Chaucer’s Retraction
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The Retraction at the end of the Parson’s tale and the end of the whole work, which has puzzled generations of scholars, may be, as Pearsall has suggested, Chaucer’s “response to the [Parson’s] call for penitence, and penitence now .......Chaucer’s own act of Satisfaction” for sin.\(^1\) If so, it must have been done with considerable ambivalence, for it contains a pretty full bibliography of Chaucer’s own work, of the kind that authors normally display with pride. He may be renouncing them, but fortunately that makes no difference to their survival; they were safely out of his hands.

Chaucer says more than once, and repeats in the Retraction, that all that is written is written for our doctrine, but pardoners could say the same as they told scurrilous tales in church, as many of them did, according to Wycliffe, a sharp critic of the contemporary church. And certainly it would be difficult to squeeze much moral doctrine from tales like those of the Miller and the Reeve. But Chaucer’s contemporaries and immediate successors clearly concluded that doctrine of some sort, even if not the Parson’s sort, could be had from all that Chaucer had written. If his contemporary world had agreed with all of his Retraction, there would not have been so many manuscripts of his work that still survive after 600 years. If churchmen had wanted to suppress his work, they could have done a much better job than that.

One cleric, though fictional, probably spoke for many other real ecclesiastics: “Taketh the morality, good men”, says Chaucer’s Nun’s Priest, “Taketh the fruit, and let the chaff be still.”

Sensible good men did just that. We can do the same.

Retraction
is on the next page

Now pray I to them all that hearken this little treatise or read it, that if there be anything in it that liketh [pleases] them, that thereof they thank our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom proceedeth all wit and all goodness; and if there be anything that displeaseth them, I pray them also that they arrette [charge it] it to the default of my uncunning [ignorance] and not to my will, that would fain have said better if I had had cunning [skill]; for our book saith, all that is written is written for our doctrine, and that is my intent.

Wherefore I beseech you meekly for the mercy of God that ye pray for me, that Christ have mercy on me and forgive me my guilts, and namely of my translations and inditings of worldly vanities, the which I revoke in my Retractions, as the book of Troilus, the book also of Fame, the book of the Five-and-twenty Ladies, the book of the Duchess, the book of Saint Valentine's day of the Parliament of Birds, the Tales of Canterbury, those that sounen unto [conduce to] sin, the book of the Lion, and many another book, if they were in my remembrance, and many a song and many a lecherous lay, Christ of his great mercy; forgive me the sin. But of the translation of Bœce de Consolatione, and other books of legends of saints and of homilies, and morality, and devotion, that thank I our Lord Jesus Christ and his blissful mother and all the saints in heaven, beseeching them that they from henceforth unto my life's end send me grace to bewail my guilts, and to study to the salvation of my soul, and grant me grace of very penance, confession, and satisfaction to do in this present life through the benign grace of Him that is King of Kings and Priest of all priests, that bought us with the precious blood of his heart, so that I may be one of them at the day of doom [judgement] that shall be saved.

Qui cum patre et spiritu sancto vivis et regnas Deus per omnia secula. Amen
Who with the Father and the holy spirit lives and reigns, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Here is ended the Book of the Tales of Caunterbury, compiled by Geoffrey Chaucer of whose soul Jesus Christ have Mercy. Amen