Chaucer’s Retraction: Examining the Case for Disavowal

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ABSTRACT: Chaucer’s Retraction, which concludes both the Parson’s Tale and the Canterbury Tales in most manuscripts, presents a number of interpretive problems. Many of these problems stem from the widespread assumption that, as its (editorially supplied) title asserts, the Retraction constitutes a retraction or disavowal of Chaucer’s literary corpus. But on what basis do we assume that the work we know as the Retraction does in fact constitute a retraction or disavowal? This article examines the evidence for the presence of a disavowal, arriving at the conclusion that the element of disavowal has been overestimated. Editorial conventions that have persisted into our modern editions, some of which date to the earliest manuscripts, have the effect of not only creating the distinct work we know as the Retraction, but of subtly smoothing over many of the most vexing problems presented by the text in favor of a reading that highlights Chaucer’s supposed disavowal.

KEYWORDS: disavowal, editors and editions, prayer, Retraction

Chaucer’s Retraction occupies a place in our literary imaginations and our texts as Chaucer’s final statement on his works. The Retraction’s status as a final statement is due in part to the belief that, as its title asserts, it constitutes a retraction or disavowal of Chaucer’s works. This belief is so widely accepted, and so enshrined in the work’s customary title, that to pose the question at all borders on tautology. (Is Chaucer’s Retraction a retraction?) The Retraction’s
status as a disavowal of Chaucer's literary corpus, however, does not present itself in a vacuum. It is accepted only in the presence of a number of assumptions about the Retraction and its author: that Chaucer wrote the Retraction; that his words can be taken at face value; that the speaker of these lines is in fact “Chaucer”; that the Retraction is the author’s intended ending for the Canterbury Tales; and that, by virtue of this position, it ought to be read as his most authoritative statement about his own work.

Many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics took the Retraction’s apparent disavowal for granted and, unwilling or unable to accept the prospect of Chaucer disavowing the majority of his works, doubted instead the authenticity of the passage.1 By the early twentieth century, the textual evidence for the Retraction’s authenticity had been largely accepted, and critics, still dismayed by the apparent disavowal, turned toward biographical readings that could account for it.2 Robert Kilburn Root, for example, conceded that “in the sadness of his latter days the poet’s conscience was seized upon by the tenets of a narrow creed, which in the days of his strength he had known how to transmute into something better and truer."3 A later generation of critics who were perhaps less despairing of the Retraction accepted the view that the lines contained a rejection of Chaucer’s works, but they found such a rejection either an aesthetically appropriate ending to the Canterbury Tales, “most


2. The manuscript evidence for Retr as the original ending for CT is difficult to overcome. Retr appears “in practically all of the MSS. that have the whole of [ParsT]” (John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, eds., The Text of the Canterbury Tales Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts, 8 vols. [Chicago, 1940], 2:471–72 [hereafter “Manly-Rickert”]).

3. Robert Kilburn Root, The Poetry of Chaucer: A Guide to Its Study and Appreciation, rev. edn. (Boston, 1922), 288. See also John S. P. Tatlock, The Development and Chronology of Chaucer’s Works ([London], 1907), 135. It is common for scholars advancing a biographical reading to cite Thomas Gascoigne’s near-contemporary testimony of Chaucer’s deathbed repentance, from his Dictionarium Theologicum (ca. 1434–58), as evidence independently corroborating the authenticity of Retr, or as an early reading of Retr. Douglas Wurtele, however, points out that what Gascoigne says does not accurately report what Chaucer wrote in Retr; he takes Gascoigne’s testimony as evidence of Chaucer’s deathbed remorse but not as direct corroborating evidence for Retr (“The Penitence of Geoffrey Chaucer,” Vitator 11 [1980]: 335–60). Contra Wurtele, Mícheál Vaughan has argued that Gascoigne’s account “makes eminently better sense when read as the expression of his own preludes and personal politics,” which were severely anti-Lancastrian (“Personal Politics and Thomas Gascoigne’s Account of Chaucer’s Death,” Medium Ævum 75 [2006]: 103–22, at 103–4).
cunningly and artistically intervolved with the whole” in one critic’s estimation, or a morally appropriate act of piety.⁴ Even those who perceive irony in the Retraction and doubt Chaucer’s personal sincerity in these words,⁵ or point to a tension between rejection and affirmation in the Retraction,⁶ base their readings on an ostensible disavowal in these lines, which is undermined or counterbalanced by other aspects of Chaucer’s language.

The implications of accepting Chaucer’s supposed disavowal extend beyond interpretive concerns to textual matters as well. For example, in support of his argument for the Ellesmere order of the tales, Larry D. Benson has reasoned that the fact that Chaucer makes a retraction of his works at the end of the Canterbury Tales is evidence that he was finished working on them, despite their apparent incompleteness.⁷ But on what basis do we assume that the passage editors have called the “Retraction” (John Urry was the first to apply this title to the passage in his 1721 edition) does in fact contain a


retraction or disavowal of Chaucer's works. This paper will consider the evidence upon which editors and critics have based this assumption, arriving at the conclusion that the element of disavowal in the Retraction has been overestimated. Apart from the internal evidence, which is inconclusive, much of the strength behind this interpretation of the Retraction is derived from editorial conventions and extratextual evidence.

Let us first consider the internal evidence. Chaucer's Retraction comprises the last twelve lines of Fragment X of the Canterbury Tales, the other 1080 lines of which are made up of the Parson's Prologue and Parson's Tale.

Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse. And if ther be any thyng that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonynge and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyd bettre if I hadde had konynge. For ooure book seith, “Al that is writen is writen for our doctrine,” and that is myn entente. 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 enditynges of worldly vanites, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns: as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the XXV. Ladies; the book of the Duchesse; the book of Seint Valentynes day of the Parlement of Briddes; the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne; the book of the Leoun; and many another book, if they were in my remembrance, and many a song and many a leccherous lay, that Crist for his grete mercy foryeve me the synne. But of the translacion of Boece de Consolacione, and othere bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun, that thanke I oure Lord Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder, and alle the seintes of hevene, bisekyng hem that they from hennes forth unto my lyves ende sende me grace to biwaiyle my giltes and to studie to the salvacioun of my soule, and graunte me grace of verray penitence, confesioun and satisfaccioun to doon in this present lyf, thurgh the benigne grace of hym that is kyng of kynges and preest over alle preestes, that boghte us with the precious blood of his herte.

I may been oon of hem at the day of doom that shulle be saved. *Qui cum Patre et Spiritu Sancto vivit et regnat Deus per omnia secula.*  
*Amen.*

The chief evidence for the presence of a retraction or disavowal in this passage is found in lines 1084–87. Understanding whether or not these lines constitute a disavowal and, if so, of what, depends primarily upon Chaucer’s assertion that he “revoke[s]” in his “retracciouns” his “translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees,” and in particular on the meanings of the words “revoke” and “retracciouns.”

As a number of scholars have shown, both words had a wide range of meanings and associations in Middle English and the languages from which they were derived. Olive Sayce points out that both classical Latin *revocare* and Old French *revoquier* have the primary sense of “call back” or “recall.” Only in late Latin and in medieval French from the fourteenth century onwards did the words acquire the modern English sense of “withdraw.” Sayce concludes that Chaucer’s use of the word derives from the late medieval French sense of “withdraw.”

Walter W. Skeat, however, objected to this meaning on logical grounds, since for Chaucer such an action would have been impossible. He argued that Chaucer is here merely saying that he wishes to “recall” (that is, “bring to mind”) what he “may have said amiss.” The range of meanings for “revoke” in Middle English was wide, including, in addition to those already mentioned, the senses of “revive,” “bring back,” “rescue,” “restore,” “repeal,” and “repress.” Aside from this passage, Chaucer used the word only once, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, in the sense of “revive” (III, 1118). Although this single instance is insufficient to establish the word’s meaning in the *Retraction*, it does help to establish the plausibility of Chaucer using the word in the *Retraction* to mean something more like “call back” or “recall” than “withdraw.” This plausibility is reinforced when we consider the possible meanings for “retracciouns.”

Chaucer’s use of “retracciouns” here appears to be the only extant example of its use in such a context. Sayce has offered the fullest discussion of the possible derivations of the word. They include Latin *retractio*, which has the

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9. All quotations from the works of Chaucer are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987).
12. *MED*, s.v. *revoken* (v.).
13. The only other context is a medical one: a "withdrawal of blood" or the "drawing back or retraction of the tongue" (*MED*, s.v. *retraccioun* [n.]).
sense of “withdrawal” (the verb form *retrahere* can be transitive or intransitive in meaning), and its extended form *retractatio*, which in its verb form (*retractare*) signifies “reconsider,” “revise,” and “withdraw” (transitively or intransitively), and in its noun form signifies “reconsideration” and “remembrance,” in addition to “withdrawal.” The plural form, *retractationes*, signifying “revisions” or “corrections,” was used primarily in reference to Saint Augustine’s *Retractationes*, a work whose nature reinforces the meanings of “reconsideration” and “remembrance” present in the related word forms. Rosemary Potz McGerr, in her thorough analysis of the relationship between Chaucer’s *Retraction* and Augustine’s *Retractationes*, characterizes the nature of Augustine’s work as follows:

Augustine’s *Retractationum libri duo* does not retract his writings in the modern sense of recanting or renouncing them. Instead, Augustine makes a careful review of all the books he has written since becoming a Christian. For each work, he gives the title and incipit, so as to verify the book’s authenticity. He also explains the circumstances of each work’s composition, so as to give the reader a sense of the work’s context in Augustine’s life and in the theological debates of the period. He uses the rest of each entry to clarify the views expressed in the work, either by revising what he had written or by defending the original statements.\(^{14}\)

Such “reconsideration,” as exemplified by Augustine’s work, is hardly consistent with the narrower modern English sense of “withdrawal.” Although the sense of “withdrawal” is available in the singular form *retractatio* and the verb form *retrahere*, these forms are further afield from Chaucer’s usage, which bears closer resemblance to the plural form associated with Augustine’s work.

These words appear in Old French in the forms *retraction*, in the senses of “reproach” and “withdrawal” (the verb form *retraire* is either transitive or intransitive and includes the sense “revoke”), and *retraction*, also in reference to Augustine’s *Retractationes*. The Middle English words *retracten* and *retractaciones* are derived from the Latin, the former used transitively in the sense of “draw back” or “draw in,” and the latter used only in the plural as

\(^{14}\) McGerr, “Retraction and Memory,” 98. See also McGerr, *Chaucer’s Open Books*, 131–53.
a reference to Augustine's work. Sayce suggests an amalgam of the meanings and associations from the various cognates: “Chaucer has thus probably added to a noun derived from French in the sense of ‘withdrawal,’ the meaning of ‘revoke’ present in the related verbs, and combined this with an allusion to the well-known title of Augustine’s work.” Sayce’s reading, however, begs the question: she assumes the French derivation on the grounds that the sense in which Chaucer uses the word here (“withdraw/revoke”) is not attested in the Latin. But the sense in which Chaucer uses the word is exactly the question. John S. P. Tatlock suggests a different amalgam of the French and Latin: “The form retracciouns . . . instead of retractaciouns, may be meant to convey the idea of withdrawal as well as of rehandling.” He also makes the crucial observation, to which we will return, that the plural form renders the word concrete in sense, increasing the likelihood of an allusion to Augustine’s *Retractationes*. Given the nature of Augustine’s *Retractationes* as a reconsideration and revision of his earlier works, rather than a recantation or rejection of them, it is well within reason to doubt whether Chaucer’s likely allusion to Augustine here signals a withdrawal or recantation.

My point in this article is not to argue for an authoritative gloss of these two words, but to emphasize their range of possibilities and to challenge facile readings of Chaucer’s rather strange locution as a straightforward retraction in the modern sense. Our modern usage of retract, in reference to a statement or text, unequivocally suggests withdrawal, with little suggestion of “rehandling,” “remembrance,” or “reconsideration.” One need only consult a printed “retraction” from a newspaper or academic journal to note the sense

18. Tatlock, “Chaucer’s Retractions,” 525. Both Sayce and Tatlock see a reference to Augustine in the word. Tatlock discusses three Latin works, including Augustine’s, that use the word concretely in the sense of a reconsideration or correction; he concludes that Chaucer’s reference is probably to Augustine or Gerald de Barri’s *Descriptio Cambriæ*, “either of which might have served to crystallize a narrowly pious impulse in the sick or aging Chaucer.”
of finality and even negation present in the modern word.19 By contrast, as we have seen, Chaucer’s words *revoke* and *retracciouns* are rich in possibility. Chaucer’s *revoke* is at least as likely to mean “recall” or “bring to mind” as “rescind” or “recant,” and *retracciouns* is as likely to signal “reconsiderations” or “remembrances” as “recantations” or “withdrawals.” From a purely lexical standpoint, understanding these lines as a disavowal of Chaucer’s works is by no means a given, and when one considers the likely comparison being drawn to Augustine’s reconsideration and revision of his works, such an interpretation begins to look less and less convincing. The matter is skewed in the opposite direction, however, by a number of editorial conventions that reinforce the idea of Chaucer disavowing his literary corpus, some of which date to the earliest manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* and all of which color our experience of the *Retraction*.

Let us consider how a reader first encounters the *Retraction* in a modern edition. I have in mind here Larry D. Benson’s 2000 edition of the *Canterbury Tales Complete*, although most of the following points would apply as well to *The Riverside Chaucer*, also edited by Benson.20 Having reached the end of line 1080 of the *Parson’s Tale*, the reader encounters what appears to be the conclusion of the tale, indicated by white space that occupies roughly the bottom two or three inches of the main text. Turning the page, the reader encounters the statement “Heere taketh the makere of this book his leve,” which indicates a shift in speaker (from the Parson to “the makere of this book”) and, by extension, a shift out of the *Parson’s Tale* and out of the frame narrative of the *Canterbury Tales*. Reference to either the Table of Contents or the explanatory notes (both of which refer to this section with the heading “Chaucer’s Retraction”) will confirm the suspicion that we have indeed

19. The 2005 controversy surrounding the journal *Science*’s retraction of a paper by South Korean scientists is a good example of the context in which the word is used today. In this case, the journal determined that it was necessary to retract the paper once allegations surfaced that some of the research had been fabricated. Dr. Katrina Kelner, one of the investigators in the case, commented, in response to the care that was taken to the wording of the retraction, that “once a paper is retracted, you can’t retract it again.” Such a statement is hardly consistent with notions of “reconsideration” and “remembrance,” which are open-ended processes. See Gina Kolata, “Amid Confusion, Journal Retracts Korean’s Stem Cell Paper,” *The New York Times* (Dec. 31, 2005), online at: https://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/31/science/amid-confusion-journal-retracts-koreans-stem-cell-paper.html.

encountered a separate work, spoken in Chaucer’s own authorial voice.21
Thus, before a reader comes to the first line of what they now know to call
Chaucer's Retraction, many of the most vexing questions about the passage
have already been decided, in ways that tilt a reader’s judgment toward the
view that Chaucer is making a disavowal or withdrawal of his works.

Foremost among these questions is whether or not the Retraction deserves
its status as a distinct part of the Canterbury Tales, bearing its own title and
occupying the closing position of the work much as the General Prologue
occupies the opening. In recent decades, scholars including Charles A. Owen
Jr. and Miċeál Vaughan have shown that this very question troubled the earli-
est readers of the Canterbury Tales: the scribes responsible for copying (and,
perhaps, introducing an organizing principle to) Chaucer’s great work. The
earliest recorded responses to the Parson’s Tale and Retraction are the manu-
script rubrics, arguably scribal in origin, inserted between lines 1080 and
1081, represented in Benson’s and other modern editions by the rubric found
in Ellesmere: “Heere taketh the makere of this book his leve.”22 A close look
at the rubrics shows “an uneasiness with the Parson’s Tale, expressed mainly
at its juncture with the Retraction.”23 That uneasiness is primarily a response
to the problem of determining the speaker of the Retraction. As Vaughan
points out, apart from the context of the Canterbury Tales, nothing in the
Parson’s Tale and Retraction demands that they be treated as separate works
with separate speakers.24 Once appended to the Canterbury Tales, however,
they require distinctive speakers. The Parson’s Prologue clearly attributes the
ensuing tale to the Parson, but the Retraction—or at least parts of it, includ-
ing the list of Chaucer’s works—can only be attributed to Chaucer, the author
of the Canterbury Tales and the other works listed. Either a distinction must
be drawn between the speakers of the Parson’s Tale and the Retraction, or the

notes in the 1987 edition use the heading “Chaucer’s Retractation” (The Riverside Chaucer, 965).
The Norton Chaucer treats the matters discussed here with significantly more care. Although it too
reproduces the Ellesmere rubric and demarcates Retr with line and page breaks, it avoids giving the
work a separate title, including it instead as part of ParsPro and ParsT. It also discusses the work’s
editorially provided title, its problematic relationship to ParsT, and the questions both raised and
addressed by the Ellesmere rubric. See David Lawton, ed., The Norton Chaucer (New York, 2019),
520–21, 590.
22. The Ellesmere manuscript is San Marino, Calif., Huntington Library MS El 26 C 9.
23. Charles A. Owen Jr., “What the Manuscripts Tell Us About the Parson’s Tale,” Medium
Ævum 63 (1994): 239–49, at 239. See also Charles A. Owen Jr., The Manuscripts of the Canterbury
of the Parson’s Tale,” in Thomas A. Prendergast and Barbara Kline, eds., Rewriting Chaucer: Culture,
Authority, and the Idea of the Authentic Text, 1400–1602 (Columbus, OH, 1999), 45–90, at 46.
whole thing must be taken out of the dramatic context of, and denied a place in, the *Canterbury Tales*.

Modern editions, from Skeat (1894) to David Lawton’s *The Norton Chaucer* (2019), have mitigated the problem by printing rubrics that draw a clear distinction between the *Parson’s Tale* and the *Retraction*, particularly Ellesmere’s “Heere taketh the makere of this book his leve,” which not only breaks up the two works but assigns the *Retraction* to the “makere of this book,” presumably the author. There is, however, substantial disagreement in the rubrics of the extant manuscripts. Vaughan’s hypothesis is that the various versions of the rubric represent steps in a gradual process of assimilating what may originally have been a separate work, Chaucer’s “Treatise on Penitence,” to the *Canterbury Tales*.25

This development in the manuscript tradition reflects unease about the speaker of the *Retraction*. The text presents other interpretive problems as well. If the *Retraction* is intended to end the *Canterbury Tales*, not just the *Parson’s Tale*, why at the outset does it address itself to readers of “this litel tretys,” evidently the *Parson’s Tale*, rather than to readers of the larger work?26 Why is it necessary for Chaucer to declare a doctrinal intention (“Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine”) for the *Parson’s Tale*, a work that is transparently doctrinal? Why, if Chaucer’s words are taken to indicate a withdrawal or disavowal, is the *Canterbury Tales* included in the list of works to be retracted? Why retract it in the very act of completing it?

A crude but convenient solution to these problems is the one followed for nearly two hundred years by editors of the *Canterbury Tales*, from William  

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25. Vaughan has grouped the manuscripts into five categories, ranging from those that mark no break at all between *ParsT* and *Retr*, to those that offer a “leave-taking formula” like that of El (or a shorter version that omits “of this book”), to manuscripts that add an explicit for *ParsT* (with or without a “leave-taking formula”). Despite El’s relatively early provenance, Vaughan argues that it represents an endpoint in the process of assimilation, while manuscripts that offer a continuous text, with no break at all between *ParsT* and *Retr*, represent a form of the Chaucerian original. More recently, Stephen Partridge has issued a forceful defense of the Ellesmere rubric (“‘The Makere of this Boke’: Chaucer’s *Retraction* and the Author as Scribe and Compiler,” in Stephen Partridge and Erik Kwakkel, eds., *Author, Reader, Book: Medieval Authorship in Theory and Practice* [Toronto, 2012], 106–53).

26. Although Robertson and Huppé ignited much discussion of this phrase by arguing that here, as well as in two similar instances in the introduction to *Mel* (VII 957, 963), “litel tretys” refers to *CT* as a whole, no conclusive evidence was ever put forward for this reading, and most later scholars have found these readings strained. See Huppé, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales*, 235–36; and Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer*, 369n179. For thorough refutations, see Glending Olson, “A Reading of the *Thopas-Melibee* Link,” *Chaucer Review* 10 (1975): 147–53; and John W. Clark, “‘This Litel Tretys’ Again,” *Chaucer Review* 6 (1971): 152–56. The simplest interpretation is that “litel tretys” refers to the work that immediately precedes it, *ParsT*. Clark lists scholars who have taken “litel tretys” as a reference to *ParsT* (155n9).
Thynne (1532) to John Urry (1721): simply omitting the *Retraction* from their editions.27 Another solution, adopted by a number of scholars from the mid-eighteenth century on, is to regard all or part of the *Retraction*, generally lines 1085–90, which include the supposed disavowal, as an interpolation, the work of a Chaucer in decline, or a devout but clumsy monk inserting a few lines spoken in Chaucer’s authorial voice into what was originally a speech for the Parson.28 A third option, as we have just seen, is to acknowledge the origins of the *Parson’s Tale* and *Retraction* in a separate work, a “Treatise on Penitence,” that was, perhaps clumsily, appended to the *Canterbury Tales* as an ending. The fourth and final option, that represented in our authoritative modern editions, is to include the most developed of the manuscript rubrics in the body of the text, letting it neatly resolve the problem. The consequence of this editorial decision is that readers encounter a text that presents lines 1081–92 as a work wholly separate from the *Parson’s Tale*, demarcated by white space, a page break, an introductory statement that neatly distinguishes between speakers, and, in many cases, a title that reifies the passage as “Chaucer’s Retraction.” These decisions, in effect, create the *Retraction* as a separate and final work that brings closure to the *Canterbury Tales*. The closure, however, is procured at some cost: by isolating the so-called “*Retraction*” as a separate

27. William Thynne, ed., *The works of Geffray Chaucer newly printed* (London, 1532). The folio editions of *CT* printed during the period 1532–1687 followed Thynne in omitting Retr. Those editions are Thynne (1532, rev. 1542 and ?1550); John Stow (1561); and Thomas Speght (1598, rev. 1602, reissued 1687). Prior to Thynne, only one early edition, Richard Pynson (1492), had omitted it. See Joseph A. Dane, *Who Is Buried in Chaucer’s Tomb?: Studies in the Reception of Chaucer’s Book* (East Lansing, MI, 1998), 5–10, 95–114. Urry himself had presumably intended to omit *Retr*, as he shared with Thomas Hearne doubts about its authenticity. Urry died in 1715, six years before the publication of the edition attributed to him, and the edition was completed by William and Timothy Thomas, who chose to include Retr. Dane, in the work cited above, recounts the various misconceptions about the textual history of *Retr* on which Urry, Hearne, and the Thomases based their views of its authenticity and canonicity. Recently, Megan Cook has analyzed the ways in which *Retr*’s disappearance from the editions of 1532 to 1768 allowed room for other Chaucerian commentary, in particular *Adam*, which first appeared in Stow’s 1561 edition. Like *Retr*, *Adam* acknowledges the limits of authorial control, but in decidedly more secular terms. See Megan L. Cook, “‘Here taketh the makere of this book his leve’: The *Retraction* and Chaucer’s Works in Tudor England,” *Studies in Philology* 113 (2016): 32–54.

28. The examples cited in note 1 above represent the crudest version of the interpolation thesis, in which critics consciously construct “Chaucer” by selecting the parts of his work that accord with their tastes and rejecting the rest as inauthentic. A more sophisticated version has been advanced by Wurtele, who makes a stronger case for interpolation than any of his predecessors by arguing from the text itself and not from contempt for *Retr* (“The Penitence of Geoffrey Chaucer,” 335–59). However, his argument leaves unanswered the fundamental question facing those who argue for interpolation: why would Chaucer (or another acting on his behalf) insert a conclusion spoken in his own authorial voice, and from outside the frame narrative of *CT*, into a speech assigned to the Parson within the frame?
work with its own title, undue emphasis and unmitigated clarity are forced upon Chaucer’s subtle and vexing locution.

The title given to this work has its origin in Urry’s 1721 edition, which referred to the passage in the table of contents as “The Retractations.” Since then it has acquired several variant forms, and might now be encountered in separate editions (or within a single edition) as Chaucer’s Retractations, Retractation, Retractions, or Retraction. The latter form, Chaucer’s Retraction, is the one most commonly used in editions of the Canterbury Tales and related scholarship. This title, which is so well established as to be almost impossible to avoid, introduces some unfortunate distortions into the passage it aims to represent. First of all, as a modernized form, it unavoidably calls to mind modern usage, which as we have seen, underrepresents the range of meanings and associations of Chaucer’s word. Second, as a singular form, it takes what in Chaucer’s hands is a plural, and therefore concrete, reference to his “retracciouns” and turns it into a generalized act of retraction. The title, in other words, points to the entire passage as an act of retraction on Chaucer’s part. Chaucer’s word, however, points to something more concrete: “retracciouns” can refer only to the lines that follow, his list of works, or to another work of “retracciouns.” This important question of the referent of “retracciouns” is effectively, though arbitrarily, answered by the modern editorial convention of placing a colon after “retracciouns,” implying that what follows the colon, the list of works, is an elaboration on “retracciouns”: “my translacions and enditynys of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns:/ as is the book of Troilus.” The list of works, however, introduced by the conjunction as, is best understood as referring to “translacions and enditynys,” with the intervening clause being regarded as parenthetical. “Retracciouns,” then, could point to a separate work of Chaucer’s that has not survived or was only contemplated by the author, rather than to the list of works itself. If this were in fact the case, then the convention of referring to this passage as Chaucer’s “Retraction,” and along with it the implication that Chaucer is disavowing or retracting (in the modern sense) the works listed would no longer be tenable. Should such a work exist, it might indeed contain a disavowal of Chaucer’s literary corpus, but we would need to examine that work to determine the nature of Chaucer’s disavowal, and what is commonly referred to as the “Retraction” would cease to carry such heavy implications. While the prospect of proving such a work existed is doubtful, the suggestion cannot be dismissed outright, especially since the list of works evidently includes one other “lost” work: “the book of the Leoun,” an apparent reference to a
work that has not survived. The language of the passage itself is thus open to either interpretation, and the referent of “retracciouns” must not be taken for granted.

Regardless of the referent of “retracciouns,” viewing the whole passage as an act of retraction not only distorts and misrepresents Chaucer’s language but also places undue emphasis on what is only a subordinate element in a larger rhetorical act. The first, most obvious point to make about the Retraction is that it is an address to readers. Chaucer makes two basic requests of his readers in these lines. First, in lines 1081–83, he asks them to attribute their pleasure or displeasure with the Parson’s Tale to its proper source: their pleasure to “oure Lord Jhesu Crist,” and any displeasure “to the defaute of myn unkonnynge.” Second, in lines 1084–92, he asks readers to pray for the forgiveness of his sins. All that is included in lines 1084–92, including Chaucer’s confession of his “translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees,” are qualifications or elaborations of this basic rhetorical act: the request for prayer.

This two-part division of the Retraction stands in contrast to a conventional three-part division, which, like the editorial conventions we have seen, has the effect of emphasizing the notion of disavowal in the passage. Anita Obermeier outlines the conventional division as follows: “the initial prayer, the author’s plea for intercession on his behalf (1081–84); the ‘retractio’ proper, his confession of his literary offenses and the list of works (1085–89); and the final prayer (1090–92).” The primary differences between my proposed two-part division and the conventional three-part one are that the conventional division includes line 1084 in the first part of the Retraction and that it identifies a distinct third part in lines 1090–92. My reasons for departing from the convention in these two respects are both grammatical and rhetorical. Line 1085, the starting point of the second part of the conventional division, which begins with “and namely,” depends grammatically upon the “giltes” to which Chaucer refers in line 1084. Similarly, the conventional third part, lines 1090–92, beginning with “bisekynge hem,” depends grammatically on the “thanke I oure Lord Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder” of line 1089. By contrast, the

29. Various attempts have been made to identify the nature and possible sources, particularly among Chaucer’s French influences and contemporaries, for this lost work. See Aage Brusendorff, The Chaucer Tradition (London, 1925), 426–33; Victor Langhans, “Chaucer’s Book of the Leoun,” Anglia 52 (1928): 113–22; and F. M. Dear, “Chaucer’s Book of the Lion,” Medium Ævum 7 (1938): 105–12. Each of these approaches is discussed in Russell A. Peck, Chaucer’s Romaunt of the Rose and Boece, Treatise on the Astrolabe, Equatorie of the Planetis, Lost Works, and Chaucerian Apocrypha: An Annotated Bibliography (Toronto, 1988), 329–33, 241–42. Nowhere have I encountered the suggestion that Chaucer’s “retracciouns” might be considered among his lost works.

end of my proposed part one is a full stop, and the beginning of my proposed part two begins with the clearly transitional “wherefore.” Thus, the only clean grammatical break of the two proposed dividing points is the one I suggest, between lines 1083 and 1084. Just as the two-part division more closely follows the grammatical structure of the passage, so it more closely reflects the rhetorical movement of the passage. The clear rhetorical shift in the passage occurs at the juncture between lines 1083 and 1084, where Chaucer moves from asking readers to attribute their pleasure or displeasure with the Parson’s Tale to its proper source to asking them to pray for his soul. Setting apart the last three lines, which are an extension of Chaucer’s statement of gratitude for his works in lines 1088–89, from the rest of the passage artificially separates the confession, list of works, and what Obermeier calls the “retractio’ proper” from the context of Chaucer’s request for prayer. In general, the tripartite division has the effect of laying undue stress on the poet’s literary confession and isolating this confession from the larger rhetorical framework of the passage. Like the editorial conventions we have been considering, it draws our attention, at some cost to the grammatical and rhetorical sense of the passage, toward the supposed disavowal as a separate and final element in the Canterbury Tales.

The points I hope to have made thus far are: 1) that the element of disavowal inherent in our modern sense of the word retraction is not a necessary, or even likely, implication of Chaucer’s words; and 2) that the seemingly self-evident view that the last twelve lines of the Canterbury Tales constitute a generalized act of “retraction” by Chaucer is largely the result of editorial and critical conventions that have obscured the primary thrust of Chaucer’s rhetorical act. “Retraction” as disavowal is neither the aim of the passage nor a meaning on which Chaucer necessarily drew, and the fact that many critics have found the Retraction as a whole morose and narrow, or ironic, seems to be a consequence of the tendency to focus on its subordinate and parenthetical elements, rather than on the larger rhetorical act of which these elements form a part.

The clarifications I am suggesting help clear the way for an interpretation of the Retraction that takes the passage as both unironic and free of the notion that Chaucer is rejecting or withdrawing his literary corpus, a notion that has both scandalized and tantalized generations of readers and critics. In this way, the present article might be seen as complementing recent studies that have emphasized the Retraction’s status as a prayer, rather than a literary flourish or a literary-critical statement. Ian Johnson, for example, takes the confession
at the heart of the _Retraction_ as a “serious spiritual transaction,” rooted in the theological virtue of hope, a concept about which Chaucer shows a keen and precise theological sensibility in his writings.\(^{31}\) Megan Murton goes one step further in approaching the _Retraction_ “not as a statement for readers to analyze but as a script for them to perform.” She sees readers’ active participation with Chaucer, through praying the prayer he scripts for them, as opening up a reading process by which they will discover the “doctrine” (teaching) in his works.\(^{32}\) What these approaches share in common is a deemphasizing of the polyphonic, potentially ironic, or purely literary elements in the _Retraction_ and an acknowledgement of the spiritual and rhetorical act at the heart of Chaucer’s request for prayer.

How then, within the context of a sincere and unironic request for prayer, are we to make sense of Chaucer’s statement that he “revoke[s]” in his “retracciouns” his “translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees”?

Many critics have noted a tension in the _Retraction_ between Chaucer’s supposed disavowal and his apparent acknowledgment that the final value of his works will be determined not by the author but by readers.\(^{33}\) This tension shows up in the opening of the _Retraction_ as a contrast between the contingency of the first two lines (“if ther be any thyng . . . And if ther be any thyng”) and the finality of the third line (“oure book seith . . . and that is myn entente”). This contrast can be accounted for by the two standards of judgment to which Chaucer here appeals. The first standard is the interpretation of the reader. Chaucer does not assume that the reader will necessarily find anything pleasing or displeasing in the _Parson’s Tale_. His language here is an admission that readers may have different responses to his words. The determination of what is pleasing in the _Parson’s Tale_ is left to those who “herkne this litel tretys or rede,” and Chaucer does not presume to know how readers will judge. The second standard of judgment is Chaucer’s intention. The intention he claims as his own for the writing of the _Parson’s Tale_, “Al that is writen is writen for our doctrine,” is borrowed from Saint Paul’s letter to the Romans: “For what things soever were written were written for our learning; that, through


\(^{33}\) See Travis, “Deconstructing Chaucer’s Retraction,” 136–41, for an overview of critical approaches to this apparent contradiction.
patience and the comfort of the scriptures, we might have hope.”

Chaucer’s use of the Pauline dictum here serves not to establish the meaning of the Parson’s Tale (much less the Canterbury Tales), but to express his intention in writing it, that is, to ensure that readers will not conclude that he meant them any harm (or anything less than their edification) should they find something displeasing. In other words, Chaucer’s language here suggests concern with the author’s moral culpability, not the relative morality of the work itself, which will be determined by readers.

This concern with the author’s moral culpability, and not the final value of the texts themselves, extends to the second part of the Retraction: the request for prayer. Here the author asks the reader to pray that Christ may forgive his sins, in particular his “translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees,” which he claims to “revoke in my retracciouns”; lists these works by name, including among them, along with the majority of his literary corpus, “the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne”; indicates his thankfulness to Christ, Mary, and all the saints of heaven for his translation of Boethius and “othere bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun”; and concludes by naming those things for which he implores Christ, Mary, and the saints. Interpretations of the Retraction as a disavowal of Chaucer’s literary corpus often proceed on the assumption that Chaucer is registering concern in these lines for the harmful effects his work may have on readers. But, in keeping with his opening apology, Chaucer limits his judgment here to his own intentions and actions, a focus that makes eminent sense in the context of a confession and request for prayer.

The list of works in lines 1086–88, beginning with those the author identifies as his “translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees,” reads for the most part as a straightforward accounting of Chaucer’s major poems. Aside from the references to the evidently lost “book of the Leoun” and the “book of the XXV. Ladies,” an apparent allusion to the Legend of Good Women, although that work includes the stories of only ten women, the rest of the works named are easily identified. One work, however, is distinguished from the rest with a qualification: “the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne.” The meaning of “sownen into synne” is usually understood to be

34. Rom. 15:4 (Douay-Rheims). Chaucer’s use of this particular Pauline phrase is instructive. Although in its original context this scriptural passage is a reference to the edifying nature of divine Scripture, it was used by a number of vernacular authors and compilers to justify the reading of just about any text, secular or sacred. See Alastair Minnis, Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages (London, 1984), 204–9, for discussion of its use in the compilatio tradition. One need look no farther than NPT for an example of the Pauline dictum’s (albeit playful) application to a nonscriptural text (VII 3441–42).
something like “conduce to sin,” a reading that leads to the conclusion that Chaucer is expressing concern with the effect his work may have on readers.35 The word Chaucer uses here, however, a form of the Middle English verb *sounen*, need imply nothing more than that the tales “have to do with” or “are in accord with” sin. Chaucer used the word twenty-eight times in his works, none of which require the sense of “conduce” and all of which can be safely understood in the senses of “have to do with” or “be in accord with.”36

In the context of his confession, Chaucer is clearly including the writing of at least some of the *Canterbury Tales* among his “giltes.” His qualification of the tales that “sowneth into synne,” however, can be understood as a reference to either the subject matter of the tales or, perhaps, to Chaucer’s sin in writing them, not the sin into which they could lead readers. In other words, while the passage no doubt constitutes an admission of guilt on Chaucer’s part for writing worldly vanities, this confession need not imply any judgment on the suitability of these works for readers, any concern for their harmful effects, or any need for withdrawing or disavowing them.

The specificity of Chaucer’s list of “worldly vanities,” amplified by the qualification of the *Canterbury Tales*, stands in stark contrast to the generality of the list of works for which he gives thanks. Among these, he lists only one work by name: his “translacion of Boece de Consolacione.” The rest are referenced by type: “bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and morali-tee, and devocioun.” Sayce takes the generality of the reference, in contrast to the specificity of the list of “worldly vanities,” as evidence that Chaucer is viewing the condemnation of secular literature “with ironic and humorous detachment.”37 It is possible, however, to explain the contrast without resorting to irony, by returning to the broader context of this line. The list of “worldly vanities” occurs in the context of a list of sins for which the reader is asked to pray. The mention of “bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun” occurs at a transition in the pas-
sage, in which the author turns from naming his sinful acts to describing his gratitude to “Lord Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder.” The urgency, and therefore the need for specificity, is greater in the context of the confession and request for prayer than in the context of the expression of gratitude.

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35. Benson, in both his 2000 edition of *CT* and the 1987 *Riverside Chaucer*, glosses the phrase as “tend toward, are conducive to, sin.” Neither F. N. Robinson nor Skeat commented specifically on the phrase. Both Wurtele and Johnson, to name only two examples, take the phrase to mean “conduce to sin” (Wurtele, “The Penitence of Geoffrey Chaucer,” 349; and Johnson, “The Ascending Soul,” 258).


37. Sayce, “Chaucer’s ‘Retractions,’” 245.
this context it is entirely possible, indeed probable, that Chaucer, by way of requesting prayer for the forgiveness of his sins, is stating that he wishes to “bring to mind in his remembrances” (“revoke in my retracciouns”) those sins, some of which were committed in the writing of his many works. This reading best suits the larger context of Chaucer’s request to the reader: in asking for prayer for the forgiveness of his sins, he pauses to remember and reconsider those sins. The ideas of recalling and remembering also help explain the otherwise puzzling note of uncertainty that concludes the list of works: “and many another book, if they were in my remembrance.”

In opening ourselves to the possibility that Chaucer’s Retraction may not be a retraction in the modern sense, it is worth considering the weight of editorial convention that has in effect created a separate work out of Chaucer’s “retracciouns” and elevated it to the status of a generalized retraction. Consider, by contrast, the effect of dispensing with the title of Chaucer’s Retraction altogether, of understanding his “revok[ing]” of his “retracciouns” as an act of recalling and remembering, and of referring to this passage as the “Prayer of Chaucer,” or of not distinguishing it from the Parson’s Tale at all, either of which editorial choices has some precedent in the manuscript tradition. The long-accepted reification of these final lines of the Parson’s Tale and the Canterbury Tales has obscured the simple fact that Chaucer is asking for the reader’s prayer, and, in particular, prayer for the forgiveness of his sins. Chaucer’s focus here is on the moral implications of his own actions and on the role readers can play in his salvation. Anything that can be said about the language Chaucer uses or the references he makes to his literary corpus must be understood in the larger context of this request for prayer. Even if one holds to the view that Chaucer’s words indicate a rejection or disavowal of his work, that rejection or disavowal is not the primary aim of the Retraction, but a subordinate theme. In the rush to explain the apparent, and surprising, rejection, the primary thrust of Chaucer’s words has too often been overlooked.

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38. One of the earliest manuscripts that includes ParsT and Retr. London, British Library MS Harley 7334 (Ha4), contains a rubric that designates Retr as the “Preces de Chaucer,” the “Prayer of Chaucer.” Owen argues that the rubric used in Ha4 is probably the earliest used to set Retr apart from ParsT (“What the Manuscripts Tell Us,” 242–44). On the dating of Ha4, see Manly-Rickert, 1:220; and Owen, The Manuscripts, 7–14.