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3 ☒ Audience

THE IDEA of art without audience would probably have seemed either contradictory or absurd to Chaucer, if in fact he could have entertained it at all. The word "audience," as he uses it, remains close to its etymological sense of "those within hearing," and his own poems almost always contain references to those who "hear" or "harken" or to whom he is "telling" his "tale."¹ Even in his later works, when listeners begin to yield to page turners who "see" his meaning written out rather than hear it read, these absent readers are as much the objects of admonition and address as if they were literally present. For, whether Chaucer seeks literal audience from listeners or figurative audience from an emerging reading public, the consequences of losing audience would be devastating; in a view that he repeats several times, the narrator who fails to hold the attention of those he is addressing might as well not speak or write at all. In the *Tale of Melibee*, for example, one of the "olde wise" gains audience or hearing but then loses the attention of the group he wishes to sway: "alle atones bigonne they to rise for to breken his tale, and beden hym ful ofte his wordes for to abregge." Chaucer as pilgrim-narrator observes that, "whan this wise man saugh that hym wanted audience, al shamefast he sette hym down agayn. / For Salomon seith: 'Ther as thou ne mayst have noon audience, enforce thee nat to speke'" (VII. 1037, 1042, 1045-46). A similar moment is about to occur on the pilgrimage itself. The Monk's "hevy" recital of tragedies is interrupted by the Knight, who is in turn seconded by Harry Bailly: "Whereas a man may have noon audience, / Noght helpeth it to tellen his sentence" (VII. 2801-2). The sentiment is of course a commonplace. The spurned counselor of *Melibee* and the narrator's accompanying observation are taken directly from the *Livre de Melibe* of Renaud de Louens,² and

Harry Bailly's remark has its source in Ecclesiasticus 32.6. Such insistence on the indispensability of attentive hearing to meaningful discourse is commonplace because it was one of the cornerstones of a rhetorical system, elaborated in various places including medieval treatises on preaching, in which Chaucer's work remains securely lodged.³

The notion that discourse assumes its full significance—perhaps its only significance—in interaction with an audience has certain corollaries, one of which is that artists should not simply hope for good audition but should shape their discourse with the needs and capacities of an intended audience in view. As Petrarch observes to Boccaccio, in a somewhat condescending explanation of his decision to countenance the free humor of the *Decameron*, the style and language of that work may well be suitable for those who are likely to read such tales. "It is important," he continues in a more general vein, "to know for whom we are writing, and a difference in the character of one's listeners justifies a difference in style."⁴ Chaucer's own allegiance to this precept is not only suggested by his poetic practice but is embodied in words presumably close to his own voice when he states his tactical decision to avoid complex argumentation and to reiterate hard points in explaining the astrolabe to little Lewis: "curious endityng and hard sentence is ful hevy at onys for such a child to lerne . . . me semith better to writen unto a child twyes a god sentence, than he forgeþe it onys" (45–49). A similar tactical decision is made, but announced less discreetly, by the Eagle when he lectures Geoffrey about the nature of sound: "so I can / Lewedly to a lewed man / Speke" (*HF*, 865–867). Such examples might be continued almost indefinitely. Their common denominator is simple: a successful artist adapts both content and style to the requirements and capacity of the intended audience.

Critics have not given much weight to the communicative dimension of Chaucer's work. The formalist or explicatory critics who have produced the largest volume of commentary on his work over the last three or four decades regard his oeuvre as autonomous, as a system of signs with no important referents outside itself. More recent criticism, written under the influence of Foucault and other French theorists, has been even more emphatically focused on the textual surface of the poetry and insistent on its status as discourse in a world of discourse, rather than as a form of utterance in a communicative situation.⁵

Other critics have followed the different lead of reception theory, abandoning the assumption that Chaucer's writing is self-contained and concerning themselves with its impact on auditors or readers,

whether historical or current. Still, even while acknowledging a communicative dimension to Chaucer's work, these critics tend to view his communication with his audience as proceeding in one direction only: from author to audience. However active the audience's participation in the ultimate determination of meaning, it is presumed to be on the far side of a communicative divide that precludes its influence on the form of the work. Jauss' initial formulation of the matter seems to promise an expanded acknowledgment of the audience's impact at all stages of the creative process, as when he argues that "in the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather an energy formative of history."⁶ But he goes on to restrict the audience's influence to works yet to be created. In his scheme the work enters history only after its production, when the audience's experience of the work issues in new norms and new transgressions; underestimated is the contribution of the artist's understanding of an audience to the very form of the work.⁷

The medieval sense that the requirements of an audience might influence literary creation deserves consideration within the framework of a theory that grants its possible legitimacy. Such a theory would assign to the audience, and to the author's sense of audience, a role not simply founded on passive consumption but on active participation, in determining textual meaning and in influencing the form of texts. One such body of theory exists in the writings of Bakhtin and his collaborator/surrogates Voloshinov and Medvedev. The importance of Voloshinov's sociolinguistics and Medvedev's recasting of formalism in a social context is that these works give full weight to the importance of communicative context for the *formation* of utterances. The utterance, according to Voloshinov, is a "two-sided act . . . the product of a reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee."⁸ As such, it is to be regarded as the sole property neither of the speaker who frames it nor of the listener who receives it, but as their common property. This is because the utterance is formed and received within the larger social milieu that embraces both speaker and listener and the more particular social relationship that exists between them; the organizing center of the utterance thus lies in the social circumstances and purposes of the discourse.

Literary works cannot, of course, be treated simply as utterances or speech acts.⁹ Medvedev and others have long recognized that the literary text is hardly a fresh or pure creation of a speaker and an addressee, but that it represents an artist's selection of an appropriate

genre from within a previously existing system of literary possibilities, a system through which any communicative intent is "refracted" in extremely subtle ways.¹⁰ While the literary work remains a highly specialized form of communication, a communication mediated through the spectrum of existing generic possibilities (for the writer) and generic expectations (for the audience), it remains a form of communication nonetheless. Medvedev's contribution to Voloshinov's theory of the utterance is to argue that the artistic work, like every other form of utterance, "is a communication, a message, and is completely inseparable from intercourse."¹¹ The text is not transmitted from the author to the reader, but is constructed between them as a kind of ideological bridge.¹²

Persuasive as this formulation of the audience's contribution may be in theory, however, its implications for the understanding of particular works of literature are less easily explored—particularly in a case like Chaucer's, where the composition of his actual audience remains a matter of uncertainty. The most plausible supposition about Chaucer's audience is that it consisted mainly of those gentlepersons in service who, together with a few London intellectuals, I have identified as Chaucer's social and literary circle. Owing to the perplexing nature of the available evidence and the peculiarities of the circumstances, however, this conclusion cannot be reached in a straight argumentative line. We must pause at every point to evaluate the character of the evidence itself and its relation to Chaucer's own circumstances.

Starting with the assumption that Chaucer addressed much of his poetry to a circle of social equals and near-equals, I wish to give fair weight to a number of countervailing considerations. We have, for one thing, already seen that the membership of this group was in constant flux and that it played a variable role in his life. To address such a group would have meant one thing in the 1360s and early 1370s, when he was very much a member of a court circle; a somewhat different thing in the period 1374–1385/86, when associations with members of the royal household were supplemented by involvements with London intellectuals; quite another thing after 1386, when political friction and Chaucer's removal from Westminster-London would have complicated communications among such a circle; and yet another thing after his return to a reconstituted circle in the fall of 1389.

Not only did this group shift in composition throughout Chaucer's career, but it vied with other groups for his attention. At times he addresses other groups altogether; a poem of clear-cut advice to

princes, "Lack of Steadfastness," is a case in point. This poem, together with works like *Boece* and *Melibee*, stands as an apt reminder that, although he rarely if ever wrote for patronage, Chaucer conformed in some ways to the career of "court poet." Although current consensus regards Chaucer as writing mainly for social equals,¹³ we would, as Elizabeth Salter reminds us, be wrong to deny him any audience in the inner circles of the court.¹⁴ At times, too, Chaucer undoubtedly worked concurrently on poems for more than one kind of audience within a single period of his career. The years after 1387, for example, probably involved some simultaneous work on a poem for the most broadly conceived of his audiences (the *Canterbury Tales*) and for one of his least socially diverse (the *Legend of Good Women*). Another competing audience, increasing in importance throughout Chaucer's career, is his audience in posterity. The *Canterbury Tales* numbers people like Bukton and Scogan among its hearers or readers, but they must share his attention along with a larger audience of imagined page turners, encountering Chaucer's work beyond his control.

I do not, in other words, mean to argue that Chaucer addressed one audience alone. In a sense, the thesis of this chapter might be served simply by attributing a communicative aspect to his poetry and tracing it through varied situations of address and varied groups of addressees. But the shifting body of social equals and near-equals I have identified as his core audience continues to stand in *some* relation—however tacit or indirect—to most of his major work. Without exaggerating this audience's role, I will nevertheless trace its continuing importance throughout Chaucer's career by concentrating on several instances from different stages of his career: the *Book of the Duchess*, a poem addressed to a social superior in which this core audience is evoked as a kind of "secondary" addressee; *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which this audience vies for narrative attention with a host of other implied and intended auditors; the *Canterbury Tales*, in which traces of this audience are practically lost between the vividly inscribed pilgrim audience on the one hand and an imagined future audience on the other; and a cluster of short poems (and works written under Chaucer's influence) in which the importance of an audience of friends and equals most vividly shows through.

The "Book of the Duchess" as Social Communication

The *Book of the Duchess* is securely grounded in communicative situations, both within the poem (as the grieving Knight in Black pours

out his sorrows and recollections to a narrator marked either for his obtuseness or his extreme tactfulness) and beyond the poem as well (in the presumed connection of the Black Knight with John of Gaunt and that of the narrator/dreamer with Chaucer himself¹⁵). I do not say "presumed connection" because Chaucer's referential motives are in any serious doubt. Nothing could be more reasonable than the supposition that the young courtier Chaucer between 1368 (the death of Blanche) and 1371 (Gaunt's marriage to Constance of Castile and his assumption of the title "King of Castile")¹⁶ should write a poem directed to a social superior who was in a position to do favors for him and his wife.¹⁷ Still, certain considerations argue against an exact correspondence between the Black Knight and Gaunt, the dreamer and Chaucer. Commentators wishing to firm up the connection have been forced to some ingenuity by the fact that the Black Knight's age is not right,¹⁸ and the dreamer seems less closely identified with Chaucer's own person than is a narrator such as Geoffrey of the *House of Fame*, who makes "rekenynges" by day (653) and has a weight problem. The relation of the narrator and the Black Knight within this poem is, then, less a replication of that between Chaucer and his eventual patron than a restatement of it, a counterpart refracted through the available literary tradition of the Old French love vision. With this modest distinction, I would argue for a very broad application of the poem to Chaucer's relations with John of Gaunt: that the dream is not only a consolation to John of Gaunt for his loss of Duchess Blanche, but an exploration of Chaucer's own existing and potential relations with Gaunt, in a form at once tactful and quietly self-promotional.

The debates about the dreamer's therapeutic strategy—whether he is obtuse or is giving the Knight a chance to vent his sorrows and replace them with fond memories—are essentially beside the point. The dreamer tells the Knight outright that "to make yow hool, / I wol do al my power" (553–554), and whatever its motivation and source, his persistent interrogation of the Knight certainly promotes a series of healing recollections. More interesting here is Chaucer's subtle delineation of the Knight's and the dreamer's respective social positions. At every point in their interaction, we are reminded of a certain amicable equity, on the one hand, and of a considerable social gulf on the other; of a polite egalitarianism in that both are gentlepersons and a decided limitation of egalitarianism in that one is an aristocrat and the other is not.

The dreamer is the most gentle of any of Chaucer's narrators. He tells us that, unable to sleep, he "bad oon reche me a book" (47), a

book not only bespoken from a servant in the voice of one accustomed to obedience, but also a book elected from among other gentle leisure-time activities such as "ches or tables" (51). Once within the dream, he conducts himself as one accustomed to participating in the hunt, addressing a huntsman with a confident, "'Say, felowe, who shal hunte here?'" (366). The Black Knight recognizes his station, warmly addressing him as "goode frend" (560). But the social divide between them is acknowledged in a number of ways. Having first greeted the Black Knight as best he can, the narrator waits patiently before him, head uncovered, presumably out of respect not only for his grief but for his superior social station ("y stood / Before hym and did of myn hood"—515–516). As Alfred David points out, the Black Knight addresses the dreamer with the informal "thee," while the dreamer retains the more formal "ye" or "yow" appropriate for a social superior.¹⁹ The Black Knight's civility is ultimately marked by social condescension; the dreamer's evident pleasure in the fact that the Black Knight addresses him without difficult verbal formulas or verbal artifice ("He made hyt nouthur towgh ne queynte," he gushes—531) measures both their proximity and their considerable social distance.

The actual relations of Chaucer and John of Gaunt would presumably have been marked by a similar mixture of equity and inequality. On the side of equity, we may note that Chaucer, as a newly appointed esquire of the king, was a gentleperson and hence a member along with Gaunt of the broadly conceived fellowship of gentlepersons and clerks that R. T. Lenaghan has described as embracing all the members of the household and court, from the civil servant most recently elevated to gentle status to the king himself.²⁰ Moreover, Chaucer was recently married to Philippa, either newly appointed or soon to be appointed as lady in the household of Gaunt's second wife Constance.²¹ Eventually, by virtue of Gaunt's third marriage to Philippa's sister, Chaucer would even become a kind of brother-in-law to Gaunt. Yet, on the side of inequality, we must remember that, during the period in which Chaucer's poem was probably composed, John of Gaunt was arguably the most powerful man in England. With his marriage to Blanche in 1359 and her inheritance of 1362, he gained title to the most extensive duchy in the country. With his marriage to Constance in 1371, he gained additional claim to the throne of Castile. With the illness of the Black Prince after 1367, he became the most authoritative of young Richard's uncles and in some ways overshadowed the aged and infirm ruler. Lenaghan reminds us that relations within the court were not only lateral but decidedly hier-

archical, and, within the society of gentlepersons constituting the court, Gaunt was situated near the very top and Chaucer near the very bottom.

We cannot know what Chaucer might or might not have felt himself able to say to John of Gaunt in real life, but the poem as a whole and particularly the dream provide a forum within which it can be shown that Chaucer is a fit interlocutor—at once a gentleperson worthy of intimacy and friendly exchange, and a person of discretion who can be trusted not to forget aspects of social difference (including the ultimate separation of the Knight and the dreamer into their respective worlds, as “this kyng” [1314] returns to his castle and the dreamer to his bed). Chaucer found his format in the love visions of Machaut and Froissart, and he learned much from them. To our relief, he also manages to avoid the pitfalls of bathetic excess, as in Machaut’s “Dit de la Fonteinne Amoureuse,” in which the patron falls asleep with his head in the narrator’s lap and the two experience temporary obliteration of social difference by dreaming the same dream.²² As in Machaut’s *Dit*, however, the poem itself—and especially the dream within the poem—provide an imagined arena where some ordinary restraints on the interaction between socially unequal parties may be set aside.

While modeling Chaucer’s relation with John of Gaunt in its dream, the *Book of the Duchess* is nevertheless simultaneously addressed to a larger group that the narrator describes collectively as “ye” or “yow.” Not only are these people presumed to be auditors of an oral narration rather than readers of a text (“Ryght thus as I have told hyt yow”—271), but certain shared understandings are taken for granted (“And wel ye woot”—16) and certain allusions presuming special knowledge of Chaucer’s personal state are addressed to them (“there is phisicien but oon / That may me hele”—39–40). Our sense of this enlarged but familiar audience is sharpest in the frame of the poem, as opposed to the dream with its focus on the narrowed situation of address, and this broadened situation of address permits poetry of correspondingly greater range and tonal variation. Present in the framing narrative of Seys and Alcyone, for example, are shifts in perspective and tone missing in the conscientious and respectful dialogue of the dream, including alternation between serious attention to Alcyone’s loss and the buffoonery of the messenger’s approach to Morpheus, between the implied consolation for those who know the ending of the Ovidian tale and the narrator’s own sly refusal to tell it, between the narrator’s presumed reason for choosing a tale of bereavement and his trumped-up

suggestion that he has recounted Alcyone’s plight because it gave him the idea of praying to Morpheus for sleep.

Chaucer’s address to this larger audience also suggests that its membership is encouraging to a new dimensionality in subject matter and tone. Although the composition of this audience cannot securely be known, the confidence with which Chaucer approaches it would argue for relatively greater social equality than that existing between Chaucer and John of Gaunt. In the late 1360s and early 1370s, such an audience could most likely be found among fellow knights and esquires of the household and ladies of equivalent station—persons like Richard Stury, for example, listed with Chaucer in 1368 along with other members of the household of Edward III,²³ someone well situated to appreciate his transformations of poems by Machaut and Froissart.²⁴ Other evidence of the composition of this enlarged public, with its seemingly expanded capacity for tonal variation, will be pursued in the discussion of Chaucer’s subsequent poems. We can certainly say for now that the increased expansiveness in content and tone that marks Chaucer’s address to this larger audience suggests his early recognition that alternative situations of address can open alternative narrative and stylistic possibilities.

The Audience of “Troilus and Criseyde”

Troilus and Criseyde exemplifies a dazzling array of situations of address. Within this one poem we encounter a plethora of temporary (and presumably fictional) addressees, briefly evoked in order to provide an orientation for particular perspectives that Chaucer wishes to employ in the process of his narration; references to real listeners or readers who provide the ideal audience-within-an audience for particular aspects of the poem; and an implied audience of unusual acuity and sophistication.

Chaucer’s use of fictional audiences within his poem may be seen as the complement of his flexible use of his own narrative position. We have all benefited from E. T. Donaldson’s discussion of Chaucer’s manipulation of the narrative voice within the poem,²⁵ and his formulation has been extended by Derek Brewer, who has argued for a multiplicity of vague narrators whose voices “surge up and fall away” within the boundaries of Chaucer’s text.²⁶ These multiple narrators find their counterparts in Chaucer’s tactical evocation of appropriate addressees to hear them out. These fictional addressees are not, by the way, simple extensions of the narrator’s outlook; integral as they

are to an utterance, they may fulfill their role by virtue of their very difference from the narrator's speaking voice. Dwelling on his own "unliklynesse" (I.16) in the opening lines of the poem, the narrator imagines himself speaking to an audience composed of "loveres" (I.22) who rarely fail and who are unacquainted with pain or woe. Several hundred lines later we hear a new narrative voice, as the speaker adopts tones of lofty disdain to comment on the deserved subjugation of those who scorn love. His imagined audience also shifts, to embrace a cohort of these proud and scornful persons:

Forthy ensample taketh of this man,
Ye wise, proude, and worthi folkes alle. (I.232-233)

Another voice, issuing from a more inclusive view of human experience, belongs to the historically conscious narrator of book II, who understands that human behavior remains essentially the same, despite changes in customs and speech ("and yet thei . . . / spedde as wel in love as men now do"—II.25-26). The imagined auditors of these remarks are thought essentially to agree with him, but possibly to include the odd skeptic, who "wondreth" at Troilus' customs (II.34). The presence of at least a few people who nurse small reservations is suggested in the next book, where the narrator pauses to explain his omission of some details of Troilus' and Criseyde's looks, conversation, and voluminous correspondence; while assuming that most members of his audience understand his practice, he says that "som man" may expect a more detailed recounting (III.491). Any suggestion that the audience might harbor skeptics is, however, abandoned as the time for consummation of Troilus' and Criseyde's love draws near. The narrator now associates himself and all of his audience with Pandarus' preparations: "Us lakketh nought but that we witen wolde / A certeyn houre, in which she comen sholde" (III.531-532). For the remainder of the book, the zealous narrator and his audience are one.

Corresponding with the narrator's own uneven and uneasy disengagement from the substance of his narration in books IV and V are several kinds of estrangement of the presumed audience from the plight of the lovers. The immediate, aural audience presupposed in the opening books (as in I.52, 154) is replaced by a more remote "redere" (V.270), with the aural audience not to reappear until late in the poem (V.629, 637). When this audience does reappear, it is—needless to say—no longer an audience of lovers, successful or otherwise. Instead we encounter different auditors chosen to complement the different kinds of agitation that have overcome the narrator of

the poem. We encounter, for example, a group consisting of "every lady bright of hewe, / And every gentil womman" (V.1772-73) that the narrator nervously assumes to be inclined toward blame for his treatment of Criseyde. He gives these ladies no satisfactory answer—or rather too many answers, including an explanation that he was dealing with received subject matter, a promise to do penance by writing something like his eventual *Legend of Good Women*, a somewhat fishy attack on false men, and an antic claim that only he among all men is to be trusted ("Beth war of men, and herkneth what I seye"—V.1785).

Narrative voices and tones of voice multiply in the closing stanzas of the poem, but (as Donaldson has pointed out) the most decisive shift is when the narrator takes Troilus' own advice to eschew "The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste" (V.1824) and launches into his own fervent rejection of the world. Summoned to hear this rejection is an audience well suited to profit by it, composed of "yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she" (V.1835). Yet these young folks do not endure for long. Chaucer shifts to a more general address in his bemused assault on rascally pagan gods and (apparently) on those poetic sources that got him into this trouble in the first place (V.1849-55). Finally, ending in utmost seriousness with a prayer for mercy, Chaucer addresses God, establishing his utterance as, for once, wholly fervent by directing it toward an auditor who subsumes all previous audiences and surpasses them in ability and inclination to perceive devotional intent ("And to the Lord right thus I speke"—V.1862-69).

Also addressed in the poem's closing stanzas are two persons drawn from Chaucer's circle of actual acquaintance, "moral Gower" and "philosophical Strode," whom he urges on the basis of their "benignities and zeles goode" to correct his book as need be (V.1856-59). Coming as they do within a succession of fictional and hypothetical addressees, these two historical persons plainly represent a special opportunity for added insight into the composition of Chaucer's actual audience, and this opportunity will be pursued below. For now, though, they may be seen as a partial vindication of Walter Ong's observation that "the writer's audience is always a fiction,"²⁷ since they are used for the same purpose as Chaucer's more obviously fictional addressees, that of orienting address to an audience able to comprehend its intended meaning.

However variously critics might apply Chaucer's concluding stanzas to the interpretation of the poem as a whole, we can hardly disagree that he has chosen to end with strong emphasis on the insta-

bility and false felicity of earthly attachments. "Moral Gower" clearly belongs to a segment of Chaucer's audience well suited to hear and respond to this point of view. Gower is, as John Fisher has shown us, the preeminent moral poet of Chaucer's day, in the sense in which Chaucer would have used the word, to describe an interest in the principles of human conduct.²⁸ And, as Fisher also reminds us, Gower brooks no illusions about the durability of earthly love. The opening lines of his earlier *Mirour* remind us that worldly delights pass like a dream ("Car s'un soul homme avoir porroit / Quanq'en son coer souhaideroit / Du siecle . . . / Trestout come songe passeroit") and that secular love must finally pass to nothingness ("l'amour seculer / En nient au fin doit retorner").²⁹ When Gower himself will write of Troilus in his *Confessio*, we will find him "hevy chiered" in the parade of lovers viewed by the aged Amans as he takes leave of earthly love at the end of his poem, for he knows that he has been supplanted and that his love has failed (VIII. 2531-35).³⁰ Gower may or may not have been thinking of Chaucer's poem here; certainly his own previously written reflections on love would have disposed him to such a view. We are reminded of Gower's persistent skepticism about earthly love when his Amans bids his final farewell to such love, choosing—as in Chaucer's final stanza—the love of God:

So that above in thilke place
Wher resteth love and alle pes,
Oure joie mai ben endeles. (VIII. 3170-72)

The identification of Gower as ideal auditor confirms a moral emphasis within Chaucer's concluding stanzas. Assuming, provisionally, that Strode the Oxford philosopher and fellow of Merton College (before 1360) and Strode the London lawyer and factionalist (who died in 1387) are one,³¹ the commendation of the poem to "philosophical Strode" would seem to assert the importance of a philosophical dimension as well. The most evident moment of overt philosophizing within the poem occurs in Troilus' meditation on necessity (especially IV. 953-1085).³² In these lines Troilus embraces Boethius' arguments against human freedom (based on *Boece*, v. 2-3), but omits Lady Philosophy's more encouraging rejoinder (*Boece*, v. 4-6). The point of this passage would seem to reside less in what Troilus reasons out—that deeds are subject to God's prescience—than in what he mistakenly omits—that God's prescience is conditional and does not constrain choice. Seen in this way, Troilus' speech seems to require some knowledge of Boethius or some general philosophical understanding

for correct interpretation. Even knowing Boethius, Thomas Usk gets the passage wrong, citing it as a basis for his declaration that Chaucer is "the noble philosophical poete in Englissh" (III.iv), but erroneously applauding it for resolving a question it does not address, that of God's apparent sufferance of evil in the world. "Philosophical Strode" would, however, have been well equipped to read the passage correctly. In fact he contended with Wyclif on this very question of free will. While his own critiques of Wyclif's early work are lost, two surviving responses by Wyclif suggest that Strode protested against Wyclif's necessitarianism.³³ Strode's position on free will fitted him well to penetrate the weakness of Troilus' halfway argument, a weakness attributable to Troilus (rather than to Chaucer³⁴) and to his attempted self-exoneration for those same worldly attachments condemned in the last stanzas of the poem.³⁵

In Gower and Strode, Chaucer invokes what might be considered a special "interpretive community" within the larger community comprised by his whole contemporary audience. The two are a particular subset of his larger audience, designated to reinforce or complete a meaning that Chaucer wishes his passage to have. Here, concerned to advance a moral/philosophical perspective from which Troilus is seen as free to choose divine love over earthly pleasure, Chaucer finds "audience" by directing his words to those members of his circle most likely to understand his words as he wants them understood.³⁶

As in the case of the *Book of the Duchess*, however, this poem clearly has an even larger circle of addressees than those persons fictional or actual who are named or directly addressed within the poem. Auditors with a still larger range of response are constantly presupposed or implied. Both speaker and addressees are, for example, represented to us as polished courtiers, in the narrator's nicely turned compliment to Queen Anne ("Right as oure firste lettre is now an A"—I. 171).³⁷ At other times the narrator shares with his audience observations about love suggesting that both he and they are more mature and knowledgeable than either the "clerc" of love (III. 41) who narrates parts of the story or the audience of "lovers" that harkens to him. "Blissed be Love, that kan thus folk converte!" (I. 308) exclaims the narrator over Criseyde's first effect on Troilus—remaining within the speaker's credulous voice, but also offering his audience something of the bemusement with which the mature Theseus comments on the plight of Palamon and Arcite ("How myghty and how greet a lord is he!"—I. 1786). Sometimes, in fact, the narrator's word choice and tone suggest a bemusement that he and his audience share. This tone

is fleeting early in the poem ("God leve hym werken as he kan devyse," the narrator observes as Troilus rehearses his speech while awaiting Criseyde at Deiphebus' house—III. 56). As the poem progresses, and as attitudes toward Troilus' love multiply, we encounter moments of outright flippancy ("But Troilus, thow maist now, est or west, / Pipe in an ivy lef, if that the lest!"—V. 1432–33). Other remarks presuppose a speaker who is slyly flirtatious, if not a downright rake, and an audience that is knowing in this regard. Quite different from the tone of modest credulousness adopted by the narrator of the opening books is this sly innuendo, unmistakably underscored in its closing line:

To God hope I, she hath now kaught a thorn,
She shal nat pulle it out this nexte wyke.
God sende mo swich thornes on to pike! (II. 1272–74)

We are certainly dealing with a sexually aware narrator who, at the moment Criseyde "heals" Troilus' pain with her love, twits the women in his audience and no doubt overjoys the men, with the suggestion that "take every womman heede / To werken thus, if it comth to the neede" (III. 1224–25).

Implied by such narrative sallies is the presence of an audience broader in its perspective and more sophisticated in its responses than are any of the particular fictional audiences addressed within the poem. One constantly has the sense of an audience addressed in temporarily narrowed ways, but actually possessed of a more inclusive point of view. Some narrative observations imply the audience's entire sympathy with Troilus' predicament ("lith Troilus . . . / Ibounden in the blake bark of care"—IV. 228–229), while others, in nearly adjacent passages, imply that his sorrows might be overblown or partially self-inflicted:

A thousand sikes, hotter than the gleede,
Out of his brest ech after other wente,
Medled with pleyntes new, his wo to feede. (IV. 337–339)

Even at the end of the poem, important passages about "feynede loves" (V. 1848) are closely juxtaposed with passages so hectic in tone as practically to require a sophisticated audience ("Lo here, of payens corsed olde rites"—V. 1849).

Among the different sorts of sophistication evidently expected of his audience is an implied literary "horizon" of some refinement. Within the poem itself, Chaucer gives us a model of the integration of

literature into a certain kind of gentle life. Criseyde, hearing a romance of Thebes, summarizes its plot to the visiting Pandarus, up to the disappearance of the bishop Amphiorax through the ground into hell (II. 100–105). Pandarus assures her that he knows the story too. His motives are colored by his objective of getting Criseyde to set aside her book, but we have no reason to doubt the truth of his claim. The work in question appears to be a "romaunce" similar in nature to the French *Roman de Thèbes*, as would befit persons with ties to the royal family, slightly more elevated in social position than those at the heart of Chaucer's own audience. Yet the notion of literary pleasure, and knowledge, in integration with the details of daily living may surely be permitted to stand as an emblem of Chaucer's own expectation.

Of course Chaucer stops short of any expectation that his hearers are *littérateurs* or mythographers, choosing a reasonable middle course in what he expects them to know. Difficult paganisms are glossed, as in "Thesiphone . . . thow goddesse of torment" (I. 6–8), or "Herynes, Nyghtes doughtren thre" (IV. 22). So that the audience will not miss the irony of Criseyde's exchange for Antenor, his ultimate betrayal is carefully explained ("For he was after traitour to the town / Of Troye"—IV. 204–205). On the other hand, Chaucer feels no need to gloss the first appearance of major figures like Hector (I. 110), and I should be very surprised if his audience were not included in the humor of his jesting reference to the supposed Lollius (I. 394). This audience certainly has a sufficiently developed sense of literary tradition to permit Chaucer to frame even more elaborate jests upon the literary afterlife of his characters. Like characters in postmodern fictions, the protagonists of *Troilus* seem constantly on the brink of discovery that they are characters in a book. Pandarus, ignorant of the fact that his reputation has preceded him, speculates that if his intrigues were known, "al the world upon it wolde crie" (III. 277). Troilus, in his extremity, sees his troubles in narrative form (as a "proces"—V. 583) and wonders if his plight might not have literary potential ("Men myght a book make of it, lik a storie"—V. 585).

Appreciative of ironic interplay between a character's life in tradition and particular realization in a story, this audience is no less capable of recognizing the different generic patterns within which a narrative may be cast. For much of the challenge and narrative excitement of *Troilus* is Chaucer's play on his audience's previous expectations. Telling us from the outset that his poem will end with Troilus "out of joie" (I. 4)—that is, in a form that his audience would recognize as tragic and that he finally does label "tragedye" (V. 1786)—Chaucer

sets about to deflect his audience's attention from this announced pattern by signaling all sorts of other generic possibilities. Troilus, for example, falls in love like Amans in the *Roman de la Rose* and the heroes of several dozen chivalric romances, wounded through the eye into the heart: "he felte dyen, / Right with hire look, the spirit in his herte" (I.306-307). No sooner, though, does the audience begin to accept its entry into the world of amorous romance than it is confronted by other, conflicting characteristics: as in a history, sentiment is to be eschewed and sources are to be weighed (II.13-14); room is to be made for philosophical "argument" (IV.956); songs and epistles are embedded throughout; in the end, the audience is sermonized. This constant clash of codes within the larger framework of a Christian tragedy would be rich in literary excitement for an audience aware of the genres and generic features in question, and very confusing for an audience ignorant of them. Evidence of early reception suggests that Chaucer was probably regarded as a somewhat difficult poet,³⁸ but not so difficult that he would depend heavily upon systems of literary expectation beyond the recognition of his audience.

The room is beginning to fill up with audiences—fictional, actual, and implied. Fictional audiences of lovers, scoffers, historians, those unsophisticated in history, ladies and gentlewomen, and young people on the brink of love jostle with actual (though exemplary) addressees in Gower and Strode, and also with implied audiences of courtiers, mature people able to keep love in perspective, rakes, embarrassed or vexed women, flirts, devout moralists whose devotion is nevertheless constrained within human limits . . . and closer analysis of the poem at the level of individual lines would enable us to extend this list. We might now be gaining enough sense of these audiences to frame a crucial question: taken together, do these addressees somehow add up to Chaucer's "real audience"? Not quite. Some of these fictional and implied audiences must be seen as ephemera, in the sense that they exist as temporary ways of orienting discourse or even as products of the discourse itself. We might, for example, want to assign such figmentary status to the "man" (III.491) who expects every word of every letter exchanged between Troilus and Criseyde to be reported verbatim (permitting Chaucer, in return, to explain his principle of selectivity). In many cases, though, we can reasonably assume that fictional and implied audiences are employed to facilitate communication between Chaucer and his real audience, and that their attitudes stand in some tactical or referential relation to attitudes characteristic of the audience of the poem. Proceeding on this assumption, we

might seek cautiously to locate these fictional and implied audiences within a historical frame by connecting them to the ultimate audience with which they seem designed to provide communication.

Chaucer's poem presupposes an audience capable of embracing a mixture of styles and tones of voice and of managing abrupt transitions between them. It presupposes an audience able both to inhabit and to stand outside a particular point of view. (It seems able to view ardent secular love both as admirable and as rather foolish; to believe that only divine love as embodied in God's sacrifice is stable and trustworthy, but that there are many paths to Rome and we have much to learn from pre- or non-Christian attempts at understanding.) It presupposes an audience that can simultaneously entertain different perspectives and tolerate a high degree of contradiction between them. (Privy at the outset to the knowledge that Troilus' love will fail, the audience is then treated as a group of accomplished lovers who hope for his success; urged to join Troilus in rejecting the world, it is tantalized by fleeting reminders of the world Troilus has lost.³⁹) It presupposes an audience of some literary sophistication, which shares literary expectations formed not only by the experience of the work at hand but also by acquaintance with other major texts and genres of antiquity and the newly flourishing vernaculars.

God save such an audience! It deserves our admiration.⁴⁰ Yet we have progressed very little in connecting the traits of this audience with its actual membership. If we pause, however, to reflect on the fact that the poem was completed in or about 1385,⁴¹ we will gain some important clues into the rich sense of audience conveyed by the poem. The period culminating in 1385 was not only the period of greatest stability in Chaucer's life, it was the period in which he would have come closer than ever again in his career to participation in a stable social and literary circle. Still in close touch with the court, he enjoyed continuing contact with such persons as Stury (the literary courtier who befriended Froissart), Clifford (whom we recall as Chaucer's intermediary with Deschamps), and Clanvowe (author both of a Chaucerian love vision and a devotional treatise in prose). Now resident in London, he enjoyed added scope for acquaintance with such citified intellectuals as Gower and Strode. There he could hardly avoid crossing paths with such other interesting persons as the shifty politician and author Thomas Usk, who mentions *Troilus* in his *Testament of Love*.⁴² Common sense supports the likelihood that this Westminster-London audience of gentlepersons and clerks was at the heart of Chaucer's public. For such an audience—with its verifiable

acquaintance with literary tradition, its inclusion of several fellow poets, and its simultaneous interest in the secular and the divine—has much in common with the audience that is fictionalized, implied, and (in the cases of Gower and Strode) directly cited within Chaucer's *Troilus*.

The Pilgrims as Fictionalized Response

If implication and direct invocation suggest for *Troilus* an audience drawn from a circle congruent with Chaucer's own, our sense of the importance of such an audience will gain little added support from the *Canterbury Tales*. Despite the many signs of its provisional and unfinished nature, that work nevertheless possesses a degree of creative autonomy that, as one commentator has properly concluded, "makes it almost impossible to talk about the 'historical' audience of the *Canterbury Tales* on the basis of internal evidence."⁴³ An element of this autonomy is Chaucer's remarkably complete effacement of evidence bearing on contemporary reception. This effacement is facilitated by the development of an internal communication system that permits Chaucer to orient narrative within fully realized conditions of telling and hearing without leaving the boundaries of his work. His masterwork thus teems with fictional pilgrim tellers and hearers, and contains no references at all to a real audience.

Chaucer's emphasis on the responses of a fictional pilgrim audience seems to leave little space for history, in the form of contemporary engagement with an actual public. Yet history has its own trick of covertly reentering discourse precisely at its point of exclusion, sometimes even in and around our understanding of the act of exclusion. In the case of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's own obliteration of the evidence of actual reception can itself be historicized in several different and revealing ways. His effacement of history can, in the first place, be seen as historically conditioned, in its relation to known features of his own career. And his creation of a fictional audience can, in the second place, be seen as an enabling device, a vehicle for communication with a contemporary audience that, while unrepresented, remains important to him.

Chaucer's interest in inscribed situations of telling and hearing is apparent at every stage of his career, but never so vividly as in the realization of his *compaignye* of pilgrim-narrators. Although this elaborate fictionalization of narration and response occurs in a plainly aesthetic register, it may still have been encouraged by developments in

his own career in the years after 1386. As we have seen, the period between 1386 and 1389 posed substantial obstacles to Chaucer's continuing interaction with members of his circle. In 1366–1374, when he composed the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer had been a member of the royal household, with opportunities for intermittent contact with powerful figures like Gaunt and for more regular contact with people like Clifford, Vache, and Stury. In the period 1374–1385/86, culminating in the completion of *Troilus and Criseyde*, he was settled in London with opportunities for continued communication with the court. Several events, including his service at Parliament and his testimony in Scrope-Grosvenor, would have had him in London throughout 1386. But, after the relinquishment of his Aldgate house and full withdrawal to Kent in 1386, many of his associations must have been interrupted. Between fall 1386 and fall 1389, he seems to have lived in virtual estrangement from both court and city. The *Canterbury Tales* were, in short, launched in a situation that permitted much less direct address to an intimate circle than the one to which he had been accustomed. Given Chaucer's tendency to conceive his work as communication, we may understand his deliberate enhancement of a fictional situation of telling and reception as a way of "staging" his work during a precarious time, in the absence of a stable communicative situation.

The same point may be made of Chaucer's heightened tendency to look beyond the present, to an audience of distant and future readers. The idea of such a readership emerged as a matter of mingled aspiration and unease at the end of *Troilus*, where he aspired to launch his book into a timeless realm of "alle poesye" but unsettled himself by reflecting on the interpretative disasters (including not only problems of transmission but outright failures of understanding that might attend circulation of his work in written form). Such a remote readership, rather than the more familiar circle implied in the *Book of the Duchess* or *Troilus*, now seems to be addressed in the "yow" of the General Prologue and in the *Parson's Tale* and the Retraction. Those so addressed are, we learn on several occasions, a reading audience, which will draw its conclusions in private, away from any possibility of Chaucer's intervention. To such readers, encountering his poetry through the medium of a bound manuscript, he refers in the Prologue to the *Miller's Tale*:

. . . whoso list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef and chese another tale. (l. 3176–77)

His relative remoteness from this audience is registered in the absence of familiar banter (in the vein of his "Beth war of men" in *Troilus*, v. 1785). His admonitions to this audience have a tone of generality and seem—if anything—to convey a certain unease about how his poetry might be received. Lines that might be confidently read as jocular in address to a present public seem somewhat more defensive or even apologetic in a written text:

But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
That ye n'arete it nat my vileynye,
Thogh that I pleynly speke in this mateere. (l. 725–727)

This same observation may be made of the Retraction, in which he seems at pains to clarify his "entente" (x. 1083) to an audience of whose understanding he does not seem completely certain.

Other references to audience inside the *Tales* add little to our understanding of their contemporary reception. Once we move from the frame of the *Canterbury Tales* to the body of the work, references to any audience external to the work itself come to an end. A disclaimer addressed to "every gentil wight" at the threshold of the *Miller's Tale* and a vagrant reference to "yow that reden" in the Prologue to the *Second Nun's Tale* (viii. 78) do little to enstate the rich sense of context we have previously observed, and most other alleged references to groups outside the poem—such as to those "lordes" whom the Nun's Priest warns against flattery (vii. 3325) or the "chanons" whom the Canon's Yeoman takes time to reassure (viii. 992)—are simply instances of apostrophe, without a point of contact in groups of real auditors.⁴⁴ Although discourse within the *Tales* retains a firm audience orientation, that orientation is now located inside the poem, and the "lordynges," "wise wyves," "ladyes," "sires," "lordes," and "goode men" addressed in individual Canterbury narratives are imagined to exist within the pilgrim company rather than outside it. By no means wholly to be explained as a mere function of Chaucer's personal circumstances, this remarkably self-contained quality, this nearly complete absence of external reference, may be connected with the relative social isolation in which the *Tales* were begun.

The estrangement of 1386–1389 was soon moderated by Chaucer's appointment as Clerk of Works in the fall of 1389 and his return to something like a literary circle—an altered and diminished circle, to be sure, but one nevertheless subject to reconstitution and one he probably had a hand in reconstituting. Strode had died in 1387. Chaucer seems not to have resumed active contact with Gower and

Beauchamp after the events of 1386. Aspirant-to-membership Thomas Usk had died, along with others, in 1388. Clanvowe and Nevill were on the scene but left in 1391. On the other hand, Chaucer's poem to Vache (possibly 1386–1389) and his epistles to Scogan and Bukton (in the 1390s) suggest both his continuing commerce with old friends and his ability to recruit to his literary audience new, younger persons. Some of these new interactions probably involved the reading or loan of portions of the *Canterbury Tales*. Partly as a result of his own exertions, Chaucer would appear once again to have found some measure of "audience."

The question I wish to pose now concerns the relationship of Chaucer's inscribed audience of Canterbury pilgrims to the actual audience I am suggesting he reconstructed as he wrote the *Canterbury Tales*. The one observation to be made with certainty is that this relation is *not* the one we might spontaneously suppose: one in which the pilgrim audience might be taken as a representation, or at least a refracted version, of Chaucer's contemporary audience. We may, for example, note from the outset that Chaucer's pilgrims represent neither an accurate cross-section of late fourteenth-century English society nor an accurate cross-section of his possible audience. Compared with fourteenth-century society as a whole, the Canterbury pilgrimage is deficient in representing the two ends of the social scale, as comprised by those landholding aristocrats and knights who monopolized the attention of conservative theorists like Bracton and by the multitudes of free and unfree who worked the land. The landholders, while numbering less than 1 percent of the populace, certainly loomed large in people's awareness. Yet, on the pilgrimage, they are represented by a single knight, and not necessarily a landholding knight at that. Also represented by a single individual are the 90–95 percent of the populace who earned a livelihood by various forms of free and bonded agricultural labor.

Present in vast disproportion are people from the "middle strata." Yet, although the pilgrims come from what Brinton sees as a fairly spacious midsection of the body politic, they come from different parts of that section than those probably occupied by Chaucer's actual audience; not from the right hand where the knights are located, but from the left hand ("mercatores et fideles mechanici") and the heart ("ciues et burgenses"). In the terms of the Statute of Apparel, this band of pilgrims slights the various categories of gentlepersons, esquires, and knights, instead inclining heavily toward those nongentle persons of the middle strata described as "Marchantx, Citeins &

Burgeis, Artificers, gentz de Mestere." The pilgrims' tilt away from Chaucer's circle is most vividly revealed in the four categories of the 1379 poll tax, the first of which consists entirely of *gentils* down through the rank of esquires "en service" and the other three of which include sergeants at law, attorneys, aldermen, merchants, sergeants, franklins, pardoners, summoners, and others. Chaucer's actual audience would have been concentrated largely in the first of these four groups; the pilgrims are drawn mainly from social and occupational groupings described in the other three.⁴⁵

Of course, as Jill Mann has definitively shown, Chaucer was obliged like any other artist to work through existing models of representation.⁴⁶ Even so, he shows little impulse to put forward his pilgrims as persuasive representations either of his society as a whole or of his particular social group. Their composition is determined less by motives of historical or social representation than by a more immediate and more literary imperative, which is to create a socially diverse group drawn from the most dynamic fourteenth-century social strata, whose social and vocational conflicts will provide good possibilities for staging a diverse collection of tales.

The historicity of the pilgrim audience lies less in the fidelity of its social representations than in its effectiveness as a constitutive strategy enabling Chaucer to produce a new kind of tale collection, some of whose aesthetic features themselves bear an historical charge. The "newness" of Chaucer's collection is expressed in its unusual generic and stylistic diversity, a diversity that departs emphatically from the precedent of previous medieval collections.⁴⁷ What Chaucer appears to have grasped so firmly in his creation of his pilgrim tellers and hearers is the inseparability of the different elements of the communicative situation: a generically diverse collection requires a diverse group of tellers and hearers as well.⁴⁸

The inextricability of the connection between Chaucer's mixed circle of tellers and hearers and the mixed genres of his collection—as well as its sheer originality—may best be understood against a background of customary medieval practice. Boccaccio's *Decameron*, for example, draws its novelle from sources as diverse as fabliaux and pious exempla, but seeks to refine these differences away and to treat all its subject matter in an even style that is likened to a *piano* or plain;⁴⁹ so too does he create an ideal body of tellers and listeners who are uniformly gentle and who differ only in modest respects. Gower's *Confessio Amantis* attains stylistic evenness by assigning all its narratives to Genius, a single-voiced and authoritative teller.

Chaucer himself experiments in the *Legend of Good Women* with a generically uniform collection, recounted in a single narrative voice (however internally varied that voice might be) and aimed at a very limited segment of his possible reading public.⁵⁰

In contrast with such uniform audiences as the gentle hearers and tellers of the *Decameron* and the royal couple of the *Legend* we can appreciate the diversity of Chaucer's body of pilgrims.⁵¹ Chaucer in fact seizes on every pretext to emphasize divergence in outlook and literary taste. Only at rare moments do we encounter consensus, such as when, stirred by the Prioress' miracle, "every man / As sobre was that wonder was to se" (VII. 691–692) or when, the end of the journey drawing near, the "Hoost hadde the wordes for us alle" (X. 67). More often we encounter every species of disagreement, fostered by Chaucer's insistence on the divisive impact of social position and vocational role upon literary taste.

One of his bold strokes is to divide his pilgrims into different literary camps on the basis of their social position—most noticeably, into *gentils* and *cherls*. (The exact membership of these two groups is never specified, though we may assume that the *gentils* include the Knight, the Squire, the Prioress, possibly the Monk, and—in spirit if not in fact—the Franklin and the Man of Law; explicitly identified as *cherls* are the Miller and the Reeve, and we may assume that they are joined by the Cook and a number of other pilgrims as well.) This polarization is introduced immediately after the first tale, when we learn that everyone likes the Knight's narrative on general grounds as a "noble storie" (I. 3111)—that is, as a narrative that is historically verifiable or is so venerable and edifying that it might as well be—but some like it better than others. Liking it most are the "gentils everichon" (I. 3113). Less persuaded is the Miller, whose own "noble tale" (I. 3126) will be no "storie" but a narrative out of oral tradition, that parodies aspects of the *Knight's Tale* ranging from derisive echoes of its most serious lines through its plot configuration to its premises about necessity and choice. Further, Chaucer implies that the Miller's revolt is socially based, identifying him as a *cherl* who will tell a "cherles tale" (I. 3169). Then, reaching beyond the created audience of pilgrim tellers and hearers, Chaucer reinforces his point by suggesting that his reading public (or at least a faction of *gentil wights* within it) may, by reason of its own social position, prefer to choose other, more "storial" tales involving "gentillesse, / And eek moralitee and hoolynesse" (I. 3179–80). Opinion is in fact divided after the *Miller's Tale* ("Diverse folk diversely they seyde"—I. 3857), though we never

learn the details of the *gentils'* response. They will, however, rise once more as a group in the prologue to the *Pardoner's Tale*, provoked either by Harry Bailly's request for "som myrthe or japes" (VI.319) or by the Pardoner's intention of stopping for a drink:

But right anon thise gentils gonne to crye,
 "Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!
 Telle us som moral thyng . . ." (VI.323-325)

We know that this dichotomy—between *gentils* who want moral content and *cherls* who want as much harlotry as they can get—is mostly pretense. Modern scholarship confirms that a romance might be "chivalric" or "popular"; a fabliau might be aimed at a courtly audience (in the instances cited by Nykrog⁵²) or a bourgeois audience, or even (in the adaptations cited by Rychner⁵³) successively at each kind. But, even if the social basis of literary judgment is far more complex than Chaucer chooses to pretend, his pretense can be embraced as one that (in conjunction with a socially mixed body of tellers and hearers) permits a tale collection of unprecedented internal diversity.

Equally a matter of pretense is Chaucer's assertion of an occupational or vocational basis for his tellers' selection of tales. Many of his assignments are based on premises—like the attraction of knights to *storial* romances and *cherls* to low tales—that were not really operative in the later fourteenth century. And he is fairly casual even about the realization of these premises, assigning his Knight an elevated *storie* but then granting him a down-to-earth narrative perspective (as in I.886-887) and assigning his Miller a tale of village life that is then told from a decidedly haughty point of view (as in I.3268-70). The legerdemain lying behind even the most plausible assignments is evident in the tales of such religious pilgrims as the Prioress, the Monk, the Second Nun, and the Parson. Nothing could seem more reasonable on its face than the assignment of religious tales to religious people, but Chaucer nevertheless puts this premise under some strain. So plausible is the assignment of a miracle of the Virgin to the Prioress, for example, that we hardly pause to reflect that evidence of manuscript ownership and popular taste suggests that such miracles (and especially such miracles in vernaculars) were almost exclusively the province of lay audiences and an object of popular circulation rather than reclusive or contemplative devotion.⁵⁴ The Monk's *tragedies* are not at all the kind of thing that a monk would be expected to have lying around his cell, but were in the 1380s the province of an international and Latinate literary elite of the highest order of humanistic pretension,

and the assignment of tragedies to the Monk would itself have been a subtle literary joke.⁵⁵ The Second Nun's impeccably devout tale of St. Cecilia is based on a tradition of hagiographical narrative derived from the *Legenda aurea* and employed from the very beginning for purposes of lay piety.⁵⁶ Even the *Parson's Tale* is less the popular sermon of a country preacher than a learned treatise suited for an audience that must be supposed highly educated if not academic.⁵⁷ But the point is finally not whether we believe in every one of Chaucer's assignments, or even whether we believe any of them; the point is the kind of diverse collection enabled by these assignments, and in this sense we can regard them as a literary strategy of consummate worth.

Detached as they might seem from history in the sense of immediate reception, the aesthetic choices involved in launching this literary strategy nevertheless have an important social aspect. For the apparently aesthetic choice of a tale collection varied in style and genre gains social implication in the likelihood of its attractiveness to a particular social group. Even in some of its most accessible features of stylistic variousness, multiple perspective, and mixed tone, the poetry made possible by Chaucer's diverse pilgrim tellers is of a sort likely to be particularly attractive to the social group I have described as his core audience.

The idea that certain highly contrastive poetic features are likely to appeal to those in ambiguous social situations would appear to be one that must be accepted or rejected on grounds of personal belief. But, fortunately, available evidence does permit us to form some opinions about the kinds of poetic features that addressees like Scogan, Bukton, and Vache, and fellow writers like Usk, Scogan, and Clanvowe, did in fact like.

Other Evidence of Social Interaction

Chaucer's short poems to Scogan, Bukton, and Vache might be thought "familiar" in their intimate and frequently jocular form of address, but they are additionally revealing of what Chaucer expected in the way of literary competence from members of his circle. These poems as a group might be contrasted with other of Chaucer's short poems, such as "Lack of Steadfastness," in their relatively high demands for attentive response.

These familiar poems ask much of their hearers, in their manipulation of voice and other aspects of literary form and their mixed per-

spective on the subjects under discussion. Portentous statements are made and then undercut by new tones of voice suggesting new attitudes. Traps are suddenly sprung, revealing alternative interpretative layers beneath authoritative statements. Hearers are asked to think two things or to juggle different voices in simultaneous conflict. Knowledge of Chaucer's previous poetry is assumed, and assumed to be available for use. Taken as a group, these poems move beyond mere amicability to require of their readers such additional qualities as a nimble response to changing tone, an ability to hear opposed voices and to sustain mixed attitudes, and a readiness to follow complex textual choreography.

These poems have been sensitively analyzed on several occasions.⁵⁸ Of interest here is the subtlety of some of the demands they make upon their audiences. All presuppose a single speaker and a single addressee, but each is actually multivoiced in the sense of shifting rapidly among different perspectives, and each appears to be addressed simultaneously to its intended listener and to an enlarged—though still intimate—group.

"Scogan," for example, imagines a seemingly straightforward situation of address between a single speaker and his "friend" Scogan, but actually draws its hearer through a rapid succession of alterations in voice and points of view. The bold certainty of its opening lines ("Tobroken been the statutz") gives way to the quavering uncertainty with which the stanza concludes ("I deye almost for drede"). The bathetic reference to the tears of Venus yields to a jocular accusation that Scogan is the offender. Scogan is charged ("Hastow not seyde . . ."), but we are then given cause to suspect that in giving his lady up for lack of responsiveness to his overtures he might have some common sense on his side. The jocular fear that Cupid might have revenge on both of them (by withholding his arrows) gives way to a part jesting, part serious retreat from the poetic fray that in turn yields to a rather melancholy reflection on time and succession ("But al shal passe that men prose or ryme; / Take every man hys turn, as for his tyme"). The envoy shifts ground again, to a request for Scogan's intervention on Chaucer's behalf ("Mynne thy frend") and then returns to the poem's central jest ("never eft Love dyffye").

Scogan remains the object of this varied address, and the easy tone of the poem leaves us no doubt of the sincerity with which Chaucer describes Scogan as his friend. But we are also left with a sense of a slightly expanded public for this poem, a larger listening circle of friends who appreciate Chaucer's association of Scogan and himself

as aging and portly lovers with fears of being left out of Cupid's sphere altogether.⁵⁹ This expanded public is also called upon to resolve yet another dilemma. Scogan's offense turns out to be intriguingly two-sided in import. By giving up his lady for failing to respond to his appeals, he has undoubtedly offended the "lawe of love," but his down-to-earth attitude would certainly have its defenders elsewhere in Chaucer's poetry. One thinks, for example, of his worm and water fowl, including the goose ("But she wol love hym, lat hym love another"—PF, 567) and his like-minded associate the duck ("That men shulde loven alwey causeles! / Who can a resoun fynde or wit in that?"—PF, 590–591). Is Chaucer suggesting that Scogan has blundered or that he makes a great deal of sense? The verdict appears to lie with the circle of friendly associates implied by the poem. "Scogan" reveals itself as open in form, as willing to pose both formal and substantive problems, trusting the ability of its audience to resolve them or to accommodate their contrariety.

"Scogan" tests its hearers' capacity for adjustment both in its opening stanzas and later. But "Bukton" turns its corners even more quickly. The speaker tells us at the outset that, no more truthful than other men, he must now break an earlier promise to describe "the sorwe and wo that is in mariage." He dares not write any wickedness about marriage, "Lest I myself falle eft in swich dotage"—meaning that he might be punished for his words by an obligation to remarry? That if he remarried, his wife's tongue might cause him to suffer for what he has said? As the Variorum editors note, "The logic in the introductory stanza is by no means clear."⁶⁰ But the hearer does feel sure of one thing: the speaker will guard his words. In the next stanza, though, while seeming to be cautious in utterance ("I wol nat seyn how that yt is the cheyne / Of Sathanas"), the speaker takes a strong position: anyone, once out, would be a fool to expose himself to marriage again. Might Bukton, like the speaker, have placed one marriage behind him and be considering another? Or is the speaker thinking mainly of himself? No matter; we are at least certain now of the speaker's opposition to marriage. But hearers are to be surprised once again: the speaker cites Corinthians, proposing that Bukton take a wife after all ("lest thou do worse, take a wyf"). Does he mean it? If so, only in a sense more fatalistic than the apostle's own, because he goes on to predict on the basis of authority and experience that "thow shal have sorwe on thy flesh, thy lyf." And, instead of seizing the occasion of the envoy to relent, he cites an ultimate authority (the Wife of Bath) on the problems of bondage. In "Scogan," the audience

was asked to entertain different attitudes about love. Here the audience is asked to revise, and then to revise again, its attitudes about what the speaker is likely to say next—even to a mild surprise when, in the envoy, the speaker does *not* change his ground.

"Truth" would pose no such interpretative problems, were it not for the single manuscript of the poem that attaches an envoy. The body of the poem without envoy is a single-voiced and unambiguous injunction to an undefined (but presumably broad) audience, urging it to "Flee fro the prees and dwelle with sothfastnesse." Questions of interpretation have, however, multiplied, ever since Edith Rickert explained that the "Vache" addressed in the first line of the envoy is not just the beast of the earlier "Forth, beste, out of thy stal," but a double reference to the sluggish beast of the body of the poem and to Chaucer's acquaintance and probable friend Philip la Vache.⁶¹ We evidently have at least two audiences here: the general audience of the gnomic poem as circulated without the envoy and (if we can assume that the addition of the envoy represents some intention of Chaucer's, and not simply an editorial intervention or chance association) the more particular audience of Vache, and perhaps a few friends, who received the altered version. But questions do not cease here. Would members of the general audience, stumbling upon the envoy, have read it "straight," as Chaucer critics did before Rickert? Would injunctions like "leve thyn old wrecchednesse," amusing in address to a friend and fellow gentleperson, have seemed appropriately generic and Boethian to those who did not catch the "Vache" reference? And, more perplexing still, how are readers of the Vache envoy to take the earlier, gnomic stanzas? Can lines like "Forth, beste, out of thy stal" still be read without mirth? Or is there such a thing as *retrospective* comedy? In presenting Vache with this envoy, Chaucer would also have presented him with an interpretative bind that would not easily have been resolved, with a problem that both recognizes Vache's friendship and builds some presumptions (about patience, good will, and ability to handle ambiguity) upon it.

Special relations between Chaucer and his addressees are implied by all these poems, and many problematic passages would undoubtedly be clarified if we could know them: whether Chaucer has a particular favor in mind when he asks Scogan to "mynne thy frend," what larger audience is implied in Chaucer's epistle to Bukton, whether the envoy to Vache was prepared for Vache's private reading or was circulated among a larger group. Even as the poems stand, though, they are replete with hints of shared understanding. When

Chaucer professes to "deye almost for drede" in the first stanza of "Scogan," one senses that he is invoking a narrative persona with which his audience is already well acquainted. When he speaks to Bukton of the "wo that is in mariage," one senses that his echo of his own Wife of Bath (iv. 3) is meant to be recognized—even before his subsequent mention of her name.

Whatever their ostensible subjects, these poems can also be appreciated as solidifications and celebrations of the relations that made them possible. As R. T. Lenaghan has said of "Scogan," "The statement of the poem is not, 'Renew my pension,' or 'Don't defy love'; rather, it is something closer to 'We are friends, we react the same way to matter of love.'" ⁶² Chaucer also, in my estimation, celebrates the high expectations he is able to entertain of these friends as addressees of his poems—expectations of their capacity for mixed perspectives and open forms, their ability to enjoy his abrupt shifts of direction and tone, their willingness to rethink and revise prior interpretations. One has in reading these poems a sense of symbiosis: a sense that Chaucer demands more of these friends and social equals than of his other possible audiences and that he gets more from them; he addresses them through poems that speak well for their qualities and capacities, and their availability as sympathetic respondents helps to make such poems possible.

THE FAMILIAR poems addressed to Scogan, Bukton, and Vache imply that Chaucer's poetry was comprehended sympathetically by members of his circle, but they include no conclusive evidence of reception. For this, or at least evidence more specific than general encomia to Chaucer as translator, philosopher, and rhetorician,⁶³ we do have access to an underutilized source of information in the form of several passages and poems written under Chaucer's influence, two (by Usk and Clanvowe) from his lifetime and one (by Scogan) from the months or years immediately after.⁶⁴ The lessons to be learned from these three passages differ, but each in its own way confirms one point: at least some of Chaucer's contemporaries did read his work attentively and with keen comprehension.

Thomas Usk might conceivably have heard Chaucer's works read, since he was in and about London in the 1380s, was hand in glove with Brembre (after 1383), and even gained provisional and ill-fated admission to the royal faction between autumn 1387 and his death in 1388. More probably, though—given his role as a rather shadowy and Pynchonesque inhabitant of what Chaucer probably considered

a political demimonde—he encountered Chaucer's works in manuscript form. While working on his *Testament of Love* between late 1384 and mid-1387, he may have had access to Chaucer's *Boece* (though this notion has been challenged⁶⁵), and he refers to Chaucer's *Troilus* in his *Testament of Love* (III.4, 248–258).⁶⁶ His unmistakable encounter with Chaucer's text occurs, however, in his use of the passage preceding Dido's complaint in the *House of Fame* (269–360). His adaptation of this passage in his *Testament* (II.3, 45–81) shows that he was well able to apprehend Chaucer's sense and even to embellish it on some occasions.

Chaucer's narrator denounces Aeneas' adoption of a fair outward manner to deceive Dido (269–285); Usk assigns similar sentiments to Love, who visits him in confinement and denounces the tendency of men to display feigned goodness in order to win women's grace (45–58). Chaucer encapsulates his point in a proverb:

. . . lo, thus yt fareth:
 "Hyt is not al gold that glareth."
 For also browke I wel myn hed,
 Ther may be under godlyhed
 Kevered many a shrewed vice. (271–275)

Usk's lines are parallel and—contrary to what we normally suppose of him—somewhat more direct: "For every glittering thing is nat gold; and under colour of fayre speche many vices may be hid and consoled" (47–49). In fact, Usk not only catches Chaucer's sense in an economical way but goes on to embroider it sympathetically. Nearing the end of this section, Chaucer notes that a man tends to make a fair outward show until he has "caught" what he sought (280–282). Usk, adopting the same point about outward show, then expands upon the latent implications of "capture" by introducing the metaphor of the fowler, his whistle and net: "Lo! the bird is begyled with the mery voice of the foulers whistel. Whan a woman is closed in your nette, than wol ye causes fynden" (54–56). I have discussed elsewhere Usk's keen attentiveness to Chaucer's verse, but the brief examples given here should confirm his ability to read Chaucer with care even as he bent him to his own uses.

Written between Chaucer's death in 1400 and Scogan's own death in 1407, Henry Scogan's "Moral Balade" is literally a poem of advice to princes. "To the Kynges sonnes," the heading of Shirley's Ashmole MS 59 declares, and the text that follows is addressed to "my noble sones and eek my lordes dere."⁶⁷ This poem functions as a communi-

cative "bridge" between Scogan and his young charges by mixing deference and pedantry in reasonable proportion to the mixture of social inferiority and tutorial authority within the relationship itself.

The poem's solemnity may argue for the power of genre to constrain utterance, for Scogan's adaptation to his tutorial role, or possibly for the fact that Scogan (whose literal-mindedness is implied in Chaucer's epistle) was solemn all along. Despite his narrowing of Chaucer's tonal range, however, Scogan amply demonstrates the intimacy with Chaucer's poetry that our poet seems to have expected from members of his circle. He echoes the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and "Gentilesse" with some subtlety, he borrows from the *Monk's Tale*, and he finally quotes "Gentilesse" outright and in full. Some recollection of lines 1119–22 of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and lines 16–17 of "Gentilesse" is embodied in Scogan's remark that virtue may not be inherited:

He sayde, the fader whiche is deed and grave,
 Biquath nothing his vertue with his hous
 Unto his sone . . . (67–69)

A subsequent use of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is so dutifully exact that it moves editor Skeat to quotation marks:

Thus "by your eldres may ye nothing clayme,"
 As that my mayster Chaucer sayth expresse,
 "But temporel thing, that man may hurte and mayme." (97–99)

Consistent with his argument is an enumeration of princes that "cam fro povertie to hy degree" (167), and his positive citation of Tullius Hostilius and Julius and his negative mention of Nero, Balthasar, and Antiochus seem based entirely on precedents provided by Chaucer—the first from the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the other three from the *Monk's Tale*. His comment on Antiochus and his chair ("Loke how Antiochus fil fro his char, / That he his skin and bones al to-tar!"—177–178) seems a direct echo of Chaucer's lines in the *Monk's Tale* ("For he so soore fil out of his char / That it his limes and his skyn totar"—VII.2610–11). But his ultimate act of deference to Chaucer's work is undoubtedly the inclusion of a complete (and carefully transcribed) text of "Gentilesse" within the body of his poem, dutifully marked off with "and of this thing herke how my mayster seyde" (104). Nor is Scogan's use of Chaucer's poem unconsidered; he shows some talent as an interpreter of Chaucer's poetry. Modern critics have disagreed about whether the "first stok, fader of gentilesse" with which Chaucer's poem begins is God (Christ) on the one hand or a

worthy human ancestor on the other.⁶⁸ Scogan takes a clear and persuasive position, explaining within the body of his verse that "than is god stocke of vertuous noblesse" (100).

For all his deference, Scogan shows himself willing in the final analysis to alter Chaucer's meaning to suit purposes of his own. Even though Chaucer's poem contains virtually nothing about youth (touching upon it only obliquely in reference to inheritance), Scogan characterizes it as a complaint on "the losse in youthe of vertue" (128), to further his own motive of persuasive address to the young princes. He is closely acquainted with Chaucer's poetry, and he is prepared to open his poem to Chaucer's voice and to credit his master extensively for his borrowings. He seems a good deal less interested, however, in responding to Chaucer's actual sense, or to such formal traits as openness to generic mixing, shifts in tone, rejection of the singular authority of monovocalism in favor of multivocalism, or the reconciliation of competing voices. For evidence of a thoroughgoing appreciation of these and related elements of Chaucer's poetry, we must turn to another member of his circle: John Clanvowe.

The most "Chaucerian" of fourteenth-century poems, the *Boke of Cupide* is labeled "Explicit Clanvowe" in the colophon of one mid-fifteenth-century manuscript.⁶⁹ Fifteenth-century attributions are notoriously fanciful, but I am inclined to take this one seriously and to connect it with John Clanvowe, Chaucer's known associate in the Ricardian faction. Several considerations support his authorship. His dealings with Chaucer would have permitted him access to Chaucer's poetry of the mid-1380s, especially to two poems from which borrowings abound in the *Boke of Cupide*—the *Parliament of Fowls* and the *Knight's Tale*. John Clanvowe is known to have been an author, since the devotional treatise "The Two Ways" is almost certainly written by him.⁷⁰ Finally, arguments for the only other Clanvowe seriously advanced as a candidate, Thomas, have proven unsubstantial.⁷¹ The principal argument for John Clanvowe—his involvement with Chaucer in the matter of Cecily Champaign suggests a degree of involvement that could extend to literary discipleship, and his literary discipleship argues that his surety for Chaucer was undertaken from friendship rather than as a routine factional assignment—may be admitted to have a certain circularity. Still we should make what we can of the few facts available to us, and, circular or not, the conjunction of the facts that John Clanvowe was an associate of Chaucer and a likely author in his own right would seem legitimately to support the proposition that he is the one.

Unlike the *Testament of Love* (which cites Chaucer in III.4) and the "Moral Balade" (which lauds Chaucer as Scogan's "mayster"), the *Boke of Cupide* refrains from mention of Chaucer by name. Yet, while Usk and Scogan eulogize Chaucer and use his works in particular ways, neither seems to have explored in depth the formal or stylistic precedents offered by his major works. Clanvowe, mentioning Chaucer not at all, shows in his poem a deep level of assimilation of Chaucer's poetic accomplishment in such major poems as the *Parliament of Fowls* and the *Knight's Tale* and a deep level of artistic response to that achievement—so deep a response that the *Boke of Cupide* may be read not simply as a poem that stands in Chaucer's debt for particular lines and phrases, but as a virtual meditation on Chaucer's artistic example.

The question of the poem's deliberateness in evoking Chaucer and his poetic accomplishments is raised in its very first lines, which are quoted verbatim from Theseus' ironic praise of love:

The god of love, a! benedicite,
How myghty and how grete a lord is he!

This couplet has, as John Scattergood has pointed out, the look and feel of a piece of sententious or proverbial lore, a fact that raises in turn the possibility that Clanvowe has no intention of invoking Chaucer, meaning only to launch his own poem with an anonymous apothegm.⁷² But any such deliberate suppression of Chaucer as his source is belied by the next lines of the poem, which use the succeeding lines of Theseus' speech in an unmistakable way. Theseus continues in his speech that love "can make" of each heart whatever he can devise (I.1789–90). Clanvowe picks up this phrase and proceeds to give us examples of love's impressive but unsettling power: it "can make" low hearts high and high ones low, sick well and well sick, wise folk silly and irresolute folks moral, and so on.

Theseus' lines, moreover, offer a particularly apt point of entry to the consideration of issues central to Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* and the *Knight's Tale*. For Theseus' speech in Chaucer is double-voiced, purporting to praise the god of love but actually (as we learn later in his speech when he comments more directly on love's irrationality and folly) mocking love's potential to turn followers into fools. The irony is double in the sense that it places two contradictory propositions before us: love is great, but great in its capacity to make fools of its servants. This sense—that a certain kind of passionate love is at once solemnly important and wildly irrational—underlies many

of the formal dichotomies of Chaucer's poetry of the 1380s, including the contrasts between Venus' and Nature's gardens and between the avian factions respectively favoring *fin amour* and procreative love in the *Parliament*, the contrast between Troilus' idealistic intensity and the fallible earthy object toward which he directs it, and the degree to which Palamon and Arcite's hot pursuit of Emily blinds them to the capricious workings of destiny in spheres beyond human control.

In launching his poem as he does, Clanvowe has not simply seized upon a neatly self-contained maxim, but has chosen a couplet charged with implications that touch large formal and conceptual issues. Nor does Clanvowe fail to see the possibilities that attend his choice; he explores the contradictions between views of love as both admirable and destructive in the debate of his nightingale and cuckoo. One can hardly maintain that every use of a contradictory position to generate poetic debate is specifically Chaucerian, since the *debat/conflictus* tradition in both Latin and Old French poetry by far antedates either Chaucer's or Clanvowe's poems.⁷³ Yet Clanvowe's own urbanely impartial attitude toward the respective poles of his debate, and his extension of the debate into such correlative subjects as the social basis of the relation between attitudes, artistic styles, and issues of reception, have a flavor that—for all the looseness with which we usually use the word—seems particularly Chaucerian.

Clanvowe's nightingale and cuckoo embrace polar attitudes toward love, the former believing it to be the source of "al goodnesse, / Al honour and al gentilnesse" (151-152) and the latter regarding it as the source of "disease and heuynesse, / Sorow and care and mony a grete seknesse" (171-172). The complexity of their debate is enhanced, however, by its extension into thematically related areas. As in the *Parliament of Fowls*, the different views of love are seen as socially based; the nightingale expects her views on love to appeal to everyone "that gentil ys of kynde," and accuses the cuckoo of revealing a "cherles herte." Most appropriate in a poem that I have already characterized as being "about" Clanvowe's relations with literary tradition generally and the example of Chaucer in particular, the two views of love are linked to matters of art and aesthetics. The nightingale's voice is "clere" (99) while the cuckoo's is "foule" (94); the nightingale's song is stylistically intricate or "queynte" (123) while the cuckoo's is direct or "pleyn" (118); in addition to being bloody-minded, the nightingale's cry of "ocy! ocy!" or "kill! kill!" (124) is characterized by the cuckoo as elitist and obscure—"Who myght wete," he asks, "what that shulde be?" (125).

The debate is terminated rather than resolved. The nightingale, having argued that love rewards "whom him likes," finds herself unable to reply to the cuckoo's charge that love is diverse and willful, and her anger and frustration silence her ("I can for tene sey not oon worde more"—209). Hearing her wish to be revenged upon the cuckoo, the narrator lurches into action, driving him away with a stone. The narrator's actions place him emphatically in the nightingale's camp, as have his words and actions throughout, but—as in the comparable poems of Chaucer—we cannot arrive at a final judgment of his position without noting his decided limitations. Far too obtuse to command or hold our respect, he has already earned a year's bad luck in love by hearing the song of the cuckoo before that of the nightingale, and his own ally has no more comfort to give him than the rather cryptic assurance that the god of love will send "As mekil ioy . . . As euer yet he eny lover sende" (254-255)—a consolation already somewhat tainted by the revelations of the cuckoo. He seems fatally injured by the parting taunt of the cuckoo ("Farewel, farewel, papyngay"—222) and weakens himself still more by seeming unsure of whether he has been insulted ("As thogh he had scorned, thoghte me"—223). This limited and enfeebled promotion of the nightingale does little to turn our sympathies her way. In fact, the nightingale has—if anything—lost the debate and is less than successful in convincing the other birds to sustain her complaint against the cuckoo (they decide instead to hold a parliament, at which the cuckoo will be allowed to speak).

The use of an evidently limited narrator is not of course strictly "Chaucerian," but rather the common property of an entire tradition that reaches at least as far as Boethius, with his need for Lady Philosophy's advice, and is elaborated by the poets of the French love visions. Closer still to home is the bedazed and obtuse Amans of Gower's *Confessio*, and with respect to his example Clanvowe's narrator might well be considered at least as "Gowerian" as "Chaucerian." But Clanvowe's handling of his narrator within the total framework of his poem does have still more in common with the example of Chaucer, when we consider the absence of *other* authoritative voices from his poem. Gower's *Confessio* introduces the decidedly authoritative voice of Genius, which resolves differences and effects the reformation of Amans, resolving the issues of the poem and transforming it into a unified and ultimately monological statement. The *Boke of Cupide* offers no voice more authoritative than that of its fallible narrator, allowing him to report the multiple voices of his dream but

finally denying him the prestige or cogency to reconcile them or to resolve the multiple issues of the poem. This use of the narrator as a way of maintaining the open form of the poem and a competition of values within the world of the poem may not be uniquely Chaucerian, but it is certainly consistent with distinctively Chaucerian strategies as we have come to know them.⁷⁴

These passages by Usk, Scogan, and Clanvowe remind us that, however fictionalized the devices by which Chaucer reaches out to his audience, the audience itself was not a fiction. Three real authors are listening attentively, adapting lines from Chaucer, and—in Clanvowe's *Boke of Cupide*—assimilating central devices as well. With respect to Clanvowe, and with respect to Scogan and Bukton and Vache as addressees of Chaucer's familiar poems, we are given the unique opportunity to link poetic devices and strategies to particular persons who received (or who were expected by Chaucer to receive) them sympathetically. These devices have already been broadly characterized as including the mixing of generic expectations, shifts in perspective and tone, rejection of a singularly authoritative narrative voice in favor of multiple voices, and a willingness to leave such voices in competition—qualities characteristic of what might be considered open rather than closed and hierarchical poetic forms. From the evidence of Chaucer's familiar poems and Clanvowe's poem, we may conclude that these characteristically Chaucerian devices were received with particular warmth by his rather close social counterparts. Putting it slightly differently, Chaucer's familiar poems and Clanvowe's poem may be viewed as held in common by speakers and by addressees who are their near-social equals, depending on and celebrating certain capacities for delight and habits of mind: nimbleness, alertness to tone, ability to entertain multiple points of view, and sensitivity to the social relatedness of seemingly literary address.

The sense of an immediate audience dims within the *Canterbury Tales*, even as Chaucer's sense of an audience in posterity seems to grow. At times he seems to turn away from his core audience altogether, as when he shapes poems like "Lack of Steadfastness" and "To His Purse" toward royal addressees or advises princes in the *Tale of Melibee*. Yet, as we have seen, Chaucer expected Bukton to know the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, and we know that Scogan knew it well and that Clanvowe not only knew the *Knight's Tale* but incorporated some of its elements into his own verse. Such incidental and accidentally preserved scraps of information remind us that—even as the membership shifted within Chaucer's core audience and even as the vicissitudes

of his career raised obstacles to regular contact—such an audience did not cease to exist for him as an inspiration and an animating ideal.

The supposition that Chaucer's poetry normally enjoyed at least some exposure to a reasonably congenial contemporary audience invites us to consider its reception within a historical frame. I will return now to the poetry itself, viewing it as a socially conditioned bridge between Chaucer and a similarly situated audience. So considered, certain of Chaucer's themes—particularly those involving hierarchy and community, human ties, and the bonds that sustain them—gain special immediacy as charged social communication. So too will some of the more apparently formal or aesthetic aspects of his work gain added implication as products of socially conditioned choice and bearers of socially determined meaning.