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CHAUCER'S LITTLE TREATISES

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Chaucer's prologue to the "Tale of Melibee" tends to attract more critical interest than the tale itself, often revolving around Chaucer's references to a "litel tretys" and a "tretys lite," as article titles such as "'This Litel Tretys' Again" (by John W. Clark) and "Chaucer's Little Treatise, The *Melibee*" (by Thomas J. Farrell) suggest. The focus of such commentaries on the prologue tends to be identification of the treatise, with the inevitable conclusion being that there is only one treatise to identify. However, careful reading of the passage in question reveals that the most logical conclusion is that the two references, to a "litel tretys" (VII.957) and a "tretys lyte" (VII.963), refer to separate, albeit linked, treatises. Recognition of this likelihood depends on focussing not simply on the question of what Chaucer refers to in the two lines cited above but on the larger context of the linking material preceding the "Tale of Sir Thopas" as well as the interruption of that tale. In focussing on the question of the treatise, previous commentators have not sufficiently considered the ways that the references to the treatises develop from the dialogue between Harry and the narrator begun prior to the "Thopas." The dialogue between Harry and Geoffrey before and after the "Thopas" stresses in various ways the difficulty of finding a fixed and single meaning even for a single word, let alone for a person, or a tale. Chaucer's use of the word "tretys" in the Thopas-Melibee link is emblematic of the way he undercuts

the idea that meaning is fixed and invariable, not only within the link itself, but throughout his writing. To understand the implications of granting a double referent to the word "tretys," we must first consider what Harry's way of reading implies.¹

At issue in Harry's comments to and discussions with the narrator is, of course, the reliability of Harry as interpreter; throughout the tales, Harry's skills as literary critic are cast in doubt.² Although Harry's misreadings are familiar by the time we meet Geoffrey the pilgrim, Harry's misreadings of Geoffrey and of his tales are especially noteworthy. Harry's initial reading of Geoffrey differs from the normal type of commentary he makes about the pilgrims; he has little or nothing to say about many of them, and when he does comment on other pilgrims, he identifies them by their vocations rather than as individuals, as Lee Patterson notes (117-18). Whereas the other pilgrims are identifiable according to some social role, Geoffrey is not. Patterson takes this difference as grounds for a discussion of Chaucer's concern with his role as author in society, but of equal interest is the fact that the unidentifiability of Geoffrey leads Harry into interpretations of what Geoffrey must be like:

And thanne at erst he looked upon me,
 And seyde thus: "What man artow" quod he;
 "Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,
 For evere upon the ground I se thee stare.
 Approche neer, and look up murily.
 Now war yow, sires, and lat this man have place!
 He in the waast is shape as wel as I;
 This were a popet in an arm t'enbrace
 For any womman, smal and fair of face.
 He semeth elvyssh by his contenaunce,
 For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce." (VII.694-704)

Harry's evaluation of Geoffrey is based in appearance, in what he sees; Harry "looks" at Chaucer, who "looks" as if he seeks a rabbit. Here, the work "look" is used twice, in quick succession, and it means something different in each instance; first, it refers to Harry's visual perception of Geoffrey, but only two lines later it has acquired a different meaning, and reflects Harry's interpretation of Geoffrey's appearance. The close repetition of the word, and the punning shift of its meaning from naming the process of seeing something to interpreting the appearance of something, underscores the shakiness of Harry's basis of judgment in looks, or in appearance—in surfaces. The pun underscores the faultiness of the assumption that appearance

dictates meaning; just as the word "look" can mean two different things in two different contexts, so too any two similar things can in fact be essentially very different.

Harry proceeds to observe physical details that suggest Geoffrey is similar to himself—he and Geoffrey have a similar girth—so assumes a corresponding internal similarity, or mirth, and he requests a mirthful tale. That Harry's focus is on appearance is reiterated by his observation that Geoffrey "*seemeth elvyssh*"; that such a focus is misleading is made clear by his assumption that Geoffrey's appearance will reflect the kind of tale he will tell: "now shul we heere / Som deyntee thyng, me thynketh by his cheere" (VII.710–11). Harry recognizes a superficial correspondence between himself and Geoffrey, so assumes a fundamental similarity between them; that is, he assumes that two things that appear alike must be alike, but the dual meaning of the word "look" as used in the passage automatically undercuts Harry's assumption. That his assumption is indeed invalid is borne out by his response to Geoffrey's tale; as far as Harry is concerned, Geoffrey's attempt at mirth falls woefully short of his expectations.

Harry's response to "Sir Thopas," which begins the material prefatory to the "Melibee," further clarifies his inability to see beyond surfaces. His criticism of the tale is devoid of anything other than condemnation of what he sees as wretched rhyming; as Alan T. Gaylord notes, "he speaks *only* of the form and effect of the rhyme" ("Chaucer's Dainty 'Dogerel'" 85). P.M. Kean's observation, "the very naivety of [Harry's] reactions—always to the content in the most superficial sense, never to the art of the tales—enhances the comedy" (91), is generally acute, but needs some qualification: the significance of Harry's obtuseness goes much deeper. Harry is a surface interpreter; he attacks the rhyme four times and Chaucer's speech once in the course of his diatribe, but never once mentions the story being told. In fact, so exclusively does he focus on surface that all he recognizes is the obviousness of the rhyme, without recognizing how that obviousness, in concert with the content he ignores, works to make "Sir Thopas" a delightful parody, the sort of pure joke he asked for when requesting a tale. Charles A. Owen, Jr. demonstrates that the rhymes of the tale contribute substantially to the parody, thus further demonstrating Harry's ineptness as an interpreter; not only is he incapable of understanding the content of the tale, he is not even a perceptive critic of its rhyme.

Harry's failure here is especially significant in relation to the different meanings possible within a single word, or tale. Harry is correct to note that the rhyme is bad, according to the conventions of serious poetry. He fails,

however, to recognize that the mirth of the tale depends on a doubleness of perception, a recognition of the failure of the "Thopas" as romance in order to recognize its success as parody. Exactly what makes the poem bad according to one set of criteria makes it good according to another. The rhyme is good precisely because it is so risible. Harry is unable to recognize that more than one meaning is possible and consequently fails to glean anything useful, even mirth, from the "Thopas." The tale looks like something other than what it is.

In response to Harry's uninformed objections, Geoffrey offers a different tale, the "Melibee." As prologue, he makes the long speech on which so much critical attention has focussed, a speech that addresses the problems of interpretation inherent in Harry's responses to Geoffrey, but which is usually approached in order to figure out what "treatise" refers to. Geoffrey here tells his audience what to expect from him: his tale is a familiar one, he asserts, albeit one told in different ways and by different tellers before:

It is a moral tale vertuous,
 Al be it told somtyme in sondry wyse
 Of sondry folk, as I shal yow devise.
 As thus: ye woot that every Evaungelist
 That telleth us the peyne of Jhesu Crist
 Ne seith nat alle thyng as his felawe dooth;
 But natheless hir sentence is al sooth,
 And alle acorden as in hire sentence,
 Al be ther in hir tellyng difference.
 For somme of hem seyn moore, and somme seyn lesse,
 Whan they his pitous passioun expresse —
 I meene of Marke, Mathew, Luc, and John —
 But doutelees hir sentence is al oon.
 Therefore, lordynges alle, I yow biseche,
 If that yow thynke I varie as in my speche,
 As thus, though that I telle somewhat moore
 Of proverbes than ye han herd bifoore
 Comprehended in this litel tretys heere,
 To enforce with th'effect of my mateere;
 And though I nat the same wordes seye
 As ye han herd, yet to yow alle I preye
 Blameth me nat; for, as in my sentence,
 Shul ye nowher fynden difference
 Fro the sentence of this tretys lite
 After the which this murye tale I write. (vii.940-64)

The subject addressed is the relationship between words and sense, between tale and meaning, and the passage asserts that different tellings can

nevertheless possess the same *sentence*. The passage has consequently been used to justify arguments for the existence of a single meaning beneath the multi-faceted surface of the *Canterbury Tales*, on the assumption that the "tretys lite" to which Chaucer refers ought to be seen as the tales as a whole, rather than as the source of the tale he tells. D.W. Robertson articulates the claim in *A Preface to Chaucer*:

[I]t is usually assumed that the "tretys" is the source of the "Melibee," but there is no reason to assume that Chaucer's audience would have been so familiar with earlier versions of that story that this long explanation was called for. Moreover, Chaucer's version differs so slightly from Renaud's that there would have been little point in assuring everyone that the *sentence* remained unchanged in Chaucer's translation. The "tretys" is obviously *The Canterbury Tales* itself. . . . Chaucer tells us that the "Melibee," although it differs verbally from the other tales the audience has heard from the "sondry folk" who proceed toward Canterbury, and contains more proverbs than any of the others, after which it is now placed, it does not differ from them in *sentence*. (368-69)

His contention is supported by Bernard F. Huppé, who avers that the reference to the "tretys" makes no sense if it is intended to refer to the *Livre de Melibee et Prudence* but "does make sound sense as explaining that the *Tale of Melibeus* is different in kind from the tales which have preceded it (has not the same words), but that in its sentence it is one with them. The sentence of the *Tale of Melibeus* is the sentence of the *Canterbury Tales*" (236).

Robertson and Huppé's interpretations rest on their understanding of what Chaucer intended as his *sentence*, but the basis of their conclusions in the assumptions that the "tretys" referred to is all of the *Canterbury Tales* and that Chaucer's focus is on the unity of scriptural *sentence* despite the variety of scriptural narrative has sidetracked much subsequent criticism on to the issue of what the "tretys" is. The contention that Chaucer's "tretys lite" consists of all the tales is easy to contest, and subsequent commentaries attempt to offer alternatives. Nevertheless, the common ground of such commentaries, presumably derived from Robertson and Huppé, is an attempt to come up with a reading that allows the "litel tretys" and the "tretys lite" to refer to some other single text, despite the fact that a more consistent reading, and one more in keeping with Chaucer's consistently ironic position on authorial commentary, would be that the two references have different referents. Some consideration of the various refutations of Robertson and Huppé is necessary to prove this point, however.

In his attempt to refute Robertson and Huppé's contention, John W. Clark merely asserts that "the narrator is not likening to the comparatively slight differences of the gospels the pronounced differences . . . between *Melibee* and most of the preceding tales, but differences between various versions of the Melibeus-and-Prudence story which, for all he knows, may exist and may be well known to some of his audience" (153); he concludes that Huppé gives a "forced interpretation because he is so firmly committed to the view that he shares with Mr. D.W. Robertson, Jr., about the universally moral intent and allegorical method of the *Canterbury Tales*" (154). Similarly, Glending Olson focusses his discussion on determining what the "tretys" is; he rejects the conventional reading that it refers to Renaud's version on the same grounds as does Robertson, that the differences between the two versions are too slight, but he also rejects the Robertsonian conclusion on the grounds that the link between the "Melibee" and the "tretys" is too specific to admit of the possibility of the "tretys" being the whole of the *Tales*. Instead, he offers his own conclusion, that the "tretys" refers to multiple versions of the Melibee story:

I suggest that the "litel tretys" . . . refers back to the "sondry wyse" in which the story of Melibee has been circulating. It may well refer specifically to a shorter version then known, but it does not have to; it could simply be a particularization of various briefer treatments, oral and/or written. (149-50)

Clark's conclusions and Olson's seem somewhat doubtful, since they suggest that the single "tretys" is the "sundry wise" (which must conceptually be plural) in which the tale has been told; although the tale might be called a "tretys" in any one of its versions, referring to various versions of it at once as a singular "tretys" makes little sense.

Thomas J. Farrell rejects the traditional reading, the Robertson-Huppé reading, and the Olson reading in favour of a reading of "tretys" as the "Melibee" itself by offering an emendment to Robinson's punctuation of lines 955-58:

Robinson's punctuation—a comma after "heere"—distinguishes the current "telling" from the "tretys," but in so doing raises the lexical problem of "this . . . heere" and the rhetorical issue that Chaucer is presenting a very literal translation of his source. . . . This rhetorical oddity, the strained reading of "this heere," and the distinction between the tale and the "tretys" can all be eliminated by . . . the enclosure of the whole explanatory phrase—"Comprehended in this litel tretys heere / To enforce with th' effect of my mateere"—in parenthetical dashes. (64)

He further suggests that in lines 963–64 “After” has as its object “sentence,” not “tretys,” so that the tale is written in accordance with an intended *sentence* rather than as a version of another “tretys”; hence, the “tretys lite” also refers to the “Melibee” (65–66). Farrell’s case for the ‘litel tretys’ is a good one, and makes sense, but, accepting the basic assumption made by the scholars he is refuting, he is determined to make the “tretys lite” have the same referent—the “Melibee” itself—and his case here, as he himself concedes, is less persuasive than his former. Farrell seems on the right track, but his desire for a single meaning for “tretys” trips him up, as it does the other commentators as well.³

Important as it may be to identify the treatise to which Chaucer refers, these analyses veer away from the central issues of the passage by focussing solely on that one aspect of it. The importance of the passage, its emphasis on the relationship between form and content, and between apparent and underlying meaning, too often remains unexplored. Not considering the “tretys” references in relation to the larger meaning of the passage in which they occur in fact impedes our understanding of what the “litel tretys” and the “tretys lite” mean. The repeated use of the word “tretys” is part of Chaucer’s larger agenda of challenging the easy association between word and *sentence*.

In his repeated juxtaposition in the prologue of the unity of *sentence* with the variation of words used to express it, Chaucer seems to be articulating an artistic position that by its own overemphasis of a point invites us to question, or at least think critically about, the assertion being made. Indeed, Chaucer’s “sondry folk” and his “tretys,” as they are used in the prologue, serve to help undercut his assertion of the unity of *sentence*. Geoffrey’s speech may be summarized as follows: the words of the gospels vary but they all agree in *sentence* even though their words vary; for though the words vary, the *sentence* is all one. Geoffrey then proceeds to assert that though the words he speaks in “this litel tretys heere” will differ in content, they will not differ in *sentence* from “this tretys lite.” In other words, the speech contains three assertions of varying form coupled with three assertions of unity of content. Such an elaborate protest is indeed, as Robertson asserts, more than seems necessary, unless we are to find the very elaborateness of the claim important itself. As elsewhere in statements concerning the artistic process, Chaucer ought not necessarily to be taken at face value.

In *Troilus and Criseyde*, for example, Chaucer claims to duplicate the words and *sentence*, “As writ myn auctour called Lollius” (1.394), and he

denies responsibility for any offence readers may take on the grounds of this duplication:

to every lovere I me excuse,
That of no sentement I this endite,
But out of Latyn in my tongue it write.
Wherfore I nyl have neither thank ne blame
Of al this werk, but prey yow mekely,
Disblameth me if any word be lame,
For as myn auctor seyde, so sey I. (II. 12-18)

Nowhere does he acknowledge his true source (Boccaccio) or the true language of his source (Italian), nor does he acknowledge the extensive changes he has in fact made to the version he claims to follow; he claims a unity of *sentence* with, and a slavish faithfulness to the words of, his source, but actually provides neither. And we ought not to forget that Chaucer, on the grounds of the authority of his source, includes material in *Troilus and Criseyde* about which his narrator expresses doubts, thus at least suggesting that claims of authoritative support do not necessarily guarantee authenticity. What Chaucer claims about the *sentence* of his work, then, and about the relationship of his texts to his sources, is not entirely reliable in the case of *Troilus and Criseyde*.

In the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, too, Chaucer plays with the idea of *sentence* and authorial intention. Here, the narrator is defended from the charge of offending Love by Alceste, who excuses his translations as innocent:

He may translate a thyng in no malyce,
But for he useth bokes for to make,
And taketh non hed of what matere he take,
Therefore he wrot the Rose and ek Criseyde
Of innocence, and nyste what he seyde. (G 341-45)

Chaucer has Alceste present this conventional defence against the charge he has had the god of Love bring against him, but since the numerous alterations Chaucer made to the *Filostrato* are manifest in his *Troilus and Criseyde* and the influence of *The Romance of the Rose* on his work is equally manifest in many ways, the argument that he translates mindlessly, merely reproducing whatever meaning lies in his source material with no awareness of the meaning of the words, is a patently ironic one. The *sentence* is assuredly not "all oon."

Chaucer again relies on the argument that he cannot be held responsible for merely repeating exactly what somebody else said in the prologue to the Miller's tale:

demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they better or werse,
Or elles falsen som of my mateere. (l. 3172-75)

He makes clear here that the tales he recounts represent exactly the words of his sources, the pilgrims, and that he is only their compiler, not their author; he is thus not responsible for any offensive or sinful content. As Alastair Minnis notes, "[t]he common principle involved is that a compiler is not responsible for his reader's understanding of any part of the *materia*, for any effect which the *materia* may have on him, and, indeed, for any error or sin into which the *materia* may lead a reader" (201-02). Chaucer repeatedly claims that he is not to blame, and he warns readers, "Avyseth yow . . . / And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game" (l. 3185-86), thus calling on readers to exercise their own critical faculties and to interpret aright.

The claims regarding "Sir Thopas" and the "Melibee" echo this abdication of responsibility for the tales. "Sir Thopas" is "a rym I lerned longe agoon" (VII.709), Geoffrey tells us; consequently, he is not to blame for its flaws. It is the best rhyme he knows, not one he has made himself. The "Melibee," too, is a tale "told somtyme in sondry wyse / Of sondry folk" (VII.341-42), so again is not original with its teller; indeed, the echo of the sundry folk of the pilgrimage subtly reinforces the idea of absolute faithfulness to a source, as the General Prologue promised would be accorded to the pilgrims. As Leonard Koff observes, "the protestations of ignorance from Chaucer's storyteller, faithful to the words of others . . . only encourage the reader to pursue the intent of words he hears from a less than omniscient source" (31); Chaucer adopts "the part of a well-meaning storyteller, a pilgrim among many pilgrims, whose limitations as narrator . . . necessarily shift the burden of interpreting stories from himself, because he simply cannot do so, to the members of his audience" (29-30).

All Chaucer's claims about his lack of involvement in the tales he tells pretend that he provides no art himself but instead simply acts as a conduit for *sentence*, repeating what someone else has said, rather than reworking and modifying material to make it his own—as Minnis notes, simply retaining the *sentence* of the original tales "is not enough for Chaucer the compiler, who is determined to preserve the proper words of each pilgrim

without 'feigning' anything or adding 'wordes newe'," as the General Prologue makes clear (202). As mentioned, in the General Prologue, Chaucer equates word for word faithfulness to one's source with truthfulness:

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
 He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
 Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
 Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
 Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
 Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe. (1.731-36; emphasis added)

This assertion is followed by a reference to Christ's speech in "hooly writ," where his words are repeated exactly with no blame accruing the tellers, even though Christ "spak hymself ful brode" (1.739). The conceit of exact fidelity to a source is repeated throughout Chaucer's work, but it consistently invites us to recognize the falseness of the claim.⁴

The prologue to the "Melibee" makes a similar claim, insisting on and indeed overemphasizing the congruity of meaning between versions of the tale; apparently the close correlation between Chaucer's tale and Renaud's tends to make us disregard this suspicious overemphasis of a claim we elsewhere recognize as misleading. Nevertheless, Chaucer's claim here bears examination, for in fact he has modified its terms. Whereas elsewhere, even within the *Canterbury Tales*, he insists on word for word faithfulness as essential to representation of truth, even using as an authority the example of Christ's words, here he insists on the opposite, using as an authority the example of the gospels that record Christ's words; Chaucer acknowledges divergences from his source while simultaneously claiming unity of *sentence* with it, and he does so in a claim that diverges from his own claims elsewhere within the *Canterbury Tales*. Not only, then, does the assertion call itself into question because it protests too much, it calls itself into question by articulating a position contrary to the one taken elsewhere, the terms of which recall those used here. The argument from scripture is conventional, as Minnis notes (167), but its context here suggests that Chaucer is undercutting rather than asserting the consonance of meaning among tales.

That Chaucer's claim is misleading seems to me evident from the prologue itself. One need not look to the "Melibee" to see whether it is true to the claim that precedes it. As has been noted by such commentators as Robertson and Huppé, Chaucer's assertion that his tale has been told "in sondry wyse / Of sondry folk" may recall the pilgrimage and tales "Of sondry folk" (1.25) that comprise the *Canterbury Tales*; this assertion, however, immediately precedes Chaucer's citation of the four gospels as an example of

what he means. The juxtaposition of the tales of the sundry Canterbury folk with scripture suggests not a consonance of meaning, as Robertson suggests, but rather undercuts the claim being made. If the reference to "sundry folk" recalls the pilgrims and their tales, readers are more likely to be surprised by this comparison to scripture than they are to be struck by a realization of the inner meaning of the tales. As Clark notes, the differences between the gospels are "comparatively slight" (153) when compared with the differences between the "Melibee" and the other tales—or simply between the other tales themselves, for that matter. Even without having yet read the "Melibee," the reader knows that the tales of sundry folk are sundry indeed, much more sundry than the gospels, and that they do not accord in *sentence* nearly so obviously as do the gospels, if they do so at all. If the parallel between the gospels and other tales is intended, as Robertson asserts, to suggest what the *sentence* of the tales is as well, then the reader is even less likely to see the connection. Convincing readers that the Miller's tale has the same *sentence* as the Monk's would be difficult enough, without the added assertion that both, and all the others, also have the same *sentence* as the gospels. We are more likely to question both the assertion of unity of meaning and the appropriateness of the scriptural example than we are to accept that the tales we have been reading all have the same *sentence*.

Furthermore, and to return to the usual focus of discussions of the prologue, Chaucer's references to the "litel tretys" suggest that the same words can mean different things, and not vice versa. As we have seen, commentators in search of the chimera of consistency often want to make the "litel tretys" (VII.957) and the "tretys lite" (VII.964), and sometimes the "litel tretys" of the retraction (X.1081), all refer to the same work, but doing so inevitably makes for a forced reading somewhere. Just as Chaucer can use the phrase "pitee renneth soone in gentil herte" (I.1761 and elsewhere) in different places to mean different things, just as the meaning of the word "look" can shift radically in only two lines, so can the term "tretys" be used more than once without necessarily referring to the same treatise each time. The "litel tretys" of the retraction might arguably refer to the *Canterbury Tales* rather than simply the Parson's tale, but to make either "tretys" of the prologue to the "Melibee" refer to the *Tales* requires forcing the meaning of the text.

Unforced readings of the prologue references suggest that the first reference, "this litel tretys heere" (957), with "heere" the key word, refers to the "Melibee" itself, which is about to be told to the pilgrims and is indeed "heere" to the reader, while the second reference, "this tretys lyte / After the

which this murye tale I write" (963-64), refers to the tale's source. Clear understanding of the passage does not require that the words mean the same thing both times; indeed, the most obvious understanding of the passage requires that they do not, in contrast both to the claims of the General Prologue that repeating the same words ensures repeating the same meaning, and to the claim the passage in which the terms occur makes, that different words can nevertheless mean the same thing — "litel tretys" and "tretys lite" are not in fact identical terms, though their occurrence in proximity to each other in a context stressing that slightly different expressions may mean the same thing invites us to miss the distinction. They vary in their words, *and* they vary in their meaning, in contrast to the reiterated claim being made in the passage in which they appear.

The repetition of words, terms, phrases, and so on might suggest links in meaning, but if we argue that the same words must always mean the same things, then the "sondry folk" referred to here must be the pilgrims, and logically they too must have all told the "Tale of Melibee," as the context of the reference here clearly suggests. To look at something and see how it looks must reveal the truth about it. One treatise is not necessarily identical to another, just as one group of sundry people is not identical to another; and if the *same* words do not always refer to the same thing, then how can we accept that *different* words nevertheless "alle acorden as in hire sentence" (VII.947), as Chaucer here claims? Chaucer's "litel tretys" and his "tretys lite" have different referents; the similarity of the two expressions serves to undercut the assertion of the prologue that the "Melibee" has the same *sentence* as its source.

The prologue, then, far from asserting any unity of meaning, either between the "Melibee" and its source or among the tale and the other tales recounted, suggests instead that, although connections may exist, no simple interpretative grid can be applied. A given word or group of words may carry the same meaning at different times, or they may not; similarly, the same meaning may be expressed by different words; the same words may even carry more than one meaning at once, as the tale's immediate suggestion of an allegorical framework suggests. By reiterating constantly the idea that readers will find the *sentence* of the tale unchanged, without articulating what that *sentence* is, and by undercutting through that reiteration any certainty that the interpretative relationship between words and meaning is a simple one, Chaucer ensures that readers will come to the tale with the subject of that interpretative relationship foremost in their minds.

After going on at such length about the unity of *sentence* between his tale and its source, Chaucer proceeds to bifurcate his own tale, thus undercutting even further any faith readers still might have in these claims. Restressing yet again that the reader will find no difference between the tale and the “tretys lyte / after the which this murye tale I write” (VII.963–64), Chaucer proceeds to exhort his audience to pay attention: “And therfore herkneþ what that I shal seye, / And lat me tellen al my tale, I preye” (VII.965–66). For one moment, Chaucer steps out of the Canterbury context to acknowledge the written nature of his tale, only to return immediately to that context to call for readers’ attention in terms of the fiction of an oral presentation; they are to listen to what is said, not read what is written, and not to interrupt, as Harry did the last tale. By juxtaposing the written and the oral, Chaucer creates the illusion of a doubleness for his own single tale, as a written and a spoken piece. He also forces readers (or listeners) to recognize the nature of the fiction just as they are about to begin the tale; in drawing attention to the written tale, Chaucer reminds listeners that the orality of his presentation is a fictional representation, and in drawing readers’ attention to the fiction of the pilgrimage he requires them to recognize that they are reading a fiction, despite the claims of the preceding lines. The audience is called on, then, to enter the tale aware of the deception of its context and consequently aware of its own deception. To proceed on this basis without questioning the tale’s claims would be unwise; Chaucer ensures that readers enter the tale alerted to the necessity of their own involvement in determining what words mean in their particular context. No comfortable, pre-existing *sentence* can be relied upon to explain the meaning of Chaucer’s tale.

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NOTES

¹ I wish to acknowledge the insightful commentaries on early drafts of this paper provided by Richard Firth Green and James Miller. I wish also to acknowledge research assistance provided by James Allard.

² Alan T. Gaylord offers a penetrating exploration of Harry’s literary limitations in “*Sentence* and *Solaas* in Fragment VII of the *Canterbury Tales*: Harry Bailly as Horseback Editor,” and several interpretations of the “Melibee” see it as part of Chaucer’s joke at the expense of Harry’s critical taste; see, for instance, Paul F. Baum, *Chaucer, A Critical Appreciation*, R.M. Lumiansky, *Of Sondry Folk*, or Trevor Whittock, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales*. Harry’s interpretive skills continue to be challenged by commentators such as Judith Ferster, who devotes considerable space in *Chaucer on Interpretation* to pointing out Harry’s limitations, Lee Patterson, or Seth Lerer, who encapsulates the common view of Harry in the observation, “he misreads nearly everything that comes his way” (197).

³ Farrell's is the most recent attempt of which I am aware to find a referent for "tretys." That such a recent study as Seth Lerer's, which deals in some depth with the problems of reference in the link, asserts of the *Melibee*, "This is a 'tretys' (957, 963), a document, contract, prose text" (193), makes clear that a single referent for "tretys" remains a given in discussions of Fragment VII.

⁴ There has, of course, been considerable critical discussion of the implications of Chaucer's statements about the authority underlying his texts. There is not room here to rehearse such analyses in detail. A good summary of the discussion of the "General Prologue" passage can be found in the notes to lines 725-42 in Malcolm Andrew's *The General Prologue Part One B: Explanatory Notes*, volume two of the Variorum edition of Chaucer's works.

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