Introduction: The Popular and the Professional

The concept of popular Chaucer might still seem like an oxymoron to some. He lacks the kind of cult following Jane Austen enjoys, or the mythic and affective celebrity of Charles Dickens or Mark Twain, and his presence on the cultural radar certainly pales in comparison to the global phenomenon of “Shakespop.” But in just the past decade Chaucer has been adapted to film, television, stage, ballet, and opera, translated into hip-hop, and resurrected as a sleuth in historical detective fiction. The pilgrimage structure has been appropriated within the genres of science fiction, travelogue, postcolonial critique, romance, scientific debate, and zombie thriller. Chaucer’s name is used to sell products ranging from dessert wines to teddy bears. And he has a blog. The impulse might be to view some manifestations of Chauceriana as ephemera, if not disposable and debased representations, then certainly pale reflections of Chaucer’s literary and cultural value. But if Chaucer’s popular reproduction is considered within the context of reception history, one might appeal to the notion that canonicity is based on successive acts of valuation, or that accumulated dialogues institutionalize a work’s reputation, or that old texts are refracted, reconstituted, and revivified through the prism of new texts.

And from the perspective of cultural studies, Chaucer’s circulation in popular culture would attest to the continuing value of his texts as a meaningful resource in the construction of social identities and the articulation of social interests. Chaucer’s relatively fulsome afterlife arguably reflects the vitality of his contemporary canonicity, a cultural viability that is not solely created by or confined to academic discourse. An examination of his popular reception can therefore offer some insight into the mechanisms of Chaucer’s cultural renown, that is, why Chaucer continues to make meaning and give pleasure to a wide range of taste cultures. Indeed, those under a pop culturalist persuasion would argue not only that Chaucer’s popular reproduction indicates his continuing cultural relevance, but also that to dismiss the legitimacy of such meanings and pleasures has less to do with critical or aesthetic dis-
crimination than the assertion of cultural distinction and the defense of social privilege.

Designating Chaucer’s extra-academic reception as “popular” follows established precedent. Designating Chaucer’s extra-academic reception as “popular” follows established precedent. But the subject would appear to be misnomered since the texts examined here represent a range of cultural production including both conventionally-designated high and low genres, from poetry, metafiction, and dark comedy to animation and pulp fiction. Moreover, many of the texts examined here as “popular” will probably be unfamiliar to most readers. Therefore, a clarification of nomenclature is probably warranted. The quality of statistical popularity might be “the sine qua non of popular culture,” but “popularity” itself is notoriously difficult to quantify. Popular culture encompasses a number of definitions, connoting texts, products, or practices that are well liked by many, judged inferior or in contrast to a high culture, created for primarily commercial purposes, and widely accessible. Depending upon the conceptual approach, popular culture has also been associated with products that are mass produced, widely disseminated, and consumed as a form of entertainment or leisure. But with the exception of commercial visual media such as Brian Helgeland’s A Knight’s Tale, or the genre of mystery fiction, few of the texts examined in this study would seem to qualify. Given the semantic ambiguity of the term, however, John Storey maintains that popular culture is both an “empty conceptual category” and a “residual category,” dependent upon context and always defined in contrast to what is considered a high or dominant culture.

Within the circumscribed context of contemporary Chaucerian cultural production, high culture is certainly academic discourse, or what Derek Brewer calls “the Chaucer industry,” that is, “the professional criticism of Chaucer by salaried academics.” Carolyn Collette suggests that by the end of the nineteenth century, “Chaucer the man ... disappeared into the academy to become the subject of professional study”; and by the 1930s any effort to extract and survey the industry’s voluminous scholarly output would be, Brewer contends, “rash, if not suicidal.” The split between institutionalized hermeneutic discourse and interpretive commentary accessible to common readers is often traced to the formation of departments of English literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A number of factors contributed to the gradual transformation of literary study as part of a belletristic public culture to professional criticism, including the expansion of the university system, increasing specialization, the collapse of the literary periodical, and the influence of conceptual paradigms of expertise from the hard sciences. The study of English literature, and medieval studies in particular, was from its inception characterized by a bifurcated theoretical approach, partly created by the perceived need for professional credibility. On the one
hand, the approach to the study of English was influenced by a Romantic, humanistic tradition with an emphasis on the cultural, ethical, and spiritual value of the study of literary aesthetics. On the other, the adoption of a German disciplinary model with a focus on the scientific rigors of philology, empirical analysis, and the production of knowledge helped to place the professional study of literature on par with the natural sciences and classics. Lee Patterson suggests that early Chaucerians such as George Lyman Kittredge embodied this conceptual split in their work, producing both philological analyses of Chaucer’s language and descriptive literary interpretation accessible and of interest to a wider reading audience.

Despite their emphasis on the intuitive accessibility of Chaucer’s poetry, however, Kittredge’s lectures (collected in *Chaucer and His Poetry*) were hardly pitched at a wide audience in the same manner as, for instance, Percy MacKaye’s contemporaneous popular adaptations of *The Canterbury Tales* for stage, pageant, and comic opera. Indeed, popularizations and popular appropriations, or what Barrington characterizes as “secondary transmissions” for the “uninformed” and “illiterate,” are not represented in Brewer’s extracts of Chaucer’s pre-professional critical heritage. While popularizations are briefly documented in Caroline Spurgeon’s collection of criticism and allusions, the narrative of Chaucer’s early reception has been dominated largely by the learned medievalism of tutored eminents. And a century of the professionalization and specialization of scholarly labor has resulted in a relatively clear demarcation between critical commentary intended for scholars and their students and Chaucer’s imaginative reproduction and reception outside of an educational context. Thus, modern manifestations of Chaucer’s extra-academic afterlife are called “popular” to make a distinction between his academic or professional reception—that is, work on Chaucer that is largely produced by and for specialists and educators, circulating within an interpretive community of largely professional scholars and teachers—and creative works produced primarily (although not exclusively) by and for nonprofessionals. Because Chaucer’s quantitative popularity is certainly provisional, “Chaucer’s afterlife” (a notion that connotes some wrangling over a celebrity’s legacy) or Chaucerian “intertextuality” (some forms of intertextuality explore the conjunction between literary influence and socio-political power) will also serve as descriptors for his non-academic reception. But preference has been given to the concept of the “popular” which carries the primary theoretical baggage—the metanarrative of opposition to the cultural elitism of an authoritative discourse—that attends the study of popular culture and that permeates Chaucer’s popular reception.

Those professionals who produce high Chaucerian discourse have taken an increasing interest in how Chaucer is reproduced in popular culture. The
critical attention to Chaucer’s contemporary afterlives (or what David Wallace has called “new Chaucer topographies”) is in part a product of the pervasive popularity of medievalism, both as a professional field of inquiry and in its recreational manifestations, and the legitimation of the study of popular culture as an interpretive methodology in literary studies. But the growing consideration of popular culture on the part of medievalists, particularly as part of a pedagogical strategy, also reflects larger institutional concerns about the viability of the discipline within the larger cultural economy, manifested in the perceived marginalization of medieval studies and the real dwindling supply of medieval literature tenure track lines. David Marshall, for instance, suggests that for scholars of the Middle Ages who feel that they “must explain their usefulness,” the study of medievalism in popular culture “opens avenues for medievalists to further engage in the social debates that occupy other areas of academic inquiry.” In her study of the successes of nineteenth-century popularizers, Charlotte Morse provides a bleak appraisal of the current discipline:

Morse concludes that in order to attract customers, “Chaucerians should be more willing than they have been to engage with popular culture” (117). And although acknowledging “a time of few jobs and much pessimism about our discipline,” Richard K. Emmerson perceives a healthier industry in his review of the state of medieval studies at the beginning of the new millennium (based on Medieval Academy memberships, conference attendance, and a vigorous output of scholarship). He nonetheless also contends that “For medieval studies to flourish in the future,” medievalists should engage with “popular representations of things ‘medieval’ and make use of them to direct the interest of students and the general public” (26–7).

All suggest appropriating the popular as a way to promote our own academic product. But in Chaucer at Large, the pioneering analysis of Chaucer’s place in the modern imagination, Ellis often finds dubious value in popular estimations of the poet’s work. With some notable exceptions, Ellis concludes that “Chaucer’s present popular status is firmly down-market.” He finds a consistent “reductive appreciation” of Chaucer’s poetry, in which the poet is constructed, among other things, as a nostalgic icon representing “the easy, inebriated amity of a static Merrie England” or as an embodiment of “uncomplicated bawdy affability” (162–64). Among the reasons for this “relative
obscurring” of Chaucer in the culture at large is the difficulty of Middle English, Chaucer’s association with patriarchal tradition and, most importantly, his appropriation by academics. That is, because primary intellectual and aesthetic work done on Chaucer only addresses others within the academy rather than the general public, “the persistence of reductive ideas about Chaucer is hardly to be dissociated from the difficulty of access to the means of enlightenment” (165). What Ellis hopes for is better communication between the academy and the reading public, and he looks forward to a new generation of teachers who will bear a “more modern outlook” and exploit more popular responses to Chaucer (e.g., translations) as an adjunct to academic commentary in the classroom.

This study suggests a somewhat different approach to the relationship between the estimation of Chaucer’s cultural value and his representation in popular culture, positing a continuum rather than a chasm between the professional and popular modes of cultural production. Ellis suggests that there are two Chaucers (the one in the culture at large and the one owned by the academy) and wants better communication between Chaucerians and the reading public in order to correct what professional readers not unreasonably might see as the trivialization and infantilization of Chaucer in the modern imagination. An examination of Chaucer’s popular reception should, in short, serve as a wake-up call for those responsible for communicating Chaucer’s aesthetic distinction to the general reader. Similarly, Barrington concedes in her seminal study of Chaucer’s remarkable adaptability to key features of American ideology that readers might be wont to dismiss Chaucer’s popular progeny as “bastard children begotten by ignorant lowbrows.” From the perspective of cultural studies, however, all forms of Chaucerian cultural production contribute to his cultural valuation. All cultural production — high and low, professional and popular — is a social practice that reflects the mediation of social relations and the articulation of social identities. An important aspect of the mediation of social power and privilege is in the very distinction itself between high and low cultural forms. Thus, the hierarchical distinction between professional and popular valuations of Chaucer is problematic, having less to do with aesthetic evaluation than with an assertion and defense of institutional privilege. In short, Chaucer’s circulation in the cultural imagination, that is, his functioning canonicity, is predicated on his continued meaning making in both professional and popular culture.

Ellis’s distinction between the two Chaucers is not perverse and does reflect efforts to make conceptual distinctions between elite and popular cultures. Academic discourse and popular culture would appear to represent two separate spheres of Chaucerian reception, distinguished by the motives for their production and consumption. The difference between the Chaucer
of professional and popular culture—between a monograph, such as David Carlson’s revisionary biography, *Chaucer’s Jobs*, and something like Helgeland’s *A Knight’s Tale*—would seem obvious. The two might be easily differentiated on the basis of production, distribution, and consumption, or by the nature of their creators, suppliers, and users, the basic categories often used to distinguish between high and low cultural products. Most distinctions between elite and popular culture emphasize the commercial motives of the producers and suppliers, the accessibility and distribution of the product to a wide audience, and, more ambiguously, the motives or disposition of the reader or consumer. Academic writing is created primarily by and intended for what Gans calls “professional taste cultures,” which ostensibly enjoy at least a relative degree of commercial autonomy. The monograph is seemingly not solely produced for profit either by the author or the publisher (although the former will hope for some form of compensation in the form of salary increase, promotion, or professional prestige, and the latter will obviously hope for a financial return on its investment). Distribution is quite limited (print runs are often several hundred copies) and access is restricted either by the prohibitive price of the monograph ($95 for Carlson’s hardcover; $30 for paper) or by the relative inaccessibility (geographical, financial) of university library holdings. John Street suggests that high culture is “less accessible both practically and socially,” but in this case, since the audience for high Chaucerian culture is restricted and exclusive, requiring a highly specialized Chaucerian cultural literacy, accessibility is primarily limited by education. The product will likely be consumed as a form of scholarly labor, providing information or aesthetic insight, rather than as a form of leisure. In Carlson’s case, the monograph radically rewrites some traditional perceptions of Chaucer as a congenial humanist fostering individualism and social aspiration.

Looking at a popular culture product such as *A Knight’s Tale* from the perspective of production, distribution, and consumption appears to yield very different results. First, and perhaps most importantly, the film is produced by “an industry organized for profit.” Because the product costs tens of millions of dollars to create, profit is based on consumption, consumption is predicated on wide distribution, and wide distribution is dependent upon accessibility. Accessibility presumably demands the comfort of ritual: stereotypes, formulae, homogeneity, and standardization. Using a demographic model, Gans distinguishes between high and popular culture primarily by the nature of the audience (the education, income, and opportunity of the product’s users, with education being the most important) and how the cultural product is consumed: “The popular arts are, on the whole, user-oriented and exist to satisfy audience values and wishes.” In this case the film peddles
the mythical American dream of upward mobility, specifically the Nike-esque fantasy of material success made possible by athletic prowess. The character of Chaucer, who facilitates the rise of the commoner and fosters the dream that he can change his stars (i.e., social class) resembles the ideologically accommodating figure that Carlson seeks to dismantle. Similarly, John Fiske suggests that in contrast to aesthetic discrimination, “popular discrimination” prizes social relevance and functionality, that is, how the text can be related to everyday life. Conventional genres allow a plurality of meanings, and the popular text is read selectively, treated as a “resource bank” from which meanings are extracted as they are serviceable. In the case of A Knight’s Tale, notwithstanding the ostensible invocation of the Chaucerian text, very little is found relevant from the original with the exception of a heterosexual love interest and the spectacle of male chivalric combat. Chaucer’s Boethian romance is transformed into a rags-to-riches romance, but it is the film’s generic superficiality itself that, rather than closing down the play of meaning, provides any number of readings. Pleasure might be had in the demonstration of the powerful efficacy of male camaraderie and mentoring in overcoming social barriers. Or perhaps pleasure is derived from the violence committed against the cheating aristocrat, a representative of the dominant class who is exposed rigging the system to maintain his social domination.

Louise Fradenburg suggests that the “pietas” of academic expertise is often defined in contrast to the enjoyment associated with popular manifestations of medievalism: “But the differences between academic and popular medievalism are of course made, and sometimes are made to occlude similarities.” One could easily problematize the apparent stark difference between these two cultural products, emphasizing continuum rather than antithesis. A Knight’s Tale, for instance, both reflects Chaucerian critical tradition and has itself become an object of professional scrutiny. Helgeland’s apparently idiosyncratic construction of Chaucer’s character as a silver-tongued ne’er-do-well is not created ab ovo, unanchored from academic discourse. Helgeland represents Chaucer as outside, or above, a rigid class hierarchy, occupying a curiously ambiguous social position, equally at home penning sentiments of fin amors or participating in a farting contest. In short, he is a master of self-fashioning. This image of the poet has a long critical pedigree, dating back at least to the Renaissance when Chaucer appears to have been valued for his knowledge of courtesy, courtly love, and proper courtiership because of the attendant promise of social advantage that such knowledge might bring. Chaucer’s run-in with “Peter” the Pardoner and “Simon” the Summoner who threaten to take their Shakespearean pound of flesh for his gambling debts reflects the erstwhile critical assumption that the pilgrims are based on historical individuals (c.f., John Manly’s Some New...
And the belief that Chaucer’s biting ecclesiastical satire emanates from personal animosity might be traced to Thomas Speght (1598) who first floated the engaging anecdote of Chaucer’s “beating a Franciscane friar in Fleetstreete.” The film has also excited a surprising amount of academic attention. Considered by several professional readers to be an important contribution to medievalism and to the reception history of Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, the film has been variously read through the lens of masculinity, heteronormativity, capitalist ideology, historiography, and American myth. And the film itself enjoys a fulsome afterlife in fandom as slash, speculative fiction that develops the homoerotic subtexts and romantic possibilities left unexplored in the film (the slash “/” takes the place of the ampersand “&” conventionally used to denote lovers). In the spirit of early continuations of *The Canterbury Tales* such as John Lydgate’s *Siege of Thebes* or the anonymous *Tale of Beryn*, online contributors interpret, criticize, and rewrite Helgeland’s narrative, developing, for instance the implications of the kiss between Chaucer and Wat, or casting Laura the smithy as a more proper and appealing romantic partner for William or Chaucer (or both, at the same time).

Notwithstanding the subversive pleasures of slash, as evaluative responses to Chaucer’s poetry one would like to insist on a distinction between expertise and entertainment. But as cultural valuations of Chaucer, the distinction becomes more difficult. Gans concedes that high culture requires “formal training” and is more “comprehensive”; but he maintains that while various taste cultures are “aesthetically different,” they are nonetheless of “equal worth.” And for Fiske, the privileging of aesthetic over popular discrimination is simply part of a “disciplinary system” intended to reinforce social differences: “Aesthetics is naked cultural hegemony.” Neither denies that conceptual or descriptive differences between elite and popular culture can be made. But both argue that such differences often carry implicit evaluative judgments that are based less on defensible qualitative criteria than on an interest in asserting social dominance. From the perspective of cultural studies, the hierarchical distinction itself between Chaucer’s cultural value as determined by his professional readers and his reception in the culture at large reproduces a privileged form of intellectual/aesthetic discrimination.

Indeed, British cultural studies posits that all cultural production (and therefore cultural distinctions) reflects a negotiation of social relations involving the distribution of social power. Lawrence Grossberg suggests that cultural studies “tends to look at culture itself as the site of the production and struggle over power, where power is understood, not necessarily in the form of domination, but always as an unequal relation of forces in the interests of particular fractions of the population.” Cultural production, and the dis-
tinction among cultural products, is a medium through which a normative establishment (groups with economic, educational, or social power) seeks to exert and legitimate social privilege. Thus, one might view the academic as part of an elite intelligentsia, protecting the integrity of Chaucerian discourse against the caricatures produced by the mass media (Chaucer as a byword for farts and booze), or the misapprehension of other academic fields (for instance, the notion that subjectivity was invented in the Renaissance), or what Jonathan Brody Kramnick describes as the defense of “professional norms” against public “anti-intellectualism” and “the national skepticism about academic labor.” That is, the notion of the Arnoldian academic engaged in “the disinterested and active use of reading, reflection, and observation, in the endeavor to know the best that can be known” would simply be a mystification of other more clearly ideological or social pursuits.

Both Chaucer’s own cultural production and elite cultural status would similarly be attributed to his ideological usefulness in exerting or exercising social difference and reproducing unequal social relations. In other words, regarding the ideological value of cultural products, both the liberal pluralist critique of canon formation and cultural studies share similar assumptions about why texts or products attain cultural prominence. Canonized texts embody the ideological values of dominant groups, endorsing the existing status quo—an equilibrium that is based on exclusion. Carlson’s Marxist critique, for instance, asserts that Chaucer’s poetry worked to enforce social discipline and sustain class control. Carlson does not deny that Chaucer was “a good poet.” But what made him the father of English poetry was that he was a useful poet—by pretending in *The Canterbury Tales*, for instance, that class divisions and inequities did not exist (“and by pretending contributed something towards making it so”), or suggesting that “questioning established order unleashes anarchy,” or concluding *The Canterbury Tales* by advocating obedience to institutional religious authority, or, via his love poetry, peddling and sustaining “an aristocratic culture of vacuity” (57, 61, 74). Chaucer’s ideological usefulness presumably would be dependent upon historical context. But his continued circulation in both university and secondary educational institutions might suggest that Chaucer remains useful to dominant interests. Assuming that art fulfills a social function of legitimizing social differences, Chaucer’s abiding presence in the educational canon might be attributed to any number of ideological functions intended to reproduce “the structure of social relations, a structure of complex and ramifying inequality.” He might serve as founding “father” of a Western literary tradition, a totemic figure useful in promoting both British and Eurocentric nationalism. Perhaps it is the ostensible anomalous social identity embodied in his biography and his narrative persona that obscures continuing
socioeconomic divisions. Or, perhaps it is what Alcuin Blamires calls his strategy of “containment,” working to fulfill ideological functions not dissimilar to those Carlson describes:

Chaucer is committed to the “dominant” social view and categorically does not sympathize with political dissent. “Containment” is the key to his positioning. He seeks to divert and thereby contain the resentment of the economically underprivileged. Such deflection of resentment away from its logical target is the familiar ruse of a threatened power structure: it is the familiar impulse to contain threat by dispersing its energies among scapegoats.

Part of Chaucer’s institutional usefulness springs from the fact that his poetry remains highly amenable to contemporary critical trends (e.g., neo-Marxism, feminism, new historicism, cultural materialism). And notwithstanding the liberal pluralist critique eschewing Chaucerian aesthetics in favor of ideology, Chaucer’s high cultural status is certainly perpetuated by such high culture academic critique. But if Chaucer’s canonicity is in part a reflection of his ideological and institutional usefulness, his popular afterlife suggests an alternative ideological function, constituting a form of resistance to professional Chaucerian discourse. Culture is a site where dominant groups, those with social entitlement, seek to legitimate that power. One of the ways in which that power is perpetuated or naturalized is by the very distinction itself between high and low culture. Although it is difficult to make categorical, evaluative distinctions between high and low culture, within the broader cultural economy few of the texts that constitute Chaucer’s popular afterlife would be considered popular (i.e., commercial, accessible, inferior, widely known). But within the context of Chaucerian cultural production the popular can be defined as both in contrast to and inherently oppositional to the dominant Chaucerian discourse. In a New Yorker review of Peter Ackroyd’s retelling of The Canterbury Tales, for instance, Joan Acocella insists that the “new, dark-minded, always ironical Chaucer” recently favored by “critics” who have “wearyed of the sun-kissed Chaucer” is a gross characterization of “the freshest, clearest, and sweetest of the great English poets.” Deriding recent critical trends, Acocella goes on to praise Chaucer not only for his realism and ribaldry (“How he loves fart jokes!”) but also for his charity and tenderness: “One of the qualities that make [sic] Chaucer so lovable is that he seems to love us.” The New Yorker is not by any conventional definition a low or popular culture magazine, and this kind of professional rivalry between journalism and the academy has a long history. But Acocella’s antagonism in the wrangling over a cultural product reflects the semiotic resistance, “the power to construct meanings, pleasures, and social identities,” that Fiske sees as a hallmark of the popular: “The challenge it [popular culture] offers lies
both in *what* meanings are made and in *who* has the power and the ability to make them.”

Thus, popular Chaucerian culture can be produced (and often is) by representatives of the dominant discourse. One might consider, for instance, Brantley L. Bryant’s *Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog*, a “pop culture parody” written by a “Chaucerian persona” whose popularity struck even its professional creator as unlikely. The blog is a parody of a celebrity blog, a self-promotional media platform that can serve as an online journal, a gossip column, and as a way to connect with fans bypassing the distortions of mainstream celebrity news outlets. Written as a pleasurable break from Bryant’s own academic labor, “the blog was meant to offer a Chaucer without canonical fame, to blend specialist medieval scholarship with pop culture, and to throw the medieval and the contemporary together in a way that would inextricably link them.” Chaucer’s posts describe his daily life as a customs and court official and middle-class father, the developing plan of the *Tales*, his frequent impecuniousness, and his unabashed enthusiasm for the marvels of popular culture and modern media technologies. He monitors an advice column covering topics from unrequited love to plumbing, and sidebars provide links to electronic educational resources, professional organizations, medievalist blogs, charities, what is “Playing on My iPod,” and a “Marketplace for Myn Liverie.” Certainly one of the more engaging manifestations of Chaucer in new social media, part of the attraction derives from the participatory pleasure of interactive fiction and the intellectual pleasure of parsing the tissues of intertextualities. Currently closing in on 400,000 hits the blog can be considered a manifestation of fan culture, for Fiske “formed outside and often against official culture,” appropriating and reworking “certain values and characteristics of that official culture to which it is opposed.”

The blog is neomedievalist in its playful blurring of past and present and its tapestry of incongruous conceptual, linguistic, and temporal allusions. Modern idioms are put into mock archaic spelling (“Ich am really psychede”; “Hekke yes”) and modern vernacular is sprinkled into what Bryant modestly calls his “cod-Middle-English” (Chaucer is “sexiled” one night while “Tommy” Usk entertains the mysterious Margaret). Victimized by modern litigiousness and intellectual property rights, Chaucer is charged with plagiarizing Boccaccio. He describes a familiar fit of anti-French political sentiment preceding the naval battle at Sluys: “And thus we eten of ‘Magna Carta fries’ and ‘Magna Carta breed’” (Sept. 2006). Chaucer writes an elegy on the passing of his good friend Sir Ulrich von Lichtenstein/William Thatcher (a.k.a. Heath Ledger): “For blessed on earthe are al who had the chaunce/ To walk in the gardyn of his turbulaunce” (Nov. 2008). And his various biographical adventures are packaged in modern popular genres: he is captured by
“the drede pyrate Robertson,” whose accoutrements include a “pegge leg and a copye of the De Doctrina Christiana” (July 2006), and he and Richard II experience fear and loathing on a road trip to Las Vegas. Written for cultural omnivores, decoding the allusive parodies requires the privilege of what Jostein Gripsrud calls “double access” to both specialist knowledge and contemporary popular culture.60

The Chaucer persona, which Bryant describes as “defanged” and “a pleasurable disorientation of the canonical Chaucer,”61 reflects the privileging of authorial presence, the desire for authorial incarnation embodied in the critical tradition and prevalent in his popular corpus as well.62 Bryant’s blogger is “nice,” “congenial,” and “modest”—but not without his caustic moments and hobby-horses, including an “unmitigated hatred” for John Gower, who, besides being a sycophant and a show-off, is selfish with his cellphone minutes (March 2006).63 Much of the humor arises from the disjunction between the canonical poet, or what Thomas Prendergast describes as the “disembodied and transcendent” genius,64 and the gross corporality of the daily indignities he must suffer: catering to Richard II’s idiosyncratic whims and moods, having little Lewis prefer Gaunt’s gift of an “Exeboxe CCCLX” to his astrolabe, seeing to his wife’s demands (“Philippe ys on me aboute payntyng the porche”), or having Kalamazoo reject his paper proposal (“...the whiche ys a thynge of much ridiculousnesse, for the papere was on myn selfe! Thou woldst thynke that ich was somedeel of an expert on that subiecte” [May 2006]). In contrast with the ostensible pietas of academic labor, what Pierre Bourdieu might call the “barbarous” pleasure here is in the “continuity between art and life,” the privileging of “norms of morality or agreeableness” common to the popular aesthetic.65

The indignity of having his paper proposal rejected reflects the sense of intimacy and pattern of identification often found in fan culture. But fandom is also a form of empowerment, with pleasure derived from its opposition to or subversion of the dominant discourse of those who control the means of cultural production. Indubitably, part of the pleasure here is in the violation of professional norms. Pushing back against what Stephanie Trigg calls the suspicion “of both the metaphysics and the politics of authorial presence and readerly identification with that presence,”66 Chaucer is unashamedly constructed in the image of many of his fans—underpaid cultural omnivores and bibliophiles (“As messier John of Gaunt loueth women, so ich loue bokes: without limit or discriminacioun”) whose temporal sensibilities straddle the medieval and the modern. And in parodic contrast to the coy critical toying with Chaucer’s queerness or his quarrel with Gower, we have the overt outing of his youthful affair with the Pearl poet on “Mont Dorse-Quasse” (March 2006), and his iterative insistence that his fellow poet is a “wanker.”67
Within fan culture, the construction of posthumous celebrity is a site of contention where competing groups lay claim to the meaning of a celebrity’s legacy. As a manifestation of popular culture, the claim on a cultural product, that is, the power of constructing meaning and pleasure, represents a negotiation, albeit symbolic, of social relations and identities. But fandom is also finally an expression of both affection and ownership. As this study will attest, nonprofessionals (and perhaps a popular impulse in professionals) prefer a nice Chaucer, whose optimistic poetic vision embodies inclusivity and social comity, who professes an egalitarian spirit and affirms the promise of social opportunity, whose poetry provides a mirror on historical reality, who was politically engaged in the prominent political events of his age, and who is ready with philosophical platitudes notwithstanding his predilection for scatological humor. As such, Chaucer’s popular reception both complements and challenges a professional estimate of his cultural value. But the fact that Chaucer has a popular afterlife attests to his continued relevance as a cultural product over which groups with competing interests lay claim. His broad cultural circulation is indicative of a continued meaning making, of the amenability of his text and persona to the construction of value and the creation of pleasure. Chaucer’s canonicity finally resides in a number of cultural functions that represent a mix of competing interests and values, a negotiated mixture of meanings across a range of high and low taste cultures.