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NARRATIVE FLEXIBILITY AND FRATERNAL PREACHING TECHNIQUE IN  
*THREE CANTERBURY TALES*

Chelsea Honeyman

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements for the M.A. degree in  
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## Abstract

A divide exists between those who view the *Canterbury Tales* as a series of self-contained texts and those who contend that the various characters' interactions affect each tale's direction. This paper takes the latter view, using the contemporary preaching attitudes of Chaucer's day to examine how the Pardoner's, Prioress's and Friar's respective levels of consideration for their situation and audience are directly related to their tales' success. While the Pardoner's self-absorption and over-dependence on his professional habits and the Prioress's favouring of sentimentality at the expense of engagement with her tale and audience result in less-than-popular narratives, the Friar's use of fraternal preaching techniques emphasising an adaptable, audience-centred style leads him to greater success with the pilgrims. Chaucer's advocacy of narrative flexibility may be part of his overall goal with the *Canterbury Tales*: to create a written text that replicates as much as possible the spontaneous nature of oral performance.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
Abbreviations .....	v
Introduction .....	1
Chapter One : The Pardoner's Tale .....	23
Chapter Two : The Prioress's Tale .....	47
Chapter Three : The Friar's Tale .....	77
Conclusion .....	98
Works Cited .....	106

## Abbreviations

FrP.....	Friar's Prologue
FrT.....	Friar's Tale
GP.....	General Prologue
Intro PardT.....	Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale
PardP.....	Pardoner's Prologue
PardT.....	Pardoner's Tale
PrP.....	Prioress's Prologue
PrT.....	Prioress's Tale
ShT.....	Shipman's Tale
SumP.....	Summoner's Prologue
ThP.....	Prologue to Sir Thopas
WBP.....	Wife of Bath's Prologue

## Introduction

A strong conflict exists in Chaucerian criticism between those scholars who evaluate the *Canterbury Tales* based on each tale's independent aesthetic merits and those who see the work as unified and organic, in which various interactions between the pilgrims at one point in the narrative may have an impact on the substance and quality of the tales at later junctures. This latter group counts among its pioneers George Lyman Kittredge, who was at the forefront of the "roadside drama" school of *Canterbury Tales* criticism; he asserts that "to regard the several stories [i.e. the *Tales*] from the dramatic point of view...is manifestly our paramount duty."<sup>1</sup> Other scholars who focus on the dramatic aspects of the work include R.M. Lumiansky, who acknowledges a debt to Kittredge's emphasis on character and context and expands it by analysing the multi-level effect of each tale on its narrator in terms of developing his or her character (7-9).<sup>2</sup>

In the other corner, representing those who analyse each tale as a discrete work, are found critics like Robert Jordan, who offers one of the best-known refutations of Kittredge's "roadside drama" paradigm. In his *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader*, Jordan relies on an aesthetic reading of the *Canterbury Tales*, one focused on the literary merits of the texts

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<sup>1</sup> While the details of some of Kittredge's character assessments have since been discounted (see, for example, his contention that the Prioress's courtly manners are not an object of Chaucer's satire), his general attention to character has remained an important component of Chaucerian thought. E. Talbot Donaldson's essay "Chaucer the Pilgrim" (found in his collection *Speaking of Chaucer*) is an example of criticism that analyses the specific environment which Chaucer has created for his characters and for his fictional self in the *Canterbury Tales*. See also Charles Owen's *Pilgrimage and Storytelling in the Canterbury Tales*.

<sup>2</sup> The three levels of impact outlined by Lumiansky are the tale's reinforcement of the narrator's depiction in the General Prologue, its development of those character traits which appear outside of his or her General Prologue portrait (for example, the rivalry between the Summoner and the Friar), and the "complete dramatic revelation" which occasionally occurs during a character's performance; for this last level, Lumiansky gives the example of the Wife of Bath's Tale, which, while compatible with her feminist views as articulated in her prologue and in the General Prologue, "goes beyond...in the completeness and detail of character revelation" (7-9).

themselves, rather than a reading that considers the context and motivation of the tales' narrators and of Chaucer himself.<sup>3</sup>

Should the *Canterbury Tales* be interpreted the way Jordan advocates – as a series of separate tales whose quality stems principally from their poetic virtues? While it is tempting to downplay the notion of context in the work, one must remember that Chaucer did not write most of the tales as discrete stories independent of either their teller or their context. If this had been Chaucer's wish, he would not have supplied the reader with detailed portraits of the tales' diverse narrators and sundry links developing the context of the tales and their impact on the other characters. This context of the storytelling competition that the Host has contrived for the group makes audience reaction a vital component for each character to consider when formulating his or her tale. Thus, even if references to that reaction are limited, the artistic merit or success of each pilgrim's tale is best evaluated with some consideration of what can be determined about listener response.

The General Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* sees Harry Bailly call for a tale that provides both *sentence* and *solaas*, meaning and pleasure (798). There are perhaps no pilgrims better prepared to provide moral edification to those on the road to Canterbury than those characters representing the religious estate: the Pardoner, Nun's Priest, Prioress, Friar, Parson, Monk and Second Nun. These representatives must, however, not only find a way to provide *sentence*, but also *solaas*, especially if they wish to win the competition.

How, though, should this be achieved? How should the Canterbury pilgrims go about presenting their tales? In his General Prologue, Chaucer hints at one possible technique. In the pilgrim Chaucer's exhortation that "the wordes mote be cosy to the

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<sup>3</sup> Jordan argues that Chaucer embraces the "certitude of theology" over the more relativistic implications of rhetoric, a view that suggests Chaucer's subscription to a sense of truth or artistic merit that transcends the circumstances and intentions of the narrator (3-4).

dede," we see a reflection of a sentiment expressed by Plato in the *Timaeus*—that words should be used in a way that reflects their status as unchangeable, universal symbols (GP 742). This philosophically realist approach to language was most likely gleaned by Chaucer, as it was for many others of his time, from Boethius's use of Platonic concepts in his *Consolation of Philosophy* (GP 742, n.) This tradition of thought suggests that language has only one absolute meaning, and that any trickier use of words (i.e. use that belies the speaker's true thoughts, personality or opinions) is morally unacceptable. One can see how this conclusion is reflected in Plato's *Republic* when Socrates bans unsuitable poetry and poets from his ideal state for their liberal manipulation of words to distort the true nature of the gods (III. 376c- 398b, 70-98). D.W. Robertson sees this link between Chaucer and Boethius as reflective of the medieval era's general embrace of Neoplatonic ideals (6). More recently, David Williams has also perceived the ethos of Chaucer's time as firmly rooted in Neoplatonic thought; he relates this ethos to the realm of storytelling by arguing that the medieval English worldview believed in an absolute truth to which any speech had to conform in order to be considered "truthful" (81).<sup>4</sup>

Is this attitude towards words and storytelling, though, exactly what Chaucer has in mind for his pilgrims as they compete with their tales? The phrase "the wordes mote be cosyng to the dede" could also be interpreted in a way which subverts the traditionally accepted meaning outlined above. Chaucer may instead advocate a strong link not so much between word and meaning as between word and situation. To put it another way, the terms employed by the storytellers in the *Canterbury Tales* should be solidly connected to the immediate context in which they are being spoken. The ultimate "dede" being the

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<sup>4</sup> The Robertsonian position that Neoplatonism had an impact on medieval European art, literature and architecture has since been roundly criticised for its generalist nature (see, among others, Bruce Holsinger's *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture* for its critique of Robertsonian ideals).

tale-telling competition, the pilgrims' words must take that competition into account in order to succeed.

Thus, the strategy which makes more sense for the pilgrims to follow begins with an awareness of how their situation will affect their tale. Where does this lead, however? It is in the best interest of the Canterbury narrators, as performers, to keep their audience's attention rather than merely entertain themselves. Thus, this dual set of interests (the audience's and his or her own) means that the performer, as one prominent dictionary of theatre puts it, must act and speak on his or her "own behalf (as an *artist* and as a *person*)" (Pavis 262; italics mine). This definition is notable because of its implied assertion that a performer not only attempts, as an artist, to satisfy the audience, but also has a true self on whose behalf he or she acts.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of a possible conflict between the performer's desire to provide the audience with what it desires and the performer's own drive to act in his or her own interest is hardly new; in fact, one sees this tension implied in an unexpected source: medieval sermon literature and preaching manuals. In his analysis of the *artes praedicandi*, medieval treatises on the art of preaching, A.C. Spearing writes of what those manuals consider a main priority in preaching:

"[T]he *ars praedicandi* provides a paradigm for any literature based on an immutable revelation. The preacher or poet of Christian orthodoxy cannot leave us with an original message *of his own*: his aim must be to revitalize for us a commandment

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<sup>5</sup>This idea runs contrary to what scholars like Judith Butler have written about the self; Butler, in particular, argues that the self is constructed entirely as a result of external influences (see *Bodies that Matter* x-xi). Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) also addresses the issue of the construction of the self with particular emphasis on how one is constructed to be a "woman" or a "man." While focused on the realm of gender identity, Butler's ideas are pertinent here because of their more general application to the idea of personality as construct—an issue of particular interest as one examines how the Pardoner, Prioress and Friar present themselves to their audience (consciously or otherwise).

whose very familiarity may have deadened it as a motive for action. (*Medieval Poetry* 116; second use of italics mine)

It would seem from this passage that the preacher as individual is not important and that it is more vital that the preacher present himself as a mere channel for religious enlightenment. Nevertheless, that Spearing mentions that the preacher or poet should not convey his own message makes it clear that those individuals had a self whose messages were suppressed while composing a Christian text, thus creating a conflict between the speaker's own desires and the desires he needs to fulfil for his audience.

Based on Spearing's assessment of preaching technique, then, one could draw the conclusion that the effort to eliminate as much as possible the traces of one's original self figures prominently in the preaching manuals of the time as part of an effective strategy to command an audience's attention. In this respect, this conclusion gives a sense that the identity of the performer is a hindrance at best, if one even assumes its existence at all.

This devaluation of individual identity finds parallels in medieval theories of authorship. Just as preachers were encouraged to focus on long traditions of authoritative religious thought rather than expressions of personal opinion, many medieval authors focus on placing themselves within a long history of other great works rather than overtly praising the originality of their own ideas (Wogan-Browne *et al.* 4). The intended result was that the author would be seen as taking part "in an intellectually and morally authoritative tradition" (Wogan-Browne *et al.* 4).<sup>6</sup> Not only writers, but also preachers, may

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<sup>6</sup> Among the examples given in *The Idea of the Vernacular* (an anthology of texts highlighting the evolution of medieval English literary theory) is a medical text entitled the *Cyurgie* compiled by Guy de Chauliac; the editors write that the work "sees itself as constituting an addition to an authoritative tradition of medical writing that the [work's] prologue invokes by using the common rhetorical topos of deference" (Wogan-Browne *et al.* 6). The editors also point to Chaucer's own works to support this idea of deference to tradition, noting that the narrator of the *Legend of Good Women* is portrayed by Alceste as a mere compiler and translator (Wogan-Browne *et al.* 5). While this definition, however, is used to absolve the narrator Chaucer of responsibility for

be seen drawing on this technique of deference to precedent; by stating that one's ideas are not one's own, but connected with a large and well-established line of thought, the speaker (whether author or preacher) creates an aura of authority clearly identifiable with his respective institutions, be they the literary canon or the Church. This aura is seen as an effective way to engage the listeners' attention. One may see this trend manifested in the proliferation of sermon compilations, from which preachers could draw upon a tradition of established thought to make their own ideas more authoritative. This reliance on pre-existing sermons as a source of authority was depicted in many drawings of the time; pictures of preachers giving sermons from a book, seen in works like Mirk's late-fourteenth-century Latin preaching guide *Manuale sacerdotis*, were perceived to represent the preacher's authority, presumably by showing that he drew upon a documented sermon tradition (Spencer 77).

Is this somewhat automatised call to precedent, though, the best way to attract and hold the attention of one's audience? Spearing's assessment of medieval preaching — essentially, that the assertion of one's individual interests in interactions with others is inadvisable — ignores that one needs a motivation to interact with others, and that this motivation must necessarily derive from a self with individual interests. At the same time, though, Spearing's observations on the downplaying of personal identity in the *artes praedicandi* leads one to consider the influence of external forces in determining the way a preacher should speak. In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer sets forth a social situation in which self-interest plays a vital role in the characters' interactions. The context of the storytelling contest provides a venue in which the characters are motivated not only to

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the content of his works, the *Canterbury Tales*'s pilgrims must claim accountability for their tales in order to be eligible for the competition; thus, Chaucer's use of the idea of ceding to precedent differs in the latter work. For more on the promotion of deference in the *artes praedicandi*, see Alistair Minnis's *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 174.

recount a tale, but also to recount the tale best received by the audience; this creates an opportunity for the characters to persuade their audience through deliberate choices of tale and delivery. As mentioned earlier, George Lyman Kittredge was perhaps the first scholar to understand this competitive angle and the resultant interplay between the characters. Kittredge argues that numerous factors, ranging from a character's personality and his or her relationship with other characters to what has already been stated by other storytellers, affect the course of each tale, a phenomenon which he describes below:

Structurally regarded, the stories are merely long speeches exposing, directly or indirectly, the characters of the several persons... But they are not mere monologues, for each is addressed to all the other personages and evokes reply and comment, begin thus, in a real sense, a part of the conversation. (155-56)

Thus, Kittredge reinforces the idea that the *Canterbury Tales* are shaped less by impersonal convention or the sole influence of social, external factors than they are by the spontaneous and mutual flow of personal interaction.

Lee Patterson, in his *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (1991), examines this idea further, arguing that Chaucer shares the modern preoccupation with the conflict between the individual and the collective – an idea that defies the common perception that the concept of the individual self was a Renaissance creation (7-8). He writes that, contrary to this popular position, “the antagonism between the desires of the individual and the demands of society provided one of the great topics for literary exploration throughout the Middle Ages” and points to the large tradition of medieval romance as an example (*History* 8). For medieval thinkers such as Augustine, Patterson writes, human desires – human *will* – constituted the self, albeit one with conflicting drives to satisfy either his own desires

or those of others (*History* 8). Patterson maintains that the characters of the *Canterbury Tales* are each caught in their own battle between asserting their individual identities (what he calls “character”) and conforming to social expectations and precedent, which Patterson groups under the term “history” (*History* 11). As Patterson sees it, Chaucer’s pilgrims are under intense pressure to alter their behaviour in order to satisfy the exigencies of their society and peers; this pressure could even be said to extend to the recounting of their tales.<sup>7</sup>

How, then, do Chaucer’s pilgrims strive to respond to these pressures and achieve their dual goal, as prescribed by Harry Bailly, of educating and entertaining their audience? What role should their individual personality and will play in an effort to please the personality and will of their listeners? Before discussing these questions, it is first important to note that Chaucer, in his characterisation of the pilgrims, imbues them with personality traits that often reflect just as strongly how such characters were perceived in Chaucer’s society as they reflect how such characters behaved as real individuals.<sup>8</sup> Thus, much of what we see of the Canterbury pilgrims is a composite of various public perceptions of the profession embodied by any individual character. Nevertheless, Chaucer, through his narrative device of a tale-telling context, has imbued each of his characters with a measure of self-interest, thus giving the pilgrims a sense of unique identity. Three of the pilgrims – the Pardoner, the Prioress and the Friar – use a combination of individual self-interest and the speaking skills with which each character

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<sup>7</sup> In his assertion that the self is largely constructed by external pressures, Patterson makes a point similar to that by Butler, mentioned above (n. 5). However, it is notable how the two arrive at different conclusions from this point: while Butler sees authority as deriving from precedent and repetition, Patterson takes a more conventionally liberal stance, viewing power as deriving from an individual who is able to transcend social constraint and assert his or her innate uniqueness.

<sup>8</sup> Jill Mann’s *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (1973) is probably the best-known example of a study examining the influence of satirical stereotypes in Chaucer’s development of the pilgrims.

type was popularly assumed to have been familiar to weave their respective tales. While each of the three efforts has at its core an exemplum, a stock story often used in medieval sermons to illustrate a moral point, the tales enjoy varying degrees of audience success. While Chaucer's descriptions of the listeners' responses to each tale are scant (a deliberate effort, perhaps, to avoid giving the reader one authoritative interpretation of the success or failure of the tales), the Pardoner and Prioress's stories are met with derision and silence, respectively. By contrast, the Friar's Tale does succeed in its aim to anger the Summoner, fuelling a rivalry no doubt entertaining to the other pilgrims. Why do the reactions vary so wildly? An explanation may be found in the degree to which each character's performance draws from the speaking and preaching techniques with which Chaucer's audience would have thought them most acquainted. Some time, then, should be taken to outline various aspects of English sermon culture and preaching techniques from which these pilgrims may draw aspects of their own manner of storytelling.

Chaucer's awareness of the vernacular preaching tradition seems assured. Sermons preached by friars in English were a common occurrence in Chaucer's time; W.A. Pantin writes that it would require a great effort to avoid at least hearing vernacular sermons, which he refers to as "abundant, vigorous and influential" in fourteenth-century England (235-36).<sup>9</sup> The material was varied as well; Pantin states that "the analyses of virtues and vices, of the commandments and the Lord's Prayer, the denunciations of social abuses, and all the material of satire and complaint that we find in Chaucer or Langland or the political poems, can be paralleled in the sermons of the day" (238). A.C. Spearing speaks further of the proliferation of sermons in the fourteenth-century English landscape, as well as of their

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the sermon culture was so influential that it even affected architecture; Pantin writes that by the late medieval era "the friars developed a particular type of church plan, where the nave was a spacious preaching house" (236).

influence on literature; he writes that Langland's style in *Piers Plowman* must almost certainly have been affected by the vernacular sermon culture of his time (*Medieval Poetry* 113). The reforms of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), especially the decree *Omnis utriusque sexus*, which mandated annual confession and communion by one's parish priest, resulted in changes to how religious thought was conveyed to the laity (Pantin 191-92). These changes allowed, among other things, the wider dissemination of both Latin and vernacular religious ideas in forms including, but not limited to, preaching. For instance, Lawrence Clopper believes it probable that clerics had a hand in writing some of the vernacular biblical dramas of late medieval England; at the very least, he argues, those who did write them clearly had access to vernacular religious writings (such as the *Stanzaic Life of Christ* and the *Gospel of Nicodemus*) which the "educational agendas of Lateran IV" had helped promulgate (208).<sup>10</sup>

Preaching, however, remained a major focus in efforts to educate the laity in religious matters. In order to satisfy Lateran IV's edicts regarding confession, priests had to know how to instruct their parishioners in how to live well; thus, by the fourteenth century one of the Council's major legacies was an abundance of sermons and sermon literature, including numerous educational religious manuals (Pantin 192). These manuals, such as that issued by thirteenth-century English archbishop Alexander of Stavensby, often included a section on how to preach, sometimes even including a model sermon (Pantin 192). In 1281, John Pecham, the Archbishop of Canterbury, decreed in his *De informatione simplicium* that basic matters of doctrine like the Decalogue, fourteen articles of faith, seven virtues and vices, and seven sacraments had to be "expounded to the people in the

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<sup>10</sup> Support for vernacular religious texts is reflected in contemporary sources other than those mentioned above by Clopper; an example is the late- fourteenth-century priest John Trevisa's *Dialogue Between the Lord and the Clerk on Translation*, in which the lord argues for the translation of religious texts into English (130).

vernacular four times a year," a practice which by 1357 had spread north to the Archdiocese of York (Pantin 193-94). The early thirteenth-century *Northern Homily Cycle*, a compilation of vernacular verse sermons, sprang from efforts inspired by edicts like those issued by Pecham to better communicate the word of God to the laity (Wogan-Browne *et al.* 125). Part of the Prologue, written anonymously, expresses the author's desire to write in English so that "both learned and laymen" may enjoy spiritual benefits which only the well-educated could derive from a Latin sermon ("*Northern Homily Cycle*" 11.73-77; 128).

A main topic of discussion for preaching manuals was how to keep an audience interested in what the preacher had to say. Spearing writes that while the moral edification of his listeners was the primary objective of the preacher, he could and often would give a sense of "aesthetic organization" to his sermons in order to make the audience appreciate them more (Spearing, *Medieval Poetry* 113). This manifested itself in the thirteenth century not so much in the less sophisticated "ancient" sermon (not extensively discussed in spiritual manuals) as it did in the more intellectually and artistically complex "modern" (or "university") sermon (Spearing, *Medieval Poetry* 114). This latter type of sermon, carefully divided into sections introducing and developing the particular theme, was generally limited to a university audience of clerics who understood Latin; however, Spearing notes that some English sermons, preached to both clergy and laymen, were influenced by this "high-style" sermon (*Medieval Poetry* 115).<sup>11</sup>

While a more academically florid style did remain in use, the fourteenth century saw the rise of efforts to make preaching more interesting to a wider audience and the presentation of preaching theory more interesting to preachers. These efforts resulted in

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<sup>11</sup> For more on the development of the university sermon in the thirteenth century, see Vol. 3 of Hughes Oliphant Old's *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* (1999).

the writing of vernacular religious and moral treatises instructing preachers in how to give an engaging sermon; Pantin observes that these treatises “were sometimes in prose, but more often in verse” (221). The use of verse, along with exempla, was motivated by a “desire to make instruction attractive...[to make] it easier for the audience to carry something away of what they heard” (Pantin 222). As an example, Pantin gives Lincolnshire Gilbertine canon Mannyng of Brunne’s *Handling Sin* (c. 1303), a text whose creative use of exempla fulfils Mannyng’s goal “to avoid pedantry and dullness, and deliberately to compete with profane tales and rhymes” (225).<sup>12</sup> Clopper’s study of medieval entertainments indicates that engagingly-written vernacular texts on various aspects of religious doctrine were likely received by priests and layfolk, resulting in the production of vast amounts of literature devoted to teaching the laity the articles of faith through such means as sermons (208-9). Even those critics who question Chaucer’s influence by contemporary preaching concede that such an influence probably existed. Siegfried Wenzel, for instance, argues in an influential article that many of the exempla, similes and proverbs employed by Chaucer were not exclusive to sermons or sermon literature; ultimately, though, Wenzel admits that Chaucer would likely have heard these images employed in many sermons, even if he were not familiar with preaching manuals (“Contemporary Preaching” 140-41).

Among the techniques used in medieval sermons was the development of particular styles of speech to best suit an individual audience. While it was important for each

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<sup>12</sup> Given that only four manuscripts of *Handling Sin* survive, it is best not to overestimate the impact of this particular text, says Pantin (225). Many other texts, however, attempted both to teach preachers how better to relate to their audience and to present this counsel in an engaging way. These included the early fourteenth-century *Oculus Sacerdotis*, which counselled priests to preach basic principles of doctrine in the vernacular four times a year and which Pantin remarks upon for its “garrulousness” (195, 199-200). Another example is the *Regimen Animarum*, a mid-fourteenth-century book which explains how a priest should preach to his parishioners in a friendly manner in order to quiet their annoyance at such practices as tithe-paying (Pantin 203-4).

sermon to convey a certain set of eternal and universal religious truths, these had to be balanced with the varied tastes and interests of the listeners in order ultimately to have one's own ends satisfied. This dynamic between speaker and audience and the resulting need to manipulate the speaker's public identity was not lost on medieval preaching theorists. Guibert de Nogent, an early twelfth-century French Benedictine monk, writes in his *Book about the Way a Sermon Ought to be Given* of the importance of a mixed style, one that provides "simple and uncomplicated matter to the unlettered" while attaining "a higher place with the educated" (170). Guibert advises that the preacher "offer to them [i.e. the listeners] what they are capable of understanding" (170). Thus, it is vital to keep the audience's interest in order ultimately to turn them toward God, an idea that gave the preacher a measure of artistic latitude in his efforts to bring his audience closer to divine truth. This advocacy of an adaptable speaking style was seen in other areas of persuasive composition as well; medieval rhetoricians divided poetry into low, high and middle styles, using these categories in order to determine which audience would best appreciate which type of poetry (Spearing, *Medieval Poetry* 63).<sup>13</sup> Spearing relates this to Chaucer, noting how the *Canterbury Tales'* Harry Bailly deems the high style too fancy for the pilgrims' purposes (*Medieval Poetry* 63). The sermons which adopted the hybridised style, mixing Latin and vernacular conventions, combined the appeal of the "modern" sermon's stylistic wizardry with the repetitive quality necessary to make the preacher's audience remember his point (Spearing, *Medieval Poetry* 115).

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<sup>13</sup> This rhetorical attitude towards oratorical adaptability had its share of classical antecedents. A notable example is Cicero's *De Oratore*, which counsels aspiring orators to "speak in a style fitted to convince" one's particular audience; by way of illustrating how not to do this, the text warns that a man who "roam[s] haughtily and with head upraised" in a land with whose laws and customs he is unfamiliar will make little headway in the promotion of his talents to those around him (I. XXXI. 138, XL. 184).

Thus, a variety of contemporary documents on preaching recommend a style of speech that appeals to one's listeners, be they intellectual clergy or average layfolk. Chaucer applies this tradition to his Pardoner, Prioress and Friar, demonstrating through their tales the effectiveness of a narrator who carefully considers his audience and the uselessness of a narrator who focuses only on his own tastes and goals. Specifically, the success of each of the pilgrims depends in large part on their reliance on the elements of preaching technique with which the average reader would have linked them, and particularly those elements which advocate a flexibility of content and presentation depending on one's audience. This flexibility, in its implied subscription to language as a socially-influenced means of communication, rejects the Neoplatonic view, held by Robertsonian critics to be pervasive during the medieval era, that language must represent certain unchangeable divine truths in order to be socially beneficial.

As stated above, the advocacy of a flexible preaching style gave preachers a degree of artistic licence in preparing an audience-pleasing sermon. However, one group in particular generated much debate as to how far one should pursue the listeners' interests in efforts to turn them towards God: the mendicant friars, whose dramatic and popular preaching brought them fame – and infamy. G.R. Owst, in an early study of medieval English vernacular preaching, writes that friars who preached in the vernacular employed a number of techniques in order to maintain the interest of an audience whose attentions were divided by secular entertainments (*Preaching* 71). Friars were “often learned in the schoolmen and the works of natural science, yet equally well versed in the thoughts and ways of ordinary men,” a breadth of knowledge which led them to reproduce in their sermons “familiar social types, their chatter, their arguments, the things they do and the things they deal in,” a description consistent with the characterisation and tale of Chaucer's

Friar (*Preaching* 24). Other techniques included colouring sermons with “fables, anecdotes and ‘figures’ natural and domestic,” as well as including dramatic and far-fetched tales of religious miracles and punishments for lackadaisical devotion (*Preaching* 82). As well, in order to compete with secular storytellers, “preaching friars were driven more and more to resort to artifices similar to those of their rivals,” including more anecdotes and risqué stories (Owst, *Literature* 16). Owst writes,

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that even an element of skilful stage-craft has its place along with the low-comedy of the narrations on the high-flown phrases of the schools, in the developed preaching of the friars of the open air. (*Preaching* 85)

While Owst’s work is several decades old, subsequent scholars’ research complements rather than contradicts his findings. David Jeffrey’s study of the links between Franciscan brothers and English lyric poetry finds that English Franciscan preaching manuals were full of poems and musical settings of texts, all designed to make the friars’ sermons in the streets more entertaining, a strategy which suited their description by founder Francis of Assisi as *joculatores Dei*, “the minstrels of God” (*Franciscan Spirituality* 172-73). John Fleming concurs with Jeffrey; he notes that the Franciscan and Dominican fraternal orders were especially focused on developing a preaching technique which called less for reliance on an anonymous and authoritative body of scriptural writings and commentary than for an adaptable, spontaneous style of preaching more likely to attract listeners in the streets, where the friars were instructed to give sermons (“Friars and Literature” 350-51). In his book on medieval Franciscan literature, Fleming writes that St. Francis himself sang in Provençal “because that was the language of the most admired poetry of his day, and he sought to reach out and

exploit a secular tradition for sacred purposes," a practice repeated by the Franciscans in their adaptation of secular medieval carols for spiritual ends (*Franciscan Literature* 178-79).<sup>14</sup> One may even see in the Franciscan Rule hints of a tendency to favour the audience; Chapter 9 of the Rule states that sermons should be brief and end with a positive subject, like the discussion of Christian virtues (Jeffrey, *Franciscan Spirituality* 190). This discouragement of wordiness makes it hardly surprising that the Friar laughs at the Wife of Bath's lengthy prologue and himself delivers a tale of only 378 lines (including his prologue), ending with an overall upbeat message about salvation, albeit one which lobs one final insult at the Summoner (WBP 831; FrT 1659-64).

The strategy of accessible and adaptable preaching was elaborated by some Franciscans as early as the beginning of the thirteenth century; at that time, English Franciscan theologian Alexander of Hales argued that sermons had to be "tailor made to fit people of all kinds, ranks, classes and callings, from each of the 'three estates' in medieval society and every subdivision thereof" (Minnis 137-38).<sup>15</sup> The means by which this strategy of homiletical flexibility was enacted varied as the Franciscan order became more established. Many early Franciscan friars described themselves as wary of formal academe, an attitude which no doubt contributed to a simpler preaching style; this strain of thought, however, was considerably quieted after the publication of the bull *Quo elongati* by Pope Gregory IX in 1230, which allowed Franciscans to own and acquire worldly goods, including books (Fleming, "Friars and Literature" 351-52). While Beryl

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<sup>14</sup> While both Jeffrey's and Fleming's books date from the 1970s, Fleming maintains his arguments and acknowledges Jeffrey's in a 1999 article (see "The Friars and Medieval English Literature" in David Wallace's *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, 349-375 and 362, n.4)

<sup>15</sup> Minnis notes the Ciceronian influences of this idea (also outlined in note 13) and adds that the "general principle of suiting the style to the capacities of one's audience...was fully articulated in the section on preaching in Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*" (264, n. 84).

Smalley notes that, by the late medieval era, “[t]he Franciscans had gone respectable and accepted the constraints of rhetoric,” she also observes that techniques like emotion, exempla, analogy, jokes and classical allusion were still used sparingly “as a concession to human weakness” in order to make a sermon more palatable (40, 42).<sup>16</sup> While some friars condemned such techniques, they were largely considered typical of the fraternal preaching style, especially that of the Franciscans (Smalley 41, 33). Siegfried Wenzel, in his study of medieval preaching and lyric poetry, has noted the volumes of lyric poetry written by mendicant friars, many examples of which appear in written sermons of the time (*Preachers* 7-8). He argues that “medieval preachers created English poems for specific structural purposes in their prose sermons,” several of which involved attempts to make the listener feel more “directly” the lessons or emotions dominant in a given sermon (*Preachers* 13, 115).

There was opposition, however, to the crowd-pleasing style of the mendicant friars. This opposition was double-barrelled, critiquing the friars’ sermons either for their overindulgence in dazzling rhetorical techniques (a criticism usually reserved for the Latin sermons friars preached to their colleagues) or, in the case of vernacular sermons, for their tendency to cater excessively to base popular tastes; both charges, though, condemned the friars’ use of artful speech at the expense of spiritual substance. Wenzel outlines the opposition of certain individuals towards an artistic preaching style; these include an anonymous Latin sermon lamenting the listeners’ attention to how the preacher spoke as opposed to what he said, as well as the writings of thirteenth-century English philosopher Roger Bacon, who complained that those preachers who relied on the “boundless artistry”

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<sup>16</sup> Fleming concurs, noting that the friars adopted techniques like borrowing descriptive devices from the realms of secular literature and storytelling in order to make their sermons more resonant with lay audiences (“Friars and Literature” 357).

of friars' preaching handbooks were generally ill-educated (*Preachers* 64).<sup>17</sup> Several academics have argued that Chaucer satirises what some deemed the excessively entertaining style of mendicant popular preaching conventions in order to take an antifraternal stance in the *Canterbury Tales*. This may have been in solidarity with the views of those like the Wycliffites (or Lollards), a late-medieval English heretical movement which maintained that the friars' techniques were used not to communicate truth, but to tell people artfully what they wanted to hear in order to collect money for the preachers' own ends (Hall 125-6; Knapp 25). Those who argue for Chaucer's antifraternal position include Penn Szitty, whose book *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature* (1986) argues that works such as the Summoner's Tale, with its depiction of a corrupt friar, embody the antifraternal stand outlined by reformist figures like John Wycliffe (176, 231). Even Fleming, while arguing for Chaucer's indebtedness to certain fraternal preaching conventions, groups him among the "trenchant anti-fraternal satirists" of the medieval era ("Friars and Literature" 365). Smalley echoes this sentiment, writing that Chaucer "mocked at the friars," but that in denigrating those who had so strongly informed his style "he was biting the hand that fed him" (307).

Was Chaucer so resolutely opposed to the friars, though? While the Pardoner's Tale fails to persuade any of the audience to buy the Pardoner's relics or even accord him respect, and the Prioress's Tale is not followed by praise of her piety but by a tellingly ambiguous silence, the Friar succeeds in his goal of annoying the Summoner and creating the kind of rivalry appreciated by the spectators of a competition; significantly, he does so by using various elements of the mendicant preaching techniques that critics have argued

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<sup>17</sup> Wenzel is careful, though, to include a defence of mendicant preaching techniques advanced by no less than Thomas Aquinas, who argued in his *Contra impugnantes Dei cultem et religionem* that one should not dismiss artistic devices out of hand merely because some misuse them (*Preachers* 65).

Chaucer satirised. This decision suggests, contrary to what one might expect, that Chaucer was not hostile to fraternal preaching rhetoric, but in fact supported that rhetoric's valuing of adaptable, socially situated speech over less flexible and more overtly didactic modes. Chaucer's support of this fraternal preaching flexibility points to his advocacy of a world in which show does not replace substance, but instead temporarily supercedes it in an effort to make it attractive to the most people possible. This debt to fraternal convention may be seen to extend to Chaucer's crafting of the tales told by the Pardoner, the Prioress and the Friar. These three characters, all members of religious orders, would have been especially familiar with popular preaching; the Friar and Pardoner both make their living as professional preachers while the Prioress, as a nun, would have been a key audience for popular preachers and thus well-versed in popular preaching convention.

Given that Chaucer went to great lengths to describe his characters' professions, it seems unlikely that these pilgrims would not have employed in their tales the conventions of the milieu in which they were most familiar. A look at the characters and tales of the Friar, the Prioress and the Pardoner will help illuminate how Chaucer has his characters use what their real-life contemporaries would likely have been taught in their religious lives as a means of gaining authority over their audiences. While the Pardoner, the Prioress and the Friar all employ in their tales the basic formula of an exemplum, the approach of the first two pilgrims to their performance and their audience differs greatly from that of the third. The performances of the Pardoner and Prioress are marked by a sense of rote recitation, connected to how each character's profession was popularly perceived to have absorbed certain speaking and preaching conventions, which causes them to neglect their immediate circumstances and audience and thus lose control over their tale and audience. By contrast, the Friar's Tale displays performance traits consistent with the preaching

techniques of mendicant friars, most significantly that of adapting one's performance to suit the tastes of one's specific audience, and enjoys a more positive reaction as a result.

The first chapter will centre on how the Pardoner, by not considering the tastes of his audience, ultimately fails in capturing his listeners' attention (not to mention their money). While information on the training of pardoners, particularly in the realm of preaching, is scant, it is clear that the techniques used by the Pardoner defy those used successfully by the Friar. As the Pardoner himself states from the beginning, "For thogh myself be a ful vicious man / A moral tale yet I yow telle kan / Which I am wont to preche for to wynne" (Intro PardT 459-61). By being so honest about the split between his true self and the words he speaks, the Pardoner changes the dynamic between himself and the audience; he fails to adapt to these altered circumstances, though, and continues in a self-absorbed fashion with his stock sermon, thus ensuring his failure with the audience. The Pardoner's Tale, unbeknownst to its narrator, also gives the reader a lesson in the dangers of self-absorption in one's dealings with others; by depicting the three young revellers as utterly disrespectful of all other views than their own, then punishing them dearly for that lack of respect, Chaucer has the Pardoner unwittingly deliver a commentary on his own central failing as a preacher and storyteller: his lack of attention to individual audiences.

The second chapter's focus will be on the Prioress and her Tale. While scholars like Felicity Riddy and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne have argued that medieval nuns were often better educated than commonly thought, they acknowledge the common perception of nuns in Chaucer's era as uneducated, prone to rote learning rather than true understanding and susceptible to the sensationalist charms of popular preaching.<sup>18</sup> The argument that the

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<sup>18</sup> See Riddy's "Women Talking About the Things of God" and Wogan-Browne's "Outdoing the Daughters of Syon?" for more elaborate discussion of intellectual trends in women's religious communities.

Prioress, through her highly emotional and sentimental tale, embodies the stereotypical qualities outlined above has been advanced by several academics, including Derek Pearsall and Richard Rex.<sup>19</sup> Chaucer helps to reinforce this stereotype through his depiction of the Prioress and her Tale. The Prioress's description in the General Prologue reveals a woman preoccupied with social convention and personal image; this attitude of self-absorption and blind acceptance of precedent are reflected in the delivery of her tale, which quickly careens out of her control because of her rote style of delivery. The substance of the tale, which depicts in eerie terms a boy's unthinking and uncontrolled singing of a hymn to the Virgin, leads to the "sobre" and ambiguous reaction of the Host and other pilgrims at the end of a tale which is more of a rehearsed outburst gone wrong than a genuine attempt to give the audience what it desires.

The third and final chapter will focus on the Friar and his Tale, which demonstrate in a positive way the value of catering to specific circumstances in order to please others and also offer a more specific advocacy of the preaching techniques of the mendicant friars. The Friar's description in the General Prologue is indicative of his ability to play both up and down to his audience. If he is required to act more like a layman, he does so; if the situation calls for a more formal persona, he takes it on. This adaptability extends to the style in which he tells his tale: a combination of a standard moral exemplum with dashes of situation-specific humour meant to aggravate the Summoner and amuse the audience. The Tale itself, in its punishment of the fictional summoner for his inability to alter his routine, even when his soul depends on it, also makes a strong point for adaptability in storytelling. The Friar, then, makes use of fraternal preaching technique, particularly its advocacy of a

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<sup>19</sup> See Pearsall's *Old English and Middle English Poetry* and Rex's "Chaucer and the Jews." The idea of the Prioress and her Tale as stereotypical is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Two.

situation-based flexibility of speech, in order to present a tale that provides both *sentence* and *solaas*.

By the conclusion of this thesis, it will be clear that Chaucer advocates a flexible style of speaking, one in which the interests of the audience are carefully considered in the effort to craft a memorable and engaging narrative. The final part of this study will examine Chaucer's support of an adaptable narrative and narrator from the perspective of his own position as a writer. Are the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole a lesson in the value of adaptability, both in their variety of narrative voices and their plethora of styles and subjects? What possible connections may this lesson have with the shift in Chaucer's world from a more oral culture to a more literary one? Through the examination of these questions, the wider implications of the Pardoner's, Prioress's and Friar's Tales will be illuminated and an argument made for Chaucer's advocacy of narrative flexibility in order to both entertain and educate one's audience.

## Chapter One: The Pardoner's Tale

Many scholars have argued that the Pardoner's Tale, despite its narrator's moral depravity, is a tour-de-force of dramatic storytelling, albeit one that does not meet with an overwhelmingly positive response from the pilgrims. Robert Jordan focuses on the tale's technical merits, praising its "swiftness and economy," "fervent accents and metaphorical language" while downplaying the role of the Pardoner's individual character in crafting the sermon (130-31). Donald Howard, despite his acknowledgement of the tale's failure with its audience, still considers the Pardoner's Tale an effective and "exciting" performance (349).<sup>20</sup> Derek Pearsall notes the utter consistency among the Pardoner's depiction in the General Prologue, his self-assessment in his own Prologue, and his chosen subject matter for his tale (*Canterbury* 91). He writes that the Pardoner puts on a "brilliant performance," if a hollow one, and that he acts "as if he exists only in the act of performance" (*Canterbury* 99). He adds that, for the Pardoner, no will is relevant but his own (*Canterbury* 98). If, however, Pearsall is correct in his statement that the Pardoner acts only by his will without considering the will of others, can his performance truly be effective?

While the Pardoner's Tale, when analysed as an independent story, may indeed be a narrative gem, it falters if one considers it inextricably linked to the Pardoner's entire performance, from his first words to the audience to the moment he is pushed into silence by the Host and the other pilgrims. In other words, an examination of the success of the Pardoner's Tale as a performance must take into account the circumstances in which the Pardoner speaks. The Pardoner, instructed to tell a moral tale, complies – but not before establishing his complete lack of credibility to tell such a tale. As a result, the Pardoner

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<sup>20</sup> This view is echoed by Frank Cespedes, who notes in a 1977 article "the Pardoner's effective but illegitimate manner of preaching" (7). One wonders, though, on what group the tale has been so "effective," as the audience that Chaucer has created to hear the Pardoner's Tale responds to it in a unanimously negative way.

endures reactions ranging from the pilgrims' laughter to the Host's rage. That the Pardoner gives his ill-fated sermon in the context of a storytelling competition is vital to an evaluation of its success, as the tale is being told for the purpose of winning over an audience.

Therefore, it is vital to distinguish between the popular assessment of the Pardoner's Tale as a narrative independent of its context (a view which provides insight into the tale's aesthetic merits but not its merits as a performance) and a performance-based assessment of the tale in which listener response is key to evaluating the success of the narrative. Given the environment that Chaucer has created for his characters, audience reaction is a vital and entirely necessary component in determining the artistic merit of any of the tales.

In this respect, one may connect this chapter's interpretation of the Pardoner's Tale to the tradition of modern Chaucerian interpretation spearheaded by George Lyman Kittredge. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, Kittredge championed a style of interpretation that examines closely the dynamic between the Canterbury pilgrims before, during and after each tale. His interpretation of the Pardoner relies heavily on a conception of that character as a psychologically realistic individual; Kittredge himself writes that in the Pardoner "convention is vitalized, and it is an individual that speaks, not a type" and reads the Pardoner's performance as the poignantly contradictory efforts of a man who, despite having "lost his soul," still shows ephemeral and tortured bursts of desire for a salvation which he will never achieve (22, 217). While Kittredge steps rather far in his perception of the Pardoner as a fully-fledged individual, his critic Robert Jordan delivers an exaggerated counterpoint, arguing that the Canterbury pilgrims only possess "nominal 'dramatic' identities" which eventually all dissolve into the voice of Chaucer the writer (127). While the Pardoner may not be a fully-rounded personality, his status as an amalgam of various public perceptions about pardoners does not preclude his ability to

give a performance which reflects his interests as a pilgrim (albeit a composite one) in the tale-telling contest. Kittredge's philosophy of character assessment, one that evaluates the pilgrims based largely on how the other pilgrims perceive them, is akin to the approach adopted here in analysing the reaction to the Pardoner's narrative.

It is hardly controversial, though, to note the pilgrims' dislike of the Pardoner's Tale. The more interesting issue is why the tale fails so miserably with its audience. Much of it may have to do with the vacuum of credibility that the Pardoner establishes as a result of candidly revealing his corruption immediately before he launches into his high-minded sermon. The sermon's substance is not the problem; indeed, no argument will be made here denying the technical praises which scholars like Howard, Jordan and Pearsall have heaped upon it. The sermon is a failure because it does not address the circumstances of the situation in which it is told, circumstances that the Pardoner has himself helped to shape by means of his confessional pre-tale speech.<sup>21</sup> By ignoring his immediate context and instead whipping out a sermon which he reveals he has used many times before, the Pardoner exhibits a preaching technique which violates one of the cardinal rules set forth in many medieval preaching texts: consider the audience.<sup>22</sup> By trotting off a cookie-cutter narrative seemingly by rote, the Pardoner does not tailor his tale to the company assembled;

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<sup>21</sup> Alan Fletcher has argued that critics who "take the *Prologue* with the bulk of the *Tale* to comprise the Pardoner's complete sermon" ignore the Pardoner's own distinction (in the words "Lordynges, in chirches whan I preche") "between the professional preaching Pardoner and the confessional Pardoner as he presents himself to the pilgrims" ("Preaching" 21). While this argument works if one only analyses the Pardoner's sermon as a sermon, it is less useful if one remembers that the Pardoner preaches his sermon as part of a performance designed to win over the audience. With the Pardoner's ultimate motivation in mind, it is vital to examine how he comports himself from the moment he begins to speak to the other pilgrims, regardless of whether he has begun his tale proper.

<sup>22</sup> Fletcher, in his article "The Pardoner and Preaching," offers a complementary view; he maintains that the Pardoner's Prologue and Tale are meant to be "polemical, even if only obliquely, about contemporary preaching" and that the Pardoner's artistically elaborate sermon form would have grated against the desire of Chaucer's 1390s London contemporaries for a simpler preaching style, a desire Fletcher is careful to note was not exclusive to Lollards (16, 33-34).

he does not perform for them, but for himself, and this self-centredness ensures that his tale will not appeal to his audience.<sup>23</sup>

Derek Pearsall's analysis of the Pardoner argues that Chaucer's portrait of that character depicts his "zero-psychology"; he contends that the Pardoner is a character for which no world exists outside of his own will (*Canterbury* 98). However, this lack of cognizance of a world outside himself is precisely why his tale is a failure as a performance; particularly given the competitive context, it is imperative that the Pardoner take the will of the audience into account should he wish his performance to succeed. He fails to do this, choosing instead to give a sermon whose moral condescension ignores how the Pardoner changes the dynamic between himself and the group only minutes before through his admission of cupidity. The Pardoner's failure to anticipate how such an admission would require him to change the tone of his tale results in that tale's chilly reception by the audience.

Donald Howard adopts a view somewhat more in line with that being proposed in this chapter; he writes, "Certainly it is true that the Pardoner *wills* the role he plays. He says so: 'I wol noon of the apostles countrefete'. In rejecting the prescribed role-model and playing himself, he decides against the whole world" (374). This adversarial relationship with his audience, though, is precisely the source of the Pardoner's failure. Granted, the

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<sup>23</sup> Psychoanalytic approaches to assessing the Pardoner's character have elicited controversy in recent years (for a strong argument against them, see Lee Patterson's 2001 article "Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch: Psyche and Clio in Medieval Literary Studies"); even so, it is worth mentioning selected articles whose conclusions are consistent with this chapter's general argument about the Pardoner's solipsism. Susanne Sara Thomas's "Textual Exhibitionism: The Pardoner's Affirmation of Text over Context" argues that the Pardoner's reliance on his papal bulls and false pardons reflects "the questionable nature of his own oral and sexual potency"; while that tangent seems somewhat far-fetched, Thomas's statement that the Pardoner's dependence on his written documents "is an attempt to deny or supercede the idea of oral context" which leads him to misjudge the environment of his performance is more in line with the view proposed in this chapter (134-38). More plausible is Donald Fritz's reading of the Pardoner as a textbook narcissist, displaying the classic symptoms of exhibitionism, deceit, fear of commitment and a lack of self-esteem; particularly striking is Fritz's observation that the Pardoner's Prologue features the word "I" fifty-two times in 133 lines (338, 342-43).

Pardoner does employ a number of rhetorical techniques, which Howard says range from a sense of intimacy and conspiracy with the audience to a deliberate condescension towards those fools who would believe in the authenticity of his relics (350-54). While the Tale itself may demonstrate the Pardoner's efforts to construct an aura of piety, however, these efforts have come on the heels of his soul-baring self-description in his Introduction and Prologue, thus rendering the performance hollow and useless. Howard's opinion of the Pardoner's performance leaves unanswered the question of how the pilgrim audience would have taken the Pardoner's Tale after hearing only moments before of the Pardoner's true and corrupt self, and it is evident that their negative reaction cannot be ignored by any evaluation of the merits of the tale. The Pardoner's carelessness, due largely to his selfishness and failure to follow the principle of preaching to one's particular audience, has led him to follow by rote the same formula he follows all the time; by not judging the uniqueness of this situation, and realising that, in this particular circumstance, to "countrefete" a more pious performing identity may ultimately be in his best interests, the Pardoner's tale is doomed to failure.

Given that the Pardoner is described as drinking ale at more than one point during the sections dedicated to him, it may seem reasonable to ascribe his frankness to his drunkenness. Ignoring for the moment the fact that the Pardoner is never explicitly described as being drunk, it must still be noted that even if the Pardoner were inebriated, this simple fact is not as important as why the Pardoner's frankness is so offensive. If one lays aside the assumption that the Pardoner is, in fact, a superior performer, one begins to get some answers. As already postulated, by ignoring one of the principal tenets of medieval preaching – that is, to consider and adapt to one's audience in all efforts to spread the word of God – the Pardoner is doomed the moment he begins to recite his tale. In the

context of the storytelling competition, the members of the pilgrim audience seek *solaas* with their *sentence*, entertainment with their edification. While the Pardoner does offer an entertaining exemplum with a sound moral core, the story's *sentence* rings hollow when set beside the Pardoner's disclosure of his swindling techniques. Unfortunately, the Pardoner treats this particular audience in the same way he treats the gullible audiences about whom he boasts to the present company, thus alienating himself from the pilgrims and ensuring that they will not wish to gain any *solaas* from a character who respects them so little. The Pardoner has been foolish in treating all of his audiences in the same manner, a feat made even more ridiculous by the fact that, through his confession, the Pardoner has made this particular audience special by opening their eyes to his villainy.

An analysis of the Pardoner, and particularly of his candour, would not be complete without some discussion of what many critics believe to be the Pardoner's closest analogue: the figure of Faux-Semblant in Jean de Meun's continuation of the thirteenth-century medieval French allegory *Le Roman de la Rose*.<sup>24</sup> This influential work has at its core the quest of the young Amant to find true love, embodied in the form of the Rose. Along the way, numerous allegorical figures attempt to obstruct his path to love. Faux Semblant, dressed as a Dominican friar, is one of them, although he makes a seemingly sincere confession to the God of Love stating that he wishes to enlist in his army and help Amant win the Rose (Calin 337). Chaucer was quite familiar with the *Roman*; in fact, he translated it into Middle English in the late 1360s (Pearsall *Geoffrey Chaucer* 308).<sup>25</sup> William Calin offers

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<sup>24</sup> Apart from William Calin, whose views are discussed above, see Alan Fletcher's "The Topical Hypocrisy of Chaucer's Pardoner," Jane Chance's "'Disfigured is thy face': Chaucer's Pardoner and the Protean Shape-Shifter Fals-Semblant" and Lee Patterson's chapter on the Pardoner in *Chaucer and the Subject of History*.

<sup>25</sup> The depictions of some of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims were influenced by allegorical figures from the *Roman de la Rose*; in addition to the links between the Pardoner and Faux-Semblant discussed above, William Calin sees similarities between the Wife of Bath and the figure of La Vieille, a bawdy old woman not unlike

an insightful comparison between Chaucer's Pardoner and Faux-Semblant, noting how the latter, "the embodiment of hypocrisy...[reveals] the truth about himself" to his audience, confessing his corruption for the purpose of swaying them to accept his offer of help (337). In doing so, Faux-Semblant "ceases to be himself. In effect he denies his own essence and yet, in another sense, by so doing he becomes most truly himself" (Calin 337). Calin remarks that the Pardoner ultimately stumbles because he "is a brilliant but corrupt manipulator of language" (337). This distinction between the two characters, though, is not quite complete. The Pardoner's failure is due not so much to his corrupt ability to manipulate language as to his failure to manipulate language when he should: at the point when he reveals all in his Prologue. The Pardoner differs from Faux-Semblant in how he uses his particular confession. Whereas Faux-Semblant makes a calculated revelation of his personality in order to gain sympathy and thus get his way, the Pardoner's confession does not serve any similar kind of master plan. In fact, the tale with which the Pardoner follows up his moment of truth is only hurt by the Pardoner's previous candour. By refusing to modify his public performance in order to maximise audience satisfaction, either by holding his tongue in his Prologue or by recounting a less sanctimonious tale, the Pardoner reveals that he has no overriding strategy for winning over his particular audience. His lack of attention to the specific situation ends up costing him his audience's respect.

Why has the Pardoner failed to develop an effective preaching strategy? Could his failure be reflective of a lack of preaching skill in the real pardoners of Chaucer's day? Such an historical investigation yields little fruit for two reasons. Firstly, scholarship in the area of pardoners' training is both limited and dated; the most detailed account of pardoners'

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Chaucer's Wife (326-27). Calin's assessment of La Vieille (and, by extension, the Wife of Bath) contends that she, "if not a rounded person, becomes a vibrant, living, dynamic persona, in a philosophical and satirical genre wherein ideas contribute to psychology, and psychology shapes and gives expression to ideas," words that may easily be used to describe the characterisation of Chaucer's pilgrims (327).

qualifications is found in Owst, who contends that pardoners were “often indeed as unlicensed in [their] general behaviour as in [their] offices” (*Preaching* 99). Because of the paucity of information on the education of pardoners, it is difficult to determine whether the Pardoner’s speaking techniques are typical of his instruction. More importantly, however, to examine too closely the actual circumstances of fourteenth-century pardoners in an effort to better understand Chaucer’s Pardoner veers dangerously close to treating the Pardoner as a psychologically plausible individual. As argued in the introduction, Chaucer appears to develop his characters more as a representation of how the public perceived people of that station than as a faithful depiction of any one individual. Given both that general perception can often exaggerate and stereotype any personal characteristic and that popular opinion is often all that is presented to the average reader, it is better to analyse the Pardoner’s style as a reflection of how people thought he would have preached rather than assume he preaches as pardoners actually did. It is likely that the Pardoner is assigned the task of demonstrating what not to do in preaching simply because pardoners were almost universally vilified in late medieval England. This is the position argued by Alan Fletcher, who contends that Chaucer had the Pardoner embody the image of a corrupt and ineffective preacher in order to bypass the controversy that would have arisen had he assigned the tale to either a Lollard or a friar, both of which were, depending on the theological position taken, condemned for embracing corrupt preaching practices (“Topical” 118-19). That said, it is clear that, whether the Pardoner preaches according to popular stereotype or actual practice, his technique has failed in comparison with that of the Friar, whose speaking will be shown to be consistent with much of what mendicant friars in Chaucer’s day were seen to have been taught about preaching. The Pardoner’s

biggest error is his failure to recognise the tastes and reactions of his audience; his insistence on sticking to a pre-determined plan is his undoing.

The General Prologue's physical description of the Pardoner has been discussed by others in terms of its relation to the Pardoner as a storyteller. Charles Owen remarks, "[For] a man whose success depends so entirely on a public performance, [the Pardoner's] physical makeup, described in the first half of the portrait, provides a considerable handicap" (82). Indeed, most analyses of the Pardoner's appearance as a reflection of his personality have led to conclusions about his character of which his audience would not likely have been receptive. Pearsall offers a brief but insightful survey of some of these interpretations, ranging from Curry's 1926 conclusion that the Pardoner's "long fair hair, his glaring eyes, his thin-pitched voice, [and] his beardlessness" reflected his status as a "congenital eunuch" to the numerous critics who cite the Pardoner's somewhat effeminate personal appearance as proof that Chaucer envisioned him as a homosexual (*Canterbury* 93-4).

By the pilgrim Chaucer's own account, though, the Pardoner believes that he cuts quite the fashionable figure. This is made evident by Chaucer's statement in the General Prologue that the Pardoner "thoughte he rood al of the newe jet" — so much so, in fact, that he stashes his hood in his bag, wishing to present the finest image possible (GP 680-83). The Pardoner's desire to be admired by others notwithstanding, Chaucer shows us in the General Prologue just how out of touch the Pardoner is with those around him. Chaucer's manner of phrasing that the Pardoner *thinks* he is the height of fashion (a statement whose subtle ambiguity has also been noted by Jill Mann) suggests that his opinion is not shared by the rest of the company, yet the Pardoner pushes forth proudly, not covering himself to spare his neighbours, but baring his head to flaunt what he believes is his astute sense of

style (Mann 148). The Pardoner's lack of regard for popular trends and favouring of his own taste over that of those watching him may strike a blow for individualism, but it also gives the reader a hint of the Pardoner's fatal performance flaw: instead of catering to the will of his audience, he considers only his own, thus ensuring that his tale will please only himself.

The Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale begins with Harry Bailly expressing how he has been moved by the Physician's Tale of the doomed heroine Virginia. Since the Host's reaction to the Physician's Tale opens the section with which the reader becomes acquainted with the Pardoner, an examination of why the Host is shown to be so impressed may help in understanding the tone set in the description of the Pardoner and the telling of his tale. To this end, the Physician's final couplet may offer a clue: "Therefore I rede yow this conseil take: / Forsaketh synne, er synne yow forsake" (PhyT 285-86). The Physician's warning against sin contrasts sharply with his portrayal in the General Prologue as a lover of gold all too aware of how his wealth derives from others' illness (443-44, 425-28).<sup>26</sup> It could be argued that the Physician tells such a moral tale in order to maintain the position of respect one expects a "Doctour of Physik" would have among the assembled company, whether or not his actual personality merits it. The Physician knows what his audience expects of a person in his role and tells a tale consistent with that perception. While the Pardoner also tells a tale which corresponds to his position in the Church, the Physician succeeds where the Pardoner fails because the former does not once refer to his more

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<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Lee Patterson (who has also noted the Physician's Tale's moral tone and deemed it "a 'countrefete' hagiography") writes that the Physician's authoritative moral tone, exemplified in his final words, sets the scene for the Pardoner to forsake his own sin in a way which echoes the medieval formulae for confession (*History* 369-70). Given the inherently private and self-centred nature of confession, though, subscribing to the view that the Pardoner follows confession convention in his performance only complements his depiction as a self-obsessed individual who is unable to recognise the impropriety of such a private discourse in his public context.

flawed, greed-driven tendencies. He tells the audience what they want to hear and thus keeps his self-presentation consistent. The strategy is a hit, at least with the most important member of the audience: the judge of the competition. The Host is convinced of the Physician's respectability, calling him a "propre man" (Intro PardT 309).

With the tone thus set, the Host asks the Pardoner to tell a mirthful tale (Intro PardT 319). Significantly, the Pardoner agrees with a compliance that later suits the proudly irreverent personality he projects in his Prologue (Intro PT 321-22). However, in a gesture that reminds the reader of the importance of the pilgrim audience's tastes in determining the course of the storytelling competition, the assembled group calls on the Pardoner to tell a moral tale, saying, " 'Nay, let hym telle us of no ribaudrye! / Tel us som moral thing, that we may lere / Som wit, and thane wol we gladly here' " (Intro PardT 324-26). Why does the group wish to hear the Pardoner tell a high-minded story? Presumably the pilgrims are accustomed to hearing such moral tales come from the lips of people in the Pardoner's position; regardless of the Pardoner's personal conduct, the role suggested by his profession has created certain expectations of the kind of morality he will project to others. While the Pardoner does acquiesce, agreeing to tell a more sermon-like story, he notes that he must think (and drink) before coming up with an honest story to relate, a seeming indication that such tales do not come naturally to him (Intro PardT 327-28). This explanation seems odd, however, given that the Pardoner ends up telling a tale which he claims he knows by heart (PardP 332). Perhaps the Pardoner is not thinking so much of what tale he will tell as what he will tell before the tale; motivated by his desire to show off his prowess at fleecing his audiences, the Pardoner opts to preface his tale with a grand description of his accomplishments as a confidence man. By considering only his own will, though (and a short-term will at that), the Pardoner fails to ponder how his stock sermon will fit into what

he says before delivering it. This lack of active attention to the immediate context in which the tale is told will cost him the respect of the audience.

In the Prologue, the Pardoner makes the fatal error of being too frank, divulging various techniques for fleecing his “lewed” audiences; in doing so, the Pardoner reveals his inner self and thus sets the stage for a tale that, as A.C. Spearing puts it, “is made into an expression of the whole personality of the pilgrim who tells it, so that teller and tale are hardly separable, and the tale and all its surrounding material are fused into a dramatic monologue” (*Pardoner’s Tale* 1-2). While all of the *Canterbury Tales* are, in a sense, monologues in that each narrator speaks with virtually no interruption, the Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale are more monological than perhaps any other of the Tales, because of (as Spearing notes) the Pardoner’s decision to bind himself to the tale he tells. By considering only his own immediate desires – first to confess all manner of greed and then to tell a tale condemning it – the Pardoner considers only his own will, not that of his audience; this state may be contributed to the Pardoner’s over-reliance on memorisation which he outlines before his tale (PardP 332). In the end, the audience gets its moral tale, but only after its potency has been ruined by the Pardoner’s disclosure of his villainy.

The Pardoner starts wading into dangerous territory when he describes his false relics to the pilgrims, from the supposedly holy waters whose ingestion is said to bestow various blessings to the magical mitten into which one slips one’s hand in order to have a good crop (PardP 350-74). The powers of these “relics” are entirely fictional, but those who buy them do so because they desire them, and the Pardoner usually tells them what they want to hear: that the relics will exercise magical powers. However, by revealing the charade to this particular audience, the Pardoner performs the exact opposite function, telling the pilgrims the awful truth – exactly what they do *not* wish to know.

A similar strategy is employed by the Pardoner when he describes the way in which he delivers his sermons to unsuspecting audiences. The Pardoner begins by noting that, when he preaches in churches, he makes an effort to speak in a high style and fill the room with his resonant voice (PardP 329-32).<sup>27</sup> The Pardoner reveals that he has a good vocal technique; because he is utterly in control of the timbre and volume of his voice, he knows that his words resonate with his audiences. Later, when he speaks of how he changes his physical appearance and gestures to best influence his audience, we get an even stronger sense of how the Pardoner normally takes great pains to show the audience what they want to see:

“Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke,  
 And est and west upon the peple I bekke,  
 As dooth a dowve sittynge on a berne.  
 Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne  
 That it is joye to se my bisynesse.” (PardP 395-99)

The overall impression portrayed in passages such as these is a sense of effort, both physical and mental, of the Pardoner in his quest to gain his listeners’ ear (and, no doubt, their money). By his very admission of such tactics, though, the Pardoner does not consider the reaction of his listeners to such descriptions of his efforts. As one sees at the conclusion of the Pardoner’s Tale, the pilgrims are none too impressed.

The final section of the Pardoner’s Prologue sees the most explicit statements yet of that character’s true motives. While the reader has already gathered a clear sense of the Pardoner’s pecuniary motives for preaching, granting pardons and bestowing relics, the

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<sup>27</sup> Cespedes offers a different reading of these lines, arguing that the Pardoner’s “theatrical delivery” is at odds with preaching advice, including that found in Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana*, encouraging a more subdued, less overwrought style of speech (6).

Pardoner removes any lingering doubts as to his intentions with his insistence, repeated in various ways throughout the Prologue, that “[his] entente is nat but for to wynne, / And nothing for correccioun of sin” (403-4, 423-24, 433). However, the Pardoner maintains that despite his moral failings, he can still tell a moral tale, if only to make some money at it in the process (PardP 459-61). In maintaining that he can keep his inner sinfulness separate from his ability to recount a moral tale, however, the Pardoner ensures that that moral tale will never be appreciated by his audience, given that he has through his candour only moments before shattered any semblance of respect that his listeners may have granted him because of his position.

By refusing to cater to his audience’s expectations, the Pardoner has left himself only one way of getting his listeners to pay even a modicum of attention to his tale: he must alter it to make it less sanctimonious in order to suit the changed circumstances of the narrator-audience dynamic, circumstances which he himself changed. The Pardoner, however, does not take this opportunity to save his performance, opting instead to tell the moral tale he had initially promised his audience. While it may seem like the Pardoner is making an effort to satisfy his listeners’ original desire to hear him tell a moral tale, the fact that the Pardoner has altered the relationship between himself and his audience renders this strategy disastrous.

One wonders why the Pardoner decides to continue with this original sermon-style story. A reason may be found at the beginning of the Pardoner’s Prologue when he declares, “For I can al by rote that I telle” (332). The Pardoner presses forth with his moral tale simply because he *always* presses forth with his moral tale. While this strategy may work like a charm on the audiences with whom the Pardoner is less honest, such a tale cannot work under the present circumstances between the Pardoner and his listeners. The

Pardoner, though, fails to take this into account (whether out of laziness, contempt for his audience, or both) and proceeds with his tried-and-true plan.

While the Pardoner may attempt to tell his customary moral tale, the substance and imagery of the story reflect the Pardoner's inability or lack of desire to control his tale, to shape it into something that his audience will accept and appreciate. This loss of control is cleverly if subconsciously depicted through the Pardoner's beginning his tale with an exceptionally long and detailed treatise against various uncontrolled behaviours. In particular, the emphasis on gluttony and over-imbibing is astounding; the Pardoner expresses his low opinion of such behaviours with a ferocity that suggests a sense of projection on his part. While the Pardoner is not shown anywhere in the narrative to be a glutton (except figuratively, perhaps, for money), he embodies a glutton's uncontrolled self-absorption and subservience to his own needs in his inability to tailor his narrative to anyone's will but his own. This parallel suggests itself on several occasions, including when the Pardoner states, "Allas, the short throte, the tendre mouth, / Maketh that est and west and north and south... / To gete a glotoun deyntee mete and drynke!" (PardT 517-20). In these lines, the Pardoner makes the same use of the "est and west" image and the idea of the throat as he does in his Prologue when he says of his preaching techniques, "[P]eyne I me to strecche forth the nekke, / And est and west upon the peple I bekke" (PardP 395-96). An implicit contrast is made here between the gluttonous behaviour of the denizens of the tavern in which the rioters are first described and the Pardoner's supposed control over his oratorical performances. By associating this purported mastery of preaching with the uncontrolled consumption of the gluttons, though, Chaucer has the Pardoner give the reader an unintentional hint that the latter's narratives are not always as calculated and controlled as he may like to think.

The Pardoner's revealing commentary on excess continues with an expression of his views on drunkenness:

Allas, a foul thing is it, by my feith,  
 To seye this word, and fouler is the dede,  
 Whan man so drynketh of the white and rede  
 That of his throte he maketh his pryvee  
 Thurgh thilke cursed superfluitee. (PardT 524-28)

While the Pardoner condemns drunkenness, he does so in terms that may easily be applied to his own behaviour. Through his inability to control the substance of his tale, fuelled by his inherent self-centredness and satisfaction of only his own whims, the Pardoner has made his own throat his privy in the sense that it contains the undesirable results of his self-absorbed narrative interests. This idea is reinforced by the Pardoner's reference to the glutton's stomach: "O wombe! O bely! O stinking cod, / Fulfild of donge and of corrupcioun! / At either ende of the foule is the soun" (PardT 534-36). By stating that the results of excessive indulgence include foulness both of one's mouth and of the sounds emanating from it, the Pardoner unwittingly makes yet another connection between the glutton's lack of control over his appetites and his own inability to restrain his self-interest in telling his story.

When the Pardoner finally turns to his tale of the three young revellers, it becomes clear (to everyone, it seems, but the Pardoner) that his protagonists share his failing of a lack of control motivated by intense self-absorption. This is shown throughout the tale, from the Pardoner's initial situation of the rioters in the midst of a sea of gluttony to the trio's plainly self-interested actions. Significantly, though, the men's conceit and resultant

actions lead to their downfall, foreshadowing the Pardoner's own narrative self-destruction before his audience.

As mentioned above, the Tale begins with a description of "a compaignye / Of yonge folk" whose excesses range from merriment to gambling, drinking, eating and women—in other words, a group who engages in "superfluitee abhominable" (PardT 463-67, 471). When the Pardoner finally returns to this setting after a lengthy digression condemning these excesses, he introduces the three young men central to his tale; the first lines describing them demonstrate how they fit perfectly into the established setting of excess: "Thise ryotoures three of which I telle, / Longe erst pryme rong of any belle, / Were set hem in a taverne for to drinke" (PardT 661-63). The Pardoner has chosen to say of the three men, before anything else, that well before nine in the morning they are in the tavern drinking. The rioters are thus introduced as driven by their own excesses—words that could easily be used to describe the Pardoner.

When the young men are first told of the passing of an old companion, they are warned by the messenger that Death, the man's slayer, is a force not to be taken lightly:

"And maister, er ye come in his presence,

Me thinketh that it were necessarie

For to be war of swich an adversarie:

Beth redy for to mete him everemore.

Thus taughte me my dame, I seye namore." (PardT 680-84)

Here, the boy offers the trio some useful advice while at the same time making it known that it is counsel he himself has learnt from someone else: his mother. The owner of the tavern also attempts to warn the men about Death, saying that the boy speaks truthfully

and that “[t]o been avysed greet wisdom it were, / Er that [Death] dide a man a dishonour” (PardT 690-91).

The rioters’ response to this offered advice is a pivotal point in the Pardoner’s Tale. Instead of listening to the concerns and advice of two individuals more experienced with Death than they, the rioters vow to rush ahead and slay their friend’s destroyer:

“Ye, Goddes armes,” quod this ryotour,

“Is it swich peril with him for to mete?

I shal him seke by wey and eek by strete,

I make avow to Goddes digne bones!

Herkneth, felawes, we three been al ones:

Lat ech of us holde up his hand til other,

And ech of us bicomen otheres brother,

And we wol sleen this false traytour Deeth.” (PardT 692-99)

The passage above is significant for two main reasons. Firstly, it is notable that, while the man asks whether Death is truly so threatening, he does not wait for an answer, suggesting that he does not care for the opinion of either the boy or the innkeeper. This self-centredness and lack of concern with reality spur the rioters to swear their impetuous oath. There is another item of interest, though. The man asserts that he and his companions are all of one mind; this makes their later murder of each other a form of self-destruction (PardT 696). This self-destruction parallels that of the Pardoner, and both are effected for reasons of self-absorption and unwillingness to value others’ opinions when making decisions – whether that decision is to kill Death or to alter one’s tale to suit changing circumstances.

The figure of the old man is also vital in demonstrating the rioters' fatal self-absorption. This is evident through the disrespect accorded the old man by the three youths at the moment of their meeting. While the old man, upon seeing the trio, hails them with a "Now, lordes, God yow see!" the young men reply by calling him a "carl" and asking how someone so very old can yet be living (PardT 715, 717-19). This lack of respect grows even more egregious after the old man advises the young men not to show unwarranted rudeness to their elders (PardT 739-47). The rioters, significantly, do not heed this advice, but instead continue to harangue the old man as to the whereabouts of Death (PardT 750-57). The old man replies,

"Now sires...if that yow be so leef  
 To finde Deeth, turne up this croked wey,  
 For in that grove I lafte him, by my fey,  
 Under a tree, and there he wol abyde:  
 Nat for youre boost he wol him nothing hyde." (PardT 760-64)

With these words, the old man sets in motion the series of events that will lead to the rioters' ultimate punishment. Aware that finding Death is their single-minded, self-centred goal, the old man directs the men to the gold that will be the death of all three. As if to reinforce his point (not to the trio, who are largely oblivious to the words of others, but to the reader), the old man notes that not even the young men's boasting will prevent them from finding death, an understatement illustrating the fact that it is the trio's self-exaltation and subsequent lack of regard for others which has led them to death in the first place.

Upon finding the gold, the three men further ensure their doom by concluding that the money was given them by Fortune so that they might enjoy themselves with the wild abandon to which they have all become accustomed (PardT 779-81). At this point, the trio's

fate is sealed. By opting to use the money to fuel their various excesses, their regard for no one's will but their own is made patently clear. Soon after, the three begin to succumb to the greed that will be their undoing. Just as the three have shown utter disregard for the will of all others, it is at this point that each begins to view the others as unworthy and expendable. This is shown when one of the rioters is sent back to town to buy dinner for all; while he buys poison with which to kill his companions, the two who remain with the money plot to stab him when he returns (PardT 802-78). As noted earlier, the three friends have sworn that they are of one mind; thus, when they begin to turn against each other, it can be seen as a type of self-destruction – the only fitting end for a trio for whom nothing of interest exists outside of their own mind. The result is inevitable: the three murder each other out of greed and self-interest (PardT 696, 879-88).

One would imagine that the Pardoner's ultimate message at the end of his tale would be one counselling against greed and condemning murder. While the Pardoner does lament "traytours homicyde," however, he does not address directly the issue of greed, choosing instead to curse "glotonye, luxurie, and hasardrye," all manifestations of an individual's uncontrolled will (PardT 895-97). This condemnation of excess, particularly gluttony, brings the reader back to the beginning of the Pardoner's Tale and, by extension, to the Pardoner's link to the young rioters in the quartet's common rampant self-absorption.

At this point, after he has spent copious amounts of time professing his true motives to his audience and recounting a tale which (despite himself) warns against the self-absorbed pursuit of one's own will over that of others, the Pardoner reverts to the spiel which he uses on his so-called "lewed" audiences in order to get them to buy pardons and relics of dubious provenance (PardP 392). He declares during this speech that the pilgrims are lucky to have such a person as he on their journey:

It is an honour to everich that is heer  
 That ye mowe have a suffisant pardoner  
 T'assoille yow in contree as ye ryde,  
 For adventures whiche that may bityde. (PardT 931-34)

Why the Pardoner suddenly attempts at this juncture to make the shift in persona to that of a bona fide religious authority is unclear. Scholars have advanced ideas ranging from attributing the slip to his drunkenness to his simply forgetting that he was not speaking to an audience ignorant of his methods, but instead one quite savvy to his ways (Pearsall, *Canterbury* 94). Kittredge writes that the Pardoner's rhetoric is effective only on himself, reminding him of his once-moral nature and sending him into "a very paroxysm of agonized sincerity" which soon sees him inappropriately absolve the pilgrims (217). This interpretation leans towards an individualised psychological portrait of the Pardoner.<sup>28</sup> More plausible is a conclusion which Kittredge draws only slightly before his above statement; specifically, he argues that "momentum" carries the Pardoner through his sermon to the point where he offers them the relics he made known were fake, and that this slip reveals how the Pardoner has lost his sense of who he is and to whom he is speaking.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Kittredge's treatment of characters as psychologically realistic portraits has been modified, but not entirely rejected, by many scholars. Lee Patterson offers in a note to his *Chaucer and the Subject of History* a concise summary of academic reaction to Kittredge, writing that "[t]he majority of contemporary critics, including those who draw upon recent psychoanalytical paradigms, adopt Kittredge's general position, with the exception of those who, like myself, seek to locate the Pardoner within traditional literary and theological contexts," adding that some critics believe that "an exegetical reading can be accommodated to the norms of psychological realism" (385, *n.*). This later trend of compromise between the individualisation of the Pardoner and his placement within a tradition or type corresponds closely to this chapter's assessment of the Pardoner's character.

<sup>29</sup> In his analysis of the Pardoner's preaching techniques, Frank Cespedes examines the Pauline epistle from which the Pardoner takes his theme "*Radix malorum est cupiditas*" ("the love of money is the root of all evils"); he finds that Paul distinguishes between the good preacher, who focuses on a holy message, and the bad preacher, who "is characterized by a certain superfluous but dangerous facility with language, by his 'babbling' and 'strifes of words'" (3). This "babbling" suggests a loss of control similar to Kittredge's view on the Pardoner's "momentum."

The Pardoner's lack of active care in assessing his circumstances and relating to his audience spells failure for his performance.

It is clear from the self-centredness seen in both the Pardoner's Prologue and in the protagonists of his Tale that the Pardoner's shift from a tell-all attitude to an assumption of airs of devotion stems from a combination of utter solipsism, the "momentum" of which Kittredge writes and a fatal dependence on reciting by rote. With these factors comes failure. The Pardoner's attention to no one's will but his own and his tendency to work from a preaching formula that has worked several times before cause him to ignore the particular circumstances of a situation which, through his unexpected candour, he helped to create.

It is reasonable to think that, once the pilgrims have learnt all they need to know of the Pardoner's true self, they no longer have a reason to listen to him with anything more than a sense of amused condescension at best and insulted anger at worst. Thus, when the Pardoner performs the *coup de grâce* in offering up his relics to the Host, the Host responds with utter rage (PardT 946-55). Even worse, perhaps, the rest of the pilgrims laugh, suggesting a lack of respect for the tale and its teller so strong that it merits no response beyond laughter (PardT 961).

Interestingly, the audience's reaction pushes the Pardoner into silence: "This Pardoner answered nat a word; / So wroth he was, no word ne wolde he seye" (PardT 956-57). Howard notes that the Pardoner's Tale is unique in the *Canterbury Tales* in that it ends with a voice other than that of the pilgrim narrating the tale (370). While Howard believes that "[t]he effect [of the Pardoner's silence] is to put us at a distance from the Pardoner's character and from the final incident itself," one may also see the Pardoner's silence as a form of poetic justice. For quite a long while, the Pardoner was able to expound views that

catered to no other will but his own; now, shamed into silence, the Pardoner must necessarily listen to the views of others, particularly their views about him.

So many scholars have praised the narrative and rhetorical skill of the Pardoner's Tale that it is tempting to view the Pardoner's exemplum as a clever piece of rhetorical handiwork that can and should be evaluated on its own.<sup>30</sup> To ignore, however, the context which surrounds the exemplum—the Pardoner's confession of his swindling tricks, his long tirade against gluttony, gambling and swearing, and his sheer chutzpah in offering his false relics to the pilgrims at the conclusion of his tale—is to ignore how the Pardoner has chosen to present himself and relate to his audience. The choices made in these areas will determine whether or not the Pardoner's Tale is a hit with the audience. Since the competition ranks the pilgrims based on their tale's audience response, the reader must also weigh the tales' successes as performances based on the pilgrims' reaction. It is by looking at the Pardoner's relationship with his listeners that we realise that he has sabotaged his chances of success almost as soon as he opens his mouth. Through the Pardoner's self-characterisation as a wretched man, and his refusal to accommodate that characterisation through the tale he tells, Chaucer paints a portrait of a man who decides to rank his own tastes over those of his audience, a decision that violates the preaching techniques which we will later see work so well for the Friar. By considering only his own mind rather than those of his listeners, the Pardoner ignores the external context in which he performs and thus refuses to recognise the circumstances under which the tale will fail or succeed. By defying his audience's expectations and prefacing the moral tale they desire with a detailed

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<sup>30</sup> In summarising this opinion, it is appropriate to cite Kittredge one final time; he notes of the Pardoner's Tale, "In studying the structure and proportions of this matchless short-story, we must, of course, disregard the long preachment against drink, dicing, and oaths" (21). This rather convenient edit dodges the fact that we cannot disregard any of what the Pardoner says, as it is all part of his performance and must therefore be considered in any assessment of the Pardoner's success as a performer.

description of his personal villainy, the Pardoner shows his lack of respect for his audience, one reinforced by his automatic attempts to dupe them thereafter by preaching his standard sermon and offering his “relics” for sale. Despite itself, however, the Pardoner’s Tale reveals how one is punished for subscribing uncontrollably to one’s own will while showing a complete disregard for others. While the Pardoner may not realise the ultimate message of his tale, the reader does, and also recognises how the rioters’ self-destruction at the end of the tale reflects the Pardoner’s own failure and humiliation at the conclusion of his monologue.

## Chapter Two: The Prioress's Tale

### *Psallam spiritu et mente*

The above motto of the Royal School of Church Music (the bane of many an English choirboy) may be translated to read "I will sing with the spirit and with the understanding also." These words become especially significant in an analysis of the Prioress and her tale of a young, tuneful "clergeon" (PrT 503). The Prioress's Tale, in both its style and content, highlight the importance of performing with both one's heart and one's mind fully engaged, as well as the dangers of letting the former dominate the development of one's performance.

One may wonder how a chapter on the Prioress and her Tale finds its way into a discussion of preaching and storytelling in the *Canterbury Tales*. It is true that, in the Middle Ages, nuns were not permitted to preach, an interdiction that became even more strictly enforced in the High Middle Ages (Shahar 23).<sup>31</sup> Despite this, nuns were a main audience for sermons; generally, however, these sermons were of a particular kind, tailored to respond to certain stereotypes about nuns. While it has been argued by several scholars that women, particularly religious women, were more educated in religious matters than often thought, the common perception of nuns as unschooled and preoccupied with emotion rather than reason persisted in Chaucer's England.<sup>32</sup> Specifically, there was a belief that nuns' heightened emotional nature was more suited to the reception of lighter religious fare

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<sup>31</sup> More information on women and preaching may be found in H. Leith Spencer's *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*, which features a brief section on the fine line "between private teaching and public preaching" walked by Margery Kempe and certain Lollard women (52-53). While those Wycliffite women who played a preacher-like role in their communities generally kept their activities on a very low profile, Kempe was quite open about her appreciation of preaching, learning a great deal about various preachers and their sermons and colouring her own speech with exempla which at times seemed "remarkably like preaching to her contemporaries" (Spencer 52-54).

<sup>32</sup> The views of these scholars, which include Felicity Riddy and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, will be addressed at a later point in this chapter.

such as the more “popular” type of sermon. This “popular” preaching was criticised by many in its time for its excessively dramatic rhetoric, and one sees these qualities in the Prioress’s heartrending tale.<sup>33</sup> Thus, many critics have read the Prioress’s Tale as Chaucer’s critique of the excessive sentimentality of more popular forms of religious expression. Derek Pearsall maintains that the tale may best be seen “as [an exercise] in certain modes of popular and sentimental religiosity,” and Richard Rex argues that Chaucer satirises the Prioress’s sensibilities through her hyper-emotional tale (Pearsall, *Old and Middle English* 208; Rex, “Chaucer and the Jews” 120). A tale of this nature is in perfect keeping with the image of the Prioress presented both in the General Prologue and in her self-constructed preamble to the Tale: that of a delicate, genteel, pious woman with a predilection to courtly rather than conventual manners.

A major concern of the Prioress’s Tale, one in keeping both with the Prioress’s character and with public perception of nuns’ education in Chaucer’s day, is its emphasis on rote learning. Louise Fradenburg writes in an influential article that

[l]earning, in the *Prioress’s Tale*, is itself an object of phobia; it is figured as a terrifying alteration of innerness by the outside world or outside events. Learning and speaking by rote – being spoken through – is thus counterphobic: it allows the Prioress to defend against change, against the advent of meaning or narrative event. (95)

Fradenburg’s assessment depicts the Prioress as afraid of active thought, a quality that fits with the common perception of nuns as unintellectual. This provides one possible explanation for the Prioress’s dependence on rote learning, a dependence fatal to effective

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<sup>33</sup> This suspicion of overly entertaining or dramatic sermons is recorded in works ranging from Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana* to thirteenth-century Dominican Thomas Waleys’ *De modo componendi sermones* (Kienzle 95- 100). See also John O’ Malley’s comment on page 54.

preaching (or, in the Prioress's case, effective moral instruction) as it fails to take the current audience into account. The Prioress's lack of intellectual engagement with her tale, and its correlative focus on her own emotional state, leads to an ultimately self-centred narrative whose unclear results with its audience hardly allow the reader to judge it an unqualified success, just as the schoolboy's emotional song to the Virgin Mary fails, with fatal consequences, to take into consideration those who hear it. The conscious care which the Prioress takes in her own prologue and in the General Prologue to establish a public persona acceptable to her audience is negated by her subsequent loss of control over both the style and substance of her tale. In addition to the Prioress and her protagonist's shared predilection for rote learning, the modifications the Prioress makes to the common analogues for her tale of the little "clergeon" serve only to heighten the duel of extremes presented in her tale; the result is a narrative whose emotional impact controls the speaker rather than the other way round. The Prioress's extreme details and focus on recitation reflect an uncontrolled outburst of her inner self that demonstrates her lack of power over the tale—and, by consequence, her loss of authority over her audience. Felicity Riddy writes that the success of a miracle story such as the Prioress's depends entirely on whether the audience is willing to accept the set of religious values that give the tale meaning; if the tale is told without this context of belief, it becomes "merely absurd or grotesque" (105-6). By ignoring the largely secular context of the competition and pressing forth with a tale commonly taught to nuns like herself, one which she renders even more serious with her graphic descriptions of the boy's murder, the Prioress is doomed to recount a tale which will, by its conclusion, be received with an ambivalent response at best. The audience's ambiguously-depicted reaction, to be discussed at this chapter's conclusion, suggests the

Prioress's lack of conscious engagement with her specific audience and its resultant impact on her effectiveness as a storyteller.

On the subject of nuns' education in medieval England, there are two main opposing points of view. They do agree, though, that nuns' experience with popular preaching and religious culture was for the most part quite different from that of male members of religious communities. Some scholars see the nuns' education as light on intellectual concerns and more focused on emotional pursuits. Nuns, generally speaking, were not as well-educated as their monastic brothers. Shulamith Shahar remarks quite bluntly that "[a] Christian woman could not officiate in church. She could not take the sacrament of the priestly order...and she was denied the right to preach" (22). While John O'Malley notes that, particularly in the late Middle Ages, "[w]omen who were superiors of convents sometimes addressed their subjects on religious themes," this appears to have been the extent of anything resembling preaching by religious women (6). Nuns, however, were not completely ignored as sermon targets, particularly of the written kind; an example is the set of sermons Peter of Abelard wrote for the women of the Convent of the Paraclete in France (Old 300). Hughes Oliphant Old writes in his history of medieval preaching that, while sermons, Abelard's writings "were intended more to be read than preached" (301). Examples such as these suggest that religious women were not exposed to preached sermons as often as they were to other forms of religious oral expression (Old 301). Chief among these were the reading aloud of such popular genres as saints' lives during prescribed hours of the nuns' day (Shahar 44). Julia Bolton Holloway writes that, with the rise of universities and the corresponding intellectual movement of scholasticism, women were more cut off than ever from indulging an interest in such disciplines as Latin and

grammar (203-4). They were, however, permitted to sing hymns “as an outlet for their emotions, if not their intellect” (Holloway 204).

The relatively undemanding substance of the nuns’ education typically followed the pattern described by Shahar:

Apart from prayers and hymns in Latin, the nuns in most nunneries studied selected chapters of the Scriptures, writings of the Church Fathers, the lives of the saints, and founders of the monastic orders and the translated rule of their order. It was also customary to read aloud in Latin during one of the meals of the day. The nun who recited to her companions was required to read fluently and in some of the nunneries there was one sister whose task it was to follow the recitation and correct all mistakes. (50)

Shahar continues by noting that “most nuns did not know Latin well, and learned the prayers and sections of religious literature by heart; what appeared to be a knowledge of Latin was in fact parrot-like repetition” (50). This information gains an interesting significance when one considers that the young protagonist of the *Prioress’s Tale* learns the *Alma redemptoris* antiphon in the same rote fashion (PrT 522). While nuns were exposed to patristic writings and studied the Scriptures, they also came into contact with lighter genres of religious literature such as lives of the saints. Even those who became known for their religious writings, such as St. Gertrude and Hildegard of Bingen, wrote in genres commonly associated with females, mostly tending towards saints’ lives and mystical writings (Shahar 51). This was hardly surprising, given that mysticism was one of the only accepted intellectual outlets for nuns; they were not permitted to contribute much of note to the scholastic field (Shahar 52). Riddy notes that the two female religious characters who

tell tales on the road to Canterbury, the Prioress and the Second Nun, both choose to recount stories of a devotional nature, similar to what nuns were perceived to have known best in Chaucer's day and deemed to have been of particular interest to women: the Second Nun's life of St. Cecilia and the Prioress's miracle of the young "clergeon" (105).

This contention, though, that nuns' education was scant and emotionally-centred has been disputed by several academics, who argue instead that such views merely reflect the stereotype of nuns rather than the reality. Recent research has shown that some religious women both inside and outside of convents wrote and thought extensively on religious matters. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, in writing of the early fifteenth-century text outlining the life of English nun St. Edith of Wilton, notes that the text "values the liturgical and devotional reading embraced by lay and professed women in their psalters and books of hours" and portrays St. Edith as "a vigorous, educated noblewoman patroness" (406). As well, Wogan-Browne argues that the text's "account of Edith may be designed to represent Wilton as a learned community comparable with Syon or other Benedictine monasteries," particularly in its frequent references to Wilton's nuns going to their chambers for reading; such an assessment points out that several religious women's communities of the medieval era placed a focus on their nuns' education (407). While it is unknown whether the real Edith embodied the learned qualities ascribed to her, that they were attributed to her at all suggests that the idea of an educated nun was not outlandish.

Even so, medieval religious women did have to contend with the view that they were meant to cultivate not their minds, but their sensibilities. The links many nuns shared with noblewomen, ranging from a tradition in book-sharing to the common practice of recruiting noblewomen as nuns, served as ammunition for those who belittled the intellectual pursuits of religious women (Riddy 110). Riddy contends that the Prioress may

be seen as representative of a construct of “female piety” formulated by male clerics and reinforced in the texts that they distributed to religious women (106-7). These texts were often highly emotional, conforming to the stereotype of religious women as being feeling rather than thinking beings; one of the texts, the fourteenth-century Vernon manuscript, contains an analogue to the Prioress’s Tale which rivals it in its sentimental nature and vivid anti-Semitism (Riddy 106-7, 110). Studies of the Prioress’s links to Chaucer’s historical landscape connect her to the Benedictine communities at either Stratford at Bow (where the Prioress is noted to have learnt her French) or at Barking, places known not only for their focus on reading, but also for their “daily recitation of the Divine Office or the Little Office of the Virgin Mary, an abridged version commonly used in nunneries” (Hourigan 39-40). This latter, more stereotypical vision of nuns’ education, which is in keeping with the traits of traditional femininity reinforced in the texts they were given to read, appears to be the one which Chaucer favours in creating his Prioress. In developing this character, Riddy argues, Chaucer satirises the Prioress’s more stereotypically “feminine” features; by playing up her knowledge of French and her close attention to etiquette, Chaucer links these “delicate” qualities with the Prioress’s highly sentimental tale and invites his readers “to regard her feminine piety as desperately limited, largely because it is feminine” (Riddy 110, 117).<sup>34</sup>

As this brief overview of nuns’ education helps to illuminate, regardless of which interpretation is true, the dominant perception in the medieval period was that religious women like the Prioress were more familiar than their religious brothers with the lighter side of devotional literature. If one considers the Prioress’s portrayal in the General

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<sup>34</sup> This trend extended to the Continent as well; as early as the twelfth century, women in the Cathar (or Albigensian) heretical sect, who were often quite educated in matters of theology, were referred to as *mulierculae*—a term meaning “little or silly wom[e]n” which was taken from Paul’s second letter to Timothy (Biller 375-76).

Prologue as a woman more concerned with expressions of genteel sentiment than demonstrations of intellectual capacity, it is not surprising that the Prioress's Tale tends to focus on the emotional genre of the "saint's life" rather than on anything more intellectually demanding. Popular preaching, too, was commonly linked to the use of more emotional rhetoric, a technique embraced by some, shunned by others. John O'Malley writes that, of the three styles of preaching being widely practiced in the late Middle Ages (the other two being the homily and the university sermon), the popular preaching of the friars was "coming under increasing criticism as being...too vulgar and sensational" (10).

These traits of vulgarity and sensationalism can easily be discerned in the tale of the Prioress, whose account of the life of the little "clergeon" is laden with extreme depictions of the boy's murder. While the following pages will provide a more detailed expansion of this argument, some preliminary examples include the tale's multiple references not merely to the fact that the child is killed, but to exactly *how* he is killed. That the boy's throat is cut "unto [his] nekke boon" is mentioned in various ways no fewer than four times in the Prioress's narrative (PrT 649; also 560, 611, 648). The Prioress also decides to have the murderers dump the boy's body in the most undignified of resting places: "[I]n a wardrobe.../ Where as this Jewes purgen hire entraille" (PrT 572-73). These depictions are in stark contrast to the genteel air the Prioress projects in the prologues that preface both her own tale and the tales as a whole. While calculated deviations from a persona of holiness are sometimes useful in attracting an audience's attention (as we shall see later in Chapter Three's discussion of the Friar and his Tale), the Prioress appears unable to control their appearance in her narrative; the frequency and vividness of these unsavoury digressions lead one to conclude that the Prioress is a narrator unable to maintain power over her tale—and therefore, by extension, control her audience. The General Prologue and

Prioress's Prologue both describe a woman consciously maintaining a proper façade.

Chaucer, through the Prioress's Tale, shows how unexpected breaks in that façade lead to an uncontrolled tale whose impact on the audience is ambivalent at best. The figure of the young schoolboy, whose holiness and innocence parallel the Prioress's self-perception, also mimics the Prioress in a manner she probably does not intend: as a rote reciter who has no mastery over his expression. This lack of mastery leads the boy's audience to kill him and the Prioress's audience to respond to her tale in a way that hardly casts it as an unmitigated success.

As the Prioress's depiction in the General Prologue has already been discussed so thoroughly by many other scholars, only a brief analysis will be made here of those points which most closely reveal the Prioress's meticulous attention to her persona, a self-consciousness later abandoned as she delves into her tale.<sup>35</sup> The General Prologue, in its depiction of the Prioress's treatment of animals, contains a preliminary hint of her tendency to lose control over her emotions. While much has been written of how the Prioress's manners and behaviour towards her pets are manifestations of her efforts to portray a courtly persona, one added observation should be made before continuing with an analysis of the Prioress's Tale.<sup>36</sup> The narrator Chaucer takes pains in his assessment of the Prioress to note her "conscience" and how it moves her to take care of the animals around her:

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<sup>35</sup> Critics who analyse the Prioress's General Prologue portrait in such a way include D.W. Robertson, who notes in his *Preface to Chaucer* that the Prioress's efforts to speak French and adopt courtly behaviours at the table "are the manners of the social climber who wishes to form a reputation for being ladylike," and Elizabeth Fowler, whose 2003 study of medieval literature's "social persons" (a kind of shorthand for assigning characters certain traits) notes that the Prioress's behaviour expresses a tenuous negotiation between the "social persons" of the nun and the courtly lady (Fowler 12; Robertson 245). While E. Talbot Donaldson notes that both Chaucer the pilgrim and Chaucer the man would "undoubtedly" have liked the Prioress, Donaldson does not deny that the Prioress "is better fitted to be a romance heroine" and thus deviates from the piety typical of her role ("Chaucer the Pilgrim" 3-4, "Four Women of Style" 59-60).

<sup>36</sup> Robertson, for one, argues that Chaucer's references to the Prioress's "small, spoiled dogs" and her highly emotional response to seeing trapped mice are ironic, meant to draw attention to her "courtly affectation[s]"

But, to speken of hire conscience,  
 She was so charitable and so pitous,  
 She wolde wepe, if that she sawe a mous  
 Caught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde. (GP 142-45)

The Prioress's hypersensitivity towards the welfare of animals is an early example of her emotional extremity. This tendency towards the histrionic and to paint things in dire terms manifests itself later in the tale with the Prioress's alterations of the analogues of her tale to make the "clergeon" younger, his death more violent, his murderers more evil and his posthumous behaviour more miraculous. By describing her emotional reaction to the harm of mere animals, Chaucer prepares the reader for the Prioress's response to the death of a human being. The ultimate point to draw from this passage, though, is that the Prioress, through her ostentatious displays of sorrow at the pain of animals, is anxious to present herself as a "woman of feeling," so much so that later, when she tells her tale, she recounts a narrative which satisfies her own need to feel sadness and pity in front of others. This focus on her own feelings, though, leads the Prioress to disregard the sensibilities of her audience and fail in her tale as a result.

The Prioress's loss of emotional control is suggested in other ways as well. When Chaucer describes the Prioress's skill at liturgical music, he writes, "Ful wel she song the service divine, / Entuned in hir nose ful seemly" (GP 122-23). This passage merits note for two reasons. Firstly, the fact that the Prioress sings through her nose suggests a degree of shrillness in her delivery. On both a vocal and a rhetorical level, shrillness has been argued to represent a lack of control, either in one's voice, one's narrative or both. Joseph Dyer, in

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rather than to any truly noble character traits (246). Florence Ridley disagrees, arguing that "Chaucer loved animals too, and would not have considered such love a particularly effective device for the creating of biting satire" (23). From whence Ridley finds support for the statement that Chaucer loved animals, though, is unclear.

writing of medieval vocal technique, notes that a nasal quality of voice (which can often lead to shrillness, especially in higher women's voices) indicated a lack of mastery of proper technique which generally led to a negative audience reaction; the late fifteenth-century commentator Conrad of Zabern even went so far as to say that such nasal singing was "dissonant" and unnatural (173-74). Nasal singing was also associated with effeminacy in male singers and was thus decried (Dyer 174-75).<sup>37</sup> Dyer concludes that the Prioress's singing through her nose is hardly a positive feature of her performance skills (173). Bruce Holsinger, in his discussion of the idea of *musica humana* and its relation to medieval literature, writes that the pseudo-Ciceronian text *Rhetorica ad Herennium* counsels against excessive shrillness in one's speech, a sentiment echoed by medieval texts on singing such as the *Summa musice* (289-90). In singing as well as speaking technique, shrillness indicates that one has lost control over the proper use of one's vocal cords; there is no major scholarship thus far that suggests any positive connotations to this vocal condition. Thus, that the Prioress sings through her nose hints at her lack of mastery over her tale as it spirals emotionally out of her grasp. As well, the Prioress's ability to sing the "service divine" is not necessarily an indication of her understanding it, given what was earlier cited about the perception regarding nuns' general inability to comprehend Latin and their subsequent tendency to learn it by rote (Shahar 50). Thus, when the Prioress in her Prologue asks the Virgin Mary to guide her "song," the reader is reminded of the shrillness and lack of control which the Prioress displays in her liturgical singing (487). As well, the

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Rex, arguing the satirical purpose of the Prioress's nasal singing, points to the advice for nuns given by Frère Robert's *Le Chastel Perilleux*, written for a fourteenth-century Benedictine convent: " 'And when you sing, do not sing with a weak feminine voice—that is to say, through the nose—but open your mouth wide and sing vigorously' " ("Why the Prioress Sings" 75). Rex contends that the exhortations against nasal singing as a vain affectation were well-known in Chaucer's time, and that the Prioress's singing "through the nose" is likely part of Chaucer's satire of the Prioress's courtly manners ("Why the Prioress Sings" 71, 75-77).

Prioress's being guided resurrects the idea of rote learning which gives the Prioress an unanticipated parallel with her little protagonist, with negative consequences for both.

In the Prioress's Prologue and Tale, the Prioress's own voice exhibits many of the concerns raised in her depiction in the General Prologue. In particular, the Prioress displays a loss of control over her tale that highlights the dangers of rote learning and excessive reliance on the words and techniques of others. The Prioress starts off well enough in her Prologue, working consciously to establish an air of holiness and purity. Even at this early stage, however, the reader gathers a sense that the Prioress and her protagonist share characteristics more harmful than those that the Prioress is hoping her audience will perceive. Specifically, the Prologue sees Chaucer's Prioress make a subtle and unintended link between the schoolboy's rote performance and her own. As becomes clear in the tale, the child's terrible fate as a result of this memorised and uncontrolled performance has implications for the Prioress's own largely rote recitation of her tale.

The Prioress begins her Prologue with an invocation to God:

O Lord, oure Lord, thy name how merveillous

Is in this large world ysprade...

For noght oonly thy laude precious

Parfourned is by men of dignitee,

But by the mouth of children thy bountee

Parfourned is... (PrP 453-59)

The use of the verb "performed" in her assessment of how both men and children praise God has connotations hardly complimentary to the Prioress. While the word may be translated as "make perfect," an assertion that mere human beings could make the Lord's Name perfect does not fit into the theme of modesty that the Prioress expresses throughout

her prologue (MED, “performen” 1c). The word, however, also has connotations of memorisation and recitation at best and insincerity at worst. One could see the Prioress’s focus on children praising God as a prelude to her later likening of herself to a child, a comparison which Richard Rex argues is Chaucer’s means of insulting the Prioress by equating her intelligence (and, by extension, her moral comprehension of her own words) to a child’s (“Pastiche” 3). Louise Fradenburg sees the passage along similar lines, writing that by having both children and men praise the Lord in the same way, the two groups are “collapsed” into one (91-92). This concept may be used in comparing the Prioress with her subject, both in the pair’s shared praise of Mary and, less favourably, with their sacrifice of rational thought in favour of pure devotion.

A nun’s demonstration of utter devotion may not seem like such a negative occurrence. Indeed, if one is examining the Prioress’s piety and not her performance skills, her total and unthinking dedication to God is quite commendable. As a performer, however, the Prioress needs to be intellectually engaged in her tale so that she may, if need be, adapt it to suit her audience. Her forfeit of this intellectual engagement in favour of emotional attachment to God thus compromises her performance. Bruce Holsinger sees this issue of performance as indicative of how “the Prioress betrays the tenuousness of her own narrative authority,” showing how God’s power is only manifest if people keep talking about Him (263-64).

While Holsinger’s conclusions about the power of God are somewhat radical, his initial statement about the Prioress’s shaky “narrative authority” merits further thought. It could be that the introduction to the Prioress’s Prologue shows the Prioress’s shaky “narrative authority” not by making the Prioress the source of that authority, but by having God give the Prioress that authority through inspiring her performance. The ultimate

authority in the narrative is thus not the Prioress, but God. This surrender of one's will to serve God's glory is seen in numerous literary modes in the medieval era, even where one may not expect it; a notable example is Guy de Chauliac's *Cyirurgie*, a medical text which invokes God's approval of every aspect of the work and maintains that He, not the author, is the true creator of the text (Wogan-Browne *et al.* 6). While this approach may succeed in winning over God, though, ceding control to a higher power does not necessarily help the Prioress win over the earthly audience. One is reminded of Riddy's contention that without the audience's acceptance of the religious values the Prioress attempts to project, the tale is a failure (105-6). This passivity of performance also characterises the young boy's behaviour throughout the Prioress's Tale. However, such passivity would hardly have been considered proper preaching technique in medieval England; while the Prioress is not preaching as such, the preaching tradition is the area of public speaking with which most, including nuns, were familiar.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, the element of intellectual engagement with one's text, and the resulting ability to recognise when to alter it to suit the situation, were key to an effective sermon. It becomes especially clear as the Prioress's narrative develops that she performs her tale without really thinking about what she is saying or, even more importantly, to whom she says it. This lack of active engagement with her story and her audience causes the Prioress to lose control of her tale at times, taking it in directions which are neither flattering to her nor entertaining to the assembled pilgrims.

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<sup>38</sup> Canon law required priests who wished to preach to study, in addition to numerous religious texts, collections of homilies composed " 'throughout the year for Sundays and Festivals' " (Owst, *Preaching* 29). Such as did not know what would be most appropriate to preach on a particular occasion were not considered worthy to do so (Owst, *Preaching* 29). Owst writes that only knowledge of one's listeners and their tastes could keep alive "the stimulus for original and up-to-date preaching," and that the friars' street-preaching allowed them to determine what audiences did and did not find interesting in a way that cloistered monks rarely could (*Preaching* 50-51).

For the most part, the Prioress establishes a convincing identity of holiness in her opening Prologue. The Prioress's methods of storytelling, though, may not always keep the tale and her audience in her power. This may even be seen in the Prioress's descriptions of the Virgin Mary, which are meant, ironically enough, to establish the Prioress as an authority in piety. Most striking of these images is that of the Virgin Mary as burning bush: "O mooder Mayde, O mayde Mooder free! / O bussh unbrent, brennyng in Moyses sighte" (PrP 466-68). The burning bush is characterised by the fact that, while its exterior is ablaze, its fundamental self remains unchanged. While this image was commonly used as a point of favourable comparison to Mary's perpetual virginity despite giving birth to Jesus, it is somewhat less flattering if one applies it to the situation of the Prioress. By putting on an exterior show, without letting any aspect of her interior self (especially her mind) affect that display, the Prioress allows the story to blaze out of her control. However, unlike the bush or the Virgin, the Prioress finds by the end of her tale that this lack of control has led to a negative reaction from the audience.

The Prioress's Prologue continues with more examples that demonstrate how Chaucer establishes her lack of conscious intellectual engagement with her tale. One arrives when the Prioress asserts that "no tonge [may] expresse in no science" the virtues of the Virgin (PrP 476). This line has been taken to mean that "human learning" cannot find a way to extol the Virgin's holiness (PrP 476, *n.*). By having the Prioress base her description of the Virgin outside the realm of "science," Chaucer reinforces the chasm between the Prioress's particularly emotional brand of storytelling and the realm of the intellectual, the realm which would help the Prioress control and modify her tale by gauging the conditions and audience of the situation in which she tells it.

The last stanza of the Prologue reinforces the overriding idea that the Prioress has lost her grip on her tale before it even begins:

My konnyng is so wayk, O blissful Queene,  
 For to declare thy grete worthynesse  
 That I ne may the weighte nat sustene;  
 But as a child of twelf month oold, or lesse,  
 That kan unnethes any word expresse,  
 Right so fare I, and therefore I yow preye,  
 Gydeþ my song that I shal of yowe seye. (PrP 481-87)

Here, the Prioress asserts her lack of “konnyng” and ability to do justice to the Virgin. While one may identify this strategy as merely the Prioress’s way of demonstrating her modesty (a standard technique of medieval authors), one cannot ignore that Chaucer has separated the Prioress and her way of telling tales from her ability to control her story on an intellectual level.<sup>39</sup> Many others have noted the similarities which the Prioress sets up in this stanza and others between herself and the “clergeon” of her tale, remarking how she likens herself to a young child and her tale to a song; whether this process is conscious or (as Edward Condren maintains) unintentional, it is difficult to read the Prioress’s Tale and not garner a sense of the connection between the Prioress and the schoolboy (PrP 484-87; Condren 193). As Sherman Hawkins has noted, the Prioress is a woman who “has not put

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<sup>39</sup> *The Idea of the Vernacular* makes note of the prevalence of the modesty topos—which, it is argued by paraphrasing David Lawton, “serve[s] to establish both a poet’s own achievement and that of the vernacular literary tradition in which the poet is working”—and related practices, such as medieval English writers’ frequent tendency to “submit their works to their readers for improvement (or at least make this rhetorical gesture);” while this offer is sometimes indicative of a desire to engage in a discussion with the reader, to an extent it is also another manifestation of the modesty topos (Wogan-Browne *et al.* 10, 13). The Prioress’s claim of ignorance appears to fit with both, professing a lack of knowledge for purposes of public image while also genuinely lacking that knowledge.

away childish things: her pets, her locket, her Stratford French. Thus her story of a child and its growth is fitted to the teller with exact decorum" (601).<sup>40</sup> With this connection in mind, the fate of the boy's song must be compared with the reaction to the Prioress's own narrative. In particular, Condren's remark that the Prioress is shaped by the tale as much as she shapes it may be applied to the idea that the Prioress loses control of her tale as it gains emotional impact (203).

As well, Chaucer dissociates the Prioress from the rational world. One may connect this to the perception, as discussed earlier, that the religious instruction of nuns was limited mostly to reading lighter religious fare and memorising prayers and songs (Shahar 50). By using her emotions rather than her reason to guide her tale, the Prioress starts on a course that, because of her having forsaken the ability to think about her tale and its effect on her particular audience, leads to a less-than-enthusiastic audience response.

In the tale proper, it is remarkable how the Prioress loses control over both her tale and her authority as a storyteller. Chaucer shows how the Prioress's basic tale, one with many contemporary analogues, is only harmed through the unthinking way in which the Prioress implements changes to the narrative without considering the circumstances under which she is telling her tale. This is achieved through the unwitting negative associations she makes between herself and the little "clergeon" as well as through the elaborations she makes on the tale. Most of the changes that the Prioress makes to this common story serve to heighten the extremity of contrasts and emotions in the tale. As a result, the Prioress gradually loses emotional control over her tale—and, by extension, over her audience.

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<sup>40</sup> While Hawkins does not make it clear why the Prioress's "Stratford French" is indicative of her immaturity, its perception by scholars like Maureen Hourigan as an "inferior" kind of French provide a clue (39). More specifically, Richard Rex notes that the phrase "'French...of Stratford-at-Bow' was employed by Ben Jonson as a proverbial expression for ignorance and affectation—perhaps a better guide to Chaucer's meaning than guesses by more recent authorities" ("Sins" 99).

As mentioned earlier, the popular preaching with which nuns like the Prioress would have likely been most familiar was critiqued for its tendency towards the vulgar and sensational (O' Malley 10). In the Prioress's embellishments upon the numerous analogues to her tale, one can perceive threads of emotional extremism that threaten to wrest the tale from the Prioress's control. This extremism may be seen most clearly in the tale's portrayal of the life, murder and posthumous behaviour of the schoolboy. Miri Rubin's assessment of anti-Semitism in medieval literature finds a widespread hatred of Jews in contemporary collections of exempla; in particular, Rubin notes the trends in fourteenth-century exempla of Jews either desecrating the Host, perceiving it as a small child, or both (35-6, 142-43). These trends are significantly similar to features of the Prioress's Tale, whose murder of the little "clergeon" by the Jews and prominent featuring of the Host-like grain upon the boy's tongue is compatible with the trends described. The Prioress's version of the story, however, is remarkably harsh, even by the standards outlined by Rubin. Florence Ridley notes many of the alterations made by the Prioress. Unlike most of its analogues, the boy in the Prioress's Tale is not ten years old, but seven; the Jews are pushed by Satan himself to murder the boy; and the boy sings after death (27). That the boy dies at all is seen by Edward Condren as an extension of the analogues; he writes that many contemporary versions of the tale do not feature this as the schoolboy's fate (193). Allen Koretsky has observed that, while many "tales of the Virgin" were not anti-Semitic, Chaucer has the Prioress deliver what Koretsky calls "the most sustained, virulent outpouring of anti-Semitic prejudice in his whole corpus," exceeding even the Pardoner's and Parson's references to the Jews as killers of Christ (17-19, 22-3). While Carleton Brown has traced most of the details of the Prioress's Tale to analogues whose variations place them in three main groups, it is notable that the Prioress decides to take the most unpleasant aspects of

tales from each group to form her own tale and leaves out the more redemptive aspects of some of these analogues. For example, in most tales from what Brown dubs Group A and Group B, the Jews who murder the child are repentant and convert to Christianity; the Prioress, though, chooses to assign her murderers the fate of torture and death found in only some of the tales from Group B (448-49). Instead of having the Jews bury the boy under a house or in a trench, stable or garden (the norm in tales from Group A), the Prioress chooses to have the murderers leave the boy in a privy, a characteristic of Group C tales (Brown 448-50). Most significant, though, is that the Prioress chooses the most tragic fate possible for her protagonist, the death common to tales from Group C, as opposed to the resurrections outlined in Groups A and B (Brown 448-50).

Why does Chaucer have the Prioress compile a tale with the most tragic details she can muster from the analogues? Ridley believes that making the boy younger and his fate more tragic “serve[s] to increase the tale’s devoutness and pathos and to keep its action centered upon the young hero” (27). However, there is a point at which the tale’s pathos becomes excessive, especially given the circumstances under which the Prioress tells the tale. Given that the competitors are meant to entertain as well as edify the audience, the Prioress’s over-emphasis on gory and eerie details like the boy’s death and supernatural singing indulges her own desire to be moved emotionally than to move her audience. This lack of respect for her listeners leads the Prioress to tell a tale which appears to unsettle rather than entertain them.

By having the Prioress focus so closely on the role of memorisation in the schoolboy’s education, Chaucer reminds the reader of the Prioress’s own tendency to recite without thinking. In a tale meant to exalt both the child and the Virgin Mary, it seems incongruous that the Prioress would spend so much time elaborating on how the

“clergeon” learns what he does—unless Chaucer engineers such a discussion in order to show how the Prioress and the boy are linked in their favouring of rote learning over a deeper comprehension of what they have learnt. With the child’s death as a result of what he has memorised, Chaucer’s ultimate point is that the Prioress will, too, suffer negative consequences for merely reciting a tale to an audience whose reaction she has not considered while telling her tale.

The link between the educational backgrounds of the children and the Prioress is first articulated when the Prioress relates that the Christian school that the boy attends teaches children “to seyn, to syngen and to rede,” a curriculum quite similar to that which nuns were taught in the convents (PrT 499). The schoolboy’s dependence on rote learning specifically, however, is not made explicit until the reader learns of how his mother has taught him to venerate the Virgin Mary:

And eek also, where as he saugh th’ymage  
Of Cristes mooder, hadde he in usage,  
As hym was taughte, to knele adoun and seye  
His *Ave Marie*, as he gooth by the weye. (PrT 502-506)

The “clergeon” does not embrace on his own the practice of praying before the Virgin, nor does he possess the knowledge of Latin required to truly understand what he is saying. Instead, he is taught by his mother to recite the prayer from memory, almost on command (PrT 509). This lack of intellectual initiative on the little boy’s part is forgivable. After all, he is only seven, an age which was still on the threshold of infancy in popular medieval thought (Pittock 25). As a grown woman, though, the Prioress displays the same tendencies of rote response over intellectual consideration. While this may be expected somewhat

given how many perceived the typical education of medieval nuns, the Prioress's technique of recitation will not help her to assess the tastes of her audience as she tells her tale.

The schoolboy's tendency to recite rather than think is reinforced, with eventually fatal results, when he learns the *Alma redemptoris* antiphon:

He *Alma redemptoris* herde synge,  
 As children lerned hire antiphoner;  
 And as he dorste, he drough hym ner and ner,  
 And herkned ay the wordes and the noote,  
 Til he the firste vers koude al by rote. (PrT 516-22)

Hawkins has argued that, unlike in many of the analogues, the Prioress's schoolboy "makes an authentic moral choice" in learning the antiphon (610). However, this agency rings hollow when one considers that the child does not make an effort to understand the Latin text more literally, but instead only memorises the sounds he hears. The Prioress states immediately after this passage that the boy does not understand what the Latin means, so asks a schoolmate (himself hardly an expert in Latin) to explain the gist to him (PrT 523-29, 536). As a result, he gives the semblance of learning, but not the substance, a situation much like that of medieval nuns who, not knowing Latin, memorised prayers and antiphons in the same way (Shahar 50). Bruce Holsinger writes that the boy's resolve to learn the antiphon outside of school is Chaucer's way of making the boy's achievement seem more spiritual than academic, saying that "pedagogical protocol gives way to 'rote' memorization" (271). While Holsinger treats this contrast neutrally at best, one can also argue that such rote learning is negative in its tendency to make the student ignore individual circumstances and apply one set of knowledge to all manner of situations. This type of learning is less intellectually challenging than emotionally comforting, an idea

compatible with Louise Fradenburg's statement that the Prioress uses rote learning as a defence against change (95). It is notable that the schoolboy's friend tells him after explaining all of the antiphon he possibly can, " 'I kan namoore expoude in this mateere, / I lerne song; I kan but smal grammeere' " (PrT 535-36). Once again, the Prioress unwittingly (and therefore significantly) stresses the opposition between the emotional nature of the child's song and the more mechanical, intellectual practice of learning such disciplines as grammar. This showcases yet again how the central conflict in the Prioress's Tale, manifested both in the tale itself and how it is told, is between the emotional and the intellectual. Unfortunately for the Prioress, the emotional tends to win out in her narrative.

Chaucer emphasises in other ways how the schoolboy's being is dominated by the emotional rather than the rational. As if he knows that learning the antiphon somehow opposes the intellectual environment of his school, the child has his friend teach him the song "homward prively" (PrT 544). This favouring of the emotional, as Bruce Holsinger notes, is also seen in the boy's decision to learn the antiphon even though he knows that he will be physically punished for it by his schoolteachers (Holsinger 271; PrT 539-43). We are further persuaded of the antiphon's emotional rather than intellectual nature when we learn that, once the schoolboy "koude it by rote, / ...he song it wel and boldely, / Fro word to word, acordynge with the note" (PrT 545-47). With these lines, Chaucer focuses on the words blending seamlessly with the music. Given the previous associations in the Prioress's Tale between music and emotion rather than music and reason, that the words "accord" with the music so well suggests that the antiphon lies more in the emotional realm than the rational one. That the "clergeon" only knows the antiphon by rote and is unable to grasp the full meaning of the Latin text further distances it from anything intellectual.

One of the most significant passages of the tale occurs shortly after the boy has memorised his song:

As I have seyð, thughout the Juerie  
 This litel child, as he cam to and fro,  
 Ful murily than wolde he synge and crie  
*O Alma redemptoris* everemo.  
 The swetnesse his herte perced so  
 Of Cristes mooder that, to hire to preye,  
 He kan nat stynte of syngyng by the weye. (PrT 551-57)

The “clergeon” is not moved by any rational impulse to sing the antiphon, but instead by a “swetnesse” that pierces his heart (PrT 555). The Prioress describes his performance as a mixture of singing and crying, words that one associates more with the histrionic than the intellectual (PrT 553). Because the child is motivated by emotional rather than rational factors, the antiphon moves out of his control; he “kan nat stynte” from singing the Virgin’s praises, even when he passes through the Jewry, a neighbourhood unappreciative of the young boy’s sentiments (PrT 551-2, 557). While a safer reading of the phrase “kan nat stynte” may lead the reader to think that the schoolboy is merely very eager to share his religious fervour with others, an analysis of the words as they appear brings forth the idea that the boy is unable to stop singing. In fact, if one entertains all possible meanings of the words, one could even conclude that the “clergeon” does not *know* how to stop his song, suggesting that his hymn of praise is not overseen by any part of his reason. The boy’s emotions have overwhelmed him, causing him to lose control over his text. The child fails to recognise his particular location and audience, and this error leads to his death. This course of events leads the Prioress’s Tale to illustrate an important point regarding

performance: that one does not perform for oneself, but for others. A self-absorbed performance, in which one loses track of how one sounds, what one is saying, and to whom it is being said is rarely a hit with the audience. The audience must be taken into consideration, particularly within the confines of a story-telling competition. The Prioress, lost in a reverie of religious devotion that parallels the child's, has lost sight of her pilgrim audience.

The consequences of the schoolboy's song are well-known. The Prioress describes how the Jews plot

[t]his innocent out of this world to chace.

An homycide therto han they hyred,

That in an aleye hadde a privee place;

And as the child gan forby for to pace,

This cursed Jew hym hente, and heeld hym faste,

And kitte his throte, and in a pit hym caste. (PrT 565-71)

The particular way in which the "clergeon" is killed is meaningful to the tale and its overall message. With his throat slit, the boy's head and his heart are made more separate than ever, a state of affairs which parallels how the child has treated his song all the while. The emotional and the intellectual must be in a proper balance to tell an effective tale. One must sound as if one sincerely feels what one is saying, but must also keep one's mind aware of the audience and what they want to hear. The "clergeon" has relied almost solely on his heart to guide his song, making him unaware of his audience; now, with his head even more separate from his heart, the boy's song becomes severed even more definitively from reason and more unsettlingly supernatural as a result.

When the boy's murderers dispose of the boy's body in a privy where "this Jewes purgen hire entraille," the Prioress indirectly refers to a concept which colours her own tale-telling (PrT 573). Much like the idea of incontinence evoked by the image of the privy, the Prioress's Tale has been marked by her distinct lack of control over her story. One can also see this incontinence at work in the Pardoner's Tale, whose discussion of uncontrollable gluttony parallels his own inability to consider his audience before reciting a stock exemplum that entirely contradicts the flawed persona he establishes in his prologue.<sup>41</sup>

The child's praise of the Virgin, of course, does not end with his death. The Prioress recounts that "[t]his gemme of chastite, this emeraude, / And eek of martyrdom the ruby bright" sings the *Alma redemptoris* loudly in the church where the Christians have borne his body (PrT 609-13). The Prioress notes that God's praise is often proclaimed "[b]y mouth of innocentz"; in this case, however, the praise is even less rational than before, and considerably less authentic (PrT 607-8). The "clergeon" does not make an active choice to sing, but instead acts as a conduit through which a higher force pushes the song. Reason plays even less of a role than it did while the boy was still alive, and the overall effect is more frightening than inspiring.

When the "clergeon" is asked why he still sings despite his throat being slit, he replies,

"My throte is kut unto my nekke boon,"  
 ... "and as by wey of kynde  
 I sholde have dyed, ye, longe tyme agon.  
 But Jesu Crist, as ye in bookes fynde,  
 Wil that his glorie laste and be in mynde,

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<sup>41</sup> See the previous chapter (pages 37-39) for the full discussion of this idea in relation to the Pardoner.

And for the worship of his Mooder deere

Yet may I synge *O Alma* loude and cleere." (PrT 649-55)

In this first stanza of the boy's response, there is a focus on established knowledge rather than original thought. The schoolboy relates what he knows about Jesus to what can be found in books rather than to what his own thoughts may be. While the boy's appeal to written authority may seem to indicate his capacity for rational thought, its reliance on reason other than his own demonstrates the child's lack of rational agency. This is a situation strikingly similar to the Prioress's dependence in her tale on God's authority rather than her own intellectual abilities. The resulting impression one derives of both "clergeon" and Prioress is of the pair's lack of rational engagement with their respective performances, a lack that, as has been shown, has negative consequences for both.

As the boy continues his explanation of why he continues to speak and sing after his death, he reveals that the Virgin Mary has told him to keep singing his song of praise (PrT 656-60). That the Virgin Mary sanctions this kind of emotional outburst would seem to validate the Prioress's own highly emotional narrative. Given, though, the audience's ultimate reaction to the Prioress's Tale, it is clear that not everyone shares this opinion. Perhaps more important, though, is the fact that the boy cannot stop singing; the issue of whether he continues his song is completely out of his hands. He cannot end his song until the mysterious grain is removed from his tongue or, presumably, until the Virgin sees fit to let him stop (663-65). Holsinger, citing Boethius, maintains that the grain's

narrative function in the tale may be to literalize in a particularly miraculous way the Boethian notion of the unheard *musica humana*, the "human music" that "unites the incorporeal nature of reason with the body" and "holds together the parts of the body in an established order." (288)

However, the exact opposite argument is even stronger: that the power the grain holds over the “clergeon” indicates exactly how dissociated his reason is from his body, especially from the heart from whence springs his song. If the boy’s tale were the result of a union between body and reason, then the severing of his throat, not the removal of the grain, would have ended his song. Holsinger himself alludes to this when he views the grain as representative of “the miraculous affirmation of body as the very instrument of devotion” (289). The problem, of course, is precisely that the child’s body is the means of devotion—to the point at which his mind is excluded. The “clergeon” has totally lost control over a song that was, from the beginning, outside his rational grasp.

Once the abbot removes the grain from the boy’s tongue, further reinforcing the idea that the boy’s peace is contingent upon the will of others rather than his own initiative, the entire assembled company dissolves into outbursts of extreme emotion. The abbot cries and falls upon the ground, and the others “eek lay on the pavement / Wepyng, and heryng Cristes mooder deere” (PrT 670- 78). While this reaction is meant to display the piety of the Prioress’s Tale’s Christians and their highly emotional sensibilities, it does not appear to be so popular with the Prioress’s audience. Once the Prioress has concluded her tale, the pilgrims react with silence:

Whan seyð was al this miracle, every man  
 As sobre was that wonder was to se,  
 Til that oure Hooste jopen tho bigan,  
 And thanne at erst he looked upon me,  
 And seyde thus: “What man artow?” quod he;  
 “Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,  
 For evere upon the ground I se thee stare.” (ThP 691-97)

The lines' meaning is strikingly ambiguous. For some critics, the silence is one of reverence for the Prioress's holy tale.<sup>42</sup> For many others, though, the pilgrims' wordlessness reflects their sense of awkwardness at the Prioress's narrative. This "unusually sober response," as John M. Hill puts it, is spoken from the point of view of the pilgrim Chaucer and encapsulates the awkward reaction of the pilgrims to the Prioress's Tale (99). Hill attributes this reference to the audience's reaction as evidence of Chaucer's increasing interest in examining "the tale-telling act in relation to teller, tale, and audience"; Hill does not examine, though, why the pilgrims are so unanimously subdued after the Prioress completes her tale (99, 146). Florence Ridley maintains that the audience's silence is not because of any shock over the tale's anti-Semitism, which she points out was rather common in popular literature of Chaucer's day; Ridley, however, does not explain why the audience *is* silent (12). The pilgrims could very well have been pushed into silence by their awkward reception of the Prioress's excessively emotional and self-absorbed tale, a tale which does not suit the mood established by the preceding Shipman's Tale. This mood may be gauged by the reaction of the Host, who laughs at the tale and merrily warns the pilgrims against being fooled like the story's merchant (ShT 439). By contrast, the Host attempts to break the silence after the Prioress's Tale by joking around (ThP 691-93). While it is true that the pilgrims' silence may be interpreted in a number of ways, the crowd's sobriety does disturb the atmosphere of merriment established after the Shipman's Tale, and the fact that the Host seeks to return to that atmosphere so quickly after the Prioress's short tale suggests that her narrative has ruined the dynamic established by her peers. Julia

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<sup>42</sup> In addition to Florence Ridley, mentioned above, critics who adopt this reading include George Lyman Kittredge, who maintains that the Prioress's Tale leaves the pilgrims on the brink of tears; Charles Owen, who notes that the pilgrims' sober reaction is still in rime royal, "as if [the pilgrims are] still under the spell of the Prioress;" and Edward Kelly, who argues that the Prioress's Tale, true to Chaucer's artistry, "ends in the pilgrims' appropriate coda of silence" (Kelly 374; Kittredge 181; Owen 121).

Bolton Holloway has argued that the pilgrims, disapproving but uncertain of how to respond to the Prioress, are silent, "hoping that the silence would register disapproval and discomfort" (204-5).<sup>43</sup> As well, the body language of the pilgrim Chaucer, who is staring silently at the ground, can also be construed as an attempt not to meet the eyes of anyone in the company, particularly not the Prioress. The Host's request of the pilgrim Chaucer to "[t]elle...a tale of myrthe, and that anon" is further proof that the Host wishes a hasty end to the pall of awkwardness cast over the crowd by the Prioress's Tale (Pittock 13). The audience's negative response to the tale lasts longer than this initial discomfort; the Nun's Priest's Tale, as Hawkins points out, features several sly and gently mocking remarks regarding the Prioress's self-professed childlike nature and its resultant hindrance of her tale (622-23).

Bruce Holsinger refers to the schoolboy's song as "an excessive rhetorical performance, a 'musical delivery' from the body and voice of an untrained but thoroughly indoctrinated Christian *actor*" (291). This description could just as easily be applied to the Prioress's Tale itself, with one minor quibble: neither the "clergeon" nor the Prioress can truly be considered an actor, as both display in their tales a remarkable deference to their emotional urges. In doing so, both retreat into their own world of feeling and ignore the tastes of the audiences to which they perform. The Prioress's emotional tale has ignored the rational component required to make the tale a success. This appears to be in keeping with the focus on emotional rather than intellectual instruction received by most religious women in medieval nunneries. While a certain measure of emotional rhetoric may be useful in convincing an audience of the sincerity of one's tale, the lack of intellectual calculation

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<sup>43</sup> Donald Howard concurs, writing, "[T]he reaction of the company...strikes me as the uneasy sobriety of people who know something is wrong but have failed to protest" (278).

carries with it the risk of ignoring one's audience and becoming completely self-absorbed.

Like the child in her tale, the Prioress has failed to consider the tastes of her audience.

Indeed, with the exception of one fleeting possible reference to the preceding tale of the

Shipman, the Prioress does not appear to consider her audience's presence at all throughout

her tale (PrT 642-43). Furthermore, the Prioress shares with her protagonist an emphasis on

rote learning and memorisation which leads both of them to disaster – for the “clergeon”

through his death, for the Prioress through her failure to understand her audience. Both the

nun and her subject must learn to sing not only with their spirit, but with their

understanding also.

### Chapter Three: The Friar's Tale

The Friar's Tale, if one accepts the order of the Ellesmere manuscript, is the earliest tale to be recounted on the road to Canterbury by a member of the religious estate. In the General Prologue, Chaucer's description of the Friar focuses on his attention to appearance, emphasising the Friar's favouring of opulent clothes over the "thredbare cope" traditionally associated with a mendicant friar; this quality may be viewed in conjunction with various tracts of Chaucer's day which denounced friars as hypocritically worldly (GP 258-63).<sup>44</sup> Indeed, criticism of the Friar has overwhelmingly painted him as corrupt. However, unlike the Pardoner or the Prioress, the Friar manages to tell the best-received tale of the three, a remarkable decision on Chaucer's part given the prolific number of contemporary texts condemning mendicants.<sup>45</sup> In his construction of the Friar and his Tale, Chaucer focuses on the characteristic of medieval friars that perhaps defined them most in the public eye—their practice of preaching to audiences in the street—and demonstrates how such a practice makes the Friar the best able of the three characters discussed to gauge the particular context in which he must tell his tale. Because the Friar is fully aware of the fact that he performs for an audience, he is willing to customise his narrative to achieve the response he desires from the audience, a strategy that was commonly associated with the mendicants of

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<sup>44</sup> For a sampling of various castigations of the Friar over the past several decades, see Arnold Williams' 1953 article "Chaucer and the Friars" (in which the Friar is derided as a character "with no mitigating virtues," Donald Howard's 1976 book *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (which emphasises the Friar's abuse of fraternal ideals like poverty and chastity) and Derek Pearsall's *The Canterbury Tales* (1985), whose assessment of the Friar's depiction by the Summoner as "stupid" rather than "wicked" is among the gentler views of that character (Howard 100; Pearsall 170; A. Williams 63).

<sup>45</sup> For selections from these texts, including excerpts of what Robert P. Miller calls the late medieval era's "standard reference in antifraternal writings," thirteenth-century University of Paris professor William of Saint-Amour's *The Perils of the Last Times*, see Miller's section on antifraternal literature in his compendium *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds* (237). Saint-Amour's text supports the efforts of French archbishops to curtail mendicant preaching and deems those friars who "preach for temporal profit, or for worldly honor, or for the praise of men,...not true Apostles, but Pseudo," an attitude which Miller notes helped shape opinions against the friars up through the fifteenth century (Miller 237; Saint-Amour 247).

Chaucer's day. The Friar is able to determine the particular means of gaining their attention and approval with an ease that eludes the Pardoner and Prioress, whose storytelling techniques are mired in a self-absorbed view of preaching and a reliance on memorisation, respectively.<sup>46</sup>

Why, however, is it somewhat surprising that Chaucer would assign his friar such a positive role in the storytelling competition? As the general introduction emphasised, there was a strong current of opposition to the mendicant friars' populist preaching techniques, which were seen as powerfully seductive tools often used for the friars' individual gain than for the gain of souls (Hall 125-26; Knapp 25). Even Chaucer alludes to this perception in the General Prologue, saying that the Friar could, with his song, charm a poor widow out of a farthing (253-55). Characteristic of the double-edged language Chaucer uses to describe the Friar, this example of the Friar's speaking skills is a subtle jab at the Friar's morals, but also a testament to the "plesaunt" nature of his performance (GP 254).<sup>47</sup> Without an overt condemnation of the Friar's practices, though, and faced with his skilfully-crafted tale, the reader is more inclined to accept a neutral or even positive view of the Friar, at least as a performer. Chaucer tends to favour the positive aspects of the Friar's preaching skills over their potential for exploitation. As was noted in the chapter on the Pardoner's Tale, if Chaucer had wanted to make the Friar a villain, he could have given him the Pardoner's narrative, which highlights the possible abuses of skilful preaching (Fletcher,

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<sup>46</sup> H. Marshall Leicester reverses this view, arguing that the Friar chooses "a consistently ingratiating style of self-presentation in his dealings with others generally" precisely *because* he "lives in a society which finds it easy to make fun of him and his brethren" (36). This view does not consider the possibility that the friars are mocked because of their ingratiating style; even if one accepts Leicester's argument, though, the fact remains that Chaucer's Friar is meant to be viewed with contemporary (i.e. negative) public perceptions of friars in mind.

<sup>47</sup> Citing Jill Mann, Leicester writes that "Chaucer's contribution [i.e. to the large body of literature concerning friars, much of it satirical] is 'the constant use of ambivalent words which make it hard to subject the Friar to moral analysis.' We can suspect all kinds of typical Mendicant vices, but we cannot prove them" (21).

“Topical” 118-19). Instead, Chaucer allows the Friar to use the abilities common to mendicant friars of the time, particularly the ability to capture the attention of street audiences, to construct a tale that succeeds with the pilgrims.

The resulting implication that preaching skills may be used for both good and evil ends is echoed in Edwin Craun’s study of medieval pastoral writings on oral language. He observes that these writings focus on speech as an instrument used “to convert the errant speaker, particularly as it was used in preaching, directing confession, and other acts of oral instruction. In keeping with its basic Augustinian sign theory, it presents itself as a social instrument designed to achieve certain effects” (Craun 6). Because of their position of moral power, it was all the more important that clerics use their gift of persuasive speech properly (Craun 187). Craun writes that, while the *Canterbury Tales* see many of Chaucer’s pilgrims (or the characters in the stories that those pilgrims tell) commit sins of the tongue, including blasphemy and violation of oaths, the issue of how speech may be manipulated is not extensively addressed until the tales of the Manciple and the Parson (188).

Is this statement entirely accurate, though? It may be argued that, while the Manciple and the Parson have narratives that most explicitly address the manipulation of speech, several other tales also address the various implications of adapting one’s words in order to suit the context of a given situation. The tales of the Pardoner and the Prioress have already shown the dangers of failing to make this adaptation, and this issue is seen more positively early on in the *Canterbury Tales* with the narrative of the Friar.

The Friar’s Tale centres on a corrupt summoner who chances upon the devil one day in the road. The devil, by discussing the words and intentions of a carter and a widow, demonstrates to the summoner the importance of keeping one’s words separate from one’s

thoughts on appropriate occasions.<sup>48</sup> The summoner, however, chooses honesty at a crucial moment and is sent to hell as a result. David Williams has written about the Friar's Tale in terms of its influence by the realism-nominalism debate, which pitted the view that words have universal and unchanging meanings against the view that words' meaning may change depending on the situation. He argues that Chaucer ultimately comes out on the side of realism, condemning the Friar for his dissembling nature and conflict between thought and word.<sup>49</sup> Williams argues that, given the Friar's Tale's focus on a character whose use of language for deceitful ends results in his eternal punishment, the message of the story advocates philosophical realism and advances Chaucer's own "theory of fiction" (77). Williams sees the Friar's tendency towards nominalism, expressed in behaviour like accepting money from his "penitents" instead of their true contrition (which the Friar argues is too internal to gauge properly), as improper in Chaucer's eyes (85). In exploring the relationship between "the words a speaker utters and the meaning he intends them to have," Chaucer ultimately supports the idea that words have an inherent connection with the object they are meant to describe, a connection not determined merely by what the speaker wants that particular word to signify in any given context (80). The summoner in the Friar's Tale does not believe in his inherent connection, and has in fact made a career of divorcing his words from his intentions in order to call his victims up on false charges and exploit them through blackmail (D. Williams 78). In the devil, though, the summoner meets his match. The fiend is able to make the summoner both intend and state explicitly a desire

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<sup>48</sup> For the sake of clarification, it should be noted that this chapter uses "summoner" with a lower-case "s" to refer to the character in the Friar's Tale and "Summoner" with a capitalised "S" to refer to the pilgrim on the road to Canterbury.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Myles, whose book *Chaucerian Realism* also deals with the philosophical implications of the Friar's Tale, comes to an even blunter conclusion about the Tale's lessons on language: " 'Good' and 'bad,' 'proper' and 'improper,' are not relative terms—at least for Chaucer" (22).

to be sent to hell with the pan of an old woman he is trying to extort; as a result, the summoner and the pan are cast into the infernal pit (D. Williams 89). The message that the intent behind the words is key to their significance and morality is conveyed in a more positive way when the carter, frustrated at his cart's being stuck in the mud, curses it to hell; because his wish was for the cart to be removed from the mud, this is what occurs, rather than the cart joining the summoner and the pan (D. Williams 79). Williams concludes that Chaucer, in the Friar's Tale, advocates a realist view. By having the Friar, himself a nominalist, imbue the representation of his enemy the Summoner with the very nominalist views he himself embraces, Chaucer argues that words possess a power which escapes whatever meaning a nominalist speaker may wish them to have (85).

While a detailed examination of the realism or nominalism of the Friar's Tale will not be given here, David Williams's interpretation of the work may still be questioned in two ways. If the Friar's attitude that language's significance is adaptable is a flawed one, then why is his tale, which puts into practice the technique of adapting one's words to one's audience, so well-received? And if the Tale's summoner is a villain because of his verbal duplicity, why is he punished only *after* his words and intentions finally match? The Friar and his Tale advocate instead a flexible approach to language in storytelling that takes into account the particular circumstances of an individual situation. This flexibility allows the narrator to gauge the tastes of his audience and thus recount to them the narrative that he has judged will have the best impact on them. The examination that follows will argue that the summoner's downfall in the Friar's Tale is caused not by a discrepancy between thought and word in that character, but by his refusal to acknowledge the particularities of his audience and situation and adjust his performing strategy accordingly. In doing so, Chaucer demonstrates that, in order to convince one's audience most effectively, one must

make some concessions to their tastes and occasionally disguise one's true identity and motives. The Friar understands this, mainly because of the kind of training that friars were commonly known to have undertaken, and through his appearance and tale makes positive use of this important lesson.

As he is described in the General Prologue, the Friar demonstrates two major personality strands: while it is clear that he is a fellow familiar with the secular world, he is also quite aware of the fact that an attention to appearance and the pomp and circumstance of orthodox religion can have an impact on those who turn to him for counsel—in effect, his audience. Critics like Robert Jordan and Marshall Leicester have noted Chaucer's carefully ambiguous diction in his description of the Friar; one may see how this fuzzy language, whose various interpretations paint the Friar as either serious or jolly, reflects the Friar's own ability to change his tone as the situation permits (Jordan 126; Leicester 21). Chaucer takes great care in the General Prologue to emphasise the Friar's performing skills, ultimately revealing where the Friar stands in the matter of presenting a given image to attain specific ends.

The Friar is initially described as follows:

A FRERE ther was, a wantowne and a merye,

A lymytour, a ful solempne man.

In alle the orders foure is noon that kan

So muchel of daliaunce and fair langage. (GP 208-11)

In this description, three main personality traits of the Friar are introduced. First, the Friar is described as "wantowne" and "merye," qualities that speak more to the character's enjoyment of the pleasures of the world rather than those of heaven. In this regard, Chaucer's Friar is similar to the figure of Faux-Semblant in the *Roman de la Rose*, discussed

more extensively earlier with regard to the Pardoner; Faux-Semblant, known for his hypocrisy, is clad in the garb of a friar (Calin 337).<sup>50</sup> Even this worldliness, though, may be seen in a positive light; the Friar's frivolity makes him more approachable to an audience about whom he knows little except their desire (as seen in their reaction to both the Knight's and Miller's Tales) to be both entertained and edified by the stories in the competition. Despite this convivial streak, however, the Friar is still able to project an aura of dignity when need be, as evidenced by the narrator's description of him as a "solempne man."<sup>51</sup> The Friar's position gives him a superficially dignified air, and this surface appearance is important to the Friar's ability to command attention and respect. Finally, the Friar is lauded for his knowledge of "fair langage," a comment that suggests for the first time that this character's facility with an audience is well-known. This facility is addressed later on when the narrator notes of the Friar, "Somwhat he lipped, for his wantownesse, / To make his Englissh swete upon his tonge" (GP 264-65). The Friar, from the words he uses to the lisping way in which he delivers them, knows what affectations he must embrace in order to make his words sound as fashionable and appealing as possible.

The Friar's performance skills also manifest themselves in other ways. Most notably, the General Prologue observes of the man, "Wel koude he synge and pleyen on a rote; / Of yeddynges he baar outrely the pris" (GP 236-37). This passage demonstrates the Friar's abilities in secular entertainments, and takes special care to emphasise the Friar's talent for reciting "yeddynges," or ballads. The idea of Franciscan friars being the "minstrels of God" arises with this description; Chaucer links the Friar's merriment with the common

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<sup>50</sup> See pages 28-29 of Chapter One for an elaboration on the Pardoner's resemblance to Faux-Semblant.

<sup>51</sup> Leicester has noted that "solempne" can be taken to mean either "dignified" or "festive"—yet another example of the "slippery" language Chaucer uses to describe the Friar (21). This ambiguity, though, demonstrates further how the Friar can present himself as either sober or merry, depending on the situation.

Franciscan tendency to incorporate such diversions as music into their efforts at religious instruction to make their message more memorable (Fleming, "Friars and Literature" 351; Jeffrey, *Franciscan Spirituality* 134). Once again, the Friar's skill at transfixing audiences is linked both with his ability to spin a tale and with his fraternal preaching training. It is also significant that Chaucer notes the Friar's skill in ballads, poems known more for their style and emotional accuracy than their basis in actual fact. The Friar's skill in such a means of expression suggests that one can convey a message that, while not accurate in the usual sense, expresses a sense of truth and usefulness. This idea is reflected in how the Friar's Tale uses techniques that apparently contradict the Friar's somewhat holy status but which resonate with his audience in a way mere pontificating could not.

An examination of the Friar's conduct in his religious duties shows how the Friar also relies heavily on external performance in the execution of his offices, illuminating how Chaucer uses the Friar to explore the issue of antifraternality. Is Chaucer's portrayal of the Friar essentially antifraternality, or does it suggest that, in terms of how the Friar attracts and preserves the attention of those approaching him, the end justifies the means? John Fleming offers a compromise in response to this question, noting that while the friars' depiction in the General Prologue and the Summoner's Tale (in the latter of which Friar John is depicted as self-serving and manipulative) is quite satirical, Chaucer cannot fail to acknowledge the sheer artistry of a mendicant's sermon when he has Friar John speak at the end of the Summoner's narrative ("Friars and Literature" 375). The following interpretation will consider a similar train of thought and argue that, regardless of Chaucer's view of friars generally, he makes the Friar and his Tale a powerful testament to fraternal preaching techniques.

As he does with his words in general, the Friar takes great care to make his liturgical speech and song as appealing as possible. The result is a power over his listeners that transcends their actual means to satisfy his demands, as is shown in this passage: “For though a wydwe hadde noght a sho, / So plesaunt was his *‘In principio,’* / yet wolde he have a ferthyng, er he wente” (GP 253-55). The Friar’s words are so attractively phrased that listeners cannot help but heed them; while this may not always yield the best moral results (one would think the shoeless widow could have made good use of that farthing), such a skilled oratorical technique would be most effective in a storytelling competition of the kind being waged on the way to Canterbury.

Another telling clue to the Friar’s general attitudes towards appearance and its power to influence others is revealed in the narrator’s description of how the Friar dresses on days of reconciliation, when penitents return to the Church to mend their ways: “For he was nat lyk a cloysterer / With a thredbare cope, as is a povre scoler, / But he was lyk a maister or a pope” (GP 259-61). With his opulent dress, the Friar seeks to awe those who see him, and thus gain their respect and deference. While what the Friar does with this influence in the context of his religious duties may be somewhat suspect, the aura he projects succeeds in maintaining the attention of the crowd. On an even more positive note, one could see the Friar in this instance as understanding the psyche of his penitents. These contrite souls need to feel as if they are being confessed by a figure of solid religious authority, and the Friar rises to the occasion through his formal dress. Thus, through his focus on describing the Friar’s tendency to emphasise appearance over internal motives, the narrator conveys how the Friar chooses his words and external expressions in order to win over his audience most effectively.

The Friar's priorities are shown not only in his manner as described in the General Prologue, but also in the substance of his narrative. The Friar's Tale recounts the experience of a corrupt summoner (a jab at Chaucer's Summoner, with whom the Friar has already quarrelled) who, through a meeting with the devil, learns the value of considering one's context before sharing one's thoughts. In this regard, the Friar's Tale delivers a strong message: that each interaction with another person produces a unique dynamic, and the techniques required to persuade each audience of one's views will therefore vary. These techniques may even include separating one's thoughts from one's words in order to tell the audience what they are most receptive to hearing. This message, while susceptible to abuse, is morally neutral in and of itself, and could just as easily be used for good purposes as evil ones; it is a message, therefore, that is fairly consistent with the flexible approach to public preaching advocated by the mendicant fraternal orders and expressed in Chaucer's Friar.<sup>52</sup> Through the final clash between the summoner's frankness and the devil's separation of thought and word, the Friar shows how the public performer must not follow any persuasive technique automatically, but instead determine which techniques and messages will best suit one's particular audience and alter one's performance accordingly, even if this means projecting a performing self which differs from one's true self. Both the substance of the Friar's story, and the techniques he uses to tell it, demonstrate how he promulgates this latter option. In a slight divergence from his strategies as outlined in the General Prologue, the Friar's main technique in telling his tale (and, more importantly, in ensuring that it is entertaining to his audience) is not so much to make himself look grand, but to make himself more accessible to his audience, a strategy

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<sup>52</sup> As articulated in note 17, Thomas Aquinas also points out that the artistic methods of mendicant preachers were morally neutral in and of themselves, subject to both use and abuse (Wenzel, *Preachers* 65).

which one can see has been helped in its development by the Friar's skill in storytelling and song-spinning. The principal way in which the Friar achieves this increased accessibility is by making the protagonist of his story a not-so-subtle representation of the Summoner, who has become the Friar's nemesis over the course of the trip.

Chaucer demonstrates as early as the Friar's Prologue that, by the Friar's initial silence in the face of the Summoner's insults, the Friar attempts to construct an image of himself as a Christian example, ready to turn the other cheek:

This worthy lymytour, this noble Frere,  
 He made alwey a maner louryng chiere  
 Upon the Somonour, but for honestee  
 No vileyns word as yet to hym spak he. (FrP 1265-68)

The narrator's reference to the Friar's "honestee" is ironic; however, the passage does illustrate how the Friar pays close attention to how the others in the group perceive him. The Friar's silence may be interpreted by others as characteristic of his holy position. This strategy does enjoy some success. The Friar's position within the church hierarchy is enough to make the Host defer to him, saying, "'Tel forth youre tale, leeve maister deere'" (FrP 1300). However, the Summoner's antipathy towards the Friar becomes wearisome to the latter. When he can hold his tongue no longer, the Friar uses his remarks to the Wife of Bath to resort to a more effective attention-getting strategy, saying to her,

"Us nedeth nat to speken but of game,  
 And lete auctoritees, on Goddes name,  
 To prechyng and to scoles of clergye.  
 But if it lyke to this compaignye,  
 I wol yow of a somonour telle a game." (FrP 1275-79)

By abandoning his holy image and separating himself from those religious “auctoritees” (or sources) who would express authoritative views about God, the Friar dissociates himself from his profession and creates an image of himself as “one of the crowd”; this is consistent with John Fleming’s discussion of Franciscan friars as suspicious of formal academe and scholasticism (“Friars and Literature” 351). With these words, the Friar makes a calculated break from his established persona of authority, making his story more accessible to the pilgrims. He offers his audience a tale that, in its game-like nature, promises to be far more interesting than anything to be studied by preachers in “scoles of clergie.”

Having thus initially lured his audience with promises of a most un-friarlike narrative, the Friar briefly returns to his role as a religious figure in order to give his veiled condemnation of the Summoner an amusing weight:

“Pardee, ye may wel knowe by the name  
 That of a somonour may no good be sayd;  
 I praye that noon of you be yvele apayd.  
 A somonour is a rennere up and doun  
 With mandementz for fornicacioun,  
 And is ybet at every townes ende.” (FrP 1280-84)

By judicious use of his religious credentials, especially in his adoption of a slightly pontifical and even preachy tone, the Friar makes his abuse of the Summoner much more amusing. In the process, the Friar employs two seemingly contradictory personae simultaneously: while the persona of the religious authority gives his audience a certain moral obligation to listen to what he says, his divergence from that pious persona by insulting the Summoner makes his words much more effective. By showing a calculated fall from grace, the Friar creates the persona of an individual no better than the audience to

which he speaks, a persona that serves the opposing purpose of placing the audience entirely at his command.

That the Friar's Tale ultimately supports the notion that one's performing techniques should be geared towards one's specific audience is best shown through the contrast between its two main characters, the summoner and the devil. By assigning an unfortunate fate to the summoner as a direct result of his straightforwardness and by letting the duplicitous devil escape virtually unscathed, the Friar not only executes a thinly veiled critique of the pilgrim Summoner but also observes that an attentiveness to the desires of one's listeners is more likely to result in their satisfaction than a careless reliance on formula and precedent.

The first time that the reader encounters the devil, the latter is described as disguised as a yeoman (FrT 1380). Right from the beginning, the devil is defined as a character whose appearance is greatly at odds with his true nature. As becomes clear later in the tale, this dichotomy becomes extremely useful in the devil's interactions with the summoner he encounters in his travels. When the summoner first meets the devil, he takes him to be a man because of his "mannes shap" (FrT 1458). The devil, however, explains in terms relevant to the areas of storytelling and maintaining the interest of one's audience why he takes forms other than his own:

"But whan us liketh we kan take us oon,  
 Or elles make yow seme we been shape;  
 Sometyme lyk a man, or lyk an ape,  
 Or lyk an angel kan I ryde or go.  
 It is no wonder thyng thogh it be so;  
 A lowsy jogelour kan deceyve thee,

And pardee, yet kan I moore craft than he." (FrT 1462-68)

In describing his deceitful ways in such terms, the devil's ability to transform himself to best suit his audience's tastes, a strategy which leads most efficiently to his bending them to his will, is subtly likened to what the Friar must do as a preacher to gain control over his audience: namely, present himself in a form which is most palatable to them.<sup>53</sup> In this passage, a reference is made to how "[a] lowsy jogelour kan deceyve" the summoner; while this is likely yet another of the Friar's barbs towards the pilgrim Summoner, it may also be a reference to how Franciscan friars, the "minstrels of God," are able to manipulate their audiences in general (FrT 1467). The devil reinforces this sentiment, albeit in a more overtly sinister way, later on when he says, "For we...wol us swiche formes make / As moost able is oure preyes for to take" (FrT 1471-72). The devil's skill in divorcing his appearance from his true self also extends to the beings surrounding him. When asked by the summoner whether he can create new bodies, the devil says no, but notes he is able to re-animate old ones, a power that again reinforces the fiend's ability to craft an appearance separate from reality (FrT 1504-10).

The summoner's fatal weakness is his lack of skill in disguising his true intentions in the face of an audience he has failed to understand. The summoner, in becoming rather friendly with the devil, has neglected to take into consideration the fact that his new acquaintance is the Prince of Darkness, and that he should thus take great pains to be wary of his companion. The summoner does not take his particular situation into account, though. Instead, he continues with his routine of pressing false charges and demanding payment from innocent victims, and this lack of adaptation to his new companion (in a

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<sup>53</sup> Leicester notes the irony of the Friar likening himself to the devil in this section (26). Given, though, that the devil in the Friar's Tale is not so strict as the summoner in holding others to their word, the fiend is not an entirely negative character, which makes the comparison between him and the Friar not as damning as one might initially think.

sense, his new audience) allows the devil, an expert in gauging the details of a situation and manipulating them to his benefit, to trick the summoner into damning himself. Once again, we see the perils of speaking before an audience by rote. Before the devil uses the summoner's flaw against him, however, he converses with him on the importance of considering one's audience when playing a role in the world. Early in his acquaintance with the summoner, the devil outlines his strategy in gaining what he desires and points out the summoner's major obstacle to obtaining the same:

"I wol entende to wynnyng, if I may,  
 And nat entende our wittes to declare.  
 For, brother myn, thy wit is al to bare  
 To understonde, althogh I tolde hem thee." (FrT 1478-81)

By stating that the way to win what one wants is not to declare that one wants it, the devil favours a strategy of secrecy over one of full disclosure. As well, while his comment that the summoner's "wit is al to bare / To understonde" could be construed as an assessment of the summoner's scant intelligence generally (and yet another pointed barb at the pilgrim Summoner, inserted for the benefit of the rest of the audience), it may also be seen, in light of the devil's earlier use of "wittes" to mean "intentions," to mean that the summoner's intentions are transparent and predictable and therefore not a useful weapon in achieving his goals (FrT 1480-81).

With this advice, the devil has given the summoner a chance to change his ways; he has revealed the importance of hiding one's true thoughts from the world if one's needs are best served by such concealment. In other words, the devil advises the summoner to alter his technique, as his current intentions are too clear to others and thus leave him open to manipulation. The summoner, were he attentive to his interlocutor, would understand the

devil's words as both general counsel and a warning that the devil may take advantage of his "bare" wit. Despite this, though, the summoner still refuses to alter his behaviour to suit the new terms of his relationship with the devil. The summoner continues with his extortionist routine and his tendency to take others' words too literally. When the devil and he encounter a fellow cursing his mud-mired cart to hell, the summoner thinks only of what the carter says, moving the devil to correct his superficial interpretation:

"Herke, my brother, herkne, by thy feith!

Herestow nat how that the cartere seith?

Hent it anon, for he hath yeve it thee,

Both hey and cart, and eek his caples thre!"

"Nay," quod the devel, "God woot, never a deel!

It is nat his entente, trust me weel." (FrT 1551-56)

The devil understands the difference between what is thought and what is said. His experience in manipulating minds and souls has given him a skill invaluable to any performer: the ability to sense a person's inner weaknesses, much as he does with the summoner. While the summoner, too, can be deceptive – near the end of the story he attempts to summon a widow to court on charges he knows are fabricated – his overall state of mind has been shown to be too literalist to understand his audience's thoughts fully, and thus he will never achieve a level of success anything like the devil's.

Not only does the summoner's tendency to interpret words as accurate reflections of intent not yield any success in terms of acquiring material wealth, its corresponding tendency of straightforward speech causes his damnation. The summoner commits two dramatic errors: he is unable to sense his audience's true desires and opinions, and he is ultimately incapable of masking his intentions from his audience. The summoner's infernal

condemnation occurs when, in an attempt to coax the fraudulently-charged widow out of her house, the summoner declares in response to the widow's challenge to repent that his true intent is to be condemned:

"The devel", quod she, "so fecche hym er he deye,

And panne and al, but he wol hym repente!"

"Nay, olde stot, that is nat myn entente,"

Quod this somonour, "for to repente me

For any thyng that I have had of thee." (FrT 1628-32)

By declaring that his intent is not to repent for what he has done to the widow, the summoner displays a frankness that will be his downfall. The summoner has, through his candour, made himself vulnerable to a fiend who has gauged the summoner's inner thoughts better than the summoner has gauged his. As a result, the devil takes advantage of his companion's external declaration of his inner thoughts and sends him to hell.

Overall, the Friar has adopted throughout his tale an air of familiarity with the popular tastes of his audience, mainly by introducing a colourful devil figure and tossing some sly insults at his rival, the Summoner. That the tale has captivated the attention of at least one listener is clear: after the Friar finishes his tale, the enraged Summoner "in his styropes hye stood; / Upon this Frere his herte was so wood / That lyk an aspen leef he quook for ire" (SumP 1665-67). Anticipating the Summoner's reaction and keen not to look too petty to the other pilgrims, the Friar reverts in his conclusion to his image as a figure of spiritual authority, attaching a moral to the story and demonstrating a sense of charity (but also a skill for subtle insults) by sparing a thought for misguided summoners everywhere, saying, "And God, that maked after his ymage / Mankynde, save and gyde us, alle and some, / And leve this somonours goode men bicomel!" (FrT 1642-44). In phrasing his

comments thus, the Friar manages to achieve what would seem to be mutually exclusive goals: looking devout while delivering yet another blow to the Summoner. The Friar reinforces his status as a religious authority while keeping to his crowd-pleasing formula by making numerous references to Scripture and Church Fathers in his closing comments, but thereafter stating that he will not delve into them at present due to time constraints:

Lordynges, I koude han toold yow, quod this Frere,  
 Hadde I had leyser for this Somnour heere,  
 After the text of Crist, Poul, and John,  
 And of oure othere doctours many oon,  
 Swiche peynes that youre hertes myghte agryse...(FrT 1645-49)

The Friar's final words contain both an exhortation to his audience to stay holy and one final insult at the Summoner's expense: "And prayeth that thise somonours hem repente / Of hir mysdedes, er that the feend hem hente!" (FrT 1663-64).<sup>54</sup>

While recorded reaction to the Friar's Tale is restricted to the Summoner, his anger leads one to believe that the reaction of the other pilgrims to the Friar's narrative is a positive one. The Summoner asks the pilgrims to listen to his tale, since they were so willing to entertain the Friar's lies (SumP 1668-71). It is true that the reaction of the rest of the audience to the Friar's Tale is not recorded. This silence, though, may be an indication of the tale's success, as Chaucer does not write of any objections by the Host or the other pilgrims, clearly voiced at the conclusion of the Pardoner's performance (PardT 946-61). One also gets the sense from the General Prologue's characterisation of the Friar, as well as from the general perception in Chaucer's time of the mendicants' persuasive speaking

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<sup>54</sup> Derek Pearsall phrases his comments on the Friar's final words in a strikingly similar way, noting that the Friar's "pious prayer....is his way of getting a last jab in at the Summoner" (*Canterbury* 222).

skills, that the Friar is so utterly charming in his storytelling manner that his tale would likely have won over his listeners. As well, it stands to reason that the Summoner would feel no need to pay back the Friar for his tale if the audience's reaction had been negative, as such a response would have been vindication enough. Thus, the Friar's Tale has likely succeeded in engaging its audience.

The Friar combines in his conclusion the two techniques that have served him so well throughout his tale: projecting an aura of piety and descending to the level of his audience. Used at the appropriate times, these two techniques serve to craft a narrative that holds the interest of the Friar's listeners. The General Prologue's description of the Friar makes plain that character's attention to his audience and his consequent employment of specific persuasive techniques in order to bend his listeners to his will. These techniques are consistent in spirit with the mendicant friars' training to go into the streets and preach to crowds in whichever way was most effective. This training made an attention to particular crowds' tastes absolutely vital. The Friar's efforts in this area have reaped rewards with his audience. As Jill Mann notes, while the Friar and Summoner share many vices, the Friar's pleasant manner, entertaining talents and ability to "[make] life easy for everyone" make him a much bigger hit than the Summoner with both his audience and Chaucer's readers (192). The Friar's Tale's amiability is consistent with this deference to the audience, but also demonstrates how such a deference paradoxically gives the Friar power over his audience.<sup>55</sup> While much literature of Chaucer's day condemned the friars for their duplicitous oratorical skills, here Chaucer presents a context in which such skills have a

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<sup>55</sup> Leicester maintains that the Friar's efforts to refrain from a complete tirade against the Summoner prevent him from "*let[ting] himself go* as savagely and completely as he would have liked" and thus put him "at [his audience's] mercy" (33, 37). In fact, the Friar's favouring of the audience's desires over his own shows how he has control over his tale and his audience, in that he is able to set aside his short-term wants and construct a tale which will yield him victory in the long run.

benefit for all involved (if one excludes, of course, the Summoner) – for the friar in submitting a real contender in the story-telling contest; for the audience in being served an entertaining tale. While the way in which the Friar delivers his tale to the pilgrims is heavily influenced by his use of various performing techniques, including a mixture of sly insult and subtle self-elevation, the Friar also conveys in the substance of his tale the usefulness of considering one’s listeners before making oneself vulnerable to them. The result is a narrative that keeps the audience interested and keeps the Friar in the race to win the tale-telling competition.

To return, then, to the questions asked earlier of David Williams’ critique of the Friar’s Tale, what are the implications of the summoner’s punishment for his honesty and the generally positive attitude towards the Friar and his narrative? Given the tale’s emphasis on language as a reflection of inner thought, an idea cognate with the Platonic view of words as inferior copies of eternal ideals, the summoner’s damnation for his direct correspondence between word and idea and the Friar’s relatively benign portrayal despite his strategic weakening of this correspondence would lead one to conclude that the Platonic and Neoplatonic views of language which scholars like Williams, Myles and Robertson have deemed to be pervasive in the medieval era may not have been so dominant as they would contend. The Friar’s Tale advocates, both in substance and form, a flexible, situation-centred use of language rather than an absolutist Platonic language model. This advocacy is strengthened by the failure of the Pardoner’s and Prioress’s performances, which do not embrace the Friar’s view of language.<sup>56</sup> While Williams and

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<sup>56</sup> David Aers, citing Bakhtin, makes a similar point; he writes that, in order to interpret the true meaning of any text, one must remember that the spoken word is “ ‘socially oriented,’ determined by the ‘immediate social situation and the broader social milieu’ ” (3-4). As the Friar’s, Pardoner’s and Prioress’s Tales demonstrate, it is as important for the performer as for the interpreter to keep in mind this “socially oriented” view of language and adapt his or her words accordingly.

others have argued that the Friar's use of language is duplicitous and intended to demonstrate his immorality, Chaucer's depiction of the character ultimately judges him not as a moral being, but as a performer. In this respect, the Friar is a positive example for the other pilgrims.

## Conclusion

As this paper's introduction discussed, a tension exists between those who view the *Canterbury Tales* as a series of sections, each with its own self-contained theme and development, and those who perceive the text more as an organic unit, in which ideas introduced in earlier sections inform the work in later stages, making any interactions between the pilgrims crucial. In addition to scholars like Kittredge, Lumiansky and (more recently) Carl Lindahl who support this latter view, there are others who have taken even more seriously the notion of the *Canterbury Tales* narrators as performers working in a dynamic environment. These academics have focused their efforts on understanding the oral environment that Chaucer has attempted to replicate with the *Tales*, and their results have ranged from traditional analyses of the pilgrims' performances to recordings of selected narratives.<sup>57</sup>

This thesis takes the position that the *Canterbury Tales* is a unified entity and that, as such, it is important for readings of the work to understand not only what occurs within each character's appointed block of time for tale-telling, but also in the interactions those characters have with the other pilgrims before and after their tales. It is clear, given the rather involved context Chaucer has provided the reader, that one can use that context to develop a level of understanding of the *Canterbury Tales* which goes beyond a solely aesthetic interpretation. This context-based view is reflective of an older tradition championed by writers like Lumiansky and Kittredge. This dissertation, while drawing on that tradition's initial emphasis on oral context, seeks to make that context more specific. A

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<sup>57</sup> Betsy Bowden has made the performance of Chaucer a focus of her research; see *Chaucer Aloud: The Varieties of Textual Interpretation* and her *Listeners' Guide to Medieval English: A Discography*. See also Stephen Knight's "Chaucer's Pardoner in Performance," which argues for reading Chaucer's tales aloud in order to gain an understanding of their original context and significance.

vital part of the context that shapes the Pardoner's, Prioress's and Friar's relationship with the other pilgrims before, during and after their tales is their employment of various preaching techniques with which each character's real-life cohorts were commonly perceived to have been familiar, whether first-hand or as an audience, in Chaucer's day. The Pardoner and Prioress, representatives of groups whose members were generally viewed as suspicious or inexperienced speakers, respectively, do not take sufficient care in considering their audience and immediate circumstances when presenting their tales. The Friar, however, by making use of the flexible and audience-based preaching techniques commonly ascribed to actual mendicants of Chaucer's day, takes care to consider his listeners, and thus crafts a tale which affects them in exactly the way he wishes.

The first chapter of this dissertation focused on the Pardoner and his Tale, examining how the Pardoner's essentially self-centred nature (as hinted in the General Prologue and realised in the Pardoner's Prologue) is exactly the wrong kind of nature required for an effective connection with one's audience, mainly because it helps create and maintain an inflexible narrative which satisfies no one's tastes but the Pardoner's. Criticism on the Pardoner's Tale is particularly indicative of the chasm between those who judge the tale on a purely aesthetic level and those who judge the tale by considering the action surrounding it. While several critics of the Pardoner's Tale have viewed the exemplum at the core of the Pardoner's performance as a well-crafted tale, these critics view that exemplum as the entirety of the Pardoner's performance.<sup>58</sup> While the exemplum may comprise the Pardoner's *official* performance, though, this performance may be defined more broadly as beginning when he accepts the request to recount a tale and starts to

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<sup>58</sup> Donald Howard, Derek Pearsall and Robert Jordan were among the scholars addressed in Chapter One who espouse this view. Even Kittredge, whose character assessments were usually based on the wider context articulated in the work, chooses to ignore much of what the Pardoner says before and after his exemplum (21).

interact with the assembled company. At this point, the Pardoner assumes a more public role within the group; whatever he says thereafter will affect the pilgrims' consideration of his character and, by extension, of his tale. In his Prologue, the Pardoner establishes himself to his audience as a corrupt individual with a talent for using sermons to swindle his listeners out of their money. Instead of altering his strategy and his story after this revelation, however, the Pardoner presses forth with the same formula of tale he uses on all his audiences, completely ignoring how his present audience's attitudes towards him will inevitably have changed after the revelation of his methods. As a result, the Pardoner's canned sermon – which, appropriately enough, recounts how the self-absorbed actions and disrespectful attitudes of the three protagonists result in their death – meets with expressions of derision and outrage from the pilgrims.

The Prioress's well-documented attention to courtly manners, described in her General Prologue portrait, unfortunately do not extend to the way she considers what the other pilgrims want to hear. The Prioress, in keeping with the contemporary stereotype of medieval nuns as emotional rather than intellectual and therefore highly influenced by more histrionic "popular" sermons, allows her sensibilities to carry her tale of the little "clergeon" out of her control. Instead of consciously adapting the text to work with her particular audience, the Prioress asks the Blessed Virgin to "guide" her song, thus establishing from the beginning a lack of control over her own text and an ability to alter it based on her specific performing circumstances. The result is a tale whose graphic descriptions of the boy's murder seem to stem from the Prioress's inability to temper her tone, eventually leading to the assembled company's ambiguously "sobre" reaction to the tale (ThP 692). The tale's content, too, warns of the dangers of merely reciting a text without any active consideration of one's audience, as the "clergeon" loudly sings, with

fatal results, an antiphon in a language he does not understand through a neighbourhood whose residents' tastes do not concern him.

By contrast, the Friar has a better sense than either the Pardoner or the Prioress of the importance of considering one's audience while telling a story. The Friar, as depicted in the General Prologue, is a man who easily understands and adopts the persona required for a given occasion, be it solemn or celebratory. It is perhaps because of this skill that he understands the circumstances under which he tells his tale: a competition in which the most effective way to win consists not only of telling the best story, but also of pushing down any potential rivals. Given that the Friar has already exchanged words with the Summoner, the latter proves a natural target for the Friar to ridicule in his narrative. In adapting the exemplum of a foolish man whose encounter with the devil starts him on a path to hell, the Friar tailors his tale to make the man a summoner, thus achieving his dual goal of enraging the pilgrimage's Summoner and satisfying the audience's desire for a good tale and an interesting rivalry. Appropriately, the substance of the Friar's Tale, which punishes its summoner for refusing to adjust his communications with others even as changing circumstances make such an adjustment critical to his survival, offers an illustrative counterpoint to the Friar's own success with the flexible fraternal preaching technique.

Thus, we see through the varied levels of success of the Pardoner's, Prioress's and Friar's Tales how Chaucer favours an adaptable, situation-based strategy of speaking, one patterned on the preaching rhetoric of the mendicant friars. What implications, though, does the promotion of this flexible style have beyond the world of the *Canterbury Tales*? One cannot ignore a discussion of what Chaucer intends to achieve by allowing the Friar to construct an effective tale using the very preaching techniques condemned by so many

writers with antifraternality attitudes, attitudes which several scholars argue Chaucer conveys in his own works.<sup>59</sup> If Chaucer harboured the attitudes against mendicants that he is ascribed, though, why are the Friar and his Tale depicted relatively well? It may be that Chaucer's attitude towards the friars was split, and that he admired their ability to connect with an audience while at the same time condemned the abuses of that gift.<sup>60</sup>

It may also be, though, that Chaucer felt an affinity (grudging or otherwise) for the friars because of their role in maintaining the tradition of oral performance, one that was seeing changes in Chaucer's day. While it is generally agreed that reading aloud was still the dominant means of communicating the written word in late-fourteenth-century England, literacy (and with it, silent, private reading) was beginning to increase (Knight 21). The proposed reasons for this increased literacy are diverse. Sheila Lindenbaum contends that the popular distrust in London of civil documents, which many believed too often manipulated words in order to serve "special interests," resulted in an increase of Londoners writing with as much "direct and truthful expression" as possible (286-87). Several other scholars, though, have linked this jump in literacy and writing to the rise of the Lollards, who encouraged lay reading so that their followers may study religious texts independently (Rosenwein 194). Ann Hudson points out the numerous advantages of this private reading of religious texts, particularly Lollard ones: "[T]he written word could stay when the persecuted preacher could not; a book is more easily hidden than a man; the text is constant if not permanent, while the spoken word is fleeting" (231). This may have been why private reading was advocated by Wycliffe and his followers; such reading made it

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<sup>59</sup> Among these writers, also identified on page 18, are Penn Szitty, John Fleming and Beryl Smalley.

<sup>60</sup> This is a view similar to that taken by Fleming, whose belief that the Summoner's Tale's Friar John, while a satirical figure, also reflects Chaucer's admiration of fraternal preaching skills has been mentioned earlier in this paper (Fleming "Friars and Literature" 375; see also Chapter Three, pages 83-4).

easier for the reader to receive and interpret the text in the way he or she wished and made it extremely difficult to guide the reader, using what Paul Saenger calls “peer correction and control,” to certain conclusions as the knowledge was transmitted, as was possible with an oral performance (264).<sup>61</sup>

To speculate on whether Chaucer condemned or supported Lollard views could constitute, and has constituted, a line of research of its very own. It is useful, however, to contrast briefly the culture of private reading advocated by groups like the Lollards with the persuasive oral techniques of the mendicants in order to suggest why Chaucer depicts the Friar and his Tale relatively positively.<sup>62</sup> One of the reasons for this portrayal may be that the friars’ spontaneous and adaptable style of speech runs closer to how Chaucer’s works were most often presented in his day: orally to assembled groups. This style of presentation, necessarily more versatile and adaptable (not to mention more capable of conveying the variety of characters found in a work like the *Canterbury Tales*) than the private reader-book relationship, found a closer link to the friars’ preaching style than the world of silent reading, and this familiarity may have appealed to Chaucer as a writer accustomed to having his texts read aloud.

Nevertheless, Chaucer may have realised that the trend of private reading would eventually extend beyond its role as a tool of social and religious dissent. In this respect, the *Canterbury Tales* may be seen as a response to, or more precisely, an attempt to

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<sup>61</sup> Saenger continues, “Private, visual reading and private composition thus encouraged individual critical thinking and contributed ultimately to the development of skepticism and intellectual heresy,” thus making it hardly surprising that, “[i]n England, the mere possession of Lollard writings was legal grounds for formal charges of heresy” (264).

<sup>62</sup> It is also notable that, in the Friar’s ability to tell an effective tale despite certain morally iffy character traits, Chaucer comes into an indirect conflict with the Wycliffite view that “sacraments administered by a sinful priest are invalid” (Nicholas 490). While Chaucer is dealing not with priests and sacraments but with friars and sermons, the suggested conclusion drawn from the Friar’s success—that one can divorce a person’s character from his words—appears to be at odds with the Lollard sentiment.

accommodate the change from a predominantly oral presentation of literature to a presentation more rooted in individual reading. When faced with such a shift towards a world in which a storyteller is no longer in immediate control of how a text is received, it is reasonable to argue that attempts would be made within the text itself to satisfy a variety of potential audiences demands in an effort to maximise the chances that the work will be well-received. If one looks at the *Canterbury Tales*, one sees a wide variety of genres and tones, each designed to suit the desires of a specific audience segment. From the courtly and genteel Knight's Tale to the bawdy fabliau of the Miller, from the Second Nun's pious saint's life to the Wife of Bath's folk-influenced narrative, it appears that Chaucer has attempted to write a tale to suit every possible taste. In the absence of a live storyteller who can shift his tone or subject if he senses the crowd's disapproval or restlessness, the *Canterbury Tales* instead try to approximate on paper an oral performer's adaptability.<sup>63</sup>

Not content, though, with merely attempting to preserve the best aspects of oral performance in his writing, Chaucer creates a scenario in which his characters face pressures similar to his own. While the Canterbury pilgrims are not overtly concerned with a possible decline in oral transmission of texts, they are placed in a situation in which, like Chaucer, they must keep their audience interested. Those who succeed, like the Friar, find the key to that success in their ability to adapt to present circumstances. In much the same way, Chaucer seeks through the *Canterbury Tales* both to attract and maintain the attention

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<sup>63</sup> Carl Lindahl offers a similar view in his *Earnest Games*, postulating that the *Canterbury Tales* mimic "the structure of the medieval festival, fitting the patterns of action within the frame and links to a model of oral group performance thoroughly familiar to his contemporaries"; he adds that the work, "whether or not it was read aloud...became a model oral entertainment in their eyes" (44-45). Sheila Lindenbaum approaches the *Tales'* variety from a different angle, relating the work's "generic diversity and polyvocality" to late-fourteenth-century London's "fascinating convergence of cultural influences and institutional discourses" (284).

of as wide an audience as possible and, more generally, to adapt to a culture in which hints of oral performance's declining supremacy were beginning to emerge.

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