SERMON AND PENITENTIAL IN *THE PARSON'S TALE* AND THEIR EFFECT ON STYLE

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One of the few aspects of *The Parson's Tale* about which little has been written is its style. Without doubt the circumstances of the *Tale* demand critical caution. Despite the research of Wenzel, the foremost authority on Fragment X and its sources, and despite his summations that are accessible in an admirably succinct form in the *Riverside Chaucer* (1987: 954–65), unanswered questions remain. The way in which we deal with them must inevitably affect our assessment of style.[*]

We all know that *The Parson's Tale* is no tale at all. It is a penitential manual, a curious choice because nearly all such vehicles of religious instruction were prepared by the clergy or by mystics. It is largely derivative, using material common to so many treatises that only a few of the actual sources can be established with some certainty. The other *Canterbury Tales*, whatever their genre, consist of stories of the plotted kind, with protagonists, setting, action, dramatic dialogue, and suspense. They often begin with variants of "Once upon a time" — "Whilom, as olde stories tellen us" (*KnT*, I, 859); "Whilom ther was dwellynge at Oxenford" (*MilT*, I, 3187); "Whilom ther was dwellynge in my contree" (*FrT*, III, 1301). With the exception of the *unfinished* tales and the Monk's series of tragedies, they

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each have a beginning, middle, and end. Like the Parson, the Physician says that he is not telling a fable, yet he manages to tell a story — a "historial thyng" (*PhysT*, VI, 156). It is not unreasonable to suggest that Chaucer did intend to write a genuine tale to follow the *Parson's Prologue*, and that this theological tract is a translation, perhaps made many years earlier, that got stuck in because some scribe thought the subject matter suitable for a parson. To argue thus may also be to argue as, for example, Norman Blake does (1979: 1–18), that Chaucer was *not* finished with his poem, that he was still engaged on *The Canterbury Tales* at the time of his death. Fighting words indeed! but even Larry Benson (1985: 21), the foremost opponent of this view, does state that while the *Tale* seems appropriate to the character of the Parson, beyond that it "has no dramatic or even fictional qualities, and if (as is possible) it was written for some purpose other than inclusion in the *Tales*, it shows no signs of adaptation to the larger work beyond the opening paragraph." *The Parson's Tale* and *Retraction* appear to go together, explicitly joined by the words "this litel tretys," but with the manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales* in disorder as it supposedly may have been when the first redactor or redactors came to work on it, who can say how this tale got there or what Chaucer's contribution to it was?*

The textual position has been investigated very thoroughly by Wenzel, and a composite picture emerges. We know that the *Tale* contains material found in the *Summa* of Raymund of Pennaforte (for lines 80–386 and 958–1080) and from the *Summa vitiorum* of Guilielmus Peraldus (for a great part of lines 390–955), and it is worth noting that these works, written in the second and third decades of the thirteenth century, were widely circulated in Latin and vernacular handbooks. It also uses two redactions of Peraldus' work referred to by Wenzel as *Quoniam* and *Primo*, and for the "remedies" of the sins a source now called *Postquam* which Wenzel edited under the title of *Summa virtutum de remediis anime* in 1984. Further parallels for certain passages have been found in the Anglo-Norman *Compileison*, Frère Laurens' *Somme le Roy*, Wetheringsett's *Summa* and other works. The image of "the wey" itself, from Jeremiah 6:16, is similarly applied to penitence in

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*The linguistic analyses of Emil Koeppel, "Über das Verhältnis von Chaucers Prosawerken zu seinen Dichtungen und die Echtheit der 'Parson's Tale'," *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 87 (1891): 33–54, and H. Spies, "Chaucers religiöse Grundstimmung und die Echtheit der Parson's Tale," *Studien zur Englischen Philologie* 50 (1913): 626–721, are credited with offering proof of Chaucer's authorship. Nevertheless, in their anxiety to refute the views of H. Simon (1876) and W. Eilers (1884), they used some arguments that are less conclusive than they intended.

the *Sermones dominicales* by John Felton, one of the most popular Latin sermon collections compiled in Chaucer's time.

Nevertheless, when we examine the *Tale* for style we are hampered by acknowledged uncertainties. While no one doubts that *The Parson's Tale* is heavily indebted to the treatises both for its general organization and verbal detail, not uncommonly passages that seem to be derived from identifiable sources will suddenly develop expansions and deviations. We are constantly reminded of unanswered questions: Does the *Tale* represent a truly Chaucerian piece of writing, a "purposeful compilation and translation from divers sources" to quote Wenzel (1987: 956)? Is it an amalgamation and adaptation made by various redactors of pieces derived from many treatises? Is it a translation, pedestrian or innovative we cannot tell, from a single source or intermediary (probably French)? Or is there even a possibility, not hitherto considered, that the *Tale* is not a translation at all, that apart from a few insertions it is a plagiary, a copy of some lost *Middle English* penitential tract? Under the dubious circumstances of its creation, not surprisingly most scholars desist from making a detailed examination of its style. Yet brief, generalized assessments are numerous. These are affected by suppositions regarding Chaucer's intentions and by assumptions that the literary artistry of the other tales can be taken as a yardstick.

Before Baldwin (1955) and Schlauch (1950; 1966) early opinion was usually unfavourable. W.P. Ker (1893: 39) found the style dull. Krapp (1915: 8–10) considered that the tale was "idiomatically expressed in a simple, straightforward and unmannered style . . . quite without personal or dramatic coloring . . . ." Chute (1946: 309) stated that the style was more laborious than that of Chaucer's usual prose — "heavy, full of effort and painfully in earnest," while Gerould (1952: 99) thought it pleasant to the ear if read aloud but was disturbed by its "somewhat lumbering manner." (Since an oral delivery would last three and a half hours, the "lumbering manner" might be partly ascribed to the reader's exhaustion.)

Baldwin in 1955, in his celebrated monograph on the unity of *The Canterbury Tales*, was the first to praise the *Tale* at length without reservation, believing that "word for word, principle for principle," Chaucer himself might have claimed it as one of "the most artistic of the Tales." Schlauch (1950; 1966) analysed the stylistic artistry that she claimed for the *Tale*. Her final judgement (1966: 148–53) was that Chaucer shaped his style "in harmony with his subject matter," use of rhythm, and "exploitation of repetition and the echo of cognate forms for the purpose of clarity."

In general, however, the style remains like Wordsworth's Lucy with none

to praise and very few to love. Jordan (1967: 240) claimed that the *Tale* lacks "differentiation of style and varieties of tone and figurative language" and he sought to excuse Chaucer on the grounds that the poet was no longer an entertainer. In 1971, on the contrary, Finlayson found *great* variety of style and thought that Chaucer was making an ironic presentation of the Parson, with the language sometimes sliding from "judicial abstraction to the plain-speaking level of a hell-fire preacher" (p. 113). A year later, Eliason (1972: 77–78) condemned the style as wooden, dull, bumbling, lifeless, lacking in variety and vivid diction and using trite rather than fresh similes. He disputed Schlauch's claim that Chaucer's prose read rhythmically: "Sense alone seems to govern, not sound at all." Unlike Gerould's, his impression was that "it was written for the *eye* rather than the ear." Further condemnations came from Norton-Smith (1974: 156) and Norman Davis (1975: 62), the latter finding most of Chaucer's prose "labored and artificial." Whereas Schlauch termed the style "the heightened style of homiletic discourse," Dean (1985: 755) found it "humble, . . . parish-priest jejune, prosaic in the true use of the word."

On the other hand, Elliott in 1974, in the most detailed examination of the style apart from that of Schlauch, found evidence of careful control, appropriate to the instructional function of the work. Syntactical variation showed that Chaucer "was not translating mechanically, but trying to breathe some life and artistic character" into the long treatise (p. 147). In his view "no sympathetic reading of the work can fail to detect the range of usage, diction and style, which includes many lighter touches some of which, *pace* the Parson, are unmistakably and characteristically Chaucer's own" (p. 153). Clarity is the aim, and it is a very even work (p. 146).

The implication made by sympathetic critics such as Elliott, Howard (1976), Patterson (1978), and Wenzel (1981) is that we get what we should expect in a pastoral handbook, clarity and competent organization. In Howard's view (1977: 377), the work has all the virtues that we ask of prose, and the lack of artistry may have been intentional. Patterson (1978: 346), remarked approvingly that the style "aimed at sober exposition rather than a more vibrant or vivifying effect." While other critics complained of the diffuseness of the writing, Patterson discovered a "relative spareness," designed to make the reader focus not only on individual instances of sin but also on the larger structure from which such instances derive their significance (p. 346). Finke (1984: 96–101) also claimed that the stylistic unattractiveness served a functional intent. The static structures, emphatic patterns of alliteration, verbal concordances, and pleonastic doublets as well

as the rhythmic force of the prose itself demonstrated ironically the Parson's ineffectuality both as a man and as a preacher of "the wey." In 1987 we have two conflicting opinions in one work. While Benson (1987: 21) finds the language "vigorous," his opinion is not now shared by the editor of the text. Wenzel (1987: 956) excuses some of the deficiencies on the grounds of haste, faulty sources or difficulties of extrapolating from a complex, longer text. But he no longer calls the style "relaxed and fluid." "Stylistically," he observes with a hint of asperity, "the tale is frequently uninspiring and awkward, with faulty or incorrect transitions (e.g., X.916, 939) and blatant errors (870, 1073, perhaps 679, 692)." At the same time he generously remarks on the "balanced evaluations" of Schlauch, Eliason, and Elliott.

Such is the tenor of considerations of the style in *The Parson's Tale*. Of necessity, we omit reference to numerous critics who share the various views presented and also to those such as Luengo (1980), Shimogasa (1981), and Burnley (1983) who examine the means whereby the prose style is achieved rather than its aesthetic quality.

Faced with a situation comparable to that at the end of *The Miller's Tale* whereby "diverse folk diversely they seyde," we cannot do better than refer to Pearsall for a cautious, generalized, yet profound evaluation. In his opinion, both *Melibeus* and *The Parson's Tale* "demonstrate little interest in the imaginatively self-aware and generative use of language most commonly associated with poetry" and they are not "literature" at all (1985: 246). At the same time he dismisses some of the grounds advanced to exonerate Chaucer: "It should be stressed that the lack of interest in the imaginative capacities of prose is Chaucer's, and not of course a lack of capacity in prose as such" (p. 340n).

Lack of interest does not, of course, account for the startling disparity in the opinions of the critics. Yet, probably very few have read the entire work through, examining it for *style* rather than for content. A common assumption is that the *Tale* is all of a piece, possessing a style that is homogeneous and consistent. An examination of the opening discussion on Penitence alone shows that such is *not* the case and that we may search in vain for the qualities of the style that are most frequently praised, clarity and skill in choice of vocabulary and in classification.

The early lines quoting from Ambrose (actually pseudo-Ambrose), Isidore, and Gregory are clear enough. Then we are introduced to the three "acciouns" of penance (95), "accioun" being a synonym of "werkynges" (82). In enumerating the second of these "acciouns" the Parson changes the word to "defaute," usually glossed as "need" (for penance). The first "defaute"

occurs if one sins before baptism, the second if one commits a deadly sin
after baptism, and the third if one commits a venial sin after baptism. Be-
cause of the inconsistencies in the modes of expression, especially the vari-
ations in the treatment of the "defautes" and of the "speces" that follow,
the passage lacks the clarity of Pennaforte's rendering. The first "defaute"
is supplemented with a quotation from Augustine and further clarification
from the Parson, the second "defaute" is simply put, and the third is supple-
mented again from Augustine. The Parson then describes the three species
of penance: "solempne," "commune," and "privee." "Solempne" is divided
into two: the first is "as to be put out of hooly chirche in Lente for slaughtre
of children, and swich maner thyng." The second kind is "whan a man hath
synned openly, of which synne the fame is openly spoken in the contree."
Such sinners are to do open penance. For the second kind, "commune," gen-
eral or public penance, the offence is not described. That the sin committed
was very reprehensible may be deduced from the prescription that sinners go
in a body on pilgrimage either naked or barefoot (105). While "naked" can
mean "lightly clad" and not necessarily the condition in which, according
to Malory, the fair Elaine stepped lightly from her bed, the penalty seems
severe enough if the trip is to Jerusalem or to Santiago de Compostella.

We know no more about the nature of the sin that entails the third
species of penance, only that "pryvee penaunce is thilke that men doon
alday for privee synnes." Lumiansky, in his translation of this passage,
manages to make the distinctions clear by naming three divisions, public,
general, and private (1961: 384). But his distinctions are not those made
in the *Tale* or in the treatise *The Clensyng of Mannes Sowle*: "Oone is
cleped solempne penaunce; Another is cleped penaunce publisched or open
penaunce, and the thrid is cleped a private penaunce." The first is given
on Ash Wednesday "for open cryme, or horrible synne knowne to all . . .
penaunce publisched or open is . . . whan a man is enioigned openly to go in
his schert, or naked body . . . ," and the last is that penance "which is done
alday whan a man will priuely be confessed of his shrifte fadir" (263–64).
The passage in Pennaforte's work is clearer because it is more detailed and
interlaced with scholarly references.

Wenzel has long held that some of the stylistic flaws can be attributed to
problems of translation or redaction (1971: 452), while Machan (1985: 113)
declared that Chaucer made his sources his own and was himself responsible
for what Machan considered to be notable qualities of style in *The Parson's
Tale* — "colloquial exposition and direct address." Nevertheless, confusions
and errors occur, for which, in most instances, no explanation is at hand.

The figure that immediately follows provides an illustration: it is not given by Pennaforte at this point, and while the *arbre de penaunce* occurs elsewhere, we have no close analogue for the crux to which I will draw attention. Contrition, hidden in the heart, is like the root of a tree hidden in the earth. From it springs "the stalke that bereth braunches and leves of Confessioun and fruyt of Satisfaccioun." Two biblical quotations amplify this statement, and then we learn that the seed of grace springs from the root — which seed is "mooder of sikernesse, and this seed is both egre and hoot." The expansion of this point poses problems. Instead of its bitter quality bringing remembrance of Doomsday and "peynes of helle" in contrast to the *warmth* of the seed that is "the love of God and the desiryng of the joye perdurable," the Parson states that grace brings remembrance of the day of doom, etc. Scribal error? Carelessness? Scholars have suggested that "egrenesse" (Patterson, 1978: 352) or the Anglo-Norman "egrece" (Beer, 1988: 298–301) should be substituted. Whatever the solution, this brief example illustrates the futility of suggesting that the style is only uninteresting because it sacrifices colour of expression to plain instruction or of praising it for its relative spareness, clarity, or inclusive organization. Even one of the *Tale's* warmest admirers admits that "stylistic attention seems not to have been directed to the verbal level at all but to the larger units of his text" (Patterson, 1978: 346n). Further examination is required of the kind illustrated in Shaw's brilliant investigation of corporeal and spiritual homicide in *The Parson's Tale* (565–79) in 1982. Shaw discovered an explanation for the randomness and confusion of the passage by referring to its traditions. Her revelation that the passage derives from popular laicized versions of canonical material points up the lack of clarity, mistakes caused largely by misconceptions regarding canonical law, and, in certain instances, sloppy transitions, that occur in Chaucer's version. There is at present no way of telling whether the ignorance and incompetence reflected lie in the sources of *The Parson's Tale* or within the provenance of the immediate redactor.

It is the lack of consistency in the work that accounts for the diversity of opinion among the critics. The homogeneity of style that they imply does not exist. The varied and often otiose treatment of traditional penitential material does not offer characteristics that might identify the work as coming from a single author, but suggests instead that the *Tale* is a collation of numerous treatises. When we compare the text with the sources and analogues, we find that the material has been variously rendered in the form of paraphrase, in word for word translation, in free and idiomatic redactions

that are nevertheless "aftir the sentence and not oneli aftir the wordes," as Purvey recommended in the prologue to his revision of the Wyclif Bible (1929: 27). There are also adaptations that seem to draw on more than one source, expanded and reformed, in some instances, to become what can be regarded as original passages.

Far from being constructed *secundum ordinem disciplinae* in the fashion of a scholastic *summa*, this work is a rhetorical collage, and, of course, this kind of irregularity comes as no surprise to Chaucerians, accustomed as they are to the "gothic" Chaucer and his quantitative concept of structure. But if we find evidence in *The Parson's Tale* of Chaucer's artistic practice of fitting fixed, often autonomous, parts into preconceived and prestated entities, as defined by Jordan (1967: 236), we may nevertheless feel that the effect on stylistic consistency and dramatic propriety has been underestimated. Not all critics would agree that Chaucer in *The Parson's Tale* was "not concerned about such matters" (p. 236) or that "differentiations of style and varieties of tone and figurative language" are absent (p. 240) or that Chaucer does not "scruple to adjust the deadly sins' excursus so that it conforms stylistically to the treatment into which he inserts it" (1987: 168). Such a view is based on the premise that there is only one voice and it belongs not to a country parson but, in our imagination, to "a monkish selfless devotee of the Word of God" (1987: 166). It presupposes that "the assumed audience of the Parson's sermon is mankind . . . . In the absence of specific personal designations, his [Chaucer's] sermon must be understood to apply to all the pilgrims and, more important, to all of us" (1967: 115).

The essential difference between the penitential treatises and *The Parson's Tale* is that the latter contains more than one voice. As is well known, penitential treatises were written after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), when auricular confession was declared mandatory, to teach parish priests the appropriate moral theology or to serve educated laymen as a guide. The elaborate Constitutions, framed in Latin by Peckham and restated by Archbishop Thoresby of York, resulted in the production of thousands of vernacular tracts, how-to-do-it books for priests. These manuals often indicate the audience with the familiar rubric "Sacerdos parochialis tenetur per canones docere et predicare in lingua materna quater in anno" (Owst, 1926: 284), and enable the reader to distinguish between instructions to the priest and examples fashioned ready-made for the pulpit. Howard (1987: 495) surmises that Chaucer may have made the translation or adaptation "a bit at a time." It would also seem that some of the passages were intended for the clergy and some for an audience composed of parishioners such as the Par-

son might be expected to address. The Latin manuals, directed to priests, have a consistency lacking in *The Parson's Tale*. *Postquam*, for example, is "thoroughly 'scholastic'" in tone and style, as Wenzel observed (1984: 6); the same can be said of Peraldus's *Summa de vitiis* and *Quoniam*. Whereas Chaucer's presentation in many instances might be said to be comparable in style, in others it is not. In a passage on envy (485–87) which is prefaced by the argument that the initial reason for its gravity is, as both *Summa de vitiis* and *Quoniam* state, "peccatum in Spiritum," Chaucer's rendering is scholarly. In the discussion on backbiting, which as Wenzel observes (1974: 358), occurs as *detractio* under envy in *Quoniam*, and *Peccatum linguae* in Peraldus's treatise, the style is looser and more colloquial with clumsy repetitions of adjectives such as good/goodness (four times), "wikked entente" (twice) and the phrase "atte laste ende" repeated in consecutive sentences. Although the essence of the five kinds of backbiting occurs in the same place and order in *Quoniam*, the image of the "wikked knotte" is from elsewhere. The style at this point seems suitable for oral delivery and even strikes a dramatic note: "Than wol the bakbitere seyn, 'Parfey, swich a man is yet bet than he'" (497).

The marked differences in style between the manuals and *The Parson's Tale* in many passages indicate the audience intended. Not surprisingly, critics call the tale, a sermon for the Parson frequently harangues the laity and on some occasions becomes a Bromyard in his pulpit, thundering rebukes at his silent parishioners. He uses direct exhortations such as "Thou shalt nat desiren his wyf" (521), rhetorical questions such as "Is nat this a cursed vice?" dramatically answered "Yis, certes" (559) or such phrases as "What seye we eek of hem that deliten in sweryng" (601) or "Now shul ye understonde . . . " (476). On such occasions, the result is an attempt, rarely successful or consistent, to adopt a colloquial tone and simple presentation while using the material of the manuals with all the stock devices and complexities of organization.

The treatment of the incentives ("causes") to contrition furnishes some useful comparisons. The first two causes in lines 134 and following seem to be addressed to the priest, providing him with the arguments that he can then pass on to his parishioners, with an appeal to Job, Hezekiah, the Book of Revelation, Peter, and Ezekiel for support and clarification. At line 148, "O goode God," and subsequent *exclamatio* "Allas!" (152), "O goode God" (155, 161), and the *subjectio* "Why"? (167), "Whider?" (173), the detachment that marks the sober exposition in Peraldus's *Summa* and in the Anglo-Norman *Compileison* gives way to an appeal to the emotions

and a hortatory tone, coloured by threatening pictures of a merciless God at
Judgement Day and of the "horrible pit of helle" that awaits sinners (170).
Injunctions intended for parish priests do not lack conventional *exclamatio*,
but in this passage the *exclamatio* "O goode God" which is followed by
a general maxim, "Wel oghte man have desdayn of synne" (149), marks a
distinct turning to the audience with a stern imperative, "Tak reward of thy
value, that thou ne be to foul to thyself" (151) and "Ye wommen that been
of so greet beautee, remembreth yow of the proverbe of Salomon" (155). The
exclamatio repeated (161), and the *interrogatio* "And why? For, certes, alle
oure thoghtes been discovered as to hym" (167) and "Whider shal thanne
the wrecched synful man flee to hiden hym? Certes, he may nat hyden hym
. . . ." (173), and other direct modes of address, "Loo, heere may ye seen
. . . " (178) and "For wel ye woot . . . (188) suggest that here the priest is
still addressing his parishioners. Line 181 marks the beginning of a lengthy
tautological *interpretatio* followed by an effective, elegiac *interrogatio* (197)
and an admonitory direct address to the audience "For truste wel" (204).
But after "delices" (186) is picked up at line 207 and expanded, the evidence
that the material was ready-made for the pulpit is less apparent. "Ye shul
understonde" (260) gives place to "Now shal a man understonde (292) and
"The laste thyng that men shal understonde . . . "(308); the *interrogationes*
(213, 236–37, 265, 303) are spread over approximately one hundred lines,
and the passage concludes with an intrusive "I" (298, 304, 308) that has
more force than the single rhetorical "I gesse" (175), and it appears, in these
instances, to be the writer of the tract, addressing the priest.

   But if there seem to be two voices, that of the instructor addressing
the parish priest and that of the latter his parishioners, the creator of these
voices offers us little evidence of his identity. Patterson (1978: 357–62),
in considering thirty-five passages in *The Parson's Tale* that echo passages
in the *Tales*, found ten to be typically Chaucerian expressions, twenty-
one conventional homiletic material, and the remaining four, dealing with
matters of blasphemy and perjury, "gentilesse," marriage, and repeating
one's confession out of humility, to be of more significance than the others
because their treatment in *The Parson's Tale* differed from that in the tale's
alleged sources. While he argued convincingly that the lines of influence ran
from the *Tales* and not vice-versa, he assumed without question that these
instances offered proof of authorship. Yet there is no denying the possibility
either that any of these verbal echoes could have been adopted by a skilled
redactor familiar with Chaucer's works, or that Chaucer was himself one of
several redactors who created *The Parson's Tale*.

We also find that the multiplicity of stock expressions used to explain the familiar doctrine are a barrier to any attempt at specific identification. A device common to many kinds of theological literature is the application of a figure for purposes of instructional classification. The figure of the tree of penance has none of the pictorial impact that we might expect of a true simile or metaphor of this kind, nor does it appeal to botanical knowledge. Diagrammatic and usually accompanied by complex numbering, it is primarily a mnemonic device to enable the homilist to recall in order all the doctrinal elements essential to the subject in hand and to present them in sequence. Such classifications occur frequently and make up the commonest mode of progression in the work. Another stylistic device, equally commonplace, consists in the appeal to theological *auctoritas*. As Wurtele notes in his comparison of *The Parson's Tale* and Wycliffe's writings (1985), the Parson makes extensive use of scriptural proofs and illustrations, citations from the *libri didactici* and *libri prophetici* in the Old Testament and the *libri historici* and *libri didactici* in the New.

These sometimes effectively underline the point to be made or are a means of provoking the kind of vigorous denunciation that has earned the Parson the reputation of being a hell-fire preacher. From the simple statement in line 136, a quotation from Revelation (2:5), "Memor esto itaque unde excideris": "Remembreth yow fro whennes that ye been falle," the Parson launches into a tirade on the sins of his listeners — "foul and abhomynable," committed so often that the sinners are worse than a dog returning "to eten his spewyng." "Ye be roten in youre synne," he thunders, "as a beest in his dong." The Parson also uses nearly one hundred similes and metaphors, mostly commonplace based on the elements, natural phenomena, and human relationships. Occasionally the phrases are proverbial as, for example, in line 911: "Though that hooly writ speke of horrible synne, certes hooly writ nat been defouled, namoore than the sonne that shyneth on the mixne" (see Wenzel, 1974: 376 n. 117).

Again there is nothing to characterize these features as coming from a particular writer. Indeed, the inappropriateness of some comparisons might suggest a hand other than Chaucer's. As in *Quoniam*, the outward and visible signs of pride, ostentatious behaviour and clothing, are the visible signs of internal pride and are compared to a "leefsel" (411), a tavern sign put out by a merchant to indicate that there is wine in the cellar. Scholars have debated whether "leefsel" does in fact mean tavern sign or a leafy bower, and they have noted that a similar comparison occurs in Latin texts where the word *circulus*: wreath or garland, is used. In vernacular texts also (Owst,

1933: 383), the tavern garland is used as a pejorative metaphor. Nevertheless, might we not expect that Chaucer, as a poet, would have questioned the appropriateness of the simile itself? Basically, unless there is a sunken proverb here such as "A good wine needs no bush," something good is being compared to something bad. There are many other such comparisons that are either inappropriate or have only a remote, abstract application, and they are usually accompanied by quotations, direct admonitions, and other amplifications that tend to obscure their fundamental weakness. A man who squanders his resources, gives money to minstrels for the sake of "veyne glorie," is like a horse that prefers "to drynken drovy or trouble water than for to drynken water of the clere welle" (816). Just as the child loves its nurse's milk and hates it mixed with other food, so the sinner loves his sin but becomes nauseated by it when he turns to the Lord. The sinner who delays turning to the Lord is like "hym that falleth in the dych and wol nat arise" (718). An abstraction may be compared to a common object, but it rarely has the visual or olfactory impact of Robert Burns's red, red rose. For example: "fyr fayleth anoon as it forleteth his wirkynge, and right so grace fayleth anoon as it forleteth his werkynge" (250); just as a sword cuts a thing in two, so sinful consent cuts God from Man. Such comparisons have none of the visual vitality of the Pardoner's simple image of the dove: "And est and west upon the peple I bekke, / As dooth a dowve sittynge on a berne" (VI. 396–97) nor the aptness of the implied comparison of wandering souls to "blackberrying" (406).

Certainly there are some common phrases and brief descriptions that are used with telling effect, creating vivid images and instilling a sense of immediacy into the moral lesson. "He that despeireth hym is lyk the coward champioun, that seith 'creant' withoute nede" (698). The sins that prevent man from seeing the face of God are like "a derk clowde bitwixe us and the sonne" (185). Contemplation of Hell inspires not only the *ubi sunt* motif — "Where been thanne the gaye robes, and the softe shetes, and the smale shertes?" (197) — but horrifying pictures of devils using the heads of the damned as stepping stones and of the damned themselves suffering from the effects of sulphurous air pollution — "Hir nosethirles shullen be ful of stynkynge stynk" (209). Nevertheless, such phrases are part of the homilist's stock-in-trade. In using them the Parson seldom frees himself from doctrinal ponderousness, and his eloquence, though certainly more noticeable when he contemplates the sins of lechery and pride, rarely rises to the heights of John Bromyard's or of those indefatigable preachers cited by Owst, whose admonitions contain striking anecdotes, *exempla*, numerous references to

sights and sounds in town and country, to domestic relationships, crime and punishment, and contemporary trading practices, and convey such a keen sense of the everyday life of their hapless auditors.

A peculiar feature of this tract is that it has so few marks of belonging to the fourteenth century. References to the French song, perhaps (248), and to certain features of clothing that cannot be dated earlier than 1350 do not make this work a contemporary tract. The numerous allusions to rapacious knights and barons, to specific offenses such as the bearing of false witness (796), the "holdynge of greet meynee" to oppress the common people (436), are equally applicable to practices in the previous century, and the overall subject, sin and the instances of its committal, reaches back through the centuries to the Bible itself. In the timeless presentation of man's guilt, there is no subjectivity in the treatment, little sense of the local and immediate. The plodding tautology, the unimaginative use of theory, speak of the traditional, unchanging, sinful world viewed from the musty seclusion of the cloister.

There is one passage, however, that has been frequently praised, as being distinctively Chaucerian and contemporary. It occurs in the section on Pride:

> Upon that oother side, to speken of the horrible disordinat scantnesse of clothyng, as been thise kutted sloppes, or haynselyns, that thurgh hire short-nesse 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 hirnia, in the wrappynge 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 disgisynge, in departynge 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 red, and so forth, / thanne semeth it, as by variaunce of colour, that half the partie of hire privee membres were corrupt by the fir of Seint Antony, or by cancre, or by oother swich meschaunce. (422–27)

As we know, a remarkable feature of Chaucer's poetry is the animal im-agery, the profusion of similes and metaphors usually expressing traditional ideas in simple diction. Such analogies, frequently proverbial and colloquial, must have been eminently suitable for oral delivery. Moreover, an appar-ently simple analogy may have far-reaching implications. It was Chaucer's comparison of Alisoun to a weasel "as any wezele hir body gent and smal" (I, 3234) that first alerted me to the possibility that a parody of the An-nunciation existed in *The Miller's Tale* (1971: 140–46; 1973: 43–54). The

Virgin was believed to have conceived by the ear — hence the hymn "Gaude Virgo, mater Christi / Quae per aurem concepisti." The weasel, according to popular lore, conceived by the ear and gave birth by the mouth or vice versa. A drawing of weasels below an illustration of the Virgin and Child in The Queen Mary Psalter (BL. Royal 2B vii, f. 112) demonstrates one such unusual mode of conception and parturition. Nicholas, with his song *Angelus ad Virginem*, can be identified with Gabriel; Alisoun is blasphemously cast in the role of Mary.

As in this example from *The Miller's Tale*, Chaucer's most effective application of an animal figure occurs when he combines it with others associated with the world of nature. Because of the brevity and banality of the expression, the images may have a casual surface simplicity, but when they are assembled they form a complex pattern that creates a specialized view of the action and of the world of the story. Subtly integrated into the structure, their nuances and echoes reverberate until many of the implications become equivocal. At the same time, the essential function of such figures is to create contrast in character or action, thematic irony, or to contribute a marvellous sense of overall unity to a typically Chaucerian narrative built of self-contained parts, differing in proportion, style, or even genre. Some expressions, such as those having to do with mad hares, swans singing at their death, the pert or "flekked" magpie, the busy bee, may have only an immediate significance; but when Criseyde addresses her uncle as "fox that ye ben" (III, 1565) after the night of consummation that he himself contrived, we are reminded of the profusion of images concerned with hunting, snaring, and fishing that contribute to the pervasive sense of inexorable fate that hangs over the lovers and the city. Pandarus, who had previously seen himself as a beater driving a frightened deer into a hunting station where the bowman and his dog await, is now greeted by the quarry herself with tragic facetiousness as the crafty barnyard marauder of fact and fable. The metaphor not only reminds us of the predatory world that serves as a backdrop for the doomed lovers but also prompts us to make yet another assessment of the relative responsibility of the protagonists for the action.

Homiletic material abounds in animal similes and metaphors. Traditional, stereotyped traits and the widely-held concept that animal behaviour showed men and women the sins to avoid and, less frequently, the virtues to follow, made such figures admirable for didactic purposes. Drawn from natural and unnatural history, and proverbial lore, the descriptions of animals had a startling impact. They were miniature *exempla* that impressed

themselves visually on the memory.

Yet *The Parson's Tale* shows little evidence of an interest in such imagery. The animal metaphors and similes are sparse and, except for one passage for which a source has not yet been found, derivative. Most of the Parson's allusions are typical of the preacher's art and appear in countless sermons. They are sometimes accompanied by indignant or anguished apostrophes such as a preacher used when directly addressing an audience. There are the common similes and metaphors of the wolves and the sheep where the former stands for wicked pastors, unscrupulous lords and simoniacs, and the latter for the victims (721, 768, 775, 790). Those in authority who allow their servants to commit crimes are like flies that follow honey or dogs that follow carrion (441); scorners are like foul toads (636); pranksters are the devil's apes (650). The lustful are associated with the basilisk or scorpion (853, 854); the incestuous (907) and old lechers (857–58) behave like dogs. The comparison of the promiscuous woman to a "ryng of gold that were in the groyn of a soughe" (156) appears with its application in *Quoniam*, as Wenzel (1982: 237–38) shows. Nor are more popular or more ancient antecedents far to seek. The analogies of the backslider returning like a dog to its vomit, of sheep to helpless parishioners and wolves to pastors, of wicked administrators to a roaring lion and hungry bear, are biblical in origin; the toad that fears the vine which provides an antidote for its poison, the horse that stirs up muddy water to drink, the lethal basilisk, the satiated wolf that "stynteth to strangle sheep" (769), belonged to traditional animal lore. Some such analogies refer directly to the source as, for example: "And therfore seith Salomon that 'whoso toucheth and handleth a womman, he fareth lyk hym that handleth the scorpioun that styngeth and sodeynly sleeth thurgh his envenymynge'" (854). Even the colourful comparison of the behaviour of "olde dotardes holours" (857) to that of dogs occurs verbatim in *Quoniam* (Wenzel, 1987: 963). The passage on "the synful costlewe array of clothynge" (415) deals with a commonplace of the mediaeval pulpit (Owst, 1933: 390–411). Not only are the contemporary treatments of the general subject matter numerous but, as I have remarked elsewhere (1968: 160–61; 1971: 25), simian comparisons were applied to obscene exhibitionists in contemporary garb. Saint Birgitta (d. 1373) even denounced a certain bishop (*quasi simia*) who deliberately arranged his clothing so that his more shameful parts appeared naked (*sed verecundiora ejus apparent tota nuda*). Nevertheless, the Parson's diatribe appears to be unique and no source has been found for it. Read aloud, the words sound denunciatory, impassioned, harshly emphatic. The rhetorical fervour, induced by a skilful deployment

of *expolitio*, *descriptio*, *frequentatio*, *similitudo*, *demonstratio*, and *exclama-tio*, is overwhelming. Most remarkable is the use of structural imagery. The Parson never allows his listeners to forget the repugnant implications of the comparison of the she-ape at full moon. He is referring, of course, to the vivid colour of the animal's buttocks at oestrus and the accompanying sexual excitement. He anticipates and prepares his audience for the image in the previous sentence and then exploits it in the similes that follow. Those exposed female parts that provoke the Parson's wrath are likened to *hirnia*, flayed flesh, St Anthony's fire and *cancre* (an ulcerated tumour). *Hirnia*, according to Lanfranc, had a parti-coloured appearance when the veins were full of "melancholious blood," the fleshly excrescences being striped purple or red (p. 270). Lurid colours are provoked by the Parson's assertion that men's red and white panty-hose gave the appearance "that half hir shame-ful privee memberes weren flayne" (425), and the impact for his audience would have been immediate. The punishment of skinning malefactors while still alive was so common that the phrase to flay "al quic" was a frequent threat (MED.s.v.(2).flen.v.). The signs of St Anthony's fire which, in the Parson's imagination, seem to attack the privy members when clad in white and blue, white and black, black and red, or other parti-coloured hose are described by the surgeon Mondeville as livid in colour with the stench of a corpse (481), a description that anticipates the Parson's revulsion at the thought of anal functions which he calls "stynkynge ordure." The olfactory and visual images are intensified by the comparison to *cancre*, an ulcer-ated tumour described by Lanfranc as being "brennyng & blac colour & stynkynge" (208).

In his denunciation of male fashions the Parson keeps his eye fixed steadily on the objects that he finds so execrable and never allows the au-dience to forget the central image that serves to epitomize both appearance and intent, the she-ape at full moon. The use of structural imagery in pen-itential literature is exceptional. Here attention to detail, close observation of the comparisons as well as of the subjects, creates repulsive images that startle the audience by their visual appropriateness. Clearly, this passage is an instance of the sharp way in which the Parson was accustomed to reprove his erring flock (*GP*, 523), and it is directed at his parishioners.

When an animal image with comparable potentiality for development is addressed to the reader of the manual — the parish priest or educated layman — the treatment is different. The following passage refers to a custom widely enforced in the thirteenth and the early part of the fourteenth century in France and central and south-eastern England, the franchise

known as *tauri liberi libertas* whereby the bull belonging to the lord of the manor was allowed to run free with the village herd (Homans, 1938: 447–49). The comparison occurs in an involved allusive passage. The Parson calls the lecherous priests the sons of Eli:

> Swiche preestes been the sones of Helie, as sheweth in the Book of Kynges, that they weren the sones of Belial — that is, the devel. / Belial is to seyn, "withouten juge." And so faren they; hem thynketh they been free, and han no juge, namoore than hath a free bole that taketh which cow that hym liketh in the town. / So faren they by wommen. For right as a free bole is ynough for al a toun, right so is a wikked preest corrupcioun ynough for al a parisshe, or for al a contree. (897–99)

Eli's two sons were priests who displeased Jehovah by demanding uncooked sacrificial meat rather than, as was their due, mutton that had been cooked with the fat burnt off it, going up in smoke to Jehovah. Presumably they were anxious to eat the fat of the tail of the sheep (*ovis laticaudata*), still considered a delicacy in the Middle East (Hastings, 1904: 487). In addition, they seduced the women "quae observabant ad ostium tabernaculi" (1 Sam. 2:22), and no doubt the sacred character of the duties of the servant women aggravated the priests' sin in the eyes of Eli and Jehovah. When the Parson calls lecherous village priests who assume the same freedom as the free bull the sons of Eli, he makes the allusion relevant to his indictment by an ingenious use of folk-metaphor. Such priests, he says, prefer "the raw flessh of folkes wyves and hir doghtres" to "roosted flessh and sode flessh" (901). But if the sexual connotations of the basic metaphor were familiar to Chaucer, as is seen, for example, in *The Merchant's Tale* (IV, 1420), they were also known to the author of *Quoniam* (p. 375) where the priests' dietary excesses precede references to their sexual improprieties and the simile of the "free" bull. Chaucer omits the picturesque detail of the priests' boy going with his three-pronged fork to grab the meat, and neither author offers an explanation for the priests' culinary demands. When the great preachers made lengthy and dramatic denunciations of clerical vices, their references to biblical history were specific and explanatory. In contrast to the flamboyant and emotionally charged passage previously quoted, here we have a translation in a flat, colourless style, without the modifications that might have made it suitable for oral delivery.

The disparity of treatment in these two passages brings into focus the problem that we have noted in this essay. It points up the contrast in style occasioned, we believe, by the difference in the audiences addressed as well as by the sources. In the scathing denunciation of men's fashions,

the animal imagery develops in the subtle, structural manner that Chaucer frequently adopts in his poetry; in the attack on lascivious priests, a potentially dramatic situation appears to have been hamstrung in the process of translation, which prevented the redactor from treating the subject imaginatively. The first seems to be fashioned for the pulpit. It belongs to the sermon-like sections running through the work that create the illusion of the Parson haranguing the pilgrims, providing in this instance a striking illustration of his ability to "snybben sharply for the nonys" (*GP*, 523). The second passage with its indebtedness to a Latin treatise and its assumption of the reader's familiarity with 1 Samuel 2:12 ff., relates to the kind of instructional literature for parish priests that makes up the remainder of the *Tale*. The material is to remedy *ignorantia sacerdotum*, for which purpose innumerable handbooks were translated in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

But the problem remains. The distinctions are not always clear-cut: in some passages the intended audience may be either the *clerici* or the *laici*. Moreover, once we agree that several redactors may have been involved, some adapting freely, some translating closely from sources yet to be identified, we have to acknowledge that lack of homogeneity in style is inevitable.

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A Bibliographical Note on the Penitentials

Parallel passages from the *Summae* of Raymund of Pennaforte and William Peraldus are given by K.O. Petersen, *The Sources of the Parson's Tale*. Radcliffe College Monographs 12, Boston 1901. Germaine Dempster, "The Parson's Tale," *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W.F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941, pp. 722–60, gives representative extracts from the *Summae* as well as parallel passages from two French manuals, the Anglo-Norman *Compileison* (c. 1275) and Frère Laurens's *Somme le Roy* (1279). A major breakthrough was Siegfried Wenzel's discovery of a source (*Postquam*) for the "remedies" of the seven deadly sins. For this see *Traditio* 27 (1971): 433–53, subsequently expanded in his edition of *Summa virtutum de remediis anime* in 1984. Wenzel also identified two redactions of Peraldus's *Summa vitiorum* (referred to as *Quoniam* and *Primo*) that are close to Chaucer (*Traditio* 30, 1974: 351–78).

Bibliographical Note

My bibliography of notes, articles, books, and parts of books contains over 3,400 items to date on *The Parson's Tale* and *The Retraction*. I omit here reference to many works essential to a broader study of *The Parson's Tale*. The recent article by David Lawton, "Chaucer's Two Ways: The Pilgrimage Frame of *The Canterbury Tales* (*SAC* 9 (1987): 3–40), is illuminating both for the author's ideas and for his comments on the important contributions of Charles A. Owen Jr, A.J. Minnis, and others.

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