

THE INVENTION AND REINVENTION OF THE MIDDLE AGES: WRITERS, READERS, AND THE  
COMPOSITION OF TEXT

by

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(Under the Direction of William A. Kretzschmar)

ABSTRACT

“The Invention and Reinvention of the Middle Ages: Writers, Readers, and the Composition of Text” focuses on the multiplicity of historical eras as produced within the narratives written within those time periods. By interpreting and comparing pairs of texts from the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century, we see that the medieval period can exist both in chronological and narrative time. H.R. Jauss’s “horizon of expectations,” the theoretical idea that recognizes the variety of responses readers—and, by extension, writers—may have to a particular text, allows different interpretations of a single narrative to exist simultaneously. Multiple interpretations

mean that multiple historical periods can then exist. Jauss includes a discussion of genres and how they can be associated with representing these different time periods. Study of how various genres are invoked and then transformed in the narratives created by writers from both the medieval and nineteenth century then illustrate the existence of several Middle Ages that are the same chronologically but they fulfill several narrative, rhetorical goals.

Jocelin of Brakelond's *Chronicle of the Abbey at Bury St Edmunds*, a description of a twelfth-century monastery, is translated and "edited" by Thomas Carlyle in *Past and Present* (1843). Through his revision of Jocelin's chronicle, Carlyle also recreates the twelfth-century moment as a perfect image of society, one governed by a heroic and paternalistic leader who makes choices for those he governs. This historical image, crafted by Carlyle's narrative artistry, serves—Carlyle believes—as the ideal model of government England needs to emerge from social failings and revolutionary atmosphere they have encouraged. A comparison of these texts shows how both authors use multiple genres to meet their own rhetorical goals. In the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer reinvents the medieval genres of dream vision and romance within the late medieval period itself. William Morris, an admirer of Chaucer, combines both genres within the nineteenth-century narrative worlds he envisions in his novels: *A Dream of John Ball* (1886-87) and *News from Nowhere* (1890).

Even though an unavoidable doom pervades the late chapters of *Past and Present*, Carlyle tries to maintain confidence in his narrative. Morris, however, while never abandoning his medieval creation and desire to inhabit that world, knows that the

nineteenth century can never be contained inside this reinvented world; his resignation is obvious but does not stop efforts to escape.

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## DEDICATION

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1-8
2 METHODOLOGY.....	9-50
3 JOCELIN OF BRAKELOND AND <i>CHRONICLE OF BURY ST EDMUNDS</i> .....	51-63
4 THOMAS CARLYLE AND <i>PAST AND PRESENT</i> .....	64-82
5 GEOFFREY CHAUCER AND DREAM VISION: <i>BOOK OF THE DUCHESS</i> .....	83-95
6 GEOFFREY CHAUCER, THE DISENCHANTMENT OF ROMANCE, AND <i>THE KNIGHT'S TALE</i> .....	96-128
7 WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE DREAM OF MEDIEVAL PAST AND FUTURE: A <i>DREAM OF JOHN BALL AND NEWS FROM NOWHERE</i> .....	129-164
8 CONCLUSION.....	165-174
9 BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	175-179



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In chronological time, it is simple to see beginnings and endings, but despite its appearance of predictability, in reality, time constantly shifts. Writers know that time is anything but a static commodity and take advantage of its flexibility: “The writer . . . lives in a world free of time, able to dive back into the past, foretell the future or capture the single moment of composition” (Mortimer 3). All four writers considered here—Jocelin of Brakelond, Thomas Carlyle, Geoffrey Chaucer, and William Morris—rely on time’s flexibility to achieve different purposes, and studying their work from different historical perspectives confirms that there is no final ownership of interpretation. The differing versions of history they create are largely shaped by choice of genre. This dissertation, “The Invention and Re-invention of the Middle Ages: Writers, Readers, and the Composition of Text,” reviews how medieval England’s history and society, as well as its literary genres, have been—and continue to be—recast. When interpretation begins with comparing several approaches to the same text or genre, reader response theory can be an ideal way to read and review. There are several main branches of this theory, and the two discussed here are the work of H.R. Jauss and Lee Patterson. Based on opening appearances, Jauss’s theory depends on a broader, more inclusive foundation, with Patterson’s initial focus already on politically-driven discussion. With

further work it should be clear that Jauss may begin on a gentle incline, asking readers to make judgments based on the aesthetic appeal of a text, but that is merely the beginning of his investigational plan as seen in "The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature." As a reader continues with Jauss's program, the requirements for a supportable interpretation become more rigorous. Patterson's choice of political agenda as the exclusive entry into literary and historical discussion puts more demands at the beginning of interpretation but then offers little further opportunity for developing individuated reading experiences. Since my project includes not only modern but nineteenth-century and medieval readers who become the writers, the theory that can accommodate responses that can be surmised without absolute documentation is Jauss. Politics are certainly part of the discussion, but their absence does not end anyone's participation.

Besides a political agenda, social and personal concerns influence readers' responses to and writers' choices of genres, the common element in all the texts to be considered. Both the medieval and nineteenth-century authors look at traditional genres and then modify them to best serve their purposes. The nineteenth-century writers appropriate England's interest in its medieval past and how that history shaped medieval texts, past historical events and situations into explanations of their own century's problems. Carlyle, a conservative reactionary, and Morris, a liberal proto-Socialist, both create imaginatively detailed medieval worlds but reach different conclusions about the possibility and efficacy of imposing those societies on the nineteenth century. The messages they convey begin to show how many possible ways

traditional generic literary forms might be used. Both Carlyle and Morris have outspoken political beliefs, and those politics combine with social and artistic concerns; the reinvented genres emerging from such an amalgam of thought need interpretation that can address multiple concerns. Carlyle constructs a medieval monastic society that imitates what Carlyle's perfect nineteenth-century world would be: a class-driven world governed by an all-powerful member of the upper-class, powerful because he is wise; wise because he is upper-class. From the other end of the continuum, Morris dreams first of medieval past that is perfected before its fall in revolution. His second dream world is the more developed "future" Middle Ages, still a perfected society, and still, in spite of chronology, medieval. For all their contradictory beliefs, Carlyle and Morris share worry for industrial England.

The medieval writers also led strikingly different lives, but Jocelin and Chaucer both produced texts that rely on the unexpected and revised uses of genres, showing that Jauss's theory, which encourages reading that considers interpretive questions, can focus an interpretation on genre, something useful for early and late texts alike. Even though his abbey and abbots greater secular world, Jocelin's politics are more insular, as shown by his narrative. The title of "chronicle" tells a reader to look for chronologically-organized information with no additional explanation or context: Jocelin of Brakelond's *Chronicle of the Abbey at Bury St. Edmunds* reflects the title only in the loosest sense. The combination of diary, memoir, and social history does present accounts of events concerning the monastic community, but the accounts are not based solely on public record. They are enriched by Jocelin's intensely personal concerns, their inclusion

affecting decisions about content and genre. For example, the description of King John's visit to the abbey includes nothing about his conflicts with working class citizens or his place in world history. Instead, Jocelin complains that after King John has freely accepted the monastery's generous hospitality, he makes the paltry contribution of thirteen shillings to their coffers. For a modern reader, it is significant that Jocelin, a twelfth-century monk, uses genres that give the modern reader evidence that the medieval mind could create a world that conceived the concept of selfhood long before the Renaissance-Early Modern period. Acknowledging this awareness alongside Jocelin's vivid narrative changes how we think about the medieval era. This medieval author chooses genres not only according to precedent but because he decides they are most effective in achieving his rhetorical goals, at the least goals as they appear to the modern reader.

In the case of Chaucer, the modern reader can again focus on generic transformation. Dream visions and romances so frequently appear in medieval literature that the familiarity of their narrative style and characterization can result in a tedious repetition of form, but Chaucer's use of these typical categories is anything but ordinary. If a reader's progress across Jauss's hermeneutic bridges is limited by a lack of interest or knowledge, then the texts might appear impenetrable, but when a reader has historical and literary awareness, Chaucer's refiguring of genres has implications for interpretation. The outward forms of the dream vision and romance, their structural scaffolding, may be preserved, but the interior of each text is filled with material that, while disguised as traditional, enacts radical textual changes.

The nineteenth-century writers, Thomas Carlyle and William Morris, also chose genres that suited their rhetorical purposes, and each found a medieval writer with whom they felt a kinship. The genres the medieval writers chose suited the nineteenth-century writers' modes of expression and provided an opportunity for more reinvention. Carlyle's decision to "translate" Jocelin's Latin text gave him the material to craft another twelfth-century monk, a Jocelin whose simple character makes it necessary that a confident translator like Carlyle take control of the medieval chronicle. Now Carlyle is in the position to make the twelfth-century world of the abbey the template for an organized, peaceful society, and its power structure, as reinterpreted by Carlyle, is celebrated as the anecdote to England's woes in *Past and Present* (1843). A comparison of the medieval and Victorian societies gives Carlyle the material he needs to create a narrative history of England, a version of history that supports his argument. The detailed intimacy of Jocelin's memoir—within which resides the abbey's memoir—parallels the personal narrative style found in *Past and Present*, making it easier for Carlyle to incorporate sections of the *Chronicle*, often the precise descriptions that make Carlyle's version believable. He takes the genres that are ostensibly the equivalent to a chronicle and reinvents the characters of Jocelin and his abbot, Samson, so that they can speak to their immediate concerns as well as to those of the nineteenth-century, Carlyle's concerns. The resultant text imposes the Carlylean version of the twelfth-century on an uncontrolled society, maybe as imaginary parameters meant to hold the masses in check while greater powers, like a benign despot, make decisions. With an intensely personal focus, Carlyle makes his reinvention of the Middle Ages and literary

genre a successful one that finds a way to improve the “Condition of England,” changes that endorse his rhetoric and philosophy.

William Morris is probably the nineteenth-century artist and writer most obviously obsessed with the Middle Ages, connecting to the past by using the same genres as Chaucer when he combined his immediate present with the medieval past. Like Carlyle, he uses historical England to imagine two Englands, one before the workers’ revolution, one after and inserts himself as an obvious traveler and observer from a nineteenth century that represents the future and the past. His presence as the dreamer in both *A Dream of John Ball* (November 1886-January 1887) and *News from Nowhere* (1891), combining dream vision and romance, makes it impossible to separate the writer Morris from his literary self. His rhetorical goals and personal agenda are definitely public, and he speaks as the actual nineteenth-century man. Looking at their texts and rhetorical agendas, Morris differs from Carlyle in two specific ways: he does not adopt a persona, and he does not find solutions to contemporary questions after his narrative visits to the Middle Ages. In terms of comparing Morris and Chaucer, Morris reinvents the dream vision and romance by first combining them and then inserting his realistic self. When “Chaucer” the character or speaker appears, there is no apparent reason suggesting that “Chaucer” is actually Chaucer; to the reader, there is an appreciable distance between Chaucer and his characters. This narrative helps the medieval poet escape connection with disappointments found in the poetry, but the same cannot be said of Morris in the nineteenth century.

Genre organizes the discussion of all four writers, and the context of their historical moments shapes the nineteenth-century versions of genres, and historical narrative is predominantly included in all the genres. However the writers transform and sometimes combine genres, their experiments with form are meant to further rhetorical goals. One can see a long string of interpretations from different eras, examinations of genres and texts that show how an original form of text is re-written by its readers who want an earlier work to address a later problem. As they tried to find ways to fuse their belief systems with those of the nineteenth century, Carlyle and Morris choose genres to reinvent via their ideas of medieval England. The narrators they create have differing levels of belief in their enterprises. The “Editor” of *Past and Present* has a certain confidence, not exactly a positive outlook but more assurance in the answers he has found. The two William Morris dreamers, maybe personifying opposing sides of Morris, have experiences that are dependent on which medieval world inspires the dreams. From the moment of his appearance, the Morris in *A Dream of John Ball*, is resigned to the division between medieval and industrial England, knows that the revolution of his dream is also a historical event that saw the workers defeated. He still leaves his dream world with reluctance and wakes in the nineteenth century with renewed despair. In *News from Nowhere*, there is still a tremendous difference between a disgruntled nineteenth-century Morris and relaxed dreamer Morris who awakes in a renewed medieval world of the twenty-first century. After this dream, Morris is still disappointed to leave the futuristic past, but he has taken hope from the experience; since his vision materialized in the future, surely change might still occur.

The genres are shape-shifters, providing writers from distant centuries with connections to each other, and with more reinvention available through every new approach from writer or reader, genres remain viable forms of expression.



## CHAPTER TWO

### METHODOLOGY

In addition to time and genre, history does not exist unchanged within chronological limits. It plays an important part in the scheme of reinvention, and the frequency of its transformation into multiple narratives makes the necessity of “fact” seem rather unimportant. Certainly this dissertation sees an undeniable link between literature, history, and the types of writing that produce both. Searching for singular, absolute meaning in either realm is a dull enterprise, and as long as there is an informed awareness, like that hoped for by Jauss, the lack of absolutes is no cause for concern. The modern study of medieval literature was founded on an understanding of the historical moment that occurred alongside a work’s creation and initial reception. This moment was interpreted as a singular “truth” that was experienced by all readers, medieval and modern. As medieval studies entered the mid and late twentieth centuries, theorists began considering subjective approaches to medieval texts, and interpretations once considered objectively true were no longer dominant. Reader reception theory combined with a new concentration on an audience’s participation in a text’s development created even more interpretive possibilities. Along the way, New Historicism grew as kind of controlled reader reception that allows only a single interpretation restricted to a text. As we entered the twentieth-first century, these

theoretical paths, while having complimentary elements, battled each other for the interpretive high ground.

It is important to state at the outset that Jauss's theory provides a model rather than a list of requirements. Maybe in the spirit of his horizon of expectations, here is a reader's response that takes the spirit that controls a theory as a springboard to further work. My study of the following four writers is not a strictly Jaussian interpretation but rather a reading that is shaped by his main ideas. The writers—who are also readers—produce examples of text, considered literature by modern readers, that are strongly influenced by and inseparable from history. Jauss's theory, in its recognition of inclusiveness, multiplicity, and genres, encourages me to investigate not a single text but its layers that develop over time. I use these ideas to organize my approach to interpretation and comparison. One might say that Jauss inspires the way I think about the cycles of invention and reinvention, and his notion of constantly evolving reader response drives my thoughts about how each response, including my own, produces a new text reflective of a historical moment.

The three scholars whose work most interests me combine the traditional use of history in the interpretation of literature: C.S. Lewis, H.R. Jauss, and Lee Patterson. They have their own views of how the meaning of both history and literature relied on a set of incontrovertible "facts," and each contributed to the development of reader reception theory and the emergence of subjective reading. Alongside reader reception theory, New Historicism and its more narrowly focused vision of history, reader, and meaning is also a prominent theory. These theoreticians combine history with

literature, defining history and the way it is used in different ways. Although Lewis is definitely the most conservative of the three, his work was also progressive in the way it allows the reader to leave the text in order to immerse one's self in the text's historical moment. Lewis believes that intellectual immersion created a reader who resembled the original reader; while his theory could not actually produce such a reader, Lewis at least acknowledges that interest in the world surrounding a text might contribute to a fuller interpretation. H.R. Jauss enters the discussion as a theorist who understands Lewis and also believes that history should play a role in literary interpretation. In an effort to encourage more representative interpretations, his vision of history includes as many different subjective perspectives as there are readers. If a reader follows Jauss's interpretive path, it is not as Lewis's invented medieval reader but as a modern self. Finally, Lee Patterson redefines history in social and political terms, believing that modern subjectivity is inherently political, and both medieval and modern readers are therefore political. Their theories try to answer the question: "How should we read?"

We can follow the path of change beginning with Lewis. In his major works like *The Allegory of Love: studies in medieval tradition* (1936) and *The Discarded Image* (1964), Lewis's traditional interpretation of the medieval world as monolithic gives readers a standardized image that does not acknowledge subjectivity of the modern reader or the medieval audience. Later scholars have criticized the "spirit of the age" approach to history as too homogenous and find his reading theory, requiring knowledge of medieval society and history, unnecessarily confining. Despite its outdated reputation, Lewis's traditional reading does provide twenty-first century

readers with an idea of how, at least initially, we can think about the Middle Ages in terms of its distant and unfamiliar past.

Lewis connects the middle Ages with a literary tradition that some readers might find surprising. This tradition is not based on widespread literacy or publishing, but it recognizes the printed word as the only non-verbal source of information, and “the Middle Ages relied on books” (*Discarded Image* 5). The literary man, the writers and readers, make the medieval world “a bookish culture” through reliance on the authority of past writers and their texts, *auctorite* (“Imagination and Thought” 43). This “bookish culture” was founded on the idea that a text whose importance had been established would provide inspiration for later writers, as they would be intent on following an approved authorial precedent.

Herein lies a tremendous difference between medieval and modern approaches to the concept of originality. The modern mind understands writing as developing new ideas, but the medieval writer’s willingness, even eagerness, to return to a field already tilled perplexes the modern writer and reader: “We are inclined to wonder how men could be at once so original that they handled no predecessor without pouring new life into him, and so unoriginal that they seldom did anything completely new” (*Discarded Image* 209). According to Lewis, the medieval writer, in one way, sees the subject matter as greater than the personal result of his effort: “For the aim is not self-expression or ‘creation;’ it is to hand on the ‘historical’ matter worthily; not worthily of your own genius or of the poetic art but of the matter itself” (210-11). Lewis’s certainty about the absence of self-expression is not as convincing now, but it is significant that

medieval writers did concentrate on transforming texts that were already known; perhaps familiarity was the hook needed to gain the attention of audiences and readers.

The concept of shared authorship is connected with the medieval attitude toward originality. The modern writer is familiar with work that is independently produced, but the medieval writer is accustomed to joining a long line of revisionists that have worked on the same “original” material, and “one is tempted to say that almost the typical activity of the medieval author consists in touching up something that was already there” (*Discarded Image* 209). If a modern reader accepts this idea absolutely, there is a question of focus: should the modern reader concentrate on the older source or the new treatment? Consider the *Canterbury Tales*. Will a reader focus on Boccaccio and *The Decameron* or on Chaucer’s pilgrims and tales? The new author can manage to change the earlier texts in ways so significant that the later version becomes the more memorable of the two. Lewis points out that medieval writers “do not hesitate to supplement [sources] from their own knowledge and, still more from their own imagination, touching them up, bringing them more fully to life” (“Genesis of a Medieval Book” 36). How can the presence of originality be denied? Of course, “touching up” sounds like appropriation to the modern reader, but the medieval limits of originality are obviously different from modern ones. Lewis may not give the medieval writer the full benefit of independent authorship, but he defends the writer’s text with a reminder that the “book-author unit, basic for modern criticism, must often be abandoned when we are dealing with medieval literature” (210). The lack of a single

author does not diminish the text, and the ability to come up with another compelling version of a well-regarded text demonstrates a medieval writer's knowledge and talent.

As Lewis has stated above, these characteristics of medieval writers and their texts may create problems for the modern reader. The modern reader might lack the cultural and historical knowledge that informs the reading. Lewis was convinced that awareness of the medieval past was necessary even if the effort temporarily removed the reader from the text: "That anything which takes us outside the [text] and leaves us there is regrettable. . . . But we have to go outside in order that we may presently come back in better equipped" (*'De Audiendis Poetis'* 1). Lewis combines the New Critical concentration on the text with historical information that explains the medieval past surrounding the time of a text's creation and initial reception, leading to what Lewis believes is a fully informed interpretation.

By adding historical background to close reading, Lewis gives one answer to the question, "How should we read?" Reading a medieval poem from only a modern perspective results in an interpretation that does not explore what might have been the medieval writer's intention, something that Lewis believes we can find as long as we concentrate on finding the "real" past: "What a poem may 'mean' to moderns and to them only, however delightful, is from this point of view merely a stain on the lens. We must clean the lens and remove the stain so that the real past can be seen better" (*'De Audiendis Poetis'* 2). The meaning of a "real" past, how we look for it, and what we find is perhaps a question that further explores how we read, at least in terms of Lewis's reading strategy. The idea that a "real" past can be found is not supportable now, but

Lewis worked in a time that accepted positivist history. His way of understanding a medieval text was to enter the past as a new medieval person, free of the present, with vision cleared of any modern obstructions. Even though it is impossible to sustain, Lewis's mode of reading can still be part of the way to immerse one's self, as much as it is possible, in the medieval world, aware that the present can never be completely put aside. The reader who has glimpsed the Middle Ages is challenged to push even further past the boundaries of a modern world:

Are we to rest content with "putting ourselves back"  
into the attitudes of old authors just so far as general  
education permits, . . . or are we to go on and put  
ourselves back as completely as, with labor and patience  
we can? (*De Audendis Poetis*" 2)

For Lewis, this is the only way to attempt reading a medieval text.

Many readers are still daunted by Lewis's requirements, and, as mentioned earlier, some contemporary scholars agreed that a meaningful experience with medieval literature did not require immersion in medieval history. John Speirs, in *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (1957), specifically questions the usefulness of historically-based interpretation:

[Quite] discouraging is the idea . . . that before the  
modern reader can properly appreciate a medieval

poem he must first have somehow put himself back into  
the [Middle Ages]; he must reconstruct what the poem  
meant to its first audience. Thus a shift occurs from the  
idea of discovering what the poem *means* to that of  
discovering what it once meant. (48)

Speirs wants to concentrate on the contemporary moment and reader, hoping that this kind of concentration will make it more likely that modern readers might want to read medieval literature. Speirs does not advocate that all interpretations of a text are equal; rather he does not seem believe that historical exploration must be part of a worthwhile reading experience. Instead, he seems to think the requirement of medieval history is exactly what discouraged students' interest in medieval literature and sees that the modern reader's discovery of what a medieval poem means at the moment of reading gives life to what others could consider a dead text with a single meaning languishing in the distant past.

Lewis's plan is not difficult for the sake of being difficult. He argues that the efforts at historical study—in his view, required efforts—will give the careful reader rewards that are more than academic: “What the world means to us after we have [put ourselves back in the medieval past] appears to me not only more accurate, (more like what [the medieval writers] intended) but also more interesting and nourishing and delightful” (“*De Audiendis Poetis*” 8). The last three adjectives—interesting, nourishing,



delightful—anticipate what Jauss, over twenty years later, believed are the keys to restoring the stature of medieval studies. The connective thread that runs from Lewis to Jauss and finally to Patterson shows that Lewis’s theory is not worthless. Instead, it is the beginning of a shift in the understanding of medieval studies that wants to organize modern responses to the literature within a paradigm of medieval knowledge. Lewis does not dismiss the modern reader, as he makes clear in his traveler-as-reader analogy. He compares the modern reader to a modern traveler who remains unchanged by his new surroundings:

One man carries his Englishry abroad with him and brings  
it home unchanged. . . . In his own way he may have a pleasant  
time. . . . In the same way there is a man who carries his  
modernity with him through all his reading of past literatures  
and preserves it intact. The highlights in all ancient and  
medieval poetry are for him the bits that resemble—or can  
be so read that they seem to resemble—the poetry of his own  
age. . . . and such reading has its rewards. Those who practice it  
will have certain enjoyments. (*“De Audiendis Poetis”* 2-3)

The ideal reader, however, will experience an understanding of which the first reader is unaware. This ideal reader, like the ideal traveler, embraces the challenges brought by

the unexpected, returning home “modified, thinking and feeling as you did not think and feel before. . . . You can go beyond the first impression that a poem makes on your modern sensibility. . . . By steeping yourself in the vanished period, you can re-enter the poem with eyes more like that of a native” (3). The reality is that the medieval world envisioned by the most diligent reader is only an educated guess; since that world is gone, we can never enter it as a true native. Lewis’s elegant prose does make a compelling case for the necessity of studying medieval history and culture, and we can at least experience some version of a moment in the Middle Ages.

In “The Alterity and Modernity of the Medieval Literature” (1979), Hans Robert Jauss remembers the traditional path taken by Lewis and recognizes its flaws. He outlines the difficulties that medieval studies faced as interpretative theories continued to change:

[Medieval literature] has lost its place in the educational canon, and therefore it hardly shows up in courses of study or curricula. It stands far from the modern trend of developmental theory and began its reorientation without notice; it is therefore more strongly challenged in terms of its universality and public reputation than are the neighboring historical disciplines. (181)

C.S. Lewis's work can provide no solutions here, and his belief that a modern reader must try to be maybe more medieval than a medieval reader or listener ever was, has contributed to these problems. His methods are no longer viable because the "classical paradigm of the positivistic research of tradition as well as of the idealistic interpretations of styles have exhausted themselves" (182). On the opposite end of the continuum, "structural linguistics, semiotics, and phenomenological or sociological theory" (182) have not provided an adequate replacement for work such as Lewis's. Medieval literature has no representation in the academic world of the late twentieth century.

Jauss then proposes an alternative paradigm that builds upon the more traditional approaches like that of Lewis but continues moving in another direction, establishing three characteristics that are found only when there is movement beyond positivistic reading. Research and interest in medieval literature can be revitalized by focusing on "the aesthetic pleasure, the surprising otherness, and the model character of medieval texts" ("Alterity and Modernity" 182). These three points include the modern reader's contemporary perspective in ways that did not occur or seem important to Lewis, giving the reader, Jauss will argue, a different way to move between the medieval and modern worlds.

Before examining more new ideas, it is useful to consider the connections between Lewis and Jauss. Besides admiring "the insight into the medieval world which we owe [him]" ("Alterity and Modernity" 192), Jauss refers to Lewis when discussing the aesthetic pleasure that can be experienced with medieval texts. Jauss sees the

difficulties that a modern reader might have in experiencing this pleasure but believes, like Lewis in *The Discarded Image*, that such pleasurable reading is possible if the modern reader tries to understand the expectations of the medieval audience: “[In] a reversal of his aesthetic expectations . . . [the modern reader should] not dismiss endless didactic digressions as boring; the medieval reader could find texts enjoyable for exactly that reason, for they told him what he already knew, and because it satisfied him deeply to find each thing in its correct place in the world” (185). From this point of view, literature might provide a medieval person with a feeling of security in a very uncertain world. Jauss also agrees with Lewis that “[the medieval lifeworld] cannot again become imaginable for the modern reader without historical mediation” (185). Despite potential difficulties, history must be part of aesthetic experience.

Jauss’s thinking also runs parallel to Lewis’s when visualizing the alterity that defines the medieval world. It seems an obvious point, but recognizing the innate difference or otherness of the Middle Ages—not stopping with a modernized conception of the time—is necessary when trying to see a realistic version of that time. Lewis and Jauss each perceived the Middle Ages as a world unlike their own—they just disagree on how the modern reader might best reach and navigate it. From his traditional position, Lewis counsels the reader to study the world that surrounded a medieval poem, and “you can then re-enter the poem . . . now perhaps seeing . . . that what you thought was strange was then ordinary and what seemed to you ordinary then strange” (*De Audiendis Poetis* 3). Jauss stresses that “in order to become conscious of this otherness of a departed past, a reflective consideration of its surprising aspects is

called for" ("Alterity and Modernity" 182). For Jauss, the activity of reading needs the modern perspective for the sake of comparison, understanding that the initial aesthetic pleasure only begins the journey into an alien past.

Lewis and Jauss make different use of the aesthetic pleasure that often comes with a first reading. Lewis reminds the present-day reader that "you can go beyond the first impression that a poem makes on your sensibility" (*"De Audiendis Poetis"* 3), which Jauss hopes the modern reader can do as the "surprising otherness" or "alterity" is combined with the initial aesthetic pleasure. The difference is that Lewis's reader can either stop with the experience of modern pleasure or move into the Middle Ages by immersing oneself in the history of the period. Jauss wants readers to do both as they actively read, carrying a contemporary understanding as they search for meaning in the otherness of medieval texts. He believes that

the mediating effect or hermeneutic function of the

aesthetic pleasure proves to be that, whether through

progressive agreement or through a *via negationis*,

through the displeasure which occurs during the reading,

one becomes aware of the astounding or surprising

otherness of the world opened up by the text. ("Alterity and Modernity"

182)

Lewis's reader finds a medieval world only after discarding—trying to discard—modern sensibilities; Jauss's reader finds that world only after those modern sensibilities are made part of the interpretive.

The active nature of Jauss's reading strategy continues with the inclusion of a key image, "the horizon of expectations." When Jauss insists that the reader try to recall the otherness of the departed past, this recollection "methodologically entails the reconstruction of the horizon of expectation of the addressees for whom the text was originally composed" ("Alterity and Modernity" 182). Reconstruction of a departed past is a necessary complication of Jauss's theory of how to read a medieval text. The theory is also different from Lewis's in that the reconstruction of the medieval world is not the end product of interpretation: "this second hermeneutic step cannot in itself be the absolute goal of understanding" (182). The attempt to combine the modern horizon of expectation with the medieval one can result in understanding that the significance of a text goes beyond its place in an historical moment; if the two horizons do not combine, the passage across the bridges may not be accomplished. Jauss openly considers the possibility of failure:

But there is no guarantee that the fusion of horizons will  
succeed. The initial aesthetic pleasure of the text can  
finally disclose itself as a naïve, modernizing, pre-  
understanding, and the first aesthetic judgment of

unreadability proves to be incapable of being overcome.

Then the text, as a document which only retains

historical interest, drops out of the canon of

contemporary aesthetic experience. ("Alterity and Modernity" 183)

The reader is reassured that a text need not be excluded forever because the "sentence may be commuted, for the text which can no longer be aesthetically concretized for us may be able to obtain significance again for later readers" (183). The horizon of expectation provides the opportunity, not the certainty, of poetic interpretation.

One of the reasons that Jauss and his horizon of expectation are so useful is the inclusion of the historical reception that surrounds any text, emphasizing the close connection between what the twenty-first century mind often sees as the separate disciplines of literature and history. In his introduction to *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982), Paul de Man notes that Jauss did not agree with the Marxist and Formalist scholars for the same reason: they adhered to the design of the classical canon, both ideologically-opposed schools of thought accepting that a "work is assumed to transcend history because it encompasses the totality of tensions within itself" (xi). For Jauss, works of art are never disassociated from history, and the classical canon of Ernst Robert Curtius is less interesting than the "dynamic and dialectical process of [ongoing] canon formation" (xi). The horizon of expectation addresses several issues that question the classical canon:

This approach corrects the mostly unrecognized norms  
of a classicist or modernizing understanding of art, and  
avoids the circular recourse to a general “spirit of the age.”  
It brings to view the hermeneutic difference between the  
former and the current understanding of a work; it  
raises to consciousness the history of its reception, . . .  
and calls into question . . . [the belief] that objective  
meaning [of a text], determined once and for all,  
is at all times immediately accessible to the interpreter.

(28)

This methodology brings about the conflation of the modern reader’s response and the medieval reader’s or audience’s recreated response. Jauss further insists that the “method of historical reception is indispensable for the understanding of literature from the distant past” (28), meaning that medieval literature is best read and interpreted with a horizon of expectation that includes historical reception.

Since the horizon of expectation combines literary interpretations and historical experiences possible in both the medieval and modern periods, the reader might wonder why the study of medieval literature needs further justification through applying Jauss’s three hermeneutic principles—aesthetic pleasure, surprising otherness,



and model character of medieval texts. Jauss clearly states that the study of medieval literature is on such uncertain footing that relying on historicism is not enough, especially since positivistic historicism played a role in medieval studies' decline. He also refutes a popular claim made in the defense of medieval texts: "Whoever, as specialist and as aficionado of its texts, holds the experience of medieval literature to be irreplaceable can certainly no longer convince the educated among its detractors by appealing to a timeless canon of masterpieces" ("Alterity and Modernity" 183). The horizon of expectation and the three hermeneutic bridges are the more convincing approach: instead of applying the typical interpretative strategies—positivistic historicism, thinking about the "spirit of the age"—let modern perceptions shape the initial reading. More readers might be enticed with "the invitation that the literature of this particular distant and yet still exemplary past translates itself into our present without recourse to *thesaurus* or *tabula rasa*" ("Alterity and Modernity" 183). Jauss goes on to say that such a curious reader who pursues a "pleasurable understanding and an understanding pleasure" (183) can grasp the works of the Middle Ages not by first looking back into the past but by remaining in the present, thinking about what aspects of the text please and appeal to the modern mind.

As a last word on comparing Lewis and Jauss, consideration of how they would think about two famously linked texts, Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* will highlight the essential differences between them and how Jauss clearly moves into the realm of subjectivity. Lewis and Jauss each address problems that the modern reader might encounter when reading a medieval text. Lewis wants

the modern reader to return to the medieval world, while Jauss believes that the same reader has several choices: remaining totally in the modern world, perceiving a possible connection to the medieval world, or freely moving back and forth across literary boundaries. As mentioned earlier, Lewis's theory problematizes the modern reader's understanding of medieval literature, as shown by comparing Boccaccio, Chaucer, and connections that exist between their works. In a general reference to such a situation, Lewis thinks that a medieval writer's main occupation "consists in touching up something that was already there" (*The Discarded Image* 209), and since the modern reader is accustomed to the direct connection between the product of a book and its producer, the author, that reader might be confused in deciding which sources are original.

These decisions are further troubled because in our example, the older source—*The Decameron*—exists in the shadows while the new version of much of its material—*The Canterbury Tales*—occupies a fairly consistent place in the literary canon. The most basic difference in the two theoretical approaches is that with Lewis the reader must choose between either the present or the past, but with Jauss the reader can and should have both the present and the past. Lewis requires that the reader become, as much as possible, a medieval reader with the medieval perspective developed by Lewis himself, a positivistic history with an idealized vision of the medieval world, and without acceptance of Lewis's approach, the reader can produce no acceptable interpretation. Jauss acknowledges that the modern reader might have no response to a medieval text, meaning that the text has no relevance in a certain interpretive sphere, or the reader

might develop multiple responses to a text in the movement across the hermeneutic bridges. Jauss believes that reading a medieval text **can** start in the modern world where a reader begins with “a pleasurable understanding” that may lead to “an understanding pleasure” (“Alterity and Modernity” 184), an example of how a reader can, at the same time, think about the past and the present. Lewis wants to control the interpretive process; Jauss relinquishes all control, if any existed in the first place, and watches as the interpretive process comes to a full stop or continues to develop according to the reader’s wishes. Lewis does recognize the imagination of medieval writers, but he does not acknowledge originality outright. Just as Jauss is certainly open to the originality in a writer like Chaucer, he welcomes the originality of interpretations, and although his theory does not accept any reading or interpretation, it seems that Jauss would rather see a failed encounter rather than no encounter at all.

The engaged reader that Jauss anticipates is one armed with historical information so that real participation can occur. By carefully establishing a mental image of medieval society, the modern reader has a better sense of what a medieval audience might expect. A background in history also equips the modern reader to approach a text thinking about the medieval writer’s potential place in his society; social position affects everything, including how the medieval writer might present and organize his text. The response of a courtly audience could have could have consequences for a poet like Chaucer, who depended on the court and commerce for his livelihood.

This study of the invention and reinvention of the Middle Ages requires another level of engagement, a focus on how the writers, medieval and nineteenth-century, used genres as tools in achieving their artistic and rhetorical goals. The genres chosen by the medieval writers can tell us a great deal about influences and surroundings; the nineteenth-century writers have more artistic freedom of choice, but their choice and use of genres still signify what the writers sought to communicate and how they wanted these communications to be received.

As the comparisons are initially set between one writer from each period, an analysis can begin by looking at the medieval writer's reader response, if any exists, to other contemporary and available texts. This response is not so important in Jocelin's case, but quite relevant in Chaucer's. A move to the nineteenth-century writer doubles the response: one from the reader's point of view, then from the writer's. Secondary comparisons can then be made between writers as representatives of the same period; this comparison will be more useful applied to Thomas Carlyle and William Morris.

The key to all analyses and interpretations is to think about how, in each circumstance, genre functions. A writer's manipulation of genre can indicate the observance of shifting values in that historic and social moment. Shaping a genre's traditional form, in obvious and subtle ways, can translate the writer's stylistic language, explaining how tweaking expected characteristics of poetic form might elicit different responses from an earlier audience as compared to a modern one. So the studies of the writings included here will not move from work to work via only identification of similar elements. Comparisons will be established by answering questions of how goals are

achieved—employing genres in particular ways—and, with a focus on genes, what information might be teased from all the comparisons and interpretations. Jauss’s type of historicism, considering history and society from an individual’s perspective, provides any kind of interpretive study with many possible approaches, including some whose ideas can connect with a work on multiple levels of understanding. Ultimately the idea that could encompass this entire project returns to a consideration of time and how past, present, and future are, in some fashion, are always intertwined, one with the others.

Before moving on to the project’s more specific elements, the discussion must return to theoretical considerations, particularly any that depend on historicism but disagree with Jauss and his aesthetics of reception. Writing about the same time as Jauss, Lee Patterson, like most medievalists, believes that history must be part of reading medieval texts but, like Jauss, is dissatisfied with the positivist historicism traditionally used in medieval studies. He points to the most traditional schools that have existed in opposition to one another, Exegetics and New Criticism: “these two attitudes—[the former] aggressively historical, [the latter] by and large indifferent to historical understanding—are bound by their shared participation in the historical development of English studies” (*Negotiating the Past* 3). Recognizing what these approaches have given to—or forced upon—Chaucer studies, Patterson feels that Exegetics still exerts a stranglehold: “Unable to absorb Exegetics and move on, Chaucer studies instead circle back almost compulsively to an irrepressible scandal, a recursiveness that itself bespeaks a scandalous limitation to its own critical creativity”

(5). He is further convinced that “as long as Exegetics is allowed to stand as the only fully articulated model of specifically historical criticism” (7), medieval studies will remain isolated from current developments in critical approaches.

For Patterson, history is politicized, and a politicized historical reading results in an interpretation reflecting the reader’s specific political and social belief system: an openly subjective reading. He wonders “why all the historicism of medievalists should differ so sharply from that of critics working in later periods” (*Negotiating the Past* 3), referring to the absence of a subjective reader in medieval studies. It is objectivity, the belief that objectivity is possible—the crucial element in the work of scholars like D.W. Robertson and C.S. Lewis—that separates medieval studies scholarship from everything else, and Patterson rejects the notion that objectivity should or even could be part of the work:

Since all reading and all scholarship is political, all audiences are inherently subjective. Each reader approaches a text from a particular position, and reads it according to particular ideologies, interests, and biases. There is no such thing as an objective, or disinterested, audience. (Cawsey 132)

Subjective reading should not be confused with uniformed reading. In defining a different kind of historicism, Patterson shows that his historicism, although subjectively applied, is not careless about history:

To acknowledge that absolute objectivity is impossible  
does not mean that no interpretative procedures are  
more reliable than others. To say that one cannot read  
a medieval text “on its own ground” (a position with  
which virtually every scholar would agree) does not mean  
that one is entitled to ignore evidence of what those grounds  
might have been. . . . Not even to inquire what Chaucer  
plausibly may have thought to have meant [in his texts],  
nor how a contemporary audience might have understood  
it, is—to adapt Robert Frost’s comment on writing free  
verse—like playing tennis with the net down. (Patterson in Cawsey 134)

A reader from the Lewis school would believe in the possibility and the necessity of leaving the modern self behind, but a scholar-reader schooled in New Historicism will enter a medieval text as a modern, subjective reader whose interpretation is supported both by historical information and subjective perception of that history.

Again, like Jauss, Patterson wants to reestablish the importance of medieval studies and literature. The isolation of medieval studies, partially self-imposed, has prevented it from accommodating recent types of criticism, like New Historicism. Patterson wants to control every aspect of his theory and, as we will see later, its application; he intends to empower not only medieval studies but will also “rehabilitate New Historicism for medievalists” (*Twentieth-Century Chaucer Criticism* 137). The Renaissance scholars’ appropriation of “modern” in the label “Early Modern” pushes the Middle Ages even further from anything new, but Patterson “demonstrates the way in which so-called ‘modern’ concepts such as individuality, subjectivity and psychology can be found in the Middle Ages” (137). The insistence that individuality and other modern concepts can be found in medieval literature and culture is an important move, and so far there are no contradictions between Patterson’s New Historicism and Jauss’s horizon of expectation.

Perhaps the most significant element in this New Historicism is the emphasis on the medieval individual’s experience with medieval texts, in this case Chaucer’s. Lewis’s generic medieval audience is unsatisfactory, and Patterson wants to “reinstate the individual within the workings of power. This will become important in terms of his concept of audience. The relationship between the individual and society is . . . similar to the relationship between the individual reader or listener and the audience as a whole” (Cawsey 137). Like C.S. Lewis and D.W. Robertson, whose critical approaches he rejects, Patterson thinks that modern readers must read and interpret medieval works from inside their original contexts, knowing what a medieval person might have known,



believed, and thought. His New Historicism looks for the single medieval reader's or listener's perspective: "[Patterson] tries to reinstate the individual reader into the sometimes totalizing historical concepts of the audience and the 'medieval mind'" (137). Since the means of recording personal thoughts and communicative acts was limited to the written word, the record of individual medieval responses is limited as well, but Patterson looks for ways to give attention to multiple interpretations along with a writer's—Chaucer's—various intentions.

In her book, *Twentieth-Century Chaucer Criticism: Reading Audiences* (2011), Kathy Cawsey looks closely at how the individual medieval reader or audience member functions for Patterson. She analyzes how Patterson reorients a reading of *The Knight's Tale* so that it focuses on what a medieval audience might have been thinking when reading or hearing about, for example, a tournament. In 1390, Richard II ordered that a tournament be held in Smithfield, and since Chaucer had been appointed clerk of the king's works in 1389, he would have been familiar with the tournament's organization. Combining this information with the suggestion that Chaucer read the classical *Teseida* "with contemporary politics in mind, for he juxtaposes descriptions in the *Teseida* with descriptions taken from contemporary accounts of Richard II's tournament . . . [which] shows that Chaucer thought that the works of the 'auctorites' could be used to shed light on [contemporary medieval] problems" (146). To further broaden the modern concept of Chaucer's medieval audience, Patterson draws attention to possible differences between the courtly audiences for the early dream vision poems and the later *Canterbury Tales*, not a new idea, thinking that there was "a more bourgeois . . .

audience for his final works” (146). Patterson’s insistence on variability in the medieval audience is a needed shift away from the amorphous, homogenous audiences imagined by so many early scholars, but it should still be important to present—if there is no documentation—a new kind of audience member or reader as a possible, not definite, medieval presence.

It is Patterson’s absolute confidence in his estimation of Chaucer’s intentions and therefore the medieval audiences’ responses that cause problems for the readers of this New Historical approach and Patterson’s applications of it. Kathy Cawsey does make note of some contradictions. The cornerstone of Patterson’s brand of New Historicism is the focus on the individual as a presence in the medieval world as they listen to and read Chaucer. Even though one can very reasonably imagine and then find evidence supporting what individual people could have been thinking, emphasizing the presence of medieval subjectivity, the number of specific, documented reading experiences is still not evident. Leaving the discussion of medieval readers aside, if a theory asks for focus on a particular interpretation, how might one account for other members of the audience who might stand for a different interpretation? A single interpretative stance is interesting, but criticism does not want to be that limiting. Cawsey thinks that demanding treatment of an individual subjective reader “means that Patterson *needs* to generalize. In order to determine what *our* interpretations should be like . . . he must generalize from one specific medieval response to some sort of abstract idea of a ‘medieval’ response” (147). In his effort to “renovate” medieval historicism, to give it a modern perspective, Patterson moves away from the generalized “spirit of the age” idea

that has allowed single historical descriptions to oversimplify possible meanings in medieval texts.

His theory, however, cannot be supported by a lone medieval voice, and so that single medieval interpretation must be multiplied to make its possibility real. Cawsey agrees that “Patterson . . . seems caught between two imperatives: first, the imperative to focus on the specific, the local, and the contingent in exploring Chaucer’s readership, and second, the historical imperative to read Chaucer’s texts as a medieval audience would have read them” (149). The need to generalize is defended in several ways, with a reference to swarm theory the most surprising. The theory sees an audience that is a group of people who arrive at similar conclusions about their shared experience, like bees that seek a solution to a particular problem. These audience members remain individuals, but they will have a tendency to make the same decisions. It follows that while it is accepted that the subjective reader and his politics will influence an interpretation, a Patterson reader might choose an interpretation of a specific medieval text only because it bolsters the support of a particular argument. In this group scenario, is the same decision reached on the basis of individual choice or because of outside pressure to prove the theoretical point? In other words, the modern reader controls what the research reveals, which is fine as long as the critical theory itself is honest. Patterson’s insistence on political subjectivity alone could mean that other kinds of subjectivity are ignored. This brand of New Historicism guarantees a particular sort of outcome, and such a guarantee requires that the theory exert control over its modern and medieval participants alike.

Thinking back to his initial theoretical goals, Patterson wanted to move beyond Exegetics to establish a different medieval historicism. Other scholarly approaches stopped after their recreation of the Middle Age, causing Patterson to wonder “why the historicism of medievalist should differ so sharply from that of critics working in later periods” (*Negotiating the Past* 3). Whether the recreation is exegetical with Robertson or psychological with Lewis, the historicism did not involve a modern perspective and so lacked complexity. Patterson wants the modern reader to be a full-blown participant and sees no theory that will accommodate such an inclusion. He believes that

not only is there no widely known and generally  
acknowledged paradigm of historical criticism to be  
set against that defined by Exegetics, but that  
issue of historical understanding per se has  
received virtually no general discussion within  
the context of Medieval Studies. (7)

In a footnote on the same page, however, Patterson points to one exemption whose work we have already explored—Hans Robert Jauss. The reason Jauss’s work does not satisfy Patterson’s theoretical requirements is that, in his view, Jauss reverts to a positivistic—generalized—historicism, and the focus on an audience’s horizon of expectations is the root of the problem. To review, the horizon, comprised of “the expectations of the work’s original readers” (7-8), is revealed by comparing the work to

the characteristics of the genre, to other works of the period, and by juxtaposing the fiction of the work to the reader's reality (8). In Patterson's opinion, these means of comparison constitute a "traditional literary history" (8), a kind of history that nods both to Exegetics and New Criticism without any trace of a new historical approach that, like his own New Historicism, includes the modern subjective reader. Patterson then looks at the role of the modern reader in "The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature," claiming that "Jauss declines to confront the historicity of the observer:"

The modern reader is described as being able to  
  
recognize both the culturally confirmatory aspects  
  
of a medieval text (its alterity) and its disruptive  
  
elements (its modernity) because both these aspects  
  
correspond to an analogous opposition within the  
  
modern situation—an analogy that remains unexamined. (8)

To Patterson, "Jauss's work seems . . . to represent a sophisticated reconceptualization of the problems of historicism that promises a theoretical solution that neither it nor any other scheme can deliver" (8). In this estimation, the historicism proposed by Jauss relies too exclusively on traditional methods of comparison that in no way connect the medieval text with the social realities of either the medieval or modern world.

The first problem with Patterson's estimation of Jauss's theory is in the definition of terms, namely the "horizon of expectation." As mentioned above, he defines the

horizon as constructed by the expectations of the original readers or audience, and Jauss does initially assign a horizon to them: "In order to become conscious of this otherness of the departed past, a reflective consideration of its surprising aspects is called for, an activity which methodologically entails the reconstruction of the horizon of expectations of the addressees for whom the text was originally composed" ("Alterity and Modernity" 182). Patterson believes that this reconstruction itself will be the focus of Jauss's and his readers' interpretations, keeping this method in line with the older theories that Patterson wants to displace. His own New Historicism also includes attention to the original medieval situation; Patterson "characterizes modern scholars as 'eavesdroppers' on a conversation originally meant for another audience, and that audience's response is what "we must painstakingly try to reconstruct" (Patterson in Cawsey 134). Jauss himself defines the horizon's initial reconstruction of the medieval audience as "a truly historical literary study. . . [which is] not the work itself but the work's 'horizon of expectation,' by which [Jauss] means the expectations of the work's original readers" (*Negotiating the Past* 7-8). Both Jauss and Patterson begin to read and interpret from what they believe is the position of the original audience; Patterson's belief that Jauss and his readers will focus on the reconstruction itself as the terminus of their studies is the exact opposite of what Jauss has stated as his theory's goal. What Patterson wants to perceive as opposition is actually very much in line with his own theory. The only absolute difference may be that Jauss does not mention the modern reader while the politically-driven subjective reader is always with Patterson.

It is also clear that both Patterson and Jauss want readers to have proficiency in medieval history. They also accept that some readers will move beyond the text's first impression; some will not. Jauss thinks that there will be a variety of readers and responses, but he does not predict what kind of readers will present interpretations. He has set out to develop a hermeneutics of study that does not stay in the past but encourages readers to keep the past and move ahead in combining the past with their present expectations. Jauss tells us that thinking about "the otherness of the departed past . . . cannot itself be the absolute goal of understanding, if the knowledge of the otherness of a distant text-world . . . is to be more than simply a sharpened variation of historical reification, objectified through the contrast of horizons" ("Alterity and Modernity" 182). For further explanation, Jauss turns to Hans-Georg Gadamer who believed that "in process of understanding, the contrast of horizons must be led on to the fusion of the past aesthetic experience with the present one" (183). Even more to the point, Gadamer states in his own *Truth and Method* that a hermeneutics that "regarded understanding as the reconstruction of the original world would be no more than the recovery of a dead meaning" (148-49). In contrast to Patterson's reading of Jauss's theory, the horizon of expectations is not a restatement of positivist history.

Cawsey points out that a complication of Patterson's theory is the conflict between the desire to focus on the specific and the need to generalize. The audience is still comprised of individuals, but they are individual like a swarm of bees—all the individuals happen to have much the same idea. This complication comes from Patterson's need to control every aspect of the theory to make it prove his claim that all

audiences and readers are subjective, and that the subjectivity is political. He shrinks or multiplies the audience. If medieval readings conflict, he can “tone down the historicist imperative, acknowledge the contradictions, and open up a broad interpretative field into which modern readers can fit their interpretations while acknowledging the variety of medieval responses” (Cawsey 142). Jauss begins with this structure, accepting the fact that once he lets the theory go, he can no longer exert control over it.

This “swarm theory” is just a brief mention in Cawsey’s explanation and defense of a significant point in Patterson’s theory. The necessity of finding a single medieval voice within a group, a group that might potentially have had many different voices, could be—at least sometimes—impossible. So even though he rejects the older, generalized “spirit of the age” vision of the medieval world, Patterson finds it necessary to impose a modernized generalization—one that is political, not religious—on that same world. Instead of audiences that have the same experience with Christianity, Patterson wants to assume that an audience would have agreed with a chosen representative’s subjective and politically-driven response to a text.

Since the claim associated with his new generalization is an important one, Cawsey’s defense of it deserves scrutiny. The swarm defense stands out as a surprising scientific support of literary theory, and in a departure from a typical theoretical discussion, what follows is an exploration of honeybee swarm culture. Cawsey turns to this group insect dynamic as an example of how a large group of individuals can arrive at one answer to a problem. This comparison is meant to show that a general human audience can be imagined as an anonymous group that, despite their unknown



differences, will agree that the imposition of one person's political focus on the group will be representative of the entire group's beliefs. Her defense is organized as follows:

1. A swarm moves according to the bees' decisions, and it functions as one unit.
2. Each bee is an individual, making independent choices.
3. All the bees make the same decision.
4. So bees in a swarm are all individuals who happen to make the same choice.
5. Like a swarm of bees, each member of a medieval audience, listeners and readers, is an individual.
6. Each of these individuals makes independent choices.
7. There is one individual who chooses a political interpretation of the text, and this interpretation is accepted.
8. All the members of this group choose the political interpretation, making each choice subjective and political.
9. Since the individual and the general group are one in the same, Patterson can generalize while focusing on a single interpretive stance, and so everyone within the audience has a subjective and politicized perspective of the text.

Cawsey does not include the above list in her analogy of bees and medieval audience members. The swarm theory defense requires an audience that is

not homogeneous in its composition, but . . . not so

heterogeneous that it cannot be considered a group

entity. . . . [I]ndividuals [in the medieval audience]

work like a swarm of bees: they each think they are individuals—and in fact they are individuals—but they all end up tending in pretty much the same direction.

*(Twentieth-Century Chaucer Criticism 149)*

It seems that nature has provided an explanation that clarifies a previously untenable problem.

Unfortunately, Cawsey's presentation of the swarm is too simple and often anthropomorphizing another species results in an answer that is just wrong. Dr. Thomas Seeley is a world expert on honeybees, and his latest book, *Honeybee Democracy* (Princeton UP, 2010) carefully explains how a swarm initiates, controls, and completes the process of finding a new swarm a suitable home. He has spent most of his academic life studying bees, especially *Apis mellifera*, the honeybee species that is "the best-known insect on the planet" (1). His observations in *Honeybee Democracy* guide readers through the entire cycle of the swarm and its springtime ritual of establishing a new hive. The swarm's decision-making process includes many additional steps and sophisticated patterns not presented by Cawsey. Moreover, the process demonstrates not just the similarity between a swarm's and, when at its best, human decision making but that one species cannot fully represent the behaviors of another.

Before moving deeper into Seeley's investigation of the swarm and Cawsey's theory, it is important to emphasize that Seeley's work, as well as my use of it, does not

anthropomorphize the bees. As a research scientist, Seeley has watched hives die and even killed them himself so that he could open a hive for safe study. In his effort to describe the inner workings of a colony, Seeley combines scientific and everyday language for the sake of both academic and laypeople audiences. The language of “democracy” is not used for comfort’s sake; he really does see the bees’ existence organized as a democracy free of human emotion and agenda. The bees, however, are not personified nor viewed with sentimentality. The swarm shows how sophisticated and intricate an insect kingdom can be. The swarm’s sophistication is remarkable, but it is not the same as the more complicated organization—disorganization—of a human community.

Bees live in a collective environment, but their society does not dictate, nor does nature require that each bee’s individual decisions be the same as every other individual bee’s decision. In fact, their survival depends upon a great amassment of information about where the swarm will go next. This body of information is gathered into a “single collective intelligence” (*Honeybee Democracy* 19) but unlike the swarm that is Cawsey’s medieval audience, they do not just *have* the same ideas; they *reach* consensus. More than just “an aggregation of individuals” (25), Seeley suggests “that the single best demonstration of the superorgasmic nature of a honeybee colony is the ability of a honeybee swarm to function as an intelligent decision-making unit” (27). Can the medieval audience unit rise to resemble this now more complex group? If there is recognition of any disparity between honeybees and humans, should a theorist then suggest that humans once mirrored insect behavior? It may seem contradictory to see

the colony or swarm as “superorgasmic” and having a “single collective intelligence” (19), and then argue that Cawsey’s comparison falls short, but her comparison does not consider the process that leads to a final, unanimous decision.

A honeybee democracy includes debate; in the case of the swarm, the debate considers the possible sites for a colony’s new home. Their process involves (need Ch.4 page numbers) direct democracy where, instead of chosen representatives, individuals themselves enter the political arena. The scout bees come to the arena ready to present their arguments for the best site, and for Seeley, the presentations represent one of the honeybees’ most useful traits:

[o]ne valuable lesson we can learn from the bees is that

holding an open and fair competition of ideas is a smart

solution to the problem of making a decision based a pool

of information dispersed across a group of individuals. (75)

Each presentation is a “waggle dance,” and they happen simultaneously. Whatever the mode of argumentation, waggle dance or verbal debate, “we all know, in any contest for popular support, the side with the most persistent and zealous support is most likely to prevail” (Seeley 144). Seeley includes discussion of four kinds of democracy—representative, direct, adversary, and unitary—and the bees seem to use a mixture of all four. The scout bees are direct participants, they gather information as representatives

of different sites, their presentations compete against each other, and the final choice is unitary, with virtually all of the bees dancing the same dance.

In contrast, an application of Patterson's theory—in this case, as applied by Cawsey—may not rely on any democratic forms. Each individual in a group—the medieval audience—could be representing a different interpretation, but the multiple ideas are reduced to one that represents a single political conclusion. Since the only idea presented that one, there is no adversary discussion, and representation is not free but controlled. There is a direct democracy of one, so the democracy resembles something unitary, but the choice was not reached by consensus. Within Cawsey's "swarm," the individual whose interpretive decision wins out is Patterson's—the interpretive decision does not come from an outside source, not an identified person in the audience. Of course, theories are established with the main idea of the inventor-theorist's firmly in place—and literary theorists typically do not share billing. Patterson's theory, however, is supposed to rely on individual readers who have subjective and therefore inescapably political interpretations. Patterson has assumed the role of individual with the interpretation that has not actually won but been imposed upon the imaginary medieval audience. It doesn't seem to matter that each audience member has the same idea because, no matter what, we already know what the emergent interpretation will be. The perspective will be presented as subjective and political, making, in Cawsey's estimation, this particular version of New Historicism valid, but there was never any doubt as to this outcome.

It is Jauss's horizon of expectations that provides a better comparison to the swarm. He and his theory do not accept only certain kinds of subjectivity; they do not try to control what or who has influenced a reader's subjective perspective. Further, they do not attempt to change how the subjective reader will approach and cross the hermeneutic bridges. Jauss clearly takes an observer's, not a participant's role. Jauss has structured his theory so that a broad range of responses can be included in the search for the best interpretations, which resembles the structure of the swarm: "By virtue of having numerous individuals examining a problem . . . a bee swarm . . . [is] much more capable than any solitary bee or person in coming up with a broad range of alternative options" (*Honeybee Democracy* 74). Jauss looks for a range of responses; Patterson wants only one.

Consensus and collaboration are perhaps the two most important words in the comparisons of bees, Patterson, and Jauss. In Chapter Five of *Honeybee Democracy*, "Agreement on the Best Site," Seeley uses examples of bees and humans on the real estate market to illustrate the house-hunting process. He believes that "[among humans] truly optimal decision making rarely happens because the decision makers must pay costs in time energy, and other resources . . . and these costs usually preclude . . . using all the relevant information" (100). In terms of Patterson's medieval audience and Jauss's potential responders, real control of information and those in possession of it seems impossible. The theorists deal with this issue in two ways: Patterson controls the source and type of information available for interpretation, and Jauss acknowledges he has no control over how readers will cross the hermeneutic bridges. Bees do have

the advantage in consensus building because they are not limited by the urge to outdo a fellow worker or to be right as a mark of personal achievement. They behave in the truest sense of a collective:

[The swarm's] democratic organization enables it to  
harness the power of many individuals working together  
to perform collectively the two fundamental parts  
of the decision-making process: acquiring information  
about the alternatives and processing this information  
to make a choice. (101)

Here we can see why comparing humans to natural phenomena is both useful and potentially disappointing: useful in that comparing medieval audiences, modern responders, and literary theorists to a swarm provides insight as to motive, intention, and ultimate success of a literary theory's application, and disappointing, because humans will never be able to put what is good for the whole always before good for self. And achieving that kind of communal mentality is not the point of looking more deeply into the swarm, nor is it the ultimate goal of these literary theories. The most significant point may be that a comparison like this one should be carefully examined before using it as a broad claim of support.

Even though Cawsey's initial comparison of bee swarm to medieval audience was, after further consideration, less convincing than it might have been, the comparison itself, when cleared of its obligation to explain Patterson completely, is still useful. The basic reality concerning the two parties should be kept in mind: as winning as the bees and their characteristic industriousness and consensus-building are, "swarm smarts" cannot be turned into a paradigm for understanding human achievements. The comparison between bee and human does highlight complex differences that would make for more thoughtful reading of both audience and text, but the basic problem as stated at the chapter's beginning remains. As presented and defended by Cawsey, Patterson's theory supports a decision that *looks* like one reached after the consideration of all the votes from the medieval audience, by consensus, when actually the controlling decision is Patterson's. This example is the final piece of evidence that shows how Cawsey's use of swarm theory is not an accurate representation, and Patterson's theory must be manipulated in order to fulfill its claims

Even if everyone involved in a moment of reading and interpretation has a political point of view, recognizing and defining each person's subjective focus is too much for a single, narrowly-organized theory to do. Instead of including, as Jauss does, limitations within the theoretical paradigm itself, Patterson will have to make various adjustments to prevent the theory from failing. Jauss is willing to let his theory fail; there is no gatekeeper that lets in only those responses that promise to support the theory. Patterson's theory is not a complete failure, and he is not wrong in highlighting the importance of politicized subjectivity. The misstep comes when he excludes all



other possible responses and kinds of subjectivity. His theory can be part of Jauss's, but the reverse is not possible.

To reiterate, the flexibility of the horizon of expectation makes it ideal for a project that needs to move back and forth from one historical period to another, looking at literature and the society in which it exists, all the while maintaining the modern perspective that brought them together in the first place. It is not the single modern horizon of expectation that structures the interpretations, but the combination of the expectations and intentions of medieval and nineteenth-century writers as well. The nineteenth-century writers their own contemporary responses to the medieval worlds they have created and their very different political perspectives find success or failure in their attempts to superimpose—philosophically—a medieval English world onto their own post-Industrial Revolution societies. Since they are both politically subjective in their views, Patterson's New Historicism seems a natural choice. But the possibility of failure, of not finding answers that satisfy the political questions comes with Jauss who does not prejudge the fitness of a response. His application to the medieval texts and writers will find voices who are also responding to their societies but in a less straightforward manner. The issues of success and failure are also not so black and white: the writers' intentions are more complex, and the writers themselves not so transparent to the modern reader.

The inclusiveness of Jauss's theory and its willingness to bend with interpretative information as it appears explains that he provides the best theoretical underpinning here. Patterson denies that he seeks to make New Historicism destroy Exegetics, but

the older theory is included only so his readings of the poetry and the poet himself illustrate Exegetics uselessness. Critics' present theories that provide new ways to read and interpret, displacing what has come before. Jauss does not seem concerned with displacement so much as presenting a theory that is probably more elastic than other theories of its time—certainly more so than Patterson's. In trying to combine past and present, the theory that is capacious enough to accept such a project's ideas reflects the movement of the project itself. It is not focused on a single writer, time period, and text. Instead, the idea that a time period, like the Middle Ages, can be invented countless times, even in its own historical moment, and the multiple responses and horizons of expectations shape the inventions.

The four writers and the works considered here benefit from the Jaussian paradigm because of the multiplicity of responses: medieval, nineteenth-century, and modern. Jauss said that "'the old things and the new / only together are good and beautiful.' Why shouldn't we also rediscover in this alterity of the Middle Ages an aspect of its modernity for us?" ("Alterity and Modernity" 222). Studying the past, present, and future in the context of one another can reveal how all time—including written production and the genres chosen for its expression—can be reinvented as many times as there readers and writers who wish to do so.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### JOCELIN OF BRAKELOND AND *THE CHRONICLE OF THE ABBEY AT BURY ST EDMUNDS*

Amongst the four writers studied here, Jocelin of Brakelond is both the most familiar and the least well-known. His writer's voice and character are sincere and approachable and can make us forget that his text is controlled by narrative: the story is from his subjective point of view. Information about his life is scant, and there have been no documents or other texts that contribute more to his biography than is already known. The *Chronicle* itself has an established history of readers' responses and appears in the famous Harleian and Cotton manuscripts as well as two others in the Bodleian Library. Maybe the most notable response is that of John Rokewood, who produced the Camden Society edition; his "work was excellent . . . and he laid a firm foundation for all the work on Jocelin ever since" (xiii). On the other hand, perhaps Jocelin's near-anonymity is good; since no other "Jocelin of Brakelond" exists, the modern reader must focus solely on the monk Jocelin the writer creates. The title "chronicle" was probably not a title Jocelin used, but his inclusion of several, more private genres causes one to think about what sort of monk would choose private over public expression. The *Chronicle* bears little resemblance to an actual one: "Chronicle manuscripts were books laid out specially and solely for annals" (Swanton, intro. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 14). The medieval chronicle could be considered a kind of

almanac, and most were “written piecemeal over a number of years . . . providing an abbreviated and disconnected record of the significant events that occurred each year” (Georgianna 116). V.H. Galbraith joked that “history, for the medieval chronicler, is apt to be just one thing after another” (110). Maybe Jocelin did not choose the title, but he makes the genre his own, transforming the *Chronicle* into a well-integrated combination of other genres. It is significant that while a traditional chronicle emphasizes dates and lists, the other types of writing used by Jocelin allow people, not information, to choose and organize the content.

The opening page makes it clear that people and, quite surprisingly, a single individual will dominate the text that follows: “I have been at pains to set down the things which I have seen and heard” (*Chronicle* 1, emphasis mine). The first person narrator, Jocelin, takes responsibility for the content, and Jocelin’s presence results in more scholarly attention being given him than to the events he describes. He is a medieval writer who is aware of his voice and control over the pseudo-chronicle he produces, a kind of awareness that is generally saved for later centuries. Jocelin has a recognizable personality, and he is certainly regarded as an independent, autonomous person. In his edition, *Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond concerning the acts of Samson, Abbot of the Monastery of St Edmund*, (1939), H.E. Butler notes that Jocelin may have been “an inferior scholar [but he] used his somewhat homelier idiom to perfection”, making his chronicle “a delight to read” (xiv). In their 1989 translation, Diana Greenway and Jane Sayers are even more generous in their praise:

Jocelin is a gifted writer, almost a diarist and in parts

a biographer. Because of his sheer quality as a writer,  
his observations, sensitivity, and discrimination, we  
enter the inner life of the monks and their community.  
World-shaking events, wars, and political maneuverings  
are recorded, but Jocelin pays greatest attention to  
what went on within the community and within men's  
minds. (xi)

Greenway, Sayers, and Butler all compare Jocelin's tight focus on people, himself included, to the cursory attention given to events on the world's stage. Butler acknowledges that Jocelin "has his faults. . . . [H]is chronology is at times obscure and inaccurate, and his narrative has a tendency to ramble. He loses himself occasionally when the story . . . is complicated" (xiv). All three editors regard these flaws as minor, and Jocelin remains "the most lovable" writer of his day. Not many medieval writers are described as "lovable," but Butler justifies the admiration of all in terms that could appear in the review of any fortunate twentieth-century writer:

Jocelin is never dull even when his material is dry and  
technical; he never strays far from the human side of  
his theme, and there his charms are extraordinary.  
His character sketches [are] . . . lifelike in the extreme and

full of humour. . . . [H]is portrait of Samson, as he looked  
and as he lived, is unforgettable. There is nothing any-  
where else quite like his chronicle, and its fame is well-  
deserved. When we reach its close we have only one  
regret—that it ends too soon. (xv)

Jocelin's personal approach elevates his work over anything similar, and he becomes a writer and narrator who verifies his individuality.

A character study would obviously be an interesting approach, but unless more material comes to light, it would also be a finite one; approaching the writer and text from the perspective of genre and artistic choice can result in an interpretation that can evolve. An open-ended study allows for the inclusion of different responses from later readers. Just as a genre study promises flexibility of interpretation, Jocelin's reliance on narrative instead of a strict chronology frees the text from the requirement of a linear progression. With the departure from linear organization in mind, Linda Georgianna, with a medievalist's perspective, believes that, unlike other chronicles, Jocelin's work does not rely on time for the purposes of organization. From another point of view, one can argue that Jocelin does indeed recognize time but does not use it in a traditional way. His sort of time is a suspended, narrative time that allows the writer to fill the work as he wishes without the control of linear chronology. The absence of strict time keeping allows him to construct parallel but not synchronized storylines that follow his

own transformation alongside that of Samson. Such a self-conscious look at changes in personality and attitudes is definitely another example of modernity in the medieval world that is, of course, expressed in the medieval text, just as Jauss claimed it might be in “The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature.”

Jocelin is the timekeeper, the timepiece, and while the obvious focus is on Samson, I would suggest that the main character is really Jocelin. His overarching control of text creates the possibility for introduction and reinvention of multiple genres. The *Chronicle* is a memoir, a diary, a biography,—of Samson—as well as an autobiography, and everything is presented within a narrative history. Linda Georgianna points out that “few medieval chroniclers would conceive of confining themselves to so strict a definition of history, but then few chroniclers could observe the world around them so intimately and with such self-consciousness as Jocelin does” (110). Instead of seeking or even needing the world that is beyond his grasp, Jocelin finds an expansive universe within the monastery and its inhabitants. Georgianna expands on the earlier claim of Jocelin’s importance in organizing the whole of his work:

In a sense, the unifying subject of the *Chronicle* is  
Jocelin himself and his experience; in deciding to write  
down what he has himself seen and heard, Jocelin does  
not promise a history of the monastery or even a  
biography of Samson, but rather a continuing account,

recorded in a voice distinctly his own, of his thoughts

concerning the events which draw his attention. (110)

This *Chronicle*, which could be read with an eye only on Samson,—Thomas Carlyle will show how and why a reader might make that choice—has been identified as a multi-layered document capable of fulfilling many goals and requirements. It is created by a twelfth-century monk whose self-awareness makes him and even his life seem, at times, thoroughly modern.

In combination with the use of genres, the modernity of topics highlight the freedom of choice Jocelin exercises throughout the text. The first topic of discussion is money, or rather the lack of it, and the discussion is not in the terms of accounting but of personal responsibility. St Edmund's abbey is in debt, and Abbot Hugh, Samson's predecessor, has allowed that debt to grow. In the context of this obvious problem, Jocelin tells his readers the primary purpose behind his writing: "I have been concerned here to record what I know from personal experience of the events that took place in St Edmund's church in my time, describing the bad deeds as well as the good, to provide both a warning and an example" (Greenway and Sayers 3). It is important to note Jocelin's sense of looking back. Using memory means that the *Chronicle* is not a daily diary but a narrative shaped by its author. Disastrous accounting is the catalyst of coming events, primarily Samson's election as abbot. One of Jocelin's gifts is understanding how characters can be defined by showing comparisons, and the examples of Samson's energy and power are intensified when seen against Abbot



Hugh's character: "A gentle and kind man, he was a good and devout monk, but lacked ability in business matters" (3). The conflict between sacred duties and secular necessities as defined by those in power is made clear on the first page, and Jocelin describes how this conflict affects the religious community, and the disparity between the needs of each camp troubles him deeply. Under the guidance of the spiritual abbot, "discipline, worship, and everything connected with the Rule [of St Benedict] flourished within the cloister, [but] external affairs were badly managed" (3). Abbot Hugh's description, his strengths and weaknesses, makes the modern reader wonder, as Jocelin did, if the world of temporal concerns can be involved with the sacred world and the former not change the latter. Ultimately, as seen through Jocelin's eyes, the traits of a good monk and a good business are mutually exclusive; at the least, one will dominate the other.

It may be limited to the abbey, but Jocelin is aware of socio-economic issues, and they do influence the *Chronicle's* content and Jocelin's thoughts about problems besetting the order. Disease and physical affliction symbolize debt and its associated issues, not the most original imagery, but the quality of Jocelin's style make the symbol memorable, perhaps suggesting the use of similar motifs to Carlyle as seen in *Past and Present*. Finances were out of control, complicated by the pressures of moneylenders of all sorts, and "this infection [or debt] spread, from the top downwards, from the ruler to the ruled, so that before long each obedientiary had his own seal and pledged himself in debt as he chose, to both Jews and Christians" (Greenway 3). A seal was the equivalent of a promissory note, a physical stamp that assured the lender of a return. The

accumulation of debt is so reminiscent of twentieth- and twenty-first-century financial mistakes and the characters and situations described in such a familiar way that the narrative of a twelfth-century world reminds the modern reader that people are more alike than different, not a thought usually associated with a medieval manuscript. Jocelin understands that royal favor improves an institution's likelihood of survival, and he explains that "the abbot [Hugh] has bought the grace and favor of King Richard with gifts and money," but the sovereign's death in 1199 meant that plans made with this king's approval were without necessary support, and "the abbot's labour and expenses were wasted" (102). Jocelin accepts the abbey's connection with money and is not critical of its attention to acquiring it. The first flaw that Jocelin sees in the old Abbot Hugh is that "he lacked ability in business matters" (3). Jocelin does not reserve his criticism for other monks. When the new King John visits the abbey,

[w]e naturally thought that [King John] would make a  
sizable donation, but he only gave a silk cloth which  
his servants had on loan from our sacrist—and still  
have not paid for it. Although he accepted St Edmund's  
most generous hospitality, when he left he contributed  
nothing at all honorable or beneficial to the Saint,  
except the 13s which he gave at Mass on the day he left  
us. (103)

These details about King John concern behavior in the abbey and nothing else, but the narrow focus is simply consistent with the rest of the *Chronicle* and illustrates how, for Jocelin, the entire world exists within the abbey and its environs. Although the world shrinks to fit Jocelin's purpose, his work remains significant.

Jocelin has another quality that supports his individuality and ability to work in other genres that rely on personal information, like the memoir or autobiography: introspection. He thinks about his past actions, pointing to mistakes and explaining their effects; this consideration of the past is another way time Jocelin uses time in his writing. As a young monk, he listened to older monks protect the abbey during Abbot Hugh's tenure, lying to King Richard's almoner about debts and telling him that "our business was being conducted ably and wisely" (Greenway 5). During a different visit from Archbishop Richard, sometime between April 1174 and April 1175, Jocelin again listens to a defense of the abbot based on the same false claims. He vents his frustration to the then Master Samson, the monk responsible for training the young Jocelin in the Benedictine rule. Jocelin asks Samson, "What are these rumours? Why do you remain silent when you know perfectly well what is going on—you a cloister monk, who is not ambitious for office and fears God more than any other man?" (5) Since Jocelin is writing from memory, not a daily account, the narrative is active, not passive, as it shows, instead of tells, important moments. Here is an example of how Jocelin organizes parallel transformation stories as he and Samson move in opposite directions. The emphasis on Samson as once a cloister monk with no ambition other than serving God becomes more significant as the writing progresses, making it clear, from a modern

reader's perspective, that Jocelin grasps the importance of foreshadowing, a stylistic awareness that feels modern. Samson's answer confirms who he was and why Jocelin admired him:

“My son, a child who has recently been burned is  
afraid of fire: that is how it is with me and many  
others. . . . [Some of us were] imprisoned . . . because  
we spoke out for the good of our church against the  
abbot's wishes. This is the hour of darkness. This is  
the hour in which flatterers prevail and are believed:  
their might is increased and we can do nothing against  
it. For the time being we must ignore these things.  
Let the Lord look down and judge.” (5-6)

Jocelin allows readers to observe how the church is an institution where those in power can silence others of lower rank. The comparison of opposites continues with Samson: the humble monk and the powerful abbot are different entities. Samson's metamorphosis exacts a transformation of Jocelin, and the trusting novice becomes a worldly wise, occasionally cynical observer of the world who accepts change as the only constant.

Following the election of Abbot Hugh's successor gives Jocelin more narrative space to display the changes in Samson, apparently the central character, while Jocelin's own changes happen more quietly. During the story of Samson's rise to power, the reader can glean just as much about Jocelin and his growing dissatisfaction with monastery politics, including the search for a good candidate for abbot. As the monks critique all the candidates put forward, Jocelin reminds them that "if we must wait to elect an abbot until we find someone of quite blameless character, then we [will] never find such a person, because no one lives irreproachably, and 'nothing is entirely perfect'" (Greenway 14; Horace, *Odes*, II.xvi.27). In comparison to the calm wisdom of seasoned monk, Jocelin thinks of his behavior as a younger man, before he learned the benefit of remaining silent:

I rushed in to express my own opinion, believing that I  
spoke in confidence. I said that a certain person, who had  
previously been very fond of me, was not worthy to be  
abbot. . . . I was speaking according to my own conscience,  
for the benefit of all rather than out of consideration  
for my own prospects. (14)

Unfortunately, Jocelin's confidence was not preserved, his friend heard of the conversation, and the relationship was never the same. The situation is like the earlier memory of Samson's speaking the truth, being punished for his honesty, and

subsequently holding his tongue when he hears that bad behavior has been concealed. These twin moments of discovery, learning that the truth is not always welcomed, brings up another genre: the coming-of-age story. The twist is that Jocelin hears his mentor's stories and applies them to his life; then Jocelin watches as that same mentor pursues the path he previously rejected. Once more, other than the setting of a monastery, if a reader was not aware of the *Chronicle's* date, the narrative of discovery, disillusionment, and resignation could be read as another modern story. Jocelin's exploration of different genres might be the work of a writer with an independent mind who experiments with his art. When Jocelin returns to the immediacy of his narrative, he tells the reader that, especially with controversial matters, "perhaps it would be a more sensible policy to stay completely silent" (15). In his pronouncement that advocates silence, he is openly rejecting the idea. Inside the safety of his work, written expression affords him the luxury of complete honesty—with the modern reader trusting Jocelin and accepting his version of events. The art of writing allows him to do precisely that which he claims he will not do.

As a whole, the *Chronicle* does seem, except for the focus on Samson, a bit disjointed, but even in the more pedestrian material Jocelin is still an individual voice. Regarding Abbot Samson, Jocelin follows him closely and gives the reader access to their private conversations; Jocelin is evenhanded with his observations of Samson, recording the good and the bad from this abbot's tenure. All the particulars the reader learns about Samson, from the detailed physical descriptions to careful evaluations of his rise and fall are wonderful to read but have little bearing on studying the text with greatest

attention to Jocelin and his practice of using several genres simultaneously to achieve a rhetorical goal. My response to this chronicle identifies a writer who knows himself as an individual who understands how to protect himself within the politicized society of the monastery. Whether the various modes of writing were chosen with uniform intentionality is not known, but Jocelin is consistent about allowing observations to pass through his own personal filter. It would be useful to know if his book was intended for anyone besides Jocelin himself; such deeply personal writing is not often intended for public consumption. The mysteries surrounding his work are all reasons why the best sort of interpretation is one that finds a way to go beyond a character study, like focusing on genre, keeping entry into the text open to all responses.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THOMAS CARLYLE AND *PAST AND PRESENT*

An effort to understand Thomas Carlyle should include an understanding of the world that reflected the “condition of England” and inspired the writing and publication of *Past and Present* (1834). The following is a list of literary, political, and social events compiled by Richard Altick in his *Victorian People and Ideas* (1973):

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 1821 | begins decade of industrial factory system growth  |
| 1829 | Catholic Emancipation Act; Carlyle begins “Signs of the Times”   |
| 1831 | Reform Bill introduced to, rejected by House of Lords; workers’ riots at Bristol and elsewhere; J.S. Mill, “The Spirit of the Age”                 |
| 1832 | First Reform Bill passed   |
| 1833 | Oxford Movement begins; Carlyle, <i>Sartor Resartus</i> (33-36)  |
| 1834 | Poor Law Amendment Act   |
| 1836 | Pugin, <i>Contrasts</i> ; beginning of the Chartist Movement   |
| 1837 | William IV dies; niece Victoria ascends throne; Carlyle, <i>The French Revolution: A History</i>   |
| 1838 | People’s Charter published; Anti-Corn Law League founded   |
| 1839 | Chartist riots after Parliament rejects petition; Eglinton Tournament; Carlyle, <i>Chartism</i> ; Ecclesiological movement: beginning of ritualism |
| 1840 | Victoria marries Albert Saxe-Coburg-Gotha  |
| 1841 | Carlyle, <i>Heroes and Hero-Worship</i>  |
| 1842 | Chartist riots at peak; Young England Movement (conservative; -45)   |
| 1843 | Carlyle, <i>Past and Present</i> ; Hood, “Song of the Shirt”   |



- 1845 Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England*
- 1846 Repeal of the Corn Laws; free trade triumphs

As is made evident by the list, the friction between the working and upper classes caused many, including Carlyle, to worry about impending revolution of unemployed, hungry workers. Carlyle has great contempt for the agrarian aristocrats whose interests were protected by the Corn Laws, but, in even greater measure, he sees the rule of industry and capitalism destroying anything good in English society. In his defense of the worker and contempt for the idle aristocracy, at times he may sound like a liberal revolutionary, but Carlyle thinks much more as a conservative reactionary. Since his contemporary world promises nothing but chaos, Carlyle looks to the past in search of an alternative world that exemplifies what England, free of industrialism's control, *might* be.

Most readers would move directly to "The Ancient Monk," Book II of *Past and Present*, and begin a comparison of Carlyle and Jocelin via their portraits of Samson, but then the reader would miss the full design of Carlyle's argument. Narrative history, a genre of history that envelops his entire treatment of the *Chronicle*, creates more than a look back to a golden but unattainable past. Carlyle wants the whole of *Past and Present* to offer the present nineteenth-century England a future that is based upon the past; in other words, *Past and Present* is not a book that stands still in a story of medieval England but rather a map that can lead a present, one mired in greed and ineffective government, to an equitable society ruled by wise leaders. In "Midas-Eared

England: The Production of meaning in Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present*," Erin M. Goss also believes that the text is not passive but active because "rather than simply presenting a nostalgic dirge for what is now gone, *Past and Present* seeks to make possible a future that might be other than inane" (267). Goss emphasizes the power of language and its role in shoring up civilization, pointing out that "England has been transformed by its inability or refusal to recognize meaning in its own language" (267). This project focuses instead on genre and how its reinvention at the hands of four particular writers illustrates the multiple inventions, in both medieval and nineteenth-century England, of the Middle Ages. The particular focus of Goss's article may be different, but its analysis of how readers read and then arrive at meaning provides a good parallel explanation of how Carlyle and the other authors considered here each use genre in transformative ways.

Another more immediate reason to reference Goss's work is that it supports the inclusion of other sections of *Past and Present* in this discussion of "The Ancient Monk," primarily the text's opening chapter, "Midas." From Goss's perspective, the chapter establishes how language has failed and been failed by its speakers, an important point, but it also presents an example of an unexpected genre Carlyle uses to open his argument: the fairy tale. A word associated with the fairy tale, from positive and negative aspects, is "enchantment," some version of which is used ten times in this short first chapter. Goss tells us that "enchantment" and "cant," the meaningless, repetitive language of politicians that is hated by Carlyle, are etymologically connected: "Both *cant* and *enchantment* derive from the Latin word *cantare*—to sing.

While cant becomes a word referring to a repetitive and formulaic (song-like) language that privileges form over content, enchantment (*in + cantare*) suggests the subjugation of another by means of song" (282). These definitions have something in common with a discussion of genre. When a genre like romance or dream vision has been used, without change, for too long, the form is accepted even if the content has become predictable, resembling *cant* and the privileging of form over function. As found in Carlyle and especially in Jocelin, genres seem more invented, but the other ideas about genre will be investigated at length in terms of Chaucer and William Morris. From a more complicated viewpoint, *enchantment* appears to exert control so powerful that men, who, transfixed by the sirens' song, could be led to destruction. Such a powerful effect may seem too much to be achieved by a genre, but the point is that while a genre worn-out by constant, repetitive use has no real substance, only the outward form of a particular kind of narrative, a reinvented form with the appearance of a specific genre may have content such that the message it communicates has unexpected power.

As noted above, throughout *Past and Present*, Carlyle relies on the rhetoric of repetition—different from the repetition already mentioned—to intensify meaning, and he takes on the role of magician or wizard as an observer of the dark transformation that has occurred:

The Condition of England . . . is justly regarded as one  
one of the most ominous, and withal one of the strangest,  
ever seen in this world. England is full of wealth, of

multifarious produce, supply for human want in every  
kind; yet England is dying of inanition. With unabated  
bounty the land of England blooms and grows; yet  
. . . some baleful fiat of Enchantment has gone forth,  
saying, "Touch it not[!]" ("Midas" 7)

The fairy tale has gone wrong. Those in power have instructed their workers to produce, and like Midas they do not understand that their success as producers does not create success for *them*. Carlyle is convinced that by listening to but understanding nothing of substance from the cant delivered by their leaders, English citizens—except probably the landed aristocracy—now suffer under a government that governs without wisdom. Goss sees the problem as one in which "[c]ommunication has become chanting as language has been stripped of the power to express anything but artifice and convention" (Goss 267). Here Goss has made another claim that can also be applied to the reinvention of genre and the power it gives the reinventor. Carlyle combines the fairytale-mythology with narrative history, which will again combine with socio-political pamphlet. These hybrid genres empower narrative forms to communicate information they have never before contained, and Carlyle sees these narrative forms as better modes of communicating all the truths he perceives in the past, the present, and maybe even the future.

There is a final point from Goss's article that can be applied not only to Carlyle and the greater issue of genre but to the even more encompassing claims of this project's methodology. Jauss's reader-response theory allows any interpretation to participate, but only readers who actively engage with a text will cross the hermeneutic bridges set by Jauss. Midas represents a misunderstanding of language and, perhaps more importantly, "a lesson in reading" (Goss 271). Carlyle includes two stories about Midas—Midas receives the golden touch as well as the donkey's ears. Asking that everything he touched turn to gold is obviously a tale about the consequences of greed, not understanding what his wish will entail, but greed is a byproduct not only of misunderstanding but an example of assigning importance to the wrong entities. When Midas declares that Pan is a greater musician than Apollo, he does not just anger a god. Midas has chosen appearance over substance; Pan may seem more appealing to earthly desires, but Apollo represents the divine, the greater good. According to Carlyle, Midas had "parted company with the eternal inner Facts of the Universe, and followed the transient outer Appearances thereof; . . . Properly it is the secret of all unhappy men and unhappy nations . . . . They have become enchanted; stagger spell-bound, reeling on the brink of high peril, because they were not wise enough" (*Past and Present* 14). Carlyle wants his readers, by translating language and searching for meaning, to participate in creating the text and, in a different sense, participate in creating their society. After reading "Midas" and better understanding how "The Ancient Monk" works not just as an example of the past but a modifier of the nineteenth century,

modern readers can see why the famous version of the *Chronicle* should not be read in isolation and how *Past and Present* might be greater than a sum of its parts.

The final section, Book IV, “Horoscope,” deserves a brief mention if only to remind the reader that Carlyle does not see past, present, and future as discreet units and that the past assist his present in attaining a better future. Jocelin and his monastic order do not play a significant role here, but there is a continued emphasis on a communal order of life. Carlyle sees a hierarchical order to a communal society with power residing in the head: “Men cannot live isolate: we *are* all bound together, for mutual good or else for mutual misery, as living nerves in the same body” (“The Landed” 282). The Narrator is proselytizing, finishing in the genre of a sermon, and even though there is not the comfort of religious belief associated with Jocelin, there are substitutions for wise leaders, like men of genius or of letters; he looks to the highest level of talent to work out a plan of “salvation” for all those below. For all the criticism he metes out for the nineteenth-century world, Carlyle does offer some cautious optimism: “What a Future; wide as the world, if we have the heart and heroism for it,—which, by Heaven’s blessings we shall” (“The One Institution” 265). As Carlyle sees it, if people will follow him in search of the heroic—who reside in the upper class—and give the chosen heroes control, the nineteenth century will be on its way to embarking on the twelfth-century path to contentment directed by the rule of a wise hero.

## Book II, "The Ancient Monk"

Now that the real beginning and end of *Past and Present* have their places, the discussion can now move to "The Ancient Monk," taking care to recognize how the imposing Editor-Narrator figure, in support of his rhetorical goals, transforms the original *Chronicle* into a different mix of genres. The real history of the *Chronicle* and its publication have an amazing synchronicity with Carlyle's own plans. The idea for *Past and Present* comes to him almost magically. As mentioned earlier, in 1840, the *Chronicle of the Abbey at Bury St Edmunds* "was printed for the first time . . . under the auspices of the recently founded [in 1838] Camden Society for antiquarian research and publication" (*Past and Present* xiii). The *Chronicle* would become a significant source of English monastic history as well as the inspiration for Carlyle's consideration of the past and present that, he argued, would save England. The *Chronicle* seems made for Carlyle at this particular moment in time. On the research trip that would become famous for *not* finding what it was meant to find, Carlyle sees "the ruined abbey at Bury St. Edmunds, once the habitation of a prosperous and peaceful community of men," located not far away from the ruin of men at the St. Ives workhouse (Intro., *Past and Present* xii). Even the location of these two images, one of England present—the workhouse—and the other of England past—the abbey, could be read as serendipitous to an amazing degree. This research trip occurred in the summer of 1842; the Camden *Chronicle* had become available two years earlier; and the coalescence of ideas pushed that earlier idea, a history of Oliver Cromwell, aside. If there was some planning to make these events seem more connected than they were, the point is that Carlyle

wanted them to be seen as a body of apparently unconnected events that came together spontaneously, as if controlled by a good spell. These two tangible places give Carlyle the comparison he needs: that the contentment associated with the memory of what was the monastic community shows that in the past, England was the place of work and fulfillment, while the current workhouse at St Ives suggests no hope for their immediate or future situations.

Anyone who knows about the original versions and publication history of the *Chronicle* would wonder if Carlyle's breathless description was meant to suggest that he had discovered it: "[T]he ideas, the life furniture, whole workings and ways of this worthy Jocelin; covered deeper than Pompeii with the lava ashes and inarticulate wreck of seven hundred years!" (46). Carlyle does acknowledge "the labours of the Camden Society . . . [that have given] us an extremely foreign book" (46), and here begin the conflicting reports. Jocelin writes in a "dialect of Monk-Latin" (46) that "lies across . . . the ninefold Stygian Marshes, Stream of Lethe" (46), but the *Chronicle* is also "written in . . . childlike transparency, . . . [transparent] as shallow limpid water" (47; 48). In a nod to the first editor, Carlyle acknowledges that the Latin manuscript "has now therefrom, by Mr. Rokewood of the Camden Society, been deciphered into clear print" [and] anyone with "a smattering of grammar" can read it (48). Carlyle keeps his readers off-balance because he wants to be only editor who can reveal the truths of this mysterious text. He does not set out to deceive but rather to replace the straightforward text edited by Rokewood with one that, after Carlyle's reinvention, can serve as example and support for his plan to save England from her own industrial success. His revision of the



*Chronicle in Past and Present* suggests a resemblance between Carlyle and medieval writers who, with their perception of authorship as a potentially shared enterprise, honor an older text *by* reinventing it. Jocelin is not one of those medieval writers; since Jocelin's writing is more inventive than that of other medieval writers, his use of genres, especially ones that are meant for personal, private thoughts and introspection, is notably special.

In making his argument for social change, Carlyle is not looking only to a text that happens to be medieval but to the medieval past as a whole. It is clear that the nineteenth-century had a fascination with the Middle Ages as it revisited that period's design, art, and architecture, the most visual expressions of the trend. Carlyle uses the Middle Ages differently, highlighting a twelfth-century monastery as a contrast to his own time. The past serves as a corrective, using Jocelin's Benedictine house as the example. In Carlyle's view, a society that offers the best to all its citizens is one where power moves from the top down, and the leader at the top is the hero who knows what is best for his dependents. The monastery is such a society, and Abbot Samson is Carlyle's twelfth-century hero who shows how the world's order can be restored.

Carlyle does imbue his medieval country with a magical, mysterious otherworldliness, and within the *Chronicle* lies the key to a better world: "[T]o the present editor it has seemed possible some glimmering of light . . . might lie in these confused Paper-Masses now entrusted to him; wherefore he determines to edit the same" (*Past and Present* 42). He then considers time in its past, present, and future forms, explaining how the three phases are both separate and woven together:

Out of old Books, new Writings, and much Meditation  
not of yesterday, he will endeavor to select a thing or two;  
and from the Past, in a circuitous way, illustrate the  
Present and Future. The Past is a dim, indubitable fact, and  
the future too is one, only dimmer; nay properly it is  
the *same* fact in new dress and development. For the  
Present holds on it both the whole Past and the whole  
Future. (42)

Carlyle will lift *his* version of the *Chronicle* out of chronological time and make it the tale of an eternal hero. History becomes a narrative independent of time, losing its monastic context. There is Jocelin's *Chronicle of the Abbey at Bury St Edmunds* followed by Carlyle's own *Chronicle of Abbot Samson, Hero of the Abbey at Bury St Edmunds*.

### ***Chronicle Comparisons***

Jocelin the writer of the *Chronicle* and Jocelin the monk in Carlyle's "The Ancient Monk" are, save a few faint similarities, identical in name alone. Carlyle recognizes Jocelin as a "kind of born *Boswell*, though an infinitesimally small one" (*Past and Present* 47), a compliment that is immediately qualified. He refers to the monk as "Poor Jocelin" (Georgianna 106) but then admires "the 'veracity' of Jocelin's distinctly human details" (106). Carlyle competes with Jocelin as a historical narrator; he acknowledges the

medieval writer's abilities but not so much as to make himself seem less gifted. The vivid details and admiring observations of Abbot Samson that Carlyle finds in the *Chronicle* appeal to Carlyle, but when Jocelin criticizes the man he once lionized, Carlyle embraces the role of editor and does not include anything negative in his own text. As a narrative historian, Carlyle is just as much—maybe more—the storyteller as the historian, using historical information as illustrations in a story's framework. Linda Georgianna, in "Carlyle and Jocelin of Brakelond: A Chronicle Rechronicled," agrees that Carlyle is revising the role of the historian as he revises the historical document itself: "It is Carlyle the literary artist who 'edits' Jocelin's text. Interestingly enough, Carlyle calls himself a historian only once in Book II. Carlyle's method in working with his source makes use of as many events and concrete details from the *Chronicle* as possible, but at the same time to rearrange and reinterpret Jocelin's material freely" (106).

As famous as the *Chronicle* and *Past and Present*, especially "The Ancient Monk," are, there has been little investigation, such as suggested here and supported by Georgianna, into how and why Carlyle uses his medieval source. In *The Writing of Past and Present*, Grace Calder believes that while Carlyle may alter some of the *Chronicle* for effect,

he does not alter the content of the historical picture  
as given by Jocelin. Carlyle frames Jocelin, as it were,  
fashioning around Book II a gesso border of his own  
composition—he does not distort the picture he

impanels for his modern spectators; the panel is

Jocelin's own document. (104, qtd. in Georgianna)

Richard Altick, in his introduction to *Past and Present*, describes the abbey at Bury St. Edmunds as "once the habitation of a prosperous and peaceful community of men" (xii) and does not question Carlyle's estimation of this past world. D. Heyward Brock, however, does see the discrepancies between the *Chronicle* and how its content is presented in "The Ancient Monk," noting that "Carlyle has, generally, oversimplified and often disregarded Samson's political ability and activity, and certainly has not reflected the complexity of the monk's character, as presented by Jocelin" (104, qtd. in Georgianna). Additionally, no one has studied Jocelin himself as a chronicler, memoirist, and, more importantly, an individual. As suggested earlier, the *Chronicle*, while it is most obviously about Samson, is just as much an autobiography of Jocelin as the reader watches his development from innocent novice to disillusioned senior monk. Georgianna agrees, finding that the *Chronicle* "is not impregnable to analysis any more than is Carlyle's transformation of it. Neither Carlyle's genuine admiration for Jocelin's talents nor his invented role as bewildered Editor . . . should blind us to the systematic revisions which Carlyle makes, revisions which alter rather drastically Jocelin's historical sense . . . and his conclusions about heroes" (105). Although Carlyle, the "Editor," seems to have an easy relationship with the medieval amateur, he must work hard to control Jocelin so that he can gain control over the narrative itself.

In his attempt to diminish Jocelin's abilities as a writer—and elevate his own position as the Editor—, Carlyle repeatedly compares him to a child or simple man not equipped to handle complex materials. After the initial left-handed compliment about Jocelin as a small version of a Boswell, Carlyle describes “[this Jocelin]” as . . . an ingenious and ingenuous, a cheery-hearted, innocent, yet withal shrewd, noticing quick-witted man; . . . [t]he man is of patient, peaceable, clear-smiling nature (*Past and Present* 47). Carlyle writes nothing that is clearly negative, but he continues to undercut Jocelin's image as a mature adult. Jocelin is

[a] learned grown man, yet with the heart of a good child,

whose whole life indeed has been that of a child,—St.

Edmundsbury Monastery a large kind of cradle for him,

in which his whole prescribed duty was to *sleep* kindly,

and love his mother well! (47)

Carlyle continues to insist that for a work as inaccessible as the *Chronicle*, his interpretive skills are necessary. The distance between the Victorian reader and the medieval text is vast, and it is difficult to discern Jocelin or his words because Jocelin's “light is most feeble, intermittent, and requires the intensest kindest inspection [by Carlyle]; otherwise it will disclose mere vacant haze” (49). The earlier praised and respected efforts of the first editor, J.G. Rokewood, have been conveniently forgotten,

and his clear translation of a text that is apparently not difficult—anyone with a smattering of Latin can read it—is no longer clear enough.

### **Magical Materials**

Looking beyond the people involved with the *Chronicle*, Carlyle expands his vision to consider the power of language. He terms it “magic,” an appropriate word since he works at transforming Jocelin, Samson, and the *Chronicle* itself, and this transformation is the evidence of Carlyle’s reader’s response that approaches and interprets a text differently from the probable reception of the original medieval audience and even differently from J.G. Rokewood. In his typical way, Carlyle chooses an image and uses it again and again throughout a few pages. Although he certainly wants his version of Samson to be the memorable one, Carlyle still alludes to the transient nature history and the past, and the careful reader notices that the shadows of the past will allow future readers to shape meaning out of indistinct forms:

Here [Jocelin] is; and in his hands a magical speculum,  
  
much gone to rust indeed, yet in fragments still clear;  
  
wherein the marvellous image of his existence does  
  
still shadow itself, though fitfully, and as with an  
  
intermittent light! (*Past and Present* 49)

Language has the magical ability to give voice to those long dead, and it is Carlyle’s concern from the beginning of his own book that he be the conduit for these magical

elements. Jocelin is a member of the species of “monk,” “so very strange an extinct species of the human family,” (49) and his ability to speak to the modern reader through his writing is like a “deep-buried Mastodon, some fossil Megatherion, Ichthyosaurus, . . . [speaking] from amid its rock-swathings” (49). The past speaks to the present, and “this miracle [is possible] thanks to the Letters of the Alphabet” (49). Carlyle knows that a reader and writer have possession of a formidable power, with his dramatic flair, Carlyle is every bit the showman as he leads his readers to the magical place that is founded on Jocelin’s narrative. The readers are encouraged to “peep with us into this singular *camera lucida*?” (49), and it seems that their vision becomes reality as they follow Carlyle into “wintry twilight, through some poor stript hazel-grove, . . . [and] some real human figure is seen moving . . . and we look into a pair of eyes as deep as our own, *imagine* our own, but all unconscious of us: to whom we for the time are become as spirits and invisible!” (55) As there is no other guide—Jocelin unawares of the observers—Carlyle must take the role of guide, guaranteeing that this interpretation of the past will be shaped by the nineteenth-century present.

The sudden end to the *Chronicle* favors Carlyle’s treatment of Samson, allowing him to concentrate on the abbot at his peak and conclude with a startling jolt. Jocelin follows Samson into his decline and, as described before, ends with an apparently mundane concern, but Carlyle leaves his readers with a differently crafted image of “[m]agnaminous Samson, his life is but a labour and a journey” (*Past and Present* 127). The Abbot prepares to leave on a quest for King Richard, who has been fighting in the

Crusades, and he leaves, but then nothing more. Jocelin's memoir ends without any final explanation, and Carlyle gives the close an appropriate dramatic flourish:

And Jocelin's Boswellian Narrative, suddenly shorn through  
by the scissors of Destiny, *ends*. There are no words more;  
but a black line, and leaves of blank paper. . . . [T]he miraculous  
hand that held all this theatric-machinery suddenly quits  
hold. (127)

Carlyle is once more the magician as he brings his readers back through a worm-hole of time, the modern reader visualizing them tumbling to the site where the monastery once hummed with activity, monks in their cells like worker bees, only now "there is nothing left but a mutilated black Ruin amid green botanic expanses" (127). The *Chronicle's* content, particularly material concerning Abbot Samson, may have been substantially altered, but Carlyle continues to breathe life into Jocelin until the last moment, and the re-entry by the abbey's remains feels active, the reader landing with a thud onto pasture land.

Instead of castigating Carlyle for taking vast editorial freedom, it is more useful to concentrate on why he arrived at his translation and how his use of genres are used to empower the writer. Carlyle reinvents genres mainly through combination: narrative history is expressed in fairytale, social pamphlet, and sermon. As the Editor-Narrator, Carlyle himself takes on different guises such as storyteller, social activist, pastor,



magician, and an always present historian. Carlyle encourages the reader to become involved in “translating” the language of the day, to understand what the politicians’ rhetoric really means for everyday life. Of course, Carlyle wants any additional translations to agree with his own; the modern reader will add new layers in interpreting Carlyle and Jocelin, the two considered jointly and independently. “The Ancient Monk” will probably remain the most well-known and read section of *Past and Present*, as it is central to this analysis, but Carlyle should also be remembered for his insistence that past, present, and future are interconnected, and that the past is not an age to be thought of only with regret and longing but as an active participant in the present moment of life.

### **Jauss, Jocelin, Carlyle**

Jauss’s idea of the “horizon of expectations” is crucial to this reading of *Past and Present*, and it can be applied at several levels. It is useful to give a moment’s thought to the Camden Society and J.G. Rokewood. The founding of this society, with its concentration on early English texts, gives clear evidence of the nineteenth-century’s fascination with and psychological need for a medieval past, something that represented stability to the later unsettled era. Then Carlyle appropriates the text, presenting the *Chronicle* as if it is his discovery and therefore his version should be given attention. He crosses the hermeneutic bridges as all readers do, with their own interpretation of what they need, what they want to find. Carlyle envisions a kind of feudal medieval society, hierarchical in its organization and distribution of power—a description of Jocelin’s Benedictine abbey. Thinking back to his own experience with

England controlled from the top down, Carlyle believes the example from the Middle Ages—as he has read it—is the paradigm that will prevent a social explosion. He chooses several different genres, their appropriate personae and language, for the most convincing expression of his rhetorical goals.

Even as he communicates with the modern reader with a warm, intimate voice, Jocelin remains distant, locked away in his chronicle. Though limited in our knowledge, we can still access his rhetorical needs as suggested in his writing. Under Jauss's theoretical umbrella, the modern reader, while openly subjective, must still try to keep that modern self from replacing the medieval monk's spirit. It is through his use of genres like the memoir and diary that Jocelin opens the door to modernity—Jocelin is the "I" of the *Chronicle*, and his choices seem to mirror those of the reader's modern self so much so that his goals and struggles do not seem foreign to us. The modern reader finds both alterity and modernity in Jocelin's text. Carlyle finds an alterity defined in relation to the past he needs; he does not find his own age because he wants it to become what he has found. Jauss's notion of reader response allows for Jocelin's interpretation of what a "chronicle" is meant to be, Carlyle's reading—"translation"—of it as support for his rhetorical-socio-political agenda, and then modern readers' response and interpretation to Carlyle, Jocelin, and to anything woven in between and around them.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CHAUCEER, DREAM VISION, AND *THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS*

*The Book of the Duchess* stands out as an apparently traditional dream vision that resists traditional interpretations, a poem that is more elusive and problematic than it first appears. An analysis like that of George L. Kittredge, one of the poem's earliest critics, shows that scholars even disagree with themselves. Kittredge's lecture, "Chaucer and his Poetry" (1915), excuses any perceived missteps taken by the insomniac-dreamer, declaring him "a purely imaginative figure to whom certain purely imaginative things happen, in a purely imaginary dream" (Bronson 864). This created figure's mental capacity is not fully developed but is rather one "of childlike wonder. He understands nothing. . . . The Dreamer is not merely artless by nature; he is dulled, and almost stupefied by long suffering" (864). Later on, though, Kittredge's Dreamer is no longer stupefied, but

[w]ith instinctive delicacy. . . he suppresses [knowledge of the  
lady's death] . . . to afford the knight the only help in his  
power—the comfort of pouring his sad story into  
compassionate ears. (864)

Kittredge's insistence on the "imaginary" quality of the dream and dreamer could mean that he wants distance between the dream and any reality, medieval or twentieth century. The Dreamer himself is childlike, artless and stupefied, or compassionate, with later critics finding him naïve or comic. The poem is "tedious, disconnected, and ill-proportioned, languid in its beginning and abrupt in its conclusion" (Bronson 863) or "very difficult and subtle" (Dilorenzo 20). Readings that concentrate on the Dreamer-Narrator or try to judge the poem on its narrative progress offer no convincing reasons for choosing one over any other.

Later readings move in the right direction by elevating the genre itself to the center of investigation, but the modern theoretical positions that claim opposing views of poetic structure find results that can be seen as remarkably similar. Marcelle Thiebaux' *The Stag of Love: The Chase in Medieval Literature* (1974) and J. Stephen Russell's *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (1988) both study conventional form, the first looking for meaning in tradition, the other expecting to find empty symbols. The Dreamer-Narrator's own dream vision opens with a prototypical description of the natural world. Whether or not this natural dreamscape ultimately creates the expected atmosphere of solace for the Man in Black is a point of contention. If the Man in Black is unable to experience solace, is it because the dream vision form has failed or is it because Chaucer's fourteenth-century society is unable or ill-equipped to offer solace to anyone.

The use of conventions is actually not a guarantee of outcome, and the conventions themselves drives the artist, the poet to innovate in subtle ways. The

natural dreamscape appears as tradition would have it: “And eke the welken was so fair-  
-/Blew, bright, clere was the ayr,/ . . . [N]other to cold nor hoot yt nas,/Ne in al the  
welken was a clowde” (ll.339-40; 342-43). The day is perfect, perfectly ordinary because  
it has the essential qualities of all the other dream visions. By not making any actual  
changes, Chaucer highlights the effect of symbolic repetition, and repetition drains  
words and symbols of meaning. By draining the symbolic language of meaning, it gains  
meaning: comfort is hard to come by, and a tradition is not always a dependable source.  
The Dreamer encounters the image of the hunt, and the quarry escapes:

This hert rused and staa away

Fro alle the houndes a privy way.

The houndes had overshote hym alle

And were on a defaute yfalle. (ll.381-5)

In the vocabulary of love, the “hert” is also the “heart,” and she has moved beyond the  
lover’s reach, and to a traditional reader like Thiebaux, it is “clear that the hunt is  
allegorical, that pursuing the quarry is like pursuing a woman” (11). He expands the  
meaning of the symbol, finding it in the Dreamer’s dreamscape bedroom: the hunt  
portrayed in panels of a frieze that is supposed to bring solace to the Man in Black. The  
hunt does not exist in the present moment but is artistically represented by “the desired  
hart’s flight and pursuit [across the walls of the dreamer’s bedroom]. It is the  
ineluctable power of death. . . . [Although] . . . [the] living beloved may never again be  
held, . . . she is captured within the poem’s [and the frieze’s] permanence” (125-6).

Before the Dreamer observes the hunt, while still in his dream's bed, he sees stories represented in stained glass and on the walls of the bed chamber. This time artistic subjects are from ancient tragedies, "of Ector and of kyng Priamus, / Of Achillies and of kyng Lamedon, / And eke of Medea and Jason, / Of Paris, Eleyne, and of Lavyne" (ll. 328-31), and like the hunt, these images are static and are, more obviously than the hunt, scenes of loss and love gone wrong. For the Dreamer, "to beholde [these images] was gret joye" (l. 325), and he does not speak of their sadness and grief; it is more important to think of the role that art, including poetry like *The Book of the Duchess*, is supposed to play in creating solace and empathy.

Thus far, artistic representation do not seem chosen to inspire solace. The divide between art and reality is not a gap easily traversed; as observed by Helen Phillips, "the relationship of art to painful reality" (*Chaucer's Dream Poetry* 31) is a troubled one. While elegiac poetry like *The Book of the Duchess* might "suggest the comfort that art can offer the bereaved," poetry—and any other literature and the images depicted there—reveal "the ultimate inadequacy of words to assuage real-life pain" (31). Thiebaux finds meaning in the structure and symbolism of dream visions, but the power within the meaning seems trapped and unable to function beyond the dream vision's structure. So meaning may exist inside or outside the form, but a separation remains between poetry and reality. *The Book of the Duchess* succeeds as an elegiac poem only in the confines of formal design; the poem's words loose potency and fail at its task in the real world. Thiebaux's approach satisfies requirements of his search for meaning but does not appear applicable outside a predictable dream vision.

Perhaps the Dreamer does not acknowledge meaning in courtly language and images because he perceives none, and the lack of intrinsic meaning is what a focus on structure and form reveals to J. Stephen Russell, as he explains in his deconstructionist approach, *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (1988). Russell defines deconstruction as the “ubiquitous urge to untangle, untie, unravel, and demythologize an intellectual system . . . whose primitive communal sense becomes . . . ‘lost in transmission’” (141) and his reading of *The Book of the Duchess* finds disjunction between what he defines as poetic structure and narrative truth. He believes that the intellectual system supporting dream vision had already been dismantled; further, the modern reader should continue, by linguistic investigation, to dismantle the aristocratic system. The language of courtly love is “full of artificial and grotesquely inflated *expressions* of sentiment, . . . [a poetic empty shell that] exposes the discourse of sentiment, . . . [as offered by the conventions of courtly love] in all of its foolishness and inefficacy” (144). The dream vision’s attempt to function as an elegiac poem is doomed; as an example of “bankrupt conventionality” (149), the poem fails to offer consolation.

Looking at both Thiebaux’ formalist close reading and Russell’s deconstructionist analysis,—which in some ways is also a formalist close reading, just from a different academic-political perspective—the reader is given a choice between two readings. Each scholar finds what he believes is present in the poem, and even though there is only one text—*The Book of the Duchess*—under consideration, both theoreticians’ demands are satisfied. These interpretations are useful and make valid points, but only

by acknowledging the scholars' subjectivity can one text accommodate two convincing interpretations.

With the genre as an organizing principle, instead of beginning with the viewpoint of a modern reader who claims objectivity, what if, according to Jauss's theory, the Dreamer-Narrator and the poet himself were considered the first readers, each with an unapologetically subjective approach. The Dreamer-Narrator reads Ovid, Chaucer reads French dream visions, and then the modern reader, whose own viewpoint should not be forgotten, begins an analysis from the position of the medieval readers, starting within the poem instead of without. Via a modern reader's approach, responses that could have existed in the past are recreated.

Giving power to the poem's narrator does not limit a reading to only the poem itself, but because Jauss's reader-response provides the essential structure the reader is encouraged to look at the world surrounding the poet, who is also one of the readers. Chaucer experienced and witnessed changes in society that could explain his treatment of the dream vision. In the fourteenth century, the social paradigm that courtly love imposed on society was noticeably shifting. Courtly society's elevated position above other classes was no longer absolute: "[G]rowing towns has given rise to cultural [beliefs] which were decidedly more realistic and practical than those at the more conservative court. This newer culture, often characterized as bourgeois, existed alongside the more feudal and idealistic courtly culture in an uneasy alliance for some time" (Boardman 568). Once these two cultures found it difficult to coexist, a breakdown represented in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, "courtly tradition was only



invoked to call up a double vision: an archaic, inadequate approach to life as well as an idealistic critique of bourgeois culture” (569). Chaucer’s poetry does not sustain this double vision, but it allows these competing versions of life to converse and compete within dream visions organized around a more elastic frame of his own making.

The luck of good timing applies not only to the historic but to the artistic moment as well. As is often the case, changes in artistic expression occur in tandem with changes in society: “The great advantage for a poet to come at a time of disintegrating culture is . . . [that] the actuality of what we are and what we believe in is suddenly seen to be nearly meaningless habit, and must . . . be translated to the terms and modes of the imagination” (R.P. Blackmur qtd. in Boardman 575). Boardman speaks more directly: “Chaucer stood at just such a juncture in literary history; the terms of courtly love, while widely understood and often invoked, did not command a stable response, and could therefore be . . . made to reverberate with fresh imaginative force” (575). Chaucer viewed changes from several perspectives. The courtier, the business man with the wool trade, and the poet all merged their interpretations of life, giving the poet a wider imaginative range than was possible before. The dream vision could no longer stay safely within the court but had to meet the gaze of those citizens whose lives now had power of their own. Even the “fresh, imaginative force” could not make the traditional dream vision a new form that still relied on an old system of belief. Chaucer could transform *The Book of the Duchess* but not without making changes that reflected new sources of power that no longer found meaning in the language of courtly love. The failure of the poem to offer real consolation to the Man in Black, the

explicit task of the elegiac poem, tells the reader that the language and form of the dream vision must reappear as a text that is somehow changed. Without revision, “a poet, even with the best of intentions, will not be able to offer words of comfort and solace” (578). If Chaucer’s goal was to demonstrate the hollowness of standard dream language, then the poem’s “failure” is the poet’s success. Shifts in society, historic and poetic, demonstrate that the innovations surrounding art do have a connection to other changes in society, so it is not surprising that the reordering of class dominance ran parallel to Chaucer’s reinventions in poetry.

Chaucer’s ability to produce a dream vision that seems to follow the French model and even includes borrowings from that example may obscure the subtle changes he makes, and these changes tell the story of his fourteenth-century reader’s response to the original sources. His continued use of the recognized poetic form keeps him in the position of court poet writing what is probably a memorial to Blanche, the deceased wife of John of Gaunt. As an insider, Chaucer knows that the reality of his world outside the court undercuts the power that courtly society once wielded. By continuing with the dream vision, Chaucer kept his courtly audience; he might be one of the few present who understands the turbulence in the world outside. He presents a reader’s response that is not one of a medieval compiler, a reader and writer who honors his sources as a blueprint from which he will not deviate. Instead, like Jocelin of Brakelond, Chaucer sees the possibility of individual artistic choice that in this case reflects the spirit of a larger society. The language of courtly love and the standardized dream visions in which it is used may be drained of their meaning, but, unlike Russell,

Chaucer does not want to dismantle the construction to expose an empty shell without content. The dream vision becomes the conduit for other kinds of information, and it can still be meaningful; the exploration of genre allows new readers to respond to old forms. The absence of old meaning makes poetic space for the inclusion of new meaning, and so *The Book of the Duchess* is not a failure. Again like Jocelin, Chaucer can be seen as a medieval writer who has a modern self-awareness, and he crafted a reinvented dream vision using a framework whose outwardly traditional structure houses a radical interior.

Aside from structure, Chaucer's narrators are sometimes spokesmen for their creator's artistic theories, and this dream vision's Dreamer-Narrator is perhaps not comically oblivious to dream vision elements but actually a new kind of dreamer who does not understand the courtly language that keeps reality at a distance. Like Chaucer, he is both reader and poet—"I wol . . . / put [my] sweven in ryme" (1331-2)—who reads the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone from Ovid, and his dream is, at least partially, a reader's response to that tale's dream vision of lost love and the bereavement that follows. The Dreamer-Narrator does not grasp the messages in his late-night reading, and once he enters his own dream vision, he shows that he cannot communicate in the language of courtly love. In Ovid's tale, Ceyx's drowned body, animated by Morpheus, visits his grieving wife, Alcyone and leaves with these famous words: "To lytel while oure blysse lasteth!" (l.211) This line is the heart of what the Man in Black discusses in the Narrator's dream: life is too short, and bliss or joy will be gone too soon. The majority of the Narrator's dream focuses on his attempts to understand the Man in Black's

communication of this basic sentiment, attempts that would have been unnecessary if the Dreamer-Narrator had realized the importance of that single line. If, however, he is a new kind of reader and poet with a different system of communication, the line does not seem so important.

The Dreamer feels that another concern is supremely important, and courtly language and images have nothing to do with this physical necessity: sleep. The Narrator-Dreamer's first concern is his lack, not of love, but of sleep: "I have gret wonder . . . / How that I lyve, for day ne nyght / I may not slepe" (ll. 1-3). A forlorn lover loses sleep over a lost love, but this Dreamer refers to a vague reason for his suffering and tells his readers outright that "my boote is never the ner, / For there is phisicien but oon / That may me hele" (ll. 38-40). That particular physician is not named. What is mentioned most frequently is sleep, including seven forms of "slepe" before the Dreamer reads Ovid's story, fourteen within the actual tale. Before the Dreamer's own dream begins, "slepe" appears in some way thirty-one times. The information available to the Dreamer would prepare him to understand the classic dream vision he will enter, but he has ignored or missed those examples in the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone. Instead, the comic scene of Juno's messenger blowing his trumpet in the ear of a sleepy Morpheus gets attention, and the Dreamer skips over the details of Alcyone's end: "But what she sayede more in that swow / I may not telle yow as not; / Hyt were to longe for to dwelle" (ll. 215-17). The reason he has informed us of his reading does not mention anything that would stand out in a love story, rather that he would be "dolven everydel / And ded, ryght thurgh defaute of slep, / Yif I ne had red and take kep / Of this tale next

before” (ll. 222-25). The most important idea that has prevented his death has nothing to do with love but with the pursuit of sleep, and he makes a promise to Morpheus or Juno or “som wight elles, / I ne roghte who” (ll. 244):

“To make me slepe and have som reste

I wil yive hym the alderbeste

Yifte that ever he abod hys lyve [,] . . .

Of down of pure dowves white

I will yive hym a fether-bed,

Rayed with gold and ryght wel cled

In fyn blak satyn doutremer,

And many a pilowe, and every ber

Of cloth of Reynes, to slepe softe—

Hym thar not need to turnen ofte. (ll. 245-57)

None of these details is important individually, but this elaborate description, which continues beyond l. 257, confirms that the Dreamer’s deepest wish is for sleep, and for him sleep is more significant than the last thoughts of a dying Alcyone that he cannot be bothered to relate. Some modern readers see this section leading to the primary dream sequence as an entirely comic one expressed by a Dreamer whose mind is simple or naïve; others think the disconnect between Dreamer and theme is indicative of an early,

unpolished poem. Thinking in a different direction, the Dreamer could perhaps be interpreted as a “straight” character who uses Alcyone’s dream as a vehicle to sleep, paying no attention to the dream vision form and its expression of courtly love because for him, it lacks meaning.

Even though Chaucer’s narrators are not his direct representatives, the Dreamer could be expressing indirectly an artistic idea: a new interpretation of a static poetic form. Chaucer was a student of the dream vision and the romance; he certainly understood the genres and borrowed from French originals with great frequency. Helen Phillips compiled the French sources Chaucer included in *The Book of the Duchess* in her introduction to the poem in *Chaucer’s Dream Poetry* (1977). The concern is not with those exact sources but how the recognizable conventions work in the poem and what effect they have on the Dreamer. Chaucer employed poetic traditions for different reasons than previous poets. His dream visions represent a departure from the accepted form: “Rather than being a defense of poetry, like that offered by Dante or implied like Alain de Lille, Chaucer’s dream poems describe an uncompleted poetic quest. Sophisticated, convoluted, they chronicle his doubts, his false starts in seeking poetic material, his frustrations as an artist” (Lynch 102). The poem may or may not present examples of Chaucer’s artistic doubts and false starts, but he has certainly moved from defending poetry to creating poetry: to reinvent the dream vision while using the dream vision form.

A quality that can be found in Chaucer’s poetry is tension, and it reveals a modernity not usually connected to a medieval writer. Michael Herzog believes that

“Chaucer’s poetry is filled with the tension resulting from the confrontation of oppositions: opposition of ideals . . . , opposition of narrative techniques, and opposition of thematic concerns” (269). He also finds tension in his poetic structures: “Chaucer’s narratives are often unbalanced and sharply angular. . . . [T]hese disruptive tactics . . . are integral to his sense of the inorganic discontinuity between fiction and experience” (Robert Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Experience*, qtd. in Herzog 269-70). This Chaucer and his poetry have entered the sophisticated world of modern criticism, and they might appear unfamiliar. It might be a stretch to equip Chaucer with a “sense of inorganic discontinuity,” but *The Book of the Duchess* should certainly receive more than a glance as an early effort at dream vision. What Chaucer has clearly achieved is, by using all the traditional parts of a dream vision, a transformation of that genre. Since all the expected elements are included but something different has been created using what was always there, Chaucer’s dream visions are more than the sum of their parts. A new artistic theory can be identified, and Chaucer could then evaluate how new readers responded to the old forms. We are not privy to what those evaluations were, but we do know that an artistic approach was in place that entitled the dream vision genre freedom to become something new.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CHAUCE, THE DISENCHANTMENT OF ROMANCE, AND *THE KNIGHT'S TALE*

The romance is the medieval genre most familiar and agreeable to the modern reader. The aesthetic pleasure we initially feel when reading a romance is probably due to its omission of less appealing traits found in much medieval literature: "the priority of convention over expression . . . [and] the mixture of the poetic and the didactic" (Jauss, "Alterity" 184). Romances, "the least orthodox field of medieval texts" (185), combine their appeal to a modern audience with other surprising qualities that are revealed when the reader has historical awareness:

Romances depended upon an aristocratic milieu, which  
  
ancient and princely legends and settings provided, but  
  
beyond these externals, the behavior of these aristocrats  
  
and the codification of that behavior was notoriously  
  
contemporary. The well-known medieval anachronicity  
  
prevails; time and place are relevant only as guarantors  
  
of class. (Burlin 2)



There is an intersection of social reality and narrative time, and the romance “intrigues modern audiences . . . [with] the diversity of [their] forms and subject matter, the complexity of [their] narrative strategies and perspectives, and the many critical responses [they] invite” (Krueger, intro., *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* 1). Reader-response theory accommodates the diversity of both the romance and the responses to it. In *The Knight’s Tale*, an example of “Chaucer’s great and original experiments in narrative voice and genre” (Nolan, qtd. in Rose 204), Chaucer allows his narrator to decide how deal with the social struggles that hinder the enactment of the chivalric code in fourteenth-century society. The narrative freedom granted the Knight—it is, of course, Chaucer who chooses to be free of generic constraints—is one of the primary reasons why the romance that opens the *Tales* is set up for failure. Thinking again about the function of the Knight, Chaucer’s ability to maintain distance between himself and the narrative characters give them ownership of their ideas, keeping their creator in the background. The Knight’s story, its content, seems perfect for him, but it is curious that this is the tale that reveals the flaws and subsequent disintegration of the chivalric code. Through a narrative told by an insider of that particular culture, its society breaks crumbles from the inside out.

Before specifically focusing on *The Knight’s Tale*, it is useful to think about Chaucer and his artistic theory in terms of the romance. As the opening to his article “‘Troilus’ and the Disenchantment of Romance,” Barry Windeatt includes a passage from Richard Hurd’s *Letters on Romance and Chivalry* (1726):

This sagacious person was Dan Chaucer; who in a reign,  
that almost realized the wonders of romance chivalry,  
not only discerned the absurdity of the old romances,  
but has even ridiculed them with incomparable spirit.

His RIME OF SIR TOPAZ, in the Canterbury Tales, is a  
manifest banter on these books, and may be considered  
as a sort of prelude to the adventures of Don Quixot . . . (129)

This Chaucer sounds like a medieval writer who somehow looked at his own world as an eighteenth-century reader, and the above passage seems to assume knowledge of Chaucer's thoughts and intentions. The spirit of reinvention should not remove him from the historic moment of the fourteenth century. Modernity is an element of Chaucer's approach to writing as well as of the texts he produced, but he is not, chronologically speaking, modern, and modern readers should remember the effect his historical and social position have upon his work. Along with the other three writers considered, Chaucer demonstrates how a mind can, through a reader's perception, be seen existing in more than one world—that of its chronological moment as well as of the past and future. *The Knight's Tale* combines ancient history, which provides characters and setting, with historical "documentation," which creates a frame of reality: "A romance purports to tell not something new, novel, but an old 'storie,' a true

history of events remote in time and often in place, which the romancer has learned from fantastic creatures and events” (Carley, intro. *Arthurian Poets* 7). From this point of view, then, a romance is an example of how narrative writing and historical writing are both emotional and psychological texts, and they are separated only by a very blurred line.

*The Knight's Tale* does provide, at different moments, a design for a traditional romance, but Chaucer includes other tales that, though they follow that of the first competitor's submission, can serve as primers that assist the modern reader. For instance, *Sir Thopas*, memorable for its failure in Harry Bailly's contest, illustrates how the inclusion of every possible romantic trope results in a text that has a, a narrative façade with no meaning within. Chaucer serves in two roles: he is the comic, mercilessly poking fun as his created self, Chaucer the pilgrim, verbally stumbles through his romance; he is also the poet, experimenting with a genre whose efficacy seems to have played out. Numerous elements of the romance genre illustrate how ridiculous the tale-teller and his narrative genre are, and no matter how many characteristics are layered upon Sir Thopas, he will never be a knight. If he is the only sort of “knight” that remains for the romance, at least, for the sake of something different, he is not boring—although, in Harry Bailly's estimation, the tale is. This tale, however, is not just a simple example of how Chaucer could satirize the romance. It offers comment on social issues already mentioned and on Chaucer's poetic theory and presence in his own work. The tale may not win the contest, but it is important as an anti-romance that demonstrates

one poet's attempt to fulfill the narrative's requirements while proving how empty the requirements have become.

The order of the tales is not, at least at this moment, random because the Prioress's anti-Semitic tale had left "every man / As sober was that wonder was to se" (ll. 1881-82), and the Host needs to lighten the mood. Harry Bailey's wonderful description of Chaucer the pilgrim implies that this pilgrim may not be up to the task. The pilgrim is a slight man, "a popet in an arm t'enbrace / For any woman, small and fair of face. / He semeth elvysh by his countenance, / For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce" (ll. 1891-84). A standoffish pilgrim, perhaps devious or elusive as an elf, has not been involved with his traveling companions, maybe observing more than becoming a member of the group. The pilgrim's choice to remain outside the group reflects the separation of Chaucer the artist and Chaucer the creation. The pilgrim Chaucer does not disagree with beliefs that are repugnant to most modern readers, like those of the anti-Semitic prioress who finds no contradiction between professing love for God while hating the Jews. Although C.S. Lewis's suggestion that readers of medieval texts can and should leave their modern selves behind and enter medieval as a person of that age has been deemed impossible, in an effort to excuse the poet of accepting immoral attitudes we still find ourselves trying to understand how Chaucer's medieval mind could have made allowances. If becoming medieval readers is impossible, so must it be beyond twenty-first century capacity to gain access to the poet's mental processes. Looking at the fourteenth-century world from an historical position, we can imagine how Chaucer

might have handled social pressures. His world can be envisioned as a world of compromise:

Chaucer the man, the successful courtier and busy  
government official, could have not been naïve. . . .  
But a rigidly moralizing Controller of Customs, who  
had to deal everyday with cunning merchants and  
thieving shipmen, would have been [disastrous].

(Benson, *Riverside Chaucer*, 6)

Maybe the realities of medieval commerce were not that different from current commercial dealings—money. The twenty-first century reader might take a clue from the distance Chaucer put between his own self and his characters and try not to conflate the pilgrim and the artist who brought him to life.

Chaucer the pilgrim could be another outlet for Chaucer's feelings about all sorts of people, feelings that, for the sake of social position and peace, remain hidden. The poet's alter ego is not the voice of righteous indignation but the kind of fellow who laughs at inappropriate jokes, even finds them funny. Since he does not actively join the fellowship of the other pilgrims, Chaucer the pilgrim moves along the boundaries, literal and figurative, of their society, making no claim to be anything more than someone who "lookest as thou wouldest fynde an hare, / For evere upon the ground I se thee stare"

(Prologue to “Sir Thopas” ll. 696-97). As a man shy or sly or both, this pilgrim can make himself the observer and listener, roles that a person with one foot in poetry and the other in society and business could find instructive.

Instead of taking the obvious interpretive path that analyzes, one by one, each element in what is a catalogue of romance genre features, the more interesting approach is to think about why the elements have been used in such numbers—Chaucer the artist wants to express something via a clumsy tale that he, at several removes, tells as Chaucer the pilgrim. Harry Bailly looks to Chaucer for “[s]om deynte thing” (l. 712) to clear the pilgrims’ minds of the Prioress’s tale, but is instead given a story in verse with a heavy rhyme scheme that can make a reader or listener sway back and forth. Sir Thopas, a knight errant, is almost perfect, but not quite. He seems very feminine:

Whit was his face as payndemmayn,

His lippes rede as rose;

His rode is lyk scarlet in grayn,

And I yow telle in good certain

He hadde a seemly nose. (ll. 725-29)

His rosy cheeks, red lips, and pale skin usually belong to a maid, and the closing comment—“a seemly nose”—is Chaucer’s unmerciful dig at the beauty of a romance’s typical knight. As he leaves to battle the giant, instead of taking an oath on a sword or

some other knightly talisman, Sir Thopas turns to the domestic and “swoor on ale and breed / How that the geaunt shal be deed, / Bityde what bityde!” (ll.872-84). The tale is organized by fit or episode, each with predictable content: the knight is introduced, the knight encounters a terrible monster, the knight is ceremoniously dressed for combat, the knight departs for combat. It is at the beginning of the third episode that Chaucer is interrupted. Why does Chaucer take the role of the pilgrim whose tale, one can imagine, was greeted with groans until the Host, whose “eres aken of thy drasty speche” (l. 923), declares “Sire, at o word, thou shalt no lenger ryme” (l.932)? The portrayal of the poet as a quiet, even secretive figure who studies people, notices their attributes and flaws and reveals them and their masters—business, religion, or court—could be seen as comical or maybe, in possession of secrets, dangerous. He can criticize as he hides behind the creature of his making, Chaucer the pilgrim, a traveler who does not show his hand to anyone. Even though the poet and the pilgrim are not one in the same, they do reflect how each lives in a world of contradictions.

A brief word from one of the most colorful pilgrims, the Wife of Bath, whose tale informs the reader of another kind of romance that definitely beats that of Sir Thopas and, in terms of knighthood, makes a knight look a little better than the ones we meet in the Knight’s entry. She begins her version of a romance with reference to what could be a historical narrative from the beginning of English history:

In th’ olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,

Of which that Britons speken greet honour,

Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.

The elf-queene, with hir joly compaingye,

Daunced ful ofe in many a grene mede.

This was the olde opinion, as I rede;

I speke of manye hundred yeres ago.

But now kan no man se none elves mo[.] (ll. 857-64)

The Wife puts the images to her own use, but here the point is to emphasize the entanglement of history and narrative, in this case a romantic narrative that could be connected to what the nineteenth century identified as narrative history. Chaucer will continue narrative history as he develops the romance genre.

### ***The Knight's Tale***

*The Knight's Tale* looks beyond mythical English history told by the Wife of Bath to the even older classical past, and the Knight organizes his tale according the chivalric and courtly codes played out in ancient Greece. At first this tale seems to support the idea that order can control chaos, but a disconnection between the social order the Knight ought to represent and the disorder his tale describes is the focus of much early twentieth-century criticism. The Knight tries to sustain belief in the power of chivalry and court, but by the end of the tale, all that stands is another façade with no interior substance. If Chaucer has become “disenchanted” with romance, why has he still



chosen to use the genre and give it so much narrative space? His disenchantment is not a sign that the form holds no further possibilities of expression, but that what is expressed can be reinterpreted. As an artist, Chaucer has the opportunity to make changes that reflect how the chivalric code is at odds with medieval social and economic reality. As a reinvented form, the *Tale* also serves as a type that can now be connected with real human emotion and psychological struggle. The characters in a Chaucerian romance may not “live happily ever after,” but they can honestly experience the disappointments of real life that generic forms had typically ignored.

Chaucer finds weakness in the chivalric code, and that change appears in the *Tales*. As the Wife of Bath already told us, King Arthur’s England no longer exists: “I speke of manye hundred yeres ago. / But now kan no man se none elves mo” (ll. 857-64). The transformation in her story keeps the fairytale structure but does not necessarily rely on magic. When the loathly lady becomes beautiful, the change is just as likely to be a psychological one fueled by the knight’s acceptance of a woman’s control. Magic is now a mental construct. By the end of *The Knight’s Tale*, the romanticized knight has disappeared or is at least significantly changed. Chaucer’s revisionist urge is not limited to characterization. Barry Windeatt finds in *Sir Thopas* a Chaucer who is “[impatient] with the episodic structure of repetitious exploits at arms . . . [and that explains] why [he] abandons the romance of marvels and adventures” (129-30). In addition to overused romantic tropes, “it is the unsustainable nature of human idealisms which both draws him towards some depiction of the characteristic experience of romance, and also necessarily leads him to show the qualifications and

exhaustion of romance” (131). For Chaucer, when the standard form has been emptied, another one can be teased from the original’s remains.

Before studying the Knight’s narrative and the results of his rhetorical efforts, it is useful to begin with an early theoretical reading—Charles Muscatine’s influential article from 1950, “Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*.” In an effort to understand “one of the most baffling of the *Canterbury Tales*,” (911) Muscatine applies the formalist tools of New Criticism, and like the Knight himself, focuses on order and structure as he tries to control what he perceives as an unwieldy story. According to Muscatine, the bafflement begins with a misunderstanding of what is important in the *Tale*. The study of character and plot, elements that typically receive attention, produce, for Muscatine, little substantive material. J.R. Hulbert thought that “lack of characterization [to be] the story’s greatest weakness” (Muscatine 912); Paul F. Baum thought that if the reader could look for the “possible smile behind the description of the worthy and perfect knight himself” and find “Chaucer to be satirical,” focus on plot might lead to understanding (913). Muscatine examines many critics and their disagreements, but a compilation of all these interpretations is not necessary here. The point is rather to emphasize that just as many critical arguments existed then as now, just without labels of theoretical schools. The New Critic searched for meaning in the text and its poetic form.

Robert B. Burlin’s definition of romance includes knights, acts of knightly prowess, royal courts, and battles that vanquish something or someone evil or that decide a question, maybe concerning a woman. These elements and the tale’s structure

are some of the reasons why the *Knight's Tale* has long been identified as a romance, so it is surprising that Muscatine believes that seeing the poem as a romance is the first source of critical problems: "The *Knight's Tale* is almost universally taken to be a love poem—a medieval romance—with philosophical appendages, but the particular location of its value is the subject of considerable disagreement" (911). In 1929, J.R. Hulbert thinks the problem with the romance is the lack of interest it creates for modern audiences: "Obviously in so far as the ideas of courtly love have passed into oblivion since the Middle Ages, narratives in which that are basic cannot appeal to modern taste" (913). His idea could be debated from several angles, but the premise of Jauss's "The Alterity and Modernity of the Middle Ages" claims that after readers are taught a different approach, medieval time and texts are indeed available to them. Moving back to Muscatine, R.K. Root offers elegant but back-handed reasons for accepting romance:

If we are to read the *Knight's Tale* in the spirit in which Chaucer conceived it, we must give ourselves up to the spirit of romance; we must not look for subtle characterization, nor for strict probability of action; we must delight on the fair show of things, and not ask too many questions. Chaucer can be realistic enough when he so elects; but here he has chosen otherwise. (914)

The first sentence reminds us that assumptions about the reasons behind an author's choices presume knowledge that is unavailable. Even though Root agrees that romance is the appropriate choice, the limitations applied to reading itself are not reasonable: readers should not look for subtleties in characters or for an exciting or interesting plot. The reader is a passive observer "who must delight in the fair show of things, and not ask too many questions" (914). Thinking of Root's interesting but confined vision of the *Tale* as a statically-rendered tapestry, the interpretive process has become a tour of a very dank and boring museum. Muscatine also thinks this version of romance is stultifying: "we may be justifiably reluctant to give ourselves up wholly to romance; we may want to ask questions" (914). The reader, all readers, are told by Muscatine and, by extension, New Criticism, how to think about a text and what interpretation will be discovered.

Despite the restrictions applied to reading and the rejection of romance genre, we will review the reasons supporting Muscatine's departure from romance classification and how he believes the reader can find meaning in the *Tale*. It is the battle between order and disorder that uncovers meaning, meaning that, in Muscatine's opinion, a romance cannot provide: "[The] subsurface insistence on disorder is the poem's crowning complexity, its most compelling claim to maturity. We have here no glittering, romantic fairy-castle world. The impressive, patterned edifice of the noble life, its dignity and richness, its regard for law and decorum, are all bulwarks against the ever-threatening forces of chaos" (929). Muscatine's understanding of romance as a simple fairy story that is also an element of chaos allows him to overlook the idea that

an obviously fictive narrative designed for entertainment can have deep connections to social realities of its time. Maybe the desire for order and control led him to different kinds of narrative that do not encourage the depiction of disorder. He may have seen the romance as a safe option with no links to realism, its meaning residing only on the surface, but from the post-modern perspective, it is Muscatine who has made the safe choice. His New Critical interpretation does not explore the poem to find answers to questions, maybe even a connection to an idea outside the poem. Instead, when Muscatine establishes the boundaries of reading—what is within the text alone—he has already decided what will be found.

With a critical inquiry that depends on structure, Muscatine uses specific interpretive language and imagery to find meaning. He looks at the poem as a piece of art or architecture, and this perspective identifies “symmetry [as] . . . the most prominent feature, [which includes] a high degree of regularity and order among parts” (914). The arrangement and grouping of everyone and every aspect is evaluated in terms of symmetry: knights, kings, even descriptions are studied for their number and balance. There is a formal procession to Arcite and Palamon’s battle, and the symmetry and balance are obvious and emphasized by Muscatine:

Ther maistow see, comynge with Palamounn,

Lygurge himself, the grete kyng of Trace.

Blak was his berd, and manly was his face;

The cercles of his eyen in his heed,

They gloweden bitwixen yellow and reed,

And lik a grifphon he looked he aboute[.] (ll. 2128-33)

The descriptions are examples of kingly, virile traits. The royal representative who accompanies Arcite is given his own particular appearance, but the overall effect is the same: a king who is powerful and respected:

With Arcite, in stories as men fynde,

The grete Emetreus, the kyng of Inde, . . .

His crispe heer lyk rynges was yronne,

And that was yellow, and glytered as the sonne.

His nose was high, his eyen bright citryn,

His lippes rounde, his colour was sangwyn;

A fewe frakenes in his face yspreynd[.] (ll. 2155-56; 2165-69)

For all the specific qualities included, the kings are still general, stock figures; their appearance, not personality is important. There are many other descriptive passages, and, as Muscatine observes, they are meant to inspire mental pictures. The people are not individuals but members of a corporate body of aristocrats, who are important not for action but appearance.

Descriptive analysis continues as Muscatine changes his focus to movement within the poem. Instead of referring to plot, he considers what he calls movement and

pace and finds “the *Tale* deliberately slow and majestic” (916), making sure to establish that while the story is chronologically slow, Chaucer “frequently resorts to the rhetorical device of *occupatio* to summarize in detail events or descriptions in such a way as to shorten the story without losing its weight and impressiveness” (916-17). It seems that *occupatio* works in combination with *paraleipsis*, another rhetorical device that draws attention to things, people, or situations by claiming that the specific element will not be discussed. This device can be used to accomplish different purposes; its context might seem deceptive or at least a little sly or desperate. It is always important for the reader to ask why specific devices are used and to what effect, although this active reader participation should not, from the New Critical perspective, involve looking for connections outside the text.

Whenever Muscatine mentions a quality of the *Tale* that could be thought of negatively, like “this *Tale* moves very slowly, is very long, and full of information that doesn’t seem important,”—and he makes statements like these about its description and speeches throughout the article—he then finds a different way to describe what has just been gently criticized. Some material is questioned and appreciated in the same sentence, like when he notices “a great deal of this descriptive material has a richness of detail far in excess of the demands of the story” (917). The *Tale* includes a number of passages that are beautiful but “appear to be irrelevant and detachable” (917). It is missing, however, material concerning chivalry, “the distinctive details of look, attitude, and gesture” (918). What is expected in a tale from a Knight—discussions of chivalry—is replaced with long passages and speeches that do not benefit characters, action, or plot.

Muscatine, though, sees another function, another meaning represented by the *Tale*, meaning that no one else had yet suggested, and it is his key to this baffling text.

The key is in front of the reader:

The *Tale* is replete with conventional stage business. There are swoons and cries, fallings on knees, and sudden palenesses. . . . These . . . inescapable observations on the nature of the *Knight's Tale* make clear how the poem must be approached. The symmetry of scene, action, and character-grouping, the slow pace of the narrative and large proportion of concrete descriptions . . . all indicate that this tale is not the best in which to look for either delicate characterization or the peculiar fascination of an exciting plot. (918)

So instead of a story, the Knight actually relates a drama to be envisioned. If a reader expects the *Tale* to work along conventional lines of character and plot, Muscatine and other critics of his time predict disappointment, but only Muscatine imposes a different kind of artistic, literary organization in order to find meaning. He argues further that “the structure of the poem . . . works against story interest. . . . [U]nder the principle that a poem should be read on the basis of its own assumptions, it seems reasonable to conclude that the *Knight's Tale* . . . [has] a closer affinity to the medieval tradition of



conventionalism than to realism" (919). It seems that the poem's own assumptions mean that Chaucer wrote this tale more as a presentation of images and scenes that medieval audiences would recognize. This reading of the poem might also suggest that the Knight hopes that the dramatic ordering of the tale can create distance between the audience—lower classes—and the reality occurring offstage. Muscatine offers his own category for the tale: "[T]he *Knight's Tale* is essentially neither a story, nor a static picture, but a poetic pageant . . . [and] all its materials are organized and contributory to a complex design expressing the nature of the noble life, . . . the pomp and ceremony, the dignity and power, and . . . the repose and assurance with which . . . nobility invokes order" (919). Keeping in mind the qualities of a typical tale, readers and critics, Muscatine believes, have been unable to find meaning and so have had no control over the text. Imposing the structure of a royal pageant, something that is "symmetrical," delineated, even choreographed, encloses the tale and now there is order that can figuratively shut out chaos.

Establishing order in the poem is the path to meaning, just as establishing order in a society is the path to happiness for those ruled by the court—or so think those who wish to remain in control. By not acknowledging any individuals and concentrating on the public vision of symmetry and noble pageant, Muscatine eliminates the uncertainty of the rogue performer and can track meaning as it emerges in the lines of parade—the outcomes are known before they happen. Returning to *The Poetry of Chaucer* (1906), R.K. Root provides a tangible example for Muscatine's visual, artistic approach: "The *Knight's Tale* is preeminently a web of splendidly pictured tapestry, in which the eye

may take delight, and on which the memory may fondly linger. . . . It is . . . in the description that the greatness of the *Knight's Tale* resides" (914). The physical edges of a tapestry and the woven story whose characters and movements are literally held captive by the thread is a perfect image of Muscatine's orderly royal pageant, and its progress will continue uninterrupted past the unruly crowd.

It is clear that both Muscatine and the other critics are concerned with characterization, plot, and how the function of each affects the meaning of the *Knight's Tale*; the former settles on the medieval pageant-drama form that has no need of strong characterization or plot elements, the latter on identifying unsatisfying characters and plots, making the *Knight's Tale* something of a disappointment. The reader can, however, find a character who is definitely complex and, after close consideration of his social and historical settings, see that the plot of his life is based on frustrating contradictions. This elusive character is the narrator himself, the Knight.

In absolute contrast to Muscatine's approach, Lee Patterson reads Chaucer with careful, obsessive attention to what occurs "without" the text, the historical and sociological medieval evidence that, in Patterson's view, informs both the poet and his audience. Patterson and his version of reader response and subjective reader theory has already been introduced, but it will be helpful to recall a few points before moving to a historical interpretation specifically of *The Knight's Tale*.

Patterson's New Critical background informs the theory that becomes New Historicism. Although Patterson is reluctant to be categorized, having a "complicated

relationship to the New Historical movement” (Cawsey 131), his theory certainly reflects an approach that denies any claim of objectivity and instead relies on the subjectivity of individual response to particular historical moments: “[S]ubjectivity is . . . a historical phenomenon: every audience, every reader, is conditioned by a unique historical situation. . . . It is more concerned with the way in which one is subject to one’s society and culture than with one’s inner identity” that would have affected a reader’s experience with a medieval text and constructs what he believes to be a reasonable interpretation. In “Chaucer’s Influences and Reception,” Stephanie Trigg confirms that “New Historicism is famously difficult to define, partly because its chief practitioners have a habit of refusing the label” (348). As a reader and theoretician, Patterson believes that any document that was once considered a source of objective history “may [now] be read as only so many texts constructed through narrative and rhetorical arrangements, while the poems may be called upon to fill the old role of trustworthy witnesses in the reconstruction of historical data” (349). Perhaps most importantly, Patterson insists on the politicization of every reading; the politics of any time, as he defines them, must be imposed on every subjective moment. The interpretive process begins by choosing “specific readers located in a particular, particularly analyzable, time” (133), a process that differs from other New Historical approaches and, while it promises new and politically-informed readings, the demand for specificity might result in a greatly limited pool of readers and audiences.

*The Knight’s Tale*, however, is the perfect vehicle for Patterson’s kind of historicity—the tale’s context and content allow Patterson to establish connections

between the poem and specific historical documents that support the inclusion of politics in literary theory. In *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (1991), Patterson argues that social upheaval informs Chaucer's poetry, and "*The Knight's Tale* and the Crisis of Chivalric Identity," (Patterson, *Subject of History* 165), he claims that the instability of the chivalric code of order, as seen in the history of the 1380s as well as in documents from the period, constructs an interpretation that speaks to more citizens than just those in the upper class. Muscatine's interpretation, based New Criticism's practice of close reading, is basically an optimistic one, and Patterson addresses it at the beginning of the chapter mentioned above. A New Critic like Muscatine would apply "'reduction terms of order and disorder" (165), and so the tale represents the struggle between the terms, and, from a positive vantage point, his interpretation sees order triumphing over disorder. Thinking meta-critically, Patterson sees order and disorder not only present as organizing principles in Chaucer's poem but as the goal of New Criticism: to bring order to literary interpretation by focusing on just on the text in question and rejecting the influence of information from the outside world present in the text's chronological moment.

Historically-inspired readings, however, have found New Criticism's vision of history in *The Knight's Tale* oversimplified, too narrowly focused on an already-established outcome. Part of this vision comes from a belief in "art's ability to endow experience with a coherent shape," (Patterson, *Shape of History* 166), confident that the poem contains everything necessary for understanding. Such a belief means that the "*Tale* could thus be read as expressing issues relevant not merely to the noble life of the

late Middle Ages but to all forms of historical engagement[.] . . . [Acceptance of this claim suggests that a reader might] understand history as nothing more or less than a struggle between noble design and chaos” (166). An interpretation of the *Tale* could oppose Muscatine’s conclusion that order wins out over chaos, finding that weakness in the chivalric code and a reversal of the happy ending, but any opposition is limited to the world within the poem.

In the chronology of theoretical development, historical readings have competed for dominance, and as political attitudes changed, Patterson’s political historicity gained more followers. Following the other historical camp, that of D.W. Robertson’s exegetics, supported a belief that “all medieval writing was governed by a fully coherent and hierarchically organized world view[,] . . . [and so] disorder is not a structural fault in the nature of things but an effect of human blindness and immorality” (Patterson, *Shape of History*, 166). Once more, there are limits on what kind of information a reader may bring to an interpretation, guaranteeing, at least, the structure of the response. Patterson initiates his theory with reference to what he believes were the poet’s artistic intentions: “I do not believe that Chaucer’s engagement with chivalry took the form of either moral or social polemic. . . . [He] focused finally, neither on moral standards or social conditions but on attitudes[,] . . . in socially determined and therefore historically contingent values and beliefs. . . . Chaucer himself historicized his world” (167). In choosing the Knight as a participant in the pilgrims’ contest, the poet gives himself the opportunity to address issues facing the upper class and chivalry.

The most significant and developed system of “historically contingent values and beliefs” that Chaucer focused on is the system or code of chivalry, and so Patterson builds his chapter around late fourteenth-century England and the disintegration of chivalry. The character of the Knight and the difficulties he faces as a story teller are studied throughout the chapter, but it is Patterson’s reference to historical documents that sets his theory apart from other historical approaches. The case of *The Knight’s Tale* exemplifies how a political approach to history can work. The first instance of social and political struggle that is presented is the

relation between honor and competition, rivalry and governance, and instance particularly pertinent because Chaucer himself was a spectator, and to some extent a participant, in the contest. [Patterson refers] to the famous dispute between Sir Richard Scrope and Sir Robert Grosvenor over the right to bear the arms *azure and bend d’or*. (Patterson, *Shape of History*, 180)

The dispute that began on August 14, 1385, simply put, concerned an argument between two knights, Scrope and Grosvenor, fighting with King Richard in a battle against an invading French army. They discovered that the arms they bore were the same, and the dispute over which knight could bear the arms lasted six years (180). Patterson notes that 300 of 450 depositions given in the case survive, and none of them

were given by a “man of the commons or any other estate” (180). One of the depositions was given, on October 15, 1387, by Geoffrey Chaucer, most importantly, “as his deposition . . . suggest, and as the details of his career make clear, he did and did not belong [to the chivalric community]—an ambiguity crucial to both *The Knight’s Tale* and to the larger project it initiates” (181). Chaucer’s dual roles as participant in and observer of the noble class allowed him the appearance of detachment from his pilgrims the independence to control their stories, enhancing the realism of the *Tales*.

For our purposes here, the minutiae of the legal case are not important, except to say that the power given to those minutiae emphasizes the pettiness that had come to represent late fourteenth-century chivalry, and the narrative freedom granted the Knight allows him to present the nobility in such a way as to undercut his own intentions. The Scrope-Grosvenor case unwittingly arrives at the same result in its legal narrative. As more coats of arms were issued, their value became harder defend: “by the mid-thirteenth century urban merchants and craftsmen began to assume coats of arms, and in the fourteenth century this fashion spread not just to corporations but—the ultimate affront—to peasants” (Patterson, *Shape of History*, 182). Scrope and Grosvenor, however, do not give up on endowing the coats of arms with power, something that has now become common. The final act in the legal battle has the two knights appearing, with John of Gaunt, to present in official, courtly language, their terms of reconciliation. Grosvenor makes it clear that he had intended no harm or dishonor; his confession was then recorded in court records. Patterson explains that “[usually reconciliation or settlement] could be accomplished only by a physical act. . . .

But if violence were to be avoided, then another form of tangible, concrete reclamation was necessary” (185). Most importantly, “the very ritual aspect of the case, its insistence upon legitimacy . . . was an indication of chivalry’s lack of confidence in itself” (186). Grosvenor, Scrope, and even John of Gaunt work very hard to insist that a thing—coat of arms—is still socially vital, even though it, no longer exclusively a possession of nobility, has clearly lost social prestige.

There is more evidence from this case, and its content also leaves a reader questioning the reality of chivalry. Chaucer gives a deposition, and what he leaves out emphasizes his tenuous relation to the noble, chivalric class. Not only does he present himself as part of their military world—his capture in the French campaign of 1359-60—, “when asked about Grosvenor, Chaucer takes it upon himself to provide a brief narrative” (195). It is unnecessary to include the passage but important to note some of its details. In Patterson’s analysis, the passage has an urban setting—“in Friday Street in London”—; circumstantial description—“he asked what inn was this that had hung out the Scrope arms. And another person answered him and said, ‘No sir, . . . they are painted and put there for a knight . . . called Sir Robert Grosvenor’” (195). Chaucer is a character in the deposition: “[t]he witness is unavoidable” (195); the evidence he gives are not focused solely on the knights in question: “these details [are] unchivalric, [and] . . . they can be released by subjectivity, only be described from the perspective of a specific individual: we have not only a narrative but a narrator, not only a tale but a teller” (196). In his everyday existence, Chaucer is and is not part of the noble class, and



his urge to use narrative in understanding the world cannot be repressed, even in a court of law.

Patterson references several other texts and events contemporary to Chaucer's work, but the reader should also consult his own analysis of the tale. The Knight as narrator is his first concern: "[I]t is clear that the Knight himself intends [the tale] to celebrate both Theseus as a model of rational governance and chivalry as a force for civilization" (*Subject of History* 198). Chivalric knights stand for the order that so many critics and readers seek, and they "[impose] order first upon themselves—the Order of Chivalry—and then upon an unruly world" (201).

The rest of Patterson's chapter—"The *Knight's Tale* and the Crisis of Chivalric Identity"—is devoted to his understanding of the tale with focus on the Knight and his role as tale teller, and his interpretations are the same as those not seen through a political lens but with a view that is historically informed. It has already been made clear that Patterson's politicized historicism should be disregarded—elements of the theory are seen here numerous times—but that its requirements of specificity in both medieval audience and documented evidence limit the range of readers' receptions. The theory can also lead to reliance on vague support for its claims, as seen in Cawsey's idea of swarm theory. An approach that does not depend legal, political documents contemporary with Chaucer can produce an analysis that includes support from Patterson.

As Chaucer is present as the narrator in his deposition for the Scrope-Grosvenor dispute, the Knight is the narrator of as well as character in his *Tale*. Chaucer's emphasis on the existence of the individual allows psychological discovery to become a central concern of this romance. The poet's artistic thoughts about the chivalric and courtly codes change the genre's content: "Chaucer, too sophisticated to be a mere romancer, has in fact problematized the [chivalric] code itself, refusing to allow it to stand unquestioned and impervious to the actualities of social intercourse in which it presumably operated" (Burlin 11). The Knight's image from the General Prologue can serve as a refresher on the chivalric code:

A KNYGHT ther was, and that a worthy man,

That fro the tyme that he first bigan

To riden out, he loved chivalrie,

Trouthe and honour, freedom and curteisie. . . .

And though that he were worthy, he was wys,

And of his port as meeeke as is a mayde.

He nevere yet no vileynene sayde

In al his lyf unto no maner wight.

He was a verray, parfit, gentil kynght. (ll. 43-50; 68-72)

As Chaucer problematizes the chivalric code—primarily by questioning its existence—the Knight’s attempt at narration is problematized as well. He tries to stick with the romance elements that will support the code, but despite his best efforts, he is unable to stop himself from undercutting the social paradigm that he seeks to preserve. Although he is referring to the narrator in *The Book of the Duchess*, Rose could also be speaking about the Knight:

“Chaucer’s narrator habitually represents a realm of discourse,  
and experience absolutely outside the sphere of courtly love.  
His is a poetry in which matter can and often does escape  
certain meaning, . . . in which the teller must share understanding  
and limitations with the audience in the face of the matter he  
takes up. (218)

This kind of narrator does not have complete control of his story, and the self-empowerment granted by Chaucer is the proverbial double-edged sword: as an individual, the Knight is able share a tale outside the control of the romance gene, but he can no longer rely on the corporate identity of the knightly brotherhood and its party line. So, it can be said that the Knight initiates the destruction of his own public identity as a chivalric knight. The public persona that has shielded the upper classes from scrutiny is overtaken by a private, psychologically-complicated man, the new Knight. Instead of telling the reader that the chivalric code is false or unsupportable, Chaucer

shows how the code responds to social or psychological realism, and the code cannot stand up to the new individual.

As indicated by the rest of his description, the Knight is anywhere except the society in which many of the other pilgrims live, and so he feels pressure to sustain his own rarified, some might say imaginary realm. Chivalry depended on a unified public persona for survival, an identity behind which discrepancies could be hidden. This Knight goes a step further in geographically removing himself from everyday life in England, roaming the world in battle “[at] Alisaundre[,] / in Pruce . . . / and in Ruce, . . . / Algezir . . . in Belmarye. . . . / At Lyeys was he and at Belmarye” (ll. 51; 53-4; 57-8). The distance of foreign lands can be equated with the personal distance that Knight wants to establish between himself and human reality: “[C]hivalry entailed a form of selfhood insistently, even exclusively, public. It stressed a collective or corporate self-definition and so ignored the merely personal or individual. It sought, as a code of behavior, at every turn to foreclose self-reflection and personal distance” (Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* 168). The conflict between a traditional knight and Chaucer’s Knight is evident. As an individual, a knight could be seen in and judged by practical terms that might question how and why he acquired wealth and what allies that wealth created for him. The nobility and knights worked together to fashion and then support chivalry, but Johan Huizinga, the famed chronicler of how he saw the Middle Ages fade from view, believed that “the realities of late medieval warfare—its financial structure and rationale, . . .—and its technical developments that rendered the aristocratic cavalryman vulnerable . . . ‘were bound to open the eyes of the nobility and show the

falseness and uselessness of their ideal” (Patterson 171; Huizinga qtd. in Patterson 171). Chaucer’s Knight faces these problems as he takes his turn in the game.

The Knight’s narrative choices make it difficult for readers or listeners to follow the story. The narrator relies on the rhetorical device of *paraleipsis*, sometimes referred to as *occupation*, to manage the pace of the story, but the device makes the Knight appear desperate to maintain control. *Paraleipsis*, making an allusion to something by denying that it will be mentioned, is present from the beginning of the tale; it follows the introduction and interrupts the story’s progression:

And certes, if it nere to long to here,

I wolde have toold yow fully the manere

How wonnen was the regne of Femenye

By Theseus and by his chivalrye; . . .

But al that thing I moot as now forbere.

I have, God woot, a large feeld to ere,

And wayke been the oxen in my plough. (ll.875-77; l.879; ll.885-87)

By deciding not to talk about Theseus and his victory over the Amazons, he **has** shared at least an overview and continues with an explanation of how he will continue his tale in a timely fashion, alerting the audience the moment the tale will begin:

The remenant of the tale is long ynough.

I wol nat letten eek noon of this route;

Lat every felawe telle his tale aboute,

And lat se now who shal the soper wyne;

And ther I lefte, I wol ayeyn bigynne. (ll.888-92)

These opening examples are just the beginning of many instances when the Knight will interrupt his own tale with explanation or apology; promises similar to “But shortly for to telle is myn entente” (l.1000) only make the tale a little longer. Phrases like this one appear at least eight times, along with phrases that tell the audience what comes next, like “Now wol I speken forth of Emelye” (l.2816) or “Now wol I stynten of the goddess above, . . . / And telle yow as pleyntly as I kan / The gret effect, for which that I bigan” (l.2479; ll.2481-82). The Knight breaks a basic rule of narrative when he tells the audience what to see instead of showing them. The prefaces, explanations, and apologies may be a sign of a modest speaker, but, thinking of Muscatine, the interruptions impede the story’s pace.

For a tale meant to “celebrate” chivalric knights, Arcite and Palamon are troublesome examples. While it is true that the royal pageant preceding the final fight should impress the audience, those figures and settings are predictably described:

Ther maystow seen devisynge of harneys

So uncouth and so riche, and wrought so weel

Of goldsmythrye, of broweynge, and of steel;

The sheeldes brighte, testers, and trappures. (ll.2496-99)

Again, the Knight is telling his audience information, and the violent action seen with Arcite and Palamon not only shows the details but provides the pace and movement absent from much of the *Tale*. Their first fight, after they have seen Emily and before Theseus arranges their last meeting, is full of detail and action, all of which is shown, not told:

Thou myghtest wene that this Palamon

In his fighting were a wood leon,

And as a crueel tigre was Arcite;

As wilde bores gonne they to smyte,

That frothen whit as foom for ire wood,

Up to the ancle foghte they in hir blood. (ll.1655-60)

Despite the Knight's attempts to contain passionate disorder by imposing the figuratively heavy frames of royal procession and ritual, the individual with personal desires work their way into the tale. Chaucer has given the Knight, a person who defines himself by membership in the company of other knights, the power of choice, and he struggles to maintain control; hence, his interruptions and asides that might prevent the story from gaining too much momentum. Patterson attests to the power inherent in narrative:

[If] narrative is the model of communication by which

discourse acknowledges the inevitable presence of the  
subject—of the interests and needs that connect the tale  
to the teller—the Knight’s narrativity cannot be exempt  
from this function, however much he would like it to  
be so. (Patterson, *Subject of History*, 202)

So finally, the Knight is given the chance to represent his world-order as a paradigm of stability and honor, but his narrative’s honest presentation of chivalry’s disintegration—the Knight’s honesty being a hallmark of his noble character—shows the unraveling of that social tapestry. Chaucer, though distanced from the narrator, guides the story, giving the Knight freedom to concentrate on the genre most familiar to him, the romance—when the Knight loses control of his narrative, it is not his but Chaucer’s rhetorical goal that is fulfilled.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### WILLIAM MORRIS, DREAM VISION AND ROMANCE: *A DREAM OF JOHN BALL AND NEWS FROM NOWHERE*

In order to establish a connection between Geoffrey Chaucer and William Morris, a connection that shows how Chaucer influenced Morris or how Morris's presentation of Chaucer affected the nineteenth-century's reception of the medieval poet. Morris seemed to turn each pursuit into a search for the medieval quality in everything—designing stained glass, weaving, printing—, even down to designing his family's first home. The Morris family lived in Red House from 1859-1865, and, according to Morris himself, was “‘very medieval in spirit,’ [as it was] based on the architectural style of the thirteenth century” (MacCarthy 154). It was located “close to the Ancient Watling Street, the pilgrims’ route to Canterbury, . . . and [Morris] referred to [its] squat and cosy garden porch . . . as ‘the Pilgrims’ Rest’” (156). This dedication to constructing a physical environment conceptualized as “medieval” confirms Morris wanted to live somewhere not like the medieval world but in a place that was actually medieval. One is reminded of the famous image, William the child, dressed in a suit of armor as he rides his pony through the Essex woods. He began as an actor playing, actually inhabiting a role, and as a man, he transformed into many other versions of

himself—architect, designer, artist, writer, printer—that were all focused on finding a psychological and physical place for the nineteenth-century medieval man.

In a final effort to satisfy this desire, Morris settled on creating a tangible representation of the Middle Ages he sought: an edition of Chaucer’s works that was printed, decorated, and bound entirely by hand—the Kelmscott *Chaucer*. What might be termed the result of that last creative surge, “[i]n the summer of 1891, Morris had begun speaking of an edition of the work of the writer to whom he felt more attuned than any other” (MacCarthy 647), but whatever he “felt” when he described Chaucer as his “Master—with a capital M” (Kelmscott *Chaucer*, intro., ix) does not convince several modern scholars that a connection existed. Diana C. Archibald, in “Beauty, Unity, and the Ideal Wholeness and Heterogeneity in the Kelmscott *Chaucer*,” contends that unity of Morris’s text, which is camouflaged by beauty, is deceptive: “In the case of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* in general, and *The Canterbury Tales* in particular, Morris’s attempts to impose unity on the book undermine the richness of the text itself” (169). She further believes that the unruliness of Chaucer’s work overpowers the nineteenth-century’s urge to present the Middle Ages and its literature as the embodiment of the unity found in England’s imagined medieval past:

On a textual level, *The Canterbury Tales* defy wholeness.

For instance, there is the fact that [they] were never

finished. How can an unfinished work be presented as

a whole? . . . As Helen Cooper writes, “attempts to

reconstruct Chaucer's original have always been fraught with peril due to the manuscript variances." The form of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* implies a unified harmony that the text of the *Tales* does not warrant. (173)

Looking at the Kelmscott text is its own pleasurable experience, but Archibald's argument reminds us that this reinvention, as well as reinventions in general, will probably reveal more about the new text and its inventor than about the actual subject or original text. With this idea in mind, the reader should not think that reading Morris's reprinting has much to do with Chaucer, but more to do with Morris's desire to inculcate his work with medieval spirit. Do the foliate borders and precise wood cuts by Burne-Jones that decorate the nineteenth-century *Chaucer* reflect the medieval illuminated manuscript's freer form, with images exploding from capital letters and creatures escaping the borders on the page? There is a tightness and neatness about Morris and Burne-Jones's collaborative effort, and its unity reflects their desire to present what they perceive as medieval unity controlling a medieval text. Remembering that a reader or reinventor cannot do as C.S. Lewis suggested and slip out of a contemporary skin and into that of someone medieval, there is no way that Morris could mentally inhabit and then create a medieval world without a touch—or taint—from the nineteenth century.

So, if Morris's personal and professional efforts produced interesting physical constructions and printed images of a latter-day version of the Middle Ages without any

solid confirmation of an artistic connection between Morris and Chaucer, why refer to them at all? In the context of this project apparently failed attempts, which did succeed in certain ways, should be noted for several reasons. First, they signify the ways William Morris hoped would allow him some entry to the era he sought. Morris's wish was not like Carlyle's, which wanted a replication of the hierarchical power system and its imposition on the nineteenth century, hoping for a restoration of societal control as Carlyle understood it. Morris longed to be a real citizen of the past, but of course that "past" would be shaped by the nineteenth-century present, and Morris saw the medieval world being perfected in the future. These various efforts also instruct the reader of Morris's own artistic and personal frustration as demonstrated by his feverish attempts, using any means and activities as vehicles, to reach his own version of a medieval Shangri La. Red House and the Kelmscott Press are only two examples, one early and one late, from a long list; literally speaking, he was successful to some degree but remained dissatisfied with the results. Finally, they illustrate how the Middle Ages provided the symbols that England—and its writers—could mold into what a society encountering great uncertainties needed, and England was "a nation sensing itself in tension[,] . . . prone to unite . . . 'around certain talismans and images'" (Meacham 3). Looking out from varied perspectives, Morris responded to the political and social struggles that surrounded him.

Since reliance on these pieces of physical evidence alone does not suggest and may even refute the idea that Chaucer and Morris can be evaluated as they follow similar paths, the reader must return to the basics, examining the simplest way that

would show how Morris responded to Chaucerian precedents and to what end. The obvious point of comparative analysis focuses on genres: how the two writers used the traditional genres of dream vision and romance, what drove their reinventions, and how a modern reader can best evaluate the texts and their effects on their writers and audiences. In the preceding study of Chaucer's approach to dream vision and romance, the reader finds genre revision that maintains traditional structures and makes changes within the narratives. Neither the dream vision or romance appears useless, but worn types of characters and conclusions are given new energy. The romance is more polished, and the changes here, richer character development and more problematized structure, result in a romance that tries to reach an expected ending but it seems that the narrative's vitality outruns the narrator's plan for resolution. Morris combines dream vision and romance and wants the genres, in the past and then future, to realize his political, social agenda. Chaucer's engagement with the social and political agendas of his day is just as real as Morris's but not as evidently present, the main reason being the difference between the medieval and nineteenth-century narrators. As noted earlier, Chaucer establishes and keeps distance between his fourteenth-century self and his narrators. The version of "Chaucer" he creates, Chaucer the pilgrim, may be presenting the poet's ideas—directly or indirectly—, but the reader should never assume that a narrator and its creator are one in the same. The Knight of the *Knight's Tale* is anxious about the presentation of knights and the stability of chivalry, and the modern reader does know that Chaucer observes changes in social power that affect nobility and knighthood. The aristocracy and order of chivalry could no longer expect

deference or unquestioned financial support from lower classes. Chaucer's relation to multiple classes makes it difficult to detect just one set of alliances, but an audience could and can know that he understood the intricacies of shifting class relationships.

The situation with Morris and his narrators is quite different. Morris inserts himself as the dreamer in both *A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere*, and since Morris made his political position clear during his lifetime, there is no question that the thoughts and ideas of his narrators certainly come from Morris himself. Further confirmation of Morris's presence in the narrators is obvious because Morris the Socialist goes to sleep and awakes as a dreamer in a different England. Morris, then, is in no way distanced from his narrators; they are not introduced as "William Morris," but there is no discontinuity between the persons of the writer and the dreamers. Chaucer nurtures the skill of detachment as it allows him to speak more openly as an anonymous voice, but Morris is not concerned with anonymity. He is a spokesman for Socialism as well as for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings; Morris sees the future—political change—made possible by reinstating elements of the past as envisioned by him in his present moment of the nineteenth century.

Chaucer and Morris also share similar interests in using history in works that are considered "fiction." Chaucer's inclusion of historical background is classically inspired, but the history of Morris's dream vision-romances emphasizes his link with the Middle Ages. Narrative history with elements of storytelling is obviously welcome in texts by Morris, and fictive elements are not distinguished from what might be historical "fact." The medieval world in *News from Nowhere* is best considered as a utopia, another

genre to be discussed later and only in reference to Morris. Once the parameters of the utopia are established, the essential meaning Morris imbeds in this new medieval world is clear: that a work ethic focused on achieving artistic fulfillment is preferable to the mechanized, soulless work forced upon the nineteenth-century citizen. Romance is a good vehicle for expressing messages of social dissatisfaction, for it has “the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present” (Silver, *Romances of William Morris*, xi). Both writers make history an interpretive tool, a way to control the past and the present.

The romance is also amenable to change: “The story of the medieval romance’s evolution is one of translation and transformation, adaptation and refashioning” (Krueger, intro., *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* 1). If a writer’s goal is to establish a way to read history, then romance is the genre that can mold the past, present, and future into one timeframe. Morris’s own conception of combining different eras into a single narrative is ideal for his goals as well as Chaucer’s: “To reconstruct an old romance . . . the writer should read it through . . . then shut the book and write it out again as a new story for [himself]” (Carley, intro. *Arthurian Poets* 7). Chaucer does the same kind of revision, adapting Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, which began life as an epic narrative with classical references (*The Riverside Chaucer* 6). In the *Knight’s Tale*, Chaucer transforms the romance from a genre dedicated to the concerns of the upper class into one that still includes the upper class dealing with new problems suggested by a rising middle class. For Morris, the romance can focus on the Peasants’ Rebellion of 1381—central to *The Dream of John Ball*—from the perspective of the

rebels. That perspective then allows Morris to connect that social activism with the battles between the upper and lower classes that were occurring in the Victorian period. Once more, Roberta Krueger explains the romance genre's shifting focus. As the composition of romance moved beyond the confines of the royal court

to more modest noble courts and households . . . and as tensions increased between the different orders of feudal society with the emergence of new commercial and political interests, chivalric fiction presented itself less as a panel for the advertisement of social ideals than as a forum for the construction and contestation of social identity and values. (5)

Even though her observation comes from *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, it applies to the nineteenth century as well as the Middle Ages. Struggle that escalates into violence is not specific to a single era; it only requires people, so Chaucer and Morris do share some of same types of experiences. They then write about these experiences using the same literary vehicles—dream vision and romance—that illustrate the conflation of history and literature, a combination that circles back to one of the initial questions this dissertation poses: after moving back and forth across the fluctuating line that divides history and literary narrative, is there a final difference



between the two? The difference, if there is any, will depend, like everything else in interpretation, on the individual moment of a response from that individual reader.

### **The Texts**

*A Dream of John Ball* (Commonweal November 1886-January 1887) and *News from Nowhere* (1890) are a pair of romances that, when studied together, show a progression of Morris's thinking about how the Middle Ages worked as an example of a just and productive society and that the past, from his perspective, can move beyond the present into the future. The action in each novel is fueled by the narrator's—Morris's—dream vision as presented within a romance. The analyses and interpretations will follow each dreamer's "pilgrimage" and examine how the narrators behave differently from those seen in Chaucer. A significant difference is that Morris's narrator-dreamers awake and reenter their worlds as compared to the narrators in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and *Knight's Tale*. After he awakes, the first narrator-dreamer does not express any emotion, not happy or sad about his experience but almost businesslike in pronouncing that "'I wol, be processe of tyme, / Fonde to put this sweven in ryme / As I kan best, and that anon.' / This was my sweven; now hit ys doon" (ll.1331-34). The Knight's rush to close his romance with a happy ending does emphasize the point that his happy ending is not self-evident, so the Knight as narrator is not content with the close of his tale, but the audience has no absolute knowledge of Chaucer's attitude or feelings, except that he has once more successfully reinvented his text. Morris's narrators are discontented from their first appearance, almost predicting

that, since they will enter the dream-state, their return to reality will surely bring disappointment. Recalling that these narrators are at least a version of Morris, the reader can reasonably surmise that although Morris sets out as a hopeful dreamer, he finally expects to face the dreary nineteenth-century world that disappears only while his eyes are closed.

### ***A Dream of John Ball***

Of the two romances, *A Dream of John Ball* (*DJB*) follows the traditional organization of the dream vision, and from the outset, the narrator is and the dreamer will be William Morris. Morris the dreamer is fully present, and his worries about saving England are manifested in a desire to save the country's architectural past. Subtlety is not Morris's aim, not as a designer or a Socialist and not a narrator-dreamer who wants to make his objective clear: The preservation of a tangible example from England's past—a medieval structure that personifies an aspect of that period's architecture—will demonstrate that the English soul, a psyche that understands the value of medieval society's respect for the worker, can lead nineteenth-century society to a better world. The dreamer sets out on a review of architectural styles, putting his training as an architect to use: "I was journeying (in a dream of the night) down the well-remembered reaches of the Thames . . . [and] I came upon a clear-seen medieval town, . . . grey and ancient, but untouched from the days of its builders of old" (*DJB* 3). His visit to the fourteenth century begins when he awakes—in the dream—"to find myself lying on a strip of wayside waste by an oak copse just outside a country village" (4). At first, the

setting of the dream is predictable; it is summer with ripening apples, white poppies, and blooming rosebushes (5). Initially there is no expectation that the dreamer will do anything other than pursue love.

In a way, the dreamer does pursue love, but he loves something more than a single person. He loves and is concerned for the well-beginning of society, which he sees headed for destruction. The dreamer returns to a study of architecture, and the “architectural peep-show” (*DJB* 1) develops into a gauge that takes measure of the health or sickness of society. Morris’s work and personal life show how he imbued inanimate structures with heart and feeling. The attachment Morris felt to domestic architecture was evident in the care he gave his homes, first Red House, which was mentioned earlier, and then Kelmscott Manor. A study of these buildings can establish a timeline of how his wish and efforts to bring the Middle Ages to the present in physical forms developed. Thinking of the emotion that Morris brought to the analysis of structures, it is not surprising that Morris the dreamer love to see “the very buildings of the past untouched by the degradation of the sordid utilitarianism that cares not and knows not of beauty and history” (3). This is the voice of Morris, founder of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings or the “Anti-Scrape League,” fighting the efforts of those who wanted to “restore” medieval buildings to what they imagined that style to be, something much closer to neo-Gothic than anything recognizable to a medieval builder. A “splendid collegiate church untouched by restoring parson or architect” (2) is the sort of building that stands in the fourteenth-century world of dreams. Maybe the

stuff of dreams is typically unattainable, but Morris fuels his own frustration when he imagines a scene that is impossible to recreate.

The people of the dream are given as much careful attention as the buildings, and they are just as detailed. When the narrator-dreamer Morris enters the town center, he observes the local men carefully:

They were rough-looking fellows. . . . Their arms and buckles  
and belts and the finishings and hems of their garments  
were all what we should now call beautiful, rough as  
the men were; nor in their speech was any of that  
drawling snarl or thick vulgarity which one is used to  
hear from labourers in civilization. (*DJB* 11)

He is complimenting the men's speech, explaining that they spoke not like gentlemen but with voices "full round and bold, and they were merry and good-tempered enough" (11). Evaluating the descriptions of the men, they are more than two-dimensional figures. The reader sees and hears them, and their appearance is described within a social context. In Morris's opinion, these working men were better human beings than the workers and the gentlemen of the nineteenth century. The medieval world does not separate the rough from the beautiful, nor is the beautiful reserved for the wealthy. Morris also admires their politics. In the local tavern, a man sings about Robin Hood,

and all the men “listened eagerly” (23) to the story of “the struggle against tyranny for the freedom of life, how the wildwood and the heath . . . were better for a free man than the court and the cheaping-town; . . . [a free man could do] his own will and not the will of another man” (22-3). The village’s beliefs were what Morris hoped would one day rule every English town.

Morris the dreamer meets his first dream guide, Will Green, a representative of the English working man’s spirit. He is a man “some six feet high, with a short black beard and black eyes and berry brown skin, with a huge bow in his hand,” (*DJB* 11-12), with the look of one ready to join Robin Hood, hero of the tavern song. After hearing the rebel John Ball’s passionate speech on the importance of fellowship, support for one another, concluding that “the proud, despiteous rich man, though he knoweth it not, is in hell already, because he hath no fellow” (38), Morris finally sees respect given to the deserving common man. Green also shows that he is more than just a physical man: “[T]he tears were running out of his eyes and down his big nose without his will . . . and [he] dealt me a sounding thump in the ribs . . . which I took as an esquire does the accolade which makes a knight of him” (39). Morris continues to grant feelings and attitudes that have previously been thought the privileges of the upper classes to the worthy laborers who, in his estimation, actually deserve them.

In addition to guiding Morris through the village, introducing him along the way, Green acts as protector of the unwary traveler, and as the working men gather to fight a group of enemy aristocrats, “Will Green led me by the hand as if I were a boy. . . . [I was

told to] ‘sit down out of the way at once: forsooth I wot not why I brought thee hither . . . for thou art little of a fighting-man” (63; 69). To complete the portrait, Morris sees that Green is a family. When he returns from the skirmish, “his daughter gave him a close and eager hug. . . . She made merry with her father; yet it was easy to see that her heart was in her mouth all along” (100). The idealized portraits of Green and the other members of his society are easy to dismiss as forced or overly simple, but the descriptions are important because they illustrate the claim that the working man is as, maybe more, human than any landed aristocrat and deserving of equitable treatment in society. These common yet exemplary characters replace the nobles or chivalric knights that generally populate a romance.

Morris’s second and more philosophical guide is John Ball, and he gives the reform and Socialist political agendas their medieval voice. The rebel priest is a historical figure alongside Wat Tyler and Jack Straw, but it is the John Ball as imagined by Morris that the romance needs to drive its plot. From the moment he enters the square, it is clear that Ball is not just a priest but a seer, with his “grey eyes well opened and wide apart, . . . at whiles resting in that look as if they were gazing at something a long way off, which is the wont of the eyes of the poet or the enthusiast” (*DJB* 32). Thinking of the novel’s prose style, Ball’s speeches are long, and the archaic language, which Morris may have used to create a feeling of historic reality, can be tedious, but they do present some ideas that are pure Morris in support of his version of a Socialist agenda. The need for rebellion is accepted, but Ball urges his audience to remember the importance of community:

“Forsooth, brothers, fellowship is heaven, and lack of  
fellowship is hell: fellowship is life and lack of fellowship  
is death: and the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is  
for fellowship’s sake that ye do them.” (37)

The priest openly speaks for equal distribution of wealth, probably not a popular topic with his religious superiors, and he believes that “too many rich men there are in this realm; and yet if there were but one, there would be too many, for all should be in his thralls” (47-48). He longs for the day when “man shall help man . . . because men no more shall fear each other, and the churl will be ashamed, and hide his churlishness till it be gone, and he shall no longer be a churl; and fellowship shall be established in heaven and on earth” (52-53). In his dream, Morris can be part of the workers’ world, but in nineteenth-century life, he is one of the wealthy. He may not be an oppressive aristocrat or ambitious mill owner, but Morris is able to pursue his interests because he has money. This potential contradiction is mentioned not to make Morris a fraud or his novel’s message a joke, but emphasize what choosing a dream vision-romance could suggest about the writer’s goals and expectations. Once again, Morris seems to set himself up for disappointment, and the reader should consider why, if Morris wants to convince others of the rightness of his political cause, he chooses narrative formats that point out failure their potential failure.

In conversations with Morris the dreamer, the dream guides establish or suggest links to earlier texts. Will Green confirms the dreamer's abilities as a storyteller, telling Morris the dreamer to put away his money in the tavern, since payment "shall be a song for a supper" (*DJB* 12); Green tells Morris to think "now on the meat, brother, that we may sooner have thy tale" (20). His role as a bard is stoked as the "fire of the good Kentish mead ran through my veins and deepened my dream of things past, present, and to come, as I said: 'Now hearken a tale, since ye will have it so. . . . [F]or I am in sooth a gatherer of tales, and this tale that is now at my tongue's end is one of them'" (21). Morris presents himself as a figure of Chaucer, Will Green later describes Morris as Chaucer the pilgrim who tells the tale of *Sir Thopas*: "Thou art tall across thy belly and not otherwise, and thy wind, belike, is none of the best. . . . Look no more on the ground, as though thou sawest a hare, but let thine ears be busy to gather tidings to bear back to Essex—or heaven" (28-29). Morris wants to inhabit his idea of a Chaucerian world, and, at least temporarily, the dream allows the fulfillment of his wish. Chaucer's distance from his narrators keeps his personal responses hidden from the audience, and failures do not seem so absolute—modern readers can only surmise what Chaucer might have intended to express in his writing. Morris's presence in his novels, coupled with the lack of personal distance—his political and social beliefs were very public—make the disappearance of the medieval dream world and its attempted revolution difficult to bear as they might predict the impossibility of change in the current nineteenth century.



John Ball's private conversations with Morris let the reader know that travel to the future is still to come. Already identified as a seer with understanding of other worlds, Ball reveals that he knows Morris is a time traveler: "I were fain of speech with thee; for thou seemst like one that has seen more than most. . . . I have words in me that crave to come out in a quiet place where they may have each one his own answer" (*DJB* 96). Morris waits for the conversation to begin: "I gathered my thoughts to hear what he would say, and I myself was trying to think of what I should ask of him; for I thought of him as he of me, that he had seen things which I could not have seen" (121). The two travelers discuss the coming revolt, and Morris gives the bad news that "many a man's son will die who is now alive and happy, [and] surely thou goest to thy death" (125). Thinking of his fate as merely "an old tale [telling] that men must die" (126), Ball wants to know what society will follow and after hearing of the Corn Laws and the woolen trade, he warns Morris that "we are not yet out of the land of riddles. The man may well do what thou sayest and live, but he may not do it and live a free man" (134). Industrialization has made man a slave; he has no freedom in his work and organizes his day according to the wishes of someone else. Likewise, the landed aristocracy exerts the same kind of control over medieval laborers. John Ball and William Morris see their societies mired in the same predicament, fusing past and present.

As the time of the revolt draws near and the men have shared their information, the dream comes to an end, but its ending is different from that of the *Book of the Duchess*. The priest's figure becomes dim and confirms that this vision has been experienced by both men: "Thou hast been a dream to me as I to thee, and sorry and

glad have we made each other, as tales of old time and the longing of times to come shall ever make men to be" (*DJB* 167). Despite knowing that the rebellion will not end well for his side, Morris does not want to leave, and "a great pain filled my heart" (168). He hears "quick steps coming up the paved church-path" (168), and Will Green comes to fetch him and Ball; the door-latch rattles, the dreamer awakes, and "a white light broke upon me . . . [and] I was lying in my familiar bed" (168). Morris gazes out his window and, instead of fields and forests, "the road in front of the house was sooty and muddy at once, and in the air was that sense of dirty discomfort which one is never quit of in London" (169). In contrast to the warm June of his dream, "the morning was harsh . . . as was the January wind," and Morris, "shivering and downhearted . . . grinned surily, and dressed and got ready for my day's work" (170). The vision-romance has definite closure, but Morris the dreamer awakens to the ugliness of late Victorian reality and obviously takes no comfort from his dream journey. The dreamer's last word compares his "work" to something that "many a man besides John Ruskin (though not many in his position) would call "play" (170). The reference is to Ruskin's famed chapter from *The Stones of Venice*, "On the Nature of Gothic," in which he presents a theory of work that focuses on the medieval artisan who, because he is in control of what his labor produces, finds joy in his "work." From the perspective of both Ruskin and Morris, "freedom of the working man [is] destroyed by industrialism" (*Stones of Venice*, qtd. in Faulkner 6). The ending brings the narrative back to the nineteenth century and anticipates another dream journey to a future world of medieval perfection where there is no distinction between work and play.

### ***News from Nowhere***

In the closing pages of his story, John Ball speculates on what dreams might come to Morris: “Scarce do I know whether to wish thee some dream of days beyond thine to tell what shall be, as thou hast told me, for I know not if that shall help or hinder thee” (*DJB* 167). The second dream journey takes Morris to a utopia in a fourteenth century propelled to the twenty-first, and here Morris the writer has a forum for the development and presentation of his ideas for radical reform. In *A Dream of John Ball*, the historical narrative of the Peasants’ Rebellion controls the literary narrative’s organization. Although it includes a good deal of English geography and social history, *News from Nowhere* (*NN*) comes from the writer’s imagination:

[It] shows the past, present, and future converging in  
  
the timeless, ageless realm of dream. The shift away  
  
from an historical base is significant, for Morris has  
  
moved from the irretrievable to the possible and from  
  
the creation of historical legend to the engendering of  
  
psychological and sociological myth. (Silver 141)

Critically speaking, it has been difficult to categorize this second dream vision-romance: “[Morris] even wrote a sort of novel, . . . an account of imagined existence in an ideal, decorative world; the book reflects his enthusiasm for his own specialized brand of

aesthetic socialism" (Kelmscott *Chaucer*, ix). Actually, Morris's title tells the reader exactly what to expect: "*News from Nowhere or An Epoch of Rest, being some chapters from a Utopian Romance*," and the genre of utopia dominates the book: "The vision which he offered in *News from Nowhere*, the Utopian romance which brings together many of his most important concerns into an attractive story, is still worth our attention today" (Faulkner ix). Faulkner feels he must make an argument to encourage the modern reader to delve into this "Utopian romance, and it becomes clear why this urging is necessary. The organization of the book, particularly in the first chapter, is awkward. It begins in third person with Morris, for the moment unnamed, leaving a Socialist meeting where the discussion had turned to "what would happen on the Morrow of the Revolution?" (NN 1). After a few pages, the storyteller realizes that the narrative would be more powerful if told with the immediacy of first person voice. The recorder of the events agrees that it "will be the easier and more natural . . . since I understand the feelings and desires of the comrade of whom I am telling better than anyone else in the world does" (4). Morris builds doubleness into the romance from the start, and this mysterious listener-cum-storyteller quickly takes on the mantle of Morris himself.

Before moving to a closer examination of the book once Morris finds another way to begin his story, we need to focus on the role of genres like the utopia. Utopias can lean toward the tedious with dialogues and didactic tone, and these tendencies will dampen readers' enthusiasm. The reader encounters both the stock conventions of dialogue and later the guided tour, first of London and later rowing up the Thames,

accompanied by the anticipated tedium: “The Guest [William Morris] is regularly lectured . . . [by Nowhereians] on how utopian [Nowhere] is. Sometimes provoked to counterarguments by what he perceives as error or complacency, but more often to ask a question, he does manage to break the lectures up somewhat. But these conventions can lead to a relentless didacticism of tone” (Lewis 57). The development of Guest as more than just a narrator is important, and seeing this narrator within the dream vision defines him “simultaneously [as] a being from another planet, a tourist from overseas and a time-traveler from the past who may be a magical double of Old Hammond’s grandfather. . . . These factors give this conversation an interest it would not have had in a stock utopia” (58). Taking on multiple guises allows Morris to construct a more complete rhetorical agenda along with a livelier narrator: “Morris cleverly fuses Marxism and the romance tradition when he presents himself as an enchanted figure wearing a ‘cap of darkness’ and ‘seeing everything’ in a time and place different from Victorian England” (Silver 148). Immediately there are several interpretive opportunities based on politics, romance and dream vision, and utopia, and the reader can choose one or several. The narrator can even be seen as Morris’s humorous or satiric take on himself, and attention to a comic turn interrupts concentration on anything didactic. From this perspective Guest is reminiscent of Chaucer the pilgrim: “The protagonist William Guest—choleric and prematurely ageing—is a piece of engagingly ironic self-portraiture. (One might compare the similarly self-mocking persona adopted by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*.)” (Wilmer, intro. to *News from Nowhere and Other Writings* xxxvi). So while understanding the components of the

utopia genre is necessary, if a reader pays attention to characterization and additional generic conventions, a much fuller comprehension of the text is possible.

Morris's presence is such that *News from Nowhere* is not only a utopian romance that includes a dream vision, the voice of Morris as Guest speaks autobiographically with the strong tone of a Marxist. Childhood is glorified, a reminder of Morris's own young life, and Morris's anxieties about love are certainly important, but everything exists inside the brain and heart of a Socialist—since this project is not first a political one, Marxist and Socialist will be used interchangeably. Carol Silver confirms the definition of this multi-faceted genre: "Morris's aim in *News from Nowhere* is complex: it is not only to write a utopian romance, . . . or to depict and thus relive or purge the important moments of his personal experience, but to integrate these elements with a Marxist vision of the future. Thus, *News from Nowhere* is unique; it is probably the only autobiographical Marxist utopian romance in literary history" (147). Its uniqueness comes in more than one form; it lies in the text's capacity for an unexpected number of genres and its flexibility as it fits into so many readers' responses.

The story starts fresh, and the beginning has familiar elements of introducing the dream and how the dreamer begins his journey, and he wishes for a glimpse of the world after a workers' revolution: "If I could but see a day of it" (*NN* 2). As in *A Dream of John Ball*, the nineteenth century lingers in winter, but the natural world still represents an alternative to modern machinery; the narrator walks out into a "beautiful night of early winter, the air just sharp enough to be refreshing after [leaving] the hot

[Socialist meeting] room and the stinking railway carriage" (2). The cold, quiet night calms Morris and causes "discontent and trouble to slip off [him]" (2), and Morris the dreamer is primed to enter his dreamscape, one that resembles the banks of the Thames that he walks this winter evening.

The dreamer and his dream do initially follow basic rules of medieval visions. He falls asleep with a specific idea on his mind, wakes, and after the clock strikes a magical three times, falls into a deep slumber that will be filled with "surprising adventures" (*NN* 3). The dream vision opens in summer, on a "beautiful bright morning seemingly of early June" (5). A swim in the Thames—in the nineteenth century, a swim in a cesspool—clears the dreamer's head, and he notices that the sights on the river have changes. The water is clear and full of salmon nets (6-7). The dreamer then catches sight of even greater differences:

For though there was a bridge across the stream and

houses on its banks, how all that was changed from last

night! The soap-works with their smoke-vomiting

chimneys were gone; . . . the lead-works were gone. . . .

[A]nd the bridge! I had perhaps dreamed of such a bridge,

but never seen such a one out of an illuminated manuscript. (7)

When Morris asks a waterman the bridge's age, the reader finally knows where, chronologically-speaking, the dreamer has landed: "Oh, not very old. . . . [I]t was built or at least opened in, 2003" (8). Like the previous dreamer, this one will be aware but not distressed by his anachronistic presence, this time in the future. As before, the second dream vision-romance's form and organization will be compared to that found in Chaucer, and there is yet another effort at refocusing and, in this case, inventing the content of a historical text. *News from Nowhere* does include more kinds of narrative than the other dream visions-romances already considered, but Morris does maintain the basic genre formats even while arriving at his own conclusions.

*News from Nowhere* features a utopia that resembles a traditional utopia, a society with no historical reality, and, unlike the situation in *A Dream of John Ball*, the absence of history in the future allows Morris more creative freedom. The perfection of this next version of the working man is heightened by his speech, which no longer uses an archaic vocabulary. When Morris meets Dick and listens to his voice, he is amazed that "he spoke in a way so unlike what I should have expected from a Hammersmith waterman, that I stared at him" (6). Like Will Green, Dick seems flawless:

He was a handsome young fellow, with a peculiarly  
  
pleasant and friendly look about his eyes,—an  
  
expression which was quite new to me. . . . His dress  
  
would have served very well as a costume for a



picture of fourteenth-century life. (6)

Morris includes many more particulars, but it is perhaps most important to note that he sees this fourteenth century as the prototype for a perfected future world where a working man—like a waterman—is not a member of the lower class and is instead regarded as an “especially manly and refined young gentleman” (7). Dick is not the only example of a young, perfected English citizen, but he is significant because he serves as the dream guide: “If you think you can put up with me, pray take me as your guide” (11). The tour Dick proposes begins in Hammersmith and then goes up the Thames to Oxfordshire, and it will become clear why the destination, the end of the journey, is important.

The second dream guide that leads Morris through the social and historical landscape that helped create the post-revolution England is, inexplicably, familiar to Morris. He is Old Hammond, Dick’s great-grandfather, and due to his knowledge about England’s past, including the nineteenth century, his other name is the Sage of Bloomsbury, and maybe he is Morris’s doppelganger. Morris feels a strange sense of déjà vu when he meets the old man: “I was now looking at him harder than good manners allowed . . . for in truth his face . . . seemed strangely familiar to me; as if I had seen it before—in a looking glass it might be” (*NN* 58). Old Hammond is one hundred and five years old (57), and though there is never any serious consideration that they are related, they do share characteristics, and in a dream world actual familial ties are not required for discovery of a kind of “relation.” Dick mentions that Old Hammond,

who makes his home in the British Museum, was the “custodian of books for many years. . . . He looks upon himself as a part of the books, or the books a part of him” (56). Despite a conflicted attitude about education—his days at Oxford were not always satisfying—Morris did love knowledge: consider his dedicated reading to discover the ways that medieval dyers, weaver, and other artisans accomplished their artistry. Work at the Kelmscott Press assisted in the creation of beautifully printed, illustrated, and bound books, arguably some of the most admired books of the period. Books and traditional styles of learning, however, do not comprise the most popular styles of learning in a society free of politically-driven intellectual control. Morris relies on Old Hammond to recount English history between the end of the nineteenth century and the post-war world. The multitude of details exchanged between Morris the dreamer and Old Hammond would confuse the discussion of points more relevant to this study’s claims. Gaining an understanding of the second Civil War—Peasants’ Rebellion of 1381 in the context of a chronologically-organized history—and some the social changes enacted after it are more useful when trying to grasp the meaning of this created socialist-communist society.

Old Hammond’s history of Morris’s era finds a society that is beyond saving. He presents an apt metaphor: “The nineteenth century saw itself as a man who has lost his clothes whilst bathing and has to walk naked through the town” (*NN* 107). No amount of finery or aristocratic posturing could hide the mistreatment and eventual destruction of the working people; it was an inescapable cruelty supported by that political system. As much as Morris, in both his real and dream life, wanted to see significant social

change, he was not eager for was, and he wonders how much worse the situation had to become to result in actual fighting. The guide responds, “What peace was there amongst those poor confused wretches of the nineteenth century? It was war from beginning to end: bitter war, till hope and pleasure put an end to it” (115-16). If one believes that unless everyone shares in the benefits of a socially-equitable system, no elements of such a system can actually exist, and war might be the only way to achieve a total victory.

After the dust of war settled, a happy peace ruled the land and, during Old Hammond’s life has continued to do so. Once a society has achieved economic and social balance, “it is easy for us to live without robbing each other” (NN 88). Even though England is a utopia, sometimes people transgress, but Morris is surprised to learn that there is no criminal class and no criminal or civil law. Old Hammond posits that since there is no longer any private property—material or human, servant or wife—there were no longer crimes that concerned the unlawful taking of said property: “Our standards of honour and public estimation are very different from the old ones. . . . We have got rid of the scowling envy” (90). One kind of crime that still might occur is a crime of passion, and the guide admits that “hot blood will err sometimes, . . . and the result be a homicide” (90). For example, two men were in love with the same woman, and the spurned lover attacked the successful one. In an act of self-defense, the attacker was slain. A solution worked out rather neatly because, as Dick put it, “It was the right man that was killed and not the wrong” (187). At least from a modern perspective, this example oversimplifies the problem, and there are very few decisions

that are either black or white, but maybe a logical legal system and answers for injustices perceived by modern readers are not required of a hypothetical utopia.

The inhabitants of this new England did not have to experience the inequity of nineteenth-century England, so to avoid taking their freedom for granted, they keep its memory fresh with commemorations. In the “easterly communes of London,” May-Day celebrates “The Clearing of the Misery” (*NN* 72), and with games and feasting held “on the site of some of the worst slums” (73). Nineteenth-century poems, like Hood’s ‘Song of the Shirt,’ the story of a seamstress who loses her site to relentless piecework sewn in the dark, are sung as “old revolutionary song[s]” (73). While listening to a beautiful young girl sing, Old Hammond remarks how strange it is “to hear those terrible words . . . coming from [her] . . . [while] she is unconscious of their real meaning. . . . [H]ow glorious life has grown!” (73). He focuses on how wonderful it is that hard times have grown so distant that a new generation has no first-hand experience. His happiness is counter to the purpose of the day. This conflict does make a future utopia seem more difficult to sustain; major sectors of society might have opposing ideas concerning the historical narrative of the revolutionary past, with one supporting the past with what could be an aggressive, confrontational viewpoint, and the other perhaps not concerned if the realities of workers’ suffering are no longer emotional memories.

One of the last questions Morris poses recalls Ruskin’s belief that work should be a personally satisfying activity, not thought of as an onerous task forced upon the worker. Morris understood the realities of a capitalist system, but he still wanted labor

itself to be rewarding. So, the question could be interpreted as set up for a socialist answer that supports its own social agenda: “[H]ow do you get people to work when there is no reward of labour?” (NN 101). Old Hammond believes that in the nineteenth century, all work was equated with suffering, but in the reformed society, “the reward of labour is life” (101). Before this conversation with Old Hammond, Morris walks through London with Dick and is curious about the numbers of children working in the shops. Dick explains that in earlier days

“a good many people were afflicted with a disease called  
Idleness, because they were the direct descendants of  
those who had in bad times used to force other people  
to work for them—. . . [They were] called slave-holders or  
employers. . . . I’m glad to say that all that is gone by now.” (43)

Morris thinks that this change is more important than any other connected with crime or law; in his hierarchy of wrongs, “Idleness” was the source from which all other wrongs come: “Can you tell me how you have come to this happy condition?” (102). Revolutions may usually be inspired by a noble goal, but after the rebels have won and there is no need for the kind of unity that battle requires, the fundamental reason behind the rebel cause must be reiterated, and Old Hammond remembers that reason: “What is the object of Revolution? Surely to make people happy[,] . . . and happiness without daily work is impossible” (102). Morris the dreamer thinks that Ruskin’s vision

of play existing in work eludes people of the nineteenth century; Old Hammond, in the new century that embodies aspects of an older one, tells the dreamer that “**all** work is pleasurable” (102, emphasis mine). He also believes that the post-Revolution society, in which laborers do not seek pleasure but encounter it daily in work, shares much with the long-ago medieval past: “More akin to our way of looking at life was the spirit of the Middle Ages, to whom heaven and life of the next world was such a reality that it became to them a part of life upon the earth” (147). The England of the future seems, improving as it progressed, an amalgamation of its past, present, and future; the rebel warriors and their descendants do not hope and wait for their Valhalla but experience it daily.

Morris the writer pushes the bliss of the society a step further into fairytale, yet another genre, stretching the reader’s understanding of utopia. The narrative continues to evoke a journey—a dreamer-pilgrim’s journey, the utopian tour, Morris’s journey back to a place of happiness—as Dick, Morris, and Clara—a female version of Dick’s capable manhood that is happiest living and working in nature—row upriver towards Oxfordshire, where Dick has promised to help with haymaking. As they move through the water, Morris feels “[h]is youth come back” (*NN* 161), maybe his youth as a boy in his suit of armor enacting a fairytale in Essex. Earlier in the text, Morris tells Old Hammond that the “curious pleasant imaginations . . . Jacob Grimm got together from the childhood of the world” represented “childishness” and nothing more (111). As he, however, floats on the river, those pleasant imaginations have nothing of that negative connotation. When the party reaches Runnymede—certainly an appropriate place for

the novel's action—, they meet a young woman whose appearance is reminiscent of a fairy. She is in the cottage where they have been offered lodging, “light-haired and grey-eyed. . . . [H]er gown was of silk, and on her wrists were bracelets that seemed to me to be of great value. . . . [She] danced around us in delight of our company” (173). Her name is Ellen, and she and her grandfather live in the cottage. Ellen is in love with the natural world and sees the information in books as too distant from nature, the real source of knowledge, an echo of the novel's earlier criticisms of reliance on books and government-controlled education. Teasing her grandfather, who could be seen as another curmudgeonly figure representing Morris, she advises that instead of searching the printed page for life's answers, he should just look out the window: “Books, books! Always books, grandfather! When will you understand that after all it is the world we live in which interests us; the world of which we are a part, and which we can never love too much” (168). Morris the writer, poet, printer has been engaged in a life of books, the life of the mind; he communicates his belief of nature's power through the printed word, and the friction between the two is not resolved. Ellen is a child of nature who dances in a cottage by the river, and Morris is enchanted.

The references to fairytale become more explicit, further complicating the idea of a communist utopia. The next morning, outside the cottage Morris sees Ellen, glowing in the sun, “her eyes like light jewels,” and Dick comments, ‘Doesn't it all look like one of those very stories out of Grimm[?] . . . Here we are . . . wandering about the world, and we have come to a fairy garden, and there is the very fairy herself’” (179). Aware of his status as a time-traveler, Morris reminds Dick that he, the dreamer, is not

part of the tale, and Dick admits, "That's true. You had better consider that you have got the cap of darkness, and are seeing everything, yourself invisible" (179). The waterman has "touched [Morris] on [his] weak side of not feeling sure of [his] position in this beautiful new country" (179). Like that other storyteller, Chaucer the pilgrim, Morris is more an observer than a participant; he is not content with his role, but the events unfold in a dream, not reality, and Morris has put them there.

As the scenic tour continues, Morris enjoys the sights of buildings and landscapes much improved by the current society, but rowing on the river must come to a resolution. On the third day, Ellen joins the party in her own green boat and takes Morris as her passenger. Here Morris reveals to Ellen that he understands the past so well because he has travelled from that time, but Ellen is not surprised: "I saw that you were not one of us" (*NN* 211). On the shore, they walk alone through the overgrowth to find "an old house amongst new folk [and] . . . a fit guardian for all the beauty of this heart of summer" (226-27). Ellen declares, "This is what I came . . . to see; this many-gabled house built by the simple country-folk of the long-past times. . . . It seems to me as if it had waited for these happy days" (227). The house is Kelmscott Manor, a house that Morris lived in sporadically until the end of his life in 1896; it is identified in the frontispiece of *News from Nowhere* as "the old house by the Thames to which the people of this story went; hereafter follows the book itself which is called *News from Nowhere or An Epoch of Rest*." "An archetypal building, the place which time forgot" (MacCarthy 312), Morris the writer knows that Morris the dreamer's time in the ivied house will be fleeting, as will be his time with Ellen, and he does not want to share them



with anyone else: "I dreaded lest the others should come in suddenly and break the spell [Ellen] cast about me" (227). Ellen, aware that the dream is almost at an end, calls Morris back: "I must not let you go off into [your] dream so soon. If we must lose you, I want you to see all that you can see first before you go back again" (229). The dreamer, like before in the medieval past, is at the mercy of whatever controls his time in dreams of the future.

As Dick and Morris head to the feast that celebrates haymaking, Dick mentions the coming change of the seasons and cannot help but feel

"the coming of dark days, and the shorn fields and empty  
gardens; . . . It is, then, in the autumn, when one almost  
believes in death. . . . [I wonder why] in the midst of summer  
abundance . . . that I must needs trouble myself about the  
winter and its scantiness. . . . If it hadn't happened to me before,  
I should have thought it was your doing, guest; that you had  
thrown a kind of evil charm over me." (232-33)

This is the second time that Dick has reminded Morris that he is only a temporary visitor, and if the visit ends, the dreamer has his own dark magic to blame. These observations are similar to Carlyle's comments about his own nineteenth century. The

haymaking feast is spread in the local church, “a simple little building, . . . the windows mostly of the graceful Oxfordshire fourteenth century type” (235), and it is fitting that the feast take place in what represents the actual Kelmscott Church. Morris takes the form of the visiting dreamer, observing but not visible to those around him: “[Dick] made no response to my glance—nay, he seemed to take no heed at all of my presence, and I noticed that none of the company looked at me” (236). Only Ellen notices his vague presence, and

she *did* seem to recognize me for an instant; but her bright  
face turned sad directly, and she shook her head with a  
mournful look, and the next moment all consciousness of  
my presence had faded from her face. (236)

Morris leaves the church, “lonely and sick at heart” (236), and the last person that acknowledges him is not one of the free citizens but like someone from the nineteenth century he left. The man “looked old, . . . he eyes dull and bleared; . . . His clothing was a mixture of dirt and rags long over-familiar to me. . . . [And] he touched his hat with some real good-will and courtesy, and much servility” (236). After some days in a society with no class division, no necessity to tug one’s forelock, Morris stunned as he crosses the gulf between waking and sleeping. “A black cloud roll[ed] to meet me, like a nightmare of my childish days” (237), and Morris is plunged into darkness.

Morris, however, does not remain in the dark. Quite opposite the ending of *A Dream of John Ball*, the close of *News from Nowhere* is cautiously optimistic. Morris the narrator tries to describe his feelings: "I lay in my bed . . . trying to consider if I was overwhelmed with despair at finding I had been dreaming a dream; and strange to say, I found that I was not so despairing" (226). By setting this romance in the future, Morris is not only able to construct that world according to his imagination, he is also allowed to believe that great changes are yet to come. As Guest, Morris has journeyed ahead of the rest, gathering information, and must now be a sort of prophet, not as one who makes prophesies but as a living symbol of how good life might be. He imagines what Ellen's parting words could have been:

'[Y]ou cannot be one of us. . . . Go back again, now that  
  
you have seen us, and your outward eyes have learned . . .  
  
there is yet a time of rest in store for the world. . . .  
  
Go back again and be the happier for having seen us,  
  
for having added a little hope to your struggle. Go  
  
on living while you may, striving . . . to build up little  
  
by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness.'

(228)

Since he did not make *News from Nowhere* an instruction manual for establishing his idea of a Socialist world, Morris escapes naysayers who might point to certain laws or rules as impossible to make or enforce. His dream focuses on the spirit of Nowhere, finding “happiness and freedom of humanity in harmony with nature” (Lewis 62). Since such a dream has come to him, Morris the narrator believes that “if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream” (*News from Nowhere* 228). Speaking to the naysayers, “The enemy of the dreamer of better times to come is the ideologist of the present, armed . . . with the claim that the prevailing relationships of oppression are immutable. . . . [Yet] history can explode. . . . And when it does it is ignited by those who have dared to dream” (Coleman and O’Sullivan 11). Of course, Morris did not see the rise of Socialism and Communism and, since those systems depended on state control, would most likely have welcomed their fall. But Socialism did come and remains a part of politics, a reality that most nineteenth-century England could not have envisioned. Morris begins with romance, adds utopia, and layers other genres such that the result is one text, and *News from Nowhere* is definitely one of Morris’s most successful attempts at turning one of his dreams into something available to the rest of the world.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONCLUSION

Inventing and reinventing the Middle Ages is generally associated with the idea of medievalism, essentially the appropriation and then imposition of what is considered medieval onto some element of a later time. The Victorian age, of course, provides the most thoroughgoing example of a time consumed with reinventing versions of the medieval past, and its efforts ranged from beautiful architecture to an event like the Eglington Tournament that appears ridiculous on all counts. Medievalism can drive a thoughtful investigation of why a particular cultural moment found it necessary to incorporate something from medieval history into self-definition, but it might also concentrate on collection of comparisons that, while interesting, are not part of a more scholarly argument. The idea of discovering why nineteenth-century England so enthusiastically sought connection with some sort of medieval history could be developed by the idea of medievalism; moving beyond that into medieval literary theory, the discussion becomes both broader and more specific. "The Invention and Reinvention of the Middle Ages: Writers, Readers, and the Composition of Text" relies on H.R. Jauss's reader-response theory to explore not only how but why medieval and nineteenth-century readers who became writers, using the vehicle of genre, imagined

and presented medieval worlds that attempted to satisfy various rhetorical and social agendas.

History is the backdrop of this argument, beginning with Jauss's recognition of history's individuated role in any interpretive act and continuing with the consideration of each writer and the comparison of a medieval writer and a nineteenth-century one who established connections with his medieval predecessor. It seems obvious to a twenty-first century academic reader that interpretation is inescapably subjective and that an individual's notion of the history associated with a text as well as historical understanding of the text must be taken as part of the reading experience. The battle over the role of historicism and, indeed, the notice of anything outside the text in interpretation that began with New Criticism moved to battles within New Historicism. Jauss's historicism is included in his view of reader-response theory, a way of reading that is open to all comers and refines the respondents by way of hermeneutic bridges that not all readers will cross. Those bridges consist of three levels of understanding, the ways that a reader might follow a more complicated path in a text: aesthetic pleasure, surprising otherness, and the model character of medieval texts. A modern reader might experience aesthetic pleasure but still lack a connection with medieval aesthetics, and a text might drop from the literary canon. Jauss acknowledges that this result is part of the reading encounter, and his acceptance of a text's departure from a standard canon demonstrates the flexibility of this theory. Readers and their training change, the common reading list will change, but the fluctuations guarantee the viability of medieval studies. Absence of change is evidence of academic death, and the

freedom Jauss's theory allows readers promises a range of possibilities available to the canon and accompanying interpretations.

Lee Patterson's brand of historicism, termed New Historicism by other critics and reluctantly accepted by Patterson himself, imposes political interpretation as a frame through which all interpretive approaches must pass. He believes that all reading and understanding is driven by political belief; political awareness is inescapable, and even if it is not obvious, this awareness controls a reader's approach and subsequent interpretive encounters with all texts. Political viewpoints can certainly be expressed through social opinions; social opinion, however, is not confined to the political. He tries to discredit Jauss's theory as one that still allows objectivity to control literary interpretation. In *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature*, Patterson looks to Robert Holub who agrees, in *Reception Theory* (1984), that Jauss's "historicism" is finally positivist history under another name: "In contradistinction to Gadamer's insistence on historicity, we are asked [by Jauss] to ignore or bracket our own historical situatedness. Despite his struggle to escape a positivist-historicist paradigm, then, Jauss, in adopting objectivity as a methodological principle, appears to fall back into the very errors he criticizes" (*Negotiating the Past* 8). Both Holub and Patterson are determined to exclude Jauss's broadly inclusive plan that initially accepts all readers' interpretations. Since Jauss's entire theory is not based on a single, specific interpretive principle, namely politics, Patterson refuses to see how his own theory can be nested within Jauss's.

Looking back to Jauss, his use of genre explains how the work of all four writers considered here can be analyzed and compared. Genres are thought of as forms both traditional and as yet unknown. In “Genres and Medieval Literature” (*Toward an Aesthetic Reception*), genres may have characteristics associated with their initial forms, but they are not ossified but elastic as they represent “the interdependence between the infrastructure of society and the superstructure of literature. . . . [Genres] transform themselves into the structural elements of art, and then ‘[break through] the traditional, stabilized forms, styles, and value-concepts of literature’” (91). As is it later suggested, the transformation of genres accomplished by all four writers is definitely possible. In his own way, each writer’s work responds to a personal vision of society and the socio-rhetorical agenda it inspires. Jauss’s insistence that genres reflect not just their moment of inception but current situations of history precisely supports this project’s approach to writers, readers, and history.

The open approach allowed by Jauss is ideal for Jocelin and *Chronicle of the Abbey at Bury St Edmunds*, the text with the least specific background on the writer or his audience and the most curious use of genre. The modern reader can make informed guesses about why Jocelin’s *Chronicle* includes very little of what is found in a typical chronicle and an abundance of personal writing of an intimate tone. Why does a twelfth-century monk write the equivalent of a memoir, diary, biography, and social history all connected by narrative, not chronology? Some scholars and critics of other literary periods do not see the individual in medieval society or literature, believing that the great mass of people were led a group that believed in the same religious and social



systems, but reading Jocelin surely makes it impossible to ignore the individual who makes writing decisions based on his own rhetorical needs. A chronicle is usually meant for a wide audience, perhaps with specific information for the religious or social communities it concerned; the *Chronicle* might not be to any audience but that of its author. Jocelin's criticism of his abbey on many points, personal revelations that, while not scandalous, do reveal private information. It is important, then, to remember Jauss's treatment of genre—it may be traditionally defined but is not restricted to an inflexible form. The possibility of generic change helps the modern reader regard the *Chronicle* not only as unique but even representative of the liveliness within medieval literature supported by the reinvention of genre by an individual writer.

The obvious connection of a common text—Jocelin's original and Carlyle's new translation—only begins the discussion about the *Chronicle* and *Past and Present*. It is not enough to point out Carlyle's departures from and changes to the actual chronicle; these differences need a purpose, and focusing on genres gives the comparisons structure. Recalling the multiple genres Jocelin applies in his work makes Carlyle's textual reinvention more notable. The rhetorical agenda and its categories presented by Carlyle are inspired by the threat of workers' revolution and his belief in the power conservative socio-political beliefs to quell the unrest. Like Jocelin, Carlyle invents genre forms, and although the individual character and voice had, by the nineteenth century, been recognized long ago, Carlyle chooses to hid the single individual—himself—behind several narrative cloaks, keeping distance between Carlyle the man and the voices making arguments in *Past and Present*. Carlyle's audience knows that he is the one

source empowering each narrative thread, but the distance between actual reality and the narrator's reality gives Carlyle inventive freedom seen in his application of magical language and fairytale narrative to the situation of industrialized England. While modern readers are less sure of Jocelin's rhetorical plan or if one existed, they can be sure that Carlyle, who took great liberty with the *Chronicle's* content, wrote with the same attention to detail and movement within genres as that seen in his medieval source. As a Jaussian reader, Carlyle comes to the *Chronicle* as one who definitely identifies a medieval spirit, molding it to fit his expectations, wants to establish—as he defines it—that twelfth-century monastic control as a corrective to the nineteenth-century's problems and fulfills his agenda's goals by several genre formats to *Past and Present's* narrative.

As in the case of the previous pair of writers, Chaucer and Morris present the casual observer with many point of connection, and once more, identifying connections is useful but does not necessarily result in deeper investigation of how the medieval writer can be seen influencing the nineteenth-century one. This time genres are familiar ones, dream vision and romance, and transformations of them is not just reflected worked out with sophistication by each writer, Morris's efforts influenced by but not exactly the same as Chaucer's. In the second pair, the medieval writer can also be evaluated as a reader of known sources, and so the genre developments follow a more detailed path: first, the French versions of dream vision and romance, then Chaucer's response to and transformation of them; next, Chaucer's versions are read by Morris, and he transforms them to fit yet another rhetorical, social agenda. The studies of

Chaucer and Morris are more complex because more is known about the medieval writer, both Chaucer and Morris were more involved in a greater realm of activities, and Morris's reading of Chaucer was extensive with documented response. It is Jauss's theory that unites all four writers and supports a developed interpretation of each, the theory's focus on genres keeps a project looking at the Middle Ages, the nineteenth-century, two authors from each period, and the numerous transformations discovered under control.

### **A Final Look Back**

As Carlyle begins his recreated version of Jocelin's *Chronicle*, he wants his readers to understand how the "Editor" interprets his duties, and "Salvation lies not in tight lacing" describes an approach that is not bound by stiff rules. The phrase not only applies to Carlyle's historical enterprise but to this project as a whole. The methodology of H.R. Jauss's reader response theory allows tremendous latitude for the sorts of interpretive positions granted consideration, but this latitude no way suggests a lack of structure. Instead of obvious limits like the ones imposed by Lee Patterson's politicized theory, using a gatekeeper to limit possible interpretations to those with political concerns, complexities in Jauss's approach are built within the theory itself. A similar paradigm organizes the study of how a specific historical period can be reinvented by writers and readers such that the various "Middle Ages" only resemble each other. The

possibility, then execution of reinvention reminds the reader that changes here do not occur in a linear fashion but back and forth and around the past, present, and future.

The experimentation with genre provides the skeleton key to exploring all four writers, from individual and comparative perspectives, and the most exciting discovery is changes are not predictable but instead depend upon what these writers', implicitly or overtly, hope to achieve as rhetorical goals. The genres seem to resist classification as they become what a writer needs them to be. Jocelin, whose chronicle could best be described as a treasure trove of genre experimentation and even creation, offers the least direct plan for his text, but his presence as the personal narrator makes the choice of genres clear—memoir, diary, autobiography. Carlyle depends on his genre of narrative history to control other genres that work within that dominant plan. In the fourteenth century, dream vision and romance cycle through repeated changes as Chaucer the medieval reader, who encounters traditional French forms, becomes Chaucer the medieval writer who twists those forms to suit his social, political, and artistic agendas. After reading Chaucer, Morris produces his hybrid genre of dream vision within romance, and the modern reader, as with the other three, imposes another interpretive layer and studies Morris's rhetorical intentions and artistic explorations. The genres can achieve unexpected results. In *The Knight's Tale*, Chaucer allows the romance to upend itself; the Knight's frenzied rush to close with a happy ending emphasizes that the "ending"—of knighthood, the chivalric code—is not happy, at least where the Knight is concerned. When Morris dream vision ends in *News from Nowhere*, Ellen, maybe the most complex of the dream characters, does not disappear

as expected but wavers on the threshold between dream and reality and is cognizant of both. With more obvious personal investment than Chaucer, Morris writes his dreams, aware of his status as a dream figure. While most dreams represent the unconscious working on an issue in the dreamer's reality, Morris again inhabits both states at once, conscious of his unconscious activity.

There is also an even more expansive idea that connects the methodology and the writers, perhaps making the proverbial whole greater than the sum of its parts. Looking once more to Carlyle's "Jocelin of Brakelond" in *Past and Present*: "The Centuries are . . . all lineal children of one another; and often, in the portrait of early grandfathers, this and that other enigmatic feature on the newest grandson shall disclose itself, to mutual elucidation" (45). The greater idea is history; all four writers depended on history to achieve their goals. Carlyle and Morris focused on the medieval past that became a different talisman for each, a rosy hierarchical past for Carlyle and a liberated society of independent workers for Morris. For Chaucer, literary history of genres and a staged history from classical Greece lay groundwork for his structure. Given its departure from the genre's norms, Jocelin may not have had actual reference to earlier examples, but whatever the case, he still gave his own writing the title of "chronicle."

Jauss himself, from a medievalist's perspective, looks at the history of medieval studies in "The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature" and cites medievalists' own definition of themselves and their work as the reason for that field's "ghettoization." By looking beyond the immediate literary world's language, readers as

well as writers can find a historical position that will influence rhetorical goals and contribute to the composition and then revision of text. Carlyle mentions the “lineal descent” of centuries, but it is the cyclical or repeating patterns—“the enigmatic feature on the newest grandson”—that he emphasizes. By recognizing familiar characteristics present in some chosen era, an interpretation or argument might snap into focus. Reader response frees all readers from following only a traditionally-accepted path through literature, and the most logical starting point will not only reside outside the text but in the related world of history.

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