Chaucer's Provisions for Future Contingencies

Eyvind Ronquist

I

In Chaucer's narratives, people think about the future, and typically they find it uncertain.[1] *Quelle surprise!* you exclaim ironically, since narrative requires suspense in the steps between beginning and ending, or otherwise it would become the exposition of a static, allegorical, universal grid. The uncertain steps of narrative might only be those of characters within a story, whereas the omniscient narrator would know the plot and is beguiling the reader. For Chaucer, however, uncertainty extends to the narrator, and what is reached by the ending is only a hypothesis.[2] There is also a choice of narrators. The beguilement of the reader in the suspense of a story becomes confrontation with something like a real problem of choosing from past to future. Where there is a real problem, there may be various trials of possible solutions. Each plan has steps taken in a distinctive pattern, and we learn distinct and ingenious ways of conceiving of what we may do in the course of time. Thus, among Chaucer's other works, the loose gathering of *Canterbury Tales* rehearses tales of divergent strategy and scope for which contentious individual narrators were further invented. I will particularly consider "The Nun's Priest's Tale," but add some observations about *Troilus and Criseyde*.[3]

My investigation here concerns Chaucer's work with the problem of future contingents, the problem raised first in Aristotle's *De interpretatione* 9 about the truth value of statements about the future.[4] It is simplest to hold that statements

about the past and present are either true or false, so that affirmation of proposition *p* implies denial of *not-p* C the Law of Contradiction. Singular matters of the past were or still are strictly speaking contingent, in that they might not have happened — "Caesar might not have crossed the Rubicon" — but we work with the assumed fact, "Caesar did cross the Rubicon."[5] However, matters of the future cannot be treated as already "fact," and so their contingency has a different status.[6] The sun will rise in all likelihood, but human causation, due to "deliberation and action" as Aristotle said, particularly has less predictability and probability.

The usual opinion is that of the future the only thing logically true is a double Vel statement of two possible cases. For example, on the morning of 30 May 2003 I did read an earlier and shorter form of this paper in Halifax, Nova Scotia. What was true on the 30th was that on the 31st I would either still be in Halifax *or* (**v** for Vel) that I would not be, each half of which remained contingent (perhaps I would forget a crucial engagement and must fly home the evening of the 30th). Put formally, I would then have said, "On 31 May 2003, I will be in Halifax and it is possible I will not be **v** I will not be in Halifax and it is possible I will be." A future contingent in the definition of Pierre d'Ailly is "something that will be and has the possibility of not being or that will not be and has the possibility of being."[7]

I have loosely been calling this problem "logical," and certainly it was taken up by medieval logicians, but I find it is frequently not discussed by modern textbooks. This seems to occur when logic is considered to be the art of relating propositions, while disregarding their content.[8] Truth is compatibility in this regard, rather than verifiability. Contingency, in contrast, has to do with matters that may or may not be known and verified, so they cannot universally be asserted; it is empirical.[9] Past, present, and future are human matters, and the question is what *we* can assert. Thus Chaucer directly has his characters worry about this lack of certainty.

In dealing with time, logic is supplemented by narrative, rhetoric, and theology. Narrative may be eased by probability, custom, law, and pious practices, so that the future may seem more certain. Fiction can claim certainty about all the phases of an assumed event and so become, as Aristotle might say, "more philosophical" than history (cf. *Poetics* 9). The narration may even be what we call omniscient. But this is a term borrowed from theology. A rhetorical form of theology is prophecy, and so medieval logicians worried whether "There will come an antichrist" had special status (Normone 89). And especially God may be given the best right to omnis-

cience, not knowing things temporally. In the problem of the uncertainty of the future, Christians, at least from Pelagius and Augustine on, worried about God's more-than-scrutiny, His guidance and even knowledge of our choices, and consequently they advanced theories of Predestination particularly in the provision of salvation. If to God's scrutiny omniscience is attributed, and His eternity does not exactly have past and future, He does not require contingency. Then He also knows—from our point of view, already—human choices, and the freedom of the will seems thrown into question. Even salvation would be predestined. But still it may be that sin-ridden human beings may do what they choose and are capable of, as in the formula, "Faciens quod in se est, de congruo meretur gratiam" (a technical phrase meaning something like "Those who actively do what they can on their own are worthy of appropriate grace"). Such a person is said to be granted a "semi-merit" without the further grace of "condignity" (see further Oberman, *Harvest* 129-45, 170-71). I should add that I will sometimes use *predestination* in a looser sense, for any apparent divine or fated forecertainty and call *fatalism* thinking that depreciates contingency.[10]

Theological responses have differed, and we shall see Chaucer aware of the lack of consensus. As a teller of stories and of people telling stories on varying principles, he dealt with human temporality and might find differing confidence in divine certainty. It would be for the observation of human beings that he would emphasize moments at which the future is contingent. My argument is that he does so to free future acts from the constraint of repetition. This would also account for his considerable liberty of enquiry, experiment, and narratorial invention.

The lack of consensus promotes a certain skepticism about theologians. This does not make Chaucer a disbeliever, as there can be a variety of piety called skeptical fideism (Delany). Skepticism about the ways of predestination need not be opposed to religious practice. For reconciliation of contingent action with a watchful divinity, consider confession and repentence, which allow people to stop in their tracks and change their ways. Thus, the humility of skepticism permits reflection and revision. Chaucer's narratives do not roll in an exemplary way from once-upon-a-time to happily-ever-after but to disjuncture, uncertain hope, disillusionment, and only then to prospects that may rise from humiliation. The characters pause pensively (though not always penitently) to consider what honourable record they may be making, and they also have near next things to worry about — what spouse to take,

how to deal with a tyrant, when it may be better not to do what they did in the past or follow traditional advice. This permits the future to be faced as an experiment, pragmatically, and not as the pageant of tradition (see more fully Ronquist, "Rhetoric"). Reading Chaucer is a therapy, watching characters detach themselves from their fixed ideas, watching Chaucer try their voices. I will discuss some instances.

II

Characters may drop their fictive inventions, as Walter does the apparently savage tests of the obedience of Grisildis in "The Clerk's Tale." That the tale projects a new sort of marriage arrangement in the future, and indeed a different conception of political power, can be argued from Walter's taking of Grisildis's peasant father into the palace in the last phase of the story, even before the mocking second epilogue that manuscripts attribute to Chaucer's own voice. The alternative suggestion in *Troilus and Criseyde* that love is a continuing negotiation rather than an inevitability is carried further in the Wife of Bath's changes and in the modifications by the characters of "The Franklin's Tale" of their initial concepts of love. Change of habit can begin in the scrutiny of self-description, a less-than-formal confession (see Leicester on the Wife of Bath, 82-158). There is guarded optimism of improvement in the *Canterbury Tales*, so that after "The Knight's Tale" has argued for what it names a virtue of necessity, a change of attitude, and a second chance, the Knight can object to the Monk's tale of repetitious and inevitable loss.

Chaucer can use the language of fatalism, but I submit that he was interested in the active condition of fatalists. This appears even in the relatively conservative narrative handling of passage into an uncertain future in *Troilus and Criseyde*.[11] The appearance in *Troilus and Criseyde* of reflections taken quite directly from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* has long been recognized, since Chaucer also translated that text as a guide to thought. Critics of *Troilus and Criseyde* make reference to the *Consolation* to show the "errors" of Chaucer's characters in that they rely on positions subsequently refuted by Boethius's authoritative Philosophy (but see Eldredge, Pearsall 175 for "a more than usually painful honesty" of their discussions, and Camargo for Pandarus in the momentary role of Philosophia). Notably, in Book

Four Troilus, in a lonely temple, is overheard by Pandarus casting possible arguments and repeatedly concluding that it has already been divinely foreseen and thus is ordained by predestination that he should forego Criseyde (the Trojan parliament had decided she should be exchanged for a Greek prisoner of war):

> "For certeynly, this wot I wel," he seyde,
> "That forsight of divine purveyaunce
> Hath seyn alwey me to forgon Criseyde."
>
> $\qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad$ (*Tr* 4.960-62)

The Boethian argument against this position (5, pr. 6), as I understand it, is that the Divine Purveyaunce Troilus invokes—we would revert to the same roots in Latin and say Providence—is a looking out for (*pro*) and not a looking forward (*prae*). Providence permits choice, while watchfully providing goals: we act in accordance with Providence when we choose what is best and act on it.[12] The Divinity knows human acts and the plan of salvation, but in a way that is not cast along the line of time. Troilus at the moment of his apparent certainty saw no alternative contingency. Moreover, he seemed to take love with Criseyde as the highest of choices, conceived of with the nobility of the songs of Philosophy in Boethius (e.g., *Tr* 3.1744-72). It had been suggested by Pandarus that he find a new love (*Tr* 4.400-27), but Troilus would not abandon the virtue of his loyalty. He may see himself without Criseyde in a "foregone" conclusion, but he does not renounce her, and never will. What *he* once determined continues down the days. Troilus's argument in favour of predestination is thus better taken as a sign of his character. We read the argument not for its persuasive conclusion but for its procedures and assumptions, and we suppose he is one who steers every possibility to the same conclusion, and that he is a fatalist. Moreover, we follow the story to see what a fatalist may do in various circumstances. We see in Troilus that he is liable to emotional certainty so absolute it reduces him to collapse and fainting, and that he withholds spontaneous action. Troilus thus endures his commitment even when circumstances seem no longer to require it. In withholding himself from violent interruption of the plan to arrange the return of Antenor, he will also have contributed to the ultimate defeat of Troy, but that is a large story which by now we are pretty much unable to suppose could have gone any other way.[13]

In contrast, Criseyde shares with Boethius a long diatribe on the vagaries of Fortune, but does not conclude that external goods, the goods of Fortune, should be

eschewed. She would prefer to do so—she seems content to lead the life of a widow reading the tragic history of Thebes—but she engages in temporal negotiation in the precarious situations of her survival in Troy after the defection of her father and in the Greek camp after her arbitrary exchange (an exchange she might have prevented by ceding her autonomy to marriage with Troilus).[14] She acts upon her thinking about Fortune in discourses that avoid a conclusion and a series of choices that try to make the best of an immediate situation. She treats as an object of exchange a brooch which Troilus had given her as a memento. Criseyde is the more capable of improvisation of the two, but the tale tries to favour continuing and continuing.

Both Troilus and Criseyde stay in the middle development of the Boethian argument that trusts to a rising hierarchy as in Plato, while they attempt to maximize temporal happiness. Moreover, the theory of each is both contradicted and confirmed by the larger story. For Troilus the contradiction is that he seeks to turn into destiny the happiness of a moment. If Troilus is fated, it is to discontinuity—breaks in love and the failure to effect the closure of revenge on his rival. Criseyde imagines too soon that her love with Troilus has ended, but also contradicts herself by making an improvised declaration promising expedient subterfuge to make permanent the best of things on a certain day in the future, a strategem of return to permanent love that she does not enact, easing instead into a new liaison. Troilus, in contrast, fatalistically expects day to day that she will be doing something, when he might instead be recognizing the risks of contingency. Troilus seems to confirm the philosophy of Fortune in losing the pleasure of Criseyde, Criseyde that of Predestination by surviving with her father on the winning side of the war.

Troilus treats as inevitable what has been and continues it as his own decision. The emotional response to a lovable appearance is beyond control (Chaucer objectified it by saying that the manifestation of the person who invokes love is divine), but Troilus pledges fidelity to the disturbance, while Criseyde is puzzled by it and suspects intoxication: epiphany is not inevitable.[15] Criseyde particularly shows how contingent and undetermined the future remains—love is not inevitable nor is her enslavement with the fall of Troy. Admittedly, that seems impious, if piety calls for a commitment to permanent providence. *Troilus and Criseyde* does end with a suggestion that Providence has intervened for Troilus in the conveying of his soul (5.1808-10). Chaucer's last shell of closure turns to a Christian Providence free of time, as the Trinity can be counted backwards and forward (5.1863-68). Only be-

yond the story did Chaucer begin to fill in the shadows of omitted sections of Boethius's *Consolation*.

We may pause to consider what human action Predestination still entails. Viewed piously, what will have occurred is referred to divine direction, so that it may be said in retrospect that what has happened has happened for the best. Yet while the human actor may remain at the hiatus entirely passive, a fatalist, participation in the action of the moment involves the choice and risk of the operation of some divine direction. It might be direction by combined planets in the astrological system which Chaucer himself studied and to which some of his characters and narrators adhere (Troilus in the fear that Venus may not be entirely favourable to him, so his fatalism tends toward despair rather than to hope; and elaborately in "The Knight's Tale" the doling out of compromise goods by planetary gods), or it may be a fatalism committed to benign divine intervention, calling for a choice by the human actor of the good to which providence is atemporally proposing a hierarchy. While biblical Providence may become "previdence," if divine providence can produce miracles that reduce contingency, we can pause to consider the willed action still required. For example, the Lord made trial of Abraham (*tentavit*, Vulgate; *did tempt*, Authorized Version) in commanding the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.1). In uncertainty the human actor had fully to choose, the knife be drawn at the youth's neck, for intervention to impose the hiatus of recognition, and there was that uncanny moment of contingency, whether savage or benign. If Abraham had simply loved his son, he would not have drawn his knife, and the Lord would not have rewarded him with a miraculous and providential son who would be the father of nations. Abraham had to will to act on the belief that the Lord was provident, and he already had had the promise of descendants (Gen. 13.16). Although the Lord was already certain of Abraham (Gen. 18.17-19), He "watched" Abraham in action ("Appellavitque nomen loci illius, Dominus videt. Unde usque hodie dicitur: In monte Dominus videbit," Gen. 22.14).[16] Isaac, meanwhile, did worry what provisions his father had made (Gen. 22.7). Attitude is also an action, as it is for Job, suffering the pains of the Lord's experiment. For Job the gap is longer between apparently inevitable disaster and the surprise of unexpected rescue, and to him the Lord proclaims His providence to be uncanny.[17] It may be too that Patience is often what is called on as the "virtue of necessity," as in Chaucer's tales of passive heroines, such as "The Man of Law's Tale."

We may also shift attention for a moment to consider the contemporaneous narrative of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The narrator of that austere romance reminds us that "Þe forme to þe fynisment foldez ful selden" which might immediately suggest simply that one never knows, reinforcing the darker clause that "þaȝ þe ende be heuy, hafȝe no wonder" (499,496). Yet in the longer story, while the end is a source of chagrin for Gawain, it is not of mortal weight. The story has it that Gawain attempted to manipulate the inevitability of the Green Knight's blow with a clandestine and allegedly magical green girdle. This brings him closer to a mortal cut, but, as it turns out, he receives a mere nick in the neck that does not match the beheading he had dealt to the Green Knight a year earlier. Were I Gawain, I would continue to speculate about what would have happened if I had not hidden the green girdle and had simply trusted God or the Green Knight. A pious response is that the permanent virtues outward on his shield and the Virgin Mary inward would have rewarded him with fame and salvation, yet they might not have guaranteed him life and success, which instead continued to depend on the concealed and perhaps amused good will of the disguised Green Knight and of Morgan la Fay.[18]

III

A more liberating instance of the complication of attempting to think about the future appears in Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale." Chauntecleer, the rooster, has a theory of the prophetic nature of dreams, that the future is both thereby knowable and also inevitable. His dream of a threatening foxlike but unnamable creature is confirmed that very day by an encounter with a fox who does want to eat him, Don Russell by name. Chauntecleer at that moment senses anger without remembering and applying his dream of the previous night, and the narrator suggests it is sheer animal instinct (7.3275-81). We might also suppose the dream had been provoked by instinct, except that Chauntecleer had an articulate theory about it.

The dream, meanwhile, is not confirmed, because Chauntecleer gets free of the fox's jaws. He does so, however, by picturing the encounter as fatal, and thus as what his dream had warned him of. At that moment of extreme fatalism, he declares himself already dead. But not so simply. Chauntecleer actively engages a strategic purpose, thinking clearly (we can give him credit and say that finding the strategy is

more than good luck), because it is Russell the fox he invites to proclaim the victory. The fox to boast must open his jaws, and Chauntecleer flies to safety. Picturing the worst is part of the strategy, yet inevitability is evoked to serve improvisation, rhetorical manipulation, and a lucky chance. The proposition of preordained certainty is presented rhetorically to Russell, with directions for the certainty of the propositions Russell is to use:

> Sire, if that I were as ye,
> Yet sholde I seyn, as wys God helpe me,
> 'Turneth agayn, ye proude cherles alle!
> A verray pestilence upon yow falle!
> Now I am come unto the wodes syde;
> Maugree youre heed, the cok shal heere abyde.
> I wol hym ete, in feith, and that anon!'

(*CT* 7.3407-13)

"The Nun's Priest's Tale" demonstrates the limits of fatalism and the complexity of choice among diverse goods. Chauntecleer was persuaded of the predictability of future events, and the examples he cited from Cicero were of cases where there was no intervention and the event predicted in a dream took place (or the dream was a simultaneous communication of a dire event taking place). Chauntecleer was sufficiently a fatalist that he did not feel obliged to act on his dream by staying out of harm, as if the dream would be realized no matter what he did, but we know that the nearer reason he did not hold true to his conviction was his active choice of hedonistic short-term pleasure with Pertelote, the most articulate of his hens. Don Russell further complicates Chauntecleer's choices by inviting him to substitute pride (pride in the singing which is a family tradition) for instinctive self-preservation, and he is captured. But, again, in the least of actions by fully imagining the worst and giving it ingenious direction, Chauntecleer avoids his fate. He gives rich meaning to the rule of "The Knight's Tale" to make virtue of necessity. Virtue in this rule becomes not habit but the skill of decision and attitude in the face of blind inevitability, substituting initiative intelligence for a mechanism of external causation. "I wol hym ete," the declaration Chauntecleer proposes Don Russell make, is a proposition about a future contingent, and not "necessarily true." Chauntecleer had freedom to act while in dire constraint and while renouncing his lesser desire for honour. His dream prophecy was not fulfilled; the curse to be pronounced against the villagers' pride

was not effected. The morals drawn by the two beasts also are distant from fatalism. Russell's lesson, put simply, is "Keep your mouth shut," in which case performative claims for the future will not be made. Chauntecleer's is "Keep your eyes open." This must mean "Look for the unexpected"; it is not Troilus's forlorn scrutiny of the horizon for the return of familiar Criseyde.

In the *Canterbury Tales* "The Nun's Priest's Tale" follows "The Monk's Tale," which promised inductively a bad fate for anyone, with or without a tragic flaw. We may expect a challenge to its fatalism. The narrator we call the Nun's Priest highlights the imperiousness of omniscient and didactic narration. The distance his narration sets between *histoire* and *discours* problematizes and reinitiates enquiry into foreknowledge and future contingency. The narrator introduces Don Russell as what had been "By heigh ymaginacioun forncast" (*CT* 7.3217) in a dream inspired by God (an echo of the "alta fantasia" of Dante, *Purgatorio* 17.25, according to Pratt 565-68). The narrator proclaims peril as certainty, and says it was known in advance by God:[19]

> O Chauntecleer, acursed be that morwe
> That thou into that yerd flaugh fro the bemes!
> Thou were ful wel ywarned by thy dremes
> That thilke day was perilous to thee;
> But what that God forwoot moot nedes bee,
> After the opinioun of certein clerkis.
>
> (*CT* 7.3230-35)

But he is beginning to transfer his certainty to a bibliographic enquiry, remembering with the Wife of Bath (or a Chaucerian scribe) that "Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes" (*CT* 3.44c):

> 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,
> Wheither that Goddes worthy forwityng
> Streyneth me nedely for to doon a thyng –

'Nedely' clepe I symple necessitee –
Or elles, if free choys be graunted me
To do that same thyng, or do it noght. . .

(*CT* 7.3236-47)

I must share the Nun's Priest's confession of faltering in the doxographic effort of tracking logicians and theologians up to the most recent discussions. For sifting out error and validity from the *bren* or husks, the Nun's Priest provides an initial bibliography that could be expanded, I suspect, with a hundred recent articles exploring just the views of Augustine, Boethius, and Bradwardine. Thus, Eleonore Stump, before advancing her own interesting correction of Augustine, cites John Rist: "There is still no consensus of opinion on Augustine's view of each man's responsibility for his moral behaviour"[20] (Augustine's thinking troubled particularly by his belief that sinful mankind is incapable of securing God's grace and yet that salvation is promised). Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy* reverted to analysis of pagan terminology, criticizing Aristotle *De interpretatione* 9. Bradwardine in the earlier fourteenth century was part of an Augustinian revival of a "more personal and immediate view of God," and distinctively in taking up Augustine's attack on Pelagians he "rejected not only all claims for the independent existence of free will, but denied any other form of determinism in the interest of God's" (Leff 4, 15). It would be tempting to suppose that because Bradwardine was the most recent thinker named he was the closest to Chaucer's own thinking, but I find it impossible to read the tale as justification of theocentric determinism, given the ingenuity of Chauntecleer's escape. I guess it is just possible that God loved Chauntecleer from the start, although his status as a beast would deny him an immortal soul. Bradwardine was taken up again by John Wyclif closer to Chaucer's time, but I would argue that he is in the Nun's Priest's short reading list for the challenge of an extreme position that still by the end of the century could be considered along with the opposing current of William Ockham and Robert Holcot that gave greater emphasis to free will.[21] Indeed, Robert A. Pratt argued that the discussion of dreams in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" was drawn in large part from Holcot's commentary on the *Liber Sapientiae*. As to the theory of Boethius, we can say Chauntecleer would have done better to keep in mind a hierarchy of goods, but the narrator did not ask him to eschew lesser goods.

In any case, the narrator is wrong in evoking "destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed" (7.3338; sim. 7. 3225, 3233). He thunders prophetic music, but Chauntecleer does better than he supposed and gets a second chance, as characters in the *Canterbury Tales* often do. The clamour, too, of the villagers, evoked with the terror of the Uprising of 1381, falls unmentioned when Chauntecleer and Russell are left reflecting on their mishaps.[22]

IV

In solitude or moments of calm, Chaucer permits his characters to discourse, and they and he may shift from the direct intervention of narrative to various forms of more or less successful philosophizing that gives them general opinions as a basis to choose the next step into the future. Criseyde calls this seeing with the third eye of Prudence, while regretting that she has not been good at it (*Tr* 5.743-49, concluding "But future tyme, er I was in the snare, / Koude I nat sen; that causeth now my care"). Thinking about the future in a simple form consists of induction from example, as in Chauntecleer's gathering of examples of dreams that have come true, or in a more complex way in "The Franklin's Tale" Dorigen's review of examples of women responding to rape, this before she has had any meeting with the lover who claims her. Dorigen uses the dialectic procedure of a review of opinions, which more widely the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole provides, just as the Nun's Priest began to list theological theories.[23] I am thinking of how Aristotle and later the scholastic theologians began with a survey of opinions, *doxa*, before making their own formulations. Unhappy the character who has no time to consider alternatives, as with Virginia in "The Physician's Tale," who manages to advance only the example of Jephtha's daughter before her father cuts her head off, but then this story is an unhappy variation also of the story of Abraham and Isaac, allowing no intervention to halt the murderous sacrifice, though it has some later social benefit. The Formel Eagle in *Parliament of Fowls* is given time at least to consider options for what may later be obligatory marriage, and Theseus, though peremptory in "The Knight's Tale," gives Emelye an important philosophical position to work with—the making virtue of necessity. Other women faced with marriage have less of a moment for consideration, notably Maius in "The Merchant's Tale," who is simply warned by her husband she won't enjoy her wedding night, and Grisildis, in "The Clerk's Tale," who

apparently thought commanding Walter would be as benign as she was. In "The Wife of Bath's Tale" marital intercourse is preceded by elaborate deliberation.

The pause to think is crucial. An instance in the philosophical tradition would be the intervals of stasis to which Socrates found himself sometimes compelled by his Daimon. Solitude is individualizing; the individual finds his or her own basis of intuition (cf. Goodall). In Chaucer, even a position urging a traditional method of thinking is announced through a pause for consideration: "Stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of olde pathes (that is to seyn, of olde sentences) which is the goode wey, and walketh in that wey," with the promise that "ye shal fynde refresshynge for youre soules": thus the Parson, expanding on Jeremiah 6:16 (*CT* 10.77-78). As narrator he thus marks "The Parson's Tale" as a position within the doxographic survey that is the *Canterbury Tales*, while as a character in the "General Prologue" he was initially encountered in his practice rather than his doctrine ("This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf, / That first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte," *CT* 1.496-97). In Chaucer the determination and refutation is often *pentimento*, that is, chagrin or further uncertainty, and "The Parson's Tale" is taken from manuals of confession to become an instrument of self-scrutiny. What has been called the "Refutations" of the *Canterbury Tales* declares the didactic uncertainty of much of Chaucer's writing, holds out points of doctrine, but concludes in a simple hope for salvation in the terms of the Christian Creed. The Prologue to "The Tale of Melibee" (*CT* 7.951) evokes the single teaching of the Four Gospels (in the Augustinian tradition of *De doctrina christiana* 1.34-36, we can say), but acknowledges their "tellyng difference" (*CT* 7.948; see Morrison for the hermeneutic problem). The tale that follows provides maxims for varied occasions and reaches action that is the result of renunciation of the initial plan of Melibee and depends on the repentent good will of his adversaries. The material from Albertano of Brescia is advice about advice, a reference handbook of advice, rather than a singular formula, like the rule of charity. "The Friar's Tale" evokes the punishment of damnation, but the soul-hunting devil of the tale is careful to allow for change and deliberation before he seizes his prey (see the nuanced discussion by Kline).

Chaucer's discursive poems strikingly conclude in uncertainty:

> and yit I rede alwey.
> I hope, ywis, to rede so som day

> That I shal mete som thyng for to fare
> The bet, and thus to rede I nyl nat spare.
>
> (*PF* 696-99)

This is what passes for the conclusion of *The Parliament of Fowls*, which has followed willy-nilly allurement and threat, culture and nature, with debate, limited certainty, and suspension of judgement.[24] The dream format permits vignettes in suspension, simulacra of the practical world, potential patterns of activity. Only *The Book of the Duchess*, because of its allegorical abstraction, suggests that the Man in Black may forever persist in mourning and evasion. *Troilus and Criseyde* in its last stanzas suggests a fresh way of reading the story, and makes plans for a comedy.

Chaucer often suspends action to consider the nature of temporal causation, and this pause is a hiatus that prevents simple tracking from the present to the future. The contingency and indetermination of the future is thus emphasized. Its determination depends on the human actor. Mid-course in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer has his Pilgrims disparage the fatalism of "The Monk's Tale," which is framed between the mercenary transactions of "The Shipman's Tale" and the inspired good sense of the Nun's Priest's Chauntecleer, who makes more artful use of his initial pessimism. "The Nun's Priest's Tale" would also mark a departure from the reiterative traditionalism and the violent human enforcement of divine intervention of "The Prioress's Tale." The cause of anxiety in *Troilus and Criseyde,* contingency in the *Canterbury Tales* is thus welcome solace.

There have been various readings of Chaucer's attitude toward change. To take two recent instances, Green has found the mindset of the later fourteenth century to be "Saturnian" (both malevolent and nostalgic), and presumably Chaucer's also, based on discursive lyrics such as "The Former Age" and "Lak of Stedfastnesse,"[25] while Pearsall provocatively has proposed "a time-serving opportunist and placeman, who pictured his own pliability in all that he saw" (8). In contrast to either of these positions, I have been discussing instances that do show concern about the future, with an interest in experiment I have elsewhere called pragmatic ("Rhetoric"; see Anderson for some contemporary approaches to contingency). Chaucer suspends pious anticipation of Providence for a variety of smaller moves. Already in *Troilus and Criseyde* the Classical, Horatian, ethic of *carpe diem* could be raised (cf. Ronquist, "Franklin"). The boisterous energy and experimentalism of his last work, the *Canterbury Tales*, suggests he was not a

pessimist. We can make positive use of the disjunction between present and future, so that the future *can* hopefully be different from the past. Why and how still have to be distinguished. If dissatisfaction is not an inevitable condition, one can hope for change by removing the causes of dissatisfaction. It still remains that the future is uncertain, so change is ventured on as an experiment with a change in variables. This pragmatic approach to the future is a procedure based on steps of experience, with possible modifications of the goal.[26]

Behind the dissatisfactions of Chaucer's characters lurk large issues that in long historical time have seen change, as long as we are "not looking for causes, but for prototypes of modern ways of life and thought," as Oberman puts it ("Shape" 5). Authoritarian monarchy, liable to tyranny, became constitutional. Abuses of ecclesiastical power were attacked in a reformation. The organization of gender roles (and marriage in consequence) is only recently realigning to reduce dissatisfaction, as women participate in public affairs and religious offices, as marriage is seen as a limited contract, and as friendship is taken as the basis of love and civil union. These developments are hard to justify directly on Chaucer's authority, but nevertheless his works have furnished authority to reformers in these areas. The Wife of Bath and the liberty of Criseyde are not entirely historically distant phenomena and arouse direct rancour and admiration, and there are good words for what is seen as the defiant camp of the Pardoner. As scholars rather than polemicists we want to give characters their fullest scope of performance in Chaucer's own period, but we can see that they do not necessarily reiterate tradition. As old seeds become new crops (*PF* 22-25), we may get something like the open project of the *Legend of Good Women*, where a new range of suffering is named martyrdom, and there is a new cast of the historically famous. In the *Canterbury Tales* there are endings after the endings that permit a revised social alignment. As has been noted, in "The Clerk's Tale" Grisildis's peasant father ends up living with her and noble Walter in the palace. It would seem that with his tests of Grisildis, Walter had hoped for falsification of an hypothesis of the steadfastness of women—his social presuppositions make it implausible to assume that he was as confident in advance of her worthiness as God was of Abraham and Job. In "The Franklin's Tale," the squire Aurelius learns that romances of courtly adultery are not necessarily realistic, Dorigen that choice and discretion matter at every instance, that feared disaster is not inevitable, that improvisation is possible beyond historical examples. In "The Merchant's Tale" ocular fact can be negated. "The Wife of

Bath's Prologue and Tale" show confidence in social revision: "Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal" (*CT* 3.45). A rapist there comes to accept a woman's choice despite the drastic contingency of her appearance (he has already been forgiven by the council of women). In her fifth marriage the Wife of Bath rips out pages of traditional accounts of women, there is danger of death and accusation of murder, but she and her clerk husband, she says, "fille acorded by us selven two" (*CT* 3.812). This marks a new beginning, like the discovery of law by small groups of revolutionaries, as pictured by Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution* (see particularly ch. 5, and the conclusion 279-85). Critics have sometimes emphasized the always and already inevitable limitations on women in Chaucer's narratives, but is it not the case that he allows choice and movement?

Chaucer was exploring the relaxation of inevitability. Play, Middle English *game*, permits momentary shifts of impulse and chance. Marked as game, "The Miller's Tale" evokes impulse as a corrective to the seeming perfection of historical closure of "The Knight's Tale," which turned what "so bifel, by aventure or cas" into the work of Fortune or the stars (*CT* 1.1074-90, *cas* from *casus* 'chance'). Yet in "The Knight's Tale," too, the happenstance of a glimpse of beauty opened elaborate plans for happiness. Human beings are called on to be active and imaginative. They are not to hold to their propositions without corresponding acts of will: words must be cousin to the deed (*CT* 1.742). The ethics of virtue converting necessity is an art like architecture and medicine that finds resources for fresh constructions. In Chaucer's characteristic usage, truth is not simply a logistic property, with the question of when or how statements about the future are valid whether through contingency or necessity.[27] Rather in his Middle English truth is a performative commitment requiring choice of future loyalty, and apprehensively it is joined in rhyme by *ruth* or pity.[28] Pity in turn can participate and ameliorate. The contingency of conceptions of the future allows shadowy potential to be empowered into fresh actuality. What is not fated but possible can be reformed.

Concordia University

Notes

1   This paper was first presented in the congenial conference of the Canadian Society of Medievalists, 30 May 2003, in a Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Canada considering the general theme of Conflict and Cooperation. I am very grateful for the stimulating and watchful comments of the readers and editors for this publication.

2   See, for example, Sklute, and Shepherd's observation about Chaucer, "As a writer he seems always to have been puzzled by some variation of the question: How does a succession of events make any sense" (116), but in this short paper I will not engage widely with the voluminous discourse of criticism.

3   I would argue that the successive books of *Troilus and Criseyde* work in divergent narrative modes, with different "muses," focus, sequencing, and thoughtful reflections.

4   I take it to be a problem, though Adams and Kretzmann take Aristotle to be a "fatalist" for whom "no events, actions, or states of affairs are contingent" (3-5). William Ockham, whose commentary they translate, sees "several absurdities from the absurdity already deduced" (101).

5   Oberman does call for a larger sense of contingency and a historical problem that would also bear on Chaucer's narration of past events: "Contingency is perhaps the best one-word summary of the nominalist program. This contingency is understood in two directions, embracing both the vertical relation God-world-man and the horizontal relation world-man-future. We cannot pursue now this second form of contingency, which concerns the so-called question *"De futuris contingentibus."* When applied not only to the future but also to the past, it provides for a truly scholarly basis of historical studies by its tendency to eliminate supernatural factors in the interpretation of the course of events" ("Shape" 13).

6   Thinkers such as Anscombe and Wolff show how debate continues on the import of Aristotle's finding.

7   "Illud quod erit et potest non fore, vel quod non erit et potest fore," Pierre

d'Ailly, *Quaestiones Magistri Petri de Aylliaco super I. Sententiarum*, Q. 12, B (Strassburg, 1490), qtd. in Boehner, ed., Ockham, 44. For other medieval formulations see Normone.

8   As to the purity of logic Cohen and Nagel declare "just as we have distinguished the proposition (as the objective meaning) from the sentence which states it, so we must distinguish it from the act of the mind or the judgment which thinks it" (28).

9   So Jevons, "Any subject or branch of knowledge in which universal statements cannot usually be made is called contingent matter ... In reality ... this part of logical doctrine is thoroughly illogical, because in treating a proposition we have no right ... to assume ourselves acquainted with the science to which it refers. Our duty is to elicit the exact consequences of any statements given to us. We must learn in logic to transform information in every possible way, but not to add extraneous facts" (80), and Kretzmann, "A contingency depends for its truth or falsity on the truth or falsity of various substitution-instances for its variables, which, in turn, must be decided on the basis of information that lies outside the subject-matter of formal logic" (35). For the synonym *empirical*, Barker 26; for Ockham, Courtenay 37.

10   In the definition of Mill, an admitted "Pelagian," "A fatalist believes, or half believes (for nobody is a consistent fatalist), not only that whatever is about to happen, will be the infallible result of the causes which produce it (which is the true necessitarian doctrine), but moreover that there is no use in struggling against it; that it will happen however we may strive to prevent it" (6.2.1, 3 [8: 836, 840]).

11   Bloomfield held that "*Troilus and Criseyde* is a medieval tragedy of predestination because the reader is continually forced by the commentator to look upon the story from the point of view of its end and from a distance" (22). "I think he stands with Bishop Bradwardine," he said (23). True that in epic style Chaucer declares from the start "ye may the double sorwes here / Of Troilus in lovynge of Criseyde, / And how that she forsook hym er she deyde" (*Tr* 1.54-56), but he also leaves extensive passages to the characters' own words and shows concern and forgiveness for their plights.

12 Byrd provides a useful account of deliberative moments in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

13 In the period we now call *entre deux guerres*, Giraudoux returned the Trojan War to contingency by using the future tense in *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*.

14 Noting "the impingement upon the ideal of the banal and work-a-day," Sharrock declared, "The horror into which Criseyde falls is that horror of the contingent that cuts across particular quirks of personality and lies in wait for all of us"(148, 152).

15 Struck by the "goddess" of Criseyde, Troilus pledged service unto death (1.421- 27); Criseyde suspected intoxication when she saw Troilus as more "knightly" than Mars (2.628-51).

16 The understanding of an action is different as it is watched or as it is performed. The former is scenic and permits judgement of the whole of the action and allegorical assessment of values. The latter emphasizes the intention of the actor. See, for instance, Ricoeur, chs. 5-6, for "l'identité narrative," and Aristotle, *Poetics* 18, as expanded by Burke, esp. chs. 1.1 and 2.

17 Cf. Courtenay on the fourteenth century "increase in Biblical theology" (58).

18 Spearing discusses the ending of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in comparison with other Middle English narratives, including *Troilus and Criseyde* (esp. chs. 5 and 8).

19 Later, at the moment of actual peril for Chauntecleer, the Nun's Priest evokes Geoffroi de Vinsauf's tragic lament for Richard I (367-430), which, combined with a memory of the Uprising of 1381, would imply an admonition to the present king, Richard II. It threatens risk rather than future fact, and might have had the flavour of prophecy except that it lacks solemnity. In "The Pardoner's Tale," the Old Man who points the Revellers to the finding of a person they name Death may know only that they will find a treasure and that "Radix malorum est cupiditas," the sermon theme.

20 Stump 124, citing John Rist, "Augustine on Free Will and Predestination," *Journal of Theological Studies* 20 (1969): 420.

21   Robson, chs. 2-4 (32-112), details divergent theses subsequent to Bradwardine.
      According to Kenny, while Wyclif was condemned after his death as an
      "extreme determinist," his reconciliation of human freedom and God's
      foreknowledge "is that we should say that the relationship between the divine
      volition and the human action is a two-way one: if God's volition causes
      man's act, so, in a sense, man's act causes God's volition" (31, 37). For the
      "catholicity" of so-called nominalists such as Ockham, despite semi-
      pelagianism, and for Holcot's fideism and a connection with Bradwardine,
      see Oberman, *Harvest* 423-28, 235-48.

22   Charles Muscatine observed that "The one constancy in the poem is this shifting
      of focus, the Chaucerian multiple perspective which itself virtually constitutes
      the theme," such that "The plot is tragic, until it ends happily. It is an allegory
      of the Fall – leaving Man, somewhat wiser, still in possession of his paradise,
      or his chicken yard" (239, 242).

23   The survey is wide but not necessarily systematic, though critics like Allen and
      Moritz have tried to work out its consistency.

24   Pearsall observes that "Chaucer's poetic techniques are not clever ways of
      arriving by indirect routes at paraphrasable answers. The techniques of
      indirection, of non-assertion, *are* the realities. The question is open, and it is
      necessary that we should be puzzled" (122-23).

25   Green xiii, 39-40, 391; 160-61 for an extension to our own time. In some
      contrast, in answer to Saturnian melancholy Brown and Butcher find mixed
      projects of reform, regeneration, and restoration (vii, 250).

26   Howard limits pragmatism to the moves of Pandarus (161, 163).

27   See extensively Green, especially 1-31.

28   For a larger issue, cf. Courtenay: "The unique feature of Ockhamist thought
      was that these ideas were all present and grounded in the idea of pact, or
      covenant – willed verbal agreements that are no less dependable and certain
      because they are in origin voluntary" (51).

Works Cited

Adams, Marilyn McCord, and Norman Kretzmann. eds. and trs. *William Ockham: Predestination, God's Foreknowledge, and Future Contingents* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969).

Allen, Judson Boyce, and Theresa A. Moritz. *A Distinction of Stories: The Medieval Unity of Chaucer's Fair Chain of Narratives for Canterbury* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1981).

Anderson, Amanda. "Pragmatism and Character" *Critical Inquiry* 29 (2003-04): 282-301.

Anscombe, G. E. M. "Aristotle and the Sea Battle" *Mind* n.s. 65 (1956): 1-15.

Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963).

Aristotle. *De interpretatione* ed. and tr. H. P. Cooke. *The Organon* Loeb Classical Library 325 (London: Heinemann, 1938).

Aristotle. *Poetics* ed. and tr. W. H. Fyfe. Loeb Classical Library 199 (London: Heinemann, 1932).

Augustine. *De doctrina christiana* ed. and tr. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

Barker, Stephen F. *The Elements of Logic* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965).

Bloomfield, Morton W. "Distance and Predestination in *Troilus and Criseyde*" *PMLA* 72 (1957): 14-26.

Boethius. *Philosophiae consolatio* ed. Ludwig Bieler Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 94 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1957).

Biblia Sacra juxta Vulgatam Clementinam (Romae: Desclée, 1927).

Brown, Peter, and Andrew Butcher. *The Age of Saturn: Literature and History in the "Canterbury Tales"* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

Byrd, Forrest M. "Conditional Statements in *Troilus and Criseyde*" *Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association* 10 (1984): 29-43.

Camargo, Martin. "The Consolation of Pandarus" *Chaucer Review* 25 (1990-91): 214-28.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer* ed. Larry D. Benson 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

Cohen, Morris R., and Ernest Nagel. *An Introduction to Logic* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, World: 1962).

Courtenay, William J. "Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion" Trinkaus and Oberman 26-59.

Dante Alighieri. *La divina commedia* vol. 2 *Purgatorio* ed. Natalino Sapegno 2nd ed. (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1968).

Delany, Sheila. *Chaucer's "House of Fame" The Poetics of Sceptical Fideism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

Eldredge, Laurence. "Boethian Epistemology and Chaucer's *Troilus* in the Light of Fourteenth-Century Thought" *Mediaevalia* 2 (1976): 49-75.

Geoffroi de Vinsauf. *Poetria nova.* ed. Édmond Faral. *Les arts poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Champion, 1962) 194-262.

Giraudoux, Jean. *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu: piece en deux actes* (Paris: Grasset, 1935).

Goodall, Peter. "Being Alone in Chaucer" *Chaucer Review* 27 (1992-93): 1-15.

Green, Richard Firth. *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

Howard, Donald R. "The Philosophies in Chaucer's *Troilus*" *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield* ed.

Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1983) 151-175, 288-90.

Jevons, W. Stanley. *Elementary Lessons in Logic: Deductive and Inductive* 5th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1875).

Kenny, Anthony. *Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Kline, Daniel T. "'Mine by right,' Oath-making and Intent in 'The Friar's Tale'" *Philological Quarterly* 77 (1998): 271-93.

Kretzmann, Norman. *Elements of Formal Logic* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

Leff, Gordon. *Bradwardine and the Pelagians: A Study of His "De causa Dei" and Its Opponents* Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought n.s. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957).

Leicester, H. Marshall. *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the "Canterbury Tales"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

Mill, John Stuart. *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive* ed. J. M. Robson. *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 7-8. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973-74).

Morrison, Karl F. "Interpreting the Fragment" *Hermeneutics and Medieval Culture.* ed. Patrick J. Gallacher and Helen Damico (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) 27-37.

Muscatine, Charles. *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

Normone, Calvin G. "Petrus Aureoli and His Contemporaries on Future Contingents and Excluded Middles" *Synthese* 96 (1993): 83-92.

Oberman, Heiko A. *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

Oberman, Heiko A. "The Shape of Late Medieval Thought: The Birthpangs of the Modern Era" Trinkaus and Oberman 3-25.

Ockham, William. *The Tractatus de Praedestinatione et de Praescientia Dei et de Futuris Contingentibus* ed. Philotheus Boehner. Franciscan Institute Publications 2 (St. Bonaventure NY: Franciscan Institute, 1945).

Pearsall, Derek. *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

Pratt, Robert A. "Some Latin Sources of the Nonnes Preest on Dreams" *Speculum* 52 (1977): 538-70.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1990).

Robson, J. A. *Wyclif and the Oxford Schools: The Relation of the "Summa de ente" to Scholastic Debates at Oxford in the Later Fourteenth Century* Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, n.s. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

Ronquist, E. C. "The Franklin, Epicurus, and the Play of Values" *Chaucer and Language: Essays in Honour of Douglas Wurtele* ed. Robert Myles and David Williams (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001) 44-60, 192-98.

Ronquist, E. C. "Rhetoric and Early Modern Skepticism and Pragmatism" *Canadian Journal of Rhetorical Studies* 5 (1995): 49-75.

Sharrock, Roger. "*Troilus and Criseyde*: Poem of Contingency" *Chaucer's Mind and Art*. ed. A. C. Cawley (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1969) 140-54.

Shepherd, Geoffrey. "Religion and Philosophy in Chaucer" 1974. *Poets and Prophets: Essays in Medieval Studies by G. T. Shepherd*. ed. T. A. Shippey and John Pickles (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990) 105-32.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight ed. Theodore Silverstein. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

Sklute, Larry. *Virtue of Necessity: Inconclusiveness and Narrative Form in Chaucer's Poetry* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984).

Spearing, A. C. *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Stump, Eleonore. "Augustine on Free Will" *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*. ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 124-47.

Trinkaus, Charles, and Heiko A. Oberman, eds. *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion: Papers from the University of Michigan Conference* Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought 10 (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

Wolff, Peter. "Truth, Futurity, and Contingency" *Mind* n.s. 69 (1960): 398-402.