‘So Hydous was the Noyse’: Forgetting the 1381 Rebellion in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*

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Abstract

Since the medieval period, memory has been considered a site of identity formation and an important cultural force. Forgetting, on the other hand, has been dismissed because it seems impossible to study or recover what has already been forgotten. This study argues to the contrary. I focus on forgetting as a significant cultural practice, allowing the ruling classes and social institutions to perpetuate ideologies and manipulate how history is represented. In so arguing, I choose one of the most renowned events in medieval England as the subject of my study, which is the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. This Rebellion has been commemorated by many medieval authors, including Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* from *The Canterbury Tales*. In this particular tale, I contend that Chaucer uses ‘everyday’ language and description of life in a rural village to erase the memory of the turbulence and boisterousness of the Revolt. Through this narrative of everyday life, the upheaval of the Revolt is forgotten and it is reduced to a story of another barnyard commotion.

Keywords: Chaucer, *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, forgetting, the everyday, the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381

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Whatever its other aspects, the everyday has this essential trait: it allows no hold. It escapes.

(Blanchot, 1987, 14)

1. Forgetting as Cultural Practice

How can we represent something that appears to be lost from our cultural memory? How can we recover the seemingly forgotten past, when it is common to think that what is forgotten must be forever lost? If it is not lost, it would be a memory. In his *Confessions,* Saint Augustine struggles over this problem as he claims that forgetting is at once the "absence of memory" and simultaneously (perhaps more paradoxically) something to be remembered (Ivic and Williams 2004, 1). However, Augustine's agony would be solved if he did not assume forgetting to be a dispossession and deprivation, while memory was perceived to be an all-fulfilling field for human, or in his words "a vast, immeasurable sanctuary" (Augustine 1998 as cited in Ivic and Williams 2004, 1). In writing his long treatise on the pilgrimage to Canterbury, later known as *The Canterbury Tales,* Geoffrey Chaucer offers a solace to Augustine's bafflement that there is much more to forgetting and much less to memory than it seems.

Several medieval literary critics and historians have long observed Chaucerian remembrance of the 1381 Peasant's Revolt. Most of these scholars tend to be 'surprised' that Chaucer, who was 'on the threshold of the most prolific part of his career as a poet' in 1381, mentions the insurrection only once (Dobson 1970, 386) in the account of the fox chase at the end of *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. A historian and specialist of the 1381 Revolt, Richard Dobson expresses his astonishment further that the poet might even live in London during the turbulent days of June 1381, possibly in the apartment over the gate of Aldgate which he leased from the city corporation between 1374 and 1386. Yet Chaucer only referred to the experience of witnessing the rebellion once in the chasing scene in his 'murie tale of Chauntecleer' (Dobson 1970, 386), where the cacophony of the peasants pursuing the rooster-stealing fox (Chaucer 1997 255, lines 3389-3397) is said to exceed the shouting of Jack Straw, one of the leaders of the Revolt, and his followers as they set about killing the Flemish merchants:[2]

So hydous was the noyse – a, benedictee!
Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee
Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille
What that they wolden any Flemyng kille,
A thilke day was maad upon the fox.
(Chaucer 1997, 255)

Critical opinion is divided on the precise connotation of this passage, but it is frequently noted that the chase reproduces the key features of the representations of the 1381 rebels found in other

[2]John Ganim (1990), suggests that there might be an allusion to Jack Strawe in *Troilus and Criseyde,* IV. 184-185: 'The noyse of peple up stirte thanne at ones, / As breme as blasé of strawe iset on-fire'. Jay Stephen Russell (1995) sees allusion to the revolt in *The House of Fame*, II. 935-949.

contemporary accounts: the noise, boisterousness, mayhem, and the associating of humanity and bestiality, which had characterized the depictions of the uprising in the contemporary chronicles and John Gower's *Vox clamantis.*[3] The latter work is known for the way in which Gower represents the rebels as raucous animals refusing to obey their human masters.

In addition to the Nun's Priest's direct mention of the event, other critics have constantly argued for further possible connections between some of the other pilgrims and the Peasants' Revolt. In *The Knight's Tale,* the cruel god Saturn claims that one of his effects on human life is "the murmure and the cherles rebellyng" (Chaucer 1997), and critics have sometimes associated several tales with the Revolt. Alfred David (1976) refers to *The Miller's Tale* as "a literary Peasants Rebellion" (92). In his pivotal study on literacy and the medieval insurgence *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381,* Steven Justice (1994) points out the geographical and other similarities between the Revolt (specifically Richard II's failure to grant a requested audience to the peasant at Greenwich) and Chaucer's description of the argument among the Miller, the Reeve, and the Host in *The Reeve's Prologue* (Chaucer 1997, 66-67). Justice (1994) provocatively asks: "What are we to do with these lines? The situation – Greenwich; an angry peasant; a king (an innkeeper speaking as lordly as one); a failed intervention; violence in consequence – almost invites recollection of that crucial moment from which the violence in London flowed (255). For Justice (1994), however, Chaucer controlled these potential remembrances of the Revolt by replacing political action with personal conflicts (225-231).

Correspondingly, Lee Patterson (1991) reads a group of tales known as Fragment I (*The General Prologue, The Knight's Tale, The Miller's Tale, The Reeve's Tale,* and *The Cook's Tale)* as a whole in terms of consecutive rebellions that should be understood with allusions to the Revolt, and concludes that the "Cook's rebelliousness, and the rebelliousness per se, stand for all that must be annulled if the *Canterbury Tales* is to be brought to its appointed and orthodox conclusion" (Patterson 1991, 279). On the other hand, Paul Strohm (1992) discovers a more positive value in the Miller's rebellion against the Host's authority: "restated in terms of style," it dialectically allows "the incorporation of the challenger into the resultant new order" rather than functioning merely as the suppression of rebellion (153-154). Beyond the renowned Fragment I, Susan Crane (1992) draws a connection between the Revolt and the Wife of Bath in terms of gender. She argues that the analogies between the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and the 1381 Uprising are so striking as to deserve commentary. Not only was it plausible that the Revolt might have included women, Alisoun of Bath also shares with the rebels her inferior status, exclusion from literate circles, a sense of undervaluation by the powerful, and consequent hostility to writing as the instrument of these interrelated oppressions (Crane 1992, 215). Furthermore, Alisoun's yearning for 'sovereynetee' in marriage may register her desire to be liberated from social oppression.

While these studies offer numerous ingenious possibilities to connect Chaucerian imagination with the Revolt, what seems more surprising to me than Chaucer's sole direct reference to the event is their tendency to pay more attention to the ways in which Chaucer remembers the Revolt than his

[3] Ian Bishop (1979) suggests that Chaucer mocks Gower's account of the revolt; and Steven Justice argues that Chaucer is writing for his own circle, with satirical criticism of Gower, see more in *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381,* 211-218 (Justice 1994). Other critics who draw parallels between the characteristics of Chaucer's fox chase and contemporary accounts of the revolt include: Lillian M. Bisson (1998, 157-158), Richard W. Fehrenbacher (1994), Larry Scanlon (1989), and Peter W. Travis (1998).

deliberate act of forgetting. The discourse shared amongst these critics concerns with the recovery of the forgotten. They tend to focus on how to recover what Peter Burke (1997) calls "social amnesia," that is, the official and unofficial acts of censoring the past (56-59). As a result, most critics attempt to read between the lines in order to rescue what had been marginalized, subjugated, and silenced within Chaucer's texts. Simply put, they seek to fill in history's gap, to discover how this traumatic Revolt was remembered by Chaucer, and how it was preserved in multiple forms and voices. Under such anticipation of recuperating the past, forgetting appears to be violent, a negative cultural power secondary to memory. It stands in the opposite of remembrance, which is considered to hold liberating force. If Chaucer participated in the process of forgetting, it might imply that he was in the same boat with those officials and chroniclers who struggled hard to write off or forget the Revolt through their systematic manipulation of memory. Along with Thomas Walsingham, a monk of St. Albans and a renowned medieval English chronicler, who tried to remember the rebels as "yokel interlopers, as shifty manipulators of traditional oaths and understandings" (Strohm 1992, 34), Chaucer, according to those who favor the resurrection of memory, also equated the entire Uprising with animal chasing in the rural barnyard.

This study seeks to intervene such interpretations of Chaucerian remembrance. I argue that while it is imperative to uncover how the traumatic event was remembered, it is also crucial to focus on the process of forgetting that Chaucer utilized in composing his text. Following Ivic and Williams (2004), even though forgetting is often viewed as "traumatic for social agents," (3) especially when it comes to history and narratives involving the marginalized and the disenfranchised, forgetting also "performs vital and complex cultural work, at times ideologically suspect, at other moment subversive, yet not restricted to a single political valence" (Ivic and Williams 2004, 3). In other words, forgetting also has its own multifaceted functions in the constructions of cultural world and collective identities. That said, we can better understand each culture by looking at how and what people collectively choose to forget. This is because forgetting is not simply there to impede remembrance, but it is "very much the silent yet active partner of memory in social sphere" (Ivic and Williams 2004, 3). To this I agree. What I intend to do in this study is therefore to uncover *how* Chaucer attempted to forget the 1381 Rebellion, especially in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. By *how,* here I mean specifically the practice that he utilized to make his audience become oblivious to the notorious event and blatant social oppression.

I choose to focus on *The Nun's Priest's Tale* because it is the only Chaucerian text that explicitly mentions the 1381 Revolt, albeit very briefly. Such direct reference is particularly intriguing as it shows that Chaucer did indeed remember the Rebellion to the point that he deliberately compares the barnyard commotion near the end of the *Tale* with the noise that occurred when rebels, led by 'Jakke Straw,' killed the Flemish inhabitants in London. Such remembrance contrasts sharply with the absence of other allusion to the 1381 Revolt. It seems that his overt reference suddenly comes out of the blue. Then it disappears, not to be heard of again as the *Tale* comes to the end. I contend here that such anomalous presence and questionable absence is the interplay between forgetting and remembering. While the Rebellion was explicitly remembered, it was also systematically forgotten through Chaucerian description of what is known today in critical theory parlance as the 'everyday' practice. In so doing, forgetting comes *vis-à-vis* with remembering. It mediates the process of storytelling and helps the teller

of the tale to achieve his goal in the end: to narrate a farcical story about the chicken and the fox in order to win the story-telling competition set up amongst the group of pilgrims to Canterbury.

Before we get to the reading of Chaucerian forgetting in *The Nun's Priest's Tale,* it is worth taking a closer look at how the 1381 Revolt might affect Chaucer. It should be noted that the insurgents directed their revolt not against King Richard II, whom they often identified themselves with, but rather against his advisors, primarily his hated regent, the powerful Duke of Lancaster. This Duke of Lancaster is better known to Chaucerian readers as John of Gaunt. He had been Chaucer's official patron throughout much of his poetic career. As Gerald Morgan states, Chaucer began to fulfill his training and education at court in the ways of the best French poetry by writing in 1368 a poem celebrating the life of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, the daughter of Henry of Grosmont and first wife of John of Gaunt. He also had an investment in political institutions, notably in his capacity during the late 1380s as a justice of peace in Kent, with a particular responsibility for enforcing labor legislation.

Therefore, it is unlikely for Chaucer to have viewed the destruction of the Savoy (the palace of John of Gaunt and formerly the ancestral home of Blanche herself) by the rebels in 1381 with anything other than sadness and apprehension, and something of his disfavor is echoed in his reference to "the cherles rebellyng" as part of the damaging influence of Saturn in worldly affairs (I 2459) (Morgan 2003, 286). John of Gaunt's particular patronage and Chaucer's personal association with the contemporary political matters at a relatively high level might be used to explain the poet's participation in silencing the voice of the oppressed, by employing a broad range of strategies designed to supplant the social standings, judgment, and objectives of the rebels at every level of representation. Alcuin Blamires (2000) decisively concludes that Chaucer is "committed" to the dominant social view and "categorically does not sympathize with political dissent" (524). This can be seen from the way in which the Rebellion is mentioned directly only once in his entire oeuvre. It seems as if Chaucer attempted to forget it himself while also participating in the collective process of making his contemporary audience forget about the Rebellion. Such collective forgetting would in turn lead to the erasure of the rebels' voice. However, as noted above, forgetting is indeed a complex process, as it "performs vital and complex cultural work, at times ideologically suspect, at other moment subversive, yet not restricted to a single political valence" (Ivic and Williams 2004, 3). There might be more to Chaucerian forgetting than meet the eye. This is because forgetting is not simply there to impede remembrance, but it is "very much the silent yet active partner of memory in social sphere" (Ivic and Williams 2004, 3). Such implication of forgetting can be best illustrated through the revised version of *Imagined Communities,* when Benedict Anderson interprets the work of the 19th century French theological scholar and historian Ernest Renan.

In his newly added chapter entitled "Memory and Forgetting," Anderson is intrigued by Renan's famous statement that forgetting is "crucial to the creation of a nation" (Renan 1990 as cited in Ivic 2004, 99), since "the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also they have forgotten many things" (Renan 1990 as cited in Ivic 2004, 99). Anderson remarks that what strikes him most in Renan's declaration is the "peremptory syntax of *doit avoir oublie* ('obliged already to have forgotten'), which 'suggests that "already having forgotten" ancient tragedies are a prime contemporary civic duty" (Ivic 2004, 99). Furthermore, Anderson is enthralled by Renan's assertion that his readers 'have already forgotten' certain matters that Renan clearly assumes they remember. Despite of its obvious ambiguity, his statement shows that Renan is interested in something beyond simple

memory lapse. Anderson explains that it is "precisely the need for forgetting that occupied him" (Renan 1990 as cited in Ivic 2004, 99).

What Anderson uncovers from Renan's ostensibly paradoxical account is a critical element in the "construction of national genealogies" (Ivic 2004, 99-100). Christopher Ivic (2004) further explains that such construction registers that the collective (or national) acts of remembering are inextricably intertwined with collective acts of forgetting (~~2004,~~ 100). The latter exists not only in relation with but also in fully dialectical terms with the former. That being said, while remembering requires forgetting in order to postulate its identities and sustain its illusions of being all-encompassing, remembering also conjures up – or maybe even creates new memory. Then, forgetting / memory dialectic is precisely not 'static' but actually effervescent, in that both memory and forgetting are constantly sustained by one another and adjusted by one another in their inter-productivity (Ivic 2004, 100). Ivic thus claims forgetting is more bound up with memory than obstructing it. Anderson's frequent use of 'remember / forget' and 'remembered / forgotten' perturbs traditional formulations that demarcate memory and forgetting along the lines of remembering and not remembering, thereby reconstruct forgetting as a formative force in the production of history and culture (Ivic 2004, 100).

2. The Revolt of 1381

At this point, it should be noted that Anderson's elaboration on how memory and forgetting perform their cultural roles in the construction of collective identities focuses primarily on the world after the Enlightenment (Anderson 1991, 2). His cases in point include the 19th century France, the 20th century Spain and Southeast Asia. This is because his treatise concentrates mainly on nations and nationalism. For Anderson, nationalism began only after when the masses were capable of reading and accessing printed materials (his favorite example is newspaper). While the question of whence the nation starts is beyond the scope of this study, I find myself agree with Ivic here that such restriction leads Anderson to critically overlooks the ways in which cultural forgetting was practiced in earlier periods (Ivic 2004, 100). Likewise, it seems that many critics of these periods also fail to notice the implication of forgetting as a formative force in the production of history and culture. When it comes to the interpretations of Chaucer and the 1381 Peasants' Revolt, literary critics and historians seem to be unable to move beyond what historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) has called the 'storage model of memory-history', whereby the past is just 'there' to be regained through the act of hermeneutics interpretation (14-15). Then, this study intends to fill the lacunae in the discourse of forgetting in Chaucerian studies, since it is quite remarkable that Chaucer's practice of cultural forgetting does not simply erase historical events and information. Instead, it is a conscious process of disassociation from the traumatic past, engaged in for the purpose of constructing new history to confront with his present. This history involves the reconstruction of a new peasant imagery for social institutions to commemorate. Such imagery and its function will be explored in the later portion of this study.

The 1381 Peasants' Revolt was indeed the traumatic historical event that many late medieval English texts – whether chronicles, poems, and plays – struggle to erase from collective memory. As Richard Dobson (1970) perceptively suggests, nearly everything written by contemporaries about the

Revolt was exclusively done by their "enemies" (3). Social unrest against the 1381 poll tax (a tax which was seen as excessive, inequitable in that it taxed many people whose poverty had hitherto exempted them from charge, and incompletely administered) was probably the immediate incentive, especially since it was the culmination of several years of increasing taxation (Hilton 1975, 146; Dobson 1970, xxxiv-xxxvi). But there were also longer standing animosity between the rulers and the ruled. Such hostility can be seen from the complaints issued against the authority. These complaints involve the revulsion for the pointless and expensive war pursued in France (Dyer 1984, 37); fear that the bad regulation of Edward III's last years would be carried on or made worse since Richard II ascended to the throne as a minor; objection to the ongoing endeavors by landlords to enforce old restrictions and obligations on laborers (Dyer 1984, 19-36). The hostility that was shown to apostolic property-owners, such as the Benedictine abbey at St. Alban's, seems to have been exacerbated by the high proportion of the land in southeastern England that was owned by such holders (Hilton 1975, 167-168). Beyond these pressing and immediate economic reasons, there seems also to have been an element of more idealistic radicalism: a desire for freedom from lordship, except that of the king, as they saw the monarchy as surpassing individuals and classes (Hilton 1975, 245) and a demand for social equality (Prescott 1981, 138). Hilton (1975) summarized the political ideal of the 1381 peasants as a "popular monarchy, a state without nobles, perhaps without churchmen, in which the peasants and their kings are the only social forces" (15). Such principle of equality and freedom from bondage was expounded very forcibly in a sermon given by the rebel leader John Ball, who is described by authorities as an 'insane' priest from a minor order. The famous chronicler Thomas Walsingham states that Ball preached this sermon at Blackheath on the text of a proverb: "Whan Adam dalf and Eve span/ Wo was thanne a gentilman?" (Dobson 1970, 370). This verse was found written in Latin as well as in several vernacular languages, although it appears to have become a proverbial statement only in the late Middle Ages (Justice 1994, 14-23, 102-19) Ball's appropriation and utilization of the proverb in his sermon registers that the rebels demanded more from the ruling classes than simply immediate economic needs. They also wanted ideological reform. They asked for the fundamental equality of all people. They then argued against the 'unnatural' practice of servitude, and the concavity of claims for innate nobility.

What happened exactly during this notorious medieval English insurgency? According to the survived archival evidence, even though the event started in the southern countryside and several main activities occurred in the rural areas, most accounts of the Revolt primarily focus on what happened in London. Essex was a major scene of unrest but the most explosive phenomenon took place in Kent, where the rebels established their headquarter in Maidstone and Canterbury. The rebels behaved, according to *The Westminster Chronicle,* "like the maddest of mad dogs" (Hector and Harvey 1982, 3). It should be noted here that while the rising is widely referred to as the Peasants' Revolt, historians have long recognized that the rebels consisted not only of peasants, but also the 'lower social rung,' included 'craftsmen, guildsmen, laborers, and farmers,' as well as lower clerics and several millers (Prescott 1981, 132-133). Following *The Westminster Chronicle,* on the tenth of June, 1381, a large troop probably led by Wat Tyler entered the Canterbury Cathedral searching for Archbishop Sudbury, destroyed legal and manorial documents and insisted that the people support only "kynge Richarded" and "the trew communes," since "they held themselves out as champions of the king and the welfare of the kingdom against those who were betraying them" (Hector and Harvey 1982, 3).

Amongst the greatest betrayals of their imagined community were the Archbishop Sudbury and John of Gaunt, the latter was King's regent and Chaucer's royal patronage. They perceived the Archbishop to be the traitor to the true religion and John of Gaunt as the corrupted ruling figure who also attempted to pollute the mind of Richard II. The Archbishop's manor was plundered and destroyed, while the rebels, "as if applauding a praiseworthy accomplishment," were exclaiming "A revelle! A revelle!" (Strohm 1992, 36) Later, the Archbishop was captured and beheaded by the rebels at the Tower of London. John of Gaunt was more fortunate that only his palace in the countryside was destroyed, as he timely escaped from the scene.

After creating many disturbances in remote areas for many weeks, the rebels, led by those whom the chroniclers and historians remembered as "Wat Tylet, Jack Straw, and John Ball," began to converge outside of London, looking to directly negotiate with the monarch. Once they entered the city, the rebels received much supports from the urban craftsmen and guildsmen, who had aided their entrance by insisting on lowering the London Bridge. Then, they became increasingly violent. Their anger focused on the persons and properties of those whom they considered to be the privileged class: lawyers, clergymen, civil servants. Another group that fell the victim to their destructive outburst were the Flemings, a foreign minority. Such devastation forced Richard II to meet with the rebels, in order to hear their complaints and negotiate with them. It turned out that the meeting with the monarch and the aristocrats brought the end to the Revolt, as the mayor of London was able to kill Wat Tyler. When their leader was slain, Richard II offered himself as their sole leader. *The Westminster Chronicle* recounts that the young king led the commons to a nearby open field and said to them sweetly "I am your king, your leader, your captain, and those of you loyal to me are to go at once into the open field" (Hector and Harvey 1982, 12). Jean Froissart, a French-speaking court historian contemporaneous with Chaucer recorded that the king's words "appeased well the common people" (Dobson 192). The rebels were persuaded by the monarch whom they perceived as being exploited by the nobles (which, ironically, were the king's relatives and aides). They followed Richard II to Smithfield, where they were disbanded and unarmed. Later, according to Froissart, John Ball and Jack Straw who timely fled from the field were captured and executed, their heads displayed on London Bridge (Dobson 198).

3. Chaucer: Forgetting and the Everyday

What seems to be Chaucer's most obvious and only remembrance of the Revolt in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is intertwined closely with forgetting. This is seen from the way in which the Nun's Priest, the obscure character whom we know almost nothing about, begins his tale with the detailed description of the 'everyday' life of the poor, aged, peasant woman:

A povre wydwe, somdeel stape in age,
Was whilom dwellyng in a narwe cotage,
Biside a grove, stondynge in a dale.
This wydwe,of which I telle yow my tale,
Syn thilke day that she was last a wyf

In patience ladde a ful symple lyf,
For litel was hir catel and hir rente.
By housbondrie of swich as God hire sente
She foond hirself and eek hir doghtren two.
Thre large sowes hadde she, and namo,
Three keen, and eek a sheep that highte Malle.
Ful sooty was hire bour and eek hir halle,
In which she eet ful many a sklendre meel.
Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel.
No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte;
Hir diete was accordant to hir cote.
Repleccioun ne made hire nevere sik;
Attempree diete was al hir phisik,
And exercise, and hertes suffisaunce.
The goute lette hire nothyng for to daunce,
N'apoplexie shente nat hir heed.
No wyn ne drank she, neither whit ne reed;
Hir bord was served moost with whit and blak –
Milk and broun breed, in which she foond no lak,
Seynd bacoun, and somtyme an ey or tweye,
For she was, as it were, a maner deye.
(Chaucer 1997, 253)

At a glance, this long description of the aging widow seems quite trivial. Her identity was obscured or too insignificant to be mentioned. She lives in a tiny cottage, has a very small income, and only a few belongings. She also supports herself in difficult circumstances. It seems that she attempts to make the best out of her situation: she tries to support herself in reduced circumstance, she maintains her barnyard quite effectively by enclosing it with sticks and a dry ditch (Chaucer 1997, 255, lines 2847-2848), she plants herbs in the barnyard (Chaucer 1997, 255, lines 2963-2966), and she even keeps bees (Chaucer 1997, 255, lines 3391). Such portrayal may be regarded as an admiration of the virtues of Christian patience, humility, and contentment with a simple life. Fehrenbacher (1994) argues that the rhetorical style of this passage is utilized "in an attempt to efface both the social inequities the tale threatens to bring to light as well as the 'pastoral' voice capable of articulating these concerns" (139). While I tend to agree with him that this passage contributes to the obliteration of social concerns, I perceive Chaucer's long and detailed description of the "everyday" life of this old widow quite differently from Fehrenbacher. At least, Chaucer's (or the Nun's Priest's) obsession with the widow's diet and her routine chores as a practice of the everyday seems to suggest otherwise. It is obvious that the teller of this tale chooses to utilize several simple and banal dictions when it comes to the widow's diet and daily tasks. Words such as "sklendre meel," "bord," "Milk and broun breed" all provide quite a repetitive metrical rhythm of everyday life. Such monotonous rhythm of the poor woman's everyday life functions to lead the medieval audience from the traumatic memory of the Peasants' Rebellion to meet the humble widow who dwells in peaceful poverty.

However, such "peaceful poverty" is quite questionable. Considering that this widow lives off the land in the countryside, makes a living mostly through her meticulous management of husbandry. It is therefore obvious that she is a peasant. Yet the tale introduces her using the rhythmic practice of the everyday to the audience, so that they may forget the fact that this exemplary widow might be one of the 'peasants' that the audience (most likely to be aristocrats and urban-dwellers) might have encounter with hatred and fear during the 1381 Revolt. It is thus crucial to explicate why I perceive the concept of the trivial 'everyday' as beneficial to interpret Chaucer's description of the widow, as I contend that it is the practice used by the author to initiate the process of forgetting. The everyday, as a concept formulated by (post)modern thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel de Certeau, involves not only normative regularity but also the figure of the repetitive compulsion. According to Henri Lefebvre (1984), the everyday ("*la vie quotidienne*") suggests the ordinary, the banal, but more importantly, it connotes continual recurrence, insistent repetition (18). Defined both by what it excludes as extraordinary and other, and by its necessary recurrence – by what is enacted rhythmically and regularly – the everyday is, essentially, a practice of oblivion. That is, it obscures whatever is not reiterated in representational practice. In that sense, the everyday is much similar to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus*: a mediating system that both structures experience and practices and is itself structured by practices. As Bourdieu (1977) suggests, since the imperatives of the *habitus* appear ordinary and inevitable because their historical exigency has been forgotten, reproduced in the unconscious, the particular and the exceptional is doubly repressed and forgotten (78).[4] The obligation to repeat is also the coercion to split the exceptional (i.e. the traumatic Peasants' Revolt) from the simple, to suppress the particular instances that challenge the totalizing force of the everyday. As Martin Heidegger (1972) points out, the practice of the everyday requires that something must 'withdraw' and be 'forgotten' in order to be produced habitually (2).

Reading the representation of the everyday in the context of 1381 Rebellion, the quiet and monotonous life of the widow marks a stark contrast from the lives of those 'murderous' and 'troublesome' peasants who marched from Kent and Essex, demanding to meet in order to negotiate with Richard II in London. Indeed, such description of her meagre living obviously reveals social inequality, especially if the audience happens to compare her life with those of the aristocratic characters in *The Knight's Tale*. However, for Chaucerian audience in late medieval England who were primarily from the aristocratic circle, the monotony of the widow's everyday life might function to ease their minds. It took them away from recent memory of the boisterous revolt and introduced them to the exemplary peasant. It made them forget that there still were angry peasants whom their demands had not been answered residing out there in the countryside, waiting for a chance to strike another rebellion. Moreover, such portrayal of the widow also performs another ideological task: it creates an idealized peasant for the society to commemorate. It shows that there is a 'good' and humble peasant who is satisfied with what is given to them and tries to make the best out of the land regardless of her

[4] "It is the habitus, history turned into nature, i.e. denied as such, which accomplishes practically the relating of structure and conjuncture in and through the production of practice. The 'unconscious' is never anything other than the forgetting of history which history itself produces…" (Bourdieu 1977, 78)

poverty. In other words, it contributes to the construction of an 'imagined community' of the idyllic rural England that has been much cherished in pastoral and georgic literature of the later period.

Nevertheless, as most medieval aristocrats and landowners already knew from their experiences of the recent insurgency and other complaints, the countryside was not the place that they could fully trust. Beneath the idyllic surface there always lurked the awareness that rural England could be quite dangerous. As the Nun's Priest continues his tale to the story of Chauntecleer, an oversexed rooster in the barnyard who suddenly has a nightmare that he will be killed. Nevertheless, Chauntecleer's nightmare quickly subsides when the everyday returns to the barnyard. Walking around after recounting his dream to Pertelote, his favorite 'wife,' Chauntecleer finds his daily feedstuff and becomes 'namoore aferd' to the point that he is able to 'fethered pertelote twenty tyme.' It is the return of the everyday in his consuming of food and in the insatiable repetitiveness of Chauntecleer's sexual desire that makes him forget his own prophetic dream:

For he hadde founde a corn, lay in the yerd.
Real he was, he was namoore aferd.
He fethered pertelote twenty tyme,
And trad hire eke as ofte, er it was pryme.
He looketh as it were a grym leoun,
And on his toos he romeths up and doun;
Hym deigned nat to sette his foot to grounde.
He chukketh whan he hath a corn yfounde,
And to hym rennen thanne his wyves alle.
(Chaucer 1997, 258, lines 3175-3183)

In this passage, the banality of the everyday contributes to the forgetting of both the actual social tension and the fictional potential danger that threatens to kill Chauntecleer. It also helps the medieval audience to forget the traumatic memory of the violent, 'insane,' murderous 'peasants' of the 1381 Uprising and to re-remember both the ideal widowed peasant and the seemingly normal barnyard where Chauntecleer and his ladies happily dwell. The strategic intervention and representation of the everyday in this tale thus trivializes and dehistoricizes the peasant's actuality of fourteenth century England, draining it of social currency, erasing it from the cultural and political memory of the era.

After providing the audience with the banality of the everyday, the narrator abruptly shifts the tale's setting from a peasant's farm to a chicken's "yeerd…enclosed al aboute." Such transformation further contributes to the forgetting of the social reality. Indeed, as Ann W. Astell (1999) argues, it is possible that Chauntecleer the chicken and his wives may be read as political allegory concerning Richard II's superciliousness, since Chauntecleer's brilliant appearance bears much more resemblance to humankind than any normal chicken (30). Nevertheless, I argue that while I appreciate the attempt to connect the chicken with the monarch, the representation of Chauntecleer also draws the reader's attention from the pathetic world of the poor widow, from the everyday life of the peasant to the imaginary world of the animals, to the everyday life of the chickens. The audience is thus twice removed from the memory of the historical, as the tale's retreat from history is so powerfully ratified that it abandons not only England, but the entire world of humanity. For the next five hundred lines, the tale

involves a land of chickens and other barnyard animals – a place so utterly removed from the social and historical that it no longer purports to reflect social reality and memory.

However, as stated above, there lurks certain danger in the countryside regardless of how peaceful it seems to be. In the tale's last 100 lines, the repressed memory of the 1381 Revolt returns with a vengeance: the fox captures Chauntecleer, the poor widow and her daughters hasten to the rescue, and the historical world makes a brief but spectacular intervention in Chaucerian remembrance through the murderous and mysterious figure of Jack Straw. However, such recollection is not as persistent as the representation of the widow's everyday life. The narrator immediately moves from the brief reminiscence of the Revolt to the banal beast fable, as Chauntecleer tricks the fox into releasing him. Then, the Nun's Priest ends his narrative with trivial preaching rhetoric, which, again, encourages his audience to forget his pithy remembrance of the 1381 Revolt:

> But ye that holden this tale a folye,
> As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,
> Taketh the moralite, goode men.
> For seint paul seith that al that writen is,
> To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
> Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.
> Now, goode god, if that it be thy wille,
> As seith my lord, so make us alle goode men,
> And brynge us to his heighe blisse! amen.
> (Chaucer, 1997, 261, lines 3438-3446)

As Larry Scanlon (1989) observes, such ending "simply invites the reader to submit the tale to the procedures of Christian exegesis" (49), but it also allows the narrator and his audience to escape the historical memory by offering a conservative, culturally sanctioned mode of transcendental interpretation. The tale thus removes us thrice from the memory of the Revolt: first time to the banality of the everyday, second to the realm of barnyard animals, and this third time to the transcendental Christian charity unsullied by temporal concerns. It seems that for Chaucer (and the Nun's Priest), forgetting is permanent and necessary to social stability, while remembrance tends to be ephemeral, disruptive, and perilous.

4. Conclusion

Mary Carruthers (2008) simply states in her pivotal study, *The Book of Memory,* that the ancient and medieval writers "supposed that human memories were by nature imperfect" (X). To the Post-Enlightenment mind, forgetting is regarded as a failure of knowledge, however ordinary a failure it may be. Yet to have forgotten something was perceived in medieval culture as a necessary condition for remembering others. As I have shown throughout the essay, forgetting for Chaucer is essential to constructing the art of narrative and memory. As the master of storytelling, Chaucer deliberately utilized

several techniques to facilitate the process of forgetting. While I cannot say with certainty that this is Chaucer's intention, the result is quite obvious. His readers, whether medieval or postmodern, remain in the blissful oblivion about the whole event of the Revolt. Some might feel the present absence of it, but we cannot really recapture the moment. Chaucer's 'Engelond' is almost cleansed from the memory of the Revolt through the Lethean power of forgetting. However, he also reminds us that the much-desired stability is not quite there yet, as there are still several fraudulent figures (such as the fox) to deal with.

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