

## PRUDENTIAL PENANCE

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My subject in its largest sense is the sacrament of penance as it took shape, and assumed a major role, in medieval European Christianity. This momentarily influential religious and cultural phenomenon can be approached along many avenues, among them theological, psychological, prudential, rhetorical, and literary. In my comments here, after a brief nod at the first two of these categories, I'll concentrate on the latter three, outlining some of the ways in which the prudential and rhetorical components of penance—specifically of its central element, private confession to a priest—inspire fictional narratives within two of late medieval Europe's most significant works of fiction, Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, in its 21st canon, or statute, spelled out the obligations henceforth imposed by the Church on both those who make and those who hear confessions. In doing so, it built on formulations about penance developed during the preceding century and more. While oral confession of sins to a priest—originally a monastic practice—had been recommended widely within western Christendom for some centuries, its configuration as a sacrament within intellectual circles in northern France during the twelfth century was accompanied by lively discussions and disagreements of a theological and ethical nature. Perhaps the most important of these disagreements concerned whether the key element of penance was the contrition of the penitent or the absolution granted him or her by the priest as the mediator of God's power and grace. Everyone agreed that a sinner had to be truly contrite for penance to be effective, but how could the confessor be sure the penitent was truly sorry for his or her offences? In an age before the confession box (instituted by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century), confessors were supposed to seek external signs—tears, sighs—that indicated, and guaranteed, true contrition; but not everyone gave such indications, while others could feign them (a fact made much of in the Boccaccian novelle I'll be discussing below).

Such uncertainty seemed to some to compromise the notion of absolution; on the other hand, defenders of absolution as the heart of the sacrament insisted that the penitent's disclosure of his or her sinfulness to the confessor, painful and shame-ridden as it was, was the only guarantee that contrition was sincere, not a form of self-deception, and as such deserving of the divine forgiveness guaranteed by the priest's absolution.

In the latter years of the twelfth century, Paris, earlier the professional home of penitential pioneers such as Peter Abelard, Hugh of St. Victor, and Peter Lombard, saw the formation of a school of ethical philosophy around Peter the Chanter that investigated the relationship between specific stations in life—occupations, professions, ranks, gender—and patterns of transgression. The result of such an approach to virtue and sin was an emphasis in the penitential writings of the Chanter's followers on the need for confessors to take the penitent's worldly situation into account in eliciting and judging confessions, as well as in assigning penances.

Hence by the time Pope Innocent III convened the fourth Lateran Council there was already a substantial body of texts dealing with the theoretical grounds for the sacrament of penance, as well as a growing number of guides for priests in performing their duties as confessors; to these categories of treatises written in Latin were added, in the years following Lateran IV, vernacular translations and adaptations, some intended for parish priests not proficient in Latin, others for lay folk as guides to making a full and sincere confession. Both confessors and penitents were instructed to take account of an increasingly complex taxonomy of transgression, into which the seven deadly sins—pride, envy, anger, sloth, covetousness, gluttony, and lust—had been subdivided.

Both the complex demands these penitential guides make and the requirement, enunciated by Lateran IV, that confession must be made to one's parish priest invite consideration of penance's, and more specifically confession's, psychological dimension, which incorporates several difficulties confronting the would-be penitent, in the assuaging of which the confessor has a role to play.

Surely the greatest of these was the anxiety that accompanied confessing one's failings and misdeeds to another human being, who not only had the power, as a representative of the Deity, to save or damn those who confessed to him but, as a fallible human being and their parish priest, would recognize them—remember, no confession

box—and be able, if prompted by malice, a love of gossip, or a tongue loosened by drink, to tell their sins to others, with disastrous effects on livelihoods or status within the community. (To protect the seal of confession, the institutional church legislated, including in Lateran IV's decrees, fierce punishments for such indiscretion which, however, were hardly enforceable at the local level.) The lecherous behavior of priests toward their female penitents was another cause of worry and complaint, to the point where, as Alexander Murray notes, "some experts recommended young women to take a parent into confession with them" (69n23).

Quite aside from worries about the integrity of the confessor, the shame experienced even by a contrite penitent at the prospect of revealing his or her sinfulness could throw up a roadblock to confession, and it was incumbent on the confessor to allay the resultant reserve by uttering soothing words of encouragement. We see the challenge of shame confronted, for example, in the first chapter, "Quomodo suscipiendus sit poenitens," of the early 13th-century *Liber poenitentiae* by Robert of Flamborough, a canon of the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris: in response to the penitent's ritualized opening declaration, "suscipe me, domine, miserum peccatorem," the confessor assures him or her of God's infinite mercy, and, describing himself as the poor and unworthy minister of Christ, promises that nothing the penitent says will become known to anyone else. I'm as concerned as you are to get this right, he assures the penitent, dramatizing his responsibility (and potential culpability) in a Gospel metaphor in wide currency throughout the contemporaneous literature of penance: "for if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into the ditch" (Matt. 15.14, Luke 6.39; also quoted in canon 27 of Lateran 4, on the importance of properly training priests; Robert of Flamborough 56-57).

Not every priest, however, was as invested as Robert of Flamborough's exemplary confessor in facilitating a full confession by means of a welcoming demeanor. A famous instance of the harm that could result from a contrary confessorial posture occurs at the beginning of the memoirs (the truthfulness of which is under debate) of Margery Kempe, who lived in East Anglia but traveled widely as a pilgrim in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

Margery describes her mental state as a young wife and new mother in these terms: And after she had conceived, she was labored with great attacks of illness until the child was born,

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and then, what for the labor she had in childing and for the sickness going before, she despaired of her life, thinking she might not live. And then she sent for her ghostly father [i.e., her confessor], for she had a thing in conscience that she had never shown before that time in all her life. For she was ever hindered by her enemy, the devil, evermore saying to her that, while she was in good health, she needed no confession but could do penance by herself alone, and all should be forgiven, for God was merciful enough. And therefore this creature [Kempes's way of referring to herself in her Book] oftentimes did great penance in fasting on bread and water and other deeds of alms with devout prayers, except she would not show this sin in confession. And, when she was at any time sick or troubled, the devil said in her mind that she should be damned, for she was not shriven of that sin. Wherefore, after her child was born, she, not trusting her life, sent for her ghostly father, as was said before, in full will to be shriven of all her lifetime as nearly as she could. And when she came to the point to say that thing which she had so long concealed, her confessor was a little too hasty and began sharply to reprove her before she had fully said her intent, and so she would say no more for aught he might do. And anon, for the dread she had of damnation on the one side and his sharp reproving on that other side, this creature went out of her mind, and was wonderfully vexed and labored with spirits. (6-7)

This episode exemplifies a penitent's shame exacerbated rather than calmed by faulty confessorial response. At the opposite extreme from reluctance to confess because of shame or of doubts about the worthiness of the confessor, obsession with the necessity to confess in order to escape the damnable consequences of sin could lead some Christians to what we might call a neurotic attachment to the sacrament of penance.

A notable early exemplar of such dependence, and of the related fear that one's sinfulness might be beyond confession's power to erase it, is the mother of Guibert, Abbot of Nogent in northern France. Guibert's memoirs, composed within the first twenty years of the twelfth century, and thus almost a century before Lateran IV, relate that after the death of her husband his mother embraced a life of austerity and self-denial in a monastery, Saint-Germer de Fly, as part of which

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she confessed her former sins almost every day, for she had learned that this is where all goodness begins. He writes:

Her mind was ever occupied with an examination of her past deeds, summoning relentlessly to the tribunal of reason what she had done, thought, or said whether as a young girl, as a married woman, or as a widow with a wider possibility of action. She would bring the fruits of her examination to the priest, or rather to God through his intermediary. Thus one might have seen the woman praying with such sharp cries, consumed by such anguish of spirit that even while at her work she hardly ever stopped pouring out prayers of supplication, interrupted with the most terrifying sobs.... If ever some small encounters with people from outside the monastery came to disturb the solitude she had embraced,...if after their departure she found that something untrue, futile, or trivial had slipped into their conversation, one cannot imagine what torment she felt in her soul, until she had once again come to the waters of compunction or penance. But whatever effort and zeal she might put into such matters she never succeeded in giving her spirit the confidence and peace of mind she was seeking without having to continuously lament and question, through her tears, if she could ever deserve pardon for her sins. (Bk. 1, ch. 14, 46-47)

It was part of the responsibility of the confessor to palliate, if he could, such penitential pathology. For an example of a pastoral approach designed to accomplish this, we can turn to the *Ancrene Wisse*, a guide to a Christian spiritual life originally written within a few years of Lateran IV and intended for a small community of anchoresses, or female recluses. The author proposes to offer his charges an inner rule “concerned with the right direction of the heart” that balances the importance of embracing penance with the need to avoid debilitating anxiety about sin and sinfulness. This rule’s goal is “a clean, unblemished conscience, free from the awareness of sin that has not been forgiven through confession,” but it also “governs the heart and keeps it untroubled and free from the wounds and tumors of an unhealthy conscience and from over-scrupulous self-accusations which say, ‘in this matter you are committing sin,’ or ‘that is not amended as well as it ought to be’” (1-2).

This concern for psychological equilibrium also underlies the *Wisse*-author's deployment of a striking, scripture-based metaphor in his subsequent discussion of how a good confession must proceed from both hope and fear:

But hope and fear must always be mingled. It was to signify this that it was decreed in the Old Law that two millstones should not be separated [a reference to Deuteronomy 24.6]. The lower one, which lies still and bears a heavy load, signifies the fear which holds man back from sin, and is here made heavy with hard things, so as to be free of harder [ones] hereafter. The upper stone signifies hope, which runs and busies itself with good works, always trusting to be greatly rewarded. Let no man separate these two, one from the other, for as St. Gregory says, 'hope without fear grows rankly into presumption. Fear without hope degenerates into despair.' . . . Thus, in between these two extremes of despair and presumption, let hope and fear be always joined together. (147-49)

In fact, no task was more crucial in the imposition of penitential confession on medieval Europe's Christian population than the pastoral inculcation and maintenance of a mindset in which hope and fear exist in precarious balance, while each struggles to avoid being dragged into the abyss of mortal sin by what we might call its evil, overachieving twin, with hope lapsing into presumption and fear into despair, as exemplified above in the situation described in Margery Kempe's memoir.

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It is with this basic awareness of its theological complexities and psychological challenges in mind that we can now turn to considering medieval penance in the fascinating light of its status as the only *prudential* and *rhetorical* sacrament. To do this requires a close look at the aforementioned canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council (*Decrees* 245). The canon consists of two parts, the first rehearsing the obligations imposed on those who must confess their sins, that is, all Christians—or, in its famous opening words, "omnis utriusque sexus fidelis" 'every believer of either sex'—who have attained "annos discretionis" 'the age of moral responsibility'; the second on the priest

who must hear and respond to the confession. Of the penitent it is required that he or she confess alone (“solus”) and faithfully (“fideliter”) at least once a year, to his or her own (i.e., parish) priest (“proprio sacerdoti”), and do all in his or her power to perform the assigned penance (“iniunctam sibi poenitentiam studeat pro viribus adimplere”); further, the penitent should then receive the Eucharist at least at Easter. The penalty for ignoring these injunctions will be denial of access to any church during the sinner’s life and of Christian burial after death. Finally, if anyone should wish, for a good reason (“iusta de causa”) to confess to a priest other than the parish priest, the permission of the parish priest must first be obtained; lacking this, the resulting confession and absolution will be invalid.

The second section of canon 21 can be subdivided into three parts, of which the first compares the effective confessor to a good physician (using language borrowed from the Gospel parable of the Good Samaritan), while the next explains his health-restoring regimen: he must “carefully inquire about the circumstances of both the sinner and the sin so that he may prudently discern (‘prudenter intelligat’) what sort of advice he ought to give and what remedy to apply, using various means (‘diversis experimentis utendo’) to heal the sick person.” The last part warns the confessor to avoid at all costs revealing the penitent’s sins, under pain of deposition from the priesthood and life-long exile to a monastery for the performance of perpetual penance.

A careful reading of canon 21 offers abundant support for my characterization of penance (and confession within it) as the prudential sacrament. For the Romans, the virtue called *prudencia* translated Greek *phronesis*, understood as “practical wisdom,” to distinguish it from theoretical wisdom (Gk *sophia*), which comes into play where there is one, and only one, correct solution, as in a mathematics problem. By contrast, practical wisdom is required in responding to situations where more than one solution is possible, and one cannot be absolutely certain that one’s answer is the correct one. In such situations, careful deliberation about the past and present is essential, in order to arrive at the best course of action *under the circumstances that obtain (and have obtained, and may continue to obtain)*.

As can be seen, canon 21 enjoins upon the priest-confessor the task of considering circumstances: he must find out what he can about the past (that is, the circumstances of the sin, such as with whom and where it was committed—fornication with a nun, for example, was considered more sinful than with a lay woman or common prostitute, and worse

when committed in a church than in a field) and about the present (that is, the circumstances of the sinner: is he a merchant, a noble, a peasant, a priest, a bishop; is she a nun, a noble woman, a wife, a widow?) in order to make two key decisions: first, whether the penitent is truly contrite, has confessed fully and honestly, and thus deserves absolution; next, what penance is appropriate to provide satisfaction for sins committed. *Appropriate* is the key word here; to expand my definition, the performance of prudence involves deliberation leading to action appropriate to the circumstances that obtain.

In addition to taking into account the circumstances of the sin and the sinner, the confessor, as ecclesiastical documents repeatedly stress during the century after Lateran IV, must also make a prudential judgment about the extent to which a penitent can perform an imposed penance without rebelling or despairing, and also without revealing to others that serious sin is involved, thus giving scandal and perhaps wrecking friendships or marriages. As Alexander Murray sums up, "it was axiomatic, in fact, that penances must be made on the basis of certain—or sometimes uncertain—principles, in interpreting which the confessor had to think for himself" (66).

In yet another example of penitential behavior grounded in an appropriate response to circumstances, post-Lateran IV confessional literature repeatedly advises the confessor—and sometimes also the penitent—to exercise prudence in dealing with the confession of sexual sins. Given the shame likely to inhibit revealing such behavior, the confessor was urged to engage in a vigorous scrutiny with a view to insuring the complete revelation of faults. Yet it was also deemed crucial that he not, in pursuit of the whole truth, suggest to the penitent new ideas about how to perform such acts! As various thirteenth-century English episcopal documents put it, the priest should broach such matters "a longe et per circumstantias" (which we might translate as "indirectly, by beating around the bush"), so that "inexpertis non detur nova occasio delinquendi," that is, so that confession doesn't become a how-to guide to new ways of sinning (e.g., Powicke and Cheney 995).

That the danger of sexual frankness was bi-directional is made clear in another passage from the *Ancrene Wisse*, where the anchoress is advised not to take refuge in exculpatory euphemisms when confessing impure thoughts, but also—and contradictorily—to avoid language that is too foul (i.e., too suggestive), and not to confess such



things to a young priest. That is, language must be appropriate to the confessor hearing it (152).

In sum, the word that well describes the exercise of prudence in confession, taking account of the circumstances of the sin, the sinner, and indeed the confessor, is *decorum*: the decorum of scrutiny, the decorum of self-revelation; in both cases the embrace of what is appropriate to the situation. But the concept of decorum, like that of the circumstances, belongs to classical rhetoric, the art of persuasion through language. In determining appropriate, that is, decorous, oratory or description, one had to consider the circumstances in which one was speaking, just as taking account of the ethical or practical circumstances was a crucial part of choosing a course of prudential action. Hence the link between prudence and rhetoric lies in their shared basis in deliberation about appropriate responses to complex problems susceptible of multiple solutions.

Furthermore, just as penance is the only sacrament that depends for its success on the prudential wisdom of the confessor, so is it also the only sacrament grounded in verbal communication between two human beings that is, at its core, unscripted and that varies with each confessional encounter. As in all rhetoric, persuasion is the ultimate goal of both participants in the conversation: the confessor officially seeks to persuade the reluctant penitent to overcome shame and tell all; less official, but obviously in play in many confessions, is the penitent's desire to persuade the confessor to give a complete absolution accompanied by as light a penance as possible. To this end, the penitent must present him or herself in words—and, if possible, with accompanying physical signs—that testify to sincere contrition and complete disclosure—whether or not this be the case.

Speaking of the confessor and penitent, Alexander Murray says,

together they had to forge a morality practicable as well as consonant with Christian profession. Their battles in doing so have almost entirely vanished from any historical record. We are left only with the battlefield. But that is enough to prove that the struggles took place, extensively, in the later Middle Ages, at this one point on the priest-laity boundary where the part of the church was represented by the initiative of a fallible individual. (77)

If the battles between penitent and confessor are absent, as Murray claims, from the historical record, they, with their accompanying strategies and anxieties, make frequent appearances in the literary record, to two illustrious constituents of which, Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, I now turn.

I think the perfect place to begin is with the very first novella of the *Decameron*, and indeed with its very first word, which is "convenevole," best translated as "appropriate," or even better, "decorous."<sup>1</sup> From this start, the novella develops three linked themes: confessional self-construction as an important, indeed life-saving, prudential strategy; credulity as a central component of Christian practice, especially with respect to private confession; and mediation as a shared feature of both ecclesiastical and commercial structures, one Boccaccio uses to imply as well a common interest in turning a profit wherever, and by whatever means, possible. Above all, *Decameron* 1.1 feeds on, and feeds, the anxiety inevitably haunting the institutional church: how could any priest, no matter how well trained and prudent, be sure that the confession he heard was accurate and the contrition it expressed sincere?

The core of *Decameron* 1.1 is a blatantly false confession of such virtuosity that it transforms an egregious sinner into an improbable saint. When Musciatto Francese, a Tuscan merchant living in Paris, is required to return to Italy he realizes that he needs representatives—surrogates; in short, mediators—to collect debts owed him all over France. Of these, the most difficult to recover will be the ones incurred by Burgundians, whom Musciatto believes to be, as a group, "uomini riottosi e di mala condizione e misleali" (8), that is, "treacherous, quarrelsome nogoodniks." Seeking an appropriate ("convenevole") agent to get the best of (and the most from) the Burgundians, Musciatto immediately remembers Ser Ceperello of Prato (mistakenly renamed Ciappelletto by the Parisians), whom he considers to be "il piggioire uomo forse che mai nascesse" [perhaps the worst man ever born] (35): a crooked notary, that is, a middleman between average citizens and the legal establishment, specializing in forgery and perjury; a hypocrite, thief, sodomite, blasphemer, glutton.... You name it.

Having come to terms with Musciatto, who promises him an appropriate ("convenevole") portion of all the money he can collect, the merchant's newly appointed representative heads for Burgundy, where he will lodge with two Florentine money lenders, friends of Musciatto, while proceeding about his patron's business. However, what has

shaped up as a purely commercial confrontation morphs into something quite different when Ciappelletto comes down suddenly with an illness, life-threatening not only to him but to his hosts as well: as the beleaguered Florentines put it, “noi in ogni guisa stiam male se costui muore” ‘no matter what we do, we’re in big trouble if this guy kicks the bucket’ (24-26) If, on the one hand, they throw the sick man out of their home, they will be blamed for cruelty. On the other hand, keeping him may be worse: should he refuse to confess his many sins and receive the Church’s last rites, he will be denied Christian burial and end up thrown in a ditch (cf. canon 21), while, should he opt for confession, the resulting narrative will be so horrible that he will be denied absolution—and end up thrown into a ditch, in which case, the people of the district, who despise the usurious practices of “these Lombard dogs” will use the presence in their house of an unshriven sinner as an excuse to rob, and perhaps even murder, them.

Taking stock of this ethnically and commercially fraught situation, Ciappelletto assures his hosts that their fears for their possessions and safety are unfounded, as he is quite ready to sin one last time on their behalf. Accordingly, he has the Florentines bring him “an old friar of good and holy life, a most venerable man and a specialist in Bible study,” and to this sage, Ciappelletto, who is fully acquainted with the prescribed rules for a thorough confession, though he has never made one, offers a fraudulent masterpiece of repentance, combining a narrative of near-impossible asceticism and goodness with exaggerated worry over tiny (or non-existent) infractions, presenting himself as the kind of overly anxious penitent epitomized by Guibert of Nogent’s mother, and like her claiming to have sought the solace of confession very often (at least once a week).

When the friar, in accord with the injunction of canon 21 injunction that he consider the circumstances of the sinner, responds to Ciappelletto’s self-characterization as a merchant by asking, “Have you ever cheated anyone, the way merchants do?” (54), the wily ne’er-do-well is ready for him: he “admits” that he once unintentionally overcharged a customer by a few cents, and, noticing this a month later, spent the next year searching unsuccessfully for him before giving the pennies to charity. (Confession manuals stressed the importance of restitution as a necessary prerequisite to absolution for sins of theft, including commercial malpractice.)

Using his ability to shed tears at will, Ciappelletto even pretends to fall into the despair warned against by the author of the *Ancrene Wisse*,

lamenting “a sin...that I have never confessed, so ashamed am I to have to admit it; and every time I remember it, I cry just as you can see, and it seems to me very certain that God will never have mercy on me because of that sin” (67). The sin in question is that once, as a child, he cursed his mother; “and having said that, he again began to cry bitterly” (71).

In short, by his confessional performance the crafty Tuscan completely fools the priest, compromising his position as mediator of salvation and reminding Boccaccio’s reader that the confessor can never really be sure that he is right in absolving a presumed penitent. Further contributing to the success of Ciappelletto’s masquerade is the fact that the friar has no idea with whom he is dealing, since Ciappelletto is “in Burgundy, where almost no one knows him” (19) and is thus shielded from what would otherwise be the negative effect of his notorious reputation were he confessing to his parish priest, as canon 21 normally mandates.

But—and here the novella takes its last ironical turn—the friar’s religious gullibility ultimately coexists with, and is more than redeemed by, his commercial shrewdness. Having given absolution to this vicious trickster whom he mistakes “for a most holy man” (74), he asks, and receives, Ciappelletto’s permission to have his body buried in the friar’s conventual church, and then he preaches a sermon in praise of this supposed saint that results in his tomb’s becoming a goal of pilgrimage and the reputed site of many miraculous cures. What Boccaccio’s text does not make explicit, but what would have been clear to his readers, is that having a supposed saint buried in your church would attract pilgrims whose offerings at the saint’s grave or shrine would generate a tidy profit, year in and year out.

And so, just as Ciappelletto sets out to be Musicatto’s middleman in the collection of the latter’s debts, the friar turns out to be Ciappelletto’s middleman in making him a saint—the saints being themselves intercessory mediators between sinful humanity and its Creator—and the convent’s middleman (in this case, salesman) in convincing the laity to venerate the old reprobate and thus provide a new source of wealth for the congregation of friars. The line between commercial and sacramental mediation blurs; using mediated structures to make money becomes their common denominator. Both Ciappelletto and his confessor show prudence of a kind that parodies the prudence required of the confessor according to canon 21: Ciappelletto by

making a fraudulent confession; his confessor, by turning it into a financial boon.

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In his study of Pope Innocent III, John C. Moore offers this balanced judgment on canon 21:

[A]s to its impact on contemporary society...one can argue that it probably contributed to the mental and moral health of many Christians.... It may also stand as a monument in the development of oppressive institutions in European life.... By making confession mandatory, the canon placed enormous power in the hands of parish priests, and although many priests no doubt used the power well, it is certain that many others abused it. The exploitative and deceitful confessor became a fixture in European literature. (249-50)

Frate Alberto, the friar protagonist of *Decameron* 4.2, exemplifies this widely diffused fictional response. The novella also derives considerable satiric traction from its appropriation of the animus directed in late-medieval Europe against the orders of mendicant friars, whose license as Papal-sanctioned confessors, available to parishioners as an alternative to their parish priests, was widely resented by the latter and their supporters. Finally, *Decameron* 4.2 rubs salt in another penance-related wound, the chronic worry about confessors violating the seal of confession, but it does so in a novel way by suggesting that the human propensity not to keep promises of secrecy and the resultant publication of private scandals through the medium of gossip may at times serve the common good more effectively than keeping silent.

Frate Alberto and Ser Ciappelletto are similar characters in many ways: both are amoral and exploitative; both operate best as foreigners or immigrants in communities that are therefore unfamiliar with their shady pasts. However, whereas Ciappelletto comes to Burgundy on a hit-and-run assignment, as it were, Berto della Massa arrives in Venice on the run ("disperato," 8) having been forced to leave Imola, where his schemes and scams have made him *persona non grata*.

In moving to Venice, Berto throws over his true colors a mantle of holiness, not (like Ciappelletto) in the privacy of confession but in the public eye of the city, transforming himself into Frate Alberto da Imola, friar and priest, who, by his oratorical skills as a preacher and show of

virtue (including the false appearance of an ascetic life and a knack for shedding tears whenever he wishes [10]), achieves as good a reputation as his formerly bad one and inserts himself profitably into Venetian society as a widely-sought-after confessor and business adviser.

The plot of *Decameron* 4.2 centers on Alberto's relationship with Monna Lisetta da ca' Quirino, the vain and simple-minded wife of a major merchant (conveniently out of town), who comes one day to have the fashionable friar hear her confession. Bored by the garrulous revelation of her peccadillos, the faux priest interrupts to ask if she has lovers, only to be scolded for his foolishness in not realizing the full significance of her great beauty: "Just a minute, Mr. Friar," she asks him in pique; "haven't you got any eyes in that head of yours? Does my beauty seem to you no better than all these other women's? I could have plenty of lovers if I wanted them, but looks like mine aren't there for the taking by any Tom, Dick, or Harry." Her charms, she assures her bemused confessor, far exceed those of her fellow citizens, "ché sarei bella nel Paradiso" 'because I'd be beautiful even in Paradise' (13).

Alberto is immediately smitten—we recall the danger posed to priests by women penitents, and vice versa, as articulated in confessional manuals—and he deduces from Monna Lisetta's narcissistic words that she is a perfect object of his seductive wiles. Taking a cue from her conviction that her beauty finds heavenly favor, Alberto subsequently visits her at home, apologizes abjectly for having insulted her, and claims that no less than the angel Gabriel appeared to him at night and beat him severely for his harsh words to one of the angel's most beloved creatures, promising further thrashings unless he seeks, and Lisetta grants, her forgiveness. Furthermore, Alberto confides that Gabriel is so fond of Lisetta that "he wishes to come some night soon to stay a while with you," taking on human form so that she can enjoy his presence (23). He follows up this revelation with a request to Lisetta that, since the angel will need a human body for his visitation, she grant him the privilege of supplying it, his reason being that for as long as Gabriel takes his corporeal place, his soul will be transported to the angel's heavenly dwelling, there to enjoy all its beauties. The delighted simpleton of course agrees, thus closing the libidinous cleric's trap. Accordingly, he appears a few nights later, having transformed himself into angelic semblance (30) "by means of some cheap props that he had brought with him" (30), and he takes Lisetta to bed where, "showing her some positions quite different from

her husband's, he flew without wings several times that night" – a popular euphemism for the sex act as well as a jokey reference to the fact that Gabriel is almost always portrayed with wings in depictions of the Annunciation (32).

For this comic seduction is, of course, also a parody of the Annunciation, in which Gabriel appears to Mary to announce her conception of Jesus by the action of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1.26-38). Alberto, as Gabriel's supposed intermediary to Lisetta, becomes, in effect, God's messenger's messenger, or, to put it bluntly, Gabriel's pimp. (Thus does Boccaccio parody the role of the priest-confessor as God's intermediary in absolving sins.)

There is, however, one basic risk, or flaw, in Frate Alberto's campaign to seduce Lisetta: it depends on keeping secret his true character and, therefore, his masquerade as the angel Gabriel, from all the other Venetians whom he has, in effect, seduced by his masquerade as a pious friar. So when he first visits Lisetta to set up his subsequent "angelic" appearances, Alberto attempts to impose the equivalent of the seal of confession on her (in an amusing reversal of their original, confessional, relationship), saying, "But I warn you of one thing, that you must take care not to tell what I'm telling you to anyone in the world, if you don't want to ruin everything" (21).

The problem with this command is that we've already been informed early in the novella that Venetians are by nature foolishly chatty ("bergoli")—a tart comment on a rival state by a Florentine narrator. Hence Lisetta, constitutionally unable to abide by Alberto's caveat, brags to a friend that the angel Gabriel is her lover. Needless to say, the friend is impatient to share this juicy (and ridiculous) news with as many fellow citizens as possible, and without delay; but while the dissemination of Lisetta's folly throughout Venice seems at one level an exercise in malicious pleasure at the expense of a fool, at another it speaks to communal solidarity as a block against, and antidote to Frate Alberto's fraudulent authority, exercised by abuse of the sacrament of penance.

When the news reaches Lisetta's male relatives, they "without saying anything to her, made up their minds to find this angel and find out if he really knew how to fly," and accordingly begin surveillance of her house (44). Alberto walks into their trap soon thereafter, on a night when he comes not only for more angelic sex, but also to scold his paramour for breaching their contract of secrecy. Caught literally with his pants down, to escape exposure and injury he must jump naked out

the window and into the Grand Canal, leaving his would-be assailants to find “that the angel Gabriel had flown away, leaving his wings behind” (47).

Alberto takes refuge with a stranger, but this worthy, learning via the Venetian grapevine that he too has now been visited by an angel—a damp and desperate one—betrays him, leading him, disguised as a wild man in the mode of Venetian carnival, to the Piazza San Marco, Venice’s central square, where carnival quickly becomes Lent: chained to a post, in front of the entire population of the city, Alberto is exposed as cheat and seducer, at which point “a general shout went up against Alberto, [everyone] trash-talking and calling him the worst names that were ever hurled at any lowlife, and at the same time bombarding his face with whatever kind of filth each person could find” (56). This public comeuppance, a kind of mock-crucifixion, is in striking contrast to the confessional privacy in which the tale began, and functions as a grotesque parody of the public penance routinely imposed on great sinners in the centuries before private confession became the norm, and thereafter still resorted to on occasion by the Church.

As in the Gospels, deposition follows crucifixion: the news of Alberto’s travail comes by chance to his fellow friars, six of whom go to the piazza, where, “having unchained him and thrown a hood over him, not without a great ruckus following them they brought him back to their convent,” where, in enforced seclusion, he will spend the rest of his “wretched life”—a fate that strikingly parallels the punishment promised by canon 21 to those priests who violate the seal of confession (57). Thus throughout its course *Decameron* 4.2 rings comedic changes on elements of confessional theory and practice, exploiting its audience’s awareness of the centrality of penance in Christian life and anxieties about its potential for abuse by self-serving, corrupt clerics.

The comic plot of *Decameron* 3.3 takes its impetus from the church’s well-documented anxiety that a confessor’s overly descriptive questions about sexual sins might put new and attractive ideas into a penitent’s head. Once again a confessional encounter (or in this case a series of them) between a friar and a merchant’s wife organizes the novella, but here the woman completely outwits the cleric. Dissatisfied with her commercially preoccupied husband, the high-born wife resolves to seek pleasure outside marriage with someone of more appropriate rank and, having identified a suitably attractive gentleman, must find a way to communicate her passion and win his acquiescence,



without undue risk to her reputation. So she considers the circumstances, not of the sinner, but of the man she would make a sinner, and realizing that he is friendly with a certain friar, she prudently decides that this cleric would make an ideal go-between (“ottimo mezzano”) and approaches him on the pretense of needing to confess (8).

What follows, in the course of her several pseudo-confessions, is a wonderful parody of the circumstances of the sin: under the guise of complaining about the increasingly bold liberties being taken toward her by a certain man (in fact, her proposed suitor), and by insisting that the friar, who should have moral influence over his friend, reprimand him and urge him to desist from such scandalous behavior, the wife communicates to the latter the what, when, where, and how of committing adultery with her.

For this audacious plan to succeed, its object must interpret the friar’s warnings and reprimands as the wife wishes (and, *mutatis mutandis*, as the confession manuals fear), namely as hitherto undreamed of but eagerly accepted suggestions for new sexual adventures. Sure enough, he takes the bait, and before too long, following her precise instructions, he is climbing into her bedroom via a tree in her garden, on a day when her husband has left town on business. The wife’s decision to use a confessor as the conduit of her desires and of her strategies for fulfilling them in effect converts the priest from a mediator of divine grace and mercy into a mediator of erotic intent – in other words, her unwitting pimp, even as, enacting the same anticlerical joke, Frate Alberto plays the part of Gabriel’s pimp. Concurrently, her ability to disguise her adulterous desires behind the façade of a loyal wife repelling a threat to her chastity—aiding her deceit by her ability, we are told, to cry at will—suggests once again the ease with which a fictional performance can counterfeit a truthful confession. Ultimately, *Decameron* 3.3 establishes a strong contrast between the (supposed) penitent’s skills of deliberation and eloquence in manipulating the sacrament of penance to her erotic and social agenda and the confessor’s obtuseness to the fact that he is being transformed by her manipulations from the church’s sacramental voice into the clerical dummy of a determined, desiring ventriloquist.

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Chaucer’s attention to penance and confession in the *Canterbury Tales* reiterates, through different procedures and strategies, the

concerns expressed comically in the *Decameron*. The first thing to notice about Chaucer's tale collection is that it sets its generically diverse constituent parts within a frame derived from penitential theorizing and recommended confessional practice. Although Chaucer seems never to have established a definitive order for the *Canterbury Tales*—they come down to us as a series of fragments variously disposed in the text's many manuscripts—he did compose a conclusion for the work (although some have recently argued it does not really belong there) that is nothing less than a full-fledged penitential manual, a vernacular compilation of segments from several Latin and French texts written in support and clarification of Lateran IV's canon 21. This manual (tricked out with some features of a sermon) is put in the mouth of a country Parson, the one priest among a group of pilgrims riding to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury, and contains several references to the tales and behavior of the other pilgrims, a fact that has led some readers—mistakenly, I believe—to conclude that the whole point of *The Canterbury Tales* is to encourage its hearers and readers to perform the contrition, confession, and satisfaction demanded of every Christian by Lateran IV. But the Parson's voice is only one among many, and the passage in the text preceding his contribution to (or more precisely, against) the pilgrimage tale telling makes it clear that his traveling companions give him the last, solemn word (very many words, as it happens) because this seems appropriate to the religious occasion that has brought them together.

It seems to me that the Parson's Tale, as it is usually called, serves Chaucer instead as a last emphatic sounding of the penitential theme on which the poet has played insightful comic variations throughout the fictive Canterbury pilgrimage, beginning with the one that opens the frame around the tale telling later closed by the Parson's Tale.

What is usually called the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* describes how a group of pilgrims, "wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye / of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle / in felawshipe" (1.22-24), meet at the Tabard Inn in Southwark and are persuaded by its boisterous, bossy host, Harry Bailly, to shape their roadside banter into a storytelling contest with himself as judge. The most memorable feature of the General Prologue is its series of so-called portraits of the pilgrims, offered to us by Chaucer's surrogate narrator.

Until fairly recently these descriptions of fictive representatives of a wide range of professions, occupations, and statuses occupying the

middle ranks of late medieval English society were regarded as praiseworthy exercises in realism. Then Jill Mann, nearly forty years ago, reoriented understanding and assessment of the General Prologue by documenting its substantial dependence on the conventions of late medieval estates satire. A long-established European ideological tradition had divided human society into three so-called estates—those who pray (monks and clergy), those who fight (primarily the warrior aristocracy), and those who labor (originally the peasantry)—and this taxonomy was greatly expanded to include urban occupations such as merchants, artisans, and so on, when it became integrated into the socio-ethical thought and teachings of the school of Peter the Chanter in late-twelfth- and early-thirteenth-century Paris, subsequently to play a key role in defining the “circumstances of the sinner” marked for investigation by confessors in accord with Lateran IV’s canon 21. Eventually, the catalogue of estates vices migrated from a sacramental to a socio-literary context, becoming the basis for estates satire, a genre intended to reform a corrupt society—or at least to lambaste its by now stereotyped vices—as confession was intended to reform the individual sinner.

The fact that many of the portraits in the General Prologue show affinities with estates satire might seem to suggest that the Prologue is itself a document of social criticism. My own interpretation differs, as it starts from the fact, made forcefully by Donald Howard, that the portraits are the Chaucerian narrator’s memorial reconstructions, at some unspecified but subsequent moment in time, of his pilgrimage partners. What the narrator recalls about a particular pilgrim varies greatly from one to another, in some cases stressing mimetic details (the Miller’s nose wart; the eating habits of the genteel Prioress) in others qualities that are more deduced or imputed than observed, as in his paeans of praise to the Knight and the Parson. It appears that the narrator’s recollections have been shaped both by what I once called “the erotics of memory,” that is, by his physical attraction to, or repulsion from, particular pilgrims—the Prioress and the Monk in the first category, the Miller and Summoner in the second—and by his acceptance and application to a given pilgrim of stereotypical understandings or accusations drawn from estates satire (or from the discourse of sermons and confessional manuals that lurks behind it).

Hence, as H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., has insightfully concluded, the General Prologue portraits taken together offer the reader of *The Canterbury Tales* a portrait of the narrator, his preferences and

prejudices, which, however personal and experience-based they may seem, can never completely escape the control of his society's dominant discourses—very much including those generated by penance and confession.

One other point needs to be made about the General Prologue, namely, that the behavior and even the language of some pilgrims suggest that they are themselves familiar with the moralizing traditions to which the narrator has recourse in characterizing them, and they are reacting in a manner that reflects either their adoption of a holiday posture of outrageous self-parody or their oblique expression of resentment at the stereotyping potential of totalizing discourses. Either way, their response to estates satire assumptions—and thus to the confessional practices underlying them—should, I think, be understood as deliberate and prudential.

The most sensational examples in *The Canterbury Tales* of what one might call this imprudent prudence—a deliberate embrace of observed or reported behavior stigmatized in established discourses, be they authorized or merely popular—occur in the self-revelatory performances prefaced to the tales told by Chaucer's two most notorious creations, the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner: she a much-married, oft-widowed west country clothier; he a licensed purveyor of indulgences—remissions of the punishment for confessed and repented sins—to Christians who supported charitable enterprises. I call these putatively autobiographical monologues performances because, while parts of them (almost all of the Pardoner's, in fact) sound like a confession better made privately to a priest, they are so hyperbolic in content and so entirely free of any hint of contrition as to suggest that their aim is simultaneously to amuse, entertain, and in some cases shock their immediate audience, even as they register a longer range animosity toward discourses that condemn or marginalize them, and toward the proponents of those discourses.

The Pardoner is described in the General Prologue as having long, thin, blond hair, glaring eyes, and a voice "as smal as hath a goot" (1.688). These physical features, and his lack of a beard, which the narrator considers to be the result of necessity, not choice, lead the latter both to doubt his sexual potency and impute homoerotic tendencies to him—"I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" (1.691)—even alluding to a sodomitic relationship between the Pardoner and another pilgrim, the Summoner, with whom he sings a duet, "Com hider love, to me" ("The Sumonour bar to hym a stif burdoun," the

narrator smirks, l.672-73). The more socially elevated members of the pilgrim company are similarly spooked by the Pardoner, so much so that when the Host, addressing him with insulting familiarity as “thou beel amy” (6.318; roughly translatable as “sweetie pie” or “boy friend”), asks him, at a tavern stop, for what sounds like a bawdy story the “gentils” cry out, as to no other pilgrim, “Nay! Let hym telle us of no ribaudye!” (6.324).

Embracing the opportunity thus offered him, the Pardoner replies, “I graunte, ywis...but I moot thynke / Upon som honest thyng while that I drynke,” gleefully implying the difficulty he will have finding a respectable subject. (6.327-28) The sting in this “honest” tale is a prefatory revelation of how he uses phony relics and probably phony pardons to raise money from the gullible audiences to whom he always preaches—brilliantly, he claims—on the same theme: avarice the root of all evils – the very vice to which he devotes his career, with the goal of leading a life of ease and having, he boasts, a wench in every town.

If the provocative nature of this self-exposé is obvious, its accuracy is less so; not only is its claim of sexual prowess not easily squared with his physical appearance and the narrator’s doubts about the nature of his sexuality, but its graphic account of hypocritical preaching and the profitable hawking of sham relics corresponds a little too precisely to widespread late medieval European complaints about fraudulent relics and pardons and to an established, post-Lateran IV literature that seeks to instruct the clergy in effective preaching while condemning priests who exhort their congregations to virtue while leading vicious lives.

So Chaucer’s Pardoner is fully aware of his age’s anxieties about peccant preachers and pardoners. Nor is this the only challenge he faces: widespread pseudo-scientific theories about the deterministic relationship between physical appearance and moral character would make such a person susceptible to harsh judgments by those who interpreted his somewhat anomalous bodily characteristics as signs of depravity.

Faced, in Chaucer’s imagining of him, with the potential of such widespread negative responses to his physical status and professional situation, the Pardoner responds with a strategy appropriate at least in the context of a holiday tale-telling competition: he embraces all that negativity and molds it into an over-the-top performance so in conformity with the worst expectations of his audience as to horrify them, and thus to establish his control over their responses, winning, if

not the tale contest then the larger contest for social mastery—in Chaucer’s terminology, “maistrye.”

Alisoun, “the good Wyf...of bysyde Bath” (1.445), who the Pardoner, at one point, claims has persuaded him not to marry, devotes much of *her* prologue to an impenitent revelation of her life with five husbands, over all of whom she eventually attained “maistrye,” by means of rhetorical artifice such as cajolery, flattery, and outright mendacity; by the manipulation of her sexuality; and by verbal and even physical confrontation and abuse. And this triumphalist account of successful domestic rivalry (not to say warfare) forms a narrative thread intertwined with others—admissions of sexual voracity and other extravagances of behavior, and even a lament “that evere love was synne” (3.614)—that seems less a confessional exercise than the ambivalent, associational ramblings of a patient in therapy.

Aside from husbands who refuse to grant her respect and autonomy, the major object of the Wife of Bath’s considerable anger and resistance is the enormous body of misogynistic and misogynous discourse that circulated throughout medieval Europe in both popular and learned forms (the latter often ecclesiastically sponsored). At one point in her prologue she gives several reasons why clerics, in particular, almost never have a good word for women, and notes tartly that in other circumstances, where women had more access to literacy, things would have been quite different: “By God, if wommen hadde writen stories, / As clerkes han withinne hire oratories, / They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse / Than al the mark of Adam may redresse” (3.693-96).

Feminist and other students of Chaucer continue to debate his attitude towards women and his intentions in creating the Wife of Bath out of texts as various as Ovid’s *Amores*, passages from the Book of Proverbs and the first epistle to Timothy, St. Jerome’s attack on Jovinian, and Jean de Meun’s *Romance of the Rose*. I think it is at least as useful to consider how he uses the Wife of Bath to raise issues important to his culture—especially since some of them are still important to us. Central among those issues is the tension between Lateran IV’s mandate of universal confession and clerical attitudes toward women which would certainly impinge upon their treatment in a confessional situation. For example, as Jacqueline Murray points out, in confession manuals, “women...remained constrained by purely ideological criteria and limited to sexual categories.... By confining women to their sexual functions, the authors of the confessors’ manuals

chose to ignore women's broad social and economic functions" (82, 93).

This potential distortion, within confessional practice, of a woman's situation and voice bleeds into the Church's ongoing, already oft-mentioned concern with the difficulty of judging the accuracy of a supposed penitent's confession. The Wife of Bath introduces this concern into her Prologue by telling us more than once that she is an accomplished liar, and that this is part of her husband-getting and husband-taming strategies; in which case, what guarantee have we of the truth of any of her revelations to a group of strangers on the Canterbury road, or indeed to her parish priest? None whatsoever.

The insoluble problem of distinguishing in a confessional setting between intimate revelations (in Chaucer's English, "pryvetee") and concocted fictions—a major theme, we will recall, of *Decameron* 1.1 and 3.3—comes under scrutiny from a very different perspective in the Wife of Bath's Prologue via its treatment of the eternally fascinating subject of gossip. At one point in her chronicle of husband seeking, wedding, dominating, and burying, Alisoun refers to one of her closest confidantes as her "gossib" (3.529), a term that originally signified kinship not by blood but through baptismal sponsorship. Eventually, the word's meaning was extended to good friends, and from there transferred to being a description of the kind of talk shared among such good friends—if they were women. By further misogynist extension gossip became stigmatized as the silly chatter of women, as opposed to the serious, meaningful conversational exchanges of men. Already in the New Testament's First Epistle of Paul to Timothy, the Apostle (or whoever wrote in his name) contrasts the "fidelis sermo," the word of faith that his young disciple should embrace, to "ineptas aniles fabulas," the old wives' tales (another way of saying gossip) he should avoid (1 Tim. 1.15, 4.7).

Speaking of her favorite gossip, the Wife of Bath declares, "She knew myn herte, and eek my pryvetee, / Bet thanoure parisshe preest, so moot I thee" (3.531-32). By making this contrast Alisoun in effect reverses the Pauline priority and places it in a confessional context: the relationship of a woman to a priest who derogates her good sense and fears her sexuality—in many ecclesiastical documents regulating penance, priests were forbidden to look at women who were confessing to them—is less important to her, and less likely to command her trust, than her relations with her female intimates. As Peter Biller puts it, when a woman confesses, "a male, seated and vested with authority, is

haranguing a woman who is on her knees. So, *this scene is gendered*" (14).

It seems to me relevant to note that gossip, as described by the Wife of Bath, bears a striking resemblance to many of the stories told within both the *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*, that Chaucer and Boccaccio invent fictional gatherings of friends or fellow pilgrims among whom, as among "gossibs," they pretend that their tales circulate, and that creativity in retelling oft-told stories is a mark of the artistry of both Boccaccio and Chaucer as well as of enjoyable gossip. Taking all these factors into account, I suggest that the Wife of Bath, speaking for her creator, not only makes a case for the cultural problematic of penance as a sacrament into which women enter at a multiple gender disadvantage, their moral fiber and their language equally under suspicion. Alisoun also appears to imply that the cultural value of storytelling as a therapeutic act may even exceed that of confession. And if this is so, then Chaucer, who found his inspiration for the Wife of Bath's Prologue in confessional practice, must stand accused of biting the sacramental hand that fed him such literary riches.

Anxieties about confession percolate just below, or at, the surface of other *Canterbury Tales*; the last of which I will consider here, the paired tales of two antipathetic pilgrims, a mendicant friar and a summoner, or process server to the ecclesiastical courts, provide a good example of this phenomenon. In the Summoner's Tale, a greedy friar comes to the home of a sick townsman and tries to convince the man, named Thomas, to give money to the friar's convent in order to save his soul. True to his namesake, Thomas clearly doubts the efficacy of the friar's prayers and the veracity of his ludicrously exaggerated claims of influence with God. With barely suppressed anger, Thomas finally tells the friar he may have a gift that the sick man has hidden under his bed covers, provided that he promise to share it equally among the twelve members of his convent. The friar, eager for the money and having no intention to divide it with anyone, gropes for it near Thomas's body and so positions his hand, following the sick man's instructions, that Thomas is able to release a gigantic fart into it, thus infuriating the friar and setting up the seemingly insoluble problem of how to divide a fart into twelve equal parts, a problem which will, however, be amusingly solved by the end of the tale.

This story of a friar's comeuppance contains a dose of deep cynicism about confession, turning upon a pun on "grope," the word used by Chaucer to describe the friar's search for money in Thomas's



bed (3.2141, 2148), but also the word used in his English to describe the thorough interrogation of a penitent by his confessor. The tale implies that a friar will only grope a layperson to extort money, not to save him or her from sin, yet another expression of concern that the sacrament could be corrupted by money and another example of satire directed against friars by their ecclesiastical opponents.

The tale told by the Friar against the Summoner also contains a good deal of displaced groping, albeit in very different circumstances. Widely attested throughout medieval Europe, it concerns a wicked oppressor of the poor who encounters a devil in search of souls, in whose company he hears a peasant curse a disobedient animal. The fiend refuses to take the beast ostensibly offered him because, he explains, the peasant did not mean what he said. Only when someone whom the evil protagonist has mistreated sends *him* to the devil does the latter, recognizing a sincere utterance when he hears one, take the offered prize off to hell.

The importance to the devil of determining intention accurately links this exemplary narrative to a major issue in penitential theory and practice, one given special prominence in Peter Abelard's influential and controversial early-twelfth-century treatise, *Ethics, or Know Yourself*, where intention rather than deed is the marker par excellence of sin. But in adapting this tale as an attack on his pilgrimage rival for using the bogus threat of subpoena to extort money from the gullible, the Friar draws heavily on his understanding of confessional practice in order to introduce into the fictitious summoner's encounter with the devil a further (albeit parodic) confessional element that culminates in a stunning role reversal.

The summoner, on his way to win a bribe from an old widow, falls by chance into the company of a devil, but each initially disguises his true identity by claiming to be a bailiff. Inquisitive to a fault – as the Friar puts it, “everē enqueryng upon every thyng” (3.1409)—the summoner, who specializes in ferreting out secrets he can use for purposes of blackmail, begins to quiz his companion, first about the latter's methods of “wynnyng”—so that he himself can turn them to his advantage – and then, after the so-called bailiff confesses to being not only an extortionist but a devil, about life in hell. At one level, the summoner's eagerness to be more like a devil in his activities and to find out what hell is like functions as a metaphor for the sinful life he leads and the end to which it is heading. Concurrently, his interrogation of the fiend as to the circumstances of the latter's life and works also

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casts him as a parodic confessor, obeying canon 21 in searching out the circumstances of a (monumental) sinner in order not to absolve, but to imitate him and thus share his fate. The summoner brings the implicit confessional dimension of his behavior to the surface of the story and simultaneously expresses his scorn for the sacrament (thus again, with supreme imprudence, forecasting his damnation) when he admits to being as much an extortionist as his companion: “Nere myn extorcioun I myghte nat lyven, / Ne of swich japes wol I nat be shryven. / Stomak ne conscience ne knowe I noon; / I shrewe thise shrifte-fadres everychoon” (3.1439-42).

At the climax of the Friar’s Tale, the devil asks the old woman who has just consigned the summoner to him, out of anger at the summoner’s attempt to extort money from her, whether her words express her “wyl in ernest”; she replies, “The devel...so fecche hym er he deye, /... but he wol hym repente!” to which the Summoner rejoins, “Nay, olde stot, that is nat myn entente” (3.1627-30). Now the devil takes the role of the confessor who, having discovered no contrition on the part of the sinner, has no choice but to deny him the possibility of salvation, offering instead an ironic opportunity for satisfaction (the last stage of penance), namely, the satisfaction of his curiosity about the devils’ “pryvetee”: “Thou shalt with me to helle yet tonyght, / Where thou shalt knowen of oure privetee / Moore than a maister of dyvynytee” (3.1636-38). Thus underlying the wholesome exemplary moral of the tale there runs a current of anxiety about the subversion of the sacrament of penance by either unrepentent sinners, corrupt confessors, or both.

I’ve only scratched the surface of the response, in the fictions of Chaucer and Boccaccio, to penance as an anxious obligation and confession as a prudential encounter—even a duel—between confessor and penitent. In the process, I hope I’ve not led you into a ditch.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup>All quotations from Boccaccio, *Decameron*, follow *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio. Volume quarto: Decameron*. All translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup>All quotations from Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, follow *The Riverside Chaucer*.

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