“ALMOOST FULFILD”: GAME AND FRAME IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

by

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(Under the Direction of William Provost)

ABSTRACT

Readers have always questioned the purpose of the frame in Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales. Why does Chaucer choose a pilgrimage as the setting of his tale-telling game, and furthermore, what, if anything, is considered the conclusion of the frame? This paper outlines this problem and concludes that the frame is much more than an excuse for the game. Acknowledging the importance of the frame is the key to understanding the narrative that is The Canterbury Tales.

INDEX WORDS: The Canterbury Tales, The Parson’s Tale, General Prologue, Harry Bailly, Pilgrimage, Penance, The Pardoner, Wycliffe, Lollardy, Glossing
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When most people read Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* for the first time, they are first presented with an explanation of a frame story. Maybe they discuss some other frame stories such as *Arabian Nights* or the *Decameron* and compare them to *The Canterbury Tales*. After this brief discussion, I would suspect that most readers of Chaucer never think about the frame again. After the description of the pilgrims in the General Prologue, most readers dive immediately and in a sense, irrevocably, into the tales. In my own reading of Chaucer, however, I have come to see the importance of the frame—especially if we consider the frame to be everything immediately outside of Harry Bailly’s tale-telling game. This would include both “sides” of the frame— the General Prologue and the Parson’s Tale—and the brief but important scattering of frame in between the tales. I have also come to see that while certain, important questions are raised within the context of the tales, those questions are, for the most part, answered in the frame. In this study, I reconsider the frame as something created out of great deliberateness and intention. Here we find the key to understanding the whole of *The Canterbury Tales*.

The purpose of pilgrimage and penance in medieval literature has always been a source of great debate. Recently, an excellent study has been done comparing different ideas of pilgrimage throughout history.¹ This study distinguishes between “place” pilgrimage—the act of going somewhere to offer prayers—and “spiritual” pilgrimage—the idea that all people are on a pilgrimage journeying from this world to the next. There has always been a connection between “place” pilgrimage and penance, for pilgrimage was understood as a penitential act—it was the spiritual reason for going in the first

¹ Dee Dyas’s book *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature, 700-1500*, analyzes the development of the idea of pilgrimage and the constant controversies surrounding it.
place. In Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, the ideas of pilgrimage and penance constitute the frame of the work.\(^2\) In *The Canterbury Tales*, both ideas of pilgrimage are at work: “place” pilgrimage and the idea that humans are pilgrims on a journey to heaven are discussed explicitly. Chaucer’s characters are “place” pilgrims, yet they are reminded, at least at the beginning and again at the end of the work, of their role as pilgrims journeying through this life to the next. They are also reminded at these crucial times in the narrative of their need for penance. Built into *The Canterbury Tales* is also the idea of game. The characters of Chaucer’s work will go on a pilgrimage, but they will divert themselves with a tale-telling game. Thus, the status of the journey to Canterbury forever seems to teeter between the frame of pilgrimage and penance and the game – the individual tales themselves. The tensions between the material, physical pilgrimage, the spiritual, metaphorical pilgrimage, and the penitential implications of both are heightened. In Chaucer’s work, we are left wondering whether the author himself favors the spiritual over the material and whether penance as described by one pilgrim and practiced by his author\(^3\) is necessary for community and, ultimately, salvation.

Pilgrimage, as Chaucer understood it, was a religious practice that developed over several hundred years. This development was not a culmination of a growing understanding of the practice; indeed, the practice of pilgrimage as we see it in the Middle Ages was controversial and was constantly challenged by both the orthodox and heterodox (Dyas 3). According to some medieval sources, pilgrimage to holy places was seen as harmful to the soul. Like most social institutions surrounded by controversy,

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\(^2\) Traugott Lawler has established the Parson’s Tale as the “general epilogue” of the *Canterbury Tales* (156).
medieval pilgrimage and its various interpretations captured the attention of many medieval writers (Dyas 3).

Christians always believed in some sort of pilgrimage, even if it was not a physical journey to some holy place. Even in the New Testament, writers such as Paul and the author of the letter to the Hebrews tell their readers that they are not of the world in which they are living (Dyas 21-22). Thus, Christians viewed themselves as citizens of heaven and therefore as pilgrims on earth. For early Christians, there were practical reasons to support such belief. As they were persecuted, they fled the center of their faith – Jerusalem. Instead of considering themselves citizens of the earthly Jerusalem, they considered themselves citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem working and suffering towards full citizenship in heaven:

The image of the city and citizenship . . . had a particular resonance within the context of the Roman Empire, combining as it did elements of status and responsibility. The New Testament taught that Christians enjoyed the privilege of adoption into the household of God and into citizenship within his kingdom (Ephesians 2:19). This new status, however, had radical implications. Like those Roman citizens who lived in colonies scattered across the Empire, Christians had to combine life amongst people of other creeds and lifestyles with a constant awareness of their true homeland and allegiance (Philippians 3:10). Out of the twin concepts of the sojourner-pilgrim and the citizen of a distant, greater homeland, therefore, the New Testament writers fashioned an image which combined the promise of future security with a challenge to present behavior. Faith in God’s promises of blessings to come would inspire willingness to make sacrifices in the present. Pilgrims en route to heaven would be enabled to remain impervious to sufferings or abuse. Like the heroes of faith listed by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, they would be content to be aliens on earth if thereby they might win citizenship in heaven. (Dyas 24)

Early Christians viewed pilgrimage as a vertical journey rather than a horizontal one.

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3 To me, Chaucer’s Retraction seems both literal and sincere.
4 The idea of citizenship in heaven while living on the earth is an idea present in both The Canterbury Tales and Pearl. This form of pilgrimage, although not as explicit as in the New Testament, is still present in late medieval literature.
Pilgrimage was not a physical journey from one place on earth to another; instead, it was seen as a spiritual journey from this life to the next. Christians were called to live this life as if they were citizens of heaven and believed they would be held accountable for their response to this call. This view continued to grip Christians through the early centuries of Christianity up to the Middle Ages as is evidenced in the patristic writings through poems such as *Pearl, Piers Plowman*, and *The Canterbury Tales* (Dyas 25).

While the idea of life pilgrimage was always accepted and taught, place pilgrimage has endured periods of acceptance and criticism. This has to do, in part, with the shifting role of holy places themselves. Dyas notes two major changes in the significance of holy places in the course of Christianity. The first of these came with the conversion of Constantine and the re-conquering of the Holy Land. The second of these came at the eve of the Reformation, about the time Chaucer and the *Pearl*-poet were writing (37). The first change saw a move towards the practice of place pilgrimage. The second change saw a rejection of place pilgrimage as a corrupt practice that thwarted spirituality (37). Dyas’s notice of the controversy stems from what she terms the “oscillation between an emphasis on the omnipresence of God and the belief that visiting special places would result in special blessings” (37). She believes that “[f]or three centuries the Church focused predominantly upon God’s presence with his people wherever they might be, looking for comfort and inspiration to a heavenly rather than an earthly Jerusalem” (38). In fact, some early Christian writers such as Origen spoke out against Jerusalem as the city that had lost the favor of God (Dyas 38). To the early Christians who were persecuted throughout the Roman Empire and especially in Jerusalem, God could not be limited to that place.
The development of the covenant in the Old Testament demonstrates a shift from a God who was present wherever his people were to a God who was limited to one place. Although the Israelites were God’s chosen people from the time of Abraham, they did not have a “place” until the time of Solomon. Understanding the Old Testament importance of the Ark of the Covenant is key to understanding the New Testament understanding of God’s presence. Before Solomon, the Ark of the Covenant traveled with David. It was Solomon who built the temple, and with this building “holiness was bound to place” (Dyas 40).

Early Christians felt strongly about the availability of God regardless of place. To them, Jerusalem had lost its special status because it failed to recognize Christ as the Messiah. Dyas notes, “the Book of Acts in its account of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit even among the despised Gentiles (Acts 10) makes it plain that the early Christians, like the people of God travelling through the desert to the Promised Land, claimed a relationship with God which was independent of place” (43). In fact, Eusebius writes that “‘[t]he Law of Moses required all who desired to be holy to speed from all direction to one definite place, but, I, giving freedom to all, teach men not to look for God in a corner of the earth, nor in mountains, nor in temples made with hands, but that each should worship and adore him at home’” (Dyas 48). Also, records of visitors to the Holy Land during the first three centuries demonstrate a purely intellectual pursuit instead of a search for a specific place to worship (Dyas 46). For the most part, pilgrims did not travel for spiritual benefit. Dyas tries to prove that early Christians rejoiced in the idea that they could have the full presence of their God wherever they were, but perhaps their belief followed the reality of their situation. Writings from Augustine and Origen, for
example, although they look towards a wider view of God’s presence, almost seem to substitute one idea for the other. Because they do not have a “place” on the earth, i.e., Jerusalem, they should look to their “place” in heaven. Origen may speak against the earthly Jerusalem because he cannot have it. The early Christians may have spoken against specific “places” because it was unrealistic to do otherwise.

Despite the problems with the development of place pilgrimage, England inherited the idea with its Christianity. Dyas notes that “[t]he roots of the tensions observable in medieval English attitudes to pilgrimage lie therefore in the extraordinary events of the fourth century which witnessed the initiation of a network of holy places which would spread from the Holy Land throughout Europe” (37). Dyas attributes part of the development of place pilgrimage to Constantine’s reclamation of holy sites in the Middle East. Not only did Constantine re-take holy sites, but he also built shrines and churches and encouraged devotional travel (48-49). Cyril, the bishop of Jerusalem also began speaking of the importance of Jerusalem (49). Donald Howard notes that “[t]he Jerusalem pilgrimage was the pilgrimage of pilgrimages; others were types and shadows of it, for Jerusalem was at the center of the world (it is regularly pictured there in maps of the period), it was the ground the Lord had walked upon, and it was a symbol of the Heavenly City” (*Writers* 12). Perhaps because of its distance from Western Europe and the dangers they faced as they traveled, pilgrims were especially proud of their pilgrimages to Jerusalem. By 381, we have the travel narrative of Egeria, a pilgrim from the west traveling to the east who indicates a more devotional approach to her travels. Dyas lists a number of hints towards this new approach: “visits to holy people as well as places made holy by biblical associations, the importance of worship at holy sites, the
veneration of relics, the intense emotions triggered by a combination of recollection and place, and the particular spiritual blessings which pilgrims acquired through their labours” (50). Margery Kempe is perhaps one of the most famous medieval pilgrims. Her early fifteenth century journeys to Jerusalem and other holy sites were well known. (Atkinson 51-58).

By the time Chaucer was writing, both the idea that humans are pilgrims on earth journeying to their true citizenship in heaven and the idea of place pilgrimage had been explored and argued against. Although the ideal pilgrimage was still “a spiritual act ultimately directed toward overcoming death” (Storm 813), in most cases, the practice of pilgrimage shifted from a devotional experience to a mere travel or tourist experience. Thus we find modern definitions of pilgrimage that imitate this shift: “A pilgrimage is itself a diversion, a recreation from the demands of ordinary life” (Olmert 159). For the most part, gone was the devotion that took pilgrims to the Middle East in search of the true burial site of Christ. Instead, we find fraud, both on the part of the pilgrims and those hosting them in their destination cities (Dyas 54-55). Indeed we find both a mixture of devotion and regular travel when we look in detail at Margery Kempe. Traveling in the fifteenth century, the devoted Margery Kempe is described as bothersome to her companions for her fasting, her weeping, and “her constant conversation about God” (Atkinson 54). Eventually these companions abandoned her and would take her back only if she would not “‘speak of the Gospel where we are, but shall sit and make merry, as we do, both at meat and at supper’” (54-55).

For most scholars studying the late medieval period and the development of pilgrimage, the two types defined by Dyas could co-exist without problem. There is no
apparent contradiction between the idea of humans’ roles as pilgrims on earth and the actuality of making a physical pilgrimage. In fact, we would tend to think that the act of making a pilgrimage would further enhance the idea that life on earth could be reduced to a pilgrimage. However, Dyas notes that

the two developments of place-oriented pilgrimage and the increasing importance of the saints posed a potential threat to the scale on which the Christian life was to be lived. The rising profile of saints as intermediaries between a holy God and sinful human beings was paralleled by a danger that pilgrimage to an earthly goal could obscure or even undermine the longer-term goal of reaching the heavenly Jerusalem. Both trends may have reflected genuine piety but they also offered the possibility of a kind of spiritual reductionism as the demands of a direct relationship with God and the requirement to make the whole of life a continual pilgrimage were gradually scaled down to something a little more manageable. The invisible became visible, tangible; the benefits sought were as often material as spiritual; the distance travelled could be measured in miles rather than in personal growth. It is small wonder that from time to time these newer standards were questioned and that tensions persisted. It was, however, the very complexity and multi-faceted nature of the pilgrimage motif that made such a rich resource for medieval authors. (65)

Not only were there problems with the corruption of the spiritual aspects of place pilgrimage, but there is also another apparent contradiction. As long as the earthly pilgrimages are mere “diversions” from everyday life, they will always stand in contradiction to the greater life pilgrimage. To avoid this, “[t]he ideal pilgrim would have travelled, as St. Bernard of Clairvaux is said to have done along the shores of Lake Léman, with his eyes upon the ground to shut out the glories of the world” (Howard Writers 23-24). The whole point of viewing this life as a journey to heaven is to make living in the reality of everyday life worthwhile. To abandon reality for a diversion is also abandoning the greater view of life pilgrimage. Dyas, however, demonstrates the medieval need for “place” pilgrimage. She notes that
destination and motivation are intimately bound together, for shrines offered different benefits and were visited for different reasons. These benefits ranged from the spiritual to the material. The former included the desire to identify with the life and sufferings of Christ, to obtain forgiveness, or to grow in understanding; the latter often focusing on issues of physical well-being, such as recovery from injury or disease, the ability to conceive a child or liberation from captivity. (132-33)

Dyas further delineates the necessity of pilgrimage in the role of forgiveness:

“For forgiveness was always high on the list of mercies sought. In a general sense all pilgrimage had a penitential element, since all were sinners and in need of God’s grace. The use of indulgences to formalise the remission of penance grew from the twelfth century onwards and played a vital part in establishing and maintaining the attraction of shrines” (134). Medieval Christians, then, with the weight of temporal punishment upon them, sought out shrines to relieve their burdens; or sometimes such a charge was placed on them by their confessor.

In order to prepare the people for pilgrimages, priests preached sermons, wrote how-to tracts and pamphlets often comparing the pilgrim “with Adam, Abraham, Jacob, the children of Israel, Jesus and the Apostles,” and emphasized that “the physical journey is to be accompanied by spiritual and moral reformation. It is in other words to be a microcosm of the pilgrimage of life . . .” (Dyas 138).

Those preparing pilgrims also taught that “the shrines of the saints were places where heaven and earth were believed to intersect . . .” (Dyas 139). Part of the problem of pilgrimage stemmed from the belief that God was “everywhere present,” not limited to a few isolated shrines, criticism that stemmed from the fourth century (Dyas 141-142). Although much of the criticism came from those labeled “lollards,” Dyas warns, “their treatment of this topic is not to be viewed purely as an isolated phenomenon. Their
concerns resonated in significant respects with those expressed by orthodox men and women throughout the ages” (144). The problems with pilgrimage cannot, therefore, be seen as an orthodox versus heterodox debate. Those who were considered heterodox were against “place” pilgrimage, but then so were many who were orthodox.

Dyas has shown us that the idea of medieval pilgrimage cannot be taken for granted. Even in an ideal setting, pilgrimage was questioned as a necessary means for spiritual growth in the human life. Coupled with the abuses that inevitably developed throughout the Middle Ages, criticism of pilgrimage and other Church practices were common. It is difficult, therefore, to read *The Canterbury Tales* without questioning Chaucer’s intent in using pilgrimage to frame, in part, his tale-telling game. Was Chaucer speaking against the idea of “place” pilgrimage itself or just the corrupt practices that had developed? How does the idea of pilgrimage as an act of penance compare to Chaucer’s idea of *game* as it develops throughout the *Tales*? Finally, do Chaucer’s the Parson’s Tale and Retraction give us a definitive answer to any or all of these questions?

Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* can be seen in light of Dyas’s study on pilgrimage: his pilgrims are traveling to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket and they are reminded that they are on a pilgrimage of life as well. Many critics have commented on Chaucer’s position on the idea of “place” pilgrimage. To some, Chaucer’s acceptance of pilgrimage is as obvious as his acceptance of Church sacraments. Others see Chaucer criticizing both pilgrimage in its practice and in its ideal. In this view, Chaucer would be in accord with the beliefs of the Lollards of his day. Lollards, followers of John

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5 When defending Chaucer's orthodoxy, Ruth Ames says, “Chaucer’s own orthodoxy is plain enough in other works, but it is relaxed rather than aggressive. Elsewhere he makes no secret of his belief in the necessity of confession to a priest, of his reverence for saints and sacraments, his acceptance of pilgrimages, all condemned by the Wycliffites, but never argued by Chaucer” (Ames 23-24).
Wycliffe, were “for the greater part ordinary people, mainly craftsmen, opposed the subjection of the English Church to Rome, the temporal rule of the clergy, the doctrine of transubstantiation, clerical celibacy, the consecration of physical objects, masses for the dead, pilgrimages, and the veneration of images” (Ozment 210). Two of these practices, “the consecration of physical objects” and “pilgrimages” are directly linked to the pilgrimage to Becket’s shrine. Dyas finds “an implied critique” of place pilgrimage based largely on the motivations of some of the pilgrims (181). As an example, Dyas refers to the Wife of Bath “with her unashamed admission that her many pilgrimages, like her visits to her own parish church, are largely prompted not by devotion but by amorous intent” (182-83). Chaucer’s creation of such a character “casts doubt upon the practice of pilgrimage itself” (183). To me, it casts doubt upon the practice of the Wife of Bath. Readers also doubt the practice of pilgrimage because of the observable commercialism that pervaded the pilgrimages themselves and the shrines that were their destinations. Linda Georgianna, however, disputes this doubt, suggesting that for medieval people, commercialism was a part of their faith and that even the redemption is described in commercial terms. Throughout the gospel, the language of money is used. Christ has “paid the debt” of our sins and has “bought” us with his blood (Georgianna 86-88). Georgianna continues,

Chaucer is fully aware of the possibility of confusion inherent in atonement theory and practice, whether in showing the Pardoner’s willful reduction of spiritual to material values, or in his portrayal of the more benign and almost inevitable wandering that occurs when men and women seek as pilgrims to respond to the offer of redemption. Unlike many of his critics, however, Chaucer never confuses a corruptible idea with a corrupt one. He no more rejects pilgrimage, pardon, and penance than he does the terms of redemption itself. (88-89)
Georgianna cites, for example, the use of indulgences in the Church. An indulgence is a remission for the temporal punishment due to sin. One could receive indulgences for good works done, for prayers offered, pilgrimages made, or alms given to support the needs of the Church or the poor. Here abuses were rampant, and in order to curb the abuses, reformers such as Wycliffe would do away with the doctrine of indulgences altogether (Georgianna 95). Chaucer’s speaking out against the abuses does not necessarily mean that he too would do away with the doctrine itself.

For some the pilgrimage is nothing other than an excuse for the tale-telling game. For others, the Canterbury pilgrimage has a real but elusive significance. Seeing a greater significance, however, Edmund Reiss believes that

\[\text{the pilgrimage is more than a setting, backdrop, or even starting point for the tales. It and the level it represents provide the raison d’être for the stories told: while the tales have meaning in relation to each other, they provide most of all a way of expressing the developing pilgrimage; and when between the tales we return to the explicit pilgrimage, it is to a narrative level that takes on meaning and point because of the tales. In some frame stories, the Arabian Nights and Chaucer’s own Legend of Good Women, for instance, it is sufficient to go from the frame to the tales themselves; and, even if we do return to the level represented by the frame, it is not to see a development of it. In others, however, the Gesta Romanorum, for instance, the tales are used to develop the narrative, which is the same as the frame. (296)}\]

It is the narrative that Reiss speaks of that is the most important part of The Canterbury Tales. In my view, the tales are necessary for the development of the outlying narrative. Without the pilgrims talking about who should and should not tell the next tale, we would not see their true intentions.

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6 In his article “The Satiric Mode and The Parson’s Tale,” John Finlayson notes, “In reading The Canterbury Tales I assume the pilgrimage to be the frame it clearly is, the excuse for the Tales. I assume also that the pilgrimage has some symbolic significance, that by using this device, rather than the enforced retreat used by Boccaccio, Chaucer is suggesting some overall spiritual significance for his work, such as that we are to be involved in a journey to some sort of Truth; but since Chaucer does not say so, I do not
With Chaucer’s choice of pilgrimage, readers question whether Chaucer believed in “place” pilgrimage or “life” pilgrimage. For Morton Bloomfield, Chaucer seems to emphasize life pilgrimage:

The pilgrimage is also a key metaphor for life from the religious sphere. We are all pilgrims on the way to the heavenly city, and every journey, but especially a religious one, reflects the basic patterns of existence. We are all homeless, exiled from paradise, looking for a return to our true home which is heaven, of which the earthly paradise was the foreshadowing. No doubt Chaucer had this religious dimension in mind when he chose a pilgrimage as a frame. The introduction to the last tale, that of the Parson, makes this quite clear. (Bloomfield 86)

With few other mentions of pilgrimage throughout the rest of the frame, is the redirection to life pilgrimage offered by the Parson enough for the pilgrims and ultimately the reader to regain focus on the spiritual aspect of their journey?

Most critics do not ignore that Chaucer utilizes all aspects and dimensions of a particular idea at hand, religious or secular, and so it is with pilgrimage. Ruth Ames sees the pilgrimage as a culmination of several ideas: it “is a literary device; it is a vacation, a frolic, an escape; it is a literal journey to the shrine of St. Thomas a Becket; it is a symbolic passage from this world to eternity” (72). Ames does not see a problem with the co-existence of all of these ideas at the same time. As we saw with Margery Kempe and her companions, individual pilgrims certainly had different ideas about what they should be doing and how they should be behaving on a pilgrimage.

Whatever their conclusion about the religious intentions of the beginning and end of the Canterbury pilgrimage, readers of Chaucer seem to agree that there is a problem with the “middle” of the Tales. Between the prologue and the “epilogue,” there is not

assume that it is, therefore, an allegory of the Way to Truth or that the spiritual significance of pilgrimage is the dominating preoccupation of the work” (103-104).
much mention of the religious intent of the pilgrimage. Indeed, Harry Bailly seems to struggle at all costs to avoid any mention of the religious nature of the pilgrimage. He seems only interested in the game. Helen Corsa notes that

[1]he concept of ‘game’ includes in its connotative cluster more than an attitude of a special kind, more than a spirit of jest and play; it includes also the understanding that there are participants whose relationships are determined or created by rules of some sort. A game, whatever kind it is, is a determinate, and its participants, as long as they are consciously part of it, must remain within its disciplines no matter how, as individuals, they carry out the rules. A game is an ordered world in which the agonistic impulses can be profitably used to fulfill its aims. And a game, though unique in one sense, is never really over in one trial. (93)

It is my contention that Harry Bailly deliberately thwarts the ideas of true pilgrimage – both of a true pilgrimage to the shrine of Becket and the idea of life as a pilgrimage – in order that his game will come to completion.

In line twelve of the General Prologue, Chaucer the pilgrim says that it is in April, when spring arrives in England, that “Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages” (I 12). As Chaucer the pilgrim begins to describe the “nyne and twenty in a companye / Of sondry folk,” we already lose sight of the idea of pilgrimage (I 24-25). Already the heavenly purpose of the trip is tainted with the description of the worldly travelers. Chaucer the pilgrim describes a few ideal people, but mostly we have sinners who seem proud of their sins. While we do not expect angels, we might expect sinners who are aware of their sins, especially those on a pilgrimage. We especially lose sight of pilgrimage when the Host proposes the story telling game. Like the pilgrims, we too are

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7 Ozment notes that “ordinary people were strongly attracted to ritualized pilgrimage piety with its cult of the saints, relics, special indulgences, and promise of miraculous cures. Already in the fifteenth century such reformers as Wyclif, Gerson, and Ailly protested the multiplication of shrines and new saints. Protestants condemned pilgrim shrines as hoaxes designed to fleece the credulous, and with the outbreak of the Reformation, many shrines fell victim to iconoclastic riots” (206).
8 All citations from The Canterbury Tales are from The Riverside Chaucer and are cited parenthetically.
excited about the game and wonder who will tell the best tale, the tale “of best sentence and moost solaas” (I 798). Like the pilgrims, we nearly forget the idea of pilgrimage, nor do we mind forgetting, for what is to come is mostly fun, “solaas.” But there are three pilgrims who do not forget the frame, namely the Host, the Pardoner, and the Parson. The Host does not forget because he is working deliberately against the frame. The Pardoner, too, in his own selfish motives, ultimately attempts to thwart the pilgrimage. The Parson does not forget because he is destined to be a part of the frame.

Immediately, from the General Prologue, we may question Harry Bailly’s motives for joining the pilgrimage. Obviously, Harry never mentions religious intentions; in fact, the only time he ever uses religious speech seriously is when he first begins speaking to the pilgrims:

Ye goon to Caunterbury – God yow speede,  
The blisful martir quite yow youre meede!  
(I 769-70)

Instantaneously, however, Harry moves into his real intentions:

And wel I woot, as ye goon by the weye,  
Ye shapen yow to talen and to pleye;  
For trewely, confort ne myrthe is noon  
To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon;  
And therfore wol I maken yow disport,  
(I 771-75)

Interested in “so myrie a compaignye,” the Host will join the pilgrimage to sponsor the tale-telling game, and ultimately, so he conjectures, he will profit from it. Here, Harry Bailly reveals himself a businessman. He has sold food and lodging to the pilgrims once, but if his gaming venture succeeds, he will double his profits. The Host’s revelation of his plan becomes especially interesting when we later consider his conversation with the Pardoner.
After the Knight begins his tale, we are well on our way. The game has begun. After the Knight has finished his tale, however, we are back in the frame. We are still on the pilgrimage, and the Host calls on the Monk to give the next performance. Before he can speak, however, the Miller interrupts, and the worldliness of the pilgrims is more evident than ever. Nowhere in this part of the frame is the idea of pilgrimage mentioned. In the Reeve’s Prologue, the Host assures us that he has forgotten the frame, especially when he says to the Reeve “‘What amounteth al this wit? / What shul we speke alday of hooly writ?’” (I 3901-902). Here, the Host is reprimanding the Reeve for taking so long to get to his tale, but his words say more than that. On a pilgrimage, it might be a good idea to speak, at least briefly, of “hooly writ.” The Host, revealing the essence of his worldliness, is working, in a sense, against the frame. Lee Patterson says of this interchange, “Harry Bailly wishes to hurry the Reeve, but the language he uses bespeaks his own sense of festal temporality . . . [his bourgeois mindset] wishes to protect the special time of holiday from the encroachments of an inappropriate spiritual earnestness. If it is already seven-thirty in the morning, it is only seven-thirty, and the Host wants to make sure that the pilgrims do not speak ‘alday of hooly writ’” (Chaucer 277). The Host’s purpose on the trip, then, is for the perpetuation of the game, a game that works against the frame.

The Epilogue to the Man of Law’s Tale is perhaps the most interesting link in the whole of *The Canterbury Tales*. Here, the Host calls upon the Parson to tell his tale. We have to question the Host because, if we have paid close attention to the General Prologue, we should know that the Parson is probably on the pilgrimage for the sake of the pilgrimage. The Parson makes no attempt to hide this fact as he answers the Host:
“What eyleth the man, so synfully to swere?” (II 1171). Indeed, as we later learn, the Parson’s role is to close the frame. He represents penance. If he tells his tale when Harry first asks him, Harry’s game is over. For a moment, Harry seems to forget the urgency with which he guides the game. One of the pilgrims, however, does not want the game to end. When the Host confirms that the Parson will be the next to go, the pilgrim responds in this passage:

“Nay, by my fader soule, that schal he nat!”
Seyde the Shipman, “Heer schal he nat preche;
He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche.
We leven alle in the grete God,” quod he;
“He wolde sowen som difficile,
Or springen cokkel in our clene corn.”
(II 1178-1183)

Up to this point, the tales have been pure – pure worldliness. The interrupting pilgrim knows that the Parson represents the frame, and he does not want to remember it. The Parson “wolde sowen som difficile.” He would end the game. The pilgrim quickly brushes the Parson (and along with him the frame) aside, assuring the game will last for the duration of the actual trip. Lee Patterson says of this passage, “When the Wife of Bath preempts the Parson she displaces a voice that will provide a conclusion to the tale-telling so authoritative that it comes to include the tones of the author himself . . . For the *Canterbury Tales* to exist at all, then, the Parson’s Tale must be deferred; and who could be a more appropriate agent of deferral than the Wife of Bath?” (*Chaucer* 316).

Despite the gap between the Epilogue to the Man of Law’s Tale and the Wife of Bath’s Prologue, the idea of the frame being forgotten is still evident. The Wife of Bath, after being interrupted by the Pardoner, says, “But yet I praye to al this compactunye, / If

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9 Critics disagree about who is actually speaking here. Although most criticism I have read thinks this is the Shipman as the text notes, Lee Patterson thinks it is the Wife of Bath. Thus, because of the confusion, a
that I speke after my fantasye, / As taketh not agrief of that I seye, / For myn entente nys but for to pleye” (III 188-192). In this sentence, the Wife of Bath justifies her talking about her five husbands. Realizing that the other pilgrims probably think she will be telling a sort of tragedy about “tribulacion in mariage,” the Wife of Bath has to assure them that she too is participating in the game (III 173). Later in her prologue, as the Wife of Bath speaks of the fifth husband, she says,

“Myn housbonde was at Londoun al that Lente;  
I hadde the bettre leyser for to pleye,  
And for to se, and eek for to be seye  
Of lusty folc. What wiste I wher my grace  
Was shapen for to be, or in what place?  
Therefore I made my visitaciouns  
To vigilies and to processiouns,  
To prechyng eek, and to thise pilgrimages,  
To pleyes of myracles, and to mariages,  
And wered upon my gaye scarlet gytes.”

(III 550-59)

The Wife of Bath does not distinguish between “pleye” and the true purpose of pilgrimage – penance. Or she might distinguish, but she does not care about the latter of the two. In display of the complete worldliness of the individual pilgrims, we finally have mention of pilgrimage in a portion of the frame other than the introduction and conclusion, yet it is only mentioned in association with the word “pleye.” Pilgrimage is not something serious she engages in to enhance her spirituality; instead it is a chance for her to play while her husband is in London. Thus, with the Wife of Bath, we have moved further away from the idea presented to us in the General Prologue.

In the Friar’s Prologue, the word “game” is mentioned twice. To the Friar’s taste, the Wife of Bath has deviated from the game:

later editor wrote in the Shipman’s name (Chaucer 288-89).
“Dame,” quod he, “God yeve yow right good lyf! Ye han heer touched, also moot I thee, In scole-matere greet difficultee, Ye han sayd muche thyng right wel, I seye; But, dame, heere as we ryde by the weye, Us nedeth nat to spoken but of game, And lete auctoritees, on Goddes name, To prechyng and to scoles of clergye. But if it lyke to this compaignye, I wol yow of a somonour telle a game.”

(III 1270-279)

The Friar seems uncomfortable with the Wife of Bath’s dwelling too long in the frame. Indeed, she has the longest prologue of any other pilgrim. But perhaps it is not just the Friar who is uncomfortable. We have to remember that the Pardoner, too, interrupted the Wife, as did the Friar. Obviously, the pilgrims simply want the Wife to hush about her several husbands. But perhaps there is something more. The pilgrims seem uncomfortable within the links. After the Wife tells her tale, all of the prologues to the succeeding tales are relatively short. That is, they are short until we come to the Pardoner’s Prologue.

After the Summoner’s response to the Friar, the Host again comments on the rules of the game. Speaking now to the Clerk, the Host says,

“For Goddes sake, as beth of bettre cheere! It is no tyme for to studien heere. Telle us som myrie tale, by youre fey! For what man that is entred in a pley, He nedes moot unto the pley assente. But precheth nat, as freres doon in Lente, To make us for oure olde synnes wepe, Ne that thy tale make us nat to slepe.”

(IV 7-14)

Although the Host is speaking of friars’ practices in general, we cannot help but think of our Friar’s recent performance. He and the Summoner have strayed from the game.
through their wrathful behavior. Although their anger is not quite as concentrated as the Reeve’s, they have left the Host’s plan for the game, and here, in the Clerk’s Prologue, the Host reminds all of the players of the rules of the game, rules that are the conditions upon which the Host has agreed to come on the pilgrimage.

The next time the Host mentions the word “pleye” is at the conclusion of the Pardoner’s Tale. As the Pardoner offers the pilgrims his pardons and relics and calls on the Host to come forth first, the Host responds candidly, telling the Pardoner and everyone else what he thinks of the Pardoner’s false relics. After the Pardoner’s silencing, the Host says, “Now,” quod oure Hoost, “I wol no lenger pleye / With thee, ne with noon oother angry man” (VI 958-59). There are several different problems with the Pardoner’s offer and the Host’s reply. First, the Pardoner “still thinks that his rhetoric will gull the pilgrims” (Baumlin 132).¹⁰ Lee Patterson notes that the Host, “[a]lluding to the famous relic of St. Thomas’s breeches that were awaiting the pilgrims at Canterbury . . ., accuses the Pardoner of trying to preempt the pilgrimage by substituting his counterfeits for the true relics that urge them on their pilgrim way” (Chaucer 409).

Secondly, the Host’s angry response comes from three sources. He is first responding to the absurdity that he would be called upon to give money for false relics. The Host is also responding to the Pardoner’s threat to the pilgrimage and, ultimately, his tale-telling game. Medieval penance “was an established part of the Christian tradition from the earliest days, but it was only with the mandate of the fourth Lateran Council of 1215 that it became a yearly requirement” (Pigg 429). According to Lee Patterson, the Council was

¹⁰ “The problem of fruitfulness confronts every pilgrim as he or she tells a tale: is their discourse ever edifying? Does it renew the faith of their audience, inspire morality, or increase charity?” (Baumlin 127). Baumlin believes that it is by their fruit that they shall be judged. The Pardoner produces no fruit, only discord among the pilgrims.
initiated to combat both lay and clerical ignorance; the clergy required education in
“basic theology, the canon law governing clerical behavior and pastoral care, and the
proper administration of the sacraments, especially penance” (Patterson “‘Parson’s’” 334-35). If they could achieve this goal, then the clergy could in turn educate the people in
the basic elements of faith, the ten commandments, the seven sacraments, acts of mercy,
and so on (Patterson “‘Parson’s’” 335). As the council instructed, both the pulpit and the
confessional (within which clergy would see people at least once a year) were to become
the two main methods of instruction (Patterson “‘Parson’s’” 336). The Pardoner, in
offering the pilgrims pardons for money, a substitution for true penance, almost ends the
pilgrimage, which would, in turn, end the game. Melvin Storm quotes Quentin Schaut
who explains the efficacy of papal pardons: “‘When on account of illness or other good
reason it was impossible for penitents to visit the shrines and gain the indulgences, they
had recourse to letters to the Pope. Sometimes such letters were sent to bishops. The
replies were ‘pardons’’” (811). From this statement, Storm concludes that “even the
purveying of legitimate pardons and relics has the potential to restrain or redirect the
impulse to pilgrimage . . .” (811). Thus, “[t]he Pardoner purports to carry with him not
only relics akin to those that the pilgrims seek to honor in Canterbury but also the
indulgences themselves, potential substitutes for one of the benefits of pilgrimage” (811).
Jim Rhodes also comments on the role of Pardoner in his position of authority: “He
exults in the role, dispensing pardons, and showing his miraculous relics as if he were

11 Although he does not deal specifically with the threat the Pardoner poses to the game, Melvin Storm
analyzes fully the threat the Pardoner poses to the pilgrimage: “the Pardoner endangers the pilgrimage
realistically as well as symbolically, threatening to halt the pilgrims long before they even approach
Canterbury by persuading them that they have reached an equivalent goal” (810).
12 Storm continues, “Yet the convenience was fraught with the potential for abuse. . . . Chaucer’s Pardoner,
then, is not without precedent in presenting himself as a kind of walking shrine, portable and compendious
Christ himself. Presenting himself in the role of someone who can heal, pardon, and absolve, and then to be affirmed in that role by one’s audience, allows the Pardoner his moment of transport and sense of self-actualization” (231). This time, however, our Pardoner has no moment of transport, and any “self” is attacked with the harsh words of the Host. The Host, the officiator of the game, attempts to “disqualify” the Pardoner.

The third source of the Host’s response could stem from a comparison of the Host and the Pardoner. In the General Prologue, Chaucer the pilgrim almost invites this comparison as he describes the Host: “A large man he was with eyen stepe – / A fairer burgeys was ther noon in Chepe – / Boold of his speache, and wys, and wel ytaught, / And of manhod hum lakked right naught . . .” (I 753-56). Compared to the Pardoner, whose description immediately precedes the Host’s, the Host is described as “all man” while the Pardoner is depicted as a “geldyng or a mare” (I 691). The comparison extends beyond their physical appearance, however. In the Pardoner’s Prologue, the Pardoner discloses his practices for making money:

“By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer,
An hundred mark sith I was pardoner.
I stonde lyk a clerk in my pulpet,
And whan the lewed peple is doun yset,
I preche so as ye han herd bifoore
And telle an hundred false japes moore.
Thanne peyne I me to streche forth the nekke,
And est and west upon the peple I bekke,
As dooth a dowve sittyne on a berne.
Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne
That it is joye to se my bisynesse.
Of avarice and of swich cursednesse
Is al my prechyng, for to make hem free
To yeven hir pens, and namely unto me.”
(VI 389-402)

as one could wish, peddling both ostensibly holy objects and the spiritual advantages they supposedly provide” (811).
Several of the Pardoner’s actions echo what Chaucer the pilgrim described of the Host in the General Prologue. The Host looks on the people and notes that they are merry, and while he does not tell “false japes” himself, he advises the pilgrims to tell them, and the Host will be the one to profit from it. Perhaps the Pardoner calls upon the Host to purchase his wares because he notices the similarity in business styles. The Host has succeeded in his business proposition, and so the Pardoner calls upon him to aid him with his own business proposition. The Host, refusing to jeopardize his own security, strikes back at the Pardoner. Although the Knight restores peace and says to the Pardoner “drawe thee neer, / And, as we diden, lat us laughe and pleye” (VI 966-67), we no longer hear from the Pardoner. The man who has been bold enough to interrupt the Wife of Bath is not heard from again.

Speaking of the content of the Pardoner’s Tale, Melvin Storm conjectures, “Does Chaucer, perhaps, intend the rioters’ initial misconception as a subtle reminder that any pilgrim is similarly in error who conceives of his goal as physical relics rather than spiritual values and perceives his reward as temporal rather than eternal?” (814). Storm’s idea about the tale the Pardoner tells is answered by the Pardoner himself: “myn entente is nat but for to wynne” (VI 403). The Pardoner, who interrupted the Wife of Bath, also echoes her “entente.” It is the Wife of Bath’s intent to “pleye.” It is the Pardoner’s intent to “wynne,” a winning separate from the rules of the tale-telling game.

After the Pardoner’s performance, the issue of “game” does not arise until we get to the Prologue of the Monk’s Tale. As the Host calls on the Monk to tell his tale, he says, “My lord, the Monk . . . be myrie of cheere, / For ye shul telle a tale trewely. / Loo, Rouchestre stant heer faste by! / Ryde forth, myn owene lord, brek nat oure game” (VII
1924-928). Before the Host is finished speaking to the Monk, he says “‘But be nat wrooth, my lord, though that I play. / Full oft in game a sooth I have herd seye!’” (VII 1963-964). The Host, after asking the Monk not to be angry with him, interrupts the Monk in the middle of his tale, saying he is annoying the pilgrims with his tragedies because “therinne is ther no desport ne game” (VII 2791). The Host does not kick the Monk out of the game, as he did the Pardoner. He instead offers him another chance to follow the rules of the game. The Monk, however, has no “lust to playe” (VII 2806). The game continues, but with no mention of the frame.

In the Canon’s Yeoman’s Prologue, an interesting and telling thing happens. Someone who was not at the Tabard with the rest of the pilgrims wants to join the pilgrimage. The Canon and his Yeoman approach the group and the Canon says, “‘God save . . . this joly campaignye! / Fast have I pricked . . . for your sake, / To ride in this myrie campaignye’” (VIII 583-86). His reason for joining? The Canon’s Yeoman says, “‘Sires, now in the morwe-tyde / Out of your hostelry I saugh yow ryde, / And warned hear my lord and my soverayn, / Which that to ryden with yow is ful fayn / For his desport; he loveth dialiaunce’” (VIII 588-92). In order to join the group, the Canon and his Yeoman do not need anything related to the pilgrimage. The fact that the “campaignye” is on a pilgrimage is not even mentioned. Instead, the Host replies, “‘for certein it wolde seme / Thy lord were wys, and so I may wel deme. / He is ful jocunde also, dar I leye! / Can he oght telle a myrie tale or tweye, / With which he glade may this campaignye?’” (VIII 594-98). The Canon and Yeoman, in order to join the pilgrimage, must also join the game. In fact, from the conversation, it would appear that they are just joining the game and not the pilgrimage. When the Canon understands the rules of the
game, that his Yeoman could tell his “pryvetee,” he leaves. The Yeoman is glad: “heer shal arise game” (VIII 703). The Yeoman, knowing the personality of his master, lies about the Canon’s personality to gain entrance to the “game.” Once his master is gone, the Yeoman is free to pursue his desires.

After the Manciple’s Tale, there is one tale left. The Host says,

“Lordynges everichoon,  
Now lakketh us no tales mo than oon.  
Fulfilled is my sentence and my decree;  
I trowe that we han herd of ech degree;  
Almoost fulfild is al myn ordinaunce.  
I pray to God, so yeve hym right good chaunce,  
That telleth this tale to us lustily.  
“Sire preest, . . . artow a vicary?  
Or arte a person? Sey sooth, by thy fey!  
Be what thou be, ne breke thou nat oure pley;  
For every man, save thou, hath toold his tale.  
Unbokele and shewe us what is in thy male;  
For trewely, me thynketh by thy cheere  
Thou sholdest knytte up wel a greet mateere.  
Tell us a fable anon, for cokkes bones!”  
(X 15-29)

This passage is telling for many reasons. Laura Finke believes that “Harry Bailly’s tone is good natured, even festive . . .” (96). The Host, whose game has been repeatedly threatened, has made it to the last pilgrim. The Parson answers “atones”: “‘Thou getest fable noon ytold for me’” (X 30). Now after all of the tales, the Parson takes us back to the beginning and answers the Host’s “A man may seye ful soth in game and pley” as if he had just spoken it. The Parson refuses to play Harry’s game, but he will conclude the pilgrimage; he will conclude the frame. He “wol yow telle a myrie tale in prose / To knytte up al this feeste and make an ende” (X 46-47). Helen Phillips tells us that “the Parson and his tale reject fables, fiction. The Parson’s Tale is not a story but a treatise; it
is not about either sentence or solaas but the most important choices human beings have to make: between good and evil, and its subject is humanity’s ultimate destination, the Next World” (219). Thomas Bestul says that “the tale occasions an end to intellectual and moral wandering, in keeping with the Parson’s reminder in his prologue of the true goal and significance of the pilgrimage, just as the geographical goal of the pilgrimage is about to be reached” (616). The Parson’s goal is to redirect the pilgrims to the actual physical pilgrimage they are on; he also directs their attention to the ultimate pilgrimage that, if they are not on, they need to be on. Baumlin notes,

It is, therefore, not only thematically appropriate but also dramatically appropriate that the Parson now offers his sermon on penance and the penitential spirit; he has in mind a restoration of order among the pilgrims, but he also has in mind a greater goal: ‘To shewe yow the wey, in this viage, / Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage / That highte Jerusalem celestial’ (X. 49-51). This pilgrimage to Canterbury, he says, is merely a symbol for that higher, ultimate and lifelong pilgrimage of every human being. (133)

Also interesting is that the Parson deliberately chooses “feeste” when he could have used the word “game” or “pleye.” Unlike most of the other pilgrims, the Parson has, for the entire pilgrimage, been fasting from words – not feasting. Charlotte Gross notes that most readers “have found in this last Canterbury tale not the sense of fulfillment or resolution generally associated with conclusions, but rather a transcendence, denial, or even cancellation of the preceding tales, a negation of their diversity, festivity, and art” (177). The Parson negates the festivity not because diversity, festivity, and art are inherently evil. He negates them because he is instituting a more appropriate behavior for the conclusion of the pilgrimage – the gaze towards their immediate journey and the focus of their earthly lives. The Host and the others agree; they allow the game to end, but the game is ended before the Parson begins his “tale.”
The personality of the Parson and his social relationship with others on the pilgrimage provide interesting insight to the topic at hand. Historically, the medieval parson is among the lowest on the social scale. In Chaucer’s time, 8,500 parishes dotted the landscape of England. Each parish corresponded to the local village, and each village was supposed to have a priest (Singman and McLean 11). The parson of the parish is the shepherd for the sheep, but his social status is not any higher than that of his impoverished neighbors (Singman and McLean 11). Ozment states, “Parish clergy had two basic sources of income: a portion of the tithes regularly collected from parishioners and the modest fees for performing the sacraments of penance, marriage, baptism, and the last rites, together with such other pastoral duties as burials, vigils, and masses for the dead” (212-13). As some of the historical criticism states, most clergy with this job description spent a good part of their lives escaping their jobs and their poverty. Perhaps the scandal that left the Church most vulnerable was the practice of absenteeism. For many secular clergy in the medieval church, being a regular parish priest was a loathsome job, and “Church appointments often went to outsiders unaware of or indifferent to local religious needs and problems” (Ozment 196). Many who started in these positions simply did not fulfill their pastoral duties; instead, they “hired even less qualified substitutes to perform their offices, while they resided in Rome or more pleasant spots” (Ozment 196). The job of the regular parish priest was continually passed down until a number of “shepherds” were themselves almost illiterate and virtually uneducated, leaving their “flocks” unattended. Chaucer’s Parson, however, is not like most clergy. He is good, and he takes care of his people. As stated in the General Prologue, the Parson does not excommunicate those who cannot pay their taxes; instead, the good
Parson pays them. Chaucer’s Parson is not working for self-advancement. He uses his position to provide service for others. Some would say this behavior is uncommon for the time period. He does not fit in with the majority of the pilgrims, not because he is an outcast of society, but because Chaucer is calling attention to him. Even in the General Prologue, Chaucer the pilgrim spends most of his time and space describing the Parson in his activity while a good number of the pilgrims have been described in their inactivity. Chaucer the pilgrim does not mention the Parson’s array as he does with most of the other pilgrims, maybe because it is not much to talk about, but maybe because he senses something more substantial in the Parson’s character. D. W. Robertson suggests that Chaucer is using the Parson not to characterize a good person, but to characterize the bad ones. In other words, the Parson serves as a foil to the corrupt pilgrims (Robertson 109-10). The picture of the Parson is very powerful, and while it may by contrast demonstrate the failures of most of the individuals on the pilgrimage, I do not think Chaucer’s sole purpose in using the Parson is to demonstrate these failures. The Parson is most powerful because he stands for something positive – everlasting life. To suggest that the Parson is solely a foil takes this positive function away from him. Although the Parson does not have a position of power socially or politically, his moral position is very powerful.

Murry explains the significance of the medieval parson:

There was one person in the village – the person *par excellence* – the parson. He was the man marked out to represent the community. He belonged to it, in a way the lord did not. In perhaps most manors the lord was per force an absentee – a cathedral chapter, or a monastery, or a great soldier fighting for the king in France, or a courtier. The parson belonged to the village; he lived in it, and as like as not farmed in it as well. But on a higher plane than this he represented precisely what we may distinguish as the community of the village – community – its simple and mysterious organic wholeness. As a person, he was supported by the tithe of the
community as a whole[] because he represented an authority as superior to the lord as it was to the villains. (Murry 41-42)

The Parson is powerful because his position is universal. He is the Parson of the people no matter where he goes. Even when he leaves his parish, he is still the Parson. On the pilgrimage to Canterbury, the Parson is among the poorest on the trip. The Parson is among the lowest socially on the Canterbury pilgrimage as well, and yet his authority as a man of truth is intimidating to the other pilgrims, and this intimidation stems from who he is as much as what he says.

The Parson is often labeled a Lollard, and this judgment is based upon two points: the attack of the Host on the Parson and the literal interpretation of scripture that constitutes the Parson’s “tale.” The first issue is easily challenged. The Parson is twice referred to as a “Lollere” in The Canterbury Tales. At that crucial spot when the Host calls on the Parson to tell his tale after the Man of Law, the Parson responds, but his response is unexpected. In his answer, the Parson does not refer to Harry’s request for him to tell a tale; instead, he remonstrates him for his language: “What eyleth the man, so synfully to swere?” (II 1171). Because of the Parson’s response, the Host then answers, “I smelle a Lollere in the wynd” and “This Lollere heer wil prechen us somwhat” (II 1173 and 1177). Harry Bailly is not very reliable, especially in areas of doctrine. The term “Lollard” could be used as a derogatory term meaning “mumbler.” The Parson could have easily been called a Lollard without anyone associating him with

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13 The word “lollard” was not associated with the followers of Wycliffe until after the passing of their founder. In 1384, people began associating Wycliffe’s followers with the term “Lollard,” which previously had been used as a derogatory term meaning “mumbler” (Hollister 308). D. W. Robertson comments that most of the people using the term “Lollard” had no idea of its association with Wycliffe. These uninformed citizens “would have been deeply shocked by the more radical ideas of the Oxford philosopher” (133).
the Wycliffe movement. Thus, Harry’s name calling is just that and has no implications on the character of the Parson.

The issue of the Parson’s simplicity of interpretation as evidence of his Lollardy is a complicated issue, especially when we consider the medieval controversy on glossing. Lawrence Besserman gives a definition of “glossing” as it applies to medieval literature:

The earliest interpreters of the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin bibles tried to make sense of especially difficult passages by ‘glossing.’ In its simplest form, the practice consisted of adding an explanation of a verbal difficulty, a ‘gloss,’ . . . either between the lines and directly over the word to be explained or in the margin opposite the line in which the word occurred. (139)

The controversy over glossing is a very prominent one among the Parson and the other Canterbury pilgrims. Where the Parson is concerned, glossing is mentioned twice: once in the Epilogue of the Man of Law’s Tale and once in his own Prologue. In the first of these cases, the Shipman responds to the possibility of the Parson delivering his tale: “Here schal he nat preche;/He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche” (II 1179-80). In the Parson’s Prologue, the Parson is asked again to “[t]elle us a fable anon” (X 29). The Parson responds with “I wol nat glose” (X 45). In the first use of the word in the Man of Law’s Epilogue, the definition given by Besserman can easily be applied. The Shipman prevents the Parson from telling his “tale” that inevitably will be a treatise, full of the exegetical practices of the Church, including glossing, or explaining difficult texts. In the second instance, however, the Parson uses the term as synonymous with both fable and lie. When the Parson himself uses the term, he is not saying, “I will not translate difficult texts so you can better understand them”; instead, he is saying, “I will not tell you what you want to hear.” Besserman summarizes this idea:
In context, the Parson’s “I wol nat glose” means “I won’t deceive you with poetic fables” . . . Here, in the climactic linking scene of dramatic action that precedes the Parson’s Tale, Chaucer turns glossing against poetry – that is, against himself – as he prepares for the Parson’s hundreds of following quotations from the Bible, free of deceptive glossing and without concern for its potentially dangerous proximity to fabular entertainment. (157)

In his recent article “Chaucer’s English Lesson,” Andrew Cole has meticulously demonstrated differences in Wycliffite interpretation of texts. Although his article does not deal specifically with Chaucer’s Parson or the controversy over glossing, Cole’s conclusions illuminate the problem of the Parson and his interpretation of scripture in his tale. Over the years, critics have erroneously used the Wycliffite terms “naked text” and “naked words” interchangeably (1143). Cole points out that these two terms are not synonymous, a conclusion which revises how we interpret one aspect of Wycliffism altogether:

In debates about religion and hermeneutics, the Wycliffites used the phrase “naked words” to describe what they saw as the misuse of institutional, interpretive, and textual authority by friars and prelates, mainly: anything from everyday preaching to papal decrees must be grounded in Scripture or issue from it. Meanwhile orthodox theologians, chroniclers, bishops, and priests accused the Wycliffites of fixating only on the “naked text” of Scripture (sola Scriptura) without the proper regard for established exegetical, institutional and sacramental authority. (1143-144)

In light of Cole’s study, the image of Chaucer’s Parson changes. As he rejects the Host’s suggestion of a fable, he will not gloss, meaning he will not use “naked words” or “naked texts,” for Chaucer’s Parson neither misuses textual authority nor fixates only on the “naked text of Scripture.” Chaucer, with his final tale, has not only given us something we did not expect by giving us prose, but he has changed the way we view everything that has come before it. The Parson refuses to tell a fable and end The Canterbury Tales
in a light and comical manner. He will not gloss or lie, and he will not make our understanding of our lives and ourselves easy. He gives the truth. He does exactly what the Shipman has from the beginning feared he would do and that is to “sowen som difficile” (II 1182).

Some critics also see the glossing issue in relationship to the accusation that Chaucer’s Parson is a Lollard. This topic is important to my main idea, because if the Parson is considered a Lollard based on his refusal to gloss, then the purpose of the tale has changed. With the Parson’s refusal to gloss, Chaucer is, in a sense, rejecting some or all of literature, but especially his own literature. The Parson’s refusal to gloss gives the Parson a distinct role on the pilgrimage. His purpose is to awaken the pilgrims from their game of falsehood so that a message of truth can be received. Also, if the Parson is Lollard, and Lollards were known to preach consistently against pilgrimage, then the Parson would not have been on the pilgrimage, and we cannot simply dismiss this fact as a blunder on Chaucer’s part. John Fleming believes that if the Parson were truly a Lollard, then “wild horses could not have dragged him to the shrine of Becket at Canterbury” (159). Lillian also believes that the Parson’s very presence on the pilgrimage is enough to outweigh the attacks on his orthodoxy (70). Ruth Ames confirms Bisson’s statement:

Lollard priests had a reputation for simplicity, but orthodox as well as Lollard reformers condemned the abuses singled out here, and praised simple Christianity. On controversial matters, the Parson is entirely orthodox. Not only does he never express a heretical view, but also no Lollard would have been on a pilgrimage or preached the sermon that is his tale. (32-33)

Ames continues by discussing the orthodox content of the tale. She also agrees that the tale’s main theme is the sacrament of penance and that “the Lollards were hostile to the
sacraments in general, and private confession in particular was called by Wycliffe a device of the devil” (33). In her article “Chaucer’s Parson and the Specter of Wycliffism,” Katherine Little refers to the Parson as a “reformed” priest. Unconcerned about the charge of Wycliffism against the Parson, Little “reinvestigate[s] the contours of an orthodoxy that was at times sympathetic to Wycliffite belief” (228). While there is no doubt the Church needed reform, must it have come from “reformed” priests? Could it not have come from “well-formed” priests, i.e., priests who took their formation seriously? If we read the actual tale, it is obvious that the Parson, despite his simple use of language and his simple interpretations, is not a Lollard. The Parson advocates many ideas that Lollards were clearly against. If the Parson were a Lollard, his petition for penitence would have been personal, without the aid of the Church and her sacraments. Robertson suggests that Chaucer’s remedy for the apparent weaknesses of the individual pilgrims is not in itself individual. It is not “Wycliffite contrition without confession, which could easily degenerate into a mere sense of guilt”; instead, Chaucer offers “penance as described in the closing tale of the collection by the learned Parson” (220).

The Parson’s Tale serves a function: “[t]o knytte up al this feeste and make an ende” (X 47). But it does more than that; it causes trouble. If we follow the action of the Parson through The Canterbury Tales, the role of his final tale is more apparent. The Parson, although he is approached earlier about telling his tale, does not. The Parson does not reject the Host’s offer, but he does not accept it either. Perhaps the Parson decides not to pursue his tale after the Shipman’s interjection because he knows he is to be last. The Parson carries a heavy burden as the moral leader of the pilgrimage. He goes through the trip, knowing the whole way that the minute he opens his mouth, the
game will end. The Parson knows he must be last, and in this sense, it is the Parson who both perpetuates the game and ends it. Baldwin suggests that “in order to reserve this position for him it has been necessary to have him discouraged from coming forward earlier” (83). At this point in *The Canterbury Tales* (the Man of Law’s Epilogue), Chaucer is not yet ready to make us uncomfortable. At this early stage of the game, which is only Fragment Two, Chaucer is busy making us comfortable. Any speech from the Parson would ruin our complaisance entirely. Therefore, the Parson is silenced by the Shipman and accepts this sentence of judgment, not because he does not have an apt defense for himself, but because it is not yet time for him to speak. He knows that, in time, he too will deliver a sentence of judgment.

When the Parson does speak, his judgment is harsh. His judgment is harsh not because the Parson himself is judgmental, but because it makes the rest of the pilgrims very uneasy. Some see the Parson’s Tale as judgmental and accusatory. I contend, however, that if the Parson had wanted to accuse anyone, he would have had ample opportunity throughout the pilgrimage. A good number of the pilgrims flaunt their sins, almost daring someone to say something, yet no one does. St. Augustine, in his sermon on Psalm 102, addresses a similar issue:

> But men are easy and ready enough to inflict injuries, and hard to seek for reconciliation . . . .Decidedly then I will neither betray him, nor neglect him; I will reprove him in secret; I will set the judgment of God before his eyes; I will alarm his bloodstained conscience; I will persuade him to repentance. With this charity ought we to be endued. And hence men sometimes find fault with us, as if we do not reprove; or they think that we

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14Laura Finke remarks, “The logical point-by-point progression of the Parson’s Tale presents a conception of sin and penance predetermined by patristic authority” (97). Thus, “the tale’s orthodoxy is its limitation. It makes the mysteries of Christianity self-evident. This is not to suggest that the Parson never says anything unpleasant or unsettling, but that whatever he says falls within categories of received systems of knowledge – for him, divinely ordained reflections of the Truth. He fails to acknowledge the chasm between the divine logos and its parody in human language” (98).
know what we do not know, or that we hush up what we know. And it may be that what thou knowest, I know also but I will not reprove in thy presence because I wish to cure, not to act informer.

So the Parson, not a part of the game from the start, does not reprove the pilgrims in the moment of their sin. Like Augustine, the Parson says to the pilgrims “I reprove many of you now in public . . . . In all my words I set a mirror before you. Nor are they my words, but I speak at the bidding of the Lord, by whose terrors I refrain from keeping silence.” Taylor, too, remarks that “the Parson has no argument directly against the idea or practice of roadway entertainment . . . . The Parson plays neither Summoner to spiritual trial nor Pardoner of sins. He is one of his own flock, and a teacher ‘to synful men not despitous’ (1 516)” (408). Thus, the Parson’s point “is to judge not others but ourselves. What the Parson will talk about is how (notice it is the way, the process) to get to heaven. In its spare simplicity, the Parson’s announced intention comes as a shock, both simpler and more profound than the ‘entente’ of any of the pilgrim tellers encountered so far’ (Roper 168). The Parson brings the other pilgrims out of the game and back into the frame to remind,

For it may be thou art saying to thyself, “God hath promised me forgiveness, whenever I reform myself I am secure; I read the divine Scripture, ‘In the day that the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness, and doeth that which is lawful and right, I will forget all his iniquities.’ I am secure then, whenever I reform myself, God will give me pardon for my evil deeds.” What can I say to this? Shall I lift up my voice against God? Shall I say to God, Do not give him pardon? Shall I say, This is not written, God hath not promised this? If I should say ought of this, I should say falsely. Thou speakest well and truly; God hath promised pardon on thy amendment, I cannot deny it; but tell me, I pray thee; see, I consent, I grant, I acknowledge that God hath promised time pardon, but who hath promised thee a to-morrow? (Augustine)

The pilgrims, even if only for a very short time, are back on a pilgrimage, just in time to receive their penance – the Parson’s Tale. Dee Dyas instructs that “[t]he Parson’s
purpose in his tale is not merely to explain sin so that it may be correctly confessed: it is to explain sin so that it may be avoided” (188). The pilgrims have been enjoying the partly bawdy and partly moral tales that make up their game, and the Parson ends the game. The Parson reminds the pilgrims why they are on the pilgrimage in the first place. He “provides a long-deferred return to the poem’s initial emphasis on spiritual need and hope” (Georgianna 110). This return to the purpose of the pilgrimage (and for Chaucer the restatement of the pilgrimage as a metaphor for life) is unsettling. The Parson does indeed “sowen some difficulte.”

Some critics remark that the Parson’s Tale does not fit with the rest of the tales. Phyliss Portnoy suggests that “Chaucer’s ending is well prepared, both symbolically and dramatically, yet it has the effect of an about-face. It is at once organic and incongruous, cohesive and disjunctive; the reader’s composure does not seem to have been the poet’s ‘entente’” (286). Chaucer stuns us with the Parson’s Tale. He does exactly the opposite of what we would have expected him to do. The further we get into the Tales, the more we are filled with anticipation. We anxiously await the conclusion of the game, wondering who will win the game, and we are shocked with the Parson’s Prologue. No one wins because it is time to stop playing.

Perhaps Chaucer is using the Parson’s Tale to grab our attention. After several tales, our senses have been dulled. We no longer distinguish between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood. When we come to the final tale, the need to distinguish is taken away. The truth is laid simply before us, although it is the hardest tale to hear. Several readers already mentioned, in attempts to deal with the oddity of the tale, have tried to explain it as ironic. Portnoy confirms, however, that “no explanation, however
ingenious, can undo the disturbing jolt to expectations which the end of The Canterbury Tales gives its readers” (288). And no explanation can take away the significance of this tale and its special relationship to Chaucer’s personal beliefs. Chaucer, as a medieval Catholic, knows that “[p]enance is by definition the ‘sacrament of reconciliation,’ and that is why it is the subject of the last tale on the pilgrimage” (Ames 257). Paul Ruggiers notes that the Parson’s Tale “is the last act of a drama which now, in a sense, announces its theme, salvation” (89).

But, the Parson’s Tale does not have to take us out of the world completely. This is especially true considering Chaucer’s own response to the Parson’s Tale. Reiss, for example, sees the Parson’s Tale as a re-entrance to life:

this tale may be seen as a prologue to a return to London, that is, to this world. As an analysis of what is necessary for true penance – the proper contrition, confession, and satisfaction – it acts as a guide for man’s behavior, a prologue, as it were, for the real and continuing pilgrimage, represented artistically and symbolically here by the journey to Canterbury, but being finally the good Christian life that is to be led by each person after his new understanding, purification, and return to the world. It is this new life that will enable man to arrive at the real heavenly Jerusalem. (302-303)

Thus,

[t]his tale may be set within sight of the walls of Canterbury but the gates of the heavenly Jerusalem are still some way off. The Parson is not at this moment preparing his audience for death but for life; not administering the last rites but recommending the kind of penance undertaken annually by all serious Christians before they took communion at Easter. (Dyas 190).

15 James Dean notes a shift in thought between the Parson’s Prologue and his tale: “It is a mistake to read the Parson’s Tale in the same spirit as we understand the Prologue. They are quite different enterprises with different functions in closure. The Prologue sets the pilgrimage back in a symbolic framework – the life of man, the voyage to God – but the Tale itself, the sermonlike treatise, brings us back to the human community, to sins and their remedies, and to penitence as a cleansing, healing act” (“Dismantling” 755).
Charlotte Gross, too, notes that “[t]he Parson’s Tale introduces an equally strong anti-closural movement of ‘not ending.’ This is the forward-looking ‘goode wey’ (line 77), which leads the Chaucerian audience away from the fictional world of pilgrims and tales – not towards transcendent reality, but instead towards the English here and now, towards a practical scrutiny of self guided by the Parson’s careful treatment of penitence” (181).

And we must remember, too, that the Parson lives in the world. He deals with the day-to-day problems with which his parishioners are faced, the most obvious of which is poverty – both spiritual and material. Donald Howard says that the final topic of the Parson’s Tale is “contempt of the world,” but perhaps it is solely a contempt of the world as it currently is (172). The Parson, after all, is a reformer. The Parson’s sermon, then, is ever reminding of the fact that Christ’s return is imminent, if not for the whole world, at least for the individual soul. But, like other medieval poems such as *Pearl*, the reader is reminded that no matter how close or far the end, heaven, or at least the vision of heaven, is to be a part of all of our lives.

The Parson’s sole reason for being on the pilgrimage is for pilgrimage and penance – the frame. Interestingly, the Parson allows the Host to sway the other pilgrims away from the frame of pilgrimage and penance, and any time there is a chance they might be reminded, the Host hurries the game along. Some critics see the Parson as rejecting the pilgrimage once he gets to his tale on penance: “Another way the tale criticizes the pilgrimage is that this pilgrimage is a group activity with an *ad hoc* structure while confession is solitary and institutionally mandated. The collectivism, spontaneity, and voluntarism of the pilgrimage emphasize the contrasting aspects of confession: it is an individual activity and a matter of obligation” (Ferster 140-41). While confession or
the act of penance is an individual exercise, the penitent not only reconciles himself with
God, but also with the entire Church. A pilgrimage is an obvious sign of community, but
it is an arbitrary community. In the General Prologue, Chaucer the pilgrim says there
were “Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye / Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle / In
felaweshipe.” It is by chance that they are there together. Penance, however, restores a
deliberate community. It is a matter of obligation for the very reason that this deliberate
community called the Church is much more significant than the arbitrary community
established by this particular pilgrimage. The Parson understands the difference, and
while he does not end the temporary, arbitrary community (as he could), he does contrast
the two ideas by drawing a very exact picture of an individual confession that restores the
deliberate community. The Parson indeed leads the pilgrims down an individual path,
but it is only for the sake of them rejoining the community as their whole selves. Except
for his brief outburst in the Man of Law’s Epilogue, the Parson does not speak again until
he ends the game with his “tale.” Here again, Chaucer emphasizes the importance of
silence. This powerful, authoritative voice that is the Parson has plenty to say – he ends
up with the longest tale – but he does not utter one word of it until it is his turn. But
perhaps this is Chaucer’s plan. Perhaps Chaucer too is struggling between the ideas of
game and pilgrimage and penance. And if this is true, then we must question his purpose
in concluding with the Parson’s Tale and, ultimately, the Retraction. Perhaps Chaucer,
too, has forgotten the frame, but his joy at rediscovering it cannot be forgotten, and
maybe that is his “entente.” In his article “Dismantling the Canterbury Book,” James
Dean comments that with the Parson’s Tale, Chaucer never “destroyed the book,
‘deconstructed’ it, or rendered it unreadable. He dismantled to expose the architectonic
features of *The Canterbury Tales*, to lay bare his storytelling art, and to reintegrate himself into his community as an act of penance, or at least in the guise of penitence” (746).

Critics often question whether or not the Parson’s view of literature is also Chaucer’s view. Laura Finke says that the Parson’s Tale “reminds us that we must distinguish between Christian morality as part of an artist’s cultural milieu and Christian morality as an absolute determinant of his art” (104-105). Jim Rhodes does not think so:

> What is conspicuously absent from his poetry, particularly *The Canterbury Tales*, is any unifying or overarching theological vision that ultimately binds all of the tales together in a singular point of view. The lack of a unifying theological vision is a strength rather than a weakness of the poem because its absence prevents the poem from becoming tendentious or wedded to a specific ideology that might turn it into a polemic or have it serve some end other than its own discourse. (169)

What is lacking in Rhodes’s study is a serious account of the Parson’s Tale. Looking at the Parson’s Tale as just another tale would indeed limit its significance, but if Chaucer intended it, from the first, to be part of the frame, then its significance is increased. Rhodes does not provide an explanation for the Parson’s Tale. The title of his study, *Poetry Does Theology*, may explain his exclusion – the Parson’s Tale is not poetry, but this is Chaucer’s point. A man cannot tell full truth in game and play. Rhodes does not believe, however, that any tale can be favored over another. All the pilgrims’ voices are equal, all offering contrasting but viable versions of theology:

> Allowing each individual pilgrim to speak for him- or herself instead of using a master narrator, dialogizes the poem, leaving us with a multiplicity of discourses, no one of which functions as a master text that serves as a vision of the whole. By dispersing the discussion of theological issues throughout the poem, he implies that all of the pilgrims, from all levels and vocations in society, have a stake in the religious or doctrinal matters that impinge upon their lives. (170)
Finke also finds the Parson’s Tale to be lacking in authority: “The ironic discrepancy between the Parson’s anatomy of the letter of the law and the reader’s perception of his failure to capture or convey its spirit suggests that he is not Chaucer’s spokesman nor his tale a redefinition of speech, and poetic speech in particular. . .” (104). I can certainly see why Rhodes would view the individual voices in this light; however, Chaucer does provide us with a final, authoritative voice – the Parson. The Parson gives the answer to all of the questions. Confirmed by Chaucer’s own final statement, perhaps the Parson is Chaucer’s answer to the problems the Church is facing. In the Church in England in 1399, there are not enough authoritative voices who can set people on the correct path. Instead they are led astray by indulgent friars and monks. Jim Rhodes also distinguishes between game and play and pilgrimage:

Chaucer’s willingness to mix play with the sacred thus is not an attempt to demean the sacred or, simply, to satirize late medieval pilgrimage mores. He was not content to use pilgrimage merely in the traditional literary context as a metaphor for the journey of life when it encompassed so much more of human experience. Besides the symbolic representation of the journey and the goal, he chose to include something of the personal character and motivations of individual pilgrims including their impulse to play. Chaucer acknowledges that an eschatological strain is inherent in all pilgrimages but he also recognizes that coextensive with the urge to direct all of one’s activities toward some specific end or goal is the urge to allow things to happen unpredictably or at random. (178)

Linda Tarte Holley and David Raybin put the burden on the reader:

For all its spiritual cheerfulness, however, and all its obvious importance as a tale to conclude tales, a final voice to subsume all the other voices headed to Canterbury, a last word from a notable maker of words, the tale which Chaucer assigns to his righteous cleric seems to have inspired sentence and solaas in remarkably few critics. Studies of Chaucer’s spirituality often refer to the Parson and the Parson’s Prologue, but only occasionally and generally cursory analysis has been given to the language of the Parson’s Tale. It is a rare reader of The Canterbury Tales who imagines him- or herself to have taken seriously Chaucer’s suggestion that a reader who does not wish to hear a particular tale should ‘Turne over the
leef and chese another’ (I 3177). Nonetheless, the critical history of the Parson’s Tale (and, indeed, of much of Chaucer’s overtly spiritual writing) leads one to suspect that many a modern scholar eager to consume the Miller’s Tale is inclined to turn over the leaf upon encountering the Parson’s. (xii)

Thus, “It is . . . distressing that even scholars who do consider seriously the matter of the Parson’s Tale almost uniformly open their accounts by apologizing for Chaucer’s composition of this tale . . .” (xii). Readers who do take the Parson’s statements seriously find it ironic that most critics apologize for Chaucer’s apology. In his most recent article on the Parson’s Tale, Siegfried Wenzel finds in general that there are two different ways of reading this controversial tale: “one is to read the Parson’s Tale as one among twenty-four tales in which Chaucer has a wide variety of characters tell tales that, to say the least, fit their narrators’ professions and personal characteristics, and may do so in an ironic vein; the other is to read the Parson’s Tale as in some fashion set apart” (56). As long as the game is continuing, Rhodes’s scenario makes sense; however, once the game is ended by the Parson, once the pilgrims are back into the frame for good, the hierarchy is reestablished. Looking at things from the Parson’s perspective, which is an orthodox Christian perspective and not one tainted by the sins of the world, we see that the hierarchy has been inverted. In the world that the Parson describes and longs for, the first shall be last. Here, the Parson is last, and taking his place humbly and without complaint, he looks forward to the time when he will be first.

Rhodes also questions the lack of emphasis on the goal of the actual pilgrimage: the shrine at Canterbury. This lack of emphasis points to the fact that the process of travel is the point Chaucer emphasizes:

Normally when we think of a pilgrimage we think of the sacred goal. Most pilgrimage literature reinforces this impression by concentrating
rather exclusively on the sacred shrine with only passing reference to the special and separate character of the journey. In any enterprise, however, the outcome is not the only significant event; the actual play counts for something too. After all, the ceremonies conducted at the pilgrim shrines could just as easily have been dispensed at one’s local parish church. What gives a pilgrimage its unique character and makes the ceremony at the shrine all the more efficacious is the journey itself – the transition from place to place. The journey provides both a sense of detachment from one’s normal routine and psychological refreshment (refrigerium) to embrace anew the spiritual values offered at the shrine. (176-77)

Had *The Canterbury Tales* ended with the conclusion of the Manciple’s Tale and the Parson, like his brother the Plowman not been called upon to end the game, I might have noticed the lack of emphasis on the physical goal of the pilgrimage. As it stands, however, the Parson has given us a vision of something much greater than a shrine, and it can only be our own lack of vision that keeps us from seeing this.

Some critics try to have it both ways; they want to keep the seriousness of the Parson’s Tale and the comic nature of most of the tales. In his article on the Parson’s Tale, Michael Olmert treats it as if it were rules to a game, a game of life. Thus, the Parson gives the other pilgrims clues to winning the game and the ultimate prize – heaven:

The Parson’s Tale is steeped in play and presents the rules for playing the game of life – a game clearly a part of Christian doctrine. That is, it rightly concludes a series of tales told by game players, in several of which ‘losing’ strategies for playing are espoused. The Parson’s advice is that of the coach properly schooled in Christian eschatology. His tenets may seem bland and predictable to the casual reader, but he is clearly committed to making ‘winners’ out of those who will listen. (159)

If it is to be treated as a game, it must be a most serious game, for the Parson describes the alternative to winning.

The link between the Parson’s Tale and the Retraction is, at least to this reader, obvious. The Parson has given his readers instructions for Confession, Penance, and
Satisfaction, and, like all people who have been confronted with a choice, we (readers, pilgrims, author) must choose. Chaucer makes his choice: “Constructing his ‘meditation,’ the Parson is asking for an introspection that will lead to another kind of ‘tale-telling,’ the confessional variety. That Chaucer the poet is the first person or character to make such a confession in the form of his Retraction is no surprise. He is the nexus for all the voices in his texts” (Pigg 445).

There are several arguments about what to do with the rest of Tales after we are done with the Parson’s Tale. Are they retracted, ready to be tossed aside? One cannot help but struggle with Chaucer’s intentions here. Is the Retraction ironic? I have recently been aware of some retractions that have taken place in the newspaper and on television. What often happens with a retraction is that it calls even more attention to that which is retracted. Baumlin suggests that “it is only after traveling with these pilgrims, participating in their all-too-understandable weaknesses and sins, reasoning our way through the contrast between the fruitful Parson and the deadly, barren Pardoner – only then are we moved fully by Chaucer’s own response” (141). Mehl proffers, “Like the Retractions, the Parson’s Tale is not the definite and authoritative answer to everything in the book, but an offer we may accept or reject” (224). But here is the point that almost everyone except Chaucer misses. The Parson’s Tale is the definite answer to everything in the book, but it is still an offer we may accept or reject.
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