Original Article

Physical possibilities: pedagogical presence in Chaucer

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Abstract With interest in body studies increasing, scholars are reconsidering the bodies of teachers, especially as online learning gains prominence in the realm of educational innovation. They question the lessening role and even complete disappearance of teachers' physical presence, while acknowledging that the teacher's body constitutes a force that guides and transforms the educational experience of students. Teachers' bodies have always served as a pedagogical force – potentially useful or detrimental – in classrooms. Medieval thinkers, especially poets, also recognized the powers of teachers' bodies. Chaucer, for one, portrays a spectrum of possibilities regarding the effects of a teacher's physical presence, particularly in Fragments VIII and IX of the Canterbury Tales, depicting the morally ambiguous *auctoritee* and limitations of the physical presence of a teacher. The contemporary classroom, the physical world inhabited by both students and teachers, can perhaps be better navigated by the map provided by Chaucer, which illustrates the possibilities of presence.

Keywords: Chaucer; *Canterbury Tales*; Second Nun's Tale; Canon's Yeoman's Tale; Manciple's Tale; Pedagogy; Physicality

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'Body criticism is surging,' Rosemarie Garland-Thomson declares in the foreword to *The Teacher's Body: Embodiment, Authority, and Identity in the Academy*

(Garland-Thomson, 2003, 11), and it has yet to subside. If anything, the body is garnering increased scholarly attention; Fat Studies, for example, has entered the university curriculum and academic journals and conferences. Increasingly over the past two decades, scholars have been examining the bodies of teachers and how these bodies inform and influence the classroom. Some scholars examine the meaning of teachers' racialized, gendered, sexualized, classed, and ethnicized bodies, how these bodies are distinct in a historical and social context, and how they affect classroom dynamics. Other scholars explore the meanings produced and constructed in the classroom by teachers whose bodies are not considered 'normal.' At the same time that this increased critical focus has been placed on teachers' bodies, the bodies of teachers are receding and even disappearing. The fear of harassment and abuse allegations has caused teachers to be cautious about physical contact with students. Hugging elementary students, which can be misconstrued and lead to charges of sexual harassment, is nearly forbidden. Bodies in contact bring fear of trouble. In addition, with the rise of tailored, student-centered learning and prescribed 'teacher-proof' curricula, the teacher's body is becoming more peripheral in the classroom. Most obvious is the disappearance of teachers' bodies in online classes and programs. Recorded lectures and synchronous video discussions or online office hours can place teachers' images on the computer screen in front of students, but scholars are asking if the actual physical departure of teachers from classrooms has particular consequences for student learning.

The bodies of teachers are undergoing critical study as never before, but these bodies are receding and marginalized as never before as well. Such a dynamic provides us with a paradoxical and perhaps problematic framework in which to examine the current status of teachers' bodies and their meanings in educational settings. Ours, however, is not the only era to grapple with these concerns. Medieval thinkers also examined the bodies of teachers, portraying their benefits, detriments, and limits. What is more, they plotted these aspects of teachers' bodies on moral and even spiritual axes, and their perspectives can help inform today's discussion. In particular, Chaucer's depiction of teachers' bodies can shed light on their power – and their bearing on teachers' *auctoritee* – for our era in which these bodies are undergoing a more focused consideration.

The teacher's body considered today

The teacher's body has received different forms of critical attention in the past two decades. Black feminist scholar bell hooks sees the teacher's body as an integral arbitrator of critical theory in the classroom. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), hooks attempts to disrupt the deeply held institutional belief that 'individuals enter the classroom to teach as though only the mind is present, and not the body. To call attention to the body is to betray the legacy of repression and denial that has been

  2040-5960 **postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies** Vol. 9, 3, 367–387

handed down to us by our professional elders' (hooks, 1994, 191). hooks finds the denial of the teacher's body a denial of the cultural and social history a particular body carries. She holds that 'one of the unspoken discomforts surrounding the way a discourse of race and gender, class and sexual practice has disrupted the academy is precisely the challenge to that mind / body split' (hooks, 1994, 136). The 'normal' teacher's body in the classroom is generally white, male, middle-to-upper class, and heterosexual. Such a body is thought to seamlessly represent the body of knowledge that often drives the traditional curriculum. A teacher with this body has more opportunity to hide it within the overarching academic framework; for hooks, the 'person who is most powerful has the privilege of denying their body' (hooks, 1994, 137). This teacher, hooks illustrates, can operate in the classroom with a slovenly appearance (i.e., in the caricature of the unkempt college professor) because students have to 'respect that he's there to be a mind and not a body' (hooks, 1994, 137). To bring up his physical appearance ultimately shows a student's 'own intellectual lack' (hooks, 1994, 137). Sitting behind the desk or standing behind the podium also aids in denying the body, as these structures further protect an unquestioned body of knowledge, particularly for authority-wielding white males (hooks, 1994, 137).

hooks, though, is looking to transgress this classroom experience and liberate students from its traditional dictates. As a black woman, hooks explains that she is 'acutely aware of the presence of [her] body in those settings that, in fact, invite us to invest so deeply in a mind / body split,' so that she sees herself 'always as a body in a system that has not become accustomed to [her] presence or to [her] physicality' (hooks, 1994, 135). Hiding her body is not an option for hooks. But hooks wants to make the teacher's body more transparent for all individuals, as 'talking in the classroom about the body and about how we live in our bodies' assists in 'automatically challenging the way power has orchestrated itself in that particular institutionalized space' (hooks, 1994, 137). Such acknowledgment of the teacher's body ultimately fosters a classroom dynamic more apt to question and critique. In today's campus environments of social and racial unrest, hooks' focus on the teacher's body provides an incisive perspective.

Diane P. Freedman and Martha Stoddard Holmes follow hooks' theoretical path in their edited volume, *The Teacher's Body: Embodiment, Authority, and Identity in the Academy* (2003). Freedman and Holmes acknowledge that 'student bodies often command most of the attention in the college classroom. Young or old, pierced or tattooed, sleeping or rapt, these bodies dominate the room and seem to justify its existence' (Freedman and Holmes, 2003, 6–7). Echoing hooks, they observe that the

> body of the often-parodied professor, in contrast, is (to students and increasingly to administrators) both present and irrelevant, disembodied by discreet or dowdy dress and, most hurried mornings, by a face unredeemed by cosmetics or careful coif. Even the battered briefcase expresses disregard for anything but the

> life of the mind and the practicalities of scholarship. One stereotype has the professor displaying the intellect without shame but keeping the body out of speech, sight, and investigation. (Freedman and Holmes, 2003, 7)

Like hooks a decade earlier, Freedman and Holmes look to place the teacher's body as a central component of the classroom's educative process. The essays they present consider the 'palpable moments of discomfort, disempowerment, and / or enlightenment that emerge when we discard the fiction that the teacher […] has no body' (Freedman and Holmes, 2003, 7). Many of the authors included

> portray the moments of embodied pedagogy as unexpected teaching opportunities. Visible and / or invisible, the body can transform the teacher's experience and classroom dynamics. When students think the teacher's body is clearly marked by ethnicity, race, disability, size, gender, sexuality, illness, age, pregnancy, class, linguistic and geographic origins, or some combination of these, both the mode and the content of education can change. Other, less visible, aspects of a teacher's body, such as depression or a history of sexual assault, can have an equally powerful impact on how we teach and learn. (Freedman and Holmes, 2003, 7)

Many scholars, like those included in Freedman and Holmes' volume, have argued that their embodiments in the classroom create, foster, and even sometimes hinder student learning.

Other scholars have investigated the importance of the teacher's body in the classroom through the lens of its disappearance because of the rise of student-centered learning approaches, concerns of physical misconduct on the part of teachers, and the continuous increase in online education. These scholars shed light on the potential benefits of the physical presence of teachers by highlighting the effects of such bodies' absences. Of course, the most common reasons for the receding of teachers' physical presence compel us to consider the advantages that accrue from it, such as increased hands-on learning, safer learning environments, and enhanced accessibility of education to a greater number of students.

Megan Watkins, for example, insists that we acknowledge that the teacher's role has shifted within contemporary practice and that such a shift has fundamentally altered how teachers 'regulate and use their bodies' (Watkins, 2007, 768). Watkins undertakes an ethnographic study in which she examines two kindergarten classrooms: one operating primarily in a student-centered methodology and the other in a more traditional, teacher-centered approach. In approaching her study, Watkins notes the teacher's new role as 'facilitator,' which ultimately 'alters the affective force of the teacher upon the bodies of learners and the capacities this intercorporeality produces' (Watkins, 2007, 768). Tailored, student-centered instruction stands in opposition to traditional, teacher-centered instruction, and as Watkins explains, such contrasting methodologies 'would appear to possess different affective force,' causing 'teachers to use their bodies differently' (Watkins,

  2040-5960 **postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies** Vol. 9, 3, 367–387

2007, 768). Watkins does not set out to disparage student-centered instruction, but to detail what is lost when the teacher's body falls to the background. She focuses much on the 'performance' component of traditional teaching, wherein the teacher occupies the front and center space of the classroom. Drawing all eyes, this space is 'conducive to performance and, with the emphasis given to whole-class instruction, the teacher's role is just that: to perform, to modulate their voice, to display their knowledge, to exaggerate a point, to gesture and, inevitably, to engage a class as an actor does an audience' (Watkins, 2007, 768–769). When a teacher's role is that of facilitator, the class misses out on the teacher's 'potential to arouse the class and generate a desire to learn'; such 'performance can spark a reaction, which has a contagious effect amongst a corporate body of learners, who, within a whole-class context, share a common ground for learning' (Watkins, 2007, 769). But when the teacher's role is marginalized to that of a facilitator in the student-centered classroom, one in which the teacher primarily sets up prompts, encourages independent and group practice, and guides this practice in more of a helper role, there 'is less opportunity for teacher performance and whole-class interaction,' meaning that teachers' 'affective force and their impact on students' bodies is greatly reduced' (Watkins, 2007, 770).

Erica McWilliam, in her 'Admitting Impediments: Or Things to Do with Bodies in the Classroom' (1996), acknowledges the disappearance of the teacher's body because it is 'now an object of suspicion because of the power it can wield as a potentially abusive body' (McWilliam, 1996, 373). She recognizes that the teacher's body has perhaps been forced to disappear in this respect. Abuse, or at least possible allegations thereof, has rendered the teacher's body suspicious. (Sexual forms of abuse are now at the forefront of contemporary scrutiny, having replaced corporal punishment.) Alison Jones undertakes a more detailed perspective of this suspicion in 'Social Anxiety, Sex, Surveillance, and the "Safe" Teacher' (2004). Jones points out that this distrust is a by-product of the 'intensified demands of a risk-management culture; the risk of sex abuse accusation is one of many risks that now must be managed by teachers' (Jones, 2004, 53). Jones' argument is that, at present, the teacher's body has to be demonstrably 'safe,' and that constant surveillance, such as cameras, is integral in this assurance (Jones, 2004, 53). Jones finds much to lament from the resulting loss of physicality. While such surveillance and touch-avoidance have helped teachers avert accusations of improprieties,

> the routine restraint of expressions of enjoyment and mutual affection in primary classrooms and playgrounds might also be seen to represent a profound loss for both teachers and children. Some teachers, particularly men who no longer hug, spoke of their sadness at the disappointment many children seemed to express when their favourite (male) teacher did not respond warmly to their embrace. (Jones, 2004, 61)

The physical presence of teachers' bodies can have immeasurably beneficial effects: as one male teacher bemoaned, 'My hug is the only hug some of these kids get' (Jones, 2004, 61).

The teacher's body also recedes, of course, in online learning. The evolving nature of online learning makes studying its efficacy and outcomes tricky for now, but some scholars have begun to raise questions, particularly about the disappearance of the teacher in these designs. Sherry Turkle has perhaps provided the most prominent voice to this conversation, especially in regard to reaching a mainstream audience. Turkle is the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT. Her latest bestseller, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age* (2015), follows a long line of her prominent books and articles concerning technology's role in society. *Reclaiming Conversation* continues Turkle's cautions about how technology can ultimately hinder our ability to foster and cultivate interpersonal relationships. Unsurprisingly, one primary focus of Turkle's is the world of online learning. She identifies 'an irony' in research results indicating online classes work better 'when they are combined with the least measureable element of a traditional classroom: presence. Even in the most technical subjects, such as an introduction to calculus, students in online classes do better when the curriculum includes face-to-face encounters' (Turkle, 2015, 230). Turkle refers to Shanna Smith Jaggars' 'Choosing Between Online and Face-to-Face Courses: Community College Student Voices' (2014) for much of her support. Jaggars, in her often-cited study, examines the decision-making process for community college students when choosing between online and face-to-face courses and discovers that some students 'were also pushed away from online courses due to the weaker instructor presence' (Jaggars, 2014, 32). Jaggars also observes, 'almost all students noted that the nature of the student-instructor interaction was more "distant," less "personal," less "immediate," less "detailed," or less "solid" online. In particular, they missed the direct instruction that they received in face-to-face courses, and many felt as though they were "teaching themselves"' (Jaggars, 2014, 31). The type and quality of the interpersonal relationships fostered between physically present teachers and students speak once again to the potential benefits of the former's presence.

The teacher's body in Chaucer

Medieval thinkers also showed a keen interest in the bodies of teachers and the force and authority they wielded. That the physicality of teachers mattered to people in the Middle Ages is perhaps most persuasively suggested by the appearance of the period's most famous teacher: Lady Philosophy. This model teacher is a marvel to behold, with her head at times seeming to touch the heavens and dressed in symbolic clothing.[1] Philosophy's words alone, apparently, are not enough to cure Boethius of his malady. He must first be

1 Many other pedagogical figures with significant and awe-inspiring physiques could be cited, including Beatrice of the *Divine Comedy* and Holy Church of *Piers Plowman*.

  2040-5960 **postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies** Vol. 9, 3, 367–387

marvelously induced to listen to what turns out to be the most important account of Greek and Roman wisdom available to Western Europe in the Middle Ages. Teachers are prevalent in Chaucer – even if they are not classroom teachers or *auctoritees* in the sense of Boethius (or Lady Philosophy), Augustine, or Aristotle. The physical attributes of Chaucer's teachers – both pilgrims, including the Clerk, the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, and the Parson, and characters within the tales, including Theseus and his father Egeus, the Wife's loathly lady, Friar John of the *Summoner's Tale*, Placebo and Justinus, and Dame Prudence – like all of his creations, are significant insofar as they shed light on psychological and moral aspects of their characters. As is the case with Lady Philosophy, the bodies of Chaucer's teachers are essential to their ability to convey knowledge. Nonetheless, not all teacher-student relationships in Chaucer mirror that of Lady Philosophy and Boethius, of a beneficial teacher to a benefited student. In other words, as is still the case today and always will be as long as face-to-face classes endure, the physicality of teachers can serve less than ideal interests as scholars like hooks are acknowledging today. The most apparent negative form of physicality is corporal punishment, like that risked by the clergeon in the *Prioress's Tale*. But Chaucer also displays other negative effects that today's pedagogical scholars are focused on, such as how physicality can be an instrument of cementing authority, even if that authority is illegitimate, inaccurate, or malicious, and, by so doing, dominate the vulnerable. Along with demonstrating the ambiguous power a teacher's physicality possesses, Chaucer also shows its limitations, a useful corrective to those thinkers today lamenting the loss of the teacher's body from the classroom.

Many characters in Chaucer's corpus play a teaching role, with their physicality tied essentially to that role. Perhaps the two most obvious examples of teachers (most similar to today's conception of the classroom teacher) are the Clerk and the Pardoner. In the former – who 'gladly wolde […] lerne and gladly teche' – one sees the ideal teacher and student (I.308).[2] His physical appearance suggests much about his abilities. His threadbare clothes, pale hue, sober look, and extreme thinness (coupled with his emaciated horse) suggest that he has devoted his life to study. Whereas a potential student might not be mesmerized by his appearance as he or she would by Lady Philosophy's, nonetheless his appearance has the effect of instilling trust: the Clerk's physical appearance assures us that he is serious about study and that 'sownynge in moral vertu was his speche' (I.307). On the other hand, the blond haired (and hoodless), lisping Pardoner has something of the mesmerizing power of Lady Philosophy. But though his preaching and teaching might be persuasive, they are deceitful. These two pilgrims bookend the moral and phenomenal spectra of physicality's effect on teaching. Because of the number of characters who take on a teaching role, we will limit our analysis to those characters of the three tales of Fragments VIII and IX, which seem to be most concerned with that very subject. Critics have long observed common themes in the Second Nun's, Canon's Yeoman's, and

2 All citations from the *Canterbury Tales* are from *The Riverside Chaucer* (ed. Benson, 1987) and identified by fragment and line numbers.

Manciple's prologues and tales, particularly the power and purpose of poetry. (Additionally, these tales constitute the beginning of the end of Chaucer's work, and, indeed, the end of Chaucer's poetry.) The nature of poetry is shown in the tales largely by means of the teachers therein and the information they seek to communicate to their students. Eric Weil has further observed that physical change (and the lack thereof) constitutes a linking thread among the three tales (Weil, 1991, 163). What has not been analyzed in a comprehensive manner, however, is what bearing the bodies of the teaching characters of these tales have on their insights into poetry's effectiveness and, consequently, teachers' effectiveness. If the tales lead us to wonder about the power, authority, role, and moral consequences of poetry, they also shed light on these same issues in regard to the physicality of teachers.

Fruitful physicality

There is no portrait of the Second Nun in the *General Prologue*, and critics have often claimed that, with the possible exception of the Parson, she has the least specific personality of all the pilgrims who tell a tale. Nicola Masciandaro observes, 'the Second Nun is the most purely vocational being brought within the view of the narrator, who never allows us to hear her name or see her appearance' (Masciandaro, 2007, 132). Related to this is the emphasis placed on her tale being a text, not a told story, which Masciandaro identifies as an emblem of her 'productive self-effacement' (Masciandaro, 2007, 133). Glending Olson comes to these conclusions regarding her characterization: 'the Nun remains the most disembodied of all the Canterbury pilgrims,' and she is disembodied to such an extent 'that even her sex is made ambivalent: this female is also an "unworthy sone of Eve"' (Olson, 1982, 222, 231). The nun's lack of physicality is in striking contrast to the emphasis on beneficial physicality and miraculous phenomena in her prologue and tale, particularly as it influences Cecilia's pedagogical powers.

If not directly related to physicality, the theme of the opening stanzas of the prologue – the contrasting nature and effects of 'Ydelnesse' and 'bisynesse' – at least tangentially calls to mind a slothful, indolent passivity contrasted to a fruitful activity. Such a contrast is easy to picture physically, and indeed the Nun pictures the idle held on a leash by sloth and easily caught by the fiend 'with his thousand cordes slye' (VIII.8). Cecilia, the exemplar of 'leveful bisynesse,' is introduced with this apostrophe: 'Thou with thy gerland wroght with rose and lilie— / Thee meene I, mayde and martyr, Seint Cecilie' (VIII.27–8). Her dual-colored garland manifests her virginity and martyrdom, that she is 'mayde and martyr.' Hence, from her first appearance in the prologue, Cecilia's primary concern is with her body: both its virginal purity and its bloody destruction. Her double concern for her body paradoxically manifests itself as a complete disregard for it. The Second Nun inclines in this direction when in the course of her invocation to Mary she prays,

  2040-5960 **postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies** Vol. 9, 3, 367–387

> And of thy light my soule in prison lighte,
> That troubled is by the contagioun
> Of my body, and also by the wighte
> Of erthely lust and fals affeccioun. (VIII.71–4)

Hence, David Raybin asserts that the tale 'stands out for its protagonist's blatant contempt for body and property,' and that

> concerned exclusively for her soul, Cecile responds to marriage and trial by embracing both literal and figurative disembodiment. Rejecting sex and reproduction, the activities that most characterize the body, and welcoming death, the abandonment of the body, she preaches a mankind 'ybounde in synne and cares colde.' (Raybin, 1997, 198, 205)

Ultimately, for Raybin and other critics, the tale indicates that 'Living in the transient world of bodies, wherein even Christ's residence was temporary, it is one's overriding spiritual aim to translate oneself into the world of the eternal heavenly spirit' (Raybin, 1997, 197). No doubt there is truth in such a perspective, especially when this tale is contrasted to its succeeding tale in which all earthly matter seems deceptive, fleeting, and dangerous. But we should not lose sight of the fact that Cecilia's excessive concern about the intactness of her body and the mode of its destruction (which is the means of transforming it into a relic) grants it a privileged status.

Other remarks about Cecilia's body in the prologue frame the *interpretacio nominis*. The first etymological explanation of her name – 'hevenes lilie' – is a reference to Cecilia's 'pure chaastnesse of virginitee' (VIII.87–8). Likewise, the last – 'hevene' and 'leos,' that is, 'the hevene of peple' – indicates her exemplary status due to her good works:

> And right so as thise philosophres write
> That hevene is swift and round and eek brennynge,
> Right so was faire Cecilie the white
> Ful swift and bisy evere in good werkynge,
> And round and hool in good perseverynge,
> And brennynge evere in charite ful brighte. (VIII.113–8)

Cecilia *moves* as swiftly as the heavens. She *burns* figuratively (and in the tale literally) with love. And she is 'white,' 'round,' and 'hool,' all physical attributes that harken back once again to her virginity. Such physical attributes are essential to her identity and further suggest the privileged status of her body and the divine authority bestowed upon her.[3]

Cecilia's privileged body and her teaching function fuse on her wedding night when she reveals her desire to remain a virgin to Valerian and begins catechizing him. In doing so, she explains that she has a guardian angel that not only will protect her physical intactness – he 'is redy ay my body for to kepe' – but also

3 Two parallel cases of the privileged status of bodies occur in the Second Nun's prologue: Mary's and Christ's.

will inflict physical punishment on him if he violates that intactness: he 'wol sle yow with the dede, / And in youre yowthe thus ye shullen dye' (VIII.154, 157–8). There is, however, a physically manifested reward if Valerian should love Cecilia 'in clene love': the angel, she explains to her husband, will 'shewen yow his joye and his brightnesse' (VIII.159–61).

Valerian's understandably incredulous response is equally physical: he must 'se' and 'biholde' the angel, or, if the angel turns out to be man – Cecilia's lover – he will kill them both (VIII.164, 168). Nonetheless, he agrees to take the first step in loving Cecilia cleanly by seeking to 'biholde' Pope Urban, to be cleansed from his sins, and, as a result, to 'se that angel' before he departs from the pope. This meeting occurs in the catacombs, surrounded by the bodies of martyrs. After some words of thanksgiving uttered by Urban, Valerian sees his first vision, that of an old man in white holding a book with golden letters. Immediately upon seeing the vision, Valerian faints but is lifted up by the figure who briefly reads to him from the book some elementary Christian doctrine. In what must be history's shortest catechism lesson, the figure asks whether Valerian assents to the statements. Oft-commented on is how quickly this conversion takes place, but it does so in large part because of the wondrous physical sight of this figure clad in white. Without such a miraculous appearance Valerian may still have converted, but surely not so quickly.

Physical confirmations of Cecilia's promise (and hence her divinely sanctioned authority) serve an educative function by strengthening Valerian's faith and lead to Tiburce's instruction in the faith. After his baptism, Cecilia's promise to Valerian is fulfilled: after returning home he

> fynt Cecilie
> Withinne his chambre with an angel stonde.
> This angel hadde of roses and of lilie
> Corones two, the which he bar in honde;
> And first to Cecile, as I understonde,
> He yaf that oon, and after gan he take
> That oother to Valieran, hir make. (VIII.218–24)

What is more, these remarkable physical attributes also set Tiburce on the path to conversion. The angel explains that the flowers are from paradise, and

> Ne nevere mo ne shal they roten bee,
> Ne lese hir soote savour, trusteth me;
> Ne nevere wight shal seen hem with his ye,
> But he be chaast and hate vileynye. (VIII.228–31)

Valerian is rewarded with this miraculous physical phenomenon, and the reward will continue so as long as he remains clean in his love. Bruce Cowgill, building off of the work of Caroline Walker Bynum (1987), notes that sweet smells were an indication of sanctity among saintly medieval female ascetics: tales of

  2040-5960 **postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies** Vol. 9, 3, 367–387

'extraordinary effluvia […] offer specific illustrations that late medieval peoples saw a *direct* linkage between spiritual "sweetness" and striking bodily emissions' (Cowgill, 1995, 352, emphasis in original). When Valerian expresses his desire that his brother also learn the faith, the angel explains that Tiburce will be able to smell, though not see, the flowers. The miraculous flowers induce wonder, and Valerian explains, 'The sweete smel that in myn herte I fynde / Hath chaunged me al in another kynde' (VIII.251–2). Chaucer has here placed great emphasis on the productivity of pedagogical physicality, for, as Sherry Reames, in a comparison of Chaucer's version of the Cecilia legend with earlier forms, observes, 'only in the tale does Tiburce flatly declare himself transformed by the scent of the flowers' (Reames, 1980, 49). After Valerian recounts his conversion, Tiburce agrees to take the first step of conversion, but a stumbling block is the fact that he must first seek out Urban. This fact also instills wonder in the new catechumen. He asks his brother,

> Ne menestow nat Urban […]
> That is so ofte dampned to be deed,
> And woneth in halkes alwey to and fro,
> And dar nat ones putte forth his heed?
> Men should hym brennen in a fyr so reed
> If he were founde, or that men myghte hym spye,
> And we also, to bere hym compaignye. (VIII.309-15)

Urban's physical demeanor and location (and the threat of the seemingly imminent destruction of his body) have the opposite effect of the wondrous flowers: they instill incredulity rather than confidence. Nonetheless, after another of Cecilia's pep talks he proceeds to Urban and is baptized. As is the case with his brother, he is rewarded: 'every day he saugh in tyme and space / The aungel of God' (VIII.355–6). When it comes time for their martyrdom, Cecilia's promise of their receiving 'the corone of lif that may nat faille' provides the final necessary confirmation in preparation for their martyrdom (VIII.388). In both cases, then, physical wonders lead to and confirm the faith exemplified by Cecilia.

Cecilia is likely the most efficient teacher in the *Tales*. With the exception of Almachius, everyone she evangelizes converts (and is martyred), and does so quickly. The instrument of her own martyrdom is the Roman prefect Almachius, whose complete opposition to Cecilia is clearly indicated in the tale. Among their oppositions are differing uses of physical means to attempt to achieve their goals. Whereas the Christian conversions set in motion by Cecilia are effected by miraculous physical means, Almachius attempts to instill apostasy by physical means that Cecilia has already and will again disparage as idle. His method of eliminating Christians is to require them to sacrifice to 'the ymage of Juppiter'; those who do not will lose their heads (VIII.363–6). This idol is just as ineffective as the 'whippe of leed' he uses to martyr Maximus, whose conversion

began when he saw the souls of Valerian and Tiburce 'to hevene glyde / With aungels ful of cleernesse and of light' (VIII.402–3).

Such pedagogically ineffective idols (lacking authority) are contrasted to the educative physical wonders (possessing divine authority) throughout the tale. After Valerian recounts his conversion, Cecilia lectures on the vanity of idols. Unlike the miraculous and conversion-inspiring flowers of the Christians, the physical manifestations of the pagans are mere stone, 'dombe' and 'deve' (VIII.286). Almachius's ineffectiveness in re-converting Christians by means of idols is highlighted during his debate with Cecilia, who laughs at his futility and ignorance. Cecilia acknowledges that Almachius has the power to take away bodily life, but he lacks the power 'to quyken a wight' (VIII.481). He is essentially as idle, as useless, as his idols:

> Ther lakketh no thing to thyne outter yen
> That thou n'art blynd; for thing that we seen alle
> That it is stoon – that men may wel espyen –
> That ilke stoon a god thow wolt it calle.
> I rede thee, lat thyn hand upon it falle
> And taste it wel, and stoon thou shalt it fynde,
> Syn that thou seest nat with thyne eyen blynde. (VIII.498–504)

Whereas the Christians can clearly see that a stone is just a stone, Almachius cannot learn this simple lesson. As Cecilia concludes, 'thise ymages, wel thou mayst espye, / To thee ne to hemself mowen noght profite, / For in effect they been nat worth a myte' (VIII.509–11).

Almachius's idolatrous and pedagogically ineffective methods are further displayed by their unintended results. As is standard procedure, Almachius proceeds with martyring Cecilia. In doing so, two greater bodily miracles occur: though Cecilia is sentenced to a hot bath for twenty-four hours, she remains 'al coold and feelede no wo. / It made hire nat a drope for to sweete' (VIII.521–2), and thereafter, her neck is struck three times (the maximum the law allows) by an executioner without her being decapitated. Her lack of sweat aligns her with another type of physical evidence of sanctity: non-excretion. As Cowgill suggests, 'Cecilia's remarkable ability "nat a drope for to sweete" in her bath of flames would have signaled her spiritual kinship with more contemporary non-exuding female ascetics' (Cowgill, 1995, 246). For three days she lives and preaches in this state as the faithful come to collect relics: 'The Cristen folk […] With sheetes han the blood ful faire yhent' (VIII.535–6). After three days she dies, and her body is placed with those of the other martyrs. Her house, the physical location of her martyrdom, is transformed into a church, perpetually a place where her miracle can be remembered and celebrated.

Far from renouncing the physical realm, this tale highlights the body's key role in conversion, which, for this legend, largely means assenting to the authority of elementary Christian tenets and seeing the ineffectiveness of pagan

  2040-5960 **postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies** Vol. 9, 3, 367–387

idols. In other words, some – namely, Christian – types of physicality are pedagogically beneficial, whereas others – pagan – can only delude. Though today's pedagogical scholars will not look to a wondrous Christian physicality as the source of an effective body of a teacher, they must nonetheless recognize that some forms of physicality will be more effective than others and determine the lines of division between effective and ineffective bodies. What is more, they must acknowledge that some forms of pedagogical bodies will actually be harmful, as Chaucer shows more clearly in the succeeding tale.

Furtive physicality, beguiling bodies

As many critics have pointed out, the *Second Nun's Tale* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* form an intricate and contrasting link, and this is first suggested by the differing physical descriptions of Cecilia and the Canon (Rosenberg, 1968). Whereas Cecilia covers her hairshirt, a source of bodily penance, with a golden robe, the Canon covers a 'clote-leef,' a source of bodily succor, underneath his hat. Cecilia does not lose one drop of sweat even in the flaming bath, but, despite the 'clote-leef,' the sweatiness of the Canon (along with his and the yeoman's horses) is such to instill wonder in Chaucer the pilgrim. A number of physical aspects render the Canon's character dubious. His haste, suggested by the sweat along with the fact that his hat is hanging down on his back, might merely indicate his great desire to join the pilgrims, but when it is coupled with his yeoman calling him 'a passyng man,' his hurrying becomes more dubious (VIII.614). 'Passyng' possesses connotations of haste, along with such notions as fleeting, transitory, and evading, attributes he displays in the prologue during which he flees from the pilgrims. As we shall see, physicality plays an important pedagogical role in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, but instead of being beneficial, or even merely useless, pedagogical physicality in this tale is portrayed as possessing demonic and destructive *auctoritee*.

The entrance of the Canon and his Yeoman, and the interruption of the tale-telling game, are accomplished physically. Mark Bruhn observes, 'Chaucer-the-poet clearly means for these characters to enter the *Tales* just now, and with a tactile force of presence evoking no little "wonder"' (Bruhn, 1999, 289). Both the narrator and the Host glean knowledge of the Canon from his physicality. The fact that he is a canon is ascertained by the narrator because of his sewn hood. Harry Bailey doubts what the yeoman attributes to his master – the ability to pave the way to Canterbury with silver and gold (VIII.624–6) – because 'His overslope nys nat worth a myte [. . .] It is al baudy and totore also' (VIII.633–5). He asks the yeoman, 'Why is thy lord so sluttissh, I the preye, / And is of power bettre clooth to beye, / If that his dede accorde with thy speche?' (VIII.636–8). Later, the yeoman explains this physical ruse when he describes alchemical practitioners in this way:

> And if a man wole aske hem pryvely
> Why they been clothed so unthriftily,
> They right anon wol rownen in his ere,
> And seyn that if that they espied were,
> Men wolde hem slee by cause of hir science.
> Lo, thus this folk bitrayen innocence! (VIII.892–7)

Joseph Grennen notes that the 'bodily corruption of the alchemical brethren, all too apparent in the physical appearance of the Yeoman, might seem to imply a corresponding breakdown in the Canon himself,' who 'is gay one moment, wrathful the next, highly unstable and in possession of a personality which would today be described as "volatile"' (Grennen, 1964, 282–283).

Whether or not the canon of *pars secunda* is the same as that of the prologue, both possess largely the same traits. Like the prologue's canon, the tale's is a *passyng* man: 'He is so variaunt, he abit nowhere' (VIII.1175). Most significant, though, is their shared 'false dissymulynge' (VIII.1073). The beguiling of the priest by the canon of *pars secunda* is not an isolated incident, for he has 'bitrayed folks many tyme' (VIII.1092). The canon is compared to a demon, for he will

> speke his words in so sly a kynde
> Whanne he commune shal with any wight,
> That he wol make hym doten anonright,
> But it a feend be, as hysleven is. (VIII.981–4)

His 'doublenesse' goes hand in hand with his demonic nature: he is a 'feendly wrecche' who 'semed friendly to hem that knewe hym noght, / But he was feendly bothe in werk and thoght' (VIII.1158, 1302–3). Besides his sweatiness and apparel, little can be gleaned from the Canon's physicality because, as Christine Chism has observed, 'To a large extent, the only gesture of self-definition he makes is a gesture of dissimulation; he reveals only his need to keep himself secret' (Chism, 1996, 354). In attempting to ascertain to which of the three contemporaneous chief orders of canons the Canon belongs, Chism speculates that 'it is possible, too, that Chaucer gives him a piebald habit to introduce elements of all three orders – making him a kind of ur-canon, or one who plays fast and loose with his dress to show his evasion of canonical habit, or to sharpen the sense of duplicity that divines his characters' (Chism, 1996, 342–343). Whatever the case, the Canon hides behind the authority of his habit, much as hooks observes how certain teachers can hide behind the authority generated by both their lecterns and their own bodies. When he flees, fearing that the pilgrims will learn his secrets, the Yeoman excitedly vows never again to meet him and curses him: 'the foule feend hym quelle!' (VIII.705). Such demonic dissembling is doubled by the canon in *pars secunda* by means of authority-inspiring physicality.

  2040-5960 **postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies** Vol. 9, 3, 367–387

Pars secunda can be read as a series of hands-on chemistry lessons. The canon promises the priest, 'I wol yow shewe, and if yow list to leere, / I wol yow teche pleynly the manere / How I kan werken in philosopie' (VIII.1056–8). Of course, his lessons turn out to be sleight of hand tricks. The priest is duped largely because he works with the materials himself and (mistakenly) sees the transformations with his own eyes (VIII.1059), which is much more convincing than if he had merely purchased a recipe from the canon. That is, besides his words, the canon's physical actions along with those he has the priest perform make him convincing. He and the priest work as busily, though not as fruitfully, as Cecilia. In fact, it is due in part to the physically taxing nature of the work (exemplified by the yeoman in *pars prima*) that the priest is blinded.

During the first lesson / trick, the priest, after being instructed by the canon, 'blew the fir, and bisyed hym ful faste' (VIII.1146). It is assumed by both the canon and the priest that performing such a procedure hands-on is advantageous. Hence, the canon says, 'For in tokenyng I thee love […] thyne owene hands two / Shul werche al thing which that shal heer be do' (VIII.1153–5), to which the priest responds gratefully. Yet it is while the priest is 'bisy' with this hands-on learning that the canon secretly takes out his hollow coal filled with silver filings. Then, he pretends to correct the priest who is 'bisily' arranging the coals and gives him a break: 'of yow have I pitee, by Seinte Gile! / Ye been right hoot; I se wel how ye swete. / Have heere a clooth, and wipe awey the wete' (VIII.1185–7). When the priest is temporarily blinded while wiping his brow, the canon throws his false coal in the fire over the crucible. During a break in this first lesson (trick), the canon explicitly points out the fact that he can be trusted because he remains physically present with his student:

> for ye shul han no mysbileeve
> Ne wrong conceite of me in youre absence,
> I ne wol nat been out of youre presence,
> But go with yow and come with yow ageyn. (VIII.1213–6)

Indeed, during this trick he commands the priest, 'stondeth by me' (VIII.1205). Their close physical presence necessitates that the canon be sly when he removes the silver hidden in his sleeve.

The priest is so excited about the apparent success of the first experiment that likely no other instruction is necessary for him to be convinced of the canon's truthfulness. However, the canon proceeds with another lesson and highlights the importance of the teacher's presence before beginning the second lesson (trick):

> Yet wol I make assay
> The seconde tyme, that ye may taken heede
> And been expert of this, and in youre neede
> Another day assaye in myn absence
> This disciplyne and this crafty science. (VIII.1249–53)

Once again the priest 'bisieth' himself with the fire, and the canon helps with his hollow stick, filled, like the false coal, with silver filings. As after the apparent success of the first lesson, after this lesson the priest is willing to give 'body and good' to the canon, but the latter again proceeds with yet another experiment.

Physical confirmations (though deceptive) once again prove to be pedagogically powerful in the third lesson. While the priest is in an 'unwityng' state blowing the fire, the canon secretly exchanges the rod of copper with the rod of silver he had concealed in his sleeve. The canon then criticizes him for negligence, grabs him by the chest, and commands him to look into the pot. In this case, in addition to the priest picking up the silver with his own hands, the quality of the silver is further tested by hands-on experience with a visit to a goldsmith. After the *passyng* canon-teacher collects his forty pounds for the false recipe, he is never seen again.

Ultimately, the tale suggests that appearances can be deceiving in a teacher-student relationship. The end of *pars prima* could serve as a summary of the tale:

> But al thing which that shineth as the gold
> Nis nat gold, as that I have herd told;
> Ne every appul that is fair at eye
> Ne is nat good, what so men clappe or crye.
> Right so, lo, fareth it amonges us:
> He that semeth the wiseste, by Jhesus,
> Is moost fool, whan it cometh to the preef;
> And he that semeth trewest is a theef. (VIII.962–69)

Such a lesson serves as a warning about the power of the physical presence of the teacher: though inspiring confidence, the authoritative physical performance of a teacher can ultimately aid in blinding as much as it can in illuminating students. The yeoman addresses students who follow this tempting, and most physical, science thusly:

> Ye been as boold as is Bayard the blynde,
> That blondreth forth and peril casteth noon.
> He is as boold to renne agayn a stoon
> As for to goon besides in the weye. (VIII.1413-6)

Such physicality does not ensure that truth is communicated or that students' best interests are served.

To use terminology from the *General Prologue* (its narrator here quoting Plato), 'wordes moote be cosyn to the dede' (I.742). Cecilia's words are, which makes her an effective, indeed miraculous, teacher. The words of the Canon of *pars secunda* (and, we can safely assume, those of the Canon of the prologue) do not, yet his deeds – the alluring physicality of his tricks – are such as to be convincing. Paul Taylor, reading the conflicting views of physicality of the tales as part of a larger debate about nominalism, suggests that

  2040-5960 **postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies** Vol. 9, 3, 367–387

> Sight and odour are the cognitive clues to the success of Cecilia and to the failure of the Canon and his Yeoman. Cecilia converts her husband and his brother only after she can offer them concrete evidence of the truth of Christianity. Valerian *sees* her protective angle, the roses, lilies and two crowns. His brother Tiburce *smells* the roses and lilies. The Roman solider Maximus *sees* the souls of the martyred brothers rise heavenward. The Second Nun is saying, in effect, 'see this and believe.' The Canon's Yeoman counters with 'see this but do not believe it.' (Taylor, 1979, 385, emphases in original)

The pair of tales suggests that pedagogical physicality is a two-edged sword, an effective tool that can be abused for the sake of a teacher's greed, pride, and power and to ensure dominance over a student. A third perspective of pedagogical physicality – that which shows its limits – is manifested in the subsequent tale.

Limits of teachers' bodies

For the Manciple, like the Second Nun, essentially no information is provided regarding his body. John Fisher, considering why his description is so bare, speculates that since there were only two actually-existing manciples at the Temple, 'The Manciple was the only figure among the rascals whom it might be possible to identify. […] The colorlessness kept specific identification to a minimum' (Fisher, 1996, 284). Whatever the reason for the absence of details, just as the description of Cecilia's body is a striking contrast to the Second Nun's, so too is the crow's to the Manciple's. Indeed, what physical attributes are portrayed make up most of the bird's characterization. John J. McGavin has gone so far as to argue that Chaucer omitted any description of the crow's character, and reduced others, including plot, character, and scenery, from his sources (McGavin, 1987, 446–447). The omission of an explicit description of the crow's character places more emphasis on the qualities gleaned from details of his body.

The crow possesses wondrous traits that would seem to make him an effective teacher (just as Cecilia's render her an effective teacher), yet this tale suggests that even the teacher with the most potentially effective physical presence can be ineffective due to the nature of both the subject matter and the student. Both the crow's innate physical characteristics as well as those taught to him by an even more wondrous teacher, Phebus, are clearly marvelous:

> Whit was this crowe as is a snow-whit swan,
> And countrefete the speche of every man
> He koude, whan he sholde telle a tale.
> Therwith in al this world no nyghtyngale

Ne koude, by an hondred thousand deel,
Syngen so wonder myrily and weel. (IX.133–8)

These characteristics largely run parallel to Phebus himself, who 'was the semelieste man / That is or was sith that the world bigan' and who also possesses a superlative singing ability (IX.114–20). And it seems likely that at least partly due to these characteristics (for a wondrous and excellent tale teller has a greater chance of being believed than one who is not), Phebus initially believes the report of adultery given 'By sadde tokenes and by wordes bolde' (IX.258). So far, then, the wondrous crow is Cecilia-like in its ability to communicate truth.

However, unlike the students Valerian and Tiburce, Phebus does not receive any consolation from this news, especially after he executes his wife. Despite the crow's wondrous physical characteristics, Phebus later chooses to disbelieve him. The crow prefaces his account of the adultery with these words addressed to Phebus:

for al thy worthynesse,
For al thy beautee and thy gentilesse,
For al thy song and al thy mynstralcye,
For al thy waityng, blered is thyn ye. (IX.249–52)

Given the similarities between the crow and Phebus, the same could largely be said about the former. It matters not how wondrous the crow is; Phebus will no longer believe him. Unlike Phebus, the crow's eyes are not blinded, but his mouth is stopped and his color changed. Phebus curses him:

Thou songe whilom lyk a nyghtyngale;
Now shaltow, false theef, thy song forgon,
And eek thy white fetheres everichon,
Ne nevere in al thy lif ne shaltou speke […]
Thou and thyn ofspryng evere shul be blake,
Ne nevere sweete noyse shul ye make,
But evere crie agayn tempest and rayn,
In tokenynge that thurgh thee my wyf is slayn. (IX.294–302)

The crow's transformed body, and henceforth the bodies of all crows, thus becomes an object lesson, a token of the cause of Phebus's wife's death. As Weil observes,

> Although Phebus cannot change the crow's words or draw back the arrow that killed his wife, he can resort to changing the crow's features in order to make a repetition of the crow's traitorous words impossible. Phebus cannot change his perception of his wife as unfaithful, but he can change the world's perception of the crow. (Weil, 1991, 165–6)

  2040-5960 **postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies** Vol. 9, 3, 367–387

A crow's body, like Cecilia's, is educative in nature, though its pedagogical range is now more narrowly limited, as it no longer can 'countrefete' human speech.

The tale suggests that the authority of even the most physically wondrous teacher can be ineffective, a fact highlighted by the conclusion of the tale containing disembodied teaching authorities of the highest orders. The Manciple supplementing his tale with scripture declares the moral of the tale: hold your tongue. Thereafter, for further confirmation, he cites another authority, his absent mother, who herself cites scripture, Seneca, a Flemish proverb, and even the tale the Manciple has just told, to teach the same lesson: 'kepe wel thy tonge' (IX.362). This lesson, of course, the Manciple does not put into practice. The crow's wondrous appearance and the disembodied authorities are shown to be equally ineffective in the tale, suggesting a further lesson: when a student is obstinately opposed to what is taught – an ugly truth, for instance – a teacher's appearance and words, no matter what their quality and authority, are ultimately ineffective. Despite the great, two-edged power of a teacher's body, that power ultimately hinges on many factors, including, as this tale shows, a student's receptivity to what is taught. Of course, as seen above, such physical presence can instill greater receptivity in a student, but it is not all-powerful. Other circumstances – in the case of the *Manciple's Tale*, the subject matter – also affect a student's disposition to learn. A teacher's body can be an effective tool, but even at its utmost power it does not guarantee success.

Conclusion

Much is at stake for today's teacher and student with the diminishing presence of the former's body from the classroom. Educational and sociological scholars are examining the meanings and markings of the teacher's body in the pedagogical process, partly as a result of its current and dramatic departure. Chaucer demonstrates concerns still present, by delineating the beneficial and detrimental effects a teacher's body produces. Cecilia and the canon demonstrate the pedagogic potentiality of the body – the *auctoritee* and power it wields – whether authentically or through deception. As we debate the necessity of the teacher's body, Chaucer reminds us that its presence, as displayed by the crow's body, also has limitations. These limitations are all the more apparent now when the pedagogic power of a teacher's body is afforded fewer opportunities to operate on students, to any effect, due to student-centered instructional methods, legal fears, and online teaching. Yet, through Chaucer, we see that re-embodying even the most physically effective teacher cannot ensure student success, leaving us to evaluate whether the efforts and risks of such re-embodiment are worthwhile. We are encountering an ambivalence that is not new.

However, today's economic, legal, philosophic, and institutional forces are quickly disembodying teachers in ways unknown in the Middle Ages, rendering more crucial questions about the pedagogic bodies of teachers. Chaucer's portrayals of the pedagogical possibilities of teachers' bodies provides perspective on a current educational dilemma. As with so many other subjects, Chaucer's final thoughts on the physical presence of teachers are ambiguous. Nonetheless, his poetic portrayals of them can help us to further refine our thoughts on what is likely to be a longstanding debate. What is potentially Chaucer's most useful contribution to today's debate is his portrayal of its complexity: he shows that, regardless of the teacher's body and its potential powers, ultimately other factors, including subject matter and student receptivity, play crucial roles in learning (regardless of whether teachers can or do use their bodies to 'gladly teche,' students must nonetheless be willing to 'gladly lerne'). As many ambiguities persist in today's conversations concerning the role and influence of teachers' bodies, Chaucer's poetic descriptions can, ultimately, help guide us in this precarious navigation, and, at the very least, medievalists may be instigated to elucidate Chaucer and other medieval poets through the lens of contemporary pedagogical body studies.

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