The Postmodern Chaucer: From a Procession of “Sondry Folk” to the Precession of Simulacra

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Pour Baudrillard:

*Le formidable spectacle que n’existait jamais en hyperréalité*

I believe the question has to be asked, what’s so bad about postmodern theory and Chaucer studies? Part of the answer lies with the theoretical approaches that dominate Chaucer studies, which attempt to find meaning within Chaucer’s text, or like the approaches of historicism, which attempt to reconstruct Chaucer’s history in order to find lost meanings and fixed origins in his text. Any way you look at it, these theories all rely on one common goal: the search for meaning. Postmodern theory, then, would immediately disagree and counteract these approaches since, for the postmodernist, meaning cannot be found in the metanarrative. Not only can it not be found, most postmodern theorists would argue that the text is better understood in the absence
of a whole. Nevertheless, Chaucerians “have yet to see a no-holds-barred, take-no-prisoners combination of Chaucer and contemporary theory” like that suggested by Faye Walker who admits, “In some ways, this criticism could be the most threatening and the most thrilling” (579). “Threatening” and “thrilling” tend to be the words used when describing such theories as postmodernism and gender theory, and what’s “threatening” must always be destroyed, right? But as we all know you can’t destroy something that doesn’t really exist; that only makes it more real.

It is my intention in this essay to do what some say can’t be done. Using the postmodern theory of Jean Baudrillard I will argue that Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, especially the relationship between Chaucer the poet and Chaucer the pilgrim, follows Baudrillard’s order of simulacra as put forward in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*. Applying Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacra to Chaucer’s poem, I will analyze the correlation between the order of the simulacra and *The Canterbury Tales*. The first order of simulacra will analyze the portraits of the pilgrims in the General Prologue as poetic copies of the ‘real,’ or original, human form. I will then argue that the continual characterization of the pilgrims and the production of their tales become the copies that are scattered with refractions of truth, creating the simulacrum of the second order. As a postmodern reader of Chaucer, I will analyze how the reader’s ability to choose which tales are read is a condition of the copies already generated by Chaucer the pilgrim. As a result, it’s Chaucer’s removal from his position as a figure of authority that creates not only another independent copy, but also a copy that determines the real. This occurs whether or not the reader chooses Chaucer’s pre-constructed frame narrative. Either way, the choice determines the real while creating another copy that precedes and determines the real image of the poem’s pilgrims revealing the
precession of simulacrum that constitute Baudrillard’s third order.

A daunting task indeed, I know, but by using Baudrillard’s theory I hope to show a strong argument for the Chaucerian community that postmodern theory should be regarded as not only at the same level as traditional criticism in its ability to provide theoretical discourse, but that postmodern theory can help conceptualize, through Chaucer’s poetry, the way in which the postmodern reader perceives the medieval self through the postmodern self. Finally, I will discuss other avenues for the postmodern theorist in connection with Chaucer studies so that the fragmented environment will become an embraced perception of Chaucer’s poem, bridging the gap between Chaucer studies and the postmodern world.

I. Postmodernism: The Phantom Menace

The argument against the incorporation of postmodern theory and Chaucer is the belief that postmodernism is an idea that is historically situated against the modern era; thus Chaucer as a postmodern poet could not be possible. Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, however, argues that the modern cannot become modern without already being postmodern, “Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant” (79). With this understood, Chaucer as a postmodern poet does exist because the idea is an always emerging state, which, like Jameson argues, makes a mockery of historicity and the critics who attempt to fix Chaucer as merely a medieval poet.

Already we have an idea of what the postmodern represents, but Jean Baudrillard takes this fragmented perception further in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, and even though Baudrillard does not go so far as to call himself a postmodern theorist, the criticism in this book expands on the postmodern theory of Jameson and Lyotard.
Baudrillard and Lyotard are similar in the way in which they interpret perceptual information and knowledge. Baudrillard’s chapter on the “Precession of the Simulacra” dissect the way in which the postmodern subject perceives the “real.” Here the “real” stands for the original, which existed before the first copy. It is not to be confused with the Lacanian “real.” For Baudrillard, and for the postmodern subject, the commodification of products has created a precession of simulacra, which could be defined as the representation of copies of the real where these representations not only proceed, but also determine what we know as the “real.” However, this precession does not materialize by itself. According to Baudrillard there are three orders of the simulacra. The first order is associated with the pre-modern era where the copy of the real is understood as a counterfeit, or a place marker for the original. The second order appears as the connection between image and representation begin to corrupt through the mass production of the copies. The final, or third, order is nothing but the continual precession of simulacra where the representation of the image proceeds and determines the real, which Baudrillard then argues as being so far removed from whatever real there might have been that it becomes a hyperreal, or it creates a real replacing the unknown real.

Although some of Baudrillard’s terms seem to inhibit their acceptance into other fields like medieval literature, Baudrillard never defines these terms as being segregated to the postmodern era. For Baudrillard, “production” does not simply imply industrial production of commercial things. In fact, Baudrillard’s first example of production is the maps of cartographers. Therefore, production applies to anything that is produced by knowledge; this then would also apply to, say, a poem that is produced by the knowledge of a poet. Here’s where Chaucer and postmodern theory intersect. I don’t believe anyone denies Chaucer is the creator and producer of *The Canterbury Tales*;
thus it is possible to view the poem as a production of knowledge, which is applicable to Baudrillard’s theory. The bulk of my argument that follows will be to view Chaucer’s poem, specifically the production of human figures in the pilgrims’ portraits in the General Prologue, as the first order of simulacra. The further characterizations of the pilgrims and their tales then, as productions of not only Chaucer the poet and pilgrim, but also productions of the Canterbury pilgrims, remove the real for the sign, which fulfills the second order of the simulacra. In the third portion of my argument for the third order of simulacra, or the precession of simulacra, I will examine the reader’s ability to create a subjective world of copies as conditioned by Chaucer the pilgrim when narrative authority is given to the reader leaving the reader with the ability to create and determine the “real.” I will argue that this choice determines how the postmodern reader perceives the pilgrims as hyperreal caricatures leading to a fragmented environment of perception, thus fulfilling the postmodern reception of knowledge. For both Postmodern theory and Chaucer studies this reception of knowledge is important. Without Chaucer’s removal from the authority of the narrative, the reader would not be able to legitimize the narrative through their creation of a “real.”

Of course to do this with every pilgrim and every tale would require a scope so large that it would not only be unnecessary, but would also lead me into the postmodernist’s trap of attempting to bring totality to Chaucer’s already fragmented text. Instead, for the first order of simulacrum, I will examine the copy of Chaucer the pilgrim. Much has been written on the dynamics of Chaucer as poet and Chaucer as pilgrim, but through Baudrillard’s simulacra, Chaucer the pilgrim is a direct copy of the “real” Chaucer, the poet. Hence, Chaucer’s representation projects the image as a copy, which not only creates the simulacra, but more importantly, it establishes Chaucer as
II. Attack of the Clones: Simulacra, Simulation, and Chaucer

i) Simulacrum of the First Order:

Throughout the years, Chaucerians have referred to the General Prologue as a gallery of human images, which represent the varying range of medieval identities. In fact, Arthur Hoffman agrees that most Chaucerians have adapted the metaphor of the tapestry in order to describe the portraits of Chaucer’s pilgrims (1). The metaphor of the tapestry is interesting because I see the tapestry as a map—a map that guides the reader from left to right in a social and political digression. Like Baudrillard’s example of the cartographers in the Borges fable who create a copy of the Empire’s terrain, Chaucer’s tapestry is a creation that captures “real” human images mapping medieval society.

Referring to the pilgrims as “real” assumes that it was Chaucer’s intention to recreate real images, but what I am arguing is not that it was Chaucer’s intention, but that the reader of Chaucer would automatically interpret the pilgrims as real figures. In fact, Lyotard acknowledges that the pre-modern reader reads in order to gain knowledge from the narrative. John Ganim describes this tendency in his article “Identity and Subjecthood”:

Most readers instinctively understand literary characters as if they were real people. We even judge the success of fictional or dramatic works by holding their characters or narrators to the standard of “real life”, even if we demand more consistency from literature than we do from life itself. (224-25)

Ganim’s argument articulates two important aspects of the simulacra that are Chaucer’s pilgrims. First, the instinct to adopt these representations as copies of the original is always in the reader’s perception. Second, and more important, these copies are expected to fit a standard that
must maintain a consistency in their representation of the real.

Chaucer as poet and pilgrim is at a distinct advantage in maintaining this consistency. As poet, Chaucer represents what he knows, but as a pilgrim, he can only present what he sees. In this way, Chaucer the pilgrim does not present a copy of a pilgrim, like Chaucer the poet; he presents the “real” pilgrims: “Me thinketh it acordaunt to resoun / To telle yow al the condicioun / Of ech of hem, so as it semed me” (I. 37-39). That last interjection, “so as it semed me” gives authority to the pilgrims he presents in the General Prologue, and it provides by what standard the reader will judge the pilgrims: by the observation of Chaucer the pilgrim, not Chaucer the poet. Nevertheless, if the reader expects the representation to hold up to the standard of real life, then Chaucer the pilgrim’s presentations of the pilgrims would be subjected to the same standard of Chaucer the poet, strengthening the connection between the pilgrim Chaucer as a copy of the real life poet. The pilgrims’ claim, “so as it semed me,” legitimizes Chaucer the pilgrim’s portraits as “real” copies from the narrative knowledge of Chaucer the poet, but at the same time, it places Chaucer the pilgrim as a subjective creator and observer.

Since Chaucer the pilgrim stands as the subject for presenting the portraits of the pilgrims, the Canterbury pilgrims then stand as objects in their representations. These relationships between the subject and the objects of representation exist through the relationship between Chaucer the poet and his copy, Chaucer the pilgrim. Although it would be futile to argue a reason for Chaucer the poet’s representational intention for each of the pilgrims, it is reasonable to argue that Chaucer the pilgrim’s intention is to present these pilgrims, not by their deeds, but as objects. After Chaucer finishes the portraits he re-iterates his task: “Now have I told you soothly, in a clause, / Th’estaat, th’array, the nombre, and eek the cause” (I. 715-16). The first three criteria
present each pilgrim as an object rather than a human subject. The pilgrims are described by their place in life, how they are dressed, their names (even though Chaucer only allocates a given name to a small number of pilgrims), and finally their cause, which could be read as the cause for their position, or the cause of their being on the pilgrimage. I am more secure in arguing for the former reason. But even their cause represents an object status, since as Ruth Nevo notes, “there is no portrait which does not take its orientation from an attitude to money or from the dealings with money, whether in the form of illicit gain or of legitimate hire” (105). All of these descriptions depict a tapestry of objects rather than a tapestry of human life. I am not the first Chaucerian to point this out, but this does create a tapestry of copies of real pilgrims, which includes Chaucer.

Although this may seem troubling to some, Baudrillard would only see the representation of the simulacra of the first order. The pilgrims, including Chaucer the pilgrim, become copies and in their copying, become objects to be consumed by the reader. Nevertheless, because Chaucer the pilgrim is never presented as an object in the General Prologue, the reader cannot legitimize the copies’ ability to present the objects, thus the objects become the reader’s way of representing Chaucer the subject. This is an unstoppable process according to Baudrillard: “the subject no longer provides the representation of the world (I will be your mirror!) It is the object that refracts the subjects” (14). Because the reader cannot legitimize Chaucer the pilgrim, the subject loses all its abilities of representation leaving the objects themselves as Baudrillard argues. This leads to the way in which the postmodern reader accepts the characterizations of the pilgrims before and during their tales. I argue that the tales are accepted not through the storytelling of Chaucer the pilgrim, but by the way in which the pilgrims are presented as copies of the pilgrims.
where the tales are expected to reflect some aspect of the teller through the reader’s representation of the teller. The tales are thus products that lead to a further breakdown of the “real” from the representation of the General Prologue, becoming Baudrillard’s simulacra of the second order.

ii) *Simulacra of the Second Order:*

At this point, it’s hard for me not to view Geoffrey Chaucer as a postmodern poet. As noted above, *The Canterbury Tales*, and the General Prologue specifically, reinvent the human form as an object, or a copy of the real, and because Chaucer the poet fails to represent his copy as an object, the objects are forced to speak for themselves in terms of their deeds and other internal representations. By doing this, Chaucer the poet not only refuses an authorial legitimization through Chaucer the pilgrim, but he also removes the pilgrims further away from any “real” representation refusing, once again, to bring any totality to the pilgrims’ tales. However, because Chaucer the pilgrim is once again in charge of re-telling the tales, any “reality” that the tales held becomes displaced in the poetic production of the tales. This is a complicated production, but one in which Chaucer the poet does very well in bringing the tales into the second order of the simulacra.

For Baudrillard, and for Chaucer, the second order of the simulacra represents a proliferation of copies, which continue to put further distance between the real and the copy. For Baudrillard, this is indicative of the industrial age, where a continuous production of copies further displaces the real by trying to reconnect and continually copy the real. But as I noted before, Baudrillard does not limit this process to a specific era; he argues that it is most clearly seen in the industrial age, but does not limit the second order of simulacra as only belonging to this period. For the pilgrims then, the tales become an attempt to reconnect with the real through their own story-telling, which adopts
the realities presented in the prologue. Nevertheless, because Chaucer the pilgrim re-tells the tales, the tales become a product of Chaucer the pilgrim that further distances the real and the copy. As a result, what makes this the simulacra of the second order is that the tales, as produced by Chaucer the pilgrim, attempt to replace the images of the copies as depicted in the General Prologue. This is done by replicating the “real” qualities of the pilgrims in their presentations before and during their tales and through the communication between the other pilgrims, masking any reality there might have been in the first order of simulacra.

The game is simple. Each pilgrim will tell two tales towards Canterbury and two tales back. The pilgrim who tells the best tales, as decided by the host Harry Bailly, will win supper, which will be paid for by the losing pilgrims. Anyone who refutes the judge’s decision will automatically lose. The tales are expected to be “of best sentence and most solas” (I. 798), but what these tales present are further representations of the pilgrims that build from the prologue portraits. The chivalric Knight tells a tale of chivalry and courtly romance; the Miller, a teller of jests, tells a tale about a cuckolded carpenter; even the Wife of Bath tells a tale about marriage. More often than not, these tales are directed towards, or are reactions against, the other pilgrims, which build upon their representations in the General Prologue, creating a fragmented form of communication between the pilgrims. Take, for example, the Miller. Even though it is not his turn to speak, he interjects after the Knight’s tale and demands to tell his tale before all others. What’s interesting is that he wants to tell a tale in order to “quyte,” or repay, the Knight’s tale (I. 3127). Since the Knight has just finished a tale that represents chivalric aspects of knighthood, the Miller demands to tell a tale just as noble as the Knight’s as a way to prove he is of the same caliber as the Knight. Not only is the Miller...
attempting to prove his status among the other pilgrims, but he is also re-affirming the character portrait originally drawn by Chaucer the pilgrim. On this basic level, the pilgrims’ tales become copies of the prologue copies, but there is no denying that these copies cannot be seen outside of their teller, who is always Chaucer.

As true as Chaucer the pilgrim intends his re-telling of the pilgrims’ tales to be, he cannot escape his own accountability for the pilgrims’ tales. This is important because the tales can no longer be viewed as the pilgrims’ independent attempt to reconstruct their reality, but become another representation by Chaucer the pilgrim so that the tales copy the reality of the prologue portraits, becoming another aspect of the real. I am not alone in making this connection between Chaucer’s portraits and their connection with the later tales of the pilgrims. H. Marshall Leicester Jr. agrees: “After all, we like to read Chaucer this way, to point out the suitability of the tales to their fictional tellers” (140). Leicester’s argument not only shows the link between the perception of the pilgrims as copies where their tales fit their portraits, but it also shows that Chaucer’s poem is suited to be read this way. In this way, Chaucer is aware of this process since the pilgrim also acknowledges this representation, as I will discuss later. But for now let us return to the Miller.

Although the Knight is first in the prologue and is the first pilgrim to tell a tale, the Miller refuses to allow any other pilgrim tell a tale before him, even though his portrait is near the end of the prologue. The Miller’s insistence to jump ahead of the other pilgrims matches his description in the prologue: “Ther nas no dore that he nolde heve of harre, / Or breke it at a renning with his heed” (I. 550-51). The Miller is bull-headed, ready to break down any door with his head in order to get what he wants. But this isn’t the Miller describing himself. Chaucer the pilgrim draws particular attention to his stubbornness,
and then repeats that characteristic after the Knight has finished his tale. Chaucer has copied the Miller’s characterization from the stubborn characterization of the prologue to an even more stubborn and demanding Miller during the ride to Canterbury. What this does is masks any “real” characteristics that may have been associated with a Miller on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. These couplings of copies, which create the tenacious Miller, become the sign that replaces the real. From this point forward the sign created by Chaucer will always replace the Miller. This presentation is not limited to my understanding of Chaucer’s work.

As in the first order of simulacra, when the pilgrims are presented as objects, those defining terms presented as characteristics, before and during their tales, replace any real connection to, say, a miller, or a reeve. During the game, the “real” copy is replaced by the sign, which attempts to make the copy more real. The Miller’s qualities become the sign from this point forward, creating a copy of a copy (as Dr. Arroyo would say: I guess you can say it’s turtles all the way down). But let’s not forget that Chaucer the pilgrim is aware of this process. A copy of a copy is representative of Plato’s theory of the ideal, where everything is a copy of the ideal that exists outside of our ability to represent the ideal. Any copy of the original copy becomes an even worse copy. This idea transcends to the art of writing.

For Plato, writing is an imperfect way of representing something, but if one does write then the deeds must match the words. Chaucer the pilgrim acknowledges this idea in the General Prologue as a way to reassure the reader that what he says will be as true as what actually happened: “Eek Plato seith, whoso can him rede, / The wordes mote be cosin to the dede” (I. 741-42). I like Chaucer’s term, “cosin” because it implies that the words don’t have to be directly connected to the deeds; they are not “brothers,” but the word must be somewhat related, maybe
being as close as first cousins. Nevertheless, this allows the replacement of the words to be the sign, which will now be representative of the pilgrims during the storytelling process. It also allows for more copies and more signs to be generated through Chaucer’s language. The fact that Chaucer is aware of this process is important in understanding the way in which the pilgrims become hyperreal copies of their copies in the prologue.

Chaucer understands his re-telling will be imperfect since another copy only further distorts what might contain some truth, or representation of the ideal. However, Chaucer never argues that his attempt at re-telling the tales will bring any further reality, or truth, to the pilgrims, but there is no other way to produce the copies. Baudrillard’s statement, “it is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (Simulacra 2) holds true to Chaucer the pilgrim’s words and deeds. If we think of the prologue as representing mere copies, or imitations of the real, then the real threat to that order of simulacra is the change of removing the real and substituting them for signs. This replacement signifies the shift of the second order of simulacra towards the third order.

iii) Simulacra of the Third Order:

This transition from the second order to the third order is, what I believe to be, the strongest argument for the Postmodern Chaucer. Recognizing the process of replacing the real with the sign does two things. First, it acknowledges the inability to create true human objects in the text. Secondly, it creates a need for the reader to re-represent the pilgrim as an original copy, which only further displaces any real that may have existed. Nevertheless, the re-representation of the pilgrim is never set by the reader. In this third order the production of the copy is done on a consistent basis with each hyperreal copy preceding the
previous copies so that the reader does not fix a particular copy as the “real;” they only add another copy in the attempt to fix meaning. Baudrillard knows this and so does Chaucer: “what every society looks for in continuing to produce, and to overproduce, is to restore the real that escapes it” (*Simulacra* 23). As critics and scholars attempt to transfix meaning onto the pilgrims, their attempted production of meaning only creates a further displaced copy. Chaucer’s fragmented pilgrimage depicts this attempt even though Chaucer the pilgrim has already identified his inability to produce ideal copies. Nevertheless, the production of copies will continue, but the new copies will supplant the real they attempt to discover, leaving nothing but a continuous precession of simulacrum.

Baudrillard’s third order of simulacra is arguably the most difficult to conceptualize. Essentially, Baudrillard’s theory argues that the copies produced within the first and second order continue to be produced to the point where there is no longer an original, or “real;” the only thing left after these copies are copies, which become more “real” than the originals. For Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, the portraits in the General Prologue are copies of “real” Canterbury pilgrims; however, as the pilgrimage and the storytelling begins, the pilgrims assimilate to the copies of themselves presented in the prologue and their tales become products of Chaucer the pilgrim who re-tells all the tales. The third order of simulacra, where the copy becomes more real than the original copy, is created in a subtle gesture to the reader through Chaucer the pilgrim.

This gesture occurs during the interruption of the Miller’s prologue as Chaucer the pilgrim speaks out to the reader. We have already discussed the Miller’s insistence to tell his tale before all the others, but before he is allowed to tell his tale, which is being re-told by Chaucer the pilgrim, Chaucer comments on the character of the
Miller and his tale, along with his regret that he must tell it as true as his wit enables. Because of his regret, Chaucer provides a way to bypass these types of tales, thus providing the reader with a map and the opportunity to choose his/her destination:

Turne over the leef, and chese another tale;
For he shal finde ynowe, grete and smale,
Of storial thing that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee and holinesse. (I. 3177-80)

By allowing the reader a choice in which tales he or she reads, or does not read, Chaucer the pilgrim releases control over how we interpret and read the pilgrims. Even though Chaucer emphasizes grander tales of morality and holiness, we have the choice to read any tale “grete and smale” (I. 3178). Thus, the tales become a map, which precedes the tellers by the reader’s ability to choose any destination. As Baudrillard notes, the map now determines the terrain (Simulacra 2). At the same time, our choice is conditioned by Chaucer’s warning regarding which tale we choose: “Blameth nat me if that ye chese amis. / The Millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this” (I. 3181-82) Here Chaucer relinquishes all authority: “Avyseth yow and putte me out of blame; / And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game. (I. 3185-86). Chaucer’s representation of the Miller as a churl and Chaucer’s exclamation, “ye knowe wel this” (I. 3182) becomes the “real” Miller since the choosing of his tale is only to be blamed on the reader and not Chaucer. This affects not only the Miller, but also all of the other pilgrims, like the Reeve as noted above. Chaucer the pilgrim’s representation becomes how the reader determines the “real,” which precedes what tale we choose. In this way, our choosing becomes the third order of simulacra.

Chaucer’s copies become more real only because the first and second order have created a copy that is more real than the original, which then allows the reader to choose by what is now the only real
that is recognized. The Miller is presented as a churl, so naturally his tale will be churlish. This process of choosing not only replaces the prologue copy, but also destroys the original communication between the pilgrims and their tales. Even though we like to read the tales as a continuous communication between the pilgrims, Chaucer’s allowance for choice conforms to Baudrillard’s simulacra of the third order where, “rather than creating communication, it exhausts itself in the act of staging communication” (80). Thus, whatever communication that might have existed between the Canterbury pilgrims becomes staged by the reader’s choosing of tales. Again, this choice then replaces the original copy created by Chaucer the pilgrim by allowing Chaucer’s copy to be more real than the copy. This in turn is the hyperreal. There are no “real” pilgrims anymore. As the reader moves from one tale to another, that copy becomes the “real” and is interpreted as such. There is another aspect to this replacement of the real that only exists when the subject is devoid of all power.

Since the objective reader gains control over the tales that are read, this creates a world independent from Chaucer’s frame narrative. The signs and the models of the pilgrim have become the “real” by which we choose while being assimilated into this subjective world. Temenuga Trifonova discusses this process in the article, “Is There a Subject in Hyperreality?” For Trifonova the creation of this world creates an absolute representation of the subject that becomes the “real” representation, in turn replacing all those other copies that came before (29). The power of representation needs to be removed from the subject in order to become the third order of the simulacrum. The power of representation that is transferred to the reader also transfers the power of representation, which is conformed by the reader’s representation of the “real.” Thus in the reader’s hands the tales become independent worlds that are determined by the simulacra.
III. Revenge of the Postmodern: Chaucer and the Theory of the Postmodern

The transition into the third order of simulacra is difficult and complex, but because Chaucer does it in such a subtle manner, the reader is often left to try and rediscover the “real” by interpreting the hidden meaning in the text. This need to interpret meaning and to find origin has dominated Chaucerian criticism as noted in the first part of this essay. This need is directly connected with the proliferation of copies presented by Chaucer. Barbara Nolan reflects on this type of criticism in regards to the passage examined in the last section: “Chaucer the pilgrim…thus turns the text over to the audience, who will have to interpret or translate the signs into meaning, discerning the ‘true’ inner structure” (164). For Nolan, and for many scholars of Chaucer studies, Chaucer’s inability to represent a whole, along with his fragmented poetic discourse, manufactures the need to discover “Chaucer” and to re-interpret his text so that we can find the meaning and truth in his poetry. Whether it is by historicizing his text, or through close readings, which offer insight into the mind of Chaucer the poet, these criticisms attempt to create and legitimize Chaucer’s text. Because Chaucer’s poem denies these attempts at finding meaning and origin, this type of criticism copies the fragmented copies of Chaucer the pilgrim, contributing further to the third order of simulacra.

It could be argued that the limitation to Chaucer the poet/pilgrim throughout this essay denies the ability to break away from this postmodern stronghold. Some might argue that there are tales which do not fit this precession of simulacra. However, as noted earlier, to make an argument for every pilgrim and every tale would be useless strictly since any view outside of the Chaucer poet/pilgrim paradigm would be analyzing a copy, which would re-represent it as another copy falling into the third order of simulacra. For the postmodern reader
of Chaucer, it is important to be aware of how those representations reflect the representation of our postmodern society.

It was my goal in this essay to discover a new Chaucer: the postmodern Chaucer. Taking Walker’s advice, I applied postmodern theory to Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* in order to show that postmodernism does have its place in Chaucer studies. I agree with Stephanie Trigg, who argues that contemporary theories like postmodernism, “and the transformation of literary studies mean more than simply reading Chaucerian works from different perspectives” (196). My attempt at utilizing postmodern theory as a way to analyze Chaucer is not just another way to simply look at Chaucer’s poetry; it’s a way of understanding how we respond to Chaucer’s poetry as readers of Chaucer in the new millennium. By surpassing the need to find meaning and truth, we as Chaucerians are able to perceive and appreciate the unpresented (using Lyotard’s term) fragments of Chaucer’s poetry, bringing Chaucer into the 21st century. The application of postmodern theory allows Chaucer to be presented as a poet rather than a social authority. More importantly, it allows non-medievalists enter into the current discussion of Chaucer studies, demolishing a barrier that has too long dominated the department of Medieval studies.

Keith M. Booker was correct in his announcement that “both Chaucer and the postmodernists tend to transgress boundaries, destabilize hierarchies, and question authority of all kinds” (566). Chaucer, then, is the perfect postmodern poet. In fact, both *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus & Criseyde* refuse totality by destabilizing the hierarchy of the narrative authority, making them applicable to postmodern theory. Although postmodern theory allows this destabilization to be perceived, it does not intend to discover meaning in its destabilization. This is often the basis for the argument against postmodern theory and Chaucer studies. If the intent is not to re-
discover Chaucer’s meaning, or revive Chaucer’s historical position, then what is the purpose of this fragmented viewing of his poetry? I would argue, as I have throughout this essay, that postmodern theory is not just a fragmented representation of Chaucer as a postmodern poet, but also a fragmented representation of the postmodern reader. This understanding allows the postmodern reader an insight into the narrative of the postmodern era and its connection with medievalism.

Even though I limited this essay to Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacra, I believe Chaucer, through postmodern theory, has much to teach us about the way we perceive and understand the authority of the grand narrative, and its inability to represent the “real.” For the postmodern and for Chaucer there is no “real,” but the real we create. Thus, the search for meaning is the search for something that doesn’t exist. And that’s not such a bad thing after all. Often in life, what is perceived by others is not what defines us; what defines us is what’s unpresented. What’s unpresented is the “real,” so in the words of Jean-Francios Lyotard: “Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witness to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name” (82).

Works Cited


