

# The Retraction

## Religious Debate and Polemic in the *Retraction*

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### Tools

“Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys, or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure Lorde Jhesu Crist” (Ret 1081). So begins Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Retraction* to his *Canterbury Tales*. Reading a piece that professes to disavow many of the most enjoyable works (to a modern audience) written by the author at the end of his *Canterbury Tales* can be a shock for readers whose experience of the *Tales* has been one of delight in the romance, earthiness, and jocularity of Chaucer’s voice. But, following in the tone of the penitentially-inflected *Parson’s Tale*, the *Retraction* offers up a glimpse of a more complicated Middle Ages, one wrestling with matters of the earth and the divine.

The language of the *Retraction* repeats a similar introductory apology in the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*: “Now wol I preie mekely every discret persone that redith or herith this litel tretys to have my rude endityng for excusid” (*Astr* 41-43). Unlike the *Astrolabe* apology, which discounts its simple style, the *Retraction* can be read as divided into parts that echo the genre of penitential literature: an opening prayer, an intercession for Chaucer’s well-being; the retraction and confession itself, asking for forgiveness for his sinful works; and a final prayer. The confession portion also names his literary works, suggesting what Chaucer may have thought his canon contained. The retraction can be analyzed in terms of the medieval literary technique of the *humilitas* (“humility”) topos found in other writers such as Jean De Meun’s *Le Testament* and Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* (two writers influential on Chaucer’s work). This rhetorical strategy allowed the author to be excused for writings the audience might not like while also asserting their role as author of the works they are apologizing for. It is a double-duty rhetorical technique.

The *Retraction* can also be thought of in terms of medieval penitential practice. The three aspects of medieval confession are listed by Chaucer in this brief work: contrition, confession, and repentance (l. 1089). Chaucer also invokes the role of *auctoritas* in creation of his works; Jesus works through Chaucer to produce his best material (that material which elevates the reader) and thus Jesus works through Chaucer in his writing. Chaucer refers to St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans, “Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine” (Ret 1083). Chaucer examines his life’s work through the lens of this verse, separating out the works that are too focused on worldly

vanities (Chaucer lists such work as his *Troilus* and those *Canterbury Tales* that “sownen into sinne” (Ret 1085) as falling into this category) and those that have more uplifting morals behind them (Chaucer mentions his saints’ legends and translation of Boethius, the *Boece*, in this category). Finally, the *Retraction* also gestures toward the Lollard controversy in terms of the place of public and private confession in medieval Christian life.

## Text

Chaucer’s *Retraction* troubles readers and scholars. Why would a writer who has created such a dynamic group of literary works suddenly turn on so many of them? Is this really Chaucer’s final, deathbed word on his poems? Is Chaucer even to be taken seriously? To answer these kinds of questions is to ask a question of authorial intention, one that we cannot recover from a writer so distant from us. However, while the *Retraction* raises these kinds of questions regarding Chaucer’s intentions, it also leads to a re-thinking about Chaucer’s canon, the role of religion and confession in medieval society, as well as the role of the author and their secular and divine inspiration. I will deal with this final issue first and work backwards to Chaucer’s sense of canon as a way to end with the most controversial issue in Chaucerian studies.

The concept of *auctoritas* shaped literary production. In Scholastic thinking, the Latin word *auctoritas* does not easily translate to just “authority.” Rather it categorizes statements that were considered weighty in the context of an argument. Thus, a medieval writer or thinker may use the work of St. Augustine, not only because he was considered an authority on a subject, but also because his statements weighed heavily on the dispute at hand. This did not mean that one could not argue with Augustine or think Augustine wrong. Thus, *auctoritates* (the plural) were not simply used as platitudes; they were used as tools for argument. Thinking about *auctoritas* in this manner suggests Chaucer thought of his best works, such as his translation of *Boece* or his “legendes of saintes” (Ret 1087) as not only utilizing authoritative sources (Boethius, saints’ lives), but also as holding weight in supporting the concept of the work of grace within the author. We may imagine then that Chaucer categorized his “sinful” fables, fabliaux, and romance narratives as having little weight in an argument and derived from sources Chaucer thought of as having less authority, such as classical sources. Thus, the retraction brings our attention to the multivalent use of the concept of *auctoritas* and asks us to consider how Chaucer and his medieval context would have judged literature itself and how different that sense of aesthetics is from our own.

Connected with this sense of aesthetic categorization is a consideration of Chaucer’s writing as “sinful.” What part of these works, such as his own *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, and the tales in the *Canterbury Tales* that lead to sin (Ret 1085) are necessarily sinful? This leads a modern reader to think about the purpose of reading in the Middle Ages. As Margaret Hallissy points out, reading “to moderns [...] is mainly for intellectual pleasure, to medievals art was for religious instruction” (292). Hallissy’s point may be somewhat overstated as plenty of non-religious works circulated for some kind of artistic enjoyment; however, she does bring our attention to different sensibilities for the seriousness of literature in the medieval period. Chaucer categorizes some of his works as sinful because of their subject matter. A medieval education would have used classical models, but instructors would have asked students to consider the context as irrelevant and the structure of the work as

everything. There is a tradition of eschewing one's frivolous works stretching back to the ancient Greeks. For an analogue close to Chaucer's time, the writer Jean de Meun offers up a similar kind of retraction as Chaucer's own: "In my youth I have made many *dits* because of vanity, in which many people have been delighted several times. Now may God grant me to make one out of true charity so that I can make amends for the ones that have profited me little" (de Meun 798). Jean de Meun indicates various purposes to his writing: while his previous literature caused delight in his audience, he now must turn to writing something to make up for the salacious content of his previous work. As Anita Obermeier points out, Chaucer "begs excuse for three main flaws: the pagan content of his literary material, material celebrating sexuality [...], and questionable language" (186). These literary sins reflect the tension about the use of pagan literature in Christian society. If literature was supposed to reflect back on a Christian morality, writing a spoof of the story of Noah, as Chaucer does in the *Miller's Tale*, could be considered sacrilegious and lead to too much audience delight.

The line of thinking in the retraction genre goes something like this: the creation of these kinds of works warrants an act of confession since the author is not using his God-given gifts in the correct, spiritual, or Christian way. In the tradition of other literary retractions, Chaucer's confessional impulse may stem from a sense of literary legacy. The *Retraction* appeals to Jesus and the Virgin Mary: "from hennes forth unto my lyves ende sende me grace to biwayle my giltes and to studie to the salvacioun of my soule, and graunte me grace of verray penitence, confessioun and satisfaccioun to doon in this present lyf" (Ret 1089). I quote this line in full to draw attention to the idea that Chaucer was "not dead yet," as they say in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, as a reminder that though this work is situated last in the *Canterbury Tales* by later compilers of the *Tales*, there is nothing to suggest that Chaucer did not continue to work on the *Tales* (or his other works) after he wrote the *Retraction*. The appeal to "unto my lyves ende" suggests that maybe the rumor that Chaucer wrote this on his deathbed is spurious. Maybe the *Retraction* could be thought of as Chaucer's living will. One might imagine Chaucer thinking, in the vein of St. Augustine, "forgive me these dirty tales, but not yet."

Another reason this line is important is that it reflects medieval penitential practice: the aforementioned contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Medieval penance was a process in which the penitent sought forgiveness for their sin. After the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, yearly penance to a priest became mandatory. The penitent sought out a priest and through a process of question and answer, the penitent disclosed their sins. Priests, or confessors, heard confession and acted as mediators between the sinner and God. As the Middle Ages developed, texts called penitentials were used to guide confessors in prescribing appropriate penance for the sinner. Penitentials such as the *Paenitentiale Theodori*, the *Paenitentiale Pseudo-Ecgberhti*, or, more contemporaneous with Chaucer, Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* outline the proper way to confess, a list of sins, as well as various forms of penance the penitent can perform. The issue surrounding this form of penance has to do with a private, subjective self and a public declaration shaped by the penitential act. Penitential practice reveals a sinner that is shaped by the penitential itself—what if the priest, going through the list of questions, does not ask you the right question? The only sins revealed are the sins the Church think are sins. There is a tension between the identity of the Christian sinner and what the Church thought that sinner should look like. Thus, Chaucer's *Retraction* presents a conflicting portrait of the Chaucerian authorial voice:

is this Chaucer the writer or is this Chaucer the Christian? Are these even separate identities at all?

As the previous paragraph indicates, there was controversy over penitential practice, and Chaucer is not immune to its representation in his work. Penitence had a public and private characteristic. To confess one's sin was to ask forgiveness from God. This emphasized an inner transformation within the sinner. However, penitential practice formalized this process. As the sinner endured penance, their sin was forgiven and they were renewed. Yet, the role of the priest in this act and their wielding of power to forgive were rife with controversy.

Doctrines surrounding penance were attacked by the Lollard movement during Chaucer's lifetime. This late-medieval reform movement circulates around Chaucer's writing, as well. Lollardy, with its roots in the work of the medieval theologian, John Wyclif, challenged the authority of the medieval Church in matters such as papal authority, translation of the Bible into the vernacular, transubstantiation, and the use of priests to hear confession. Some of these ideas find their ways into a number of Chaucerian works, especially the *Parson's Tale*. There is much debate around whether Chaucer was sympathetic to Lollard causes or not—as in much of the Chaucerian canon, Chaucer is able to make in-jokes and play both sides. However, Lollards believed that confession was an act performed between the sinner and God and, thus, the priest-as-mediator was superfluous. One cannot help but notice that Chaucer's own literary confession is *directly* addressed to Jesus and the Virgin Mary without a mention of a priestly intercessor.

Despite its short length, the *Retraction* is a rich piece in Chaucer's *Tales*. Rather than the *Retraction* acting as his own final word on the works, the historical and analogical evidence suggests, much like the rest of *The Canterbury Tales*, that there is a high-level of indeterminate meaning contained within it. We can use the *Retraction* as a piece that disturbs easy chronological ordering of the *Tales*. We can think about Chaucer's own sense of aesthetics and, possibly, humor. We can even use the *Retraction* to think about how an artist sees their work proceeding through time. As much as Chaucer may have wanted to categorize his works into sinful and beneficial—providing *sentence*—the *Retraction* ends up raising far more questions than it answers. It is hardly an ending at all.

## Transformation

1. Despite the retraction's placement at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, critics call into question whether Chaucer wrote this last. If, like the other tales, the *Retraction* could be moved around in the order what effect may this have on the tales? Where would you place it and why?
2. Why might Chaucer feel his "sinful" works fall into the category of "worldly vanities"? How might you categorize them instead?
3. What are the ethical responsibilities of a writer? Does Chaucer have an ethical responsibility to his reader that would warrant a retraction?
4. Consider other writers. If they looked back at their other writings, what might they ask for forgiveness for from a reader and what might they claim? Why?
5. How does Chaucer fit into the literary history of the retraction? How does his differ from those that have come before (and after)?

6. How does Chaucer place the responsibility on the reader to divine the correct moral lesson, not only in the *Retraction*, but in various Prologues, as well?

**Suggestions for Further Reading:**

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