CHAPTER 3

THE RUNAWAY GODS OF THE
MANCIPLE’S TALE

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t the Pardoner’s Tale and Miller’s Tale tell stories that kick God out of the world, the Manciple’s Tale tells a story that kicks God out of heaven. “It is significant,” writes Marijane Osborne, “that the tale features a euhemerized Apollo, his deity almost entirely suppressed.”¹ Put simply: In the first two stories, the men try to become like gods. The Old Man would defy death. First in the bed of Eos and centuries later by killing Death and making sure the Fall stays put, that nothing comes to replace it. The Miller’s narrators attempt, to use Strohm’s words, an “unfettered attack on all forms of transcendence,”² and pool their resources in order to collapse the universe into a single empty signifier. Both poetic worlds try to mean more than they can and they destroy each other, either one drunk at a time or one “poure scoler” at a time. The Manciple’s Tale is an opposite movement for similar ends. The gods try to become like men.

Insofar as it recounts the jailbreak of a promiscuous and pagan Phoebus, the gimmicky bedsheets rope was furnished by a promiscuous and pagan tendency in the medieval mind. Édouard Jeaneau writes, “according to William of Conches, the ladder of Jacob was nothing other than the golden chain mentioned by Zeus, father of the gods, in Homer’s Iliad.”³ In her discussion of the Knight’s Tale, Ann Astel observes in Chaucer the same, for lack of a better phrase, ‘ecumenical broadmindedness’ on the topic of poetic eternity. “Starting at Saturn’s height, Chaucer does not conclude a pattern of ascent, but rather initiates a pattern of descent. Whereas Dante’s Paradiso uses Jacob’s Ladder as an emblem of the monastic saints climbing up scala perfectionis… Chaucer introduces the Neoplatonic “faire cheyne of love” (I.2988) as an emblem for the order of being, ‘descendynge so til it be corrumpable’ (I.3010).”⁴ I happen to believe we shouldn’t attach too much importance to the difference between moving down or up when

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both take place on the same imaginary Golden Ladder and “bele chaene doree”\(^5\) that connects heaven to earth vertically and classical paganism to medieval Christianity horizontally. Where two poets admit the reasonableness of such a ladder I see a difference in temperament and not metaphysics. In the *Manciple’s Tale*, the major significance in the idea of art “descendynge” the magical ladder and “faire cheyne of love” “so til it be corrumpable” is indeed metaphysical. Here too it repurposes rather than refutes the enquiries of an Italian poet. Jamie C. Fumo describes it as “Apollo’s ontological degeneration from god to man to beast.”\(^6\) “The golden chain of Homer” writes Macrobius, is one that “God ordered to hang down from the sky to the earth… even to the bottommost dregs of the universe,” with reflected images “degenerating step by step in their downward course.”\(^7\) Earlier I called it a “pulp romance.” To a certain extent, that’s what it is – a short story about a guy with a sidekick who falls in love with the wrong girl. Sidekick tells him she’s a cheating dame; guy shoots her dead; never speaks to the sidekick again. Where it deviates from pulp it borders on science fiction. Because it turns out the ‘guy and his sidekick’ are from outer space.

It may be part of the reason why the poem has never been the darling of Chaucerian criticism. F.N.M. Diekstra writes, “I am not going to argue that it is one of Chaucer’s more brilliant tales. It is not. It is obviously a lightweight thing.”\(^8\) “As a narrative,” Fumo argues, “the Manciple’s Tale is hardly compelling. As a fabliau, it is profoundly unfunny.”\(^9\) Derek Pearsall strikes a diplomatic tone: “The *Manciple’s Tale* is in many respects a peculiar performance.”\(^10\) It’s not an operatic poem, at first glance. There’s no Flood coming to ravage it. It is a minimalistic history of the gods and its minimalism is almost scientific in effect. And perhaps it is scientific. For Augustine, literature is the “scientific knowledge” of falsehood\(^11\) and Chaucer’s poem is about a bird that tells a truth that isn’t true. Even so, narrative minimalism is an unusual literary conduit for this mode of literary epistemology. Plato, Cicero, Ovid, Horace, Alain de Lille, none of the great marble busts of the school were writing haikus. The clipped diction is especially unusual here, in a poem that serves as a spiritual sequel to the *Metamorphoses*, one that self-consciously invokes classical linguistic traditions, and one that parades the famous Platonic aphorism from the *General Prologue* for an encore. The poem is episodic because it’s a series of flashbacks. Like us, it remembers its childhood by montage. Unlike us, its childhood was thousands of years ago. The *Manciple’s Tale* only seems small because it comes at the end rather than the beginning of a very long story. I think a more helpful starting point is Loren C. Gruber’s position: “The *Manciple’s Tale*… seems for the most part to either have been little appreciated or but partially understood.”\(^12\)