

THE 'PARSON'S TALE' AND THE QUITTING OF THE 'CANTERBURY TALES'

Author(s): LEE W. PATTERSON

Source: *Traditio*, Vol. 34 (1978), pp. 331-380

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27831048>

Accessed: 02-05-2018 09:53 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Traditio*

## THE 'PARSON'S TALE' AND THE QUITTING OF THE 'CANTERBURY TALES'

BY LEE W. PATTERSON

For most of Chaucer's readers the *Parson's Tale* provides a conclusion to the *Canterbury Tales* that is at best drab, at worst a betrayal of all that is thought to be most Chaucerian. Even sympathetic readers find it something to argue away rather than interpret, a strategy that finds its logical fulfillment in the unsympathetic claim that Chaucer is not really responsible for the tale at all. Manly expressed this view with admirable forthrightness: 'the Parson's Tale . . . was probably never composed by Chaucer, the two uncomposed fragments of penitential treatises found in our MSS under that designation being at best only loose materials, translated by Chaucer for future use, and copied by his literary executor as the Parson's Tale only because Chaucer's chest contained no other piece of prose that seemed appropriate to the Parson.'<sup>1</sup> While few contemporary critics would have the temerity to engage in these bibliographical speculations, many of Manly's assumptions are in fact still with us. On the question of originality and date, for instance, Professor Donaldson has recently described the tale as 'apparently translated by Chaucer from the Latin of some manual directed at helping priests in the performance of their spiritual duties,' and adds that 'scholars generally agree that the

---

<sup>1</sup> John M. Manly, 'Tales of the Homeward Journey,' *Studies in Philology* 28 (1931) 616. A more radical attack on Chaucerian responsibility for most of the tale was first mounted by H. Simon in 'Chaucer a Wicliffite: An Essay on Chaucer's Parson and *Parson's Tale*,' *Essays on Chaucer* Part 3 (Chaucer Society, 2nd series 16; London 1876) 227-292, and by Wilhelm Eilers, 'Dissertation on *The Parson's Tale* and the *Somme de Vices et de Vertus* of Frere Lorens,' *Essays on Chaucer* Part 5 (Chaucer Society, 2nd series 19; London 1884) 501-610. Simon tried to show that Chaucer wrote only those parts that were consistent with Lollard moral severity and Wyclif's rejection of auricular confession, and that the rest of the tale was a Popish interpolation; Eilers argued that the whole of the discussion of the sins was 'the work of a bungler of the lowest order. Can any one seriously persist in regarding these portions of the P. T. as Chaucer's? . . . No!' (609). These speculations were destroyed by the careful linguistic analyses first of Emil Koepfel, 'Über das Verhältnis von Chaucers Prosawerken zu seinen Dichtungen und die Echtheit der "*Parson's Tale*,'" *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen* 87 (1891) 33-54, and then of Heinrich Spies, 'Chaucers religiöse Grundstimmung und die Echtheit der Parson's Tale: Eine textkritische Untersuchung,' *Festschrift für Lorenz Morsbach* (Studien zur englischen Philologie 50 [1913]) 626-721. Both Koepfel and Spies show that Chaucer wrote the whole tale, but both see the part on the sins as written first and then later fitted into the newly composed part on penance.

translation was made at an earlier stage in Chaucer's career.<sup>2</sup> On the work's coherence — or lack of it — another recent commentator has approvingly quoted a remark first made in 1901 by Mark Liddell: 'none of the Latin, English, or French treatises on this subject that I have seen (and I have examined a great number in the hope of finding the source of Chaucer's work) is so confused and disproportioned as Chaucer's is.'<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in commenting on 'the disjointed nature of the links' between the part on penance and that on the sins, Morton Bloomfield speculates that this 'indicates an early stage in the combining. Chaucer, who left the *Canterbury Tales* unfinished, would probably have provided the proper links, but he did not have time.'<sup>4</sup> While this view of the *Parson's Tale* as journeyman's work completed early in the poet's career is not entirely unanimous, it is close to a consensus.<sup>5</sup>

Related to these bibliographical and biographical issues are two matters of more purely critical interest. One is the genre of the work. Donaldson suggests a priest's manual, others call it a sermon or a penitential manual for laymen, the Parson himself refers to it as a 'meditacioun' (X.55), and for Chaucer it is 'this litel tretys' (X.1081).<sup>6</sup> The terms are not important, but it

<sup>2</sup> *Chaucer's Poetry* (2nd ed.; New York 1975) 1112. On the question of translation, most writers opt for a French original: H. G. Pfander, 'Some Medieval Manuals of Religious Instruction in England and Observations on Chaucer's Parson's Tale,' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 35 (1936) 257; Ralph Elliott, *Chaucer's Language* (London 1974) 143–144; John Norton-Smith, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London 1974) 155. For an account of the (Latin) sources as we currently understand them, see below, nn. 29, 45. The assumption of an early date is virtually unanimous, from Skeat on; for specific discussions, see Victor Langhans, 'Die Datierung der Prosastücke Chaucers,' *Anglia* 53 (1929) 235–268 (as early as 1358), and Charles A. Owen, Jr., 'The Development of the *Canterbury Tales*,' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 57 (1958) 449–476 (early 1390s).

<sup>3</sup> T. P. Dunning, 'Chaucer's Icarus-Complex: Some Notes on his Adventures in Theology,' *English Studies Today* series 3, ed. G. I. Duthie (Edinburgh 1964) 104, quoting Liddell, 'A New Source of the *Parson's Tale*,' *An English Miscellany Presented to Dr. Furnivall* (Oxford 1901) 256–257.

<sup>4</sup> *The Seven Deadly Sins* (East Lansing, Mich. 1952) 192.

<sup>5</sup> John Koch, *The Chronology of Chaucer's Writings* (Chaucer Society, 2nd series 27; London 1890), proposed a late date, and the hypothesis of a deathbed repentance virtually requires one: see, e.g., Gervase Mathew, *The Court of Richard II* (London 1968) 72–73. As to unity, Robert Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation* (Cambridge, Mass. 1967) 227–241, argues for at least a structural coherence.

<sup>6</sup> All quotations from Chaucer are from F. N. Robinson, ed., *Works* (2nd ed.; Boston 1957). On the tale as a manual for confessors, see Donaldson 1112 and Mathew 72; as a sermon, Coolidge O. Chapman, 'The *Parson's Tale*: A Medieval Sermon,' *Modern Language Notes* 43 (1928) 229–234, Norton-Smith 155, and below, n. 28; as a penitential manual for laymen, W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge 1955) 226–227, and D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton 1963) 335. Robertson also argues that the phrase 'this litel tretys' refers not to the *Parson's Tale* but to the whole of the *Canterbury Tales*. This idea was originally refuted by James A. Work, 'Chaucer's

would be helpful to know how this text compares to others like it in contents, function, character, and especially quality.<sup>7</sup> Second, and the source of the greatest controversy, is the thematic relation of the *Parson's Tale* to the rest of the *Canterbury Tales*. Among the many discussions of this issue one can distinguish four positions: (1) the moral absolutism of the *Parson's Tale* has been implicit throughout the tales, guiding our judgment as we read them and now receiving its full expression and authority; (2) the *Parson's Tale* provides a retrospective commentary on all that has gone before, and our understanding of the tales should now (but only now) be revised in the direction of its moral judgments; (3) the *Parson's Tale* is itself subject to the comic and dramatic norms that govern the rest of the *Canterbury Tales* and its absolutism is simply a last contribution to the multifarious voices of the Canterbury conversation; (4) in both style and substance the *Parson's Tale* is utterly foreign to the rest of the tales, its significance is primarily biographical, and as a conclusion to the tales it provides at best a pious gesture towards conventional standards of literary seemliness.<sup>8</sup> In trying to choose among these positions the reader too

---

Sermon and Retraction,' *Modern Language Notes* 47 (1932) 257–259, and again by J. W. Clark, "‘This Litel Tretys” Again,' *Chaucer Review* 6 (1971–72) 152–156.

<sup>7</sup> Pfander's article provides a useful beginning here, but he fails to note the structural distinctiveness of the *Parson's Tale* and for the most part avoids questions of character and quality.

<sup>8</sup> (1) The most thorough attempt to interpret the *Parson's Tale* as a norm to be applied to the rest of the tales is by Frederick Tupper, 'Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins,' *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 29 (1914) 93–128, and 'Chaucer's Sinners and Sins,' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 15 (1916) 56–106; a slightly more subtle contemporary application may be found in Bernard F. Huppé, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Albany, N.Y. 1964), and is indeed implicit in the many interpretations of individual tales which invoke the Parson's teaching on specific issues in order to pass judgment on the other pilgrims; see, e.g., Donald R. Howard, 'The Conclusion of the Marriage Group: Chaucer and the Human Condition,' *Modern Philology* 57 (1960) 213–232. For Jordan the *Parson's Tale* provides a structural norm or 'paradigm.' (2) The best known proponent of this retrospective application is Ralph Baldwin, *The Unity of the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Anglistica 5; Copenhagen 1955). For recent applications, see John Leyerle, 'Thematic Interlace in "The Canterbury Tales,"' *Essays and Studies* 29 (1976) 107–121, and Donald Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley 1976): 'One could say that the Parson's Tale imposes a retrospective structure comparable to what the General Prologue imposes sequentially. . . . The structure of *The Canterbury Tales* is like two mirrors set opposite one another with the "world" of the tales between them' (216–217); (3) John Finlayson, 'The Satiric Mode and the Parson's Tale,' *Chaucer Review* 6 (1971–2) 94–116; Judson B. Allen, 'The Old Way and the Parson's Way: An Ironic Reading of the Parson's Tale,' *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 3 (1973) 255–271; and, for a more challenging version of this argument, Carol V. Kaske, 'Getting Around the Parson's Tale: An Alternative to Allegory and Irony,' in *Chaucer at Albany*, ed. Rossell Hope Robbins (New York 1975) 147–177; (4) E. Talbot Donaldson, 'Medieval Poetry and Medieval Sin,' in *Speaking of Chaucer* (London 1970) 164–174; Jordan 111–115; Paul G. Ruggiers, *The Art of the Canterbury Tales* (Madison 1965) 249–252; Norton-Smith 155–159; and Howard, *Idea*: 'There are dozens of ways in which

often finds himself knowing a great deal about the *Canterbury Tales* but not very much about the *Parson's Tale*. In fact, virtually all the discussions on relevance avoid the logically prior questions of originality, date, coherence, and genre. Since we are then in effect trying to fit an unknown element into a familiar setting we naturally allow our understanding of the tales to condition our reading of the *Parson's Tale*, and whatever it really is becomes lost in our presuppositions about what it should be. In this essay I shall try to move in the opposite direction. My focus is primarily upon the genre of the *Parson's Tale* and the distinctiveness that emerges when it is placed among others of its kind. In drawing together the findings of previous investigators, and in adding some new ones of my own, I hope to demonstrate that the *Parson's Tale* is both more ambitious and more achieved than has been assumed, and that when its character is rightly understood its larger meanings can be more easily recognized. Second, by examining the verbal echoes between this tale and others I hope to settle the question of date. Only then will the question of relevance arise, and as we shall see the interpretation that emerges from the earlier discussions will urge us toward conclusions that are at once more absolute and more generous than those that have heretofore been proposed.

## I

The task of locating the *Parson's Tale* within the huge mass of fourteenth-century religious writing can be made easier if we recall, if only briefly, the history of late medieval didacticism. The catalyst that initiated this development was the Fourth Lateran Council, called by Innocent III in 1215–16. Innocent directed the Council to attend to the decline in the moral and intellectual standards of the clergy — one of his sermons to the Council was on this theme — and several canons were passed that were directed against both clerical and lay ignorance.<sup>9</sup> In England the great reforming bishops of the thirteenth century, Richard Poore of Salisbury and Durham, Robert Grosseteste of Lincoln, Archbishop John Pecham, and Peter Quinel (or Quivel)

---

the *Parson's Tale* can be thought a suitable ending, but it is so different from everything else that . . . it tells us something about the whole book that has gone before, makes us turn from the world of that book and look to our selves in the world about us' (380). It is not always easy to distinguish this position from (3), since many critics are unclear about the extent to which the *Parson's Tale* is subject to the dramatic context of the *Tales* as a whole.

<sup>9</sup> Of the three kinds of spiritual sleep — ignorance, negligence, and concupiscence — Innocent designates ignorance as the worst: 'Nam ex negligentia procedit delictum, ex concupiscentia procedit peccatum, ex ignorantia provenit delictum atque peccatum'; J. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (Venice 1778) XXII col. 974. Innocent's sermon is discussed by E. J. Arnould, *Le manuel des péchés* (Paris 1940) 6ff.

of Exeter, responded with an educational enterprise that had two aspects.<sup>10</sup> First, and primarily, they sought to instruct the clergy in the knowledge it required to perform its tasks properly: basic theology, the canon law governing clerical behavior and pastoral care, and the proper administration of the sacraments, especially penance.<sup>11</sup> Second, they sought to instruct the laity in the basic elements of the faith: the ten commandments, seven sins and virtues, seven sacraments with special attention to penance ('que exiguntur ad vere confessionis et penitentie sacramentum,' as Grosseteste says in the prologue to his *Constitutions*), the seven (or fourteen) deeds of mercy, and so forth.<sup>12</sup> As well as prescribing what is to be taught, several of the bishops also provided the catechetical material itself, either directly as part of the statutes or as complementary treatises designed to be circulated with them.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Marion Gibbs and Jane Lang, *Bishops and Reform, 1215-1272* (London 1934) 94-179; Christopher R. Cheney, *English Synodalia of the Thirteenth Century* (London 1941). The relevant texts have been newly edited by F. M. Powicke and C. R. Cheney, *Councils and Synods with other Documents relating to the English Church*, 2 volumes (Oxford 1964).

<sup>11</sup> Efforts at instructing the clergy had been renewed even before the Lateran Council: Robert of Flamborough's *Liber poenitentialis*, ed. J. J. Francis Firth (Toronto 1971), was written prior to 1213 at the instigation of Richard Poore, at that time Dean of Salisbury; and a sub-dean of Salisbury, Thomas de Chobham, wrote a *Summa confessorum*, ed. F. Broomfield (Louvain 1968), probably before 1215 and certainly before Poore issued his synodal statutes sometime before 1219. The vast majority of surviving discussions of penance are in handbooks for priests such as these or the works written in England in the early fourteenth century by, for instance, William of Pagula: Leonard Boyle, 'The *Oculus sacerdotis* and Some Other Works of William of Pagula,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th Series 5 (1955) 81-110. A survey of this material is provided by Pierre Michaud-Quantin, *Sommes de casuistiques et manuels de confession au moyen-âge, XII<sup>e</sup>-XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Louvain 1962).

<sup>12</sup> Grosseteste prescribes the ten commandments, seven sins, seven sacraments, confession, and baptism. He adds: 'Habeat quoque quisque eorum saltem simplicem intellectum fidei, sicut continetur in simbolo, tam maiori quam minori, et in tractatu qui dicitur: Quicumque vult, qui cotidie ad Primam in ecclesia psallitur,' i.e., the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian creeds; Powicke and Cheney I 268. Pecham's programme is much the same: the fourteen articles of faith, ten commandments, two 'precepta evangelii, scilicet, gemine caritatis,' seven works of mercy, seven sins 'cum sua progenie,' seven virtues, and seven sacraments; Powicke and Cheney II 900-901.

<sup>13</sup> This is true of Stavensby, Pecham, Quinel, and Grosseteste. See the comment by Powicke and Cheney on Pecham's *Constitutions*: 'A lengthy chapter (c. 9) preceding the sentences of excommunication is of a didactic sort more common in diocesan statutes. It provided parish priests with the rudiments of religious instruction which they needed for themselves and for the teaching of their flock. It is to be compared with other manuals of instruction issued by diocesan bishops in England and abroad in the xiii century [such as Stavensby's c. 29, Quinel's *Summula*, and Grosseteste's *Templum Domini*], but it is not to be traced to any single source. Copies of c. 9 were widely diffused apart from the other canons of the council; it was taken over by John Thoresby, archbishop of York, in 1367, received commentaries in Latin and in English in the later Middle Ages, and as late as 1554 formed the

This material was to be taught to the parishioners 'frequenter domestico ydiomate sane,'<sup>14</sup> and in order to forestall any *litteratus* from imposing on his captive audience, Pecham adds 'absque cuiuslibet subtilitatis textura fantastica.'<sup>15</sup> The most common method of instruction was the sermon, and many works that we now read as lengthy treatises were originally delivered from the pulpit. *Jacob's Well*, for instance, despite being lumbered with a *textura fantastica* of no little *subtilitas*, is divided into ninety-five separate sermons that were delivered, the author tells us at the end, 'þis hool tweyne monythys and more.'<sup>16</sup> Second only in importance to the pulpit as a place of instruction was the confessional. Canon 10 of the Fourth Lateran advised priests to teach 'non solum in praedicationis officio, verum etiam in audiendis confessionibus et poenitentiis injungendis ac ceteris quae ad salutem pertinent animarum,' and Grosseteste told his priests to examine parishioners when they came to confession as to 'utrum scierint predicta, et secundum quod expedit in eis a sacerdotibus instruantur.'<sup>17</sup> The double function of confession is reflected in the contents of the *forma confitendi*, the list of topics on which the penitent is examined.<sup>18</sup> In part these topics are designed to discover the penitent's sins, and he is examined on not only the seven sins but also the five wits and sin *in corde, ore, et opere*. But in part they are also a means of examining him on the items of the faith for which he is responsible, and so the *forma* includes the ten commandments, the works of mercy, the sacraments, the gifts of the Holy Ghost, and even the petitions of the *Pater noster*.

---

basis of Edmund Bonner's article 34 for the diocese of Lincoln' (II 887–888). Phyllis Hodgson, 'Ignorancia sacerdotum: A Fifteenth-Century Discourse on the Lambeth Constitutions,' *Review of English Studies* 24 (1948) 1–11, discusses MS Bodley Eng. th. c. 57, one of the English redactions mentioned by Powicke and Cheney.

<sup>14</sup> Statutes of Richard Poore, c. 3; Powicke and Cheney I 61.

<sup>15</sup> Powicke and Cheney II 901.

<sup>16</sup> Part I, ed. Arthur Brandeis (EETS o.s. 115; London 1900) viii. Other instances, among many, are Edmund Rich's *Le Merure de seinte église*, ed. Harry R. Robbins (Lewisburg, Pa. 1925), and Jacopo Passavanti's *Lo specchio di vera penitenzia*, ed. Maria Lenardou (Florence 1925), delivered as a set of sermons at S. Maria Novella in Florence in 1354.

<sup>17</sup> Mansi col. 998; and see Arnould 11 n. 7; for Grosseteste, see Powicke and Cheney I 269. The didactic function of the confessional is also discussed by Bloomfield xv; John R. H. Moorman, *Church Life in England in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge 1945); and W. A. Pantin 192: 'documents show that confessors were expected to cross-examine penitents on their religious knowledge as well as on their sins, and in this way the confessional was as important as the pulpit as a potential means of religious instruction.'

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the *forma*, see Bloomfield 387–388 n. 107. A concise example can be found in Carl Horstmann, *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole and His Followers* (London 1896) II 340–343; versifications appear in Andrew Clark, ed., *The English Register of Godstow Nunnery* (EETS o.s. 142; London 1911) 8–11, and W. Mackay Mackenzie, ed., *The Poems of William Dunbar* (London 1932) 163–167.

The widening of confession to include instruction is also reflected in the form and contents of the vernacular treatises. Prior to visiting his confessor the penitent is expected to engage in a thorough self-examination that discovers both the sins to be confessed and the circumstances that determine their gravity. There were several kinds of written aids to this self-reflection. One was the first-person confession that diligently rehearsed each item of the *forma*, a soliloquy of sinfulness that the penitent read through before confession and from which he extracted the sins he had himself committed.<sup>19</sup> The most common aids were simply the ubiquitous accounts of the deadly sins *cum sua progenie*. As D. W. Robertson has shown in the case of *Handlyng Synne*,<sup>20</sup> its account of the sins has this clear, practical function. '*Handlyng Synne* "handles" sinful actions so that the reader may "handle" them in thought and finally "handle" them at confession,' and he rightly classifies the work as 'a guide to assist the penitent in his self-examination before confession.'<sup>21</sup> But if accurate in general terms, this classification needs to be broadened to reflect the complicated character of the work. For while *Handlyng Synne*, like many of the treatises, 'developed from the tradition of the confessional inquiry,'<sup>22</sup> it also includes, as does its source, the *Manuel des péchés*, a substantial amount of material that is primarily catechetical. This includes discussions of both the ten commandments and the seven sacraments. In short, the double use of the confessional as a place of instruction as well as penance is reflected in the mixed contents and purposes of the corresponding treatises. Furthermore, many of these works aim for an encyclopedic inclusiveness, repeating and supplementing the topics outlined in the synodal decrees. Even if they show the expected emphasis on penance, it is clear that their purpose is instruction for its own sake. According to one writer, 'to seke knowledge of [God] and of his ordenaunces' is 'noblesse spyrytuall, . . . the moost grete noblesse that

<sup>19</sup> Instances of a dramatized *confessio* are R. H. Bowers, 'The Middle English *St. Brendan's Confession*,' *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen* 175 (1939) 40–49; Jean Gerson, *La confession* (Paris [1490]); *La confession generale de frère Olivier Maillert* (Lyons [1485]). The function of the *confessio* is explained in the fourteenth-century *Clensyng of Mannes Sowle*: 'in this forme of confessioun whiche I write I schal schewe 30w diuers spices of ech of hem which in general ben cleped þe seuene dedely synnes. Scheweth tho in which 3e ben giltly and leueth the remenaunt'; MS Bodley 923, fols. 73<sup>v</sup>–74<sup>r</sup>. The requirement that the sinner must prepare for confession with a careful self-examination is stressed by virtually every writer on penance, e.g., *Jacob's Well* 173–174; *Avis sur la confession*, MS Harley 273 fol. 106<sup>v</sup>; John Bromyard, *Summa praedicatorum* 6.17 (Antwerp 1614) I 126; *Parson's Tale* 1003–4.

<sup>20</sup> Ed. F. J. Furnivall (EETS o.s. 119, 123; London 1901, 1903) 2 vols.; a prose translation may be found in St. John's College, Cambridge, MS G. 30 (197) fols. 1<sup>v</sup>–87<sup>v</sup>, and is discussed by Arnould 292–334.

<sup>21</sup> 'The Cultural Tradition of *Handlyng Synne*,' *Speculum* 22 (1947) 167.

<sup>22</sup> Robertson 183.

is and that man may haue,' and it is to fulfill this ambition that these texts are written.<sup>23</sup>

There is of course a wide variety of types among the many Middle English devotional treatises, and in our present state of knowledge any final classifications are impossible.<sup>24</sup> But the *Parson's Tale* is a clear instance of one recognizable type, the manual for penitents, and when it is placed within this category its distinctiveness becomes apparent. While most of these manuals stress the priority of penance they are not, as we have seen, simply adjuncts to the sacrament. Of the three dozen or so treatises I have examined, all but four are concerned with larger didactic concerns.<sup>25</sup> The four exceptions, which

<sup>23</sup> *Lucydarye* (London 1508) fol. 1<sup>v</sup>. Some writers, however, prescribed a more severe injunction, as in this passage from W. O. Ross, ed., *Middle English Sermons* (EETS o.s. 209; London 1940) 15: 'Sir, ryght as Criste is well payed with euery man þat can is lawe, and þe more þat he can þer-of, þe bettur he is apeid, ryght so euery lewde man and laborere is excused generally to beleue as all holychurche dothe with-owte more lernynge þer-of. 3it he may not excuse hym, but he muste do is diligence to knowe and to cunne hem, þe xij articles, as I haue seid hem; þe x Commaundementes; þe v wittys; and þe vij werkes of mercye, of þe wiche God at þe Day of Dome inspeciall shall reherse vs. And þer-for þer may no Cristen man excuse hym of þis, but þat he muste nedis kepe hem and fulfill hem. And giff we do þus trewly, þan we shall verely at þe Daye of Dome vndirstonde Goddes lawe face to face.'

<sup>24</sup> A beginning towards such classifications, and a preliminary bibliography, is usefully provided by P. S. Jolliffe, *A Check-List of Middle English Prose Writings of Spiritual Guidance* (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Subsidia Mediaevalia 2; Toronto 1974).

<sup>25</sup> Of the texts consulted, the following are relevant to the comments that follow (bibliographical information, when not provided here or above, may be found in Jolliffe):

**English:** Dan Michael, *Ayenbite of Inwit* (Jolliffe, A.1 (a)); *Book of Vices and Virtues* (A.1 (b)); *Ignorancia sacerdotum* (A.2); *A Myrour to Lewde Men and Women* (A.3); *Memoriale credencium* (A.4); MS Add. 30897 fols. 78<sup>r</sup>-137<sup>v</sup> (A.5 (b)); *Disce mori* (A.6); *Be Manuel of Zynnes* (A.7); MS Douce 60 fols. 213<sup>v</sup>-228<sup>r</sup> (C. 17); MS Sloane 1584 fols. 63<sup>v</sup>-79<sup>v</sup>, 19<sup>v</sup>-21<sup>v</sup> (E.2); St. John's College, Cambridge, MS S.35 (E.12); *The Clensyng of Mannes Sowle* (E.14); *The Weye to Paradys* (E.15); Richard of Lavynham, *A Lilyl Tretys* (F.2); *The Book Royal* (F.9); *Manuale curatorum*, MS Rawl. D.913 fols. 10<sup>r</sup>-19<sup>v</sup>; *The Boke of Penance*, in *Cursor Mundi* Part 5, ed. Richard Morris (EETS o.s. 68; London 1878) 1470-1586; *Speculum Christiani*, ed. Gustaf Holmstedt (EETS o.s. 182; London 1933); John Myrc, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. Edward Peacock (EETS o.s. 31; London 1868); *The Lay Folks' Catechism*, ed. Thomas F. Simmons and H. E. Nolloth (EETS o.s. 118; London 1901); *Handlyng Synne* (*op. cit.*); *Speculum Gy de Warewyke*, ed. Georgiana Lea Morrill (EETS e.s. 75; London 1898); Andrew Chertsey, *Lucydarye* (London 1508); *Jacob's Well*; *The Pricke of Conscience*, ed. Richard Morris (Berlin 1863).

**French:** *Avis sur la confession*, MS Harley 273 fols. 103<sup>r</sup>-110<sup>v</sup>; Edmund Rich, *Le Merure de seinte église*; Pierre d'Abernun, *Lumière as lais*, MS ULC Gg. 1.1. fols. 17<sup>r</sup>-111<sup>v</sup>; MS Trinity College, Cambridge, O.1.20 fols. 325<sup>r</sup>-330<sup>v</sup>; MS Trinity College, Cambridge, O.2.45 fols. 6<sup>r</sup>-7<sup>v</sup>; MS Trinity College, Cambridge, R.14.7 fols. 1<sup>r</sup>-120<sup>v</sup>; MS Douce 282 fols. 56<sup>r</sup>-62<sup>v</sup>; MS Bodley 82 fols. 39<sup>r</sup>-57<sup>v</sup>; MS Bodley 90 fols 1<sup>r</sup>-77<sup>v</sup>; MS Bodley 654 fols. 119<sup>r</sup>-140<sup>v</sup>; MS Bodley Fr.1.1 fols. 84<sup>v</sup>-105<sup>r</sup>; MS Rawl. C.46 fols. 300, 322<sup>r</sup>.

constitute in effect a genre of their own, are *The Clensyng of Mannes Sowle*, *The Weye to Paradys*, *The Boke of Penance*, and the *Parson's Tale*.<sup>26</sup> These four treatises (and there may of course be others like them to be found) have a tripartite structure to match the three parts of penance: they begin with contrition and its causes, then deal with confession and the seven deadly sins, and conclude with an account of satisfaction.<sup>27</sup> There are, of course, significant variations among them in detail and in the order of treatment within each part. But they are alike in the simplicity and coherence of a common structure that reflects a common subject and function. Their concern is not with a life of moral struggle and aspiration, but with the justification of sin through penance, and their matter is fitted securely within a penitential perspective that guarantees its relevance. The very organization of the text, in other words, is a source of persuasion, the judicial force of penance providing an urgency that needs no stylistic enhancement.

The *Parson's Tale* is thus not merely one among the many different sorts of religious writing typical of fourteenth-century England; far less is it what it is so often called, 'a typical medieval sermon.'<sup>28</sup> It is an instance of a clearly defined and recognizable genre, the manual intended exclusively for penitential use. Further, in his subsequent articulation of the details of content and structure, and in his stylistic choices, Chaucer reinforces precisely the literary values characteristic of the genre. The penitential treatise is characterized by a simple overall structure that enforces the clarity of its focus and function. The severity with which Chaucer's text restricts itself to this purpose is unusual even among its structural analogues. For both *The Clensyng of Mannes Sowle*

---

<sup>26</sup> *The Clensyng of Mannes Sowle* survives in four MSS; I have consulted MS Bodley 923. *The Weye to Paradys* is found only in MS Harley 1671; it appears to be an English redaction made in the fifteenth century of the fourteenth-century French prose treatise *La voie de paradis*: see the description of this work by George H. Keith, 'A Medieval Prose *Voie de Paradis*,' *Romanic Review* 58 (1967) 166–172. *The Boke of Penance* survives complete in one MS and partially in three others; it is printed by Morris as an addendum to *Cursor Mundi*. Both *Clensyng* and *Boke* date from the late fourteenth century.

<sup>27</sup> This structure should be contrasted to that of a more generally didactic treatise such as *Memoriale credencium*, MS Harley 2398: ten commandments, seven deadly sins and remedies, penance, sacrament of the altar, tribulation and temptation, *Pater noster*, seven theological virtues, articles of faith, four further virtues, self-knowledge and the knowledge of God, seven sacraments, seven gifts of the Holy Ghost, seven works of mercy, and the contemplation of God in His creatures, in Scripture, and in Himself. For the development of the complicated structure of the *Manuel des péchés*, see Charlton Laird, 'Character and Growth of the *Manuel des Pechiez*,' *Traditio* 4 (1946) 253–306.

<sup>28</sup> The phrase is used by W. W. Lawrence, 'The Tale of *Melibeus*,' in *Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown* (New York 1940) 104, but the sentiment is ubiquitous: e.g., John Speirs, *Chaucer the Maker* (London 1951) 200, or Ian Robinson, *Chaucer and the English Tradition* (Cambridge 1972) 147.

and *The Weye to Paradys* contain a variety of didactic materials that are only tangentially relevant: catechetical accounts of the ten commandments, the twelve articles of faith, and so forth; discussions of despair and free will; and in *The Weye* an elaborate presentation of Christ's passion, complete with illuminations, as material for meditation. Similarly, *Clensyng* and *The Boke of Penance* both contain material relevant not to the penitent but to the confessor, such as *Clensyng's* discussion of various canonical issues and *The Boke's* account of the office of a priest. *The Parson's Tale*, on the contrary, explicitly refuses to broaden its discussion to include anything that is not specifically penitential. When the opportunity arises to discuss the ten commandments Chaucer gracefully declines: 'But so heigh a doctrine I lete to divines' (957); and he similarly avoids discussing the petitions of the *Pater noster* by reference to 'maistres of theologie' who are alone capable of this 'exposicioun' (1043). Even more significant than this avoidance of distraction is the effort throughout the *Parson's Tale* to provide an account of sinfulness and its cure that is at once detailed and intellectually coherent. The structural simplicity and clarity of function that are characteristic of the genre are in Chaucer's usage extended throughout the details of his text. His approach is rationalistic, almost philosophical, and it is not too much to say that he grounds the vivid details of sinful action in a comprehensive metaphysic. In its intellectual ambitions his text differs not merely from others of its genre but from the whole range of comparable religious writings. Not that the *Parson's Tale* is unique; most of its details can be paralleled elsewhere, and we now possess the Latin texts that are, in all likelihood, its immediate sources: Pennafort's *Summa de casibus* for the penitential frame, the text called *Primo/Quoniam* for the sins, and the text called *Postquam* for the *remedia*.<sup>29</sup> But the important point is that in both his choice of sources and in his revisions Chaucer has elected to use just those elements from the paradigms of religious writing that will enforce a sense of theoretical cohesion.

---

<sup>29</sup> Kate O. Petersen, *The Sources of the Parson's Tale* (Radcliffe College Monographs 12; Boston 1901); Siegfried Wenzel, 'The Source of Chaucer's Seven Deadly Sins,' *Traditio* 30 (1974) 351-378; Wenzel, 'The Source for the "Remedia" of the Parson's Tale,' *Traditio* 27 (1971) 433-453. There is a fourth source yet to be found, a probably French discussion of pride: see below, note 56. While of course an intermediary between these texts and the *Parson's Tale* may yet appear, Professor Wenzel's comments in his 1971 article bear repeating: 'I would not be astonished if future investigations and finds made it more and more likely that Chaucer himself had put the Tale together from a variety of sources' (453); in 1974 he said: '. . . the suggestion that Chaucer may have combined these ingredients himself still remains a distinct possibility' (378). My own understanding of both the cohesiveness of the Tale and of its differences from similar works, as well as its unmistakably Chaucerian stamp in detail and intention, leads me to agree with Wenzel's suggestion.

In the *Parson's Tale*, then, sin is not merely identified and reprehended but explained. Alone among the Middle English treatises I have examined, the *Parson's Tale* contains an elaborate account of sinfulness *per se* (321–357). It then enforces this metaphysical concern by carefully locating each individual sin within a theological context. Furthermore, this context is appropriate philosophically: sin is understood in neither psychological nor judicial terms (neither as a spiritual condition nor as a criminal act) but ontologically, as a derangement of the divine order. In this presentation Chaucer is of course simply following the central teachings of medieval theology. Sin is a negation of reality rather than a reality in its own right. Far more than a disobedience, it violates not merely a code of conduct but the purpose and structure of creation itself. In giving to the things of creation the love due to the Creator, the sinner defects from his role in a divine disposition that finds its only fulfillment in God. He literally 'unmakes' himself, declines back toward the nothing from which he was first created.<sup>30</sup> When Augustine says, in a sentence that was to provide the Middle Ages with its standard definition of sin, 'Ergo peccatum est, factum vel dictum vel concupitum, aliquid contra aeternam legem,' he is referring to a *lex aeterna* that is known ethically in the commandments but also ontologically in the form, order, and due measure that inform reality. 'Lex vero aeterna est, ratio divina vel voluntas Dei ordinem naturalem conservari jubens, perturbari vetans.'<sup>31</sup> As Chaucer says, '... God hath creat alle thynges in right ordre, and no thyng withouten ordre, but alle thynges been ordeyned and nombred' (218). But 'in mannes synne is every manere of ordre or ordinaunce turned up-so-doun' (260). Further, not only is this *ordo naturalis* violated by sin but both the sinful act and agent are themselves deprived of it. Hence in rebelling against God the sinner rebels as well against his own created being: his sin is a continuous and progressive self-destruction that enacts the metaphysics of sin both psychologically and judicially.

The *Parson's Tale* presents sin in these theoretical terms. This is accomplished not only in the amplifying discussion of specific points, as in the two phrases quoted above from the discussions of the third and fourth causes of contrition, but more directly in the introductions, both general and individual, to the accounts of the seven sins. The general introduction (321–357) gives an account of the 'spryngynge of synnes' by means of a traditional moralization of the Fall. Satan is to be understood as the agent of temptation, Eve as the tempted flesh, Adam as the reason that tragically consents. Because of the Fall temptation (although not sin) is now inevitable: as Chaucer rightly points

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 14.13.1 (PL 41.420–21), *Contra Secundinum Manichaeum* 1.15 (PL 42.590); Gerhard B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform* (Cambridge, Mass. 1959).

<sup>31</sup> *Contra Faustum* 22.27 (PL 42.418).

out, while baptism can remove the 'synne' (*culpa*) of the Fall it cannot overcome the 'peyne' (*poena*), 'whiche peyne highte concupiscence. And this concupiscence, whan it is wrongfully disposed or ordeyned in man, it maketh hym coveite' (335–336) and so leads him into temptation. But while 'every wight is tempted in his owene concupiscence' (348, quoting James 1.14), sin occurs only when, like Adam and Eve, we submit to the suggestion of the devil and consent with our reason to the temptations offered by our three enemies, the world, the flesh, and the devil himself (336). The Fall thus provides both an archetype (to use Augustine's word) and a cause for sin.<sup>32</sup> Since we sin, as Paul says, 'in similitudinem praevaricationis Adae' (Romans 5.14), our relationship to the Fall is at once typological and allegorical: each sinful act at once recreates the act that began human history and contains within itself the meaning of sin *per se*.

This introduction serves to locate the vivid descriptions of the sinful acts that are about to be enumerated in a firm theological context that rises above vividness and specificity. Sin is to be understood not merely as a characteristic of this time and this place but as the central fact of the human situation. This generalizing perspective is reinvoked in the individual accounts of each sin. Although dealing with a notoriously random and disparate topic, Chaucer provides careful structures. The wide variation in length among the accounts of both the sins and the *remedia*, ranging from 144 lines for anger down to 18 for gluttony, and the paratactic and conjunctive style in which much of the material is presented, give an impression of an apparently limitless enumeration of specific sinful acts — branches and twigs, in the traditional metaphor that is invoked at the beginning only to be significantly dropped. But in fact the discussions follow a careful and, with few exceptions, consistent pattern of exposition. First the sin is related to others of the seven, reminding us through this reference to the *progressus peccati* that each sinful act is part of a larger process of self-destruction.<sup>33</sup> This is followed by a definition of the sin, and the introduction is then completed by a careful exposure of its nature and gravity in relation to the divinely disposed reality of which it is both a privation and violation.<sup>34</sup> Only after this context has been established does

<sup>32</sup> *De civitate Dei* 15.5.1 (PL 41.441).

<sup>33</sup> On the *progressus peccati*, see Bloomfield 355 n. 12; and Alfred L. Kellogg, 'An Augustinian Interpretation of Chaucer's Pardoner,' *Speculum* 26 (1951) 465–481. In "Seith Moyses by the Devel": A Problem in the "Parson's Tale," *Revue Belge de philologie et d'histoire* 31 (1953) 61–64, reprinted in *Chaucer, Langland, Arthur: Essays in Middle English Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J. 1972) 339–342, Kellogg shows that lines 355–356 derive from the *Summa de officio sacerdotis* by Richard de Wetheringsette (or Wetherset) and refer precisely to the *progressus peccati*.

<sup>34</sup> The definition is lacking in the case of *luxuria*, although the theoretical element is by no means absent or even reduced; see below, pp. 343–344.

the discussion turn to an enumeration of the 'speces' of the sin. The effect of this procedure is to contain each specific act within a controlling theoretical perspective. The arrangement stems not from a bureaucratic impulse toward neatness but from a vision that sees all of experience as reflecting a universal and rationally apprehensible order and coherence. And while these elements are included not always in this sequence — pride and lust, the first and the last on the list, are the exceptions — they are present in every description.

In demonstration of this program let us analyze the discussion of *accidia*, which would seem to be an entirely passive and self-enclosed sin. The account begins by linking *accidia* to the wrath and envy that have preceded it in the order of discussion: their obsessions and turmoil exhaust and embitter the sinner and prepare him for *accidia*'s negations (677–678a). As with envy and wrath, two definitions are now provided, one that is psychological ('the an-gwisssh of troubled herte'), the other, assigned to Augustine, implying more spiritual values: 'anoy of goodnesse and Ioye of harm' (678b). The personifications implicit in this phrase prepare us for an exposition of the sin's spiritual nature and gravity:

Certes, this is a dampnable synne; for it dooth wrong to Jhesu Crist, in as muche as it bynymeth the service that men oghte doon to Crist with alle diligence, as seith Salomon [Eccl. 9.10]. But Accidie dooth no swich diligence. He dooth alle thyng with anoy, and with wrawnesse, slaknesse, and excusa-cioun, and with ydelnesse, and unlust; for which the book seith, 'Acursed be he that dooth the service of God necligently' [Jer. 48.10]. (679–680)

Having now established that *accidia* is a sin directed, like all sins, against God Himself, Chaucer amplifies his theme by applying a traditional trope of moral writing, man's three 'estates' of innocence, sin, and grace. In each of these estates *accidia* frustrates the service man owes God, whether it be the 'heriynge and adowrynge of God' enjoined upon pre-lapsarian man, the 'laboure in preiynge to God for amendement of hire synnes' of fallen man, or finally the 'werkes of penitence' of redeemed man. Hence, continues Chaucer, *accidia* is like the fourth estate known to man, damnation, 'by cause of hir slouthe and of hire hevynesse; for they that been dampned been so bounde that they ne may neither wel do ne wel thynke' (686). Only at this point, then, can the enumeration of the various species of *accidia* begin.

Here a rhetorical structure suggests a metaphysical order: the trope of the three/four estates becomes not just a device of exposition but a demonstration of the way sin attacks the form, order, and measure of God's creation. The theoretical discussions of pride, envy, anger, and avarice are developed according to the same plan. With pride the trope is that of the three goods of nature, fortune, and grace upon which the foolish man prides himself (448–474); with envy it is the unforgiveable sin against the Holy Ghost, which is at heart a form of malicious envy (484–490); with anger it is the relation of the

*imago Dei* in which man was originally made to the *imago daemonis* he has become through sin (535–545); and with avarice it is the comparison with idolatry, ‘for certes, every floryn in his cofre is his mawmet. . . . Thus is an avaricious man, that loveth his tresor biforn God, an ydolastre’ (749, 751b). The discussion of lechery, on the other hand, lacks a self-contained theoretical introduction, but the specifically spiritual offensiveness of this sin is actually stressed even more than in the other cases. Chaucer divides *luxuria* into two forms, lechery and adultery; lechery is simple fornication, a violation of the ‘old lawe,’ but adultery (‘avowtrie’) breaks the new law, especially as it is expressed in the sacrament of marriage. ‘Certes, the brekyng of this sacrement is an horrible thyng. It was maked of God hymself in paradys, and confermed by Jhesu Crist. . . . This sacrement bitokneth the knyttyng togidre of Crist and of hooly chirche’ (842–843). There are other forms of adultery as well — fornication by those in holy orders, the abuse of sexuality in marriage, incest, and sodomy (890–911) — and it is these explicit violations of the ordinances of the *lex aeterna* that most concern Chaucer in his account of *luxuria* (there are 64 lines devoted to adultery, only 14 to lechery).<sup>35</sup> Even gluttony, given the shortest discussion, is carefully linked to the larger perspective: ‘This synne corrupped al this world, as is wel shewed in the synne of Adam and of Eve,’ and as Paul says, many are ‘the enemys of the croys of Crist; of whiche the ende is deeth, and of whiche hire wombe is hire god . . .’ (819–820). This is not verbal overkill but a necessary insistence that when a man commits even the most inoffensive of the sins of gluttony — when, for instance, he ‘devoureth his mete, and hath no rightful manere of etyng’ (825) — then he is re-enacting the primal defecation and is an enemy to the passion of Christ by which every sin is justified.

At the risk of overemphasizing the distinctiveness of the *Parson’s Tale*, we should nonetheless recognize that Chaucer is introducing an intellectual and theoretical concern into material that is far more commonly treated in a realistic and hortatory fashion. To my knowledge, there is no passage com-

---

<sup>35</sup> The confused structure of the discussion of *luxuria* makes its argument difficult to follow, but it is present and may be outlined as follows:

- I. Relation of *luxuria* to the preceding sin (gluttony): 836.
- II. Nature and gravity of *luxuria*:
  1. of lechery: 837–839;
  2. of adultery (discussed in terms of the first kind, ‘that is to seyn, if that oon of hem be wedded, or elles bothe’): 840–864, 873–890.
- III. Kinds:
  1. of lechery (1–3): 865–872, 912–914;
  2. of adultery (2–5, number 1 having been discussed above): 890–911.

To sort out the argument in this way is to demonstrate its fundamental clarity, but obviously the exposition is imperfectly achieved.

parable to Chaucer's account of the nature and development of sin to be found in any vernacular treatise on the sins. And while the presentation of the individual sins in terms of definition, gravity, and then species is more common, it is by no means universal. It is not found, for instance, in *The Boke of Penance*, *The Clensyng of Mannes Sowle*, or *The Weye to Paradys*, the three treatises most like Chaucer's in structure and function. At any rate, the point is less that Chaucer is unique in his rhetorical strategy than that he has a consistent strategy at all. The quite remarkable degree of its consistency, furthermore, can be seen if we turn for a moment from *dispositio* to *elocutio*, where the same cognitive and conceptualist procedure is at work. It is of course true that Chaucer continues to provide detailed descriptions of individual sinful acts accompanied with the expected exhortations; and several traditional homiletic themes are given a not ineffective treatment: the attacks on extravagant clothing (pride), back-biting (envy), swearing (anger), hard lordships (avarice), and the disgusted account of the five stages of lechery are the most important instances.<sup>36</sup> There are also moments of direct address when the instructional purpose of the work gives way to a more emotional appeal, as in the apostrophes against anger (559–560) and despair (698–705). But on the whole these traditional homiletic elements are played down in favor of a more sober tuition, just as the form of the whole is that of a treatise rather than a sermon.

This is most obvious in the virtual<sup>36</sup> exclusion of the great stock-in-trade of the medieval preacher, the *exemplum*,<sup>37</sup> but it is also evident in the sparing appearance of vivifying images and comparisons. Fewer than two dozen instances occur in the whole of the section on the sins (as opposed to some seventy references to scripture or patristic authorities), and of these most are either clichés<sup>38</sup> or quotations from the Bible or an *auctor*.<sup>39</sup> In fact, only three or four have the energy and wit characteristic of both homiletic writing and Chaucer's satiric style.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, most traditional accounts of the sins are enlivened with moments of dramatic life, the abstract sin being suddenly crystallized into a human scene that is enacted before us:

---

<sup>36</sup> An account of the traditional discussions of these themes may be found in G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (2nd ed.; Oxford 1961).

<sup>37</sup> The only *exemplum* in the work is the story, included in the *remedium* against ire, of the philosopher who loses his temper with a naughty pupil. In commenting on the relation of the *remedia* as a whole to their source, Siegfried Wenzel says: 'The redactor — whether he was Chaucer himself or an intermediary — evidently went through the Latin work with care and selected what served his purpose, disregarding almost completely the wealth of authorities and of images that are so typical of popular preaching' ('The Source for the "Remedia" of the Parson's Tale' 451).

<sup>38</sup> As at lines 441, 620, 636, 718, 721, 792, 853, 855, 859, and 951.

<sup>39</sup> As at lines 468, 568, 631, and 768.

<sup>40</sup> As at lines 424, 858, 899, and 954; two of these (858, 899) occur in the source.

And right as fuyre caste first up smoke and afterward bresteth up the leie [i.e., into flames], right so after ire and yvel will cometh stryf and debate; and whan oon seith to an other — ‘It is thus,’ the tother seith — ‘Nay!’: the ton seith — ‘It was thus!’ that other seith — ‘It was nought so!’ Thus bygynneth stryf; and after that cometh chidyng, with ‘Thou lixte’ and ‘Thou lixt.’<sup>41</sup>

There is nothing like this in the *Parson's Tale*. In fact, one of the great dramatic opportunities in homiletic writing, the tavern scene that conventionally illustrates drunkenness, is excluded, leaving *gula* with by far the shortest account of any of the sins.<sup>42</sup> Finally, the homilists' violent denunciations, directed sometimes against the sin itself, sometimes, with more satiric intent, against the estate of which it is typical, are here carefully muted. They lack both the political impatience and the holy rage that raise some sermons to an almost apocalyptic height. On the contrary, Chaucer's vision is characteristically balanced — in the midst of the attack on hard lordships he inserts a careful defense of degree (771–774) — and discriminating: after an account of aristocratic extravagance he adds, ‘I speke this for the synne of superfluitee, and nat for resonable honestitee, whan reson it requireth’ (436). The point is not that the *Parson's Tale* is flatly written, although the modern reader who relies on local color to get him through will find it hard going, but that it aims at sober exposition rather than a more vibrant or vivifying effect.<sup>43</sup> By the relative spareness of the writing it seeks to prevent its readers from attending only to the individual instances of sin, to keep them from ignoring, in other words, the larger structure from which these instances must derive their significance. There is indeed no case of human misbehavior that does not or cannot find its place, and what makes the vision compelling is less our recognition of these instances than our understanding of the fact that they can be so neatly and conclusively fitted into a coherent spiritual perspective.

By its insistent foregrounding of its metaphysical assumptions and implications, the *Parson's Tale* lays claim not to a merely literary unity but to a complete and even absolute view of experience as a whole. Its narrowness of focus does not exclude or reduce reality but on the contrary fits all of reality

<sup>41</sup> Owst 459.

<sup>42</sup> 13 lines, compared to 30 for *invidia*, 85 for *superbia*, and 121 for *ira*. On the tavern scene, see Owst 425–449 and, of course, the *Pardoner's Tale*.

<sup>43</sup> Chaucer's stylistic attention seems not to have been directed to the verbal level at all but to the larger units of his text. Margaret Schlauch, ‘Chaucer's Prose Rhythms,’ *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 65 (1950) 568–589, finds only a slight incidence of the *cursum* effect so noticeable in both the Boethius and *Melibee*, and Ralph Elliott's survey of the verbal style of the *Parson's Tale* leads him to conclude that Chaucer is aiming for clarity above all: ‘In keeping with the serious aim of *The Parson's Tale*, language and style are carefully controlled. It is a very even work’ (146).

within a single and peculiarly intense and authoritative perspective. The practical advice that the *Parson's Tale* offers in its role as a preconfessional meditation is throughout grounded in a careful and consistent theory; we are expected not only to enact but to understand its precepts, indeed to enact because we understand. Its appeal is not to the will or the emotions but to the right reason that properly controls these lower faculties. Avoiding the hortatory language and vivid *exempla* characteristic of the mode, the Parson aims not to move but to teach, to turn us away from the 'heigh folye' of sin by demonstrating that, as Chaucer puts it in another context, 'trouthe shal thee delivere, it is no drede.' What persuades, in short, is the inclusive orderliness of the work rather than its energy or realism.

This orderliness extends beyond the discussion of the sins, so much so that it is only when we see it in its entirety, with the discussion of the sins as only one part carefully located in a structured whole, that its full impact becomes apparent. Not only has Chaucer, like other didactic writers, constructed his treatise *secundum ordinem disciplinae* in imitation of the great scholastic *summae*, but his structural control aims to be at once extensive and precise, containing not only the major elements of the work within a fully articulated pattern but organizing as well the details of individual expositions. That these ambitions are in the event unfulfilled is surely less important than that they are projected in the first place. For they make it clear that Chaucer conceives of his work as above all a rational exposition of a single, coherent subject, and that it is to be understood as providing information that is to be learned rather than language or examples that are to move. Furthermore, by its very form the work enforces the metaphysics of sin it elsewhere asserts directly. Its orderliness stands as both a standard by which the disorder of sin is to be measured and as a victory over disorder, a demonstration that the *ars fidei* can fit even the most grotesque and random acts of misbehavior into a coherent pattern.

To turn, then, to its overall structure, the *Parson's Tale* broaches its subject with the common strategy of a sermon-like opening with a text, explication or protheme, and a *partitio* of the theme. But once the sermon form has provided an easy entry into the subject it immediately drops away and the *summa* organization asserts itself. The six parts of the work are: the nature of penance, its etymology, its 'accions or werkynges,' species, 'whiche thynges apertenen and bihoven to Penitence,' and which hinder it. The first four parts are treated in lines 84–106;<sup>44</sup> the last is treated in lines 1057–75.

---

<sup>44</sup> Although Chaucer has been chided for forgetting the etymology, it is in fact included in this discussion in a somewhat oblique fashion. According to the pseudo-Augustinian *De vera et falsa poenitentia* 19.35: 'Poenitere enim est, poenam tenere: ut semper puniat in se ulciscendo, quod commisit peccando. Poena enim proprie dicitur laesio, quae punit et vindicat

The body of the work, then, lines 107–1056, is devoted to the fifth topic, ‘what is bihovely and necessarie to verry perfite Penitence’ (107). In lines 107–127 Chaucer uses authorities and the image of the tree of penance to show that these ‘bihovely and necessarie’ things are contrition, confession, and satisfaction — a demonstration that is not as superfluous as it may seem, for the long-standing medieval dispute about the necessity of confession had recently resurfaced in Chaucer’s time both in nominalist contritionism and in Wyclif’s antisacramentalism.<sup>45</sup> These three concepts now provide the topics for the ensuing discussion. As advertised (128), contrition is treated according to four categories: nature (129–132), causes (133–291), manner (292–307),

---

quod quisque commisit. Ille poenam tenet, qui semper vindicat quod commisisse dolet. Poenitentia itaque est vindicta semper puniens in se quod dolet commisisse’ (PL 40.1128–29). Chaucer includes this definition in the phrase: ‘Penitence . . . is verry repentance of a man that *hall* hymself in sorwe and oother *peyne* for his giltes’ (86b). I am indebted to Siegfried Wenzel for this information.

<sup>45</sup> Scholastic penitential theology taught that justification is fully accomplished only in the sacrament, and that while the penitent’s disposition must be a sincere renunciation of sin it is only through the sacrament (*ex opere operato*) that grace is normally received. In fact, even if the sinner’s disposition is incomplete (*attritio*) the sacrament itself can accomplish its transformation into justifying contrition (*ex attrito fit contritus*). With this doctrine scholasticism reaffirmed the importance of confession and satisfaction, and it firmly located the power of binding and loosing with the Church in its administration of the sacraments (*vis clavium*). Fourteenth-century nominalism, however, called this sacramentalism into question and urged a return to the contritionism of the prescholastics. Ockham quotes Lombard’s distinction between an inner and outer penance and agrees with the *Magister sententiarum* that it is the inner quality alone which justifies. While confession is defended by insisting that the *propositum confitendi* is a part of contrition, the act itself is an effect of contrition rather than a cause or means to it. It is contrition alone, proceeding at least in part *ex puris naturalibus*, by which sins are justified; *Super IV libros Sententiarum* 4.8–9.M–U, in *Opera plurima* (Lyons 1496) IV. Even Bradwardine, with his fierce opposition to nominalistic voluntarism, agrees that remission flows only from true contrition and that the sacrament is not *causa efficiens* of grace but a ‘*signum sacrae rei per ipsum semper collatae, augmenti scilicet gratiae praecedentis*’; see Heiko A. Oberman, *Archbishop Thomas Bradwardine* (Utrecht 1957) 163ff. and Gordon Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians* (Cambridge 1957) 203–206. As well as being discussed in these philosophical circles, contritionism was the natural teaching of the vernacular treatises. For one thing, their ethical and hortatory purpose assumed that salvation can be won through spiritual striving, and naturally part of their focus is on the quality of contrition. One need only note, for instance, the elaborate analysis of contrition in the *Parson’s Tale* or *Jacob’s Well*, both far more elaborate than the corresponding discussions in the *summae confessorum*, to see how the growth of a lay audience encouraged a contritionist attitude. Furthermore, there is the historical fact that most of the treatises were based ultimately on Pennafort’s *Summa* with its strong contritionist bias; see P. Amadeus Teetaert, ‘La Doctrine penitentielle de Saint Raymond de Penyafort, O.P.,’ *Analecta Sacra Tarraconensia* 4 (1928) 156–158. Greta Hort, *Piers Plowman and Contemporary Religious Thought* (London [1938]) 130–155, has convincingly demonstrated Langland’s contritionist bias.

and effect (308–315). The treatment of confession is more complicated; perhaps it can best be explicated by a scheme. We are told that confession will be treated according to three categories: 'Now shul ye understonde [I] what is Confessioun, and [II] wheither it oghte nedes be doon or noon, and [III] whiche thynges been covenable to verray Confessioun' (317). These three categories are then treated in order:

- I. *What* (317–931) is defined as the 'verray shewynge of synnes to the preest,' and in order to do this 'it is necessarie to understonde [1] whennes that synnes spryngen, and [2] how they encreessen and [3] whiche they been' (321); and [4] 'alle the condiciouns that bilongen to . . . synne' (319) must also be confessed;<sup>46</sup>
  1. 'sprynge of synnes' (322–349);
  2. 'in what manere that synne wexeth or encreesseth in man' (350–357);
  3. 'whiche they been,' i.e., either venial or deadly (358–370):
    - a. particular venial sins and their remedies (371–386);
    - b. particular deadly sins and their remedies (387–955);
  4. 'circumstaunces' of sin and 'condiciouns' of confession (960–979).
- II. *Whether* (980–981).
- III. '*Whiche* thynges been covenable to verray Confessioun' (317), i.e., 'foure condiciouns' (982):
  1. 'sorweful bitternesse of herte' (982–997);
  2. 'hastily doon' (998–1002);
  3. 'this condicioun' (4 items) (1003–1011);
  4. 'certeine condiciouns' (9 items) (1012–1027).

After the account of confession is completed, Chaucer turns to satisfaction and deals with it in terms of two topics, alms (1030–1037) and 'bodily peyne' (1038–1056), which completes the fifth part of the work. The sixth part on the 'thynges that destourben penaunce' occupies lines 1057–1075, and the treatise closes with the famous account of the celestial Jerusalem that is the 'fruyt of penaunce' (1076–1080).

The most frequently criticized element of the *Parson's Tale* is the relation of the material on the sins to the rest of the work. It is generally assumed that Chaucer has created or inherited a hybrid form that uneasily yokes together, in the words of a recent commentator, 'two kinds of *summae*, one treating penance, the other the Seven Deadly Sins.'<sup>47</sup> But the inclusion of these elements

---

<sup>46</sup> My outline here is in fact 'a' clarifying reorganization, as the line numbering indicates. Moreover, there is a terminological muddle here between the *circumstances* that determine the gravity of a sin (the estate of a sinner, his age, intention, the nature of the act and its context, and so forth) and the *conditions* of a good confession. These two aspects are conflated in Chaucer's 'condiciouns of a synne' but are sorted out when the circumstances of a sin and the conditions of a confession are discussed (960–979).

<sup>47</sup> Norton-Smith 154.

into one work not only is not unusual in penitential manuals but is virtually mandatory. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find *any* discussion of penance in the later middle ages that does not deal with the sins in more or less detail. As we have seen, 'meditacioun' on the sins is an important part of pre-confessional preparation for the layman, and in the confessional itself the sins are the central element of the examination by the priest. But even if the validity of the presence of the sins is admitted, other commentators complain of the 'unexampled crudity of the combination'<sup>48</sup> and 'the disjointed nature of the links.'<sup>49</sup> But if we look at the text without preconceptions, and without being misled by the inaccurate and inauthentic rubrics,<sup>50</sup> we can see not only that the discussion of the sins is appropriately placed in the second section that deals with confession, but that its precise location is chosen with, if anything, unexampled care. In providing the reader with what he needs to know about confession, Chaucer first describes the origin and development of sin *per se* (I.1 and I.2), then the two kinds of sin, venial and deadly (I.3), then the particular venial sins and their remedies (I.3.a), then the particular deadly sins and their remedies (I.3.b), and finally the circumstances that aggravate or mitigate the gravity of a sin (I.4). It would be hard to conceive of a more orderly development, and complaints about 'the absence of a satisfactory logical link' between the discussions of the two kinds of sin are possible only if we fail to grasp the logical structure that controls the work as a whole.<sup>51</sup> In fact, by *not* introducing a merely stylistic connective between the two kinds of sin Chaucer asks the reader to move beyond any implicit or instinctive sense of structure: we should be concerned not with a superficial quantitative balance but with the powerful logic of a deeper structure that both integrates the account of the sins and renders its length irrelevant.<sup>52</sup> By comparison, the discussions of the sins in both *The Clensyng of Mannes Sowle* and *The Boke of Penance*, in both cases presented in part discursively and in part through a first-person *confessio*, are huddled awkwardly at the end of the section on

<sup>48</sup> John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales* (Chicago 1940) II 454.

<sup>49</sup> Bloomfield 192.

<sup>50</sup> The most glaring instance of inaccuracy is the rubric that appears between lines 957 and 958: 'Sequitur secunda pars Penetencie.' In fact the discussion of the sins has already ended at line 955 so that the rubric interrupts a continuous discussion; and at any rate the 'secunda pars Penetencie' includes the sins rather than succeeding them.

<sup>51</sup> See Germaine Dempster, 'The Parson's Tale,' in W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, eds., *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Chicago 1941) 725.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Jordan rightly points out that 'though the presentation of the deadly sins seems to bulge out of all proportion to its setting in the Parson's Tale, its relevance to confession justifies its presence. Once such an exterior connection is secured, considerations of size become immaterial, since the connected part retains its autonomy and is free to fulfill the requirements of its own nature' (238-239).

confession: since neither of these works has anything more than a gross overall structure there is no necessary place for the sins within the relevant section.<sup>53</sup> Hence the placing in the *Parson's Tale*, far from witnessing to ignorance or haste, points up the care with which the work is conceived.

This is not to say, however, that the work as a whole is executed with comparable care, and in defending the large-scale coherence of the structure we should not overlook the failures of detail. There are various kinds of error in the *Parson's Tale*, ranging from apparent mistakes in translation or wording to confused exposition and argument. Most of the former seem to be little more than slips of the pen: 'subjeccioun' translating *suggestio* (351), while both words are used correctly elsewhere (276, 331);<sup>54</sup> 'enforced' for *informata* (832), which is elsewhere translated properly (658) while 'enforceth' is itself used properly in another context (730); ascribing a biblical quotation to Christ rather than John the Baptist (115); writing 'Of this roote eek spryngeth a seed of grace' (117) when 'This root springs from a seed of grace' is required; or adding a misleading 'of orisouns' (1038) to a phrase in anticipation of the next point.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, items are occasionally misplaced: jangling is wrongly included among the sins of pride (406) — contrary to the rubric introducing the section — and then rightly among the sins of the tongue under envy (649–650);<sup>56</sup> some of the remedies for accidia appear within the account of the sin (689–690, 712–713) instead of all together at the end as with the other sins.<sup>57</sup> And on one occasion the preliminary outline is apparently wrong: we are told to expect six kinds of homicide (565) but are given only three.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *The Weye to Paradys*, on the other hand, places the account of the sins in approximately the same relation to the rest of the material on confession as does the *Parson's Tale*.

<sup>54</sup> Three of the MSS in fact read *suggestion*: see Robinson 768.

<sup>55</sup> Similar errors may be found at lines 365, 792, 867b, and 858. The paragraphing and punctuation in Robinson's edition also cause occasional difficulties.

<sup>56</sup> The inclusion of jangling as a species of pride is common in French treatises on the sins, as in MS Bodley 82, MS Bodley 90, and MS Rawl. C.46. Wenzel points out that Chaucer used a different source for the discussion of pride than for the rest of the sins, and it seems likely that this source was indeed French. In not including a theoretical introduction and in relying upon a merely enumerative organization, the account of pride is more like the rather random French *compileisons* than it is to the rest of the *Parson's Tale*.

<sup>57</sup> Similarly, line 959 awkwardly introduces two of the organizing structures common to confessional treatises — *peccare in corde*, *in ore*, *et in opere*, and the five wits — and then abandons them without comment. This follows upon a similar reference to the ten commandments, and we recognize here Chaucer turning away from the larger catechetical concerns that occupy other treatises.

<sup>58</sup> This may be simply a textual error, with vi having been substituted for the similar iii. In the following passage, the enumeration of 4 kinds of manslaughter appears to be correct: 1) 571b; 2) 572–573; 3) 574–575; 4) 576–579. But for another view, see Dudley R. Johnson, "Homicide" in the *Parson's Tale*, *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 57 (1942) 51–56.

There are as well serious problems of exposition. The account of the 'three acciouns of Penitence' (95–100) is in the event accurate but so confusingly put that the reader needs to consult Pennafort to make his way; and the image of the tree of penance has a number of problems. For one thing, the fruit is defined as the 'fryut of Satisfaccioun' but the biblical quotations supporting this interpretation use 'fruitful' in the wider sense of 'effective,' and it is theologically unsound to suggest that it is satisfaction that makes penance effective (as Chaucer knows, 308–313). Furthermore, in describing the 'fryut of penaunce' at the end of the work as 'the endeles blisse of hevene' (1076) Chaucer uses the concept of fruitfulness in its proper, more generalized form. For another thing, the discussion of the 'seed of grace' that is 'egre and hoot' is confused. Presumably the 'egreness' of the seed is *timor Domini* while the 'heet' is *amor Dei*, the two basic impulses that lead to penance. Interpreted this way the passage presents a perfectly straightforward if otiose moralization. But in fact Chaucer says: 'The *grace* of this seed spryngeth of God thurgh remembrance of the day of doom and on the peynes of helle' (118), and after a reference to *timor Domini* he goes on to talk about the heat of the seed and the love of God. Perhaps there is simply another miswriting here (so that the phrase should read, 'The egrenesse of this seed'), but on the whole the passage seems more a muddle than a mistake. And the concluding reference to the tree of Nebuchadnezzar's dream as the tree of penance, when Daniel himself interpreted it as a symbol of the king's vainglory, seems bizarre.<sup>59</sup>

There is one other defect, this time structural, that can help us not only to judge the quality of the tale but to divine something of Chaucer's stylistic intentions. After discussing the 'circumstances' of sin Chaucer turns to the 'condiciouns' of a good confession (982–1027). There are, we are told at the beginning of the account, 'foure condiciouns' (982), but what follows seems to be fifteen separate items. If we compare this account to its probable source in Pennafort we can see the direction of Chaucer's incomplete revision. Pennafort does have four conditions, *amara*, *festina*, *integra*, and *frequens*; under *integra* he also includes nine other items (*voluntaria*, *fidelis*, *propria*, *accusatoria*, *vera*, *nuda*, *discreta*, *pura*, *morosa*). Chaucer has in fact adopted Pennafort's four categories, but with revisions. One (983–997) and two (998–1002) are essentially the same. But eight of the nine items that Pennafort includes under *integra* are transferred by Chaucer to *frequens* (*morosa* remains behind); a new one is added (premeditation); and *integra* itself is split into two parts (all sins must be confessed, and they must be confessed to one man). The effect is that the third category now includes, as the introduction to it says, 'foure thynges' (1003), *integra* in its two forms, premeditation, and *morosa*

<sup>59</sup> Medieval biblical commentaries also interpret the tree as a symbol of vainglory, and I have been able to find no precedent for Chaucer's comparison.

(1003–1011). The fourth category then has the eight remaining items plus *frequens* (1012–1027). Chaucer's organization is in its substance more reasonable than Pennafort's, but it is in its present form impossible to follow because Chaucer has left out Pennafort's introductory phrases for the last two categories. Consequently, the third category is headed 'this condicioun moste han foure thynges' (1003) and the fourth, even more bewilderingly, simply 'certeine condiciouns' (1012). In revising these lists, then, Chaucer seems to have realized that Pennafort's *integra* and *frequens* were inappropriate labels for their inclusive categories. But he himself failed to provide new ones.

I have dwelt on these errors and omissions at such tedious length partly to defend the *Parson's Tale* from its harsher critics, partly because they suggest something of Chaucer's relationship to the tale. On the whole these errors are local matters of style and organization. The larger structural and thematic coherences of the work remain untouched by them, and while there is nothing particularly daring or *au courant* in the theology, neither are there any blunders.<sup>60</sup> Of course this is hardly surprising in a work that begins by asserting its conservatism and then proves it by citing some 175 'olde sentences.'<sup>61</sup> It is perhaps consistent with this conservatism that the *Parson's Tale* should be more intellectually ambitious than others of its genre, and none of the errors I have noted calls these ambitions into question. They are on the whole errors of execution rather than conception and are most easily explained as effects of haste or inattention. It is easy enough to imagine a neat and tidy *Parson's Tale* and to see the one we have as only a stage on the way. Then we can fit the Chaucer of our choice into the appropriate scenario: he either died in mid-penance or turned with relief to less bloodless work. I do not intend to deny myself the pleasure of these speculations, but first there is further evidence of a rather more interesting nature that needs discussion.

Side by side with passages that betray a nodding Chaucer are others that display a polish and control that argue for careful attention and even revision. The most impressive of these is the account of the six causes of contrition. The initial source of this account is Pennafort, but he provides less than half of Chaucer's version. Furthermore, not only is Chaucer's account greatly expanded but it is significantly varied. Pennafort's six causes are *cogitatio*,

<sup>60</sup> Dunning argues that in his discussion of marriage (917–943) Chaucer first presents a progressive position from which he then nervously withdraws by inserting a conservative statement that marital intercourse is venial sin. Unfortunately for Dunning's argument, the statement in question (920) appears in the source.

<sup>61</sup> Unlike both *The Boke of Penance* and *The Glensyng of Mannes Sowle*, the *Parson's Tale* includes no discussion of the Wyclifite attack on the sacramental value of confession nor an account of attrition and contrition. *The Boke of Penance* also includes a justification of confession, deriving originally from Pennafort, that Chaucer omits. Theologically, the *Parson's Tale* can charitably be described as bland.

*pudor de peccatis commissis, detestatio vilitatis ipsius peccati, timor iudicii et poenae gehennae, dolor de amissione patriae caelestis et multiplicii offensa Creatoris, and spes triplex, veniae, gratiae, et gloriae.*<sup>62</sup> The emphasis of the items on this list is on self-directed emotions that are negative and even self-destructive; indeed, with slightly different objects *pudor*, *timor*, *dolor*, and *desperatio* (which is not very far from *detestatio*) are in fact the four *impedimenta* that stand in the way of contrition itself.<sup>63</sup> In Chaucer's version, however, *pudor* and *detestatio* are combined into one (the second cause) and a new, more generous feeling is added (number five), 'remembrance of the passioun that oure Lord Jhesu Crist suffred for oure synnes' (255). This substitution shows a pastoral attention that is unusual among discussions of penance: none of the other vernacular treatises that use Pennafort's six causes varies any of them.<sup>64</sup> The crucial point for our purposes is the care with which the brief, individual accounts are amplified in Chaucer's text. As with the whole of the work, the eloquence of these passages derives not from style but from disposition, for they use traditional techniques of amplification primarily to extend the range and grasp of the impulse toward order.

The most impressive instance of this technique is the long discussion of the third cause of contrition, 'drede of the day of doom and of the horrible peynes of helle' (158–230). The discussion is divided into two sections, corresponding to the two parts of the traditional phrase, and each section uses a different *modus dilatandi*. The fear of judgment is treated by means of the *auctoritates Sacrae Scripturae et aliorum doctorum catholicorum* and uses what Thomas Waleys, for instance, calls an extrinsic method of connecting the various quoted passages.<sup>65</sup> The passages are presented in a carefully articulated sequence. We begin with Jerome in the midst of life thinking always of the last trump, move to the scene of judgment itself with Paul's visualization, then describe the process (Bernard) and the judge (Solomon), and conclude first with Anselm's account of the anguish and terror of the sinful when they learn of their damnation and finally Jerome's description of the physical act of damnation itself: 'the erthe shal casten hym out of hym, and the see also, and the eyr also, that shal be ful of thonder-clappes and lightnynges' (174). We begin, then, with Jerome's thought of future judgment, move through the act of judgment itself, and conclude with the results of judgment, again given by

<sup>62</sup> *Summa de poenitentia et matrimonio* (Rome 1603) 443.

<sup>63</sup> Pennafort 498–502.

<sup>64</sup> E.g., *The Clensyng of Mannes Sowle, Ignorancia sacerdotum*, and MS Trinity College, Cambridge, R.14.7. The relevant folios from *Clensyng* are printed by Liddell; for the *Ignorancia* see Hodgson.

<sup>65</sup> For a discussion of the techniques of *dilatatio*, see T. M. Charland, *Artes praedicandi* (Publications de l'Institut d'Étude Médiévales d'Ottawa 7; Paris–Ottawa 1936) 194–211; Waleys' treatise is printed on 328–403; see especially 390.

Jerome. The sequence is chronological, a coherent account presented solely by means of quotations about judgment day and why we should fear it. To amplify the second phrase ('drede . . . of the horrible peynes of helle') Chaucer relies on the tradition of the *supplicia damnatorum*, which provides him with both a list of punishments and their rationales, e.g., the sinner who has indulged in 'delices' while alive will have each of his five senses assaulted with ugliness and pain while dead (207–210).<sup>66</sup> But again, rather than present a random list of items Chaucer provides a coherent structure by appropriating Gregory's exegesis of a passage from Job: 'Suffre, Lord, that I may a while biwaille and wepe, er I go withoute returnyng to the derke lond, covered with the derknesse of death; to the lond of mysese and of derknesse, whereas is the shadwe of death, whereas ther is noon ordre or ordinaunce, but grisly drede that evere shal laste' (176–177, Job 10.21). This passage is then broken up into seven phrases which are carefully expounded and among which the various *supplicia* are distributed.

By this blend of two different tropes of religious writing Chaucer's passage manages to render intellectually coherent a vast amount of material. The effect is that the logic of the verbal disposition enforces our sense of the logic of divine justice with its neat *contrapasso*. And our admiration should properly be not for Chaucer nor any earthly maker but for the Creator of a truth that so impressively disposes itself into a pattern that at once pleases and instructs the well-ordered mind. It is in the midst of this account of hell that we are reminded that 'God hath creat alle thynges in right ordre, and no thyng withouten ordre, but alle thynges been ordeyned and nombred' (218), not the least of these things being knowledge itself. The persuasion at which this strategy aims is of the intellect, not the feelings: as Gregory says in his discussion of hell the *sacrum eloquium* by which we are instructed is the eloquence not of words but of truth itself.<sup>67</sup> Chaucer's conclusion lays even greater stress upon this cognitive response:

Whoso thanne wolde wel understande these peynes, and bithynke hym weel that he hath deserved thilke peynes for his synnes, certes, he sholde have moore talent to siken and to wepe, than for to syngen and to pleye. For, as that seith Salomon, 'Whoso that hadde the science to knowe the peynes that been established and ordeyned for synne, he wolde make sorwe.' 'Thilke science,' as seith Seint Augustyn, 'maketh a man to waymenten in his herte.' (228–230)

We are shown why we should fear judgment and hell by having them not set before our eyes but enacted in our minds. The form of the discourse demon-

<sup>66</sup> For comparable but less well-organized discussions of the pains of hell, see Peter Damian, *Institutio monialis* 12 (PL 145.745–746) and *The Pricke of Conscience* 174–203. See also the passage from MS Trinity R.14.7 printed by Bryan and Dempster 745–758.

<sup>67</sup> PL 75.916.

strates the precision and inevitability of divine justice, and by embodying the logic of truth it forces us to acknowledge its self-evident rightness. With the exception of *cogitatio*, each of the discussions of the other causes uses an analogous device — the explication of the metaphor of a scriptural text (142–157), instruction in the doctrine of good works (231–254), moralization of the crucifixion (255–282), and an *ethymologia vocabulorum* (283–291) — and each shows the same structuralist and intellectualist approach. For instance, in substituting remembrance of the passion for *pudor* as a cause we might think Chaucer to be reflecting the contemporary Christology as movingly expressed in the devotions of Rolle and others. But in fact he provides not a meditation but a demonstration, showing that ‘after the diverse disordinaunces of our wikkednesses was the passiou of Jhesu Crist ordeyned in diverse thynges’ (275). Like most medieval exegesis, this passage is directed not to the heart but the head.<sup>68</sup> And the other accounts of the causes show, if not a comparable complexity of exposition, at least an impressive clarity and control, persuasive evidence of the author’s sustained attention.

## II

The large question of the thematic relevance of the *Parson’s Tale* to the other *Canterbury Tales* is bound up with two smaller, rather technical questions: the date of composition and the echoes (or foreshadowings) of passages in the other tales. In fact, once we have put aside our assumptions about the kind of poetry Chaucer ought to have written we notice that virtually the only evidence for either date or relevance are these apparent allusions. The argument for an early date takes them as proof that the *Parson’s Tale* in-

---

<sup>68</sup> The distinction between an exegesis that aims at general knowledge and one that aims at a passionate personal response is the same as that between scholastic *lectio* and monastic *collatio*. The discussion by M.-D. Chenu on the scholastic development of a scientific hermeneutic is instructive in this regard; see *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century*, edd. and trans. Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Chicago 1968) 301–302: scholastic *lectio* ‘was before anything else an exegesis, i.e., an interpretation attempting to explore the objective substance of a text, whatever the subjective needs or the results obtained. For thus the organized scholarly transmission of revelation demanded it; this is why it had to develop sooner or later into a science, moving further and further away from the personal and affective character of religious witness. The word of God was treated as an “object,” given, to be certain, within the context of the faith, but apart from one’s own fervor and experience. . . . Scholastic objectivity robbed the traditional *meditatio* of its ends and its dynamism. . . . The pressure of faith, the light of grace were certainly everywhere present, but scientifically new — for the benefit of scientific lucidity. The *summae* were the masterpieces of this lucidity.’ In *Form and Style in Early English Literature* (London 1971) 50–53, for instance, Pamela Gradon stresses the dispassionate and intellectual quality of the comparison in the *Ancrene Riwe* between the crucifixion and a shield.

fluenced, sometimes heavily, some of the other tales. The argument for relevance takes them as deliberate references by the Parson back to earlier tales and their tellers. While these arguments are logically exclusive, the firmest proponents of relevance nevertheless tend to read the tales both as if the *Parson's Tale* were written early and hence provided a controlling context in Chaucer's mind when he came to compose the other tales, and as if they were told late and hence became Chaucer's last word, a testimonial summing up that only the self-indulgent would dare to ignore. But quite apart from the problem of allusion, the argument for an early date is complicated by the presence of the so-called 'retracciouns.'<sup>69</sup> While readers are doubtless right to consider the effect of this paragraph on the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, it is in the first instance a *licentia auctoris* to the 'litel tretys' of the *Parson's Tale* to which it explicitly refers. But if the *Parson's Tale* is an early work, which are 'the tales of Caunterbury' to which the *licentia* refers? Or are we to believe that Chaucer at one point rejected 'translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees' only to reject the rejection and turn back to them? Clearly, then, the apparent allusions, being finally the only objective evidence for both the chronological and thematic relationship between the *Parson's Tale* and the rest, require careful re-examination.

By the most generous count there are thirty-five passages in the *Parson's Tale* that echo passages in the preceding tales.<sup>70</sup> Of these thirty-five, ten are conventional phrases or ideas that are of value only in showing that the *Parson's Tale* uses typically Chaucerian locutions: riches (or a woman's charms) are as fleeting as 'a shadwe upon a wal' (*Parst* 1068, *Mercht* 1315, *ShT* 9); husband and wife owe each other a marital 'dette' (*Parst* 940, *WBProI* 129–130, *Mercht* 2048); knotty theological questions should be 'lete to divines' (*Parst* 957, *KnT* 1323); riches are often dangerous (*Parst* 472, *KnT* 1255–56, Introduction to *Pard ProI* 294–296); the crowd is often unreliable (*Parst* 473,

---

<sup>69</sup> Norton-Smith, 80 n. 2, argues that the word 'retracciouns' refers not to the farewell paragraph itself but to an apocryphal work invented here by Chaucer himself: 'It should be capitalized and italicized. Chaucer invents his own late work, "my Revisions," citing items as an index.' Olive Sayce, 'Chaucer's "Retractions": The Conclusions of the *Canterbury Tales* and its Place in Literary Tradition,' *Medium Ævum* 40 (1971) 230–248, shows that Chaucer's use of the word is in all likelihood a direct reference to Augustine's *Retractationes*, which is itself not the withdrawal or rejection of earlier work but its correction. Hence it is quite true that the term 'retracciouns' hardly fits the *licentia auctoris* itself.

<sup>70</sup> Koeppl 39–46 lists 33 echoes which he takes as evidence of both the *Parson's Tale's* authenticity and its early date. To his list I have added *Parst* 464, 154, 73, and *WBT* 1158; and *Parst* 884 and *Mercht* 1438–40. *Parst* 248 refers to 'thilke newe Frenshe song, "Jay tout perdu mon temps et mon labour,"' a line which is also quoted in *Fortune*. *Fortune* is usually dated after 1390 and sometimes as late as 1393–94, but there is no way to tell which passage was composed first.

*CIT* 995–1001); and so forth.<sup>71</sup> The other echoes are apparently more substantial and are virtually confined to five of the tale-tellers: the Wife of Bath, Summoner, Merchant, Physician, and Pardoner. To evaluate these echoes properly we should place them in the context of Chaucer's characteristic poetic concerns, in this case his abiding interest in specific, almost technical *modus dicendi*.

Although often considered a learned poet, Chaucer is in fact less interested in the matter of learning than in its form, the characteristic language in which it is expressed. The authorities and arguments with which his characters buttress their positions function as a form of rhetoric, a copiousness that persuades not by its substance but by its impressive mastery of the appropriate way of speaking. These discourses are almost never decisive for the action at hand. In some cases they serve as consolation: Theseus' Boethian profundities allow Palamon and Emily to marry without worrying about either Arcite's departed shade or the less than glorious political realities that have brought them together; the black knight postpones the fact of his lady's death by recalling in moving detail their golden courtship; Dorigen withdraws from her impossible choice into the literary heroism of complaint; and Chauntecleer avoids the nasty implications of his dream, whether a purge or a fox, by overwhelming Pertelote and himself with dream-lore. In other contexts learnedness is a device of simple self-inflation, as with the eagle's labored expositions, the Friar's display of devil-lore, or the Monk's dismal tragedies. These modes of discourse are widely varied: courtly, scientific, historical, philosophical, moral, and — especially later in Chaucer's career — homiletic. The Wife of Bath, for example, assumes and then suborns the anti-feminist language of Jankin's book of wicked wives, and in triumphantly exemplifying its worst assertions she shows how her femininity paradoxically redeems even these sour clerical negatives. In a more satirical vein, the Summoner gives to his fatuous friar an appropriately scattered sermon on *ira*: 'Ire is a thyng that hye God defended, / And therof wol I speke a word or two' (1834–35), he begins, and over 175 lines later (still in mid-stream) he prophetically warns that 'I koude of ire seye so muche sorwe, / My tale sholde laste til to-morwe' (2011–12). Chaucer has brilliantly caught the fluent, fraudulent style of this diligent preacher (1818) as he pieces together traditional phrases, scriptural tags, and barely relevant *exempla* into a plausible and infuriating whole. The Pardoner, on the other hand, is a more self-conscious and effective fraud, and produces a fine instance of one of the great set-pieces of vernacular preach-

---

<sup>71</sup> The other five instances are *ParsT* 389, *MerchT* 1640–41; *ParsT* 857–858, *RvProl* 3879–81, *WBProI* 291; *ParsT* 630, *WBProI* 244; *ParsT* 603, *PardProI* 350–351; *ParsT* 368, *Mel* 1079. Koepfel also lists (46–47) even less substantial parallels in phrasing and syntax.

ing in Chaucer's day, the attack on the tavern vices.<sup>72</sup> Finally, the Merchant and the Physician are more restricted in their use of homiletic materials, but to much the same end. January's interpretation and defense of marriage consist largely of homiletic commonplaces (1383–88, 1433–40, 1441–51) precisely so the Merchant can show that he knows the authorities — he carefully includes a reference to the marriage sermon in his account of the wedding (1703–1705) — and their fatal limitations when faced with experience. And the Physician, morally pretentious but spiritually negligent, tries to ennoble his flaccid tale with a collection of worn homiletic truisms (101–102, 114–116, 206).

In sum, Chaucer's use of homiletic materials is both extensive and critical, and hence some overlap between these tales and the *Parson's Tale* is virtually inevitable. Numerically, this overlap consists of twenty-one specific passages in the *Parson's Tale* that use the same homiletic materials as are found in several of the tales. Any effort to use these overlappings to settle the question of either chronology or relevance, however, is frustrated by the utter conventionality of every one of these phrases. Take, for instance, January's famous defense of lust in marriage: 'A man may do no synne with his wyf, / Ne hurte hymselfen with his owene knyf' (1839–40). This proverb is found in the discussion of *luxuria* in the *Parson's Tale* (859), but also in the analogous discussions in the *Somme des vices et vertues*, *Jacob's Well*, and numerous other treatises on the sins.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, the Pardoner's account of how blasphemers tear Christ's body with their oaths (472–475) is a standard homiletic trope found not only in the *Parson's Tale* (591) but in the English *Book of Vices and Virtues* and other similar texts.<sup>74</sup> And so on.<sup>75</sup> Recent scholarship has shown,

<sup>72</sup> See above, n. 42.

<sup>73</sup> For the reference in the *Somme*, see Eilers 38; *Jacob's Well* 161; and see B. J. Whiting, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly Before 1500* (Cambridge, Mass. 1968) M154.

<sup>74</sup> *Jacob's Well* 153; *Book of Vices and Virtues* 62; and see Robinson's note, 730.

<sup>75</sup> This is a list of all 21 passages: (1) *ParsT* 93, *PhysT* 286: Robinson 728; Whiting S335. (2) *ParsT* 155–157, *WBProL* 784–785: Proverbs 11.22; Robinson 702; Whiting W486; Pratt 623–624. (3) *ParsT* 407, *GP* 377, 449–452: Robinson 663; Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge 1973) 122–123. (4) *ParsT* 484, *PhysT* 114–116: *Middle English Sermons* 50; as Siegfried Wenzel points out, *Traditio* 30 (1974) 355 n. 16, this definition of envy is 'the standard definition in later Scholastic discussions.' The suggestion by Robert Fox that this definition comes to Chaucer from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is most unlikely, 'Chaucer and Aristotle,' *Notes and Queries* 203 (1958) 523–524; and Charles Owen's use of this passage, and also of number 12 below, to settle the question of chronology overlooks also the conventionality of the phrase: 'The Relationship between the *Physician's Tale* and the *Parson's Tale*,' *Modern Language Notes* 71 (1956) 84–87. (5) *ParsT* 564, *SumT* 2009: *Jacob's Well* 93; *Ayenbite of Inwit* 30; Gower, *Confessio Amantis* 3.1093ff. (6) *ParsT* 589, 592, *PardT* 633–637: *Middle English Sermons* 99–101, 109. (7) *ParsT* 591, *PardT* 472–475: see above, n. 74. (8) *ParsT* 593, *PardT* 648–650: *Middle English Sermons* 100. (9) *ParsT*

with specific and impressive documentation, that in passages throughout the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer shows himself to have been fully familiar with the language of contemporary preaching, and that this language begins to appear in his poetry as early as *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>76</sup> To argue, then, that these twenty-one phrasings could have come to Chaucer only through the sources of the *Parson's Tale* is to ignore both their conventionality and Chaucer's familiarity with other homiletic materials. Indeed, the fact that several of the most striking reminiscences do not appear in the sources at all argues just the opposite. These instances include January's proverb about the knife, quoted above; the comparison of a beautiful but lecherous woman to a gold ring in a sow's nose; the flatterer as a *Placebo*; the injunction that a man should forsake sin before sin forsakes him; and the comparison of a negligent governess and her charge to a wolf and a lamb.<sup>77</sup>

None of these five passages is anything less than conventional, but their appearance both in the tales and in the *Parson's Tale*, and not in the known sources of the *Parson's Tale*, at least suggests that the relationships here are more complicated and challenging than has been assumed. In dealing with this overlapping of homiletic material we should not forget that its function in the tales and in the *Parson's Tale* is substantially different. In the tales the characters use the language of homiletic exhortation as the material from which they fashion nothing less than themselves. This is most true of the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner, the two characters who fully accept the challenge of the Chaucerian dramatic monologue and create themselves for us not merely in language but *as* language, giving to a generalized mode of speaking

---

617, *SumT* 2075; Eilers 530; Robinson 708. (10) *ParsT* 631–634, *WBProI* 278–280, *Mel* 1086; Robinson 742. (11) *ParsT* 710, 714, *SNProI* 1–3; Robinson 756. (12) *ParsT* 721, *PhysT* 101–102; Robinson 728. (13) *ParsT* 793, *PardT* 591–594; *Jacob's Well* 134–135. (14) *ParsT* 819, *PardT* 504; Phil. 3.18–19. (15) *ParsT* 819–820, *PardT* 529–533; *Middle English Sermons* 107; *Speculum Christiani* 68; *Jacob's Well* 141. (16) *ParsT* 822, *PardT* 558–559; Robinson 695, 730. (17) *ParsT* 836, *PardT* 481–484, *PhysT* 59, *WBProI* 464; *Proverbs* 20.1; *Middle English Sermons* 56, 107; Robinson 700, 727, 730. (18) *ParsT* 859, *MerchT* 1839–1840; see above, n. 73. (19) *ParsT* 884, *MerchT* 1438–40; Robinson 714. (20) *ParsT* 929, *MerchT* 1384; Robinson 714. (21) *ParsT* 100, *Mel* 1054; Whiting H166. These passages are all typically Chaucerian in both phrasing and diction, but the appearance of their substance in other texts makes it impossible to use them as evidence for the priority of the *Parson's Tale*.

<sup>76</sup> Robert A. Pratt, 'Chaucer and the Hand that Fed Him,' *Speculum* 41 (1966) 619–642; Siegfried Wenzel, 'Chaucer and the Language of Contemporary Preaching,' *Studies in Philology* 73 (1976) 138–161.

<sup>77</sup> These instances are, respectively, numbers 18, 2, 9, 1, and 12 in the list above. The Pardoner's discussion of how blasphemers tear God's body (7) does not appear in the corresponding place in *Primo/Quoniam* but, Professor Wenzel informs me, does appear under *Avarice*. Of course the point is that the ubiquity of these images and proverbs in medieval homiletics makes any ascription of a specific source hazardous in the absence of other evidence.

a unique voice that implies a coextensive character.<sup>78</sup> But it is also true of the more ironic Summoner and Merchant, who in mastering a language show that they have triumphed over their learned opponents who rely upon it, the Friar and the Clerk. Homiletic language functions for all these characters, then, as a means towards a personal end, and its meaning provides little more than an ironic commentary on their strategies of self-creation and mastery. But for the Parson homiletic language remains essentially denotative. Words are signs for realities that transcend the personal, and even when language assumes rhetorical devices and a degree of self-reflexiveness it still functions symbolically, in its order and coherence invoking and delineating the larger order and coherence of a divine reality. Furthermore, at a less abstract level, the *Parson's Tale* is, as we have seen, intellectual rather than hortatory. Consequently, not only is homiletic language used genuinely in the *Parson's Tale* but it is used sparingly: it is for the Parson an ornament and even a respite from his demanding lesson rather than the centre of his rhetorical strategy. Hence the homiletic set pieces in the tales tend to be more extensive and more fully articulated; hence, too, we should not be surprised to find that the rest of our evidence leads us to conclude that the lines of influence run from the tales to the *Parson's Tale* and not *vice versa*.

Of the thirty-five specific echoes, then, ten are nothing more than typically Chaucerian locutions, and a further twenty-one are common or even proverbial phrases that prove little by themselves but in the context of sources and function suggest that it is the *Parson's Tale* that has been influenced by the homiletic material that appears in the tales. The four remaining echoes are more substantial and so more helpful.<sup>79</sup> To be fully understood, these four passages should also be placed in the context of Chaucer's revision of his sources. A comparison shows that there are substantial alterations in just three areas: blasphemy and perjury, the nature of *gentillesse* and the responsibility of the rich to care for the poor, and marriage. Significantly, three of our four remaining allusions fall precisely in these areas; and the fourth involves a technical issue in which there is also a variation from the source.

(1) Blasphemy and perjury hardly seem a typically Chaucerian subject, yet the *Parson's Tale* adds three passages about it to the source, two of them being substantial (594–600, 796–797, 931a). Swearing is also a recurrent theme in the *Canterbury Tales*: the Host and the Parson quarrel about it, the *Friar's Tale* turns on a blasphemous oath, and both blasphemy and perjury are in-

<sup>78</sup> Pratt, *op. cit.*, has shown that Chaucer's use of the *Communiloquium*, or an analogous preacher's handbook, is most extensive in his delineation of the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, and the Summoner's preaching friar.

<sup>79</sup> These four are: *ParsT* 464, 154, 73, *WBT* 1158; *ParsT* 600, *PardT* 631–632; *ParsT* 1008, *SumT* 2098; and *ParsT* 938–939, *MerchT* 1441–51.

cluded, although not in an easily distinguishable form, in the Pardoner's sermon. It is in this last passage that there occurs one of our allusions. In beginning his discussion 'of othes false and grete . . . as olde bookes trete' the Pardoner, with a typical display of scholastic precision, distinguishes between blasphemy and perjury: 'Gret sweryng is a thyng abhominable, / And fals sweryng is yet moore reprevable' (631–632). In the midst of the discussion of swearing in the *Parson's Tale* the same distinction is made: 'Now certes, sith that sweryng, but it be lawefully doon, is so heighly deffended, muche worse is forsweryng falsly, and yet nedelees' (600). While the language is not particularly similar, both passages do express the same idea; and while in the *Parson's Tale* the comment is only awkwardly related to its context, it fits coherently into the *Pardoner's Tale*. Furthermore, this discussion does not appear in the corresponding place in *Primo/Quoniam*, nor in Peraldus' account of the *peccatum lingue*, nor in the vernacular accounts deriving from the Peraldian tradition.<sup>80</sup>

(2) Throughout his work, and most memorably in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, Chaucer gives impressive expression to the medieval topos that nobility consists in *virtus non sanguis*. This assertion has a converse, also mentioned by the old hag, that only 'vileyns synful dedes make a cherl' (1158).<sup>81</sup> This phrase, repeated in a slightly different form in the *Summoner's Tale* ('a cherl hath doon a cherles dede'), is an English version of the French proverb 'Nus n'est vilains, s'il ne vilaine.' In the *Parson's Tale* there is a recurrent and consistent discussion of *gentillesse* that focuses on this theme, with a significant variation. For the Parson churlishness or 'thralldom' is a moral rather than a social quality, and he gives it a forceful penitential interpretation by linking it with the scriptural passage 'qui facit peccatum, servus est peccati': 'Whoso that dooth synne is thral of synne' (142).<sup>82</sup> And Chaucer continues, in a passage that does not appear in Pennafort:

Allas! wel oghten they thanne have desdayn to been servauntz and thralles to synne, and soore been ashamed of hemself, that God of his endeles goodnesse hath set hem in heigh estaat, or yeven hem wit, strengthe of body, heele, beautee, prosperitee, and boghte hem fro the deeth with his herte-blood, that they so unkyndely, agayns his gentillesse, quiten hym so vileynsly to slaughtre of hir owene soules. (152–154)

<sup>80</sup> As with the discussion of the tearing of God's body with oaths, the distinction between blasphemy and perjury appears in *Primo/Quoniam* under Avarice; see above, note 77. Pratt 631–635 traces the Pardoner's accounts of gluttony and hazardry to the *Communiloquium*.

<sup>81</sup> George M. Vogt, 'Gleanings for the History of a Sentiment: Generositas Virtus, Non Sanguis,' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 24 (1925) 107; see also *Romaunt* 2181–82.

<sup>82</sup> Pennafort and Chaucer both refer to 2 Peter 2.19, but as Petersen points out, the passage comes in fact from John 8.34; see also Romans 6.16–23 where Paul contrasts slaves of sin and slaves of righteousness.

With this as preparation, then, the Parson's expected attack on the pride of *gentrie*, a traditional element of the Peraldian account,<sup>83</sup> takes on a religious force that Chaucer encourages with the reminder: 'For truste wel that over what man that synne hath maistrie, he is a verrey cherl to synne' (463). Later in the *Parson's Tale* the moral point moves beyond a recognition of the folly of social pride to include specific action: the rich and powerful must not oppress the poor with hard lordships — again we are reminded that churlishness is a condition of sinfulness: 'every synful man is a cherl to synne' (763) — and must relieve the sufferings of the poor with alms (420–421, 804b–805, 811–817, 1035–37). Of the nine or so passages dealing with this theme, all but two are added to the sources, and even these two (145, 461–469) are expanded. This is perhaps the best instance of the consistency and coherence of Chaucer's revisions of his sources, and however traditional the language in which it is expressed the sense of social justice appears genuine and persuasive. The Wife of Bath's discussion, on the other hand, remains at the level of personal insight and her argument is informed with the philosophical idealism of Seneca, Boethius, and Dante. Like Chaucer himself in the lyric *Gentillesse*, she is concerned with the inner nature of a virtue, while the Parson focuses on the shameful spiritual degradation of sin that renders all men equal in bondage. The proverb, then, used by the Wife of Bath with appropriate conventionality, is redirected by the Parson toward a more inclusive and penitential meaning; and although the two discussions share some of the same traditional materials,<sup>84</sup> they are in fact moving in different directions.

(3) Chaucer's interest in marriage is all too well known, and in the *Parson's Tale* he adds or significantly expands some half-dozen passages having to do with marriage (634, 842–846, 927b–928a, 931b, 933–938, 942b–946).<sup>85</sup> These additions, and the discussion of marriage as a whole, express much the same mix of theoretical male domination and practical equality as we find in the *Canterbury Tales*: a wife's husband is 'hire lord; algate, he sholde be so by resoun' (931b). An instance is the account of the creation of woman: she is made not from Adam's head, 'for she sholde nat clayme to greet lordshipe,' nor from his feet, 'for she ne sholde nat been holden to lowe; for [adds Chaucer illiberally] she kan nat paciently suffre'; but from his rib, 'for womman sholde be felawe unto man' (926–928). As the single addition to the sources in this

<sup>83</sup> *Summae virtutum ac vitiorum* 2.6.28–29 (Antwerp 1587) 137–138.

<sup>84</sup> Pratt 624–627 adds further sources from *Communiloquium* to those already known to lie behind the Wife's discussion.

<sup>85</sup> Discussions of these passages may be found in Henry A. Kelly, *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer* (Ithaca 1975); Joseph Mogan, 'Chaucer and the *Bona Matrimonii*,' *Chaucer Review* 4 (1969–70) 123–141; and the articles by Kaske and Donaldson cited in note 8 above.

passage suggests, the *Parson's Tale* is quick to condemn the woman who has forgotten her place at her husband's side, and is uninterested in the qualifying complexities that inform the Wife of Bath or Dorigen's inadvertent straying. Indeed, woman hardly exists in the *Parson's Tale* except as a wife, dutiful or otherwise. However reprehensible ideologically, this judicial attitude is generically appropriate, and is expressed as well in the Parson's discussion of the role of sex in marriage, a passage that is particularly interesting not only because of what it may (or may not) tell us of Chaucer's opinions but because it throws a good deal of light on the relation of the *Parson's Tale* to the other tales.

Marriage is discussed in relation to chastity, the remedy against lechery. The Parson begins by saying that there are two forms of chastity, 'chastitee in mariage, and chastitee of widwehod' (916). When in due course he comes to the discussion of the chastity of marriage he distinguishes 'thre' reasons why a 'man and his wyf fleshly mowen assemble': to have children, 'for certes that is the cause final of matrimoyne'; to pay their marital debt; and to avoid lechery (i.e., fornication, a reason that derives ultimately from Paul's reluctant judgment that it is better to marry than burn). But then the Parson confusingly adds: 'The ferthe is for soth deedly synne' (940), and without further explanation goes on to say that the first and second reasons are meritorious but that the third is venial sin, 'and, trewely, scarsly may ther any of thise be withoute venial synne, for the corrupcion and for the delit' (942). Only after this are we told that the fourth reason awkwardly introduced above is 'for to understonde, as if they assemble oonly for amorous love and for none of the foreseyde causes, but for to accomplice thilke brennyng delit, they rekke nevere how ofte. Soothly it is deedly synne; and yet, with sorwe, somme folk wol peynen hem moore to doon than to hire appetit suffiseth.' The account of chastity in marriage now being completed, we turn to 'the seconde manere of chastitee [which] is for to been a clene wydewe':

Thise been tho that han been wyves and han forgoon hire housbondes, and eek wommen that han doon leccherie and been releevd by penitence. And certes, if that a wyf koude kepen hire al chaast by licence of hir housbonde, so that she yeve nevere noon occasion that he agilte, it were to hire a greet merite. (945-946)

By this point, then, the two cases mentioned at the beginning of the discussion have been covered. But to our surprise we are now given an account of 'the *thridde* manere of chastitee,' virginity (948-950), followed by a long account of two practical remedies, withdrawing from the occasions and from the company that are invitations to the sin. The only specific warning given here is the advice that 'slepyng long in greet quiete is eek a greet norice to Leccherie' (952).

This confused account should be compared to two parallel passages, one in the source (*Postquam*) and the other in the *Merchant's Tale*. *Postquam* begins by dividing 'continentia seu castitas' into *three* kinds, 'pudicitia coniugalis, continentia vidualis, integritas virginalis,' which correspond to what prove to be the Parson's three kinds. In discussing the first kind, *Postquam* gives this account of the *actus copule coniugalis*: 'Ad hoc sciendum quod *quatuor* de causis cognoscitur uxor: aut causa prolis procreande, aut debiti reddendi, aut incontinentie vitande, aut libidinis explende.' The first and second are meritorious; the third 'licet concomitetur veniale'; and the fourth is either venial or mortal depending on degree: 'In quarto distinguendum est utrum maritali affectu cognoscat suam, quamvis libidinese, adhuc est veniale; si vero tanta sit libido quod non decerneret utrum suam an alienam, mortale est.'<sup>86</sup> We then turn to the account of *continentia vidualis*, which is presented without the detail of the *Parson's Tale*, and in conclusion to the definition and praise of virginity. The two practical suggestions find no parallel in *Postquam*. In sum, the *Parson's Tale* follows *Postquam* closely with several variations: a confusion in numbering, a harder line on 'amorous love,' a more detailed explanation of chastity in widowhood that makes it clear that it is obtainable both within as well as after marriage, and the addition of the practical remedies with the specific injunction about 'slepyng long in greet quiete.'

The other passage is the account of 'For whiche causes man sholde take a wyf' that January proudly provides to show that despite his lack of experience he knows whereof he speaks:

If he ne may nat lyven chaast his lyf,  
 Take hym a wyf with greet devocioun,  
 By cause of leveful procreacioun  
 Of children, to th'onour of God above,  
 And nat oonly for paramour or love;  
 And for they sholde leccherye eschue,  
 And yelde hir dette when that it is due;  
 Or for that ech of hem sholde helpen oother  
 In meschief, as a suster shal the brother,  
 And lyve in chastitee ful holily —  
 But sires, by youre leve, that am nat I. (1446–56)<sup>87</sup>

The structure of this passage needs some disentangling, but its basic lines are indicated by Chaucer's careful use of 'and' and 'or.' January gives two main reasons for marrying: *procreatio*, which is the *causa finalis* of marriage ('By cause of leveful procreacioun'), and chaste companionship ('as a suster shal the brother').<sup>88</sup> If one does choose the first kind of marriage (and January

<sup>86</sup> Wenzel, *Traditio* 27 (1971) 449–450.

<sup>87</sup> I have repunctuated Robinson's text slightly.

<sup>88</sup> This phrase also appears in the *Parson's Tale* (861) and not in the source.

agrees with the Wife of Bath that the second is only for higher spirits), then there are three reasons for the conjugal act: to have children, to avoid lechery, and to pay the marital debt. The complications of this structure arise inevitably because *procreatio* is both a justification of marriage *per se* and one of the further justifications of the conjugal act. Nonetheless, January's deliberately learned exposition, proffered as it is against those 'That woot namoore of it than woot my page' (1444), is orderly and coherent. It is not, however, complete: of the fourth reason for the conjugal act, the *expletio libidinis* characteristic of the man the theologians call the *vehemens* or *ardentior amator*, January here says nothing. But when he is abed with May he informs her, with bad theology and worse taste, that 'in oure actes we mowe do no synne' (1838), and he stays in bed until after prime, now enacting the libidinous pleasures that he had previously 'purtreyed in his herte and in his thoght' when 'that he was in his bed ybroght' (1599-1600).<sup>89</sup>

All of the Parson's significant variations from *Postquam* can be found in the *Merchant's Tale*: the organization of the discussion into two main divisions, with the first further divided into three; the presentation of *castitas vidualis* as a form of married love; the harsh denunciation (through the narrative) of amorous love; and the double portrayal of the dangers of 'sleeping' long in great quiet. The discussion of marriage in the *Parson's Tale* is thus a blending of *Postquam* and the *Merchant's Tale* (or its homiletic sources); and in all likelihood Chaucer wrote the *Merchant's Tale* before he read *Postquam* and hence before he wrote the *Parson's Tale*.

(4) The last allusion is neither drawn from conventional homiletic material nor part of a larger pattern of revision. When the friar of the *Summoner's Tale* urges his intended victim to confess Thomas replies as follows:

'Nay,' quod the sike man, 'by Seint Symoun!  
I have be shryven this day at my curat.  
I have hym toold hoolly al myn estat;  
Nedeth namoore to speken of it,' seith he,  
'But if me list, of myn humylitee.' (2094-98)

---

<sup>89</sup> Justinus' advice to January about the morality of conjugal love is also part of this pattern:

I hope to God, hereafter shul ye knowe  
That ther nys no so greet felicitee  
In mariage, ne nevere mo shal bee,  
That yow shal lette of youre savacion,  
So that ye use, as skile is and reson,  
The lustes of youre wyf attemprely,  
And that ye plese hire nat to amorously,  
And that ye kepe yow eek from oother synne. (1674-81)

In the discussion of the conditions of a good confession in the *Parson's Tale*, Chaucer follows Pennafort in defining *integra* as the requirement to confess all one's sins to the same priest. But unlike Pennafort, he then qualifies this injunction with two exceptions:

I seye nat that if thow be assigned to the penitauncer for certein synne, that thow art bounde to shewen hym al the remenaunt of thy synnes, of whiche thow hast be shryven of thy curaat, but if it like to thee of thyn humylitee; this is no departynge of shrifte. Ne I seye nat, ther as I speke of divisioun of confessioun, that if thou have licence for to shryve thee to a discreet and honest preest, where thee liketh, and by licence of thy curaat, that thow ne mayst wel shryve thee to him of alle thy synnes.

(1008–1009)

Then in the final sentence of the discussion Chaucer returns to Pennafort to include the injunction that '*alle* the synnes' must be confessed. While it seems at first sight that the only thing that connects these passages is the idea that confession needs to be repeated 'only if it like to thee of thyn humylitee,' the theological advice offered by the Parson follows precisely the reply Thomas makes to the friar. Thomas says he has already confessed to his curate and he has confessed 'hoolly,' i.e., he has no sins that need the attention of a special penitentiary such as the friar.<sup>90</sup> His earlier confession, in short, was *integra* and so needs no repetition, 'But if me list, of myn humilitee.'

The connection between the two passages seems indisputable, but the nature of the relationship is difficult to determine. That the passage does not appear in Pennafort is significant, but more suggestive is the oddness of these additions when seen in the context of analogous discussions in other works. In adding these particular qualifications Chaucer is touching on a number of complicated issues. One is the question of when it is lawful to confess to a priest other than one's own curate (e.g., a mistrust of his moral or religious character, when the sin to be confessed injured the priest or his kinfolk, and so forth); another is the problem of reserved sins and who can absolve them; and a third is the question of when a confession should be repeated (e.g., when one sin is forgotten by error, or deliberately, or when satisfaction is not performed, or when the penitent is sent to a superior for absolution). The vernacular treatises either ignore these issues entirely — so far as I know, none of them discusses the question of the repetition of confession at all — or treat them more or less thoroughly in sections specially devoted to each issue.<sup>91</sup> The Latin handbooks

<sup>90</sup> In the *General Prologue* the Friar identifies himself as a penitentiary: 'For he hadde power of confessioun, / As seyde hymself, moore than a curat' (218–219); see Arnold Williams, 'Chaucer and the Friars,' *Speculum* 28 (1953) 499–513.

<sup>91</sup> In *The Clensyng of Mannes Sowle*, for instance, there is a fairly full account both of to whom one should confess and of the reserved sins, but no mention of the problem of repeated confession.

for priests are naturally more thorough, but again they usually handle each of these matters in a separate section, although several deal with repetition within the context of *integra*. What is striking about the Parson's account is not only that all three issues are included under *integra* but that, given the range of possible issues for discussion, these should be the ones chosen. These are by no means the usual matters raised in works of this sort, nor do they deal with problems likely to be encountered by the penitent.<sup>92</sup> The question of repetition, for instance, is more likely to be raised by a forgotten sin than by one of the somewhat arcane reserved sins. The Parson's advice seems valid enough, but given the context it is eccentric even to raise the question.<sup>93</sup> In

---

<sup>92</sup> A good indication of the issues dealt with in discussions of the repetition of confession is provided by the *Manipulus curatorum* by Guido de Monte Rocherii, a popular handbook for priests written in 1330. Guido outlines four cases in which a penitent should reconfess a sin: 1) if he is sent to a superior to confess a sin that his curate cannot absolve (but there is no mention of whether he should confess all his sins or only the reserved one); 2) if he has been wrongly absolved of a sin by a priest who does not have that authority; 3) if he has failed to do satisfaction for a sin; 4) if a sin has been maliciously held back: then all the others, plus the sin of lying at the first confession, must be reconfessed. At the end of his discussion Guido says: 'Et quod in istis quattuor casibus sit confessio iteranda de necessitate concordant omnes doctores. Sunt tamen alii casus in quibus doctores variantur. Primus est propter peccati obliti recordationem. Secundus est propter reciduationem' (Strasburg 1489) 2.3.7. In the ensuing discussion of these cases there is no mention of Chaucer's instance, the reconfession of unreserved sins when a reserved sin is confessed to a penitentiary. A similar treatment is provided by another popular handbook, the *Summa de casibus* written by Bartholomeus of Pisa (Bartolommeo da San Concordia) in 1338: 'Utrum aliquo casu teneatur quis confessionem iterare. . . . Iterare tenemur in quattuor casibus. Primus est si sacerdos non potuit absolvere. Secundus est si nesciuit discernere. Tertius si confessio non fuit integra ut quia scienter tacuit aliquod mortale. Quartus si contempsit uel neglexit satisfacere et oblitus est satisfactionem iniunctam' (Speyer 1477) fol. 40r. Like Guido, Bartholomeus then discusses more complex issues, such as 'utrum recidians teneatur confiteri priora peccata.'

As for vernacular treatments, the *Boke of Penance* is typically brief in discussing only two cases and in its reliance on Pennafort. If, having repented, you then fall into a new sin, must your subsequent confession repeat all previous sins? No, as Raymund says, late repentance revives the earlier, so only the unconfessed sin must be shown to the priest, unless this is a new priest who does not know 'quatkin man' you have been before (26432–498). This is the second of Guido's two additional cases. But if the penitent confesses some sins and not others, and then later becomes truly contrite, must he confess *all* his sins again? Yes, 'Raymund here answers til vs': 'For þof man scriue him of a sin / And in a-noþer ligges in, / Man mai well wit alkin right, / þat neuer was forgiuen his plight' (26904–917). This latter case, in other words, is a question of false or fraudulent confession (Guido's fourth case, Bartholomeus' third).

<sup>93</sup> The Parson is supported here by, for instance, John Burgo in his *Pupilla oculi* (1384), a revision of William of Pagula's *Oculus sacerdotis*: 'Item sacerdos facta sibi confessione a subdito suo de peccato de quo non potest eum absolvere: debet eum absolvere a peccatis illis de quibus habet potestatem. Et quoad aliud ipsum mittere ad superiorem cui penitens

the context of the *Summoner's Tale*, on the other hand, it is appropriate and subtle: challenged by a grasping penitentiary, Thomas replies with perfect correctness, showing a knowledge of canonistics that makes him more than a match for his ostentatiously learned opponent. Indeed, his lord's compliment with which the tale closes has an ironic range that extends beyond the flatulent bequest: 'What, lo, my cherl, lo, yet how shrewedly / Unto my confessour to-day he spak!' (2238-39).

In conclusion, then, it appears that as Chaucer composed the *Parson's Tale* he supplemented his three main sources with material he had already used in the tales. Most of these additions are of brief homiletic images, proverbs, and phrasings that temper the severe and doctrinal *Parson's Tale* with something of the conversational colour of the tales; four deal with specific issues of larger concern to the poet. Sometimes these latter inclusions are smooth and effective (as with the account of *gentilesse*) while others are awkward and confusing (the *opus conjugale* and *integra*). But it seems clear that the lines of influence run from the tales to the *Parson's Tale* and that the *Parson's Tale* was therefore composed after them. Furthermore, the specific allusions we have surveyed provide no encouragement to the assumption that Chaucer wrote the *Parson's Tale* as a pointed commentary on the preceding pilgrims and their tales. Insofar as the pilgrims are human and their tales express our common condition, of course the *Parson's Tale* is relevant. But in just those places where Chaucer has provided what might most easily be construed as specific references we find instead that his attention is directed to the development of the argument in hand. Doubtless it is possible, for instance, to apply his comments on *gentilesse* and thralldom to the Knight, Wife of Bath, Squire, and Franklin, but the focus of the Parson's comments is on the *conditions* of nobility and servitude and their penitential meaning. In the whole of the *Parson's Tale* there is not a single line that can, in my view, be taken as applying to a specific pilgrim. And to read the tale retrospectively is to misunderstand its most important characteristic, its generality. For if it is narrow and reductive in the intensity of its preoccupation with sin, so too is it broad and capacious in its application of that concern not merely to the pilgrims but to all men. To reduce this generality by insisting on the dramatic particularity of the tale is to misread it.<sup>94</sup> For as we have seen, the *Parson's*

---

Idem peccatum de quo non est absolutus a proprio sacerdote confiteri debet et absolui ab eodem. Nec oportet confessionem proprio sacerdoti prius factam: si forte integra fuerit iterare. Nam absolutio proprii sacerdotis que precedere debet cum absolutione superioris sequente vnam sufficientem complement absolutionem' (London 1510), 5.3.G. fol. 28<sup>v</sup>. For a similar discussion, see the *Summa de casibus conscientiae* written by Astesanus of Asti in 1317 (Venice 1478), 5.18, fol. gg.2<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>94</sup> Norton-Smith comes to essentially the same conclusion: 'The effect of reading (with attention) the Parson's treatise is to enter into a closely interconnected, logical and analytic

*Tale* is distinguished from others of its kind by its concern with the largest possible context for individual acts, the Christian *historia salutis* that defines a pattern of sin and redemption applicable not merely to these local figures but to all men and all women, in any place and at any time. The *Parson's Tale* is not irrelevant to what precedes it, but it is no more relevant to that than to anything else. Its vision is extensive and inclusive, and it should not be focused on a merely local fiction.

### III

In closing the *Canterbury Tales* with a work of this generality, then, Chaucer forces us to look beyond the specific world that has so far occupied our attention. He concludes, in other words, with something of the same dismissive withdrawal to a higher, more inclusive perspective as occurs at the end of the *Troilus*. In both cases Chaucer himself emerges at the end, replacing the narratorial voice, dramatic, engaging, and multivalent, with his own identifiably historical tone. In the *Troilus* he invokes the judgment of his friends Gower and Strode and in the *Canterbury Tales* he provides us with an account of his past and a promise for the future. The effect of this gradual withdrawal from fiction to history is to devalue fiction, and the specific reductions occasioned by these endings are in effect extensions of the larger reduction implied by the form itself. The elaborately contrived fictional world is brought into contact with a reality, both divine and human, which exposes simply by its presence the factitiousness of what has preceded it. The effect, then, is not to invite a reinterpretation or even reevaluation of the fiction but to declare it transcended. Having once been granted his vision of the insignificance of earth, Troilus can hardly return, and the certainties of the *Parson's Tale* render the complexities of the tales inconsequential and even sophistical. Indeed, to argue that the Parson's view of human character provides the standard by which we should measure what we have just read is to encourage us to reread precisely that which Chaucer now dismisses as unworthy.

Yet while the *Parson's Tale* issues into the clear light of reality it takes its beginning in the imprecision of fiction, and it is itself a part of the whole it dismisses. This is the paradox the Parson himself expresses when he promises

---

account of man's nature which has no connections with the characterization and debate which have been carried on in the "Canterbury way" before this moment. The verbal construction, ethical method and religious "reasoning" combine to give the impression of triumphant autonomousness. Its laws of development and analytical procedure leave the rest of the tales behind' (p. 157). See also the comments by Robert Jordan, in responding to Ralph Baldwin: 'The universality of the Parson's Tale, its transcendence of the particular and the "dramatic," is the insight which should emerge from Baldwin's analysis' (p. 115).

to 'telle a myrie tale in prose' that will 'knytte up al this feeste, and make an ende' (46–47). On the one hand, the *Parson's Prologue* stands securely within the limited dramatic world of the pilgrimage; but on the other, despite its air of agreeable consensus, it radically redefines the nature of the tale-telling itself. As the sun descends and the shadows lengthen the Host moves confidently toward the completion, oddly enough, not of the journey but of the tale-telling game he has initiated and presided over:

Lordynges everichoon,  
Now lakketh us no tales mo than oon.  
Fulfilled is my sentence and my decree;  
I trowe that we han herd of ech degree;  
Almoost fulfild is al myn ordinaunce. (15–19)

The note of self-satisfaction is clearly heard here, and it is continued in his direction to the final participant in the game. 'Be what thou be, ne breke thou nat our pley' (24), he warns him, and advises him that in order to 'knytte up wel a greet mateere' he should 'Telle us a fable anoon' (28–29). In rejecting fables the Parson rejects more than the Ovidian form chosen by the Manciple and more than the 'gesta, poemata vel fabulas extra corpus scripturae' that (according to Wyclif) infected the popular preaching of the day.<sup>95</sup> He rejects both the Host's game and its tales, the *fabulae Chauceri*, as one manuscript labels them.<sup>96</sup> The Parson invokes Paul's exhortation to Timothy: 'preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching' — *sanam doctrinam*, the Parson's 'moralitee and vertuous mateere' (38) — 'but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths [*fabulas*]. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry' (2 Timothy 4.2–5). When the Host proposed the tale-telling game in the *General Prologue* he presented it as a pastime 'to shorte with oure weye' (791), a means of 'confort' and 'myrthe' (773) to while away the journey. Far from an extension or expression of the pilgrimage, the tale-telling is in fact an alternative, a distraction from both the tedium of the journey and, inevitably and even deliberately, its significance. As we approach the end the Host is proud of the fulfillment of 'my sentence and my decree,' of 'al myn ordinaunce.' But as he fails to realize, this completion is possible only because the tale-telling has been simply 'pley,' a game that is by definition

<sup>95</sup> On *fabula* as designating specifically a beast fable, see Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum doctrinale* 3.113 in *Bibliotheca Mundi* (Douai 1624) II col. 289; and Bromyard, *Summa praedicatorum* 6.14. Wyclif's strictures are quoted by Simon 239.

<sup>96</sup> See Norton-Smith 146.

enclosed and delimited. The Parson rightly understands that their journey is linear and not circular, and that it extends further than they can easily see, into a darkness of which the approaching night is a mere symbol. In its ultimate terms, the opposition between Host and Parson is between literalist and symbolist, between an attitude that accepts the here and now as a sufficient reality and one that perceives human experience as only the foreground to a larger horizon. In literary terms it is an opposition between *fabulae* and *sana doctrina*, and between two concepts of form: an additive, self-generating, and almost extemporaneous seriality on the one hand, and on the other a carefully organized action with beginning, middle, and end.<sup>97</sup>

Everybody agrees that the *Canterbury Tales* has a coherent beginning and end, but the large, undistributed middle remains to challenge the ingenuity of the exegete. Any reading that presents the tales as providing, as a recent writer puts it, 'most of all a way of expressing the developing pilgrimage,' is compromised by several unavoidable facts.<sup>98</sup> First, it is not enough to show that there is a beginning, middle, and end, to all of which the concept of pilgrimage is relevant, since it is indeed relevant to all medieval action. Rather, we must show how the middle develops from the beginning and requires the end: we can go from A to Z easily enough, but how are all the other letters to be fitted into their appropriate order? To my knowledge, nobody has even attempted this kind of progressive reading of the tales; but if one is to argue that they are meaningful primarily ('most of all') in terms of pilgrimage, then this timely and specific relevance must be demonstrated.<sup>99</sup> Second, a reading that invokes the pilgrimage metaphor as continuously relevant must confront the fact that it is never explicitly invoked throughout the tales. It is present at the beginning of the *General Prologue*, momentarily in Egeus' speech in the *Knight's Tale*, and in the *Parson's Prologue and Tale*, but it is absent from everything in between. Professor Donaldson is surely right when he reminds us that the medieval reader would have been most struck by Chau-

<sup>97</sup> These two kinds of medieval narrative form are discussed by Charles Singleton, 'Meaning in the *Decameron*,' *Italica* 21 (1944) 117-124; Ralph Baldwin discusses Singleton's distinction in relation to the *Canterbury Tales* and attempts to see the pilgrimage frame as providing a *sovrassenso* equivalent to that of the *Divine Comedy*.

<sup>98</sup> The phrase is used by Edmund Reiss, 'The Pilgrimage Narrative and the *Canterbury Tales*,' *Studies in Philology* 67 (1970) 295-305.

<sup>99</sup> Paul Ruggiers, 'The Form of *The Canterbury Tales: Respite Fines*,' *College English* 17 (1956) 439-444, does discuss the relevance of the *Knight's Tale* and the *Man of Law's Tale* as providing, respectively, a philosophical and religious guide for the pilgrimage, with the *Parson's Tale* then as a final admonition to those who have not followed this advice and have gone astray; see also his comments in *The Art of the Canterbury Tales* 5-11, 247-257. There are many discussions of the appropriateness of beginning with the classical values of the *Knight's Tale*, e.g., Joseph Westlund, 'The *Knight's Tale* as an Impetus for Pilgrimage,' *Philological Quarterly* 43 (1964) 526-537.

cer's 'avoidance throughout most of the *Canterbury Tales* of the expected implications of the pilgrimage.'<sup>100</sup> For Chaucer's poem bears only an oblique relationship to pilgrimage allegories such as Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* or Jean de Coucy's *Chemin de vaillance*, and to describe the *Canterbury Tales* as 'linked a priori to the great body of pilgrimage literature written during the late Middle Ages'<sup>101</sup> is to allow one contingent and carefully limited theme to become the sole determinant of genre.<sup>102</sup> It would of course be excessive on the other side to say that the pilgrimage theme is irrelevant. One of the major differences between Chaucer's formal conception and those of Boccaccio and Sercambi is that Chaucer's travellers are not simply wandering in an effort to escape from reality but actually journeying toward it. But the tale-telling game in which they engage is in a radical way opposed to the concerns of their journey. Indeed, that the game comes so near to completion is a testimony to the success with which the meaning of the pilgrimage has been repressed throughout.

The degree of this repression can be gauged by recalling how narrow is the scope granted to the tales of 'moralitee and devocioun' in the course of the narrative. The narrator's division of the tales into 'sentence' and 'solaas,' despite its limitations, has the advantage of sorting out Chaucer's complicated blendings of *utile dulci* into opposed categories. The serious tales of the Knight, Man of Law, Clerk, Physician, Prioress, Monk, and Second Nun, and the *Tale of Melibee*, provide not merely recreation for those sophisticated enough to enjoy them but absolutes that are uplifting and urgent. They present to their audience imperatives that go beyond appreciation to self-scrutiny and moral action. In this sense, each of the serious tales is at odds with the holiday mood that is the context and foundation of the tale-telling, and much of the *Canterbury Tales* is concerned with disarming this threat to its continuance. Hence we should notice that the serious tales are never allowed to impose their tone or perspective upon the pilgrimage but are consistently countered and limited.

The most obvious instances of this limitation are the refusals by the comic characters to allow the sober Knight and Man of Law to be followed by the equally sober Monk and Parson. These interruptions are perhaps judgment enough, but a finally more telling critique is provided by the new and severely limiting contexts which the interjected comic tales establish for their dour predecessors. This limitation is enforced by the narrative strategy of the *Canterbury Tales* itself: the inclusion of the teller with the tale personalizes

<sup>100</sup> Chaucer's *Poetry* 1113.

<sup>101</sup> Reiss 297.

<sup>102</sup> In responding to Reiss's article, Siegfried Wenzel, 'The Pilgrimage of Life as a Late Medieval Genre,' *Mediaeval Studies* 35 (1973) 370-388, discusses these, and other, pilgrimage allegories and shows to just how substantial a degree Chaucer's poem differs from them.

the meanings that emerge and encourages a dramatic reading that discounts any authoritative significance. The Truth that each teller labors to express is rendered simply as an individual truth or the truth for an individual. The total effect, then, of the *Miller's Tale* on the Knight's is to suggest that the Knight's Boethian wisdom is as much a function of his class consciousness as are his preferred ways of making love and war. Similarly, while the uncertainties of order make it difficult to provide the same context for the *Man of Law's Tale*, it is easy enough to see how the faithless wife of the *Shipman's Tale* or the Wife of Bath herself provides a sufficient foil for the otherworldly Constance. Further, in reinvoking the dominant dramatic and psychological mode of the *Tales* either of these succeeding tales serves to foreground the unseemly personal qualities of the Man of Law that have been allowed a presence in his tale. The same kind of deflation and even satiric dismissal is brought to bear upon the Physician, Prioress, and Monk, whose personalities stand in awkward contrast to their proffered values and indecorously intrude into their tales. Finally, the *Second Nun's Tale*, while secure in its anonymity, is revealed as providing at best only a partial antidote to the problem of sloth and despair when set next to the hectic confession of the Canon's Yeoman; and the *Clerk's Tale*, by far the most assured of Chaucer's creations in this mode, carries an epilogue that ironically limits its relevance. In sum, the *Canterbury Tales* provides various prospects on and versions of the truth, but no one is allowed authority or even an unchallenged assertion. Indeed it seems that truth fares best when, as in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, it is pared down to the limitations of a proverb and hidden within the sharp perspectives of irony.

While this circumscription of the serious and the demanding is characteristic of Chaucer's urbane good humor, it also implies an unorthodox and even subversive poetics. The full range of medieval literary theory can hardly be dealt with on this occasion, but we should note that Chaucer's poetic practice more often reflects the internally determined values of a rhetorical poetics than the external strategies prescribed by the allegorists. As the exegete discovers when he tries to specify the full meaning of a Chaucerian poem, Chaucerian *sententiae* are less the conclusion which all the elements of the text express than occasions for writing which the complexities of the text rapidly transcend. Theme figures as only one element among many, not the *res* which the *verba* labor to express but a ground of significance upon which the variables of fable, personality, and language display themselves. Like the Pardoner's sermon, Chaucer's poems use traditional truths as *themae* upon which to play variations, and we can no more define the significance of the whole by reference to its rhetorical origins than we can say that the *Pardoner's Tale* means *radix malorum est cupiditas*. When located within a rhetorical perspective, then, the *Canterbury Tales* reveals itself not as a progression

toward a goal — parts that signify a unifying whole — but as a series of poetic experiments in various styles, a witty compendium of late medieval literary fashion embellished with the appropriate personalities.

Indeed, not only does the progressive and coherent form of the pilgrimage frame not extend to the inner organization of the tales, but the form this great, undistributed middle *does* display is minimal, additive, and arbitrary. It is a form required by the tale-telling game; the Host, in his role of *magister ludi*, defines it as *quitting* (I.3119). Its workings are demonstrated in Fragment I: Miller quits Knight, Reeve quits Miller, Cook (presumably) quits Reeve, but not before warning the Host, 'But er we parte, ywis, thou shalt be quit' (4362) in turn. The form is thus one of the most common of medieval narrative structures, bipartition or binarism.<sup>103</sup> The tales proceed two-by-two, and a mere listing of the pairs (appropriately annotated) is sufficient to indicate the binary form: Man of Law/Wife of Bath; Friar/Summoner; Wife of Bath/Clerk; Clerk/Merchant; Squire/Franklin; Physician/Pardoner; Shipman/Prioress; *Tale of Sir Thopas/Tale of Melibee*; Monk/Nun's Priest; Second Nun/Canon's Yeoman; Manciple/Parson.<sup>104</sup> Certainly larger thematic patterns

---

<sup>103</sup> An account of the bipartite or 'diptych' form, with examples, is provided by William W. Ryding, *Structure in Medieval Narrative* (The Hague 1971) 116–137. Donald Howard, *Idea* 224–225, 322–324, discusses binary structure, with interesting comments on its source in the relationship of the Old to the New Testament. It is worth remembering that the single most important source for the *Canterbury Tales*, the *Roman de la Rose*, is itself binary, the second part functioning as a revision and hence a gloss on the first: Jean de Meun promises 'si la chose espondre / que riens ne s'i porra repondre' (10573–574); ed. Felix Lecoy (CFMA 95; Paris 1966) II 72.

<sup>104</sup> My list assumes the Ellesmere order, convincingly defended by E. Talbot Donaldson, 'The Ordering of the *Canterbury Tales*,' in *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies: Essays in Honor of Francis Lee Utley*, edd. Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg (New Brunswick 1970) 193–204; but it can easily be accommodated to the Bradshaw shift. Indeed, nothing could more tellingly demonstrate the absence of a coherent, sequential order in the tales than the fact that readers are still arguing about the proper placement of over 3000 lines. What other masterpiece could survive such uncertainty? The point is that the different placements require only local adjustments, i.e., they make no difference to the total meaning of the poem because the 'poem' has no total meaning. Hence Donaldson is right to argue that the question of order is properly an editorial one, and to opt for Ellesmere because it has greater manuscript authority.

The thematic connections between the Man of Law and the Wife of Bath have often been discussed: see, e.g., Lee Sheriden Cox, 'A Question of Order in the *Canterbury Tales*,' *Chaucer Review* 1 (1966–67) 228–252. More important is the formal pairing: these two tales are the first of four pairs that are generically linked by the pattern of hagiography and confession, the other three being Clerk/Merchant, Physician/Pardoner and Second Nun/Canon's Yeoman. For discussions of this pattern in the last pair of the sequence, see Joseph E. Grennen, 'Saint Cecilia's "Chemical Wedding": The Unity of the *Canterbury Tales*, Fragment VIII,' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 65 (1966) 466–481, and Bruce A. Rosenberg, 'The Contrary Tales of the Second Nun and the Canon's Yeoman,' *Chaucer Review* 2 (1967–68) 278–291.

exist, but in relying upon binarism for his basic narrative structure Chaucer reduces form to a bare minimum. Indeed, as the tales proceed even the use to which this form is put is simplified. Fragment I displays a relatively sophisticated use, in which the second member of each pair provides the first member of the next (Knight/Miller, Miller/Reeve), and this pattern is repeated, with an interruption, in Fragments II–IV: Man of Law/Wife of Bath, Wife of Bath/Clerk, Clerk/Merchant. Is the *Franklin's Tale* then the conclusion to the Marriage Group? Perhaps, but the Franklin is in the first instance responding to the Squire, a tale-teller who has, his gracious opponent admits, 'yquit' himself well (V.673).<sup>105</sup> The quitting pattern is thus explicitly reinvoked in Fragment V, and from then on the binary form continues in its simplest mode. It is the *first instance* that is crucial: the binary pattern provides Chaucer with a clearly defined structure upon which to play variations, but it also enforces the discreteness of each pair and so foregrounds their merely sequential relationship. Tied to each other, they look inward rather than out to the tales as a whole. As our reading proceeds, then, the variations fall away to reveal the repetitive pattern beneath. Uncontrolled by any larger purpose, there is no reason the pattern should not repeat itself endlessly, extending itself even beyond the one hundred and twenty tales envisioned by the Host: any ending is arbitrary for a form that is merely additive. The form itself, in other words, is no more meaningful than the ten-by-ten scheme of the *Decameron*. Nor should we expect it to be: the rules of every game are arbitrary.<sup>106</sup>

The Parson's final contribution to the game is thus a formal alternative that in effect renders the game unplayable: the monolithic articulations of his *summa* reveal how inconsequential and even random are the self-generated oppositions of the tales. But there are compensations, for it is only by such an interruption that the tales can be brought to any conclusion. The Parson destroys the poem, in other words, in order to release the poet from his fiction-making, to turn him finally from shadows to reality. The beneficence the Parson offers can be fully appreciated only when we recognize how persistently Chaucer has asked the moral questions raised by his kind of poetry, and how

---

Of the other pairs listed, the only problematical one is the Shipman/Prioress, a difficulty that arises, I suppose, because of the incompleteness of the revisions. For the Squire/Franklin, see below, n. 105.

<sup>105</sup> For this linking of Squire and Franklin, see Harry Berger, Jr., 'The F-Fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*,' *Chaucer Review* 1 (1966–67) 88–102, 135–156.

<sup>106</sup> The reader will have noticed that the brevity of my discussion has allowed me to beg several important questions. The most recent and most ambitious attempt to demonstrate that a premeditated and fully articulated form lies 'behind' the *Canterbury Tales* is Donald Howard's *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*; I have offered a fuller critique of this project, both particularly and in general, in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* 48 (1978–9).

persistently he has refused to answer them. Of course poetry can never tell the truth in quite the way that the allegorical literary theory of Chaucer's day prescribed, and his conventionalized gestures toward authenticity, whether moral or historical, are more appeasements of this expectation than real claims to truthfulness.<sup>107</sup> The traditional justifications are offered but they are never pressed home, for Chaucer's unwillingness to define a poetics that is anything more than *ad hoc* is a prerequisite for his most striking formal innovations. But it leaves him vulnerable to moralistic attacks, such as that which (as Alfred David has shown) lies behind the autobiographical comments in the *Man of Law's Prologue*.<sup>108</sup> Chaucer's response to these Gower-like criticisms is typically delimited. Rather than providing a comprehensive defense of his stylistic eclecticism and complex *modus significandi*, Chaucer is content with an *ad hominem* and local victory. He gently parodies Gower in the fussy moral narrowness of the Man of Law and then out-Gowers Gower by retelling, more effectively, one of his opponent's own stories. This is not a defense, in short, but an avoidance of attack, and the problem of the morality of Chaucer's kind of poetry remains unresolved. It is raised again, in a particularly telling form, by the *Manciple's Tale*. Indeed, the Manciple prepares for the Parson not just by rehearsing one of the fables the Parson is going to reject but by casting doubt upon the whole poetic enterprise. Superficially, his tale is simply a bitter commentary on the contretemps of his prologue: the crow is to Phoebus as he himself is to the Cook. Just as he was rebuffed in his attempt to admonish a public drunkard, so the crow is a truth-teller who is punished for his honesty. The concluding litany of homely saws and proverbial wisdom serves then as the Manciple's mocking celebration of the

---

<sup>107</sup> As Robert O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics* (New Haven 1963), has shown, Chaucer is fascinated with the relation of poetry to scientific and moral wisdom, to dreams, and to experience itself. But none of these relationships is anything less than complex and ambiguous, and in no case does the poem resolve itself into one pole of the dialectic. At the end of the *General Prologue*, for instance, the narrator defends the salty language he is going to use by reference to the demands of *mimesis* (731–736). Far from being a statement of theoretical intent, however, this passage is in fact a way of assuring a courtly audience that the bourgeois literature they are about to enjoy is authentic and gratifyingly vulgar. Chaucer is asserting not a realistic relationship of life to literature but defining the relation of one form of literature to another. Similarly local purposes are served by the other quasi-theoretical statements in the *Canterbury Tales*. The Physician's boast that the tale of Virginia 'is no fable, / But knowen for historial thyng notable' (155–156) is part of his larger effort at self-authorization; and when the Second Nun says that she is simply recording 'the wordes and sentence / Of hym that at the seintes reverence / The storie wroot' (81–83) she is defining a stance of spiritual humility rather than a poetics relevant to Chaucer, as the subtlety and elegance of the tale suggest.

<sup>108</sup> 'The Man of Law vs. Chaucer: A Case in Poetics,' *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 82 (1967) 217–225.

trimmer's motto that silence is the best policy. The disdain and self-regard of his rebuke to the Cook, mirrored in the tale by the crow's cruelly elaborate account to Phoebus of his wife's adultery, allows the reader to see the Manciple's pose as an injured moralist in an ironic light. But the severity of the charge implicitly levelled against poetry is not diminished by the Manciple's own moral inadequacy. On the contrary, the *Manciple's Prologue and Tale* provides a bitter parody of the tale-telling game. The festivity in which it began and by which it has been sustained has by this time degenerated into the Bacchic excesses of the Cook, and the balancing pressure of a larger vision, never granted its full scope throughout the course of the tales, is now reduced to the querulous cynicism of the Manciple.<sup>109</sup> Further, the Manciple implicitly calls into question the artful use of language itself.<sup>110</sup> His tale is a set of evasions that offers an opinion only to withdraw it and that mouths moralisms but remains in fact deeply cynical. He asserts with harsh realism that man is dominated by an animal nature, but the only redemption he offers is expediency dressed as integrity — the verbal equivalent to the wine with which the Cook is put back to sleep and a version of the poetic encomium by which the self-deluded Phoebus reconciles himself to the wife he has murdered. In sum, the Manciple's refusal to give a serious answer to the complex moral issues raised by his tale stands as a dark parody of Chaucer's dispassionate withdrawal from assertion, and we are invited to see in the cynical Manciple a sour self-portrait of the ironic poet.<sup>111</sup>

These doubts about the moral integrity of poetic language have been raised throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. The dismissal of the tales that the *Parson's Tale* effects consists not merely in the reduction of the rich complexity of personality to seven types of misbehavior, nor in the transcendence of the various truths of the preceding tales with an authoritative Truth. Rather, by choosing as his final work a treatise on confession Chaucer redefines in an irremediable way the very act of speaking. Poetic speech in its largest defini-

<sup>109</sup> Norton-Smith, 150–151, connects the Cook to Bacchus, but sees the relationship as wholly comic. As a further link, see the passage quoted by Pamela Gradon 54, from Holcot, *In Librum Sapientiae*: 'Someone feigns the image of Drunkenness to have been thus depicted, the image of a child, having in his hand a horn and on his head a crown of [vine]. He was a boy in token that (drunkenness) makes a man speechless and senseless, in the manner of a child. He had a horn in his hand as a token that (the drunken man) conceals no secret but reveals (it) with clamour and clangour. He has a [vine] crown, because he considers himself glorious and wealthy, he who is drunk, whereas he has nothing.'

<sup>110</sup> V. J. Scattergood, 'The Manciple's Manner of Speaking,' *Essays in Criticism* 24 (1974) 124–146.

<sup>111</sup> Scattergood points out the parallel between the Manciple as a servant to lawyers and Chaucer as patronized by the court, and adds: 'Chaucer is particularly interested in the Manciple because the Manciple's way of using words bears some relation to the strategies he himself uses as a poet' (143).

tion, as the artful use of language, is the most general target of this redefinition, and the *Manciple's Tale* exists precisely to present poetic speech in its most morally offensive form. But there is as well a more local target, specific to the *Canterbury Tales*, in the self-expressiveness that runs through the tales and that in characters such as the Wife of Bath, Pardoner, and Canon's Yeoman becomes virtually confessional.<sup>112</sup> While the degree of this self-expressiveness is a matter of critical dispute, the very form of the narrative forces the issue upon us. By including within his poem the tellers as well as their tales, Chaucer manages to achieve the same poetic range as in his dream visions: the total meaning of each tale extends beyond its narrative to include its relationship with its teller, just as the experience of the poet-dreamer provides a crucial element of the total significance of those poems. To some extent, then, each of the tales is self-expressive, and it is this process of self-expression that the *Parson's Tale* serves to redefine. For his sober and prosaic treatise is a rejection of all personal speaking that does not confront, in the sacramental language of penance, the sinfulness of the human condition. It is not merely the qualifying complexities of the personality that are to be abandoned, but any language that does not deal with sin in the terms defined by the Parson. 'Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest, / Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?' (35–36): his question draws its authority less from medieval arguments about the validity of literature than from its immediate context, the shadows that lengthen about him. The tales were told as a pastime to 'shorte with the weye,' but now the time has passed and the way must be attended to. So the Parson redefines not only the journey but the tale-telling itself: he gives not so much directions to the heavenly Jerusalem as the prior and more radical knowledge that 'this viage' itself, the specific journey to Canterbury, can be so undertaken that it can itself become a 'parfit glorious pilgrymage,' a pilgrimage that does not merely lead to but in fact constitutes — 'is highte' — 'Jerusalem celestial.' And for this to happen the various voices of the tales must give way to the penitential speaking defined by the Parson.

It is necessary, then, that the *Parson's Tale* should provide not a fulfillment to the tales but an alternative, a complete and exclusive understanding of character, action, and even language. But in concluding we must return to the paradox in which the tale is grounded. If it cancels out rather than completes that which precedes, its position at once enforces and weakens its

---

<sup>112</sup> See my 'Chaucerian Confession: Penitential Literature and the Pardoner,' *Mediaevalia et Humanistica* 7 (1976) 153–173, and Lawrence V. Ryan, 'The Canon's Yeoman's Desperate Confession,' *Chaucer Review* 8 (1973–4) 297–310. The paratactic and digressive style in which these confessional prologues are couched provides a paradigm for the form of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, and, as the extent of the critical literature suggests, the Wife of Bath and Pardoner express literary values that are recognized as quintessentially Chaucerian.

authority. His tale takes its origin in the very dramatic and realistic context which it will dismiss, and it is a denial of the tale-telling game that in the first instance quits the Manciple. In sum, while the Parson has the last word he must wait until last to say it, and although the transcendence of his message is never in doubt he must wait until the imperfect and even immoral expressions of merely verbal art have been passed in review. Chaucer and the pilgrims have it both ways, but this should lead us to question neither their nor Chaucer's sincerity. The evidence is that the *Parson's Tale* was written late in the poet's career, and there seems no reason not to accept the obvious biographical implication that it was his last work. Furthermore, its very nature is terminal. It begins within the fictional construct but becomes the tale to end all tales, and its conclusion inevitably escapes from the narrative frame and now refers to the larger context of biography. The tale becomes not simply the last element of a sustained poetic enterprise but a crucial and even decisive piece of evidence about the moral worth of Chaucer himself. As the *licentia auctoris* informs us, it is to be measured by the standards not of literary fame but of eternal salvation. Indeed, the *Parson's Tale* itself shows Chaucer already beginning to respond to these new imperatives. The writing of an edifying treatise as an act of penance is a not uncommon medieval habit. Chaucer would certainly have known the treatise on *The Two Ways* written by his friend Sir John Clanvowe just before he died in 1391, and would probably also have been familiar with *Le Livre de seyntz medicines* by Henry, Duke of Lancaster, written in 1354. Both the *licentia* and the medieval habit of the repentance of old age encourage us to see the *Parson's Tale* as another instance of literary penance. This is a penance that is neither perfunctory, as the care with which the tale is composed suggests, nor unexpected. Rather it is a part of the fitting shape of the Christian life, hardly a hypocritical *volte-face* but an inevitable and gratifying process of change and fulfillment. 'Young devil, old saint' runs one of the proverbs that express this conception, and its cynicism is tempered with a benign assurance that each man's history is concluded with a reversal that is both fulfillment and justification. It is in this radically linear awareness of the range of human action in its response to divine requirements that we should locate the paradox of a tale that can at once 'knytte up al this feeste, and make an ende.'

*University of Toronto*