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## The “Sermons” of English Romance

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The influence of sermon content on mediaeval secular literature has long been acknowledged. Widening the trail blazed by Gerald Owst in 1933, Siegfried Wenzel has recently identified sermon material in the fabliaux, the drama, the epic, and, very extensively, in the mediaeval lyric.<sup>1</sup> Evidence for the usage of sermon formats, however, is considerably harder to develop, although efforts to do so — both brilliant and bizarre — have certainly been attempted.<sup>2</sup> Many of the difficulties arise because the homily style in preaching design that had been dominant until the twelfth century and remained a viable option especially in the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries was too unique and personalized to the individual sermon giver to be reduced to a scheme. In addition, the more organized pattern of preaching, which today is called “scholastic,” “university-style,” or more correctly “thematic,” vied for prominence with the homily throughout most of the mediaeval period. Only in the fourteenth century, and probably only in England where manuals on thematic design and sermons thus organized flourished, can the effect of a prescribed preaching structure on non-religious writing be easily discerned. Such a discovery occurs when certain unusually-shaped passages in English metrical romance are measured against thematic formats.

Thematic sermon structure was clearly outlined in those most effective of mediaeval, self-help manuals, the *artes praedicandi* of the British writers,

John of Wales, Robert of Basevorn, Thomas Waleys, and Ranulph Higden. All four, between 1275 and 1350, composed arts of preaching that were more schematized than either their predecessors or progeny in the genre, exhibiting demonstrable affinities with classical *dispositio* as communicated to the middle ages through Cicero's *De inventione*.<sup>3</sup> They counselled the preacher to choose an appropriate theme, generally scriptural, from which the entire sermon could be developed. The quotation's significance for the occasion was to constitute the substance of the protheme; the audience's attention would be captured and the theme's specific resonances developed in the introduction. Suitable divisions, mostly triplex, were to follow, and the whole skeleton fleshed out by citation of confirmatory authorities and through incorporation of some of the educational and/or philosophic techniques emanating from the schools. The preface to Ranulph Higden's *Ars componendi sermones* provides a succinct outline of the process:

Circa sermones artificialiter faciendos sunt quedam generalia consideranda, videlicet: thematis assumptio, eiusdem introductio, principalis divisio et principalis divisionis prosecutio seu subdivisio, membrorum subdivisionis prolatio, et ipsorum dilatio. (3)

[Sermons made with artifice should exhibit certain qualities: the assertion of a theme and its introduction, a principal division and subdivision, the spelling out of the members of the subdivision and their elaboration.]

Implementing this clear plan proved both attractive to and fairly simple for even the less educated or less talented members of the clergy, and sermons in thematic format were composed and commented upon in great numbers during the fourteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Generally, they explicated their subject in a comprehensible, if not always fascinating, manner. Like most of the other manualists, Higden offered many suggestions for the orderly development of material into a tree-shaped construct, growing out of the root text. A sermon on the theme "Pascha domini est" ("It is the passover of the Lord," cf. Exod. 1:11) should, he maintained, be developed according to the following scheme:

The condition or quality of resurrection is signaled in "pascha" which is interpreted as "transitus;"

Secondly, the authority or jurisdiction over the resurrected is indicated by "domini;"

The veracity of the resurrection manifest to the world is denoted by "est," which is a substantive verb and expressive of truth.

A subsequent division based on the "pascha/transitus" complex would begin by noting that the Lord makes three transits:

1. in changing bread into his body;
2. in obviating our death through his;
3. in taking his body back *post mortem*.

A specification of when these events occurred should follow: the first, on the preparation day when Christ instituted the Eucharist; the second, on the day of passover when he vanquished the devil on the cross; the third, when he conferred the possibility of resurrection on us. In light of these achievements, we also ought to “transire” in a triple manner:

- from the miseries of sin in order that we might be refreshed by the sacraments of the church;
- from the desires of the flesh so that we might understand the sufferings of Christ;
- from the delights of the world, thus perfecting our spirit in joy.

Higden suggests that this schema be enhanced through figural exegesis, by examples from canon law and from the lives of the saints, with citations to things similar in the visible world, and in adducing whatever miraculous events will be pertinent (Jennings, ed., 69).

Obviously, such a precise blueprint made successful preaching inevitable and further efforts in this line desirable, especially in the Christian religious culture of mediaeval England. The impetus to undertake thematic preaching, however, was affected by a confluence of factors other than the rise of the sermon manual.<sup>5</sup> When the Third Lateran Council (1179) convened, its primary purpose seemed to be the restoration of ecclesiastical discipline, but it did not ignore the existence of pastoral problems related to the *cura animarum* and mandated more consistent educational opportunities for clerics. Further authorization and motivation for a true pastoral awakening was created by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which fulminated against a variety of current abuses. Among many pieces of legislation connected with parochial life, its decree “Omnis utriusque sexus” imposed annual confession to the parish priest; observation of this rule demanded that both priests and laity be instructed. The sermon was the obvious medium not only for popularizing the Lateran decrees but also for communicating the kinds and nature of sin in preparation for confession; moreover, the standardization of church practice vis-à-vis sacraments, devotions, even liturgical prayer made clear preaching imperative. Outside ecclesiastical precincts, the social and economic upheavals, associated especially in the fourteenth century with the rise of the middle class and the rumblings of the peasants, were also a constant goad to the sermon giver, who fortunately now had access to simply written and well illustrated manuals of preaching instruction.

Given the concise and useful format advocated there, it is not surprising that thematic structural patterns can be found in specific literary genres. Wenzel has traced some of these elements in the medieval lyric and has suggested that others may have influenced Chaucer's dream visions.<sup>6</sup> Yet, similar influences on the English metrical romances have escaped detection despite the many studies of these texts from perspectives related to preaching.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, evidence of thematic sermon format can be seen in the White Knight's discourse in *Sir Amadace*.<sup>8</sup> Although in toto the text acts as a panegyric on the glories of generosity, the speech of the White Knight himself ("Milke quyte was his stede, / And so was alle his othir wede." sect. 37) rivets attention on the tale's moral. As outlined below, his counsel is clearly organized, its many resonances arising out of assertions made earlier in the poem. In unadorned language the White Knight begins:

That God may make a man to fall and rise again should prompt the grievously mourning Amadace to consider several implications of being generous.

1. Goods are only a "lante lone" — essentially ephemeral; meditation on the death of Christ who shed his precious blood "for the and monkynd alle" (sect. 39) will confirm this.

2. A man who gives of a kind heart, alike to the deserving and the undeserving, will triumph. As the White Knight affirms that courtesy begets courtesy, his listeners make reference to Amadace's prior conduct both toward the merchant and toward the dame and agree with the advice:

"Repente the nozte, that thou hase done,  
For he that schope bothe sunne and mone  
Fulle wele may pay for alle!" (sect. 39)

3. Having fastened on the winning of the royal maid as a sure cure for Amadace's mourning, the White Knight develops his final point: "freedom" is the key to happiness.

He sayd, "That thou be fre of wage,  
And I schalle pay for this costage,  
x thowsand gif thou ladde;  
Ther schalle thou wynne fulle mekille honowre,  
Fild and frithe, towne and towre,  
That lady schalle thou wedde!" (sect. 42)

Sir Amadace is obviously convinced of the prophetic authority of the Knight who utters these words because he swears to be true to him. The remainder of the romance confirms the speech's promise: Amadace is rewarded not only with the King's daughter but also with unparalleled honour throughout the land.

Thematic format is not perfectly exemplified here, but its presence is demonstrable. There is a rudimentary theme in the statement that God

may make a man to rise and fall; the aptness of this declaration in light of Amadace's mourning is a kind of protheme; the audience's attention is caught by the implications of generosity, which are divided into three categories and finally confirmed in a twofold manner: first, by Amadace's acceptance of the Knight's examples and second, by the later progression of the story. But the unity of effect attendant upon thematic form is somewhat undermined by an immediate dispersal of emphasis, and the White Knight's "sermon" becomes an illustration of Kane's contention that although didacticism is not foreign to romance, "to fulfill successfully both a teaching intention and one of entertainment would overtax the abilities of all but the most gifted" (19).

Among the latter, the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is surely to be counted. S/he weds *utile* to *dulce*—or instruction to enjoyment—when the Green Knight explains to Gawain the significance of the three blows he has endured in Fytt Four (lines 2338–68). The whole passage can be viewed as a thematic sermon on knightly courtesy under the rubric: "A true man pays his obligations and then need have no fear." Given the poem's preceding action, there is no necessity for a protheme to point to the statement's significance on this occasion when Gawain fulfils the promise he made in the preceding yuletide. Consequently, following prescriptions for the introduction, the Green Knight immediately captures and focusses Gawain's (and the audience's) attention by dramatically reminding the knight that the terms of this encounter are indeed those previously agreed:

That earthling then harkened, holding onto his axe,  
Set the shaft at a slant and leaned toward the sharp blade,  
And looked at the knight who stood near on the land,  
How that gallant Gawain courageously stands,  
Armed, and full hardy; at heart it does please him.  
Then he smiles and speaks with a resonant voice,  
And with a clear command, he calls to Gawain:  
"Fearless fellow, on this field be not so fierce;  
No man has handled you unmannerly,  
Nor cancelled the covenant arranged at the king's court." (2331–40)

Having accomplished the purpose of any sermon's introduction, the Green Knight proceeds with his division and confirmation, reviewing with Gawain the significance of each of the three blows and epitomizing, at the same time, both the poem's earlier narration and its present action. The first two "boffets" were ineffectual because, at the corresponding times in "Bercilak's" castle, Gawain had fulfilled the terms of his and the Green Knight's

agreement: “You carried out the pledge, correctly, as you had promised / You gave me all the gain as a good man should” (2348–49). The emphasis on truth and trust in line 2348 (“And þou trystly þe trawþe and trwly me halde”) is refocused in line 2354 when the Green Knight reflects on his sermon’s obvious but previously unstated theme, affirming that “A true man must truly restore. / Then one need fear no harm.”

But on the third day, a sorely tempted Gawain kept the “girdel” proffered by Lady Bercilak; having failed to “trwe restore,” the nearly faultless knight “lakked a lyttel” (2366). The indictment is softened by the Green Knight’s acknowledgment that Gawain’s failure is not due to “wild wickedness nor to wooing” but to his love for life (2367–68). The resultant action, directly following the sermon’s conclusion, is startling: a pale and furious Gawain curses the cowardice that made him able to reconcile himself to covetousness and go against the liberality and loyalty of his nature:

Now I am faulty and false, and have foolishly followed  
Treachery and untruth; both betide sorrow and care. (2382–83)

Like Sir Amadace, Gawain immediately internalizes the sermon’s lesson; he apologizes for his discourtesy to the Green Knight, and responds magnanimously:

As my host, I honor you still;  
I know I have not been fair.  
Now let me work your will;  
To be false I will never dare. (2385–88)

Gawain’s wholehearted resolve is specified some fifty lines later when he avers that every time he beholds the sash he will recall to himself “The faultiness and frailty of the flesh so perverse” (2435).

For its length — 30 lines — the Green knight’s sermon is probably the most efficacious in preaching history. It plays a crucial role in the text, acting as a prism wherein the earlier actions and reactions of Gawain are summed up, evaluated, and judged. Every item in its posited thematic rubric is significant — especially “trwe,” a word of resounding importance during the later middle ages.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the pointing suggests that this whole poem is best explained in light of the various parameters of “trouthe.”<sup>10</sup> As knights at Arthur’s court, Gawain and his comrades are expected to be true: i.e., loyal, courageous, faithful, devoted, committed. But that expectation and its implications come dangerously close to failure upon the appearance of the Green Knight. Gawain’s “trouthe,” as well as that of the whole knightly company, is at its lowest ebb when the Green Knight addresses

them as beardless children (280) and laughs at their dread of him (316). If a grudging resemblance to truth characterizes Gawain's acceptance of the challenge, this occurs only after Arthur has risen to preserve the honour of them all. The Knight's petition that he take on the adventure is surely not accompanied by a ringing assertion of his prowess:

I am aware of my weakness, my wisdom so feeble,  
 And loss of my life least important would be;  
 I only am honored because you are my uncle,  
 And no virtue but your blood prevails in my body. (354–57)

Even the Green Knight wonders if Gawain can be counted on to fulfil his commitment: "You must tell me truly if I am to trust you," he says (380); and again: "You shall assure me, sir, on your honor, / That you shall seek me yourself" (394–95). Gawain responds: "I swere þe forsoþe, and by my seker traweþ" (403), and the "game" begins.

The following year, Gawain's initially honorable behaviour at Bercilak's castle can be seen as a rebuilding of the "trouthe" in him, but he is still not perfect in its accomplishment and on the third day secretly harbours the good-luck girdle. He must be taught, both about the ramifications of truth and about his own fallibility; for this the Green Knight's "sermon" is a compact and convincing tool. Its emphasis on the all-encompassing nature of truth suggests that the parameters of that word must extend beyond the present physical situation and into the more spiritual realm of fidelity, loyalty, and belief. At the poem's end, Gawain is to know both his human limitations and how endangered he had become as a man of faith.<sup>11</sup>

Although its triplicate patterning certainly manifests the many resonances of truth, the brevity of the Green Knight's instruction does not permit extensive exploration of sermon design. A fuller understanding of the operation of thematic structures in English romance can be attained from a consideration of the "sermons" in Chaucerian texts like the *Knight's Tale*, the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, and *Troilus and Criseyde* (ed. Benson 65–66, 120–21, 527).

In the *Knight's Tale*, Theseus addresses Palamon with the words:

I trowe ther nedeth litel sermonyng  
 To make yow assente to this thyng, (1.3091–92)

the "thyng" being Palamon's wedding of Emilie. Nevertheless, for the preceding one hundred lines, for whose content Chaucer was largely indebted to Boethius, Theseus had preached a fine thematic sermon with a cogent and sequential format and, because longer than that of *Sir Gawain and the*

*Green Knight*, easily linked to specific preaching structures. His theme or controlling idea celebrates the glorious reality of the order established by the First Mover when he made “the faire cheyne of love” (1.2988):

Greet was th’effect, and heigh was his entente.  
Wel wiste he why, and what thereof he mente. (1.2989–90)

Such purposiveness is focussed by the protheme — which reminds the audience that the chain places the elements in certain bounds — and highlighted by the introduction — which declares that the world’s structures need not be attested by authorities: they are apparent from experience, which reveals that “thilke Movere stable is and eterne” (1.3004). The introduction proceeds to extend the theme of orderliness, showing how every part derives from “his hool” of perfection and stability, inevitably descending to that which is corruptible. Since nothing here is eternal, it is the Creator’s behest — demonstrable, of course — that

speces of thynges and progressiouns  
Shullen endure by successiouns. (1.3013–14)

In his division, Theseus applies the theme to three aspects of creation: first, to animate nature likened to the oak, which lives long but eventually succumbs; second, to inanimate nature exemplified by the stone that finally crumbles, by the river that eventually runs dry, and by towns that wax and wane; third, to humankind who obviously move from youth to age and finally to death:

Som in his bed, som in the depe see,  
Som in the large feeld, as men may see. (1.3031–32)

Theseus’s confirmatory examples permit a summation of the theme’s emphasis on the excellence of order. Arcite’s death is thus put into proper perspective:

Thanne is it wysdom, as it thynketh me,  
To maken vertu of necessitee,  
And take it weel that we may nat eschue  
And namely that to us alle is due. (1.3041–44)

It is folly to rebel against the divine order; it is far better to cease complaining about the eternal plan and realize that Arcite, dying untimely but on the crest of the wave, “Departed is with duetee and honour” (1.3060).

More expansively than that in *Gawain*, the thematic format here acts as a capstone to the text providing the final triple patterning of the poem



and raising to a higher level the poet's previously (and triply) expressed concerns with events, atmosphere, attributes, and interests (human, ethical, and theological).<sup>12</sup> Whatever tensions, frustrations, and discordancies the tale presents are refocussed by this "sermon"; their disparateness is transcended by recognition that God the Creator — called Jupiter by Chaucer but clearly the Prime Mover — causes everything to return to its own source. And in this orderly movement, which unifies all the triplicate structures, there is a tantalizing suggestion of the unity in the trinity. Thus, the *Knight's Tale* is revealed not only as a most striking Chaucerian statement about the nature of order but possibly a prelude to the poet's discussion of its ultimate expression: the harmonious world controlled by love presented in the *Parlement of Foules*. That the Athenian ruler's sermon may well indicate a societal vision preliminary to that expressed in the *Parlement* could affect the currently disputed date of the *Knight's Tale*, placing its composition closer to 1380 than to 1390. But, however one views the import of Theseus's message, recognition of the all-pervasive, love-bound orderliness of creation finally prompts that ruler to recommend another pairing: the marriage of Palamon and Emilie.

Marriage plays an important role in another of Chaucer's thematic "sermons," this in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, lines III.1100–1206, where the pulpit is the marriage bed. The situation, however, is diametrically opposite to that discussed above. Theseus had emphasized pattern and was the voice of his society speaking on a public occasion; the Wyf has shown herself the incarnation of the unpredictable, finding nobility in unexpected places, overturning normal expectations in the progression from youth to age, speaking out of turn, and here, through her mouthpiece, converting in private only a doubting husband.<sup>13</sup> Despite these anomalies, the "sermon" is even more compelling than that of the *Knight's Tale*. As the Loathly Lady's unwilling groom writhes in misery at his situation and turns away from her in disgust, she questions his very strange behaviour, crying "What is my gilt?" (III.1096). In his extremity, the knight blurts out his reasons: she is utterly unattractive to him, old, and low born. His words provide the perfect opening for remarks about a perennially important question and one which Chaucer had toyed with throughout his literary career: what control do accidental factors exercise (here, personal taste, chronological age, and position in society) vis-à-vis the attainment of happiness? Interestingly, when the Loathly Lady preaches, she counsels the knight to examine his own arrogant assumptions (III.1113–16) and then adjusts the items in his catalogue of woes; the significance of financial status is added, occupying second place

in the discussion while the barb about social class devolves into an exploration of how and whether or not one possesses gentility. Probably because of Chaucer's interest in and frequently expressed conviction about the nature of "gentillesse," the sermon-like disquisition opens with that topic, proceeds to a commentary on poverty, and ends with assurances about the safeguard of age. The first two sections use triplicate patterns in both division and confirmation:

On "gentillesse":

- 1) It is not inherited. No ancestors may bequeath to us that virtuous life which merited for them the term "gentle." Dante made this very clear when he counseled that we "Clayme oure gentillesse" from God (III.1125–29).
- 2) It is not a concomitant of possessions. Just as it is the property of fire to shine whether men perceive it or not, so it is the nature of the gentle person to act thus "in his kynde" and not "annexed to possessioun" (III.1147).
- 3) It is a gift or grace from God. The Loathly Lady recommends consultation of Seneca and Boethius in confirmation of this assertion, along with the remarks of Valerius Maximus on Tullius Hostilius who "out of poverte roos to heigh noblesse" (III.1165–70).

The Loathly Lady's conclusion equates gentility with a virtuous life.

On poverty:

- 1) It was chosen by Jesus himself. Seneca would agree with this choice since "Glad poverte is an honest thyng" (III.1183).
- 2) It makes a man rich because he desires nothing. Juvenal sang merrily of this type of poverty whereby a man may move blithely among thieves (III.1192–94).
- 3) It is a "hateful good" encouraging industry, improving wisdom, helping us to know God and ourselves and who our true friends are (III.1195–204).

The Loathly Lady concludes that since her poverty does not cause the knight any pain, she is not blameworthy (III.1205–06).

These first two divisions of the Loathly Lady's "sermon" indicate a development in Chaucer's thought on both of the subjects discussed. It was commonplace in the middle ages to proclaim that gentility depended on character not on inheritance, possibly to assure and inspire the church's predominantly poor members who supposedly were to take their place in a visionary—if not very practical—Christian democracy.<sup>14</sup> Chaucer had equated gentility with the embrasure of the highest values in the *Clerk's Tale* (IV.655–61), stressing that this superb human quality was grounded

in truth, fidelity, and integrity. He had also affirmed its non-transferable aspects in the moral “ballade” on the subject of “Gentillesse”:

Vyce may wel be heir to old richesse,  
 But ther may no man, as men may wel see,  
 Bequethe his heir his vertuous noblesse. (15–17; ed. Benson 656)

The Loathly Lady repeats the standard lore in her first two subdivisions. But in the third, she reaches into a more supernatural realm:

Thanne comth oure verray gentillesse of grace. (III.1163)

In Christian theology, grace is a divine gift that liberates one from the domination of natural appetites and bestows the power to throw off the chains of a damaged nature.<sup>15</sup> “Gentillesse” — a consequence of that heavenly favour untrammelled by place or time — is, therefore, an admirable “quality open to any individual nature if so blessed by God” (Carruthers 231–32), a perspective particularly fitting in a society as changeable (below royal rank) as that of fourteenth-century England. Although Walter, in the *Clerk’s Tale*, had indeed stated that gentility was a matter of goodness derived from divine grace, Chaucer is clearer here. Gentility is not solely manifested in the living of a virtuous life; it is a gift of God. The transcendental implications of this statement affect the Loathly Lady’s commonplace conclusion, giving her words extraordinary impact.

Her ensuing presentation of poverty is equally noteworthy, but from another set of perspectives. It differs greatly from that in the “Visio” section of *Piers Plowman*, which explores the miserable state of the hapless poor,<sup>16</sup> and is at considerable variance with that expressed elsewhere in Chaucer’s works. He had previously signalled the consequences of poverty by asserting, impersonally, that it affected one’s status in hell (*Parson’s Tale*, x.190ff.), disdainfully, that it was the mother of ruin (*Melibee’s Tale*, vii.2750ff.), and humorously, that it must be obliterated (“Complaint to His Purse,” 15–21). In the *Clerk’s Tale* he pitied but did not dwell on its manifestations at the house of Griselda and her father and sorrowfully recognized the destitution signified by her “smok” (iv.204–07; 882–96). In the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, however, poverty is something to be espoused interiorly rather than imposed exteriorly, a position consonant with its depiction as a moral/philosophical exercise in Virgil, Horace, and Seneca, and repeated in a plethora of verbal and sententious lore in the middle ages.<sup>17</sup> The Loathly Lady’s rather spiritual explication of poverty’s benefits could also have been affected by debates among the mendicants, but more probably came from fourteenth-century

sermon material. Most of her comments are contained in the *Fasciculus Morum*, a compendium of mediaeval attitudes toward the vices and virtues and a fecund source of preaching topics.<sup>18</sup> In demonstrating how voluntary poverty stands like a strong champion (“sicut fortis athleta”) against the vice of avarice, the *Fasciculus* compiler notes that the Son of God especially chose to be poor (“Ipsam autem specialiter elegit Christus,” IV.xii.9–10). Seneca is also mentioned as one of the many non-Christians who valued this stance (112–15). As in the Loathly Lady’s “sermon,” the *Fasciculus* states that the poor are unconcerned about thieves (“predones non verentur” 153); it does not, however, credit Juvenal with the aphorism. Chaucer’s information is actually more complete; the poor man’s blithe attitude in the face of thieves is a happy translation of line 21 in Juvenal’s tenth satire (Shannon 361). The handbook’s final words about poverty (166–85), like those in the tale, show how through its practice we can know God and ourselves as well as our neighbour. The Loathly Lady’s conclusion that her poverty is irrelevant to the knight’s status is strikingly apropos since he had not cited it in his complaint! Nevertheless, her discussion succeeds in highlighting the individual and personal nature of the good to be derived from voluntary poverty, a position consonant with mediaeval preaching.

The section on old age is much briefer and, in that, reminiscent of many thematic sermons that slighted their final division because of the length of earlier parts. Nevertheless, the Loathly Lady makes clear that dirt and old age are the grand wardens of chastity. Her sermon ends with a challenge: choose between an ancient hag who could never cuckold you and a youthful wife who can and may attract other men. The knight obviously has internalized the true importance of the ideas presented because he decides to place himself in the lady’s hands, thereby winning for them both “parfit joye” (III.1258).

Probably the best of Chaucer’s thematic sermons is “preached” by another woman, again in bed but under vastly different conditions. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book III, lines 987–1054, Criseyde discourses on the theme: “Jealousy is great folly.” The occasion for this polemic is Troilus’s accusation that she had consorted with another man, an unfounded charge that Criseyde attributes to the machinations of the green monster. Her protheme, providing a fine setting for the lesson to follow, functions in a manner similar to that advocated by Higden for the “transitus” section of his “Pascha domini est” sermon: it is a triplex commentary in which the third element is attenuated in three ways. Criseyde asserts that love should not be resisted, that Troilus shows great love and service, that he is ultimately a

good man and, because of this last quality, she will have mercy on his pain, be true always, and be wholly his. Having been assured of the nature of love and the stance of the principal characters, the auditors are ready for the introduction. Criseyde rivets their attention by promising them and Troilus that she will slay the pain which “halt youre herte and myn in hevynesse” (1007). Next she inveighs against jealousy, that wicked viper that should have no hold on Troilus (1008–15). In a seeming bow to the traditions of the *artes praedicandi* which counsel that divine aid should be invoked before the main sections of the sermon are set forth, she even appends a prayer to Jove:

But, O, thow Jove, O auctour of nature  
 Is this an honour to thi deyte,  
 That folk ungiltif suffren hire injure  
 And who that giltif is, al quyt goth he?  
 O, were it leful for to pleyn on the,  
 That undeserved suffrest jalousie  
 Of that I wolde upon the pleyne and crie! (1016–22)

In the division, Criseyde concentrates on the ways in which jealousy can be misconstrued:

- 1) Some, wrongly and destructively, say that jealousy is akin to love and would excuse a bushel of it if a grain of love were found (1023–29). Criseyde’s spirited condemnation of jealousy here shows that her fear of it, clearly expressed in the “chek mat” soliloquy of Book II (750–56), “has not lessened over time” (Mann 107).
- 2) Some would excuse a modicum of jealousy because they find there is some cause for it or because they see it as the product of fantasy. Criseyde looks less harshly on this misconception.
- 3) Some do not understand the horror of that type of jealousy that is full of fury and spitefulness. Criseyde is certain that Troilus “be nat in that plit” (1039) and that his problem is illusionary, stemming from an excess of love and anxiety.

Our heroine’s avowal of innocence in the face of Troilus’s jealous accusation takes the form of a personal “confirmatio.” She insists that Troilus “prove” her contention that his indictment is motivated by jealousy, not by adducing authorities but by testing her,

Wherso yow list, by ordal or by oth,  
 By sort, or in what wise so yow leste. (1046–47)

The cadence of a preacher’s peroration stamps her closing remarks: Now, God, you know that never in thought or in deed was Criseyde yet untrue to Troilus. Actually, Criseyde has considerably refocussed her “lesson” here

in that her avowal of virtue, like that in *Gawain and the Green Knight*, is related to the possession of truth.

This thematic “sermon,” placed midway through the central section of *Troilus*, gives Chaucer a chance to look intensely at one of the elements that can poison and destroy true love. Later, in Books IV and V, he will show that the exigencies of war and the perception of one’s place in the fabric of society can wreak havoc from without. From within, however, abiding love is at the mercy of only two phenomena: fear and jealousy. Given the circumstances in which his characters find themselves, a stress on fear is a natural focus for the poet, especially in Books I and V where it is compounded by isolation. But Chaucer’s only chance to discuss the ravages of jealousy comes at this critical juncture in Book III, just before the lovers are at last physically united.

Many aspects of this long speech prompt critical inquiry. Already noted are the unfortunate connotations of the “yet” in its last line as well as its inopportune placement in terms of the love affair, even though its cogency puts Criseyde “in a very good light” (Frantzen 91–93). That jealousy would affect the male rather than the female is not particularly startling; mediaeval literary texts are about equally divided on the gender of this type of sinner. Much more notable is the Chaucerian depiction of species of jealousy. Criseyde’s pointing in her third division to its fury and spitefulness (1037) seems to situate the vice, as scholastic tradition and some types of mediaeval preaching did, in a subgroup of envy, where angry grumbling and backbiting abound.<sup>19</sup> She had also called jealousy a snake (1009), an image whose negative connotations are rooted in Genesis where the devil (snake) tempts Eve by appealing primarily to her pride. This reference provides a tenuous link between Chaucer and Gregory the Great, who had identified jealousy as the fourth species of pride whereby one is led to cherish the idea that s/he is the sole possessor of a type of excellence.<sup>20</sup>

Divorced from either a theological or pastoral matrix is Criseyde’s commentary on the types of jealousy viewed by some as either beneficial or at least excusable. Her initial remarks seem to be another instance of the “happy contagion” of *Troilus* by the *Roman de la Rose*, where jealousy “figures as the great chill of love” (Harrison 296). In that thirteenth-century poem and in its nearly contemporary recensions, like that of Gui de Mori, the vice’s personification as the Jaloux, a creature generated out of clerical sources and expression (Friedman 23) and later a stock foil of mediaeval comedy, serves complex and complementary purposes (Fleming 156). The Jaloux in the *Roman* reveals himself as a ridiculous tyrant, thus allowing his creator to satirize not only anti-feminist attitudes but also Rules XXI and

xxii in Book II of Andreas's *De Amore*, which contend that "Real jealousy always increases the feeling of love" and that "Jealousy, and therefore love, are increased when one suspects his beloved" (ed. O'Donoghue 51). Portraying the Jaloux as a kind of slave and definitely taking aback the Lover in the *Roman*, Ami clearly scorns the vice; Gui's Amis, however, carries the indictment a bit farther, associating jealousy with the dark passions condemned by Reason (Huot 213).

Criseyde's sentiments reflect Chaucer's sophisticated understanding of the *Rose* tradition as well as his critical stance with regard to the precepts of courtly love. Certainly many of its standard elements are mirrored in the *Troilus*; still, Chaucer draws the line at the theory that jealousy in any form is a good. He continues, through Criseyde's subsequent division, to portray it as highly undesirable, albeit a concomitant of the human condition. Inevitably, then, Criseyde comes down hard on the now helpless Troilus, despite the fact that she believes that his "jealousy will be of the suffering rather than the aggressive kind" (Mann 107). Her sermon is devastatingly effective. Troilus swoons, giving the "surest possible demonstration that he is not, in fact, the jealous bully of Pandarus' story" (Mann 107).

Chaucer finished the *Troilus* before 1390. By the end of the fourteenth and throughout the fifteenth century, thematic patterns were often mishandled by manualists<sup>21</sup> and their impact as structuring devices for sermons weakened. Their usage in English romance literature illustrates a similar decline with one possible exception: Thomas Henryson's *Testament of Crisseid*.<sup>22</sup> Here, as in the *Troilus*, Criseyde is the "preacher," but the circumstances are infinitely more tragic than those which animate Book III of the earlier poem. Criseyde has done the very thing that she explicitly denied doing in her Chaucerian peroration: she has been false to Troilus and in her despair she rails against the gods. Henryson shows how she is punished for that folly: she has contracted leprosy. It is her pre-death lament in lines 541-74 that exhibits vestiges of the thematic form. The poignant theme statement is made more effective by repetition at the end of three consecutive stanzas: "O false Crisseid! And true knight Troilus." No protheme or introduction is discernible; rather, the audience is immediately thrust into contemplating the three implications of the theme, beginning with its second premise. The reader initially considers the love, loyalty, and gentleness of Troilus that Crisseid held as naught when she climbed Fortune's wheel. There

All faith and lufe I promissit to thee  
Was in the self fickil and frivolous. (551-52)

Troilus's loyalty ("lawtie"), incidentally, is portrayed in the most exalted language, akin to the fidelity-equals-belief perspective noted in *Gawain*. The second extrapolation of the theme concentrates on the virtues of Troilus, who is described as continent, as true and chaste in conversation, and as a protector of women (554–56). The third implication of the theme refers to its first lament, "O fals Crisseid," and is spelled out in her decline and fall. The contrast to Troilus's state is glaring:

My mind in fleshly foul affectioun  
Was inclinit to lustis lecherous. (558–59)

The conclusion to this abbreviated thematic structure is brief and pointed: Lovers beware; only a few are true.

As in Chaucer's *Troilus*, the last focus of the "sermon" is on the nature and manifestation of truth. The fourteen line final segment advises male lovers that "thair is richt few thairout / Whom ye may traist to have trew lufe agane" (563–64). Criseyde has learned about her own "unstableness" and concludes that, if other women are as bad (570–71), there can be very few faithful mistresses (Burrow 321). The emphasis on truth prompts Criseyde to tell it. Although earlier she saw Cupid and Venus as the perpetrators of her misfortune, now "Nane but myself . . . I will accuse" (574).

Despite the truncation in the thematic format of the *Testament*, there are good reasons for the label. Henryson had considerable knowledge about the mediaeval rhetorical arts and was especially conversant with the *artes praedicandi*, using their precepts in several texts, most notably "The Preaching of the Swallow."<sup>23</sup> Perhaps also, as an admirer and imitator of Chaucer, he may have been more immersed in the intellectual world of the fourteenth century than were his contemporaries. Nevertheless, his case seems a fairly isolated one, parallel to the sporadic appearance of thematic formats during the later middle ages in works other than insular romance.<sup>24</sup> But that genre's clearly demonstrable employment of the design recommended by the arts of preaching allows for a few general remarks about the relationship between preceptive rhetoric and mediaeval literature. Certainly the modern reader is prepared to accept there the omnipresent rhetorical figures that sometimes "coloured" texts in a gaudy or displeasing manner. However, the integration of preaching formats into romance supports the theory that to the mediaeval mind no essential difference existed between the art of poetry and the other verbal arts (preaching and letter writing); that because the term "rhetoric" signified skillful communication — its form ordered and artificial and its technique deliberately persuasive (Stevens 194) — its



precepts, and the linguistic patterns emanating from them, were available to any and all literary expression. The effect of this universalist position on the romances is seen in their inclusion of formalized speeches, some of which are discursive<sup>25</sup> and others of which are thematic. The presence of the latter should not be viewed as an excrescence but as an effort to express thought with fluency, force, and appropriateness so as to appeal to the reason and move the feelings.<sup>26</sup>

Such an object is essentially secular and consonant with the lessons to be learned from the “sermons” of romance. Their removal from a specifically religious or incontestably moral context, moreover, points to the endemic nature of thematic structures in mediaeval thought. It is one thing to be able to trace sermon formulas in, for example, the harrangue of Lady Holychurch (*Piers Plowman* B, I, 85–207) on the excellence of truth,<sup>27</sup> where the entire surrounding poem is an exposé of ecclesiastical felonies that must be reduced to misdemeanours before the whole Church crumbles. It is quite another thing to trace thematic formats in discussions of order, generosity, gentility, and jealousy. In fact, the influence of sermon structure, rather than content, on mediaeval poetic texts may yet illumine many of their still puzzling progressions.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Wenzel’s articles in *Anglia*, *MP*, and *MLR*. His *Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric* is largely devoted to showing the pervasiveness of sermon matter in the mediaeval lyric. Cf. Peek, 159–60. The pioneering study in the field is Owst’s *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*.

<sup>2</sup> Wenzel, “Medieval Sermons and the Study of Literature,” and “Poets, Preachers, and the Plight of Literary Critics.”

<sup>3</sup> For bibliography, see Murphy, pp. 310–17, 327–29, 330–31, and 333–35.

<sup>4</sup> Extensive bibliographical material is available; see the *Medieval Sermon Studies Newsletter*, volumes 14–25. Wenzel’s *Macaronic Sermons* traces thematic formats in that sermon type. Sermons known by “reportatio” rather than by transcription also seem to be thematic in format. For a discussion of sermon transmission, see Roberts, pp. 56–61 and Leclercq, pp. 187–232.

<sup>5</sup> Lucid commentary on the many facets of the mediaeval pastoral movement can be found in Boyle. Recent and extensive bibliographical material is available in Longère, and in Brown.

<sup>6</sup> See *Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric*, pp. 61–100, and “Medieval Sermons,” p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Chief among these explorations are Mehl, pp. 120–58; Ramsey, pp. 214–23; Kindrick; and Gallick. See also Sanders.

<sup>8</sup> The poem was edited by Robson. Citations are to sections 37 through 42, pp. 42–44, as indicated in Robson's text.

<sup>9</sup> See Kiser; Lawton, p. 90f.; and the citations below in 10.

<sup>10</sup> See Barron; Burrow.

<sup>11</sup> See Barnes, p. 136.

<sup>12</sup> See Frost, pp. 98–116.

<sup>13</sup> See Martin, p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> See Benson, p. 874, citing Robinson.

<sup>15</sup> See Roney, p. 185.

<sup>16</sup> See Pearsall, pp. 175–80.

<sup>17</sup> See Pearsall, pp. 167–68, citing Claus Uhlig, *Chaucer und die Armut*.

<sup>18</sup> Wenzel, ed. and trans., *Fasciculus Morum*, pp. 386–95.

<sup>19</sup> See Wenzel, *Fasciculus*, pp. 158–65; Thouvenin, cols. 315–18.

<sup>20</sup> See Herbst, p. 860.

<sup>21</sup> See Jennings, "Rhetor Redivivus?", pp. 119–21.

<sup>22</sup> Quotations from the *Testament of Crisseid* have been taken from Burrow, ed., *English Verse, 1300–1500*, pp. 319–21.

<sup>23</sup> See Kindrick, *Henryson*, pp. 189–271.

<sup>24</sup> See note 6 above. There is some evidence of thematic format in the Tristan stories, but they are in prose; cf. Vinaver, pp. 339–47.

<sup>25</sup> See Wittig, pp. 250–55. Stevens, p. 193, discusses the discursive qualities in Troilus's "Paleys desolat" speech, Book v, 540–53.

<sup>26</sup> OED definition of "eloquence," 2nd ed., vol. XIII, p. 287.

<sup>27</sup> As Siegfried Wenzel does in "Medieval Sermons," p. 28.

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