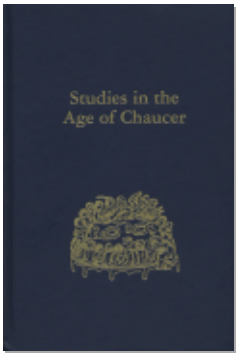
"It may nat be": Chaucer, Derrida, and the Impossibility of the Gift



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"It may nat be":

Chaucer, Derrida, and the Impossibility of the Gift

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CHAUCER'S MOST LIKELY SOURCE for his *Summoner's Tale*, Jacques de Baisieux's fabliau *Le dis de le vescie a prestre*, tells of a dying priest who promises to bequeath to two corrupt friars a "jewel" so precious that, while he were alive, he would "not let another have it for two hundred marks."[1] The friars are crushed when the priest reveals that the precious jewel "locked in [his] possession" is his bladder.[2] The tale concludes shortly after the friars learn of their misfortune. As T. W. Craik notes, however, *The Summoner's Tale* diverges from its source and portrays not only the revelation of the friar's unwelcome gift—in this case a fart—but also the aftermath of the gift's reception, which includes the friar's reporting the gift of the fart to the town's lord, whose squire then proposes a solution to the task of dividing the fart into twelve parts.[3] This coda represents a marked departure from the rest of the tale, the plot of which mainly concerns the friar's attempt to obtain money from Thomas. It seems, in many ways, a non sequitur. Why

[1] Jacques de Baisieux, "The Tale of the Priest's Bladder," in *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux: Texts and Translations*, ed. Larry Dean Benson and Theodore Murdock Andersson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), 354–59.

[2] The introduction to the Variorum Edition of *The Summoner's Tale* includes an extensive discussion as to whether Chaucer worked directly from *Le dis de la vescie a prestre,* or whether both were responding to an earlier common source (John F. Plummer III, "Introduction," *The Variorum Edition: The Summoner's Tale* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995], 3–51 [8–10]). Either way, critics seem to agree that the final scene is Chaucer's own addition.

[3] T. W. Craik, *The Comic Tales of Chaucer* (London: Methuen, 1964), 118.

Chaucer concludes his tale with such a bizarre scene has been the subject of much critical attention.[4]

The purpose of the coda, I argue, comes into focus through the word *impossible*, which the lord of the town uses to describe the division of the fart: "Who evere herde of swich a thyng er now? / To every man ylike? Tel me how. / It is an inpossible; it may nat be."[5] While few critics have drawn attention to the word, according to the *Middle English Dictionary,* Chaucer was the first English writer to use the word *impossible*—also in the form *impossible*—as a noun. The occurrence is not isolated: similar expressions appear in both *The Franklin's Tale* ("[T]his were an inpossible" [V.1009]) and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* ("For trusteth wel, it is an impossible / That any clerk wol speke good of wyves" [III.688–89]). The *Middle English Dictionary* lists this particular usage under the noun's primary meaning: "something which cannot be or be done; impossible thing, impossible action, etc." Although the *MED* suggests that Chaucer's usage of the word predates the next usage in this context by thirty years,[6] the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists a similar occurrence in Usk's *The Testament of Love* (c. 1387–88). The next listed occurrence of the word as a noun, however, is not until c. 1440.[7] Thus, while Chaucer may not have been the first to use *impossible* as a noun, he was certainly among the first.[8] This usage of *impossible* might have been novel, but the thirteenth-century Latin noun *impossibile*—more commonly seen in the

[4] Plummer, ed., *Variorum Edition,* summarizes the ongoing critical discussion about the ending (14). Among major readings, Derek S. Brewer argues that the last scene is intended to parody an arithmetic handbook ("Chaucer and Arithmetic," in *Medieval Studies Conference Aachen 1983: Language and Literature*, ed. Wolf-Dietrich Bald and Horst Weinstock [Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1984], 111–20). R. F. Green argues that the division of the fart has a parallel in a collection of riddles from northern France ("A Possible Source for Chaucer's Summoner's Tale" *ELN* 24.4 [1987], 24–27). Alan Levitan claims that the fart is "a brilliant and satirical reversal of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost" ("The Parody of Pentecost in Chaucer's Summoner's Tale," *UTQ* 40 [1971], 236–46). Karl P. Wentersdorf suggests that the division of the fart into twelve parts on the carousel represents the "twelve winds of heaven" ("The Motif of Exorcism in the Summoner's Tale," *Studies in Short Fiction* 17 [1980], 249–54). Despite the copious criticism on the subject, no clear consensus exists as to the source or function of the coda.

[5] *The Summoner's Tale,* III.2229–31. Chaucer quotations are from Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

[6] *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "Impossible."

[7] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Impossible."

[8] Roy J. Pearcy suggests the possibility that the Usk usage was in fact based on Chaucer's. "Chaucer's 'An Impossible' ('Summoner's Tale' III, 2231)," *N&Q* 14 (1967): 322–25 (322n). The precise ordering is less important than the fact that the usage was, in Chaucer's time, still innovative.

plural, *impossibilia*—was well established. It is perhaps from this Latin word that Chaucer's *impossible* derives. That is, Chaucer employs *impossible* not in the modern sense, but to refer to a now-obscure scholastic exercise that Roy J. Pearcy defines as "a proposition, advanced by a self-acknowledged sophist, which violates the dictates of common sense or is clearly incapable of demonstration, but which is nevertheless vigorously defended or 'proved' by a series of such paralogical arguments as the sophist's ingenuity can devise." For example, a sophist might begin with the proposition, as the thirteenth-century philosopher Siger von Brabant does in a classic example of an *impossible,* that "the Trojan war is still in progress," and then use logic to prove his clearly impossible claim.[9] The goal of these exercises was to train students to identify errors in logic that could lead to erroneous conclusions.

Pearcy's reading of the word "inpossible" is appropriate in this context. Thomas's order to divide his fart among twelve friars, with each getting as "muche as oother" (III.2134), resembles a sophist's presentation of an *impossible*—as does the friar's own presentation of the problem to the lord. As Pearcy notes, the problem of the fart has "the requisite effect of violently challenging common-sense presuppositions about the nature of the physical world" but, like an *impossible*, is ultimately "proved" through the ingenuity of the squire who proposes that the fart be divided up using a cartwheel.[10] The squire suggests that Thomas be placed on the hub of the wheel with a friar at each of the twelve spokes. That way the sound and smell of Thomas's fart will travel through the hollow spokes of the wheel to reach each friar. Although Pearcy convincingly argues that this method of dividing a fart functions as an example of an *impossible*, he does not fully explain why Chaucer concludes his tale with this odd parody of a scholastic exercise. A closer examination of *The Summoner's Tale*, however, reveals that the structure of the *impossible* applies not only to the lord's discussion of the fart. The friar's impossible attempt to acquire a gift of money from Thomas represents a second *impossible*. Through a series of parallels, Chaucer links Thomas's fart to the money that the friar tries to attain. As such, the impossibility of the fart serves as an analogue for the impossibility of the friar's obtaining money as a gift in exchange for heavenly rewards. Through this juxtaposition of flatulence and money, *The Summoner's Tale* raises a broader ques-

[9] Pearcy, "Chaucer's 'An Impossible,'" 322–23, 323.
[10] Ibid., 324.

tion as to the possibility of the gift in general. That is, the skeptical attitude toward the friar's attempt to extract a gift from Thomas invites the reader to consider whether all gifts are undermined by similar principles of economic exchange.

Insofar as Chaucer complicates and questions the notion of the pure gift, *The Summoner's Tale* independently discovers the idea set forth by Derrida in *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* that the gift is "the very figure of the impossible."[11] Derrida suggests that, for a gift to take place, a donor must intentionally give something to a donee and receive nothing in return. If the donee knows that it is a gift, he will necessarily feel indebted to the donor. As soon as the donor knows he has given a gift, he will "make a return payment" to himself with the "gratifying image of goodness or generosity."[12] Consequently, for a gift to be a pure gift, neither the donor nor the donee can know that it is a gift. But, by its very nature, a gift requires that someone intentionally give something to someone else, that both parties know that a gift event is transpiring. Thus, says Derrida, the gift "could not take place except on the condition of not taking place." It is "*the* impossible."[13] I will argue that, in the context of this argument, Chaucer's concluding *The Summoner's Tale* with an *impossible* is not only relevant but crucial. It serves as a model for "the impossible" that lies at the tale's heart: the impossibility of the gift. Indeed, Derrida's thought on the gift gives us a new way to conceive the ending of *The Summoner's Tale*. But every gift demands a return, and, just as Derrida gives us a new lens through which to examine Chaucer's work, *The Summoner's Tale* reciprocates by discovering a type of gift unthought in Derrida's *Given Time*.

Before exploring such connections, however, we must first return to the vexing question of how to divide a fart into twelve parts. Pearcy observes that the entire problem of dividing the fart—from its proposal to its eventual solution—assumes the form of a logical *impossible*. According to the traditional structure of *impossibilia,* a "master propos[es] and defend[s] his sophistical argument before a critical audience of students." That is, a sophist makes a proposition that "violently challenges common-sense presuppositions about the nature of the physical world" and then proves it.[14] The role of the audience is to express "wonderment

[11] Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money,* trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 7.
[12] Ibid., 21–23.
[13] Ibid., 35.
[14] Pearcy, "Chaucer's 'An Impossible,'" 323, 324.

at the ingenuity which devised so outlandish an assertion, and incredulity that its validity should be susceptible of proof."[15] Pearcy claims that, in *The Summoner's Tale*, the role of sophist is shared by Thomas, who initially poses the seemingly impossible problem of dividing a fart among twelve friars, and the squire, who solves Thomas's problem through his suggestion that a cartwheel be used to divide the fart. The lord assumes the role of audience by expressing astonishment at the proposition. Pearcy posits a number of linguistic clues that Chaucer leaves to connect the tale to sophistical *impossibilia*. For instance, the friar rejects the title of "master" but reminds Thomas that he is a university graduate. He also points to the use of Latinate technical terms like "reverberacioun" and "perturbynge" as further support for a mockingly academic tone. In the end, though, Thomas's fart cannot be divided using a cartwheel or any other means because it is already dissipated with no conceivable means of ever being reassembled. This basic flaw in the squire's logic dovetails neatly with the structure of the *impossible*, which has as its goal the demonstration of logical fallacy in order to train the audience in "recognizing and refuting false arguments."[16] Regardless of what the sophist argues, he cannot change the truth that, while the division of the fart has a solution in the context of the *impossible*, it remains impossible in reality.

While Pearcy claims only that Chaucer depicts the division of the fart as the subject of the *impossible*, implicit in Chaucer's *impossible* is a second "illogical proposition"—that a fart can be given as a gift. Regardless of whether or not it has been divided, the idea of giving a fart to someone else is absurd. The fart-gift would be impossible even if the fart were "whole"—if a fart can be said to be capable of existing in such a state. A fart is a noise, an odor, a gas, what Chaucer's lord calls "but of eir reverberacioun" (III.2234). As a result, when the squire proposes the cartwheel solution, he solves not only the *impossible* of how to divide a fart but implicitly solves the more fundamentally impossible problem of how a fart can be given as a gift at all. This illogical idea of the fart-gift, one that the sophistical characters Thomas and the squire both embrace, comes to serve as a metaphor for the gift in general.

While it requires little imagination to see the illogic in a fart's being given as a gift, it is not immediately obvious how a fart symbolizes the

[15] Ibid., 324.
[16] Ibid., 323.

impossibility of the gift as a phenomenon of human culture. In his classic anthropological work *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss explains that the giving of a gift represents more than just the exchange of an item. Mauss observes that the law of the Maori culture accounts for a gift's being endowed with a *hau* or a spirit that it retains even when a given item changes hands. He goes on to argue that his observations of these primitive cultures reflect a broader truth: even in societies like ours and Chaucer's, which do not recognize an actual spirit in a gifted item, a gift still represents "a part of one's nature and substance"—and receiving a gift is equivalent to receiving "a part of one's spiritual essence."[17] Besides the humorous surface parallel that a fart, like Mauss's gift, is both quite literally a "part of one's nature and substance" as well as an "essence," Chaucer's rendering of the fart in *The Summoner's Tale* resembles Mauss's argument that the gift is something that exceeds mere physical representation.

In that sense, Thomas's inelegant fart serves as a surprisingly elegant model for the impossibility that Derrida sees as characterizing the gift, since Derrida not only follows Mauss in perceiving the gift as something intangible but also argues that the gift itself is, paradoxically, ungivable. Thomas's fart is an apt metaphor for such an event. As the lord says when he hears the problem of the fart, "The rumblynge of a fart and every soun / Nis but of eir reverberacioun, / And evere it wasteth litel and litel awey" (III.2233–35). Like a gift, a fart lacks a physical form and it, too, exists for "a paradoxical instant" before "wasting away." Thus, similar reasoning in each case underlies the fact that both the fart and the gift are ungivable. Derrida writes, "It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible. Not impossible but *the* impossible [non pas impossible mais *l'*impossible]. The very figure of the impossible."[18] Derrida's use of "impossible" as a noun, a usage he emphasizes by italicizing the article in "*l'*impossible," recalls Chaucer's own innovative use of "impossible" as a noun.

An understanding of the way in which the *impossible* of the fart reflects back on the impossibility of the gift illuminates the odd ending of *The Summoner's Tale*. The *impossible* at the tale's end serves as a model for the friar's similar, albeit more subtle, *impossible* when he attempts to attain

[17] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift,* trans. Ian Cunnison (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1954), 10.

[18] Ibid., 7. French from Jacques Derrida, *Donner le temps: 1. La fausse monnaie* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1991), 19.

a gift of money from Thomas. In this case, the *impossible* concerns not the division of a fart among twelve friars but the acquisition of a gift of money, a gift that would ordinarily be recognized as possible. Mirroring his presenting the fart problem to the lord and the lord's wife, the friar presents his proposition for money to the parallel audience of Thomas and Thomas's wife. Furthermore, just as the lord says that "it may nat be" (III.2231) upon hearing that the fart must be divided, Thomas is also skeptical when he hears the friar's request for money:

> As help me Crist, as I in fewe yeres,
> Have spent upon diverse manere freres
> Ful many a pound; yet fare I never the bet.
> Certeyn, my good have I almoost biset
> Farwel, my gold, for it is al ago!"
> (III.1949–53)

Significantly, Thomas states not only that he does not want to give the friar money but also implies that his gold is "al ago" or completely gone. As a result, when the friar later demands, "Yif me thanne of thy gold, to make oure cloystre" (III.2099), he quite literally demands the impossible since Thomas has no gold. The friar's demand for a gift represents the seemingly illogical proposition necessary as the starting point of an *impossible*.

Despite the hopelessness of obtaining money from Thomas, the friar engages in the logical progression that the form of the *impossible* demands, the same logical progression the squire practices when he describes how to distribute the fart by cartwheel. The friar outlines what Pearcy calls "a series of . . . paralogical arguments" to prove why Thomas should donate. He explains that the friars' supposed asceticism makes them the most godly, that other clerics are not worthy, and that giving the friars money will lead to spiritual salvation. The friar's argument culminates in the outrageous claim that the world itself could end if he does not: "And if yow lakke oure predicacioun, / Thanne goth the world al to destruccioun" (III.2109–10). The fart and the money share parallel structures in their respective *impossibilia* insofar as both represent the impossible end that the sophist figure seeks to prove. Consequently, shortly before beginning his "proof" of the *impossible*, the friar remarks, "Thou shalt me fynde as just as is a squyre" (III.2090). The "squyre" in question is ostensibly a measuring square: a symbol of justice and bal-

ance. But at the time Chaucer wrote the tale, the *y* in "squyre," meaning "square," and the *i* in "squier," meaning "squire," would likely have already phonetically merged to [i].[19] As such, the text may play on the similarity between "squyre" and "squier" in order to link the friar, the man who "proves" the *impossible* about the gift of money, to the squire, the man who "proves" the *impossible* about the fart.[20]

A more blatant linguistic hint connects the tale's two *impossibilia* when the friar says, "What is a ferthyng worth parted in twelve?" (III.1967). Drawing upon an ancient correspondence between feces and money, the reference to a "ferthyng parted in twelve" seems a foreshadowing of the "farting," also to be "parted in twelve."[21] The tale confirms this connection when Thomas invites the friar to reach behind him "in hope for to fynde there a yifte" (III.2146). Identifying the fart as a "yifte" aligns it with the gift of money that the friar seeks. And just as the fart is impossible, Chaucer subtly alludes to the impossibility of money as gift when the friar says to Thomas, "A, yif that covent half a

[19] *The Cambridge History of the English Language,* vol. 2, ed. Norman Blake (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 57. Furthermore, *The Merchant's Tale* refers to a squire by the alternate spelling "squyer" instead of the more usual "squier" (III.1772).

[20] Bernard F. Huppé is perhaps the first to suggest that the line contains "unconscious word-play involving the squire's suggestion for a just distribution of Thomas' gift," in *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1967), 208.

[21] Numerous critics have pointed to the farting/farthing pun, most notably J. Edwin Whitesell in "Chaucer's Lisping Friar," *MLN* 71 (1956): 160–61; Paull F. Baum in "Chaucer's Puns: A Supplementary List," *PMLA* 73 (1958): 167–70; Earle Birney in "Structural Irony Within the Summoner's Tale," *Anglia* 78 (1960): 204–218; and according to Plummer, ed., *Variorum Edition,* "all commentators since" (note to line 1967, p. 160). Valerie Allen points to the pun and explains away an apparent phonetic difference. She also points to the pun of *ars-metrike* on "arithmetic" and "arse-metrics" (*On Farting* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007], 139–40). The fart and gold may also be linked on a psychological level. According to Sigmund Freud, "Wherever archaic modes of thought predominate or have persisted—in ancient civilizations, in myth, fairy-tale and superstition, in unconscious thoughts and dreams, and in the neuroses—money comes into the closest relation with excrement." Money, according to Freud, comes to serve as a substitute for the "original erotic interest in defecation" that is "destined to be extinguished in later years." He cites a folk figure known as the "excretor of ducats" and a Babylonian myth in which gold is the "excrement of Hell" ("Character and Anal Erotism," *Collected Papers,* trans. Joan Riviere [New York: Basic Books, 1959], 49–50). For an extensive list of works that make the connection between feces and money, see Marc Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 196–97. Because psychoanalysis bases this argument in part on a notion of sublimated anal eroticism, the same reasoning that links excrement and money may also link the fart and money.

quarter otes! / A, yif that covent foure and twenty grotes! / A, yif that frere a peny, and lat hym go! / Nay, nay, Thomas, it may no thyng be so!" (III.1963–66). Although the friar mocks Thomas for giving small donations to many different friars, he also impugns the possibility of the gift insofar as the pronoun "it" in "it may no thyng be so" may subtly refer not to the division of the gift among various clerics, but to the act of giving money in general. By claiming that even these smallest of gifts "may no thyng be so," Chaucer suggests that, like the division of the fart, Thomas's gift of money is impossible. Indeed, the lord's description of the dividing of the fart, "it may nat be," echoes the friar's description of the gift, "it may no thyng be so."

The parallels that Chaucer constructs between the gift of the fart and the gift of money reveal why he goes to such lengths to align the final scene of *The Summoner's Tale* with sophistry. For Chaucer, the "impossible proposition" taken as the starting point of each of the tale's two *impossibilia* is a gift—first a gift of money and then a gift of flatulence. *Impossibilia*, however, represent a "perversion of the proper ends of logic."[22] They are intended to train students in "recognizing and refuting false arguments." So it is no surprise that Chaucer uses the *impossible* of the fart to expose the perversion in the friar's logic. By connecting the friar's attempt for money with a sophist's argument for the division and distribution of a fart, Chaucer mocks the friar's attempt to use the logic of economic exchange to obtain a gift. The appeal to the flawed logic of sophistry serves not only to mock the friar but reflects a broader erasure of the gift.

One might object that the problematic of the gift in *Given Time*, which is that it demands reciprocity, differs from the problematic of the fart, which is that it cannot be given at all. But the impossibility of full presence underlies both impossibilities. According to *Given Time*, the gift can take place only if the donor and donee simultaneously know that a gift event has occurred, but also simultaneously not know it. That is, a gift can take place only through a "forgetting so radical that it exceeds even the psychoanalytic categoriality of forgetting"—a forgetting so extreme that it is fundamentally impossible.[23] For that reason, Derrida writes, "The 'present' of the gift [le 'présent' du don] . . . is no longer thinkable as a now, that is, as a present bound up in the temporal

[22] Pearcy, "Chaucer's 'An Impossible,'" 323.
[23] Derrida, *Given Time*, 16.

synthesis. . . . That a gift is called a present [un présent] . . . will not be for us just a verbal cue."[24] The text suggest that the polysemy of "le présent," that it means both "gift" and "now," reveals that the gift can exist only in a "paradoxical instant [that] tears time apart"—a paradoxical and thus impossible instant.[25] A *present* necessitates the full *presence* that Derrida's philosophy famously denies.

As such, the impossibility of the gift is related to Derrida's idea of logocentrism: the privileging of the spoken word or *logos* over the written. As explored in "Plato's Pharmacy," logocentrism demands the (impossible) *presence* of the "speaking subject": "*Logos* is a son, then, a son that would be destroyed in his very *presence* without the present *attendance of his father*."[26] Instead, literature and language must be given.[27] To that end, *Given Time* includes the example of Baudelaire's "Counterfeit Money," to which Baudelaire appends a dedication to his "dear friend" Arsène Houssaye. That is, he *gives* his story to someone. But by making it available to the public, Baudelaire "gives" it "above and beyond any determined addressee, donee, or legatee." Derrida writes, "The accredited signatory delivered it up to a dissemination without return" because the "structure of trace and legacy of this text" inevitably "surpasses the phantasm of return and marks the death of the signatory."[28] The text enters into a system. Similarly, the gift is destroyed by the presence of its "father," the giver, and can exist only within a system of exchange that is, not coincidentally, analogous to the weave of signification that exists among texts or even within a monetary system. He writes, "That is why there is a problematic of the gift only on the basis of a consistent problem of the trace and the text."[29] The necessarily absent author/giver places his work/gift into the scene of writing/system of exchange. Upon entering, it becomes not a gift.

The gift of a fart remains necessarily absent from this system. As such, it resembles Derrida's idea of *logos*. Valerie Allen's *On Farting* posits

[24] Ibid., 9–10. French from Derrida, *Donner le temps*, 21–22.

[25] Derrida, *Given Time*, 9.

[26] Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (New York: Continuum, 2004), 67–186 (82).

[27] Derrida is not the first to conceive of literature as a gift. Marc Shell notes that Faust identifies poetry with "cornucopian dispensation." He continues, "This association is as old as Aristotle and Alcidamous, and was common among many eighteenth-century thinkers, such as Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten." *Money, Language, and Thought,* 94. See also Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (London: Vintage Books, 1983).

[28] Derrida, *Counterfeit Money*, 99–100.

[29] Ibid., 100.

this very connection between the fart and *logos*: "Farts supplement shit as does living speech to the archive of writing."[30] Allen's Derridean language—"supplement" and "the archive of writing"—points to a deeper correspondence. Unlike a gift, which can leave its author and enter into a system, a fart exists only in the act of its production and thus as a supplement in the full Derridean sense of the word. Like the spoken word, the fart has no tangible form but is mere sound and "reverberacioun." The fart is a gift that cannot be given or received outside the presence of its "giver." Thomas calls it "swich thyng . . . that may *I* yeve, and *noon other*" (III.2124–25; emphasis added). Even the squire, who otherwise has no problem with the idea that a fart can be given as a gift, recognizes that Thomas must be "sette . . . on the wheel right of this cart" (III.2269) for the fart to be given. Like *logos*, the fart needs its "father," its farter, to exist. This explains Allen's connection between spoken word and fart, writing and shit. With its own system of signification, money—including the gold that the friar so persistently demands—falls on the shit/writing side of that divide because it exists within a system independent of its source. Perhaps this link illuminates the long-standing connection between feces and money proposed by Freud and others.[31] But as *logos*, the fart is denied a place in such a system.

Indeed, Thomas's fart represents a gift more radically impossible than that discussed by Derrida and consequently illuminates a subtlety in his argument. While *Given Time* states that the gift is impossible because it is necessarily enmeshed in a circle of exchange, it does not address what it would be like to think a gift that must remain outside that system. Unable to enter the circle of exchange—represented quite literally by the circular cartwheel—the fart is a gift that cannot be separated from its giver. But the inherently impossible nature of the fart-gift reveals that the gift cannot exist outside the circle either. This raises the question of whether these two competing models of the gift's impossibility are in some fundamental way the same.

Indeed, a comparison of the way Chaucer treats the gift in *The Summoner's Tale* with his treatment of it in other tales suggests a deep equivalency between the two competing models for the gift's impossibility. *The Franklin's Tale* links the gift and the impossible in a way more

[30] Allen, *On Farting*, 3.
[31] See Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought,* and note 16 above.

strictly similar to Derrida's model of reciprocity as explored in Britton Harwood's reading of *The Franklin's Tale* and *The Squire's Tale* in his "Chaucer and the Gift (If There Is Any)." Harwood claims that both "make a problem of the gift"—that, in both tales, Chaucer anticipates Derrida and tries to "erase unproductive expenditure—what Georges Bataille called *dépense*—by safely framing and containing it by economy and exchange."[32] Both Harwood and Derrida seek to show how every gift is subsumed in a cycle of reciprocity.

Besides just questioning the status of the gift, *The Franklin's Tale* also has an *impossible*. This is no coincidence. *The Franklin's Tale*, in fact, features an even clearer example of an *impossible* than the Summoner's. Aurelius presents the task of removing rocks from the coast—a feat that Dorigen explicitly deems "agayns the proces of nature" (V.1345)—to a man that Chaucer refers to as a "philosophre." While "philosophre" in this case ostensibly means "magician" or "alchemist," the *MED* notes that it could also refer to a sophist, the exact type of person who might have practiced *impossibilia*.[33] The philosopher's actions align him more with a sophist or scholar than a magician insofar as he uses not magic but scientific knowledge to make the rocks disappear: "Whan he hadde founde his firste mansioun, / He knew the remenaunt by proporcioun, / And knew the arisyng of his moone weel, / And in whos face, and terme, and everydeel" (V.1285–88). The philosopher uses his astrological charts to find the position of the moon and then calculates the "remenaunt by proporcioun" to see where it will be in the future. Presumably he uses this knowledge to calculate when the tides will completely cover the rocks. By using logic to solve the seemingly impossible problem with which Aurelius presents him, the philosopher neatly follows the structure of *impossibilia*—just as the squire does when he solves the problem of dividing the fart. Not surprisingly, Aurelius's response to Dorigen's demand that he either move the rocks or cease loving her draws upon the same peculiar nominal usage of "impossible" that we see in *The Summoner's Tale*: "'Madame,' quod he, 'this were an inpossible" (V.1009). Implicit in both instances is the idea of scholarly *impossibilia*.

The similarities, however, do not end with semantics. As in *The Summoner's Tale,* the *impossible* in *The Franklin's Tale*, in this case not the division of a fart but the removal of rocks, is aligned with a scenario in

[32] Britton J. Harwood, "Chaucer and the Gift (If There Is Any)," *SP* 103:1 (2006): 26–46 (26–27).

[33] *MED*, s.v. "Philosophre."

which the gift is depicted as the impossible. Harwood argues that "the solicitation of a return comes right to the surface" in *The Franklin's Tale*.[34] Arveragus gives up his wife. As a return, Aurelius gives her back. And, as a return for Aurelius's return, the philosopher refuses to accept payment for his services. Thus, each would-be gift is negated and contained within a circle of exchange. But the Franklin describes all three of these actions as gifts, referring to their "gentilesse," crediting the spirit of giving, asking "Which was the mooste fre?" (V.1622). Read through the lens of the *impossibilia*, however, no one was "fre." The apparent exchange of generosity breaks down. Just as the friar's gift of money "may no thyng be so," impossibility pervades each display of generosity in *The Franklin's Tale*. Alan T. Gaylord argues that the tale is a "satiric masterpiece," that Chaucer fills it with intentional contradictions to show "how ludicrously and inadequately the Franklin grasps the essence of gentle behavior."[35] Although the tale is indeed filled with intentional contradictions, they result not—as Gaylord suggests—from the Franklin's inadequacy but from the text's exposure of the contradictions inherent in the gift.

Gaylord identifies one such contradiction when he observes that Dorigen's promise to sleep with Aurelius if he can move the rocks is not really a promise at all.[36] Indeed, Dorigen uses *adynaton*—a rhetorical device in which a speaker describes an impossible event as a means of hyperbole—when she says that she will love Aurelius only if he can clear the coast of rocks.[37] After stating as much, she says, "For wel I woot that it shal never bityde. / Lat swiche folies out of youre herte slyde" (V.1001–2). By making such a promise and then insisting on its impossibility, telling Aurelius to give up his "folies," Dorigen does not make an earnest promise at all, but uses the impossible condition as a rhetorical device to express the impossibility of her ever loving Aurelius. Perhaps her claim that it "shal never bityde" even subtly hints that, according to her understanding, there "shall never *be tide*" at which the rocks are covered.

Chaucer establishes a precedent for using the movement of rocks as just such a hyperbolic device through a similar statement in *Troilus and*

[34] Harwood, "Chaucer and the Gift," 33.
[35] Alan T. Gaylord, "The Promises in the *Franklin's Tale*," *ELH* 31.4 (1964): 331–65 (332).
[36] Ibid., 347.
[37] Christopher Brookhouse, "Chaucer's Impossibilia," *MÆ* 34 (1965): 40–42 (40).

Criseyde: "That first shal Phebus fallen fro his speere, / And everich egle ben the dowves feere, / *And everich roche out of his place sterte*, / Er Troilus oute of Criseydes herte."[38] In this instance, the rocks' disappearing from their usual places is an example of something as impossible as the sun's dropping from the sky or an eagle's befriending a dove. All are items that Chaucer lists to show the strength of Criseyde's love for Troilus. Just as the reader would be foolish to interpret the statement about Troilus and Criseyde literally—that is, by assuming that if the sun were to fall from the sky Criseyde would stop loving Troilus—Aurelius acts absurdly in taking Dorigen's promise at its word. In doing so, Aurelius violates a basic tenet of speech-act theory: Searle's treatise that a binding promise necessitates that the speaker intend her speech act to obligate her to do something and that the speaker intend that the listener understands said obligation. Searle explains, "If a speaker can demonstrate that he did not have this intention in a given utterance, he can prove that the utterance was not a promise."[39] Dorigen, who repeatedly states that Aurelius will never achieve the conditions she sets, clearly lacks this intention, and, as a result, her promise is not a promise.[40] Because the promise is founded on an unsound speech act, Aurelius's claim to Dorigen is faulty, and his supposed generosity in giving her up is not generosity at all because she is not his to give.

Even if the flawed promise is accepted as legitimate, Aurelius lacks a rightful claim to Dorigen because he fails to meet her stated conditions that he remove all the stones from the shore and instead only makes it "*seme* . . . that alle the rokkes were aweye" for a "wyke or tweye" (V.1295–96; emphasis added). Presumably, though, they remain just below the surface and thus do not allow ships the safe passage that Dorigen desires. Also, Aurelius does not personally remove the rocks

[38] *Troilus and Criseyde* III.1495–98; emphasis added.

[39] John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 60.

[40] R. F. Green argues that Dorigen's rash promise may have been valid according to medieval law since medieval "common law stands foursquare behind the principle that *pacta sunt servanda* [agreements must be kept]." He writes that what Gaylord calls "fanatical literalism" in *The Franklin's Tale* is "precisely the kind of thinking on which a medieval serjeant would have most prided himself." Nonetheless, Green admits that this type of thinking was opposed to that of both the "canonist" and "civilian"—who would have required intent from both sides for a promise to be binding. *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 324. Whether Chaucer favored the common-law interpretation of such a promise or was—more likely—satirizing it, he certainly would have been cognizant of its special status as a promise without intent to bind.

"stoon by stoon" as Dorigen requests but instead pays a philosopher to make them disappear from sight. Gaylord observes that, in all of these aspects, Chaucer departs markedly from the source for the tale, the fifth story of the tenth day in Boccaccio's *The Decameron.* In it, the lady demands that a garden "full of green grass, flowers, and leafy trees" appear in the month of January[41]—a task that the suitor in the tale miraculously achieves. Whereas Boccaccio's version of the impossible feat requires a miracle, Chaucer's task is solved through the prosaic process of calculating tides. Chaucer's substitution of a task with such an easy—although technically inadequate—solution seems a decision to show how the suitor and his philosopher fail to meet the lady's conditions, to show how they fail to accomplish her impossible task but merely give the appearance of doing so.[42] Consequently, when Aurelius shows apparent generosity by relinquishing his right to Dorigen, he gives up something that was never his to give. And, for the same reason, the philosopher's excusing Aurelius's debt fails as a gift because the philosopher does not do what was requested of him either—that is, to remove the physical rocks. In this sense, despite the appearance of generosity in both instances, the gifts cannot take place. Chaucer foreshadows these strangely impossible gifts when Aurelius tells the philosopher, "This wyde world, which that men seye is round, / I wolde it yeve, if I were lord of it" (V.1228–29). His suggestion that he would give something that does not belong to him anticipates his "generously" relinquishing Dorigen despite her never actually having made a truly binding promise—and his not even fulfilling it. Thus, like the fart that Thomas gives the friar, and even like the money that the friar tries to wrest away from Thomas, the gifts given by Aurelius and the philosopher do not—and cannot—exist.

More extensive analysis of *The Franklin's Tale* reveals that Chaucer sees economic exchange pervading even the most seemingly legitimate generosity. Although Arveragus hands his wife over to Aurelius in order to maintain the value of her word, the Franklin narrates the event as if it were a gift, describing Arveragus as "fre" (V.1622) and of "grete gentillesse" (V.1527). But Arveragus's generosity is so extreme as to seem false. Gaylord observes that the first promise Dorigen makes in the tale is not to love Aurelius if he moves the rocks, but to be true to

[41] Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York: New America Library, 2002), 731.
[42] Gaylord, "Promises," 360.

her husband: "Sire, I wol be youre humble trewe wyf—/ Have heer my trouthe—til that myn herte breste" (V.758–59). Her speech almost exactly parallels her words to Aurelius when she promises to love him if he meets her impossible request: "Have heer my trouthe" (V.998). But when Arveragus instructs his wife to be true to her word—"Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay!" (V.1474)—he refers only to the "trouthe" of her promise to Aurelius and forgets the promise that she has made to him. Her dilemma becomes a struggle between chastity and truthfulness instead of a struggle between one "trouthe" and another, between her "trouthe" to Aurelius and her "trouthe" to her husband. Gaylord notes, "This omission, when noticed, gives [Arveragus's] speech to her a strange quality of unreality."[43] By applying the lessons of the sophistical *impossible* in *The Summoner's Tale*—that is, by seeking a logical fallacy in the nature of the gift, this seeming contradiction, this "strange quality of unreality," becomes not only understandable but central to the tale's theme. Although Gaylord argues that Chaucer builds the contradiction into the tale to show the Franklin's ignorance of "gentilesse," it also leads to the representation of a gift that Arveragus has no reason to give, a gift that Chaucer portrays as necessarily strange.

Furthermore, the word "trouthe" itself may imply an unexpected absence of generosity insofar as it retains shades of its proto-Germanic etymological meaning: a mutual understanding arising from a promise between two parties. This meaning exists in all early Germanic cognates of the word,[44] and R. F. Green notes that, even as the semantics of the word shifted over time, some "fundamental concept of reciprocity" persisted even when it was used to denote primarily what the *MED* defines as "nobility of character" and "adherence to the chivalric ideal"—both of which resemble the idea of "gentilesse." Chaucer traded in both senses of the word.[45] In fact, in certain instances in *The Franklin's Tale*, such as "Have heer my trouthe" and "Ye shul youre trouthe holden," the contractual meaning may crowd out the more chivalric

[43] Ibid., 343.

[44] D. H. Green's investigation of the origin of the word "truth" reveals that this meaning, which he calls a "mutual agreement or treaty on the basis of a promise between two parties," is present in Old High German, Gothic, Old Saxon, Old Norse, Old English, and even such non-Germanic languages as Latin and Old French. *The Carolingian Lord: Semantic Studies on Four Old High German Words: Balder, Frô, Truhtin, Hêrro* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

[45] Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, 11–16.

meaning. When Dorigen and Arveragus refer to Dorigen's "trouthe," their overtones of generosity are tempered by the language of a potentially binding legal contract. Whereas the former suggests the idea of the gift, the latter reduces it to terms of exchange, contractual obligation, and reciprocation—the very concepts that Derrida sees as destructive of the gift.

Thus, the three gifts in *The Franklin's Tale* involve a man who gives up his wife for an absurd and paradoxical reason, a squire who gives up a woman who does not belong to him, and a philosopher who gives up a thousand pounds that he could never rightfully claim anyway. Because of these contradictions that undermine all the tale's gifts, the Franklin's final question as to "which was the mooste fre" (V.1622) rings hollow. As Harwood suggests, there is no real generosity in *The Franklin's Tale* because every gift exchange is trapped in a circle of economy and reciprocity. That even a tale purportedly *about* "gentilesse" and "being fre" negates the gift resolves the debate as to whether Chaucer's text applies the impossibility of the gift only to farts and corrupt friars.

The two impossibilities in *The Franklin's Tale* and *The Summoner's Tale* are essentially the same. In *The Franklin's Tale*, as in Derrida's model, every gift is negated by reciprocal demand. In *The Summoner's Tale*, the fart cannot be given because it requires the presence of its giver. But, in Derrida's argument, that impossibility of the giver's absenting himself is universal and is the very reason that the specter of reciprocity can never be eluded. The apparently competing impossibilities of the traditional gift and the fart-gift are merely two sides of the same coin—perhaps quite literally if one accepts the farthing/farting pun and the connection between feces and money so central to *The Summoner's Tale*.

Ultimately, it is this unified impossibility of the gift that unifies *The Summoner's Tale*, that makes its strange ending with its farts, cartwheels, and *impossibilia* a fitting conclusion. Throughout the first part of the tale, the words "yif" and "yifte" are a constant focus: "A, yif that covent half a quarter otes! / A, yif that covent foure and twenty grotes!" (1963–64), "Yif me thanne of thy gold" (III.2099), "And doun his hand he launceth to the clifte / In hope for to fynde there a yifte" (III.2145–46). But, of course, the only thing the friar receives is a fart—that which literally cannot be given because it is intangible and nontransferable. Only through the coda, which so closely follows the form of the sophistical *impossible*, does the full import of Thomas's fart become clear. By paralleling the squire's explanation of how to divide a fart with the fri-

ar's attempt to get money from Thomas, the coda serves as a model for the illogicality of the friar's actions. As such, the coda does exactly what an *impossible* is supposed to do: it demonstrates a seemingly sound, but inherently flawed, premise and trains the audience—in this case, the reader—to apply the same process of "recognizing and refuting false arguments" to other scenarios, such as the impossibility of the friar's obtaining a gift of money. Without the "practice" that the squire's clearly defined *impossible* provides at the end of *The Summoner's Tale*, and without the parallels that Chaucer uses to tie the gift to the *impossible*, the reader would not have sufficient evidence to understand the impossibility of the gift in the main text of *The Summoner's Tale*—or anywhere else in the *Canterbury Tales* for that matter.

Still, throughout this analysis, the question of why we should consider any of these transactions gift events at all arises. Why should the corrupt friar's attempt to *exchange* heavenly rewards for monetary ones be considered a gift? And if each display of generosity in *The Franklin's Tale* is reciprocation for a previous response, why should we call them gifts? Why not just call everything exchange and render it in terms of debt and repayment? Why not just call the fart a fart instead of a gift? Derrida asks the same question about Mauss's text by questioning why Mauss insists on referring to certain transactions as gifts instead of merely as exchanges: "Mauss tries to restitute, so to speak, the value of the gift . . . where others wanted to describe the same operation of exchange with purely economic, commercial, or fiduciary operation, without needing in the least to have recourse to the category of the gift."[46]

Derrida briefly raises—but quickly rejects—this possibility that the concept of "gift" should be dismissed and replaced with the logic of exchange. He asks: "And since we are saying with such insistence that [the pure gift] is impossible, why not denounce it as an illusion, even as sophism or paralogism, as well as a pseudo-problem that reason would require us, in good logic, to evacuate? Does it not suffice in fact to describe scientifically the objective exchange of values with usurious supplement, in short, the logic of credit, of interest rates, and of repayment due dates?"[47] Eventually, Derrida decides that the gift should not be denounced as an illusion because it is merely the impossible and not

[46] Derrida, *Counterfeit Money*, 42.
[47] Ibid., 42.

the unthinkable. Derrida insists that the gift must be thought. It must be named. Derrida vigorously defends the value of "thinking" the gift and explains that, while the gift is impossible, it is certainly not "unnameable or unthinkable."[48] He even goes so far as to suggest that the gift is among the only things that can be properly named or thought:

> Perhaps there is nomination, language, thought, desire, or intention only there where there is the movement still for thinking, desiring, naming that which gives itself neither to be known, experienced, nor lived—in the sense in which presence, existence, determination regulate the economy of knowing, experiencing, and living. . . . One can desire, name, think in the proper sense of these words . . . *only* to the *immeasuring* extent . . . that one desires, names, thinks *still* or *already*, that one still lets announce itself what nevertheless cannot *present itself* as such to experience, to knowing: in short, here *a gift that cannot make itself (a) present* [un don qui ne peut pas se faire présent]. This gap between, on the one hand, thought, language, and desire and, on the other hand, knowledge, philosophy, science, and the order of presence is also a gap between gift and economy.[49]

That is, Derrida maintains that only that which is not measurable can be rightfully named or thought. Economy, with its system of debts and values, can be definitively measured. Therefore, it cannot be properly "thought" or "named" since it is already "known." "In this gap between the impossible and the thinkable a dimension opens up where *there is* gift."[50]

The fart of *The Summoner's Tale* resides in the gap between the impossible and the thinkable. The idea of the fart's being divided by cartwheel can be named, thought, and desired (assuming of course that someone had a reason to desire one-twelfth of a fart). But, like Derrida's gift, it remains impossible. Just as Chaucer invites the reader to "think" the division of the fart, Derrida insists that the reader must "think" the gift even while recognizing that it can never be attained, even while recognizing that the gift will never be "(a) present." But *The Summoner's Tale* thinks the gift in a way that even Derrida's wide-ranging philosophy does not. For Derrida, the gift must be thought in a system of

[48] Ibid., 10.
[49] Ibid., 29.
[50] Ibid., 10. Derrida later notes that the German *es gibt*, literally "it gives," is an idiomatic expression equivalent to English *there is* or French *il y a* (20).

exchange divorced from the giver. *The Summoner's Tale,* however, invites the reader to think the gift in an even more impossible form: as a *logos*-like fart that cannot exist away from its giver but is still somehow a gift.

Perhaps *The Summoner's Tale* can think the gift in this way because the *Canterbury Tales* exists as part of a tradition that Derrida would deem logocentric. The *Canterbury Tales* is a text, and many critics have pointed to references that call attention to the tales' status as material objects, such as when Chaucer invites any displeased readers to "turne over the leef and chese another tale" (I.3177).[51] At the same time, the tales are presented as oral works told by pilgrims on a journey. When the host agrees to ride with them on the condition that each pilgrim tell four tales, he says that whoever wins the contest "[s]hal have a soper at oure aller cost" (I.799). The tales themselves become items of exchange. Harwood, building on a commonplace in Chaucer criticism, notes, "The pilgrims enter into exchange by hearing a tale and thus incurring a determinate obligation."[52] Every tale is told as reciprocation for a previous tale and in turn demands its own reciprocation. Harry Bailey reveals the extent to which economic exchange pervades the structure of tale-telling when he tells the Monk, "Now telleth ye, sir Monk, if that ye konne, / Somwhat to quite with the Knyghtes tale" (I.3118–19). The word "quite" in this case means "to match." But it derives from the earlier meaning "to repay a debt,"[53] a usage that Chaucer himself employs in *The Monk's Tale*: "And she that bar the ceptre ful of floures / Shal bere a distaf hire cost for to quyte" (VII.2373–74). When this earlier meaning is considered, Harry Bailey's suggestion that the monk "quite with the Knyghtes tale" indicates that the tales are quite literally recast as part of an economy, as payment for debt.

R. Allen Shoaf claims that this repayment of debt, this "quiting," is central to the structure of the *Canterbury Tales*, noting that the Miller echoes Harry Bailey's use of *quite*: "'I kan a noble tale for the nones, / With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale'" (I.3126–27). Shoaf argues that the Miller then "quites" the Knight by recasting *The Knight's Tale* in his own parodic way: "It cannot be denied that he pays

[51] For one such reading, see V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), 17.
[52] Harwood, "Chaucer and the Gift," 27.
[53] *MED*, s.v. "Quiten."

the Knight back, 'quites' him, by almost retelling *The Knight's Tale*."[54] Insofar as the Miller repays the Knight by retelling a version of the same tale, the exchange exemplifies what Derrida sees as the impossibility of the gift in its most obvious form: "If the other *gives* me *back* or *owes* me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift. . . . This is all too obvious if the other, the donee, gives me back *immediately* the same thing."[55] The donee's giving back "immediately the same thing" is exactly what happens when the Miller "quites" the Knight by immediately retelling his tale. This event is an "all too obvious" example of how each pilgrim must "quite" the debt in which the previous tale has placed him, how the concept of exchange is woven into the very fabric of the *Canterbury Tales*.

The notion of these oral tales as elements in a system of exchange arises within a world that Derrida would consider logocentric. As with the fart, there is no physical "text" and thus no hope that the gift of the tale will survive the death of its "donor agency." The pilgrims' oral tales cannot exist without the presence of their tellers, their "fathers." But the tales still enter into a giftlike system of exchange. This doubleness informs Chaucer's representation of the fart-gift in the *Canterbury Tales* and allows him to think the gift in a way more extreme than Derrida. In a sense, the fart is its own oral tale, and thus the idea of fart as gift represents the tension that arises from allowing oral tales to enter into a system of exchange. The very idea is in a sense impossible, but the fact that it is thought in *The Summoner's Tale* requires it to exist.

That is, even as *The Summoner's Tale* resists the idea of the gift, it cannot escape it. The text's very attempt to place the gift under erasure necessitates its existence. The occupatio, a ubiquitous rhetorical device for Chaucer, nicely models this paradox. When an author describes something by saying that he cannot describe it, he recognizes the inadequacy of his description. But at the same time, he describes it. Chaucer uses occupatio in *The Squire's Tale* to depict the opulence of Genghis's feast:

[54] R. A. Shoaf, *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word: Money, Images, and Reference in Late Medieval Poetry* (Norman, Okla.: Pilgrim Books, 1983), 168. Shoaf is referring to what he calls a "long recognized" critical opinion that the Miller "tells, in effect, a parody of [*The Knight's Tale*]—complete with an old man who is a father figure, two suitors, a pretty young woman for them to compete over, etc." *Chaucer's Body: The Anxiety of Circulation in the "Canterbury Tales"* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 96.

[55] Derrida, *Counterfeit Money*, 12.

"I wol nat tellen of hir strange sewes, / Ne of hir swannes, ne of hire heronsewes . . . Ther nys no man that may reporten al. / I wol nat taryen yow, for it is pryme / And for it is no fruyt but los of tyme" (V.67–74). The paradoxical construction, "I wol nat tellen of hir strange sewes," resembles Derrida's "paradoxical instant" since, as soon as the narrator claims that he "wol nat tellen" of the "sewes," he has told of them. Considered in the context of Harwood's argument, the similarity between the squire's occupatio and the gift is not a mere structural coincidence. Harwood argues that Genghis's opulent feast in *The Squire's Tale* represents the excess of the gift. As such, the occupatio applies not only to the banquet, but to the gift in general. Just as the claim that the banquet is indescribable provides a description of the banquet, albeit one unattainable for the narrator, Chaucer's erasure of the gift names the gift. The text's framing of every gift transaction in terms of economic exchange invites the reader to imagine a "gentilesse" that breaks that circle, invites the reader to *think* the gift just as it invites the reader to think the division of the fart.

Given this model of tales as gift, the consideration of the text itself as a gift is inevitable. Could the *Canterbury Tales* themselves be placed into a circle of economic exchange? Probably: after all, Chaucer has received lasting fame in exchange for his work. But perhaps the best answer is simply to heed Derrida and think the gift: a work that has *given* itself to generations of readers, an opus that has opened itself up to centuries of critical *reception*, a *present* from the past that will persist into the future.