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The Various Functions of Irony in Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Parson's Tale"

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THE VARIOUS FUNCTIONS OF IRONY
IN GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S
"THE PARSON'S TALE"

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
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LIFE

Thomas Gerard Savage, S.J., was born in Oak Park, Illinois, July 27, 1926.

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CHAPTER I

IRONY, A FORGOTTEN ELEMENT IN A FORGOTTEN STORY

Although literary critics agree that Geoffrey Chaucer is a master par excellence in the art of irony, few of them are of one mind as to precisely what that irony is. They disagree, for example, as to whether Chaucer's use of irony is conscious or unconscious; they disagree in their analyses of his irony's specific qualities. Some maintain that Chaucer merely translated the irony found in the French and Italian stories which influenced him. Others, however, hold that Chaucer was most original in his contribution of irony, although he borrowed his stories and fables in germ from others. In brief, critics agree that Chaucer's irony in the Canterbury Tales is a device properly his own, but they neither define it nor attempt to distinguish it from the irony of other English authors.

This same variance of opinion is found particularly in the critics' handling of Chaucer's prose sermon, "The Parson's Tale." These commentators differ concerning the purpose of the tale itself, its real value, its concluding position in the Can-

terbury collection: Indeed, it would seem that few critics adequately evaluate the worth of this tale, much less understand and appreciate the ironic element contained therein. We do not think it is too much to say that few critics understand the intrinsic connection between this pious exhortation and the tales of the other pilgrims. Several note the presence of irony in the sermon, but misrepresent it to be the usual irony contained in the ordinary medieval homily. No one seems to consider the twofold function irony plays in this tale of the seven deadly sins: (1) that it is the prime source of the sermon's realism; and (2) that it is the unifying element between the tale of the Parson and those of the other pilgrims. It is the purpose of this thesis to explain and prove this twofold function.

Critical excerpts from a few outstanding Chaucerian commentators illustrate the common attitude toward "The Parson's Tale." The same passages prove irony to be a forgotten element in a forgotten story.

A recent Chaucerian scholar to attain some repute in the world of letters is Miss Marchette Chute. In her praiseworthy little volume Geoffrey Chaucer of England Miss Chute presents the reader with a criticism of "The Parson's Tale," not unlike the vast majority of criticisms given by other leading scholars of Chaucer. Miss Chute says of this sermon:

Therefore, Chaucer wrote that interminable piece of prose that calls itself The Parson's Tale. It is a sermon on penitence, divided and subdivided in the usual medieval manner, with a long additional treatise on the seven deadly sins. It is written in the laborious style that was Chaucer's usual one in prose, heavy, full of effort and painfully in earnest.¹

Obviously Miss Chute, like so many others, has taken the tale at its literal value and has failed to consider any further meaning than that conveyed by the words of the sermon. Failing to penetrate sufficiently beyond the mere wording of the sermon, Miss Chute appears to be completely oblivious of the ironic element in the words of the Parson.

Howard Patch is also seemingly unconscious of the real merit of "The Parson's Tale." After reading the sermon, Mr. Patch exclaims, "I cannot discern that the Parson ever wore a smile."² True, the Parson was a sobering influence on the mere rowdy pilgrims, as was only right from the nature of his office. However, he did possess a sense of humor, otherwise he would not be capable of flavoring his exhortation with an ironic spice.

Although Mr. Patch cannot fathom a smiling Parson on the Canterbury pilgrimage, he does note something more in "The Par-

¹ Marchette Chute, Geoffrey Chaucer of England, New York, 1946, 309.

² Howard Patch, On Rereading Chaucer, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1939, 152.

son's Tale" than mere pietism. However, he fails to probe far enough into the deeper ironic significance of the tale, contenting himself with the following surface critique of the Parson's sermon:

But some critics will regard all this material in "The Parson's Tale" as only perfunctory. We have learned, however, that with all its light-hearted setting even the Tale of Melibeus can hardly be set aside in that way. After all, the tedious work of translating such a document means something in the poet's interest; and here especially in the tale which concludes the series it is very doubtful whether the writer offers us something more than an edifying and insincere performance intended as a sop to the "sad" and a pose for the orthodox. Small wonder if the poet appear like a cynic if we regard him as insincere when he is moral.³

Gilbert Chesterton, usually a rather accurate and searching critic in such matters as this, here falls in line with the vast majority of critics. In one place he refers derogatorily to the "almost excessive devotionism of the Parson's Tale."⁴ In another section he calls the reading of this tale a "somewhat heavy medieval penance."⁵ Finally, when he speaks about the climax of the Tales, Chesterton says that Chaucer "solemnly proceeds to tell a rather dull story in prose."⁶

3 Ibid., 191f.

4 Gilbert K. Chesterton, Chaucer, New York, n.d., 121.

5 Ibid., 257.

6 Ibid., 21.

Thus, we note how Chaucerian critics generally treat the closing part of the Canterbury Tales. But, lest only one side of the picture be given, let it be said that not all critics fail to see some merit in the sermon of the Parson. In his excellent little Handbook Robert French remarks quite aptly about "The Parson's Tale":

Surely it is not strange that this medieval poet, probably neither more nor less devout than most of his contemporaries, should have seen fit to conclude his great collection of tales with such a work as the Parson's sermon. Neither is it very strange, it seems to me, that the last words appended to the Canterbury Tales should be a penitential prayer for forgiveness for the "translacions and endynges of worldly vanities." . . . To conclude his last great work in such a fashion was the natural act of a devout Catholic.⁷

Other critics, like Percy Shelley, not only observe the reason for this sermon, but also indicate some of its more admirable qualities. Shelley comments,

Chaucer the poet never conceived of art as a vehicle of religious or moral instruction, for such things as the Tale of Melibeus and the Parson's Tale are not only in prose, but are dramatic in intention and must be considered rightly as part of the dramatic scheme of the Canterbury Tales as a whole.⁸

These accurate and praiseworthy remarks of critics

7 Robert French, A Chaucer Handbook, New York, 1941, 539.

8 Percy Van Dyke Shelley, The Living Chaucer, Philadelphia, Pa., 1940, 44.

French and Shelley are corroborated by George Kittredge who lauds Chaucer for assigning this sermon to the humble Parson. However, no single critic seems to have analyzed fully all that can be found in the Parson's sermon. Consequently, both Parson and sermon are frequently misunderstood. For instance, a question often unasked by critics, and consequently unanswered, is: precisely what is the relationship between "The Parson's Tale" and the other tales of the Canterbury pilgrims? This is a most logical question to ask if one considers the purpose of "The Parson's Tale." Yet, few critics ever propose it, much less answer it. In our opinion, Frederick Tupper approximates an answer when, in an article written almost three decades ago in PMLA, he says,

Is it a thought too bold that this last of the tales is not a thing apart, but closely connected with all those stories that have plundered it so freely? The Parson's tract—in some earlier form perhaps—was certainly before Chaucer when he wrote many of his Sin's narratives. Of that relation we have just had ample evidence. Why is it then unreasonable to suppose that Chaucer had in mind the other Tales, when he finally conducted the Parson through his homily against the Vices they illustrate? To me the conclusion seems unavoidable that this division of the Parson's sermon is but the culmination of the frequently recurring motif of the Seven Deadly Sins.⁹

Mr. Tupper has observed the unity, i. e. the fact of the unity be-

⁹ Frederick Tupper, "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins," PMLA, New York, XXIX, 1914, 116-117.

tween the sermon of the Parson and the manifest sins of the other pilgrims. However, he has overlooked the basis for this unity, namely, the fundamental ironic implications that arise spontaneously from the situation in which Chaucer has placed the Parson.

The purpose, then, of this thesis will be threefold: first, to point out in a general way wherein the irony of the Parson's sermon consists; secondly, to illustrate how this irony forms the basis for the realism both in the character of the Parson and in his sermon; finally, to indicate the various ironic links existing between the Parson's admonitions and the openly confessed sins of the pilgrims. It should then be quite clear that the source of unity between the Parson's prose and the other pilgrims' poetic tales is a distinctive irony, without an appreciation of which, the Chaucerian reader has only a partial understanding of the sermon and its function in the poet's plan.

To render our procedure more effective, we must give space first to a consideration of irony in general, and then to Chaucer's distinctive irony. In this chapter certain opinions regarding "The Parson's Tale" have been advanced, considered briefly, and found wanting. We saw that the sermon itself has been overlooked by the critics in general, and that the irony in the sermon is seemingly a forgotten element. Only Frederick Tupper attempts an answer to the question: what is the relation between "The Parson's Tale" and the tales of the other Canterbury

pilgrims? But, even Tupper's solution leaves unexplained the basis for this unity. To the further study of this question, our thesis now turns its attention.

CHAPTER II

IRONY IN LITERATURE, ITS TYPES AND MANIFESTATIONS

According to J.A.K.Thomson, irony is a criticism of life, and is a very difficult notion to define.¹ Nor is the difficulty lessened when one attempts to recognize and explain irony in any particular work of literature. Yet, for our present purpose, some analysis and interpretation of irony must be made.

Cleanth Brooks has described irony in the glossary of the book Understanding Poetry as follows:

An ironical statement indicates a meaning contrary to the one it professes to give; an ironical event or situation is one in which there is a contrast between expectation and fulfilment or desert and reward. In the irony of both statement and event there is an element of contrast.²

What Mr. Brooks says is true. Anyone who takes the time to analyze an ironic situation notes an element of contrast to be the fundamental bond of the ironic implications. However, because

1 J.A.K.Thomson, Irony, An Historical Introduction, London, 1926, 2.

2 Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Understanding Poetry, New York, 1944, 636.

this definition is far too extensive and general, it is not desirable for our study. In Webster's New International Dictionary we read that irony is "that sort of humour, ridicule, or light sarcasm, which adopts a mode of speech the intended implication of which is the opposite of the literal sense of the words."³ This, too, is a generic definition, under which specific types of irony may be grouped. As such, then, it is a poor guide for the study of Chaucer's personal ironic gift, which lies not so much in his use of one or other specific type of irony as in the adoption of all ironic forms synthesized into his own particular ironic cast. Obviously, therefore, in order to understand Chaucer's distinctive irony, a consideration, albeit brief, of various particular types of irony and their characteristic exemplifications in literature is necessary.

Doubtless, the oldest examples of irony are found in the Greek poet Homer. Dramatic irony and satire are clearly manifest in the comedies of Aristophanes. Historically, Homeric irony and dramatic satire take precedence over two other forms of ancient Greek irony, Socratic irony and tragic irony.

Socratic irony, perhaps more familiar to us, is a device the Greek philosopher Socrates used for the purpose of instructing

³ Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, 2nd ed., Springfield, Massachusetts, 1950, 1312.

the ignorant and the pseudo-intellectuals of Athens. The dictionary defines this type of irony as "ignorance or the like feigned to confound or provoke an antagonist."⁴ Socratic irony is pretended ignorance or willingness to learn from others assumed for the sake of making their errors conspicuous by means of adroit questioning.⁵

Concerning Socratic irony, Alfred Croiset, in his History of Greek Literature, says:

Socratic irony was a profession of ignorance. What Socrates represented as ignorance in himself was actually a non-committal attitude towards any dogma not carried back to its first principles.⁶

An interrogator uses Socratic irony when he feigns an ignorant, questioning manner and, although aware of the truth, allows himself to be instructed by the brief answers of his naive friend.

Irony is also Socratic in spirit should the speaker have intentions not apparent on the surface, which his analysis brings into clearer perspective. Chaucer frequently indulges in such cryptic irony when he manages certain situations in the Canterbury Tales.

Tragic irony, or Sophoclean irony, is defined as a type of irony "by which a speaker is made to use words bearing to the

⁴ Ibid., 1312.

⁵ Ibid., 2388.

⁶ Alfred and Maurice Croiset, An Abridged History of Greek Literature, New York, 1904, 230.

audience, in addition to his own meaning, a further and ominous sense."⁷ Or, in the words of Mr. Thomson,

It is the device, often strikingly effective, which puts in the mouth of a character language whose full significance is not perceived by himself but only by his hearers, who know, as he does not, the doom that awaits him.⁸

Practically identical with tragic irony is dramatic irony. Mrs. Germaine Dempster in her excellent work Dramatic Irony in Chaucer defines this type of irony as

...the irony resulting from a strong contrast, unperceived by a character in a story, between the surface meaning of his words or deeds and something else happening in the same story.⁹

In Sophocles' tragedy Oedipus Tyrannus, Oedipus is an excellent example of the dramatic unfolding of this type of irony. Although Oedipus is completely unaware of this predicament, every oath he utters against the murderers of King Laius condemns himself.

Closely linked with tragic and dramatic irony is the "reversal of fate." This dramatic device is sometimes considered as another specific type of irony. However, the "reversal of fate" seems to be rather the hub around which an ironic situation revolves. In its cause and effect tragic irony and the "reversal

⁷ Webster's Dictionary, 1142.

⁸ Thomson, Irony, 35.

⁹ Germaine Dempster, Dramatic Irony in Chaucer, Palo Alto, California, 1932, 251.

of fate" are identical. They differ in that the "reversal of fate" is proper only to the tragic figure. Oedipus well exemplifies this dramatic technique. From his lofty position as honored king and respected hero, he suffers a reversal of fate, and, as a result, is an outcast from his own land by his own curse.

Another not uncommon device used to portray the ironic is the innuendo. As a form of irony it is neither as artistic nor as poignant as dramatic or tragic irony. Yet the innuendo or sly insinuation, because of its very subtlety, is as amusing as it is elusive.

Two common manifestations of irony similar to the innuendo are the proverb and the sententious remark. Of the numerous proverbs in the Gospel narrative two may be selected as indicative of the proverb's essentially ironic nature. In Matthew VI, 24 we are told that "No man can serve two masters." And in the following chapter we read the proverbial warning, "Do not judge, lest you yourself be judged."

The sententious remark, though not strictly ironic, frequently is so by reason of the speaker's character, position, or circumstances. Mr. Micawber's words in David Copperfield illustrate the irony of the sententious remark.

Finally, there is what some call "indirect satire." Although the words "indirect satire" are hardly adequate for an

accurate knowledge of irony's essence, still they may serve as a working definition of irony, according to Mr. Earle Birney who prefaces his study of English Irony before Chaucer with the following:

The word irony is so protean a cliché that I must begin with a warning that I shall use it as loosely as the dictionaries allow. "Indirect satire" may serve as a working definition and it is one which I should be prepared to defend even for the "irony of fate" and "dramatic irony."¹⁰

However, even if "indirect satire" as a working definition of irony is defended by the scholarly Mr. Birney, its deficiency for our purposes here is obvious.

Since the primary object of this study is Chaucer, the question is now asked quite naturally: What type of irony did Chaucer use? This is not easily answered, for Chaucer uses all types of irony in his own peculiar way. For instance, Mrs. Dempster gives a rather complete analysis of how Chaucer uses dramatic irony. Again, the early Chaucerian criticism indicates that Chaucer employed the Socratic method, because some readers and critics have, in their simplicity, accused him of naivete. Sly verbal twists and innuendoes fall from the lips of the Canterbury pilgrims. Frequently Chaucer administers a good-natured jibe to some character, institution, or class in the manner of indirect

¹⁰ Earle Birney, "English Irony before Chaucer," University of Toronto Quarterly, Toronto, Canada, VI, 1936-7, 539.

satire. So, it seems that no one type of irony predominates; Chaucer uses all types of irony.

Briefly, then, we have seen how some distinctions have been made regarding certain types of irony and their manifestations in literature. Besides a rather complete generic definition of irony, the working definition "Indirect satire" has been preferred. Socratic irony, tragic and dramatic irony, "reversal of fate," innuendo, proverb, and sententious remark have been briefly shown to be either essentially ironic or as touchstones for irony. That Chaucer employs all types of irony in his writings was mentioned. Now our attention centers on how the poet incorporates all types of irony into his writings, casting them in his own unique ironic mould.

CHAPTER III

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF CHAUCER'S IRONY

In English literature Chaucer's irony appears to be unique. Unlike the twentieth-century novelist Evelyn Waugh, Chaucer, when ironic, does not assume a position on the reviewing stand of life, commenting disdainfully on the sins and foibles, public and private, of his fellowmen. Nor does Chaucer's irony resemble the irony of Lewis Carroll, that Victorian master of the parody, who chiefly employs caricature as a means of developing the ironic. Chaucer neither approaches the highly imaginative flights of Carroll's works, nor does he, as does Waugh, caricature people. Nor does Chaucer resemble his admirer Gilbert Chesterton who seeks life's ironies in the abstract paradox. Nor does Chaucer strictly follow the methods of the great Latin and Greek and English masters of satire, as Howard Patch clearly indicates:

Chaucer does not appear to be irked by the faults he reveals in his characters. Unlike Juvenal, Persius, Dryden and Pope and Swift, he does not give evidence of being unhappy about them or of holding a lash in readiness. I cannot find that, however much he remains conscious of vice as vice, he has expectation of making people over by his ridicule. Perhaps that is the subtlest method of teaching, but it is not the procedure of most satirists. Indeed one is inclined to think that these ironic touches appear in his portraits

simply because he saw life in this way.¹

The author who seemingly most approximates Chaucer in this matter of irony is the modern novelist Bruce Marshall. The character he has created—Father Malachy, Canon O'Duffy, Father Smith, and others—who live and laugh, suffer and rejoice on the pages of his novels, put the reader in mind of those pilgrims whom Chaucer in this same England created five centuries earlier.

Chaucer's peculiar use of irony seems neither to be exclusively Sophoclean nor exclusively Socratic, though both forms are used by him in the Tales. Chaucer also uses an irony brought about by characterization and verbal innuendo, by contrast between real and ideal. His irony is a clever, artistic use of words, placed by him in the mouth of his prototypical characters, to which words he joins subtle meanings in the spirit of irony.

What, then, is Chaucer's distinctive irony? To define Chaucer's irony strictly seems an impossibility, because, while it embraces all forms of irony, still in itself it is something unique and defies strict definition.

However, some positive notion may be gathered from the descriptions of Chaucer's irony given by certain scholars. Mrs. Dempster, from the lead given in her definition of dramatic irony,

¹ Patch, On Rereading Chaucer, 224.

implies Chaucer's irony will be found in the verbal innuendo, whether or not it is understood by the speaker or listener. Our knowledge of this sly, verbal irony is further enhanced by a consideration of Mrs. Dempster's significant qualities of Chaucer's irony. Since no study of Chaucer's irony, however cursory, is complete without some study of these four noteworthy qualities of Chaucer's irony, attention is given to them here.

In summary form at the close of her treatise on dramatic irony in Chaucer, Mrs. Dempster declares that Chaucer's irony is deliberate, varied, creative, and sincere. She bases her proof for Chaucer's deliberateness on the fact that "the better we know our poet, the less naive he appears."² This proof ultimately rests on each individual reader's experience. Besides this fact, however, internal evidence is offered from the Canterbury Tales themselves, and among her proofs "this most Chaucerian of all features, the delineation of character" would appear to be her strongest argument.³ Chaucer's deliberateness is recognizable in his delineation of character, for his works manifest the artistic skill with which the poet characterizes the personae who move across the stage of his Canterbury drama.

Chaucer knew exactly what he was doing when he drew his

2 Dempster, Dramatic Irony, 96.

3 Ibid., 96.

characters, otherwise how can we explain the little eccentricities, the exterior carriage, the physical bearing he notes with such exact detail in pilgrims like the Miller, Reeve, Wife of Bath, Summoner, Pardoner, and Prioress, as well as the noble, spiritual traits of the Knight and Parson he is careful to mention. No author inadvertently inserts the little, easily overlooked points which Chaucer casually mentions in his vivid verbal portraits of the Canterbury pilgrims.

Variety, the second quality of Chaucer's irony according to Mrs. Dempster, is brought into clearer relief, if a comparison is made between Chaucer's writings and the works of an English tragedian. She chooses as a subject for this comparison the tragic novels of Thomas Hardy. A gloomy fate ever prevails in the ironic situations of Hardy's tragedies. Apparently Hardy knew no other mood conducive to life's irony. Chaucer, on the contrary, runs the whole gamut of ironic moods from the gay humor of the Wife of Bath to the sober warnings of the Parson. Mrs. Dempster cites examples and logically concludes that in Chaucer's irony "we find all the subtle scale of delicate and complex nuances of humour in tragedy, of emotion in laughter."⁴ Mrs. Dempster seemingly is excessively brief and simple here. However, her brevity of treatment may be excused on the score that she is summarizing

4 Ibid., 97.

explicitly what has already been implied throughout her entire treatise. Her comparison of Chaucer with the fatalist Hardy is legitimate for the sake of an example, and, had the comparison been carried further, an even stronger argument in Chaucer's favor would have been made.

Again, from the variety of characters who tell a variety of stories there are bound to arise situations of varied ironic implications in which different ironic techniques will be employed. There is the brutal irony in the Miller telling a story about a carpenter, and in the Reeve, a carpenter by trade, avenging himself with a tale about a miller. Neither tale is complimentary to either man or trade. The dispute between the regular and the secular clergy is brought into the Tales by the ironic tiff between the Friar and the Summoner. Dramatic irony is latent in the stories of the Monk and the Pardoner. Each of the latter vehemently proclaims against a sin of which he himself is guilty to a marked degree. Then, finally, there is the subtle irony, similar to the Socratic form, discernable in the dullest tale told by none other than the pilgrim Chaucer himself. That Chaucer, superb raconteur that he is, should tell the dullest story is a pretense of ignorance made in the spirit of Socratic irony. The irony in the Ganterbury Tales certainly lacks no variety. As Patch says,

Like medieval allegory, which builds up not only a literal meaning, but the moral and spiritual and even other interpretations as well, his irony is sometimes many-faceted, and sends forth varied colors

in a single situation.⁵

The third quality of Chaucer's irony proffered by Mrs. Dempster is the one most apt to cause controversy among students and scholars of Chaucer, namely, creativeness. We know that Chaucer borrowed some stories and plots for the Canterbury Tales. The question, then, naturally arises whether Chaucer merely copied and translated them, or whether he actually enhanced these stories with his own art when he incorporated them into his own works. Also, in following the traditional English irony, did Chaucer slavishly imitate the Old English form? In brief, was Chaucer creative in his irony?

In an article in The Dial George Saintsbury takes a very determined stand on the originality of Chaucer's irony.

How saturated with irony Chaucer himself is! Great translator as he may be, I defy anyone who knows his French originals well to say that the source of this saturation is wholly or even mainly in them. For every one per cent of irony that there is in the Fabliaux; for every two or three that there may be in the Roman de la Rose—there is ten, twenty or more in Chaucer.⁶

For those to whom Saintsbury's hyperbole is not convincing, Mrs. Dempster takes a more logical approach. She does this first by contrasting Chaucer's irony with the irony of his source-material.

⁵ Patch, On Rereading Chaucer, 224f.

⁶ George Saintsbury, "Irony," The Dial, New York, LXXXII, 1927, 184.

Then she indicates that the best examples of Chaucer's irony are not contained in Chaucer's borrowed stories, but in his original works. These proofs determine conclusively that Chaucer was creative in his irony. Mrs. Dempster says these original stories

owe their existence to the poet's perception of the ironical coloring which details, void of any such connotation in their first setting, could acquire when woven into the fabric of his own narratives.⁷

Dempster then adds that this perception is an author's limit of attainment in ironic originality and creativeness in literature.

Append to this the laudatory remarks of Chesterton, who calls Chaucer "one of the most original men who ever lived."⁸ Chaucer's originality is not to be denied, as Chesterton implies in the following:

There had never been anything like the lively realism of the ride to Canterbury done or dreamed of in our literature before. He was not only the father of all our poets, but the grandfather of all our hundred million novelists. It is rather a responsibility for him. But anyhow, nothing can be more original than an origin.⁹

Regarding an author's sincerity, several objections are immediately raised. Why must there be a distinct mention of an author's sincerity? Is not every author sincere? Does it not seem superfluous to comment on sincerity as a prominent quality of

7 Dempster, Dramatic Irony, 97.

8 Chesterton, Chaucer, 34.

9 Ibid., 34.

an author's art? Such queries are legitimate here, because Mrs. Dempster has devoted time and space to explain what she means by Chaucer's sincere irony. "I mean his conceptions of those little absurdities as part of his life and ours."¹⁰ Irony was not a mere trick of the dramatic art for Chaucer. He employs irony to heighten his best characterizations, not to enliven his less interesting subjects. This is a fact. Irony for Chaucer was a definite, necessary means of accurate character portrayal. His use of irony, for instance, differed totally and entirely from the manner in which the Metaphysical Poets employed the rhetorical conceit. Clearly Chaucer was sincere in his irony.

Besides these four significant qualities given by Mrs. Dempster, two other characteristics of Chaucer's irony should be studied. They are subtlety and non-vindictiveness.

Notable among the essential qualities of Chaucer's irony is subtlety. To discern the irony in Chaucer's writings is frequently a difficult task. All too often the recognition of Chaucer's irony depends on a knowledge of the poet himself, his times, and his world. One cannot fully appreciate Chaucer's irony without an understanding of the character about whom he is writing or into whose mouth he is putting words. Finally, most fundamental for an insight into Chaucer's irony is a knowledge of

¹⁰ Dempster, Dramatic Irony, 97.

man's little hidden ironies manifested in the foibles and quirks of human nature. This subtle quality of Chaucer's irony is so characteristic of him that it prompted Chesterton to remark that Chaucer made a good many more jokes than his critics have ever seen.¹¹ If Chaucer's irony is sometimes beyond the ken of commentators and critics, how elusive must it be for the average student or reader!

Concomitant with Chaucer's ironic subtlety is his lack of vindictiveness. Unlike his bold contemporary Langland, Chaucer implies his ironic remarks concerning the social, political, and religious evils of the day. Unlike the bitter satire used by later authors of the neoclassic period of English literature, Chaucer's irony is more like the piercing rapier than the hacking short-sword of 18th Century authors. This distinction of Chaucer's irony from that of other authors, notably Langland, is brought out quite well by Gerald Owst, when he says,

From the comparatively crude verse of Langland to the polished lines of Chaucer is a far cry in our literature, indeed. Here, to be sure, is also a radical change of weather in the literary firmament. Chaucer, as has been said truly, is too genial a wit, "too little of a preacher and enthusiast," to be very much of a ruthless satirist.¹²

Rarely is Chaucer actually vindictive, and the French

¹¹ Chesterton, Chaucer, 28.

¹² Gerald Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England, Cambridge, 1933, 229.

commentator² Legouis maintains that Chaucer on these occasions "cedes the pen to the moralist."¹³ Legouis further adds that Chaucer's indignation at these times "takes the merriment out of his laughter and ruins the truth of the picture."¹⁴

While Legouis' opinion is to be respected, still another opinion may be defended with equal vigour. This opposite opinion states that Chaucer, like any normal Christian, lost his patience with the religious hypocrite and the social parasite. Thus, Chaucer's purpose was not to paint a picture of a noble character, was not to whitewash blackened characters.

No matter to which opinion one is inclined, the fact remains that Chaucer on the whole was not vindictive in his irony. He kept a sane balance and maintained a sensible attitude toward life as it should be and life as it actually is; between the real and the ideal, Chaucer steered a good middle course, despite these rare lapses into bitterness and scorn.

Chaucer's irony is along quite lines. His is a retiring sort of irony that causes a slow smile to creep across the face, rather than a broad guffaw from lips parted wide in laughter. J. B. Priestley, in his little study English Humour, says Chau-

¹³ Emile Legouis, Geoffrey Chaucer, New York, 1928, 155.

¹⁴ Ibid., 155.

er's irony is "so quiet, so delicate that many readers never notice it is there at all or mistake it for naivete."¹⁵ Earle Birney concurs with this opinion in his article on the beginnings of Chaucer's irony.¹⁶

Therefore, with the possible exception of "The Parson's Tale" and some moral sections in other tales, Chaucer, whenever he employs irony, does not upbraid anyone. And his strong language in sections of "The Parson's Tale" may be justified because certain pilgrims understood only this sort of blunt exhortation. Otherwise there are no deliberate harangues, subtle or bitter, against people or institutions; there are no scathing words against groups or individuals that are not accompanied with a smile. Patch maintains this to be a definite quality of Chaucer's irony when he says that, although Chaucer may have moral purposes in his writing, "still in his satire and in his humour his spontaneity does not primarily include a desire to rectify or change."¹⁷ This agrees with a previous remark about Chaucer's acceptance of mankind as it is. By so doing he neatly bridges the gap between ideal and real, a chasm all realist authors must span, if they are to succeed.

15 J.B.Priestley, English Humour, London, 1929, 63.

16 Earle Birney, "Beginnings of Chaucer's Irony," PMLA, LIV, 1939, 637.

17 Patch, On Rereading Chaucer, 224.

Six fundamental qualities of Chaucer's irony have been considered. Now some attempt at definition may be made. Since many Chaucerian scholars do not essay a definition, it is encouraging to read Legouis' description, the core of which may serve as a basis for our definition. Legouis describes Chaucer's satire, which here is understood as synonymous with irony, thus:

Usually Chaucer's satire resembles that of the great comic writers. It is simply an insight into the hidden feelings and uncommon motives of the human machine. Like Moliere he sees the selfish causes of a man's actions and views them with an equanimity, a serenity of which Moliere was not always capable.¹⁸

This is perhaps as accurate a definition of Chaucer's distinctive ironyas can be found. Chaucer had an insight into those hidden feelings of men which cause external manifestations of foibles or even greater faults of conduct. Indications of this insight are observed in his ironic characterizations of the pilgrims, notably the Pardoner, the Monk, and the Friar. The poet possessed the knack not only of detailing the external deportment of these characters, but also of penetrating deeply and analyzing accurately their inner selves. If, along with Legouis' definition, the six aforementioned qualities of Chaucer's irony are borne in mind, some accurate notion of this distinctive form of the ironic as it appears in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer will be had.

In this chapter we saw that Chaucer's irony arises from

¹⁸ Legouis, Chaucer, 155. Italics not in original.

a "sincere, deliberate analysis of human nature, founded on an exceptional insight into all the various hidden feelings and uncommon motives of men, together with a unique appreciation of the folly involved in human feelings, and expressed in an original, non-vindictive, and frequently subtle style."

Chaucer's irony was observed to resemble neither the irony of Juvenal, Persius, Dryden, Swift, Lewis Carroll, Chesterton, nor Waugh. A possible comparison was suggested between Chaucer's irony of character portrayal and that same form of irony in the novels of Bruce Marshall.

Since irony has been defined in general, and Chaucer's own distinctive irony has been partially studied, the consideration of the function of irony in "The Parson's Tale" is now in order,

CHAPTER IV

IRONY, THE SOURCE OF REALISM IN THE CHARACTER OF THE PARSON AND IN HIS SERMON

The function of irony in a piece of literature like the Canterbury Tales may be studied from all or one of several angles. In any particular tale irony may be considered, (1) from the viewpoint of the practical contribution it makes to the general overall literary style and effect; (2) from the historical standpoint which indicates how an author writes in the spirit of his times; (3) from the standpoint of the teller of the tale; and (4) of the author himself.

A consideration of these four viewpoints will prove how dependent any one tale is on irony, both for its realistic effect and for its intrinsic link with the whole unit of tales. In this chapter, then, these four viewpoints will be given ample study. This consideration will point out that irony forms the basis for the realism in "The Parson's Tale." The next chapter will treat irony as the bond of unity between this tale and the others.

1. The Historical Aspect of Irony in "The Parson's Tale"

While one analyzes the historical function of irony in "The Parson's Tale," attention must be focused on two factors, namely, the content and style of the medieval sermon, and the English tradition of irony before Chaucer. We shall first consider the English tradition of irony.

Even such an artful device as irony had been traditional in English letters prior to Chaucer's appearance on the scene. It was, then, quite natural for him to become imbued with a sense of the ironic from his first years as a writer. As an author, he fell heir to the tradition of his country's literature. As a scholar, he observed the irony in the Old and Middle English classics.

Considering this tradition of irony in English literature, Mr. Earle Birney takes issue with Mrs. Dempster, when the latter says there was a mere latent taste for the ironic in the early writings of Chaucer and that irony really did not appear in his writings until his later works. Birney, however, because he cites references from Old English works, seems to have the evidence in his favor.¹

Apparently, Chaucer required no formal education in the art of irony. True, he read and imitated French and Italian

¹ Birney, "Beginnings of Chaucer's Irony," 639-657.

literature, not a small fraction of which was ironic. However, Chaucer's reading interests do not indicate conclusively that he neither fully understood irony nor skillfully incorporated it into his writings before he read these foreign stories. As Mr. Birney aptly remarks, "Chaucer did not have to be graduated into an 'Italian period' to read ironic literature."² For there was already a sufficient and flourishing tradition of English irony on which Chaucer could draw for his early writings, as Birney had concluded in an earlier article.³

Chaucer however did not merely copy the irony he noted in Anglo-Saxon legends and tales. For just as he improved the irony of foreign authors whom he imitated, so also does he refine the irony of the Saxon writers who preceded him. Chaucer's irony did not descend to the brutal satire and sarcasm of earlier authors and contemporary writers such as Langland and Gower. Chaucer's irony was rather a clear, genuine, genial expression of a very human and original wit. The difference between Chaucer and his predecessors is pronounced, and, as we saw, G. R. Owst indicates this marked difference in his splendid study:

From the comparatively crude verse of Langland to the polished lines of Chaucer is a far cry indeed in our literature. Here, to be sure, is also a radical change of weather in the literary firmament. Chaucer,

2 Ibid., 637.

3 Birney, "English Irony before Chaucer," 538-557.

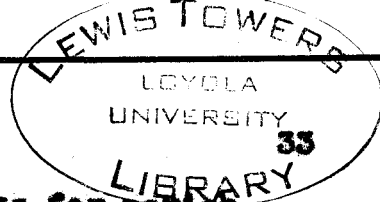
as has been truly said, is too genial a wit, "too little of a preacher and enthusiast," too much entertained with the world as he sees it, to be very much of a ruthless satirist.⁴

Doubtless, then, Chaucer inherited a whole tradition of English irony when he began to write. Especially noteworthy in this tradition was the medieval sermon. For, when Chaucer approached "The Parson's Tale" and determined to give it the form of a closing sermon to his pilgrims, tradition had already cast the die. Subject matter: the Seven Deadly Sins; vital quality: satire and irony. Submitting to this then popular vogue of preaching, Chaucer in "The Parson's Tale" chooses the Seven Deadly Sins for his main theme and tones his words with ironic tinklings to give his exhortation the forceful realism that a sermon necessarily demands. As Tupper remarks, "Among men of the Middle Ages, no theme, religious or secular, was more widely popular than the motif of the Seven Deadly Sins."⁵ Clearly, then, Chaucer's knowledge of the traditional style of medieval preaching is most complete, a fact which is substantiated by Coolidge Chapman in an article entitled "Chaucer on Preaching and Preachers":

Chaucer's knowledge of preaching can be traced to two sources, first to the preachers' manuals and secondly to the world in which he lived. His skillful use of rhetorical devices in the sermons of the Pardoner and the Parson can be attributed only to a

4 Owst, Literature and Pulpit, 229.

5 Tupper, "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins," 93.



thorough familiarity with the handbooks for parish priests. To the poet's keen observation of preachers in the pulpit and at cross-roads we owe his portraits of good and bad preachers and his scenes in Church at mass with pardoner or limiter striving not to win souls from perdition, but silver from lean purses. It is these combined sources that give immortality to his preachers, and to his sermons a vigor and reality that come only from first hand knowledge of the art of preaching.⁶

A prominent rhetorical device in the medieval sermon was indirect satire or irony, which, as Mr. Owsst remarks, was demonstrated in a superior fashion by the vigorous preachers of the Middle Ages in England. And it was to this tradition of pulpit irony that Chaucer had fallen heir.

The reader is bound to see that the everyday characters and scenes which the preachers sketched with such vivid effect in exemplifying their arguments, sooner or later would lead them to behold the absurdities of human life.

It may be inserted here that a necessary condition of any ironic observation is that the author be capable of perceiving these "absurdities of human life." If the author lacks this perception, he will never employ irony effectively. We noted earlier that Chaucer possessed this perception to a unique degree. Owsst
Continues,

Upon one who gazed so attentively at the contorted beggars of the medieval gutter, the pranks of children and animals, the very caricatures of the street juggler and acrobat, thoughts of weaknesses and fol-

⁶ Coolidge Otis Chapman, "Chaucer on Preaching and Preachers," PMLA, XLIV, 1929, 185.

lies of human society, would be continually breaking in. A sudden sense of the ridiculous in our stern moralist's mind—and in a flash, pulpit Realism might be converted into pulpit Satire. This lighter vein of rebuke was so well suited apparently to the taste of contemporary sermon audiences, that the preacher would feel encouraged to indulge his gift still further. For the sermons themselves tell us how people loved to hear their neighbours' vices lampooned from the pulpit.⁷

Here was the tradition of pulpit irony and satire Chaucer followed while writing the sermon of his humble Parson. However, Chaucer's Parson rests content with this "lighter vein of rebuke," that is, he preferred sly ironic remarks to brutal satire or sarcasm. Nor did he lampoon his neighbours' vices to amuse and entertain his congregation; rather, his subtle irony was such that a listener must penetrate the literal verbal significance to understand his ironic undertone. Herein lies Chaucer's contribution to the tradition of irony in English literature and medieval preaching.

Thus, considering the Parson's irony from the historical standpoint, we note not only how Chaucer followed tradition, but also how he developed the irony in his national literature. Our study now turns to an observation of how the style and content of "The Parson's Tale" is enhanced by irony.

2. Practical Aspect of Irony in "The Parson's Tale"

"The Parson's Tale differs from the other tales at

⁷ Owat, Literature and Pulpit, 237.

least in this, that it is told in prose, not narrative or dramatic poetry. Besides, the tale is told in a homiletic prose. Therefore, the irony in "The Parson's Tale" will contrast with the irony distinguished in the tales of the other pilgrims. The rollicking mirth of the tale of the Wife of Bath will be absent; nor will there be the patent dramatic irony of the Pardoner's sermon. Since the Parson's words are in prose—and in parts not too imaginative a prose—the humorous lyrical twists of language and the clever juxtaposition and collocation of words will be wanting.

The Parson's sermon concludes the Tales. Propriety demands that the Parson be edifying and pious rather than entertaining. Chaucer, mindful of the pilgrimage's true spirit, wisely selected the Parson to deliver the sobering conclusion of the Tales. And it is irony that not only gives the realistic touch to the Parson's sincere, frank admonitions, but also forms the bond of unity between the Parson's sermon and the other tales.

The serious and admonitory temper of this tale by no means excludes irony, but rather demands it. The tale is a medieval sermon, the irony of which, as we observed, came frequently in the form of vivid scorn and trenchant sarcasm in the sober exhortation to a better life.

As mentioned above, Chaucer assumes a new role when he plays the Parson. For the most part he omits the clever lan-

guage, and concentrates on making his point clear. Nor should wonder be expressed at Chaucer's change here. He is portraying a zealous fourteenth century parson, an obvious rarity, if medieval ecclesiastical history is accurate. Chaucer, then, must depart from his customary approach; he must employ a different medium; if his sermon is to be realistic, his speech has to be vivid, clear, pointed, and sometimes even scornful. This is the very same Chaucer, who has acted the parts of other pilgrims; but in "The Parson's Tale" he adapts himself to a most distinctive character with a purpose entirely different from that of the other pilgrims. Chaucer makes this necessary transition with manifest ease.

Yet there are some who fail to understand "The Parson's Tale." Proof of this was shown in the first chapter of this thesis. Chesterton, for instance, referred to the sermon as a piece of dull prose, which is an accurate criticism if one reads the sermon merely as it appears on black and white. If one divorces the true meaning of the sermon from the tale, then the words of the Parson do effect dull prose. But, if one reads the tales and studies all the ironic nuances, the sermon becomes as vivid as the Pardoner's sermon or as the tale of the Wife of Bath. If one reads the sermon as logical prose, he perceives nothing but cumbersome rhetoric and length admonitions; if one reads the sermon as an ironic medieval homily delivered by a fervent priest, then

one observes the full meaning of the sermon and appreciates more completely the universal genius of its author.

To read "The Parson's Tale" without the benefit of having heard the Parson deliver it, presents a practical difficulty. For any sermon, even some of Cardinal Newman's more colorful and picturesque, fails to be fully comprehensible without a knowledge of the speaker's personality and the circumstances in which he spoke. Without actually being present to see the Parson addressing the pilgrims, we lose much of the sermon's force and vigor, and its irony in particular. On this factor Owsen makes a very pointed observation.

So solemn, however, are the speaker's accompanying remarks as we read them to-day, unhappily without the means of watching his face, that we cannot often be sure whether he is giving us typical statements of facts or picturesquely exaggerated satire.⁸

A summary of the substance of the irony contained in "The Parson's Tale" is given by Birney in the following:

For the most part the Parson hits from the shoulder, scorning sly pokes, but there is an economy in his metaphor and a careful restraint from glossing them, which is surely in the spirit of irony.⁹

While Birney's summary is accurate, still no better proof of irony in "The Parson's Tale" can be given than to select certain passages from the text of the sermon and note how the irony is here

⁸ Ibid., 237.

⁹ Birney, "Beginnings of Chaucer's Irony," 649.

manifested."

a. The Sly Insinuation or Verbal Innuendo

In one section the Parson, when exhorting the pilgrims to conquer sloth, adds this suggestion: nothing is more conducive to this overcoming of sloth than hard work. Notice that his words do not pertain directly to overcoming a vice and acquiring a virtue. Could it be said that he uses a needle of irony on the slothful? For nothing is more obvious than to say that hard work overcomes sloth. Such advice would parallel the advice of a renowned physician, were he to prescribe plenty of sleep for a person with insomnia. Or like advising an obese person to watch his calories. The advice is so obvious and so simple, that one would not advert to any ironic or humorous twist in the prescription.

Again, we know from experience that the slothful person becomes sluggish physically and spiritually. If the slothful man overcomes himself and works hard, he will develop himself physically. This physical development corresponds to a spiritual development as well. For a man cannot overcome a vice without gaining a virtue. Therefore, besides his physical advance, the man will similarly progress spiritually. On this analogy the Parson plays when he quotes Saint Bernard:

Useage of labour is a greet thyng for it maketh as
seith Seint Bernard the laborer to haue stronge
armes and harde synwes and slouthe maketh hem feble

and tendre/10

As we read this admonition, the analogy between physical and spiritual perhaps evades our minds. From the Parson's context, however, it seems obvious that he is slyly playing on this comparison. This sly insinuation is surely in harmony with his subtle irony.

To appreciate the Parson's words directed to the avaricious and wealthy land owner, one must put himself right in among the pilgrims listening to the Parson speaking. The reader must feel and hear, as well as read, the irony of the following:

...and eek taken they of hire bonde men amercimentz
whiche myghten moore resonably ben cleped extorcions
than amercimentz/ Of whiche amercimentz and raunson-
ynge of bonde men somme lordes stygardes seyn that
it is rightful for as muche as a cherl hath no tem-
poral thyng that it ne is his lordes as they seyn/11

If the interest given the Parson's words here has been intense, his final afterthought, "as they seyn," should ring in our ears with the suppressed tinkle of the Parson's irony. This phrase may be rendered into modern English, "or so they say," and no difficulty can be found in understanding why the Parson adds these few words. Obviously, the situation has been created unlawfully, merely because of the opinions of the lords, and not because of

10 Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Parson's Tale," The Text of the Canterbury Tales, John Manly and Edith Rickert, eds., Chicago, Illinois, 1940, Vol. IV, 430, l. 690.

11 Ibid., I, 752-753. Italics not in original.

any consideration of the persons' rights. The Parson's sly insinuation, "as they seyn," is his ironic commentary on the whole situation.

That his words on the subject might have the desired effect on his audience, the Parson casts a sobering barb in the following gentle, but firm, reminder:

Thynk eek that of swich seed as cherles spryngeth
of swich seen spryngen lordes As wel may the cherl
be saued as the lord/ the same deeth that taketh
the cherl swich deeth taketh the lord Wherfore I
rede do right so with they cherl as thow woldest
that they lord dide with thee if thow in his plit/¹²

If and when this thought is pondered by the lord, it certainly should have a definite influence on his future actions, granting that he is a just man at heart. Such a truth at first may be incomprehensible for the lord, and in this confusion lies the irony. The Parson definitely desired the lord seriously to consider this fact, and to be converted to more noble thoughts about life's purpose. Once again the Parson's innuendo is in the spirit of his subtle irony. His short sentences, like so many verbal jabs in rapid succession, serve to intensify the rebuke and to clarify the subtle irony of his reminder.

When the Parson treats prodigal spending, he uses a paradox to show the spendthrift how foolish he actually is. This is the ironic paradox in which the Parson couches his warning:

¹² Ibid., I, 761-762

Certes, he that is fool-large ne yeveth nat his catel, but he lesseth his catel/¹³

The ironical twist is found in this, that those who are prodigal with their wealth would do far better were they to give their money to some charity, for in being prodigal they are not giving, as they might perhaps mistakingly believe, but they are throwing their money away. The prodigal actually lose their money, though they believe they gain something. The subtle paradox used by the Parson further indicates his ability to slip in sly verbal blows when the listeners least expect it, and to do so in a most unsuspected manner.

A subtle ironic touch is given by the Parson to the section on adultery. Here he calls attention to the position of the Sixth Commandment, placed as it is between the Commandments against the sins of stealing and killing.

Vnderstand eek that Auowtrie is set gladly in the ten commandmentz bitwixe thefte and manslaughtre for it is the gretteste thefte that may be for it is thefte of body and soule/¹⁴

This little play on the position of the Sixth Commandment is a clever rhetorical trick, wholly in the spirit of irony whereby the obscure is brought forth into the light. This little ironic stroke is among the best of the sly innuendoes the Parson uses in his sermon.

¹³ Ibid., I, 855.

¹⁴ Ibid., I, 886.

b. The Bold Figure

In speaking against the defamers of matrimony, the Parson betrays an outspokenness rarely observed anywhere else in his sermon. In modern jargon, the Parson calls a spade a spade. The bold figure here outlines the elusive irony. The Parson is haranguing men who live by prostitution.

What seye wee seek of putours that lyuen by the horrible synne of putrie and constreyne women to yelden to hem a certeyn rente of hire bodily putrie ye sometye of his owene wyf or his child as doon thase bawdes certes thise ben cursed synnes/15

All immediately recognize the frank, outspoken manner of the Parson. All agree he uses a bold figure here. Few, however, observe the underlying ironic tone. Consider how pathetic it is that a husband sell his wife's body to other men. Such an action, besides being contrary to the purpose of marriage, is savage and barbaric. Now the irony is observed in this pathos if we recall that the husband has an obligation of providing for his wife and children. These lazy panderers, to whom the Parson refers, earn their livelihood by selling their wives' and daughters' bodies for the use of other men. A bold Parson speaks outright to the pilgrims. Perhaps they notice the pathetic irony of a husband providing for his family in such a boorish, unnatural manner; perhaps they do not. In either case the irony is present.

15 Ibid., I, 885.

The rhetorical thrust made at men who frequent brothels could not be more expressive, especially when expressed in the brazen figure the Parson uses to produce the intended irony:

And namely thilke harlotes that haunten bordels
of thise fool women that mowe be likned to a
commune gonge where as men purgen hire ordure/¹⁶

The irony here is observed in the frustration men experience when they enjoy sexual pleasure illegitimately. Men believe they will find satisfaction by patronizing brothels, yet after they have gratified their bestial appetite, men feel disgusted with themselves. They are anything but happy. Chaucer contrast the pretended pleasure and the actual sordidness. He compares a prostitute to a common latrine which men use indiscriminately. In this contrast of pretense and actuality lies the irony of the situation. It is intensified further when consideration is given to what man expects and what in his frustration he receives.

Examples of bold figures, which conceal latent ironic implications, are found throughout the sermon. Among the more clever figures are two, one in the treatise on gluttony, the other in the section on lechery. In the treatise on gluttony, the Parson enumerates the five types of gluttony, as St. Gregory related them. These five types "ben the fyue fyngres of the deuceles hand by whiche he draweth folk to synne."¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., I, 884.

¹⁷ Ibid., I, 830.

Now if this figure had been extended somewhat or even a bit more elaborated, the scope for the irony would have been unlimited. For the Parson extends the same type of figure when he treats lechery, and the irony is much more clever. The Parson calls lechery the Devil's other hand. By ascribing a manifestation of lechery to each finger of the Devil's other hand, and elaborating on each one, the Parson produces a neat figure. For brevity's sake, one part of the whole figure is quoted. It is among the more bold and frank expressions in the whole Tales. The Parson is speaking about the fourth finger of the devil's hand.

The ferthe fynger is the kissynge and trewely he were a greet fool that wolde kisse the mouth of a brennyng oueven or of a fourneys/ and moore fooler ben they that lissen in vileyne for that olde dotardes holours yet wol they kisse though they may nat do and smatre hem/ Certes they ben lyk houndes for an hound what he comth by the roser or by othere beautees thogh he may nat pisse yet wole he heue vp his leg and make a contenance to pisse/¹⁸

The ironic undercurrent is this: men in their dotage think they are still the swains they once were. They make love to any woman who attracts them, and take great delight in kissing. The Parson, playing on the fact that these men are such, that their sex drive is but a reflex action, compares them to dogs who react at the sight of any bush or tree, though they may merely go through the

¹⁸ Ibid., I, 855-857.

otions.

One final example of the Parson's use of bold figures should be given. When speaking about the creation of Adam, he uses a humorous, but very pointed figure, to clarify woman's position in the world. This is observed by reflecting on woman's actual position in many situations and the place destined for her by God.

For he ne made hire nat the heued of Adam for she sholde nat clayme to greet lordshipe/ for ther as the womman hath maistrice she maketh to much desray ther neden none ensamples of this the experience of day by day oghte suffice/ Also certes god ne made nat womman of the foot of Adam for she ne sholde nat ben holden to lowe for she kan nat patiently suffre but god made womman of the ryb of Adam for womman sholde be felawe vn to man/¹⁹

c. The Proverb

In the second part of his sermon on repentance the Parson speaks about venial sin. Exhorting the pilgrims to avoid venial sin he says:

And they fore lat vs nat be negligent to deschargen vs of venial synnes for the prouerbe seith that manye smale maken a greet/²⁰

This proverb translated into our own present day English, or rather into our own proverb borrowed from the Scots, would be:

19 Ibid., I, 925-927.

20 Ibid., I, 362.

"Mony a mickle mak's a muckle." Now the irony lies precisely in this, that no sum of venial sins will ever equal one mortal sin. But, generally, the habitual deliberate venial sin leads the sinner into a mortal sin. Clearly, the reader must delve beneath the surface meaning of the proverb to grasp the full import.

Where the Parson treats wrath, he mentions the sin of cursing. A homelike proverb is used here, underneath the simplicity of which is hidden a deep ironic truth. The Parson says,

And ofte tyme swich cursynge wrongfully retorneth
agayn to hym that curseth as a byrd that retorneth
to his owene nest/²¹

In other words, if a man curses, his own curse will eventually fall upon himself, as surely as a flying bird returns to his own nest. The latent irony is contained in the fact that when a man curses he believes he curses another, though he is actually cursing himself.

A stronger proverb is found in the words on lust. Here the Parson mentions how a person may sin in this regard. He says the fifth kind of adultery should not even be mentioned, even if such mention is made in Scripture. Then he adds,

But though that holy writ speke of horrible synne
certes holy writ may nat ben defouled namoore than
the sonne that shyneth on the mixne/²²

21 Ibid., I, 619.

22 Ibid., I, 910.

This is to say that holy writ can mention such things and be no more affected than the sun is affected when it shines on a dung pile. Beneath the figure is an ironic warning for men not even to speak about this sin, for, unlike the sun, they will be affected by the rottenness of that dung pile, if they remain in its proximity.

Throughout the Parson's Tale such proverbs are found, each with an underlying ironic meaning. This deeper significance in the mouth of the humble Parson is what causes the proverb to be as ironical as it is here in his sermon.

d. Sententious Remarks

Some attention should be given to the sententious remarks, which the Parson has sprinkled throughout his sermon. The sententious remark is a wise saying, and the Parson manages to use one or more of them in a paragraph. He calls them forth from his treasury of Scriptural knowledge and from traditional figures of speech and metaphors. Near the beginning of his sermon the Parson, recalling the words of Solomon, says,

A fair woman that is a fool of hire body lyk to
 a ryng of gold that were in the groyn of a sowe/
 for right as a sowe wroteth in euerich ordure so
 wroteth she hire beautee in stynkyng ordure of
 synne/²³

23 Ibid., I, 155-156.

Régarding the sin of pride the Parson warns those who have been enjoying good luck that they should realize their prosperity might not continue forever. He reminds them of ironic circumstances that could result were they to place too much trust in their affluence.

Certes also who so prideth hym in the goodes of fortune he is a ful gret fool for som tyme is a auman a gret lord by the morwe is a kaytif and a wrecche er it be nyght/²⁴

The irony is rather obvious, for it has happened that a man, quite wealthy for some years, ends his life a social outcast.

Admittedly in the innuendoes, the bold figures, the proverbs, and the sententious remarks the Parson has been realistic. His examples have been concrete and vivid. Upon reading the sermon one cannot but observe this realism, that the Parson knows both what to say and how to say it. Beneath this realism is a certain, almost innate, tendency on the Parson's part towards the ironic.

This irony consists in the fact that the Parson has a definite meaning in mind for the pilgrims. He is ever conscious of his congregation. He always speaks in concrete language. His irony is sometimes obvious, sometimes not, but always he gives an ironic twist to his pointed observations. In brief, the Parson

²⁴ Ibid., I, 473.

is ironic because he sees reality and preaches it; he is realistic because he sees life's ironies and incorporates them into his sermon.

Irony, then, bestows that necessary spark of realism on the Parson's sermon. For, bereft of its irony, the Parson's sermon surely does become a medieval penance. Yet, if the irony is observed and understood, the sermon comes to life, is vivid, is real. If the irony is overlooked, the Parson is nothing more than sounding brass.

3. Irony from the Parson's Standpoint

But what about the character of the Parson? Has Chaucer painted him in ironic garb on the Canterbury canvas, as he has most of the others? If there is irony, how does it help towards a better understanding of a real person, who delivers a real sermon? Is irony consonant with the Parson's character? Does the reader sense any incongruity between the Parson and his use of irony in his sermon? The answers to these questions will now be considered, and it will be observed that the character of the Parson contributes not a little to the realism of the sermon. And, just as irony is the source for the realism of his sermon, so also is irony a real basis for the realism of the Parson's character.

Doubtless the easiest and most logical manner of approach is to study the Parson's character as Chaucer paints it for us in the "General Prologue." Who was the Parson of a town? Chaucer tells his readers that he was a poor cleric, who had been mellowed by poverty and suffering. He was not the kind of Parson who would rely on wealthy benefactors to supply him with his subsistence; he was most independent of the rich, except insofar as he could help them save their souls. For this reason, there was no reason for him to play to the crowd whenever he preached, in order to assure himself of his next meal. Truly, he need not fear that his exhortation to the virtuous life might offend some of the wealthy gentry who listened to him.

Noteworthy in Chaucer's portrait is the fact that he paints interior virtues and qualities of character in the Parson, something he does not do in the sketches of other pilgrim-clerics. With these latter he is content to portray their exterior deportment, since this sufficiently indicates the interior life of each of them. But let us look at Chaucer's own picture.

A good man ther was of religioun
 And was a poure PERSON of a town
 But riche he was of holy thought and werk
 He was also a lerned man a clerk
 That Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche
 His parissheis deuoutly wolde he teche
 Benyng he was and wonder diligent
 And in aduersitee ful pacient
 And swich he was preued ofte sithes
 Ful looth were hym to cursen for his tithes
 But rather wolde he yeuen out of doute

Vn to his poure parisshens aboute
 Of his offrynge and eek of his substaunce
 He koude in litel thyng haue suffisaunce
 Wyd was his parisshes and houses fer asonder
 But he ne lafte hat for reyn ne thonder
 In siknesse nor in meschief to visite
 The ferreste in his parisshes muche and lite
 Vp on his feet and in his hond a staf

This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf
 That first he wroughte and afterward he taughte
 Out of the gospel he the wordes caughte
 And this figure he added eek ther to
 That if gold ruste what sholde iren do
 For if a preest be foule on whom we truste
 And shame it is if a preest take keep
 A shiten shepherde and a clene sheep
 Wel oghte a preest ensample for to yue
 By his clennesses how that his sheep sholde lyue²⁵

The above refers to the inward disposition of the Parson and the virtues he possessed. Chaucer has mentioned the Parson's ideals of the priesthood. By contrast with the other pilgrim-clerics one sees immediately how the Parson towered over them spiritually. In this contrast there is some sly irony, which intensifies as Chaucer continues this litany of the Parson's qualities which were lacking obviously in the other Canterbury clerics.

He sette nat his benefice to hyre
 And leet his sheep encombred in the myre
 And ran to Londoun vn to Seint Poules
 To seken hym a chauntrye for soules
 Or with a bretherhede to been withholde
 But dwelte at hoom and kepte wel his folde
 So that the wolf ne made it nat myscharye
 He was a shepherde and nocht a mercenarye
 And thogh he hooly were and vertuouus
 He was nocht to synful men despitouus
 Ne of his speche daungerous ne digne
 But in his techyng discret and benigne
 To drawen folk to heuene by fairnesse
 By good ensample this was his bisynesse

But it were any persone obstinat
 What so he were of heigh or lowe estat
 Hym wolde he anybben sharply for the nonys²⁶

Chaucer concludes with his own praise of the Parson, which is as fine an estimation and tribute as can be given a priest.

A bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys
 He wayted after no pompe and reuerence
 Ne makid hym a spiced conscience
 But Cristes loore and his apostles twelue
 He taughte but first he folwed it hym selue.²⁷

Besides his other virtues, the Parson in the matter of preaching was totally devoid of anything even approximating that infectious disease of the public figure, human respect. He knew what had to be said; he intended to say it; despite opposition to a pious tale from Harry Bailly and the Shipman, both of whom spoke the feelings of the other pilgrims; finally, when his turn came to speak, he spoke outright, with no inhibitions, using every rhetorical device he knew. Irony came naturally to this priest in these circumstances. Let the chips fall where they may, he would speak the truth. If, on occasion of his next sermon, only a few had the patience and virtue to listen to him, he was not particularly disturbed or bothered, for he knew he was preaching God's word as long as he spoke the truth. If fear of pain keeps some people away from the doctor, that is not the doc-

²⁶ Ibid., A 507-523.

²⁷ Ibid., A 524-528

tor's fault. Such fear to learn the truth. The Parson felt the same way about his congregation. He spoke the truth. The people were free to listen or not.

Considering the Parson as Chaucer has portrayed him and the circumstances in which he has placed him, we readily see how spontaneously the ironic follows as a vital and necessary part of his speech. He is preaching to sinners of the medieval world. Irony, then, far from being incongruous in the character of the Parson, flowed as a natural consequence as well by reason of his office and position as from the circumstances in which he found himself.

On the other hand, were the Parson a sophisticate, would he be expected to be as ironical as he actually is in his sermon? Would he not rather be expected to sugar-coat his words and soften or water down the truth, so as not to appear in the eyes of the congregation the pious, devout, simple man he was? The sophisticated preacher is the full-blown pulpit orator, who cares nothing about anything or anybody, except his own reputation as a great speaker and profound philosopher. According to him, his main task is not to speak the truth, condemn sin, console the sinner, and help him return to the wholesome practice of his faith. It is, rather, to exhibit his own powers of eloquence to the congregation, who he believes have come merely to listen.

to him and wrap themselves in wondering admiration at his eloquence. The sophisticated preacher is the worldly-wise cleric who plays to the audience and preaches for himself and his own good, not for God and the good of his neighbour. Irony is a quality too simple and plain for the sophisticated preacher. Were he to use irony, he might hurt some of his unvirtuous, but generous and wealthy friends; he might lose some of his congregation who are most enthusiastic about him as long as he does not bore them with piety or frighten them with truth. For, the truth occasionally can and does hurt; especially does it hurt the sinner. The sophisticated preacher has his reputation at stake when he preaches, but no so the poor Parson. The Parson was not such a pulpit orator.

Consequently, with the hard sayings of truth and the simple tones of piety cast in his own ironic form, the Parson, with true love of his people animating and motivating every word he uttered, steps down from his pulpit, smiling and happy because he has served God and his fellowmen. True, the Parson cannot abide sin; he hates it! But, like his Divine Model, Jesus Christ he loves the sinner, while at the same time hating his sin. The ironic preacher can do this; the cynical preacher cannot. The sophisticated preacher could not act the way the Parson acts. If and when the sophisticated preacher does condemn sin vehemently, he immediately identifies sin and sinner. For the sophisticated

preacher fails to make the necessary simple distinction. In place of irony, the sophisticated preacher substitutes a condescending cynicism, and nothing is more prone to drive away a repentant and sorrowful sinner than cynicism.

The cynic cannot laugh at man's foibles, at the quirks of human nature. Probably this is because the cynic sees them in himself, and he does not enjoy a laugh where he is the subject of the laughter. Therefore, the cynic finds it hard to forgive people; he finds it difficult to overlook the faults of his fellow-men. The ironic person casts his laughing barbs at human nature with an instinctive skill both spontaneous and natural. The cynic becomes bitter and swings his stinging verbal lash at every poor sinner in sight, though he never thinks of lashing himself, sinner that he may be. In the Canterbury Tales the harsh cynical type may be contrasted with the mellow, yet firm, ironical type, by placing the Pardoner and the Parson side by side. Ironically enough too, both of these pilgrim-clerics preach sermons in the course of the journey.

But, while irony is a natural quality of the Parson's words, is the Parson himself an ironical character? Does Chaucer find in the Parson's personality scope for the ironic? A necessary distinction must be made, if we are to understand the irony of the Parson's character. That he is directly and positively an ironic character is denied; that he is indirectly and negatively

an ironic character is more accurate. Perhaps the words of Muriel Bowden, who comments briefly and precisely on this point, will clarify what we mean by indirectly and negatively.

Chaucer's Parson, like his Knight, is an idealized conception. In it there is none of the satire which sharpens nearly all the other portraits, unless we concern ourselves with what the Parson is not.²⁸

Omitting any discussion regarding the Parson as an "idealized conception," Miss Bowden's analysis comes close to the truth, for it is Chaucer's emphasis on what the Parson is not, that makes for the subtle and implicit irony found in the portrayal of his character.

Since Chaucer is a man of his time, he could not overlook the contrast between the foibles and virtues of the clergy. The Lollard movement under the reformer Wycliff sufficiently indicates that many clerics were not living up to the ideals of the clerical state. However, Chaucer, instead of directly satirising the worldly parson, represents for the reader in his place a man who does not do the things that other clerics were accustomed to do. In this manner some clever irony of character results, irony subtle and elusive if the reader is not alert for it. Legouis calls attention to this quality of indirectness in the irony here when he says,

²⁸ Muriel Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, New York, 1948, 230.

The village Parson, whose noble personality is made up of negations and abstentions; he did not excommunicate those who refused to pay him their tithes; nothing could prevent him from visiting his poorest parishoners; he did not do himself what he forbade others to do; he did not forsake his flock in order to go to London, and so forth. In these praises given to one man are contained reproaches for hundreds of others.²⁹

The irony here is brought out by contrast. Chaucer has contrasted the character of the Parson with clerics in general and with other ecclesiastical figures on the pilgrimage in particular. Notable contrast may be observed when Chaucer places Pardoner alongside Parson. Here the poet has found ample scope for irony, subtle and indirect. The lines of the picture Chaucer has painted are broad enough however; nothing need be interpolated to perceive the irony clearly. But the broad lines of the picture will be overlooked, if the characters of these two Churchmen, Pardoner and Parson, are viewed at too close range. For Chaucer does not seem directly to satirize. Legouis explains this,

But there are so many delicate shades between the brutal revelations made by the Pardoner and the imperceptible irony, which accompanies the enumeration of the Parson's virtues, that reality itself could not boast of greater variety.³⁰

A qualification, however, may be made here regarding this very point. The shades, while delicate, seem to be obvious, and it is this very obviousness that effects the subtlety. That is, the

29 Legouis, Chaucer, 156.

30 Ibid., 156.

Pardoner is so manifestly the direct antithesis of the Parson, that no one would even bother to consider any irony in a comparison of them. The fact that the unwary reader is inclined to overlook this touch of irony makes it all the more artful and typically Chaucerian.

Therefore, irony is present in the Parson's character, which irony definitely contributes to the realism of his person, his character and his sermon. The chief source of this irony we saw was the indirect contrast between the Parson and other clerics, notably the Pardoner. But, in order that irony be more clearly understood to be the point d'appui of the realism of the Parson's sermon, attention is now focused on Chaucer himself. We turn now to the function of irony from the author's viewpoint.

4. Irony from the Standpoint of Chaucer

Certain reasons and arguments may be advanced regarding irony from Chaucer's point of view, so that the realism of "The Parson's Tale" may be accurately observed and understood. To do this completely, necessitates a brief study of the place irony and realism hold in the Canterbury Tales as a whole, then in "The Parson's Tale" in particular, and, finally, in Chaucer's personality.

First, regarding the Canterbury Tales as a whole, we must remember that they were a picture of medieval England, and

a good one at that. They are the first realistic pictures of England still extant. Other writers of the period, notably Langland, the alleged author of the Vision of Piers, gave the world of letters bitter satires on the economic, social, and political situation in England at this time. Only Chaucer, however, has left literature a real picture of medieval England as a whole. Now a true picture, a realistic picture, if it is to be at all trustworthy, must accurately represent the foibles and charming qualities, the virtues and vices of people. Such a picture will, then, be a conspectus of the whole, not merely of one part. To paint the whole picture Chaucer had to be real. To be real he had to include everything that contributes to the whole character of a person. This meant vices, virtues, quirks, foibles, etc. Chaucer could not be realistic, and at the same time omit any one of these factors of a man's personality.

Since Chaucer could chuckle at himself, as well as at his fellowmen, he found in these contrasting quirks and vices a source of ironic humour. He would not, however, rant and rave about sin; he would not condemn the sinner; he would not pessimistically and ceaselessly deplore this sin or that abuse; he would not be a social or political satirist waving the banner of reform and brandishing the sword of righteousness in the face of any and all evil. True, Chaucer, through his Parson, has some scathing remarks to make about sin and sinners. But he never

loses himself in sin. He ever looks at the whole picture of the whole man. Chaucer is always able to manage a smile. In "The Parson's Tale" Chaucer is definitely ironic, but never is he bitterly satirical, as was his contemporary master of social and political satire, Langland. Chaucer primarily portrayed mankind. The irony seems to be but a natural property of his portrayal, for irony is inherent in man's life. Regarding his portrayal of mankind in medieval England, Legouis remarks quite well:

His group of pilgrims constitutes a picture of the society of his time,...Except for royalty and great nobles on the one hand, and the lowest ragamuffins on the other, two extremes unlikely to meet in any company, he has painted in brief practically the whole English nation.³¹

Chaucer certainly was natural; he was real. And he could not help but be ironic if he was both natural and real. Chaucer drew on his daily experience with men and their habits. As was remarked recently in the literary supplement of the London Times, "He was the one who knew many men and many cities." And with this knowledge as a basis he wrote his tales of the pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, ever mindful of the little ironies that occur in the everyday life of these "men" in these "cities."

The fact that Chaucer could smile good humoredly at mankind as he found it, contributes not a little to the fine balance of mind noticed in his writings. There is an excellent

31 Ibid., 143.

blend of extremes contained in them, and nowhere do we find this more truly exemplified than in his Canterbury Tales, wherein Chaucer pictures for his readers, in his own subtle, ironic style, the people of his England. Is it not a remarkable thing that the sins and foibles of men, about which he wrote in "The Parson's Tale," did not make him sour and bitter about life, make him feel sorry for himself, make him thoroughly disgusted with people? It was his saving sense of humour, his ability to appreciate in a humorous way those ironies inherent in daily living that made him the great poetic realist he is. Kittredge points this fact out when he comments on Chaucer's balance,

He saw the irony of circumstance, of fate, or what you will, pervading human life, as no articulate-speaking man has ever seen it before or since. ... This divine gift of humour preserved him from the abject vice of self-pity. He had too sound a nature to "thank whatever gods there were for his indomitable soul."³²

One thorough reading of the "General Prologue" to the Tales is sufficient to convince a reader that Chaucer is realistic. If he is realistic, irony naturally follows. Thus, if Chaucer intended to present a true picture—and is there any reason to suspect he did not?—irony had to be used, otherwise he would have fallen into the deplorable state of excessive moralizing, mere empty preaching, or raving against abuses in a more or less general way.

eral way.

In "The Parson's Tale" Chaucer used irony chiefly to remain consistent, to be realistic. As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, he had both an historical tradition of irony and the custom of the day in preaching to bear in mind when he wrote the Parson's sermon. Filled as the sermons of the day were with irony, satire, and complaint, he too would have his Parson speak in the common ecclesiastical parlance, if his Parson was to be realistic.

In this chapter reasons have been advanced for the function of irony from the historical standpoint, the practical literary standpoint, from the character of the Parson, and from the viewpoint of the poet. Proofs were advanced to show that irony forms the basis, is the touchstone from which the realism of this tale and of the whole Tales springs. There remains now but one point still to be proved, that is, the matter of irony and unity between "The Parson's Tale," and the tales of the other pilgrims. This will be the task of the following chapter.

CHAPTER V

IRONY, BOND OF INTRINSIC UNITY BETWEEN "THE PARSON'S TALE" AND THE TALES OF THE OTHER PILGRIMS

The main question to be answered in this chapter has already been put to Chaucer readers by Adolphus Ward when he asks the following about "The Parson's Tale":

Is it to be looked upon as an integral part of the collection; and if so, what general and what personal significance should be attached to it?¹

The contention throughout this thesis has been that not only is the humble Parson's sermon an integral part of the Canterbury collection, but also that without this sermon and its basic realistic irony with self-reform as its purpose, the Tales would lack something very necessary. This latter point will be observed more particularly now. An explanation of the significance of a quotation from G.G.Sedgwick's Of Irony, Especially in Drama, will clarify our intention in this chapter. Sedgwick remarks:

¹ Adolphus Ward, Chaucer, New York, 1880, 133.

Ambiguous speech, let me repeat, is not necessary to the ironic effect....One use of irony is always the same: it points the significance of the situation, it brings the conflict of dramatic forces into clearer view, it heightens the sense of pity and fear.²

Now, mutatis mutandis, regarding the irony of "The Parson's Tale," this description of the effects of irony is quite accurate. For, when the ironic element is considered as the unifying link between this tale and the remaining tales, the significance of the Parson's sermon is seen in clearer perspective; the intrinsic unity between his words and those of his fellow pilgrims is made more obvious; finally, the real value of "The Parson's Tale" is made more easily perceptible.

Attention should be called to the fact that, as Kittredge says, the Tales are not "mere monologues, but are addressed to all the other personages."³ Therefore, the situation in which Chaucer places the Parson gives him wide scope for the employment of irony in his speech. He is addressing a pilgrimage. Now what precisely is the purpose of such a pilgrimage as this one to the shrine of St. Thomas a Becket at Canterbury? Ultimately the purpose is twofold: first, to repent of sin committed, and second, to resolve adamantly and firmly never to sin again deliberately. Sorrow for sin, therefore, is among the primary requisites of a

2 Gerard Sedgwick, Of Irony, Especially in Drama, Toronto, Canada, 1935, 53-54.

3 Kittredge, Chaucer's Poetry, 155.

pilgrimage. But, in order to be sorry for sin, the sinner must first examine his conscience to learn exactly where and how he has sinned. Here is the Parson's logical position among the pilgrims wending their way to Canterbury.

While listening to the pilgrims' tales, the Parson heard many open confessions of sins, all of which may be categorized under one or other of the Seven Deadly Sins. In his sermon the Parson reiterates these sins, gives concrete examples of them, warns the pilgrims against their intrinsic evil, and offers them practical aids to keep themselves free of these sins in the future. Naturally, since the Parson is speaking theoretically on the sins which were manifestly the sins of the pilgrims, and since the same people openly confessed these sins were right at his side during his sermon, what more natural quality of preaching should we expect the Parson to use in his sermon than irony? This is just the rhetorical garment in which the Parson cloaks his words.

Into this ironic pattern of the sermon is woven the "theory" as preached against the Seven Deadly Sins, a theory which had practical manifestations in one form or other in each pilgrim's tale. The Parson finds matter for his tale in the pilgrims' words and in their characters. And this, perhaps, without their suspecting it.

An excerpt from an article by Frederick Tupper was quoted above as offering a more accurate critique of "The Parson's Tale" than did most critics' opinions. This excerpt is repeated here for convenience sake.

Is it a thought too bold that this last of the Tales is not a thing apart, but closely connected with all these stories that have plundered it so freely? The Parson's Tale—in some earlier form perhaps—was certainly before Chaucer when he wrote many of his Sins' narratives. Of that relation we have just had ample evidence. Why is it then unreasonable to suppose that Chaucer had in mind the other tales when he finally conducted the Parson through his homily against the Vices they illustrate? To me the conclusion seems unavoidable that this division of the Parson's sermon is but the culminating of the frequently recurring motif of the Seven Deadly Sins.⁴

This argument of Tupper coincides with what was mentioned about the Parson having his material at hand when he started to tell his tale. Throughout the telling of the tales by the other pilgrims, in the general description of the pilgrims by the poet, and in the head and end links there were self-accusations in one form or other; sins were publicly proclaimed by the pilgrims themselves, and defects of character were deftly drawn by Chaucer. The Parson had this ready-to-hand when he began his sermon.

However excellent Tupper's observation is, it fails to go far enough. His conclusion omits mention of the cause of the unity, the real force uniting the Parson's words with the con-

⁴ Tupper, "Chaucer and the Seven Sins," 116-117.

fessions and portrayals of the pilgrims. This unifying factor that links the Parson's words with the tales of his fellow pilgrims is irony. For, in this situation, if the Parson would treat the Seven Deadly Sins, he naturally could not help slip in little ironic touches as he spoke.

Chaucer, therefore, maintains the unity of the Tales by subtle ironic implications in "The Parson's Tale," which in view of its irony, is definitely a very vital part of the Tales and not a mere pious addition nor devout retraction.

This subtle ironic touch of Chaucer is as perceptible in "The Parson's Tale" as it is in the other tales. However, the ironic link between "The Parson's Tale" and the other tales is frequently overlooked. Consequently, that this irony be more clearly observed, we will select a pilgrim, either because of Chaucer's description or because of the pilgrim's own confession, as representative of one of the Seven Deadly Sins. After his character and predominant fault have been briefly considered, the words of the Parson regarding this particular sin will be given. This study will clarify the ironic bond between the Parson's sermon and the other tales.

A. Pride and the Monk

The deadly sin of pride is exemplified by many of the pilgrims, but it is especially prominent in the Monk, about whom

In the "General Prologue" Chaucer says,

The reule of Seint Maure or of Seint Benoit
 By cause that it was old and sondeil streit
 This like Monk leet olde thynges pace
 And heeld after the newe world the space⁵

Pride is generally the primary and fundamental reason why a monk fails to follow the pristine rule of his order. So it is with this Monk. After some years in religion he believes the rule and monastery regulations old-fashioned, out-of-date. Consequently, the Monk chooses to live according to his own will. Pride, an unwillingness to submit his will, is the source of his discontent.

A monk's proud heart is further manifested in an unwillingness to join in any common effort or community project. He loathes tedious study and hard manual labor. The Canterbury pilgrim Monk is such a person.

What sholde he studie and make hym seluen wood
 vpon a book in cloystre alwey to poure
 Or swynken with his handes and laboure
 As Austyn bit How shal the world be serued
 Lat Austyn haue his swynk to hym reserued⁶

This brief description of the Monk's ideals of the religious life presents the reader with a subtle heresy. The proud, worldly Monk asks how the neighbor can possible be helped, if monks are content to stay working in their fields, tilling the soil, and in their cells reading or studying, wasting their time. This is the

⁵ Chaucer, "General Prologue," A 173-176

⁶ Ibid., A 184-188.

forerunner of the heresy of action, so prominent in modern times that Bishops have written letters warning of its danger to the true spirit of religious life. This heresy was present to some extent even in Chaucer's day.

Truly, as Chaucer says, the monk out of his cloister is "likned til a fissh that is waterlees."⁷ If the Monk was humble, he would certainly submit to the little privations and duties imposed on him by his rule of enclosure. However, the Monk's pride is much too strong to admit this restraint. His nature is different, is such that he must be abroad, riding about, hunting with his "bootes souple his hors in greet estat,"⁸ and with his grey fur that was the "fyneste of a lond," keeping him warm.⁹

This was the Monk whom the Parson observed during the ride to Canterbury. Imagine his thoughts when he considered the lofty Benedictine ideals and contrasted them with the reality of this Monk. Nor is the Parson alone among the pilgrims who notice the incongruity of the Monk's profession and his manner of living. Harry Bailly, standing aghast at this fish out of water, chides him saying,

Vp on my feith thow art som officer
Som worthy sexteyn or som celerer

7 Ibid., A 180.

8 Ibid., A 203.

9 Ibid., A 194

For by my fader soule as to my doom
 Thow art a maister when thou art at hom
 No poure cloistrer ne no novys
 But a gouernour wily and wys¹⁰

Surely no monk feels himself complimented, should a lay acquaintance tell him that he reminded him of anything but a monk. Yet, in so many words this is just what Harry Bailly tells the Monk.

An ironic situation arises in the Monk's tale, the main subject of which is the tragic fall of such great men as Satan, Adam, Samson. All these were undone and fell from their lofty state for one reason or other, but primarily because they were proud men. Consider the irony of a monk, whose obvious moral fault is pride, preaching a tale whose moral is the fall of proud men.

What will the Parson say to all this, when his turn comes to speak? Certainly he cannot possibly permit such an opportunity to pass without some few words of admonition and advice. Nor does he. A study of his sermon in the section De Superbia will prove enlightening. The Parson, after enumerating more than a dozen evils that spring from Pride, takes each evil, considers it, and briefly exemplifies it. See him looking straight into the worldly face of the Monk when he says,

Inobedient is he that desobeieth for despit to the
 commandements of god and to hise souereyne and to

his goostly fader/11

If the Monk was attentively listening to these words, he surely must have felt a little prick at his conscience, since he was far from being a model of religious obedience. Again, the Monk might well profit by considering this barb:

Ypoocrite is he that hideth to shewe hym swich as
he is and sheweth hym swich as he nocht is/12

That the Monk dresses in religious garb—and this is open to question—is no sign of his true inner disposition. Just because he received the habit does not necessarily signify he is near canonization. As a matter of plain fact, the Monk's interests lie more in worldly affairs outside the monastery, than in the humble work behind cloistered walls. Clothes might make the man, but the habit hardly makes the monk.

Mention was made of the Monk's dress, how ostentatious it was for a man professing to share a poverty in common with his religious brothers. In his words on the external manifestation of pride the Parson speaks in bold language. Superfluous dress, he says, is a clear indication of a proud person. How neatly the Parson could have delivered these words with one eye cast on the ornate garb of that Monk, who had bound himself by vow to perpet-

11 Chaucer, "The Parson's Tale," I 392.

12 Ibid., I, 394.

ual poverty.¹³

The Parson mentions how physical fitness and bodily health influence man's pride and vanity. He reminds the pilgrims that the "flessh is a ful greet enemy to the soule and therefore the moere that the body is hool the moere be we in peril to falle/¹⁴

Since the Parson's admonitions on pride are easily directed to the pilgrim Monk, we readily see that the Parson's sly ironic barbs form the basis for the link between the Parson's sermon and the other Tales.

2. Sloth and the Friar

Sloth is a distinguishing feature of certain Canterbury pilgrims. Perhaps the best example among the slothful pilgrims is Hubert the Friar, a mendicant whom the Parson addresses in his words De Accidia. But before any consideration of the Parson's words is undertaken, a study of the Friar will be helpful. Once Hubert's character is known, the irony in the Parson's words will be more clearly observed.

The chief occupation of the poor mendicant was begging.

13 Cf. Ibid., I 409-421.

14 Ibid., I 458.

His task was to go among the people and seek alms both for the monastery and for the poor. But, unlike a good, zealous friar, eager to work for his brothers in religion and for the poor in the world, this "wantowne and merye" Friar was more inclined to spend his time in the local pubs and seek out wealthy friends for large donations rather than beg from the doors of the middle class people. A scathing, almost bitter, reproach is uttered by Chaucer against the Friar:

He knew the tauernes wel in euery toun
 And euery hostiler and tappestere
 Bet than a lazar or a beggestere
 For vn to swich a worthy man as he
 Accorded hat as by his facultee
 To haue with sike lazars aquentaunce
 It is nat honeste it may nat auauce
 For to declen with ná swich poraille
 But al with riche and selleres of vitaille
 And ouer al ther as profit sholde arise
 Curteys he was and lowely of seruyse¹⁵

The Friar was evidently a clever politician looking for an easy way of scaling the ladder of life. For, if no one pushed him up the ladder, he would have to climb it himself. This meant work, something totally foreign to the Friar.

Two little lines in the "General Prologue" indicate other slothful characteristics of the Friar. The first is:

In alle the ordres foure is noon that kan
 So muche of daliaunce and fair langagel¹⁶

15 Chaucer, "General Prologue," A 240-250.

16 Ibid., A 210-211.

This is Chaucer's quaint manner of saying that the Friar was about the best gossip in all four mendicant orders, a dubious honor by anyone's standards. This unenviable title indicates the Friar wasted a lot of time, and no one is more injurious to a religious institution than a person who wastes both his own time and the time of his brothers by gossiping. The source of this fault was doubtless the ingrained sloth of the Friar. For, if he did not gossip, he had to work. It was a simple case of one or the other. And hard work and the Friar were not very close companions.

"He was an esy man to yeue penaunce," says Chaucer.¹⁷ There is one ultimate reason why a confessor is too easy on his penitents, in the sense that Chaucer means "esy." By "esy" is not understood a kind, merciful, understanding confessor. Rather, "esy" means a sort of complacent, indifferent, disinterested attitude toward the penitent, which a confessor can in some situations manifest.

Obviously the Friar was "esy" because he was a complacent, self-satisfied priest, who had an interest in the penitent, only if he or she had a good-sized alms for him. In one sense he was "esy," because of his disinterestedness; in the other sense he was "esy," because he preferred an alms made easily rather

17 Ibid., A 223.

than one which involved some effort on his part.

Ironically enough, the Friar relates blandly the faults of a certain summoner, of which faults he himself is guilty. How ironic it is for the worldly, loose-living Friar to speak contemptuously of someone's "harlotrye" and to comment disdainfully on a church official who had "wenches at his retinue."¹⁸

What has the Parson to say about such a slothful Friar? "Certes this is a dampnable synne," he says, "for it dooth wrong to Iesu Crist with alle diligence."¹⁹ Imagine the Parson staring at the Friar when he spoke these words. Consider the strong irony in these words of the Parson. The Friar after all had bound himself to Christ's service very specially, and now, by his sloth, was going back on his word.

The negligent, disinterested attitude of the Friar was mentioned above. When the Parson speaks about negligence in performing one's duty, he uses a clever figure.

And how that Ignoraunce be moder of alle harm
certes Necligence is the norice/ Necligence ne
dooth no fors when he shal doon a thyng wheither he
do it wel or baddely/²⁰

The impression which the reader takes from the description of the

¹⁸ Chaucer, "The Friar's Tale," D 1323 and 1355.

¹⁹ Chaucer, "The Parson's Tale," I 679.

²⁰ Ibid., I 710-711.

Friar in the "General Prologue" is certainly that of a negligent priest, caring more for idle chatter than for his ministry. The Parson is not slow to reprimand such an habitual disposition.

Hubert the Friar was a lazy man. Although he was a pillar of the community and a provider for his brothers, yet he failed as a monk and priest. While he did much to support his monastery, still he should have been observing his rule much better than he was. At least his effort could have been stronger. Hubert, abandoning the lower classes of society, takes up his life of comparative ease among the wealthy. He was literally like the "newe shepherdes that leten hir sheep wityngly go renne to the wolf that is in the breres."²¹ Perhaps the Parson's figure of the shepherd and the sheep was meant to bring home the idea to the Friar that his model, Jesus Christ, was in every sense of the word a good shepherd who guarded his sheep. This model lived that the Friar might imitate Him. By directing his words on sloth to the Friar especially, the Parson tries to bring the Friar to his senses.

3. Avarice and the Merchant

Although Chaucer says quite clearly that he cannot recall his name, yet some indication of the avaricious character of

²¹ Ibid., I 721.

the pilgrim-Merchant is given the reader in the "General Prologue." The poet says of him, "Wel koude he in eschaunge sheelde selle."²² That is to say, the Merchant defies civil law by dealing in foreign exchange. In fourteenth century England laws were enacted which forbade private commerce in exchange. However, unscrupulous merchants paid little heed to such edicts as this and carried on quite a thriving, albeit illegal, trade in foreign money. In this eschaunge of the Merchant we note the vice of avarice, and it was this avaricious spirit that led the Merchant on to engage in such illegal traffic.

Two lines in the "General Prologue" serve to elucidate the fact that the Merchant is a most covetous individual.

So estatly was he of his gouernaunce
With his bargaynes and with his cheyysaunce.²³

This "cheyysaunce" was nothing but lending money at a good interest, and, from the tone indicated by Chaucer, this was synonymous with the sin of usury, that is, taking money far in excess of the amount lent. As G. G. Coulton remarks in his Medieval Panorama, "cheyysaunce" was a sort of "black market" system of money lending set up by avaricious, greedy merchants, when they could not legally demand money over and above the amount they had lent.²⁴
someone.²⁴

22 Chaucer, "General Prologue," A 278.

23 Ibid., A 282-283.

24 G.G.Coulton, Medieval Panorama, Cambridge, 1939, 335.

The Merchant's avaricious spirit is most explicit in the "General Prologue." What then does the Parson have to say to him? Beginning with a quotation from Saint Paul, "The love of money is the root of all evil," the Parson then elaborates on the matter.²⁴

The Parson reminds the Merchant that in his eagerness for wealth he has forgotten God and his neighbor. "The auaricious man hath moore hope in his catel," he says, "than in Iesu Crist and dooth moore orseruance in keynyge of his tresor than he dooth to the seruyse of Iesu Crist."²⁵ Indeed, the Parson was correct, for the very impression that the Merchant leaves with the reader is that he is too sophisticated to think of God, and too busy to give time to his religious duties. His illegal dealings indicate that money alone holds his interest. The picture of the dignified man of the business world sitting "hye on hors" with his "Flaundryssh beuer hat" on his head and with his "bootes clasped faire and fetisly" are indications of the Merchant's self-esteem.²⁶ The Merchant's words bespeak a self-centered individual, an avaricious medieval swindler, who "spak ful solempnely Sownynge alwey thencess of his wynng."²⁷ His business and himself, there were always uppermost in his mind.

25 Chaucer, "The Parson's Tale," I 747.

26 Chaucer, "General Prologue," A 271-273.

27 Ibid., A 274-275.

We mentioned the Merchant's practice of "cheysaunce". As a remedy for this vice, the Parson advises mercy, not for the Merchant, but for the poor borrower. One of the specific manifestations of mercy, he says, is to lend. Another is reasonable largess. Both these virtues, sadly lacking in the Merchant, if practiced by him, would bring about the desired conversion.

The Parson gives an ironic twist to the words he directs to the Merchant and other avaricious souls.

But soothly here bihoueth the consideracioun of the grace of Iesu Crist and of hise temporel goodes and eek of the goodes perdurables that Crist yaf vs/ and eek to han remembrance of the deeth that he shal receyue he noot whanne and eek that he shal forgoon al that he hath saue oonly that he hath depended in goode werkes/28

4. Gluttony and the Franklin

The Parson spends very little time on gluttony in his sermon. There is, doubtless, a reason for his brevity of treatment. His omission of a longer exposition can be explained by the fact that he already has inveighed against vices and sins, the practice of which either leads to or springs from overindulgence in food and drink. This is nothing more than Gula, the yielding to the immoderate desire for food and drink.

Among the pilgrims there is one who seems particularly

given over to excessive indulgence in this matter. His god is his belly. The pilgrim is the Franklin. In the "General Prologue" Chaucer summarizes the sensual character of this gourmand and his philosophy of life.

Wel loued he by the morwe a sop in wyn
 To lyuen in delyt was suere his wone
 For he was Epicurus owene sone
 That heeld opynyoun that pleyn delit
 Was verray felicitee parfit.²⁹

Thus, for the Franklin, true happiness was complete, perfect, and real if delight was contained therein, that is, some sensual delight. Chaucer continues his description of the customs of this bon vivant:

His breed, his ale was always after con
 A bettre envyned man was neuere noon
 Withoute cake mete was neuere his hous
 Of fissh and flessh and that so plenteuous
 It snewed in his hous of mere and drynke
 Of alle deyntees that men koude thynke³⁰

From this description Chaucer cleverly portrays the Franklin to be a man who loves extraordinary bounties of the table. Delicacies were the ordinary fare for him. These lines are clearly sufficient for the reader to grasp the type person the Franklin is. Chaucer, however, that he might depict this sensual vice more explicitly, descends to further minutiae of the Franklin's character when he says:

After the sondry sesons of the year

29 Chaucer, "General Prologue," A 334-338.

30 Ibid., A 341-346.

So chaunged he his mete and his soper
 Ful many a breem and many a luce in stuwe
 No was his cook but if his sauce were
 Poynaunt and sharp and redy al his geere
 His table dormaunt in his halle alway
 Stood redy couered al the longe day³¹

Obviously Chaucer desires to place before the reader's eye a gluttonous Franklin, grievously committing one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

The Parson explains in his brief treatment De Gula,

He that is vaunt to this synne of glotnye he ne
 may no synne withstonde he moot ben in seruage of
 alle vices for it is the deuyles hoord ther he
 hideth hym and resteth/³²

The Parson, while not entirely despairing of the glutton, expresses a severe mind on the matter. Gluttony is just about as far down on the ladder of vice as a man can step. Yet, how common the sin of gluttony is! The Parson, to all appearances, then, might consider some other vice more fundamental than gluttony to be the root of a gourmand's sin, for instance pride or sensuality. Therefore, even if gluttony might externally be a more manifest common evil, still an interior pride or sensuality is frequently the raison d'être of its existence in a person.

However, although the Parson is cursory in his treatment of the sin of gluttony, still there are several verbal lash-

31 Ibid., A 347-354.

32 Chaucer, "The Parson's Tale," I 921.

es cracked at the sensual pilgrims, notably the Franklin. The Parson distinguishes five species of gluttony, four of which can easily apply to the Franklin. These are:

The firste is for to ete biforn tyme to ete. The seconde is whan a man gete hym to delicat mete or drynke/ The thridde is what men taken to mucche ouer mesurs. The fourthe is curiositee with greet entente to maken and apparailen his mete. The fifthe is for to eten to gredily/33

From what we read in the "General Prologue" the Franklin was guilty of the first four species of gluttony, and, although nothing explicit was said about his eating too greedily, nevertheless to picture the Franklin eating and drinking with much gusto is not too difficult a phantasm to form in one's imagination.

The Parson refers to these five species of gluttony as the five fingers of the Devil's hand, by which he draws people into sin. This is a picturesque way of warning the Franklin that he had better watch out because the Devil has a pretty good grip on his soul and will throw him into hell, inless he his way of life.

Whether or not the Franklin understood the Parson does not enter into the picture. The fact remains that, when the Parson spoke out, the Franklin was nearby, and the Parson's fiery irony came naturally in his proclamation against the Franklin's sin. This conclusion may well be drawn, because ironically

enough this very same Franklin says to the Squire, "Fy on possessioun But if a man be vertuous with al."³⁴ And yet, who literally possessed more of the fruits of the earth and seemed to give least thought to the acquiring of solid virtue, than the gluttonous Franklin?

b. Anger, Envy and the Pilgrims

Two altercations between Canterbury pilgrims, which occur in the links, serve to exemplify and illustrate the sins of anger and envy. In the dispute between the Summoner and the Friar the old clerical war is brought to the fore. Both groups were envious of the other group's privileges. Naturally, when a member of each grade should be brought together under the banner of a pilgrimage, an opportunity is evidently furnished the two to express their differences.

Anger is the manifest sin in the quarrel between Oswald and Robin, the Reeve and the Miller. The prevailing peace of the pilgrimage is disturbed as Reeve and Miller clash as a result of the tales each tells about the other's trade.

A consideration of these two incidents will be both interesting and profitable for our study, especially since both Deadly Sins are motivating forces in these two altercations, and

34 Chaucer, "Squire-Franklin Link," F 686-687.

because the Parson says some scathing words on the matter.

Immediately after the Wife of Bath's lengthy prologue the Friar speaks out, "Now dame so haue I loye or blis This is a long preamble of a tale."³⁵ That the Summoner was any more pleased with Alice's long, drawn-out introduction than was the Friar, seems dubious. However, he spies an opportunity for admonishing Hubert and making some uncomplimentary remarks at the friars in general. Thus, when he declaims against the doorish interruption of the Friar, it is rather obvious to one and all that the Summoner is merely igniting another spark in the fiery quarrel that exists potentially between them. Hear him say,

Lo goddes armes two
 A frere wol entremette hym euere mo
 Loo goode men a flye and eek a frere
 Wol falle in euery dyssh and matere
 What spekestow of preambulacioun
 What amble or trotte or pees or go sit down
 Thow lettest oure disport in this manere³⁶

The fires of wrath are now enkindled as the Friar, taking up what the Summoner has started, answers:

Ye woltow so sir somnour
 Now by my feith I shal er that I go
 Telle of a somnour swich a tale or two
 That al the folk shal laughen in this place³⁷

35 Chaucer, "Wife of Bath's Prologue," D 830-831.

36 Ibid., D 835-839.

37 Ibid., D 840-843.

The Friar's threat falls on deaf ears and fails to stir the Summoner, save to make him more adamant in his convictions against Brother Hubert and all he stands for. The Summoner retorts,

Now elles frere I wol bishrewe thy face
 ...and I bishrewe thy face
 But if I telle tales two or three
 Of freres er I come to Sydyggeborne
 That I shal make thyn hefte for to morne
 For wel I woot thy pacience is gon.³⁸

Finally, the Host interrupts the petty quarrel and puts an end to the disedifying spectacle, which joins two representatives of religion in a childish argument.

Why was it that such a little affair as the comment on the verbosity of the Wife of Bath's introduction sufficed to rouse the tempers of the Friar and Summoner? Consideration of the existing rancour in the hearts of friars and summoners for each other supplies the answer. For, at the root of this altercation was a deep-seated envy for each other's position.

The Friar was a religious dedicated to active service of God in the world; the monks were religious who spent their whole lives in the cloister and who spent their day in holy contemplation rather than in external works. The Summoner was not a cleric, but a minor Church official, connected with the ecclesiastical courts. The chief and most important occupation of the summoner was to bear a court summons from the ecclesiastical court

to the person cited to appear. However, according to Dr. L.A. Haselmayer, the summoner soon became a kind of "criminal investigator" for the bishop or archbishop, the two presiding officials of the ecclesiastical courts. His remuneration for this service was a percentage of what he collected in fines for the courts.³⁹

Obviously such a system clears the path for extortion and leaves the way open for graft, especially when the sins for which a person could be tried for excommunication were quite general: non-payment of tithes, sacrilege, slander, arson, theft, heresy, usury, etc. John Myre explains this quite well in his book Instructions for Parish Priests.⁴⁰

Naturally the Summoner knew the sins of many people. He had the power, in a sense, to obtain a light penance for these people, should he decide to represent the case in a milder way than what it actually was. His decision to act in this manner ultimately rested on how much money was forthcoming from the person involved. With these factors in mind, Chaucer's remarks about the Summoner are seen in their true light.

He wolde suffre for a quart of wyn
 A good felawe to haue his concubyn
 A twelf monthe and excuse hym atte fulle
 Ful pryuely a fynch eek koude he pulle

³⁹ Louis A. Haselmayer, "The Apparitor and Chaucer's Summoner," Speculum, XII, 1937, 56.

⁴⁰ John Myre, Instructions for Parish Priests, ed. Edward Peachok, London, 1868, (E.E.T.S., O.S. 31).

And if he found owher a good felawe
 He wolde techen to haue noon awe
 In swich caas of the ercedekenas curs
 But if a mannes soule were in his purs
 For in his purs he sholde ypunysshed be⁴¹

We saw previously that the Friar not only was capable of accepting bribes, but also quite willing to do so. In this respect at least both Friar and Summoner were alike. This was one reason for their fight: each was envious of the other's ability and power, if such it be called, to extort the poor. But what intensified the Summoner's envy was the fact that the Friar could hear confessions of people, a faculty not granted to him. Thus he attacks the character of the Friar in his words following the prologue of the good Wife. Both of them attack each other by telling tales, the Friar about a summoner, the Summoner about friars.

To the rest of the pilgrims the patent jealousy and envy on the part of both Friar and Summoner was anything but uplifting, nor was it conducive to the general overall pious and devout spirit of the pilgrimage. Their outburst of anger certainly did not set well in the minds and hearts of the onlookers. Well, indeed, might the Parson preach a reform to these two ecclesiastical representatives. This is exactly what he does.

Envy springs by its very nature from malice, says the

⁴¹ Chaucer, "General Prologue," A 649-657.

Parson, and this is certainly true in the case of the Friar and the Summoner. The Parson mentions several points on which they both could profitably meditate. Both men sin by their grumbling and murmuring, manifestations of envy. The Parson reminds the pilgrims, especially the Summoner and Friar, that

And som tyme it (grumbling) sourdeth of enuye
whan men discoveren a mannes harm that was
pryuee or bereth hym on hond thyng that is fals/42

Both Friar and Summoner are guilty of both these failings, as we observed both in their altercations and in their tales. Each exposed and exaggerated the faults of the other, thereby relating falsehoods about each other. The Parson continues,

Som tyme it comth of ire or pryuee hate that nor-
isseth rancour in herthe as afterward I shal declare/43

Surely an unholy hate can be perceived by the reader of the Tales to be lodged in the hearts of Friar and Summoner for each other. The Parson warns them again thus:

Thanne comth accusynge as whan a man seketh occas-
ioun to anoyen his neighebores which that is lyk the
craft of the deuyl that waiteth bothe nyght and day
to accusen vs alle/44

Both Friar and Summoner seek occasion in their tales to offend each other, as they paint each other in a bad light before the other pilgrims. Besides this sin, the envious Summoner uncharit-

42 Chaucer, "The Parson's Tale," I 505.

43 Ibid., I 509.

44 Ibid., I 512.

ably indulges in some illicit ad hominem arguments against the Friar's practices.

That the Parson was more the mildly displeased with the envy manifested by these two, would seem to be true. For, immediately after his words on envy, he considers anger. The anger of both Friar and Summoner was clearly the external manifestation of the envy in their heart. This situation is in the Parson's mind as he makes his final telling comment:

After Enuye wol I discryuen the synne of Ire for
soothly who so hath enuye vp on his neighebores
anon he wole comunly fynde hym a matere of wratthe
in word or in dede agayns hym to whom he hath
enuye/45

Our attention now centers on the other altercation, that is the brief quarrel between Robin the Miller and Oswald the Reeve. Little comment is needed on this section immediately preceding the tale of the Miller. Chaucer has narrated it so clearly that the reader easily perceives the storm brewing in the hearts of both pilgrims. The Miller remarks,

For I wol telle a legende and a lyf
Both of a carpenter and of his wyf
How that a clerk hath set the wrightes cappe⁴⁶

The Reeve answers,

...Stynt thy clappe
Lat be thy lewed dronken harlotrye
It

⁴⁵ Ibid., I 533.

⁴⁶ Chaucer, "The Miller's Prologue," A 3141-3143.

It is a synne and eek a greet folye
 To speyren any man or hym defame
 And eek to bryngen wyues in swich fame
 Thow mayst ynow of othere thynges seyn⁴⁷

The Miller, replying to the Reeve with mock meekness, proceeds to tell his bawdy tale concerning a carpenter, the Reeve's trade. This annoys Oswald no end. The ribald fabliau, told with much enthusiasm on the Miller's part, ends to the accompanying laughter of all the pilgrims, save Oswald, who is quite angry. Such is his anger at this juncture that Chaucer remarks about him,

Ne at this tale I saugh no man hym greue
 But it were oonly Osewold the Reue
 Bycause he was of carpenteris craft
 A litel ire is in his herte ylaft
 He gan to gruoche and blamed it a lite⁴⁸

Now it is the Reeve's turn and he delivers a brief sermon to the assemblage, after which the Host chides him, telling him to forget preaching and tell his story, because they are only at Deptford and it is already half way to prime.

Thereupon Oswald's tone changes, reverting to some semblance of his former anger at the Miller. He reminds all that he will meet the Miller on his own ground, and trade him blow for blow.

For leueful is with force of showue
 This dronken millere hath ytold vs heer
 How that bigiled was a carpenter .

47 Ibid., A 3144-3149

48 Chaucer, "The Reeve's Prologue," A 3859-3863.

Perauventure in scorn for I am oon
 And by youre leue I shal hym quyte anon
 Right in his cherles termes wol I speke
 I pray to god his mekke mote to breke
 He kan wel in myn eye seen a stalke
 But in his owene he kan nocht seen a balke⁴⁹

And with this firm reminder to the pilgrims that the Miller has
 seen the mote in the Reeve's eye, while failing to observe the
 beam in his own, Oswald continues his ribald tale of John and
 Alain.

Certainly this portrayal of the ruffled tempers of
 Robin and Oswald was not a serious breach against the sin of anger.
 However, such impetuosity and rage as the two tradesmen displayed
 in the situation is contrary to the admirable virtue of patience.
 Such faults as Oswald and Robin represented in themselves must be
 known, confessed, and repented of, if the true spirit of the pil-
 grimage is to be maintained. Thus, though their anger might not
 be as scandalous to the assemblage nor as grievous an offense
 objectively as was the manifest anger of the Friar and the Sum-
 moner, who by their very profession were obliged to be exemplary
 in their virtue, still the Parson has the Reeve and the Miller in
 mind when he considers at some length this matter of anger.

This synne of ire after the discryuyng of Seint
 Augustyn is wikked wil to be auenged by word or
 by dede⁵⁰

49 Ibid., A 3911-3920.

50 Chaucer, "The Parson's Tale," I 535.

Thus, the Parson speaks directly to those who sin against patience. The Parson has in mind the Summoner, who avenged himself with an uncomplimentary tale about friars, intended for Brother Hubert. He is likewise thinking about the Reeve, whose crude fabliau about a miller is directed at the inebriated Robin. The Parson also recalls Brother Hubert, whose envy of the Summoner started the quarrel, and again about Robin, whose ribald story gave rise to the clash of tempers between himself and Oswald.

The Parson uses a vivid figure when he attempts to make his point clear to those whose quick, fiery tempers control their hearts. The Parson speaks about the devil's furnace forged with three evils. He says,

In this forseide deuyles fourneys ther forgen thre
shrewes Pride that ay bloweth and encreseth the
fyr by chidyng and wikked wordes/ thanne stant
Enuye and holdeth the hote iren vp on the herte
of man with a peire of longe toonges of long ran-
cour/ and thanne stant the synne of contumelie
of strif and cheeste and batereth and forgeth
by vileyns repreuynges/⁵¹

The irony is easily perceived by the reader, for the Parson has these four pilgrims in mind. This vivid figure is forceful enough to sober the drunken Miller, is simple enough to penetrate the mind of the unlettered Reeve, and is good enough a motive to appeal to the spiritually inclined hearts of the professional religious, the Friar and the Summoner.

51 Ibid., I 554-556.

Later on the Parson becomes more concrete and explicit. He condemns chiding and reproaching, of which the Friar, the Summoner, the Miller and the Reeve were all guilty. Recall the disgusting picture Chaucer paints of the Summoner in the "General Prologue." Again, consider the name calling in which the Friar indulges about the Summoner in the prologue to his own tale:

Pardee ye may wel knowe by the name
 That of a somnour may no good be sayd
 I praye that noon of you be yuel apayd
 A somnour is a rennere vp and down
 With mandementz for fornicacioun⁵²

This implies that the Summoner is a fornicator, liar, procurer, and any other disreputable title.

Again the Reeve in his reference to the Miller's state of inebriation call his fellow-pilgrim, "This dronken millere."⁵³ In their previous altercation the Reeve in his fit of rage had told the drunken Robin in uncomplimentary fashion, "Stynt thy clappe. Lat be thy lewed dronken harlotrye."⁵⁴

Against such boorish chiding the Parson speaks out, almost as if he had remembered verbatim the words of Hubert and Oswald.

Lat vs thanne speken of chidyng and reproche

⁵² Chaucer, "The Summoner's Prologue," D 1280-1284.

⁵³ Chaucer, "The Reeve's Prologue," A 3913.

⁵⁴ Ibid., A 3144-3145.

whiche ben ful grete woundes in mannes herte
 for they vnsowen the semes of frendshipe in
 mannes herte/...Now if he repreue hym vnchar-
 itably of synne as thow holour thow dronkelewe
 harlot and so forth thanne aperteneth that to
 the reiosyng of the deuel that euere hath loye
 that men doon synne/ and certes chidyng may nat
 come but out of a vileyns herte for after the
 habundance of the herte speketh the mouth ful
 ofte/55

This with certain pilgrims in mind was said by the Parson. He uses practically the same words as did the pilgrims. Consequently, it is this similarity between the pilgrims' confessions and the Parson's reprehensions that points up the ironic element.

6. Lust and the Pardoner

Whenever consideration is given to the last of the Seven Deadly Sins, among the pilgrims, immediately the name of one pilgrim comes to the fore. The sin is Lust; the pilgrim is the Wife of Bath. Nor is it too remote a possibility that when the Parson treated this Deadly Sin of Lust, the first pilgrim to whom he would primarily direct his words would be the "good wyf of biside Bathe." However, although the Wife of Bath offers matter for consideration here, still there is another pilgrim, who presents a more ugly picture, showing the foul, deadly effects of such sin. True, the Wife of Bath is guilty of lust, but there is another side to her character. She has a warm

friendliness, an immense good humor, and an unashamed forthrightness, which one admires instinctively. This other pilgrim, the Pardoner of Rouncivale, has but one side, to all appearances, and that one side is an ugly side.

Before we undertake a direct study of the ironic barbs the Parson hurls at this scoundrel,—what other name can be found more fitting for him?—we will be helped by a study of his character, as Chaucer has described it in the "General Prologue." The description of him indicates his character, in fact, it is almost a character analysis made from studying merely external appearances.

This pardoner hadde heer as yellow as wex
 But smothe it heeng as dooth a strike of flex
 By ounces henge his lokkes that he hadde
 And ther with he his shuldres ouerspedde
 But thynne it lay by colpons con and con
 But hood for lolitee wered he noon
 For it was trussed vp in his walet
 Hym thoughte he rood al of the newe let
 Discheuelee saue his cappe he rood al bare
 Swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare

• • • • •
 A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot
 No berd hadde he ne neuere sholde have
 As smothe it was as it were late yshaue
 I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare⁵⁶

From this detailed description one conclusion may definitely be drawn: there is certainly a sad lack of virility about the Pardoner. He is effeminate in his every action, in his bearing, in his dress. Now effeminacy itself is not a grave moral fault, but

56 Chaucer, "General Prologue," A 675-684; 688-691.

such a quality of character can be the occasion of grave sin. This seems to be the situation, if judgment may be legitimately made from the words Chaucer uses to describe the relations between Summoner and Pardoner. This description leads one to conclude that both of them are nothing more than low, despicable characters. The Pardoner seems to be nothing better than a cheap libertine. Chaucer says of him:

With hym ther rood a gentil Pardoner
 Of Rouncival his freend and his comper
 Ful loude he soong com hider loue to me
 This Sounour bar to hym a stif burdoun
 Was neuere trompe of half so greet a soun⁵⁷

These words indicate that the existing friendship between the Summoner and the Pardoner was open to question. Certainly one man does not sing to another man, "Come hither, Love, to me." Nor does this other party in return affectionately answer the tender plaint. Now an objection may be made that the two are merely jesting, that no justifiable charge of perverted friendship can legitimately be brought against the two. At first this might appear true. But in the light of Chaucer's previous description of the Pardoner, and considering the tone of the context, such a charge seems not merely permissible and legitimate, but even more proximate to the actual truth of the whole situation.

Besides this manifestation of the sin of lust, the

57 Ibid., A 669-670; 672-674.

Pardoner proclaims other sins in this regard, sins which have marred the beauty of his soul, for he himself confesses in the prologue to his own story:

May I wol drynke licour of the vyne
And have a ioly wenche in euery toun⁵⁸

and later he adds:

For thogh my self be a ful vicious man⁵⁹

The finished portrait of the Pardoner's character, as sketched by Chaucer in the "General Prologue," impresses the reader that the Pardoner is a man completely immersed in the concupiscence of the flesh. How horrible a sin for anybody, but how down-right loathesome for an ecclesiastical representative!

A glance at his friend and confederate, the Summoner, gives one a brief, but sad commentary on what filthy effects the sin of lust can have on a person. What physical degradation this sin wrecks on a person is written all over the diseased face of the Summoner. Because of a life of self-indulgence, the Summoner has come to this wretched condition. Chaucer says of him:

A sonnour ther was with vs in that place
That hadde a fyr reed cherubynnes face
For saucefleyn he was with eyen narwe
As shoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe
With scaled browes blake and piled berd
Of his visage children were aferd

⁵⁸ Chaucer, "The Pardoner's Prologue," G 452-453.

⁵⁹ Ibid., G 459.

Ther nas quyk siluer lytarge ne brynstoon
 Boras ceruce ne oille of tartre noon
 Ne cynement that wolde clense and byte
 That hym myghte helpen of his wheelkes white
 Nor of the knobbes sittynge on his chekes

He was a gentil harlot and a kynde . . .
 A bettre felawe sholde men nocht fynde
 He wolde suffre for a quart of wyn
 A good felawe to haue his concubyn
 A twelf monthe and excuse hym atte fulle
 Ful pryuely a fynch sek koude he pulle⁶⁰

Here have been considered two pilgrims, whose sin has been a fierce lust. One, the Pardoner, whose fair effeminacy is so attractive to those of his own sex, that he makes use of it to cultivate a perverted friendship. The other, the Summoner, whose physical repulsiveness, which drives even the children away, is the effect of a life of debauchery and lust. What will the humble, virtuous, self-controlled Parson say to them? Surely his irony on this subject ought to be a bit more direct to rouse them from their spiritual stupor.

Lust, or lechery, the Parson calls the Devil's other hand, as was mentioned previously. Using this figure as a guide, he enumerates in general and in particular certain sins of lust. Were the Pardoner, Summoner, or Wife of Bath inattentive when he was speaking on this matter, the Parson has further words to say.

To the Wife of Bath the Parson directs many of his

60 Chaucer, "General Prologue," A 623-633; 647-652.

words on fidelity of wife towards husband. To the Pardoner and Summoner he is a bit more subtle in his approach, though the irony is stronger than it was in the case of the Wife of Bath. In the section where the Parson speaks about religious who indulge in the grave sin of adultery, it can be affirmed that the Pardoner and the Summoner are in his mind. While the Pardoner and the Summoner are not strictly religious, they are nevertheless called to give good example at all times and are called to a perfection higher than layfolk by reason of their ecclesiastical office. To them, therefore, apply these words of the Parson:

Yet ben ther no speses of this cursed synne as whan
 that con of hem is religious or elles bothe or of
 folk that ben entred in to ordre as subiekne dekne
 or preest or hospitaliers and euere the hyer that
 he is in ordre the gretter is the synne/...and thise
 ordred folk ben specially tited to god and of the
 special meignee of god for which whan they doon
 deadly synne they ben the special haytours of god
 and of his peple for they lyuen of the peple to
 preye for the peple and whil they ben swiche tray-
 tours hir preyeres auailen nat to peple⁶¹

Is it not clear how the Parson must have had his scandalous Church brothers in mind, when he speaks about the way they take people's money given in good faith? They promise to pray for their benefactors and then by their sinful, lustful lives are able to do absolutely nothing for them, or at least not nearly as much as they should or could.

The Parson reserves a special little bit of advice for

61 Chaucer, "The Parson's Tale," I 891; 894.

the two friends whose doubtful relationship is a source of scandal:

Another remedie agayns lecherie is that a man or a woman eschue the compaignye of hem by whiche he douteth to be tempted for al be it so that the dede be withstonden yet is ther greet temptacioun/
 Soothly a whit was al though it ne brenne nocht fully by stikyng of a candele yet is the wal blak of the leyt/ Ful ofte tyme I rede that no man truste in his owene perfeccioun but he be stronger than Sampson holier than David and wiser than Salomen/⁶²

Doubtless the Parson does not believe, nor does anybody else who knew these two, that either the Summoner or the Pardoner were as strong as Sampson, as holy as David, or as wise as Solomon, much less superior to them in any way. Thus, by this ironic example the Parson makes his point clear.

We have now considered how the Parson's sermon and the tales of the other pilgrims together with the "General Prologue" are all intrinsically united. By means of ironic nuances of the Parson, as he preaches against the Seven Deadly Sins, the reader may observe his words directed towards those pilgrims who clearly confessed these sins either by their external deportment, as described by Chaucer in the "General Prologue" or by their own confession in the links, the particular prologues, and in the tales themselves.

62 Ibid., I 953-955.

Summary

Since the question about the real literary merit of "The Parson's Tale" was raised at the beginning of this thesis, the express purpose of the author has been to point out that irony gives literary life to this tale. For, the function of irony in "The Parson's Tale" is to provide the basis for the realism of the tale and to offer a unifying link with the rest of the Canterbury Tales. Critics were considered to be rather cursory in their general treatment of this sermon, and those who attempted to give a more thorough study to the sermon failed to penetrate far enough or deeply enough into the sermon's true significance.

This failure on the part of Chaucerian critics to understand accurately the purpose of the Parson's words on the Seven Deadly Sins is easily comprehended. First of all, how many of the critics, who comment apparently so wisely on the Canterbury Tales, actually knew the real purpose of a pilgrimage? How many of them had more than an academic appreciation of the duties of a medieval parson? Above all, how many of these critics were of the same faith as the author of the Canterbury Tales?

Now this is not bringing morality or religion into the artfulness of these stories. Far from it! But unless a thorough understanding of the end and purpose of a religious pilgrim-

age is had, how can any critic, no matter how keen his intellect, fully comprehend all the meanings of the Parson's sermon, much less discern the subtle irony? Without some sympathy for the character of a medieval parson, and without an experimental knowledge of the Catholic Faith, how can any Chaucerian scholar really understand all there is to understand in the whole Canterbury collection of stories?

Thus, it happens that many Chaucerian commentators overlook "The Parson's Tale," or else explain its purpose superficially. Chaucer did not merely intend to parade his knowledge of theology when he wrote this sermon, as some critics maintain. Nor was his express purpose to try his hand at medieval homily, as others have remarked. Nor, finally, was this concluding tale to be a devout retraction made by Chaucer in reparation for some of the ribald nonsense and crude vulgarity that preceded it in certain tales and in the language of some of the pilgrims. This latter explanation meets with much popular favor among critics of Chaucer. It is hoped that the chapters of this thesis, particularly the last two, have shown sufficiently that there is something more to the Parson's sermon than most critics allow.

"The Parson's Tale" motivated the pilgrims as they were about to enter Canterbury, terminus of their long journey. Through the humble, exemplary Parson of a town, Chaucer would

lead the pilgrims on a true pilgrimage. Does this necessarily signify that Chaucer's purpose in writing the Canterbury Tales was predominantly a moral one? But if Chaucer was to be realistic in his portrait of a pilgrimage, he had to picture the true motivating spirit of a pilgrimage, namely, repentance. Therefore, that he conclude his Tales on this note, which will linger in the reader's ear when he finishes the Parson's sermon and lays aside the Canterbury Tales, is absolutely necessary to preserve the realism of the whole.

But if Chaucer merely wrote a pious tale and inserted it as a proper conclusion to the whole work, the unity of the collection would be questionable. Actually some question the unity on this very fact. Again, if he wrote something idealistic or merely theoretical, how would he maintain his quality of realism, which is such a prominent feature of his other tales?

Chaucer was able to answer both these problems by the use of irony. Irony in "The Parson's Tale" forms the basis of the tale's realism; ironic implications in the Parson's words joined his sermon to the rest of the Tales.

Those critics who overlook Chaucer's irony in "The Parson's Tale" take the sermon too much at face value. In a sense, they take Chaucer too seriously, in that they do not look beneath the literal meaning of his words. The critic in his small way

considers the Parson's sermon as only a part, albeit an important one, of the greater whole. The critics are contemplating a detail, when they should be contemplating a design. And the Chaucerian irony, as Gilbert Chesterton says so well, "is sometimes so large that it is too large to be seen."⁶³ This certainly appears to be the case with most, if not all, of the critics of the Canterbury Tales.

In conclusion, let it be restated that irony gives a vitality and a literary flavor to the prose sermon, which otherwise might have been rather flat and dry. If the reader fails to appreciate the irony in "The Parson's Tale" he will lose much of what Chaucer intended, and will fail to see something of his peculiar ironic style. If he fails to read this tale as it should be read, that is, as a medieval sermon delivered to men and women of all classes on a religious pilgrimage, he will never arrive at the correct notion of it, and the Parson's sermon will be for him, as it has been for so many others, merely a piece of dull prose.

⁶³ Chesterton, Chaucer, 20.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Thomas G. Savage, S.J., has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

August 28, 1953
Date

Rev. John B. Conrath, S.J.
Signature of Adviser