

THE NEW MIDDLE AGES



SHAME *and* GUILT
in CHAUCER

Anne McTaggart

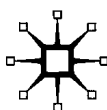


SHAME AND GUILT IN CHAUCE

Anne McTaggart



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For my family

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CHAPTER 1

SHAME AND GUILT, NOW AND THEN

The malice of the act was base and I loved it—that is to say I loved my own undoing, I loved the evil in me—not the thing for which I did the evil, simply the evil: my soul was depraved and hurled itself down from security in You into utter destruction, seeking no profit from wickedness but only to be wicked.

—St. Augustine, *Confessions*

Shame is the feeling of an original fall not because of the fact that I may have committed this or that particular fault but simply that I have “fallen” into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of others in order to be what I am.

—Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*

This book explores Chaucer's representation of the primary emotions of penitence, shame and guilt, in order to contextualize his engagement with late medieval penitential theology in the light of modern theories of shame and affect. By focusing on the emotions and psychology of penitence, I show that the central questions and problems underlying medieval debates about contrition and confession, from Augustine¹ to Wyclif, shape even Chaucer's secular texts, such as the *House of Fame*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and his tales of pagan antiquity and romance. In all of these texts, and in *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole, Chaucer dramatizes an inverse relation between the shame a person feels, or is subject to, and the possibility of representing his or her moral culpability, either in narrative or in confessional terms: shame pervades Chaucer's texts but guilt is largely invisible, inaccessible, or resistant to full disclosure. In tracing Chaucer's treatment of shame and guilt, therefore, this book shows how the ethics of affect lie at the heart of Chaucer's poetics, alongside a profound skepticism about the possibility of making a full and honest confession.

Critical work on penitence in Chaucer thus far has focused almost exclusively on the two figures in *The Canterbury Tales* who address the theme overtly: the Pardoner and the Parson. What has been overlooked is the extent to which concepts of penitence and problematic confessions shape *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole and Chaucer's corpus in general, implicitly, on the levels of affect and social critique. As many scholars have pointed out, after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 made annual confession to a priest mandatory for all believers, an increasing portion of pastoral instruction focused on teaching the laity how to make an effective confession, and why it was necessary to do so, and on teaching the clergy how to guide the penitent through the sacrament.² As Lee Patterson observes, "Of all the ways in which the church affected the lives of medieval Christians, certainly the most ubiquitous and probably the most profound was through its administration of the sacrament of penance."³ In Middle English poetry and romance, as in their Continental sources and analogues, this cultural emphasis on penitence was manifest in literary representations of inwardness and spiritual transformation: the dream-vision, the quest, the discovery of self through trial and adversity. The literary type of the sinner evinced a "psychology of sin" and afforded medieval poets a language through which to explore concepts of individuality, interiority, self-awareness, and will.⁴ Indeed, for many scholars of medieval literature and history, the centrality of penitential thinking and practices in the Middle Ages suggests that the structure of penance, with its stages of remembrance, contrition, confession, and forgiveness, rooted in the relationship between the sinner and "the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile," sets the parameters of late medieval subjectivity itself.⁵

And yet, what precisely this means—and what kind of subject is expressed or produced through medieval penitential discourse—remains far from clear. In Chaucer's England, the nature and necessity of confession was itself the unstable subject of intense debate. In the decades following Lateran IV, one key tension for medieval theologians and clergy involved the dual movement toward a greater emphasis both on inner contrition instead of satisfaction and on the necessity of auricular confession.⁶ This dual movement pulled medieval penitential theology in contradictory directions, between the need to justify the officially mandated and customary practice of regular confession and the logical possibility "that the telling of sins and the intervention

of the priest had become superfluous, that the forgiveness of sins was purely a matter between the contrite man and a forgiving God[.]”⁷ By the mid-fourteenth century, the Oxford theologian John Wyclif and his followers had come to precisely this conclusion, rejecting auricular confession as sufficient for the remission of sins:

[S]hrift of mouthe is nedeful to al suche that ben counselid of God for to make it mekeliche. But yut very contricioun is more nedeful, forwhi withouten schrift of mouthe may a syneful man be saued in many a caas, but withouten veri contricioun of herte mai no syneful of man of discrecioun be saued.⁸

For the movement that came to be known as Lollardy, the sacrament of penance amounted to an exercise of the priest’s “feynid power of absolucion” rather than the penitent’s spiritual conversion and thus inverted the true purpose and substance of penance, in which contrition is the “essential” part and confession merely the “accidental.”⁹

If the “psychological event” of penance and confession requires further inquiry and reflection, Chaucer’s relationship with Wycliffite ideas is, similarly, a subject of ongoing debate.¹⁰ It seems clear that Chaucer was conversant with the controversies engendered by Wyclif’s teaching, that he was not unsympathetic to Wyclif’s concerns, but was not himself a Wycliffite. The case for Chaucer’s orthodoxy, despite the desire of early English Protestants (as well as later Protestant scholars) to claim the father of English poetry as their own, rests above all on *The Parson’s Tale*, compiled and translated from Raymond of Pennaforte’s *Summa de paenitentia* and Guillelmus Peraldus’s *Summa de vitiis et virtutibus*. The Parson’s contribution to the storytelling competition, his response to Harry Bailly’s request that he “knytte up wel a greet mateere” (X.28), and his call to pilgrims and readers alike to follow the “wey . . . cleped penitence” through confession (X.81) thus draws from source material that is not only orthodox but theologically conservative.¹¹

However, recent scholarship has done much to open up the discussion of Lollardy’s effect on late medieval literature and religious culture beyond the simple and static categories of heresy and orthodoxy to considerations of “the gray areas of medieval religion” and of the ways in which orthodoxy was a concept under pressure in the late medieval period.¹² Rather than asking whether or not Chaucer was orthodox, therefore, we should ask how his texts register an awareness

of and engagement with the philosophical and spiritual questions that the Wycliffite controversies made urgent. Similarly, rather than asking whether Chaucer's Parson, whom the Host famously suspects as a "lollere," stands at odds with his apparently "orthodox" tale, Katherine Little argues that "Chaucer establishes this figure as a contradiction: he is meant to evoke both sides of the contemporary religious debate, not to be identified as one or the other."¹³ The point is that the nexus of ideas at stake in these debates—ideas about the sacraments, the authority of the church, about the Bible, translation, even language itself—did not necessarily offer itself to fourteenth-century writers and thinkers in the form of two fixed and "historically uncomplicated" positions, orthodoxy versus lollardy or heresy, but rather as a call for negotiation and as a source of poetic inspiration.¹⁴

The ways in which Chaucer's major narrative poems grapple with the meaning of confession and the problems posed by the Wycliffite critique of the external performance of penitence must be understood in this context of negotiation, in the "gray areas" between orthodoxy and heresy, but also in the gray areas between religion and ethics. Chaucer's representation of confession tends to focus on the social and ethical implications of penitential thinking and practices, rather than on the theological or metaphysical consequences of sin and salvation. Moreover, Chaucer's preferred practice is to emphasize the dilemmas and paradoxes of shame and confession rather than to dictate solutions, but his interest in these problems does not necessarily evince a modern, pluralist, or skeptical moral outlook. What often seems superficially to be a "design to destabilize categorical morality" is, on closer analysis, an expression of moral seriousness and an implicit critique of the politics of shame and contemporary abuses of power.¹⁵ I aim to show that the open-endedness of Chaucer's treatment of the emotions involved in penitence is one shaped specifically to point out the discrepancy between the ideal and the psychological reality. Indeed, in almost all of his major works, Chaucer is most interested in exploring what motivates people to act as they do, the variety of forms of self-defense, self-deception, and self-aggrandizement, the power of affect to shape empathetic responses to others, and the power of self-interested desire to impede or override the will to obey the moral law. As Alcuin Blamires observes, even as Chaucer is asserting the validity of a particular moral doctrine, he "tends to make us very aware, not unsympathetically aware, that impassioned humans don't listen to doctrines of [moral rectitude]."¹⁶

As a psychologist of morality, Chaucer is in an indirect dialogue with Wycliffism but he is also an heir to Augustine. In the well-known passage in the *Confessions* quoted at the start of this chapter, Augustine rebukes his younger self for an act of adolescent rebellion that most people today would be inclined to understand as harmless and wholly age-appropriate. The bishop of Hippo, however, sees in his theft of the pears nothing less than malicious “wickedness” and a consequent descent into “utter destruction” (*exterminium*). What strikes the older Augustine as morally and spiritually significant about his youthful transgression is the intent that lies behind the act: stealing pears in order to satisfy hunger, or even out of an inordinate love of pears, falls into the category of *peccata levia*, small sins, but stealing pears purely for the sake of transgressing, or out of pride in one’s ability to break the law, evinces, for Augustine, the very depth and definition of man’s depravity.¹⁷ On the levels of genre and authorial persona, Augustine’s spiritual autobiography and Chaucer’s story collection—the latter organized by a frame narrative whose narrator is famously self-effacing and elusive rather than confessional—could not be more different. And yet, in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer evinces an Augustinian interest in the moral will by exploring the relationship between narrative and penitence and by developing a self-reflexive poetics.¹⁸ The collection opens with an image of longing, of the “restless heart” of the pilgrim, who is stirred by the promise of spring, not to the creation and celebration of new life, but to the self-reflection, thanksgiving, and purification of pilgrimage; Chaucer’s pilgrim-tellers in turn wield a wide range of storytelling techniques and suggest a variety of “ententes” or motives behind the act of narrating. And the pilgrims’ efforts conclude, as did Augustine’s, with a “Retraction”—a literary confession that records Chaucer’s authorial acts and, retrospectively if somewhat enigmatically, asserts his own authorial “entente”: “Al that is written is written for oure doctrine” (X.1082).¹⁹

Chaucer is a psychologist of morality, but he is also an anthropologist of emotion: while he is only mildly interested in what it feels like to be a person who is ashamed or contrite, he is deeply and persistently interested in literary and cultural expressions of shame and guilt—the various ways in which these emotions are created in and through language and literature, as well as the extent to which they shape human action in the social world, in and over history. As we will see, Chaucer is very aware of the differences between classical