ABSTRACT

CHAUCERIAN PHYSIOGNOMY AND THE DELINEATION OF THE ENGLISH INDIVIDUAL

By William Patrick Orth

The unique question my thesis addresses can be stated thusly: Why does physiognomy appear—suddenly and forcefully—as a discursive component of character development in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales? When examined against contemporary literary texts (i.e. Jean de Meun, John Gower and Giovanni Boccaccio) no similar implements of narrative “marking” work, as they do in the Canterbury Tales, to physically and accurately ground causal linkages between behavior and the individual.

My thesis argues for three possible explanations: the 12th/13th century reemergence of Aristotelian empiricism and its subsequent effect on philosophers such as Duns Scotus and William Ockham; the increasingly ornate (and politicized) aesthetics of High Gothic art and architecture; and, finally, an emerging impulse towards decolonizing the English nation. I also offer the argument that Chaucerian physiognomy might very well operate—conterminously with the aforementioned influences—as a mode of class interpellation.
CHAUCERIAN PHYSIOGNOMY AND
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Throughout Western history, physiognomy has intermittently captured the attention of both scholars and the public-at-large. For example, during the last quarter of the 18th century, German philosopher Johann Caspar Lavater ignited something like a cultural frenzy in the parlors and reading rooms of Europe with release of his treatise, Physiognomische Fragmente. Within a mere decade of its English translation in 1789, the science of physiognomy found itself securely en vogue with British authors. Lavater’s theories had crossed the English Channel with such ease partially because, as Katherine Hart observes, they fed into the already-established English “preoccupation with reading the outward guise” (127). The English novel, in particular, latched on with great alacrity to the discourse of physiognomy. By 1830, literary portraiture could claim a distinct symbolic language—one with a discursive and rhetorical range that encompassed not just the face, but also the body, vegetation, weather, animals and landscapes.

Today, Lavater’s notions of physiognomy/phrenology persist. Despite having earned the reputation as a “pseudo-science,” and despite continued disapprobation from mainstream scientific scholarship, physiognomy nevertheless holds uncontested spaces in the theatres of cultural representation. Modern literature, film, song and television continue to speak in the language of its outer/inner correlation, a correlation John Friedman sketches thusly: “man’s soul follows the changes in his body and his body follows changes in his soul” (141). One need only look at the characters of American film to see this language of physiognomy at work: it is ever-apparent in villain’s low brows and thin lips; in the hero’s high forehead and pleasant, symmetrical countenance. Caricature—racial and otherwise—also exploits physiognomy’s symbols: on the editorial page, in cartoons, in cheap novels, and frequently in the ubiquitous advertisements of Capitalist society. While the most overt abuses of physiognomy (such as those seen in the heyday of the minstrelsy) have given way to more subtle uses, it is not uncommon to find national and/or racial categories still idealized through the use of Lavater’s symbolic language. Simply put, Western Tradition continues to posit the Other, both morally and materially, through the recognizable markers of physical appearance—through the discourse of physiognomy.

However, while Lavater’s version physiognomy is that most familiar to modern audiences, the origins of this symbolic language may be traced some three millennia into

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1 The list of late 18th and early 19th century English novelists who make use of Lavater’s work is impressive: Sterne; Hogg; Fielding; William Godwin; Ann Radcliffe; Austen; Brontë; Sir Walter Scott; and Thomas Hardy.

2 After eventually adopting the moniker “phrenology,” Lavater’s mass-culture science then immigrated to the United States (through Gall and Spurzhiem) where it became entangled with the raging arguments over race, class, and “inherent” criminality. Similarities between phrenology and Chaucerian physiognomy are discussed in the third chapter of this study.
the past. Embryonic glimpses of modern physiognomy appear intermittently in the art and philosophy of both classical and medieval authors. Indeed, it is within these early texts, such as Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, that one finds not only the foundations upon which Lavater structured his epistemology, but the precursors of what would later become so important to the novel, to racial interpellation, and to the discourses of nation(hood). Through the examination of these early texts, it is possible to read physiognomy as an evolving and flexible discourse, employed in various ways by various cultures, to wholly different (and sometimes strange) teleological ends. The goal of this study is to conduct such a reading; specifically, to read the 14th century texts of Geoffrey Chaucer as intimately engaged in the “use” of physiognomy toward a culturally dependent end. In doing so, my hope is to complete one step in a longer (and imminently necessary) examination of physiognomy as an apparatus of authority that has emerged haltingly over the course of some two thousand years. By examining early European representations of physiognomy, we thus begin the archeology needed to explain its modern incarnations.

II

Certainly, no other early source of physiognomical discourse has been as thoroughly explored as Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Perhaps because it integrates science and poetics so smoothly and clearly to the benefit of art, scholars have not infrequently taken on the task of exploring physiognomy’s role in the *Canterbury Tales*. Walter Clyde Curry’s seminal 1926 work on the subject, *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences*, painstakingly excavates “how and to what extent [Chaucer] made use of scientific material in the creation of his works of art” (xi).3 To his credit, Curry’s text allows modern readers and scholars to see the pilgrims of the *Canterbury Tales*, particularly the Miller, the Reeve, the Pardoner, and the Wife of Bath, through a proper contextual framework: one that makes sense of Dame Alysoun’s “gat-tothed” grin; the “wert” on the side of the Miller’s nose; and the “sclendre colerik” appearance of the Reeve. Curry’s research brings the inner/outer correlation of medieval physiognomy into sharp focus by arguing (and rightly so) for nothing less than an “exact correspondence between the characters and physical appearances of certain Canterbury Pilgrims” (xix). Yet, Curry shows little interest in recovering why Chaucer chooses to bring physiognomy exclusively into the portrayal of a religious pilgrimage to Canterbury. For Curry, the choice simply arises through “an intense curiosity regarding the sciences” and the artist’s natural inclination toward the concrete:

[Chaucer’s] poetical world was a world of concrete perceptions filled with a variety of individual human beings, whose characters and personalities, observed as acting or reacting to specific environments, constituted the material with which he worked. And all the elements which he employed in his creations were carefully subordinated to one outstanding purpose, the concrete representation of life. (viii)

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3 Curry, of course, explores more than just the science of physiognomy. He also addresses astrology, geomancy, metoposcopy, chiromancy, medical lore, dream-origins, and the physical affectations precipitated by the four humors.
Thus, Curry sees the employment of physiognomy as something perhaps not unexpected. The argument being that any artist might easily choose a similar path in the service of developing “concrete representations of life.”

However, this supposition begins to falter when read against Chaucer’s contemporaries—particularly the texts of Giovanni Boccaccio and John Gower. To my knowledge, no medieval author employs physiognomy to the extent that Chaucer does; moreover, even within Chaucer’s own oeuvre, physiognomy only truly surfaces in the context of the Canterbury pilgrims. Explaining this phenomenon requires more than a Formalist’s preoccupation with the concrete components of poetic artistry. Indeed, to explain the presence of physiognomy in Chaucer’s most prescient work, it is necessary to partially eschew the text itself in favor of examining 14th century culture at large—both English and Continental.

This study will argue that the sudden appearance of physiognomy in Chaucer’s late poesy results from the culmination of three forces: an increasing attention to Aristotelian empiricism (as informed by Scotus and Ockham); the aesthetically ubiquitous demands of High Gothic art; and, perhaps most importantly, a proto-nationalist need to “de-colonize” the English peoples from residual French/Norman interpellation. Before examining these forces, however, it is necessary to evidence just how innovative Chaucer’s use of physiognomy is, and how clearly it represents a break from both preceding and contemporary texts.

III

Difference allows definition, as the linguists argue, and defining Chaucer’s physiognomical discourse thus begins with defining what it is not. To that end, however, there is no broad category that quite captures pre-Chaucerian character delineation. The Greeks playwrights delineated character through the use of masks; the epics allowed heroic action to bespeak character. As Friedman points out, the early (and late) Medieval Romances often used “the movement of the eyes [and] the color of the cheeks” (139) to reveal interiority. Friedman terms this technique “affective physiognomy,” and while it is a pre-cognate of Chaucer’s physiognomy, it no more summates pre-Chaucerian character delineation than do the masks of Greek tragedy.

Yet, within the Greek tradition, the work set forth in Theophrastus’s (371 - 287 b.c.e.) short text, Characteres Ethicae, presents a logical starting point as well as a model

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4 John Block Friedman makes an important distinction amongst the schools of physiognomy in his 1981 article “Another Look at Chaucer and the Physiognomists”. Friedman distinguishes between what he terms humoral and affective physiognomy. Humoral physiognomy bears markers are permanent (written on the physical body) and relatively uncommon in medieval literature up until the appearance of the Canterbury Tales. The markers of affective physiognomy, on the other hand, are transient and typically relate to color changes in the face and movement of the eyes. Affective physiognomy appears throughout Chaucer’s work, as well as in the French romances that precede his work. Still another distinction might be made in reference to what Curry calls celestial physiognomy—the indelible markers that inevitably appear on the sons and daughters of each astrological sign.
familiar to Western Tradition. Perhaps best known as Aristotle’s successor, Theophrastus wrote his Characteres, according to the dedicatory note, at 99 years of age—after “having […] long […] observed the divers dispositions of men” (1). Such long observation ostensibly allows Theophrastus to separate “all sorts of natures bad and good” (1) into some 28 distinct categories, ranging from “Cavilling” to “Pride” and “Detraction.”

Under the Theophrastan model, character is revealed through action. The Caviller, for instance, is one who “will entertain his enemies with a pretence of love; who applaudeth those publickly, whom secretly he seeketh to supplant” (1-2). Or consider the Blockish fellow:

[…] who after he hath cast up an account, asketh him who stands next to him what the sum was; or one, who having a cause to be heard upon a peremptory day, forget himself, and goes into the country: and sitting in the Theatre, falls asleep, and when all are gone, is there left alone. (8)

As such an account reveals, while the portraits of Characteres do act as descriptive “snapshots” of character, they are snapshots exclusively informed by short descriptive narratives. Pride, for instance, is evidenced thusly: “A proud man is of this quality: if any man desire to speak to him speedily he will tell him that he will, after supper, walk a turne or two with him” (12). Appearance occasionally plays a role in the delineation of the Characteres, but it is appearance precipitated by action, not the reverse as physiognomy would have it. A Nasty fellow might have “ulcers in his legs, […] long and loathsome nails, […] [and] black and worm-eaten teeth” but the cause is solely “neglect, or carelesness of the body” (10). Characters that a modern audience can scarcely picture without reference to physiognomy, such as Avarice, herein appear without any reference to physical form(s). This Theophrastan notion, that character reveals itself naturally through action, does not capture the full range of pre-Chaucerian character development. However, it does seem an apt descriptor in most instances. It captures, at the least, the psychomachia that would later inform so many medieval plays, allegories, and debate-narratives.

Indeed, the Theophrastan model accounts for the vast majority of characters who appear in the oeuvres of Chaucer and his contemporaries. Yet, the Characteres did not remain in a fixed stasis across the centuries separating Theophrastus and Chaucer. Most noticeably, the Characteres seemed to consolidate into representations of the Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Cardinal Virtues. For example: the Obscene, Nasty, and Unpleasant are sometimes collapsed into simple Lechery; and the Blockish, Rustic, and Servile collapse into the single category of Sloth. The Ostentatious man, with his “boasts […] and shewing how high he is grown in gain” (11) became a branch of Pride. Some authors—Gower most notably—kept many of the Theophrastan characters but hierarchized them as secondary examples of the Seven Qualities. The Characteres also

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5Theophrastus’ Characteres, one of his few surviving works, appeared in many English translations and shaped character development throughout the Middle Ages. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Theophrastus”) The Roman de la Rose’s lamenting mention of Theophrastus suggests a familiarity with the work: “Ha! would I’d Theophrastus read / Ere, like a fool, I thrust my head / In wedlock's noose […]” (46.8975-8978). Book V of Troylus and Criseyde suggests Chaucer’s own familiarity with the text.
changed as authors used them in combination with one another to varying degrees of success. Finally, appearance began to be occasionally used in conjunction with action during the period leading up to the 14th century. A fine example of this appears in Chaucer’s Middle English translation (circa 1365) of Guillaume de Lorris’s 13th century Roman de la Rose.

We certainly find a proto-Theophrastan model at work in Chaucer’s Romaunt of the Rose, but we also find a shift in how character is understood and delineated. In the first section of the poem—that most clearly translated by Chaucer himself—Guillaume de Lorris’s Dreamer encounters a series of “ymages and peyntures” (142) on the wall surrounding the garden of Deduit. These images represent what are essentially Theophrastan-type characters: Idleness, Mirth, Hate, Courtesy, Simplicity, etc. However, we find attention here not just to revelatory narrative, but also to appearance.

It is important not to overstate this case: many of the images that appear to the Dreamer do rely on narrative action to delineate character. Covetousness, for example, is described thus:

And that is [Covetousness], for pennes feele,
That techeth for to rob and steele
These theves and these smale harlots;
And that is routhe, for by her throtes
Ful many one hongeth at the last.
She maketh folk compasse and cast
To taken other folks thynge
Through robberye and myscountyng. (189-196)

Covetousness has obviously moved here into a more psychomacian form, but the covetous individual still follows a narrative, similar to Characteres, and Covetousness (as allegorical figure) makes manifest her affectation through narrative action.

After passing the images on its walls, Romaunt’s Dreamer enters the Garden and encounters another series of allegorical personifications. These “persons” represent various attitudes towards courtly life or love, and their descriptions vary in length and type. Again, many follow the Theophrastan model. For example, Largess, “large of yeftes and free,” is described first through action, and only secondarily as having a “wel fourmed […] face” (1168, 1189). Others are characterized differently: Sweet-Looking, Love’s bachelor who carries the arrows of Beauty, Simplicity, and Fair-Appearance, is entirely characterized through his weaponry. Gladness is characterized through her “voice ful clere” and its ability to “syngen fyrst folk to solace” (751, 756). Yet, not all of the personifications in the Garden adhere to the tenets of Characteres; indeed, other figures present more interesting case studies.

The Avarice of Romaunt, for example, differs decidedly from that which appears in Characteres. A close reading of the two passages is useful. In the latter, the Avaricious man is described as “[he] who being with his feast-companions doth exact and stand upon a farthing as strictly, as if it were quarters rent out of his house; and telleth how many drinking-cups were taken out of his house, as if he were jealous of some Leger-demain” (6, emphasis in original). The Theophrastan man of Avarice continually surveys his property, sells goods at unconscionable rates, compounds usury upon usury, and forbids
his wife from lending salt or oil (6). In all, there are a total of twelve narrative examples informing the Theophrastan description of the vice of Avarice—none of which mention either physical form or characteristics.

The Romaunt of the Rose, however, proceeds with a different tact. Therein, Avarice is described in physical (and arguably physiognomical) detail. Unlike the Characteres’ description of Covetousness, Avarice appears:

[…] as grene as any leke.
So yvel hewed was hir colour,
Hir seemed to have lyved in langour.
[…] And she was clad full pourely
Al in an old torn courtepy […] (211-220)

This image might be understood as a middle-ground between the two modes of character development (Theophrastan and Chaucerian) and opens the space for an interesting distinction.

The Avarice of Characteres seems in some ways a palpable individual, a suggestion strengthened through realistic narratives that avoid the allegorical stance of psychomachian abstraction. Readers have little trouble picturing this figure, assiduously counting his farthings and drinking-cups, and many might claim to know “just such a person.” The Avarice of Romaunt is also an individual figure, but one whose representation is entirely allegorical; literally speaking, there is no “person” named Avarice. One might claim to know an Avaricious woman, but one cannot claim to know Avarice herself. The occasional physiognomy that does appear in Romaunt is therefore estranged from reality and for this reason feels artistically inferior—as an aesthetic methodology—to that pursued in Characteres. The figures in the work of Theophrastus succeed as characterizations, I believe, because they are less allegorized and disconnected from what D.W. Robertson calls “the simple signs of everyday life,” (12). This is perhaps why physiognomy all but disappears in Chaucer’s work as he moves towards Canterbury Tales. Translating the Roman was among his first acts as a serious, working artist, and its successes and failures seem to have pushed him decidedly toward a Theophrastan model.

To illustrate this, we need merely examine character development in a subsequent work such as Troylus and Criseyde. In that text, Chaucer is obviously no longer working with psychomachia. Troylus and Criseyde are not allegorical figures; rather, they are individuals, nicely fleshed as characters, and viscerally distinct from those characters surrounding them. Chaucer has a fine opportunity in their development to employ the physiognomy familiar to him through Aristotle, the Roman and the pseudo-Aristotelian Secreta Secretorum. However, he chooses to not only avoid character-through-appearance, but to position what little is given as ironic.

While it is obvious Chaucer imbibed significant artistic influence from Guillaume de Lorris’s Roman de la Rose, establishing his precise relationship with Aristotelian and pseudo-Aristotelian sources raises what Curry describes as “a problem of unusual complexion” (xvii). We know Chaucer was familiar with some Middle English version of the Secreta. (Curry, 72) David Luscombe describes some 600 manuscript versions of the Secreta, and was perhaps more widely disseminated than its own source material. (Luscombe, 62) Chaucer’s medicinal, astrological, physiognomic, and humoral knowledge suggests an intimacy with source material on these subjects as well. Moreover, as most of Aristotle’s physical treatises (including “Physiognomonika” and “On the History of Animals”) were circulating Europe by the 12th
For example, Criseyde is initially described by the narrator as “forpassying every wyght / So angelik was her beaute / That like a thing immortal semed she” (1.101-103). When Troylus first views her, a similar description unfolds, and it is through her “lymes so well answerynge” (1.282) that men easily perceive (through movement and appearance) that she exemplifies “Honour, estat, and wommanly noblesse” (1.288). The narrative of *Troylus and Criseyde* later proves otherwise, of course, as she abandons Troylus for the arms of the Grecian knight Diomedes. The sparse physiognomic description of Tryolus offered in Book V also proves to be inaccurate. Chaucer’s purpose thus seems one of negating or making ironic physical appearance. Because actual character is revealed through narrative action, the delineation of character in *Troylus and Criseyde* can thus be said to follow the Theophrastan model, despite its (sparse) use of physiognomic detail. Action, simply put, outweighs appearance.

The tales shared between Chaucer and his contemporaries, John Gower and Giovanni Boccaccio, show a similar pattern of character development: most follow in the tradition of *Characteres*: that is, physical/physiognomical description is used sparingly, and often for ironic effect. As Linda Tarte-Holley observes, “Chaucer frequently posits a figure whose stereotypical or iconographical recognition is clear. But in the course of the story […] the shift from expectation to failed expectation makes the narrative pattern” (44, emphasis in original). A fine example of this occurs in the “Wife of Bath’s Tale,” which appears in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* as “The Tale of Florent.”

Although certain details differ between the two stories (in Gower’s version, a murder precipitates the knight’s quest; in Chaucer, a rape) both utilize the figure of a foul old woman as part of the knight’s test/punishment. Because there is an emphasis here not only on age, but also on appearance, one might expect either artist to employ physiognomy as a means of delineating the repulsiveness of the figure. In Gower’s “Florent”, attention is indeed given to the appearance of the “vecke,” some of which sounds decidedly physiognomical in nature:

Hire Nase bass, hire browes hyhe,
Hire yhen small and depe set,
[…]
Hire Lippes schrunken be for age,
There was no grace in the visage,
Hir front was nargh, hir lockes hore,
[…]
Hire Necke is schort, hir schuldres courbe (1678-1685)

Some of the features presented in this description arise, in the Theophrastan manner, as a result of life and/or lifestyle. The “vecke’s” lips and eyes may be accounted for in such a manner, along with her hoary locks and slumped shoulders. Her nose, brows, neck and visage, however, do not fall into this category. These are physiognomic details—details

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7 This is a theme Chaucer will return to in the “Wife of Bath’s Tale.”
addressed in both Aristotle’s texts and the *Secreta Secretorum*. However, much necessary information is missing from these descriptions: the thickness of the neck and brows, the shape of the nose, the sub-strata of humors that ultimately sculpt her physiognomy. The details provided reinforce the arc of the narrative, but do little beyond that.

In his version of the tale, Chaucer actually takes less time to delineate the appearance of the faerie woman. She is described initially as a “fouler wight [than any] man [might] devyse” (999). The woman later describes herself as “foul and old” (1213), yet Chaucer never moves past this rather perfunctory description. This is particularly noteworthy in light of the attention to Wife of Bath’s physiognomic details. Chaucer, if he indeed wrote these texts in chronological order, seems to have either: 1) Exhausted his attention to physiognomy in the description of Dame Alysoun, or 2) Purposefully avoided grounding the character of the old woman in specificity.

At any rate, what physiognomic detail does shape the portraiture of the old woman—in either “The Tale of Florent” or “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”—matters little upon conclusion of the tale. The “vecke,” much like both Troylus and Criseyde, falsely signifies through physical appearance. Earlier descriptions of necks, shoulders, etc., read ironically when the “foule wight” transforms into “a lady […] / of eyhteteine wynter age, / […] the faireste of visage” (“Florent” 1802-1803). Indeed, one of the ostensible lessons readers might take from these tales concerns the unreliability of physical appearance as an accurate signifier of character: in these narratives, the handsome and chivalrous knights of Arthur’s court lust and rape, and the foulest of women transform magically into the most beautiful of young maidens. Moreover, in both versions of the tale the knight is ultimately allowed to *choose* the physical exterior of his new wife—a fact that suggests a certain malleability between signifier and signified, as if the inner character might attach itself to any exterior, regardless of physiognomic appearance, and retain its fundamental characteristics.

Other tales shared by Chaucer and Gower utilize physiognomy to an even lesser extent. The “Man of Law’s Tale” (which Gower writes as “The Tale of Constance”) seemingly ignores two excellent openings for physiognomic detail; specifically, there exists in the figures of Constance and the Sultan’s mother opportunity for a detailed contradistinction—through physicality—that simply never manifests itself. In a tale that focuses on the difficulties inherent to the coupling of beauty and holiness, physiognomy offered an artistic technique through which both might be signified simultaneously. By describing the beauty and the grace of Constance *separately*, Chaucer takes more narrative space than need be taken and seemingly ignores the range of artistic tools at his disposal. Gower proceeds much in the same way, mentioning the “the beaute and the

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8 The *Secreta* addresses noses, necks, and visages (or “frounts”) in particular detail. Concerning necks: “He Þat hauyss a lonyge neke, he shal be of good sound, but foltysc ys he; And he þat hauyss a short neke, ys queueyte, and deckyuant, engynous in euyl, & trechour; And he þat hauyss a greet neke, ys foltysc, and mekyll, etynge” (10.126, emphasis added). It is not clear what Gower intends by describing the old woman’s nose as “Bass.” Most likely, he is describing the size of the nose, and its effect on the voice. Peck glosses the word to mean “low,” but that hardly seems accurate. Gower would have probably used “longe” if he intended to refer to vertical measurements. Finally, we cannot be sure whether “nargh,” in relation to the forehead, addresses vertical or horizontal dimensions. In either case, however, the derogatory connotation remains the same.

9 The role magic plays in disconnecting signifier and signified cannot be discounted here.
grace” (“Constance” 622) of Constance, but never connecting the two through the description of physiognomic features. The evil of the Sultan’s mother unfolds in an entirely Theophrastan manner. No temptation to catalog the physiognomy of the Sultan’s mother, despite her characterization as a “beste of helle” (“Constance” 1278) and the very “roote of iniquitee” (“Man of Law’s Tale” 358), ever evidences itself. In light of the artistic delight Chaucer obviously takes in physiognomy (vis-à-vis his pilgrims) it must have taken something like an act of will to resist adding concrete physical descriptions to these characters. As Linda Tarte Holley points out in her book *Chaucer’s Measuring Eye*, “Chaucer’s was an age of vision […] in the simple terms of physical seeing” (18) and thus we cannot help but wonder why he opts, in such instances, to tell rather than show. (Chapter 3 will offer two possible explanations.)

As we have seen thus far, the non-ironic amalgamation of physiognomic detail and narrative action remains an elusive thing. The examples discussed to this point have either appeared in relation to an allegorical figure (as in *Romaunt*) or as false signifiers. Not one example has shown physiognomy as a reliable method for structuring the character of an individual; indeed, the vast majority of both Chaucer’s and Gower’s work eschews physiognomy altogether—relying instead on the Theophrastan model of delineating character through action alone.

We find the antecedent for this particular approach, aside from *Characteres* and *Confessio Amantis*, primarily in Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*. Chaucer shares more narrative tales with Boccaccio than Gower, and that weighty influence perhaps explains the overwhelming lack of physiognomy in Chaucer’s art. Certainly, a close reading of *The Decameron* reveals almost nothing in the way of physiognomic description. Boccaccio exhibits little artistic inclination to move beyond the bare essentials of physical portrayal—meaning those requisite details which set the foundation for narrative irony, establish age or attractiveness, or reinforce virginal innocence. Certainly, Boccaccio’s maidens and wives are “pretty” or “beautiful” when necessary, and his Kings and knights are “tall and handsome.” But Boccaccio’s interest in narrative circumscribes excessive descriptive flourishes. In the six Decameron narratives that Chaucer adapts into the *Canterbury Tales*, few physical details are either added or changed; the narratives themselves change (sometimes significantly), but little attempt, with one critical exception, is made by Chaucer to more concretely flesh Boccaccio’s characters.10 A brief analysis of two of the tales adopted by Chaucer will adequately illustrate this point.

Day 8, Tale 1, which Chaucer offers as “The Shipman’s Tale”, is a study in austere physical description. Madonna Ambruogia alone receives any attention to her outward appearance: Boccaccio—through his narrator, Lauretta—portrays her simply as a “very beautiful woman” (588). Neither the merchant nor the ex-soldier Gulfrado (a friar in Chaucer’s version) enjoys any description of their appearance whatever. It is only through narrative action that we discover Gulfrado to be, in the Theophrastan tradition, a “caviller”; likewise, the merchant’s rusticity and avariciousness reveals itself through narrative, rather than through physical channels. Chaucer’s version of the tale proceeds in much the same way: the merchant’s wife (here presented without a name) is a person of

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10 They are as follows: Day 6, Tale 10 appears partially in The Pardoner’s Prologue; Day 7, Tale 9 becomes the Merchant’s Tale; Day 8, Tale 1 becomes The Shipman’s Tale; Day 9, Tale 6 becomes the Reeve’s Tale; Day 10, Tale 5 appears as The Franklin’s Tale; and Day 10, Tale 10 appears as The Clerk’s Tale.
“excellent beautee” (3), but nothing more. The “yonge monk” Doan John receives a nod for being “fair of face” (29), yet his height, weight, body type, hair, eyes, ears, neck, etc., are all lost in ambiguity. Considering his amative tendencies and willingness to make a cuckold of the merchant, Doan John deserves, one might think, physical characteristics that reflect his propensities. Such treatment begs the question: are readers to expect such behavior from all those “fair of face,” or is Chaucer herein (again) making eiron the connection between signifier and signified? Based on the material covered thus far, the latter seems a decidedly sound conclusion.

Yet, one final comparative analysis critically complicates this conclusion: Day 9, Tale 6, the analogue to Chaucer’s “Reeve’s Tale.” Boccaccio proceeds as he does through much of The Decameron. The young girl is “charming and beautiful” and the Florentine gentleman who sleeps with both her and her mother is “gay and handsome” (710). No physical description whatever is given for Andriano (the father/husband in the Boccaccio’s version of the tale).

Chaucer, however, in addition to the narrative emendations he introduces into the tale, ornaments the husband and wife with genuine physiognomic detail. (Only in one other tale, “The Miller’s Tale”, does physiognomy appear with any significant narrative force.) Here, the miller in the tale, Symkyn, is described as having a skull “piled as an ape” (3935). His nose is “camuse” (3934), and his daughter’s features are an interesting mix of aristocratic and plebian details:

This wenche thikke and wel ygrowen was,
With kamuse nose and eyen greye as glas,
Buttokes brode and brestes rounde and
Hye.
But right fair was hire heer, I wol nat lye. (3973-3976)

With her “kamuse” (witness, plebian) nose and “eyen greye as glas” (traditionally, an aristocratic marker), the Miller’s daughter accurately signifies her parentage through physical characteristics. Curry addresses the physiognomy in “The Reeve’s Tale” extensively, and there is no reason to repeat all of that material in this space: suffice to say that Chaucer, with this example in mind, clearly had it within his ability to delineate character through physiognomy. Moreover, he demonstrates an eagerness here to ornament his source material with not only narrative adjustments, but adjustments to physical description as well—both as a means of improving his artistic product.

IV

11 In his discussion of this detail, Curry chastises Skeats for his misreading of “piling.” I would like to argue that Curry is also incorrect in his interpretation. “Piled” in this instance does not refer to hair (as both Skeats and Curry believe). The line reads: “As piled as an ape was his skull.” The word “skulle” undoubtedly suggests bone structure more so than hair. I believe “piled” refers to a cranium heavy on the bottom (i.e. the brow and amative areas) and weak on the top (i.e the areas of higher intellectual faculties)—much the way a pile of mud or sand appears. Examination of an ape’s skull reveals these very features. If the Reeve’s intent is to skewer the Miller through caricature, this seems a barb more brutal than a simple reference to one’s hairline (or hair thickness, as Curry argues).
The physiognomy that appears in the “Miller’s Tale” and “Reeves’s Tale” does not interrupt the general pattern identified in this opening chapter. Outside of his portraiture of the Canterbury pilgrims, Chaucer rarely relies on physical/physiognomic detail as a trustworthy indicator of inner character. In all the cases we have examined, signifier (physiognomic detail) and signified (inner character) never line up wholly in relation to the individual. That is, effacement ignores the connection, the eirón corrupts it (as does magic and illusion) and the use of allegory (through the privative prefix allos) makes it “other than real life.” Only in relation to the Canterbury pilgrims do we find a definitive and trustworthy correlation between the signifiers of physiognomy and the signified of distinct individuals. The two tales that do utilize physiognomy reinforce this assertion; that is, in “The Miller’s Tale” and “The Reeve’s Tale,” we have, unlike the other tales, pilgrims describing pilgrims. This leads inevitably to the conclusion that Chaucer, for whatever reason, felt it necessary to accurately and intricately characterize his English pilgrims—and almost exclusively his English pilgrims—through their physical features and physiognomic details.

Now that this phenomena has been isolated and identified, two areas of inquiry remain: 1) What led Chaucer to this artistic innovation? 2) Why does it only surface in relation to his depiction of the English pilgrims, and what role does the individuality of those pilgrims play in a larger political scheme? The answer to the first of these questions, as we have seen, cannot be found in the work of his literary contemporaries. It is necessary therefore to widen the scope of analysis here to include other modes of art with which Chaucer would have been familiar, along with the particular philosophical dispositions that shaped 14th century medieval thought.

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12 As an example of genuine physiognomic detail, we might review the Miller’s portraiture in the General Prologue:

The Millere was a stout carl for the nones;
Ful byg he was of brawn, and eek of bones.
[…] He was short-sholdred, brood, a thick knarre;
Ther was no dore that he nolde heve of harre,
Or breke it at a renning with his heed.
His berd as any sowe or fox was reed,
And therto brood, as though it were a spade.
Upon the cop right of his nose he hade
A werte, and theron stood a toft of herys
Reed as the brustles of a soweys erys.
His nosethirles blake were and wyde.
[…] His mouth as greet was as a greet forneys. (GP, 545-559)
Chapter 2: “I’ve Just Seen a Face”: Philosophy, Art, and Physiognomy

I

Identifying links between Chaucer’s literary art and the philosophical and plastic arts of the 14th century requires a certain level of supposition. We do not find in any manuscript Chaucer’s opinion of Duns Scotus’s haecceitas or William Ockham’s conceptual nominalism; similarly, he left no journals detailing his reaction to the High Gothic cathedrals of England and Europe. Only through Chaucer’s ars poetica can we discern his awareness (if any) of these extra-literary influences. Yet, the presence of these influences can be reasonably expected: as James I. Wimsatt states, philosophy, art and literature, particularly in the Middle Ages, “do not float free of each other” (633). General movements of human intellect generally affected all three. However, tracing explicit influences is not always easy or appropriate. Declaring finally who has influenced whom sometimes asks too much from vacuous supposition. Another approach, one that seeks simply to identify analogous qualities, for instance, or shared aesthetic foci, asks less from supposition. Moreover, it also avoids labeling any one avenue of human thought as the fount from which all others proceed. Thus, rather than positing concrete syllogistic hierarchies of influence, the method of this chapter is more closely aligned with one might label “discernment.” I will mainly attempt to discern coterminous features in the art, philosophy, and literature of the 12th-14th century. Some syllogistic constructions are of course unavoidable, but it is my hope that those employed will strike the reader as more reasonable than imaginative.

II

The mention of scholarly “imagination” perhaps offers an appropriate segue into the starting point of this chapter: the intellectual revival of the 12th century. It is ostensibly within that fecund period of history that the long concentration of the “Dark Ages” finally gave way (in the Arnoldian sense) to an expansion. Although later developments in art and philosophy strike closer to Chaucer’s time, the foundation for his admixture of literature and science lies in the 12th century. It was therein that the translation and transmission of Aristotle’s treatises on logic and the physical sciences initiated a shift away from mysticism and commentary towards empiricism and experentia.

Prior to the 12th century, little of Aristotle’s corpus was available to Western intellectuals. Boethius’s translation of the logica vetus circulated in partial form, as did his translation of Porphyry’s Isagoge. But this material represented but a glimpse of the
Aristotelian corpus. The remainder of Aristotle’s work, locked in its original Greek, was essentially closed to Western scholars. Beginning in the early 12th century this slowly changed. Arabic, Muslim, and Jewish scholars—long familiar with Aristotle—began a series of translations and commentaries that carried on through the next three centuries. By the mid-12th century, the whole of the *logica nova* (including “Posterior Analytics” and “Topics”) was almost certainly available to scholars in Toledo and Venice. Aristotle’s other works soon followed: among these were “Politics,” “On the Soul,” “Physics,” “Metaphysics,” and the “Nicomachean Ethics.” By 1250, after an initial, reactionary prohibition, the Parisian Faculty of Arts required that all of Aristotle’s works be taught to students in the first six years of their studies (Luscombe 76).

These texts had an understandably profound effect on Western scholars. It was, as Stephen Brown describes it, analogous to meeting with something from an entirely different world:

> [As this material circulated] and began to be studied, more than the style or character of Christian knowledge was changed. The contents of Aristotle’s works, his natural philosophy, slowly but surely began to have their influence: his view of man, his teaching on the eternity of the world, his portrait of the unmoved Mover or supreme Being […]. For the first time since the patristic era, Christian thinkers encountered a pagan thinker directly. (191).

In his “Metaphysics” these thinkers found the science of being, in his “Ethics,” a science of natural morality and virtue, and in “De anima,” the basis for the altogether new science of psychology. Aristotle’s texts contributed significantly to the intellectual shift of the 12th and 13th century, but his influence was not the only one felt by Western scholars. The texts of Avicenna and Ibn Rushd likewise played integral roles in eventually developing what Charles Haskins calls “the experimental spirit” (303). The century spanning 1125-1225 also introduced Western philosophers to Euclid, Ptolemy, Arabic mathematics and astronomy, and the medical treatises of Galen and Hippocrates (303). Much of this new information—regardless of topic—described demonstrative experiments and empirical examinations of the external world.

This “experimental spirit,” necessarily asked of scholars a move from commentary to exploration—from response to experimentation. Many took to heart Aristotle’s assertion that “everything that is known […] is known through demonstration” (qtd., Luscombe 87). By the coming of the mid-13th century, scholars felt comfortable enough with Aristotle’s epistemology and the body of Arabic science to begin challenging and expanding upon that material. The work of Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon, for example, reveals a growing emphasis on personal observation and visual analysis (something Chaucer will later take up with great delight). For Grosseteste, it is *experientia* alone that offers “the first inkling of the shape of […] truth” (Marrone 212).

As Grosseteste’s pupil, Bacon expanded upon this and argued for a “science” of

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13 Linda Tarte Holley’s “Seeing Inside the Dream Vision” (*Chaucer’s Measuring Eye*, 1990) examines the common aesthetics of *perspectiva* shared by Chaucer, Grosseteste, and Bacon—particularly as they relate to “The House of Fame” and “The Book of the Duchess.” According to Tarte Holley, part of what Chaucer explores in “The House of Fame” is how “reality comes to be expressed by means of spatial relationships that can be measured” (113).
experiment—separate from the sciences proper, but necessary to their search for accurate conclusions. Stephen Marrone explains Bacon’s new epistemology thusly: “One might know by reasoned argument that fire burns, but only the experience of a scorched finger teaches one to avoid the flame” (219).  

This theory carried over into other areas. According to one scholar, “the study of optics for Bacon combined the aesthetic, spiritual, and scientific: he wanted to define a system for painting so that mystical truths might be portrayed through art” (Tarte-Holly 32). As we will discuss shortly, this impulse to paint “truth,” to capture the thisness of a thing, would greatly shape Chaucer’s literary art. Indeed, Bacon’s arguments about perspectiva, the relationship between signifier and signified, and the efficacy of the five senses (particularly the sense of sight), would later become the very earmarks of Western scientific studies.

The net effect of this thinking—from Aristotle to Bacon—was a legitimization of the senses, a new embrace and expansion of the sciences, and a special emphasis on visual observation. Yet, these alone do not adequately explain the adaptation of the science of physiognomy into Chaucer’s art, nor do they explain his movement away from the earlier Theophrastan model. Following Bacon’s lead, Chaucer could have simply intensified the observation of behavior and action associated with Characteres. He could have embraced a kind of “behavioral realism.” Instead, Chaucer chose to focus on the physiognomy of his Canterbury pilgrims as they (theoretically) appeared before him. The analog for Chaucer’s new technique of characterization thus appears not so much in Aristotelian empiricism—although it certainly legitimized observation and made sciences such as physiognomy more commonplace—but in sources closer to his own era. To that end, the texts of Duns Scotus and William Ockham offer likely analogs for Chaucer’s focus on individuated physical descriptors.

III

In moving into a discussion of Scotus and Ockham we turn a corner of sorts. Chaucer’s oeuvre fits snugly within/against the revival of science. His art is rife with scientific references, and evidence exists suggesting Chaucer himself at least dabbled in the sciences. And even if these references can be somehow pushed aside, the putative effects of the scientific revival were so widespread that one can hardly imagine Chaucer not encountering them in some manner. The influence of Scotus and Ockham, on the other hand, was never so widely felt—particularly during the 14th century. It is

14 Chaucer’s Treatise on the Astrolabe opens with a clear echo of this legitimization of the senses: “Little Lowys my sone, I have perceived well by certeyne evidences thine abilite to lerne sciencez touchinge noumbres and proporciouns” (908). Here, not only does Chaucer trust in Lewis’s ability to learn from evidence gathered through the astrolab, but also his own sensory evidence, that which suggests Lewis capable of surmounting the device’s technical demands. Also, it is possible to see the “Wife of Bath’s Tale” as a study in experience-as-authority. Despite Dame Alysoun’s assertion that experience is “noon auctoritee / […] in this world” (1-2), her experiential knowledge clearly trumps the authority of Janakin’s book.

15 There is a danger in characterizing late-medieval science as anything like our own. This was indeed an age of growing empiricism, but it was also the age of alchemy, astrology, physiognomy, and a host of other pseudo-sciences. Haskins, when speaking of late-medieval medicine, recounts a Frankish doctor who cures a knight’s abscess with a battle axe—and who alleviates a woman’s fever by carving a deep cross into her scalp with a razor. Both patients died (326-327).

16 I am referring here to Chaucer’s Treatise on the Astrolabe and the apocryphal Equatorie of the Planets.
impossible to say how many outside of the university system (if it can be termed as such) would have been aware of the existence of Scotus and Ockham, much less their respective philosophies. As stated at the opening of this chapter, there is no direct evidence that Chaucer encountered either \textit{haecceitas} or nominalism.

Circumstantial evidence, however, does exist. In his article on the influence of Scotus on Chaucer’s characterization of the Canterbury pilgrims, Wimsatt argues that with Chaucer’s “sphere of activity” and “wide experience” would have inevitably exposed him to “current philosophical thought” (634). Moreover, the “great Scholastic [realism]” associated with Scotus was “[probably] dominant in what [Chaucer] had heard and learned” (633, 634). Russell A. Peck argues a similar line in an article on “Chaucer and the Nominalist Questions” (\textit{Speculum} 1978). Peck admits that nominalism “lies apart from Chaucer’s particular [artistic] interests”, but asserts that Chaucer would have nonetheless been “profoundly interested in the moral implications of nominalistic questions” (745). The question driving this essay, of course, is not morality, but physiognomy. Yet, both Scotism and Ockhamism have at their center epistemologies that may have suggested physiognomy’s use as an implement of artistry and character development—as an appropriate \textit{perspectiva} from which to examine the external world. Scotus’s notion of \textit{haecceitas}, for example, and its focus on the “thisness” of the individual external entity, is an apt analog to Chaucer’s intensified delineation of physical characteristics.

Born somewhere between 1265 and 1270, John Duns Scotus studied and wrote theology in Oxford and Paris. Following the lead of Henry of Ghent, Scotus worked on the problems of essential being and the univocity of transcendental concepts.\footnote{For a look Scotus’s influence on present-day philosophers, John Martin Fischer’s “Scotism” (\textit{Mind}, 1985) summarizes contemporary arguments over Scotism’s applicability to causal determinism and the “incompatibility of God’s foreknowledge and [human] freedom” (231). Those interested, as Russell Peck is, in Chaucer’s “[depiction of] man trapped by his mental limitations” (758) will find the discussion useful. Fischer explores the terse interaction between “can” (the theoretical ability to perform an action) and the “inviolable constraints on human nature” (234).} For Scotus, unlike Aquinas and Anselm, “the concepts of being and the other transcendentials applied univocally to God and creatures, substance and accidents” (Dumont 297). Scotus rejected Henry of Ghent’s argument that Being could only belong to both God and Man analogously. Henry believed Being was primarily assigned to God, but creatures could partake of Being in a “secondary but related sense” (299). The “related-but-not-related” strictures of analogy allowed scholars such as Henry to maintain God’s ultimate separation from his creatures—meaning that the observation of X in creature Y did not subordinate God to limitations associated with either X or Y. Scotus’s argument for univocity, on the other hand, posited that X, “conceived in its utmost generality,” is not an “analogous notion” but a univocal conception (307). By examination of X in creature Y, one can know that X and Y, in their most general, abstracted and perfected states, exist in God. This syllogism, as Scotus reveals in his introduction to his “Treatise on God as the First Principle”, relies on “demonstration” as the means of gauging “how much our natural reason can learn about that true being which you are if we begin with the being which you have predicated of yourself” (“Jon Duns Scotus”). Being—the capital essence—was not therefore understood by Scotus to be a property available only to God.\footnote{Dumont outlines Scotus’s argument as follows:}
the argument that the denial of this premise renders impossible human knowledge of God.

Haecceitas is the natural outgrowth of Scotus’s univocity. If all beings partake in Being, then each being has something to tell us about “Being writ large.” The individual thus becomes a legitimate target of study—outside of whatever categories happen to apply to that individual:

Scotus denies that it is accidents or matter or existence that individuates. He held it to be axiomatic that only what is distinct and determinant in itself can individuate. [For Scotus] Individuating principles do not fall under any of the categories; they have an actuality of their own. [Thus] human nature is common to all men and therefore is numerically many, but in Socrates it is numerically one. The “thisness” of Socrates makes human nature in him numerically one [...]. (Luscombe 128)

Semantics obviously play a role in this understanding of individuality. Although all humans share in common natures, the looseness of non-proper nouns, when set against proper nouns (as in a proposition) creates certain contradictions. Always-contestable statements such as “Socrates is a man” sound illogical under Scotus’s conception of haecceitas—a kin to stating, “The individual is a common nature.” Scotus mitigates this by arguing that categories and species exist, but primarily as semi-intellectual “formalities.” It is the mind, according to Scotus, that “abstracts the universal from a sensible object” (Luscombe 128). The external and particularized individual, on the contrary, is known intuitively, regardless of apparently shared essences or properties actualized by the intellect. To paraphrase Robert Merrihew Adams, I have my property of being identical to me, and you have your property of being identical to you (6). Our shared properties are predicated on qualitative properties.

Haecceitas is essentially the argument for “non-qualitative thisness” (Adams 6, emphasis mine). Thus, paradoxically, haecceitas might be described as the non-qualitative quality proprietary to the individual.19 Adams smartly defines haecceitas negatively; i.e., as a concept in opposition to “suchness,” those properties known to be “general [...] and nonrelational” (7). Every individual entity partakes of “suchness” but is only individuated through “thisness.”

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Major: } & \text{An intellect certain about one concept, but doubtful about others, has a concept about which it is certain that is different from the concepts about which it is doubtful.} \\
\text{Minor: } & \text{We can be certain that God is a Being, but doubt whether God is infinite or finite being.} \\
\text{Conclusion: } & \text{The concept of being is different from the concept of infinite or finite being, and hence univocal, since asserted of both. (308)}
\end{align*}
\]

19 One might argue that what is being described here is “essence.” However, essence and “essential properties” are “normally [...] understood to be constituted by qualitative properties” (Adams, 6). The essence of Socrates, for example, consists of qualities such as “wisdom.” The haecceity of Socrates consists of something altogether nonrelational and nonqualitative.
The similarity between Scotus’s philosophy and Chaucer’s portrayal of the Canterbury pilgrims should be apparent at this point. As opposed to the Theophrastan understanding of character, wherein individuals are understood as belonging only to certain externally real categories/species of behavior, Chaucer paints his pilgrims more as individuals. Immediately, however, objections can be raised against this assertion. The Miller, for example, by virtue of the abstractive quality of his name, cannot seemingly be an individual. The signifier “Miller” is clearly representative of a conceptual category rather than an individual. In other words, if there is an individual sensible object here, it exists first and foremost as an already-categorized type.

This problem is raised in Wimsatt’s examination of Chaucerian haecceity. Wimsatt argues that to realize haecceity “the pilgrims must embody natures in common with others like them, and there must be a principle by which each is individuated” (634). Occupational characteristics fulfill the initial requirement, but if Chaucer is indeed constructing individuals, where does the contraction of categories occur? In other words, where does the actual haecceitas reside in Chaucer’s portrayal of the pilgrims? Wimsatt names behavior as the resting place of Chaucerian haecceity:

[…] In every case the person is an active pilgrim known mainly by the behavior that responds to his or her affections. The portraits are full of verbal portrayals of action: the Friar’s begging, the Prioress’s behavior at the table, the Wife’s insistence on precedence at the offering. […] In showing the pilgrim’s daily lives, the portraits consistently evoke vivid activity […] [which] confers particularity on the Prioress’s affectations, the Friar’s alternately ingratiating and testy manners, the Franklin’s hovering over his table. (642)

This answer, although well formulated, is not entirely correct. These “quirks” do assist in separating the individual from the type, yet the problem with identifying these behaviors as the resting place of Chaucerian haecceity is that they lack required “thisness.” The Wife of Bath’s insistence that “noon / […] to the offrynge bifore hire sholde goon” (18.449-450) is an individuation proscribed from immediacy. The action described, while it may take place again in future, and has certainly taken place in the past, is not occurring in the present. The narrator is not observing such haecceity, such “thisness,” as a sensible object or motion of object; indeed, we cannot even say for certain how he knows this specific information about her behavior in the parish. Its availability cannot be traced with any certainty. Distinct behavior, therefore, at least in Dame Alysoun’s case, falls short of realizing true haecceity.

It is my contention that her personhood realizes individuation not through removed accounts of behavior, but through her physiognomic features. It is her physiognomy, “reed of hewe […] [and] gat-toothed” (18.458, 468) that clearly stands before the narrator in a kind of meaty haecceitas—in all the immediate graspsability associated with Scotus’s “thisness.” Her clothes also serve to delineate immediate

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20 This is not to say that only the Wife of Bath possesses a red face and gap-toothed smile. Both are arguably qualities. However, they are qualities only after making their way through the abstracting intellect. In the immediate haecceity of encounter, they represent the bare particulars (the “thisness”) of the individual. Much of the problem in reconciling this contradiction is semantic in nature. I believe Chaucer strives to express the haecceity of the pilgrims through physiognomic features. However, he cannot express
individuality, but they are transient and temporary markers at best. Only in her physiognomy do we find that immediate quality that gives Dame Alysoun the property of being identical to Dame Alysoun. If Chaucer was familiar with haecceitas and sought an appropriate artistic avenue for its expression, physiognomy no doubt offered a tempting methodology. If unfamiliar with Scotism and haecceitas, perhaps it was William Ockham’s conceptual nominalism that suggested to Chaucer a focus on the primitive individual. A brief look at nominalism—in addition to offering an alternative hypothesis—will assist in fleshing out the argument presented thus far.

Generally speaking, nominalism examines the external world without the abstract optics of categories, universals, or species. For Ockham, ontological parsimony (Ockham’s “razor”) is paramount, and he deems the use of universals as “the worst error in philosophy” (qtd., Adams 144). As with Scotus, universals (categories, species, etc.) exist mainly as internal, mental constructs, as linguistic signs that “[serve] the function of bringing back into our mind the image we have of individuals” (Luscombe 148). Nominalism, however, more so than Scotism, addresses the linguistic consequences of universals on the intellect and imagines a model of knowing in which knowledge moves to and from the specific and abstract. Russell Peck, in his discussion of Chaucer and nominalism, presents a convincing case for the theory that Chaucer’s general understanding of the intellect is nominalistic, and that Chaucer finds the “ongoing imagistic-linguistic process [of nominalism] appealing” (747). In this process, external objects/images require corresponding linguistic code within the intellect, but that code, because of its abstractive nature, has no independent external reality. According to Peck, the disconnect of signifier/signified in such an understanding “is a wonderful place in which to create and explore” (747).

This seems an apt statement. Indeed, the opening chapter of this study detailed a number of instances in which Chaucer—through appearance and action—played with the relationship between signifier and signified. In relation to his pilgrims, however, we find a signifying relationship that is quite solid. Dame Alysoun’s “gat-tooth” grin signifies accurately her licentious nature; the Prioress’s noble eyes, mouth and forehead, accurately reflect her refined deportment; the Miller’s thick bones and low skull accurately signify his unrefined, bestial nature. Thinking back to Scotus, the difference between the Canterbury pilgrims and earlier/other character models is the haecceity of presentation: the experience of immediate “thinness.”

In reflecting again on Criseyde, for instance, we cannot say that Criseyde stands before us with all the contracted individuation of, say, Dame Alysoun. It is that immediate contracted individuation that allows for accurate correspondence between signifier and signified. This is precisely because, in the words of Ockham, “singularity immediately befits that to which it belongs, therefore it cannot befit it through something else” (“Ock Ord I.2.6”). By extension, it is the distance and abstraction associated with a
temporally removed figure like Criseyde that allows for play between signifier and signified. Put another way, Dame Alysoun begins in the intuitive and ends in the abstractive; Criseyde begins and ends in the abstractive. The feeling of primitive exerentia one gets from the “General Prologue” thus serves as a doorway to abstract exploration. Let me explain this in more detail.

As Peck points out, Ockham argued for the idea that “experience is preeminently an authority” (749). In detailing the immediate haecceity of the Canterbury pilgrims through their physiognomy, Chaucer seems to pointedly engage with the process of nominalist assimilation; in other words, he proceeds from external experience (intuitive cognition) to internal abstractions (abstractive cognition). From describing the sensible individuated object to examining the conceptual associations his mind ascribes to that object—i.e. their respective “tales.” This partially explains why a good portion of the Canterbury pilgrims are examined in physiognomic detail, while the tales they tell avoid those details. Chaucer may very well be exploring—in nominalist fashion—what the individual entity signifies, through the willful act of abstractive cognition, to the abstracting intellect. Linda Tarte-Holly argues a somewhat similar line, stating that:

To evoke the name “summoner” is to call to mind universal qualities and to establish clear audience expectation. In the case of the Friar’s Tale, of course, what we see is what we get: the concept of the “summoner” is particularized in this Friar’s tale. The frame of perception is the Friar’s own eye. The tale sustains the initial image, that is, the Friar’s bad opinion of summoners. (45)

I would amend this reading by suggesting that it is the physiognomic portrait of the Summoner, rather than his name, which sets the tale into motion. The name is but a spoken reference to the Summoner’s image, a placeholder. It is the Summoner’s particular appearance before the narrator, in the haecceity of direct perceptual experience, which touches off the Friar’s mind’s exploration of the “universal qualities” associated with that image.

If we have thus far sketched an answer to the question of analogs to Chaucer’s use of science and individuation, other questions remain unanswered. For instance, why, of all possible sciences, does Chaucer choose physiognomy? A ready answer to this question arises in the context of Gothic art and the concomitant 14th century reinvention of the portrait.

IV

Along with the arrival of Aristotelian empiricism, the 12th century also introduced Western cultures to the aesthetics of Gothic art and architecture. Much like empiricism, this new style relied heavily on earlier models. The Romanesque movement (roughly c. 1000-1150) that preceded Gothicism had spread quickly throughout England, France, Italy and Spain. It thrived in conjunction with a renewed attention to experimental engineering. Masonry, once roughshod labor, became during this period a precise and demanding art. Yet, despite its significant technical innovations, Romanesque architecture remained heavy and earth-bound: vaults were low, and windows were
generally sparse and narrow. Even airier examples of Romanesque style, such as the bell tower at Pisa (c. 1063-1272), give the impression of being enslaved to gravity and mass. But this weightiness did by no means characterize all expressions of Romanesque style; indeed, inside the abbeys and cathedrals one finds a great wealth of light and ornament. The internal spaces of Romanesque buildings, saturated as they are with tympanums, capitals, mosaics and frescoes, thus contrast with their decidedly bland exteriors. Many edifices (for example, the 12th century Cluniac abbey at St-Pierre) seem conscious of this internal/external contrast as a technique by which to highlight their interior spaces.

With the construction of the abbey church at St-Denis (c. 1137-1140), north of Paris, internal ornamentation began to radiate into external structures. Architecturally speaking, the design of St-Denis was not entirely innovative; all its component parts existed previously elsewhere. Visually speaking, however, the sudden height of St-Denis could hardly be more dramatic. In general, two engineering advances allowed for this vertical grandeur: 1) the perfection of ribbed vaulting, 2) the further development of the flying buttress. By Chaucer’s time the technology needed to perfect the Gothic style was all but fully developed.

These perfected developments essentially allowed the necessities of architecture to give way to the niceties of architecture. Energy once spent on foundation and reinforcement thus found a new outlet in ornamentation, creating a fused style that stressed the “inseparability of structure and decoration” (Shaver-Crandell 39). Tarte-Holly contends that Gothic “theories of time, space, and light […] brought developments that changed the static nature of the visual arts, allowing access to a dramatic, three-dimensional world that had become readable in human terms” (47). Emile Mâle puts it yet another way, stating that the “art of the Middle Ages” exudes a “care for disposition of parts [that extends] to the smallest detail” (8). Despite the inference of these three quotes, Gothicism was more than just a technological exercise. Abbot Suger, the intellect behind St-Denis, understood the new style primarily as an opportunity to invoke a religious experience in onlookers. And this purpose remained ever-present in Gothic style. The cathedral at Notre-Dame in Paris, for instance, its flanks lined with flying buttresses, its south face fronted by two large stained glass portals, appears quite awash in God’s light—its interior not unlike a forest “amidst the blaze of noon.” Technology allowed these innovations, but religious and aesthetic sensibilities controlled and directed their particular “Gothic” expression.

Obviously, this new and immediately influential style was not long contained to France. By the 14 century, Chaucer, had he never left English soil, would have encountered various and significant expressions of Gothic sensibility. Although art

21 Nowhere does English Romanesque find a more proper example than in the Tower of London (c. 1078-1087). Its impressively thick walls, narrow, vertical windows, and rectangular shape serve all the purposes asked of a Romanesque structure—safety from fire, unquestionable stability, and visual impact.

22 Verses inscribed on doors beneath the tympanum at St-Denis declare that “The dull mind rises in truth through that which is material / And, in seeing this light, is resurrected from its former submission” (Frisch, 7). The thesis of Mâle’s famous study, The Gothic Image, contends that all gothic cathedrals sought to matriculate the “childlike and humble souls” (391) of the Middle Ages. Cathedrals, Mâle argues, are essentially legible books—books containing the moral and philosophical doctrine of the Catholic Church.

23 The transfer of Continental Gothicism to England was not without amendments. Generally speaking, English Gothic cathedrals tended to emphasize horizontal elements over vertical. This “perpendicular” style made the flying buttress—the classic hedge against vertical pressure—less common in England. English
historian John Harvey describes the architectural achievements of late 14th century England as “too numerous even to catalogue” (55), a short list of these achievements may be useful. Among the most famous are: the Canterbury Cathedral (c. 1170-1497); Ely Cathedral (c. 1322-1340); Gloucester Cathedral (c. 1332-1460); Worcester Cathedral (c. 1365-1374); Winchester Cathedral (c. 1394-1460); and Westminster Abbey (c. 1045-1395). Certainly, Gothic cathedrals, abbeys, and homes populated the English countryside.

It is not likely that the widely traveled Chaucer escaped seeing these buildings, nor is it likely that their hyper-attention to detail escaped his artistic eye. Moreover, we know that Chaucer’s interaction with the aesthetics of the Gothic style probably went beyond “casual.” Both John of Gaunt and the Black Prince played patron to a number of carpenters, masons, painters and architects (“master masons”). Gaunt employed master mason Henry Yevele, designer of the Canterbury Cathedral and the naves in Westminster Abbey. Also on Gaunt’s payroll was Hugh Herland, “greatest of carpenters” (Harvey, 56), who worked collaboratively with Yevele on Westminster College. Similarly, Gaunt also retained the services of William Wintringham, “a Southwark carpenter who had built the great hall roof of Windsor castle under […] Herland’s supervision” (56). The Black Prince employed, among others, John Clavyll, executor of the Castle at Gloucester, and William Helpston, a Chester master mason. Gothic sensibility, therefore, likely suffused the immediate air surrounding the poet. It was no doubt discussed casually in the court. However, the resume of Chaucer’s fellow patrons suggests that Gothic style may have also been discussed in technical detail; that is, from the learned perspective of master masons and (pseudo) engineers.

Przemyslaw Mroczkowski’s article, “Mediæval Art and Aesthetics in The Canterbury Tales,” (1958) concurs with this assertion that Chaucer was intimately and variously familiar with the conventions of Gothic art. Mroczkowski begins, as I just have, by pointing out that Chaucer’s contact with medieval art would have occurred both inside and outside the court. In addition to the “popular and democratic” art of church and abbey, Chaucer also had an enviable access to the “decorated interiors of private houses” (207). It was therein that he would have encountered—first hand—the non-architectural (and more secular) expressions of Gothicism: illuminated manuscripts, ivories, tiles, frescoes, silk textiles, and decorated objects of all types. The result of this two-fold exposure, according to Mroczkowski, was that Chaucer (consciously and unconsciously) adopted the motifs of medieval art into his poetry.

Indeed, a series of connections appears readily when one examines the motifs of the plastic arts against those selected by Chaucer. For example, Mroczkowski identifies three English representations of what would become “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”. Two, in particular, would have been highly visible:

In one of the stalls in the church at Stratford-on-Avon is carved a scene of a violent quarrel in which an unfortunate husband or lover is being pretty badly beaten. The woman is holding his beard and pushing him with her leg while he tries to shield himself from her dangerous weapon—a ladle. No less interesting is the capital of a column in Ely cathedral. The carver presented a struggle between...
man and woman. Each tried to tear a rod from the other’s hand—possibly a symbol of power [...] the woman is victorious. (210)

Related plastic motifs are likewise identified for “The Merchant’s Tale”, “The Franklin’s Tale”, “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale”, and “The Parson’s Tale”.

“The Physician’s Tale” finds Chaucer interacting closely with medieval conceptions of art and the artist’s individual role. The assertions put forth therein by Nature (9-30) correspond to any number of contemporary texts on the subject: including, Alain de Lille’s De Planctu Naturae, Guillaume de Lorris’s Roman de la Rose, Guillaume d’Auvergne’s remarks on aesthetics, and St. Bonaventure’s ideas about “the positions held by Nature and Art” (Mroczkwoski 215). Nature’s remarks, Mroczkwoski asserts, “echo [...] those comparisons of which the medieval theorists of aesthetics are so fond” (215). In other words, Chaucer demonstrates a definite familiarity—through his Physician, at least—with the philosophical foundations of medieval art.

Finally, and most importantly for this discussion, Mroczkwoski deals with the portraits of the pilgrims presented in the “General Prologue”. He points out that medieval artists of all types inherited from antiquity “a list of requirements which had to be fulfilled in order to make a description of a person complete” (216). These were, in part: name, nature, habit, fortune, affections, pursuits, accidents/aberrations, and speech. Although “these rules were observed by the [medieval] artists and rhetoricians scrupulously,” Chaucer, in the estimation of Mroczkwoski, typically “steers a middle course” (217). He asserts that “in some of the portraits in the [“General Prologue”], [Chaucer] accepts many of these prescribed features, but in many others his well-known freedom is recognizable” (217).

What exactly is this “well-known freedom”? I believe Mroczkwoski is referring here to Chaucer’s poetic adaptation of physiognomic detail. Yet, because Mroczkwoski focuses primarily on the translation of motifs from the plastic to literary arts, he passes over the topic without much exploration—physiognomy being the matter of aesthetics rather than the matter of motifs. This is not unexpected; no scholar, to my knowledge, has explored the simultaneous 14th century rise of physiognomic detail in both the plastic and literary arts. It seems clear, however, that such a rise indeed took place—at least partially for the philosophical and aesthetic reasons already outlined in this chapter: philosophy stressed individuation, Gothicism stressed detail. Physiognomy allowed and indeed encouraged their alliance.

The 14th century emergence of physiognomic detail as a complement to plastic portraiture has been well documented, most recently by Georgia Sommers Wright.24 Wright argues that likenesses constructed through physiognomy “gradually disappeared during the late antique period” and were replaced over time with the identifying markers of “costume, inscription, and […] coat of arms” (117). Interestingly enough, the change was “contingent upon the will of patrons rather than upon the skill of artists” (117). In

24 Wright uses three criteria to identify likenesses: 1) Subjects must be securely identified. 2) The likeness must have been produced during the patron’s lifetime. 3) There must be two or more likenesses that resemble one another (117). These criteria do not, obviously, describe the portraits presented in Canterbury Tales. For example, two or more likenesses do not exist of Dame Alysoun; she is not securely identified, etc. However, as the third chapter will explore, there is the possibility that Chaucer observed physiognomy’s new role as the preferred technique of individuation, experienced its political influence, and attempted to transcribe those features into his poetry.
other words, artists did not, with the fall of Rome, suddenly lose the ability to characterize physiognomy. Rather, they simply lost the inclination to “transcribe from nature the features of an individual” (117). It may be that religious and monarchical symbolism offered a long-term stability that physiognomic detail did not. To be sure, one would be more likely to remember and respect a recurring papal symbol than the wart on the side of an individual papal nose. Politics, not skill, determined physiognomy’s place in the art of the early middle ages.

According to Wright, the 14th century reinvention of portraiture—through the use of physiognomic detail—was also the result of politics. In particular, the uncertain election of Boniface VIII to the papacy in 1294 set up a situation in which the need to capture and disseminate a personal likeness trumped the need to perpetuate the symbols of office. It was a historical moment in which the man was more important than the title. Because of this, Boniface commissioned self-likenesses in numbers that exceeded all popes through Julius II (Wright 119). Boniface’s high cheekbones and rounded forehead and eyes grace each and every identified likeness. The image of Boniface appearing on his tomb thus resembles sculptures in Amiens, Rome, Florence, Bologna, and Orvieto. In total, Wright identifies eleven definite likenesses of the papal ruler (123). In the years following the short reign of Boniface, portrait likeness appeared throughout Europe—almost always in conjunction with various monarchies. Karl IV of Bohemia, for example, enjoyed a number of widespread likenesses:

 [...] these paintings portray the emperor, always in profile, as a dark-haired man with a prominent nose, high cheekbones, and a softly rounded beard. His wife is a comely woman with long blond hair. The series of likenesses continues later at the cathedral of Prague, in the Wenceslas Chapel where the emperor and his presumably his fourth wife [...] kneel beside a scene of the Crucifixion with the Virgin and St. John. (125)

Rudolf IV of Austria and Charles V of France likewise exist in portrait likeness, identifiable in numerous instances through distinct physiognomic detail.

Charles V, in particular, exemplified the new attention to physiognomy. In describing standing figures of Charles and his wife (now in the Louvre) Wright states, “for the first time, here are individuals whose features and poses express emotion and individuality” (129). The tomb of Charles, in the abbey at St-Denis, stands out in the “strength of its characterization” (130). Again, the motivation for such likenesses was political; Charles, much like Boniface, faced repeated challenges to his legitimacy. By concretizing his individual image, Charles essentially set his personhood above the office, rather than beneath its obfuscating mantle.25 There is every possibility that Geoffrey Chaucer, during his diplomatic missions to France in the late 1370’s, encountered these distinct representations of Charles V. Chaucer’s attempts (in 1377) to negotiate a marriage agreement between Richard and Charles’s daughter, Marie, would have certainly brought him into contact with the King himself, as well as the artistic propaganda being produced on his behalf. That such art drew strength from accurate

25 No such phenomena seem to have appeared in 14th century English portraiture. For instance, the famous portrait of Richard II in Westminster Abbey exhibits a decided “vagueness of features” (Harvey 63) and does not correspond with any other known likenesses.
physiognomy, rather than monarchical symbolism, probably struck Chaucer as interesting—if not hubristic.

I would like to also suggest at this point that physiognomy might have provided artists with an alternative to what Mâle describes in The Gothic Image as the “world of ideas so curiously compounded of theology and the science of the Bestiaries” (35). In the physiognomic likenesses identified by Sommers, there are no traces of the plant and animal symbols associated with earlier representations. It is likely that the haecceitas of a present subject, along with the language of physiognomy, eliminated the need for the symbolism of the olive branch, the ox, the dove, the snake, etc. That is, physiognomy allowed the expression of these objective correlatives (to use Eliot’s term) on the actual surface of the subject, rather than on surrounding capitals or tympanums. Chaucer could hardly have examined his pilgrims, the Pardoner for example, through the Mirror of Nature as it related to specific plants and animals; he could not feasibly set the Pardoner amidst hawthorns and gargoyles and still retain the realism of his narrative framework. In this way, physiognomy eased the movement of Gothic aesthetics from the plastic and architectural realms to the realm of literature.

Thus far in this chapter, I have attempted to identify factors “in the air” surrounding Chaucer that may have precipitated his sudden and surprising use of physiognomy in the construction of character. The effect of Aristotle’s empiricism, along with the work of Scotus and Ockham, set in place a general focus on the haecceity of the individual object or entity. Gothicism emphasized ornamentation and attention to detail. Physiognomic detail, at least as it related to religious and monarchic painting/sculpture, experienced a revival of sorts in the latter half of the 14th century. However, if these discussions explain where Chaucer might have imbibed the notion of accurate, distinctive, and detailed use of physiognomy, they do not explain why physiognomy appears mainly in relation to the English pilgrims. To answer that question, it seems wise to pursue the political line raised in conjunction with physiognomy’s role in painting and sculpture. If physiognomy appeared, as Wright suggests, as an aesthetic technique for reinforcing power and legitimacy, Chaucer’s artistic choice—as innocuous as it may seem—may very well have been politically motivated.
Chapter 3: Physiognomy and the De/Colonizing Impulse

Before exploring physiognomy’s role in the construction and decolonization of English peoples, I would like to provide a bit of theoretical grounding. Postcolonial studies are now settling into a stable semiotics. Having once referred specifically to a period of 20th century history, the term “postcolonial” currently references any number of historical situations. This broader definition avoids temporal limitations for an important reason. As Jeffery Jerome Cohen states in his introduction to The Postcolonial Middle Ages: “just as there has never been a time before colony, there has never yet been a time when the colonial has been outgrown” (3). In other words, the constant historical dialectic of human communities and productive means makes it difficult to identify the genesis and/or status of any given colonial activity. The realization of this difficulty has forced certain morphological changes; to be more precise, “Post-Colonial” has transformed into the less formal, and less proscriptive, “postcolonial.” The aggregation of the two words according to Cohen occurred as a means of suggesting “temporal contiguity” (3), as against the knife’s edge of “before and after.” Postcolonial, as I use it in this chapter, thus refers to those distinct historical moments—whenever they occur—in which the subaltern acts in resistance to the dominant influence of a colonial power. The inclusiveness of this definition seeks to peremptorily resolve the temporal ambiguity associated with postcolonial studies.

This is necessary in light of the fact that postcolonial criticism presents special concerns for medieval scholars. Certainly, the phrase “postcolonial middle ages” has come to hold a bisected meaning. While it refers most commonly to postcolonial moments occurring within the period of European history between antiquity and the Renaissance, it likewise indicates the practice by which medieval time and space has itself frequently been “colonized” by scholars of all shades. As evidenced by the work of Kathleen Biddick, Jeffery Jerome Cohen, John M. Ganim and Kathleen Davis, this practice of temporal colonization is now receiving careful attention from scholars.

Nevertheless, many continue to view the medieval world either as a distant and silent place, or as a kind of flâneur awaiting proper order and direction. This approach has certainly been useful to Modernity in that it constructs the period as a blank surface (the “Dark Ages”) upon which cultural and national etymologies can be inscribed. Most famously, Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities colonizes the Middle Ages as a

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25 For example, in “Decolonizing the English Past” (1993) Biddick confronts the notion that “[history] produced the ‘civilized’ world by crafting a place called the past, a past that could exist for the present but not in the present” (3). She pays special attention to categorical creations such as the peasant in view of the role these historical “subjects” play in constructing an uninterrupted temporal continuum of English progress. By “excavating” (20) (both literally and figuratively) the boundaries between categorical subjects and disciplines, Biddick argues, it is possible move past historical narratives that simply “[fit] the needs of national myths” (23).
kind of temporal East against which he can pursue his agenda. This enables Anderson to construe the medieval period as one awaiting its saviors—"meanwhile" and the printing press—to bring it the light of Nation. The fact that "homogenous, empty time" (24) most certainly informs a handful of medieval literary texts does not disrupt Anderson’s project. These examples lie conveniently silenced under the blanket of time, effaced by what Said describes in *Culture and Imperialism* as the West’s drive to “make representations of foreign cultures the better to master” (100).

Casting Chaucer’s use of physiognomy into a far-reaching discussion of English nationhood would thus seem to me to be repeating Anderson’s mistake. It would silence too many voices, overwrite too many histories. Rather than examine the discourse of physiognomy as rigidly linear, therefore, I will examine two instances of its manifestation as disparate points with no historical connection to one another. My own studies suggest this as particularly felicitous to a discussion of the “archeology” of physiognomical discourse, which, in the words of Georgia Sommers Wright, “does not develop in a predictable fashion but appears and disappears” (117). Both historical moments addressed, however, will ultimately inform a larger discussion of physiognomy’s role in the Chaucerian construction of English nationhood and its requisite Other(s).

I will begin by briefly returning to a matter touched on in the opening chapter. Therein, mention was made of physiognomy’s wide popularity (by way of Johanne Casper Lavater) during the late 18th and early 19th century. The United States, in particular, fell in love with physiognomy and phrenology. As in Chaucer’s age, the discourse of physiognomy moved therein through the sciences and into the humanities; however, Victorian physiognomy eventually took on a distinctively populist mien that fed into American sensibilities. The result was a shared discursive “language” that concretized the nation-at-large whilst all the while shaping its much-needed Other(s).

II

Physiognomy’s historical moment in the United States arrived, not surprisingly, as the nation was attempting to define itself. Jacksonian politics were in the midst of attempting to erase—or at least hide—the limitations of class; America was developing the psychology that would later find its synecdoche in the novels of Horatio Alger. The

27 I am mainly thinking here of “The Knight’s Tale” and *Troilus and Criseyde*. “The Knight’s Tale,” in particular, lives and breathes in the space of “meanwhile.” I have argued elsewhere that Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* understands the encounter with (and transfer of) relics as a shared national language—one unconcerned with the Latin/vernacular split that draws so much of Anderson’s attention. My effort here is not meant to discount Anderson’s book: much of the scholarship therein is invaluable and indeed plays a important role in my own argument.

28 The difference between physiognomy and phrenology is slight and more the result of marketing than speciation. Both essentially entail reading the physical form as indicative of moral and intellectual dispositions. Phrenology’s focus on the skull is perhaps its most distinguishing practice; yet, phrenology also pursued a prescriptive discourse not openly espoused by physiognomy. Both innovations resulted more from the desire to create a marketable product/service than from any significant disagreements with the science of physiognomy.

29 “Jacksonian” here refers to the antebellum period of U.S. history spanning 1820-1840. Andrew Jackson’s appeals to the spirit of Democracy and the strength of the “Common Will” exemplify his pseudo-populist ideals. The number of eligible voters more than tripled during this 20-year period as white males were
nation was also expanding: it was the age of Manifest Destiny and second-wave immigration. Physiognomy, appearing as it did under Franz Joseph Gall’s tag “phrenology,” fit quite well within the admirable Jacksonian mix of Democracy and Nation. Doubtless, the rapid assimilation of phrenological discourse into the “mainstream” of popular culture suggests that conclusion. By the 1840’s, most major cities in the East could claim at least one phrenological society. Journals like the Phrenological Almanac boasted readerships of 150,000. Lay, or “practicing” phrenologists, estimated at some 20,000 strong, peddled their wares (phrenological “readings”) to both urban and rural markets. As recounted in Charles Colbert’s A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America, one practicing phrenologist claimed to have conducted approximately 200,000 readings over the course of his travels (21). This figure hardly seems an exaggeration considering the tenacious grip phrenology exerted on the culture of Jacksonian America. Colbert describes that grip by way of comparison:

By the middle of the nineteenth century, phrenology held a place in the American mind not unlike that occupied by psychiatry in the 1930’s. Its terminology and tenets entered the language of daily conversation. In literature, it provided a convenient means of summarizing behavior and character [...] (23)

Chapter One of this study briefly summarized the heavy influence physiognomy and phrenology had on 19th century literature and it would be redundant to again recount that phenomena. I make mention of it only to highlight the success phrenology enjoyed across 19th century American culture. Doctors, scientists, writers, painters, sculptors, quacks, and laypersons all took part in what might be best termed as the phrenological craze. Exploring the breadth of phrenology’s popularity can only assist this to limited extent. Exploring the reasons behind phrenology’s unique popularity in Jacksonian America, on the other hand, can tell us much about Chaucer’s own use of physiognomy and physical description. Primarily, phrenology offered 19th century Americans a cohesive “high” language through which all classes might speak with one another; it was, simply put, the first democratic science. The sciences up to that point had been almost exclusively the property of intellectuals. (This was certainly true during Chaucer’s lifetime.) Phrenology was different: it was accessible, immediately rewarding, and did not require a long expensive sojourn in the University system. It epitomized the Jacksonian impulse towards self-improvement and an economic system less constrained by class boundaries. “Enterprising [youths],” by learning phrenology, could relieve themselves from the “grinding toil of the farm” with but “a few books and a fancy for the open road” (Colbert 21). Both the educated and uneducated shared common ideological ground in the science of phrenology. It was a mutual interest: a language through which they might appreciate art on a similar footing; and, most importantly, a lens through which they might perceive those around them.

The latter became quite central to the Jacksonian de-emphasis of economic class as a marker of social rank. Phrenology offered a worthy distraction from class status.

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encouraged (partially through voting reforms) to take advantage of their rights as citizens. These advances, though admirable, often came at the expense of minority populations. Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States spends considerable time detailing the human cost of Jacksonian Democracy.
More specifically, it enabled the time and energy once spent patrolling class boundaries
to be effectually re-directed towards the boundaries of race and gender—boundaries soon made visible in individual and group phrenologies.30

Thus, physiognomy and phrenology played critical roles in solidifying the uniquely American language through which the various races stood interpellated. They did so in part by encouraging the compartmentalization of physical features into racial categories. The effect of this compartmentalization was strikingly similar to that described by Ben Anderson in his brilliant chapter on “Census, Map and Museum.” He discusses therein the manner by which the mapping industry gave nationalism a visible “grammar” (163). Anderson’s understanding of the significance of this process is particularly useful to our discussion of phrenology. To wit: What are phrenology and physiognomy, after all, if not sciences engaged in the process of mapping? Certainly, both studies proceed from a decidedly classificatory stance. Medieval physiognomy, as evidenced in the *Secreta Secretorum*, mapped the human form into dozens of legible “spaces.” These included the four humors, bone structures, facial features, and complexions. Aristotle’s physiognomy did likewise. In the case of phrenology, the human skull alone lay mapped into some 30 quadrants (some phrenologists dissected the skull into as many as three times that amount!). Once mapped, these spaces found agential expression *in*, and functioned primarily *through*, easily reproducible forms—such as journals, charts and ceramic phrenology heads. These resources mapped not only psychical faculties, but also the history and boundary of nation and race.

As physical mapping and racism intersected in the 19th century, African and Native Americans found themselves perpetually under the gaze of the phrenologist. With the invention of the *craniometer*, a device that allowed phrenological practitioners to empirically measure the dimensions of the skull, their alleged inferiority transformed (almost overnight) into a scientific “fact.” Other techniques reinforced the data collected from craniometers. For instance, the empty skulls of Native Americans were filled with lead shot in order to measure their volume—a number that could then be contrasted (negatively, of course) with that of the Anglo-Saxon. Conversely, the physical features of the Anglo-Saxon—skulls in particular—quickly became the model against which all other races paled. It would not be incorrect to say that the worst abuses of the antebellum period occurred, at least in part, as the expression of these scientific conclusions.

This physical tendentiousness also led to the heavily manipulated the art of the early to mid 19th century. While some artists undoubtedly used physiognomy as a means of accurately capturing the *haecceity* of the individual—as Chaucer did—others abused its growing discursive weight. Political and historical figures often had their images egregiously adorned with magnificent examples of physiognomy. A stunning example of this is Horatio Greenough’s marble statue of Washington (1840), a statue still on display at the Smithsonian Institution. Greenough’s sculpture, interestingly enough, exhibits no real phrenological interest in the General’s *actual* physiognomy. Instead, Greenough caps

30 Lavater’s comments on race no doubt facilitated this epistemology. Judith Wechsler’s article “Lavater, Stereotype, and Prejudice” quotes Lavater on the subject of race: “Compare a Negro and an Englishman, a native of Lapland and an Italian, a Frenchman and an inhabitant of Terra del Fuego. Examine their forms, countenances, characters, and minds. Their difference will be easily seen, though it will sometimes be very difficult to describe scientifically” (qtd., 105). Jacksonian America, much to its shame, developed the means to “scientifically” measure racial differences.
Washington with “a universal expansion […] of faculties” (Colbert 235), essentially transforming him into a modern Jupiter. On the opposite end of the spectrum, tendentious portrayals of the “lesser” races would eventually give way to the vicious minstrel caricatures that persisted well in the 20th century.

To summarize then, phrenology and physiognomy thus helped construct the national character and consciousness of 19th century America in three ways. First, the astute and marketable combination of physiognomy and phrenology presented Jacksonian America with a viable alternative to class-based social ranking. Second, it essentially democratized the “high” art of science—giving citizens a new language through which to communicate. Finally, it forwarded the cause of Manifest Destiny by scientifically mapping the American “self” and the inferior “Other(s)” against which it moved in pursuit of that Destiny. As we turn again now to Chaucer’s historical moment, the last of these three becomes a particularly useful notion.

III

Describing early 19th century America as postcolonial seems an unassailable position. The events of 1776 demarcate that period of U.S. history into colonial and postcolonial moments: English influence may have persisted, but the presence of the English did not, and much of its culture was looked upon with scorn. Describing Chaucerian England as postcolonial, however, drives us into murkier waters. Numerous questions arise. If foreign occupation began in 1066, when did it end? How did the tangled cross-channel nesting of culture and land affect English self-perception? Did the English resist such cultural exchanges or embrace them? Not one of these questions has an easy answer.

Yet, I believe the larger question—that is, whether or not we can describe 14th century England as postcolonial—has an affirmative answer. Despite long wars, neither England nor France had significant cross-channel holdings during the last quarter of the 14th century. Battles in 1380 left impoverished England holding only a small part of the coveted Aquitaine duchy, and the French, by then, lacked the requisite naval fleet with which to invade English soil. This prolonged the stalemate known as the Hundred Years War; however, it also precipitated the concretization of both England and France as polar nations.

As John M. Bowers describes it, the resultant relationship between the nations was confused, certainly, but on the march towards clarity:

Postconquest aristocrats came to identify with Frenchmen, or contrast themselves with the increasingly alien French nationals, but the other half of the geographical formula was always the same. England and France became fixed in a dynamic of binary opposition that reached an extreme of self-consciousness during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries […] (54, emphasis in original)

This description highlights the fact that although spatially the two nations had essentially separated by the time Chaucer authored his Canterbury Tales, culturally, France still held sway with English aristocrats and intellectuals. Indeed, there was never a major push—at least not during the 14th century—to erase the marks of French influence. The courts of
England still spoke its language; its literature was a prized import. King Richard, as Bowers reminds us, approached the cultural body of France with the “eager embrace” (51) of a true Francophone. This of course returns us to the difficult questions that opened this section: If Chaucerian England stood the ground of a postcolonial nation, why did it not act the part with more alacrity? Where exactly was the decolonizing project manifesting itself?

Bowers identifies Chaucer’s use of vernacular English, particularly in the Canterbury Tales, as one of the most immediately evident examples of English decolonization. “Because Chaucer had the greatest natural inducement to perpetuate French usage,” argues Bower, “his turn to English struck at the heart of Francophone culture” (54). I would add that, within that text, his use of physiognomy as a mode of describing the people of England (in Dryden’s words, “the whole English nation of his Age”) contributes to that project in a very complex manner—complex because it lends itself to two opposing readings.

IV

Both of these readings take into account Chaucer’s love of irony and playfulness. Under the first model, his use of physiognomy stands as a kind of inside joke that may have only struck those in the court as humorous. If we think back now to Chapter 2 of this study, you will recall we witnessed therein the relationship between physiognomic detail and the elite. In the plastic arts of Europe—specifically France—only the highest-ranking members of the court (and in Rome, the Papacy) had their representations adorned with the markers of physiognomy. Also, written sources for the science were available only to the literate class. Despite its widespread availability, the Secreta Secretorum was not illustrated, and the illiterate masses, therefore, probably had little or no use for it. No evidence survives suggesting medieval physiognomy circulated in any orbits other than those of the literate and aristocratic.

In terms of literature, physiognomy was again the sole property of literate intellectuals. Moreover, when physiognomy did elaborate literary character, it was commonly in conjunction (as evidenced in the opening chapter of this study) with aristocratic or allegorical figures. Outside of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, the only relatively significant appearance of physiognomical detail is in Guillaume de Lorris’s Romaunt de la Rose. Within that text, such details (as perfunctory as they may be) only crown the denizens of the Garden, allegorical figures far removed from the reality of actual “persons.” Some basic physiognomy delineates the characters of Troylus and Criseye, but again, Troy was always more associated with aristocracy than with the “English peoples.”

That Chaucer paints his “common” pilgrims with the markers of physiognomy is thus ironic, comical, and ultimately punitive.31 This notion is reinforced when one

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31 Use of the term “irony” here may be confusing in respect to the assertions made in Chapter 1. In that chapter, I identified the Canterbury pilgrims as one of the few examples of non-ironic physiognomy; in other words, their physiognomies could be read as accurate indicators of character. However, while such details are non-ironic insofar as they are accurate, the fact that they adorn the lowest of the pilgrims is quite ironic.
examines specifically the characters that receive physiognomic detail. Out of the thirty pilgrims appearing in the “General Prologue,” just under a third of them (nine, to be precise) have character traits delineated through physiognomy. These are: the Prioresse; the Monk; the Friar; the Franklin; the Wife of Bath; the Miller; the Reeve; the Summoner; and the Pardoner. Missing from this list—interestingly enough—are the “aristocratic” pilgrims, the Knight and his son. This suggests that Chaucer is perhaps consciously upending the traditional discourse of physiognomy by eschewing its usual recipients. While a Knight stands leagues below a monarchical figure such as Charles V, he nonetheless represents the echelon in the hierarchy of the pilgrims. Ignoring his physiognomy in favor of persons like the Summoner and the Pardoner suggests a kind of grotesque irony, a play on the pretentiousness of such characters.

But let us look still closer at this group of nine. Close reading reveals that those receiving the most physiognomic detail are—metaphorically speaking—the “bottom of the barrel,” the most reprehensible of the pilgrims. Chaucer first draws attention to this group by listing them together: “Ther was also a REVE, and a MILLERE, / a SOMNOUR, and a PARDONER also, / a MAUNCIPLE, and myself—ther were name” (542-544). It is by virtue of Chaucer’s self-effacing humor that his own name appears among this group; yet, the other members (perhaps excluding the Maunciple) doubtless deserve such low ranking. The Reeve, Miller, Summoner and Pardoner have no redeeming qualities to speak of—a fact reflected in their respective (often grotesque) physiognomies.

To see these characters both described and skewered through that language, one almost always associated with science, philosophy, high art, and monarchy, has all the indications of a guilty pleasure, a cruel kind of “double-mocking.” The pretentious Sommoner, for example, speaking as he does in Latin, and acting the petty lord as he serves his summons, finds his pretentiousness turned against him through the elite language of physiognomy:

A SOMONOUR was ther with us in that place
That hadde a fyr-reed cherubynnes face,
For sawcefleem he was, with eyen narwe.

32 Later in the text, Chaucer sketches his own physiognomy. In the prologue to the “Tale of Sir Thopas”, Harry Bailey describes him thusly:

Now war yow, sires, and lat this man have place—
He in the waast is shape as wel as I!
This were a popet in an arm t’enbrace
For any womman, smal and fair of face.
He semeth elvyssh by his countenaunce,
For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce (698-704).

“Sir Thopas” itself stands as a model of self-deprecation, and because of that I do not believe we can approach Bailey’s description with anything but skepticism. Chaucer’s audience most likely had reason to chuckle at the poet describing himself as small and womanish. The second, Theophrastan-type description of Chaucer’s behavior is appropriate to any writer intent on the creative process.
As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe,
With scalled browes blake and piled berd.
Of his visage, children were aferd. (623-627)

For someone like the Sommoner, who obviously pretends to the language of the elite, this portrait is all the more devastating. Instead of a Jupiter-like forehead (such as Greenough gives to General Washington) and fair skin, he is saddled with narrow eyes, a humoral imbalance, and sores that “ne oynement that wolde clense and byte” (631) can heal. The Reeve and Pardoner share similar pretensions: the Reeve “koude bettre than his lord purchase” (608), and lives in a fine home surrounded by trees; the Pardoner dresses “of the newe jet” (682) and preaches before crowds in such a way as to “[make] the person and the peple his apes” (706). Even the Wife of Bath, although not a member of this particular group, sees her upward mobility denigrated in the details of her physiognomy; her fine dress offset by her gapped teeth.

Obviously, this reading has little to do with postcoloniality and/or the attempt to decolonize the English people. If anything, it reminds us of the Jacksonian use of physiognomy as a means of interpellanting, or internally colonizing, racial groups. However, Chaucer’s target in the Canterbury Tales is not a race, but rather a class: a class that disrupts society through the open and tasteless pursuit of wealth. In her examination of the Summoner, Laura Braswell-Means argues that Chaucer employs physiognomy because he “saw characters as ‘case histories,’ in which physiology and psychology were part of an intricate whole” (268). My reading of the “General Prologue” demonstrates that this definition is far too broad. The pilgrims who “know their place,” so to speak, are not described in physiognomic detail: these include the Knight and his Yeoman, the Shipman, the Doctor of Physic, the good Parson, and the gentle, hardworking Plowman. The latter two, especially, stand in sharp contrast to the pilgrims that bookend them—the Wife of Bath on one side, and the group including the Reeve, Miller, Pardoner and Summoner on the other. This contrast, and the unarguable role physiognomy (and physiology as a whole) plays in its delineation, evidences Chaucer’s use of the science as an instrument through which to punish and control a group. That such a group is not the

33 D.W. Robertson, Jr. makes a similar assertion in his essay “Simple Signs from Everyday Life” (1981) and that passage is worth quoting at length:

The “ideal” characters—the Knight, the Clerk, the Parson, and the Plowman—love intangibles, whereas others love more tangible goods, ranging from little dogs and fancy dress to lands, robes, expensive foods, jolly wenches and money. Chaucer is especially hard on figures who pretend to higher station or greater wisdom than they actually have. Thus his Sergeant of the Law, who seems wise, apparently knows all the cases since the conquest and all the statutes by heart, a manifest impossibility, which means that he pompously refers to nonexistent authorities. (21)

The gentle Chaucerian irony that informs the Sergeant of the Law’s portrait brings into relief the monetary aspect of my argument. This Man of Law may pretend to knowledge, but he is “discreet […] and of greet reverence (312); he may be a great “purchasour” (318), but one never gets the sense that such buying makes others his apes, or that his pretension is a societal evil. Had the Sergeant of the Law’s portrait included physiognomic detail (good or ill) the loosened signifying space necessary for ironic presentation would not have been available to Chaucer. The physiognomy of the “General Prologue” is reserved for those about whom Chaucer wishes there to be no mistake, no ironic confusions.
traditional recipient of physiognomic detail can be attributed simply to Chaucer’s love of irony, and the sense of playfulness that pervades the “General Prologue”.

The preceding exegesis takes into account Chaucer’s audience, the familiarity they would have had with the applications of physiogomy, and their common distaste for the pretentious class that increasingly disrupted traditional cultural and economic structures. I would like to now offer a second reading that understands Chaucer’s audience as wider than just the courts of England—an audience partially made up of French aristocrats, intellectuals and fellow writers. This second reading largely contradicts the first. Yet, as I see both having merit, I reluctant to privilege one over the other; accordingly, I do not attempt to settle the conflict between them. Perhaps they are not, as I currently understand them, mutually exclusive. Both, for instance, understand Chaucer’s use of physiognomy as at least partially comedic.

V

However, if the first exegesis saw Chaucer as controlling and interpellating a class, the second sees him as liberating and decolonizing a nation. This argument begins with an assertion made by John Bowers in his article entitled “Chaucer after Smithfield.” In reference to Chaucerian nationalism, Bowers asserts that:

[…]. Chaucer the nationalist does not invent an essential Englishness that would have homogenized his characters and trivialized them as mere types. Such an assertion of English identity was a trap. It would have validated the stereotype of otherness that a dominant culture maintains to render manageable a subaltern people. […] Chaucer’s English nationalism would be realized in a crowded pageant of uniquely crafted personalities. (56)

This strategy of decolonization is remarkably keen. By constructing a pageant, rather than hegemony, Chaucer makes slippery the then-subaltern image of Englishness. Indeed, no solid representation exists upon which the “French speaking courtiers and bureaucrats” (Bowers 54) could seize; rather, the image of the English people presented by Chaucer appears shattered into some thirty pieces. His goal in the “General Prologue” is not to define Englishness so much as to fragment it. Once fragmented, the image can then be reclaimed in what Edward Said describes as a “restored and invigorated authority” (Culture and Imperialism 212).

Physiognomy’s position in the structure of this prismatic representation is one of utmost importance. To begin, its implementation takes control of a discourse associated with intellectual dominance and with the French monarchy. In what could be termed a “preemptive strike,” Chaucer predominantly attaches this discourse—as we have seen—to his “lowest” pilgrims. The result of this brilliant move is two-fold. First, the power of physiognomy as an interpellating force is partially neutralized or dissipated; in painting a character such as the Miller with its language, the effect is not unlike pulling physiognomy from a pedestal and dragging it through the mud. No longer could it serve but nobly as a range of signifiers available only to intellectuals, to monarchs and popes. With the advent of the “General Prologue”, any individual, no matter what class, could
theoretically be conceived in the pronounced *haecceity* of physiognomic detail. Also, because the increased detail associated with Gothic art measurably helps to inform Chaucer’s portraits, that discursive, cultural power is likewise siphoned, redirected.\(^{34}\)

The second result has to do with the wide range of Chaucer’s physiognomic vocabulary. While his pilgrims are indeed sketched with often-grotesque physiognomies, the descriptions are extraordinarily varied and realistic (perhaps as a means of precluding the kind of hegemonic interpellation foisted upon African and Native Americans during the 19th century). When coupled with the broad range of types appearing in the “General Prologue”, this complex grammar of the body further fragments the image of the English people.\(^{35}\)

Again, I am not asserting that Chaucer’s attempt is to deny/destroy the existence of an English nation, but rather to reclaim its image, to set the agenda for its future representation. Remarks made by Said in his chapter on “Themes of Resistance Culture” may be useful towards understanding the impetus behind such an effort:

> To achieve recognition is to rechart and then to occupy the place in imperial cultural forms reserved for subordination, to occupy it self-consciously, fighting for it on the very same territory once ruled by a consciousness that assumed the subordination of a designated inferior Other. (210)

The term “rechart” is particularly valuable here: as Jacksonian America mapped the physiognomy of the head so as to define both the Self and Other, Chaucer likewise seems to be engaged in a mapmaking process. However, this map is not of England, but of its people. (Chaucer is hardly interested the accurate representation of the various English locales that appear in the *Canterbury Tales*. His cities are mostly London.) In mapping the English peoples with such empirical detail—detail that partakes of powerful discourses—he creates a cultural edifice, a kind of Gothic museum through which visitors might stroll as they examine its subjects, in the words of Ben Anderson, “disinterred, unjungled, measured, photographed, re-constructed, fenced off, analyzed and displayed” (179).\(^{36}\)

The grotesque quality of these subjects results from the simple

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\(^{34}\) There may be some connection between Gothic art as an aesthetic form and Gothic art as an expression of Capetian cultural imperialism. Edith C. Lee in an online discussion forum recently suggested this possibility to me. Lee theorizes that “the [Gothic] style as we know it, not just several distinguishing parts, but the sum of those parts in a single cohesive style, this was put together to promote the Capetian regime (and of course, for the glory of God) by the Abbot Suger at St. Denis” (soc.history.medieval 5/21/03). In adopting the Gothic style into his portrayal of the English pilgrims, Chaucer may very well have been consciously siphoning energy from the cultural capital associated with the Capetians as a means of disrupting the cultural ascendancy of the House of Valois. Further research into this possibility is necessary, but its implications are significant for postcolonial medieval studies.

\(^{35}\) It is unclear whether Chaucer was familiar with the damage done by interpellative physiognomy to the Jewish peoples. “The Priories Tale,” while certainly pursuing a number of medieval stereotypes about “the Jew,” makes no mention of physical appearance. Assuming Chaucer was aware of the “typical” Jewish physiognomical representation—not an unlikely assumption—it is noticeable that he does not implement that language as part of his artistic vision. Again, physiognomy appears to be a set of signifiers available only to his English pilgrims. (For an overview of Chaucer and Judaism, see Sylvia Tomasch’s article “Postcolonial Chaucer and the Virtual Jew”.)

\(^{36}\) Antony Easthope argues in *Englishness and National Culture* (1999) that the “discursive formation of Englishness” stands defined “mainly in relation to empiricism” (61). The physical form is important, in the eyes of Easthope, as a corollary means of constructing empiricist rhetoric. “English empiricism,” states
need to make this museum interesting, entertaining. A dull recitation of physiognomic
details would not have pleased listeners in the court; a procession of Jupiter-like heads
and flawless physiognomies would not have titillated their curiosity.37

Perhaps the two theories presented here are not entirely exclusive of one another.
Perhaps they demonstrate Chaucer’s desire to utilize the discourse of physiognomy on
two distinct planes: one being class, the other, nation. Because Chaucer was a prominent
member of the court, we naturally expect him to reflect—in some part—the class biases
of that dominant body. On the other hand, his desire to decolonize and define Englishness
is likewise logical, even expected. Chaucer’s characteristic subtlety (and irony) in the
pursuit of class and national desires belies his tendentiousness; indeed, Chaucerian
physiognomy is one space in which it is possible to excavate those partially submerged
desires.

VI

To conclude, then, I would like to review the arc of this study, reify the
connections between its component parts, and pose a few unanswered questions. Divide
et impera has been the methodology thus far, and it is now the moment to make those
parts contiguous.

Chapter 1 proceeded from the following question: What makes Chaucerian
physiognomy distinctive? To answer that question, we examined a handful of literary
works of the period—English and Continental—with careful attention to the physical
descriptors used therein. All of those sources, including Guillaume de Lorris, Giovanni
Boccaccio, and John Gower, if they used physiognomy at all, used it in quite a
perfunctory way. The Italian text, in particular, shows almost no interest in physiognomy.
The Romaunt de la Rose demonstrates considerably more interest, but never moves
beyond a certain point: Guillaume de Lorris, while willing to describe physiognomies,
does not have a firm scientific grasp of the subject. His descriptions are thus predicable
and rote. John Gower follows this lead, only occasionally sketching the physical
attributes of his characters, and only doing so when absolutely necessary to a narrative
(as in his version of the “Wife of Bath’s Tale”). All three authors tend to employ
physiognomy solely in relation to either faerie or allegorical characters. We might add to
this list (as a kind of postscript) one additional source: the literature of the Classical Age.
Ovid, Homer, Juvenal, Suetonius, and Pliny the Elder all reference descriptive
physiognomy in some capacity. Such physiognomy is not predictive, however, as is
Chaucerian physiognomy (and later, phrenology) but it does reinforce Georgia Wright

Easthope, “[is] explicitly committed to the individual experience of reality, [and consequently] embraces a
strong awareness of the body” (83). While he mentions neither Chaucer nor physiognomy in the course of
his discussion, both would, in my opinion, prove instructive and useful to such an argument.
37 We have not yet discussed the physiognomy appearing in the “The Knight’s Tale” and now may be the
moment to address that subject. The two kings fighting alongside Palamon and Arcite are both described in
measurable detail—some of which is physiognomic. Neither description, however, is particularly
interesting and I would relate the two more with the perfunctory detail of Romaunt de la Rose than with the
vivid detail offered in the “General Prologue.” Walter Clyde Curry’s essay on “The Knight’s Tale” is still
the preeminent examination of this subject.
Sommers’ argument that physiognomy appears and disappears from the arts seemingly at random.\textsuperscript{38}

Within his own oeuvre, Chaucer appears reticent in his early texts about employing physiognomy as an accurate indicator of character. The title characters in \textit{Troylus and Criseyde} both have their physiognomies described, for instance, but each proves to be ultimately ironic; Criseyde, in particular exhibits a fine shape, face and cheek that are not reflected in her capricious behavior. Indeed, almost all of Chaucer’s techniques for character delineation, prior to the \textit{Canterbury Tales}, proceed from the Theophrastan model—one more inclined to relate character through behavior than appearance. The same is essentially true for his literary contemporaries.

The question then became one of sources: If contemporary literature offered no real models for Chaucerian physiognomy, from whence did that impulse arise? Chapter 2 identified two very likely possibilities, possibilities supported by strong, if at times circumstantial, evidence. The first of these was medieval philosophy. General trends within that field evidenced a shift away from reflection towards a more empirical methodology. The revival of science, realized through Aristotle, Bacon, and a host of Muslim and Jewish scholars, thus served to legitimize the senses. This allowed Duns Scotus to argue for \textit{haecceitas}, the “thisness” of the discernable individual object in externality; it allowed William Ockham to champion immediate experience as an authorizing part of the willful knowledge-gathering process. Physiognomy, and the description of the physiognomy of the individual (as experienced by the conscious subject), enabled Chaucer to bring all three of these mainstream theoretical positions into his literary practice.

The widely disseminated aesthetics of Gothic art and architecture made that transition relatively easy. Detailed grotesques would have routinely greeted Chaucer in many Gothic cathedrals, as well as on the intricately decorated \textit{objets d’art} that filled the households of medieval aristocracy: illuminated manuscripts, carved ivories, shimmering frescoes. Moreover, his frequent excursions to the continent would have exposed him to the increased use of physiognomy in the plastic arts. Boniface VIII and Charles V each solidified their authority through accurately mapped images of their respective physiognomies, a fact that also suggests the political power of physiognomic signifiers—a power that could not have escaped the ever-perceptive poet.

Finally, we addressed the question of why true Chaucerian physiognomy (which I would characterize as uniquely detailed, knowledgeable and accurate) appears suddenly and almost solely in reference to his English pilgrims. A discussion of phrenology’s political and social agency in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century set the foundation for two (arguably) separate explanations: 1) That physiognomy is used primarily as a punitive discourse against the pretensions of those attempting to disrupt the “traditional” social and economic hierarchy of medieval England. 2) That, in constructing his vision of Englishness through physiognomy, Chaucer takes possession of an interpellative discourse in order to simultaneously neutralize and exploit its growing political weight.

\textsuperscript{38} By “predictive” physiognomy, I mean the inclination by Chaucer and the phrenologists to “lead” with the physiognomy, and “follow” with behavior that corresponds to that description. Greek and Roman physiognomists leaned more towards pure description, such as that seen in the \textit{Secreta Scratorum} and in the texts of Aristotle. The difference here may be merely one grounded in the split between literature and science.
In the former, Chaucer, as part of the dominant class, uses physiognomy to colonize and interpellate the lower classes. In the latter, he uses physiognomy to decolonize a nation: to fragment the image of essential Englishness as he describes not a people, but a brilliant pageant of individuals.

Admittedly, it has been difficult to keep this discussion from exploding onto a hundred different paths, the majority of which were ultimately prohibitive for reasons of time, space, and language. I do not believe I have adequately addressed physiognomy as it existed outside of Western Europe. Theoretically, it may be possible to follow physiognomy, threadlike, through the hands of the Greeks and Romans, into the Muslim world, and finally into the texts of Geoffrey Chaucer. On the other hand, as Sommers argues (and as my preliminary work here suggests), physiognomy may never have moved from culture to culture, age to age, in a linear fashion.

More work is also needed in the excavation of physiognomy’s literary presence in medieval France and Italy: for instance, I have adequately not examined the work of Eustace Deschamps, Jean Froissart, Dante Allegheri or Francesco Petrarch. How, we might ask, did physiognomy operate politically in these texts? What can this tell us about the relationship between science and politics in the early/late middle ages? Did Chaucer create that now-indivisible relationship?

At any rate, I believe the scholarship here has advanced our understanding of medieval physiognomy *his non obstantibus*. While the signs of physiognomy have long been explained (and never so well as in Curry’s essays on the topic) my hope is that this study will initiate a closer look into the subtle political implications of those signs, into their literary beginnings, and into their continued hold on the explanatory and artistic imagination of the West. Because physiognomy crosses the boundaries between disciplines, it offers, in the words of Kathleen Biddick, “some space for agonistic ways of imagining the study of medieval material culture, a method more attentive to the construction of its past objects in the present” (5, emphasis in original). I believe this space is necessary if we indeed wish to decolonize Western rhetoric of the body as it relates to race, gender and class.
Works Cited


