

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 22 (2009)  
  
**Artikel:** The poetry of "things" in Gower, The Great Gatsby and Chaucer  
**Autor:** Putter, Ad  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-130946>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 25.12.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# The Poetry of “Things” in Gower, *The Great Gatsby* and Chaucer

Ad Putter

“Make thee ready, my derling / for we must doe a little thyng”  
(Abraham to Isaac, from the *Chester Plays*, IV, 229-30)

This essay considers the use of the word “thing” in a range of Middle English writings (Gower, Chaucer and mystical authors). It argues that the vagueness of the word can paradoxically be a source of strength. Gower in his *Confessio Amantis* and Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde* use “thing” with a lively sense of its power to conceal and tantalize, and in mystical writings and Chaucer’s Second Nun’s Tale its blankness becomes suggestive of the darkness of God.

“Thing” is not a word we tend to use carefully and deliberately in our own language, so it is only natural to suppose that it is not worthy of our critical attention when it occurs in the language of others. In fact, this assumption is mistaken: “thing” is a wonderful word for lovers of language and poetry, in part because of its versatility and rich linguistic history, and in part because great writers of English were capable of using it to remarkable effect. I would like to focus here on the poetry of Gower and Chaucer, taking in an American classic, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, along the way; but I ought to begin by explaining why the word “thing” is relevant to the unifying theme of this collection, the theme of pre(-)texts, with and without hyphen.

*The Construction of Textual Identity in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 22. Ed. Indira Ghose and Denis Renevey. Tübingen: Narr, 2009. 63-82.

The most obvious connection is that “thing” is typically anaphoric, referring back to something that has already been mentioned, and to that extent presupposes a prior discourse, a pre-text. The word thus lies, interestingly, somewhere in between the category of noun and pronoun. Syntactically, it behaves like a noun, but semantically and pragmatically it has all the characteristics of a pronoun. Like a pronoun, it has little or no inherent meaning. If it is not anaphoric it refers to something that is about to be introduced or points exophorically to something that is accessible to both speakers from their communicative situation or from common knowledge. A remarkable instance of an anaphoric “thing” occurs at the end of the *Confessio Amantis*, when Venus advises John Gower to give up all hope of being a lover. Venus’ words strike a deliberate balance between bluntness and delicacy:

Min herte wolde and I ne may  
Is noght beloved nou adayes;  
Er thou make eny such assaies  
To love, and faile upon the fet,  
Betre is to make a beau retreat ...  
Mi sone, if thou be wel bethoght,  
This toucheth thee; foryet it noght.  
The thing is torned into was. . . (*Confessio Amantis*, VIII, 2413-35)

Though Venus stops short of actually saying so, she knows Gower is not physically up to it anymore, and to save himself from further embarrassment he should quit now with his honour intact. This is expressed not in “plain English,” but through euphemistic Gallicism. A *beau retreat* is the most striking example. It was the military term for a tactical withdrawal,<sup>1</sup> and because French was itself the language of tact and diplomacy there is surely no more diplomatic way of phrasing the unpalatable future to which Venus condemns Gower: a future without *eros*. But Venus is capable of ruthlessness, too, and understandably so. She is a goddess, and if you don’t age yourself the fact that humans do can be regarded with mild amusement; and old Gower has got to learn that his ridiculous fantasies, which include him fancying himself as “Amans,” are finished: “The thing is torned into was.” This line shows Gower at his most inventive. The daring “rank shift” by which the verb “was” is transformed into a noun,<sup>2</sup> and so both *means* and *is* “past tense,” obvi-

<sup>1</sup> I owe this point to my colleague J. A. Burrow (personal communication).

<sup>2</sup> The term “rank shift” refers to shifts of function from one rank to another. Turner (*Stylistics* 81-2) provides an amusing modern example: “I would rather be a has-been than a never-was, because a has-been has been and a never-was never was.” In the passage from Gower, the device is anticipated in 2413-14, since the opening line metamor-

ously catches the eye; but there is also the distancing effect of using the anaphoric and exophoric "thing" with reference to the whole life and meaning of Amans within the text and all the complexity and intensity of love familiar to readers from outside the text. When the Goddess of Love refers to your love life as "The thing<sup>3</sup> that was" you know the game is up, and even Amans sees no scope for further self-delusion: "When Venus hath hir tale told . . . Tho wiste I wel withoute doute, / That ther was no recoverir" (VIII, 2440-3). After falling into a swoon, and seeing or imagining that Cupid withdraws the fiery dart of love from his heart, Gower meekly retires to a life of abstinence. But since Amans' love life was also the pretext for the eight books of the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower's wake-up call is simultaneously the call that prepares readers to take leave from the fiction. "The thing is torned into was" is Amans' goodbye to love as well as our goodbye to *Confessio Amantis*.

"Thing" looks back, then, to a pre-text (with hyphen), but it is also relevant to pretexts (without hyphen). The word "pretext" etymologically refers to a woven adornment, "something wrought or fastened in front" (*prae* = "before" in the spatial sense) but quickly developed the extended sense "pretence," "excuse" (see Lewis and Short, s.v. *praetextum*), presumably because words, like clothes, can be covers for something else. And since the word "thing" is beautifully opaque, it is an excellent word to take shelter behind. Again, Gower's *Confessio Amantis* will illustrate my point. In book V, devoted to avarice, Gower tells the story of Paris' rape of Helen to exemplify the branch of avarice known as sacrilege (on the grounds that Paris first saw and then seized Helen inside a temple). In the passage below, a plan begins to take shape in Paris' mind. Anyone who has read the classical legends will know his plan is to abduct Helen, but Gower was not primarily writing for a Latinate audience and keeps Paris' sinister intentions under wraps:

Whan he to shipe ayein was come,  
To him he hath his conseil nome,  
And al devised the matiere  
In such a wise as thou schalt hier.  
Withinne nyht al prively

---

phoses into the grammatical subject of the copula. One would want to edit the lines as follows: "Min-herte-wolde-and-I-ne-may / Is noght beloved nou adayes."

<sup>3</sup> Is there a sexual pun on the word "thing"? The possibility has been suggested to me by a number of the conference participants. Prof. Ian Kirby informs me that Nevil Coghill's stage adaptation of Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" (part of his dramatization of *The Canterbury Tales*) drew the audience's attention to another possible pun in the key question: "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (905, cf. 1007).



His men he warneth by and by,  
 That thei be redy armed sone,  
 For certein thing which was to done:  
 And thei anon ben redi alle,  
 And ech on other gan to calle,  
 And went hem out upon the stronde  
 And tok a purpos ther alonde  
 Of what thing that thei wolden do,  
 Toward the temple and forth thei go. (V, 7523-7446)

The dramatic power of the passage depends on the stirring of a secret. It opens with Paris, informing his council of what Gower vaguely calls “the matiere”; exactly what that elusive word means Gower promises to reveal only later (“as thou schalt hie”). Then, under cover of darkness, the secret gradually spreads “al prively” to Paris’ chosen band of warriors, who are asked to get themselves ready “for certein thing which was to done.” Once ashore, they resolve how this “thing” is to be accomplished and move in on the temple, but the only insight into their plans granted to the reader is that “*certain* thing” has crystallized into “*what* thing” (with unusual metrical emphasis on *what*). “Thing” and “matiere” are words that seem well at home in this passage. Since they give nothing away they are useful to characters and writers who have secrets to keep or appearances to maintain.

A modern example may be helpful here. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* is as full of secrets as it is of the word “thing.” The narrator, Nick Carraway, begins by knowing nothing about Gatsby’s person or his past. He is ignorant of Gatsby’s love (now turned into obsession) for Daisy, the flame of his youth. Nor does he know that Daisy’s new man, Tom Buchanan, is a faithless and callous husband. These and various other secrets are slowly unveiled as mysterious “things” gradually find their referents. In the following passage, Daisy gives Nick the narrator a hint of the desperateness of her situation, while her husband listens on:

“Listen Nick; let me tell you what I said when she [her daughter] was born. Would you like to hear?”

“Very much.”

“It’ll show you how I’ve gotten to feel about and – *things*. Well, she was less than an hour old and Tom was God knows where. I woke up out of the ether with an utterly abandoned feeling, and asked the nurse right away if it was a boy or a girl. She told me it was a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept.” (21-22)

Why did Daisy cry (or why does she say she cried) on discovering the baby is a daughter? Obviously, it is because the helpless baby girl is, as it were, another Daisy Buchanan in the making, an unloved woman, powerless to change her fate. The anecdote is meant to tell Nick what she feels about her own marriage, but, of course, her husband's presence prevents her from stating the point openly. The word that helps her out is the vague "things," and the resource that makes us notice it is Fitzgerald's dash, which draws attention to Daisy's deliberate verbal substitution.

Another example: at the end of one of Gatsby's parties, Jordan Baker, with whom the narrator has a casual affair that serves as dull backdrop to Gatsby's intense love for Daisy,<sup>4</sup> becomes privy to one of Gatsby's secrets, that he courted Daisy before Tom married her, but Nick and the reader do not find out until later and have to remain content merely with knowing that there is something more to know:

As I waited for my hat in the hall the door of the library opened and Jordan Baker and Gatsby came out together. He was saying some last word to her, but the eagerness in his manner tightened abruptly into formality as several people approached him to say good-bye.

Jordan's party were calling impatiently to her from the porch, but she lingered for a moment to shake hands. "I've just heard the most amazing *thing*," she whispered . . . "It was . . . simply amazing," she repeated abstractedly. "But I swore I would not tell it and here I am tantalizing you." (53; my italics)

Fitzgerald's secretive "things" continue to tantalize when Gatsby finally does disclose a little of his past to Nick. Having come into money, Gatsby lived the good life, he says, "trying to forget *something* very sad that happened to me long ago" (64). Exactly what this "something" is becomes clear later, but at that stage the extravagance of Gatsby's obsession with Daisy and the missed opportunity of his past have made his character even more mysterious:

He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover *something*, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if only he could

---

<sup>4</sup> The *ennui* of this casual affair prompts different kinds of "things" in *The Great Gatsby*. When Nick finally musters the energy to tell Jordan it's over, he says: "There was one *thing* to be done before I left, an awkward, unpleasant *thing* that perhaps had better have been let alone. But I wanted to leave *things* in order . . ." (168).

return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what *that thing* was . . . (106; my italics)<sup>5</sup>

The word “thing,” as this passage shows, can conceal secrets-to-be-revealed, but it can also hide what Derrida calls *true secrets*, secrets never to be revealed perhaps because in the final analysis there really aren’t any. If Gatsby verges on insanity it is because he stands on the brink of such a maddening realization. His desire is not just the desire to recover “something,” but the fatal desire to go beyond desire itself by discovering exactly what “that thing” is. I say “fatal” because desiring “something” while at the same time knowing “that thing” is impossible. Once you get too close to the object of desire, you lose the lack that constitutes it. If this is beginning to sound faintly psychoanalytical, that is intentional, for it is psychoanalytic discourse that provides the closest analogues for Gatsby’s unknowable object of desire in what Jacques Lacan calls the *Thing* and its materialization in the symbolic order, *l’objet petit a* (“the thing little-*a*”): the object of desire that sustains our fantasies by covering up the originary loss of the *Thing* that is the true cause of human desire. The paradox of desire, explains Slavoj Žižek, is that “we mistake for postponement of the ‘thing itself’ what is already ‘the thing itself,’ we mistake for the searching and indecision of desire what is, in fact, the realization of desire” (*Looking Awry* 11). Lacan’s *objet petit a* rescues us from this fundamental emptiness, our lack of the *Thing*, around which desire circles: in reality the desired object is nothing, but we imagine it as “something” to save ourselves from disillusionment. Returning to the theme of this collection, we might say that *l’objet petit a* is a pretext that covers nothing.

There are, as we shall see, interesting parallels to be drawn between modern and medieval uses of the word “thing,” but there are also serious dangers if we assume that the word necessarily meant the same to Middle English speakers as it does to us. Often it did not, and the modern associations of the word with generality, vagueness and looseness, are clearly excluded from some of the contexts in which the word was used in Middle English. I would like to comment on two particular contexts: firstly, contexts in which “thing” is the object of verbs of speech, and, secondly, legal situations. *MED* directs attention to the first context under sense 7(a), “That which is spoken or heard, a spoken command, request, account . . . an object of speech, prayer, etc.” *MED* gives plenty

---

<sup>5</sup> In “Winter’s Dream,” Fitzgerald’s first attempt at telling this story, he overplayed his hand: “Long ago,” he said, “long ago, there was *something* in me, but now *that thing* is gone. Now *that thing* is gone, *that thing* is gone. I cannot cry. I cannot care. *That thing* will come back no more” (*The Great Gatsby* xiv; my italics).

of examples, though not one that answers to the precise sense of "prayer" which interests me here. The *Form of Excommunication* perhaps comes close when it rehearses the words of excommunication and then instructs the priest: "Thou shalt pronounce this hidous thing / With crosse and belle knellyng." Arguably the context warrants the specific sense of "formula" or "utterance," but "thing" also supplies an expedient rhyme with the present participle "knellyng," so it is hard to be sure that "thing" means anything very precise. The best examples of the contextual sense of "prayer" are in fact not in *MED* but in Chaucer:

For ther as wont to walken was an elf,  
 Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself  
 In undermeles and in morwenynges,  
 And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges  
 As he gooth in his lymytacioun. ("Wife of Bath's Tale" 873-77)

Norman Davis seems justified in glossing "thyngys" in line 876 as "prayers" in his *Chaucer Glossary* ("And says his matins and his prayers"). Chaucer's "Shipman's Tale" provides another possible example. Daun John the monk, who is on very familiar terms with the merchant and soon to be on even more familiar terms with his wife, is out in the garden, where the merchant's wife will shortly join him:

Daun John was rysen in the morwe also,  
 And in the gardeyn walketh to and fro,  
 And hath his thynges seyde ful curteisly. ("Shipman's Tale" 89-91)

Perhaps we should hear a deliberate note of superficiality in "thynges" (Pearsall 211), but I am not sure. When Emily in the "Knight's Tale" performs her devotions in Diana's temple, Chaucer writes: "Two fyres on the auter gan she beete, / And dide hir thynges, as men may biholde" ("Knight's Tale" 2292-3). There can be no question of perfunctoriness in these lines, and one wonders whether it isn't the word "curteisly" rather than "thinges" that glances at Daun John's wordliness.

The second contextual application, which *MED* neglects completely and of which *OED* gives no Middle English examples, is legal. It is curious, to say the least, that in so many languages the word "thing" has a legal history. In medieval Iceland, "the thing" was, amongst others, the assembly that settled disputes, and "thing" in Old Norse and in Old English had the senses "court of justice" and also "lawsuit"; from these legal senses developed the verb "thing," meaning "to dispute." The same applies to French *chose* (< Latin *casus*), giving rise to the Old French verb *choser* "to dispute." German and Dutch often use instead of

“Ding” the word “Sache” or “zaak”: the word is cognate with OE *sacu* (Modern English “sake”), which also had the legal senses of “lawsuit,” “jurisdiction.”

If we trace “thing” words back in time, they often turn out to be rooted in folk law; and *MED* and *OED* cannot persuade me that these roots were entirely lost in Middle English. In fact, Chaucer, Gower and Langland seem to use the word in quasi-legal senses. The Sergeant of Law is the legal expert amongst the Canterbury pilgrims. He knows all the legal jargon, and Chaucer knew some too:

In termes had he caas and doomes alle  
That from the tyme of kyng William were falle.  
Therto he koude endite and make a thyng,  
Ther koude no wight pynche at his writyng,  
And every statut koude he pleyn by rote. (“General Prologue” 322-7)

The language is deliberately technical, and professional technical jargon also sets the tone of 325, “Therto he koude endite.” As William Rothwell has shown, *endite* is Anglo-Norman legalese, meaning to “draw up a formal accusation.” In this context, “thing” can hardly be loose talk: to “make a thyng” must mean “to compose a lawsuit,” as *The Riverside Chaucer* has it.

There is another example in *Piers Plowman*. In Passus IV, when Lady Meed is to be tried at the king’s court, Conscience and Reason ride to court:

Oon Waryn Wisdom and Witty his fere  
Folwed hym faste, for thei hadde to done,  
In the Cheker and the Chauncery, to ben discharged of thynges ...  
(*Piers Plowman* B IV 27-29)

A.V.C. Schmidt glosses the last line as “In the courts of the Exchequer and the Chancery, to be released from legal liabilities.” The line from *Piers Plowman* is duly cited in Alford’s *Piers Plowman: A Glossary of Legal Diction*, along with Schmidt’s gloss, but only under the verb “discharge.” Possibly the word “thing” would have merited an entry in its own right.

Finally, there is Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*. Gower was probably himself a lawyer (Hines, Cohen and Roffey 25); and it is striking that his version of “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” “The Tale of Sir Florent,” strikes a much more legalistic note, as befits the virtue which the tale is supposed to exemplify: the keeping of covenants. Having killed the cap-

tain's son and heir, Brachus, Florent is captured, his life spared only under the strict conditions stipulated by Brachus' wily grandmother:

Florent, how so thou be wyte  
Of Brachus deth, men schal respite  
As now to take vengeance,  
Be so thou stonde in juggement  
Upon certein condicioun,  
That thou unto a questioun  
Which I schal axe schalt ansuere. (I, 1456-61)

The question is: what do women most desire? If Florent can answer it correctly, he will be acquitted; if not, he must die. A day and time for his return to court are "assised" (appointed) and the crucial question is written down in a sealed document ("under Seales write," 1474). When Florent returns with his answer, his case is re-opened:

Forth with his conseil cam the lord,  
The thinges stoden of record . . .  
. . . In presence of the remenaunt  
The strengthe of al the covaunt  
Tho was reherced openly. (I, 1631-7)

The legal context and the analogous case of *Piers Plowman* B IV 29 warrant the following translation of line 1632: "The charges stood on record."

In the examples above, the word "thing" seems to be used with precise meanings that are lost in Modern English. However, it is clear that in other contexts the word could be just as vague in Middle English as in Modern English. For example, the translators of the Wycliffite Bible used it simply to get around the difficulty posed by neuter adjectives used substantivally in Latin. When Jonah goes down below deck to hide from the storm, the Vulgate reads *et Jonah descendit ad interiora navis* (Jonah I.5); the painfully literal translation in the Wycliffite Bible is "And Jonah went down to the ynnere thingus of the ship" (ed. Hudson 42). Here the noun is no more than a "prop word," in Anne Hudson's phrase (165). Because its semantic content is nil, it can be used to perform the purely grammatical operation of converting adjective into noun. There is further evidence of its potential vagueness in its use as a euphemism. In the *Roman de la Rose*, Reason defends her policy of calling a spade a spade, and men's balls balls, but she also says the ladies of France prefer indirections such as "purses, harness, or things" (*riens*, 7145, ed. Strubel). Since, as Reason argues, *coillons* are part of God's glorious creation, there really is no need for such evasiveness. In Middle English, Reason's ar-



gument that genitals are God's great handiwork is taken up by Chaucer's Wife of Bath:

Tel me also, to what conclusioun  
 Were membres maad of generacioun?  
 Glose whoso wole, and seye both up and down  
 That they were maked for purgacioun  
 Of uryne, and oure bothe thynges smale  
 Were eek to knowe a female from a male,  
 And for noon other cause, say ye no?  
 The experience woot wel it is noght so. (*Wife of Bath's Tale* 115-24)

There are those who will say our reproductive organs are "little things" meant to distinguish male from female, but the Wife of Bath knows far too much about them to believe that. If we compare the Wife's discourse with Reason's, however, we begin to notice just how much the Wife likes her euphemisms. And evidently it is not lady-like *decorum* that explains why. Her husbands, she boasts, thought she had the best *quoniam* ("whatsit" 608) that could be; her husband Jankyn was irresistible and could have her *bele chose* ("beautiful thing" 510; cf. 447) whenever he liked. *Quoniam* and *bele chose* are spectacular circumlocutions, doubly euphemistic since they also switch into a foreign language; but since the Wife likes nothing better than to talk about her sex life, their effect is not to cover up her sexuality but to flaunt it. Thin pretexts are like see-through clothing: they are often donned to attract attention to what is underneath.

The range of senses and possible uses of the word "thing" makes it a very rewarding word for the literary critic. I would like now to examine some passages in Chaucer where, I hope, the word will repay our attention. My first case study is *Troilus and Criseyde*. At the beginning of Book II, Pandarus visits his niece Criseyde, bearing the news that Troilus is in love with her. Reductive readings of this scene commonly represent Pandarus as the "active" manipulator and Criseyde as the "passive" victim, but in reality the situation is much more complicated and playful. The first complication is that Pandarus cannot simply tell Criseyde his news outright. He has been entrusted with Troilus' secret and Criseyde has female companions in tow. Pandarus will therefore need to drop a hint in the hope that Criseyde takes the hint and will dismiss her ladies-in-waiting. The social situation thus requires Criseyde's active cooperation – which brings us to a second complication. It is important that Criseyde should want to hear what Pandarus has to say just as much as he wants to tell her. And that is where the fun begins. Here is Pandarus talking to Criseyde in full hearing of her womenfolk:

"As ever thrive I," quod this Pandarus,  
 "Yet koude I telle *a thyng* to doon yow pleye."  
 "Now, uncle deere," quod she, "telle it us  
 For Goodes love; is than th'assege aweye?  
 I am of Greekes so fered that I deye."  
 "Nay, nay," quod he, "as ever mote I thryve,  
 It is *a thyng* wel bet than swyche fyve."

"Ye, holy God," quod she, "what *thyng* is that?"

.....

And but youreselven telle us what it is,  
 My wit is for t'arede it al to leene.  
 As help me God, I not nat what ye meene."

"And I youre borugh, ne nevere shal for me,  
*This thyng* be told to yow, as mote I thryve!"  
 "And whi so, uncle myn? Whi so?" quod she.  
 "By God," quod he, "that wol I telle as blyve!  
 For proudder woman is ther noon on lyve,  
 And ye it wyste, in al the town of Troye.  
 I jape nought, as ever have I joye!"

Tho gan she wondren moore than biforn  
 A thousand fold, and down her eyghen caste;  
 For nevere, sith the tyme that she was born,  
 To know *a thyng* desired she so faste;  
 And with a syke she syde hym atte laste,  
 "Now uncle myn, I nyl yow noght displese,  
 Nor axen more that may do yow disese."

So after this, with many wordes glade,  
 And frendly tales, and with merie chiere,  
 Of this and that they pleide . . . (*Troilus*, II, 120-49)

The kind of play that Chaucer presents here is not unlike that of children when they want to draw someone into their "secret." "I have a secret," one will say; "tell me what it is," says the other. "O no, I won't," says the first; and now any clever child who really wants to know should shrug and say: "I don't want to know anyway." Pandarus and Criseyde play this type of game like proper grown ups. For Pandarus to say he has a "secret" would already be to give too much away, so he says he knows a "thing" that would delight her. The word keeps its secret well and naturally piques Criseyde's curiosity: what, she now asks Pandarus, could this "thing" be? Pandarus of course replies by saying he is not



going to tell her, all the while teasing her with the suggestion that it's the kind of news that would make a woman very pleased with herself. Notice, however, that Criseyde comically defeats his purpose by being (or perhaps pretending to be) too well brought up to press him on the point: though bursting with curiosity, she sighs and says she will not question him on a matter he is reluctant to reveal. Subject closed. Psychologically, then, this is a game of thwarted reverse psychology: Pandarus wants to tell Criseyde his secret but his first move is to claim the opposite, while Criseyde, who wants to discover the secret, parries this move by remaining content not to know. After this first exchange, the secret is left to hang in the air while both players keep up appearances and anticipate the start of the second round.

Since the word "thing" cannot be specified any further in the presence of Criseyde's ladies-in-waiting, round two effectively begins when Criseyde dismisses her ladies by announcing she has "some business" to discuss with Pandarus (213-7). At the end of their business talk, Pandarus declares it is high time he went, but of course the game would be lost if he did leave, so he lingers and reminds her again of his secret:

Quod Pandarus, "Now tyme is that I wende.  
But yet, I say, ariseth, lat us daunce,  
And cast your widewes habit to mischaunce!  
"What liste yow thus yourself to disfigure,  
Sith yow tid is thus fair an aventure?"

"A wel bithought! For love of God," quod she,  
"Shal I nat witen what ye meene of *this*?"  
No, *this thing* axeth leyser, tho quod he,  
And eke me wolde mucche greve, iwis,  
If I *hit* tolde and ye toke *it* amys. (II, 220-231)

The point of Criseyde's words is lost in the *Riverside Chaucer*, which glosses "A wel bithought" as "well put." What Criseyde actually says is "well remembered": Pandarus, that is, has done well to remember the "thing" he was going to tell her, and if Criseyde's forceful question "Shal I nat witen what ye meene of this?" breaks the cover of her polite reticence to ask, it simultaneously blows Pandarus' cover that he is not minded to tell her. Pandarus keeps the game up with one last "thing" but then comes clean: the "thing" is that Troilus has fallen in love with her. Pragmatically, "thing" and the various pronouns which I have also italicized have the same important properties: to speakers who know the pre(-)text, their meaning is clear, to those who don't, like Criseyde, they

are frustratingly reticent; and together they make Pandarus' and Chaucer's game possible.

The banter of *Troilus and Criseyde* could not be further apart in mood and tone from the experience of the divine in Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*, the Life of St Cecilia; but the word "thing" bridges the divide, and I hope that *The Cloud of Unknowing* and a dazzling Middle Dutch lyric once attributed to the Beguine Hadewych can prepare us for the crossing. The Dutch poem, *Mi een pijnt*, belongs to the tradition of negative mysticism, which is premised on the principle that, if God is beyond word and understanding, then our faculties of understanding, reason, memory and imagination need to be circumvented if we are going to get near to him (Turner, *Darkness of God*). In Middle English the most powerful expression of the *via negativa* is *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which teaches those who want to tread this way to "un-know" what they know, not to rely on reason but to perfect techniques of sabotaging it (Putter). One such technique is to try and be precisely "nowhere" since:

nowhere bodily is euerywhere goostly. Loke than besily that thi goostly werk be nowhere bodily; and than wher-so-euer that *that thing* is, on the which thou wilfully worchest in mynde in substaunce, sekerly ther art thou in spirit. (*Cloud*, ed. Hodgson 121)

To be nowhere physically is to be everywhere spiritually, and by the same token to "focus" on something that has no "content" (that *thing*) is far better than to think deep thoughts. For in this "goostly werk" *nothing* and *nowhere* count for more than *everything* and *everywhere*:

For I telle thee trewly that I had leuer be so nowhere bodily, wrastelyng with that blynde *nought*, than be so grete a lorde that I might when I wolde be everywhere bodily, merily pleing with al this *ought* as a lorde with his owne. (*Cloud*, ed. Hodgson 122)<sup>6</sup>

The *Cloud* author's disciples must learn first to create and then to tolerate the emptiness of thought, imagery and recollection that clears the space in which the divine may appear.

---

<sup>6</sup> In this and the following citation from *The Cloud of Unknowing* I have modernized thorns and yoghs, and silently expanded abbreviations.

To this context belong the words of Pseudo-Hadewych:

Nuwe mare  
In doncker clare  
Vinden si,  
Van hogher prise  
Sonder wise  
In verre bi. (*Mi een pijnt*, ed. Komrij, 32-7)

[A new message they will find in dark clarity, of great value, without logic, in a distant nearby.]

The poem busies itself creating that space beyond reason, where dark is bright and far is near, and where the word of God, *sonder wise*, without sense, will appear. In that space of sensory and rational nakedness, *in dat bloete* (56), we must remain, for

Daer dunct hare baren  
Sonder verklaren  
Een simpel *iet*  
Alse in vertiën;  
Doch moet sijs liën  
In een bloot niet. (50-55)

[There it seems to her that a simple something comes into view, inexplicably, even as it withdraws itself; and yet she must recognize it a naked nought.]

In this startling evocation of an epiphany “something” seems to appear, *een simpel iet*; but before we can quite get hold of its meaning, the sense is deconstructed. The thing that dawns is also the thing that gets away, and the something (*iet*) has to be recognized as a naked nothing (*niet*). The poet’s rigorous approach to the simple word *iet* is impressive: it might be thought that the word’s lack of connotation and denotation, its senselessness, made it ideal for gestures towards the ineffable, but the poet has thought further and knows that even the blankest descriptor says too much: the divine is not *een simpel iet* but *een bloot niet*, or rather it is the impossible *iet* and *niet* that is both.

Chaucer is of course temperamentally far removed from the negative tradition, but he did write a poem, *The Life of St Cecilia*, that deals in moments of epiphany, when the world beyond this world comes into view, not by the power of reason, but by acts of naked faith. If the motto of empiricism is “seeing is believing,” then Chaucer’s motto in *The Second Nun’s Tale* is “believing is seeing.” Empirical “seeing” is from

St Cecilia's perspective really a kind of idolatry, a "slavery to the signifier," in St Augustine definition of idolatry.<sup>7</sup> The pagan, who worships sticks and stones without realizing that all creation is a sign of God, has "outer eyes" just like the saint but is unable to see the material world properly. It is from this literalism and lack of vision that Cecilia promises an escape. According to one of the etymologies offered in the prologue, "Cecilia" comes from *caecus* "blind": "Cecilie is to seye 'the wey to blynde'" (92). Follow her and you will suddenly become aware that things are signs, and that the material world is the shadow of a spiritual world richer beyond compare. Cecilia's husband Valerian and his brother Tiburce discover this for themselves as their eyes are opened to spiritual realities. Cecilia has an "aungel which that loveth me" (152), but her earthly lover Valerian cannot see the angel until the moment he converts. Valerian's brother Tiburce is granted a whiff of this wonderful world beyond the empirical one when, thanks to Valerian's prayer, he smells the spiritual crowns of roses and lilies that Cecilia and Valerian wear as virgin martyrs-to-be, but which, as Valerian tells him, he will not be able to see until he believes:

"And as thou smellest hem thurgh my preyere,  
So shaltow seen hem, leve brother deere,  
If it so be thou wolt withouten slouthe,  
Bileve aright and knowen verray trouthe."

Tiburce answerde, "Seistow this to me  
In soothnesse, or in dreem I herkne this"?  
"In dremes," quod Valerian, "han we be  
Unto this tyme, brother myn, iwys.  
But now at erst in trouthe oure dwellyng is." (256-63)

The lines are a powerful statement both of the theological principle that faith must come before reason, that believing comes before seeing, and of the promise that conversion will radically transform lived experience. It will be like waking up from a long dream which, all the while you slept, you mistook for reality. After you have woken up, you will of course encounter non-believers like Tiburce who apprehend your new reality as if it were a dream, but that's only because they have not woken up to that bright new world of truth in which you now live.

---

<sup>7</sup> St Augustine's point (in *De Doctrina Christiana* III ix) is that all created things are signs that point to the Creator. To treat signs without regard to their ultimate signification is a form of literalism, a slavery to the letter.

There is an earlier episode in the poem which dramatizes the priority of faith over reason even more powerfully and which returns us to the word “thing”: the scene in which Valerian comes to Pope Urban to be baptized. Urban praises Cecilia in a series of glorious paradoxes: her “chastity” has born “fruit” in the shape of her first convert, Valerian; he was once a fierce lion, impatient to possess her, but now she has sent him ready to be baptized “as meek as a lamb”:

And with that word anon ther gan appeere  
An oold man, clad in white clothes cleere,  
That hadde a book with lettre of gold in honde  
And gan bifore Valerian to stonde.

Valerian as deed fil down for drede  
Whan he hym saugh, and he up hente hym tho,  
And on his book right thus he gan to rede:  
“O Lord, o feith, o God, withouten mo,  
O Cristendom, and Fader of alle also,  
Aboven alle and over alle everywhere.”  
Thise wordes al with gold ywriten were.

Whan this was rad, thanne seyde this olde man,  
“Leevestow *this thyng* or no? Sey ye or nay.”  
“I leeve *al this thyng*,” quod Valerian,  
“For sother *thyng* than this, I dar wel say,  
Under the hevene no wight thynke may.”  
Tho vanysshed this olde man, he nyste where,  
And Pope Urban hym crist[e]ned right there.  
(200-217; my emendation)

Has not Chaucer written this whole scene as if it were, or at least could be, some strange dream, to make us marvel at this epiphany just as Tiburce marvels at the smell of roses and lilies? I am sorry that *The Riverside Chaucer* breaks the spell with the following note on line 201:

[An oold man] Probably St Paul. Reames takes his appearance before mention of Valerian’s faith as one indication among many of Chaucer modifying his source to lessen human participation and emphasize God’s grace in conversion.

This completely destroys the mystery. Surely what matters to our appreciation of this scene are the man’s namelessness and the inexplicability of his appearance and vanishing. Who is he? Where did he come from, and where does he go? And what kind of sense is he making? Even more unhelpful is Reames’s theory that Chaucer’s point is to “lessen

human participation." This is positively perverse in the context of what is after all a saint's life, a celebration of human participation in divine providence, of grace *and* good works. (Jill Mann powerfully argues in "Chaucer and Atheism" that being an atheist is a positive advantage in reading medieval literature since it avoids these kinds of protestant misunderstandings, but to read Chaucer sympathetically it really is Mann's Catholic atheism you need.) Indeed Chaucer here celebrates the participation of *two* saints, St Cecilia and the man he repeatedly calls "*seint Urban*" (179, 547, 551): the former has given birth to her first convert, while the latter's words of praise seem to summon the old man from nowhere. God and his saint thus work together in mysterious harmony as they inexplicably synchronize moves. Just as God seems to wait for Urban's prayer of thanksgiving before sending his missionary, "And *with that word anon* ther gan appeere," so Urban seizes the moment of vanishing to administer the sacrament of baptism: "And Pope Urban hym crist[e]ned *right there*."

To think these are all meaningless coincidences is not to believe, or, in Valerian's words, not to have woken up from a dream. The old man's words to Valerian have this same double aspect: if you do not believe (and remember Valerian is not a Christian yet), the old man's incantation is gobbledygook, but, if you do, it all makes sense. Faith comes before reason, and so conversion requires not rational persuasion but a blind leap of faith: "Leevestow this thyng or no? Sey ye or nay." It might of course be objected that we cannot be expected to believe in something without being told exactly what it is, but the old man's "logic" is that Valerian will find out when he has said "yes" to it. The terms of the old man's question acknowledge what Slavoj Žižek calls the vicious circle of belief: "the reasons why we should believe are persuasive only to those who already believe" (*Sublime Object* 38). How, then, does one enter this vicious circle? According to Žižek, the answer is "leave rational argumentation and submit yourself simply to ideological ritual, stupefy yourself by repeating the meaningless gestures, act *as if* you already believe and the belief will come by itself" (39). The trick certainly works wonders for Valerian, who responds simply by affirming the old man's words – "Leevestow this thing . . .?" "I leeve al this thyng" – and thus learns what "this thing" is by acting as if he already knew. In this reading, the repeated "things" in these lines aren't clumsy "prop" words, or at any rate they weren't that for Chaucer. The word "thing" presupposes meaning, and since belief is nothing but the supposition of meaning, the "things" in this sublime passage speak of Chaucer's faith and call on ours.

In conclusion, "thing" may not look like a poetic word but modern writers and medieval writers appreciated its versatility and its usefulness.

As John Gower and F. Scott Fitzgerald understood, the word is great at keeping secrets, and Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde* gives a brilliant demonstration of its tantalizing power. Its evasiveness made it suitable for euphemisms, its blankness appealed to Pseudo-Hadewijch and the *Cloud* author. Whether or not it means anything in *The Second Nun's Tale* depends on what you choose to believe: "Leevestow this thyng or no? Sey ye or nay."



## References

- Alford, John A. *Piers Plowman: A Glossary of Legal Diction*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1988.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- Davis, Norman et al. *A Chaucer Glossary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time, I: Counterfeit Money*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Ed. Tony Tanner. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990.
- Gower, John. *Confessio Amantis*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 2 vols, EETS 81, 82. London: Oxford University Press, 1901, repr. 1957.
- Hines, John, Nathalie Cohen and Simon Roffey. "Iohannes Gower, Armiger, Poeta': Record and Memorials of his Life and Death." *A Companion to Gower*. Ed. Siân Echard. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004. 43-61.
- Hodgson, Phyllis, ed. *The Cloud of Unknowing*. EETS OS 218. London: Oxford University Press, 1944.
- Hudson, Anne, ed. *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*. Medieval Academy Reprints, 38. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.
- Komrij, Gerrit, ed. *De Nederlanse Poëzie van de Twaalfde tot en met de Zestiende Eeuw*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1994.
- Langland, William. *The Vision of Piers Plowman (B-Text)*. Ed. A.V.C. Schmidt. London: Dent, 1978, repr. 1995.
- Lewis, Charlton T. and Charles Short. *A Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.
- Mann, Jill. "Chaucer and Atheism." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 17 (1995): 5-19.
- Pearsall, Derek. *The Canterbury Tales*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1985.
- Putter, Ad. "The Cloud-Author and Walter Hilton". *A Companion to Middle English Prose*. Ed. A.S.G Edwards. Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2004. 33-52.
- Reames, Sherry L. "The Cecilia Legend as Chaucer Inherited it and Retold it: The Disappearance of an Augustinian Ideal." *Speculum* 55 (1980): 38-57.
- Rothwell, William. "English and French after 1362." *English Studies* 82 (2001): 539-59.
- Strubel, Armand, ed. and trans. *Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meun: Le Roman de la Rose*. Lettres gothiques. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1992.
- Turner, Denys. *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.



Turner, G. W. *Stylistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.

———. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997.