

THE OPACITY OF RENUNCIATION IN

CHAUCER'S *CANTERBURY TALES*

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ABSTRACT

The dissertation provides a systematic study of the theme of renunciation in the *Canterbury Tales*. Irreconcilable oppositions cluster around renunciation in almost all of the occurrences of the theme in Chaucer's book. The effects of these oppositions are varied: they render his ideological commitments inaccessible, protecting him from hostile criticism; they arouse the suspicion of poetic incompetence; they reflect the controversies about renunciation in Western ascetic literature; and they mirror the oppositional structure of the universe—the *concordia discors* posited by many writers in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. To demonstrate and historicize Chaucer's evasive development of the theme of renunciation, each chapter reads the poet's work alongside the writings of major patristic and medieval theorists of asceticism.

Chapter 1 examines renunciations of poetry. Chaucer's pilgrimage audience rejects the Monk's tragedies. These conventionally monastic poems are not compatible with the anti-ascetic Monk of the *General Prologue*. Chaucer conjoins a

heterodox pilgrim and an impeccably orthodox tale, puzzling and boring his fictional audience. Likewise, the *Parson's Tale*—a treatise on confession compiled from mendicant sources—is incompatible with the Parson who appears in the *General Prologue* as a Wycliffite ideal, and the incompatibility undermines the Parson's renunciation of verse and fable. The most explicit denial of literature, the *Retraction*, tactfully lends itself to irreconcilable interpretations. Chapter 2 concerns the renunciation of music and excessive speech in the *Manciple's Tale*. Chaucer playfully constructs the ending of the tale in order to prompt contradictory assessments of its decorum. Chapter 3 demonstrates that, though the *Miller's Tale* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* urge renunciation of curiosity, the acute ambivalence of the tales renders them morally incoherent. The final chapter addresses poems in which characters are praised for their renunciations: the *Clerk's Tale* constructs its protagonist out of ascetic contradictions and makes contradictory demands on its audience; the doctrine of world harmony salvages the moral incoherence of the *Franklin's Tale* from absurdity but does not clarify Chaucer's moral perspective on the narrative. Where the theme of renunciation arises in the *Canterbury Tales*, the poet's tone often becomes difficult—if not impossible—to determine.