

## Chaucer's Last Words: Penitent or Subversive?

This essay will explore Chaucer's enigmatic religious and political views through an examination of the final text in his last published work: the *Retractions*. Throughout his works Chaucer appears to treat such issues with deliberate vagueness, carefully curating an air of neutrality. In *The Canterbury Tales*, where a wide range of political and religious opinions are openly aired, Chaucer keeps his distance from all of them by positing himself as a character—a simple poet who, rather than masterminding the whole text, is merely noting down the opinions of others. It is only in the *Retractions* that Chaucer reassumes his full authorial position, taking responsibility only to quickly deny it:

“Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretis or rede, that if ther be anything in it that liketh hem, that thereof they thanken oure lord Jesu Christ, of whom precedeth al wit and al goodnesse. And if ther be anything that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of min unkonninge, and nat to my wil, that wolde ful fain have seid bettre if I hadde had konninge” (1081-2).

The *Retractions* thus provide a somber and pious ending to a work that, at other times, seems specifically meant to offend. Many of its texts are sexually explicit, crudely humorous, and derisively satirical in their presentation of religion and political authorities. While there are other moments of solemnity within the text, seen for example in *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Prioress's Tale*, they are offset and undermined by their circumscription within the narrative structure—they are fabricated, ultimately unattached

to reality. Thus the *Retractions* stand alone in their reality, seemingly revealing something of the true Chaucer in their desperate uncertainty.

What drove Chaucer to distance himself so drastically from his own writing? What led him, in the final lines of his final work, to beg forgiveness of both his readers and of God: “Wherfore I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me, that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes; and namely of my translacions and enditinges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns” (1084-5)? The *Retractions* can, on the one hand, be understood in terms of a contextually-motivated change in opinion. On the other hand, they can be analyzed within the framework of the larger text in terms of a unifying theme. This essay will test both of these frameworks by examining the *Retractions*, first, within the historical context in which they were written and, second, through Michel Foucault’s concept of Panopticism.

One event of obvious relevance that coincided with the writing of the *The Canterbury Tales* was Chaucer’s death in 1400. The work, which took up the last decade of his life, was never finished (Gray). Therefore it seems at least plausible that, recognizing his own impending end, Chaucer had some kind of religious revelation:

Dr. Thomas Gascoigne in the fifteenth century tells a story of a deathbed repentance, in which he died lamenting that he would not be able to revoke or destroy what he had written about the wicked and foul love of men for women. This is sometimes regarded as the context for his ‘Retraction’...However, it is certainly possible that Gascoigne constructed his story from the retractions themselves (Gray).

In support of Gascoigne's tale, there is speculation that he was in ill health in the months leading up to his death (Gray), which would have given him ample time to reflect on his life and his literary legacy; perhaps, finding them both lacking in Christian virtue, he was driven either by remorse or fear to scribble off something that might excuse his sins and put him on God's good side. However, there is the strange fact that, in December of 1399, he took out a 53-year property lease (Chaucer and Mann xvi)—why would a man who knew he was dying make such an investment? Thus, while the possibility of a revelation is not eliminated, it cannot be concluded that the *Retractions* were motivated by an awareness of death's proximity.

The other momentous event that occurred around this time, and of which Chaucer was most certainly aware, was the deposition of King Richard II and the accession of his replacement, Henry IV. Chaucer had been an esquire to Richard since the beginning of his reign and there is evidence that, under Richard, Chaucer acquired "an established civic position and reputation" (Gray). There is also speculation that the royal tercel eagle in *The Parliament of Fowls* was meant to represent Richard (Chaucer and Lynch 93)—which, if true, would have been high flattery: "The tercel egle, as that ye known wel,/ The foul royal above yow in degree,/ The wyse and worthy, secree, trewe as stel..." (393-395). Given these connections to Richard, it is possible that Chaucer felt his own security threatened by the king's deposition. Henry IV was closely tied to the Church through his relationship with Archbishop Arundel (Brown and Summerson)—thus, the *Retractions* could have been an attempt to demonstrate his support for the new monarch, who was now in charge of paying Chaucer's yearly annuity (Chaucer and Mann xvi). They could also have been motivated by a desire to distance himself from anything heretical in his

works; under the guidance of the Archbishop, the punishment for heresy was made increasingly severe (Brown and Summerson).

These explanations share an assumption of the *Retractions*' sincerity—that Chaucer, for whatever reason, really did want to disown his works. But what if they weren't sincere? What if, like the rest of *The Canterbury Tales*, they were meant to be satirical? Foucault's concept of panopticism, a form of disciplinary power, provides an alternative framework for Chaucer's motives.

The concept of panopticism is based on an architectural design that was meant to innovate a kind of prison. Foucault describes it as such:

[A]t the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible.

Thus, the panoptic mechanism disciplines through the imposition of visibility. It is of central importance to this mechanism that the windows of the observation tower function only in one direction: the prisoner can always be seen by, but never see, the

supervisor. The concealment of the supervisor allows “that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary” (Foucault). In other words, the Panopticon functions through the *prisoner’s belief* that he is being observed, rather than through the actual observation—“He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power” (Foucault).

Thus, it is a mechanism that can be operated by anybody. In fact, an essential element of the Panopticon is that anybody can enter the tower and, in doing so, can supervise not only the prisoners but also the supervisors themselves—“An inspector arriving unexpectedly at the centre of the Panopticon will be able to judge at a glance, without anything being concealed from him, how the entire establishment is functioning” (Foucault). No one escapes observation, and thus every individual is subjected equally to the confines of discipline—it is by nature a democratic form of power, the complete antithesis of sovereignty. Writes Foucault:

The body of the king, with its strange material and physical presence, with the force that he himself deploys or transmits to some few others, is at the opposite extreme of this new physics of power represented by panopticism; the domain of panopticism is, on the contrary, that whole lower region, that region of irregular bodies, with their details, their multiple movements, their heterogenous forces... Within the panoptic structure, each individual “inscribes in himself the power relation in which he plays both roles” (Foucault)—the mechanisms of force, once employed by external agents, become internalized. In his administration of self-discipline, he follows some concept of the normative. And normative ideals are not laid out as law by monarchs

or archbishops, but are set by everyday people going about their everyday lives.

Panopticism therefore represents the rejection of centralized authority in two interconnected yet distinct principles: self-discipline, on the basis of publicly determined standards.

Both of these principles are embodied in Chaucer's *Retractions*. By claiming to revoke his works, Chaucer exemplifies the mechanism of internalized discipline. Here, God is the concealed supervisor—the author is motivated to question and critique himself by the notion of an all-seeing God with the power either to damn or to save. And by addressing, specifically, the potential reactions of the readers—not of the king, or the clergy, or even God himself—Chaucer illustrates the concept of commonly determined normativity: it is the public who sets standards to which all people must adhere.

Thus the vision of authority contained in the *Retractions* is one of panoptic power—a power oppositional to that of the king or of the Catholic clergy. In his *Retractions*, Chaucer gives the power of religious judgment to the laity, impliedly dismissing the hierarchy of the established Church. By claiming to hold himself to common standards of piety and morality, he also creates the prerogative for others to do so—even those who, like him, are not commoners.

The *Retractions*, understood through the lens of panopticism, can thus be seen as a fitting ending to *The Canterbury Tales*. By demonstrating a form of power that excludes the hierarchical authority vested in the state and the Church, the *Retractions* offer a democratic alternative to the corrupt and ridiculous power arrangements satirized within the text. In throwing his work into question, he rejects even his own authority over the text—each reader becomes a judge in their own right.

## Works Cited

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