this that I saye I hafe it of the shewinge of him that es soverayne techare" (75).¹³ Here Julian eliminates what she might call any "meane" between her and the "soverayne techare." She turns her "frailty" to advantage, dismantling the teacher/student hierarchy by insisting that God communicates through her to all believers: "And thus wille I love, and thus I love, and thus I am safe. For I mene in the person of mine evencristene" (75).¹⁴ Disclaiming authority on these grounds allows her to appeal to her "evencristene" rather than to a spiritual elite: "In alle this I was mekille sterede in cherite to mine evenchristen, that they might alle see and know the same that I sawe, for I wolde that it were comfort to them" (151). The *Cloud* author begins his text much differently, warning "janglers" and other language abusers away: "Fleschely janglers, opyn preisers and blamers of himself or of any other, tithing tellers, rouners and tutilers of tales, and alle maner of pinchers, kept I never that their sawe this book" (22). From the outset, this mystical treatise hopes to exclude "jangeling," and so addresses itself to a narrow audience. Because interpretation is central to Julian's quest, she does not try to shed language or claim authority as readily as the *Cloud* author. She does not

imagine herself as an instructor farther along her journey than her pupils (“This revelation was shewed to a simple creature unlettered” [125]), and remains as much in the middle of an interpretive project as her readers.¹⁵

Langland, for whom a cloud of forgetting seems impossible, imagines the “meane” as layers of commentary, the varying definitions of Dowel that he encounters, definitions that offer only partial access to the knowledge Will wants. Like Julian’s *Revelation*, *Piers Plowman* represents its quest as a series of interpretations in which the quester encounters commentary but not an ultimately authoritative text. Julian’s relentless concentration on the scene of the cross, however, distinguishes her from Langland, whose encyclopedic vision includes a profusion of scenes that try Will’s interpretive powers and our own. As Julian overcomes the fiend during his second appearance, she focuses again on the crucified Christ: “My bodily eye I set in the same crosse there I had seen in comforde afore that time, my tong with speech of Cristes passion and rehersing the faith of holy church, and my harte to fasten on God with alle the truste and the mighte that was in me” (341). She tries to exclude the cacophonic threat by beholding the cross and by “rehersing” her faith. In some sense this passage is a microcosm of the *Revelation*, in which Julian again and again returns to her vision of the crucifixion. She may foreground her interpretive process and its “noisiness,” but unlike Langland, she tries to keep out the everyday world’s clamor, even if she does not go to the *Cloud* author’s lengths. Langland fills his poetry with this very clamor. The crowd of folk in the field, the argumentative personifications, the alehouse, and the hayfield have no place in Julian’s revelations.

Despite their different attitudes toward the world’s noise, both the *Revelation* and *Piers Plowman* are commentaries on the idea that God is love. In her last revelation,

Julian's text achieves a crescendo effect as she again learns God's meaning: "What, woldest thou wit thy lordes mening in this thing? Wit it wele, love was his mening. Who shewed it the? Love. What shewid he the? Love. Wherfore shewe he it the? Love" (379). In some sense, her whole text tries to understand this idea, and her book becomes a commentary on 1 John 4:8: "God is Love" (Nuth 39). This commentary effect helps account for the *Revelation*'s repetition. Even if Julian cannot achieve perfect knowledge of God, she seems to move toward greater understanding, yet she often returns to the original vision, a certain set of ideas, and even similar phrases (25). Versions of the crucifixion vision recur in her text, as do variations of her famous assertion "all shall be well." Like Langland, she circles about an idea she can never fully comprehend, a strategy of return and progress that both writers share with theology itself. For the Pseudo-Dionysius, an early mystic, "theology moves in three ways: on a straight line, in a circle, and in a combination of both—that is, in a spiral" (qtd. in Turner 4). Julian pursues God's "mening," knowledge above the spiral, at its center, and beyond the human intellect's imperfections.

Julian's reinterpretations of her initial revelation may acknowledge the noisiness of hermeneutics, but in another way her concentration on the scene of the cross has also been trying to keep out that noise all along.¹⁶ She not only soon quiets the muttering demon but also remains focused on her revelation of the suffering Christ and her reinterpretations of the scene throughout her *Revelation*. In contrast, Chaucer's main object in the *Parliament*, the "certeyn thing" for which he searches, never emerges, and he wanders wide-eyed from marvel to marvel—the heavens that Cicero describes, Venus' temple, Nature's park—and allows his text to revel in the fallen world's multiplicity. For

Chaucer, little seems to exist outside this chaos: only the mysterious “certeyn thing,” which receives little attention, promises an end to the debate. Julian’s text reverses this structure: most of her text centers on the promise of certain knowledge, and only briefly does she foreground the incoherent assembly. Unlike Margery Kempe, who witnesses various moments of Christ’s life, Julian continues to extract ideas from variations of the same revelation.¹⁷ And Julian further narrows her focus by avoiding mention of the world outside her mystical experience, as Watson and Jenkins remark: “Constantly pushing away all specific reference to the world and its facts to focus on the single burning fact of revelation, the signature phrase of both works, used to introduce the most abstruse material, is ‘I saw’” (7). Julian may foreground her own interpretive process and thereby admit a certain “noisiness” into her work, but like other mystics and unlike Langland and Chaucer, she tries to keep out the everyday world’s clamor, even if she does not go to the lengths of the *Cloud* author, who recommends avoiding all sound save a single syllable.

Much as Julian returns to her initial vision and its variations, she repeatedly interprets their meaning as expressions of God’s love. Although in some ways her book seems open-ended, she seems to want her reader to do the same. Anna Lewis argues that thereby Julian restricts her reader’s quest: “Julian does not consider the text to be fixed or perfected but considers it an on-going work. However, as the imagination of the reader of the affective text is always bounded by the truth of the biblical narrative, so interpretations of *A Revelation* are kept within safe boundaries. These boundaries are laid down by no less than the divine author himself when he reveals to Julian the meaning of the entire text” (10). That meaning, of course, is love. After rehearsing the “love was his mening” passage, Lewis goes on to argue that such an assertion limits the range of reader

responses to a text that otherwise invites readerly participation: “Effectively a hermeneutic principle, the instruction is much like Augustine’s caritas-cupiditas framework for interpreting the Bible” (11). Julian’s reader, then, faces a version of Chaucer’s problem in the *Legend of Good Women* (however widely the two texts otherwise differ), in which the poet must endlessly produce what the god of love wants him to find. In both cases the quest is endless, but the questers keep generating similar answers. For Julian as much as for Dante, “other realms of discourse” always wait just beyond her experience because history remains open until the Last Judgment (Mazzotta, *Dante’s Vision* 30), but Julian does not explore those other realms quite as Dante or Langland do, nor as Chaucer does when not performing penance for Cupid. Instead, she focuses on her revelation, a capacious “realm of discourse”—for it includes the whole world, which is an expression of divine love—but a realm of discourse that continues to teach that love is God’s meaning.

Both Julian and Langland also leave their texts in some sense unfinished despite lifelong efforts. In the fallen world, commentary continues indefinitely, striving to see the text face to face. *Piers Plowman* starts with Will’s desire to know how to save his soul, and something comparable motivates Julian’s *Revelation*, for like Langland’s poem, her book emerges from the tension between divine justice and mercy. Both writers, moreover, affirm that love is the answer (Watson 100). *Piers Plowman*, Clergie says, has “set alle sciences at a sop save love one” (XIII. 125). But the revelation that love is God’s meaning only allows Julian and her readers to begin their journeys again,¹⁸ for in that same revelation, she remarks that her book “is not yet performed.” In affirming that love is God’s meaning, she returns to an early moment when she learns to find love at

creation's source. When Julian sees "a little thing the quantity of an haselnot" in her hand and asks "What may this be?" God replies, "It is all that is made...It lasteth and ever shall, for God loveth it. And so hath all thing being by the love of God" (139). Julian seems to have known all along, then, that love is God's meaning, yet she must keep working to understand the lesson. God's meaning always remains partially revealed, so her search must continue indefinitely, again much what she asserts at the start of the *Vision*: "And this vision was a lernyng to my understanding that the conynually sekyng of the soule plesyth God moch" (19). Langland and Julian both end their books by beginning again.

3.

Although Julian confines the fiend to a few sentences, his noise seems to resonate across her writing, for her encounter with dissonance is limited neither to that short passage nor to her fascination with the problem of "meanes." Much of her text is an effort to show that the cosmos itself does not "jangle" but operates according to a sacred harmony. Theological difficulties impede her quest, and she tries to quiet them as well. Perhaps most immediately, she wonders how eternal pain can coexist with divine love: "A, good lorde, how might alle be wele for the gret harme that is come by sinne to thy creatures?" (213). Her revelation that all shall be well conflicts with the church's teaching that divine justice damns sinners, but she professes that she believes in the institution's doctrines despite her confusion over them: "But in all thing I beleve as holy church precheth and techeth" (157). Later she more explicitly accedes to the church's teaching on Hell: "For I beleved sothfastly that hel and purgatory is for the same ende that holy church techeth for" (225). The formulation "all shall be well" tries to harmonize mercy

and justice. Without this harmony, she cannot make sense of the world. Her parable of the master and servant, which also wonders why sin and suffering exist, poses a related interpretive problem, for she must understand why the servant falls, and her meditation on this short scene becomes the most extended section in her *Revelation*. Like many of her exegetical remarks, this passage does not appear in her text's earlier, and in many ways less complex, version. As Julian ponders her revelation she seems to hear the world's noise heightening.

Julian looks forward, though, to fuller knowledge, and sometimes she seems to explain divine meaning confidently: "Then he, without voys and opening of lippes, formed in my soule these wordes: 'Herewith is the feende overcome.' This worde said our lorde mening his blessed passion" (169). Julian learns the "mening" of Christ's suffering, and his language, which seems hardly "bodely" because he does not open his lips, contrasts with the fiend's "bodely jangeling." God uses special language to communicate his meaning to her directly, yet the word "mening" keeps appearing, which suggests that God's intentions require incessant pursuit and meditation. "The contemplative option is, in fact, a commitment to the ongoing experience of failure," as Roger Ellis and Samuel Fanous remark (152). When she insists that her reading and ours must continue, Julian acknowledges this "failure," even if she would not use that word. After unpacking her parable of the servant and the master, she writes, "I sawe and understoode that every shewing is full of privites" (277). Her showings may allow her to take God's meaning confidently, but she always takes only part of that meaning, for each revelation contains "privites." This partial knowledge incites a desire to know more: "the more that we know, the more shalle we besech, if it be wisely take. And so is our lordes

mening” (249). This insight addresses the possible tension between her often confident explication of heaven’s intentions and her sense that she cannot know them fully, for here she presents her assurance of God’s plan alongside her conviction that she can never know enough of that plan: the “lordes mening” is that desire will increase with knowledge.

Julian’s whole text attests to this principle that desire and knowledge may always increase, for she leaves the completion of her book to its readers:¹⁹

This boke is begonne by Goddes gifte and his grace, but it is not yet performed, as to my sight. For charite pray we alle togeder, with Goddes working: thanking, trusting, enjoying. For thus wille oure good lorde be prayed, by the understanding that I toke in alle his owne mening, and in the swete wordes where he seth fulle merely: “I am the ground of thy beseeching.” For truly I saw and understood in oure lordes mening that he shewde it for he will have it knownen more than it is. (379)

Rather than thinking of her endeavor as “failed,” Julian refers to it as “not yet performed.” She learns that God is the ground of beseeching, both the impetus and the end of desire, and thus the “thanking, trusting, and enjoying” do not cease, as the progressive forms of these verbs suggest. And importantly, these continuous activities are not for Julian alone but for all her “evencristene.” Robert E. Wright observes that Julian cannot finish her book because her readers must: “The performance of the book has less to do with the discursive function of language than with its comprehensive, fundamentally affective experience, the realization of the text in its readers” (28). Almost above all, Julian seems interested in nourishing readerly desire. Love may be God’s

meaning, but the text does not end with this discovery because it requires the reader's response, the "thankng, trusting, enjoying" that he or she must endlessly enact.

Because Julian looks forward to knowledge of the universe's workings, the Apocalypse (literally, "unveiling") underpins an important part of her thought. She glimpses God's plan for doomsday, when he will perform a marvelous "deed" and make everything well:

There is a deed the which the blissful trinite shalle do in the last day, as
to my sight. And what the deed shall be and how it shall be done, it is
unkowne of alle creatures which are beneth Crist, and shall be tille whan
it shalle be done...This is the gret deed ordained of oure lorde God fro
without beginning, treasured and hid in his blessed brest, only knownen to
himselfe, by which deed he shalle make all thing wele. (223)

Intent on shunning the noisy present, here Julian turns us toward the future. A secret hidden in God "shalle make all thing wele," which is to say that something will someday make sense of the world and its suffering. Because this passage prophesies a revelation, it implicitly imagines time as a narrative, a narrative that Julian and her "evencristene" are still learning to read and can never finish reading. For Julian, this narrative will remain incomplete until the cosmic story's end (Watt 74), when the "gret deed" will give final shape to creation's story and silence the fiend's muttering, the fallen world's jangling. Julian's quest remains unfinished and its object, the divine author's "mening," not fully articulable until this narrative's conclusion.

Julian's approach to reading the book of the world exemplifies parts of Frank Kermode's discussion of fiction and the apocalypse in *The Sense of an Ending*, where he

shows how ends make sense of beginnings. Kermode uses a clock's ticking to explain fiction's power to organize time: "The fact that we call the second of the two related sounds *tock* is evidence that we use fictions to enable the end to confer organization and form on the temporal structure" (*Sense* 45). Endings confer significance on the interval: without an ending, an interminable series of "ticks," or "happe" and "aventure" in Julian's idiom, would follow upon each other shapelessly. We might say that the fiend's babble represents the threat of "tick, tick, tick," mere noise without a "tock" to make time meaningful. Organizing time keeps confusion at bay, and to oppose the fiend's "jangeling," Julian relies on coherent time, a story with a beginning and an end, as much as on coherent speech. Kermode goes on to acknowledge that stories require more complication than a "tick," or beginning, and a "tock," an ending: "*Tick* is a humble genesis, *tock* a feeble apocalypse; and *tick-tock* is in any case not much of a plot. We need much larger ones and much more complicated ones if we persist in finding 'what will suffice'" (45, original emphasis). What "suffices" for Julian? In some sense, for her the large and complex Christian story occupies the middle place between "tick" and "tock," a story that God will complete with his "gret deed," the cosmic "tock." Naming the man of great authority who seems about to appear at the end of the *House of Fame* (an authority who of course may not be divine) would also offer a "tock," an ending to make sense of the noise. But from the beginning that poem seems persuaded that the world resists an ultimate explanation, and the fact that we do not learn the approaching figure's name seems much the point. Julian, however, knows an approaching authority figure who will perform a "gret deed" and sort the noise from the truth.

Julian's "expectation of knowledge that is to come" leads her to argue that that while sin may seem inexplicable, like only so much muttering, it is ultimately "behovely." She wonders why "the beginning of sinne was not letted," and Christ replies that "Sinne is behovely, but alle shalle be wele, and alle maner of thinge shalle be wel" (209). Watson and Jenkins gloss "behovely" as "necessary or fitting, also good or opportune" (208). The "behovely," then, fits into a larger design. In his study of Julian's theology, Turner explains this term by likening it to part of a story. The "behovely," he writes,

possesses not a law-like intelligibility of the kind that one provides when explaining something against the background of the causal mechanisms and sequences that generate it; the "just so" of the behovely is not that of the scientific prediction that is borne out by events. What generates the expectation that the *conveniens* meets and fulfills is a particular story, the exigencies of a plot that just happens to have turned out in this way or that thus far and, so far as it has got, makes sense of what happens next. (43-44)

For Turner, the behovely (or "*conveniens*," a theological term that Julian's vocabulary may invoke) is neither determined nor contingent but rather something that satisfies a narrative logic. Sin and all the world's "happe" and "aventure" need not exist, nor are they random and inexplicable: they are part of a story. Julian's understanding of the behovely is part of her faith in a divine a narrative, a narrative that she will understand when she arrives at its end. Meanwhile, she remains in the story's middle, where something more is always about to happen (65-66). This view sees life as a kind of

romance quest, which also tends to delay any clarifying resolution and meanwhile allows its characters to wander in a confusing landscape full of trials. For Julian, narrative is both inescapable and fragmented (an idea the *House of Fame* affirms) until the last day and the divine “gret deed.”

The behovely fits into a scheme but not a readily apparent scheme, just the sort of situation to require an exegete. Kermode ends his study *The Genesis of Secrecy* with comments on interpretation that help us think further about Julian’s faith in the behovely and her confrontation with the muttering fiend:

For the world is our beloved codex. We may not see it, as Dante did, in perfect order, gathered by love into one volume; but we do, living as reading, like to think of it as a place where we can travel back and forth at will, divining congruences, conjunctions, opposites; extracting secrets from its secrecy, making understood relations, an appropriate algebra. This is the way we satisfy ourselves with explanations of the unfollowable world—as if it were a structured narrative, of which more might always be said by trained readers of it, by insiders. World and book, it may be, are hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing; we stand alone before them, aware of their arbitrariness and impenetrability, knowing that they may be narratives only because of our impudent intervention, and susceptible of interpretation only by our hermetic tricks. (145)

The “behovely” makes the world “followable,” to use Kermode’s language. For both Dante and Julian, the world is a “beloved codex...gathered by love.” Julian does not present herself as someone with privileged knowledge and would not claim to be an

“insider,” but Kermode uses the word “insider” to refer to a literary critic, and Julian’s task in the *Revelation* largely involves explaining her vision, unpacking the experience she recorded decades earlier in *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*. She is, in other words, an exegete, and indeed for Julian “more might always be said” about her revelation, which always contains further “privites” or secrets, much as “trained readers” can always say more about “world and book.” For Julian, this book is indeed a “structured narrative,” a story that contains a secret, a great deed “unknowne of alle creatures which are beneth Crist” that will make everything well. For the critic that Kermode describes and for Julian, “living” and “reading” are inseparable: to live in the world necessitates trying to make sense of it.

But even if Julian acknowledges that she cannot finish interpreting her revelations, she does not maintain that “world and book” are “hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing.” The fiend represents that position. Where the “behovely” “fits” into a narrative and “makes sense of what happens next,” the muttering demon is an anti-narrative impulse, mere nonsense. “Sin,” as Turner writes, “has no coherent narrative” (65). For Julian, God authors a “coherent narrative,” even if the fallen world is not prepared to follow it; sin, aligned with chaos, cannot tell an intelligible story. For Julian, sin is part of a story but cannot offer one itself. The fiend embodies the threat of “arbitrariness and impenetrability,” words that could sum up what Julian’s text resists most, and she tries to contain his chaotic energy by fitting him into a narrative, an interpretable framework. Julian’s text imagines a world that contains secrets “treasured and hid,” knowledge that demands seeking, but the fiend would destroy that sacred world by turning imperfect knowledge into nonsense. Her *Revelation*, then, contains both

impulses that Kermode identifies in his comments on interpretation: Dante's confidence that love binds the book of the world together in "perfect order" and the critic's insight that that book may be a narrative "only because of our impudent intervention." Julian's text registers the power of this second insight, even if it must reject that position in favor of the first.

4.

If the fiend "jangles" and God's "mening" will elude Julian until the "gret deed," what is the difference between her difficulties understanding God and understanding the fiend? From a human, fallen perspective, God's plan jangles too, for no one can perceive its structure.²⁰ How does Julian distinguish between her confusion over divine and diabolical communication? The end of Dante's journey offers a way to understand Julian's interest in oppositions and her inquiry into God's "mening." As the poet moves through Paradise, he encounters more perfect language, and when he meets Cacciaguida, Dante marvels that he cannot understand his ancestor (XV. 38-42), an episode that echoes Hell's incomprehensible speech. In other ways, too, Paradise continues to regenerate the deteriorated language that the pilgrim has encountered. As Dante navigates the spheres, he hears heavenly choruses rather than demonic cacophony.²¹ The poem's acrostics also register heaven's richly significant language, and the heavenly silence that Dante finds mirrors the infernal quiet (Turner 114). For Dante, this symmetry makes the book of the world more readable, more "followable." He can follow the world if Hell inversely mirrors Heaven, for this cosmic arrangement allows him to "divine congruences, conjunctions, opposites," in Kermode's vocabulary. Dante sees the world as a pattern, a story, that reflects divine authorship and its plan for creation. He expounds an intricate

organization that is anything but “hopelessly plural,” a phrase that aptly describes what Chaucer comes upon in the *House of Fame* but hardly what his precursor finds in his cosmic pilgrimage.

Julian’s book also ends with a trajectory toward a heavenly chorus, one way that she tries to overcome the world’s “jangeling.” In her final revelation, she imagines the Last Judgment, where the saved celebrate God with one voice: “And then shalle none of us be stered to sey in ony thing: ‘Lorde, if it had ben thus, it had ben wele.’ But we shalle alle sey with one voice: ‘Lorde, blessed mot thou be, for it is thus, it is wele. And now we see verily that alle thing is done as it was thin ordinance, or ony thing was made’” (379). A celestial choir has drowned out the demonic parliament. The day of doom promises clarity, as we have seen, and this “one voice” is both intelligible and united. “All” participate in this song, and “all” is an important word for Julian: it structures each form of her recurring assertion that “all shall be well and all manner of all thing shall be well.” Anything less than “alle” would let in dissonance. Because all can now “see verily that alle thing is done as it was thin ordinance,” here interpretation is no longer necessary, unlike in the fallen world, where the jangling fiend threatens to make interpreting that “ordinance” impossible to begin with. At the end of Julian’s journey, her commentaries have dissolved into a chorus.

Also like Dante, Julian explores the cosmic harmony by structuring her text around a series of oppositions. “Almost any passage in the *Showings*,” Lynn Staley observes, “yields rich evidence of Julian’s refusal to oppose systems to one another. If she at times distinguishes between modes of knowing, she does not admit any fundamental division” (Aers and Staley 177).²² For Julian, bodily and the spiritual, for

example, do not contain “any fundamental division.”²³ Her wordplay gets at this idea: “A man goeth upperright, and the soule of his body is spared as a purse fulle fair. And whan it is time of his nescessery, it is openede and spared ayen fulle honestly” (143). The passage seems to describe both the soul’s relationship to the body and food becoming waste in the digestive system. Liz Herbert McAvoy unpacks Julian’s pun on “soule,” a word that means both soul and, as Watson and Jenkins note, “food or meal” (142): “Julian’s daring and adept pun on the word ‘soule’ here draws an analogy—synonymy even—between the faecal waste produced by the human body and the transcendent soul and both, therefore, become an expression of an *imago Dei*” (177-78). The human and divine realms, for Julian, intermingle more than they conflict.

The diabolical world also reflects God’s image, however inversely, for in the *Revelation* the fiend’s attributes—his jangeling and his appearance—have holy counterparts. Julian’s visions of Christ and the devil elicit comparison, for she dwells on their physical characteristics and imagines them both as young men (Dale 133). The fiend is “a yonge man, and it was longe and wonder leen,” a figure with “side lockes hanging on the thonwonges,” “whit teth” and “pawes” (333). Earlier she had described Christ’s “swete handes” (181) and “skinne and the fleshe that semed of the face and of the body was smalle rumpelde, with a tawny colour, like a drye bord whan it is aged, and the face more browne than the body” (181, 183). Julian emphasizes Christ’s “rumpelde” body as much as she emphasizes the devil’s smelly, hairy body. The “red bloud” on Christ even seems to recall the fiend’s “red” color (135, 333). Because the *Revelation* describes only these two figures, their parallels seem all the more suggestive. We can also see this logic at work when Julian uses similar words to describe herself and the fiend: both his noise

and her rebuttal are “bodely” (as opposed to “ghostly”), and where she is “besy” the demonic parliament is full of “besines.” But Julian also implies a difference between her “bodely speech” and the fiend’s “bodely jangeling,” for she cannot liken his noise to any other “bodely bisnes.” Watson and Jenkins comment that this line “evokes the inverted ineffability of the scene, as far below words and metaphors as the divine is above them” (340). For Julian, as for Dante, human speech occupies a middle realm between diabolic and divine language. Finally, Julian allows the fiend’s jangling to play against her laughter: “Also I saw oure lorde scorne his malis and nought his unmight, and he will that we do so. For this sight, I laughd mightily” (171). Her laugh presages the fiend’s noise during his second attack, but here “noise”—the mystic’s laugh—signals triumph rather than despair.²⁴

Perhaps now we can see more fully why for Julian evil jangles. In the muttering fiend, she encounters heavenly language’s unholy double. Julian’s apophaticism mirrors the fiend’s jangling much as the fiend’s description recalls Christ’s, or the pun on “soule” connects the bodily and the transcendent. Contradictions and ambiguities, far from undermining Julian’s project, allow her to evoke God’s incomprehensibility.²⁵ They are part of her conviction, even part of her evidence, that dissonance will one day become harmony. For Julian, the very fact, in other words, that the descriptions of the devil and Christ both confront us with their physicality or that “soule” can mean something both corporeal and divine implies cosmic design. Her text’s anxiety emerges from the possibility that the noisy fiend will make this design unfollowable, and in an effort to overcome him, she must repeatedly divine “congruences, conjunctions, opposites,” and those opposites especially suggest an underlying “structured narrative.” They affirm that

the world is “followable.” The interpretive “noise” that Julian encounters—language’s slipperiness, the unavoidability of “meanes,” inconsistency between Church teaching and her personal revelation—does not, then, ultimately coincide with the fiend’s “muttering,” which suggests that the world is arbitrary and impenetrable. Where Julian puns, the fiend can only jangle.

Notes

¹ Many commentators document this pattern. See, for instance, Schnapp, “Virgin Words” 278-79.

² Fyler explains that Nimrod’s “most extreme punishment, in *Inferno* 31, is compete isolation: he blows his horn, speaks a completely unintelligible language, and cannot understand anyone else’s speech” (“Language Barriers” 419).

³ Dante discusses these ideas in Book I, iii.1-2.

⁴ See, for example, Rudd, “I Wolde for Thy Loue Dye”; and Dale, “Sin is Behovely”; Tinsley, however, argues that the “second assault is more serious. The stench of his presence assails her, fueled, if one gives credence to Gregory’s exegesis, by thoughts of lust. She also hears voices which she cannot understand, but they seem to her ‘as they scornyd byddynge of bedys which are seyde boystosly with moch faylyng’ (69.648) [“as if they were mocking the recitation of prayers which are said imperfectly” (Colledge and Walsh 648.n.8)], thereby invalidating one of the sinner’s strongest weapons against possession” (“Julian’s Diabology” 224). I hope to argue that the fiend’s noise also invalidates another of Julian’s “weapons,” her ability to read the world and interpret God’s “mening.”

⁵ Zina Petersen argues that “The remarkable distinguishing feature in the writings of Julian of Norwich is the tone of deep serenity that emerges even when she is describing the most overwhelming of her visions. She is gentler than most if not all of her past or contemporary Christian thinkers when discussing such topics as the human body, preferring to praise God for the body’s functions rather than condemn the flesh as part of the mortal world to be subdued and cast off” (“Every Manner of Thing Shall Be Well” 91). Nicholas Watson differentiates Julian from Chaucer and Langland by noting her “assurance” and “optimism” (“Trinitarian Hermeneutic” 63). Somewhat similarly, Caroline Walker Bynum comments on “Julian of Norwich’s need for a God of comfort and mercy beyond justice, a mother God who promises that ‘all shall be very, very well’” (*Jesus as Mother* 195).

⁶ In both the short and long versions of her text, this word contributes to Julian’s emphasis on her participation in a community of readers and believers. See, for instance, *Writings* 75, 151.

⁷ “Meanes” may have interested Julian because in several ways she herself occupied a kind of middle space: “Technically, then (that is, by canon law), she is a common lay

parishioner, attached to a parish church. But yet, in practical, pastoral reality, she is positioned at the margins of the ways of life of her fellow Christians, being neither religious nor secular, neither clerical nor yet an ordinary laywoman, professed but not a nun; she is canonically marginal just as the physical positioning of her cell is attached to, but remains outside, the main body of her parish church. Physically, as well as theologically, an anchoress lives, to employ a phrase of Bernard's, *in regione dissimilitudinis*, in a 'land of unlikeness,' a place of 'exile'" (Turner 13).

⁸ Perhaps unsurprisingly given her interest in removing "meanes," Julian prays directly to God and avoids intermediaries, rarely mentioning possible intercessors (Nuth 158). Julian does rely on Mary's intercession, but as McDonald observes, she invokes the saints sparingly: "Julian lived in an age well aware of the companionship of love and concern provided by the blessed in heaven to the church on earth. The intercession of the saints, the veneration of relics, and pilgrimage to sacred shrines were hallmarks of the late Middle Ages. However, undoubtedly aware of the extremes to which such devotions could go, Julian exhibits a cautious attitude toward them. It was much more important for her to enter into companionship with God in prayer than to pray to many saints" (158). Minnis remarks on *Piers Plowman* CXVII, 156-8, where Langland also warns against a false "mene": "It is perfectly natural for a creature to honour its Creator. But many men do not love Him in the correct way; neither do they live in accordance with trusty belief, for they believe in a 'mene', i.e. a false mediator" (53).

⁹ McDonald observes that "There seems to be an association between 'worldliness' and 'wordliness' that is continued throughout *The Cloud*" (51). The mystic's desire to escape language nevertheless allows him this playfulness, which draws attention to his language all the more, perhaps because puns can point beyond themselves to an underlying structure, as we see in *Piers Plowman*.

¹⁰ Karnes explains that "although acknowledging the limitations of human understanding, Julian displays a fundamental faith in language. She stands apart from those mystics who bemoan its inadequacies, most famously the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*" (346).

¹¹ Julian's and her contemporaries seem to have faith in the efficacy of speech even as they worry about language as an imperfect medium. David K. Coley documents a "shared understanding that the spoken word could perform work, that speech contained the potential to affect, even to effect, its specific cultural environment" in late fourteenth and early fifteenth-century Middle English poetry (9).

¹² Critics often make this contrast. See, for instance, Baker 61; Aers and Staley 173; Robertson 148; and Windeatt 196-97.

¹³ Linda Rose contrasts Julian's nonlinear thinking with male theology: "Because its circular structure emulates the female form, l'écriture féminine has been called "writing the body." It is consistently in opposition to the bulk of the male-dominated Western literary canon, which insists on classical logic and, in a reflection of the male body, on coming to a point. Most religious tracts of Julian's time follow such a linear progression, for example, Walter Hilton's 'Ladder of Perfection' describes learning as a series of discrete, culminating steps. Through repetition and the blending of logic with intuition the feminine style of writing privileges the process by which one reaches a conclusion rather than the conclusion itself. This nonlinear, circular style... is especially appropriate for Julian's subject, for the very nature of a vision implies an understanding through

contemplation or intuition rather than logical deduction” (“The Voice of a Saintly Woman”). The *Cloud* author also seems to rely on a “coming to a point” with prayer that pierces heaven and on a “series of discrete, culminating steps.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Simpson explains that “Julian saw it herself, and she is instructed by God, but that ‘self’ is immediately reformulated to include all her fellow Christians, just as what she learns from God is precisely that her learning is common” (*Reform* 445).

¹⁵ Windeatt makes a related observation: “The state of Julian’s inner life is not always something different from her writing, unlike Hilton or the *Cloud author*, who write from an achieved viewpoint on their material in order to instruct a known individual” (197).

¹⁶ Interestingly, though, Julian did not seek this revelation to begin with: “Presented at what she believes to be the point of death with an image of the suffering Christ, she seeks to obtain the spiritual wound of compassion through the identification of her own tortured body with Christ’s. Still, though she desires that her body ‘might be fulfilled with mynd and feeling of his blessed passion,’ she goes on to note, ‘in this I desyred never no bodily sight ne no maner shewing of god.’ (3.48-49). But Julian finds what she had not sought. The crucifix in front of her begins to bleed from beneath the crown of thorns” (Bauerschmidt 194). This unsought vision aligns Julian with writers such as Langland after all, for both in both her *Revelation* and *Piers Plowman* more knowledge always waits just beyond the seeker.

¹⁷ Julian’s close attention to the cross, though, is not unique. Her theology participates in the fourteenth-century emphasis on Christ’s suffering body. See Newman, *Sister of Wisdom* 258-59.

¹⁸ Windeatt notes this connection: “*Piers Plowman*, like *Pearl*, is often described as being circular in structure, which usefully conveys how the poems (after exploring the issues they raise) return essentially to their starting point, leaving the reader better equipped to begin again” (205).

¹⁹ Simpson describes Julian’s “anagogical” reading: “Dante, in one of his most intense poetic claims, affirms that he writes not only for present readers, but also for “coloro / Che questo tempo chiameranno antico” those who will call this time antique). Reading of this kind necessarily leaves contemporary readers with a sense of *not* having fully grasped a text. In Middle English writing, the most profound and explicit statement of such anagogical reading is made by Julian of Norwich...her text has hardly started its hermeneutic and ethical unfolding—its performance—in time” (“Not Yet” 40-41, original emphasis).

²⁰ Mystics had to guard against false revelations, for visions could as easily come from the devil as from God. “Truth and error co-exist at every stage of the spiritual process,” Ellis and Fanous explain, and “What contemplatives think they understand may, on closer scrutiny, turn out to be an illusion” (151). As Riehle observes, however, Julian does not worry about this possibility (212). But perhaps this traditional concern manifests itself as the fiend’s jangling. Julian, in other words, does not worry that her vision is false but that the world defies explanation.

²¹ In his commentary on *Paradiso*, Hollander documents “a profusion of hymns in this heaven...six musical outbursts in all” (672).

²² Newman finds a similar logic at work in Hildegard of Bingen’s writings: “Like any living metaphors, Hildegard’s tropes are patient of inversion. This is particularly true of

Ecclesia's femininity, which makes her not only virginal and fertile but also highly vulnerable to corruption" (*Sister of Wisdom* 238). The idea also structures parts of *Piers Plowman*. Meed, for instance, can become both just reward and bribe. Turner explains that this doubleness is a symptom of the fallen world: "As fallen beings, we are conflicted. As conflicted beings, necessarily we construe the world, ourselves, God, and the relationships between all in conflicted, fractured, and dualistic terms" (194).

²³ Riehle argues that Julian's understanding of the bodily is nothing less than "novel." Julian "draws a novel conclusion from divine incarnation: since God descended not only into human substance, but also into human sensuality, and even dwelt in it, sensuality, most remarkably, can no longer be considered the chief cause of sin" (220).

²⁴ Brad Peters contrasts Julian's laugh with the demon's threat (188). In Margery Kempe's text, "noise" also functions positively. Petersen explains that Kempe's weeping bolsters her claims to authority ("Authoritative Noise").

²⁵ Cynthea Masson argues that Julian uses oppositions to evoke this ineffability: "The rhetoric of opposites remains, from beginning to end, a crucial structuring device in the *Showings*. Julian cannot fully represent God; she can, however, rhetorically reconstruct the coincidence of opposites—a concept rooted in Christ, the embodiment of coincidence between the human and the divine" (174).

Chapter 5

The Questing Beast and the Noise of Adventure

1.

The Questing Beast, Thomas Malory writes, “was a full wondirfill beste and a grete sygnyfycasion; for Merlyon prophesyed muche of that byeste” (II: 717). After an early appearance in Malory’s text, the creature runs through the forests of the *Book of Sir Tristram* and tends to appear briefly amid other stories. Pellynor and then Palomides pursue the monster, a hybrid lion, leopard, hart, and serpent.¹ Typically it stops to drink at a well, where its barking (or “questing”) momentarily quiets, and after a knight appears in pursuit, the pair rush off. No one catches the noisy Beast, and Malory never explains its “grete sygnyfycasion.” The Questing Beast somewhat resembles another obscurely significant, occasionally invoked object, the “French book” with which Malory authorizes his retellings.² But despite their shared mysteriousness, in another way the two are opposites: the book promises wholeness while the Beast threatens fragmentation. We might liken the French book to the “certeyn thing” that Chaucer researches in the *Parliament of Fowls* and to Will’s quest-objects in *Piers Plowman*. In those works, important knowledge eludes its pursuers, knowledge that seems to offer an alternative to the world’s confusion. These texts all imagine parts, whether discourses on Dowel, different forms of love, or the fragmented Beast in a fragmented narrative, that will not converge into an intelligible whole, an elusive ur-text much like the language that alchemists seek in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*. But where Langland and Chaucer fill their texts with the din of competing authorities and untrustworthy language, Malory, more like Julian, seems anxious to marginalize noise, and the Questing Beast’s

unexplained, sporadic appearances feel like a threat to chivalry that his text cannot quite suppress.

Although the search for the Questing Beast contains some central chivalric romance preoccupations—mysterious landscapes, a monster, aristocratic heroes, questing itself—the monster scarcely appears in Malory’s compilation of Arthurian material. We seem meant to understand that Palomides constantly chases the Beast, but Malory rarely mentions him doing so. Derek Pearsall likens the knight to a butterfly-collector running across a stage:

The repetitive formality of the pattern of meeting, challenge, joust with spear, fight on foot with sword, is as strict as the steps of a dance, whatever reality it may have had being choreographed now into a ballet of violence. Occasional variation is introduced when every so often the mysterious Questing Beast, who makes a noise in his stomach like thirty couple of questing hounds, will race across the foreground with Sir Palomides in hot pursuit like an eccentric lepidopterist in a stage farce rushing across with his butterfly net. Palomides inherits the quest from Pillinor (I.19), and pursues it still many hundreds of pages later (X.13). No reason is given... The Questing Beast is a prime example of what might be called the imperfect assimilation of given story materials to Malory’s intentions, whatever they were, and assuming that at any particular point he had any. (99)

In addition to seeing the Beast as imperfectly assimilated source material and “occasional variation” to the ritual combat, we might also find the creature paradigmatic of Malory’s

project and even of romance itself. In Malory “the pattern of meeting, challenge, joust with spear, fight on foot with sword,” like the pursuit of the Beast, often lacks motivation beyond proving the heroes’ worth, which requires incessant reconfirmation. Romance relies on mysterious destinies and episodic plots, plots that often tends toward interminability, and the hunt for the Beast makes this threat of endlessness explicit. The Questing Beast adventure, then, seems at once peripheral and central to Malory’ *Works*.

This chapter approaches the Questing Beast’s uncertain “sygnyfycasion” through its strange name, which seems related to the creature’s elusiveness. It is as if Palomides’ search would end if the Questing Beast’s name became transparent. In Middle English, “questing” means both barking and searching, so this pun at least obliquely suggests that the monster both pursues and is pursued. Malory writes that the Beast makes “such a noyse as hit had bene twenty couple of houndys questynge” (II: 484). Like a pack of hunting dogs, the creature seems to chase something, but knights also chase the creature. Ambiguous signs help create the danger and delight in romance narratives, as Patricia Parker writes in her influential book on the genre (128). The Questing Beast’s name is one such sign, a sign that simultaneously gestures toward those delights and dangers, hunting and being hunted. And the creature’s incessant, unexplained barking only heightens its association with uncertain signs. Knights, however, both fight the fallen world’s deceitfulness and rely on stable language to spread their renown. My central claim is that the noisy, unexplained creature embodies a tension in chivalry, a tension between a fascination with the mysterious on the one hand and a desire for trustworthy language on the other.

Two of Malory's sources explain the Questing Beast's barking and origins,³ and in both stories the quest ends. The thirteenth-century *Perlesvaus*, also called *The High Book of the Grail*, explicates the creature (there a frightened animal "as white as new-fallen snow, bigger than a hare but smaller than a fox") in the manner of Malory's grail section where hermits or clerics interpret marvels (154). In the *Perlesvaus*, dogs emerge from the Beast's belly and tear her apart. Perceval's uncle explains that the "sweet and gentle beast in which the twelve dogs were barking signifies Our Lord...the twelve dogs are the Jews whom God nourished and who were born into the Law which He had established, but never wished to believe in Him or love Him; instead they crucified Him" (166). Here when an authority arrives to interpret the marvel, the adventure ends. The *Post-Vulgate's Merlin Continuation*, which draws on the prose *Tristan*, also centers on a victim dismembered by dogs but links the Beast to the devil rather than to Christ. In this retelling, King Pellehan relates that a woman desired her brother, who rejected her, so she conspired with the devil to kill him. As the brother goes to his death (she asked her father to throw him to hungry dogs) he announces that she is carrying a demon. She gives birth to the Questing Beast, which barks continually as a reminder of the young man's fate and of the disunity in Logres more generally (*Lancelot-Grail* v.5, 283-85).⁴ Pellinor chases the monster because, he says, "this beast is fated to die at the hand of a man of my line, but he must be the best knight to come from our kindred and the kingdom...because I wanted to know if I was the best of our line, I have followed it so long" (*Lancelot-Grail* v.4, 168). Later Yvain, Bors, Galahad, and Palamedes also take up the hunt. Eventually Palamedes kills the Beast when it stops to drink from a lake (*Lancelot-Grail* v.5, 278). Both the *Perlesvaus* and the *Merlin Continuation* accounts of the Questing Beast involve

Christianity's assimilation or dominance over a religious other: in the former, the animal becomes an allegory for the New Testament's superiority to the "Old" Testament, and in the latter, the Saracen Palomides gets baptized after a fight with Galahad (271), and together they pursue the Grail and Beast (274, 277). Although his story aligns more with the *Merlin Continuation* than the *Perlesvaus*, Malory suppresses most of this material, and those elisions turn his version into a story about a unfinished quest for an imprecisely defined object.⁵

The Questing Beast's unexplained "sygnyfycasion" derives partly from chivalry's investment in ambiguity. In Malory's text, the Beast first appears early when Arthur sees it after his liaison with Morgawse, who gives birth to Mordred. Here the creature's significance does seem somewhat clear: the strange combination of animals reflects the kingdom's disorder and presages its doom, much as in the vulgate material. After the early episode with Arthur, the Beast next appears in the *Book of Sir Tristram*, where Palomides has apparently taken over the quest from Pellynor. This chapter focuses on the Questing Beast's role in this book, a large collection of mysterious encounters and interlacing quests unlike the preceding *Tale of Sir Gareth* or the *Tale of the Sankgreal* that follows. The *Tristram* book's first few pages announce its themes when Queen Elyzabeth sets out into the forest to seek her husband, King Melyodas, after he becomes enchanted during a hunt (II: 371-72). This story's opening movements suggest that the forest is place of magic, danger, and thwarted quests, an appropriate haunt for the Questing Beast.⁶ The Questing Beast epitomizes the allure of the romance forest, a place of uncertainty at once attractive and threatening to adventurers. The creature gathers

together not only romance's delights—the possibility of endless adventure—but also its dangers—the possibility of endless wandering in a confusing landscape.⁷

Malory provides a kind of circular explanation for Palomides' adventure, and this explanation can help us think about why chivalry requires mysterious language:

And thys meanewhyle com sir Palomydes, the good knyght, folowynge the
questyng beste that had in shap lyke a serpentis hede and a body lyke a
lybard, buttokked lyke a lyon and footed lyke an harte. And in hys body
there was such a noyse as hit had bene twenty couple of houndys
questynge, and such a noyse that beste made wheresomever he wente. And
thys beste evermore sir Palomydes folowed, for hit was called hys queste.

(II: 484)

We might wonder not only why Palomides follows the Beast, but also why the pair enter the narrative at this moment, or why these animals combine to form the monster. Instead, Malory explains only that the knight pursues the creature “for hit was called hys queste.” But “for” both offers and avoids clarification. The word suggests that an explanation will follow, but instead a kind of self-justifying circularity emerges: Palomides quests after the Beast because it is called his quest. This circularity seems echoed in the Beast’s very name, which suggests the creature quests and is quested after. Malory also relies on the conjunction “for” to explain the Beast’s importance: the creature is “a grete sygnyfycacion; for Merlyon prophesyed muche of that byeste.” Again, “for” introduces an announcement as much as an explanation. Merlin’s prophecy seems to confer significance simply because that is what Merlin’s prophecies do.

In some sense, every knight in Malory's book agrees to a challenge merely because "it was called hys queste," whether given to him by Arthur or by some mysterious destiny. This language appears again when Tristram stops to drink at a well and "sawe the questyngeste commynge towarde the welle. So whan sir Trystram saw that beste he put on his helme, for he demed he sholde hyre of sir Palomydes; for that beste was hys queste" (II: 683). Soon, of course, Palomides arrives. Malory had used the "for it was his quest" formulation to describe an earlier adventure as well. When a white hart and white brachet interrupt one of Arthur's feasts and a lady on a white horse enters only to be snatched away by an unknown knight, the king assigns some of the company to find the intruders. Pellynor, Arthur says, will "brynge agayne the lady and the knyght, other ellis sle him" (I:103). Soon Pellynor sees the distressed woman: "anone he rode unto the pavilons and saw the lady how she was there, for she was hys queste" (I:115). Because Arthur commands Pellynor to find the woman and the knight, this quest's origin is not as obscure as Palomides' adventure, but the formulation "for she was hys queste" highlights the adventure's arbitrariness here, too.

Enigmatic quests serve a number of purposes in chivalric romance. Perhaps most obviously, knights desire knowledge about themselves, and marvels give them opportunities to learn their worth.⁸ This idea structures many otherwise very different stories. By healing Urry's unusual wounds after failing to achieve the grail, Lancelot reasserts his inherent nobility, for instance, and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the marvelous green knight, who can suffer decapitation and demand an exchange blow a year later, tests Gawain. Accomplishing an adventure, though, does not permanently reveal a knight's destiny. Much as the necessity of exercising the interpretive faculties

never ends for the dream-vision poets, the imperative to try their powers never ends for chivalric heroes. Knights can never stop testing themselves because their “worship” always requires reconfirmation,⁹ and because knights must constantly reconfirm their worship, their quests in some sense remain incomplete. Even if a hero’s worthiness is inherent, it requires display. Malory’s Gareth is worthy from the start, but the story unfolds to show that worth. “Preve” is Malory’s word for this confirmation, and like Langland, he uses the term often. One of Gareth’s defeated opponents declares that the kitchen boy “hath previd himself a bettir knight” (I: 307). As his adventure closes, Gareth explains to Lyonet that her chiding only encouraged him: “the mysseyng that ye mysseyde me in my batayle furthered me much and caused me to thynke to shew and preve myselffe at the ende what I was” (I: 313). In Langland’s poem, characters often try to “preve” ideas, while in Malory’s romances, the word appears when knights prove their abilities, but in both texts characters constantly seek proof that they can never permanently realize. The effort to “preve” is a search for understanding in both works, too. Romance heroes, though, all tend to look for similar knowledge: they want to learn their inner worth, an education that never ceases and always involves challenges designed to ascertain that value. The “repetitive formality” of the joust and duel on foot that Pearsall identifies is part of this endless testing. Langland’s Will, on the other hand, looks for new experiences and ideas in his attempts to “preve” truth and falsehood.

Like other romance marvels, the Questing Beast offers a chance for knights to learn their worth through adventure. Arthur sees the creature when his own hunt for a hart fails, and after reflection and sleep, the king decides to pursue the Beast. But Pellynor refuses to give away the chase: “Sir kyngh,” seyd the kynge unto Arthure, ‘hit ys in

vayne thy desire, for hit shall never be encheved but by me other by my next kynn”” (I: 43). Quests are precious to knights because these trials are opportunities to prove themselves and learn their fates. Jill Mann explains that when the chivalric hero cannot understand the world, he uses “his body as the medium through which his destiny will be revealed” (“Malory and the Grail Legend” 209). In his desire for revenge after Gareth’s slaying, Gawain explains as much to Lancelot: “I shulde do batayle with the myne owne hondies, body for body, and preve hit upon the that thou haste ben both false unto myne uncle, kynge Arthur, and to me both” (III: 1201). Similarly, when suspicions about Lancelot and Guinevere emerge, Lancelot’s body, rather than a legal argument or some objective fact, proves their guilt or innocence.¹⁰ Malory’s source material also makes the knight’s desire for knowledge of his destiny explicit. In the *Merlin Continuation*, Pellynor explains why he trails the Beast: “I’ve followed this beast a whole year and more to learn the truth about it” (168). Arthur asks why, and the knight replies: “this beast is fated to die at the hand of a man of my line, but he must be the best knight to come from our kindred and the kingdom. Now, as things stand, they consider me the best knight of our land and of all our country. And because I wanted to know if I was the best of our line, I have followed it so long. I’ve said this not to brag but to learn the truth about myself” (168). Pellynor wants to discover the reason for the yelping, but when pressed he confesses that he also seeks the truth about himself. Like all knights, Arthur and Pellynor use their bodies to reveal their destinies. Again Langland’s Will again offers a useful contrast, for he tries to “understand the mysterious laws that govern” his universe through reading and debate, not jousting and swordplay. If achieving an adventure allows

knights a way to read their destinies, then Malory's elusive Questing Beast threatens to become an endless text.

Although Palomides and other knights struggle with difficult quests, they do not think of rejecting their aggressive or amorous inclinations. They seem to regard their impetuses towards violence and love as given, perhaps even more important than their objects. But as Nina Dulin-Mallory points out, Palomides has different attitudes toward his quests. While he anguishes over Isolde and repeatedly mentions his upcoming christening, which he eventually receives, he never comments on his task of finding the Questing Beast. "Curiously," Dulin-Mallory writes, "he quietly accepts the life-long nature" of that quest (79). While this equanimity does contrast with Palomides' feelings about his other trials, it also aligns him with the typical knightly response to an adventure. Palomides "quietly accepts" his search for the Beast much as other knights in Malory's *Works* refuse to ask for explanations of or qualify their commitments to near-impossible challenges. Balin, for instance, insists on keeping the sword that he pulls from Lyle of Avilion's scabbard despite her damsels' request that he return the weapon. When she prophesies disaster, he declares that he will keep the sword and take the adventure (I: 64). In an otherwise much different tale, Gareth similarly insists on taking the adventure that Lynete announces despite her efforts to persuade him otherwise: "sey to me what ye woll, yet woll nat I go fro you whansomever ye sey, for I have undirtake to kynge Arthure for to encheve your adventure, and so shall I fynyssh hit to the ende" (I: 300). Although Gareth may "fynyssh" Lynete's adventure "to the ende," he and his comrades never cease questing. Another experience always awaits, and knights rarely worry about the origins or significance of these trials. Jill Mann explains that by "taking the adventure" knights

accept rather than try to understand the marvelous: “The knight does not try to close the distance between himself and events by fitting them to himself, mastering them so that they become a mere expression of himself; instead he achieves union with them by matching himself to them, by taking into himself, accepting without understanding, their mysterious inevitability and his enigmatic responsibility for them” (“Taking the Adventure” 90-1). When he “quietly accepts” his pursuit of the Questing Beast, Palomides acknowledges an “enigmatic responsibility” for the quest. Langland’s Will, who accepts very little without argument, would ask innumerable questions about the animal, its origins, and its relation to himself, what Mann seems to mean by “mastering” events “so that they become a mere expression” of the quester.

Novels offer a contrast to romance’s mysteries, for their protagonists also do not simply “take the adventure.” More than romance, the novel explores “causal relationships,” which might align with “horizontal motivations” in Northrop Frye’s terminology (*The Secular Scripture* 47). Moll Flanders and Robinson Crusoe, for example, inhabit episodic adventure narratives, but unlike romance characters, they live in mostly recognizable worlds. Defoe’s protagonists meticulously itemize their resources, and what befalls them at least partly originates from how they manipulate those resources, not from some inexplicable destiny. This heroine and hero are not enigmatic, aristocratic knights but ingenious people dedicated to manipulating their circumstances, and the books they inhabit tend to show how one situation emerges from another. Rather than this kind of narrative logic, romance relies on what Frye calls a “vertical perspective” that emerges when a story “proceeds toward an end which echoes the beginning, but echoes it in a different world” (49). Such an echo structures *Sir Gawain*

and the Green Knight, for example, when the second ax blow, delivered at least partly as the Green Knight's judgment, recalls the first, delivered as part of a terrifying holiday game. This symmetry evokes an enchanted world, where events often signify more than characters can understand.

Malory's *Tale of Sir Gareth*, where names become transparent, offers a counterpoint to the Questing Beast's strange "sygnyfycasion," for this tale also represents a comprehensible world, although not in the way that Defoe's novels do. The resolution to Gareth's adventures shows language creating order. Elizabeth Edwards argues that this story imagines a world that makes sense, a place where people and their names correspond clearly (*Genesis* 51). The fair unknown gets his worth and name confirmed, and we learn the names of his adversaries at the adventure's close: the Black Knyght, Sir Perarde; the Grene Kynght, Sir Pertholope; and the Red Knyght, Sir Perymones (I: 314). Naming restores order and ends the quest, unlike the Questing Beast story, where the knight's noisy antagonist retains its ambiguous name and remains at large. Edwards calls the Gareth romance a "knowable" (51) world, where learning knights' names leads to a reduction in violence, and she contrasts this story with the tale of Balin (50). There a mistaken sign, Balin's shield, leads to fratricide. If we imagine a continuum between what Edwards calls "marvels and symbols" on the one hand and a "knowable" world on the other (51), the Questing Beast fits at the far end near marvels and unknowability. It is a sign that no one can read, save perhaps Merlin, and we learn only that he has prophesied much about the creature and nothing of that prophecy.

Gareth and often other questers in medieval romance return home, and this return journey can provide an explanation for the adventure, can make the world "knowable"

again. If a pattern of integration, disintegration, and reintegration structures many romances, then the Questing Beast tale lacks the final stage, and even the first. Cooper characterizes the romance pattern of outward journey and return home in terms of text and commentary: “The outward journey tells a story; the return not only completes the story but comments on that first half” (*English Romance* 58). Malory’s Gareth begins working in Arthur’s kitchen, but when he returns from his adventures having proven his inherent nobility, he gets integrated into the court as a knight. At the romance’s close his worth has been confirmed, marriage arranged, and seat at the Round Table secured. Gareth’s return makes sense of his story’s beginning by establishing his worth, the story’s main point. But the Questing Beast plotline seems to contain the story without the commentary. Again, it feels like an unreadable book. The hunt for the creature does not include a return that might make sense of the adventure. It is as if Gareth had wandered away from the kitchen, fought various battles for no obvious reason, and remained lost in the woods.

The Beast is not leading Palomides anywhere, and we might contrast this uncertain trajectory with animal encounters in other romances. In Marie de France’s *Guigemar*, the protagonist’s hunt and confrontation with a magic animal begins his education.¹¹ When his arrow rebounds from the hind’s breastbone and impales him in the thigh, Guigemar collapses, and the hind declares that he will continue to suffer “until a woman heals you, / one who will suffer, out of love for you, pain and grief / such as no woman ever suffered before. And out of love for her, you’ll suffer as much” (114-118). Here the story sends the knight into the forest for an erotic education. The hart propels not only the story forward, as does the Questing Beast, but also leads the knight toward

greater knowledge. In *Guigemar* the marvelous animal helps the story take a shape that resembles the *Tale of Sir Gareth*, which ends with marriage and reconfirmed chivalric company, more than the story of the unfinished search for the Questing Beast.

Quests and mysteries serve to test knights and reveal their destinies, then, and thus also help define the chivalric company. Because the Questing Beast story feels stuck in its own middle and does not include a return trip, Palomides suffers a kind of permanent exile full of ambiguous signs and unending desire. Where Gareth achieves his adventures then reappears at court, Palomides struggles with three quests: he longs for Isode, wants baptism, and pursues the Questing Beast. He never, of course, wins Isode's love, but on the *Tristram* book's last page he does get baptized (II: 845). Palomides' frustration might involve his identity as a Saracen (perhaps another vaguely defined term), as if he suffers a kind of displacement until he becomes Christian.¹² Just lines after Palomides' baptism, Malory mentions the continued search for the creature, despite the knight's earlier claim that he will convert only when he achieves this adventure. Although baptism incorporates this cultural outsider more firmly into Arthur's chivalric company, then, something remains incomplete. Palomides' unfinished quest for the monster reveals the tension between secular romance and religious pilgrimage, for completing one does not complete the other. His religious and knightly journeys do not entirely converge.¹³

3.

Mysterious quests allow knights to know their destinies, and mystery helps maintain knighthood to begin with. In his study of chivalry, Maurice Keen discusses two knightly customs with significance as obscure as the Questing Beast: the *perron*, "an

artificial mound or pillar” “closely associated with the rites of challenge” in the *pas d'armes* (205), and the “curious ritual of swearing upon a bird” (215). “We are never told,” Keen explains, “what the precise significance of swearing on a bird was any more than we are told of any precise significance in a *perron*. A sound literary pedigree and theatrical potential seem to be the keys to ritual significance in both cases, not any coherent attempt to symbolize or signify” (215). These customs, as Keen implies, suggest that knighthood involves a performance as much as a “coherent” rationale. Susan Crane identifies a similar logic at work in aristocratic heraldry during the Hundred Years War: “Some stories may be lost, but the enigmatic quality of most mottos suggests that personal devices were often deliberately occulted. Rather than simply proclaiming the bearer’s identity, enigmatic signs work to mystify the aristocratic self by enlarging its signature but at the same time resisting close scrutiny” (17). In these instances, chivalric customs establish their importance by avoiding “any coherent attempt to symbolize or signify.” Obscuring their origins allows these rituals to achieve a mythological status that can bolster knightly status. Palomides seems to achieve just this mystification when he carries a shield with an image of the Questing Beast, an emblem identifying him yet, like the Beast itself, “resisting close scrutiny.”

Chivalric texts also use mysterious signs to motivate adventures and to reinforce an aristocratic ethos. By definition heroic tales tend to avoid the commonplace,¹⁴ and Erich Auerbach argues that chivalric romance thus hides socioeconomic conditions in which it is implicated: “The world of knightly proving is a world of adventure. It not only contains a practically uninterrupted series of adventures; more specifically, it contains nothing but the requisites of adventure...In the courtly romance the functional, the

historically real aspects of class are passed over" (136). Marvelous stories often reinforce, or at least do not challenge, aristocratic values because focusing on marvels ignores everyday realities.¹⁵ As Auerbach points out, chivalric texts rarely mention who or what produces their knights and castles (136-7). With Palomides' hunt for the Questing Beast, "a practically uninterrupted series of adventures," Malory takes this logic perhaps as far as possible. Its insularity—Palomides chases the Beast for it was called his quest—relegates the adventure to the space of romance, often figured as a forest in Malory, a place partly cut off from the familiar. Chivalry uses this shadowy landscape to create a network of signs and marvels, a world that would see nothing unusual in a knight prosecuting a quest simply because it was called his quest. Writing on the *Knight's Tale*, Lee Patterson argues that "the chivalric life was its own goal" (175).¹⁶ Similarly, Edwards, drawing on Auerbach, argues that chivalry becomes "a self-referential and idealising mythology, a prison house of semiotics" (*Genesis* 12). If Malory's *Works* center on one thing, it is the performance of chivalry: knights and ladies comprise nearly the entire cast of characters. The knights often enjoy clearer challenges than catching the Questing Beast, like winning a joust or rescuing a prisoner. But if chivalry is its own goal, then an adventure need not have such well-defined aims. The pursuit of this monster receives no explanation and often neither does chivalry itself, both closed off from anything beyond themselves.¹⁷

Like many romances that extol aristocratic values, Malory's stories avoid the commonplace. Malory achieves his unrelenting focus on chivalry partly by removing details from his sources.¹⁸ P.J.C. Field observes that Malory avoids "set-pieces" in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*: "The vivid picture of the embarkation for France has vanished

without a trace. The seventy-line description of the feast for the Roman ambassadors is reduced to three lines, and its descriptive content to one word” (*Romance* 94). This adaptation moves the emphasis from style to story. Field also documents that when Malory reduces the tale of Balin from thirty-eight thousand to eleven thousand words, he “leaves out almost nothing of the *action* of Balin’s career, of the sequence of events which would fill a summary or paraphrase of his life” and instead “sheer reduction in verbiage” accounts for the condensation (*Romance* 73, original emphasis). When the *Merlin Continuation* author begins the Balin episode, for instance, we learn that “the king sat at his dinner” and that he “had already had all the courses” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. 4, 184). Malory removes these everyday details and begins the story more immediately. The famous moment where we learn of Gawain’s preference for pears stands out because the narrative rarely includes material unconnected to knighthood, but even this detail contributes to its story.¹⁹ As Mark Lambert argues, “The ordinary, the mechanical, time and weather, the merely human: such things have more to do with Lancelot’s reality than with Sir Lancelot’s reality” (92). Malory’s text describes the world through a knight’s visor.

In one way, this investment in marvels may restrict romance, but in another way the genre is a machine for generating forever more story, a kind of endless openness. “The pleasure of the text,” Edwards argues of Malory’s book, “is largely in the striking semiotics of the Arthurian scene: the severed heads, cryptic inscriptions, swords in stones, magic barges and perilous drinking horns” (*Genesis* 3). The Questing Beast drinking at a forest fountain could fit in this list of the “striking semiotics of the Arthurian scene.” The monster often appears at wells, which intensifies his affinity with adventure.

Like bridges and castles, wells seem to appear on the romance landscape when heroes require them, as if the watering places only exist to maintain chivalry. “Wells in the *Morte*,” Sue Ellen Holbrook observes, “are places at which people stop for refreshment, thus allowing fights” and “meetings” (73).²⁰ While riding through a forest, Palomides sees a well “where lay a fayre wounded knyght,” and his conversation with this defeated warrior leads to the next adventure (II: 769). During his madness, Tristram “was wonte to be” “by a faiyre welle” (II: 496). Lancelot, in his own madness and exile, also finds a “gardyne, and there he layde hym downe by a welle and slepte” (II: 823). The Questing Beast tends to stop and quietly drink at a well until his pursuer arrives, at which point the pair run out of the story again. One meeting between Tristram and Palomides occurs this way: Tristram sees the Beast at a well and stays nearby until Palomides arrives (II: 683). The Questing Beast at a well in a mysterious landscape epitomizes some of the engines of romance narrative.

If the Questing Beast story only involves a knight chasing a monster, then we might see the narrative as emblematic of romance, which often emphasizes a sequence of events rather than their coherence. In other words, Malory condenses the Questing Beast thread into romance’s essence: plot. Robert Hanning argues that “the defining attribute of the romance form is its plot, which organizes incidents ranging widely in space and time around the life of the hero without any larger controlling narrative context, action, or system (such as fate, providence, or national destiny)” (196).²¹ Although for Malory the Round Table’s fate seems to be Britain’s, few of the romances he retells involve the king and national destiny (Edwards, *Genesis* 3). An important exception, Arthur’s confrontation with the Roman emperor Lucius, arrives in a relatively self-contained story

near the beginning of Malory's *Works*, and soon this plot gives way to the many quests structuring the book's great middle. The pursuit of the Questing Beast shows how Malory "organizes incidents ranging widely in space and time around the life of the hero," for those short episodes indeed have no "controlling narrative context, action, or system," unlike the imperial narrative of Arthur's war with Rome. So little happens during the search for the Questing Beast that we can see how scarcely a knight's exploits need rely on an umbrella narrative: Palomides simply chases the Beast "for it was called hys queste." Hanning's comment helps us understand why chivalric quests can have obscure motivations, and why this quest has none. The knight's confrontation with a series of adventures matters more than any logic that might connect them.²²

For Malory, significance lies in the performance of knightliness in the present moment, not observations about everyday experience or about life beyond the chivalric ritual. Lambert argues that this concentration on knightliness excludes something that much other literature tries to include, the suggestion of a world elsewhere:

What Malory...gives up when he leaves out all the dozens of small details we have watched him exclude, is not just a few pleasant moments in works which, as wholes, are clearly inferior to his. In keeping our attention on the one thing needful Malory excludes from his book something we of the twentieth century want and find in the greatest works of art—particularly tragic art. That is the sense of what Coriolanus calls "a world elsewhere." (121)

Palomides' hunt for the Questing Beast may be a partial exception to Lambert's observation that Malory refuses to give his readers a sense of "a world elsewhere."

Although also focused “on the one thing needful” and lacking “small details,” the hunt for the Beast remains interlaced with other narratives. After Malory introduces the quest we imagine Pellynor’s and later Palomides’ search continuing while we read about other adventures, and this interlacing preserves the sense that something is going on elsewhere simultaneously. Because Malory assures us that the monster has some great significance, its escape also suggests that this chase is important, even if we cannot quite discern that importance. The Questing Beast thread combines romance’s promise that more adventure always waits with Malory’s insistence on the practice of chivalry. He does want to leave open the possibility of a world elsewhere, but he knows what he wants that world to look like.

To limit the world elsewhere to more chivalric adventure, Malory’s *Works* not only removes details from sources but also circumscribes any “other realms of discourse,” just what writers such as Chaucer and Langland so often include (Mazzotta, *Dante’s Vision* 30).²³ For Malory, chivalry is the “one thing needful,” so his text always seems to generate another adventure, and he does not imagine the possibility of endless ways to see the world, another realm of discourse always waiting just ahead. As if to insist on this limited focus, occasionally Malory does remark that two people discuss something other than chivalry, but he avoids detailing those conversations. Trystram and Brewynys Saunze Pité “spake of many thynges” in an encounter near a well (II: 683). Similarly, at the Tournament at Lonezep Trystram and La Beall Isolde “talked of many thyngys and of all the hole justes” (II: 757). The pair discuss the jousting and many other things, topics left unmentioned because they do not relate to jousting or to the next plot event. At the same tournament, Tristram and Lancelot rehash the combat, then “lefft[e] of

and talked of other thynges” (II: 758). After Bors tries in vain to persuade Lancelot to love Elaine of Astolat, the two knights move to other subjects, but again Malory declines to elaborate: “And so they talked of many mo thynges” (II: 1085). When Bors meets a woman on his quest for the grail, the pair “sate downe togydirs and spake of many thyngis,” but Malory only mentions the most important thing for his narrative, namely that she “besought him to be hir love” (II: 965). “Many” realms of discourse do exist for Malory, then, but he is uninterested in exploring them. Langland is trying to figure out “the one thing needful,” but Malory has no such anxiety, for he has already found that thing. Chaucer, too, seems less anxious than Langland, but he enjoys the playfulness and humor that can result from uncertainty, where Malory remains suspicious of the confusion that “langayge” and “noyse” introduce into Arthur’s kingdom (I: 377).

By filtering out anything unrelated to knighthood, Malory’s romances organize the world, even if a story such as the Questing Beast adventure does not offer a “controlling narrative context.” Emily Steiner explains that in the Middle Ages, “the three estates exist not only so that the needs of society may be met (i.e. the first estate provides order, the second, counsel, and the third, food), but also so that each person may know what pertains to him, and what his privileges and restrictions are under the law” (64-5). Malory’s knights know what pertains to them so thoroughly that they mention little else. Their formulaic language and Malory’s centers almost exclusively on chivalry, and this focus on “the one thing needful” helps account for the repetition of words, phrases, and plot structures. This repetition extends to the way Malory presents his characters. Good knights share similar qualities, even if they possess those qualities in different degrees. As Lambert points out, “for Cicero friendship is one soul in two bodies; for Malory

knightliness is one soul in one hundred and forty bodies” (58-9). The knights may differ in the degree of their knightliness, then, but rarely in the kind. We might contrast the Round Table with the Canterbury pilgrims, who are hardly one soul in twenty-nine bodies. Unlike Malory’s knights, they each articulate a different way of seeing the world, a different “realm of discourse.” To preserve his emphasis on knighthood, Malory usually avoids this breadth.

Malory’s focus on marvels derives not only from an aristocratic worldview, but also from a Boethian one, and this in sense his text does attempt to reproduce a kind of everyday experience. Evelyn Birge Vitz argues that “The medieval period had a high tolerance for the unintelligible event, which may be just another way of saying that it had a high tolerance for life itself—for in this particular sense medieval literature is extraordinarily ‘mimetic.’ The *aventures* that Marie offers us do give us that sense of mystery—*permanent* mystery, yet an incomprehensibility charged with *meaning*—that life itself gives us” (164, original emphasis). These lines could just as well describe the Questing Beast adventure as Marie’s lais. Vitz might argue that although, or because, the Questing Beast story suppresses everyday detail, it does reflect “life itself,” a view that owes much to Boethius’ differentiation between human and divine knowledge. Romance deploys a “sense of mystery” to create the impression that the world is enchanted, that partly concealed significance is all around us.

4.

Thus far I have tried to outline chivalric romance’s investment in impenetrable language, but knights also aim to reduce ambiguity, and even mistrust language altogether. Caxton’s version of Llull’s treatise on chivalry explains that knighthood

entered the world as a response to deceit: “At the begynnyng whan to the world was comen mesprysyon / justyce retorne by drede in to honour / in which she was wonte to be / And therfore alle the peple was deuyded by thousands / And of eche thousand was chosen a man moost loyal / most stronge / and of most noble courage / & better enseyned and mannered than al the other” (15). The OED documents that the verb “ensign” can mean both “to teach” and to “mark with a distinctive sign or badge.” Here Caxton seems to say that the men chosen from among thousands are well-taught, but this second definition, related to heraldry, enriches the word: the enemies of deceit use appropriate signs. For Llull, a fallen world full of duplicity requires knighthood to create order, and knights create this order by combating “mesprysyon.” This misprision contrasts with the well “enseyned” chivalric adventurers, who ride out into a baffling world to diminish confusion. Lull argues, then, that chivalry’s goal is “justyce” and order, not performance for the sake of knightliness itself. However, this passage not only establishes chivalry’s opposition to “mesprysyon” but also illuminates its competitiveness and thus the tendency to become, in Patterson’s words, “its own goal.” Llull explains that the fallen world requires social hierarchy, and that knights represent the “moost loyal and mooste stronge” and most courageous and best mannered men. In Malory’s text, this selection process continues indefinitely as knights compete to prove themselves the most loyal, strong, courageous, and well-mannered of all. Knights strive to outperform each other in these values to the point that chivalry becomes its own object.

Noise, meanwhile, disrupts this hierarchy. As Lambert shows, “noyse” both contrasts with knightly composure and eventually destroys the kingdom itself (194).²⁴ To confiscate Tristram’s lands, Andred “made a lady that was hys paramour to sey and to

noyse hit that she was with sir Trystramys or ever he dyed," and soon after the giant Tauleas "heard telle that sir Trystramys was dede by the noyse of the courte of kynge Marke" (II: 498, 499). Similarly, a damsels tells Lancelot that "hit is noysed that ye love queen Gwenyvere" (I: 270). Noise becomes equated to rumor and gossip: "This meanewhyle cam the langayge and the noyse unto kynge Melyodas how that sir Marhalte abode faste by Tyntagyll, and how kynge Marke cowed fynde no maner of knyght to fyght for hym" (I: 377). The word crops up especially in the later books when Lancelot and Gwenyver's relationship begins the series of misfortunes that ends in the kingdom's collapse.²⁵ When the Orkney knights debate exposing the pair, for instance, the king enters and "asked them what noyse they made" (III: 1163). Soon after, Mordred and Aggravayne denounce Lancelot, and he declares, "thys shamefull cry and noyse I may nat suffir" (III: 1166). Lancelot tries to reduce the "cry and noyse" after rumors about him and Gwenyver circulate, but eventually this dissention leads to civil war. The Questing Beast's "noyse" echoes these noisy moments, and thereby the creature, already an emblem for adventure and story, becomes associated with rumor, too, something its progeny the Blatant Beast embodies more fully.²⁶

Far from encouraging rumor, the perfect knight almost eschews language. Lancelot and Tristram are so dedicated to stoic silence that "they fought the space of foure owres, that never one wolde speke to other" (II: 568-69). Malory seems to direct us not toward their failure to communicate, however, but toward their wounds and prowess. Only after proving their valor to each other do they reluctantly exchange names, at which point they discover that they have no quarrel: again, naming ends the adventure. The scene closes with the two kneeling to one another and offering each other their swords.

Lancelot has a similarly aloof relationship to language in an earlier story, where he comes upon a knight with a drawn sword chasing a lady. Lancelot intervenes, but the knight “bade sir Launcelot turne hym and loke behynde hym, and seyde, ‘Sir, yonder com men of armys aftir us rydynge’” (II: 285). When Lancelot turns, the knight “swapped of the ladyes hede” (II: 285). The episode does not imply that Lancelot is naïve but that good knights trust language to mean something transparent.²⁷ Lancelot makes this knight, Pedyvere, carry the dead woman to the king, and “there he tolde all the trouthe” (II: 286). By forcing out the “trouthe,” Lancelot resolves the adventure by means of his knightly relationship to language, a relationship that insists that deeds and words can correspond. The popular knightly reply “ye say well” gets at these ideas, too. The short sentence exemplifies chivalry’s insistence on brief, formulaic language.

Although knights often shun words, they rely on others to talk, for they want tales of their deeds to circulate. As Crane observes, “The full semiosis of incognito requires that the knight complete his adventure by giving up the disguise and incorporating the renown he has won into his earlier identity...This trajectory towards revelation is characteristic of romance adventures: the wandering knight, isolated from the court’s view, fully achieves his adventures only when they are reported—whether by himself or by his captives and emissaries—back to the courtly audience” (132-33). Lancelot may not discuss his own prowess, but others do for him. Noise is also inimical to knights, then, because reliable language must proclaim their feats and establish them as “moost loyal / most stronge / and of most noble courage / & better enseygned and mannered than al the other.” Bad reporting worries knights because it undermines their chivalric identities: “noyse” (especially as another word for ‘rumor’) can obscure the destinies that

marvelous adventures reveal. For Malory, language is threatening because it can deceive more readily than the wounds on a knight's body. If "noyse" endangers the chivalric ethos, then the Questing Beast, relegated to the narrative's periphery yet strangely insuppressible, seems to reflect the text's anxieties about what Malory calls "sygnyfacion." The "noyse" in another cacophonous medieval work, the *House of Fame*, also threatens to make the world indecipherable, but where Malory's text seems to lament the world's falseness, Chaucer's dream vision reveals a fascination with language's imperfection. Malory's text tries to keep out "noyse"—the language so hostile to the chivalric ideal—even as it seems to recognize that project's hopelessness.

Despite his aversion to "noyse," Malory does include some possible dissent from his chivalric system. Although Palomides never considers abandoning his hunt for the Questing Beast and adventurers only reluctantly admit their inadequacy for the grail quest, one knight does remark on the appropriateness of turning down impossible tasks. Explaining his refusal to joust with the formidable Lamorak, Dynadan argues that "hit is ever worshyp to a knyght to refuse that thynge that he may nat attayne" (II: 581). This maxim, which almost says that discretion is the better part of valor, undermines most knightly enterprises in Malory's book. The idea is antithetical to "taking the adventure." Aside from Galahad, none of the book's cast can attain chivalric perfection, but should the knights refuse the challenge to perfect themselves, as Dynadan's logic suggests they may, Malory would have few quests to relate. We cannot imagine Lancelot, or indeed any knight, avoiding a task because it seems too hard. Shame, central to romance, relies on an honor code, and allowing knights to decline to attempt impossible tasks would loosen the code, which insists that knights take the adventure given them. But Dynadan's

pragmatism makes him unashamed to decline challenges, and he needs persuasion to take an adventure. Faced with thirty opponents, he recommends that he and Tristram avoid the fight, but Tristram demands that Dynadan account for at least one adversary, and the pair triumph (II: 505-6). Dynadan's lucid, practical remarks contrast with the mysterious pronouncements elsewhere in Malory, and this knight could hardly succeed Pellynor and Palomides in their hunt for a strange animal of uncertain significance.

But few other knights seem to subscribe to Dynadan's philosophy, and Eugène Vinaver argues that Dynadan does not threaten Malorian knighthood: "This maxim expresses an attitude of mind incompatible with the belief in knight-errantry as a mode of life, but consistent with Malory's essentially practical view of knighthood. For a knight to attempt what 'he may nat attayne' is to do a disservice to the 'High Order'" (*Works*, 2nd ed., 753-54). Put this way, Dynadan's argument seems familiar, an idea that the rest of the text seems to endorse. If a knight's adventures are meant to reveal something about himself but he should not attempt what he may not attain, then a kind of circularity emerges. He must know whether or not he will succeed so that he avoids "a disservice to the 'High Order'." A good knight's adventures manifest his inherent worth, an idea that Malory's romances repeatedly affirm.²⁸ Andrew Lynch argues that Dynadan's objections to the chivalric code "causes just enough disturbing of the ruling ethos of 'worship' and 'love' to permit its speedy and comforting reaffirmation. His jesting curses at the burden of chivalry (706/1-5) always serve to unite the company of the good" (101). Indeed, although Dynadan and Tristram sometimes quarrel, the pragmatic knight's views do not rupture the Round Table, and Dynadan's tendency to "jape" does not ultimately resemble

the threat of “noyse.” Malory presents an objection to the chivalric code only to contain it.

Like Malory’s other knights, Dynadan has a penchant for epigrammatic observations, and elsewhere his pithy comments on knighthood reinforce the chivalric ethos more explicitly. When Palomides unhorses an unprepared Tristram, Dynadan observes, “here may a man preve, be he never so good yet may he have a falle; and he was never so wyse but he might be oversayne, and he rydyth well that never felle” (II: 516). Tristram observes that “a knyght may never be of proues but yf he be a lovear” (II: 689), and not long after he declares that “manhode is nat worthe but yf hit be medled with wysdome” (II: 700). Rather than speeches, Malory and his knights offer maxims, which make sense of the world. They keep out “noyse” by remaining short and by presenting themselves as simple truths.²⁹ Edwards links these knightly aphorisms to a central chivalric preoccupation: “The notion of chivalry as something which must be discovered, or invented in the medieval sense of the word, in the course of actions explains a striking feature of the *Morte*, which is the tendency to sum up narrative incidents with a maxim. In part, the purpose of chivalry is self-definition; its mission is to derive propositions about its own behaviour” (*Genesis* 72). Edwards’ argument that chivalry’s purpose is self-definition complements Patterson’s observation that chivalry is its own goal. The code’s maxims and behavior confirm one another, the language trying to accord with the deeds so closely that here we can see another reason why commentators find chivalry an enclosed system.

“Noyse” even contrasts with Malory’s straightforward prose: he is often as terse as his knights. If the reasons for chasing the Questing Beast are uncertain in Malory’s

retelling, his prose style only intensifies the desire for explanation. Critics often comment on his laconicism, and this laconic style helps create the Beast's inexplicability. "And" begins each sentence of the scene that includes the Beast's description, one thing happening and then another without any obvious connection. Because something else always waits just after the next "and," this strategy emphasizes narrative (Lynch, *Malory's Book* 81). More than periodic sentences that suspend their meaning until the final clause, this "loose" style complements romance's episodic plot structure. Delaying the main verb by beginning sentences with subordinate clauses creates a sense of inevitability, tension, and arrangement, while avoiding subordination turns sentences into lists of events.³⁰ In a free or loose prose style, one thing happens after another. This relatively simple sentence structure, moreover, keeps our focus on those events rather on some larger design: "Where complicated syntax would draw the reader's attention to a controlling mind, Malory's simplicity of style leaves our attention on the narrative rather than the narrator" (Field, *Romance* 40). Leaving our attention on the narrative concentrates the book's energies all the more firmly on chivalry.

5.

How does one leave the romance forest and the noisy Questing Beast? If the Beast aligns with adventure itself and perhaps even rumor, then escape is unlikely, but the *Tale of the Sankgreal* does offer an alternative to the monster's "noyse." Tellingly, the *Tristram* book ends with Malory's final mention of the Beast: "And so therewythall they departed and dysceyvirde, all the kynghtys of the Rounde Table. And than sir Trystram returned unto Joyus Garde, and sir Palomydes folowed aftir the questynge beste" (II: 845). The grail book then begins. Where in the *Merlin Continuation* the two quests

interlace, here Galahad assumes the Siege Perilous after Palomides gets mentioned chasing the Questing Beast for the last time. Malory's juxtaposition of the Beast and the grail seems important, for the creature feels like the vessel's unholy double.³¹ Malory's vocabulary reinforces the juxtaposition, since the bridge between the book of Tristram and "the noble tale of the Sankegreall" refers to the "sygnyfacion of blyssed bloode off oure Lorde Jesu Chryste" and we earlier learn that the monster "was a full wondirfill beste and a grete sygnyfycasion; for Merlyon prophesyed muche of that byeste." Prophecy and "sygnyfycasion," a word that seldom occurs in Malory, surround both the grail and the Beast.³² At times the grail even floats in and out of the text, appearing to and eluding questing knights somewhat as the Questing Beast does. After manifesting itself to the Round Table, "the holy vessel departed suddeynly, that they wanst nat where hit becam" (II: 865). The vessel compels silence from knights, a reverential quiet appropriate for Malory's laconic heroes: "Natforthan there was no knynght that might speke one worde a grete whyle, and so they loked every man on other as they had bene doome" (II: 865). The knights begin searching for the grail at Pentecost, and unlike the apostles, the Round Table knights do not speak in tongues. But the grail, like the miracle at Pentecost, promises perfect communication.³³ The noisy Questing Beast contrasts not only with silence in the grail's presence but also with the promise of Pentecost.

What is the relationship between these two quests, which seem similar yet quite different? In one way, the search for the grail is central to Malory's *Works* and the Questing Beast peripheral. Richard Barber argues that the grail quest exemplifies and even trumps all other chivalric adventures: "The quest of the Holy Grail becomes the epitome of all knightly quests. Beside it, the adventures of a knight in pursuit of a white

brachet or even a questing beast pale into triviality” (28). Galahad’s successful quest for the grail replaces Palomides’ uncertain adventure with a more sharply delineated one.

Where the Questing Beast evokes a fallen, inscrutable world, Galahad and the grail promise that the world will become legible again. Galahad is “unfallen man,” according to Barbara Newman, and in his tale we find that language explains marvels (52). In his adventure the commentary becomes explicit, whereas it is absent from the Questing Beast story. “Noyse” also figures importantly in this tale, which tries to clarify and control interpretation. Not long after Galahad sets out to find the vessel, for instance, he arrives at an abbey, and a monk brings him to a grave and explains that here “ys such a noyse that who hyryth hit verily shall nyghe be madde other lose hys strength” (II: 882). Galahad opens the tomb and “herde a grete noyse,” and “there com oute a fowle smoke” and “the fowllyst vygoure lepe thereoute that ever he saw in the lyknes of a man” (II: 882). A resident of the local abbey explains the marvel to Galahad: “Sir, I shall telle you what beokenyth of that ye saw in the tombe. Sir, that that covered the body, hit betokenyth the duras of the worlde, and the grete synne that oure Lorde founde in the worlde” (II: 882). The “noyse” gets explained and the marvel thereby made a bit less marvelous. During the grail quest, many more wonders appear and receive interpretation similarly.

If the Beast were to race across the grail story, some clerical figure would expound the meaning of its hybridity and “noyse.” Instead, the Questing Beast, whose tale seems to be about interpreting romance narratives, offers a different reading model. Clarification always waits elsewhere. Like Chrétien de Troyes’ romances, Malory’s Questing Beast tale sets the reader on an interpretive quest without a precise goal.³⁴ The monster’s punning name suggests the “prison house” that Edwards describes, as does the

language that Malory repeats each time the creature appears. Angus Fletcher argues that allegories’ “enigmatic surfaces are known not to be random and accidental, by virtue of their periodic repetitions” (172). The repeated elements in the Beast’s story suggest that the whole plot somehow signifies more, that it adds up to something greater than its parts. Reader and knight always seem to be looking for some greater significance. The barking in the Beast’s belly sounds like “the questyng of thirty cou pyl houndes” (or, elsewhere, twenty); it drinks from wells; a knight follows. The repetitive diction complements the chivalric ritual: looking for the creature becomes its own end, much as chivalry becomes its own end. This repetition also recalls the circular formulation that Palomides follows the Beast “for it was called hys queste.” If at times the Quest Beast seems like an allegory that leads nowhere in particular, then perhaps the monster finally represents the idea of questing itself,³⁵ in which case the Beast will always remain uncaught, the adventure unachieved. Palomides is looking for an adventure as much as for the Beast, which is to say that he seeks a quest, like all knights errant.³⁶

Malory’s closing comments assure readers that clarification still waits somewhere and that we might retrieve a full account of Arthur and his knights. As he ends his book, he brushes aside other accounts of the Round Table:

And somme Englysshe booke s maken mencyon that they wente never oute
of Englond after the deth of syr Launcelot—but that was but favour of
makers. For the Frensshe book maketh mencyon—and is auctorysed—that
syr Bors, syr Ector, syr Blamour and syr Bleoberis wente into the Holy
Lande, theras Jesu Cryst was quycke and deed. And anone as they had
stablyssed theyr londes, for, the book saith, so syr Launcelot commaunded

them for to do or ever he passyd oute of thys world, there these four
kngthes dyd many bataylles upon the myscrentes, or Turkes. And there
they dyed upon a Good Fryday for Goddes sake. (III: 1260)

Here at the end of his tales, Malory dismisses “Englysshe booke” and invokes the “Frensshe book” to authorize his account, an authorization he reiterates (“as the book saith”) in the very next sentence. He attributes misinformation about Arthur’s knights to the “favour of makers,” using a Middle English word for poet. Beneath poets’ fables, he implies, is the true text. In yet another attempt to insist on chivalry’s wholeness, Malory explains that the four remaining knights of this company lived out their days defending the integrity of the “Holy Lande.” He goes on to declare that he has compiled the “hoole book of Kynge Arthur”: “Here is the ende of the Hoole Book of Kynge Arthur and of his noble knighthes of the Rounde Table, that whan they were hole togyders there was ever an hondred and forty” (III: 1260). Malory’s insistent assertion of his text’s wholeness and authorization, however, draws attention to its fragmentation, and perhaps here we recall unresolved pieces of narrative such as the Questing Beast tale.

The holy grail ultimately seems to resemble the “Frensshe book” more than the Questing Beast. As Tzvetan Todorov writes, “the quest of the Grail is the quest of a code. To find the Grail is to learn how to decipher the divine language” (qtd. in Quilligan 276). Like the “auctorysed” account that Malory invokes for his version of things, the grail promises that the world makes sense. Although Malory presents the grail quest as the ultimate test of knightly perfection, perhaps the relationship between the search for the holy vessel and hybrid monster is not so much hierarchical as inverse. Where the grail offers clarity, a quest full of religious purpose, the Beast draws its pursuers into a

romance world of uncertainty,³⁷ and Malory's text values open-endedness as much as closure. The short sentence concluding the story of the war with the five kings captures something essential about his project: "So on the morne there befelle new tydyngis and many other adventures" (I: 132). Although the grail is in some sense as mysterious as the Beast, Galahad's journey ends with the completion of the quest and his assumption into heaven. In fact, Malory's tales of both Gareth and the Grail are short and resolve decisively compared to the sprawling *Tristram* book, where we most often find the Questing Beast. This simple observation might reinforce the Questing Beast's significance to Malory's project. Andrew Lynch observes that Tristram and Palomides fight often but inconclusively, which, he argues, demonstrates "a Malorian principle...that the matters of highest importance are those which resist closure most strongly" (117).³⁸ In other words, we can be sure of the feud's importance between these two knights because it will not go away. Lynch's observation might illuminate another of Palomides' unresolved adventures, his search for the always elusive monster. This resistance to closure preserves more opportunities for chivalric exploits, and if this principle is important to Malory, then the Questing Beast lurks somewhere near the heart of his book. The noisy monster is the sound of narrative itself.

Notes

¹ The long neck, spotted body, tail, and hooves suggest a giraffe, and Helmut Nickel points to an etymology that reinforces this possibility. He explains that the author of the *Roman de Palamedes* mentions that the Questing Beast is "called 'Douce in his [Palamedes'] language,'" and the word "Douce," French for "sweet," might be a translation of the Arabic word for "sweet" or "pleasant," "zurafa," possibly a false etymological trail to "giraffe" (67-8). Lynette Ross Muir notes that the Beast's description recalls both the beast of the Apocalypse and the classical chimera (28). The Questing Beast becomes so tantalizingly significant partly because it suggests

associations with classical and Christian cultures as well as their own orientalizing tendencies.

² Catherine Batt makes this point: “The motif of the Questing Beast is analogous to the idea of the ‘French Book’, which we ‘know’ to be somehow important, and which is introduced at moments when it may or may not seem relevant to the matter at hand” (“Malory’s Questing Beast” 151).

³ William Albert Nitze and Linette Ross Muir compile the animal’s literary genealogy. See “The Beste Glatissante in Arthurian Romance” and “The Questing Beast: Its Origins and Development.”

⁴ Furtado’s essay “The Questing Beast as Emblem of the Ruin of Logres in the Post-Vulgate” makes this argument.

⁵ Catherine Batt argues that stories such as this distinguish Malory from his sources: “Malory’s text emerges as different in kind from the French compilations, because it does not reassure us that a ‘full’ text is retrievable, that, for example, the Beast has a recuperable and ‘readable’ history” (*Malory’s Morte Darthur* 128-29).

⁶ I borrow this characterization of the *Tristram* book from Helen Cooper (“The Book of *Sir Tristram*” 186). I would like to thank Randy Schiff, who pointed out to me that Tristram invented hunting terms (I: 375) and that the Questing Beast adventure thus makes particular sense in his book, which includes a number of other hunts.

⁷ Corinne Saunders describes this tension: “Like the fawning puppy which leads us into the dream landscape of Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*, Tristram, the Questing Beast and the surrounding hunts draw the reader deep into a world of play and game, a world of ‘all maner of myrthis’, but a world whose fiction is, ultimately, as impossible as Palomides’ quest” (“Malory’s ‘Book of Huntyng’”). Objects of uncertain significance in other late medieval texts also seem designed to draw readers into the fiction (such as the “certeyn thing” in the *Parliament of Fowls*), especially in dream visions. See Russell 118.

⁸ Jane Taylor reads the knight’s desire for the marvelous and for trials as diverging near the end of the Middle Ages: “where once the quest was, typically, a *Bildungsreise*, in the course of which a knight established his reputation by deeds of valour in pursuit of a moral obligation—in which, in other words, the focus was on the quester and the quest—now, in late medieval romances, it serves, like the proliferating ‘journey tales’ of the period, as a frame for episodes and images which celebrate the exotic, the Other, rather than subduing it as a means of demonstrating chivalric maturity” (182). Later quests become journeys for their own sake: “as late medieval Arthurian romance develops, the *journey* becomes the structuring narrative envelope, rather than the *quest* proper with its properly defined objective, the focus is more on serendipity, the chance discoveries of the journey, than on the process of self-testing or self-validation that was the usual focus of the conventional romance quest” (188, original emphasis). The Questing Beast fits well into the catalogue of marvels that Taylor documents in late medieval romances, and indeed the search for the monster seems as much a journey for its own sake as an opportunity for knights to test their valor.

⁹ The trial both tests and enhances value,” as Jill Mann observes of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (“Price and Value” 198). Maurice Keen makes a similar point: “Chivalry involves a constant quest to improve on achievement and cannot rest satisfied” (15).

¹⁰ Lambert explains this idea as the difference between guilt and shame cultures (178-9). In a shame culture like chivalry, appearance matters most.

¹¹ I would like to thank Randy Schiff for suggesting this analogy to me.

¹² Edwards argues that the term “saracen” has little content: “The label ‘saracen’ retains only a trace of its possible theological content, the trace that is useful for narrative, the latent possibility of conversion. Indeed, Palomedes is in no meaningful sense an unbeliever” (14). The most prominent non-Christian in Malory’s text, however, experiences perhaps the most frustration. Palomides’ identity as a Saracen ensures that he remain on the edges of the knightly company for most of the narrative, and the Beast appears only in a few paragraphs and receives no explanation. P.J.C. Field sees Palomides’ conversion as part of a larger, Malorian emphasis on the crusades: “In the long fifth section of the *Morte*, Malory untangles an episode in the French prose *Tristan* so that his admired Sir Tristram no longer refuses a genuine papal summons to go on crusade to Jerusalem. The climax of the section is the conversion of the Saracen knight Sir Palomides, an episode not in Malory’s source” (*Life* 82).

¹³ Marco Nievergelt explains that chivalric romance often explores the failure of chivalry and Christianity to overlap: “the convergence of quest and pilgrimage also requires the integration of two ethical systems largely at odds with one another: Christianity, guilt-culture, self-abnegation on the one hand; knighthood, shame-culture and worldliness on the other. Hence, the quests provide the occasion for implicit and at times explicit theoretical debates about the actual possibility of achieving such a synthesis, but often end up exacerbating the tension instead of resolving it” (18). Also see Cooper, *English Romance* 83.

¹⁴ “The characters of romance are heroic and therefore inscrutable,” Frye explains (*Anatomy* 308).

¹⁵ To the contrary, Simpson argues that medieval romance is often “extremely sensitive to the dangers of self-enclosed and unthinking reaffirmations of chivalric and noble self-sufficiency” (*Reform* 276). The hero’s “return implies conservatism; the provisional encounter with the other implies a reformist conservatism” (274-75). For Simpson, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* exemplifies this reformist conservatism. In that romance, after we find out that “the Other turns out to be part of the family,” we might imagine that the threat was merely theatrical, an illusory threat produced by the court itself (281). But “the fact remains,” Simpson argues, “that Gawain has, or had, a cut in his neck: something beyond the reach of the court has inflicted a certain damage, and that small flesh wound may implicate very much more. Only by extending the resources of romance to include a penitential ethics can the narrative contain all that threatens royal authority” (281). Because the Questing Beast story does not involve a return journey, its political implications seem uncertain. On the one hand, the story lacks a reinforcement of the status quo that a return journey might celebrate, but on the other hand, no return journey means no opportunity for a “reformist conservatism” either.

¹⁶ Andrew Lynch makes a similar observation: “Prowess is a great good in itself; in Malory’s mind, rather different from Langland’s, it is simply to ‘do well'” (44).

¹⁷ Dulin-Mallory makes a similar point about Palomides’ hunt for the Questing Beast: “This quest is, eventually, about the quest itself, rather than the capture of the beast:

never once is there mention of what Palomides would do if he were to capture the beast” (82).

¹⁸ Malory does not entirely eschew observations about everyday realities, however. Cooper notes that he “adds authenticating detail, such as that Tristram and Segwardes’ wife ‘soupede lyghtly’ before going to bed, and are found by her husband ‘by candyll-lyght’ (245/24, 33; VIII.14); or the notorious twenty thousand pounds that the search for the mad Lancelot costs Guinevere (505/19; XII.9). Such stylistic features reflect a broader realism in the *Tristram*, a realism that co-exists with the fantastic encounters of unnamed knights errant in forest glades” (“The Book of Sir Tristram” 197-8). In the *Tristram*, rather than magic, the “motivating force of the many actions instead becomes a web of shifting allegiances” (198). This realism, Cooper goes on to argue, contributes to this book’s reflection of the “troubled fifteenth century” (198). Commenting on the Gareth romance, Edwards argues for another important exception: “Ordinarily, his relation to the non-knightly world can be expressed as ‘necessity mothers and a dwarf’—that is to say, minor players (functionaries) appear as their function is required (message sent, direction given) and just as promptly disappear...This amplitude of description is the sort of thing that Malory ruthlessly cut out of the *Suite de Merlin*, where is accounted for much of that work’s charm, when writing his ‘Balin’. One result of such description is that as it enlarges the view of the world, it reduces the size of the protagonist” (*Genesis* 47). “Such detailed descriptions,” Edwards goes on to argue, “are, furthermore, of the natural world...Gareth is a knight in tune with nature and this is possible because here nature is not ontologically deceptive as it was in ‘Balin’” (48).

¹⁹ Field notes other exceptions: “we know the colour of Arthur’s eyes, Gareth’s height, and Gawain’s taste in fruit, but we do not know these things about anyone else in the story, and we finish the *Morte Darthur* with no idea of what either Lancelot or Guenivere looks like, except that the former has a scar on his cheek (V 1075. 36). And this, like the scar on Bors’s forehead and Gawain’s taste in fruit, is necessary to the action” (*Romance* 84).

²⁰ Medieval writers often linked water to marvels. Edwards finds “some association with water and the advent of adventure, most strongly expressed in the magic barges navigating these works” (*Genesis* 61). Edwards also connects wells to adventure: “There seems to be little difference, as well, between a ford and a bridge, and for that matter, a well, in that they are all semiotic sites of adventure” (61).

²¹ Hanning’s claim centers on twelfth-century romances rather than later Arthurian stories, which he finds less willing to exclude a “controlling narrative context” (*Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* 240).

²² To bring Malory’s connection between mystery and questing into focus further, we might turn to T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, which reinterprets the Questing Beast story. There the quest is still interlaced with other stories, but King Pellinore explains why and how he follows the Beast:

“It is the Burden of the Pellinores,” said the King proudly. “Only a Pellinore can catch it—that is, of course, or his next of kind. Train all the Pellinores with that idea in mind. Limited eddication, rather. Fewmets, and all that.” “I know what fewmets are,” said the boy with interest. “They are the droppings of the beast pursued. The harborer keeps them in his horn,

to show to his maste, and can tell by them whether it is a warrantable beast or otherwise, and what state it is in.” “Intelligent child,” remarked the King. “Very. Now I carry fewmets about with me practically all the time. Insanity habit,” he added, beginning to look dejected, “and quite pointless. Only one Questing Beast, you know, so there can’t be any question whether she is warrantable or not” (23).

Near the novel’s close, this adventure becomes even more parodic when the Beast develops an infatuation for Palomides. This retelling “domesticates” the creature and demystifies the quest. I am grateful to Angela Fulk, who offered these helpful comment after I presented a version of this chapter at the 2015 Northeast Modern Language Association annual convention.

²³ Kenneth Hodges might disagree. He writes that “the disunities in chivalry are precisely what provide the book its unifying structure” (4). Hodges goes on to argue that “Malory seems aware that chivalry is constructed...and that therefore multiple, legitimate codes can coexist and coevolve” (4-5). These codes might prize love, battle, loyalty, piety, or a range of related ideals, and therefore chivalry might not reduce to a coherent set of values. But perhaps Malory laments these divisions, or at least the destruction they lead to, even as he draws attention to them.

²⁴ Muir observes that this noisiness, although not always threatening, defines the Beast across each reinterpretation (24).

²⁵ Edwards notes the “dangers of talk” in the later books (*Genesis* 171).

²⁶ The Beast’s connection to the rumors of Lancelet and Gwenyver’s adultery links the creature even more firmly to narrative itself. As Edwards explains, “adultery is the condition for the possibility of narrative after the Grail questers have put an end to the marvels which were the objects of these quests” (“Place of Women” 49).

²⁷ I would like to thank Barbara Orton for pointing out how this scene connects to knighthood and language.

²⁸ Edwards remarks on this uncertainty: “it is difficult to say whether combat is ‘trial’ which establishes the worth of knights, or whether the already given worth of knights determines the outcome” (*Genesis* 66).

²⁹ Andrew Lynch sees the proverbs somewhat differently: “The ideal of surpassing prowess is alloyed with this more canny set of values, enabling knights to cope with losing, as well as winning, and above all to permit continuity. There can always be another ‘day’ for the losers” (89).

³⁰ Carey McIntosh contrasts loose and periodic styles in eighteenth-century prose. The loose or free styles, he writes, “work well in narrative and description, because, having made a major point early on, they can devote most of their words to comment, amplification, or examples, and they can ‘change their mind’ in the middle—start on a new tack, explain, develop, and embroider” (77). For McIntosh, Defoe exemplifies this style. Despite the differences between Malory’s fifteenth-century romances and Defoe’s eighteenth-century novels, both authors use loose syntax to complement their fast-paced, wandering narratives.

³¹ Muir makes this point: “It is not apparently an allegory, as are so many of the strange manifestations on the quest of the Grail; it may perhaps be likened to the Holy Grail itself, in its pre-Christian forms: the Beast is the goal of an interminable quest, the excuse

for illimitable adventure" (24). Her essay, though, does not aim to explore the implications of this connection.

³² Batt makes this observation: "The rare word 'signification' also hints that the epistemological will not be easily recuperable, for just as the 'signification' of the Questing Beast proclaims and defers its meaning, so here the term invokes but does not explain the numinous" (*Malory's Morte Darthur* 137).

³³ Strohm explains the connection between this feast and the grail: "Pentecost as a time of dispersal and dissemination is perhaps best conveyed in its literary uses; in particular, in its traditional invocation in the *Queste del Saint Graal* and in Malory as the season at which the grail quest was initiated, at which time Arthur's knights went abroad in the world in pursuit of the ineffable goal of spiritual perfection" (*England's Empty Throne* 136). Also see Edwards, *Genesis* 98.

³⁴ Commenting on Chrétien's *Conte del Graal*, Robert S. Sturges argues that "this romance invites the reader's participation in this process without orienting him or her toward any particular interpretive goal" (41). Similarly, Pearsall argues of Chrétien's *Lancelot* "Meaning is always elusively beyond reach; the reader's quest mirrors the knight's" (29).

³⁵ Parker observes that the Questing Beast at least partly represents the impulse of questing itself, and perhaps the creature also contains a threat to questing, as Parker remarks of Spenser's Blatant Beast (103-4). Similarly, Helen Cooper argues that Palomides' pursuit of the Questing Beast is characteristic of Malory's *Tristram* book: "Formal quests are scarce, their completion even scarcer; Palomides' intermittent pursuit of the Questing Beast, its achievement infinitely deferred, is typical" ("The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones" 186). Perhaps the Beast is not only "typical" of the book of Tristram but also of Malory's whole collection of romances. The Beast appears near the beginning of the text just after Arthur's foreboding dream, and the monster's possible reappearance haunts the many stories that follow.

³⁶ Cooper observes that knights errant by definition have no precise goal: "*Errare*, to wander, feeds into both the knight-errant, questing with no fixed goal, and errancy, the moral equivalent of physically going astray" (*English Romance* 70).

³⁷ Antonio Furtado observes that in the *Post-Vulgate* the search for the Questing Beast mirrors the quest for the grail: "Those who follow it behave like fools (*Post-Vulgate* 5: 269), straying from the right path in a subversive rendering of the Grail Quest. As a synthesis of negative energies, it is an Anti-Galahad, Galahad's other, given that the perfect knight is compared to a lesser image of Christ (*Post-Vulgate* 5: 129-130)" (46). Although the knights that follow the Beast do not exactly "behave like fools," Malory's retelling also suggests similarities between that quest and the grail adventure. In the *Post-Vulgate's Merlin Continuation*, though, Palomides kills the Beast (or at least drives it into a lake from which it does not emerge) (*Lancelot-Grail* v. 5, 278). Malory's version of the Questing Beast story, in which the quest remains unfinished, heightens the contrast between the grail and the monster.

³⁸ Simpson offers evidence for this view when he observes that the *Tale of Gareth* leaves unsettled the relationship between aristocratic brothers. This tension produces irresolvable conflict, for neither can claim higher birth, and this threat of civil war eventually emerges at the end of Malory's text (*Reform* 290).

Chapter 6

Spenser's Medieval Monster

1.

Sound fills Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*: shepherds “Playing on pypes, and caroling apace” (ix.5); Colin Clout’s “shril pipe” (x.10); the Salvage Man’s “soft murmur, and confused sound / Of senselesse words” (iv.11); a cannibal ceremony with “bagpipes and the hornes” and “peoples voice confused” (viii.46); brigands who “fall to strokes, the frute of too much talke” (xi.16); woods that “echoes vaine rebound” (xi.26). Spenser’s fascination with sound—from the *The Shephearde Calender*’s piping to the *Epithalamion*’s echoes—seems to culminate in this late work. Sound reverberates across the Legend of Courtesy perhaps because the virtue centers on language. Courtesy is the “roote of ciuill conuersation” (i.2), and Calidore, knight of courtesy, “loathd leasing, and base flattery, / And loued simple truth and steadfast honesty” (i.3). Calidore’s love of “simple truth” implies that courtesy requires transparent language, and thus he hunts the Blatant Beast, who amplifies Book VI’s soundscape with his slander and barking and whose “tongue doth whet / Gaint all, both good and bad, both most and least” (vi.12). Although Spenser’s knights are more talkative than Malory’s, “simple truth and steadfast honesty” describes a Malorian chivalric ideal, too. In fact Spenser may model Calidore on the Questing Beast’s primary pursuer in Malory, Palomides, who serves as a more worthy rival for Tristram than King Mark (Keita 26). And like Palomides, who takes over his quest from Pelinore, Calidore is not the only knight who fails to achieve his adventure: after the Blatant Beast breaks free from Calidore, Sirs Pelleas and Lamoracke take up the quest, “Yet none of them could euer bring him into band” (xii.39). Both the

Questing Beast and Blatant Beast appear sporadically and remain uncaught: neither text finally suppresses their noise. More adventure remains while the Beasts' fallen language fills the world.

Like late medieval texts, Book VI of *The Faerie Queene* involves a search for origins. In the Proem to the book, the poet asks to learn the origin of virtue: "Reuele to me the sacred noursey / Of vertue" (3). Meliboe's pastoral retreat and the vision on Mount Acidale both offer versions of this origin, but these moments do not last. Virtue cannot remain while the Beast is loose, and meanwhile other stories fill the legend, which becomes an encyclopedia of romance conventions. Romance relies on aristocratic heroes discovering their names, whether their lineages or renown or both. Because he defames "both good and bad, both most and least," the Beast makes names untrustworthy and thus threatens to make origins and identities irrecoverable, too. Like *Piers Plowman* and other late medieval poetry, Book VI of the *Faerie Queene* centers on sacrality, an unreachable origin, and like the noisy creatures in late medieval literature, the Blatant Beast threatens sacrality, for the monster obscures origins and destroys wholeness. The beginning of Book VI opposes the Beast to virtue's "sacred noursey," and near the legend's end the monster infiltrates religious spaces. But while the noisy monster would undo this enchanted world, his duplicity, his "many a forged lie," resembles poetry's mythmaking and thus generates as much as threatens Faery land (xii.33).¹ The Blatant Beast both disenchants the world and contributes to its enchantment. Simultaneously activating and frustrating the desire for origins, the Beast is both fecund and menacing, and Spenser's text proves as ambivalent about noise as its medieval precursors. Like the agents of

unstable language in Chaucer's *House of Fame*, the Beast not only tears down but also remakes.

The Blatant Beast's name contains a related tension between marring and making. Allegory encourages readers to pursue etymologies, as if characters' fates lie hidden in their names. Like many allegorists, however, Spenser creates characters whose names include multiple ideas. Antagonists' names especially take advantage of such ambiguity, as if to emphasize that evil is by nature duplicitous. Early on we meet Archimago, for instance, arch-magician and arch-image, and perhaps arch-image maker, a reading that would suggest comparing him with the poet. Like the Questing Beast's name, too, "Blatant Beast" is richly suggestive, and the history of the word "blatant" does not align the monster with a single function; instead, it suggests a slipperiness that complements his role as a noisy disrupter. Spenser apparently coined "blatant," and one derivation includes the Latin "blatire," "to babble," and noise indeed seems counter to courtesy and poetry, both of which the Beast threatens. The alliterative name emphasizes creature's connection to language and babble all the more. "Blatant" also suggests the Scots "blate," "to bleat" (Bond 97), a derivation that supports the sense of "babble" and evokes the Beast's animal nature. Leslie Hotson provides a somewhat different source for the Beast's name and argues that more than noise "blatant" connotes harm: "It is definite sense of this sort—of the hurt, the harm, the injury his bite inflicts and not the clamor he may or may not incidentally produce—which the poet must have meant to convey by the epithet" (35). (Hotson also writes that "Littleton gives Blatta, ae. f. $\alpha\beta\lambda\alpha\pi\tau\omega$, noceo qu. blapta. A kind of moth or fly, that eats books or clothes" [36]. The Blatant Beast as a moth, a kind of bookworm, has interesting implications, for he destroys monasteries and

perhaps by extension monastic learning.) Given these definitions, Hotson argues that “our *blātant* has nothing whatsoever in common with Spenser’s *blātant*” (34). But in the sense that blatant now means open or obvious, this meaning perhaps also helps characterize the Beast, who lays open secrets, whether by disseminating slander or invading monasteries: as Book VI closes, the monster chases monks and “searched all their cels and secrets neare” (xii.24). In fact, Hotson partly approves of deriving the Blatant Beast’s name from the Questing Beast’s: “*Questing* means ‘opening,’ ‘giving tongue on finding the scent,’ as a hunting dog or hound. This at least draws our minds away from bleating to yelping” (35-6). Even more explicitly than its predecessor in Malory, the Blatant Beast hunts, making “questing” a suggestive source for “blatant.”

“Blatant,” then, might at once connote noise, wounding, and opening, a mixture of meanings appropriate for an embodiment of rumor. The Blatant Beast’s name suggests that he both obscures and reveals: as babble or lies he conceals; as rumor and slanderous wounding he may conceal, too, but he also publicizes secrets. Here we might recall that allegorical characters generate narratives that comment on themselves: in *Piers Plowman*, a story develops from the complexity of the word “meed,” for instance, which can signify both merited and unmerited reward. If “blatant” describes both a disclosing and an obscuring action—making open and babbling—then the narrative that this allegorical monster generates goes on forever, for whatever the Beast reveals becomes suspect, and whatever slander he perpetuates might be true. Because the Beast represents the ideas of concealing and revealing, he necessarily remains uncaught, for this movement is a property of fallen language itself, which, always suspect, can only point to truth. Silencing the Blatant Beast would mean retrieving the Salvage Man’s unfallen language.²

2.

We first encounter the Blatant Beast in Book V, and the poem consistently associates him with both suspect language and obscurity. In Book VI, the Beast's duplicity undermines Calidore's desire for "simple truth" (i.3). Spenser emphasizes this point by providing the Beast an ancestry that proves as irreducible as his name, namely two genealogies, another uncertainty befitting this figure of rumor (Gross, "Reflections" 106). (The account of the Beast's escape from Calidore involves a similar logic: "whether wicket fate so framed, / Or fault of men, he broke his yron chaine" [xii.38]. Simply the monster's proximity seems to obscure knowledge.) When he meets Artegall near the beginning of Book VI, Calidore describes the Beast's origins:

Of *Cerberus* whilome he was begot,
 And fell *Chimæra* in her darksome den,
 Through fowle commixture of his filthy blot;
 Where he was fostered long in *Stygian* fen.
 Till he to perfect ripenesse grew, and then
 Into this wicked world he forth was sent,
 To be the plague and scourge of wretched men:
 Whom with vile tongue and venomous intent
 He sore doth sound, and bite, and cruelly torment. (i.8)

Both parents have multiple heads and thus multiple tongues, tongues that multiply in the Blatant Beast, who has in one place a hundred and others a thousand tongues (xii.33; i.9; xii.27). In Spenser's alliteration we can almost hear them hissing: "vile" and "venomous," "sore" and "sound." By deriving the Beast from the Chimaera, this passage

associates the Beast with rhetoric (Nohrnberg 692),³ a craft often at odds with the “simple truth” that Calidore loves. Because poetry more resembles rhetoric than truth, this ancestor may be an early clue that the Blatant Beast is not only Book VI’s antagonist but also part of the allegory’s engine. This passage sets up another instance of the Beast’s doubleness that returns later: the “filthy blot” here reappears when the Beast blots others (xii. 28) and eventually the poet (xii.41). These blots connote inkiness, as if the “blotting” Beast not only mars language but defaces the page, and indeed he eventually emerges from the text itself to attack the poet and trouble the distinction between Faery land and reality.

Different characters report the Blatant Beast’s lineages, increasing the sense that we hear rumors about the creature of rumor, for in canto vi the hermit supplies a second ancestry. Here Spenser sets the monster’s origins back one generation: in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, Echidna and Typhon produce several multi-headed offspring: Orthos, Cerberus, the Hydra, and the Chimaera (309-322). Where the first genealogy offers Cerberus and the Chimaera as the Blatant Beast’s parents, in the second we learn that their parents begot him:

For that same beast was bred of hellish strene,
 And long in darksome *Stygian* den upbrought,
 Begot of foule *Echidna*, as in bookeis taught.
Echidna is a Monster direfull dred,
 Whom Gods doe hate, and heauens abhor to see;
 So hideous is her shape, so huge her hed,
 That euen the hellish fiends affrighted bee

At sight thereof, and from her presence flee:
 Yet did her face and former parts professe
 A faire young Mayden, full of comely glee;
 But all her hinder parts did plaine expresse
 A monstrous Dragon, full of fearefull uglinesse. (vi.9-10)

The *Theogony*, full of genealogies, is a myth of origins. By contributing to this monstrous lineage, Spenser signals his participation in a tradition of mythmaking poetry, but in this case his poem does not reveal a clear origin. By placing the older genealogy second, he gives us the sense that we are searching deeper into the creature's history, yet the first genealogy remains, and the continued emphasis on the Beast's origins produces uncertainty rather than clarification. Echidna might remind us of Duessa, executed near the end of Book V but resurrected here as a deceptive, alluring Dragon Mayden. Fradubio similarly describes seeing Duessa "in her proper hew," "a filthy foule old woman" (I.ii.40-41). The poet's gaze exposes Duessa and Echidna and finds doubleness, moments that contrast with the image of the ring of naked nymphs in the vision on Mount Acidale. Both scenes, though, involve a male quester or knower—Calidore wondering what he sees and the hermit describing Echidna to detail the Beast's lineage—and both efforts to learn more only partly succeed, for Calidore's intrusion dispels the vision, and the hermit's account of the Beast's origins conflicts with Calidore's account. These episodes invite an interpretive gaze and trouble its perceptions.

The Blatant Beast himself might also remind us of Duessa, for in both antagonists, Rebeca Helfer argues, "Spenser affirms duality and duplicity over the dream of singular truth" (267). In this sense the Blatant Beast recalls Archimago as well, another

tenacious, deceitful Spenserian adversary who does not appear in Book VI (Nohrnberg 695; Hardie 402-3). By offering a new version of these old enemies, the text reemphasizes that duplicity never leaves the fallen world but keeps getting reborn. In romance's fallen world, both duplicity and mortality oppose the hero in various forms. Harold Bloom remarks that "The hero needs an antagonist; ultimately, in romance, this is likely to be mortality itself. The immense strength and variety of Spenser's invention in *The Faerie Queen* is owing to that great poet's abundant projections of the quest's adversaries" (*Visionary Company* 371). Mortality offers romance heroes their final adversary because romance promises something evermore about to be. In a fallen world full of imperfect knowledge, more always remains for questers to discover. The fallen world thus fills with enchantment, which thrives on imperfect knowledge (Bloom, *Genius* 649). Only death can end romance heroes' quests for more experience and more understanding, a threat that never leaves but takes new forms. As *The Faerie Queene*'s final opponent, the Blatant Beast combines many "projections of the quest's adversaries" both from other traditions and from Spenser's own poem, and his ancient genealogy underscores this omnipresence.⁴

If mortality offers heroes their ultimate antagonist, then fame might allow them some victory, but the Blatant Beast challenges the survival of names. In his complex relationship to noise, he also derives from representations of Fame, which puts him in the company of Chaucer's goddess Fame and Malory's monster, who both emerge from Vergil's Fama, a shape shifting, monstrous creature (Gross, "Iconoclasm" 255). Appropriately, we hear the Questing and Blatant Beasts before we see them: they spread rumor, and rumors of them reach us before the monsters themselves, and we also hear the

“grete swough” from Fame’s hall before we see the goddess in the *House of Fame*. Both Malory and Spenser wait to describe the beasts, and when they do detail their appearances we learn that they are hybrid, monstrous creatures. Like his ancestry, the Blatant Beast’s appearance evokes multiple associations rather than a single origin. Spenser’s description focuses on the Beast’s many tongues:

And therein were a thousand tongs empight,
 Of sundry kindes, and sundry quality,
 Some were of dogs, that barked day and night,
 And some of cats, that wrawling still did cry;
 And some of Beares, that groynd continually,
 And some of Tygres, that did seeme to gren,
 And snar at all, that euer passed by:
 But most of them were tongues of mortall men,
 Which spoke reproachfully, not caring where nor when.
 And them amongst were mingled here and there,

The tongues of Serpents with three forked stinges (xii. 27-28)

The Beast creates a cacophony from “sundry” sounds “mingled” with reproach pronounced without regard for place or time, and this list creates a sense of increasing chaos. Here late in Book VI’s final canto we finally see the Beast, or at least his mouth, but his origins only multiply. Much as researching his genealogy more deeply only produces more division, this portrait contributes to the Beast’s obscurity. If the sacred is wholeness, then the Beast everywhere declares his profanity.

The Blatant Beast's triumph and dangerous tongues at the poem's end also place in his literary lineage the Beast of the Apocalypse, another multi-headed monster at the end of the book. Commenting on Spenser's Beast, Jane Aptekar observes that "one of the principal, several times repeated features of the beast in Revelations is that 'there was given unto him a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies'" (208). In Revelation the Beast's blasphemy contrasts with the Apocalypse's promise of fuller knowledge. Because "apocalypse" means "unveiling," the Blatant Beast's association with the end times enhances the monster's connection to the desire for knowledge, a desire he seems to frustrate and perpetuate. Spenser molds the Blatant Beast, then, from ancient heredities that he supplies, from traditions he only alludes to, and from antagonists earlier in his own poem. And in each of these three cases, the Blatant Beast derives from still more distant sources. Like rumor, the creature's origins proliferate the more they are pursued. We might of course say the same for many of Spenser's villains and heroes, and even of literary genealogies in general, an idea that connects the Beast with fiction itself.

The Blatant Beast's second genealogy continues with a description of Echidna's lair and another parent, Typhon, who both links the Beast even more firmly to rumor and associates him with the rebellion against Jupiter:

To her the Gods, for her so dreadfull face,
 In fearefull darkenesse, furthest from the skie,
 And from the earth, appointed have her place
 Mongst rocks and caues, where she enrold doth lie
 In hideous horrour and obscurity,
 Wasting the strength of her immortall age.

There did *Typhaon* with her company,
 Cruell *Typhaon*, whose tempestuous rage
 Make th'heauens treble oft, & him with vowes asswage.
 Of that commixtion they did then beget
 This hellish Dog, that hight the *Blatant Beast*. (vi.11-12)

Typhon opposed Jove's rule, and the noise of Mutabilitie's approach in the *Mutabilitie Cantoes* initially causes Jove to worry that Typhon has returned: "The father of the gods, when this he heard, / Was troubled much at their so strange affright, / Doubting least *Typhon* were againe vpear'd" (VII.vi.15). As Typhon's offspring, the Blatant Beast also "represents an overt challenge to the authority of self-fashioned gods, much as Typhoeus did" (Helfer 295). In the *Mutabilitie Cantoes*, Jove offers a history lesson of the rebellion against him:

Harken to mee awhile yee heauenly Powers;
 Ye may remember since th'Earths cursed seed
 Sought to assaile the heauens eternall towers,
 And to vs all exceeding feare did breed:
 But how we then defeated all their deed,
 Yee all doe knowe, and them destroied quite;
 Yet not so quite, but that there did succeed
 An off-spring of their bloud, which did alite
 Vpon the fruitfull earth, which doth vs yet despite.
 Of that bad seed is this bold woman bred. (VII.vi.20-21)

Jove tries to fix Mutabilitie's origin, her "seed," and in doing so provides a history of his reign that emphasizes "heauens eternall towers" and elides its own beginnings in rebellion. Helfer observes that his account "remembers wars with rebellious giants but conveniently overlooks his own rebellion against the Titans. Such wars repeat previous wars in a kind of infinite regress of origins" (241). Jove mystifies his authority, and the Blatant Beast, born from Typhon and thus also of this "bad seed," implicitly challenges Jove's imperial lineage not so much with outright revolt as with rumor and slander's ability to demystify authority. The monster exposes secrets and turns language into rumor, and Jove's myth relies on obscurity and inspired language. In Kermode's terms, Jove creates a "myth," while the Beast embodies the idea of "fiction," a revisable story (*Sense* 39).

The Blatant Beast's connection to Typhon also brings the poet himself into the family. Hesiod relates that Typhon brought forth the harmful winds, and James Nohrnberg remarks that "There is a sense in which the Beast is a wind-monster" (694).⁵ Indeed, Calidore winds the Beast: "Through woods and hils he follow'd him so fast, / That he nould let him breath nor gather spright, / But forst him gape and gaspe, with dread aghast, / As if his lungs and lites nigh a sunder brast" (iii.26). Here the knight nearly deflates windy rumor, though ultimately pursuing slander or rumor only increase their demesne.⁶ As wind and rumor the Blatant Beast recalls the *House of Fame*, where the dreamer's guide explains that all speech reduces to broken air, and Geffrey eventually hears the "grete swough" of tidings on its way to Fame's hall. At times the poet also needs air. In Sonnet 80 of the *Amoretti*, where Spenser mentions that he has finished six books about Faery land, he says that he has become winded: "After so long a race as I

have run / Through Faery land, which those six books compile, / Give leave to rest me
 being halfe fordonne, / And gather to my selfe new breath awhile" (*Edmund Spenser's Poetry* 619). Their mutual need for air to continue making fictions suggests an affinity between the poet and the monster, both nearly "fordonne" as Book VI closes yet still poised to continue their work. Spenser also sets up this comparison at the end of Book V, where at the entrance to Mercilla's palace the poet Malfont is

Nayld to a post, adiudged so by law:
 For that therewith he falsely did reuyle,
 And foule blaspheme that Queene for forged guile,
 Both with bold speeches, which he did compile;
 For the bold title of a Poet bad
 He on himselfe had ta'en, and rayling rymes had sprad. (ix.25)

This "rayling" language presages the Blatant Beast's slander, and indeed he arrives for the first time just a few cantos later. "Sprad" also connects the two characters, who disseminate words rather than practice chivalric reticence or the hermit's quiet. Although the Beast appears "sodainely" and intermittently in Books V and VI, his affinity with this poet and with poetry itself suggests that in another sense he is omnipresent (iii.24).

In the Proem to Book V, Spenser gives an account of the declining world, and here he also prepares the way for the Blatant Beast's appearance and his association with the poet:

For that which all men then did vertue call,
 Is now cald vice; and that which vice was hight,
 Is now hight vertue, and so us'd of all:

Right now is wrong, and wrong that was is right,
As all things else in time are changed quight. (4)

When the Blatant Beast defames its victims, he contributes to this confusion: it is not so much that virtue has disappeared and vice proliferated in the fallen world (at least in this canto) as that we no longer call virtue or vice by their proper names. At the end of the poem, when Spenser exhorts his own verse to please rather than to tell the truth, he also contributes to this decline in language's reliability. It may be that the Beast has bitten Spenser, or it may be that Spenser and the Beast have had an affinity all along. Slander seems linked to unstable, ambiguous language, the very stuff of poetry. As in the Questing Beast tale, the noise that interrupts or thwarts the quest turns out to be constitutive of the quest to begin with.

The Blatant Beast and poet also both name. As an allegory, much of Spenser's poem necessarily centers on naming: each book defines a virtue, much as the episodes in *Piers Plowman* emerge from the complexity of words like "meed" or "dowel." Spenser's verses, moreover, teem with proper nouns, whether of Irish geography or British lineages. On the one hand, a bleating monster would overthrow these careful etymologies and descriptions.⁷ Spenser's allegories make him into a "conquistador," to borrow Fletcher's description of allegory again, but the Beast threatens to disrupt the poet's conquest by disordering names. But on the other hand, the Blatant Beast himself also names, for his defamation is a kind of naming or renaming (Kinney 90-1). The Beast, then, is not merely destructive, "for his destruction creates the space for new constructions" (Helfer 311). We might think of the *House of Fame* and its exploration of names and their origins, which the Houses of Fame and Rumor obscure. The *House of Fame* implies that noise

has permeated nearly all language, and at the end of Book VI of the *Faerie Queene*, seems to have effected a similarly widespread influence. Like Chaucer, Spenser suggests that something inherent and uncontrollable in poetry tends to noise, and the Beast is as ubiquitous as fallen language itself. As long as more images or knowledge always remain to destroy or more language to corrupt, the Blatant Beast cannot be caught. To catch the monster would be to silence rumor.

3.

The Blatant Beast's genealogies are part of a larger preoccupation with origins in Book VI. The first description of the Beast's ancestry recalls Spenser's explanation of "the sacred nurserie / Of vertue" in the Proem:

Reuele to me the sacred nurserie
 Of vertue, which with you doth there remaine,
 Where it in silver bowre does hidden ly
 From view of men, and wicked worlds disdaine.
 Since it at first was by the Gods with paine
 Planted in earth, being deriu'd at furst
 From heauenly seeds of bounty soueraine,
 And by them long with carefull labour nurst,
 Till it to ripenesse grew, and forth to honour burst. (3)

Both "vertue" and the Blatant Beast "grew" to "ripenesse" before entering the "wicked world" (Bond 97), a "long" cultivation in both cases. Virtue is born from "heauenly seeds" and now hides in a "silver bowre," and the Beast "fostered long in *Stygian den*" (Heale 160). Virtue comes from a "sacred nurserie," but the Blatant Beast derives from

multiplicity from the start, both in its two ancestries and in its hybrid parents Cerberus and the Chimaera. Virtue is wholeness, the Beast a “commixtion.” The origin of slander remains obscure even after two genealogies, and virtue’s origins are also hidden, but where virtue remains concealed, the Beast brings to light shame and secrets. As a representation of a mob and its many tongues and endless noise, the Blatant Beast is the antithesis of privacy, which virtue requires to preserve itself in a corrupt world. Where virtue “in silver bowre does hidde[n] ly / From view of men, and wicked worlds disdaine,” the Beast, “the plague and scourge of wretched men,” lives among people. The Beast not only has a detailed, crowded lineage but also colleagues and superiors: like courtesy, slander is a public virtue. At the end of Book V, Envy and Detraction release him, and in Book VI, Decetto, Despetto, and Defetto employ him. He is not a solitary monster, appropriately in that rumor and slander are social phenomena and disrupt privacy.

Because slander is social, the hermit advises Timias and Serena to find the remedy for the Beast’s bite in themselves: “For in your selfe your onely helpe doth lie, / To heale your selues, and must proceed alone / From your owne will, to cure your maladie” (vi.7).⁸ The hermit’s description of virtue’s source, here a core self beyond slander’s reach, complements the Proem’s emphasis on virtue’s remove from the “wicked worlds disdain.” Isabel Gamble MacCaffrey argues that like *King Lear*, “Spenser in Book VI is also concerned with true and false needs and the responses appropriate to them” (362):

The process of finding what “*true* need” means, involves reducing life to its lowest terms, peeling away the shows of things and retreating to the paradise within. This is, once more, a description of the plot of *Lear*. The

king learns “the art of our necessities” and in consequence can speak, for the first time, to the “houseless poverty” of his subjects, the “poor naked wretches... / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm” that is the storm of the world’s great rage. Spenser’s hero is more gently initiated into the realities of life close to the bone, in the soft pastoralism of Canto ix... Spenser explores the venerable tradition of virtuous *otium* in the colloquy between Melibee and Calidore in Canto ix. The old man has reduced nature, not to beastliness, but to the limits of “true need.” (364-65, original emphasis)

The play’s exploration of “true need” involves Lear’s desire to rid himself of “addition”: “Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here” (III.iv.108-9). Lear may or may not learn anything about the suffering of others, but at the end of the play, having lost his crown, family, clothes, and mind, he manages to rid himself of still more: “Pray you undo this button” (V.iii.310) (Kermode, *Shakespeare’s Language* 109). MacCaffrey points to a fascinating parallel between *King Lear* and the Legend of Courtesy, but perhaps they also share a sense that the condition of “true need”—“the thing itself: unaccommodated man”—remains elusive (III.iv.106-7). Even the hermit and Meliboe live in a fallen world full of imperfect desire rather than “true need,” and both works, moreover, end with a sense of apocalypse and confusion. In several ways, the Blatant Beast generates more—more story, language, uncertainty—and this multiplying effect implies that “peeling away the shows of things” never ends. As restless excess, the monster threatens both “virtuous *otium*” and “true need.” In *King Lear*’s idiom, the Beast is the “superfluous” (II.iv.265).

Spenser shares with late medieval writers a fascination with the declining world that can help account for his attitude toward language's doubleness and Book VI's sense that origins have become irrecoverable. As the world declines, the Beast's strength increases. In Book VI's penultimate stanza, we learn that "He growen is so great and strong of late, / Barking and biting all that him doe bate" (xii.40). In Book II, Guyon explains that the Golden Age was a Temperate Age:

The antique world, in his first flowring youth,
 Found no defect in his Creatours grace,
 But with glad thanks, and unreprooud truth,
 The gifts of soueraigne bountie did embrace:
 Like Angels life was then mens happy cace;
 But later ages pride, like corn-fed steed,
 Abusd her plenty, and fat swolne encreace
 To all licentious lust, and gan exceed

The measure of her meane, and naturall first need. (vii.16)

In Book VI Meliboe explains that he tries to live according to something resembling "naturall first need": "hauing small, yet doe I not complaine / Of want, ne wish for more it to augment, / But doe my selfe, with what I haue, content; / So taught of nature" (ix.20). In the fallen world, this relationship to "first need" has become lost. Excess overwhelms measure, and the Blatant Beast or his avatars ruin Meliboe's world. In terms that seem to echo Chaucer's sentiments in "The Former Age," Guyon goes on to explain that "Then gan a cursed hand the quiet wombe / Of his great Grandmother with steele to wound, / And the hid treasures in her sacred tombe, / With Sacriledge to dig" (vii.17). As

happens often later in Book VI, here something hidden gets exposed. Like disruption on Mount Acidale, this digging is “Sacriledge,” the destruction of sacred wholeness.

Privacy and the secret self complement the legend’s interest in genealogy: all involve a traceable, definable identity.⁹ As a representation of the multitude and its many tongues, the Beast menaces not only “naturall first need” but also aristocratic identity (Norbrook 128), one of romance’s preoccupations. The Beast’s uncertain lineage contrasts with the reunion and reintegration typical of returns home in romance, where aristocratic lineages get confirmed. As is so often the case in romance, parentage becomes important to some of Book VI’s tales. The naturally courteous Salvage Man has a noble lineage, and his simple, transparent language contrasts with the Beast’s slander. Book VI also contains two foundling stories. Calepine rescues a child from a bear and gives it to a childless couple, Matilda and Sir Bruin, of whom “was it sayd, there should to him a sonne / *Be gotten, not begotten*” (iv.32). In canto xii, Pastorella and her parents reunite when “her owne handmayd” Melissa recognizes a “rosie marke” (14, 15), and Claribell confirms her daughter’s identity “by very certaine signes” (xii.20). Both stories draw on many romance motifs: recognition and reunion, a mysterious sign deciphered, coincidence, the fair unknown’s aristocratic lineage. The Blatant Beast threatens to destroy this enchanted world. The second half of the final canto returns to Calidore’s pursuit of the creature, successful for a time but soon frustrated. In returning to Calidore’s quest, Spenser leaves Pastorella’s romance in mid-stanza, highlighting the two plots’ differences all the more (22). By including stories that involve a search for parents, Book VI emphasizes just how much romance, and perhaps *The Faerie Queene* itself, depends

on origins and finding correct names. A noisy creature that impugns reputations, the Beast compromises traceable identities.

The emphasis on privacy and identity seems to create a profusion of bowers in Book VI, the most memorable on Mount Acidale. Virtue's "bowre" in the Proem is the first of several in the legend: a knight comes upon Aladine and Priscilla in "a couert glade / Within a wood" (ii.16); Calidore finds Calepine and Serena "In a couert shade" (iii.20). In the "Stygian den," a kind of unholy bower, we witness slander's origin, and in the dance of the Graces "in the couert of the wood" (x.11), we glimpse "a poetic apotheosis," Colin Clout piping amid or near rings of dancers (Shore 140). Like the private self that the hermit describes, the dance of the Graces on Mount Acidale offers a counterpoint to the Blatant Beast: the dance is secluded, the Beast everywhere.¹⁰ Where the Beast fragments and is fragmented, this dance contains two of the poem's many rings, which emblematicize an elusive sacrality. But although this scene seems to reveal the origins of poetry and grace, Colin Clout's location seems unclear. Calidore sees "a troupe of Ladies dauncing found / Full merrily, and making gladfull glee, / And in the midst a Shepheard piping" (x.10). Then Spenser describes another circle: "All they without were raunged in a ring, / And daunced round; but in the midst of them / Three other Ladies did both Daunce and sing" (x.12). Where exactly is the piper in relationship to the rings of dancers?¹¹ He may be in the outer circle and outside the inner, but Spenser does not make it easy to say. Because who is "in the midst" of whom seems uncertain, we cannot quite locate the piping's origin. The poem places the reader in Calidore's position, stepping forward to make things out more clearly but finally unable to do so. Something similar happens in the Proem to Book VI, where Spenser describes a ring around Gloriana:

“Right so from you all goodly vertues well / Into the rest, which round about you ring, / Faire Lords and Ladies, which about you dwell” (7). In these verses, too, the source of grace, Gloriana herself—Elizabeth—never quite appears, and neither does she emerge elsewhere in *The Faerie Queene*. Sacred authority remains just offstage.

Calidore will not merely watch the dancers and listen to the piping but wants to understand more, and his intrusion disenchants the vision. Humphrey Tonkin connects this search to the destruction of enchantment: “Calidore, all unwittingly, repeatedly does what the Beast does intentionally: he breaks in and destroys. Book VI is the only book the object of whose quest is all around us” (756). Calidore and the Blatant Beast thus both destroy the sacred in their search for knowledge. The object of the quest is understanding, which Calidore attempts when he disrupts the dance and ends Colin Clout’s piping. Patricia Parker argues that “The suggestion through the Legend is that to inquire too closely into origins—or to penetrate a secret ‘shade’—would be to intrude upon a privacy, like that of a grace which cannot be forced or the Graces who disappear when Calidore determines to question their identity” (111). Inquiry and intrusion disenchant, but they also constitute the quest itself, and this tension seems to inform much of the Legend of Courtesy. The Beast is threatening not only because he destroys privacy but also because he seeks knowledge, “searched” the monks’ “secrets,” and thus the monster himself becomes a quester (Gross, “Reflections” 110). Not only mortality but also knowledge can end the quest, for full knowledge destroys the possibility for a world elsewhere by removing alternative realms of discourse. In this sense the Beast threatens Spenser’s enchanted world, which, like all romance, relies on imperfect knowledge. If the quest is to make sense of everything around us, something we cannot ultimately do, then

the quest object is all around us in Julian's *Revelation*, *Piers Plowman*, and Chaucer's dream visions, too. In all of the texts in this dissertation, something private, some origin, remains secret. Each quester both moves toward this elusive object and simultaneously further away.

These disruptions of privacy and searches for knowledge offer an explanation for Book VI's self-consciousness. The legend foregrounds its literariness with abrupt transitions, a profusion of romance motifs, and characters with names such as Calepine, a knight of courtesy whose name suggests something like "dictionary" and thus reflects the "lexicographical concerns" elsewhere in the canto (Fried 237). In contrast to the Blatant Beast, Calepine's name may represent correct language use, but his story, unlike Pastorella's, ends unresolved. Harry Berger, Jr. argues that this mixture of conventional and unresolved plots shows Spenser thinking about poetry's inadequacy to life's problems: "The contrivance of the narrative, the inconclusiveness of the adventures, the gradual flaying of the romance world, the failure of chivalric action—these dramatize the claims imposed by actuality on the life of the imagination. They also reveal the poet's awareness that the problems of life cannot be solved by poetry, cannot even be adequately represented in the simplified forms of Faerie" (219).¹² This idea becomes clearest when the Blatant Beast destroys the fiction itself, flaying the romance world entirely. The patterns that Berger points to draw attention to the precariousness of Faery land, which seems on the edge of disenchantment.

4.

In addition to romance's emphasis on identity, the Blatant Beast's two ancestries may also register sixteenth-century English genealogical anxieties. Because Books V and

VI involve Spenser's Irish colonial experience, behind the Beast's "commixture," which Spenser mentions in both of the monster's genealogies, we might hear New English fears of blurred cultural distinctions.¹³ In Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, Irenaeus links this fear to unreliable language. Commenting on the Old English in Ireland (colonists who arrived in the twelfth century during the reign of Henry II), he laments that "some of them have quite shaken off their English names, and put on Irish that they might bee altogether Irish" (68). Identity and language have nearly become unmoored in the *View* and in the *Legend of Courtesy*, and in the *View* Spenser describes another linguistic "commixture" when he shows that the Old English have adopted some Irish language: "For at their joyning of battell, they lykewyes call upon their captaines name, or the name of his auncestors. As the under Oneale cry Landerg-abo, that is, the bloody hand, that is Oneale's badge. They under O'Brien call Laun-laider, that is the strong hand. And to their ensample, the old Englishe also which there remayneth, have gotten up their cryes Scythian like, as Crom-abo, and Butler-abo" (59). This Old English hybridization may also appear in *The Faerie Queene*. Lisa Jardine argues that Satyrane, who saves Una "from the 'saluage' nation" in Book I but then gets defeated by Artegall in Book IV's tournament, represents the Old English, an especially interesting suggestion in that one of his parents is a satyr, the other human (81). The poem implies that the Old English, like Satyrane, have become hybrid and half-wild. Perhaps due to this perceived indeterminacy, Irenaeus declares that the Old English are "more malitious to the English than the Irish themselves" (54).¹⁴

Prose, however, does not necessarily allow Spenser to preserve distinctions and control his text any more than does poetic allegory. In the *View* Irenaeus traces the Irish

to the Scythians through a detailed genealogical discussion, “probably the longest digression in the dialogue” (Hadfield and Maley xviii). After this investigation, Eudoxus comments that Irenaeus has returned to his subject, the depravity of Irish customs: “You bring your self Iren. Very well into the way again, notwithstanding that it seemeth that you were never out of the way” (54). Simultaneously in and out of the way, Spenser digresses to describe the Irish derivation from the Scythians, as if the land pulls him away from his purpose. The search for origins seems to conduce wandering, and interestingly, Scythia may not even be a precise location (Hadfield and Maley, 44 n.34). This wandering seems especially notable in the context of Book VI, where Calidore fails “to establish the source of true courtesy” and is absent or off-course for much of the legend (Waller 26). There Spenser must also bring himself back “into the way again” when he retakes up Calidore’s quest late in Book VI: “Now turne againe my teme thou jolly Swayne, / Back to the furrow which I lately left” (ix.1).¹⁵ In both texts Ireland creates the digression perhaps because for the poet the land is both center and periphery, home and exile. As pastoral retreat, Ireland is a source of poetry but at the same time a threat, a place of “commixture” and otherness. The Blatant Beast embodies this tension: the monster conduces error, an “endless trace” (i.6), but as an image of fallen language itself he also generates poetry.

Another fear of “commixture” and desire for a national linguistic source appears in the dedicatory epistle to *The Shephearde’s Calender*, where E.K. describes the deterioration of English:

For in my opinion it is one special prayse, of many which are dew to this
Poete, that he hath laboured to restore, as to theyr rightfull heritage such

good and naturall English words, as have ben long time out of use and almost cleare disherited. Which is the onely cause, that our Mother tongue, which truly of it self is both ful enough for prose and stately enough for verse, hath long time ben counted most bare and barrein of both. Which default when as some endevoured to salve and recure, they patched up the holes with peces and rags of other languages, borrowing here of the french, there of the Italian, every where of the Latine, not weighing how il, those tongues accorde with themselves, but much worse with ours: So now they have made our English tongue, a gallimaufray or hodgepodge of al other speeches. (*Edmund Spenser's Poetry* 503)

“Disherited” introduces a genealogical metaphor into E.K.’s description of the poet’s attempt to fix his language’s ancestry and restore the “Mother tongue” and “naturall English.”¹⁶ This genealogy, though, does not seem secure. Again the Blatant Beast may lurk in these lines: a many-tongued, composite creature, he seems like a more sinister “gallimaufray or hodgepodge” of words. But as an iconoclast who breaks into bowers and tears apart monasteries, the Beast also aligns with the desire in this passage to clear away the “gallimaufray or hodgepodge” and locate an origin. E.K.’s comments on the decline of English in the preface to the *Calender* rely on a logic of destroying and remaking that informs the *View* and the Blatant Beast.¹⁷

Further complicating E.K. and Spenser’s efforts to restore their language, the Old English in Ireland may have offered Spenser an important source for his poetic language, despite his hostility toward them in the *View*. Thomas Ward explains that “Many of Spenser’s contemporaries imagined the version of English spoken by the Old English to

be, in the words of Richard Stanihurst, the ‘very dregs of the old ancient Chaucer English’ (780), and “The idea that the purest English might easily be mistaken for Irish (and vice versa) points to the fear that the English might already be ‘straungers’ and ‘aliens’ in their own ‘mother tongue’” (782). Spenser describes Chaucer, “well of English undefiled,” as an important origin for his own poetry, but Spenser finds that origin now in Ireland,¹⁸ a complex object of desire. Like the Blatant Beast, Ireland’s “commixture” of language offers his poetry both a source and an antagonist.

5.

These anxieties about origins and “commixture” surface especially in the Legend of Courtesy because this virtue emanates from the court and involves observing each person’s place.¹⁹ Nohrnberg comments that “The Graces...teach us ‘how to each degree and kynde / We should our selues demeane, to low and hie’ (VI.x.23). The Beast disregards this sort of ranking, and speaks licentiously ‘Of good and bad alike, of low and hie’ (VI.xii.28)” (707). Although the Beast clearly opposes the Graces’ instruction, courtesy remains difficult to define because it shares much with slander.²⁰ Both involve language and community, and in different circumstances one easily becomes the other: Malfont’s fate in Book V underscores this point, for the poet had been Bonfont. Thus in Book VI the Beast’s effects largely only spread. His habitat increases as the Legend of Courtesy continues, and he appears in the city, town, and country (ix.3-4). Like Chaucer’s goddess Fame and the rumors she judges, the Beast’s slander eventually threatens everyone. “So now he raungeth through the world againe, / And rageth sore in each degree and state” (xii.40). In threatening all equally, the monster erodes hierarchy, as Nohrnberg suggests. MacCaffrey connects this effect to some of Book VI’s central

ideas: “leveling of distinctions is rebuked in Book V by Artegal in his colloquy with the Giant; in Book VI it is associated with the forces marshaled against Courtesy. It is a sign of lovelessness, for love cherishes the unique. Spenser makes the point again when, in the ‘huge havocke’ of the Brigants’ quarrel, the candles go out, leaving ‘no skill nor difference of wight’ (xi.16). The darkness that blots out distinctions is the enemy of Courtesy” (360).²¹ Here we might remember that both of the Blatant Beast’s genealogies emphasize darkness, appropriate given his murky beginnings and threat to fame as renown (Malory’s “worship”), which requires clarity.

Because Book VI does not easily distinguish between courtesy and slander, Calidore, the Beast’s ostensible opposite, facilitates the monster’s wide range. In canto ix, the knight asks some shepherds if they have seen the Blatant Beast, and they reply “that no such beast they saw / Nor any wicked feend, that mote offend / Their happie flockes, nor daunger to them draw” (ix.6). But the pastures soon fill with noisy brigands who disregard all courtesy, and in this sense the monster appears among the shepherds, which suggests that Calidore does lead the Beast into the pastoral landscape.²² When Calidore briefly captures the Beast, Spenser compares him to the hydra-slaying Hercules, but like many such heroes, the knight of courtesy cannot forever control fickle tongues. Aptekar observes that “figures of heroic, herculean virtue have always had as their inevitable enemies foul-tongued envying beasts which they cannot destroy” (211). When Calidore captures the Beast, he leads him in parade and enjoys admiration from spectators, who “much admyr’d the Beast, but more admyr’d the Knight” (xii.). As David Lee Miller notes, “The repeated verb links Calidore and his antagonist” (“Calidore” 128). The knight brings the Beast with him because the monster is part of him.²³ Calidore’s artful speech

also seems to link him to the Beast from the beginning. The knight wields nearly magical speech: his “euery act and deed, that he did say, / Was like enchantment, that through both the eyes, / And both the eares did steale the hart away” (ii.3). As early as the second canto a tension in courtesy suggests itself: Calidore is both truthful and enchanting. The Blatant Beast has a similar relationship to language: as a slanderer he reveals secrets and thus becomes a kind of truth-teller. In the difficulty separating protagonist and antagonist we can see further why Calidore’s quest never ends.

Justice might stop the Blatant Beast’s slander, but in Book V that virtue has already proven incapable of the task. Like heroism and renown, justice requires clarity, and the Blatant Beast begins his career by attacking that virtue. In Book V, we learn that justice relies on correct language and interpretation.²⁴ In the book’s opening adventure, Talus, Artegall’s squire, overtakes Sir Sanglier, “Whom at the first he ghessed by his looke, / And by the other markes, which of his shield he took” (i.20). When Talus overcomes Sanglier and leads him to Artegall, Sanglier accuses another of a murder he himself committed. Artegall, however, is not fooled: “*Artegall*, by signes perceiuing plaine, / That he it was not, which that Lady kild, / But that strange Knight, the fairer loue to gaine, / Did cast about by sleight the truth thereout to straine” (i.24). (Artegall’s “sleight” involves a version of Solomon’s trick of offering to divide a disputed child between two claimants.) In Malory, Lancelot has a similar relationship to language and truth. Knights are readers and must interpret correctly to deliver justice, Book V’s governing virtue. What would such readers do confronted with Spenserian characters that defy ready interpretation? How would they judge Calidore, who at least seems to transgress the virtue he embodies? Some of Spenser’s most interesting moments likely

defy justice's interpretive framework, in other words, and this idea suggests that justice and poetry do not align easily. The former desires clarity, the latter uses indirection. Both the poet and the Blatant Beast, who "spake licentious words, and hatefull things / Of good and bad alike, of low and hie," wield uncertain language (xii.28). Appropriately, then, the Beast attacks Artegall, knight of justice, at the end of Book V. Unstable language prevents justice, and in Book VI Calidore, who takes over from Artegall in a world without a central authority, must "tread an endless trace, withouten guyde" (i.6).

Although courtesy is not a Langlandian virtue (Norbrook 129), Book VI's absent authority and series of definitions for courtesy recall *Piers Plowman*, which defines Dowel in various and perhaps even contradictory ways. Much as Langland's poem lacks a central authority, in Book VI the court is unstable, and courtesy resists definition. Andrew Hadfield argues that because justice fails in Book V, Calidore's quest "is doomed before it is begun," for "he has no hope of defining what he does. Furthermore, there is no proper means of ruling, or even controlling, the country in which the Blatant Beast has been set loose by the actions of the crown itself" (*Edmund Spenser* 332). The court calls Artegall away from Irena's land "ere he could reforme it thoroughly" (V.xii.26). Almost immediately, Envie, Detraction, and the Blatant Beast attack him. By Book VI, then, the court itself seems imperfect, so no one can perfectly practice its virtue. Without a central authority, the quest continues.²⁵ In both poems, an endless work seems to result from this absence, as if the poets try to write their way toward reliable language.

The Beast's infiltration of the monasteries is the last of several disruptions of closed spaces in Book VI until he violates the borders of the poem itself. Born in a hellish "den," he now tears apart monks' "dennes":

Into their cloysters now he broken had,
 Through which the Monckes he chaced here & there,
 And them pursu'd into their dortours sad,
 And searched all their cels and secrets neare;
 In which what filth and ordure did appeare,
 Were yrkesome to report; yet that foule Beast
 Nought sparing them, the more did tosse and teare,
 And ransacke all their dennes from most to least,
 Regarding nought religion, nor their holy heast. (xii.24)

We can almost hear whispered secrets in the line, “searched all their cels and secrets,” but Spenser declines to reveal what the Beast finds, so that even as the monster exposes the monastery something remains hidden. A similar tension also occurs on a larger level in this stanza. In his conversations with William Drummond, Ben Jonson seems to associate the Beast with Reformation iconoclasm when he comments that “by the blating beast the puritans were understood” (465).²⁶ Angus Fletcher calls the Beast “Unmeasurable, like death...a creature of Babel” (*Prophetic Moment* 293). In his destruction and slander, the Beast overthrows measurement and distinctions, and thus he is not only an enemy of Courtesy but also of knowledge. But here as he disrupts distinction and measure he also seeks knowledge, ruining in search of secrets, and in his destructive, iconoclastic research, the Beast drives magic from the world. As a figure for both iconoclasm and poetry, the Beast seems to embody sixteenth-century anxieties about the world’s enchantment.

In some sense the Beast's iconoclasm must eventually lead to self-destruction, for he is a creature of magic: as Gary Waller observes, "The Blatant Beast attacks not only virtuous and unwary courtiers, but the basis of the very art that has brought him into being" (157). And indeed, just as the Beast begins to align with *The Faerie Queene's* own interest in iconoclasm,²⁷ he attacks the poet. Soon after the Beast breaks into the monasteries where he "did tosse and teare," he breaks through the poem's boundaries and threatens to tear apart the poet's own verses. In this monster, the poet himself meets an antagonist: the Blatant Beast threatens the survival of Spenser's fame and thus his place in a literary genealogy:²⁸

Ne spareth he the gentle Poets rime,
 But rends without regard of person or of time.

Ne may this homely verse, of many meanest,
 Hope to escape his venomous despite,
 More then my former writs, all were they clearest
 From blamefull blot, and free from all that wite,
 With which some wicked tongues did it backebite,
 And bring into a mighty Peres displeasure,
 That neuer so deserued to endite.

Therfore do you my rimes keep better measure,
 And seeke to please, that now is counted wisemens threasure. (xii. 40-41)

"With which some wicked tongues did it backebite" suggests that the Blatant Beast remains unchained because Spenser cannot determine his poetry's reception. But as a representation of interpretation itself, the monster's slander implies that Spenser's

reputation will survive, though beyond the poet's own control.²⁹ The hermit extols the private self as a resource against the world, and Meliboe offers a similar maxim: "It is the mynd, that maketh good or ill" (ix.30). Calidore understands Meliboe's remarks to mean that "in each mans self... / It is, to fashion his owne lyfes estate" (ix.31).³⁰ This idea derives from the desire for a private self, and Calidore's reply helps further bring into focus the Beast's threat.³¹ The Beast partly represents how readers make meaning and that people cannot entirely "fashion" their "own lyfes estate," and in this way he counters the poem's aim to fashion a gentleman. At the end of Book VI, the poem seems to have abandoned its attempt to fashion and given in to pleasing its readers.³² The Beast seems to win. Perhaps, though, Spenser again nearly aligns himself with the Beast, even if the poet prepares himself to flatter more than slander. Spenser seems to say that in his search for preferment he must distort language, and this distortion erodes the distinction between the Blatant Beast and aspiring poet. The monster, born from Echidna's "rocks and caues" and Chimæra's "den," which recall the bowers elsewhere in Book VI, seems like the embowered poet's double, and we perhaps realize that slander and poetry, like courtesy and poetry, are not always distinguishable.

In the *House of Fame* the dreaming Chaucer declares himself unconcerned with his reputation, and somewhat similarly Calidore remarks of his quest, "Yet shall it not by none be testifyde" (i.6). Like Geffrey, the knight wants to preserve himself from fame and rumor. But Geffrey's declaration comes between his visits to the Houses of Fame and Rumor, and Calidore cannot permanently chain the Blatant Beast. In Book VI's last stanzas, Spenser, though, imagines his verses assailed by "wicked tongues," and Chaucer's Fame also differs from Spenser's Beast in that she pronounces judgments

arbitrarily, whereas the Beast only slanders. Thus even in a text as noisy as the *House of Fame*, the threat to sacrality may seem more contained than in Book VI of *The Faeire Queene*. The *House of Fame*'s ending also saves some authority from rumor's destruction, implying that perhaps fame and rumor have not corrupted everything and everyone, a moment that resembles the end of *Piers Plowman*, where the authority figure, Piers himself, remains out ahead somewhere waiting for Conscience. Julian relegates the muttering fiend's destructive potential to isolated passages in her text, and he is nowhere heard among her revelation's final chorus. Malory caps his narration of Arthur's death and the cataclysmic battle with a final gesture toward wholeness, a gesture that Spenser declines at the end of Book VI.

The *Mutabilitie Cantos'* last line, though, does gesture toward a far-off authority (Kinney 120-21): "O that great Sabbaoth God, graunt me that Sabaoths sight" (viii.2). In this complex gesture, the pun Sabbaoth/Elizabeth suggests that Spenser still courts favor and thus must fear the Blatant Beast. In "Sabbaoth" we might distantly hear "Elizabeth," a name that has not appeared in *The Faerie Queene*. Neither Elizabeth's name nor person appear in the poem except in a series of surrogates, and Richard McCabe observes that "The proem identifies the queen as the source and end of courtesy but the marked absence of an effective surrogate within the ensuing narrative stands in stark contrast to the virtual omnipresence of the beast" (*Spenser's Monstrous Regiment* 233). Elizabeth is an ur-text or the man of great authority who seems to approach at the *House of Fame*'s close. Elizabeth J. Bellamy argues that "the episode on Mt. Acidale may be the greatest interpretive challenge in the entire Faerie Queene, may, indeed, be beyond interpretation itself...Spenser is presenting his final attempt at naming Elizabeth, at achieving the

perfect synchronization of Colin's poetic voice and the image of his queen" (15).³³ The Mount Acidale scene might be "beyond interpretation," and Calidore, who often resembles his adversary, attempts to interpret the spectacle only to destroy it. A sacred monarch must remain beyond interpretation, as the *House of Fame* shows. But the Blatant Beast's omnipresent noise insists that everyone gets interpreted, for as a slanderer, the Beast renames and thus interprets. Perhaps Spenser keeps his monarch offstage, then, not simply to impugn her authority but also to preserve it. The Legend of Courtesy both creates a complex threat to sacrality and gestures toward a far-off wholeness.

Piers Plowman and Julian's *Revelation*, both lifelong works, return to their beginnings only to start again, and both foreground their readers' participation. By beginning with pastoral poetry and ending with epic Spenser charts a more linear career that seems to follow a Vergilian progression, but the *Faerie Queene* also ends with a sense of ongoingness and something of late medieval works' recursiveness. Book VI closes by acknowledging that readers will make the text their own, an acknowledgment that appears in late medieval books, which also defer authority and significance. These writers are trying to write their way into a non-noisy space where interpretation would be unnecessary, but at the same time they acknowledge that fallen language is inherently noisy. As their works close, we can still hear echoes of fiends muttering, beasts barking, rumors rushing, and the geese's "Kek kek!"

Notes

¹ Hardie observes that the Beast's "hundred tongues" "match the hundred tongues for which the poet traditionally wishes. 'Oft interlacing many a forged lie' (VI.xii.33, 5) is an

activity that he shares with the poet, and one that also brings him (and the poet) close to the feignings of Archimago" (402-3)

² Hadfield comments on the Salvage Man's inaccessible idiom: "For him, language is straightforward in a way that Calidore's search demands it should be; the obvious problem is that unless we can forget our own sophistication we cannot return to the state of innocence which the salvage man represents. The paradox is that we inevitably have to affirm our difference from his goodness simply by dint of being able to observe and recognize it. In this way he stands as both a stage of innate primitive goodness which man must leave behind in order to advance, and the lost Golden Age referred to in the proem to Book V" (*Spenser's Irish Experience* 176).

³ Nohrnberg shows that his genealogy associates the Blatant Beast with unstable language in at least a few ways: "Calidore derives him from the Chimaera and Cerberus. The Chimaera signifies the arts of rhetoric in Comes and Bocchius. (The Beast is also compared to the Hydra, which has an association with the abuse of words going back to Plato's sophists.) Being a dog, the Beast's philosophical affinities are with the Cynics" (692).

⁴ Fletcher notes the Beast's longevity: "From the Fall until the present time of the poem's creation the Beast is abroad and destroying everywhere he can" (*Prophetic Moment* 291).

⁵ Spenser also associates Archimago with the wind: "He stayd not for more bidding, but away / Was suddein vanished out of his sight: / The Northerne winde his wings did broad display / At his commaund, and reared him vp light" (II.iii.19) (Brooks-Davies 54).

⁶ Bond observes a similar effect: "The more rapidly pursued, the more it recedes to the circumference of the poem" (97).

⁷ Clare Regan Kinney makes this argument: "He locates his act of making, then, in a 'present age' where all visual and verbal representations are pre-emptively fallen and potentially duplicitous. How is he to authenticate *his* acts of naming amid the perverse usage of the world where 'that which all men...did vertue call / Is now called vice: and that which vice was hight / Is now hight vertue and so us'd of all' (V. Proem 4)? Spenser's anxieties about this very issue have already been incorporated into the poem in his repeated representation of the monstrous enemies of his questers as monstrous abusers of language" (86, original emphasis).

⁸ C.S. Lewis comments that "The wise old man, full of true courtesy without 'forged shows' such as 'fitter beene for courting fools', happy as 'carelesse bird in cage', and gently teaching his penitents that the Blatant Beast cannot do you much permanent injury unless something is wrong within, is one of the loveliest of Spenser's religious figures" (*Allegory* 352). This analysis of the Beast seems like the hermit's perspective, but the legend might offer a more complex view, for by the end of the book, the monster does seem "within" even the poet's language.

⁹ Nohrnberg notes these themes' connection: "An important aspect of the theme of the reserved and manifested self is the frequent motif of secret or concealed *origins*" (663, original emphasis).

¹⁰ Miller argues that the "dance of the Graces on Mount Acidale in Book VI...stages what may be Spenser's yearning to withdraw from the imperial Gaze. At once ecstatic and nostalgic, Colin's vision of the Graces dancing around a mysterious country lass

seems to offer an alternative theatre, ‘deep within the mind,’ for a disclosure untainted by the motives of publicity” (“Spenser” 757).

¹¹ The editorial note for VI.x.10.7-9 explains that “The shepherd is seen with the damsel encircled by the Graces and the nymphs; or he may be encircled only by the nymphs who ‘him daunst about’ (16.5); or he may be outside the two circles” (669).

¹² Judith H. Anderson makes a similar observation: “The sixth book, whose arch-villain is a blatant and beastly misuser of language, is fundamentally about words, about interpretations, and, by a further extension, about poetic forms. The inclusion within the book of conventional forms such as moral proverbs and pastoral lyrics subjects their powers and limitations—their authority—to exploration and assessment” (42).

¹³ Richard McCabe explains that “The majority of New English planters were hardly the cream of civil English society but single men of low social status whose likely intermarriage with Gaelic families posed the most serious threat of cultural assimilation” (“Edmund Spenser” 86).

¹⁴ Andrew Murphy explains that in the *View*, Spenser contends that “the Old English are, in fact, worse than the Irish themselves—whereby the Irish are relatively pure barbarians and the Old English are impure barbarians and hence are doubly savage” (68).

¹⁵ Corey McEleney observes that “In the Legend of Courtesy, Spenser pushes to the extreme an interruptive impulse or drive that the previous books try so hard to subdue” (812).

¹⁶ Helfer observes that E.K. himself contributes to the decline he laments: “Complaining that earlier authors ‘made our English tongue, a gallimaufrey and hodgepodge of al other speeches,’ E.K. only heightens this linguistic Tower of Babel with his choice of words” (83).

¹⁷ Moroney argues that Spenser’s support in the *View* for destroying Irish culture, language, and people then remaking the country, a process of “reformation and dissolution...inextricably bound together in political practice,” finds expression in the Blatant Beast (121).

¹⁸ Willy Maley argues that “In his encounters with the Old English in Ireland, Spenser discovered a community who were drinking from the ‘well of English undefyled’” (41). Thomas Ward documents an instance of this movement by tracing the word “hubbub” from its use as an Irish war cry back to its possible Anglo-Norman origins (782).

¹⁹ Parker notes “the tension throughout the Book between the virtue nurtured on a “lowly stalke” (Pro. 4.3) and the “Courtesie” derived from “Court” (107). Similarly, Hadfield observes that “The quest of Calidore is impossible because courtesy is defined in a series of contradictory ways, being the ‘roote of ciuill conuersation’ (VI.i.I, line 6) yet also buried ‘deepe within the mynd’ (proem, 5, line 8); emanating from the court (i.I, line 1) and imagined as a flower that grows on a ‘lowly stalk’ (proem, 4, line 3)” (*Edmund Spenser* 327).

²⁰ Waller explains this idea: “All the encounters between the knight of Courtesy and forest dwellers blur the distinction between courtesy and its opponents. If Calidore’s quest to subdue the Blatant Beast is an attempt to establish the source of true courtesy and to continue to locate it in the English court, and especially the symbolic (and real) person, the Queen, we are never able to forget that his queen is unsuccessful, that his great enemy the Blatant Beast escapes, and seemingly can never be conquered” (25-6). Waller also

notes that “part of the Beast’s threat seems to lie in its being uncannily close to the virtue it seeks to undermine: the enemy of courtesy is not an alien force, but a variant of courtesy itself” (154). Also see Phillips 71.

²¹ MacCaffrey notes that the Beast’s bite produces symptoms like love: “The arbitrariness of love’s wound, and its incurability as well, connects it with a more malign power in Book VI, the Blatant Beast itself. Spenser describes Calidore’s love-sickness in language that curiously echoes earlier stanzas describing the Beast’s bite; it is an ‘envenimed sting,’ a ‘poys-nous point deepe fixed in his hart’ (x.31), ‘Which to recure, no skill of Leaches art / Mote him availe, but to return againe / To his wounds worker’” (372). This affinity emphasizes that love and language fell together, both now marred by imperfect desire and the possibility of duplicity.

²² Debra Belt describes Calidore’s hopless position: “If he ignores him [the Blatant Beast] entirely, the monster ranges uncontrolled; yet if he pursues him he extends his sphere of influence by pushing him from the court to the towns and villages of Faery Land and eventually all the way to the open fields and into the pastoral world. Whatever he does the knights thus risks reproach and those he is defending risk their very lives” (127). Richard Rambuss also attributes the Beast’s considerable range to Calidore (116-17).

²³ Douglas A. Northrop argues that Calidore “cannot use his sword on the Blatant Beast to kill it any more than Mirabella can allow Prince Arthur to kill Disdain. It is part of her nature, and she would perish with it. So the best Calidore can do with his and the whole world’s doppelganger is to suppress it by crushing it with a shield and muzzling it” (230). Also see Cain 172.

²⁴ In her study of Book V, Aptekar makes this point: “the final confrontation of justice with rumor and malicious report emphasizes justice’s dependence on truth. For rumor, guile, and wrong speech are essentially antithetical to justice and law, which depend upon rightly recorded history and accurate information” (211).

²⁵ McCabe shows how this idea functions on the level of the whole poem: “Of particular interest is the Faerie Queene’s failure to make a single appearance in the poem that bears her name. She is discussed, desired, idealized, envisioned, fleetingly apprehended in a myriad of male and female surrogates, but never present. She is to the world of the poem what Elizabeth was to Ireland, a remote authority figure acting through deputies and substitutes” (81).

²⁶ Hadfield describes Spenser’s complex sympathies: “The British isles were littered with the ruins of religious foundations in the late sixteenth century. Even so, this is an astonishing image, especially for readers who want to see Spenser as a straightforward Protestant with low church leanings. Equally so, it complicates the arguments of those who want to see accounts of ‘bare ruin’d quires’ as evidence of a coded sympathy for Catholicism. Many ‘church papists’ were nostalgic for the unified church of the late Middle Ages. Ben Jonson was presumably referring to these stanzas when he remarked to William Drummond that ‘by the blating beast the puritans were understood’. Jonson’s judgement is acute, indicating that he thought that Spenser, like so many others, deeply regretted the division of Christendom and the destruction it wrought, and, like Rome and Verulam (St Albans) in his own *Complaints*, looked back nostalgically to a more unified, happier past” (224).

²⁷ The Beast's destruction recalls the iconoclasm of Arthur and Guyon in earlier books. Hardie notes this connection: "The Blatant Beast comes closer to the poet, and the heroes with whose goals the poet identifies, in his destruction of the monastery and church at VI.xii.23-5, an iconoclastic violence which parodies that recorded with approval, it seems, by the poet in the destruction of the Bower of Bliss and the House of Busyrane" (402). Gross aligns the Beast with iconoclastic impulses elsewhere in Spenser: "the questing Beast is here in the position of Prince Arthur in Canto 8 of Book I, investigating the dark secrets, the bloodily fouled altars and desolations, at the heart of Orgoglio's palace, dragging its monstrosities (and its victims) into the light. Book VI's closing image of slander's ravages thus becomes the double or the dream-like mirror of iconoclasm and reformation with which Spenser identifies the springs of his entire project in *The Faerie Queene*" ("Reflections" 110-11). Gross argues that the Beast "is all the more unsettling because in accusing it the poet is half accusing himself. For the Beast is ultimately related to the poet's anxious sense of 'how doubtfully all Allegories may be construed'; it is the 'giant form' of those uncontrollable duplicities, those 'jealous opinions and misconstructions' that seem the inevitable shadow of his poetry; it is a force of violation internal to, but also released by, any act of staking out an allegorical vision, especially one with such high spiritual, political, and moral stakes as Spenser's own" ("Iconoclasm" 259).

²⁸ Hardie notes that this ability is common to representations of fame: "The Blatant Beast has the power to roam freely across the boundaries that separate antiquity from the present day, and Faery land from the England of the sixteenth century. This also is a characteristic of Virgilian and Ovidian *Fama*, that as a person(ification) within a narrative she should also embody features that relate to the production and reception of the text in which she appears" (403).

²⁹ Leigh A. DeNeef remarks that "We are asked to chain the misreading Beast by becoming right readers" (21). Perhaps the poem suggests, though, that we can never read correctly. The Legend of Courtesy closes with the Beast unchained either due to fate or "fault of men," both inevitable.

³⁰ MacCaffrey points out that Calidore misinterprets this idea: "Melibee's conclusion—'Each unto himselfe his life may fortunize (30)—is misunderstood by Calidore, who interprets it to mean that he can choose between vocations in the 'real' world, remaking it in the image of his desires" (368).

³¹ On VI.xii.24, Moroney observes that "This language of withdrawal into privacy, with the notions of interior, psychic space that this implies, suggests some reasons why the Beast's violation of the 'monastrous,' as it were, threaten Spenser's construction of the sacred, with its links to the inaccessible, the interior, the mysterious" (126).

³² Several critics makes this point. See McEleney 813; Philmus 512; and MacCaffrey 402.

³³ Bellamy argues that "In the structure of the 'endless trace,' the readability of the originary Name (Elizabeth) will always be under erasure by the slander of allegory, the Blatant Beast" (14).

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