

"A Poet Ther Was": Chaucer's Voices in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales

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“A Poet Ther Was”: Chaucer’s Voices in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*

CHAUCER GIVES us no explicit portrait headed “A Poet ther was” in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. Yet the entire Prologue, like so many vernacular invitations to narrative from the twelfth century on, is designed to introduce the poet, describe his task, and gain the goodwill of the audience. Scholars generally agree that the later medieval practice of composing prologues depended on the grammar school study of rhetorical handbooks and classical poetry. By the fourteenth century a self-reflexive prologue conforming to handbook definitions had become more or less de rigueur for aristocratic narrative, both secular and religious.¹ Chaucer’s Prologue, though longer and more complex than most, is no exception. It raises expectations in just the areas the handbooks propose, promising to take up important matters of natural and social order, moral character, and religion and outlining the organization the work will follow. Above all, the poet *presents himself*, as the handbooks direct, to ingratiate himself with his listeners or readers and render them receptive to his argument.

Chaucer’s Prologue, however, meets these generic expectations in entirely unexpected ways. Most recent critics have recognized that it does not provide a neat, straightforward portrait of the poet. Chaucer’s authority remains elusive, exceeding the requirements of the humility topos. Furthermore, whatever potential there may be for coherence in his self-presentation tends to be undermined by the several abrupt changes of style and subject. In fact, the parts of the General Prologue seem to function as several attacks on a beginning, each of them probing from a different angle a problem that traditionally belonged to prologues, “How shall I begin and to what purpose?” At first the various styles and subjects juxtaposed in the Prologue appear to suggest no clear answer. Moreover, the parts, or attempts at beginning, are governed not by a single, cumulatively enriched and deepened figure of the poet but, as

I argue, by a series of impersonations. None of these taken alone reveals the poet’s presence fully. Nor, taken together, do they reveal the poet literary tradition might have led readers to expect.

The General Prologue, I suggest, contains not one voice of the poet but three major attempts at authorial voicing. Each constitutes part of a complex argument about the nature of the poet and poetry in terms authorized by well-known medieval theory and practice. The first of these voices declaims the April opening with the learned assurance and scientific attention of a clerk deliberating in venerable literary formulas on the causes of things. The last is a tavern keeper’s, urging good cheer and play for material profit. In between we hear the modest, devout “I” of Chaucer the pilgrim, intent on giving systematic order to his experience. But the voices of the other pilgrims so intrude on his own that he is left at last simply with genial apologies for failing to do what he had promised. All the voices are finally Chaucer’s, of course, all of them impersonations. And all participate in the poet’s complex, unexpected argument concerning his character(s) and purpose.²

For the most part, only the voice of the pilgrim has been related to Chaucer’s self-presentation. In his well-known and brilliantly persuasive essay, E. Talbot Donaldson urges a separation of the pilgrim from the poet. He argues that the pilgrim persona is a comic device that the poet manipulates as an ironic foil for his own incisive wit. The poet, he says, “operates in a realm which is above and subsumes those in which Chaucer the man and Chaucer the pilgrim have their being” (936).

Few critics have questioned the isolation of the pilgrim persona as Chaucer’s principal foil in the Prologue, though several have challenged Donaldson’s way of explaining the relationship between the persona and the poet or the man. In an important article and in his book, Donald Howard argues for a more complex and mysterious relationship between the pilgrim and the poet than Donaldson proposes. The pilgrim, he suggests,

gives a tantalizingly partial sense of the man behind the work; the limitations invite us to create Chaucer finally in our own image (“Chaucer the Man”).³

More recently, Marshall Leicester has objected to all interpretations that separate the pilgrim from the poet, contending that the poet’s presence is to be discovered not beyond the work but in the voicing of the text. Positing a separation, he argues, gives us the comfortable (and false) sense that we can know who is speaking at any given moment and what position each speaker holds on the matter presented. In his view, it is “just this sense of knowing where we are, with whom we are dealing, that the General Prologue deliberately and calculatedly denies us” (219). Instead of a pilgrim persona juxtaposed with an unimpersonated poet, Leicester proposes the model of a “prologal voice” that belongs to an impersonator preparing to take on the character of each pilgrim in turn. This thesis is provocative, important because it insists that we listen to the text’s voicings of character rather than read from preconceived character to text.

But Leicester assumes that such attention to voices should aim at discovering the “personality” of the poet and his pilgrims. This concern for “personality,” as also for the presence of the “man,” misses the essentially rhetorical, ideologically oriented character of the poet’s self-presentation. Heeding Leicester’s warning against positing more speakers than necessary and casting Howard’s concern for the man in different terms, I argue that Chaucer as a single author projects three major “authorial” voices in his Prologue to examine several possibilities for poetry, all of them empowered by well-known medieval theory and all of them useful for his tales. The three voices lead us not to the poet’s “personality” or to Chaucer the man in a general sense but rather to the problem of being a poet in the late fourteenth century. Instead of giving us a single image of the poet and a single definition of the poet’s authority, Chaucer juxtaposes images of himself as three possible kinds of poet. The pilgrim is only one of these, though he holds a privileged position among the rest. He is the “I” from whom the others take their being, and he provides a moral center from which to judge the other voices. But an impersonal voice pronounces the opening third-person narration, and Harry’s “boold” voice finally replaces the pilgrim’s to an-

nounce the literary theory and design of the fictive order that follows.

Poetry and poets occupy an uncertain position in medieval theory. Some writers—among them the twelfth-century Platonists, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio—contend that the poet can express truth under the veil of “beautiful lies.” In this well-known argument, the reader is to take the fruit, or sentence, and discard the rhetorical chaff of the poet’s fictive covering. Another, less generous position—put forward by the Parson in *The Canterbury Tales*—refuses to traffic in “fables” at all. In this view, poetry is frivolity, diversion, false consolation; poets, the perpetrators of falsehood. Chaucer’s three voices in the General Prologue form dramatic images of several theories, carrying us from a notion of poetry as philosophy to Harry’s view of poetry as distracting merriment.

The argument Chaucer makes about the poet and poetry is neither mechanical nor detached. In the Prologue and in the tales, he explores the whole range of medieval positions regarding poetry, not so much to establish a “true” position as to emphasize his sense of the ambiguities and contradictions surrounding fiction’s valuation, and also to turn these difficulties to his advantage. The pilgrim-poet deliberately places himself in the midst of the questions he poses—and he has his pilgrims take up the problem again and again in their prologues and tales. In his many voices, he invites readers to share intimately his quest for a radically new, personal (and ultimately comic, provisional) poetic, one true to his sense of the ironies and limitations inherent in his art of fiction.

I. Multiple Voicing in Medieval Theory and Practice

Multiple voicing as a mode of argument was essential to later medieval narrative, whether in allegorical debate or exemplary private conversation or interior monologue framed by first- or third-person narration. Indeed, romance and allegory, the two dominant narrative forms of the later Middle Ages, positively required multiple voicing. These essentially dialectical forms typically pose challenging social or moral or spiritual questions to be solved by means of the narrative process. Nearly always, the subjectivity of such texts—their grounding in the poet’s authority—is presented through two or more voices. Beatrice, Vergil, Rai-

son, Gracedieu, a hermit, a grotesque maiden may serve in the poet's place as a guide to wisdom at various moments in the narrative. By putting on a number of voices, the poet can mask his position and thus draw the audience into an exacting, unpredictable process of discovery.

When we listen to Chaucer's several voices in the General Prologue (and in the tales), therefore, we hear the master of an art cultivated by generations of French and Italian writers. To be sure, in Chaucer the art of playing voice against voice assumes a decisive new direction predictive of the novel's complexities. Yet his invention depended absolutely on the prior discoveries of those major poets who had most influenced him—among them, Benoit de Sainte-Maure, Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meung, Boccaccio, Dante, and Machaut.

To find the main theoretical bases for multiple voicing in the Middle Ages, we must turn to the rhetorical handbooks universally used in the grammar schools and to schoolroom exegesis of the curriculum authors. Handbook discussions give primary attention to calculated voicing and impersonation in the orator's self-presentation and in the acting out of the client's attitudes, feelings, and experiences in order to build a convincing case.

When Quintilian describes the orator's self-presentation in the exordium, or prologue, he recommends an artful management of voice, style, and manner:

[W]e should . . . give no hint of elaboration in the *exordium*. . . . But to avoid all display of art in itself requires consummate art. . . . The style of the *exordium* . . . should . . . seem simple and unpremeditated, while neither our words nor our looks should promise too much. For a method of pleading which conceals its art . . . will often be best adapted to insinuate its way into the minds of our hearers. (4.1.56–60; 2: 36–39)

If artifice and adjustments of voice are to be used even in the defense of honorable cases, they become all the more important for doubtful or discreditable ones.

In this regard, the rhetorical handbooks distinguish between a direct prologue (*principium*) for good causes and a subtle approach (*insinatio*) for doubtful ones. The *Ad Herennium*, for example, a popular rhetoric attributed to Cicero, defines the difference as follows:

The direct opening should be such that by . . . straightforward methods . . . we immediately make the hearer well-disposed or attentive or receptive; whereas the Subtle Approach should be such that we effect all these results covertly, through dissimulation, and so can arrive at the same vantage-point in the task of speaking. (1.7; 20–21)

As the classroom handbooks suggest, the assumption of a persona to mask intentions and win favor in the exordium has to do with pragmatic manipulation and strategic dissimulation quite separate from issues of truth and falsehood.

There was also, however, another, larger theory of multiple voicing, propounded in well-known scriptural and literary exegesis. This theory supports the indirect pursuit of true understanding in and through narrative discourse that dramatically represents several opinions, including the author's. Commentators on a variety of texts describe the ways in which a writer can use personae or characters to represent various positions on a given subject. These discussions are rich with suggestion for understanding Chaucer and other vernacular poets. Servius, for example, explaining Vergil's first eclogue, writes:⁴

A certain shepherd is introduced lying safe and at leisure under a tree in order to make a musical composition; another, indeed, has been expelled from his homelands with his flock, who, when he has seen Tityrus reclining, speaks. And in this place we must understand Vergil under the character [persona] of Tityrus; however, not everywhere, but wherever the argument demands it. (1: 4)

Here, according to Servius, the author presents himself through his characters, not to reveal his personality, but to serve his argument. Tityrus does not always represent Vergil, but speaks for him only when the argument requires it. In this dispensation the author is present not as a distinctive personality but, rather, as a writer strictly speaking, arranging characters and voices in relation to the large argument being made.

In terms still more suggestive for medieval poetry, commentators regularly identify dialogical self-dramatization as a formal feature of some of the most important and influential works of the period, including Augustine's *Soliloquies* and Boethius's *De consolatione*. Of these two texts Peter Abelard says:

[It is] as if someone, speaking with himself, set up his argument as if two [were speaking], just as Boethius in his book, the *Consolation of Philosophy*, or Augustine in his *Book of Soliloquies*. (760)⁵

And Conrad of Hirsau writes of the *Consolatio*:

Three characters [personae] are brought forward by Boethius: miserable Boethius seeking to be consoled; Philosophia who consoles; Boethius the author who speaks about both of them. (Huygens 108)⁶

There can be no doubt that such dialogical forms as the *Consolation* and the *Soliloquies*, together with the commentaries surrounding them, provided powerful models for multiple voicing in many kinds of texts throughout the medieval period, but particularly from the twelfth century on.

Gregory the Great's comments on Ecclesiastes offer us yet another full and well-known discussion of the writer's manipulative use of personae and voices in philosophical argument. His description of Solomon's authorial strategies might well have served as a headnote for many a medieval text, including *The Canterbury Tales*. Emphasizing the orator's role in bringing together and reconciling the opinions of a contentious audience, Gregory explains how Solomon impersonates the characters and views of many people as if to pacify a cantankerous crowd:

This book is called "The Orator" because Solomon takes up there the thinking of a crowd which is in disagreement: under the form of questions he expresses what the man on the street is tempted to think. All the ideas that he takes up in his inquiry correspond to the various characters he impersonates. (4.1; 3: 26-27)⁷

According to Gregory, Solomon ends his multi-voiced discourse by addressing his listeners in his own voice and drawing them into unity. After he has assumed the many characters and positions leading away from salvation, he argues for the necessity of fearing God and understanding the world's vanity.⁸

Hugh of St. Victor's homily on Ecclesiastes improves on Gregory's description of impersonation and sheds further light on Chaucer's art of multiple voicing:

[A] many-sided disputation is signified, and [one that has] elicited diverse opinions. For since, in this book,

the moral conduct, aspirations, and achievements of many are described, it is necessary for the speaker to assume the voices of many speakers, to express the opinions of many in his discourse, so that he has the power to present the characters of many in his own person, when he who speaks is nonetheless only one. For at the end of the book, having spoken in many [voices], he himself testifies that he has been many [characters] in himself, saying: Let us all equally hear the end of the speaking: "Fear God, and obey his commandments. This is every man." For this is why he wanted to be called "Ecclesiastes" in his work, namely, because his discourse is directed here not to a certain person particularly but to the whole Church—that is, the assembly or multitude of people—and the argument in this book serves at once to portray the conduct of many and to form an image of it. (115)⁹

Of course, Chaucer's art of voicing is far more complex than the kind described by Gregory and Hugh. Among other things it involves a detailed dramatic action so compelling that some eminent critics have assumed that the drama itself was Chaucer's principal concern.

But medieval theorizing about multiple voicing, both the rhetoricians' and the exegetes', suggests a different emphasis, and one well suited to the intricate play of Chaucer's Prologue and tales. While the exegetical comments I have quoted do not explain precisely how multiple voicing works in medieval poetry or in Chaucer, they do provide a rationale for its use and encourage us to examine Chaucer's complex management of voicing with a closer scrutiny than it has generally been given. As I have already suggested, critics propose a false problem when they try to determine who is speaking in a Chaucerian passage—whether, for example, we are to hear the poet or the pilgrim or the man at a particular moment in the General Prologue (see also Christianson). The real question is not autobiographical but rhetorical and dialectical.¹⁰ For what rhetorical purpose does the poet assume the pilgrim's voice? How and why is this voice juxtaposed with others in the Prologue and in the tales?

In the General Prologue, we must listen closely to all the voices—the impersonal voice of the opening lines, the pilgrim's, the Host's—as aspects of an argument in which the poet himself participates through his juxtaposition of tonally and stylistically different voices. The poet's presence and his self-definition inhere in his acts of manipulation and his multiple impersonation. Seen in

this light, Chaucer emerges from the Prologue, as from the tales, a quick-change artist, a shape shifter, a prestidigitator, a player with voices.

Chaucer's play, however, is more like Solomon's than like Harry Bailly's. It takes the form of an exacting dialectic that dramatically articulates various positions on the human condition. If one attends only to the linear, temporal, narrative process of the Prologue and tales, the play is a source of rich comedy. But for those who assume the poet's perspective as master player and look to the form, the many voices also offer a way to philosophical clarification. By experiencing the voices as parts in a complex argument, the reader, like the poet, may avoid commitment to the misplaced seriousness, the ego attachments, and the foolishness that govern most of the characters. Chaucer's deft juxtapositions of one position with another point in a wise, deep way to the absurdities, the pain, the poignancy, the pretensions, the limited perspectives of the human condition. The poet's own fully conscious play, expressed through his multivoiced dialectic, allows him to acknowledge his fiction making, and that of his characters, for what it is. In this way, he can vindicate the muses of poetry as Boethius could not. Chaucer's play with voices does not issue in a resolution as clear or univocal as Solomon's in Ecclesiastes. Yet the Parson's Tale and the Retraction offer images of finality and closure that *may* bring the Canterbury fictions to an end by an appeal to an order of being beyond the tales.

II. Chaucer's Voices in the General Prologue

As I have suggested, three voices and three attitudes toward poetic authority vie for control in the Prologue—the "clerk's," the pilgrim's, and the Host's.¹¹ While the first and last are diametrically opposed, the important central voice of the pilgrim mediates between them and explains the unavoidable "fall" from the first to the last in the deliberate absence of a truth-telling allegorical guide. Harry Bailly becomes the necessary muse for *The Canterbury Tales* because no Philosophia or Raison or Gracedieu or Holichurche provides a graceful alternative. But Harry's worldly theory of poetry does not prevail entirely. The other two major prologal voices encourage the possibility of higher poetic aspirations. "Authors" in search of philosophical or spiritual wisdom—like the Knight, the Oxford Clerk, the Second Nun, and

the Parson—imitate the clerkly or pilgrim voice in one way or another. In this respect they counter the fictions of others—like the Miller, the Reeve, the Merchant, and the Pardoner—who in one way or another follow the Host in his purely secular play. In addition, the higher voices remain available as alternative models of authority and purpose for readers who will "rewrite" the tales in their private quests for a saving doctrine.

III. The Clerk's Voice

The first of the Chaucerian voices we hear—the first impersonation—gives us the learned poet of the schools. Versed in the literary topoi of the Latin tradition and skilled in rhetorical composition, he is also a scientist of sorts who knows precisely how plants grow and a philosopher who looks into the nature of things.

The rhetorical description of spring spoken in Chaucer's clerkly voice occurs over and over in classical and medieval poets, philosophers, and encyclopedists alike. It belongs to no particular genre or poetic form but appears in a wide variety of contexts—in Lucretius, in Vergil and Boethius, in Carolingian and Goliardic poetry, in encyclopedias like the one by Bartholomeus Anglicus, in scientific manuals like the *Secreta secretorum*, in vernacular lyric and narrative poetry.¹² Whether philosophic or lyrical, the spring topos usually serves as a synecdoche, pointing to the whole order of creation. In medieval lore, spring, as the first of the four seasons, signals the regularity of nature and implies the causal presence of the Creator. In love poetry the arrival of spring may explain the beginnings of erotic feeling and the lover's joyful discovery of his beloved. Or the regularity of spring's appearance may be shown to be at odds with a lover's unseasonal dejection at the loss of his lady.

Like his predecessors, Chaucer in his clerkly guise uses the synecdoche of spring to imply a hierarchy in the universe, one that points inevitably to God as the source of love and order. Within this cosmic scheme Chaucer emphasizes the erotic movement of all creation, imperfect and incomplete, inherently synecdochic, toward completion and the fulfillment of longing. The "when . . . then" construction of the long opening monologue, full of "gret and high sentence," underscores the poet's philosophical urge to explain the causes and laws of things (including human be-

havior). Within this tight syntactic construction the speaker's facile descent from pilgrimages in general to the Canterbury pilgrimage—from genus to species—exemplifies schoolroom habits of logical thought. Furthermore, the highly literary beginning exactly coincides with its subject, the cosmic beginnings of things, whether in lower nature or in human life. The outer garb of poetry in the high style suits its philosophical subject perfectly, as if the poet could explore and explain the deep matter of natural and human and divine causality.

This sort of beginning sums up a dominant medieval tradition of narrative authority. Just such a voice might well have initiated an allegorical vision of the kind written by Raoul de Houdenc or Dante or Deguileville. Or it might have generated a rewriting of the *Roman de la rose*, exploring the philosophical distinctions between secular and religious love. Allegories like these presuppose the poet's (and humanity's) power to know causes, to give cosmic explications of the kind the first Chaucerian "beginning" seems to promise.¹³ The heightened, philosophizing voice is the voice of authoritative literary tradition. It articulates a general longing—shared by poet and readers alike—for a wise, full vision of the human condition and even for entrance into the recesses of divine privacy. Yet Chaucer's clerkly articulation of the poet's task is abruptly truncated. It remains a fragment, a possibility unexploited. In the very next section of the Prologue a second voice definitively denies access to the high mysterious realm of causes—a realm that had been confidently explored by medieval poets of the greatest importance, including Bernard Silvestris, Alain de Lille, and Dante.

IV. The Pilgrim's Voice

The poet's startling shift from a clerk's voice to a pilgrim's turns on the important word *bifil*. It is a word that, together with *bifalle*, *falle*, and *fil* in the same sense, occurs often in the course of *The Canterbury Tales*. It typically signifies chance happenings, unexpected events occurring at random. The order of time governed by *bifil* and *fil* is radically different from the mythic, cyclic time of the spring topos. It is, in fact, the "order" of the fallen historical world, in which chance, change, unpredictability hold sway. Nor is this time synecdochic; unlike the springtime imagery,

it does not point beyond itself. By its nature it does not lend itself to allegory and the wise explication of causes but, rather, supports the more modest claims of chronicle, storytelling, and confession.

The abrupt break in Chaucer's introductory monologue, initiated by the word *bifil* and dominated by a personal "I," constitutes just the sort of "semantic reversal" that the Czech critic Jan Mukarovsky has singled out as a sign of "dialogic discourse."¹⁴ We are unexpectedly jolted from the monologic structure of the clerkly discourse, largely free of involvement in specific time or space, to the pilgrim's direct dialogic address to the other pilgrims and to the readers. Mukarovsky's description of this kind of discourse precisely suits the complex interplay in the pilgrim's speech as the "I" introduces himself and the other pilgrims: "by a sleight of hand the listener becomes the speaker, and the function of the carrier of the utterance constantly jumps from participant to participant" (113).

We observe immediately that the character into which the poet has "fallen" defines him as essentially imperfect, incomplete, on the way: "I lay / Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage / To Caunterbury with ful devout corage" (1.20–22). Through his pilgrim "I" as the central voice in the Prologue, Chaucer exploits to the full the humility topos the rhetorical handbooks recommend for the exordium. He genially claims incompetence in the art of making arguments, and he speaks directly and personally to his audience with the same ingratiating deference he had evidently used in insinuating himself into the fellowship of pilgrims. As we follow Chaucer's development of the pilgrim's character, however, we discover that the device is no mere device. The pilgrim persona is not just a mask but a central fact of this and every poet's existence. Chaucer's genius here, as elsewhere, lies in his ability to transform a familiar topos into a precise metaphor.

The image of the pilgrim is heavy with meaning, though critics have had a tendency to pass lightly over it, settling for its function as a comically ironic front for the poet. In fact, this assumption leaves us with an incomplete understanding of Chaucer's point in having his central persona and voice develop as they do. Chaucer gives us not a poet assuming the guise of a pilgrim but a pilgrim attempting the poet's task. His "I" persona identifies the speaker as *first* a pilgrim.

The priority thus defined is an important one because it establishes an ontological perspective from which to measure all the rhetorical play recorded in the portraits.

How are we to interpret this voice, this image, if we take it seriously as a necessary replacement for the clerkly voice? As pilgrim, the poet participates in "corruptable" nature, acknowledging by his pilgrimage that his nature takes its beginning from a being greater than himself and finds its end beyond himself in a "thyng that parfit is and stable" (1.3009). The pilgrim, like Everyman, proceeds at least to some extent "dronke . . . as is a mous" who "noot which the righte wey is thider" (1.1261, 1263). Of course the pilgrim Chaucer is not the lovesick Arcite or the drunken Miller or any of the other "sondry folk" in and out of the tales. But he claims fellowship with them. His identity and his voice are intimately bound up with theirs, and he discovers his own powers and limits by investigating theirs.¹⁵

The pilgrim insists that his investigation be made not from the superior vantage point assumed by the clerkly voice but from within: "I was of hir felaweshipe anon, / And made forward erly for to ryse, / To take *oure* wey ther as I yow devyse" (1.32-34). Chaucer the pilgrim submits himself explicitly to the demands and limits of the occasion "in *that* seson on *a* day" (19). And he makes an immediate accord with the motley crowd of travelers who have come together at the Tabard "by aventure" (25). Accepting their chance fellowship as a matter of course, he assumes the responsibility of telling us about them and their plans. Instead of casting about in old books and authorities for material, as his clerkly and courtly predecessors had typically done, Chaucer simply "finds" the matter that has fallen in his way—the flesh and blood (and words) of his fellows at the Tabard. Instead of remaining apart from this matter to infuse it with wise meaning, the pilgrim joins the group, becomes a part of the matter he proposes to investigate and invest with form.

Now from the point of view of literary history such involvement is not unprecedented. Dante had, after all, admitted his own participation in the sins of his purgatorial ascent—particularly lust and pride. Yet he had also styled himself a visionary, blessed with a higher understanding of his matter, able to transcend his mortal blindness by intellect and grace. Chaucer the pilgrim, by contrast, eschews the perspective of the allegorist and

the comforts of enlightenment. The relationship he establishes with his pilgrim characters and their stories is rather the historian's than the visionary's.

Indeed, in his self-defining art of portraiture in the General Prologue and in the imitation he proposes to undertake, the pilgrim as *auctor* probably owes his greatest debt to the literary example of Dares, the self-styled eyewitness chronicler of the Trojan War. Dares, perhaps chiefly through his medieval "translators," had profoundly influenced Chaucer in writing the *Troilus*. In the General Prologue, the influence of Dares and his progeny appears once again, this time as part of the poet's complex defense of his art. Chaucer the pilgrim, like Dares, claims direct, personal observation as the basis for his "true" writing.¹⁶ But in the Prologue, the historian's voice is absorbed into the character of the pilgrim-poet and linked to a game of storytelling.

The connection Chaucer makes in linking the pilgrim persona, historiographic mimesis, and the Canterbury fictions is deep and important, for it crystallizes one of the most painful lessons of medieval Christianity: that human beings in their condition of exile must depend for their knowledge on limited powers of observation, an imperfect understanding of events, and a language essentially different from, and inadequate to, the truths it seeks to express.

The pilgrim-poet acknowledges his metaphysical condition most directly at the end of his "historiographic" portrait gallery in the well-known declaration "My wit is short, ye may wel understonde" (1.746). This disclaimer is most often interpreted as a tongue-in-cheek gesture, the calculated stance of a brilliant bourgeois before his social betters. And it probably is an opportune rhetorical strategy. But, as is often true in Chaucer, the surface significance may be shown to belie a deeper, or even opposite, sense. If we consider the apology not only a ploy but also a straightforward, nonironic statement of fact—and the language, as well as medieval theology, allows us to do so—then Chaucer's self-definition as poet assumes a new direction in this central voice. The pilgrim seeks to authorize himself not by his brilliance or learning or moral perspicuity but by his common humanity. If we read *wit* in its central medieval acceptance as "power of knowing and understanding" rather than as "ingenuity" only, the clause "My wit is short" assumes a

philosophical sense.¹⁷ Absolute shortness of wit supplies a principle of organization whereby the poet may bypass high cultural literary order in favor of a larger, ironic inquiry into the sorry but also comic plight of the human spirit in this world's exile.¹⁸

V. The Pilgrim's Portrait Gallery

In every aspect of his self-presentation, Chaucer's pilgrim persona practices a comically incomplete power of "devysyng," one that reveals the *humana fragilitas* in the historian's stance. He begins his portrait series with the confident formula "A Knyght ther was" (1.43), as if he intends to uncover the nature of each social type by giving a full, precise, ordered example. The formula proposes rhetorical and philosophical plenitude by way of synecdoche; yet the text fails to deliver fullness or completeness. Individual characters systematically escape from or evade the expected formulas, leaving us with a sense not only of the social "obsolescence" Donald Howard has suggested but also of an essential partiality and eccentricity (*Idea* 94-106).

Through his voice as pilgrim-historian, Chaucer structures the portraits so as to deny us a clear, total representation of the individuals as types related to transcendent ideals. The portraits fail to arrange themselves in a recognizable hierarchical order, an order that would call our attention to the expected, or "proper," order of society. Nor, for the most part, do the eccentric characters who claim nominal participation in the various estates fully clarify their preordained roles, either negatively or positively. The ideal knight, the ideal monk and friar, the ideal wife (or their systematically developed opposites) remain notions partly beyond the horizon of the text.

What is important in the fictions of the portrait gallery is that the pilgrim participates in them, allowing his "exemplary" figures to overtake his own voice dialogically through indirect discourse. As rhetor and historian, Chaucer delights in his pilgrims as *dramatis personae*. He observes, often with admiration, the details of their self-dramatization—the fictions they project to fool themselves or to impress, cajole, or exploit others.

Yet, if the pilgrim-poet were *homo rhetoricus* and secular historian only, there would be no moral center against which to measure the wanderings and eccentricities of those he describes.¹⁹

And the portraits would lack just the tension that gives them their lasting power and point. In fact, the amorality of the historian's rhetorical stance is pervasively countered by reminders of a nonrhetorical, suprahistorical mode of existence. Not only the "ful devout corage" of the pilgrim himself but also the figure of the Parson provides a point of reference for this alternative mode. The Parson's "pose"—or, more properly, "role"—as a shepherd conscientiously caring for his flock approximates his central identity. He imitates Christ the Good Shepherd in every detail of his life and thereby identifies himself exclusively as a son of God. Indeed, our *only* image of the Parson's physical presence is that of a Christian shepherd of souls with staff in hand. What Chaucer emphasizes in the Parson's portrait is the coincidence of word and deed, of Christian teaching and high moral conduct. There is in the Parson's life little matter for "troping," little rhetorical distance between his soul's self and his outward presentation.

From the perspective of Christian pilgrimage, the social or religious roles of most of the other characters appear to be added onto them, like their costumes, often accompanied by distorting or falsifying elaborations. The Knight's remarkable achievements in battle, the Pardoner's fashionable cape, the Friar's girlfriends, the Wife of Bath's old and young husbands—all distract the pilgrims more or less from their single proper concern, the destiny of their souls. In rhetorical terms, the lives and speech of most of the pilgrims are "troped," turned in one way or another away from transcendent truth in the direction of Harry Bailly's kind of worldly fiction making.

Both the Parson's life and the poet's brilliant juxtapositions of detail call attention to the artifices the pilgrims practice. The obvious contradictions between pretension and fact encourage us to recognize the fictions for what they are. Yet we do not hear in the pilgrim's portraits the voice of the strict moralist anatomizing human folly with clerical rigor. In his rendering, the fictions of daily life in the temporal world of "bifil" coincide with the fictions of art, and the poet exploits, even as he delights in, the coincidence.

For an anagogically "true" reading of the poem's matter we must wait for the Parson. It is he who will insist on a definitive separation of fact and truth from fiction:

Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me;

For Paul, that writeth unto Thymothee,
 Repeveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse,
 And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse.
 (10.31-34)

Chaucer might have given the Parson's voice to himself as "I" from the beginning. Had he done so, however, he would have had to reject all the "pley," all the voices, of *The Canterbury Tales*. Boethius's Lady Philosophy, it will be remembered, had rejected the muses of falsifying, consolatory poetry at the start of his *Consolation*. In pointed (and I think calculated) contrast, Chaucer's Retraction comes only at the end of his work. The very existence of the tales depends on his deliberately *not* beginning as Boethius had, not rejecting the sweet venom of fiction until its pleasures and possibilities have been fully explored as well as exposed.

VI. The Pilgrim Voice and the Question of Truth

The pilgrim broaches the question of truth, and broaches it explicitly, in the General Prologue. Yet when he invokes a Platonic theory to support his tale-telling, he misapplies the theory and thereby brilliantly defers the question of a transcendent truth beyond the truth of historical reportage:

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
 He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
 Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
 Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
 Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
 Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.

Eek Plato seith, whoso that kan hym rede,
 The wordes moote be cosyng to the dede.
 (1.731-36; 741-42)

Here, in a flagrant misreading, the pilgrim comically conflates his own "historiographic" notion of truth as the imitation of passing life with Plato's theory relating words to the transcendent truth of things. We may pass lightly over the conflation and assume that the poet is simply pleading for a new kind of artistic freedom. But Chaucer seems to intend something deeper by deliberately juxtaposing the pilgrim's and Plato's ideas of imitation. In placing his theory cheek by jowl with Plato's, he aims, I think, to provide a

mortal correction for what he considers an impossible dream.

The pilgrim's description of his language is straightforwardly *antiallegorical* in an age that generally revered allegorical poetry: his words will not, at least easily or directly, point to things (or truth or doctrine) as words were said to do in allegorical poems like the *Roman de la rose*. They will simply imitate the words and "chiere" of the other pilgrims, which are neither Platonic "things" nor stable ideas, but transient phenomena. The text as a collection of unstable, ambiguous signs will mark the beginning rather than the completion of speculation about the nature of things. The poet in his pilgrim voice will not be a philosopher or a repository of high wisdom, at least not in a traditional sense. Instead he will simply be an earthly maker and historian, putting idiosyncratic words and actions together according to his limited powers of observation and invention and the unpredictable demands of the matter.²⁰ Chaucer the pilgrim, like Dares the historian, thus turns the text over to the audience, who will have to interpret or translate the signs into meaning, discerning the "true" inner structure informing the ensemble of outward manifestations. While this management of the poet's and the audience's roles may appear modern, or even postmodern, it is in fact thoroughly explicable as a logical (though also brilliantly original) development from dominant medieval theories concerning fiction and the limits of human knowledge.

The Platonic theory Chaucer's pilgrim invokes originated in the *Timaeus* (29B), and versions of it appear in many a medieval text, including Boethius's *Consolation* (3, pr. 12) and Jean de Meung's *Roman de la rose* (Guillaume, lines 6943-78 and 15159-94). Underlying all the arguments from Plato to Jean is a confidence that words describe objective, knowable, nameable reality, whether that reality is the motions of the will (Plato) or ideas in the mind (Chalcidius) or God (Boethius) or testicles (Jean de Meung). For writers of fictions, the theory provided some assurance that poetic narratives—"beautiful lies" according to the dominant learned tradition—could legitimately explore the causes of things and teach truth. In Boethius and Jean, voices of authority—Philosophia, Raison, the Poet—speak the theory. Their authority is in a certain sense absolute. They grant the poet and therefore the reader

power to cut through the artifices of allegorical fabrication to touch the secrets of philosophy.

What distinguishes Chaucer from earlier poets is that he refuses to give the Platonic doctrine to an authority figure. Instead of speaking it through *Philosophia* or *Raison* or *Gracedieu*, he presents it through his pilgrim voice. The pilgrim as historian proposes to use words not to represent things or truth or doctrine or ideas, as a clerk would have done, but to mimic the transient words and gestures of others. These acts belong to the sundry folk of the fallen world, who are not likely, by and large, to speak or behave philosophically. Some of them are counterfeiters. Some are professional (lying) rhetoricians. Others are professional cheaters or tricksters or swindlers. Of course all of them are finally given voice by Chaucer. All are part of his grand masquerade, and all represent aspects of his self-presentation as pilgrim-poet.

Paradoxically, the pilgrim's very act of mimicry bespeaks an oblique recognition of the truth about his poetry. On one side of his equation are the stories he and his subjects offer—the fictions they construct about themselves as well as those they construct for the game's sake. On the other is his own *humana fragilitas*, yearning for, needing transcendent truth, the explanation of causes, but bound by the necessities of limited wit, imperfect observation, ambiguous language, and inevitable mortality. The pilgrim-poet can do no more than endeavor to record and illustrate these limitations, using trope and omission at every turn to acknowledge his distance from truth and wholeness. As a sort of magician, an illusion maker, he—like the Orleans clerk of the Franklin's Tale, or the Fiend of the Friar's Tale—can only make free with necessities. His tellers, in presenting themselves as "characters" and telling their tales, will propose causal explanations for themselves and try to elucidate the events of their stories. But the explanations will be limited finally by their fictiveness. Only the Parson's Tale will probe the true causes of things directly, but his "tale" is not a fiction. The language of the tales is deliberately and designedly the language of error, as judged by an unrealized, extratextual language of transcendent truth.

In the pilgrim's argument, fiction, like history, is a necessity imposed by the Fall. Chaucer's pilgrim voice as it mingles with the voices of the other Canterbury pilgrims proclaims the delights

of tale-telling. The poet willingly, even willfully, engages the fallen world's illusions, opinions, and beliefs, questioning by his play their relations to truth.

Is there, then, any "truth" to be found in the pilgrim's report of the Canterbury adventure? And, if so, where and how? As the orchestrator of all the artifices, all the falsifications, all the voices of the *Tales*, the pilgrim Chaucer unashamedly encourages his fictive surrogates in their mendacious enterprises. A shapeshifter and a trickster, he himself thrives on lying. Yet because he styles himself a pilgrim, his lying, like that of the Fiend of the Friar's Tale, may be read as part of God's service. The Fiend, as he tells the summoner, lies partly because human "wit is al to bare" to understand the truth (3.1480). Even when he tells the summoner the transcendent truth about himself—recessed within the fiction of his bailiff disguise and voice—the summoner fails to grasp it. In a parallel way, Chaucer gives his tellers matters of truth in their stories, but the truth more often than not remains unobserved by the tellers and their characters within the fictive frames.

Of course, as the Fiend says, some withstand "oure temptacioun"—see through the disguises—and this act is "cause of [their] savacioun" (3.1497–98). Multiple (and wrong) interpretation must be the rule in reading the "divers art and . . . diverse figures" of the Fiend and the pilgrim-poet alike (3.1486). Yet Chaucer, like the Fiend, holds out the possibility of "right" interpretation. Such interpretation, however, will depend more on the reader's intention than on the fiction itself—the individual's personal concern for truth and salvation.

Chaucer provides this saving extraliterary definition of fiction and interpretation not through his pilgrim but through his final voice and final image in *The Canterbury Tales*. In his Retraction after the Parson's Tale, he says, "'Al that is written is written for oure doctrine,' and that is myn entente" (10.1083). The poet in this last voice also begs pardon for any of his tales that "sownen into synne" and apologizes for his "enditynges of worldly vanitees" (10.1085, 1084). Yet, while he, like the Fiend, warns of the dangers of fiction, he knows that his audience may not heed the warning. In fact, he himself has succumbed to temptation in allowing his many fictive voices to enjoy the delights of Harry's game.

VII. The Host's Voice

Harry Bailly's voice, which dominates the final movement of the General Prologue, follows directly from the pilgrim's declaration "My wit is short." From that point on, another "I," another character, empowered by the pilgrim voice, assumes control over the design of the tales. Like most Chaucerian transitions, the juxtaposition of the apologetic voice with Harry's portrait and his "boold" speech requires more than cursory attention. It is as if Harry were born of the pilgrim-poet's essential limitation.

Yet, as a child of insufficiency, Harry lacks the self-critical awareness of his parent. Like the pilgrim, he espouses a theory of fiction. But while his notion of "making"—the third in Chaucer's series in the General Prologue—coincides with the pilgrim's in fundamental ways, it lacks the pilgrim's acknowledgment of partiality, limitation, and absence. Despite Harry's pious bow to "sentence" in the General Prologue, his fiction is essentially fiction for the sake of play and mirth and also for financial profit. As such, it is a fiction unmoored in ideas about truth or the quest for truth.²¹

Harry, the fourteenth-century bourgeois innkeeper, has often been regarded as an "original," having no clear literary antecedents. Manly even identifies him with a historical Henry Bailly, thus establishing his credentials as a "realistic" character (78-79). Like so many other Chaucerian characters, however, Harry owes his originality not only to his apparently idiosyncratic, realistic "condicioun" and "chiere" but also to the poet's complex manipulation of well-established literary and theoretical formulations. Understood as the latter-day spokesman for an ancient tradition, Harry assumes a climactic place in Chaucer's dialectical argument concerning the character of the poet and the functions of poetry.

We first meet Harry Bailly in the dining room of his inn after he has served supper to his guests and collected their bills. For this third major voice in Chaucer's complex introductory defense of his fiction, the context has narrowed significantly. The vast panorama of the external, seasonal world served as locus for the clerkly voice. An entire inn treated *as* an inn—a place on the way—framed the pilgrim. By contrast, a single public room designed for drinking and eating encloses Harry's authority and poetic theory. And Harry is at

home in the Tabard. As the scene narrows, so too do the possibilities for poetry as an art of wise interpretation. In the dining room of a tavern we listen to the host's limited and limiting notions about the poet and poetry.

As the innkeeper "reads" poetry, it fully deserves the notoriety assigned to it by the stricter antique and medieval theorists, from Paul, Augustine, and Boethius to Chaucer's Parson. Harry sponsors fiction for reasons very like those of Boethius's muses—the "scaenicas meretriculas" 'theatrical whores'—at the beginning of the *Consolation*. The Muses that Lady Philosophy dismisses from Boethius's chamber are those Plato and Cicero had also condemned, those who inspire laments over bad fortune and celebrate pleasure as the proper goal of poetry (and life). Some medieval commentators widened Philosophy's condemnation to include all secular poetry. As one exegete puts it, Boethius's "theatrical whores" are the "Musas quas inuocant illi qui saeculariter scribunt Horatius Virgilius et alii qui nouem Musas nouem deas fingunt et inuocant" 'The Muses whom those invoke who write in a wordly way: Horace, Vergil, and others who depict the nine Muses as nine goddesses and invoke them' (Silk 7).²² In the environment of philosophy, so the medieval commentator's argument goes, all worldly poetry is to be recognized as falsifying fiction. Later theorists—among them Petrarch and Boccaccio—fully aware of such religiously based opposition to secular poetry, took pains to redress the criticisms.²³ They insisted with humanist zeal on the correctness of ancient definitions that allow poetry both its fictive covering and its truth. Chaucer, by contrast, turns over the direction of his poetry making to Harry Bailly and thereby gives a hearing to a notion of poetic fiction divorced from the philosophical search for truth.

Despite his brief, perfunctory bow to Horatian "sentence," Harry prefers poetry as mirthful distraction from the hard realities and pain of the human condition. His interest in tale-telling coincides with his pleasure in drinking and, covertly, his desire for money. This last use of fiction for profit aligns him particularly with Boethius's theatrical strumpets. As Nicholas Trivet puts it in his commentary on the *Consolation*, "the poetic muses are called theatrical whores—[because] just as a whore copulates with those [lovers] for love not of procreation but of lucre, so poets were

writing about those [things]—for the love not of wisdom but of praise, that is to say, of money” (fol. 6v).²⁴ Harry’s ultimate goal in generating the fictions of the Canterbury journey is to collect the price of twenty-nine suppers, minus his own small contribution to the winner’s meal at the end of the trip.

As a master of mirth, Harry is also kin to the all-important figure of Déduit in Guillaume de Lorris’s *Roman de la rose*.²⁵ This character, whom Chaucer called “Sir Mirth” in his translation of the *Roman*, is the courtly proprietor of the garden into which the poet enters as a young lover (about to be trapped by erotic desire). In this garden Déduit acts as choragus for a troop of jongleurs, jugglers, musicians, singers, and dancers. In a parallel way, Harry in his dining room proposes himself as the leader of a band of fiction makers. As Déduit’s followers are distracted by the garden’s “siren” birds and the music of his players, Harry’s pilgrims succumb without demur to the innkeeper’s strong wine and promises of mirth through storytelling.

Above all, both Déduit and Harry traffic in “divertissement.” In Chaucer’s translation of the *Roman*, Sir Mirth in the garden “walketh to solace . . . for sweeter place / to pleyen ynne he may not find” (lines 621–23). Like Guillaume’s allegorical figure, Harry, who seeks play for the sake of solace, is essentially mirthful. The words *mirth*, *myrie*, *pley*, *disport*, and *comfort* appear twelve times in twenty-six lines as Chaucer gives us Harry’s portrait and has him explain his game. The very name Déduit suits both characters exactly, containing as it does the two senses “having a good time” and “turning away from a [right] course” (Dahlberg 361, line 590n). To be sure, Harry and his followers leave the Tabard and walk out into the world engaged to play a diversionary game, whereas Déduit remains at home in his symbolic garden. Yet Harry sees to it that his pilgrim subjects never forget that they have contracted to remain within the bounds of his play and his notions of solace. The fictions themselves, together with Harry’s framing commentary, become the pilgrims’ “pleasure garden” for the duration of the Canterbury journey. At the same time, however, the inescapable fact of the pilgrimage serves as an ever-present critique of the game, reminding us that there is another, “right” course.

While Harry, in framing his game, shares Dé-

duit’s concern for mirth and solace, his image of diversionary art is richer and more philosophically complex than his French counterpart’s. In his avowed antipathy for silence and his intended use of fiction for financial profit, he sums up Boethius’s whole argument concerning the conflict between distracting fictions and the search for philosophical truth. Harry’s kind of fiction explicitly opposes the silence of spiritual introspection proper to the life of true pilgrimage. Poetry is, for him, a pleasant noise that keeps the mind conveniently distracted from any pilgrim sense of the need for truth or meditation on the *lacrimae rerum*. “And wel I woot,” he says,

as ye goon by the weye,
Ye shapen yow to talen and to pleye;
For trewely, confort ne myrthe is noon
To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon;
And therfore wol I maken yow disport,
As I seyde erst, and doon yow som confort.

(1.771–76)

Harry’s interest in distraction coincides with his pervasive urge to rush from one tale to another. Gaps in diversionary discourse, like the absence of mirth, may allow introspection to enter, and this Harry cannot bear.²⁶

Why, we must ask, does Chaucer turn over the important last place in his prologal argument to so disreputable a voice and position? He does so at least in part, I believe, to give a full, unabridged account of all aspects of the fiction he proposes to write. Like Dante in the *Commedia*, he intends to include—and even praise—the impure, infernal element in his poetry as well as its potential for philosophical vision. Indeed, poetry as rhetorical bedazzlement may have seemed to him the most evident, accessible, attractive aspect of his art, the one most likely to charm his audience into paying attention. By way of Harry’s voice, Chaucer, unlike many of his critics, defends (though with the substantial reservations imposed by the other prologal voices) the delights of puzzlement, diversion, and absorption in the illusions wrought by rhetorical coloring.

Through Harry, Chaucer also calls attention to the common tendency, in which the tavern keeper’s notion of fiction making participates, to miss or set aside contemplation of the providential design of the universe and humanity’s place within it. Storytelling, at least at one level, affords

a pleasure not unlike the Wife's putative joy in wealthy and virile husbands, the Friar's enjoyment of rich patrons and comfortable taverns, the Monk's pleasure in hunting, January's delight in his love garden, and the myriad other diversions by which the Canterbury characters live. Chaucer the poet does not exempt himself or his writing from this pleasurable, spiritually subversive function of fiction. But he admits his involvement in so disreputable a cause only indirectly, as a good orator should, using Harry's voice and character to mask his own. In his last voice, Chaucer slyly celebrates poetry in just the terms that the strictest theorists had used to condemn it.

In doing so, however, Chaucer is not giving Harry's ideas about poetry precedence over other, higher notions. Like the opening formulations of the clerkly voice, the Host's game provides a framing contrast for the central, dynamic notion of the poetic enterprise in the General Prologue—the one articulated by the pilgrim's voice. The voices of the clerk and the innkeeper offer relatively fixed, static images of poetry: one is concerned with causality, hierarchy, and order, the other with the disorders, sexual exploits, and trivialities of quotidian life. Both positions are curiously abstracted, though in opposite ways, from the complex central subject of poetry as the pilgrim voice proposes it—human consciousness of a universe that emanates from God but also participates in entropy, mortality, disintegration.

Neither the first nor the last notion of poetry entertained in the General Prologue allows for the

rich, active, tentative, dialogic exploration of that difficult subject as the pilgrim voice engages it. The pilgrim Chaucer may reach upward toward the clerk's philosophical formulations or downward to Harry's bourgeois laughter. He is bound by neither, though he may play with both. His deeply human engagement with his flawed, mortal subject and art precludes direct statements of transcendent truth in his fiction. By the same token, his storytelling will rise above the category of fictions made simply for the sake of rhetorical play and distracting frivolity. What remains—the poetry at the center—is fictive, certainly. But it is as richly various and morally dense and stubbornly inconclusive as its total subject. Its self-conscious fictionality will press well-disposed readers toward a new awareness of the nature of illusion and self-deception, whether in literature or in life. The truths the tales uncover have to do mainly with human ways of knowing (and not knowing) the self and the mortal world.

To find the truths of Christian doctrine, however, one must set the tales aside. Transcendent truth remains largely absent from the Chaucerian narratives, and it must. In Chaucer's argument, this is just the kind of truth that makes all secular fiction untenable. Nonetheless, Chaucer the poet in his several voices points directions, marks boundaries, poses questions and puzzles that bear heavily on the truths beyond his fictions.

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Notes

¹ Hunt provides a useful history of this medieval genre, including an outline of its characteristics. See also Arbusow 97–103; Curtius 83–89; Porqueras Mayo; Cunningham; and Baldwin 32–35.

² For a valuable discussion of Chaucer's creative engagement with classical notions of the orator, see Payne.

³ Other helpful studies on this issue include Malone; Duncan; Hoffman; Woolf; Bronson; Major; Nevo; Jordan, "Chaucer's Sense" and *Chaucer* 111–31.

⁴ All translations from works not cited in translation are my own.

⁵ "Quasi ergo aliquis secum loquens se et rationem suam quasi duo constituit . . . , sicut Boetius in libro 'De consolatione Philosophiae' vel Augustinus in libro 'Soliloquorum.' "

⁶ "Tres autem a Boetio inducuntur personae, Boetius miser querens ut consoletur, Philosophia quae consolatur, Boetius auctor qui de utrisque loquitur."

⁷ "Hic igitur liber idcirco concionator dicitur, quia Salomon in eo quasi tumultuantis turbae susceptus sensum, ut ea per inquisitionem dicat, quae fortasse per temptationem imperita mens sentiat. Nam quot sententias quasi per inquisitionem mouit, quasi tot in se personas diuersorum suscepit."

⁸ Gregory's description of Ecclesiastes was well-known and popular in the later Middle Ages. It appears, for example, in a truncated form in Wyclif's English commentary on Ecclesiastes. I am indebted to Eric Eliason for this reference to Wyclif.

⁹ "Multiplex disputatio signatur, et ad diversas deducta sententias. Quia enim in hoc libro multorum mores, studia, et opera describuntur: propterea necesse est loquentem multorum voces assumere, multorum opiniones in suo sermone exprimere, ut valeat multorum personas (cum ipse tamen non nisi unus sit, qui loquitur) in sua persona presentare. Nam circa finem libri multis locutum se, et in se multos fuisse testatur, dicens: Finem

loquendi omnes pariter audiamus. *Deum time, et mandata ejus observa hoc est omnis homo.* Hoc est etiam cur se in hoc opere Ecclesiasten nominari voluit; quia videlicet sermo ejus hic non ad unum aliquem specialiter, sed ad totam Ecclesiam, id est concionem, sive multitudinem populi dirigitur, et multorum moribus exprimendis simul, et informandis ejus in hoc libro oratio famulatur.”

¹⁰ For useful discussions of the medieval rhetorical “I,” see Spitzer; Bethurum; Kellogg; Bevington; and Kane. See also Anne Middleton’s excellent description of the public voice (and public “I”) developed by certain English poets, including Langland and Gower, during Richard II’s reign. Derek Brewer offers important observations about Chaucer’s dramatized tellers.

¹¹ These three voices coincide interestingly with T. S. Eliot’s description of the poet’s three voices. Chaucer’s articulation of the theory, however, grows out of rhetorical tradition and serves a philosophical argument, while Eliot is describing his own writing experience (4).

¹² Numerous studies trace the history of the spring topos. Among the most important for Chaucer are Cook; Hankins; Tuve, *Seasons* and “Spring”; and Baldwin 19–28. See also Curtius 185–202 and Ross. For a discussion of the *Secreta secretorum* and Chaucer’s spring opening, see esp. Tuve, *Seasons* 52–58.

¹³ For a suggestive discussion of the relations between allegory, explorations of causality, and the language of truth, see Quilligan, esp. 156–223. See also Brewer 222–23.

¹⁴ See ch. 3, “Two Studies of Dialogue” (81–115). I am grateful to Ralph Cohen for directing me to Mukarovsky and other modern theorists who deal with the question of voicing in fiction.

¹⁵ For discussions of Chaucer’s involvement with his pilgrims, see Malone 40–45; Green; and Mandel.

¹⁶ R. M. Lumiansky and Jill Mann have rightly observed a connection between the portrait gallery in Benoit de Sainte-Maure’s *Roman de Troie*, based on Dares, and Chaucer’s portraits in the General Prologue. Even more important is Chaucer’s borrowing of the authorial perspective of the eye-witness historian that supports the portraits in Dares and Benoit. See Lumiansky, “Benoit’s”; Mann 179–81.

¹⁷ In Middle English the word *wit* has several more or less related meanings: “mind,” “faculty or power of thinking and reasoning,” “bodily and spiritual powers of perception,” “sanity,” “genius, talent, or cleverness.” When the pilgrim says, “My wit is short,” he is usually thought to be referring to his ingenuity or power of invention. In the immediate context, he

is speaking about his inability to set the rest of the pilgrims in their proper order. Because this task is, technically speaking, an act of rhetorical invention, the reading “my ingenuity is short” is not improbable. Then we have only the simple irony of the brilliant poet’s “humility.” If, however, the deeper meaning, “my power to know is limited,” is the central one, then Chaucer is affirming the metaphysical irony of absolute human limitation and acknowledging his necessary participation in this condition.

¹⁸ Two centuries later Cervantes would choose a similar ploy to explore similar questions. His *Don Quixote*, he tells us, emanated from a shriveled brain. From this comic vantage point he can reveal high literary romances as elegant (falsifying) fabrications designed, consciously or unconsciously, to obscure the sad, sordid reality of quotidian life. For Cervantes and Chaucer alike a self-critical posture coincides with an ironic critique of all linguistic efforts—particularly efforts by courtly poets—to express truth or to describe reality accurately.

¹⁹ For a thought-provoking discussion of *homo rhetoricus* in Western tradition, see Lanham, esp. ch. 1, “The Rhetorical Ideal of Life” (1–35).

²⁰ See Olson for a useful discussion of the poet as maker.

²¹ Alan Gaylord offers one of the fullest, most helpful discussions of Harry Bailly’s involvement in the theory of storytelling. He rightly observes that Harry’s principal concern in the tales proper is solace and not the “sentence” he piously invokes in the General Prologue. For other discussions of Harry’s theoretical commitments and significance, see Lumiansky, *Of Sondry Folk* 85–95; Ruggiers 6; David 75–76; Richardson; Scheps; and Bloomfield 49.

²² For the attribution of this commentary, see Courcelle 304.

²³ See Petrarch’s coronation speech in Godi; also, his *Invektive contra medicum* in Petrarch 648–93.

²⁴ “Scenicas meretriculas muse poetice dicuntur. meretricule sic enim meretrix conmiscetur cuibus non amore prolis sed lucri, sic poete scribebant de quobus non amore sapientie sed laudis videlicet lucri.”

²⁵ Alan Gaylord points out the connections between Harry’s interest in mirth and its importance in the *Roman de la rose* (230), but he does not observe the direct relation between Déduit and Chaucer’s innkeeper.

²⁶ Harry’s notions of tale-telling as a source of mirth align his poetry with the sphere of “curiositas”—“a fastidious, excessive, morally diverting interest in things and people” (Zacher 20). Zacher’s discussion of “curiositas” is full and illuminating.

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