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"TO KNYTTE UP AL THIS FEESTE": THE PARSON'S RHETORIC AND THE ENDING OF THE *CANTERBURY TALES*

By LAURIE A. FINKE

. . . there is a difference between writing on a
blank sheet of paper and bringing to light by the
application of caustic a text which is hidden under
another text.

Søren Kierkegaard¹

The Parson's "myrie tale in prose" (46)² poises the reader of the *Canterbury Tales* midway between an understandable distaste for the Parson's dull anatomies and the need to "knytte up wel a greet mateere" (28), to perceive a sense of closure in a long and presumably unfinished work. On one level, the *Parson's Tale* may satisfy our desire to perceive the journey's "appropriate cessation" but, on another, it raises enough questions about Chaucer's linguistic world to deprive us of the feeling of "finality, completion, and composure which we value in all works of art".³ At first glance, Chaucer's retreat into overt didacticism seems puzzling, even disappointing, after the vitality and sophistication many of the previous tales display. In other overtly moral tales (*Melibee*, *The Physician's Tale*, and the *Man of Law's Tale* come immediately to mind) Chaucer qualifies the moralizing by his characterization of the teller. He elevates dullness to a stylistic device in itself to comment ironically on the failings of his comic narrators. In each of the tales, the poet assumes rhetorical masks suited to the pilgrims' prejudices and limitations. Each narrator has his or her own way of ordering experience through language. In this sense, each tale creates not only a fictional world (the story itself) but a fictional narrator, a voice that describes a particular way of seeing and responding to the world.

Yet, perhaps because the *Parson's Tale* occupies the final position in the poem, many critics tend to assume that, in this tale, Chaucer the poet speaks authoritatively through an "ideal" narrator who shares his view of the world. Lee W. Patterson's remark that "Chaucer himself emerges at the end, replacing the narratorial voice, dramatic, engaging, and multivalent, with his own identifiably historical tone", is typical of this belief.⁴ In fact, since Ralph Baldwin's 1955 article on the unity of the *Canterbury Tales*, all but a few of the poem's commentators have accepted without hesitation the Parson's authority as the poem's "moral touchstone".⁵ The psychological appeal of this interpretation is obvious: it allows the critic to see the rest of the tales as part of the poem's "significant design" of salvation and

the work itself as a closed, unified whole. But if the Parson's orthodox view of sin and penance seems designed to correct the pilgrims' moral shortcomings, it does not seem to vitiate their aesthetic perception of experience. The Parson's limitation is inherent in his language, at once familiar and self-congratulatory. He reduces a complex work of art, reflecting a variety of human experience, to a straightforward admonitory discourse. In the words of John Finlayson, who rejects the notion that the *Parson's Tale* is Chaucer's summing-up of the tales, "the very business of describing the more vivid pilgrims in terms of the Parson's dull categories demonstrates the inadequacy of the schematization to capture the essence of these characters".⁶ In brief, the Parson's rhetoric gives short shrift to our aesthetic experience of the poem as a whole.

The exchange between the Host and the Parson that precedes the last tale may clarify this sense of uneasiness Finlayson notes, itself emblematic of the complex issues with which Chaucer confronts us. When Harry Bailly calls upon the Parson to tell his tale, he uses the language of play and game that has dominated such exchanges throughout the poem:⁷

Be what thou be, ne breke thou nat oure play;
 For every man, save thou, hath toolde his tale.

 Tell us a fable anon, for cokkes bones! (24-5, 29)

These lines recall the storytelling game and prize dinner that, along with the pilgrimage, define the rhetorical context of the *Tales*. Harry Bailly's tone is good-natured, even festive; he asks for a "fable", not a manual for penance. But the Parson rejects his host's notion of play. His reply invokes the high seriousness of the religious pilgrimage that provides the occasion for the storytelling game:

Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me;
 For Paul, that writeth unto Thymothee,
 Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse,
 And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse.
 Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,
 Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?
 For which I seye, if that yow list to heere
 Moralitee and vertuuous mateere,
 And thanne that ye wol yeve me audience,
 I wol ful fayn, at Cristes reverence,
 Do yow plesaunce leefful, as I kan. (31-41)

This dialogue reveals two conflicting attitudes toward language and its function, the one serious, the other playfully rhetorical. For the Parson, as for every writer on the metaphysics of language from Plato to Hegel, language attempts to communicate a truth that is fixed and immutable. It points to a *presence* behind the sign, hence it need speak only of "moralitee and vertuuous mateere". The Parson dismisses "fables" as "draf", and views such poetic

excrescences as rhyme and the "rum, ram, ruf" of alliteration with scorn. He chooses prose as the proper vehicle for his "mateere". By prose he means transparent, unadorned prose, language that does not call attention to its stylistic surface, but which communicates an ideal, unassailable Truth forcefully. Like Plato, the Parson would banish from "Jerusalem celestial" all the lying poets. Language, for him, is a serious business, itself a "parfit glorious pilgrimage". It, like the "wey" to Canterbury, is a well-trod road to salvation (31-51).

On the other hand, Harry Bailly views language playfully. He initially proposes the game of storytelling "to short oure weye" (*General Prologue*, 791). He offers the prize dinner for the tale "of best sentence and moost solas" (*GP*, 798). But, although he dutifully cites the Horatian dictum that literature must both instruct and delight, he seems much more interested in "confort" and "myrthe" (*GP*, 733) than "sentence". He constantly encourages, and even revels in, the manipulation of language for its own sake. His enjoyment, it seems, is more aesthetic than moral ("ne breke thou nat oure pleye" (24) he tells the Parson). To the Parson, the Pardoner can only be an unregenerate liar and thief, the Wife of Bath a lewd sophist. But to Harry Bailly, both can be skilled storytellers. He can admire their rhetorical skill without necessarily approving of them morally, so long as they remain within the established boundaries of the game.⁸

The Parson's and Harry Bailly's contrasting attitudes toward language reflect the dialectic of solemnity and play that Chaucer establishes in the *General Prologue* and reiterates throughout the *Tales*. The Prologue insists on both a serious framework, the religious pilgrimage that accompanies the regeneration of spring, and a rhetorical one, the storytelling game that passes the time on the road. The ethical and aesthetic become two poles between which Chaucer can manipulate almost infinite possibilities of response. From the courtly and philosophic ideals of the *Knight's Tale* to the no less idealized fabliau world of the *Miller's Tale*, from the combative Wife to the subservient Griselda, from the sentimentousness of Chaucer's own *Melibee* to the Prioress' simple-minded miracles, Chaucer manipulates rhetorical and ethical values without ever committing himself to any one view of experience. In each tale then the reader must examine the assumptions about language's relationship to experience that the tale asks us to accept. The *Parson's Tale*, in this context, represents just one possible view of life and man's nature. In the pluralistic world of the *Canterbury Tales*, it asserts only its own claims to final authority.

In the linguistic world of the *Parson's Tale*, knowledge (of Christian morality, of ethical behaviour) is perceived as the organization (verbal and ideational) of criteria outside of the knowing self. The logical point-by-point progression of the *Parson's Tale* presents a conception of sin and penance predetermined by patristic authority. In this respect, the last of the *Canterbury Tales* illustrates the type of religious writing Søren Kierkegaard criticizes in *The Point of View for My Work as*

an Author - writing in which the ignorant man "is to have a piece of knowledge imparted to him, so that he is like an empty vessel which is to be filled or a blank piece of paper upon which something is to be written" (p.40). But if such a man is under the illusion that he is a Christian when in fact he is a Christian in name only (one suspects the shortcoming of many of the Canterbury pilgrims) such writing will be insufficient to dispel that illusion: ". . . direct communication presupposes the receiver's ability to receive is undisturbed. But here such is not the case; an illusion stands in the way" (p.40). Christianity can only become "visible for those with eyes to see, audible for those with ears to hear" (Matt. xi 15). Hence, one can only dispel such an illusion by "deceiving a person into truth", by the application of a caustic fluid to reveal "the text hidden under the text". The Parson's discourse fails to dispel his audience's illusions, even as he castigates them, precisely because it assures them that what they have always thought about salvation is true and that their ways of thinking in themselves are sufficient to ensure their salvation. Paradoxically, the tale's orthodoxy is its limitation. It makes the mysteries of Christianity self-evident. This is not to suggest that the Parson never says anything unpleasant or unsettling, but that whatever he says falls within categories of received systems of knowledge - for him, divinely ordained reflections of the Truth. He fails to acknowledge the chasm between the divine logos and its parody in human language.⁹

The opening paragraph sets the tone for the rest of the tale by creating a paradigm of seriousness and orthodoxy. The Parson begins by reassuring his audience that Christ "no man wole perisse, but wole that we comen alle . . . to the blisful lif that is perdurable". The forcefulness of "no man" and "all" in these lines hardly suggests the tentativeness of the opening subjunctives of Pennaforte's *Summa Casuum Poenitentiae*, Chaucer's ultimate source for the penance material:

Post abyssum et laqueos Babylonis, de quibus superius aliqua memoravimus ad cautelam, videlicet, ut cognoscantur et cognita melius evitentur, restat ut portam quietis ac serenitatis aeternae solliciti festinemus, inquirentes viam rectam, . . .

(After the abyss and the snares of Babylon, some of which we have already cautiously related, specifically so that that knowledge may be perceived and better avoided, it remains that we hasten apprehensively to the quiet and serene gate of eternity, seeking the right way, . . .)¹⁰

It is even further from the fear of damnation and predestination so agonizing for William Langland in *Piers Plowman*.¹¹ At the same time, the assertion that the "ful noble wey . . . may nat fayle to man ne to womman" suggests something of the Parson's confidence that, through rational discourse, man may reduce salvation to a comprehensible process available to all. If there is nothing in the introduction to disconcert the fourteenth- (or twentieth-) century reader, there is also little to challenge him.

The Parson's absolute confidence in himself and his language is mirrored in the syntactical patterns of the prose.¹²

Oure sweete Lord God of hevене, that no man wole perisse, but wole that we comen alle to the knoweleche of hym, and to the blisful lif that is perdurable, / amonesteth us by the prophete Jeremie, that seith in thys wyse: / Stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of olde pathes (that is to seyn, of old sentences) which is the goode wey, / and walketh in that wey, and ye shal fynde refresshyng for youre soules, etc. / Manye been the weyes espirituels that leden folk to oure Lord Jhesu Crist, and to the regne of glorie. / Of whiche weyes, ther is a ful noble wey and a ful covenable, which may nat fayle to man ne to womman that thurgh synne hath myssoon fro the righte wey of Jerusalem celestial; / and this wey is cleped Penitence, of which men sholde gladly herknen and enquere with al his herte, / to wyten what is Penitence, and whennes it is cleped Penitence, and in how manye maneres been the acciouns or werkynges of Penitence, / and how manye spesces ther been of Penitence, and whiche thynges apertenen and bihoven to Penitence, and whiche thynges destourben Penitence.

(75-8)

Although the complex subject of the first sentence ("Oure sweete Lord God of hevene, that no man wole perisse, but wole that we comen alle to . . . the blisful lif that is perdurable") delays, through a series of modifying clauses, the main verb "amonesteth", the reader is swept along by the rhythmic force of the prose. Throughout the first paragraph, the emphatic patterns of alliteration, verbal concordance (particularly the repetition of the key words "wey" and "penitence") and reinforcing pairs like "seeth and axeth", "herknen and enquere", "acciouns or werkynges", and "apertenen and bihoven" give the prose a rhythm that arouses and fulfills the expectations it raises. These, in turn, are reinforced by the syntactic patterns. This kind of hortatory patterning suggests that the Parson recognizes the limitations of his audience and the requirements of persuasive discourse.

The final sentence of the introduction, beginning "Of whiche weyes", offers a mode of perception based on division, categorization, and enumeration. Its structure helps define the scope of the Parson's discourse in a series of clauses, linked by anaphora and antistrophe, that correspond to the formal structure of the whole:

what is Penitence, and whennes it is cleped Penitence	corresponds to 84-94
in how manye maneres been the acciouns or werkynges of Penitence	corresponds to 95-100

and how manye spesces ther been of Penitence	corresponds to 101-5
and whiche thynges apertenen and bihoven to Penitence	corresponds to 106-1055
and whiche thynges destourben Penitence	corresponds to 1056-75

Although the corresponding divisions throughout the text are not of equal length - the fourth is by far the longest, containing the interpolated tract on the Seven Deadly Sins - the sentence reflects the self-conscious intellectual activity of classification. Once again, a comparison of this passage with the original in Pennaforte's *Summa* is suggestive, even if Chaucer is translating Pennaforte only indirectly:

. . . circa quam videndum quid sit poenitentia, unde dicatur, de tribus actionibus poenitentiae, de tribus speciebus ejusdem, quae sunt necessaria ad poenitentiam veram, de clavibus, de remissionibus, de impedimentis poenitentiae, et aliqua alia dubitabilia interponemus circa istam materiam.
(. . . About which it will be seen what is penance, that is, of the three actions of penance, of the three species of it, what things are necessary to true penance, of the keys, of the remissions, of the impediments of penance, and of some other doubtful things we introduce with respect to this material.)¹³

Pennaforte recites the same catalogue without rhetorical embellishment, seeming almost deliberately to avoid the patterns of anaphora and antistrophe that structure and order Chaucer's version. Regardless of whether this patterning is original with Chaucer or an imitation of an intermediary, but as yet undiscovered, source, the sentence calls attention to itself rhetorically, and it does so to emphasize the Parson's structured perception of human existence, rather than to demonstrate his verbal ingenuity. To the Parson, language simply mediates between human consciousness and an absolute Truth. For him, classifications inhere in, and proceed from, that Truth.

Nowhere in the tale is the preacher's characteristic reliance on such catalogues more evident than in the proliferation of subdivisions throughout the tract on the Seven Deadly Sins (386ff.). But here the Parson's stylistic practices occasionally give the lie to his serious assumptions about language and suggest something of his lack of self-knowledge. If there is little drama in the enumeration of the "braunches and twigges" of the sins, there is often both vivid and effective prose, as well as rhetorical display, seemingly for its own sake. Standing at the head of the tract as the "general roote of all harmes", the subdivision on Superbia demonstrates not only the Parson's obsession with order and proportion, but his mastery of the harangue as well. Once again, the

formal introduction results in divisions that find their correlatives in the syntactical structures of the prose. The reader is carried along by the rhythm of parallel grammatical inversions of subject-verb word order: "Inobedient is he . . ." "Avauntour is he . . ." "Arrogant is he . . ." Here the rhetorical figure of isocolon links like concepts so that the cumulative force of repetition relieves the reader of the responsibility for perceiving and assessing the relationships between the individual sins. The Parson's syntax is, in this sense, accretive rather than hierarchical. The relationships between sins become almost arbitrary, linked only as subsystems of a greater evil. His logic is that of truistic cataloguing.

But as general statement gives way to concrete illustration, the Parson's rhetorical style becomes less schematic, less mechanistic. Chaucer is particularly skilful in adapting the Parson's heretofore "plain" style to his own satiric design. As his discourse progresses, the narrator's glowing sense of his rhetorical prowess reveals another aspect of his character - his puritanical intolerance of the flesh, or, for that matter, of symbolic play, verbal or otherwise. He attacks, for instance, pride of clothing with an abundance of scatological detail, ranging from mildly satiric jibes - "forthwith the superfluitee in length of the for-seid gownes, trailyng in the donge and in the mire on horse and eek on foote" (419) - to Juvenalian invective - "of the hyndre part of hire buttokes, it is ful horrible for to see. For certes, in that partie of hir body ther as they purgen hir stynkyng ordure, / that foule partie of hir body shew they to the peple prouedly" (427). Yet even in the midst of such seemingly idiosyncratic denunciations, the static structures of enumeration and logical progression characteristic of the Parson's homiletic style dominate and order his language. The fashionable vices of dress are further subdivided into the opposites of "superfluitee of clothyng" and "scantnesse of clothyng", and the divisions clearly marked by the transitional phrases "As to that first synne" and "Upon that oother side", directing the reader's attention to the process of classification itself. As a result, the following diatribe against revealing dress stands isolated from the narrator's ostensible purpose. It is, at once, impressive and empty, a display of oratorical fireworks:

Upon that oother side, to speken of the horrible disordinat scantnesse of clothyng, as been thise kuttid sloppes, or haynselyns, that thurgh hire shortnesse ne covere nat the shameful membres of man, to wikked entente. / Allas! somme of hem shewen the boce of hir shap, and the horrible swollen membres, that semeth lik the maladie of hirnial, in the wrappyng of hir hoses; / and eek the buttokes of hem faren as it were the hyndre part of a she-ape in the fulle of the moone. / And mooreover, the wrecched swollen membres that they shewe thurgh disgisyng, in departyng of hire hoses in whit and reed, semeth that half hir shameful privee membres

weren flayne. / And if so be that they departen
 hire hoses in othere colours, as is whit and blak,
 or whit and blew, or blak and reed, and so forth, /
 thanne semeth it, as by variaunce of colour, that
 half the partie of hire priuee membres were corrupt
 by the fir of seint Antony, or by cancre, or by
 oother swich meschaunce. / (421-6)

The argument, such as it is, circles back again and again to the obscene display of the "membres", a word repeated in each sentence with a crescendo of declamatory adjectives: "shameful membres", "horrible swollen membres", "wrecched swollen membres", "shameful priuee membres". The passage depends, both for its logic and rhetorical effect, on the cumulative weight of these repetitions. Both the rhetorical effulgence, particularly the figures of *repetitio* and *amplificatio*, and the lively colloquial imagery reveal an "astringent chiding quality"¹⁴ that confirms my suspicions, at least, that the General Prologue's abstractly virtuous portrait and the characterless style of enumeration that marks much of his tale tend to obscure the Parson's un-Chaucerian intolerance.¹⁵

The Parson is both fascinated and repelled by sexuality and the body. He lavishes on the "stynkyng synne of Lecherie" (835ff.) his best imagery, linking each of the "fyve fyngres of Lecherie" with a particularly repellent, but memorable similitude. Looking, the first finger, "sleeth, right as the basilicok sleeth folk by the venym of his sighte" (852). Those who touch, "fareth lyk hym that handleth the scorpioun that styngeth and sodeynly sleeth thurgh his envenymynge" (853). Foul words, number three, "fareth lyk fyr, that right anon brenneth the herte" (854). The fourth is kissing: "he were a greet fool that would kisse the mouth of a brennyng oven or of a fourneys" (855). Finally, "olde dotardes" in love "been lyk to houndes; for an hound whan he comth by the roser or by othere [bushes], though he may nat pisse, yet wole he heve up his leg and make a contenance to pisse" (856-7). Such glimpses of Juvenalian invective, scattered throughout the section on the Sins, resemble nothing so much as the Pardoner's outbursts on the sins of the flesh (cf. *Pardoner's Tale*, 485-660). Yet the Parson's rhetoric seems flatter than the Pardoner's because it is never allowed to dominate the prose, but is kept strictly within the framework of classification that controls the tale. What distinguishes the Parson from the Pardoner is his Platonic and patristic horror of impersonation, the kind of role-playing in which the Pardoner seems to revel. The Parson's serious attitude toward language in passages like the ones cited above suggests, at times, a man of almost puritanical rigidity intent on reducing the complex rhetorical world of *The Canterbury Tales* to a series of absolute imperatives.

Paradoxically, then, the Parson participates in the social world of *The Canterbury Tales*, even though he rejects its sense of linguistic play. Rather than transcending the temporal concerns of the other pilgrims, he appeals to their sense of social propriety. He concerns himself not only with proper dress and proper marriage (920-40) but with proper lordships and economic realities as well: "Of Coveitise comen these harde lordshipes, thurgh whiche men been

distreyned by taylages, custumes, and cariages, moore than hire duetee or resoun is. And eek taken they of hire bonde-men amercimentz, whiche myghten moore resonably ben cleped extorcions than amercimentz" (751). He, perhaps more than any of the other pilgrims, is concerned with the group as a community. He actively tries to convert them to his beliefs. Thus, his "tale" may succeed precisely because its appeal is to a perceivable social, as well as moral, norm. However unpleasant his words may be, he can never be truly upsetting because he reinforces his audience's beliefs that salvation may be grasped through his brand of rational discourse - his lists of rules and anatomy of penance - and assured not through spiritual struggle and crisis (the method of *Piers Plowman*), but by conforming to external standards of decorum. But the Parson is no hypocrite. He cannot really be criticized for whatever self-blindness he, like the other pilgrims, falls victim to. His fallibility lies in the fact that, like the other pilgrims, he is both in and of this world. His moral vision is, in a very real sense, a social vision as, paradoxically, it must be. His language is that of the world, not of the divine Logos. It comes at the expense of any true sense of religious experience and hence remains limited as a means of bringing the *Canterbury Tales* to an appropriate end through a transcendent and all-encompassing divine vision (such as, for instance, the vision at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*).

In this sense, the conclusion is marked by contradiction. If it seems superficially a fitting end for the *Tale* and, perhaps, for the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, its assumptions also make it seem unsatisfying. Although the final sentence climaxes in a crescendo of clauses linked by parallelism, balance and antithesis, there is in it little that actually suggests a mystical vision of God. The Parson prefaces his final remarks with the same, almost formulaic, transitional phrase, "Thanne shal men understonde", that introduces other divisions throughout the tale. The adverb "thanne", which connects the closing statement with what has gone before, marks the final step or logical closure of a process. The verb "understonde" suggests that divine mysteries can be made comprehensible through human rationality (understanding). The Parson's stylistic practice of splitting up an idea into component elements allows him to gloss over the divine and therefore unknowable aspects of "the endeles blisse of heven":

ther joye hath no contrariouste of wo
 ne grevaunce;
 ther alle harmes been passed of this present lyf;
 ther as is the sikernesse fro the peyne of helle;
 ther as is the blisful compaignye
 that rejoysen hem evermo,
 everich of otheres joye; /
 ther as the body of man,
 that whilom was foul and derk,
 is moore cleer than the sonne;
 ther as the body,
 that whilom was syk,
 freele
 and fieble,

and mortal,
 is immortal,
 and so strong
 and so hool
 that ther may no thyng apeyren it; /
 ther as ne is neither hunger,
 thurst,
 ne coold,
 but every soule replenyssed with the sighte
 of the parfit knowynge
 of God. /
 (1076-9)

As the diagram illustrates, the final sentence takes shape by presenting a group of antithetical statements in symmetrical groups to sharpen the sense of division between them. The effect of such schematic pointers as "ther as . . . whilom" is to pit each syntactic element rigidly against its opposite, while the strict parison among clauses and the balance within clauses draw attention to the demarcation between ideas. This syntactic disjunction characterizes the Parson's performance as a whole; it leads the reader step-by-step in a logical and orderly fashion to a point of certainty: the final effect, or reward, in a series of cause and effect relationships. The reward itself is earthbound, tied to the physical image of the body, however transformed, just as his earlier description of the punishments of hell is tied to the body's frailty: "ther as they shul han the fyr and the wormes that evere shul lasten, and wepynge and wallynge, sharp hunger and thurst, and grymnesse of develes, that shullen al totrede hem withouten respit and withouten ende" (863). (Indeed, the Parson's visions of a body without pain, perfectly formed, recalls the Wife of Bath's fantasy of an old crone transformed into a beautiful seductress.) To be sure, the Parson's objective is to persuade the Canterbury pilgrims of their individual roles in salvation and to do so he must shape his discourse to fit his audience's capabilities. However, his vision of the resurrection of the body ignores the dissolution of the self essential to the mystical experience. The Parson's meticulous language gives only perfunctory attention to the divine perspective that must render insignificant any social perspective, even the Parson's serious one, and our experience of the end remains fragmentary. Chaucer's ironies, not the Parson's certainties, reflect the paradox of the Christian mystery.

The ironic discrepancy between the Parson's anatomy of the letter of the law and the reader's perception of his failure to capture or convey its spirit suggests that he is not Chaucer's spokesman nor his tale a redefinition of speech, and poetic speech in particular, that one critic has called it.¹⁶ The *Canterbury Tales* closes on an ambiguous, even disturbing note, precisely because the Parson's discourse cannot subsume under a redeemed language the plurality of social roles the tales create. Paradoxically, the open-ended nature of Chaucer's narrative underscores the significance of the tales' diversity. It reminds us that the ethical, aesthetic, and rhetorical values of the whole work ought to determine the significance of the *Parson's Tale*, not the reverse. It reminds us that we

must distinguish between Christian morality as part of an artist's cultural milieu and Christian morality as an absolute determinant of his art. The tale sets the aesthetic and rhetorical values of the other tales against the ethical values it asserts, rather than synthesizing the aesthetic and ethical poles between which Chaucer moves throughout the tales. In doing so, it suggests that beyond the syntactical and social limitations of its language lies a fuller and more complex understanding of Christian morality, one that remains implicit in the *Canterbury Tales* dialectics.

NOTES

- 1 *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, trans. Walter Lowrie, (New York, 1962) p.40.
- 2 All quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson (2nd ed., Cambridge (Mass.), 1957).
- 3 Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure* (Chicago; London, 1968) p.36.
- 4 "The 'Parson's Tale' and the Quitting of the 'Canterbury Tales'", *Traditio*, 34 (1978) p.370.
- 5 Ralph Baldwin, "The Unity of the *Canterbury Tales*", repr. in *Chaucer Criticism*, ed. Richard Schoek and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame, 1960) I, pp.14-51. Lee Patterson distinguishes, among the many discussions of the *Parson's Tale*, four critical 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 seamliness." (Op.cit., p.333 and n.8.) My own position will emerge in the course of this article as somewhere in Patterson's third category.
- 6 "The Satiric Mode of the *Parson's Tale*", *Chaucer Review* 6 (1971) p.107.
- 7 Richard Lanham has documented the frequency of such allusions to play and game throughout the *Canterbury Tales* in *Motives of Eloquence* (New Haven; London, 1976) pp.68-9.
- 8 Lanham suggests that Harry Bailly humiliates the Pardoner largely because he oversteps the boundary between game and life, destroying the ironic detachment through which the pilgrims can enjoy the Pardoner's con (*Motives of Eloquence*, p.69).
- 9 As has one critic who suggests that "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" (Patterson, op.cit., p.355).
- 10 W.F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (New York, 1958) p.729 (my translation). The correspondences in phrasing and structure between the two works are striking from the first paragraph of *The Parson's Tale* and, with the exception of the interpolated tract on the Seven Deadly Sins, run almost to the end of the tale. But Margaret Schlauch reminds us that "Chaucer probably made use of some intermediary version in French. Hence some of the characteristics [of Chaucer's prose] . . . may be due to skilful imitation rather than independent variation" ("The Art of Chaucer's Prose", in *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, ed. D.S. Brewer (University, Alabama; London, 1966) p.149). The problems of *The Parson's Tale's* sources are complex and will probably

- not be solved until more of the texts involved are edited. For a discussion of these problems see Kate Peterson, *The Sources of the Parson's Tale*, *Radcliffe College Monographs*, No. 12 (Boston, 1901); Bryan and Dempster, *Sources and Analogues*, pp.723-9; Morton Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept with Special Reference to Medieval Literature* (Michigan, 1952), pp.191-2; and two articles by Siegfried Wenzel: "The Source for the 'Remedia' of the Parson's Tale", *Traditio* 27 (1971) pp.433-53; and "The Source of Chaucer's Seven Deadly Sins", *Traditio* 30 (1974) pp.351-78.
- ¹¹ Damnation, for Langland, is a real threat, while salvation, in human terms, often seems arbitrary. The examples of Solomon and David ("al holy chirche holden hem in helle"), Mary Magdalene and Dismas the Good Thief who were both saved in spite of their sins, recounted first in the A text (XI 256-84), plunge the dreamer into a spiritual crisis. Langland's inability to resolve the crisis satisfactorily precipitates the poem's hasty conclusion. Later, when Langland returned to the poem, he again took up the problem (B X 211ff.), concluding "Ther are witty and wel libbyng ac hire werkes ben yhudde / In þe hondes of almyȝty God . . ." (B X 438). Quotations are from *The A Version*, ed. George Kane (London, 1960); and *The B Version*, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London, 1975).
- ¹² For two important studies of the Parson's prose see Margaret Schlauch's article cited above in *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, pp.140-63; and Ralph W.V. Elliott, *Chaucer's English* (London, 1974) pp.132-80.
- ¹³ *Sources and Analogues*, p.729 (my translation).
- ¹⁴ Donald Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley; London, 1976) p.378.
- ¹⁵ One might argue that the change in the Parson's tone in this section results from Chaucer's using a different source for the tract on sin and that the rhetorical expansion here is attributable to a pre-text. This argument is given some force by the awkwardness of the transition between the treatise on penance and the section on the Sins (see Bloomfield, *Seven Deadly Sins*, p.192). However, no direct source has yet been uncovered for this section, and the problems of sources are even more daunting than those involved in the Penance sections. This section of *The Parson's Tale* seems closest in general structure to the *Summa Vitiorum* of Guilielmus Peraldus, but there is nothing in Peraldus quite like the passages I am discussing. The rhetorical display, the tone of exhortation, and the more colourful and picturesque language are foreign to the detached tone of exposition that characterizes Peraldus' Latin. Although *The Parson's Tale* shares these features with a vast body of late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Latin and vernacular religious manuals, so far none has been identified as a source. Clearly the language is suited to a less educated member of the clergy and directed toward a lay audience - the dramatic situation of Chaucer's Parson. For a discussion of the sources of this segment of *The Parson's Tale* see Kate Peterson, *The Sources of the Parson's Tale*, pp.34-6; Bryan and Dempster, *Sources and Analogues*, pp.723-8; Bloomfield, *Seven Deadly Sins*, pp.191-2; and Wenzel's two articles in *Traditio* 27 and 30. Wenzel's examination of a related text does not find any significant differences from Peraldus in the section on Superbia (*Traditio* 30, p.362).
- ¹⁶ Patterson, pp.378-9.