

THE PARSON'S TALE: ENDING
"THILKE PARFIT GLORIOUS PILGRYMAGE
THAT HIGHTE JERUSALEM CELESTIAL"

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The Parson's penitential "meditacioun," which Harry Bailly describes as having "som vertuouus sentence," points to the hereafter, appropriately concluding Chaucer's earthly tales of mirth and solas, joy and woe, comedy and tragedy. For like Troilus's vantage point in the eighth celestial circle, this heavenly vision places the mundane realities in their proper perspective. Lee Patterson astutely finds in the Parson's Tale "something of the same dismissive withdrawal to a higher, more inclusive perspective as occurs at the end of the *Troilus*. In both cases Chaucer himself emerges at the end, replacing the narratorial voice, dramatic, engaging, and multivalent, with his own identifiable historical tone. In the *Canterbury Tales* he provides us with an account of his past and a promise for the future."¹ That promise, however, is contingent—contingent upon grace, contrition, penance, fulfillment of duty, keeping faith with God's laws. What, then, is the connection between the tales, which demand nothing, and the conclusion, which demands trouthe and promises salvation, if only conditionally? I would suggest that the tales and the meditation are in a problem-solution relationship: the function of the tales is to present the "problem"—multivalent vowing and forswearing—in various genres and tones, while the function of the Parson's Tale is to critique that betrayal and offer the means for exonerating betrayal in actual life through penance.

I. COMPARISON: TALES AND "MEDITACIOUN"

However apt a closure to the *Canterbury Tales* it presents, the Parson's Tale is nevertheless qualitatively different from its predecessors, a different order of "tale."² Linda Georgianna points to the tonal differences in previous tellers' attitudes, noting that "the pilgrims' dress, spirit and tale telling bespeak a festive rather than a penitential atmosphere, at least until the Parson steps forward at the journey's end."³ And when he does so, a new kind of discourse replaces the previous multivalenced, heteroglossic ones uttered by the other pilgrims. Let us examine the Parson's capstone tale for what it uniquely contributes to this generically mixed melting-pot of a work.⁴

Astrologically, the Parson's Tale heralds completion:

The sonne fro the south lynne was descended

So lowe that he nas nat, to my sighte,
Degrees nyne and twenty as in highte.
Foure of the clokke it was tho, as I gesse. (X.2-5)⁵

Speaking allegorically, as the day draws to a close, so ends the experience of the literal pilgrimage and the pilgrimage of the travelers to their spiritual destination which culminates their lives. Negating the injunction of the Manciple's Tale to silence, at the penultimate moment the Parson calls for speech, not of the preceding mundane type, but a definitive speech act which will undo all unfaithful speech, all failed obligations and vows broken against God or men.⁶ He calls for penance.

Language philosophers such as Searle, Austin, Grice, and Strawson have long explored performative speech acts, both illocutionary acts such as promising, betting, or warning, and perlocutionary acts which affect hearers, such as persuading, frightening, amusing, or annoying.⁷ Austin contends that illocutionary acts are essentially conventional, requiring extra-linguistic, ritual conventions for their performance (as in a marriage ceremony, calling a batter "out" in a ballgame, or bidding at bridge).⁸ Although he fails to mention them, his definition suggests performance of all seven traditional sacraments is a conventional illocutionary act.⁹ Penance most properly falls into this category because it requires of the penitent particular linguistic conventions—acknowledgment of sin, recitation of prior offenses, expression of contrition, and request for forgiveness and absolution from a confessor empowered to effect yet another speech act, the absolution sought by the penitent. The relation between vowing, or promising (the informal manifestation of the same commitment), regularly enacted through most previous tales, and penance, enjoined in the Parson's Tale, will signify and re-enact the relationship between the prior *Canterbury Tales* and the last. If the tales exemplify one type of speech act (vowing), and its failure (foreswearing), while demanding nothing of the characters or audience, the Parson's meditacioun offers another speech act (penance), as the cure for that failed speech act, and demands acceptance. Let us examine vowing, so prominent in the marriage group, but also in other narrative tales of foreswearing.

But first, who is winning the still-debated dispute over the importance of Chaucer's "Marriage Group" tales: the dramatic-theory proponents, who find here a major thread linking *The Canterbury*

Tales through competitive quitting or mutual deception, or the non-dramatic-theory proponents claiming the marriage controversy has clouded other more significant issues from the critical horizon? The debate is no more easily resolved at the end of this century than it was at the beginning. However, by broadening the category of "Marriage Group" Tales, so obviously riddled with infidelity and broken promises, to encompass other tales of foreswearing, we establish new parameters for investigation and a more comprehensive basis for discussion. Thus, the validity and vitality of the "Marriage Group" is rewritten in a more pertinent dimension, providing a deeper understanding of Chaucer's major work.

II. CONTEXT: VOWING AS AN HISTORICAL SOCIAL ACT AND A LITERARY, CHAUCERIAN "ACT"

Marriage, of course, elicits only one type of vow; but we know that the Middle Ages, as well as the preceding heroic ages,¹⁰ and to some degree, the succeeding periods,¹¹ were a vow-making society, promising behests at every turn. Oaths of fealty bound sworn brothers in sacred pacts. Solemn pledges to lords, royalty, and kings were also held sacrosanct. Oaths to God proliferated at every illness, as promises of pilgrimages and other forms of penitence were bartered for health and protection. These vows, which initiate individuals into society, and their breaking, which extricate them from its compass,¹² are evidenced in history and the literature derived from it.¹³ F.R.H. DuBoulay says of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* that "of course this pilgrimage to Canterbury was a literary construct, yet behind it lay a constant historical reality,"¹⁴ motivated in fact and fiction by sacred vows.¹⁵

The phenomenon of pledging one's troth in life and in literature is widespread. J. Douglas Canfield is right that "this code of the word preoccupies English literature from the Middle Ages to the Restoration."¹⁶ Within Chaucer's "Roadside Drama,"¹⁷ characters regularly swear fealty to each other as a pledge of their mutual loyalty—Plaamon and Arcite, the Pardoner's three rioters, the Friar's summoner and devil—or as an incentive for others to act in a certain way—the Franklin's Aurelius, the Wife of Bath's wise old hag, the Clerk's Walter, the Second Nun's St. Cecilia, the Yeoman's canon. In these instances, a kind of dialectic is created between two vow-sharers.

Likewise, those in religious orders have taken oaths to follow

their order's prescribed life before the action of the narrative begins. This institutionalized, formulaic vowing initiates the vower into a socio-religious community. Although these pledges are personal in their commitment, they are social in their ramifications. The Summoner's Thomas expects the Friar to act according to his state; when he fails to do so, Thomas punishes him. Assumptions about the behavior of a prioress color how the audience, and perhaps the other pilgrims, view the demeanor of this particular Prioress. Thus, through his tellers the master narrator has crafted the kernel of most tales using various types of vows or promises—kept, broken, dismissed, or dispensed. They are so integrated into the fabric of the tales and frame that they seem unobtrusive, as indeed they would have been in actual life situations. Chaucer has hit upon the perfect narrative device—natural and common—around which to structure both the frame and the tales, culminating in what we might call the "Vowing Group." And in so doing, we may be closer to capturing what Chaucer actually wrote about, and how he crafted his vision of social and religious pledges and their consequences.

III. VOWING IN THE "PARSON'S TALE"

How then, does the Parson's Tale "knytte up wel" this conglomerate of vows? Harry Bailly's final duty, after noting, "Fulfilled is my sentence and my decree" and "Almoost fulfild is al myn ordinaunce" (X.17, 19), is to ask the Parson to satisfy his promise: "Thou shuldest knytte up wel a greet mateere" (X.28). The Parson offers forty pages of "Moralitee and vertuous mateere" (X.38) to fulfill his pledge before "the sonne wole adoun" (X.70). This matter is overwhelmingly penitential: a resolution, a cure, and a closure for imperfect, unfaithful lives—both the relatively real lives of the pilgrims and the somewhat more fictive lives of their characters. In effect, the Parson's promise to tell a tale offers the cure for other promises and vows foresworn; it shows how to erase them through penance.

As Lee Patterson points out, the Parson's Tale has "a tripartite structure to match the three parts of penance: [it] begin[s] with contrition and its causes, then deal[s] with confession and the seven deadly sins, and conclude[s] with an account of satisfaction."¹⁸ The tale thus offers a remedy for man's imperfection and a reparation, a restoring of a prior order of sanctity before the final moment of judgment which Rodney Delasanta points to as the direction of the

Parson's meditation.¹⁹

According to the Parson, the three aspects of the present life are comprised of "honours, delices and richesses" (X.186). The first and perhaps most significant for an appreciation of vowing is defined as "the reverence that man doth to man, but in helle is noon honour ne reverence." Earthly human interrelationships, displaying varying degrees of reverence or its absence, are often marked by mutual promises, oaths, and vows, and by the manner in which these relationships keep or betray those promises. Throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, this aspect of social intercourse, vowing or promising—often by quitting of tellers and characters, repetitive paralleling of tales and motifs, and sparring of gender barbs—has had exceptional power. The entire construct of the *Canterbury Tales*, the motive for the journey as well as its tale-telling entertainment, is built upon promise. Linda Georgianna reminds us that "Pilgrimages undertaken in fulfillment of a vow, the motive Chaucer implies was the most common, might be rather mechanically undertaken to pay off the pilgrim's half of a previously made bargain with a saint. Yet the vow itself, uttered in a time of need, such as the illness of a spouse or child, certainly bespeaks the basic model of faith in, and a need for, a divine intercessor."²⁰ And the oath-swearer is willing to pay for that intercessor with a promise. The concomitant promise of the pilgrimage comes of course from God: besides physical help, He offers the pilgrim remission of temporal punishment due to sin, a new state of sanctifying grace, and ultimately salvation. That is the primary purpose, the goal for which pilgrims travel. It is effected both through the journey in His honor, and through penance.

As noted above, some vows grounded in the human level and equally tied to pilgrimage are no less binding or significant. Georgianna points out that at the outset of the *Canterbury Tales*, in the Knight's Tale "the spring 'rite' of 'pilgrimage' is repeated three times, always as a strictly contractual agreement."²¹ The Parson's grand finale at the end recapitulates Chaucer's utilization of vowing and betrayal. If one speech act, promising or vowing, controls the social intercourse within tales and often between their tellers, another speech act, that of expressing contrition in order to seek penance, can rectify its failures. As Mark Allen reminds us, "penance is the spoken sacrament, 'shrift of mouthe' as the Parson describes it (ParsT 87) and as it is described in Lenten homilies and handbooks about penance."²² Contrition is thus the proper culmination and resolution of foreswearing.

No doubt previous tales present all manner of moral and social violation, but the sin of betrayal—breach of honor, faith-breaking—is all-pervasive in the Parson's discourse: betrayal of God or fellowmen in word or deed. If honor and trouthe constitute the narrative cores of many tales, then an injunction to preserve honor and trouthe, or seek forgiveness for broken trouthe, properly motivates the *Tales'* discursive conclusion.

Rightly, the Parson's Tale is not a tale itself, for its function is to comment on moral behavior, recapitulate moral principles, bring the listeners to moral action, and resolve moral issues, not to offer new narration. The focus on right order, emphasized by the Parson's continual numbering, endorses the notion of propriety. Betrayal of one's fellows is recurrently chastised, and in fact implodes in betrayal of the divine, first by Satan and then by sinful man when Adam and Eve defied God's injunction not to eat of the forbidden fruit. Sin is that re-enactment, contrition its remedy. The sins abjured by the Parson explore betrayal or neglect of duties to both God and one's fellowmen. Expiation is by self-accusation, contrition, and forgiveness alone.

The Parson describes sin in general as faith-breaking, not giving God His due. He quotes Saint Augustine's statement that deadly sin

“is whan a man turneth his herte fro God, which that is verray sovereyn bountee, that may nat chaunge, and yeveth his herte to thyng that may chaunge and flitte.” / And certes, that is every thyng save God of hevene. For sooth is that if a man yeve his love, the which that he oweth al to God with al his herte, unto a creature, certes as mucche of his love as he yeveth to thilke creature, so mucche he bireveth fro God; / and therefore dooth he synne. For he that is dettour to God ne yeldeth nat to God al his dette; that is to seyn, al the love of his herte. (X.368-70)

Sin, then, is a betrayal of God. More specifically, pride is a betrayal of duty due to misperceiving one's rightful place among one's peers:

[P]ride . . . waiteth first to be salewed er he wol salewe, al be he lasse worth than that oother is, peraventure; and eek he waiteth or desireth to sitte, or elles to goon above hym in the wey, or kisse pax or be encensed, or goon to offryng bifrom

his neighebor, / and swiche semblable thynges, agayns his
duetee, peraventure, but that he hath his herte and his entent
in swich a proud desir to be magnified and honoured biforn
the peple. (X.407-08)

Pride may include other things, as “when this folk of lowe degree, as
thilke that holden hostelries, susten the theft of hire hostilers, and
that is in many manere of deceites” (X.440). Envy encompasses
“whan a man werreyeth trouthe, whan he woot that it is trouthe; and
eek whan he werreyeth the grace that God hath yeve to his neighebor”
(X.490). In thus begrudging what is rightly due his neighbor, he is
breaking faith with him. Ire can be, among other things, “wikked wil
to do vengeance,” surely a treacherous offense against others. It is
traitorous in forsaking friendship; the Parson goes on at great length
describing its manifestations: “Of Ire cometh thise stynkyng
engendures: First, hate, that is oold wratthe; discord, thurgh which
a man forsaketh his olde freend that he hath loved ful longe; / and
thanne cometh werre and every manere of wrong that man dooth to
his neighebor, in body or in catel. / Of this cursed synne of Ire cometh
eek manslaughtre” (X.562-64). Surely these offenses are betrayals.
Perhaps the very quitting games themselves engaged in by the
rivalrous tellers indicate a will to vengeance. Accidia or idleness fails
to give God his due, and “dooth wrong to Jhesu Crist, in as muche as
it bynymeth the service that men oghte doon to Crist with all
diligence” (X.679).

Avarice even more specifically violates promises, as it
includes all manner of “deceite, false othes, chidynges, and alle
ravynes, blasphemynge and reneyng of God, and hate of his
neighebores” (X.795). The Parson comments that this “is the grettest
synne that may be, after this synne of Lucifer and Antecrist. / For by
this synne God forleseth the chirche and the soule that he boghte with
his precious blood” (X.789-90). All types of falseness—breaking faith
with another as well as with truth by lying, theft, and bearing false
witness—are here encompassed. Gluttony, unmeasured appetite, and
drunkenness break faith with the natural order and with *measure*.
Adultery or avowtrie merits punishment in a “stank brennyng of fyr
and of brymston . . . nat oonly that God forbad avowtrie in dede, but
eek he comanded that thou sholdest nat covete thy neighebores wyf”
(X.841, 844). More than simple coveting marks the *fabliaux*.
Excessive desire is idolatry, a breaking faith with God: “Be it wyf, be
it child, or any worldly thyng that he loveth biforn God, it is his

mawmet, and he is an ydolastre" (X.860). The Reeve's Miller, idolizing his wife and daughter, and the Miller's John, idolizing Alisoun, are here guilty. Serious ramifications follow from adultery: "First, brekyng of feith, and certes in feith is the keye of Cristendom. / And whan that feith is broken and lorn, soothly Cristendom stant veyn and withouten fruyt" (X.875-76). Thus, foreswearing makes the offender spiritually barren. The egregious sin of religious "is the brekyng of hire avow of chastitee, whan they receyved the ordre" (X.892). The Merchant's Monk and the Summoner's Friar stand out as exemplary breakers of chastity.

Infidelity or deception seems to proliferate in most unlikely places. One unique medieval interpretation of redemption, a twist on the betrayal theme, includes the "devil's rights theory," which, according to Linda Georgianna, sees the Incarnation as "primarily a bargainer's trick meant to deceive the devil into accepting an unequivocal payment (the sinless Christ) for the sinful thralls he was asked to trade"²³ in what is still called "the transaction of the Cross." Here the promise to the devil is technically kept, but he has been conned into accepting an unequal portion. No literal faithbreaking has occurred, but the devil has nevertheless been betrayed, albeit unbeknownst to him. On a lesser scale than the Incarnate, the devil has been betrayed in the *Canterbury Tales* (in the Friar's Tale, for example), but one is left wondering whether this is sin or meritorious behavior. The devil likewise is said to betray man: "Certes synful mannes soule is bitraysed of the devel by coveitise of temporeel prosperitee, and scoured by deceite whan he cheseth flesshly delic- es. . . . For this disordinaunce of synful man was Jhesu Crist first bitraysed" (X.275, 276).

The emphasis on vow-breaking and the extent of the discussion on its manifestations indicate its paramount significance to the Parson. Like most theological tracts of the day, the Parson's uses intimidation and the threat of hell to turn his hearers to moral righteousness. The continued refrain, however, echoes the recurring melody of the *Canterbury Tales* in its emphasis on fidelity and truth-telling, vow-keeping and promises maintained.

IV. VOW-BREAKING IN THE TALES AND REPARATION IN THE CONCLUSION

In fact, all sin can be seen as a betrayal of God, a breaking faith with his word, by a transgressor who gives not what is owed

Him and becomes his “dettour” (370). Betrayal of one’s companions is Chaucer’s recurrent obsession—we find vow-breaking by Palamon and Arcite, the fabliaux women (such as Alisoun, May, the Merchant’s and Apollo’s wives), Custance’s mothers-in-law, the Friar’s summoner, the Clerk’s Walter, the Pardoner’s three rioters, the Prioress’s little boy or the Jews, depending on one’s position, Melibee’s foes, the Nun’s Priest’s fox, the Canon’s Yeoman’s canon. Who, after all, does *not* break faith with another? But most heinous of all is betrayal of Christ through sin. Chaucer has added the section on the Passion to his source material (ll. 255-82), according to Thomas H. Bestul, who notes that “this part of the tale has no parallel in Pennaforte.”²⁴ Bestul explains that

In the Parson’s Tale the first notable departure from Pennaforte’s *Summa* [the major source for the tale] is straightforward. . . . Chaucer added an abstract from Anselm’s *Meditation on the Last Judgment* to the section on the third cause of contrition, “drede of the day of doom and of the horrible peynes of helle” (X.158).²⁵

This interpolation is significant for various reasons. Notably, the description of the Last Judgment comments on finality, the end, forgiveness when all is complete, and evaluation of that end. The message is clear: retribution for faithless sinning must be made immediately, for judgment at the finality of the day, of the pilgrimage, of the tales, and perhaps of Chaucer’s waning life, is at hand. Its ramifications occur everywhere: in the greater sphere of the real world; locally, here in the fictive tales; and for the audience and the author. It is a regularly repeated trope, uttered both seriously and casually.

Siegfried Wenzel claims that “there is no question that its three component parts, the Parson’s Prologue, Parson’s Tale, and Retraction, are firmly linked together by speaker and repeated theme. . . . Nor is there any doubt that the fragment was intended as the final section of the *Tales*.”²⁶ Wenzel notes too “its repeated stress that the Parson’s Tale is to be the last on the fictional pilgrimage . . . with its seemingly deliberate use of verbal echoes and of literary motifs”²⁷ elaborately pointed out by Lee Patterson. Alfred David is right that “the Parson will have the last word, and Chaucer must know that in the end he will turn to him.” A strategically deferred invitation heightens the sense of anticipation. Finally in the evening—of both the

day and the pilgrimage, of the narrative and the author's life—Harry “turns to the most genuinely busy man among the pilgrims, the good shepherd. . . . [T]he Host calls upon the Parson to tell the last tale and ‘knytte up wel a greet mateere’ (X.20-28).”²⁸ For all its differences, as Patterson suggests, the Parson's Tale “is itself a part of the whole it dismisses. . . . On the one hand, The Parson's Prologue stands securely within the limited dramatic world of the pilgrimage; but on the other, despite its air of agreeable consensus, it radically redefines the nature of tale-telling itself” (370).

The question is, can the Parson's Tale even be *called* a “tale”? In no way participating in the fictive game, containing no fictional characters or fabulous events, the discourse is also not delivered for the purpose of contest-winning, the other pilgrimage game. It seems to have an altogether different agenda, in keeping with its solemn teller. David contends that “Chaucer had reached a turning point but that this time he did not hope to turn again. For the last time he discusses poetry through the mouth of one of his characters; when he turns back to the subject at the end of his sermon, he is making his Retraction in his own person.”²⁹ Thus his discourse has evolved out of the tales' fictive mode, into the theoretical penitential mode of the Parson's Tale, finally culminating in the actual, literal penitential mode of the Retraction.

But Emerson Brown, Jr., may well be right that “Many of us find it difficult to accept the Parson's Tale and its harsh view of human life as the final word of Geoffrey Chaucer the man, even an old and dying Geoffrey with his mask off at last as he prepares to meet his creator.”³⁰ How can this view of life be reconciled with the jolly poppet of a man we are so accustomed to enjoy? If the Parson's meditatioun is no tale, but is in fact antithetical to the social motives of the pilgrimage, distracting the pilgrims from serious meditation on the purpose and meaning of their journey, in what ways can it be said to “knytte up” the package?

Patterson contends “his sober and prosaic treatise is a rejection of all personal speaking that does not confront, in the sacramental language of penance, the sinfulness of the human condition.”³¹ Although they regularly exemplify infidelity of all sorts, the tales themselves rarely “confront” it directly. And yet, as Laurie Finke suggests,

The Canterbury Tales closes on an ambiguous, even disturbing note, precisely because the Parson's discourse

cannot subsume under a redeemed language the plurality of the social roles the tales create. Paradoxically the open-ended nature of Chaucer's narrative underscores the significance of the tales' diversity. It reminds us that the ethical, aesthetic, and rhetorical values of the whole work ought to determine the significance of the Parson's Tale, not the reverse.³²

Finke's point is well-taken. On the other hand, this *is* the last "tale" and it is so for *some* reason. I would suggest that this penitential manual is intended to remedy the sins and imperfections, specifically faith-breaking, scattered throughout the tales; it is a reconstruction of the fidelity and faithfulness previously breached, a necessary cure for salvation. Its very purpose is to bring its audience to see the need for and feel contrition, to atone for betrayal of God and man, both treachery and foreswearing. One notion of redemption common in the Middle Ages sees salvation as "a bond to be loosed,"³³ a debt for having sinned now forgiven, or canceled; it is God's forgiveness of man's troth-breaking, his breaking of the Word. The means of forgiveness, of course, is through contrition and penance, the ultimate message of this Pardoner's penitential manual. Thus, the remedy for sin, for breaking faith with the Creator or His creatures, is divine forgiveness enacted through the generous redemptive mercy of the sacrament of Penance. What a perfect "knyttyng up" of these pilgrim acts and pilgrim tales of faith-breaking: the final healing in preparation for the final judgment in the final hours of the last day—for the weary travelers and *their* Chaucerian creator. The promise has been fulfilled.

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Notes

1. Lee W. Patterson, "The 'Parson's Tale' and the Quitting of the 'Canterbury Tales,'" *Traditio* 34 (1978): 370.

2. Numerous critics have discussed the genre of this "tale": see, for example, Linda Georgianna, "Love So Dearly Bought: The Terms of Redemption in *The Canterbury Tales*," *SAC* 12 (1990): 85-116; Patterson 332-34; H.G. Pfander, "Some Medieval Manuals of Religious Instruction in England and Observations on Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*," *JEGP* 35 (1936): 243-58; Siegfried Wenzel, "Notes on the *Parson's Tale*," *ChauR* 16 (1982): 248-51. Linda Georgianna claims, "Part confession manual, part examination of conscience, and part sermon, The Parson's Tale is a 'meditacioun' carefully orchestrated around the three parts of sacramental penance, contrition, confession, and satisfaction" (109).

3. Georgianna 97.

4. Patterson aptly summarizes the critical positions on the thematic relation of the Parson's Tale to the other tales offered since 1914:

(1) The moral absolutism of the Parson's Tale has been implicit throughout the tales, guiding our judgment as we read them and now receiving its full expression and authority; (2) the Parson's Tale provides a retrospective commentary on all that has gone before and our understanding of the tales should now (but only now) be revised in the direction of its moral judgments; (3) the Parson's Tale is itself subject to the comic and dramatic norms that govern the rest of the *Canterbury Tales* and its absolutism is simply a last contribution to the multifarious voices of the Canterbury conversation; (4) in both style and substance the Parson's Tale is utterly foreign to the rest of the tales, its significance is primarily biographical, and as a conclusion to the tales it provides at best a pious gesture toward conventional standards of literary seemliness. (333)

Patterson's own contribution is to see the Parson's Tale as a manual for penitents which "explicitly refuses to broaden its discussion to include anything that is not specifically penitential" (340).

5. This and all subsequent quotations from *The Canterbury Tales* are derived from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

6. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975), lists the following verbs as “comissives,” those which “commit the speaker to a certain course of action”: promise, undertake, covenant, bind myself, contract, give my word, am determined to, mean to, propose to, envisage, guarantee, vow, dedicate myself to, adopt, espouse, intend, plan, shall engage, pledge myself, agree, declare for, champion, oppose, declare my intention, purpose, contemplate, swear, bet, consent, side with, embrace, favour (157-58). Nowhere in Austin’s lecture notes here reprinted do I find a discussion of seeking or offering forgiveness, from either secular or ecclesiastical domains. Nor are the actions putatively enacted in any of the other sacraments included as speech acts, although judging by their intended function, they properly fall under the category of performatives. “Christening” is mentioned once in the context of falseness and bad faith promises (11). “I apologize / I am sorry / I repent” are listed as three types of *behabitives*, explicit, half-descriptive and descriptive performatives concerned with reactions to behavior and behavior to others, designed to exhibit attitudes and feelings (83). None of these catch the spirit of ritual penance, however.

7. J. R. Searle, ed., *The Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971), 7 et passim.

8. P. F. Strawson believes that non-conventional speech acts are more common, and will be successfully performed if the “complex overt intention” is grasped and understood by the hearer (“Intention and Convention in Speech Acts,” *The Philosophy of Language*, 37). In the case of penance, conventional and ritual speech is required: the request for forgiveness, the implicit purpose of the act. In this sense, penance is conventional. But, the intention to seek forgiveness is essential for the efficacy of the performed action, and is assumed by the hearer, in this case, the confessor. It thus fulfills the stipulation of a non-conventional speech act to be successfully performed.

9. Baptism, Penance, Holy Eucharist, Confirmation, Matrimony, Holy Orders, and Extreme Unction are all effected by means of the proper words, in conjunction with the appropriate gestures or use of artifacts (pouring of holy water, anointing of oil, extending of the penitential blessing, exchange of the wedding ring).

10. Ward Parks' *Verbal Duelling in Heroic Narrative: The Homeric and Old English Traditions* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990) offers a fine exploration of speech acts, flyings, boasting, and oral contracts from Greek contests to those in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

11. See two excellent discussions of verbal pledges after the heroic period in Carol Thomas Neely's *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1985); and J. Douglas Canfield's *Word as Bond in English Literature from the Middle Ages to the Restoration* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1989).

12. I am indebted to William Woods for this point on vows as the means of initiation into and extrication from society.

13. The Pardoner, for example, loses his identity *as pardoner* within the community when he breaks faith with his audience.

14. F.R.H. DuBoulay, "The Historical Chaucer," in *Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Derek Brewer (Columbus: Ohio UP, 1975) 35.

15. Charles Owen believes "The 'game' of the storytelling became for Chaucer more important than the 'ernest' of pilgrimage; it yielded a more vivid experience of value; in the interaction of its elements it had an almost autonomous growth" (*Pilgrimage and Storytelling in the Canterbury Tales: The Dialectic of "Ernest" and "Game"* [Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1977] 14). But as Owen acknowledges, they are intricately bound up with one another, the "ernest" pilgrimage being the vehicle, the context, and the foil for both gaming and serious tales. Both encompass vowing, and in fact some of the most serious vow-breaking occurs in the context of gaming, particularly in the fabliaux.

16. Canfield, xii. He also offers some explanation for the lessening of the power of this vowing trope in later eras: "But once patrilineal

succession is no longer the fundamental principle of the transmission of political power, once any man—not to mention woman—can become prime minister or president . . . then literature, co-constituting the shift in the wind, ceases to be centrally preoccupied with word-as-bond" (xv).

17. John Livingston Lowes first coined this term for the bit of theater occurring along the Chaucerian pilgrimage; the term has been taken up by those proponents of the dramatic method who focus on the interplay between tellers, or between contiguous tales playing the same theme.

18. Patterson 339.

19. Rodney Delasanta. "The Theme of Judgment in *The Canterbury Tales*," *MLQ* 31 (1970): 298-309.

20. Georgianna 99.

21. Georgianna 106.

22. Mark Allen, "Penitential Sermons, the Manciple, and the End of *The Canterbury Tales*," *SAC* 9 (1987): 79.

23. Georgianna 91.

24. Thomas H. Bestul, "Chaucer's Parson's Tale and the Late-Medieval Tradition of Religious Meditation," *Speculum* 64 (1989): 607.

25. Bestul 606.

26. Siegfried Wenzel, Explanatory Notes to Parson's Tale, *The Riverside Chaucer* 955.

27. Wenzel 955.

28. Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1976) 131.

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29. David 132.

30. Emerson Brown, Jr., "The Poet's Last Words: Text and Meaning at the End of the Parson's Prologue," *ChauR* 10 (1976): 236-42.

31. Patterson 379.

32. Laurie Finke, "'To Knytte up al this Feeste': The Parson's Rhetoric and the Ending of the *Canterbury Tales*," *Leeds Studies in English* 15 (1984): 105.

33. Georgianna 89.