

Spring 2010

# The Transcendent Comedy of the "Canterbury Tales": Harmony in "Quyting," Harmony in Fragmentation

John Zedolik

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THE TRANSCENDENT COMEDY OF THE *CANTERBURY TALES*:  
HARMONY IN “QYTING,” HARMONY IN FRAGMENTATION

A Dissertation

Presented to the McAnulty College and  
Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

John J. Zedolik, Jr.

May 2010

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2010

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By

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Approved April 6, 2010

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## ABSTRACT

### THE TRANSCENDENT COMEDY OF THE *CANTERBURY TALES*: HARMONY IN “QUYTING,” HARMONY IN FRAGMENTATION

By

John J. Zedolik, Jr.

May 2010

Dissertation supervised by Anne Brannen

The *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer has been a controversial work for many years due in part to its tonal variety which leads to questions of genre and the work's purpose. Ambiguity regarding the work's hypothetical finished state, due to its actual fragmented condition, also contributes to critical controversy. Thus the dissertation analyzes certain tales and these tales' relationships to other tales to arrive at an argument that sees the *Canterbury Tales* as indeed fragmented, but harmoniously complete.

The most important critical point in the dissertation is the “quyting”—paying-back or balancing—which one tale and teller perform upon another tale and teller or other tales and tellers. Thus each chapter looks at how a pilgrim specifically balances the *Canterbury Tales* by telling a tale contrasting in tone, outcome, or genre to a preceding tale in the same fragment or to another tale in a separate fragment. Additionally, the

chapters analyze specifically how a tale-teller, a member of the tale-telling “game” during the pilgrimage, often takes comedic revenge upon the teller (a fellow pilgrim) of the preceding tale or a tale-teller from a separate fragment. Finally, chapters focus also on how the fragmented state of the *Canterbury Tales* allows further “quyting” that helps make the work what it is as a whole.

The analysis produces the argument that the “quyting” between tales and between tellers, and the *Canterbury Tales*’s fragmented state produces comedy as a whole due to the pragmatic harmony—necessary to comedy—that arises from the “quyting” of tales and tellers. The harmony that this “quyting” produces allows the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole to transcend the non-comedic nature or genre of some of its individual tales. Moreover, the fragmented state of the *Canterbury Tales* allows the reader to “quyt” the author, thus allowing imaginative freedom and thereby harmony between reader and author. The great comedy extends beyond the pages to readers themselves who now exist beyond the bounds of Chaucer’s world of the late fourteenth century. The comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* continues to transcend limitations.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my mother, MaryAnne Zedolik, who took the time to teach me to read; my late uncle, Gerald Kuhar, whose interest in my literary pursuits as an adolescent has proven continually inspiring; and especially my wife, Lisa Seligman, who has been a constant, enthusiastic support through every challenge in this process.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to acknowledge Professor Bernard Beranek and Professor Linda Kinnahan for taking the time to sit on my committee and read several drafts of my dissertation. Their insights and advice have been invaluable in my crafting this final version of the dissertation, a version that I hope does justice their knowledge and intelligence. I would especially like to thank my committee chair, Professor Anne Brannen, who has guided me through this long process with intelligence, kindness, and encouragement. Without her presence, this dissertation would have not been possible, and I owe her a debt of gratitude I hope I may pay off some day.



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## Chapter One- The Comedy of the *Canterbury Tales*

The *Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories, prologues, and links whose variety sometimes baffles both reader and critic regarding its genre. In fact, a reader or critic might even say that the *Canterbury Tales* “are” a collection of disparate tales and miscellany. I say disparate because the tales themselves offer a wide variety of medieval genres: romance, fabliau, parody, saint’s lives, beast epic, and sermon, to name some of the represented genres. Beyond the variety of genres the *Canterbury Tales* contains, the outer dramatic framework of the pilgrimage, the dramatic interplay between the pilgrims, the introductions, prologues, and epilogues to the individual tales further expand the variety of the work as a whole. Thus the *Canterbury Tales* contains variety in genre but also variety in its narrative modes and components. It is almost as if Chaucer wrote this work with its multi-layered and multi-faceted structure in order to defy classification. However, if one looks closely, one main bond unites the work: the *Canterbury Tales* is a comedy,<sup>1</sup> whose humorous and non-humorous tales move toward a final, if sometimes problematic harmony, which transcends the non-humorous natures of some of the tales and the rancor which remains between pilgrims in the story-telling “game.”

Humor and comedy are, of course, not the same thing. Humor is speech, situation, or action that generates laughter or is meant to generate laughter in the audience or reader. However, humor is only an element of moment, so to speak, in a work of art. Conversely, comedy is an overarching form to which humor *may* contribute. A humorous element within a work of fiction also may eventually work toward satire, parody, or other

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<sup>1</sup> The major project of this dissertation will be the argument that the *Canterbury Tales* as whole is a comedy. I am responding to the lack of criticism I perceive in this argument of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. Many critics note its humor and the comedy of its individual tales, but I have not found criticism

genre of comic fiction—not necessarily comedy. Medieval considerations regarding humor show the localized quality of humor. For example, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, an Englishman writing (in Latin) in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century states that “humor proceeds from lightness of heart. And a joke is a youthful thing and is agreeable to those who are in their green years. And a joke is a ‘light’ thing to which the more sprightly age applies itself easily. And third, the action is light. Therefore let everything to do with it be light” (101). Thus, for Geoffrey of Vinsauf, humor consists of words or action that lack seriousness and that, moreover, proceeds generally from young people. He mentions nothing regarding the ultimate end toward which humor may work. In another work, he states that “[i]f [ . . . ] we have humorous matter at hand, let us use trivial and colloquial words through the entire body of the matter, and words pertinent to the persons and things about which we speak. The sort of matter demands words which are used by those carrying on conversation and not different words nor more difficult words” (*Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi* 93). Here he calls for colloquial diction since humor will necessarily involve characters of relatively low social status. His advice does not, as in his statement regarding the source of humor, consider the ultimate end of a work that uses humor. In fact, humor (from the Latin *humor* or *umor*—[bodily] fluid) is “[a] term used in English [only] since the early eighteenth century to denote one of the two major types of writing (*humor* and **wit**) whose purpose is the evoking of some kind of laughter” (Holman 220). Thus, even though Geoffrey of Vinsauf may have used the term, the modern sense of “writing [ . . . ] evoking laughter” did not exist until the early modern period. Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s medieval definition

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that treats the work as comedy as a whole that transcends its individual tales, some of which are not humorous and that even end with death or unhappiness.

suggests only localized lightness of tone and subject matter. Laura Kendrick even notes that “humorous matter” in Parr’s translation of the *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi*, is originally, in Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s Latin “jocosa materia” (93), that is, “joking or fun” matter (Traupman 235). The original word is certainly close in meaning to the modern sense of “humor,” but again suggests the tactical, small-scale use of language to produce laughter at particular moments in the work of literature, which as a whole may not even be a comedy at all.

Comedy, unlike humor, has a wider scope. Comedy concerns teleology, the outcome of a work of fiction. Comedy works toward an eventual harmony within its particular fictional world and often uses humor to criticize human foibles, which prevent harmony from coalescing until the comedic resolution near or at the end of the work. I am not arguing that, at the end of a comedic work, the story resolves all its situations perfectly and that a paradise ensues for all. Instead I argue that comedy ends with a working harmony, which allows elements of the fiction’s society to coexist in a viable, mutually tolerant, if not amicable manner. In the resolution of a comedy, the possibilities of life, laughter, and fertility—or at least vigorous sexuality—triumph over forces of stasis and pretense and produce a society where each member plays his or her own appropriate note, so to speak, while blending with others’ notes. Even if all these notes are not joyous, they at least can work together to produce pragmatic harmony. This musical definition and metaphor applies to the *Canterbury Tales* as well. The individual humorous tales resolve conflict, even if the established harmony is problematic, and the work as whole illustrates this harmony at its ending, even if, and even because the work is fragmented and incomplete. Its comedy paradoxically arises from, and transcends, its

fragmentary and incomplete state. Its comedy, as a complete work including its outer dramatic framework, also transcends the seeming discordance which some humorous and non-humorous tales and episodes in the outer framework display. The analysis and explanation of this seeming discordance, which ultimately produces harmony, along with the analysis and explanation of the more obviously humorous tales, will constitute the bulk of my study.

In Dante's *Letter to Can Grande Della Scala*, for instance, discussing the *Divine Comedy*, he states that "it is evident that the title of the present work is 'the *Comedy*.' For if we have respect to its content, at the beginning it is horrible and fetid, for it is hell; and in the end it is prosperous, and gracious. For it is paradise" (122). Dante states that the *Divine Comedy* is a comedy because it begins in "horrible" circumstances and ends in "prosperous" ones. This statement essentially encapsulates the comedic dynamic. I do not argue that the *Canterbury Tales* ends in "paradise," as the *Divine Comedy* does; however, I argue that the *Canterbury Tales* (a pilgrimage, like the *Divine Comedy*) does show this basic dynamic, if in the modulated movement of discord to harmony. The *Divine Comedy* moves its narrator from Hell to Heaven, an obvious move to happiness and perfection, while The *Canterbury Tales*, at least in plan, moves its pilgrims from Southwark to Canterbury Cathedral, from the earthly to the spiritual (if still earth-bound goal). The humorous and non-humorous tales themselves and the outer dramatic framework of the *Canterbury Tales* illustrate this movement in a variety of ways, always working toward a basic comedic resolution involving a final, essential harmony, even if gaps in plot resolution remain and the comedy is not immediately and obviously apparent.

Some of the humorous tales in the *Canterbury Tales* do not, in fact, appear comedic in their resolutions for a variety of reasons, one being medieval definitions of comedy such as Dante's, where comedy involves a plot movement from sorrow to happiness, since some do not show this movement for every character, even if these tales end in pragmatic harmony. For example, in the fabliaux-influenced *Reeve's Tale*, Symkyn the miller does not end up unscathed and happy. However, we can perceive the comedy in this apparently un-comedic and cruelly humorous ending if we briefly examine certain ideas present in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*.

William R. Cook and Ronald B. Herzman, referring to one of the *Consolation's* most famous and influential elements, state that "The image [of the Wheel of Fortune] is also responsible for medieval definitions of tragedy and comedy: when the wheel makes a downward turn, moving from good fortune to bad, it describes a tragedy; when the wheel makes an upward turn, moving from bad fortune to good, it is a comedy" (152). Thus Boethius's conception of the dynamic from "bad fortune to good" finds expression in Dante's definition of comedy. Its comedy, as a complete work including its outer dramatic framework, also transcends the seeming discordance which some humorous and non-humorous tales and episodes in the outer framework display. The analysis and explanation of this seeming discordance, which ultimately produces harmony, along with the analysis and explanation of the more obviously humorous tales, will constitute the bulk of my study.

It is important, however, to remember that Boethius, like Dante, was a Christian, and so conceived an all-powerful, benevolent God as ultimately being behind the movement, despite the apparently cruel, arbitrary, or mindlessly mechanistic nature of the

Wheel's turning. Thus, in order to perceive the comedy in some tales which do not end happily for all characters, such as the aforementioned *Reeve's Tale* with Symkyn the miller and his cuckolding and beating, one must keep in mind the rise in fortune of the tale's protagonist(s). Since the Wheel is a circle, the antagonist falls, but the revolution creates a harmonious situation, even if the situation is not equitable or enjoyable for both protagonist and antagonist. Harmony is a meshing of unlike elements of varying degrees of similarity, and the elements which will predominate in the newly harmonious situation are the protagonist and his allies, or co-conspirators, such as Nicholas and Alison in the *Miller's Tale*.

Another reason that it may be difficult to perceive the comedy in some humorous tales of the *Canterbury Tales* and the overall comedy of the entire work is the contemporary conception of comedy. Nowadays we generally view comedy as a work of art that contains humor and thus creates laughter in the reader, listener, or viewer, but as Kendrick states, "Whereas we tend to think of a comedy as a dramatic genre and the comic as virtually anything provoking laughter, medieval definitions emphasize neither drama nor laughter" (90). Thus, the medieval conception of comedy does not *necessarily* involve humor. Humor, because it usually illustrates a gap between truth and appearance, or especially truth and pretense, is a useful and often used tool in the comedic dynamic but it is not a necessary tool in that process. The pragmatic, harmonious outcome is the necessary criterion of comedy.

It is also important to consider the intent of medieval comedy when analyzing the humorous tales of the *Canterbury Tales*. Cook and Herzman also state, in reference to Bernard of Clairvaux's writing, that "in so much of medieval humor, the comic aspects of

the passage [from one of Bernard's *Treatises*] are intended to forcefully heighten the reader's awareness of deviation from an ideal [ . . .]" (244). Thus "comic" passages and "humor," potential elements of comedy, may serve a didactic purpose and aid the comedy as a whole in showing the "deviation from an ideal," which in the Middle Ages most likely was a Christian one, though the comedy may certainly imply other ideals as well. Therefore, we must keep in mind that the medieval notion of comedy involves both the protagonist moving from bad fortune to good fortune and the teaching of a lesson, however harsh, in some cases, to most major characters, and to the audience or reader as well.

Another contemporary expectation in comedy and its resolution is marriage, following the precedent of Renaissance comedic dramas and the Greco-Roman plays which influenced it. Marriages in these plays, from Plautus to Shakespeare to modern cinematic romantic comedies, certainly bring harmony to the social milieu in which they occur. Yet in medieval comedy, harmony may occur in processes that do not necessitate an ending in marriage between the male and female lead and often their young, marriageable allies. As Boethius and Dante both express, the higher power of God can create comedy greater than or at least equal to the comedy (and harmony) that marriage or marriages generate at a comedic work's end. This greater harmony is not always apparent to sublunary creatures, a possibility which may also help explain the comedy of Chaucer's comedic tales or the comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole.

These preceding paragraphs are not meant to explain and illustrate the totally alien or obscure nature of Chaucer's comedy. Some humorous tales of the *Canterbury Tales* do, in fact, show a comedic dynamic recognizable as such to a contemporary



reader, since they do follow in some ways the Greco-Roman tradition of comedy, which is the model of structure and expectation a contemporary reader generally follows, consciously or not. Northrop Frye states, regarding “Greek New Comedy, as transmitted by Plautus and Terence” that

the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another. At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in charge of the play’s society, and the audience recognizes that they are usurpers. At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero, and the moment when this crystallization occurs is the point of resolution, in the action, the comic discovery, *anagnorisis* or *cognitio*. (163)

I do not include this excerpt to argue that Chaucer completely and consciously follows the plot dynamics of Greco-Roman New Comedy<sup>2</sup>, but rather that Chaucer’s humorous tales often contain this dynamic, which leads from discord to harmony in a variety of guises, the end result not necessarily being marriage. This basic progression from discord to harmony will become evident in the following chapters where, for example, I analyze the *Miller’s Tale*, in the context of this basic movement, even as Chaucer deviates from the ancient, well-worn form based upon the eventual marriage of the young hero and heroine that Frye describes.

As medieval comedy tends at least to be implicitly didactic, and Frye himself uses the terms “*anagnorisis*” and “*cognitio*,” which refer to a gaining of self-knowledge (and

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen A. Bishop does argue for the influence of Plautus, at least indirectly, in Chaucer’s fabliaux-like tales. See “The influence of Plautus and Latin Elegiac Comedy on Chaucer’s Fabliaux.” *ChaucR* v 35 (3) (2001): 294-317.

the truth of situation) by the main character, the movement to truth and revelation is also an important overarching dynamic in comedy. Frye elaborates that

The movement [ . . . ] from a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom is fundamentally [ . . . ] a movement from illusion to reality. Illusion is whatever is fixed or definable, and reality is best understood as its negation: whatever reality is, it's not *that*, hence the importance of the theme of creating and dispelling illusion in comedy: the illusion caused by disguise, obsession, hypocrisy, or unknown parentage. (169-70)

Thus the movement from falsehood to truth, from a supposed "fixed" reality, defined by individuals in positions of power, to a flexible reality, is almost as important as the movement toward harmony. The two movements go hand-in-hand, because only when the truth is apparent will the comedic world in the play or tale work as it should, that is, without hiding or suppressing the real nature and the real energies of the society and its inhabitants. The machinery of society can best work when all its energies go into moving in one direction through the motive powers of its unlike elements, instead of working to hide true elements, thus working against itself and wasting energy, especially the energy of youth. To start this dynamic, it is necessary to eliminate or diminish the power of the blocking agent, usually an older male, who, through his pretense, impedes the energies of the society from working as well as they could to produce happiness for the majority of society, especially the young people, who will mold and reproduce the future of the society. Thus the comedic dynamic must work to eliminate and/or punish the false

pretense under which the powerful individual rules. Truth, even if unpleasant to some, such as the *senex amans* (or *senex furens*, in Symkyn's case) is necessary for the harmony and happiness of the majority. A false pretense only impedes the pragmatically harmonious potential of the work's present and, more importantly, future society. Even if the success of youth involves breaking "fixed and definable" Christian laws, such as those against fornication and lying, the status quo is worse, so flexible, experiential alternatives produce harmony, which, even if not ideal, move in a productive direction. The frozen, corrupt, and false situation at the beginning of the comedy does not move at all, and movement and change are natural in the physical world.

Since, as I have stated, comedy often involves fornication and deception, it is easier to perceive the comedic nature of some of the more problematic of Chaucer's humorous tales if we consider the prominence of the supposedly low matter and language which forms the linguistic grist in comedy's mill. Kendrick states that "in some cases, to write in the vernacular, the 'vulgar' tongue, was enough to make a work into a comedy" (91). I am not arguing that low characters and their language *in themselves* make a comedy, but the emphasis on these kinds of characters, situations, and language in medieval comedies contrasts with aristocratic characters of tragedies, and thus gives medieval comedy another facet of its identity: its simple opposition to tragedy. Kendrick, citing Henry Ansgar Kelly, states that "To explain the title of Dante's masterpiece, Boccaccio had recourse to a more general definition of comedy: a narrative whose plot leads from sorrow to happiness. Thus a comedy could be almost any versified narrative that treated the lives of ordinary people and ended on a happier note than on which it began" (92). This definition of medieval comedy incorporates both the happy ending and

the focus on socially lower, less heroic characters than tragedy features.<sup>3</sup> But even with these peasant or bourgeois characters, the comedic dynamic from discord to harmony still basically operates, despite the humorous crudity of language or subject matter, which the process illustrates or even uses didactically or otherwise in its progression toward harmony.

A related feature of this component of medieval comedy is the apparent materialism, physicality, and by extension, carnality, driving this dynamic. Derek Pearsall states that

Comedy sets all [these transcendent chivalric and Christian ideals] [ . . . ] aside, and asserts that there are no values, secular or religious, more important than survival and the satisfaction of appetite. Characters who may be temporarily under the illusion that things are otherwise, such as Absolon or January, are given short shrift. The injunction is not to ‘be noble’, or ‘be good’, but ‘be smart’. (161)

However, as I have stated, medieval comedy does contain the idea that an omnipotent and benevolent God at least controls and stands behind the vicissitudes of the Wheel of Fortune, no matter how physically gross those turnings may become. Chaucer’s comedy and the humorous tales certainly engage with, and often celebrate, the physical aspects of life, and the final harmony sometimes involves a celebration of experience and the body, but a greater, if problematic harmony will still permeate the tale beyond the “satisfaction of appetite.”

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<sup>3</sup> The *Knight's Tale*, a romance (though parodic of romance in some respects), features aristocratic characters, and, moreover, ends in the death of Arcite. Therefore, even with the marriage of Palamon and Emelye it is not a comedy, in my definition since the narrative eliminates Arcite as an element that might play a role in the harmonic resolution in the tale’s physical world.

I also must acknowledge the influence of Mikhail Bakhtin in my consideration of the nature of Chaucer's comedy. Though he was writing with François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*—a work of the mid-sixteenth century—specifically in mind, I believe some of his ideas apply to at least some portions of the *Canterbury Tales*. His ideas regarding “carnival” and the importance of the “lower body stratum” are particularly important to my interpretation of comedy and humor in portions of the *Canterbury Tales*. Bakhtin states, regarding “carnival,” that

opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (10)

One can look at the tale-telling “game” and pilgrimage of the *Canterbury Tales* as a kind of “carnival” where the “prevailing [ . . . ] order” is suspended, with Harry Bailly, a tavern keeper, acting as supreme (but certainly not omnipotent or omniscient) arbiter of the competition, and where the story-telling pilgrims—on the road and thus in no single place for long—enjoy the freedom of release in their journey and in their tales, to a degree, from “prohibitions” which normally would inhibit them. Since “carnival” is “hostile to all that is immortalized and completed,” the tales of the *Canterbury Tales*, again a kind of traveling “carnival,” engage in a “quyting” or balancing process—a controlled competition in the spirit of a festive “game”—which will lead eventually to pragmatic harmony.

Regarding the importance of the gross body, Bakhtin states that “[t]hings are tested and reevaluated in the dimensions of laughter, which has defeated fear and all gloomy seriousness. This is why the material bodily lower stratum is needed, for it gaily and simultaneously materializes and unburdens. It liberates objects from illusions and sublimations inspired by fear” (376). Thus many comedic tales in the *Canterbury Tales* utilize the body and its effluents to dispel “illusions” which have accreted in the milieu of the tale and impede the revelation of the truth and the full blossoming of happiness for the majority of the tale’s society. Bakhtin also states that “[t]he essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity”(19-20). Some of Chaucer’s humorous tales show this “lowering of all that is high.” In other words, an inversion of hierarchy occurs—at least in the discomfiting of clerical or social authority—often revealing repressed scatology and sexuality, which recalls the Greco-Roman dynamic Frye notes regarding the flexible young people and their robust physicality displacing the intractable old folk and their fossilized rules in positions of power by the comedy’s end. The use of the body aids in displacing the ossified hierarchy, which impedes happiness and truth. The “degradation” that “grotesque realism” provides is necessary for the young people or the majority of the tale’s society to fulfill its desires and flourish. As Peter Elbow states, “The body seems to be an antidote [ . . . ] for paralysis” (140). Marion Turner does note that one twenty-first century point of view does not necessarily consider the “carnavalesque” liberating: “[a]ccording to ‘safety valve’ theories, carnival allows the release of pent-up tensions, which enables society to continue unchanged” (386). If one considers Turner’s caveat

regarding the “carnavalesque” and its latently controlling intent, it is possible to regard Chaucer’s comedy as providing this kind of controlled release and subsequent return to the hierarchical, oppressive status quo. Yet even if one views Chaucer’s humorous tales and comedy in this fashion, the ultimate, complex harmony of the *Canterbury Tales* still remains, and, though perhaps propounding only limited, sanctioned freedom, may even escape the clutches of this authorized release and exist as comedy, which transcends these implied strictures. This transcendence remains, even considering the fragmented and unfinished state of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Finally, it is also important to keep in mind that the *Canterbury Tales* contains a process, a teleology, toward harmony. After all, the *Canterbury Tales*’s fundamental plot as a whole consists of a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket, “That hem hath holpen whan that they were seke” (CT I 18). The movement from Southwark to Canterbury thus moves from sickness—physical discord within the individual—to hoped-for health—physical harmony. The most important component in this process toward the work’s overall harmony is the “quyting,” or balancing, dynamic by which one tale and its teller rebuts the preceding tale and teller or resonates in a “quyting” manner with another tale (or other tales) in the work. One of Chaucer’s major innovations as a storyteller is his fitting of the tale to the teller and the concomitant dramatic interplay between the tale-tellers *between* the tales. This organic interplay between the pilgrims in epilogues and prologues provides organic, logical “quyting” between the life-like pilgrims. As Dieter Mehl states,

[t]he most important [element], and one that most affects the plan of the whole collection, is the assignment of each story to a clearly identifiable

individual narrator, the stylistic differentiation of tales according to the social and moral standing of the narrator and, the direct confrontation between some of these narrators, as reflected in their contributions. (123)

“Quyting” in the *Canterbury Tales* can also mean alternation in tone and genre from one tale to the next. As Elbow states, Chaucer, “presented with an opposition, might be more interested in showing how both sides were true than how one of them was false” (15). These “opposition[s]” in the *Canterbury Tales* exist in matters of tone and genre as well, and the continual “quyting” shows the values of all these tones and genres in creating ultimate comedic harmony. This “quyting” dynamic so necessary to comedic harmony relies to a great degree on the sequence of tales within the fragments and also the “quyting” resonances particular tales have with others not necessarily preceding or following that tale sequentially. These “quyting” resonances, which transcend sequence, only provide for more imaginative freedom and thus increase the liberating, comedic tone of the *Canterbury Tales*. In fact, the imaginative freedom itself, which the fragmentary nature of the *Canterbury Tales* provides, contributes to harmony, as gaps allow the reader or audience its own space, “quyting” the work’s and author’s own text. Fragment I begins this “quyting” dynamic and provides the model of this dynamic for the rest of the work, and Fragment X (the last) ends this dynamic by “quyting” the entire work. This “quyting,” balancing process leads ultimately to comedic harmony. Additionally, these comedic tales often contain a “quyting” dynamic within themselves. Thus the multiplying of the “quyting” dynamic increases the harmony the *Canterbury Tales* contains. I have chosen to focus on the fragments, that is, the groups of tales which show dramatic interactions among pilgrims and thus transitions between the tales, because the sequence



of tale and pilgrim interaction in each fragment I have chosen illustrates the “quyting” dynamic clearly. Additionally, even as the “quyting’ dynamic binds the *Canterbury Tales*, it also frees the work to move from tale to tale in relative harmony as it releases tale and/or teller from verbal obligation after the “quyting” tale or verbal exchange with another pilgrim/storyteller. Therefore the root of the word, Latin “*quietus—at rest*” or “*freed of*” (*The American Heritage Dictionary* 1017) from “*quiescere*”—to rest, shows the sense of easing tension the Middle English word “quyten” or “quiten” still contains.<sup>4</sup>

Thus if the reader keeps in mind this notion of a transcendent process, of an ongoing movement, it will aid him or her in perceiving the comedy, which, though not evident in certain tales or at points in certain tales, is working toward the harmonic goal. If the reader does not laugh at a humorous tale, s/he will only have to acknowledge the individual tale’s harmony, even if problematic, then move on to the following link or the next humorous tale, which may offer some laughter as the process moves toward harmony. At the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, the reader will at least *smile* in the knowledge that the humorous and non-humorous tales and the *Canterbury Tales*, though fragmented and incomplete, have reached the comedic goal: an ordering of disparate parts in a working whole—perhaps not music of the spheres—but harmony nonetheless.

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<sup>4</sup> The *Middle English Dictionary* also cites as possible (among many) definitions of *quiten* “to pay for [ . . . ]”; “to give reward; requite [ . . . ]”; “to take revenge on, get even with, punish”; and “to acquit of a charge [ . . . ].” These related senses also figure in the “quyting” dynamic as it works throughout the *Canterbury Tales*.

## Chapter Two- The *General Prologue*: a place to start—not to stay

I used the word ‘teleology’ in chapter one to describe the notion that the *Canterbury Tales* works toward harmony. The *General Prologue*, the beginning of Fragment I, is where this process starts, though its motley variety of characters participating in the pilgrimage may only indicate that a variety of tales is to come from these disparate sources. The famous opening lines that set the pilgrimage in “Aprill” (*CT* I 1), then early spring, clearly put the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales* in the tradition of the literary genre known as the reverdie, a genre which describes seasonal and spiritual (re)awakenings. Derek Pearsall states that “[t]he absence of discrimination between the secular and the spiritual impulse, the easy continuity between the one and the other, do not seem designed to provoke ironical unease, but to hint rather at some optimistically conceived unity of the world of natural reality and the world of the spirit” (55). Thus, even at the very beginning of the *Canterbury Tales*, the notion of a harmonious cosmos in which “natural reality and the world of the spirit” coexist without necessarily being adversarial is present.

The pilgrimage to Canterbury, most importantly a spiritual quest to the tomb of Saint Thomas à Becket, is also a physical journey occurring within a season of natural renewal. However, the opening of the *Canterbury Tales* does not illustrate the completed state, but only the beginning. Even though the pilgrims begin in auspicious, pleasant circumstances, they are human beings journeying within a fictive late fourteenth-century England. Karla Taylor, in comparing the *Canterbury Tales* to the *Divine Comedy*, states that “[t]he world of the *Canterbury Tales*, though, embraces neither heaven nor hell. Its inhabitants live within the world and time, and hence can change right up to the moment

of death. Because of this mutability, Chaucer utters no final judgments” (2). The *Canterbury Tales* therefore will show movement and change in living beings, unlike the static, dead souls of the *Divine Comedy*. Yet the *Canterbury Tales* will partake of the divine in its latter stages even as it illustrates an earthly progression to harmony. Again, “natural reality and the world of the spirit” can exist simultaneously in the work. This freedom of movement increases the ultimate comedy.

It is important to note that the opening, with its emphasis on new life, calls for movement. It is as if the “shoures soote” (*CT I 1*) impel the pilgrimage to action, in contrast to the stasis of winter. The very impetus to movement implies that the beginning state of affairs—and in this case the place—though not necessarily troubled or dangerous, is only a point from which to move to another place and eventually to a final destination. The place of origin—Southwark—is a secular place, and the Tabard Inn, the domain of Harry Bailly, especially secular. As Pearsall states, there is no clear “discrimination between the secular and spiritual impulse,” so Southwark is not a terrible place from which a person must necessarily begin a pilgrimage, the somewhat disreputable reputation of the Thames’s south side in medieval and Renaissance England notwithstanding. However, the narrator-pilgrim does say that

In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay  
Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage  
To Caunterbury with ful devout corage [ . . . ]

(*CT I 20-22*)

The key word in this series of lines is “Redy.” In other words, the narrator-pilgrim is intent and prepared to leave this spot for a destination. The Tabard Inn, despite being a

possible destination on a hypothetical return journey is only a starting point in this fiction. The *Canterbury Tales* thus begins at a point of physical departure, but the journey will not involve meeting an enemy and killing him/her or being killed. As I have stated in chapter one, such a movement from relative happiness to unhappiness and death, in the medieval mind, would be a tragedy. For example, Henry Ansgar Kelly paraphrases Huguccio of Pisa, an influence upon Dante, regarding the simple dynamic: “tragedy moves from joy to sorrow, whereas comedy goes from sorrow to joy” (6)<sup>1</sup>. The *Canterbury Tales* will not move from a point of “joy” to a point of “sorrow.” Instead, it will move toward harmony, a specific variation on the comedic dynamic of “sorrow to joy.” The *General Prologue* begins the *Canterbury Tales* in a state of, if not discord, then an obvious place and condition which the pilgrims must leave. Their destination will exhibit the completion and harmony, which the *General Prologue* “engend[ers]” (CT I 4).

It is intriguing to note that the *Canterbury Tales* begins at a place of eating, and will presumably end with a prize—for one pilgrim—of a free supper. Laura Kendrick states that “A banqueting context would promote high spirits, and medieval clerical and aristocratic elites typically confirmed their own superiority by laughing at vulgarity – that is, rustic life and language” (91). It is possible to argue that Chaucer, as an educated man, an employee of the King, might feel a condescending attitude toward the unlettered lower classes; however, this condescension does not appear in the *General Prologue* or in any of the tales or links that follow. Instead, the *General Prologue*, with its beginning at the Tabard Inn, only serves to “promote high spirits” and a kind of equal treatment in the subsequent portraits for all involved. This equal treatment does not mean, though, that

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<sup>1</sup> From *Magna Derivationes*, ca. 1170 (Kelly 129)

complete harmony exists at the beginning of the journey. The travelers must journey to Canterbury, and, as the portraits illustrate, this motley assembly is a fragmented group whose members do not all get along with each other, the Miller and the Reeve being prime examples.

Thus, the motley assembly must move in order to work toward a kind of harmony. Chaucer achieves this harmony by placing tales in the mouths of the pilgrims. In the static situation, which the sequence of portraits illustrate, the pilgrims are only individuals with a goal, spiritual or not, who will meld into a sometimes contentious, but working, storytelling unit. At times, this machine will work through a “quyt [ing]” (CTI 3746) dynamic, as occurs with the *Miller’s Tale* and the succeeding *Reeve’s Tale*. Their contention actually moves the story-telling enterprise toward a harmonic resolution, which yields, if not complete happiness to everyone, at least viable physical co-existence and proximity.

Though the comedy begins at a realistic place of eating and drinking and consequently merry-making, the pilgrim-narrator soon dissolves this realistic tableau and introduces each pilgrim in a series of portraits. These portraits, like images in a procession of secular and sacred stained glass, relate to each other only like these windows, separated by stone mullions. The pilgrims do not interact dramatically with one another in this series, and this lack of activity also calls for the enlivening process of storytelling, which will lead the *Canterbury Tales* toward final harmony, even in its irreparably, irreducibly fragmented state.

The static series of portraits therefore calls for movement, as the opening eighteen lines call for inspiration and quickening. It is as if the portraits, in their stasis, create

tension, juxtaposed against the kinesis of the dramatic spring opening and lively, verisimilar starting point at the Tabard Inn. As I stated in chapter one, a portion of Chaucer's originality lies in his creation of dramatic interaction between the pilgrims as the tale-telling "game" proceeds following the *General Prologue*. In other words, Chaucer breaks the pilgrims out of their stained glass portraits to create another level of narrative within the *Canterbury Tales*. This eventual quickening of the pilgrims, which the *General Prologue* portrays (and the multiplication of narratives levels provided by pilgrim interaction), will provide a portion of the *Canterbury Tales's* imaginative freedom, which is apparent in the prologues and epilogues between tales and in the gaps between the fragments. Thus the often contentious 'doing' between the pilgrims will add imaginative space to that which the 'telling' in the individual tales creates.

In the tension for movement, which these portraits as a whole create, however, lies humor, irony, and satire, which already enliven the beginning of the work, as if the narrator-pilgrim is giving clues of the subsequent substance of the tales and the movement that will follow. Moreover, the realistic details of the portraits suggest that an experientially based perspective will inform a bulk of the comedy. F. Ann Payne states that

The underlying concrete entity which defies universalization is most evident [ . . . ] in the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*. There is a sense in which the satire desires that finitude which most balks at an instant drift into a concrete universal, which would imply a “system.” It wants the single uncomplicated personage or event of the moment. (19)

Despite the non-dramatic, static quality of the portraits, their realistic details, in addition to their humor, create a tension between the conventional notion of a particular character-type and his or her individuation in the portrait, as Jill Mann states, “an extraordinarily vivid *impression* of their existence as individuals” (16). A well-known example in a particular portrait, which illustrates the tension between convention and individuality that ignites a spark for movement, occurs near the end of the Prioress’s portrait, where the narrator-pilgrim states that, upon her set of rosary beads,

[ . . . ] heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,  
On which ther was first write a crowned A,  
And after *Amor vincit omnia*.

(CT I 160-62)

One may interpret “*Amor*” as divine love or *agape*, which one might expect a typical nun to exhibit and extol. However, it is also possible to interpret “*Amor*” as referring to cupidinous, romantic love. This ambiguity destabilizes the portrait of the Prioress and thus rouses curiosity in the reader. The Prioress will satisfy a portion of this curiosity by joining the pilgrimage and eventually telling her tale. The possibility of the Prioress being involved in a love affair—illicit (and secret) as a celibate member of the Church—also creates humor in the idea of the supposedly pious Nun actually enjoying sinful carnal

bliss under her guise of sanctity. Thus the humor lies in the recognition of possible incongruity between appearance and reality. This possibility of incongruity, or at least uncertainty, is a powerful incentive for a movement toward the revelation of truth, as Frye states, “dispelling [harmful] illusion” (170), which accompanies the progress toward harmony.

. Another famous portrait—The Monk’s—also creates uncertainty, which generates an impetus toward movement and eventual harmony, along with providing humor. A famous ambiguous element is present in the Monk’s prologue. The narrator-pilgrim, noting the sporting Monk’s response to cloistering, states

He yaf not of that text a pulled hen,  
That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men,  
.....  
And I seyde his opinion was good.

(*CT I 177-78; 183*)

The Monk does not give a damn about written authorities, which state the proper place for a monk is a cloister, and the narrator-pilgrim ostensibly agrees with the Monk’s “opinion.” It is easy to interpret the narrator-pilgrim’s comments as ironic: the narrator-pilgrim actually believes the Monk’s “opinion” is bad, and, by extrapolation, that this Monk is a bad man, especially as a man supposedly pledged in a sacred vow to the Church. The ambiguity of the verbal irony destabilizes the portrait of the Monk, and as with the ambiguity of the Prioress’s brooch, stimulates desire on the reader’s part to know the truth. The progress of the pilgrimage, and the Monk’s tale, will reveal at least some of the truth of the Monk. The irony produces humor, since the possible incongruity



between the Monk's supposed piety and his worldly pursuits encourages the reader or listener to place laughter into the gap between the apparent and the real. The humor and laughter, the acknowledgment of possible incongruity, stimulates the discovery of truth, a prime component of the intended harmony.

On the other hand, if Chaucer-the-pilgrim is actually sincere in his appraisal of the Monk and "his opinion," the interpretative gap between Chaucer-the-pilgrim and the reader or listener creates a level field of play whereby the Monk can begin the "game" as a character not already condemned. He can proceed as an equal, morally, among the rest of the pilgrims, and his subsequent interplay with them—and his tale itself—will produce the "quyting" necessary to momentary and finally ultimate harmony.

Conversely, some other portraits illustrate the unsavory qualities of pilgrims in an unambiguous or unironic way. For example, the narrator-pilgrim states that the Summoner is

[ . . . ] lecherous as a sparwe,  
With scalled brows blake and piled berd,  
Of his visage children were aferd.

(*CTI* 626-28)

In this instance, the narrator-pilgrim explicitly calls the Summoner "lecherous," certainly no praise at all; moreover, the unhealthy condition of his face may be the result of a venereal disease resulting from his cupidity. No ironic humor lies in this description. Yet it is possible to chuckle at this morally and physically repulsive man because, in a comedy, he will receive his just due—for making the "earnest" quest for salvation a self-serving game"—even as he himself serves justice to the Friar as part of the harmony the

*Canterbury Tales* achieves. The Summoner has his place, and his place is to rebuke another corrupt cleric and be rebuked himself in turn. Though repellent, he too has his proper place and tale amid the fragmented whole.

The *General Prologue* ends with Harry Bailly, the self-appointed arbiter of the tale-telling contest, declaring that

[ . . . ] Which of yow that bereth hym best of all—  
That is to seyn, that telleth in this caas  
Tales of best sentence and solaas—  
Shall have a soper at oure aller cost.

(CT I 796-99)

Appropriately, Harry, the Tabard innkeeper and purveyor of physical sustenance, determines that the winner will receive a free meal from the rest. The pilgrims, even the aristocratic Knight, acquiesce to his power-claim. This acquiescence, though not entirely realistic in the late fourteenth century, provides a way for the comedy to move forward in a way that will allow for variety, not only aristocratic romance, which might be the case if the Knight directed the tale-telling game. Alfred David states that “[b]y challenging the Knight, the figure of authority, [the Miller] [ . . . ] follows the pattern of medieval comedy” (94). David goes on to argue that the Host ingratiates himself to the aristocracy by criticizing Robyn the Miller’s drunken assertions following the *Knight’s Tale*. However, despite this (dare I say) pandering, Harry Bailly is not a member of the aristocracy, but a member of the rising urban bourgeoisie, and a man dedicated to making profit by providing people food and lodging. Thus Harry himself “challeng[es]” [ . . . ] the figure of authority,” at least implicitly, by managing the whole tale-telling game.

Harry is “the Lord of Misrule” (David 94), who, by his ambivalent posturing and positioning, functions as the perfect catalyst for this comedy, which will break up the initial stasis.<sup>2</sup> To keep the process moving, the leader himself must be imperfect and assailable. If he were not, the pilgrims might as well have the hierarchically superior and unapproachable Knight as their leader in the tale-telling game.

Therefore the “game,” the comedy, begins with the narrator-pilgrim stating

Were it by aventure, or sort, or cas  
The sothe is this: the cut fil to the Knyght,  
Of which ful blithe and glad was every wyght [ . . . ]

(CT I 844-46)

It is intriguing to note that the narrator-pilgrim attributes the Knight’s winning the chance to tell the first story as “aventure [ . . . ] sort [ . . . ] or cas” which Larry Benson defines as “chance, luck, or destiny” (note p. 36). As Harry Bailly may be rigging the game for the Knight, so the narrator-pilgrim may be rigging the *Canterbury Tales*, even as he claims that, in truth (“sothe”), fortune is the reason that the Knight will tell his tale first. Of course, in Boethian comedy, fortune would also bring the eventual harmonious ending to the work. Thus “[C]hance, luck, or destiny” may help bring about harmony in the work, but the *Canterbury Tales*, even unfunny at times and producing debate and contention between the pilgrims quite often—and fragmented as a whole—moves with purpose to produce harmony. Chapter three will initiate the focus on the humorous tales that play a large part in producing this harmony, which, though not producing perfection upon this world, at least provides a viable means for all elements to work together toward possible

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<sup>2</sup> Harry’s unstable mastery, a quality which at times is necessary for the “quyting” to continue, is the focus of Tison Pugh’s article, “Queering Harry Bailly: Gendered Carnival, Social Ideologies, and Masculinity

eventual perfection. In this sense, comedy is practical, and the practical yields the possibility of perfection.

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under duress in the *Canterbury Tales*." *ChaucR* 41 (1) 2006: 39-69. Project Muse. Web. 6 Nov. 2008.

### Chapter Three- The First Fragment: Sweet and Sour “Quyting” and The Harmony it Generates

Jean E. Jost states that “[h]umorous elements are local—funny, clever, surprising (in reversals and unmaskings), appealingly deceptive, lighthearted, and jovial” (xviii). We can see that many of the individual tales of the *Canterbury Tales*, which follow the *General Prologue*, are humorous due to the presence of such elements as “reversals and unmaskings” in their plots. She further states that “[c]omedic elements are more global, encompassing the whole structure of the tale or story, and culminate in a satisfying resolution of an ending, situation, or milieu. Thus, dark, nonhumorous comedies, sinister, dignified, or painful, but with happy endings may result” (xviii). By *her* definition, many “nonhumorous” tales in the *Canterbury Tales* are therefore comedies, for example, the *Knight’s Tale*, which ends in marriage and happiness for Palamon and Emelye. However, Palamon’s friend and rival, Arcite, prays to Mars for victory instead of to Venus for the love of Emelye. Thus, even though he wins the military battle with Palamon for Emelye, he dies, because Venus prays to her father, Saturn, to send an earthquake, whose force fatally drives Arcite’s torso into his own saddle pommel. Arcite ironically deserves victory *only* in battle, and his death eliminates possible future conflict with Palamon, who has prayed to Venus that he may win Emelye’s love and thus has proven that his concern for Emelye’s love is superior to his concern for military victory. However, if the tale were a true comedy as I am defining it,<sup>1</sup> Arcite and Palamon or other characters would devise an accommodation, which would work for all—even if the rewards were unevenly distributed, but distributed according to merit. Therefore I will

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<sup>1</sup> I have noted in a footnote in chapter one that the *Knight’s Tale* does parody traditional romance, so offers some humor even if it does not fit into the definition of a comedic tale as I define it.

focus on the tales that ultimately show disparate elements working together to produce harmony in which all these elements have a proper and useful role in the world of the tale. Moreover, I will focus also on comedies that feature varying degrees of humor in order to analyze how humor (or lack thereof) contributes to comedy's dynamic. Humor, though not necessary in comedy, is helpful in realizing ultimate harmony, for without humor, the comedy will lack a leavening agent and leave the reader, though having a resolution, stuck in an un-"quyted" serious mode without the catalyzing, opposing force of laughter. Additionally, humor can help reveal the gap between appearance and reality and thus aid the main characters in closing this gap as they move toward harmony. The *Miller's Tale* demonstrates the importance of humor as an aid to the comedic dynamic, which moves toward harmony, and the *Reeve's Tale*, in its paying-back of the Miller and his tale,<sup>2</sup> illustrates the balancing rhythm necessary for pragmatic harmony in the *Canterbury Tales's* outer, dramatic frame and tale sequence. Moreover, the fragmentary *Cook's Tale* further illustrates the comedic "quyting" dynamic and the liberating comedic potential of fragmentation. As I have stated previously, Fragment I also sets the model for the "quyting" dynamic, which will generate harmony and produce the overall comedy of the *Canterbury Tales*.

The prologue to the *Miller's Tale*, in fact, opens with discord, which the succeeding tale must work to eliminate and produce harmony. After Harry Bailly calls for the Monk, a clergyman, to follow the aristocratic Knight in a traditionally appropriate order, the narrator-pilgrim states that the Miller, "that for dronken was al pale, / [ . . . ] / [ . . . ] / Ne abyde no man for his curteisie [ . . . ]" (CT I 3120; 3123 ). Robyn the Miller does not wait for his traditional last place, as a member of the third estate, to tell his own

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<sup>2</sup> As the comedic *Miller's Tale* "quyts" or balances the non-comedic (if parodic) *Knight's Tale*.

tale, but early in the pilgrimage disrupts the hierarchy and traditionally accepted order. Yet, since discord is a reason, a catalyst for a movement toward its opposite, the Miller's assertiveness is an important element in the slowly quickening process toward harmony. Frye states that "The comedy emerging at the conclusion of comedy represents [ . . . ] a kind of moral norm, or pragmatically free society. Its ideals are seldom defined or formulated: definition and formulation belong to the humours [villains], who want predictable activity" (169). The Miller's interruption and his tale itself illustrate a "pragmatically free" attitude where elements of inversion disrupt the static, once-accepted order. The word "pragmatically" is particularly useful in understanding the comedic dynamic, for it communicates the need for certain characters in a comedy to work toward a viable solution in their experiential world, not just a continuation, which follows ancient precepts whose reasons for existence and imposition no longer apply. Moreover, Alfred David states that "Our sympathies are entirely on [ . . . ] [the Miller's] side [ . . . ] [because] [the pilgrims] [ . . . ] are seeking 'Jerusalem celestial' [ . . . ] But their pilgrimage is also a holiday, an escape from serious matters and from holy things" (92-93). The Miller offers "solas," as opposed to the Monk's potential "sentence." The earthly, springtime pilgrimage, a time-out-of-time, offers this freedom, which acknowledges the importance of the world, and thus brings an element of comedic harmony at least unconsciously to the partially freed participants.

Harry Bailly, both a "Lord of Misrule" and a weak apologist for the aristocracy, tries to dissuade Robyn from disrupting the hierarchic order, which would call for a cleric or another aristocrat to tell the next tale. He implores Robyn, "[ . . . ] Abyde, [ . . . ] my leeve brother; / Som bettre man shal telle us first another" (*CT I* 3129-30). However,

Robyn responds, “By Goddes soule [ . . . ] “that wol nat I; / For I wol speke or elles go my weye” (CT I 3132-33). Robyn takes the name of the Lord in vain and then offers an ultimatum. In the face of his adamant desire to tell the next tale (and his drunkenness), Harry relents: “[ . . . ] tel on, a devel way! / Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome” (CT I 3134-35). Benson glosses “a devel way” as “in the Devil’s name” (note p. 67). Ironically, Harry, the apologist for the aristocracy, the servant of tradition, in a way, blasphemes worse than Robyn does, as if Robyn’s unruly spirit has overwhelmed Harry’s sense of propriety. The “Lord of Misrule,” the equivocal master of the carnival, is swept away in the uncontrollable tide for which he is at least partially responsible. This tide will sweep away the arbitrary order, which medieval social hierarchy has imposed, in the name of the Devil, the ultimate “Lord of Misrule.” In fact, Robert W. Hanning states that the Devil, in his “role as a trickster, and his status as the principle of opposition to—and perversion of, all the divine attributes—proved particularly amenable to representation in terms (and practices) drawn from the festive, parodic and comic dimensions of European popular culture” (296). Robyn may be a churl, but churlish, even shocking (and thus in a way, enervating), behavior at this point is necessary to catalyze the comedic dynamic and move the pilgrimage toward pragmatic harmony. Harry will come along for the ride, even if slightly unwilling and knocked, at least temporarily, from his seat of undisputed power within the dynamics of the “game.” Moreover, at the end of the *Miller’s Prologue*, Chaucer-the-pilgrim states that, if the reader does not appreciate the Miller’s upcoming predictably ribald tale, s/he should

Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.

The Millere is a cherl; ye know wel this.



So was the Reeve eek and othere mo,  
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two;  
Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame;  
And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game.

(CT I 3181-86)

Chaucer-the-pilgrim advises the reader or listener not to make a “game”—play—“ernest”—serious, even if s/he chooses to read this tale, which might offend his or her moral sensibilities and sense of decorum. Thus the reader approaches the fabliau-like tale forewarned that, even if the tale is ribald, the context is a “game.” After all, the pilgrims are engaging in a story-telling “game,” and, additionally, the tale itself is just a funny story on one level. Chaucer-the-pilgrim’s distinction and warning opens up space for interpretive play. Since the “quyting” dynamic, which arises within the tale and the subsequent *Reeve’s Tale*, works toward pragmatic harmony even between professional enemies such as Robyn and Oswald, this caveat to be mindful of the “game” quality of the tale—and subsequent tales—highlights the emotional flexibility and forgiveness necessary for pragmatic harmony. The tale-telling contest and its tales are only in “game” after all even if the contest and/tales occasionally offends tellers and audience.

The *Miller’s Tale* itself provides more movement toward harmony. It very clearly shows the influence of both fabliaux and Plautine Roman comedy. Derek Pearsall states that this tale is one of Chaucer’s four fabliaux, whereby “a bourgeois husband is duped or tricked into conniving at the free award of his wife’s sexual favours to a clever young man” (163). Kathleen Bishop cites Paul Ruggiers as stating that the fabliaux are

“Chaucer’s Roman comedies [ . . . ]” (296). She also notes in Chaucer’s fabliaux “the continuing presence of Roman comic stock figures like the blocking *senex* [old man, represented by Carpenter John] [ . . . ]” (295). Thus the *Miller’s Tale* very clearly follows the ancient comedic formula whereby a young man succeeds at an old man’s expense, through getting the girl, in this case, Alison, his wife. The young man’s success specifically involves the cuckolding of the presumptuous and inadequate old man who should never have married the young woman in the first place.

The tale offers plenty of humor, especially humor resulting from bodily pain and/or discomfiture, which the male characters’ hubris generates. For example, Absolon, the squeamish suitor of Alison, receives a double dose of physical and psychological humiliation. This double dose is doubly funny because the Miller-narrator states that

In al the toun nas brewhous ne taverne  
That he ne visited with his solas  
Ther any gaylard tapestere was  
But sooth to seyn, he was somdeel squauymous  
Of fartyng, and of spech daungerous.

(CT I 3334-38)

The humor increases because of the incongruity of Absolon’s character and activities. He enjoys visiting generally coarse places but is squeamish about farting and is “fastidious” (Benson note p. 70) in his speech. Thus we have a young man who seems to want it both ways—coarse and refined. The split desire foreshadows the situation into which he will place himself. Moreover, I cannot help but think of the dainty Sir Thopas when reading Absolon’s description. The Miller-narrator also notes that Absolon frequents taverns with

his “solas,” an allusion to Harry’s words in the *General Prologue* and an implied jibe at story-tellers or entertainers, such as Absolon, who will not win any “soper” (CT I 799). It seems Chaucer had it in for dainty fops and made them butts of his dislike several times in the *Canterbury Tales*, since their personal qualities are incongruously inappropriate for dealing with the situations in which they find themselves. Incongruity clashes with the process toward harmony, so the tales in which they feature bring necessary comedic justice onto them.

Absolon, unaware of his incongruity in regard to the situation, eventually begins to woo Alison passionately, but in an overdone manner:

He woweth hire by meenes and brocage,  
And swoor he wolde been hir owene page,  
He syngeth, brokkyng as a nyghtingale;  
He sente hire pyment, meeth, and spiced ale [ . . . ]

(CT I 3377-78)

The reader receives the impression that Absolon is desperately in love (or a least lust) with Alison and thus tries all his means to gain her. Alison, however, has ideas other than a secret tryst with this foppish and sentimental—but sincere—young man. This difference between Alison’s and Absolon’s desires generates humor, as does Absolon’s overwrought, “ludicrous” (Thro 380) efforts. The Miller-narrator states that

He ne hadde for his labour but a scorn,  
And thus she maketh Absolon hire ape,  
And al his ernest turneth til a jape.

(CT I 3388-90)

Absolon is like Nicholas the clerk in that he overdoes his effort. Absolon goes over the top with his wooing, so Alison, as a kind of comedic arbiter, turns his “ernest” into a “jape.” Absolon overdoes his “ernest” wooing so deserves the “jape”—his serious efforts turned into “game.” It is as if Alison is working for God or some cosmic agency to show humans their errors and the consequences of these errors in deed or judgment. She is a foil to Absolon’s pretensions and a comically transformed, distant and relative of Lady Philosophy who must correct his errors in judgment, though Absolon and his situation are a comically debased mode when compared to the narrator of the *Consolation*. Thus the didactic point of medieval comedy is apparent even in her crude joke, which shows little evidence she is thinking about teaching a lesson. Still, Alison’s reaction to Absolon’s wooing is a kind of justice, which is a move toward harmony, since fools must learn and be punished for their foolishness. Charles Muscatine states that “[f]aith in Love is the heresy most elaborately dealt with in the poem, and it is most elaborately caricatured” (227). Absolon, since he overdoes his wooing primarily with his mouth, receives his ironic gift in the mouth:

And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole,  
And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne werse,  
But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers  
Ful savourly, er he were war of this.

(CT I 3732-35)

It is comedically appropriate that Absolon kisses her anus, or at least her ass, since this tale’s humor rests partially upon proper, ironic rewards for the overstepping offender. Absolon spews too much sentimental drivel, so kisses the part of human anatomy that

eliminates waste. The anus or buttocks of Alison is a parallel or symbol of Absolon's mouth and his spewing of romance convention. It is no accident that he kisses her nether regions "savourly," since he "savours" his romancing. Again, the figure of Sir Thopas rises. Absolon's ass-kissing<sup>3</sup> is a veiled revelation of the truth, if not to pitiful, foppish Absolon, at least to the reader. It is as if the Miller-narrator is commenting on the worth of romance and romantic language, especially if overdone. In this way, the Miller balances or "quyts" the *Knight's Tale* with one that pokes fun at its conventions, and pokes fun at it in a bodily way, wholly appropriate for a criticism of aristocratic values, which often place unrequited desire above fulfillment, especially of bodily desires. Though, as we all know, the *Miller's Tale* does not end happily for all, it possesses the comedic feature of the overthrow of repressive hierarchy, which is another necessary component of the move toward pragmatic harmony.

The humor in this incident does not end with Absolon's kiss. The Miller-narrator atomizes the moment to strain almost as much humor as possible from the scene. For example, the Miller-narrator states that Absolon, after kiss:

Abak [ . . . ] stirte, and thoughte it was amys,  
 For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd.  
 He felt a thyng al rough and long yherd,  
 And seyde, "Fy! Allas! what have I do?"

(CT I 3776-79)

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Miller states that Absolon "is humiliated" not because he is "a fool," but because he is a human being who must make his identity partially through those around him, such as Alison, "who matter to [him] [ . . . ] not just as an object but as agents" (33). Thus Miller's argument implies the need for compassion toward Absolon, who will receive it in this comedy, as he suffers nothing more than this momentary humiliation and a foul taste in the mouth. See "Naturalism and Its Discontents in the Miller's Tale." *ELH* (2000) 1-44.

The humor at this moment, beside the kiss itself, lies in Absolon's belated recognition of the physical truth of the act: a woman has no beard, and thus he is kissing her anus or genitalia. In a very physical sense, Absolon learns, or at least senses, the truth. The moment the gap closes between perception and reality, the moment the reader realizes Absolon apprehends his folly, offers another element of humor. Humor appears when the offender realizes his offense in a manner that makes him ridiculous. Subsequently, in a mock-ominous manner, the suddenly enlightened Absolon states to no one that, "I shall thee quyte [ . . . ]" (CT I 3746), bringing to mind the "quyting" (revenge, in this case) dynamic of the *Canterbury Tales*, which has already started with the Miller "quyting" the Knight (and even Harry Bailey) and will continue with the Reeve "quyting" the Miller. In the end, this balance will contribute to the overall comedy of the *Canterbury Tales*, and even if the "quyting" dynamic consists of taking revenge within the outer narrative frame, the revenge does not take the life<sup>4</sup> of a character, but instead works toward pragmatic harmony.

Following Absolon's declaration of vengeance, more humor arises, however, when the narrator states that he "rubbeth now [ . . . ] his lippes / With dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes" (CT I 3747-48). Absolon, in a scene in which the reader may see him as frantic, cleans his mouth with detritus of another kind, but at least detritus that he perceives as cleaner than the human anus. The result, beyond Absolon's determination upon revenge, is reminiscent of a mock fairy tale ending:

His hoote love was coold and al yqueynt;

For fro that tyme that he hadde kist her ers,

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<sup>4</sup> I will discuss the *Friar's Tale* later, which involves the presumed end of the evil Summoner, who, through his own greed, damns his soul to hell.

Of paramours he sette nat a kers,  
For he was heeled of his maladie.

(CT I 3753-56)

Absolon, unlike the proverbial woman kissing the frog and turning him into a prince to fulfill her dream of an ideal man, kisses an “ers” and is healed of “his [love] maladie.” His action produces a microcosmic movement from lovesickness to a kind of health, or at least freedom from error, in his debased pilgrimage to the Alisoun’s debased shrine-“ers.” Medieval readers might also notice that his hot love is now cool and quenched, that is “yqueynt,” a pun on “cunt,” yet in an ironic way, for he does not win Alisoun’s “queynt.” The obscene pun pushes the realism to an extreme, in reaction to the *Knight’s Tale’s* aristocratic, romantic concerns and its resolution involving the otherworldly element of the god Saturn. Muscatine states that “in contrast to the courtly tradition, this [fabliaux-influenced] literature has a remarkable preoccupation with the animal facts of life. It takes [ . . . ] a realistic view of things. It finds its easiest subject in low life, but with high or low it is impartially impolite—and often vulgar and obscene” (59). Absolon’s initial defeat is funny partially because it does not shirk from realities, “the animal facts of life.” Absolon falls into humiliation and discomfiture because he is a foppish, sentimental, yet ultimately provincial wooer. His squeamishness receives its ironic reward in a gift bound to rouse his squeamishness to its heights, or depths. If Absolon only learns of the physical nature of the joke played upon him, and the silliness of himself and his effort, the lesson at least propels him to give up his sentimental wooing and move toward revenge, which will ultimately lead the tale into its comedic climax.

Nicholas, though achieving his goal of seducing Alison, now shows overweening pride in his cleverness and overextends Alison's fart-insult-gift. He is literally burned on his buttock by the vengeance-seeking Absolon: "Of gooth the skyn an hande-brede aboute, / The hootte kultour brende so his toute" (CTI 3811-12). It is as if Absolon (or Chaucer) punishes Nicholas for overextending the joke, for Absolon does not deserve a second huge fart in his face. Perhaps the Wheel of Fortune turns, not only because of hidden Providence, but because Nicholas, in his intellectual pride, upsets the balance. Thus his scalding is a kind of cosmic justice. We laugh because we sense this justice and because Nicholas survives the attack. He will implicitly live to love (and deceive the deserving, one hopes) another day. Killing him would only raise more unnecessary discord, when the action has reached pragmatic harmony between Absolon and Nicholas, even if they themselves do not realize it.

At the end of the tale, old John the carpenter still remains the *senex amans* ostensibly in control of his household. However, already cuckolded, he faces even more humiliation and pain partially at the hand of Nicholas. The tale generates more humor from the credulity of old John as he listens to Nicholas' bogus prophecy of another flood. The Miller-narrator, in fact, encapsulates John's major flaw in this regard:

Lo, which a greet thyng is imaginacioun,  
So depe may impressioun be take  
This sely carpenter bigynneth to quake;  
Hym thinketh verraily that he may see  
Noes flood come walwyng as the see  
(CTI 3611-16)



In other words, John yields to his imagination, to what is not real. Nicholas, the clever clerk, has stirred John's imagination with his tale of a second flood. V.A. Kolve states that "[t]his creative aspect of the imagination was often called *phantasia*, from Plato onwards. Medieval attitudes toward it are sometimes ambiguous: it was understood to be a higher power, but it could also mislead, presenting the unreal as if it were real" (22). The tale's action will punish John for his ignorance and for yielding overly to "*phantasia*." John obviously does not know his Scripture, since God promised he would not destroy humanity in a flood again (*Genesis* 9:11). Additionally, John states, after he hears the stricken Nicholas yell "Water!" (*CTI* 3815) that "[ . . . ] now comth Nowelis flood [ . . . ]" (*CTI* 3818), thus mistaking Noah for "Nowel" (Father Christmas?—another level of humor, the "gift" of water) and showing more ignorance of Scripture. Thus simple humor arises from mistaken precepts and an inability to remain reasonable in the face of the supposedly upcoming calamity. John is foolish, uneducated, prideful, and immoderate in imagination. More humor also arises from the contrast of John being ignorant of his wife's adultery and his credulity regarding Nicholas's bogus story of a new flood. John is blind to the truth regarding both matters. However, he is blind to Alison's infidelity while believing too much in Nicholas's story. At the very end of the tale, "[ . . . ] with the fal he brosten hadde his arm" (*CTI* 3829) and the now assembled townspeople laugh at the foolish, though not necessarily evil man, almost as if they are in on the joke, a kind of charivari, because John and Alison "are greatly different in age" (Jonassen 234), and laugh to acknowledge and celebrate the rough harmony his comeuppance generates.

The Miller-narrator then makes some important points—if unintentionally so—regarding the final resolution to the tale, which expand the understanding of the comedic movement. For one thing, he states that “Thurgh fantasie that of his vanytee / He hadde ybought hym knedyng tubbes three [ . . . ]” (CTI 3838-39). The Miller-narrator states, without equivocation, that carpenter John has built his ark out of the “foolishness” (Benson note p. 77)—“vanytee.” The reader can also connect “vanytee” with the contemporary sense of “vanity,” since John believes that God will save *only* himself, Alison, and Nicholas, in an oddly configured family (or debased Holy Family<sup>5</sup>), which will dominate and enjoy the Earth after the second flood. Thus John falls from overweening pride, like a tragic hero, only in a comedy, which brings neither serious mutilation nor death. This fall brings to mind the Boethian perspective for this kind of dynamic. Cook and Herzman, as I have cited in chapter one, state that “The image [of the Wheel of Fortune] is [ . . . ] responsible for medieval definitions of comedy and tragedy: when the wheel makes an upward turn, moving from bad fortune to good, it is a comedy”. In light of this definition, the tale is not a comedy for carpenter John, since he literally and figuratively falls from a high position to a low one. However, we can take this Boethian notion as part of the dynamic of tales such as the *Miller’s Tale*. I do not claim the *Miller’s Tale* becomes a tragedy because the male characters fall from some degree of happiness. If these three characters died, and were heroic in some way, the tale might turn into a tragedy. It is humorous that, keeping the Boethian notion in mind, old carpenter John literally falls from the rafters of his house—from on high. The beguiled and cuckolded ruler of the house literally falls. In a way, one may call his fall mock

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<sup>5</sup> For an examination of the Miller’s Tale as a debased rendering of the Holy Family, and especially of carpenter John with a debased Saint Joseph, see Beryl H. Rowland “The Play of the Miller’s Tale: A Game

tragedy, since he only breaks his arm and invites the laughter of the gathered townspeople. His ignorance and presumptuousness bring pain and embarrassment but nothing more. In this outcome, the tale rests firmly in the comedic realm, since John setting himself on high—literally and figuratively—deserves his fall. His fall to earth restores balance to the life situation, albeit in one where the harmonious outcome leaves him cuckolded, but blind to it (as Januarie in the *Merchant's Tale*), not feeling the sting, and young Alison satisfied.

The Miller-narrator adds that the tale's gathered townspeople "[ . . . ] turned al his harm into a jape" (CTI 3842) since "The folk gan laughen at his fantasye [ . . . ]" (CTI 3840). The townspeople's laughter transforms his current situation—a broken arm and a ludicrous broken tub probably near his person—into a moment that expresses the just outcome of carpenter John's hubristic foolishness. The Miller-narrator's comment about "harm" turned to "jape" recalls his earlier statement about Alison's "jape" on love-sick Absolon, which discomfits and humiliates the suitor. However, since the tale has reached resolution, the Miller-narrator's second statement about a "jape" overrides the earlier, humiliating "jape," and transforms the entire narrative into a humorous joke for characters and audience. Within the action of the tale itself, Nicholas's ingenuity, like Alison's, brings a presumptuous man down to earth. The resolution restores harmony for several reasons: the first, it punishes John for his pride and foolishness; the second, it provides Alison with a continuation of a satisfying sexual life, since her secret liaison with Nicholas apparently continues; the third, the townspeople engage in the mirth that accompanies John's fall. Though John is humiliated and injured, he is not seriously maimed, ostracized, or killed. The resolution determines his place in the society as a man

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within a Game." *ChauRv* 5 (1970-71): 140-46.

who will continue his life as husband to a young, attractive woman, though a life changed through humiliation and pain and, as the audience knows, as a cuckolded old January-type husband mismatched with a May-type wife. In this sense, as a presumably inadequate lover, he deserves his cuckolding, which he does not need to discover, since the ongoing liaison between Nicholas and Alison—under his nose and under his roof—will not harm him. The comedy thus works towards Nicholas's and particularly Alison's sexual fulfillment—not necessarily toward a societally and religiously sanctioned, but constraining, marriage—in order to reach pragmatic harmony in this regard. Nicholas's ruse disabuses old John of the illusion of his special, saved status in God's plan, but for the comedy's success, old John can remain relatively and blissfully ignorant. The “jape” dissolves the conflict, and the society can move on in a direction that leads the young couple—Alison and Nicholas—in a happy, fulfilled direction, while old carpenter still has life and nominal wife.

Referring to several ribald tales in the *Decameron*, G.H. McWilliam states that “in [these] stories, the author, by directing his reader's sympathy toward the lovers, and condemning the actions of those who cruelly sever their respective liaisons, is proclaiming the supremacy of natural laws over any rigidly constructed and strictly interpreted code of ethical conduct” (cx). In the *Miller's Tale*, “natural laws” of attraction between two young people win out over a marriage of an old man and a young woman. As Frye states, “a pragmatically free society” forms, where young folk can heartily make love and produce many offspring to continue the generative process—comedy's and nature's harmony. The Miller-narrator summarizes the tale by stating at its very end that

“[ . . . ] every wight gan laughen at this stryf,

Thus swyved was this carpenter's wyf,  
For al his kepyng and his jalousye,  
And Absolon hath kist her nether ye,  
And Nicholas is scalded in the toute.  
This tale is doon, and God save the rowte!

(CT I 3849-54).

The end-summary is humorous partially on account of its brevity and the neutral tone the narrator imparts to the encapsulation of the varied and colorful action of the tale. It is almost as if the Miller-narrator is unintentionally acknowledging a teleological process in the tale whereby the ends predominate over the means, no matter if the means involve adultery, farting, ass-kissing, and arm-breaking. The "tale is doon," the resolution brings the world of the tale into pragmatic harmony, and the Miller-narrator asks that God "save" the company. Harmony may even win out among the pilgrims, though the road to Canterbury is long and full of opportunity for conflict.

The conflict that breaks out immediately following the *Miller's Tale* is that between Robyn the Miller and Oswald the Reeve. Chaucer the pilgrim-narrator states in the *Reeve's Prologue* the reaction that the company has toward the *Miller's Tale*:

Ne at this tale I saugh no man hym greve,  
But it were oonly Osewold the Reve,  
By cause he was of carpenteris craft [ . . . ]"

(CT I 3860-62)

Oswald is angry because he believes the Miller is somehow alluding to his life in the course of old carpenter John's misadventures, even though the Miller-narrator has stated

in his prologue, perhaps disingenuously, that “[ . . . ] Leve brother Osewold, / Who hath no wif, he is no cokewold” (CT I 3151-52). Regardless of the Miller’s intention and his knowledge of Oswald’s personal life, Oswald takes offense. The end of the *Miller’s Tale* becomes an opportunity for the Reeve’s revenge through a tale. He states, “So theek [ . . . ] ful wel koude I thee quite” (CT I 3864). Perhaps one does not normally associate vengeance with comedy, but one must keep in mind that the vengeance is through story-telling, not bloodshed. The Reeve’s “quit[ing]” of Robyn is necessary for the outer frame action to proceed in its course toward pragmatic harmony. If “quit[ing]” does not occur, the Reeve and Miller would continually be at odds, at a point of unresolved tension perhaps leading to violence and death. The *Reeve’s Tale* allows Oswald to exact revenge upon Robyn in a manner that precludes mutilation or bloodshed, again providing the company with a way to manage its differences and allow every member to complete the pilgrimage as a living being—even if Oswald makes “errest of game.” As I have stated in the first chapter, harmony is the working together of disparate elements to produce a worthwhile result, and the worthwhile result is that the pilgrimage to Canterbury moves forward in its geographical progress and story-telling game with a balance, which neutralizes the potential harm of disruptive forces.

The *Reeve’s Prologue* begins this balancing process, but the process, as I have stated, is not necessarily mirthful, as comedy does not depend upon mirth for its dynamic, and the *Canterbury Tales’s* comedy transcends the genre or tone of individual tales.

Chaucer-the-pilgrim begins the prologue by stating that

Whan folk hadde laughen at this nyce cas  
Of Absolon and hende Nicholas,

Diverse folk diversely they seyde,  
But for the moore part they loughe and pleyde.

(CT I 3855-58)

Chaucer-the-pilgrim admits that, even though most of the company laughed at the “foolish business” (Benson note p. 77), “Diverse folk” speak “diversely.” This comment brings to mind the opening conflict between Harry Bailly and Robyn, who wants to tell his tale after the Knight’s aristocratic (if somewhat parodic) piece, and thus introduce diversity of class, subject, and tone almost at the beginning of the tale-telling “game.” Chaucer-the-pilgrim reinforces the Miller’s inversion of hierarchy and introduction of his contrasting voice by stating that individual pilgrims had differing opinions of the tale (but most enjoyed it). However, the Reeve is not amused because he considers the tale a veiled personal attack. Near the end of his prologue, he states that “Right in his cherles termes wil I speke” (CT I 3917). Thus he will repay the Miller with the same kind of ribald language and subject matter, which Robyn used. This declaration is fitting in a “quit[ing]” dynamic. Oswald ends his prologue by stating that “He [Robyn] kan wel in myn eye seen a stalke, / But in his owene he kan nat seen a balke” (CT I 3920). Oswald additionally believes that, while Robyn has criticized him through carpenter John, Robyn is unaware of his own faults. Oswald will now teach him a lesson. Oswald’s desire alludes to the idea I stated in chapter one, that medieval comedy often has a didactic intent, though Oswald’s lesson may backfire a bit on him, since he, like “hende Nicholas,” overextends his attack upon Robyn.

The *Reeve’s Tale* features, like the *Miller’s Tale*, many elements of fabliaux and indirectly, as I previously stated, Plautine Roman comedy. Bishop states that “Deceit in

all its guises is central to all works rooted in the fabliau” (305). “Deceit” is central to the *Reeve’s Tale*, on the part of the eventually cuckolded miller and the clever, cuckolding and fornicating young men. “Deceit” is often the most important dynamic in comedy because of the intransigence of the ruling element in the work’s society. Bishop adds that fabliau-type comedies are “destructive [ . . . ] an unraveling of the status quo, whether it be a father and son competing for the same woman [ . . . ] or a young student cuckolding an old husband [ . . . ]” (301-02). Thus fabliaux-type comedies feature a destruction of at least a portion of the society’s power at least for a small amount of time. The *Miller’s Tale* certainly features this kind of dynamic, whereby young Nicholas defeats old John for the prize of Alison. This process yields pragmatic harmony, as I have stated, with the defeat and humiliation of the presumptuous, proud, and jealous old man, and the discomfiture of Nicholas by Absolon when he tries to overextend the fart-joke at undeserving Absolon’s expense.

A similar kind of dynamic occurs in the *Reeve’s Tale*, and thus it is a comedy restoring pragmatic harmony to the small society of the tale. However, despite this similarity to the *Miller’s Tale*, and despite the general “quit[ing],” which the *Reeve’s Tale* performs for Oswald and his damaged ego, the tale has a different tone and does not generate the same amount of laughter that Robyn’s tale does. Robyn ends his tale by noting the gathered townspeople’s laughter within the tale and the general approbation of the pilgrims listening to the tale. The *Reeve’s Tale* ends in no such laughter. The Reeve-narrator only states that “[ . . . ] I have quyt the Millere in my tale” (CT I 4323). It appears that Oswald has been more intent upon revenge than generating any laughter on the gathered pilgrims’ part. The tale is less humorous because it contains quick, almost



mirthless cuckolding, sex, and violence, which features the “quyting” dynamic stripped to a mechanical essence. For example, Aleyne and Symkyn’s unnamed wife have sex but the description is brief, and no future exists for their relationship together beyond this brief sexual encounter. The Reeve-narrator only states that “And shortly [ . . . ] they were aton. / Now pley, Aleyn, for I wol speke of John” (CT I 4197-98). The “pley” primarily serves to cuckold and “quyt” Symkyn and “quyt” Robyn. The cuckolding works toward rough harmony, which has little of the humor and expansive playfulness of Nicholas and Alison.

Symkyn, the tale’s miller, also receives almost more punishment than he deserves. Since Oswald is so angry at Robyn the Miller, his tale downgrades the ultimate harmony, as if Oswald is only interested in “quyting” Robyn the Miller while he eschews the mollifying sense of a joke—the “jape” with which the *Miller’s Tale* concludes. In Symkyn’s beating, the *Reeve’s Tale* pushes to the edge of comedy beyond which lies theater of cruelty. In this sense, Oswald is like Nicholas in the *Miller’s Tale*, who suffers from overextending the fart joke. Oswald’s reputation as a storyteller suffers in the opinion of readers and possibly the pilgrims, since his tale is not as funny or light in tone as Robyn’s as it is overly burdened with Oswald’s desire for revenge upon Robyn at the expense of laughter. Yet, by the end, despite Oswald’s vengeful intentions, which go beyond Robyn’s “jape,” the tale produces harmony, inside and outside of the tale, and thereby remains a comedy, even if not entirely funny. Chaucer thus may be pushing the limits of comedy as the tale-telling proceeds. However, pushing established limits of all kinds is another feature of comedy, and more possibilities allow for more complex and inclusive harmony.

Symkyn the miller possesses several faults, which make him a target for necessary pain and humiliation in the tale. First of all, the Reeve-narrator states that Symkyn “As any pecok he was proud and gay” (CT I 3926). Symkyn is overly prideful, like carpenter John, thus exhibiting the archetypal first sin, which precipitated Lucifer to Hell. Almost as soon as the tale begins, the Reeve-narrator sets him up for a balance-restoring fall, as no one should have excessive pride. The Reeve-narrator also calls him a “[ . . . ] market-betere atte full” (CT I 3936), which Benson defines as a “bully, quarrelsome swaggerer” (note p. 78). Old carpenter John is a prideful man but he was not a “bully.” Bishop notes that “[i]n Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* and *Rhetoric*, we find sketches of three basis comic characters: the braggart or imposter (*alazon*), the ironical person (*eiron*), and the buffoon (*bomolochos*)” (306). Carpenter John may show shades of the buffoon, but Symkyn, although ultimately a buffoonish character, is a bully, as the Reeve-narrator states, as well. Thus, in Symkyn, Chaucer has created a comic character who is more of a threat to the clever young folks, or even the stability of the small society, than carpenter John. Old John is only foolish and proud, but Symkyn is physically dangerous, according to student John, “a perilous man” (CT I 4190). The Reeve-narrator also states that “A thief he was for sothe of corn and mele. / And that a sly, and usaunt for to stele” (CT I 3939-40). Finally, Symkyn is also inordinately proud of his wife since “The person [priest] of the toun hir fader was” (CT I 3943). This pride also extends to his daughter, since he, laughingly, perceives her to be Church royalty. Derek Brewer states that “This is itself a joke, because the parson, being a cleric, ought to be celibate and therefore his was daughter was illegitimate” (181). Symkyn, therefore, in

addition to being a bully and thief, has ridiculous pretensions and presumptions, which set him up for a fall. This combination calls for comedically harsh measures.

This movement to greater violence clearly distinguishes the *Reeve's Tale* from the *Miller's Tale*. Pearsall states that “[t]he tale seems to be concentrated on its destructive purpose, and everything serves the Reeve’s revenge upon the Miller. Where the *Miller's Tale* began with a seductive description of Alison, the Reeve begins by presenting the miller of his tale as a target to be attacked and destroyed” (169). The young men and his wife certainly attack him, but Symkyn deserves his cuckoldry, humiliation, and beating. For one thing, he would continue to maintain his inflated, hubristic pride in his wife and his daughter and continue to steal grain without punishment. The punishment he receives is harsher than carpenter John’s because he is a worse character.

In fact, Symkyn cheats Aleyn and John (the other student) out of the grain they give him to grind. Not only is Symkyn a habitual thief, but he steals from the two young men on this very occasion. It is as if the Reeve is not content with stating at the beginning of the tale that Symkyn is a thief, but has to make Symkyn perpetrate thievery within the tale to make him as bad as possible and as deserving as possible of harsh justice. Symkyn is concretely the comedic villain, and thus the students have to seek concrete revenge. They go about this in a manner that will bring full, appropriate, if harsh punishment to Symkyn.

First of all, in the dark bedroom where Symkyn’s family and the young clerks are sleeping, Aleyn copulates with Malyne, Symkyn’s daughter, whom Symkyn ludicrously wants to marry into nobility. Subsequently, and in a seemingly compressed amount of time, suggesting humorous haste, John says, “Allas! [ . . . ] this a wikked jape; / Now may

I seyn that I is but an ape” (CTI 4201-02). John calls the fact that Aleyn is copulating while he is lying alone a “wicked joke.” The phrase brings to mind Robyn the Miller’s comment that the townspeople in his tale congregate to a “jape” full of mirth. Student John illustrates the reverse of a mirthful joke, as he considers it and, appropriate to the tale and the dynamic between the Miller and Reeves, decides to “quyt” Aleyn, although in an indirect way. He proceeds to fool Symkyn’s wife into entering his bed by moving the baby’s cradle, which serves as a guide in the completely dark room. The ruse works, and John has sex with her. Thus John has his own sexual adventure, now a mirthful joke, while Symkyn is cuckolded, and his unrealistic hopes for his virginal daughter are dashed. In this sense, again, the *Reeve’s Tale* outdoes the *Miller’s Tale* in its comedic vengeance. Yet this outdoing is appropriate since it is a tale that “quyts” the previous one. Thus it has the first upon which to build its characterization, plot, and revenge dynamics, though the revenge will not go as far as murder, for this would convert the harsh joke into serious injury and turn the comedy into debased tragedy.

The comedic retribution does not stop with the double cuckolding (if one considers Malyne Symkyn’s sexual property since he, in his deluded hope, is saving her for a noble). Instead, Malyne, grateful to Aleyn for the night’s sex, tells him where her father has hidden their grain. She even admits that she “[ . . . ] heelp[ed] my sire for to stele” (CTI 4245). Thus she confesses her role in the crime to the victim, betrays her father’s trust, and tells one of the victims where he can find their stolen grain. Malyne’s complete betrayal of her father’s confidence and deluded hopes is appropriate since Symkyn is completely unreasonable in his conception of his daughter and is completely dishonest in his thievery of the students’ grain. The daughter’s complicity with the young

men restores the comedic balance to a world in which Symkyn has overvalued himself and his progeny. Pragmatic harmony demands this kind of rough resolution in dealing with such a rough character as Symkyn. However, the comedy does not end with Malyne's betrayal. It continues to a point that almost makes one sympathize with Symkyn. Chaucer, however, pushes the boundaries of comedy but deftly creates pragmatic harmony without resorting to a kind of revenger-tragedy.

Aleyn cannot resist telling John of his sexual conquests so he "creep[s]" (CT I 4260) to what he thinks is John's bed; however, because of John's cradle-shifting, Aleyn "creep[s]" into Symkyn bed and says, "[ . . . ] awak / For Cristes saule, and heer a noble game" (CT I 4262-63) about his screwing of Malyne. Aleyn's mistake is akin to Nicholas's attempt to fart in Absolon's face in the *Miller's Tale*, where, following the well-established motif, the trickster, taking the trick too far, is tricked. The dynamic is a form of comedic justice. Symkyn, obviously, is outraged, and says, before avenging his spoiled honor: "Who dorste be so boold to disparage / My doghter, that is come of swich lynage?" (CT I 4271-72). Humor arises from the fact that Symkyn cares more about his deluded hopes for his daughter's marriage than from the simple fact that Aleyn had sex with her, in a breach of visitor decorum, beneath his nose. The humor highlights Symkyn's pretensions—the gap between the reality of his daughter's situation and his dreams for her. Symkyn still requires more comedic justice, which will show the ridiculous nature of his pretensions and work toward bringing the eventual pragmatic harmony.

Symkyn is not a helpless victim, however, unlike carpenter John. As the Reeve-narrator stated, he is a bully and a physically strong man:

[ . . . ] by the throte-bolle he caughte Aleyn  
And he hente hym despitously agayn,  
And on the nose he smoot hym with his fest.

(CT I 4273-75)

Symkyn's dangerous power and violence call for comedic reprisal. Symkyn falls upon his wife in the dark confusion, and since she believes she is already sleeping with Symkyn, believes "The Feend" (CT I 4288) has fallen on her. She subsequently finds a staff in the dark "And smoot the millere on the pyled skulle" (CT I 4305). Thus the wife with whom John has fornicated delivers the avenging blow for Aleyn, whom Symkyn has punched in the nose, drawing blood. The clerks escape with their horses and retrieve their stolen meal. The Reeve-narrator comments at the end of the tale that "[ . . . ] the proude millere [is] ybete [ . . . ]" (CT I 4315) and "His wyf is swyved, and his doghter als. / Lo, swich it is a millere to be fals!" (CT I 4317-18). The later two lines are reminiscent of the Miller's summary of his tale, and since Oswald is "quit[ing]" Robyn, it is appropriate that their end commentaries are similar. However, Oswald adds a proverb: "'Hym thar nat wene wel that yvele dooth,' / A gylour shal hymself bigyled be" (CT I 4319-20). In other words, the deceiver shall be deceived, which again alludes to the ancient comedic device whereby the young folk use deception (necessary because of the villain's intransigence) to defeat the blocking, older character, usually the *senex amans* and produce at least a temporary inversion of the society's social hierarchy. Moreover, similar to Aleyn's punch from the Symkyn, the comment alludes to the traditional medieval device in drama and literature whereby the "trickster" (Satan) is "tricked" by the "salvific" death of Christ (Hanning 299; 313). Thus Oswald has made Symkyn the miller into the foolish,

“beguiled” (Hanning 313) *senex amans* but also a kind of devil whom the characters in the tale must chasten. Symkyn ends his presence in the tale by stating hyperbolically that he is dying (*CT I* 4307). Of course, since this is a comedy, he is not. He receives justice for his presumption, thievery, and cruelty. Britton J. Harwood states that “[t]he exorbitance of the miller’s social aspirations leads to another exorbitance, the excessive punishment that Chaucer arranges for him” (12). His wife and daughter, since the Reeve-narrator makes no more mention of this, escape repercussions. They have enjoyed their sexual experiences, and Symkyn’s wife has performed the last procedure in the tale’s process of comedic vengeance. Symkyn will probably suffer in silence due to his necessary humiliation. After all, “[h]e is simply a miller who wants to be more than what he is; he longs to transcend himself” (Woods 35) but is dangerous, dishonorable, and deluded in this pursuit so receives justice, which nullifies his actual violence in the tale’s climax and lessens the possibility of potential future violence. Thus his comeuppance is a prophylactic for the community, which acts to ensure all in the tale, especially the young folk and his wife—producers of life and of the future—and ostensibly subservient to him have an opportunity to lead lives unthreatened by his blocking delusions and bullying violence. Following the end of the tale’s action, Oswald asks God to “Save al this compaignye, greet and smale! (*CT I* 4323) for he has “[ . . . ] quyte the Millere in [his] [ . . . ] tale” [*CT I* 4324). One wonders if he actually wishes God to save Robyn as well. Yet, since he has “quyte[ed]” Robyn, the “compaignye,” including Robyn and Oswald himself, can now transcend this momentary conflict and move forward in the tale-telling game. If rancor stills remains, the “quyte[ing]” has controlled it. Pragmatic harmony replaces discord for the moment. This moment—one among many—of pragmatic

harmony in the *Canterbury Tales*, like a pillar between unsupported sections of wall, will support the overall comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* even as it moves through non-humorous and non-comedic tales.

The fragment containing the *Miller's Tale* and *Reeve's Tale*—which, along with the generally sober *Knight's Tale*—illustrate the “quyting” dynamic—is nearly complete, except for the *Cook's Prologue* and *Tale*, which I will cover later in this chapter. Robyn has told a tale in which the carpenter is humiliated and cuckolded, and Oswald, a carpenter, tells a tale that “quyt[s]” the Miller by humiliating and cuckolding a miller. Robyn and Oswald can now exist in harmony throughout the rest of the pilgrimage. They may not speak to each other and may still harbor resentments, but they can move forward as members of the temporary community in relative peace. The resolution involves not armed, physical conflict and possibly death for one or both, but a balancing pair in a tale-telling contest.<sup>6</sup> The Miller's and Reeve's enmity is “ernest” but the tales turn it into “game” whereby Robyn and Oswald—different men of different professions and temperaments—can move toward Canterbury among disparate folk. At least in this relationship and in this instance, harmony arises, but the pilgrimage and the tale-telling contest has a way to go. Other relationships and tales will provide additional adjustments in the movement toward further harmony.

Roger the Cook enters the sequence following the end of the *Reeve's Tale* and makes an intriguing comment, which adds an additional element of humor to the fragment and offers comedic freedom in its possibilities. He states that

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<sup>6</sup> As I have stated in a footnote in chapter one, the argument regarding pragmatic, harmonious comedy responds to the lack of such arguments I have found in the criticism I have found. Since Robyn and Oswald obviously do not get along even after their “quyting” tales, it is easy to overlook the necessary comedic



Wel seyde Salomon in his langage,  
'Ne bryng nat every man into thyn hous,'  
For herbergage by nyghte is perilous.  
Wel oghte a man avysed for to be  
Whom that he broughte into his pryvetee.

(CT I 4330-34)

Roger, sententiously (and thus humorously) citing Solomon, a proverbial figure of wisdom, interprets the tale as a warning against giving strangers lodging and thus completely misses the point of Oswald's tale. Intriguingly, however, Roger warns against letting a stranger into one's "pryvetee." In the *Miller's Tale*, carpenter John says to Nicholas, "Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee" (CT I 3454). Ironically, Nicholas penetrates carpenter John's "pryvetee" by copulating with his private possession, Alison. John may be unintentionally dramatically ironic in stating that humankind should not know God's secrets, for it distracts John himself from his own secrets, which Nicholas reveals and violates. Thus Roger intentionally realizes a key feature of both tales—the usurpation of private space and privilege, which lies at the heart of these comedies and their necessary reversals. Both Nicholas and Aleyn/student John "collapse[ . . . ] [ . . . ] "private [ . . . ] space" and make it "socially accessible" (Aloni 163) in a limited sense, thereby deflating the private pretensions of the older men and bringing them back to earth, literally in the case of carpenter John (and even in the case of Symkyn, where he falls down due to his wife's blow). Roger's dramatically ironic statement demonstrates his own obtuseness but also a main feature of comedy—deflation of pretension by the

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functions their tales perform and add to the comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* that transcends rancor, even intractable rancor such as that between Robyn and Oswald.

just humiliation of a blocking character. Thus his words open up imaginative space and add to the freeing comedic harmony, which the tales themselves offer.

Roger's partial comprehension suggests the possibility of a negative reaction on Oswald's part to his thickheaded interpretation, which would require another "quyting" by the Reeve. Instead, Harry Bailly becomes the character who opposes the Cook, with his criticism of Roger's kitchen hygiene. However, after criticizing Roger, Harry states: "But yet I pray thee, be nat wroth for game; / A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley" (*CT I* 4354-55). Yet again, the tale-telling contest features the alchemical process, which turns seriousness into play, and Harry begs Roger to eschew taking offense. Roger apparently does not, and tells Harry he will tell a tale about a "hostileer" (*CT I* 4360), Harry's profession, and finally states: "Be thou nat wrooth, er we departen heer, / [ . . . ] / But er we parte, ywis, thou shalt be quit" (*CT I* 4359; 4362). Roger will continue the "quyting," since Harry has insulted him, ostensibly in "pley." Roger "[ . . . ] therwithal [ . . . ] lough and made cheere [ . . . ]" (*CT I* 4363). He, unlike Oswald, will start his tale in mirth, which "quyt[s]" Harry's good cheer. We move from Oswald's acerbity, an unusual tone for a comedy, to a more familiar comedic mood. This shift also illustrates the freeing, mobile characteristics of comedy in general.

Perkyn Revelour, the protagonist of the Cook's fragmentary tale, is an apprentice in the trade of "vitailleurs" (*CT I* 4366), thus the fictitious analog to Harry Bailly and the potential butt of this aborted comedy. The tale quickly begins to set up its plot even as it ends fragmentarily, for the Cook-narrator states that Perkyn "[ . . . ] hadde a wyf that heeld for contenance / A shoppe, and swyved for hir sustenance" (*CT I* 4421-22). Thus Roger, in his "quyting" of Harry, outdoes Robyn and Oswald because Perkyn Revelour's

wife is already a prostitute; the tale needs no cuckolding, violence, or mishap to humiliate Perkyn. Moreover, the speed with which the Cook-narrator reveals the wife's profession generates humor, in the way silent movies generated humor by speeding up movement on the screen, thus making human beings look like unthinking, mechanical puppets.

Therefore by this point in the fragment, the successive tales, ending in the Cook's, have degenerated to featuring open sexual profligacy. No young people need practice deception to eliminate Perkyn's presumptions since the degeneracy of the situation is apparent. Chaucer does not need to finish this tale because its immediate illustration of immorality "quyt[s]" Harry Bailly, and readers, have already experienced a double-dose of cuckoldry, violence, and pain, which restores balance to the small societies of the tales. The bulk of Fragment I has already established and modeled the "quyting" dynamic for the rest of the *Canterbury Tales*.

The fragmentary end of the *Cook's Tale* itself additionally leaves the reader free to imagine a plot line, even if Roger sets up an immediately sordid domestic situation. This freedom contrasts with the long, complete, and generally sober (if again, subtly parodic) *Knight's Tale*, which does not offer this freedom, since it eliminates imaginative freedom regarding the development of its plot. Finally, the fragmentary *Cook's Tale* ends the conventionally assigned first fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*. The freedom of possibility thus multiplies outside the pragmatic harmony, which the *Miller's Tale* and the *Reeve's Tale*, in their comedy and in their varying degrees of humor have generated. This multiplication of possibility is a kind of imaginative abundance, and another prime feature of comedy is the general abundance that it produces by the pragmatically harmonizing process of its resolution. This abundance, freedom, and harmony will

become apparent again in later fragments of the *Canterbury Tales* even as the tales and links display differing tones and varying degrees of humor—humor which works to illustrate incongruity of situation and/or utterance—especially regarding controlling characters—and thus move the tale and the work toward a balance of their disparate elements.

## **Chapter Four- The *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale: Unexpected Comedy in A Biographical Narrative and A Moralistic Romance***

Fragment I of the *Canterbury Tales* ends with the unfinished *Cook's Tale*, which provides the final “quyting” that occurs between all the tales in the fragment. In one sense the narrative stream ends, thus putting an end to “quyting” and any clear narrative connection between fragments one and two. However, the momentary break in the narrative of the tale-telling “game” allows the reader to “quyt” the work itself and provide his or her own narrative link or allow the gap to stand. These possibilities provide some of the *Canterbury Tales's* comedy, which transcends apparent limitation—this time a limitation in continuous narrative flow.

Fragment II of the *Canterbury Tales* begins with the *Man of Law's Tale*, a serious narrative of pathos that, since it ends happily, a medieval reader (and some current medievalists) would consider a comedy. It follows the fortuitous adventures of the pious heroine Custance, first to Syria, then to Northumbria. In both locales she overcomes treachery, first at the hands of the Sultan's intolerant and jealous mother, second at the hand of an evil, lying knight who accuses her of murder. She escapes these treacherous situations passively, saved by fortune and ultimately God, especially in the instance involving the evil knight, whose neck breaks and whose eyes burst out of his skull when he swears on the Bible that Custance is a murderer. The tale ultimately ends with Custance a safe, pious, and orthodox Christian in Rome. The ending of this monotonous tale is one factor that contributes to the overall comedic nature of the *Canterbury Tales*. However, the tale contains little humor, so functions as a comedy without the piquant emotional dynamics which humor provides. Therefore it does not generate the excitement

and delight which the fabliaux-influenced tales in Fragment I do.<sup>1</sup> Tales such as the *Miller's* and even the somewhat harsh *Reeve's* create more robust comedy, since the comedic resolution must work to resolve the great tension the humorous and surprise-laden plots produce. The end result is a great comedic catharsis and thus great comedy overall. The *Man of Law's Tale*, despite the ending, which offers life and orthodox Christian sanctity for the heroine, lacks this humor and surprise-driven tension, since Custance remains pious from beginning to end with little of no change in character. The flatness craves a “quyting” dose of humor, and narratives that show a rebellious but necessarily balancing spirit and change in the main characters, which yields harmony where none existed before. Thus, though the pious and pure *Man of Law's Tale* “quyted” the scurrility of the *Miller's*, *Reeve's*, and *Cook's* tales, piety needs the balance of mirth—if not exactly of the same variety—which the three last-mentioned tales contained. The *Man of Law's Tale* thus contributes to the overall comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* by its very lack of humor. This lack necessitates a balancing with fresh, invigorating humor. The Wife of Bath's *Prologue* and *Tale* can do just that, even if no narrative connection exists between it and the *Man of Law's Tale*. As I have stated previously, tales may “quyt” other tales, even if we have no evidence that certain fragments followed others in sequence. The power of “quyting” to resonate between apparently unrelated fragments increases the *Canterbury Tales's* overall liberating comedy.

The Wife of Bath's comedy is more complex than that contained in Fragment I, as the *Canterbury Tales's* comedic variety offers freedom from one model. Moreover, the

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<sup>1</sup> Thus Fragment II's sobriety balances the rollicking, fabliaux-inspired tales that end and make up the bulk of Fragment I, even as the humorous *Miller's Tale* balances the generally serious *Knight's Tale* within

*Canterbury Tales* will show a progression in its comedy, as we will see, as it moves away from graphic, violent scurrility in such tales as the *Miller's*, toward charming, philosophical humor in such tales as the *Nun's Priest's*.

In this process of progressively smoother comedy, however, the Wife of Bath must “quyt” the sobriety, which others’ tales offer, for the progression toward harmony to continue. The *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, in contrast to the *Man of Law's Tale*, contains humor and repeats the “quyting” dynamic of the first fragment. Intriguingly, her prologue begins Fragment III, so the “quyting” dynamic again even continues between unliked fragments, such is the structural freedom of the *Canterbury Tales* in its fragmentation. Since the *Man of Law's Tale* illustrates a dutiful, passive wife, Alison of Bath (who is not actually married as the pilgrimage progresses) “quyts” his narrative with a personal history and exposition of her view regarding marriage and the relationship between the sexes. Her biographical narrative displays her as an active agent who seeks pleasure and satisfaction, rather than just a passive recipient of men’s desire and male-generated authority. As a single tale or prologue in the *Canterbury Tales* can “quyt” multiple tales or prologues, the Wife of Bath’s *Prologue* also “quyts” such tales as the *Clerk's*, which features another dutiful, passive wife, Griselda. Moreover, the succeeding *Wife of Bath's Tale* features a dynamic that reverses traditional male hierarchy and ultimately places the woman in a sovereign position in the marriage between the offending knight and magical old/young woman.

The Man of Law-narrator ends the story of Custance’s life by stating that she, “[ . . . ] finally to seye, / Toward the toun of Rome goth hir weye” (*CT* II 1147-48). After undergoing many trials, which she did not cause, she ends her life in the holiness of

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Fragment I. The balance works to create harmony in the tale-telling “game” itself.

Rome—the spiritual heart of the Western World at this time. Thus Custance becomes a tropological symbol of the “Constant” Christian soul, which receives its reward after a life of suffering through which the believing soul has remained faithful to God. However, Jost states that “Only the spiritual success of the steadfast Custance throughout her ordeals can justify calling this tale of weariness and woe a comedy, for even its conclusion offers only qualified happiness” (xxx), and, moreover, many characters die throughout the course of the narrative. Thus if this tale is a comedy, by the simple medieval definition of a movement from sadness to happiness, it is qualified in being only a spiritual, Christian comedy, since Custance’s husband dies, and the reader receives little sense of Custance’s happiness at the end of the tale. Additionally, she has survived only passively, rather than actively opposing the obstacles that impede her progress to happiness (or in Custance’s particular case, safety). Thus the tale meets the requisite medieval comedic criterion of a relatively happy ending for the heroine but it lacks humor and does not invert hierarchy, with the goal of uniting young people. As I have stated, the tale-telling “game” needs an antidote to this spiritual but wearying comedy. The Wife of Bath, in all her open, proud, and vigorous physicality, provides this welcome change.

Intriguingly, in *The Epilogue to the Man of Law’s Tale*, the Shipman objects to the possibility of the Parson preaching a sermon at this point in the “game” even if at Harry’s derisive instigation. The Shipman himself claims that his tale

[ . . . ] shal waken al this compaignie,  
But it schal not ben of philosophie,  
Ne phisylas, ne termes queinte of law.



Ther is but litel Latyn in my maw!"

(*CT* II 1187-90)

Thus the Shipman, tired of Custance's dutiful, unassailable constancy, offers a tale that will wake the members of the pilgrimage/"game" from their pious boredom. He claims he will tell a tale that contains no philosophy, rhetorical figures, or Latin. Though the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*—not the *Shipman's Tale*—begins Fragment III, she is the perfect source for a tale—and a biography—that can “wake” an audience or reader weary of Custance or any other monotonous tale anywhere in the fragmented, disconnected body of the *Canterbury Tales*.

She begins her *Prologue* with a tone that “quyts” any notion feminine passivity even as she appears to submit to authority with piety. She states that “Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me” (*CT* III 1-2). The reader can imagine the Shipman boasting he will tell a raucous, profane tale, but the Wife of Bath, confident and strong, taking the storytelling reins out of his hands because she can tell more vigorous and intriguing narratives. She immediately claims that experience is good “ynogh” for her, provided that “auctoritee [ . . . ] were” not “in this world.” Certainly, she ostensibly and explicitly privileges authority. Robert Longworth states that “[t]he subjunctive mood of her first statement acknowledges the privilege of Authority (embodied as text) and therefore the marginalization of Experience, however valuable” (384). However, her prologue and her tale put experience at the center, thus, if not debunking her stated submission to authority, giving experience as much clout as “auctoritee.” In fact, Longworth admits that “[o]n the other hand, Authority (in the form of the *Glossa Ordinaria* and commentators like St. Jerome) has demonstrated for her the

power of maneuvering on the margins of the text [ . . . ]” (385). Indeed, the Wife of Bath’s narratives themselves will place “Experience” in the center of her own “text,” if not in the center of interpretative Patristic literature and the Bible.

F. Ann Payne, writing specifically about the *General Prologue*, states that “[t]here is a sense in which the satire desires that finitude which most balks at an instant drift into a concrete universal, which would imply a ‘system.’ It wants the single uncomplicated personage or event of the moment” (19). One can make a similar point regarding the Wife of Bath’s *Prologue* and *Tale*. Even if “Authority” remains in some distant, hierarchical realm of power and thought, “Experience,” based upon the “finitude” of the moment, manifests itself as a force that can combat the rigid strictures of “Authority” to yield a pragmatic harmony in the biographical and fictional milieux of the Wife’s respective narratives. Robert O. Payne notes that “The key term in Chaucer’s attempted synthesis of art, experience, and history is ‘remembrance’” (63). He goes on further to state that the past for was “[Chaucer] [ . . . ] primarily an intellectual phenomenon which continued in remembrance just so long as it could be made meaningful to experience” (64-65). One can apply this notion to the Wife of Bath, where “Authority,” a manifestation of past decrees and precedents directs her—but only up to a point useful to her. When she reaches a point where the “Authority” becomes a hindrance, such as the blocking *senex amans* or *senex furens*, she will eschew it and rely on experience—or present narratives that feature validated experience implicitly or explicitly at their centers.

As the Wife moves into her *Prologue*, she in fact does not use experience exclusively as her guide to living. On the contrary, she uses Scriptural authority to bolster her succession of marriages: “God bad us for to wexe and multiplie; / That gentil text

kan I wel understonde” (*CT* III 28-29). The Wife calls the Bible “gentil,” thus showing an ostensible respect for the Holy Book and its “text,” which must include its meanings and the interpretations that inhere in the divine *logos*. However, the Wife uses the authority of the Bible to support the fact that she has broken Church law by marrying five husbands. Like other “glozers” in the *Canterbury Tales*, she can use Scripture to support her actions, desires, and personal beliefs. These personal concerns based upon her experience trump the Church’s teaching against successive marriages. However, she does cite Scriptural authority, as for example:

[ . . . ] sith [ . . . ] Crist ne wente nevere but onis  
 To weddyng, in the Cane of Galilee,  
 [ . . . ] by the same ensample taughte he me  
 That I ne sholde wedded be but ones.

(*CT* III 10-13)

In the explanatory notes to the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* in the *Riverside Chaucer*, Christine Ryan Hilary states that “[t]he argument from lines 11-34 is from Adv. Jov. 1.14 (S & A, 209)” (865). In a closely following note, Hilary quotes in translation the particular sentence from *Adversus Jovinianum* by Saint Jerome that serves as the basis for the wife’s statement: “[f]or by going once to a marriage he taught that men should marry only once (Jerome, Adv. Jov. 1.40)” (865). Yet, very soon after this apparent verbal submission to authority, she states that “God bad us for to wexe and multiplye / That gentil texte kan I wel understand” (*CT* III 28-29). Thus, for Alison, this command transcends the Scriptural and Patristic injunction against successive marriages—marriages which might produce multiple offspring. In other words, she moves in a

direction that makes her happy, regardless of the Church's Scripturally based injunction, and moves toward active sexuality. This move produces harmony, since the Wife will work best in society if she pursues her happiness, whether that happiness requires sexual fulfillment, considerate companionship, or material wealth.

Alluding to her own freethinking and free-choosing, Alison states, regarding variety in her men, that

Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes,  
And diverse practyk in many sondry werkes  
Maketh the werkman parfyt sekirly [ . . . ]

(*CT* III 44c-e)

Alison may be commenting upon the “divers[ity]” or variety she prefers in her sexual or marital experience. However, one can also argue that “divers[ity]” is an important general concern of comedy, since diverse elements working together produce harmony. As Frye notes, comedy features a need to break immobile, corrupt societal forces and authority, because interpretation of authority produces “divers[ity]” full of freeing loopholes. Longworth states that “Authority, for all its power, is susceptible to treachery. By the same token, the exegetical charlatantry of which critics have accused the Wife of Bath herself is at least no more intrinsic to the use of Experience (of which she is the avowed champion) than to the exercise of Authority (against which she has come to argue)” (374). The world is “diverse,” even in the interpretation of its “Authority,” and Alison is deft and bold enough to reject “Authority,” since its transmission is inherently polyvocal, with its numerous translators and commentators.<sup>2</sup> Alison continues her argument by

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<sup>2</sup> I cannot help thinking of Bakhtin's notion of polyvocality in texts, specifically novels. However, since so many sources and transmitters claim authority, according to Longworth, they must build up the voice of

stating that “He [Saint Paul] seith that to be wedded is no synne; / Bet is to be wedded than to brynne (CT III 51-52). She may be disingenuous, but that is beside the point in the movement toward harmony which she enacts. In response to the clerical argument that male and female genitalia are different in order to distinguish the sexes, she says, “The experience woot wel it is not so” (CT III 124). She further claims that “engendrure” (CT III 128) is as much a reason for the presence of genitalia as the function of urination. Again, she may be disingenuous, but as we have seen with comedic protagonists, deception—even out in the open, such as the Wife’s—may be necessary to move the protagonist toward her or his goal, which usually involves coupling with a mate and thus moving the narrative’s society to working harmony, even if the Church, state, or social hierarchy does not condone this harmony.

Alison’s verbal and behavioral rebellion is also funny. Her *Prologue* generates its humor for a variety of reasons. One reason is her use of authority for her own pleasurable ends. The reader may disapprove of Alison’s (mis)appropriation of Scripture for her own ends and thus find her interpretative, marital, and sexual sins funny. Alfred David states that “sin, just like the burlesque Vice characters of the morality plays, is not only wicked but ridiculous [ . . . ]” (103). Thus Alison’s gloss of Scripture, which encourages successive marriages is “ridiculous” since the gloss exposes a gap between the supposed Truth of Scripture and Alison’s use of it. However, Alison’s *Prologue* also generates humor due to the fact that she is an attractive character precisely because of her (mis)appropriation and because she is such a force for life, and in a comedy, the protagonist usually carries this force, which will lead to renewing harmony. Her strength

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authority into a great, intertextual, transhistorical mass of writing that cannot help but display a degree of “heteroglossia” (*The Dialogic Imagination*).

and temerity produce laughter because it highlights not the “ridiculous” quality of her life, words, and deeds, but the questionable nature (to Alison) of Church strictures and its clergyman who profess “Authority,” even as they corrupt it through specious interpretation. Pearsall states that “[i]t will be seen that Chaucerian comedy, on this definition of it, differs markedly from comedy as classically defined, that is, as a socially normative literary form, working to correct our behaviour through making us laugh at the ridiculousness of vice and folly” (161). Alison of Bath’s words and behavior may not display this “normative literary form” since she rebels against Church and social authority, but we should expect this since Chaucer’s comedies do not necessarily display this desire to uphold the status quo. As we have seen, his comedies work to produce harmony that often disrupts or destroys the frozen social dynamic which institutions and empowered individuals have imposed. This disruption of impeding stasis makes sense in the *Canterbury Tales*, which, after all, features a pilgrimage—a situation which is always on the move.

Alison even physically eliminates a portion of the status quo embodied in a “book of wikked wyves” (*CT* III 685) by ripping out pages of the book and punching Jankyn, her fifth husband, on the cheek, for which she receives a “[ . . . ] fest [ . . . ] on the heed / That in the floor I lay as I were deed” (*CT* III 795-96). In this instance (and on a previous, as she has been deafened in one ear by a blow from Jankyn for defying him), the comedy comes dangerously close to theater of cruelty or even tragedy and is similar to the violent climax of the *Reeve’s Tale*. However, this violence and injury ultimately produce harmony between Alison and Jankyn—even if Alison’s retributive violence exhibits

traditional medieval anti-feminism (Mehl 148). After Alison hyperbolically claims she will die, she states that:

He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,  
To hand the governance of hous and lond,  
And of his tonge, and of his honde also:  
And made hym brenne his book anon right tho.

(*CT* III 813-16)

Jankyn burns his book of “wikked wyves” with which he has been browbeating Alison. Moreover, he gives her “governance” in the relationship. Subsequently, Alison states that “After that day we hadden never debaat” (*CT* III 822). Her narrative ends happily ever after with a “trewe” (*CT* III 822) husband who has given her “soveraynetee” (*CT* III 818), a component in the interpersonal dynamic that Alison must possess in order for the relationship to be successful. John B. Friedman, though noting the Wife’s “misinterpretation of the horse and rider topos,” (177) where the rider should be rational, not “irascible” (176) as Alison is, states that “[f]rom [her] [ . . . ] point of view [ . . . ] when the woman bears the bridle, harmony comes to the household and by extension the universe” (177). Friedman also adds that her words show “Chaucer’s mostly gentle satire of the failed application of learning in one of his most learned characters” (177). However, Alison, despite her “misinterpretation” and “failed application”—intentional or not—resolves the conflict with her fifth husband Jankyn, and, in a sense, defeats textual, non-experiential authority, with the incineration of the misogynistic book of “wikked wyves.” Thus, though Chaucer may satirize elements of her character, she succeeds in breaking from static, unreasonable authority and moving toward marital, experiential

harmony with her fifth husband. Pearsall, referring specifically to the *Friar's* and *Summoner's Tale*, states that "they operate according to the same basic comic rules, namely, that the criterion by which human beings are judged successful is the extent to which they find means fully to satisfy their appetites and manipulate the world, by their smartness, to their will" (174). One can apply this argument to the Wife of Bath because she succeeds in her battle against authority and "satisf[ies]" her "appetites." Yet, I would add to this argument that these "appetites" produce harmony, which leads to a more fulfilled life for her and for her husband, who accepts his subservient role in the marriage and remains "trewe." Thus Alison may misinterpret and misapply Scriptural and Patristic authority, but the end of pragmatic harmony transcends the limitations imposed by remote, inflexible authority, similar to how the *Canterbury Tales's* comedy transcends unhumorous tales such as the *Man of Law's Tale*. As Patricia Clare Ingham states, "[c]ritical reception of the Wife's prologue stresses the agency of her aggressive re-reading of scripture as a means for displaying and resisting the medieval anti-feminist tradition [ . . . ] 'Bad' readings of texts, or so the Wife shows us, can produce 'useful' readings of culture" (40). The Wife's reading is "'useful'" in bringing about harmony.

The yielding of "soveraynetee" by Jankyn to Alison near the end of her *Prologue* offers a perfect segue to her *Tale*, for the *Tale* duplicates this yielding of "soveraynetee" by a man to a woman. In the *Tale*, the rapist-knight eventually yields to the magical "wyf" (CT III 998 ff.). Yet the *Tale's* process of yielding ramifies the *Prologue's* basic comedic dynamic, and the freedom, which this ramification offers, perfectly complements the *Tale's* movement to harmony. One should always keep in mind also that Alison's *Prologue* and *Tale* "quyt" the *Man's of Law's Tale*, the *Clerk's Tale*, the



*Physician's Tale*, and other sober tales featuring pious, passive women, and thus offer another dimension of the comedic dynamic. Yet again, the diversity of movement itself aids in the development of this dynamic.

The *Wife of Bath's Tale* begins like a conventional romance, “in th'olde days of the King Arthour” (CT III 857), and quickly descends into sexual violence, odd for a comedy, when the nameless knight “By verray force, [ . . . ] rafte [a young woman's] [ . . . ] maydenhed [ . . . ]” (CT III 888). Again, Chaucer, as in the *Reeve's Tale* and in the *Wife's Prologue*, pushes to the edge of comedy in order to show the extent of the capacity for harmony (and even forgiveness) in human society. Frye states that “The tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society: the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated” (165). Since forgiveness or at least forbearance are important features of comedy in general,

[ . . . ] the queene and other ladyes mo  
So longe preyeden the kyng of grace  
Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place,  
And yaf hym to the queene, al at hir will,  
To chese wheither she wold hym save or spille.

(CT III 894-98)

Thus the queen and ladies, the segment of society that would sympathize most with the victimized young woman, ask the king to put judgment of the rapist into their hands. They do not choose to torture or kill him immediately. Instead, they offer him an ultimatum—a kind of conditional forgiveness if he can fulfill his quest and thus gain

knowledge of himself and of women. Though he is not a classical “blocking character” such as carpenter John—the *senex amans*—his crime has made him an element that the society’s authority had planned to eliminate—execute—in the interest of its Christian morality and societal mores. The “queen and other ladyes mo,” though aristocrats and undoubtedly powerful, are subservient to the king. Yet the king yields “soveraynetee” to them as well, appropriately, and they magnanimously offer the knight a chance to live. In other words, they—subservient to the king—provide space for the comedic dynamic to work toward harmony where every character in the tale will have a chance to live productively, even as the society serves justice and the rapist-knight learns a lesson.

The queen subsequently tells the knight that “I grante thee lyf, if thou kanst tellen me / What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren” (*CT* III 904-05). The knight has a year and a day in which to discover what women most desire or else the society will execute him for his crime against a woman. The Wife of Bath interpolates her personal opinions regarding women and their relationship to their husbands as the knight sets out upon his quest, retelling Ovid’s version of the King Midas story. She states, ostensibly in the voice of Midas’s wife, “Myn housbande hath longe asses erys two!” (*CT* III 976). This paraphrasing of Ovid’s tale and the humor it generates is telling. Ironically, the Wife of Bath is deaf herself in one ear, due to her fifth husband’s, Jankyn’s, blow. The irony lies in Jankyn’s figurative deafness to his wife’s indignation regarding listening to the book of “wikked wyves.” Midas’s story also alludes to husbands’ tendencies in general to become asses, at least partially, and not listen with human understanding. The knight in the tale shows this insensitive behavior, which leads to violence and rape, in his encounter with the young woman. Again one must remember the “quyting,” which the

Wife is constantly enacting upon tales featuring pious, passive women, whereby the female persona in the *Prologue* and the female character in the *Tale* will assert herself and gain her desire, producing a more realistic kind of harmony than found in the submissive, *mater dolorosa*-like character of Custance, Griselda, or Virginia from the *Physician's Tale*.

The knight errant (who, beside wandering, as “errant” denotes, also has “erred” morally)<sup>3</sup> despairs of finding out what women most desire. However, on his return home, as he expects to die, he finds a magical group of ladies who disappear as he approaches them. Yet, one woman remains: “[ . . . ] on the grene he saugh sittyng a wyf— / A fouler wight ther may no man devyse” (*CT* III 998-99). It is appropriate in this tale, told by the “quyting” and middle-aged Wife of Bath, that the young man encounters an older woman to whom he must submit if he wants to save his life. The older, powerful woman is a surrogate for Alison, who desires—and has exercised power—over her male mate or mates. Thus Alison’s tale repeats elements of her prologue in a fictionalized form, “quyting” the Man of Law, the Clerk, and the Physician and their tales in quantity (as well as quality). The abundance of her words opens up more space for the balancing comedy in the tale-telling “game.” Like the Reeve, her outdoing paradoxically quits tellers of tales with whom she disagrees (in her case, implicitly), and the overall comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* allows this, since strict recompense would only lead to more contention and a possibly tragic end. The *Canterbury Tales’s* comedy transcends this strict recompense as it transcends uncomedic and unfunny tales. As long as an offended

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<sup>3</sup> The word “errant” derives from the Latin verb “errare,” which means both “to wander” and “to make a mistake.”

pilgrim has the opportunity to tell a tale, s/he will “quyt” the offender and thus provide necessary balance and harmony to the tale-telling “game” and the pilgrimage.

In the *Tale*, Alison’s surrogate is now prepared to educate the rapist-knight, enact comedic justice for all womanhood, and gain sovereignty over the rapist-knight, as Alison gained over her latest husband, Jankyn, according to her biographical narrative. This “wyf” states that she will help the young man; however:

The nexte thyng that I requere thee,  
Thou shalt it do, if it lye in thy might,  
And I wol telle it yow er it be nyght.

(*CT* III 1010-12)

The “wyf” will tell him the secret of women’s desire and thus save his life if he immediately puts himself under her sovereignty. The tale places the knight again under the sovereignty of a woman, as if Alison, mindful of Custance, Griselda, and Virginia, must outdo these tellers and their tales, as the Reeve paradoxically outdoes the Miller in order to “quyt” him and thus bring balance to the story-telling “game.” The knight grants his “trouthe” (*CT* III 1013) to the old woman, and she subsequently whispers to him the life-saving answer he needs. When he return to court, he tells the queen:

“My lige lady [ . . . ]  
“Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee  
As wel over his housbond as hir love,  
And for to been in maistrie hym above.  
That is youre mooste desire, though ye me kille.

(*CT* III 1037-41)

The knight addresses the queen as his “lige” (lord), so reiterates his submission to the female wielder of power. However, after he tells the queen and the assembled ladies that they most desire “sovereynetee,” (1038) he paraphrases this statement in line 1041 with words that communicate his epistemological “sovereynetee” over women since he now knows an intimate secret—if not the most intimate one—of the gender. In fact, he implies that he is so sure, that even though they may “kill” him, the truth will not change. He adds, “Dooth as yow list; I am heer at your wille” (*CT* III 1042). Again, he rhetorically places the power of life and death over himself into their hands, since he is “heer” at the queen’s “will,” but even if they execute him, he still has revealed the truth and will possess it—and the portion of intellectual mastery it entails—to the grave. Thus in yielding “sovereynetee,” the knight gains some, if in an intangible way. Thus the “quyting” dynamic continues.

However much intellectual sovereignty remains with the knight, the tale, since it relies heavily on this “quyting” dynamic, will not let him end the plot with his rhetorical victory, since he, a rapist, must in some way pay for his crime. If the rapist-knight remained only victorious—and thus only defeated the “wyf,” the tale would not be a comedy, as its ending would not display balance which the rapist-knight’s humiliation and education will provide. The old woman, subsequent to the court’s forgiveness of the knight, says, “Bifore the court thanne preye I thee, sir knyght [ . . . ] / [ . . . ] that thou me take unto thy wyf” (*CT* III 1054-55). The old woman “quyts” the knight’s rhetorical victory with a request, which requires him to submit to her wishes, as he had agreed. He responds with “Allas and weylawey!” (*CT* III 1058). His response is funny because of the incongruity of the match between the young man and the old woman, a situation, though

of reversed gender, which is a common initial situation in comedy, as, for example in the *Miller's Tale*. However, the response is also funny because the old woman punctures the knight's rhetorical pride. The surprise in the knight's response also contributes to the humor. The knight's response, which generates mock-pity in the reader and thus humor, contributes to the shifting tone of the tale, which now moves in a more obviously comedic direction.

The knight, though calling the old woman his “dampnacioun” (*CT* III 1067) in response to the old woman calling him her “love” (*CT* III 1066), thus again generating humor by his romantic discomfiture, agrees to marry her:

[ . . . ] the ende is this, that he  
Constreyned was; he nedes moste hire wedde,  
And taketh his olde wyf, and gooth to bedde.

(*CT* III 1070-72)

The knight is “[c]onstreyned,” forced, and “moste” wed the “olde wyf” in a non-violent mirroring of the original rape, which balances the original crime, but does it with “the quality of mercy,” as the comedic dynamic—one of forgiveness, if conditional—flows through this arrangement. One can imagine the Wife of Bath smiling to herself while telling the tale as she thinks about the young man taking the older woman “to bedde” and satisfying her sexual appetites. One also should notice that her narration of the knight's submission ends with “bedde,” the metonymic center of comedy. However, even though the knight has submitted to formal marriage with the “olde wyf,” he is not happy about it:

Greet was the wo the knyght hadde in his thought,  
Whan he was with his wyf abedde ybrought;

He walweth and he turneth to and fro.

(*CT* III 1083-85)

Moreover, he marries her “prively [ . . . ] / And al day after hidde hym as an owle” (*CT* III 1080-81). We again may imagine the cowering, embarrassed, and skulking knight—not a model of chivalry in many senses—trying to avoid the public humiliation, which the marriage will bring him. The apparent marital mismatch again recalls the classic comedic dynamic of marital partners far apart in age. In this sense, it appears that the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* reverses an important element of the comedic dynamic, where the young person ends up with the wrong mate, instead of the proper, young mate. In this case, the tale would not be a comedy at all, but ultimately a satire upon foolish young men or lecherous old women. The tale continues in a humorous vein as the “olde wyf” works toward fulfilling the comedic dynamic that transcends the initial violence, which the knight’s rape produced. In response to the knight’s complaint that she is “[ . . . ] so loothly, and oold also [ . . . ]” (*CT* III 1100) and moreover, “[ . . . ] so lough a kinde [ . . . ]” (*CT* III 1101), the old woman responds that she could change her appearance if *she* desired it, “so wel ye myghte bere yow unto me” (*CT* III 1108). The wife’s proposition again brings up the notion of harmonic balance, for she will change for *him*, if *she* desires it, in order to improve the young knight’s behavior toward her. If sovereignty intrinsically entails rule and subservience, it also yields balance in this case.

The old wife—didactic in this instance like a fairy godmother or other aged, kindly, and perceptive mentor<sup>4</sup>—then simultaneously scolds and advises the knight regarding his less than noble behavior toward her:

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<sup>4</sup> Chaucer’s blending of genres even within a tale, in this case—chivalric fairy romance and domestic comedy that shows the influence of fabliaux with an apparently age-mismatched couple—shows that the

Looke who that is moost vertuous always,  
Pryvee and apert, and most entendeth ay  
To do the gentil dedes that he kan.

(*CT* III 1113-15)

Since the old wife is concerned with her domestic/marital arrangement, she advises the knight to be virtuous in public and in private, the two spheres in which the married couple will move (if the knight ever decides to leave their chambers). Thus she advises him to act like a willing and polite husband wherever they may be. Their potential domestic harmony relies on the knight's good behavior in whatever social environment they find themselves. The wife implicitly highlights the superior importance of the private sphere, however, since the knight has been acting rudely to her in private, and moreover, hides himself indoors. Part of the old wife's advice, ironically, may be that since the knight now spends all his time between four walls, he should act well in his embarrassment and in his private sphere.

The old wife next lectures the knight about eschewing his superficial notion of gentility. She states that "gentillesse [like the "quality of mercy"] cometh fro God allone" (*CT* III 1162) and "That he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis" (*CT* III 1170). Her second aphorism, in particular, points to the gap, which the knight must eliminate, between pretension and actuality. This elimination of the disjunction between truth and reality must occur before the wife and knight can enjoy marital harmony. The elimination of superficial, false gentility based on his aristocratic state, and replacing it with true

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comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* also can transcend limits of genre in a single narrative. For a penetrating examination (among other concerns such as semiotics and scatology) of the relations between husbands and wives in French fabliaux, see R. Howard Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.



gentility of mind and heart, is another necessary process in the comedic dynamic, which moves toward domestic harmony and the resolution of the knight and old wife's domestic problems once and for all.

Intriguingly, and related to the apprehension of truth, the old wife returns to Alison's ambivalent attitude just before she offers the knight his final choice:

“Now, sire, of elde ye repreve me;  
And certes, sire, thogh noon auctoritee  
Were in no book, ye gentils of honour  
Seyn that men sholde an oold wight doon favour  
And clepe him fader, for youre gentillesse;  
And auctors shal I fynden, as I gesse.

(*CT* III 1207-12)

In other words, she criticizes the young knight for his disparagement of age, even though, without the direction of authority, noblemen honor their ancestors. The old wife subsequently claims that she probably can find authorities, even if none are easily at hand. Like Alison, she is a manipulative reader whose potentially “[b]ad’ readings [ . . . ] can produce ‘useful’ readings of culture” (Ingham). Additionally, since noblemen know, without authority, that they should honor their elders, she implicitly valorizes experience, another important feature in the comedic dynamic, even as she claims with some equivocation (“I gesse”) that she can find textual authority supporting respect for one's elders.

After the old wife's ambivalent or manipulative inclusion of authority in her argument, she points out an important, positive feature of their relationship based on her

physical unattractiveness: “Now ther ye seye that I am foul and old, / Than drede you noght to been a cokewold [ . . . ]” (*CT* III 1213-14). Again, her argument implies the balance inherent even in this marriage that is so troublesome and embarrassing to the knight. Since she is old and unattractive, he need not fear being cuckolded, robbed of his marital, masculine imperative and thus feminized—alluding to the original rape, which the knight perpetrated on a woman—or symbolically castrated, at least as the male-dominated society would see it. Thus the “wyf” offers him protection from cuckoldry and protection from symbolic rape. Her offer contrasts to the knight’s raping of the young woman, in which the knight certainly did not protect the woman. Thus the “wyf,” like Alison in her narrative and tale, regarding the Man of Law, the Clerk, and the Physician outdoes the knight in her “quyting” of him. As I have stated, the forgiving, accommodating nature of comedy can contain this paradox and thereby encourage imaginative freedom with the possibility that more can be equal. Yet, the still-old wife realizes that this overlooked benefit will not placate the knight. She then promises, “But natheless, syn I know youre delit, / I shal fulfille youre worldly appetite” (*CT* III 1217-18). The old wife’s promise is striking since it necessitates her fulfilling the knight’s “appetite,” in other words, apparently yielding sovereignty to his emotions and desires. This yielding highlights again the balance toward which the comedy is working and introduces the old wife’s ultimatum, which is so important in producing the comedic resolution and attendant harmony.

The old wife, now driving straight to the resolution, states, or rather orders that the knight:

“Chese now [ . . . ] on or thise thynges tweye:

To han me foul and old til that I deye,  
And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf,  
And nevere yow displese in al my lyf,  
Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,  
And take youre aventure of the repair

(*CT* III 1219-24)

The old wife's choice offers both positives and negatives to the knight. As she stated before, if the knight chooses that she remain old, he remains free of the anxiety regarding cuckoldry. However, if he wishes her to transform into a young, attractive woman, he will "take" his "aventure"—his chances—with her fidelity, his reputation, his self-esteem, and his happiness.

The old wife's ultimatum illustrates in an indirect way an ancient feature of comedy that Frye explains:

A little pamphlet called the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, closely related to Aristotle's *Poetics* [ . . . ] divides the *dianoia* ["theme" (52)] of comedy into two parts, opinion (*pistis*) and proof (*gnosis*) [ . . . ] Proofs (i.e. , the means of bringing about the happier society) are subdivided into oaths, compacts, witnesses, ordeals (or torture), and laws—in other words the five forms of material proof in the law cases listed in the *Rhetoric*. (166)

I do not claim that Chaucer knew the obscure *Tractatus Coislinianus*, but the wife's ultimatum is a kind of test—a "[p]roof"—which will determine if the knight has learned his lesson. The ultimatum therefore will determine the knight's future domestic life as it

reveals his priorities regarding his marriage and his wife. The knight, at this comedic climax, responds:

“My Lady and my love, and wyf so deere,  
I put me in youre wise governance;  
Cheseth youreself which may be moost pleasance  
And moost honour to yow and me also.  
I do no fors the wheither of the two,  
For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me.”

(*CT* III 1230-35)

The knight, even though the lady is still physically “loothly,” addresses her in an extremely polite fashion in the first line of his response. In fact, his response is a mirror of his polite words to the queen immediately after he told her and the courtly ladies what women desire most. The repetition recalls his “[c]onstreyn[ing]” marriage arrangement with the “wyf” that mirrors—again in a non-violent way—his rape of the young woman. . The comedic dynamic allows for this kind of repetition—an abundance of education working toward harmony between the rapist-knight and the “wyf.” Not only does he call her “deere” and “my love,” but he addresses her as “My Lady,” illustrating that he has lost his aristocratic pretensions of superiority over her. He verbally elevates her to a social position equal to himself, thus beginning the ultimate movement toward harmony and balance which the tale illustrates. The knight then puts himself in her power, as she has put herself in his. Whatever her choice, the knight says, “it suffiseth me”—it is enough, if not everything he wants. He yields, as his society—at the queen’s urging—yielded in its desire for his permanent punishment—his death. The knight’s words to the

old wife illustrate reciprocity, which is another necessary component for the comedic movement toward practical, marital harmony.

The knight's abnegation of the offered sovereignty to the old wife in this situation is completely in line with the tale's theme and the Wife of Bath's attitude. Susan Carter states that "[s]ince [he] [ . . . ] is a sexual predator rather than an aristocratic sportsman, the turning of the power ratio to make him a sexual victim is acutely appropriate" (334). He has brutally victimized a woman, so now it is proper that he submits willingly to a woman. However, the knight submits willingly, thus implicitly communicating to the old wife that he is going beyond what she requires of him. In other words, he will pay his penance and more. The elimination of his emotional resistance "quyts" his crime, at least in the Wife of Bath's implicit view, as the tale's outcome will show. Again, sometimes "quyting" can paradoxically restore balance by going beyond the offending precedent, as the *Reeve's Tale* and the "wyf's" protective offer to remain old and unattractive demonstrate. Yet comedy, with its stress on abundance, with enough (but not the same) for everyone in the end—even the villains—can accommodate this paradox as long as it works toward harmony in the social milieu.

The old wife asks the knight to restate that he will give her sovereignty. He does this, and she, plighting her eternal troth to him, reveals the reward for his submission and gives him yet another choice:

And but I be to-morn as fair to seene  
As any lady, emperice, or queene,  
That is betwixe the est and eke the west,  
Dooth with my lyf and deth right as yow lest.

(*CT* III 1245-48)

The old wife states that she will be as beautiful as any empress or queen by the following morning. If she is not, she continues, he may kill her, if *he* chooses (as the knight has told the ladies at court they may do to him even after he has revealed their greatest desire to them). Yet again, the old wife offers the knight sovereignty, but only because he has offered her sovereignty. Since they both have offered each other this power, they initiate the harmony and balance that will ensure their amicable marriage. The old wife's promise turns out to be true, and the knight is overcome with joy.

If one is looking for final one-upsmanship (or, more appropriately, one-upswomanship), s/he may perceive a victory on the old/young wife's part since she, not limited by normal human capability, wins sovereignty ultimately from the knight. Susanne Sara Thomas states that "[a]s shapeshifter, the *wyf* represents the ultimate fantasy of power over one's own body, and to this power is added her power over the knight's desires, over which he has demonstrated no intellectual control" (94). It is intriguing that an otherworldly, supernaturally powerful creature fosters the harmony between the man and woman because she "quyts" the human knight. This occurrence suggests the difficulty of actual harmony between men and women in the real world, though the harmonious ending trumps (if it does not eliminate) any lurking allusion to difficulty and discord. As Martha Fleming states, "[t]here is no further mention of crude dominance but rather equilibrium, harmony, and restoration" (157). Certainly the wife's intellectual or ontological superiority is not hard to imagine since she has led him to this point of harmony. However, her superiority will allow them to live harmoniously, which is the paramount end of the comedic dynamic. The Wife of Bath states that "[ . . . ] she

obeyed him in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng” (CT III 1255-56), since he has given her sovereignty to choose her physical form. The Wife of Bath, returning to the outer dramatic framework of the tale-telling “game,” then “quyts,” in a way, these lines by praying subsequently that

[ . . . ] Jhesu Crist us sende  
Housbondes meeke, and fressh abedde,  
And grace t’overbyde he that we wedde;  
And eek I praye Jhesu short hir lyves  
That noght wol be governed by hir wyves [ . . . ]

(CT III 1258-62)

Alison humorously asks Christ to let wives outlive their husbands generally and outlive them especially if husbands will not be “governed by hir wyves.” Lisa Perfetti states that “[t]he notion of comedy as psychological control is [ . . . ] a useful way to view the Wife, for since she has little control over the antifeminist tradition disseminated by clerical culture, she can seek relief from its harm by controlling it, and her masculine audience, through her laughter” (47). Her humorous prayer provides this final comedic “control.” The knight may have gained qualified sovereignty in the tale, but Alison, returning to the outer dramatic framework, caps her entire verbal presence in the tale-telling game with a prayer that God give women submissive husbands and send “pestilence” (CT III 1264) to husbands who refuse to yield sovereignty. The Wife of Bath ends her prologue and tale with the marital sovereignty of women, doubly reinforcing her point, “quyting” while outdoing, at least certainly in the quantity, tales such as the *Man of Law’s*, the *Clerk’s*, and the *Physician’s*, which feature entirely and unbelievably submissive women. The

assertive, engaging presence of the Wife of Bath, along with her prologue and tale, which promote feminine sovereignty, is necessary to “quyt” the unrealistic humility of certain female characters in the *Canterbury Tales*. Alison “quytes” Jankyn in her prologue; the queen and her attendants and the “olde wyf” “quyt” the arrogant, raping knight; and Alison “quyts” men and tellers of tales featuring passive women. Alison’s presence, prologue, and tale restore harmony in the outer, dramatic framework of the pilgrimage and in the interior narratives. The comedy, buoyed by the balance Alison’s presence and narrative provide, may continue, even as it encounters further moments of discord in the tale-telling “game.” In the alternating movements of harmony to discord and discord to harmony—even if the tales or fragments do not necessarily “quyt” each other in sequence—we can perceive an analogy to Boethius’s Wheel of Fortune turning. However, the *Canterbury Tales* will end ultimately with harmony ascendant and transcendent, though at this point, the alternation between discord and harmony will continue as the “game,” intersecting with the experiential, outer-framework conflicts of its characters, moves to the next participants and their necessarily “quyting” and balancing antagonists.

The *Friar’s Prologue* acts as a transition from the *Wife’s of Bath’s Tale* to his own, and clearly illustrates the tension between experience and authority, which comedy often expresses. His prologue also clearly generates more conflict within the pilgrimage. The Friar, Huberd, tells Alison, in an apparently qualified compliment that:

Ye han seyde muche thyng right wel, I seye;  
But, dame, heere as we ryde by the weye,  
Us nedeth nat to speken but of game,



And lete auctoritees, on Goddes name,  
To prechyng and to scoles of clergye.

(*CT* III 1273-77)

Huberd states that Alison has said many things “right wel,” apparently concerning Church dogma and Scriptural interpretation.<sup>5</sup> However, forgetting the nature of the story-telling contest and erroneously interpreting Alison’s prologue and tale as entirely “ernest,” he subsequently states that the pilgrims only need to speak “of game,” and leave preaching to the clergy. Huberd’s words and intent are ambiguous, opening up again the oft-noted slippery terrain of Chaucerian irony. Is the Friar actually praising Alison? Or is he actually condescending to her femininity and formally uneducated status? Is he praising “game,” play, or again essentially telling Alison to leave serious matters to ecclesiastically educated men? Alison’s narratives, in using authority, have stolen Huberd’s ecclesiastical and masculine prerogative (thus inverting hierarchy, another feature of comedy), so his compliment actually is ironic and has its root in jealousy. However, the Friar’s overwhelming rivalry with the Summoner defuses this potential conflict. Alison has expressed her views in biographical and fictitious modes, respectively, the Friar has expressed his jealousy and condescension ironically, and both—if not allies or friends—can move on in the pilgrimage without any open conflict.

Yet, beyond Huberd’s jealousy, the tale-telling “game” certainly needs, as part of its comedic harmony, both serious and funny tales. Harry Bailly, after all, states near the end of the *General Prologue* that the pilgrim who

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<sup>5</sup> D.W. Robertson would disagree, stating that “her exegesis is [ . . . ] rigorously carnal and literal” (*A Preface to Chaucer* 321); however, in my argument, Alison’s words, though manipulative of Scripture and Patristic interpretation, work toward comedic harmony and thus transcend authority that interpreters themselves have manipulated.

[ . . . ] telleth in this caas

Tales of best sentence and moost solaas—

Shal have a soper at our aller cost

(*CT I 797-99*)

Thus “sentence” will have as big a role as “solaas” in this “caas,” this particular tale-telling “game” and context. The Friar’s statement thus is disingenuous. He only wants to put down Alison and begin his tale, which attacks his rival, the Summoner, and contains biting “solaas.” Thus Huberd is “quyting” Alison’s biographical narrative and tale, since, according to him, it contained “prechyng,” the verbal manifestation of ecclesiastical authority. His tale, in contrast, will be funny and rely on his belief in, or experience of, the Summoner’s corrupt nature and practices. In fact, Huberd states that “I wol yow of a somonour telle a game” (*CT III 1280*). According to Huberd, the tale will be funny, “a game,” which ostensibly subsumes serious conflict (remember Harry Bailly’s words to Roger the Cook in the *Cook’s Prologue*), even though, as readers or listeners will perceive, the relationship between the Friar and the Summoner is not amicable and appears incapable—even with reciprocally “quyting” tales and dialogue—of moving beyond animosity. Thus again the outer framework sets up the conflict which individual tales will resolve pragmatically, as the *Canterbury Tales* continues to move toward comedic harmony and comedically transcend the intractable, interpersonal rancor, which remains between pilgrims—the contestants—even after they finish their tales and their words to each other.

**Chapter Five- The *Friar's Tale* and The *Summoner's Tale*: Open Bitterness, Open  
“Quyting,” and Satire for the Sake of a Greater General Comedy**

As the Friar moves away from his ironic compliment to Alison and toward his own tale, he immediately sets the stakes of the “quyting” dynamic quite high, for, after telling the pilgrims that he will “tell a game” (*CT* III 1279) about the Summoner, he immediately states that “Pardee, ye may we knowe by the name / That of a somonour may no good be sayd [ . . . ]” (*CT* III 1280-81). Thus Friar Huberd immediately and explicitly attacks the profession of summoner. Subsequently Huberd moves to specific criticisms of summoners’ activities and a brief mention of the consequences summoners suffer for their crimes:

A somonour is a rennere up and doun  
With mandementz for fornicacioun  
And is ybet at every townes ende.”

(*CT* III 1283-85)

Huberd thus claims that summoners, instead of carrying summons from ecclesiastical courts, carry summonses for fornication, implicitly with summoners themselves. Huberd adds that they receive beatings for their misapplication of their power. Thus Huberd enacts a mini-“quyting” of summoners and the specific Summoner among the company, even at this early moment in his narrative space. However, Harry Bailly, again assuming equivocal control of the tale-telling contest and the interpersonal exchange, as the “Lord of Misrule,” advises Huberd:

“A, sire, ye shoulde be hende  
And curteys, as a man of youre estaat;

In compaignye we wol have no debaat.

Telleth youre tale, and late the Somonour be.”

(*CT* III 1286-90)

Harry reminds Huberd that he should be polite to the Summoner, since in this “compaignye we wol have no debaat.” Even in his obtuse cautioning of Huberd, Harry reinforces some significant elements of the tale-telling “game.” First of all, the pilgrims are a company and should move together in at least rough harmony, since they are all involved in a “game” that defuses tensions verbally rather than physically. Secondly, Harry realizes that this defusing will occur primarily in the tale itself, not in the conversations which occur between the pilgrims. However, Harry does not realize that his injunction against “debaat”—if actually followed—would defeat the comedic dynamic of “quyting,” for “debaat” is necessary to create pragmatic harmony between conflicting viewpoints and characters. As I argue, the “quyting” dynamic operates between most of the tales, so obviously Harry does not realize its operation within the tale or even its lesser operation that occurs in this squabble and in the numerous instances of bickering in other points in the outer framework. In fact the Summoner interrupts Harry and says:

“Nay [ . . . ] lat hym seye to me

What so hym list; whan it comth to my lot,

By God, I shal hym quiten every grot.

(*CT* III 1290-92)

Thus the Summoner allows Huberd to say anything he wants about summoners in general, for the Summoner will “quiten” him “whan it comth to my lot,” that is, the Summoner’s turn in the tale-telling “game.” Though the relationship between the Friar

and the Summoner is obviously full of animosity, both will express their spite—and even hatred—primarily in tales and secondarily with acerbic bantering in the outer dramatic framework. Harry, however, still does not understand this dynamic and responds to the Summoner with “Pees, namoore of this!” (*CT* III 1298) and orders the Friar to begin his tale. Yet, even though he is obtuse, Harry does his job as the master of the “game” and catalyzes the “quyting” dynamic. His obtuseness generates more humor since it illustrates the reality and necessity of the game’s “quyting,” balancing dynamic and Harry’s limited understanding of game’s ramifications. The humor lies in the gap between truth and Harry’s apprehension of it. In his limited understanding, Harry illustrates the classic comedic process whereby the apparently more powerful character is duped/overcome by less powerful characters in order to achieve their regenerative aims. However, since Harry is only a temporary “Lord of Misrule,” and a tavern-keeper at that, his authority is equivocal, partially based upon his limited intelligence and thus offers the freedom and flexibility that comedy requires. His command to Huberd to begin his tale moves the comedy forward, even though Harry does not understand its nature fully. Thus Huberd will tell a story that contains the necessary “debaat” in the form of a tale.

The Friar wastes little time in harshly criticizing his tale’s summoner. In fact, he states that “[ . . . ] though this Somonour wood were as an hare, / To telle his harlotrye I wol nat spare [ . . . ]” (*CT* III 1327-28). Huberd interpolates himself early into tale, after explaining the archdeacon’s severity and his summoner’s slyness and dishonesty. Huberd’s personal interpolation is an escalation of the “quyting” dynamic we witnessed between the Miller and the Reeve because Huberd cannot dissolve himself easily into his tale. Instead, his rancor against the Summoner is so extreme that it almost upsets the

fictional “debaat” and the ameliorative “game”—which, as it “quyts” and thereby produces “debaat”—is necessary for the comedy to work toward harmony.

Huberd’s extreme rancor and desire to criticize summoners and the Summoner in particular lead the Summoner to “quyt” Huberd’s interpolation with his own. After Huberd states that friars are not subject to summoners’ jurisdiction, the Summoner replies that “[ . . . ] so been wommen of the styves, / [ . . . ] yput out of oure cure!” (*CT III* 1332-33), thus implicitly comparing friars to prostitutes. Harry, however, even though the equivocal “Lord of Misrule,” steps into the verbal fray and says, “Pees! with myschance and with mysaventure!” / [ . . . ] and lat hym telle his tale” (*CT III* 1334-35).

Harry ends the “debaat” which, in its extremity, threatens to undo the insulating “game” of the tale-telling contest. Intriguingly, Harry adds, “Now telleth forth, thogh that the Somonour gale; / Ne spareth nat, myn owene maister deere” (*CT III* 1336-37). Harry is obviously aware of the Summoner’s anger concerning the tale’s criticism that cuts too closely to home. However, Harry advises the Friar to spare nothing in the tale, thus encouraging Huberd to tell as scurrilous and damning a tale as he pleases. Again, the “quyting” dynamic escalates, this time with Harry’s encouragement, as if Chaucer is pushing the boundaries of comedy to its limits and thus highlighting the freedom inhering in this experimentation.

Huberd, freed for the duration of his tale from the Summoner’s “quyting” rancor and mollified by Harry’s encouragement, proceeds to “spareth nat” and offer a litany of his tale’s summoner’s abuses. For example, he states that “He was, if I shal yeven hym his laude, / A theef, and eek a somonour, and a baude” (*CT III* 1353-54). Quite humorously, in addition to calling his summoner a thief, he calls him a “baude,” a pimp,

thus “quyting” the Summoner for implicitly calling friars prostitutes. This summoner, though, has no authority as a pimp does over prostitutes, but only over “[ . . . ] wenches at his retenue” (*CT* III 1355). The summoner, like old Carpenter John, Symkyn the miller, and the rapist-knight is involved in inappropriate relationships with women, thus bringing to mind the need for the tale to bring the perpetrator to comedic justice. The summoner in his travels—seeking monetary gain—finds the source of this justice in the form of a

gay yeman, under a forest syde.

A bow he bar, and arwes brighte and kene;

He hadde upon a courtrepy of grene,

An hat upon his heed with frenges blake.

(*CT* III 1380-84)

The being’s spiffy appearance generates humor and irony when he reveals eventually that he is not a real “yeman” at all but a “feend” whose “dwellynge is in helle [ . . . ]” (*CT* III 1447), though a well-dressed demon provides an appropriate example for the greedy and materialistic summoner. It is also humorous that the green-caped fiend repeatedly refers to the summoner as “broother,” (*CT* III 1395 *passim*), thus implicitly calling the summoner one of his kind—a demon—and thus all summoners demons working for the cause of evil. Humor arises once more in the summoner’s reaction (or lack of) to the demon’s revelation, for immediately after this revelation, the summoner states:

“A! [ . . . ] benedicite! What sey ye?

I wende ye were a yeman trewely.

Ye han a mannes shape as wel as I;

Han ye a figure thanne determinat

In helle, ther ye been in youre estat?"

(*CT* III 1456-60)

The summoner's lack of horror reinforces the figurative reality that he is, in fact, a "broother" of the demon, akin to him in evil practices and desires. Additionally, this lack of horror suggests that the summoner is ignorant of the nature of the danger in which he is involving himself. Finally, humor arises because, in lieu of expressions of horror and revulsion, the summoner asks questions about what shape the demon takes when in hell, thus again suggesting his obtuseness and his attraction to such a diabolical being. Again, the summoner is strongly implying—with dramatic irony—that he is a demon in real human flesh, just as the real demon disguises himself in the appearance of human flesh. The dramatic irony is humorous because it points out the gap between the summoner's sense of himself and the reality of his character.

The summoner continues to display his obtuseness when the demon states, after telling the summoner that his "wit is al to bare" (*CT* III 1480) to understand the demon's entire purpose, that "[ . . . ] somtyme we been Goddes instrumentz / And meenes to doon his comandementz" (*CT* I 1483-84). The meaning of the demon's answer escapes the "bare"-witted summoner who does not understand that the demon will be an instrument of God's justice upon himself. Thus the "yeman"-demon is "a foil for the transgressive summoner" (Bryant 188). Since the tale is building toward a fabliaux-like overthrow of the obtuse summoner, the demon continues to draw the stupid, greedy, and corrupt summoner toward his doom, which, as we will see, is a darkly funny, if not comedic ending. However, the demon also offers clues to his real purpose:

But o thyng warne I thee, I wol nat jape;



Thou shalt hereafterward, my brother deere,  
Come there thee nedeth nat of me to leere,  
For thou shalt, by thyn owene experience,  
Konne in a chayer rede of this sentence  
Bet than Virgile, while he was on lyve,  
Or Dant also [ . . . ]

(CT III 1513-19)

The demon tells the summoner that he will not need him to answer his questions, for he will “experience” what he wants to know and eventually will know more than Virgil and Dante, who, in the *Divine Comedy*, journeyed to Hell. The implication is obvious to the reader but not to the stupid summoner, whose perfect stupidity serves to position the Friar for “quyting” in the succeeding *Summoner’s Tale*.

The tale moves to its resolution after the summoner pledges to take what is his own, while the demon correspondingly will take *his* own. If one receives more than the other, he will even up the score with the other by “part[ing] it with his brother” (CT III 1534), thus ensuring harmony between the two evil beings, though certainly not the harmony the end of a comedy displays. When the two come upon a carter stuck in the mud and cursing his horses to hell, the summoner urges the demon to take “Bothe hey and cart, and eek his caples thre” (CT III 1553). However, the demon counters with “Nay [ . . . ] / It is nat his entente [ . . . ]” (CT III 1554-55). Subsequently, the carter urges on the horses, prays that “[ . . . ] God save thee [ . . . ]” (CT III 1564), and both cart and horses escape from the mud. The demon tells the summoner that “The carl spak oo thing, but he thoughte another” (CT III 1568). The demon’s statement implies that the summoner is too

stupid to understand hyberbole and that, like Shylock in the *Merchant of Venice*, focuses only upon the letter of the utterance, unable to grasp its spirit and thus is mired himself in merely the physical, quite appropriate for this venal man. The summoner thus displays the inability to transcend matter, an inability common in comedic villains. This inability will damn him shortly, as the demon and the summoner now come upon a poor widow from whom the summoner wishes to extort money. One may imagine the demon mentally licking his chops in anticipation of the summoner's fall and the cosmic justice it will display.

The summoner tells the old widow that he has a summons for her to appear in ecclesiastical court. However he tells her that, in lieu of appearing at the court, she can “[ . . . ] pay anon — lat see / Twelf pens to me, and I wol thee acquite” (*CT III 1598-99*). Thus the summoner wishes to extort money from the widow for his personal gain. The widow retorts with “Ye knowen wel that I am povre and oold [ . . . ]” (*CT III 1608*) and thereby cannot pay the summoner's “acquit[al]” fee. The summoner is merciless in his demand, again showing an inability to transcend his material desire with charity, or its variation—forgiveness. Since the summoner is relentless, the widow curses him: “Unto the devel blak and rough of hewe / Yeve I thy body and my panne also” (*CT III 1622-23*). However, the demon ironically offers mercy while laying the trap. He firsts asks her, “Now, Mabely, myn owene mooder deere, / Is this youre wyl in earnest<sup>1</sup> that ye seye?” (*CT III 1626-27*). We recall the demon definitely telling the summoner that he would not take the horses to hell because the carter did not mean the curse. In response to the demon's question regarding the widow's “ernest” entent, she answers, “The devel [ . . . ]

so fecche hym er he deye, / And panne and al, but he wol hym repente!” (CT III 1628-29). As the demon offered the summoner mercy (though disingenuously) by asking the widow if she really meant to curse the summoner to hell, so the widow offers to retract her curse as long as he repents of his false accusation and extortion. The trap is now set to spring upon the greedy, intransigent, and stupid summoner.

The summoner responds, “Nay, olde stot, that is nat myn entente, / [ . . . ] for to repente me / For any thyng that I have had of thee” (CT III 1630-31). Thus the word “entente” proves extremely important in this exchange, for the “entente” of the word is the key to the summoner’s damnation. The summoner’s words match his “entente,” so the demon takes the summoner:

And with that word this foule feend hym hente;  
Body and soule he with the devel wente  
Where as that somonours han hir heritage.

(CT III 1639-41)

Since the summoner’s words match his “entente,” it is poetically appropriate that the demon takes the summoner’s “Body and soule,” material and spirit, to hell after offering the stupid summoner leeway, even knowing that the summoner would refuse the chance to escape eternal damnation. In an ironic dynamic, the demon offers the summoner forgiveness—space to maneuver and space for freedom—but the summoner does not take this chance, thus doubly illustrating his stupidity and evil nature. After all, according to Friar Huberd, Hell is the “heritage” of all summoners, including this one, and the Summoner on the pilgrimage. Thus tale is not a comedy—the summoner seeks no

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<sup>1</sup> The demon’s questions regarding the “erdest” nature of the old woman’s request alludes to the *Canterbury Tales*’s concern with the relationship between “erdest” and “game.” The old woman is “erdest”

redemption and the demon therefore offers only damnation. Although the Friar does not kill or mutilate the summoner in a tragic catastrophe, eternal damnation is certainly not a pragmatic, harmonious ending for the summoner. Instead, the tale resides in the realm of “bitter, scurrilous” (Holman 242) lampoon, which barely touches the didactic quality of satire. If the tale contains any explicitly didactic words at all, they are the last two sentences, where Friar Huberd pithily states, “[ . . . ] prayeth that thise somonours hem repente / Of hir mysdedes, er that the feend hem hente!” (CT III 1663-64). The Friar’s concluding words to the tale refer to real-life summoners who still have a chance to repent, though, since the Friar and the tale have shown such malice toward the Summoner, the Friar probably hopes summoners, his ecclesiastical and financial rivals, never repent, and all go to Hell. However, the funny but uncharitable tale does its job in the ultimate movement of the *Canterbury Tales* toward harmony, since the Summoner now has an opportunity for balancing the “game,” even as the rancor between him and Friar Huberd rises to its highest point. Since their rancor is at its height, a “quyting” tale is absolutely necessary at this point to defuse their interpersonal tension and restore harmony to the “game.”

As I mentioned in the last chapter, the Friar offered a backhanded compliment to Alison of Bath, but their differences did not erupt into open verbal hostility. Their neutral relationship results in part from the Friar’s “quyting” of Alison’s implication that friars are lecherous (CT III 878-81). Penn Szittyta, noting word and sentence similarity in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and the *Friar’s Tale* (and the yeoman-demon as a parody of the loathly lady), states that “[a]ll these verbal echoes create that first flicker of recognition that the Friar is apparently making some sort of response after all to the crude insult the

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in her cursing of the summoner, since he will not repent, so the demon ends his extortion “game.”

Wife had flung down at the beginning of her tale” (388 “The Green Yeoman as Loathly Lady: The Friar’s Parody of the Wife of Bath’s Tale”). Thus the Friar “quyts” Alison with his tale in this sense, since his protagonist finds damnation not love. Even if the *Friar’s Tale* is not a comedy, it works to restore the emotional balance in the pilgrimage which Alison of Bath’s tale has upset. The humor the tale generates helps to restore the Friar’s equanimity. However, it sets him up for the “quyting,” which the enraged Summoner will subsequently provide, and restore pragmatic harmony to the “game” and the pilgrimage.

The pilgrim-narrator, in the *Summoner’s Prologue*, describes the Summoner’s immediate reaction to the *Friar’s Tale*:

This Somonour in his styropes hye stood;  
Upon this Frere his herte was so wood  
That lyk an aspen leef he quook for ire.

(*CT* III 1665-67)

The Summoner’s anger is so great that it manifests itself physically. He stands upright in his horse’s stirrups, almost as if in preparation for lunging at the Friar, showing that the Friar and his tale have strained the limits of the “game,” since the Summoner, like the Reeve after the *Miller’s Tale*, is taking the *Friar’s Tale* and criticism so seriously. In fact the Summoner is even angrier than Oswald, since he quakes like an “aspen” leaf “for ire.” The anger again physically manifests itself, suggesting that the next step in its expression is violence, as if Chaucer is again pushing the limits of the comedy and the “game” by amping-up the anger in the targeted listener—the Summoner. If Chaucer chose to have a pilgrim resort to physical violence against another pilgrim, the comedy

would end, since with undiluted serious anger—and fists or daggers—death would most likely result, thus the end of the “game” in the outer framework. However, the Summoner expresses his anger verbally—a viable and necessary release—immediately after quaking in rage, and a few lines later states that “Freres and feendes been but lyte asonder” (CT III 1674), thus reversing and “quyting” the implication in the *Friar’s Tale* that summoners and demons are “broothers.” As the Reeve outdoes the Miller, and Alison outdoes the Man of Law, the Clerk, and the Physician, the Summoner now outdoes the Friar in his “quyting” by providing a graphic, scatological anecdote regarding friars in Hell, which foreshadows the topic and attendant themes of the *Summoner’s Tale*. The summoner relates that a friar, having a dream of Hell, asks a demon where the friars reside, since he sees none but expects many. His expectation alone already provide a small amount of “quyting” of friars and Friar Huberd. The obliging demon, echoing the “yeman” demon of the *Friar’s Tale*, leads him to the devil and then asks the devil himself to lift up this large tail, which Satan also obligingly does. Subsequently

Right so as bees out swarmen from an hyve,  
Out of the develes ers there gonne dryve  
Twenty thousand freres on a route,  
And thurghout helle swarmed al aboute,  
And comen agayn as faste as they may gon,  
And in his ers they crepten everychon.

(CT III 1692-97)

The Friar had criticized summoners in his prologue, but the Summoner goes a step beyond bare criticism. His prologue contains a tale that places friars not only in Hell, but

in the very epicenter of foulness—Satan’s anus. The friars swarm like “bees,” not like Dido’s followers energetically and purposefully building Carthage, but like a mindless mob of little malicious beasts. Pearsall states that “[t]he little story [ . . . ] he tells of the special place that friars have in hell [ . . . ] seems to be the sort that a coarse mind might particularly relish [ . . . ] (222). Thus the Summoner’s “coarse” character itself increases the rancor and elaboration of “quyting,” and in a way outdoes the Friar. One can argue that he is worse than unctuous Friar Huberd, who at least does not stoop to scatology. However, one also can argue conversely that at least the Summoner is honest, and that this graphic honesty shows Chaucer again increasing the kind and amount of “quyting” as the “quyttings” themselves multiply. The explicitly or implicitly encouraged abundance in comedy allows this freedom. Amid this implicit abundance, the Summoner nevertheless ends his prologue uncharitably by praying that “God save alle, save this cursed Frere!” (CT III 1708). With a benediction for all of the pilgrims except the Friar—the Summoner will begin his tale already having “quyte” the Friar at least in the quantity of “quyting” and in graphic vividness, which his hellishly humorous anecdote supplies. Now the main “quyting” begins with the *Summoner’s Tale*, the scatological nature of which the graphic anecdote has foreshadowed. Yet, since the tale is necessary for harmony between the Friar and the Summoner, the comedic dynamic will transcend the scurrilous nature of the anecdote and move to the *Summoner’s Tale* itself to produce momentary balance between the two ecclesiastical antagonists. The interpersonal rancor of the outer framework stops, and the “game” will continue.

The *Summoner’s Tale* begins mildly in comparison with the scatological anecdote, which takes up most of its prologue’s second half. In fact, the earliest criticism

of the tale's friar's is relatively minor: "He syngeth nat but o masse in a day [ . . . ]" (CT III 1728), which suggests only innocuous laziness or indifference. Whereas the Friar's summoner was an actively and obviously evil agent, the Summoner's friar is, if evil, covertly so—at least so far in the tale—thus suggesting that the Friar's summoner and the Summoner's friar are mirror images of each other in terms of *modus operandi* and *personae*—another kind of "quyting" balance. However, just as at the beginning of the *Friar's Tale*, the butt of the satire irrupts into the new tale to "quyt" the teller, after the Summoner states that the tale's friar essentially tells his benefactors lies: "'Nay ther thou lixt, thou Somonour!' quod the Frere" (CT III 1761). And, as in the *Friar's Tale*, Harry Bailly pipes up in order to restore the fiction and the "game": "'Pees,' quodoure Hoost, 'for Cristes mooder deere!'" (CT III 1762). Again, as the "game" threatens to explode from the pressure of a pilgrim's anger, the "Lord of Misrule" restores order to the "game," which, though not supposedly in "ernest," has rules. The tale-telling game's rules, elements of restraint, paradoxically allow the freedom of the tale, the displacement of reality into freeing fiction. It is appropriate that the comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* utilizes the "game" since part of comedy's appeal is its looseness and the freedom from absolute seriousness, while still bringing about harmony—if not in the resolution of tales such as the *Friar's* and *Summoner's*—at least in the relations between these two battling characters after they both conclude their tales.

The Summoner now proceeds without interruption into his tale about the unctuous friar who goes to see a sick man named Thomas, who is certainly doubting, in one of the tale's many Scriptural allusions. Irony, and the humor that it generates, arises from many sources in the tale, and though the tale may be a bitter satire or lampoon against friars, it



is one of the funniest in the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>2</sup> The tale is full of details that highlight the hypocrisy of this worldly friar. For example, the Summoner-narrator states that, upon entering the sick man's house, the friar "[ . . . ] fro the bench [ . . . ] droof away the cat [ . . . ]" (CT III 1775), thus suggesting the friar's selfishness and callousness toward even innocent, innocuous creatures such as household cats. Thomas soon responds that "I saugh yow nought this fourtenyght or moore" (CT III 1783), thereby suggesting the friar's lack of real concern for the sick man's welfare. These small instances of humor and irony set up the friar for his eventual comeuppance. Their frequency highlights the abundance of humor, which laces the tale. Thus even if the work is not strictly a comedy, it features comedic abundance in the amount of humor, humor such as I have mentioned, which harms no one seriously. In this respect, the Summoner shows himself not as rancorous as he seems to be, pointing to the comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, which transcends the non-comedic nature of some tales and the discord, which sometimes lingers between the pilgrims even after they have told their tales.

One of the most important sources of humor in the tale is the friar's subsequent comment outlining his *modus operandi* regarding his sermon to the ailing Thomas. He states that he has

[ . . . ] seyde a sermon after my symple wit —  
Nat al after the text of hooly writ,  
For it is hard to yow, as I suppose,  
And therefore wol I teche yow al the glose.  
Glosynge is a glorious thyng, certeyn,

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<sup>2</sup> I do not believe that most critical opinion highlights the sheer hilarity in this tale, which overwhelms the rancor in the outer framework between the Summoner and the Friar.

For lettre sleeth, so as we clerkes seyn —

(*CT* III 1789-94)

Szittyta comments that the tale contains many allusions to “antifraternal exegesis” directed against friars (21 “The Friar as False Apostle: Antifraternal Exegesis and the *Summoner’s Tale*”). If this is true then it is appropriate that the friar is a manipulative exegete himself, “glosynge” sacred Scripture in order to manipulate listeners. In this sense he is reminiscent of Alison of Bath, who manipulates Scripture and Patristic exegesis for her own ends. However, the friar’s own ends involve satisfying his greed, not establishing marital and sexual harmony for himself and his partner. Thus he is not a comedic heroine like Alison is but rather a villain, if mild, to whom the tale must serve justice. Moreover, the friar tells Thomas that the “lettre sleeth,” implying the need for “glosynge” as a necessary step toward spiritual understanding. This comment, in a debased way, is reminiscent of Saint Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*, where Augustine directs the reader to look for a symbolic meaning of Scripture if the literal level does not lead to spiritual, charitable understanding. In matters of medieval art, Emile Mâle wrote very succinctly in the early twentieth century that “the artist, as the doctors might have put it, must imitate God who under the letter of Scripture hid profound meaning, and who willed that nature too should hold lessons for man” (272). However, the friar, as an artist of words, a deceptive rhetorician, twists this precept by claiming spiritual and exegetical authority to gloze Scripture. Frye has noted that these kinds of “blocking” characters in comedies are always “usurpers” (163), and the friar, though not usurping sovereignty is usurping spiritual authority. His usurpation sets him for a fall from his undeserved position.

After stating his intent and giving his advice regarding proper reading and interpretation, Friar John greets Thomas's wife "And hire embraceth in his armes narwe, / And kiste hire sweete, and chirketh as a sparwe" (CT III 1803-04). A few lines later he tells her that "[ . . . ] saugh I nat this day so fair a wyf / In al the chirche [ . . . ]" (CT III 1807-08). Friar John kisses like a sparrow, suggesting his inappropriate enthusiasm and liveliness when kissing. He is not being "charitable" (CT III 1795), as he states he will be, following his comments upon "glozyng." In this instance, one can compare the friar to the lecherous but loathsome *senectes amantes* of Plautine comedy and fabliaux—and the *Miller's* and *Merchant's Tales*—who inappropriately pursue (usually much younger) women. The friar thus sets himself for his initial fall at the hands of Thomas. Frye states that "[t]he contest of *ieron* [ironic individual] and *alazon* ["imposter"] forms the basis of the comic action, and the buffoon and the churl polarize the comic mood" (173). Thomas plays the "*ieron*," "buffoon," and "churl" in this tale since the Summoner's intent is to lampoon the Friar with a scatological<sup>3</sup> comeuppance, which is buffoonish, churlish, but also ironic and appropriate. Thomas and his gift for the friar encompass all of these qualities.

Friar John also shows himself to be a kind of ecclesiastical *miles gloriosus*, who vaingloriously criticizes curates and explains his intent and his life's work:

These curatz been ful necligent and slowe

To grope tendrely a conscience

In shrift; in prechyng is my diligence,

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<sup>3</sup> R. Howard Bloch, in *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, whom I mentioned in a footnote in the previous chapter, makes perceptive points regarding scatology and language in fabliaux. For example, he states that in a certain scatological fabliau, "the jongleur circulates and recirculates dead—fecal, inert—matter [ . . . ]" (58). In the *Summoner's Tale*, Friar Huberd "circulates" gaseous, empty waste matter—his own words.

And studie in Petres wordes and in Poules.  
I walke and fische Cristen mennes soules  
To yelden Jhesu Crist his propre rente;  
To spred his word is set al myn entente.”

(*CT* III 1816-22)

If one knows the tale’s first satiric climax in the “two-part structure” of the tale (Finlayson 457), the humor of the word “grope” is immediate. Additionally, Friar John himself has said that the “lettre sleeth,” that is, the exclusively literal and material sense of language and interpretation does not lead to spiritual enlightenment. Friar John uses “grope” in a figurative sense in this instance, but his reward will be disgustingly and hilariously physical, as Thomas delivers his opinion on the value of Friar John’s “glozyng.” Friar John also claims that he seeks souls for Christ, but the tale’s humorous details have already suggested that he seeks money and food for himself. He is only a “fisher of men” in the sense that he fishes for gullible folk to wheedle them out of their material goods to feed his bodily appetites. The friar is thus a hypocrite who will spread Christ’s “glozed” message for cupidinous rather than charitable aims. In his greed, verbal manipulation, lechery, and hypocrisy he sets himself up clearly as the villain in this humorous satire, a satire necessary for the harmony the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole produces.

Despite Friar John’s stated aim of presenting a “glozed” sermon to Thomas, Thomas’s wife, the subject of Friar John’s thinly disguised lechery, redirects the friar’s intention. The ease with which she redirects his intention suggests that Friar John’s spiritual focus is rather dull. She urges the friar to “Chideth him [Thomas] weel, for

seinte Trinitee! / He is as angry as a pissemyre [ . . . ]” (CT III 1824-25). In response, Friar John switches his tack with the sick man: “Ire is a thyng that hye God defended, / And therof wol I speke a word or two” (CT III 1834-35). Friar John’s new intent to sermonize against one of the seven deadly sins brings to mind the *Parson’s Tale*, which the Parson will deliver near the very end of the *Canterbury Tales* but in a manner that ostensibly deserves more respect, due to the Parson’s high standing within the pilgrimage. Here, as with several important elements of the *Summoner’s Tale*, Friar John’s speech is a debased version of a possibly worthy sermon. He accentuates the debased quality of his subsequent sermon by responding to the wife’s question about his preferred dinner:

Have I nat of a capon but the lyvere,  
And of youre softe breed nat but a shyvere,  
After that a rosted pigges heed —  
(CT III 1839-41)

Friar John’s precise desires regarding food, where he names one item after another suggests that, though he will be preaching about the spiritual dangers of the deadly sin of ire, he will be engaging in another of the seven deadly sins—gluttony (which he will deride in lines 1915-16). In fact, he states that “I am a man of litel sustenance; / My spirit hath his fostryng in the Bible” (CT III 1844-45). Friar John again claims to be a spiritual man, after obviously showing his physical appetites, and therefor his eventual gift will be perfect comedic recompense for his hypocrisy.

Friar John, as an ecclesiastical *miles gloriosus*, continues to claim spiritual superiority over materially minded lay people, with the ever-present object of wheedling

a reward out of sick Thomas. Finally, after much praise regarding the abstinence of friars, Friar John moves to his sermon; however, he states that “I ne have no texte of it, as I suppose, / But I shal fynde it in a maner gloze [ . . . ]” (CT III 1919-20). Thus he actually has no sacred text with which he can “gloze.” His tale is empty “wind” figuratively, a sense which will relate Thomas’s gift to the pertinacious friar near the end of the tale. Friar John finally does get around to his sermon on ire, but it is mainly a desultory collection of exempla (bringing to mind the *Monk’s Tale*) which includes interpolated suggestions to donate wealth to mendicant orders. Friar John’s intent is not spiritual edification at all, but only to spew “lettres” whose intent is to cajole. His speech, though desultory, is funny because of its obviously manipulative intent and the fact that it reveals Friar John’s hypocrisy. In a way, it is like the “*gnosis*,” (Frye) or trial, which forms the centerpiece of so many traditional comedies. Friar John, as the villain, and thus target in this satire, will be exposed by the very tools he uses in his attempt to wheedle goods from Thomas. His *modus operandi* will prove to be his undoing. As with the violent Symkyn, whose violence will be his undoing, Friar John’s windy speech will receive wind. The symmetry is comedic recompense, even if the *Summoner’s Tale* is not strictly a comedy.

After Friar John ends his desultory sermon against the dangers of ire, he asks Thomas to “Yif me thanne of thy gold, to make oure cloystre [ . . . ]” (CT III 2098). He immediately shifts to concern for the monetary recompense he merits for his spiritual edification of the sick man. However, Thomas, not so sick as to be helpless,

[ . . . ] wax ny wood for ire;  
He wolde that the frere had been on-fire  
With his false dissymulacioun.

(CT III 2121-23)

Ironically, Thomas does not follow Friar John's advice regarding the spiritual dangers of ire because of the windy nature of the friar's speech and "his false dissymulacioun." The first comedic climax is nigh. Friar John, continuing in his hubris, tells Thomas he should [ . . . ] departe [the gift] [ . . . ] so, my deere brother, / That every frere have also much as oother" (CT III 2133-34). Apparently, Friar John is a charitable man who will share Thomas's gift with other members of his order. Szittyta states that "[t]he name Thomas means, among other things, 'divisio' or 'sectio,' or at least so we are told in the most popular life of Saint Thomas [ . . . ]" (note p. 32 "The Friar as False Apostle"). It is ironically appropriate that Friar John ostensibly should want Thomas to divide the gift among his order. This is precisely what Thomas will do, in a debased, physical manner, perfectly in line with Friar John's debased, physically focused character.

Thomas instructs the eager friar to "grope" (CT III 2141) behind his back, thereby ironically recalling for the reader Friar John's own use of the same word to describe his shricing technique. Friar John follows Thomas's instructions (like old Carpenter John's following Nicholas's), and thus he "About his tuwel grope there and heere, / Amydde his hand he leet the frere a fart [ . . . ]" (CT III 2149-50). The first comedic climax gives the windy friar his reward: wind. No divine *afflatus*, but airy human waste, in a Bakhtinian inversion where the repressed, physical—and unpleasant but necessary—aspects of humanity assume prominence. Bakhtin states, referring to "all forms of popular-festive merriment" that "[a]ll of them thrust down, turn over, push headfirst, transfer top to bottom, both in the literal sense of space, and in the metaphorical meaning of the image" (370). Though Thomas is not participating in communal *carnival* "merriment," his gift of

a fart is an inversion of general decorum, since a gift generally is valuable, not worthless, gaseous excrement from the body's "lower stratum" (Bakhtin 370), a major function of which is to purge wastes—produce worthless materials. The equation is simple: the friar's words are worth as much as a fart. The apparently worthless fart has revealed the truth. Since his sermon is debased by greed, his reward shall be debased. He receives his fair recompense rather than the gold he has sought. Judith Tschann states that "Thomas's pent up anger explodes into the Friar's hand, and judging from the Friar's immediate reaction to the gift-fart, the friar has received Thomas's anger as his gift" (357). The Summoner-narrator states Friar John's immediate reaction: "The frere up stire as dooth a wood leoun [ . . . ]" (*CT* III 2152). His reaction is hilarious, ironic, and appropriate. After having preached about the dangers of "ire," this deadly sin overtakes him, highlighting his hypocrisy in general, let alone his spiritual hypocrisy. Thomas, both "*eiron*" and "*bomolochoi*" (buffoon), provides the comedic justice—and truth through "debasement" (Bakhtin 370)—for this windy, though innocuous villain. The fart, the truth-equivalent of Friar's John's words—thus paradoxically valuable through its worthlessness—dethrones the false usurper, whose authority collapses in his anger and probably Thomas's laughter—laughter that defeats Friar John's hypocrisy, false sanctimony, and authority which is dubious at best.

Yet, almost as if the Summoner is intent upon outdoing the Friar in "quyting" him, he puts Friar John through another "*gnosis*," which will further test and ultimately humiliate this grasping man. Friar John, so upset, "[ . . . ] as he were in a rage [ . . . ]" (*CT* III 2166), at Thomas's disrespect, runs to the lord of the village, whom the friar customarily shrives. Appearing before the lord, he states that Thomas has given him a



foul gift and moreover “Blasphemed hath oure hooly covent eke” (CT III 2183). Friar John exaggerates the offense against him, ludicrously multiplying the offense from “myne ordre and me” (CT III 2191) all the way “[ . . . ] to ech degree / Of hooly chirche [ . . . ]” (CT III 2192-93). As Friar John ostensibly coveted a gift for his entire order, the foul gift/insult of a fart is an offense to the entire order, in the friar’s ire-generated logic. Comedies generally feature an ultimately abundant world, and in this satire, which features many elements of comedy, the abundance is debased: the friar desires Thomas’s food and money, but receives a “gift-fart” (Tschann) and thus seeks exaggerated punishment for Thomas. The friar, though, as the villain/butt in this satire, will only receive an unsatisfying abundance of figurative gas and wind, even after his appeal to the secular lord of the village. It is completely appropriate that he seek recompense from the lord—a secular ruler—since his actual desire is for worldly gain. However, Friar John will gain nothing even as he takes his grievance to the power that controls the immediate worldly environment and its gifts he actually craves.

This entire episode involving the deliberation of the lord’s household is part of the Summoner’s outdoing Friar Huberd in his “quyting,” for not only does the Summoner “quyt” the friar in the tale physically with a fart, but the episode in the lord’s household will intellectually “quyt” irate Friar John. The lord’s wife, after listening to the friar’s description, tells him that “I seye a cherl hath doon a cherles dede”<sup>4</sup> (CT III 2206) thus implying that the friar himself—now like a *senex iratus*—is now blowing too much hot air in his desire for perceived justice. Friar John subsequently shifts his tack and tells the lady that

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<sup>4</sup> Her words bring to mind Chaucer-the-pilgrim’s plea that the audience or reader excuse him from blame regarding the coarse elements of the *Miller’s Tale*, since, “The Millere is a cherl [ . . . ]” (CT I 3182).

This false blasphemour that charged me  
To parte that wol nat departed be  
To every man yliche, with meschaunce!

(*CT* III 2213-15)

Friar John modulates the tone of his appeal and thus the final parts of the tale into a parody of scholastic deliberation wherein the Summoner “quyts” the friar intellectually. Since Friar John’s rage has now cooled, the final part of the tale sets itself up for more poetic justice, but appropriately on a note of laughter, as it becomes even more a “game.” Friar John’s objection now is that Thomas gave a gift, which, if intended for his friary, is impossible to divide. The lord, after listening to the friar, utters an amazingly funny pun: “In ars-metrike shal ther no man fynde, / Biforn this day, of swich a question” (*CT* III 2222-23). Benson glosses “ars-metrike” as the “art of measurement (arithmetic)” (135), and Janette Richardson later comments briefly in the explanatory notes on the “obvious[ness]” inherent in the “pun” (879).<sup>5</sup> The pun, however, needs more explanation, as it is the key link between the physical and intellectual “quyting,” which Friar John and thus Friar Huberd receive. “[A]rs-metrike” obviously contains “ars”—Latin for “art, skill,” but also British Isles English for “ass.” “[M]etrike” is Latin for “measuring.” Thus one may translate the word etymologically from the Latin as “measuring skill,” “pertaining to the art of measurement, or just “art of measurement,” in other words, a rational dimension-taking of some phenomenon. However, one may also translate it using the British-English first part: “ass-measuring.” This portmanteau etymology links the body with the mind. Moreover, the term “arse” is impolite even today and refers to the

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<sup>5</sup> The obvious[ness]” of the “pun” does not detract from its hilarity, a hilarity that produces laughter (and pleasure) necessary for the freedom and release that comedy offers.

generally hidden part of the body, which is synecdochally connected to the purger of solid and gaseous bodily waste—the rectum and anus. Thus the term suggests in a compact form the ultimate worth of the friar’s words and person and the poetically appropriate gift which Thomas dispenses. The sheer ludicrousness of “measuring an ass” additionally highlights the friar’s ridiculous, angry quest for justice, especially after the lady of the house notes that the friar should expect churlish behavior from a churl. Finally, the word itself begins with the body and ends with mind, summarizing Friar John’s quest, though by linking “ass” and “measuring,” especially regarding the division of a fart, the lord suggests the ridiculous nature of the friar and his desire for vengeance, which he conceives as justice.

The lord, however, continues the discussion, perhaps enjoying the ludicrous show Friar John is providing. He privileges the body in a Bakhtinian inversion by asking a seemingly serious rhetorical question about dividing farts. In this tale “[t]rue wealth and abundance are not on the highest or the medium level but in the lower stratum” (Bakhtin 369), especially when the tale moves to humiliating appropriately the adamant Friar John. The lord asks:

Who sholde make a demonstracioun  
That every man sholde have yliche his part  
As of the soun or savour of a fart?

(*CT* III 2224-26)

Since the friar has pushed for justice regarding the undivided and seemingly indivisible gift, the lord decides to push the explanation and asks how “every man” can have a piece—in sound and odor—of such an elusive phenomenon as a fart. The lord’s apparent

concern for equal and fair division of the gift obliquely highlights the theme of cupidity that the tale contains and which Friar John's words and actions illustrate. The question of charitable division does not linger in the air long, for an appropriate "ars-metrician" proposes a solution to the difficult problem.

The solver is, appropriately, the lord's "*kervere*," (*CT* III interpolation between lines 2242 and 2243), a divider of meat—flesh—who solves a philosophical problem, in a duplication of "ars-metrike's" linking of the physical and intellectual, which highlights again Friar John's attempted transformation of Scripture and Scriptural authority into material gain. Thus Jankyn the meat-carver attempts to solve this "mock-eucharistic riddle" (Hayes 264), which the friar's greed has created out of his bloated, empty, foul verbiage.

Jankyn initiates the proposal for a practical solution to the seemingly unsolvable problem by suggesting that they:

[ . . . ] bryng a cartweel heere into this halle;  
But look that it have his spokes alle —  
Twelve spokes hath a cartwheel comunly.

(*CT* III 2255-57)

Jankyn then directs that they place the wheel horizontally on a flat, horizontal frame so that each of the twelve brother friars can place his nose at a spot on the rim where the "spokes ende" (*CT* III 2263). Before even the Scriptural parody of Pentecost, which some scholars have noted,<sup>6</sup> the image of the Boethian Wheel of Fortune, turned on its side, upended, especially for the hapless friar, comes to my mind. Friar John, once high upon

fortune's wheel in his assumption of spiritual and Scriptural authority, now finds himself low—beholden to the lord's lay meat-carver for the solution of a ridiculous problem, which involves the world of gross matter generally and noxious, bodily *efflatus* specifically. Thus the upended wheel is a particularly appropriate symbol of the inversion of hierarchy, which the satiric tale contains in its inclusion of comedic elements.

Jankyn next suggests that the friar himself—as a Judas to true Christianity—will make the thirteenth member of the receiving group and place himself and his nose directly under the wheel's hub and under Thomas, who will squat atop the hub and fart again. By this arrangement, Jankyn claims that

[ . . . ] ye shul seen, up peril of my lyf,  
By preeve which that is demonstratif  
That equally the soun of it wol wende,  
And eke the stynk, unto the spokes, ende [ . . . ]

(*CT* III 2272-74)

Thus the meat-carver, the man of literally fleshly concerns, solves the riddle, at least mentally, in another ironic development. Each of the twelve friars at the spoke-ends will receive an equal measure of the fart's odor. Thus Jankyn's solution answers Friar John's original request to Thomas that he distribute his gift equally among his brothers.

However, Jankyn's solution involves, after all, only a smelly fart, a useless gift. The deserved humiliation multiplies as in the *Reeve's Tale* and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, the "quyting" paradoxically outdoing the originally offending tale and teller.

This solution is the second comedic climax. Thus Jankyn doubles the friar's discomfiture.

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<sup>6</sup> Alan Levitan, "The Parody of Pentecost in Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 40 (1971): 236-46, is the first interpretation of this parodic Pentecost and the most often cited regarding

However, Jankyn is not finished with his proof. He further specifies that the friar “Shal holde his nose upright under the nave” (*CT* III 2266). The placement of Friar John, the first among equals, will give him an advantage on his brothers in the enjoyment of the fart. He subsequently states that “By cause he is a man of greet honour, / Shal have the first fruyt, as resoun is” (*CT* III 2275-76). Jankyn’s unreasonable, ridiculous proof drips with irony, for the “fruyt” is nothing to enjoy and the friar is not “a man of greet honour.” Jankyn explains the friar’s ironically privileged position by then stating that

He hath to-day taught us so mucche good  
Wyth prechyng in the pulpit ther he stood,  
That I may vouche sauf, I sey for me,  
He hadde the firste smel of fartes thre [ . . . ]

(*CT* III 2281-84)

Apparently Jankyn has heard Friar John’s sermon and/or certainly is aware of his reputation. Moreover, he has just witnessed the friar’s ridiculous indignation, so provides him with his second deserved gift: a solution to a ridiculous problem that further humiliates him. Hayes states that “Jankyn’s meta-commentary on his solution indicates that it is meant to redress Friar John’s abuse of his authority to preach, which he has exhibited both at Mass and in his performance at Thomas’s house” (282). Since Friar John has debased Scripture by preaching only for his material gain, he receives worthless material from Thomas. Since the friar used specious logic concerning the sanctity of friars and the proper division of gifts, he receives a specious solution from Jankyn. Moreover, Friar John, like Shylock, disappears from the proceedings. His last words occur in line 2193, while the tale continues to line 2294. Like the fart, his presence

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Jankyn’s proposed solution to the fart-dividing dilemma.

vanishes into thin air after creating quite a stink. It is appropriate in a tale which satirizes the worthless, insubstantial nature of the friar that he disappears from the tale as the lord and his meat-carver provide the final word and blow his argument into thin air.

The tale finally ends with the Summoner-narrator praising Jankyn and the cherl while ignoring dissipated and disappointed Friar John:

The lord, the lady, and ech man, save the frere  
Seyde that Jankyn spak, in this matere,  
As wel Euclide [dide]<sup>7</sup> or Ptholomee.  
Touchynge the cherl, they seyde, subtilitee  
And heigh wit made hym speken as he spak;  
He nys no fool, ne no demonyak.

(*CT* III 2287-92)

Thus the secular powers comment that Jankyn spoke as well on the subject as those ancient authorities on geometry—earth-metric—Euclid and Ptolemy. In fact, Glending Olson states that “[t]he clarity of the *Elements* [Euclid’s major work, as least in medieval consideration] in its structure and its proofs made it the quintessential model for mathematical/scientific thinking and the presentation of demonstrative argument” (414). Thus Jankyn’s proof is superior to the best of what medieval geometry and its ancient masters could muster. The hyperbole—additional hot air meant more to ironically deflate Friar John additionally rather than praise the scholastic learning of Jankyn or especially Thomas—is, however, effective and appropriate. The witty layman’s hot air—clever but not the product of a university or ecclesiastical education—blows up the debased hot air of the cleric. Jankyn’s specious argument is superior to Friar John’s, since he used it, as

comedic heroes often use deception, to unseat the tyrannical powers that stunt the progress and happiness of the society. Comedic heroes may use deception, provided it does not cause death or mutilation, since the villain's recalcitrance offers no alternative. Moreover, the lord's household agrees that Thomas's fart was a result of his "subtiltee" and "heigh wit." This comment is certainly ironic and funny, especially since the lord specifies that his wit lay in his speech, which was anal and not oral, and not really even speech, but a sound and an odor. Again, the fart—the product of Thomas's wit—illustrates the true value of Friar John's words and enacts justice upon the friar for his hypocrisy. The comedic hero resorts to tricks to discomfit and/or to defeat the recalcitrant, blocking power. This is not to say that the tale is a comedy in the medieval sense of a happy ending following a sad beginning; rather, it is a satire that uses many element of comedy such as the "blocking" tyrant, clever servants, poetically appropriate justice, and the inversion of authority. Moreover, it uses humor to expose the gap between Friar John's pretension and the truth of his words and behavior. However, the tale "quyts" Friar Huberd in the outer dramatic framework, so fulfills its function to bring momentary balance and harmony to the tale-telling "game."

The harmony of the *Canterbury Tales*, which transcends inter-pilgrim rancor, moves forward even through satire, which, though leaving Friar John unsatisfied and absent at the tale's end, brings Friar Huberd and the Summoner at least to the point of a silent, workable truce. Since the wind has now dissipated in all of its senses, and the "quyting" has been so complete, the Summoner only says, in the tale's last line: "My tale is doon; we been almoost at towne" (*CT* III 2294). The fragment ends, and harmonious silence ensues. Since no epilogues or prologues follow to start up another contentious

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<sup>7</sup> Benson provides the brackets around this word.



interpersonal dynamic, which needs the “quyting” to restore harmony, it is possible to view Fragment III as being a complete, contained unit. However, the abrupt endings of the tale and the fragment open up imaginative space and thus imaginative freedom as well, which aids to increase the comedic sense of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. Harmony, though obviously created by witty, humorous, or rancorous “quyting” tales and pilgrim-interplay, can exist in silence—and in the empty spaces, complete or not—just as well. As I stated in the introduction, the empty spaces allow the reader to “quyt” the text—offer his or her imagination after accepting the tale, as a reader must. The reader, imaginatively free in the gaps between fragments, may offer nothing—leave only a *pagina vacua*—or construct his or her own version of the pilgrimage/story-telling proceedings between the fragments.

Paradoxically, the *Canterbury Tales* is complete in this regard, since it allows imaginative freedom, which is necessary for the reader or listener in order to move into imaginative harmony with the text. The reader or listener can do this by assertive, imaginative “quyting” of Chaucer’s text with a text of his or her own creation, or just by enjoying the empty narrative space which the end of the fragment provides. Thus the fragmentation of the *Canterbury Tales* offers the reader or audience a comedic experience, since the fragmentation leads to imaginative harmony even as the tales, prologues, epilogues, and links lead to harmony among the tales and the tellers. This harmony—even if only pragmatic and imperfect—knits together the *Canterbury Tales*, even as Fragment III, though containing many “quyting” resonances<sup>8</sup> to other tales in

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<sup>8</sup> As I have stated the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale* particularly “quyt” tales such as the *Man of Law’s*, the *Clerk’s*, and the *Physician’s*, which feature pious, passive women and which are other fragments. The fact that tales resonate with others from unconnected fragments increases the comedic freedom and

other fragments, ends with no apparent link to Fragment IV. Of course, *we* are free to imagine any link we would like.

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flexibility of the *Canterbury Tales* as whole, since many tales have abundant valences within the whole, and abundance is an important feature of comedy, stressing its flexible, forgiving nature.

## Chapter Six- The *Merchant's Prologue and Tale*: Complicated “Quytings” within a Complex Comedy

Fragment III ends with the “quyting” of the Friar by the corrupt Summoner. No narrative link exists between Fragment III and Fragment IV. However, since, as I have stated, “quyting” can involve a difference or reversal in tone and not just a plot that provides obvious vengeance for the teller, the studious Clerk tells a sober tale, which resonates in a “quyting” manner with the hilarious or scurrilous tales throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. The *Clerk's Tale* thereby “quyts” and is “quyt” by such tales/narratives as the *Miller's*, the *Reeve's*, and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. The *Merchant's Tale*, which immediately follows the *Clerk's* in Fragment IV, “quyts” it and again provides the balance necessary for harmony within the *Canterbury Tales*. The “debaat” of the “game” can continue in tonal equilibrium, whereby neither farce nor tragedy dominates. Comedy remains the invigorating mean.

Though the Clerk is an innocuous fellow who includes none of the excess verbiage such as the Man of Law provides in his *Prologue*, the Clerk nonetheless tells a tale of a pious, dutiful woman—Griselda this time. Thus the tale-telling “game” requires another “quyting.” The Merchant, a man of the physical and commercial world, as opposed to the spiritual and intellectual world of the Clerk, a man who has taken minor religious orders, steps up to tilt the contest back to the balancing “solas.” His tale is fabliau-like, whereby two young people copulate secretly under the old husband's nose and defeat the efforts of this foolish old man to keep them apart or discover their fornication. The tale's primary purpose is to “quyt” the *Clerk's Tale* of patient Griselda, as the Merchant presents a young, lusty wife, May, whom the old husband, Januarie,

cannot sexually satisfy. However, the *Merchant's Prologue* suggests that the “quyting” has ramified to include not only the Clerk and Griselda<sup>1</sup>—but the Merchant’s wife and even all women—including the Wife of Bath—as the Merchant perceives them. Thus one can argue that the *Merchant's Prologue* and *Tale* are advanced “quyttings” and show Chaucer further complicating his comedy—a process which comedy—ever ready to accept abundance—allows.

The Clerk concludes his tale by claiming that Griselda is not a practical example of a living wife but rather stands for human constancy (*CT IV* 1146). Subsequently, Chaucer adds an envoy in which he urges wives *not* to follow Griselda’s example, thus ironically reinforcing the value of living a totally submissive and passive life as Griselda literally does. The Merchant, after listening to Harry Bailly obtusely wish that his wife had heard the story of patient Griselda, states, referring to his own marriage that

“Wepyng and waylyng, care and oother sorwe

I know ynogh [ . . . ]

[ . . . ] and so doon other mo

That wedded been [ . . . ]

.....

I have a wyf, the worste that may be [ . . . ]

(*CT IV* 1213-16; 1218)

The Merchant essentially echoes Harry’s bone-headed interpretation concerning the proper conduct of wives. He continues to bewail his married lot, still focused on the

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<sup>1</sup> Griselda is so patient that, even after her husband Walter has taken her daughter to test her piety, the Clerk-narrator states that Griselda “Ne nempned she, in earnest nor in game” (*CT IV* 609). The Merchant certainly needs to “quyt” a character such as Griselda, who never asks about her daughter in seriousness or

contrast his wife offers to Griselda, until Harry, as equivocal—and still obtuse—*magister ludi*, implores:

“Now [ . . . ] “Marchaunt,  
Syn ye so muchel knowen of that art  
Ful hertely I pray yow telle us part.”

(*CT* IV 1240-42)

It is possible that Harry only acknowledges the Merchant’s marital woes in order to restart the “quytting” process, but Harry also has made a comment about his shrewish wife, so he also may have a vicarious desire to “quyt” his wife without bringing to much attention his own equivocal position. However, Harry, as only a temporary *magister ludi*, has a tenuous position at best, and the nature of the tale-telling will work to expose those such as Harry, who act with hypocrisy and pretension. Tison Pugh states that “[a]lthough Harry attempts to control the tale-telling carnival, the carnivalesque is a potentially queering force that undermines his masculine bourgeois governance by troubling gender categories to the point of incomprehensibility” (40). Harry’s shrewish wife henpecks him, so inverts the power relationship in their marriage, since a man of Harry’s time and social standing would generally expect and desire dominance in his marriage.<sup>2</sup> Hence Harry, especially after hearing the Clerk’s disavowal of the tale’s literal level and Chaucer’s envoy, which seemingly proclaims the overwhelmingly preponderance of strong wives, desires a tale that will “quyt” his own gender and marital insecurities while at the same time “quytting” the Clerk’s tale about a passive wife. Chaucer thus complicates the

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in jest. Thus Griselda’s refusal to act in either “earnest and game,” such an important tonal dynamic in the *Canterbury Tales*, highlights the need to move away from a character such as she.

<sup>2</sup> The *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *Prologue* would be sure to heighten Harry’s insecurities about his marriage and power-relationship with his wife, if we had evidence in Fragment III that he had heard them. However,

comedy in this instance as he ties the Clerk, Harry, and the Merchant (let alone the persona of the *envoy*-Chaucer) in a knot that complicates the relatively simple, binary “quyting” dynamic which has been occurring between two opposed characters. The resulting complexity brings fresh energy after a tale of piety, and displays the life force inherent in the pilgrimage exploding at its narrative seams. It is now up to the Merchant to direct this energy. Intriguingly, his last words before he begins his tale are: “Gladly [will I tell my tale] [ . . . ] but of myn owene soore, / For soory herte, I tell may namoore” (*CT IV* 1243-44). The Merchant’s marital woes are too much for him to continue relating. This burden is a benefit for the pilgrimage and the reader, for the Merchant will supply a tale that “quyts” not only the Clerk’s pious one but his own apparent harridan of wife and Alison of Bath. The comedy explodes out of a merely binary “quyting” dynamic, even as it brings harmony to the assembled pilgrims and even to the life beyond the pilgrimage for at least the Merchant.

The Merchant-narrator begins his tale by describing a “worthy knyght” (*CT IV* 1246) who lives in Lombardy, a region of Italy famous or infamous for commerce. This gentleman has remained a bachelor for most of his life, living “ [ . . . ] in greet prosperitee; / [ . . . ] a wyflee man (*CT IV* 1247-48). The wish-dream for the Merchant is obvious. The tale immediately presents a seemingly “worthy” man who prospers, even after age sixty, without a wife. The protagonist is a knight, a supposed paragon of aristocratic virtue. However, as in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, we find a debased version of a romance ideal—in the unheroic, commercial realm of Lombardy—and an ideal *senex*

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we certainly can imagine that Harry, as the arbiter of the “game” most likely would have paid keen attention to her narratives, even if he did not understand them fully.

*amans* and *senex fatuus* who will prove the butt of cuckoldry, which in this comedy, he will deserve to become.

The Merchant-narrator soon tells his listeners that the knight wants to wed, though “Were it for hoolynesse or for dotage / I kan nat seye [ . . . ]” (CT IV 1253-54). The Merchant-narrator can find no good reason for the knight’s marriage, and the reader, remembering the Merchant’s complaints regarding marriage, can see the Merchant’s ambivalence about his own marriage surfacing in the tale. Holly A. Crocker also states that “[t]ellingly, Januarie’s decision to marry after sixty years of bachelorhood does not conclude a narrative cycle of heroic deeds that preclude marriage; instead, by emphasizing the bachelor’s inglorious waning mortality the narrator devalues the knightly model of masculinity that perpetually avoids marriage” (182). Thus the tale contains a debased “model of masculinity” but also “devalues” those codes that “preclude” men from marriage. However, Januarie will marry, but for the wrong reasons. The Merchant-narrator, unconsciously or not, sets up a travesty of romance. The distance between the noble knight of romance and Januarie creates immediate humor and immediately establishes Januarie as a debased character meant to fall and illustrate the Merchant’s “quyting” the Clerk, his own wife, and the Wife of Bath, whose tale also features a debased knight (but noble women). However, his “quyting,” apparently directed intentionally at these external elements, rebounds to the Merchant himself. The “quyting,” ultimately uncontrollable if loosed with too much emotion and not enough rationality, can come back at the “quyter.” If the “quyter” is *too* invested in the vengeful aspects of “quyting,” this unintentional self-“quyting” is, nevertheless, totally appropriate to the comedy of the *Canterbury Tales*, where the need for harmony transcends any

desire for pure vengeance. This self-“quyting” further instills the crucial balance necessary for pragmatic harmony.

Januarie the knight, though not knowing why exactly he wants to marry after passing the age of sixty, decides to wed anyway, and thus justifies his decision, even after the Merchant-narrator has stated he does not know the real reason for Januarie’s decision:

“Noon oother lyf,” seyde he, “is worth a bene,  
For wedlok is so esy and so clene,  
That in this world it is a paradys.”

(*CT IV 1263-65*)

Januarie determines that wedded life is “so” easy and clean that it establishes an earthly paradise for the married man. Immediately after the Merchant-narrator relates Januarie’s words, he states that “[ . . . ] this olde knyght [ . . . ] was so wys” (*CT IV 1266*). As the reader knows that the Merchant has trouble in his marriage, it is difficult to take this compliment of Januarie’s wisdom seriously. As the tale will show, Januarie is anything but wise, and instead the foolish butt of the young people’s deception. The fact that Januarie desires an earthly paradise of his marriage also suggests a foolhardy desire for a situation that is only possible in the celestial paradise. Yet again, if one refers to the Merchant, Januarie’s desire for an earthly paradise resulting from his marriage alludes to the Merchant’s unfulfilled hopes for his marriage. The Merchant, a man of the world, might not have desired a literal paradise, but only a very happy domestic life. Januarie’s hyperbole only highlights the gap between expectations and reality. The hyperbole also creates humor, as the gap between Januarie’s expectations of May and the reality of his



marriage is huge, and provides comedic justice to the presumptuous old man who marries for no good reason.

The Merchant-narrator does state that Januarie wants a wife, beyond the desire hoped-for earthly paradise, because he might find a young woman, “On which he myghte engendren hym an heir [ . . . ]” (*CT IV* 1271). However, even if this desire for “an heir” is practical and ostensibly follows Church doctrine regarding the primary purpose of marriage, it is selfish and shows no concern for the desires of the “yong wyf” (*CT IV* 1271). This selfishness is another prime factor in his eventual cuckolding, since May will go elsewhere for her sexual needs, as Januarie cannot satisfy her and does not appear to care if he does. The Merchant-narrator goes on to state

That bachelers have often peyne and wo;  
On brotel ground they buylde, and brotelnesse  
They fynde whan they wene sikernesse.

(*CT IV* 1278-80)

The woe of the bachelor-state may be a further impetus for Januarie to marry, but one can read these words ironically, since the Merchant-narrator very well may have been happier as a bachelor. In fact, the brittle ground on which bachelors build may really be more secure than the “paradys” Januarie plans to build with his marriage and the marriage that the Merchant has built in his existence beyond the pilgrimage. Thus the Merchant has not found “sikernesse,” nor will Januarie find it.

The *Merchant's Tale* now takes a curious turn, as the Merchant-narrator interrupts his narrative regarding Januarie's marriage plans and diverges into a summary of various anti-feminist authors who disparage marriage. He begins his digression by stating that

“[ . . . ] Yet somme clerkes seyn it nys nat so [that wives are obedient]. / Of which he Theofraste is oon of tho” (*CT IV* 1293-94). The Merchant-narrator states that “clerks” deny the bliss of marriage and the worth of a wife. The Clerk has just finished a tale of an infinitely patient wife but has also included an ending disclaimer that patient wives such as Griselda are not realistic, and that Griselda is only a tropological symbol of a human being obedient to God. The Merchant’s attitude at this point is difficult to discern. If he is making a “quyting” jab at the Clerk, whose Griselda is so unrealistic a role model, he is agreeing with the Clerk’s end assessment but yet “quyting” him for just telling the pious tale of patient Griselda. It is also possible that the Merchant is criticizing his own judgment of women and marriage by denying the validity of Theophrastus’s anti-feminist and anti-marriage ideas. Mainly, however, he is being ironic and means to side with Theophrastus and condemn women, marriage, and his own wife. The “quyting” again may turn toward the teller for his foolish past decisions, and thus the comedy complicates as the Merchant-narrator expatiates before moving to the relatively simpler, fabliau-like main comedic action of the tale.

Soon paraphrasing some of Theophrastus with the statement that “Thy verray freendes [ . . . ] / Wol kepe thee beet than she [a man’s wife] [ . . . ]” (*CT IV* 1302-03), the Merchant-narrator urges men to “[ . . . ] take no kep of al swich vanytee; / Deffie Theofraste, and herkne me” (*CT IV* 1309-10), reinforcing his apparent agreement with Januarie and others who hold marriage a blessed state. Subsequently, the Merchant-narrator continues to praise marriage, for example stating that “[m]ariage is a ful greet sacrement” (*CT IV* 1319) and “[ . . . ] womman is for mannes helpe ywroght” (*CT IV* 1324). The platitudinous nature of these statements drips with irony especially

considering the Merchant's marital woes. It is hard to believe that Januarie, the ostensible stand-in for the Merchant will have "His paradys terrestre [ . . . ] (*CT IV 1332*), which he seeks in a wife. Nevertheless, the Merchant-narrator continues to praise marriage, and eventually praises a number of prominent wives from the Old Testament. Intriguingly, among these prominent Scriptural wives, he chooses Judith, who "[ . . . ] slow hym Olofernus, whil he slepte" (*CT IV 1368*). Judith certainly may have slew Holofernus for a Godly reason, but the violence with which Judith killed Holofernus subtly alludes to May's ruthlessness in carrying out of her cuckolding plan. May will figuratively slay Januarie—unaware, as Holofernus—and replace him with Damyan as her sexual partner.

The Merchant-narrator, near the end of his digression, advises that

Ther nys no thyng in gree superlatyf,  
As seith Senek, above an humble wyf.  
Suffre thy wyves tonge, as Catoun bit;  
She shal comande, and thou shalt suffren it,  
And yet she wole obeye of curteisye.

(*CT IV 1375-79*)

The Merchant-narrator's words are curious in that he agrees with Seneca's statement that there is nothing on Earth better than a "humble" wife, implicitly reinforcing the main thrust of his digression that a good wife is a wonderful and necessary companion for a man. However, citing Cato, he also states that a husband should suffer a wife's tongue and a wife's commands. One wonders if the Merchant-narrator is, like the Clerk, disavowing his previous statement about wives, or is implicitly calling for equality in the marital relationship of the kind the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* portray and

encourage. Nevertheless, the Merchant-narrator concludes his sentence by stating that, even if the husband should obey his wife, the wife will obey him out of courtesy, even though she should have sovereignty, according to Cato, with whom the Merchant-narrator agrees. Finally, the Merchant-narrator urges husbands to “Cherisse thy wyf, or thou shalt never thee” (CT IV 1388). He concludes with advice for husbands, implying that wives will be worth cherishing. As the reader or listener knows the Merchant’s general, supposed experiences with his wife, s/het may be skeptical of his sincerity. The action of the tale will further the skepticism.

Januarie himself, unlike the Merchant-narrator, apparently will not accept any authority regarding wives or marriage. Christian Sheridan states that “[t]he only text January will acknowledge is one of his own composition, as his dismissive response to Justinus’ quotations makes clear: ‘Straw for thy Senek, and for they proverbes’ (IV.1567). Januarie’s view of texts is inflexible; he can see them only from the author position” (34). However, if Januarie is going to be “inflexible” in his interpretation of authority, he dismisses authoritative warnings about the dangers of marriage, not the authoritative praise of marriage. Thus Januarie and the Merchant-narrator differ in their attitudes toward textual authority, but both attitudes show their errors and intellectual blindness. The gap between truth and reality produces humor regarding both the Merchant-narrator and Januarie, and the complicating comedic dynamic establishes both of them as *senes fatui* who suffer in the marriage state. The tale itself will elaborate the possibilities of the cuckolding the Merchant may be suffering. The elaboration is a complicating element that Chaucer is providing as the tale-telling game moves from the

*Knight's Tale* to the *Parson's*, and the abundance and imaginative freedom inherent in the elaboration is a feature which comedy more often than not includes.

The *Merchant's Tale* now fully turns to its plot involving Januarie's marriage. Januarie now starts speaking substantially for the first time, initially telling his friends that "I wol noon oold wyf han in no manere" (CT IV 1416), highlighting the traditional comedic situation in which an older man will not take a woman of similar age, but only a young one. The mismatch in age immediately sets up the cuckoldry that will follow. Januarie also reveals the classic comedic feature of the deluded *senex amans*: "[ . . . ] thise old wydwes, God it woot, / They konne muchel craft [ . . . ]" (CT IV 1423-24). Januarie does not want an old widow for a wife because he believes that they are deceptive. Dramatic irony and thus humor arise because the opposite is true: his young wife will be deceptive. Moreover, Januarie also reveals hubris regarding his virility: "I feele my lymes stark and suffisaunt / To do al that a man bilongeth to [ . . . ]" (CT IV 1458-59). Januarie claims he will be virile enough to satisfy his young wife, so again another classic element of the comedic *senex amans* fits into the matrix of Januarie's character. However, as Chaucer has been complicating the comedy as the tale-telling "game" apparently progresses, so he complicates Januarie. Already Januarie may be a double of the Merchant, but Chaucer complicates Januarie further by creating a kind of psychomachia<sup>3</sup> in which Januarie listens to lengthy advice from two servants, Justinus and Placebo, who really are more facets of Januarie's mind than fully fleshed-out characters. Thus Januarie is not a violent buffoon in the manner of Symkyn, but a

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<sup>3</sup> In a work such as the *Canterbury Tales*, whose comedy so depends upon "quyting" and creating a balance in tone and emotion through a back-and-forth dynamic between tales and tellers, it is appropriate that Januarie—a comedic character—has a psychomachia—literally a "battle of the soul," which features

character with a complicated, if heavily flawed psychology. In the fragmentation that accompanies the analysis of Januarie's character, Chaucer, as he complicates the comedy, creates more abundance of interpretation—thus freedom of interpretation.

Placebo is Latin for "I will please." It is no surprise that Placebo's counsel is only that he will offer no counsel counter to Januarie's decision. If Placebo is indeed an element in Januarie's psychomachia, he may embody complacency in the face of decisions and phenomena: "I holde youre owene conseil the best" (CT IV 1490). Placebo even contributes to Januarie's hubris by stating a bit later, referring to Januarie's wisdom that "By God, ther nys no man in al this toun, / Ne in Ytaille, that koude bet han sayd!" (CT IV 1510-11). The effect is humorous because of Placebo's name and his obsequious words, which only inflate Januarie for his eventual comedic deflation. With Placebo's help, Januarie further reinforces his status as the deluded *senex amans* of classic Greco-Roman comedy and French fabliaux. His intellectual arrogance necessitates the appropriate, but non-lethal justice cuckolding provides in this complicated comedy.

Since this portion of the tale is a psychomachia, it is appropriate that the opposing element of his psyche now has a chance to express itself. Justinus is Latin for the "just one" or even "one who uses judgment." It is not surprising that Justinus, after Placebo's obsequious non-advice, counsels Januarie to be cautious regarding his impending marriage. For example, he warns the old man that "[ . . . ] [it] is no childe pley / To take a wyf withouten avysement (CT IV 1530-31). Justinus himself will provide this advising, and subsequently tells Januarie, from his own experience, that "[ . . . ] I have wept many a teere" (CT IV 1544). The tale complicates itself again, for Justinus now sounds like the

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elements of his mind going back forth in a kind of "quyting" contest. For an analysis of the early model of a psychomachia—Prudentius's aptly title *Psychomachia*, see C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*.

Merchant-narrator relating his marriage experience. In this abundant, complex comedy, the meanings of the characters and their words mushroom and produce various levels of meaning and various connections, which reach beyond the matter of the tale. Justinus further warns Januarie specifically to avoid young wives for a certain reason: “[ . . . ] Trusteth me, / Ye shul nat plesen hire fully yeres thre [ . . . ]” (*CT IV 1561-62*).

Justinus’s warning that old Januarie will not be able to satisfy young May’s sexual desires foreshadows the cuckoldry that will occur after Januarie marries her. As I have stated, Januarie dismisses Justinus’s advice: “Straw for thy Senek [ . . . ]” (*CT IV 1567*) and remains committed to choosing a young wife. Thus Placebo—complacency and lack of critical discernment—wins the psychomachia, and Januarie runs headlong into his marriage to young, lusty May. The Merchant-narrator, following the initial psychomachia, states that

Heigh fantasye and curious bisynesse  
Fro day to day gan in the soule impresse  
Of Januarie about his mariage.

(*CT IV 1577-79*)

Januarie is figuratively blind to the problems that will come with his marriage and blind to his hubris and lack of sound judgment. Placebo subsequently echoes Januarie’s words near the beginning of the tale about the earthly paradise: “[ . . . ] there [is] so parfit felicitee / And so greet ese and lust in mariage” (*CT IV 1642-43*). Justinus responds by stating, and alluding to the “yeman” demon’s role in relation to the summoner, that “Paraunter she may be your purgatorie! / She may be Goddes meene and Goddes whippe [ . . . ]” (*CT IV 1670-71*). May certainly will prove to be an earthly purgatory rather than

an earthly paradise, especially since no earthly place—or situation—can remain a paradise.

Curiously, Justinus, near the end of this portion of his response, explicitly mentions the Wife of Bath. He desires an the end the discussion of marriage, so says,

But lat us waden out of this mateere.

The Wyf of Bath, if ye han understonde,

Of mariage, which we have on honde,

Declared hath ful wel in litel space.

(*CT IV 1684-87*)

In a tale so far full of textual authority, Justinus explodes the barrier between the inner fiction of the tale and the outer fiction of the pilgrimage-framework, to include more authority in order to curtail the discussion altogether. Pearsall states that “[i]t is this parody of the operation of moral consciousness that provides much of the intensity of the Merchant’s Tale” (197). Humor results from “this parody” because the Merchant-narrator uses supposed authority—even in the form of the anti-authoritation Wife of Bath<sup>4</sup>—for his own ends. Justinus essentially says that the Wife has done it better and in a greater quantity, so that if Januarie needs more convincing that marriage is a serious and sometimes difficult matter, he should seek out Alison, who has stated it “wel” in a small “space.” The Wife of Bath did not explicitly state that a man or woman should avoid marriage but she “is reintroduced as an authority made to affirm the marital values she seeks to resist” (Edward 347). In the “quyting” world of the tale-telling “game,” the Merchant, ironically in the voice of Justinus, the just one, can “quyt” the Wife by using

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<sup>4</sup> It is ironic that the anti-“auctoritee” Wife of Bath now has become an “auctoritee” for the Merchant-narrator.



her words for his own purposes, purposes which involve “quyting” his wife, women, the Wife of Bath, and marriage. However, since the abundance of comedy evades the strict control of the Merchant, the “quyting” which will take place reveals the pathetic nature of the Merchant through the guise of cuckolded Januarie. He will be the hidden butt who reveals his loss as Januarie loses to the young people in the tale. Chaucer’s complicated comedy can perform this operation, which reveals the pathetic teller while simultaneously providing success for characters in the tale who ostensibly illustrate the Merchant’s jaundiced view of women and marriage and help him “quyt” various characters as well.

Januarie marries May “hastily” (*CT IV* 1694), thus again suggesting his error in judgment since he ignores Justinus and only follows complacent Placebo. The wedding celebration is quite joyous, and the Merchant-narrator states that

[ . . . ] Venus laugheth upon every wight,  
For Januarie was bicomme hir knyght  
And wolde bothe assayen his corage  
In libertee, and eek in mariage [ . . . ]

(*CT IV* 1724-27)

The lines may seem to be part of a conventional epithalamium; however, “Venus” may be laughing because Januarie will become her knight, her servant, and since this tale deals with debased characters and ideals, her buffoon. Moreover, the Merchant-narrator states that Januarie would test his strength in liberty and marriage. Thus he will become the hero of the bedroom, though readers can sense that he is somewhat less than heroically virile. Additionally, the Merchant-narrator “ironically fashions old January in the model of Walter [ . . . ]” (Edwards 348), the nobleman who tests patient Griselda in

the *Clerk's Tale*. Januarie will test himself rather than May in this marriage, with the result that he will be lacking, though he will not realize it. The Merchant-narrator adds to the parody by claiming that the poet Marcian should

Hoold thou thy pees [ . . . ]  
That writest us that ilke weddyng murie  
Of hire Philologie and hym Mercurie [ . . . ]

(*CT IV 1732-34*)

The Merchant-narrator exaggerates the merriment and scale of Januarie and May's wedding by stating that the wedding of Philosophy and Mercury (eloquence) cannot compare to Januarie and May's. This hyperbolic comparison implies that Januarie's deluded philosophy had wedded itself with specious eloquence in this marriage, with the result expected when clever rhetoric overcomes common sense and careful deliberation.

If Januarie has made a bad decision, he still enjoys May sexually, at least on their wedding night: “[ . . . ] he on that nyght in armes wolde hire streyne / Harder than evere Parys did Eleyne” (*CT IV 1753-54*). The statement also yields irony, since Paris's abduction of Helen eventually caused the destruction of Troy. This Paris will have his Helen taken from him by deception—as Troy by the deception of the Trojan horse—and the walls of his fortress figuratively will be breached (and his wife's genitals, literally). Since Januarie “[ . . . ] is ravysshed in a traunce (*CT IV 1750*) when he does this, he is obviously not heeding Justinus's words regarding the possible dangers of marriage and is figuratively blind to his wife's true character. It is the perfect time for young squire Damyan to enter the narrative, since Januarie remains in his chronic lustful trance for May. Damyan, a meat-carver, a man of the flesh like clever, humorously heroic Jankyn in

the *Summoner's Tale*, also falls under May's spell: "So soor hath Venus hurt hym with hire brond [ . . . ]" (CT IV 1777). If Januarie is Venus's knight, he has implicitly and unknowingly received a challenge from another servant of Venus. Humorously, the Merchant-narrator leaves him swooning over May and turns to a diatribe against treachery. The humor lies in the knowledge of Justinus's forewarning and Januarie's faulty reasons for marrying a young woman. The Merchant-narrator also connects the tale with other fabliau-like ones in the *Canterbury Tales* by complaining that "[ . . . ] in this world nys worse pestilence / Than hoomly foo al day in thy presence" (CT IV 1793-94). Like Carpenter John, and like Symkyn, Januarie is harboring the source of his comedic downfall within his home. This dynamic is a key feature of fabliau-like tales and emphasizes the stupidity of the older man ruling the house, who does not realize that his rule is already compromised and that his downfall lies under his own roof. However, the *Merchant's Tale* is a bit different from the *Miller's Tale* and the *Reeve's Tale* in the nature of the young man who intrudes into the marriage between the old man and the young woman. Pearsall states that "[t]he *Merchant's Tale* is once more the exception, and there is no doubt that the nastiness<sup>5</sup> of the tale is much increased by the fact that the intruder is a squire of January's own household, and furthermore, one who plays a subordinate part in the intrigue to the wife" (165 "The *Canterbury Tales* II: comedy"). Damyan not only will be an intruder into Januarie and May's marriage, and an intruder into May's body, but is a member of the household. Thus the Merchant-narrator increases the fall of Januarie, since a trusted member of his retinue cuckolds him. Damyan's

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<sup>5</sup> Despite this "nastiness," the tale remains a comedy, as I state, due to the duping of the deluded old man and the successful, unpunished, and finally unrealized (by Januarie) union of the young people and overall "quyting" even this somewhat "nast[y]" tale performs for the sake of the "game's" progress toward harmony. Additionally, the sheer hilarity of the images of the three characters' actions in the garden; of

position as a member of the household shows Chaucer again complicating the comedy and providing the reader freedom to speculate that the Merchant himself was betrayed by someone close to him—a worse fate than being betrayed by a relative stranger. Like the *Reeve's Tale*, the *Merchant's Tale* pushes the boundaries of comedy but remains nevertheless a comedy—if a nasty one—whose outcome—with the young people triumphant—is only mildly humorous to some tastes. This humor might seem slight to some, even as the names Januarie and May, suggestive of types rather than individuals, offer potential humor, as readers are less likely to sympathize with Januarie or condemn May as opposed to fully fleshed-out characters.

Meanwhile, Januarie continues in his pursuit of sexual pleasure with May. Since he is an old man, implicitly not up to the task of satisfying May, he ingests sexual-performance-enhancing substances to increase his virility, such as “[ . . . ] ypocras, clarree, and vernage” (*CT* IV 1807). Again, the gap between Januarie’s self-conception and the reality generates humor. The narration implies May’s reaction to his enthusiastic attentions, as “[ . . . ] he kisseth hire ful ofte; / With thikke brustles of his berd unsofte [ . . . ]” (*CT* IV 1824). The reader or audience might imagine May’s face red and stinging from the chafing it received from Januarie’s newly shaven face, which nevertheless retains sharp stubble. The *Merchant's Tale* also differs from the *Miller's Tale* and *Reeve's Tale* because it describes, albeit in vague terms, the *senex amans* actually having sex with the young woman. This actual sexual activity on the part of the soon-to-be-cuckolded old man in a way sets him up even higher so he may fall farther. Moreover, Januarie, who

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May in the privy; and Damyan in bed supposedly sick, for example, heighten the comedy and sense of release from unreasonable and silencing strictures.

“[ . . . ] laboureth [ . . . ] till that the day gan dawne [ . . . ]” (*CT IV* 1842), and thus does not perform sex easily, does not please his young wife:

Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte,  
In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene,  
She preyseth nat his pleyying worth a bene.

(*CT IV* 1853-55)

The Merchant-narrator does state that January “[ . . . ] was al coltish, ful of ragerye [ . . . ]” (*CT IV* 1847), so perhaps at least performs with enthusiastic intent if not with effective, long-lasting energy, which produces the results May desires. However, the Merchant-narrator undercuts the majority of the praise this sentence contains by subsequently stating that “The slakke skyn aboute his nekke shaketh / Whil that he sang, so chaunteth he and craketh” (*CT IV* 1849-50). Januarie’s loose neck-skin, flapping like the proverbial lecherous rooster’s, creates humor when the Merchant-narrator juxtaposes it with his enthusiasm. One receives the impression not of a heroic knight of Venus, but rather of a barnyard animal—a debased Chaunticleer (himself a debasement of a heroic human in some ways)—assuming the guise of noble knight of Venus (like Palamon in some respects). His zealous efforts do not satisfy May and thus introduce the second factor in his eventual cuckoldry. This description of Januarie’s sexual ability and his physical appearance is much more abundant than the Miller and the Reeve provide for old Carpenter John and Symkyn respectively, and depicts fresh May as a helpless object of Januarie’s misplaced lust. However, J.D. Burnley states, regarding the seemingly victimized May, that “she is immediately recognizable as the passive object of defilement, the innocent victim of a rapacious old lecher. But we have been deceived;

instead of the spoliation of the veritable Lucretia which we have been led to expect, we encounter only the contest of rapacity with duplicity” (17). Again, Januarie’s fall will be greater, since the Merchant-narrator has set him up as the enraptured oppressor satisfying his inappropriate lusts upon apparently innocent, helpless May. The Merchant-narrator now leaves Januarie to concentrate on Damyan, still in the throes of love-sickness, which is appropriate for him, since he is a young man full of vital, sexual energy. Conversely, Januarie, the old man “ravysshed in a traunce,” is acting inappropriately. It is now the perfect moment for the Merchant-narrator to quicken the machinations that will lead to Januarie’s appropriate cuckolding.

Damyan is not so sick as to be incapable. In fact, he exaggerates his illness, thereby causing Januarie to send May to his chamber in order to raise his spirits. After all, Januarie says to May, “[ . . . ] he is a gentil man” (CT IV 1924), again showing his blindness—this time to the true nature of his supposedly trustworthy young squire. When May arrives to his bedside—with all her women, mirroring the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* where the rapist-knight must present himself to the courtly ladies—Damyan furtively places a purse containing a letter in her hands. Thus Damyan performs his second deceptive act and continues to show his intellectual superiority to Januarie, a trait which comedic heroes invariably display in relation to the comedic butt. If Damyan appears immoral, it is important to remember that Damyan is the necessary “quyter” of Januarie and his lust, delusion, and folly. If Damyan is not a morally good person, than at least he is an instrument of God or at least the author—like the “yeman” demon who punishes the evil summoner in the *Friar’s Tale*. However, Damyan, unlike the demon, will also unite with

another young person, thus fulfilling his role in the comedy, and not just as an agent of satire like the demon.

May takes the note and performs her own bit of deception—going to the privy under the pretext that she must relieve herself. In a fabliau-like tale, it is appropriate that May reads Damyan’s words in a toilet, since their desires reside in the carnal and their satisfaction of these desires will result in Januarie’s cuckoldry. Moreover, the placing of May in a privy to discover Damyan’s lust contrasts with Januarie’s construction of a paradisaical garden and his belief that marriage is an earthly paradise. The privy thus reveals the true worth of Januarie’s delusion and the true nature of May’s character. Subsequently, though Damyan’s desires and May’s character symbolically reveal themselves in a toilet, the comedy nevertheless calls for these young people to “quyt” Januarie for his foolhardiness, inappropriate desire, and metaphoric blindness. After May reads Damyan’s letters, “[s]he rente it al to cloutes atte laste, / And in the pryvee softely it caste” (*CT IV* 1953-54). May tears up the letter and drops it into the latrine-hole, again reinforcing the moral worth of Damyan and his desires, and again performing deception by destroying the letter. However, again May and Damyan’s forthcoming cuckoldry of Januarie is necessary in the comedic dynamic to bring the young people together and “quyt” the foolish and lecherous old man. His delusion and inappropriate desire overrides the immorality of May and Damyan’s liaison, and thus the comedy must move toward punishing Januarie and uniting May and Damyan, even if the union is only sexual.

May subsequently returns to Januarie’s bed, where a “cough hath hym awaked” (*CT IV* 1957), suggesting his general sickliness but also his insensitive desire. Januarie then tells May to take off her clothes. May, ostensibly obedient, takes them off, but the

Merchant-narrator states he does not know “[ . . . ] whether hire thoughte it paradys or hell” (CT IV 1964), alluding to Januarie’s garden and paradisaical conception of marriage but also casting serious doubts on Januarie’s ability to sexually please May. Paul A. Olson states that “it is [ . . . ] evident that [Januarie] [ . . . ] married her [ . . . ] as property [ . . . ]” (205), sexual property at that, thus further bringing down the need for punishment. Januarie is not only inappropriately lecherous but greedy as well. Olson adds that “[m]edieval thinkers knew that the desire to possess a woman and the desire to possess any other purely physical object proceeded from the same root” (204-05), that is, *luxuria et avaritia*.<sup>6</sup> Thus, added to the comedic dynamic to cuckold the foolish old man is the Christian impetus to punish an individual indulging in two of the seven deadly sins.

May quickly decides to help the pining Damyan, reminiscent of a debased Criseyde aiding a debased Troilus. She states to herself that

“Certeyn [ . . . ] whom that this thyng displese  
I rekke nocht, for heere I hym assure  
To love hym best of any creature,  
Though he namoore hadde than his shert.”

(CT IV 1982-85)

Thus she does not care whom she offends if she sexually satisfies Damyan, and additionally, claims that she will love him better than anyone even if he were destitute. The Merchant-narrator immediately exclaims that “[. . . ] pitee renneth soon in gentil herte!” (CT IV 1986). The Merchant-narrator so far has hardly characterized May, who partakes, as I have stated, of the aspects of a type rather than a fully realized individual. Olson states that “[h]er characterization is so flat as hardly to make her a person at all

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<sup>6</sup> Olson adds in a note that “[t]he word ‘cupiditas’ can [ . . . ] mean both avarice and lust in general” (205).



[ . . . ]” (205). So it is not surprising, on the surface level, that May appears to offer herself for the sake of pity, despite her marriage to Januarie. May appears to be a charitable young woman who will offer her body for the well-being of Damyan’s. The irony will become evident later in the tale when May dupes Januarie in a less than charitable manner. However, since this tale is a comedy, it is appropriate that May will succor Damyan’s body, since *their* young bodies contain vital life energy, as opposed to the flagging, misguided, and misused energy in Januarie. Even if May is not truly charitable, her impulse to help Damyan is comedic. The Merchant-narrator’s implication that May must have a “gentil heart” is ironic (she is certainly no Griselda), since her duplicity does not evince her gentility, but quite the opposite. Yet, her duplicity is necessary to the comedy in the context of Januarie and his delusions.

May writes a letter back to Damyan in order to set up the assignation. Upon reading the letter, Damyan’s malady lifts and “He is so pleasaunt unto every man / (For craft is al, whoso that do it kan)” (CT IV 2015-16). Damyan can fain pleasantries to all, and the Merchant-narrator notes that “craft,” deceptive skill, is all important for those inclined to use it. The Merchant-narrator may be commenting upon his marital situation, but he also alludes to the common feature of fabliaux that the winner of the overt or covert conflict is the one who is craftiest.<sup>7</sup> Damyan and May certainly are craftier than Januarie and thus stress the triumph of youth that comedies feature. May and Damyan outdo Januarie in not only the force of their life energy but in the quickness of their intellects. Despite the immorality of their act, they must triumph, as comedies support the

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<sup>7</sup> Derek Pearsall states that the goal in a Chaucerian comedy is a “satisfaction of appetite” (161 “The Canterbury Tales II: Comedy” in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*), but I would refine that statement by saying that the comedic goal is a “satisfaction of appetites” that goes along with joining the crafty young people and defeating the presumptuous old man.

regenerative properties that these life forces produce (and produce a “quyting” of the *Clerk’s Tale*). Karl P. Wentersdorf states that “[i]f May does wrong in breaking her marriage vows, January is also at fault in marrying for completely selfish reason; and from the medieval theological standpoint, he is clearly wrong in arguing [ . . . ] that in wedlock his lechery is not sinful” (522). Thus the comedic dynamic will punish Januarie’s sinful “selfish[ness] and “lechery” while uniting the vital young people in a union that at least “quyts” Januarie for his blindness, if it does not bring May and Damyan more than temporary sexual fulfillment.

As quantitative “quyting” to his comment regarding Damyan’s “craft,” the Merchant-narrator abruptly turns to Januarie’s “craft,”—his private, paradisaical garden in which he hopes to fulfill all of his sexual desires concerning May, whether or not she likes how he fulfills his desires. He “walled” it with “stone” (*CT IV 2029*), suggesting his desire to shield his young wife from external temptation.<sup>8</sup> Thus Januarie, though deceived by the young people, is aware—on some level—of May’s attractiveness and, though he tries to enclose her in a structure of his own “craft,” Januarie himself, figuratively blind to reality, also walls himself in this garden and in his conception of an earthly paradise. The Merchant-narrator’s details concerning this garden also indicate that it is a place for a metaphorical fall, reproducing in a much less epic form the fall of Adam and Eve, though the fall concerns primarily the debased Adam—Januarie. May, a debased Eve, will fall morally, but her fortunate fall is necessary to the comedic dynamic. The Merchant-narrator states that

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<sup>8</sup> Laura J. Howes sees garden in the *Canterbury Tales* in general as “loc[i] of male domination [ . . . ]” (83) in *Chaucer’s Garden’s and the Language of Convention*. Gainesville: U of Florida P, 1997. I contend that Januarie’s garden, though symbolic of his domination, also shows the foolishness of his pretension to complete control of May and thus Januarie’s *lack* of total power over his young wife.

So fair a gardyn woot I nowher noon.  
For [ . . . ] I verraily suppose  
That he that wroot the Romance of the Rose  
Ne koude of it the beautee wel devyse;

(*CT IV* 2029-32)

The *Romance of the Rose* centrally concerns the allegorical seduction of a woman. However, the allegory is thin, and the sexual tenor is clear, for example, as the protagonist states, as he approaches the innermost barrier guarding the woman that “I wanted to sheathe my staff by putting it into the aperture while the scrip hung outside. I tried to thrust it in at one go, but it came out and I tried again, to no avail because it sprang out every time and nothing I did could make it go in” (332-33). Januarie’s desire is just physical—and inappropriate and presumptuous since he is an old man—while the description of May and Damyan’s sex will be more explicit than the allegorical thrusting “into the aperture” which the *Romance of the Rose*’s protagonist (Amant-“the lover”) performs, and thus highlight the physical deficiency of Januarie, the contrasting virility of Damyan, and the basic sexual desires of the young people. This garden is like Eden because it will contain sin and folly, but unlike Eden as well because it will produce comedy, even if the comedy rests upon the necessary immorality of May and Damyan.

The Merchant-narrator also adds to his hyperbole regarding the garden’s beauty, stating that “Ne Priapus ne myghte nat suffise, / Though he be god of gardyns [ . . . ] (*CT IV* 2034-35). “Priapus,” a favorite decoration of walled Roman peristyle gardens, is also a phallic god, so the Merchant-narrator again reinforces the sexual focus of this garden. The irony is that the Romans usually represented Priapus with a huge penis, suggesting

the god's virility and his role as a symbol of masculine virility, while Januarie's virility is questionable. Priapus, however, figuratively suggests Damyan's virility perfectly. Intriguingly, Priapic statuettes and paintings often served an apotropaic function, but in Januarie's garden, nothing can keep the threatening force of Damyan—with May's complicity—away from Januarie and his supposedly perfect creation and "craft." The power of comedic cuckolding is too strong for walls or talismans to prevent its entrance and effect. As Olson states, "[h]e imagines a prosperity where none is in order to keep secure an Eden which never really existed" (213). Added to the power of comedic cuckolding is the inevitability of the sublunary world's mutability. May and Damyan, the young people potentially producing the future—even long after Januarie is dead—symbolize the mutability that will bring new life.

Seemingly incongruously, the Merchant-narrator turns to a digression upon Pluto and Proserpina—pagan Classical gods—who cavort around a well in the garden. Yet their inclusion is not really incongruous. After all, the Merchant-narrator has already introduced Priapus in his commentary, so Pluto's and Proserpina's presence, like the ithyphallic Classical god's, comments upon the situation and adds to the sophisticated comedic ending to which the tale is moving. Before the Merchant-narrator returns to the king and queen of Hades, he notes that Januarie

“[ . . . ] wol no wight suffren bere the keye

Save he himself; for of the smale wyket

He baar alwey of silver a clyket [ . . . ]

(*CT IV* 2044-46)

Januarie jealously guards the key that offers entrance into his earthly paradise. The *Romance of the Rose*'s protagonist, thrusting his staff into the "aperture" comes to mind again, and we can regard Januarie's "clicket" as a symbol of his sexual activities and desires regarding May. Moreover, his jealous guarding of the key foreshadows the loss of the exclusive sexual use of his wife, which one should expect in a fabliau-like comedy. Since Januarie has locked his sexual possession into an earthly and, in his mind eternal paradise, to make his happiness certain, the Merchant-narrator, perhaps stung by his own marital experiences, now bewails the uncertainty of this sublunary world where "[ . . . ] joy may nat alwey dure" (*CT IV* 2055), even in a walled garden. He rails against

[ . . . ] Fortune unstable!

lyk to the scorpion so deceyvable,

That flaterest with thyn heed whan thou wolt styng [ . . . ]

(*CT IV* 2057-59)

Boethius's Wheel again rises behind the metaphor of the scorpion. Since Januarie places "his reliance on the permanence of his temporal prosperity, he is likely to see the loss of that prosperity as the loss of the ultimately valuable. [ . . . ] He [ . . . ] made himself a candidate for deception by regarding as permanent what must by its nature change" (Olson 209). Additionally, the scorpion's tale is a phallic metaphor for Januarie's improper lust but also Damyan's deception and sexual vitality—both of which will sting the old man by the tale's end. The Merchant-narrator also balances or "quyts" the phallic metaphor with a coarse but veiled allusion to the vagina when he apostrophizes: "[ . . . ] O sweete venym queynte!" (*CT IV* 2061), with "queynte" also being slang for "cunt." As the Merchant-narrator bewails the vicissitudes of Fortune, it is appropriate that

he couch his harangue in metaphors that suggest the physical root of these fatal desires for impermanent delights.

Immediately following the Merchant-narrator's complaint against Fortune in general, he makes physical what the tale has been suggesting figuratively all along, and Januarie goes blind: "[ . . . ] now thou [Fortune] has biraft hym both his yen [ . . . ] (*CT* IV 2067). However, Januarie's physical blindness is not now just the symbol of his intellectual blindness but the *cause* of his immanent cuckolding. The tale implies that Januarie's intellectual blindness causes him to trust in transient earthly Fortune, and thus he is struck by Fortune in his physical eyes, as his intellectual eyes have already been blind. Again, like the "yeman" demon of the *Friar's Tale* enacting justice upon the corrupt summoner, Fortune enacts justice upon offending Januarie. This justice is comedic—it does not kill Januarie, and the blinding does not cause him great pain or cause him to become derelict. Moreover, this initial punishment foreshadows and causes the ultimate comedic justice, which will occur in the garden where Januarie has attempted blind folly in a place he thinks invisible to the outside world and has hidden his young, desirable wife—and tried to shut himself off from the mutability of that sublunary world.

Januarie's physical blindness (and thus double blindness) now increases his jealousy regarding May. The Merchant-narrator states that

[ . . . ] Therewithal the fyr of jalousie,  
Lest that his wyf sholde falle in some folye,  
So brente his herte that he wolde fayn  
That som man bothe hire and hym had slayn.

(*CT* IV 2073-76)

Januarie's physical blindness drives him to an extreme desire whereby he would rather someone killed him and May rather than she should perform some implied sexual "folye." The extremity of his jealousy further sets him up as a proper candidate for a comedic fall. However, May is not going to be the passive victim of Januarie's jealous and misplaced passion. Though she and Damyan, like a debased Pyramus and Thisbe, are separated by a wall, their machinations can outdo the foolish old man who trusts in his own "craft" to keep out the vicissitudes of the world: "[ . . . ] by wrytynge to and fro / And privee signes wiste he what she mente" (CT IV 2104-05). The Merchant-narrator puns on "privee" to connect this instance of May's writing/reading with her previous reading in the "privee," an instant which fostered the genesis of the cuckoldry, just as this instance at the boundary between garden and outside world will help to actualize the cuckoldry. The young people can breach this liminal space by their "craft," because they suffer from no enclosing delusions as blind Januarie does. The Merchant-narrator immediately apostrophizes the deluded old man and delivers a kind of moral to the tale after he has revealed how May and Damyan initially breach his wall:

O Januarie, what myghte it thee availle,  
Thogh thou myghtest se as fer as shippes saille?  
For as good is blynd deceyved be  
As to be deceyved whan a man may se.

(CT IV 2107-11)

Intellectual blindness is as bad as physical blindness and may even be worse, since Januarie initiated this situation while physically sighted but intellectually blind. The Merchant-narrator now turns to May's machinations that will directly allow Damyan

access into the garden. May takes the key, imprints it in warm wax—the wax suggesting the mutability and flexibility of all earthly concerns—and Damyan thus makes a copy. The ease with which May takes Januarie’s key stresses his blindness, as his lack of physical sight must have allowed for an easy temporary theft of the key. Even as Januarie’s garden now lies open to the interloper, he sings a “grotesque parody of the Song of Solomon” (CT IV 2138-48) to May (Harrington 28). The debased marriage-song highlights by contrast the unfaithful nature of May, who, as Januarie finished his words “[ . . . ] On Damyan a signe made she [ . . . ]” (CT IV 2150). The moment is similar to Nicholas’s deception of old Carpenter John in the *Miller’s Tale*, whereby old John is deluded enough in his pride to think himself God’s favorite and is ignorant of Scripture. Januarie, cloaked in his delusion, promises to give her all his property after his death, and May swears to be true to him. If she is not, she urges him, “Do strepe me and put me in a sak / And in the nexte ryver do me drenche” (CT IV 2199-2200), recalling patient Griselda’s naked state after Walter strips her in his testing; however, May is no patient Griselda, and, as we have seen, already has set in the motion the wheels of cuckoldry and the comedic dynamic.

Damyan, who has entered the garden, now climbs a pear tree, “charged [ . . . ] with fruyt [ . . . ]” (CT IV 2211) under May’s direction. May takes an active role in the cuckoldry, thus making her more an agent than Alison (who does show some agency) from the *Miller’s Tale* or Malyne from the *Reeve’s Tale*. In fact, her activity, with the goal of fornication, shows the Merchant “quyting” Alison of Bath, whose active women, though assertive, are not despoilers of marriage. In the *Merchant’s Tale*, the assertive woman—though deceptively passive to her husband—acts to cuckold the trusting but



deluded old man. However, the Merchant-narrator's tale is a comedy, so the comedic dynamic transcends any intentions that the Merchant might have of "quyting" Alison of Bath or the Clerk, or his shadowy wife, for that matter. Certainly, the basic "quyting" occurs since the Merchant-narrator balances patient Griselda and the wise fairy-woman with scheming May, but May is a positive figure like Griselda and the old/young wife, since she is necessary for the comedic dynamic to move to completion.

The Merchant-narrator then shifts to an argument, unsensed by the human inhabitants of the garden, between Pluto and Proserpina. Pluto, incensed by May's deception of Januarie, determines "That he shal have ayen his eyen syght, / Whanne that his wyf wold doon hym vileynye" (*CT* IV 2260-61). Pluto and Proserpina serve as a thematic counterpart to Januarie and May, since Pluto, the god of the underworld and of wealth (precious metals are found underground), seized Proserpina to be his wife. Thus Pluto is a type of Januarie and Proserpina a type of May. However, May goes beyond Proserpina in a way, by having total freedom within apparent confinement, as opposed to Proserpina's six months of freedom (granted by Zeus) above the ground. Wentersdorf, focusing on the argument between the king and queen of Hades, states that "Proserpina, whose skill in exploiting the authorities recalls that of the Wife of Bath, adeptly turns the tables on Pluto by drawing attention to Solomon's lechery and to the idolatrous practices of his old age" (524). Thus Proserpina reinforces the ideas that Januarie is lecherous and "idolatrous" of his worldly pleasure, which he both finds in May and constructs in the form of his walled garden. Proserpina also counters Pluto's gift of renewed sight for Januarie by promising that she will give May a gift to foil Pluto's:

"[ . . . ] though [women] [ . . . ] be in any gilt ytake,

With face boold they shulle hemself excuse,  
And bere hem doun that wolden hem accuse.

(CT IV 2268-70)

Pluto's and Proserpina's respective gifts to Januarie and May provide the final components to the plot and the comedic dynamic. At the end of their argument, Pluto and Proserpina exchange sovereignty in a way reminiscent of the rapist-knight and the old wife in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. Pluto says "I yeve it up! [ . . . ]" (CT IV 2312), while Proserpina responds "[ . . . ] I wol no lenger yow contrarie" (CT IV 2319). They yield in their arguments to produce marital harmony, though the outcome of the tale will show Proserpina the winner, as May's victory over Januarie utilizes Proserpina's gift—a gift which defeats Pluto's gift of *physical* sight to Januarie.

Subsequently, the Merchant-narrator returns to the earthly characters after Pluto and Proserpina's reconciliation. May tells Januarie that she must have fruit—sexual experience which Januarie cannot offer. May adds that

[ . . . ] a womman in my plit  
May han to fruyt so greet greet an appetit  
That she may dyen but she of it have."

(CT IV 2335-37)

These lines lead some critics to see May as pregnant. For example, M. Teresa Tavormina states that "May's alleged craving for fruit and the pregnancy implied thereby have been compared to Mary's hunger in the Cherry-Tree Carol [ . . . ]" (889). May is thus carrying Damyan's "fruyt," though Januarie will be the "parodic" Joseph (in some ways like carpenter John in the *Miller's Tale*) who stands in for the real father (Tavormina 889).

Thus Damyan's virility and vitality produce what Januarie may not be able to engender—the desired heir. Damyan thereby replaces Januarie as the necessary element for new life to appear, thereby reinforcing the comedy of the tale.

Subsequent to this possible implicit situational humiliation of Januarie, May climbs up into the pear tree where Damyan awaits—using Januarie's back as a step. The scene creates literal humiliation of doubly blinded Januarie and shows the young people using the very garden—walled exclusively for Januarie—as an instrument to actualize their own sexual desires. The Merchant-narrator then very quickly moves to the climax: “And sodeynly anon this Damyan / Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng” (*CT IV* 2352-53). The sex is quick and mechanical. May and Damyan cuckold the deluded old man in the phallic pear tree, which rises amid his jealously guarded, enclosed space. As often happens in fabliau-like tales such as the *Miller's Tale* and *Reeve's Tale*, the transgressor usurps the older man's privilege in his most private space, thus enacting the most stinging betrayal. W.W. Allman and D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., commenting on the concise manner of the Merchant-narrator's depiction of May and Damyan's sex, state that “Januarie's nasty, impotent vaunting serves as a foil to the simple efficiency of Damian, whose body proves a mechanism requiring no erotic supplement, no verbal or liquid aphrodisiac” (54). Thus Damyan further reduces Januarie by satisfying May quite easily and mechanically (after perhaps already having impregnated her). The tale will push Januarie lower before its end. The triumph of the young people will be complete and reinforced in multiple ways, even after this extremely complicated comedy.

Yet Pluto, presumably enraged, observing the cuckolding of Januarie, “[ . . . ] made hym se as wel as evere he myghte” (*CT IV* 2356), whereby Januarie is horrified

and outraged at the sight of Damyan and May having sex in the tree and exclaims: “Out! Help! Allas! Harrow! [ . . . ] / O stronge lady stoore, what dostow? (CT IV 2366-67).

May, quick in mind as she is nimble in her body, retorts with:

I have yow holpe on both youre eyen blynde.

Up peril of my soule, I shal nat lyen,

As me was taught, to heele with youre eyen,

Was no thyng bet, to make yow to see,

Than struggle with a man upon a tree

(CT IV 2370-74)

May uses Proserpina’s gift, which aids women and thus now the young lovers as well.

However, Januarie is initially incredulous and responds, “He swyved thee; I saugh it with myne yen [ . . . ]” (CT IV 2378). His response is dramatically ironic, for, although he saw it with his own physical eyes, he still does not perceive the reality of May’s character or the folly of his desire for a permanent, earthly paradise and a marriage to a woman whom he cannot satisfy. Thus he deserves his fate: further delusion. May states subsequently that “Ye han som glymsyng, and no parfit sight” (CT IV 2383), as if he is a patient from whose eyes bandages have just been removed. Januarie insists he saw them coupling, but May “bere[s] hem doun that wolden hem accuse” and says “This thank have I for I have maad yow see” (CT IV 2388). May’s bearing up under Januarie’s accusation further humiliates the old man, for now May throws the accusation in his face and accuses him of being ungrateful. The young people’s triumph is almost complete. May explains fully how one’s vision is blurry when “[ . . . ] a man waketh out of his sleep [ . . . ]” (CT IV 2397). May’s statement is ironic, for Januarie will never wake from his intellectual sleep,

and this delusion will allow the young people to succeed in their endeavor and continue succeeding. May continues her deception and further ironically reinforces Januarie's blindness as she states that

Right so a man that longe hath blynd ybe,  
Ne may nat sodeynly so we yse,  
First whan his sighte is newe come ageyn,  
As he that hath a day or two yseyn  
Til that youre sighte ysatled be a while  
They may ful many a sighte you bigile.

(CT IV 2401-06)

May's statement is ironic in several ways. First, Januarie is an old man who has—or should have—seen—thus gained wisdom during the course of his long life of sixty years, but does not and never will. Michael A. Calabrese, noting Reason's words to Amant in the *Romance of the Rose*, states that “[o]ld age [ . . . ] liberates men from delight, leading them to the right path. However, not many appreciate this liberation, and they try to preserve youth” (265). Januarie will never find this “liberation,” thus is trapped in his illusion that will allow the young people to continue their cuckoldry of him. Secondly, May states that “many” sights can confuse the man to whom sight has been restored during the early moments of the physical recovery of his sight. May might be correct, but her words also imply that the deluded individual will misconstrue reality even if he has physical sight. Michelle Kohler, referring to the dynamics of deception in fabliaux, states that “by establishing verbal control over reality in a way that produces visual proof, one gets what one wants without enduring suspicion or discovery” (141). May controls

Januarie's epistemological sight by using her quick wit to produce an effective verbal defense, which works so well it completely blinds Januarie to reality. Since he is a deluded old man, it is not comedically necessary for him to grasp the truth permanently—as May, Damyan, and the reader or listener has. The *senex amans* is also *fatuus*—permanently—and thus deserves his defeat—even if he is too dense to realize it. His lack of perception produces more humor and also moves the tale toward its ultimate conclusion. Karla Taylor states that “[f]abliaux conventionally require that the dupe recognize that he has been gulled, often a prelude to the violent climax; Chaucer follows this convention in RvT and MerT (although as soon as January's sight is restored, he embraces the deeper blindness of the delusional faith in his wife)” (note 319). Thus Chaucer further humiliates Januarie by making his recognition only temporary and thus eliminating even his attempt at retribution. Januarie is completely eliminated as an active agent in his relationship with May. His excessive desire for the possession of a woman whom he is not able to satisfy leads to his complete loss of possession. The comedic dynamic can be harsh to the foolish, but it is appropriate that May and Damyan will succeed and continue at least to sexually satisfy each other as young people are supposed to do, as they follow the natural impulses of their youth, which involve their physical sexuality. Bakhtin states that “[t]he material bodily lower stratum is productive. It gives birth, thus assuring mankind's immortality. All obsolete and vain illusions die in it, and the real future comes to life” (378). Thus, though the “lower stratum” of the body purges waste—as is apparent in the *Summoner's Tale*—it is also a place that brings forth life, and Damyan's and May's “lower” strata are young and vital enough to do so. Bakhtin adds that “[t]his lower stratum is mankind's real future. The downward movement [ . . . ]

is ultimately directed toward the gay future. At the same time [this focus on the body] [ . . . ] mocks the pretenses of the isolated individual who wants to be perpetual and who is ridiculous in his senility” (378). Therefore Damyan’s “throng[ing]” into May illustrates the comedic, regenerative force in the young people and “mocks” Januarie who desires to be “perpetual” in his sexual vitality and in his desire for an heir, whom Damyan actually may have sired.

Vital but also clever, May finishes her specious explanation by stating very cogently and importantly, “He that mysconceiveth, he mysdemeth” (*CT IV 2410*), thereby encapsulating a major theme in the tale. Januarie “misapprehends, misunderstands” so he misjudges (Benson note p. 168). Januarie’s problems go back to his trust in his young wife and in his belief in the marriage state as an earthly paradise (for himself, at least), ignoring the impossibility of perfect, permanent happiness on earth. He actualizes his delusion by building a walled garden in order enjoy his supposed passive possession in the form of his wife May. However, she is not just a passive possession upon whom he can impose his desires without considering her desires (which he cannot fulfill). His cuckolding by Damyan is a final result of this delusion, which started at an uncertain time in the past for this debased, unheroic “knyght,” and which will continue into an unspecified future—where sexual pleasure and freedom lie for May and Damyan.

The Merchant-narrator concludes the tale by asking rhetorically, “This Januarie, who is glad but he?” (*CT IV 2412*). Januarie remains in his delusion regarding May and Damyan and thus continues in blissful ignorance. Proserpina’s gift to May has trumped Pluto’s gift to Januarie, thus showing the triumph of women, but in a manner that “quyts”

Alison of Bath and the Clerk, since the triumph of May involves breaking marriage vows rather than forging honest bonds of mutual respect. However, the comedic dynamic triumphs over the marriage vow, since the marriage is unsatisfying to May and inappropriate for January, since he is unrealistic and greedy in desires and goals regarding May and the marriage state. Januarie is happy in his delusion (with an heir possibly on the way), while May and Damyan can go on fornicating indefinitely and apparently without detection since Januarie is so hopelessly dense. Benjamin Lehmann states that “[s]ocial homogeneity, or true unity [at the comedy’s end], cannot be always maintained: there is bound to be schism. But the sacrificed will be gently discarded, after being duly wrapped in derision, away from our complete sympathy, and the mutually opposed parties will fuse once more in a firm social unity” (102). May’s ingenuity and Januarie’s delusion prevent the open rupture of the “schism,” and Januarie will be “gently discarded” as an object of true desire and affection, but he will never know. Though the immoral Damyan and May triumph, thus suggesting the fabliau-like tale’s challenge to a simple notion of happiness, pragmatic harmony results, which allows the tale’s society to move into the future in relative concord.<sup>9</sup> All the main characters in the tale end up happy, and the Merchant-narrator even says, “Now goode men, I praye yow to be glad” (CT IV 2416). The Merchant-narrator has “quyted” the Clerk, the Wife of Bath, his shadowy, shrewish wife, and even revealed himself as an object for derision. His “quyting” is complete (if not totally in his control), the balance of the “game” returns,

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<sup>9</sup> M. Teresa Tavormina, in the *Explanatory Notes to the Merchant’s Tale in the Riverside Chaucer*, states that arguments still persist over “the tale’s apparent failure of decorum, its mixture of genres, styles, voices, and tones, of Pagan and Christian elements, even of narrative levels” [ . . . ]” (885). However, the harmony that arises between the characters at the end of the tale transcends these noted concerns—concerns particularly regarding lack of artistic unity. The ultimate concord produces comedic unity that overrides the possibly incongruous elements in the tale’s art.



and the Merchant exits the scene—if not happy—at least relieved of his frustration after verbal release through a the tale-telling “game.”

In the *Epilogue* to the *Merchant’s Tale*, Harry Bailly again interprets only a part of the tale’s theme, yet again illustrating his obtuseness: “Lo whiche sleighes and subtilitees / In wommen been! [ . . . ] (CT IV 2421-22). He subsequently states that “Me reweth soore I am unto hire [his wife] teyd” (CT IV 2432). Harry feels the sting of the tale but acknowledges no fault in Januarie. Harry ends the *Epilogue* by stating that someone should tell his wife some of this tale, but not him, because “[ . . . ] eek my wit suffiseth not therto / To tellen al; wherefore my tale is do”<sup>10</sup> (CT IV 2439-40). At least Harry admits his lack of intelligence, though again showing his obtuseness, because he does not realize exactly what escapes his grasp. However, it is of no matter as the dynamic effectively works to produce pragmatic harmony. The Merchant performs his “quyting” (even as it rebounds upon him) and Harry continues as functional and facilitating “Lord of Misrule.” The *Canterbury Tales* proceeds in equilibrium for the moment (though the *Merchant’s Tale* itself requires “quyting” at least in tone), until discord arises among the pilgrims—either because of personality conflict or the theme of a particular tale—and “quyting” will be necessary to restore balance in the outer framework and among the tales themselves. The restoration I will next explore is elaborate and refined, unlike the coarse *Miller’s Tale* and *Reeve’s Tale*, which began the “quyting” (excluding the parodic, but romance-like *Knight’s Tale* that catalyzed the need for “quyting” in the tale-telling “game”). These other tales will bring the *Canterbury*

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<sup>10</sup> Certain scholars do not believe the Merchant is, in fact, the teller of the *Merchant’s Tale*. For example, see Thomas Garbáty “The Monk and the ‘Merchant’s Tale:’ An Aspect of Chaucer’s Building Process in the ‘Canterbury Tales.’” *Modern Philology* 67 (1) 1969: 18-24. *Jstor*. Web. 11 May 2009.

*Tales* to a brilliant, “quyting” climax and leave it, though fragmented—freed from absolute authorial restraint—an imaginatively liberating comedy.

**Chapter Seven- the *Shipman's Tale*, *Sir Thopas*, the *Prologue of the Monk's Tale*, and the *Prologue of the Nun's Priest's Tale*: Smooth and Subtle**

**“Quyttings” Preparatory to Ultimate Comedic Fulfillment**

Fragments V and VI, like the other fragments of the *Canterbury Tales*, contain tales that enact the “quytting” dynamic. For example, from Fragment V, the Franklin’s mature romance, balances the Squire’s immature one, while the moral *Pardoner’s Tale*, from Fragment VI, resonates in a “quytting” manner with tales, such as the amoral Manciple’s, from other fragments. However, Fragments V and VI do not feature humorous tales offering release through laughter. Thus they do not contribute immediately to the sense of freedom from intellectual sobriety which humorous comedy does—a sense of freedom indispensable to the entire comedic effect of the *Canterbury Tales*—even as that comedy transcends the work’s mixed composition in terms of genre. However, Fragment VII “quytts” the relatively serious tone of Fragments V and VI with its first tale—even if this tale—the Shipman’s—brings along no rancorous relations between pilgrims, which the inner fiction or outer dramatic framework must “quyt.”

Fragment VII itself as a whole is a mixed bag in the tonal variety of its tales. The tones range from pathetic in the *Prioress’s Tale*, to didactic in the *Tale of Melibee*, to silly in *Sir Thopas*. However, as in earlier fragments, the tales continue to “quyt” each other and “quyt” the pilgrims who tell these tales. In fact, Fragment VII may offer the most sophisticated “quytting” in the *Canterbury Tales*, thus illustrating the increasing sophistication and strength of the comedy as the entire work nears its fragmented—though paradoxically complete—end. The most famous bit of fragmentation concerns the

*Shipman's Tale*, which Chaucer originally might have planned the Wife of Bath to tell.<sup>1</sup> However, even if this tale is misplaced, Fragment VII still produces a comedic dynamic, which partially works through particularly smooth—if heartless—“quyting.” Thus Chaucer’s complication continues, again pushing the boundaries of the “quyting” process and the comedic dynamic. The *Shipman's Tale*, *Sir Thopas*, the *Prologue of the Monk's Tale*, and the *Prologue of the Nun's Priest's Tale* exhibit this comedic complication, and most importantly, set up the culminating comedy of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*.

The *Shipman's Tale* is similar to the *Merchant's Tale* in that it features a clever wife cuckolding a husband with the help of an able young man. It is helpful to note that this tale, which appears immoral or at least amoral, has a “quyting” resonance with the *Pardoner's Tale* in Fragment VI, which features the punishment of excessive greed and audacity with death. The *Pardoner's Tale* ends in the outer dramatic framework, with the corrupt Pardoner, well after explaining in his prologue how he dupes people with false relics, audaciously asking the pilgrims—Harry Bailly first all—to kiss his false relics:

Come, forth, sire Hoost, and offre first anon,  
And thou shalt kisse the relikes everychon,  
Ye, for a grote! Unbokele anon thy purse.”

(CT VI 943-45)

Harry, outraged at the Pardoner’s audacity, says that

Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech,  
And swere it were a relyk of a seint,  
Though it were with thy fundement depeynt!”

(CT VI 948-50)

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<sup>1</sup> As I mentioned in chapter six, see Thomas J. Garbáty’s article, for one.

Harry's response is scatological, making the equation that the Pardoner's relics are worth a fecal stain. The equation brings to mind the *Summoner's Tale*, which makes clear that Friar John's words are just noxious hot air—a fart. The base physicality brings out the reality of the Pardoner, his *modus operandi*, and his supposedly sacred relics. Bakhtin states that “debasement is the fundamental principle of grotesque realism; all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images” (370-71). To this statement, I add that Chaucer debases the *apparently* “sacred,” in order to bring out the truth, which is an important feature of comedy, even if the villain does not realize, to one degree or another, the truth.

Harry, however, is not done “quyting” the Pardoner for his outrageous revelations and requests. Harry, expressing a hyperbolic wish, rhetorically states that

[ . . . ] I hadde thy coillons in my hond  
in stide of relikes or seintuarie.  
Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;  
They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!”

(*CT* VI 952-56)

Harry's extremely gross and graphic image of the pardoner's testicles<sup>2</sup> in a pig's turd completely debases the image of a sacred relic and also leaves the Pardoner so shocked that he “[ . . . ] answered not a word; / So wrooth he was, no word ne wolde he seye” (*CT* VI 926-27). Harry's bitterly ironic dismissal of the Pardoner's relics have so incensed the Pardoner that he cannot speak, although, since “toord” rhymes with “word,” it is apparent that the Pardoner's words are an equivalent of a turd, thus worthless. The equation of

Friar John's sermonizing and Thomas's fart comes to mind, and the "quyting" that these equations produce. However, as with the Summoner, the Pardoner's anger over Harry's "quyting" of him almost destroys the "game" and therefore almost turns the verbal exchange into a violent physical exchange. To forestall violent conflict, in which the "game" becomes reality, the aristocratic Knight—a hierarchical safety valve who guarantees the comedic process—steps between the Pardoner and Harry and exclaims, "Namooore of this, for it is right ynough!" (CT VI 962). In other words, the situation is balanced—right enough—so Harry and the Pardoner should cease their conflict. The Pardoner intentionally has revealed himself as a fraud (though in a way "quyted" himself with an essentially moral tale), and Harry has expressed his anger at the Pardoner's presumption. As the tale ends, the Knight seals the peace and allows the "game," even as arbiter, precludes his absolute rule of the contest:

[ . . . ] sire Hoost [ . . . ]  
[ . . . ] kisse the Pardoner.  
And Pardoner [ . . . ] drawe thee neer,  
And, as we diden, lat us laughe and pleye."

(CT VI 964-67)

The Knight brings the open conflict to an end by directing the Pardoner and Harry to kiss, an act that will allow, according to the Knight, the company to laugh and play—key components of a "game"—as they did previously during the tale-telling contest. Harry, the equivocal and unstable Lord of Misrule, has fallen from his (supposedly) unbiased

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<sup>2</sup> As I have noted in previous chapters, see Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, for insightful points regarding castration and scatology and their relations with language, the essence of the fabliaux, and poetry

position as judge and entered the “game” due to his anger at the Pardoner’s outrageous words. However, the spirit of comedy transcends even the momentary collapse of the rules. Harry falls into the “game”—and the Knight, retaining empowering emotional distance, restores the balance so that the “quyting” restores momentary harmony, and the *Canterbury Tales* can move toward its ultimate harmony. The *Pardoner’s Tale* ends with the pilgrim-narrator stating that “Anon they [the Pardoner and Harry] kiste, and ryden forth hir weye” (CT VI 969). The equestrian progress toward Canterbury physically resumes, symbolic of the “game” resuming. However, even with the Knight’s restoration of pragmatic comedic harmony, the *Pardoner’s Tale’s* substance—and Harry’s gross, graphic, and threatening words in response to the Pardoner’s outrageous and presumptuous claims—require the “quyting” mechanism. A tale such as the *Shipman’s*—though in a separate fragment—provides balance, which the “game” needs once again to restore its equilibrium within the internal, tale-telling context of the competition. The power of the “quyting” dynamic is such that it is not necessary for one tale to follow another in narrative sequence in order for the “quyting” to find its mark in apparently unconnected parts of the *Canterbury Tales*.

*The Shipman’s Tale* begins Fragment VII. However, as I have stated, controversy has existed for many years regarding the originally intended teller of the tale, the Wife of Bath being the most likely candidate.<sup>3</sup> The Wife certainly may have been the originally intended teller of this fabliau-like tale. However, in the comedic, “quyting” spirit of the *Canterbury Tales*, and the freedom that the work’s fragmentation offers, the *Shipman’s Tale* performs its functions regardless of its teller. In other words, the comedic dynamic

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in general.

transcends the concern regarding which pilgrim Chaucer originally intended to tell the tale. This is not to say that the teller is unimportant. Certainly, one can gain more insights into the Wife of Bath's character if one believes Alison is actually telling the *Shipman's Tale*, a story about a wife tricking a husband, even as she has described apparently honest, trusting marriages at the conclusions of her own conventionally assigned *Prologue* and *Tale*. But the *Shipman's Tale* performs its function because it especially "quyts" the *Pardoner's Tale*—which contains bloodshed, rioting, and cursing—and Harry's final graphic, rhetorical desire for the Pardoner's testicles enshrined in a pig's turd—with a tale that eliminates almost all graphic descriptions of physicality. As John Finlayson states, "[a]s a tale, its 'meaning' lies not in its fulfillment of the norms of the genre but in its displacement of these by focus on the verbal exchanges between the characters and the rich ambivalence of their language" (336). Thus the *Shipman's Tale* "quyts" the *Pardoner's Tale's* graphic substance with a narrative that subsumes concrete physicality in verbal subtlety. In addition, the tale is another complication of comedy, whereby pragmatic harmony triumphs in a smooth fashion without precedent in the *Canterbury Tales* by the tale's end, despite the immorality of the young people's actions. Finally, the *Shipman's Tale* "quyts" the Pardoner's moral tale (and other moral tales, such as the *Franklin's*, with its faithful wife) with this immorality.

The tale starts out with a "marchant whilom dwelled at Seint-Denys [ . . . ]" (*CT* VII 1). It is easy to imagine that the Shipman, though lacking any prologue and thus words to other pilgrims, is intended upon "quyting" the Merchant who might have cheated the him during their business transactions. Robert L. Chapman states that "[w]e know from the

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<sup>3</sup> For example, William W. Lawrence, in "Chaucer's Shipman's Tale," *Speculum* 33 (1) 1958: 56-68, sees the tale's tone and focus particularly appropriate for an assertive, worldly woman such as Alison of Bath.



General Prologue that his relations with the worshipful chapmen are likely to have been soured by his habit of stealing their wine” (5). The “quyting” of the Merchant becomes more likely if one considers the second line of the tale where the narrator states that the Merchant was “[ . . . ] riche [ . . . ] for which men helde him wys” (CT VII 2). Thus we can envision the Shipman preparing to satirize and “quyt” the Merchant and merchants in general because they believe their money provides them with wisdom (or that society believes them to have this wealth-acquired wisdom). The tale will show the merchant of “Seint-Denys” as unwise and unwary, thus fulfilling the “quyting.” No matter if Chaucer originally intended the speaker to be the Shipman or the Wife of Bath, the merchant of “Seint-Denys” is “quyted” in a comedy that, though similar in some ways to the *Merchant’s Tale*, is gentle—in the devious machinations of the monk and wife—and thus “quyting” of the brutal but moral *Pardoner’s Tale* and other moral tales in the *Canterbury Tales*. Again, the comedic dynamic, incorporating elements of fabliaux, transcends the concerns regarding the tale’s teller.

The narrator subsequently describes the merchant’s wife as having “excellent beautee,” (CT VII 3), implying her youth and desirability. However, he also describes her as being “[ . . . ] compaignable and revelous” (CT VII 4). Thus she enjoys a good time, and the audience or reader by now should recognize these adjectives for the attractive wife as signs that she is capable, if not also desirous, of cuckolding her supposedly wise merchant-husband. Cathy Hume notes that “[t]he entertaining, sociable side of the wife’s personality is central to her presentation, and from the very outset there is a suggestion that these qualities may tip over into the illicit: *compaignable* and *revelous* could mean mere conviviality, or, in this context, juxtaposed with her beauty, could be euphemisms

for promiscuity” (139). The narrator subsequently notes that the wife’s convivial personality “[ . . . ] causeth more dispence / Than worth is al the chiere and reverence” (*CT* VII 5-6) This noting again indicates that the wife is going to cause the merchant trouble—more trouble than she is worth, and in the merchant’s mind—profit, worth—is very important, if not the most important concern in his life. The eventual cuckolding of the merchant thus criticizes subtly the merchant’s focus upon his material wealth and profit. However, Helen Fulton states that “[s]ince merchants as a group were fundamental to [an] [ . . . ] urban economy, the temptation to read the *Shipman’s Tale* simply as a satire of merchants or merchant values *in toto* should probably be resisted” (312). The reader, instead, should look at the tale in part as an exemplum against aligning oneself against powerful, transcendent, and irresistible comedic forces, as the merchant unwittingly does.

Lines twelve to nineteen contain the often-noted feminine pronouns which indicate the tale-teller is female. Certainly this may be true, but the speaker—Shipman impersonating a woman or Wife of Bath—again foreshadows the trouble that this wife, and wives in general, may bring:

He moot us clothe, and he moot us arraye,  
Al for his owene worshipe richely,  
In which array we daunce jolily.

(*CT* VII 12-14)

Thus husbands must clothe wives richly in order to bring honor upon *themselves*. This stated (if untrue) situation will drive the cuckolding which the monk and the wife perpetrate upon the merchant. Since the expenditure for money is a sterile process, the

comedic nature of this tale implicitly criticizes this attitude and works against those who practice it or believe in it.

The narrator then quickly introduces Daun John into the tale, who is “[ . . . ] yonge [ . . . ] [and] so fair of face [ . . . ]” (CT VII 28). Thus the tale supplies the young man who will cuckold the older man, even if this younger man is a cleric. We also learn that the monk and the merchant share a common childhood: “Were bothe two yborn in o village, / The monk hym claymeth as for cosyngage” (CT VII 35-36). The monk and the merchant therefore have a history and a bond of a common hometown. However, since Daun John will cuckold the merchant even with their affinity, Damyan—a household servant of Januarie—comes to mind as well. The cuckolding will be worse than in the *Miller’s Tale* or *Reeve’s Tale* because the male perpetrator is a trusted insider. Yet the *Shipman’s Tale*, even though it contains a trusted insider as deceiver as in the *Merchant’s Tale*, differs from the *Merchant’s Tale* in the portrayal of the cuckolding because the *Shipman’s Tale* must “quyt” the sexually graphic *Merchant’s Tale* and the brutal, yet moral *Pardoner’s Tale*. Thus the *Shipman’s Tale* avoids the graphic physicality, which the *Merchant’s Tale* and *Pardoner’s Tale* both supply in varying degrees. In other words, the *Shipman’s Tale* balances the *Pardoner’s Tale*’s violence and scatology and the *Merchant’s Tale*’s graphic sexuality with *double entendre* and minimal physical description, especially of sex. Daun John, who often comes to the merchant’s house, also brings to mind Friar John from the *Summoner’s Tale*, who is a familiar guest at Thomas’s house. However, in this subtle comedy, the merchant invites Daun John into his home, thus inviting the serpent into his marital garden. Daun John is neither an annoying, unwanted guest nor a crafty interloper who literally has climbed a wall to penetrate a

man's private paradise. Daun John, whom the narrator ironically calls "noble" (*CT* VII 62), has "licence" (*CT* VII 63) from his "abbot" (*CT* VII 63) to travel outside the abbey. Daun John brings to mind the Monk of the pilgrimage who is also "An outridere [ . . . ]" (*CT* I 166) of questionable morals, especially sexual ones. Thus Daun John, within the *Shipman's Tale*, explodes his containment in a discreet tale and displays multiple valences to other elements of the *Canterbury Tales*. Comedy's abundance ripples through the work and allows the reader the freedom to connect these elements that Daun John's characterization presents.

The merchant's character also contains these kinds of multiple connections to a degree. For example, after the narrator leaves Daun John enjoying the merchant's hospitality, the narrator states that on "The third day, this marchant up ariseth [ . . . ]" (*CT* VII 75). The allusion to Christ's resurrection is obvious, but since the merchant is merely a man—and a flawed one at that—it is a debased allusion. The merchant will arise not to bring redemption to fallen humanity, but to chart his material wealth, as he goes to his treasure room:

Ful rich was his tresor and his hord,  
For which ful faste his countour-door he shette;  
And eek he nolde that no man sholde hyme lette  
Of his acountes, for the meene tyme [ . . . ]

(*CT* VII 84-87)

The merchant in this instance brings to mind Januarie, in the *Merchant's Tale*, who jealously walls May in his private garden and keeps the key to himself. Thus the merchant in the *Shipman's Tale* shows literal *avaritia*, as Januarie shows figurative

*avaritia* in his effort to keep May as a physical possession rather than a thinking, feeling woman. It is no coincidence that, while the merchant is jealously counting his money in his counting room, Daun John “[ . . . ] in the garden walketh to and fro [ . . . ] (CT VII 90) when “This goode wyf cam walkynge pryvely / Into the garden, there he walketh softe [ . . . ] (CT VII 92-93). This garden, though, is unbarred, and Daun John, trusted as even Damyan is not, strolls at leisure and meets the wife, who is taking a young female ward for a walk. The difference in situation between Januarie’s garden and the merchant’s illustrates a prime difference between the two tales: the *Shipman’s Tale*, unlike the *Merchant’s Tale*, has none of the roughness that the latter contains. In the *Merchant’s Tale*, Damyan and May must devise a stratagem in order to penetrate Januarie’s defenses. In the *Shipman’s Tale*, Daun John and the wife need no stratagems. The garden is open and provides easy opportunities for the adulterers’ machinations. Finlayson states that one may interpret this ease (and ease of deception) perhaps as “Chaucer’s very subtle presentation of the ‘reality’ of bourgeois ethics—a pleasant world of simple delusion and almost harmless deceit whose only important sin is its absence of higher values, secular or religious” (349). Thus the opening tale in Fragment VII “quyts” the *Merchant’s Tale*, with its *hortus irruptus*, and the *Pardoner’s Tale*, with its multiple deaths and with Harry Bailey’s gross, graphic, rhetorical wish for the Pardoner’s testicles in a pig’s turd. As the *Canterbury Tales* moves to its conclusion, a comedy such as the *Shipman’s Tale* paves the way for ultimate harmony with its easy deception, and, as we will see, lack of onerous consequences—or even physical or emotional pain for the victim.

Daun John opens his conversation with the wife by implicitly declaring his virility:

“[ . . . ] it oghte ynough suffise  
Five houres for to slepe upon a nyght,  
But it were for an old appalled wight,  
As been thise wedded men, that lye and dare

(*CT VII 100-03*)

Daun John claims that, unlike old, married men who lie abed for an unspecified, long time, he only needs five hours of sleep a night. The implication is clear—if not quite like the implicitly amorous “[ . . . ] smale foweles that maken melodye, / That slepen al the nyght with open ye” (*CT I 9-10*)—Daun John is their kin in his ability to copulate throughout the night. Thus Daun John is similar to Nicholas, John and Aleyn, and Damyan, whose energy overmatches their married male dupes/adversaries. In the *Shipman’s Tale*, the narrator never states that the merchant is old, but, lacking the adjective “young” (*CT VII 28*) attached to Daun John, we can assume that the merchant is the older man. As Daun John continues his conversation with the wife, he further pushes forward his sexual agenda. After asking the wife why she looks so pale, he answers himself by stating that

[ . . . ] certes [ . . . ] oure goode man  
Hath you laboured sith the nyght began  
That yow were nede to resten hastily.”

(*CT VII 107-09*)

Daun John’s implication of the wife’s fatigue due to the previous night’s sex is clear, and he blushes after completing his sentence. His face does not “[ . . . ] wax al reed” (*CT VII 111*) because he is embarrassed, but because the implication of the wife’s sexual activity

stimulates his sexual desire for her. However, unlike Damyan in the *Merchant's Tale*, who pines in lust for May, Daun John's cheeks merely grow red, and he begins thinking of ways to fulfill his sexual desire for the wife. Again, the *Shipman's Tale* displays the elements of comedy losing their extremes expressions even as the comedic dynamic moves ahead with its usual, unstoppable force. Pearsall states that "[t]he tale is remarkably free from the amplifications and rhetorical extravagances that characterized the other three fabliaux, and there is no moment in it when courtly values are invoked or parodied" (210). It is as if at this point in the *Canterbury Tales*, the comedic dynamic is so strong that it is flattening the extreme manifestations of comedic elements in the previous fabliau-like tales such as the *Miller's* and *Reeve's* tales from Fragment I, which began the story-telling "game." At the same time, the *Shipman's Tale* is "quyting" the brutal and finally gross *Pardoner's Tale* with its smooth and debonair machinations. Even if the Shipman did not tell the tale, the positioning of the *Shipman's Tale* works beautifully to restore the tale-telling "game's" balance at this juncture and subtly display the increasingly mollifying effects of transcendent comedy.

The wife, if not already devising plans to cuckold the merchant and thus push forward the comedic dynamic, denies that she has been laboring all night. In fact, she states unequivocally that "In al the reawme of France is ther no wyf / That lasse lust hath to that sory pley" (*CT* VII 116-17). She admits that she gets no pleasure from the "sory pley" the merchant's lovemaking entails. Thus, even though she does not immediately plan an assignation with Daun John, she expresses dissatisfaction with her husband's sexual performance, adding yet another element taken from fabliaux and another

component in the comedic dynamic, which will unite “young” Daun John and the “faire” (*CT VII 112*) but dissatisfied wife.

Since Daun John has implied his sexual virility, and the wife has stated her implicit sexual dissatisfaction with her husband, they agree to tell each other further secrets, but in an explicit way this time. The wife, following Daun John’s oath of secrecy, in turn swears that

Ne shal I nevere, for to goon to helle,  
Biwreye a word of thyng that ye me telle,  
Nat for no cosynage, ne alliance,  
But verrailly for love and affiance.”

(*CT VII 137-40*)

The wife effectively plights her troth with Daun John, at least for the purpose of mutually revealing each other’s secrets. We therefore have two young would-be lovers revealing the truth to each other. The young couple’s mutual revelation of truth is a prime feature of comedy, and, even though Daun John and the wife are immediately concerned only with trading secrets—not expressing illicit sexual desires—the effect is comedic. Daun John and the wife will work together in order to unite themselves as a couple, at least temporarily, if not in eternal bonds of marriage or a covert liaison. The narrator subsequently states that “Thus been they sworn, and heer upon they kiste, / And ech of hem tolde what hem liste” (*CT VII 141-42*). At this time, the kiss may only be a physical gesture of agreement, but it also foreshadows the cuckolding they will perpetrate upon the merchant. It is appropriate in a tale featuring a merchant—a man of commerce—that the wife and Daun John seal their truth-telling agreement with a contractual kiss. Yet this



kiss guarantees not an exchange of money and inanimate goods, but truth and eventually bodies. Lee Patterson interprets the tale as exploring the “correspondence between the public world of commerce and the private world of marital negotiation” (349). Thus the kiss between Daun John and the wife represents the osmosis of these two worlds.

However, in this particular case, the urge to couple physically transcends the marriage contract. Patterson further states that “[i]f marital relations are a specifically bourgeois issue claims the *Tale*, then they can be represented in typically bourgeois terms and their problems will yield to the practices that prevail within the bourgeois world” (348). This permeability of the boundaries between the world of commerce and the world of marital contracts also allows the comedic dynamic to move towards its conclusion in the tale, for the wife’s desire for money and Daun John’s desire for sex eventually bring together these two enterprising young people.

The contract, which Daun John and the wife make, also transcends any implicit or explicit contracts that they have with the merchant. Soon after Daun John and the wife kiss to seal their mutual trust, the wife tells the monk that if she had the time, she would tell him “What I have suffred sith I was a wyf / With myn housbonde, al be he your cosyn” (*CT* VII 146-47). The wife states she would ignore the fact that Daun John and the merchant are related—break an implicit rule against speaking ill of another’s family member—if only she had time to do so. She is willing to break rules in order to satisfy her new, transcendent contract with Daun John. However, Daun John obviates the need for any verbal forbearance on her part by responding that

“He is na moore cosyn unto me

Than is this leef that hangeth on the tree!

I clepe hym so, by Seint Denys of Fraunce,  
To have the moore cause of aqueyntaunce,  
Of yow, which I have loved specially  
Aboven alle wommen sikerly.

(*CT* VII 149-54)

Daun John reveals that he is not the merchant's "cosyn"—a family relation of some indeterminate kind—but only calls him that in order to ingratiate himself with the merchant and the household with the goal of being close to the wife. The monk thus uses the word "cosyn" to cozen the merchant and thus break the contract of trust and friendship he implicitly has with him. Karla Taylor states that "[w]ith these words, a new English pun is born: the monk proposes to cozen or deceive the merchant, thus taking advantage of the intimacy afforded by 'cosynage' to betray the very bonds the word designates" (308). Daun John and the wife's deception of the merchant proceeds because, according to the wife "Myn housbond is to me the worste man / That evere was sith that the world began" (*CT* VII 161-62). The wife criticizes the merchant for "his nygardye" (*CT* VII 172) and states that "[ . . . ] he is noght worth at al / In no degree the value of a flye" (*CT* VII 171-72). The wife rates her husband as nothing, and the husband has left the wife alone, unguarded—as if she, too, were worth only a fly. The merchant's lack of circumspection is a great fault, which will help produce the "quyting" in the tale, involving Daun John's sexual satisfaction, the wife's material gain, and thus the merchant's defeat as a husband with exclusive sexual rights to his wife. Despite the audience or reader never knowing if the merchant is actually as bad as the wife claims, the wife's words make explicit the comedic component, at least on a verbal level, that the

merchant is a deficient man—at least in his marital relationship with his wife—who deserves his cuckolding. The audience or reader also can criticize the merchant for naïvely inviting the young, attractive monk to spend time with his wife while he is away on business.<sup>4</sup> Thus, if the merchant is not a bad man, he is a man unaware of the dangers that lurk close to him, in a similar way to the manifoldly blind Januarie. This blindness to truth deserves punishment, even if harsh, at least if it brings together the young people—no matter if the wife herself realizes in the end she has been duped by her young lover.

The wife justifies her complaint against her husband shortly after criticizing his niggardly nature by telling Daun John that

For his honour, myself for to arraye,  
A Sondag next I moste nedes paye  
An hundred frankes, or ellis I am lorn.

(*CT* VII 179-81)

The wife needs money to keep herself looking good for her husband, but her husband is too cheap to pay for her fine dress and appearance. The wife's complaint magnifies the apparent shortcomings of the merchant, since, as an apparently successful man of commerce, he should have enough surplus money to help his wife look good. The merchant, therefore, displays *avaritia*, at least according to the wife. Her complaint elaborates the negative qualities of her husband and therefore sets him up for a comedic fall, which will include the sexual liaison of Daun John and the wife and his loss of a hundred francs—ultimately to his wife. Again, though the audience or reader may never

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hahn notes that the Merchant seems to be involved in complex financial dealings, which the prohibition against usury necessitated, and thus his association with “the newly flourishing fourteenth-century money market” (238)—not technically usurious—might still serve to pain him as a man too concerned with money and its unnatural manipulation and thus deserving of cuckolding—comedic justice.

know if the merchant is actually this egregious, the wife's words set up the dynamic for the comedic union. She next comes straight to the point with Daun John, asking him to "Lene me this somme, or ellis moot I deye" (CT VII 186). Daun John, perceiving the opportunity for his eventual sexual gratification, states that "I have [ . . . ] on yow so greet a routhe / That I yow swere, and plighte you my trouthe [ . . . ]" (CT VII 197-98), again using the language of love to finalize a commercial and sexual transaction. After guaranteeing that he will deliver to the wife a hundred franks, "[ . . . ] he caughte hire by the flankes, / And hire embraceth harde, and kisse hire ofte" (CT VII 202-03). Since they have sealed the deal, they participate in a physical embrace and kiss, which foreshadows the sexual union to come.

When the wife next sees her husband, he is still busy in his counting-house, and she inquires, "How longe tyme wol ye rekene and caste / Youre sommes, and youre bookes, and youre thynges?" (CT VII 216-17). The merchant is too busy counting his money, figuring out his monetary profits and losses, to realize that he is losing the exclusive physical profit of his wife. Again, though the audience or reader does not know if the merchant is an egregiously bad character, his blindness to his wife's machinations places him in thematic kinship with Januarie. The merchant subsequently responds to his wife's rhetorical criticism/question by asserting that "[ . . . ] litel kanstow devyne / The curious bisynesse that we have" (CT VII 224-25). It is dramatically ironic that the merchant claims his wife cannot understand the "curious" business of commerce, when the merchant himself does not understand the "curious" business of cuckoldry linked with

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See "Money, Sexuality, Wordplay, and Context in the *Shipman's Tale*" in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, 235-249.

commerce—a kind of prostitution—in which his wife and Daun John are involved. The merchant further explains his assiduous concern with his business by stating that

Upon this queynte world t'avyse me,  
For everemoore we moote stonde in drede  
Of hap and fortune in our chapmanhede.

(*CT* VII 236-38)

Yet again, dramatic irony arises because the merchant does not realize that the “hap,”—chance—which he dreads, lies within his own home, where commerce has invaded the domestic sphere along with the traditional comedic lust of the young man for the young wife. Moreover, the merchant uses the word “queynte,” which is also a slang term for female genitalia. The world certainly is “queynte”—“tricky” (Benson note p. 206)—when the world of commerce and lust mix so smoothly as in this tale.

The fluidity with which the two spheres of activity—commerce and domesticity—combine is the primary reason why this tale “quyts” the brutal *Pardoner’s Tale* with its gross ending featuring Harry Bailey’s vulgarity and implied wish for the Pardoner’s castration. As the *Canterbury Tales* continues to elaborate its “game,” the *Shipman’s Tale* displays the ameliorating transcendence of comedy. The spheres of commerce and domesticity mix in Daun John and the wife’s agreement, and as we will see, the process and consequences of cuckoldry involve no violence or even momentary recognition—as in Januarie’s witnessing of Damyan and May coupling. If the *Canterbury Tales* features a persistent “quyting” dynamic between tales and tellers, it also features an escalation of comedy’s power. Thus the *Canterbury Tales* is not only a literary manifestation of Boethius’s Wheel of Fortune, but an ultimately linear movement toward

harmony, providing not a static vision of prosperity turning to woe—as in the *Monk's Tale*—but a process toward a pragmatic harmony, which ends in a place better than where it started. This movement is appropriate since the pilgrimage, after all, is to a saint's tomb where miracles of healing supposedly occur.

As for the *Shipman's Tale*, it is now left for Daun John and the wife to start the smooth engine of cuckoldry that the tale features. Daun John disingenuously asks the merchant, his “Cosyn” (CT VII 257), for a hundred “frankes” (CT VII 271) ostensibly in order to buy “[ . . . ] certein beestes” (CT VII 272). Humorously, Daun John is not being “frank” for his “frankes.” The pun, one of the many in the tale, shows comedy's abundance and freedom, where even words multiply beyond the speaker's control or the listener's comprehension. Also again, the sphere of business enters the sphere of domesticity, where Daun John claims a familial—or at least familiar—relationship with the merchant in order to “cozen” him out of money (“frankes” also rhymes with the wife's “flankes”—a synecdoche for Daun John's ultimate goal). The merchant responds sincerely to Daun John's request by stating definitively that “My golde is youres, whan that it yow leste, / And nat oonly my gold, but my chaffare” (CT VII 284-85). The merchant, dramatically ironic yet again, does not realize that his “chaffare”—his wife—also will belong to Daun John, at least for a time. One can link the merchant with Januarie in this regard, since he, like Januarie, thinks of his wife as a possession, as she has stated that she must have money to look good for *his* honor. The merchant's misapprehension of his wife's being thus is another factor that will produce a comedically just fall.

The merchant leaves for Flanders, thereby leaving the house open to the trusted deceiver. Very simply, Daun John gives the wife the hundred franks, “And shortly to the point [ . . . ]” (CT VII 313) the narrator describes the result and climax of the sexual/commercial transaction:

This faire wyf accorde with daun John  
That for this hundred frankes he sholde al nyght  
Have hire in his armes bolt upright;  
And this acord parfourned was in dede  
In myrthe al nyght a bisy lyf they lede

(CT VII 315-19)

Unlike the cuckoldry in the *Merchant's Tale*, where Damyan “throng” into May, Daun John and the wife only perform the “dede.” The narrator provides no graphic verbs such as “throng” and little visual description to highlight the physicality of Daun John and the wife’s sexual encounter. Instead the narrator very briefly notes that Daun John will have the wife “al nyght [ . . . ] in his armes bolt upright [ . . . ],” which last phrase Benson glosses as “flat on her back” (note p. 207). The description does not explicitly mention sex, but only implies it through metonymic association. The association highlights the overall amelioration of fabliau elements under comedy’s influence as the *Canterbury Tales* elaborates its “game” and move toward its comedic ends. This association also highlights the presence of commercialism in Daun John and the wife’s contract, since the metonymic association substitutes for an explicit description of sex, as money substitutes for the actual material one might buy. Additionally, Daun John and the wife substitute

lust for love, but under the ameliorating effect of comedy, this substitution of loveless sex is better than no sex—or no material gain for the wife—at all.

The tale adds to its comedic climax by necessitating a need for Daun John—and subsequently the wife—to account for the hundred franks to the duped merchant. Upon the merchant's return, Daun John tells him that

[ . . . ] I took unto oure dame,  
Youre wyf, at hom, the same gold ageyn  
Upon youre bench; she woot it wel [ . . . ]

(*CT VII 356-58*)

Daun John then leaves to travel with his abbot. He escapes without any penalty for his cuckolding of his “cosyn,” whose wife he has called “oure dame,” since, in this comedic mode, the merchant unwittingly shared his abundance—not only his money, but his desirable wife. Moreover, as the comedic dynamic flows, the merchant himself in his recent business dealings will gain “[ . . . ] in that viage / A thousand frankes aboven al his costage” (*CT VII 371-72*). Thus even the comedic dupe wins something, even as he has lost the exclusive sexual right to his wife. Frye states that “[c]omedy usually moves toward a happy ending, and the normal response of the audience to a happy ending is ‘this should be,’ which sounds like a moral judgment. So it is, except that it is not moral in the restricted sense, but social” (167). Since the merchant is concerned with his finances, his reward, like Antonio’s in *The Merchant of Venice*, is financial reward, as the spirit of abundance in comedy generally provides reward for all at or near its conclusion—even if the reward is not necessarily “moral” but a “social,” pragmatic one. This rewarding of all is an important feature fostering ultimate harmony.



Yet, the comedy has to bring one more defeat to the merchant, even as he stands to make a lot of money in his business dealings. After Daun John explains how he gave the loaned franks to the wife, the merchant goes to the wife “[ . . . ] and maketh it ful tough” (*CT* VII 379) for her as he questions and criticizes her regarding her financial dealings with the now safely absent Daun John. The wife, like May, escapes this possibly dangerous situation by using her verbal skills to smooth over any conflicts which her arrangement with Daun John might have caused. After the merchant’s objections to the secrecy of her financial dealings—“a manere straungnesse” (*CT* VII 386), as he humorously understates—with Daun John, she responds:

What! Yvel thedam on his monkes snowte!  
For, God it woot, I wende, withouten doute,  
That he hadde yeve it me bycause of yow  
To doon therwith myn honour and my prow,  
For cosynage, and eek for beele cheere  
That he hath had ful ofte tymes heere.

(*CT* VII 405-10)

The wife defends herself by first cursing the monk because he told the merchant that he gave the wife a hundred franks “By redy token” (*CT* VII 390), “in cash (by clear evidence)” (Benson note p. 209). The wife has spent the hundred franks on new clothes so has no “clear evidence” that Daun John gave her the money, thus raising doubt in the merchant’s mind about the money’s ultimate destination. However, the wife swears on God that Daun John gave it to her to “array” herself to increase her husband’s honor since the merchant has been so nice to Daun John. Thus the wife has spent her husband’s

money for the sake of appearance that increases the husband's honor. Again, the transcending, increasing comedic dynamic illustrates its force. The merchant's money has produced sex for Daun John, new clothes for the wife, and honor for the merchant. Money produces this harmony between all three, even though the price is the cuckoldry of the merchant. However, he is unaware, and so—like old carpenter John—will suffer no more. Moreover, the wife asserts to her husband that “Ye han mo slakkere dettours than am I!” (CT VII 413), suggesting that her spending is relatively small. The merchant, however, does not understand that—consciously or not—the wife is referring to Daun John as a “dettour” who will never be able to pay back the merchant for his sexual liberty with the wife. The wife skillfully continues her defense and tells her husband to “[ . . . ] score it upon my taille” (CT VII 416), with the pun on “taille” meaning both “tally” and “tail” (a metonymy for female genitalia and/or sex), with the additional sense that her explanation is a lie—only a *tale*. Again, the merchant does not understand. Roger A. Ladd states that “[w]here January chooses to believe May's story over his own restored chance for vision, the *Shipman's Tale* merchant's acceptance remains bound up in his inability to read the puns at the end of the tale [ . . . ]” (29). Thus the comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* proceeds from Januarie's momentary realization to the merchant's “inability” to realize. The increasing force of the comedy has smoothed a bump in the road toward harmony. In fact, the wife states that she will only pay back her husband “abedde” (CT VII 424) and asks him to “forygve” (CT VII 425) her. The merchant's final words in response are

“[ . . . ] I foryeve it thee;  
But, by thy lyf, ne be namoore so large,

Keep bet they good, this yeve I thee in charge.”

(*CT VII 430-32*)

The merchant forgives her, thus displaying a prime feature of many comedies, but advises her to curb her spending, and “Keep bet thy good,” again speaking with dramatic irony, since she has given her goods, her body, to Daun John. The tale ends with all characters reconciled and happy. The narrator finally states, “Thus endeth my tale, and God us sende / Taillynge ynough unto our lyves ende. Amen” (*CT VII 433-34*). Again, the pun on “Taillynge” (which Benson defines as “credit,” note p. 208) arises even as he asks God for it, thus blaspheming implicitly. However, in this smooth comedy, where sex and business mingle, the narrator can mix sexual desire with a desire for God’s grace. No disruption between the pilgrims occur, and in the link between the *Shipman’s Tale* and the *Prioress’s Tale*, Harry only reaches the conclusion that a husband should “Draweth no monkes moore unto your in” (*CT VII 441*). Thus Harry at least realizes that the tale contains an important element of fabliaux, if not understanding the more subtle comment upon the intermingling of commerce and sex. However, Harry also alerts husbands to

[ . . . ] beth ware of swich a jape!

The monk putte in the mannes hood an ape,

And in his wyves eek, by Seint Austyn!

(*CT VII 438-440*)

Harry calls Daun John and the wife’s deception a “jape,” again illustrating the smooth operation of the tale’s plot and the insulating context of the tale-telling “game,” where the “joke” allows the tale to conclude with harmony for all involved internally and externally—characters and listeners. Harry additionally puns on “hood” and “ape,”

implicitly substituting vagina and penis for “hood” and “ape,” reinforcing the tale’s major point concerning permeability of apparent boundaries and the interchangeable nature of apparently separate concerns such as commerce and sex. His conscious interpretation, though, remains on the carnal level, as he is no sophisticated exegete. Harry only expects “a tale of solace [such as the *Shipman’s*] to be salacious” (Gaylord 231), rather than a subtle mixture of “sentence and “solace,” as many individual tales in the *Canterbury Tales* are. However, he is capable enough to allow the game and the “quyting” to continue. He finally directs the Prioress to tell a tale, which will turn out to be appropriately pious, in contrast to the *Shipman’s Tale*, with its blurred morality (despite its comedy), thus moving the “game” forward in balance and harmony.

After the pious and pathetic *Prioress’s Tale*, which one might call a Christian comedy because the murdered “litel clergeon” (*CT* VII 503) becomes a martyr and thus a saint, Harry notices Chaucer-the-pilgrim staring at the ground. Though, as I have stated, one can call the *Prioress’s Tale* a Christian comedy, it contains no mirth or liberating laughter (after all, it does “quyt” the humor of the *Shipman’s Tale*). Thus Harry and the pilgrims need an antidote for the previous sad tale, which also features savage, un-Christian revenge upon the Jewish population inhabiting the unnamed city in Asia Minor. Harry immediately dispels the somber mood cast by the *Prioress’s Tale*, by stating that Chaucer-the-pilgrim “[ . . . ] in the wast is shape as wel as I [ . . . ]” (*CT* VII 700). Thus Harry makes a joke, partially at his own expense to begin the necessary “quyting” that will balance the previous tale with “solas.” Chaucer the pilgrim, after Harry makes some more “japes” about his small size and “abstracted” (Benson note p. 213) demeanor, agrees to tell a tale, though with the warning and hope that Harry and the pilgrimage will

“[ . . . ] ne beth nat yvele ypayd,  
For oother tale certes kan I noon,  
But of a rym I lerned long agoon.”

(*CT* VII 707-09)

It is easy to conceive Chaucer-the-pilgrim as a diffident, preoccupied, and distant member of the pilgrimage, trying to remain in the background in order to avoid Harry's "japes" and refrain from telling a tale for as long as possible. After all, Chaucer-the-pilgrim asks Harry and the pilgrimage not to be angry at his tale, since it is the only one he knows. Thus he immediately implies that his tale is not a good one. Yet Harry is not bright enough to catch the warning and responds, "Ye, that is good [ . . . ] now shul we heere / Som deyntee thyng, me thynketh by his cheere" (*CT* VII 710-11). Benson glosses "deyntee" as "excellent" (p. 215). Harry expects an "excellent" tale because of Chaucer-the-pilgrim's "cheere." This last word is ambiguous, but Benson variously defines it as "facial expression," "outward appearance," "mood," "good humor," and several other similar terms (1228). Thus Harry, ever the carnal reader, judges Chaucer-the-pilgrim and his upcoming tale on Chaucer-the-pilgrim's appearance and the few words he has spoken. Harry does not understand or take seriously Chaucer-the-pilgrim's warning, and thus has little justification for being displeased with the subsequent tale.

I have so far analyzed Chaucer-the-pilgrim's response as one of diffidence. However, the diffidence may only be a persona. This seemingly hesitant and meek pilgrim is already beginning his "quyting" of Harry, even as he prepares to "quyt" the *Prioress's Tale*. Harry has called him a fat little "poppet" (*CT* VII 701) who is too "abstracted" to assertively engage in the tale-telling "game." Thus Chaucer-the-pilgrim

prepares to tell a tale that will “quyt” Harry’s jokes directed at him while maintaining the balance of the tale-telling “game.” Chaucer-the-pilgrim will tell an intentionally bad tale, but telling it as if he is completely in thrall to the equivocal “Lord of Misrule,” thus highlighting Harry’s necessarily unstable rule and illustrating that all the pilgrims, even the chief arbiter, are subject to the “game” which at times brings disparagement upon the disparager, as with the Merchant and his tale. In returning Harry’s “jape,” Chaucer-the-pilgrim “quyts” Harry—even as he outdoes him, as the Reeve outdoes Robyn. However, the comedy can contain the paradox of unequal “quyting” as it moves to ensure pragmatic harmony, which, though not perfect, allows the pilgrims to progress toward their goal in relative concord.

Chaucer-the-pilgrim’s tale is *Sir Thopas*, which, though aborted and thus without a comedic resolution, “quyts” Harry’s verbal abuse of him and “quyts” the Prioress’s pious tale. *Sir Thopas* starts out as what appears to be a serious chivalric romance. However, the “quyting” dynamic requires that it be a mirthful tale offering solace. In fact, Chaucer the pilgrim states in the first stanza that he will tell a tale of “myrthe and of solas” (*CT* VII 714). He will provide the necessary balance by telling a parody or “burlesque” (Pearsall 162) of the romance genre. I will not analyze every ludicrous word or phrase in the tale; Pearsall, citing another critic, states that “‘*Sir Thopas* has everything that the chivalric romance ought to have – except sense’ (Gibbs, 1966, p. 36)” (163). In other words, the content of *Sir Thopas* fits the criteria for a romance, but the tale’s use of this content is ridiculous. Pearsall adds that “[i]t almost seems to have been made up by a latter-day Peter Quince from some list of instructions on ‘How to write a romance’” (163). If one believes that Chaucer-the-pilgrim is “quyting” Harry Bailly, then it certainly

makes sense that Chaucer-the-pilgrim—actually erudite and clever (a surrogate for the author)—knows the elements of the romance genre but debases them to a ludicrous and hilarious level in order to “quyt” Harry’s verbal abuse and the *Prioress’s Tale’s* (brutal and unfunny) piety. Examples of Chaucer-the-pilgrim’s debasement of romance conventions include his statement that Sir Thopas “[ . . . ] hadde a semely nose” (*CT* VII 730). The description of the hero’s physiognomy is conventional, but the focus on the “nose”—rather than formidable thews or intimidating facial features—shows content without proper romance sense. Another example of the debasement occurs when Chaucer-the-pilgrim states that Sir Thopas “Yborn [ . . . ] was in fer contree, / In Flaundes, al biyonde the see [ . . . ]” (*CT* VII 718-19). Therefore he deflates the romance convention of the exotic locale by stating that his hero is born in Flanders, just across the English Channel—not as a reader might expect, in some exotic land thousands of miles away. Chaucer the pilgrim momentarily appears to fulfill this romance convention by initially stating that Sir Thopas was born “biyonde the see,” raising expectations of exotic provenance but then lowering them immediately. Even Harry Bailly may be disappointed by the mundane birthplace of Sir Thopas, but it is too late to stop the “quyting” which Chaucer-the-pilgrim is enacting.

Further into the first fit, the narrator continues to “quyt” Harry and the *Prioress’s Tale* by including *double entendres* which harken back to the *Shipman’s Tale*. For example, he states that

Sire Thopas eek so wery was

For prikyng on the softe gras,

So fiers was his corage [ . . . ]

(*CT* VII 778-80)

One may read this as a humorous implication that Sir Thopas would rather have sex—“prik[ . . . ]”—than fight, which again dashes romance expectations—if Sir Thopas is really so courageous. However, the delicate details of Sir Thopas’s physical description indicate he is not “fiers”—either in love or battle. His daintiness puts one in mind of Absolon from the *Miller’s Tale*, a character who deserves comedic justice on account of his silliness, if not any evil intent. Sir Thopas will receive his comedic justice, but a character exterior to the tale will deliver it, as the comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* allows this freedom to “quyt” within, and outside of, the tales themselves.

At this point, Chaucer the pilgrim still continues to tell his silly tale—heightening the parody and necessitating the eventual, forced truncation of the tale. After noting Sir Thopas desires to rest, he states that the dainty knight “[ . . . ] leyde him in that plas / To make his steede som solas [ . . . ]” (*CT* VII 781-82). If Chaucer the pilgrim is as clever as I argue, his use of the word “solas” must be a dagger he subtly throws at Harry, who wanted a tale of “myrthe” (*CT* VII 706). However, the actual tale offers “solas,” not in salacious detail as in the fabliau-like tales, but in its ridiculous burlesque of the genre. Harry gets—and does not get—what he wants. Ann W. Astell states that “[t]he ‘Tale of Sir Thopas’ [ . . . ] subverts its end of delighting by confusing ends and means [ . . . ] the joke itself is lost on Harry Bailly who fails to recognize the parodic nature of Chaucer’s ‘deyntee thyng’ (VII. 711)” (190).<sup>5</sup> Chaucer the pilgrim’s “quyting” shows his

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<sup>5</sup> Parody is an important component of comedy, as it highlights ridiculous elements in characters, works of art, or situation by exaggerated imitation. Thus parody can aid in bringing about “quyting” and eventual harmony.



intellectual superiority to Harry, but Harry will not notice this superiority, so the “game” can continue in relative harmony after the tale’s abrupt ending.

In fact, the ending of the tale is abrupt because Harry stops it, as he ironically does not find “solas” in this hilarious, silly tale. Near the end of the second fit, Sir Thopas decides to search for an unknown elf queen whom he will love. On the way, he meets “sire Olifaunt [elephant]” (CT VII 808), a three-headed giant whom he will have to fight in order to gain his unknown elf queen. Again, Chaucer the pilgrim follows the basic romance convention of the climactic combat for the hand of the beloved lady. However, he never carries through with the climactic combat, initially because he has Sir Thopas run away from the stone-slinging giant to arm himself. The second and third fits, progressively diminishing in length, depict Sir Thopas’s arming and re-starting of the quest *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseum*—but also *ad hilarum*. He will not get another chance to challenge “sire Olifaunt” because Harry interrupts the disingenuous narrator and stops the tale:

“Namooore of this, for Goddes dignitee,

[ . . . ] for thou makest me

So wery of thy verray lewednesse

(CT VII 919-21)

The tale full of “myrthe” and “solas” has only served to tire Harry, who criticizes the teller for his “lewednesse.” Dramatic irony again arises, as it does with many comedic villains within the tales, because, of the verbal combatants—Harry and Chaucer-the-pilgrim—Harry is clearly the lewd (unlearned) one. His subtle antagonist has “quyted” Harry in his seeming defeat by making Harry listen to a silly tale, which he does not

realize is an intentional parody or burlesque of a conventional romance. The tale presents no reactions on the part of the other pilgrims, so leaves the reader free to imagine. *Sir Thopas* probably—in *my* imagination—amused the other pilgrims and “quyted” the *Prioress’s Tale* quite well. Chaucer the author leaves imaginative space in this instance, as the *Canterbury Tales* does with its fragments that have no narrative links and thus are unconnected to any other fragments. This freedom, as I stated earlier, allows the reader the freedom to “quyt” the text and thus establish his or her own harmony with it, thus ensuring the entire comedic experience of reading or hearing the *Canterbury Tales*.

Harry’s negative reaction to the tale also hinges upon its very sound. After telling Chaucer-the-pilgrim to desist, he says that “Myne eres aken of thy drasty spech. / [ . . . ] / This may wel be rym dogerel [ . . . ]” (*CT* VII 923-25). Thus Chaucer the pilgrim’s parody/burlesque of short, choppy trimeter or tetrameter (like the clippety-clop of Sir Thopas’s horse) and tail rhyme, apparently common in bad “popular” romance (Pearsall 161), also annoys Harry but provides hilarity to the informed and intelligent reader or listener. In fact, Craig A. Berry states that its “meter has the subtlety of a sledge-hammer [ . . . ]” (153). If one senses “sledge-hammer” meter, the hilarity increases, as a reader or listener is free to imagine the extremity of Harry’s reaction. Harry’s abrupt interruption of the tale also guarantees the hilarity of the tale, since a full tale might only beat to death the parody/burlesque and thus lessen the enjoyment and the “quyting” (and eliminate Harry’s hilarious negative reaction). Additionally, J.A. Burrow makes the fascinating argument that the ratio of the stanzas’ lengths (in order)—“4:2:1”—actually results in harmony:

The basic ratio 2:1 is one of those singled out by Macrobius in his

commentary on ‘Tullyus of the Drem of Scipioun’ as being productive of harmony. In music, the ratio produces an octave or ‘diapason’; and it was thought by many to produce a similarly harmonious effect in poetry. Even the fragmentary Third Fit of ‘Sir Thopas’ is concordant in so far as it stands an ‘octave above’ the Second, just as the Second stands an octave above the First. Harry Bailey unwittingly interrupts Chaucer at a point, almost exactly halfway through the fifth stanza of his Third Fit, which allows the Tale, despite its apparent raggedness, to achieve a harmonious resolution. (57-58)

Thus the fragmentary tale and fragmentary Third Fit actually create a mathematical harmony<sup>6</sup>, even as Pearsall notes that the tale “dwindl[es] away to nothingness” (note p. 337), befitting its progressively worsening quality, as the fits become progressively shorter in number of stanzas—eighteen to nine to four-and-a-half (Burrow 57). It is appropriate in the *Canterbury Tales*—a work whose fragmentation produces freedom and harmony—that the apparently bungled attempt at a mirthful romance actually works towards harmony at verbal, tonal, and mathematical levels. The abundance of comedy, even in its valences, makes the harmony *Sir Thopas* produces doubly appropriate. As Derek Brewer states, “[a]t [the] [ . . . ] literal level the poem is a genuinely feeble attempt. At the other deeper level, in reality outside the fiction, the poem is a most amusing parody of what it pretends to represent” (194). As it “pretends,” it “quyts” doubly and thus is a most effective, balancing element in tale-telling “game.”

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<sup>6</sup> E.A. Jones expands Burrows’s idea by noting additional mathematical harmony in ‘Sir Thopas’ based on the ratio of  $\pi$ . See “‘Loo, Lordes Myne, Heere Is a Fit!’: The Structure of Chaucer’s *Sir Thopas*.” *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, 51 (202) 2000: 248-252.

After Harry has vented his spleen, he calls for Chaucer-the-pilgrim to tell another tale, in “prose” (CT VII 934) if he cannot rhyme or at least rhyme in a manner that will not offend Harry. Chaucer-the-pilgrim again obliges the dim arbiter by agreeing to tell a tale which, though presenting “sentence” (CT VII 946 ff.), may present this “sentence” in a form different from what the pilgrims have heard. Again, he defends himself regarding this particular component of his upcoming tale:

Blameth me nat; for, as in my sentence,  
Shul ye nowher fynden difference  
Fro the sentence of this tretys lyte  
After the which this murye tale I write.

(CT VII 961-63)

Once again, the apparently bumbling Chaucer-the-pilgrim disavows his ability to tell a tale that will please all. However, since Harry does not let him off the hook and return to his abstracted musing, the “quyting” will continue with the didactic and plodding *Tale of Melibee*. Harry had told him to tell another tale “In which ther be som murthe or som doctryne” (CT VII 935). Since Harry gave Chaucer the pilgrim the choice, he chooses a tale of “doctryne,” balancing the ridiculous, hilarious *Sir Thopas* with the sober, moral *Melibee*. Harry again gets what he deserves, as is appropriate in comedies, but the *Tale of Melibee* only offers “sentence” and “doctryne,” even if complete—and even if it is not a parody as is *Sir Thopas*. Gaylord states “that a tale should combine two modes is apparently not in Harry’s mind [ . . . ] (231). As Harry has given Chaucer-the-pilgrim a choice, since Chaucer-the-pilgrim has just told a silly tale, and since Harry cannot comprehend a tale combining “sentence and solace,” he doubly deserves the *Melibee*.

One must wonder if Harry is actually happy with the story. After the tale's end, in the *Prologue of the Monk's Tale*, Harry compares his wife with Melibee's wife, Prudence, and yet again finds his wife, Goodelief, lacking, particularly in "paciencce," a quality which wives such as Griselda certainly have shown (CT VII 1895). According to him, she calls him a "milksope" and "coward ape" (CT VII 1910) if he does not avenge the wrongs she perceives done to her. We easily can see Harry's verbal abuse of Chaucer-the-pilgrim as "quyting" his wife indirectly by bullying a character apparently weaker than himself. Thus Harry's interpretation remains only self-referential and tied to his concrete marriage situation, and he gets all he can, intellectually, from the *Tale of Melibee*. Brewer states that "we cannot tell if the humor lies in the truth or the falseness of the description of her [Harry's wife]; it might be either. At all events, the Host's remark provides a welcome relief after the ponderousness of *The Tale of Melibee*" (195). Harry's complaint—humorous to a perceptive reader or listener—thus brings necessary balance to the "game" at this point. The "quyting" continues smoothly with only minor, dramatic irruptions into the "game," such as Harry's truncation of *Sir Thopas*. The "quyting" in this fragment generally proceeds fluidly as it displays the progressively strengthening dynamics of comedy. Harry, after finally ending his complaint against his supposed virago of a wife, asks the Monk to "[ . . . ] brek nat oure game" (CT VII 1927) and tell a tale of unspecified subject or tone. However, instead of stopping with his request, Harry elaborates on the supposed superior virility of monks when compared to laity. He even states that

This [virility] maketh that oure wyves wole assaye

Religious folk, for ye mowe bettre paye

Of Venus paiementz than mowe we [ . . . ]

(*CT VII 1959-61*)

Harry invokes the traditional, fabliau trope of the lecherous monk who carries on a secret sexual liaison with a married woman. If monks and the Monk are as virile (unlike Chaucer-the-pilgrim, whom Harry can bully without fear of physical reprisal or assertive, explicit verbal hostility) as Harry claims, he is wise to cap his implication with an apology, asking the Monk to “[ . . . ] be nat wrooth, my lord, though that I pleye. / Ful ofte in game a sooth I have herd seye!” (*CT VII 1963-64*). Harry once again, as equivocal master of the “game” whose unstable rule allows a degree of freedom, defuses potential conflict with the Monk by claiming that his own possibly insulting implication of monkish lechery is made in “pleye.” Once again, the insulating force of the “game” context rises to forestall any conflict, which might destroy the tale-telling competition and usher in real conflict between Harry and the Monk as they proceed in the “game” and the pilgrimage. Highly intriguing though, is Harry’s comment that “in game,” one may often find “sooth” (truth). Though Harry does not realize the full implication of his words, he alludes to the combination of “sentence and solas,” which plays such a huge part in the “quyting” dynamic of the *Canterbury Tales*. Moreover, his comment foreshadows the Nun’s Priest’s comment at the end of his own tale about taking the wheat while ultimately letting go of the chaff. Finally, Harry’s comment, after his urging the Monk to accept the “pleye” of his words, also contains a claim that even in play, serious matter resides. Unwittingly again, Harry alludes to the primary dynamic of the

*Canterbury Tales*—the “quyting,” which provides the harmony necessary for ultimate comedy.

The Monk apparently accepts Harry’s semi-apology and “[ . . . ] took al in pacience [ . . . ]” (*CT* VII 1965), like a moderated male version of Griselda and Constance, and thus does not “brek” the “game.” Initially, he proposes to tell a life of Saint Edward but then decides tell a tale that consists of a series of tragedies. The Monk then provides one of the conventional medieval definitions of tragedy:

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,  
As olde bookes maken us memorie,  
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,  
And is yfallen out of heigh degree  
Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.

(*CT* VII 1973-77)

The Monk’s definition is basically Boethian (though without an acknowledgment of God’s providence), as it alludes to an individual “in greet prosperitee” at the apex of the Wheel of Fortune’s ascent, plummeting to the nadir by the end of a narrative. The short narratives, which the Monk will tell, certainly show this movement from earthly prosperity to earthly misfortune. Susan H. Cavanaugh states that “[w]hether this concept, literally applied as it is in *The Monk’s Tale*, reflects the genuine application of a theory of tragedy as Chaucer understood it, or whether it reflects the ‘philosophical inadequacy’ of the Monk is a matter of dispute [ . . . ]” (930). However the case may be, the *Monk’s Tale* performs “quyting,” and in turn needs “quyting.” One may argue that the *Tale of Melibee* is a comedy, since it begins in adversity and ends in good fortune for Melibee and his

family, thus illustrating the conventional medieval notion of comedy, which is simply that it is the opposite of tragedy. However, the *Monk's Tale* (or really, tales) “quyts” Harry as *Sir Thopas* did, since Harry implicitly insulted the Monk as he explicitly did Chaucer-the-pilgrim. Additionally, the Monk, as did Chaucer the pilgrim, apologizes for a possible deficiency in his tale-telling skills. Harry again ignores the warning, so deserves the monotonous series of medieval tragedies he gets with the *Monk's Tale*. However, since the Monk is a member of the first estate, the Knight, a member of the second estate, next in the social hierarchy—higher than third estate-Harry, truncates his monotonous tale as the *Prologue of the Nun's Priest's Tale* begins:

“Hoo [ . . . ] good sire, namoore of this!  
That ye han seyde is right ynough, ywis,  
And muchel moore; for litel hevynesse  
Is right ynough to much folk, I gesse.

(*CT VII 2767-70*)

The Knight becomes momentary *magister ludi* at this point in the “game,” where Harry’s rude, *initial* interruption of a member of the clergy might destroy the “pleye” context of the competition by upsetting the hierarchy, which still structures the social interaction in the outer framework, despite the partially insulating and detaching effect of the “game.” The Knight—although not necessarily an expert on comedy—then implicitly calls for a narrative that fits a widespread medieval definition of comedy:

[ . . . ] whan a man hath been in povre estaat,  
And clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat  
And there abideth in prosperitee,



.....  
[ . . . ] swich thyng were goodly for to telle.

(*CT VII 2775-77; 2779*)

The Knight's request provides the matching bookend to the Monk's definition of tragedy<sup>7</sup>. The Knight's words therefore foreshadow the comedic *Nun's Priest's Tale* that will provide the most subtle "quyting" and most perfect harmony within the *Canterbury Tales*.

Harry—like an obsequious and cowardly sidekick<sup>8</sup>—feeling more confident after the authority of the Knight's mildly critical words to the Monk, now explicitly and even rudely criticizes the *Monk's Tale*:

“Sire Monk, namoore of this, so God yow blesse!

Youre tale anoyeth al this compaignye,

Swich talkyng is nat worth a boterflye,

For therinne is ther no desport ne game.

(*CT VII 2788-91*)

At this point, Harry seems to want only tales of “solas” since he criticizes the Monk for his tale's lack of “desport” and “game.” Yet, as Gaylord has pointed out, Harry only comprehends exclusively didactic tales or exclusively salacious tales. He cannot comprehend tales that offer both “sentence” and “solas” and has shown he cannot see the philosophical themes in such salacious tales as the *Merchant's* and the *Shipman's*. Thus,

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<sup>7</sup> Ann Astell notes that the Monk's definition of tragedy is deficient since his tragedies “are unmotivated by any sense of human choice or divine purpose” (191) in *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning*. This deficiency thus calls for a “quyting” with a comedy—the *Nun's Priest's Tale*—which features a less mechanistic sense of Fortune.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, Harry verbally butters up the Knight by responding, after the Knight's request for comedy that “Ye seye right sooth [ . . . ]” (*CT VII 2781*). See David, Alfred. “The Comedy of Innocence.” *The Strumpet*

after the didactic allegory of the *Tale of Melibee* and the repetitive illustration of a medieval definition of tragedy in the *Monk's Tale*, Harry receives his wish. The subsequent *Nun's Priest's Tale*, a beast fable, which offers all the “solas” Harry could want or comprehend, will “quyt” the previous two tales and illustrate the comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* to the fullest extent.

Before the Nun's Priest speaks, though, Harry asks the Monk to tell a tale of “huntyng,” (*CT* VII 2805), but the Monk replies that he “[ . . . ] has no lust to pleye” (*CT* VII 2806) and asks Harry to ask another pilgrim. Harry, though deferential to the supposedly virile Monk, now turns “[ . . . ] with rude spech and boold [ . . . ]” (*CT* VII 2808) to the Nun's Priest. It appears the Knight's previous imposition upon a clergyman has emboldened Harry, or perhaps the Nun's Priest does not offer such a physically imposing presence in Harry's mind, so Harry, as bullies do, picks on this up-till-now quiet character much as he had done with Chaucer-the-pilgrim. Harry commands the Nun's Priest to “Telle us swich thyng as may oure hertes glade” (*CT* VII 2811). The Nun's Priest states that he understands Harry's dictum: “But I be myrie, I wol be blamed” (*CT* VII 2817) and so will do his best to tell a “myrie” tale. It is curious that Harry asks this previously silent priest to tell a mirthful tale, when one would expect this apparently quiet, serious man of God to deliver a theological treatise or sober moral exemplum. Harry's insistence highlights yet again his obtuse nature, but also allows the quiet Nun's Priest to subtly “quyt” the bullying Harry, as Chaucer-the-pilgrim had done. Again, Harry's mental mediocrity (in addition to his third-estate status) means that his rule will be equivocal and thus offer the freedom necessary for complex “quyttings” to occur and

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*Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry*: Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976, 90-117, for exploration of the Harry's fawning, unilateral allegiance with the Knight and the aristocracy.

help propel the *Canterbury Tales* toward ultimate, pragmatic harmony. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* will offer both “sentence” and solas,” and thereby the Nun’s Priest will implicitly violate Harry’s dictum and include “sentence” in a tale that apparently is only “glade.” The Nun’s Priest, as Chaucer-the-pilgrim had done previously, will also “quyt” Harry by triumphing over him intellectually. The “Lord of Misrule,” inherently equivocal and thus unstable in his authority, allows the “game” to continue, partially by intentionally setting up himself for “quyting.” This competitive and imaginative freedom he unintentionally facilitates—or cannot control—in prologues, which liberate the reader from focusing on a pilgrim’s story, will lead to ultimate, pragmatic harmony in the pilgrimage and among the tales of *Canterbury Tales*. Thus Harry, as he reacts obtusely between the telling of separate tales, plays a necessary part beyond ostensible tale arbiter in the fulfillment of the comedy, in which the *Nun's Priest's Tale* plays such an important part.

## Chapter Eight- *The Nun's Priest's Tale*: Comedic Fulfillment in an Apparently Silly

### Fable about a Cock and a Fox

The Nun's Priest, following Harry's dictum to tell a tale that will make the pilgrims glad—after the depressing mechanistic *Monk's Tale*—begins his tale in homely fashion with a “povre widow” (*CT* VII 2821) who keeps a working farm and lives in a modest fashion, thus ensuring her relative comfort. Thus even in this ostensibly mirthful tale, the Nun's Priest offers a small lesson regarding temperate living, as he illustrates with the “povre widow” whose “Attempree diete was al hir phisik [ . . . ]” (*CT* VII 2838). However, this instance is subtle and does not constitute a large digression from the tale's plot. Very soon after this description of the prudent “widow,” the Nun's Priest-narrator begins to describe the tale's protagonist—Chauntecleer the rooster. The fact that the tale's hero is a rooster indicates a humorous beast fable to come. Harry is probably smiling in anticipation of pure mirth—and he will get this, though the tale offers “sentence” simultaneously, which Harry will never understand. The complexity of “quyttings” the tale offers make it the culmination and paramount example of comedy in the *Canterbury Tales*, even if obtuse listeners such as Harry cannot understand the complexity of the “quytting.” The comedy and the harmony it generates transcend limitations, such as Harry—even as he is the “Lord of Misrule”—possesses.

The Nun's Priest-narrator describes Chauntecleer as foremost among roosters: “In al the land, or crowyng nas his peer. / His voys was murier than the murie orgon” (*CT* VII 2849-50). Moreover, this rooster is particularly adroit in astronomical matters: “By nature he knew ech ascencioun / Of the equynoxial in thilke toun [ . . . ]” (*CT* VII 2855-56). Thus the Nun's Priest-narrator begins with a superior specimen of a rooster in great

prosperity. After having heard or read the preceding *Monk's Tale*, one would be ready to expect the tragic end of Chauntecleer, following the Boethian<sup>1</sup> examples of tragedies that the Monk provided in his tale. However, as Chaucer has been complicating comedy and the comedic tales since the *Canterbury Tales* began, one should expect Chauntecleer's course to be more complicated than, say, Balthazar's or Alexander the Great's in the *Monk's Tale*. Chaucer allows that Boethius's wheel turns, but its end for certain individuals may involve not a 180-degree journey, but a 360-degree one, which brings the protagonist back to the prosperity s/he enjoyed. As Jean Jost states, "[i]n both humorous and comedic pieces, a triumph over mischance [ . . . ] is often the occasion for rejoicing" (xviii). Chauntecleer, in his pride and in his imperfection, may undergo "mischance," but this may be a temporary state from which the protagonist can extricate himself. Thus Chaucer's comedic vision allows for the possibility of escape from the Boethian downturn. This kind of vision, moreover, involves an internal "quyting," whereby prosperity may alternate with misfortune, though, since comedic, the vision ultimately ends with prosperity.

The Nun's Priest-narrator also describes Chauntecleer in a manner similar to Sir Thopas, whereby the barnyard rooster seems to be, like the Flemish lad, a parody of a knight:

His coomb was redder than the fyn coral,  
 And batailled as it were a castel wall;  
 His byle was blak, and as the jeet it shoon;

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Astell notes that though the Monk's tragedies are Boethian in terms of basic movement of the Wheel of Fortune, the tragedies "focus [ . . . ] on losses that Boethius identifies explicitly with the body, not the soul; with matter, not the spirit" (191). Thus Monk misses Lady Philsophy's and the *Consolatio's* point. See *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning*.

Lyk asure were his legges and his toon;  
His nayles whitter than the lylye flour,  
And lyk the burned gold was his colour.

(*CT* VII 2859-64)

The martial allusions in the descriptions, such as the rooster comb like a “castel wall” and his “byle” (beak) as “blak” as “jeet”—like a sharp weapon, convey the knightly parody of this barnyard lord. Moreover, the colors and color similes such as “asure,” “whitter than the lylye flour,” and “gold” ludicrously connect Chauntecleer with aristocracy and wealth. As R. T. Lenaghan states, “[t]he dominating feature of the tale is misplaced elegance” (300). This “dominating feature” provides much of the tale’s humor, since, for example, the juxtaposition of a rooster’s “comb” with “a castel wall” highlights the ontological distance between a barnyard rooster and a true chivalric hero. However, unlike the nominally aristocratic Sir Thopas, this non-aristocratic hero will triumph, even as the victory occurs in an unknightly, rustic context, but following the Boethian dynamic of the Wheel turning through God’s providence to a position that leaves the protagonist on top. Thus the comic juxtaposition may do more than just highlight the ridiculous inflation of the tale’s characters. Instead, the juxtaposition emphasizes the power of comedy to transcend the limitations that genre concerns may attempt to place upon it.

One reason why Chauntecleer begins in prosperity is because he already has his romantic partner: “faire damoysele Pertelote” (*CT* VII 2870), a romantically conventional “Curteys [ . . . ] discreet, and debonair” (*CT* VII 2871) female who happens to be a chicken. Again, the “misplaced elegance” of the description creates humor by comparing a chicken to a beautiful, aristocratic woman; however, again, the comic juxtaposition works

to build the comedic underpinning, the upper edifice of which will be visible by the tale's end. The "misplaced elegance" also helps heighten the sense of Chauntecleer and Pertelote's initial prosperity, since they appear to have everything they could possibly want in a fowl's life on the poor widow's farm. This initial prosperity seems to set up the hero and heroine—or one of them—for a tragic fall, according the medieval definition of tragedy—at least as the Monk has defined it. Moreover, Chauntecleer tells Pertelote that he has had a disturbing dream on the preceding night:

Me mette how that I romed up and doun  
Withinne our yeerd, wheer as I saugh a beest  
Was lyk an hound and wolde han made areest  
Upon my body, and wolde han had me deed.

(*CT VII 2898-2901*)

As the tale's action will bear out, Chauntecleer's dream is prophetic; he will encounter "swich meschief" (*CT VII 2894*) as he himself states before describing the worrisome dream. Since readers and audience have already experienced the *Monk's Tale*, with its series of initially fortunate men who inevitably and *permanently* fall into misfortune—death, specifically—the outcome of the tale seems ridiculously obvious. However, as the Nun's Priest's task is to "quyt" the *Monk's Tale*, the matter of Chauntecleer's dream offers an important opportunity to set up an element in the "quyting" that ultimately will occur. Additionally, Pertelote's immediate response will lighten the sense of inevitable and irreversible doom, as she criticizes Chauntecleer as a wife would a husband with whom she has lived a long, comfortable, and reasonably happy time:

Have ye no mannes herte, and han a berde?

Allas! And konne ye been agast of swevenys?  
Nothyng, God woot, but vanitee in sweven is.  
Swevenes engendren of repleccions,  
And ofte of fume and of compleccions,  
Whan humours been to habundant in a wight.

(*CT VII 2920-26*)

Pertelote's dismissive tone is reminiscent of Noah's wife in *Noah*, from the Wakefield mystery cycle, where Noah's wife upbraids Noah for trying to coax her into the Ark. For example, she tells him that "[ . . . ] thou art always adred, be it fals or trew" (l. 201), meaning that she thinks Noah is credulous and too quick to become anxious about rumors. David Bevington notes that the "comic battle" between Noah and his wife "is an old and popular medieval legend, owing much to the tradition of the fabliau [ . . . ]" (290). Pertelote's response shows evidence of this fabliaux-influenced squabbling, and this squabbling breathes air into what a reader or listener might regard initially as a tightly plotted, inevitably downward-moving tale such as one experiences in the *Monk's Tale*. The tale will now digress into arguments between Pertelote and Chauntecleer regarding their particular opinions on the sources of dreams and thereby offer more humorous divergence from the seemingly inevitable tragic downturn.

Pertelote specifically argues that the source of dreams is an imbalance of humors caused by overeating, a material cause. Her argument brings to mind Bakhtin's notion that the physical acts as an antidote to the rigid, dogmatic idea. "The movement from top to bottom" (Bakhtin 373), whereby Pertelote sees the cause of the immaterial dream in Chauntecleer's *head* as the food below, in his *guts*, serves to deflate what she perceives to



be a ridiculous idea. Thus Pertelote grounds Chauntecleer, at least as he must listen to her argument that grounds the dream in the material—an antidote to Chauntecleer’s and the narrator’s subsequent windy digressions upon dreams and fortune that invoke Classical authority, legendary history, and folk tales. Moreover, Pertelote states that she “[ . . . ] sette[s] nat a straw by thy dremynges, / For swevenes been but vanytees and japes [ . . . ]” (CT VII 3090-91). Thus she completely discounts the immaterial evidence regarding future events that dreams, according to Chauntecleer, provide. Pertelote’s proto-empiricism is funny because it at least deflates the notion that dreams *necessarily* prophesy the future and thereby show the inevitable tragic course, which the dreamer must take. Certainly, her diagnosis turns out to be wrong, if one takes the dream as prophetic and not coincidental. Stephen Manning states that “when Pertelote so summarily dismisses Chauntecleer’s fears, we can see how completely wrong she is, and we can enjoy the irony of her diagnosis and prescription. She thus emerges as a delightful mixture of paramour and *Hausfrau*, complete with home remedies” (4). The “delight [ . . . ]” she offers contributes to the comedy of tale, but again, even though she is wrong, her diagnosis that the disturbing dream has a physical cause, and not one dictated by some numinous power, points to the tale’s implicit notion that all falls (and even prophesied ones) do not end in death for the protagonist.

In fact, Pertelote’s antidote for an imbalance of humors is a physical “purg[ing]” (CT VII 2947), aided by herbs that Pertelote claims she can find. To highlight her focus upon the physical, she provides a catalogue of herbal “laxatyves” (CT VII 2962) easily available in their barnyard realm. Her focus on physical purgation of disturbing dreams brings to mind the *Summoner’s Tale*, in which Thomas’s fart expresses the worth of Friar

John's sermon. In this case, Pertelote equates the dream with overeating, and the purgative cure will eliminate the cause of the disturbing dream in the form of feces or vomit. Thus she equates the dream's meaning with worthless, physical dross and thereby claims the dream has no meaning. "Dredeth no dreem" (*CT VII 2969*) she says to sum up her argument. Again, the tale's plot will show Pertelote wrong in a way, since Chauntecleer will be temporarily caught by "[ . . . ] a beest / [ . . . ] lyk an hound [ . . . ]" (*CT VII 2899-2900*), about which he dreamed. Yet even though the dream may prophesy (or coincidentally illustrate) a portion of Chauntecleer's future, it does not include his escape from the mouth of Russell the fox. Thus Pertelote, arrogantly in error, still has a relevant point: dreams do not necessarily indicate the entire future and spell doom for the dreamer. If the dream did prophesy entirely Chauntecleer's downfall and death, the tale would become a tragedy like one of the Monk's narratives, but this tale is a "quyting," balancing comedy, so an upturn in Fortune's wheel is possible after a downturn.

Following Pertelote's catalogue of organic purgatives, Chauntecleer, "quyting" his avian wife, launches into a counter argument<sup>2</sup> that relies heavily on anecdotes and the authority of ancient authors, in the manner of the Wife of Bath's last husband. However, even at this early stage in Chauntecleer's lengthy counter argument, he unintentionally concedes to a portion of Pertelote's argument:

"[ . . . ] dremes been significatiouns  
as wel of joye as of tribulaciouns  
That folk enduren in this lif present.

(*CT VII 2979-81*)

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<sup>2</sup> A rooster citing ancient authorities certainly ratchets up the burlesque qualities of this comedic tale.

Even though Chauntecleer is worried about his future because of his foreboding dream, he admits that dreams may prophesy either “joye” or “tribulaciouns.” Thus he allows the possibility of a fortunate outcome for the dreamer, even if he does not believe it for himself. As the tale will reveal, his dream only shows him a momentary “tribulacioun [ . . . ]” in his future. Chauntecleer finishes this section of his argument (before citing authorities) by adding that “Ther nedeth make of this noon argument; / The verray preeve sheweth it in dede” (CT VII 2982-83). Though Chauntecleer bases his argument primarily on ancient authority, he adds that the “dede,” the outcome, shows the proof of his argument. The outcome of the plot certainly will show that Chauntecleer is correct, but the outcome will also show that his dream did not forecast his permanent doom, only a temporary situation out of which he will extricate himself through his own efforts. Thus, even though Chauntecleer voices a partially correct opinion regarding dreams, and implicitly regarding authority, he unintentionally highlights the experiential bias that comedy often displays. This emphasis on experience puts one in mind of the ultimately comedic *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, in which Alison’s experience trumps any claims Ecclesiastical, societal, or masculine authority might have upon her. Experience often runs concurrently with freedom, since the individual is free to experience actual life apart from a dogmatic conception of it and determine his or her outcome, and, in a comedy, arrive at a happy and harmonious ending.

Chauntecleer’s first source for support of his argument is an exemplum from “Cicero or Valerius Maximus” (Cavanaugh 938). Chauntecleer states that two men find separate places to sleep in a town, each according to “[ . . . ] his aventure or his fortune, / That us governeth alle as in commune” (CT VII 2999-3000). Thus he explicitly claims

that “fortune” governs the course of an individual’s life. However, as Chauntecleer’s actions at the end of tale will show, his will and his actions affect his outcome, so fortune’s control may not be all-powerful, as Chauntecleer now claims. The condition and energy of life create freedom, and this assertion of active agency often produces comedy, as this tale will illustrate. However, in this exemplum about fortune that Chauntecleer now tells, the two men share different fates due to the accident of their differing “herbergage[s]” (*CT VII 2989*). The fortunate traveler dreams that the unfortunate one is killed, and this indeed proves to be the case. After completing the narration of the exemplum’s plot, Chauntecleer launches into an apostrophe to God, praising his ability to reveal betrayal and murder. Chauntecleer even devotes seven lines to condemning murder and praising God’s justice. In fact, his last line of the seven is, “Mordre wol out, this my conclusion” (*CT VII 3057*). It sounds as if he has shifted the morality of the exemplum from the prophetic power of dreams to the evil of murder and the power of God’s justice. The effect is humorous because of the seeming incongruity, as if the speaker has lost control of the narrative’s point or forgotten the theme. However, we must remember that the teller is, after all, a rooster, so we should not expect rhetorical and intellectual brilliance, even if the tale resides to a great degree in the beast-fable tradition wherein animals act and speak as if human beings. We also must remember that the Nun’s Priest is telling the tale. Thus Chauntecleer’s digressions in terms of theme “quyt” the *Monk’s Tale* with its narratives of inevitability. Additionally, “the Nun’s Priest’s rejection of the Monk’s rhetorical aggrandisement of human affairs [ . . . ] is based on a theologically grounded certainty about the importance of eternal matters and the vanity of earthly concerns [ . . . ]” (Rigby 108). This theological implication will be

lost upon Harry, who has asked the Nun's Priest for "swich thyng as may oure hertes glade" (*CT* VII 2811). The Nun's Priest thus will "quyt" Harry and his ignorance of less obvious "sentence[s]" as well. However, even if the Nun's Priest-narrator intends to make a theological point, the digression in the mouth of a rooster is still humorous—burlesquing verbose human orators—and continues to maintain and build the tone for an ultimately comedic tale.

Chauntecleer does end this exemplum with "Heere may men seen that dremes been to drede" (*CT* VII 3063) and thus returns to his intended moral after his digression from the tale's plot. The narrative and rhetorical space, which illustrates that planned ends do not always occur totally as planned, mirrors the comedy that will occur and show such a contrast to the mechanistic, inevitable outcomes in the tragic narratives contained in the *Monk's Tale*. Henri Bergson, writing in the early twentieth century, states that we laugh in a situation where "I now have before me [a human being acting as] a machine that works automatically. This is no longer life, it is automatism established in life and imitating it. It belongs to the comic" (81). The *Nun's Priest's Tale* will express a similar criticism of "automatism" impinging upon life in general, rather than just the individual human being. Its ending will show that humans, as living beings, have the agency and flexibility to regain their prosperity, and thus produce a harmonious comedy out of what might appear to be a situation heading for a tragic catastrophe.

The windy rooster then goes on to support his point with a folk tale (which features a doubter proven wrong, as Pertelote partially is), a saint's life, the Old Testament, and Classical examples of the prophetic nature of dreams. His lengthy argument is particularly funny, again and always, if one keeps in mind that a rooster is

doing the telling. This very basic fact contributes to the tale's comedy, since, even if Chauntecleer did fall, it would be the fall of a fowl, not of a human being. However, if Chauntecleer were a human being, the effect of his overblown rhetoric would still be humorous. Chauntecleer's state of being as a rooster links him metaphorically with a human speaker too proud in his rhetorical skill—a speaker *cocksure* in his ability. If the Nun's Priest-narrator is not “quyting” the Monk in this regard, he is satirizing all—including poets—who excessively use rhetoric and language. The animal form of the protagonist partially insulates the tale from reality and provides humor in its metaphorical juxtaposition, even as the “game” generally insulates the tale-telling competition from deadly hostility and provides the relief of humor. This insulation in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and in the “game” of tale-telling provides the necessary harmony that will eventually lead to the overall comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* that transcends variation in tone and form—even if satire may raise a few hackles of characters along the route.

Chauntecleer ends his argument, following his short exemplum regarding Andromache's dream of Hector's death, with a final statement of his belief about his dream and Pertelote's remedy, humorous because a rooster is citing Homer:

Shortly I seye, as for conclusion,  
That I shal han of this avisioun  
Adversitee; and I seye forthermoore  
That I ne telle of laxatyves no stoor [ . . . ]

(*CT* VII 3151-54)

Humor arises from his “conclusion” initially because he states that he will conclude “shortly” after he has rambled on in his defense. His long-winded argument that consists

primarily of exempla illustrates his pride in his verbal ability—ludicrous as always, since he is a rooster—but also indicating a dangerous hubris, despite his anxiety about the dream. However, his hubris will only lead him to a temporary fall that contributes to the tale’s direct “quyting” of the *Monk’s Tale* with its inevitable and inexorable falls. Yet Chauntecleer is correct in his interpretation of the dream that possesses “transcendent knowledge” (Gallacher 60), even if that prophecy is incomplete. This partially correct prophecy of the dream foreshadows the balance, or self-“quyting” that the tale will perform, since Chauntecleer will fall, as the dream has shown, but also rise again, as the dream does not show. In this reversal lies the comedy that “quyts” the *Monk’s Tale* and best illustrates the *Canterbury Tales*’s focus on “sentence” and “solas.”

After his short “conclusioun,” Chauntecleer immediately calls for happy discussion, mimicking the Wheel of Fortune as it turns from woe to weal: “Now let us speke of myrthe, and stynte al this. / Madame Pertelote, so have I blis [ . . . ]” (CT VII 3157-58). After the long list of exempla, the audience or reader is ready for the tale to move on in its plot and move on from its somber mood created by the exempla, whose protagonists ultimately die. These exempla mimic the short, tragic narratives in the *Monk’s Tale*, whose protagonists also end up dead, but the Nun’s Priest-narrator is a man partially of his word, and now it is time to move the tale into happier or at least livelier narration that includes plot. However, Chauntecleer does not immediately proceed to act. He explains that Pertelote’s beauty is the reason for his “blis” and hilariously includes a bit of the Gospel of John and some garbled Latin in his explanation:

For al so siker as *In principio*,  
*Mulier est hominis confusio* —

Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,

‘Womman is mannes joye and al his blis.’

(*CT VII 3163-66*; text italics)

Chauntecleer, proud and verbose, but only a rooster after all, mistranslates the Latin. The correct translation is “woman [or wife] is a man’s ruin.” Chauntecleer’s mistake, though, highlights the progressively complicated comedy that Chaucer presents as the *Canterbury Tales* moves closer to its end. Chauntecleer unwittingly voices a common, medieval misogynist view that would not be out of character for a sober cleric such as the Nun’s Priest to utter. Thus the tale’s narrator may be irrupting unintentionally into the story, even as Chauntecleer unintentionally utters it. The possible slip of the biased narrator into his tale increases the humor and again reveals the permeability of barriers that provide the *Canterbury Tales* with so much of its imaginative freedom. Moreover, Chauntecleer’s confusion regarding his Latin proverb illustrates the intellectual dangers of spouting what one does not understand and thus producing nonsense. Therefore Chauntecleer is similar to Friar John in the *Summoner’s Tale*, who produces verbal nonsense and receives a worthless fart as his reward. Yet the rooster may triumph despite his ignorance and longwinded nature, as the tale will show that these qualities do not inevitably lead to an unfortunate or tragic end on this earth to flawed mortals—rooster or human.

In fact, Pertelote may be Chauntecleer’s “*confusio*” because of the sexual hold she has upon him—with which point the Nun’s Priest might agree. After Chauntecleer devotes a few more lines expressing his happiness to be with Pertelote, he states, “I am so ful of joye and of solas, / That I diffye bothe sweven and dreem” (*CT VII 3170-71*). He is



so full of love for Pertelote that his anxieties about the dream and his imminent future dissolve. S.H. Rigby even devalues his love for Pertelote to desire and states that “Chauntecleer [ . . . ] ignores his own fine words and is lured into forgetfulness by his lustful delight in Pertelote’s sensual charms [ . . . ]” (126). His hubristic tautology of “sweven and dreem” expresses the overweening pride that traditionally foreshadows a hero’s fall into adversity. The proud, “lustful” and loving rooster now literally goes down:

[ . . . ] with that word he fley down fro the beam,  
For it was day, and eke his hennes alle,  
And with a chuk he gan hem for to calle,  
For he hadde founde a corn, lay in the yerd.

(*CT VII 3172-75*)

If Chauntecleer had heeded his “dreem,” he would not have flown down from the protection of the high “beam” and put himself into a dangerous situation. His decision is curious, since he has spent so much time arguing for the prophetic force of dreams. Patrick Gallacher states that “Chauntecleer dramatizes his effective refusal of transcendent knowledge by discovering food for his hens in a manner signalled by absurd fearlessness; and he displays the hubris of a mock-epic breakfast” (62). It is as if Chauntecleer implicitly and unintentionally illustrates the power of Pertelote’s argument regarding overeating, since the immediate cause of his flight to the ground is the need for food—which Pertelote claimed was the ultimate cause for his disturbing dream. The Nun’s Priest’s-narrator goes on to say that

Real he was, he was namoore aferd.

He feathered Pertelote twenty tyme,

.....

He looketh as were a grym leoun [ . . . ]

(*CT* VII 3175-77; 3179)

He is so unafraid now, in fact, that he has sex with Pertelote “twenty” times, suggesting that the physicality on which Pertelote based her arguments has taken full control of his actions, thus in a way validating her argument. The Nun’s Priest-narrator generates more humor by ridiculously comparing the rooster to a lion—a truly dangerous beast—in an inflation of Chaucer’s actual physical form. Carolyn Van Dyke states that “[t]he representations [of the fowl] are [ . . . ] carefully sequenced: the animal actors are first objects, then subjects, and finally both at once, in an ironic perspective that both deflates and expands them” (88). Herein lies further humor because the Nun’s Priest-narrator creates chickens that are both animal and human. Thus it is perfectly appropriate for a rooster to act like a rooster and seek food and copulation since instinct impels him to do so. It is also appropriate for a cock to act with cockiness, as humans, upon observation, have interpreted its behavior, hence the source of the term. To a great extent, the brilliance and humor in Chaucer lies in his at times dual “ontological” (Van Dyke 92) existence as fowl and man. The permeability between “ontological” boundaries is another manifestation of freedom inherent in the comedy and, as I have stated, heightens the humor of Chaucer and the whole tale. We, as readers or as listeners, are free to imagine Chaucer as rooster, anthropomorphosed beast, or both. The effect of this rooster’s manifold essence is liberating, and as comedy features abundance, the nature of the tale’s protagonist is abundant as well. He can be simultaneously or at separate times

the aforementioned beings. Just because he begins as a barnyard beast does not mean he has to stay that way as the tale progresses. Chaucer's skill as a narrator and a poet of comedy allows this multiple ontological existence in Chauntecleer. Chauntecleer's manifold essence is an implying "quyting" of the *Monk's Tale* and philosophy, where a prosperous life always ends in downfall, where only one outcome of existence is possible. As Chauntecleer will not necessarily die by tale's end, so he does not have to be one, immutable kind of creature throughout the tale. Chauntecleer partakes of shape-shifting trickster—another character common in comedy—and the trickster allows the reader or listener to shift perspective as the trickster himself shifts ontological essence. Comedic and narrative freedom is the result for the reader or listener.

After satisfying his appetite for food and sex, Chauntecleer hubristically struts around the barnyard, and the Nun's Priest-narrator curiously digresses into a paean to spring similar to the opening of the *Canterbury Tales*. As April arrives, Chauntecleer is walking around in the barnyard with his seven wives, including Pertelote, to whom he says:

Herkneth thise blisful briddes how they synge,  
And se the fresshe floures how they spryng;  
Ful is myn herte of revel and solas!"

(*CT VII 3201-03*)

In this comedic mock-epic, Chauntecleer has already begun his diminished pilgrimage to his destiny. However, he feels satisfied with his current state, surrounded by his paramours, with his heart full of "solas." Yet, as the Monk stated: "Lat no man truste on blynd prosperitee [ . . . ]" (*CT VII 1997*). As if the Nun's Priest remembered these words,

he interpolates himself into the tale by stating, after describing Chauntecleer's "solas," that

[ . . . ] sodeynly hym fil a sorweful cas,  
For evere the latter ende of joy is wo.  
God woot that worldly joye is soone ago [ . . . ]

(*CT VII 3204-06*)

The Nun's Priest is a clumsy, though "quytingly" effective narrator who cannot help placing himself into the story's action and commenting on thematic issues. However, the Nun's Priest may be highlighting his "quyting" of the *Monk's Tale* and philosophy, especially since the major conflict in the tale is about to occur. It is as if the Nun's Priest is putting in mind for the audience the Monk's notion of tragedy in order to increase the effect of his own "quyting" of the Monk. Additionally, at the end of the Nun's Priest-narrator's digression, he states that "Now wol I torne agayn to my sentence" (*CT VII 3214*). Harry has particularly called for a tale that is the opposite of the Monk's dreary one. The Nun's Priest-narrator is now reminding all that he will return to his serious matter—his "sentence"—which the funny beast-fable contains. Yet it is doubtful if Harry can understand this, since, as he has shown, he only can take limited meaning from a tale and cannot understand adequately one that offers both "sentence and solas." The Nun's Priest-narrator highlights the serious component of his story by explicitly mentioning the less obvious component—but a component that Harry still will not understand. Thus the Nun's Priest highlights the "quyting" he subsequently will perform upon the bullying, obtuse, but necessary arbiter of the competition.

The Nun's Priest-narrator then immediately introduces the comedic villain—the “col-fox” (*CT* VII 3215) that will disrupt Chauntecleer's prosperity and make the tale *look* like a basic tragedy up to a certain point. The narrator definitively states that the fox was “By heigh imaginacioun forncast” [ . . . ] (*CT* VII 3217), thus validating Chauntecleer's dream as prophetic—yet not signifying ultimate, irrevocable tragedy. The Nun's Priest-narrator, again interpolating himself thoroughly into the tale, begins a lengthy digression that first contains a complaint against murder that mirrors Chauntecleer's own complaint when he was arguing his point with Pertelote. With hilarious inflation, the narrator compares the fox to famous “false mordour[s]” (*CT* VII 3226) such as Judas Iscariot, Sinon, and Ganelon from Scripture and literature. However, even if the Nun's Priest-narrator characterizes the fox as treacherous, we must remember that foxes naturally seek to eat chickens, despite the anthropomorphosed animals. Yes, Russell the fox will beguile Chauntecleer, but the beguiling is only a creative rationalization of an instinctive action. The blurring of lines between real and fabular again creates imaginative freedom for the reader or listener, while increasing the humor as one remembers that the fox and rooster are dumb animals that the Nun's Priest and ultimately Chaucer will use to put forth a comedic resolution and vision.

The Nun's Priest-narrator, again creating humor by inflation, next apostrophizes Chauntecleer and complains about the pitfalls of Fortune:

O Chauntecleer, accused be that morwe  
That thou into that yerd flaugh fro the bemes!  
Thou were ful wel ywarned by thy dremes  
That thilke day was perilous to thee;

But what that God forwoot moot nedes bee [ . . . ]

(*CT* VII 3230-34)

The Nun's Priest-narrator's complaint is muddled, however. For one thing, he blames the morning upon which Chauntecleer flew down from the safety of the barn "bemes," thus seeming to blame the unavoidable forces that act upon living beings in this world. Yet subsequently he states that Chauntecleer was warned by his dreams, thus implying that the fault for the impending fall (after the literal fall from the beams) lies with Chauntecleer. The rooster therefore has agency, even as the Nun's Priest-narrator wraps up this complaint with an acknowledgment that God's Providence guides everything in this sublunary region. Is the Nun's Priest-narrator implying that God made Chauntecleer ignore the dream's warning? If he is, then Chauntecleer has no real agency and will ultimately and permanently fall. However, the tale's outcome will show differently.

At this point, the Nun's Priest-narrator segues into a brief discussion of the question of predestination that Boethius and other philosophers tackled. Intriguingly, the narrator states that "[ . . . ] I can nat bulte it to the bren" (*CT* VII 3240), meaning "bolt (sift) it to the husks (separate completely the valid from the invalid arguments)" (Benson note p. 258). The Nun's Priest-narrator admits that he cannot argue satisfactorily regarding the great theological and philosophical question of predestination and God's foreknowledge. The tale's plot—separate from the Nun's Priest's interpolations—bears out this confusion, but in a way that shows the power of the story to harmonize ideas where the Nun's Priest's rational powers cannot. Regardless, the Nun's Priest-narrator does attempt to "bulte it to the bren":

"Nedely" clepe I symple necessitee —

Or elles, if free choys be graunted me  
To do that same thyng, or do it noght,  
Though God forwoot it er that that I was wrought  
Or if his wityng streyneth never a deel  
But by necessitee condicioneel.

(CT VII 3245-50)

Cavanaugh, explaining these Boethian propositions (and quoting from Chaucer's *Boece*), explains that "[s]imple' necessity is direct, *as in it byhovith by necessite that alle men ben mortal*. 'Conditional' necessity is inferential: *yif thou wost that a man walketh, it byhovith by necessite that he walks*. Thus God's foreknowledge, Boethius argues, is not a necessary cause for man's actions" (939-40). Since this is a comedy, Chauntecleer will have free will, at least as he can perceive it, and his agency, motivated through his free will, is going to save him and the tale from tragedy.

The Nun's Priest-narrator, at this point, ends his attempt to discuss Boethian questions of free will and God's foreknowledge. In this reluctance or inability to turn the tale into a philosophical exploration of predestination, he is much like Chaucer (at least in reluctance to overly philosophize) in some ways. Donald Howard states that

Chaucer was no less a poet of the secular world [as compared to Dante], but he fastened attention on the *saeculum* as it is known to us in this life; what lies beyond it, its ultimate reality, he does not explore. Between man's life in the secular world and the vast hierarchical design of eternity lie those acts of the human will which determine whether a man be saved or damned. (43)

If the tale ends happily for Chauntecleer and Pertelote, the tale will be an earthly comedy, which the reader or audience will have to accept as another instance of harmony, which the *Canterbury Tales* creates as it moves towards its ultimate harmony. If one expects a Christian comedy, s/he will have to wait until the *Parson's Tale* and the *Retraction*. Yet these pious pieces that “quyt” the secular tales of the *Canterbury Tales* might only do so in a partially ironic manner. This partial irony helps ensure the sublunary comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, a sublunary comedy that the outcome of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* will make abundantly clear as it “quyt” the inevitably tragic outcomes of the *Monk's Tale*.

The Nun's Priest-narrator, perhaps aware of his promise to tale a tale of “solace,” now simply brings the tale back to its concrete subject matter:

I wol nat han to do of swich mateere;  
My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere,  
That tok his conseil of his wyf, with sorwe,  
To walken in the yerd upon that morwe  
That he hadde met that dreem that I yow tolde.

(*CT VII 3251-55*)

Yet even in this apparent return to the straightforward plot elements of the tale, the Nun's Priest-narrator cannot help inserting a bit of misleading and/or uncontrolled opinion. The narrator states that Chauntecleer falls *because* of his wife's counsel. Here again the *Nun's Priest's Tale* highlights the necessity in the manner of the *Monk's Tale* that it is “quyting.” Chauntecleer's flying down from the beam certainly may have resulted from physical causes such as hunger, but nowhere does he explicitly accept his wife's ideas



about the physical causes of dreams and thus capitulate to her suggestions regarding physical, herbal remedies. Chauntecleer flies down from the beam because of his instinct for food—as he is a rooster, but also because of his pride and his free will—as he is also imaginatively a sentient rooster in this tale.

The Nun's Priest-narrator subsequently goes into a conventional medieval complaint against "Wommennes conseil" (CT VII 3156; 3157). The inappropriate application of his complaint to Pertelote and women in general raises the hilarity of the complaint and again shows the Nun's Priest either wittingly or unwittingly setting up the "quyting" of the notion regarding Fortune's inevitable and permanent downturn that the Monk's narratives featured again and again. However, after this relatively short complaint, the Nun's Priest-narrator states that "If I conseil of wommen wolde blame; / Passe over, for I seyde it in my game" (CT VII 3261-62). Yet again, a member of the pilgrimage brings up the disclaimer of the insulating "game." The Nun's Priest-narrator ends his disclaimer by stating that "Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne; / I kan noon harm of no womman divyne" (CT VII 3265-66). These words are reminiscent of Chaucer the pilgrim's words of disclaimer during the *Miller's Prologure*: "Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys. / The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe wel this" (CT I 3181-82). The reader or listener has the comedic freedom to turn away from words s/he finds objectionable. In effect, the Nun's Priest-narrator "quyts" his own words, or at least the words of his narrator-persona in his "game" of story telling. Again, the tale at this point clearly illustrates that actions and even words are not *necessarily* leading to one direction and meaning. In this contingent dynamic lies imaginative freedom, and the freedom to laugh at the narrator after as he has apparently disparaged women.

The Nun's Priest-narrator—in control of his narrative and voice or not—finally resumes the tale's plot. Chauntecleer becomes aware of the fox hiding in the greenery, cries out in his rooster's voice, and is ready to take flight because “[ . . . ] naturelly a beest desireth flee / Fro his contrarie [ . . . ]” (*CT* VII 3279-80). Again the Nun's Priest, or Chaucer, is playing with the notion of agency so prominent in the tale, for the narrator states that an animal *naturally* wants to flee from its enemy. In other words, instinct, not will, guides Chauntecleer's initial reaction to his awareness of the dangerous fox. However, the Nun's Priest-narrator again skirts the line between reality and fable when he states that

This Chauntecleer, whan he gan hym espye,  
He wolde han fled, but that the fox anon  
Seyd “Gentil sire, allas, wher wol ye gon?  
Be ye affrayed of me that am youre freend?”

(*CT* VII 3282-85)

The fox earns the narrator's epithet of “false dissymulour” (*CT* VII 3228) by claiming to be Chauntecleer's “freend” while Chauntecleer ignores his instincts when the fox begins to speak to him. Helen Storm Corsa states that “[n]ature warns him of danger, confirming his dream; his pride quiets his fear and brings him close to ‘tragedy’” (216). Thus, at least in this tale, instinct does not predestine the rooster to flee and save himself quite easily. Instead, the fox beguiles the prideful rooster with words that penetrate to “the very source and manifestation of his cock-hood, that which is the emblem of all his pride and happiness” (Corsa 216), therefore finally persuading him with flattery to sing:

This Chauntecleer his wynges gan to bete,

As man that koude his traysoun nat espie,  
So was he ravysshed with his flaterie.

(*CT* VII 3322-24)

Russell the fox's verbal skill overrides the rooster's instincts and manipulates the vain cock into closing his eyes and singing. The Nun's Priest-narrator once again cannot help digressing on the evils of flattery and warning lords to be wary of flatterers within their courts. The warning puts in mind the young men who hoodwink the older men in the earlier fabliaux-like tales of the *Canterbury Tales*. In this tale, however, though momentarily hoodwinked, the protagonist will not ultimately fall. David S. Chamberlain states that Chaucer "laugh[s] gently [ . . . ] at Chauntecleer [ . . . ] for singing with *heart* and feeling in recklessness and not with *head* and reason in wisdom" (191). Chauntecleer's emotional vulnerability in regard to pride and his attendant "recklessness" will only cause him momentary discomfiture. The end of excessive pride and of a lack of reason is not *always* death. Yet momentarily, the Nun's Priest "quyts" the fabliaux-like tales (with Chauntecleer being temporarily hoodwinked) to a small degree—thus creating liberating space in the tale's tone—even as he works on the major "quyting" of the *Monk's Tale*. The Nun's Priest's-narrator's complaint also once again generates humor because the Nun's Priest-narrator puts his complaint in the tone of a great epic, when we are again dealing with a rooster and a fox in the barnyard. This juxtaposition of tone and character allows for imaginative freedom, as does the simultaneous existence of Chauntecleer and Russell as animals and human-like characters. In a way, this dual existence sets up the comedic ending, where disparate elements can exist together in harmony even in an imaginative realm beyond the tale's plot and included outcome.

The Nun's Priest-narrator subsequently complains again after Russell clamps onto Chauntecleer's throat and swings the rest of his body onto his back:

O destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed!

Allas, that Chauntecleer fleigh fro the bemes!

Allas, his wyf ne roghte nat of dremes!

(*CT* VII 3338-40)

Yet again, the audience or reader has to wonder if "destinee" brought Chauntecleer down from the "bemes" and whether Pertelote's dismissal of his prophetic dream is the cause of Chauntecleer's predicament. It appears again that the narrator is arguing for necessity, where in fact, Chauntecleer ignored instinct and willfully listened to the fox's flattery. Yet this will, and pride, that propels Chauntecleer into difficulties will also bring him out of it. The comedic dynamic allows this experiential flexibility, which allows woe to turn to weal. Thomas L. Reed, Jr., writing about medieval debate poetry's relationship with official dogma, states that "[a]nxiety about the knowability of Truth will almost invariably involve skepticism about 'the Word' in all of its guises" (35). The Nun's Priest-narrator recognizes the inflexibility in this conception of destiny and thus is making fun of it as he prepares to show the comedic, flexible aspect of experience. The Nun's Priest-narrator also may be unaware of the partially silly nature of his interpolations, and the "quyter" is opening up himself to disparagement, as in the case of the Merchant. The very indeterminacy of the Nun's Priest's-narrator's intention and awareness illustrates the flexible, indeterminate, and open nature of earthly experience. After all, the "quyting" dynamic of the *Canterbury Tales* is a kind of debate. If one remembers that Chaucer the author is creating this ambiguous narrator, the indeterminacy

and opportunity for interpretive and imaginative freedom increases. Ultimately, this freedom and the accompanying demolition of tragedy's inevitability is the major point of the comedy that is the *Nun's Priest's Tale*.

Thus the Nun's Priest-narrator and the tale's plot elements up to Chauntecleer's escape from Russell reinforce a rigid conception of experience and the mechanism of earthly destiny. However the tale's subsequent portrayal of Chauntecleer's experience will shatter this rigid conception. Simultaneously, and in addition to my oft-stated point that the tale is about common, rather small animals, the Nun's Priest-narrator—intentionally or not—further introduces humor by noting that “[ . . . ] on a Friday fil al this meschaunce” (*CT* VII 3341). The allusion to Good Friday in a debased context, implicitly and ridiculously juxtaposing Chauntecleer and Christ is funny but, moreover, provides a foreshadowing that Chauntecleer—though certainly no Christ-figure—will rise again to prosperity, as comedy demands.

The Nun's Priest-narrator continues in mock-epic mode as he compares the noise made by the hens when they find out Chauntecleer is missing to the wailing of the Trojan women at the fall of Troy and the killing of King Priam. The implicit connection between Chauntecleer and Priam is hilarious, again in its juxtaposition of the low with the high, but it is also important as it relates to the tale's ultimate outcome and comedy. Priam was told that his son, Paris, would bring down Troy, no matter what the father did. Thus, despite Priam exposing the infant Paris, the child survives and eventually does bring about the destruction of Troy through his taking of Helen from her husband, Menelaus of Sparta. Priam was destined to fall, and so does. If the negative simile comparing the hens' cries with the Trojan women's cries is disproportionate, then the comparison of

Chauntecleer to Priam is inappropriate—not just because of disproportion—but because Chauntecleer escapes his destiny—if destiny is an unstoppable force in this world, as it is within the narratives of the *Monk's Tale*. The inappropriate simile produces more humor and more foreshadowing of the overthrow of the tragic viewpoint that the *Monk's Tale* expressed.

At the hens' outcry, the widow, her daughter, dogs, and various farm denizens rush out to save the rooster. This scene is completely appropriate to comedy, as Frye states that “[t]he tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society” [ . . . ] (165). hilariously, even the bees fly out of the hive in pursuit—but certainly not like the hard-working Carthaginians/bees in Virgil's famous epic simile from the *Aeneid*. This cacophonous, ludic scene dispels the tragic tone<sup>3</sup> that had hung over the tale since Russell the fox made his appearance. Amidst this frenetic scene, the Nun's Priest-narrator places another negative simile but this time without the mock-epic inflation:

Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee  
Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille  
Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille,  
As thilke day was maad upon the fox.

(*CT* VII 3394-96)

The simile is curious because the Nun's Priest-narrator is referring to the actual events of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, in which English laborers did kill many Flemish weavers. The simile introduces death into the narrative, even though only in a metaphoric term,

almost as if to foreshadow what might happen to Chauntecleer, since the outcome at this point in the tale is uncertain. The sober simile momentarily “quyts” the boisterous, hilarious chaos of the chase, implying the Wheel of Fortune poised to spin Chauntecleer to its depths or its heights. The uncertainty also implicitly argues against a tragic inevitability.

In fact, the Nun’s Priest-narrator now explicitly focuses on the uncertainty of “Fortune” as he again stops the plot and pauses the Wheel for another digression, where he urges the audience to note the imminent turn of the Wheel:

Now, goode men, I prey yow herkneþ alle:

Lo, how Fortune turneth soðeynly

The hope and pryde eek of hir enemy!

(*CT* VII 3401-03)

“Fortune” dashes the “hope and pryde [ . . . ] of hir enemy [ . . . ].” However, it is unclear as to exactly what or who the Nun’s Priest-narrator means by “hir enemy.” Is Russell the fox the foe? Is certitude the foe? Is inevitable tragedy the foe? It may be that the “enemy” of “Fortune” is anyone—human or sentient animal—that hubristically considers him/herself above—and thus safe from—the vicissitudes of the world. At this point in the narrative then, it appears that Russell is the “enemy,” since he already considers Chauntecleer as good as a meal in his stomach. The fox prides himself on the success of his plan without yet reaching the plan’s goal. Thus he disregards the possibility that his fortune will change from apparent weal to woe. However, one can also apply the “enemy” of “Fortune” epithet to Chauntecleer especially as he spoke and acted earlier in

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, a tragic tone can also produce humor, especially if the reader knows a farmer raises animals, such as chickens, for food, and sees such an animal fighting for its life as if it were human—a being

the tale, for he ignored his dream due to his instincts for food and perhaps because of a sense of pride in his supposed role as *dominus domi*. But now, the roles of Chauntecleer and Russell have reversed, as fortune reverses, and the clever fox momentarily humbles the once prideful Chauntecleer. However, the reversal is only temporary. It has no permanent, damaging effects upon the rooster. Instead of being eaten and thus converted into lifeless pieces of flesh and bone in Russell's stomach, Chauntecleer lives, thereby rising on the spinning Wheel. Therefore he retains his agency, instead of becoming a dead, voiceless object—a victim of destiny such as the protagonists in the *Monk's Tale*. Chauntecleer uses his verbal skills (thus, unlike tragic victims, successfully acting *upon* circumstances), as Russell had done, and persuades the fox to turn and say mockingly to his pursuers that “I wol hym ete, in feith, and that anon!” (CT VII 3413). Russell, himself now prideful, answers that “[ . . . ] In feith, it shal be don” (CT VII 3414). However, as the Wheel turns, “[ . . . ] As he spak that word, al sodeynly / This cok brak from his mouth delyverly [ . . . ] (CT VII 3415-16). The deceiver is deceived; the victim victimizes, and the subject to be turned object remains subject. Chauntecleer appropriately “heighe upon a tree [ . . . ] fleigh anon” (CT VII 3417). The protagonist is literally on high once again (unlike carpenter John in this regard, but like carpenter John, alive and generally well), metaphorically on top of the Wheel that has spun ultimately in a direction that brings him bliss and life. His dream only prophesied part of the future, not the inevitable whole, not unavoidable death. It remains only to configure the final elements in this tale that, though implying tragedy at times, ends up a complete comedy.

Additionally, since the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is a beast-fable, a narrative based generally on the well known *Roman de Renart* cycle and more specifically on John

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destined (one hopes) for other than someone's dinner menu.



Bromyard's "complete story of the cock and the fox [in his] [ . . . ] *Summa Praedicatorum* [ . . . ] of the 1360's" (Shallers 322-23), where the cock ultimately escapes from the fox's jaws, Chaucer's audience would have expected a happy ending for Chauntecleer. Thus the lineage and genre of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* would have set up the audience to expect a comedic ending. The beast-fable, therefore, as a genre, automatically works to build a foundation to "quyt" the somber and tragic historical narratives of the *Monk's Tale*.

Russell does try to persuade Chauntecleer to come down from the tree—and thereby create a final tragedy, but Chauntecleer's experience has made him wiser and thus he responds "[ . . . ] I shrewe myself, both blood and bones, / If thou bigyle me ofter than ones" (*CT* VII 3427-28). Furthermore, Chauntecleer now spouts his own moral to the tale, distilled from his recent experience: "[ . . . ] he that wynketh, whan he sholde see, / Al wilfully God lat him nevere thee!" (*CT* VII 3431-32). Chauntecleer literally closed his eyes when opening his mouth to sing, yet one can interpret his words metaphorically and connect them to the necessity of being mentally aware of internal and external elements in one's life. Chauntecleer closed his eyes metaphorically several times during the tale: when he flew down from the beam and when he believed Russell's flattery. However, now his eyes are open, literally and metaphorically (unlike the deluded butts of the *Miller's*, *Merchant's*, or *Shipman's* tales), and this state prevents the tale from becoming a tragedy, albeit one involving a talking rooster and fox. Since this tale is a comedy—where every character receives something—Russell, now in harmony with Chauntecleer, ceases his attempts at deceiving him and provides his own moral that his experience has taught him:

"[ . . . ] God yeve hym meschaunce,

That is so undiscreet of governaunce  
That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees.”

(*CT* VII 3433-35)

Russell admits that he should have kept his mouth shut when he had possession of Chauntecleer in his jaws. As with Chauntecleer’s moral, we can apply his words to human life (or poetry, in the case of the long-winded Nun’s Priest-narrator), where one must know when to keep one’s mouth shut. The comedy abounds with morals, though one must ask him/herself, what is the moral of the story? This is a fair question, since the Nun’s Priest-narrator, following Chauntecleer’s and Russell’s morals, offers a famously ambiguous moral and disclaimer:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,  
As of a fox, or of a cock and hen,  
Taketh the moralitee, goode men.  
For Seint Paul seith that al this writen is,  
To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis:<sup>4</sup>  
Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.

(*CT* VII 3438-43)

The Nun’s Priest has told a mirthful tale, fulfilling his promise and Harry’s desire, though he shows anxiety about the possibility of some taking it as a “folye.” Harry would not understand the “moralitee” in the tale, but the Nun’s Priest, even as he has “quyted” him and the *Monk’s Tale*, still cannot rest at ease. The overdone apology is humorous in that, with the advice to take the moral kernel and leave the fictitious chaff, it piles morality

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<sup>4</sup> Chaucer will repeat Saint Paul’s words in the *Retraction*, and I will discuss their significance in the next chapter.

onto a beast-fable, even after the beasts themselves have provided morals. Marc. M. Pelen states, moreover that “[t]he ‘fruit/chaff’ figure has obvious Scriptural overtones [ . . . ] but, since Chauntecleer seems to have escaped the fall, it is not clear to critics of the tale exactly what is the chaff here, and what is the fruit of inner meaning” (331). He adds later that “[p]erhaps it would be appropriate [ . . . ] to suggest that the Priest has lost control of his argument” (331). However, even if this is the case, the ambiguity generates interpretive freedom, thus allowing the audience or reader to preclude the imposition of any “Truth” by the tale or teller. This ambiguity allows for harmony between audience or reader and text. Additionally, as I have stated, the “quyter” is sometimes unintentionally “quyted” by his or her tale—and this gap between intention and product yields yet more space for imaginative and interpretive freedom. Thus the Nun’s Priest’s ostensibly flawed narratorial skills and the indeterminacy of the tale’s moral—or morals—do not detract from the tale’s efficacy as a story and as a comedy. It is quite possible that Chaucer is laughing—appropriately—at the effect the Nun’s Priest-narrator has created. Manning states that “Chaucer [ . . . ] sees how narrow is the view of reality that his Narrator perceives [ . . . ]. Comic too is the Narrator’s attempt to control meaning, but his rhetoric too often surpasses meaning or reduces to absurdity” (14). Russell’s moral regarding jangling can apply to the Nun’s Priest—who constructs a tale that includes digression after digression in a tale that involves barnyard animals spouting philosophy and citing Scripture, history, literature, and legend. To eliminate the authority of these philosophical digressions, Chauntecleer turns what could be a tragedy—a narrative that would have followed the patterns given in the digressions—into a comedy. The Nun’s Priest-narrator “quyts” himself humorously with his interpolations and digressions and presents a world

where the protagonist ultimately prospers, despite momentary setbacks. However, the tale does even more than “quyt” the narrator, the *Monk’s Tale*, and Harry Bailly. A. Paul Shillers states that

[t]he Nun’s Priest’s Tale is more than a cleverly turned joke. It is instead Chaucer’s comic vision of mankind which counterbalances in the *Canterbury Tales* the ideal image he presents in the Knight’s Tale. Both images, naturalistic and idealistic, are recurrent in Chaucer’s poetry, and both fit naturally into his Boethian concept of a benevolent cosmos. (335)

Thus the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* “quyts” the “idealistic,” generally sober kind of tale that the *Knight’s Tale* exemplifies, as well as “quyting” the characters and elements I have previously mentioned. The tale ends happily for the protagonist who will implicitly return to Pertelote and “fether[ . . . ]” her many more times and produce new life, new chickens. The widow, her daughter, and all the other barnyard animals allow Russell—who learns something from his experience, even as he loses his intended goal—to live. Thus harmony in the tale reigns, and the reader or audience participates in this harmony, allowed the intellectual and imaginative freedom to choose among a variety of morals.

In the *Epilogue* to the tale, Harry Bailly shows himself extremely pleased with the entertaining *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, but in his ostensible compliment to the Nun’s Priest and his refreshing tale, he curiously focuses on the Nun’s Priest’s virility, as he had done with the Monk:

“I-blessed be thy breche, and every stoon!

This was a murie tale of Chauntecleer.

But by my trouthe, if thou were seculer,

Thou woldest ben a trede-foul aright.

(*CT* VII 3448-51)

Harry certainly may be making fun of clerical celibacy and loutishly and teasingly egging on the supposedly celibate Nun's Priest. Harry also does not acknowledge gleaning any moral from the tale, though the tale suggests many. Thus Harry again shows his obtuse nature, which cannot rise above the concrete level of a tale, even when there is more to a tale than the obvious surface "sentence" or "solas."<sup>5</sup> As the *magister ludi*, he appropriately brings mirth (of a coarse variety) to the *Epilogue*—at the Nun's Priest's expense—even as Harry appears to appreciate his virility. Yet the Nun's Priest has no need to "quyt" Harry now, as he has already done so resoundingly in the *Tale*. The Nun's Priest remains silent, apparently satisfied with the proceedings of the "game," and Harry, leaving freedom for the reader or audience, only "Seide unto another [ . . . ]" (*CT* VII 3462) to tell the next tale, though the *Canterbury Tales* have reached a comedic climax with the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. The comedy that the tale presents transcends any effort, ironic or not, to curb the harmony and balance it has created and the imaginative freedom it has allowed, and the few unfunny tales (including the religiously instructional *Parson's Tale*) that follow will not destroy this harmonious comedy which has been so pervasive, if not omnipresent, throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. The overall comedic dynamic that transcends tone and genre—aided by the *Canterbury Tales's* fragmentation—operates even when comedy, harmony, and humor are not obvious, such as where tales end unhappily or pilgrims remain enemies, though mutually "quyting" and "quyted." Once loosed, this dynamic is unstoppable—even with the violent death of Saint Cecilia in the

*Second's Nun's Tale*—for the tale is only a component of a living pilgrimage and story-telling “game” exploding with liberating variety and vitality that ends fragmentarily and on an apparently serious, devotional note, but not in death for the animated pilgrims or in a discordant view of life and the cosmos.

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that Harry possesses no critical ability. Donald Howard, for one, states that Harry “is a pretty good literary critic because at least he understands that the kiss of death in story-telling is for the story to bore the audience” (*The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* 378).

## Chapter 9- Conclusion: Harmony in Comedy, Harmony in Fragmentation

Fragment VIII contains the *Second Nun's Prologue and Tale* and the *Canon Yeoman's Prologue and Tale*, while Fragment IX contains the *Manciple's Prologue and Tale*. Since they are not comedies, I will not devote a large amount of time to them, though they do play a part in the “quyting” dynamic, as, for example, the pious and sorrowful *Second Nun's Tale* “quyts” the delightful and funny *Nun's Priest's Tale*. In the former, Saint Cecilia, the protagonist, is brutally executed, and thus finds happiness only in heaven. The *Second Nun's Tale* is a divine comedy and thereby balances the earthly comedy of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. In turn the *Canon Yeoman's Tale*, with its account of alchemical trickery, whereby the goal is to transmute matter to a richer earthly substance, “quyts” the pious *Second's Nun's Tale*, which involves a transmutation of the body through martyrdom into sacred spirit. The fragment produces balance of tones and philosophical/theological values and thereby contributes to the overall comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* in a non-comedic way. Thus the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole transcends its tonal, philosophical, and generic variety to produce its total comedy.

Fragment X, which includes the *Parson's Prologue and Tale*, and Chaucer's *Retraction*, provide the ending for the *Canterbury Tales*—if we can say that a fragmented work possesses an ending, a point of total closure.<sup>1</sup> These tales follow the comedic climax of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and ride on a wave of the energy that the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the other tales, especially the comedies, have created. In addition, the final “tale”—not a tale at all but an instructional piece—the *Parson's Tale*—ostensibly

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<sup>1</sup> The lack of total closure increases the imaginative freedom the *Canterbury Tales* allows its readers and audience. Thus, though some critics see this lack as an aesthetic flaw, I argue (and have argued) that the *Canterbury Tales* is a paradoxically fragmented but complete work. In other words, it does not need whole tales and whole links to achieve its effect. Stephen Powell, “Game Over: Defragmenting the End of the

“quyts” the entire fiction of the *Canterbury Tales*, since it focuses on advising individuals how to deal with the Seven Deadly Sins (with which many of the preceding tales have dealt)—not on creating a fictitious narrative that requires “glozing” and interpretation. In fact, in the *Parson’s Prologue*, the eponymous speaker states that

“Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me,  
For Paul, that writeth unto Tymothee  
Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse  
And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse,  
Why shoulde I sowen draf out of my fest,  
Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?

(*CT* X 31-36)

The Parson unequivocally states that “fable[s]”—even if they do deal with the Seven Deadly Sins—are sinful because they “turn aside from” (Benson note p. 287) the unadulterated truth—the “whete” without the “draf.” Moreover, the preceding *Manciple’s Tale* seems to show the impossibility of linking “sentence” with “solas”—a combination that supposedly makes for the best kind of stories, according to Harry, even as he cannot understand the whole “sentence” of many of the tales, especially the humorous ones. Stephen D. Powell states that “[t]he *Manciple’s Tale* ends, as does no other tale, with the enterprise of storytelling—especially storytelling that is designed to marry ‘best sentence and moost solass’ (I 798)—thoroughly discredited” (50), since the honest crow receives no reward for telling the truth but is turned black by a vengeful Apollo who has just murdered his unfaithful wife. In fact, near the end of his tale, the Manciple tells the

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*Canterbury Tales*” in *The Chaucer Review* 37 (2002) 40-58, makes some pertinent points regarding the interpretation of Fragments IX and X of the *CT*.



audience that his mother has said, “A jangler is to God abhomynable” (*CT IX 343*), even though the crow has been honest and uncovered marital infidelity. The Manciple’s mother’s advice is reminiscent of Russell the fox’s self-advice to avoid jangling—although Russell’s jangling had nothing to do with telling the truth. The reader or audience is left wondering if the *Manciple’s Tale* possesses any clear “sentence” or moral. Additionally, the *Manciple’s Tale* contains the fabliau-element of the unfaithful wife who cuckolds her husband, but in this case, her husband learns of her infidelity and kills her, providing an uncomedic ending where one might expect a harmonious, comedic one. At the end of this tale, it appears comedy has disappeared, and only discord—neither “sentence” nor “solace”—remains, especially since, the *Parson’s Tale* is a sober enchiridion-like text on penance, and the *Retraction* shows Chaucer rejecting his works that do not have a religious subject.

Yet the discordant *Manciple’s Tale*, ponderous *Parson’s Tale*, and pious *Retraction* cannot dispel the comedy that the “quytting” dynamic and the comedic tales of the *Canterbury Tales* have established and nurtured. These three pieces “quyt” the rest of the *Canterbury Tales* and thus paradoxically fulfill a role in the comedy, even though they are harsh or serious pieces, and Fragment X, which contains the *Parson’s Tale* and the *Retraction*, ends the “game” of the tale-telling contest and the fiction of the pilgrimage. Moreover, even as Chaucer-the-pilgrim notes that “The sonne fro the south lyne was descended” (*CT X 2*) at the beginning of the *Parson’s Prologue*, even though the Manciple apparently told his tale in the morning, thus creating a time disjunction, thereby signifying a spiritual rather than earthly end, the pilgrimage has reached “[ . . . ] a thropes ende [ . . . ]” (*CT X 12*), a natural place to end a day of riding. Thus the day’s

progress, partially verisimilar to a real, earthly pilgrimage, gives prominence to the experiential and the social, even as the pilgrimage course now becomes apocalyptic and implies the end of every human life as the sun sets after time has illogically and excessively lapsed. The Parson even provides some humor in his prologue when he states that

But trusteth wel, I am a Southren man;  
I kan nat geeste ‘rum, ram, ruf,’ by lettres  
Ne, God woot, rym holde I but litel better [ . . . ]

(CT X 42-44)

Though Seth Lerer is justified in one way to state that the Parson only gives “a disavowal of all things poetic, fictive, and feigned” (287) when Harry calls upon him to tell a tale, the Parson’s parodic imitation of northern alliteration is funny and allows levity to enter even at the beginning of the “penitential manual” (Lerer 287) that constitutes the Parson’s “tale.” Siegfried Wenzel states that “[b]asically, the Parson’s tale uses material from the *Summa casuum Poenitentia* (1222/29) by the Dominican St. Raymund of Pennaforte for lines 80-386 and 958-1080, and from the *Summa vitiorum* (1236) by the Dominican friar William Peraldus (or Peyraut) for a large part of lines 390-955” (956). Chaucer changes very little in his translation, and the dearth of revision reinforces the non-fictive quality of the *Parson’s Tale*. However, even the sober, doctrinal Parson cannot keep the seed of humor from blossoming in his supposedly exclusively serious discourse. The humor allows emotional freedom, a momentary relief from seriousness, a small “quyting” of the religious sobriety that the Parson’s “penitential manual” in spoken form ushers into the

pilgrimage. In this small instance of unintentional humor on the Parson's part, the listener or reader "quyts" the seriousness of the Parson's intent and words.

In fact, the Parson uses more words that still unintentionally convey a comedic sense to the pilgrimage and the tale-telling "game," even as he prepares to "quyt" the whole enterprise of the "game" and the focus on earthly affairs and creations. For instance, after rejecting alliteration and end-rhyme, the prime poetic components of much story-telling (and thus synecdochally story-telling itself) in the Middle Ages, he states that "I wol yow tell a myrie tale in prose / To knytte up al this feeste and make an ende" (*CT X* 46-47). The irony of stating he will tell a "myrie tale" is obvious, since his "tale" will not be conventionally merry, but rather merry in an eschatological sense for a believing, pious Christian. In fact, this kind of mirth is often completely the opposite of conventional worldly mirth. Humor arises from this complex irony, even if the Parson does not intend it. He does, however, intend to "knytte up,"—end, "quyt," balance—the entire work and is confident he can do so in a religious discourse, despite the humor leaking from his own generally serious words.

The Parson does not realize also that he is more like Harry Bailly than he might like to admit. This similarity generates more humor and "quyts" again the seriousness of the Parson's intent and words. Donald Howard states that the Parson

thinks there is an absolute difference between truth and falsehood and that all fables are falsehoods; he doesn't understand about 'poetic truth.' The tale he tells has got to be wheat or else it will be 'draf' [ . . . ]. So he proposes 'Moralitee and vertuous mattere' and says that if this can be permitted he will do them 'plesauce levelful' [(*CT X* 41)]." (379)

The Parson wants only religious and moral “sentence,” while Harry wants tales that are *either* moral or mirthful. Thus both characters have a problem with stories that contain both “sentence” and “solas.” The Parson does not want “solas.” Harry, contrastingly and similarly, can appreciate “sentence” and “solas” only when a tale is one or the other (which most in the *Canterbury Tales* are not), even as he has stated that “Tales of best sentence and moost solas— / Shal have a soper at oure aller coste” (CT I 798-99). For example, in the *Epilogue to the Merchant’s Tale*, Harry, regarding May and her deception, says

[ . . . ] swich a wif I pray God kepe me fro!

Lo, whiche sleightes and subtilitees

In wommen been! [ . . . ]

(CT IV 2420-22)

Harry can only apply the tale to his own life and does not appreciate the humorous “solas” of blind Januarie’s cuckolding; May’s ingenious explanation of it; the “sentence” of Januarie’s metaphorical and literal blindness; or Pluto and Proserpina’s domestic debate. Alan T. Gaylord states that “[w]hen Harry reacts to a story he never treats it as a thing-in-itself; it serves rather to mirror his own likes and dislikes, or to point to something which is already known. He is a realist, a literalist, and a materialist [ . . . ]” (232). Harry is too simple-minded to appreciate the subtlety of “sentence” and “solas” in the tales, so his critical faculty is flawed and limited. The Parson’s single- or simple-mindedness thus makes his authority equivocal like Harry’s, even if he does not realize it.

James Feibleman, discussing Plato's theory of comedy, states that "[t]here are few references to comedy in Plato, and all of them treat of it as the exposure of real impotence behind the appearance of power" (76). Certainly the Parson possesses ecclesiastical and moral authority, and Harry defers—or relinquishes—his authority and steps into silence as the Parson tells his narrative of penitence. However, his prologue is not void of humor, even as he is a man who does not understand the subtlety of fiction—subtlety that often conveys humor or at least irony. In fact, the Parson's sober intent and inability to appreciate fiction and humor allow the human comedy to continue, even as he paradoxically preaches toward a spiritual goal that seemingly denigrates conventional mirth. His "quyting" seriousness contains sparks of unintentional humor—he does not have the power to eliminate humor from his intentionally serious narrative—so even a portion of *his* narrative "quyts" itself. Thus a degree of "impotence" or at least limitation in regard to controlling the work's tone arises "behind the appearance of power." As Susan Purdie states, "the more evident the claim to power, the more probable funniness as a response to [the claimant's] [ . . . ] power" (61). Humor arises due to the uncovering of the claimant's lack of total discursive power, as the gap in the *Parson's Prologue* between the teller's intention and literary product demonstrate to the reader or listener. The humor in the *Prologue* sets up the reader or listener to take the succeeding *Tale* at least an iota less seriously than s/he would without the unintentionally mischievous leavening of the *Parson's Prologue*. Humorous space opens up with the *Prologue*, and even the Parson's serious "penitential manual" of a "tale" cannot eliminate its resonance. Mikhail Bakhtin, discussing the novel in *The Dialogic Imagination*, states that it contains "an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished

still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)” (7). One can apply this statement to the *Parson’s Prologue* and *Tale*, where “indeterminacy” of tone allows for humor and a degree of attitudinal freedom on the reader or listener’s part, even if the *Parson’s Tale* attempts to impart “unitary language” and meaning (Bakhtin 270 ff. *The Dialogic Imagination*). Even if the Parson or Chaucer the poet desired Christian closure at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, “reality often frustrates such desires, and Chaucer, who was intensely aware of human aspirations and fallibility in other areas, may have projected that sense of incompleteness into his perspective on conclusion as well. His apparent inability to close may be, instead, an artful and conscientious imitation of reality” (Grudin 168). Harmony therefore develops from the overall “quyting” of the other tales and the small closure-resisting “quyttings” within the *Parson’s Prologue*. This prologue is an important element of the Parson’s discourse, since it reveals to the audience or reader his intention and a bit of his psychology and personality that, though seemingly opposed to earthly mirth, nevertheless contributes to the overall harmonious comedy of the *Canterbury Tales*.

The *Parson’s Tale* itself begins with the Parson redirecting the pilgrims away from the physical pilgrimage to Saint Thomas à Becket’s physical shrine and toward the spiritual pilgrimage leading to heaven and the believing soul’s salvation:

“Manye been the weyes espirituel that leden folk to oure Lord Jhesu Crist  
and the regne of glorie. / Of which weyes ther is a ful noble wey and a full  
covenable, which may nat fayle to man ne to woman that thurgh synne  
hath mysگون fro the righte wey of Jerusalem celestial / and this wey is  
cleped penitence [ . . . ].” (CT X 78-80)

The Parson uses the metaphor of the “wey” to lead the pilgrims’ concerns from the physical pilgrimage to the earthly city of Canterbury (which is a liminal, balancing—even “quyting”—locus since it contains the sacred space of the Christian shrine) toward the journey to “Jerusalem celestial.” The specific “righte wey” is “penitence.” However, even in this manual for “penitence,” the Parson remains partially focused on the sublunary world. Howard states that in the *Parson’s Tale*, “we get at the end not a vision of the heavenly Jerusalem but an examination of human experience” (380). Thus this “penitential manual” remains focused upon a human being’s experience in the world, even as it guides the human being toward the “celestial goal.” Again, “quyting,” balance is present despite the apparent turning away from the world.

Additionally, since the anomalous *Manciple’s Tale* offered a moral that seemed confused (and the *Nun’s Priest Tale* also offered seemingly many morals), the *Parson’s Tale* “quyts” that defect. Ann W. Astell states that

The Manciple would sacrifice the truth-telling crow, sending him as a blackened scapegoat, accused by Apollo, into the wilderness. But in the immediately following *Prologue to the Parson’s Tale*, the truth-teller returns in the person of the virtuous Parson and assumes his place, no longer at the margins, but at the center of a once-divided community of pilgrims that consents unanimously to his instruction and listens gladly to him. (335)

Thus the Parson reaffirms the ability of an individual to speak truth embodied in a narrative, even if the narrative is not strictly a tale. It works in tandem with the *Manciple’s Tale* to produce intellectual harmony within the *Canterbury Tales* where,

with Apollo murdering his wife and punishing the crow for telling the truth by turning his feathers from white to black, the value of truth momentarily disappears. Apollo tells the truthful crow that “I wol thee quite anon thy false tale” (CT IX 293), in a perversion of the “quyting” dynamic, since the crow has not done anything wrong to deserve “quyting.” The Manciple subsequently quotes his mother as stating that “A jangler is to God abhomynable” (CT X 343) in reference to the crow’s truth-telling. The tale thereby ends with a moral that suggests that truth is worthless. It is necessary for the Parson to “quyt” this questionably moral with a work that contains, in the Parson’s mind, only truth.

The Parson ends his tale by stating that “This blisful regne may men purchase by poverte espritueel, and the glorie by lowenesse, the plentee of joye by hunger and thirst, and the rest by travaille, and the lyf by deeth and mortification of synne” (CT X 1080). Even at this final point in the final tale, the Parson’s words call for “quyting[s]”—glory by lowness, plenty of joy by “hunger and” thirst, rest by travail, and life by death and the “mortification” of sin. At least in this world, even the Parson cannot rise above this principle that has worked to produce an overall harmony in the *Canterbury Tales*. Of course, now the earthly “quyting,” for example, being humble in life, will lead to heavenly exaltation for the pious, believing human soul. Earth and heaven combine—as is perfectly appropriate and desirable on an earthly pilgrimage to a saint’s holy relics and shrine; proper behavior on this earth is necessary for eternal salvation. If one has been sinful on earth, one can rectify this sinful state by changing earthly behavior while alive. One again, the prominence of experience arises, even if the goal is a realm beyond living experience. F. Anne Payne, interpreting the frame structure and certain tales of the



*Canterbury Tales* as Menippean satire, states that, in a such a work, “[t]he physical structure of the world is seen as incapable of imposing what are generally thought to be its usual limitations” (10). Thus, a transition toward the spiritual realm is entirely appropriate in a work that uses satire to aid in the construction of ultimate comedy. The world is important, but it is not the only—or most important element—in creation. The world—glorious, multifarious, and vivid as Chaucer portrays it in the *Canterbury Tales*—must at least share preeminence with the divine. The sharing ensures the final harmonious comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* as a transcendent whole.

Chaucer’s *Retraction* follows, and its ambiguity has fascinated interpreters for centuries. It is possible to read the *Retraction* as a sincere leave-taking of art by Chaucer the poet, à la Prospero breaking his magic wand in *The Tempest*. In this sense, Chaucer “quyts” his creation and his experience as a poet. Chaucer-the-Retractor states that “[ . . . ] namely of my translacions and endityngs of wordly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns [ . . . ]” (CT X 1084). One can interpret the “worldly vanitees” as the secular literature and translations Chaucer composed over the course of his lifetime, including the *Canterbury Tales*. In this sense also, the *Parson’s Tale* seems like an artistic forerunner or transition away from art and toward spirituality. As the Parson ended his tale with a call to penance, Chaucer ends the *Retraction* with a dogmatic statement in Latin and Hebrew: “*Qui cum Patre et Spiritu Sancto vivit et regat Deus per omnia saecula. Amen*” (CT X 1091). “[P]er omnia saecula”—“through all ages” seems to deny earthly, temporal existence and place the work finally in an eternal, Christian realm, a realm where the author apparently wants to dwell in bliss for all time, even as Derek Pearsall states that the *Retraction* “confirms the passing of artistic into historical

consciousness” (292). Thus the *Canterbury Tales* partakes of the nature of a divine comedy, though if so, the participation is only partial, since the mere presence of a final *Retraction*, sequentially following all the tales—secular and sacred—cannot eliminate the worldly and fictive content that has preceded it. It may be that the *Retraction* and the *Parson’s Tale* “quyt” the fictive content of the *Canterbury Tales* and provide Boethian equilibrium in tone (though the *Parson’s Tale’s* title announces it as a fiction), but this “quyting” is only a balancing, and balance needs two equally weighted sides to exist. The sequentially ultimate *Parson’s Tale* and *Retraction* do not eliminate the preceding works or devalue their worth or meanings because of their final positions. The hierarchy that the sequence creates because of the prominence of the ending is only illusory. As Derek Brewer states, “[t]he dominant impression is liveliness,” and comedy allies itself with life. The harmonious comedy that features varying degrees of humor still resonates from the transcendent, variegated whole.

Thus the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole is ultimately a comedy, instead of just a collection of humorous tales despite its fragmentation and ostensibly somber ending, because the tales and tellers generally “quyt” each other to bring a balance in terms of the tales’ tone and the tellers’ interpersonal relationships on the pilgrimage. Humor may certainly aid in constructing comedy, as it is effective in pointing out incongruities in thought, speech, or behavior. However, it is not necessary to the creation of true comedy. If an apparently (unfunny) anomaly such as the *Manciple’s Tale* arises, the transcendent harmony that the general “quyting” has created can subsume a tale such as this<sup>2</sup> into the harmonious whole. Moreover, the abundance of specifically humorous, comedic tales—

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, Ann Astell and Stephen Powell show how this tale relates quite well to the succeeding *Parson’s Tale*, even if the *Manciple’s Tale* is problematic in isolation.

which unite young people and the greater society of the tale in pragmatic, in not perfect, harmony—brings an overall vitality to the *Canterbury Tales* that pious, sober works cannot dispel—despite the necessity of these serious works in the “quyting” dynamic that yields harmony between tales and between tellers. The world, after all, is a place of great variety, and the *Canterbury Tales* reflects the variety of this world, a variety that partially consists of sober, harsh, and sad elements. Yet the impression of “liveliness,” as Brewer states, remains predominant, since the bulk of the *Canterbury Tales* works to change discord to concord, and the effort that succeeds in establishing at least pragmatic harmony gives the work its comedy that transcends tone and genre. Even if Russell does not eat Chauntecleer, he retains his life and receives a moral lesson about jangling. Even if old Carpenter John breaks his arm and is cuckolded by Nicholas, he is only made fun of—not severely beaten, mutilated, ostracized, or killed. Yes, the sublunary world is imperfect and transient, but within this imperfection and transience, a way of coexisting and cooperating—even with rancor present—is possible.

This possibility relates as well to the tellers of the tales. Even if Harry Bailly insults or goads the Nun’s Priest, the latter has told his tale, which has already “quyted” Harry, and thus he can hold his peace for the remainder of the pilgrimage. Even if Robyn the Miller pokes fun at the Oswald the Reeve, the latter can tell his tale about the cuckolding, beating, and outsmarting of a miller and then refrain from entering into a physical conflict with Robyn. The Miller and the Reeve might never grow to like each other, but they can coexist in the pilgrimage without killing each other—and this may be the best one can hope for in an imperfect world, which, though imperfect, allows opportunities for disparate and jarring elements to work together toward a goal and

maintain relative peace—pragmatic harmony. Moreover, the fictive pilgrimage to Canterbury that Chaucer creates becomes a permanent monument to pragmatic, harmonious comedy as the once oral work eventually becomes a manuscript in the real world. Comedy transcends apparent limits once again.

Another contributing element in the *Canterbury Tales*'s ultimate comedy is the Bakhtinian notion of Carnival, where the inversion of social and political hierarchy occurs, and the suppressed physical nature of human existence rises to prominence in another inversion of established mores and laws. As Bakhtin states, “[p]eople were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations”(10 *Rabelais and his World*). Though the *Canterbury Tales* does not totally eschew class distinctions and hierarchy, the pilgrimage, which features a tavern-keeper—not an aristocrat or cleric—as “Lord of Misrule,” partially inverts the usual order of everyday life in late fourteenth-century England. Harry, as “Lord of Misrule,” has equivocal authority, and this kind of unstable authority allows the comedy to increase, as he cannot completely understand the full meaning of many tales and cannot totally control the “quyttings” that occur within and beyond the tales themselves. Comedy feeds on this instability—as life is unstable and changeable—to show a world where possibility overrides—at least to a degree—the strictures of official law and practice. Thus in the comedic tales themselves, the young hero and heroine come together<sup>3</sup>, usually sexually, to override religious and societal strictures against fornication and adultery. The comedic imperative is the establishment of harmonious happiness, and this concern trumps marital bonds, which usually, as in The

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<sup>3</sup> Chaucer and Pertelote in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* do not break any religious or societal laws since they are already a couple, albeit chickens. Their tale is a comedy that specifically debunks the notion of inevitable tragic downfall as the Monk presented it, and thus differs from the fabliau-like *Miller's* and

*Miller's Tale* and *The Merchant's Tale*, are relatively weak due to the mismatch in age and the overweening pride and obtuseness of the old husband. Thus, in the comedic world, these men deserve their cuckolding, for, instead of aiding the rising generation by finding an closer match in age or being a mentor to the young, they stand in the way of the vital, younger characters living their lives as they *should* live them. The *senex* loses in his encounter with the *iuvenis* not just because he is old, but because he attempts to overstep the natural bounds that old age has provided for order and succession in the living world. Thus the audience or reader generally feels “sympathy” for the young people and “ridicule” (Frye 177) for the old cuckold, even if the old cuckold and young woman are married and the old cuckold is not purely evil. Yet, even after the cuckolding, the old men possess blissful ignorance. They do not die or experience ostracism—and this blissful ignorance is all they need in order to live reasonably well in their social and physical milieu and in their limited intellectual/perceptual purviews. Thus the comedic plot yields pragmatic comedy for all—protagonists and dupes, and audience—involved internally and externally. Both the comedic tales and the pilgrimage itself thus participate in the “game.”

Additionally, Bakhtin’s notion of the “lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, [and] abstract [ . . . ]” (19 *Rabelais and His World*) aids in revealing the truth of the comedic or satiric villains’ shortcomings. For example, in the satirical *Summoner's Tale*, Thomas’s noisome fart symbolizes the worth of Friar John and his words. The value-equation of Friar John’s sermon with a fart comedically “quyts” Friar John and reveals his greed and sophistry and, moreover, discomfits, humiliates, and offends him. Friar

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*Merchant's Tale* that are not “quyting” the Monk’s notion of tragedy, where the prosperous, such as Chauntecleer and Pertelote fall into permanent woe or lose their lives.

John's deserved humiliation also creates humor and laughter in the reader or audience, thus driving home the "quyting," balancing "ridicule" that Friar John receives due to his greed. Likewise, in the comedy (as opposed to the satire) of the *Merchant's Tale*, the narrator succinctly describes Damyan's penetration of May with the word "throng," thus communicating the basic, physical nature of Damyan and May's coupling, which humiliates the deluded, unaware Januarie. The bare physical connotation of "throng" aids in revealing the truth of the matter to the audience or reader, and this revelation of truth to the audience or reader is another prime feature of comedy, though, as I have stated, the duped, generally older men do not need truth to live in a relatively content state on this earth.

Finally, the fragmented state of the *Canterbury Tales* also produces comedy, since the gaps invites the exercise of imaginative freedom on the part of the reader and audience. The imaginative freedom or space allows the reader or listener to "quyt" the narrator and author by allowing his or her own version of thoughts, words, and deeds in the interstices between tales. For example, the fragmentary *Cook's Tale*, which ends abruptly with the narrator's revelation that Perkyn the protagonist has a wife who prostitutes herself, allows the reader or listener to imagine what this seemingly fabliau-like tale might contain beyond the tale's abrupt ending. The reader or listener can place his or her own narrative within this gap. In another example of the freedom that fragmentation allows, no link between fragment VI (the end of the *Pardoner's Tale* and fragment VII (the beginning of the so-called *Shipman's Tale*) exists. Thus the reader or listener can imagine, for example, a contentious interaction between the Pardoner and the Shipman, an attempt at reconciliation by Harry or the Knight, or nothing at all. The total

gap provides release and relief from Chaucer's narrative, thus allowing the reader or listener to assert his or her own imaginative power. In a final example of the freedom the fragmentation allows, Harry Bailly, in the *Epilogue to the Nun's Priest's Tale*, states that "another" can tell the next tale. This character turns out to be the Second Nun, but the reader or listener is free to imagine an exchange between her and Harry or any other pilgrim who might interpolate himself or herself into the interstice. Thus even partial gaps allows for the reader or listener to supply his or her own narrative. The gaps therefore create harmony between reader or audience and the text by allowing the alternation of narrative and the source of narration. The reader or audience thereby can "quyt" the *Canterbury Tales* and provide yet another layer of comedy to the great comedy within the text itself. It is as if comedy, so powerful, breaches or transcends the boundary between text and reader or listener to become part of the particular, historical experience of an individual's reading or listening process. This breaking of apparent boundaries is perfectly appropriate for comedy, since it is a form that features forgiveness (where boundaries of *quid pro quo* justice often dissolve), abundance, and generosity in the conclusions of its plots. This abundance can even spread beyond the text itself.

Gerald Morgan, writing about Chaucer as a poet of his own social class, states that "[t]here is a compatibility or harmony [ . . . ] between sophisticated poet and narrator and also the implied reader or audience (in ironic and unironic moments alike) [ . . . ]" (287). We can say the same thing about the text of the *Canterbury Tales* as we have it: it is compatible and harmonious with us, not only because of the preponderance of humorous and comedic tales that illustrate the revelation of hypocrisy, foolishness, and error; the breaking of unreasonable rules; and the establishment of happiness. All of these

overwhelming satiric and comedic factors certainly make the *Canterbury Tales* a pragmatically harmonious comedy that transcends tone and genre despite its sober ending that seems to end art and “game” (which, however, points to a divine comedy that “quyts” but does not cancel the earthly comedy). However, the fragmentation of the work—paradoxically complete in its incompleteness (a state that forgiving, flexible comedy allows)—makes the work a harmonious comedy even beyond itself—and the process repeats with every new reader in every new age of life on this earth. Thus comedy’s imperative to illustrate a renewal of life—even if flawed—moves from the pages of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* to the minds of historically particular individuals—a transcendent comedy indeed. Chaucer himself states at the beginning of the *Retraction* that “Now prey I to hem all that herkne this litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and goodness” (CT X 1081). The reader certainly can thank God for the *Canterbury Tales*, but he or she can also thank Geoffrey Chaucer for this work of infinite possibility and therefore comedy—and thereby provide a proper, appreciative, amicable, and harmonious “quyting” of the text and the author of “al” this “wit and goodness.” Indeed Chaucer, including a quote from Saint Paul<sup>4</sup> (*Romans* 15. 4) in the *Retraction* also states that “‘All that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,’ and that is myn entente” (CT X 1083)<sup>5</sup>. And “All” includes every tale—humorous or otherwise—that

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<sup>4</sup> The quote here from Saint Paul is the same the Nun’s Priest-narrator speaks near the close of his tale. The reader or listener has the freedom to take the “fruyt” and “chaff”—“solas” and “sentence” for his or her (probably spiritual) edification and pleasure, and therein lies a great portion of the *Canterbury Tales*’s comedy as it moves from the page to the mind of the reader or listener.

<sup>5</sup> Glending Olson states that “[m]edieval understanding of the function of poetry depended on these lines [333-34] from Horace’s *Ars Poetica*: ‘Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae / aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae’” (20). He then translates these lines as “Poets aim either to benefit or to amuse, or to utter words at once both pleasing and helpful to life” (20). One can imagine Chaucer remembering



constitute the harmonious comedy of the *Canterbury Tales*—a comedy that transcends apparent limitations of every kind—as all great comedies should.

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Horace's statement and harmonizing them with Saint Paul's words. See Olson's *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982.

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