"THE NOBLE PHILOSOPHICAL POETE IN ENGLISHE":
JOHN WYCLIF'S ULTRAREALISM AND THE WORKS
OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER

THESIS

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ANALYSIS

The connections between Chaucer and the nominalist school of philosophy have been investigated and analyzed by numerous Chaucerian scholars, and the results have varied from assertions of direct influence (Wimsatt, Peck et al.) to assertions of Chaucer's purposeful rejection of the tenets of nominalism (Andretta). However, when we take into account the profound and pervasive interest Chaucer had in Boethius, we find ourselves in a critical conundrum. With the debates between nominalists and scholastic realists raging at Oxford in the late fourteenth century, it is confusing to try and place Chaucer squarely on either side of the debate. We will attempt to tease out of Chaucer's fiction what influence if any the chief proponent of realism at Oxford in the late 1380s, the schoolman John Wyclif, had on Chaucer's philosophical viewpoint. Rather than search for direct evidence of some intellectual relationship between Chaucer and Wyclif, two men whose patron was John of Gaunt, we will instead attempt a Wycliffite reading of Chaucer's work. More specifically we are interested in Chaucer's philosophical stance as it relates to Wyclif's ultrarealism regardless of any personal connection they may have shared. Therefore this analysis will rely on intertextual criticism more than on historical or biographical.

An important fact which relates the motives of both Chaucer and Wyclif to a shared anxiety in textuality is their desire to write in the English tongue. Wyclif had begun and defended a process of translation of the Vulgate Bible into English. Chaucer expresses a similar anxiety towards the composition and translation of his poetry into English. For Wyclif, the stability of the concept of universals becomes the foundation for his justification of scriptural translation. His translation is the result of years of scholarly debate against the tenets of the Ockamist nominalists. Chaucer expresses his own doubts on the dangers of the nominalist revolution in philosophy and theology and its effect on the courtier:

> Trouthe is put doun, resoun is holden fable,
>
> Vertu hath now no dominacioun;
>
> Pitee exyled, no man is merciable.
>
> Through covetyse is blent discrecioun.
>
> The world hath mad a permutacioun
>
> Fro right to wrong, fro trouthe to fikelnesse,
>
> That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse.   (*Lak of Stedfastnesse*, ll. 15-21)

Wyclif as well complains about the attack on reasoning, more specifically on the scholastic method of philosophy and theology (Robson 174). What Chaucer sees as threatening the integrity of the royal court, Wyclif sees as a fundamental attack on the neoplatonic realism which buttressed the epistemology of the Church.

As we conduct a Wycliffite reading of selections of Chaucer's works, we will be concentrating on their philosophical foundation and how this expresses an affinity with Wyclif's concepts of realism. Specifically, we will use Wyclif's stance on universals as elaborated in his work *Summa De Ente*. In this work Wyclif insisted upon the necessity of a belief in ultrarealism as the only sure way the mind can know the certainties and truths of God. Ultrarealism was distinct from other forms of realism such as conceptualism in that it asserts that universals have their own existence. That is, universals are not simply constructs of the mind as a way of understanding and categorizing *Being*. Wyclif insists that universals must have being because they exist in the mind of God, who is the source and the *suppositum* of ultimate being. Wyclif's example illustrates this concept: Socrates was a man in that he was a *suppositum*, or place of inherence, of the universal *humanitas*; he was Socrates the specific man in that he was a *homo*. So it is not just Socrates the man who exists, but also the universal humanity exists through Socrates. This strict assertion of the existence of universals as truly real was Ultrarealism as defined and defended by Wyclif.

Wyclif developed his concepts of Ultrarealism from the traditional scholastic curriculum. He is restating, with added fervor, the tenets expressed by Augustine. The belief in a moderate realism, or conceptualism, had been the official doctrinal standpoint of the Church for over five hundred years. Neoplatonic realism was the philosophical foundation for Boethius in his *Isagoge de Porfyry* and *Consolation of Philosophy*. Chaucer had translated and glossed *The Consolation of Philosophy* shortly before writing his *Troilus*. Could Chaucer's interest in Boethius have been influenced by the Oxford

debates between the nominalists and the realists?   We have no direct evidence that

Chaucer, a courtier and semi-private poet, had a specific interest in what Wyclif was

arguing. However, there are hints in Chaucer's works which reveal his knowledge of the

scholarly interests of the Oxfordians. For example in the *The Nun's Priest Tale* the

narrator states:

> But what that God forwoot moot nedes bee,
>
> After the opinioun of certein clerkis.
>
> Witnesse on hym that any parfit clerk is,
>
> That in scole is greet altercacioun
>
> In this mateere, and greet disputisoun,
>
> And hath been of an hundred thousand men.
>
> But I ne kan nat bulte it to the bren
>
> As kan the hooly doctour Augustyn,
>
> Or Boece, or the Bisshop Bradwardyn,   (*NPT* 3234-3242)

The end of the above quotation lists three realists who were very influential on

Wyclif's philosophical standpoint. The omission of John Wyclif from the above list

could have been because of his trials for heretical assertions in the 1360s. Wyclif was the

best known Oxford scholar of his time, but he was also frequently embroiled in

controversy. One historical example of his renown was his supposed role as an instigator

of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381(Richard West 176). His ideas were apparently influential

throughout medieval London society, and his involvement in politics and religious reform is testament to his usefulness as a man of great learning and influence.

Before looking at Chaucer's works from a Wycliffite point of view, let us review the extensive scholarship concerning the nominalist/realist debate among Chaucerians. Some of the following articles discussed are seminal to the development of the debate. Also included, however, are works of scholarship which help to frame the arguments being proffered in this paper. In following the course of these arguments we will precipitate the main areas of concern for Chaucerians in creating a paradigm through which the discourse may ideally proceed in a productive and organized manner.

Russell Peck's article "Chaucer and the Nominalist Questions" published in *Speculum* in 1978 has proven to be the watershed argument around which many subsequent articles have focused. Peck puts Chaucer squarely in the nominalist camp, showing how Chaucer implements the poetic implications of Ockham's philosophical theorizing. For example, the dream visions in *Book of the Duchess* and *House of Fame* reveal the mind searching for conceptual foundations of knowledge. The confusion in the process of each narrative is blamed on a lack of will. For Ockham, the will is what directs the proper apprehension of the intellect to intuit within itself the proper causes. However, "It places… a heavy burden on the will and its ability to structure a satisfactory state of mind. Man seems to have an almost infinite capacity for confusing himself, for tying himself up in dilemmas, which are little more than verbal tricks which the mind plays on itself" (Peck 755).
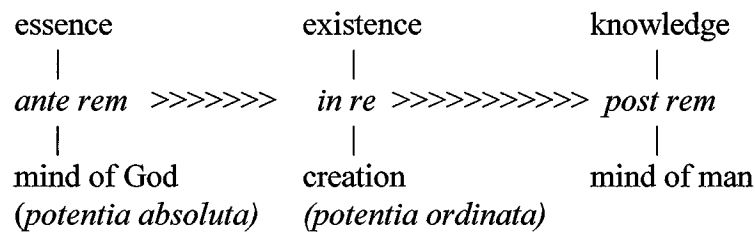
It seems, and Peck alludes to this, that Chaucer may be using a nominalist/empiricist mode of thinking to try to add to his ambiguity and complexity of thought as a poet. Peck's thesis is that Chaucer is "profoundly interested in the moral implications of nominalist questions," rather than the philosophical or logical implications (745). Chaucer is in a sense taking advantage of nominalist thought, using it as a jumping off point to give the motivation but not the solution to his dream poems. Peck explains,

> Because of the mind's capacity to manipulate words and images in the
> shaping of its state of being, the boundaries of man's interior reality are
> open to almost limitless variation....The nominalistic idea that the mind
> and its knowledge are an ongoing imagistic-linguistic process is appealing
> to Chaucer. The mind is not only a wonderful place in which to create and
> explore; for Chaucer it is a marvelous place for getting lost as well (747).

Peck falls short by failing to mention Sheila Delany's argument (1972) on skeptical fideism in *House of Fame*. The confusion of the will fails to resolve itself as the poem devolves toward a less and less logical ending. Peck does mention the images of "dangling" or "entrapment" in this and other of Chaucer's works (758). But he concludes, "such settings and analogies are philosophical and designed to direct attention toward the contingency of mental schemes upon the ability of the perceiver to perceive" (758).

Rodney Delasanta in his 1986 article "Chaucer and the Problem of the Universal"

explains how St. Thomas Aquinas dealt with the epistemological problem of contingency.

St. Thomas had defined the relationship of universals to God and man in the following

scheme:

```
essence              existence            knowledge
  |                    |                    |
ante rem  >>>>>>>    in re >>>>>>>>>>>>  post rem
  |                    |                    |
mind of God          creation            mind of man
(potentia absoluta)   (potentia ordinata)
```

Contingencies are what allow the mind of man to move up the *potentia ordinata*

to glimpse the *potentia absoluta.*   Delasanta says "in the Thomistic synthesis essence

precedes existence in the ontological order, but existence precedes essence in the logical

order" (Delasanta 147). Delasanta explains that Ockham takes a contrasting viewpoint:

Rather than try to explain the individual as a derivative from the universal,

Ockham strove to understand how the universal could be derived from a

world made up of intuitively known singulars.... Ockham's first axiom

asserted that, because the order of the world is utterly contingent on the

divine will and is not controlled by the immutability of divine ideas or

necessitated by secondary causes, only individual things exist

ontologically and all human knowledge derives from intuitive cognition of

them.... To Ockham, the universal was utterly more imperfect a mental

construct than the singular because as a mere abstraction it could be
known only conceptually in the intellect and not outside of it. Possessing
no extra mental reality, the universal could only make claim to logical,
and not ontological, reality (147-148).

With this the case, an implication could be that the realistic detail of the pilgrims
in the *General Prologue* inclines towards a nominalistic epistemology. But it would be
imprudent and unjustified to abandon altogether the tendency for the portraits to point to
a general type of universals seen in their descriptions. Delasanta, however, focuses on "a
common-sense view of Chaucer that recognizes his greatest talent to be the purveying of
plenty in which universal types are not easily espied" (148-149). I think this view
anachronistic and specious. It diminishes Chaucer's artistic complexity, hoping chiefly to
make him an exemplary nominalist poet. It is one thing to see traces of nominalist theory
in Chaucer's poetry, but to assert that the quintessential Boethian is a nominalist
mouthpiece is risky scholarship. In an endnote Delasanta acknowledges that he differs
with Peck's position that Ockham and Boethius are "on opposite sides of the
philosophical fence" (162).

Delasanta asserts that the multiple levels of narration serve to undermine "the
omniscience of the traditional narrator into unreliability" (149).   He pushes his analysis
to ask the question, "[I]s certitude still possible in a world despoiled of ontological
universals?" (150) More specific to Chaucer the poet are the implications of this question
which evolve allegorical symbolism "from an epistemology quite comfortable with

analogical predication (and thus a guarantor of symbolic statement) to an epistemology

more comfortable with equivocal predication (and thus a guarantor of ambiguity)" (150).

This latter element is what Chaucer seems to like to play with, but we do not see Chaucer

use this nominalist epistemology in a mode of resolution or philosophical conclusion.

How can Chaucer possibly expect to use his words to construct meaning in his

dream visions? To a nominalist, once it is understood that we are hopelessly incapable of

logically understanding the mind of God through universals, we must use language to

construct meaning justified by empirical knowledge. Chaucerian scholars including

Delasanta focus this part of the nominalist debate on Chaucer's famous phrase from the

General Prologue, "The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede." Delasanta explains that

"this phrase seems to represent the aesthetic equivalent of the aforementioned

epistemological axiom that knowledge is the adequation of the intellect with the thing"

(151).

Delasanta points to the discussions of how Chaucer makes ironical this idea he

most assuredly takes from Boethius. He sees this phenomenon as further proof that

"Chaucer is experimenting with an equivocal rather than an unequivocal epistemology"

(152). Delasanta goes on to conclude,

> Whatever the final commitment of Chaucer the Poet to epistemological
>
> and aesthetic equivocity, it is evident that Chaucer the Pilgrim at least
>
> cannot tell the whole truth because his is a language of inadvertent

equivocal terms dependent upon the limitations of his own experience and

upon an inadequate intrusion of reality. (153)

But later Delasanta recognizes that "there is considerable contradictory evidence

suggesting that his [Chaucer's] sympathies lay with earlier more traditional doctrine"

(154).

Chaucer's interest in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* reveals, even to

Delasanta, who has painstakingly tried to put Chaucer in the nominalist camp, a

dedication to "an epistemology that assumed the accessibility and transmissibility of truth

by a process of intellection that adequated generic universals to describe singulars" (155).

Next he locates a Chaucerian bias toward universals existing *ante rem* in an interpretation

by Chaucer in his translation of the *Consolatio*. In short, Chaucer states that universals

exist "perdurablely in the devyne thought" (*Boece* V.4.168). This is only five years or so

from the generation of *The Canterbury Tales*. After giving more examples of Chaucer's

interaction with his Boethian text Delasanta concludes, "Powerful phrases about the

mind's operations... underscore Chaucer's attraction, at least in this period, to the

epistemology of *ante rem* Ideas from which man's ideas temporarily derive" (159).

Ultimately Delasanta relates Chaucer to the ultra-realist Wyclif. He surmises,

John Wyclif, though never directly mentioned in Chaucer's pages, was the

founder of the religious reform movement for which our poet betrayed

considerable sympathy, and was patronized by the same great noblemen

who, by a quirk of fate, was to become Chaucer's brother-in-law, John of

Gaunt. (159)

Delasanta finally comes down on the side of Chaucer's narrative tension, deriving "from

two conflicting worldviews," which he conceives of as "a nominalist surface cozening a

realist depth" (160). He does not in the end assign Chaucer to the nominalists.

Other scholars have investigated the literary traditions which Chaucer drew upon

in the creation of his poetry. For example, William Franke, in analyzing the different

ways in which Dante and Chaucer pursue "truth" in their art, claims "as a man of

medieval faith Chaucer believed that the truth belonged properly only to a transcendent

realm of Being in a Platonic-Boethian sense, revealed in Christian dogma, and that unlike

Dante he believed this truth to be beyond the range of poetry" (Franke 88). So instead of

building an epistemology through his poetry, Chaucer uses his art to unmask human

falsehood thus revealing divine truth" (88). The difference between Chaucer and Dante

lies, as Franke reveals, in the skepticism of Scotus and Ockham in the years between

Dante and Chaucer. Franke explains that Dante is working from a presupposition "that

the sensible world from which poetic imagery is drawn is capable of offering signs by

which the human intellect may apprehend divine reality" (89). Chaucer is separated from

this marriage between philosophy and theology. Therefore Chaucer is starting in an

epistemological setting directly opposed to Dante's. Franke refers to the *House of Fame*

in which the authority of the poetic tradition collapses as simply "a process of false

reporting" in Rumor's house (91). And later in Book III poetry is revealed to be "of fals

and soth compounded." Franke sees Chaucer's conclusions in *House of Fame* as

reflecting "a sense of crisis -- in the tradition of poetry that seems to have no way of

distinguishing true from false" (92). Franke goes on to assert: "His works following the

House of Fame will all grapple with this situation in which there is no adequate poetic, no

theoretical basis for legitimizing poetry as an authoritative kind of knowledge or channel

to truth" (92).

Franke then brings in the *Troilus* for analysis based on the assumptions of

Chaucer's loss of confidence in poetry. Chaucer, as Umberto Eco says in *Art and Beauty*

in the Middle Ages, continues because of the necessity "to look for new aesthetic

concepts, quite different from those on which the whole medieval period had in one way

or another depended" (Eco 89). But as Franke points out, "Chaucer has lost the

confidence that love can be rational and thereby redeeming" (99). This makes for a great

divide between Dante's use of Beatrice as a symbol of divine love and Chaucer's

particularization of Criseyde as a character too complex to successfully point to a

universal type. Criseyde exists only in terms of particulars, and this helps bring irony to

the way that Troilus idealizes her. Franke explains, "Beatrice is the truth....The pilgrim

draws ever nearer the truth by following her attractions.... For Chaucer poetry works by

placing in perspective, which is a form of distancing" (99). A powerful example of this

occurs when Troilus ascends through the spheres, achieving the perspective needed to

cure him of his earthly attachments.

Yet this motivation of perspective is not without its rewards. Viewing *The Canterbury Tales* in this light, Franke admits, "Yet stories that put this damned humanity in perspective serve for recognition of human falseness.... Precisely the recognition of 'false worldes brothelnesse', which Chaucer's poetry ineluctably leads to, can turn us toward the truth which no poetry can give" (101). He then concludes that Chaucer's intention was to reveal that "all poetry can do is undeceive as by showing all our language to be devoid of truth" (105).

Holly Wallace Boucher investigates the differences between Chaucer's and Boccaccio's response to nominalism. In comparison to Dante, Boccaccio and Chaucer find the world "wider, but considerably less secure and more elusive of knowledge" (213). Therefore, asserts Boucher, "I believe them both [Chaucer and Boccaccio] to have been profoundly influenced by the crucial theological development of the fourteenth century, nominalism" (214). Equating nominalism with the epistemology of William of Ockham, Boucher emphasizes the pervasiveness of this school of thought: "Unquestionably Ockham's theory of *suppositio* caused a tectonic upheaval even in the thinking of realists like Wyclif who rejected it" (215).

In terms of the effects this philosophy would have on the literature of the period, Boucher states: "The logos is now only partially available through language and the old strict duality of sacred text and blasphemy has opened to create a space free for linguistic play" (215). In the context of what has been argued by the preceding scholars, I think the phrase "partially available" is nonsensical. To Ockham it is faith alone which gets a

person to the Logos, not a mixture of faith and scholastic logic. The severing of the Logos from man's abstraction is the crux of the problem. This is where we find Chaucer most anxious as poet and believer. The latter part of the above quotation does seem valid, i.e., the "space for linguistic play" created by the exploration for meaning represented in Chaucer's and Boccaccio's fiction. Boucher points out the affinity and attraction which Boccaccio displays for tales that "delight in verbal game" skirting blasphemy in the process of parody (215). For the nominalist, Boucher points out, this ambiguity and autonomy of words make them all the more powerful (217).

But, as Boucher shows in Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*, the friar is duped by his attempts to manipulate this inherent ambiguity of language. Boucher explains, "The friar enters too fully into his own game and forgets the power of words to spawn new meanings" (218). He is rebutted by the loud fart. After comparing the two poets, Boucher concludes concerning the tactics of Chaucer and Boccaccio, "The poet protagonist or master rhetorician opens up a neutral space in which language traces its own patterns. Yet language, freed from its traditional doctrinal responsibilities, is full of risks; the artist protagonist may find himself endangered by his own verbal traps" (219).

Kathryn Lynch takes a similar stance in her analysis of *The Book of the Duchess* as a search for knowledge. But instead of simply revealing falseness in human abstraction, Lynch sees Chaucer's method as more teleological. She states that "it is only by slowly illuminating different venues toward some understanding that the poem inches toward that understanding....The poem is a kind of reflection of examples of frustrated

knowledge" (Lynch 284). As the confused narrator moves through the dream poem, Kathryn Lynch asserts that "knowledge is painfully problematized" (285). This is not toward ultimate confusion, but instead, as Lynch explains, "The convolutions do not necessarily mean that knowledge or understanding is never achieved as it would have been in the conventional philosophical vision, but rather that it must be achieved in unconventional ways, not discursively, not simply through argument and example, but through experience the poem offers that is felt and inwardly seen as patterns of the poem come together" (286).

Lynch has just defined the epistemology of this dream vision as nominalist. Lynch focuses on a Bakhtinian interpretation of this "dialogic" storytelling. Lynch disagrees with Russell Peck's assertion that Chaucer was not "interested in whether we can know with certitude only individual things" or with "questions about whether universals exist in creation or only in our heads" (Peck 745 as quoted in Lynch 287). Lynch instead concludes that "the *The Book of the Duchess*, analyzed as a 'philosophical vision', shows that Chaucer was deeply concerned with these precise questions, with the status of universals, with the relationship of universals to singulars, the certainty of human knowledge, and the structure of the knowing" (Lynch 288).

Later Lynch interprets the poem as making specific references to Ockham's arguments on universals. Indeed, she suggests the entire dream is more Ockhamist than Ovidian. She says, "Taken together, though, they [the Ockhamist references] suggest the kind of dream that might more easily follow upon reading Ockham than Ovid -- a dream

(or nightmare?) in which an academic treatise comes to life, the terms of its discussion assuming physical form in the strange logic of the dream" (294). Lynch makes a careful and convincing argument that the Ockhamist epistemological good of distinguishing between the concrete and the abstract serves to bring the seeking of knowledge to fruition near the end of the poem. Lynch explains, "Like many dream visions this is a poem about the relationship of names and things, signifiers and referents....[Lady Whit] is finally an individual being who as an individual can be known absolutely.... Chaucer's commemoration of her as an individual captures some of what is difficult about knowing...." (296). Lynch ultimately sees this poem as founded on nominalist epistemology. She concludes, "Chaucer's use of the genre of philosophical vision, then, to some extent turns it on its head. In his hands, the form's epistemological argument becomes a nominalist rather than a realist one, an argument that values the singular over the universal" (297). This certainty gives an intriguing meaning to Dryden's comment about "God's plenty."

As F. Anne Payne summarizes in her opening arguments from "Foreknowledge and Free Will: Three Theories in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*", both Bradwardine and Boethius "support the orthodox position established by St. Augustine that man has free will and God has absolute foreknowledge" (Payne 202). She refers to Gordon Leff's description of Bradwardine's determinism. She quotes Leff: "by making God the most immediate cause of all they do, men were left with no autonomy; they became dependent upon him for their being, movement, and worth; they had no positive qualities or powers to call their own" (203). Payne asserts that Bradwardine's and Boethius' concepts of

foreknowledge and free will were, however, distinct. Bradwardine, in combating

Pelagianism, takes the position of an extreme determinist. Boethius instead argues for

conditional necessity, remaining closer to the opinion of St. Augustine. Quoting from St.

Augustine's *De Libero Arbitrio* Payne reveals, "the power [of free will] then, is not taken

from me because of His foreknowledge" (203). Payne goes on to explain Augustine's

point: "The simultaneous existence of free will and foreknowledge is a paradox which

must be accepted by faith" (203). Finally, Payne informs us of the third argument on the

subject presented in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. She says: "The third theory, the theory of

conditional necessity, is the most complex and interesting, because it offers infinite

understandable possibilities for the investigation of the relation of event and character and

how they are created out of the forces of freedom and compulsion" (204). Payne explains

how Chaucer satirizes Augustine's theory. If we see the animals as human, then they are

divided from the knowledge of the widow, who would represent divine knowledge. In an

Ockhamist way the rooster and chickens are incapable, except through the ill-defined

symbolism of their dreams, of understanding the foreknowledge of the divine. She says,

"In the truncated deity that the widow comes to represent, what is satirized is man's habit

of projecting into the province of the divine states concocted out of his finite imaginings"

(207). Payne submits that even a proverb represents an attempt to generalize, but

proverbs fail to articulate the complexity of human experience. She explains, "The

inarticulate half-truths are the original and private attempts man has made to evade the

implications of his primary experience, which is that he cannot find the consistent

outcome of any human action" (214).

Overall, Payne criticizes any logical explanation of Chaunticleer's free will and its relationship to God's foreknowledge. She states that Chaucer is here satirizing the "unsuccessful efforts logicians make to stop life and thought so that they can categorize and formulate them in language" (218). In conclusion, we see Payne identify Chaucer's nominalist leanings by saying, "Underneath the satire there is an insistence on life's cacophony, on the independent existence of events and matter which simply elude all consistent theoretical explanations" (218).

As for the end of the *The Nun's Priest's Tale* Payne argues that Chaunticleer's escape amid the chaos resists the three theories stated above. She says, "it is true that Chaunticleer does not meet his fate on this day, and the reasons for that seem a long world away from the explanations of Bishop Bradwardine and St. Augustine and the rules of the Boethian conditional necessity, in spite of the delightful possibilities for satire which its bright tautological formulations offer" (219).

Robert Stepsis in his article "*Potentia Absoluta* and the *Clerk's Tale*" addresses the problems with anagogical interpretation. If, as is commonly assumed, Griselda is a Job-like figure, then "What are we to do with Walter on this level of anagogical interpretation?" (129) Even though the Clerk warns against such interpretation, the Walter-as-God understanding of the tale is difficult to completely eliminate. Stepsis attempts to relate this argument in the context of intellectual history. He explains, "One of the consequences of the condemnations of Averroism was a massive attempt in the fourteenth century to separate what was accessible to reason from what could be known

only by faith, which, in turn in the nominalist movement meant a severe restriction on

what could be predicated about God and divine things by the unaided, rational mind"

(132). Stepsis lists the important names in the nominalist school of thought: "Duns

Scotus, William of Ockham, Thomas Bradwardine, Robert Holcot, and Adam

Woodham." These men, he reveals, "insist on the infinitude of God, and hence, the

inability of finite human minds to understand His ways and, as an ultimate consequence,

the radical contingency of all earthly things" (133). They are united in their belief in

God's *potentia absoluta* which asserts, "the close proximity of His willing to His

knowing" (133). The implications of this are that "Nothing in this created world is

necessary, all is merely the product of the arbitrary Will of God and He is free to change

that will at any moment" (134).

Here we see the relationship of Walter to God. God's omnipotence is not as Duns

Scotus describes it, but rather as Ockham carried it to its ultimate logical conclusion.

Stepsis explains:

> What Ockham objected to was the fact that when Duns discussed God's
>
> infinity or His omnipotence he treated them as attributes that could be
>
> distinguished and analyzed. Instead Ockham argued that these are merely
>
> verbal distinctions (his nominalism) and that the only legitimate way to
>
> consider God was in terms of his *potentia absoluta*: a single being
>
> without attributes whose only predication was the supremacy and freedom
>
> of His will. (135)

Bishop Bradwardine could not accept Ockham's arbitrary divine power. He says that although this level of rationality may not be accessible to us, "God acts justly and rationally in everything he does" (136). Wyclif ties his position to that of Bradwardine. Stepsis says, "Wyclif was heavily influenced by Bradwardine, and Chaucer at least knew something of Bradwardine since he mentions him in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* as a learned man who had discussed the problems of foreknowledge and predestination" (137). Stepsis relates the two, saying, "Bradwardine and Wyclif stressed the necessity of God's not only knowing but predetermining future events" (138). Stepsis cites a passage from *The Man of Law's Tale* as an example of Bradwardine's influence on Chaucer:

Men myghten asken why she [Custance] was nat slayn

Eek at the feeste? Who myghte hir body save?

And I answere to that demande agayn,

Who saved Danyel in the horrible cave

Ther every wight save he, maister and knave,

Was with the leon frete er he asterte?

No wight but God, that he bar in his herte.

God liste to shewe his wonderful myracle

In hire, for we sholde seen his myghty werkis;

Crist, which that is to every harm triacle,

By certeine meenes ofte, as knowen clerkis,

Dooth thyng for certein ende that ful derk is

To mannes wit, that for oure ignorance

Ne konne noght knowe his prudent purveiance.

(*Man of Law's Tale* ll. 470-83)

So in *The Clerk's Tale* Walter's capriciousness serves to point more to his being a figure

of God.   Stepsis explains, "we can see that the atmosphere of theological speculation in

the fourteenth century made it possible to conceive of God as willful and arbitrary.... The

purpose for Ockham, Holcot, and Woodham is, of course, not blasphemy but the attempt

to assert God's absolute power and freedom" (Stepsis 140). The testing of Griselda does

end with Walter's favoring her. And thus, "In this way the picture of Walter in the tale

partakes of the slightly more rounded conception of God and His *potentia absoluta* that is

found in Bradwardine, where the freedom of His will does not contradict the rationality

and justice of His intellect" (141).

For David C. Steinmetz in "Late Medieval Nominalism and *The Clerk's Tale*"

the story is not simply a response to the Wife of Bath's opinions on marriage. It has a

philosophical purpose. Steinmetz explains, "The story of Walter and Griselda affords the

Clerk an opportunity to demonstrate on the allegorical level (and in a somewhat

exaggerated form) the nominalist doctrine of justification" (Steinmetz 38).

Steinmetz lists three themes which Chaucer explores, each compatible with the

opinions of Ockham. The first theme is the absolute and ordained power of God. He

makes mention of the opinion of Robert Stepsis to explain the concept of *potentia dei absoluta.* Steinmetz reports:

> According to Stepsis, who follows the negative assessment of late
>
> medieval nominalism found in the writings of Gilson, Knowles, and Leff,
>
> the chief characteristic of the Ockhamist doctrine of God is absolute and
>
> unbounded freedom of will. The world is radically contingent. Even the
>
> structures of salvation are totally dependent on the arbitrary will of
>
> God. (Steinmetz 39)

This would allow the imperfect character of Walter to play the part of God in the allegory, with Griselda as the earthy pilgrim. Steinmetz rejects this solution by Stepsis, objecting that this doctrine is not what the fourteenth-century nominalists actually taught. Moreover, as he points out, Chaucer himself resists this interpretation when he advises:

> This storie is seyd, nat for that wyves sholde
>
> Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
>
> For it were inportable, though they wolde;
>
> But for that every wight, in his degree,
>
> Sholde be constant in adversitee
>
> As was Grisilde; therfore Petrak writeth
>
> This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth.

For, sith a womman was so pacient

Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte

Receyven al in gree that God us sent;

For greet skile is, he preeve that he wroghte.

But he ne tempteth no man that he boghte,

As seith Seint Jame, if ye his pistel rede;

He preeveth folk al day, it is no drede,

And suffreth us, as for oure exercise,

With sharpe scourges of adversitee

Ful oftee to be bete in sondry wise;

Nat for to knowe oure wyl, for certes he,

Er we were born, knew al oure freletee;

And for oure beste is al his governaunce.

Lat us thanne lyve in vertuous suffraunce.

(*Clerk's Tale* ll. 1142-62)

Steinmetz goes on to explain, "But while God is radically free from external limitations,

He is not free from limitations which He has imposed upon himself" (39).

This, in Steinmetz's view, is not voluntarism. Instead, he explains it as the principle of

de potentia ordinata. This principle he locates as central to late medieval nominalism.

The second theme Steinmetz defines from his nominalist reading of the *Clerk's Tale* is that of divine election and justification. God elects for salvation those who love Him above all things according to the nominalists. This requires virtue, and Griselda, her humility being chief among her virtues, merits grace from the God/Walter *potentia ordinata.*

The third and final theme in Steinmetz's argument is that of Christian discipleship, or more accurately Christians' adjustment of their will to the will of God. Griselda, of course, serves as the perfect example of this, submitting herself to Walter's capricious whims without complaint. Steinmetz explains the nominalist meaning in this:

> Conformity of our will to the will of God, not in order to
>
> obtain temporal or eternal benefits from Him but out of
>
> love for Him alone -- a love which is not turned aside when
>
> God Himself seems to be the very one who opposes our
>
> obedience and is the apparent cause of our adversity -- will
>
> be rewarded at long last. (50)

God is limited by his covenant with us, or rather his *potentia absoluta* is made tolerable by His *potentia ordinata.* This is what the nominalists would say justifies our belief and trust in an Ockhamist concept of the deity.

As to Chaucer's sympathies with Lollard ideas, Michaela Paasche Grudin dismisses the idea that a clear connection must be sought, in her article "Credulity and the Rhetoric of Heterodoxy: From Averroes to Chaucer." Instead, she puts Chaucer in the intellectual context of Lollard ideas being new and attractive to artists and intellectuals of the later fourteenth century. Grudin begins, "Chaucer partook of a deep current of heterodoxy -- more likely a reflex of his artistic intelligence and curiosity, rather than a philosophical or theological position..." (204). Grudin lists Ockham and Wyclif as two outspoken opponents of "official discourse, on its tendency to conceal and confuse" (205). Both are enlisted as addressing the problems of authority and credulity. Grudin explains that "their discussions of credulity urge a greater public awareness of discourse and provide a rhetoric to that end" (205).

Grudin goes on to explain the role provided by Ockham in discussing credulity. She says, "William of Ockham provides the means and ammunition by which his readers may confirm belief or deny it" (207). Later she gives more detail on Ockham's thought, saying, "Thus Ockham's *Elementarium logicum* describes the necessary relationship of words to things, warning against a deception -- of the simpler people by the learned -- that builds or creates words in order to deceive the less clever, and that insinuates circumstances which do not and cannot exist, or creates difficulties where there are none" (209). Grudin explains the way in which Ockham could broach heterodox ideas without incriminating himself. She points out, "Ockham's rhetorical strategy is subversive of official discourse because, by providing a superflux of ideas, many of them in conflict with one another, it generates discourse and opens to discussion subjects that official

discourse would limit" (210). This explanation is of course motivated an intellectual context in which Boccaccio and Chaucer could write.

Wyclif was seen to apply the ideas of Ockham and others regarding language and authority. Many of his tractates on credulity, such as *De eucharista*, discuss the power of the vernacular to reveal absurdities hidden in the Latin (211). The implications of the use of vernacular in the intellectual discourses were vast and controversial. Grudin explains, "Without vernacular translation – not only of the Bible – there was simply no flow of information, and the distinctions (among other things) between being blessed or cursed were controlled by the very few" (212).

We see Chaucer following Boccaccio in using what Grudin calls a "masking" strategy in his writing. She explains, "Chaucer's strategies of indirection in the *Canterbury Tales* are legion, including the very copiousness of the work and its inconclusiveness" (216). Grudin gives a more specific example of Chaucer's use of this strategy in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. She says, "The Wife's insistence on first-hand evidence of the text and her freedom and aggressiveness with speech generally are...most relevant to the issues voiced by Wyclif and the Lollards concerning doctrinal authority versus first-hand experience of the biblical text" (217). Grudin touches on the aspects of credulity in the *Summoner's Tale* and then in the *Pardoner's Tale*. Each is offered as further proof of Chaucer's interest in opening discourse but avoiding heterodox conclusions. Grudin concludes:

Boccaccio and Chaucer make use of all the methods described by

Ockham, and they variously draw attention to the fact that they are doing

so: The appropriation of familiar cultural topics, copiousness, the

penchant for dialogue and dramatics, the use of fictional narration, and

denying the audience's expectation of conclusiveness, of the simple

answers on which gullibility thrives, are the hallmarks of their fictive

frames. (219)

John Michael Crafton in "Emptying the Vessel: Chaucer's Humanistic Critique of

Nominalism" favors and argues for the view that Chaucer was mediating between what

he had learned from Dante and Boccaccio. Dante is described as an "essentialist" or

realist who depends upon a system of universals for the grounding of his allegorical epic,

the *Commedia*. Contrariwise, Boccaccio is in reaction against the confidence Dante puts

in universals and allegorical meaning. Boccaccio is described as a nominalist poet in

terms of his language theory. Crafton sees Chaucer shifting between these two poles of

what Hugo Keiper calls the nominalist/realist complex (Keiper 13). He puts Chaucer in a

dominating position when he describes how Chaucer not only finds meaning in each

position, but also how he finally rejects them both as solutions to his artistic purposes.

Crafton explains:

Therefore, he [Chaucer] is left with the problematic relationship

of being satisfied with neither the fullness of the Augustinian

tradition nor the emptiness of the Occamite tradition; thus, doing

what he must to overcome the anxiety produced by his precursors,

he consumes them both....Thus, Chaucer appropriates both the realist and

nominalist positions in the *Canterbury Tales* and thus empties the fullness

of realism and fills the emptiness of nominalism. (Crafton, 123)

This is an intriguing argument, which serves to free us from a postmodern

celebration of Chaucer's inscrutable ambiguity, although it would be quite specious to

imagine Chaucer as the philosophical panacea to the nominalist/realist complex. Crafton

skillfully divides the various early poems, the *Troilus*, and the *Canterbury Tales* into

realist and nominalist tales or critiques of each philosophy. Crafton details how this

"obsession" for Chaucer informs his characterization in the *Troilus:*

Troilus represents something of a realist; Pandarus seems to be

the representative of nominalism with the narrator, Criseyde, and

the audience caught up variously in the dialectic between the two.

(Crafton 125)

Ironically, this would essentially make the poem allegorical, thus grounding the very

debate in terms of a realist worldview. The assignation of the audience to a philosophical

position, moreover, seems highly questionable.

In terms of identifying tales as realist Crafton chooses *Melibee* and the *Physician's*

Tale as the two most imbued with a realist epistemology. The *Melibee* is eligible as the

most allegorical of the tales, whereas in the *Physician's Tale* Crafton equates Nature with

realism. (127) Rather than concluding in favor of Chaucer's skepticism, Crafton sees

Chaucer as taking a humanist approach to some traditionally scholastic questions:

> ...this dialectical manner of canceling out these scholastic methods
>
> (or theories) reveals Chaucer's sympathy with the new rhetorical
>
> attitudes emerging from Italy during this period, flourishing among
>
> the law students, those trained like Chaucer in the *ars dictaminis*. (133)

Robert Myles in *Chaucerian Realism* begins by strongly asserting that Chaucer

was a realist in all facets of its meaning. He labels Chaucer a foundational realist, an

epistemological realist, an ethical realist, a semiotic and linguistic realist, and an

intentional realist. Myles complains that critics have fundamentally misunderstood the

terms nominalist and realist. Ockham as the embodiment of the nominalist school in the

Middle Ages, Myles argues, was not the "extreme nominalist" he has come to represent.

To call Chaucer a nominalist simply because he is not a "cratylist realist" is illogical.

Myles defines Cractylic realism as holding "that there is a natural, real relationship

between a word and a thing – that somehow the essence of a chair is reflected or

contained in the sound of the word 'chair'" (2). Myles sees the motivation of these

misinterpretations to be the creation of "an overly exclusive association of these

[definitions] with post-modern literature" (4).

Myles attempts to give a connected definition of realist and nominalist beliefs:

Both scholastic realists and scholastic nominalists believe in divine

ideas, but in different ways. The realist believes that universals

subsist in God. In Augustine's realism, for example, *rationes aeternae*

are universals, the equivalent of the Platonic forms, and are the

patterns of individual things. So too in Ockham's scholastic

nominalist view, God has ideas as exemplars of real beings, as any

craftsman has in knowing what he is to make. However,

Ockham's nominalist ideas exist in the mind of God in a scholastic

nominalist fashion, as particulars rather than as universals.

(Leff as quoted in Myles 5)

In criticizing the misunderstanding of the above terms Myles makes a sharp

distinction between linguistic realism and Cratylic realism. This argument is clearly

anachronistic. How is Chaucer or even Dante supposed to have had contact with Plato's

Cratylus? The Latin Middle Ages only knew of Plato's thought through the *Timaeus* in a

Latin translation (Desmond Lee 7). Robert Jordan leads us to a conventionalist Chaucer

who values ambiguity. But Myles objects and concludes the opposite:

Chaucer, like Dante and Augustine, is a realist who believes not only

that extramental reality precedes language, but also that extra-

subjective reality can be named, revealed by language, and known

to some degree by the human subject -- epistemological realism. (Myles

14)

And in regard to Chaucer's seemingly ubiquitous sympathies for nominalist poetics, Myles explains:

> [T]he uncertainty and multiplicity of reference that is potential in any
>
> use of signs is not an understanding that is exclusive to 'anti-realists.'
>
> Such a position does not exclude a realist belief that in their reference
>
> signs reveal extramental reality with some degree of accuracy. (Myles 76)

Myles continues his explanation of how each of the major critics involved in this nominalist/realist debate has some fundamental misunderstanding. First he attacks Russell A. Peck's conclusions in "Chaucer and the Nominalist Questions." Peck has apparently misidentified the concept of "the primacy of will" to be an exclusively nominalist position. Myles points out that it is not an issue about which the proponents of nominalism and realism disagreed. He locates the primacy of the will in Augustine, Boethius, and especially Duns Scotus. All of the above philosophers is an established realist in his position on universals.

Moving on, Myles simply skewers Rodney Delasanta's arguments from "Chaucer and the Problem of the Universal." Myles says:

> [like] so many others Delasanta misses the point that, while thinkers
>
> may be divided on the question of the nature of universals, it does

not necessarily follow that they are opposed on all other issues -- the

primacy of the will or intellect, for example. (18)

Myles concludes that Delasanta is simply confused.

Myles has little confidence in John Gardner's arguments about Chaucer as a

relativist and therefore a nominalist:

'Truth is relative' is certainly not a view held by any scholastic

philosopher, and so it is certainly wrong to assert that such a view could

be held by Chaucer because it was current in 'the philosophical position

called nominalism.' (in Myles 18-19)

Myles offers that Chaucer's play with ambiguity more probably was related to the

general belief in the Middle Ages that absolute truth escapes the capability of the inferior

human mind:

Indeed, given man's inferior status to absolute Being, as well as the

belief in man's fallen nature which has debilitated his cognitive

abilities, the view that man is unable to attain absolute knowledge of

the truth through language or thought was one held by all medieval

Christian thinkers, be they scholastic nominalists or scholastic realists

on the question of the universals. (19)

Myles refers to the Chaucer-narrator in *The House of Fame* and his state of confusion as an example of this elusive truth. Myles turns to David Steinmetz's opinions on the subject expressed in his article "'Late Medieval Nominalism and the *Clerk's Tale*." He faults Steinmetz for the same misunderstanding of exclusively nominalist positions as he does Peck, Delasanta, Gardner, and P.B. Taylor. Myles initially criticizes Steinmetz's reading of the Latin phrase important to Occamists, "facientibus quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam." According to Myles, Steinmetz has mistaken "in se" in this axiom to mean "in themselves" instead of Myles' translation of "in itself" (21). Grammatically, either reading could be correct.

The next scholar-critic whom Myles discusses is David Williams, who sees Chaucer as a committed realist. Myles warns, however, that "Williams' work is more directed at disproving that Chaucer is a 'nominalist' than at proving that he is a 'realist' in the scholastic sense of the term" (21). To go further and label Chaucer a realist because he successfully parodies extreme nominalism Myles sees as unsupportable. In summation Myles seems discouraged by the almost irreversible confusion generated by the seminal articles of Peck, Taylor, and Steinmetz. As a result, many critics following these foundational articles on Chaucer's nominalist leanings have built subsequent arguments for Chaucer's nominalism on a proverbial bed of sand. For Myles, the early misunderstandings of the terms and their limits have corrupted the entire debate.

An interesting series of commentaries on the literary nominalist debate is given by Kathryn L. Lynch in her book *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions*. She recalls for the reader an intriguing bias in philosophical and subsequent literary scholarship away from the Catholic privileging of Thomist studies toward a nominalist focus by Utz and others (13). In literary scholarship Lynch takes notice of the split of the New Criticism from Exegetics or "Robertsonianism." These divisions in the academic world have resulted in a privileging of a nominalist viewpoint against the conservative, papal and theological realist viewpoint. Lynch points out:

> It is little wonder, in such an environment, that literary scholars
> have often resisted surrender of their poet to the clutches of the
> philosophers, who depending upon the paradigm might seem either
> excessively otherworldy or so compromised by local tricks of
> language and logic as to be uninterested in deeper human value. (19)

Lynch gives her opinion that Chaucer was a nominalist, insisting that he could engage the topics of the schoolman in his poetry "without committing himself to a 'consistent' set of positions" (16). After much informed and learned speculation about Chaucer's possible attendance at Oxford or Cambridge, Lynch concludes by insisting that "His philosophical interests, however, do not depend on it" (20). Lynch explains the rise in interest of lay audiences in the dispositions of the academics. She quotes Utz:

> Recent research demonstrates that a wide variety of connections,

especially sermons and public disputations, could very well bridge

the allegedly unbridgeable gap between learned discourse at the

universities and popular discourse outside the institutions of

learning. (Utz, *Negotiating the Paradigm* 14)

Lynch follows this logic and puts Bradwardine, Strode, and Wyclif in this more

publicly accessible arena (23). Lynch next links the "core of Chaucer's audience" to the

"Lollard Knights," who were men of the court favoring the political opinions of Wyclif

supported chiefly by John of Gaunt. Lynch remains interested in this connection even as

she explicates *The House of Fame* later in her book. She asks:

Is he [Chaucer] a nominalist delighting in Fame's abstruse language

games, or does he criticize these games with the idea of imposing

a sterner Wyclifite logic in its place? (27)

As in *The Parliament of Fowls* and *The Book of the Duchess* Chaucer seems content not

to answer these questions he has raised.

Helen Ruth Andretta has written a book, *Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde: A

Poet's Response to Ockhamism,* in which she analyzes the relationship of Chaucer to

Ockhamism. Specifically she asserts that the *Troilus* is a "poetically rendered response of

Chaucer to Ockhamism" (1). Andretta gives the justification for her thesis in that

Chaucer's *Troilus* is concerned with philosophical problems that were addressed by

Ockhamism. Andretta states:

> The nature of human happiness, the spiritual aspects of earthly love,
>
> the attainment of true knowledge, and the conflict between God's
>
> foreknowledge (or necessity) and man's free will are matters related
>
> to the skeptical tendencies in Ockhamist thought. (Andretta, 4)

Chaucer is easily linked to the poet-philosopher characterization when we remind

ourselves that he had completed, or was working on, a translation of Boethius'

Consolation of Philosophy prior to his composition of the *Troilus*. Andretta continues

the introduction of her book with a review of the scholarship concerning nominalism and

Chaucer's poems, specifically the *Troilus*. She explains her opposition to the conclusions

drawn by Richard J. Utz in his published dissertation entitled *Literarischer Nominalismus*

in Spatmittelalter, Eine Untersuchung zu Sprache, Charakterziechnung und Struktur in

Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Troilus and Criseyde'. Andretta explains what she objects to:

> I do not consider Chaucer's mentality as of a nominalist nature,
>
> and therefore I disagree with some of the conclusions Utz makes.
>
> He bases his approach on the critical use by Chaucer of the medieval
>
> proverb to point out its epistemological ambiguity; his nominalist
>
> rejection of analogy by avoiding allegory; his depiction of the
>
> psychologically realistic Criseyde to emphasize the nominalist

attitude towards free will; his characterization of the idealistic/

realistic and sometimes deterministic Troilus to manifest the

ultrarealism of Ralph Strode's foe, Wyclif; and the structural

split of the Epilogue from the main body of the poem to manifest

two separated levels of truth: revelation and secular truth. (9)

In relation to the ultra-realism of Wyclif as a philosophical basis for the characterization of Troilus, Andretta offers a different possibility:

Rather than identify Troilus with the ultra-realism of Wyclif, as

Utz does, I see Troilus as representative of confused medieval

man in his attempt to find certainty amid the conflicting philosophies

of his time. (10)

Andretta views Troilus throughout the poem as consistent with Chaucer's rejection of Ockhamism. She asserts:

I think Chaucer has Troilus, from Book One to the Epilogue in Book

Five, perceive his particular love affair as universal in meaning, and

then through the narrator's voice, Chaucer in the Epilogue affirms the

theological truth of every man's necessary end, Universal Good, a

truth that is synonymous with traditional scholastic thought and not

Ockhamism. (10)

We will now attempt to see if and how deeply Chaucer was affected by the realist ideas of thinkers such as Wyclif's. First let us look at the *General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales* and the *House of Fame* to see how the concept of universals is being incorporated. After this discussion we will look at how Chaucer's anticlerical pieces correspond to Wyclif's attacks on the friars. Finally we will conclude with the discussions of time, predestination, and free will in both Wyclif and Chaucer as the author of the *Troilus*.

Chaucer's description of his characters in the *General Prologue* has been a focus for questions of Chaucer's nominalist influences. James Wimsatt addresses the debates on Chaucer's technique and his philosophical leanings: "For the Scholastic problem of metaphysical reality, the question about the portraits of the *General Prologue* is not whether Chaucer had actual people in mind, but what conception of reality underlies the portrayals" (Wimsatt 636). Wimsatt is not only responding to Manly's assertion that each of the pilgrims represented an actual contemporary of Chaucer, but he is also addressing the nominalist interpretations of the portraits. Wimsatt concludes that Chaucer's realist leanings can be seen as a valid philosophical underpinning of the seemingly nominalistic individuation of the pilgrims. He explains, "A good monk, a bad monk, and a commonplace monk can equally represent 'monkness'" (Wimsatt 641). Wyclif recognizes such an interpretation in saying, "A negation may have Being, but it is only by contrariety, *propter repugnanciam*, which presupposes a knowledge of positive Being" (Wyclif, *Summa De Ente*, intro. xxi). The "haecceity" of the monk is a

"suppositum" (a place of inherence for universals) which is independently essential to its

status as a universal of monkness. To understand the importance of this assertion to

Wyclif one only need turn to his example of the Trinity. Wyclif explains, "In the same

essence there inheres both being a man and being this man. And being a man is common

to every man, and this is formally universal, while being this man is restricted

individually to this essence" (Wyclif, *De Universalibus*, i. 215-218).

A similar observation was made by Professor Root in 1922. He explains:

> It is by their successful blending of the individual with the typical
>
> that the portraits of Chaucer's *Prologue* attain so high a degree of
>
> effectiveness. The Wife of Bath is typical of certain primary
>
> instincts of woman, but she is given local habitation 'bisyde
>
> Bathe,' and is still further individualized by her partial deafness
>
> and the peculiar setting of her teeth. A wholly different type of
>
> womanhood, the conventional as opposed to the natural, is
>
> furnished by the Prioress. The description of the gentle lady
>
> abounds in minute personal, individual characteristics, physical
>
> and moral; yet all these individualizing traits are at the same time
>
> suggestive of that type which finds fullest realization in the head of
>
> a young lady's school -- What is true of these two is true of all the
>
> personages of the *Prologue*. The details enumerated nearly always

suggest at once the individual and the type. (Root *The Poetry of*

Chaucer, 161)

In his explanation of universals using the example of Socrates, Wyclif asserts that

Socrates is a *suppositum*. That is, he is the bearer of universals and of accidents, and he

has both matter and form, but he does not in turn inhere in any other entity. Thus Wyclif

would agree with Root's assessment of the Pilgrims.

Chaucer definitely reveals an interest in the nominalist theories of apprehension in

his many dream poems. The mind in its inner reality is an illusory place for Chaucer,

where the truth is evasive and things are not what they seem. Chaucer's *House of Fame*

shows the disjointed nature of a reality governed by skepticism. Chaucer's narrator

"seems to be seeking something which his skeptical orientation actually precludes --

namely, an idea of love general enough to encompass his experience" (Eldredge, 111).

This search for ideals in a nominalist world creates the tension which some modern critics

find aesthetically essential. Eldredge, however, contends that the poem's incomplete

state is a result of Chaucer's frustration with that very insoluble tension. Chaucer may

have been trying to illustrate for his reader the results of an antirealist epistemology in the

poetic landscape of his dream. The symbols in the poem dissolve, revealing the vanity of

fame and the emptiness of man's attempt to immortalize himself. As a caveat, it must be

stated that the incomplete state of the poem may simply be an aspect of the expectations

of literary performance at court. It, however, also elicits questions about how Chaucer is

structuring the terms of the discussion.

The threat to realism seen in the *House of Fame* recalls Wyclif's concerns regarding the discrediting of scholastic reasoning by nominalists. Conversely, nominalists such as William of Ockham were concerned with the misuse of scholastic reasoning to produce truths. Ockham was opposed to the proliferation of abstract terms carried into Latin for scholastic reasoning. He feared these terms were capable of leading people astray by imparting a sense that these abstract terms had a reality of their own instead of a simply logical and grammatical function. For example, "An abstract word like 'dualitas' could, in Ockham's view, lead people to think there is a 'duality' that exists as a quality in each of two things that are related" (Brown 282-3). This might explain the apparent nominalism at work in Chaucer's narrative technique. Chaucer seems to reveal a linguistic interest in nominalism, but philosophically he returns again and again to the realism he had learned from Boethius.

The confusing dream terminology at the beginning of the *House of Fame* reads like scholastic argumentation. The purpose of such scholastic argumentation was to reduce questions to an accepted truth by way of logical disputation (Weisheipl 146). Chaucer's narrator is disturbed by the various accidents of dreams and points to a "cause," which he is unable to elucidate. The very multiplicity of the genera of dreams evokes a question of final cause:

> But why the cause is, noght wot I.
>
> Wel worthe of this thyng grete clerkys

> That trete of this and other werkes,
>
> For I of noon opinion
>
> Nyl as now make mensyon,
>
> But oonly that the holy roode
>
> Turne us every drem to goode!   (*HF* I. 52-8)

Wyclif insists, "This separability of an accident from its subject is a necessary concept for a right understanding of Holy Scripture" (Wyclif *SDE* xxviii). Before the narrator asserts that this question is unsolvable, he admits that it is out of his scope to resolve it:

> I not; but whoso of these miracles
>
> The causes knoweth bet then I,
>
> Devyne he, for I certeinly
>
> Ne kan hem noght, ne never thinke
>
> To besily my wyt to swinke
>
> To knowe of hir signifiaunce
>
> The gendres, neyther the distaunce
>
> Of tymes of hem, ne the causes,
>
> Or why this more then that cause is....   (*HF* I. 12-20)

Here are represented Wyclif's three divisions of the universal: 1) causation 2) communication and 3) signification (Wyclif xxvii).

Chaucer's uses a form of the word "cause" seven times in his sixty-five line proem as he discusses the multiplicity of both the communication of dreams and the ways in which they are said to signify. Unfortunately, Chaucer can at best relate a most "wonderful" dream as a singular example which imperfectly signifies the universal truth. Wyclif explains, "Our depraved nature must be led to a knowledge of the prior higher insensibles through the sensibles" (Wyclif xxiii).

In the invocation the god of sleep and his companions "duelleth in a cave of stoon/ Upon a strem that cometh fro Lete" (*HF* I. 70-1). According to Plato, the souls of those to be reborn into corporeal existence are plunged into Lethe, so they "forget" all that has been revealed to them of the universals (Plato 359). The source of this invocation was most probably Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 11, lines 592 and following (note on lines 69-70 in *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 979). Ovid's story continues by describing how the god of sleep arouses "vana somnia imitantia varias formas" (idle visions resembling diverse forms) (Ovid 342). The god of sleep sends the singulars to the dream to imitate or signify universals to the dreamer. Chaucer prays no one "mysdeme hyt," knowing full well that the misunderstanding of signs/singulars will result in a misjudging of meaning/universals.

Wyclif explains that the universal truth is unaffected by the singular signifiers of that truth. He says, "Existence (esse) adds nothing to Being (ens)" (Wyclif xxiv). Contrary to nature, "we sometimes proceed from effect to cause" (Wyclif xxiii). This is the process of the dreamer in the *House of Fame*, which is the reason his vision seems

disjointed and allows many modern critics to insist upon a nominalist interpretation.

When effect is taken to be prior to cause, the confusion of the poem can be seen as a

critique of nominalism. The temple of glass introduced in line 120 has been seen to

denote "insubstantiality" (notes in *Riverside Chaucer*, 929). This place houses the

illustrious works of fiction, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*. Chaucer's narrator sets out the text

of this great work, which is the first step in the scholastic method of analysis (LeGoff

86-92). The text is presented before its meaning is determined. Its meaning is elusive in

this dream world where singulars are everywhere manifested without distinct reference to

their universals. Chaucer is thus presenting the question, "What does a great work of art

ultimately mean if there are no universal truths to reveal by way of human perception?"

At the end of Book II Chaucer again evokes the Ovidian assignation of images

(sounds) and what the images signify (speakers who embody meaning):

> Whan any speche ycomen ys
>
> Up to the paleys, anon-ryght
>
> Hyt wexeth lyk the same wight
>
> Which that the word in erthe spak,
>
> Be hyt clothed red or blak;
>
> And hath so verray hys lyknesse
>
> That spak the word, that thou wilt gesse
>
> That it the same body be,
>
> Man or woman, he or she.   (*HF*, II. 1074-82)

After all, sound is just another manifestation of the accidence of substance. How can sounds represent subjects if they are not first defined by the universal they represent? The sound, the word, and the "wight" are all signifiers of the insensible universal subject.

In the invocation to Book III Chaucer calls upon his muse, here Apollo, for guidance to help him reveal the meaning or "sentence" alone. He admits a distrust in the art poetical, in words alone, to impart the intended meaning "That in myn hed ymarked ys." This is the truth he knows to be expressible in words, but independent of them for its own essence. Wyclif addresses this concern: "the general is known before the singular and the singular cannot be known without the general. A man may forget the singular, but the general which he knew first, he never forgets" (Wyclif xxii).

Chaucer communicates an anxiety about capturing the general (truth) by way of singulars (words). Again, the debates between the realists and nominalists confronted this issue of whether a word is truly "cosyn to the dede." Ockham objects to the scholastic use of coined terminology in logical argumentation. He fears logical fallacies may result from insisting on the reality of abstract terms. Wyclif answers his arguments and informs them concerning its potential dangers. He states, "By refusing to recognize that simple truths may be denoted by complex terms our opponents oppose themselves to the words of Christ and the expressions of Catholic faith. They are so involved in signs that they fail to see what lies behind the sign" (Wyclif xxv). He then quotes Augustine of Hippo as his authority, writing, "Bonorum ingeniorum insignis est indoles in verbis

veritatem amare, non verba" (Remarkable is the character of men of good mental powers to love the truth in words, not the words themselves). This doctrine is in essence the rallying cry of the realist apologists such as Wyclif.

Chaucer's narrator espies the foundation of the *House of Fame*, and he is disenchanted:

> This were a feble fundament
>
> To bilden on a place hye.
>
> He ought him lytel glorifye
>
> That hereon bilt, God so me save!   (*HF*, III. 1132-5)

It all seems to be "as craft countrefeteth kynde." Fama's "kynde" or true nature is to make things seem better than they are. This is not to make the word "cosyn to the dede." These aggrandized effects do not lead to the proper cause. The singulars are manipulated and cannot be trusted to point to universals. Rodney Delasanta explains the problem:

> Aristotelianize the universal to the extent that the only objective
>
> reality is reduced to the phenomenon, and one traps the noumenon
>
> in his own mind, does violence to the essentiality of the real, and
>
> makes inaccessible to rational man a metaphysical and moral
>
> order. (Delasanta, 145-6)

This is just what Chaucer the artist repeatedly concerns himself with. In recognition of the nominalist ideas revolutionizing the world of thought from the universities to the artists' studios (Brewer 9), Chaucer writes an apology of poetry which tries to assimilate the nominalist questions. Chaucer gives his reader an indication of why art is where it is, and where it may be headed.

The House of Rumor described in lines 1925-85 has been interpreted by Sheila Delany as a "locus of experience" (Delany, 106). Is not this place as dangerous as the vainglorious House of Fame? Here truth and falsity are mingled, which is the fearful potential of the skepticism resulting from Ockham's arguments. Wyclif argues that "it is impossible to know any singular of Being if Being itself is not known" (Wyclif xx). The various and multiple phenomena in the House of Rumor are vain absurdities without universals to give them meaning and significance in the higher moral order. Chaucer's nominalist influences must be viewed against the backdrop of his earlier realist affinities. Chaucer glosses a passage in the *Boece*:

> ...This is to seyn, how schulde men deme the sothe of any
>
> thing that were axid, yif ther nere a rote of sothfastnesse that
>
> were yplounged and hyd in the naturel principles, the which
>
> sothfastnesse lyvede within the depnesse of the thought?
>
> (*Boece*, Bk.III., Metrum 11, 38-45)

Robert M. Jordan explains Chaucer's conundrum: "Even though that [Boethian] reality

was undergoing dissolution in Chaucer's time and its pervasive power was waning, it

nevertheless provided a comprehensive and unified system in which language and reality

interpenetrated in a fixed embodiment of truth" (Jordan 173). Wyclif and Chaucer as

scholastic philosopher and court poet respectively were engaged in the intellectual and

spiritual questions of the late fourteenth century which would have an enormous

influence on the dissolution of the medieval outlook.

In the *Summa de ente* amidst a discussion of his ultra-realist stance on universals,

Wyclif argues against the possibility of annihilation. That is, as a voluntary limitation of

his own power God cannot make something not exist that has at one time existed. J.A.

Robson explains:

> Wyclif's refusal to admit God's power to annihilate was founded
>
> not on theological validations but on purely metaphysical assumptions;
>
> it was incompatible with his doctrine of the eternity of being. If one
>
> could annihilate substance, he says, one would destroy also past and
>
> future, since it would have lost the 'esse rei' which is its eternal being...
>
> time can individuate being as known to us but not its indestructible
>
> essence. (187)

Chaucer seems to respect Wyclif's theories on annihilation. For example, let us look at the problem of the rocks in the *Franklin's Tale*. Dorigen laments the existence of the rocks, but she accepts the order of things in her discouragement:

'Eterne God, that thurgh thy purveiaunce

Ledest the world by certein governaunce,

In ydel, as men seyn, ye no thyng make.

But, Lord, thise grisly feendly rokkes blake,

That semen rather a foul confusion

Of werk than any fair creacion

Of swich a parfit wys God and a stable,

Why han ye wroght this werk unresonable?

For by this werk, south, north, ne west, ne eest,

Ther nys yfostred man, ne bryd, ne beest:

It dooth no good, to my wit, but anoyeth.

Se ye nat, Lord, how mankynde it destroyeth?

An hundred thousand bodyes of mankynde

Han rokkes slayn, al be they nat in mynde,

Which mankynde is so fair part of thy werk

That thou madest lyk to thyn owene merk.

Thanne semed it ye hadde a greet chieritee

Toward mankynde; but how thanne may it bee

That ye swich meenes make it to destroyen,

Whiche meenes do no good, but evere anoyen?

I woot wel clerkes wol seyn as hem leste,

By argumentz, that al is for the beste,

Though I ne kan the causes nat yknowe.

But thilke God that made wynd to blowe

As kepe my lord! This my conclusion.

But wolde God that alle thise rokkes blake

Were sonken into helle for his sake!

Thise rokkes sleen myn herte for the feere."

(*FranT* 865-893)

At the beginning of her complaint she refers to God's "certein governance" or the *potentia ordinata*. The creation of the rocks was for a purpose which makes sense in the divine order and its relation to men. Still, she cannot understand why God would create something so seemingly "unreasonable." This is the crux of the argument where Wyclif would step in to say that it is in no way unreasonable or literally unintelligible to the divine mind. Here we see Wyclif's objection to the Ockhamist's mode of defining truth as explained in Robson:

> Wyclif's rejection of terminism was rooted in his belief that truth could
> only be known in the real, 'res'. In his opinion the Ockhamists limited
> the range of ascertainable truth by making it dependent on logical
> convention; the meaning and 'reality' of an object became what our

mind chose to impose upon it. But from conventional signs, he declared, could only come conventional truths...for to restrict knowledge to what can be derived from sense-data, was to limit oneself to the imperfect and perishable. (146)

Although Dorigen admits that she can only comment on her "sense-data" saying "to my wit" she defeats herself by giving all over to the disputation of clerks. She ends by wishing what Wyclif sees as impossible, the annihilation of these troublesome rocks. This leaves her open to the trick upon her sense-data by someone who understands the impossibility of annihilation and thus achieves the trick of the disappearing rocks by a circuitous route. Aurelius' prayer is to a God (Apollo here) who works according to the *potentia ordinata*. There is a way in the Wycliffite scheme of metaphysics to achieve the miracle of the disappearance of the rocks without appealing to the untenable concept of annihilation.

Interestingly Aurelius' brother, a clerk, steps in to help. Coming upon a book of magic he determines to find a magician to help effect the trick of the rocks. Magicians, including the one in the story, rely on illusion. Dorigen's dependence on sense-data for truth will make her susceptible to the arts of the magician. For Wyclif, this would be the lesson of the story. Dorigen in mistaking accidence for substance, as would be justified by a nominalist epistemology, and has risked her most precious virtue, her truth. She learns the hard way, but Chaucer ends the story with a resolution confirming the nobility of the characters.

The explanatory notes in the *Riverside Chaucer* relate the above-quoted passages of Dorigen's complaint to those of Palamon in Bk. I, lines 1003-24 in the *Knight's Tale*. The explanatory notes for this passage of the *Knight's Tale* reveal its debt to *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy* Book I, metrum 5. In that locus Boethius' lamentation to Lady Philosophy ends with the prayer:

> Ruler, restrain their rushing waves and make the earth
>
> Steady with that stability of law
>
> By which you rule the vastness of the heavens.
>
> (ll. 46-48, Loeb Classical Library)

Lady Philosophy answers his concerns by explaining that it is Boethius' grief-ridden state that is clouding his perception of divine justice, or the lack thereof. Wyclif certainly echoes this sentiment in his discussion of universals and their accidents. Our perception of the truth is not the basis on which it is validated. Robson explains Wyclif's opinions on this:

> The sensible particular may be forgotten, but the universal perceived
>
> in it can never be. He therefore follows Grosseteste in stating that
>
> truth depends on the 'res signata' and not on our concept of it. (Robson
>
> 147)

In the *Lak of Stedfastnesse* Chaucer reveals his profound concern regarding the effects of the revolutionary change in the life of the mind in the latter half of the fourteenth century. He makes an explicit connection between the discrediting of reason and the declining moral climate. This same lament was made in the scholastic setting by the ultrarealist John Wyclif. Wyclif connected Ockhamist nominalism to a growing problem of ecclesiastical abuse. He felt that nominalism was undermining faith in the accepted Augustinian interpretation of scripture (Lambert 222). His doctrines defending realism soon brought Wyclif to the attention of important political leaders such as John of Gaunt. Gaunt and many others of the nobility were interested in disseminating antifraternal propaganda in the hope that their funding might be diverted to political interests, specifically the conflict with the French (Lambert 227). Wyclif was well supported by his political patrons in his attacks on the clerical orders, and thus a speculation can be made that Chaucer's anticlerical tales might have received the same sanction from his patrons, one of whom was John of Gaunt.

The systematic discrediting of the clergy in Wyclif's tractates is echoed in many of Chaucer's treatments of them in *The Canterbury Tales*. Wyclif insisted that one reason for the low moral standards of the clergy was their excess of property. In this state of sin they were spiritually invalid; they were not holding ecclesiastical dominion justly, and should thus be deprived of their special status. The portrait of the Monk in the *General Prologue* shows him to be venial and unfit for his duties. Chaucer describes him in an ironic tone that reads like a Wycliffite condemnation:

What sholde he studie and make hymselven wood,

Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,

Or swynken with his handes, and laboure,

As Austin bit?   (*GP* lines 183-187)

Chaucer's tongue-in-cheek sympathy with the Monk clearly invokes Wyclif's question

regarding the legitimacy of unfit clergy to be receiving the benefits of ecclesiastical

authority.

Such a situation of the misuse of ecclesiastical power in Wyclif's thinking is

directly resultant from the abandonment of the tenets of Augustinian interpretation of the

scriptures (Szittyn 172). Chaucer the poet is profoundly concerned with how to say

something that is true and according with "our doctrine." To Wyclif "a knowledge of

universals is the pre-eminent step on the ladder of wisdom by which we search out hidden

truth" (Lambert 221).   Without the correct mode of interpretation, there can only be

misjudgment. The inability to recognize the form beyond the material can lead even to

damnation. The summoner of the *Friar's Tale* sees his companion as a successful fellow

summoner, and thus he allows himself to fall prey to the fiend who can "make yow seme

we been shape" (*FrT* 1463). The nominalists would say that the error lies in both the

apprehension and the judgment (Peck 749).

The development of the relationship between the summoner and his new

companion supports Wyclif's opinions on mistaking *accidents* for *substance.* Let us look

at the course of the summoner's misjudgment. According to the explanatory notes in the *Riverside Chaucer* a learned clergyman would have picked up on the physical appearance of the fiend. The devil's green hunting outfit is the first accident that lures the summoner into the misjudgment that this "bailiff" is indeed just a crafty, and potentially rewarding, fellow summoner. The fiend's invitation to join forces draws the summoner into his trap. As the summoner concentrates on his likely windfall, he misses the numerous hints (accidents) the fiend gives concerning his true identity (substance). Chaucer's dramatic irony here depends upon what Wyclif insists is a nominalist adulteration of proper apprehension. Szittya explains:

> The nominalists are mistaken to emphasize appearance (things as we perceive them through the senses), rather than the underlying reality; accident rather than substance; *terminus*, not *res*; the letter (*sensus corporalis*), not the spirit (*sensus spiritualis*); *signum*, not *signatum*. (Szittya 155)

This misinterpretation leads not just to ignorance but, more importantly to Wyclif and Chaucer to damnation. The summoner is so dimwitted that the fiend reveals himself and explains to his victim that since demons have no set substance, they appropriate whatever shape will serve them in their mission to capture damned souls. The summoner asks:

> "Han ye a figure thanne determinat
>
> In helle, ther ye been in youre estat?"   (*FrT* 1459-60)

And the fiend dutifully explains:

> "Nay, certeinly," quod he, "ther have we noon;
>
> But whan us liketh we kan take us oon,
>
> Or elles make yow seme we been shape;
>
> Sometyme lyk a man, or lyk an ape,
>
> Or lyk an angel kan I ryde or go.

The fiend ends with a jab that echoes from a Wycliffite condemnation of the nominalist "seekers of signs."

> A lowsy jogelour kan deceyve thee,
>
> And pardee, yet kan I moore craft than he.   (*FrT* 1461-1468)

The fiend ends emphasizing his superior "craft" or power over his mortal victims. Thus we feel the impending doom of the summoner as his faulty interpretation is revealed.

The fiend goes on to mention Archbishop Dunstan , whom he was not able to hoodwink. As a leading reformer in the tenth-century English monastic orders, and a leading proponent of the *Regularis Concordia*, St. Dunstan serves as an ironic backdrop to the misguided character of the summoner. The fiend mentions St. Dunstan to remind the summoner that he has abandoned the protection of his own authority. In a squarely Wycliffite condemnation the summoner will be divested of his ecclesiastical authority

and his soul! The fiend later expresses his contempt for "youre dyvynytee," which we have learned is not the summoner's theology, but his false authority. He also promises his victim knowledge of his true substance when they get to Hell:

> "But o thyng warne I thee, I wol nat jape:
>
> Thou wolt algates wite how we been shape;
>
> Thou shalt herafterard, my brother deere,
>
> Come there thee nedeth nat of me to leere,
>
> For thou shalt, by thyn owene experience,
>
> Konne in a chayer rede of this sentence...." (*FrT* 1512-18)

The fiend and the summoner carry on into a village, where the summoner must learn a lesson in proper interpretation. After the old carter curses his team, the summoner insists that the devil take him at his word. The devil instead reveals to the impatient summoner that words can often disguise meaning. This is why Wyclif insists upon focussing on meaning (substance) over words (accidence). Szittya explains Wyclif's objection, "Those who cultivate signs live by external show, not inward realities" (Szittya 155). This was Wyclif's chief complaint against Ockham and the other nominalists, "Et ignorancia huius sensus fecit Ockham et multos alios doctores signorum ex infirmitate intellectus declinare ab universali reali (Wyclif, *De universalibus*). He accuses them of having a "sick (or weak) intellect," and this is what allows them to err on the side of nominalism.

In the end the summoner is condemned by his own words and his own ignorance of the significance of his impending doom. The devil gives the summoner a taste of his own nominalist medicine and takes the old widow at her word. He takes the frying pan, in which we imagine he will fry the soul of his victim, and sweeps the summoner off to Hell. The fiend, as Chaucer's voice, makes a final jab which Wyclif would see as fitting:

"Thou shalt with me to helle yet tonyght,

Where thou shalt knowen of oure privetee

Moore than a maister of dyvynytee." (*FrT* 1636-38)

Wyclif sees the nominalist schoolmen as threatening the entire church. He places great emphasis on the potential damage these "doctors of signs" could do to the souls in their keeping. Szittya explains Wyclif's conclusion: "Those who attend to the visible sign and not to the invisible reality abuse the sacraments" (158).

Wyclif felt that he was championing the arguments on realism of his great predecessors including Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Hugo of St. Victor, and Grosseteste (Thomson, 110). Chaucer as a philosophical poet worked in the shadow of these great minds. We need not conclude that Chaucer was significantly influenced by Wyclif himself. Instead it seems more useful to think of Chaucer as showing an interest in the artistic, aesthetic, and linguistic implications of the debates between the realists and nominalists. His literature shows a proclivity towards each side at different points. Although it is justifiable to label Chaucer a Boethian in his epistemological self-

definition, it would be specious to identify him as either a Wycliffite ultrarealist or, as has

been attempted by some, as a conspicuous Ockhamist nominalist.

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