Ugly Beauty: Chaucer's Poetic Ecclesiology

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Abstract

Over the last several decades, the "religious turn" in Chaucer studies has opened up numerous avenues for analysis of Chaucer's poetics without completely resolving questions about their specifically Christian character, or lack thereof. Approaches to answering such questions include biographical analysis, which in Chaucer's case seems least likely to yield substantial conclusions: we simply don't have enough biographical data to be confident that Chaucer held strongly to one, or another, or no version of Christian faith. Our limited sources of knowledge about Chaucer's distinctly secular professional life certainly give us no basis for confident assertions about his own personal piety. Unlike his contemporary John Lydgate, for example, Chaucer was no monk. On the other hand, given the numerous, lively and vigorous forms of lay piety in Chaucer's era, his lack of religious vocation and/or sacerdotal ordination is not *per se* a limiting factor on the possibility that his poetics is robustly Christian at a deep philosophical level. One important movement of lay piety, founded on protest against ecclesial corruption, was inspired in large part by the indignation and influence of another Chaucer contemporary, John Wyclif, and this movement has been the focus of a substantial body of scholarship over the last several decades. Not surprisingly, possible allusions to Wyclif's ideas found in Chaucer's poems, placed under various scholarly lenses, have led to recurrent speculation as to the possibility of a generally heterodox or, indeed, a decidedly Wycliffite bent in Chaucer's poetic *oeuvre*.

In order to test the notion that Chaucer's *poeisis* reflects a Wycliffite bent, scholars must consider most especially the Wycliffite doctrines themselves, many of which are more negative than positive: that is, they express a piety that is characterized above all by objection to and protest against real or perceived ecclesiastical abuses of a divine calling. Many scholars have speculated that Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, with their pungent, pointed satire directed at the foibles of errant clergy and vowed religious, could well share a common spirit with the Wycliffite reformist agenda. That Wyclif's ideas and the movement he sparked have long been considered a type of "premature reformation" is no surprise, and if in fact Chaucer's poetics is distinctively Wycliffite-leaning, we should be unsurprised by the manifestation of a "Protestant Chaucer" across prior generations of Chaucer scholarship. On the other hand, in spite of the pungent anti-clerical satire that features so prominently in the *Tales*, there is much evidence to suggest that Chaucer's poetics is more genuinely Catholic than heretical, and scholars are quite right to continue to subject the "Wycliffite" Chaucer to careful, multivalent scrutiny.

The Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards, a late fourteenth century precursor to Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*, provides a handy summary of the accusations leveled by Wyclif and his followers at the late medieval church. Among the aspects of Wycliffite thought and polemic which are represented in the *Conclusions* and relevant to the *Canterbury Tales*, the third and eleventh conclusions rail against the celibacy mandated for secular clergy, for monks, and for nuns, while the ninth conclusion rejects the sacrament of penance. Certainly Chaucer had a keen eye for manifestations of clerical corruption, but it is doubtful that his *Tales*, taken as a reasonably complete and unified work of art, reflect the outright heretical loathing of ecclesial foibles that characterizes

the most savage aspects of Wycliffite polemic. Furthermore, there are some important indicators, deserving of deeper investigation, that Chaucer's poetic ecclesiology as crafted in the Tales, is consciously an orthodox ecclesiology characterized especially by the theological virtue of hope, as against the heretical ecclesiology of suspicion, fear, and contempt proffered, all too often, by Wyclif and the polemicists whom he inspired.

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My dissertation is dedicated to my three beloved children, Stella Grace, Christina Joy, and James Judah, in hopes that they, too, will find wellsprings of joy and wonder, of sentence and solaas, in their Lord, as they continue to learn about Him and the glories of His creation – His *poiema*.

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Introduction

The first part of the title of this dissertation, the paradoxical phrase "Ugly Beauty," is intended to capture the essence of a certain unavoidable truth about Chaucer's best-known poem, the *Canterbury Tales*, and also about the church: namely, you can't have one without the other. There is both beauty and ugliness in Chaucer's *Canterbury* poetics, and also in the historical church which Chaucer's *Tales* evoke in miniature. The founding of the Church, in a deeply poetic sense, necessitated a particularly ugly form of judicial execution, all the much more hideous because so profoundly unjust. Church fathers both east and west understood this moment poetically as the birth of the Bride of Christ (like Eve from Adam's side) when blood and water, signifying the ecclesial sacraments of holy Eucharist and holy baptism, gush from the side of Jesus the Messiah, as he hangs on the cross and his body is pierced by a Roman soldier wielding a spear. This beautiful ugliness, on the other hand, can of course be noted in less mystical terms: the only entirely innocent human being in all of history was beaten bloody and then crucified: nailed to a cross made of wood and left to hang there until he died. The crucifixion of Christ, however, is only one among numerous aspects of Christian doctrine that are ugly in the eyes of the world, while being paradoxically beautiful, in one way or another, in the eyes of the church. As if the various scriptural calls to poverty, abstinence, suffering, and mortification of the flesh aren't bad enough, there is the sacrament of the Eucharist, in which the faithful understand themselves to be, in a spiritual but nonetheless objectively real sense, eating the flesh and drinking the blood of their Lord, their God, their Savior. Aspects of the faith which convey to the faithful deep, mysterious beauty while signifying ugliness, blasphemy, obscenity, madness and so on to

the world would potentially include – and historically have included – the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Resurrection, along with the church's perennially offensive assertion that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the sole mediator between God and humankind, a claim warranted, perhaps most famously, by the words of Jesus recorded in the fourteenth chapter of John's gospel, when he responds to Thomas's plaintive "Lord, we do not know where thou art going, and how can we know the way?": " I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me" (John 14:5-6).[1]

An additional and different layer of ugliness, of course, is the historical track record of the church's failures to live out her calling to follow Christ and His ways, loving God and loving neighbor as self. Far from being the unspotted, unblemished Bride of the eschaton, the church has shown her ugliness time and time again, and the era in which Chaucer was writing the *Canterbury Tales* is no exception. This is not to say that the history of the church is one long failure; far from it. Nonetheless, a sober inquiry into facts unavoidably leads to many ugly specifics of church history, including the persecution of Christians by other Christians, an especially grievous failing given that Jesus told his disciples they would be known as His by way of the evidence of their love for each other (John 13:34-35). Among the Christian victims of Christian persecution, some of Chaucer's near contemporaries, the variously styled Lollards or Wycliffites, who were accused of and tried for heresy and subsequently burned to death when they refused to recant, are among those most relevant to this dissertation. On the other hand, a case can made that the father, so to speak, of the Wycliffite movement was himself a

[1] All Biblical references are from the Douay-Rheims.

persecutor of the church who (ironically) believed himself to be a victim of persecution, as in fact some of his followers ultimately were.

In Chaucer's lifetime, his contemporary John Wyclif vigorously and vociferously pressed the church to reform, and his passion for reform found enough of a following, and constituted enough of a threat, that the church responded not only by condemning various of his teachings, but also by resorting to occasional executions, by burning, of unrepentant Wycliffites. Scholars have rightly wondered to what extent Chaucer may have shared the manifestly dangerous reformist ideas of Wyclif and his followers,[2] and opinions have varied widely, including at one extreme the 16th century Protestant martyrologist John Foxe's claim that Chaucer was a "right Wyclevian, or else there never was any." At another extreme and a much later date, we have G.K. Chesterton's assertion that although Chaucer and his noted contemporary and fellow poet, William Langland, were "both highly intelligent Christians and Catholics," nonetheless

> Chaucer was more unmistakably orthodox than Langland; not because Chaucer was more superficial, but because he was more fundamental. Langland was troubled about many things, though most of them were worthy things; social order and moral discipline and the economics and ethics sharply needed in his time. But Chaucer had the one thing needful (260).[3]

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[2] See Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (1994), especially Chapter 2, "Wyclif in the Rising".

[3] On Foxe's dubious and often disparaged claim, see Komowski, p. 5. Regarding Chesterton's better grounded claims, it's worth noting that Etienne Gilson, the eminent 20th century Thomist, praised Chesterton's book about Aquinas as follows: "I consider it as being without possible comparison the best book ever written on St. Thomas. Nothing short of genius can account for such an achievement" (cited in Pearce, p. 3). Given Chesterton's ability to grasp the essence of Aquinas in a way that superlatively impressed a scholar of Gilson's stature, it does not appear far-fetched to speculate that he may have "nailed" Chaucer as well. Given also that Chesterton's take on Chaucer indicates a strong connection to the thought of Aquinas, this points towards the one of the tentative conclusions I draw from the

Similarly, distinguishing between Chaucer and Wyclif, and noting that "[s]ome critics have vaguely suspected Chaucer of being a Lollard," Chesterton lays down a helpful principle that appears highly relevant to the question of whether Chaucer's *Canterbury* poetics merits the label "Catholic":

> A man does not come an inch nearer to being a heretic by being a hundred times a critic. Nor does he do so because his criticisms resemble those of critics who are also heretics. He only becomes a heretic at the precise moment when he prefers his criticism to his Catholicism. That is, at the instant of separation in which he thinks the view peculiar to himself more valuable than the creed that unites him to his fellows (236).

As I will argue, although some features of Chaucer's critique of the church bear affinities with Wycliffite critiques of the church, the full design of the *Canterbury Tales* cannot in the end support the notion of a Wycliffite Chaucer – and more importantly, the poet's design seems on the whole to point in a distinctly opposite direction.

Written during the period of the great papal schism, which lasted from 1378 to 1415, and less than two centuries after the reform-focused Fourth Lateran Council, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* responds to a powerful yet embattled church culture of self-justification, self-scrutiny, debate, and pressure to reform. The *Tales* mirror, satirize, embody, and comment on major social and religious realities of the poet's era in English history: anti-clericalism, growth in lay literacy, increased lay involvement in multifarious aspects of church life, expanded opportunities for production and access to vernacular

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dissertation: that Chaucer scholarship *might* be better served by focusing more on Aquinas and less on Wyclif.

literature, including the bible, and determined challenges to orthodoxy, in particular Wycliffism. An extended poetic portrait of the late medieval English church (both laity and clergy), the masterful and multi-vocal *Tales* indicate the author's investment in an ongoing critical inquiry into questions which are inherently the province of ecclesiology, in that the *Tales* persistently touch on the corruption of church officials, their disciplines, and practices. Who, and what, is the church, ecclesiology might be said to ask, and what are the means to its proper functioning? Are all the baptized, confessing, and communing faithful equally qualified to inherit the kingdom, or is the church inescapably stratified and divided by differences of official responsibility, sacramental status, education, social class, and gender? More to the point, perhaps, does superior (more perfect) devotion to the ideal, as evidenced by specific works, give an individual Christian greater hope, or is the identity of the real church in fact determined – willed – by God in such a way that individual works have no salvific power? What is the official and/or unofficial source of unity in the church? Deeply related to questions of ecclesial identity and unity are questions concerning the church's authority: what are the sources of that authority, how is authority manifested, and what tends to undermine that authority? These and other broad questions underlie the specifics of the church's various institutional functions: guardian of doctrine and sacramental practice; propagator of learning and producer of educational materials; caretaker, in diverse ways, of the concerns of laity and clergy. These questions also underlie Chaucer's literary project in creating the *Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer's contemporary John Wyclif, and Wyclif's followers, gave answers to ecclesiological questions which were particularly inflammatory, given that they tended to consider the visible, hierarchically-ordered institutional church to be antithetical in

numerous and profound ways to what they considered the real church. Wycliffite polemic raised questions that orthodoxy considered answered, and offered up answers that, in several instances, orthodoxy found intolerable. Wyclif is perhaps best known for having firmly denied, on scriptural and philosophical grounds, the doctrine of transubstantiation; although he emphatically did not deny the Real Presence, he asserted that the elements of bread and wine in the Eucharist remained substantially present, even as their accidents or appearances remained present, after the words of consecration were spoken by the priest. As Anthony Kenny notes in his concise overview of Wyclif's dissent from the doctrine, this one issue consumed him, ironically, in more senses than one:

> the doctrine of the Eucharist became for Wyclif the touchstone to judge all other matters. He would follow either of the rival Popes if they could tell him the truth about the nature of the Sacrament; on the other hand, if monks and friars who supported him on other matters differed from him on this, that proved that they were limbs of Satan. And if it was on this point that he judged others, it was to be on this that he was himself to be judged and condemned, after all his previous escapes (Kenny 87-88).

Wyclif's denial has major implications for ecclesiology as well: if the miracle of transubstantiation is called into question, inevitably the authority, power, and special sacramental status of the clergy are called into question as well.[4]

[4] For a more substantial treatment of Wyclif's views on transubstantiation, see I.C. Levy's *John Wyclif: Scriptural Logic, Real Presence, and the Parameters of Orthodoxy* (2003).

Yet the issue of the Eucharistic sacrament was only one aspect of the way Wycliffite critique tended to undermine the traditional and orthodox understanding of sacerdotal authority and spiritual power. Cutting perhaps deeper still, Wyclif and his followers argued that the visible church, with all its powerful institutional norms and officials, was not the church at all; rather, the church as Wyclif defined it, was "the *congregatio predestinatorum,* the body of those predestined by god for salvation," and, as Anne Hudson notes, there was no way of being certain as to the status of any given individual. As Hudson explains, despite the respectable scriptural and Augustinian foundations of Wyclif's views, in Wyclif's hands those source ideas were "pushed to extreme lengths". Wyclif's intense insistence on the absolute distinction between the two classes of people coexisting in the visible church – those who would ultimately be saved and those who would ultimately be damned – was "[j]uxtaposed with [his] insistence upon the preeminence of the gospels and the epistles as the sole arbiters of legitimate practice in the church". In turn, "[t]he effect of this juxtaposition was to cast into uncertainty the authority of the church and its ministers" (*Premature Reformation* 314-315). As against a clear cut definition of the church as visible and indeed palpable institution, with a rigid divide between clergy and laity, and a claim that salvation depended not only on believing in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ, but also, and crucially, on faithful adherence to official church doctrines, Wyclif and his followers presented a different division, one in relation to which the clergy/laity divide had no necessary relevance for determining whether one was saved, holy, or righteous, and one which radically threatened the visible church's claims to exclusive authority.

Several generations of work relating to the question of Chaucer's sympathy (if any) with various elements of the Wycliffite reform agenda have led to the present state of fruitful uncertainty on the matter, such that there is now a substantial and growing body of scholarship that wrestles in various ways with the possibility of a distinctively pious, religious, heretical, or simply Catholic Chaucer. Indeed, it is likely that the increasing prominence, over the last few decades, of studies of Chaucerian piety, however construed, is a result in some measure of the increase in the study of Wyclif and his followers. The so-called "religious turn" in Chaucer studies, spearheaded in many ways by the work and influence of D.W. Robertson, but not limited to the "Robertsonian" school of thought, has by no means extinguished skepticism in various quarters about the newly fashionable "religious Chaucer."[5]

My dissertation focuses on a small selection of Wycliffite reformist ideas and their possible relevance to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which is, among other things, a kind of fictional ecclesiology. By ecclesiology I mean the study of the nature of the Christian church, including the related questions of who the members of the church are, how those members relate to each other, and how the institution should be ordered, governed and disciplined from within. Not surprisingly, given the perennial human interest in questions of authority and power, contested or conflicted areas of ecclesiology in Chaucer's time, and in his fiction, relate persistently to sacerdotal authority, whether manifested in a secular priest, a friar or a monk, a deacon, a bishop, an abbess, or – most pointedly in Wycliffite polemics, but almost completely absent from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* – the Pope.

[5] For a revisionist take on several decades of revisionist takes on D.W. Robertson, see Justice, "Who Stole Robertson?" (2009).

Two areas on which Wyclif and Wycliffites urged reform were clerical celibacy and so-called "private religion," in particular the orders of mendicant friars; both of these concerns were intertwined with a larger trend or tendency towards de-sacralizing piety, and diminishing, de-emphasizing, or even disordering and undermining distinctions between various classes of Christians falling under the general headings of clergy and laity. In addition this trend overlapped with a particularly virulent attack on clerical attachment to worldly power and wealth, or temporalities, an attack which included ferocious cries for involuntary poverty by means of royally-mandated disendowment. Both the general mandate of priestly celibacy and the narrower mandate of sexual abstinence for members of the female monastic orders were scathingly condemned in the document known as the *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards*, a manifesto at once announcing and demanding a decidedly Wycliffite program for the reform of "holichurche in England," which was publicly posted in 1395. The relevant items on the list of conclusions, numbers three and eleven, insist that vowed celibacy is instrumental in encouraging widespread sin and corruption in the church as a whole. In addition, the ninth conclusion condemns the sacramental practice of oral confession and priestly absolution, attributing to it a range of different opportunities for abuse, while giving it no credit for having any value in and of itself. These three reformist "conclusions" will be touchstones of my analysis of how they relate to Chaucer's Canterbury poetics in its ecclesiological dimensions.

What, then, might Wycliffite ecclesiology tell us about Chaucer? How to accurately describe Chaucer's attitude toward the church culture of his era, and in particular the extent of his sympathies, if any, for the reformist/heretical Lollard

movement, is an ongoing scholarly project to which many scholars have contributed, and which nonetheless is in need of more attention than has yet been paid to it. As Alcuin Blamires remarks, "Chaucer's writings really require fresh concerted analysis from the point of view of Wycliffite polemic" ("Crisis and Dissent" 140). Substantial progress in the study of Wyclif and Wycliffism over the last several decades has made the work of pursuing Chaucer-Wyclif connections at once more feasible and more complex, not least because connections may entail either agreements or disagreements, or an elusive combination of the two. The complexities are of course compounded by the persistent popularity of Wycliffism as an object of study, which means the full bibliography of books, editions, and articles published to date (English-language alone) is becoming massive indeed. The contributions of Anne Hudson are the most outstanding and important, in particular her magisterial work *The Premature Reformation* (1988), which has provided needed clarification and correction to older scholarship on Wyclif and the Wycliffite movement. Given that there is significant overlap between Wycliffite and orthodox protests against clerical abuses, Hudson's work has greatly helped scholars by developing a more rigorous approach to discerning real rather than merely perceived Wycliffite ideas in manuscript sources, which are typically anonymous and often ambiguous as to their orthodoxy or heterodoxy (*Premature Reformation* 7-59). Hudson also collaborated with Pamela Gradon on the invaluable five-volume critical edition of *English Wycliffite Sermons*, and her shorter articles on topics related to the study of Wyclif and his movement number in the dozens.

Other particularly important contributions to scholarship on Wyclif and Wycliffism include Anthony Kenny's *Wyclif*, as well as several important articles;

Richard Rex's study *The Lollards* (2002); Margaret Aston's *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (1984); Penn Szittya's *The Anti-Fraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature* (1986); Fiona Somerset's recent *Feeling Like Saints: Lollard Writings After Wyclif* (2014), her *Four Wycliffite Dialogues* (2009), consisting of previously unpublished treatises, the anthology *Wycliffite Spirituality* (2013), co-edited and co-translated with J. Patrick Hornbeck and Stephen Lahey, and numerous articles; Jeremy Catto's likewise numerous articles; Craig Fehrman's "Did Chaucer Read the Wycliffite Bible?" (2007); David Aers' *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England* (2004), as well as *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (1996), co-written with Lynn Staley; Andrew Cole's *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (2008); Nicholas Watson's "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409" (1995); and Khantik Ghosh's *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts* (2002).

English-language scholarship on Wyclif, in a post-Latinate era, has been hindered by the fact that his numerous works, which were written almost entirely in Latin, have not – with only a handful of exceptions – been translated into English, and hence, all too often, they are not being read; most scholars of the present writer's generation are dependent on those who can or could read Wyclif's works in Latin. Experts on Wyclif have duly noted the problem, both in the relatively distant past and more recently. In 1926, Herbert Workman asserted that "the weakness of much writing on Wyclif has lain in an insufficient knowledge of his Latin writings"; in 2001, I.C. Levy remarked as follows: "… it is perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of John Wyclif's legacy that while

so much has been written about him, few people actually read what he has written" (Workman vii; Levy ix). Levy's assertion is from the introduction to his recent translation of Wyclif's *De veritate Sacrae Scripturae* or *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, which is one of two translations of major works contributed to Wyclif studies in the last twenty years; the other is Stephen Lahey's translation of the *Trialogus*, published in 2013. A somewhat older contribution, Terence McVeigh's 1992 English language edition of *On Simony* was the first published translation from the Latin original. Both Lahey and Levy have in addition made multiple substantial contributions to the study of Wyclif and his followers, such as Lahey's *John Wyclif* (2009) and Levy's introductory anthology of topical essays by multiple scholars, *A Companion to John Wyclif* (2006).

The option to view Chaucer as a distinctively and seriously religious poet, whether leaning towards orthodoxy or heterodoxy, but in either case deeply invested in the secular spheres he inhabited, is richer in possibilities than ever before, thanks to the work of the aforementioned and many other excellent scholars. In order to develop a reading of Chaucer's poetic ecclesiology as expressed in the *Canterbury Tales*, this dissertation will pose some questions about possible connections between Chaucer's fictive representation of the church and the Wycliffite/Lollard critique of the church, noting from the outset that Chaucer's fictive church (i.e., the *viators* or pilgrims en route to Canterbury and – more tentatively, but hopefully – to the heavenly Jerusalem) seems to privilege ostensibly lay perspectives and voices, a tendency many scholars have observed. Some forty years ago, for example, in her groundbreaking book *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, Jill Mann noted that in the *General Prologue* of the *Canterbury Tales*, "Chaucer is consciously producing an example of [estates satire], and just as

consciously refusing to adhere to the one principle of order that usually characterizes it, the separate treatment of clergy and laity" (*Satire* 6-7). About ten years ago, in "Chaucer's Public Christianity," Nicholas Watson emphasized the poem's "context of a common act of lay devotion, the pilgrimage" and averred that "the poem asserts a lay identity quite as clearly as it asserts a class identity" (Watson 100). Assuming these and other scholars are correct, it remains to be fully fleshed out why and how this apparent lay affiliation matters to the project of describing Chaucer's genius as (perhaps) a specifically Catholic poet. While a pronounced lay affiliation characterizing both the poet's biography and his *oevre* does not by any means automatically make the poet a Wycliffite, it does underscore the need to inquire diligently into how Chaucer's work may indicate particular affinities or oppositions to aspects of the Wycliffite critique of the institutional church, a critique which is notoriously prejudicial to the special status and power of the clergy. Three striking aspects of that critique, as briefly sketched out above, are its vigorous denial of the legitimacy of clerical celibacy, its opposition to the vowed continence of female religious, and its refusal to adhere to orthodox teaching on oral confession. This dissertation uses those three aspects of Wycliffite thinking, which are summarized in the *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards*, as starting points for an analysis of Chaucer's poetic ecclesiology.

Chapter One ("Dowyde and Wifles aȝens Godis auctorite": The Fruits of Celibate Clergy) begins with a summary of the history of clerical celibacy in the Roman Catholic church, including opposition to it in medieval times, and this summary leads into an examination of Wycliffite polemic regarding clerical celibacy. This paves the way for an assessment of the ostensibly celibate clerics of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*,

asking in particular what the narrative fruits of male clerical celibacy appear to be, or to put it another way, what do stories by and/or about the celibate clerisy *generate*. This chapter scrutinizes the interplay of celibacy, sterility and/or futility, and greed in the *Summoner's Tale*, the *Pardoner's Tale*, and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, and explores some suggestive connections between this conceptual blend of clerical sterility and clerical avarice and the Wycliffite polemical approach to the same issues.

Chapter Two ("Feith, and Nakednesse, and Maydenhede": Strength Made Perfect in Weakness) considers the closely related but different issue of vows of continence taken by female religious, again laying out some historical background, exploring the Wycliffite critique as articulated in the eleventh of the *Twelve Conclusions*, and then moving on to the examine the spiritual fruits of various religious and non-religious female characters as they are imagined in specific parts of the *Tales*. These spiritual fruits include metaphorical fruits of marriage (i.e., not children): what does *marriage* produce or generate in the soul of the married woman or man? Does the poem appear to validate female monastic continence or the more ordinary path of marriage, or is the opposite true – or neither? Surely it is imaginatively significant that marital conflict (the "wo and peyne" famously cited by Alisoun of Bath) is a distinctively fruitful field of literary-philosophical "game" as well as spiritual "earnest," and this poetic complex of conflict and fruitfulness, I argue, does not appear to map well to the often reductive, simplistic Wycliffite attacks on clerical and/or religious continence. To get at some specific fruits of Chaucerian models of marriage, and in particular the interplay between physical and spiritual poverty and holiness, this chapter examines the Wife of Bath and

the Prioress, *The Man of Law's Tale*, *The Second Nun's Tale*, and *The Clerk's Tale*, in tandem with Wycliffite polemic about clerical malfeasance and lust for worldly power.

Chapter Three (Chapter 3: "Taak the siker wey": Penance & *Poiesis*) begins with an overview of scholarship, both older and newer, on *The Parson's Tale*, that oft-maligned, oft-neglected literary closure to the Canterbury fiction of a pilgrimage that points simultaneously backwards (to the Tabard Inn) and forwards (to the heavenly city of Jerusalem), and that knits things up more perfectly than various scholars have been willing to admit. The inquiry turns briefly to the *Melibee*, to tease out a little bit of the context for taking seriously its role as a fictive-allegorical precursor to the explicitly penitential prose of the *Parson's Tale*.[6] Lastly this chapter concerns itself with church doctrine on the sacrament of penance, comparing the bitter, weirdly impoverished, and markedly cynical polemic of Wyclif's denial of the sacrament's value with Chaucer's Parson's richer, more hopeful, and more charitable explication of (or meditation on, to borrow Thomas Bestul's insight) the "goode wey" of "fructuous" penance. The chapter closes with some remarks about the implications of the foregoing for an ecclesiology of mutual forbearance and mercy, at once hopeful and unsentimental, grounded deeply in prudence and charity in the face of human limitation and human waywardness (on which Josef Pieper's perspective, citing Thomas Aquinas, is especially helpful, as is William Lynch's insightful study of the Christian literary imagination, from his still fresh, still excellent *Christ and Apollo*).

[6] D.W. Robertson's remarks (in *A Preface to Chaucer*) on the importance of the *Melibee* as a structural forerunner and hermeneutic key to the *Parson's Tale* are still worthy of consideration, although many scholars (see, for example, Wallace's *Chaucerian Polity*) have tended to undervalue them.

In at least one respect Chaucer and Wyclif appear to be a study in contrasts, and that respect, bluntly, is their relative popularity in present day academia. Chaucer's congeniality, real or perceived, gives his work a capacious ability to appeal to scholars advancing all manner of intellectual agendas, and he is not merely voraciously studied but also genuinely liked. Wyclif, on the other hand, seems to fascinate and repel; he is also avidly studied, but he is only rarely warmly admired, and in some cases he is actively vilified. This scathing essay-closing remark written by Beryl Smalley in the sixties is an extreme example of a noticeable academic tendency to view Wyclif as interesting, yes, important, yes, but *persona non grata* all the same:

> To choose the most arbitrary interpreter of Biblical texts of the Middle Ages would be rather like awarding a prize for the ugliest statue of Queen Victoria. Yet I would back Wyclif to win. He ended his life as a mere bore, inventing fresh insults in default of new ideas (Smalley 89).

Smalley's harshly witty summation has its merits, but nonetheless Wyclif has his defenders as well, among whom Ian Levy stands out for having taken an especially charitable stance on the cantankerous would-be reformer and "indignant master."[7]

Having remarked on the tendency of Chaucer scholars to be wary, in the wake of simplistic claims for a "Protestant Chaucer," of making too much of the "substantive affinities between John Wyclif and the Chaucer of the *Canterbury Tales*," William

[7] See Levy's *Holy Scripture and the Quest for Authority at the End of the Middle Ages* (2012), Chapter 2.

Komowski offered this statement about additional obstacles facing scholars who attempt to analyze Chaucer through the lens of Wycliffite polemic:

> Of course, Chaucerians have slighted Wyclif for other reasons. For one thing, the aesthetic implications of a Wycliffite Chaucer are discouraging in their potential for a reductive criticism written to a specific theological agenda. Nor does Wyclif's polemical voice ring with rhetorical artistry. By temperament a proto-Puritan, Wyclif held an aversion to the literary enterprise, much like Chaucer's Parson who would eschew the aesthetics of fiction for the "ascetics" of penitential prose. Small wonder that Chaucerians have hesitated to examine their poet's affinities to the theologian who would have thought the Retraction the best part of the *Canterbury Tales* (Komowski 5-6).

Whether Komowski's assertions regarding Wyclif are entirely accurate is debatable, but surely he is correct in pinpointing what we may be justified in calling an active source of scholarly prejudice, an impediment well worth setting aside. As Komowski does, I suspect that a thorough evaluation of Chaucer's "affinities to Wyclif" – or the relative lack of them – "[will] yield a clearer, more satisfying definition of the religious, or pious, Chaucer" (6). By focusing closely on a limited subset of the issues highlighted by Wycliffite ecclesiological critique, in tandem with several of the *Canterbury Tales*, this dissertation aims to forward not only that goal, but also the goal of elucidating Chaucer's carefully crafted poetic ecclesiology.

In doing so, I hope in particular to shine a light on Chaucer the artist more so than on Chaucer the sociopolitical figure of much recent new historicist and/or ideology-

driven criticism. Taking a cue from C.S. Lewis, Derek Pearsall, and others, I take seriously the obligation of good literary criticism to prioritize the unveiling, contemplation, and explication of artistry, rather than the secondary, although important, concerns of social, political, and historical analysis. For example, as Pearsall explains in his essay "Towards a Poetics of Chaucerian Narrative,"

> One could read many of the books and essays written in recent years about Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* without being made aware that nearly all of them are in verse, or that this is in any way important. The *Tale of Melibee*, in prose, is often treated as if it were the same kind of literary production as the tales in verse, and the word "discourse" has come widely into use to mask the need for differentiation. A long chapter on *Melibee* in the important book by David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, makes passing mention of the fact that the tale is in prose, but nowhere indicates any awareness that this might make a difference. For those commentators with a predominant or more usually exclusive interest in political, social, or cultural history, or in race and gender studies, what is needful is paraphrasable meaning. Yet paraphrasable meaning is only a part of what and how poems mean (99).

Similarly, in his much older but still relevant commentaries on trends in literary criticism, Lewis reminds us to distinguish very carefully "between life and art" in order to avoid "a failure to allow for the existence of art at all" (*Experiment* 74). Furthermore, as he notes in "Image and Imagination,"

> Always the real world is the bank on which the poet draws his cheques; and though a metaphysical lyric may be a fine and private place, all the meanings embraced within it are but passengers who come there from the public, eternal, objective world of reality and haste thither again. Aristotle was right. Poetry presents … things that might be – it recombines elements which belong to the real, and to appreciate poetry involves at every moment a knowledge of those elements and therefore of the real (49-50).

The real, for both Lewis and myself (and, I suspect, also for Chaucer), includes not just the fragile and ever-vexed contingences of human, temporal existence, but also the dimly seen transcendent horizon which suggests that we just might be far more enduring and cosmically valuable than we can rightly imagine. With such a hunch, or such a kernel of faith, it is no surprise that part of Lewis's answer to the question "Is Theology Poetry?" includes these words:

> We cannot … turn down Theology, simply because it does not avoid being poetical. All world views yield poetry to those who believe them by the mere fact of being believed. And nearly all have certain poetical merits whether you believe them or not. This is what we should expect. Man is a poetical animal and touches nothing which he does not adorn (156).

Hence, the intertwining of the pursuit of beauty and the pursuit of God is inevitable. This dissertation, in some measure following up on an old intuition that Chaucer's poetic imagination is more Christocentric[8] than not, and that his embrace of the church in all her

[8] For a salient example of the use of this term, see *The Powers of the Holy*, Epilogue, p. 272, where David Aers and Lynn Staley assert of Chaucer that "[u]nlike both Julian and Langland, he is not a christocentric

ugly beauty is more warmly substantial than not, will suggest a few possibilities for thinking about why and how that might matter to a better understanding of Chaucer's affinity, or lack of it, with his contemporary John Wyclif and the heretical ecclesiology which turned into a popular movement.

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writer." My disagreement with Aers and Staley stems, as best I can see, from a fundamental difference in our ideas about the full possible range of artistic expression for a Christian writer, whether medieval or not. Chaucer stretches literary possibilities in ways that enable startling and even shocking methods for imagining Christ and Christ's church; under surface contradictions posed by the fearless and favor-less depiction of human frailty, a deeper Christocentrism lies. A modern Catholic artist whose keen appreciation for the coexistence of the grotesque and the sublime may be related to Chaucer's in more than superficial ways, Flannery O'Connor lends some perspective on the vocation of Christian writers *to be artists*: "The novelist is required to open his eyes on the world around him and look. If what he sees is not highly edifying, he is still required to look. Then he is required to reproduce, with words, what he sees. Now this is the first point at which the novelist who is a Catholic may feel some friction between what he is supposed to do as a novelist and what he is supposed to do as a Catholic, for what he sees at all times is fallen man perverted by false philosophies. Is he to reproduce this? Or is he to change what he sees and make it, instead of what it is, what in the light of faith he thinks it ought to be? Is he … supposed to 'tidy up reality'?" (*Mystery and Manners* 177) The plausibility of positing a degree of commensurability between Chaucer's and O'Connor's Christian poetics is evidenced not only in broad terms, across the *Canterbury Tales*, but also in the narrator's apologia at I 725-46 of the *General Prologue*.

Chapter One:

"Dowyde and Wifles aȝens Godis auctorite": The Fruits of Celibate Clergy

Part 1 The "First Fruit" of Clerical Celibacy: Perennial Critique

The long-standing insistence of the Roman Catholic Church on priestly celibacy as a perpetual obligation is a mandate which to this very day stirs up intense debate, and with good reason. Of all the different ways this church has maintained strict boundaries between clergy and laity, none perhaps is more deeply characterized by a densely problematic face-off between other-worldly idealism and on-the-ground realities of how human beings actually live and what human beings actually are. A wealth of evidence, from the oldest sources to the newest, shows that resistance to this ecclesiastical requirement, in both principled and unprincipled forms, is a constant of church history. Writers as disparate as Peter Damian, the reformist monk of the 11th century, and Henry Lea, the 19th century historian who wrote *The History of Sacerdotal Celibacy*, agree profoundly on at least one thing: the sexual behaviors of ordained clergy in the Roman Catholic Church have historically been in glaring violation of the official rule to a significant degree. In the nearer term, news reports of grievous scandals involving sexually abusive priests and subsequent church cover-ups, obfuscations, and collusions have pointed to the possibility of a disturbed and disturbing underside of the policy, a kind of shadow world that follows the outward policy inseparably. [9]

[9] For recent, substantial accounts of issues pertaining to the sexual shadow life of the imperfectly celibate Roman Catholic clergy, see Sipe, Keenan, and Blenkinsopp, *inter alia*.

Questions about the relative success or failure, in practice, of the discipline of clerical celibacy are one thing; the more foundational question is whether the discipline is legitimate in the first place. Pressure to reform the western church's policy on the matter has been a fact of church history for as long as the policy has been in effect, while debate on the merits of sexual abstinence, in particular for the clergy, was persistent in the centuries leading up to the Second Lateran Council. [10] In her recent study of clerical celibacy and clerical marriage in the western church during the period from 1100 to 1700, Helen Parrish notes the continuity of "content and structure" in the debate about clerical celibacy, a debate that, as of her study's terminal point in history, was already nearly two millennia old:

> … the fundamentals of the debate … have remained remarkably consistent. Questions of scriptural mandate, apostolic precedent, ecclesiastical tradition, sacramental function and pastoral role were repeatedly aired … and the rationale behind obligatory clerical celibacy, and the desirability or acceptability of a married priesthood, considered and contested (1-2).

Drawing on work done by Peter Brown and Mary Douglas, Paul Beaudette stresses in particular the deep entrenchment of concern for ritual purity, which in his view was the preeminent source of the early canons on clerical continence, canons which led in turn to clerical celibacy proper (28). That overriding concern for purity reflected both needs for clear boundaries between the church and the world, and for power to function in the world. Always jointly featured in a vexed locus for interpretation, the establishment of clerical celibacy and the consolidation of papal power were closely intertwined, and those

[10] One of the earliest hints of this debate in church history can found in Paul's remarks at 1 Tim 4 1-3.

intertwined processes likewise played their parts in generating the problematic dividing wall between clergy and laity. Beaudette succinctly summarizes this division as follows: "'the church' came to be associated with the clergy, and 'the world' with the laity" (39).

The first modern historian to produce a magisterial overview of clerical celibacy in the western church, Henry Lea is of course only one of many scholars on all sides of the confessional divides who have noted what Roman Catholic historian and former priest Charles Frazee articulates as follows: "There was absolutely no connection made by Jesus between the ministry and celibacy. The call to perfection is addressed to all believers." Frazee goes on to note that Jesus emphasized the validity of the unmarried life, thus making an important alteration to "the prevailing Jewish attitude towards marriage … which required every male to be married" (149). He subsequently comments on the enduring appeal of the symbolic value of ascetic practice as a marker of "the sacralization of the clerical life," a process which meant that in the early post-apostolic era the priesthood gradually "[became] a special kind of Christian caste, something it had not been before this time" (151). He goes on to examine the specific pressures that led, in two major movements, to the petrification of the western church's stance on clerical celibacy. The early phase of the movement reached a high point in the fourth century synod of Elvira, understood to be the most ancient instance of official church authority attempting a universal mandate of continence for married clergy, but clerical marriage persisted all the way up to and beyond the later movement, which culminated in the Lateran councils of 1123 and 1139, wherein "[t]he final legislative blows [were] levelled against clerical marriage" (167). On Frazee's view, the primary impetus behind this later,

highly successful push to formalize and entrench the celibacy requirement was, bluntly, ecclesial power:

> By fortifying the clerical state as a distinct institution with thousands of celibate members, the rights and privileges of the church throughout western Europe were much more likely to be acknowledged than by a married clergy subject to the bonds of feudal society (166).

Frazee concludes that this overriding concern to protect the power of the Church in the world remains with us now, under vastly different cultural conditions: "The pope and bishops generally resist change, still fearing that a married priesthood would diminish their power, an opinion which they have in common with their twelfth-century predecessors" (167).[11]

More recent scholarship on the history of the celibacy debate includes David Hunter's important work on the early phases of the process that produced the celibacy imperative. Hunter notes the lack of a univocal position on the issue among the leaders in the western church, as well as the presence of dissent on the issue both in the west and the east (453-54). Focusing on key differences between Siricius, Ambrose and Jerome, Hunter illuminates subtle details that illustrate "the very fragility of the consensus that Siricius wishes to define" (454). Each of these men was an influential opponent of "Jovinian's view that married Christian women and consecrated virgins were equally

[11] Anne Barstow's study of the topic places the emphasis differently: rather than asking how clerical celibacy came to be a priority, she asks "how and when did the entrenched custom of clerical marriage become the subject of a vigorous campaign to abolish it?" (48-49) Her focus is the consolidation of papal power in the 11th century, with the concomitant emphasis on monastic asceticism, and her examination of the evidence reveals the harshly punitive dimension of papal policies, as well as the fierce resistance to them, which on occasion was violent.

deserving of honor" and of his "argument on behalf of the essential equality of all baptized Christians" (454, 461). Yet their opposition to Jovinian, according to Hunter, although superficially suggestive of unity, was in fact motivated by strikingly different factors which tend to support his conclusion that the "condemnation of Jovinian was a turning point in the history of Western asceticism" in which nonetheless "the leaders of the Western Church did not speak with one voice on the matter" (466). Hunter's analysis underscores the fact that "ascetic behavior was a powerful source of social power in late antiquity and fertile ground for the production of diverse hierarchies," hierarchies which merit the resistance apparent in Jovinian's "heresy" (466). The persistent tendencies towards pursuit of worldly power by means of a putatively spiritual distinction, as we will see, continued to be hotly criticized in the much later era of the 14th century, when Wyclif and Chaucer, in different ways, contributed to the celibacy debate and to the exposure of its deep conceptual roots.[12]

Part 2 The Wycliffite Critique of Clerical Celibacy

In the England of Chaucer's time, the most prominent version of the perennial debate was articulated by followers of his contemporary John Wyclif. About a decade after Wyclif's death, and some five years before Chaucer's, anonymous Wycliffites made

[12] For scholarly perspectives more in sympathy with the position of the Roman Catholic Church, see Heid, Cochini, Strickler. Schillebeeckx explicitly denies the primacy of ecclesial lust for power in stringent, yet oddly ambivalent terms: "Anyone who interprets the law of celibacy as an ecclesiastical abuse of power for the benefit of the hierarchical organization, although this did occur in certain areas, makes a caricature of history" (61). In some respects, his account harmonizes with that of Frazee et al.

a striking and principled statement of opposition to the mandate of clerical celibacy. The statement was one of a dozen listed in a document we have come to know as the *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards*. [13] The writers of this document, whoever they were, posted one copy of it on the doors of Westminster Hall while Parliament was in session in early 1395, and another copy on the doors of St. Paul's Cathedral. Although the Conclusions survive in a Latin version preserved and quoted by opponents of the Wycliffite reform agenda, both Cronin (292) and Hudson (*Select English Wycliffite Writings* 150) note that it is more likely than not that the original language in which they were written and published was English, which as Cronin observes is "a language particularly appropriate in the mouths of the champions of the English church and nation against "their stepmother, the great church of Rome" (293). That being the case, I have opted to use only the English portions of the text from my source (Cronin), but note that Cronin's source manuscript, and his printed edition of the manuscript, includes alternating English and Latin versions of each of the *Conclusions*.

The anonymity of this document is typical of many Wycliffite texts (Hudson 1988 10-11), and it announces itself as having a plural authorship ("We pore men, tresoreris of Cryst and his apostlis") whose explicit aim is the declaration of "certeyn conclusions and treuthis for the reformation of holi chirche of Yngelond." Among these "conclusions and treuthis," the third is a grave accusation leveled primarily at mandatory celibacy itself, and secondarily at the "priuat religions" of monastic and fraternal orders which are here said to be the source of the "lawe of continence":

[13] Following the lead of Andrew Cole and others, I reject the use of "Lollard" as a label for the individuals who adopted and in some cases revised opinions disseminated by Wyclif. See Cole 72ff.

> Þe thirdde conclusiun sorwful to here is þat þe lawe of continence annexyd to presthod, þat in preiudys of wimmen was first ordeynid, inducith sodomie in al holy chirche; but we excusin us be þe bible for þe suspecte decre þat seyth we schulde not nemen it. Resun and experience prouit þis conclusiun. For delicious metis and drinkis of men of holi chirche welen han nedful purgaciun or werse. Experience for þe priue asay of syche men is, þat þe[i] like non wymmen; and whan þu prouist sich a man mark him wel for he is on of þo. Þe correlary of þis conclusiun is, þat þe priuat religions, begynneris of þis synne, were most worthi to ben anullid. But God for his myth of priue synne sende opyn ueniaunce (Cronin 297).

There is a good deal of overlap between the substance of the twelve conclusions and ideas directly taught by Wyclif, but it is uncertain whether Wyclif himself would have entirely approved this particular conclusion, had he lived to read the document; although in at least two instances he criticized the celibacy mandate for its lack of scriptural warrant, he did not appear to be committed to the possibility of clerical marriage (Hudson *Premature Reformation* 357) As Henry Lea puts it, the movement he set in motion was "easier to start … than to restrain," and some degree of inconsistency between his published opinions and those of his followers would have been developmentally inevitable:

> Wickliffe might deny the authority of tradition, and yet preserve his respect for the tradition of celibacy, but his followers could not observe the distinction. They could see, if he could not, that the structure of sacerdotalism, to the overthrow of which he devoted himself, could not be destroyed without abrogating the rule

> which separated the priest from his fellow-men, and which severed all other ties in binding him to the church (324).

Hudson and Gradon note that Wyclif's position on the matter may have been due to indecision (Gradon and Hudson *EWS* 4:114); perhaps, had he lived longer, his views would have moved towards solidarity with the strong statement articulated in *The Twelve Conclusions*. Given his passionate commitment to the Scriptures as the basis for all aspects of life in Christian community, it is not implausible to suggest that under the right circumstances he might have come to see the celibacy mandate as a violation of the divine will for the church. Leaving that speculation aside, however, what is clear (as Hudson and Gradon likewise note) is that Wyclif was pre-eminently concerned with the corrupting effect of temporal power on the clergy, and that concern, though at times differently expressed, is also pre-eminent in the discourse produced within the movement after his death (Gradon and Hudson *EWS* 4:114).

Assuming that Frazee and others are correct in linking the celibacy mandate to the desire of the church hierarchy to protect, consolidate, and indeed increase its own power, it makes sense to inquire whether such an insight is reflected in Wycliffite rhetoric related to the celibacy debate, and if so, how. Ironically, it appears that the Wycliffite critique of clerical celibacy flips on its head the original reformist agenda behind the increasing pressure, leading up to the second Lateran council, to transform clerical continence to clerical celibacy. Beaudette summarizes that pressure as stemming from two ideas about how to reduce corruption in the church in the specific economic context of feudalism:

> The situation called for a change that was structural in nature. The reformers fastened their attention on two great evils: simony (the purchase or sale of sacramental actions or offices) and nicolaism (marriage among the clergy). Through these two efforts, "the one aimed at the independence, the other at the purity of the church," … the reformers hoped to eradicate the roots of the worldliness that had become endemic to church life (37).

About three centuries later, however, the anonymous Wycliffite authors of the *Twelve Conclusions* forcefully assert that widespread corruption has been the *result* of the earlier reformist agenda: "Þe thirdde conclusiun sorwful to here is þat þe lawe of continence annexyd to presthod, þat in preiudys of wimmen was first ordeynid, inducith sodomie in al holy chirche." Although the term "sodomie," both in this specific context and outside of it, has obvious sexual connotations, it also, for a reform-minded medieval English thinker, has connotations that go well beyond sexual ideation and figuration while not entirely leaving them out of the mix.[14] There's no surprise here: Sodom, after all, is a geographical place, and the narrative of its destruction is a textual locus that has attracted its share of commentary. The interlinked symbologies of sexual and spiritual corruption show up in precisely that locus within Wyclif's own rhetoric, as Patrick Hornbeck has shown. Offering a corrective to Lea's account of Wyclif, for example, Hornbeck rightly notes that "Wyclif's views on clerical marriage were more complex than some commentators have … remarked" (115). Echoing Hudson, Hornbeck notes that "Wyclif was not an ardent advocate of clerical marriage," but he then goes on to add that "nor did he follow other medieval thinkers in holding that the sacrament of orders is an

[14] "Obvious" here admittedly deserves nuancing, particularly in light of recent important work by Beechy, Goldberg, Boswell, et al., including Olsen's helpful reassessment of Boswell.

impediment to that of marriage." The important question, Beaudette elaborates, is whether priestly marriage would stem the tide of sexual vice arising from "enforced celibacy" (116). Citing a passage from Wyclif's *Trialogus,* Beaudette illustrates Wyclif's concern to correct not just sexual sin among the "celibate" clergy, but more generally their rampant worldliness. It is worthwhile to cite this passage at greater length than in Beaudette's analysis.

The passage is situated within a section dedicated to the explication of virtue and vice, within a subsection in which Wyclif's Phronesis lays out "five species of corporeal lust," of which "the sin against nature, which has many cursed species" is the fifth and evidently the gravest, to judge by its short- and long-term consequences. It is also the one most directly associated, in this rhetorical framework, with the grievous, oft-excoriated sins of the fraternal orders, whose mendicancy and hypocrisy are underscored here in a way that echoes the language of the *Twelve Conclusions*:

> the vice of sodomy has touched generally the apostolic ways, lest from improvident words be given occasion for committing this vile act. Yet it seems to me, that for the place and time this should not be passed by in silence, since the Devil knows how to teach young men who are removed from wifely consort this most vile sin, and especially giving aid in abundance to vigorous young men separate from women, who live in luxury, free from labors. Whence Ezekiel 16[:48] "Behold this was the iniquity of Sodom thy sister, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of wine, and idleness." *Thus the private orders ought beware, lest they fall into this fault, since many are proud youths, elegant and living*

> *together in luxury, at leisure from the labors of man, and commonly separate by their own hypocrisy from women* (169-70; emphasis mine).

As the passage continues, Phronesis expounds upon sodomy as a particularly vicious species of behavior, inexcusable, rooted in indifference to divine ordinance, and leading to deserved calamity; one striking rhetorical touch identifies spilled semen with the blood spilled by murderers:

> This sin is the least excusable among the corporeal lusts, since apart from women there should be less stimulation towards sinning, the sin is greater against nature, and commonly the libido is made to burn so much the hotter. So this sin is said to "cry out to God" more than the other four, which would be the cause of producing a man in the proper circumstances, as such would cry out to God for vindication, from which it has thus been unnaturally kept (170).

The sheer unnaturalness of acts of sodomy not only increases carnal appetite to a correspondingly unnatural pitch, while disrupting the natural order for reproduction of human life, but in addition the fate of such withholders of life, or misusers of the divine gift of procreative power, is a two-fold "harsh vindication, as much from God as from man," and the death penalty for acts of sodomy parallels, in the rhetoric of this passage, the account of God's retributive justice in destroying the unrepentant sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah:

> From this Sodom and Gomorrah, along with their inhabitants, were destroyed, as is clear in Genesis 19. And because of this God has struck men down dead, as is

> clear in Genesis 38[:8-10], so such Sodomites have been killed according to the laws of men (170).

The conceptual and rhetorical framework sketched here, which is a matrix of scriptural commentary coupled with the superabundant literary taxonomy of virtues and vices, clearly suggests that it is also a matrix out of which the *Twelve Conclusions* grew. Given the general and the specific matrices, it is no wonder that the anonymous Wycliffite reformers took so seriously their claim that clerical celibacy "[induced] sodomie in al holichurche" and expressed so urgently their call for the whole church to reform on this issue. Not only must the silence be broken in the form of written treatises such as the *Trialogus*, but it must also be the subject of public *outcry*.

Part 3 The Church Un-manned: Chaucer's Host and the Topos of Fruitfulness

The instigator of the story-telling contest that is foundational for the *Canterbury* poetics is the Host, who, as John Plummer astutely notes, persistently connects manliness with rhetorical fruitfulness (117); the Host's confrontation of the Pardoner, furthermore, is one of several significant loci for an appreciation of the poetic conflation of genital "purses" or "males" or lap-borne wallets that contain seeds that are, variously, monetary, sexual, and/or spiritual (118). When the Host angrily rejects the Pardoner's invitation to buy a false absolution and receive a chance to "kisse the [false] relikes everichoon," he matches or "quits" the worthless pseudo-gift of the Pardoner's purchasable absolution with a worthless offer to enshrine the Pardoner's worthless testicles in "an hogges toord" – yet another emblem of worthlessness -- and then to help him carry them, suggesting that, as the Host sees it, the burdens of both manhood and priesthood are too much for the

Pardoner: he isn't man enough, or man of God enough, to sow seed fruitfully – or perhaps to sow it at all.

In "Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch," Lee Patterson argues that the best way to understand the Pardoner's sexuality is to treat it as primarily *symbolic* of spiritual sterility, rather than as an indicator of a particularly strong literal interest in the practice and/or underlying psychological meaning of sodomite behaviors.[15] On his view, the reformist controversies of 14th century England, which included but were not limited to Wycliffism, and which were not, in any case, necessarily unorthodox, were crucially focused on simony, and he presents considerable evidence "that sodomy exists in reformist literature far less as a sexual sin than as a sin against the church" (Patterson 663-665). Wyclif's remarks in his treatise *On Simony*, which are based on older commentary written by William of Peraldus, are illustrative:

> Whence the Parisian in his treatise *On Avarice*, in listing eight reasons to detest this sin, expresses its terrible nature by calling it spiritual sodomy. For just as in carnal sodomy contrary to nature the seed is lost by which an individual human being would be formed, so in this sodomy the seed of God's word is cast aside with which a spiritual generation in Christ Jesus would be created (36).

In light of Patterson's observations, illustrated by this example from Wyclif's treatise, the third of the *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* may have less to do with literal sodomy than with spiritual sodomy, but if so, that does not negate the fact that the

[15] For an additional reading of a possible literary/traditional source of the Pardoner's "effeminacy," see Klassen (2007).

demand in the *Conclusions* is for the *literal* abolition of the canon law which requires priests to remain unmarried. It seems safer to say, given the passage from *Trialogus* on sodomy, that both spiritual and physical sodomy are in view for the anonymous Wycliffites who posted the *Twelve Conclusions* in 1395. Perhaps, indeed, they were not entirely conceivable except in tandem with each other.[16] In addition, if Charles Frazee (*pace* Edward Schillebeeckx) is correct in asserting that clerical celibacy is founded *primarily* on papacy-driven ecclesiastic will to power (simony for short), then the third conclusion, along with other 14th century rejections of the celibacy requirement, may be deeply predicated on an implicit understanding of the connection between simony and an institution of clergy that "like non wymmen," as the anonymous author(s) of *The Twelve Conclusions* put it.

The Host, again, is a crucial starting point for assessing the possibility that the connection was not lost on Chaucer, especially if we can take the Host's remarks to the Monk, in the *Prologue to the Monk's Tale,* as indicative of a consciously earnest authorial "sooth" beneath the Host's playful words and the "game" of story-telling. After noting visible markers of virility in the Monk, and invoking a curse on whomever it was that led the Monk into the life of vowed monasticism, the Host announces to the Monk that if

> … I were pope,
>
> Nat oonly thou, but every mighty man,

[16] According to one scholar, there is "a remarkable lack of concern with sodomy" in medieval English source texts, in comparison with sources from elsewhere in Europe. See Karras (2005) 193.

Though he were shorn full hye upon his pan,

Sholde have a wyf; for al the world is lorn! (VII 1950-53)

The world is lost, that is, because of the imbalance of power to sow and responsibility for sowing, with sowing implicitly understood as simultaneously literally sexual and yet also spiritual:

Religioun hath take up al the corn

Of tredying, and we borel men been shrympes.

Of fieble trees ther comen wrecched ympes.

This maketh that oure heires been so sklendre

And feble that they may not wel engender. (VII 1954-58)

The bifurcation of Christian community into those who sow spiritually but not sexually, and those who sow sexually but not spiritually, is, on the Host's view, a disaster. The ambiguity of the pronouns suggests that the failure to engender sturdy, viable "heires" applies simultaneously to both realms: the making of literal families, and the making of the larger family of Christ.[17]

[17] For a different interpretation of Chaucer's use of the Host to critique clerical celibacy, see Ames. On another note, see R.L. Storey, who asserts that in Chaucer's lifetime there was a noticeable drop in the numbers of men seeking ordination to the priesthood, a drop that "cannot be attributed solely to the overall demographic consequences of the Black Death … although it is perhaps possible that clerical celibacy became socially less acceptable in a period of population decline." Storey remarks as well that writers such as Chaucer, Langland, and Wycliffe (in other words, both orthodox and heterodox) contributed to a general climate of anti-clericalism that probably helped produce the outcome of smaller numbers of vocations to the priesthood (102-103).

Certainly Chaucer was aware of the Wycliffite manifestation of this centuries-old controversy, and his Canterbury poetics hints at a story-shaped ecclesiology that "sees through" rhetorical "postures of sanctity" to various nuggets of truth. Chaucer, like all or virtually all of his adult contemporaries in 14th century England, was well aware that clerics frequently failed to conform to the standard of sacerdotal celibacy, and at least one reference in his work to this widely known fact appears, on the surface at least, to have a casual quality which underscores the ubiquity and inevitability of such complaints about the clergy.[18] In the *Reeve's Tale,* he introduces one of his characters, the haughty Miller's wife, with this devastatingly blunt remark:

> A wyf he hadde, ycomen of noble kyn;
> The person of the toun hir fader was. (I 3942-43)[19]

The bluntness and simplicity of these paired statements about her ancestry suggests strongly that for Chaucer and his audience, there is no need whatsoever to explain such a fact, no sense that there is anything out of the ordinary about it. We could say such family trees are as common as dirt, even as the haughty Miller's proud wife is "digne as water in a dich." Does this particular feature of clerical hypocrisy matter greatly to Chaucer, and if so, how does he express what matters to him about it? As he continues with a fuller description of the Miller, his wife, their twenty year old daughter, and the parson who fathered the Miller's wife, we see that Chaucer is creating an account of an inherently hypocritical clerical family tree that interweaves the greed and pride of the

[18] Passus 6 of the C-text of *Piers Plowman* features a similarly blunt representation of commonly known "fruits" of clerical celibacy. See Pearsall 126.
[19] This and all subsequent quotations of Chaucer's works are from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

laity with the greed and pride of the clergy: laity and clergy are married, in the deepest sense, not only by outward and ordinary connections that the church explicitly forbids (rightly or wrongly), but also by the dirt-and-ditch-water common denominator of human sin; with a kind of grim hilarity, that "marriage" is consummated when the vengeful young clerics Aleyn and John "swyve" the daughter of the "person of the toun" and his grand-daughter, for whom his grand ambitions may well come to naught as a result of this promiscuous encounter, if she is impregnated. Chaucer winds up the introductory section of the *Reeve's Tale* with a sardonic evocation of the worldly ambitions entertained by the Miller's father-in-law for, and by means of, his pretty grand-daughter:

> This person of the toun, for she was feir,
> In purpos was to maken hire his heir,
> Bothe of his catel and his mesuage,
> And straunge he made it of hir marriage.
> His purpose was for to bistowe hire hye
> Into som worthy blood of auncetrye;
> For hooly chirches good moot been despended
> On hooly chirches blood, that is descended.
> Therefore he wolde his hooly blood honoure,
> Though that he hooly chirche scholde devoure. (I 3977-86)

The insistent, fourfold repetition of the word "hooly," with its different line-by-line valences, evokes a deeply embedded social reality and creates a poetically enigmatic tension in the striking incongruity between the repeated descriptor "hooly" and the patent

unholiness of the parson . In Wyclif's hands, such rhetoric would obviously indicate clear-eyed yet passionate revulsion for all that that reality represents; in Chaucer's hands, we hesitate, rightly, to identify the poet too dogmatically with a particular stance on the reality his Reeve's Tale so darkly evokes. Nonetheless, the striking outcome of this parson's illicit breeding, and his subsequent scheming to secure the worldly standing of his carnal offspring, is that he eats the church he is called to *feed*. He is, in few words, a wolf and not a shepherd.

This passage from the *Reeve's Tale* powerfully illustrates Chaucer's awareness that clerical celibacy, as mandated by the church, was a mixture of fiction and reality, but on its own the passage cannot resolve the question of whether Chaucer, in company with the Wycliffites, would have advocated for abolition of the policy as a reformist measure. The revulsion, or mordant laughter, or both, that we sense in those echoing "hooly"'s of the lines above may suggest that Chaucer believed the ideal of clerical celibacy was worthy of being continued in the specific institutional form of the mandate which required it; on the other hand, the precise opposite could be argued, on the same fragment of evidence. The evidence available to us, both within and without the *Canterbury Tales*, is unlikely to ever answer such a question in a way that leaves no space for doubt. Nonetheless, it is worth pressing the issue in order to see what does emerge from an attempt to assess the available evidence, using various lenses. Given the deep relevance of the trope of fruitfulness in Christian writing, emanating from specific Biblical sources, and the profound relevance of that trope for Chaucer's fictional and meta-fictional *Canterbury* project, we can usefully approach the topic of Chaucer's "take" on clerical

celibacy by examining the kinds of fictional fruits produced by and about ostensibly celibate clerics, particularly in relation to several Wycliffite writings.

The opening lines of the *Canterbury Tales* point us to one variety of fruitfulness, that which is found in the natural order of things, but then our attention is abruptly diverted to a different order of things, not the natural but the spiritual, as conveyed by both the symbol and the reality of Christian pilgrimage: as many scholars have observed, from start to finish the poem simultaneously evokes both the profane, mundane, and specifically detailed realities of pilgrimages undertaken by sinful people with frail, mortal bodies to identifiable and palpable places on this earth, and the spiritual pilgrimage undertaken by the very same people, in hopes of making it to the heavenly Jerusalem of which the Parson speaks as he concludes the last of the *Canterbury Tales*. Likewise, the story-generating pilgrims are engaged in a tale-telling contest proposed by the Host which can be seen as a testing of fruits – which narrative fruits are good, which better, which best of all – and this contest overlays a deeper poetic project of capturing a vision of what constitutes genuine, enduring spiritual fruitfulness.[20] Having briefly sketched one aspect of a rationale for an interpretive schema, we can begin to ask what the specific fruits of particular tale-tellers and their tales may indicate, if only in a shadowy way, about Chaucer's attitude towards the long-standing church policy of deeply dividing clergy from laity by insisting that clergy must be celibate, implicitly and explicitly elevating both clergy and celibacy itself to positions of putative spiritual superiority. To put it another way, what can the poetics of the Canterbury fictions tell us about Chaucer's ecclesiology? How does that poetic ecclesiology resolve (or fail to resolve) the persistent

[20] Luke 13 and Matthew 7 and 15 are just a few of the numerous scriptural *loci* for the theme of fruitfulness.

tangle of conflicts around the nature and meaning of the church's historical bifurcation into clergy and laity?

Chaucer's artistic renderings of an ostensibly celibate clerisy highlight some notably bad fruits of their imaginary vocational lives. Three egregious examples are Friar John, the main character of the *Summoner's Tale*; the Pardoner, who narrates his own autobiographical preface and his tale; and the Canon, who enters and exits the Canterbury pilgrimage abruptly, but whose history and significance are nonetheless conveyed in detail through a combination of exposé, confession, and exemplum narrated by his servant, the Canon's Yeoman. As I explore each of these characters, I will follow this ordering partly because it follows the order of the tales in respected editions, and hence probably reflects the author's wishes regarding the ordering of the tales, and also because the outlines of a progressively darkening descent into idolatry can be glimpsed as we pass from one tale to the next.

These three characters, all distinguished by the external markers of specific institutional functions, are united in being in some sense versatile criminals, expert in the conduct of a parasitic lifestyle. Friar John is glib and superficially charming, with a narcissist's grossly inflated and potentially murderous sense of self-worth; like the Pardoner and the Canon he is a habitual liar, lacking in empathy and remorse, adept at manipulation, callous, irresponsible, and so on. Highly relevant to their common character profile is the connection between falsehood and malignant self-interest; these three Chaucerian characters are motivated to lie especially by an overriding desire to have things their own way: truth must never stand in the way of the imperatives voiced by their own desires and their own wills. Hence, for example, Friar John's desire for a

life of ease and status is reinforced by his scripture-twisting; the Pardoner's addiction to the abuse of rhetorical power for dishonest gain prevents him from fully embodying the faith that he expresses with his tongue when he asserts the superiority of Christ's mercy (VI 916-918); and the Canon is so resistant to admitting the truth about his fraudulent way of life that he flees even the possibility of hearing it spoken by the Yeoman (VIII 685-702).

Within the medieval Christian value system, of course, these false clerics would stand out as corrupt precisely because they not only fail to *embody* truth, but also they signally fail to *care* that they do so, unlike Chaucer's Parson, who is able to teach truth because he lives it: "Christes lore and his apostles twelve / He taught; but first he folwed it hymselve" (I 527-28). Christ, the living word of truth, perfectly embodied in human form and perfectly lived out, is the model after which a Christian must strive. Failing at the task (an inevitable outcome) ideally will produce humility and deeper faith; failing to undertake the task in any meaningful way, while being ostensibly committed to doing so, and empowered to do so, by virtue of institutional standing, is another matter, and this matter is what we are invited to explore as we examine Chaucer's portraits of clerical corruption narrated into imaginative reality. Again, the overriding trope is fruitfulness (or lack thereof): the perfect sower of perfect seed is Christ, and in Him real and lasting fruit is conceived; his followers, as recorded in Matthew 7, are commanded to evaluate spiritual teachers by their fruits, which reveal who they truly are:

> 15 Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 By their fruits you will know them. Do men gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles? 17 Even so, every good tree bears good

> fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Therefore, by their fruits you will know them.

The metaphor here implicitly calls attention to different seeds; if the fruit is from a Christ-like seed, or rather from the Word as seed, that trustworthy source will be made clear eventually, but any other seeds produce strange and dangerous fruit.[21]

Wyclif and his followers were particularly attuned to (and relentlessly adept at) driving home the disparity between the status conferred by the church in the sacrament of holy orders and the avaricious, parasitic lifestyle enabled by the church hierarchy and its systems: a lifestyle that, as reformist critics would have it, ironically produced material fruit for the church hierarchy rather than spiritual fruit for all the church. Sermon 4 in the English Wycliffite sermon cycle, for example, uses a text from Luke's gospel as a jumping off point for chastising the waywardness of the clergy, setting up a contrast between the freely given mercy of God and the clergy's simoniacal trafficking in spiritual gifts as a means to worldly profit:

> Siþ God almiȝty, al witty and al goodly, kan not worche but ȝif he worche by mercy, be we þanne merciful for goodnesse of God. Þe leste mercy of men ys among clerkys, þat wol[en] not ȝyue goodus of grace but ȝif þei sullen hem. And

[21] For a useful discussion of some of the problems that inhere in the project of training the laity in discernment, as viewed through the lens of Wycliffite polemic and Chaucerian poetics, see Somerset (2001).

> þerfore þis sinne is heresye byfor God, for þey weyen her wynnyng more þan þer God. (Hudson *EWS* 1:236-37)

Wyclif's treatise *On Simony* elaborates on the specifics of the *heretical* nature of simony, distinguishing it from apostasy and blasphemy as follows:

> Whereas apostasy is generally, according to its underlying principles, a turning away from religion by man, blasphemy, at its root, is a slandering of God's power; simony, however, according to its underlying principle, is a striving to destroy God's plan (*On Simony* 29).

He goes on to pair each type of heresy with sin against a different person of the Trinity, naming simony as an offence against the Holy Spirit, and underscoring the seriousness of the sin by identifying it with the unforgiveable sin identified in Matthew 12:31-32 and in the parallel text Mark 3:28-29.

In the fourth book of his *Trialogus,* Wyclif's alter ego Phronesis emphasizes the impossibility of remaining faithful to Christ in ordained ministry while seeking worldly honor, wealth and power; touching briefly on a series of scriptural *loci* that demonstrate the validity of his point, he notes especially Luke 14:33, in which Jesus utters this piercing, indeed bubble-bursting summation of the character of discipleship: "every one of you who does not renounce all that he possesses, cannot be my disciple" (*Trialogus* 237) Phronesis goes on to note that the pattern for the clergy is Christ's own poverty, as well as that of the apostles:

> The life of Christ and of the apostles teach how these words should be understood. Likewise, the Apostle in 2 Cor. 8[:9], assuming as a part of the faith

> that all of us follow Christ in behavior, continues, "You know the Grace," he says, "of our Lord Jesus Christ, for being rich He became poor for our sakes, that through His poverty you might be rich." Since it does no good whatsoever to deny that every Christian ought to follow Christ in behavior, it is clear in the highest degree the clergy should especially follow Him in humble poverty" (*Trialogus* 239).

Although the particular emphasis here is on the special responsibility of the clergy to eschew worldly riches, Wyclif's mouthpiece characteristically opens the way for considering the burden as one to be shared by clergy and laity alike, rather than attaching to it a special honor that comes with ordained status, because, after all, "every Christian ought to follow Christ in behavior."

Part 4 Strange Fruits: Friar John Flies out of the Nest and into a Rage

In contrast to the model of Christian life described by Wyclif's Phronesis (whose name means, loosely, wisdom that generates virtue or wisdom conducive to virtue), the vicious clerics of the *Canterbury Tales* repeatedly embody opposition to their own callings to model Christ to the laity. Furthermore, they repeatedly receive correction (even if it falls on deaf ears) from the laity they are called to lead. In his tale, the Summoner, enraged by the Friar's portrayal of a summoner who is not only eagerly allied with a devil but relentlessly stupid to boot, gets his revenge with the tale he tells about Friar John, whose deceiving and perhaps also self-deceived mode of fraternal discipleship is represented in a story framed by scatological tropes at beginning and end. The prologue to his tale sets the scatological tone with a pungent illustration of his claim that

"Freres and feendes been but lyte asunder" (III 1674). He imagines a friar having a vision of hell (alluding to Paul's remarks at 2 Corinthians 12, with the effect of underscoring the distinctly non-apostolic character of fraternal life, contra claims made by the friars), in which he sees an enormous "nest of freres" which, "as bees out swarmen from an hyve," come and go from their headquarters inside Satan's "ers" (III.1691-98). In the introduction to his translation of Wyclif's Trialogus, Stephen Lahey argues that this work was designed by Wyclif to be particularly accessible to a literate but non-scholarly lay audience, and his description of the audience he believes Wyclif intended could easily include someone like Chaucer:

> Who had had sufficient schooling as to understand *Trialogus*? Lawyers, clerics, merchants, civil servants, members of Commons, the lower nobility – the class that made things happen in civil society, that would, in the next century of so, define the Modern – might be argued to have been Wyclif's intended readers … Whether they read it or not is quite a different matter, and much less easily addressed (*Trialogus* 13).

If Chaucer did read Wyclif's *Trialogus*, it could have helped spark the idea for the asinine, arse-sheltering nest of hellish friars in the *Summoner's Prologue*.[22] From the fourth of sixteen signs expounded in Book 4, Chapter 7, "The mendicant friars lacking the sign of love are not sons of God," this passage expresses the theme of fraternal greed in scatological terms that suggestively echo the terms used by Chaucer's Summoner:

[22] Note, however, that lines 7575-77 of the C fragment of *The Romaunt of the Rose*, is highly reminiscent of the language used in the *Summoner's Prologue*.

> If the friars have an abundance of envy, how can they not break forth in acts that pollute the church, in their gathering up temporal goods for themselves, which they plunder from the poor in ways that diverge from the law of love? It is difficult indeed to describe the fruits of their perverse actions in just a few words, because whatsoever they do, is shamefully perpetrated as nuisances to the church. They appear to be the spongy feces of the body of holy mother church as they generate ulcers from the four humors, residing with the other diseases (*Trialogus* 345).[23]

Continuing with the metaphor of disease related to digestion and elimination, Wyclif says, "Christ had ordered the body of His church in such harmonious love that if one particle of the body were to stray, the whole body would be infected, and so it seems that these sects deal perversely in nurturing themselves" (*Trialogus* 345).

The perversity of Friar John's self-nurturing ways is of course vividly imagined throughout the Summoner's Tale, which richly details his interest in food for his own belly, as opposed to spiritual food freely given by him to others. The verb "devoured" and the adjective "hooly" – so notable in the passage of the Reeve's Tale cited earlier – both show up again, tellingly, in this opening account of how and why Friar John fulfills his duty and license to preach:

> … so bifel that on a day this frere
>
> Hadde preched at a chirche in his manere,

[23] For a powerful array of evidence supporting the relevance of a Wycliffite rhetorical framework to this tale, see the numerous textual examples cited by Fletcher in Chapter 12 of *Preaching, Politics, and Poetry in Late Medieval England* .

> And specially, aboven every thyng,
>
> Excited he the peple in his prechyng
>
> To trentals, and to yeve, for Goddes sake,
>
> Wherwith men myghte hooly houses make,
>
> Ther as divine servyce is honoured,
>
> Nat ther as it is wasted and devoured,
>
> Ne ther it nedeth nat for to be yive,
>
> As to possessioners, that mowen lyve,
>
> Thanked be God, in wele and habundaunce. (III 1713-23)

The explicit, self-serving, and sanctimonious reference to "possessioners" hints at fraternal envy of the resources of parish priests, their ostensible "habundaunce" rhyming wickedly with the friar's immediately subsequent claim to be able to use his audience's donations as a means to set their loved ones free from purgatorial "penaunce" sooner rather than later. The entire passage captures the substance of the oft-reiterated complaint about the friars: they are greedy and irresponsible, intervening needlessly in the parish-level work of priests and redirecting parish-level support of priests to their own convents. The passage also strikingly reveals the underlying mechanism of deceit involved here: the Summoner dramatizes the manipulative technique of projection, characteristically wielded by liars precisely because it is so effective. Rather than admitting that alms given to his convent might in fact be given "ther as it is wasted and

devoured" and "ther it nedeth nat for to be yive," Friar John slyly insinuates that "possessioners" such as the priests whose work he undermines are guilty of what he, in fact, is perpetrating. With a dastardly, hypocrite's touch, he pretends to give thanks for the divinely ordered "habundaunce" in which he claims possessioners already live, a touch which from the poet's hands displays the inner workings of the con game in a quite realistic fashion. So much for the ordered body of Christ, engaged in mutual care and bound together by "harmonious love"! The purpose of the Friar's preaching is fulfilled by his own care of himself, not by care of souls: having received his donations from the church audience, he is quickly on his way, in pursuit of "mele and chese, or elles corn … or [b]acon or beef" as he begs from house to house, writing down the householder's names on a wax tablet with a claim that he will pray for them, when in fact his practice is to promptly erase their names as he moves on to a new target for his con game.

At this point the issue of his self-awareness arises: does Friar John know he's a phony? Unlike the Pardoner, he never explicitly says that he is, and of course unlike the Pardoner he is not narrating his own tale, but rather acting and speaking as one character among several, a character who is crafted by a narrator we understand to be his enemy, if only a temporary one. Nonetheless he cloaks all his interactions with verbal shows of sanctity, relentlessly reporting on his own holiness, and that of his fraternal order. Right before the climactic moment when Thomas, hiding his rage at Friar John's "false dissymulacion," donates a fart directly into the friar's eagerly groping hand, the friar had just culminated another begging speech with these grandiose words:

> Now help, Thomas, for hym that harwed helle!

> For ells most we oure books selle.
>
> And if yow lakke oure predicacioun
>
> Thanne goth the world al to destruccioun.
>
> For whoso wolde us fro this world bireve,
>
> So God me save, Thomas, by your leve,
>
> He wolde bireve out of this world the sonne.
>
> For who can teche and werchen as we konne? (III 2107-2114)

Who could be persuaded that such claims are true of himself? To imagine that someone could be so persuaded stretches credulity to the limit, with at least two crucial exceptions, one expressed in present day psychology, and another expressed in the pages of Wyclif's On the Truth of Holy Scripture. A key factor in the personality profile of a psychopath, characterized by aggressive narcissism, is "grandiose sense of self-worth," and along with that factor it is worth noting three others, from the profile of the "socially deviant lifestyle" that is typical of the psychopath: "need for stimulation/proneness to boredom," "parasitic lifestyle," and "lack of realistic long-term goals." To be sure, favorably comparing the importance of one's own work in the world with the importance of the sun suggests that a very exciting fiction has replaced sober truth in the psychopath's mind, making boredom less likely, while also rendering unlikely the kinds of realistic long-term goals that require the development of some tolerance for boredom. The parasitic lifestyle, of course, is amply justified in the psychopath's mind by the grandiose sense of self-worth, and it is also necessary to prevent the boredom of real work. Hence, the

factors tend to predict and re-inforce each other in a systematic way, and the system, if adhered to in habitual practice, would in time yield an all but impenetrable shield between the psychopath's conscious awareness and the bare truth that persistently refuses to flatter him.

Wyclif also speaks directly to the question of whether such total self-deception is possible, and he finds it not only inevitable, but also logical and just, in the terms of a related but differently articulated system, namely the dynamics of sin in its demonic status as opponent of truth. Commenting on John 8:44, he remarks as follows:

> Christ teaches this logic or metaphysic … when he says that, **The devil is a liar and the father of lies**. On the one hand, a liar is an aggregate derived from a good and true created nature, since he is a work of God. While, on the other hand, he is comprised of a fictitious falsehood elicited by sinful nature. Because that aggregate is a detestable monstrosity … on account of one of its parts, the devil is called the father of lies. For, by the freedom of his own perverted choice, that nature turns away from the first truth and procures the lie within himself (emphasis in original) (*On the Truth of Holy Scripture* 223).

Wyclif goes on to remark on the inherent justice of the spiritual blindness that ensues when falsehood, understood as one of various forms of denying the truth of holy scripture, becomes one's preferred mode or orientation:

> The difficulty which remains in this matter, however, is whether God deceives, misleads, or defrauds anyone as a penalty for sin. And, based upon the authorities cited, it appears that this is the case. If God hardened Pharoah's heart, as evinced

> in Exod. 7:3; and kills every person who was killed, as evinced in Deut. 32.39; and makes sport of the one who deserves to be deceived, as he does with the Leviathan in Psalm 103 … why does he not then deceive the sinner by handing him over to his own spurious sense, as the Apostle says (Rom. 1:22-32)? (*On the Truth of Holy Scripture* 225)

After laying the groundwork with this selection of scriptures, Wyclif then goes on to say this:

> Since seduction and deception, and things of this sort, can be offered as an excuse for a punishable act, by means of which the created spirit deviates from the truth, why would it be unfitting for God to do this? It seems appropriate, since this is a just creation of God. Yet God does not act in this manner, nor would he punish someone in any way whatsoever, unless it had been accepted as an opportunity for sin (*On the Truth of Holy Scripture* 226).

In other words, what begins as a voluntary choosing of sin, becomes progressively binding as well as blinding, or to use Wyclif's words again:

> [t]here are two aspects to be considered in an instance of deception. The first is blindness of intellect, occurring either through withdrawal of illumination, or through the positive addition of obtuseness, as a punishment for sin … second, there is a two-fold deficiency on the part of the deceiver, by which he says one thing according to one part or potency, and according to another part or potency he says this together with its opposite (*On the Truth of Holy Scripture* 227).

A salient Chaucerian exemplification of Wyclif's two-fold point can be seen if we juxtapose the previously cited bombastic begging speech with the ostensible self-deprecation that Friar John expresses subsequently when he goes to a local lord, "a man of greet honour, / [t]o whom that he was alwey confessour" (III 2163-64). The lord sympathetically asks Friar John what is troubling him, and calls him "maister," to which he swiftly and glibly responds:

> "No maister, sire," quod he, "but servitour,
>
> Thogh I have had in scole that honour.
>
> God liketh nat that 'Raby' men us calle,
>
> Neither in market ne in youre large halle." (III 2185-88)

In this hilarious turn, the sheer incoherence of the Friar's inner world is laid bare: as he here calls attention, simultaneously, to his faux humility and his academic achievements, we are reminded that this same man was just boasting of being part of a religious order more important to Christendom than the sun itself (with, perhaps, a pun on the Son Himself, thus suggesting a subtle emphasis on the character of the Antichrist, which according to many Wycliffite and other complaints about the friars, was the genuine heart of their spiritual practice).

Part 5 Strange Fruits: The Pardoner, or Getting to the Roots of Bad Fruit

The Pardoner, unlike the Summoner's Friar John, confesses his faux sanctity himself; there's no need to ponder the question of self-deception in his case, which, intriguingly, raises a tantalizing possibility that the Pardoner is in some sense less

wicked, less hopelessly reprobate than the Friar. Laying that tantalizing issue aside, however, I will instead focus on some similarities between the two deceptive preachers. The Pardoner makes his theme explicit, in three senses: first, he names and announces it, in the fifth and sixth lines of his Prologue; second, he explains the techniques he uses in order to make the theme "work" for him, thus demonstrating that his own cupiditas is the root of his specific, personal embodiment of evil; and third, he gives a sample sermon in the form of an exemplum, an exemplary and cautionary tale that illustrates various evil fruits that arise from the one root. In *A Preface to Chaucer*, Robertson notes that the Pardoner

> deliberately fosters cupidity in his audience while developing the theme *radix malorum est cupiditas*. He tempts his listeners by assuring them the proper application of his "relics" will multiply the "beestes" and the "stoor" of his customers, cause them to be unconcerned about the marital infidelities of their spouses, and bring about a "multiplying" of grain. In other words, he appeals to their cupidity, at the same time seeking to satisfy his own (332-33).[24]

This insight is worthy of closer attention in relation to the *Summoner's Tale*, wherein we find that Thomas's increasing anger at Friar John results, in part, from the fact that he is not receiving the good health to which, as understandably he sees it, he is entitled

[24] It is worth noting in this context that the Pardoner also manipulates his audience's avaricious desire for the *appearance* of sanctity, precisely because (like the two lying tailors in the H.C. Anderson's "The Emperor's New Clothes") he sets seemingly impossible terms for how one's neighbor will interpret whether one plays the game or not. See Wenzel (1989) 313, wherein the author cites Lombard's *Sentences* as the source of a definition of avarice that is "'immoderate desire not only for money but also for rank and knowledge, when one strives for a high position beyond measure.'" (This, in turn, points us unambiguously back to pride.) I note as well that the Pardoner frames his description of a magical antidote for a husband's warranted jealousy with a throwaway suggestion that the wife's partners in adultery could well be "prestes two or three" (VI 366-371).

because he *paid* for it, having been encouraged to do so by the friar's boasted spiritual power to deliver on the promise of health:

> "Who folweth Cristes gospel and his fore,
>
> But we that humble been, and chaast, and poore,
>
> Werkeris of Goddes word, nat auditours?
>
> Therefore, right as a hawk up at a sours
>
> Up springeth into th'eir, right so prayers
>
> Of charitable and chaste bisy freres
>
> Maken hir sours to Goddes eres two.
>
> Thomas, Thomas! So moote I ride or go,
>
> And by that Lord that clepid is Seint Yve,
>
> Nere thou oure brother, sholdestou nat thryve.
>
> In our chapitre praye we day and nyght
>
> To Crist, that he thee sende heele and myght
>
> Thy body for to weelden hastily." (III 1935-47)

Hearing this particular speech, a facsimile of others he has heard oftentimes in the past, Thomas in exasperation bursts out with "'God woot … no thing therof feele I!'" and gives a brief account of his foolhardy spending "upon diverse manere freres/ Ful many a

pound," with no improvement in his health resulting. His experience, however, is no authority in the estimation of Friar John, who in response subjects Thomas to nearly one hundred and fifty lines of spontaneous yet practiced pontification, mainly on the topic of ire, a topic he knows so well that his "tale sholde last til to-morwe" if he told all he could; in light of his subsequent rage, provoked by Thomas's donation of a fart, this claim, at any rate, is fully, if ironically, believable.

Significantly, ire is a concluding note of the *Pardoner's Tale*, which may indicate that it is a lurking, implicit subtext that underpins the explicit theme, *radix malorum est cupiditas*. If we try to read the Pardoner through the lens of modern psychology, his anger may not make complete sense to us; after all, he himself revealed his deceitfulness in a wealth of detail, so why would he be angry at the Host's well-informed and vigorous resistance to the attempted sale of relics with which the Pardoner caps off his sermon? The logic of his anger is embedded in medieval discourses on sin, which insistently and repeatedly expound the interconnectedness of specific categories of sin, elaborating exhaustively the kernel of truth expressed in James 2:10. Hence, for example, in the *Fasciculus Morum*, the anonymous author, a Franciscan friar, reasons that "[s]ince a cruel mother usually gives birth to a savage daughter, in this second part we deal with wrath, as the chief daughter of that wicked mother, pride" (Wenzel 117). Pride, of course, is imagined rather than expounded into view as the source of Friar John's wrath: given his wildly inflated conception of his own and his order's importance in the spiritual scheme of things, it stands to reason that he would take offense at Thomas's bodily enactment of a complete negation of this putative spiritual superiority. Rather than the sudden wind of the Holy Spirit descending on the disciples as a gift, as reported in Acts,

the clever squire in the *Summoner's Tale*, inspired by Thomas's equally clever donation, proposes a scenario in which the fraternal convent receives "breaking wind" as the gift that corresponds with perfect logic to the "hot air" they have received from their demonic spiritual source, the devil's arse. Right before Thomas sets the terms for his donation of a fart, he says, "'Swich thing as is in my possessioun … / … that may I yeve, and noon oother.'" This is a subtle echo of Peter's spiritually effective, healing interaction with a beggar, recorded in the third chapter of the book of Acts; ironically, in the scriptural text, the one begging alms is the one who is healed, whereas in the *Summoner's Tale*, the one seeking healing and the one begging alms are two different people, and neither is healed, although as readers of Chaucer's poem, we are pointed to the source of possible healing, whether physical, spiritual, or both. Thomas freely gives, as he has freely received, mere valueless nothing, devoid of spiritual power; Peter, on the other hand, freely gives what he has freely received, leading the once lame beggar to go "into the temple with [Peter and John], walking and leaping and praising God." The contrast could not be sharper, particularly when we note that Friar John, after freely receiving the freely given donation that disappoints (and keeps giving, as we see in Squire Jankyn's diabolically brilliant plan), has to be kicked out of Thomas's house by his servants, because his rage has made him murderous.

In the *Pardoner's Tale*, a more explicitly simoniacal economy of interlaced greed and rage also expresses itself in the imagery of scatological giving and receiving. That is, the Pardoner freely admits to his own simony, with an apparent lack of shame, yet his rage at the Host's rebuke of his simony suggests a less tidy inner world than his apologia renders visible. The free gift of divine forgiveness has been transformed by institutional

and individual corruption into an item for sale, which the Host rejects implicitly as enacting simony; his assumption that he would receive "Christes curs" if he were to attempt to buy absolution alludes directly to Peter's resounding curse of Simon the magician in Acts chapter 8. Although we might attribute the Host's strong reaction to anger at being publically accused of being "moost envoluped in synne," this interpretation is neither inevitable nor fully persuasive. The text *tells* us that the Pardoner is so "wrooth" that he waxes speechless, a remarkable thing given his self-described and splendidly demonstrated professional eloquence; similarly, we are told directly and explicitly that the Summoner is so angry after hearing Friar Huberd's tale that "lyk an aspen leaf he quook for ire." The text does not *tell* us, however, that the Host is angry, and if he *is* angry, there is good reason to think that his anger, unlike the Pardoner's, is spiritually and morally justified. Hence, there's a difference here between the Host's possible anger and the Pardoner's obvious anger: one is righteous and the other is not, and likewise this contrast pertains, at least in some measure, to the anger, respectively, of Friar John and Thomas.

Part 6 Strange Fruits: Sterile Alchemy and the Yeoman's Canon

In the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, neither sexual nor scatological innuendoes are prominent, and indeed the absence of any apparent interest in women on the part of any of the tale's alchemists or their apprentices suggests a deep disconnect from ordinary human community, a disconnect so deep that desire itself has vanished; that lack of desire is figured in the facial discoloration of the Yeoman, which the Host notices and the

Yeoman himself emphasizes, comparing his present reality to an earlier time when his "colour was bothe fressh and reed," which in turn calls to mind the emphasis in the *General Prologue* on the youthful, lusty Squire's freshness (I 79-100), which is conventionally associated with a lover's lively pursuit of his beloved. Yet the interconnection of pride, deceit, and wrath are prominent, albeit in a fashion that is different from what we observe in the conflicts between laity and clergy in the tales told by the Summoner and the Pardoner; indeed this tale, so different in other ways from those that precede and follow it, both recapitulates and revises related features of the prior narratives about sin-enslaved clergymen. Furthermore, the tale evokes what is perhaps the lowest ebb of idolatry for an errant member of the clergy, who has wandered away into error in the manner described at 1 Timothy 6: 9-10:

> But those who seek to become rich fall into temptation and a snare and into many useless and harmful desires, which plunge men into destruction and damnation. For covetousness is the root of all evils, and some in their eagerness to get rich have strayed from the faith and have involved themselves in many troubles.

The Canon, in fact, could be said to exemplify the Pardoner's theme in its most extreme expression, with the effect that he is recognizable as a clergyman by his garment only, given that his habits do not include anything other than self-interested and insane pursuit of gold via alchemical means, a pursuit which succeeds only to the extent that he can trick others into providing the gold or silver he claims he has power to make. In other words, he is doing no sowing at all, unlike both Friar John and the Pardoner, who at a minimum point their hearers to the Bible, even if they do so hypocritically. Furthermore, the trashiness of his garb (pungently described and interrogated by the Host at lines 633-

38) reflects simultaneously his worthless "service" to the church and his worthless pursuit of worldly gain, such that his appearance both provokes and mirrors the uncertainty of his status, leading the Host to ask, "[i]s he a clerk, or noon?" The one marker by which he should be recognized immediately as a clergyman is, ironically, a signifier of his status as traitor to not merely his order, but to the church as a whole and to Christ specifically.

The Canon and his Yeoman join the group of pilgrims belatedly, so they aren't fully incorporated at first, and in fact the Canon never is; he guiltily flees the possibility of exposure within community, and his flight, which follows the Host's encouragement to ignore the Canon's angry threats, frees the Yeoman to articulate his combined expose, confession, and exemplum, which is folded into the game of story-telling with a significant emphasis on the doubled rhyming of "shame" with "game":

> And whan that this Chanon saugh it wolde nat bee,
>
> But his Yeman wolde telle his pryvetee,
>
> He fledde awey for verray sorwe and shame.
>
> "A!" quod the Yeman, "heere shal arise game;
>
> Al that I kan anon now wol I telle.
>
> Syn he is goon, the foule feend hym quelle!" (VIII 699-705)

The Yeoman, in other words, enters the game as one who exposes both his own shame and the shame of another, the other's shame being expressed with the sexually loaded term "pryvetee"; hence he enters the community of pilgrims as another earnest, game-

playing penitent, trading in the “game” of deceptive alchemy for the moral game of story-telling:

> “He that me broghte first unto that game,
>
> Er that he dye, sorwe have he and shame!
>
> For it is ernest to me, by my faith;
>
> That feele I wel, what so any man seith.
>
> And yet, for al my smart and al my grief,
>
> For al my sorwe, labour, and mischief,
>
> I koude nevere leve it no wise.
>
> Now wolde God my wit myghte suffise
>
> To tellen al that longeth to that art!” (VIII 708-716)

The trap of the alchemical “game” has affected the Yeoman in “ernest” with an actual affliction, which in modern terms we would call a compulsion or addiction, but stepping out of the trap (by “coming to terms” with it, or naming it accurately) in some measure begins to free him: it places him among a community of earnest gamers, who are also, in various senses, authors in the making, or makers of authoritative narratives exposing vices and virtues.

The Yeoman’s narrative, in all three of its phases, places a marked emphasis on the demonic or satanic, as noted by scholars, suggesting to one that the association

between the satanic or diabolic and the pursuit of alchemy "comes to be the central technique of Chaucer's attack upon alchemical charlatanism" (Linden 48).[25] Wyclif and his followers, of course, hammered away at the connection between clerical greed and the demonic. In his *On Simony*, for example, Wyclif points back to his foundational definition of simony as one of three types of heresy, specifically blasphemy rooted in "a striving to destroy God's plan," when he subsequently asserts of the clergy that

> the god of this world has so blinded them from God's cause with the dust of temporal goods and with the desire for their own profit that in God's cause they are foolishly paralyzed. But in the devil's cause of warring against Christians they rush headlong in search of profit and honor. And so simony is the reason why a large part of the church lies disappointingly dead (41).

Wyclif here pinpoints spiritual death as resulting from the pursuit of dust, which is intrinsically lifeless unless (in Scriptural terms) it is given breath and life by the spirit of God; indeed, this is death precisely *because* it is pursuit of self, which again in Scriptural terms, is necessarily dead unless (re)vived by God. Ironically, this pursuit of self/death/dust relates directly to a *refusal* to embrace death in a different sense: the Christian calling is centrally predicated on trust that in seeking Christ as the only source of real life (and that more abundant), our own deaths, both figurative and literal, if founded on service to Him, lead us more deeply into His very life. The effort to buy and sell spiritual standing, authority and power, which is at the heart of simony's self-sufficient yet self-destructive striving (strife!) is aptly captured by this phrasing:

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[25] Linden credits Charles Muscatine as a leader in this line of interpretation, quoting his observation (excerpted from *Chaucer and the French Tradition*) that the alchemical pursuits of the imagined clergymen have "'the poetic effect … [of] suggest[ing] that their activity is a deep apostasy, a treason, a going over to the devil himself. They are Judases'" (43)

"headlong [rush] in search of profit and honor." That fruitless, sterile, death-dealing effort is persistently intertwined, in Wycliffite rhetoric and Chaucerian poetics alike, with the false-seeming holiness of clerical celibacy, an ecclesial technique for ensuring, and earning or "buying" holiness on human terms, in terms of human achievement rather than receiving holiness as a gift enabled by divine grace. That merely human achievement is, furthermore, generative of doubly-dead hierarchies: the church's systematic ranking of the "hooly" by way of the celibacy-induced divide is itself a literally and symbolically sterile system, incapable of generating life, while its members are dead hierarchs, the devil's dupes who forgot that he came to steal, kill and destroy.

The *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* captures this relentless intertwining of deceit, avarice, and the deadly pursuits of worldly power, itself a dead thing in relation to divinely bestowed spiritual power. In his exemplum, the yeoman describes the canon as follows:

> "this chanoun, roote of al trecherie,
>
> That everemore delit hath and gladnesse –
>
> Swich feendly thoghtes in his herte impresse –
>
> How Christes peple he may to meschief brynge." (VIII 1069-72)

The yeoman goes on to exclaim of one of the Canon's victims, "O sely preest! O sely innocent! / With coveitise anon thou shalt be blent!" (1076-77), a blinding that is but one individual expression of the canon's infectious power to deceive, evoked in the opening words of the exemplum and carefully explained as an instance of "o singuleer mannes

folye" rather than a blanket condemnation of the entire order of "worshipful chanons religious." This cautious avoidance of the appearance of condemnation of the entire order, however, is overshadowed by the yeoman's strong association of such a canon with the apostasy of Judas, and his exhortation "If any Judas in youre covent be, / Remoeveth hym bitymes, I yow rede" (VIII 992-1007).

The Yeoman's narrative effectively enacts what it exhorts the listeners to do: remove the Judas from your midst. The canon flees at the very prospect of having his sins exposed; the yeoman confesses his complicity in the canon's sin, and via confession he begins to break free of enslavement to the same sin. His anger at the canon (both the one imagined as being part of his real life, and the one he narrates into imaginative life in his exemplum) is hence different from the anger of Friar John at Thomas, and the anger of the Pardoner at the Host, and arguably nearer to the anger of Thomas and the anger of the Host. In each imagined scenario, the poet invites us to consider the appropriate response to the figurative Judas (whether explicitly or implicitly wedded to simony): Friar, Pardoner, and Canon. That response is directly related to the specific fruits each character bears, and the fruitlessness of each of these clergymen is made clear as part of the process of exposure and illumination. Cumulatively, however, as narrated, the fruits of these wayward clergymen are an increasingly resistant and well-informed laity. Thomas, whose brutally figured and embodied honesty offends Friar John; the lord, to whom Friar John airs his complaint, and the lord's clever squire Jankyn, who resolves the dispute in favor of Thomas, declaring him neither a "fool, ne no demonyak" in implicit contrast to the greedy friar: all are part of what is imagined in the *Summoner's Tale* as a highly successful lay counter-revolt against the revolting, rebellious clergy (double

entendre fully intended). The potential power of such a revolt is imaginatively, if tentatively and temporarily, squelched by the Knight's intervention between the Host and the Pardoner, and of course it is in each instance tempered by the double-edged nature of the legitimate complaints about clergy made by a sinful laity: Jankyn appears to be primarily motivated by desire for a specific material reward (a "newe gowne") rather than by a thirst for truth; Thomas appears to be primarily angry because he has not received the good of physical health in exchange for the "good" of the gold he has depleted by donating to the friar's convent; Harry Bailly, of course, is a notably ambiguous signifier of lay righteousness; and the Yeoman, perhaps, is most of all angry at losing both money and a large part of his life, rather than righteously angry at the clergy's abdication of responsibility. It's fair to say that each of them exposes the truth about clerical corruption from a mixture of motives.

The Wycliffite adaption of the *Lay Folks Catechism*, which expands and revises the limited commentary of the earlier version, vividly suggests at once the spiritual power of obedient laity, and their vulnerability to sin, in these remarks on the ninth and tenth commandments:

> Thow schalt not coueyte þy neyȝborys wyf. Ne his hows ne his seruant ne his maydyn. / ne his oxe ne his werk-best. ne ony thyng þat ys his. For þe rote of synne and wrong couetyse stondys in þe herte. / Therfore god forbedys; euyl couetyse and wyl of helle … And yf þou breke these comaundementys or ony of hem alle. also syker as god ys god. but þou amend þe in þis lyf. þou shalt be dampnyd in helle in body and sowle withouten ende. þow þou have haue a ousand bullys of pardoun lettres of fraternite and Chauntres aftyr þy deth. And also sekyr

> as god ys god. ȝif þou kepe wel þese comaundementis þou shalt haue þe blysse of heuyn in body and sowle with-outen ende. þow þou haue neuer bulle of pardoun. / ne letter of fraternite. ne Chauntre aftyr þy deth (*Lay Folk's Catechism* 55-57).

The expositor's deliberate contrasting of scriptural truth with contrary "truths" offered by the institutional, hierarchical church's practices, divests the clergy of spurious claims to power, and suggests that the power of the laity increases in proportion to their obedience to scripture itself, not in proportion to their conformity to clerical leadership. Notably, this lengthy passage ends with a handful of scriptural references in support of its claims, one of which is the fifth chapter of Isaiah, which excoriates Israel's spiritual fruitlessness, relating it to a causative underlying covetousness and a subsequent outcome of actual fruitlessness and poverty, ordained by the economy of divine justice, and imagined in the prophet's *poesis* as a vineyard that lies waste. This Wycliffite version of the *Lay Folks Catechism*, then, gives rhetorical and devotional flesh to the framework spelled out in Wyclif's *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, wherein the theologian insists that "every Christian must be a theologian" in order to "be a person of faith, and faith is the highest theology of all" (300), and wherein he explicitly calls on the laity not only to correct the clergy, but also to punish them by withdrawing support and/or re-appropriating goods:

> For while the world hates to hear it, I tell you that the laity are permitted in some cases both to withdraw and to carry away the Church's property from their ecclesiastical superiors … For the layman who presents the cleric with his ecclesiastical benefice ought to judge whether he is worthy of it. Indeed, the one choosing the priest to minister and hear confession should be the one to render judgment regarding his discretion and holiness … Likewise, according to the laws

> of the church, the layman ought to accuse a delinquent priest in some cases, and consequently judge whether or not he is evil (306-307).

Chaucer's lay pilgrims, in the cases of the *Summoner's, Pardoner's,* and *Canon's Yeoman's Tales,* can plausibly be seen as fictive enactments or embodiments of this very same subjection to the truth of holy scripture, a sword that cuts both ways, laying bare the truth about clergy and laity alike.

At a minimum, these three tales picture a profound disconnect between the official teleology of clerical celibacy, and the actual ends, or results, of the practice. Instituting mandatory celibacy ostensibly "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven," on the assumption that those ordained to Christian ministry could not be spiritually fruitful while being sexually fruitful in marriage, those who promoted and enforced mandatory celibacy "endeavored to destroy natural immorality by enforcing unnatural morality," as Phillip Schaff put it (IV 333). Chaucer's pilgrims interact within a combination of drama and narrative that suggests very strongly indeed that the celibate clergy class of his day was, to a disheartening degree, spiritually sterile, while nonetheless being vowed to physical sterility for a putative higher purpose. Yet this spiritual sterility, like the deadness of all dead things, is potentially reversible in the larger – indeed, all-sufficient -- scheme of Christ's redemptive and voluntary death and resurrection, and this more fundamental reversibility, this decidedly earnest yet comically playful raising of the dead to life is the larger scheme to which Chaucer's Canterbury poetics points. Each member of the church is faced with the same problem and each is offered the same solution; no merely human hierarchy is ultimately relevant to the penitential journey and its destination. The Parson points the way to mortification of sin, and even the cowardly, Satanically-allied Canon,

the poison-tongued Pardoner, and the irate Friar might all find that way open for their once-erring feet, by the grace of God, and grâce à dieu, and indeed gratis, no buying or selling required.

Wycliffite rhetoric, whether harshly polemical or not, can't be mapped directly onto Chaucerian story-telling, but that does not negate the possibility of a strong affinity between the underlying perceptions articulated by the two. The work of philosopher James K. A. Smith suggests some reasons why this might be the case. Developing an Augustinian model of the human person as primarily lover rather than thinker, Smith argues in *Desiring the Kingdom* for the centrality of worship to an adequate understanding of what *kind* of beings humans are; Smith's aim is

> the elucidation of a philosophical anthropology that recognizes that we are, ultimately, *liturgical animals* because we are fundamentally desiring creatures. We are what we love, and our love is shaped, primed, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends. So we are not primarily *homo rationale* or *homo faber* or *homo economicus*; we are not even generically *homo religiosis*. We are more concretely *homo liturgicus;* humans are those animals that are religious not because we are primarily believing animals but because we are liturgical animals – embodied, practicing creatures whose love/desire is aimed at something ultimate (Smith 40).

In his subsequent book, *Imagining the Kingdom*, Smith builds on this anthropological model, noting the central function of story in liturgical formation (whether secular or sacred). He calls this the "body/story nexus – the inextricable link between imagination,

narrative, and embodiment," and asserts that "our most basic, passional orientation to the world is primed and shaped by stories; it is stories that train and prime our emotions, which in turn condition our perception and hence our action" (Smith 38). On this view, "identity and love are shaped 'liturgically' precisely because liturgies are those rituals and practices that constitute the embodied stories of a body politic;" liturgies, furthermore, "are compressed, repeated, performed narratives that, over time, conscript us into the story they 'tell' by showing, by performing" (Smith 109). Chaucer's *Canterbury* stories fold the "orthodox" or official "story" of the hierarchical relationship between clergy and laity into complex narratives that *show* why that official "story" isn't adequate to express the fuller, non-hierarchical truth about these two socially intertwined and institutionally segregated classes, the loves they cherish, and the real objects of their individual and corporate worship.

Chaucer inherited a rich tradition of satire directed at the failings of the clergy and the laity, and these satirical stories in turn grew out of the soil of a rich tradition of reflection on the common heritage of scriptural narratives. The eye of satire sees the gap between word and deed most acutely, narrating the body's lack of fidelity to truth – whether that body be a clergyman's body or not. These Chaucerian narratives hint at a story-shaped, scripturally-fed space in the poet's ecclesiology that could well be more sympathetic than not to certain Wycliffite pressures to reform the church, which aim to make the church more fruitful in more ways than one, in particular by beginning with an admission of the failure of clerical celibacy in theory and in practice. The sin-devoted bodies of Friar John, the Pardoner, and the Yeoman's two canons, all of whom bear various imaginative marks of the simony/sodomy nexus, along with the lay characters'

responses to these embodiments of sin, could conceivably constitute a fictive recapitulation of the harsh polemical cry of the third conclusion of "Lollard" fame, which in its turn re-presents sentiments such as this, from sermon 50 in the English Wycliffite cycle:

> Here may men dowte and trete of the þe staat and lif of preestis, how þei ben dowyde and wifles aȝen Godis auctorite; for Christ forfendid dowyng boþe in hym and hise apostlus and approuyde weddyng in apostlus and monye oþre. (Hudson *EWS* Vol. II 264)

The accusation leveled at clerical celibacy itself in the *Twelve Conclusions* has its logical mate in conclusion number eleven, directed at the vows of sexual abstinence taken by women religious. Taking that eleventh conclusion as its starting point, the next chapter will assess the imagined fruits of saintly females, whether celibate or married (and whether obviously *saintly* or not) in the poetics of the *Canterbury* pilgrimage, further testing the potential to discern any fugitive Wycliffite sympathies in Chaucer's artistic ecclesiology. In particular, chapter two will take up the closely related question of how the "wo and peyne" of marriage relates to holy sowing and/or the sowing of holiness in Chaucer's poetic ecclesiology.

Chapter 2

Feith, and Nakednesse, and Maydenhede: Strength Made Perfect in Weakness

Part 1 The Wycliffite Critique of Nuns

The eleventh of the Wycliffite *Twelve Conclusions*, publicly posted in 1395, was in a sense a companion piece to the third conclusion, although its less prominent place near the end of this manifesto for reform is understandable. Men vowed to celibacy greatly outnumbered women at any given time in late medieval European history, because women could not be ordained as priests; hence, for the Wycliffites, celibacy vows taken by women were a serious problem, but perhaps not quite on the same order of magnitude as the celibacy vows which bound not only those men who joined the oft-maligned private religions, but also the entire priesthood. Indeed, as the third conclusion phrases the matter, the corruption ensuing from mandatory celibacy for men is understood to "[induce] sodomie in al holy chirche"; the rotten fruits extending throughout the church from the one rotten root out of which all (implicitly male) institutional leadership must grow. In the eleventh conclusion, on the other hand, grim though the accusations may be, there is no claim, implicit or explicit, that the corruption of women has such a far-reaching institutional impact, yet the impact that *is* imagined runs possibly deeper. As with the third conclusion, which I quoted in full in Chapter 1, it is worth quoting the eleventh in full:

> Þe xi. conclusiun is shameful for to speke, þat a uow of continence, mad in oure chirche of women, þe qwiche ben fekil and vnparfyth in kynde, is cause of

> br[i]ngging of most horrible synne possible to man kynde. For þou sleyng of children or þei ben cristenid, aborcife and stroying of kynde be medicine ben ful sinful, ȝet knowing with hem self or irresonable beste or creature þat beris no lyf passith in worthinesses to ben punischid in peynis of helle. Þe correlary is þat widuis and qwiche as han takin þe mantil and þe ryng deliciousliche fed we would þei were weddid, for we can nout excusin hem fro priue synnis (Cronin 301).

The primary emphasis here is on monstrosity: when women systematically take religious vows of celibacy, vows which they cannot be expected to keep because to do so would conflict with the "kynde" of persons they are, they are inevitably led into "horrible synne" that is against "[hu]man kynde." Infanticide, lesbianism, and bestiality are simultaneously evoked as the deepest expressions of human depravity, the deepest denials of "kynde" or intrinsic nature, and the deep results of a prior denial of two senses of "kynde": the all-but-universal, natural human drive for sexual union, and the specifically female version of a universal human weakness in attempting to resist this natural drive.

The anonymous authors of the *Twelve Conclusions* do not call explicit attention to the connections between the third and the eleventh conclusions, and they seem to give the third conclusion a graver official and causative role in the wide spread corruption that has made the church "al out of joint." Yet the connections would not have been lost on their contemporaries; complaints of moral laxity (in sexual matters specifically, but not exclusively) among nuns and their male counterparts were legion throughout the Middle Ages. St. Boniface's scathing letter to Ethelbald of Mercia, written around the middle of the eighth century, is but one example of the many accusations scattered across centuries.

Boniface was particularly concerned to rebuke Ethelbald for his practice of fornication (adultery), and he calls attention specifically to the fact that Ethelbald's "atrocious crimes are committed in convents with holy nuns and virgins consecrated to God, and this, beyond all doubt, doubles the offense" (Boniface 104). He goes on to note a further crime, that in the context of the letter applies more broadly to "the English people," perhaps including Ethelbald himself, although he does not assert this:

> It must be noted that in this crime another frightful sin is involved, namely murder. For when those harlots, whether they be nuns or not, bring forth their offspring, they generally kill them and so, instead of filling the churches of Christ with children of adoption, they crowd tombs with corpses and hell with miserable souls (106-7).

Similarly, as noted by B.D.H. Miller, "In his genealogy of the Seven Deadly Sins, the author of the *Ancrene Riwle* denounces those women who drink potions in order to induce sterility or miscarriage" (Miller 188). Miller remarks that although "the evidence was often indirect" for the use of drugs or potions for these purposes, "we have to infer that what was frequently prohibited was also frequently practiced. It is nevertheless overwhelming" (188). He concludes his brief but dense and wide-ranging survey of such prohibitions with the following: "It is clear, then, that potions designed to confer sterility, or to induce abortion, were well known throughout the Middle Ages. The denunciation is therefore amply warranted" (193).

Among the sources denouncing such practices, Miller includes the Chaucer's Parson's remarks from line 575 of his *Tale*, although a fuller citation would need to

include the ensuing two lines. In that passage, which falls under the Parson's explication of forms of homicide, classified as subspecies of the outworking of the sin of Ire, there is a notable lack of emphasis on the specific status of the women – and also men – who are guilty of killing their own offspring, preventing their conception, and so on. In other words, the Parson's emphasis is on the sin, rather than on the question of whether the sin is committed by a member of the laity, the clergy, or the religious orders. This is in keeping with the Parson's general practice, and it contrasts sharply with the ninth Lollard conclusion, which seems, on reflection, rather naïve in its assumption that if nuns forsake their vows and get married, they won't subsequently face or succumb to the temptation to contracept or abort their own offspring.

In *Medieval English Nunneries, C. 1275 to 1535*, Eileen Power acknowledges the general problem and many details of clerical and religious incontinence, yet she does so in strangely ambivalent terms. In the interest of a balanced account, she notes obstacles to a full and accurate reckoning:

> It is difficult to form any exact impression of the state of the English nunneries during the later Middle Ages. Certainly there is widespread evidence of frailty on the part of individuals, and there are one or two serious cases in which a whole house was obviously in a bad condition. It is certain also that we retain only a portion of the cases of immorality which existed; some never came to light at all, some were hushed up and the records of others are buried in Bishops' Registers. On the other hand it is necessary to guard against exaggeration (Power 436).

So far, so good: this is evidently a sensible overview. Yet she immediately adds what I take to be an *exaggeration*: "The majority of nuns certainly kept their lifelong vow of chastity." How precisely could we conclude such a thing, given the severe limits of the available evidence?[26] In short order, indeed, Power goes on to undermine this particular claim of certainty:

> the history of ecclesiastical celibacy is one of the tragedies of religious life. The vow was constantly being broken … a survey of the monastic visitations of a careful visitor such as Alnwick shows that consorting with women was a common charge against the monks and there is some evidence which points to a suspicion of grosser forms of vice. It would be strange indeed if the nuns were an exception to the rule. Even if they kept their vow, they kept it sometimes at a cost which psychologists have only recently begun to understand. The visions which were at once the torture and the joy of so many mystic women, were sexual as well as religious in their origin … The terrible lassitude and despair of *accidia* grew in part at least from the repression of the most powerful of natural instincts, accentuated by the absence of sufficient counter interests and employments (437).

In addition, the ubiquitous presence of what Power calls "an 'ecclesiastical proletariat,' all vowed to chastity" figures largely in the historical record of "rape and other crime" (437), yet she leaves out of her account any mention of abortion or infanticide. Barbara Hanawalt's study of "The Female Felon in Fourteenth-Century England" may give some indication of why this is so: she notes that "[a] consideration of the female feloness must

[26] In light of Matthew 5:27-28, it is difficult if not impossible to imagine any Christian, virgins not excepted, truthfully claiming to have perfectly kept a vow of chastity. The number of such truthful claimants would necessarily be very small indeed, if not, bluntly, zero.

begin with the problem of her relative infrequency in criminal statistics," a fact which itself requires explanation that can in turn only be imperfectly formulated (Hanawalt 126). According to Hanawalt, one

> common explanation for the paucity of female offenders is that women are more able to conceal their crimes than men. For instance, very few cases of women killing newborn babies appear in either the coroners' rolls or in gaol delivery, and yet one assumes that unwanted babies were sometimes killed (127).

In other words, infanticide (committed pre- or post-term) would be, perhaps, a relatively easy type of homicide to hide from official scrutiny.

The larger question remains, however: were the nuns anywhere near as vicious as the Wycliffites evidently liked to think they were? The totalizing rhetoric of the eleventh conclusion argues that the *only* solution to the sexuality-related sins of nuns is to put a stop to the vows of continence altogether, because, the authors of the *Conclusions* claim, such vows are "cause of br[i]ngging of most horrible synne possible to man kynde." In addition, in keeping with the Wycliffite's general reformist program (however loosely conceived), which was driven by a desire to "purify" the church by eliminating all "private religions," the *Conclusions*, if adopted formally, would have required the dissolution of nunneries. According to a much more recent study of female monasticism than Eileen Power's, namely Valerie Spear's *Leadership in Medieval English Nunneries* (2005), given the challenges they faced, the leaders of female monastic institutions in late-medieval England deserve credit at least as much as in some instances they deserve

blame. For one thing, those blameworthy-instances, she asserts, are not typical or all-defining:

> The episcopal records do not hide the fact that there were those who proved unsuitable for the religious life and brought shame and even financial ruin to their convents. But the reports on individual houses do not support the hypothesis that serious abuses were common (190).

Spear's concluding remarks reflect a wisely humble view of how the monastic vocation worked out in practice among female leaders, as well as scholarly humility regarding the limitations imposed by surviving evidence:

> Although a significant body of evidence on the mechanics of administering the convents survives there is little which describes the personal lives of the women in charge. They have left few letters, and those which remain only hint at their spiritual or emotional struggles. The leadership ideal was an extraordinarily demanding one, and it is doubtful if any achieved its heroic proportions of spiritual insight, discipline, decisiveness, integrity, and business acumen (191).

Nonetheless, such qualities were "far from absent among the cohort" that Spear's study describes, and "it is possible to see patience, persistence, shrewdness, a reaching for God, a love of beauty and an asperity among the scraps of evidence reflecting their service and their dilemmas." What's more, given that "[m]ost managed to keep their convents alive through war, plague, famine and various levels of deprivation," we should acknowledge that "[t]his in itself is an impressive feat for individuals who were, after all, human" (191).

Part 2 Holy Prioress, Unholy Wife?

The foregoing remarks about the Wycliffite critique of nuns call to mind – and call into question – one scholar's tantalizing but ultimately unsatisfactory assertion about Chaucer's view of women: "to judge from all of Chaucer's works … he thought women less vicious than men" (Ames 166).[27] Indeed, as imagined in the fictive world of *The Canterbury Tales*, the relative viciousness of men and women, which rhetorically is intertwined always with the relative viciousness of clergy, laity, and vowed religious, is a good point of entry for an examination of this question: are there any substantial indications in *The Canterbury Tales* that the poet may have shared the concerns expressed by some of his Wycliffite contemporaries in the eleventh *Conclusion*? Again, the authors of the *Conclusions* claimed that such vows are "cause of br[i]ngging of most horrible synne possible to man kynde." One implication of this assertion appears to be that sexual sin is in fact irresistible, and as I noted above, there's a naïve-seeming and indeed illogical assumption underlying this that marriage will eliminate sexual sin.[28]

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[27] Although I disagree with Ames on this point, there is warrant for her view, most clearly in that the preponderance of saintly characters in the *CT* appears to be female. The saintly profile, if you will, is noticeably feminine, as various scholars have noted. See, for example, Jill Mann's "Apologies to Women" (1990), in which she remarks that "in the *Canterbury Tales* it is women rather than men in whom he chooses to embody the values he admires" (28). (On this, see also Mann's *Geoffrey Chaucer* (1991). To find this general view fully persuasive, however, one would have to dismiss the possibilities for seeing how Chaucer embodies the admirable in various male characters, including the poetically polyvalent, insistently masculine Host and the "gold standard" shepherd himself, the Parson – among others.

[28] Indeed, the rhetoric of the eleventh conclusion seems simultaneously to over-interpret and under-interpret St. Paul's famous dictum that "it is better to marry than to burn" (1 Cor 8). The over-interpretation consists of the assumption that sexual sin ceases to exist with marriage; the under-interpretation consists of a striking failure in the Wycliffite argument against clerical and monastic celibacy: the failure to consider Paul's larger treatment of the topic of the gift and opportunity of virginity and/or singleness. On the

The overall concern about sinful female religious, as expressed in the *Twelve Conclusions*, includes a remark indicating that a lifestyle marked by wealth, pleasure, and ease is at least as important to the reformers' critique as the specific sins and crimes they listed: rather than being "deliciousliche fed" in convents, widows should marry again. Only two women stand out among the pilgrims as described in the *General Prologue*, in being fully portrayed: Madame Eglentyne, the Prioress, and Alison, the Wife of Bath. Chaucer's Wife of Bath, ironically and for entirely different reasons, would agree with the eleventh Wycliffite conclusion, but only in this narrow sense: widows should marry, again and again and again, world without end, for the sake of sexual pleasure and worldly wealth. Any reader of the Canterbury Tales would readily pick out the Wife as perhaps the outstanding fictive embodiment of female viciousness in the entire work: outstanding not only because of her sheer popularity with readers, her name recognition if you will, but also because of the length, complexity, and fullness of poetic realization found in the intriguing generic pairing of her *Prologue* and her *Tale*. In her *Prologue* she is given an opportunity to speak her mind about her own existence, experience, and "auctoritee" to a far greater degree than any other pilgrim-narrator, the Pardoner just barely excepted; in her Tale proper, she gives expression to Chaucer's carefully crafted philosophical fairy tale, in which the sexually divisive *libido dominandi* which originates in the fall of Adam and Eve is defeated through a process that is led by the wisdom of women. The aptness of the tale to the teller, in her instance, is among the most intriguing in the entire *Tales*. There's a richly suggestive balance between her autobiographical narrative and her *Tale*.

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general tendency of Wycliffism to elevate marriage to a status of spiritual normativity, see, among others, Shannon McSheffrey's *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities, 1420-1530* (1995), Chapter 4, "Lollards and the Family" and Patrick Hornbeck's *What is a Lollard? Dissent and Belief in Late Medieval England* (2010), Chapter 4, "Lay Marriage and Clerical Celibacy".

In her autobiographical *Prologue*, she boasts of having had the "upper hand" in a series of four marriages to older, hapless men, only to lose power and then mysteriously regain it in her fifth marriage to a younger man, but with this important change: rather than misusing the power she gains over her fifth, formerly abusive husband, she claims that . In her *Tale*, on the other hand, power dynamics between men and women are radically reversed and fantastically overthrown, or, as Jill Mann puts it,

> The tale that the Wife of Bath goes on to tell repeats on a larger scale the pattern of surrender and reconciliation which is traced in miniature form at the end of her Prologue. It begins with a manifestation of masculine "maistrye" in its ugliest form: the knight's casual rape of a young girl. It ends with the rapist's humble surrender of "maistrye" to the old wife who has been inflicted on him as punishment (Mann *GC* 87).

The consequent "magical transformation of the ugly old hag into a beautiful young wife" is in turn "no whit more miraculous that the transformation of a rapist into a meekly submissive husband," which leads Mann to suggest that the "magical change in the woman is merely the external projection of this even more magical change in the man" (87).

The Prioress, on the other hand, gives no overt indication in either the *General Prologue* portrait or in her tale that she is particularly marked by the sexual lust that characterizes the Wife, yet her worldliness is apparent in other ways. In Richard Rex's book-length analysis of the Prioress, *The Sins of Madame Eglentyne*, Rex makes an argument that may prove Chaucer's Prioress to be in reality far more vicious than her

non-religious fellow pilgrim, the oft-married, "sin positive" and thoroughly self-centered Wife. As Rex's account demonstrates, connecting criminal activity with nunneries is, among other things, a matter of carefully reading property ownership records: it was well known, in Chaucer's time, that properties owned by nunneries, abbeys, bishops, and other church officials included brothels, such as the Rose in Southwark. It is plausible, as Rex argues, that Madame Eglentyne, Chaucer's Prioress, is a thinly veiled portrait of one among the real-world brothel-owning religious, whose practice of profiting from prostitution drew severe and possibly warranted criticism from Wycliffites (Rex 78-94). In "Bishop, Prioress, and Bawd in the Stews of Southwark," however, Henry Ansgar Kelly has argued that Rex's view, which he summarizes as follows, needs to be taken with a grain of salt:

> Rex argues the thesis that the nunnery of Stratford-at-Bow, with which Chaucer associates his Prioress, owned and perhaps helped to operate a bordello called the Unicorn, and perhaps other bordellos, in the area of Southwark known as the Stews, and that, consequently, Chaucer would have expected his audience to find high irony in his presentation of the elegant nun who joins the character Chaucer in a Southwark tavern (Kelly "Bishop" 349).

Kelly goes on to explain that Rex's conclusions rest on a foundation of prior scholarship which he, Kelly, found wanting on examination, leading ultimately to his own argument that "a more cautious and conservative approach is called for, which will leave us in possession of far fewer facts than has been supposed, specifically regarding ecclesiastical ownership of bordellos" (350).

Indeed, Kelly's cautious conservatism can be seen as well in his article "A Neo-Revisionist Look At Chaucer's Nuns" (1996), which "[aims] at a more even-handed, eclectic, and 'de-totalized' account of historical and literary nuns in Chaucer's time" (116) and which duly notes a couple of obstacles to be cleared away. First, there's the literary-critical error of confusing art with real life: "it is striking how easily modern scholars take portraits of friars found in Chaucer, Langland, and Gower as evidence that the mendicant orders were in a state of decline and corruption at the end of the fourteenth century" (115). Second, there's the additional error, in some cases, of allowing an insufficiently examined Protestant bias against ecclesial celibacy – and against pre-Reformation Roman Catholicism more broadly speaking – a bias that can lead to the kinds of "telling example" of overtly pre-determined historical analysis that he points to in Eileen Power's assertion "that there was a 'steady movement downhill in the history of the monasteries during the last two centuries and a half before the dissolution" and a "growing degradation of the Church in its head and members" (115).

All the same, the inappropriately elegant Prioress has other sins to answer for, even if Rex's account of nunnery-whorehouse connections is ultimately more tentative than certain. For example, among the more damning accounts of her character, as crafted in the masterful *General Prologue* portrait, is the one offered by Stephen Witte in "*Muscipula Diaboli* and Chaucer's Portrait of the Prioress." Witte contrasts the love of neighbor which is highlighted in the portrait of the Plowman, with the ostensibly tender-hearted affection for highly questionable animals (mice in particular, and dogs) that is on display in the portrait of the Prioress. Weeping for a mouse caught in a trap, Witte argues, indicates that the Prioress is invested in precisely those things which would lead

her astray from her monastic vocation; the symbolic and iconographic charge of the mousetrap image, he demonstrates, had, by Chaucer's time, a long-standing association with the sin of gluttony, especially in its subspecies drunkenness, and Witte illustrates Chaucer's awareness of that association with examples of the analogy "drunk as a mouse" taken from his *Knight's Tale* and from the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. In addition, Witte connects the Prioress's gluttony, which, as he notes, is subtly hinted at in other ways as well, with the Parson's explication of the deeper connection between gluttony and lack of charity (Witte 228-32).[29] Still worse, as Witte goes on to show, is the possibility that Chaucer was also availing himself of another strand of meaning textually built into the image of a mouse in a mousetrap: the old Augustinian theological metaphor of Christ's crucifixion as the trap in which the devil was caught, taking the "bait" of Christ's seemingly mortal flesh.[30] Worse, that is, for the Prioress, but better and better for Chaucer's penetrating poetics, which makes mysteriously visible the hidden dimensions of a sinful nun's heart in ways that continue to escape the poet's readers to this day.[31]

To return to the question of the Wife's ostensible viciousness, which pales, perhaps, in comparison to the wickedness of the Prioress, a striking case can be made that she is an exemplar of a particular model of saintliness, and a Wycliffite-leaning one at that. The sensible, cautionary statements of limitation must be acknowledged, of course:

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[29] On this connection, see also Rex's analysis of the Prioress's misdirected alms-giving, illustrated by Chaucer's focus on the lavish way she feeds her dogs (*Sins* 97-101).
[30] Citing Witte, Rex notes this important connection as well.
[31] The poet's readers, however, certainly include many who enjoy the pleasurable process of discovery through difficulties that Augustine long ago prescribed in his *On Christian Doctrine*: "The more these things seem to be obscured by figurative words, the sweeter they become when they are explained (128-29).

as Alastair Minnis puts it, "Alisoun of Bath is no Lollard" (Minnis 247).[32] Nonetheless Minnis acknowledges the insights of Alcuin Blamires' paper on "The Wife of Bath and Lollardy" (439), which concludes with a pointed call "to reconsider the extent of Chaucer's involvement with, and response to, principles stridently advanced by this controversial pressure-group that gathered strength as his literary career developed" (Blamires 224). Leaving aside discussion of the possible Lollard texture of the Wife's *Prologue* (a task undertaken by Blamires, as noted), I will attend instead to the Wife's *Tale,* which begins with a knight's crime of rape, in a sketchily Arthurian fictive frame, and ends with the blissfully paradisal union of said knight with his miraculous and miracle-working wife, who dominates the discourse of the tale as she leads the knight from profound ignorance to loving truth. While it might be tempting to dismiss the Tale as mere fantasy, or to despise the Wife's submission to her husband's commonplace male desire for a pretty and man-pleasing woman, the Tale manages to convey a nicely worked out story-picture of the Pauline ideal of mutual submission between husband and wife, which is, notably, an ideal that if lived out in practice would tend to undo the woeful, cursed sexual knots that ensued from the fall of Eve and Adam.

One of the most poignant and enduring features of knotty post-lapsarian sexual realities, of course, is the selfish mutual desire for dominance of the other, a *libido dominandi* that in fact taints all human relationships, not just conjugal ones, and that expresses itself in all manner of invidious and (sometimes) unjust class distinctions, including the doubly divisive class distinction between educated male clergy and

[32] It may be worth noting, however, that Chaucer's Wife of Bath perhaps parodically illustrates the perennial suspicion that heretical groups were actually guilty of the kinds of sexual sins they excoriated in others. On this issue, see, for example, Anne Hudson's annotation of the eleventh "Lollard" conclusion in her *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*. Hudson cites both Dymmok and Netter as having accused the Wycliffite movement of "[imputing] their own immorality to others" (*SEWW* 154).

uneducated female laity, which is so gloriously and so hideously evoked by the Wife's *Prologue*. At the end of both the *Tale* and the *Prologue*, we are invited to imagine how the seemingly impossible knot might be cut if the male leads the way in submission – if he leads, that is, by following his wife's lead, which in this narrative context is first of all a leadership in wisdom. She knows the deep significance of what he in singular obtuseness has failed to address: women don't want to be victimized, enslaved, or lorded over any more than men do. Furthermore, they don't want these things – and they are right to not want them -- because they bear the *imago dei*, which they share with men in a way that precedes not only the fall and the subsequent curse, but also appears to precede sexual differentiation itself. That *imago dei*, when untainted by disobedience "in the beginning," is what qualified men and women to be on earth jointly "Lords of All" (in Milton's famous phrase); it is also what assures Alisoun (as well as her own fictitious alter ego, the old, poor, ugly woman of the *Tale* proper) that she can demand sovereignty with good reason.

As the rapist knight submits to the leadership of the old hag as part of a process that is both judicial and penitential, he becomes at once wiser, more powerful, and more human; in addition, there's a suggestion that he is also now more authentically *masculine*. When he returns to court to answer the question the queen assigned to him, he "ne stood nat stille as doth a best, / But to his question anon answerede / With manly voys" (III 1034-36). Yet it remains the case that his power is derivative: he gained it by hearing the truth from the hag. Likewise it comes with a price-tag: he must make good on his rash and blind promise to exchange obedience to "the nexte thing that [she requires]" of him (III 1010) for the newfound knowledge and life-saving power granted by the "pistel"

which she whispers in his ear (1021). In effect, both the hag who provides the answer, and before her the queen who initiates the earnest game of the knight's quest to answer this all-too difficult, all-too easy question, have power to grant mercy, but mercy, the narrative suggests, requires reciprocation, an active giving back rather than a merely passive receiving. Having learned one part of the lesson, he must learn another and perhaps harder part. It is not enough to refrain from outward acts of violence, such as rape, which violate the justified feminine desire for sovereignty, but he must also submit to learning from one whom he perceives to be his inferior in every way, and he must leave her free to choose *who* she will be in her relationship with him; most crucially, he surrenders the desire to control the explicitly feminine other, and his *libido dominandi* vanishes after much sighing and perplexed meditation on the difficult choice she presents to him. His obedience to her sovereignty is rewarded – or quited, to use the language of the pilgrim's story-telling contest – by her reciprocal obedience to his, which leads them both to "parfit joye," an outcome the Wife herself could just as easily crave and imagine as one less obviously vicious might; however, the terms in which Chaucer crafts the Wife's paired redemptive visions (prologue and tale) of mutually submissive love in marriage are those of a "worldly woman" (cf. III 1033) whose desire for the blessing of mutual submission (an inner image corresponding to the paradise that was lost) is saturated, colored, trained, and qualified not only by the traditional cultural flow and texture of anti-feminist rhetoric, but also by the universal *libido dominandi* which taints male and female alike, irrespective of culture and historical moment.

In both her *Prologue* and her *Tale*, the Wife gives us no indication of whether her lust for sexual union with as many husbands as she can get away with corresponds in any

way to delight in child-bearing and child-rearing. We could make an argument from silence here; better instead to note the absence and focus on what *is* there. Strikingly, within the Tale there is a Christocentric heart that suggests affinities with Wycliffite rhetoric. The knight's newlywed bride, after hearing his complaints about her ugliness, her elderliness, and her "lough … kynde," responds with a speech that is worth quoting at length:

> "Now sire," quod she, "I koude amende al this,
>
> If that me liste, er it were dayes thre,
>
> So wel ye myghte bere yow unto me.
>
> But, for ye speken of swich gentillesse
>
> As is descended out of old richesse,
>
> That therefore sholden ye be gentil men.
>
> Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen.
>
> Looke who that is moost vertuous alway,
>
> Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay
>
> To do the gentil dedes that he kan;
>
> Taak hym for the grettest gentil man.
>
> Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentillesse,
>
> Nat of oure elders for hire old richesse." (I 1106-1118)

This trenchant critique of the notion that "gentillesse" is a matter of inherited social standing harmonizes with Wycliffite assertions about ecclesial status, which, as Wyclif saw it, was largely a false, worldly construct irrelevant to – and indeed destructive of -- servant leadership in the church. The old hag, teaching her newlywed husband, remarks on the sheer arrogance of assuming one can inherit the kinds of virtue that would entitle one to be called a "gentil man"; similarly, Wyclif, in the person of the character Phronesis in the *Trialogus*, identifies monumental pride as the source of the hierarchical rankings found in the church. In a discussion of ordination that precedes and prepares for a condemnation of the temporal riches of the clergy, Phronesis tells Alithia that in the early days of the church,

> there had not been invented the distinction of pope and of cardinals, of patriarchs and archbishops, of bishops and archdeacons, of officials and deacons along with other offices and private religions … it seems to me that there is enough in the faith of Scripture that Christ commanded for there to be priests and serving deacons; it is certain that Caesarian pride invented all the rest of the degrees and orders (235-36).

Not only is the simplicity and sufficiency of Scripture distorted by such ambition-fed institutional complexity, but the attendant breakdown of coherence between sign and signified leads to a papacy that is precisely the opposite of what it claims to be. As Wyclif notes in the supplement to the *Trialogus*, entitled "On the Endowment of the Church," "it can be gathered that Avignonicus, whom some call the pope or the high and

unmediated vicar of Christ on earth, is the source and origin of all iniquity in the church militant, and that he is especially antichrist" (332).

With similarly intense rhetoric, in *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, Wyclif warns against the worldly-wolfish papacy:

> It is clearly essential that we discuss the power of Christ's vicars, since the Church is in danger of being led astray by the disguised power of some pseudo-vicar with the teeth of a wolf and the fleece of a sheep, besieging our churches. Christ appears to command just this in Matt. 7:15, **Watch for false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, although they are inwardly ravenous wolves.** Thus he gives Christians a decisive sign by which to discern them when he adds, **By their fruits you will know them** (Matt. 7:16) (169; emphasis in original).

In particular, the fruits that concern Wyclif are arrogant claims about papal power over Scripture itself, as he elaborates:

> Now I ask you, what would be more suspicious than if I were able to exult my own power beyond the clouds by saying that I can do whatever I please, cloaking this claim in Scripture, and licensing disciples of my tradition to discuss this matter on my terms, while decreeing that no theologian studying Holy Scripture is permitted to venture beyond the terms and limits I have set? This would exceed even the craftiness of Mohammed! (169)

Hence, Wyclif argues, far from being even in a modest way a representative of genuine Christian faith and authentic, trustworthy doctrine, "Lord Pope" more accurately

represents a faith and a teaching that is radically opposed to Christ, worthy of being compared to the teaching of the prophet of Islam, or of the Antichrist.

To return to the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, and to the hag's remarks to her husband, we can see a common thread when she expounds upon the disparity between titles or names, and claims about what the titles mean, on the one hand, versus deeds, on the other; as the Wife's hag states the matter, aptly capturing the spirit behind the letter of the gospel text,

> Looke who that is moost vertuous alway,
>
> Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay
>
> To do the gentil dedes that he kan;
>
> Taak hym for the grettest gentil man. (III 1113-16)

In other words, "you shall know them by their fruits," and whether the metaphorical fruit tree is a rich ecclesiast or a rapist-knight who thinks he's too good for his wife because, among other things, he is better-born, "swich arrogance is nat worth an hen." Indeed, the hag's reasoning corresponds closely to versions of Wyclif's view of the papacy, which show up as echoes in Wycliffite rhetoric, as Anne Hudson has noted:

> if any human being were to be described as head of [the] church on earth, that description could only legitimately be made for the man who most closely resembled the eternal head of the church, Christ; such a person must by definition be … the most perfect man, or woman, alive. William Emayn opined in 1429, "the hed of the churche is Crist, and thoo that be most virtuous in lyuyng be most highest in the church" (Hudson, 328).

Fitting the profile of a pope, as with fitting the profile of a "gentil" man, requires actively and consistently living out the underlying logic behind the role and its name; to borrow a phrase from the *General Prologue*, "the wordes moote be cosyn to the dede." Furthermore, as Takashi Shogimen has observed,

> Wyclif viewed ecclesiastical office purely in terms of spiritual service. The primary duty of priests was to understand the Bible and to disseminate scriptural teachings. Sacramental functions of the priesthood were not denied but were significantly curtailed. The meaning of the hierarchical order accordingly changed: it was no longer a hierarchy of power but a hierarchy of duties (Shogimen 236).

In such a hierarchy of responsibility and virtue, the emphasis is not on ecclesiastical power, per se, but rather on "the cognitive authority of knowledge of the Bible" – along with lived conformity to the truth of scriptural instructions for Christ's followers, or as Wyclif called it, "the law of Christ" – which is firmly and categorically placed ahead of the "official authority of holding ecclesiastical office," a secondary or derivative authority that must be tested against scripture, and not the other way around (Shogimen 236-37). Furthermore, the testers must include those outside the official authority structures of the ordained hierarchs: every Christian must strive to be in some degree a theologian, because "lay believers can no longer depend upon the judgment of ecclesiastics for the orthodoxy of the faith, to which they subscribe" (Shogimen 236).

In the *Canterbury Tales*, of course, examples potently abound of laity speaking truth to ecclesiastical power, whether these examples are "earnest" or "game," or a subtle

mixture of the two. In one foundational instance, Chaucer-as-pilgrim famously claims inability to arrange and order the pilgrims according to "hir degree / Heere in this tale, as that they sholde stond." (I 744-45) Yet this claim follows his defense of his own poetic practice of (ostensibly) telling the unvarnished truth about each of the pilgrims, so the passage as a whole suggests the contrary of what he claims: he knows plenty about their words and deeds, and he cites Jesus as an authority for speaking plainly about them. Conceivably Chaucer gestures here, however obliquely, towards Wyclif's characteristic stance on authentic church membership, which emphasized the limits of merely human discernment in the matter of who was in fact among the holy company of those who would ultimately be saved.[33]

In another instance, the old widow Mabel of the Friar's Tale is unjustly accused and persecuted by a greedy, demonic Summoner; her heartfelt and effectual curse is entirely orthodox, leaving open to the Summoner the possibility of repentence, an possibility which he explicitly and disastrously refuses:

> "Nay, olde stot, that is nat myn entente,"
>
> Quod this somonour, "for to repente me
>
> For any thyng that I have had of thee." (III 1630-32)

The widow's just and orthodox curse, backed by the full force of divine sanction, empowers the devil, the Summoner's "brother," to take the Summoner off to hell for his multiple unrepented sins, his appointed service to the church, as a supporter of discipline, having been shown to be a complete fraud and a failure. A third illustration of lay power

[33] See Hudson, 314-315.

to correct wayward clergy, in the Summoner's tale, forcefully conveys the truth that none of the good fruits of service to the church– assuming there are any – should be arrogantly claimed or grasped in order to glorify oneself or one's particular social or ecclesial standing, a message which Friar John of the tale misses hilariously, which leads to his poetically just comeuppance at the hands of several members of the laity acting in a unison which is all the more striking for its narrated spontaneity. Each member of the ad hoc lay committee that gives Friar John the poetic rebuke he richly deserves is acting independently of the others, yet they come to a conclusion that all would agree upon, such that "cherlish" Thomas, who isn't present to hear Jankyn's proposal for dividing Thomas' donation, would certainly approve not only the proposal but also the final assessment made by this committee of his donated fart and the wisdom which produced it:

> Touchynge the cherl, they seyde, subtiltee
>
> And heigh wit made hym speken as he spak;
>
> He nys no fool, ne no demonyak. (III 2290-92)

The subtle implication here, as this tale concludes, is a confirmation of the tale's unsubtle, indeed starkly grotesque initial imagery of a "nest of frères" who come and go from their home in Satan's arse. The story in its imaginative conclusion invites us to speculate that the false Friar John, his convent, and all their ilk are more than merely demonic (although they are certainly that, at a minimum): they are likened to Satan's shit, and the hot air they inhale and exhale, along with the words they speak, could not be farther from the spirit-breathed scriptural testimony of Christ that, as Wyclif and St. Paul

would agree, alone is "profitable." No tongues of fire here, as when the Holy Spirit descended on the assembled disciples in the aftermath of the Ascension, to be sure.

Desiring to be rich, powerful and comfortable, and profiting through trickery and hypocrisy from the labor of others, neither self-absorbed Friar John, nor the unrepentant and thus hell-bound Summoner, appears to be capable of a genuine assent to the hag's assertion that "Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentillesse," an assertion which is in harmony with the analysis of virtue's source in Wyclif's "The nature and origin of virtue, especially faith" from the *Trialogus*, wherein Phronesis tells Alithia,

> How, I ask, could a man merit beatitude in living and acting in accord with the good pleasure of God, unless God accept him in His great Grace? Thus whatever a man might carry out, or a created nature bring about in itself, it is not called a moral power worthy of reward or perpetual praise, unless this power comes from on high, and consequently, from the Grace of God (114-15).

Similarly, in his treatise *On Simony*, Wyclif notes the connection between divine gifting, which inherently cannot be credited to any human being, and genuine calling to ecclesiastical service specifically in a monastic context, both of which he associates with contentment in poverty, grounded in apostolic precedent. Citing scripture and Gratian's concordance of canon law, which cites papal precedents, Wyclif reasons as follows:

> … it is clear that in the primitive church all temporal things were common for every religious person who needed them, as it was revealed to the apostles by the Holy Spirit in the greatest rule of religion in Acts 4:32: "They held," he says, "all things in common" (133-34).

Furthermore,

> … in order to exclude the lazy who do not wish to work but demand an exaggerated portion, it is a serene and evangelical attitude to be content with the bare necessities of life. And … the reason for the pope's counsel is clear. "We know," he says, "that every best and perfect gift comes from on high, descending from the father of lights,' and from this source he has received the gift of a good will who after pious deliberation prepares to serve God freely. It is obvious, therefore, that anyone who accepts money in return for any bestowal of a divine gift sells or buys simoniacally God's gift" (134).

Building on the basis of these venerable precedents, Wyclif then adds the clincher:

> And if this precept were observed, few would be enticed to enter religious orders for temporal gain because it is not known if the gift of the father of lights makes a person suitable for this, but if it does, the person made fit by God should not be motivated by temporal profit or gain" (134).

The model made explicit here is one of voluntary poverty received as an utterly unearned divine gift, a spiritual gift that is impervious to any and all merely human attempts to fabricate it, however many spiritual imposters may attempt to do so.

Part 3 Griselda, Voluntary and Involuntary Poverty, and the Bride: Chaucerian and Wycliffite Contexts

If we look for an exemplar of this level or degree of voluntary spiritual and literal poverty among the characters in *The Canterbury Tales*, we find few candidates, only one

of whom is male, and an ordained clergyman, namely the parson. Unquestionably, neither the Wife of Bath nor the Prioress will fit the bill. Our other possible candidates are women, and one "litel clergeon," but the nuns in the company of story-tellers, and the characters they craft, are not entirely persuasive matches to the ideal articulated by Wyclif. Certainly the Prioress widely misses the mark, even if we might make the case that the widowed mother and her orphaned son in the Prioress's tale express, in some measure, this ideal of radical dependence on divine gift and provision. Yet even if the Prioress can "tell a moral tale" in spite of being herself a vicious hypocrite, it appears unlikely that either the miraculous narrative framing and the anti-Semitic context of the tale can support the notion that this tale is moral in the first place. To return to Richard Rex's detailed analysis *The Sins of Madame Eglentyne*, it looks implausible that Chaucer and his Prioress speak with one voice in the tale proper. As Rex goes to considerable length to show from historical evidence, and as he concludes, "we ought to be very skeptical indeed of any attempt to equate Chaucer's belief in miracles with the Prioress's" and furthermore our skepticism should actively extend to the idea that he shared his character's anti-Semitism:

> any notion that a universal bigotry necessarily precluded the possibility for satire of an anti-Semitic prioress, or that a universal credulity necessarily precluded use of a miracle tale for this purpose, should be dismissed … it seems far more likely that the Prioress is not a gauge of Chaucer's own sentiments concerning Jews, but that the poet shared in some degree the … outlook of his more enlightened contemporaries such as Uthred of Boldon, Wyclif, Brinton, Bromyard, Langland,

> the *Erkenwald* poet, the Pricke of Conscience author, Gower, and the Lollard polemicists (25; footnote included in original omitted).

All of those "enlightened contemporaries," on Rex's account, made a point of praising the righteous ways of Jews, of anticipating their ultimate salvation with or without prior conversion, and of comparing loveless, sinful Christians unfavorably with loving, devout Jews. Given the plausibility of Rex's account, we need to look elsewhere in *The Canterbury Tales* for an exemplar of the Wycliffite ideal of voluntary poverty (again, understood as both spiritual and literal).

If we look to the Second Nun's Tale, what we find is problematic. We don't have a *General Prologue* portrait to ponder, nor do we have any hints in the brief mention of the second nun in the *GP* that might indicate whether she emulates her institutional superior, the Prioress. Her tale follows immediately after that of the Nun's Priest, whom the Host lavishly praises for his virility, and in particular his putative potential to be a lusty "trede-foul" needing many hens to satisfy him. The Host's remarks to the Monk, whose tale he cuts short before inviting the Nun's Priest to tell his, are similarly notable for his emphasis on the Monk's virile capacity for "engendrure":

> "I pray to God, yeve hym confusioun
>
> That first thee broghte unto religioun!
>
> Thou woldest han been a tredefowel aright.
>
> Haddestow as greet a leeve as thou hast might
>
> To parfourne al thy lust in engendrure,

Thou haddest bigeten ful many a creature." (VII.1943-46)

In a sequence of a sort that understandably has led many critics to suggest the impossibility of pinning Chaucer down on anything, these two tales and the Host's comments on their ostensibly hypermasculine, hypersexed tellers are succeeded by the *Second Nun's Tale*, a vita of the aggressively determined virgin saint Cecilia, whose primary focus in prayer appears to be the preservation of her own virgin state. When, against her will, she is married, she issues a supernatural death threat to her newlywed husband on their wedding night, calling him "sweete and wel beloved spouse deere" and telling him

"I have an aungel which that loveth me,

That with greet love, wher so I wake or sleepe,

Is redy ay my body for to kepe.

And if that he may feelen, out of drede,

That ye me touche, or love in vileynye,

He right anon wol sle yow with the dede,

And in youre yowthe thus ye shullen dye;

And if that ye in clene love me gye,

He wol yow loven as me for youre clennesse,

And shewen yow his joye and his brightnesse." (VIII 152-161)

As one critic remarked in reference to Walter's grievous mistreatment of Griselda, "Too much virtue in a wife makes some men immoderately vicious," but in Cecilia's case that is not an issue (Hallissy 67). Although Valerian, in an earthy touch, suspects Cecilia of having a lover, and threatens to kill her if he confirms that she does, he is nonetheless willing to follow her orders and take the steps she prescribes in order to seek the proof she offers of her claimed heavenly protector. As the story goes – "as her lif seith" – he finds the proof, as promised, and his conversion is one of a series of miracles in this tale of holy martyrdom.

Whether Chaucer was skeptical of the miraculous elements of this vita, even in the process of crafting his own version of it, we can't know with certainty, any more than we can know how Wyclif would have assessed Cecilia's vita specifically. We do have enough evidence, however, to strongly indicate that both Wyclif and Chaucer were well aware that pious frauds were abundantly available, in texts and in the flesh. Wyclif in particular urged a cautious attitude towards the practice of venerating ostensible saints; as Anne Hudson puts it, "post-biblical saints are, in his view, a dubious lot, many of whom have been canonized unjustifiably and many of whose legends purvey fiction and questionable morality – they are best ignored" (*Premature Reformation* 302). In his *Trialogus*, under the section on Virtue and Vice, for example, there is a subsection titled "No saint is intrinsically praiseworthy" in which Phronesis remarks as follows:

> …our church quite reasonably has the custom that whoever prays to a saint directs his words to Christ, and not chiefly to the saint. Nor is the commemoration or the

> festival of a saint legitimate unless it helps to glorify Christ, to increase His honor, and to lead one to love Him. So if there are any commemorations of saints that depart from this end, I am sure that cupidity or some other sin is the cause (188).

Furthermore, as he goes on to say, to choose some other intercessor in preference to Christ Himself is misguided at best, a pursuit of the second rate when the first rate is available at all times:

> … many think it would be helpful if Christ alone among men was worshipped, because He is the greatest mediator and intercessor, most able in any circumstance, best because of love and infinite mercy. So he would be a fool who sought some other intercessor, because if two were proposed as suitable, whoever would choose the one less eligible without a reason would be a fool (189).

Such a foolish confusion in the matter of prayer could in turn lead to "a twisted devotion in which stupidly worships canonized demons, esteeming them as blessed" (189). In addition, the miracles purportedly done by erroneously canonized saints are likely to be demonic deceptions that the papal curia fails to discern when it "presumes to canonize holy people blasphemously, since carried away by revelation, they blatantly ignore the actual sanctity of the dead person":

> it is certain that a witness's deposition proves nothing, since with the purported knowledge of the truth of the one being canonized, faithfully and genuinely perceived by the pope, *which of course rarely if ever actually occurs*, a deposition proves nothing … Nor do I doubt that miracles are very deceptive, since the Devil, transfiguring himself to be an angel of light, is able to demonstrate the

> miracles of a damned soul. So it seems that the church might frequently be deceived by those procuring testimony, judges, and even heaven; this is simple, and the Devil does not sleep when he could be deceiving people (190; emphasis mine).

The upshot of Wyclif's deeply cynical critique, as voiced by Phronesis, is that "there are many more who cultivate the memories of those newly called saints because of some extravagant perceptible sign than who cultivate the Lord Jesus Christ." (190)

Given such severe strictures, it seems implausible to propose either the Man of Law's Constance or the Second Nun's Cecilia as exemplars of the kind of saintliness advocated by Wyclif.[34] Constance, however, is perhaps in one respect far closer to the ideal than Cecilia; the miraculous interventions in the events of her life seem less "given" than in Cecilia's case, as the narrator intervenes with commentary frequently and obtrusively. [35] For example, his explanation for Cecilia's ability to survive the "yeres and dayes" she spends at sea after the massacre at Syria goes beyond the mention of provisions placed on the boat (II 442-45) to a series of analogies to scriptural and traditional accounts of miraculous rescue and provision (Daniel, Jonah, St. Mary the

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[34] See, however, Bruce Rosenberg's analysis in "The Contrary Tales of the Second Nun and the Canon's Yeoman", in which he argues for the crucial hermeneutic practice of interpreting paired tales in tandem, in this case in order to accurately assess the "complexity, subtlety, and … richness beyond [the] seemingly facile surface" of the *Second Nun's Tale*, which he understands to be worthy of greater admiration, as a work of devotion, than it has often received. See also Elizabeth Robertson's argument for Constance's spiritual power in "The 'Elvyssh' Power of Constance: Christian Feminism in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale*."

[35] It is important to note that the Man of Law's prologue indicates that the imagined narrator's personal aims might be antithetical to the poverty advocated by Wyclif. The prologue is a rather strange combination of a borrowing from Pope Innocent's *De miseria condicionis humane*, with a concluding expression of praise for merchants who prudently seek riches and gather not only wealth but also "tidynges / And tales" while seeking "lond and see for … wynnynges". Given that the portrait of the Man of Law in the *GP* shows him to be quite good at winning the game of wealth-building via real estate transactions, it is an appropriate prologue for his character, even if an odd one for a hagiographical tale of a devout Christian woman who is utterly dependent on "Godes' sonde".

Egyptian). Such interventions make the story appear more obviously fictional, whereas Cecilia's vita was widely accepted as an authentic model for devotional focus. Yet that distinction need not necessarily mean the tale is less motivated or driven by devoted pursuit of holiness. Indeed, John Yunck's analysis suggests the contrary. Citing Edward Block's study of how Chaucer revised his source text, Yunck agrees with Block that the changes tend to "increase the religious intensity of the tale which he found in Trivet" while also making the characters more human, but Yunck goes on to express disagreement with Block's assertion that the humanizing tendency is not artistically compatible with the religious intensification because they constitute an "irreconcilable dualism of purpose." Contra Block, Yunck writes:

> In a number of years of teaching this tale I have been most strongly impressed with this intensification of the religious element. I have not found it to be at cross-purposes with his humanization of his characters; I suggest, in fact, that much of the humanizing is incidental or subordinate to Chaucer's homiletic and devotional aims. I believe that these aims are central to his re-working of the tale … [which] became in Chaucer's hands a romantic homily on the virtues of complete submission to divine providence, worked out against the harshest vicissitudes which folktale could provide (248).

Of particular interest, in addition, is Yunck's assertion that Chaucer changed Trivet's Constance in such a way that, as a model of holiness, she is less like Cecilia and her ilk:

> He carefully excised only one religious element from his source: the aggressive sanctity of Trivet's Constance, that sort of militant, self-assured, often unpleasant

> proselytizing fervor not uncommon in the early saints' lives; an element which he allowed to remain, for example, in the Second Nun's retelling of the life of St. Cecilia (248).

These two distinctions suggest that saintly Constance might well be better suited than Saint Cecelia to model an exemplary holiness, imagined from the standpoint of an explicitly anti-sacerdotal Wycliffism that is skeptical of religious vows.

Constance and her fellow non-religious, uncanonized saint, Griselda of the Clerk's tale, are notable for being a pair of "ugly beauties": their specifically spiritual beauties are challenging -- or worse, invisible -- for some critics, who may see profound ugliness where, arguably, their creator least intended it. Sheila Delany, for example, remarks that "for most readers, Constance is among the least attractive of Chaucer's women, sharing with patient Griselda … the somewhat repulsive masochistic qualities of extreme humility and silent endurance." (63) In an odd, ironic twist, this sounds all too much like indirect verbal abuse: if Griselda or Constance were real women, as opposed to literary-fictional characters, Delany would perhaps hesitate, if only briefly, to label them "repulsive" and "masochistic," a labeling that seems to re-enact and re-inscribe abuse of the feminine just where she means to call it out and extirpate it. [36]

More curious still than the strange irony noted above, in that snippet of harsh and arguably abusive rhetoric directed at women (in the name of setting of them free from harshness and abuse), is the odd reality that such critical responses to Griseldas and

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[36] In "The Clerk's Tale and the Grammar of Assent," a more sympathetic account of *Griselda*'s mysterious ways (and hence, by extension, the mysterious ways of humility, silent endurance, submission to divine will, etc.), Linda Georgianna likewise acknowledges that modern readers are often inclined to find the piety of Griselda distasteful (793).

Constances and their like have a marked, if hidden, logical affinity with the very abuses that vexed Wyclif and provoked his impassioned defense of the purity of the church. Ruth Ames is instructive on this issue:

> In the Christian view, human beings are liberated not by indulgence but by virtue. In philosophical terms, *Lady* Philosophy explains to Boethius … that true freedom means liberation from the prison of desires for clothes, for sex, for money, for power. In religious terms, Christ is the Truth that sets both men and women free. In Chaucer's works, more women than men are liberated in this way; most of his saints are women. Teaching, preaching, cajoling, suffering, dying, they become saints by imitating Christ. The do not imitate their husbands; indeed, Melibeus and Walter become liberated men only when they recognize the wisdom and goodness of Prudence and Griselda (178).

Constance, similarly, is the instrument whereby both of her pagan husbands are converted, in both cases from religious systems whose murderous emblems, her two mothers-in-law, are responsible for much, although not all, of Constance's suffering, as well as the deaths and suffering of many others. Regarding these evil foils to Constance's steadfast virtue, Delany astutely notes that "the older women seek power, are jealous of it, and do not hesitate to abuse that power to protect their private interests," and she provides a penetrating summary of the multiple crimes and sins that are folded into Donegild's and the Sultaness's plots against Constance. As Delany observes, the sheer, unalloyed badness of these two women is expressed in the rhetorical form of apostrophes, the language of which finds a potent echo in the Canon's Yeoman's explosions of outrage at his former master's treachery, as we can see from these parallel passages:

"Loo, how this theef koude his service beede!

Ful sooth it is that swich profred servyse

Stynketh, as witnessen thise olde wyse,

And that ful soone I wol it verifie

In this chanoun, roote of al trecherie,

That everemoore delit hath and gladnesse –

Swiche feendly thoghtes in his herte impresse –

How Cristes peple he may to meschief brynge.

God kepe us from his false dissymulynge! (VIII 1065-73)

Al to simple is my tonge to pronounce

As minister of my wit, the doublenesses

Of this chanoun, roote of alle cursednesse!

He seemed friendly to hem that knewe hym noght,

But he was feendly bothe in werk and thought." (VIII 1299-1303)

In like manner, the Sultaness is the "roote of iniquitee" and Donegild's wickedness defies the Man of Law's ability to express it: "I ne have non English digne / Unto thy malice and thy tirannye!"; the fiendish, hellish associations are manifest in each case, and most particularly the role of deception in enabling each of the three to do massive harm.

Radically connected (just so: from the same *roote*) to this hyperbolically characterized trio of villains, if not rhetorically displayed in the same manner, the Summoner's hellish Friar John, the Friar's hell-dragged Summoner, and the Pardoner's own self-confessed, false-seeming, silver-tongued preacher stand in marked contrast to Griselda and Constance, neither of whom, of necessity, pursue holy orders (being inherently disqualified from doing so by their sex), and neither of whom is characterized in any way by self-seeking much less guile. More significant, neither of these women pursues religious vocation, in the institutional sense, unlike the Prioress, or the second nun, or, for that matter, the assertively virginal Saint Cecilia, who wears a hair shirt under her cloth of gold in order to make her comfortable life less so. For Constance as for Griselda, there is no need to pursue trouble and pain; pain and trouble come looking for both of them, and faithful, spiritual purity is a mysterious "given" in the character of each in such a way that we don't see them aiming for it: they simply have it, or it has them. In regards to Constance, Sheila Delany notes that she "seems to exist in order to suffer, yet it is unclear why she suffers – certainly not to become perfect, for she is morally perfect from the start of the tale" (63). While Constance's life purpose appears to me to be larger than merely "to suffer," it is certainly the case that her capacity for suffering and her faith-full tolerance of it is a crucial feature of her story; no need to quibble on that score, or on the mystery of her goodness. In Griselda's case, however, pain and trouble come in a much more concentrated form, because the source is one person, her husband, whereas in Constance's case the sources of her suffering are multiple, and her husbands are only indirectly and not by their own will sources of "wo and peyne" for her. Hence, borrowing an apt phrase from Linda Georgianna, the Clerk's Tale is indeed the "least

reassuring of Chaucer's religious tales" (793). Acutely and poignantly, the tale forces us to come to imaginative terms with divine sovereignty and humble submission thereto, a beauty that is ugly not merely to the eyes of modern readers but also to Chaucer's own contemporaries. Griselda embodies what a life sincerely lived in accord with the Lord's prayer might look like: no lip-serving servant she, when she says "thy will be done," she means the words, and acts on them. Again, Linda Georgianna captures this succinctly and accurately: "the Clerk's Tale is designed not to reassure but to challenge Christian complacency with a disturbing reminder of the demands of Christian faith, figured in Griselda's assent." (794)[37]

Extraordinary in her ordinariness, Griselda differs from Constance (and Cecilia as well) in social class, status, or rank; as worldly hierarchies go, Griselda's is lowliest, which reflects a paradoxical and distinctively Christian cosmic ordering that is deeply embedded in the tale's logic and imaginary: dust we are, and to dust we will return, but wedded to the One who breathed life into dust, and in submission to that One, the merely human and ultimately perishable puts on the imperishable; Griselda dons cloth of gold in lieu of rags, but not until her tale is nearly done, whereas Cecilia wears a hair shirt under her cloth of gold wedding gown, for a marriage she does not intend to consummate in the ordinary and lawful way. Walter's absolute power and Griselda's absolute submission imperfectly mirrors (in a glass, darkly) the human-divine power and status differential. Lest we carelessly mistake Griselda's radical submission for the mere "ugly beauty" of a woman's choice to remain faithful to an abusive husband, without calling him to account, Chaucer's clerk's envoy, and along with it the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, correct

[37] Here, it is important to note that Georgianna in turn credits A.C. Spearing most pointedly for his ongoing influence on her interpretation of the *Clerk's Tale*.

us.[38] [39] In addition, the repulsiveness of Walter at the literal interpretive level (his merely human character, stripped of any allegorical significance) would impede us, ideally, from misjudging the story or its author's aims. Without going so far as to suggest that Chaucer intended Griselda to be exemplary of the Wycliffite ideal of voluntary poverty, it is not a stretch nonetheless to assert that she is nearly alone among the tale-telling pilgrims and their characters in her potential to be read as such an exemplar, and it is more than a little suggestive that she is such an ordinary woman, in every respect, including her non-virginal, wifely status.

By no means the passive, weak, or spineless figure of oppressed womanhood that some readers might wish her to be, in support of their own agenda, Griselda is in fact profoundly in rebellion against all that the world holds dear, and hence she could well be the locus of a joint Chaucerian/Wycliffite critique of the same. An extended quote from theologian David Bentley Hart may elucidate the specifically – but to modern eyes invisibly --rebellious nature of Griselda. *In Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies*, Hart remarks on the seminal importance of one particular textual moment that all the Gospels narratives record: Peter's weeping recognition of his status as traitor to his Lord. As Hart puts it,

> To us today, this hardly seems an extraordinary detail of the narrative … we would expect Peter to weep, and we certainly would expect any narrator to

[38] A telling contemporary example of this kind of irresponsible, explicitly male, faux-pastoral attitude (the kind of thing which Sheila Delany and others rightly warn against) can be found in the *Fasciculus Morum*, in which the writer, a Franciscan friar, illustrates the remedial virtue of humility by suggesting that we admire a woman who shields her husband from the shame of having his brutality towards his wife publically exposed. Worse still, the writer indicates that if she ***lies*** about how she came by the mark of one of his beatings, she is living in humility rather than deceit. See Wenzel (1989) 65.

[39] One significant aspect of that corrective impulse in the tension of dynamic poiesis that Chaucer crafts between Alison and Griselda is that in the Wife's *Tale* the leader in submission is male, whereas in the *Clerk's Tale*, the leader in submission is female.

think the event worth recording. But, in some ways, taken in the context of the age in which the gospels were written, there may well be no stranger or more remarkable moment in the whole of scripture. What is obvious to us -- Peter's wounded soul, the profundity of his devotion to his teacher, the torment of his guilt, the crushing knowledge that Christ's imminent death forever foreclosed the possibility of seeking forgiveness for his betrayal – is obvious in very large part because we are the heirs of a culture that, in a sense, sprang from Peter's tears. To us, this rather small and ordinary narrative detail is unquestionably an ornament of the story, one that ennobles it, proves its gravity, widens it embrace of our common humanity. In this sense, all of us – even unbelievers – are "Christians" in our moral expectations of the world. To the literate classes of late antiquity, however, this tale of Peter weeping would more likely have seemed an aesthetic mistake; for Peter, as a rustic, could not possibly have been a worthy object of a well-bred man's sympathy, nor could his grief possibly have possessed the sort of tragic dignity necessary to make it worthy of anyone's notice. At most, the grief of a man of Peter's class might have had a place in comic literature: the querulous complaints of an indolent slave, the self-pitying expostulations of a witless peon … and so on. Of course, in a tragic or epic setting a servant's tears might have been played as accompaniment to his master's sorrows, rather like the sympathetic whining of a devoted dog. But, when one compares this scene from the Gospels to the sort of emotional portraiture one finds in great Roman writers, comic or serious, one discovers – as the great literary critic Erich Auerbach noted half a century ago – that it is only in Peter that one sees "the image of man in the

> highest and deepest and most tragic sense." … Yet Peter remains, for all that a Galilaen peasant. This is not merely a violation of good taste; it is an act of rebellion (167).[40]

Griselda likewise partakes of this rebellion, this vast, slow, ongoing overturning of the hierarchies ordained by powers and principalities in the spiritual realm, and by various worldly concerns and institutions in the earthly. As such, she is at a minimum a solid candidate for an exemplary Wycliffite/Chaucerian hybrid-heroine, who not only defeats "Walterity" (Linda Georgiana's delightful neologism), but also challenges the vowed religious to consider the possible superiority of a "religious practice of an ethics of everyday life in the world" (Fiona Somerset's description of Lollard piety); a quite ordinary and frail wife and mother, she outdoes (perhaps) the likes of Saint Cecilia (*Grammar* 818; *Feeling Like Saints* 21). Whatever Chaucer may have thought of his own and Petrarch's Griseldas, as well as the legendary Cecilia and his version of her life, we know that some of the single-minded devotees that Wycliffism encouraged did die in flames; we will never know whether Wyclif himself would have been among their number had he lived longer, placing him also in the company of his later follower Jan Hus, a hereticated and burned martyr. Nonetheless it is not hard to imagine that Wyclif would have approved of Griselda's piety, while she would have empathized with his, and the Parson, as his words on "poverte espiritueel" indicate in the closing lines of the *Canterbury Tales*, would have found more than a little bit to laud in each of them.

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[40] From Chapter 13, "The Face of the Faceless", in Section 3, "Revolution: The Christian Invention of the Human". On the contrast between the distinctively comic understanding of Christianity, as against the predominantly tragic conception of reality typical of ancient Western paganism, see also Peter Leithart's *Deep Comedy: Trinity, Tragedy, and Hope in Western Literature*. For another, Chaucer-specific view of Christian resistance to secular tyranny, see Klassen (2016), especially Chapter 3, "Mary's Swollen Womb".

Stepping back, however, in order to consider a fuller picture of the narrative logic of the *Clerk's Tale*, we may discern another possibility, which, far from harmonizing Chaucerian poetics with Wycliffite piety, would suggest instead a deep implicit antagonism. In the technically brilliant "envoy" to the tale, which the clerk introduces by insisting that it is time to "stynte of ernestful matere," we see Chaucer's playful affirmation of how exceedingly and unmistakably wrong Walter's abuse of Griselda truly is. This affirmation, however, is expressed indirectly rather than directly, in a manner that creates yet another and closely related interpretive difficulty. Just as the *Clerk's Tale* presents an interpretive enigma, such that readers struggle to comprehend and articulate an adequate "sentence" to extract from the interwoven levels of meaning, so the envoy creates yet another enigmatic locus for the same kind of "what's the meaning of this" struggle. On the one hand, at the literal level the envoy makes only limited sense. The sensible and humorous advice to husbands in the first stanza presents no obvious difficulty: it would, indeed, be foolish to expect from one's own real-world wife the kind of fictional patience so lavishly evoked in Griselda. When the envoy shifts into an exhortation addressed to such real-world wives, however, the rhetoric rapidly escalates to an apparently total refusal of ***any*** practice of wifely patience. Hence, the Clerk's tale closes with another rhetorical extreme, followed by the ostensibly hen-pecked Host's resigned, deflating commentary on the tale and on his own wish that his wife would emulate Griselda: "thyng that wol nat be, lat it be stille" (IV 1212g). In short, the Host's summation suggests an entirely different and biblically well-grounded sentence: husbands, bear with your wives.

Where exactly does this leave us? The rhetorical extremes of Griselda's narrated capacity for patience in the face of grievous injustice, on the one hand, and the envoy's hilarious and hyperbolic dismantling of reverence for such patience, on the other hand, suggest that anagogy is the only way out of the interpretive dilemma, while simultaneously reminding readers that the literal level cannot be utterly divorced from the anagogical. As the clerk tersely notes,

> This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde
>
> Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
>
> For that were inportable, though they wolde. (IV 1142-44)

Instead, as the clerk goes on to assert, the key to understanding Griselda as a spiritual model for the church (both clergy and laity) is first of all to separate in our minds Walter's tyranny from God's wisdom. Walter is not Griselda's maker, and there are limits on his authority over her, even as her husband (in one relationship) and her political lord (in another). Divine authority is an entirely different matter, as the clerk elaborates:

> For sith a woman was so pacient
>
> Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte
>
> Receyven al in gree that God us sent;
>
> For greet skile is he preeve that he wroghte. (IV 1149-1152)

Ancient bits of theological poetry are embedded here, and they would not have escaped the ruminative notice of either Chaucer or his contemporary audience: see, for example the haunting analogy of potter and clay, Isaiah and also God as maker or "poet" of all humanity, as Paul expressed the analogy in chapter two, verse 10 of his letter to the church at Ephesus. The clerk explicitly refers his hearers to another scriptural epistle, of course:

> But he ne tempteth no man that he boghte
>
> As seith Seint Jame, if ye his pistel rede;
>
> He preeveth folk al day, it is no drede,
>
> And suffreth us, as for oure exercise,
>
> With sharpe scourges of adversitee
>
> Ful ofte to be bete in sondry wise. (IV 1153-58)

Again a crucial difference between Walter and God comes to the surface of the Clerk's hermeneutics; God tests humans for entirely different reasons than Walter's corrupt, erratic, and irrational ones:

> Nat for to knowe oure wyl, for certes he,
>
> Er we were born, knew al oure freletee;
>
> And for oure best is al his governaunce.
>
> Lat us thanne lyve in virtuous suffraunce. (IV 1159-62)

Another strand of ancient poetic theology peeps out in lines 1159-60, with the allusion to Psalm 138 and the psalmist's sense of wonder and awe at his own formation by God's hand in his mother's womb. This Psalm, as is so often the case, blends anguish with comfort, and it concludes with a passionate request for testing: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my feelings, and see whether I follow an evil way, and lead me in the way of old" (23-24).

What the foregoing indicates is that the Clerk's hermeneutics, first of all, are more reasonable and more comprehensive than they might at first appear, especially to non-Catholic readers or to readers who are unaware of, or inattentive to, the poetics of the Clerk's scriptural reasoning. Secondly, however, the seeming disjunction between the Clerk's sober and orthodox reading of the fiction of patient Griselda, and his "up-so-doun" envoy, may subtly hide a hint of appropriate and *virtuous* impatience at tyrannical attempts to "test" or "prove" the church. Wyclif's ideas, distilled fairly comprehensively in the *Twelve Conclusions,* tend towards a stripping of all wealth from the church, which echoes the tyrannical way Walter sees to it that Griselda is stripped of her garments and her standing in the community. Given that we can see in Griselda an allegorical figure of the church, "from hevene sent … / Peple to save and every wrong t'amende" (IV 440-41), who *ultimately* disarms worldly tyranny in the form of Walter only after undergoing profound suffering, it makes sense to connect the envoy's exhortation of wifely resistance "[f]or commune profit" (1194) to contemporary attacks on the church.[41] The Clerk counsels all members of the church to practice "vertuous suffraunce," after telling a

[41] For a different approach to reading Chaucer's version of the tale of patient Griselda as a kind of "quiting" of Wyclif's ideas about the monarchy and reform, see "Chaucer and the Postures of Sanctity", Lynn Staley's concluding chapter to *The Powers of the Holy* (Aers and Staley, 1996).

deeply allegorical tale that leads hearers and readers to consider carefully the possibility that certain kinds of suffering might not be "virtuous" at all. In the *Clerk's Tale*, Griselda's suffering is unambiguously shown to be directly related to one specific tyrant, which invites reflection on real-world tyrants who all too often impose "inportable" burdens. An example of such a burden can be found in the twelfth of the Wycliffite *Conclusions*, which with chilling complacency asserts the following: "alle manere of craftes nout needful to man aftir the apostle schulde ben destroyed for encres of uertu." Eerily premonitory of the kinds of iconoclastic violence that became commonplace in Reformation-era England, this assertion could easily be applied to poetry as well as the more tangible crafts that are explicitly mentioned in the twelfth conclusion and accused of fostering "michil synne in wast, curiosite and disgysing."[42] Chaucer, we can be sure, viewed poetry and "alle manere of craftes" much more generously and indeed accurately, and furthermore, his work gives multiple indicators that he viewed poetry as one way of fostering "encres of uertu." It's unlikely, to put it mildly, that Chaucer could have agreed with the spiritual and artistic totalitarianism reflected in this final "Lollard" conclusion.[43]

The relentless "stripping" impulse that characterizes so many strands of Wycliffite reformist rhetoric seems not only to have urged stripping away tangible gifts from the church, but possibly also, unwittingly, intangible, spiritual gifts as well, such as the fragile gifts of clerical and monastic celibacy and continence, sincerely if imperfectly

[42] On this, see Duffy's magisterial *The Stripping of the Altars*.

[43] Totalitarian and reductionist attempts to control the arts are perennial, and by no means all of them stem from Christian or pseudo-Christian sources. The secular totalitarianisms of the 20th century overflow with examples of the repression of the arts, and discourses stemming from various current cultural "orthodoxies" have some decidedly totalitarian threads running through them as well. According to some such cultural critics, privileging the study of Chaucer – or any other "dead white man" – should be, if not *verboten*, at least shameful. Similarly, the ultra-cynical, and deeply disheartening, privileging of absolutely nothing as a "cool" critical practice deserves criticism itself. On this, see Lisa Ruddick's "When Nothing is Cool" (2015).

practiced by various women and men throughout the history of the church. That "stripping" impulse, sadly, seems to have blinded many Wycliffites to the theological grounding and intrinsic value of beauty in a life dedicated to Christ.[44] Chaucer, it's safe to say, was not so blinded, and his poetic ecclesiology reflects an openness to seeing the capacity of the church to continue fostering the kinds of virtues that help pilgrims (whether members of the laity or the clergy, and whether male or female) on their way to the celestial Jerusalem. As Anne Hudson notes in *The Premature Reformation*,

> Chaucer might mock the habits of monks and friars, Langland repeatedly castigates the vices of the friars, associating them particularly with the corruption of confession, but neither of them in the last resort questions the ideals of their founders, of Benedict, Francis or Dominic – to them friars and monks have gone wrong because they have failed to follow, or have sophisticated, their rules, not because their rules are in themselves evil. The Lollard position is other (350; footnote included in original omitted).[45]

The ancient remedy for such failings, which has the leveling virtue of being equally available to and equally needed by both clergy and laity as well as to non-ordained women religious, is the sacrament of penance, the topic of my next and final chapter, in which I argue that not only is the *Parson's Tale* more intrinsic to the design of the whole poem than scholars have tended to admit, but also that the poetic ecclesiology of the whole poem is, in the final analysis, more orthodox and hence more hopeful than a strong Chaucerian affinity for Wycliffite reformism, if it existed in fact, could have permitted.

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[44] On this topic, see Jaroszynski (2011) and Chapter 3, below.

[45] To be clear, I take it that Hudson's remarks apply to Chaucer's stance on *female* monastics as well, vis-à-vis the Wycliffite critique of the same.

Chapter Three

"Taak the siker wey": Penance & Poiesis

Two of the *Canterbury Tales* stand together, alone out of the entire collection, in that they are written in prose: the first is the *Tale of Melibee*, assigned to Chaucer the pilgrim after the Host puts a stop to his "drasty" rhyming in the *Tale of Sir Topas*, and the second is the *Parson's Tale*, which the Host requests of the Parson in the expectation that his tale will "knytte up wel a greet mateere." At first glance, given their putatively "prosy" literary profile, these two tales may appear to be excellent textual loci for searching out Wycliffite sympathies in Chaucer's Canterbury poeisis. William Komowski, as noted in the introduction, opines that "the aesthetic implications of a Wycliffite Chaucer are discouraging in their potential for a reductive criticism written to a specific theological agenda," and furthermore, he asserts,

> Wyclif held an aversion to the literary enterprise, much like Chaucer's Parson who would eschew the aesthetics of fiction for the "ascetics" of penitential prose. Small wonder that Chaucerians have hesitated to examine their poet's affinities to the theologian who would have thought the Retraction the best part of the *Canterbury Tales*" (5-6).

Komowski gestures here at a common, oft-reiterated theme in Chaucer studies: the supposed artistic or aesthetic inferiority of both prose tales relative to the tales in verse, with the harshest remarks, not surprisingly, being directed at the *Parson's Tale*, and with the Retraction being a perennial magnet for critical scorn or cynicism. The fact that both tales are sober, intensely serious prose works that are less obviously tied to a poetics of

imagination than all of the other tales has led many critics into the error of assuming they are flaws or blemishes on the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole; examples abound which illustrate how such errors have been generated, as well as their larger implications. The overarching error, I argue, is the attempt to fit Chaucer's *Canterbury* poetics into a framework that makes it at once more secular and more fragmented than it likely is.[46]

That error, importantly, is compounded when teaching practices foster an assumption that it doesn't actually matter whether students are encouraged to read *The Canterbury Tales* as a complete work of art (including its long prose pieces), a work of art which challenges so many modern assumptions about the Middle Ages and art, intellect, Christian tradition, church history, and so on. For example, the Norton edition of *The Canterbury Tales*, purpose-built as a teaching text and published in its second edition in 2005, includes only the *Prologue* to the *Parson's Tale* along with a small portion of the tale proper, dealing with *luxuria* and its remedies, chastity and continence. This, however, is only one instance of massive truncation of the entire *Tales*, in an edition that features nearly 300 pages of sources and analogues following the heavily abridged work itself. The *Parson's Tale* and the *Melibee* share the distinction of being offered in drastically cut versions, while seven tales simply don't appear at all: those told by the Man of Law, the Squire, the Physician, the Shipman, the Monk, the Canon's Yeoman, and the Second Nun. The editorial preface does not explain the principle behind the

[46] A "telling" (pun intended) example of fine scholarship that goes against the trend of "secularizing Chaucer" is V.A. Kolve's "Man in the Middle: Art and Religion in *The Friar's Tale*", from *Telling Images* (2009), which begins with this arresting statement: "Something very odd has happened to the *The Friar's Tale* as it is read in the pages of contemporary criticism. Though widely celebrated as one of Chaucer's most brilliant achievements in short fiction, it has somehow lost its identity as a religious tale: a tale that communicates an explicitly religious view of human life. So brilliantly is it integrated into a roadside quarrel between pilgrim Friar and pilgrim Summoner that we read it chiefly as satire – as an exercise in rhetorical aggression, smooth, accomplished, and seamlessly ironic."

selections, omissions and truncations, beyond laconically claiming "[w]e have selected tales generally considered among Chaucer's finest" and also "[t]his has not seemed to us an appropriate occasion to attempt a radically new edition of Chaucer's text" (Kolve and Olson xi). Oddly implicit here, it appears, is a tacit assumption that nothing "radically new" (or just plain "radical") occurs in a pedagogical approach to a teaching edition that leaves out substantial portions of *The Canterbury Tales*. If their edition serves, as they say they hope it will, not only "introductory courses in literature" but also "*more specialized courses in medieval studies*" (xi; emphasis mine), it is hard to see how it can function well as a pedagogical alternative to a complete works edition such as the *Riverside*.

Part 1 Coming to Terms with Chaucer's Art: Unity, Oppositions, and Reconciliation

This abridging, truncating approach to presenting a "critical edition" for undergraduates (and perhaps also graduate students) points to a larger, perennial concern in studies of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: are the tales, taken all together and ordered according to our best scholarly approximations of authorial intent, a reasonably unified, reasonably complete artistic whole – or, not? That opinions on this issue have varied over multiple generations of scholarship is no secret. This dissertation takes the position that the *Canterbury Tales is* a "reasonably unified, reasonably complete artistic whole," while noting in passing the value of ongoing testing of that position, given the inevitable difficulties of textual criticism in this case.[47] The primary evidence for Chaucer's intention to create a unified whole is found in the apparent completeness of the *General*

[47] On the related questions of unity and completeness, see, among others, Lawler and Baldwin. On the question of the ordering of the *Tales*, and the especially important question of the closure, see David Lawton's "Chaucer's Two Ways: The Pilgrimage Frame of the *Canterbury Tales*" (1987).

Prologue, along with its well-crafted narrative telos and the persistence of key features of the plan as introduced in the *GP*. Furthermore, in spite of the discontinuity between the directions laid out for the story-telling game proposed by the Host, and the actual stories told by the pilgrims who ultimately do get included as tellers, there is good reason to think that the collected tales, purposefully framed by a distinct beginning and a distinct end, constitute a whole that might well be as complete as Chaucer cared to make it. Thus, taking a primary cue from the *GP* itself, I look there for guiding principles and key terms for interpretation. In doing so, I am conscious of travelling well-worn ground, or perhaps well-prepared ground would be more accurate, and inevitably the many points highlighted here will rehearse observations made often, and insights expressed well, by others. Several things stand out with special clarity and emphasis: the larger narrative (the frame) is explicitly concerned with both pilgrimage and story-telling, hence earnest and game. These two pairs of two different things are joined or yoked together at the outset, and similarly, two different directors or managers of the larger narrative are present from the beginning as well: on the one hand, Chaucer's pilgrim persona, who takes direct charge of explaining how pilgrimage and story-telling contest came to be blended, and on the other hand, the Host, who proposes the blending of the two disparate projects and dictates the terms of the contest itself, and who will flavor the links between the two even as he seasons the literal framing links between tales with his often "salty" talk.

Stepping back momentarily from that odd couple, we may rightly wonder whether Chaucer intends an ultimate reconciliation of these opposed terms. If so, what artistic choices would constitute reconciliation? How would his *poeisis* reflect that

reconciliation? The narrative framework of the *GP* suggests that the Host intends a structure that is in some sense circular: *his* imagined "tales of and by competing Canterbury pilgrims" would, if fully realized, bring him and them all right back to where they started, at the Tabard, with or without being transformed in the pilgrimage process. In effect, the Host's project suggests no change of habit or garment: from the Tabard and back to the same, a tabard being an over-garment that (as noted in the MED) was used by various social ranks, from the lowest classes of laborers, to the ruling classes of Knights, and inclusive of monks and university scholars. The deep, multivalent scriptural associations of garments with the fallen, frail, and mortal human condition, as well as with salvation from these evils, are worth bearing in mind when we consider Chaucer the pilgrim's concern to communicate "in what array" he found his fellow pilgrims. Those multiple and poetic scriptural valences start as early as the effort by Adam and Eve, recounted in Genesis, to cover their own newly-discovered, lamentable nakedness, an effort which is then superseded by the prophetically-charged moment when God provides "garments of skins" – animals or an animal having been sacrificed for their good – to cover their nakedness.

Likewise, associations of clothing within this same symbolic network of human frailty and divine provision continue to the very end of the biblical "storial" framework, as we see in Revelation 3 ("He that shall overcome, shall thus be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, and I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels") and indeed throughout Revelation, in which, for example, chapter 19 (in vivid contrast to the purple and scarlet and lavish

jewelry of the Whore of Babylon, described in chapter 17) lays particular emphasis on the whiteness of the clothing worn by the Bride:

> Let us be glad and rejoice, and give glory to him; for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath prepared herself.
>
> And it is granted to her that she should clothe herself with fine linen, glittering and white. For the fine linen are the justifications of saints (Rev 19: 7-8).

The last reference to the Bride's clothing, found in chapter 21, makes it clear that "she" is the very city of God, "the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, and in the final chapter clothing again is at issue, indicating who may enter and dwell in this celestial city: " Blessed are they that wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb: that they may have a right to the tree of life, and may enter in by the gates into the city" (22:14).

In between these striking biblical "bookends" of clothing symbolism, from Genesis to Revelation, the Sermon on the Mount memorably includes the verses from 25 to 32 in chapter 6 of Matthew's gospel, in which Jesus expounds the message of human need and divine provision and hauntingly asks: "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"[48] It's not immediately clear that the Host would answer in the affirmative, at least as his character is developed (to the extent that it *is* developed) in the *GP*, and perhaps also throughout the entire *Canterbury Tales*. Certainly his proposal of a

[48] Two additional examples of this multivalent and omnipresent scriptural imaginary are especially fitting, given the ecclesiastical miscreants of the *GP*, as follows: "Let thy priests be clothed with justice: and let thy saints rejoice" (Ps 132:9) and "You ate the milk, and you clothed yourselves with the wool, and you killed that which was fat: but my flock you did not feed" (Ezek 34:3).

story-telling contest, which necessitates a return trip to the tavern-locus and its quotidian concerns of eating and drinking, and which stipulates a prize that ***is*** eating and drinking, does not, on the face of it, suggest that innkeeper Harry Bailley has any intention of relinquishing his characteristic and professional concern with food and drink – even for the sake of being part of the ultimate supper in celebration of the marriage of the Lamb and the Bride. Yet in his role as Host, he is named in such a way that he is a recurrent marker of dual meaning: on the one hand, he is the literal master of ceremonies in charge of meeting the needs for food and drink of travelers, pilgrims, or *viators*, but on the other hand, he also hints, however parodically, at the Eucharistic host, signifying Christ's body and his *spiritual* hospitality, which is in turn the centerpiece of the ancient ecclesiastical practice of ordered, daily, sacramental worship. That spiritual hospitality, embedded in and offered permanently through the church's central form of worship, combines supernatural and natural feeding in one decisive, loving gesture, and it is reasonable to surmise that Chaucer intends his Host to point readers of the *CT* towards that fusion of the supernatural with the natural, the mundane with the celestial, and the glorious with the profane.[49]

The Host's own *specific* profanity is of course underscored repeatedly, not only in that he habitually swears, a fact which the Parson laments, but also in that his pithy responses to the pilgrim tale-tellers, both before and after they tell their tales, are frequently vulgarly derisive. His demeanor is that of a man who is strikingly "in control," with the possible exception of his sudden venting of anger at the Pardoner for

[49] For one notable version of the general idea that the Host signifies "a parody of the true Host" see Leyerle (1976) 116. Leyerle adds that the Host's proposal of a game- and pilgrimage-ending supper is "a parody of the Last Supper," a less than apt reading in comparison to the idea that it is a parody of the eschatological wedding supper. See also Peck (1984) on the importance of Harry Bailly's role as timekeeper.

offering to sell *faux* relics (and, indeed, *faux* pardons), an outburst that famously features a physical threat to geld the gelding:

> "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!" (VI 952-55)

Indeed, in his role as self-appointed judge of both tales and tellers, he goes so far as to cut one tale off completely, forbidding the teller to finish it and comparing it unfavorably to a "turd" --the *Tale of Sir Topas*, told by Chaucer's pilgrim persona – in an intriguing echo of the paired themes of cutting off that which is of no value, and comparing its value to excrement. Yet in cutting off the *Tale of Sir Topas*, the Host sets Chaucer-pilgrim up to do what no other character does in the work as a whole: he tells *two* tales en route to Canterbury, a circumstance that (being literal-minded) requires us to pay twice as much attention to him as a story-teller.[50] His two stories, in addition, appear every bit as irreconcilable as the two pairs of opposing terms with which the entire literary project of an imagined pilgrimage to Canterbury began: earnest and game, pilgrimage and story-

[50] It's worth noting that in a sense the Wife of Bath *also* tells two tales (her autobiographical tale or the *Prologue* to her tale proper, and the *Tale* itself), but these two are firmly linked to each other in multiple ways, whereas Chaucer-pilgrim's two tales suggest, on the contrary, a complete disconnect between one rhetorical mode and the other, with one having a deep intrinsic value and, as Lawler has argued, a deeper purpose of preparing the way for the ultimate tale, the Parson's. In addition, the Monk is also given a "second chance" – an opportunity to tell a second tale after being disqualified by his dismal first effort – but he refuses it.

telling contest.[51] The juxtaposition of the entertainingly bad *Topas* with the sober, systematic, and thorough *Melibee*, especially given the importance of their teller to the whole Canterbury project and its *poiesis*, has generated its fair share of speculative readings, at least one of which is wildly off the mark: Lumiansky's "double-edged joke" interpretation from *Of Sondry Folk* (83-95).

According to Lumiansky, Chaucer the poet simply sets the Host up for ridicule, with a rhetorical one-two punch that exposes his inability to fulfill the masterful role he undertook at the outset, when he not only proposed a story-telling contest but appointed himself the judge and "governour" of the entire proceeding, setting terms, penalties, and the final reward, with the full approbation of the gathered pilgrims. The basis for Lumiansky's problematic reading is, crucially, a failure to recognize the profound gulf between a post-Enlightenment sense of "literature," and the "literariness" of Chaucer in all its own distinctively pre-modern cultural richness. Yes, Lumiansky does gesture at awareness of this gulf, as we see in the following, but like so many other modern critics he doesn't grasp the full significance of it: he grants the popularity of "such moralizing allegory … in Chaucer's day" and admits that "his audience looked upon the 'Melibeus' with a great deal less disfavor than do most modern readers" but, he goes on to assert, "we still could not urge that [Chaucer] lacked the literary discrimination necessary to see the difference" between the two tales told by his pilgrim persona. Seeing that difference,

[51] In *Geoffrey Chaucer* (1991), Jill Mann emphasizes the importance of the *Melibee* to the work as a whole in these terms: "Critics have often privileged the Parson's Tale as the non-fictional 'core' of the Canterbury Tales, the centre to whose values all the other tales must be related. If there is a centre of this sort, a far better case could be made for identifying it with the *Melibee* … the *Melibee* is given special authority by being told by Chaucer himself … 'Chaucer the pilgrim' is the fictional projection of the poet Chaucer, whose authority is lent to the values of the Melibee" (121). An important point, to be sure, but the values of the *Melibee* are significantly in harmony with the values of the *Parson's Tale*, and if anything, the *Melibee* prepares for the final tale.

according to Lumiansky, means that Chaucer – unlike the Host – has "literary taste" and therefore knows a good, entertaining story (the *Topas*) from a bad, didactic one (the *Melibee*, "this lengthy moralistic tale" which is "the most routine sort of literary fare, in contrast to the highly original 'Sir Topas'") (93-94). In short, Chaucer has "literary taste" because he likes what Lumiansky likes.

Lumiansky's error, which admittedly savors somewhat of a joke on *him*, is also, in fairness to him, a perennial failing of modern criticism of medieval literature, which sometimes unreflectively faults its own object of study for being aesthetically displeasing in modern terms, which are inherently foreign to a medieval cultural imaginary and medieval theories of beauty, which are grounded in metaphysics.[52] [53] Indeed, the notion that "literature" must give rise to particular kinds of sensual/aesthetic pleasure in order to please as art, is a direct result of a post-medieval transformation of the word itself, such that it now connotes a narrow, aesthetically-delimited idea of what we mean by "the literary," stripped in numerous ways of older, fuller acceptation of the term.[54] A more sophisticated and subtle version of this error shows up in Charles Muscatine's "Chaucer's Religion and the Chaucer Religion," in which Muscatine denigrates *The Parson's Tale* (and by more than implication, its admirers) with ferocity, calling it "this endless, narrow, small-minded, inveterately enumerative, circumstantially punitive list of sinful acts" (37-

[52] Rigorous scholarship that corrects or prevents such mistaken critical practices abounds as well, however; one good recent example is the collection of essays in *Answerable Style: The Idea of the Literary in Medieval England* (2013). See also the useful anthology *The Idea of the Vernacular* (1999).
[53] For a good recent overview of the philosophical divide between pre-modern theories of the beautiful and aesthetic theory post-Baumgarten, see Jaroszynski (2011).
[54] Several substantial studies delve thoroughly into this issue and its ramifications for the study of "literature". See, for example, *The Biography of "the Idea of Literature" From Antiquity to the Baroque* (Marino, 1996); *Institutionalizing English Literature: The Culture and Politics of Literary Study, 1750-1900* (Court, 1992); *The Scottish Invention of English Literature* (Crawford, 1998); *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Graff, 1987); "Where Do English Departments Come From?" (Parker, 1967).

38). Among other things, this diatribe registers as a "small-minded" dismissal of the real breadth and complexity (as opposed to narrowness) of the literary object being dismissed, and it appears to cancel out Muscatine's prior remark "that we cannot banish works from the canon just because we don't like them" (34). More importantly, however, Muscatine's critique illustrates a general trend, now possibly becoming obsolete, of overlaying Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* with a template that doesn't suit it. That Muscatine would like to cut the *Parson's Tale* out altogether may or may not have some merit in terms of textual criticism (34-35), but the danger is that the desire to cut it stems from its failure to conform to an "idea of the literary" (to paraphrase the title of Marino's useful study) that is simply centuries too late to be of real use in evaluating its place within the making, the *poeisis*, of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Notably, Muscatine identifies "Chaucer's pathetic religiosity" or "his pathos in a religious vein" as the defining characteristic of his capacity to be a "religious poet." This identification is explicitly tied to his works in verse, so there's a notable (and again, commonplace) narrowing of the idea of poetry to "that which is in verse," and also "that which gives rise to strong feelings," as opposed to that which the maker makes, using the verbal tools of his inherited literary imaginary, which can include both prose and verse forms, and which may or may not provoke a strong, immediate emotional response. Hence, on Muscatine's view, an additional underlying reason to dismiss the *Parson's Tale* is that it "is not poetry, of course, but a prose compilation" and worse yet, one dedicated to elaborating sin and enabling penitence, a project which is perhaps in itself an unforgiveable ("literary") sin. According to Muscatine, "[u]ntil recently almost no one but specialists read it, and that under a species of compulsion. As literature, it rivals Lydgate as a

traditional object of derision" (34). This reasoning process makes it impossible to entertain and explore a more spacious concept of Chaucer's capacity to be a religious poet,[55] one who crafts a rhetorically multi-faceted poem (that includes both prose and verse) expressive of religious and spiritual realities in a wide range of modes: a religious poet who is emphatically (and happily) not limited to what Muscatine narrowly defines as "the highest level that Chaucer's *sustained* achievement as a religious poet ever reaches": "pathetic religiosity … that conveys powerful feelings of tenderness and pity" exemplified most effectively by the *Prioress's Tale*, "[i]ts masterpiece" (32).

Muscatine and Lumiansky, to be sure, are not the only critics to comment on the putative "boring" prose Chaucer, and the foregoing is by no means a categorical dismissal of their valuable work, but their comments provide a useful index to a tendency, less tempting nowadays, to dismiss or denigrate one or both of these two essential components of the Canterbury poetics, the *Melibee* and the *Parson's Tale*. That this dismissive tendency is less tempting – because less persuasive – is thanks in full measure to a wide variety of helpful, insight-rich critical approaches to these challenging prose pieces, approaches that have emerged across a spectrum of philosophical and scholarly commitments. As noted and explored in Raybin and Holley's *Closure in The Canterbury Tales: The Role of the Parson's Tale*, there are numerous indicators of the real richness and depth that are visible in the scholarship of the last few decades. For example, Lee Patterson's seminal essay, "The 'Parson's Tale' and the Quitting of the

[55] The term, "religious poet", will be replaced with "Catholic poet" by the end of this chapter, for reasons to be made clear. On *spaciousness* as an interpretive category for understanding Chaucer's Catholic poetics, see McCabe's helpful commentary on the influence of Aquinas in Chesterton's reading of Chaucer.

'Canterbury Tales'" (1978) offers a still useful review of scholarship up to that point,[56] and does justice to the *Tale* as a polished exemplar of its genre, concluding that far from being "at best drab, at worst a betrayal of all that is thought to be most Chaucerian," the final offering in the story-telling contest (which Patterson accurately labels "a sustained poetic enterprise") is "a crucial and even decisive piece of evidence about the moral worth of Chaucer himself" (331, 380).

Patterson sums up his argument by proposing an analogy between the poem as a whole and the entirety of a human life, specifically the author's life. The *Canterbury Tales* "is to be measured by the standards not of literary fame but of eternal salvation," and the *Parson's Tale* "shows Chaucer already beginning to respond to these new imperatives" by following in the footsteps of other fourteenth century authors of penitential literature such as Henry, Duke of Lancaster and Sir John Clanvowe, his own contemporary and friend. Writing an extended treatise on penitence would itself, Patterson indicates, be an act of penance, and in Chaucer's case

> [t]his is a penance that is neither perfunctory, as the care with which the tale is composed suggests, nor unexpected. Rather it is a part of the fitting shape of the Christian life, hardly a hypocritical *volte-face* but an inevitable and gratifying process of change and fulfillment. "Young devil, old saint" runs one of the proverbs that express this conception, and its cynicism is tempered with a benign assurance that each man's history is concluded with a reversal that is both fulfillment and justification (380).

[56] For a more recent review of scholarship on the *Parson's Tale*, see Celia Lewis, "Framing Fiction with Death: Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and the Plague" in *New Readings in Chaucer's Poetry* (2003).

Three distinct problems emerge from this coda, in spite of its strengths, which include his emphatic refusal to posit, cynically, a perfunctory or hypocritical author.[57] On the one hand, we simply don't have adequate biographical information to support Patterson's notion that the *Parson's Tale* "begins within the fictional construct but becomes the tale to end all tales and … inevitably escapes from the narrative frame and now refers to the larger context of biography" (380). We aren't at all in the position of being able to assert that Chaucer was ever a "young devil" who repented of sin once he had "had [his] world as in [his] tyme." Indeed, the nature and trajectory of his devotional life, assuming he had such a thing, will likely remain unknown to us, and we can't infer it from the placement of the *Parson's Tale* and the *Retraction* at the terminus of the *Canterbury Tales*, even if scholarship one day yields ironclad proof that that they do, indeed, belong right there.[58] A second difficulty is the fact that the sacrament of penance was not intended to be something undertaken only at the end of a long life full of sin, as Patterson's analogy vaguely implies, but rather at regular intervals, with the standard set by the fourth Lateran council being a *minimum* of once per year. In short, the specifically sacramental nature and habitual character of the practice of penance simply doesn't appear in Patterson's summation at all. Last but not least, bluntly: where did the hell did damnation go in Patterson's final analysis of the *Parson's Tale*? To the devil, apparently! From the perspective of the Catholic orthodoxy quite plainly espoused by the sober Parson, Patterson's rhetorical gesture invoking a bland and "benign assurance that

[57] For an example of such a cynical take on the *CT* as a whole, see Scheps (1975), and in particular his summation of the argument, in which he labels both Harry Bailly and Chaucer the poet "self-serving".
[58] Regardless of the lack of perfect certainty about the textual evidence, various scholars concur in seeing this as a settled matter: the placement and artistic appropriateness of the final tale, and the Retraction following it, satisfy, among others, Wenzel (1981); Dyas (2001); Ruggiers (1979); Georgianna ("Love So Dearly Bought", 1990); Dean (1989); Hartung (1995); Whittock (1968); Wurtele (1989); Higgs (2000).

each man's history is concluded with a reversal" suggests dangerous presumption rather than genuine assurance; hence, it sits in uneasy opposition to the literary object it aims to sum up.

Like Patterson's justly noted article on the *Parson's Tale*, David Wallace's eighth chapter in *Chaucerian Polity* on the *Melibee* is an outstanding example of the good that can come of trying out a fresh, vigorous approach to a relatively neglected text. Titled "Household Rhetoric: Violence and Eloquence in the *Tale of Melibee*," this chapter insists on a deliberately re-literalized reading of the tale's allegory, yoking that literal level not only to historical context but also to the roles played by female characters in the political spheres imagined in the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. While his historicist approach makes it possible for Wallace to illuminate some possibilities for politically and sexually astute readings not only of the *Melibee*, but by various extensions, many or most of the other tales, he ends up, ironically, re-allegorizing the tale by replacing a "sentence" he doesn't like (the primarily religious sentence which D.W. Robertson insisted was a hermeneutic key to the *Tales* as a whole) with a "sentence" that he does like, because it highlights issues of gender, power, and moral authority in secular terms that fit his desire to recuperate the Melibee as deserving rather than "undeserving of the kind of sustained critical attention bestowed on a work of *literature*" (227). Wallace rightly notes, in a footnote to this passage, Derek Pearsall's sweeping and dubious claim that neither the *Melibee* nor the *Parson's Tale* constitutes "*literature* at all"

– a claim that Pearsall makes more than once without being sufficiently precise about the terms "literature" and "poetry" in Chaucer's historical context.[59]

With Patterson and Wallace we see two aspects of the same dynamic at work in Chaucer criticism; perhaps an analogy with the two sides of a coin will be helpful. The coin, so to speak, is Chaucer's Catholicism and its relevance to his poetics, and in order to give a robust, durable account of that, we would have to include the whole coin, not just one side or the other of it; in addition we would need to see both sides clearly to identify its actual value. That he *was* Catholic, most scholars would agree – or so Charles Muscatine thought; the current reiterated question, whether stated or implied, is not merely *how* Catholic was he, but more importantly, *how much* and also *how, specifically,* does his Catholicism matter to our efforts to understand his works. I am slightly reframing Muscatine's own words, which are as follows:

> The new religious Chaucer can easily be distinguished from the figure who emerges from prior discussion of Chaucer's religion; it is a matter of distinguishing between Chaucer's doctrinal position and the quality of his piety, that is, the nature, range, depth, and intensity of his religious feeling itself… The issue of his doctrinal position … is for now fairly settled, with general agreement that Chaucer was a safely orthodox Catholic in doctrine (27-28).

That the word "Catholic" appears at all in the longish original of this paragraph is remarkable, when juxtaposed with the fact of copiously present variations on the words *religion* and *religious* (including the clumsy *religiosity*, which appears four times). As

[59] See Pearsall's *The Canterbury Tales* (1985), Chapter 6, "Religious Tales", 244-293.

with *Catholic*, *Christian* appears once, whereas the *religion* variants total an even dozen. While I do not want to suggest that this evasion of precision and specificity is deliberate, I do want to underscore it, because it is germane to the two-sided coin analogy. If we ask a vague question, we generate vague answers, and we see less than we might otherwise be enabled to discern. In Wallace's case, he sees the side of the "Medieval and Catholic" coin that pictures an authoritative head, and associates that glimpse of "religion" with tyranny and the suffering imposed on those who are victims of tyranny. In his words, "the secular realm … is always subjected, in the Middle Ages, to the pervasive and definitional influence of religious discourses," and in this case it appears appropriate to suggest that Wallace's analysis quite deliberately associates Prudence's subjection to "the unstable emotions of an angry man who is and remains 'myghty and riche'" to the more general subjection of the medieval masses to a threatening, tyrannical and decidedly masculine god -- or "the deity," to use Wallace's preferred term, which hints at a mere idol (244-45). Patterson, on the other hand, sees the flipside of the coin, where no judging countenance can be found, although perhaps some words that point to an ultimate, non-human, indulgent, and vaguely personal authority might appear there. In neither case do we have a robust account of the Catholic specificity of Chaucer's artistry. As Linda Georgianna noted in "The Protestant Chaucer," "there are some hidden and … often unexamined assumptions concerning Chaucer's religion, such as his unwilling subjection to a totalitarian church and/or his preference for a rational, discreet religion over a 'credulous,' simple faith" (66). Yet if we are to gain any additional insight into the possibility that Wycliffite sympathies shape Chaucer's *Canterbury* poetics in more than trivial ways, we must be clearer about the fact that both Chaucer and Wyclif (as well

as Wyclif's followers) were steeped not in "religion" but in the *Catholic* religion. In short, pursuing "the religious Chaucer" or "the pious Chaucer" is less and less likely to be a viable aim of serious Chaucer scholarship, while ironically, it is far more apparent now than ever before that Chaucer is indeed a poet whose artistic accomplishment in the *Canterbury Tales* can most adequately be addressed by taking seriously the interpenetration of religious and artistic goals visible throughout the work. Reading the *Tales* as an expression of distinctively Catholic poetic imperatives does not absolutely require certainty on authorial intentions, about which there will always be some uncertainty.

Part 2 What Has the Maker Made? Coming to Terms with Chaucer's Art

Returning now to the question of Chaucer's pilgrim persona, who tells two stories (one interrupted and unfinished, of course), it makes sense to ponder two additional terms that are part of the hermeneutic-narrative framework found in the *General Prologue*: sentence and solaas. A typical unexamined (but reasonable) assumption about them would go like this: *sentence* corresponds to *earnest*, whereas *solaas* corresponds to *game*. Such an assumption is tempting, and for some aspects of the evidence appropriate, but oversimplified nonetheless. Misleadingly glossed "pleasure" when it first appears in *The Riverside Chaucer*, at I 798, in the midst of the Host's explication of the contest and establishment of his authority as judge, "solaas" in fact is semantically bifurcated, and it can mean "consolation, comfort; alleviation of sorrow; also, spiritual joy"; it is often found in specifically spiritual contexts such as this one, cited in the MED: "O, how

myche solace þei schulen haue whanne þei schulen be in her bodyes glorified!"[60] In like manner, *sentence* deserves closer scrutiny as well, and a more adequate gloss. Among other possibilities, it can be glossed "Doctrine, authoritative teaching; an authoritative pronouncement or teaching" and yet also "Understanding, intelligence; knowledge, wisdom."[61] A good deal of the work of interpreting the *Canterbury Tales* should hinge on these two terms, *sentence* and *solaas*, which are not opposed but might unthinkingly be perceived to be; the related but not identical terms *earnest* and *game*, which, similarly, might seem obviously opposed without always being so in fact; and the overlapping, interpenetrating activities of pilgrimage and story-telling, with both of these terms oscillating between affiliation with the concept *earnest* and the concept *game*.

In addition, the conceptual fit of *penance* with *pilgrimage* is crucial, as Linda Georgianna argues in "Love So Dearly Bought: The Terms of Redemption in *The Canterbury Tales*." According to Georgianna, "Chaucer's view of spirituality is neither as narrow nor as pure as some would have us believe," as evidenced by the poet's choice of "pilgrimage and penance as the twin frames of his tale collection" (86). Noting that these two practices "became the favorite target of reformers from Wyclif to Luther intent on purging the church of all vestiges of superstition and fraud," she goes on to argue that Chaucer's poetics of redemption, with consummate artistry, insistently negotiates a complex interplay of literal and spiritual modes of economic exchange rooted in the ancient theological insight that sinners are "bought back" by the redemptive sacrifice

[60] The MED cites the early 15th century *Orchard of Syon* for this particular quote evidencing a spiritual sense of the word. See *The Orcherd of Syon*, eds. P. Hodgson and G. M. Liegey, *EETS* 258 (1966).
[61] For this second sense of the word, the MED cites Chaucer repeatedly.

made voluntarily by Jesus, the God-man – an unequal exchange if there ever was one.[62] Her analysis leads her to a conclusion that does justice to the complexity of the work as a whole and to the role that the oft-despised *Parson's Tale* plays in the artist's grand yet humble design. Noting that Chaucer's closing prayer includes the familiar phrase describing Jesus as the one who "boghte us with the precious blood of his herte," she goes on to explain that far from being naïve,

> Chaucer is by no means blind to the abuses that such commercial language permits if not encourages. But he also suggests that men and women, by no means perfect but nonetheless redeemed, can be brought to respond at least temporarily in pilgrimage and confession to the spiritual implications of the transaction of the cross. And that response of sorrow, repentance, and spiritual love is enough, in Chaucer's view of the economy of salvation, to return Christians to the way and make possible a gift or unmerited reward so extraordinary that the Pardoner could only treat it as a phony lure for the "lewed." The Pardoner's seemingly ludicrous offer to restore sinners to innocence … is finally made good by the Parson's definition of the grace of redemption freely given to all who repent (116).

Similarly, in the tenth chapter of *Pilgrimage and Medieval English Literature 700-1500*, Dee Dyas argues that "Chaucer was not forced, nor is he forcing his audience to choose between place pilgrimage and life pilgrimage – between, as it were, Canterbury and the New Jerusalem … he offers instead a third way, which is neither world-denying nor sin-

[62] For another important work on the key terms of debt and payment as concepts which overlap in the *CT* on multiple levels, see Higgs (2000).

affirming" (173). Nuanced, perceptive, and sympathetic rather than hostile towards a Catholic poetics that weds human frailty with divine transcendence, Dyas and Georgianna highlight hope as a key characteristic of Chaucer's poetic ecclesiology: not only the hope of salvation, a hope which persists in spite of human imperfection, but also literary-critical hope for a more deeply satisfying, non-reductive account of what the maker made, the *Canterbury Tales* (Georgianna 87; Dyas 202-204).

In addition to the three pairs of key hermeneutical terms[63] given to us in the *GP*, four key players stand out as being especially important, but the logic of these four characters requires a further subdivision into pairs: Chaucer-pilgrim and the Host comprise one pair, Knight and Parson comprise another. The prominence of the two pairs is not completely balanced, however: the first pair takes *poetic* precedence over the second. In crucial ways the second pair represents a different order of business, business that takes precedence in its way over the limitations of poetic activity; they represent rulers and authorities in real life as given to us by our Maker, which includes the fallen state that necessitates rulers both civil and ecclesiastical.[64] The first pair, on the other hand, represents the earnest poetic game of *making*, in which vital verisimilitudes are supplied by the literary artist not as replacements for real life, but as deeply rational *and*

[63] To reiterate these pairs, they are as follows: Earnest/Game; Sentence/Solaas; Pilgrimage/Story-telling Contest (which shades or develops into Pilgrimage/Penance).

[64] Repugnant though it may be to modern sensibilities, hierarchical structures in Christian thought are understood to be not merely a result of the fall, but a fact of both nature and super nature, embedded in divine design *ab initio* and hence intrinsically good. Yet the seeming harshness of absolute hierarchy is tempered extravagantly by the "up so doun" salvific remediation of the primordial human revolt against authority: humanity, needing to be saved from the grievous results of presumptuously claiming to be "as gods," by means of the disempowering power-grab of eating forbidden fruit, receives salvation from a God who forsakes his own place in the cosmic hierarchy and assumes not only the general lowness of human status per se, but also the specific human lowness of being a baby, suspected bastard, despised dissident, and ultimate victim of judicial murder. To miss the poetic depth of the theological pattern is to run real risks; as David Lyle Jeffrey puts it, pithily: "Piety without poetry can be dangerous to theological truth." Theology, we should bear in mind, ought to be *beautiful*.

intellectual avenues of "sad" delight, avenues which are simultaneously divinely and humanly ordered: avenues, that is, that are ordered to and by both human and divine longings, imperatives, structures, forms, and voices. Yes, a paradox is built into the phrase *"sad" delight*, and that paradox, like the others noted in the phrases *earnest game* and *story-telling pilgrimage*,[65] will ideally remain at least peripherally in view when considering the design of the *Canterbury* poetics.

By "rational" and "intellectual" I here intend using these terms in a way suggested to me by the analysis offered in Josef Pieper's brilliant study, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*. Pieper asks,

> But what of knowledge, the mind's spiritual knowledge? Is there such a thing as a purely receptive attitude of mind in which we become aware of immaterial reality and invisible relationships? Is there such a thing as pure "intellectual contemplation" – to adopt the terminology of the schools? In antiquity the answer given was always yes; in modern philosophy, for the most part, the answer given is no (32).

As Pieper goes on to elaborate,

> [t]he Middle Ages drew a distinction between the understanding as ratio and the understanding as intellectus. Ratio is the power of discursive, logical thought, of searching and of examination, of abstraction, of definition and drawing conclusions. Intellectus, on the other hand, is the name for the understanding in

[65] If we substitute "story-telling penance" for "story-telling pilgrimage" – or allow it to follow from the first paradoxical phrase, the possibilities are suggestive. Narrating various stories which are distinctively drawn from one's own personal history of sin is a crucial step in taking prudent responsibility for one's own growth in virtue, on the Parson's penitential terms.

> so far as it is the capacity of simplex intuitus, of that simple vision to which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye (33-34).

The distinction merits attention as a key to a richer understanding of Chaucer's penitential poetics, which may elude us if we neglect *intellectus* in favor of *ratio* (something that we as moderns are all too prone to do). A respecter of this distinction, as a given of his cultural milieu, Chaucer created in the *Canterbury Tales* a multi-faceted poem that rewards thoughtful attention to which of these two modes of knowing is most suitable to an appreciation of which parts of the poem. That the two modes jointly comprise our pathway to knowledge is suggestive; as Pieper puts it, "the process of knowing is the action of the two together" (34). In addition, the association of effortless *intellectus* with superhuman, angelic powers and effortful *ratio* with the more typically human sphere of work (34-35) points to yet another unity-in-opposition, another paradox. That Wyclif may have lacked an adequate appreciation of the ratio/intellectus distinction is hinted at in Beryl's Smalley's penetrating analysis of his erroneous view of time and eternity, which in her view is the taproot of both his fall into heresy and his failure to flourish as a scholar, in the latter portion of his vocational life. In "John Wyclif's Dilemma," she remarks that "[t]here was one marked contrast between fourteenth-century schoolmen and fourth-century philosophers: the schoolmen as such had as little concern with poetry as they had with mysticism" (74-75).

Poetry, per se, is never merely "rational," and Chaucer's gift for it, as against Wyclif's likely dearth of talent for perceiving its connection to theology, may indeed mean just what various scholars have intuited in various ways. For example, returning

again to William Kamoski's eloquent statement of this intuition, it makes sense to consider what he does and does not get quite right:

> the aesthetic implications of a Wycliffite Chaucer are discouraging in their potential for a reductive criticism written to a specific theological agenda. Nor does Wyclif's polemical voice ring with rhetorical artistry. By temperament a proto-Puritan, Wyclif held an aversion to the literary enterprise, much like Chaucer's Parson who would eschew the aesthetics of fiction for the "ascetics" of penitential prose. Small wonder that Chaucerians have hesitated to examine their poet's affinities to the theologian who would have thought the Retraction the best part of the Canterbury Tales (5-6).

Nonetheless, questions still need answering: does the inclusion of penitential prose in Chaucer's great poem *really* cancel out the "aesthetics of fiction"? Or is it rather the case that his poetics is capacious enough (and Catholic enough?) to include penance as part of a distinctly joyous life of the poetic imagination? Is it really the case that the Parson "would eschew the aesthetics of fiction"? Or is it rather the case that he would "eschew" the aestheticization of sin, while leaving open the possibility (as the Retraction does) that the making of literary art works can be submitted to divine guidance without utterly destroying art? Briefly, can earnest and game be reconciled in a persuasive, valid reading of Chaucer's poetic ecclesiology? I tend to think so.

To return to a consideration of those four key *General Prologue* players, it's clear that Chaucer the pilgrim and the Harry Bailly the Host are primarily responsible for the obvious outward features of the poetic design, a design which highlights verbal and

conceptual paradox, and which culminates in a "tale" whose "teller" paradoxically wins the contest by *appearing* to refuse participation in it.[66] With these things in mind, it is plausible to suggest that although the Host and Chaucer the pilgrim jointly "trump" both Knight and Parson as poets, the Parson nonetheless wins the story-telling contest because what he tells is *not* a "story" in the sense of a frail or feeble fiction, only imperfectly mirroring or gesturing towards truth, and his tale both gently invites (in the Middle English senses of "gentle") and sternly admonishes the pilgrims to tell true tales about themselves, that they might enter into durable bliss rather than transient, and perilous, fancies.[67] The irony of the contest result makes sense within the poetic logic of paradox, which is also a theological reality underpinning Christian doctrine, captured persistently in the various pairings of seemingly opposed terms such as natural and supernatural, God and man, rational animal, pregnant virgin, and so on. The sheer ontological goodness of human being, which to the outward, unredeemed, or fleshly eye seems hopelessly mired in mortality and frailty and corrupted by the deviousness of sin, remains the bedrock of human existence, and this insight is central to the *Canterbury* poetics.[68] That this insight

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[66] An underlying joke, suggesting that the laughter is directed at many or even all of us, is that the real winner of the "story-telling contest" is Geoffrey Chaucer himself, but we won't be able to see that if we try to strip out his prose works (either literally or figuratively) from the entire compilation. His story about pilgrimage, and about one specific fictive pilgrimage, is not complete without them, and we can't judge "the contest" correctly if we devalue them as elements of his full poetic project. We needn't see this in cynical terms as did Scheps (1975); Chaucer's idea of how he himself might "win" could be seen more generously, and as more generous, as an artist giving away the prize of his poem, which shares his delight in the expansive possibilities of a Catholic poetics.

[67] Note, however, an excellent recent study of the *Parson's Tale* that argues the tale is exemplary not just for pious, reverent sentence, and not just for elevated spiritual solas, but also for a more down-to-earth solas: "What's *Myrie* about the Prose of the Parson's Tale?" by Arvind Thomas (2012), which argues for the presence of a distinctively rhetoric-generated pleasure of being an engaged listener as the Parson mingles and creatively combines different prose styles or genres.

[68] Both Augustine and Aquinas insist that evil is metaphysically a mere parasite on the durable ontological goodness of divinely-created reality, which includes the human race. See, for example, Book 12 of *The City of God* and Pt. 1, Q. 5, Art. 3, of the *Summa Theologica*.

may not be central to the reformist agendas of Wycliffism is a possibility to be explored subsequently.

Turning now to the *Melibee*, I will briefly consider how it anticipates and prepares for the *Parson's Tale*, and then suggest a possible connection of both tales to Wyclif that is, to the best of my knowledge, unexplored in the scholarly literature that seeks to elucidate Chaucer's sympathy (or lack thereof) for Wyclif. Thomist scholar Josef Pieper, whose treatises on the four cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues are lucid and compelling, and in no meaningful sense dated, remarks as follows in his Preface to *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, an extended meditation on the philosophy of Christian virtue expounded by Thomas Aquinas. According to Pieper,

> the classic origins of the doctrine of virtue later made Christian critics suspicious of it. They warily regarded it as too philosophical and not Scriptural enough. Thus, they preferred to talk about commandments and duties rather than about virtues. To define the obligations of man is certainly a legitimate, even estimable, and no doubt necessary undertaking. With a doctrine of commandments or duties, however, there is always the danger of arbitrarily drawing up a list of requirements and losing sight of the human person who "ought" to do this or that (xii).

He goes on to note that rather than being primarily expressed through "regimentation and restriction," it is a "doctrine of obligation" that "aim[s] to clear a trail, to open a way," and that in turn it "can enable man to attain the furthest potentialities of his nature" (xii). Hence, the way opened by virtue, while it is a laborious path that isn't for those who want

shortcuts or an easy way through, is the way to full human flourishing; moreover, I would add that it is, at its heart, a doctrine of empowerment, as seen in the etymology of the word virtue itself.

Pieper's first rhetorical move in the treatise itself is to note the nearly complete incapacity of moderns, including modern Christians, to grasp the deep significance of the Thomistic understanding of prudence, the first cardinal virtue, long known as "the mold and 'mother' of all the other cardinal virtues, of justice, fortitude, and temperance" (3). The general lack of understanding underscored here by Pieper, I believe, relates directly to those instances of scholarly inability to see the value of the *Melibee* and the character Prudence, imagined by Chaucer, in line with his source, as a strikingly *motherly* wife.[69] As the mother of all virtue, prudence/Prudence is precisely what Melibee needs in order to respond to enemy attack without sinning – and avoidance of sin is absolutely central to the counsel Prudence offers her husband. See, for example, the first of two turning points where Melibee, having tested Prudence, announces that he is ready to follow her counsel:

> "Now, sire," quod dame Prudence, "and syn ye vouche sauf to been governed by my conseil, I wol enforme yow how ye shul governe yourself in chesynge of youre conseillours. / Ye shul first in alle youre werkes mekely biseken to the heighe God that he wol be youre conseillour; / and shapeth yow to swich entente that he yeve yow conseil and confort, as taughte Thobie his sone: / 'At alle tymes thou shalt blesse God, and preye hym to dresse thy weyes, and that alle thy conseils been in hym for everemore" (VII 1114-17).

[69] Motherly, that is, towards Melibee, bringing to mind the old fashioned idiom of men calling their wives "Mother". Her calm attitude towards the wounding of Sophia, their daughter, would be chilling if we were truly meant to take the story literally, *pace* Wallace. In like manner Griselda's response to losing her children only makes sense if we read the tale allegorically, or more to the point, anagogically.

Here, in an intriguing echo of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, Prudence accepts a kind of "maistrie" over her husband,[70] but again, the logic of the narrative requires respect for the allegorical grounding in the hierarchical ordering of persons as well as virtues: prudence, the prime virtue without which, according to Pieper (reading Aquinas), no other virtues can exist ("No moral virtue is possible without prudence," p. 32) enables a right relationship between creature and Creator, directing the human soul towards that which is good by empowering him to see and think clearly about things as they are. As Pieper puts it, "[v]irtue is a 'perfected ability' of man as a spiritual person; and justice, fortitude, and temperance, as 'abilities' of the whole man, achieve their 'perfection' only when they are founded upon prudence, that is to say the perfected ability to make right decisions" (6).

Melibee doesn't instantly become perfected in virtue at a word from his wife Prudence; rather, his movement towards perfection is characterized by cognitive wrestling, blunders, and some uncertainty as to the outcome – not quite narrative suspense exactly, but maybe not too far off. From the standpoint of narrative dynamics, the most suspenseful and startling moment, arguably, is the one close to the end of the tale, when Melibee appears to abruptly overturn all the patient counsel of Prudence and to nullify his own acquiescence to her wisdom, when he announces, tersely, that he will treat his enemies as follows: "I thynke and purpose me fully / to desherite hem of al that evere they han and for to putte hem in exil for evere" (1834-35). This sudden swerve into ruthlessness, after all his seeming docility – his apparent teachability in the good way of

[70] We see another delightful echo (yes, mere rhetorical solas in the Melibee, of all places!) of the Wife's discourse, when at line 1087, after citing Solomon's warnings about "wikked wyves" and women that are "riotous", she firmly asserts: "sire, by youre leve, that am nat I". As she continues with proof of this ("for ye han ful ofte assayed my grete silence and my greet pacience, and eek how wel that I kan hyde and hele thynges that men oghte secreely to hyde"), there's an echo not only of Alison of Bath, but also of Griselda.

the first cardinal virtue – seems wildly out of harmony with the rest of the narrative flow. In his thought-provoking analysis of the discursive learning processes in which reader and Melibee are simultaneously taught to be prudent, Stephen Moore concludes by noting that ultimately,

> the educations of Melibee and the reader are not parallel. Since the real point of the text is not that Melibee should learn, but that the reader should, Melibee himself remains free to be deployed in any way that will further that end. His suggestion of a harsh sentence may not make sense from the standpoint of his delivering a convincing characterization—wouldn't anyone have learned his lesson by now?—but this is not where Chaucer's interest lies (97).

Moore is right to suggest that ordinary goals of narrative such as "convincing characterization" are not germane to Chaucer's purposes, and right also to see that the "recursive narrative structure helps to develop the sensitivities required to find further applications for the sentential wisdom delivered and enacted by Prudence and Melibee" (97). Yet there's a thinness to this account, that can be repaired with reference to Pieper (again, on Aquinas's authority). As Pieper puts it, we must be careful to allow Aquinas's words full weight, because "[w]e incline all too quickly to misunderstand" them. Where Aquinas notes that prudence is "reason perfected in the cognition of truth," Pieper clarifies by noting that

> "[r]eason" means to him nothing other than 'regard for and openness to reality," and "acceptance of reality." And "truth" is to him nothing other than the unveiling and revelation of reality, of both natural and supernatural reality.

> Reason "perfected in the cognition of truth" is therefore the receptivity of the human spirit, to which the revelation of reality, both natural and supernatural reality, has given substance" (9).

Hence, on these terms, when we note Prudence's lengthy and vigorous response to his foolhardy plan, which she condemns as both a "crueel sentence and muchel agayn resoun," her primary aim is to plead with Melibee to "overcome youre herte" and to "lat mercy been in youre herte, / to th'effect and entente that God Almighty have mercy on yow in his last juggement. / For Seint Jame seith in his Epistle: 'Juggement withouten mercy shal be doon to hym that hath no mercy of another wight'" (1836, 1857, 1867-69).

The relevance of the foregoing to the *Parson's Tale*, and the way it might be said to function as metaphorical arrow (like a pointing hand in a manuscript margin) directing the attentive reader to the journey's end, is clear enough and needs no belaboring; the active pursuit of virtue, prudence first and foremost, requires this humble, penitential attitude of increasing perfection in "cognition of truth" and receptivity to full revelation of natural and supernatural reality, which most poignantly includes the sweet sternness of the divine mandate to emulate divine mercy, which is freely given to the merciful, all of whom know full well that they require mercy themselves. At this point, however, it's important to note that ire, or wrath in its sinful human manifestation, is a prominent feature of Melibee's temptation, perhaps even his besetting sin, and ire is perhaps preeminently the sin that inclines one to be merciless. The narrative is structured in such a way that he appears, at times, to be justly angry, but Prudence repeatedly undercuts his self-justifying false reasoning, pointing him instead to the perfect reasoning of prudence itself. Wyclif, I'd like to speculate, could well have been in Chaucer's mind when he

crafted his *Melibee*; as I.C. Levy calls him in his recent book *Holy Scripture and the Quest for Authority at the End of the Middle Ages*, Wyclif was notably "The Indignant Master," hence the title of the chapter in Levy's book that is dedicated to Wyclif's intense pursuit of scholarly, doctrinal, and devotional purity, at the cost of patient and humble submission to church authority, possibly even to the degree that he was "oute of al charitee" in a deep, persistent, and perilous way. The force of the word "indignation" shades over readily into the deadly sin of ire, and the records of his last years suggest that he may never have repented of the bitterness he harbored towards those whom he considered not only his personal enemies but also enemies of God and the church, so the choice of chapter title, and moniker for Wyclif, is especially interesting coming from Levy, who is one of Wyclif's more patient and charitable readers. Passages such as the following from the *Melibee* may have been, for Chaucer, and for his readers, all too easy to apply, on reflection, to John Wyclif, whose anger at the official condemnation of his teachings was well-known:

> [Y]e knowen wel that … it is a woodnesse a man to stryve with a strenger or a moore mighty man than he is himself … And if so bifalle or happe that a man of gretter myght and strengthe than thou art do thee grevaunce, / studie and bisye thee rather to stille the same grevaunce than for to venge thee (VII 1482-86).
>
> First and foreward, if ye wole considere the defautes that been in youre owene persone, / for which defautes God hath suffred yow to have this tribulacioun, as I have seyd yow heer-biforn. / For … we oghte paciently taken the tribulaciouns that comen to us, whan we thynken and consideren that we han disserved to have hem (VII 1494-96).

Note that this speculative possibility would not rule out, on Chaucer's part, a sense of mercy and empathy towards Wyclif; on the contrary, it might make it more likely. There are few more pitiable spectacles that a friend or acquaintance who is self-tortured in the grip of relentless, persistent bitterness, which they can't or won't stop feeding.[71]

The Parson's Mirror vs. the Indignant Master's Magnifying Glass

In the final analysis, the notion, entertained in the short or long term of a scholar's career, that Chaucer's Parson was a Wycliffite, fares poorly if we set Wyclif's own commentary on the sacrament of penance, from his *Trialogus*, against Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*.[72] As in the ninth conclusion of the Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards, in the *Trialogus* Phronesis expresses a relentless unwillingness to give an inch of ground to "the enemy," imagined as all bad rather than a mixed bag of imperfectly formed virtues – imagined, indeed, as enemy and not friend, much less brother. For the sake of thoroughness and consistency, I'll quote that ninth conclusion in full, as I did in Chapter 1 with the third conclusion and in Chapter 2 with the eleventh:

> Þe ix. Conclusion þat holdith þe puple lowe is, þat þe articles of confession þat is sayd necessary to saluaciun of man, with a feynid power of absoluciun enhaunsith

[71] That Chaucer's social and professional circles intersected with Wyclif's is fairly common knowledge, and speculation abounds on how to use that information to enrich a historicist reading of the *CT*. Kerby-Fulton (2006) and Fletcher (2003), for example, make a point of speculating on Chaucer's possible strategies for dealing prudently and kindly with friends who likely were attracted to the increasingly dangerous movement. Kerby-Fulton offers a subtle analysis (Chapter 9) suggesting, among other things, that Chaucer may have been motivated to revise the *CT* by sensitivity towards Lollard-leaning friends and acquaintances who were "audience members he cared about" (356), and Fletcher concludes his essay by raising a figurative "ghostly scenario … of an historical Chaucer at the end of his life, watching his world convulse, keeping his head down, suing for favor, reinventing himself in a realignment of loyalties, and doing so, given the momentary unorthodoxies that *The Canterbury Tales* might be seen to underwrite, with a greater cause for alarm than we have customarily fancied."

[72] See McCormack (2007) for a recent example of an overt and less than successful book-length attempt to make this case.

> prestis pride, and ȝeuith hem oportunitie of priui calling other þan we wele now say. For lordis and ladys ben arestid for fere of here confessouris, þat þei dur nout seyn a treuthe, and in time of confession is þe beste time of wowing and of priue continuance of dedli synne. Þei seyn þat he ben commissriis of God to deme of euery synne, to foulin and to clensin qwom so þei lyke. Þei seyn þat he han þe keys of heuene and of helle, þei mown cursyn and blissin, byndin and unbyndin at here owne wil, in so miche þat for busschel of qwete or xii.d. be ȝere he welen selle þe blisse of heuene be charter of clause of warranties, enselid with þe comown sel. Þis conclusion is so seen in use þat it nedith non other prof.
>
> Correlarium: þe pope of Rome þat feynith him hey tresor of holi chirche, hauande þe worthi jewel of Crystis passion in his kepyng, with þe dissertis of alle halwen of heuene, be qwiche he ȝeuid þe feynid pardoun a pena et a culpa. He is a tresourer most banisschid out charite, seyn he may deliueren þe presoneris þat ben in pyne at his owne wil, and make himself so þat he schal neuere come þere. Here may euery trewe Cristene man wel se þat þer is michil priuy falsnesse hid in our chirche (Cronin 301).

In a weird ecclesiological synecdoche, corruption in the church is so overwhelming that in fact the part of the church that is corrupt is not the part but the whole; they are in sum a band of over-privileged mouthpieces of "falsnesse" who make claims ("Þei seyn … Þei seyn") about sacerdotal and sacramental powers and functions that, although quite orthodox, are made to seem suspect simply because they are sacerdotal. There is no room in this conclusion, as is also the case in the other eleven, for the possibility that the reformers are mistaken, that their vision might be clouded or contaminated in any way, or

that their accusations might actually be libel. There's no room, likewise, for the possibility that many (or merely any) priests found hearing confession deeply humbling (rather than an enhancement to pride) or that the sacramental service they rendered to some of the faithful resulted in gratitude, healing, and growth in virtue rather than "fere." The unwillingness to frame the issue of confession and absolution in a more uncertain, tentative, and humble way, like the unwillingness to frame any of the conclusions in a more uncertain and humble way, acknowledging not just corruption but also sincere goodness, however frail and fumbling, yields a call to reformation that is dense and bristling with polemical hostility, and notably uncharitable in its overall thrust.

In Book IV of Wyclif's *Trialogus*, similarly, there is no alternative to a seemingly preordained and merciless verdict of corruption, and we see this immediately in how Alithia frames her question about penance at IV. 23, "Penance," in which she speaks of the "harmful rivals" to real penance, and again in a more forceful manner at IV.24, "The Signs of True Contrition," when she asks "what sign we can take for true contrition or the destruction of sin" given that Phronesis has "pointedly, albeit darkly, laid bare the scheming of antichrist" (262-63). Then, remarkably, she asks a question that is painfully threadbare, being an obvious rhetorical ploy the purpose of which is to open the subject in a way most calculated to permit the heaping on of suspicious abuse: "Do these Caesarian and novel sects sin, who turn away from the rules of Christ and lovingly observe the new, invented rules, or are they truly penitent while they observe them with alacrity and zeal?" (263). The transparently embedded accusations crop up in the question itself, all the better to serve Wyclif's agenda of tearing down, rather than edifying or building up. Indeed, here as so often in Wyclif's polemics on real or

perceived corruption, his rhetorical method is to magnify whatever wickedness he (thinks he) sees. The two passages contain flashes of sober good sense, for example in the emphasis on the viator's need for a holy life, but placed in a context that entirely dismisses the church teaching regarding absolution. The words ring with cynicism, in multiple ways, and again, a striking lack of any tenderness or kindness of the sort that humility – an awareness of one's own frailties – will tend to generate. So the church, in teaching the sacramental, ordered, step-by-step remedy for sin via confession and absolution, is engaging in "a Lucifer-like presumption for men baselessly to cook up the idea that this or that imposition of hands upon the head absolves one from sin" (263). The barrenness and lovelessness of this dialogue contrast profoundly with the loving fruitfulness of the dialogue between Prudence and Melibee, which involves a guided wrestling process that leads to real and blessed change in Melibee.

In the *Parson's Tale*, likewise, exhaustively detailed and expert guidance on penance is directed towards the end of transforming the hearer, who is also a student or learner, rather than towards the end of equipping someone to be suspicious towards all the clergy, while being poorly equipped to notice and resist their own sins. Both the *Parson's Tale* and the *Melibee* end on a note of hopefulness, joy, and beauty, whereas the sourness of Wyclif's rhetoric, here and elsewhere in his comments on the sacramental practice of the church, seems calculated, however unconsciously or unintentionally, to strip away all prospects of finding hope, joy, healing or beauty in the sacraments, or from any activity of the ordained priesthood, for that matter, with the major exception of preaching – provided the preacher measures up to Wycliffite standards. The systematic thoroughness of the penitential treatise (and/or meditation, as Bestul has argued, to good

and insightful effect, as Wenzel notes on p. 3 of "The Parson's Tale in Current Literary Studies") lends itself to hope in that it reveals not just sin but remedies, not just the shame, misery, and suffering of the dark and corrupt, but also the joy of "making a clean breast of things." The heuristic scheme of the *Parson's Tale* is instructive, in light of Pieper's helpful comments from the Preface to his treatise on *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, where, again, he notes that the doctrine of virtues meets the need to accommodate human frailty. Indeed, elsewhere in his comments on prudence, he quotes Aquinas as saying "[n]o man is altogether self-sufficient in matters of prudence," which leads to clarification on a crucial difference between *docilitas* and "the simple-minded zealousness of the 'good pupil'." *Docilitas*, he asserts,

> is the kind of open-mindedness which recognizes the true variety of things and situations to be experienced and does not cage itself in any presumption of deceptive knowledge. What is meant is simply the ability to take advice, sprung not from any vague "modesty," but simply from the desire for real understanding (which, however, necessarily includes genuine humility). A closed mind and know-it-allness are fundamentally forms of resistance to the truth of real things; both reveal the incapacity of the subject to practice that silence which is the absolute prerequisite to all perception of reality (16).

Wyclif's notable lack of charity, prudence and mercy, are highlighted by placing them against the background of Pieper's explication of Aquinas. As Pieper goes on to explain, in the final section of the treatise on prudence, namely "Prudence and Charity," being perfected in the virtues is never an easy task, so that expectation of quick transformation of a human soul is foolish indeed. As he puts it,

> The accord of the natural order with the new life of friendship with God must not be construed in the sense that it is immediately "given" or realizable in smooth and "harmonious" development. We do, to be sure, incline to think in terms of such harmonies from long habit. But the writings of the great friends of God make plain, on almost every page, that the actual life of the Christian is ruled by a different kind of structural law; that life on earth, which has "not yet" attained the peace of concord, the concrete combination of the natural and the supernatural, is subjected to all sorts of liabilities to contradiction and disharmony (36).

Similarly, with a homely pastoral good sense, the Parson notes that in spite of the phenomenon of phony repentance, which he acknowledges without so much as a trace of the venom of Wyclif's rhetoric, there is hope:

> For, as seith Seint Ysidre, "He is a japere and a gabbere and no verray repentant that eftsoone doth thyng for which hym oghte repente." / Wepynge, and nat for to stynte to do synne, may nat avayle. / But nathelees, men shal hope that every tyme that man falleth, be it never so ofte, that he may arise thurgh Penitence, if he have grace; but certainly it is greet doute" (X 89-91).

The interplay of hope and doubt in this passage is strikingly unpretentious, straightforward, and honest:

> For as seith Seint Gregorie, "Unnethe ariseth he out of his synne, that is charged with the charge of yvel usage." / And therfor repentant folk, that stynte for to synne and forlete synne er that synne forlete hem, hooly chirche holdeth hem siker of hire savacioun. / And he that synneth and verraily repenteth hym in his

> laste, hooly chirche yet hopeth his savacioun, by the grete mercy of oure Lord Jesu Crist, for his repentance; but taak the siker wey (X 92-94).

The *Parson's Tale* is simultaneously deeply practical, coming to grips with the natural realm in an unhurried, systematic way, and deeply supernatural; it is oriented toward providing clear, detailed, concrete, and eminently practical answers to vexing questions about the nature of sin and how to combat it in this life, yet it points in real and persistent hope towards the resolution of all the difficulties and arduous obstacles that litter the viator's way.

Chesterton notes that Chaucer's pleasure in writing the *Parson's Tale* is evident and unsurprising, if we look at the man and his context aright. "Nobody," he asserts, "understands the nature of man, the nature of medieval man, or above all the nature of the medieval man Geoffrey Chaucer, who imagines that this sort of long explanation is necessarily a bore" (244). While he acknowledges that *readers* might find it boring, it wouldn't have been for Chaucer to write it: "All healthy and vigorous minds have great pleasure in explaining anything; and especially in explaining a system." Medieval systems present a wide field of opportunities for pleasurable explication, "ranging from the gravest to the most trivial matters, from hagiology to heraldry, from the rules of faith to the rules of falconry, from the calculation of the planets to the language of colors." While for "the modern mind" this can be "complicated and bewildering," for someone like Chaucer it would have been thoroughly enjoyable, given his "huge appetite for theological and ethical explanations," as evidenced throughout the *Tales* in multiple ways. Assuming Chesterton is accurate in this characterization of Chaucer, it appears likely that for the author at any rate, producing the *Parson's Tale* as the intended final

tale in the “greet mateere” of the *Canterbury Tales* involved considerable “solas,” of various kinds, and not merely a load of “sentence,” much less a dead weight of “sentence.”

On the contrary, *The Parson’s Tale* is lively indeed, and points towards a conclusion that Chaucer’s poetic ecclesiology, in the final analysis, is above all centered on mercy, the preeminent “fruit worthy of repentance,” such that all posturing, accusations, power grabs and obsessions over power grabs, and hermeneutics of suspicion towards other tale-tellers, with whom one goes on pilgrimage, are disqualified altogether at the cosmic level. *The Parson’s Tale*, as a penitential treatise that is firmly oriented towards remedying sin, has a prudential character in that it looks in even greater detail at the mechanisms of sin and how to “handle” it by turning away to the virtues which oppose sin, most especially prudence, which sees things as they truly are. The vantage point is one that encompasses all the estates of the community of pilgrims, who are called to turn away from contemplating the folly and wickedness of a neighbor, to lamenting and seeking mercy for their own failings, of whatever sort. That this reading won’t appeal universally is no surprise, but it’s unlikely that Chaucer was being anything other than earnest when he decisively displaced the Topas with the Melibee, and when he patiently and cheerfully crafted the *Parson’s Tale*.

Unlike the other-directed magnifying glass of Wycliffite anti-clerical rhetoric, he *Parson’s Tale* functions as a rhetorical mirror for the reader to perform preparatory self-examination prior to confession. Given Wycliffite contempt for the sacrament of penance, and in addition his tendency to revert to somewhat abstract or academic questions rather than strictly pastoral ones, it’s no wonder that Book III of Wyclif’s

Trialogus, "Virtue and Vice," takes an inconsistently pastoral stance on the topic in comparison to the tightly focused, orderly, and consistently pastoral approach in the Parson's Tale. There's a single-mindedness and transparency in the *Parson's Tale* that is by no means matched in the *Trialogus*, and for the most part the Parson calls no attention to distinctions between clergy and laity in his exposition of the vices that imperil all viators, and the remedies that work for all, regardless of role, office, or education. In the *Trialogus*, on the other hand, Phronesis veers into attacks on his pet ecclesiastical peeves with dismaying regularity.

In section III.5 of Book III, for example, we see an especially vivid example of such a vehement attack, in this case a "twofer" in which Wyclif opts to attack not only the clergy but also the schoolmen – hence soiling his own nest, so to speak, without, apparently, even noticing. Titled "The Distinction Between Mortal and Venial Sin," the section starts off with Alithia taking a jab at "the schoolmen, who desire to evade through sophistical arguments, and to best others in debate for empty notoriety" and then continues with Phronesis dismissing the distinction (which the Parson, in stark contrast, helpfully elucidates in X 358-370) as "not founded in Holy Scripture" and also as sourced "in the speech of the common and of the prelates, who know better how to extort money for sin than to cleanse from blame" (124). Perhaps worse still, however, is the chilling passage that closes subsection III.6 in a way that appears to foreclose the possibility of *any* human understanding of God. Having rejected the mortal/venial distinction, which the Parson's tale makes lucid and pastorally useful, he now emphasizes his favorite distinction, the mysterious foreknown-predestinate distinction, which he summarizes by asserting that "in this affair it is right to recall how no man can understand the pleasure or

hatred of God" (129). On that note, suffice it to say that this expresses the stark (and indeed dark, in two senses) divide between the Parson's labor of love in explaining the logic of how and why to please God and seek healing and reconciliation with him, on the one hand, and Wyclif's bizarre, troubling, and perhaps unconscious implication that there's no point in trying to find out how to please Him, because the divine will in matters of soteriology is inscrutable.[73]

In *The Premature Reformation,* Anne Hudson addresses one of the salient objections to the notion of a Wycliffite Parson in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* namely the issue of Wycliffite skepticism about pilgrimage. Using the moment when the Host "smelle[s] a Lollere in the wynd" as a starting point, she argues "[t]hat the Host's nose … misled him" because "the Parson would not have joined the Canterbury pilgrimage if he had been a Lollard," a seemingly obvious point, given the Wycliffite critique of pilgrimages as a form of false piety. Yet Hudson goes on to question, rightly, the pat conclusion that "the Parson is without doubt no paid-up member of the Lollard party," remarking that "[s]uch a conclusion seems reductive and misleading" (390-91). Although she is right to test such a seemingly too pat, too reductive conclusion, that conclusion, in the final analysis, is warranted. Far from harmonizing with Wycliffism and the often tortured reformist thinking that characterized the lead heretic's savage and inadequately warranted critique of the church, Chaucer's Parson seems to be not only a sincere participant in a dual-meaning pilgrimage (place- and life-pilgrimage, to borrow Dee Dyas's terms) but also a gifted helper of those – like all of us – who stumble by the way and need some help getting out of the mire.

[73] On this "new theological tendency, traditionally called voluntarism," and its implications for the shaping and outworking of modernity, see Hart, Chapters16 and 17, and especially pp. 219-228.

Conclusion

The Crossroads, Looking Back, & the Way Ahead

In "Chaucer's Parson's Tale, 'Every Tales Strengthe'," Siegfried Wenzel uses the old metaphor of ugly duckling and graceful swan to comment on the critical shift, already under way in the early 1980's when he published this article, towards taking the *Parson's Tale* seriously, not merely because it is serious (and, indeed, *in spite* of its seriousness), but because it completes a beautiful design in a way that makes deep artistic sense. That Chaucer's art is creatively moored to a scale and system of values that modern or post-modern (or post-human?) readers will continue to resist, goes without saying. That needn't stop scholars who are so inclined from pursuing a more complete sense of the "ugly beauty" of the Canterbury poetic ecclesiology and the specifically, concretely, and objectively Catholic -- not vaguely, generally, amorphously or subjectively "religious" – foundations on which that poetics was primarily built. As I noted briefly in the introduction to this dissertation, one of the major sources of critical resistance to the idea of a Catholic Chaucer is simply the perceived ugliness of Catholic doctrine, and there's no great surprise in this. Another source of resistance, however, stems not so much from a fully conscious repugnance and/or derisive dismissal of the "foolishness" of Catholic faith, but rather from inadequate grounding in (or inadequate attention to) medieval ideas of beauty as related to the astonishing promise of an ultimate *theosis*, not as a wild deviation from the norm of divine creation, but rather as its fulfillment. With *theosis* as

the metaphysical and cosmic endgame, a robustly Catholic poetics can afford to take risks and try out experiments such as the things Chaucer attempted in his *Canterbury Tales*.

As Wenzel remarks, "I submit that the change of guide which forms such an important step in the *Divine Comedy* and in the *Anticlaudianus* is consciously imitated in the Parson's Prologue," and although he then goes on to distinguish carefully between Chaucer's use of the guide-change topos and those found in his models, Wenzel's larger point stands: "an exalted view of the function intended for the *Parson's Tale*" is entirely appropriate, supported by the evidence, and ultimately compelling. Nonetheless Wenzel sees an apparent disjunction between that exalted function and a form that, in his view, is a mismatch for the exaltation of purpose in the artist's complete design. Yet I can't help but wonder whether we may be missing some perspective on the *Parson's Tale* that could resolve this dilemma expressed by one of the outstanding experts on the tale. In "Poets, Preachers, and the Plight of Literary Critics," Wenzel dryly relates a seriously funny history of gross misinterpretation, in which a preacher's sermon notes became part of an important collection of ostensible poems: "How Christ Shall Come" in Carleton Brown's *Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century* – an inclusion which led to a string of innocently inept readings by some very smart scholars. Wenzel elaborates on the significance of this:

> Though the discovered context of "How Christ Shall Come" makes further discussion of this text as a lyrical poem unlikely, it yet serves to illustrate that critical evaluations based on the poet's putative attitude and emotional state … or on an impressionistic discovery of three different voices have missed the mark widely. Similarly, a commentary that shows only that a poem's images are

> conventional is insufficient; to learn, for instance, that the "riche chapman" has its origin in Scripture, and to be offered analogues from the liturgy, Wycliffite writings, and Middle English devotional texts is interesting but unhelpful in evaluating the literary merit of a text. (350-51; footnotes from original omitted)

What then, on Wenzel's view, is needed? The short case history of this misidentified text "dramatizes neatly the not very new insight that evaluative analysis of medieval lyrics must be primarily concerned, not with thought or thought structure, but with language" (351). He closes with an illuminating quote from W.H. Auden: "'Don't overestimate the thought of any poet. Most of that he borrows from others'" (351). What, I wonder, would happen if more scholars took the concrete verbal textures of the *Parson's Tale* into deeper, more fine-grained consideration, with the primary goal of elucidating *how* it functions in the Canterbury poeisis – rather than as a possible proof text to establish evidence for or against heretical leanings in the poet?[74] That requires actually reading and re-reading (and re-reading) it, something all too many Chaucer scholars have been reluctant to do.

Can Chaucer's poetics of mercy and hope, laced and enlivened with paradox, grittily textured with a "bold … incorporation of sin into its figurative body" (Watson 112), be reconciled with Wyclif's ecclesiology of suspicion, outrage, accusation, and condemnation? Not likely, nor is it likely that a dogmatically "secular" Chaucer can be completely reconciled with the full scope of Chaucer's work, as we increasingly understand it. William Lynch, in *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination*, presents an argument that sheds light on why the answer is "not likely" in

[74] See, for example, Karen Winstead's article "The Parson's Tale and the Contours of Orthodoxy" (2009).

both of these instances. According to Lynch, the finite and the definite are characteristics of a Christocentric literary imagination, which simultaneously has – and keeps -- its feet on the ground while gazing at stars, so to speak. As he puts it, "even the symbol of Apollo," ordinarily paired with Dionysus, is "a kind of infinite dream over against Christ who was full of definiteness and actuality – and was on that account rejected by every gnostic system since, even up to now." This means that Christ, unexpectedly, betokens the finite (and not merely the infinite, although he does that too), and then as well he betokens the definite, in that Christ "stand[s] for the completely definite, for the Man who, in taking on our human nature (as the artist must) took on every inch of it (save sin) in all its density, and Who obviously did not march too quickly or too glibly to beauty, the infinite, the dream." Furthermore, Lynch's argument pertains to the work of artists (of whatsoever kind, no doubt, but Lynch's topic is imaginative literature) in that Christ is "the model and source of that energy and courage we again need to enter the finite as the only creative and generative source of beauty" (xii).

Chaucer kindly embraces human frailty, knowing full well that he is of the same "kinde" himself, yet without endorsing sin, and in that respect, following Lynch's logic, he is indeed a Christocentric artist. Wyclif, on the other hand, was too eager for an already perfect, pristine church to be able to love the one he was actually part of. He had expectations the very ordinary, definite, and finite creatures and institutions around him could never meet, and he failed, as best I can tell, to unite charity and prudence in the "felicitous collaboration" which, according to Pieper, following Aquinas, is taproot of "the highest and most fruitful achievements of Christian life" (37). Chaucer, I think it's safe to say, was both charitable and prudent, seeing and loving all at once, and his works

(a term I prefer, on the whole, to the chillier, more technical, and more disembodied "texts") are good evidence that his poetic ecclesiology was oriented above all to the expression of hope, mercy and creativity "on the wey" and "in the middle." That his ecclesiology is marked by un-anxious orthodoxy will not be persuasive to all, but the slow, steady work being done towards recovering the plausibility of the *Parson's Tale* as a crucial, passionate, non-arbitrary, and artistically competent ending of the Tales tends on the whole to support the additional core characteristic of Chaucer's poetic ecclesiology: penitence. Poetics, penance, sentence, solaas, earnest, game: they are quite merrily reconciled,[75] and perhaps the interpretive shift I'm suggesting for further exploration – the displacement of Wyclif by Aquinas in the priority lists of Chaucer scholars – will open up the enigma of the "ugly beauty" poetics I have been aiming to describe by examining a small selection of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in tandem with a likewise small selection of Wycliffite writings. The dimensions of Chaucer's poetic greatness have yet to be fully measured and described, some six centuries after his death; perhaps seeking insight into his art by pairing it with the theological insights of the church's Universal-Angelic Doctor will yield more clarity. If my hunch is correct, Aquinas is a worthier intellect to pair with Chaucer's artistic genius, which appears to me to be capable of revealing glimpses of the "mind of God" in ways that evaded Wyclif, as best I can tell. Wyclif's obsession with his own vision of ecclesiastical ugliness may have robbed him of the ability to see the beauty of the church, a beauty which after all is God's idea, and no mere human's. Chaucer, on the other hand, could see all the ugliness without allowing his art to collapse into the metaphysical absurdity of thinking that

[75] See Peck (1984) 154.

ugliness could ever have the ontological durability of beauty. [76] In addition, Wyclif's academic training may have done some real harm, in him, to the ratio/intellectus balance described by Pieper; Chaucer's ways of "knowing" via poiesis appear to harmonize *ratio* and *intellectus*, whereas Wyclif's academic practice of *ratio* went off the rails in some significant ways.[77] Lastly, Wyclif's polemics and the deadly ire which appears to have fueled them, particularly in the latter portion of his life, seem to have utterly precluded genuine, heartfelt contrition, which leads a *viator* by the goode and siker wey to the beauty of penance. If angels rejoice when a sinner repents, that suggests a Maker who likes making us (his *poeima*) beautiful. Chaucer, unlike Wyclif, had the wit and the grace to see this cosmic intersection of theology and poetry, which called forth from him an artist's response of fidelity to the real and all-too-visible human ugliness around him, without a trace of despair that there is nothing more to see.

[76] See Jaroszyński (2011) 236.
[77] See Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy* (2001), chapter 1.

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