Introduction

Chaucer and the problem of normativity

This book refines and redirects two views of Chaucer that have dominated the reception of his writing since his lifetime: that he was a philosophical poet and that he was a poet of love.[1] I argue that the *Canterbury Tales* represents an extended meditation on agency, autonomy, and practical reason, and that this philosophical aspect of Chaucer's interests can help us understand what is both sophisticated and disturbing about his explorations of love, sex, and gender.[2] In pursuing this argument about Chaucer, the book opens onto a broader discussion of the long-standing association in the Christian West between problems of autonomy and problems of sexuality, and the premodern intellectual and literary resources for understanding psychological phenomena often associated with psychoanalysis, such as repression, fetishism, narcissism, sadism, and masochism. And in discussing both Chaucer's literary experiments and the philosophical methods and psychological concepts informing them, *Philosophical Chaucer* develops a still broader theoretical argument concerning normativity and its relations to ideology and practical reason. This introduction will sketch the landscape of these arguments to indicate why they belong together in a single book.

The idea of Chaucer as a philosophical love poet has traditionally centered on his career as a courtly writer steeped in the Latin, French, and Italian traditions of psychological and philosophical allegory and erotic lyricism, a career that mostly predates the *Canterbury Tales* and whose crowning achievement was *Troilus and Criseyde*. Such an emphasis brings into relief the moments in Chaucer's poetry when philosophy and erotic life are most obviously conjoined, moments when longing,

abjection, and loss open within the erotic subject an urge to speculation that often takes explicitly philosophical form; it also allows for the drawing of close connections between Chaucer's work and that of many of the writers who meant the most to him, such as Alain de Lille, Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meun, Guillaume de Machaut, Dante, and Petrarch. I turn to the *Canterbury Tales*, however, because for all the value of the traditional focus, it encourages a restricted notion of what makes Chaucer's poetry philosophical and of what he finds philosophically provocative in erotic life. I argue that Chaucer's project in the *Tales* is philosophical not only in tales like those of the Knight and the Clerk, where such interests are explicit, but also in ones that have been seen as tangential to any philosophical interest or even as antiphilosophical, like those of the Miller and the Wife of Bath. The picture of Chaucer that emerges in these pages is that of a poet as deeply committed to philosophical thinking – and indeed, as deeply committed to dialectic – as Jean de Meun or Langland or the *Pearl*-poet, but one who became interested in pursuing that commitment independently of dialogue form, or for that matter independently of any explicit representation of philosophical topics or themes. What makes Chaucer's mature poetry philosophical is its engagement with the often repressed dialectical structures imbedded not only in abstract reflection but also in every expressive act, even the most routinized, seemingly unreflective ones. The philosophical richness of the *Canterbury Tales* lies in its way of using forms of literary representation, including narrative, genre, character, and tropological language, to investigate the dialectical structure of thought and desire.

Such imbedded dialectical structures, and the conception of philosophical poetry that attends them, are also central to my account of Chaucer's interest in love. As I have already indicated, for me, as for many recent Chaucerians, thinking of Chaucer as a poet of love means attending to his interests in gender and sexuality. Like some such critics, I will be concerned with what Carolyn Dinshaw has called a "touch of the queer" in Chaucer's representations of erotic life – or, as I would put it, with the ways erotic energies trouble and cross presumptive borders between the normal and the perverse, even as in many ways they depend on the constitution of such borders.[3] This book also shares with psychoanalysis interests in the phantasmatic constitution of desire and its

objects, the intersubjective structuring of desire and will, and the misrecognitions on which attachment and a stable sense of self depend.[4] But if queer theory and psychoanalysis provide two of this book's most proximate others, one of my central projects here will be to understand how Chaucer and his main intellectual interlocutors might have conceptualized an interest in these topics; or, to put it another way, to see how far we can get in an analysis of such topics without invoking a specifically psychoanalytic account of them. Such a project can be helpful both historically and theoretically, by refining our sense of the continuities and differences between ourselves and the past, and by defining more clearly, for both proponents and opponents of psychoanalysis, the point at which a genuinely psychoanalytic account might be taken up.

In examining the analytical structure of Chaucer's interests in gender difference, sexual desire, and love, I will locate him in relation to a number of ancient and medieval currents of thought in which, by the late Middle Ages, questions of sexuality and questions of agency and autonomy had come to intersect. Perhaps the most important of these currents is the tradition of Christian thinking about morality and sociality that Peter Brown has so brilliantly traced from Paul to Augustine, a tradition that turned time and again to the conceptual and metaphorical links between problems of sexuality and problems of autonomy.[5] Other such currents include an Augustinian and Boethian tradition of thinking about desire and its frustrations, an Aristotelian tradition in philosophical psychology, and an analysis of utopian intimacy developed in Aristotelian and Ciceronian discourses of friendship, all of which were adapted to erotic contexts by, among others, Jean de Meun. In discussing these traditions my interest will once again be both historical and theoretical. On the one hand, they will help us reconstruct an intellectual idiom important to Chaucer and in key respects different from our own. On the other, pursuing such a reconstruction will lead us to theoretical arguments concerning the ways agency and identity are constituted around incompatible demands of practical reason, and the ways an account of those demands can help us to read intersubjective and intrasubjective dramas of misrecognition. Those theoretical arguments in turn will help us to understand a historical phenomenon of interest throughout this book, namely a crisis of

intelligibility in the emergent paradigm of western sexuality and romantic love which, I will argue, is conditioned by the problematic structure of practical reason. This crisis of intelligibility in sexuality and love cannot fully be understood either through the analysis of the cultural construction of discourses, practices, subjects, and texts which currently dominates historicist modes of inquiry, or through a psychoanalytic paradigm that seeks its causes in Oedipal structures or traumatic narrative. This is not to say that I take my argument to obviate historicist and psychoanalytic accounts. It is just to say that accounts of the historical and psychological causes of such a crisis need supplementing by an account of the structures of practical reason that inform it.

Reading with an ear for the resonances between problems of sexuality and problems of agency will help us see sexuality less as a sphere of desire and behavior that provided Chaucer with the underlying causes of human behavior than as a highly charged and tropologically rich site on which he explored the drive to autonomy and the grief that attends it. This in turn will help us understand Chaucer's moral seriousness as something other than the moralizing it has often been taken to be – indeed as something in many ways disturbing to conventional moral sensibilities rather than confirming of them, and so as something we need not pass by in embarrassment on the way to supposedly more exciting topics.[6] The effort to recover that moral seriousness, the powerful speculative impulse that attended it, and the poetic resources through which Chaucer pursued it, requires rethinking the relationship between philosophy and the rhetorical forms of philosophical dialogue, allegory, and Canterbury narrative; and that rethinking requires a substantive investigation of the philosophical problems engaged by Chaucer and the traditions to which he belonged. In the course of this effort of recovery, sexuality will emerge both as a provocation to speculate on the structure of agency and the drive to autonomy, and as a place where the abstract work of philosophical analysis meets flesh and bone.

EROS AND NORMATIVITY

Of the philosophical and theoretical terms on which my argument will depend, "normativity" is both the most important and, I take it, the most obscure. I think this obscurity is both a result of the current

condition of our intellectual culture and a feature of the concept itself. A good portion of this introduction, and for that matter of this book, will therefore be devoted to giving an account of what normativity is, and why it might be worth fuller critical and theoretical attention. But before turning to an initial unpacking of this term, I want to provide a Chaucerian anchor for what will be some fairly abstract considerations. Let me then point to a scene from the *Knight's Tale* which will receive extended attention in chapter two and which suggests something of the form in which eros and normativity intersect in Chaucer's philosophical-poetic project.

The scene is that of Emily in her garden, performing her springtime maidenly duties under the watchful and desiring eyes of Palamon and Arcite. This scene condenses some key features of a normative picture of gender difference and sexuality which will be of concern throughout this book. In establishing a voyeuristic relationship between desiring men and a desired but utterly oblivious woman, the scene figures the masculine as the site of erotic subjectivity and agency, and the feminine as the site of erotic passivity and objectification, an association that continues throughout the tale as Emily's fate remains entirely hostage to the conflicts among the men whose desires seem to be the only ones that effectively count. While the Knight, here and elsewhere in the tale, adopts a stance of critical distance on what he sees as the pathological desire of the Theban cousins, the portrait of Emily with which he introduces the scene participates in this normative picture and helps to specify its further contours. Emily

> fairer was to sene
> Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,
> And fresher than the May with floures newe –
> For with the rose colour stroof hir hewe,
> I noot which was the fyner of hem two.
> (I.1035–39)[7]

Through the location of Emily in the garden and the more pointed identification of her attractiveness with that of the floral beauty that surrounds her, the Knight associates the feminine with the natural, the ornamental, and the cultivated. And through the desire this scene kindles in Palamon and Arcite, and even more through his own admiring description, the Knight associates the masculine both with the

subjectivity that appreciates all this beauty and with the agency that cultivates the aesthetic object – that is, the poem – in which, like the garden, or for that matter Emily's lovely body, such beauty is both produced and contained.

In these respects, this scene is of course utterly conventional. The aestheticizing voyeurism of masculine desire here seems flat and clichéd, so familiar in the Middle Ages and today that it is hardly even recognizable. That is why I have begun with it, and I think it is also why Chaucer places it so early in the *Canterbury Tales*. I will be arguing throughout this book that one of Chaucer's most characteristic philosophical and poetic interests lies in the unpacking of cliché, the analysis of attitudes that, because of their familiarity and the way they can pass for somebody's version of plain (if objectionable) common sense, tend to fly beneath our intellectual radar. Such cases are always in Chaucer's poetry more complex than they initially appear; and part of what interests Chaucer in such cases is the way their apparent flatness and easy recognizability function to keep their radical incoherence out of sight, and so to enable their psychic and social functionality. What we really ought to say about such moments, I think, is not that they are flat, but that we are used to thinking flatly about the attitudes to which they give expression, and that these flattening habits of mind are essential to their reproduction and inhabitation. The aestheticizing voyeurism of masculine desire is only possible in the first place because we think we know all too well what we see there.

As I have already indicated, it has been known for some time that at the center of Chaucer's literary inheritance was a rich tradition of French and Italian poetry – a tradition exemplified in the *Roman de la Rose* and the writings of Guillaume de Machaut, Petrarch, and a host of others – which combined a strong interest in erotic desire with an extremely refined formalist and lyrical aesthetic sensibility.[8] This scene belongs squarely in that tradition, and that is part, although only part, of what makes it seem so familiar. But, like that tradition at its best, this scene asks us to think about what is at stake ontologically and ideologically in a voyeuristic eroticism, and more broadly in the gendered production of beauty as an aesthetic and erotic phenomenon. As I will argue in later chapters, one thing crucially at stake is the production of an unstable ideology of gender difference, according to which the

contrast between masculine and feminine gets figured in terms of parallel contrasts between subject and object, activity and passivity, the human and the natural, soul and body, artist and artifact, and so on. This ideology in itself is familiar enough, both in Chaucer and in medieval culture at large. To pick a few examples, some of which will receive extended attention in the present study and others of which are random selections from a nearly limitless archive: think of the central trope for masculine erotic satisfaction in the *Roman de la Rose*, that of plucking the feminine rosebud, or that text's interest in the Ovidian figures of Narcissus and Pygmalion; or Alisoun's animal sexuality in the *Miller's Tale*, or the Wife of Bath grounding her speaking voice in her "joly body"; or the appropriation of Aristotelian theories of generation, in which the male partner contributes the animating principle and the female partner contributes the matter, in medical-philosophical treatises such as the *De Secretis Mulierum* of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus; or the application in late medieval and early modern English civil law of the principle of "coverture" to the traditional conception of the married couple as a single person, such that "the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband."[9] As these examples suggest, the widespread dissemination of this ideology in so many sites of cultural authority – literature, art, theology, preaching, popular religion, confession, law, medicine, and beyond – established an identificatory norm with powerful effects on the ways medieval people came to recognize themselves and each other as men and women.[10] And, as the scene of Emily in her garden and many of the above examples suggest, this gender ideology was closely related to an ideology of sexuality. Forms of gender identification necessarily affect and are affected by the ways people imagine themselves and each other as subjects and objects of desire; and this scene from the *Knight's Tale* captures the outlines of an erotic norm, again quite widespread in the culture and of central interest to the French and Italian traditions of lyrical eroticism, which figures masculine desire as inherently voyeuristic and objectifying, and feminine desire – which Chaucer does not directly represent here, but which he does in a host of other places – as a desire for voyeuristic objectification, a desire for being loved as the kind of aestheticized, passive figure Emily is.

This description of the scene, and of the ideology of gender and sexuality it figures, is necessarily simplified, and I do not intend it as a characterization of medieval representations of gender and sexuality as a whole. Much that is far from marginal in late medieval culture runs directly counter to this picture of gender difference: for instance, the feminization of Christ through an increasing emphasis on both his sufferings and his maternal nurturing, or the identification with the sorrows of the Virgin Mary cultivated in the affective spirituality of both men and women. But, while the above package of contrasts by no means presents a totalized or even internally coherent ideological edifice, we should not underestimate the force of the simplifications it expresses, either in the conceptual habits of medieval culture or in the lives of those for whom these habits had practical consequences. This is something Chaucer means to take the measure of in scenes such as the one above. He does so in part by making such scenes problematize the overly neat conceptual packages they instantiate; in this way, Chaucer explores the quite porous structures of identification and desire that swirl around ideological schematisms of this kind. This is somewhat different from the project of accounting for tendencies in medieval thought that run counter to this ideology; it is more a matter of attending to the inner workings of the ideology itself, of tracking its representational logics to see ways in which they both are driven by and lead to beliefs and desires they cannot accommodate.[11] One way Chaucer typically engages in such an exploration is by representing the paradoxically shifting valuations this ideology assigns to the feminine in order to imagine it as contrasting with a masculinity that stands in for the fully human subject and agent. So in Emily the feminine is at once associated with the natural and with a group of terms we would now take as referring to the cultural – the cultivated, the ornamental, and the aesthetic. This raises problems both for what the feminine is supposed to be and for what the desiring masculine subject is supposed to take as its object, problems which it is a principal task of ideology to try to mask, but which nevertheless must have effects on the identificatory and libidinal investments of ideology's subjects. In chapter four I will argue that Chaucer learned a basic literary and conceptual vocabulary for pursuing such problems from the *Roman de la Rose*. But while I think that the

standard scene of an objectifying masculine voyeurism is more mysterious than it is usually taken to be, the issues it raises cannot be fully explored if we restrict our scope to "courtly" lyric eroticism. This is one reason why I have focused on the *Canterbury Tales* and left both *Troilus and Criseyde* and a broader survey of the French and Italian traditions aside: for in the movement out of courtly eroticism in the *Tales,* Chaucer opens the text to scenes of desire and conceptual pressures he otherwise could not have taken into account.

I have focused so far on the aspect of normativity most familiar in the study of gender and sexuality, including studies that focus on the Middle Ages and Chaucer. One thing that sets the present project apart from such work is an argument that we cannot fully understand the function of normative ideologies of gender and sexuality, in Chaucer's work or elsewhere, without attending to normative considerations of quite a different kind than those I discuss above. To return to the scene in question: Palamon and Arcite viewing Emily from their prison has long been understood to have Boethian resonances, and these resonances establish a normative trajectory which problematizes the scene's ideology of gender and sexuality in surprising ways.[12] In Boethian terms, Palamon and Arcite's imprisonment reads not just as an unfortunate political abrogation of their freedom but as a trope for a much deeper loss of autonomy, the kind that occurs when a person becomes incapable of ordering his dispositions into a coherent and functional will, and so suffers compulsion by whatever passions happen to arise in him. More specifically, as I will argue later, the kind of compulsion at issue here is not one in which the person's will is elided or erased, but one in which the person is *invested*, and so something that characterizes his will. That is, it is not the case that Palamon and Arcite cannot order their dispositions because something external to their will intervenes to block them from doing so – a massive brain hemorrhage, say, or as in some theories the degrading influence of desire or the body. Their problem is rather that they are devoted to their compulsion; they suffer from what Augustine calls "the perversion of the will."[13] The psychic and social disintegration so much in evidence in the Thebans' fratricidal conflict is in this respect the sign of their imprisonment in their own perverse wills, their self-imposed exile from any possibility of an authentic identity.

Given the history of Chaucer criticism since the middle of this century, it is far too easy to think that we know what it might mean for Chaucer to be interested in such a condition – far too easy, that is, to think that the only form such an interest could take is that of moralizing Christian diagnosis.[14] The result is that critics without much interest in moralizing diagnosis have had little interest in what was, for Chaucer as well as for Boethius and Augustine, the immense and haunting problem of the human creature's psychic and moral alterity to itself, a problem from which the comforts of moralism offer no refuge. But we should remember that the French and Italian poetry of erotic subjectivity, like Chaucer's, was steeped in Boethian and Augustinian thinking; it did not seem like a yoking together of incommensurable thought worlds to Jean de Meun or Dante or Guillaume de Machaut to inflect an investigation of erotic longing with philosophical arguments, and more importantly, with the forms of philosophical dialectic. We can thus perhaps begin to find the philosophical and moral problem of the will's alterity to itself compelling again if we return it to the erotic location this poetic tradition gives it.

In the scene I have been using as a touchstone, the Boethian valence of Palamon and Arcite's overwhelming desire for Emily has two apparently contradictory functions, each of which deeply problematizes the ideology of gender and sexuality the scene nevertheless serves to instantiate. On the one hand, the Thebans' erotic compulsion represents their perversion, that is, their inability to take command of themselves as men properly should – in quite pointed contrast to Theseus, who does manage a masculine self-command, and who later in the tale announces with pride that he is devoted to Diana rather than to Venus. If this scene figures erotic desire as normatively masculine, then, it also figures such desire as a threat to the very masculinity it defines, a disturbance of the norms by which that masculinity regulates itself. But the identification of eros with perversion is itself problematized by another normative function of Emily's desirability that also tracks a concern with autonomy. For, as I will argue in chapter two, when Palamon and Arcite longingly observe Emily's garden activities from behind the bars of their prison, part of what they see there is a figure of a beautifully stylized freedom, the freedom of a subject and agent perfectly ordered with respect to herself – a figure, that is, for the

very autonomy they lack. Palamon's contrast between Emily's divinity and his own sorrowful, wretched creatureliness, and Arcite's sense of being slain by Emily's beauty, are not in this context just erotic clichés. For these common tropes suggest that an essential feature of the longing the Thebans feel for Emily is the way she bodies forth for them the perfected form of their own being, a perfection which, in making its normative claims on their fractured humanity, seems to turn away from them, imprisoning them in their privation and self-estrangement, and marking them as unworthy, wounded, and bound by death.

It should now be apparent that this scene is hardly one in which masculine agency and feminine passivity confront each other in a simple binary contrast. Emily – like, I will suggest, such figures as the Miller's Alisoun and the Clerk's Grisilde – functions as an erotic object in a way that seems to require the erasure of her subjectivity and agency, even while she functions as a figure for a normative ideal to which the very men who objectify her, in their abject longing, aspire. Nor do these two aspects of the representation of the feminine finally belong to separate thematic registers, as my initial formulation of the case may have suggested. For Emily's erotic function, far from being opposed to her function as an ideal of autonomy, positively *depends* on it: it is her perfect, stylized freedom that makes her beauty so ravishing. Yet the completeness and seeming divinity of this highly aestheticized perfection in no small way contributes to her objectification, particularly in this context in which subjectivity and personhood as such are imagined as fractured. If the normative picture of gender difference with which I began is deeply problematized in this scene, then, it is hardly the case that the scene serves to explode that picture. Chaucer seems rather to be suggesting that this picture, however incoherent, holds us captive. And perhaps its very incoherence is part of what makes it so captivating.

I do not want to do too much, in what must remain the highly condensed and insufficiently supple form of an introduction, to anticipate my later, more amplified discussion of this scene. I simply want at this early point to suggest the initial contours of Chaucer's complex normative imagination, and something of the conceptual terrain that that imagination inhabits. What is the relationship between a voyeuristic, objectifying eroticism that embodies an ideological norm for

masculine sexuality, and an abject, perverse masculinity that locates in the feminine a figure of the autonomy for which it longs? Why is the feminine imagined at once as the locus of passivity and of a perfected agency? Just what is supposed to be "normal" here for identification and desire? How might the normalization of gender and sexuality be understood as both produced and troubled by the normative ethical desire for a coherent will? How might the production of beauty, as both an aesthetic and an erotic category, be involved in these tensions? These are a few of the questions I think Chaucer uses this scene to explore. These too, I will argue, are questions explored by the *Roman de la Rose*, in ways Chaucer found immensely productive even – and perhaps especially – when the *Rose* functioned for him more as an intellectual interlocutor than as a direct literary source.

NORMATIVITY, IDEOLOGY, ETHICS

I indicated at the beginning of the previous section that the term *normativity* needs some unpacking, and that the turn to Emily and her hapless, aggressive admirers was meant as an entry into that discussion. A substantive analysis of normativity, and of its centrality to Chaucer's philosophical-poetic project, will be the business of this book as a whole. In later sections of this introduction I will describe some medieval contexts within which that centrality might be understood. But first I want to locate my interest in the topic and say why I think it is important to current critical and theoretical discussion. Since we can never hope to disentangle the literary-historical and cultural narratives we offer from the conceptual problematics that inform them, this theoretical emphasis is, I think, essential to a historicist project. In turning to theory, then, I do not want to evade questions of historical specificity. I want rather to set the stage for posing them in a new way.

The topic of normativity as it has mostly been understood in recent literary and cultural studies, and in that nebulous discursive formation called "theory," is a branch of the study of ideology concerned with analyzing the social technologies that construct the "normal" – and therefore the abnormal, perverse, and unintelligible – in subjects' desires and identifications. The study of normativity in this sense raises questions about how hegemonies organize populations around cultural

norms; how this organizing function produces what comes to count as normal gender and sexuality and their various deviancies; how persons come to recognize themselves as subjects through ideological interpellation; how the constitution of the normal is inflected by the very deviancies or perversions that function as its constitutive outside; and so on.[15] At its best, this mode of analysis, informed by psychoanalysis, feminist and queer theory, Marxism, and Foucauldian historicism, has helped enormously in our attempts to understand the ways ideological normalization produces, organizes, and regulates individuals and social groups, as well as in our attempts to understand the historical and cultural variability of these functions.[16] It has also helped us to think in new and challenging ways about what the interior and agentive life of the human creature is like, given that the creature's subjectivity and agency are formed through its internalization of ideological norms, and given that those norms are always more fragile and porous than ideology must declare them to be. In order to understand what is at issue in that scene of voyeuristic, abject desire in the *Knight's Tale* – not to mention, say, what is at issue in the Wife of Bath's appropriations of antifeminist discourse, or in the circuits of desire running between Walter and Grisilde in the *Clerk's Tale* – we need to think in something like these terms about the operations of normativity.

But as my discussion of Emily has already suggested, in another part of our intellectual landscape there is quite a different account of what normativity is, or at the very least a different use of the same word, which is equally relevant to the various Chaucerian cases I have alluded to. I am thinking of an account very much alive in Chaucer's time, and the one still dominant in contemporary philosophical ethics, in which "normativity" refers to the authority rational and ethical considerations have for agents, and in which an internalization of that authority is understood not in terms of "subjection" but rather as essential to the pursuit of autonomy, or a good life, or happiness.[17] There are significant differences among these three ways of putting the aim of ethical reflection, as there are differences between the theorizations of these aims in the Middle Ages and those current today; and these differences involve important disagreements about what normativity is and where in the life of an agent it comes from. But the crucial points for the purposes of this rather broad contrast are two. First, for the long

tradition of philosophical ethics dating back at least to Socrates, the question of what normativity is and where it comes from is addressed in the first instance through attention to the reflective lives of agents, rather than through attention to processes of ideological formation which may or may not be reflectively available to anyone or be part of anyone's aims. The nature of normativity is thus understood in terms of the questions raised by practical reasoning, questions that take such forms as "How should I (or we) live?"; "What should I (we) do?"; "Who should I (we) be?" Second, it is at least a working hypothesis in these philosophical inquiries, and it is often taken as a matter of fundamental intellectual commitment, that the study of normativity seeks to discover necessary features of the structure of the will or of agency as such, and that understanding these features could help us address the questions raised by practical reasoning. The study of normativity in the philosophical sense thus asks what gives an agent reasons to act, believe, and desire in some ways rather than others; what the sources of obligation and justice are; what considerations in the life of an agent compete with obligation and justice, and how to weigh such various claims on an agent's will against each other; what happens to desires and other kinds of motive, and in particular what an agent *does* to or with them, to make them characteristics of her will rather than mere happenings in her psychic life; and so on.

These are questions of quite a different kind from those raised by the study of normative ideologies. The difference between these two traditions of analysis raises the question of whether what I am pointing to is merely a verbal coincidence rather than a problem in conceptualizing a single phenomenon. It is certainly true that each of these traditions has had little to say to the other, and this might suggest that we are dealing with two concepts under the same name. But there is a powerful sense in which these ways of theorizing normativity seem to compete with each other, so that on each side of what is at least a professional and discursive divide it can seem both that the other side is simply getting normativity wrong, and that whatever value its analyses have can be reduced to terms drawn from whichever side one imaginatively occupies. So, from the perspective of ideology critique, talk of autonomy, or of general structures of the agent's relations to herself, can seem to beg questions of the historical conditions within which specific conceptions

of autonomy and agency get articulated, and even to reify fantasies of bourgeois subjectivity that have long since been exploded; while accounts of the discursive and political construction of the subject can seem to tell us whatever we might need to know about, say, what distinguishes a person's will from the random flotsam of her psychic life. But from the perspective of philosophical ethics, these very criticisms can seem to beg questions about possible conceptual conditions for any understanding of agency, in favor of a sheer insistence on the possibility of radical historical change which involves its own reified sense of what constitutes, say, bourgeois subjectivity, and what makes it different from other historical forms of consciousness; further, the political and moral motivations of ideology critique seem to require a commitment to the project of saying what autonomy and justice are, even as it at times suggests that such a project is fundamentally misguided.

I am not interested in taking sides in an argument between what looks, in the most polemical instances, like two hostile intellectual camps. The production of polemic here, as so often, is the sign of thought becoming a caricature of itself, stagnated in its attempts to deny the claim of an artificially externalized enemy on its own activity. But the sense of a competition between two perspectives on normativity does suggest that the use of that term in such different ways is neither a verbal coincidence nor a mere difference of emphasis, but rather the sign of a real conceptual problem. This is not a problem that has gone unnoticed in either intellectual tradition: one way of understanding some of the work of Bernard Williams and Judith Butler is that it attempts to make an account of one aspect of normativity responsive to the claims of the other, even as it suggests that there is something fundamentally paradoxical about doing so.[18] It would seem, then, that an account of normativity that does not open itself in both directions of analysis must fail to appreciate something essential about the phenomenon. But it would also seem that to open an account in either direction makes the resources of the other somehow unavailable, or at least deeply compromised.

The present study will not attempt to solve this problem. Indeed I do not know whether it is solvable. It might be possible to develop an account of normativity that could incorporate what is valuable in each line of thinking while explaining why each makes the other seem so problematic. I will make some preliminary suggestions along these

lines, but they should be taken as just that, and there is much in the workings of normativity that this book will not be able, or intended, to explain. But I do not know of an account that is adequate in this respect, and I think we should remain alive to the possibility that it may not be possible to give one. In any case, it seems to me that in light of our current understanding of the topic the most intellectually damaging move would be that of prematurely declaring a solution to a problem whose contours we are only just beginning to see. The primary intellectual task of this book will thus be to make the two conceptions of normativity operate in the same discursive space, in order to see better some of the pressures they exert on each other and some of the ways they might illuminate each other.

To say that this problem may not have a solution is not, of course, to abdicate the task of suggesting some parameters for understanding it more fully. In the chapters that follow I will argue that a satisfying account of normativity must rely on the irreducibility of the perspective of agency as both an analytic and a phenomenological category; and I will argue further that the ambition of autonomy is an essential structuring feature of this perspective. My emphasis on the perspective of agency does not depend on some furtive reinstatement of the metaphysics of presence in a subject supposedly possessed of incorrigible self-knowledge. To clarify what it does depend on, it will be helpful to think briefly about a familiar kind of case detached from the textual and historical questions raised by a discussion of Chaucer.

Imagine that I say something to my friend Julia that expresses some form of antifeminism or heterosexism or racism, something that marks her as different from me in a way that aligns me with privilege or power or "normalcy," and marks her as outside such privilege. It need not have been an explosive or flagrant remark; it is best for the purposes of this example to think of it as something relatively minor and thoughtless, such that I would hardly have noticed its implications. Now Julia knows that I am not the sort of person to think that way, so she thinks that in some sense I couldn't have *really* meant it. But she is hurt by it just the same, and she also knows that there is so much in our culture's social and political arrangements and the routinized habits of mind they foster that supports such attitudes, often in ways of which we are scarcely aware, that in another sense *everyone* is the sort of person to

think that way; and I did, after all, say it; and so she also thinks that in some sense I *must* have meant it. So Julia asks me why I said it, and in doing so she means both to be pointing to the hurtfulness of what I said – that is, the way it impinges on her and on our friendship – and to be calling me on and reprimanding me for my implication in habits of mind I know to be wrong. Now suppose I respond to her question by saying "I said it because I live in a culture with multiple discourses and institutions and power structures that function to invest this ideology in all of its subjects." My answer would be true, and it would match up with part of what she already thinks about why I said what I did. But hearing such an answer from me now, she is likely to find it evasive of my responsibility for what I said and the concern I ought to have for her and for our friendship. That is because, in answering her question as I did, I was offering a causal historical explanation of my remark; but her question was asking, not for a causal history, but for *my reasons for saying it*. Only *that* kind of answer would own up to what I did to her and to us in saying it, and to the fact that this ideology is not something in the face of which I am merely passive or an unwilling dupe, but is rather something that constitutes part of my will, something I allowed to speak for me and *as* me, and in that sense to be normative for me.[19]

I do not think that we should be willing to say that in finding my answer evasive Julia is simply missing the point of the argument that subjectivity and normativity are culturally constructed. And if that is right, then without denying that everything we do and the norms that inform our actions have a causal history in, among other things, socially determinate ideologies, this kind of case suggests that there is a mode of normative explanation of action that looks *directly* to reasons for acting, no matter what we understand the historical sources of those reasons to be. The above example can also help us to distinguish between explanations that look to the perspective of agency and something quite different with which they are often conflated, the attempt of an agent or collectivity to defend a sense of freedom or the possibility of political efficacy from determinist or constructivist arguments that threaten their dissolution.[20] In my example, the *doer* of the action in question *wants* to adopt the perspective of causal explanation on his own actions, in order to defeat a sense of his responsibility for them; the insistence on the perspective

of agency comes not from him, but from the recipient or victim of his act. By separating the question of how a subject or agent wishes to describe himself from the question of how causal and agentive explanations are related to each other, my example suggests that it is a mistake to imagine either that the agentive perspective issues from an agent's relations to himself, or that an invocation of the agentive perspective is fundamentally motivated by an agent's wish to preserve a freedom, illusory or real. We all can and constantly do deploy both causal and agentive explanations with respect both to our own actions and the actions of others. Much of human sociality, including the very possibilities of responsibility, obligation, and the kinds of social bonds in which it matters what someone meant and how they meant it, is structured by our routine dependence on the perspective of agency; and no argument, constructivist or otherwise, can or should change that.[21]

In what follows I will expand on this discussion of the perspective of agency to make three related arguments. First, while the pressures exerted on agents by questions of what to do and how to live always necessarily take ideological form, they cannot be reduced to sheer effects of the cultural formations that produce them, and so cannot be fully understood in terms of the cultural construction of the subject. Second, the perspective of agency is characterized by mobilities and opacities of identification, desire, and self-understanding which also cannot be fully understood through the analysis of ideological and discursive formations. And third, the analysis of ideology and ideological normalization can benefit from attention to such agentive pressures, since these pressures are part of what produces and maintains ideology in the first place.

In taking the project of philosophical ethics seriously in its own terms, then, I am hardly recommending a return to some prelapsarian notion of an unproblematic agency and a normativity redeemed of the abjections and injustices it has seemed always to instantiate. Nor, in discussing autonomy, will I be describing an ambition that could ever be free of ideological blindness, and even, as I will suggest, of a kind of psychosis. My aim is rather to resist an impulse towards redemptive theorizing which operates both in the reactionary defense of normativity and in the progressive critique of it. This redemptive impulse appears, for instance, in the reception of the figure who remains perhaps the most important touchstone for the critical historiography

of normativity, Michel Foucault. The difficulty we continue to have in taking the force of Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis is, I think, quite closely related to the relative indifference with which his late work on ethics has been met.[22] My claim in this respect would be that as long as normativity seems fundamentally to be a matter of subjection to ideology and to power, and therefore not a matter of anything we might still call ethics, then no matter how much we insist that this subjection involves the very constitution of the subject rather than the repression of something already there in the psyche, no matter how often we say that there is no relation of externality between the subject and power, we will continue to be haunted by the longing for a freedom from normativity, for a self liberated from forces by which it is simply subjected, and in the face of which it is fundamentally passive.

Let me be clear: I do not think we should take the desire for such a freedom lightly, just because it is impossible. On the contrary, my claim is that in conjuring this redemptive ghost, we continue to give voice to a drive towards autonomy which this very conjuring act denies us the resources to understand. The redemptive impulse in the critique of normativity might thus be understood as the expression of normativity's desire to overcome itself. That, at least, would be a Nietzschean way of putting the matter. The problem I am articulating is one that Nietzsche was perhaps the first in modern intellectual culture to appreciate, and the difficulty of understanding it is as symptomatically present in the reception of Nietzsche's work as it is in the reception of Foucault's – unsurprisingly, since when one speaks of Foucault, Nietzsche is often not far in the background.[23] I will conclude this sketch of a theoretical territory by invoking a brief Nietzschean passage that condenses many of the core conceptual concerns of this book.

For Nietzsche, normativity must be conceived in terms of the sublimation of violence and domination into ethical values, mores, and laws, a sublimation that takes place in the production of both social collectivities and individual psyches. But he rejects the proposal that, rather than "submitting abjectly to capricious laws," we should or even could throw off the shackles of normativity:

> Every morality is . . . a bit of tyranny against "nature"; also against "reason"; but this in itself is no objection, as long as we do not have some other morality which permits us to decree that every kind of

> tyranny and unreason is impermissible . . . the curious fact is that all there is or has been on earth of freedom, subtlety, boldness, dance, and masterly sureness . . . has developed only owing to the "tyranny of such capricious laws"; and in all seriousness, the probability is by no means small that precisely this is "nature" and "natural."[24]

It is a natural fact about the human creature that, out of the morass of conflicting desires, reasons, hopes, fears, beliefs, and other attitudes that characterize its individual and collective life, it must constitute a functional will for itself. The study of normativity is the study of how the creature does this: how it makes a will for itself both individually and collectively by organizing its conflicting attitudes into what Nietzsche calls "orders of rank," normative hierarchies of value.[25] This activity of self-ordering through the production of norms, both in and between individual and collective agency, involves violence and cruelty, tyranny and unreason, no matter how rationalized or just the norms so produced may be. This is not a fact that should be apologized away, and Nietzsche never tires of breaking down the amnesiac defenses with which we hide this ugliness from ourselves. But neither does this ugliness constitute an objection against normativity as such – unless, as this passage suggests, we have been normalized into a redemptive moralism that declares all cruelty impermissible, and so locates suffering as such an absolute evil that its avoidance becomes the normative consideration that trumps all others. This would be misguided for two reasons. First, because it wishfully and self-deceptively installs a tyranny and unreason of its own, one that dangerously blinds itself to the suffering it must necessarily install in its subjects. Second, because normativity is the condition of human functionality, and without it much of what we value – freedom, subtlety, the beauty and self-mastery exemplified in dance, even beauty and agency themselves – would be impossible.[26]

I think that Nietzsche, despite his pronounced tendency to imaginative and rhetorical excess, was basically right about normativity. And if he was right, a critical investigation into normativity must pursue an account of the ways such phenomena as violence, suffering, injustice, and unreason are deeply bound up with those of beauty, pleasure, and autonomy. Such an account is not easy to give: it can seem, for instance, as though it amounts to a fascistic apology for cruelty and injustice, or, on the contrary, as though it amounts to an indictment

of the inherent fascism of beauty and morality. The very generation of *both* of these incompatible worries, however, suggests that neither is a necessary conclusion, and that each may participate in the underlying confusion that leads us to think of ideological and ethical analysis as mutually exclusive. But the ease with which these worries get generated is, I take it, one more indication of the difficulty of attending at one and the same time to the two aspects of normativity.

I do not think that this difficulty is local to contemporary US academic culture; I think it is characteristic of the phenomenon itself, and attending to it can help us to see more clearly what that phenomenon involves. But it is a pronounced feature of contemporary intellectual culture that investigations into each aspect of normativity tend to repress the concerns and questions raised by the other. In this book I will pursue extended discussions in the theory of normativity partly out of a desire to address this blind spot in our intellectual culture. But I also have strictly historicist reasons for doing so. I have already suggested through the case of Emily in her garden what I will argue is a characteristic feature of Chaucer's poetry, that he places the two aspects of normativity in the same representational space, and does so in ways that display the workings of both and invite us to think about how they inform each other. And I have also suggested that in doing so he inherits a rich tradition of thinking about these matters, and that what he does with this tradition is part of what makes him important. As long as we proceed from within our own dominant assumptions about normativity, then, this feature of Chaucer's work, and of its imbeddedness in medieval culture, will remain opaque to us. Let me now expand briefly on my sense of the tradition Chaucer inherits, with particular emphasis on its engagements with sexuality, to suggest something of the historical dimensions of this book's conceptual project.

SEXUALITY AND MORAL ALTERITY IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Because of his dominance as a cultural figure, Augustine provides a convenient place to focus. In a passage from Book 10 of the *Confessions*, Augustine gives voice to one of his most condensed and

moving expressions of the longing at the heart of normative Christian subjectivity.

> numquid tunc ego non sum . . . et tamen tantum interest inter me ipsum et me ipsum . . . ut anima mea sequatur me . . . ut non sit rebellis sibi.
>
> Surely I have not ceased to be my own self . . . and yet there is still a great gap between myself and myself . . . Oh that my soul might follow my own self . . . that it might not be a rebel to itself.[27]

The occasion of Augustine's lament is sexual. Specifically, it is his ongoing susceptibility to sexual imaginings and erotic dreams, accompanied by feelings of great pleasure and sometimes by nocturnal emissions, long after his conversion to Christianity and to a life of chastity. As Peter Brown has argued, this is not to be read as the sign of some peculiarity in Augustine's psyche, but rather as a powerful instance of the way sexuality had come to be seen, during the long development of Christian moral ideology since Paul, as "a privileged ideogram of all that was most irreducible in the human will."[28] One consequence of the figurative power that sexuality came to assume for Christian moral reflection was that the instabilities and opacities of psychic life tended to get associated with sexual desire and sexual fantasy, and sexual renunciation and virginity became central locations for expressing and thinking about the ambition of autonomy. Augustine is the pivotal figure in Brown's story: in Augustine's writings, we find the formulations whereby sexuality was cemented in Christian thought as the paradigmatic locus of the compulsion to normativity, the need the human creature has, in Paul's famous phrase, to "give a law to itself."[29]

Brown's story is particularly salient in the present context because it suggests that, for what was to become for centuries the dominant tradition of thinking about sexuality in the West, erotic life was a site on which the two aspects of normativity were essentially and explicitly related. Augustine, for instance, was deeply invested in reinforcing the cultural hegemony of a sexual norm that had long cast its shadow over the Christian subject, and would long continue to do so. According to this norm, the perfect state of sexual being consisted in the renunciation of all sexual activity and liberation from all sexual desire; meanwhile, the ordinary Christian household became a site of deep moral

compromise. As Paul had put it long before in defending the Christian couple from a radical insistence on universal celibacy, "it is better to marry than to burn with desire": a defense this may be, but it is hardly a ringing endorsement of married sexuality.[30] Augustine recognized sexual activity as necessary for the propagation of the body of the faithful, and even thought of sexual desire as, within limits, beneficial to married sociality. But he also thought that sexual activity and desire must be constrained, that they were licit only in the service of their reproductive function, and then only in a loving heterosexual marriage sanctioned by the Church.[31] And even this necessary function remained under the shadow of death: in our fallen state, reproductive activity was little more than the propagation of mortality. This suggests that the reason Augustine thought sexuality had to be disciplined was not, say, that norms of sexual behavior or identity seemed to him to be closely tied to medicalized norms of health, and thus raised questions about the state's interest in managing a productive population.[32] It was rather that the phenomenology of erotic life had such a powerful grip on his moral imagination that, even though he regarded sexual offences as relatively minor on the scale of moral faults, they could stand in for the very possibility of moral fault as such. To return to the passage from the *Confessions*: to discipline sexuality was to do what little the human creature could to bring under control the most telling reminder of the "gap between itself and itself," the profound ache with which it hears the call of "its own self" as one it both must and cannot follow. To say, as Augustine and a long tradition before and after him did, that sexuality was the propagation of death, was thus to do more than repeat the ancient naturalist commonplace, according to which a mortal creature reproduces to attain a kind of second-rate immortality through the serial production of creatures individually doomed to die. It was to locate sexuality as a kind of death in itself, a site on which the creature confronts its willing investment in its deprivation of a divine normative principle, a principle that might order its dispositions perfectly, and so release it from the state of living death in which all of its activities are shadowed by passivities, shadowed that is by its own dull resistance to life.[33]

We should not be surprised that the problematics articulated by such figures as Paul and Augustine maintain a deep cultural sedimentation in

later periods. As I have already indicated, this sedimentation will be of continuous interest throughout this book. And if we acknowledge the cultural authority of this sedimentation for the later medieval period, then however that authority is revised, contested, or even deformed, we should expect that the two senses of normativity I outlined earlier – normativity as the drive towards ideological normalization and normativity as the drive towards a will at one with itself – so deeply interpenetrate during the long history of the construction of sexuality in the Christian West that we risk seriously mischaracterizing either if we focus on it to the exclusion of the other. That we are already engaged in telling the story of how these problematics of normativity develop over the course of the Middle Ages is suggested by the fact that some of the best work on medieval gender and sexuality is concerned with writing chapters in the history of western moral psychology – with doing, that is, what Nietzsche called "the natural history of morals."[34] And what has begun to emerge from this work is a sense that the later Middle Ages provides amazingly rich and varied sites on which the two aspects of normativity intersect in eroticized fashion. Some of these sites are religious, such as the inversions and collapses of gender categories involved in associations between Christ's bleeding wounds and lactation, the loving devotion lavished on the naked, suffering body of Christ by men and women alike, and the elaboration of an eroticized mysticism. Some cross between devotional and secular contexts, such as the concern with the moral value of the virginal female body, or the development of an eroticized ethics of friendship in same-sex clerical and monastic settings and in the discourse of marriage. And some belong squarely to the literary culture out of which Chaucer emerged, a culture which, if it did not exactly invent literary subjectivity and western romantic love, as some have claimed, did exhibit a burst of interest in the thrills and abjections of erotic passion, the analysis of erotic objectification, and the glorification of a single-minded devotion to the erotic object, and inflected each of these developments with the increased interest in ethical and psychological theory that came in the wake of the rediscovery of Aristotle.[35] These features of the late medieval cultural landscape suggest that the two aspects of normativity continued to intersect in ever more complicated fashion as erotic desire became in many ways identified with the self's deepest commitments, even while

an identification of sexuality with psychic and moral alterity remained deeply lodged in the cultural imagination.

As I hope by now is clear, the present study is in part an attempt to push harder than we have hitherto on the underlying conceptual problematics that informs both this history and our attempts to understand it. But the lines of intellectual productivity and value may run the other way as well. In my sketch of the conceptual shape of the problem of normativity, I suggested the difficulty of attending at one and the same time to its two aspects, its function in processes of ideological normalization and its function as a register of claims on the perspective of agency; and I suggested further that our attempts to understand normativity, sexuality, and their intersection are hampered by what is mostly a failure even to acknowledge that this difficulty exists. Now I want to suggest that, given the insistence with which late medieval representations of sexuality simultaneously embed normative ideology and what is often quite profound thinking about normative claims on agency, renewed attention to these representations with just this set of concerns in mind might enable us, in Foucault's phrase, to "get free of ourselves" in a way we need to do to go on thinking about these matters in productive ways.[36] Further, if Foucault is right that the medieval construction of sexuality provides the crucial prehistory of the more distinctively modern processes by which it came to seem that sex offered a secret truth about one's innermost self – and here, after all, Foucault is developing lessons he learned from Peter Brown – this getting free of ourselves may be somewhat closer to getting to know ourselves than we are inclined to think. The very "middleness" of the Middle Ages – its occupation of a middle distance in the historical imagination in which we cannot quite see immediate precursors to ourselves, but in which contemporary western culture remains more directly implicated than it is, say, in ancient Greek "practices of the self" – gives it real heuristic value for our thinking about the ways sexuality and normativity remain entangled today.[37] If such a thought seems worth pursuing, then it suggests the value of a study of normativity that foregrounds its relations to sexuality and focuses historically on medieval culture. That goes some way towards describing the present project, but stops well short of describing a book on the *Canterbury Tales*. One reason this book has the focus it does is that the perspective of agency is hard to

keep in view in a discussion that covers a large discursive territory. As I have already suggested and will argue further, an analysis of agency is not the same thing as an analysis of the subject: tracing the cultural and discursive circuits through which the subject is constructed will not tell us what an agent is or what it is like to be one. But, as I have already indicated, the main reason for this book's focus is that Chaucer himself undertakes a powerful and searching exploration of the intersection of normativity and sexuality, and the sustained effort to track the subtlety and energy of Chaucer's writing has much to teach us. More specifically, as I said in discussing Emily in her garden, exploring the joint conceptual and historical problematics of normativity is essential to the most basic literary-critical project of this book, that of understanding Chaucer as a philosophical love poet. I will conclude this introduction with a quick literary and historical sketch of the Chaucer I will be discussing, together with a brief overview of the plan of the book.

PHILOSOPHICAL CHAUCER AND THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

It is easy to understand why *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale* have been seen as Chaucer's great philosophical-erotic poems. More than anything else he wrote, these two long poems give ample attention to explicitly represented philosophical themes and problems, and both engage erotic desire as a central philosophical preoccupation and a powerful impetus to philosophical reflection. Further, both were probably written around the middle of Chaucer's career, when he may have also been engaged in his translations of the *Consolation of Philosophy* and the *Romance of the Rose.* And both show him to be steeped in French and Italian poetic traditions that combine interests in courtly erotic lyricism and philosophical dialectic. But while I think there is much of interest in the *Troilus*, I will discuss it only in passing; and I will not begin with the *Knight's Tale*. As my paradigmatic text for introducing Chaucer's philosophical poetics and its intersection with erotic life I will rather take the *Miller's Tale*, which has long been regarded as perhaps the most antiphilosophical, not to mention anticourtly, of Chaucer's poems; and only in the context provided by that tale will I turn to Chaucer's engagements with courtly eroticism in the *Knight's Tale*, and from there to accounts of what he learned from

Boethius and the *Rose*. In making the opening pair of Canterbury narratives rather than the *Troilus* the occasion for identifying Chaucer with a species of philosophical poetry, I will argue that as Chaucer leaves behind a poetry concerned with adapting philosophical sources and directly representing philosophical themes, his writing becomes more genuinely philosophical, that is to say, a more powerful and capacious vehicle for speculative endeavor.

My argument thus provides both a version and an inversion of a familiar narrative of Chaucer's poetic development. That narrative goes something like this: as Chaucer's interests develop in the formative years of the *Canterbury* project, they take him away from the abstract concerns of his dream-visions and of the Boethian literary tradition of Alain de Lille, Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meun, and the like, and thus away from the philosophically idealist commitments of courtly eroticism. Instead he moves towards an interest in ordinary talk and daily social life, the richly variegated spaces of conflicting opinions and motives that philosophy has always tried to cleanse of its impurities. These spaces exhibit people's concerns with all sorts of things: love, certainly, but also just plain sex, not to mention money, prestige, power, and so on – and the intellectual purchase of extended reflection, as even a philosopher must admit, comes fairly far down on such a list. According to this story, the *Canterbury Tales* constitutes both a radical break with Chaucer's earlier writings and a development of comic and skeptical tendencies that had always been part of his work. Think for instance of *The House of Fame*, in which the narrator's Dantean agent of visionary instruction is a pedantic windbag of an eagle, and in which the source of the "tidings" on which opinion and fame are based is a whirling wicker cage from which truth and falsehood escape at random, sometimes getting inextricably combined into a single discursive lump as they try to squeeze past each other through the cage's narrow openings.[38] *The House of Fame* is a text with a strong and overt investment in a major philosophical problem, that of the relation between representation and truth; just as *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale* show a strong investment in major philosophical problems such as the conflict between free will and determinism, and the structure and motives of moral deliberation. But *The House of Fame* also treats its topics skeptically, not just in the quasitechnical sense that

it articulates a position according to which we can never definitively sort truth from falsehood in the representations on which all discursive knowledge depends, but also in the colloquial sense that it treats this philosophical problem itself with ironic detachment. *The House of Fame* thus pursues the problem of truth and representation not in the technical mode of epistemological theory nor in the sublime mode of Platonist mythography, but rather through intentionally playful tropes that make it hard to maintain the somber tones of philosophical seriousness.

In the *Canterbury Tales*, so the story goes, Chaucer mostly leaves this sort of overt philosophical thematization behind, and when he bothers to engage it at all, either so greatly ups the ante on its silliness that it cannot be taken seriously – think of the barnyard philosophizing of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* – or exhibits it as a form of psychic and political pathology, as in what is now perhaps the dominant reading of the *Knight's Tale*.[39] But for the most part Chaucer simply goes straight for the world of "tidings." He will no longer anxiously and ironically explore the wish to be Dante, privy to visions which transcend the possibilities of linguistic expression; he will just be one pilgrim among others, and one not terribly deserving of notice at that. Further, unlike in *The House of Fame*, this rejection of the visionary model will now less be expressive of a philosophical position capable of abstract formulation – as in that poem a species of skepticism or anti-idealism – than a device to enable attention to what is really of interest to him, the great comic landscape of human talk.

I think such a story has much to recommend it. But it can also be misleading. For one thing, it seems to suggest for the *Canterbury Tales* some version of what has variously been called the "genial Chaucer," or the "liberal-humanist Chaucer," or the "ironic Chaucer" – under whatever label, a Chaucer who, through slipperiness or wisdom or bad ideology, refuses to adopt a philosophical or political position, imagining himself a subject without an ideology, and preferring the urbane wit of a wry but pleasant-humored detachment from the muddlings of the all too situated pilgrim narrators.[40] Any such view of Chaucer's identity as a poet is, I think, badly mistaken, and the Chaucer I will be conjuring is considerably more tough-minded and disturbing than this one, and considerably less the victim of bourgeois ideology.[41] What the view of

Chaucer as "genial" responds to, besides his sense of humor, is his utter disinclination to preachiness and polemic: as Lee Patterson rightly puts it, "Chaucer's . . . characteristic relation to the world was analytical rather than rhetorical."[42] But that is just to say that the task Chaucer sets himself is not that of urging some philosophical theory or legislating some moral or social program, but rather that of critically examining the space of individual and collective action and motive, the drives to theory and moral and social legislation, and the opacities and disjunctions that appear between the normative theories we spin and the worlds and identities we inhabit. And that is essentially a philosophical project, even if, as was always the case for Chaucer, it is less directed than philosophy usually is towards the goal of saying what is true about the problems it investigates.

Another potential danger of the standard narrative of Chaucer's career is that, for critics still inclined to read the *Canterbury Tales* as a serious intellectual project, Chaucer can seem to have developed an interest in politics and sociality in his later work which is fundamentally opposed to the philosophical impulse; on such accounts, philosophy then becomes associated with a politically and ideologically bankrupt idealism involving a wish for freedom from the vicissitudes of history.[43] No doubt the *Tales* do reflect a stronger and more capacious interest in an analytics of politics and sociality than Chaucer's earlier work. That is part of what makes the *Tales* so well suited to the study of ideological normalization. But we can begin to see why this interest in politics and sociality bears no necessary relation to a rejection of philosophy if we briefly turn to another familiar story about Chaucer, one that attempts to explain his concern with the analysis of political and social formations and of the subject positions of those who inhabit them. This story relates Chaucer's basic habits of mind to some important demographic and economic changes in late medieval England: plague, depopulation, a shortage of labor, the infiltration of a money economy not only into urban mercantile centers but into the furthest reaches of the English countryside, the spread of literacy, and so on.[44] Perhaps the most global effect of these changes was to make England a society without a workable articulate view of its normative social structure and its functional social relations. In Chaucer's lifetime, the prevailing view concerning the structure of English society, and the only one that offered a

presumptively comprehensive theory of social structure and social relations was still the three estates model. But while Gower and other contemporaries of Chaucer could still refer to the three estates model with confidence that everyone would assent to its obvious truthfulness, demographic and economic changes were making it increasingly ill-fitted to social reality. While it may have taken a keen and penetrating intelligence to think well about this lack of fit, we can be sure that in some sense it registered with practically everyone. We might say that the three estates model had something of the function for late medieval England that the notion of US social and political arrangements being built on principles of justice has for us: it was necessary for the well-functioning of the social system that almost everyone believe in it, even while it was incoherent in the daily experience of many if not all of its subjects.

As Patterson and others have argued, Chaucer himself was someone who, like his comic self-representation in the *Tales*, never quite belonged anywhere in the society of which he got to see so much; and this displacement helped to make him an acute observer of a rich and varied landscape of social norms, and a keen analyst of the political and psychic functions of those norms. Chaucer's early writerly career had been as a poet of and for the aristocracy, working within recognizably courtly poetic forms. But in writing the *Tales*, he left this career behind in favor of a poetry with a less easily identifiable audience and strong interests in social locations that do not fit well with articulable social structures, and in more wide-ranging disjunctions between persons' identifiable social roles and their inhabitable senses of self. Far from making the *Tales* antiphilosophical, however, this interest in the incoherence and opacity of the norms by which people live is just what I have been saying makes Chaucer's later poetry philosophically rich, even when it is emptied of any obvious philosophical themes.

The large structure of this book – two chapters on the *Canterbury Tales*, followed by two on Chaucer's main philosophical interlocutors, the *Consolation of Philosophy* and the *Romance of the Rose*, followed by two more that return to the *Tales* – is partly shaped by my sense of how, by the time of his main work on the *Tales*, Chaucer came to understand the intersection between his poetic and philosophical interests. As I have suggested, Chaucer is less interested in the abstract articulation of philosophical problems themselves than he is in the ways persons

inhabit them, in what we might call the affective and political life of philosophical problems. While I will be arguing that philosophical work can help us clarify Chaucer's interests in affect and politics, it will be truest to those interests to allow the work of philosophy to emerge from the welter of beliefs, desires, and commitments that constitutes the practical attitudes people live by and which Chaucer was so good at capturing. Also, it is essential to my argument that Chaucer was a poet rather than a systematic thinker. Matters of literary form, among them genre, narrative, tone, metaphor, and character, are at the core of my readings and of the ways I understand Chaucer to engage philosophical questions from the situated perspectives of the Canterbury pilgrims. Again, beginning and ending with the poetry – and specifically, beginning with the *Miller's Tale*, a poem whose philosophical engagements emerge from questions of poetic form and narrative investment rather than from explicitly philosophical passages or themes – will allow this feature of Chaucer's interests to emerge most clearly. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, philosophy as I understand it, and as I think Chaucer understood it, is more a matter of probing a difficult and evolving set of problems than it is of laying out doctrines that can be neatly summarized and classified according to schools of thought. In fact, such summaries of philosophical doctrine can be in a sense anti-philosophical, insofar as they make it hard to capture what I am calling the work of philosophy, its dependence on the risk of thought and on the practical and conceptual difficulties that motivate it.[45] Beginning, as it were, *in medias res*, in the midst of a situated subject's engagements with philosophical problems, is thus in my view truer to what philosophy is and why it matters, as well as to how it matters to Chaucer, than beginning by systematically tracing the philosophical positions Chaucer and his main intellectual interlocutors held.

Apart from such considerations, the order of the chapters also allows for a progressively broader and deeper understanding of the central philosophical issues Chaucer's poetry engages. Chapter one begins the book's discussions of normativity by posing the question of why there should be a problem concerning normativity in the first place. More specifically, the chapter addresses what is perhaps the simplest form of an answer to normative questions, an appeal to nature as normativity's ground. The Chaucerian locus of such an appeal is the *Miller's Tale*,

which in its polemical critique of the *Knight's Tale* stages an implicit argument that nature determines desire and its objects. The Miller means this argument to provide a basis for action and identity generally speaking, and he also means for it to underwrite a picture of sexual desire and gender difference which has antifeminist and heteronormative implications. I argue, however, that a naturalistic theory cannot answer the questions concerning action, identity, and desire the Miller faces. As a consequence, his belated, nostalgic way of holding to such a theory does as much to undermine his sense of normative gender and sexuality as it does to support it, and in the process reveals queer identifications and desires which the narrative can never effectively keep out of sight. In pursuing this argument, the chapter begins the book's project of locating Chaucer's interests in gender and sexuality within the frame of his philosophical concerns, and specifically of his interest in the structure of practical rationality.

Central to the Miller's naturalism is the idea that practical reason is an unwarranted excess whose exercise only distracts from the ends nature has already provided. Since chapter one argues that this idea is incoherent, chapter two addresses the question of what place practical reason might have in determining the ends of action. The chapter does so by turning to the *Knight's Tale*, which in its idealization of Theseus as the embodiment of practical wisdom is the object of the Miller's critique. The chapter elaborates the Knight's ideal of a Thesean deliberative rationality that could ground right individual conduct and a just polity. While this ideal directly engages the normative questions naturalism evades, I argue that it is finally unable to capture the complexity of the Knight's own sense of the grounds of action and identity. Once again, sexuality provides a central site on which this complexity gets registered. For the deliberative rationality for which Theseus strives is predicated on the renunciation of erotic passion, and as such it cannot accommodate either the Knight's glamorization of Palamon and Arcite's erotic suffering or his identification with a formalist ethical and erotic ideal whose clearest embodiment is Emily. In pursuing this argument, the chapter continues the book's concern with the ambivalences of normative masculinity and its consequences for both sexes, while refining its analysis of the difficulties involved in understanding the basis of practical normativity.

While chapters one and two explore those difficulties in the context of specific and problematic attempts to answer normative questions, neither chapter provides a direct analysis of why normativity resists grounding in a comprehensive theory. Chapter three takes up that task in the context of an extended reading of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. The chapter does so partly through careful attention to Boethius's dialectical method, which I see as at least as important as Boethius's philosophical views for understanding Chaucer's interest in agentive self-division and misrecognition. Since Philosophy in the *Consolation* is a figure for the Prisoner's own reflective capacities, I read the dialogue as pursuing an interior argument that arises from conflicts in his most basic intuitions concerning action and desire. These conflicts, hardly peculiar to the Prisoner, are paradigmatic for a rational creature, and Chaucer found ways to represent them through a range of poetic means independent of dialogue form. Further, Boethius's dialectical investigations of self-division provide the terms for a philosophical analysis of many of the psychological phenomena central to Chaucer's representations of erotic life, including repression, fetishism, and masochism. Chapter three thus provides the core of the book's argument that we can understand such phenomena in ways independent of psychoanalysis. More specifically, the chapter argues that such phenomena have a source that is not in itself sexual, and that cannot be fully understood through the causal analysis provided by a psychoanalytic history of the subject. That source lies in an antinomy that structures practical rationality, and that insures that an investment in having a coherent agency and identity is necessarily inflected by an investment in self-dissolution and self-punishment. In this sense, agency and identity are constitutively masochistic, even as masochism becomes a name for a condition of agentive and psychic life rather than an avoidable or aberrant psychosexual condition.

While chapter three brackets sexuality to ask how the conditions of practical rationality help to shape psychological phenomena, chapter four asks how this analysis might be brought to bear on erotic life. The chapter does so through a close reading of the *Roman de la Rose*, since that text played a central role in mediating philosophy and poetry for Chaucer, as well as in shaping his sense of sexuality as a site for such mediation. The chapter returns to the ambivalences animating

hegemonic masculinity, and argues that they exemplify a crisis of intelligibility in the emergent structures of western romantic love. This crisis is epitomized in the poem's representation of the courtly lover, whose desire depends on the interpenetration of sadomasochistic structures with a longing for utopian sociality. I argue that the analysis of practical rationality developed in chapter three, especially when it is elaborated in terms of its consequences for understanding the late medieval application of classical friendship theory to the erotic scene, provides a set of terms for understanding why sexual desire involves wishes for violence directed towards both the erotic object and the desiring subject. Chapter four thus continues the previous chapter's projects of recovering the deep history of psychological phenomena often thought of as distinctively modern and associated with psychoanalysis, and of offering an analysis of such phenomena derived from the intellectual traditions most important to Chaucer. The chapter also serves as a bridge back to questions of literary representation, through an argument that allegory functions in the *Rose* as a supple vehicle for speculative endeavor and for representing the mobility of fantasy, rather than a static embodiment of abstract concepts. That suppleness, I think, is what drew Chaucer to the *Rose* throughout his career, and what makes the *Rose* closer to Chaucer's project in the *Canterbury Tales* than has been allowed by accounts focused on the question of literary realism.

With the theoretical and contextual work of chapters three and four in hand, chapters five and six return to the *Canterbury Tales* to elaborate the book's discussions of intersubjectivity and the ideal of a utopian intimacy in which "two become one." Chapter five does so by expanding the book's scope beyond its earlier focus on the incoherences of normative masculinity, to examine in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* the contours of a feminine subjectivity more directly trained on such an ideal than are the men. Despite the Wife's commitment to that ideal, I argue that she remains in the grip of fantasies of narcissized self-interest, of instrumentalized relations with others and with her own body, and of subjectivity as a private interior space, all of which were central to the book's discussions of masculine subjectivity as well. By turning to a feminine subjectivity for which utopian intimacy is a central value, the chapter provides a deeper appreciation of how those fantasies are structured by intersubjective desire. The chapter also advances the

book's discussion of masochism, moving beyond the earlier chapters' focus on the conceptual structure of courtly desire to develop a fuller account of a masochistic erotics not reducible to courtliness. Such an account is facilitated by the turn to a feminine subjectivity fractured by incompatible but overlapping desires to resist the objectifying desire men have for it, to yield itself up to that desire, and to shatter the very subject position made for it by patriarchal ideology.

My discussion of the Wife of Bath, like all of the book's discussions of sexuality, explores attractions and resistances to an ideal of love that is incompatible with naturalist, instrumentalist, and subjectivist fantasies and the ideologies of gender and desire that circulate around and through them. Chapter six turns to the question of what would be required to constitute oneself and one's desires in relation to such an ideal. The Clerk offers Grisilde as a model of loving self-constitution, but while Grisilde embodies unconditional love and strength of will, her very strength and unconditionality implicate her in violations of maternal duty and in her own subjection to Walter, whose sadistic hunger for knowledge and control of her is both fueled and enabled by her exemplary patience. In keeping with my claim that Chaucer's poetry is most powerful philosophically when it explores the conflicts in our beliefs and values, I argue that he means to produce what has been, since the tale's first reception, a divided response of admiration and repulsion at Grisildan unconditionality. If Grisilde embodies what love would have to be not to be fractured, there is finally no way to avoid such fracturing, not because we are somehow flawed or lacking, but because our divided response to Grisilde is the sign of an irresolvable split in love's conceptual and affective structure. Chapter six thus completes the book's argument that an analysis of practical rationality is essential to the analysis of sexuality and ideology. For love emerges from this discussion not as the redemptive other to the pathological desires and ideologies that inform so much of erotic life in the *Canterbury Tales*, but rather as itself structured around a Boethian antinomy of the will that is a source of such pathologies.