« Thirled with the Poynt of Remembraunce »: Memory and Modernity in Chaucer's Poetry

When in 1700 Dryden first endowed Chaucer with the title « Father of English Poetry », he provided a nomenclature for a general Renaissance understanding[1]. Spenser, for example, had commonly referred to Chaucer in terms that assumed originality: first invoking « some little drops » from « the spring [that] was in [his] learned hedde » (« June », 93-94), he later called him the « well of English vndefiled » (*Faerie Queene*, 4.2.32) and claimed that « in [his] gentle spright / The pure well head of Poesie did dwell » (*FQ*, 7.7.9). As the metaphors imply, Chaucer was for Spencer a *fons et origo* of poetic inspiration whose powers were not transmitted by imitation but instead inherited through an intimate, familial relationship. Similarly, Sidney had reinterpreted the traditional designation of Chaucer and Gower as the English equivalents to Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio by setting all of these moderns over against the ancient founders of Latin poetry — a prefiguration of Dryden's comparison of Chaucer to Homer and Virgil[2]. As even these brief notices suggest, two, not entirely compatible assumptions govern the Renaissance investment

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[1] « Preface to Fables Ancient and Modern », in *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, 2 vol., ed. George Watson (London, J.M. Dent, 1962), 2.280.

[2] *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (London, Nelson, 1965), p. 96. In *The Fall of Princes* (1431-39), Lydgate had already compared Chaucer to Virgil, Dante, and Petrarch (3.3858-60) and then again to Petrarch and Boccaccio (Epilogue, 3422-28); earlier, in the *Troy Book* (1412-20), he had provided an extensive comparison to Petrarch as Laureate (3.4542-59). But Lydgate never located this comparison in the context of the « querelle des anciens et modernes », as did Sidney and Dryden.

of Chaucer with paternity. One is that he is the originator, the poet who breaks with the past and presides over the future — in short, the first modern poet in English. The other is that the idea of literature and literary history (what Dryden called «lineal descents and clans») is as natural as the patriarchal family itself. Literature is a transhistorical object always available to writers of genius: what the Greeks and Romans had possessed, Chaucer introduced into England. Neither of these assumptions are easily accepted today. Both philology and philosophy have taught us to mistrust claims to originality, while the idea of literature is widely recognized as a historical category that must be continually reconstituted and redefined.

While Chaucer's medieval successors of course recognized (and were intimidated by) his preeminence, they did not in fact endow him with the patriarchal status that came so naturally to the Renaissance. When Lydgate said that Chaucer was the first to «fonde the floures... of Retoryke» with which to «enlumyne» «Our Rude speche», he was thinking not of origination but enhancement: finding an English that was «rude and boistous», Chaucer «Gan oure tonge first to *magnifie* / And *adourne*... with his elloquence»[3]. He represents not a clean break from a rejected past but instead a transformation of that which was given: «Wyth al hys rethorykes swete» he «*amendede* our langage»[4]. Analogously, Chaucer is not a source but a model, a «maister» who can teach his pupils a technical lesson rather than a father from whom derives an intangible and so all the more indispensable aptitude. Indeed, this very question of paternity versus mastery is at the center of one of the earliest fifteenth-century response to Chaucer's poetry, Henry Scogan's *Moral Balade*[5]. While the poem is addressed to the royal princes to whom Scogan was tutor as to «my sones» from «your fader called, unworthily», it sets aside this patriarchal model in favor of discipleship precisely by invoking Chaucer. «My mayster Chaucer», says Scogan, has taught us that «the

   [3]   *The Life of Our Lady*, 1635-36; *Troy Book*, 3.4538-43. Lydgate's comments on Chaucer have been conveniently collected by Derek Brewer, ed., *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, 2 vol. (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 1.44-59; these citations are from, respectively, 1.46, 1.48.

   [4]   *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, 19774-76 (Brewer, 1.51).

   [5]   Walter W. Skeat, ed., *Chaucerian and Other Pieces*, Supplement to the *Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, vol. 7 (Oxford, Oxford University Press), 237-44.

fader whiche is deed and grave, / Biquath nothing his vertue with his hous / Unto his sone» (65-69). On the contrary, virtue can be acquired only from God and must be earned through virtuous deeds, a traditional teaching that Scogan enforces by citing both the Wife of Bath and by then reproducing, in its entirety, Chaucer's *Gentilesse*. The very frankness of his citations confirms his difference from the master whom he here imitates. Far from claiming for himself a Chaucerian inspiration, he relies instead upon the specific lessons the master taught him, a wisdom he must learn rather than simply absorb. «Therfore laborious / Ought ye to be» (69-70), he tells his own pupils; «thinke on this word, and werke it every day» (47). They are sons who will not simply inherit but disciples who must acquire for themselves the wisdom he purveys[6].

Dryden's Chaucer enacts the inevitable quarrel of the ancients and moderns by establishing a new and definitive origin, the break from the past that the modernist Dryden himself sought to achieve. But Scogan sees Chaucer as instead resisting patriarchy by referring all acts of invocation beyond earthly fathers to a transcendent *fons et origo*: in true medieval fashion, he understands history as a realm of mediation that can never in itself yield a definitive origin. Thus for him, as for Lydgate, and for the fifteenth century as a whole, Chaucer is not a father but a master, a writer who showed how the English language with which both he and his «prentises» were endowed could be made expressive[7]. Rather than breaking with the past, Chaucer

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[6]   In *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), A.C. Spearing provides an excellent account of Chaucer's own scepticism toward paternal authority, both others and his own (pp. 92-106). As Spearing points out in relation to Hoccleve (the only fifteenth-century poet, incidentally, who consistently refers to Chaucer as «father»), «The son wishes to inherit the authority of a father who has denied that any such inheritance is possible, and has in any case denied his own fatherhood» (p. 105). Oddly, however, Spearing still invokes Harold Bloom's Oedipal model to explain the relation of fifteenth century writers to Chaucer, and he argues that Chaucer has an essentially Renaissance attitude toward both the past and his own authorial identity.

[7]   For the master-apprentice trope, see George Ashby's Prologue to the *Active Policy of a Prince* (Brewer, 1.68). This is not to say that the epithet «father» is not applied to Chaucer in the fifteenth century — it appears, for example, in an anonymous *Book of Curtesye* of c. 1477, which addresses Chaucer as «fader and founder of ornate eloquence» (Brewer, 1.72) — but it is much rarer than we might have anticipated, with Hoccleve as the obvious exception.

renewed it; rather than exercising patriarchal authority over the future, Chaucer empowered it by his example.

My purpose in this essay is to argue that while Dryden is by no means entirely wrong, this fifteenth-century understanding is a largely accurate reflection of Chaucer's *own* sense of the dynamics of literary history. If Chaucer displays a vivid sense of his own modernity, nonetheless the cultural and social conditions that governed his writing defined his relation to the literary past, and to temporality per se, in a way that precluded the modernism that was so important to the humanist project. Humanism posited a double moment of originality: the moment *now*, which establishes the break from the immediate past (what the Renaissance came to call the Middle Ages); and the moment *then*, the Antiquity which provides the foundation upon which the future is to be built. Chaucer is as acutely aware as any of his *trecento* colleagues of the need for innovation, and he too turns to classicism to distance himself from the past. However, he is finally too medieval to believe that the realm of history can itself yield a transhistorical originality, that the web that binds past to present can be definitively ruptured by a merely historical action. As I hope to show, his classicism does not attempt to recover Antiquity as a self-coherent and autonomous cultural period[8]. But neither does it consist in a naive appropriation of classical *topoi* to medieval meanings: in distinction from his French contemporaries, Chaucer's is no «clergial» classicism that uses the materials of antique legend simply for illustrative and ornamental purposes. On the contrary, because Chaucer's classicism developed as a solution to a specifically social problem — the need to liberate writing, and the writer, from an increasingly constricting courtly ideology — and was enacted without the benefit of a widespread sense of cultural renewal, it came to express a sophisticated understanding of the complex negotiations that typify our own sense of the relation of past to present. Paul de Man has argued that modernity consists in the paradoxical discovery of the

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[8]   On this as the hallmark of humanism, see Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (Stockhom, Almqvist and Wiksell, 1960), and Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982). For contrary views of Chaucer's classicism, see Alastair Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1982), Winthrop Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984), and Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance*, pp. 15-58.

impossibility of being modern[9]. It is just his recognition — which we might now wish to designate as postmodern — that informs Chaucer's powerfully ambitious yet darkly self-cancelling sense of modernity.

This is an argument I will articulate in two stages. First, if we are to identify that which Chaucer sought to modify in constituting a new, «literary» way of writing — that which represented the past over against which his modernity was to enact itself — we will find it not in the relentlessly didactic sententiousness that we now think of as typically medieval but rather in the fashionable discourse of courtly versifying, what Chaucer and his contemporaries called *makyng*[10]. And we need not (as is usually assumed) wait for the *Canterbury Tales* in order to see this process in action; on the contrary, it is within Chaucer's early, courtly writing itself that the modernist initiative and the dilemmas that attend its emergence become visible. Second, I wish to offer a commentary on an early, courtly poem that confronts the question of modernity, the little-read but quite brilliant *Anelida and Arcite*.

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[9] Paul de Man, «Literary History and Literary Modernity», in *Blindness and Insight*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983 [1st ed., 1970]), pp. 142-65. On the one hand, «Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks new departure» (p. 148). On the other hand, «When [writers] assert their own modernity, they are bound to discover their dependance on similar assertions made by their literary predecessors; their claim to being a new beginning thus turns out to be the repetition of a claim that has always been made» (p. 161). «If history is not to become sheer regression or paralysis, it depends on modernity for its duration and renewal; but modernity cannot assert itself without being at once swallowed up and reintegrated into a regressive historical process» (p. 151).

[10] This is not to say that sententiousness could not provide the ground of literary writing, as Gower and Langland demonstrate: see Anne Middleton, «The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II», *Speculum* 53 (1978), 94-114; for Chaucer's equivocal relation to this «public poetry» (an equivocation I would stress more strongly than does she), see Middleton's «Chaucer's 'New Men' and the Good of Literature in the *Canterbury Tales*», in *Literature and Society*, (English Institute Essays, 1978), ed. Edward Said (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 15-56.

II.

As its subject matter, intricate verse form, and manuscript prove-
nance all declare, *Anelida and Arcite* is writing generated within and
direct toward courtly culture, the writing Chaucer and his contempo-
raries called *makyng*[11]. Displacing minstrelism in the baronial and
royal courts of England in the second half of the fourteenth century,
makyng is the literary practice through which Chaucer initially defi-
ned his authorial identity, and to enumerate its characteristics is to
sketch out the presuppositions in relation to which a Chaucerian poe-
tic emerges[12]. To begin with, *makyng* is a site of play. Written to serve
the recreative needs of the court, *makyng* stands apart from the cons-
training ideological pressure of both the dogmatic spiritualism of reli-
gion (the writer as moralist) and the narrow pragmatism of political
and economic necessity (the writer as adviser to princes)[13]. On the
contrary, the *maker* provides the materials of courtly diversion, the
texts that were not merely the occasion for courtly conversation (as
is clearly envisaged, for instance, by the *demande d'amour*) but them-
selves both provided paradigms for and constituted that conversa-
tion[14]. It is from the world of what the *Gawain*-poet called «luf-
talkyng» that these texts arise and to which they refer: they are survi-
ving fragments of an otherwise ephemeral social activity. Thus freed

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[11]   See Glending Olson, «Making and Poetry in the Age of Chaucer», *Compa-
rative Literature* 31 (1979), 272-90; the shape of my argument, as will shortly become
clear, derives from the terms established by Olson in this seminal and powerfully
argued article.

[12]   On the replacement of the minstrel by the *maker* or «household poet», see
Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Prince-pleasers: Literature and the English Court in
the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1980), pp. 101-34.

[13]   See Glending Olson, «Toward a Poetics of the Late Medieval Court Lyric»,
in *Vernacular Poetics in the Middle Ages*, ed. Lois Ebin (Kalamazoo, Medieval Insti-
tute Publications, 1984): «The lyrics supply entertainment, and insofar as a maker
makes lyrics he is functioning — whether amateur or professional — as an entertai-
ner» (p. 231). For a full discussion of the medieval theory of literary recreation, see
Olson's *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, Cornell University
Press, 1982). The social contextualization of late medieval courtly writing has been
accomplished in greatest detail by Daniel Poirion, *Le poète et le prince* (Paris, Presses
Universitaires de France, 1965).

[14]   As well as Olson, «Poetics», and Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, see John
Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (London, Methuen, 1961), pp.
147-232 and Poirion, *Le poète et le prince*, pp. 59-139.

from any overt ideological purpose, *makyng* was able to define itself as the realm of the aesthetic. Constantly drawing attention to its technical intricacy, basing its generic distinctions on prosody rather than content, and deploying a polysemous discourse of riddles, *doubles entendres*, allegory, and allusion, *makyng* explored the potentialities inherent in language as both a signifying and a phonetic system. As Robert Guiette has said, it is a «jeu des formes», a practice that aspires to pure aestheticism[15]. And the total effect is to create what Paul Zumthor has suggestively called a cultural *hortus conclusus*, a site where an aristocratic «culte égocentrique» can find an unconstrained fulfillment denied it in the threatening world of late fourteenth century history[16].

Yet of course the aesthetic is in no sense outside ideology, nor can history be so wilfully set aside. The very privileging of play served itself as an important marker of social identity, declaring the nobility to be, as a class, released from the penance of both labor and prayer. And the aestheticization of life, of which the formalism of *makyng* was simply one aspect, was central to the ideological project of class self-definition and self-legitimization in which late medieval aristocratic culture was ceaselessly engaged. Just as its cuisine transformed food into art, just as its fashion transformed the body into a visual display, so the *makyng* of the court transformed words into elegant discursive artifice[17]. What the courtly *maker* taught was, again in the words of the *Gawain*-poet, «the teccheles termes of talkyng *noble*». The obsessive focus upon love that characterizes this verse supports this project as well, not just by demonstrating over and over again that «pitee renneth soone in *gentil* herte», but by fashioning the turbulence of erotic feeling into the elegant artifice of lyric. As Derek Pearsall has said of the complaint, perhaps the most quintessentially courtly of lyric forms, «There is no movement, no action, only the lover and his mistress for ever frozen into ritual

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[15]   Robert Guiette, «D'une poésie formelle en France au Moyen Age», *Romanica Gandensia* 8 (1960), 17; see also Roger Dragonetti, *La technique poétique des trouvères dans la chanson courtoise* (Bruges, De Tempel, 1960).

[16]   Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris, Seuil, 1972), pp. 243, 267.

[17]   For the importance of cuisine and fashion in the late medieval court, see Gervase Mathew, *The Court of Richard II* (London, John Murray, 1968), pp. 23-31.

gestures of beseeching and disdain»[18]. Like the other kinds of fetishi-
zed objects with which the aristocratic world adorned itself (tapes-
tries, jewelry, books), the complaint beautifully stages, over and over
again, a reified extravagance, a petrified excess.

The primary purpose of *makyng* was the ritualistic rehearsal, with
minute variation, of familiar tropes of socially valuable modes of
speaking and feeling. The courtly text asks not to be interpreted but
imitated: it is a paradigm for social reproduction rather than an
agency of cultural understanding. In Anne Middleton's words, it ser-
ves a «socially or cultically reaffirmative function», and Zumthor
has shown how the «register» of the *grand chant courtois* articulates
the shared assumptions that bind together poet and audience[19]. It
objectifies and beautifies — but does not analyze or understand —
courtly subjectivity, just as the books in which these texts were inscri-
bed were themselves objects placed in the service of ostentatious self-
display[20]. Correspondingly, the task of the *maker* was to provide the
aristocracy with languages, pastimes, modes of feeling, and objects
that confirmed their nobility. Social historians have shown that in the
late fourteenth century the English aristocracy was seeking, under the
pressure of far-reaching economic changes, to transform itself from
a loosely organized and permeable class into a hereditary caste

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[18] Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970),
pp. 92-3.

[19] Middleton, «Chaucer's 'New Men'», p. 32; Zumthor, *Essai de poétique*,
pp. 239-40. As Zumthor says, the *grand chant courtois* «tend à la fois à convaincre
l'auditeur d'une manière 'nouvelle', inattendue, de quelque chose que, en un certain
sens, il ignorait; et à manifester les conclusions inéluctables de quelque chose qu'en
un autre sens il savait déjà. D'où une oscillation incessante entre information et
redondance» (p. 239).

[20] When Froissart presented a copy of his poems to Richard II, he tells us that
the King «opened it and looked inside and it pleased him greatly. Well it might, for
it was illuminated, nicely written and illustrated, with a cover of crimson velvet with
ten studs of silver gilt and golden roses in the middle and two large gilded clasps
richly worked at their centres with rosetrees» (cited by Green, *Poets and Princeplea-
sers*, p. 64). What Richard valued was the book as an object of beauty rather than
as a source of understanding. As Green says, «Books were regarded as an important
part of the prince's assets, able to take their place alongside the more predictable
items in the aristocratic showcase» (p. 60). And Mathew argues that «a court fashion
in *objets de luxe* may best explain some of the new developments in book production
and illustration» in the later fourteenth century (*Court of Richard II*, p. 39).

defined by a highly distinctive life-style[21]. The *aesthetic* transformations accomplished by courtly *makyng* thus served a crucial ideological function in fulfilling this purpose.

In thus subordinating itself to its ideological function, however, courtly *makyng* necessarily called into question its own status as an independent cultural activity, and with it the status of the *maker* himself. If *makyng* were to provide a discourse by which the aristocracy could identify itself, then it had to be one that the aristocracy could speak itself. Hence the late fourteenth-century demise of the minstrel must be understood not simply as the shift from one kind of taste to another but as the *de*professionalization of writing per se[22]. Hence the apparently paradoxical fact that Chaucer's career seems not to have been in any way advanced by his literary activity, and that not a single one of the large number of documents that record his career refers to him as a writer[23]. For to have acknowledged that Chaucer could do something special that other members of the court could not would have been to undermine the very ideological function that his *makyng* was designed to fulfill. That a great many courtiers could in fact write poetry is another sign of this function: we have the names and some of the poems of over a dozen noble *makers* from late medieval England, as well as the typically bizarre fact that Richard II wanted his epitaph to compare him to Homer[24].

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[21]   For a summary of these transformations, see Chris Givan-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987). The difference between class and caste is succinctly described by Edmund Leach, «Caste, Class and Slavery: The Taxonomic Problem», in Anthony de Reuck and Julie Knight, eds, *Caste and Race: Comparative Approaches* (Boston, Little Brown, 1966): «A 'ruling class' may be defined as a *caste* when the fact of class endogamy is strikingly obvious ans when the inheritance of privilege has become narrowly restricted to members of that 'caste' in perpetuity. This kind of situation is likely to arise when the ruling group is distinguished from the inferior group or groups by *wide* differences of standard of living or by other easily recognizable labels» (p. 9).

[22]   As Mathew and, especially, Green have demonstrated, the status of the new household poet was extremely ambiguous. As Green has said, «Literature in the court occupied some kind of ill-defined no man's land somewhere between a job and a hobby... With the advent of the household poet, literature seems to have been taken out of the hands of the professional...» (*Poets and Princepleasers*, pp. 12, 107).

[23]   James Root Hulbert, *Chaucer's Official Life* (Menasha, Collegiate Press, 1912).

[24]   A list of English literary aristocrats (compiled largely from Green's discussion) includes John Montagu, Earl of Salisbury; Edward Plantagenet, second Duke

Given the thoroughness with which courtly *makyng* was absorbed
by its social context, we should hardly be surprised that Chaucer's
courtly poetry — which comprises virtually *everything* he wrote prior
to the *Canterbury Tales* — should display signs of discontent. And
while its critical perspective upon the social ground of its own exis-
tence is present throughout this body of writing, its sense of aliena-
tion becomes most explicitly in evidence in the last of these poems,
the *Legend of Good Women*. Here an irascible God of Love (with
unmistakeable affinities to Richard II) reads the complex contextuali-
zation of eroticism accomplished by the *Troilus* as a simplistic attack
on love per se. Insisting upon turning all cultural products to the task
of self-legitimization, the courtly patron seeks to govern both the pro-
duction and the reception of the text, insisting that it signify a mono-
lithic, self-identical meaning, that it rehearse and celebrate but never
analyze much less criticize courtly values[25]. This is an absolutism that
Chaucer then ironically inflects through both his own incomplete
submission to the patron's commission and through the tyranny to
which his saintly heroines are subjected. In short, for all its linguistic
playfulness and apparent recreative freedom, courtly *makyng* is expe-
rienced by Chaucer as being as ideologically imprisoning as the

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of York; Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick; William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk;
John Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester; Anthony Woodville, Earl Rivers; Sir John Clan-
vowe; and Sir Richard Roos. Non-English noble *littérateurs* include Marshall Bouci-
cault and his friends, like the Duc de Berri, who composed the *Livre de cents balla-
des*; James I of Scotland; René of Anjou and his son, Jean, duc de Calabre; Wences-
las de Brabant; Charles d'Orléans; and Jean II, duc de Bourbon. As K.B. McFarlane
has said, «In what other century has the peerage been so active in literature?» (*The
Nobility of Later Medieval England* [Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973], p. 242).

[25]   All courts, whether royal or simply noble, were organized around and paid
incessant attention to the wishes of the lord; as Green has said, «The absolute autho-
rity of the head of the household was unquestioned» (*Poets and Princepleasers*,
p. 13). A visible sign of this authority was the growing interest in livery, by means
of which the each of the lord's servants became an embodiment of his master's
power. This absolutism was pronounced in the court of Richard II, especially toward
the end of his reign: the Wilton Diptych shows even the angels of Heaven wearing
Richard's livery, and Gervase Mathew tells us that «there is a description of Richard
II in 1398 sitting crowned on his throne in silence from sinner until vespers and when
'he looked at any one that man had to bow the knee'» (*Court*, p. 15). For a fine dis-
cussion of Chaucer's reaction to this absolutism, see Louise Fradenburg, «The Man-
ciple's Servant Tongue: Politics and Poetry in *The Canterbury Tales*», *ELH* 52
(1985), 85-118.

didactic sententiousness to which it stood in opposition within the system of medieval vernacular writing.

But if the writing of neither *sentence* nor *solaas* provides an appropriate discursive form — if neither allows for the generation of what we have come to call literature — then where is Chaucer to turn[26]? The answer that has traditionally been given is that it was not until the *Canterbury Tales* that Chaucer turned away from the court and returned to his bourgeois roots[27]. But this line of analysis immediately raises a host of objections: it misrepresents Chaucer's own social origins, which are within a merchant patriciate with profound affiliations to the seigneurial class, as Chaucer's long-standing residence within noble courts attests; it assumes that the *Canterbury Tales* is somehow a bourgeois text, for which there is almost no evidence; it ignores the fact that his critique of courtly norms is already established in the poetry of the pre-*Canterbury Tales'* period; it posits a sharp line between bourgeois and aristocratic tastes that is in pratice difficult if not impossible to draw[28]; it ignores the fact that what texts there were that appealed primarily to the bourgeoisie were precisely those engendered within the context of sententiousness — Middleton's «public poetry»; and above all, and in my view decisively, it assumes that Chaucer's opposition to aristocratic ideology was staged in terms of a *social* (and hence, inevitably, political) opposition — when in fact everything about both Chaucer's life and writing bespeaks his discomfort with socially oppositional modes of thought and action. In other words, we cannot understand the emergence of Chaucer's kind of writing by appealing to that all

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[26]   This formulation of the question is also offered by Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance*, p. 16.

[27]   For a recent version of this argument, see Stephen Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London, Methuen, 1986).

[28]   Richard Green has argued this point with authority and force: «However much the literary tastes of individual London merchants may have differed from those of individual chamber knights, any attempt to differentiate between the reading habits of the bourgeoisie and the court as distinct entities will in all probability prove chimerical; ... it will be a little like trying to distinguish between the reading habits of majors and lieutenant-colonels. In fact, of course, groups of lower social status tend to emulate higher ones, and it is inherently improbable that the city merchant would aspire to cultural models essentially different from those of his superiors... It is the aristocracy, not the bourgeoisie, who are the *Kulturträger* of the fifteenth century» (*Poets and Princepleasers*, pp. 9-10).

purpose *deus ex machina* of historical explanation, the rise of the middle class.

The correct answer, I believe, is that Chaucer pried himself loose from courtly ideology by means of what he called *poetrye* — by which he meant the writings of the ancients and of their *trecento* inheritors, Dante, Petrarch, and the unacknowledged but all the more ubiquitous Boccaccio. According to a familiar ratio, Chaucer sought to be modern through a return to antiquity; by establishing a relation to a recuperated past he projected himself into a new future. The distinction between courtly *makyng* and the *poetrye* of the ancients and of their imitators was, as Glending Olson has shown, ubiquitous within Chaucer's literary world, and one that he himself maintains rigorously throughout his work[29]. Yet as he makes explicit at the conclusion of the *Troilus*, but as is implicit throughout, he cannot quite conceive of himself as a poet:

> Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,
> Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,
> So sende myght to make in som comedye!
> But litel book, no makyng thow n'envie,
> But subgit be to alle poesye;
> And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace
> Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace (5.1786-92).

In the final line Chaucer reconstitutes Dante's «bella scola» of *Inferno* IV, with the significant substitution of the epic Statius for Horace the satirist — a Statius who plays a crucial role in Chaucer's attempt to write a more than courtly poetry, and nowhere more powerfully than in the *Troilus* itself and, as we shall see, in *Anelida and Arcite*. But far from allowing himself to be incorporated within this group as an equal, as had Dante, Chaucer remains «subject», a petitioner whose humble posture reinvokes the courtly configuration of dominance and submission that Dante's vision of humanistic fellowship — «each shares with me the name [of poet]», says Virgil — had supplanted. So that even the form in which the *maker* imagines his relation to *poetrye* figures his distance from it.

Moreover, although Chaucer's initial impulse toward classicism clearly derived from the Italian humanists — there is hardly an ancient text that he does not approach through their mediation — the

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[29]   See above, n. 11.

relation he establishes to antiquity is in fact far different. Rather than seeking to recuperate antiquity in all its otherness, an otherness that can then provide the terms by which a modern or Renaissance self can define itself, Chaucer is persistently, even painfully aware of the affiliations that bind together past and present into a seamless and finally inescapable web. Similarly, while the humanist conception of the poet offers the courtly *maker* an opportunity to establish a secure professional identity within a posture of cultural superiority, its grandiose claims strike Chaucer as both intimidating and foolish[30]. But the classics do provide Chaucer with two things: first, a form of writing that allows for meaningfulness — for interpretability — while resisting the preemptive hermeneutics of allegorical exegesis; and second, a prospect upon life that is capacious and synoptic but not dismissively transcendental — in other words, a historiography. For Chaucer, as for many other medieval readers, the classical poets, and especially Virgil and Statius, were essentially historians; and they provided him with an historical vision that allowed him to step outside the suffocating narcissism of courtly *makyng* and to recognize the mutual interdependence of subjectivity and history[31]. And yet this effort at escape was incomplete: the failure of classical history, and of the poets who are its historians, to provide an escape from history is, in large part, the topic of both the *Troilus* and the *Knight's Tale*. It is also the topic of *Anelida and Arcite*.

III.

Of all Chaucer's poems that stage the dilemma of the modern poet in the late Middle Ages, perhaps the most brilliant, and certainly the most compact, is the text entitled in the manuscripts «The Compleynt of Feire Anelida and Fals Arcite» — a title that misleadingly

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[30]   The *House of Fame* stages this ambivalence toward humanist poetics: he both attacks the tradition of visionary poetry and questions his own fitness as a *vates*; presents the classical poets as points of stability within a chaotic literary tradition who are nonetheless victimized by demeaning and deforming acts of appropriation; and dismisses the very idea of fame while unmistakeably asserting his own superior virtue.

[31]   As Wetherbee says, «It is clear that one of the things [Chaucer] valued most highly in the *poetae* was their ability to link the enactment of historical change with the most complex kinds of human experience» (*Chaucer and the Poets*, p. 27).

attempts to fit into a familiar courtly category a poem that in fact asserts an almost *sui generis* idiosyncracy[32]. For a number of reasons the poem is no critical favorite[33]. It is radically, almost self-destructively segmented, being comprised of what appear to be two distinct fragments: first are ten rhyme royal stanzas that invoke Mars, introduce Theseus, and recapitulate the story of the Seven against Thebes; then follows a wholly amorous account of a love affair between the two protagonists, an account that itself fall into two parts, a 140 line narrative of love won and then betrayed, and Anelida's 140 line complaint in an elaborate French rhyme scheme. This second, two-part romantic fragment bears apparently no relation to the epic opening, a discontinuity that critics have usually explained by pleading incompletion. But while four of the thirteen witnesses to the text do append a stanza that promises more to come, this addition is almost certainly scribal, while the explanation of incompletion is in any case a desperate remedy that begs the questions the poem poses[34].

Indeed, the reduplicative structure of the poem as we have it — an opening 70 lines that are then doubled into a 140 line segment that is then itself in turn replicated by another 140 lines — is itself thematically expressive; and despite its peculiarity the poem is in fact a recognizable kind of Chaucerian writing. It is a miniaturized conjunction of epic and romance as they are articulated, in more fully amplified forms, in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the Knight's Tale; and its closest analogue in the Chaucerian canon is the so-called «Broche of Thebes», a diminutive poem with similarly divided loyalties that literally fell apart in the fifteenth century, becoming the poems we now know as the «Complaint of Mars» and the «Complaint of Venus»[35]. These four poems are articulated, in typically Chaucerian fashion,

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[32]   For the title, and other textual information, see Eleanor Prescott Hammond, *Chaucer, A Bibliographical Manual* (New York, Macmillan, 1908, pp. 355-58.

[33]   The almost entirely dismissive criticism to which the poem has been subjected is expertly surveyed by Russel A. Peck, *Chaucer's Lyrics and Anelida and Arcite: An Annotated Bibliography (1900-1980)* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1983).

[34]   John Norton-Smith has persuasively argued the scribal nature of this final stanza in «Chaucer's *Anelida and Arcite*», in Peter Heyworth, ed., *Medieval Studies for J.A.W. Bennett* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 81-99.

[35]   That these two poems are in all likelihood one has been argued by Rodney Merrill, «Chaucer's *Broche of Thebes*: The Unity of *The Complaint of Mars* and *The Complaint of Venus*», *Literary Monographs* 5 (1973), 3-61.

according to a series of oppositions: love is juxtaposed with war as both astrologized mythography (Venus and Mars) and genre (romance and epic); a transcendental rationality conceived in Boethian terms is set over against the irreducible specificity of individual experience; and above all, the discourse of contemporary courtly *makyng* is set within a classical context derived primarily from Virgil, Ovid, and Statius, with Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio as mediatory figures. The result are poems that explore the relation of past to present as both cultural and psychological events: the cultural project of classicism is inflected into the psychology of a lover's memory, and the recovery of antiquity is enacted in terms of the drama of loss and reparation staged by the amorous complaint.

As I have suggested, *Anelida and Arcite* is double in both inspiration and structure. Establishing at the outset a literary context that is martial in tone, narrative in form, and male in ideology, it then modulates into a venerean world of amorousness that culminates in a highly aestheticized female lyricism. Chaucer ascribes these two elements of his poem to two different sources: «First folowe I Stace, and after him Corynne» (21). The *Thebaid* is a powerful if significantly obscured presence throughout the first ten stanzas, but we cannot be sure even whom Chaucer means by Corinna: he may be thinking of the Theban poetess of that name, or a feminine Ovidian voice with links to the *puella* of the *Amores*, or both[36]. But whoever

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[36]   On Corinna, see Edgar F. Shannon, *Chaucer and the Roman Poets* (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1929), pp. 15-47; in «Chaucer's 'Corinne'», *Speculum* 4 (1929), 106-8, Douglas Bush refutes Shannon's idea that «Corinna» was a name commonly applied to Ovid's *Amores* and argues that the Theban poetess is not only an appropriate but a likely referent. In support Bush cites Lydgate's inclusion of Statius and «Corrynne» in a list of poets in the *Troy Book*, and suggests that Chaucer «met the name of Corinna in some such list» (107). Unfortunately, Lydgate's authority for the name is probably Chaucer himself, and the lists of the seven or nine great poets of the classical world that I have found do not include Corinna; see Servius's commentary on *Aeneid* I, 12, and *Eclogues* VII, 21; and Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 10, 1. Greek sources do list her (see Vincent DiMarco's headnote in Larry Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* [Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1987], p. 991), but Chaucer could not have known these. Not even Vincent of Beauvais seems to have heard of her, and while Statius mentions her in Eclogue 3 of the fifth *Silvae* (line 158), there is no evidence that the *Silvae* were read in the Middle Ages between the ninth century and 1416, when the text was rediscovered at St. Gallen. She is also mentioned in Propertius, *Elegies* 2.3.21, a text Chaucer could have read; but Propertius' reference is merely allusive and makes no reference to Thebes. For Chaucer to know the very obscure fact that Corinna was a Theban poetess — and

she is, she functions as both an alternative and a counterpart to Statius, enforcing the differences between the poem's two parts but suggesting as well a complementary relationship. We are thus encouraged to read this female romanticism as both a modern graft onto an antique epic and as a coherent part of the poem as a whole, a gloss that constitutes as well as interprets the text. It is at once superior to the epic history it explicates and yet absorbed by and made one with it. And the ambiguous relationship between these two literary elements typifies the ambivalence that inhabits Chaucer's thought about the relationship of both the classical past to the medieval present and of the epic world of history to the romantic world of love. On the one hand the erotic is an organon to explain the historical: just as the failed love of Troilus and Criseyde can presumably teach us about the failure of Troy, so can Theban compulsions be explicated by reference to Anelida and Arcite. But conversely, the historical is a determinant of the erotic and the past of the present: historical precedents impose dark coercions upon young lovers seeking to escape a similar fate, and the local enclave of love is subsumed by the tangled world of history it seeks to explicate. Hence we are forced to acknowledge that a linear model of cause and effect (love engenders war, war dooms love) must be replaced by a model of replication, in which love equals war. And the ultimate cause — the origin — must either lie somewhere else or, more likely, be itself subsumed within the pattern of replication.

The terms in which Thebanness is represented in *Anelida and Arcite* are suggested by the Muse to whom the poet calls for inspiration. Ignoring epic Calliope and lyric Erato, Chaucer here invokes Polyhymnia (15). Literally the muse of many songs, Polyhymnia was in the classical period given responsibility for the mimic arts, while medieval mythographers ascribed to her the *magna memoria* necessary for all poetry; in this poem she sings with «vois memorial in the shade, / Under the laurer which that may not fade» (18-19)[37]. *Anelida*

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the context of the reference here makes it almost certain that he did — argues for an intense and persistent interest in the Theban story.

[37]   For the medieval Polyhymnia, see, e.g., Fulgentius, *Mythologicon*, ed. August van Staveren, *Auctores Mythographi Latini* (Amsterdam, 1742), I, 14: «Πολυμνια, ... id est multam memoriam faciens dicimus; quasi per capacitatem est memoria necessaria» (p. 643). In his *De archana deorum*, ed. Robert A. van Kluyve (Durham, Duke University Press, 1968), a text written about 1400, Thomas Walsingham cites the same definition (p. 16). Norton-Smith, «Chaucer's *Anelida and Arcite*», also makes this identification, and cites (unconvincingly, to my mind) Boccaccio's   commentary

and Arcite is an explicitly memorial poem, seeking to preserve an «olde storie» (10) that «elde... Hath nygh devoured out of oure memorie» (12-14). Moreover, when Anelida turns to «write» *her* «compleynynge» (209-10), she is impelled by what she calls «the point of remembraunce» — a phrase that is in the first instance a recollection of Dante, and then of itself, serving the complaint as both its opening and closing lines (211, 350). Indeed, the poem witnesses to and represents the workings of a memory that is at once compulsive and incomplete. Both Anelida's complaint and the poem in which it is embedded are ostentatiously and deliberately incomplete; each represents a consciousness *in medias res*, burdened with a multiplicitous past but incapable of being subordinated to a controlling understanding that would allow for a satisfactory closure. *Anelida and Arcite* articulates a form of consciousness that remembers everything yet understands nothing, that recapitulates an unforgettable past by unwittingly reliving it in the present, that finds no ending because it is unable to grasp its beginning. Most tellingly, however, this disturbed mnemonics is represented in the poem not only in terms of the abandoned lady and her false lover but also of the recording poet, in which it in effect constitutes Chaucerian literary modernity. While Chaucer engages in a continuous and respectful recourse to his predecessors, he is simultaneously aware that such recourse is typical of all literary production, including theirs; and his scepticism about his own achievements, implicit in the diminutive and even dismissive self-representations that pervade his work, extends to a larger scepticism about the availability of a legitimizing originality. On the one hand, the modern poet is in danger of becoming nothing more than an impersonator standing at an alienating distance from the sources of Western writing; on the other hand, those very sources are of uncertain reliability.

The poem establishes the thematic opposition between Anelida and Arcite in the apparently straightforward and unqualified terms of her singleness of purpose set against his duplicity. She is «pleyn» (116) while he is «double in love and mothing pleyn» (87); her «entent» is set wholly «upon trouthe» (113) while he is «fals» and «feyned» (97, *et passim*). But while the narrative is posited upon

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on Dante and the *Genealogia* as Chaucer's probable sources for the information (pp. 92-3)

Anelida's moral integrity, it simultaneously reveals her love to be
almost literally self-divisive. Compulsively thinking of Arcite, Ane-
lida barely attends to her food (134-35); lying in bed, «on him she
thoght alwey» (137); «whan that he was absent any throw, / Anon hir
thoght hir herte brast *atwo*» (93-4). And having warred against her-
self in a futile effort to become wholly at one with her lover, Anelida
reacts to her abandonment with a violence that brings her to the edge
of self-extinction:

> She wepeth, wailith, swowneth pitously;
> To grounde ded she falleth as a ston;
> Al crampyssheth hir lymes crokedly;
> She speketh as hir wit were al agon;
> Other colour then asshen hath she non;
> Ne non other word speketh she moche or lyte
> But «Mercie, cruel herte myn, Arcite!» (169-75)

This is a scene that mixes pathos with horror, and invites sympathy
while insisting upon judgment. If Anelida is betrayed by Arcite, she
is also self-betrayed; and when Arcite unjustly accuses her of dupli-
city — he swears that «he coude hir doublenesse espie, / And al was
falsnes that she to him ment» (159-60) — we recognize that beneath
the literal misrepresentation lies a metaphoric truth. Divided against
herself first in her love and then in her grief, Anelida surrenders her-
self to a necessarily interminable process of self-destruction. As she
herself says in her subsequent complaint, «Thus ferforth have I my
deth sought; / Myself I mordre with my prevy thoght» (290-91)[38].

The extent of Anelida's self-division is made vivid by the way in
which the complaint aspires to the self-possession of understanding
— to recollection as self-collection, in the Augustinian sense — and

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[38]   If we accept the suggestion of Boyd Ashby Wise, *The Influence of Statius
upon Chaucer* (Baltimore, J.H. Furst, 1911), p. 70, n. 1, that Anelida's designation
as «the quene of Ermony» (71-2) is meant to recall Harmonia, the daughter of Mars
and Venus, rather than Armenia, then we can see that her career in the poem traces
a movement from an original if unstable unity to a characteristically Theban discord.
In this connection, it is relevant to recall that it was for Harmonia that Vulcan made
the fatal Brooch of Thebes as a wedding gift for her marriage to Cadmus, as Chaucer
points out in the «Complaint of Mars». Anelida is in this case the outsider who is
undone by Theban divisiveness: Creon forces «the gentils of that regioun / To ben
his frendes, and dwellen in the toun», one of whom is «Anelida, the quene of
Ermony» (68-72). Given the implied geography, Harmonia would seem to fit better
than Armenia and is certainly a *durior lectio*.

yet falls far short[39]. Anelida begins in the confident voice of the moralist: the *sententia* she seeks to demonstrate is the sad lesson that «whoso trewest is, hit shal hir rewe» (217), and the illustrative *exemplum* is the speaker herself. «I wot myself as wel as any wight» (220), she says, meaning three things: she knows the lesson herself, she knows herself as well as anyone else knows her, and she knows herself as well as anyone else knows her or himself. But these ambitious claims are undone by the rest of the complaint, which shows Anelida as still possessed by the very experience she seeks to understand. Far from standing outside her experience and looking back upon it, she remains wholly absorbed within it. «That I have seid, be seid for evermore!» (246), she bravely asserts, yet she is referring not to the moralizing *sententia* that would seek to categorize and so dismiss the past as a grievous if instructive mistake, but to her earlier and foolish commitment to a faithless lover. The complaint is baffled at every turn, and by composing it as a letter for Arcite she acknowledges her self-chosen imprisonment. «I wil ben ay ther I was ones bounde» (245), she says, using an amorous metaphor that also has powerful, if here unacknowledged, Boethian implications[40]. While the mood of the complaint is largely interrogative, only once do the questions rise to the level of philosophical inquiry: «Almyghty God, of trouthe sovereyn, / Where is the trouthe of man? Who hath it slayn?» (311-12). But no answer is forthcoming, and Anelida's questioning remains merely rhetorical: «Who may avaunte hir bet of hevynesse / Then I? (196-97); «Shall I preye or elles pleyne?» (282); «Allas! wher is become your gentilesse?» (247); «My swete fo, why do ye so, for shame?» (272). The very possibility of enlightenment is preempted by the anxiety of the fearful lover: «Now merci, swete, yf I mysseye! / Have I seyd oght amys, I preye?»[41] (317-18).

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[39]   Augustine presents the recollection of autobiography as a re-collecting of a self dispersed among earthly pleasures by sin; see, for example, *Confessions* 2, 1, with its punning on *recolo* and *colligo*; and 10, 11, which connects *cogo* and *cogito*.

[40]   For the Boethianism of the term, see Stephen Barney, «Troilus Bound», *Speculum* 47 (1972), 445-58.

[41]   The strikingly interrogative mood of Anelida's complaint is created by the fact that a fifth of its lines are questions: 238-40, 247-52, 253-54, 272, 273-74, 275-77, 281-82, 283, 296-97, 299, 301, 311-12, 315-16, 318. Yet none of these questions actually anticipates an answer, and they serve merely to express the bafflement and emotional turmoil characteristic of the amorous complaint. For a discussion of questioning as a stylistic element of the French complaint, see Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the*

The final stanza of the complaint opens with a brave effort at conclusiveness: «Then ende I thus, sith I may do no more, / I yeve it up for now and evermore» (342-43). But what is being abandoned is not her love for the faithless and unworthy Arcite but her attempt to understand that love: «But me to rede out of this drede, or guye, / Ne may my wit, so weyk is hit, not streche» (340-41). Anelida will never «lerne of love the lore» (345), neither an *ars amatoria* nor the wisdom that unhappy love might teach. Hence she misunderstands the genre of the *Chauntepleure*, taking it to be not a moralizing poem that instructs one in the falseness of a world that passes soon as flowers fair but rather as a vehicle for expressing, and reenacting, the turmoil of uninstructed emotion[42]. In attempting to understand her past, Anelida has revealed how powerfully present it is; trying to append a dismissive *explicit*, she finds herself hopelessly implicated. The conclusion to the complaint is thus appropriately inconclusive. The last line — «thirled with the poynt of remembrraunce» (350) — exactly replicates the first (211): memory encapsulates the complaint as it engrosses the speaker, and her ending returns her to her beginning in an endless cycle of repetition. This is surely why the complaint is, as Skeat long ago noted, formally circular: the first six stanzas are exactly matched, in content as well form, by the last six[43]. Lacking a fixed perspective outside her experience from which to understand it, Anelida is condemned to repetition.

The final stanza of the complaint also contains an allusion to another famous complaint that serves to raise larger questions about the recursive shape of literary history as a whole, and about the position of the medieval poet within this history:

> But as the swan, I have herd seyd ful yore,
> Ayeins his deth shal singen his penaunce,
> So singe I here my destinee or chaunce (346-48).

French Tradition (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1957), pp. 24-5, and the earlier studies cited there.

[42]   Anelida says, «I fare as doth the song of *Chauntepleure*. / For now I pleyne and now I pley» (320-21). But as Skeat, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, vol. 1 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1894), points out in his note to these lines, according to Godefroy the *Chauntepleure* «was addressed to those who sing in this world and will weep in the next. Hence also the word was particularly used to signify any complaint or lament, or a chant at the burial service» (p. 537).

[43]   *Ibid*, p. 536 (note to line 220).

This is a citation of Dido's epistle in the *Heroides*, and by alluding to it here Chaucer invokes both the specific text that ultimately underwrites the amorous elements of *Anelida and Arcite* and the classical genre upon which he modeled the epistolary complaints that appear throughout his work[44]. Both Anelida's complaint and the poem as a whole are pervaded with echoes of Dido's epistle, and there is a deep affinity of purpose between the two texts: both are largely interrogative efforts to achieve a self-understanding that will emancipate the speaker from the corrosive ambivalence of her feelings, and both come ultimately to naught[45]. There are as well obvious affinities

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[44]   For the swan image, see *Heroides* VII, lines 1-2; Chaucer also cites the lines at the end of the Legend of Dido in the *Legend of Good Women*:

> «Ryght so», quod she, «as that the white swan
> Ayens his deth begynnyth for to synge,
> Right so to yow make I my compleynynge». (1355-57)

Both Shannon, *Chaucer and the Roman Poets*, and Nancy Dean, «Chaucer's *Complaint*, A Genre Descended from the *Heroides*», *CL* 19 (1967), 1-27, argue that Chaucer's insistence upon the specificity of the narrative setting, and his incorporation of details of that setting into the lyric complaint, mark his complaints as Ovidian. In «Guillaume de Machaut and Chaucer's Love Lyrics», *Medium Aevum* 47 (1978), 66-87, James I. Wimsatt argues on the contrary that Anelida's complaint is derived from Machaut's *chant royal*, «Amis, je t'ay tant amé et cheri» (N° 254 in *Poésies Lyriques*, ed. V. Chichmaref, SATF [Paris, H. Champion, 1909], 1.223-24). But a close comparison of the two texts does not, in my view, support his claim that «the parallels between *Anelida and Arcite* and the chant are extensive and deeply grounded» (67). In an earlier article «*Anelida and Arcite*: A Narrative of Complaint and Comfort», *Chaucer Review* 5 (1970-71), 1-8, Wimsatt tries to assimilate the poem to the pattern of the French *dits amoureux* and to suggest that it would have fulfilled this pattern more fully had it been completed. It is not my purpose to deny that Chaucer's poem invokes the genre of the *dits amoureux* — see, for example, Robinson's comments on the poem as a «complainte d'amour» — but to suggest that the antique siting of his poem, which distinguishes it from the French poems, raises questions about the linearity of literary history and the pastness of the past that are analogous to the ethical questions raised by Anelida's emotional stasis.

[45]   As well as the swan image, for specific Ovidian allusions, compare *Anelida*, 134-37 and 256-58 to *Heroides* VII, 25-6 and 64, 76, 195 respectively; for more general analogies between the emotional condition described by Anelida and Dido, see, e.g., *Heroides* VII, 6 and 168. The interrogative nature of *Heroides* VII is suggested by the eighteen questions that Dido poses in the course of the poem, fifteen of them in the first half (see lines 7-8, 9-10, 11-12, 15, 16, 19-20, 21-2, 41, 45, 53-54, 66, 71-2, 77, 78, and 83; the other three are lines 125, 141-42 and 164). Aware of her responsibility for her own condition (see line 23-4, 33, 85-6, 97-8 and 104), of her own self-delusions (35) and of the complexity of her feelings (29-30), Dido struggles towards self-understanding in the course of her complaint but finally remains baffled. It is that struggle, however, that distinguishes the classical complaint, both in the *Heroides* and in *Aeneid* IV, from its French descendent, which seeks above all

between «quene Anelida» (47) and *Dido regina*[46]. Both are royal, both exiles, both in love with a man who represents a great political hegemony (Thebes, Rome) and yet proves to be «fals» (*perfidus*), and false in ways that are, as we shall see, oddly similar.

By invoking Dido here Chaucer establishes a curious but telling chronological disjunction. In terms of the fictive time of her complaint, Anelida speaks now as Dido will come to speak later, a priority that is stressed by having Anelida *close* with the image of the swansong with which Dido will «later» *begin*. But in terms of the time of literary history, priority goes to Dido: the image of the swansong is originally hers. The effect of this temporal amalgamation is thus not to adjudicate originality but to challenge the very concept of an origin. Complaint is a form of speech that transgresses the usual temporal categories, both in the individual sense that it elides temporal divisions — before and after, then and now, past and present, are distinctions the plaintive voice refuses to observe — and in the general sense that it is always with us: Anelida speaks in Thebes as Dido speaks in Carthage and, as the elaborately contemporary rhyme scheme of her complaint reminds us, as women still speak in the courtly world of Chaucer's England[47]. The swansong of complaint is

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to encase an utterly static, even frozen emotional posture in the beautifully wrought reliquary of its highly formalized language. The point is that *Anelida and Arcite* represents Chaucer's attempt to explicate the continuities between the antique past and the modern present.

[46] Ovid's Dido never, it is true, refers to herself as a queen; but *Aeneid* IV is structured by the repeated invocation of her title: see lines 1, 296, and 504. Interestingly enough, one of the manuscripts of the *Anelida and Arcite* (Longleat 258, a Shirley manuscript) gives as the title *Balade of Anelyda Quene of Cartage*; see Vincent J. DiMarco's textual notes in Benson's edition, p. 1144. It may even be that Anelida's otherwise unattested name is a compilation of elements of the three female names of *Heroides* VII — *An*na, *El*issa, and *D*ido.

[47] In «*Anelida and Arcite*: A Narrative of Complaint and Comfort», Wimsatt points out that a generic «feature [of the complaint] which Machaut evidently tried to establish is the use of different rhyme-endings for each stanza; in the *Remède de Fortune* the poet states explicitly that a complaint is a poem with 'sad matter and many different rhymes'... In the complaint of the later *Fonteinne amoureuse*, as the lover boasts, there are a hundred different rhymes without one repetition» (5-6). In contemporary French poetry there are stanzas very like Chaucer's elaborate *aabaabbab*, such as Deschamps' *Complainte pour la religieuse Marguerite* (*aabaabbabaa*) and the Sénéchal d'Eu's *Complainte pour sa femme* (*aabaabbabba*). Indeed, subsequent literary history suggests that Chaucer's example in the *Anelida* did in fact succeed in establishing the complex metrics and rhyme scheme of Anelida's complaint as a generic norm for his fifteenth-century Scots disciples. The *Anelida* stanza was

thus both always original and already belated: a first utterance that breaks a lifelong silence, it issues forth at the point of extinction and bespeaks a helplessness before the temporality that has inflicted a mortal wound. This is what it means, then, to speak while «thirled with the poynt of remembraunce». Apparently «pleyn», Anelida's «compleynynge» is an echoic doubling that turns back upon itself not only formally and psychologically but also temporally.

As with Anelida's self-division, Arcite's duplicity — «he was double in love and no thing pleyn» (87) — is an erotic disorder with an Ovidian aetiology. His «falsnes» mimics the Ovidian Aeneas's perfidiousness, and his restless questing after «another lady» (144) parallels Aeneas's attraction to an always beckoning *alter amor* (17)[48]. «Put by your wanderings», Dido urges Aeneas, and her phrase — *ambage remissa* (149) — points as well to the evasive circumlocutions with which he first won her love and has now rejected it. Whether the goal be empire or love, the questing impulse remains the same, and both Aeneas and Arcite are insatiable, satisfied only with dissatisfaction. *Facta fugis, facienda petis* (13), Dido accuses Aeneas: «You flee what has been done; what is to be done, you seek». If for Ovid the characteristically feminine erotic disorder is endless pining, the masculine counterpart is endless discontent[49]. As the *Amores* explore

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used by Gavin Douglas for Parts I and II of *The Palice of Honour* and for the Prologue to Book III of the *Aeneid*, and by Dunbar in *The Golden Targe*. It was used as well in three poems found in MS. Arch. Selden B.24: «The Quare of Jelusy», «The Lay of Sorrow», and «The Lufaris Complaynt». But its most brilliant use was by Henryson for Cresseid's complaint in *The Testament of Cresseid*, a poem that anatomizes the workings of retrospection as erotic yearning, penitential regret, and literary indebtedness.

[48] Ovid stresses the compulsive and impersonal nature of Aeneas's desire by having Dido use the word *alter* five times in order to designate the object to which that desire is directed — as if the precise goal did not matter as long as it was other than that which he now has: see lines 14 (twice), 17 (twice), and 18.

[49] Chaucer explores male dissatisfaction at length in the *Legend of Good Women*, and nowhere more extensively than in the account of another questing deceiver, Jason. In the «Legend of Medea» he describes Jason as «of love devourer and dragoun» (1581; and see 1369):

> As mater apetiteth forme alwey,
> And from forme into forme it passen may,
> Or as a welle that were botomles,
> Ryght so can false Jason have no pes. (1582-85)

This metaphysical description, derived from Guido delle Colonne's *Historia destructionis Troiae*, represents male desire not as surplus or excess but as lack or

in detail, the elaborate system of impediments and frustrations that typifies Ovidian eroticism, and that Chaucer here and elsewhere calls «daunger» (186, 195), is established for no other reason than to forestall the disappointment of full possession. As Ovid says to an inattentive rival, «If you feel no need of guarding your love for yourself, you fool, see that you guard her for me, that I may desire her the more! What is permitted is unwanted, but what is forbidden burns all the more sharply»[50].

Chaucer's term for this discontent, in this poem and elsewhere, in «newefangelnesse» (141), and here he tells us twice that it is «kynde of man» (149) to be afflicted with it:

> The kynde of mannes herte is to delyte
> In thing that straunge is, also God me save!
> For what he may not gete, that wolde he have. (201-3)

Although this condition, like Anelida's «languisshing» (178), can be adequately glossed by reference to Ovidian texts, Chaucer in fact thinks of it in larger, philosophical terms. As the language of this passage suggests, a suggestion supported by a series of cognate passages elsewhere in his work, Chaucer's understanding of the newfangleness of sexual infidelity is informed by a number of subtexts. This is suggested in part by the anachronistic reference to Lamech, «the firste fader that began / To loven two, and was in bigamye» (152-53); the biblical Lamech is not only a bigamist but a homicide, a self-confessed member of the fratricidal race of Cain — a scriptural analogue, as it were, to the Thebans of classical mythology[51]. Evidently more is at issue than Ovidian wit would suggest, and this allusion begins to invoke the darker passions that lie behind Arcite's eroticism.

We can locate the center of Chaucer's concern by collating the newfangleness of *Anelida and Arcite* with cognate texts from elsewhere in Chaucer's poetry. Most directly relevant is the complaint of

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inadequacy, as a loss rather than as a constitutively masculine endowment. It is perhaps appropriate, then, that Jason's third wife (after Hypsipyle and Medea) is Creusa, the daughter of Creon of Thebes — a name that further links Jason with that other adventurer, Aeneas, and that locates him within the economy of historical recursion that Thebes represents.

[50]   *Amores* 2.19.1-3, ed. and trans. Grant Showerman (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 438-39; for instances of similar statements, see 1.5, 2.5, 2.19, 3.4, 3.14.

[51]   See Genesis 4.19-24.

the falcon in the Squire's Tale, a complaint that echoes *Anelida and Arcite* in a number of other instances as well[52]. In explaining the tercelet's infidelity, the falcon has recourse to a Boethian allusion:

> I trowe he hadde thilke text in mynde,
> That «alle thynge, repeiring to his kynde,
> Gladeth hymself»; thus seyn men, as I gesse.
> Men loven of propre kynde newefangelnesse,
> As briddes doon that men in cages fede. (607-11)

Even if a bird is fed on delicacies, continues the falcon, it will prefer worms, «So newefangel been they of hire mete, / And loven novelries of proper kynde» (618-19). In the Manciple's Tale the same *exemplum* reappears, again designed to show that «flessh is... newefangel» and that men «konne in nothyng han plesaunce / That sowneth into vertu any while» (193-95)[53].

Both of these cognate texts are in the first instance comic and even frivolous: the falcon's objection to her avian lover is that he has, unsurprisingly, behaved just like a bird, while the Manciple's allusion is part of a complex set of evasive insults. But in both instances a serious question is at issue: by what means can the natural man be redeemed? In the Squire's Tale it is the redemptive powers of culture — what the Squire calls «gentilesse» — that are tested and found wanting, while the vividness with which the Manciple's classical fable represents the corruptions of the flesh preempts the very possibility of cultural redemption and thus provides a fitting preparation for the Parson's terminal Christian prescriptions. Moreover, the seriousness of all three of these Chaucerian meditations on the newfangleness of sexual infidelity becomes clear when we invoke the Boethian subtext that lies behind all of them. This is meter ii of Book 3, which describes how Nature «restreyneth alle thynges by a boond that may nat be unbownde» (3.ii.6-7). Boethius gives several examples of this binding: tamed lions that become wild again upon tasting blood, the

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[52] See Robinson's note to «Anelida», line 105, citing earlier suggestions by Skeat and Tupper. These analogies suggest that if we wish to read the Knight's Tale as a mature rewriting of *Anelida and Arcite*, we might well wish to see the Squire's Tale as Chaucer's *satiric* commentary on his own earlier effort.

[53] This image of the bird-in-the-cage, derived from Boethius, reappears in a submerged form and with a sharply different valence in the Miller's Tale: Alisoun, who sings «as loude and yerne / As any swalwe sittynge on a berne» (3256-57), is kept by her jealous husband «narwe in cage» (3224) but of course manages to escape.

caged bird that scorns the luxurious food of its captivity and sings always of the shadowed wood, the bent bough that springs upright when released, the westering sun that returns to its orient source. These natural bindings are small instances of the cosmic binding that orders the universe as a whole. «Alle thynges seken ayen to hir propre cours [*recursus*]», says Boethius in the same meter, «and alle thynges rejoysen hem of hir retornyng ayen to hir nature» (39-42). Just as it is right for the bird to return to the wood, so the proper course for man is to return to his heavenly origins. This is a homecoming that is to be accomplished through a philosophical pedagogy that will enable man to gaze once again upon that «clere welle of good» (3.xii.1-2) that is itself both «the begynnynge of alle thinges» (3.10.100) and the «oon ende of blisfulnesse» (3.2.8). To possess this knowledge is to enjoy «the ferme stablenesse of perdurable duellynge» (3.11.185-86), what Boethius elsewhere calls «the ende of alle thinges that ben to desire, beyonde the whiche ende ther nys no thing to desire» (4.2.165-67).

Man is impelled on this quest for stability by a force that Boethius metaphorically designates «ayen-ledynge fyer» or *ignis revertus* (3.ix.38) and, in more philosophical language, *intentio naturalis* or «naturel entencioun» (3.11.15455). This intention is a kind of love: Boethius calls it *caritas*, a word Chaucer translates with the doublet «this charite and this love» (3.11.175-76). It represents at the level of subjectivity the force that governs the recursive action that characterizes being as a whole: all things are «constreynede... into roundnesses» and «comen... eftsones ayein, by love retorned [*converso... amore*], to the cause that hath yeven hem beinge» (4.iv. 56-9). And at the level of ethics it is the love that «halt togidres peples joyned with an holy boond, and knytteth sacrement of mariages of chaste loves» (2.viii.21-23). Its opposite is what Boethius calls the «willeful moevynges of the soule» (3.11.153-54) that deflect men into «myswandrynge errour [and] mysledeth hem into false goodes» (3.2.24-25). It is above all else that regressive Ovidian love that possesses Orpheus, in Boethius's most famous meter, and that persuades him to turn his eyes backward, in an infernal parody of the authentic recursive gaze, upon the doomed Eurydice.

In the figure of Arcite Chaucer's depiction of the «newefangelnesse» of Ovidian erotic restlessness invokes this kind of Boethian critique. Willfully rejecting Anelida's chaste love, Arcite rejects as well a fully human nature that ineluctably tends towards the true end

of things, aligning himself instead with a less than human self that
«delyte[th] / In thing that straunge is» (201-2). Hence he is
throughout the poem subjected to metaphors drawn from the animal
world. He behaves «ryght as an hors, that can bot bite and pleyn»
(157); «His newe lady holdeth him so narwe / Up by the bridil, at the
staves ende» (183-84); and in following her «he is caught up in
another les» (233). Anelida herself completes this pattern of judg-
ment with a final, plaintive question that returns us to the Boethian
passage from which we began: «is that a tame best that is ay feyn /
To renne away, when he is lest agast?» (315-16). It is this self-division,
between a truly human nature and a less than human hankering after
the unavailable and the forbidden, that most profoundly defines
Arcite as «double in love» (87) and that links him to the ironically
self-divided lady whom he seeks to abandon. What also links him to
Anelida is his disordered memory, for his negligence of his lady is a
sign of a larger forgetfulness. Arcite is one of those who has, in Lady
Philosophy's words, «foryeten hymselve» (1.2.22): he no longer
remember[s] of what cuntre» he is born (1.5.16-7) nor «remembres...
that is the ende of thynges, and whider that the entencion of alle
kynde tendeth» (1.6.37-9). «Drerynesse hath dulled my memorie»
(1.6.41), says the prisoner in the *Consolation*, and the philosophical
understanding to which the dialogue with Philosophy is devoted is
defined as a process of remembering or anamnesis[54]. Man, says Lady
Philosophy, «alwey reherceth and seketh the sovereyne good, al be it
so with a dyrkyd memorie; but he not by which path, ryght as a
dronke man not nat by which path he may retorne home to his hous»
(3.2.83-88) — a passage that is later cited by the Arcite of the Knight's
Tale[55]. Just as Anelida's obsessive memory forecloses her future, so
does Arcite's darkened memory keep him wandering in quest of a
«suffisaunce» that was once his but which he has now abandoned.
And as Arcite is alienated from his true origin so is Anelida denied
access to a transcendent end, and together they are condemned to an
endless repetitiveness that stands as a sad parody of the authentic
recursions of Boethianism.

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[54]   «And if it so be that the Muse and the doctrine of Plato syngeth soth, al
that every wyght leerneth, he ne doth no thing elles thanne but recordeth, as men
recorden thinges that ben foryeten» (III.xi.43-7).

[55]   See the Knight's Tale, 1260-67.

In soliciting a Boethian reading of its lovers, *Anelida and Arcite* prefigures the more extensive Boethianism of «The Complaint of Mars», *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale*. What is important for interpretive purposes, however, is that such a reading opens a prospect upon the complex affiliations that Chaucer establishes throughout his work among Boethian philosophy, Ovidian love, and Thebanness. Ironically, in exploring these affiliations we shall come to understand how insecurely grounded is the interpretive authority we are encouraged to cede to Boethianism. For if Thebanness stands as the other that Boethianism suppresses, this is because its configurations provide a dark mirroring of Boethian idealism that raise disquieting and finally unanswerable questions. The Theban story is itself about disordered memory and fatal repetition, about the tyranny of a past that is both forgotten and obsessively remembered, and about the recursive patterns into which history falls. In its fullest form, the story begins with acts of sexual violence — the abduction of Europa by Jove — and paternal tyranny: Agenor unfairly commands Cadmus either to recover his sister Europa or go into permanent exile, a command that in the *Metamorphoses* Ovid designates as *pius et sceleratus eodem* (III, 5). Necessarily failing in his quest, Cadmus wanders in exile until Apollo leads him to Boeotia where he is to found Thebes. But this originary act, despite its divine superintendence, is both flawed in itself and proleptic of the disasters to follow: slaying a serpent sacred to Mars, Cadmus is told that he will himself end his days as a serpent, and when he sows the serpent's teeth there spring up warriors who engage in fratricidal slaughter. Born from the earth, these first Thebans now return to it; in Ovid's phrase (which Chaucer remembered when writing the Pardoner's Tale), they beat on the warm breast of their mother for reentry: *tepido plangebant pectora matrem* (III, 126). Here is the central, recursive act of Theban history, the first instance of a chthonic return that is then endlessly repeated.

The details of this recursion are articulated in the history of «the broche of Thebes» to which Chaucer alludes in the «Complaint of Mars». The brooch is itself a sign of illicit sexuality: it is made by Vulcan as a bitter wedding gift for Harmonia, the daughter of Mars and Venus, when she marries Cadmus — a marriage that causes their exile from their city and transformation into the originary serpents. The next owner is Semele, struck by Jove's lightning; then Agave, driven mad by the Furies; then Jocasta; then Argia, wife of Polynices, who

gives it to Euripyle if she will reveal the hiding place of her husband Amphiauraus so that he may become one of the seven against Thebes, an act of betrayal that issues in his all-too-Theban engulfment in the earth. When Euripyle is then murdered by her vengeful son Alcmaeon, Ovid tellingly designates the crime as *pius et sceleratus eodem* (IX, 408), the same phrase he had earlier applied to Agenor's exile of Cadmus at the beginning of Theban history. The final owner of the brooch is Orestes, whom it incites to repeat an identical act of filial vengeance against *his* mother, Clytaemnestra[56]. Like the boar that becomes the heraldic device of the Theban family of Tydeus in the *Troilus*, the brooch is an object of desire whose possession is inevitably fatal; as Chaucer's Mars says in his complaint, its owner has «al his desir and therwith al myschaunce» (241)[57]. It arouses emotions that are in the first instance erotic (Harmonia, Semele, Agave, Jocasta) but which entail deadly consequences, and it functions in a context in which the venerean and the martial are in a continual process of mutual subversion, in which amorousness and violence are metamorphosed and finally fused, whether as internecine vengeance or romantic betrayal. Descending down through the Theban line — *longa est series*, says Statius (II, 267; cf. I, 7) — the brooch metonymically represents the primal polymorphousness of Theban emotions and the self-destructive regressiveness that results from submitting to a self unknown.

At the center of Theban history is Oedipus, the tragic figure who encapsulates the Theban fate with terrifying economy. The profound circularity of Thebanness, its inability ever to diverge from the reversionary shape ordained in and by its beginning, is reflected in the details of Oedipus's life as the Middle Ages reconstructed them. At once malevolent and pitiable, Oedipus becomes both agent and victim of the self-imposed genocide that decimates Thebes. As a son he kills his father Laius — one medieval text has him say that he «struck

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[56]   The fullest medieval survey of the genealogy of the Brooch is provided by the Second Vatican Mythographer; see Georg Bode, ed., *Scriptores rerum mythicarum latini tres romae nuper reperti* (Celle, 1834), 1.101. A modern account is offered by Neil C. Hultin, «Anti-Courtly Elements in Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*», *Annuale Medievale* 9 (1968), 58-75.

[57]   The device of the boar signifies the Calydonian boar killed by Meleager and then given by him to Atalanta as a love gift, an act that enraged his uncles and led to the family feud in which the nephew slaughtered his uncles and was, in revenge, consigned to death by his own mother. The story is told in a compressed form by Cassandra as an explication of Troilus's dream (5, 1471-84).

iron through my father's loins» — and as a father he reenacts his primal crime by cursing his sons with what the same text has him describe as «the sword of my tongue»[58]. Similarly, he reenacts the return of the dragon-warriors to their mother earth in his incest with Jocasta, performing what is described by both Statius and Seneca as a *revolutus in ortus*[59]. Even the smallest details of his life express the compulsions of repetition and circularity: exiled as an infant to Mount Cithaeron by his father, he is in his old age exiled there once again by Creon, and the riddle that marks him as extraordinary presents his life, and all life, as inescapably replicating. In the *Roman de Thèbes* and its prose adjuncts the riddle is itself given a duplicative form: «I have heard tell of a beast», says the Sphinx, «that when it first wishes to walk on the ground it goes on four feet like a bear; and then comes a time when it has no need of the fourth foot and it moves with great speed on three; and when it has greater strength it stands and goes on two feet; and then it has need of three, and then four. Friend, tell me if you have ever seen such a beast?»[60] Man is the beast, and whether he is figured as a bear or, as in the *Troilus*, as a boar, it is his irredeemable animality that lies at the heart of Theban history, just as it lies at the center of Arcite's Theban consciousness in *Anelida and Arcite*.

Thebanness is a fatal doubling of the self that issues in a replicating history that preempts a linear or developmental progress. Theban history in its pure form has neither origin nor end but only a single, infinitely repeatable moment of illicit eroticism and fratricidal rivalry — love and war locked together in a perverse fatality. In its circular recursions, moreover, it stands as a dark echo of the idealistic *recursus* of Boethianism, a specular impersonation that destabilizes the

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[58]   These are two lines from the so-called *Planctus Oedipi*, an 84-line poem that survives in at least 12 manuscripts, both by itself and with the *Thebaid*. I have here translated lines 30 and 79 from the transcription of Berlin lat. fol. 34, printed by Edelstand du Méril, *Poésies inédites du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1854), pp. 310-13.

[59]   Seneca, *Oedipus*, line 238, and see also lines 638-39; Statius, *Thebaid* I, 235.

[60]   Leopold Constans, ed., *Romand de Thèbes*, SATF (Paris, H. Champion, 1890), lines 281-91. The same circularity is stressed by the Second Vatican Mythographer: «quod primo quatuor, deinde tribus, deinde duobus, deinde tribus, deinde quatuor graditur pedibus?» (Bode, 1.150-51). In «Oedipus in the Middle Ages», *Antike und Abendland* 22 (1976), 140-55, Lowell Edmunds points out that «in the ancient sources the riddle is always simpler: first four, then three, then two feet» (144, n. 15).

interpretive authority with which the *Consolation* is invested. Like the
Theban dragon warriors and their Oedipal descendants, the Boethian
philosopher is also engaged in a *revolutus in ortus*, a return to the *fons
et origo* from which all being descends. For Boethius this origin is
celestial: as Chaucer's most securely Boethian poem advises its
readers, «Know thy contree, look up, thank God of al; / Hold the
heye wey, and lat thy gost thee lede»[61]. But the lesson about origins
that the Theban legend teaches is epitomized in a phrase from the
Thebaid: *crudelis pater vincit*. Whether personified as father Oedipus
or the dragon-warriors' mother earth, the parent ineluctably calls the
Theban back, either temporally by enacting the past or spatially by
reentering the earth, the chthonic source of life. According to
Boethius's Platonic rationalism, moral failure is a function of
intellectual error: an undiverted *intentio naturalis* directs us to the
«good [that] is the fyn of alle thinges» (3.2.230), and it is only
«myswandrynge errour [that] mysledeth [men] into false goodes»
(3.2.23-5; cf. 3.3.6-8). Boethian *caritas* is an *amor conversus* that
irresistibly returns us to the divine origin. But the *amor* that motivates
the Theban, however well-intentioned, has a twofold character (*pius
et sceleratus eodem*) that leads him inevitably to disaster. The Theban
legend harshly argues that the natural self is by definition ill-behaved
and self-defeating, an unconstrained appetitiveness that bespeaks not
a transcendent origin but a primordial and earthbound animality.

This Theban economy has a powerful relevance as well to a poet
like Chaucer, whose own habits of literary recall witness to a dynamic
strikingly similar to that articulated by Theban history. If we return
now to *Anelida and Arcite* in order to examine the intertextual rela-
tions that inform it, we can begin to understand the way in which
Chaucer's poetics of memory stand as a compositional version of
Thebanness. An important instance is Anelida's echoed phrase, «the
poynt of remembraunce» (211, 350) — a phrase that derives from
Purgatorio XII, where Dante and Virgil tread upon the figured pave-
ment of the cornice of pride. This is the terrace where the «gran
tumor» (XI, 119) of Dante's own artistic pride is put down by a
discussion of the fruitless rivalry between artistic generations. The
divine images with which the cornice is adorned are compared to the
sculptured paving stones that cover the tombs set into the floor of the
church nave:

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[61] «Truth», 19-20; ed. Robinson, p. 536.

in order that there be memory of them, the stones in the church floor over the buried dead bear figured what they were before: wherefore many a time men weep for them there at the prick of the memory [*la punctura de la rimembranza*] that spurs only the faifhful[62].

Bearing an artistic refiguring of the original that lies within, the sculptured stones are memorial images that spur the pious with the *punctura de la rimembranza*. Chaucer's own poem is a similar act of piety toward his dead poetic precursors: Corinna, Ovid, Statius, Dante himself, even the stubbornly unacknowledged Boccaccio. As with Anelida's lament over the departed Arcite, the poem testifies to the presence of those who are absent, and Chaucer presents himself, here as elsewhere, as a merely curatorial figure. He is the scribe who will «endyte / This olde storie in Latin» (9-10), as if not even translation were necessary, and will loyally «folowe» (21) in the footsteps of Statius and Corinna. But the poem itself refuses to endorse even the possibility of such an unmediated access to the past. For it argues throughout, and especially in the first ten stanzas, that the foundations of the poet's literary heritage are only fitfully available in their original and authentic form, and that he must instead make do with artful refigurings, modern rewritings that stand always at some distance from the original.

Such an understanding of the poetic past is implicit in the enigma of Corinna, whether she be the Theban *tenuis Corinna* [artful Corinna] of Statius's *Silvae*, who could have been at most only a name to Chaucer, or the Roman *versuta Corinna* [well-versed Corinna], who is implied throughout Ovid's *Amores* but, represented only as the figure of the poet's desire, has herself no voice[63]. Whoever she is, the name signifies a presence that devouring time has taken from us, leaving behind only a verbal image. Time has likewise but

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[62]   Come, perché di lor memoria sia,
         sovra i sepolti le tombe terragne
         portan segnato quel ch'elli eran pria,
             onde lì molte volte si ripiagne
         per la puntura de la rimembranza,
         che solo a'pïi dà de la calcagne. (*Purg.* XII, 16-21)

[63]   In *Silvae* V, Eclogue 3, Statius refers to «the hidden thought of subtle Corinna» (*tenuisque arcana Corinnae* [158]); the girl to whom Ovid addresses most of the *Amores* is referred to in II, 19 as «Corinna the artful» or, more literally, «well-versed Corinna» (*versuta Corinna*). On the scholarly problems of assigning this Statian source to Chaucer's use of the name, see above, n. 36.

differently distanced us from the poem's other announced source, for Statius's *Thebaid* is everywhere present in the first ten stanzas, but present in a way that insists upon distance. For what a close comparison of these ten stanzas with the *Thebaid* reveals is that Statius appears in the poem only accompanied by his belated imitator Boccaccio, whose rewriting of his master's poem — the *Teseida* — permeates these lines. If we start with the three opening stanzas, we find them to be a rewriting of the comparable opening stanzas of the *Teseida*, which is Boccaccio's own rewriting of the *Thebaid*. They are, moreover, a rewriting with a difference, for they both reverse the order of Boccaccio's stanzas — 1, 2 and 3 here become 3, 2 and 1 — and in one crucial point flatly contradict them. Whereas Boccaccio says that the *storia antiqua* he will tell has never been told by a Latin author, Chaucer assures us that he found the «olde storie» precisely «in Latin» (10)[64]. Contravening his authority in order to invoke an authority, Chaucer uses the same gesture both to demonstrate and to deny his own originality; and he implies that it is not pious accuracy that characterizes the relation of follower to precursor but deformation and even reversal.

The next three stanzas of *Anelida and Arcite*, however, do return us directly to a Theban master source in Statius's *Thebaid*: describing the return of Theseus from the conquest of Hippolyta, they begin by

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[64]   This is Boccaccio's account of the genesis of the *Teseida*, ed. Mario Marti, *Opere Minori in Volgare*, 2 (Milan, Rizzoli, 1970), p. 257:

> E' m'é venuto in voglia con pietosa
> rima di scrivere una istoria antica,
> tanto negli anni riposta e nascosa
> che latino autor non par ne dica,
> per quel ch'io senta, in libro alcuna cosa. (I, 2)

> The desire has come to me to set down in plaintive verse an ancient tale, set aside and left long undisclosed over the years, so that no Latin author appears to have recounted it in any book, as far as I know. (*The Book of Theseus*, trans. Bernadette Marie McCoy [New York, Medieval Text Association, 1974], p. 20).

In his gloss to this passage, Boccaccio makes it clear that he is claiming not originality for the *Teseida* but a more profound form of authenticity than would be the case if his source were Latin: «Non è stata di greco translatata in latino» (p. 662) — «It has not been translated from Greek into Latin» (p. 47). Boccaccio's text, he implies, relies upon no intermediary but returns to the original Greek account, perhaps something even as authentic as Dares' or Dictys' accounts of the Trojan War (both of which were originally written in Greek although known to the Middle Ages in Latin translations).

closely translating sixteen lines from Statius's last book (XII, 519-35)[65]. But before they finish they again veer off into the *Teseida* by invoking the non-Statian Emily and establishing the terms for Boccaccio's story (38-42). When Statius does appear, then, and even here in what are close to his own words, it is in service to Boccaccio, his belated imitator from whom he seems never to be quite free. Then in the seventh stanza Chaucer begins a final effort to return to the original version of the Theban story: leaving Theseus «in his weye rydynge» (46) towards Athens, the poet doubles back to the chronologically prior Theban War of which Statius is the chronicler, describing both his rhetorical turn and the Theban matter itself with the elliptically echoic phrase, «the slye wey»[66]. But this return to the origin is also predictably thwarted: when in stanzas 8-10 the story of the Theban War is summarized, it appears in a précis drawn not from the *Thebaid* but from the unavoidable *Teseida*. The Theban matter cannot, it would seem, be represented in its original Statian form; just as classical texts are encrusted with medieval glosses, so does Statius come to Chaucer embedded within a Boccaccian context.

Nor should we assume that the difference between original and imitation is so radical as to guarantee their distinction. However unlike the *Thebaid* the *Teseida* may appear to us, it is clear that Boccaccio intended his poem to be a vernacular recreation of the classical epic. Divided into twelve books and containing, in some manuscripts at least, the identical number of lines as the *Aeneid*, the *Teseida* deploys elaborate mythographical and even archaeological allusions, articulates sentiments and values appropriate to the preChristian past, and appends to its classicized text a medieval gloss. Of course it

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[65] Chaucer's rewriting of Statius's lines is preceded in the manuscripts of the *Anelida* by a citation of *Thebaid* XII, 519-21, the same lines as several of the manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* include at the start of the *Knight's Tale*. In terms of the chronology of the events, the *Anelida* takes place before the *Knight's Tale*, and few scholars have doubted that it also stands earlier in Chaucer's career; but the precise nature of the relationship remains obscure.

[66] Chaucer leaves Theseus riding towards Athens, «And founde I wol in shortly for to bringe / *The slye wey* of that I gan to write, / Of quene Anelida and fals Arcite» (47-9). This striking phrase is thus elliptical, referring both to the means by which the subject matter of the poem will be introduced and that subject matter itself, «the slye wey» with which Arcite dealt with Anelida. The ambiguity thus serves to correlate Arcite's Theban action with Chaucer's Theban writing, and not only suggests that doubleness pervades both but demonstrates its workings through the lexical instability of a double meaning.

is also a frankly medieval poem, but while it draws heavily upon the vernacular *romanzi* of contemporary Italy, it locates these medieval forms in the service of a classical subtext. Like «Anelida and Arcite» and the Knight's Tale, the *Teseida* is an attempt to translate the compulsions of Theban history into the terms of a chivalric ideology — to show, in other words, how the regressive rivalry and eroticism of the Theban past continue to be enacted in the medieval present. As a humanist homage to the classics, the *Teseida* thus implies its own critique by suggesting that its historicist piety is itself a form of Thebanness. But in the last analysis Boccaccio evades the conclusion towards which his own narrative directs him. Arcita may be a victim of the Theban curse, but he is the last victim, and his finally selfless love for Emilia makes possible a healing reconciliation with Palemone that lays the past to rest. For Boccaccio, modern love can redeem ancient hatreds, and his romantic grafts onto the epic stock are not infected by the original malignity but serve to redeem the whole[67]. Thus for Boccaccio the *Teseida* bespeaks a medieval mastery over the classical past; while Chaucer's poetry, here as in the *Troilus* and the Knight's Tale, witnesses to the almost atavistic power of the classical world.

If it is true, then, that the original voice is confusingly doubled by later echoes, is it any longer possible to speak of an original or authentic story at all? This question becomes pressing in light of all the other Theban voices that Chaucer seems to have heard, including Ovid, Seneca, the so-called *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*, the anonymous authors of the *Roman de Thèbes* and the *Planctus Oedipi*,

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[67] That this redemptiveness is to be understood as working in both individual and collective ways is clear from the poem's concluding movements. As Arcita lies dying, he prays that he not be consigned to a place among the other Theban damned since he has always sought, even if unsuccessfully, to evade the Theban fate (X, 96-99); the subsequent account of his ascent through the spheres, and of his enlightenment about «la vanitate / ... dell'umane genti» (XI, 3), shows that his prayer has been answered. Then when the question of marrying Emilia is suggested to Palemone, he demurs on the grounds that he is «the sole heir of the great infamies of my ancestors» (XII, 24 [McCoy, p. 317]), but is dissuaded by Teseo, and the elaborate account of the wedding with which the poem concludes affirms the rightness of the reconciliations that it consolidates. As with the *Roman de Thèbes* and the *Roman d'Eneas*, modern love is capable of redeeming ancient wickedness, a claim that is not true of the *Roman de Troie*. For a somewhat different but not contradictory account of the *Roman de Thèbes*, see Alfred Adler, «The *Roman de Thèbes*, a 'Consolatio Philosophiae'», *Romanische Forschungen* 72 (1960), 257-76.

and Dante[68]. And what effect does the mysterious Corinna have upon Statius's authority? Can we any longer assume that the poet whom Chaucer in the *House of Fame* identified as a native of Toulouse is himself the original Theban poet[69]? Just as *Anelida and Arcite* is hardly the last word on Thebes, neither surely is the *Thebaid* the first. Statius himself implies as much at the beginning of his own poem: *longa retro series*, he says (I, 7), and whatever starting point is chosen must be arbitrary[70]. Every beginning is *in medias res*, every account a selection, every telling a retelling. Far from being a straightforward linear development, the history of Theban writing is what Chaucer in the *Boece* calls a «replicacioun of wordes» (3.12.160-61), and to enter upon it is to broach a labyrinthine way, «so entrelaced that it is unable to ben unlaced» (3.12.157)[71]. Haunted by a past that is at once

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[68]   For the *Roman de Thèbes*, see Wise, pp. 116-37. For the *Histoire ancienne*, see Paul Meyer, «Les premières compilations françaises d'histoire ancienne», *Romania* 14 (1885), 36-76; this text included prose versions of the romans d'antiquité: see Guy Raynaud de Lage, «Les romans antiques dans l'*Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*», *Moyen Age* 63 (1957), 267-309. In the Middle Ages the *Histoire* was known as, among other things, the *Livre des histoires*, the *Trésor des ystoires*, and the *Livre d'Orose* (since it adopted Orosius's chronology). For an edition, see the version ascribed to C. de Seissel and entitled *Le premier volume de Oroze*, 3 vol. (Paris, A. Verard, 1509). The *Hystoire de Thebes* printed in this edition calls Polynices «Polimites»; in *Troilus and Criseyde*, V, 1488, 1507, Chaucer calls him «Polymite(s)». There is no evidence that Chaucer actually read Seneca's *Oedipus* (although see Skeat's note to the *Parliament of Fowls*, line 176); but it was known throughout the Middles Ages, and Nicholas Trevet, whose *Chronique* and Commentary on Boethius's *Consolation* Chaucer did read, wrote a commentary on it and other Senecan plays. Similary, several manuscripts of the *Thebaid* have the *Planctus Oedipi* attached to it, so it was available to Chaucer although there is no evidence that he in fact did read it; see Edmunds, «Oedipus in the Middle Ages», and Paul M. Clogan, «The *Planctus* of Oedipus: Text and Comment», *Medievalia et Humanistica* 1 (1970), 233-39.

[69]   *House of Fame*, 1460. Statius identified himself as a native of Naples, but the Middle Ages assigned him to Toulouse: see Charles Singleton's note to *Purgatorio* XXI, 89 in his edition and translation of the *Commedia*, *Purgatorio*, 2: *Commentary* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 510-11.

[70]   Statius, for example, begins the story with the struggle between Eteocles and Polynices, while the *Roman de Thèbes* goes back to Oedipus's killing of Laius (see *Troilus and Criseyde*, II, 100-103).

[71]   In his *Seven Books of History against the Pagans*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 1964), Orosius says that he will omit the «inextricable windings of successive evils» that constitute Theban history (I, 12 [pp. 33-34]). With the description of the House of Tydyngs in the *House of Fame*, Chaucer established a connection among inextricability, labyrinths, and Orosius's (and other's) sense that *all* history is «an inextricable wicker-work of confusion».

sustaining (like a pavement) and galling (like a spur), Theban writing simultaneously salves and reopens the wound caused by «the poynt of remembraunce»; and Chaucer, by invoking Thebes as an early and recurrent locus of his own work, and as a metaphor for his own poetics of memory, sets himself in a relationship with origins so skeptical that it will never receive a final resolution until (which will never happen) the pilgrims arrive at Canterbury.

IV.

In a recent discussion of early twentieth-century Modernism, Perry Anderson has argued that one of the necessary preconditions for its emergence was «the imaginative proximity of social revolution. The extent of hope or apprehension that the prospect of such a revolution arouses varies widely, but over most of Europe it was 'in the air' during the Belle Epoque itself»[72]. It was «in the air» in late fourteenth-century Europe too, and not least of all in England: the Rising of 1381 was the most visible expression of an upsurge of new forces that were felt to pervade social, political, and economic life[73]. Yet while the Modernists of our own century may have been empowered by the possibility of revolution, their specific response was overwhelmingly conservative, both in the explicit reactionary political programs to which they subscribed and, more profoundly, in the formalist aesthetic that largely governed their own cultural production. History enabled their innovations, but it was a history from which they sought to flee.

Something of the same could be said of Chaucer's own meditation on modernity. By seeing it as an essentially literary question, by allowing his writing to remain within the highly stylized aesthetic of courtly cultural production (however modified), and by staging

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[72] «Modernity and Revolution», in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 325.

[73] Historians generally agree that the Peasants' Revolt was a response to the effort of the ruling class to contain rising expectations rather than, as with the Jacquerie, an expression of the desperation of the exploited; see, e.g., Rodney Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism: Essays in Medieval Social History* (London, Hambledon Press, 1985), pp. 152-64.

the problematic of historical action in terms of antiquity, Chaucer in effect ruled out much of his contemporary historical world as an object of poetic attention. Moreover, the ostentatious formalism of his writing (a quality that has helped to preserve its canonicity in contemporary academia) locates it within the *hortus conclusus* of aristocratic aestheticism, a world where tyranny and victimization, possession and privation, however apparently irreparable, are domesticated and disarmed by means of a highly traditional amorous etiology. Indeed, given the sense of powerlessness and obsolescence that afflicted the late medieval aristocracy, one of the attractions of courtly *makyng* must have been just the sense of control with which it endowed the *maker* himself, a control that Chaucer deploys with effortless authority[74]. And when he does consider the problem of change directly, he calls it «newefangelnesse» and locates it in the realm not of social and political analysis but of moral psychology. Rather than a legitimate interest in change, «newefangelnesse» is here an erotic instability to be diagnosed as «falsnes» and «doublenesse».

Yet this cannot, finally, be the whole story. For if Chaucer is no revolutionary (and who ever thought otherwise?), he does remain a writer committed not just to innovation but to the understanding of innovation. Certainly such self-reflection may lead to a deManian paralysis, and *Anelida and Arcite* is a deeply self-cancelling text that calls into question the very possibility of historical action per se. Yet it is also bravely exploratory, at the levels of both literary construction and conceptual penetration. No one else in England, perhaps even in Europe, could have written it: in the imprecise way we usually use the word, it is an *original*. Finally, if we must measure the degree to which it stands apart from history — and deMan has reminded us that the proper antithesis to modernity is not antiquity but history itself — we should also see it as a gesture toward *rapprochement*. For only in this way can we understand how it could be that Chaucer concluded his

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[74] As Guiette has said, «L'artifex, dans son monde à part, clos, limité, absolu, met sa force d'homme au service d'une chose qu'il fait» («D'une poésie formelle», p. 21). It is indeed a «force d'*homme*»: as its stigmatization of woman as omnipotent suggests, especially given the practical impotence of virtually all aristocratic women, courtly writing is a deeply masculinist practice. For this writing as an escape from history, see Poirion, *Le poète et le prince*, pp. 20-25. Machaut's *Fonteinne amoureuse* deals with the topic explicitly: see Margaret J. Ehrhart, «Machaut's *Dit de la fonteinne amoureuse*, the Choice of Paris, and the Duties of Rulers», *PQ* (1980), 119-39.

career by writing the text that provides us with the shrewdest and most capacious analysis of fourteenth-century English society we possess. History impelled Chaucer toward the modern and he accepted the challenge by investigating not just the idea of history, as in *Anelida and Arcite*, but, in the *Canterbury Tales*, history itself.

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