Horse-Riding Storytellers and Distributed Cognition in Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales"

BOLENS, Guillemette


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Minding¹

In a lecture titled ‘The real reason for brains’, neuroscientist Daniel Wolpert (2011) states that

We have a brain for one reason and one reason only, and that’s to produce adaptable and complex movements. There is no other reason to have a brain. Think about it. Movement is the only way you have of affecting the world around you. Now, that’s not quite true. There’s one other way, and that’s through sweating. But apart from that, everything else goes through contractions of muscles. Think about communication – speech, gestures, writing, sign languages – they’re all mediated through contractions of your muscles. So it’s really important to remember that sensory, memory and cognitive processes are all important, but they’re only important to either drive or suppress future movements.

Biological organisms have a neurological system topped by a brain when their survival depends on their capacity to move autonomously.² Typically, trees don’t have a brain. If the brain is for movement, then the perspectives of embodied,

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² Wolpert (2011) gives the example of the sea squirt (*Ascidacea*): ‘[A] rudimentary animal, has a nervous system, swims around in the ocean in its juvenile life. And at some point of its life, it implants on a rock. And the first thing it does in implanting on that rock, which it never leaves, is to digest its own brain and nervous system for food. So once you don’t need to move, you don’t need the luxury of that brain.’
embedded and enactive cognition are easily granted. Cognition is to mind our steps, adaptably, all the way to the highest levels of complexity and abstraction. The mind **occurs**, in the sense that it is not a thing but a relational process. It is the dynamic possibility of procedural interactions with the environment via movements and cognition. Operating in constant relation to sensorimotor contingencies, the mind primarily takes place by processing perceptions and sensations, which are geared towards action (Noë 2004) and kinesic interface (Bolens 2012b, 2016). No mind exists that is not already embedded in a concrete, sensorimotor environment, and triggered by intra- and extra-corporeal distributed factors (Anderson 2015b; Wheeler 2005).

Humans strive to adapt their environment to their pragmatic and cognitive needs (Wheeler and Clark 2008). Taming animals has played a crucial role in this regard, with a massive impact on the history of mankind. The taming of horses in particular modified humans’ relation to the ground and to speed, altering the limits of humans’ sensorimotoricity, mobility and power of action (Clutton-Brock 1992; Kelekna 2009). Anthony Chemero claims that affordances available in an animal’s niche and the animal’s sensorimotor abilities ‘are not just defined in terms of one another . . . but causally interact in real time and are causally dependent on one another’ (Chemero 2011: 151). This applies to the human species as much as to other animal species. The human act of taming other animals, such as horses, and of learning to ride them (which took a remarkably long period of time) may be seen as an instance of the causal interaction and dependence between humans and their niche, a niche expanded by means of a new affordance (a biological vehicle), inducing modifications in human sensorimotor potentials. The created possibility of horse riding changed humans’ perception of space and time, as well as their impact on their environment, and their relation to their own agency:

By the first millennium bc the world was opened up to the horse-rider who could travel for the first time at a speed that far surpassed that of the ox-cart, or even of humans when running their fastest. In the fourth century bc Alexander the Great (356–323 bc) on his horse Bucephalus conquered two million square miles of the ancient world. (Clutton-Brock 1992: 12)

On a different front, turning their environment into an improved niche entails that humans keep other humans close by. Not only because the latter may perform useful complementary movements (especially and vitally in one’s infancy), but also because humans relate to and probe their environment by means of movements that include utterances – verbal and gestural (Kendon 2004). They need to utter and be uttered back to. Intersubjective relations are not optional, they are vital for the human species. Furthermore, in order for vocal, verbal and kinesic probing to be productive, it must feel meaningful to oneself and others. So that they may feel meaningful, human utterances (sounds, vocalisations, gestures and expressive moves) must relate pertinently to a context and the possibility of action – and that is true even when the action is fictional, hypothetical, symbolic, mythical or
ritualistic. In fact, it may be argued that the very function of the fictional, hypothetrical, symbolic, mythical and ritualistic is precisely to inject manageable meanings into reality.

To this effect, cultures develop. Cultures are arch-artefacts meant to convey dos and don’ts relative to a myriad of registers, and to control actions by means of tangible and intangible manifestations (e.g. explicit written laws and implicit social rules). Cultural forms and manifestations are beneficial in that they channel systems of meanings (make sense in predictable ways), which may then be transmitted to other groups and later generations. Far-reaching cognitive environments are created by such cultural forms and manifestations, along with a feeling of stability in time and space, which paradoxically affords the possibility of imagining and producing change. Cultural forms and manifestations help turn a psychophysical niche into a society, that is, a large-scale relational environment. The discipline of History may be seen as an effort to retrieve retrospectively the coherence of former systems of meanings, in order to explain past chains of actions.

In human cultures, it is a pervasive fact that those who train to move well are particularly valued. In the ‘good-mover, or skilled mover’ category, the list of sub-categories is wide-ranging (for example, warriors, athletes, dancers, comedians, surgeons, craftsmen and so on). It includes skilled movers whose action is talking. In Homer, Achilles runs fast and Odysseus speaks well. Both are heroes. The ultimate goal of a good speaker’s action often consists in convincing his interlocutors in order to trigger and control actions in others (as with lawyers and politicians), or in transmitting and teaching relevant information, whatever the field of knowledge may be. These two subcategories of skilled movers through talking include all kinds of storytellers, whether their stories are pedagogical, mythical, religious, judicial, political, philosophical, literary, performed orally, written in a book, filmed or mediated through the web. Storytelling is a particular form of action, which requires

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3 I use ‘meaning’ and ‘meaningful’ in the sense expounded by Todd Oakley: ‘I do not use the term as philosophers of language have traditionally used it: either to describe referential properties of words, or truth value sentences, or the linguistic encoding of a speaker’s intention. Meaning is paradoxically all and none of these things: it is all these insofar as the term can be felicitously used to stipulate the senses and referents of words, of asserting truth or falsity, and of displaying a speaker’s intentional stance; it is none of these insofar as it emphasises the fact that meaning is the ephemeral product of an activity not an enduring state or thing, that senses of words are continually being constructed and reconstructed and not fixed “in” the signs themselves, that truth or falsity of sentences are rarely an overriding concern in human communication, that a speaker’s intentions are not hers alone and perhaps most important, that meaning does not fall under the proprietary control of language proper, but rather is an outcome of attention to information. Therefore, the base elements of meaning are not words and sentences, per se, but interpersonally experienced selections of signs’ (Oakley 2009: 61–2).

4 The Iliad is based on a logic of embodiment in which sensorimotricity is first and foremost. Exceptional velocity is key to the characterisation of such a hero as Achilles, whose Homeric epithet refers seventy times to this ability in him (Bolens 2007).

5 The concept of actio, that is, the way an orator moves and speaks while pleading, is of decisive importance according to Quintilian (Bolens 2011b).
skill (within orality as much as literacy) and which is meant to impact the cognition, knowledge and behaviour of other humans because of the way it provides a sense of possibilities and impossibilities. Storytelling may be an expression of the cognitive faculty of hypothesis generation (Lange et al. 2013; Magid et al. 2015). However, it may also serve to block such a faculty and promote vested scenarios with the force of inescapable evidence (Salmon 2008; Pelissier and Marti 2012).

In fourteenth-century England, Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–1400), son of a vintner, himself working as a civil servant, diplomat and courtier, wrote a story about storytellers (P. Brown 2011). The Canterbury Tales is part of a vast storytelling tradition, which was transmitted over many centuries. This tradition links the Eastern Book of Sindibad – composed in Sanskrit, circulated in India as far back as 500 bce, and later translated into a great number of Eastern languages – to its Western offshoot, the Seven Sages of Rome, also translated into most languages of Europe, and widely popular and influential through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance (Bolens 2008). Each version in this tradition presents variations. It is a particularity of the Canterbury Tales that the storytellers in it are set in motion while telling their tales.

Chaucer’s storytellers are pilgrims going together to Canterbury and playing a storytelling game while riding horses. They tell stories to each other while their body and sensorimotoricity are recursively adjusting to the body and sensorimotoricity of an animal, a biological and cognisant agent (Wasserman and Zentall 2006), whose specificity (in terms of breed, health, velocity, etc.) modifies the way its rider is perceived by the other members of the group (Haddington et al. 2013). In such a context, the respective dynamics of humans, animals and environment are correlated while in constant adjustment (Eliasmith 2009). The sensorimotor and cognitive aspects of the pilgrims’ shared action are manifold. My goal in this chapter is to come to terms with the specific way Chaucer grapples with them in the artefact of his text. I will argue that Chaucer’s practice of language befits Michael Spivey and Daniel Richardson’s remark that ‘our understanding of language is composed not of amodal logical symbols that are divorced from the real world, but instead of perceptual-motor simulations and of situated actions in the environment and with other language users’. Even though the ecological environment of his readers has changed and the sight, say, of a yeoman handling a longbow is not a common experience today, Chaucer conveys relevant information by working with language in a way that successfully induces our cognitive engagement, and triggers perceptual-motor simulations of situated actions in meaningful ways.

This quality in Chaucer’s work will be my focus, as it relates at the level of a literary text to Van Gelder and Port’s definition of their ‘dynamical approach’:

The cognitive system is not a computer, it is a dynamical system. It is not the brain, inner and encapsulated; rather, it is the whole system comprised of nervous

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6 On the genre of the story-collection in relation to the Canterbury Tales, see Cooper 1983.
7 Spivey and Richardson 2009: 396; see also Bolens 2012b, 2016.
system, body, and environment. The cognitive system is not a discrete sequential manipulator of static representational structures; rather, it is a structure of mutually and simultaneously influencing change. Its processes do not take place in the arbitrary, discrete time of computer steps; rather, they unfold in the real time of ongoing change in the environment, the body, and the nervous system. The cognitive system does not interact with other aspects of the world by passing messages or commands; rather, it continuously coevolves with them. (Van Gelder and Port 1995: 3)

In literature, language is the tool and material through which such dynamics operate, in interaction with our ever-changing embodied and embedded brains.

**Talking his Way into the Group**

The ‘General Prologue’ to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* depicts the creation of a group, where each member remains autonomous and distinct, worthy of being portrayed at some length, while at the same time partaking in a corporation, called fellowship or company. David Wallace notes that

The ‘General Prologue’ to the *Canterbury Tales* proposes that adults representing (almost) every profession, cultural level, age, and sexual orientation can come together under one roof, form themselves into a corporative unity and regulate their affairs without reference to external authority. Historically speaking, this is a remarkable proposition, one that is difficult to imagine by 1415 and impossible by 1600. And the ease with which Chaucer, as poet and first-person speaker, meets and enters into such a group finds no parallel in later English literature. (Wallace 1997: 65)

Wallace remarks that the ‘Middle Ages was . . . more corporate-minded than any later period; allegiance to a specific felaweshipe or universitas could often outweigh loyalty to civic or state authorities’ (Wallace 1997: 73). He explains that Chaucer, ‘in testing the capacities of the corporate structure he chooses to invent’, was influenced ‘by his daily acquaintance with a pattern of social practice’, that of the guild (Wallace 1997: 75). Guilds ‘owed their corporate existence to the free will’ of their members (Wallace 1997: 75) and, most crucially, to the fact that the latter shared a common activity – craft, profession, economic, religious or political engagements and interests.

The members of Chaucer’s fellowship, while being defined by different socio-professional occupations, share one common spatial direction: Canterbury; one common culturally embedded intention: riding there on a pilgrimage to worship the relics of St Thomas à Becket; and one common highly dynamic cognitive and embodied activity meant to have an emotional impact: telling stories to each other in order to produce and experience merriment from one another. The core action is storytelling while travelling on horses in order to modify the experience of dura-
tion and avoid boredom by channelling attention differently. This constitutes the narrative frame of the *Canterbury Tales*. At its beginning, the self-promoted leader of the group, the Host of a tavern in a suburb of London, Harry Bailey, asks the members of the fellowship to vote and decide whether they want to play this storytelling game or not. The latter unanimously vote in favour of it and swear their oath, thus creating an explicit interactional guild-like context for their reciprocal activity. The narrative we read in the *Canterbury Tales* is fundamentally about the fictional possibility of this reciprocal activity.

The adventure in Chaucer’s masterpiece is about people gathering by chance with a shared purpose, and creating mutual involvement, where the self is aware of being addressed by other selves. Notwithstanding much-emphasised singularities (which concurrently pertain to social stereotypes), all are equally treated as interlocutors. In Chaucer’s words: ‘Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye / Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle / In felaweshipe’ (‘Well nine and twenty in a company / Of various sorts of people, by chance fallen / In fellowship’, ll. 24–6). These words come from a narrator, who speaks in the first person singular *I*, and who integrates a group by talking to each of its members:

And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,  
So hadde I spoken with hem everichon  
That I was of hir felaweshipe anon,  
And made forward erly for to ryse,  
To take oure wey ther as I yow devyse. (*CT*, Pro, 30–4)

And in brief, when the sun was (gone) to rest,  
I had so spoken with everyone of them  
That I was of their fellowship straightway,  
And made agreement to rise early,  
To take our way where I (will) tell you.

The narrator ‘talks his way into the *felaweshipe*’ (Wallace 1997: 67). He will soon shift to *us* (himself and the other members of the group), and *you* (we his readers), thereby including us in the picture. To flesh out the *I*-we-you bond, he decides to tell us about each member of the company.

But nathelesse, whil I have tyme and space,  
Er that I ferther in this tale pace,  
Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun  
To telle yow al the condicioun  
Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,

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8 The Middle English quotations from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* are from *The Riverside Chaucer* (2008). The translations from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* are from L. D. Benson’s Harvard online edition and interlinear translation, last modified 8 April 2008, last accessed 12 November 2018.
And whiche they weren, and of what degree,
And eek in what array that they were inne. (CT, Pro, 35–41)

But nonetheless, while I have time and opportunity,
Before I proceed further in this tale,
It seems to me in accord with reason
To tell you all the circumstances
Of each of them, as it seemed to me,
And who they were, and of what social rank,
And also what clothing that they were in.

The narrator decides to tell us about each member of the group while he has time and space for it. The narration has started and will soon move on. We, together with the narrator, will soon have to keep up the pace and stay abreast with the riding group, to share its overall action and therefore remain part of it. The use of the word ‘pace’ (l. 36) to refer to the progression of the narrator’s storytelling creates a parallel – sensorimotor and cognitive – between riding forward and proceeding with the frame narrative. The timing and spacing of both activities are analogically connected, which strengthens the link experienced between the narrator and ‘us’. He rides, we read – along, together.

The narrator begins by providing portraits of his companions. Each portrait is eminently distributed, articulating the way in which actions, activities, habits, manners, social and professional status, moral tendencies, relations to artefacts, to animals and to humans, styles of moving, walking and riding, ways of speaking (including accents), of using language (to entertain, convince or manipulate) and of telling stories together create what is called a person’s *condicioun*. Each portrait verbally designs a character’s condition of embodied, material, intentional and relational presence in the group, in society at large and in the world. In each portrait the focus may vary, but the above set of connections is constant.

Chaucer’s text is an artefact, whose medium – written language – is one of the greatest artefacts invented by mankind. Chaucer uses writing to provide access to his socio-historical conception of how humans relate to each other, to themselves and to the world in a way that pertains to distributed cognition. Indeed, it is not simply the representation of pilgrims that involves distributed parameters. The literary access to the latter is managed by a practice of language which is itself distributed, as it relies on the reader’s propensity to activate perceptual-motor simulations in response to the text.9 I will concentrate on a few portraits. Riding styles and the way one carries artefacts will be my focus of attention. A character’s way of being carried by his horse, of carrying himself physically (his *port*) and in relation to the group, as well as the artefacts he carries with and on himself, all these aspects are constitutive of who the narrator claims this person is. Finally, we will see that brain, body and world intersect in the embodied and emotional reactions of pil-

9 Zwaan and Kaschak 2009; Spivey and Richardson 2009; Bolens 2012b, 2016.
portraits on the ride

the first qualification of the first character to be portrayed, a knight, has to do with horse riding (ll. 43–6). the knight’s worthiness is enacted by this motor skill and his propensity to ride out, far and wide. this immediately connects in the next lines to positive social and behavioural abstractions (‘trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie’, l. 46). the distance the knight has covered on horseback evinces his merit: no man had ridden farther than him (‘and therto hadde he riden, no man ferre’, l. 48). the main bulk of his portrait lists the various places he has been to: Alexandria, Prussia, Lithuania, Russia, Turkey, Granada, Morocco and more. his principal asset, the reason for his social credit, is his propensity to ride long distances in order to be present in exotic places at key historical moments – and to kill on demand. meanwhile, his deportment, adds the narrator, was as meek as that of a maid (‘and of his port as meek as is a mayde’, l. 69). this type of startling contrast is typical of Chaucer’s modus operandi (Bolens 2011a). in this instance, the super-efficient killer is meek in his deportment and never uses swear words (l. 70).

When the narrator comes to describe the knight’s equipment and array, the first item he selects is the latter’s horse, which is said to be good.10 But he also notes that, in contrast, the knight does not pay attention to his clothes. his tunic is stained by the traces of rust left by his coat of mail, suggesting long travels: ‘of fustian he wered a gypon / al bismotered with his habergeon’ (‘He wore a tunic of coarse cloth / all stained (with rust) by his coat of mail’, CT, Pro, 75–6). According to Laura Hodges, this is a striking departure from both ‘the ideally shining knight errant of chivalric literature’ (Hodges 2000: 27) and the allegorical spiritual warrior, wearing ‘the breastplate of righteousness’ and ‘the shield of faith’ (Hodges 2000: 31). Uncannily, Chaucer portrays an untraditionally realistic knight, failing ‘to meet the social demands of ideal noble dress’ (Hodges 2000: 33). this knight fights on contract (Hodges 2000: 53) and wears dirty clothes, and yet is unquestionably respected by his fellow pilgrims.

Contrary to allegorical representations, the stains on the knight are not symbolic expressions of his sins, but suggest more pragmatic and concrete traces left by his rusting habergeon. And what really matters to him is his means of transportation (his horse), not his looks. his son, a squire who very much cares about his own looks, and one servant only, a yeoman, accompany him. attended by one servant only is the way the knight likes to travel: ‘for hym liste ride so’. for him to travel is

10 The term array (old French arrai) may refer to ‘(a) Equipment, furnishings, gear; the arms of a knight . . . ; (b) clothing, wearing apparel; garb, costume’ (online Middle English Dictionary, 5a and b). Array has to do with the artefacts that a person wears, uses, carries and possesses, which define his or her looks, activity and relation to others, and which connect directly to his or her body.
to ride a horse. A knight was accompanied by others, some of them on horse too, whether equals or subordinates – unless he was an errant knight in an Arthurian fiction. Here, one multitasking yeoman is in order. And Chaucer writes the first yeoman’s portrait in estate literature (a literary tradition representing the classes of society) (Mann 1973: 172), evincing again a close attention to the concrete and pragmatic reality of such a travelling man’s condition.

A YEMAN hadde he [the Knight] and servanz namo
At that tyme, for hym liste ride so,
And he [the Yeoman] was clad in cote and hood of grene.
A sheef of pecok arwes, bright and kene,
Under his belt he bar ful thriftily
(Wel koude he dresse his takel yemanly;
His arwes drouped noght with fetheres lowe),
And in his hand he baar a myghty bowe. (CT, Pro, 101–8)

He (the Knight) had A YEOMAN and no more servants
At that time, for it pleased him so to travel,
And he (the Yeoman) was clad in coat and hood of green.
A sheaf of peacock arrows, bright and keen,
He carried under his belt very properly
(He well knew how to care for his equipment as a yeoman should;
His arrows did not fall short because of drooping feathers),
And in his hand he carried a mighty bow.

Kenneth Thompson offers a detailed and convincing reading of this portrait. In lines additional to the quote above, the Yeoman is said to be a forester, skilled at woodcraft, and his equipment includes a dagger, a sword, a bracer (i.e. an archer’s wrist-guard), a buckler (or small shield) and a horn. ‘The character’s overlapping duties of lawman [protecting his lord’s lands and forests], hunter, bodyguard, and soldier form the background for an intricately woven portrait of a consummate Bowman, well equipped to provide service in both peace and war’ (Thompson 2006: 386–7).11 ‘The Yeoman’s arms are the primary means of defining him’ (Thompson 2006: 392). I will focus on the Yeoman’s bow and arrows because, on the one hand, they are likely to induce a reflective use of perceptual-motor simulations on the part of the reader and, on the other, they contextually imply ‘the integrated operation of social and technological-material processes at once’ (Sutton 2014).

Chaucer specifies that the Yeoman’s arrows are fletched with peacock feathers. The embodied and enactive information packed in the arrows and feathers’

11 Thompson quotes Helen Cooper: ‘A forester could be anything from a senior administrative official (one of Chaucer’s own posts was a deputy forester of a royal forest in Somerset) to a game-keeper’ (Thompson 2006: 388, quoting Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd edn, 1996, p. 37).
description is complex in terms of pragmatic ecology as well as historical and cultural connotations, related to the high reputation of English archers in the late Middle Ages (Phillips 1999; Rogers 2011; Whetham 2008). Pragmatically, Thompson explains the reference to peacock feathers by the fact that peacock wing feathers were valued as an alternative to goose feathers to fletch arrows (Thompson 2006: 396). Chaucer’s readers thus need to infer that the peacock feathers implied in the Yeoman’s portrait are wing feathers and not tail feathers. The latter were valued for their colours and beauty, and invested in religious symbolism. But they have a tendency to droop, while the density and exact quality of feathers are central to their use in fletching. This fact is alluded to in line 107, ‘His arwes drouped noght with fetheres lowe’ (‘His arrows drooped not with feathers low’). The arrows are manufactured with sharp feathers (hence wing feathers since coming from peacocks), cut keenly so as to keep the direction imparted by the archer’s propelling gesture. Because the arrows are the subject of the verb droop in line 107, the attribution of this un-drooping quality is debatable. What is it exactly that does not droop? The feathers, the trajectory of the arrows, the archer’s efficacy? Owing to this ambiguity, the idea that the feathers are not drooping blends with the idea that their trajectory when properly effected is equally ‘un-drooping’. In this sense, the text may be seen to lead the reader to cognitively combine the quality of the artefact with the way in which this very quality enhances the skill of the archer, suggesting in turn and by association that the Yeoman is endowed with an unbending potency.

Chaucer provides a type of information that relies on an ecological knowledge on the part of his readers. This knowledge is a prerequisite to trigger a mental simulation of the action consisting in using a bow to propel an arrow fletched with peacock feathers. This is not to say that readers may not enjoy the text when lacking this type of knowledge. Some readers may of course envisage a yeoman throwing pretty arrows, fletched with the fluttering feathers of a peacock’s tail. Others could simply ignore the artefactual information and find enough relevance in sexual connotations of virile efficacy. In any case, such diverse readings are not exclusive and may be combined in the cognitive acts whereby we dynamically test interpretive possibilities.

To now turn to the Yeoman’s bow, its qualification of mighty (‘And in his hand he baar a myghty bowe’, l. 108) is embedded in a cultural environment suggesting that it may be a longbow. Longbows were the type of bow famously used by English archers during the Hundred Years War (1337–1453), and thus at the time when Chaucer was writing the Canterbury Tales. Evelyn Tribble highlights the importance of ‘cultural transmission of skill’ in the practice of the late-medieval English longbow, as a life-long training was necessary for specific muscles to develop in the archer (Tribble 2015: 790). A longbow was thicker and taller than any other kind of bow. It was taller than its user, implying a remarkable strength in the latter, able to bend a bow ‘with a draw weight of well over a hundred pounds’ (Tribble 2015: 791).

In addition to the might of his bow, we are informed that the Yeoman carries his weapon in his hand. ‘That the Yeoman holds the bow in his hand suggests that
the weapon is already strung, ready for use, rather than encased for transport’ (Thompson 2006: 395). Of equal interest is the reference to the way the Yeoman carries his sheaf of arrows. He carries it under his belt thriftily, that is, properly, profitably, as he does with the rest of his equipment – an idea encapsulated in the adverb of manner yeomanly. Thriftily shares the etymology of the verb to thrive. In the same way as the Knight is defined by his activity and capacity to ride far and wide in order to fight, the Yeoman is portrayed by the way he carries the artefacts that socially define him. In the case of the arrows, he carries them under his belt. According to Thompson (who remains impervious to possible sexual connotations), ‘the sheaf is suspended from, rather than bound by, the Yeoman’s belt’ (Thompson 2006: 397). This is unspecified in the text. The fact that Thompson reaches this conclusion suggests that he mentally enacted the possible pragmatic ways of reading the phrase ‘under his belt’, and that he parsed the text’s linguistic information through deliberate and reflective perceptual-motor simulations. Indeed, the knowledge that a sheaf ‘typically consisted of twenty-four arrows’, which were ‘likely as long as thirty-two inches in length’ (Thompson 2006: 396), leads him to state that, ‘whether the Yeoman were to ride or walk to perform his duties, holding such arrows in such quantity under a cinched belt would likely be a potentially uncomfortable and awkward proposition’ (Thompson 2006: 396–7). To enact under- or un-specified information when reading a text is constant in the act of reading (Cave 2016). It is part and parcel of our enactive relation to the artefact of a text.

If the sheaf were suspended from the Yeoman’s belt, it would ‘allow the arrows to be held behind the Yeoman’s hip, conveniently contained, comfortably situated, and yet readily available’ (Thompson 2006: 397). Eventually, Thompson spells out the result of his cognitive engagement with the text by noting that, notwithstanding the exact positioning of the sheaf vis-à-vis the Yeoman’s hips and legs, we are led to imagine the pilgrim ‘ready to bend an available arrow onto a bow already in hand’. Importantly, ‘[a]s with the handheld bow, the tucked arrows succinctly suggest an immediacy of use, reinforcing the notions of readiness and efficiency that permeate the Yeoman’s portrait’ (Thompson 2006: 397). In short, Chaucer’s linguistic choices are liable to convey a notably complex aspect in the Yeoman’s portrait: a certain promptness to act. In order to gain access to such an aspect, readers must possess or acquire a type of knowledge that is contextual and historical. But also, and most importantly, they need to combine it with a type of cognitive act that is embodied and dynamically enacted. Regarding in particular the aptly fletched arrows, Thompson grapples with the text in using both historical and perceptual-motor simulations, leading us to the convincing conclusion that Chaucer’s description is really about a general attitude, that of a sharp and virile bodyguard-forester-hunter-archer always on the lookout and ready to shoot.

12 Again, it is eminently possible that such an experience of the text may fail in a reader and be replaced by another, which may turn out to be equally satisfying, albeit for different reasons and in a way that would be less mindful of the historical and pragmatic embedding of the text itself.
Other interesting artefacts are featured in the ‘General Prologue’ of *The Canterbury Tales*, such as the spurs of the Wife of Bath, or the Miller’s bagpipe, with which the latter leads the company out of town. The reference to the Miller’s musical artefact involves a type of cognition that relates to sensorimotoricity (through the way one plays the bagpipe, with breath, fingers, and an arm pressing the air reservoir of the instrument), and to the spatial displacement of the whole group in response to the sound of the instrument (Krueger 2014a). Whether a musical instrument, or a weapon used to hunt or combat, whether a piece of clothing or of equipment inducing movement in one’s horse (e.g. spurs), artefacts relate to the body that carries and activates them, and to their human, animal and concrete environment by material, sensorimotor, cognitive and social reciprocal impact. Most significantly, the nature of this relation defines the carrier in what we know of him or her.

A reference to horses may convey information as to a character’s relation to geographic distance and duration, as is the case with the Knight. Other passages characterise people by the way they ride or by their horse’s breed or state of health. In the Squire’s portrait, the information pertains to the young man’s kinesic style in riding.

He was as fresh as is the month of May.
Short was his gowne, with sleves longe and wyde.
Wel koude he sitte on hors and faire ryde.
He koude songs make and wel endite,
Juste and eek daunce, and weel purtreye and write.
So hoote he lovede that by nyghtertale
He.sleep namoore than dooth a nyghtyngale. (*CT*, Pro, 92–8)

The Squire’s portrait makes use of the cultural stereotype of the courtly lover, dressed in the latest fashion. Interestingly, its phraseology affords a distance with the stereotype, suggesting that the Squire is *performing* the role of the paramour, albeit sincerely – with consequences for his sleep.\(^{13}\) Notably, his skills are listed together in a way that helps emphasise their common denominator, that is, moving well, in dancing, jousting and riding handsomely, as well as in drawing and writing.

\(^{13}\) On the issue of social performance in literature and the performance of cultural types, see Bolens 2011a.
In the Merchant’s portrait, talking skills are the focus of attention, combining his favourite topic of conversation (his financial profits) with his fashion choices (in terms of beard cut, boot design, hat material and origin). The Merchant’s riding style is summed up by the sentence ‘high on horse he sat’. Merging the rider’s posture with the horse’s size, the emphasis is placed on the way the Merchant sits in his saddle. The adverb high interestingly blends the rider’s bearing (his kinesis is erect, lofty, further elongating the height of his horse) and his correlated attitudinal tendency (his general mood and moral stance), translated into the concepts of self-satisfaction and pride.

A MARCHANT was ther with a forked berd,
In mottelee, and hye on horse he sat;
Upon his heed a Flaundryssh bever hat,
His bootes clasped faire and fetisly.
His resons he spak ful solemnely,
Sownynge alwey th’ encrees of his wynnyng. (CT, Pro, 270–5)

There was a MERCHANT with a forked beard,
Wearing parti-colored cloth, and proudly he sat on his horse;
Upon his head (he wore a) Flemish beaver hat,
His boots were buckled handsomely and elegantly.
His opinions he spoke very solemnly,
Concerning always the increase of his profits.

The Merchant takes himself seriously, he thinks highly of himself. His mind and riding style are coextensive with each other. Such a correlation between cognition and kinesis is further developed in the Monk’s portrait.

A Manly Man in Boots, Horse and Storytelling

Regarding the idea that the ‘experience of the world is enacted or brought forth via skilful interaction’ (Ward 2014), the portrait of the Monk in the ‘General Prologue’ is a case in point. One key feature in it is the Monk’s relation to horse riding, a skilful interaction that requires a culturally valued physical training. This dominant feature in the portrait contrasts sharply with the stereotype of the cloistered monk – a contrast that draws the reader’s attention to the pilgrim’s sensorimotor relation to open space.

A MONK ther was, a fair for the maistrie,
An outridere, that lovede venerie,
A manly man, to been an abbot able.
Ful many a deyntee hors hadde he in stable,
And whan he rood, men myghte his brydel heere
Gynglen in a whistlynge wynd als cleere
And eek as loud as dooth the chapel belle
Ther as this lord was kepere of the celle. (CT, Pro, 165–72)

There was a MONK, an extremely fine one,
An outrider (a monk with business outside the monastery), who loved hunting,
A virile man, qualified to be an abbot.
He had very many fine horses in his stable
And when he rode, one could hear his bridle
Jingle in a whistling wind as clear
And also as loud as does the chapel bell
Where this lord was prior of the subordinate monastery.

The monk is a manly man who makes noise when he rides. Our understanding of the information is grounded in a perceptual-motor simulation, by means of which we supply the implied connection between horse movement and a bridle adorned with artefacts noisy when shaken, such as bells.

The Knight is defined by his activity and capacity to ride far and wide in order to fight; the Yeoman is defined by the way he carries bow and arrows, ready to shoot. The reference to the Monk’s bridle achieves a similar purpose, and so does the reference to his boots and many horses, with a focus on the horse he rides to go to Canterbury: ‘His bootes souple, his hors in greet estaat’ (‘His boots supple, his horse in excellent condition’, l. 203). It matters that the pervading term *estaat* is used in this sentence to refer to the state of the Monk’s horse, when it more commonly refers to humans’ social station. The Monk’s boots are supple. They are the sartorial artefacts he uses to protect his feet and elicit a certain type of gait, which is perhaps, by extension, equally supple. Next comes his horse, said to be in great state. This suggests, also by extension, that the Monk’s situation, his social station, is great. The state of his horse bespeaks his own. Horse and man are doing more than well. But also boots and horse bespeak a certain relation to space and mobility, specifically here to a socially acceptable or unacceptable spatial freedom of movement on the part of a monk. Oblivious to religious and social expectations regarding monastic behaviour, the man feels a bit too comfortable – with himself, in his boots, and on his jingling horse.

The narrator explains that the Monk is not keen to stay shut in a cloister obeying monastic rules, refuting the idea that a holy man cannot be a hunter. The Monk’s posture clashes with social expectations vis-à-vis the triple vows of poverty, chastity and obedience required by monastic life. Such a clash can be found in satirical texts denouncing the transgressions of clerical figures, such as monks and friars. According to Jill Mann, ‘Chaucer seems to have been most stimulated by the possibility of exploiting a rich literary tradition’ in which the targeted features of the monastic stereotype are ‘love of good food, luxurious clothing, a love of horse and hunting, contempt for patristic and monastic authority, laziness, a refusal to stay within cloister walls, the temptations of holding various monastic offices’ (Mann 1973: 17). Chaucer’s Monk has a check on most of these counts. However, Mann stresses an important fact about this portrait:
Like all the other satirists before him, Chaucer is giving his own slant to the traditional topic, but his originality lies, not in adding a bald head and gleaming eyes to the physical description of the greedy monk – although those features are indeed novel – but in making our attitude to the whole description uncertain. (Mann 1973: 20)

This is a central aspect of Chaucer’s artistic modus operandi, which, I will argue, is particularly notable in the Monk’s use of storytelling. But, first, we should note that one key aspect, emphasised by the narrator in his account of the Monk, is his love of speed.

Therefore he was a prikasour aright:
Grehoundes he hadde as swift as fowel in flight;
Of prikyng and of huntyng for the hare
Was al his lust, for no cost wolde he spare. (CT, Pro, 189–92)

Therefore he was indeed a vigorous horseman:
He had greyhounds as swift as fowl in flight;
Of tracking and of hunting for the hare
Was all his pleasure, by no means would he refrain from it.

The Monk’s love of speed is explicitly presented as part of who he is and what he does, and how. He is a prikasour. A noun kin to the verb priken, from Old English prician, ‘to prick, stab, pierce’. When speaking of a horse, it means to gallop, and when speaking of a person, it means to ride a horse especially at a gallop, to ride free or at large (Middle English Dictionary). The noun prikasour synthesises the Monk via the condensed information conceptualised within the implied movement of planting one’s spurs into a horse’s flanks to make it reach full speed as fast as possible. The term prikasour also has a sexual connotation, which the Host will insistently unpack and highlight before hearing the Monk’s tale. He will claim that with such a manly body as his, the Monk should have been a breeder of sons.

Interestingly, the Monk’s choice of story will counteract the general impression he seems to produce on the Host, the narrator, and presumably everyone else. For he goes through a tedious series of tragic situations, based on the wheel of Fortune topos, to the point of utterly boring everybody. First the Knight, who is supposed to be overly polite, and then the Host will ask him to cut it out and talk about something else, hunting, for example – to no avail. Thus, the Monk is an ineffective storyteller, if merriment, entertainment or effective moral emulation is intended. But an alternative possibility could be that the intended effect is in fact image control. If such is the case, the Monk as storyteller does manage to get what he wants via

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14 His tale corresponds to the genre of De casibus tragedy, narrating the fall of great men; cf. Wallace 1997, ch. 11.
his enactive and enacted tale, namely, to cool off the Host’s wish for an efficacious reproduction of the human species via his manly body.

The Monk controls the way in which he is perceived by means of his choice of tale. One of the numerous effects of storytelling is to shape the social perception of the storyteller himself or herself (Wortham 2001). Regarding the act of storytelling in the Canterbury Tales, the varying failure or success of storytellers emphasises the fact that storytelling is an activity that requires a certain type of skill. A storyteller must secure the audience’s attention for the duration of his or her tale, or risk being interrupted. This happens to the Monk, but also to the Squire, who is cut off in mid-sentence, albeit very courteously, by the Franklin. In this latter case, the act of storytelling also alters our reception of the pilgrim’s initial portrait, since the Squire was claimed to be a skilled mover with language (writing, composing) as much as the rest (riding, jousting and loving). Ironically, the intradiegetic character named Chaucer is also interrupted, as he turns out to be a rather poor storyteller, in need of a second chance.

The skill of storytelling entails an apt choice of topic, plot, genre and style. A suitable choice of story suggests the notion of a store of them, for instance in the image used by the Host claiming after the game has started: ‘unbokeled is the male’ (‘the bag is opened’, Miller’s Pro, l. 3115), or when he addresses the Parson, saying: ‘Unbokele, and shewe us what is in thy male’ (‘Unbuckle and show us what is in thy bag (of stories)’, Parson’s Pro, l. 26). Stories are artefacts that serve many purposes; they channel attention to avoid boredom, but also modify the perception of the world – and of the storyteller. The choice of tale defines the teller, who, in the case of the Monk, wards off unwanted intentions in others regarding his own generative potency.

Jill Mann rightly writes that

Chaucer’s method is frequently to remind us of the traditional satire while discouraging or circumventing the moral judgements it aimed to elicit. One way in which Chaucer circumvents moral judgement is to show us the Monk from his own point of view. (Mann 1973: 27)

From the Monk’s point of view, the process matters more than the product: speed more than catching the hare (with and without traditional sexual double entendre), intense riding more than reaching the right spot – say, heaven, through prayer and devotion. In sum, he likes moving for the sake of moving. He enjoys supple boots and a well-kept horse jingling in the wind. He claims his right to holiness by being a prikasour in his own right. And the Host approves. He wants to hear more about it. But the Monk knows better: surely not about patristic wisdom – Rodney Delasanta (1968) underlines the Monk’s ineptitude in this regard – but about image control by means of speech and silence, by means of skilful interaction.
Standing on Stirrups

Stories impact their audience cognitively and emotionally (Cave 2016). The narrative frame of the 
*Canterbury Tales* (the ‘General Prologue’ and links between the tales) shows that emotional redirection by means of narratives does not necessarily entail pacification in the audience (Cooper 1983). Chaucer’s fellowship of pilgrims is made of members who may share common views. For instance, they all agree that the Knight’s tale is worthy of being remembered. But they also share disparity, tension and disagreement. Part of the game they all agreed to play is about *quiting* the previous storyteller – an explicit intention that tends to induce strong emotions, described kinesically in a context that is always already physically affective and socially emotional (Colombetti 2014). To play a game presupposes at least some affective propensity to relate to the other players, whether the act of playing ultimately triggers a desire to hit one’s opponent on the head, or not.

The Miller’s attitude is interesting in this regard. He is so drunk that he is barely able to sit on his horse (‘The Millere, that for dronken was al pale / So that unnethe upon his hors he sat’, ll. 3120–1), and starts shouting that he will be the one to match the Knight with a tale (‘With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale’, l. 3127). The Miller threatens to quit the company if he is not allowed to requite the Knight: ‘For I wol speke or elles go my wey’ (l. 3133). He succeeds in imposing his tale, a churlish one, which the narrator rehearses faithfully, albeit apologetically. The Miller’s tale makes fun of a carpenter, which will lead to the Reeve’s retaliation by means of an equally churlish tale ridiculing a Miller. The reason for the Reeve’s move is explained when the latter protests that the Miller ridiculed a carpenter in his tale because he knew he (the Reeve) was one by trade. The two pilgrims’ interpersonal understanding and emotional appraisals are expressed by verbal exchange, choice of story and narrative register (churlish), as well as kinesic reactions. Their moves in the game are such that speech and kinesis are irretrievably yoked together.

A similar storytelling altercation takes place between the Friar and the Summoner, which triggers the following cognitive and embodied emotional reaction on the part of the Summoner:

This Somonour in his styropes hye stood;
Upon this Frere his herte was so wood
That lyk an aspen leef he quook for ire. (*CT*, Summoner’s Pro, 1665–7)

This Summoner in his stirrups stood high;
Upon this Friar his heart was so enraged
That like an aspen leaf he quaked for ire.

15 After the knight has told his tale, the group unanimously declares that it was a noble story, ‘worthy for to drawen to memorie [worthy to draw into memory]’ (Miller’s Pro, l. 3112).
The Host has the exact same kinesic reaction after hearing the Man of Law’s tale. However, this time, he stands on his stirrups because he approves of the story they have just heard:

Owre Hoost upon his stiropes stood anon,
And seyde, ‘Goode men, herkeneth everych on!
This was a thrifty tale for the nones!’ (CT, Man of Law’s Epilogue, 1163–5)

Our Host upon his stirrups stood up at once,
And said, ‘Good men, listen every one!
This was an excellent tale for this occasion!’

This double example illustrates the fact that social cognition and kinesic communication are dependent on context: the same posture, or kinesic expression, may have radically different meanings. In addition, by the act of standing upon one’s stirrups, the person’s mind and emotional enactment are extended (mentally and physically) in the coupled dynamic embodiedness of horse and rider, upheld by the concrete scaffold of harness and stirrups. The kinesic act of standing on stirrups manifests a notable increase in muscle contraction, which we, as readers, infer pre-reflectively when reading the two passages. Our understanding of this move and unsteady posture implies a perceptual-motor simulation on our part, which we trigger by using our embodied knowledge of the sensorimotor implications of standing, both legs stretched on the sides of a mobile and much bigger animal (a horse), feet planted in a metallic artefact (the stirrups).

Pre-reflectively again, we then correlate our embodied knowledge of modified muscle tension to the emotion articulated by the text. In the Summoner, the move manifests anger, and the rider’s overall tension is such that his entire body shakes like a leaf. In the case of the Host, standing on stirrups is, in contrast, a steady way of increasing his perceptual perspective, as well as his own visibility and audibility for others, while he calls for everyone’s attention in order to make a claim and state that the tale they have just heard was thrifty. A thrifty tale is a profitable story. The adjective *thrifty* is also used to qualify the way the Yeoman carries his arrows. A thrifty tale is somewhat similar to a well-crafted, well-handed and well-propelled arrow. It reaches its target.

According to Lambros Malafouris, ‘Meaning does not reside in the material sign; it emerges from the various parameters of its performance and usage as these are actualized in the process of engagement’ (Malafouris 2013: 117). This is true of our understanding of such artefacts as arrows and stirrups. The meaning of the object, or of its iconic sign, is in the way it affords a certain type of action, such as to enact a direction (in the case of arrows – whether object or symbol), and to stabilise the rider’s balance (in the case of stirrups), and thereby augment his capacity for action, such as shooting arrows or holding a jousting spear horizontally while galloping. But Malafouris’s statement also applies when stirrups are referred to in yet another artefact, that of a written text, in which stirrups are part of a narrative. The
level of complexity is then higher because the access to meaning is mediated by language and by a type of cognition that is *a priori* abstract (or has been abstracted via language). Yet the cognitive processing of the narrative depends on the readers’ ability and propensity to make sense of the physical implications involved in standing on stirrups. Mental enaction is necessary for any meaning to be grasped in the referred muscular manifestation of increased tension, and the concrete stretching this increase of tension exerts on stirrups, whose solidity is necessary for the rider to stand. This cognitive engagement also involves the perceptual-motor simulation Chaucer’s readers are bound to trigger when blending muscular contraction with emotional meaning, all the more so since emotional meanings are at variance.

According to Wolpert, Doya and Kawato (2003: 593),

The study of motor control is fundamentally the study of sensorimotor transformations. We can view the motor system as forming a loop in which motor commands cause muscle contractions, with consequent sensory feedback, which in turn influences future motor commands. The transformation from motor commands to their sensory consequences is governed by the physics of the musculoskeletal system, the environment and the sensory receptors. The descending motor command generates contractions in the muscles and causes the musculoskeletal system to change its configuration. However, the same motor command can have very different consequences in different situations. For example, the same motor command will generate less muscle contraction when the muscles are fatigued. Moreover, the same motor command can lead to very different changes in body configuration depending on the nature of the physical objects we interact with.

Standing is foundational to mankind, but its manifold implications are physically relative, for example, to whether one is standing on the ground or on stirrups, that is, on artefacts invented to ride other animals. The emotional vectors and the pragmatic and communicational intentions accompanying the action of standing are equally variable. In addition, a reference to artefacts, such as stirrups, is by definition historically embedded. To wit, ‘the stirrup was unknown until the first centuries ad and neither the Greek nor the Roman cavalry rode with stirrups. Once the use of stirrups became widespread, mounted soldiers could wield the lance and bowmen could shoot from the saddle, with very little training’ (Clutton-Brock 1992: 13). From there, the technology of heavier armours developed and the breeding of larger horses ensued. Clutton-Brock (1992: 13) explains that ‘the heavy horse was beginning to appear’ in the Middle Ages, and that ‘This period can justly be called “the age of the horse”’:

Radical changes came about not only because the use of stirrups spread but also because of the invention of the horse collar, which meant that horses could pull loads with greater efficiency, and the introduction of the nailed horseshoe which came into universal use in the eleventh century. (Clutton-Brock 1992: 13)
The taming of horses transformed the niche and activities of humans, as well as horses themselves: new breeds were created and metallic horseshoes were nailed to their hooves. Horses were assigned by mankind a function that changed their contact with the ground, and their relation to a space and time previously unbound.

Distributed cognition is at work when we, twenty-first-century readers of Chaucer, trigger a perceptual simulation of a pilgrim standing on stirrups, that is, on an artefact that changed the history of horse and mankind, and with which we are able to engage mentally via embodied cognition, even if we have never set a foot in the actual object. Sensorimotor inference based on a perceptual knowledge of the artefact is enough to achieve relevance. By it we understand how a human can stand on stirrups, a posture that could have at least two contrasted affective meanings in one literary artwork.

In sum, literature – whether it tells us about a pilgrim erect with anger, a yeoman on the edge, a monk riding at full speed, a group of strangers playing together by means of stories, or about strictly anything else, realistic or unrealistic – is made of stories, of ‘cognitive artefacts’ (Herman 2003), whether they be a carved two-line poem or a cyclically performed epic, which mankind developed to train our knowledge of the versatility of the real (Spolsky 2001) and bolster the power of our imagination, providing a sense of both relevance and surprise in, and through, the ever-astonishing movements that shape our minds.