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CHAUCER'S MORAL VISION

A STUDY OF THE FUNCTION OF THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS IN
'THE CANTERBURY TALES'

John Alexander MacPherson, B.A.

Submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies of
Assumption College, Windsor, Ontario, in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts.

- 1955 -

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Approved for the
Committee on Graduate Studies

CP Crowley C.S.B.

Mary Manley

G. C. Garrow C.S.B.

Albert D. Whitcomb

D E D I C A T I O N

**To Jhesu Crist and Hys heoly moder
Seinte Marie of the Assumptioun de
I dedicat thys werke of myne.....**

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T

My sincerest gratitude is herewith extended to the following people, without whose help the completion of this essay would have been impossible: my Father and Mother, Sisters and Brother; the faculty of Assumption College, especially Father C.P. Crowley, OSB., Chairman of the English Department; my graduate director, Doctor Mary Manley; the librarians of Assumption College and Wayne University, and of the Public Libraries of Windsor and Detroit; and the typists of this manuscript, Miss Mary Dalton and the Religious of the Good Shepherd.

J.A.M.

May 1, 1955,
Assumption College

A B S T R A C T

Except for the somewhat vague and casual allusions of several modern critics there has been no detailed study of The Parson's Tale and Chaucer's moral vision in forty years.

We have no doubt that Chaucer was a learned man, well versed in the ways of the human mind and heart, and of the Church and world of which he was so much a part. With this in mind, it would seem logical to suggest that the poet had a serious intention in writing The Canterbury Tales.

His much celebrated irony is not necessarily a contradiction of the premise, but rather a means by which it is made all the more effective. The notion that because he wrote in the waning middle ages, it would be unlikely that so entertaining a work could be written for a serious purpose, will not bear scrutiny. It is reasonable, therefore, to suggest that Chaucer was a serious-minded as well as a comic poet.

The Parson's Tale has been described as a moral treatise written in accordance with the beliefs of the age; however, we have no doubt that it is in complete accord with Chaucer's own beliefs, and with the philosophy of life which is hinted at in his "Retractions."

What scholars have alluded to incidentally, I have

found to be justified. It is the purpose of this essay to examine the precise way in which the Parson's sermon is a condemnation of the seven deadly sins and to juxtapose the findings with the moral portraits provided by the General Prologue and the dramatic links. By doing this, it becomes possible to suggest that the seven deadly sins have a structural value within The Canterbury Tales and that the General Prologue and links are the exemplification of the sins as they are analyzed in The Parson's Tale.

Such a scheme has additional value if we consider that the Canterbury pilgrims would be encouraged to avail themselves of the Sacrament of Penance as a fitting preparation for their arrival at the shrine of St. Thomas and for the devotions in which they would undoubtedly participate while there. Allegorically, The Parson's Tale can be thus become a plea for preparation for death, judgement, and one's final reward.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

This essay embodies the findings of a Graduate Seminar in which the seven deadly sins were examined in relation to The Canterbury Tales of Geoffrey Chaucer in an effort to determine to what extent the ancient seven-fold moral system could be shown to have served as a unifying element in the structure of the Tales.

The seven deadly sins can be noted in English vernacular literature after 1281 when the Council of Lambeth ruled that priests should instruct the people in the seven "capitalia peccata".¹ This and subsequent decrees stimulated the composition of a considerable number of instructional handbooks and 'paternosters' designed to help priests to carry out their duties and to assist penitents in confessing their sins. These works properly belong to the realm of theological literature and only concern us insofar as they contributed to the popularity of the sins theme among the laity. "At the end of the twelfth century, however, the sins began to be used by secular writers in

1. M.W. Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins, (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1952), p. 91.

increasing numbers, until in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a great many works dealt with them, directly or indirectly."¹ During Chaucer's time ample use was made of this subject matter by the authors of the morality plays then in vogue. Among his contemporaries, Langland, Lydgate, Gower, and Dunbar made the seven deadly sins a dominant theme in some of their most notable work. It has been said that the 'confession' scene in Piers Plowman is possibly the greatest treatment of the seven deadly sins to be found anywhere in English literature.² They form the framework of John Gower's English work, Confessio Amantis; and are discussed in his French work, Mirour de l'Omme; and in his Latin Vox Clamantis.³ Lydgate's Assembly of Gods has for its subject matter the struggle between virtues and vices. The grotesque realism of Dunbar's The Dance of the Seven Deadly Synn is evident from the title.⁴ Other works of this period, such as The Pricke of Conscience, The Pilgrimage of the Soul, Jacob's Well, and A Song Called the Devils' Parliament, all deal with the

1. M.W. Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins, p. 107.

2. G.S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 159.

3. Bloomfield, Sins, pp. 193-196.

4. Ibid., p. 228.

seven deadly sins in more or less detail.¹

Chaucer's schematic use of the sins was a thesis of the late Professor Tupper: that in The Canterbury Tales

"treatment of the sins [is] not casual but organic; [and that] in several of the stories the poet finds these familiar conceptions of medieval theology so serviceable a framework that he recurs often to the well-known formula as a convenient and suggestive device of construction."²

John Livingstone Lowes' denunciation of this hypothesis rests on Tupper's random choice of examples in support of his theory, for he claims that "one may choose at will, reject at will, combine at will, and that by such a method anything whatever may be proved."³

In two instances only does Tupper show a direct relationship between the tale and the vice it supposedly exemplifies: Avarice is found in the Pardoner's Tale and Wrath in the Friar-Summoner group.⁴ In the other Tales used to illustrate his thesis - those of the Wife of Bath, Manciple, Man of Law, Physician and Second Nun, the sin is indirectly

1. Bloomfield, Sins, pp. 221-223.

2. Frederick Tupper, "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins", PMLA, XXX (1914), p. 96.

3. J.L. Lowes, "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins", PMLA, XXX (1915), p. 358.

4. Tupper, "Chaucer and Sins", p. 112.

represented, according to Lowes, "through branches, concrete faults, of antitypes."¹ Later, Lowes states that "the aptness of a story to exemplify a vice counts for little, for (once given the all embracing compass of the seven deadly sins, their branches, and their antitypes, and the branches of their antitypes) the story would be far to seek that was not potentially a 'Sins Tale'."²

Tupper further bases his view on the fact that similar tales were used by Gower in specifically treating the Sins Motif. His themes of pride in the Tale of Florent, wrath in Phoebus and Cornis, and envy in the Tale of Constance find their counterparts respectively in the Tales of the Wife of Bath, The Manciple, and the Man of Law.³ Lowes rejects this apparent parallel treatment as indicative of a sins motif in Chaucer claiming: "Nor does the fact that a story was once so used thereby create for it a deadly sins tradition."⁴

1. Lowes, "Chaucer and Sins", p. 241.

2. Ibid., p. 260.

3. Tupper, "Chaucer and Sins", pp. 97-100.

4. Lowes, "Chaucer and Sins", p. 260.

Tupper claims still further support for his theory "by making several of the story-tellers incarnate the very sins that they explicitly condemn."¹ In this connection his most readily admissible illustration is the Pardoner whose frank self-accusation is found in his prologue:

"Thus can I preche agayn that same vice/ Which that I use, and that is avaryce."² Others he cites are the Manciple, as representing and condemning wrath; and the Wife of Bath, pride.³ Except in the case of the Pardoner, Lowes rejects this gratuitous linking of teller with tale and of both exemplifying a deadly sin claiming that: "in the case of all the Tales but one, the evidence is either wholly wanting or ambiguous. And in that one (The Pardoner's Tale), where Chaucer does oppose rule of life to dogma he makes his meaning unmistakable."⁴

Despite the attractiveness of the neat symmetry which Tupper's theory would furnish to the structure of The Canterbury Tales, we are inclined to agree with Lowes

1. Tupper, "Chaucer and Sins", p. 107.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 109.

4. Lowes, "Chaucer and Sins", p. 370.

that: "Out of the maze of categories, with their unnumerable overlappings and the interlacings, one may choose at will, ignore at will, combine at will. By such a method anything whatever may be proved."¹

Moreover, it may be questioned if Tupper was fully convinced of his own argument, for we are surprised when Tupper casually or cautiously states: "To Chaucer the motif is merely a device which appealed at intervals,"² or again, when he says: "The formula could be dropped and resumed at will."³ If the sins motif were really an organic part of the structure, it is highly improbable that the author could so readily rid himself of such a necessary element.

It becomes evident then that no sequence or pattern for the seven deadly sins can be upheld in the individual stories of the Canterbury pilgrims, and if Chaucer followed any sequence it must be sought elsewhere. It is the purpose of this paper to offer evidence of the existence of a pattern of the seven deadly sins within The Canterbury Tales. I shall examine the principal characters of the

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1. Lewes, "Chaucer and Sins", p. 358.
 2. Tupper, "Chaucer and Sins", p. 121.
 3. Ibid., p. 124.

General Prologue and use them as typical illustrations of the vices analyzed by the Parson. The dramatic links between the Tales will be adduced as further evidence of the structural value of The Parson's Tale. There would seem to be a vital connection between the theory set forth by the Parson in connection with each of the deadly sins and the Characters of the General Prologue in whom these vices are depicted.

Although Lowes seems to have removed any possibility of the seven deadly sins serving as a framework for the Tales, the structural value of The Parson's Tale has not been hitherto discussed. It seems plausible to consider that Chaucer was a moralist as well as an artist in the arrangement of the portrait gallery of the General Prologue and the concluding homily of the Parson.

In the first chapter a survey of the General Prologue is given with reference to a scale of moral values, that is, by grouping the characters as types according to social status and as individuals illustrating specific vices. The character of the Parson is discussed to show the appropriateness of his role as homilist on the 'Seven Deadly Sins', and an evaluation is made of the content of his Tale.

Chapter Two relates The Parson's Tale to be the General Prologue using the seven deadly sins as a frame of

reference in order to discover characters who illustrate each of the vices condemned by the Parson.

In Chapter Three an assessment of the findings concludes the essay. The artistic values of The Parson's Tale are given three-fold consideration: its relation to The Canterbury Tales as a whole, its significance as a conclusion to the poem and its ethical aspect as a commentary on the pilgrims as we first see them in the General Prologue.

The text of The Canterbury Tales which has been used is the edition by F.N. Robinson: The Poetical Works of Chaucer.¹ To facilitate identification, the source of a quoted passage are indicated by the title of the tale, while pagination and linal notation are in accordance with Robinson's text.

1. F.N. Robinson, The Poetical Works of Chaucer, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1933.)

CHAPTER ONE

A modern critic considers The Canterbury Tales to be the Human Comedy of the Middle Ages.¹ Such a designation implies both relationship and contrast with another famous medieval 'comedy': Dante's Divine Comedy which was well known by Chaucer, and which has influenced literature from the fourteenth century to modern times. In the Inferno Dante describes evil in all its manifestations from ancient days to contemporary life in his native Italy. From the depths of Hell the pilgrim-poet climbs the Mount of the Purgatorio and ascends through the spheres of the Paradiseo. In a single vision Dante "comprehends man in the multiplicity of his relationship to God - through the spheres of moral being, from the states of perdition (or utter deprivation of God) to the higher and highest states of beatitude (or contemplative love of God)."²

Chaucer, in The Canterbury Tales has made a study of the social order as it existed during the transitional period of the late fourteenth century. The pilgrimage is what Blake has called "Le Pelerinage de la Vie Humaine".³

1. John Speirs, Chaucer the Maker, (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 98.

2. Ibid., p. 99.

3. Ibid.

Jollity pervades the characters of this pilgrimage and even the scandalous conduct of several of the company does not seem to hinder our acceptance of them as real people, not too unlike ourselves or the people of any age, as Dryden has noted.¹ But more important is the fact that "there is no mitigation of the evil in the Canterbury pilgrims nor in the characters of their tales; indeed, the rogues and scoundrels have been remarked to predominate in The Canterbury Tales. Yet the Divine order - in relation to which we are all judged - is not felt to be disturbed, and the contemplation of evil characters is correspondingly steady."²

With the exception of the late Professor Tupper, none of the modern critics seem to be concerned with any possible moral values which Chaucer may have presented in his poem; rather, they tend to dismiss such a possibility in the manner of the following statement: "It is not very likely that Chaucer consciously constructed the social and ethical framework of the General Prologue."³ This is more than curious since most critics will intimate that "like

1. John Dryden, "Preface to Fables, Ancient and Modern", The Great Critics, ed. J.H. Smith & E.W. Parks (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1939), pp. 372-373.

2. Speirs, Chaucer the Maker, p. 99.

3. D.S. Brewer, Chaucer, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1953), p. 135. Author's Italics.

Langland he venerates the medieval ideal of the three basic orders of society, Knighthood, Clergy, Ploughmen [and] . . . does not satirize those Pilgrims who represent this ideal of society."¹ The question immediately arises whether satire of the discreditable characters is not perhaps the most effective means of drawing attention to foible or vice. When we consider the satirical poems of Dryden and the comedies of Ben Jonson, Moliere, Wilde, and Shaw, it is possible to conclude that Chaucer's characters of the General Prologue are in the same vein, and that in his work the ethical aspect must be considered to be an important element. The fact that the idealized characters - the Knight, Clerk, Plowman and Parson - are not satirized but presented as types of virtue would make them stand in bold relief. This implicit contrast would be a subtle, artistic means to stress the satire.

A comparison of the Monk, Friar, Prioress, Summoner and Pardoner with the Parson makes the latter conspicuous as the exemplification of what they are not. The Clerk, a professional scholar and probably a minor cleric² is a model of integrity and zeal in contradistinction to the other professional men such as the Physician, Man of Law,

1. Brewer, Chaucer, p. 155.

2. Robinson, Notes, p. 759.

Merchant, and Shipman who are solely interested in work as a means to amassing wealth. The Wife of Bath and the Franklin stand in contrast to the Knight's humility and courtesy, while the Reeve and the Miller are coarse and crafty when viewed in the light of the charitable and diligent Plowman. As idealizations, however, the Knight, Clerk, Parson and Plowman possess the same virtues; each is prudent, temperate, strong and just, poor in spirit, and charitable, according to his state in life. When juxtaposed to other professions the comparison and contrast are qually startling. The Knight's selflessness can be contrasted to the clerics' selfishness; the Parson's devotion to God is an indictment of the professional men's pursuit of Mammon; the Clerk's habitual silence highlights the Reeve's complaining and the Miller's boasting; while the ostentation of the Wife of Bath and of the Franklin is shamed by the Plowman's humility. Implicit in these comparisons are the remedies which will eradicate the different vices and reform the individuals. Because the contrasts are so sharp it is impossible to ignore the possibility of such idealized examples serving as suggested remedies to the vices presented. Character contrast is one means by which Chaucer presents a moral vision of "workaday actual England"¹ and of all time. The realistic

1. J.S.P. Tatlock, The Mind and Art of Chaucer, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1950), p. 92.

portraiture of fourteenth century worldly clerics and knavish laity is given universal significance by setting them against the pattern of moral goodness according to which rational creatures should live.

What is even more significant, however, is the structural position of The Parson's Tale at the close of The Canterbury Tales.¹ It is the norm or code of morality by which the characters of the General Prologue can be evaluated. Functionally, The Parson's Tale is a parallel to the sermon of Resoun in The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman.² Langland and Chaucer seem to be concerned with the same moral purpose: preparation for the Sacrament of Penance; and there can be little doubt that this religious duty would have been incorporated into the scheme of The Canterbury Tales had Chaucer completed the narrative and brought his pilgrims to Canterbury "the hooly blisful mirtir for to seke,/ That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke."³ Chaucer begins his narrative

1. "Fragment X The Parson's Tale . . . is regularly the final fragment in the MSS." (Robinson, Notes, p. 872).

2. William Langland, The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman, ed. W.W. Skeat (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), Passus V, pp. 43-66.

3. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 19, ll. 17-18.

with this avowedly pious purpose of the pilgrims, and though they seem to have lost sight of it in merriment and storytelling, The Parson's Tale serves to recall it to mind; it is a sermon, an examination of conscience, and a preparation for devotions in honour of "the hooly blisful martir".

"To knytte up al this feeste, and make an ende",¹ Chaucer has the Parson preach a sermon.² Of all the pilgrims it can be readily observed that the Parson was the only one qualified to deliver such a homily; in four instances it is noted that "He taughte, but first he folwed it hymselfe."³ He is portrayed as a "noble ensample", a "poure Persoun of a Toun" who taught by "good ensample" who was noted for his "fairnesse". In no uncertain terms Chaucer claims that "A bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys",⁴ One who was a "shepherde and noight a mercenarie."⁵ The Parson is a poor man "But riche he was of hooly thoight and werk"⁶ who refused to run off to

1. Robinson, The Parson's Prologue, p. 272, l. 47.

2. Robinson, The Canterbury Tales, p. 16.

3. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 25, l. 528.

4. Ibid., p. 25, l. 524.

5. Ibid., p. 24, l. 514.

6. Ibid., p. 24, l. 480.

St. Paul's in London to recite Office for a stipend and to visit with friends, "But dwelte at hoom, and kepte wel his folde."¹ No one of the pilgrims measures up to the integrity of the Parson. He is a unique example of an ideal parish priest of whom the prototype is the Good Shepherd of the Gospel.

The Parson's Tale is "mentioned without enthusiasm by most critics as a sermon on penitence and omitted as such by most readers."² On one level of meaning it seems to be presented "as an appropriate ending to a pilgrimage before the Saint's shrine is reached."³ Allegorically, it might well be deemed a preparation "for a last confession to be made on 'that perfect glorious pilgrimage' that is called the celestial, to the Heavenly Jerusalem."⁴ It has been previously noted that the homily was common reading material in the late middle ages, and even in the time of Chaucer spirituality was a goal in life for attainment of which both doctrine and discipline were required. One author notes that "Some of the most beautiful and

1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 24, l. 512.

2. Madeleva, Sister M., A Lost Language and Other Essays on Chaucer, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1951), p.69.

3. Coghill, Neville, The Canterbury Tales, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951), p. 511.

4. Ibid.

excellent books of this type in the entire literature of sanctity were written in Chaucer's England during his lifetime."¹

The Parson's Tale begins with a scriptural text (Jeremias VI, 16),² and an invocation of prayer. Penitence is then defined as "verray repentance of a man that halt hymself in serwe and oether peyne for his giltes."³ The treatise falls naturally into three main divisions according to the threefold nature of the Sacrament: "Contricioun of herte, Confessioun of Mouth, and Satisfaccioun."⁴ The Sacrament of Penance is likened to a tree of which "The root . . . is contrition, the branches and the leaves are confession, the fruit satisfaction, the seed grace and in the heat of that seed the Love of God."⁵

The first part deals with the reason for contrition, that God wishes "that no man wole perisse, but wole that we comen alle to the knoweleche of hym, and to the blisful

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1. Madeleva, Lost Language, p. 71.
 2. "Stand ye on the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, which is a good way, and walk ye in it, and you shall find refreshment for your souls."
 3. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 273, l. 86.
 4. Ibid., p. 274, l. 105.
 5. Coghill, The Canterbury Tales, p. 511.

lif that is perdurable."¹ The qualities of contrition are examined, the heart of the sinner being "verray repentaunt."² We learn of the effects of contrition and of the two kinds of sin: venial, when "man love Jhesu Crist lasse than hym oghte;"³ and deadly, "whan a man loveth any creature moore than Jhesu Cristoure Creatour."⁴ The next point is counsel as to examination of conscience and avoidance of occasions of sin. A detailed analysis of the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, anger, accidie or sloth, avarice, gluttony, lechery, and of their different branches and possible remedies, follows.⁵ The seven deadly sins are compared to a tree: "Of the roote of thise sevenne synnes, thanne, is Pride the general roote of alle harmes. For of this roote spryngen certain braunches, as Ire, Envy, Accidie or Slewthe, Avarice or Coveitise . . .

1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 273, l. 75.

2. Ibid., p. 274, l. 113.

3. Ibid., p. 283, l. 358.

4. Ibid.

5. Definition and analysis of each sin form the subject matter of the following chapter.

Gloytonye, and Lesherye."¹

The second part of the discourse treats of the confession of sins and of the aggravating circumstances of sin. This portion is concluded by enumeration of the elements of a good confession: "it must be freely willed and made in full faith. A man must only confess his own sins and truthfully with his own mouth, not painted with subtle words. It must be considered, not a hasty act, and frequent."² This portion opens with a quotation from St. Augustine reminding us that "Synne is every word and every dede, and al that men coveiten, agayn the law of Jhesu Crist; and this is for to synne in herte, in mouth, and in dede, by thy fyve wittes."³ The aggravating circumstances of sin are enumerated as: station in life, place, whether committed alone or with another, the number of times, the nature of the temptation, and the circumstances of the sin itself.⁴ A good confession requires "serweful bitterness of herte . . . humylitee in confession",⁵ and that it

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1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 285, l. 388.
 2. Coghill, The Canterbury Tales, p. 512.
 3. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 309, l. 959.
 4. Ibid., p. 309, ll. 961-978.
 5. Ibid., p. 310, l. 985.

shall be "hastily doon",¹ that is to say, as soon as possible after the sin has been committed. Also, "thou shalt shryve thee of alle thy synnes to o man",² and lastly, "lat no synne been unteold, as fer as thow hast remembraunce".³ Confession must be freely willed, confessed to a lawful priest, without dissimulation, and should be made at least once a year.⁴

The third and last part of the Parson's sermon is concerned with the satisfaction or restitution that the sinner must make to God and his neighbour "moost generally in almesse and in bodily payne."⁵ Prayer and fasting are also upheld as effective means of satisfaction, while the penitent sinner is encouraged in "yevynge of good counsell and comfort, goostly and bodily".⁶ Fear, shame, presumption, 'wanhope' (or despair) must be avoided if one is properly to make amends for his sins.⁷ Through suffering

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1. Robinson, *The Parson's Tale*, p. 310, l. 998.
 2. Ibid., P. 311, l. 1006.
 3. Ibid., p. 311, l. 1010.
 4. Ibid., pp. 311-312, ll. 1012-1027.
 5. Ibid., p. 312, l. 1029.
 6. Ibid., p. 312, l. 1030.
 7. Ibid., p. 313, l. 1057.

and penance man will gain the "endeless blisse of hev-
 ens",¹ and where man, free from sickness, frailty, hunger
 and cold, shares "the blisful compaignye that rejoysen hem
 everemo, everich of otheres joye".² This joyous eternity
 is the fruit of penance and "This blisful regne may men
 purchase . . . by deeth and mortificacion of synne."³

The subject matter, organization and treatment of
 the seven deadly sins are not original with Chaucer but
 are derived from a variety of sources. Whether The Par-
 son's Tale was merely translation or free adaptation by
 Chaucer is disputed.⁴ The author of the original treatise
 is unknown; however, it is a tribute "to an honorable
 group of canonized saints: Jerome, Augustine, Gregory,
 Bernard; of uncanonized scholars: Aristotle, Tertullian,
 Seneca, Cato, Boethius."⁵ Its clarity and detailed method,
 using definition and division, can be found in numerous
 books of religious instruction "from the catechism of the
 Council of Trent to the child's text today."⁶

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1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 314, l. 1076.
 2. Ibid., p. 314, l. 1077.
 3. Ibid., p. 314, l. 1080.
 4. Robinson, Notes, p. 873.
 5. Madeleva, Lost Language, p. 72.
 6. Ibid., p. 75.

The Parson's Tale has the same significance, timelessness, and aptness today as it had when it was first composed, for its immediacy is apparent to those who adhere to Church doctrine concerning the Sacrament of Penance.

CHAPTER TWO

The following discussion of the seven deadly sins in relation to The Canterbury Tales will follow the same sequence that Chaucer employed in The Parson's Tale, that is: Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, and Lechery. The first five are spiritual and the last two, carnal sins. This sequence of the sins originated with St. Gregory the Great (d.604) and has been traditional in Western Civilization. In addition to its use by Chaucer, it was also employed by Dante and Gower.¹

The question often arises as to why all evil has been systematized into seven deadly or capital sins, rather than, say, six or eight, or any other number. In commenting on the work of St. Gregory in this regard one critic has observed that "seven comprehends all time, as the Biblical story of creation implies, seven indicates universality."²

Seven has been made a symbol in man's destiny. The world was created in seven days, Egypt was visited by seven plagues, Shakespeare immortalized the seven ages of man, while God gave us seven gifts of the Holy Ghost and seven sacraments by which to overcome seven sins.

1. Bloomfield, Sins, p. 73.

2. Ibid.

PRIDE:- Chaucer's Parson, after a discourse on the Sacrament of Penance continues his treatise on the sins by an analysis of Pride: "the general roote of alle harmes"¹ which is likened to a tree from which "sprygen certein braunches."²

It is, therefore, in good homiletic style that Chaucer begins his analysis with Pride, the sin of Lucifer, the arch-rebel, and of Adam and Eve, by whose original sin human nature has been vitiated. By branches and twigs, Chaucer means the species or acts which comprise the sin. Pride is described as having sixteen branches "and many another twig that I kan nat declare."³ These branches are: disobedience, boasting, hypocrisy, spite, arrogance, impudence, swelling of heart, insolence, and inordinate desire for personal liberty, impatience, strife, contention, presumption, irreverence, obstinacy, and vanity.⁴

The Parson's analogy of the 'tree of pride' as well as his doctrine of pride as the root of all evil conforms to the traditional medieval teaching which stems

1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 285, l. 388.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 285, l. 391.

4. Ibid.

ultimately from Ecclesiasticus.¹ In the cross-section of human nature presented in the General Prologue, the effects of original sin are woefully in evidence. Of the thirty-one pilgrims wending their way to Canterbury, the sinners are a conspicuous majority.

While instances of pride are noticeable in several of the pilgrims, the Monk, the Prioress, and the Wife of Bath serve as the most typical examples of this vice.

Pride is classified according to two types: "oon of hem is withinne the herte of man; and that oother is withoute",² and "oon of this spes . . . is signe of that oother".³ Interior pride is the "proud desir to be magnified and honoured biforn the peple",⁴ while exterior pride "is in manye thynges; as in speche and contenaunce, and in outrageous array of clothyng . . . or for the inordinat scantnesse of it."⁵

1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 285, l. 391. (for pride is the beginning of all sin". (Ecclesiasticus X, 15).

2. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 285, l. 410.

3. Ibid., p. 285, l. 411.

4. Ibid., p. 285, l. 408.

5. Ibid. P. 286, ll. 412-414.

Chaucer is explicit about this sort of pride in the characterization of the Monk, Prioress, and Wife of Bath, therefore their conduct and character cannot be dismissed as mere expressions of individuality.

The Monk is introduced as a pompous person "to been an abbot able,"¹ one whose worldliness is stressed in his garb, demeanour, and epicurean philosophy of life:

"The rule of seint Maure or of seint Benoit,
By cause that it was old and somdel streit
This ilke Monk leet olde thynges pace,
And heeld after the newe world the space."²

This contempt for the Rule, in violation of monastic obedience, prepares us for the shock of a subsequent statement: "Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!"³ The Monk could see little purpose in remaining in the cloister to study or work "and make hymselfen wood,"⁴ for he considered his way of life to be superior to what the Rule enjoined. With superb irony Chaucer allows him to justify riding abroad and hunting, for "How shal the world be served?"⁵

1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 21, l. 167.

2. Ibid., p. 21, l. 173-176.

3. Ibid., p. 21, l. 188.

4. Ibid., p. 21, l. 184.

5. Ibid., p. 21, l. 187.

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If his speech contravenes the vow of obedience, his rich and ornate garb indicates violation of the vow of poverty. The sleeves of his habit were "purfiled at the hond with grys, and that the fyneste of a lond."¹ We note the pin that fastened "his hood under his chyn,"² and "His bootes scuple, his hors in grest estate."³ Moreover, "a fat swan loved he best of any roost."⁴

Here is the typically proud man, according to the Parson's specifications, his pride manifested through disobedience, boasting, impudence, insolence, vainglory, independence, impatience, impertinence, and extravagance of dress.

According to the Parson's specifications the Monk is plainly disobedient in his "despit to the commandments of God . . . and to his goostly fader."⁵ He is a braggart, he "bosteth of the harm er of the bountee that he hath doon."⁶ He is impudent "for his pride hath no shame of his synnes."⁷ His insolence is shown when he "despiseth

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1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 21, l. 194.
 2. Ibid., p. 21, l. 195.
 3. Ibid., p. 21, l. 203.
 4. Ibid., p. 21, l. 206.
 5. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 285, l. 392.
 6. Ibid., p. 285, l. 393.
 7. Ibid., p. 285, l. 397.

in his judgement alle others folk",¹ and nearly half of the space allotted to his portrait in the General Prologue is Chaucer's method of emphasizing his contempt for the Holy Rule and its founders. By his insubordination he "neither suffre to have maister ne felawe",² whereby inordinate love of liberty can be detected. He is impatient for he "werreleth trouthe wityngly, and deffendeth his folye".³ For defending his folly and trusting "to muchel to his owene wit"⁴ we conclude that he is pertinacious. Vain glory and extravagance are apparent in his "pompe and delit in his temporeel hynesse"⁵ and "synful costlewe array of clothyng".⁶ These manifestations of pride constitute an indictment of the Monk, and serve to substantiate the condemnation he would merit from the Parson.

It is ironic indeed when we examine The Monk's Tale to note that he begins: "I wel biwaille, in manere of tragedie, the harm of hem that stode in heigh degree."⁷

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1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 285, l. 399.
 2. Ibid., p. 285, l. 400.
 3. Ibid., p. 285, l. 401.
 4. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 285, l. 404.
 5. Ibid., p. 285, l. 405.
 6. Ibid., p. 286, l. 415.
 7. Ibid., p. 286, l. 413.

He admonishes his fellow-pilgrims to "lat no man truste on blynd prosperitee."¹ Yet his portrait epitomizes the "blynd prosperitee" of his way of life. The irony is pointed by the contrasting portrait of the Parson: "A bettre preest . . . that nowher noon ys."²

The Prioress is also an example of pride, but Chaucer's method is less patently satirical. He has painted a subtle portrait of a dignified and stately woman who "of hir smylyng was ful symple and coy."³ It has been questioned whether she is an object of ridicule in Chaucer's droll way, or whether she was another of his idealization.⁴ Generally, however, the Prioress is believed to be proud and that it is noticeable in her disobedience, vanity, ostentation, and dress.

In going on a pilgrimage, Madame Eglentyne violated an ecclesiastical ordinance which "strictly interdicted nuns from leaving their cloister."⁵ It is possible,

1. Robinson, The Monk's Tale, p. 226, ll. 1991-1992.

2. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 25, l. 524.

3. Ibid., p. 20, l. 119.

4. The contrasting views are given by J.M. Manly., Some New Light on Chaucer (New York: Peter Smith, 1951), pp. 202-220; and by Sister Madeleva, Lost Language, pp. 31-60, who finds the Prioress admirable.

5. Mariel Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 95.

however, to conceive that emergencies would necessitate for a nun in her station, absence from the convent, but here we have no such case, and this same ordinance also forbade nuns from leaving the cloister "by reason of any vow of pilgrimage which they might have taken."¹

As for the "smale houndes" which she fed so lavishly, the Prioress breaks an important rule for the owning of pets was expressly forbidden, a rule to which little heed was paid in Chaucer's time.² Owning dogs led to other abuses, because they were fed "rosted flesh, or milk and wastel-breed,"³ feed which undoubtedly could have been used to better avail. It is also noticeable that "She was so charitable and so pitous/ She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous/ Kaught in a trappe."⁴ One commentator thinks this odd indeed, when in her tale "she tells with perfect blandness of the tortures visited upon the Jews."⁵

1. Marjell Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 93.

2. Ibid., pp. 98-99.

3. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 20, l. 146.

4. Ibid., p. 20, ll. 143-145.

5. Bowden, Commentary, p. 100.

Although she evidently followed a fairly common practice among nuns at this time¹ Madame Eglentyne is decidedly out of accord with monastic rule and local ordinance in her costume. In wearing a gold brooch "she defies all regulations in wearing any ornament at all."² Chaucer observes that "she hadde a fair forehead; It was almost a spanne brood",³ but at this time "nuns were supposed to wear their veils pinned tightly down to their eyebrows, so that their foreheads were completely hidden."⁴

Lastly, the Prioress is guilty of ostentation, that "prive spece" of pride that is seen in her "proud desir to be magnified and honoured biforn the peple."⁵ This can be detected in her manners and mannerisms. In her case only, Chaucer devotes eight lines to details of her table manners. Hence, we cannot but come to the conclusion that her etiquette was painfully obvious. Moreover, it can be wondered why she would speak French, even "after the scole

1. Eileen Power, Medieval People, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1951), p. 90.

2. Bowden, Commentary, p. 98.

3. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 20, ll. 154-155.

4. Power, Medieval People, p. 89.

5. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 285, l. 408.

of Stratford atte Bowe"¹ when the majority of her companions, because of their social status, would probably not understand her. Eight lines are devoted to "hire conscience" and its preoccupation with animals - which might well be indicative of a desire to attract notice, and nothing could be more obvious when we note that it "peyned hire to countrefete cheere/ Of court, and to been estatliche of manere,/ And to been holden dign of reverence."² The minuteness of description; the pinched wimple, handsome cloak, the coral and green beads, and the gold brooch - is a subtle suggestion that in her dainty elegance, Madame Eglentyne is the feminine counterpart of the lordly, hard-riding, uncloistered Monk.³

The Wife of Bath, although chiefly to be viewed as an example of concupiscence, is also guilty of pride in several respects. On Sundays especially her fine clothes could be seen to advantage in church, although one cannot but wonder at her discomfort in the head-dresses that

1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 20, l. 125.

2. Ibid., p. 20, ll. 139-141.

3. Both the Monk and Prioress had violated the cloister, and were interested in worldly things: the Monk loved hunting and the Prioress was fond of animals. Each is fond of luxurious clothing and both wear jewelry, all of which was out of accord with their vows of poverty. Their violation of the vow of obedience has already been noted.

"weyeden ten pound."¹ We may surmise that she too derives "pompe and delit in his temporeel hynesse"² in going to the offering first. Indeed, she considers this so important that should anyone dare go before her "so wrooth was she, that she was out of alle charitee."³

In addition to the portrait in the General Prologue, there is further evidence of pride in The Wife of Bath's Prologue. This dramatic monologue is by far the longest of the prologues, save the General Prologue, amounting to ten and a half pages in the Robinson text. This is perhaps not only amusing in the indirect satire on feminine loquacity, but it gives Chaucer an opportunity to draw her three-dimensionally. Because she has had five husbands she considers "Experience, though noon auctoritee were in this world, is right ynogh for me to speke of we that is in marriage."⁴ She is obviously proud of her somewhat unusual accomplishment in this respect and assures her companions that she would "welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal."⁵ It is plain too that she is bragging of

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1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 24, l. 454.
 2. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 285, l. 405.
 3. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 24, ll. 451-452.
 4. Robinson, The Wife of Bath's Prologue, p. 91, ll. 1-3.
 5. Ibid., p. 91, l. 45.

her achievement, and the Parson's definition of that species of pride is strangely ironic and singularly fitting, for a braggart is "he that boasteth of the harm or of the bountee that he hath deon."¹

Later, contrary to what seems to have been contemporary opinion as well as learned writings which disapproved of remarriage, she declares emphatically: "Men may counseille a woman to been oon, but counseillyng is no comandement."² Although her premise is correct we can readily detect a degree of insolence. The Wife of Bath refuses to place wisdom over personal desire and "Insolent is he that despiseth in his juggement alle othere folk."³

1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 285, l. 393.

66-67 2. Robinson, The Wife of Bath's Prologue, p. 92, ll.

3. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 285, l. 399.

ENVY:- Having defined Envy as "sorwe of othere mennes wele, and joye of othere mennes harm",¹ the Parson proceeds to give reasons for considering it to be "the worste synne that is".² It is, more than any other sin, directly against the bounty of the Holy Ghost; it is specifically a sin of malice, in as much as the envious man refuses to acknowledge the grace which God gives to his neighbour; it is moreover directly against God's commandment which decrees that one shall love his neighbour as himself whereas "alle othere synnes been somtyme only agayns o special vertu."³

The species of Envy is outlined by the Parson: "wel unnethe is ther any synne that it ne hath som delit in itself, save only Envy that evere hath in itself angwissh and sorwe."⁴ Backbiting, detraction, murmuring, hate, bitterness of heart, discord, scorn, accusations, and evil actions are all prompted by the malice which manifests itself in sadness "of alle the bountees of his neighebor",⁵

1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 288, l. 484.

2. Ibid., p. 289, l. 488.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 298, l. 490.

5. Ibid., p. 298, l. 489.

and in "joys of oother mannes harm".¹

No one of the worldly-minded pilgrims offers such a good example of this spiritual blindness as Oswald the Reeve. Conspicuously placed at the end of the procession departing from Southwark, he rides the "hyndreste of cure route",² and his strange figure is strikingly contrasted with the brawny Miller, who with a lusty bagpipe tune "broghte us out of towne".³ We learn from the prologue to The Miller's Tale that the two had a long-standing acquaintance and equally protracted feud.⁴ The appearance of the Reeve as "a selendre, colerik man"⁵ indicates his meanness of disposition,⁶ and his shady business dealings as steward of his young lord's estate are sufficient to indict him for Avarice.⁷ But the Prologue of the Reeve's Tale⁸ is a dramatic monologue of self-revelation of the species of Envy which the Parson identifies as "private

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1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 289, l. 492.
 2. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 26, l. 622.
 3. Ibid., p. 25, l. 566.
 4. Robinson, The Miller's Prologue, p. 57, ll. 3151-3166.
 5. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 25, l. 587.
 6. Bowden, Commentary, p. 253.
 7. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 26, ll. 597-605.
 8. Robinson, The Reeve's Prologue, p. 66, ll. 3855-3920.

hate", deriving from anger: "Somtyme it [Envy] comth of Ire or prive hate, that norisseth rancour in herte."¹ Envy can be detected readily by the series of sharp contrasts between the Miller and the Reeve. For example, to avenge himself of the wrong he claims was done to him, a carpenter by trade, (as we know from his portrait in the General Prologue), the Reeve will requite The Miller's Tale of a cuckolded carpenter by an equally malign story of a "proude Millere wel ybete",² He even quotes Scripture and invokes God's blessing on the company who heard him vent his spite and concludes: "Thus have I quyt the Millere in my tale."³ When the Miller has announced that he "wol telle a legende . . . of a carpenter and of his wyf"⁴ the Reeve sharply retorts: "it is a synne and eek a greet folye to apeyren any man, or hym defame,"⁵ yet this is exactly his intention for his own Tale. His envy of the Miller's success in entertaining the audience ("for the moore part they loughes and pleyde"⁶) aroused in the Reeve a deep

1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 289, l. 509.

2. Robinson, The Reeve's Tale, p. 72, l. 4313.

3. Ibid., p. 72, l. 4324.

4. Robinson, The Miller's Prologue, p. 56, ll. 3141-3142.

5. Ibid., p. 56, ll. 3146-3147.

6. Robinson, The Reeve's Prologue, p. 66, l. 3858.

Resentment:

"He at this tale I saugh no man hym greve,
 But it were oonly Osewold the Reve.
 By cause he was of carpenteris craft
 A litel ire is in his herte ylaft;
 He gon to grucche and blamed it a lite."¹

In the prologue to his tale the Reeve quite pat-ently
 beweans the frailties which accompany old age, maintaining
 that "for thogh cure myght be goon, cure wyl desireth fo-
 lie evere in con."² His envy of lost "myght" may well be
 directed at the lusty Miller's success in "rebcudye", for
 the aging Reeve is only too aware that "Yet in cure aschen
 olde is fyr yreke."³ The Miller, of the same social sta-
 tus, has the advantage of virility, gaiety, and comparative
 youth. The Reeve's theme is in the line "With olde folk,
 save detage, is namoure."⁴ This is the picture of an en-
 vious man - one who is sad because another is better off.
 Older than his rival, he is incapable of arousing the
 mirthful interest of the company; they are exact opposites.
 Robin the Miller was "ful big . . . of brawn, and eek of
 bones". . . short-sholdred, brood, a thikke knarre."⁵

1. Robinson, The Reeve's Prologue, p. 66, ll. 3859-3863.

2. Ibid., p. 66, ll. 3879-3880.

3. Ibid., p. 66, l. 3882.

4. Ibid., p. 66, l. 3898.

5. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 25, ll. 546-549.

For physical characteristics denoting traits
 see Bowden, Commentary, pp. 247-248.

On the other hand, Oswald the Reeve was slender and choleric with "legges and ful lene, ylyk a staf, ther was no calf ysene."¹

Introducing his tale, the Miller calls the Reeve "Leve brother Osewold,"² obviously a term of affection among friends; yet, nowhere does the Reeve acknowledge the gesture. Instead, he tells a tale of a beaten miller - ending it with a very pointed proverb.³ Discord, another species of Envy "that unbyndeth alle manere of freendshipe,"⁴ is also apparent. The complaint of the Reeve about his own misfortunes, and his "lital ire" over the fortunes of others which spurred him to grouching and murmuring over another's better lot, are clearly symptoms of Envy as described by the Parson.⁵

1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 25, ll. 591-592.

2. Robinson, The Miller's Prologue, p. 57, l. 3151.

3. "Hym thar not wene wek that yvale deoth," (Robinson, The Miller's Tale, p. 72, l. 4320).

4. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 289, l. 511.

5. The "lital ire" and "gan to grucche" are echoes in the Parson's treatment of the species of Envy, one of which is "grucchoyng or murmuracion and somtyme it spryngeth of impacience agayns God, and somtyme agayns man." (Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 289, l. 496), and the Parson cites anger among the causes of murmuring or grumbling - "somtyme it comth of Ire or prive hate." (Ibid., p. 289, l. 509).

The "remedia" for Envy is love of God and of one's neighbour for love is "the medicine that casteth out the venym of Envy fro mannes herte."¹ The Parson further recommends that "Agayns hate and rancour of herte, he shal love hym in herte. Agayns chidyng and wikkede words, he shal preye for his enemy."² As an example of the men in perfect accord with God and his neighbour Chaucer has given us the Plowman who lived "in pees and parfit charitee."³ As every good Christian should, the Plowman loved God "with all his hoolle herte at alle tymes, thogh him gamed or smerte,/ And thanne his neighebor right as hymselfe."⁴ All that he did was "For Cristes sake . . . / Withouten hire, if it lay in his might."⁵ In this respect, too, he stands in contrast to the type of craft and cupidity as well as of Envy.

ANGER:- Chaucer, through the Parson, recognizes two types of Anger: justifiable anger "thurgh which man is wrooth

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1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 290, l. 531.
 2. Ibid., p. 290, ll. 524-525.
 3. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 25, l. 532.
 4. Ibid., p. 25, ll. 533-535.
 5. Ibid.

with wikkednesse and agaynes wikkednesse,"¹ and evil anger, the "wikked wil to been avenged by word or by dede."²

Exemplifying the first type of anger, the Parson, when asked to tell a humorous story gently reproves the Host:

Thou getest fable noon ytold for me,
For Paul, that writeth unto Thymothee,
Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse,
And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse,"³

It might indeed be said that The Parson's Tale was prompted by righteous indignation at what he had seen and heard during the trip. The experience would not have been enjoyable for one of his moral integrity. The Shipman had previously prevented him from speaking for fear that "he wolde sowen some difficulte",⁴ a course of action which would have hindered the pilgrims' enjoyment of the journey. It was the intention of the Parson, however, to try to edify the pilgrims and "at Cristes reverence do yow plesaunce leefful."⁵

Evil anger is often the result of Pride or Envy "for

1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 291, l. 539.
2. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 290, l. 535.
3. Robinson, The Parson's Prologue, p. 272, ll. 31-34.
4. Robinson, Epilogue of the Man of Law's Tale, p. 90, l. 1182.
5. Robinson, The Parson's Prologue, p. 272, ll. 40-41.

soothly, he that is proud or envycous is lightly wrooth."¹ When the Wife of Bath's pride was injured through failure to have precedence in making the offering at Mass and thereby to gain "Pompe and delit in his temporeel hynesse,"² she was so wroth "That she was out of alle charitee."³ The Reeve is so greatly vexed by the Miller's proposed tale about a carpenter that he shouts up to the Miller who was at the head of the group to "Stynt thy clappe!"⁴ Later, he has revenge in his tale of a Miller who is given a severe beating.⁵ Having already noted the contrast in the physical characteristics of these two men, we might add that the Reeve was probably very wise in being "avenged by word" rather than "by dede".⁶ His vexation and the form his revenge takes may well be ascribed to envy.

Anger manifests itself by other means than temper and chiding. Chaucer's Parson enumerates twenty-five species of wrath, some of which are not usually so

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1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 290, l. 534.
 2. Ibid., p. 285, l. 405.
 3. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 24, ll. 451-452.
 4. Robinson, The Miller's Prologue, p. 56, l. 3144.
 5. Robinson, The Reeve's Tale, pp. 67-72.
 6. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 290, l. 535.

classified. For example, lying, flattery, gossiping or joking would not be considered aspects of anger. Usury, the use of charms and magic are also regarded as part of Anger, because they "maken discord amonges folk . . . for he [Christ] deyde for to make concord."¹

Probably the most obvious species of Anger the Parson cites is swearing; instances of this vice are easily detected in many of the Canterbury pilgrims, especially among those who drink to excess. Among the sober characters Harry Bailey, the Host, utters oaths in such profusion that on one occasion the Parson is prompted to ponder aloud: "What oyleth the man, so synfully to swere?"² After almost an entire journey of hearing oaths "by Goddes dignitee",³ "Goddes merey",⁴ "Goddes bones",⁵ the "precious corpus",⁶ and by "nayles and by blood",⁷

1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 295, l. 642.

2. Robinson, Epilogue of the Man of Law's Tale, p. 90, l. 1171.

3. Ibid., p. 90, l. 1169.

4. Robinson, Epilogue to the Merchant's Tale, p. 153, l. 2419.

5. Robinson, Prologue of the Monk's Tale, p. 225, l. 1897.

6. Ibid., p. 225, l. 1892.

7. Robinson, Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale, p. 178, l. 288.

The Parson begs: "For Cristes sake, ne swereth not so synfully in dismembrynge of Crist by souls, herte, bones, and body."¹ Here we cannot but smile for the Parson shows himself to be truly human when he in turn swears: "For Cristes sake,"² in making this exclamation.

Lest we think that swearing was a vice limited to the male members of the journey, Chaucer is quite explicit in noting it among the women. The Wife of Bath in commenting on her matrimonial experiences shocks us by defiantly exclaiming: "Yblessed by God that I have wedded fyve!"³ Even of the lady-like Prioress we are told: "hire gretteste coth was but by Seint Loy,"⁴ the obvious inference being that the name of Saint Loy was heard more than enough.⁵

1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 293, l. 591.

2. Ibid.

3. Robinson, Wife of Bath's Prologue, p. 91, l. 44.

4. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 20, l. 120.

5. ". . . the Prioress invoked St. Loy as patron saint of travellers . . . and she swore by the most elegant and courtly saint in the calendar. (Manly, New Light, p. 213).

The remedy proposed against Anger is "clepen Mansuetude, that is Debonairetee; and eek another vertu, that men callen Pacience or Suffrance."¹ In selecting a person best embodying this virtue we choose, without hesitation, the Knight for it is clearly pointed out that:

"And though that he were worthy, he was wys,
And of his port as meeke as is a mayde,
He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
In al his lyf unto no maner wight.
He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght."²

The knight is a renowned fighter whose anger is justifiable since he fights for "trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie,"³ the principles of his profession and religion. It is also quite evident that he is meek and never had been known to use villainous language. He has been well described as "a lion in the field, a lamb in the hall."⁴

SLOTH:- The slothful man, according to the Parson "doth alle thyng with anoy, and with wrawnesse, slaknesse, and excusacioun and with ydelnesse, and unlust",⁵ for he

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1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, pp. 295-296, l. 654.
 2. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 19, ll. 68-72.
 3. Ibid., p. 19, l. 46.
 4. D.S. Brewer, Chaucer, p. 135.
 5. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 297, l. 680.

"loveth no bisynesse at al."¹ The medieval conception of Sloth was "Accidie" by which "a man is blent . . . and hath swich langour in soule that he may neither rede ne singe in hooly chirche, ne heere ne thynke of no devocioun, ne travaille with his handes in no good werk."² Bloomfield has noted of Accidie that "gradually its specifically spiritual meaning - dryness of spirit - wears off; and more than frequently it is used as a synonym for sloth. The intermediate step in this transformation is the common interpretation of sloth in the later Middle Ages as laziness in performing one's duties to God."³ It is in this intermediate position that Chaucer's Sloth occurs, and his definition as well as Langland's is in accordance with that of St. Thomas Aquinas.⁴

Sloth denoting mere physical laziness is virtually non-existent among the pilgrims, since, for better or for worse, all seem to be busy about something. The excellence of each secular pilgrim in his profession or trade is readily apparent: the Merchant could easily "in eschaunge

1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 297, l. 684.

2. Ibid., p. 298, l. 723.

3. Bloomfield, Seven Deadly Sins, p. 96.

4. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica (New York: Benziger Brothers Inc., 1948) Ila, Ilae, Q. xxiv, art. i-iv, pp. 1345-1348 / of also, Langland, Piers Plowman, Passus V, p. 57, ll. 392-416.

sheeldes selle,"¹ while of the Man of Law we know "Of fees and robes hadde many oon,"² and of the Franklin that "A better envyned man was nowher noon,"³ the Shipman "knew alle the havenes, as they were,"⁴ and of the Physician it is said that "In al this world ne was ther noon hym lik."⁵ The Miller's skill and strength have already been noted; and that "Ther koude no man brynge hym in arrerage"⁶ attests the Reeve's shrewdness as a land manager. Chaucer has given us a picture of an ambitious and able group; however, each is also slyly satirized for his greed in such concern for material gain.

The only reference to Sloth as physical laziness aside from The Parson's Tale, is the Second Nun's Prologue where idleness is described as "The ministre and norice unto vices,"⁷ and as "roten slogardye."⁸

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1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 22, l. 278.
 2. Ibid., p. 22, l. 317.
 3. Ibid., p. 23, l. 342.
 4. Ibid., p. 23, l. 407.
 5. Ibid., p. 23, l. 412.
 6. Ibid., p. 26, l. 602.
 7. Robinson, Second Nun's Prologue, p. 247, l. 1.
 8. Ibid., p. 247, l. 17.

The Parson gives many insights into spiritual sloth, and in this strictly medieval connotation it was apparently prevalent. One of the most surprising examples, and one which gives added plausibility to there being a moral theme in The Canterbury Tales, is found in the Epilogue to the Man of Law's Tale. The Host has invited the Parson to tell a story but the Shipman objects because the pious man "wolde sowen som difficulte."¹ Obviously, the Shipman feared that the Parson's moralizing would dampen the mirth of the group. Can we not see here an example of 'accidie' in the man who neglects religious duty for frivolity and gaiety? The Shipman's words seem to give special significance to the fact that The Parson's Tale comes towards the end of the trip when the pilgrims were nearing Canterbury.

Since religion seems to occupy a minor part in this pilgrimage - the tourist attraction predominating - 'accidie' seems to apply particularly to the ecclesiastical persons present. The fact that these supposedly religious people are devoid of religious motivation on a journey with a spiritual significance, points the finger of guilt still more sharply at them. The Monk is our prime example, rejecting the cloister for the "newe world the space,"²

1. Robinson, Epilogue of the Man of Law's Tale, p. 90, l. 1182.

2. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 21, l. 176.

because he considered the rule to be "old and somdel
 streit."¹ The text enjoining monastic seclusion "heeld
 he nat worth an oystre."² This is clearly 'accidie'
 according to the Parson's analysis.

The portrait of the Prioress provides no indication
 of concern with religious matters, but rather, her lack of
 attention to them is noticeable. We get the impression of
 a refined lady of the court or what, today we would style
 a "social climber", for it "peyned hire to countrefete
 cheere/ Of court, and to been estatlich of manere."³ It
 has already been remarked that she seemed more interested
 in animals than in people, feeding her dogs with succulent
 and expensive foods. She would weep over the death of one
 of her dogs or even at the sight of a mouse caught in a
 trap, yet tells the most harrowing of the Tales in a forth-
 right, disarming manner.⁴

The irresponsible, wanton Friar does not have the
 interests of the Church at heart. Undoubtedly he was
 popular: "ful wel biloved and famulier was he with franke-
 leyns ever al in his countree and eek with worthy women

1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 21, l. 174.

2. Ibid., p. 21, l. 182.

3. Ibid., p. 20, ll. 139-140.

4. Bowden, Commentary, pp. 99-100.

of the toun."¹ Also, "He knew the tavernes wel in every toun and everich hostiler and tappestere bet than a lazar or a beggestere."² His popularity was due to "So muchel of daliaunce and fair langage",³ and more probably because he was "an esy man to yeve pennaunce."⁴ As a member of a mendicant order it was his duty to beg a living for himself and his brethren yet "His typpet was ay farsed ful of knyves/ And pynnes, for to yeven faire wyves",⁵ and his begging was done of people like the widow who "hadde neight a sho."⁶ Bowden notes that "Hubert [the friar] represents most of the friars of his time, he is richly clad and meddles in secular matters which should not concern him."⁷

Chaucer's satirical portrait of the Friar, like that of the Monk, is illuminated by the Parson's commentary on 'accidie': "Certes . . . a dampnable synne; for it dooth the service of God negligently."⁸

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1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 21, ll. 215-217.
 2. Ibid., p. 21, ll. 240-242.
 3. Ibid., p. 21, l. 211.
 4. Ibid., p. 21, l. 223.
 5. Ibid., p. 21, ll. 233-234.
 6. Ibid., p. 22, l. 253.
 7. Bowden, Commentary, p. 135.
 8. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 297, ll. 679-680.
Final portion of this quotation from Jeremias XLVIII, 10.

Nothing is learned of the Nun's Priest in the General Prologue, but from the prologue to his tale we infer that he was persuaded to tell "swich thing as may cure hertes glade"¹ rather than something morally uplifting as a preparation for the arrival at the Canterbury shrine; so he delights the group with a humorous beast fable. It is clear that the Parson disapproves of this sort of thing, for when the Nun's Priest's Tale has been followed by three others, the Parson states in the prologue to his tale:

"Thou getest fable noon ytold for me;
For Paul, that writeth unto Thymothee
Repreveth hem that weyven sooth fastnesse,
And tellen fables and swiche wretchednesse
Why sholde I sewen draf out of my fest,
Whan I may sewen whete, if that me lest?"²

The Parson's character provides a norm for our judgement of the other religious pilgrims. Chaucer praises him as the good shepherd: "This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf, That first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte."³ In contrast to the Monk, he is humble, poor,

1. Robinson, Prologue of the Nun's Priest's Tale, p. 237, l. 4001.

2. Robinson, Prologue to the Parson's Tale, p. 272, ll. 31-36.

3. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 24, ll. 496-497.

Conscientious and zealous: "a bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys."¹ He differs from the Prioress and the Friar, who curry favour with the wealthy, in treating everyone equally and fairly.² Like the Prioress he is interested in animals, but his are the human sheep of Christ whom he leads to Heaven with spiritual nourishment, whereas the Prioress fed her "flock" on meat, bread and milk. Unlike the Friar "he koude in litel thyng have suffisaunce"³ and he was even reluctant to collect the tithes which were duly his, "But rather wolde he yeven, out of doute,/ Unto his poure parissehens aboute/ Of his offryng and eek of his substaunce."⁴ His moral integrity is a reproach to the Friar's wantonness, for Chaucer shows how strictly he interpreted his vow of chastity.⁵

The Parson is free from the pride, sensuality or greed which led the other religious to violate their vows or be lax in observance of them, but rather we see a "poure Persoun, riche he was of thoght and werk,"⁶ whose

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1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 25, l. 524.
 2. Ibid., p. 25, ll. 521-523.
 3. Ibid., p. 24, l. 490.
 4. Ibid., p. 24, ll. 487-489.
 5. Ibid., p. 24, ll. 501-506.
 6. Ibid., p. 24, ll. 478-479.

only concern was "to drawen folk to hevене by fairnesse, by good ensample."¹ The Parson's character and way of life, as depicted by the poet, provide the ideal which gives insight into the shallowness and fruitlessness of the lives of the Monk, Prioress, Friar, and Nun's Priest. When we turn from the General Prologue to The Parson's Tale, we are well aware that "Cristes loore and his apostles twelve/ He taughte, but first he folwed it hymselfe."²

AVARICE:- According to Chaucer's Parson, the avaricious man "hath moore hope in his catel than in Jhesu Crist."³ "he dooth moore observance in keypyng of his tresor than he doth to the service of Jhesu Crist."⁴ But lest this convey the idea that avarice is reserved to an inordinate love of material goods and wealth, the Parson reminds us that it can also be detected "sentyne in science and in glorie."⁵

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1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 25, ll. 519-520.
 2. Ibid., p. 25, ll. 527-528.
 3. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 299, l. 747.
 4. Ibid.
 5. Ibid., p. 299, l. 743.

Avarice was one of the sins most frequently attacked in the homilies of the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. One commentator notes: "at first the carnal sins, gluttony and lechery, were emphasized, then pride and envy, and finally, in the late Middle Ages, avarice and sloth."¹ It has been suggested that this apparent shift in values coincided with the change from an agrarian to a mercantile economic system, dating from the twelfth century onwards. Increased attention was placed on cupidity since this evil had become so conspicuous.² The fact that Chaucer aims most of his satirical barbs at both clerical and lay pilgrims for their love of money and their materialism in general would seem to indicate this prevailing tendency.³

One historian observes that Chaucer "does not much care for the new classes, the nouveau-riche land-acquiring lawyer, the usurious Merchant with his shady exchange practices, [and he makes] orthodox jokes about Doctors - their study is but little on the Bible, and they make money out of the sick and suffering."⁴ Fourteenth century bourgeois

1. Bloomfield, Sins, p. xiv.

2. Johan Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1924), p. 18.

3. This materialistic tendency has been studied in its connection with the medieval notion of Sloth.

4. Brewer, Chaucer, p. 136.

society seemed primarily intent on firmly establishing itself through material and financial success. The Canterbury pilgrims are no exception; their "likerousnesse in herte to have erthely thynges"¹ is apparent. The professional middle class is represented by a lawyer, merchant, franklin, and physician. The reeve, shipman, and manciple represent another level of middle-class society; while the tradesmen: the inn-keeper, haberdasher, carpenter, weaver, dyer, upholsterer and miller, - represent still another. While we are given no comments about the tradesmen as individuals, we do know that the basic fault of the others is avarice. Unlike the religious personages, however, they are most diligent in their work in order better to carry on their worship of Mammon. This cannot be said of the religious personages who are by contrast, as lacking in zeal for spiritual things as the secular folk are clever and capable in attaining success in their careers.

Perhaps more than anyone else, the Physician is an example of avarice. In other cases this vice is suggested or alluded to, but here we have an explicit reference. The understatement that "His studie was but litel on the Bible"² is indicative of his general attitude as a

1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 299, l. 741.

2. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 24, l. 438.

materialist.

"The cause yknowe, and of his harm the roote,
 Anon he yaf the sike man his boote,
 Ful redy hadde he his apothecaries
 To sende hym drogges and his letuaries
 For eeh of hem made oother for to wyne
 Hir frendshipe nas nat newe to bigynne."¹

Disregarding professional ethics he "spilt fees" with the apothecaries, and with this in view frequently prescribed gold as a remedy. No one could equal his knowledge "of phisik and of surgerye"² and, in one respect only did he resemble the "verray, parfit gentle knyght" for the Physician, too, had the distinction of eminence in his profession: "He was a verray, parfit praktisour."³ As unscrupulous as he was skilled, he "lovede gold in speial."⁴

The Merchant was also interested in personal gain, "With his bargaynes and with his chevyssaunce."⁵ Although nothing derogatory can be inferred from his "bargaynes", one commentator has observed that "like many other great merchants, he did a large business in lending sums of money, . . . at usurious rates, for chevisaunce had come

1. Robynson, General Prologue, pp. 23-24, ll. 423-428.

2. Ibid., p. 23, l. 413.

3. Ibid., p. 23, l. 422.

4. Ibid., p. 24, l. 444.

5. Ibid., p. 22, l. 282.

to connote usury."¹

The Man of Law is undoubtedly an unprincipled lawyer, of whom we become suspicious when it is noted that "he seemed bisier than he was."² While he is outwardly praised, the irony of implied condemnation makes him out to be a man of material success through shady legal practices.

"Nowhere is there a better buyer of land or obtainer of possessions ("purchasour") than he. If land is entailed, or defective in title ("infect"), he manages somehow . . . to hold it with a clear title (in "fee symple") to himself. He can write ("endite") his documents so that no one is able to find fault with them ("Koude no wight pynche at his writyng")³

Truly then this lawyer was "war and wys."⁴ Langland has shown that, like the physicians, many lawyers engage in their work only for money and never for love of God.⁵

Simony, a species of avarice, is singled out for condemnation in the conduct of the Pardoner selling indulgences "comen from Rome al heet,"⁶ and by selling faked

1. Manly, New Light, pp. 193-194.
2. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 22, l. 322.
3. Bowden, Commentary, p. 168.
4. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 22, l. 309.
5. Skeat, Piers Plowman, p. 14, Passus I, ll. 158-164.
6. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 27, l. 687.

relics. It is learned that "Upon a day he got hym moore moneye/ Than that the person got in monthes tweye."¹ Sometimes he was permitted to preach in Church and "To wyne silver, as he ful wel koulde;/ Therefore he sang the murierly and loude."² In the prologue to his Tale, the Pardoner is quite frank in self-accusation: "for myn entente is not but fer to wyne,/ And nothyng for correccion of synne,"³ an accusation in which he emphasizes, with bold candour, his evil doings:

"Thus spitte I out my venym under hewe
Of heolynesse, and semen hooly and trewe
But shortly myn entente I wol devyse:
I preche for no thyng but for coveityse."⁴

There can be no doubt that the Pardoner is avaricious when Chaucer so clearly states this in the General Prologue, and when the rascal admits to this vice while he purports in his tale to preach against the love of money as the root of all evil. It is perhaps Chaucer's master stroke in dramatic irony.

Avarice is remedied by "misericorde and pitse largely taken,"⁵ From comments on previous "remedies" it is

1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 27, ll. 703-704.
2. Ibid., p. 27, ll. 713-714.
3. Robinson, The Pardoner's Prologue, p. 180, ll. 403-404.
4. Ibid., p. 180, ll. 421-424.
5. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 302, l. 804.

obvious that the Parson and the Plowman best exemplify these virtues. Both place their neighbour's well-being before their own:

" . . . heere bihoveth the consideracioun of the grace of Jhesu Crist, and of his temporeel goodes and eek of the goodes perdurables, that Crist yaf to us; and to han remembrance of the deeth that he shal receyve, he noot whanne, where, ne how; and eek that he shal forgen al that he hath save only that he hath despended in goode werkes."/sup>1

GLUTTONY:- is "unmeasurable appetit to ete or to drynke, or elles to doon ynogh to the unmeasurable appetit and disordernee covetise to eten or to drynke."² The Parson lists five species: "the fyve fynghes of the develes hand by whiche he draweth folk to synne,"³ and these impairments of reason are through drunkennes, loss of discretion, intemperance as to food, incitement of passion, and loss of memory.⁴

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1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 302, ll. 811-812.
 2. Ibid., p. 302, l. 818.
 3. Ibid., p. 303, l. 830.
 4. Ibid., p. 303, ll. 822-827.

The Franklin

"Wel loved he by the morwe a sap in wyn;
 To lyven in delit was evere his wone,
 For he was Epicurus owene sone,
 That heeld opinicoun that pleyn delit
 Was verrailly felicitee parfit."¹

Of the twenty-nine lines of description, there are two of personal appearance from which we learn that the Franklin wears a small white beard and has a sanguine complexion. Next, there are four lines referring to his lavish hospitality; four lines regarding his social status as Knight of a shire; and fourteen lines of detailed comment on his specific preferences in food and drink, condiments and culinary tastes. He is both a gourmand and a gourmet. It is doubtful if any of his guests could fail to qualify for the title of the 'fingers of the devil's hand'. Certainly the Franklin himself would merit condemnation from the Parson, who concludes the shortest discourse in his treatise on the capital sins by reference to St. Gregory's five "species of Glotony": "to ete biforn tyme to ete . . . when a man get hym to delicat mete or drynke . . . when maken or apparailen his mete . . . to eten to gredily."²

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1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 22, ll. 334-338.
 2. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 303, ll. 828-830.

The correspondence between the Franklin's portrait in the General Prologue¹ and these "speces of Gletonye" could hardly be more precise.

Of the Cook we learn "wel koude he knowe a draughte of Londoun ale;"² the Friar "knew the tavernes wel in every toun;"³ and of the Summoner "wel loved he garleek, onyons, and eek lekes,/ And for to drynken strong wyn, reed as blood;"⁴ The Prioress and the Monk also relished fine food, the latter being especially fond of roasted swan. The Miller seems to be always in a drunken stupor and he was aware of it from the sound of his own voice when he rudely interrupted the Host's invitation to the Monk to tell the next tale, and the Host is forced to give way to him.⁵ In three lines of the Introduction to his tale, the Pardoner stresses the need to 'warm up' for the occasion by drinking.⁶ In his tale of drunken rioters who commit theft, treachery, and murder, the evils as depicted

1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 23, ll. 339-354.

2. Ibid., p. 23, l. 382.

3. Ibid., p. 21, l. 240.

4. Ibid., p. 26, ll. 634-635.

5. Robinson, The Miller's Prologue, p. 56, ll. 3120-3140.

6. Robinson, Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale, p. 179, ll. 315, 321-22, 328.

by the Parson, are illustrated. Moreover, the Pardoner in the exordium of his tale, sets out to show the evils of taverns and "superfluytes abhomyable", and takes up over a hundred lines to illustrate from scripture and history "that luxurie is in wyn and dronkenesse,"¹ a theme which the Parson presents in his next discourse.

Gluttony then is a fairly common shortcoming among the pilgrims. The Parson and the Clerk best exemplify abstinence, the remedy for gluttony.² We have already seen that the Parson lived simply, and although this does not refer explicitly to food and drink, it may undoubtedly be assumed that these things would be included. The Clerk is poor and thin, preferring books to fine clothes³ and no doubt to fine food. Moderation, in speech and dress, characterizes the Knight, "of his port as meeke as is a mayde./ . . . But, for tellen you of his array,/ His hors were goode, but he was nat gay."⁴

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1. Robinson, The Pardoner's Tale, p. 181, l. 484.
 2. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 303, l. 831.
 3. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 22, ll. 293-296.
 4. Ibid., pp. 19-20, ll. 69-74.

LECHERY:- The Parson introduces Lechery as a 'first cousin' of Gluttony "for these two synnes been so ny cossyns that ofte tyme they wol not departe."¹ Having likened Gluttony to one hand of the devil, he makes Lechery "that oother hand . . . with fyve fynghes to cacche the peple to his vileynye."² These fingers pertain to lascivious looks and deeds: "Heere may ye seen that nat oonly the dede of this synne is forbeden, but eek the desir to doon that synne."³ Kissing is included as a part of the basic sin for "trewely he were a greet fool that wolde kisse the mouth of a brennyng oven or of a fourneys."⁴ These, with species of lechery: fornication, adultery, whoredom, seduction, and violation of religious chastity - make up the "hand".

The emphasis in this section of the Parson's discourse is on adultery: "brekyng of this sacrament which bitekneth the knyghtyng tegidre of Crist and of hooly chirehe."⁵ In enumerating the five species of adultery, the Parson warns against violation of the religious vow of

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1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 303, l. 836.
 2. Ibid., p. 304, l. 852.
 3. Ibid., p. 304, l. 846.
 4. Ibid., p. 304, l. 856.
 5. Ibid., p. 304, ll. 841-842.

chastity: "And . . . sooth is that heoly ordre is chief of all the tresorie of God . . . [and] chastitee . . . is . . . the most precious lyf that is. And . . . whan they doon deedly synne, they been special trayteors of God, and of his peple."¹

Implications of lustful tendencies may be seen in the Friar's display of interest in the women and barmaids of the towns he visits. We know that he liked to make gifts of little trinkets to "faire wyves," and that "He hadde maad ful many a mariage/ Of yonge women at his owene cost."² The Friar was a "lymyteur", that is, one who had exclusive begging rights within a district, and "all three authors, Chaucer, Gower, Langland, stress the limiters' immoral relations with women, and Brother Hubert is, of course, no exception."³ However, Chaucer in the General Prologue rarely uses direct satire against a character for open misconduct; but the hints are there - in sly, ironic use of adjectives. The Friar is "ful solempne (pompous, festive, merry)"⁴ given to "fair

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1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 306, l. 893.
 2. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 21, ll. 212-213.
 3. Bowden, Commentary, p. 124.
 4. Robinson, Notes, p. 758.

langage", wel biloved and famulier was he", pleasaunt was his absolucion", "an esy man to yeve penaunce", and "a wantowne and a merye "man."¹ Above all he wants money, and for a specific purpose: sensual indulgence. In hearing Confession he is more concerned with imposing alms-giving as a penance than with the penitents' purpose of amendment: "For unto a povre ordre for to yive/ Is signe that a man is wel yshrive,"² . . . "Therefore in stede of wepyng and preyeres/ Men moote yeve silver to the povre freres."³ As a frequenter of the taverns in every town⁴ and the best beggar in his house,⁵ determined to have a farthing before he left a household whom he delighted with his tuneful blessings,⁶ he is depicted in the General Prologue as a gluttonous hypocrite. Gluttony, as the Parson states, is allied to Lechery, being so closely related that often they cannot be separated;⁷ we may assume that in the case of the Friar "they wel nat departe".

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1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 21, ll. 208-224.
 2. Ibid., p. 21, ll. 225-226.
 3. Ibid., p. 21, l. 232.
 4. Ibid., p. 21, l. 240.
 5. Ibid., p. 21, l. 252.
 6. Ibid., p. 22, l. 254.
 7. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 303, l. 835.

"Of nice conscience took he no keep" is what we are told of the Shipman's conduct, and we are inclined to agree with a historian who remarked that like the sailor's of that time he was "scarcely one of nice morality."¹

The Wife of Bath also exemplifies lechery, and while there is no forthright accusation, it is hinted at in the General Prologue and the prologue to her Tale. It has already been seen how she scorned the advice of the Church and wise men, who, at that time, did not approve of widows remarrying - which the Wife of Bath had done four times. This would not have been so obvious had she not gone to great length to justify herself with an authoritative argument in her prologue. "In felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe"² would indicate her popularity. Save for two nuns, the remainder of the pilgrims were men on whom she would have to expend her fellowship. Her questionable popularity is further attested by repeated reference to her five husbands. "Withouten oother compaignye in youthe."³ In her prologue, it has been noted, she praises God for five husbands while announcing her intention to seek a sixth: "For sothe, I wol nat kepe me

1. G.M. Trevelyn, England in the Age of Wycliffe, (London: The Macmillan Company, 1925), p. 54.

2. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 24, l. 474.

3. Ibid., p. 24, l. 461.

chaast in al/ Whan myn housbonde is fro the world ygon."¹
 In speaking of herself the Wife of Bath is quite unabashed,
 stating that "a lord in his household,/ He nath not every
 vessel al of gold,/ Somme been of tree, and doon hir lord
 servyse,"² and that "In wyfhood I wol use myn instrument/
 as frely as my Makere hath it sent."³ Her dishonorable
 intentions are apparent when she states that:

"An housebonde I wol have, I wol not lette,
 Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,
 And have his tribulacion withal
 Upon his flessh, whil that I am his wyf
 I have the power duryng al my lyf
 Upon his propre body, and nocht he."⁴

The Summoner was "lecherous as a sparwe,"⁵ a direct
 and precise accusation which is strengthened when he is
 termed a "gentil harlet . . . He wolde suffre for a quart
 of wyn/ A good felawe to have his concubyn."⁶ He se-
 duced the innocent: "In daunger hadde he at his owene
 gise/ The yonge girles of the diocise."⁷ Of all the

1. Robinson, The Wife of Bath's Prologue, p. 91,
 ll. 46-47.

2. Ibid., p. 92, ll. 99-101.

3. Ibid., p. 91, ll. 99-101.

4. Ibid., p. 93, ll. 154-159.

5. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 26, l. 626.

6. Ibid., p. 26, ll. 646-650.

7. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 26, ll. 663-664.
 "girles" applied to both sexes". (Robinson, Notes, 769.).

pilgrims to whom lechery may be imputed, the summoner is the most revealing portrayal presented in no uncertain terms, leaving no room for doubt as to Chaucer's intention. Aside from the Pardoner's self-accusation of avarice this is the frankest labelling of vice in The Canterbury Tales.

The kinship between Gluttony and Lust is confirmed by the Miller's fondness for drink and lewd talk. The Miller in the General Prologue stands out as a type of loose talker, a ribald jester: "a jangler and a goliardes, / And that was moost of synne and harlotries."¹ In the prologue to his tale we have evidence of his lewd and suggestive humour in conversation. The Reeve in his prologue laments how old age has deprived him of his virility, lamenting his inability to enjoy the lusty life of the Miller and his own youth.²

The Parson prescribes the remedy for lechery: chastity and continence "that restreyneth alle the descydeyne moevynges that comen of flesshly talentes. And evere the gretter merite shal he han, that moost restreyneth the wikkede eschawfynges of the ardour of this

1. Robinson, General Prologue, p. 25, ll. 560-561.

2. Robinson, The Reeve's Prologue, p. 66, ll. 3874-3890.

synne."¹ These two virtues are clearly noted in the Parson, Knight, Clerk and Plowman. These lone four are so concerned with their respective ways of life and their duties to God and their fellow men that virtues, natural and super-natural, guide their conduct. Indeed, it can be noted that no worldly traits are attached to their descriptions. They take the pilgrimage seriously and keep a strange silence, speaking only when spoken to, and then only to edify, if possible, the other pilgrims. Idealized in Chaucer's portraits, they are consciously planned as types or "mirrors" of perfection - to represent the four pillars of society. By this four-fold standard of perfection, clerical, chivalric, toiling, and intellectual, we can judge the variations from the norm in the imperfections and vices in the other characters.

1. Robinson, The Parson's Tale, p. 307, ll. 915-916.

C O N C L U S I O N

Scholarship on The Parson's Tale or on the significance of Chaucer's moral vision is scant. Except for some incidental allusions by several modern critics, there has been no detailed study of The Parson's Tale since the work of Professors Tupper and Lowes, forty years ago. A recent work has, however, some illuminating comments on Chaucer's genuine religious spirit and will be discussed below. Dissertation Abstracts show that nothing has been done, nor is being written in the principal American and Canadian Graduate Schools on this topic.

Among contemporary scholars Professor Gerould and Sister Madeleva have perhaps adduced most evidence in favour of Chaucer's place as a religious poet. In commenting on Chaucer's doctrinal poems and tales, Gerould's remarks are significant:

" . . . religion meant more to him than formal adherence to certain beliefs and practices and it might be pointed out that a man so occupied with many things as we know him to have been would scarcely have taken the time, unless impelled by stern convictions, to translate or compile the treatise on penance and the mortal sins which we call the Parson's Tale. The notion that because he lived in the fourteenth century rather than the nineteenth or the twentieth he might perform such labors without serious intent does not bear scrutiny. In no age could they have been

done by inadvertence."¹

As the research of this critic brings to light certain hitherto unrecognized aspects of Chaucer's poetry, it may be in order to quote at length from his survey of the poet's allusions to saints and their legends. His study reveals this almost neglected aspect of the poet:

"In this respect as in so many others Chaucer was altogether of his own age, reporting not only what he heard but what he felt in common with most other men of the same background and station. Yet there is more in it than that. He was steeped in the lore of the Church but not equally, we must observe, in all aspects of it . . . he was a man of very profound wisdom in the ways of the human mind and heart."²

This emphasis on the religious significance of Chaucer's work seems to be contradicted by the statement of Professor Tillyard who, though he holds him to be "the only English medieval poet who owed most"³ to Dante, stresses the comedy in his work: "He is primarily a comic writer . . . He is not primarily a religious poet."⁴ Gerould's view is more balanced. For him Chaucer is both

1. G.H. Gerould, Chaucerian Essays, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1952), pp. 4-5.

2. Gerould, Essays, pp. 31-32.

3. E.M.W. Tillyard, The English Epic and Its Background, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954), p. 149.

4. Ibid., p. 150.

a comic and a religious poet - a man of his age, whose "amused tolerance of the frailties of the flesh is not inconsistent with spiritual aspiration."¹

The Parson's Tale is in harmony with Matthew Arnold's judgement of Chaucer's poetry as a "criticism of life",² for it serves as a commentary on the individuals of the General Prologue. As Chesterton so vigorously states, it "denounces the motley figures of contemporary fops, striped and cut up into patterns by saying that they looked as if they were blasted white or yellow or red by leprosy and loathsome plagues."³

Chaucer's satire on his pilgrims appears to be all the more effective from the juxtaposition of the Parson's sermon with the General Prologue, for in collocating the beginning and the end of The Canterbury Tales we are aware of Chaucer's masterful use of irony and understatement. "For his irony . . . he has been frequently and deservedly praised."⁴ This irony gives the whole poem deeper significance. The popular and prevalent viewpoint of him "as

1. Gerould, Essays, p. 3.

2. Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry", The Great Critics, ed. by J.H. Smith and E.W. Parks, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1939), p. 635.

3. G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, (New York: Pellegrini and Gudahy, n.d.), p. 62.

4. Gerould, Essays, p. 82.

predominantly a jester, though a jester of genius, has tended to obscure certain elements of his art which are nevertheless very important."¹ We are convinced after reading Gerould's observations on the religious aspects of Chaucer's poetry that he is far from being the "mere jester which some persons have thought him"² and much more "the serious minded artist which better acquaintance shows him to be."³

The Parson's Tale and Chaucer's self-ascribed Tale of Melibeus are the only prose selections in The Canterbury Tales, both of which have been described as being the voice of the age rather than of Chaucer."⁴ We have no doubt, however, that what Chaucer expresses in these two tales "are also his sentiments, the groundwork of his belief, his philosophy, his ideas, his very joy of life."⁵ The Parson's Tale reiterates the basic Christian tenet that Christ is the source of all "Gentillesse". Chaucer takes a dim view of any worldly good which is not sought and regarded as a means of getting to Heaven. His

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1. Gerould, Essays, p. 82.
 2. Ibid., p. 100.
 3. Ibid., p. 100.
 4. Brewer, Chaucer, p. 177.
 5. Ibid.

insistence on the place of reason and authority is apparent throughout. Through the Parson his forthright plea for repentance is uncompromising, direct, and leaves relatively few aspects of life unconsidered, and his tale alludes to such topics of perennial interest as "war and courtly love, marriage and birth control, extortion and bad priests . . . mortification without excess, and the right way to Jerusalem Celestial."¹

If one attempts to visualize the entire pattern of The Canterbury Tales, of which this final fragment is a portion, "it is like looking backward or forward into a fallen and redeemed world."² In this regard, therefore, The Parson's Tale may easily be considered as the unifying factor between the surface and allegorical meanings of the poem. Literally,

". . . it seems to be offered as an appropriate ending before the Saint's shrine is reached while on the allegorical plane . . . it may be deemed a preparation for a last confession to be made on 'that perfect glorious pilgrimage', that is called the celestial, to the Heavenly Jerusalem."³

These fragmentary, and except for the remarks of Gerould, rather incidental references to the implicit

1. Raymond Preston, Chaucer, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1952), p. 300.

2. Ibid.

3. Coghill, The Canterbury Tales, P. 511.

value of The Parson's Tale show a tendency in modern critics to stress a more serious purpose in Chaucer's poetry than has hitherto been noted. Chesterton sees it as a denunciation of moral leprosy; Brewer believes that it and the Tale of Melibeus stress a whole philosophy of life; Preston alludes to the comprehensive view of the natural and supernatural as essential to salvation; Coghill considers it an allegory as a preparation for a good death; and in particular, Gercould stresses the serious intention and deep religious spirit that inspired the undertaking of such a task.

What these scholars have alluded to incidentally, I have found to be justified by an examination of the precise way in which the Parson's condemnation of the seven deadly sins can be traced in the moral portraits provided by the General Prologue and the dramatic links. This analysis, I believe, bears out Mr. Preston's suggestion that in The Parson's Tale:

" . . . those who do not know what was required for the reformation of the Pardoner and the Summoner and the Wife of Bath and the Man of Law and the Merchant may find out by reading it."¹

1. Preston, Chaucer, pp. 299-300.

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V I T A

- 1931 Born, June first at Riverside, Ontario.
- 1937 Entered St. Thomas School, Riverside.
- 1939 Moved to Windsor, Ontario.
Entered St. Joseph's School.
- 1945 Graduated, St. Joseph's School.
Entered St. Joseph High School.
- 1949 Transferred to Assumption High School.
- 1950 Graduated, Assumption High School.
Entered Assumption College in affiliation with the
University of Western Ontario (London, Ontario).
- 1953 Bachelor of Arts degree conferred through U.W.O.
Entered Graduate Studies, Assumption College.
Appointed part-time Reader, Department of
Philosophy.
Edited Souvenir Program and Picture History for
the City of Windsor Centennial Committee.
Contributed to Garden Gateway of Canada, a history
of Windsor and district.
- 1954 Nominated to Medieval Academy of America.
Awarded citation by City of Windsor for
centennial efforts.
Appointed substitute teacher, Windsor Separate
Schools and Corpus Christi High School.
Contributed literary criticism, Windsor Daily Star.
- 1955 Contributed dramatic criticism, Theatre Arts
Monthly.
Completed formal essay, Chaucer's Moral Vision:
A Study of the Function of the Seven Deadly Sins
in The Canterbury Tales.
Candidate, Master of Arts degree in English
language and literature, Assumption College.