

CHAUCER'S PARDONER AND THE GROTESQUE

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The grotesque, both an aesthetic style and a component of a style, is found in many different periods,¹ but in the English Middle Ages it is embodied most clearly in the English Decorated Style. As an aesthetic style the grotesque combines disparate elements; in the English Decorated Style the elements themselves are grotesques, or babewyns in Middle English, from the Italian word for baboon, and this diversity is encapsulated in the "magnificent intricacy" of the works themselves (Evans 38-44), whether architecture (Evans, plates 11, 13, 16, 18, 30a; Jacobs 153) or psalters (Evans, plates 24a, b, c, 26b; Medcalf, plate 5) or literature (Homan 153-54).

This style, according to Joan Evans in English Art 1307-1461, is "a peculiarly English development" (42), and it derives from an English taste that "always enjoys amusing irrelevancies" (10). Although she notes occasional domination of the "idea of correspondences"--for instance, between the violation of the Ten Commandments and the coming of the Ten Plagues (8)--ordinarily, she writes, the "subjects are fantastic and ill assorted, [but] . . . they live and move and have their being," and "every creature, man, monster, beast, bird, and insect, is vital and in action" (11). In literature early in the century she finds all the birds and beasts of the manuscript margins in The Owl and the Nightingale (10), and her quotations of both Wyclif and Chaucer on artistic babewyns indicate the continuing

influence of the English Decorated Style late in the century (36-38).

Chaucer's Canterbury Tales also seems to reflect many characteristics of the English Decorated Style: decorative expansiveness in the variety of verse forms; diversity in characters and stories, including the use of the "idea of correspondences" in the movement of the narration as one teller "quits" another; and the encapsulation of the whole by means of the pilgrimage framework, with the recurring number twenty-nine unifying the pilgrims and nature (twenty-nine pilgrims at the beginning, and twenty-nine degrees for the height of the sun before the last tale; see Peck, "Number"), and with the movement from London to celestial Jerusalem as well as the movement through Nature from morning and springtime toward evening and shadows, and with even a hint of fall in the mention of the astrological sign of Libra (Fisher 6, 344-45).

However, among the varied group on the pilgrimage the Pardoner is most obviously a grotesque, as Donald Howard points out in his book The Idea of the Canterbury Tales. Howard goes beyond Evans' description to define the grotesque as a quality whose place is "at the periphery," "on the outside or the underside," a quality that is "the disordered, incongruous, and startling element in experience, the demonic element" (338). This demonic element becomes for Howard the "manic," "compulsive," and "histrionic" nature as well as the dark underside of the Pardoner revealed to the reader, if not to the Pardoner himself, through the projections of himself in the characters of his exemplum (343, 357-63). This element is also, according to Howard, "antithetical to artistic ordering or structuring," and so it is right that the fragment containing the

Physician's and Pardoner's tales "belongs to no ordered structure," and is without reference to time or specific place, or links to other tales (334, 339). Even so, Howard finds the Pardoner "at once central and parasitic" (374) and finally not only "like a grotesque mirror-image of the institution at the heart of the Canterbury Tales" but also "like a grotesque mirror-image of Chaucer himself" (387). The peripheral has become parasitic--presumably, peripheral to the needs of society--but it has become central to the Canterbury Tales, which Howard interprets as a story about artistry in words (380-87).

Certainly the Pardoner becomes central to the Canterbury Tales, although his grotesqueness may seem less "demonic" than "mysterious." And, although his tale may be part of a floating fragment without reference to time or specific place, it is connected, as I shall argue, with the Summoner's Tale, and the Pardoner himself is linked to the Summoner, by a means that seems appropriate to decorative expansiveness beyond verse form and that supports the centrality of the grotesque. This means involves counting lines in short passages.²

In the General Prologue the description of the Pardoner is placed in the emphatic last position. He is clearly linked, moreover, to the Summoner, whose description immediately precedes his--linked both through their relationship as described by Chaucer and through line count. The description of the Pardoner runs to 46 lines, and that is the identical number of lines in the Summoner's description. No one else is described in 46 lines, and no other pair is coupled by descriptions of equal length. Thus a strong emphasis falls on the Pardoner, not only by placement of his

description but also by his unique pairing with another character.

Furthermore, when one counts to the center of each of these 46-line descriptions, one finds lines crucial to the characterization and the tale of each. Indeed, a mirror image seems to be present: in the Summoner's description the crucial three lines are lines 22, 23, and 24 from the top, and in the Pardoner's description the crucial three are lines 22, 23, and 24 from the bottom. In the Summoner's description the twenty-second line ("But whoso koude in oother thyng hym grope," 1, 643)³ ends in "grope," a key word in the action of the Summoner's Tale as the Friar of the tale gropes down Thomas's back. And the twenty-third and twenty-fourth lines emphasize the Summoner's lack of philosophy, a lack certainly found also in his fabliau-like tale ("Thanne hadde he spent al his philosophie; / Ay 'Questio quid iuris' wolde he crie," 1, 644-45). In the Pardoner's description, the twenty-second and twenty-third lines from the bottom emphasize the craft that makes the Pardoner unique, a key aspect of his tale ("But of his craft, fro Berwyk into Ware / Ne was ther swich another pardoner," 1, 692-93); and the twenty-fourth line from the bottom (the twenty-third from the top) is always interpreted as a key to the Pardoner's "secret"--his grotesque nature--whatever one believes that "secret" is ("I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare," 1, 691). Apart from the central location of that line, the line is emphasized and linked by the use of the -are rhyme repeated from an earlier crucial couplet:

Dischevelee, save his cappe, he rood al
bare.
Swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an
hare. (1, 683-84)

These lines emphasize his peculiar appearance both because of his attempts at outer fashion ("of the newe jet" in the preceding line) and because of his physical nature revealed in his "glarynge eyen." These eyes have indeed been said--by Curry and many others (Miller; Pardoner's Secret)--to reveal the "secret" that the Pardoner is a eunuch from birth. But it is the comparison with a "hare" that is emphasized by the word's placement at the end both of the line and of the couplet and by the later echoes in "mare" and "Ware," and the "hare" imagery, I shall argue, not only links but also helps explain the two grotesque companions, the Pardoner and the Summoner.

Not only does the Pardoner have eyes "glarynge . . . as an hare," the Summoner also is compared to a hare in the Friar's Tale--or, at least, if it is not the Summoner of the pilgrimage, a summoner, first called a "boye" ("A slyer boye nas noon in Engelond," 3, 1322), is then compared to a "hare":

For thogh this Somonour wood were as an
 hare,
 To telle his harlotrye I wol nat spare
 . . . (3, 1327-28)

Shortly thereafter the Summoner of the pilgrimage interjects a complaint, which, while it has nothing directly to do with either "harlotrye" or the comparison to "an hare," seems likely to have been fueled by something more than concern over "jurisdiccioun"--probably, by the earlier lines.⁴ And, while "harlotrye" is immediately clear as an insult, the comparison becomes clear only if "wood . . . as an hare" refers to the hare's glaring eyes. At least any other

leporine characteristic leading to the comparison escapes me.

"Glarynge" seems to describe properly the eyes of a hare, since hares, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, were said to be able to look all around and even to sleep with their eyes open. Now, since the glaring eyes in the example given by Curry (61-62) were not likened to those of a hare, and since, according to John Boswell in his book Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality (306-07, notes 15, 17), homosexual behavior in men was equated in the Middle Ages with the sexual nature of hares, one may wonder whether the emphasis on the hare may support an interpretation of homosexuality, which McAlpine also finds in the emphasis on the mare in the Pardoner's description. The hare and mare are even combined in one of the definitions (2e) in the Middle English Dictionary for mare, a figurative meaning with citations from the fourteenth century: "a bad woman, a slut; also, a rabbit." With this information one looks with new eyes on the clerical rabbits in the Gorleston Psalter (Evans, plate 24b) as well as on the Pardoner and the Summoner.

Whether or not mare in Chaucer's text is a pun, and whether or not the text supports interpretations of the Pardoner's secret other than homosexuality (e.g., Dinshaw, Fritz; Schweitzer), the Pardoner is obviously a grotesque central to the Canterbury Tales. He is, furthermore, a grotesque accompanied by a grotesque--the Summoner. Yet their tales are not grotesque. The Summoner, striking back at the Friar in his tale, creates and manipulates a fictional character--a friar--in order to reveal that friar's true nature, even as the Pardoner creates and manipulates himself in his tale to a point of revelation. Both tales develop the

psychological revelation through the central character's intent in preaching. Both tales--and the actions surrounding them--are finally integrated into the main plot of the pilgrimage. Most striking, of course, is the Knight's insistence on the kiss of peace between the Pardoner and the Host, although whether the Pardoner's silence is the last the reader hears of him depends on the order of the tales, one of which places the Pardoner's chatty conversation with the Wife of Bath in her Prologue--and the Summoner's Tale as well--after the Pardoner's Tale. Interpretation becomes primary, but that is the point: these grotesque characters are not significant merely because of their grotesquerie. They are essential to the text, from their pairing at the end of the General Prologue's description of pilgrims to the end of the text, and they demand interpretation not only on their own terms but also in terms of the whole text.

In his own terms, exactly what the Pardoner reveals about himself continues to be part of his "secret," to be interpreted, just as in "real life" people read the same texts differently. Perhaps he is "converted" at the end of his sermon-tale; at least he does shift from the narcissistic "I" to the first person plural when he calls Christ "oure soules leche" (Harwood 416). But also, in terms of the whole text, he and his grotesque companion are among the pilgrims who endure to the end, who agree to hear the Parson's "vertuous sentence" (10, 63), a "myrie tale in prose / To knytte up al this feeste and make an ende" (10, 46-47), and who are still with all the other pilgrims on "the way, in this viage, / Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage / That highte Jerusalem celestial" (10, 49-51). The grotesque Pardoner is finally, not a lost soul without grace, as Kittredge

believed (123), but rather a man among men and women, in need of grace. His inclusion in the pilgrimage becomes central to the reader's full understanding of the tolerant vision of humanity in the text of the Canterbury Tales, and his inclusion also reminds us of Evans' earlier quoted description of the English Decorated Style: although "fantastic and ill assorted" the subjects "live and move and have their being," and "every creature, man, monster, beast, bird, and insect, is vital and in action" (11).

Just as this English aesthetic tradition decorated the Gothic cathedrals and the psalter pages with vines and grotesques and even moved to a literally central position in Ely cathedral, so this tradition provided the aesthetic environment for the Canterbury Tales as the grotesque transcended itself and became an integral part of the story, especially through the Pardoner. And, in courses in which the tales of Canterbury, all or some, are taught, this "grotesque" connection can provide an interdisciplinary approach to literature through art.⁵

NOTES

1. The grotesque is described by Kayser (19ff.), Harpham (23 and passim), and Barnard (8-10, 59-60), all of whom point out that the term was a Renaissance coinage to describe the style of ornamental Roman paintings found in caves excavated in the late fifteenth century. So while the grotesque style was known in the ancient and medieval worlds, the term was not. Barnard nevertheless writes of the "spirit of play . . . in medieval grotesque art,"

which includes "the tiny monsters . . . of the misericords, . . . the enigmatic gargoyles, and, above all, . . . the marginal drolleries of myriad manuscripts" (59-60), and Harpham pushes his analysis to the possibility that the concept of the grotesque "may harbor the essence, or symbolize the totality, of art" (191).

2. Both number symbolism and intricate number-counts for the sake of pattern (qualitative or tectonic compositional aspects) seem to have been available to medieval poets (e.g.: Hart, "Ellen" 268, 287-89 and "Measure"; Heatt; Jones; Robertson; Rogers), and both seem to have been used variously by Chaucer (e.g.: Hart, "Medieval"; Peck, "Number" and "Theme"). Lundgren, both in his paper and in additional unpublished materials and comments provided me, emphasizes line counts among other numerical structures in the Canterbury Tales. For sheer joy of counting, surely nothing exceeds the counting that Chaucer apparently did the only two times he used the word turd in the Canterbury Tales, for he places it in the thirty-seventh line in both passages--once 37 lines from the bottom, and once 37 lines from the top. The former is in the epilogue to the Tale of Sir Thopas ("Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!"--7, 930), the latter in the epilogue to the Pardoner's Tale ("They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!"--7, 955), and both times the Host is speaking. Whether the number is symbolic or provides only a numerical pattern is unclear, but the line count itself seems too peculiar to be accidental, and it provides evidence that Chaucer

constructed the Canterbury Tales for readers as well as listeners. While this count connecting the Pardoner's Tale and the Tale of Sir Thopas was used by Lundgren to help support the Chaucer Society order of the Canterbury Tales and possibly supports Howard's idea of the Pardoner as a grotesque mirror-image of Chaucer (376), the count certainly encourages me to use the same method to interpret the Pardoner's grotesque nature. Lundgren also pointed out to me that 23 is the number of tellers of tales, that 23 symbolizes mortality and progress to judgment, and that 46, the number of lines in the Summoner's and Pardoner's General Prologue descriptions, is 23×2 . As I understand him, he uses the symbolism of 23 (as well as 24, the number of tales) to support his as-yet-unpublished argument that the Canterbury Tales is complete. Perhaps it is now time for other scholars to adopt the hypothesis that the Canterbury Tales is complete in order to see whether new patterns and symbolism may become evident.

3. All quotations from Chaucer's text are from Benson's edition.
4. Fisher prints this crucial passage thus:

For thogh this somonour wood was
as an hare,
To tell his harlotrye I wol nat
spare,
For we been out of his
correccioun.
They han of us no jurisdiccoun,
Ne nevere shullen, terme of alle
hir lyves.

"Peter, so been women of the
styves,"
Quod the Somonour, "yput out of
my cure!"
"Pees, with myschance and with
mysaventure,"
Thus seyde oure Hoost, "and lat
hym telle his tale.
Now telleth forth, thogh that
the Somonour gale,
Ne spareth nat, myn owene
maister deere."
(3, 1327-37)

The "my" in line 1333 seems to show the Summoner of the pilgrimage is taking the Friar's comments very personally. Benson prints "oure" instead of "my" without comment on the reason, although "oure" makes the reaction more general. According to Manly and Rickert (3: 289), the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts, along with many others, agree on "my," although other manuscripts have "oure" or " cure" or an omission.

5. This paper in its original form as "The Grotesque, the Green Knight, and the Pardoner" was read at the second conference of the Medieval Association of the Midwest, held in September 1986 at Iowa State University. That paper included further analysis of the reflection of the English Decorated Style in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

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