

“Voice Memorial”: Loss and Reparation in Chaucer’s Poetry

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Therto we wrecched wommen nothing konne,
Whan us is wo, but wepe and sitte and thinke;
Our wrecche is this, oure owen wo to drynke.
— Criseyde

In the opening lines of his poem *Anelida and Arcite*, Chaucer conjures up a nightmarish image of the fate of noble stories left unremembered by later writers, and vows his dedication to acts of commemorative rescue:

For hit ful depe is sonken in my mynde,
With pitous hert in Englyssh to endyte
This olde storie, in Latyn which I fynde,
Of quene Anelida and fals Arcite,
That elde, which that al can frete and bite,
As hit hath freten mony a noble storie,
Hath nygh devoured out of oure memorie.¹

Against the ravages of devouring “elde,” Chaucer invokes the aid of the Muse Polyhymnia:

Be favorable eke, thou Polymya,
On Parnaso that with thy sustres glade,
By Elycon, not fer from Cirrea,

Singest with vois memorial in the shade,
 Under the laurer which that may not fade,
 And do that I my ship to haven wyne.

15-20

Thus the beginning of *Anelida and Arcite* asserts something like an elegiac trajectory: the death of noble stories through the violent predations of age will be redressed through poetry's own capacity to memorialize. And Chaucer's source for the invocation to Polyhymnia—a passage in Dante's *Paradiso*—links the *Anelida*'s identification of poetry with elegy back to the dream visions of Chaucer's earlier career, and to problems of narrative movement first encountered therein. In *Paradiso* 23, Beatrice says to Dante:

“Open your eyes and look on what I am; you have seen things such that you are become able to sustain my smile.” I was as one that wakes from a forgotten dream, and who strives in vain to bring it back to mind, when I heard this proffer, worthy of such gratitude that it can never be effaced from the book which records the past. Though all those tongues which Polyhymnia and her sisters made most rich with their sweetest milk should sound now to aid me, it would not come to a thousandth part of the truth, in singing the holy smile. . . . It is no voyage for a little bark . . . nor for a pilot who would spare himself.²

The passage evokes the evanescence of that which is to be remembered—not waking life, but dream—and the delicacy and difficulty, even the vanity, of the act of remembering itself. But having done so, the passage goes on to re-represent memory not as the action of mind struggling with, and perhaps losing to, dream, but as book—as book containing indelible writing. And if it is gratitude that puts memory so far beyond dream that memory then becomes the very image of an impersonal immortalizing permanence, then we are clearly in the presence both of very powerful gifts, and very powerful obligations incurred by them.

The gift, in this case, is Beatrice's invitation to Dante to look, at last, upon her smile; thus the question of memory—vain struggle or permanent record—is raised at one of the many moments in Dante's text when anxieties about narrative fixation and progress break into the content of the poem. At last, it seems, in the circle of the fixed stars, Dante is no longer in danger of becoming “too fixed,” of losing himself in Beatrice, in the image, in vision, in images and visions of Beatrice. He can, as it were, bask reposefully in the smile of the woman, *and* leave her be-

hind; for in this canto Beatrice also urges Dante to move on — a movement which, perhaps for the first time in the *Commedia*, is not mourned:

“Why does my face so enamor you that you turn not to the fair garden which blossoms beneath the rays of Christ?”

Para. 23.70–72

So, a grateful memory records Dante’s indebtedness to his guides, to the dead, to those who have gone before; the dream will be recovered, vain struggle will give way to achievement in this canto of the Church Triumphant. Dante has tried to work out, through his relation to the lost object, a kind of narrative in which displacements, substitutions, indeed changes, result not in loss but only in gain. And yet something is clearly being paid for.

Peter Sacks, in *The English Elegy*, stresses the ancient coincidence of the right to inherit with the right to mourn.³ Yet in Dante, in *Hamlet*, and in Chaucer’s dream-visions (in Chaucer’s other poetry as well) doubt and uncertainty break out, to varying degrees and in various ways, in tandem with this coincidence of inheritance and of mourning. Of central importance to Chaucer’s poetry is the struggle to remember — a struggle sometimes phrased in terms of natural fertility, of bringing new corn out of old fields; sometimes phrased in terms of repose, safe haven from the effort and risk of journey at sea — a struggle that is often conducted with poetic precursors. The difficult, often clotted, beginnings of the dream visions usually register uncertainty over the relation of present to past writing; Chaucer’s elegy, the *Book of the Duchess*, closes when the dreamer commits himself confidently to the retelling of a dream based on the poems of unremembered sources. The recovery of dream from oblivion is, in Chaucer’s poetry, often the ground for further slippage.

As mourner, elegist, poet, Chaucer is as much engaged in acts of forgetting as in acts of commemoration; and it may well be that a fear of transgressive ingratitude somehow attends the problematic stops and starts of so much Chaucerian narrative. In some cases, moreover, the fitfulness of Chaucer’s narratives grinds to a halt, the waywardness of his textual borderlines having gone so far as to achieve the paralysis of “unfinishedness.” In *Anelida and Arcite*, the struggle to memorialize is, at least in the terms of Chaucer’s own invocation to Polyhymnia, unsuccessful: the muse does not lead the poet’s ship to haven. The poem sets out to narrate the love of Anelida for the Theban knight Arcite; Arcite’s desertion of Anelida; and her subsequent fate. But Chaucer only gets as far as Arcite’s betrayal and Anelida’s extremely elaborate complaint,

the closing lines of which exemplify beautifully the immobilizing and perhaps mortifying self-reflexions of this genre:

So singe I here my destinee or chaunce,
How that Arcite Anelida so sore
Hath thirled with the poynt of remembraunce.

348-50

Anelida remains pierced, forever, with memory. Her “olde storie” thus fails of the revivification promised in the opening lines of the poem. Chaucer’s intention to rescue her from the jaws of “elde” was apparently not deep enough in his mind; or perhaps, in such a case, intention—however deeply imprinted—meets obstacles it simply cannot overcome. Chaucer’s narrative thus acts out the incapacity for memorialization attributed by Dante to Polyhymnia: though Dante’s non-invocation gives way to the optimism of Chaucer’s invocation, its implications are finally borne out.

Anelida and Arcite is not the only Chaucerian narrative that seems to founder on its own grief. The *Legend of Good Women*, for example, declares that its culmination will be the apotheosis of Alceste’s constancy, but its promise is never fulfilled; complaint is broken off, reunion forever deferred. Chaucer’s “good women” are—like Anelida and like Alcyone in the *Book of the Duchess*—usually inconsolable, if not altogether dead; and the capacity of these women to generate narrative from their grief is either problematic or non-existent. The fullness of elegiac consolation seems not to be their fate. It seems that the narrative structure of Chaucer’s poems—and the workings of gender in and around them—may be more strikingly related to the processes of mourning than has hitherto been appreciated. Why women do not appear as overmuch capable of consolation in Chaucer’s poetry—poetry which is at nearly all points deeply concerned with the experience of loss—is the subject of this essay.

But before we explore in greater detail the links between narrative, mourning and gender in Chaucer’s work, we need to consider the role of loss within medieval studies. For loss, and reparation, have shaped the desire of many twentieth-century medievalists. The interpretation of Chaucer has for years involved a simultaneous investment in the archaism of the object of study and in its authority. Many versions of historicism have embraced, in one form or another, the belief that the differences between our “modernity” and the “alterity” of the Middle Ages are much more important than what they might be said to share; these differences have often become definitive for the purposes of interpretation, even if

a radical discontinuity between past and present is not explicitly asserted. One result has been the depiction of the Middle Ages as unchanging and as repudiating change.⁴ Medieval modernity—the capacity of the Middle Ages to experience itself as changing, as sometimes “new” or “contemporary” or even “forward-looking”—has not been much reflected on; and this inertness has also discouraged study of the function of archaism—including that of medieval studies—within our own modernity.⁵ The textual object has acquired its value insofar as it is, in some profound way, *lost* to us by its very pastness; critical and scholarly acts accordingly gain their legitimacy by means of reparation, by making up for that loss, by recovering an impossible relation to the alterity of the West’s own past. Moreover, the notion of the alterity of the medieval past has all too often become a means of asserting the unapproachability and inviolacy of that past—of constituting it as ideally pure and unchanging object, besieged by a variety of philosophical, political, and sexual perversions. When this happens, the historicization—we might say, the mortification—of the past, has the effect of preserving the past for the few who know how properly to revere it.

Thus totalization of the Middle Ages—wherein, as Lee Patterson has put it, “medieval culture is [seen to be] not only fully possessed of its own [unitary] ideology but endowed with an unqualified self-understanding”⁶—goes hand-in-hand with the notion of a categorical medieval alterity. If everything in the Middle Ages is Other to modernity, then an absolute boundary is in place; this enables the splitting off from the Middle Ages of anything “anomalous” or other to its supposed Otherness. Though one result of these totalizing processes has been the unsolved problem of theorizing the recovery of the irrecoverable, the power of a totalized alterity both to control our historical descriptions of the Middle Ages (and implicitly of ourselves), and to assert the enduring coherence of those descriptions, has been difficult to resist. Thus, despite the emphasis of medieval studies on the categorical difference of the past, it has tended (at least until recently) to insist upon the necessity of an identity, an agreement, between the concerns of the modern interpreter and those of the medieval text. Though the difference or “otherness” or “alterity” of the Middle Ages is thus urged upon us, the interpretive ideal is one in which hermeneutic otherness, difference, or disagreement, is in fact purged. The differences made by the past are assimilated to a caricature of difference, a stiffened stereotype whose function is to assert the recoverability of the past, the immutable authority of the historian, the sameness of the Same. Writes D. W. Robertson:

We cannot . . . reconstruct completely any period in the past. . . . But this fact should act as a stimulus rather than as a deterrent, since it means that there will always be something more to be done. The frontiers before us have no limit. And we may be consoled by the fact that the more accurately we can describe the detritus left to us by the past, the better able we shall be to understand ourselves. . . . Meanwhile, the realization that our own attitudes are, like those of the past, largely contingent may help to induce a certain equanimity and detachment. If literary studies are divorced from the larger concerns of cultural history they will eventually wither away.⁷

Thus the historicity that might seem to limit us becomes the ground of our very self-extension: "The frontiers before us have no limit." And for the mortality of our "attitudes" we should be consoled by this historicity, even as Boethius was consoled—achieved "a certain equanimity and detachment"—by Philosophy. Recognition of our contingency becomes a paradoxical stay against the withering power of time: for Robertson, to turn our backs on history is to risk disappearing from it.

The reparations—the recoveries of the past—that have been the object of so much medievalist exegesis, are commonly marked by discursive and structural features familiar to the psychoanalytic study of mourning. One which I will develop here has to do with the process of identification, first explored in Freud's essay on "Mourning and Melancholia," and recently vastly elaborated by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in their discussions of "encryptment": the grieving subject, wishing to revise a narrative, identifies with—can, in some circumstances, "become"—the "lost" object.⁸ It should be stressed that the "lost object" in this case is a fantasy object, the product of the grieving subject's wishful fiction-making. And while the object may appear to other people to be "present" in any usual sense of the term, to the grieving subject the object may yet be irremediably absent, lost in a very special kind of time. Thus there is, Abraham and Torok argue, a "poetics" of loss; to this we should add that there is medievalism. For, as we have seen, one of the striking features of latter-day medievalism has been the scholar/critics' determination of the inaccessibility of the texts which lie spread out before them; another striking feature has been the critics' identification with the lost object—to the point where Paul Olson, in a recent book on *The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society*, suggests that if we were to look at Chaucer with modern (feminist, psychoanalytic, Marxist) eyes and "see," not our

own preoccupations, but the poet's elitism, we might "despise . . . [Chaucer's] vision and dislike his artifice."⁹

The intensity of Olson's rhetoric ("despise," etc.) makes clear that any significant difference on the part of the critic with the meanings recovered from the medieval text will threaten abandonment and separation. Thus, though Olson is critical of the "narcissism" of modern readers who seek to discover modern meanings in older texts, his own critical approach has difficulty articulating a *continuing* relation to the medieval text that is not finally one of mirroring, identification, agreement. By positing an "absolute" difference between past and present—the Middle Ages can have nothing in common with "controversial points of view belonging to the sixteenth, eighteenth, or later centuries"—and, moreover, by making Chaucer's conscious (and non-self-contradictory) views the only legitimate grounds for interpretation of Chaucer's texts, Olson forecloses the possibility of critical difference: that there might be differences "inside" Chaucer and his milieu as well as "between" Chaucer and later ages, and that both kinds of difference might help us understand his poetry. The particular kind of difference Olson *does* want to create—between himself and "modern criticism"—is one which will confer reality, visibility, certainty upon his own interpretive procedures while derealizing and isolating those of his opponents—feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytic critics, who merely "see *as*" and are thus cut off from reality, mired in illusion. Implicit in Olson's writing on this subject is a fear of his own isolation from the past, his own collapse into illusion and "fantasy"—that is, not so much self-indulgence as the unhappiness of narcissism. Olson's strong identification with what he wants to "*see*" in Chaucer's age thus functions as a kind of reparation of the interpreter's separation from the past. This is marked not least by Olson's statement that, once Chaucer were properly understood and *then* looked at with modern eyes, we might "despise" Chaucer's vision and "dislike" his artifice. Olson's discomfort with "controversial points of view" gains a new poignancy when he tells us, once again, that differing from Chaucer might mean catastrophic rejection and loss.

Something similar happens in D. W. Robertson's remarks on the interpretive inadequacies of the Wife of Bath in his *Preface to Chaucer*. Robertson characterizes the opening of the Wife's Prologue as

a humorous example of carnal understanding and its consequences which is, at the same time, a scathing denunciation of such understanding. Alison of Bath is . . . an elaborate iconographic figure designed to show the manifold implications of an attitude. She is,

in some ways, typically “feminine,” but the femininity she represents was in Chaucer’s day a philosophical rather than a psychological concept. That she still seems feminine to us is a tribute to the justness of the ideas which produced her.¹⁰

While Robertson clearly senses, and tries to halt, his slippage into a notion of the eternal feminine — and hence into a reading of the Wife that might not be entirely historical — he nonetheless adverts to a continuity produced by “justness of ideas.” We have, then, a moment of breakdown in Robertson’s rigorous version of historicism. It seems that the Wife’s inadequacy as a reader becomes the ground for a rare Robertsonian appeal to enduring truth.

To understand more fully the implications of Robertson’s lapse, we should also consider a passage from the introduction to *A Preface to Chaucer*:

If we universalize the [attitudes and values of our own place and time] as though they were Platonic realities, and assume that they have a validity for all time, we turn history into a mirror which is of significance to us only insofar as we may perceive in it what appear to be foreshadowings of ourselves, but which are, actually, merely reflections of ourselves arising from reconstructions of the evidence based on our own values. And when this happens, history, although it may seem to flatter us with the consoling message, “Thou art the fairest one of all,” becomes merely an instrument for the cultivation of our own prejudices.¹¹

It is perhaps fair to say that Robertson, of all Chaucerians in this century, has until recently been the one most preoccupied with historical method; and his Wife of Bath, a woman who interprets, or “forgets,” the authorities of the past to serve her own needs, is meant to be the antithesis of such a devotee — i.e., a deluded and isolated reader of history.¹² When Robertson looks into the mirror of Narcissus, he sees, not an image of his own face, but that of the aging queen in Snow White — like the Wife, an aging woman whose fear of losing her youth and beauty leads her (as in Robertson’s interpretation of the Wife) not to true renewal but to desperation, fantasy and violence.¹³ The projection of desperation, fantasy and violence onto the aging woman becomes ground for whatever there is of certainty in Robertson’s grasp of the alterity of the past. That the “rancid solipsistic pit”¹⁴ — from which, as from the dubiousness of our memories, we can only be rescued by greater knowledge of “cultural history” — is figured as female on at least two occasions of

Robertsonian theorizing suggests that Robertsonian historicism may have made — may still be making — a contribution to the construction of woman as “other” to enduring cultural knowledge. And it should be stressed here — the implications of the point will become clearer later on in this essay — that such a construction actually helps to found the apparent participation of such knowledge in “eternity.”¹⁵

Olson, in effect, offers us two mutually exclusive alternatives: we can identify with (a conservative) Chaucer, and thus become historical; or we can reject the poet altogether. Robertson similarly posits an antithesis between a transcendentalizing (male) historicism, and a derealizing, indeed mortifying, (female) anachronism. This essay hopes to suggest that there may be interpretive alternatives to this kind of “splitting.”¹⁶ But it is enough, for now, simply to emphasize again the profoundly commemorative intention of much Chaucer criticism. So much medievalism has kept itself inspired — kept itself desiring — through an extremely romantic equation of modernity with deprivation and of the past with a fullness which must be recovered (if only, paradoxically but fundamentally, in part). By means of an inexplicit substantiation of loss through its interpretive gestures, medievalism has embraced an elegiac sense of history, and has obscured from itself its simultaneous delectation and refusal of the experience of loss.

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Given this location of plenitude in the past, it is not surprising that it has been difficult for critics adequately to appreciate the extent of Chaucer’s own losses. But Chaucer’s poetry is littered with heartbreaks, failures, fragments. Loss articulates not only particular works written by Chaucer, but also Chaucer’s generic choices and the shape of his poetic career. At times Chaucer’s poetry, as well as his critical tradition, is shaped by the inability to confront worldly loss — by the need, for example, to treat worldly loss as merely a figure for the loss of other, more important, and above all refindable things (such as the relation to God). But Chaucer’s poetry also, at times, refuses to re-figure loss as transcendence: it has ways of insisting on the irreducibility of certain limits, and on the possibility of a relatedness that does not depend on gain or presence or identity. This doubleness is something which, as we shall see, a variety of discourses — modern psychoanalysis as well as medieval theology — attribute, variously, to mourning or *tristitia*.¹⁷ But first this essay will try simply to establish the importance of loss to a canon whose comedic tendencies have been overprivileged.

There is, for example, the problem of beginnings and endings in Chau-

cer's poetry. Chaucer's narrators find it hard getting started; the *Book of the Duchess* begins with a description of the difficulty of doing anything at all, and takes a very long time to get to the grieving knight who is the object of the poem's therapeutic concerns. The ending of the *Book of the Duchess* is in some respects difficult for the opposite reason — its extreme rapidity and brevity prevent the elaboration of consolation, though not its implication. One could multiply examples — like *Anelida and Arcite*, the *House of Fame* is unfinished; the *Canterbury Tales* do not complete their stated plan; the *Parliament of Fowls*, which looks like it should have closed with a lady eagle's choosing from among three male eagles vying for her hand, finishes instead with her refusal to have any of them, with a promise that all will return next Valentine's Day to hear her ultimate decision, and with a roundel on the joys of summer and mating. This kind of thing is very frequently ascribed to Chaucerian openness, gamesmanship, indeterminacy, tolerance, and so forth, by critics who seek to find in Chaucer a gentle and liberal moralist, and even by critics who don't. Indeed, when one gives full critical measure to the difficulties of the textual borderline in Chaucer's poetry, one feels the force of Derrida's insistence on the arrogance of attributions of "unfinishedness"—implying, as they do, that some texts *are* finished, that there are ever absolute boundaries between texts and other texts, reading subjects, and surrounding cultural structures.¹⁸ Derrida's essay is itself devoted to the refusal of death as an absolute limit; his purpose in "Living On" is to question the invocation of death as the limit to end all limits, is to reveal the in-finitude of death. But it is crucial to recognize that "Living On," for all of its dispersal of absolute categories through the scrutiny of their permeability, their vulnerability to loss, is in part a defense against loss itself — against the possibility of radical non-recurrence.¹⁹

Thus while I want to find some way, if I can, of giving full measure to Chaucer's willingness to take risks, to leave things open-ended, there is another and more problematic way of reading Chaucer's divagations which needs to be taken into account: that is, that anxiety about, even hostility towards, change, transformation, and indeed *endings* is itself what gives rise to the difficulty of Chaucer's poetic beginnings and endings. Criseyde, when contemplating whether or not she should fall in love with Troilus, remarks "That erst was nothing, into nought it torneth" (*Troilus and Criseyde* 2.798). Chaucer's narrators avoid the ruptures of such beginnings and endings; their characteristic stance is a kind of infantile detachment from whatever the adults around them are doing, in particular from adult sexuality. The engaging disengagement of Chaucer's narrators is

itself a means of questioning not only the loss of the body brought on by language — in Lacanian terms, the displacement of being by meaning — but the loss of everything else too: of the subject, of the world. The question, so often asked by Chaucer, is whether poetry makes or unmakes the world.

We must also give full weight to the fact that everything most characteristically Chaucerian — the long difficulty of beginning, represented as the undoing of fixation, the animating of inanimacy; complex or ambiguous closure; funny, restless little narrators; a variety of uncertainties of tone and meaning — begins with an elegy, the *Book of the Duchess*. A number of critics have commented on this fact: Robert Edwards, for example, writes that Chaucer began his career as a narrative poet by “converting the retrospective impulse of elegy to the anticipation of new poetry.”²⁰ From this critical standpoint, the capacities offered by elegy for transcendence of grief are replicated in elegy’s capacity to give rise to new and other kinds of writing: elegy permits elegy to be left behind. Death produces new life; poems about death produce new poems about life. This understanding of the role of the *Book of the Duchess* in the trajectory of Chaucer’s career is problematic both because the yoking of life to death should not be equated in any unexamined way with “health,” and because the idea of “new poetry” obscures the fact that most of the poems Chaucer wrote after the *Book of the Duchess* were also significantly preoccupied with loss. We need to recognize, not that Chaucer took what he learned from writing the *Book of the Duchess* and applied it to other subjects, but rather that the elegiac poetics of the *Book of the Duchess* remained with him until the end of his career. Loss is not an experience so easily left behind, the promises of many elegies themselves to the contrary.

Central to both the *Parliament of Fowls* and the *Legend of Good Women* — as to *Anelida and Arcite* — are the genre of complaint and a poetics of anxiety, fixation, the difficulty of risking futurity. The *House of Fame* is about poetic gains and losses — about whether the female mouth of Fame can speak anything but the loss of ground or “referent.” Moreover, Chaucer translated Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, a text which begins by expelling the poisonous muses of tragedy and proposing philosophy as redress for grief. *Troilus and Criseyde* is Chaucer’s most profound engagement of personal and communal disaster — of terror, of trauma; it is where he risks most outrageously an affirmation of the value of relationship and of worldliness despite the inevitability of loss, and because of this it is where he regresses most decisively to the comforts of absolute presence — to figures of return, of home, of union, of the mother. In the closing stanzas of

the *Troilus*, Chaucer repeatedly describes his most ambitious poem as a “littel book,” tells it to be a good child, to be subject to the fathers, presents it as a humble part of a great tradition, hopes it has a future and won’t be lost. The horizontal eroticism — rivalry, sexuality — of *Troilus and Criseyde* is displaced by the verticality of child-parent or human-divine relationships. At the end of the *Troilus*, what’s valued is eternity, fidelity, the love of God, chaste maternity; what’s devalued is time, mortal women, sexuality, individuality (*Troilus and Criseyde* give way to “yonge fresshe folkes, he or she”), change, the world, death. “Comedye” is promised in lieu of “tragedye”; and whether or not Chaucer meant by “comedye” the *Canterbury Tales*, it seems to work out that way.

The *Canterbury Tales* is a massive attempt at reparation. It is neither “occasional” poetry (which has its own relation to loss) nor tragedy; it selects pilgrimage as its framework, which implies the hope of getting somewhere; the very structure of opposition and debate among the pilgrims enables that transcendence of duality, division, individuality on which ideal community is so often predicated. The imperfect community is imagined, at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, as giving way to the ideal community, with hope of being purged of its differences and sins. In response to the Parson’s offer to show the pilgrims the way to the celestial Jerusalem, the pilgrims respond: “Upon this word we han assented soone”; “Oure Hoost hadde the wordes for us alle” (X.61, 67).²¹ The Parson’s Prologue presents us with a rare and intense moment of agreement, of common assent. As Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry put it, “There are no others in eternity.”²² To argue for the open-endedness of the *Canterbury Tales* (e.g., the pilgrims don’t actually arrive in Canterbury by the end; and they don’t return to Southwark, as was promised in the beginning) without giving full weight to this choral expression of what Victor Turner would call “communitas,”²³ seems to me misguided liberalism. If *Troilus and Criseyde* confronts the possibility of catastrophic communal loss — of national destruction, as well as the destruction of personal bonds — it may well be with the *Canterbury Tales* (rather than the *Legend of Good Women*, which foregrounds reparation but seems, for many critics of many persuasions, not to achieve it) that Chaucer makes reparation to the nation and stakes England’s claim to a national poetry.²⁴ While this is too large a subject to follow any further at this time, some of its implications should become clearer during the course of this essay; for the deployment of difference by forms of authority based on fictions of undifferentiated union is a strategy we will meet again.

In short, then, Chaucer’s endings are sometimes unfinished in a rather

finished way. And while inconclusiveness itself may be, for Chaucer, a way of leaving things open to continuous creation, it may also be a way of avoiding risk and hence of avoiding or defending against loss. The difficulty of determining which is at stake at any given moment seems to be a problem not only for Chaucer criticism but also for many studies of mourning.

Lorraine Siggins, in her critical survey of the psychoanalytic literature on mourning, points out Freud's difficulty in distinguishing between mourning and melancholia — a difficulty shared by both earlier and later writers. Siggins herself adds: "I myself regard mourning as pathological if . . . excessively intense or violent, or if the process of mourning is unduly prolonged."²⁵ For Siggins, grief can be too strong and too long: it is subject to an economy of moderation. The determination of the line between sufficiency and excess, between natural course and fixation, is crucial to nearly all discursive managements of grief; at stake is the *creation* of a series of distinctions, whose instability is nevertheless apparent. Bad mourning and good mourning seem to collapse into one another with alarming facility. I would instance also medieval traditions on *tristitia* and despair: Susan Snyder notes that for St. Paul, for patristic writers, for medieval mystics and theologians, *tristitia* is both a deadly sin and — insofar as the Christian must sorrow for his sins before he can be forgiven — a necessary part of Christian life.²⁶

The incapacity for futurity and hence the refusal of consolation attributed by medieval writers to worldly sorrow is viewed by modern psychoanalysis in terms of the notion of defense: the diseased mourner defends against the fact of death; acceptance paves the way to health. But what looks like acceptance may be avoidance, and defense may be the way rather than the blocking of the way. Siggins comments on these ambiguities: "The very processes by which the work of mourning is carried out are those that can be used to hold on to the illusion that the dead person lives, and so retard the work of mourning."²⁷ In what ways, then, and under what circumstances, is it proper for the dead to "live on" ("*sur-vivre*," in Derrida's term in "Living On: Border Lines") through mourning? For Fenichel, the work of mourning is itself a kind of defense, a protection against the affect of grief, which would overwhelm the mourner if recognition of loss were not significantly delayed, and hence obstructed, at least temporarily.²⁸ But how — in psychoanalytic terms — could defense be theorized as healthy? Could it be treated as analogous to negation — i.e., a temporary and instrumental way of bringing the repressed into consciousness?²⁹ But if so, it cannot be an end product; that is, one

would arrive, at the end of healthy mourning, via defense, to something that was not a defensive posture. To say that the work of mourning defends the grieving subject against death, then, would be to describe process rather than outcome. The point is an important one because treatments of the elegy frequently conflate defense with health without examining the problems involved in doing so.

This is a confusing picture. Let's complicate it even further, before we attempt some provisional clarifications. Though, in "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud suggests that mourning impels the ego to give up the lost object by declaring it dead, Freud repeatedly affirms elsewhere, as Siggins puts it, "that a loved object is never really relinquished." For example, Freud's letter to Ludwig Binswanger (1929) on the subject of mourning says that

Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And, actually, this is how it should be, it is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish.³⁰

And Siggins again: "[m]ourning is never really over. . . ."³¹ The old attachment, then, does not disappear; and if the old attachment does not disappear, in what sense can we speak of a substitute? Should we not rather speak of something *new*—as Freud himself puts it, of something *else*? The point, again, is important to our understanding of the elegy, since the concept of substitution has been used—most importantly by Peter Sacks—to describe the relation of the elegist to the lost object of desire.³²

Theorists of mourning, then, have tended not only to have difficulty distinguishing bad mourning from good, but have also had difficulty—despite the consensus that good mourning by definition comes to an end—in establishing that mourning can arrive at a conclusion. The two difficulties are related. The idea of substitution involves, according to Freud, the filling of a gap; an *original* object of desire is lost, and all subsequent objects of desire will be surrogates for the original. But if we try to de-essentialize this concept, we might focus instead on the problem of how we become attached to—how we develop bonds and relationships with—*particulars*.³³ What makes grief agonizing is precisely that when someone or something particular has been lost, it cannot recur. Thus in the concept of substitution there continues a defense against the loss

of the particular, hence against the advent of the new as well as the end of the old. If the particular cannot be repeated, it remains forever lost; and this is why there can be no final closure to mourning. There can only be, *alongside* of mourning, learning to love new particulars. Our capacity to particularize—to form partialities—is what allows objects of desire to become special, unique, irreplaceable. But this irreplaceability should not be confused with concepts of *original* objects of desire; such concepts have obscured both the nature of attachment and the nature of loss. They have therefore obscured our understanding of the elegy: most studies of the genre confuse defensive postures with a chimerical “end” to mourning; most studies of the genre, indeed most elegies, seek a manageable closure, and fail of the kind of realization which Troilus, before he is subjected to closure, offers us:

“. . . I se that clene out of youre mynde
 Ye han me cast—and I ne kan nor may,
 For al this world, withinne myn herte fynde
 To unloven yow a quarter of a day!”

Troilus and Criseyde V.1695–8

It is striking, in connection with the positing of origins and ends for mourning, that the game of *fort-da* remarked on by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is often interpreted as an attempt to master loss through substitution: the child throwing out his spool of thread and reeling it back in is thought of as mastering absence by means of its representation—a representation that recalls the absent through a substitutive figure and through the substitute of language.³⁴ But the thread surely might be read instead as a link between *fort* and *da*. And if so, what if *fort* and *da* are not so much alternating oppositions but particularities linked by this thread? What if *fort* and *da*, that is, are particularities in the same way that “mommy” and “me” have been discovered to be?³⁵ If, for the sake at least of argument, we release Freud’s little child temporarily from the bondage to mimesis to which he has been routinely subjected, and posit that he may be creating something new—a gestural meaning, something like “there is a thread between this and that”—then it becomes clear that relatedness depends upon particularity. It also clarifies why metaphors of “subjection” or “submission” to language, prominent in Lacanian theory and in Sacks’s account of the elegy, may require some interrogation.

On one level, then, it is still possible to speak—as does Peter Sacks in *The English Elegy*—of man’s “submission” to language, to the law of the

father, as that which will rescue us from grief by barring us from the death wish, the desire for undifferentiated union with the mother.³⁶ Language may indeed be imagined as transcending loss by the substitutiveness of representation: the signifier displaces the signified; in place of the dead lover, the lovely elegy. But the authoritarian rhetoric often used to keep the notion of the “symbolic order” in place—like the moral rhetoric sometimes used by psychoanalysts to prohibit “excessive” grief and keep the notion of the “substitute” in place—is problematic. It is not, in my view, possible to speak of “submissions” and “subjections” and “renunciations” as “health,” as a “working through” of grief. It is not possible to speak of the “acceptance” of loss without simultaneously denying loss. That renunciation, acceptance, and closure are so commonly insisted upon both by the elegy and by theoretical and critical treatments of the genre must, then, give us pause. Marcuse, in his essay on “The Ideology of Death,” wrote that the inculcation of the acceptance of death has been the ground for all forms of domination; and though Marcuse is not overmuch in fashion now, we need to ponder his words.³⁷ When “health” is defined as submission to the rule of law, a subjection for which we are to be compensated by figures that transcend immortality and individuality, then we need a political reading of the elegy, of theories of the elegy, and of elegiac theory.

We need to understand how the elegy presents itself as “representing” the external authorities (Nature, God, Necessity, Being-unto-Death) to which we are supposed to submit. But we also need to understand how the elegy *creates* and *produces* authority *as* external, inevitable—as something to which we must submit if we are to inherit, if anyone is to listen to us or speak to us, if nothing else is to be taken from us. Elegies construct power; they threaten us with retribution, with deprivation and isolation. Regarding, in particular, the question of the “entry” into language—whereby the elegist, by renouncing the lost object, acquires language and hence poetry—we are obliged to ask: is it the case that the grieving subject does not want to talk to us? Might it not rather, or at least also, be that we do not want to talk to the grieving subject? We should recall here both the strong antagonism directed toward the “narcissism” of grief in a number of treatments of the subject—for example, in Judith Ferster’s description of the grieving knight in the *Book of the Duchess* as “wallowing in self-indulgent grief”—and Tobin Siebers’s argument, in *The Mirror of Medusa*, that the “narcissist” is constructed as such by the community that wishes to expel him.³⁸ It is important to consider in this light both the extent to which the elegy itself can function as a privatiza-

tion of communal loss, and the ways in which studies of grief in general, and of the elegy in particular, sometimes make use of psychoanalytic concepts to distance their subject from politics and society. All writers on mourning remind us of how grief impoverishes the subject's world; and if grief is that negation of desire which participates most closely in the world-destroying character of physical pain, we should remember, with Elaine Scarry, the many ways in which the infliction and experiencing of pain are caught up in our sociality.³⁹

If many elegies try to threaten the masculine mourner with isolation if he continues to grieve unremittingly, and try to buy him off with promises of future wealth, life and power — e.g., the various ways in which Chaucer's narrators are impelled, coerced, bribed into action — does something different happen for the feminine mourner? To the degree that the elegy concerns itself with the rescuing of fertility from biological birth and death — from what Maurice Bloch calls the “spectre of a tyrannical biology” — and to the degree that biological birth and death, alias nature, alias the mother, are identified in the elegy with women, we need, in particular, a reading of elegiac misogyny.

Let us begin with a summary of Maurice Bloch's views on the ways in which authority, in what he calls “traditional” cultural systems, makes use of death. In such systems, authority legitimates itself by representing itself as participating in an eternal and unchanging order. Contingency, individuality, the brute facts of biological birth and death, all pose a threat to traditional authority's attempts to eternalize itself. If the individual were to be valued, then its passing away would be a grievous blow. So traditional systems valorize unity, identity, continuity; division and difference must be triumphed over in order to assert the eternity of undifferentiated community. Death is proclaimed as a new beginning, as regenerative. And women, perhaps because of their association with biological birth, are with sobering frequency made to stand, in mortuary rituals, for division, death, and sorrow.⁴⁰

Also, in essays on the *Book of the Duchess*, all too frequently the dead, the woman, and the elegy itself are abandoned in favor of some form of transcendence. Duncan Harris and Nancy Steffen, for example, explain that

Chaucer's poem is far more than [an] . . . elegy . . . death . . . is only a part of the larger process of living which surrounds and subsumes it — not that death should be ignored, for that would deny the loss, nor that it should be isolated and dwelt upon, for that would

be taking the part for the whole, but that death should be seen and accepted in the broad context of the kind of life which Chaucer's portrayal of Blanche exemplifies.⁴¹

Chaucer creates "a context of emotional possibilities whereby grief may be ordered and exorcised." For Harris and Steffen, then, it is not enough for a poem to be an elegy, because somehow that would make it a poem just about death and not enough about life, hence not sufficiently ordered. In their essay we find concepts of law and order, of equilibrium, of rational balance—concepts which George Pigman finds strikingly in evidence in "anxious" or "rigorist" elegies of the Renaissance.⁴² For Harris and Steffen, too, the ordering of grief slides easily into the expulsion of grief through exorcism. They insist that death is a part of the larger whole of life, that to isolate grief would be to take the part for the whole, would be to isolate oneself; we see here the fear that the elegy itself may be thus isolated (hence the claim that the elegy is so much more than an elegy). Finally, the duchess Blanche—the lady lost in the *Book of the Duchess* to the grieving man in black—is treated, not as a woman who died of the plague, but as an *exemplification of life* itself.

These are widespread strategies for the revivification of the elegy. It is Robert Edwards' view that, in the *Book of the Duchess*, metapoetics is of greater "critical importance" than elegy: the poem is of interest not because Blanche died and John of Gaunt grieved for her, but because "it is at once example and paradigm—[Chaucer's] first long poem and his first treatment of the aesthetic problems of writing narrative."⁴³ Blanche is to be superseded in one other way; Edwards, comparing the *Book of the Duchess* to the *Vita Nuova*, explains that while Blanche is "a paragon of social virtue and conduct," she thereby "exists under the limits of earthly counterparts"; Beatrice, on the other hand, transcends such limits, and "participates fully in the perfection of the Virgin."⁴⁴ For R. A. Shoaf, too, the Man in Black's love for Blanche must give way to Love: the Man in Black is mistaken because he "attempted a wholeness without the whole truth"—he was, again, partial, isolated and isolating, in need of reconciliation to time and pain. "In order that the whole may mean," writes Shoaf (glossing Augustine), "the parts must die."⁴⁵ How does the emphasis on wholeness—put another way, the anxiety of isolation—reflected in this critical tradition actually work, if indeed it does work, in Chaucer's poetry? To what extent does the *Book of the Duchess* forbid—and yet "produce"—the grief of, and grief for, a woman?

The *Book of the Duchess* begins with a paralyzed, insomniac, melancholy narrator, unable to feel, let alone do, anything:

. . . by my trouthe, I take no kep
Of nothing, how hyt cometh or gooth,
Ne me nys nothyng leef nor looth.

6-8

By the end of the poem, the narrator has been revived as much as the Man in Black; he has moved from a deathlike state to the creation of poetry.

Thoghte I, "Thys ys so queynt a sweven
That I wol, be processe of tyme,
Fonde to put this sweven in ryme
As I kan best, and that anoon."
This was my sweven; now hit ys doon.

1330-34

The poem itself stands as proof: the narrator has been revived as much as the Man in Black; he has moved from a deathlike state to the creation of poetry. Writing, then, is life, not death. The poem devotes considerable attention and machinery to the circumstances of its own production: it tells the story of the narrator's origin as poet, as much as it tells the story of Blanche's death and her grieving Man in Black; and to make Blanche's death the occasion for the birth of this poem would certainly be to proclaim death's regenerative powers. Is this the beginnings of an indication that, as Bloch might put it, the *Book of the Duchess* is engaged in fabricating an ideal social order out of the remains of the dead?⁴⁶

But what, precisely, is being restored? The narrator alludes mysteriously in his opening passage to the cause of his long melancholy, but we are never told what it is. Moreover, when he raises the question, he rapidly changes the subject and says we must keep to our "first mater" (43). This marks a displacement which is never re-placed in the *Book of the Duchess*. If the events narrated in the poem offer a kind of "healing" to the narrator's illness, the process remains unconscious throughout, grief is isolated from its cause, and defense remains in place. Even if we were to read the Man in Black as a projection of the dreamer's own death wish, he is never owned as such; and the making-conscious that Judith Ferster finds salvific for the Man in Black at poem's end must be recognized as, at least in part, a displacement of the dissolution of denial.⁴⁷ If the Man in Black has to say "She ys ded" before the "hert-huntyng" can end and he can ride "homwardes" to Richmond, the narrator need say nothing of the kind. Still, we might take "she is dead" as the kernel, so to speak, of the narrator's own malaise, even as the kernel of his desire;

Chaucer, after all, makes Alcyone die of sorrow, a death which most critics read as suicidal.⁴⁸ But if the Man in Black's "She ys ded" is the poet's recognition that he has had to kill the woman (Alcyone) to write his poem, it is a distanced recognition indeed.

Of great importance in this connection is the fact that one of the most tonally awkward moments in the poem is the very moment of Alcyone's death. What happens is this: the narrator cannot sleep; he orders an attendant to give him a book, in which he finds Ovid's story of "Seys" and "Alcyone." In Chaucer's version, as in Ovid's, Seys the king is drowned in a storm one day; when he does not return from his voyage, Alcyone, distraught, prays to Juno that she be granted a "certeyn sweven"

"Wherthourgh that I may knowen even
Whether my lord be quyk or ded."

120-21

Following orders from Juno, Morpheus creeps into Seys's drowned body and appears to Alcyone in her sleep. His tone and diction are compassionate and tender:

. . . "My swete wyf,
Awake! Let be your sorwful lyf,
For in your sorwe there lyth no red. . . .
But, goode swete herte, that ye
Bury my body, for such a tyde
Ye mowe hyt fynde the see besyde;
And farewel, swete, my worldes blysse!
I praye God youre sorwe lysse.
To lytel while our blysse lasteth!"

201-211

To Morpheus-Seys's request that he be given a proper burial, and to his wish that Alcyone's sorrow might abate, Alcyone turns what has been recognized by a number of critics to be a deaf ear (Ferster refers to her subsequent death as "suicide by misinterpretation"⁴⁹):

With that hir eyen up she casteth
And saw noght. "Allas!" quod she for sorwe,
And deyede within the thridde morwe.

212-14

The narrator goes on to say that he will tell us no more of what Alcyone said in her swoon, for it would take too long: "My first matere I wil yow

telle" (218). Alcyone and Seys are not the "first matere", but only subsidiary to it; and the narrator's decision to return to this "first matere" once again marks a displacement. The narrator has good reason for his brevity, since in Ovid, Morpheus-Ceyx asks that Alcyone

"Get you up, then, and weep for me, put on your mourning garments, and let me not go unlamented to the cheerless land of shades."⁵⁰

— and Alcyone's lamentation concludes with a vow at least to link her name with Ceyx's on a carved tomb, since she believes his body cannot be recovered. She then goes to the sea simply to grieve; Ceyx's body drifts in, she goes to meet it, and they are turned into halcyon birds, which signify tranquillity on the seas.

Ovid's Alcyone, then, is not at odds with what is asked of her, nor does she "allow" herself to die of sorrow. She remains in relationship to Ceyx and to the gods until the end of the story. But Chaucer *isolates* his Alcyone from her dead husband; not only is she unable to join him in metamorphosis, she is unable to care for the import of Morpheus-Seys's words and attempt his proper burial. She is cut off. She is verbally cut off as well; Ovid's Alcyone utters a high complaint which leads to her vow; Chaucer's says, "Allas! . . . / And deyede within the thridde morwe." The brevity of this conclusion — in stark contrast, again, to the comparatively leisurely unfolding of Ovid's conclusion — is at best awkward, at worst crude and almost funny. We should perhaps recall Freud's analysis of the kind of joke that excludes woman by objectifying her body for the pleasure of the audience.⁵¹ I am, of course, arguing that the elegy — despite its usual humorlessness — does something similar; and it is fitting, in an awful kind of way, that of all the tonally odd moments in this elegy, the oddest of all should be this moment of Alcyone's death.

Harris and Steffen have tried to defend the humor with which Alcyone's story is treated on the grounds that a poem about varied responses to grief might well have varied tones. Like many other readers, they are critical, too, of the manner of her death: Alcyone makes a minor deity of her grief; her death is accordingly a "parodic mirroring," an "unsuccessful" version of the Man in Black's consolation.⁵² The point is not ill-taken; for the narrator, speaking later on to the Man in Black, vehemently argues against suicide; it is the Man in Black's rescue from some form of death by sorrow that the narrator has in mind. Surely, then, one of Alcyone's functions is to illustrate what Bloch and Parry would call

a “bad” death, a death that is selfish, that surrenders to the disappointed desires of life; a death that acts for itself alone, a death that — unlike the good death — loses for others its regenerative power, fails to hand on fertility to the living.⁵³ Alcyone’s failure to bury Seys thus takes on the greatest possible force; for in Ovid, it is Ceyx’s properly lamented entry into the afterlife that is at stake. In Bloch’s account, moreover, suicide is the bad death par excellence, in part because it “parodies” the good kind of death, the ultimate manifestation of altruistic self-abnegation; and this may account for why so many critics think of Alcyone’s death as suicidal. But the pious characterological judgments so repeatedly uttered about Alcyone’s death do not question why her isolation is chosen for her by her creator. If she is narcissistic, if she comes to represent something like individuality or difference — as opposed to the good of the community — it is because Chaucer has, once again, cut her off.

We should note, too, that earlier on in the story — just after Alcyone realizes that Seys is missing — the narrator remarks parenthetically that he

Had such pittee and such rowthe
To rede hir sorwe that, by my trowthe,
I ferde the worse al the morwe
Aftir to thenken on hir sorwe.

97–100

But this expression of sympathy, this sense of her sorrow and of how he might be affected by it, does not find a place later on in the narrative — he wakes up thinking, not about Alcyone, but about writing a poem. Nor does a similar expression of sympathy or emotion follow upon the narrator’s description of Alcyone’s death. It is not grief which Alcyone gives to the narrator, but something rather more like an idea, an inspiration, a lead-in to his dream, the pastoral setting of which is in stark contrast to the bleak tones of Alcyone’s story. In this sense, Alcyone *does* hand something on to the living — but she hands it on only by being herself cut off. She does not sacrifice herself; she is sacrificed to the poem’s need to create its antithesis, its image of what must be mastered in order for life to go on. Chaucer makes her story tragic so that he can undo a tragedy and rewrite it as comic. Metamorphosis — the future — is not for Alcyone, but for the narrator, for his poem, and to some extent for the Man in Black.

At this point we should return briefly to the problem of the humor of the *Book of the Duchess*. If the grievousness of Alcyone’s story is deflected, it is because part of the poem’s purpose is to make us feel good about

death. Such a genial elegy could perhaps not fail to do otherwise. While, in the *Book of the Duchess*, we feel to some degree the pain of the Man in Black's loss, his complaint is brief and conventional; moreover, he devotes most of his time and energy to describing Blanche's virtues, telling the story of their relationship, or railing against her antithesis, the filthy and monstrous woman that is Fortune. To say that these are the Man in Black's defenses, not those of the poem, is not entirely fair; for while we are meant to see that the splitting of Blanche's image into ideal and monster is part of the knight's illness, the poem in fact replicates this kind of splitting in its contrast of Alcyone's "bad" mourning with the Man in Black's "good" mourning. We are given a kind of knowledgeable, compassionate, therapeutic understanding of the grief of the Man in Black, and allowed simultaneously to defend ourselves from his grief through his defenses. His final, long-delayed admission—"She ys ded"—breaks in with considerable power; but we have come to recognize brevity as defensive in this poem, and while the brevity of "She ys ded" is in important contrast to the rhetorical fulgency of the knight's delaying tactics, the poem from this point on moves so rapidly to its conclusion that we have little time to feel grief before restless new life is upon us. In this elegy, brevity, like humor, keeps us moving along; it defends against the kind of paralysis and fixation that Chaucer's narrators so frequently experience, and that prevents Anelida's high complaint from going anywhere.

That occasional appeals to comedy might be said to *allow* the representation of difficult and painful material that would otherwise be unexpressed is, however, a point we should not fail to appreciate. This essay, unfortunately, has had no time to examine some of the ways the *Book of the Duchess* allows us to grieve.⁵⁴ But I have thought it of the first importance to establish both that a political reading of grief is crucial in understanding the *Book of the Duchess*, and that such a reading might make it difficult for us to identify with elegiac coercions. If we are to discover in the *Book of the Duchess* any sense of the inseparability of loss and of love, we can do so only by first recognizing how hard this elegy tries to keep them asunder.

The *Book of the Duchess*, like the tradition of commentary on it, suggests the presence of anxieties about isolation, change, death— anxieties, we have argued, that have also influenced our theorizations of medieval studies. If, as we have suggested, the masculine mourner is threatened with isolation if he continues to grieve unremittingly, and is bought off with promises of future wealth, life, and power, it is not merely a glib analogy to propose that something similar has happened to the predomi-

nantly (at least until recently) masculine critic of Chaucer. For the possibility of non-recurrence — the absolute loss of the particular — and the consequently discontinuous (and artficed) quality of our continuities, have been routinely mystified by our figurations of the relation between modernity and the Middle Ages. At stake has been the founding of the (masculine) critic on a transcendence (however difficult or impossible) of the loss of our communality with the past. The very otherness ascribed to the past by historicism is insisted upon *in order to* found the heroism, the vitality, the fertility of the attempt to “know” the historical other and restore communality with it. Hence the urge not only to read Chaucerian elegy as fundamentally reparative, but also to contain the elegiac itself — to keep it, for example, within the borderlines of the *Book of the Duchess*.

The “past” continues to have authority for Chaucerians as that which knows itself fully and whose knowledge, though inaccessible, must be recovered. One of the most important theoretical contributions feminist theory can make to the project of historical understanding is analysis of the construction of authority in the practice and theory of historical knowledge. It is true that such analysis will not encourage either the hope of a full reparation of our relation to a lost past, or a secure conviction that the dead do not haunt the living. From the standpoint of feminist theory, the notion that the Middle Ages was fully present to itself is as problematic as is the notion that we need to reconstruct such a fullness of self-understanding, or the notion — for that matter — that the “past” is indeed over, that “past” and “present” can be distinguished with absolute conviction. A deconstruction of alterity such as feminist theory might assist would make possible fresh consideration of whether and how we might define the particularities of past and present, and whether and how we might understand, not their “identity,” but their interstitiality. Such a deconstruction of alterity could note, then, that what is celebrated as “other” by some scholars might not seem “other” to “others,” specifically that what seems historically other to men might not seem so to women. It is indeed the case that, from the standpoint of feminist theory, the inadequately compensated appropriation of women’s resources, and the ideological justifications for such appropriation, have had a long history, though this does *not* mean that we neglect the specific historical manifestations of these phenomena. One difference, then, that feminist scholarship can make to our understanding of the Middle Ages is the production of different senses of the nature and significance of medieval differences from modernity than have hitherto been available. From the

standpoint of "this sex which is not one" but the Other,⁵⁵ the concept of the "alterity" of the past cannot continue to be treated exclusively as an apolitical and indeed ahistorical hermeneutic problem, but must be theorized concomitantly in terms of our knowledge of culturally specific needs, fantasies, fears, and practices involved in the construction of otherness.

Our efforts to understand the workings of death within our own works on death should, then, help us to appreciate the extent to which loss informs the most central theoretical, critical, and practical practices being undertaken by Chaucerians today. If we can grieve for our particular losses, *and* admit futurity to our interpretations, we can perhaps begin to outline an alternative to the hermeneutics of transcendence. In doing so we could perhaps recognize that the seeking of community in the form of undifferentiated unions or of unions predicated on identity can never be anything other than a defense against loss; we could also consider the possibility that historical community might be re-imagined as the promise of relationship between irreducible particularities — between, most obviously in the case of this essay's goals, our modernity and Chaucer's medievalism. In doing so, we might be able to construct a medievalism that is politically compassionate.

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N O T E S

This essay is drawn primarily from "Loss and Reparation in Chaucer's Poetry," a paper I delivered at the Conference on "History/Text/Theory: Reconceiving Chaucer" held at the University of Rochester in April, 1988. The essay also draws upon material from two other sources: the reading of the *Book of the Duchess* which appears at the end of the paper was first presented as "The Rhetoric of Consolation in Chaucer's Poetry" for a special session of the 1987 Modern Language Association Convention; and some of the remarks on the relation between medieval studies and feminism are taken from my paper on "Deconstructing the Past: Feminism and Alterity," given at the New Chaucer Society Conference in Vancouver, B.C., August 1988. I am working on a full-length study of *Chaucer's Voice Memorial*. Some of my thoughts on alterity have already been expressed in my article on "Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the *Priores's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 1 (1989): 69-115.

1. "Anelida and Arcite," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), based on *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 8-14. All citations of Chaucer's poetry are taken from this edition.

2. *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, Bollingen Series LXXX, trans. C. S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 23.46–69. All citations of the *Paradiso* are taken from this edition.

3. Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 37, notes that

. . . in Greece the right to mourn was from earliest times legally connected to the right to inherit. . . . Furthermore, the ancient law prevented anyone from inheriting *unless* he mourned. . . . the elegy clarifies and dramatizes this emergence of the true heir.

The point is suggestive, as we shall see, not only for the social and reproductive future of the Man in Black in Chaucer's the *Book of the Duchess*, but also for the poetic future of that poem's narrator.

4. Though I take issue with some of its assumptions and emphases, Lee W. Patterson's *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), has been important to all of my discussions of medieval studies, including the present one: his first two chapters constitute the most significant discussion of Chaucerianism and historicism to date, and his analysis of Exegetic historicism, and of the totalizing impulses therein, is particularly cogent. He notes (45) that

the effect of . . . historiographical totalization is to annul opposition. Not only is the possibility that a text might stand against the cultural hegemony of its historical moment rendered improbable, but the historical moment itself (and especially if it is the Middle Ages) is endowed with a monolithic uniformity that effaces the contradictions and disruptions that made, and can continue to make, social change possible.

Unfortunately, Patterson does not undertake an adequate scrutiny either of the differences made by recent initiatives in Chaucer criticism or of the principle of the absoluteness of alterity: "the difference between past and present must be both absolute and yet, if history is to be written at all, negotiable" (xiii). The question of how we are to define what is "past" and what is "present" is not taken up in *Negotiating the Past*—the question is not even really recognized as a question—which puts Patterson, where this theoretical problem is concerned, not much further along than D. W. Robertson, Jr.:

. . . I have used "the past" simply as a convenient expression. Actually, we know very little about the past beyond the dubious evidence of our memories, which are always colored by the present. . . . The historian . . . concerns himself with the order and significance of the detritus of the past in the present, not with the past itself, which is unapproachable.

See "Some Observations on Method in Literary Studies," in *New Directions in Literary History*, ed. Ralph Cohen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 71–72. Patterson's introduction to *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380–1530* (forthcoming from the University of California Press), develops with greater fullness his views on the dilemmas faced by scholars wishing to work with theoretical approaches too readily condemned as "transhistorical."

5. I have explored the historicity both of prolepsis and of archaism in connection with the Wife of Bath in my essay "The Wife of Bath's Passing Fancy," *SACb* 8 (1986): 31-58.

6. Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, 33-34.

7. Robertson, "Some Observations on Method," 75.

8. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," trans. Joan Riviere, *General Psychological Theory*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 164-79; and Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, "A Poetics of Psychoanalysis: 'The Lost Object—Me,'" *SubStance* 43 (1984): 3-18.

9. Paul Olson, *The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 16-18, writes:

. . . Recent Chaucerian criticism sometimes discovers in Chaucer's Canterbury fictions the emergence of controversial points of view belonging to the sixteenth, eighteenth, or later centuries, views opposed to the views of Chaucer's circle and of the rulers whom he served and contrary to any conscious understanding assigned to the poet in his age. . . . The controversy posited by modern criticism often argues issues of social class, capitalism, romantic love, and political marriage that no one articulated in Chaucer's age. . . . When historical-sociological analysis is done meaningfully, the *Canterbury Tales* first receive what the linguist Kenneth Pike calls an *emic* description, one that examines Chaucer's language from within the linguistic and semiotic system available to the poet's court. . . . To read as Barthes advocates . . . makes understanding poetry only an act of *seeing as*. It no longer requires *seeing*, to use Wittgenstein's phrase. . . . When we have achieved [an] understanding [of Chaucer's way of life, language and system of usage], we have done the critic's first job. We may then, if we wish, look at him with modern eyes and even decide that we despise his vision and dislike his artifice. We ought not flinch. Better so to reject the poet than to make him the Narcissus image of our own historical or semiological fantasies.

I discuss this passage more fully in "Criticism, Anti-Semitism and the *Prioress's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 1 (1989): 72-74.

10. D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 330-31.

11. *Ibid.*, 3.

12. Susan Schibanoff's "Taking the Gold Out of Egypt: The Art of Reading as a Woman," in Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocino P. Schweickart, eds. *Gender and Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 83-106, is very helpful on the subject of medieval depictions of women readers as incapable of proper reverence for, and hence understanding of, (male) authorities. See, in particular, her discussion of the *Querelle de la Rose*, in which Gontier Col described Christine de Pisan as "a woman impassioned in this matter, out of presumption or arrogance" (*La Querelle de la Rose*: *Letters and Documents*, trans. Joseph L. Baird and John R. Kane, North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, 199 [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978], 60) and Jean Gerson was "accused of reading like a woman": "he is simply the kind of man who is rendered useless for the propagation of the species, which is, after all, the purpose of this book" (Baird and

Kane, 154). The complexities of the *Querelle* thus appear to include a fear that masculine claims to certain forms of immortality—reproductive as well as literary—were being threatened by the deviant interpretations of women and “useless” men.

13. Robertson writes that the Wife of Bath’s “entire sermon is designed to resist . . . rejuvenation” of the kind involved in “stripping off the old man and putting on the new” (*A Preface to Chaucer*, 330). I have discussed some of the implications of the Wife’s—and her critics’—concern with the passage of time in “The Wife of Bath’s Passing Fancy.”

14. “Some Observations on Method,” 73; and, for Robertson’s uncertainties about memory, see n. 4 *supra*.

15. I argue later on in this essay the relevance of cultural associations of woman with loss to the study of the elegy; but I want briefly to suggest here some of the institutional and theoretical implications of such an association. For if, and when, woman is constructed as the site of loss—made responsible, in any way, for mortality—her capacity to participate in that form of tribal or cultural knowledge which we call history, will inevitably be in doubt or denied altogether. Assertions of the “trans-historicism” or “ahistoricism” of feminist scholarship—assertions which ignore the important contributions made by feminist scholars to historical knowledge—should, in this connection, be treated with utmost caution. Even a book as generally sensitive to the insights of modern theory as is Patterson’s *Negotiating the Past* largely ignores both feminist scholarship and its theoretical potential for a critique of the “monologic idealism of traditional historicism.” If it is true that the complicity of so much Exegetical historicism with medieval misogyny springs not from an embrace of, but from a refusal of, our contingency, we need to face up to this fact. We also need to consider the possibility that the challenge directed by Exegetics against the “very existence” of the “individual” (Patterson, 33) may also spring from a resistance to mortification—in this case, from a defense against unrepeatability. For a collection of essays which documents the early and continuing concerns of feminist scholarship with history, see Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory: the Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Of the many recent collections exemplifying feminist historical research, I will cite only three: *Women in Medieval History and Historiography*, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986); and Christine Klapisch-Zuber’s brilliant *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), which contains a number of essays that should be of interest to Chaucerians.

16. In psychoanalytic literature, “splitting” is one of the most important defense mechanisms; it has the function of protecting ideality (most often, the “good” mother) from danger (the “bad” mother, i.e. the dangers threatened by the psyche’s own internal aggression) and hence from loss. It is particularly prominent during processes of mourning. See Edward R. Shapiro, “The Psychodynamics and Developmental Psychology of the Borderline Patient: A Review of the Literature,” *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 135 (1978): 1305–1314, at 1307.

17. I can give the doubleness of discourses on mourning only limited attention here, and want to add that this essay emphasizes the defensiveness rather than the

creativity of Chaucer's treatment of loss. This is because I am currently uncertain how to discuss the enabling functions of loss without falling back into a figuration of loss in relation to transcendence and mastery. The seriousness of this problem—the reason it is a problem—will become clearer after our discussion of the literature on mourning. For now, I will just note how “critical” my critical approach will be in this essay: I am trying to point to difficulties that have not been fully appreciated before, that may even be said to have been screened by the identificatory involvement of so much Chaucer criticism in certain Chaucerian refusals of mourning.

18. Jacques Derrida, “Living On: Border Lines,” trans. James Hulbert, in Harold Bloom, et. al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 75–176.

19. That is, Derrida makes an essential contribution to our understanding of mourning when he shows that belief in the absolute fixity of the borderline between life and death can be seen to authorize the fixity of borderlines—of hypostases, of absolute categories—in general. At the same time, however, it must be recognized that a too-easy acceptance of the interpenetration of the “living” and the “dead” can obscure and hence defend against the unrepeatability of particulars. One could wish that Derrida's “Living On” might have been considered in Herbert Marcuse's brilliant essay on “The Ideology of Death,” in *The Meaning of Death*, ed. Herman Feifel (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 64–76—an essay which has strongly influenced my thinking, and which analyzes the relations between the treatment of death in Western philosophy and larger cultural strategies of domination. We should, moreover, reflect for a moment on the fact that a good deal of modern theory has devoted itself to the understanding of linguistic loss. Theorists—especially deconstructionists—have pondered the effects of a theology of transcendence on our understanding of signification, and the play of presence and absence has been, in the recent past, so important to the study of interpretation that the very words have unfortunately become, for some people at least, the epitome of theoretical cliché. But while loss has in fact been crucial to the work of Lacan, Kristeva, and Derrida, to name just a few, one of the most serious “blindnesses” of much recent theory remains its inability to substantiate—to thematize explicitly—its own grief. There is a need for more explicit attention to the workings of loss and reparation, not just in medieval studies, but in hermeneutics and modern theory in general. Derrida himself usefully problematizes the notion of a “true mourning” in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, and Eduardo Cadava (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 22 ff. Ned Lukacher's *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) is another important new work that links the problem of mourning to hermeneutic questions.

20. Robert Edwards, “The *Book of the Duchess* and the Beginnings of Chaucer's Narrative” *NLH* 13 (1982): 189–204, at 199. In “Stalking the Sorrowful H(e)art: Penitential Lore and the Hunt Scene in Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*” (*JEGP* 78 [1979]: 313–24), R. A. Shoaf also writes that the *Book of the Duchess* “marks the beginning of a new poetry in English: a poetry which transcends the conventions of amorous rhetoric as it strives to recover the reality of Love” (324). Shoaf, then, sees a move toward transcendence of earthly love within the *Book of the Duchess* that is then repeated in Chaucer's later poetry.

21. The whole passage reads:

Upon this word we han assented soone,
 For, as it seemed, it was for to doone –
 To enden in som vertuouus sentence,
 And for to yeve hym space and audience,
 And bade oure Hoost he sholde to hym seye
 That alle we to telle his tale hym preye.
 Oure Hoost hadde the wordes for us alle;
 “Sire preest,” quod he, “now faire yow bifalle!”
 “Telleth,” quod he, “youre meditacioun.
 But hasteth yow; the sonne wole adoun;
 Beth fructuous, and that in litel space,
 And to do wel God sende yow his grace!
 Sey what yow list, and we wol gladly heere.”

X.61-73

The passage stresses, in addition to the unity of the pilgrims, the “fructuousness” of a “vertuous” ending.

22. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, eds. *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 32.

23. Victor Turner, in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), contrasts (96)

society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of “more” or “less” [and] society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.

24. I would argue that the emphasis on the “spirit of tolerance and generosity,” “experience,” broad-mindedness and humour, “solidarity between the social classes, the cultivation of ‘larger sympathies,’ [and] the instillation of national pride. . .” which Terry Eagleton finds in the nineteenth century’s ideological formation of English studies – and which nineteenth-century critics found quintessentially in Chaucer, the father of English poetry – is still at work in Chaucerianism, and moreover can still be read “in” the *Canterbury Tales* – though, of course, “in” a very different context (that of the intensifying interest in corporate and indeed “national” entities in the later Middle Ages, and in particular of the Hundred Years’ War). See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 27; and see Ernst H. Kantorowicz’s section on “Pro patria mori” (232–72) in his *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

25. Lorraine D. Siggins, “Mourning: A Critical Survey of the Literature,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 47 (1966): 14–25, at 20.

26. Susan Snyder, “The Left Hand of God: Despair in Medieval and Renaissance Tradition,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 12 (1965): 18–59. She writes (20–21):

As a deadly sin *tristitia* had an early place among the seven [deadly sins]; but it is also a necessary part of Christian life. One must sorrow for one’s sins be-

fore they can be forgiven. . . . Paul provided the point of departure for later writers, in a key passage that distinguished between *tristitia* "secundum Deum," which works repentance and leads to salvation, and *tristitia* "saeculi," which works death (2 Cor. 7.10). Paul's "sorrow according to God" is clearly that penitent state later formalized as the first part of the sacrament of penance. Bede identifies it with the fruitful sorrow blessed by Christ in the third beatitude, "Beati qui lugent" (Matt. v.5) [*In Matt. evang.*, I, 5 (*Patrologiae cursus completus . . . series latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, Paris, 1844-1880, XCII, 24)]. The sorrow that works death is despair. This duality of *tristitia* became a commonplace. . . . The idea of despair as an excess or perversion of salutary contrition becomes increasingly important in later medieval thought. . . .

27. Siggins, 20-21.

28. Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1945): "What happens in mourning is nothing other than a gradual 'working through' of an affect which, if released in its full strength, would overwhelm the ego . . ." (162).

29. Sigmund Freud, "Negation," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (1961; reprint London: Hogarth Press, 1973), 19: 235-39.

30. Siggins, 17, citing Sigmund Freud, "Letter to Binswanger," in *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, ed. E. L. Freud (New York: Basic Books, 1960).

31. Siggins, 18.

32. Sacks, in *The English Elegy*, writes (5):

What . . . the poet pursues turns into a sign not only of his lost love but also of his very pursuit—a consoling sign that carries in itself the reminder of the loss on which it has been founded. . . . It is this substitutive turn or act of troping that any mourner must perform.

Sacks refers to Freud's letter to Binswanger at page 6.

33. John Bowlby, in *Attachment and Loss: Volume I: Attachment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1982), strongly stresses the role of "individual recognition and highly differentiated behaviour" (181) in both attachment and loss. Bowlby's work is a classic study of the issues related to mourning.

34. See Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 8 ff.; see also Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," in Alan Sheridan, trans. *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 30-113, who discusses the *fort-da* game in particular at 102 ff. Lacan's interpretation stresses that "the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing" (104), and that (103)

the subject is not simply mastering his privation by assuming it, but . . . is raising his desire to a second power. For his action destroys the object that it causes to appear and disappear in the anticipating *provocation* of its absence and its presence.

Sacks, in *The English Elegy*, discusses the *fort-da* game at 9 ff., linking it, as does Lacan, to the "entry into language" (10), to the representation of absence through a "substitutive figure," whereby "the groundwork has been laid for [the child's] . . . subse-

quent and more thorough submission to the laws of renunciation and symbolic codes" (11).

35. Applications of Saussurian linguistics to this scene might be rethought in terms of Derrida's recognition that the oppositions of structuralism speedily effloresce into a shifting multitude of discriminations, brought into relation at the very moment of their particularization: the sign cannot be analyzed as a unit containing an opposition between signified and signifier, but rather is a moment distilled out of a phonemic dash from cat to hat to rat. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 44 ff.

36. Writing of the role of "paternal intervention" in the elegy, Sacks (8) argues that

it is worth recognizing how thoroughly an important elaboration of Freud's Oedipus scenario stresses precisely this submission of the child to society's "symbolic order" of signs. According to Lacan, it is the figure of the father, representing the symbolic order, that formally intervenes between the child and the child's first object of attachment [i.e., the mother]. . . . In the elegy, the poet's preceding relationship with the deceased (often associated with the mother, or Nature, or a naively regarded Muse) is conventionally disrupted and forced into a triadic structure including the third term, death (frequently associated with the father, or Time, or the more harshly perceived necessity of linguistic mediation itself).

Father Death—that is, the power over life and death—is of course that which must be "accepted" or "submitted" to in Sacks's account of the elegy, and the mourning subject, in doing so, flouts the death instinct and his desire for (re)union with the (dead) mother. Sacks's account does indeed describe accurately the dynamics of many an elegy, but—like the Lacanian theory on which it is based—tends to absolutize and universalize what is in fact a *production* of a particular configuration of gender, loss, and language. Likewise, my argument with Lacanian theory is not with Lacan's stress on the lethal, as opposed to the masterful, aspects of identification and symbolization—the symbol is indeed not that which it symbolizes—but rather with his exclusive emphasis on the profound alienation produced by failures of identification, and by symbolization. The nature of relatedness between particulars—differences—must, for Lacan, be treated as a negativity; and insofar as this is true, Lacanian theory cannot help us significantly with understanding modes of relationship not predicated on identity.

37. He writes ("The Ideology of Death," 76):

Compliance with death is compliance with the master over death: the polis, the state, nature, or the god. Not the individual, but a higher power is the judge; the power over death is also the power over life.

No single quotation can do justice to the complexity of Marcuse's analysis of death as a "social institution" (73); in the light of recent controversies and revelations, however, it might be of interest to note in particular Marcuse's comments (68–69) on Heidegger's role in "the ontological affirmation of death . . . in the main stream of philosophy":

This tradition comes to a close in Heidegger's interpretation of human existence in terms of the anticipation of death—the latest and the most appropri-

ate ideological exhortation to death, at the very time when the political ground was prepared for the corresponding reality of death—the gas chambers and concentration camps of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, and Bergen-Belsen.

38. Judith Ferster, "Intention and Interpretation in the 'Book of the Duchess,'" *Criticism* 22 (1980): 1–24, at 16; Tobin Siebers, *The Mirror of Medusa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), esp. 57–86.

39. See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

40. This summary is taken from Maurice Bloch's and Jonathan Parry's "Introduction: Death and the Regeneration of Life" (1–44) and from Bloch's essay on "Death, Women and Power" (211–230) in Bloch and Parry, eds. *Death and the Regeneration of Life*.

41. Duncan Harris and Nancy L. Steffen, "The Other Side of the Garden: An Interpretive Comparison of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and Spenser's *Daphnida*," *JMRS* 8 (1978): 17–36, at 26.

42. G. W. Pigman, III, *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1–2 and 27.

43. Edwards, "The *Book of the Duchess* and the Beginnings of Chaucer's Narrative," 189.

44. *Ibid.*, 201.

45. Shoaf also compares the *Book of the Duchess* to the *Vita Nuova* in "Stalking the Sorrowful H(e)art," 324; and see his "'Mutatio Amoris': 'Penitentia' and the Form of the *Book of the Duchess*," *Genre* 14 (1981): 163–189, at 179, where Shoaf discusses St. Augustine's "discovery of the homology between death and the closure of (a) meaning" in the *Confessions*, Book 4:

In order that the whole may mean, the parts must die: God is writing the "sentence" of Creation (which He will declare at the Judgment Day) and each death, of any kind, is a syllable uttered in that "sentence."

46. The Man in Black is to return to Richmond and take up his duties as an aristocrat; he will return to reclaim his position in the social order. I take one of the poem's subtextual concerns to be the Man in Black's readiness to take a new wife; one of the ideological purposes of the *Book of the Duchess* may be to coordinate the "realities" of aristocratic reproduction with the eternal fidelity of *fin' amors*, and thus to narrativize a contradiction.

47. Ferster writes (21) that "She ys ded," is the knight's

first non-euphemistic and unselfish statement about [Blanche's] . . . death; his words . . . acknowledge an external reality he has previously tried to avoid.

48. If Chaucer makes Alcyone into a suicide, we cannot conclude, without further evidence, that he "wants" her to kill herself; but we can say that he "wants" to explore the meaning of her doing so.

49. Ferster, "Intention and Interpretation," 5–6.

50. *Metamorphoses* XI.167, trans. Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916).

51. Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, ed. A. A. Brill (New York: Random House, 1938), 692–97.

52. Harris and Steffen, "The Other Side of the Garden," 25.

53. Bloch and Parry, "Introduction," 16.

54. I am thinking, for example, of Chaucer's understanding of the com-passionating powers of language: its very ability to give "voice," and thereby communality, to the isolation of suffering and the suffering of isolation. Stephen Manning makes a similar point in his "Rhetoric as Therapy: The Man in Black, Dorigen, and Chauntecleer," *Kentucky Philological Association Bulletin* 5 (1978): 19-25; see also Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (50), on "acts that restore the voice," that bestow "visibility" on pain and suffering, that help the sufferer once again to become available to others through verbal and material artifacts. (I am suggesting, then, that Chaucer's poem adumbrates an approach to the elegy that invites the mourner into communality, rather than isolating the mourner and predicating re-inclusion in the community on the cessation of grief.) I am thinking also of how "She ys ded" and "By God, hyt ys routhe!" could be interpreted as a refusal of transcendent closure, and hence as marking the irreducibility of a particular loss. (Though brevity in the *Book of the Duchess* is frequently evasive, so is amplitude.) I am also thinking of the unusual sensitivity of Chaucer's apparent recognition that vituperation of female "Fortune" might at times be the product of rage against women whose bodies turn out to be mortal rather than "restyng place[s]" for (male) "Trouthe" (*Book of the Duchess*, 1003-05). A great deal more could be said about the enabling strategies of Chaucer's poem, but will have to be said in another place.

55. I refer to the title *This Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke's translation of Luce Irigaray's *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977).