

**LITERARY SELF-REFLEXIVITY
IN THE CANTERBURY TALE**

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the internal self-reflexivity of three of the Canterbury Tales: the Pardoner's Tale, the Manciple's Tale, and the Nun's Priest's Tale. I hope to show that Chaucer is more self-conscious about the strategies of fiction-making and the relation between art and truth than is generally acknowledged. In these tales, the complex and ambiguous relationship that exists between the literal level of the story and the conceptual meaning it is supposed to illustrate, reveals something of the processes and limitations of fiction itself. The Augustinian theory of the divinely ordained cognitive power of language to reveal truth is the criterion against which I examine the Pardoner's attempted subversion of the inherently appropriate relationship of words and symbols to that which they signify. The failure of the analogical relation between 'chaf' and 'fruyt' to assert itself in the Nun's Priest's Tale is an affront to the medieval theory of allegoria, and calls into question the dictum that fiction is justified only if it functions didactically as a figurative expression of moral doctrinal truth. The "realism" of the framework story authenticates the narrative while simultaneously emphasizing the "literary" quality of the tales. The framework structure establishes a dynamic relation between fiction and truth -- more accurately between realms of fiction -- paradigmatic to that which is manifested internally in the tales I analyze. Within the confines of his literary artifice, Chaucer reveals something of the power of language and of literature to create and transform as well as to reflect reality.

Sommaire

Cette thèse est une exploration du reflet intérieur dans trois contes des Canterbury Tales: le Pardoner's Tale, le Manciple's Tale, et le Nun's Priest's Tale. J'espère montrer que Chaucer est plus conscient des stratégies fictives et du rapport entre l'art et la vérité de ce qu'on lui reconnaît généralement. Dans ces contes, le rapport complexe et ambigu qui existe entre le niveau littéral de l'histoire et le sens conceptuel qu'il est censé illustrer, révèle quelque chose des procédés et des limites de la fiction en elle-même. La théorie augustinienne du pouvoir cognitif de la langue divinement décrétée à révéler la vérité est le critère sur lequel je base mon évaluation de la tentative subversive qu'effectue le "Pardoner" du rapport fondamentalement juste des mots et des symboles à ce qu'ils signifient. L'échec du rapport analogique entre "chaf" et "fruyt" à s'affirmer dans le Nun's Priest's Tale est un affront à la théorie médiévale de l'allegoria, et s'interroge le dictum que la fiction est justifiée seulement si elle fonctionne didactiquement en tant qu'expression figurative de la doctrine morale de la vérité. Le "réalisme" de l'histoire-encadrement rend authentique la narrativité en soulignant simultanément la qualité "littéraire" des contes. La structure-encadrement établit un rapport dynamique entre la fiction et la vérité -- entre, plus précisément, les domaines de la fiction -- paradigmatiquement à ce que est intérieurement manifesté dans les contes que j'analyse. À l'intérieur des limites de ses artifices littéraires, Chaucer révèle quelque chose du pouvoir de la langue et de la littérature de créer et de transformer comme aussi de refléter la réalité.

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Introduction

Realms of Fiction

Studies of the self-conscious nature of Chaucer's literary art usually concern the role of the first person narrator. This thesis will examine the internal self-reflexivity of three of the Canterbury Tales. My approach is a thematic exploration of how these tales comment implicitly upon the nature and function of literature and its potential influence on human behaviour. Hence the search for the "substance" - a single conceptual meaning based upon a priori truth extrinsic to the work, (the "fruyt" which the Nun's Priest teasingly invites his audience to sort out from the "chaf") - gives way to the search for the intrinsic structures which call attention to the strategies of fiction-making. My method is to scrutinize those aspects of the fiction that imply more about its own process and purpose than its ostensible 'meaning'. Hence internal textual evidence is of primary import. This procedure, however, is complicated by the fact that, as Robert Burlin points out, "insofar as the poet's 'definitions' are implicated in the very process of fictions, they share in its ironic cover, in the semantic relativity of its dramatic occasions."¹ In the opening chapter I will endeavour to formulate a working definition of the term 'literary self-reflexivity', and I will briefly discuss the function of the framework story of the pilgrimage as a device which simultaneously authenticates the experience of the journey as Chaucer relates it, and emphasizes (by a contrast more apparent than real) the fictional nature of the tales.

Purely fictive, the framework structure establishes a dynamic relationship between art and experience which, I hope to prove, manifests itself within the admittedly literary and contrived tales themselves. The verisimilitude of the framework and its interaction with the tales allows for, and not

infrequently confuses, the distinction between 'realism' and 'artifice' within a work of art. The realms of the frame and the tales interpenetrate in many ways. The shifting of perspective between varying levels of fiction underlines the role of the artist as manipulator. Chaucer asserts his authority by manipulating his fiction. Occasionally, for instance, the events of the frame interpose themselves into a story, destroying the dramatic illusion of the pilgrimage narrative in a way which the existence of the tales does not, for the framework story exists to make allowance for them. Two blatant examples of this confusion of art and reality - - that is the confusion of different realms of fiction - - are the Reeve's certainty that the Miller's Tale of a cuckolded carpenter is a personal affront, and the allusion to the Wife of Bath by Justinus in the Merchant's Tale. The disruptions of illusion occur not only in the relationship between frame and tales, but, as I will discuss, within the Nun's Priest's Tale itself.

Robert Jordan describes the inorganic and architectonic structure of Chaucer's poetry, characterized by "the overt manipulation of fixed structural elements" and "inert, self-contained parts",² as antithetical to the post romantic theory of organic unity: the self-perpetuation of fiction, and the practice of unbroken illusion. Chaucer's mistrust of fiction manifests itself not only in the Retraction but in the structure of his poem and the mechanical, additive principle of its construction.

Precisely such disruptive practices are at the very centre of Chaucer's art, and they are integral to his sense of the inorganic discontinuity between fiction and experience. The primary artistic means of discriminating between art and life is the clear structured outline, the explicit indication of the limits of illusion.... Though strongly secular in their persuasion, the new humanists of the late Middle Ages shared with the Church Fathers the understanding that poetic utterance is literally untrue.... The irregularities and inconsistencies of a Chaucerian narrative ... (the) overt evidence of the maker's hand - the exposed joints and seams, the unresolved contradictions, the clashes of perspective - are

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not simply the signs of primitive genius, as Sidney and Dryden were willing to believe; nor are they trivial stylistic blemishes, as modern advocates of psychological realism and dramatic unity have maintained. They are significant determinants of Chaucer's art, based upon an aesthetic which conceives of art ... as an inorganic material, a "veil". 3

The layered structure of the work as an entity places the tales in a relationship to the whole analogous to the usual relationship of words to the fiction of which they are the building blocks. In response to his question, "What is a Canterbury Tale?" William Frost comments: "By becoming part of a multiple conversation whose units are not simply words or questions or statements but also complete narratives, the Canterbury tale also makes an implicit observation on the very nature of community and communication."⁴ With one exception, which I will attempt to justify, I limit myself to tales told by clerics. This is because a work of fiction which defies traditional doctrinal interpretation and undermines the moral catch-alls appended to it by asserting its supremacy over them, makes a comment all the more pointed if told by an ecclesiast in the form of an exemplum -- a brief story with the explicit purpose of illustrating the meaning of the sermon. In the tales of the Pardoner and the Nun's Priest, a complex and ambiguous relationship exists between the literal particulars of the story and the symbolic meanings traditionally associated with them. The way in which this problem is manifested in these two tales, however, is radically different. In the case of the Pardoner, my discussion focuses on his attempted subversion of the view of the sacred relationship between language and reality formulated by St. Augustine -- his denial of 'meaning' which the pilgrims reject. "He is too articulate," Penelope Curtis writes, "the more he talks, the more he mocks speech as a power for truth or falsehood."⁵ The key issue, then, is the medieval theory of the source of the signifying power of language and of symbols. The Augustinian tradition that words and signs are inherently related to the pre-existent

'reality' they represent underlies my analysis of the Pardoner's Tale and the Manciple's Tale, for both the Pardoner and Phebus deviate from this view, attempting to re-create reality through language. In the case of the Nun's Priest's Tale, the significance lies in the ambiguity of the relationship between literary and symbolic. The failure of allegory, and the resultant auto-referentiality of this tale which invites exegetical commentary, is itself an assertion of the independence of fiction from didacticism -- one which, I hope to show, ultimately reclaims the symbol for the literal level. This defies St. Augustine's dictate that figurative expression should be reserved to express moral truth and Christian doctrine, and that, because it is enigmatic in nature, it is best suited for this purpose. The Nun's Priest's Tale undermines the relationship between fruit and chaff upon which the defence of fiction rests. The Augustinian theory of the relationship between language and truth, then, is the criterion against which I evaluate the Pardoner's strategies, while the failure of the acceptable relationship between fiction and truth to assert itself is the basis for my analysis of the Nun's Priest's Tale.

The Parson's Tale is discussed as a foil to those of the Pardoner and the Nun's Priest because the language of the Parson does truly point to a reality beyond itself. A discussion of the Manciple's Tale is included for two reasons. First because the Manciple makes explicit the malleable property of language -- the very words of which both fiction and expository are composed -- which renders language vulnerable to manipulation, and man prone to self-deception. In the Manciple's Tale, no less than those of the Pardoner and the Nun's Priest, the misuse of language results in the creation of an alternate vision of reality; one independent of that revealed in the tale. Second, because each unit is part of a larger work that includes its teller, the other pilgrims, their tales and the linking material, it is possible to examine the internal structure of a tale in relation to its teller, (the Pardoner's Tale); as a self-contained unit, (the Nun's Priest's

Tale); and in relationship to juxtaposed pilgrims and their tales, (the Manciple's Tale and the Parson's Tale). "In the Canterbury group," Burlin writes, "a multiplicity of narrators makes possible an anatomy of the kinds of experience that hide behind the fiction-maker's mask."⁶

The Pardoner sets out to prove the power of words independent of truth by raising the question of whether art needs a moral base to succeed. His pilgrim audience is privy to the process by which he ensures that his art succeeds financially in the rural parishes. To succeed with the pilgrims, however, they must be made aware that he has fooled them despite their knowledge of his methods. He thus brings to light their pride and fallibility, and despite himself, is capable of making a moral impact on their lives. The Nun's Priest's Tale has been treated as a skeletal foundation for numerous allegorical interpretations. Each proposed reading is fed by a selection of the proliferation of ultimately incongruous motifs that abound in the tale. Interpretations range from the holy-man-versus-devil conflict to that between the secular clergy and the mendicant friars, to an allegory of the Fall of Man and an anti-feminist tract. It has also been read as a renunciation of allegory, (presumably out of frustration with the quantity of mutually exclusive interpretations), a parody of the dictum that literature must instruct. I propose that the misuse of the techniques of literature makes explicit the strategies of fiction-making and comments upon the relationship of fiction to revealed truth. The Manciple's and Parson's tales are placed relative to each other in a mutually qualifying relationship. The Manciple's Tale is subversive in that its meaning is the power of language to manipulate. It illustrates the re-creation of 'reality' to accord with the word. Immediately following is the Parson's Tale with its emphasis on language as means to the saving power of truth and as a vehicle of salvation. In the words of Britton J. Harwood: "By language the Parson will reconcile the pilgrims to God. Acting out of his own destiny, the Manciple, ridiculing words which become reality, prepares the pilgrims

in his way for the Word become Flesh."⁷ It is no coincidence that all the instances described above are either sermons or exempla, or adapt and modify these forms. Fundamental to the undertaking of a pilgrimage is the recognition of one's failings, and a desire to repent and transform the self. Hence much depends upon the ability of the pilgrims to understand the implications of their own tales, and those of their colleagues.

The most succinct definition of the term "self-reflexivity" as I use it in this essay appears in an introductory article on this subject by Barbara A. Babcock, and is attributed to Maurice Natanson. Reflexivity is "the inevitable accompaniment of any method which demands scrutiny of its own terms and procedures."⁸ Babcock comments further upon the epistemological paradox of self-referential operations:

The terms reflexive, reflexivity and reflexivity ... describe the capacity of language and of thought - of any system of signification - to turn or bend back upon itself, to become an object to itself, and to refer to itself. Whether we are discussing things grammatical or cognitive, what is meant is a reflex action or process linking self and other, subject and object... Linguists as well as philosophers have come to regard metacommunication as the sine qua non of all communication. Only by being able to reflect in words about words, to talk about talking, are we able to learn to talk and to do so successfully. 9

This lesson is taught explicitly by the Pardoner, and implicitly by the Nun's Priest. In both cases I will treat the manipulation of language as the subject matter. Signifier and signified are one. I do not intend to invest the term 'self-reflexivity' with the connotations it carries in modern critical theory. My method, instead, will be a conventional textual analysis of the tales to show the very subtle way in which they reveal in their process something of the nature of language and of fiction.

The modern view of Poetic language holds that it is characteristically self-conscious, aware of its own communicative methods. Rather than serving as mimetic windows on the world, as mere vehicles for ideas and doctrines which originate elsewhere, words are autonomous entities. The medieval views of language and of literature, which I will discuss respectively in the first sections of my chapters on the Pardoner's Tale and the Nun's Priest's Tale, hold that words and fiction (if the latter is permitted at all) are valid merely as expressive tools of an extrinsic system of belief or revealed truth. Their referent is objective "Reality". Allegory, Sheila Delany explains, is a form or a literary manifestation of analogy; a symbolic mode of thought and perception. Its didactic function depends upon our ability to extract general truths from particulars:

It requires the reader to bear in mind a structure different from that of the narrative but proportional to it, and to interpret the narrative in terms of that other system.... Non-allegorical literature usually refers the reader back to the world he inhabits.... Most allegories, however, ... refer us to a realm of abstract moral or religious ideas which are not only unknown but unknowable.... Its method is circular, for the general truth to which allegory claims to lead must first be accepted if the narrative is to have any didactic effect.... Epistemologically, meaning precedes narrative in allegory. Meaning generates symbols and provides in advance the correct interpretation of those symbols. 10

Self-referential thought is by its very nature a subjective procedure, and as such is incongruous with the epistemology formulated by St. Augustine. This philosophy of knowledge was dominant through the fourteenth century when the tenet of the contingency of language upon objective 'reality' was shattered by the thought of William of Ockham. I defer my discussion of Nominalism until the conclusion, when my observations concerning the function of language in the Canterbury Tales will be restated in terms of this new

epistemology which denies that the cognitive power of language is divinely ordained to represent objective truth, effectively undoing the substantial connection of the medieval cosmos. I do not mean to imply that the orthodox medieval system of signification is not inherently reflexive. It is, inasmuch as, all interpretation is "explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others," as Paul Ricœur states, and adds, "it is thus the growth of his own understanding of himself that the exegete pursues through his understanding of the other."¹¹ But the traditional medieval theory of cognition pretends to objectivity in that language is the means to, and the reflection of, Truth. Self-reflexivity, on the other hand, is simultaneously subjective and rigorously discriminating and self-critical. It is described as follows by Barbara Babcock:

By confounding subject and object, seer and seen, self and other, art and life - in short, by playing back and forth across terminal and categorical boundaries and playing with the very nature of human understanding -- reflexive processes redirect thoughtful attention to the faculty or limited structures of thought, language and society. Just as thinking is subversive, reflexivity in any form ... remarks on the indignity of any closed system and reminds us that we have no absolute distinctions between what is 'real' and what is 'fictional', between 'I' and 'me', and that these domains are separated only by a transposition in our modes of attending to what there is.... Paradox or any liminal or ambiguous situation is the occasion for reflexivity and may well involve us in infinite semiosis, if not the infinite regress of self-regard. ¹²

The paradox which lies behind the occasion of the telling of the Pardoner's Tale, and the ambiguity within that of the Nun's Priest, are the axes upon which my examination of their self-reflexive nature revolves. In both cases, the obscurity of the 'sentence' points to its own solution. The scope of interpretation is widened so that its processes and difficulties are acknowledged and applied as part of the answer to the question of 'meaning'.

Robert Hanning, in his essay "The Theme of Art and Life in Chaucer's poetry" examines some of the ways in which the scheme of the Canterbury Tales explores:

the relationship between the artistic impulse that underlies storytelling, role-playing (the creation of a "false" identity), or the use of language to foster illusion, and the world of experience to which the artist's imagination must always respond. By probing this relationship, Chaucer is of course commenting on the power and limits of his own "craft", but he is also exploring the basic propensity we all share to transform, in fact or fancy, the reality of our character and our situation, to bring it into line with our desires or felt needs. 13

The tales, like all art, are an attempt to impose shape, order and therefore meaning onto experience. The links, although they too present us with highly selective and ordered versions of reality, convey the sense of variety and plentitude; of infinite potential for change that confirms our impression of life as a constant state of becoming. It is the links that contain the self-revelations of the pilgrims, Norman Harrington points out, who confess "not so much their sins, as a sense of their own bewilderment at the unfathomable reality of their lives.... (they) are engaged more or less consciously in the process of trying to discover what has happened to them and what, if anything, this press of undigested circumstance means."¹⁴ In the special case of the Pardoner, the incoherence and ambiguity -- the sudden changes of mood, action and modes of discourse -- have been carefully contrived by the poet as expressive of the mystery of the 'meaning' of this individual's experience.

The narrative frames of Chaucer's contemporaries Boccaccio (Decameron) and Gower (Confessio Amantis) are primarily ordering devices. Hanning discusses the complexity of the aesthetic function of Chaucer's framing device:

The coincidence of expanded mimetic and virtuosic intentions on Chaucer's part, gives the Canterbury Tales an incredibly ambitious double program: to subordinate art most fully to the manifold experiences of life in order to reproduce them faithfully, and yet to show how art dominates and metamorphoses experience by imposing on it strictures that satisfy and harmonize purely aesthetic demands for continuity, variety and authorial control in a literary narrative. 15

Thus we are constantly reminded of the artist's power to organize experience and impose comprehensible 'meaning' on it by transcribing it within material from authoritative sources.

The literary and artistic function of the framing material lies in the interplay of its comic social 'realism' with the circumscribed and contrived world of the tales. Morton Bloomfield speaks of the innovation in Chaucer's depiction of the social world in the frame, which amounts to "a report on the contemporary world and present history,"¹⁶ to authenticate the inner stories. The temporal quality of the frame (combined with its contemporaneity), is opposed to the timeless quality of the tales, and creates the fundamental illusion of 'realism' in the work. Norman Harrington, in his study, "Experience, Art and the Framing of the Canterbury Tales," discusses "the overlapping and sometimes conflicting claims of authority and experience as sources of truth" to conclude, "In the end, neither art nor experience is wholly sanctioned, just as neither is wholly discredited."¹⁷ This structure, I suggest, is paradigmatic to that which functions internally in the tales I examine. "Chaucer's way of defining the materials of fiction implicates," Burlin suggests, "the question of what one knows with that of how such knowledge has come to be ... when such philosophical problems were colored by the assumption of an absolute Truth, the comparative validity of alternate ways of knowing invariably enters into reasoned discourse. 'Experience and authority' ... constitute alternate modes of verification."¹⁸

That Chaucer establishes a competition between these

two claims of knowledge attests to his conviction that neither, in and of itself, presents the full face of truth. The remoteness of the traditional wisdom of the exempla and fables is juxtaposed with the chaotic immediacy of the phenomenal world. It is the interaction of experience and authority in a relativistic cosmos, Harrington points out, that makes the reader aware of the limitations of art and empiricism:

It is such an awareness of man's fallibility and the limitations of art that makes Chaucer sensitive to the complexities of human experience and the difficulty of accounting for it fully by any of the conventional systems of art or morality available to him. What kind of truth can be arrived at often seems the result of laying one kind of truth against another, of correcting experience by art and art by experience, a process that involves constant juxtaposition, balancing and adjusting in the search for acceptable versions of the truth. 19

The role of the framework story is three-fold. It qualifies or supplements the wisdom of fiction, and offers a gauge by which we can test its validity. It sheds light on some tales by suggesting the unspoken motives of their tellers, and by revealing the degree to which the pilgrims fail to grasp the meanings of the tales they hear.

The Canterbury Tales as a whole can be described as an instance of internal self-reflexivity, for it is a series of stories within a framework story -- both of which comment upon and modify the other. I will, at times, refer to the 'realism' of the links as providing a contrast to and thereby underlining the 'contrived' 'literary' quality of the fictional tales. This is, of course, an oversimplification, for the pilgrimage framework is as fictive as the tales -- in fact, as allegedly empirical, it lacks the claim to veracity on the basis of 'auctoritee' that validates some of the tales. When the whole work is examined in a detached manner and recognized as fiction, the narrative of the pilgrimage presents the illusion of being one step closer to reality

than the tales. It is crucial to realize, as Morton Bloomfield points out in his essay "Authenticating Realism and the Realism of Chaucer," that realism is itself "a style and not merely a reproduction of life."²⁰ Yet art's pretence to represent reality - current at least since the classical theory of mimesis -- would seem to undermine the dictum, understood universally by artists and expressed most succinctly by Shakespeare's Touchstone the Clown, that: "the truest poetry is the most faining."²¹ Bloomfield echoes this sentiment: "Art must claim to be real in some sense if it is to be taken seriously. The whole problem lies, of course, in what sense or senses art is real.... Poets are liars only in order to be true to life in its deepest sense. That life is more than sense experience, more than "fact", is a principle all great writers have subscribed to."²² Even St. Augustine, famous for his conviction of the contingency of truth upon morality, acknowledges the role of falsehood and illusion in the expression of truth in the arts. He cites examples of acting and painting, and concludes by asking rhetorically: "Wherefore, if it avails some things that they be somewhat false in order that they may be somewhat true; why do we so greatly dread falsity, and seek truth as the greatest good?"²³

The purpose of narrative realism is to establish an air of plausibility in a tale. "In part," Bloomfield comments, "narratives are strategies to avoid the accusation of lying. This type of realism may be called 'authenticating realism' ... It is fundamentally concerned with the truth-claim of the narrative and ... is very different from ordinary realism."²⁴ The Bible is distinguished from all other narratives in that its stories reveal sacred history and are the very fabric of religious belief. The basis of religious claim is their historical veracity. "Christianity offers," Bloomfield writes, "a logical paradox which bears the claim of historical accuracy."²⁵ The realism of the Bible, however, exists in the truth-claim of its narratives, and is not a realism of detail as Chaucer's is. So too must the most fantastic and logically absurd stories of the lives of saints be vested with

historical credibility. This is fundamental to the religious aim of the writer. However, "the special quality of the realism of the Canterbury Tales," Bloomfield explains, "lies in the circumstantial realism of its authenticating level."²⁶ The framing device of the Canterbury Tales is at once an authenticating strategy, and a pseudo-reality which calls attention to the tales as fiction.

The same is true of the presence of the first-person narrator. The personal participation of 'Chaucer' authenticates the pilgrimage as a real historical event. Furthermore, as Tony Millns points out in "Chaucer's Suspended Judgements", it is a device which enables Chaucer the poet to assert man's free-will and responsibility for what he says and does, while simultaneously avoiding blame himself:

The pilgrim-narrator's being on an equal level of existence with the others of the group offers to the author a way of disclaiming responsibility much more satisfying than the usual ascription of events and speeches to unalterable sources; he can appear to set his characters free ... with this freedom comes responsibility ... what is presented purports to be a full and truthful account of what occurred. ²⁷

In order to do this, as Josipovici points out in his essay "Fiction and Game in the Canterbury Tales," Chaucer must:

free his poem from the bondage to reality and ensure its status as fiction. Paradoxically this can only be done by having the narrator insist on his purely reportorial status.... The narrator's insistence on fact is the poet's insistence on fiction. Chaucer, in a very unmedieval way, has insisted on removing his poem from the "real" world to an ideal world of fiction where right and wrong do not apply. ²⁸

Chaucer uses the conflict between moral and immoral "to conduct a bold and original strategy whose aim is to free his poem from moral jurisdiction and ensure its autonomy as a

fictional construct."²⁹

Finally, in the Retraction, Chaucer speaks to us as a Christian man rather than as an artist. He removes us from the work of art, reminding us that the whole poem is his 'artifice', that he is the inventor of the verisimilitude of the framework story as well as the creator of the fictional narratives. "The 'retracciouns'," Millns writes, "are a final illustration of Chaucer's concern with authorial responsibility, and, in the context of his habitual play-off of final against interim judgements, author against narrator, they are artistically consistent.... Chaucer's farewell to art (is) a profession of religious orthodoxy, founded on the belief that only his overtly religious writings can be of benefit to Christian souls. This judgement has nothing to do with art."³⁰

Bloomfield characterizes authenticating devices, which permit the suspension of disbelief, as simultaneously and paradoxically self-reflexive in that they ironically reinforce our perception of the framed stories as artistic creations:

In one way or another a narrative must not only present a story but an authentication of that story. In other words, a story must also present a solution to its epistemological problem. How are we to know that a story is true or presumably true? The suspension of disbelief is a fundamental process in narrative art. Part of the privilege of reading a narrative is to know in some measure the teller or assumed teller and the claims of his authority.... However, all authenticating devices not only authenticate but also call attention to the need for authentication and hence to the inauthenticity of the work of art. 31

What follows is an examination of how three of the fictional tales implicitly comment upon the nature of fiction.

Notes

¹ Robert B. Burlin, Chaucerian Fiction (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 3.

² Robert M. Jordan, Chaucer and the Shape of Creation (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. IX, XI.

³ Jordan, pp. 6 - 8.

⁴ William Frost, "What is a Canterbury Tale?" WHR, 27 (1973), 55.

⁵ Penelope Curtis, "The Pardoner's 'Jape'," CR, 2 (1968), 21.

⁶ Burlin, p. IX.

⁷ Britton J. Harwood, "Language and the Real: Chaucer's Manciple," ChauR, 6 (1971 - 72), 279.

⁸ Barbara A. Babcock, "Reflexivity: Definitions and Discriminations," Semiotica, 30 (1980), 1.

⁹ Babcock, pp. 2 - 3.

¹⁰ Sheila Delany, "Undoing Substantial Connection: The Late Medieval Attack on Analogical Thought," Mosaic, 5, IV (1971 - 72), 34 - 35.

¹¹ quoted by Babcock, p. 11.

¹² Babcock, p. 5.

¹³ Robert Hanning, "The Theme of Art and Life in Chaucer's Poetry," in Geoffrey Chaucer: A Collection of Original Articles, ed. George D. Economou (New York: McGraw - Hill Inc. 1975), p. 15.

¹⁴ Norman T. Harrington, "Experience, Art and the Framing of the Canterbury Tales," ChauR, 10 (1975 - 76), 194.

- 15 Hanning, p. 21.
- 16 Morton W. Bloomfield, "Authenticating Realism and the Realism of Chaucer," in his Essays and Explorations (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 188.
- 17 Harrington, pp. 188, 199.
- 18 Burlin, p. 9.
- 19 Harrington, pp. 189 - 90.
- 20 Bloomfield, p. 175.
- 21 William Shakespeare, As You Like It, III, iii, 16. in The Complete Works, ed. Alfred Harbage (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), pp. 261 - 62.
- 22 Bloomfield, p. 176.
- 23 quoted by G. D. Josipovici, "Fiction and Game in the Canterbury Tales," CQ, 7 (1965), 195.
- 24 Bloomfield, p. 177.
- 25 Bloomfield, p. 183.
- 26 Bloomfield, p. 194.
- 27 Tony Millns, "Chaucer's Suspended Judgements," ELC, 27 (1977), 14.
- 28 Josipovici, pp. 186 - 87.
- 29 Josipovici, p. 185.
- 30 Millns, p. 15.
- 31 Bloomfield, p. 179.

The Pardoner and the Power of the Word.

I. A Medieval Theory of Signification.

The principal source of my discussion of St. Augustine's philosophy of verbal signification is the explanation of the medieval theory of the function of symbols in the acquisition and transmission of the knowledge of God presented by Marcia Colish in her excellent book, The Mirror of Language. The view that cognition should be mediated through signs and that signs are fundamentally verbal in nature was first formulated by St. Augustine and is based primarily upon Aristotle's sign theory, supported and modified by Christian doctrine:

The Aristotelian certainty that sensory data led to a knowledge of prior and non-sensible realities was paralleled by the scriptural assertions that God can be known through His creation which He is believed to resemble. Yet the kind of knowledge of God which the Christian regarded as normative in this life was faith. Knowledge by faith was firm and certain, but partial. It could be acquired only by an infusion of God's grace in the mind of the subject, and it involved his moral conversion as well as his intellectual assent. 1

In this final statement lies the seed of Augustine's theory of the contingency of truth upon morality.

Classical epistemologists were not particularly verbal in orientation. Words were only one of the many species of sensible signs. The motive for the uniquely verbal character of Christian sign theory as well as the source of the limitations placed by medieval thinkers on the cognitive

function of signs is to be found in the doctrine of the Incarnation:

Medieval Christians believed that Christ the Word was God's perfect expression of Himself to man. Having taken on a human nature and having expiated man's sin, Christ had restored man to God. Previously vitiated by sin, the human mind could now come to a knowledge of God in Christ; and the human faculty of speech could now participate in the Incarnation by helping to spread the Word to the world. Medieval thinkers thus stressed verbal signs as the primary media of religious knowledge because they saw in Christ the Word the mediator between God and man, Whose redemption enabled them to know God and to bear God to each other in human words. 2

Despite the redemption of man's speech by the Christ Incarnate, the transcendental nature of the object of medieval knowledge — God — limited the cognitive function of signs "both in the degree they could represent the transcendent God at all and in the degree to which they could convey the knowledge of God to the subject ... no one ... could acquire the religious knowledge necessary for salvation without the assistance of God."³ Medieval epistemology has as its object the world of spiritual reality, which it never doubts exists as a prior and objective order of being, with which the signs are never identified. D. W. Robertson explains that signs, whether they derive from the Book of Nature or the Book of Scripture, exist in a hierarchical relationship with their object:

The creations of man are inferior to the mind of man, and that mind, together with all other creatures of God, is inferior to God. A work of art should thus lead us to appreciate the conception of the artist, and this, like the beauty of nature itself, should lead us to a contemplation of the immutable beauty which is its source ... [Furthermore], since it is the things which are the referents of the words in Scripture which are of signifying force, and not the words themselves, a beautiful object may be taken as a figurative expression representing a principle which forms a part of ... the

immediate source of created beauty: the Providential Order. 4

The infinite chasm between man and God was bridged in part by God's intervention into the mutable world of His creation and His affiliation of man to Himself. Colish writes:

The belief that God had manifested His presence, inchoately in the history of Israel, consummately in the Incarnation of Christ, and continuously since Pentecost in His living extension in time and space, The Church, held for medieval thinkers specific epistemological consequences ... God had made such knowledge of Himself as He wished to communicate generally accessible to man ... Man might achieve the combined intellectual assent and loving personal adhesion which this acceptance required only on the basis of God's gracious gift of faith ... Medieval man believed that Christ's redemptive action had been projected in time and that it was currently operative in the Church, His Mystical Body. 5

This gift entails a reciprocal responsibility on man's part. The Christ Incarnate not only allowed man to transcend the limits of human cognition and expression that His words might become worthy vessels of Divine revelation -- He required it of those who followed Him into the ecclesiastical dispensation. The New Covenant of Christ, as Colish explains, entails the double responsibility of attaining a knowledge of God, and conveying this knowledge to the world:

God had commanded them to express the Inexpressible in terms accessible to the speaker and the audience alike. These very terms, however, would remain permanently inadequate to the assignment ... the tension between God's ineffability and the Divine mandate to preach the word to all nations remained a permanent one in the minds of medieval thinkers concerned with religious knowledge.... To the extent that they found a resolution of this tension, they found it in the doctrine of the Incarnation ... By His life, death and resurrection, He had renewed and restored these human faculties, re-enabling them to become God-like. Medieval thinkers

drew an important epistemological corollary from this doctrine [of Incarnation]. In the Christian dispensation, human modes of thought and expression, although still limited by the human condition, could now worthily take on the tasks assigned to them by God. Human language ... could now assist God in spreading the effects of the Incarnation to the world. 6

The medieval view of the function of words as cognitive intermediaries between subject and object (and between speaker and audience) was essentially objective: "A word might signify truly, if partially, a really existing thing," Colish writes, "The accuracy of any verbal formulation depends on its correspondence to the object it seeks to describe: vox sequitur rem ... Statements are thus held not to be heuristic, or productive of knowledge in the first instance, but expressive of a knowledge already existing in the mind of the knower."⁷ The subject's anterior knowledge of the object depends upon God's gift of grace. Hence the function of language as an instrument of instruction about God is limited to indication or commemoration: "The word of the speaker, although it cannot produce knowledge of the object, can point to it if it is not already in the mind of the subject. If the subject already knows the object, the word of the speaker can recall it to him, making it vividly present in his mind."⁸ In both instances, the power of language is limited by the morality of the seeker, as well as Christ's will "to teach it to him from within."⁹ This raises an important question which will become an issue in my discussion of the Pardoner's Tale. If words are inherently rather than arbitrarily appropriate to the object they signify because of the divinely given cognitive power of language, then "how could a word which [is] regarded as a vox significans rem be in the mouth of the nonbeliever or the heterodox, a hollow reverberation or a false note failing to harmonize with reality?"¹⁰ To pervert the relationship between a word and the reality it represents would not be possible were signs necessarily rather than arbitrarily

related to reality. Herein lies the crux at the heart of the Pardoner's Tale, for the Pardoner attempts to create a completely subjective self-imposed relationship between words, (or objects, in the case of the relics), and their referents.

The theories of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas resulted in the formulation of two opposing responses to this problem. Augustine adopts Plato's view that words can adumbrate truth and serve as vehicles of instruction only if Rhetoric is joined with wisdom and virtue. Christianity, however, introduces epistemological problems beyond the scope of classical approaches, and it conjoins the issue of morality -- the ability to know, speak and love the truth -- with the problem of how man attains and communicates knowledge. The gift of revealed wisdom makes possible the redemption of the spoken and written word, which are its media. Herein lie the seeds of St. Augustine's conviction concerning the interdependence of cognition and morality. For Augustine, rhetoric must contain "cognitive content and moral relevance ... [and be] put to the service of God and men."¹¹ Yet Augustine does not overlook the limitations of language in dealing with the ineffability of God. He holds that the Incarnation redeems language and makes theology possible. Intellectual and moral failure result from the misuse of linguistic faculties. He rejects the pagan poets taught in schools of grammar and rhetoric because their use of language is unrelated to truth and morality. He rejects any distinction between technique and value -- between the laws of language and the moral laws by which one should conduct one's life. In Augustine's view, "a person's moral state affects his ability to know the truth."¹² Hence the goals of Christian ethics and Christian epistemology are the same. When he met Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, Augustine was impressed not only by his eloquence as an orator and his knowledge of Scripture, but by his exemplary life as a pastor and a teacher. Augustine found himself no longer willing to distinguish between rhetorical technique and the substance of the

sermon; content was no longer separable from form nor language distinguishable from the truth it contains. This was Augustine's first contact with "redeemed eloquence,"¹³ and the first step in the formulation of his view of the function of language in the knowledge of God. His conversion was experienced as a linguistic rejuvenation in which language and morality were reunited. The extensive use of language -- that which extends beyond the realm of devotion to influence the thinking of those outside the Church -- comes into play after Augustine's ordination to the priesthood, when he faced the task of converting to the faith men ignorant of God, as well as that of winning over his own doctrinal adversaries. The difficulties he encounters give rise to his discussions of the powers and the limitations of language in De Magistro and De Doctrina Christiana.

In De Magistro, Augustine describes how words signify:

Words are acoustic signs, which correspond accurately to the realities they represent. This correspondence, however, is partial, and it does not constitute identity with the things signified. Nevertheless ... signs are not inferior to their significata. Of all the various kinds of signs, states Augustine, words are the most universal and necessary ... words can signify other words as well as things ... they can be used to describe the limitations inherent in any given instance of signification, thus helping the reader to correct the error. The real significance of words is so thorough going that a person may speak the truth without knowing it. 14

It is interesting that in Augustine's view words draw attention to their own function of signification by explicating their own limitations as no other species of sign can do. The most important element of Augustine's thought for the purposes of this thesis is that words are inherently, not arbitrarily, related to the realities they represent. This allows for the possibility that man may speak the truth and not know it. But the natural relationship between words and their referents does not guarantee that all statements are

true, for man may misuse words, deliberately or not, perverting their relationship with their significata. This too will be important to my discussion of the Pardoner's Tale.

De Doctrina Christiana deals with the pedagogical and moral requirements of the Biblical exegete and preacher:

Aware of the limitations of human language, both in the Preacher's understanding of God's Word in Scripture and in his congregation's reception of the Word through his sermons, [Augustine advocates] that the Christian teacher reinforce his technical competence with an exemplary moral character and with prayer. 15

The debate as to whether or not an immoral man is capable of knowing and preaching moral truth is central to an examination of the Pardoner's Tale.

Unlike St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas does not provide a systematic exposition of a verbal theory of religious knowledge. Nor does he share St. Augustine's view that the ability to know and to speak the truth is contingent upon personal morality. The Thomistic view holds that will and reason being separate faculties, it is possible that the evil may know the truth and truly speak it. I was able to find no sources on Thomas which deal specifically with the relationship between cognition and morality, so I shall attempt to demonstrate that Thomas does indeed hold this view by examining those sections of the Summa Theologica that deal with the problem of evil, the functions of the will and the intellect, the role of intention in the determination of the morality of an act, and the possibility that man may know but not love the truth.

Aquinas adopts the Augustinian view, summarized by Colish, that evil is the privation of good:

Since ... it has being, order, and harmony, the material creation is good, although imperfect; and it may conduce man to God, since the world is derived from Him and reflects His sovereign glory. Evil is not a substance, he

concluded, because being is good; rather, it is a perversion of the will -- a distinctly biblical notion -- whereby men love the created universe with improper reference to God. 16

Evil signifies no being, nor form, nor nature of its own, Thomas writes, since "every nature desires its own being and its own perfection ... which is good."¹⁷ Aquinas cites Augustine's assertion in the Contra Julian (i, 9) that "there is no possible source of evil except good."¹⁸ Hence evil can only be known through the knowledge of the nature of good, as one opposite is known through the other. According to Thomas, there is only one universal common cause of all being, and that is the supreme good. Because nothing is wholly and essentially bad, there is no first principle of evil; evil has only an accidental cause.¹⁹ Thomas illustrates this principle by commenting that because God causes the good of the order of the universe, which includes the order of justice, He is therefore the author of the evil which is penalty, although "God does not will death for its own sake."²⁰ Evil does not exist in its own right, but as "a certain good joined to the privation of another good; as the end proposed by an intemperate man is not the privation of the good of reason, but the delight of sense without the order of reason."²¹ As such, evil may be used in some mysterious way, to serve Divine purpose: "The universe of creatures, is all the better and more perfect if some things in it can fail in goodness, and do sometimes fail, God not preventing this ... as Augustine says (Enchir. II), 'God is so powerful that He can even make good out of evil.'²²

The objection that good cannot be the cause of evil is supported by the following quotation from Matthew, VII, 18: "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit,"²³ (a quote used, incidentally, to support the view of certain critics that the Pardoner cannot be an evil man because he knows and speaks the moral truth). St. Thomas responds, again by quoting St. Augustine (Contra Julian. i.) and elaborating:

The Lord calls an evil will the evil tree, and a good will a good tree. Now a good will does not produce a morally bad act, since it is from the good will itself that a moral act is judged to be good. Nevertheless, the movement itself of an evil will is caused by the rational creature, which is good; and thus good is the cause of evil. 24.

In his analysis of the functions of the human mind, as Colish explains, Thomas "observes that the intellect and the will are functionally interrelated. It is necessary to know something in order to desire it as good, he says; and the desire to know must precede the act of knowing."²⁵ Although interdependent, the faculties of will and reason are separate, and the primacy of the intellect in Thomistic thought derives from the moral responsibility he ascribes to the faculty of reason:

The acts of reason and of will can be brought to bear on one another ... the act of reason precedes the act of will ... will can tend freely toward various objects, precisely because reason can have various perceptions of the good. Hence philosophies define the free-will as being "a free judgment arising from reason," implying that reason is the root of liberty. 26

Armand Maurer provides a most succinct summary:

The proper object of this faculty [will] is the good in general apprehended by reason ... the universal will is identical with the most perfect of all beings; namely, God. Hence the will is the faculty by which man tends toward God and enjoys him when possessed. Man reaches God, however, not by his will but by his intellect. That is why St. Thomas insists on the superiority of the intellect over the will; it is the faculty by which we lay hold upon God, our ultimate end and supreme happiness. 27

In St. Thomas' words: "God is presented to the will as its object by the reason: and in so far as it is in accord with

reason, it enters the moral order, and causes moral goodness in the act of the will; because reason is the principle of human and moral acts."²⁸ The goodness of the human will depends upon its being subject to reason and to the eternal law, which is known to man through natural reason or revelation. But reason and will are not always in harmony. An action "is said to be evil; for instance if it lacks the quantity determined by reason."²⁹

In his subsequent discussion of whether the good or evil of a man's action is derived from its ultimate result or from the intention and the means by which this end is attained, Thomas quotes the Augustinian formula, "evil is not in things, but in the sinner's use of them," (De Doctr. Christ. III. 12) only to argue to the contrary: "although the goodness of an action is not caused by the goodness of its effect, yet an action is said to be good from the fact that it can produce a good effect."³⁰ Thomas would seem to judge the goodness or evil of an action by its consequences rather than by its methods and motivations. This seems close to the dangerous justification of the means by the end. In the fourth article, however, Thomas acknowledges the problem that a good action may be ordained to an evil end, and the converse. He quotes Boethius (De Differ. Topic. ii) that "if the end is good, the thing is good, and if the end be evil, the thing also is evil."³¹ but at the same time, now citing Dionysius, Thomas makes it clear that the end is not the sole criterion of morality:

Nothing hinders an action which is good in one of the ways mentioned (i.e.: genus, species and circumstance), from lacking goodness in another way ... An action is not good simply, unless it is good in all those ways: since "evil results from any single defect, but good from the complete cause", as Dionysius says. (Div. Nom. IV). 32

Although a good action may result from an evil intention, it does not, in the view of St. Thomas, qualify as a moral act;

If then reason or conscience err with an error that is voluntary ... so that one errs about what one ought to know; then such an error of reason or conscience does not excuse the will, that abides by that erring reason or conscience, from being evil. 33

He adds: "when a man ... wills that which is good in itself, under a species of evil ... it is evil."³⁴ Considered morally, the interior act of the will and the external action are the same. The consequences are not the determining factor in the question of morality, but evil consequences which are foreseen to result from an evil deed increase the malice of the deed.

In the Pardoner's Tale we are presented with a man who knows the truth but does not abide by it. In the view of St. Augustine, the ability to know the truth is contingent upon morality. St. Thomas, however, considers moral virtue and intellectual virtue separately. He considers the habits of the speculative intellect, wisdom and understanding, for instance, to be virtues: "in so far as they confer aptness for a good work, viz., the consideration of truth."³⁵ These are not the same as moral virtue. Moral virtue involves choice; were this not so, "for man to act well it would suffice that his reason be perfect ... there would be none but intellectual virtues."³⁶ But Thomas, like Augustine, acknowledges the conflict man often experiences between what he knows to be right, and what he desires: "the appetitive faculty obeys the reason not blindly, but with a certain power of opposition ... Hence Augustine says of Ps. CXVIII. (serm. 8) that 'sometimes we understand (what is right) while desire is slow, or follows not at all.'"³⁷ Man's will must be guided by reason toward the correct course of action, wherein lies moral virtue.

With the exception of the intellectual virtues of understanding and prudence, which Thomas defines as "right reason about human acts,"³⁸ moral virtue is not contingent upon intellectual virtue. Conversely, "other intellectual virtues can, but prudence cannot, be without moral virtue."³⁹ This is because the pursuit of a universal principle may be destroyed

by a passion, such as concupiscence, in which case the object of man's desire is not the same as the good to which his reason guides him. Father Copleston explains this principle:

For Aquinas, as a Christian, man's supreme or final good is the possession of God, the vision of God in heaven. It by no means follows, however, that everyone understands this ... Moreover, even if someone does believe that the possession of God is his final end, he does not see God in such a way that his will is compelled to seek him consciously and deliberately. Again, God can appear to the mind as repugnant, from certain points of view, as prohibiting certain acts, for example, which appear attractive ... man is free to pursue other aims in life, pleasure, for instance, or power. 40

Hence it is consistent with the Thomistic view that the Pardoner may know the truth of his stated theme Radix Malorum est Cupiditas, and truly speak it, while simultaneously pursuing his avaricious goals.

In his examination "Of the Vices Opposed to Knowledge and Understanding," St. Thomas discusses the threefold principle of blindness of the mind. In the final instance he attributes intellectual blindness to malice, which is voluntary, and therefore a sin:

A third principle of intellectual sight is an intelligible principle, through which a man understands other things: to which principle a man may attend or may not attend. That he does not attend thereto happens in two ways. Sometimes ... a man's will is deliberately turned away from considerations of that principle, according to Ps. XXXV. 4, "He would not understand, that he might do well:" whereas sometimes it is due to the mind being more busy about things which it loves more, ... according to Ps. LVII. 9, fire, i.e., of concupiscence, "hath fallen on them and they shall not see the sun." In either of these ways blindness of mind is a sin. 41

He who, because of his preference for carnal pleasure and material possessions, "dislikes or neglects the careful consideration of spiritual things,"⁴² is guilty of this sin. Furthermore,

when he discusses "whether a man can hate the truth," Thomas writes: "Nothing hinders some particular being or some particular truth being an object of hatred, insofar as it is considered as hurtful and repugnant. Such is the case of those who do not wish to know the truth of faith, that they may sin freely; in whose person it is said (Job XXI.14): "We desire not the knowledge of Thy ways.""⁴³

According to St. Thomas, the gift of counsel "is reckoned among the gifts of the Holy Ghost "⁴⁴ and is made necessary because "the thoughts of mortal men are fearful, and our counsel uncertain " (Wis. IX.14). In his discussion of prophecy, Thomas states explicitly that in some cases prophecy can be in those who are not God's by grace: "for prophecy pertains to the intellect, whose act precedes the act of the will ... If, however, we consider a good life, with regard to the passions of the soul, and external actions ... an evil life is an obstacle to prophecy. For prophecy requires the mind to be raised very high in order to contemplate spiritual things."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, according to St. Thomas, as evil does not exist in its own right, neither does falsehood exist as an absolute. The words of the false prophet contain some truth. Hence it is possible for an evil man to speak the truth and to give counsel:

Now in things it is impossible to find one that is wholly devoid of good. Wherefore it is also impossible for any knowledge to be wholly false, without some mixture of truth ... The prophets of the demons do not always speak from the demons' revelation, but sometimes by Divine inspiration ... because God makes use even of the wicked for the profit of good. Hence he foretells certain truths even by the demons' prophets, both that the truth may be rendered more credible, since even its foes bear witness to it, and also in order that man, by believing such men may be more easily led on to truth ... a false prophet is not always instructed by the spirit of untruth, but sometimes even by the Spirit of truth. Even the very spirit of untruth sometimes declares true things. ⁴⁶

The good of art, understood in its general sense of

communication, depends, according to St. Thomas, "on the goodness of the work done ... not for the will with which [the artist] does a work, but for the quality of the work."⁴⁷ The quality of the object does not depend on the virtue of the artist, nor is the final product held responsible for its misuse, either by its creator or by its audience. It is entirely their responsibility to ensure that a work of art serves a moral purpose:

And so art has the nature of a virtue in the same way as the speculative habits, in so far, to wit, as neither ... makes a good work as regards the use of habit, which is a property of a virtue that affects the appetite, but only as regards the aptness to work well ... [Art] falls short of being a perfect virtue, because it does not make its possessor to use it well ... [however] there is a virtue of art; namely a moral virtue, in so far as the good use of art requires a moral virtue. ⁴⁸

In Appendix A of his monograph, "The Quality of Fiction," Wesley Trimpi broaches the problem of the morality of fiction in the Middle Ages:

The distinction between the judgment of an artist with respect to the quality of his product and the judgment of him with respect to his actions as a moral agent ... led to the separation of art, as an activity of the productive faculty, from morality, as an activity of the prudential faculty. While the resulting amorality of the arts did much to render them suspect, it could also provide them, to some extent, with a doctrinal immunity. ⁴⁹

The Pardoner, as I will show, manipulates the distinction between "prudential" and "productive" activities -- between morality and fiction -- in many ways, but most explicitly when his benediction is followed by a return to his role of artist -- a shift of perspective which is missed by Harry Bailey and the pilgrims. It is this distinction between "erdest" and "game" which paradoxically gives fictional

works a prudential dimension: "The Pardoner is furious ... about having his 'immunity' ignored before it had expired.... It is precisely through his release from ethical and historical circumstances that the artist can establish a temporary order of events and of emotions which has the power to increase the listener's understanding of the communal world after he has returned to it."⁵⁰ I will argue in section V of this chapter that although Chaucer finally destroys the illusion of the fictional pilgrimage, and his period of doctrinal immunity expires, the Retraction frees the poems by releasing the audience from the obligation of reconciling them with its own ethical convictions.

II. The Immoral Man and His "Moral Thing."

The sheer bulk and diversity of critical opinion concerning the Pardoner and his tale has led Stephan Khinoy to assert:

It was a part of Chaucer's strategy to make the Pardoner a problem for us. In fact, to be a problem is his essence ... The Pardoner's Tale stands out, not because it offers problems, but because they are so subtle, implicate the audience too deeply, and call its values so seriously into question ... The problem is the proper use of language and the limits of its powers to discover or create. 51

In the case of the Pardoner, the relationship between the tale and the personality and motive of the teller is central to an understanding of how he uses language and how he "create[s] fiction in order to shape reality."⁵² One of the many problems involved in studying the Pardoner's performance, however, is that of determining where the reality ends and the fiction begins. It is true, as Khinoy points out, that the Pardoner's self-revelation in his prologue "has so poisoned the well it is difficult to consider the sermon

impartially ... he keeps himself in the foreground of our awareness ... [his] prologue almost forces us to doubt him."⁵³ This aggressive assertion of his own ego explains why so many critics interpret the Pardoner's Tale strictly in terms of what they believe he has revealed of the condition of his soul in the prologue.

This approach is based upon the Augustinian criterion of requisite morality for anyone who spreads the word of God to man. It holds that the final irony of the Pardoner's Tale works solely against the Pardoner himself. To understand the true nature of his evil, one must go beyond the examination of his behaviour; one must probe the depths of his soul which most agree is objectified in the characters and action of his tale. Thus the Pardoner reveals more of himself than he had intended. The question of the degree and kind of the Pardoner's evil has given rise to controversy over whether he is in fact in control of his art; whether or not he understands the implications of his tale; and finally, whether he is ultimately victim or villain, saved or damned. The issue of the degree of artistic control exercised by the Pardoner over his tale is related to the consideration of the validity of the sermon-tale proper. If the tale is accepted as valid in its own right, then the irony works against the pilgrims for their rejection of his tale on the basis of his personal repugnance. If, on the other hand, the tale is interpreted as an inadvertent revelation of his own evil -- the "sense" of which the Pardoner fails to understand -- then the irony of the tale ultimately works against its own creator.

Alfred L. Kellogg, in his 1951 essay "An Augustinian Interpretation of Chaucer's Pardoner", suggests that the portrait of the Pardoner is one of spiritual degeneration conceived in Augustinian terms:

The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale constitute an integrated study in Augustinian terms of the secret punishment of evil ... the soul which turns in pride from God, the supreme good, to seek its satisfaction in a lesser good cuts itself off from grace ... and begins

to corrupt and decay ... To escape this intolerable struggle of the created nature and corruption, of good and evil, the proud sinner seeks to give himself up entirely to evil, but finds no relief from the good within him; he seeks to laugh at and pervert, if he can, the good he sees about him, but still finds neither rest nor relief ... the portrait of the Pardoner [represents] ... the history of a mind averted from God, suffering and struggling against the penalty of its own evil. 54

That the mind averts itself from the light of God despite its knowledge of His existence is an important element of the Augustinian doctrine of the secret punishment of sin by sin. One of the punishments of sin is an intensification of moral ignorance and concupiscence. A sin committed in full awareness of its consequences results in spiritual blindness which perpetuates the cycle of sin. Such a sinner seeks happiness in love of worldly goods, and at the same time attempts to pervert those who enjoy a state of grace ... which he himself cannot attain. If he persists, "the way is open to the most terrible judgment of God -- to be permitted success in his sins, to be abandoned to the lusts of his own heart." 55

The Pardoner demonstrates time and time again his knowledge of scriptural teaching and the doctrine of Christian salvation, yet he proudly flaunts before the other pilgrims his defiance of God's will. In the repetition of "I wol," "I wol nat," at the end of the prologue, however, he gives an exaggerated sense of the potency of his own will with which he defies that of God:

For I wol preche and begge in sondry landes;
I wol nat do no labour with myne handes,
Ne make baskettes, and lyve therby,
By cause I wol nat beggen ydelly.
I wol noon of the apostles countrefete;
I wol have moneie, wolles, chese, and whete,
Al were it yeven of the povereste page,
Or of the povereste wydwe in a village
Al sholde hir children sterve for famyne.
May, I wol drynke licour of the vyne,
And have a joly wenche in every toun. 56

The feverish compulsion with which he hammers away at his atrocities verges on histrionics and ultimately rings false. Chaucer skilfully ensures that because of the Pardoner's overkill, one is left with the impression of a child stamping its foot in futility rather than of an adult forcefully and confidently asserting his own will.

The immediate function of the Pardoner's sermon-tale is to encourage his audiences to exchange their money -- the root of all evil -- for his indulgences. His implication that money itself rather than the love of money is the root of evil is yet a further example of the Pardoner's manipulation of language for financial gain. Implicit in Kellogg's argument is the notion that the Pardoner is not, however, the master he believes he is at controlling and limiting the possible interpretations of his fiction. No literary artist is capable of manipulating audience response beyond a point. In his sermon-tale he reveals more about the painfully divided state of his soul than he intends. In the conflict between the rioters and the old man, the tale mirrors the Pardoner's internal struggle between his arrogant attempt to defy God and to destroy all that is good in himself and others, and his ultimate failure to do so. If in his prologue the Pardoner flaunts his proud refusal to serve God, in the tale, which is told as a continuation of this defiance of Divine Providence, he paradoxically and unknowingly conveys the power of Divine retribution for evil:

The essential contrast of the Pardoner's Tale is between living in accordance with "Goddess wille" (726) and living "right at our owne wille" (834), the eternal antithesis of the pride of Satan and the humility of Christ ... Age represents the earthly functioning of the divine law, and those who fail to reverence in age the divine law, Pride ... The Old Man possesses dignity because he possesses humility. He is at once the symbol of the unassailable might of divine government and the symbol of obedience and humility, of the soul angelic or human which subjects its own will to the will of God ... the moral exemplum with its dark tones of divine retribution has fulfilled an altered function. That tale, which preaches the divine

punishment of sin, which reflects the futility of his own life and foreshadows his ultimate defeat, the Pardoner has used to demonstrate the superiority of his own will to divine punishment, by the example of his own impunity to render the very idea of retribution laughable. 57

Kellogg believes that during the brief moment in which the Pardoner utters his benediction, all of his fictions -- his pretence in his prologue to have found happiness despite, or because of, his defiance of God; his claim (which his tale partly dispels) to success in setting himself up as law unto himself -- come tumbling down, and the internal good that the Pardoner so vehemently denies is clear for all to see: "From the depths of his being comes revulsion, the voice of created nature, the work of God within him which no evil can ever obliterate -- which even in the midst of evil cannot lose its love of good."⁵⁸ The epilogue is a failed attempt to reinstate the stance of evil that he has let slip for one brief moment, and, simultaneously, a last-ditch attempt to pervert the morality of the pilgrims by asking them to join him knowingly in his sacrilege. But their laughter forces him to recognize the futility of this attempt.

Evil which has appeared so formidable and destructive is dissipated in laughter; evil which has seemed so repulsive and inhuman is absorbed into the pattern of existence, and the universe goes on undisturbed ... Like St. Augustine, Chaucer saw no untamed evil in the universe, but only the will of God fulfilling itself even in the acts of the evil ... he hated the vice and loved the man ... [the Pardoner] is an apostate from God, a pariah amidst society. His life is a wretched and pitiful pretence. Chaucer treats him gently because the Pardoner's vice is its own punishment. 59

The Pardoner and his three rioters play God; the former in his claim to control men's souls, and the latter in their attempt to stay Death. The Pardoner's creator, however, despite the analogy between poetic creativity and divine

creation -- or perhaps because of it -- refuses this temptation: "Of the final judgment of God, Chaucer tells us nothing."⁶⁰

In 1955, R. P. Miller published his essay "Chaucer's Pardoner: The Scriptural Eunuch and the Pardoner's Tale." He adopts Curry's identification of the Pardoner as a eunuchus ex nativitate. Curry's paper, however, at times verges on physical determinism in that it cites the Pardoner's eunuchry as sufficient motive for his disdain of other people and his wrath against God: "Born a eunuch and in consequence provided by nature with a warped mind and soul, he is compelled to follow the lead of his unholy impulses into debauchery, vice, and crime."⁶¹ Miller, more sensibly, interprets the Pardoner's physical eunuchry as emblematic of, rather than the determining factor in, his spiritual barrenness. In his own defence, he cites the exegetic tradition by which medieval man understood the Bible and the Book of Nature as signposts to an inner meaning: "What we now call realism was of itself only a point of departure in a world where man's sensible experience consistently reflected the presence and nature of his creator -- where reality itself lay beneath the sign. The criterion of ulterior signification is, in fact, a hallmark of literature as a mode of expression."⁶² Believing that Curry's paper emphasizes the scientific accuracy of Chaucer's account of the Pardoner's eunuchry at the expense of its literary purpose, Miller cites the work of the Biblical commentator Rupertus concerning the eunuch detestabilis: "This man possessing the ability to inform his neighbour, remains silent; knowing the value of good works, he chooses idleness.... He refuses offered grace. In short, he is the presumptuous man who, by his act of will, commits the unpardonable sin."⁶³ The eunuchus non Dei chooses spiritual sterility and thus is guilty of the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit -- the deliberate refusal of grace. As I will discuss more fully in my introduction to the Nun's Priest's Tale, the literary "criterion of ulterior signification" does not justify the application of the methods of Biblical exegesis to secular

literature. Miller is guilty of determinism of a different kind when he discusses Chaucer's Pardoner strictly in terms of the Church Fathers' Scriptural eunuch.

Like Kellogg, Miller believes that the Pardoner's evil nature most fully reveals itself in his exemplum. Tracing the source of much of the tale's imagery to Scripture, he examines the two-fold spiritual analogies of each image. Thus the Pardoner's physical eunuchry suggests its spiritual equivalent, and implies its own opposite, the eunuchus Dei. The identification of the Pardoner (who pretends to youth) with the three rioters who are literally but not spiritually young is telling, for they are "the purveyors of the 'olde daunce'; the false feast, the vetus canticum."⁶⁴ The Scriptural analogue of the eunuchus non Dei is the Pauline vetus homo, who represents the state of spiritual death: "the flesh and its manifold lusts ... the image of fallen Adam, unregenerate in accepted grace and unredeemed by Christ, who is called the "New Man".⁶⁵ The old man in the tale directs the rioters to the gold -- the false or worldly treasure "in the grove ... under a tree" (suggestive of the fatal tree in Eden) -- in which they find physical annihilation which is the objective correlative and logical outcome of their spiritual death. Miller identifies the old man with the vetus homo -- the principle of Death which guides the rioters and the Pardoner:

It is finally appropriate that the director on the "croked wey" should be the old man, who thus assumes a position in the tale suggestively analogous to that of the teller ... [He is] like the wandering Jew, the Old Man of whom Paul wrote cannot die, and will not die so long as human nature does not change.... Like the Pardoner, too, in full knowledge he points the way to spiritual death ... into the garden of cupidity, just as the desires of the vetus homo lead any soul astray. Lacking that peace which passeth understanding, he wanders, a "resteless kaityf" ... [The Pardoner] is the false eunuch who stands and points the way up the wrong road.... He is that Old Man as he lives and exerts his influence in the great pilgrimage of life. ⁶⁶

For reasons which I will explore more fully later, I believe that Miller's identification of the old man with the Pardoner is untenable. The main thrust of the tale, then, is not the "sins of the tavern", but Death, understood both literally and in its two spiritual senses: death to sin and death to Christ. Physical death in itself is neither evil nor frightening except to those who place greater value on worldly treasure than on the salvation of their soul, and are caught by Death unaware and unrepentant.

So thorough is the Pardoner's depravity that he is incapable of understanding the true implications of the fiction that he himself creates. Although his words, as he himself acknowledges in his prologue, may have the power to induce genuine contrition in the members of his rural parish audiences, the Pardoner, blinded by pride, is immune to the overwhelming truth of the doctrine they convey. Like his rioters, his understanding never exceeds the literal, and he becomes somewhat of a spokesman for his own inevitable damnation. The symbolic import and moral force of the tale is potentially the most devious threat faced by the pilgrims, for should they allow the Pardoner's evil to triumph despite the tale's message of divine retribution, they would share in his unpardonable sin -- the refusal of grace in full awareness of the consequences. But the integrity of the tale ironically saves them from the trap the Pardoner sets for them. This trap is very subtle and insidious, for it involves a denial of the relationship between language and morality. It has the potential to pervert certain deeply treasured values of the medieval world view -- specifically the harmony between inner and outer made possible by Christ's redemption of language as a means to truth.

Lee W. Patterson, in his 1976 essay "Chaucerian Confession: Penitential Literature and the Pardoner," suggests that the Pardoner's sin is not presumption but despair, and as such is not beyond the reach of contrition and penance. The debate between the Pardoner's sincerity and his hypocrisy is beside the point, then, for he is a "sincere

hypocrite" -- the motive for his self-revelation is precisely that sinfulness which results in the horrors of a soul divided against itself:

More significant than [his] misjudgement of others' cynicism, however, is the genuineness and even vulnerability that the Pardoner reveals while insisting early and often that his motives are brazenly simple; he also claims -- and repeats the claim -- that he is doing good works.... These hints are made all the more telling by the Pardoner's own response to them ... he hastily withdraws from the disturbing complications he has raised to the comforting simplicity of avarice: 'But that is nat my principal entente; / I preche nothyng but for coveitise.' (432 - 33).... This fugitive and embarrassed self-defence shows the Pardoner acknowledging in his spirit the values he subverts in his working, a complication that appears again in the benediction.... In sum, he is by no means unambiguously impenitent, and his attempt to reduce himself to the simplicity of allegorical evil is best understood as an attempt to escape from a consciousness that is too painfully divided. 67

Patterson sees the Pardoner as a man who attempts, but does not quite succeed, to create a fictive self to camouflage the more horrible realities of his true self. He believes that medieval discussions of confession can help explain the spiritual conditions which prompt the Pardoner to speak with reckless abandon as he does in his prologue:

The one-dimensional monologue of allegory is deepened, not by functioning as the Pardoner's confession, but by becoming part of a larger sequence of involuntary self-exposure that is fulfilled only in the tale; and the tale is, in turn, transformed by the context of its telling from an exemplum about avarice into a psychological allegory that reveals the Pardoner as a man in despair. The confession of despair ... is a theoretical impossibility ... the direct self-revelation of autobiography is distorted by strategies of manipulation and concealment, and the negatives of his condition are visible only in the displacement of fiction ... the Pardoner's illegitimately-assumed role of the professional places this discontinuity

[between language] and reality at the centre of his characterization. Language is the means by which he creates himself for others.... The 'Prologue', for all its apparent candour, is part of this image-making ... the very excess of the Pardoner's revelations hide him from us; rather than being created by the conventions of medieval allegory, he himself exploits them ... but the whole relationship between his real and his created self is less controlled and deliberate.... He goes too far and defines himself as a man outside the human community, making his ultimate rejection inevitable and revealing a pattern of self-destruction that surfaces in the offer of the relics. 68

The role of the old man in the tale sheds light on the implications of the Pardoner's failure to grasp the underlying truth of the fiction he creates. I believe that the old man illuminates the Pardoner's failure to understand by contrast. The notion that he embodies the evil of the Pardoner's soul seems absurd when one considers how the presentation of the old man in the tale contrasts in every way with that of the rioters with whom he comes into conflict. The complexity of Chaucer's art defies the consistency demanded by Miller's exegetical approach. Miller is misguided in postulating an analogy between the Pardoner's blatant disregard for the fate of the souls of the rural parishioners "goon a-blakeberyed!" (406), and the old man's directing of the rioters to the gold, for it is clear that the Pardoner exerts real influence on the actions of his audiences, whereas the old man's directions to the rioters function on a purely symbolic level. He points them to the physical death which is the only possible literary corollary to their spiritual state. Like the Pardoner, they commit the unpardonable sin of refusing, in full knowledge of the consequences, God's offer of mercy. To identify the old man with the arrogant, self-destructive evil of the Pardoner is also to remain deaf to the tone of humble piety with which he speaks at all times. In his portrayal of the old man, Chaucer emphasizes his warning to the rioters not to be disrespectful as well as his concern and desire for their repentance.

In Hooly Writ ye may yourself wel rede;
'Agayns an oold man, hoor upon his heed,
Ye sholde arise;' wherfore I yeve yow reed,
Ne dooth unto an oold man noon harm now,
Namooore than that ye wolde men did to yow
In age, if that ye so longe abyde.
And God be with yow, where ye go or ryde! (742 - 48)

The old man's instructions to the rioters as to where Death resides is followed by his final benediction: "God save yow, that boghte agayn mankynde,/ And yow amende!" (766 - 67). Patterson argues that the old man dramatizes the "human meaning" of the despair of unregenerate man: "The Pardoner presents a figure who accurately reflects his own irreducible contradictions ... the old man proffers advice both needful ... and perilous: "turne up this croked wey" (761). Also like the Pardoner he knows the truth but is unable to use it.... He offers a closing benediction ... that is in the event self-excluding."⁶⁹ But the revellers, like all men, are finally responsible for their own salvation or damnation. The old man's advice to the rioters cannot be labelled "perilous" for he neither guides nor misguides their souls. Nor does the old man's pointing the rioters toward the gold under the oak tree constitute the portion of his speech which can be labelled "advice". This has come earlier, when he warns them of the ultimate emptiness of this life lived for its own sake, and he advises them to reform:

Ne Deeth, allas! ne wol nat han my lyf
Thus walke I, lyk a resteleees kaityf,
And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,
I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late,
And seye 'Leeve mooder, leet me in!
Lo how I vanysshe, flessch, and blood, and skyn!
Allas! whan shul my bones been at reste?' (727 - 33)

The old man's words emphasize the transitory nature of the pleasures of this world, and imply that man's one true treasure is God's redemption of his soul. His advice having

been unequivocally rejected, he sends the rioters to the punishment they have chosen; still praying for their redemption.

The significance of the old man should be sought in terms of the moral implications of his words and actions. John Steadman, in his 1964 article "Old Age and Contemptus Mundi in the Pardoner's Tale," contrasts the presentation, words, attitudes and values of the old man with those of the three rioters, and finds that in each of the seven instances he examines, they are diametrically opposed: "The encounter between them juxtaposes youth and age, pride and humility, impatience and patience, blasphemy and piety, 'vileinye' and 'curteisye', folly and wisdom, avarice and contemptus mundi."⁷⁰ The behaviour of the rioters is ruled by avarice -- mundi dilectores. They are so in love with the transitory pleasures of this world that they ignore the fact of man's mortality in their proud quest to slay death. In his portrait of the old man, on the other hand, Chaucer exploits the conventional association of wisdom with old age: "He equates the treasure with death ... He is, in fact, the only person in the Pardoner's Tale who gives expression -- however oblique and figurative -- to the central theme, radix malorum est cupiditas. The fact that he expresses it in a veiled metaphor ... lends greater intensity and power to the ethical truth he is describing."⁷¹

The view that the Pardoner's immorality precludes his coming to a true understanding of the moral implications of his tale was challenged by Calderwood's 1964 essay which questions the truth of the Pardoner's portrayal of himself as a monster of evil. The pilgrims for whatever reason regard the Pardoner as something of a pariah and reject the Host's suggestion that he tell "som myrthe or japes":

But right anon thise gentils gonne to crye,
'Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!
Telle us som moral thyng, that we may leere
Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly heere.' (323 - 26)

Calderwood asserts that the Pardoner's self-revelation is itself part of his fiction created to mock the pilgrims' preconceived notions of his manifest villainy, and simultaneously, as a bid for their acceptance. He argues that Chaucer was working upon, not within, the convention of the confession of the villain to the audience:

The very absoluteness of this villainy renders it suspect ... he decides to play that role to the limit, to give the 'gentils' the demonic Pardoner of their imaginings ... his confession is a general attack upon propriety and morality ... [it is also] an implicit acknowledgement of the damage to his vanity wrought by their rejection of him.... To acquire the pilgrims' approval, he can attempt a negative demonstration of it [decency], that is, decency inferred from contrast ... His self-parody, this extravagant exaggeration of his own evil, is designed therefore partly to shock but also to render ridiculous the stereotype of absolute evil in terms of which the 'gentils' have imagined and judged him. The shrewdness of this approach lies in the fact that it does not require the Pardoner to make a positive appeal for the pilgrims' approval and hence to risk another flat rejection, in other words, it does not require any emotional involvement on his part. 72

It is at least possible, then, that the Pardoner, in his prologue, creates one fiction onto which the fiction of his tale is superimposed. Father Paul Beichner, in his 1963 essay "Chaucer's Pardoner as Entertainer", was the first to suggest that the Pardoner's prologue may represent an exaggeration of the truth. In his function as a professional collector for the chapel and hospital of St. Mary of Rouncival, "the Pardoner is letting a select group in on his trade secrets for their sophisticated amusement."⁷³ The making of a donation was only part of the requirement for gaining an indulgence, but it seems to be the only condition upon which this Pardoner insists for the dispensing of his pardons. Nor does he turn over all the funds he has raised to the Church for its charitable works: "By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by

year, / An hundred mark sith I was pardoner" (389 - 90). The epilogue is also part of the Pardoner's demonstration of his technique of salesmanship which backfires, however, when the Host refuses to participate in this charade aimed at further entertaining the pilgrims. John Halverson suggests two additional motives for the Pardoner's "put-on", and indicates that the debate over the sincerity of the benediction is beside the point:

It disguises and protects the 'real self' which is never allowed to appear in the process ... As a defensive device, it has perhaps always been common among the socially unaccepted ... where the ego is involved, it is obviously necessary that eventually the victim must realize that he is being 'put-on' so that the superiority of the perpetrator may be acknowledged ... Sincerity is necessarily and irresolvably ambivalent: part of the game is to state the plain truth in an ironic context to create confusion. 74

The most interesting aspect of this thesis developed by these last three commentators is its implication that Chaucer distinguishes between behaviour and state of mind in a manner no less subtle than that of the modern novel.

The issue of the context in which truth -- moral or otherwise -- is stated has still broader implications for the understanding of the Pardoner's performance in its entirety. If the self-revelation in the prologue is itself a subsequent layer of fiction which hides the real man yet further from view, then a number of problems arise. The danger of drowning in layer upon layer of receding fiction is very real, and would seem to invalidate any jumping-off point for critical analysis of the work as a whole. To what extent is the Pardoner's sermon-tale -- and its moral message -- independent of his prologue, and to what extent does it qualify the prologue and vice versa? The disparity between the Pardoner's prostitution of his art and the validity of the teaching of his sermon calls into question

the conditions under which literature is accepted as a guide to human behaviour. The pilgrims know -- or believe they know -- the Pardoner's true intentions, and reject his entire performance because they are repulsed by the immorality of the man. The views of Calderwood, Beichner and Halverson suggest that there are signs of spiritual life in the Pardoner -- that he is not a figure of unmitigated evil. However, he undermines the morality of his sermon-tale by telling it within the context of his prologue, which the pilgrims accept at face value. S. L. Gross comments: "No reader ever feels that the tale, in its effect, is ironic -- only the dramatic situation abstractly considered is. However, the abstract situation immediately fades, for the success of the tale is the failure of the plan."⁷⁵ -- this being the invalidation of the piety of the tale by the impiety of the teller. The very ambiguity of the Pardoner's true nature and motives allows Chaucer to debate implicitly the validity of a work of art independent of the morality of its creator.

In the Middle Ages, one view inspired by St. Augustine held that the moral of the sermon or exemplum was of secondary importance to the morality which ruled the life of its preacher. The Pardoner, in Khinoy's view, conspires to invert this hierarchical relationship, as well as that between the "sentence" of a fable or exemplum, and its literal sense:

The Pardoner -- Chaucer's only professional storyteller -- is an anomaly ... [he] has no place in the system; rather he calls the system into question. His stance toward fable and moral, inside and outside, faces us with a paradox which thoroughly subverts medieval doctrine ... he invites us to accept the doctrine of art for art's sake. In traditional theory, the wise are superior to the outward show of the fable; here, they are invited to feel superior to the moral and concentrate on the show. Thus instead of giving us a disposable exterior which satisfies the vulgar, the Pardoner presents a disposable moral ... he inverts the relationship between prologue and tale by having his immoral prologue impose its meaning on the moral

sermon. The design of his whole performance is to make the pilgrim audience accept, not the Pardoner or his relics per se, but this inversion itself. 76

Hence through the carefully planned content of the prologue the Pardoner manipulates the response of his audience to the tale.

But there was not only one view of the matter in the Middle Ages. St. Thomas Aquinas, as I have shown, believed it was possible for a man to know the good and thus give counsel, and yet not love it. In this case, the validity of a sermon is independent of the morality of its preacher. In the course of her argument against Kittredge's famous view that the Pardoner's solemn benediction represents a momentary "paroxysm of agonized sincerity"⁷⁷ Helen Corsa writes: "That he speaks doctrinal and religious truths in no sense hints that he is giving thought to reforming, any more than his utterance of such truths in any way affects their validity."⁷⁸ Leigh De Neef suggests that the pilgrims' inability to separate the immorality of the man from the morality of the sermon makes them the object of Chaucer's irony:

All four parts of the Tale do indeed form a coherent narrative designed to illustrate the inadequate understanding which results from too narrow an angle of vision ... it is possible to see the myopic confusion of literal and extra-literal meanings affects not only the rioters, but the Pardoner himself, and, ultimately, the pilgrims to whom he repeats his sermon-exemplum.... [The] tendency on the part of the pilgrims to equate the Pardoner's character with his words has far reaching implications ... rejection of teller implies rejection of the tale as well ... [This] places the pilgrims in ... their final ironic position. 79

Fooled by the incongruity between teller and tale, they reject the moral tale, unnecessarily discarding both fruit and chaff. The moral doctrine presented by the Pardoner -- only one of the many sinners who make the pilgrimage -- is

the only one rejected because of the man himself. In his essay "The Final Irony of the Pardoner's Tale," Edmund Reiss concludes that the dramatic irony of the Pardoner's preaching against the sin which he constantly commits is qualified by the fact that he himself is conscious of this incongruity. The final irony of this tale lies elsewhere. The clues are provided by the Pardoner himself in the prologue:

But though myself be gilty in that synne,
Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne
From avarice, and soore to repente. (429 - 31)
For though myself be a ful vicious man,
A moral tale yet I yow telle kan. (459 - 60)

Reiss is convinced that the Pardoner believes in what he preaches: he recognizes the truth of Christianity, although he abuses it. This distinction between mechanical knowledge and true understanding is possible only within the Thomistic view. "The dramatic irony of the Pardoner's Prologue and Tale then," according to Reiss, "is not that the Pardoner is revealing more than he intends, but rather the converse -- that no one is able to see the full meaning of what he says ... because the man himself makes his words a priori unacceptable."⁸⁰

III. The Literal and the Figural.

The failure of the rioters to understand the warnings concerning Death given by the young boy, the tavern owner, and finally, the old man -- their inability to think and function on a metaphoric level -- lies at the heart of the Pardoner's own damning failure to understand the true implications of his tale. It should be remembered that in St. Augustine's theory of signification, the misuse of linguistic

faculties results in moral and intellectual failure.

All three rioters speak of Death as a literal being, rather than as a physical and/or spiritual state. The young boy warns the rioters:

Ther cam a prives theef men clepeth Deeth,
That in this contree al the peple sleeth,
And with his spere he smoot his herte atwo,
And wente his wey withouten wordes mo....
Me thynketh that it were necessarie
For to be war of swich an adversarie.
Beth redy for to meete hym everemoore;
Thus taughte me my dame; I sey namoore. (675 - 84)

The child has taken literally the figurative expression with which adults refer to Death. So too are the rioters guilty of confusing metaphoric with descriptive speech; for the validity of the warning of the last four lines of the boy's speech -- to be spiritually prepared for Death at all times -- is lost to them. In his warning to the rioters, the tavern owner adopts the method of expression used by the child:

 he hath slayn this yeer,
Henne over a mile, withinne a greet village,
Bothe man and woman, child, and hyne, and page;
I trowe his habitacioun be there. (686 - 89)

Because the rioters are incapable of understanding metaphoric language and blind to the spiritual dimension, they inadvertently invert Christ's redemptive role, seeking to conquer physical death in order to make eternal the life of the body. The physicality of the sins of the tavern are typical of and result from their spiritual blindness. In the Pardoner's own words:

For dronkenesse is verray sepulture
Of mannes wit and his discrecioun. (558 - 59)
Hazard is verray mooder of lesynges.

And of deceite, and cursed forswerynges,
Blaspheme of Crist, manslaughtere ... (591 - 93)

But ydel sweryng is a cursednesse....
vengeance shal nat parten from his hous
That of his othes is to outrageous. (638 - 50)

Drink entombs man's wit, swearing brings vengeance upon itself, and gambling places man's fate in Fortune, a sub-lunar force. Finally the old man directs the rioters to the gold which he recognizes as the symbolic counterpart of their spiritual death. An opposing view is expressed by W. J. B. Owen who argues that this figure is just an old man who unwittingly directs the rioters to the death he himself seeks: "He does not know, then, what the revellers will find under the tree, for if he does he ought, according to his earlier speech, to have remained with the gold, seeking his death in it."⁸¹ But this view attributes to the old man the literal-mindedness and moral blindness of the three rioters. Only the avaricious find death in gold. He knows that the release he seeks through physical death is not the same as the spiritual death the rioters bring upon themselves. The gold does not hold the power of life and death over the old man; he is immune to its effects. Furthermore, Owen's reading overlooks yet another feature which distinguishes the old man from the three "young" men: that is his ability to think and speak on a metaphoric plane about death and the grave without falling into error. True understanding, then, is contingent upon moral rectitude and the subserviance of the individual will to that of God. The rioters, on the other hand, hasten toward death, understanding neither its physical nor its spiritual implications: they misunderstand the signum translatum. "At the heart of their self-delusion," Donald Howard writes, "is a trick which language itself plays on them"⁸² in which the literal and the metaphorical are equated.

Malcolm Pittock, in his 1974 essay "The Pardoner's Tale and the Quest for Death," posits that the tale develops the theme of "the difference between notional awareness and

substantial knowledge."⁸³ Because he intellectually comprehends the ideas of evil and death in a way that the rioters' spiritual blindness precludes, the Pardoner's choice to follow evil is all the more damning:

He knows that he is a sinful man; he is open-eyed about his perversion of his sermon to serve his own ends. He knows he is guilty of the very sin he preaches against, and takes pleasure not only in this, but in the fact that he indulges his sin in the very act of exposing it ... In the Pardoner, that is to say, Chaucer faces the most extreme case ... in which the intellectual grasp of what remains imaginatively completely uncomprehended seems perfect. This is what separates him ... from the rioters in his own tale. Intellectually the Pardoner knows what death is and the ways in which sinners fail to comprehend it, and he knows what good and evil are; he just chooses to follow evil. It is, however, Chaucer's belief ... that however lucid such a commitment may be it springs from a deep lack of awareness which the confident intellectual comprehension and control make more frightening. ⁸⁴

Donald Howard views the Pardoner's tale as an inadvertent projection of his consciousness, his inner turmoil, and discusses the possibility that the Pardoner may speak the truth, which could lead to his salvation, but at a much deeper, personal level, fail to recognize it:

The dreamlike quality makes his tale share in an irony about life from which no one is free -- that what we need to know about ourselves is potentially knowable and sometimes known by others, but often lies beyond our grasp ... That was the case of the spiritually impotent. The self-knowledge which they stubbornly avoided was 'repressed' but attainable by an act of will. They could speak true and not heed the truth they spoke. ⁸⁵

Hence the Pardoner seems a perfect type of that man, described by St. Thomas, who thoroughly understands the truth on a detached, intellectual level, but neither loves it nor lives by

its dictates. The implications of his lack of real awareness of the significance of what he says are far reaching. In Christian thought, evil does not exist in its own right, but rather as a negation or privation of good. This negation must be born of a "deep lack of awareness," although the perpetration of evil is usually accomplished with the cunning ingenuity displayed by the Pardoner. The success of his fraud depends, in part, on the fact that his sermon, heard independent of the context in which we know it, rings so true. His misjudgment of the pilgrim audience, however, results from his inability to imagine that there are some whose values preclude them from enjoying his account of his exploitation of his rural parish congregations.

The Pardoner's lack of substantive knowledge -- the degree to which he shares the literal-mindedness of his revelers -- also surfaces in the sermon on the sins of the tavern which precedes the tale. I shall restrict myself to an analysis of the inconsistencies in the Pardoner's discourse on gluttony. He quotes from the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians:

Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats; but God shall destroy both it and them. Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. (VI, 13) 86

This epistle, however, is not a diatribe against gluttony, as the Pardoner's glossing of it implies. In it, Paul admonishes the Corinthians to avoid the sins of the body -- and fornication, not gluttony, is the most emphasized -- for it is only with "the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (V, 5). It is characteristic of the Pardoner to choose one of the many illustrations with which Paul exemplifies his main theme and quote it out of context in order to impress -- and hence manipulate -- his audiences, while completely missing the main thrust of Paul's words which assert that the lusts of

the flesh must be controlled that the spirit may be saved; "know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?" (VI, 19). Throughout this epistle Paul deals with the complex nature of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual; the Pardoner merely extracts a vivid image of physical indulgence.

In earlier chapters of this same epistle, Paul discusses the limitations of the wisdom of even the wisest men in the light of Christian revelation:

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent ...

But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty. (I, 18 - 19; 27)

He admonishes preachers to avoid, as he himself does, the dangers of the "wisdom of words" (I, 17):

And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of Power;

That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God ...

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned. (II, 4 - 5, 14)

Paul could well have been speaking in this second chapter of the Pardoner -- a man who depends for the financial success of his preaching upon the enticing eloquence of his words and his feigned wisdom;

And in latyn I speke a wordes fewe,
To saffron with my predicacioun,
And for to stire hem to devocioun. (344 - 46)

The aim of his performances, as he preaches to the rural parish audiences, is to inspire in them supreme confidence in himself. This is achieved by parading before the congregation a series of objects which are meant to attest to his authenticity:

First I pronounce whennes that I come,
And thanne my bulles shewe I, alle and some.
Oure lige lordes seel on my patente,
That shewe I first, my body to warente ...
And after that thanne telle I forth my tales;
Bulles of popes and of cardynales,
Of patriarkes and bishoppes I shewe. (335 - 43)

The Pardoner's repetition of the verb "to show" is especially appropriate, for it conveys the nature -- and limitations -- of his performance: that it is precisely that, a performance designed to hide from the rural congregations its mercenary motives. His words do not go beyond themselves as Paul's do, to become a "demonstration of the Spirit and of Power." He is the Pauline "natural man" who, like his rioters, does not know that which is "spiritually discerned" precisely because he cannot. The Pardoner is guilty of the same failure to understand the spiritual realm which is denounced in the epistle he quotes. I shall later demonstrate that the same relationship exists between the Pardoner's understanding of St. Paul's First Epistle to Timothy from which he extracts his one and only theme, "radix malorum est cupiditas" (VI, 10), and its true significance. Contrary to the strictures of St. Paul, the Pardoner thinks of himself as a man "above that which is written" (I, Cor. IV, 6), failing to comprehend the meaning of Paul's words: "For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power" (I, Cor. IV, 20).

In the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, Paul

once again denounces false teachers: "For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple" (XVI, 18). Seen in its proper context the phrase "to make a god of one's belly" does not refer to gluttony per se, but uses the sin of gluttony as a symbol for the far worse sin of which the Pardoner is guilty; that of preferring the created to the creator, inverting the hierarchy of Christian values by placing oneself and the things of this world before God.

The imagery used by Paul in his Epistle to the Philippians is strikingly similar:

(For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ.

Whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.)
(III, 18 - 19)

These verses are set apart by parentheses from the rest of chapter III in which Paul expresses his desire for the "prize of the high calling of God in Jesus Christ" (III, 14).

The knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things ... (III, 8)

If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. (III, 11)

Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded ... (III, 15)

Let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing. (III, 16)

St. Paul briefly juxtaposes those who walk the wrong way -- the enemies of Christ's cross -- with those who follow the path of salvation. The phrase "whose god is their belly" functions both as an illustrative example of those whose

values are inverted, and as an appropriate lead-in to Paul's conclusion that Christ "shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself" (III, 21). Paul's metaphor of redemption as Christ's transformation of the vile body into something glorious is overlooked by the Pardoner, who understands merely the letter of Paul's epistle, and thinks strictly in physical terms:

O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod,
Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun!
At either ende of thee foul is the soun. (534 - 36)

In Paul, the imagery of physical corruption is applied to sinners who are not contrite. The Pardoner, however, makes the physical aspect of all men's existence obscene. Stephan Khinoy comments: "The 'stynkyng cod' is not disgusting in itself, and the Pardoner has defiled himself out of his own mouth ... Paul is denouncing the Pardoner -- but as the Pardoner repeats the words he is ironically following the letter of the Apostle's injunction -- he is an imitator of Paul."⁸⁷ Furthermore as Khinoy points out, quoting from the Gospel according to St. Mark, the Pardoner's moral lesson is refuted by Christ's own words. In Chapter VII, Mark records Christ's distinction between cleanliness of body and cleanliness of spirit:

Then the Pharisees and scribes asked him, Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashen hands?

He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men ... laying aside the commandment of God ...

And he saith unto them, Are ye so understanding also? Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, it cannot defile him;

Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats?

And he said, That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man.

For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders ...
(VII, 5 - 8; 18 - 21)

Thus even in his sermon, which many critics accept as a rather orthodox statement of doctrine, the Pardoner subtly misuses the text, consistently turning "substaunce into accident" (539). He successfully diverts the attention of his audience from the "substaunce" of the Biblical texts to which he refers, in favour of the "accident" -- the amoral surface performance.

More sinister still for the pilgrim audience -- and the reader -- is that our knowledge of the Pardoner's method implicates us in his sin. The Pardoner uses his considerable gift of eloquence to deny rather than confirm the relationship between fruit and chaff. His false relics are yet another manifestation of this inversion, for it is their mere presence that matters to him, not their intrinsic significance. Their costly setting is more valuable, both in fact and in the Pardoner's eye: "Thanne shewe I forth my longe cristal stones,/ Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones" (347 - 48). It is clear that the Pardoner's showing forth of his relics functions to impress his usual audience in the same way as his flashing in front of them his "Bulles of popes and of cardynales" (342). In and of themselves, the relics are meaningless, but the Pardoner's words have conferred meaning on them. His is, in Khinoy's view:

the power to inspire faith in the most transparent illusion ... the Pardoner inverts the relationship

between the relic's setting, its physical value and its significance.... But the problem for the Pardoner's audience ... does not end here; for the inversion cannot be simply reinverted ... like the two revelers in the sermon, one might find that, once the poison is mixed with the wine, there is no easy way to drink the wine alone. 88

The "meanings" that the Pardoner confers on his false relics are, not surprisingly, immoral: his relics ensure that man's livestock will be cured, his material wealth will multiply, and that woman may commit adultery with impunity:

If that the good-man that the beestes oweth
Nol every wyke, er that the cok hym croweth,
Fastynge, drynken of this welle a draughte,
As thilke hooly Jew oure eldres taughte,
His beestes and his stoor shal multiplie.
And, sires, also it heeleth Jalousie;
For though a man be falle in jalous rage,
Lat maken with this water his potage,
And nevere shal he moore his wyf mystriste, ...
Al had she taken prestes two or thre. (361 - 71)

The language of this professional preacher manipulates the relationship between "glittering exterior" and intrinsic significance; it imposes upon a given symbolic framework whatever meaning it will. Khinoy writes:

The issue is the connection between word and object ... he holds ... that what a thing is called is a matter of convention ... imposed by human will. In effect, the Pardoner has been trying to make 'relics' a dirty word, forever soiled by the perverted use he makes of it ... His simple confidence tricks are not so disturbing as his attempt to trick us out of confidence -- that is, out of faith ... he presents us with a Swiftian dilemma: to be ... the Pardoner's victim or the Pardoner. It is truly diabolical. 89

The view that language is not a means to an objective reality -- that words are arbitrary representatives of things

and concepts which are themselves arbitrary -- runs counter to the orthodox Christian view that words are inherently appropriate to the real things they signify, and that as such, language provides accurate, if limited, access to "the Real." The Nominalist view that reality is merely a verbal construct reducible to its description, created and destroyed by language, is inimical to the Christian view that the cognitive power of language is divinely ordained to represent a priori truth. In medieval exegesis, the meanings of symbols, whether they derive from the Book of Nature or the Books of Scripture, are fixed by tradition and/or revelation. The meanings of concrete symbols in poems, however, (and this includes their use in a performance such as the Pardoner gives the pilgrims) is more flexible not only because of the context of the poem, but also, as W. K. Wimsatt Jr. points out in his essay "Two Meanings of Symbolism: A Grammatical Exercise," because they enter the poem only as the realm of things is mediated by words. It is thus that Wimsatt justifies his thesis that the difference between symbol as a verbal sign, or as concrete object (or the name of an object), is not important for literary criticism:

Words ... do something to the things they lay hold of; they exert a pull and tear, a push and shaping power, an ordering and reordering energy.... In poetry we do not encounter things presented simply in their usual classifications, with some correct symbolic meaning attached. We have a world of things and meanings shaped up by words, ever variously. It is this fact which leads the critic to talk very little today about the natural meanings of symbols. Through this fact we arrive at the modern preoccupation with the verbal symbol itself, the complex of words presenting or creating its own reality. 90

The Pardoner manipulates language to the extent that the meaning which he imposes upon religious objects as symbols comes dangerously close to obliterating their objective meaning. That he even attempts to give validity to his relics

raises the question as to whether the inherent value lies in the object as symbol, or in the words which invest the object with its symbolic significance. Holy objects, while inherently symbolic, derive their meaning from their claim to authenticity. In the case of the relics, then, it is crucial that they be genuine. The Pardoner, however, very nearly succeeds in vesting the old rags and bones he carries with the significance of true relics. This represents the subjective limit of the "shaping power" and "reordering energy" that words exert upon reality. In Khinoy's view, the danger represented by the Pardoner's inversion of the relationship between language and objects and their significance is second to that represented by his undermining of the values and ideals which give rise to these symbols:

The real trouble is that our judgment on the Pardoner may actually reinforce the cynical position which he is trying to propagate ... that only things are truly real, and thus, in the absence of any 'inner' meaning or value, a clever man can confer meanings and establish values ... Like the cooks in his sermon (539), he can convert substance into accident by the power of his art.... If the [pilgrims] agree that the physical world alone is real and that values and doctrines are only the words of clever men, they have given up on the idea of 'thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage/ That highte Jerusalem celestial' ... With his final appeal (919 - 30), which artistically is no afterthought but rather the object of his whole performance, the Pardoner forces an inescapable confrontation ... The offer must be accepted or refused. 91

Immediately prior to his offer of his own relics for veneration, the Pardoner utters his famous benediction:

"And Jhesu Crist, that is oure soules leche,
So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve,
For that is best; I wol yow nat deceyve." (916 - 18)

Whatever motivates the Pardoner in speaking them, it is clear that through these words Chaucer allows the pilgrims this

once to recognize, in the immediate context of the Pardoner's offer of his spurious relics, the distinction between the symbol and the signified, between the pilgrimage of the body and the pilgrimage of the spirit, between the veneration of old bones and that of religious truths. This recognition of course necessitates their rejection of his relics. It is significant, too, that the final humiliation and defeat of the Pardoner -- the pilgrims' rejection of his lies -- occurs in the framework story. Here life imitates art in that the inevitability of poetic and retributive justice -- which operates within the orderly and controlled world of the tale -- proves functional in the chaotic world of experience as well.

It is less clear -- but dubious -- whether the pilgrims are made aware of the parallel significance of the arbitrary relationship between language and truth advocated by the Pardoner, and consequently see in the epistemological failings of the three revellers a reflection of their own. Robert Burlin discusses the perceptual failings of the revellers and the Pardoner:

The 'riotours' drunken oaths predicate a moral condition in which there is no reality beyond the physical, no abstraction divorced from concrete form. Paradoxically they create for themselves a world of allegory, though their motive is not to explore spiritual dimensions but to deny them ... Part of the old man's purpose in the tale is to push them further along a way in which blindness to the metaphorical and blindness to the metaphysical prove to be related ... As a 'noble ecclesiaste' the Pardoner seems to have consecrated his life to turning symbols into empty signs ... he embarks upon a performance in which verbal authority is consistently undermined. While he pretends to a clear-minded distinction between commercial exchange and sacramental penitence, between what he says and what he intends, between one audience and another, and between Death and the lust for gold, his conscious efforts are all directed toward obscuring such distinction ... his reward is to have his carefully disguised secret held up to public ridicule, enshrined in the metaphor of those relics he had so smugly exposed for the worthless things they are. 92

The Pardoner, as De Neef says, is "the human equivalent of his relics."⁹³ Harry Bailly makes this much clear in his unnecessarily brutal response to the Pardoner's baiting of him in the epilogue:

'But, by the croys which that Seint Eleyne fond,
I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond
In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.
Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;
They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!' (951 - 55)

He associates the Pardoner's "coillons" -- or lack of them -- with the false relics; both are without value, and deserve no richer encasement than "an hogges toord." That he even refers to the testicles of a eunuch is yet another instance of the host's failure to understand the relation between sign and signified. He has not benefitted from the Pardoner's Tale in which the inability to relate the literal and the metaphoric is a damning failure.

The host contrasts the false relics with the piece of the true cross found by St. Helen, the inherent value of which he does not dispute. This simplistic juxtaposition of true and false, good and evil, is similar to the clear cut line of distinction the Pardoner himself draws between true and false relics, his pardon and Christ's pardon, and between the proper motives for preaching and his own:

Of avarice and of swich cursednesse
Is al my prechyng, for to make hem free
To yeven hir pens, and namely unto me.
For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,
And nothyng for correccioun of synne.
I rekke nevere, whan that been beryed,
Though that hir soules goon a-blakeberyed! (400 - 406)

The clause "for to make hem free" seems at first to reveal the motive for his preaching: to free the members of the congregation from avarice. The following line, however,

reveals that his purpose is not to free the audience of the vice, but of the money which lies at its root. The Pardoner postulates a hard and fast division between what he says and what he intends. But what is clear in theory is often ambiguous in practice. As Leigh De Neef points out, "Each time the Pardoner denies his moral intent, Chaucer links that denial with a hint that some people do, in fact, benefit from his preaching ... if the people believe in the efficacy of these relics, they can be a means of drawing them away from sin and closer to God."⁹⁴ The Pardoner continues:

For certes, many a predicacioun
Comth ofte tyme of yvel entencioun....
Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice.
But though myself be gilty in that synne,
Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne
From avarice, and soore to repente.
But that is nat my principal entente;
I preche nothyng but for coveitise....
For though myself be a ful vicious man,
A moral tale yet I yow telle kan,
Which I am wont to preche for to wynne. (407 - 61)

In the Thomistic view, it is indeed possible that good "comth ofte tyme of yvel entencioun." This implicates not only the Pardoner, but his creator and every other literary artist. The juxtaposition of evil preacher and morally effective exemplum has always been the critical crux of this tale. Malcolm Pittock's comment that this tale, detached from its context, "would suggest quite a different teller: one who was emotionally committed to what he was saying,"⁹⁵ echoes Hinckley's 1907 proposal that "not only the Homily on the Tavern Sins but also the story of the rioters and the treasure were originally assigned to the Parson and later transferred to the Pardoner."⁹⁶

The Pardoner's character is seen by some in a better light because of his tale. Edmund Reiss argues that the final irony of the Pardoner's performance works against his

fellow pilgrims for their rejection of the tale because of the self-confessed immorality of the teller. The power of the Pardoner's fiction causes Reiss to doubt his image as finally and irrevocably evil;

Because good words and works come from the Pardoner, one may, in fact, question whether he is really evil. In their reaction to the Pardoner, the pilgrims overlook the Christian idea that just as a tree is known by its fruit, so a man is known by his words, (Matthew XII, 33 - 37).... To accept and follow the Pardoner's good words does not mean sanctioning the Pardoner's actions ... Though the teacher may be hypocritical, his words may still be good. The Canterbury pilgrims, however, failing to realise this, condemn outright the Pardoner and everything associated with him. 97

It is nowhere made explicit that the pilgrims do reject the morality of the Pardoner's exemplum. In fact, the closing episode suggests just the opposite. If the Pardoner's performance is a sample of his technique, a demonstration of the tricks he plays on his parishioner audiences and an attempt to implicate the pilgrims in his sin, then the tale itself is a vindication of the persuasiveness of the sermon -- and of literature in general -- for its message of the triumph of divine justice precludes the pilgrims from laughing with him for his duping of other audiences. Khinoy proves that the Scriptural evidence cited by Reiss in support of his view is itself taken out of context and misunderstood;

The tendency of the passage as a whole is precisely the opposite: hypocrites cannot say good things, for their words will correspond to their inner state. 'An evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things' (Matthew 12:35). It would hardly be ironic or wrongheaded for an ordinary man to avoid the Pardoner. 98

The Pardoner's attempt to undermine Christ's redemption of language as a means to truth has failed.

IV: The Artist Undone: Phebus and the Pardoner.

E. Talbot Donaldson suggests that in the Pardoner's Tale Chaucer deals with the "darker areas of human nature in which lie some of the causes for the human débauché. And a sense of lovelessness, of isolation ... is such a cause ... Chaucer fuses the impulse to art with art's frustration, if not destruction, of the artist."⁹⁹ The world which the Pardoner creates in his tale -- "a world in which justice operates with awesome precision," and springs naturally from the wicked deeds themselves -- is diametrically opposed, or so the Pardoner believes, to the world he inhabits in which evil is committed with impunity:

And in his supreme self-confidence as an artist, he seems to underestimate the pilgrims' ability to distinguish between the world of his fiction and the real world of the road to Canterbury ... he blurs the distinction between the two worlds -- confusing two versions of art -- with the result that the world he has created in his sermon without believing it comes true ... the more fraudulent world the artist had created in which he could see himself as the triumphantly perfect vice is demolished. Having destroyed himself by the realization of his art, the Pardoner has nothing left to him but silence. ¹⁰⁰

"The Pardoner's angry silence," Howard writes, "for such a manipulator of language as he, is the ultimate defeat; it makes him seem mysterious, deflated, and sad.... And the Pardoner's silence is a loss of will."¹⁰¹ He is finally helpless to control the reality that the world he creates in his sermon reflects: "People who go around self-consciously creating reality out of illusion -- and perhaps illusion out of reality -- are apt to make people nervous -- to invoke a strong reaction from those who become uneasy when someone disturbs their idea of what is real ... It is a large relief to us that so powerful and untrusty a tamperer with reality proves ultimately to be a mere fraud."¹⁰²

- 5 -

The moral probity required of preachers in the Middle Ages proves mistaken those who argue that the pilgrims are the ironic victims of the Pardoner's deliberate undermining of his tale. Art needs a moral base to succeed. When the Pardoner discredits himself as a man, he discredits himself as a preacher. His stated theme radix malorum est cupiditas is from the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to Timothy. This epigraph is lifted out of context from an epistle that is concerned with, and warns against, the superfluous use of words and the separation of word and deed in the character of the corrupt preacher:

If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness;

He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings,

Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.

But godliness with contentment is great gain.

For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.

And having food and raiment, let us be therefore content.

But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.

For the love of money is the root of all evil; which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. (I Tim., VI. 3 - 10)

In verse 10, Paul clearly states his belief that the most pernicious effect of avarice is to draw man from the faith. In the verses which follow, Paul again stresses the link between cupidity and vain speech; between those unable to comprehend "sound doctrine" and those who lust after worldly

treasure. He chastises those who wallow in words and demonstrate a dangerous facility with language, but know nothing:

O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, (I, VI, 20)

But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. (I, IV, 7)

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts they shall heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;

And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. (II, IV, 3 - 4)

The Pardoner's misapplication of Scriptural teachings to suit his own narrow ends reveals a great deal about his inability to grasp the spiritual meaning which underlies -- and justifies -- the letter of the text. The fourth book of De Doctrina Christiana refers to St. Paul's Epistles to Timothy in connection with its discussion of oratory, preaching, and rhetoric. In his 1977 article "Chaucer's Pardoner and Preaching," Frank Cespedes explains that St. Augustine makes explicit:

Paul's distinction between the eloquence of words ('verba') and the greater eloquence of things or realities ('res') ... between the truth of a proposition and the skill with which it is expressed, between a shrewd use of the arts of rhetoric, and the separate question of attaining salvation through Scripture ... In both Paul and Augustine, the emphasis remains constant since a preacher's strength derives from a source deeper than human skill, his best preparation is prayer, and his ultimate resource is the morality of his personal character ... real persuasion, a 'good' rhetoric, must enlist a means beyond art -- the appeal of the speaker's life ... in the pulpit the heresy of art for art's sake becomes intolerable. 103

The sermon has no meaning except in terms of a referent outside itself, and that is the virtue embodied by the preacher.

Those who believe that the pilgrims are unjustified in rejecting the Pardoner as preacher on the basis of his personal corruption are guilty of applying to their reading of this piece the twentieth-century critical criterion l'art pour l'art, which does not apply to a medieval tract, especially one told by a preacher.

Cespedes regards the Pardoner as a man of unmitigated villainy, and believes that the controversy over the sincerity of his benediction and the purpose of his subsequent sales-pitch is misguided. At issue is the submersion of doctrine in rhetoric, "the abuse of language and the pulpit," and ultimately the undoing of the Christ Incarnate's redemption of language as a means to knowledge of God's will;

If we can accept the epistles to Timothy as a controlling perspective on Chaucer's characterization of the Pardoner, then the sheer eloquence of the tale, and its puzzling aftermath, acquire new significance.... The danger is not that the Pardoner's salesmanship ... will persuade the pilgrims to buy his wares ... but that the tale itself has occupied the pilgrims' attention exclusively and caused them to forget a more important set of values ... they have forgotten the larger implication of the tale's adopted 'theme': Paul 'Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse/ And tellen fables and swich wrecchedness,' because a concentration on the fable per se may 'turn away their hearing from the truth' (II, Tim., IV, 4). The pilgrims should have been attending to that right and thorough understanding of Scripture which issues in charitable action, instead of being caught up in what Paul calls 'the profane novelties of words' (I Tim., VI, 11). 104

The Pardoner corresponds exactly to the description in I Tim., I. 7, of the teacher of the law who understands neither what he says, nor whereof he affirms. This lack of comprehension embraces a failure to understand the spiritual "sense" of the Scriptures. But the Pardoner is diabolically clever. His revenge on the pilgrims, his need to pervert the order of God's universe and all the good that he sees around him, goes beyond merely forcing the pilgrims to reject

the "moral thyng" they demanded of him. Placing his tale within the context of Paul's Epistle forces them to reject the moral validity of all sermonizing, of all literature. This is crucial as tale-telling is the one activity that unites all the pilgrims -- the one factor they have in common. The Pardoner is in fact an anti-artist, whose purpose is to destroy the enterprise of storytelling. Hence he is capable of even more mischief than he is aware of. If his strategy in rural churches is to manipulate the intellectual and emotional response of the congregations so that their repentance "finds its objective correlative in the purchase of a pardon,"¹⁰⁵ then his strategy on the pilgrimage is to undo the substantive connection between language and truth. He seduces the pilgrims with words, only to point out their own moral and epistemological failings. Cespedes adds:

What the Pardoner accomplishes unintentionally, is to make the pilgrims aware of the equivocal nature of their chosen enterprise of storytelling. His salespitch ... points to a different source of dishonesty, or moral limitation, on the pilgrims' part.... After the pilgrims have been entranced by the tale, they are reminded, through the Pardoner's sly crow of egotistic delight ... that a good life takes precedence over good words ... in a wonderfully comic way, the Host's enraged response to the Pardoner reasserts this doctrine by calling specific attention to the moral and physical nature of the Pardoner himself. 106

The Pardoner ultimately fails in his attempt to divorce word from meaning, to invert the relationship between object and symbolic connotation and to focus attention from the profound morality of Scripture toward his amoral fable. But he very nearly succeeded: "The Host's response," Cespedes writes, "is simultaneously a protest against the Pardoner's rhetoric and an acknowledgement that his rhetoric has, in fact, been effective ... [all the] pilgrims must come to terms with the dilemma that the Pardoner has dramatized for them: they too are storytellers and, as such, are prey to

the sort of evil that Paul warns against and that the Pardoner epitomizes."¹⁰⁷ All "storytellers" have the potential to manipulate meaning and create arbitrary value systems.

The Pardoner's tale, however, has a greater moral force than he had intended; it proves to be his undoing in more ways than one. At its most basic level, if the Pardoner's performance is read as a demonstration of the tricks he plays on the "lewed peple," the tale itself vindicates the moral persuasiveness of literature, for it precludes the other pilgrims from implicating themselves in his sins by laughing with him for his exploitation of his uneducated and unsuspecting audiences. On another level, the tale fails as an attempt to undermine the moral validity of "chaff" -- as opposed to the fruit of Scripture -- for it contains "fruyt" which the Pardoner fails to see. His spiritual blindness insures that his creative control is less than perfect, and his tale assumes a moral life of its own, reasserting the correct relationship between inside and outside. Khinoy points to an instance of this in the Pardoner's performance, which suggests that Chaucer, unlike his Pardoner, believes that values are not arbitrarily imposed but are inherent in language and in symbol:

This highly charged scene is the encounter of the revelers with the old man, a simple episode which transforms a story whose teller we were listening to -- and whose ulterior purpose we questioned -- into a creation independent of its teller, with its own intrinsic values.... [The old man] embodies or represents, among many other things, a quality which is essentially inside, something inner, which underlies and outlasts externals ... our response tells us that the inside is real, despite the Pardoner's strenuous efforts to prove the contrary.... Eventually, through the image of the old man as a vital innerness beneath the contemptible wrappings, and through the Host's inspired word-play, Chaucer demonstrates that meanings and values are inherent, not arbitrarily imposed. 108

Hence in the tale itself, as well as in its epilogue, the inherent relationship of words to meaning asserts itself. The

Pardoner's inability to create fiction which functions as a skeletal framework upon which he can impose his own meaning testifies to this: the pilgrims' rejection of his false relics and pardons confirms it. Despite himself, the Pardoner is unable to corrupt because as Donaldson says: "art so flagrantly prostituted as it is in his sermon still remains awesomely valid."¹⁰⁹ He is finally unable to dictate the response of the pilgrims to a work of art which asserts itself as an entity independent of its creator.

The final moral success of the Pardoner's Tale depends upon its forcing us to recognize that the evil embodied by the Pardoner is but a grotesque caricature of that which is in all of us. The Pardoner has his revenge on society by displaying before it its own evil: in doing so, however, he damns himself. Donald Howard writes:

We hate the man but take delight in his evil.... The tale lures us into an uncharitable response, a reversal of St. Augustine's dictum.... Everyone who has felt repugnance at him, who has thought his peculiarities a joke, a horror, or a disgrace, has played a part in the origin of this defence and owns a share in his evil. The Pardoner ... has chosen, has willed, to be what society assigned him to be ... [he becomes] a charade of evil.... The institutions of Christian life -- God's pardon, penance, the veneration of shrines and relics, the pilgrimage -- become in his act grotesque representations of themselves. Perhaps that is what the grotesque always does: it parades before us the other side of things, makes us see ourselves by making us see what we think we are not, what we dread to be. 110

In a perverse manner, the Pardoner forces us to confront the evil that exists in us all, hidden beneath the surface. For all his lies and hypocrisies, he represents the truth-telling artist, but does so in such a way that can only result in his eternal damnation.

Another artist undone by his art is Phebus in the Manciple's Tale. The protagonist is Phoebus Appollo, Greek god of poetry and god of the bow, presented here as a figure

of the courtly ideal who falls short of the paragon of perfection in terms of which he is described; stripped of the dignity and impunity with which the gods are invested. In Chaucer's version of this fable, unlike those of his sources, it is Phebus who endows his crow with the power of speech which leads to the temporary destruction of the world of illusion upon which his happiness is based. As in the Pardoner's Tale, it is the misuse of art that gives rise to the suspect nature of art as well as the destruction of the artist. The misuse of art in the Manciple's Tale is most obviously manifested in the blatant incongruity between the conclusion that the words and action of the tale suggest -- a moral judgment against sexual betrayal, wrath, unjust punishment, murder and self-delusion -- in favour of a simplistic (and repetitive) warning against jangling. The moral force of the Pardoner's exemplum defeats his sinister motive. In an analogous manner, the Manciple attempts to detract from the serious ethical problems of the tale with a "moral" which contradicts them, thereby implicitly reinforcing his claim that expedience is the only rule, that truth undoes both listener and teller. He attempts to disparage his own exemplum, to suggest that its lesson should not be taken seriously. But, like the Pardoner's, the Manciple's moral redounds upon him. William Cadbury writes:

Despite our laughter at the Manciple's slippery shifts, we know that the tale he tells is serious.... The last irony, then, is that the conviction carried by the story itself discredits the rule of expediency by which the Manciple's moral tried to discredit the story.... If we follow the Manciple's mother's advice to remember the crow, it is not as a mere example against jangling that we remember him, but as a loving and moral being who does his best for truth. Though he fails (and we know it to be from dangers inherent in tale-bearing) our morals are not subverted. 111

The Pardoner's audience, on the pilgrimage witnesses a self-admitted exposition of the strategies he uses on other

audiences. Although it is not the Manciple's intention, the effect he produces on his audience is similar. Cadbury adds: "The quality of our involvement in the action suffers deflation as we shift levels of narration at the end of the tale ... our involvement is only with his strategy, a less serious and moral participation."¹¹² In strictly ethical terms, the cynical "moral" arguing for the wisdom of holding one's tongue creates more problems than it solves. In terms of our response to the work as a whole, however, the immoral conclusion has a jarring effect like that of the yoking together of two incongruent elements, which not only shatters the illusion of fiction but forces the reader to re-evaluate the relation between the tale and the "moral" conclusion it generates. J. Burke Severs summarizes this relation:

The crux of the matter is merely this: the Manciple suddenly changes the basis of his judgment from morality to expediency. Up to line 307 his attitude has been based upon judgments of right and wrong; after line 307, it is based upon judgments of wise and foolish.... However commendable the crow morally, he is blameworthy practically.... With the best of intentions, the crow has brought about murder, the destruction of his master's happiness, and his own undoing. 113

Severs accepts without question that Chaucer's central thesis is what it appears to be: a warning against jangling. I believe, on the other hand, that the crow is the paradigm of the artist, destroyed for telling the truth and shattering another's precarious world of illusion. Phebus stands at the opposite pole in that he represents the "artist" who misuses language to construct a pleasing illusion out of a disturbing reality. If the audience laughs at the Manciple for his ill-fitting and lengthy exhortation to "Kepe wel thy tonge, and thenk upon the crowe," (362) we are in peril of not recognizing the danger inherent to the powerful tool of language. The danger manifests itself not only in the Manciple's warning against jangling,

which applies equally whether the tidings be "false or trewe" (360), but within the story itself, for Phebus succeeds in disarming the truth-telling crow and then distorting the truth about his wife.

The Manciple goes to great lengths to prove that words do not create reality, and that man's delusions can result in an ingenious use of words to distort the truth:

The wise Plato seith, as ye may rede,
The word moot nede accorde with the dede.
If a man shal telle proprely a thyng,
The word moot cosyn be to the werkynge.
I am a boystous man, right thus seye I,
Ther nys no difference, trewely,
Bitwixe a wyf that is of heigh degree,
If of hir body dishonest she bee,
And a povre wenche, oother than this ...
the gentile, in estaat above,
She shal be cleped his lady, as in love;
And for that oother is a povre womman,
She shal be cleped his wenche or his lemman. (207 - 220)

This digression asserts that the distinction between a "lady" and a "lemman" is one of neither kind nor degree, but merely a social refinement borne of man's infinite capacity to rationalize. It is followed by an analogy which claims that so too is the distinction between a "titlelees tiraunt" (223) and "an outlawe or a thief erraunt" (224) merely one of artificial social respectability based on fear of the tyrant's "gretter myght" (227):

Lo, therfore is he cleped a capitayn;
And for the outlawe hath but smal meynee,
And may nat doon so greet an harm as he,
Ne brynge a contree to so greet meschef,
Men clepen hym an outlawe or a thief. (230 - 34)

One would expect, then, the moral at the end of the tale to extol the virtue of saying the truth, and Phebus' unjust wrath against the crow to be used as an exemplum of the dangers

of self-delusion. Instead, the conclusion exalts expediency, and there is no indication in the tale that Phebus' self-delusion does not satisfy him. Furthermore, as Scattergood points out, the credibility of the first digression is lost by the manner in which it is introduced into the narrative. Having used the innocuous term "lemman" to describe the wife's lover, a man of "litel reputacioun" (253), the Manciple feigns an acute sensitivity to the word, then proceeds to justify his use of it in terms of its applicability to women: "The Manciple also demonstrates how, given a cynical disregard for the truth and acute verbal dexterity, one can escape the implications of practically anything that one says.... With a fine show of verbal skill he denies the importance of verbal niceties and leaves the disparaging term intact."¹¹⁴

The Manciple's Tale demonstrates the power of language to create a comfortable but illusory reality. Britton Harwood, in his 1971 article "Language and the Real: Chaucer's Manciple," argues that "The subject of the tale is language.... [It] is about the relationship between words and things; more precisely, it is a covert indictment in which the Manciple sneers at those who can be distracted from empirical reality by language, which creates a bogus reality of its own."¹¹⁵ Harwood points out that in none of Chaucer's sources can we find the emphasis on Phebus' singing:

Pleyen he koude on every mynstralcie,
And syngen, that it was a melodie
To heeren of his cleere voys the soun.
Certes the Kyng, of Thebes, Amphioun,
That with his syngyng walled that citee,
Koude nevere syngen half so wel as hee. (113 - 18)

No allusion is made to the fact that the classical god Phoebus slaughtered with his bow the seven sons of Amphion, who responded to this execution with suicide. Moreover it is only in Chaucer's version that Phebus is responsible for having taught the bird to speak: "And countrefete the speche of every man/

He koude, whan he sholde telle a tale" (134 - 35). The analogy of the crow's speech to man's tale-telling is important in establishing the crow as a type of truth-telling artist, thus vindicating literature as a potential purveyor of truth.

The crow speaks the plain truth with "wordes bolde" (258) about the infidelity of Phebus' wife, and Phebus' immediate response indicates that it was not for this reason but rather for his entertainment that he had endowed the bird with speech:

'Ne were thow wont so myrily to synge
That to myn herte it was a rejoyssynge
To heere thy voys? Allas! what song is this?' (245 - 47)

That the classical god of poetry and enlightenment has been transformed into one who prefers false verbal constructs of "reality" to the truth about a pre-existent reality is confirmed when, having slain his wife in a burst of ire, he destroys the symbols of his song and of his strength: "he brak his mynstralcie,/ Bothe harpe, and lute, and gyterne, and sautrie;/ And eek he brak his arwes and his bowe" (267 - 69), then proceeds to denounce the crow as a liar. Phebus must convince himself that the crow has told a "false tale" (293) in order to re-create his wife in conformity with his image of her:

'Traitor,' quod he, "with tonge of scorioun,
Thou hast me broght to my confusioun;
Allas, that I was wrought! Why nere I deed?
O deere wyf! o gemme of lustiheed!
That were to me so sad and eek so trewe,
Now listow deed, with face pale of hewe,
Ful giltelees, that dorste I swere, ywys!
O rakel hand, to doon so foule amys!
O trouble wit, o ire recchelees,
That unavysed smyteth gilteles!
O wantrust, ful of fals suspecioun,
Where was thy wit and thy discrecion? ...
Allas! for sorwe I wol myselfen slee!' (271 - 91)

Of course, he does nothing of the kind, nor does he take to heart his own admonitions against wrath and suspicion. Phebus is perhaps the extreme example of one who, like the Manciple and the Pardoner, and in varying degrees most of the pilgrims, understands on an abstract level the truth of his own words, but misapplies his insights to reveal that he is blinded by what St. Paul calls "the wisdom of the wise" (I. Cor., 9). He denounces the crow as a "false thief!" and strips him of both his white feathers and his power of speech:

And to the crowe he stirte, and that anon,
And pulled his white fetheres everychon,
And made hym blak, and refte hym al his song,
And eek his speche, and out at dore hym slong
Unto the devel, which I hym bitake;
And for this caas been alle crows blake. (303 - 08)

Despite the Manciple's claim, however, the story of Phebus and the crow is no more oriented to explaining why crows are black than to illustrating the wisdom of holding one's tongue. The real issue is that language, as it embodies the truth, is limited and subject to manipulation. The Manciple has already documented his belief that nature will out with the exempla of the bird, cat and she-wolf, and Phebus finds that the only way to control his wife's "nature" is to destroy her. The conflict between Phebus and the crow reflects the two medieval views of the relationship between language and truth. Phebus, who holds that reality can be created as a verbal construct -- who allows language to control his consciousness -- finds he must also destroy the crow, who refuses to compromise the integrity of the ideal relationship between words and the reality they represent.

In Chaucer's sources, the principal punishment of the crow is the transformation of his feathers from white to black. However, Harwood explains that in Chaucer's version:

The color change is altogether subordinated ... to the

vengeance taken by Phebus upon the bird's voice.... Phebus' self-esteem ... rests for him, not (or at least no longer) upon any observable physical reality, but upon a description. Accordingly, he has every reason to make the description a good one.... The description relates primarily to other symbols and, being wholly verbal, is entirely subject to control. Jealousy, 'awayt,' 'labour,' physical force are all unnecessary in guarding a description.... Phebus' own speech has risen up to betray his interests. His speech, which was to have cradled his pride as Amphion sang a wall up around Thebes, has gone out of control in the crow, who mistakes his function. Because, in the metaphoric sense, the crow has already foregone his 'song' and 'sweete noyse' (295, 300), Phebus deprives him of them literally.... The crow's unserviceableness is figured briefly in Phebus' destruction of his 'mynstralcie' (267) until he erects a new defense by using for the first time in the tale, his own 'clere voys,' rehabilitating his wife as a 'gemme of lustiheed.' He is careful to revive her only in song -- to omit the frantic medical attempts found in the sources. 116

The Manciple's Tale, then, brings into focus the potential failure of language to represent truth accurately in all cases. The silence of the Pardoner following the cruel tirade of the host can be likened to the silence of the crow, in that both are types of the truth-telling artist (the Pardoner in spite of himself), and also likened to the silence of Phebus which is figured-forth in his destruction of his musical instruments. Phebus relies on his verbal skill to delude himself, as the Pardoner relies on his facility with language to delude others, and unwittingly, falls victim to self-delusion as well. Brought down by the medium of his art, then, Phebus is forced to abandon it.

Loren Gruber, in his paper, "The Manciple's Tale: One Key to Chaucer's Language," suggests that at the heart of Phebus' failure lies the fact that his skills are merely verbal: "Although he could train the crow to sing, he could not command fidelity in his wife.... Phebus himself, the epitome of imaginative articulation, abandons his craft to a mute and physical reaction."¹¹⁷ I must disagree, however,

with Gruber's thesis that the crow is equally culpable, for he is guilty of "literal-mindedness ... which does intrinsic violence to the psychological or inner side of life," and that "Phebus cries for balance, for a species of verbal illusion which ... can encompass physical actuality and imaginative reality in a way that averts tragedy."¹¹⁸ Gruber's reading of this tale as a vindication of the truth of poetic fictions does damage to literal statements of truth -- "truth artlessly told" in his terms -- such as those which constitute the Parson's Tale:

Words, unskillfully uttered, ... narrowly confine life to dreams or to animality and ultimately to tragedy. Words skillfully uttered, with genuine 'art' ... facilitate a middle, if deliberately illusive path between the Scylla and Charibdis of 'fact' and 'ideal'.... The Manciple's Tale ... is a tale about the failure of language or the failure to use language wisely on both the literal and symbolic levels.... One ought to speak poetic fictions which ... approximate the texture of life and save language from becoming a system of hopelessly 'ideal' or agonizingly literal falsehoods. 119

Poetic and expository expressions of truth each have their merits and limitations; their own appropriate time and place. To vindicate poetic truth at the expense of literal statements of the truth is in my view not only wrong but unnecessary. The silence of Phebus and the Pardoner is brought about by their misuse of the strategies of fiction and their failed attempt to re-create and control reality through language. The silence of the crow -- a type of the truth-telling artist -- is brought about by man's preference for comfortable illusion. In the Parson's Tale and the Retraction, Chaucer destroys the illusion of the Canterbury Tales and all the illusions it contains without, however, repudiating fiction as a servant of truth.

V. The Problem of Fiction:

The Parson's Tale and the Retraction.

It is invalid to read the Parson's rejection of "fables and swich wrecchednesse" (34) as Chaucer's own. It is true that the Parson's discourse, followed by Chaucer's Retraction, calls attention to the fictional nature of the preceding tales not only by the contrast of their expository, unliterary style, but by what they seem to say about literature. Despite the Parson's obvious virtues as a man and as a preacher, it is not necessary to accept his verdict on literature as reflecting that of the author of his tale as well as the others, or to see it as a controlling perspective from which to reread or rethink all the tales that have come before. As Carol Kaske writes, it is possible to acknowledge an author's religion "without making it the ironic or allegorical moral of everything in the work."¹²⁰ Some years earlier, E. Talbot Donaldson in a paper entitled "Medieval Poetry and Medieval Sin," had written:

It seems to me wrong to read ... the Parson's Tale as a gloss of the rest of the Canterbury Tales; for to many of the tales sin was simply not relevant. Theologically we may all be in a state of sin or in a state of virtue, but that is not the only guise under which a poet may wish to consider us.... To reduce everything to the Parson's orthodox technicalities is to miss the point of poetry. 121

The experience versus authority debate (to use one example of many possibilities) in the Canterbury Tales cannot be resolved -- some validity is justly claimed for each -- and the subservience of reason and philosophy to revelation and theology in Christian thought does not invalidate the claims of reason as an aid to truth. So too is it unnecessary to assert that either the literary or the expository element in Chaucer's writing invalidates the other, or reduces it to

irony and satire. Kaske posits that the Parson's Tale and the Retraction, as a unit, form one of two valid but limited viewpoints which inform the work as a whole, and comments: "That a contradiction is not a correction from a higher vantage-point, is confirmed by the Parson's ... condemnations of belletristic literature in his Prologue. Within the world of a poem, a speaker who rejects poetry cannot have the whole truth."¹²²

At the opposite end of the spectrum from those who hold that the moral absolutism of the Parson's Tale provides a retrospective commentary on and a theological framework for the other tales stands John Finlayson, who argues that the pious tales are no more immune from satiric treatment than the secular tales, and that the tedious, pedantic style of the Parson satirizes the man. He suggests that "[no] part of, or element in, the Canterbury Tales can unequivocally be taken as the centre of values."¹²³ The same is true of Chaucer's Retraction, for even if it does reflect the wishes of the poet at the end of his life, it does not necessarily provide a single valid "glose" to the tales, nor does it require "that we also should reject the 'vanities' and select only from his work those elements which can be integrated into some narrowly religio-moral statement."¹²⁴ The fact that the Retraction exists suggests that Chaucer's works were not intended in a uniformly pious vein, nor is Chaucer explicit about exactly which tales "sownen into synne" (1086).

It is true that to reduce the meaning of the whole work to that of one of its parts can only result in a "thin summation of that creation."¹²⁵ Nonetheless, Finlayson's denial that the spiritual significance of pilgrimage is the dominating preoccupation of the work because Chaucer does not announce this symbolic intention in so many words, is especially surprising following his demonstration of the subtlety of Chaucer's poetic method. Nor does it take into account Chaucer's frequent use of "realism" as a smoke screen. Furthermore, because no element of the codified list of virtues and vices in the Parson's Tale is coterminous with any single

tale or pilgrim, Finlayson concludes that the orderliness of the work is the butt of Chaucer's satire:

The embodiment of vices in the individual pilgrims throws into relief the very dryness of the abstractions ... the inadequacy of the schematization to capture the essence of those characters.... The Parson's catalogue of sins, in effect, represents a way of seeing the world ... [which] cannot by its nature pretend to be the whole.... Virtue, then, does not proceed solely from the mouths of the virtuous in The Canterbury Tales, nor is it to be found neatly juxtaposed with its appropriate vice. 126

His argument is based on the premise that to contradict is to invalidate. However, just as no one expects the pilgrims or the characters in their tales to be one-dimensional illustrations of the virtues "neatly juxtaposed" with their vices; neither should the schemata of the Parson's Tale be faulted for failing to capture the "essence of those characters," for this is not their purpose.

Ralph Baldwin holds the opposing but equally extreme view that the Parson's "meditacioun" (69) on sin and its remedy completes the characterizations of the pilgrims and fulfills their dramatic context:

Each pilgrim and his story combine with the Parson's homily to make a momentary -- and moving -- diptych, a story and gloss, action and passion. This confers a sense of completeness which such episodic fictions often lack.... The characters reflectively take on new depths because they are severally highlighted in the treatise of the seven sins.... Here by the clash of the fictionally real and theologically ideal the characters are forged finally into moral perspective and dramatic validity. 127

But I must argue that the Parson's analysis of the deadly sins and their remedies achieves a neat juxtaposition of virtue and vice without irony or satire only because it is writing of a different order and kind from that of the fictive

pilgrimage created by Chaucer, or the fictive tales narrated by the characters he invented. Nor does it shed new light upon those characters, any more than it does on mankind in general. The controlling perspective of the Parson's organization of his material, as Lee W. Patterson makes clear, is the theory of sin developed by medieval theology. The Parson's Tale locates each individual sin within a theological context:

Furthermore, this context is appropriate philosophically: sin is understood ... ontologically, as a derangement of divine order.... Far more than a disobedience, it violates ... the purpose and structure of creation ... the sinner defects from his role in a divine disposition that finds its only fulfillment in God.... Hence in rebelling against God the sinner rebels as well against his own created being; his sin is a continuous and progressive self-destruction that enacts the metaphysics of sin both psychologically and judicially.... First the sin is related to others of the seven, reminding us through this reference to the progressus peccati that each sinful act is part of a larger process of self-destruction. This is followed by a definition of the sin ... [then] a careful exposure of its nature and gravity in relation to the divinely disposed reality of which it is both a privation and violation. Only after this ... [comes] an enumeration of the 'speces' of the sin. The effect of this procedure is to contain each specific act within a controlling theoretical perspective. The arrangement stems ... from a vision that sees all of experience as reflecting a universal and rationally apprehensible order and coherence.... It seeks to prevent its readers from attending only to the individual instances of sin, to keep them from ignoring ... the larger structure from which these instances must derive their significance.... The Parson's Tale lays claim ... to a complete and even absolute view of experience as a whole. Its narrowness of focus ... fits all reality within a single and peculiarly intense and authoritative perspective. Its orderliness stands as both a standard by which the disorder of sin is to be measured and as a victory over disorder. 128

Although the Parson's Tale emphasizes by contrast the nature of all the other tales as conscious works of fiction, it is as much a part of that work of art as is the framework

story, which in its own right establishes a criterion of "realism," providing the pretext for the fictional narratives, and reminding us of their nature as just that. With each link or prologue the illusion of the previous tale is destroyed; with the Parson's Tale the illusion of the pilgrimage is destroyed, qualified and transcended. In a conception of art which includes the creation and the destruction of the frame of illusion as part of its "message," a piece such as the Parson's Tale does not exist outside of the work of art, and no elaborate attempt need be made to reconcile its content or form with that of the fiction that provides its immediate context. Robert Jordan, in his book Chaucer and the Shape of Creation, explains that many misconceptions concerning the Parson's Tale arise from the failure of modern man to understand the "aesthetic possibilities of inorganic structure" which inform medieval art and literature:

There is a discrepancy in judgment between Chaucer and ourselves regarding the scope of art and the proper role of the artist in matters of belief and doctrine.... Assuming, as we tend to do, that a poem must not mean but be, are we able to invest with literary value a work which so manifestly means?.... We must ask to what extent Chaucer felt his doctrine to be an encroachment upon his art.... For him the ultimate role of art -- irrespective of its mediate roles -- was to serve and subserve the Truth ... But that ... the truth of the road to Canterbury was itself limited had to be recognized.... That art can contain both illusion and disillusion is a concept foreign to the organicist imagination, but integral to the Gothic ... the breakdown of illusions signifies the poet's awareness of his mortality. 129

Hence the Parson's Tale can be seen as a different aspect of the same view of art if we reject the insistence that its form as a prose tract forces it to call into question the validity of the poetic narratives that precede it, or at least to make necessary a re-interpretation of the tales as ironic exposés of sin, or as moral allegories. It is different from the tales which precede it without being irreconcilable with them:

From a Gothic viewpoint the Tales can be understood both as a pilgrimage (literal and spiritual) and a compound of tales.... In order thus to have it both ways, Chaucer's art must pay a price, or so it may seem to the modern reader; the price is hard outlines, imperfect resolutions, exposed seams, contradictory viewpoints.... Chaucer was thoroughly indifferent toward a quality which modern theory has conditioned us to regard as indispensable to good fiction, namely, consistent, unbroken illusion. In fact ... illusion-breaking is as essential to Chaucer's artistry as illusion-making. 130

As I show in my discussion of the Nun's Priest's Tale, the destruction of illusion as an aspect of the self-reflexivity of Chaucer's art occurs not only in the relationship between this final tale and the Canterbury Tales as a whole, but within individual tales themselves.

Jordan describes the placing of the excursus on the seven deadly sins within the systematic exposition on confession as "an annihilation of form," a "structural imbalance" which crystallizes "Chaucer's fundamental aesthetic problems and his characteristic method of dealing with them.... Chaucer was not concerned about stylistic consistency or dramatic propriety or structural balance. What for him defined artistic propriety was thematic relevance."¹³¹ This discourse is not a digression but merely the final subdivision of the three-fold definition of confession: "whennes that synnes spryngen, and how they encreessen and whiche they been" (320).

Jordan's criterion of thematic relevance also describes the relationship of the Parson's Tale to the whole of the Canterbury Tales. Its unambiguous expository form differs from that of the poetic narratives, and it destroys the illusion of the framing device of the pilgrimage to the extent that its discernible achievement is not the repentance of the fictional pilgrims but a Retraction by the poet Chaucer; a retraction which steps outside of the world of the work of art which calls it into being. Nonetheless the tale's thematic relevance in a work whose governing framework is the

motif of pilgrimage is indisputable. Furthermore, the Parson's Tale is related to the work as a whole not only thematically but also formally. It is precisely in its structural predisposition that Jordan sees a kinship between the Parson's treatise and the rest of the Canterbury Tales:

The creative impulse develops in an analytical and endlessly inventive process of dividing a pre-conceived totality into its constituent parts.... The ground upon which this inorganic aesthetic rests is the firm assumption ... that experience is finite and comprehensible, that circumscribable totality is a condition of nature, an attribute of divine creation discernible on all levels of being. The 'exposed beam' constructions of Chaucer's art reflect [this] presumption.... [and] preserves the objective integrity of the fiction and prevents the illusion from merging with the observer. 132

The Parson's Tale and the Retraction achieve the ultimate destruction of the frame of illusion. This does not mean, however, that the Parson's disapproval of imaginative literature invalidates it, or requires that the tales find their final commentary in his terms. The Parson's Tale represents one of many possible points of view concerning the function of words in the discovery of truth. Its standards and criteria are not relevant to all of the tales. That there is room for more than one controlling perspective in a work of art, or in a man's life is attested to by the co-existence of "beautiful lies" -- the symbolic game of illusion -- and revealed truth in one work. Jordan concludes:

That Chaucer could be both such a Christian and the maker of such beautiful fictions is perhaps the most conclusive demonstration we can offer of the nonorganicist sensibility. In Chaucer we find art and belief coming together without merging. The result ... is a 'multiple unity,' which allows each element its full play and autonomy yet holds them together within a controlling outline ... Thus the Parson's Tale sacrifices none of its Truth for being part of

a fiction, nor does the fiction of the Canterbury Tales lose any of its literary persuasiveness for standing in its place within the edifice of Truth. In the ultimate perspective of God's vision, contingent reality does not dissolve, for it is the palpable sign of Truth. 133

It is only when each Canterbury tale is read in the Robertsonian perspective as a moral allegory that the Retraction presents a real problem, for it becomes redundant. It is true that the rejection of poetry in the Parson's prologue and in Chaucer's Retraction point up the limitations of art, but this thesis attempts to show that even in his most memorable artistic pieces lies an implicit recognition of the very nature of fiction -- and this of necessity includes an acknowledgement of its limitations and the very real possibility that it may be misused. In fact, the literal-minded Parson's blanket rejection of all imaginative literature, his inability to think in relative terms, is as Howard says, a limitation of his own: "He thinks there is an absolute difference between truth and falsehood, and that all fables are falsehood; he doesn't understand about 'poetic truth'. The tale he tells has got to be wheat or else it will be 'draf'." ¹³⁴ It must be admitted that although the Parson is an embodiment of the Pauline and Augustinian ideal preacher, his treatise is less engaging, less entertaining than the best tales told by the other pilgrims. Nonetheless, although the pilgrims reject the Pardoner, they are eager to hear the Parson's sermon:

Upon this word we han assented soone,
For, as it seemed, it was for to doone,
To enden in som vertuous sentence, ...
Alle we to telle his tale hym preye. (61 - 66)

Cespedes points to the fact that the Parson quotes a Scriptural passage, not out of context as the Pardoner does his theme, but with a very telling omission:

The Parson's text is from Jeremias 6:16.... What the Parson's 'etc.' omits, however, is the final sentence of the Scriptural verse: 'Et dixerunt: Non ambulabimus' ('And they said: We will not walk'). In its exclusively transcendental approach to the pilgrimage, the Parson's epigraph is, in a different way, just as ironic and ambiguous as the Pardoner's use of 'radix malorum est cupiditas' in his sermon.... This contrast is one more instance of Chaucer's repeated dramatization of the comic incongruities between given theological and literary patterns and patternless, recalcitrant 'life'.... [The Parson] is severely limited in his ability to communicate the Christian message to a fallen world. This is, however, the ability of poetry and fables: their capacity for reaching and moving an audience validates the use of imaginative literature in Chaucer's world. In the character of the Pardoner, Chaucer may very well be denying admiration for art apart from the artist's morality; but the Parson makes this denial explicit and too reductive: the Parson's refusal to tell a fable is, on one level, an assertion that poetry has no place in a Christian universe. The Canterbury Tales, taken as a whole, is an open-ended investigation of the protean possibilities between these two positions: while the Parson remains the ideal temporal representative, the contours of life in this world demand a distanced compromise with the eloquent methods of the Pardoner. 135

Cespedes may be guilty of over-interpretation in assuming that, because the inhabitants of Jerusalem were reprobate and refused to respond to the exhortations of God to reform, it follows that the Canterbury pilgrims will not respond to the lesson of the Parson. It is possible that the Parson chooses this quotation because it is rooted in penitential context, and omits to mention the defiance of the people of Jerusalem because it is not relevant. More significant, however, is the fact that the final destruction of the frame of illusion achieved by the Parson's Tale and the Retraction make it impossible -- indeed irrelevant -- for the pilgrim Chaucer to record the reactions of his fellow pilgrims. The "roadside drama" of the pilgrims' reactions to each others' personalities and tales -- an illusion which Jordan¹³⁶ shows to be inconsistent with Chaucer's sense of illusion; a construct of

the critics' imaginations -- is finally shattered, as it has been disrupted so many times before, when fiction transcends itself to generate doctrinal Truth. The theory of an illusion unified in fictionalized time and space does not allow for the double perspective of Chaucer the pilgrim and Chaucer the poet, let alone the coexistence of morally dubious art and religious truth.

The ultimate significance of the Parson's Tale, then, is not that of a retrospective commentary on the other tales. Patterson holds that its general nature extends its concern with sin beyond the pilgrims, who play a role in a merely local fiction, to all men at all times. The work concludes with the author's withdrawal to a higher, more all-inclusive perspective than his fiction affords:

In closing the Canterbury Tales with a work of this generality, then, Chaucer forces us to look beyond the specific world that has so far occupied our attention.... Chaucer himself emerges at the end, replacing the narratorial voice, dramatic, engaging, and multivalent, with his own identifiably historical tone.... The effect of this gradual withdrawal from fiction to history is to devalue fiction, and the specific reductions occasioned by these endings are in effect extensions of the larger reduction implied by the form itself. The elaborately contrived fictional world is brought into contact with a reality, both divine and human.... The effect, then, is not to invite a reinterpretation or even revaluation of the fiction but to declare it transcended.... The certainties of the Parson's Tale render the complexities of the tales inconsequential and even sophisticated. 137

The Parson's Tale achieves a reunion of language and truth which is lacking in many of the tales. Moreover, its "sentence," unlike that of most of the other serious tales, is not qualified by or subject to interpretation in terms of the personality of its teller, for he effectively has none. Although the Parson, unlike the Nun's Priest, is portrayed in the General Prologue, he is not characterized as an individual, but as Howard says, as an idea: "And it is this abstract

figure, the priest rather than the man, who preaches at the end. He is a 'figural' priest who stands for the idea of priesthood."¹³⁸ Hence a dramatic reading is not encouraged, nor is the "Truth" that emerges vulnerable to a reduction to the truth for an individual. "In sum," Patterson writes, "the Canterbury Tales provides various prospects on and versions of the truth, but no one is allowed authority or even an unchallenged assertion."¹³⁹ And this includes the Parson. The absolute nature of his meaning, born of his uncompromising, anti-literary stance, can be seen as a limitation on his part. Furthermore, to argue that this work invalidates the form from which it emerges is extreme. The game of tale-telling has very nearly succeeded in sublimating the true concerns and significance of the pilgrimage, transforming this motif into a mere excuse for the existence of the tales. The Parson's Tale must counteract the submergence of "erdest" in "game," and to do so it must redefine the nature of fiction. In Patterson's words:

While the Parson's Tale issues into clear light of reality, it takes its beginning in the imprecision of fiction, and it is itself a part of the whole it dismisses. This is the paradox the Parson himself expresses when he promises to 'telle a myrie tale in prose' that will 'knytte up al this feeste, and make an ende' (46 - 47).... In its ultimate terms, the opposition between Host and Parson is between ... the attitude that accepts the here and now as a sufficient reality and the one that perceives human experience as only the foreground to a larger horizon. In literary terms it is an opposition between fabulae and sana doctrina, and between two concepts of form: an additive, self-generating, and almost extemporaneous seriality on the one hand, and on the other a carefully organized action with beginning, middle and end.... It is necessary, then, that the Parson's Tale should provide not a fulfillment to the tales but an alternative, a complete and exclusive understanding of character, action, and even language.... It is to be measured not by the standards of literary fame but of eternal salvation. 140

The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to Timothy opens

with a diatribe against embellished literature to which the Parson refers when he refuses to tell a "tale":

Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies,
which minister questions, rather than godly edifying
which is in faith: so do.

Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a
pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of
faith unfeigned;

From which some having swerved have turned aside
unto vain jangling;

Desiring to be teachers of the law: understanding
neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm. (I.
Tim., 1, 4 - 7)

The Parson interprets Paul's injunction to Timothy as a condemnation of all secular literature as being distinct from the divine truth of Scripture:

'Thou getest fable noon ytold for me;
For Paul, that writeth unto Thymothee,
Repreveþ hem that weyven soothfastnesse,
And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse.
Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,
Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?' (31 - 36)

Imaginative literature is morally suspect -- a potential distraction from the purity of doctrinal truth. Nonetheless an elaborate defense of the fable is built around the same metaphor that the Parson uses to reject it: the "draf" is believed to contain hidden "whete," or moral truth, which justifies its existence. The tension between ecclesiastical denunciations of worldly literature as iniquitous and its obvious appeal and efficacy -- especially as demonstrated by the introduction of exempla to the sermons of the preaching friars during the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries -- accounts for the phenomenon that the men of the cloth on Chaucer's imaginative pilgrimage are the most self-conscious about their literary endeavours. In Khinoy's words:

Chaucer's clergy stood in a more complex relationship to literature than their fellow pilgrims. They had accepted Harry Bailly's usurpation of the governance of the pilgrimage, which was a diversion from spiritual goals; they had subsequently accepted Harry's plans and rules, committing themselves to tell tales at request. But was not tale-telling morally dubious? ... Tradition and authority side with the idealized Parson in his refusal to play Harry Bailly's game ... This uncompromising anti-literary stance was not ... the attitude of the Middle Ages as a whole. The most usual defense of fable expressed itself in a series of distinctions which rested on the single fundamental metaphor ... the distinction between the inside and the outside. What was inside counted. The outside was 'mere,' relatively worthless, whether it was superficially attractive (to lure ordinary men to the inside) or unattractive, like a dry husk, to repel the unworthy.... The 'outside' is conceived of as ultimately disposable, the mere vessel for the inner truth. And so with fiction. 141

The Nun's Priest points out the complex nature of the apparently simple relationship between fruit and chaff. The Pardoner deliberately subverts this relationship. The literalist Parson fears that the entertaining "letter," the fable itself, detracts attention from its substance or moral. The literary self-reflexivity of the tales of the Pardoner, Manciple and Nun's Priest can be accounted for by the propensity of language, used imaginatively or artfully, even within the confines of exempla, to transcend the limitations of the function it is supposed to fulfill, and call attention to its own nature. The Parson's worst fears are realized, for the sententiae in these other tales function as merely one element in the work, and are not the goal to which all other elements of the text are subservient, and toward which they converge. The Parson's Tale, as Baldwin says, is "myrie" "only in Bernardian and ascetical terms, not in the lexicon of the host at all,"¹⁴² and it points up the failure of the other tales to subordinate "draf" to "whete."

This tale, however, is not the first to cast doubt upon the moral integrity of poetic language. The other tales do so

with an inevitability that speaks for itself. Patterson discusses the defiance of poetic language to behave in the way that its defence stipulates that it should:

Chaucer's poetic practice more often reflects the internally determined values of a rhetorical poetics than the external strategies prescribed by the allegorists. As the exegete discovers when he tries to specify the full meaning of a Chaucerian poem, Chaucerian sententiae are less the conclusion which all the elements of the text express than occasions for writing which the complexities of the text rapidly transcend. Theme figures as ... a ground of significance upon which the variables of fable, personality and language display themselves. Like the Pardoner's sermon, Chaucer's poems use traditional truths as themae upon which to play variations, and we can no more define the significance of the whole by reference to its rhetorical origins than we can say that the Pardoner's Tale means radix malorum est cupiditas. When located within a rhetorical perspective, then, the Canterbury Tales reveals itself not as a progression toward a goal -- parts that signify a unifying whole -- but as a series of poetic experiments in various styles, a witty compendium of late medieval literary fashion embellished with the appropriate personalities.... The Parson's final contribution to the game is thus a formal alternative that in effect renders the game unplayable.... But there are compensations, for it is only by such an interruption that the tales can be brought to any conclusion.... The beneficence the Parson offers can be fully appreciated only when we recognize how persistently Chaucer has asked the moral questions raised by his kind of poetry, and how persistently he has refused to answer them. Of course poetry can never tell the truth in quite the way that the allegorical literary theory of Chaucer's day prescribed, and his conventionalized gestures toward authenticity, whether moral or historical, are more appeasements of this expectation than real claims to truthfulness. 143

It is for this reason that the Nun's Priest's Tale cannot be reduced to a suitably moral allegory. The function of language in Chaucer's secular tales is not the same as that in the Parson's Tale where it is strictly denotative, pointing to something beyond itself, living up to the Pauline

injunction to exist only "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (I. Cor., II, 4). The artful use of language in Chaucer's literary fables, on the other hand, calls attention to itself. The sententiae, for example, in the Nun's Priest's Tale, no less than in the Pardoner's and Manciple's tales, underline the complexity of poetic truth by their failure to summarize and contain it. Moreover, homiletic material, as Patterson says, is not used toward didactic ends in the secular tales as it is in the Parson's Tale:

In the tales the characters use the language of homiletic exhortation as the material from which they fashion nothing less than themselves. This is most true of the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner, the two characters who most fully accept the challenge of the Chaucerian dramatic monologue and create themselves for us not merely in language but as language.... Homiletic language functions for ... these characters, then, as a means toward a personal end, and its meaning provides little more than an ironic commentary on their strategies of self-creation and mystery. But for the Parson homiletic language remains essentially denotative. Words are signs for realities that transcend the personal, and even when language assumes rhetorical devices and a degree of self-reflexiveness it still functions symbolically, in its order and coherence invoking and delineating the larger order and coherence of a divine reality. 144

The fact that homiletic language may be misused in this way -- that it may become part of a rhetorical strategy to create a bogus reality, to manipulate others and deceive oneself -- justifies the purist fears of the Parson. It is the Pardoner's aim to invert the relationship between language and truth, forcing the audience to re-examine the function of words as signifiers; and, as Patterson succinctly puts it: "The Manciple's Tale exists precisely to present poetic speech in its most morally offensive form."¹⁴⁵ In both cases, however, the attempted subversion of the relationship between language and reality is checked by the innate ability of language, born of its divinely-given cognitive power, to assert the truth despite

the intentions of the speaker. In his exemplum, the Pardoner unwittingly creates a world which he cannot control -- one in which a cosmic force of justice strikes down with unerring inevitability all embodiments of evil -- a force which seems to step outside of the fiction and undo the Pardoner himself. The arrogance with which he boasts of his villainy redounds upon him, making him appear all the more ridiculous and pathetic. In the Manciple's Tale, Phebus deludes himself into a state of contentment no more real than that which was his before he learned of his wife's infidelity; for him happiness depends upon ignorance of self-deceit. The moral, however, which exalts deception in the interest of expediency, discredits itself by engendering the bleak vision of a world in which all truth meets the fate of the crow. The impossibility of living in a world in which no criterion for truth exists, in which "moralite[s]" are inherently immoral, forces one to reject it and insist upon adherence to the standards practised by the crow.

The self-reflexivity of the Nun's Priest's Tale is perhaps the most dramatic of all, for in his closing exhortation the narrator invites his audience to interpret his fable in terms of "external strategies" -- strategies to which the subtleties and complexities of his text refuse to yield:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,
As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,
Taketh the moralite, goode men.
For seint Paul seith that all that writen is,
To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille. (3438 - 43)

The Nun's Priest's words anticipate Chaucer's own in his Retraction: "For oure book seith, 'al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,' and that is myn entente" (1083). In both cases, this alleged statement of creative intention has encouraged readers to reinterpret the text -- be it the Nun's Priest's Tale, or the Canterbury Tales in its entirety -- in search

of a consistent, orthodox Christian "doctrine."

Those who adhere to the position that Chaucer speaks in his own voice in the Retraction must come to grips with it as a document "of personal revelation, an autobiographical datum about the tension between moral and artistic claims."¹⁴⁶

These are the words of Douglas Wurtele, who believes that all but lines 1085 - 1090a should be attributed to Chaucer's Parson as his closing benediction. I believe, however, that the Retraction is meant to be read as Chaucer's own and that in it he offers an alternate viewpoint which supports that offered by the Parson. Its indifference to the artistic merits of the poetry it rejects, rather than creating a problem to be solved, may well be its point. The Retraction provides an alternate perspective from which to examine the works which it cannot, in fact, call back; a corrective to counteract and disavow the potential of the tales of mirth (the products of Chaucer's "dangerous experiment in the art of teaching with delight"¹⁴⁷) to lead man into sin. It provides for them, in the words of Paul Ruggiers, "the perspective of the interior life of the spirit.... [It] asserts the sense of another pressing reality which the form now allows Chaucer finally to admit: the rueful confession from an artist who looks back upon his achievement that the most interesting materials of poetry are the signatures of fallen man."¹⁴⁸

As before, an examination of the Scriptural context of Chaucer's allusions and of their accepted meaning in the Middle Ages, is instructive. The direct source of his citation is the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans:

For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope. (XV, 4)

These words are echoed in Paul's Second Epistle to Timothy:

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. (III, 16).

Olive Sayce points out that the first quotation gradually lost its specific reference to Scriptural truth:

It was used to justify the generally instructive purpose of literature, and occurs in this sense, for instance, at the end of the Nun's Priest's Tale. In the context of the 'Retractions' the phrase seems to have a double meaning. On the one hand in its scriptural sense it is connected with the contrast between divine truth and secular falsehood.... On the other hand, Chaucer appears also to be hinting at its wider significance and thus to be justifying his own work on the grounds of its generally instructive purpose. 149

The effect of this allusion at the end of the Nun's Priest's Tale is by no means as simple as Sayce implies. It seems more likely that Chaucer exploits the ambiguity of the meaning of the Pauline exhortation in both cases. In the case of the Retraction, this ambiguity gives rise to the debate as to whether or not he does indeed repudiate and annihilate the bulk of the canon of his work. I believe that the Retraction qualifies the function of poetic truth, re-evaluating Chaucer's poetry (and by extension all forms of imaginative literature) not in terms of artistic merit but in terms of personal morality and Christian doctrine. In doing so, it provides an implicit check upon the degradation of imagination into delusion and lies, thereby vindicating the role of poetic and literary expressions of truth by placing them in context within a larger, all-embracing framework of Truth.

Notes

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- ⁵ Colish, p. 2.
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- ⁷ Colish, p. 4 - 5.
- ⁸ Colish, p. 5.
- ⁹ Colish, p. 57.
- ¹⁰ Colish, p. 6.
- ¹¹ Colish, p. 20.
- ¹² Colish, p. 31.
- ¹³ Colish, p. 38.
- ¹⁴ Colish, pp. 54 - 55.
- ¹⁵ Colish, p. 61.
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- ¹⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, The Summa Theologica, in 3 volumes. trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc. 1947), Pt. 1, Q. 48, Art. 1, p. 248.
- ¹⁸ Aquinas, Pt. 1, Q. 49, Art. 1, p. 253.
- ¹⁹ Aquinas, Pt. 1, Q. 49, Art. 3, pp. 255 - 56.

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- 21 Aquinas, Pt. 1, Q. 48, Art. 1, Reply 2, p. 249.
- 22 Aquinas, Pt. 1, Q. 48, Art. 2, Reply 3, p. 250.
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The Nun's Priest's Tale: An Allegory of Allegory

I. Patristic Criticism and the Snares of the Nun's Priest's Tale.

The theory of figurative expression set forth in St. Augustine's De Doctrina Christiana is crucial to my discussion of the Nun's Priest's Tale, which revolves around the question of whether any single allegorical interpretation is possible, given the ambiguity of this tale -- its defiance of any single internally consistent interpretation, allegorical or otherwise. In the view of D. W. Robertson, this theory provides a justification for the allegorical interpretation of secular medieval literature. His thesis has given rise to considerable dissention, most of which argues that the techniques of Scriptural exegesis do not and cannot apply to imaginative literature composed by man.

The theory of figurative expression has its immediate roots in the technique of Biblical exegesis which depends upon the recognition of the persons, places, objects, events and cryptic utterances of the Bible as signs of divine realities, which may signify literally or figuratively. Marcia Colish explains: "The signum proprium signifies literally.... The signum translatum, on the other hand, signifies figuratively. In essence it is a nonverbal sign that is conceived in verbal terms by being treated as a metaphor, or a figure of speech with transferred meaning.... Important to the exegete here is a knowledge of arts, sciences, and institutions of all kinds."¹ The patristic exegete postulates that four levels of meaning exist simultaneously in the Bible; all but

the literal or historical level involve a figurative interpretation:

The allegorical method views persons, things, and events in the Old Testament as types of persons, things, and events that occur later, in New Testament times.... The anagogical method views persons, things, and events occurring in the Bible as types of the Church of the Saints at the end of time. In the case of the moral or typological method, both transference of meaning in time and the shift from one mode of discourse to another are involved. The moral state of the believer in the present time is the point of reference. 2

In addition, nonverbal signs which do not have their source in Scripture can have a similar function in leading man to the cognition of God: "When the knowledge of God is expressed through things, persons, and actions ... the sacraments, confession of faith, and the witness of Christian example, St. Augustine regards it as operating figuratively.... The whole of the life of faith [then] provides man with the knowledge of God per speculum in aenigmate."³ Things acting as signs are subject to the same limitations as words which signify non-sensible realities.

St. Augustine's discussion of the aesthetics of figurative expression occurs in his account of Scriptural obscurity in the De Doctrina. D. W. Robertson gives the following account of this theory:

This obscurity, says St. Augustine, was divinely ordained to overcome pride by work, and to prevent the mind from disdaining a thing too easily grasped. It stimulates a desire to learn, and at the same time excludes those who are unworthy from the mysteries of the faith. But it is also pleasant. St. Augustine's account of the manner in which pleasure arises from obscurity reveals an aesthetic attitude which became typically medieval ... that things are more readily learned through similitude and that those things which are sought with difficulty are the more pleasantly discovered.... [But] St. Augustine

seems unconcerned with the question which most interests the modern aesthetician: why is figurative language pleasant? His answer to this question, insofar as he gives one, is simply that the sense of difficulty overcome is pleasant. He has nothing to say about aesthetic pleasure in itself without reference to the discovery of truth ... figurative expression is not of any value in itself.... Instead he saw that if the figures are regarded as problems capable of an intellectual solution it is possible to recognize the fact that they conform to an abstract pattern which harmonizes with the pattern of a useful idea. 4

Paradoxically, it is the very obscurity of aenigmata that enables them to function as accurate signs: "Metaphorical significance," says Colish, "is far better suited to express realities that are themselves intrinsically obscure and difficult to understand."⁵ In its very nature the figurative expression reflects the incomprehensibility of God. In a similar vein, Robertson explains that the lack of surface consistency in the figures forces the reader to search for an underlying abstract pattern which coheres to a theological doctrine or idea:

The incoherence of surface materials is almost essential to the formation of the abstract pattern, for if the surface materials ... were consistent or spontaneously satisfying in an emotional way, there would be no stimulus to seek something beyond them.... It follows also that the concrete materials of the figures do not need to be 'realistically' conceived to obtain the effect desired.... The aesthetic of figurative expression described by St. Augustine is essentially ... allegoria: the art of saying one thing to mean another. 6

Robertson cites the Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians to justify the search for the spiritual meaning beneath the letter of the text:

Who also hath made us able ministers of the New

Testament: not of the letter, but of the spirit;
for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. (3.6)

St. Augustine and John the Scot defend poets from their literal-minded detractors on the basis of the similarity between Scriptural expression and those poetic fables which "refer to a true significatio"⁷ and thus do not lie. John the Scot makes explicit the comparison between Scriptural and poetic obscurity, "pointing out that just as the art of poetry uses 'feigned fables and allegorical similitudes' to express moral or physical truth ... in the same way the Scriptures employ figurative expression to lead the mind toward the comprehension of the intelligible."⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, as I will show later, rejects this comparison as too facile, arguing that although the allegorical methods of poetry and Scripture may be similar at times, their *raison d'être* and ultimate goals are different, and these are the telling factors.

Robertson's famous thesis posits the application of the methods of Scriptural exegesis to the interpretation of allegorical expression in secular literature. He cites the views of Augustine and John the Scot, asserting that these and similar theories manifest themselves in a conscious effort on the part of secular writers to use figurative expression to lead the mind to Scriptural understanding:

In these instances, the truths involved are not the 'moral, physical, and historical' truths of the pagans, but the invisibilia Dei, so that, as far as aesthetic matters are concerned, the poems may be thought of as having an effect similar to the effect of figurative passages in the Scriptures. When scriptural figures are used by a poet, they do not lose their original connotations, and the poet requires no special elevation or inspiration to employ them. As a Christian, in fact, he has an obligation to suggest the intelligible to his readers, whether the figures he uses are derived from scriptural or non-scriptural sources. 9

Robertson does not question the validity of his assumption that a secular poem which has an "effect similar" to a Scriptural passage automatically requires the same method of interpretation. Nor does his thesis differentiate between the presence of Scriptural allusions in non-allegorical or non-explicit allegorical writings, and the presence of Scriptural material in a work such as the Psychomachia which is clearly intended as an allegory of Christian doctrine. When Scriptural figures are used in a secular poem, they may lose their original connotations, and assume other meanings suggested by the context of the poem. The substitution of the figural interpretations supplied by the exegetical tradition for the literal meanings of the words of the poem is not the appropriate procedure in all cases. Furthermore, Robertson substantiates his argument by accepting at face value the defences of secular literature by Alanus de Insulis, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, among others, all of whom claim that their work contains moral and/or philosophical instruction which is barred from the unworthy by the figures of the literal sense. For example, Petrarch bases his defence of the enigmatic technique on an analogy between Augustinian Scriptural obscurity and the aesthetics of poetry. What Robertson fails to note is that the very conditions which prompted the writing of these apologiae placed the poets very much on the defensive.

Some respected critics such as Donaldson, Bloomfield and Wimsatt have argued that secular literature was never meant to be interpreted in the consistent moralizing fashion of Robertson. E. Talbot Donaldson in his 1958 paper "Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: The Opposition," admits the influence of the patristic tradition on medieval poetry, but rejects the extremism of the Robertsonian view that "all serious poetry written by Christians during the Middle Ages promotes the doctrine of charity by using the same allegorical structure that the Fathers found in the Bible ... [and] that patristic exegesis alone will reveal the meaning of medieval poetry."¹⁰ His counter

argument is that no critical analysis should force the text to fit a preconceived pattern or reveal a predetermined meaning. "The patristic influence on Middle English poetry," he writes, "seems to me to consist in providing occasional symbols which by their rich tradition enhance the poetic contexts they appear in, but which are called into use naturally by those contexts and are given fresh meaning by them."¹¹ It is more properly in the interpretation of Scriptural figures used by medieval authors, then, that traditional Biblical exegesis is of value.

In a recent favourable response to Donaldson's essay, William E. Rogers attempts to provide the "valid theoretical objection[s]" to this method which underlie Donaldson's reservations, but are nowhere made explicit by him. Rogers' purpose is to "define the theoretical limits of patristic criticism ... [to] indicate what sorts of conclusions the method can justify and which of its arguments are legitimate."¹² Practitioners often defend this procedure in terms of the explanatory power achieved by their readings. While Rogers concedes that no objections to it arise in "those cases where patristic criticism clearly succeeds in explaining something that seems to require explanation and that no other method seems to explain,"¹³ he demonstrates that not all cases fall within this category; nor is it always easy to determine which do. Hence his first objection is based on the structure of the argument which supports patristic readings because of their explanatory power. The criterion of consistency does not necessarily guarantee a second criterion: that of correctness.

The explanatory power of an interpretation therefore refers to its success in enabling the critic to construct a logically consistent account of all parts of the text.... [However, it] can function in only one way in an argument about the correctness of the interpretation. To account for all the parts of the work is only to show that the work can be consistently read in terms of that interpretation. ¹⁴

Internal consistency is not the sole condition for the correctness of an interpretation. A work may support any number of self-consistent interpretations, some of which it is impossible, on historical or other grounds, for the author to have intended. Hence authorial intention -- or at least historical possibility -- is an equally important criterion. Rogers distinguishes between analytic and causal interpretations, demonstrating his argument for the inherent limitations of the former thus:

If I confine myself strictly to the analytic type of explanation, I cannot reject a self-consistent interpretation of a medieval poem ... as referring to the Brooklyn Bridge, just because there was no Brooklyn Bridge in 1300. The purely analytic critic ... conceives of an interpretation as being ultimately some mental construct under which he can subsume all the parts of the text. It theoretically makes no difference to him where that mental construct comes from. 15

He cannot explain the historical cause of the text.

The patristic critics are historical critics who hold that medieval writers thought allegorically; that it was their intention to illustrate the doctrine of caritas in their work. Rogers' second theoretical objection to the patristic critics ironically argues that they are not historical enough; that they pay insufficient attention to evidence external to the text. Their method does not live up to their own criterion -- the criterion of all causal explanations -- of authorial intention, precisely because the doctrine of charity guides them in their substitutions of the figural meanings found in patristic writings for the literal meanings of the words of the text. Their predetermined interpretation dictates how certain parts of the text are read; their value-judgments and conclusions precede and determine their procedure:

In that case, the explanatory power of [the] inter-

pretation ... is by itself no argument for [its] correctness ... if by correctness we mean correspondence to the author's intent.... The analytic argument shows only that the text can be read as illustrating the doctrine of charity.... [But] what does the explanatory power of an allegorical interpretation contribute to the argument that a particular work is allegory? 16

The answer, of course, is none. In the case of the Nun's Priest's Tale, for instance, there are rival, secular interpretations that appear to have sufficient explanatory power. The patristic critic asserts that the author intended to write allegory, and that the exegetical tradition caused him to conceive the work as he did, its sententia determining the littera and the sensus of his text. Rogers' conclusion is much the same as Donaldson's: that patristic criticism serves its most valuable purpose in the evaluation of Scriptural allusions which can then be discussed in terms of their function and value in the literary work. Another approach suggested by Rogers is this:

Take the passage alluded to as part of the subject matter of the allusive work.... [In that way] we can praise medieval works because of the comments they make on the exegetical tradition when they allude to that tradition.... Similarly we can praise non-explicit allegories because of the comments they make on the subject matter of allegory (as often as not, some document or traditional symbol system). It is remarkable that most patristic 'allegorical' readings do not assert that the literary work extends or makes comments upon the sententia or the traditional symbols. 17

One aspect of the self-reflexivity of the Nun's Priest's Tale, as I will show, is that it comments implicitly upon the function of symbols and sententiae -- the subject matter of allegory -- in secular literature.

The degree to which it can be argued that a symbol retains its traditional meaning once it is removed from its

Scriptural context and introduced into a secular poem is discussed by W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., in his 1955 article "Two meanings of Symbolism: A Grammatical Exercise." He differentiates between the term symbol "in the general sense of verbal sign (or any other deliberate human sign) ... [and] 'symbol' in the far more restricted sense of some special kind of thing or event in the world of reality.... From this meaning there is also 'symbol' in the sense of some special detail in a painting or some special word or group of words in a writing."¹⁸ It is the latter conception of the term that lies at the roots of the symbolist tradition in patristic and medieval exegesis:

The fact is, as we read for instance in Aquinas, that the Biblical exegetes were thinking directly about things, a universe of things, as special symbols.... [This] means ... that individual things in the objective world and classes of things have more or less properly definable symbolic meanings or at least ranges of such meanings. For the purpose of the Scriptural exegete, it would appear to me ... that a simply traditional or revelatory fixation of symbolic meaning would be sufficient.... It is the adaptation of the Scriptural method by the secular poet, the overlay and more abstract play of symbolic meaning, which mainly enters into the poetic problem. ¹⁹

Eric Auerbach, in his 1952 essay "Typological Symbolism in Medieval Literature," speaks of "the important difference which obtains between figurism and other similar forms of thinking such as allegorism or symbolism. In these patterns, at least one of the two elements combined is a pure sign, but in figural relation both the signifying and the signified are real and concrete historical events."²⁰ The essential difference, then, between literary symbolism and Scriptural figurative expression is that the latter does not admit of a fictional level. The criterion of fiction is that which distinguishes poetic from divine revelation. Poetry reveals truth beneath the veil of fiction, whereas Scripture lays

claim to historical truth despite the poetic quality of its literal level. Richard Hamilton Green characterizes Sacred Scripture thus:

[It] contained both the prefiguration of [God's] revelation and its fulfillment. The text of Scripture was therefore regarded as literally and historically true, since it was the record of man's redemption, and as spiritually true, because the persons, things and events recorded there were themselves figures of the divine truth which the book revealed.... The sacred quality of Scriptural allegory and the divinity of its author must be stressed, because assent to these premises inevitably controlled the way a mediaeval writer could speak of other books and their makers, other figurative manifestations of what was finally the same truth but revealed within the limits of human creativity. 21

Hence, a symbol transplanted from Scripture to poetry may retain some of its traditional meaning, but it loses its claim to historical validity and is subject to the contextual requirements of the poem. It cannot be treated in the same way as a Scriptural figure. Like Donaldson and Rogers, Wimsatt argues against the imposition of an extrinsic theoretical structure on to a work of the imagination, which prescribes and therefore limits analysis of it to the terms of a priori knowledge of any theoretical scheme. Furthermore, the determinate or properly definable range of symbolic meanings which is attributed to individual objects or natural classes of objects in the Scriptural exegetical tradition is inimical both to the creation and criticism of poetry in that it minimizes or ignores the importance of the context in which the symbol appears. Wimsatt raises the question:

Whether the world and its parts have symbolic meanings that are at all strictly determinate, whether the 'book of nature' described by such authors as Saint Bonaventure in the thirteenth century ... is written in one language, a scientifically specific language, or in the polysemous ambiguity of poetry

itself. A quidditative and teleological view of the world invites ... some fairly restrictive theory of its symbolism ... such a confidence in an ultimately definable order and significance in things, does not provide a grammar of sufficient finesse for actually coping with the structure of poems.... Formulary or stereotyped symbolism as a creative technique is a contradiction. It has always tended to fizzle out into the quaint conceptions of bestiary, lapidary, emblem book, or the debased patristic style of the Euphuist. 22

It is precisely this tradition which Wimsatt disparages that Robertson cites as further evidence of the richness of the enigmatic technique as a means by which men could fulfill the aims of their art:

The delight in the enigmatic which appears ... in musical configurations of the fourteenth century, and in the emblem books of the Renaissance is not something merely 'quaint' and sporadic. It is a manifestation of a fully formed and deeply felt aesthetic theory.... The enigmatic figure ... enabled [the medieval artist] to appeal, first of all, to the reason, and through the reason to the affective values which philosophy and theology pointed to as the highest and most moving values possible to humanity. 23

While Robertson feels that the correctness of tradition and the inherently determinate nature of the symbolism which are the criteria for Scriptural exegesis also suffice as the criteria for the criticism of medieval secular poetry, Donaldson, Wimsatt and Bloomfield disagree and point to Robertson and Huppé's own Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition as an indication of how learning of this type gets in the way of poetic criticism.

In fact, Donaldson calls into doubt the very assumption that "the patristic authorities ever clearly exhorted secular poets to write as the Bible had been written."²⁴ At least one theologian unequivocally restricts the term allegoria to the mode of the Sacred Scripture. Although St. Thomas Aquinas

is admittedly not one of the Church Fathers whom the patristic critics suppose to have devised rules for secular poets, his statement in Quaestiones Quiddlibetales (VII. Q. 6, A. 16) concerning the distinction between secular literature and the Holy Scripture deserves attention. Thomas denies the evidence of the allegorical, tropological and anagogical meanings in writings other than the Bible. Only God composes polysemously; the literal is what the author intends: "In nulla scientia, humana industria inventa, proprie loquendo, potest inveniri nisi litteralis sensus; sed solum in ista Scriptura cujus Spiritus Sanctus est auctor, homo vero instrumentum."²⁵ Donaldson provides a translation: "In no intellectual activity of the human mind can there properly speaking be found anything but the literal sense: only in Scripture, of which the Holy Ghost was the author, man the instrument, can there be found the spiritual sense' -- that is, the four levels of allegory."²⁶ Furthermore, in the tenth article of question one of the Summa: "Whether in Holy Scripture a Word may have Several Senses?" Thomas posits that it is the unique quality of Scripture that not only the words themselves but the things which they signify have referents beyond themselves:

The author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to signify this meaning, not by words only ... but also by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property, that the things signified by words have themselves also a signification. Therefore the first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal and presupposes it. Now this spiritual sense has a threefold division... 27

Man is limited to the singular signifying power of words. However, the multiple sense of Scripture does not produce confusion. Thomas explains: "Thus in Holy Writ no confusion

results, for all the senses are founded on one -- the literal -- from which alone can any argument be drawn ... nothing necessary to faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere put forward by Scripture in its literal sense."²⁸

Wimsatt points out that St. Thomas' remark in the Quaestiones argues against the application of the methods of Scriptural exegesis to secular medieval literature, thus preserving the integrity of the work by focusing attention away from theoretical pronouncements and toward:

the actual accomplishment of the medieval poet in his shaping of the complex of words, symbols and reality which are always the poet's medium.... It is clear, for one thing, that by the term literal in this passage Aquinas cannot mean to rule out of poetry the range of natural metaphoric and analogical meanings which are actually there.... 'Literal' in this passage of the Quodlibetales is opposed quite strictly to the other three divinely intended levels, the allegorical, the tropological, and the anagogical. Human poetry might very well refer to these levels of meaning, or point to them, and in some way involve them.... But the human poet, not being at the divine level, could hardly speak down from it with a real message about divine meanings. The doctrine of Aquinas would seem to mean at least that we ought to avoid looking for intended messages in poetry; we ought to read it as accomplished or constructed symbolic art, an art where symbols have not a catalogued or correct meaning, but whatever meaning the poet is able to demonstrate dramatically in the very conjunction of symbols which constitutes his poem.... The poet ... claims for his abstraction only the correctness of his momentary context. 29

Morton Bloomfield, in his article Symbolism in Medieval Literature, speaks of the critics' disregard for the unique (i.e., the historical or psychological facet of a poem) in favour of a general system of interpretation, and of course it is the Christian allegorical system worked out by the Fathers of the Church that is most often applied to, or imposed upon, medieval literature. The relationship between

the literal and the symbolic or allegorical is not a simple one, for, as Bloomfield points out: "Except for typology (the veiled prediction of Christ in the Old Testament), at no time did any biblical exegete repudiate the importance and often the primacy of the biblical letter," while he simultaneously admits that "all meaning is at least partially symbolic. Beyond the fact that language itself is a system of sound and written symbols ... the substance and figures of literature must stand for more than themselves if they are to be fully meaningful."³⁰ Like Donaldson, Rogers and Wimsatt, Bloomfield believes that the vigorous application of the methods of Scriptural exegesis to the literature of the Middle Ages imposes artificial and unnecessary limitations on the rich and varied sententia conveyed by these works. And although the thoughts and beliefs of the Christian tradition form the intellectual framework of the era, it is not the sole tradition to which medieval man is heir. Bloomfield's first three objections, then, to the exegetical approach to medieval secular literature are essentially that its tendency is to oversimplify the object of its study. His fourth objection questions Robertson's assumption of the applicability of the criteria of interpretation of Scriptural texts to secular literature.

The polysematic school makes no difference between the Bible which was dictated by God in the form of the Holy Ghost and literary works written purely by sinful and erring man. There is very little evidence that the latter were written to be interpreted consistently in a symbolic manner, beyond the normal demands of literary figurative expression. To suppose that medieval man would presume to put himself on the level of God ... to think that he would write literature ... merely to convey profound religious truths clothed in many-colored 'allegory' seems to me to involve a great misunderstanding of that literature and that man. 31

He disagrees with Robertson's interpretation of the theory of

figurative expression set forth in De Doctrina. "In fact, the whole point of that work as regards the Bible is that what is taught is clearly taught, and, if occasionally obscure, it is elsewhere in the Bible made very plain."³² He concedes that St. Augustine often practised Biblical exegesis in which the "level" of meaning was, however, determined by the particular text under examination.

At the very beginning of the Summa Theologica, in his discussion of "Whether Holy Scripture Should Use Metaphor?" Thomas describes the apparent similarities in the methods of poetry and Scripture:

It is befitting Holy Writ to put forward divine and spiritual truths by means of comparisons with material things ... it is natural for man to attain to intellectual truths through sensible objects, because all our knowledge originates from sense.... Poetry makes use of metaphors to produce a representation, for it is natural to man to be pleased with representations. But sacred doctrine makes use of metaphors as both necessary and useful ... its truth so far remains that it does not allow the minds of those to whom the revelation has been made, to rest in the metaphors, but raises them to the knowledge of truths ... hence those things that are taught metaphorically in one part of Scripture, in other parts are taught more openly. 33

This final point agrees with Augustine's De Doctrina. Thomas attributes the need of figurative expression in Scripture to the limitations of man's cognitive abilities. Furthermore, the alleged similarities between poetry and theology are superficial and misleading, according to St. Thomas. They arise from the fact that neither appeals directly to the faculty of reason, but the reason for this is telling:

The science of poetry pertains to those things which because of their lack of truth cannot be grasped by reason; therefore it is necessary that reason be almost beguiled by such similitudes. Theology, however, pertains to those things which

are above reason, and so the symbolic method is common to both as neither is proportioned to reason. 34

Following Aristotle, Thomas relegates imagination to a very low position in the soul. Poetry, then, is a branch of logic, but the lowest and weakest; whereas theology transcends reason. Having succeeded in removing the problem of certain apparent similarities between poetry and theology, Thomas gives no more thought to the former. Therefore those who construct elaborate apologiae of secular literature on the basis of its analogy to theology and to Scripture are clutching at straws. This is not to suggest that the claim of didacticism is merely an excuse for a literary text, but to assert that neither is the moral lesson its sole *raison d'être*. In Bloomfield's words:

Those on the defensive were the men who, like Boccaccio, felt they must defend the claims of poetry and could do so only by arguing that it contained a 'sentence'. Yet this argument was obviously never taken very seriously by the real thinkers of the Middle Ages.... Reason, authority and divine revelation were the ways to truth. We have little evidence that the supporters of poetry did in fact interpret their poetry as symbolic, in spite of the theories of some of them.... [Rather] the Christian meaning of medieval literature is usually very clearly underlined by the normal meaning of the words ... we are expressly told by the authors what the poems mean in Christian moral, dogmatic or mystical terms. 35

Bloomfield considers Dante's unprecedented claim to polysemy in the Divine Comedy to be the exception which proves the rule.

The Nun's Priest's Tale puts up a great resistance against any attempt at systematic interpretation, proclaiming the primacy of the fictional surface itself. Most scholars are undone by the sheer subjectivity of their choice of referents for the supposedly allegorical figures of this

fable. This is the essence of Bloomfield's fifth and most important objection to the multileveled system of symbolism:

[It] provides no criterion of corrigibility except, as in the case of biblical exegesis, tradition.... Of many alternate explanations there is no way of deciding which one is correct, for supporting texts from the wide variety of medieval and patristic theology can be found for each one.... One cannot perhaps adequately prove any interpretation of literature, but if the words of the text are taken as of primary importance, there is always a court of appeal. 36

This is the same as Rogers' case that consistency does not guarantee correctness. In what follows I will examine some of the many mutually exclusive allegorical interpretations of the Nun's Priest's Tale which have appeared over the years. My goal is to show that a tale which suggests so many possible allegorical interpretations but in the final analysis allows for none is, in effect, calling attention to itself as a work of fiction which transcends because it exists outside of all systems of interpretation that can be imposed upon it. In this case an examination of the various critical approaches is important not because they illuminate the "meaning" of the poem but precisely because they fail to. Hence the argument that some of Chaucer's fictions are self-reflexive is difficult to reconcile with the medieval theory of allegory in which, although the literal level remains primary, the figures find their significance in a system of thought or belief -- a universal meaning -- extrinsic to the literature. The "concrete symbols," however, of the Nun's Priest's Tale -- if this is what they are -- refuse to yield to the symbolic significance assigned to them by the patristic exegetes, and beyond the fact that no criterion of corrigibility exists, no interpretation has been suggested which meets even the primary criterion of internal consistency.

II. The Failure of Allegory

This section examines Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale in terms of two related but fundamentally different forms of literary expression which influenced its creation: the tradition of employing fable-exempla to elucidate the dogmatic content of sermons, and the French tradition of the amoral animal epic. The didacticism of the exempla tradition undercuts any attempt to interpret the Nun's Priest's Tale at face value. At the same time the proliferation of motifs which suggest many topical or allegorical interpretations, ironically undercuts the validity of any one interpretation, for no single reading accommodates all the diverse elements present. A conclusion will be put forth which suggests that the Nun's Priest's Tale is in fact self-reflexive: a work of literature which calls attention to the strategies of fiction and examines the nature and function of literature in general.

In the late twelfth and thirteenth century, the moralized anecdote surfaced in the exempla adopted by Franciscan and Dominican friars to elucidate the themes of their sermons. Lilian Randall discusses the nature of the exempla:

Derived from the Scriptures [and I should add, Scriptural commentary] as well as from fables, beast epics, and daily events, the exempla were soon incorporated into alphabetized compendia. Mostly of English origin, these compilations served as convenient reference material for preachers seeking a tale whereby to illustrate in common terms the theological content of the sermon.... The effectiveness of this method in the hands of the mendicant orders is ... evidenced by expressions of protest against the diminishing attendance at the services of the regular clergy as people flocked to hear the more animated sermons preached in the vernacular by Franciscans and Dominicans. 3?

Motifs from the world of animals function perfectly as exempla precisely because the behaviour of animals is itself

amoral: the meaning of the story must exist on the allegorical plane. The following is a translation from a twelfth century bestiary which moralizes the behaviour of the fox and gives it a Christian interpretation:

He is a fraudulent and ingenious animal. When he is hungry and nothing turns up for him to devour, he rolls himself in red mud so that he looks as if he were stained with blood. Then he throws himself on the ground and holds his breath, so that he positively does not seem to breathe. The birds, seeing that he is not breathing, and that he looks as if he were covered in blood with his tongue hanging out, think he is dead and come down to sit on him. Well, thus he grabs them and gobbles them up.

The Devil has the nature of this same.

With all those who are living according to the flesh he feigns himself to be dead until he gets them in his gullet and punishes them. But for the spiritual men of faith he is truly dead and reduced to nothing.

Furthermore, those who wish to follow the devil's works perish, as the Apostle says: 'Know this, since if you live after the flesh you shall die, but if you mortify the doings of the foxy body according to the spirit you shall live.' And the Lord God says: 'They will go into the lower parts of the earth, they will be given over to the power of the sword, they will become a portion for foxes.' 38

From the same bestiary comes this interpretation of the behaviour of the cock:

It wakes the sleeping, it forewarns the anxious, it consoles the traveller by bearing witness to the passage of time with tuneful notes. At the cock's crowing the robber leaves his wiles, the morning star himself wakes up and shines upon the sky. At his crowing the devoted mind rises to prayer and the priest begins again to read his office. By testifying devotedly after the cock crowed Peter washed away the sin of the Church, which he had incurred by denying Christ before it crowed. It is by this song that hope returns to the sick, trouble is turned to advantage, the pain of wounds is relieved, the burning fever is lessened, faith is

restored to the fallen, Christ turns his face to the wavering or reforms the erring, wandering of mind departs and negation is driven out. Confession follows. Scripture teaches that this did not happen by chance, but by the will of our Lord. 39

Many of the motifs in English literature of the twelfth to the fourteenth century ultimately originate in the motifs adopted by the Franciscan and Dominican friars to exemplify the themes of their sermons. The assertion that Chaucer's tale depends upon the exempla tradition requires evidence that the tradition was current in England during Chaucer's time, and that the particular motif Chaucer employs in the Nun's Priest's Tale was extant and popular in a moralized form. In his article "The 'Nun's Priest's Tale': An Ironic Exemplum," Paul Shallers reports:

Animal tales were imported into England only after the Norman conquest when bestiary collections and references to bestiary lore in homilies began to appear.... However, true animal fables with pithy aphorisms about how to get along in the world had a relatively short lifespan in England, for the preaching friars ... wanted fable-exempla instead.... A fabulist instructs us about the practical temporal world while the exemplum writer continually reminds of the link between the material world below and the immaterial spiritual world beyond.... The exemplist's fox stood for either a spiritually blind man or the devil himself. 40

Shallers cites documentation that in the early thirteenth century, of seventy-five fable exempla in the recorded sermons of Oto de Cheriton, nine were taken from the Roman de Renart:

To each is appended a lengthy moralitas emphasizing its allegorical significance.... For all practical purposes, then, the Roman de Renart was introduced to the English populace in exemplum form.... there is nothing in English letters like a Renart poem until Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale. What does

exist is more fox exempla, written by John of Sheppey, Nicholas Bozon and John Bromyard.... Bromyard's exemplum of the 1360's is the only one in which we find the major ingredients of the basic plot[of Chaucer's version]. 41

Kenneth Varty, in his book Reynard the Fox: a Study of the Fox in Medieval English Art, proves that visual manifestations of the cock and fox embellishing churches and illuminated manuscripts were also exclusively didactic and moralistic. Hence it comes as no surprise that when Chaucer employs this motif in a secular poem his account is also essentially moralistic -- or seems to be. It is important to remember that this particular Canterbury tale is told by a priest. Chaucer is very much indebted to the general form and technique of the fable-exemplum. The facts that his characters are animals and that the disaster which causes so much fuss is a very common natural event -- a fox stealing a cock -- further suggest that what does matter is the meaning of his story in allegorical terms. Shallers comments:

The point is that Chaucer, drawing on the Roman de Renart as a source, reshaped it to accommodate anyone who expected a conventional exemplum. Many of his additions seem to demand allegorical interpretation as they turn our attention to important questions about the human condition. Take, for example, the Garden of Eden parallels in the poem on which several critics have remarked.... Perhaps the analogy suggests man's irrational self-delusion and overweening pride.... Perhaps it indicts woman as man's eternal bane, or perhaps it suggests man's helplessness in the web of predestination.... In any of these and similar hypotheses, we encounter the idealistic perspective of the Nun's Priest's Tale, a perspective dependent on the device of beast allegory, used as exemplum writers used it. The animal tale becomes the means to an abstract concept involving the spiritual, ethical and moral conditions of Christian man. 42

The second major form of literary expression which Chaucer employed in his writing of the Nun's Priest's Tale was

the amoral animal epic -- specifically the twelfth and thirteenth century French Roman de Renart. Shallers characterizes the poem as one which subverts a moral response by directing the reader's interest toward the strategies and schemes of the "hero."

The Renart avoids satire as it avoids any ethical or even practical standard by which we might identify vice and folly. Furthermore, victims in the Renart, weak or strong, generally elicit less sympathy than victimizers.... On close examination, it is clear that we admire this rogue purely for his wit, his guile, his audacity and vitality, in short, those traits which make him a successful rogue. He bears no impediments like a standard or code of conduct. The stories about him are splendidly ironic with ridicule aplenty, but they supply no attendant belief or cause to give that ridicule direction and meaning.... [Hence] readers laugh without moral reservation.... Because the trouvère never lets us forget that he is speaking of animals, rather than animalistic humans, he can have them act in the most outrageous, ignoble ways without evoking our censure or offending our sensibilities. A Renart poet can parody ... [literary] characters and situations without seriously attacking the values on which these aristocratic, ideal genres are based. 43

Chaucer reproduces the naturalistic tone of the Roman de Renart, as well as its mock-heroic elevation.

Many attempts have been made to interpret the Nun's Priest's Tale strictly in terms of the allegorical-didactic tradition, while others have attempted to write it off as a comedy which acts at the readers' expense by teasingly encouraging them to look for a serious moral at the base of the allegory. For example, Jill Mann examines the discrepancy between narrative and comment, and concludes that what is tested is "the limited nature of true morality, intellectualism or eloquence ... social rank, knowledge and intelligence, preferences in behaviour are here turned into the denials of nature, and are for that reason made inaccessible to serious moral comment."⁴⁴ I will examine three influential

allegorical interpretations of the tale and discuss the degree of their validity -- and their limitations -- to substantiate my claim that to interpret the Nun's Priest's Tale strictly in terms of either the exemplum tradition or as an amoral adventure story is a very restrictive approach which offers limited reward.

J. Leslie Hotson in his 1924 article "Colfox versus Chauntecleer," argues that the Nun's Priest's Tale belongs, with the Roman de Renart, to the fable-satire tradition, and that this familiar story is used by Chaucer as a vehicle for a contemporary political allegory of events that occurred in the final years of the reign of Richard II. He notes that Chaucer's account varies from all other versions in his naming his fox a colfox and describing him thus: "And tipped was his tayl and bothe his eeris/ With blak, unlyk the remenant of his heeris" (2903 - 04). Colfox is not a common noun, but an English surname. Hotson examined the records of the time, and his research revealed the following information about a Nicholas Colfax:

The first unmistakable reference to the man whom we are tracing comes immediately after Henry Bolingbroke's seizure of the throne in 1399. In open Parliament, Colfax was implicated, as chief coadjutor, in the murder of a man whose mysterious death two years before had deeply stirred the people of England. In 1397 Mowbray, who was Colfax's master and a creature of Richard II, at the King's secret order, had arrested the Duke of Gloucester, taken him to Calais, and there secretly murdered him. Gloucester, a prince of the blood, was uncle to Henry Bolingbroke, and had long led the popular opposition against the detested King. The murder, prearranged and coldly accomplished, of such a powerful man, could not remain hidden. Almost at once the truth was suspected, and popular feeling ran high against Mowbray. In challenging him at Shrewsbury (in 1398, five months after the crime), Henry publicly accused him of murder. A year later ... in the Parliament held after Henry had driven Richard from the throne, a circumstantial story of the dark affair was told by an eye-witness. It is the confession of John Hall, formerly valet to Mowbray, who guarded the door of the Prince's Inn at Calais during the murder ... he tells how they brought the Duke of

Gloucester to this house where Colfax and the others were placed in wait for him, and how they murdered him. 45

Notice the similarities in Chaucer's version:

A col-fox, ful of sly iniquitee...
In a bed of wortes stille he lay,
Til it was passed undren of the day,
Waitynge his tyme on Chauntecleer to falle,
As gladly doon thise homycides alle,
That in await ligen to mordre men.
O false mordreour, lurkyng in thy den! (3215, 3221 - 26)

"The killing of Gloucester," Hotson notes, "a prince of England and youngest son to Edward III, was more than murder: it was treason."

"It is worth noting that Chaucer likens the Colfox not to murderers, but to famous traitors (Scariot, Ganilon, Sinon).... Besides throwing light on the mysterious Colfox, this notorious murder may also explain the presence of one of Chauntecleer's exempla ... a harrowing tale of a secret murder, done in a foreign town. 46

However, the fact that neither the cock nor the fox loses his life in Chaucer's story suggests that he could not have meant the Nun's Priest's Tale as an allegory of the murder itself. Hotson suggests that the confrontation between Chauntecleer and the fox represents the quarrel of Henry Bolingbroke, then Duke of Hereford, and Thomas Mowbray in 1398. This quarrel resulted in a duel at Coventry; however, Richard stopped the proceedings and exiled Henry for ten years, and Mowbray forever. The murder of a duke would not be likely to suggest the writing of a mock heroic, however, "such an heroic encounter, ending a bit ingloriously, but without hurt, for both combatants, furnishes an excellent occasion for a sympathetic, humorous fable, done in a grave and gay mock-heroic

style."⁴⁷ As further evidence of this identification, Hotson points out that Chauntecleer's colours, which are not mentioned in Chaucer's sources, are the same as those on Bolingbroke's coat of arms, "and several of them Chaucer calls by their heraldic names."⁴⁸ In addition the colours of Chaucer's colfox match those of "a golden truncheon tipped with black at both ends"⁴⁹ that Thomas Mowbray (and his male heirs) had received permission to wear when he was appointed Earl Marshal in 1397. Like Chaucer's fox, who was tricked into talking at the wrong time and defeated, Mowbray's undoing began when he confided in Henry his conviction that King Richard was unfaithful to his country. Henry broke his confidence, revealed Mowbray's words to the King in Parliament, and, accusing him of treason, challenged Mowbray to the duel which ended in Mowbray's exile for life. Hotson cites contemporary documentation describing the "tears, cries and lamentations so utterly dolorous that there was no heart so hard that it did not feel pity,"⁵⁰ which accompanied Henry's departure from London in 1398 for his ten-year exile. The English populace idolized Henry. Hotson interprets Chaucer's use of "daun Russel" to name the fox, rather than keeping the same name -- "Renart" -- used in his sources, as a reference to "Sir John Russel, one of the five hated minions of Richard II."⁵¹

Hotson admits that there are many elements of the story which his interpretation cannot account for. The Coventry duel took place on Monday September 16, 1398; the misfortunes of Chauntecleer occurred on a Friday, "April 2, if reckoned mathematically, or May 3, in the zodiacal computation, but never in September."⁵² Pertelote has no counterpart in contemporary history, for Henry was a widower at this time. The learned discussion on the significance of dreams, or that on the free-will versus predestination issue do not fit the context of this interpretation, nor, I might add, does the widow who owns Chauntecleer. Hotson concludes that the evidence he cites is of value only in the formation of a hypothesis for the date of composition and the interpretation of the more puzzling details:

He knows that a few well-chosen strokes, scattered through, are more delightful to the reader than a weary parallelism. He will mask his batteries, too; he will give his episodes a fanciful, contradictory date.... Mowbray is only shadowed forth in the person of the fox; this fact is thoroughly demonstrated by the use of names. Colfox, to be sure, is a fox, but he is also Mowbray's esquire. Daun Russel is a fox, too; at the same time he is another of Richard's detested officers. Fugitive, deft, these allusions are the kind that tell, without exposing the author to actions for libel!... This explanation of the Nun's Priest's Tale, then, makes an effort at a rational historical explanation of the obscure meanings, the lively apostrophes, and the variations and additions which are found in Chaucer's mock heroic masterpiece. 53

Hotson's conclusion is an acknowledgment of the limitations of his approach. I agree that it's possible that Chaucer may have had this incident in mind if indeed the tale was composed shortly after the duel, in the late months of 1398, and that these events from contemporary history may help account for those details of the story that are cryptic or seem unnecessarily altered from the sources. Nevertheless, I do not believe that this or any other single allegorical interpretation of the tale can ever be proven definitive. Many other interpretations have been put forth. The two which follow are among the best documented and least far-fetched that I have come across.

Mortimer J. Donovan, in his 1953 article, "The Moralite of the Nun's Priest's Sermon," adopts a specifically patristic method, identifying Chauntecleer as any holy man and Daun Russel the fox as heretic and devil: "The adjectives recchelees and necligent, carrying the sense of 'irresponsible and inexcusable neglect of duty, especially religious duty or regulation,' suggest in Chauntecleer a soul fallen once in temptation but saved subsequently when proved alert.... Chaucer's tale ... is a sermon on alertness to moral obligation."⁵⁴ Donovan cites the familiarity of the fox motif in medieval iconography and literature, and suggests that the moralized interpretation of the fox that was made familiar by

the bestiary may explain its counterpart in the clerical fables. Various scriptural exegetes differ only in the degree to which they emphasize the interpretation of the fox as deceiver or heretic, or as the devil.

Although Donovan is mistaken in asserting that the cock receives no place in the bestiaries, he is correct in pointing to the interpretation of Hugh of St. Victor, who, following St. Gregory, sees in the barnyard animal:

a reminder for the Christian churchman. Just as the cock knows the laws of the night and crows accordingly, so the preacher ought to discern degrees of moral darkness and discreetly adapt his warnings.... In the cock's habit of beating his wings and striking himself, he sees nature's plan to awaken the watchman of the night, which, he says, prelates of the Church would do well to observe.... Two groups of prelates are included thus in his commentary: 1) those who have the intelligence to discharge their duties, but do not because they are occupied with pleasures of the flesh; 2) those who are ignorant of their pastoral duties. 55

Donovan discusses the significance of the language Chaucer uses to describe Daun Russel, writing off much of what was most significant to Hotson's interpretation:

First he is the 'col-fox', 'coal fox', recalling the Prince of Darkness. Like the devil he is 'ful of sly iniquitee'; to call him a murderer, however, is merely in line with the mock-heroic style of the poem. As the fox stalks his prey just as slyly as the devil, his movements are known by 'heigh ymaginacioun,' 'divine foreknowledge': the discussion of foreknowledge and predestination, following immediately, not only provides suspense, but also gives the animal tale a cosmic setting. During this discussion, the fox lies 'ful low,' in the manner of the devil, until he is discovered. When Chauntecleer attempts to flee his contrary ... Daun Russell attempts to allay his fears and in an ironical passage reveals his true identity:

'Gentil sire, alas! wher wol ye gon?
Be ye affrayed of me that am youre freend?

Now, certes, I were worse than a feend,
If I to yow wolde harme or vileynye!" (VII, 3284 - 87)

As in the bestiaries, the fox here is no sooner presented in the role of devil than he becomes a heretic.... Chaucer ... develops him rhetorically, to suit his mock-heroic purpose, into another Judas Iscariot, another Ganelon and another Sinon.... From this point to the end of the sermon Daun Russell's two roles are completely fused. 56

One very interesting aspect of Donovan's interpretation is that he makes reference to the tale itself as a sermon rather than likening it to the exempla used to elucidate sermons. It is also intriguing to note how each critic interprets every allusion differently to fit his own reading of the story. And indeed each illusion carries many possibilities: perhaps the critics fall into a trap of their own making.

In Donovan's interpretation, the old widow is the Church:

According to St. Ambrose's treatise on widowhood, the widow to whom Elias is sent prefigures the Church of Christ. Later in this tradition, Isidore sees in the son of the widow of Naim the sinner whom Christ restores literally to his mother and figuratively to a state of grace within the Church.... According to St. Augustine, widowhood represents a life dedicated to God through conquest of the passions. 57

Chauntecleer, on the other hand, surrenders easily to his passions, and hence to the devil. Donovan subscribes somewhat to the theory of the Nun's Priest's Tale as allegory of the Fall of Man, for he unkindly repeats the narrator's evasion admonishing Chauntecleer for listening to his wife's counsel instead of trusting in his own superior judgment. But this is not the case: Chauntecleer refutes Pertelote's counsel, then falls victim to his own sensuality. He is then ravished with the fox's flattery. He is negligent enough to close his eyes and is easily captured by the fox. Hence the Nun's

Priest's Tale cannot be an allegory of the Fall, for it is a condition of his already fallen state that Chauntecleer is so easily distracted by sex, and susceptible to flattery. It is true as Donovan says that pride precedes the Fall. But the Nun's Priest's Tale is set in a world already fallen. Chauntecleer's pride and lasciviousness are conditions exploited by the temptor, rather than instigated by him. Indeed, if this theory is to make any sense at all, one would logically be forced to argue not that Chauntecleer is Adam, but that he is Eve. The song of the mermaid is in Chauntecleer's mouth; he was drawn to near-destruction by his own singing, and bears full responsibility. "The Priest's simile of the mermaid looks both backward and forward in this tale," John Block Friedman remarks, "for the mermaid's song reminds us both of the lust which brought Chauntecleer out into the yard to tread his Pertelote, and of the flattery of the fox which will cause him to lower his guard once too often."⁵⁸ He almost becomes his own mermaid: "Chauntecleer is induced to sing himself and "sleep" so that he can be seized and devoured."⁵⁹ Of course, neither the singing nor the sleeping is real, for elsewhere in the tale, Chauntecleer crows; furthermore, he does escape destruction. His closed eyes, however, assume and symbolic connotation of sleep in that he is deceived, and his vanity about his voice is the weakness which the fox exploits.

Donovan believes that the tale is essentially optimistic:

The climax of the sermon ... is reached as Chauntecleer rides uncomfortably on the fox's back. Since Christian hope extends to the last, the once uxorious Chauntecleer now turns for divine aid against an adversary as powerful as Daun Russell, and, with all the alertness of his celebrated nature, he begs help.... He devises a plan which shows a return of reason ... whatever source of help -- pagan 'Fortune turneth sodeynly' -- or Christian, Chauntecleer sees his prayer answered as he gains his freedom by sheer alertness. The apothegm which ends the sermon, 'Lo, swich it is for to be reccheles/ And necligent, and trust on flaterye,' serves to reaffirm the deeper meaning of flaterye -- a diabolical misuse of human

speech which can lead one to hell.... The Nun's Priest is most concerned ... with the consequences of moral laxity and the habit of being reccheles, which accompanies sensuality. 60

As a response to the pessimism of the Monk's Tale, then, the Nun's Priest reminds us that no misfortune is beyond remedy. This is not to whitewash Chauntecleer of responsibility for his own capture -- for the devil himself cannot betray a man without the victim's consent -- but rather to reiterate the Christian message of hope.

This interpretation is one of the three attacked by Donaldson in his paper "Patristic Exegesis: The Opposition." Donaldson disagrees with Donovan's reading of Chauntecleer's "prayer" for "divine aid" which Donovan uses to consolidate his moralistic interpretation. When Chauntecleer utters the "prayer" he is speaking hypothetically:

This cok, that lay upon the foxes bak,
In al his drede unto the fox he spak,
And seyde, "Sire, if that I were as ye,
Yet sholde I seyn, as wys God helpe me,
'Turneth agayn, ye proude cherles alle!
A verray pestilence upon yow falle!" (3405 - 10)
(emphasis mine)

"The Prayer," Donaldson points out "qualifies the apodosis of a contrary-to-fact condition, in a position safely removed from the actual Chauntecleer; and it is indeed, not a prayer at all, but, an oath of which Chaucer's Parson would not have approved."⁶¹ Donaldson criticizes Donovan's choice of symbolic referents for the figures of the poem on the basis of its subjectivity; the lack of textual evidence. He charges that the interpretation adds nothing to one's appreciation of the poem:

There is no way of proving that the widow does not represent the Church -- unless, of course, we

apply to the tale St. Augustine's and St. Thomas's stricture that nothing that is darkly said in one place is not clearly revealed elsewhere. But I doubt that the fox represents the Devil or that Chauntecleer represents the alert Christian, not with seven wives. There were ... foxes long before there were devils, and roosters were crowing off the hours long before Christians heard them.... Even if one were to accept the allegorical interpretation of this tale I cannot see that much has, critically speaking, been gained.... The fact is that the little anecdote on which the exegesis depends is only one tiny grain of wheat in an intolerable deal of chaff, and if it contains Chaucer's main point then he is guilty of the most horrid misproportioning ... Any interpretation of a poem which ignores the bulk of it is likely to be wrong. 62

The ability to link the figures and events of the poem to exegetical symbolism does not prove that it is an allegory. "Chaucer," Rogers comments wryly, "was as capable of observing foxes and roosters as the writers in the exegetical tradition were."⁶³ Donovan's reading reduces a vital literary masterpiece into a reworking of a traditional Christian sententia in terms of pre-existing symbols. It fulfills neither the criterion of internal consistency nor of corrigibility.

The following year, Charles Dahlberg published his interpretation of Chaucer's story as a "reflection of the controversy that took place in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries between the secular clergy and the friars."⁶⁴ According to Dahlberg, Chaucer sympathizes with the secular clergy. Dahlberg discusses the long-standing fable tradition of the fox as symbol for heretics in general, and more specifically, for corrupting influences in the Church. Symbolism of this sort was soon adopted as propaganda against the mendicant friars: "In the French vernacular literature of the century before Chaucer, the fox often appears as a friar, and in two cases with the same name, Russell, that Chaucer uses for his fox in the Nun's Priest's Tale."⁶⁵ To summarize briefly, in the late thirteenth-century Renard le nouvel, the wealthy Renard is invited by the Dominicans to

join their impoverished order in the hope that his money will follow him. Renard declines but offers his first son Renardiel. In the same way the Franciscans adopted his younger son Rousiel. "Eventually Rousiel is created custodian of the Franciscan order; in the final scene of the poem we see him seated beside his father atop a wheel of Fortune which has ceased to turn. In the same poem, Chantecler the cock appears before the king to complain of the slaughter of his flock, and, on his return from the court, is killed by l'ainsié fil ... Renars."⁶⁶ In the early fourteenth-century poem, Lli Dis d'Entendement by Jean de Condé, a French Court poet whom Chaucer may have known, "Renard appears as the maître d'hôtel at the court, identified as the papal curia, of King Noble the Lion."⁶⁷ It was the job of his second son, Rousiel, to sing mass before the king and hear his confession.

The Franciscans were attacked with special vigour by Richard FitzRalph, and criticized by Wyclif for departing from the original rules and ideologies of St. Francis of Assisi. Further criticism came from such diverse origins as Cistercian monks, and the author of Piers Plowman. Dahlberg concludes that "since the Franciscans drew such a large proportion of the anti-mendicant fire during Chaucer's lifetime, there is an increased possibility that Chaucer may have had the Franciscans in mind when he chose for his fox a name associated with that order by earlier workers of vernacular poetry in France."⁶⁸

Dahlberg's interpretation also depends upon the traditional equation in Christian literature between the cock and the priest:

The cock represents 'doctores' and 'praedicatores' because, before awakening others, it must awaken itself by beating its wings against its sides.... Interpretations of this sort were certainly known in Chaucer's England. John of Sheppey, Bishop of Rochester and a preacher of great repute, died in 1360, leaving a collection of sermons among which appear various lyrics and beast fables. One of the fables is a version of the fox and henyard story,

almost contemporary with Chaucer, in which the fox who invades the henyards and eats the fowls represents ... the friars, particularly the Franciscans, to whom the qualification 'pauper' was often applied. The heading of the fable, 'De peccatis hypocrisis,' also seems to have a timely significance. 69

Dahlberg examines the significance of a number of changes that Chaucer made to his sources, interpreting, for instance, the metamorphosis of Chauntecleer's owner from a rich husband to a poor widow to support Donovan's identification of the widow as the Church. He likens the "drye dych" which surrounds the widow's yard to the "hortus conclusus" (in the "Song of Songs") surrounded by a "fons signatus" -- of which the "drye dych", however, is the antithesis for it has no living water. "The poverty of the widow," Dahlberg concludes, "represents the deserted status of the Church in the world, as does the dryness of the ditch. Part of this poverty is represented by the 'paramours' who should be the 'sponsa.' Chantecler is thus shown first as the priest of a church in the world, and second, in his capacity as the representative of Christ, as lord of a mixed flock characteristic of his earthly paradise."⁷⁰

Furthermore, Chauntecleer's colours are associated with the priestly life, but "the principal one, gold, was taken by the Allegoriae to represent 'vita sacerdotis,' which could be smirched by vices."⁷¹ Chauntecleer's sloth nearly causes him to lose his birthright -- the kingdom of heaven. Dahlberg suggests that the name 'Pertelote' derives from Old French and may mean loss of birthright. It is Chauntecleer's lack of comprehension -- the discrepancy between what he says and what he knows -- as well as his lechery and susceptibility to flattery that result in his falling into the clutches of the fox.

Chauntecleer relates the exemplum of the murdered man to support his view that dream warnings should be heeded. Dahlberg interprets this exemplum (ignoring its context) to

assert a relationship between the Nun's Priest's Tale, and the framework of the life and passion of Christ:

The murdered friend is forced to lodge in an ox's stall, rather than in a 'taberna,' he speaks of his 'bloody woundes depe and wyde' (VII, 3015), he is denied not twice during the night, but thrice, as Christ was denied by Peter before the cock crew. These changes ... create a link between the framework [Christ's life and passion] and the character of a cock by suggesting the true function of the cock, that of awakening others. To all these suggestions Chantecler remains blind, and acts in a way not befitting a cock, nor, by extension, a priest. 72

Chauntecleer's nightmare occurred at a time of day when he should have been awake and crowing. In a similar vein, the fox had no power over Chauntecleer until he closed his eyes to sing. Hence there is a direct relationship in this tale between seeing, knowing, and understanding. "The fact that Chantecler slept," Dahlberg comments, "is particularly reprehensible in his priestly role.... The vice of Sloth, or idleness, is a key concept in the tale. A corollary is that Chantecler becomes Venus' servant."⁷³ A servant of Venus is a slave of Fortune. Dahlberg takes very seriously the hints of the free-will versus predestination debate planted by the narrator:

Chantecler's servitude is shown when he defies the meaning of his dream, and thus loses his power of choice or free will ... Bradwardine, a fourteenth-century authority on the subject of free will, makes perfectly clear the idea that predestination does not apply to material or psychological phenomena (necessitee condiciouneel), but to spiritual or theological phenomena (necessitee simple).... Thus Chaucer, by referring to those (Boethius, Bradwardine, St. Augustine) who find free will to be a matter of working reasonably in accordance with a divine plan, and slavery the wilful flaunting of reason, gives his readers the clue to the exact nature of Chantecler's servitude to Venus

and Fortune: our cock has subjected himself to conditional necessity and has lost his free will.... The danger to which Chaucer alludes lies in the susceptibility of a proud, slothful clergy to flattery.... The secular clergy may however avoid this danger by reawakening, as Chantecler eventually does. His escape occurs ostensibly through a turn of Fortune's wheel.... As Boethius points out; one is either subject to her, or in some degree free from her. Chantecler, whose eyes have been opened by his capture, has in some measure ceased to be her slave, and is therefore able to effect his release by an amusing turn. It is he who has control of the wheel for a moment. 74

The framework of the Nun's Priest's Tale is such that many allegorical interpretations are possible, but none can ultimately be proven definitive. The very fact that this tale generates so many mutually exclusive interpretations says a great deal in itself. Even limiting the possible interpretations to those feasible within the framework of the fable-exempla tradition of the preaching friars only precludes the third reading, in which the fox represents the friars as seen by the secular clergy. Dahlberg makes explicit the assumption that "the tale is controlled by an allegorical intention,"⁷⁵ claiming that he has access to the intention of its author, when he clearly does not. Derek Pearsall says of this type of interpretation:

There is no doubt great satisfaction to be obtained from confident pronouncements like [these], in which literature, purged of its bewildering complexities and idiosyncrasies, emerges as essentially the statement of simple moral truths. But there must also be resistance to this tendency of exegetical criticism ... to reduce all literature to a common dead level of conventional expectation, where the difference between writers is only in the skill with which they disguise the universal platitudes which are the sum of their preachment. 76

At the same time, he warns against sinking into a "chaos of

relativism,"⁷⁷ in which no criteria exist to discriminate between those interpretations which have some -- or a great deal -- of truth, and those which have none.

It seems to me that the greatest problem with the patristic method is that it devotes its full attention to the figures of the text as isolated Scriptural allusions, the sum of which are then moulded to conform to some pre-determined pattern. It ignores the context of the words, and the interaction of the elements of the poem which, when taken together and governed by the context, do not develop along lines parallel to the doctrinal reading which the allusions may suggest, or in Robertson's words, do not "conform to an abstract pattern which harmonizes with the pattern of a useful idea." In other words, the method, as practised by some critics, does not meet Robertson's own stated criterion. Individual figures in the poem may suggest Scriptural or doctrinal meaning, but to relate their function in the poem to that meaning may be impossible. For instance, there may be a tradition associating widowhood with the Church, but the passage describing the "povre wydwe" who owns the farm where Chauntecleer and the hens live functions as an aesthetic contrast between Chauntecleer's surroundings and his splendour and pretentious behaviour, and not as a moral contrast between the widow's humility and his vanity, nor her temperance (which is enforced because of her poverty) and his self-indulgence. Indeed to check the behaviour of an amoral fowl against that of a reasoning moral (or immoral) human being within the fable itself would automatically invalidate a moral allegorical reading of the cock's behaviour.

On the other hand, many critics, such as Jill Mann and Susan Gallick, read the Nun's Priest's Tale as a satire exposing the limited nature of moral and intellectual inquiry. Hence the joke is partly at the expense of the Nun's Priest, and partly at that of the readers. Gallick writes:

After the dialogue in which the cock convinces the

fox to open his mouth to speak so that he can fly away, each character states the moral as he sees it.... The eagerness with which the Nun's Priest adds meaning to his tale parodies the idea that literature must instruct. Throughout the Nun's Priest's Tale, Chaucer pokes fun at characters who teach someone a lesson but do not apply it to their own lives.... Ironically, the only didacticism that he demonstrates adequately is the limitations of didacticism to explain or justify fiction. This tale has not been so much about truth or moralite as it has been about lively, human-like animals and the actual flexibility of language. 78

Stephen Manning, in his article "The Nun's Priest's Morality and the Medieval Attitude Toward Fables," conveniently sidesteps the problem of the ambiguity of the moral by suggesting:

Chaucer is poking fun at those who felt that a poem had to have some moral in order to justify its existence; he himself certainly felt that it needed no special justification.... This tradition became ... sharply focused in the controversy over the fable (i.e.: is it edifying or merely delightful?).... If he really believed that everything that is written is written for our instruction, he would have no need to apologize, but could point out the morality in these writings. 79

Although he is influenced by exempla and simple fables, Chaucer writes neither of these forms, but complex fiction. As such the morality remains implicit, and is not explicitly stated at the end of the story.

It is interesting to note that the reading of the Nun's Priest's Tale as an amoral Reynardian epic confirms the exposed narrator theory of the tale. Other critics suggest that Chaucer's purpose is dramatic irony: to expose the Priest's ignorance in doctrinal matters and his anti-feminism. To examine an instance of the latter, Arthur T. Broes goes so far as to claim that the artistic unity of this tale exists only in the light of the Priest's personality -- a pretentious suggestion as we are told nothing of his personality in

the General Prologue. According to Broes, the Priest's implicit aim "is nothing less than to discredit the Prioress and establish his own intellectual and moral superiority to her."⁸⁰ In his reading, Chauntecleer is a persona, or more accurately an alter ego, for the Priest through which he can criticize and dominate women. Broes identifies Pertelote with the Prioress, and finds he must whitewash Chauntecleer of his pride and stupidity, claiming, for example, that the dream debate proves Chauntecleer's intelligence, and that his mistranslation of Latin is a disguised criticism of the Prioress' linguistic shortcomings. "What the Priest appears to be saying here is that woman, in her proper place in the 'Chain of Being,' is a joy and a helpmate to man, but that to alter this position, as Pertelote does by forcing her will upon her husband [!] or as the Prioress does by ruling rather than being ruled by man, is to invite trouble and disaster."⁸¹ To support his theory, Broes distorts the basic elements of the plot of the tale beyond recognition. This essay exemplifies the danger of attempting to force all the aspects of the story to support an interpretation based on one or two isolated comments. If one is to maintain that the tale is satirical, it is best to assume that the satire is Chaucer's own rather than the Nun's Priest's, whose motives and complaints we cannot assess.

To a lesser degree, and toward a different end, Hotson, Donovan, and Dahlberg are guilty of the same unjustifiable attribution of motive, for if the Nun's Priest's Tale is indeed a moral allegory in which it is possible to assign one specific meaning to each of its figures, no element of the story should remain unaccounted for. But this is not the case. The asides, references or details of the plot for which the critic cannot account, undercut his interpretation, and suggest yet another. The tale would hardly supersede the entertaining amorality of the Roman de Renart were it not for two slight shifts of focus, by which it veers away from the naturalistic detail and mock-heroic elevation of the French epic, toward the solemn moralistic viewpoint of the native exemplum, and

thereby achieves an equilibrium between these two perspectives in which neither finally prevails. Shallers comments:

The Nun's Priest's Tale is told almost exclusively from the chicken's point of view; hence we are apt to consider Daun Russell and his stratagen less sympathetically than we view Renart and his plots. The setting of the Nun's Priest's Tale encompasses not the entire wild woods of the Roman de Renart, but only a semi-civilized clearing in which human notions of justice and order matter.... These slight shifts in themselves invite us to identify with the cock and liken his situation to our own, whence we are led away from the trickster-like amorality and toward the didacticism of fable-exempla.... We can learn the Priest's lesson just as Chauntecleer learned exempla to quote in a theoretical argument, but chances are we will fail to apply it in our own lives, given our innate 'cockiness.' Perhaps that is why men have kept on 'falling' throughout history as the many tragedies alluded to in the poem remind us they do.... [Man] is off constructing illusionary, ideal defences against the painful admission of his own inadequacies.... Be it with a sense of his strength (heroism), his beauty and feeling (courtliness), or his knowledge (scholarship), he manages in the end only to complement his natural weakness and submit to the whims of Dame Fortune as Chauntecleer submits to the fox. This ironic image of mankind is a vital part of the poem; it is the 'folye' that never yields to 'moralite' despite the Priest's closing injunction.... As an exemplum, the poem exhorts us to eschew pride and overconfidence; as a Reynardian story it ironically questions our ability to do so. 82

The Nun's Priest's Tale is to be conceived of as neither the skeletal foundation for an allegorical interpretation, nor as a renunciation of literature as a tool of moral or intellectual inquiry. It is certainly more than a simple animal fable in the tradition of the Roman de Renart. In his study of Chaucer and the French Tradition, Muscatine explains how Chaucer combines these traditions, vacillating between the perspective of the amoral animal epic and that of the didactic fable exemplum to produce a unique work of art.

The difference between this and the animal fable is that this cannot long be taken more seriously in one direction than in the other. Fable respects the boundary between animal fiction and the human truth it illustrates. But the whole spirit of this poem is to erase or at least to overlap the boundaries: animal and human, fiction and truth severally join and separate, change partners and flirt here. The one constancy in the poem is this shifting of focus, the Chaucerian multiple perspective which itself virtually constitutes the theme.... Unlike fable, the Nun's Priest's Tale does not so much make true and solemn assertions about life as it tests truths and tries out solemnities.... Some very great institutions lose importance in it, and some very humble ones are made magnificent. The critical temper of the poem ... produces no negative effect, but a continuously humane suggestion of the relativity of things. The shifting style and the succession of topics never rests long enough to serve a single view or a single doctrine or an unalterable judgment.... None of the targets of the poem's parodies are demolished, or ever really hit at the center.... The only absolute virtue that his reading induces is an enlightened recognition of the problem of perception itself, the virtue of seeing. 83

The central irony of this piece is that while the Nun's Priest bows to the traditional justification for the existence of literature by instructing his audience: "Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille" (3443), he has in fact produced a work of fiction which examines the nature, strategies and effectiveness of fiction; an allegory of allegory.

III. The Satire of Self-Consciousness:

The Abuse of Rhetoric and the Destruction of Illusion.

I place my discussion of the Nun's Priest's Tale last because of the special relationship it reveals between the poet and his materials. As Muscatine succinctly says:

"Here he sees through them."⁸⁴ The real point of the story, according to Donaldson, lies within, not beneath, the "enormous rhetorical elaboration of the telling:"

For rhetoric here is regarded [satirically] as the inadequate defence that mankind erects against an inscrutable reality; rhetoric enables man at best to regard himself as being of heroic proportions -- like Achilles, or like Chauntecleer -- and at worst to maintain the last sad vestiges of his dignity (as a rooster Chauntecleer is carried in the fox's mouth, but as a hero he rides on his back); rhetoric enables man to find significance both in his desires and in his fate, and to pretend to himself that the universe takes him seriously. And rhetoric has a habit, too, of collapsing in the presence of simple common sense.... In short, the fruit of the Nun's Priest's Tale is its chaff. 85

It is the discrepancy between form and meaning which exposes the strategies of fiction-making and holds them up to scrutiny. An examination of the potential -- and the inherent limitations -- of literature is appropriate for a pilgrimage in which the sole factor shared by all the participants is their role as tellers of tales. The Nun's Priest comments upon the nature and purpose of literature, linking the activity of story-telling with the ultimate purpose of the pilgrimage: salvation. Saul Nathaniel Brody, in his essay "Truth and Fiction in the Nun's Priest's Tale" writes:

Even if the pilgrimage's story-tellers do not see it, their fictions are full of moral implications, of hidden truths, and he is thus reminding his listeners to be on the lookout for them. These truths may not be clearly discernible, or their seriousness may be or may seem to be subverted by comic possibilities, but as in the case of Chauntecleer, the very salvation of the pilgrims may depend upon their ability to interpret what they hear. 86

Both the characters in this tale and its narrator are guilty

of subverting the techniques and didactic purposes of the art of rhetoric toward their own ends. The most obvious irony lies in the anomaly between the verbal elegance and the heavy burden of scholarship, and the sparcity of the narrative base -- a fable set in a henyard. In a similar vein, the discrepancy between the nature of the characters and the manner in which they are described and behave is constantly brought to the fore by the destruction of dramatic illusion. In fact, the discrepancy between the simple plot and the inflated rhetoric that envelops it makes inevitable the destruction of illusion. The effect is to detach us from the barnyard world, providing a perspective from which we can evaluate the epic, tragic and philosophic context of the events from an objective distance. The reader is frequently jolted between different narratorial points of view. The lack of a reliable viewpoint from which to judge the tale increases the difficulty of coming to grips with its serious "moral" statement. Even the Nun's Priest's closing injunction to his audience: "Taketh the moralite, goode men" (3440), is not free from irony and relativity, for he remains noncommittal as to which -- if any -- of the three proposed morals he means, nor do any of the possibilities seem adequate or appropriate.

Brody asserts:

The tension between the literature-like and the life-like is central to the tale ... for through it the Nun's Priest asserts the ultimate seriousness not simply of his fiction, but of all fiction.... By dissolving dramatic illusion, he forces us to a heightened awareness of the tale as a work of fiction, as art and not reality itself. Significantly, each time he interrupts himself, he does [so] ... in such a way as to suggest that he is asking the audience to consider the implications not only of his story-telling, but also of story-telling itself. 87

He illustrates his point by claiming that the Nun's Priest first seduces us into accepting the historical reality of the

talking chickens, then interrupts himself: "For thilke tyme, as I have understode/ Beestes and briddes koude speke and synge" (4070 - 71), thus reminding us that we are hearing a story, not objective truth. Twice before in his description of Chauntecleer's entourage, however, the Nun's Priest has inserted subtle but potent reminders that we are not dealing with the genteel, courtly life of the aristocracy, but with a cock and seven hens:

This gentil cok hadde in his governaunce
Sevens hennes for to doon al his plesaunce,
Whiche were his sustres and his paramours. (2865 - 67)

That Chauntecleer's "wives" are also his sisters is not an indictment of the moral bankruptcy of the world, as Dahlberg has it, but a reminder that we are reading about the world of barnyard animals, in which concepts such as incest have no meaning. Similarly, Pertelote has been the beloved of Chauntecleer "syn thilke day that she was seven nyght cold" (2873). The reader is reminded that hens come of age somewhat earlier than courtly ladies.

R. T. Lenaghan, in his study of "The Nun's Priest's Fable," does not sidestep the problem of the meaning of the tale with an appeal to the theory of l'art pour l'art, but admits that "we all feel there is something significant about the Nun's Priest's Tale, but the more we try to explain what it is, the more we sound like Chauntecleer."⁸⁸ He confronts this problem by distinguishing between the narrator of the poem and the Nun's Priest himself. The narrator, a naif, aspiring rethor whose style is characterized by misplaced eloquence, "is concerned to display his learning ... quite unaware that the display is inappropriate ... as the creature of a more intelligent speaker, [he] deserves to be laughed at."⁸⁹ The Nun's Priest deftly adapts his fable to draw attention to the misuse of rhetoric on the narrator's part;

By the very distinctness and directness of its morality, the fable affords the sophisticated teller a marvellous opportunity to turn crude morality into subtle irony.... By shifting the tone at the end of the tale the Nun's Priest steps slightly aside and plays his voice against that of the rethor. 90

The subtle irony, he concludes, arises from the applicability of the fox's moral to the rethor himself.

Although it may be expedient, it is not necessary to postulate the existence of a narrator distinct from the teller of the tale, for the Nun's Priest may choose to illustrate the misuse of rhetoric without distancing himself from his technique in this way. The exaggeration of rhetoric is so blatant that it is unnecessary for the Nun's Priest to create an ironic persona to protect himself. Had this been his intention, he would have done so explicitly. It is more convenient to think of the enigmatic Nun's Priest as providing an occasion for Chaucer's satire upon intellectual vanity. The anonymity of the Nun's Priest removes the restriction of dramatic consistency that we might expect from a storyteller more familiar to us, freeing him to disrupt the flow of the narrative, and address the audience in his own voice. Indeed the abuse of rhetoric is so pronounced that the author's wink at the audience is ever-present, even when he does not suspend the action to make explicit some grain of wheat he may have found. The inconsistencies of point of view, or breaks in the frame of illusion, are made inevitable by the discrepancy between the manner of telling and the content. Lenaghan's separation of the naif rethor and the Nun's Priest in fact lends unnecessary credence and authority to the Priest's famous closing admonition, which has been treated as a concise statement of Chaucer's aesthetic: a justification for the allegorical approach which separates fruit from chaff, meaning from form. If the narrator of the tale and the Nun's Priest are one and the same, then his exhortation to take the "moralite" is surrounded by the same ambiguity and has the

same potential for irony as all the kernels of wheat proudly presented by the narrator during the course of the tale. Alfred David was referring to the irony and ambiguity that result from Chaucer's habit of using a persona for himself within his poems when he wrote: "The persona thus becomes the poet's device for avoiding commitments and judgments."⁹¹ But this comment is germane in this case as well, for in a tale which emphasizes poetic language as a medium over and above the message it may contain, ambiguity is crucial, and in a very real sense, it is the meaning of the poem. The tendency to over-analyze, to find a moral everywhere, is the object of the poet's most devastating satire. "Such moralism," David comments, referring to this tale, "is the product of man's presumptuous belief that he can explain his condition within his earthly limitations."⁹²

The separate reality which the Pardoner creates in his tale -- a world in which the punishment of evil seems to spring from the deed itself -- is compromised by the Pardoner's belief that he can commit sin with impunity. The personality of the Nun's Priest, on the other hand, is not known to the reader: no portrait of him exists in the General Prologue, and virtually nothing is revealed in the Prologue to his own tale, except perhaps an obliging nature. "'Yis, sir,' quod he, 'yis, Hoost, so moot I go, / But I be myrie, ywis I wol be blamed'" (2816 - 17). Donaldson considers this lack of data a shrewd move on Chaucer's part, one which throws the reader off guard for what is to come, and simultaneously protects the material presented in the tale from being compromised by a dramatic interpretation:

The man who is able to maintain a satiric view toward rhetoric -- the sum of the ideas by which people are helped to preserve their self-respect -- is not apt to be popular with his victims. Inevitably, they will search him out to discover the pretensions under which he subsists. Aware that in the personality of the satirist will always exist grounds for rebutting the satire, Chaucer carefully gives us nothing to work on. 93

(Broes and Lumiansky⁹⁴, however, feel compelled to fill this gap, providing us with readings of the tale based on the character and personal motives of the teller, for which no textual evidence exists.)

The art of rhetoric was originally meant as a means of "recommending certain structural methods of varying the surface"⁹⁵ of a poem and best expressing its meaning, but the term has come to imply "language of adornment" which obscures and makes more palatable the bare facts of reality. Language functioning in this way originates as an important defence mechanism (or, in Donaldson's phrase, "a powerful weapon of survival in a vast and alien universe,"⁹⁶) which then degenerates into a dangerous world of illusion. Donald Howard agrees that the abuse of rhetoric is one of the objects of Chaucer's satire: "He is satirizing the fads of the medieval intellectual life ... what he finds absurd is the pomposity and vanity with which people discussed matters of seriousness and the heavy-handed rhetorical forms into which they cast their discourse."⁹⁷ The most famous example is Chauntecleer's two-hundred-line rebuttal of Pertelote's diagnosis of his ailment as a simple imbalance of humours, and her advice to "take youre laxatyves" (2962). Pertelote's diagnosis of indigestion is itself a sixty-eight-line compendium of pharmacopeia, supported by one authority, Cato, whom she quotes as saying simply: "Ne do no fors of dremes" (2941). Chauntecleer, on the other hand, cites the wisdom of "many a man moore of auctorite/ Than evere Caton was" (2975 - 76) -- none of whom he names -- to support his conviction:

That dremes been significaciouns
As wel of joye as of tribulaciouns
That folk enduren in this lif present. (2979 - 81)

Chauntecleer then asserts that "Ther nedeth make of this noon argument;/ The verray preeve sheweth it in dede" (2982 - 83). His proof, however, does not consist of actions but of

exempla, which are a valid part of a rhetorically structured argument. His first two exempla, like his argument, are attributed to an anonymous authority, "Oon of the gretteste auctour that men rede" (2984). The first, about a murder committed in a foreign town exactly as it had been foretold to its victim's traveling companion in a dream, suggests to Chauntecleer the fatalistic conclusion that "Mordre wol out" (3057), rather than teaching him to heed the warnings of dreams and take the appropriate precautions. The moral statement of this exemplum overshadows its principal concern with the credibility of dreams as precursors of future events. The eloquent conclusion (3050 - 57) reached by Chauntecleer is followed by a statement which is accurate but anti-climactic in both style and content:

And right anon, ministres of that toun
Han hent the carter and so soore him pyned,
And eek the hostiler so soore engyned,
That they biknewe hire wikkednesse anon,
And were anhangid by the nekke-bon.
Heere may men seen that dremes been to drede. (3058 - 63)

Having lost his conceptual control because of his stylistic flourishes, Chauntecleer finds that he cannot prevent the proper conclusion of his long exemplum from sounding like a mere afterthought. His exemplum has not remained subservient to the sentence of his argument, but instead has generated a lesson of its own which has at most a tangential relevance to the topic.

This is followed immediately by another exemplum found, Chauntecleer untruthfully claims, "Right in the nexte chapitre" (3065) of the same source. It relates the story of the sailor who dreams that he and his companion will drown if they set sail the next day. The second sailor scorns the first for believing in dreams: "I sette nat a straw by thy dremynges,/ For swevenes been but vanytees and japes" (3090 - 91). Predictably, he drowns the following morning. Chauntecleer's conclusion "That no man sholde been to reccheless/ Of

dremes" (3107 - 08) is supported by a third exemplum drawn from the life of St. Kenelm. These exempla are followed by a long list of authorities from classical history and mythology and Biblical history. C. E. Kauffman⁹⁸ has proven Chauntecleer is justified in rejecting Pertelote's prescription of laxatives, "For they been venymous, I woot it weel" (3155). However, his superior knowledge of dream-lore and herbal medicine does not stand him in good stead, for he ignores all the remembered wisdom of the past, and is undone by a very basic instinct or appetite, sex:

'Now let us speke of myrthe, and stynte al this.
Madame Pertelote, so have I blis,
Of o thyng God hath sent me large grace;
For whan I se the beautee of youre face,
Ye been so scarlet reed aboute youre yen,
It maketh al my drede for to dyen; ...
I diffye bothe sweven and dreem.'
And with that word he fley down fro the beem, ...
He fethered Pertelote twenty tyme,
And trad hire eke as ofte, er it was pryme. (3157 - 78)

The point is not only that Chauntecleer's learning is lost on him, but also that it is unnecessary in the first place. He says as much himself: "Ther nedeth make of this noon argument" (2982). It would be a simple enough matter for Chauntecleer to go about his daily affairs, wary of the possibility of impending danger, regardless of what classical and Biblical authorities have to say about the oracular significance of dreams.

Chauntecleer's disavowal of his own exempla so that he may enjoy his Pertelote is followed by a digression in which the Nun's Priest reminds us that this is a work of fiction about a pretentious cock who struts around the henyard as though he were the king of beasts, or a human prince:

He looketh as it were a grym leoun
And on his toos he rometh up and down;
Hym deigned nat to sette his foot to grounde.

He chukketh whan he hath a corn yfounde,
And to hym rennen thanne his wyves alle.
Thus roial, as a prince is in his halle,
Leve I this Chauntecleer in his pasture,
And after wol I telle his aventure. (3179 - 86)

Brody comments on the significance of the narrator's breaking into the fictional world at this particular instant:

It is important to note that Chauntecleer, engaged in an interpretative act, uses stories to illustrate a truth, and, what is just as important, he pays no attention to the point of his exempla.... [This] clearly raises the larger question of the relation of stories to moral truth and human behavior. 99

The Nun's Priest emphasizes that it is in the context of a story that the influence of stories upon human behaviour is being examined. The digression ends with the narrator's verification of the truth of this story by comparing it to yet another:

This storie is also trewe, I undertake,
As in the book of Launcelot de Lake,
That women holde in ful greet reverence.
Now wol I torne agayn to my sentence. (3211 - 14)

The story of Chauntecleer is no more true in the historic sense than that of this famous knight of King Arthur's court, but it does share with the Lancelot story the truth of those "beautiful lies" that so worried the detractors of secular literature, who feared the power of the literal dimension -- of images and sounds and fictions -- to deceive. Brody suggests that the reference to the Lancelot story "emphasizes the interplay between truth and fiction in the Nun's Priest's Tale."¹⁰⁰ He explains that Francesca, like Chauntecleer, experienced a reversal of fortune; both suffer because their reason succumbed to their sexuality; most importantly:

"The story that Francesca tells of the first root of her and Paolo's love [sic] itself makes a point relevant to the Nun's Priest's purposes, namely, that there is an intimate relationship between stories about human behaviour and human behaviour itself."¹⁰¹ When they reached the point in the story describing the first kiss of Lancelot and Guinevere, Paolo and Francesca themselves kissed, and that day read no more. Like the Lancelot story, then, the Nun's Priest's Tale not only holds a mirror to human behaviour, but is capable of influencing it -- for better or worse. It is in this sense that it is as "trewe" as the former. The Lancelot story could have been read as a warning against adultery as easily as it was understood by Paolo and Francesca as an enticement into adultery. Brody interprets the very presence of besetting ambiguity in the Nun's Priest's Tale to indicate "that if the work does contain a moral, that moral has to do with ambiguity itself -- and most particularly with the ambiguity surrounding what is true and not true in the tale."¹⁰²

Within this digression is the Nun's Priest's account of Chauntecleer's crowing of the time of day, a feat which involves an elaborate astronomical calculation:

Chauntecleer in al his pryde,
His sevene wyves walkynge by his syde,
Caste up his eyen to the brighte sonne,
That in the signe of Taurus hadde yronne
Twenty degrees and oon, and somewhat moore,
And knew by kynde, and by noon oother loore,
That it was pryme, and crew with blisful stevene.
'The sonne,' he seyde, 'is clomben up on hevене
Fourty degrees and oon, and moore ywis.' (3191 - 99)

This is one of the many comparisons of chickens to human beings which compel us to focus on the story's implications for men. Chauntecleer calculates the time mathematically. But roosters can tell the time by instinct. This is one of their functions in the barnyard, and incidentally, the trait that inspired their symbolic association with the alert priest

or Christian in exegetical commentary. The Nun's Priest employs the same double perspective in his initial description of Chauntecleer:

By nature he knew ech ascencioun
Of the equinoxial in thilke toun;
For whan degrees fiftene weren ascended,
Thanne crew he, that it myghte nat been amended. (2855 - 58)

These passages contribute to the poem's satire of intellectual vanity. Donald Howard speaks of the contrast of this tale "between what is natural and what is intellectual, between what is easily seen by common sense (the common evidence of the senses) and what is easily beclouded by ratiocination."¹⁰³ He interprets this digressive passage as paradigmatic of that phenomenon:

When Chauntecleer crows, he crows an astrological measurement. Simple facts are shot off with Intellect's heaviest artillery.... Intellect provides a science of astrology which expresses through the position of heavenly bodies what the rooster already knows. A 'sorweful cas' (3204) happens in the barnyard; Intellect provides the figure of Fortune and the theory of animal magnetism to explain why the fox approaches the rooster.... A dream whose warning is plain has to be argued about with elaborate theories.... When the Priest comes to the outcome of his story he must pause to ruminate whether it is predestined or not.... He has no quarrel with any of the theories, conventions or ideas which he brings up, but with their capacity to flatter us and becloud our thoughts. ¹⁰⁴

The progress of the narrative is briefly resumed. Having flown down from the beam, Chauntecleer is now vulnerable to the fox, who lies hidden waiting for him. The term "homycides" (3224) sparks yet another digression, which begins by asserting that the col-fox is no mere fox but a

murderer who ranks with the most notorious traitors in
human history:

O false morderour, lurkyng in thy den!
O newe Scariot, newe Gerylon,
False dissymulour, o Greek Synon,
That broghest Troye al outrelly to sorwe! (3226 - 29)

The uproar that ensues among Chauntecleer's wives when they realize that he has been captured would put to shame the lamentations of the inhabitants of the captured Troy and the burnt empires of Rome and Carthage:

Certes, swich cry ne lamentacioun,
Was nevere of ladyes maad when Ylion
Was womne, and Pirrus with his streite sword,
Whan he hadde hent kyng Priam by the berd,
And slayn him, as seith us Eneydos,
As maden alle the hennes in the clos,
When they had seyn of Chauntecleer the sighte.
But sovereynly dame Pertelote shrighthe
Ful louder than dide Hasdrubales wyf,
Whan that hir housbonde hadde lost his lyf,
And that the Romayns hadde brend Cartage.
She was so ful of torment and of rage
That wilfully into the fyr she sterte,
And brende hirselven with a stedefast herte.

O wolful hennes, right so criden ye,
As, whan that Nero brende the citee
Of Rome, cryden senatoures wyves
For that hir husbondes losten alle hir lyves, --
Withouten gilt this Nero hath hem slayn.
Now wole I turne to my tale agayn. (3355 - 74)

The Nun's Priest employs the rhetoric of epic poetry in order to invest Chauntecleer's destiny with the utmost significance. In Donaldson's words:

The fact that Achilles and Hector still have significance (if a fading one) is due to the gigantic rhetorical effort of Homer, who persuades his reader that these were the very best in their kind who ever

lived. By a similar technique, Chauntecleer is made the best rooster that ever lived, so that his death amid the teeth of Dan Russel -- if it had occurred -- could have provided a tragic episode every bit as significant to mankind as the death of Hector....

Furthermore, the divine powers take the trouble to send the rooster a monitory dream concerning his impending fate. The logic of the comedy is unexceptional: these are the devices that made Hector and Achilles, and hence all men in their persons, significant; will not the devices do the same for Chauntecleer? 105

Another kind of rhetorical device employed by the Nun's Priest is the specifically medieval reference to authority. Both Chauntecleer and Pertelote appeal to authorities in their debate on the relevance of dreams. The Nun's Priest feels compelled to remind his audience of the "greet disputisoun ... of an hundred thousand men" (3238 - 39) concerning the eternal problem of man's free will versus foreordination, in his apostrophe to the rooster for not heeding the warning in his dream:

O Chauntecleer, acursed be that morwe
That thou into that yerd flaugh fro the bemes!
Thou were ful wel ywarned by thy dremes
That thilke day was perilous to thee;
But what that God forwoot moot nedes be....
But I ne kan nat bulste it to the bren
As kan the hooly doctour Augustyn,
Or Boece, or the Bisshop Bradwardyn,
Wheither that Goddes worthy forwityng
Streyneth me nedely for to doon a thyng, --
'Nedely' clepe I symple necessitee;
Or elles, if free choys be graunted me
To do that same thyng, or do it noght,
Though God forwoot it er that was wrought;
Or if his wityng streyneth never a deel
But by necessitee condicioneel. (3230 - 50)

To explicate the rooster's predicament in terms of this three-way medieval scholastic debate would be to fall into the trap of taking every allusion seriously, like the patristic critics who seek a moral interpretation for every allusion. The

Nun's Priest immediately rejects this material as irrelevant: "I wol nat han to do of swich mateere;/ My tale is of a cok" (3251 - 52). This disclaimer would be ironic indeed had the Nun's Priest intended his tale to be scrutinized for hidden allegorical meaning.

No sooner has he extricated himself from the intricacies of medieval theology, however, than the Nun's Priest does an about-face and blames Chauntecleer's misfortune on "wommennes conseils that been ful ofte colde" (3256). Specifically, he blames Pertelote's advice: "My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere,/ That tok his conseil of his wyf, with sorwe" (3252 - 53). It is important to note that the disclaimer with which the Nun's Priest brushes aside the question of free will ("My tale is of a cok") is here used not as a conclusion to the debate but as a transition, syntactical and thematic, to the human perspective ("That tok his conseil of his wyf,") and to yet another medieval debate: the merit of woman's counsel. The Nun's Priest thus obliges man's desire to blame his misfortune on anything but his own stupidity and vanity. He fails to mention that Chauntecleer has succeeded in refuting Pertelote's advice only to succumb to her beauty. He is perhaps motivated in part by a machismo desire to prove his virility and sexual prowess, which Pertelote had so unkindly questioned earlier. "I kan nat love a coward, by my feith!" (2911); "Have ye no mannes herte, and han a berd?" (2920). Chauntecleer uses the rhetoric of authority toward his own end: to re-assert his dominance over Pertelote. "Indeed it is only his success in establishing his intellectual superiority to Pertelote," Pearsall comments, "that enables him to return, for his self-esteem, bruised by Pertelote's reaction to his dream, badly needs refurbishing."¹⁰⁶ The Nun's Priest indicts woman's counsel by referring to Eve:

Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo,
And made Adam fro Paradys to go,
Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese. (3257 - 59)

He conveniently forgets that Chauntecleer has fallen because of his own lechery and vanity, and that the song of the temptress mermaid is in Chauntecleer's mouth. Furthermore, to forestall any offence the Prioress or any other female auditors may take to these words, the Nun's Priest attributes them to the cock and to authorities that Chauntecleer may have read. He himself denies having spoken them, despite the fact that this passage is a digression in his own voice which contains none of the animals' discourse:

But for I noot to whom it myght displese,
If I conseil of wommen wolde blame,
Passe over, for I seyde it in my game.
Rede auctours, where they trete of swich mateere,
And what they seyn of wommen ye may heere.
Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne;
I kan noon harm of no womman divyne. (3260 - 66)

If the reader is to "passe over" comments made in "game", that is, in the course of telling a fable or fiction, the Nun's Priest has succeeded in writing off all literature as a potential purveyor of truth. The Priest, as a composer of sermons and exempla, cannot mean to do so; his elevation of his animal characters to remind us of humans and of his story to echo human catastrophies argues that this is not his intention. So he attempts to distance himself from these unflattering remarks by appealing to their frequency in authorities, and citing a rooster as the source of this anti-feminism.

The comedy of the foreboding dream and the two explanations generously offered by the Nun's Priest to excuse Chauntecleer are brought into sharper relief by the fact that divine foreknowledge and scholastic debates are not pertinent to the animal kingdom, where all is ruled by instinct. Nonetheless his story is replete with reminders of how human beings bring about their catastrophies. The elaborate (and equally unnecessary) description of how Chauntecleer succumbs

to flattery generates a warning, in the Nun's Priest's voice, to the lords of the court. The significance of Chauntecleer's misadventure in the barnyard is applicable to England; the consequences of the moral lessons found in a simple fable can be far-reaching:

 Allas! ye lordes, many a fals flatour
 Is in youre courtes, and many a losengeour,
 That plesen yow wel moore, by my feith,
 Than he that soothfastnesse unto yow seith.
 Redeth Ecclesiaste of flaterye;
 Beth war, ye lordes, of hir trecherye. (3325 - 30)

This warning steps outside of the narrative and interrupts its progress just prior to its climax: the capture of Chauntecleer.

To reveal the source of the vanity that facilitates Chauntecleer's capture, the narrator describes Chauntecleer's singing by referring to the Physiologus de Natura, a Latin bestiary attributed to Theobaldus:

 Chauntecleer so free
 Soong murier than the mermayde in the see;
 For Phisiologus seith sikerly
 How that they syngen wel and myrily. (3259 - 72)

Of course it is unnecessary to refer to a scholarly source to describe a very familiar act which the rooster performs by nature. Nor does Chauntecleer "sing" in the true sense of the word; he crows. This becomes apparent when the narrator finds he must resort to onomatopoeia to describe accurately the crude noise Chauntecleer makes when he is startled by the presence of the fox:

 He was war of this fox, that lay ful lowe.
 Nothyng ne liste hym thanne for to crows,
 But cride anon, 'Cok! cok!' and up he starte

As man that was affrayed in his herte.
For natureelly a beest desireth flee
Fro his contrarie, if he may it see, (3275 - 80)

The simile comparing Chauntecleer to a "man that was affrayed in his herte" is unnecessary to explain a cock's fear of his natural enemy. So too are completely irrelevant the numerous academic issues raised in coming to grips with a simple event like a fox stealing a cock.

The flattery in which the fox engages to ensure his capture of Chauntecleer inspires the latter's "moral" against flattery:

'Thou shalt namoore, thurgh thy flaterye,
Do me to syngs and wynke with myn ye;
For he that wynketh, whan he sholde see,
Al wilfully, God lat him nevere thee!' (3429 - 32)

The narrator's moral echoes Chauntecleer's, and responds not only to the events of the narrative but also to his own warning to the lords to beware of flatterers in their courts. The fox's moral, warning against him who "jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees" (3435), is a response to Chauntecleer's duping of him so that he opens his mouth to gloat over his capture of the rooster, thus releasing him. The fox's moral has been taken by some, rather arbitrarily, as the Nun's Priest's intended "moralite." But the fox is really no wiser than the cock in applying knowledge attained from sources to everyday situations. He cites Wreker's Burnellus seu Speculum Stultorum, and moments later is himself outsmarted by a clever cock. The issue is not that Chauntecleer, less well-read than he pretends misses the point of the story, but that the fox who has read it and is able to quote it in a self-defeating context without being detected, is nevertheless undone by the same shrewdness as that displayed by the cock in the poem.

The fact that these morals respond to such a small portion of the narrative and that they are, in any event, expedient and self-serving, directs the reader's attention back to the text. The inadequacy of the morals; their inability to encapsulate and justify all that has come before; and the purpose they will serve -- to make the rooster no less vain but more careful, and the fox yet a more successful rogue -- all undermine the Nun's Priest's admonition to take "the moralite, goode men" (3440). The "moralite" of the conclusion crumbles when confronted with the "folye" of the tale. This does not, however, diminish the validity of fiction as a purveyor of moral truth, but focuses attention on the ways in which literature exemplifies truth and influences behaviour -- in short, the efficacies and failings of literature. Two examples of such failings within this tale are the reference to Paolo's and Francesca's fall while reading the Lancelot story, and the fox's failure to be warned, by his reading of the story of Burnellus, about the strategies of clever roosters. Brody speaks of the complexity and elusiveness of the concept of truth in fiction:

Chauntecleer is, no doubt, the embodiment ... of the larger uncertainty in the tale over what is true and not true generally.... A fantastical rooster, he appears in the middle of a piece of fiction that poses as truth, tells a series of exempla drawn largely (though not entirely) from authoritative sources, and then ignores the truth contained in them.... One apparent truth about the tale is that it will not easily support one meaning, and if it is confused and ambiguous, if its moral is elusive, if it can be seen from a variety of angles, that is because the tale is less about a particular moral in it than about the very existence of moral possibilities ... difficult moral choices are everywhere. The narrator, in raising all sorts of possibilities of meaning, compels the audience to confront the ambiguities raised in the tale, and thus he creates in his fiction a mirror of what individuals regularly confront in life. What moral meaning they extract from or impose upon life, or the story, presumably depends upon their ethical

predispositions, and their burden is to make the right choices. 107

Hence the dynamics between truth and fiction, meaning and ambiguity, has as much to do with the ability of the audience to read the text correctly as it does with the text itself.

The Nun's Priest does much the same as Chaucer in the Retraction. Without offering an explicit moral or doctrine as the shaping principle of his work, "he can only offer," Jill Mann comments, "St. Paul's guarantee that everything that has been written has a moral in it somewhere."¹⁰⁸ The moral, however, may be lost or misconstrued, as Chauntecleer misinterprets or ignores his own exempla and as Paolo and Francesca are led into sin by the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. The Nun's Priest constantly interrupts his own narrative -- breaking dramatic illusion -- so that the reader cannot suspend his disbelief and lose himself in the story:

To be sure, the variety of his devices for accomplishing this renders the effect inescapable: not only interruptions of his narrative, but also comparisons between chickens and people, stories within his story, allusions to other stories, and parodies of literary styles. By doing all these things the Nun's Priest compels us to focus on the mechanics of his art, and his tale as a consciously wrought work of fiction. 109

The "substance" of the tale is its own intrinsic structures. It is the misuse of language and rhetoric, and the destruction of illusion, which singles out these strategies as the object of the reader's scrutiny.

As in the Parson's Tale, the inadequacies of the "morals," which are supposed to explain and justify the fiction that generates them, ironically direct our attention back to the fiction. We discover that in the "chaf," too, lies a problem, and this problem is not its potential, feared by medieval commentators, to distract man's attention

from the "fruyt," but its depiction -- by demonstration -- of the ease with which man can be seduced into believing that reality is other than it is. The problem with the morals is more insidious, for they conveniently provide trite platitudes to which the complexities of reality may be reduced, a danger which is increased exponentially by their offer of Scriptural authority and justification for this evasion. Robert Burlin discusses the detachment of language from reality in this tale:

The tale is about that point at which the abuse of language touches upon the abuse of reason, when language separates itself from thought and takes on a meaning of its own. Chauntecleer abuses language, not only when he mistranslates Latin, but when he uses his book-learning, his knowledge of dream-theory and of argumentation, for purposes he finally and foolishly considers less important than satisfying his sexual vanity. The narrator pays him the dubious compliment of telling his story with a similar abuse -- of authorities or rhetoric, of literary genre and mode.... He ties the general abuse of language to the uses of fiction, or the process of fiction-making, thus commenting most appositely on the rationale of the Canterbury Tales themselves as a fictional construct.... On the one hand, the fable may seem to imply that the act of fiction-making is nothing but 'worldly vanitee,'.... On the other hand, even such a self-deflating moral as this can be properly expressed by the experience of fiction. 110

Geoffrey of Vinsauf, the master rhetorician, to whom Chaucer makes explicit reference within the tale, is merely one of three objects of the narrator's highly rhetorical apostrophe bemoaning Chauntecleer's capture:

O destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed!
Allas, that Chauntecleer fleigh fro the bemes!
Allas, his wyf ne roghte nat of dremes!
And on a Friday fil al this meschaunce.

O Venus, that art goddesse of plesaunce,
Syn that thy servant was this Chauntecleer,

And in thy servyce dide al his poweer,
Moore for delit than world to multiplie,
Why woldestow suffre hym on thy day to dye?

O Gaufred, deere maister soverayn,
That whan thy worthy kyng Richard was slayn
With shot, compleynedest his deeth so soore,
Why ne hadde I now thy sentence and thy loore,
The Friday for to chide, as diden ye? (3338 - 51)

The two factors which have been suggested as causes (or excuses) for Chauntecleer's decision to fly down from the safety of the beam -- fate and the rooster's willingness to serve Venus -- are here equated with language, ideally a tool to represent reality after the fact. The causal and the representational are identified, implying that language -- as much as destiny, sexuality or any other factor -- is capable of creating its own reality. In Burlin's words:

Placing the authority on rhetoric on the same figurative plane as 'Destinee' and 'Venus,' implies their coequal reality. The manner of telling -- its verbal strategies -- is on a par with the causal factors in a providentially governed universe. Hence the forces of fictive manner -- namely rhetoric with all its inflations and amplifications -- assume an implied governance over the fictive matter, here the bare events of the Aesopian fable. 111

The converse is that Venus and Destiny are not real forces that shape man's life, but are themselves manners of speaking, figures or verbal constructs invented by man to corporealize and hence render comprehensible the forces he believes exert influence upon his life. To elevate these to the rank of causal forces is in fact to deny man's moral responsibility, free will, and sheer instinct to survive. Neither Venus nor Destiny can rightly be blamed for Chauntecleer's misfortune.

The consistency of dramatic illusion is not a priority for Chaucer. To place on the "same figurative plane" diverse elements which do not seem to belong to the same

realm of being is a strategy he has used before, most notably in his inclusion of a fictive pilgrim named Chaucer on a pilgrimage composed entirely of characters whom the historic Geoffrey Chaucer has created. The reader is constantly shuttled between the contrived, stylized "literary" tales and the "realistic" frame which allows for the interplay between juxtaposed tales and tellers. The Retraction which closes the fictive Canterbury Tales makes reference to work, both fictive and expository, within and outside of the framework of the tales. It transcends the realm of fiction, concerning itself instead with the hope of eternal salvation.

The Nun's Priest derides his inability to equal Geoffrey of Vinsauf's lamentation for the death of King Richard I:

Why ne hadde I now thy sentence and thy loore,
The Friday for to chide, as diden ye?
For on a Friday, soothly, slayn was he.
Thanne wolde I shewe yow how that I koude pleyne
For Chauntecleres drede and for his payne. (3350 - 54)

This self-effacing evaluation, made absurd by the elevation of the import of the rooster's capture to equal that of the assassination of the King of England, becomes all the more comic by the criterion of this equation: that both tragedies have occurred on a Friday. This passage is followed by a comparison of the hens' "crie" (3376) to the lamentations of the women of Troy, Rome and Carthage. This excess seems to be deflated in turn by the chase of the fox -- "a stock scene in mediaeval poetry of peasant life,"¹¹² according to Robinson. But the function of this scene is two-fold. First, it reminds us of the farmyard setting of this tale, for the old widow, out of sight all this time, suddenly emerges "with a dystaf in hir hand" (3384), aided by her two daughters, the other farm animals and the neighbours. The cacophonous noise of the chase contrasts sharply with the learned rhetoric spewed forth by chickens, fox and narrator throughout the tale, but, paradoxically, it invests with apocalyptic import

the fate of Chauntecleer:

[They] cryden, 'Out! harrow! and weylaway!
Ha! ha! the fox!' and after hym they ran....
Ran cow and calf, and eek the verray hogges,
So fered for the berkyng of the dogges
And shoutyng of the men and wommen eeke,
They ronne so hem thoughte hir herte breeke.
They yolled as feendes doon in helle....
So hydous was the noyse, a, benedicitee!
Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynes
Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille
Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille,
As thilke day was maad upon the fox.
Of bras they brougten bemes, and of box,
Of horn, of boon, in whiche they blewe and powped,
And therwithal they shriked and they howped.
It seemed as that hevene sholde falle. (3380 - 3401)

Not nearly so much noise and fuss was attendant upon the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, nor were the stakes so high, for the potential aftermath of Chauntecleer's capture is nothing less than annihilation: "It semed as that hevene sholde falle." The narrator's rhetoric simultaneously deflates and re-inflates the import of this event to apocalyptic proportion. In the end, neither the avian, human nor cosmic perspective holds reign, just as neither the moral nor amoral message, "fruyt" or "chaf", finally subsumes the other. The relationship of the "moralite" to the tale is similar to that of Chaucer's Retraction to the Canterbury Tales as a whole: it supersedes the realm of fiction, while fulfilling the requirements of fiction which vindicates its own validity as a purveyor of moral truth. What makes the Nun's Priest's Tale unique is that the "truth" it conveys concerns the nature of fiction itself.

Notes

- ¹ Colish, pp. 59 - 60.
- ² Colish, p. 70.
- ³ Colish, pp. 71 - 73.
- ⁴ Robertson, pp. 53 - 55.
- ⁵ Colish, p. 79.
- ⁶ Robertson, pp. 56 - 57.
- ⁷ Robertson, p. 59.
- ⁸ Robertson, p. 59.
- ⁹ Robertson, p. 59.
- ¹⁰ E. Talbot Donaldson, "Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: The Opposition," in his Speaking of Chaucer, p. 134.
- ¹¹ Donaldson, "Patristic Exegesis," pp. 134 - 35.
- ¹² William E. Rogers, "The Raven and the Writing Desk: The Theoretical Limits of Patristic Criticism," Chaucer, 14 (1979 - 80), 260.
- ¹³ Rogers, p. 262.
- ¹⁴ Rogers, pp. 261 - 64.
- ¹⁵ Rogers, pp. 264 - 65.
- ¹⁶ Rogers, pp. 266 - 67.
- ¹⁷ Rogers, pp. 275 - 76.
- ¹⁸ Wimsatt, pp. 12 - 13.
- ¹⁹ Wimsatt, pp. 14 - 16.
- ²⁰ quoted by Wimsatt, p. 16 n.

21 Richard Hamilton Green, "Dante's 'Allegory of Poets' and the Mediaeval Theory of Poetic Fiction," Comparative Literature, 9 (1957), 125.

22 Wimsatt, pp. 16 - 18.

23 Robertson, p. 63.

24 Donaldson, "Patristic Exegesis," p. 136.

25 quoted by Wimsatt, p. 19.

26 Donaldson, "Patristic Exegesis," p. 137.

27 St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Pt. 1, Q. 1, Art. 10, p. 7.

28 St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Pt. 1, Q. 1, Art. 10, Reply 1, p. 7.

29 Wimsatt, pp. 19 - 22.

30 Morton Bloomfield, "Symbolism in Medieval Literature," in his Essays and Explorations, p. 84 n, 85.

31 Bloomfield, "Symbolism in Medieval Literature," pp. 89 - 90.

32 Bloomfield, "Symbolism in Medieval Literature," p. 84 n.

33 St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Pt. 1, Q. 1, Art. 9, Reply 1 - 2, p. 6.

34 quoted by Bloomfield, "Symbolism in Medieval Literature," p. 91.

35 Bloomfield, "Symbolism in Medieval Literature," pp. 91 - 93.

36 Bloomfield, "Symbolism in Medieval Literature," pp. 94 - 95.

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- 39 White, p. 151.
- 40 A. Paul Shallers, "The Nun's Priest's Tale: An Ironic Exemplum," ELH, 42 (1975), 323 - 24.
- 41 Shallers, p. 324.
- 42 Shallers, p. 327.
- 43 Shallers, pp. 328 - 330.
- 44 Jill Mann, "The Speculum Stultorum and the Nun's Priest's Tale," Chaucer, 9 (1974 - 75), 276 - 77.
- 45 J. Leslie Hotson, "Colfox vs Chauntecleer," PMLA, 39 (1924), 769 - 70.
- 46 Hotson, p. 771.
- 47 Hotson, p. 773.
- 48 Hotson, p. 775.
- 49 Hotson, p. 775.
- 50 Hotson, p. 777.
- 51 Hotson, pp. 777 - 78.
- 52 Hotson, p. 778.
- 53 Hotson, pp. 780 - 81.
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- 55 Donovan, p. 501.
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- 57 Donovan, p. 505.
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- 60 Donovan, pp. 506 - 507.
- 61 Donaldson, "Patristic Exegesis," p. 148.

- 62 Donaldson, "Patristic Exegesis," pp. 147 - 49.
- 63 Rogers, p. 269.
- 64 Charles Dahlberg, "Chaucer's Cock and Fox," JEGP, 53 (1954), 277.
- 65 Dahlberg, p. 277.
- 66 Dahlberg, p. 278.
- 67 Dahlberg, p. 279.
- 68 Dahlberg, p. 280.
- 69 Dahlberg, pp. 283 - 84.
- 70 Dahlberg, p. 286.
- 71 Dahlberg, p. 286.
- 72 Dahlberg, p. 287.
- 73 Dahlberg, p. 288.
- 74 Dahlberg, pp. 289 - 90.
- 75 Dahlberg, p. 284.
- 76 Derek Pearsall, "Chaucer, the Nun's Priest's Tale, and the Modern Reader," DQR, 10 (1980), 168.
- 77 Pearsall, p. 170.
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- 82 shallers, pp. 332 - 35.
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- 92 David, p. 229.
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- 98 Corinne E. Kauffman, "Dame Pertelote's Parlous Parle," Chaucer, 4 (1969), 41 - 48.
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- 100 Brody, p. 37.
- 101 Brody, p. 38.
- 102 Brody, p. 41.
- 103 Howard, p. 284.
- 104 Howard, pp. 285 - 86.
- 105 Donaldson, Chaucer's Poetry, p. 942
- 106 Pearsall, p. 173.

107 Brody, pp. 42 - 43.

108 Mann, p. 277.

109 Brody, p. 44.

110 Burlin, pp. 233 - 34.

111 Burlin, p. 222.

112 Robinson, p. 755.

Conclusion:

The Reinstatement of Fiction.

In the Middle Ages, as Stewart Justman points out in his study "Literal and Symbolic in the Canterbury Tales," "an analogy can pass for a literal identity."¹ Symbols become reality: the Roman Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation is a remnant of this symbolic mode of perception, for the Host does not merely represent the body of Christ, it is the body of Christ as well as its representative. In the fourteenth century, Nominalist epistemology affected a decisive split between symbol, language, and reality. This creates a clear distinction between figures of speech and fact, and breaks with the symbolic mode of perceiving the world. In 1972 Sheila Delany published her essay "Undoing Substantial Connection: the Late Medieval Attack on Analogical Thought," which studies the parallel growth of this phenomenon in the fields of poetic practice, political theory and scientific method. She examines the thought of the English Franciscan William of Ockham as a manifestation of the disintegration of the medieval vision of the cosmos as hierarchical and therefore potentially comprehensible through the analogical mode of thought. Ockham provides a systematic critique of the epistemological basis of analogy. His thinking originates in and explicates a radically different approach to reality -- one in which "universals" are denied the status of objective or psychological existence. They correspond to no actual entity, but are merely acts of the intellect, for instance: "the person who experiences limitations on his freedom may construct a universal scheme of predestination in order to account for the human condition as he perceives it. For Ockham such an effort to organize experience in abstract patterns

would be logically impermissible (however necessary it might be emotionally)."² In Ockham's words, the universal "has only a logical being in the soul and is a sort of fiction existing in the logical realm."³ The concept of relation is a form of the universal. This includes analogy and causality. Universals cannot be proven, nor are they logically necessary to account for the facts, and so may be discarded. The allegorical persona is usually a personified universal. As such, it corresponds to nothing knowable and cannot lead man to recognize any similitude between itself and the reality it resembles.

This is not to argue that Chaucer was directly influenced by Ockham's writings, but to suggest that Ockham's thought is yet another aspect of the disintegration in the fourteenth century, of many institutions and assumptions, the validity and authority of which had never been questioned. "It is precisely this sense of the ambiguity or complexity of life," Delany comments, "that allegory is not suited to convey.... If a writer should interest himself in the infinite and infinitely subtle behavioural possibilities that free will implies, he will not ... be drawn to allegory.... The mystery of the will, which allegory dispels by fragmentation, is what we know in reality."⁴ In his work, Chaucer acknowledges and deals with the ambivalence of the human will:

The nominalist theory of will expresses the same consciousness.... Because will is not subordinate to other mental operations, the human soul does not necessarily desire what is good for it, as Aquinas and others had taught. It is ambivalent, and Ockham denies that everything has a natural inclination toward its own perfection.... God's actions cannot be constrained by what he has already done, or by what he has promised to do.... This vision of a pervasively contingent universe is one of the most important contributions of the nominalist theory, for it points to a radical revision of traditional relations between man and the world, man and God. 5

At issue in Nominalist epistemology is the undoing of the substantial connection of the universe. Figures of speech are recognized as fictions; the cognitive power of language is not divinely ordained; words and symbols have no inherently appropriate relationship to that which they signify.

They are arbitrary representatives of things and concepts. The concepts, or universals, are themselves arbitrary, since they are word-constructs. The dichotomy however, between the nominalist and the orthodox Christian view of signification is complicated by the fact that both views allow for the employment of metaphoric language.

In the Canterbury Tales, as I have tried to show, the literal world is not necessarily a cipher or an analogy of the divine. An immoral man preaches a moral sermon; the "moralities" attached to the fictional tales are overshadowed and defeated by the fictions themselves. The moral aphorisms are not necessarily "moral"; orthodox allegorical readings fail. In the tales that I have examined, with the exception of the Parson's Tale, fiction reigns supreme, undermining the didactic purpose it is supposed to serve. It bursts the confines in which the moral platitudes seek to contain it. The Parson's Tale cannot be considered as a victory of moral expository over fiction, for no contest exists. This tale directs attention to a realm which neither condones nor condemns fiction, but transcends it.

Dolores Palomo speaks of Chaucer's use of the fictional point of view as a distant ancestor of that of the novel. She cites the questioning of the traditional aristocratic and clerical authority and values, as well as the increasing reliance upon empirical tests of reason associated with Renaissance thinking, as having an impact on fiction which manifests itself in contrasts between real and ideal, shifts of tone and multiple perspective. Ockham dissociates faith and reason as independent kinds of knowledge, answering to different criteria. The former depends on revealed truth while the latter rests on empirical observation. His insistence that belief is the only possible basis for faith

resulted in the breakdown of the great medieval synthesis; the scholastic philosophy which affirmed the rational basis for Truth. Robert Burlin comments on the implications of this view: "Ockham's isolation of intuitive knowledge from matters of faith is crucial to an understanding of the theological controversy in Chaucer's time and of the poet's own attitude toward the relationship between knowledge and language."⁶

The most fundamental manifestation of this transition in Chaucer's writing is his interest in the relationship between truth and art, independent of the degree to which the fiction conveys historical or doctrinal truth. The authentication of fiction by reference to authoritative sources or history is a game that Chaucer plays, most notably in the Nun's Priest's Tale, implying that he does not consider such justification a necessary foundation for a fictional story. Chaucer frequently cites previous writers as a strategy to ward off blame for opinions that might give offence. The fact that Chauntecleer and the Nun's Priest share this strategy is further evidence that the Nun's Priest's Tale is in fact concerned with the techniques of fiction-making, and the precarious relationship between fiction and truth. That the Nun's Priest cites the Lancelot story as evidence of the veracity of his own merely shifts the blame for any lies or deceptions to the author of Launcelot de Lake. The authoritative basis of Chaucer's fictional narratives is undermined, and the technique of appeal to "auctoritee" is the object of his parody. This is not to argue that Chaucer foregoes authenticating devices; merely that he rejects the traditional strategies which anchor fiction in an independent, pre-existent truth in favour of one which foreshadows modern "realism". The unpredictability of the frame story contrasts with, and thus emphasizes, the artificial, self-consciously "literary" quality of the tales. Chaucer, Palomo concludes, is "staking out the ground that realism will occupy in modern fiction, in which verisimilitude provides the authentication of narrative that once had been supplied by the

citation of historical origins or literary progenitors....
The truth of fiction inheres in its fictiveness."⁷

Palomo discusses the relationship between the disengagement of art from the criterion of objective truth to the use of a narrative voice that calls attention to the work as the author's creation:

Chaucer differs significantly from medieval practice, for his work exhibits a high degree of authorial self-consciousness, and his first-person narrator is surely a differentiated, unique individual.... Chaucer knew ... that the particular words which body forth meaning create meaning, no matter what medieval theory had to say about fruit and chaff ... [his] works authenticate themselves.... Imaginative validity neither creates nor depends upon objective truth, but upon the power of the author to compel the reader ... not unlike Chaucer's Pardoner who sermonizes so skilfully for his fellow pilgrims that he almost persuades them of his righteousness. 8

Chaucer simultaneously demonstrates the non-truth of fiction. The frequent destruction of illusion in the Nun's Priest's Tale, for instance, forces upon us an awareness that fiction is a finely manipulated artifice. It is by means of the manipulation of his fiction that Chaucer asserts his authorship as creator, and frees the author from the requirement of objective validity. In Chaucer, Palomo believes, we find the germs of the modern writer's conviction of the auto-referentiality of the text; its internal coherence independent of authenticating authority;

The privatizing of narrative voice frees the writer from the responsibility to express objective truth, and the resulting multi-perspectivism distinguishes Chaucer from his contemporaries.... [He] shares a certain skeptical quality observable in late medieval artists who have lost complete confidence in the objective, and yet still distrust subjectivity.... We never feel the assurance of a comprehensive objective viewpoint that emanates from behind the author, as we do with Dante or

Homer.... The dislocation of the subject/object relationship ... lies behind much of the subtle irony and delicate shifting in Chaucerian narrative.... Chaucer constantly apologizes, makes excuses, shifts responsibility onto some other person, real or fictional.... The contrast between reality and traditional ideality contributes to the dialectic on truth and art. 9

The Pardoner's attempt and failure to give validity and the proper symbolic connotation to his false relics is a convenient point of departure for a brief examination of the manifestations in Chaucer's fiction of the new relationship between language and reality posited by Nominalist epistemology. The symbolic significance of the relic depends upon the authenticity of the concrete object. The Pardoner's attempt to invest his false relics with the values of genuine relics flies in the face of the Augustinian belief in the sanctity of the relationship between sign and signified, presenting in its stead a highly contingent view in which relics -- and all symbols -- are not divinely ordained signs but are mere objects whose signifying value is reducible to, and as mutable as, their description. In the Nominalistic view, language is not a means to reality. The converse is that reality is a verbal construct. In this case, the use of false relics presents no real problem. The pilgrimage, an inherently symbolic journey, is saved from meaninglessness, however, by the pilgrims' rejection of the Pardoner, his tale, his pardons and his relics. Their retreat to an orthodox, conservative epistemological point of view is made necessary by their fearful vision of the chaos of relativism and lack of meaning to which their venture as pilgrims (and as human beings) will be reduced if the Pardoner's arbitrarily assigned values are allowed to stand. They reject all, including an exemplum which adheres to the criterion of moral didacticism. Justman cites different examples, but his summary is an apt description of the impotence to which the pilgrims reduce the Pardoner's words: "Words are vain, inauthentic fictions that stand for nothing ... inauthentic

fictions and figures stripped of real authority."¹⁰ The final irony lies in the fact that it is the power of the Pardoner's words in his telling of the exemplum which constitutes his tale that results in the blanket rejection of himself and all that he stands for.

So too when the three rioters in the Pardoner's Tale understand a figurative expression of the concept of Death in terms of a non-existent literal reality, they implicitly attack and parody the spiritually inscribed status of signs which forms the basis of the analogical relation. And the paradox of an immoral man telling a moral tale is acceptable only within an epistemological system in which words are disconnected from reality. In Justman's view:

Chaucer's Pardoner is himself a false exemplification, a counterfeit.... Ironically the Pardoner's own tale confirms the connection of symbols and controls. It concerns three young 'rioters' who reject both. They undertake to kill Death himself.... They pay the price for their failure to decode the old man's instructions. They did not understand how gold could 'represent' death, and it stands to reason that 'rioters' who have little sense of symbolism do not acknowledge loyalty to any abstraction like a social unit, even one of their own making. In this sense the Pardoner's is 'a moral tale'.... But the issue does not rest there. In the Pardoner's windy digression from his tale proper almost as soon as it begins, we sense the power of words to run away from reality.... [This] may recall a modern idea, the first fact of language: that words are, after all, a 'digression' from reality.... The Pardoner may ironically remind us of the purely symbolic un-real character of words. As a professional talker, the Pardoner finds it easy enough to exploit the falsity inherent in language. 11

The fact that the Pardoner not only reflects himself through language but creates himself through it reveals a great deal of the power of language. His capacity to detach himself from himself, to regard himself as the other and to be aware of himself as his own instrument of observation is inherently reflexive.

The Nun's Priest's Tale is an extreme example of words which have run away from reality. It is significant that the absurd verbal dilation of this tale has no effect upon, nor even comes into contact with, the reality of the action in any way:

The 'plot' is meagre, all but lost, while there is an enormous overlay of 'unnecessary' words.... All of these words finally do not 'equal' the reality the tale describes. And animals cannot talk. Ironically, to mock words -- that is symbols -- the Nun's Priest uses words in abundance. It is with sounds that symbolize nothing -- mere onomatopoeia, that we come closest in this tale to the reality under the overlay of words. 12

Despite Chaucer's proven ability to exploit "the fantastic possibilities of the medieval dream vision," Justman adds, Chauntecleer's dream is ... a preview literally accurate down to the black tips."¹³ And, as I have already argued, the Nun's Priest's indeterminacy concerning the moral meaning of his tale is an affront to the medieval theory of allegoria: that visibilia bear the burden of the moral truth of the invisibilia Dei, and that the former are inherently and necessarily related to the latter. "I believe that the Nun's Priest's Tale," Justman concludes, "really concerns the authenticity of the commonplace, the chaff, and of the literalist perception. It shows that high Latin culture has no place in the barnyard, and that the barnyard is no place to look for moral signification. All creation is not a hieroglyph, or, if there is a book of nature, we cannot read it."¹⁴ Words and signs are not necessarily sacred ciphers. Burlin writes:

The Nun's Priest's Tale testifies to a creative instinct on Chaucer's part, however obliquely revealed, that stands outside the critical strictures of his age and rejects the deadly separation of form and meaning, the body and

soul of literature.... [It] undercuts its explicit 'moralitee' by implicating the narrator in the 'folye' of its characters. The antic disposition of the fable raises questions, however obliquely, about the meaning of 'meaning'. 15

If the Nun's Priest's Tale withdraws into ambiguity, the Manciple's Tale cancels all tales and withdraws into silence. It too is a highly digressive tale in which rhetoric ironically goes one way and reality another, reducing the idea of words to absurdity precisely because of their power to render reality malleable and mankind deceived. "Words," Burlin remarks, "fictionalize moral values by supplying misleading labels."¹⁵ This power is illustrated by the necessity of the Manciple's insistence on the falseness of the "lady"- "wenche", and "Capitayn"- "theef" distinctions. In each pair, both terms have a common moral referent. Justman comments: "The Manciple calls attention to the purely symbolic, un-real nature of symbolic abstraction.... His tale perfects the attack on symbols in the Canterbury Tales. It is a verbal attack on words."¹⁷ The Parson fears that fables lie and deceive; the Manciple shows how well-grounded this fear is, for not only fictions but the language of which they are composed, is slippery, ambiguous, and deceptive.

The failure of allegory in the Nun's Priest's Tale means success in reclaiming symbols for the world of literature. To construe symbolically is to moralize. The Nun's Priest's Tale and the Pardoner's Tale mock the moral control of symbols. For example, the incestuous nature of Chauntecleer's "court" inconveniences most exegetical approaches to the poem until the commentator ingeniously explains away this difficulty allegorically. But it is perfectly acceptable when we remember -- and this is one of Chaucer's ploys to remind us -- that Chauntecleer is a chicken, and Christian morality does not apply to his life. It must be acknowledged that it is the perpetrator of most of the poem's irrelevant and meaningless rhetoric that wins out in the end against his adversary. So too, although his method is vague and unconvincing,

Chauntecleer's argument for the prophetic significance of dreams is correct. His vanity and lechery render his success against the fox inexplicable within a moralistic context. As in the Pardoner's Tale the power of words asserts itself after all. Morton Blomfield writes:

The world is not entirely inscrutable. Rhetoric also enables man to win over reality as well as to succumb to self-gratification. Finally rhetoric is what enables Chaucer to give us the NPT whereby art wins out over life -- at least for a while.... What we have in the NPT is a fable devoted to the teaching of wisdom being undercut and destroyed by its mock quality, by its characterization, by its scholastic reasoning, but finally leading us back, but on a higher level, to its original didactic purpose.... Out of foolishness, out of the mouth of foxes, wisdom can come and man can be free. Destiny may be eschewed and we can learn our lesson. The mock magnification of the small is actually not mock at all, but real. These little subrational creatures can win out over fate and are bigger not smaller than life.... In a curious way, the mock-heroic mode elevates even as it denigrates.... We can admire all the more the petty beings who are briefly taken seriously even as we are aware of the author's presumption.... The ironies of the NPT turn back on themselves ... [it] preaches courage and humanity and sheer delight in mankind's endless ingenuity which even self-deception cannot completely destroy. 18

In a similar but more solemn vein, it is the morality of the Pardoner's tale which re-asserts the relation of symbols and controls, and results in the failure of the Pardoner to establish a personal and arbitrary relationship between symbol and significance, language and truth. That the pilgrims confuse one fictive level with another, mistaking the Pardoner's demonstration of his salesmanship for a sales pitch, ironically saves them from participating vicariously in his sin. Phebus mistakes his own verbal construct for the reality of the character of his wife, ironically revealing the deceptive potency of words that the Manciple warns against.

"Chaucer draws much of his irony from just such mistake [s] in kind," Burlin writes, "mistaking experience for authority ... one fictive level for another or for another mode of discourse or even another reality.... The irony is both critical and sustaining, it allows Chaucer to entertain the viciousness of fictions in the very process of creating them."¹⁹ The undramatic structure of the Canterbury Tales is such that affirmation and rejection, illusion and disillusion, stand incongruously together as informing principles of the work. Hence the critical burden of reconciling the Retraction with the mode of fiction which it appears to disclaim so forcefully is less than it may seem, for the framework structure of the Canterbury Tales, as well as the "meaning" of some of the tales themselves, examine the potential, the strategies, the limitations and the dangers of fiction. The Retraction merely passes explicit judgment on the insight that has been implicit throughout the Canterbury Tales: that the poetical experience, although valid is insufficient. Paradoxically, it is only through the poetic experience that this insight can be reached and communicated.

Notes

¹ Stewart Justman, "Literary and Symbolic in the Canterbury Tales," Chaucer, 14 (1979 - 80), 199.

² Delany, p. 47.

³ Delany, p. 47.

⁴ Delany, pp. 49 - 51.

⁵ Delany, pp. 50 - 51.

⁶ Burlin, p. 12.

⁷ Dolores Palomo, "Chaucer, Cervantes and the Birth of the Novel," Mosaic 8, IV (1974 - 75), 72.

⁸ Palomo, pp. 65 - 66.

⁹ Palomo, pp. 67 - 68.

¹⁰ Justman, p. 200.

¹¹ Justman, pp. 206 - 07.

¹² Justman, p. 207.

¹³ Justman, p. 207.

¹⁴ Justman, p. 208.

¹⁵ Burlin, pp. 232, 237.

¹⁶ Burlin, p. 244.

¹⁷ Justman, p. 212.

¹⁸ Morton W. Bloomfield, "The Wisdom of the Nun's Priest's Tale," in Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives: Essays Presented to Paul E. Beichner, C. S. C., ed. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy (University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp. 78 - 79.

¹⁹ Burlin, p. 244.

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