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P. S. Taitt

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Abstract of M.A. Thesis, "A Comparison of the
Treatment of Ecclesiastical Figures in Chaucer's
Canterbury Tales and Langland's Vision of William
concerning Piers the Plowman"

The thesis attempts a comparative examination of literary techniques used by Chaucer and Langland in their characterisation of religious figures and in their reflection of the religious practices in the fourteenth century. The study is divided into three main sections, the first two of which accord separate treatment to ecclesiastical characters in The Canterbury Tales and Piers Plowman respectively. The third section attempts to draw together the separate observations made previously in a comparative study of particular literary techniques under the five separate headings of Characterisation, Irony, Metaphor, Word Play and Conventional Devices. The choice of ecclesiastical figures as the basis of a comparative treatment has been made because of the large amount of space devoted by each poet to these figures.

The thesis attempts to show that Chaucer's characters are invested with humanly recognisable traits which make them a blend of individual human beings with unique characteristics and ecclesiastical types, representatives of a total class. Chaucer seems more tolerant of human foibles, less ready to criticise directly, more willing to reveal what he sees and to permit the reader to judge for himself. However, he appears

to assume in the reader a knowledge of the ideals of behaviour incumbent upon the characters he portrays.

Langland, on the other hand, appears to lack the tolerance, or willingness, simply to reveal the weaknesses of his ecclesiastics. Throughout his poem his method is to express an opinion directly and to reinforce his attack by examples drawn from literature and from scripture. The element of realistic characterisation is rare in his treatment of ecclesiastical figures, so that his work has a more consciously serious tone, which draws a dark picture of the consequences of religious abuse. The thesis concludes by attempting to show just how particular techniques demonstrate a difference in attitude between the two poets.

A Comparison of the Treatment of Ecclesiastical Figures in
Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and Langland's Vision of William
concerning Piers the Plowman

A Thesis
presented for the degree of Master of Arts
in the University of Durham

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P. S. Taitt

August 1969

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EETS	Publications of the Early English Text Society
ELH	A Journal of English Literary History
ES	English Studies
JEGP	Journal of English and Germanic Philology
MED	The Mediaeval English Dictionary
MLN	Modern Language Notes
MLQ	Modern Language Quarterly
MLR	Modern Language Review
MP	Modern Philology
OED	The Oxford English Dictionary
PBA	Publications of the British Academy
PMLA	Publications of the Modern Language Association of America
RES	Review of English Studies
Robinson	F. N. Robinson ed., <u>The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer</u> , Cambridge, Mass., 1957.
SA	/ Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's <u>Canterbury Tales</u>
SP	Chicago 1941.
Skeat (1886)	W. W. Skeat ed., <u>The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman</u> , 2 vols. Oxford, 1886.
<u>Spec.</u>	<u>Speculum: a Journal of Mediaeval Studies</u>
SP	<i>Studies in Philology</i>

Introduction

The aspects of a comparative treatment of ecclesiastical figures that will be considered in this thesis are the literary expressions of the ideas that distinguish Chaucer's and Langland's work. In consequence it is hoped to show how the attitude of each author differs in his conception of the ideals of Christianity and towards the actual abuses found among contemporary ecclesiasts. Thus, while motives will not be attributed to either poet, the elements which colour their reflections on contemporary religious life will be considered. That the choice of ecclesiastical figures as a basis for literary comparison is both justifiable and desirable is borne out by the large number of such figures in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and the predominant concern of Langland's Dreamer with the Church, its ancient ideals and its contemporary practices.

As far as possible only those characters which are comparable in each poet's work will be considered. For this reason the thesis will exclude an examination of such characters as cardinals, archbishops, and deans in Piers Plowman. On the other hand, Chaucer's Tales of the Second Nun and the Nun's Priest have been excluded from this study as their narrators are not characterised in The General

Prologue of The Canterbury Tales. Furthermore, the Second Nun's Tale of the martyrdom of St. Cecilia, while appropriate to a nun as an exemplum of faith, adds little to our knowledge of mediaeval nuns, either in a literary or historical sense. The Shipman's Tale, because it deals in some detail with the behaviour of a monk, has been included in this study.

It is proposed to deal with the ecclesiastical figures in Chaucer's work in the order ~~in which~~ the Tales appear in Robinson's edition of Chaucer, beginning with the friar and concluding with the Parson. A similar order will be followed in Langland's treatment of ecclesiastical figures, if only to impose a comparative order on the widely scattered references to these figures in Piers Plowman.

An appendix has been added in the form of an index of single and parallel occurrences of relevant ecclesiastical figures in Piers Plowman, in the hope that other readers in this field will find such an index as useful as the present writer. The appendix includes some figures not examined separately by chapters in the thesis, such as popes, bishops and hermits, and it excludes the previously mentioned cardinals, archbishops and deans ~~for whom there is~~ no parallel in The Canterbury Tales.

The text of Piers Plowman most frequently referred to in the thesis is the C-text. However, on occasion reference is made to the A and B-versions where the earlier text differs

in emphasis or where the C-text omits passages of interest to the thesis. The C-text has been chosen in preference to the more popular B-text so that some consideration may be given to assumptions by various writers that the C-text represent a ~~more moderate~~ attitude towards the Church by an aging poet.¹ In addition, it is the last version of the poem attributed to William Langland, and as such represents his final thoughts accumulated over a long period. One critic notes that Langland seemed to be more concerned with clarity, or with the sententia, of his work in the C-version and "was not afraid to dispense with good poetry if greater clarity could be obtained thereby."² Whether or not we agree with this assessment of the art of the C-version will be the result of a comparative reading of all three texts. At any rate, such an assessment would appear to argue against a moderating tone in the poet's treatment of ecclesiastical figures.

The method followed in comparing each poet's work is a close examination of the literary techniques adopted by each author in distinguishing various ecclesiastical figures. No attempt has been made in the main body of the thesis to compare

¹ E. T. Donaldson, Piers Plowman: The C-Text and its Poet, Yale Univ. Press, 1949, reviews various arguments which make this claim. See Chs I and III.

² Elizabeth Salter, Piers Plowman: An Introduction, Oxford, 1962, p.33 n.1.

the separate treatment of a figure ~~by~~ between the two authors. Instead, comparisons have been reserved for consideration in the third section of the study in order to avoid constant digressions in the study of any particular figure by one particular poet.

I CHAUCER'S FIGURES: THE FRIAR AND THE SUMMONER

The first ecclesiastical figure in the Canterbury Tales to tell a story to the pilgrims is brother Huberd, the Friar. His Tale is followed, appropriately, by that of the Summoner for whom Chaucer has created a violent rivalry with the Friar. The supreme irony of the situation which finds the Friar preaching against Summoners is that Huberd is guilty of those very sins, lechery and greed, of which he accuses summoners.¹ The lechery of friars generally is even attested to by the Wife of Bath:

Wommen may go now saufly up and down.
 In every bussh or under every tree
 Ther is noon oother incubus but he,
 And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.

(III (D) 878-881)

Perhaps she cannot resist this pointed attack after the Friar's critical comment on the length of her Prologue. The quarrel between Chaucer's Friar and Summoner dates from the remarks the Friar makes at the end of the Wife's Prologue. The Summoner is very quick to the attack, which he addresses to the whole company:

Lo, goode men, a flye and eek a frere
 Wol falle in every dyssh and eek mateere.
 (III (D) 835-836)

¹Adrien Bonjour, "Aspects of Chaucer's Irony in The Friar's Tale", Essays in Criticism, Vol. Xi (1961), p. 126.

To the Summoner's crude:

What! amble, or trotte, or pees, or go sit down!
 Thou lettest our disport in this manere.
 (III (D) 838-839)

the Friar replies that he will tell some stories about Summoners to make everyone laugh. The nature of the Summoner's remarks just quoted are in keeping with the crude portrait of him that we are shown in the General Prologue, with its references to his pimply, lecherous appearance and his love of strong, coarse foods and wine:

Wel loved he garleek, oynons, and eek lekes,
 And for to drynken strong wyn, reed as blood...
 (I (A) 634-635)

While the dominant characteristics associated with the description of the Summoner in the General Prologue are lechery and greed, we know that the same is true of the Friar who has commercialized his charity in order to benefit himself. But beneath the apparently light-hearted ironies in the Friar's portrait:

He was the beste beggere in his hous. . .
 (I (A) 252)

and,

Unto his ordre he was a noble port, (I (A) 214)

there is the serious contrast between the ideal of evangelical poverty and the dangerous reality of his worldly pursuits.

This is nowhere more obviously expressed than in the syntactically ambiguous references to the company that he keeps:

He knew the tavernes wel in every toun

And everich hostiler and tappestere

Bet than a lazar or a beggestere ... [I (A) 240-242]

where the ambiguity is expressed in the verb "knew",² and where there is an indication of the deviation from his proper interests with the sick and poor to the merry life of the tavern and the barmaids where profit might arise.

Chaucer's attack on the Friars seems to be twofold; that is, in the General Prologue, it is an attack in the popular tradition of condemnation of the abuses practiced by the four orders, and in the Summoner's Tale and references in the Wife of Bath's Tale it is a combination of this first attack and the tradition of rivalry between mendicants and possessioners that had been going on for about one hundred and fifty years before the writing of the Canterbury Tales.

In order to understand the nature of Chaucer's handling of the Friar and the Summoner and the methods he uses to satirise these characters, a brief digression on the meaning of the terms "mendicant" and "possessioner" would be in order, as well as an investigation into the immediate history of the rivalry between these classes of ecclesiastics. The

²Theodore Silverstein, "Sir Gawain, Dear Brutus, and Britain's Fortunate Founding: A Study in Comedy and Convention", MP, Vol. 62 (1964-65) p.193-194. The name given to this ambiguity of syntax is amphibolia.

Franciscan ideal of Evangelical Poverty held up the view that the followers of St. Francis should be free from all temporal possessions, and make their living by begging for alms.

Brother Huberd's pursuit of worldly possessions is in direct defiance of this ideal. Two other areas of activity likely to arouse hostility were the friars' invasion of the preaching office and their undue attention to learning and theological doctrine. By the term "possessioners", on the other hand, one understands this to refer to the regulars or clergy belonging to regular orders, such as the monastic orders living in accordance with a rule, and the beneficed clergy or parish priests. Their income consisted of endowments in the case of monks, and tithes and contributions in the case of parochial clergy. Thus the conflict between the Summoner and the Friar is of a more personal than theological nature, for the Summoner is neither a monk nor a parish priest deriving a living from a benefice. The Summoner's sources of income are from the regular retainers of the ecclesiastical courts he represents and, as Chaucer suggests, from moral blackmail or the threat of a summons for a variety of carnal sins.

There can be no doubt that Chaucer was familiar with some of the writings directed against mendicants. In the Middle English version of Jean de Meun's Roman de la Rose, there is a reference to William St. Amour,³ whose De Periculis

³Geoffrey Chaucer, The Romaunt of the Rose, l. 6759-66.

Novissimorum Temporum written in 1256, accuses friars of preaching without a calling, with cultivating friends in the world, especially among the rich and powerful, and with captivating weak women whose consciences are burdened by sin.⁴ The last two of these three **abuses** are referred to specifically by Chaucer in his description of the Friar in the General Prologue.

About one hundred years after the De Periculis we find Richard FitzRalph attacking the friars in his Defensorium Curatorum and charging them with usurping the rights of the parish clergy. FitzRalph asks why, of all the ~~offices~~ offices in the church, the friars choose burial, preaching and hearing confessions? He answers that it is because these are the most lucrative offices. But worse, the friars' confession, because it offers the sinner "an easy escape from the discipline which the curate and bishop would enforce",⁵ undermines the authority of the priest and bishop. Chaucer's portrait of Huberd points out the mildness of the penance he imposes and reminds us of the avaricious motive of the confessor:

He was an esy man to yeve penaunce,

Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce. [I (A) 223-224]

The contemporary attack on friars was joined, in 1378, by

⁴Arnold Williams, "Chaucer and the Friars", in Chaucer Criticism, Vol. 1., p.66, ed. R. J. Schoeck and J. Taylor, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1960.

⁵Arnold Williams, *ibid.*, p. 68.

John Wyclif, who in that year published the Tractatus de Potestate Pape which attacked the friars' deviation from Evangelical poverty and the harm that is done by excessively lavish endowments. In the Summoner's Tale Chaucer alludes to the general need for money for building convents when the Friar is soliciting alms:

Thomas, noight of youre tresor I desire
 As for myself, but that al oure covent
 To preye for yow is ay so diligent,
 And for to buylden Cristes owene chirche.
 (III (B) 1974-1977)

Similarly, on the friars' concern with building and riches, Wyclif wrote:

Freris bylden many grete chirchis and costily
 waste housis, and cloystris as hit were castels,
 and that withoute nede...Grete housis make not
 men holy, and only by holynesse is God wel served.⁶

However, before 1370 Wyclif had been concerned with protecting the friars against such champions of "possession" as Uhtred de Boldon who had defended church endowments by means of arguments drawn from history and Scripture, and had been at pains to combat the mendicant teaching on the poverty of Christ and the apostles.⁷ With the spread of Lollardy

⁶ John Wyclif, Select English Works, ed. Thomas Arnold, 1869 Vol. iii, p. 360 in J.J. Jusserand, English Wayfaring Life, London 1891 p. 294-295.

⁷ David Knowles, The Religious Orders in England, Cambridge 1948-1959, Vol. 2, p. 66, in reference to Durham, Dean and Chapter Library, (MS IV 33, ff. 69-99).

after 1382 the dispute between mendicants and possessioners took second place to the common cause of fighting heresy and politically subversive doctrines. Thus the quarrel between the Friar and the Summoner in The Canterbury Tales is a reflection of rivalry between mendicants and possessioners only insofar as a tradition of this rivalry had existed for more than a hundred years and was not easily forgotten. However, as has been pointed out, the Summoner and Friar were at loggerheads more for personal reasons, or, one might suggest, as we are dealing with a work of fiction, for literary reasons, that is, to introduce more of the element of real human behaviour into the characters, a technique at which Chaucer is so adept.

An examination of the Friar from ~~the~~ description in the General Prologue will serve to illustrate Chaucer's methods for producing characters who are a blend of both the typical and the individual, a composition of credibility that seems to appear in nearly all his characters from the Knight to the Pardoner. The opening lines of Huberd's description in the general Prologue present a series of ironical statements. We learn that the Friar is a "wantowne and a mer-ye", that he is a "ful solempne man" and that he knew "muchel of daliaunce and fair langage". The word "wantowne", in addition to "sportive", can mean "lascivious" or "lewd", which accords

with the ambiguous "daliaunce" which can mean "gossip" or "conversation" as well as having sexual overtones. Such an interpretation does not strain the meanings of the words, for we shortly learn:

He hadde maad ful many a mariage

Of yonge wommen at his owene cost, [I (A) 212-213]

where there is a further play on the word "mariage" and the suggestion of the low regard in which Huberd holds that blessed state. And if this is not enough, we know that with his "fair langage" he flatters the wives of the town, perhaps not solely for financial gain. Similarly, the word "solempne" has meanings that range from "ceremonious" and "pompous" to "festive" and "merry",⁸ an ambiguity that later appears to be fully appropriate to the Friar who is not only "lyk a maister or a pope" proud of his impressive appearance, but is also the dallying confidant of publicans, barmaids and married women. As the portrait proceeds we see Huberd move with accustomed ease among the franklins and well-to-do folk, busying himself with the affairs of this world, gaining the confidence of people, especially women, with his little gestures, affectations and tricks. He hears confessions "ful swetely"; he can sing and play the fiddle, and "Somwhat he lipsed, for his wantownesse," [I (A) 264] where "wantownesse" occurs for the

⁸See OED s.v. solemn, a., 1, 4(b).

second time and after we learn of the gifts he gives "faire wyves". While we may consider that metaphors of food and hunting dominate the Monk's portrait, the worldliness of the Friar's sphere seems dominated by the word "wantownesse", with its mild and condemnatory meanings, for there are no fewer than eight references to dalliance and women in his portrait. There is even the clever touch of a widow, whose last farthing the friar will take if he can, and the awful hypocrisy of his Tale which finds a Summoner victimising a poor old widow. Thus Huberd becomes, in the reader's mind, an increasingly corrupt figure, who, from appearing at first as a general philanderer, becomes a deliberate confidence-man, a hypocrite, for whom the word "worthy" in the last line of his portrait, conceals no satire but, rather, reveals the weight of accumulated criticism.

There is remarkable skill in the way in which Chaucer often retains the unity of the characters whom he describes in the General Prologue and then presents as the narrators of diverting stories. Friar Huberd is partially characterised by his lisping speech and sweetly heard confessions. Then, when he recites a tale about a Summoner he has no recourse to the violent, vituperative language to which the Summoner resorts. This usage of a smooth and confiding Friar is carried forward into the Summoner's Tale itself where "frere John"

attempts, by great circumlocutions, lies and flattery, to solicit funds for his convent and himself. By contrast, the Summoner of the General Prologue is depicted as a lover of strong wine, onions and garlic, things harsh and sharp in flavour, not delicate to the taste as friar John's choice in the Summoner's Tale. While Huberd may have some redeeming features, notably Bonhomie and an element of cheerful roguishness, the Summoner lacks any such qualities. Indeed, he lacks a sense of humour and his very appearance frightens children. A subtle touch, for children are universally symbols of unbiased innocence with no preconceived notions of good and bad, yet they see evil instinctively in the face of this coarse knave. As has been suggested, the Summoner's speech distinguishes him from the Friar, and is consistent with the sharp outlines drawn from references to strong food and a foul-seeming face. For when he was drunk, "Thanne wolde he speke and crie as he were wood" [I (A) 636], or, if questioned beyond his scanty knowledge could merely repeat, Questio quid iuris, like the jay to which Chaucer compares him. Finally, it is the dreadful irony of speech which we see working for the downfall of the Summoner of the Friar's Tale which is hinted at in the General Prologue:

Of cursyng oghte ech gilty man him drede,

For curs wol slee right as assoillyng savith ...,

[I (A) 660-661]

for it is by a curse that the Devil is able to trap the Summoner who had extorted money from so many innocents with his curses of excommunication.

Both the Friar's Tale and the Summoner's Tale are in the style of a fabliau or popular story told for entertainment. The chief difference between them is that the Friar's Tale includes a moral exemplum, in this instance the importance of intention when invoking God, specifically with regard to cursing.⁹ Indeed, the telling of a moral tale is in keeping with the rôle of friars, one of whose usurped functions was preaching. Furthermore, both tales reflect contemporary thoughts on the abuses of summoners and friars, for despite the apparent unity brought about between mendicants and possessioners in a common defence against the Lollards, we are aware that more than one hundred years of prejudice are not wiped away by ten years of Wyclif's writings.

The Friar begins his tale with a discussion of the methods adopted by summoners who have spies everywhere and are not above using prostitutes as their agents. When he declares that he will not spare from reporting the misdeeds of summoners, since as a friar he is not under their control,

⁹Nevill Coghill, The Poet Chaucer, 2nd edit., Oxford (1967), p.121.

he elicits a violent response from the Summoner who retorts that the women of the brothels were also out of the control of bishops. The dramatic irony of the Summoner's retort comes to light shortly afterwards when the Friar describes the Summoner's use of prostitutes to trap the unwary lecher; and in so doing introduces the rhetorical metaphor which is later to backfire on the subject of his tale;

For in this world nys dogge for the bowe
 That kan an hurt deer from an hool yknowe
 Bet than this somnour knew a sly lecchour,
 Or an avowtier, or a paramour.

And for that was the fruyt of al his rente,

Therefore on it he sette al his entente. [III (D) 1369-
 1374]

The Friar then moves easily and smoothly from a general condemnation of the methods of Summoners to the particulars of the narrative and the events which befell the Summoner of his Tale. This Summoner, on his way to extort some money from an old widow, falls in with a yeoman on horseback, dressed in green. The yeoman, we learn shortly, is none other than Satan, and is appropriately dressed and equipped in hunting garb. The irony of this becomes clear when Satan reveals his identity and the Summoner fails to realize that he might be prey to this hunter of souls. After an exchange of pleasant-ries the yeoman reveals that he is a bailiff, and the

Summoner says that he is another. Here Friar Huberd gets in a particularly vicious dig:

He dorste nat, for verray filthe and shame

Seye that he was a somonour, for the name. [III (D)
1393-1394]

After learning from the yeoman of his methods of extortion ~~in order to live~~, the Summoner says he operates in the same way, and will take anything from anybody:

But if it be to hevvy or to hoot. [III (D) 1436]

With these exceptions, he says, he knows no conscience.

Again, a delicate touch of dramatic irony, for it foreshadows that last gift of a curse that the Summoner gets from the old widow that is so heavy and so hot that it sinks him to Hell.

The irony of the Summoner's lack of heed to Satan is heightened by the yeoman's remark that the Summoner will soon know, from his own experience, better than such acknowledged experts as Virgil and Dante, what hell is really like:

For thou shalt, by thyn owene experience,

Konne in a chayer rede of this sentence

Bet than Virgile, while he was on lyve,

Or Dant also...

[III (D) 1517-1520]

This last point opens the complex question of knowledge which concerned philosophers from Plato (Republic, Book 10) to the Middle Ages, and with which Chaucer is constantly concerned.

The issues involved between the art of life and the art of books, and Chaucer's awareness of the difficulty of fusing books, or "auctoritee", with experience, are raised here. It should suffice to say that what is operating here is the mediaeval philosophy which considered that the sensible world of objects and events was not significant unless related to something greater than those immediate objects or events, some higher truth, which explains why so often Chaucer's work is concerned with moral exempla and shows the extent to which Chaucer is writing in the philosophical traditions to which he is the heir.

Near the end of the Friar's Tale Chaucer exercises a very subtle touch when the narrator, Huberd, concedes that the widow in his tale may be harbouring a Friar or a priest:

This somonour clappeth at the wydwes gate.

"Com out," quod he, "thou olde virytrate!

I trowe thou hast som frere or preest with thee."

[III (D) 1581-1583]

First the Summoner is shown adopting the attitude that everyone must be guilty of something, perhaps because of his own burdened conscience. Thus, to disarm his intended victim he always assumes the initiative, then is able to relent somewhat so as to appear a kindhearted man, really willing to excuse the sinner. Second, and perhaps more important, the

Friar relating the Tale is so confident of the ease with which he can get the better of a mere Summoner in a game of satire between themselves, that he can afford to concede a point by making a joke against himself, since at the end of his narration he assumes the pious homiletic tone and prays that God will show the Summoners the error of their ways so that they may repent. He has, at this point, assumed that the Summoner has merely gone to the devil whence all Summoners originate, and this heightens the pious hypocrisy with which he concludes his moral. The irony is complete. The curse reacts upon the head of the unsuspecting curser, and the hunter has himself become the prey of a hunter of souls. The Friar has managed to put Summoners in the same category as the Devil:

Body and soule he with the devel wente

Where as that somonours han hir heritage, [III (D) 1640-
1641]

and in so doing has fulfilled the image of masterfully smooth hypocrisy that we are shown in the General Prologue.

The pilgrim Summoner's violent reaction to Huberd's story is entirely in keeping with the attitude he adopted at the end of the Wife of Bath's Prologue, and reflects his lack of originality, since he resorts to the feeble technique of "going one better" than the Friar, thus reflecting a mind devoid of original thought and taken up with itself. For

example, when the Friar interrupts the Wife of Bath, the Summoner tells him to stop meddling:

A frere wol entremette hym everemo.

Lo, goode men, a flye and eek a frere

Wol falle in every dyssh and eek mateere. [III (D) 834-836]

The Friar responds by saying that before long he will tell a story about a Summoner to make everyone laugh. The Summoner curses and boils at this and says he will tell two or three stories about friars to "make thyn herte for to morne" [III (D) 848]. Then, continuing this technique, and following the Friar's allegation that all summoners belong to the Devil, the Summoner in his Prologue, says not only do friars belong to the Devil, they ~~end up~~ ^{go} in the Devil's anus. As we may have guessed from his description in the General Prologue, the Summoner is unable to wait to even the score with the Friar merely by telling his story about a Friar. He has to unburden himself of his insulted vanity, and he does so in a coarse and bitter manner.

The Summoner's Tale accuses friars of all of the commonly reported vices that we have seen alluded to either by Chaucer himself or by the pre-Chaucerian and contemporary writers on the decadence among mendicants. Among the sins and vices referred to by the Summoner are gluttony, hypocrisy, lying,

avarice and lust. But the Summoner overlooks the irony in his own behaviour, for in his lust for money he will stoop to any level and use any means at his disposal. So the Summoner begins his tale about a friar in Holderness, in Yorkshire, copying to some extent, even this small but significant detail of the Friar's Tale which alluded to the green-garbed yeoman as having his home "fer in the north contree" [III (D) 1413). Thus the Summoner's friar is associated with the Devil once more, but in less coarse terms. In relating his story the Summoner adopts the smooth preaching style of the hypocritical Friar. One might question this technique as it could be said to work both for and against the image we have of Chaucer's Summoner in the General Prologue. It could be argued that the impatient and vile man would have lacked the learning or the rhetoric to carry through an effective imitation of the wheedling friar in his tale. On the other hand this technique creates a masterly portrait of a contemporary friar and reflects the popular thoughts about friars in a most effective way. There is a superb deflation of the friar's pride in intellectual skill when faced with the peasant's problem of the even division among twelve friars of the gift. There is further the irony implicit in the friar's appeal to the Lord of the Manor when he is outraged, since only minutes before he had been chastising the peasant, Thomas,

- about the sins of wrath.

One does not have to seek far in the Summoner's Tale for examples of the laxity and ~~corruption~~ of friars which have been mentioned among the contemporary writings referred to earlier. There is first the hypocritical allusion to the lack of need felt by possessioners "who live in welè and habundaunce" (l.1723) compared with poor friars; there is the flattering of women to gain money from the men, there is the reference by the friar in the Tale to the negligence of parochial clergy in examining souls, with the ~~pun~~, later on, of the friar groping in the peasant's bed for a gift, and his consequent reward, with a play on the word "grope":

Thise curatz been ful necligent and slowe

To grope tendrely a conscience

In shrift; ...

[III (D) 1816-1818]

then,

And whan this sike man felte this frere

Aboute his tuwel grope there and heere,

Amydde his hand he leet the frere a fart ...

[III (D) 2147-2149]

Then Gluttony and Flattery, together with a parody of courtly behaviour, are revealed when the Friar is asked what he would like for lunch. He addresses Thomas's wife in French,

"'Now, dame,' quod he, 'now je vous dy sanz doute' ..."

[III (D) 1835]

then proceeds to order a meal which no noble person would refuse:

"Have I nat of a capon but the lyvere,
 And of youre softe breed nat but a shyvere,
 And after that a rosted pigges heed ..." [III (D) 1839-
 1841]

French, the courtly language of love, a delicate menu, fit for gentle gourmets, and the arrantly hypocritical, sentimental sympathy for living creatures, "But that I nolde no beest for me were deed" [III (D) 1842] are crowned by the friar's transparent hypocrisy:

Thanne hadde I with yow hoomly suffisaunce.
 I am a man of litel sustenaunce;
 My spirit hath his fostryng in the Bible, [III (D) 1843-
 1845]

for he confides these personal details to only a privileged few.

In reviewing the catalogue of fraternal vices one is reminded of the code of behaviour set up as the ideal for friars by St. Bonaventura (1221-1274), who, because of the growing laxity, felt compelled to bring the attention of friars to their deviation from the Franciscan ideal. But his work, the Fioretti,¹⁰ proposes an impossible and gloomy

¹⁰G. G. Coulton, Mediaeval Studies, London (1915), 2 vols, Series 1, No. 3, p.28-29.

theory of detachment from the world and a life totally lacking in warmth and spontaneity, for nature was felt to be evil. Roger Bacon, writing at about the time of St. Bonaventura's death, commented on the fallen state of the Franciscans and Dominicans, while Ubertino de Casale, fifty or more years later complained to the Pope:

So high has the flood of idleness and gluttony and continued familiarities with women risen, that I rather wonder at those who stand than at those who fall.¹¹

Thus, as Coulton points out,¹² in addition to the comments of Chaucer, Gower and Langland, the examples of deviant friars are amply paralleled in contemporary accounts, while these three literary artists are unanimous in presenting friars as a real danger to the purity of family life.

The friar of the Summoner's Tale crowns his hypocrisy with the claim that friars "lyve in poverte and in abstinence" (III (D) 1873), and commences an attack on possessioners with a quotation from Christ "Blessed be they that povere in spirit been" [III (D) 1923]. His willingness to tell lies in order to solicit money to build the convent is perhaps his most shameful deed, for the lie involves the recent death of

¹¹G. G. Coulton, Mediaeval Studies, Series 2, No. 9, p.5.

¹²G. G. Coulton, *idem*.

the peasant's son. The friar claims that within half an hour of the boy's death he, and two others in the convent, had a revelation of the child "born to blisse", [III (D) 1857]. Thus, like the Summoner narrating the tale, the friar is willing to exploit any human weakness, even that of a bereaved family, with devastating speed and merciless skill. Though the Summoner's attack on the Friar includes such obvious devices as puns on the words "grope", "chaast" [III (D) 1915-1917], and the latin text 'cor meum eructavit' [III (D) 1934], a more subtle touch is the rambling way in which the friar of the Summoner's Tale digresses from abstinence to the giving of alms, to patience, drunkenness and anger and back to almsgiving, for when the friar appeals to the Lord for redress against Thomas's insult, the Squire reminds everyone that the friar deserves the first fruit of the proposed gift, since:

He hath to-day taught us so mucche good

With prechyng in the pulpit ther he stood ...

[III (D) 2281-2282]

Thus, with one stroke, Chaucer comments on the preaching of friars, their pedantry and the justice of the friar's treatment, as the peasant had posed a problem beyond the friar's capacity for solution, yet a mere Squire is able to provide an answer. Although the Summoner has the last word in this conflict, his conclusion tends to be anticlimactic and trails

off as though he were uncertain if his listeners had been impressed. However, this may be yet another sign of Chaucer's skill, for the Summoner of the pilgrimage would not be expected to match wits with a friar and so may have been reciting a story he had heard elsewhere.

In terms of their function in the Canterbury Tales, the portraits of the Friar and the Summoner reflect Chaucer's concern with the seriously corrupt state of the Church in his age. While it may be argued that the characters are overdrawn in that they each become the focus of practically every known abuse in the range of the seven deadly sins, the argument may be countered by the suggestion that this is a work of art, a fiction, and the characters combine features typical of some friars and some summoners while retaining an air of individuality which is the mark of the artist. The class of persons who suffer most from the abuses practiced by the Friar and Summoner are those most in need of protection, both physical and spiritual, and the least able to defend themselves. The intended victim of the Friar's Tale is a poor widow, that of the Summoner's Tale a sick and grieving peasant. The Friar and the Summoner are among the galaxy of Chaucerian characters whose lives should have been dedicated to pastoral functions, yet who, in reality, prey upon those very sheep in their sacred trust. While this may be stressing the case too

strongly in terms of the Summoner's real, and somewhat distasteful, function in life, it illustrates the nature of the fall of a Church which permits such abuses and the concern Chaucer felt at the state of the spiritual office. To charge Chaucer with being anti-clerical and in favour of doing away with the established Church, and to cite as evidence the corruption of so many of his characters, would be to overlook his awareness of the Ideal to which humanity, led by the Church, should strive. Whether or not the Ideal is attainable by human beings with their natural weaknesses does not seem to be Chaucer's concern. What does seem to interest him is the choice open to such characters as the Friar or the Summoner, (and an indication given of the direction taken towards damnation because of the placing of self before others), between the love of the immediate and worldly and their quest for a remote and celestial good. That the portrait of the Friar is not impossibly exaggerated we have seen in references to contemporary accounts. That the portraits of the Friar and Summoner are effective as vehicles for satire by being credible figures, is perhaps a measure of Chaucer's concern with the corruption in the Church.

Finally, what differentiates these characters, is the type and tone of their separate Tales. The Summoner's attack, while crude and personal, reflecting the enmity between two

opposed groups, as well as between individuals, and incorporating a feeling of "disloyal competition"¹³ in carnal affairs, does not embody an exemplum. The Friar's Tale on the other hand, while it seeks to condemn the despicable behaviour of Summoners, does have the merit of praying and preaching so that:

... thise somonours hem repente

Of hir mysdedes, er that the feend hem hente!

[III (D) 1663-1664]

It does, in fact, illustrate the friar's supremacy in spiritual things. For, like the Pardoner, in spite of the irony of his own lechery, the Friar's message is to the company to so dispose themselves that they withstand the temptation of Satan. His exemplum, as an act of genuine concern for the salvation of souls, is valid in spite of his own concern for worldly goods.

¹³Adrien Bonjour, "Aspects of Chaucer's Irony ...", p.126.

References for the Friar and Summoner

Adrien Bonjour, "Aspects of Chaucer's Irony in The Friar's Tale", Essays in Criticism, Vol. 11 (1961) p.121-127.

Theodore Silverstein, "Sir Gawain, Dear Brutus, and Britain's Fortunate Founding: A Study in Comedy and Convention", MP, Vol. 62 (1964-1965), p.193-194.

Arnold Williams, "Chaucer and the Friars", reprinted in Chaucer Criticism, Vol. 1, The Canterbury Tales, ed. R. J. Schoeck and J. Taylor, Notre Dame, Indiana (1960) p.63-83.

The Clerk of Oxford

The introduction of the Clerk's Tale immediately following the Tales of the Friar and the Summoner, is appropriate in more than one way. First of all, the Clerk's Tale serves as a contrast, of an exemplary nature, to the low story just narrated by the Summoner. Secondly, in the person of the Clerk himself, there is an example of the ideal of Christian behaviour which contrasts so vividly with the behaviour of the Friar and the Summoner. The subject and language and dual theme of the Clerk's Tale all serve to heighten our awareness of the difference between his character and that of the two previous narrators. His Tale thus fulfills our expectations of his character from his portrait in The General Prologue.

While the term "clerk" in the fourteenth-century implied one in Minor Orders,¹ the emphasis on Chaucer's Clerk of Oxford seems to be on scholarship. He was not a priest in the sense that Langland often uses the term "clerk", For "he hadde geten hym yet no benefice" [I (A) 291], yet he seems to be one of those characters who hover on the border between the secular world and the ecclesiastical world. His greatest desire is to have Aristotle's books at his bedside, although

¹F. L. Cross ed., The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, Oxford 1957, "Clerk in Holy Orders". See also OED "clerk" 8b. Ia, 2(a), IV.

such an aspiration might never come within his means.² However, he is eager to pray for those who make possible his continued studies, for "Of studie took he moost cure and moost heede" [I (A) 303]. His devotion to logic [I (A) 286] is born out later by Harry Bailly's remark, "I trowe ye studie aboute som sophyme" [IV (E) 5], where the scholarly interest has not passed unnoticed by others, for sophism is an intricate branch of logic, and the Clerk has never uttered a word, so lost in study does he appear.

If worldly wantonness is the impression gained from a study of the Friar, and avaricious lechery the idea most strongly associated with the Summoner, then by contrast, scholarly and virtuous morality is the received impression of the Clerk's character. The Clerk rides a lean horse and is himself lean and clothed in worn-out garments, "Ful thredbare was his overeste countepy" [I (A) 290], sufficient indication that his first thoughts are not for his own comfort. Here is one of the ubiquitous echoes found in Chaucer's work, for the words used to describe the Friar's dress include the idea of scholarship and associate this with being threadbare:

For ther he was not lyk a cloysterer

With a thredbare cope, as is a povre scoler,

²W. L. Schramm, "The Cost of Books in Chaucer's Time", MLN, Vol. 48 (1933), p.139 f.

But he was lyk a maister or a pope. [I (A) 259-261]

As yet the Clerk has no ecclesiastical income, for he is not a worldly office-seeker but a student who prefers books to gay clothes and music. By contrast with the more or less veiled irony in the portraits of the Friar and the Summoner, the only irony in the Clerk's portrait is directed away from the Clerk himself in a play on the word "philosophie", when we remember the alchemical implication of the word and the false philosopher of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale whose search is for gold, not truth. Rather the Clerk's character is explicit and is found as much in bare statements about his appearance, such as he "looked holwe, and therto sobrelly" [I (A) 289], as it is implied in statements about the lean condition of his horse.

The Clerk's moderation, his quiet demeanour, his aura of otherworldliness, are all attested to in the portrait by his humble appearance and his restrained speech, "Noght a word spak he moore than was neede" [I (A) 304]. Thus, where a concern for self is fundamental to the Friar and the Summoner, a lack of concern with self is characteristic of the Clerk. But more than this, a genuine concern for scholarship takes first place, but scholarship of a moral and educative kind:

Sownynge in moral vertu was his speche,

And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche. [I (A) 307-308]

There is a delicate ambiguity in the idea of teaching, for the Clerk's Tale not only teaches the Wife of Bath a lesson, it serves as an exemplum to the whole company. Thus his Tale combines sententia with solas; it instructs the pilgrims while entertaining them.

Leaving aside Chaucer's "passion for relationships"³ and a consideration of other clerks in the Canterbury Tales, let us examine the use Chaucer makes of the Clerk of the General Prologue and narrator of a tale in terms of the function of his Tale, first as a reply to the Wife of Bath, and second as a statement of ideals in relation to ecclesiastical figures. In his excellent article on marriage in the Canterbury Tales, G.L. Kittredge suggested that the Wife of Bath was guilty of two heresies,⁴ first a contempt for the ideal of virginity, and second a belief that wives should rule their husbands. In her own Prologue and Tale she illustrates these attitudes both in terms of her own experience and in general terms, for the young knight of her Tale is made subservient to his wife's will just as her own last husband had been. Since, as Kittredge

³Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition, Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1957, p.223. See also H.S.V. Jones, "The Clerk of Oxford", PMLA Vol. 27 (1912), p. 106 f. where some comparisons are made with other Chaucerian clerks.

⁴G.L. Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage", in Chaucer Criticism, Vol. 1, The Canterbury Tales, ed. R.J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor, Notre Dame, Indiana (1960) p. 134.

observed, the Wife was not speaking to empty air but to her fellow pilgrims, then these listeners, being the almost real creations of Chaucer's fertile mind, can be expected to react to the tenets proposed by her life and Tale. In effect, Kittredge suggests, her Tale and remarks constitute a "rude personal assault"⁵ upon the Clerk. That this is so we may infer from the fact that not only was her fifth husband a clerk, he was also a graduate of Oxford, and despite his learning she had the "maistrie" over him. Thus the Wife not only rejects the principles by which the Clerk lives, that is chastity and obedience, but flaunts her own rejection of his ideals by her own experience told publicly. She crowns her attack on the Clerk with a reminder that the only books her husband had read were stories of wicked wives:

For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
 That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
 But if it be of hooly seintes lyves,

Ne of noon oother womman never the mo. [III (D) 688-691]

The patient Clerk waits his opportunity for telling a story not only about a good woman, but about one who, though not a saint, lived by a code of love which makes nonsense of the Wife's beliefs, for Griselda's behaviour in the end brings

⁵G. L. Kittredge, *ibid.*, p.136.

true happiness while all the Wife's "maistrie" does not. Thus there is an ironic echo in the use of such a word as "soverayntee", in the Clerk's Tale, when the people, appealing to Walter to get married, say:

"Boweth youre nekke under that blisful yok
Of soveraynetee, noight of servyse,
Which that men clepe spousaille or wedlok ..."

[IV (E) 113-115]

but it is Walter who extracts a promise of absolute obedience from Griselda and who exercises sovereignty beyond human limits. While a comment such as the Wife of Bath's:

And whan that I hadde geten unto me,
By maistrie, al the soveraynetee,
And that he seyde, 'Myn owene trewe wyf,
Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf ...'

[III (D) 817-820]

points out the absolute control she had over her husband, as much as Walter had over Griselda, but comments sadly on the Wife of Bath when compared with Griselda's humility:

"Ye been oure lord, dooth with youre owene thyng
Right as yow list ..."

[IV (E) 652-653]

and,

"Dooth youre pleasaunce, I wol youre lust obeye ..."

[IV (E) 658]

This shows the real depth of Griselda's love as compared with the lust of the flesh that motivates, in part at least, the jolly Wife, whose "soverayntee" did not bring her happiness.

We have seen how, to some extent, the Clerk's Tale is a reply to the Wife of Bath's attack upon him. An examination of the Tale itself in more detail will reveal the nature of this reply and fulfil the part of our investigation of the Tale's function in terms of Chaucer's treatment of this character.

Harry Bailly exhorts the "coy" Clerk to tell the company "som murie thyng" [IV (D) 15], but pleads with him not to preach "as freres doon in Lente" [IV (E) 12] to make the company miserable. In so doing, the Host recognizes the quality of the person of the Clerk while commenting on the mood of the pilgrimage. He knows that the Clerk can "endite/Heigh style", that he will be familiar with all the intricacies of formal rhetoric so he is afraid that the company will be made to endure a long, complicated and obscure argument. He pleads to the Clerk to speak plainly so that all present will understand and be entertained with "som murie tale". It is to Chaucer's credit as an artist that the Clerk relates a tale in what is in fact a muted form of the High Style without making it incomprehensible. The Clerk is made to give a restrained story, devoid of flowery figures, yet able to

both to teach and entertain the listeners. The austerity of the language and figures of the Clerk's Tale reflect the austerity of its narrator and the moral purity of his worldly pursuits. The Clerk's response to the Host's words is characteristic of his obedience and humility, and in a way reflects the obedience of his Tale's heroine, Griselda. The very language that the Clerk uses to reply to the Host, the first words he has uttered on the whole pilgrimage, reflect his pensive nature and high calling. We are told that he answers "benignely", and he himself uses such phrases as being under the Host's "yerde", and "governaunce" and ready to do "obeisance", but, only "As fer as resoun axeth" [IV (E) 25]. In other words, reflecting his character, he will play his part in the pilgrimage with good grace and up to the point that his conscience permits. The Clerk then says he will tell a story he learned from another clerk, the worthy Petrarch, and in singing the praises of Petrarch and Legnano he does not lose an opportunity of delivering an aphorism on the transitory nature of this earthly life:

But deeth, that wol nat suffre us dwellen heer,

But as it were a twynklyng of an ye,

Hem bothe hath slayn, and alle shul we dye. [IV (E) 36-
39]

Again this is in keeping with the sober portrait of the

General Prologue and the Clerk's Prologue, and it is from this last part that Kittredge sees the emergence of ^acarefully engineered reply to the Wife of Bath.⁶ There is first the suggestion of marriage in the Host's opening remarks to the Clerk:

"Ye ryde as coy and stille as dooth a mayde

Were newe spoused ..."

[IV (E) 2-3]

followed by the Clerk's drawing on Petrarch and giving him the appellation "worthy clerk", which, Kittredge suggests, must have caused the Wife of Bath to take notice, and, one might add with the benefit of having read the Tale, have caused her some discomfort for having so rudely challenged the Clerk.

After a very brief digression on Italian geography, not all of which is relevant to his Tale, as the Clerk recognizes, he begins his narration of an exemplum based upon a folk tale. The style in which the poem is written, as we have been led to expect from the Clerk's Prologue,⁷ is known as "high" style. That is, it is serious in purpose, and restrained in tone. The stanzaic form that Chaucer chose for this poem is rime-royal, an indication of the seriousness of the poem's purpose⁷ and the technique that Chaucer has of adapting the

⁶G. L. Kittredge, *ibid.*, p.138-139.

⁷The Clerk's Tale, IV (E) 17-18, 41. The phrase "heigh Stile" is used again at l. 1148 where it emphasises the Clerk's claim for the moral of his Tale.

tales to their tellers. Muscatine notes⁸ that the other Canterbury Tales which are written in rime-royal, namely the Man of Law's Tale, the Prioress's Tale and the Second Nun's Tale, are all of a pious and serious nature, as is the Clerk's Tale. Thus, though rime-royal is not of itself indicative of any particular level of seriousness, it is consistently used, in the Canterbury Tales at least, when the subject of a Tale is serious in nature.

Further evidence of the serious purpose behind the Clerk's Tale, and evidence that it is much more than a reply to the Wife of Bath, is found first in the poem's theme which is related to Job V, 17⁹, secondly in the lack of detail given to the main characters, who become abstractions of virtue or cruelty, and thirdly in what James Sledd has called the "scriptural echoes" or Biblical references and language scattered throughout the Tale.¹⁰ Near the end of his Tale the Clerk tells the pilgrims:

This storie is seyð, nat for that wyves sholde

Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee ...

But for that every wight, in his degree,

Sholde be constant in adversitee ... [IV (E) 1142-43,
1144-45]

⁸Charles Muscatine, *ibid.*, p.192.

⁹Charles Muscatine, *ibid.*, p.194. The Clerk himself refers to Job at line 932 of his Tale.

¹⁰James Sledd, "The Clerk's Tale: The Monsters and the Critics", in Chaucer Criticism Vol. 1, ed. R. J. Schoeck & J. Taylor, Notre Dame (1960), p.171.

This clearly illustrates the exemplary nature of his Tale and lifts it from the immediate and personal reply it has been to the Wife, to the wider more general exhortation to the listeners to strive for the Christian ideals of patience and humility.

The characters of Janicula, Walter and Griselda are seen not as highly credible human beings, but as representatives of types or ideals. Janicula is the poorest among the poor, but beyond the fact that he had a daughter named Griselda, we are told no more about him to make him human. This is as it should be, for Janicula and his house serve as the symbol of God's grace found in the humblest places, an echo of the first Christmas:

But hye God somtyme senden kan

His grace into a litel oxes stalle. [IV (E) 206-207]

About Walter we are told that he lived the proper sort of lordly life, beloved and feared by his people of high and low degree. In effect, almost a symbol of God himself but expressed in courtly terms:

The gentilleste yborn of Lumbardye,

A fair persone, and strong, and yong of age,

And ful of honour and of curteisye ... [IV (E) 72-74]

But we are prevented from regarding him as God for "in somme thynges ... he was to blame". On the other hand we are

prevented from seeing him as more than an abstraction of the idea of the chastening of God because, beyond such general details as his strength or undefined age, there are no details which humanise him as other characters in the Canterbury Tales are humanised to the point where they embody typical and individual traits.

For her part Griselda is very fair, very dutiful, industrious and patient with her lot in life. Yet she is made somewhat sympathetic by such details as the fostering of her father (1.222), and domestic life such as gathering herbs for their food (1.225-227). In all, the space devoted to describing Griselda's virtues and mode of life is only twenty-three lines. The point is of course, ^{that} where these characters are concerned, the Tale is not meant to serve simply as entertainment but as an exemplum both on marital obedience and patience in adversity. For as a heroine Griselda is deliberately too good to be an acceptable literary character, and as protagonist or central figure Walter is too bad to be credible. At least his methods, and the extent of time elapsed in testing his wife, are excessive. But these are, if anything, not faults but advantages. We are lifted beyond the level of human disbelief into an acceptance of such incredibilities that the imagined sufferings of Griselda no longer touch us personally, but become the remote aspects of the virtue that

Griselda embodies. We are reminded that the mediaeval reader would have had little difficulty in accepting Griselda as a symbol and not a reality,¹¹ and that Chaucer is always careful to prevent his readers from confusing fiction with reality, so that Walter and Griselda are carefully wrought abstractions, not frightful human beings. Thus we are not seriously critical of such incredible or unlikely details in the story as the bridal dress being the correct size, even though Walter uses a girl of similar stature as a model (lines 256-257), or that the wedding ring (l.386) was the right size. Nor are we overwhelmed when we learn that Griselda's virtue increases (l.408-409) or that she suddenly acquires the wisdom and experience to govern the land in Walter's absence (l.430-441); naturally, the hurrying-over of painful passages and playing down of any exact chronology for the story tend to make us forget associations with the possible or probable.

In terms of the "scriptural echoes" referred to earlier, which reflect both the seriousness of the Tale and the nature of its teller, we have already seen how, in a reference to a "litel oxes stalle", we are reminded of Christ's birth. There are two more references to an ox's stall at lines 291 and 398 in case we overlook the first one and are led away from

¹¹James Sledd, *ibid.*, p.168-169.

the Christian sentence. There is too, the ~~very~~ Biblical stanza where Griselda, for the first time, appears before Walter:

And she set doun hir water pot anon,
 Biside the thressshfold in an oxes stalle,
 And doun upon hir knes she gan to falle,
 And with sad contenance kneleth stille,
 Til she had herd what was the lordes wille.

[IV (E) 290-294]

The details of the water pot, the stall, the threshold, the use of the word "contenance" and the dehumanizing of Walter as "the lord", all lend this stanza a strongly Biblical flavour. When she learns she is to be rejected, Griselda's speech is strongly reminiscent of Job I, 21:

"Naked out of my fadres hous", quod she,

"I cam, and naked moot I turne agayn." [IV (E) 871-872]

The Clerk's reference to Job, as we have noted earlier, reminds us of his theme. Finally, when Walter takes his wife back again and the testing is really over, the oath upon which he swears is "God, that for us deyde" (l.1062) which helps to sustain the specifically Christian tone of the whole Tale.

It remains only to examine the conclusion of the Tale and Chaucer's Envoy ~~which~~ has given so much critical trouble.

In the last thirty-four lines of the Tale (l.1142-1176) the Clerk takes the opportunity of explaining the spiritual meaning of his story for those of his listeners who may have missed the point or simply been satisfied with the "draff" and are not looking for the "whete". This conclusion is the more effective from the preaching point of view in that the listeners are in a receptive frame of mind as the story has ended on an optimistic note and the natural order of things in Walter's family has been restored. Further, with the Tale still fresh in their minds it is no difficult task for them to be persuaded to see the parallel of the Tale with the theme of patience in adversity. Finally, the conclusion brings the pilgrim back from the unreal, fictional world of Walter and Griselda, to the real world of worldly wives, with the warning, which surely leads to his rounding upon the Wife of Bath, that modern wives are somewhat alloyed with base metal when compared with the gold which made up Griselda. It is curious that Chaucer, careful of pointing out that the philosophy pursued by the Clerk was not of the alchemical kind, should here have the Clerk resort to a metaphor which could be associated with alchemy and the search for gold. Yet even this reference to gold seems appropriate, for the Clerk's Tale had been set in a remote land at a remote "golden age", a common enough idea even in our day.

It would be mistaken to conclude that the Envoy serves simply as a means of softening the monstrosity of the Clerk's Tale.¹² To suggest that Chaucer's attribution of the Tale to the Clerk was to soften the blow is to commit two errors, first that of confusing the fiction of the pilgrimage with a real set of events, and second a failure to see the peculiarly and doubly appropriate nature of the Clerk's Tale,~~which~~ has been suggested, since not only does the Tale enlighten us about the Clerk, it harmonises dramatically with the events within the fiction of the Canterbury Tales. Furthermore, to suggest that the irony of the Envoy rests simply upon the fact that there are no more Griseldas today so wives should join the Wife of Bath's sect,¹³ is to fail to see the essentially sarcastic and cutting effect of such a reply to the Wife of Bath. Or, put another way, a failure to see how perceptive of the rôle of the Wife of Bath in a marriage the Clerk has been. For he suggests, beneath the apparent yielding to her way of life, that marriages where women have the "maistrie", lead to weeping and wailing, and not to harmony.

What seems closer to the truth of the situation is that the Envoy is a "mock encomium, a sustained ironical commendation of what the Wife has taught."¹⁴ Yet, there is reality

¹²Nevill Coghill, The Poet Chaucer, Oxford (1967), p.105.

¹³Trevor Whittock, A Reading of the Canterbury Tales, Cambridge (1968) p.152.

¹⁴G. L. Kittredge, *ibid.*, p.143.

in the Wife's attitude, it is one side of love or caritas that has to be taken into account.¹⁵ It is the worldly lust of the flesh that she proposes while the Clerk counters with a love of God and one's fellows.

But on a higher level, the conclusion to the Tale and the Envoy which follows are the two aspects of spiritual existence and the choice of the will, Babylon or Jerusalem. If the Tale stands as the direction towards salvation, then Griselda is a secular saint whom we all, not just wives, should emulate, while the Envoy reminds us of the chaotic Babylonian world that the Wife proposes where her desires, her lust, are put before the happiness of her husband with

"arwes" of "crabbed eloquence." [IV. (E) 1203]

In the framework of juxtaposition between the ~~real~~ world and the ideal represented by the Clerk, his Tale:

... yearns for the naked, simple uncompromising virtue of original Christianity, in which the divine lordship manifests itself in every corner of life, and in which nobility is humble obedience, not birth or station.

It is at once impossibly and hopefully nostalgic.¹⁶

Of the eight ecclesiastical characters under consideration in

¹⁵Trevor Whittock, *ibid.*, p.152.

¹⁶Charles Muscatine, *ibid.*, p.197.

this study, only two stand out from the crowd of corrupted religious within the Tales or outside them in the company of pilgrims. The Clerk is one of these two, who combines what is rare in the Canterbury Tales, a figure who not only does God's work by telling a story that will inspire others to do good or live better lives, but one who lives the life he proposes in his Tale. He stands a silent reminder to the Wife of Bath of what her type of love leads to, while to the whole company he offers a living example of the patient facing of the "Scourges of adversitee." Thus his person and his Tale, within the framework of the Canterbury Tales, embody the levels of the real and the ideal. For we have seen first how, in his person, he contrasts with the Friar and the Summoner who precede him in their tales, and secondly, in his own Tale, he reflects this contrast and points to the ideal, and finally, in his Tale taken together with the Envoy, how he suggests the coexistence of the ideal and the real and arouses in his audience an awareness, in marriage at the very least, of the two possibilities that the human will can choose.

References for the Clerk of Oxford

- H. S. V. Jones, "The Clerk of Oxford", PMLA, Vol. 27 (1912), p.106 f.
- G. L. Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage", reprinted in Chaucer Criticism, Vol. 1, The Canterbury Tales, ed. R. J. Schoeck and J. Taylor, Notre Dame, Indiana (1960), p.130-159.
- W. L. Schramm, "The Cost of Books in Chaucer's Time", MLN, Vol. 48 (1933), p.139 f.
- James Sledd, "The Clerk's Tale: The Monsters and the Critics", reprinted in Chaucer Criticism, Vol. 1, The Canterbury Tales, ed. R. J. Schoeck and J. Taylor, Notre Dame, Indiana (1960), p.160-174.

The Pardoner

It seems clear that most of our impressions of pardoners are derived largely from their abuses. Thus there is the danger of forgetting that much of what we take to have been normal practice in Chaucer's Pardoner, was not in fact permitted under canon law.¹ The real, permissible, functions of pardoners were limited to the duties of papal or episcopal messengers and did not include the right to preach or to forgive sins. The Bishops were expected to punish pardoners who deviated from their simple but unrewarding tasks. However, ironically, the success and continued proliferation of pardoners in England was partly a result of the unwillingness of Church authorities to stop a steady supply of money, collected by the quaestors, from reaching the coffers of the Church.

Chaucer's Pardoner is identified as a representative of the Hospital of the Blessed St. Mary of Rouncevall(e), near Charing Cross. It became the custom of such hospitals, operated by the regular orders, to farm out their rights of collection to groups of professional quaestors. The collected funds were used for charitable works as well as for building bridges and churches. The regular clergy soon realised that the professional quaestors were more productive, even though

¹A. L. Kellogg & L. A. Haselmeyer, "Chaucer's Satire of the Pardoner", PMLA, Vol. 66 (1951), p.251-253.

less worthy, than the brothers who operated the hospitals. It seems significant that Chaucer chose a foreign hospital as the institution represented by his Pardoner, for these hospitals were less subject to control from their parent establishments, and it is with foreign hospitals that the worst abuses of pardoners are connected.² From this Chaucer's readers were able to infer that the Pardoner belonged to a more heavily censured class of pardoners.

Pardoners were generally guilty of four chief abuses. Chaucer's Pardoner is even guilty of one of the less common abuses, the showing of false relics:

For in his male he hadde a pilwe-beer,

Which that he seyde was Oure Lady weyl ...

[I (A) 694-695]

The other three abuses of which pardoners were often guilty were a failure to be authorized by the Bishops; claiming of greater or more effective Indulgences than they really possessed; engaging in struggles with friars and seculars for the use of the pulpit on Sundays, an office categorically denied them under canon law.³ However, we know that the Church often aided and abetted the spread of pardoners for

²Kellogg and Haselmeyer, *ibid.*, p.274-275.

³G. R. Owst, Preaching in Mediaeval England, Cambridge (1926), p.103-104.

its own enrichment. Thus, while irony is the chief method by which this character is satirised, it is no surprise that the Summoner and the Pardoner ride together on the pilgrimage. The former a representative of ecclesiastical justice perverted beyond belief, encouraging crime of the most insidious and shameful nature, the latter a shameless thief and trickster. The Pardoner evinces his knowledge of the effect of his preaching upon the ignorant people in the country parishes:

Thanne telle I hem ensamples many oon
 Of olde stories longe tyme agoon.
 For lewed peple loven tales olde;
 Swiche thynges kan they wel reporte and holde.

[VI (c) 435-438]

What a far cry from the poor Parson of the General Prologue in whose description the word "ensample" is used three times. While the Parson represents the terrestrial manifestation of the Christian Ideal, the word "ensample" heightens our awareness of the Pardoner's avarice. While the Parson's quest is for souls, the Pardoner's is for silver. His "ensample", personally of the worst kind, is ironically, in a narrative sense, successful both for himself and for his audience. The Host's violent attack on the Pardoner at the end of the Pardoner's Tale is further witness of the spellbinding effect of the Pardoner's preaching, but this is a problem to which we shall return later.

In describing the Pardoner in the General Prologue Chaucer makes no attempt to conceal his character. He rides in company with the lecherous Summoner, "his freend and his compeer". He sings a song of love, possibly from some popular ballad, but we soon learn that his love is really directed towards winning silver from simple folk. Beyond this more obvious perversion of Christian love lies the suggestion of a homosexual partnership with the Summoner who accompanies the Pardoner's song with a "stif burdoun". There is possibly a play on the word "burdoun" for, in addition to the meaning of ground melody or burden of a song, it carries the meaning of a pilgrim's staff or staff of any kind.⁴ Further, there are no fewer than four references to symbols of lechery in this description,⁵ for the Pardoner has glaring eyes like a hare, a small goat-like voice and, Chaucer suggests, "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" (IIA691). We learn too, of his skill at fooling people with his false relics. Finally, with the unconcealed irony of the remark that in Church he is a

⁴MED, Burdoun, n. 1 and 2.

⁵R. P. Miller, "Chaucer's Pardoner, The Scriptural Eunuch and The Pardoner's Tale", in Chaucer Criticism, Vol. 1, The Canterbury Tales, ed. R. J. Schoeck and J. Taylor, Notre Dame, Indiana, (1960), p.224. For Chaucer's knowledge of the physiognomies in relation to the Pardoner, see W. C. Curry, Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences, Ch.III, 2nd edit., London (1960).

"noble ecclesiaste", we are left with the portrait of a thoroughgoing and unashamed scoundrel who makes apes of parson and parishioners alike.

When asked by the Host to tell "som myrthe or japes", the Pardoner agrees with alacrity and an oath upon "Seint Ronyon". The Host has just used this oath in commenting on The Physician's Tale. The Pardoner, perhaps echoing the oath, fails to see how the irony of his being a eunuch is strengthened by an oath on the male organs.⁶ Before he can proceed with his tale the "gentils" of the pilgrimage object that they want no ribald tales, but prefer "som moral thyng" so they may learn "som wit". The Pardoner begs leave to take a drink while he thinks "upon som honest thyng". Once refreshed, he proceeds to tell not only a moral tale, but one which truly impresses the company. This is not altogether surprising, for he is now practising that craft at which none excels him "fro Berwyk unto Ware". On this occasion the Pardoner has no recourse to the impressive parchments and official-looking seals with which he customarily silences any tendency to question his authority. For now his audience is not a group of illiterate farm workers, but a fairly sophisticated company from all walks of life and having greater or less

⁶R. P. Miller, *ibid.*, p. 236 and OED, Runnion (obs.) 2.

skill at reading and writing.

The Pardoner's Tale has been shown to have the structure of a mediaeval sermon.⁷ While this is only partly true, in that the statement of a theme, Radix malorum est cupiditas, and an "ensaumple" are the chief parts of the Tale, it distracts our attention from the chief interest of the person telling the Tale. More significant is the irony implicit in the avaricious Pardoner preaching like a perfect hypocrite against greed. For at no time does he attempt to hide his "entente" from his audience; "I preche nothyng but for coveitise" (VIc/433). He is, in fact, giving a live demonstration of his trade. By the appropriate references to authorities the Pardoner expounds also on the evils of drinking and as many other sins as possible, so as to embrace as many of his audience as possible. He is, of course, guilty of most of the sins against which he preaches, but further, it is characteristic of his nature that he is guilty of the last three,⁸ and ^{the} worst in a social context, of the seven deadly

⁷C. O. Chapman, "The Pardoner's Tale: A Mediaeval Sermon", MLN, Vol. 41 (1926), p.506-509.

⁸Frederick Tupper, "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins", PMLA, Vol. 29 (1914), p.93-94. See also O. L. Triggs' Introduction to his edition of Lydgate's Assembly of the Gods, E.E.T.S. Extra Series no. 69, London (1896), p.lxx-lxxi where numerous examples of the "normal" and irregular order of the deadly sins are recorded.

sins, Avarice, Gluttony and Lechery.

In order to explain the Pardoner's indiscretion with the Host at the end of the Tale, a great deal of effort has been devoted by critics in the past to pointing out that the Tale is related at a tavern. All this with a view to showing that the Pardoner is drunk and is tempted to throw caution to the winds. The text does not support this view which has been based partly on a misunderstanding of the Wife of Bath's remark to the Pardoner, "Nay, thou shalt drynken of another ~~tone~~" [III (D) 170] and partly on the Pardoner's remark that he must have a drink before telling his story [VI (C) 321-322]. In fact, nowhere in the Canterbury Tales, except at VI (C) 322 and 328, does the Pardoner have recourse to any drink. We cannot assume that his indiscretion is caused by drunkenness, for surely one drink would not have made him helpless. And if this had been the case, then Chaucer's skill would be highly questionable, for the Pardoner is able to relate a complicated and moving exemplum without losing the thread.

Other attempts to explain the Pardoner's behaviour at the end of his Tale have included theories of a sudden insight into the Pardoner's aversion from God, a revelation of the great power he is mocking or the fact that he was overcome by pride and vanity at the success of his story. However, one

is led to feel that a fuller explanation lies not so much in a microscopic investigation of the Pardoner alone, but in a larger view which includes the Pardoner, his audience and the Church in one context. We have seen how, by keeping company with the Summoner, there is an indication of the legitimate practices of the Church being linked with the abuses which that same Church encourages. In other words, the satire of the Pardoner is really a satire of the Church. But this does not account for the reaction of the pilgrims within the framework of the Canterbury Tales. The Pardoner realises that he has impressed his listeners, for there is silence and a pause before he begins to produce his relics. Harry Bailly is singled out by the Pardoner as one most in need of absolution. Harry Bailly's violent reaction may be accounted for since he is the leader and arbitrator of the pilgrims and the Pardoner appears to be making a fool of him. The other pilgrims are silent, impressed by the Tale and its moral. The degree of success of the Tale is measured by their silence. But they have forgotten the nature of the Tale's narrator. It is the Pardoner himself who returns the company to reality by his offer of relics. His attempt to reintroduce the mirthful mood of the pilgrimage has been entirely misconstrued by the Host. Harry Bailly and the pilgrims are the gulled ones, for the Host even accuses the Pardoner of being angry after his violent

outburst. But it is precisely the failure of the Pardoner's listeners to separate art from reality that accounts for their silence and the Host's outrage. Harry Bailly's reaction is like that of an irate viewer who shoots a television set because his emotions have ~~confused~~ the image of a play with the reality of his drawing room.

Theories of the revelation of Divine Providence to the Pardoner of the power he is mocking, or the aversion from God that he is trying to hide,⁹ while valuable in themselves, do not recognize the nature of Chaucer's art. The very vehemence of the Host's attack, with its crude and ironical references to the state of the Pardoner's masculinity, illustrate that Chaucer has seen things as they are while he contrives to show that the pilgrims, his creations, have not. Chaucer exhibits a "perfect hatred" even for this character who, thoroughly worthy of damnation, is yet one of God's creatures and hence not completely damnable.¹⁰ Furthermore, he sees such characters, albeit vile and vicious in themselves, working God's will, for the Pardoner is capable of stirring the deepest religious feelings in his listeners. It may be argued that his craft involves seducing his listeners into the acceptance

⁹A. L. Kellogg, "An Augustinian Interpretation of Chaucer's Pardoner", Spec., Vol. 26 (1951), p.470.

¹⁰A. L. Kellogg, ibid., p.475.

of the message while forgetting the messenger, so the more seductive the message the greater the financial reward. However, Chaucer had the compassion to see the Pardoner as a human being doing God's work while Harry Bailly had not.

Thus there is yet another irony in the quest of the Pardoner's Tale and the quest of the teller of the Tale. The three rioters in the Tale go in search of Death, only to be diverted by Avarice. Yet they find Death in a manner not intended by themselves, for they become the victims of their own selfish greed. On the other hand the Pardoner's quest for silver, even if made in lighthearted vein to alleviate the solemnity of his exemplum, produces a violent attack in the most telling manner. In this instance the king of quaestors has become the victim of his real quest. While his quest should involve absolution where permitted, to lead men away from sin, he has been too successful at his trade and suffers public humiliation at the hands of one who has understood his physical defects while failing to understand his craft. Both Harry Bailly and the Pardoner are the losers in this bitter exchange.

References for the Pardoner

- C. O. Chapman, "The Pardoner's Tale: A Mediaeval Sermon",
MLN Vol. 41 (1926), p.506-509.
- A. L. Kellogg, "An Augustinian Interpretation of Chaucer's
Pardoner", Speculum, Vol. 26 (1951), p.465-
481.
- A. L. Kellogg and L. A. Haselmeyer, "Chaucer's Satire of
the Pardoner", PMLA, Vol. 66 (1951), p.251-
277.
- R. P. Miller, "Chaucer's Pardoner, The Scriptural Eunuch
and The Pardoner's Tale", reprinted in
Chaucer Criticism Vol. 1, The Canterbury
Tales, ed. R. J. Schoeck and J. Taylor,
Notre Dame, Indiana (1960), p.221-244.
- Frederick Tupper, "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins",
PMLA, Vol. 29 (1914), p.93-128.

Chaucer's Monks

A problem that seems to be assiduously avoided by most critics is the extent to which the portrait of the Monk in the General Prologue is a satire on the ideals of monasticism. Most scholars advance reasons for the apparent inconsistency between the received impression of the Monk in the General Prologue and the impression we have of him when he comes to tell his Tale. Yet Chaucer is rarely guilty of inconsistency in his characters. The truth seems to be that the Monk conducted himself and clothed himself in a manner appropriate to his office as an outsider and business administrator.¹ It is true that there are very strong elements of the worldly in this portrait, which abounds with food metaphors, references to hunting and remarks on the splendour of his dress, all of which argue an excessive devotion to the profane and the Monk's neglect of the sacred aspect of his office. There are two clues, apparently casual, which draw our attention to the Monk's real duties while heightening his deviation from the sacred office:

And whan he rood, men myghte his brydel heere

Gynglen in a whistlynge wynd als cleere

And eek as loude as dooth the chapel belle. [I (A) 169-
171]

and

¹P. E. Beichner, "Daun Piers, Monk and Business Administrator", reprinted in Chaucer Criticism, Vol. 1, The Canterbury Tales, ed. R. J. Schoeck and J. Taylor, Notre Dame, Indiana (1960), p.54.

He hadde of gold ywroght a ful curious pyn;

A love-knotte in the gretter ende ther was. [I (A) 196-
197]

In the first example the worldly bridle bells ring as loud as the chapel bells and even seem to drown them. Surely we cannot think the reference to the chapel bell is accidental?

It seems to remind us of that abandoned world of service to God which is obscured by the Monk's pursuit of the hare or the fox. The "love-knotte" of the second quotation reminds us too of the two loves, caritas and cupiditas, that the human will can choose. In mediaeval symbolism the love-knot signifies the summum bonum, and in Thomas Usk's Testament of Love the knot represents perfect bliss, not achieved by worldly rank or possessions, but by grace, the wisdom of God and Holy Church.² While the love-knot may have indicated the Monk's membership of a religious fraternity, as there are mediaeval precedents for this,³ we know that this Monk is a man of power, wealth and dignity. Thus one feels justified in thinking that Chaucer's inclusion of a love-knot, in an apparently casual reference, keeps before the reader the shadow of the ideal of service to God behind the portrait of the real Monk busy in the world of man. The "curious pyn" may have been

²Ramona Bressie, "A Governour Wily and Wys", *MLN*, Vol. 54 (1939), p.487-488.

³Ramona Bressie, *ibid.*, p.488.

merely a touch of worldly vanity and an ornament,⁴ but it seems unlikely in view of the gentle irony which pervades this portrait, and had Chaucer wished simply to portray a worldly man, why bother to make him a Monk?

The portrait of the robust Monk abounds in food and hunting images and at one point these come together:

He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,

That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men. [I (A) 177-178]

In his brief defence of his way of life, that is of hunting rather than studying, the Monk uses food metaphors, even though these may be popular expressions:

... a monk when he is recchelees,

Is likned til a fissh that is waterlees, -

This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre.

But thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre.

[I (A) 179-182]

But even if these are commonly used expressions in the fourteenth century, they seem appropriately to lead up to that part of the description which says that his eyes gleamed like

⁴J. S. P. Tatlock, "Chaucer's Monk", *MLN*, Vol. 55 (1940), p.351. There are numerous instances of the use of the love-knot in secular literature, for example in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight l.612, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon Oxford (1967); Emaré l.125, 149 and l.118, ed. E. Rickert, *EEETS*, E.S. Vol. 99 (1906); Sir Degrevant l.1496-1500, ed. L. F. Casson, *EEETS* Vol. 221 (1949).

the fire under a cooking pot and that his chief culinary delight was roast swan. The whole portrait is pervaded by a sense of the healthy, well-fed, outdoor life. The Monk is overtly referred to as a "lord ful fat and in good poynt", as opposed to what one might expect of a monk who hides in his cloister to become "pale as a forpynded goost". Even his horse gives the impression of good condition while the description refers to something appealing to the palate, "His palfrey was as broun as is a berye", [I (A) 207]. This is not surprising, for we know he kept many fine horses and swift greyhounds, for hunting "was al his lust".

The satire of the Monk seems to lie in the line "now certeinly he was a fair prelaat" (1.204). As an outrider it was his function to assist the abbot in looking after the estates and convents or cells in the monastery's possession. Properly managed and with an eye on good public relations, the monasteries could be run as very profitable institutions. Yet the criticism seems to be that this Monk has been tempted into allowing his office of outrider and monastic representative, outside the convent, to become his way of life. He seems to abuse the injunctions against hunting, for we know that he is a manly man "to been an abbot able". In other words, he is not the abbot, but seems to conduct himself as though he were. While expensive clothes for the sake of

public appearances, and hunting for the entertainment of the lords who endow the monasteries, are appropriate to the Monk's dignity and office, they seem to have pushed his monastic rôle out of sight. His well-fed appearance, the frequent use of food metaphors both in his description and in the defence of his way of life, all imply a criticism of the man, not of the institution he represents. Thus there is a degree of ambiguity in the word "fair".⁵ He is indeed fair both in his physical appearance and in his office as administrator. But he lacks the piety, spiritual detachment and devotion to monastic asceticism incumbent upon monks. He has allowed his worldly pursuits to lapse into an attitude of worldliness. But behind this ambiguity we are faced with the dilemma of this Monk's function. He has to appear worldly in the execution of his office as outrider, yet that office offers him the temptation to become worldly. He seems to have been unable to resist the temptation.

Chaucer's satire of the Monk does not appear to condemn monasticism. But the description strives to keep before the reader the forgotten monastic ideal. That this is so may be seen by the references to the chapel bell and the love knot

⁵The meaning of "fair" seems to fall between meanings 1(a) and 12(a) and (b) in MED. See "fair" adj.

and by Chaucer's ironical statement "I seyde his opinion was good" (1.183). For the Monk's opinion about his way of life is good for the continued prosperity of the monastery. The world will be served by such a man. The Monk's behaviour is questionable only because it has become his way of life. The shadow of the monastic life is gently asserted.

The Monk invited to tell the company a tale is the same one described in the General Prologue, for the Host says:

I vowe to God, thou hast a ful fair skyn;

It is a gentil pasture ther thow goost.

Thou art nat lyk a penant or a goost. [VII 1932-1934]

which is an echo of, "He was nat pale as a forpynded goost", [I (A) 205] in the General Prologue. The Host's playful address, while reinforcing the original description, is made in the hope of eliciting some bawdy story from the Monk:

Haddestow as greet a leeve, as thou hast myght,

To parfourne al thy lust in engendrure,

Thou haddest bigeten ful many a creature. [VII 1946-1948]

Though there are no references to carnal sin in the original description, the Host has judged by the Monk's appearance of worldliness that he is capable of "Venus paiementz". In his attempt at familiarity the Host "thees" and "thous" the Monk, forgetting, for a moment, the Monk's office and the dignity that he has to defend. The result is that the very means by

which the Host had hoped to elicit some bawdy tale has been the cause of the Monk's retreat behind his dignity, his learning and his office.⁶ Consequently, and ironically for the Host, the company is treated to a story of boring exempla on Fortune. The Host, echoing the Knight's boredom, and exhibiting again his own lack of originality while reasserting his leadership, cries out:

Youre tale anoyeth al this compaignye.

Swich talkyng is nat worth a boterflye,

For therinne is ther no desport ne game. [VII 2789-2791]

Once again the Host has become the victim of his own crude shortsightedness. The Monk has paid off the attack on his dignity, and that of the monastic orders, while narrating tales appropriate to his station.

The Monk's Tale deals De Casibus Virorum Illustrium. As an outrider Daun Piers was obliged to deal with the great ones of this world. Stories about the danger of putting one's faith in Fortune will not offend anyone; furthermore, a series of exempla is appropriate to the Monk's ecclesiastical calling. Since the monastic possessions often depended on the continuing support of great lords, there is an ironical element in tales which deal with the changing fortunes of great men.

⁶J. S. P. Tatlock, *ibid.*, p.353.

Finally, his stories are both safe and appropriate because another type of tale, possibly one about hunting, might involve his lords and patrons too specifically while tales about remote and ancient figures would not be personal to anyone contributing to monastic upkeep. There is no danger of offending anybody with tales about Fortune, and Daun Piers is, after all, a gentleman.⁷

In the Shipman's Tale we are presented with a worldly, vigorous and attractive monk whose description accords with that of the Monk in the General Prologue. We learn that Daun John is about "thritty winter ... oold", that he was "fair of fa~~ce~~" and that he was both fair and bold. All of this fulfills the expectation that the Host must have had when he asked the pilgrim Monk to tell a tale. The Shipman's monk was also an outrider which permitted him to mix with the well-to-do:

This noble monk, of which I yow devyse,
 Hath of his abbot, as hym list, licence,
 By cause he was a man of heigh prudence,
 And eek an officer, out for to ryde ... [VII 62-65]

But his nobility and "heigh prudence" do not prevent him from enjoying the fruits of this world. A little later on the

⁷P. E. Beichner, *ibid.*, p.60.

monk himself reminds us of the service he performs outside the monastery:

Now, by youre leve, I may no lenger dwelle;
 Oure abbot wole out of this toun anon,
 And in his compaignye moot I goon. [VII 360-362]

Daun John is placed in the world of affairs, buying and selling and visiting the rich, a dear man, "ful of curteisye". His arrival at the merchant's house is always welcomed by the servants. His gifts of fine wines show that he is no mean, poverty-stricken, cloister-bound ascetic, but a man free with his money and familiar, like the friar of the Summoner's Tale, with good food and drink:

With hym broghte he a jubbe of malvesye,
 And eek another, ful of fyn vernage,
 And volatyl, as ay was his usage. [VII 70-72]

Thus the atmosphere which surrounds this monk is one of easy sophistication. The values of the monastic ideal are cheerfully suspended so that it is only by the oath that he makes on his breviary that we are reminded of the incongruity of a monk indulging in the pleasures of flirtation and adultery. He is apparently a willing servant of Lust, for in conversation with the merchant's wife he says she looks pale and worn out because:

I trowe, certes, that oure goode man
 Hath yow laboured sith the nyght bigan. [VII 107-108]

He is no novice in the affairs of the flesh for he laughs loudly and blushes deeply with the delightful thoughts in his head.

When he learns that the merchant is to make a business journey to Bruges, allowing him a chance with the merchant's wife, Daun John draws the merchant aside in pretended concern for his welfare and diet on the journey. In the cleverly engineered conversation that follows, the monk shifts smoothly from this concern for his friend to a request for a loan of one hundred franks "For certein beestes that I moste beye". The merchant quickly assures him:

My gold is youres, whan that it yow leste,
And nat oonly my gold, but my chaffare.

Take what yow list, God shilde that you spare. [VII 284-
286]

The dramatic irony of this speech is compounded by the association of money with sexual power and the portrait of the unsuspecting husband who is only too willing to open his coffers to a monk from whose mind God has long been absent. With a deft stroke Chaucer reveals the values of the monk, the wife and the merchant, for all of whom "moneie is hir plogh" (1.288).

Chaucer's criticism of monks is much more subtle than the frontal assaults of Wyclif and the Lollards.⁸ There is

⁸H. B. Workman, John Wyclif: A Study of the Mediaeval Church, 2 vols., Vol. 2, Oxford (1926), p.94.

implicit in his portrait of monks the confusion of worldly happiness with wealth and privilege. Both monks in the Canterbury Tales have perverted their love of God for a love of the world and the flesh. But Chaucer allows the reader to make his own judgement finally. There is criticism in the apparently casual clues that litter the text; the chapel bell, the love-knot, oaths upon various saints, comments on monastic rules and the breviary of the Shipman's monk. The Ideal and Real are constantly held up for comparison. The Monk of the General Prologue is an able and effective manager, and we may assume that this is true of the Shipman's monk who also understands public relations. They both present themselves in the guise of genial efficiency. But the guise insidiously becomes the habit. Yet how else "shal the world be served?"

References for Chaucer's Monks

P. E. Beichner, "Daun Piers, Monk and Business Administrator", reprinted in Chaucer Criticism, Vol. 1, The Canterbury Tales, ed. R. J. Schoeck and J. Taylor, Notre Dame, Indiana (1960) p.52-62.

Ramona Bressie, "A Governour Wily and Wys", MLN, Vol. 54 (1939), p.477-490.

J. S. P. Tatlock, "Chaucer's Monk", MLN, Vol. 55 (1940), p.350-354.

The Prioress

In dealing with Chaucer's Prioress one must resist the temptation of applying too strict a code of monastic ethics to her neglect and misunderstanding of her vocation. The terms and tone of her portrait in the General Prologue are often courtly and romantic. Her Tale is one of innocence and simplicity. Yet in this there may be the subtle irony of her own naïveté in the way in which she fails to see the ambiguity created by her manner, her dress and her behaviour. Just as the Monk of the General Prologue was a "fair" monk, that is he fits Chaucer's conception of monkishness, so too, the Prioress is characterised without bitterness and in terms which imply that she is an appropriate figure for her station in life.

Of the ecclesiastical figures so far examined, the Prioress is handled with the least obvious and most gentle irony. Her portrait does however exhibit a series of delicate ambiguities about a love of the world and of God. But it may be said in her defence that her deviations from celestial love never take her into a world of questionable personal morality. They are instead laxities of monastic regulations, a shift in the emphasis of her attention, which bring into question her sincerity about the values of monastic life and the degree to which she has comprehended the divine ideals of

such a life. Her very presence on a pilgrimage, mixing with people of the world, is a gentle reminder both of the neglected cloister and of the various injunctions prohibiting nuns from taking part in pilgrimages. Yet she is part of the fourteenth-century scene, and as such has a place in this literal and allegorical pilgrimage.

As has been suggested, the emphasis on the Prioress in the General Prologue is placed on the courtly and romantic elements of her appearance. She smiles "ful symple and coy", both words associated with Romance rather than religion.¹ Her choice of a religious name, while perhaps of a type not unparalleled in actual nuns, is not a Biblical name.² The manner in which she sings the divine service "ful semely", her use of French spoken "ful faire and fetisly" and the great care with which she ate her meals:

She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,

Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe ... [I (A) 128-
129]

are all summarised in the line "In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest", (l.132). We learn too of the trouble she took:

¹H. S. Bennett, "Mediaeval Literature and the Modern Reader", E. S. Vol. 31 (1945), p.10.

²R. T. Davies, "Chaucer's Madame Eglantine", MLN 67 (1952), p.400-402.

... to countrefete cheere

Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,

And to ben holden digne of reverence. [I (A) 139-141]

In her description the word "semely" is used three times, "fetys", and the adverb derived from it, twice,³ and words based on courtly tradition, such as "curteisie", twice. The Prioress seems, then, to be more concerned with an appearance of worthiness and ladylike qualities than with being spiritually worthy.

Chaucer speaks of Madame Eglentyne's "conscience" and includes the ideas of charity and pity. While "conscience" implies a sense of solicitude or anxiety⁴ for suffering, the Prioress's tenderness towards animals seems to displace the charity and pity she should demonstrate towards human suffering, it seems to imply a certain emotional vulnerability and an excess of sensibility,⁵ for:

She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous

Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde,

[I (A) 144-145]

surely ironical in an age when human suffering from hunger and disease was so much more obvious even to the casual

³MED, Fetis, adj. (a) and Fetislii, adv. (b) both of which imply a degree of elegance and a conscious effort or skill.

⁴MED, Conscience, n.4.

⁵C. S. Lewis, Studies in Words Cambridge, 1960, p.183.

observer or cloistered nun? And this is ironical too in the light of her words about the guilty Jews in her Tale. The section on her "conscience" concludes in a similar manner to the passage on her courtly manners, that is, on a note of gentle irony and ambiguity. Within the courtly code there are shifting levels of meaning between celestial love and romantic love. Similarly, nobody could find fault with a gentle lady for whom suffering was intolerable. It is just that such a line as "And al was conscience and tendre herte" (1.150) carries the weight of Eglentyne's behaviour towards animals. It is the shift in emphasis that Chaucer seems concerned to express. The irony of such a line is that nothing that precedes it has anything to do with humanity. Thus we are skillfully led into an ambiguous interpretation about the Prioress' solicitude for suffering, just as we are led to see the ambiguity that is part of her motto.

The third section of the Prioress' description completes the recurring pattern of concluding ironies and ambiguities at the end of the previous two sections. The Prioress has a broad forehead, well-formed nose, gray eyes and a small, soft, red mouth. These are all attributes of courtly beauty and the ideal of one who would "countrefete cheere of courte". Her ample figure is clothed with the care of one who considers dress and public notice worthy of appreciation:

Ful semyly her wympul pynched was ... (l.151)

and

Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war. (l.157)

As suggested earlier, the use three times of "semyly" with its implication of decorous propriety,⁶ and twice of "fetys", indicate the courtly emphasis of this portrait. In the General Prologue these words offer a clue to this enigmatic and often ambiguously described lady. Chaucer then describes the coral bracelet with its gold brooch. The bracelet and its motto could have been a worldly touch, a petty feminine vanity in the light of the preceding description. Yet its motto serves as a gentle reminder of the opposition of the ideal and real in its wearer. There appears to be a deliberate connection between the portrait which concludes with the motto Amor Vincit omnia and Madame Eglentyne's oath upon "Seinte Loy". St. Eligius, or Eloi, is said to have been a courtier and artist and a lover of personal adornment.⁷ May we assume then that he is a model whom the Prioress strives to emulate? She follows him in most respects except that she is not a saint. The motto on her brooch seems to suggest that her pursuit of worthiness has become an end in itself,

⁶OED Seemly, a. 3.

⁷J. L. Lowes in B. B. Wainwright, "Chaucer's Prioress Again: An Interpretive Note", *MLN*, vol. 48 (1933), p.35.

(sic)

for her attention to dress and courtly manners, her sentimentalized sympathy for suffering, have pushed her aside from the path of a true love of God and her fellow men to which her calling as a nun should direct her. We cannot doubt that Chaucer has emphasised her ladylike qualities while reminding us of her neglected vocation.

As a bride of Christ and exponent of virginity, it is not unnatural that the Prioress invokes the Virgin Mary in the Prologue to her Tale. She is adhering to the convention in so doing. But it is worth noting that while her invocation begins by praising God, nearly four fifths of the whole Prologue concentrates upon praise of the Virgin. The invocation twice mentions symbols of the Virgin Mary, the white lily flower and the unburnt bush, and twice refers to children. Both the symbols and the innocence of a child are elements of her Tale. Her invocation concludes with the statement that her skill is only to be compared with that of a twelve-year-old child, "or lesse" when praising the Virgin, so unworthy does she declare herself. Thus she prays for guidance in her Tale which is a miracle of Our Lady.

It is, then, not surprising that the "litel clergeon" of her Tale is seen, in the opening stanzas, to apply himself to learning his Ave Marie and Alma redemptoris mater. The pathos of the story is heightened when we learn that the

"litel clergeon" is not only seven years old, but that he is also a widow's son. His age appears to be Chaucer's own invention since it appears in none of the known analogues,⁸ yet it is a detail entirely in keeping with the "tender-hearted" Prioress who seeks to evoke her listeners' sympathy. The large volume of analogues to this tale indicate the popularity of Miracles of Our Lady in the Middle Ages. But further, their popularity seems to be accounted for by the very nature of the Cult of the Virgin,⁹ a product of the Romantic awakening that began a little over a century earlier. This is perhaps another clue to an understanding of the Prioress. In her self she combines the courtly and the religious, the Lady of Romance and a bride of Christ. While reminding us of the duality of the courtly code, she is herself unaware of the ironical implication of her behaviour as a "lady".

Throughout the Prioress' Tale there is a consistent analogy between any martyr and Christ. The difference is that the present martyr is only seven years old, therefore an innocent and unconscious martyr, the victim of a religious prejudice, whether real or imagined by the Prioress. It is significant too that throughout the Tale the little child

⁸Trevor Whittock, A Reading of the Canterbury Tales, Cambridge (1968), p.205.

⁹Margaret H. Statler, "The Analogues of Chaucer's Prioress' Tale", PMLA, Vol. 65 (1950), p.898.

sings his praise for the Virgin, as the Prioress had in her invocation, which places the emphasis not on the Redeemer himself, the perfect martyr, but on St. Mary, the mother. It is possible that the Prioress has sentimentalized the rôle of motherhood in the same way that her compassion for suffering is seen only in a feeling for small animals rather than humans. It has been suggested that it is this "warped quality"¹⁰ that dominates her Tale as it had prevailed in the General Prologue. Perhaps, if this criticism appears too strong for the Prioress we should recall that she is made capable of saying:

Oure firste foo, the serpent Sathanas,
That hath in Jues herte his waspes nest ...

[VII 558-559]

and, speaking of the punishment of the guilty Jews, while reminding us of "This newe Rachel", the boy's mother:

Therefore with wilde hors he dide hem drawe,
And after that he heng hem by the lawe. (VII 633-634)

It may be argued that the Prioress is a victim of an unconscious prejudice which was part of everyone's social and literary heritage in her time. It is unlikely that she can

¹⁰R. J. Schoeck, "Chaucer's Prioress", reprinted in Chaucer Criticism, Vol. 1, The Canterbury Tales, ed. R. J. Schoeck and J. Taylor, Notre Dame, Indiana (1960), p.249.

be imagined to have had first-hand acquaintance with Jews, since after 1290 there were very few left in England. But the culminating irony at the end of her Tale, after the irrelevant and gratuitous reminder of the death of Hugh of Lincoln, a particularly vicious thought on her part, is her appeal to God:

Preye eek for us, we synful folk unstable,
 That, of his mercy, God so merciable
 On us his grete mercy multiplie,
 For reverence of his mooder Marie. [VII 687-690]

The Amor on her brooch does not comprehend that same mercy which she invokes from God but fails to ask for the sinful Jews. She seems to have allowed the emotions aroused by her Tale, of an innocent victim cruelly murdered, to blind her to the need for forgiveness of the murderers. Yet her Tale is not filled with the sentimental type of compassion that we might have expected after reading about her solicitude for injured animals. For the Prioress does not wring any death-bed scene out of the murdered child. She passes quickly over the gory details and even modifies her description of the "litel clergeon" to "the child".¹¹ The metre of the poem is rime royal, a metre that is used on only three other occasions

¹¹G. H. Russell, "Chaucer: The Prioress's Tale", in Mediaeval Literature and Civilization: Studies in memory of G. N. Garmonsway, ed. D. A. Pearsall and R. A. Waldron, London (1969), p.221.

in the Canterbury Tales, for the tales of the Monk, the Clerk and the Second Nun, and all of these are on a high moral plane. The language of the Prioress's Tale is neither courtly nor pretentious. The setting and remoteness of the era in the story do not intrude upon the theme of innocence triumphant. There are no topically familiar references which detract from the sententia. The narratio is kept down to the bare bones, yet sufficiently detailed to sustain interest.

In some respects, then, there is a parallel between the Prioress and the Pardoner. Despite her little vanities, despite the misdirection of her love, there is never any doubt about the nature of the ultimate love and ultimate power which she represents: the true love of God which exists despite her neglect of the sacred offices. What appeared to be only a lightly satiric portrait in the General Prologue is now seen as part of a stronger design as the Prioress displays her unconscious hypocrisy. She is possibly guilty of minor infractions, those that first attract our eye, such as her dress, ornaments and pets. But more questionable is the extent to which her misplaced love has led her from seeing the obvious ambiguities which she reveals about herself in her Tale. The invocation and dedication to the Virgin, the pathos of a widow's bereavement, the innocence of a seven-year-old child, all suggest that her story comes from the purest part of her soul, her maternal instinct and femininity. Yet her

maternal instinct is questionable because we are treated to a cruel, anti-semitic story by one of Chaucer's more attractive figures, a woman of accomplishment and physical beauty.

But the apparent paradox between a graceful lady and the cruel story is fused by the greater love represented by her motto. The Prioress is effective as an instrument of God, just as the murdered child is an effective instrument of the Virgin Mary:

Whan seyð was al this miracle, every man

As sobre was that wonder was to se ... [VII 691-692]

And she is effective despite her faults, despite the contradiction between her character and the theme of her Tale.

Perhaps this is so because her listeners are also victims of the same prejudice. Yet, as with the Pardoner, the Prioress is capable of arousing profound religious feelings in her listeners. Chaucer has successfully juxtaposed the ideal and the real by details of dress and behaviour, by the Prioress' motto and by the paradoxical element in her Tale which suggests "conscience" but in reality points to an ignorance of the deeper meaning of mercy.

References for the Prioress

- H. S. Bennett, "Mediaeval Literature and the Modern Reader", Essays and Studies, Vol. 31 (1945), p.10.
- R. T. Davies, "Chaucer's Madame Eglantine", MLN Vol. 67 (1952), p.400-402.
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- R.J. Schoeck, "Chaucer's Prioress: Mercy and Tender Heart", in Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales Vol. 1, ed. R. J. Schoeck and J. Taylor, Notre Dame, Indiana (1960), p.245-257.
- M. H. Statler, "The Analogues of Chaucer's Prioress' Tale: The Relation of Group C to Group A", PMLA vol. 65 (1950).
- B. B. Wainwright, "Chaucer's Prioress Again: An Interpretive[sic] Note", MLN Vol. 48 (1933), p.34-36.

Chaucer's Priests

It seems appropriate to conclude our discussion of Chaucer's ecclesiastical figures with an examination of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale and the Parson's Tale, as these two tales embody respectively a duped priest who sells his soul to Satan for earthly gain, and the ideal shepherd and his concern for his flock. Furthermore, it is in these two Tales, and in the lives of the Parson and the duped priest of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, that the meaning of the pilgrimage is explicitly stated and the suggestion of life as a quest^{is} revealed. The other priest in the pilgrimage is the Nun's Priest. However, he is not characterized in the General Prologue and his Tale sheds no light either on his character as a priest or on priestly behaviour generally. Thus, an examination of his Tale would serve no useful purpose to our study of ecclesiastical figures.

The "povre Persoun" of the General Prologue is poor only in material terms, for he was rich in holy thoughts and works. In fact, the emphasis upon his character in this portrait is placed on the idea of doing good, actively, rather than simply talking about it. While the Pardoner, the Friar, the Prioress and others do good by their exemplary stories, the Parson, by contrast, does good by making himself very much a part of the world. But his world is the world of the sick,

the lonely and the oppressed; nor is his portrait clouded by images of vanity or ironical innuendo. His life is as far removed from a quest for self-indulgence as it is possible to be. While most of the other ecclesiastical figures had been content to talk about "ensaumples" to teach the ignorant of the ways of God, the Parson's whole life is an "ensaumple" of a love of one's neighbour. The Parson is, in a limited sense, modelled on Christ in the gospels.

Of all the characters with whom we are dealing, the Parson alone emerges without the detailed description of dress and behaviour which gave us an insight into the other ecclesiastics. He emerges rather as the ideal or idea of good, in an abstract way, not strongly personified but persuasively right by the parallels of his life with that of Christ. The only metaphors associated with the Parson are pastoral:

This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf,
That first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte.

[I (A) 496-497]

His goodness is explicitly stated:

A bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys. [I (A) 524]

With the exception of the ironical use of the word "figure", ironical because his speech is uncluttered with rhetorical devices, there is absolutely no irony in the entire portrait. The only contrast we have to his almost perfect behaviour at

this point is in the form of statements about negligent priests who absent themselves from their flocks, who prefer the soft life of the London chantries or who cloister themselves with some religious fraternity. In comparison with other portraits in the Canterbury Tales, because of the lack of detailed characterisation, the Parson is a less memorable figure. He is less human for the same reason, not because he has no failings, but because the portrait is a statement of fact, explicit, rather than a series of suggestions which imply a particular attitude or personality. There are no astrological references, no physiognomical attributes; the only company he keeps is that of his brother, the Plowman, and this is consonant with his humility. He utters no word in the Prologue, though Chaucer tells us about his speech:

He was to synful man nat despitous,

Ne of his speche daungerous ne digne,

But in his techyng discret and benygne. [I (A) 516-518]

The Parson, then, through a lack of personal details which humanize the other figures, emerges as an ideal, the barely human embodiment of Christian teaching. He comes almost as an anomaly in this boisterous crowd of life journeying towards Canterbury. Yet he is anomalous only in that Chaucer's satire in the Canterbury Tales is so often devoted to ecclesiastical figures, so that, with the exception of that borderline

character, the Clerk, not one of the other religious folk escapes Chaucer's criticism. Chaucer seems to suggest that the Parson, like the Knight or Plowman, is anomalous in a time of changing values, either because the ideals they represent were never possible of attainment, or because, for one reason or another, society has suffered a moral decay, a decline hastened by those very representatives of ideal behaviour who should be first in the ranks of those defending the rightness of the Christian ethic.

Our interest in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is twofold. First, it carries the message of the despair consequent upon a search for earthly goods, and secondly, this search is at one point in the Tale ascribed to a priest, so that this priest becomes a foil to the "povre Persoun". In conjunction with the search for earthly goods the Tale reiterates Chaucer's expressed belief in the possibility of redemption through God's love. Thus, those who turn from God, the Canon and the duped priest, become of the devil's party. The Yeoman's revelation of the search for the Philosopher's Stone carries echoes of the Pardoner who revealed his methods of extortion and his motives. But there is an important difference, since for the Pardoner, gone too far in his aversion from God, there is no absolution. On the other hand the Canon's Yeoman seems to cast off the burden of falsehood as he speaks, and

manages to regain his faith through a form of public repentance.

Following the legend of St. Cecilia, who survived burning through God's protection, the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is significant in the picture of the Canon and his assistant whose fire blows up in their faces. St. Cecilia had placed her faith in God, the Canon in material objects. The alchemist's fire, fed with the refuse of the world, "Poudres diverse, ashes, donge, pisse, and cley" (VIII(G) 807), conjures up visions of the Infernal fires from whose crucible comes a torment more eternal than the earthly quest for the Philosopher's Stone.

The threadbare appearance of the Canon attests to his poverty and to the futility of the consuming search that haunts his life as it is to haunt the life of the duped priest in the Tale. The blindness to which the Yeoman alludes near the end of his narrative:

If that youre eyen kan nat seen aright,
 Looke that youre mynde lakke nocht his sight,
 For though ye looken never so brode and stare,
 Ye shul nothyng wynne on that chaffare ...

[VIII(G) 1418-1421]

is a moral blindness created by the "illusioun" of the reward of earthly truth which has dazzled the Canon's eyes and

hidden the greater Truth, to which his life as a regular should have been devoted, the Truth of God revealed through service to Him and by a love of Him. By the end of the first part of his Tale the Canon's Yeoman himself has realized the folly of the alchemical search and perhaps, unwittingly, stumbled on a deeper truth:

But al thyng which that shineth as the gold

Nis nat gold, as that I have herd it told ...

[VIII (G) 962-963]

The second part of the Tale largely concerns the yeoman's illustration of a particular canon at work. In his narration the yeoman leaves enough clues for his listeners to identify the canon of the Tale with the ultimate confidence-man, Satan VIII (G) 1069-1072, VIII (G) 1303 and VIII (G) 984. We may support this by recording that there is no physical description of this canon. Rather, he is the embodiment of the abstraction of Satanic methods. At times we lose sight of the idea that the canon could be Satan himself in the realistic and practical details which show how this embezzler works. At other times the yeoman's condemnation of the canon is more general and more widely applicable to the ubiquitous nature of evil:

On his falsehede fayn wolde I me wreke,

If I wiste how, but he is heere and there;

He is so variaunt, he abit nowhere. [VIII (G) 1173-1175]
 This reflects too the nomadic existence of the canon of the first part of the Tale who has to hide and keep moving, since apprehended alchemical clerics were in danger of being regarded as criminals.¹ On the other hand this reference, applied to the canon of the Yeoman's Tale, or exemplum, suggests that Satan is everywhere and is identified with this second canon. Thus, throughout his narrative the Yeoman moves from a particular canon, intent upon deceiving a priest, to the universal deceiver, intent on leading God's people astray. This duality is further reinforced when we watch the smooth manner in which the canon entices the priest to whet his appetite for the secret of transmutation and in the language the priest uses which is suggestive of a pact with Satan:

But, and ye vouche-sauf to techen me
 This noble craft and this subtilitee
 I wol be youre in al that evere I may, [VIII (G) 1246-
 1248]

and

And to the chanoun he profred eftsoone
 Body and good... [VIII (G) 1288-1289]

The irony of a priest invoking God's blessing on Satan about

¹J. W. Spargo, SA, p.691-692.

to rob him, not only of forty pounds but of his peace of mind forever, would assume comic proportions if the implications of a deviant pastor were less serious:

For love of God, that for us alle deyde,
 And as I may deserve it unto yow,
 What shal this receite coste? telleth now!

[VIII (G) 1351-1353]

The priest of the second part of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale may be contrasted in several ways with the good Parson of the General Prologue. He is first of all a chantry priest, an "annueleer" (l.1012) and lives in London. This is almost a direct contrast to the Parson who:

... sette nat his benefice to hyre
 And leet his sheep encombred in the myre
 And ran to Londoun unto Seinte Poules

To seken hym a chaunterie for soules. [I (A) 507-510]

Then there are suggestions of a courtly way of life by the use of language which is a parody of the courtly, especially when one thinks of the neglected duties of this priest and the anomalies of courtly language applied to ^{an} ecclesiast:

In Londoun was a preest, an annueleer,
 That therinne dwelled hadde many a yeer,
 Which was so pleasaunt and so servysable
 Unto the wyf, where as he was at table

That she wolde suffre hym no thyng for to paye
 For bord ne clothyng, wente he never so gaye ...

[VIII (G) 1012-1017]

There is an ambiguity in the whole tone of this passage which describes the priest's way of life. Though carnal sin is not expressed directly, the choice of courtly words such as "servysable"² when considered together with the meaning of the passage, that is that this priest seems to have led the life of a kept man, lead the reader into assumption of ambiguity about "plesaunt" and "gaye" and a way of life which makes a knave and a hypocrite out of this priest. Beyond this, the priest has material wealth, "And spendyng silver hadde he right ynow", in contrast to the material poverty of the Parson. May we then consider that the priest is spiritually bankrupt when compared to the spiritually endowed Parson?

Apart from these obvious points about the London priest, Chaucer carries the satire further in other ways. The priest takes lightly the oath upon the Virgin Mary to see a "maistrie"^W performed by the canon. The Yeoman echoes the oath in telling the Host that this canon was not his master but one much

²F. H. Stratmann, M.E.D. Servisable adj. Useful or obliging. O.E.D. Serviceable a. 1. Ready to do service; prepared to minister. O.E.D. Servant Sb. 4(b). A professed lover; one who is devoted to the service of a lady. The word Serve, in the sense of mating, does not appear until 1577, see O.E.D. Serve V., 52.

worse:

Sire hoost, in feith, and by the hevenes queene,

It was another chanoun, and nat hee. [VIII (G) 1089-1090]

Throughout the satire of this priest there are numerous ironical oaths and plays on the idea of sight and blindness.

The priest is eager to see this canon perform a "maistrie", and the yeoman interjects with a statement that makes the priest's eagerness both ironical and a contrast to the eagerness of the Parson to save souls:

O sely preest! o sely innocent!

With coveitise anon thou shalt be blent!

[VIII (G) 1076-1077]

which contrasts with the Parson, who was a shepherd and "nought a mercenarie" [I (A) 514], so far removed from covetousness that he even gives of his own to his parishioners who are unable to pay their tithes.

The London priest, spurred on by the hope of gain, "bisyed hym ful faste" (l.1146) to do the canon's bidding, to bring about his own damnation. And having seen chalk turned into silver, he calls on God, St. Mary and all the saints to bless the canon. The irony becomes dramatic when he says that he will have their curse for not knowing the secret. He then offers a pact with the canon [VIII (G) 1248] reminiscent of a Faustian bargain with the Devil, to be his in everything

if he could but learn the secret as we have seen before.

After the second demonstration in which mercury is transmuted into silver, the priest's joy knows no bounds:

He was so glad that I kan nat expresse

In no manere his myrthe and his gladnesse;

[VIII (G) 1286-1287]

so again he offers himself, "body and good", to the canon.

The yeoman calls this canon "roote of alle cursednesse" (l.1301) and in so doing elevates him to Satanic immortality and reminds us of the Pardoner's theme in his sermon on Avarice, Radix malorum est cupiditas. The pathos of the priest's gladness at inviting his own torment is heightened by examples of real joy and freedom drawn from nature and courtly tradition:

This sotted preest, who was gladder than he?

Was nevere brid gladder agayn the day,

Ne nyghtyngale, in the sesoun of May ...

[VIII (G) 1341-1343]

Ne knyght in armes to doon an hardy dede,

To stonden in grace of his lady deere ...

[VIII (G) 1347-1348]

Furthermore, this last reference to the ideal knight in language similar to that of the General Prologue, reminds us of another ideal figure while alluding to the priest's lost grace and the purpose for which he invoked Our Lady's name.

The priest finally pleads, "For love of God" [VIII (G) 1351], to the canon to sell him the formula for transmutation and ironically asks what it will cost him. The canon replies that the recipe is "ful deere", so dear that we know it will cost the priest his peace of mind. In telling the priest that the formula is expensive the canon invokes Our Lady and says the formula is known only to himself and a friar. Thus Chaucer links the friars with the devil's party in England, a gratuitous insult but a significant one, for avarice was the keynote of the friar portrayed by the Summoner and an important part of the Friar's portrait in the General Prologue.

Thus the priest, drawn from a love of God to a love of gold, sells his tranquillity for forty pounds, as Judas sold Christ for forty pieces of silver. Blinded by covetousness he has purchased damnation with the eagerness of an innocent child. Chaucer seems to emphasise that only one search for Truth is valid, as there is only one Truth. The Yeoman has had the scales removed from his eyes and seen the folly of his master's life. The priest of his Tale is morally blinded by his aversion from God's love to the love of wealth. Like the Prioress or the Monk and Friar, he has failed to realize the possibility of redemption, by a love of God, that lies within his grasp.

The character of the Parson in the General Prologue is

sustained when he relates his Tale. The Host chaffs him and asks for a tale in the vein of many that have gone before, "Be what thou be, ne breke thou nat oure pley", [X (I) 24] but he acknowledges that, judging by the Parson's appearance, he should "knytte up wel a great mateere". Yet the Host asks for a fable. The Parson's reply is couched in strong terms. Just as he had reproved the Host for swearing earlier [II (B¹) 1170-1171], now he does the same:

"Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me;
 For Paul, that writeth unto Thymothee,
 Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse,
 And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse." [X (I) 31-34]

as we had been advised that he might in the General Prologue:

But it were any persone obstinat,
 What so he were, of heigh or lough estate,
 Hym wolde he snybben sharply for the nonys. [I (A) 521-
 523]

Rather, the Parson says he will take this opportunity to "sow whete", to teach his listeners some "moralitee and vertuuous mateere".

The Parson proceeds to preach a highly detailed and well illustrated sermon on Penitence and the seven deadly sins, in prose. Many students of Chaucer tend to ignore this tale, some because they claim it is no part of Chaucer's work, and others because it is not in verse or because it is inappropriate

to the mood of the Canterbury Tales and what they take to be Chaucer's purpose. However, the Parson's Tale, whether or not it is Chaucer's work, is appropriate both to the person preaching this sermon and to the framework of the Canterbury Tales. The Tale lacks nothing of the promise made for it by its narrator in his own Prologue. It is not a fable; it sows "whete" or teaches a moral; it is in prose; it makes an end and knits up "al this feeste"; it makes the analogy between this fictitious Canterbury pilgrimage and the pilgrimage of life to the Holy City, Jerusalem, or heavenly salvation. The Parson, perhaps echoing the previous narrator's disclaimers about his textual knowledge, claims he is not "textueel". The Manciple, while claiming that he was~~not~~ a learned man [IX (H) 235, 316] nevertheless makes frequent reference to authorities such as Plato, and even begins his Tale by a reference to "olde bookes". His protestations about his lack of learning are a form of false modesty which cover up a weak story heard at second-hand. On the other hand, the Parson's claim to being unlearned [X (I) 57] not only reminds us of the false claim to ignorance made by the Manciple, but, because we~~know~~ it is not true from the references to the Parson's learning, [I (A) 480; II (B¹) 1168-1169; X (I) 27-28], indicates his unwillingness to fall back upon authorities for his teaching. It indicates his genuine modesty and his eagerness to

teach by example in his own way of life as we are told he does in the General Prologue:

But Cristes loore and his apostles twelve
He taughte, but first he folwed it hymselfe.

[I (A) 527-528]

In terms of the pilgrimage as a literary device and as an allegory of the way of life, the Parson's Tale is an appropriate ending to the Canterbury Tales. The Parson himself draws the analogy between the present pilgrimage and life's journey:

And Jhesu, for his grace, wit me sende
To shewe yow the way, in this viage,
Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage

That highte Jerusalem celestial. [X (I) 48-51]

A mediaeval pilgrimage was above all an act of penitence, no matter how badly this ideal may have been abused. The motives of most of Chaucer's pilgrims were of great variety and often questionable in religious terms, but this does not detract from the fundamental religious purpose of a pilgrimage to a holy Shrine. The Parson's Tale is a sermon on penitence, and the Parson tells his listeners that one way to the Holy City, to salvation, is by penitence. Though he admits that there are many ways by which we may be led to Jesus, he claims that a noble and "ful convenable" way is by penitence which will

help all men and women who have strayed, through sin, from the road to Jerusalem. In one way or another most of the characters on this fictitious pilgrimage, drawn together by a common goal, no matter how diverse their reasons, have sinned and strayed. This is no less true for the majority of Chaucer's ecclesiastical characters than it is for such folk as the Miller or the Wife of Bath. The Parson's sermon serves to remind his listeners of the meaning of the pilgrimage which they have so lightly undertaken. It serves too, to reassert, in language unadorned with figures or ironies, the seriousness of purpose behind Chaucer's work. While it would be quite wrong to ascribe specific motives to Chaucer in writing the Canterbury Tales, it is permissible to comment on the attitudes reflected by this last Tale.

This is the last and longest of the Tales and one of only two in prose. Among all the ecclesiastical characters examined, with the exception of the border-figure of the clerk, the Parson is immune from satiric comments.³ In addition, the Parson makes explicit comment on and analogies to the pilgrimage, as we have seen. The road to salvation advocated by the Parson is one of severe self-examination and discipline, reflective of his own austere life and far removed from the indulgent and pleasure-seeking ways of such men as the Monk. The very exhaustiveness of the sermon reflects that the Parson

³R. M. Jordan, Chaucer and the Shape of Creation, Cambridge, Mass. (1967), p.288-289.

was a learned man, despite his protestations to the contrary, as we have discussed earlier.

Perhaps the final irony within the Canterbury Tales, apart from the ambiguous Retraction, involves the Parson and the Host. In alluding to the coming night and the shortness of time for another tale, the Host tells the Parson:

Beth fructuous, and that in litel space,

And to do wel God sende yow his grace! [X (I) 71-72]

The Host is the man who has in a large way set the tone of this pilgrimage in calling for merry tales. His final reward is a tale that is not only exceedingly long but very "fructuous" in a way he had not imagined. Yet the Host asks that God grant the Parson grace to do well. It is this emphasis on grace and doing well that knits up the pilgrimage, for it is echoed later in the Parson's Tale:

For in the flour is hope of fruyt in tyme comynge,

and in foryifnesse of synnes hope of grace wel for

to do ... [X (I) 288]

and it is the principle behind the choice of caritas or cupiditas open to each pilgrim. Without God's grace, the Parson implies, one cannot do well. The image of fruit, introduced by the Host and taken up by the Parson, appears finally at the end of the Parson's Tale. The fruit of penance, of the way advocated in the Parson's sermon, is the "endless

blisse of hevne" [X (I) 1076]. Perfect bliss is purchased by "poverte espiritueel" [X (I) 1080], by humility, in fact, by a way of life that the Parson himself follows as opposed to that followed by most of the ecclesiastical figures on this momentous journey. The Parson's Tale, despite its lack of appeal as entertainment to modern readers, is nonetheless an important part of the Canterbury Tales. In relation to the stream of ecclesiastical characters it illustrates the reverse of the deviation to which we had become accustomed in our reading, a reverse of the covetous springs which motivate most of the ecclesiastics.

As we have noted, the Parson rounds out his sermon with a description of the "blisse of hevne". Of all the pilgrims he is the only one who travels in the hope of arriving "ther alle harmes been passed of this present lyf", [X (I) 1077]. The conviction that rings out from his final phrases suggests that his hopes will not be in vain. The fiction of the pilgrimage gives way to the truth of life and death. The illusion of the created characters dissolves before a statement of belief which is, after all, Chaucer's. The belief seems to be that life, salvation, is indeed purchased by "deeth and mortification of synne". The last word of the Tales sustains the oft-remarked choice between an everlasting good and an eternal evil. The pilgrimage metaphor has been, and is, both literal

and allegorical, and this is nowhere more clear than in the person and Tale of this good man of religion.

Additional references for the Canon's Yeoman's Tale

Pauline Aiken, "Vincent of Beauvais and Chaucer's Knowledge of Alchemy", SP, Vol. 41 (1944), p.371 f.

S. F. Damon, "Chaucer and¹Al_Achemy", PMLA, Vol. 39 (1924), p.782-788.

M. P. Hamilton, "The Clerical Status of Chaucer's Alchemist", Spec., vol. 16 (1941), p.103-108.

II LANGLAND'S FIGURES: FRIARS

Since Langland's concern with friars is demonstrated in many places throughout the work, a convenient method of examining his handling of these characters will be first to make a general investigation of friars in the whole work, and then to concentrate on the more detailed condemnation seen in the final passus of the B and C-texts.

A guide to understanding Langland's uncompromising attack on friars is to be found in the mediaeval concept of charity. Fundamental to mediaeval, and indeed, to all Christianity is that the object, finally, of Biblical study is the promotion of charity or caritas, a love of God and one's neighbour.¹ The whole meaning or sentence of the Bible is bound up with this principle and should direct the course of human life. Opposed to this is the principle of cupiditas, a concern for and a desire for, things of this world, whether they be riches and earthly goods or the indulgence of human desires. As has been suggested earlier, these two principles represent the two loves of the human will, or the two, opposed, directions which the human will may choose in this earthly life.

Thus the significance of what amounts to Langland's pre-occupation with friars is to be found, not in a repetition of

¹D. W. Robertson Jr., and B. F. Huppé, Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition, Princeton, New Jersey (1951), p.1142.

the theological controversy between seculars and mendicants, nor solely in doctrinal arguments about the states of perfection,² but in the opinion expressed early in the poem, and in all three texts, that unless the representatives of the Church adhere more closely to the principles of their Orders, the whole fabric, first of the Church and as a consequence of society, will be undermined.³ And the basis for Langland's attack is his concern with covetousness, a theme that occurs frequently throughout the poem:

For sith charite hath be chapman and chief to shryue
 lordes,

Many ferlis han fallen in a fewre yeris.

But holychirche and hij holde better togideres,

The moste myschief on molde is mountyng wel faste.

[B Prol. 64-67]

The C-text differs slightly:

Bothe holy churche and charite choppe a-doun swich shryuers,
 and emphasises the specific fault of absolving the wealthy
 with an easy penance where there is a prospect of financial
 gain, and explicitly mentions charity, the opposing principle
 of cupiditas. It is this difference of the C-text from A and

²Robertson and Huppé, *ibid.*, p.7.

³E. T. Donaldson, Piers Plowman: The C-Text and Its Poet,
 Yale, New Haven (1949), p.124.

B at this point which is important, for Langland frequently returns to the abuse of confession. It is, further, this same abuse that is mentioned in the apocalyptic final passus and which confirms the belief that, in Langland's opinion, corruption among the friars will lead to a collapse of standards in society:

'The frere with his fisik this folke hath enchaunted,
And doth men drynke dwale that men dredeth no synne.'

[C XXIII 378-379]

The widest implication of Langland's attack is that the friars, by corrupting the sacrament of penance and eliminating contrition, have denied to people the hope of salvation and a restoration to grace through penance.⁴ The Friars are motivated by self-interest brought about by need. If their need, or theoretical poverty, were abolished, then the friars would not be in constant pursuit of worldly goods, "And that freres hadden a fyndynge that for neode flatren . . .," [C XXIII 383] and the way to salvation, through genuine penance and contrition, would be reopened to mankind. Conscience prays that Piers, by providing for friars, will do away with a condition which forces them to flatter and follow the rich.

On a purely literal level the dispute between seculars

⁴R. W. Frank, "The Conclusion of Piers Plowman", JEGP, Vol. 49 (1950), p. 314-315.

and mendicants is illustrated in B V and C VII where Langland deals with the sin of Wrath. In B V Wrath is depicted as a droop-headed, snivelling creature, "'I am Wrath,' quod he 'I was sum tyme a frere ...'" [B V 136]. This bald statement is unrelieved by the sort of dramatic irony of which Chaucer's friar in the Summoner's Tale is the victim. The type of attack on Friars that follows is de-personified when contrasted with Chaucer's treatment of a friar. Langland seems more concerned to emphasise the abuse rather than the character.

At this point both the B and C-texts deal specifically with the struggle between parish priests and mendicant friars to hear confession, a struggle which permits the existence of Wrath and alludes to the original aspect of the attack on friars, the corruption of penance:

Freres folowen my vore fele tymes and ofte
 And prouen vnparfit prelates of holy church;
 And prelates pleynten of hem for thei here parshenes
 shryuen
 With-oute lycence and leue and herby lyueth wratthe.

[C VII 118-121]

This specific attack by friars on parish priests has its basis in the defence of friars made by St. Bonaventura. Bonaventura claimed that not only were many parish priests morally and intellectually unsuited to hearing confessions, but also they

often betrayed confessional confidence, hence it was the duty of friars to protect the people from the tyranny of parish priests.⁵

On the laxity of friars in imposing severe penance, Langland depicts Meed's confession:

Thanne come there a confessoüre coped¹ as a frere,
 To Mede the mayde he mellud this wordes,
 And seide ful softly in shrifte as it were ...

[B III 35-37]

The alliteration of all three texts emphasises the mildness of the friar's confessional manners; A, "ful mekeliche he loutede"; C, "myldelich he sayde". All the texts agree in concluding that no matter how vile Meed has been, she will be absolved for "a seme of whete" (B III 40). A comparison of this passage with a passage on Chaucer's Friar in the General Prologue shows a similarity in the use of language to produce the effect of mildness, both in absolving penitents and in soliciting funds:

Ful swetely herde he confessioun,
 And plesant was his absolucioon.
 He was an esy man to yeve penaunce

Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce. [I (A) 221-224]

The soft and easy language of both authors' passages at this

⁵A. G. Little, Studies in English Franciscan History, Manchester (1917), p.118.

point seems to suggest a lulling of the conscience, which is, implied elsewhere in Langland's criticism of friars. Yet the temptation to confess to a friar, rather than to a parish priest, must have been great when the penitent was aware that the friar would not be back for some time and that his confessed sins would not become community property through the agency of a corrupt parson.

Concerning the preaching of friars, Langland describes two chief incidents. The first occurs in B VIII (CXI) when the poet, the "I" of the poem, enquirers of two Franciscans, "men of grete witte", where Do-wel lives. The Friars declare that Do-wel lives among them, the Minorites, and always has. The friars then deliver an obscure but orthodox parable-sermon about a man in a boat. The poet says he does not understand it:

'I have no kynde knowyng,' quod I 'to conceyue alle
 3owre wordes,
 Ac if I may lyue and loke I shal go lerne bettere.'

[B VIII 57-58]

The unconscious irony of the Friar's farewell to the Dreamer is contained in the next line 'I bikenne the Cryst,' quod he 'that on the crosse deyde' (B VIII 59), for Christ is the answer to the Dreamer's search for Do-wel and for Truth. The Friar's conventional farewell contains the answer which neither

the Friar nor the Dreamer is able to perceive. Thus Langland undermines the learning of the friars and their obscure sermon which is unrelated to living.

The second incident occurs in B XIII (C XVI) when the Dreamer meets Conscience who asks him to come to dine at Clergy's house. In what is one of the few pieces of realistic characterization in the poem, the dreamer meets a doctor of divinity, 'a man ylike a frere' (C XVI 30), who is the epitomé of the sin of gluttony. The attack becomes particularly vicious at this point. The doctor of divinity can only eat the more costly and delicate foods, ~~as does~~ the friar of the Summoner's Tale; he drinks wine at a great pace and, while stuffing his "to grete che~~ck~~es", pronounces on Do-wel, Do-bet and Do-best. The language here is more ~~suggestive of~~^a Wycliffite tract on the abuses of friars than ^{of} an alliterative poem, for the scene of the action melts before the Dreamer's dissatisfied grumbling to himself which is overheard by Pacience. The Dreamer makes a Latin pun on the friars, Periculum in falsis fratribus (C XVI 75) then wishes that the glutton had swallowed the plates as well as the food. In the B-text he goes further and wishes that the plates would become molten lead in this doctor's mouth, with the devil in the midst of the heat. The friar is condemned explicitly rather than implicitly in much of this attack:

'Ich shal Iangly to thys Iordan with hus Iuste wombe,
 And a-pose hym what penaunce is and purgatorie on erthe,
 And whi he lyueth nat as he lereth!' ... [C XVI 92-94]

Yet even in this open attack, possibly on the Friar William Jordan, there is an association of contraries in the play on the word 'Iuste', for not only is the direct meaning of "swollen" given, there is also a contrasting echo of the jousting in the Crucifixion scene of B XVI 93-95 and with it a contrast in the figures involved, that of Christ and a gluttonous friar.⁶

The illustration of hypocrisy is rather more obvious and less subtle, socially, than Chaucer's treatment with the use of French and courtly speech:

'Dowel?' quath this doctour and he drank after,
 'Do thy neyhe bore non harme ne thy-selue nother, ...'

[C XVI 112-113]

In a stroke the learning of friars is brought down to a negative statement of passive existence from the mouth of a hypocritical glutton.

Elsewhere the Friar-doctor makes a positive statement about Do-wel, Do-bet and Do-best (C XVI 125-127), yet he fails to see the irony implicit in his own gluttonous behaviour.

⁶John Lawlor, Piers Plowman: An Essay in Criticism, London (1962), p.272-273.

The message however is valid, even if the messenger is corrupt, Qui facit et docuerit, magnus vocabitur. But despite the hypocrisy and corruption in this friar, as literacy spread in the fourteenth century, and the more sophisticated congregations became more discriminating, friars were in greater demand as preachers because they were more intellectual and more entertaining than parish priests.⁷ Yet the condemnation of learning for its own sake is quite clear, first when the poet, or 'I', says he will learn better by living and looking, that is by experiencing life (C XI 57), then when Clergy, pressed by conscience, in explaining Dowel, identifies Piers with Christ and sets learning aside:

'For one Pieres the Ploughman hath inpugned vs alle,
 And sette alle sciences at a soppe saue loue one,
 And no tixte ne taketh to meyntene his cause,
 But dilige deum and domine, quis habitabit, etc...'

[B XIII 123-126]

Thus on a waking level and in a dream Langland condemns the learning of friars and their self-seeking attitudes. The implication of these two incidents is that no amount of

⁷Beryl Smalley, English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century, Oxford (1960), p.28-29. See also David Knowles, The Religious Orders in England, vol. 1, Cambridge (1948), p.184, where it is suggested that the superior learning of the friars, together with their more sympathetic attitude, attracted penitents.

scholarship or theological learning, can replace the principle of love, or caritas, as the way to Truth, and no amount of ecclesiastical law can be a substitute for life. If we may regard this poem as an illustration of a largely unsuccessful attempt to seek Truth, then we shall understand that the path of learning, represented in part by the friars, is here identified with covetousness, or cupiditas, and so will lead the seeker away from Truth.

One need not cite the many instances in which Langland associates the word "faitour" and lying, flattery and pride with friars to illustrate the direction that mendicancy had taken in his time. There are, by contrast, only very few references to the ideal conditions of asceticism and mendicancy. These are found largely in C XVIII and concern various early saints who lived in true apostolic poverty, sustained by the birds and beasts. Yet even these examples are weakened, first by being remote in time, and second because the section in which they occur is part of an idealistic vision of the way things might be, not of the way they are. These examples of ideal asceticism conclude with an exhortation to the religious to refuse "raueneres almesse", (C XVIII 47), for God will provide for his creatures (B XV 308-309). There is even a note of nostalgia in the same passus when Anima or Soul tells the Dreamer that charity was once found in friar's garb:

Ac it is ferreagoo in seynt Fraunceys tyme;

In that secte sitthe to selde hath he be knowen.

[B XV 226-227]

Yet charity is not always depicted in pauper's weeds, "Ac in riche robes rathest he walketh" [B XV 222], nor is he seen begging, [B XV 221]. A little further on we are told that by living perfectly the religious would become as good as the Apostles [B XV 409-410]. But more specifically, the friars should not depend upon alms from the rich who oppress the poor, for this would imply that they contribute to the oppression [B XV 411-412]. Instead they should live:

"... bi litel and in lowe houses by lele mennes almesse", [B XV 415]. The importance of setting an example, as Chaucer's Parson does, is stressed here:

Grace sholde growe and be grene thorw her good lyuyng,
And folkes sholde fynde that ben in dyuense sykenesse,
The better for her byddynges in body and in soule.

[B XV 416-418]

We may appreciate the vehemence of Langland's attack on the religious when we recall his early statement for the need for reform among the religious if society is to be held together. Thus Langland does not only disapprove of the abuses practiced by the friars and other religious; he feels that a reform in the exemplary groups will lead to a reform in the **whole** of

society.⁸ Common to all the ecclesiastical figures treated by Langland is the suggestion that they have all allowed charity to be replaced by cupiditas. At the root of the evil in his time was the corruption of those elements of Holy Church who should have been foremost in condemning negligence. The principle of love was absent, for in the words of Papien to the friar-doctor, "Kynde love cou~~se~~iteth nou~~g~~te no catel but speche", [B XIII 150].

We know from the opening vision of random activity the direction the poem will take. A clue is offered at the beginning of the second passus when Holy Church appears to the Dreamer:

... 'Wille, slepest thow syxt thow this puple,
 How busy thai ben a-boute the mase?
 The most partie of the puple that passeth on this erthe,
 Hau~~e~~ thei worship in this worlde thei willen no betere;
 Of other heuene than here thei holden no tale.' [C II 5-9]

If we take as our text the idea that most people, and Langland has included the friars, know no heaven except earth, we see the cycle completed, by the end of the poem, which shows that the friars are foremost in an attitude which perverts the love of God and one's fellows to a love of things of this world.

⁸Morton W. Bloomfield, Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-century Apocalypse, Rutgers, New Jersey (1961), p.46.

The attack on friars in the final passus is twofold; that is, it is based upon their excessive numbers and upon Langland's belief that their numbers and attitudes are motivated by Avarice. In the final passus Langland attaches five of the Seven Deadly Sins to the friars, either directly or by implication. Those remaining two sins which are not dealt with in C XXIII, namely Gluttony and Wrath, were dealt with, as we have seen, earlier in the poem when they were also associated with friars. We are prepared for the twofold attack as early as the first passus where we find:

Ich fond ther frerus alle the foure ordres,
 Prechyng the peple for profit of the wombe,
 And glosyng the godspel as hem good lykede;
 For couetise of copes contrariede som doctors,

[C I 56-59]

where Avarice and Gluttony motivate the friars' preaching. Later, in the tenth passus of the C-text, we learn that the Avarice that motivates the friars and false hermits, springs from need, for many workers, seeing how little reward they get for long labours, and seeing how friars grew fat without working, donned the habit [C X 203-211]. Thus the number of mendicants, living outside their rule and on the labour of others, multiplied out of all reason. But though Langland was aware of the problems posed by the friars, and was able

to suggest a condition which would alleviate the problem, that of procuring a living for the friars, he was not clear as to the methods to be adopted for obtaining such a living.⁹

While previously in Piers Plowman, need had been an abstract concept, suggested but not named, the final passus begins with a confrontation between an allegorical, although impersonal, figure of Need and the poet, who is awake at this point. The burden of Need's message to the poet, if this is not an artistic inversion, is that there is a genuine and justifiable form of need which allows the needy to supply himself with the three things necessary to survival. Whoever takes what he needs for survival does no wrong:

Neode hath no lawe ne fneure shal falle in dette

For thre thynges that he taketh hus lyf for to saue ...

[C XXIII 10-11]

But a little later on Langland reminds us that true need, caused by necessity, is or should be, subordinate to moderation, or spiritus temperancie, for it makes the needy humble:

Next hym is Neode for a-non he meoketh,

And is as louh as a lomb for lackynge of that hym neodeth;

For Neode maketh neody for neode louh-herted.

[C XXIII 35-37]

⁹R. W. Frank, Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation, Yale University Press (1949), p.6-7.

It is this spirit of temperance which the friars have forsaken. The presence of Need in the introduction to the final vision of Antichrist is no accident.

Within two lines of the opening of the vision we are shown a rabble of religious assembled behind Antichrist and his banner borne by Pride. In the forefront of the religious are the friars, following the deadliest of sins antithetical to the humility invoked by Need a few lines earlier, and spurred on by covetousness as they had been at the opening of the poem, "Freres folweden that feonde for he haf hem copes" [C XXIII 58]. The difference here is that the means of pandering to the friars' covetousness has become personified in the figure of Antichrist. Yet the difference is important for now the friars are explicitly allied with the devil himself, or his agent. One is reminded of the gentle irony of the Friar's portrait in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, where a cope gives the friar a masterly or pope-like appearance. But Langland's attack is lightened by no such ironic touches. The figure of Lechery accompanies the banner borne by Pride and followed so closely by the friars, and though later there is a humorous touch about a "limitour" who "saluede so oure women til somme were with childe!" [C XXIII 347], generally the attack is overt and explicit rather than ironic and implicit through the language of the character.

In the Middle Ages the term "Antichrist" was frequently applied to the Roman pontiff, and later Wyclif was to make the same association. But it seems more likely that by the fourteenth century the name had merely become a term of abuse,¹⁰ so that Langland's final vision is not a warning of approaching Doomsday but indicative of an enemy within the Church, the evil ecclesiastics whose corruption leads men to sin rather than to grace.¹¹ As we have already seen, at the head of the procession behind Antichrist's banner are the friars. Surely their occupation of the front ranks of the forces of evil is not a mere accident?

In attacking the excessive numbers of friars we have seen how Langland prepared the reader as early as the tenth passus of the C-text. Now in the final passus the figure of Need is again introduced, this time in the actual vision, during the heat of the battle, when Conscience cries out for help in fighting the army of Antichrist. Friars rush to the aid of Conscience, but are of no avail since they "gouthe nat wel here craft", [C XXIII 231]. Then Need tells Conscience of the friars:

¹⁰ MED, Antecrist n. 2.

¹¹ R. W. Frank, Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation, p.112. For the view that the confused struggle at the end of the poem is a threat of Doom, see David Fowler, Piers Plowman: The Literary Relations of the A and B-texts, Seattle (1961), 164.

That thei came for couetise to haue cure of soules -

'And for thei aren poure, paraunter for patrimonye
hem failleth,

Thei wolle flaterie to fare wel to folke that ben riche.'

[C XXIII 233-235]

and a few lines later:

'Let hem chewe as thei chosen and charge hem with no cure!

For lommere he lyeth that liflode mote begge,

Than he that laboreth for lyflode and leneth hit beggeres.

And sitthen freres for-soke the felicite of erthe,

Lat hem be as beggers other lyue by aungeles fode!'

[C XXIII 237-241]

The inference is clear. The friars are covetous from need.

This turns them into both liars and beggars because they have abandoned the genuine need which should be subservient to

Temperance or moderation. Once more the reader is strongly

reminded of the appellation of "faitoure" that Langland so frequently attaches to the friars. The friars are poor because they have no "patrimonye" such as the possessioners. Thus they covet earthly goods and set a bad example to the many slothful labourers who, seeing how easy it is to grow fat, flock to the ranks of the mendicant orders.

But Conscience admits the friars to Unity on condition that they forsake envy and logic and learn to love. Then

begins the passage in which Conscience lectures the friars on their excessive numbers. He refers to St. Francis and St. Dominic who forsook both possessions and the academic life to lead a holy life of love. He tells them that God has ordained the numbers of all beings:

'Monekes and monyales and alle men of religion,
 Here ordre and here ruele wol to have a certayn nombre.
 Of lered and lewede the lawe wole and asketh
 A certayn for a certayn saue onliche of freres!'

[C XXIII 264-267]

Conscience concludes with the wish that friars were registered for 'we wexeth oute of nombre!' [C XXIII 269] and suggests that Heaven has a full quota of friars while the friars in hell cannot be counted.¹² But "helle is with-oute nombre!" [C XXIII 270] seems to be another way of treating moderation or "mesure" and of contrasting the order of a Heaven, ordained by God, to the chaos of a Hell in which so many friars reside.

Envy now appears to persuade the friars to go to school to learn logic and law and contemplation, so that they can prove, by the appropriate authorities, that everything on

¹²Compare Chaucer's treatment in the Summoner's Prologue, III (D) 1683-1699, where the excessive numbers of friars are disclosed in a privy place in hell.

earth ought to be common property. A few lines later envy and covetousness drive the friars to invade the parish priests' jurisdiction of confession, recalling the struggle between seculars and mendicants.

Here we are at the core of Langland's attack on fraternal abuse, the practice of hearing confessions for money, and the belief that the more money one gives to the friars, the better one's absolution. The height of the abuse is the connection of wealth with salvation. By the end of the passus we find that penitents who are shriven by friars no longer fear sins. Thus, if there are Apocalyptic overtones in the final passus, they rest in the suggestion that the Church, by allowing the haphazard increase of friars, which leads to the abuse of confession, is genuinely undermining the moral fabric of society.

The friar in the final passus is admitted to Unity through Hende-speche and ^{by} flattery and with the consent of Conscience. There is perhaps a note of irony in the line "Conscience knoweth me wel and what ich can don" that the friar delivers to Peace [C XXIII 337]. Conscience should know of the ways of friars, but Conscience is either dazed, drugged or disarmed by the smooth talk of the friar who "corteisliche hym grette", [C XXIII 355]. But it was Contrition who had asked that Friar Flatterer be admitted [C XXIII 316-317], because,

wounded by Hypocrisy, Contrition is no longer sincere. Thus the friar comes to Contrition to give him absolution, a "plastre":

Of 'a pryue payement and ich shal preye for yow,
 And for hem that ze aren holden to al my lyf-tyme,
 And make yow, my lady in masse and in matynes,
 As freres of oure fraternitee for a litel seluer.'

[C XXIII 364-367]

Contrition has now forgotten to cry for his wicked deeds, so the onslaught on Conscience is joined by Sloth and Pride. Conscience cries out for help to Clergy and Contrition. But Peace says the final word of damnation on the action and consequences of confessing to friars when he tells Conscience that Contrition can no longer help because:

'He lith adreynt,' saide Bees 'and so doth meny othere;
 The frere with hus fisik this folke hath enchaunted,
 And doth men drynke dwale: that men dredeth no synne.'

[C XXIII 377-379]

The poem concludes with Conscience preparing to strike out as a pilgrim in search of Truth, who is Piers the Plowman, the only one who can destroy Pride and provide a "fyndynge" for the friars who flatter for need. The final passus begins and ends with the need by which friars justify their greed and sloth. Langland seems to be saying that mankind cannot achieve

grace without genuine repentance. Genuine repentance is not possible if mankind no longer fears the consequence of sin and is content to purchase salvation for "a litel seluer". It is the friars who create a threat to man's salvation. Through their invasion of the sacrament of confession which should be a path to salvation, the friars exert the most widespread and worst influence on society and so are in the greatest need of reform.

In the final passus the friars, allied with Pride, urged on by Envy and covetousness, accompanied by Sloth and fallen into Lechery, have gained access to Unity through their lies and flattery. At the very seat of purity, at the centre of that establishment which should be the shining example of love to all mankind, one finds the ultimate corruption personified by the friars who incorporate the seven deadly sins. As Chaucer said of bad parish priests, "If gold ruste what shal iren do?", so may we say the same of the example set by the friars in Piers Plowman. If the people have before them daily the living exemplars of corruption, how shall man be saved? The friars are very much a part of that mass of people who:

'Have thei worship in this worlde their willen no betere;
Of other heuene than here thei holden no tale.'

[C II 8-9]

References for Friars

R. W. Frank, "The Conclusion of Piers Plowman", JEGP Vol. 49
(1950), p. 309-316.

Summoners

There are only six references to summoners in Piers Plowman. The chief of these occur in two passus concerned with Lady Meed. None of Langland's references to summoners contains a detailed description of a realistic character. Instead summoners are mentioned in brief references to the sort of people who crowd about Meed:

To marie this maydene was many man assembled,
 As of knyghts and of clerkis and other comune poeple,
 As sysours and sompnours shireues and here clerkes ...

[B II 56-58]

or in connection with a neglect of God's flock and the consequent corruption:

The tarre is vntydy that to thyne sheep by-longeth,
 Hure salue ys of supersedeas in someneres boxes;¹
 Thyne sheep are ner al shabbyd the wolf shiteth woolle:
Sub molli pastore lupus lanam cacat, et grex

In-custoditus dilaceratur eo [C X 262-264]

The figures who "ran aboute Mede" are largely people whose concern is in the temporal world. With the exception of clerks, which here might simply mean the learned, and summoners, the confusion of figures here ~~is~~ not one

¹Skeat (1886), vol. 2 p. 127. See also R. E. Latham, Revised Medieval Latin Word-List, Oxford, 1965, superseded/ementum.

of a group of folk who claim any interests in the spiritual world. Thus by lumping together the summoners with the mass of legal representatives crowding about Meed, Langland seems to suggest first that the summoners too are concerned solely with temporal affairs, neglecting the spiritual aspects of working for an ecclesiastical court, and secondly that the corruption of Justice extends beyond the purely temporal aspect of Law.

The functions of summoners in the fourteenth-century seem to have been threefold.² They were to bear writs of summons from the ecclesiastical courts to the persons cited to appear, and to ensure that those persons did appear; they helped search out intestate estates and assisted in the probate of wills; they performed the office of beaules or marshalls in charge of witnesses and the people in the court during proceedings. The frequency with which Langland associates summoners with members of the temporal legal profession leads one to wonder whether or not he regarded them in an ecclesiastical rôle. However, the writs issued by the bishop's or archdeacon's court, and borne by the summoner, concerned offences against canon law. The

²L. A. Haselmeyer, "The Apparitor and Chaucer's Summoner", Speculum, vol. 12 (1937), p.46-48.

crimes most likely to be convicted by such courts were immorality, witchcraft, perjury and heresy.³ Like Chaucer, Langland associates summoners with worldly, covetous motives and a desire for personal gain. And like Chaucer, Langland makes the ~~satiric~~ satiric connection between the summoners, who should be on the lookout to punish lechery, and a love of lechery:

Somenours and southdenes that supersedeas taketh,
 On hem that louyeth lecherie lepeth vp and rydeth,
 On executores and suche men cometh softliche after.

[C III 187-189]

The metaphor of summoners serving as judicial palfreys is stronger in the A and B-texts than in the C-text and is a peculiarly appropriate device. In A II 146-147, Civil, or Civil Law, swears ironically on the cross "That sompnors schulde ben sadelet ...". The B-text retains the reference to Civil Law and adds Simony, containing references to both temporal law and a spiritual abuse:

Ac thanne swore Symonye and Cyuile bothe,
 That sompnoures schulde be sādled and serue hem vchone,
 And lat apparaille this prouisoires in palfreis wyse ...

[B II 168-170]

³Maurice Hussey, A. C. Spearing, James Winny, An Introduction to Chaucer, Cambridge, (1965), p.76.

But the subtle touch of this passage is that with the exception of the apparitor general and the bishop's summoner, summoners were denied the use of horses, and at various times from 1257 to the middle of the fourteenth-century regulations were promulgated in England to this effect.⁴ Langland, presumably with a knowledge of such prohibitions, has rubbed salt into the summoners' wounded pride by depicting them as the corrupt nags of a corrupt judicial system and reminded the reader of the strict distinction between a bishop's apparitor and the archdeacon's apparitor who went on foot.

In his third reference to summoners, and in all three texts, Langland links the summoners with "sisours" or jurymen, and lumps these two characters together in connection with Lady Meed or bribery. In Handlyng Synne (l.1335), there is a passage which alludes to "sysours" as false jurymen who are hired to give false judgement.⁵ In the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer assumes a similar motive of covetousness corrupting the law, and makes the additional association of lechery in describing the Summoner:

⁴L. A. Haselmeyer, "The Apparitor ...", Speculum, Vol. 12, (1937), p.49-50.

⁵Skeat (1886), vol. 2, p.34.

He wold suffre for a quart of wyn

A good felawe to have his concubyn

A twelf month, and excuse him atte fulle. [I (A) 649-651]

Langland's technique is more oblique, for the slur cast upon "sysours" and summoners works by means of proximity and the natural mental association the reader is led to make between the lechery of Meed and various **others with the** lechery of summoners. For Meed is:

As comune as the cart-wey to knaues and to alle,

To monkes and to alle men; the meseles in heggys

Lyggèth by hure whenne hem lust lered and lewed.

Sysours and somners suche men hure preyseth,

Shereues of shires were shent yf hue ne were.

[C IV 168-172]

The summoners, dependent upon bribes for their existence, are shown to be dependent upon a prostitute. While the phrase "suche men" [C IV 171] may suggest a contrast between summoners and the knaves who lie with Meed, the proximity of a catalogue of figures, together with the nature of Meed's sin, casts a shadow over the characters of summoners who are also bracketed with the bearers of false witness. The nature of a summoner's work, requiring no particular skills or high level of education,⁶ leads him to associate with

⁶L. A. Haselmeyer, *ibid.*, p.51.

recalcitrant parishioners, and has moulded his weaker character until it assumes the shape of those whom he is sent out to bring to justice. That the literary technique of reputation by association is not accidental in Piers Plowman may be supported by a second similar reference to Meed and summoners:

Mede mornede tho and made heuy cheere,

For the comune called hure queynte comune here.

A sysour and a somner tho softeliche forth 3eden

With Mede the mayde out of the mot-halle. [C V 160-163]

The full stop does not arrest mental process which associates Meed's whoredom with the earlier suggested lechery of summoners.

Beyond the condemnation of summoners for their debauched behaviour, their association with "sisours" creates in the reader's mind a connection between temporal and ecclesiastical courts, both of which branches of justice, Langland implies, are seething with corruption. The summoners, forming a part of that crowd around Lady Meed, as we have seen, are only concerned with material rewards and advancing themselves. By their association with "sisours" they are seen to help in the spread of falsehood while defrauding the poor and wrongly accusing the innocent through extortion and blackmail. The idea of the corruption of justice is

further reinforced when one notices that among the group around Meed are:

Bedelles and bailliues and brokoures of chaffare,
 Forgoeres and vitailleurs and vokates of the arches;
 I can nouht rekene the route that ran aboute Mede.

[B II 59-61]

This returns us to the question of the extent to which Langland considers summoners as ecclesiastical figures. But to defend the inclusion of a treatment of summoners as ecclesiastical figures in Piers Plowman, one must examine the last two references to summoners. One of these is peculiar to the C-text only, as we have seen, and uses the metaphor of a wolf and the flock of sheep [C X 262-264] in a way that reminds us of Chaucer's use of this metaphor in connection with the pastoral functions of the Parson. But Langland's treatment of the pastoral function suggests that it has degenerated through the influence of punitive summoners whose liberally applied salve consists of writs of supersedeas, suspending the power of certain officers or staying proceedings, and presumably writs to punish immoral offenders to whom he sets a bad personal example.

The last reference to summoners associates them more directly with imperfect priests and is more emphatic about the abused spiritual side of their office:

Alas! lewede men muche lesse þe that fynden
 Vnkynde creatures to beo keepers of þoure soules!
 Ac thyng that wikkedliche is wonne and with false
 sleithes,
 Wolde neuere other-wise god bote wicked men hit hadde,
 As imparfit preestes and prechers after seluer,
 Secutours and sodenes somners and here lemmannes;
 And that with gyle was gete vngraciousliche be
 dispended. [C XVII 272-278]

The summoners, then, are part of the general scene of decay and corruption, not just in legal proceedings, but in a spiritual sense too. The symbol common to false jurors, false summoners and negligent priests is Lady Meed. There is not one favourable reference to summoners in Langland's poem. Of the six references to summoners, four contain allusions to lechery, three explicitly connect their corruption with the type of corruption found in temporal courts, that is bearing false witness, two of them allude to a decadent spiritual function and all six imply that cupiditas is the principle that motivates these judicial "palfreis".

The dominant theme in Langland's treatment of these figures is covetousness. The method he employs is largely the association assumed by bracketing summoners with other evil-doers. The technique ^{consists of} is overt, direct criticisms,

unrelieved by any light sense of the ironic. Where irony exists it is seen to be of a bitter kind which brings no sympathy from the reader to the attacked group. The understatement of the "unkind" creatures [C XVII 273] in charge of human souls lacks the ironical humour that it might possess in Chaucer's hands. The burden with which Langland has saddled his summoners extends beyond their own personal debasement to a condition which links the two arms of jurisprudence in the common cause of corrupting society, physically and spiritually. For Langland there is neither humour nor humanity to be seen in the summoners.

References for Summoners

L. A. Haselmeyer, "The Apparitor and Chaucer's Summoner",
vol. 12 (1937), p.43-57. Spec.

Clerks

Essentially Langland's remarks on clerks may be divided into two parts. One part deals in general with the abuses of clerks and what Langland considers their true function, while another part, in the sixth passus of the C-text (not in the A or B-texts) includes an autobiographical element in which Langland also declares his personal views on the religious of his day.

Any attempt to define or limit the meaning of the word "clerk" encounters the difficulty that the word has different meanings in different contexts.¹ On occasion the word denotes a scholar or man of learning:

For as a man may nat seo that mysseth hus eyen,
No more can no clerkes bote if hit be of bookes.

[C XV 44-45]

1. F. L. Cross ed., The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, O.U.P. 1957 see under "Clerk in Holy Orders". Before the Reformation the term is applied without qualification to those in Minor Orders, whereas priests, bishops and deacons were considered to be in Major Orders. The M.E.D. "clerk" senses 1(a) and (b) merely considers clerks as members of the secular clergy. But sense 2(a) (b) (c) places emphasis on the aspect of scholarship and education, such as Chaucer's Clerk of Oxford. See also OED "clerk" senses 1(a) and 4, where the distinction is also made between a religious function and an academic life.

Yet the next lines of this same passage have a religious connotation:

And thauh men maden bokes god was here

maister,

And seynte spirit the saumplarie and

seide what men sholde wryte. [C XV 46-47].

The connotation in the word clerk is not only religious here, it also implies that wisdom and truth come only from God, service to whom is the highest good. Elsewhere the word clerk indicates more specifically the priesthood, for it is connected with benefices and plurality in the passus on Lady Meed:

And Mede hendiliche by-hyht hem the same,

To louen hem leelich and lordes hem make,

'And porchace ȝow prouendres while ȝoure

pans lasteth,

And bigge ȝow benefices pluralite to haue

...'

[C IV 30-33].

Here the soft language adds its weight to the seductive proposals for an easy life. One should, then, bear in mind that at times Langland distinguishes scholars who know holy writ, among other things, and at other times refers to clergymen and pastors. In some places the poet combines the meanings of theological knowledge and the

pastoral function. For example, in B XV Anima complains to the Dreamer that "this newe clerkes" (B XV 366) lack sufficient learning, so they run the risk of skipping over parts of the mass. Their poor scholarship is combined with their failure as priests. The parallel passage in the C-text (C XVIII 108-121) refers to priests who skip over parts of the mass.

To deal first with the abuses of clerks and with their true functions, we may consider the following abuses that Langland singles out. Clerks are accused of lacking charity, of being faulty in their learning and of covetousness. We find that cupiditas prevails where many religious clerks are concerned. for in Langland's first significant reference to clerks we find:

The kyng kallid a clerk ich can nouht hys
name,

To take Mede the mayde and make here at ese...

[C IV 3-4].

and,

Cortesliche the clerk thenne as the kyngte hyghte,

Toke Mede by the myddel and myldeliche here

broughte

In-to boure with blysse and by hure gan sitte.

[C IV 9-11].

The first passage indicates the King's ignorance of the real nature of the fateful Lady Meed. The language and meaning of the second passage works in such a way as to suggest that the guilt of clerks is wilful and deliberate in their association with corruption and bribery.

The "blysse" of earthly reward is an ironic counterpart to heavenly bliss when associated with an ecclesiastic. The wilful guilt of the clerks is reinforced a few lines later, "we ben thyn owne,/For to worche thy wil", (C IV 28-29), as they align themselves with the desire for earthly reward. Meed promises "To louen hem leelich" (C IV 31), and, as we have seen, to buy them into benefices and encourage plurality (C IV 33). But a more interesting literary element is the conscious use of courtly language in the early lines of C IV, (and in A III and B III), which describe the behaviour of the clerk towards Meed in terms of that of a knight and his romantic heroine. There are no fewer than seven words or phrases which are more reminiscent of Sir Gawain than Langland's usual style:

Cortesliche the clerk thenne as the kynge hyghte,
Toke Meed by the myddel and myldeliche here
broughte

In-to boure with blysse and by hure gan sitte.
 Ther was myrthe and mynstralcy Mede to plesen;
 That wenden to Westmynstre worshupe hure meny.
 Gentelich with ioye iustices somme
 Buskede hem to the boure ther this berde

dwellyd...

[C IV 9-15].

The whole passage is a deliciously satiric use of the courtly convention. The use of such a word as "berde"² in this context is very rare in Langland, for¹the only other place it occurs it is used to describe Mercy (C XXI 121).

The theme of the bribery of clerks in ecclesiastical courts at C IV 34 occurs again later on, but with the added implication that the sinner may bribe his way out of trouble by corrupting the clerks of the court and the Bishop's representative:

To be corsed in constorye hue counteth
 nauht a rusche;
 Hue copeth the comissarie and coteth hus
 clerkus,

2. F. H. Stratmann, A Middle English Dictionary,
 bürde, Sb.

Hue is assoilid thus sone as hure self

lyketh.

[C IV 179-181].

It is worth noting that an article of clothing as a bribe or reward is used here as it is frequently in Langland's attack on friars.

The last reference of significance in C IV occurs at the end of a long tirade by Conscience on the universal and evil influence of "mede". The coupling of covetousness with the clergy is seen as a globally corrupting force:

For Mede hath knyht clerkes and couetyse

to-geders,

That al the wit of this worlde ys woxen

in-to gyle.

[C IV 211-212].

The A and B-texts substitute the word "clergye" for clerks and similarly indicate the state of corruption among all the religious whom Meed has seduced. This gives us grounds to interpret the word "clerk" as any priest or person in religious orders.

Perhaps one might sum up Langland's attack on covetous clerks with three more references which indicate the comprehensive nature of the word. At C XIII 224 (not in B-text), Langland uses the image of weeds that grow fastest "On fat londe and ful of donge". Having initiated the

image he sustains it by saying that bishops, archdeacons "and other ryche clerkes" (C XIII 225-226), who trade like merchants, spring up like weeds, "in wose and in donge" (C XIII 229). Thus, all evil springs up from amassing material wealth, "So of rychesse vpon richesse arisen al vices" (C XIII 230), a theme reminiscent of the Pardoner's Tale in Chaucer, but without the narrative irony. Instead the image of corruption is woven into the condemnation by a process of association and analogy.

A second reference, more of an historical allusion, is found in B XV. Langland refers to an account, popular in the fourteenth century, that Mohammed trained a dove to take corn from his ear while he was preaching to the people. Mohammed is said to have claimed that the dove was a messenger from God speaking into his ear, (B XV 391-408). Langland makes a comparison with English "clerkes" who also deceive the people:

Ac for drede of the deth I dar nouyt telle

treuthe,

How Englissh clerkes a coluer feden that

Coueityse hatte,

And ben manered after Makometh that no man

vseth treuth.

[B XV 406-408].

The implication of this last passage is that the English regular clergy is contributing to the corruption of society as a whole in a manner similar to the friars by their bad example.

A last comment on the covetousness of the clergy involves a play on the word "cross". Langland suggests that clerks and rich people and all religious folk worship the cross. It is interesting to note that this association of rich people and the clergy is carried throughout the work and applied to nearly every ecclesiastical figure. The cross that the religious worship however, is not that of the crucifixion, which saves, but one of damnation which forecasts a reform:

Botheriche and religieuse that rode their
honouren

That in grotes is y-graue and in gold nobles.

For couetyse of that croys clerkes of
holychurche

Schullen ouerturne as Templers duden...

[C XVIII 206-209].

There is bitter irony in the idea that Christ died on the cross for man's salvation, while the covetousness of clerks for the cross of gold will lead to man's damnation.

The clergy, with their eyes on the wrong cross, will bring about their own downfall.

Of the other two abuses with which clerks are associated, that they lack charity and that they are deficient in learning, the former is the same as the original abuse which identifies clerks with covetousness:

Clerkus and knyghtes carpen of god ofte,

And haueth hym muche in hure mouthe ac

mene men in herte.

[C XII 52-53].

Their deficiency in learning makes the clerks, or priests, poor spiritual leaders of the flocks entrusted to them.

Their masters are "Gyle and afluaterer" (C XVIII 107-116).

On one particular occasion, in the passus on Lady Meed, clerical ignorance is connected with covetousness, "Shal no lewednesse lette the clerk that ich louye" (C IV 35).

This suggests that the original sin of cupiditas is the dominant corrupting motive attacked in the poem, an opinion that is borne out by an examination of other ecclesiastical figures. But the connection between clerical ignorance and cupididity is relatively rare in the poem.³ The reverse of this, which connects wisdom with avarice

3. See also C XIV 101-114 on priests and C XIV 115-126 which blames bishops for creating ignorant clerks.

is found in C XII:

Wysdom and wit now is nat worth a carse

Bote hit be carded with couetyse as

clothers kembern wolle. [C XII 14-15].

Further, the wisdom of clerks is used to deceive the people at love-day settlements. There is an ironic touch in the idea of the perversion of love which is reminiscent of Chaucer's Friar who helped arbitrate on love-days, [I(A)258]. Now the wisest are the best deceivers:

Ho that can contreeue and caste to

deceyue the puple,

And lette with a loueday treuthe, and

by-gyle hym,

That can coueite and caste thus aren cleped

in-to counsail. [C XII 16-18].

Langland is also scornful of clerks with full stomachs who "gnawen god with gorge when here guttes fullen", (C XII 41), while the hungry poor cry at their gates. The passage has some of the bitterness found in the scene with the gluttonous Friar who is a doctor of divinity and who preaches while stuffing himself with food and wine (C XVI 85-88).

Against these abuses Langland proposes a standard of conduct to which clerks should aspire. They should direct

their covetousness to helping the poor (CV 114), an idea which inverts the normal meaning of avarice; they should practise what the Bible teaches for they are the "wrightes" of Holy Church (B X 412-413); they should know the truth of the saving power of "loue and leaute" (B XI 138-140); and, most important, they should be the keepers of the keys to the kingdom of Christ, to salvation and Heaven (C XV 52-57). Thus their office, like that of the good shepherd, is a sacred duty which involves the inspiration of their flocks to walk in the right road towards Truth. The measure of their deviation from this course is the scorn which Langland heaps upon their heads. In every case where an abuse is referred to, the clerks appear to lack that humility which characterises Chaucer's Clerk of Oxford or Christ.

The sixth passus of the C-text gives us a more direct insight into Langland's way of life as a clerk and illustrates his general condemnation of religious orders. The passus divides easily and naturally into two parts. The first part (C VI 1-108) concerns the "I" of the poem, the narrator or poet, in a waking state or perhaps a state of conscious day-dreaming. In the second part (109-201), the persona of the poet becomes that of the Dreamer. While the first part illustrates a conscious attack on the abuses of the clergy, the second part, in the form of a vision of Reason's sermon, is largely a contrived, subconscious mirror

of the conscious commentary. Langland is writing here in the tradition of the mediaeval dream-visions in which experiences encountered during the waking day re-emerge in a different form in a sleeping dream.⁴ A brief outline of the events of the two parts of this passus will illustrate the reinforcement technique that appears to be in progress. In the first part the poet meets Reason. But it is his own, mentally awake power of reasoning with whom he confers. His reason asks what trade or craft he is able to perform and how he is able to excuse his "lollarene lyf" (C VI 31) by not labouring. The poet answers himself and justifies his existence as one called to the service of Christ:

Hit by-cometh for clerkus Crist for to
seruen,

And knaues vncrowned to cart and to worche.

[C VI 61-62].

He then goes on to describe the state of corruption among various groups of religious who have given in to covetousness, but he claims that his conscience is clear where his service of Christ is concerned and that he hopes to come to grace and turn his life to profit (C VI 99-101). It is important to

4. Cf. Chaucer's "The Book of The Duchess" and Book II of "Troilus and Criseyde".

remember at this point that the "Reason" that speaks and advises the poet to begin to live a humble life, is not the same person as Reason in the vision which follows. He is rather the poet's own rational process on a symbolic and moral level.

The vision begins after the poet has been to church, said his pater-noster and fallen asleep:

Thenne mette me moche more than ich by-fore
tolde

Of the mater that ich mette fyrst on

Maluerne hulles.

[C VI 109-110].

~~This~~ recalls the earlier vision of the Field Full of Folk. Now the Dreamer is confronted with the allegorical figure of Reason, "reuested ryjt as a pope" (C VI 112), who delivers a sermon to explain that the plagues and great storms are sent to punish the people for pride and religious folk who have broken their rule and forsaken charity. Reason concludes his Apocalyptic sermon with the reminder of the need for love and for a pilgrimage to Saint Truth rather than to Rome or St. James. Thus the vision sustains the poem's search for Truth while elaborating, as a subconscious echo of the first part of the passus, on the message of clerical service of Christ. The only difference, in a

narrative sense, between these two parts of the passus is that the first part is characterised by some interesting comments on the poet's way of life and what he believes is the proper conduct for one in holy orders:

The lomes that ich laboure with and lyflode

deserue

Ys pater-noster and my prymer placebo and

dirige,

And my sauter som tyme and my seuene

psalmes.

[C VI 45-47].

In the next two lines the poet shows that he leads a life in some respects similar to Chaucer's Clerk who prays for the souls of those who help him study:

Thus ich synge for hure soules of suche

as me helpen,

And tho that fynden me my fode...

[C VI 48-49].

However, there may be some ironical self-criticism in this last passage for the poet confesses to being one of a group he elsewhere condemns, the London chantry-priests who sing masses for the souls of the departed.⁵ But though he

(1886)

5. Skeat, / Vol II, p.62, note to C VI 44.

condemns the practice in parish-priests (C I 81-84), as Chaucer does, his remarks do not necessarily apply to clerks in Minor Orders. Langland was apparently unbeneficed, so he did not have a country flock in his care, or one he could abandon. Furthermore, he says his prayers for food and not for silver. He journeys about "With-oute bagge other botel bote my wombe one" (C VI 52). This is a crucial distinction from those priests who sing for simony and abandon their charges, for Langland sees himself as the victim of the system which prefers and advances the beggars who purchase their offices and benefices.

The message imparted by both parts of C VI, with their references to simony and a lack of charity among the religious, is consistent with the abuses illustrated elsewhere in the poem. The theme is still that of the choice between charity and cupidity, with the ideal held up of the only right way to live, contrasting with the sad reality of corruption at every level of the Church hierarchy. Unlike Chaucer's comments on the Clerk of Oxford, which form a detailed, personal portrait, Langland's comments are general and impersonal, with the exception of the autobiographical element of C VI. His concern over

clerical abuse is deep, for he feels that the erosion of society will continue since "couetise ouer-cam alle kynne sectes". (C XVI 13).

Pardoners and Pardon

There are only four references to pardoners in Piers Plowman. It is proposed to deal with these in order to examine Langland's treatment of these characters, then to deal with five other passages which discuss pardons. The purpose is to show how Langland's interest in pardoners serves as a means of contrasting the abuses of pardoners with the true nature of God's pardon. The contrast is valid in that the message borne by the five references to pardons appears to lay stress on positive action, on doing good in this world, while the brief portrayals of pardoners emphasises their deviation from doing good, a deviation motivated, as with the friars, by avarice.

In comparison with Chaucer's intensely detailed, ironic and personalised portrait of the pardoner, Langland's treatment is, in one sense, more remote. Instead of a detailed description of a character or a particular man, with external details which reveal something of the internal nature, Langland concentrates on the methods and abuses of a general class of character known as pardoners. Thus Langland's treatment, unrelieved by personal ironic thrusts, seems to be of a more serious nature and indicates his recognition of the chain of abuse that existed in the church. By this is meant that Langland is concerned with

connecting the abuses of the pardoners with the connivance of parish priests and bishops, while Chaucer, on the other hand, seems to have portrayed an intensely isolated figure in such a way that his treatment might be considered psychological rather than ideological, even though the "entente" of his pardoner is identical to that of Langland's.¹

Langland's first reference to pardoners occurs in the Prologue of A and B and at C I (66-80). It is the longest of the passages on pardoners and comes, in the vision of the Field Ful of Folke, between comments on the covetousness of friars and the simony and absenteeism of parish priests. Thus this passage forms part of a four^{-fold} comment on ecclesiastical characters if we include the hermits driven by sloth to adopt a religious habit. All of these passages, with the exception of that on hermits, have a common theme, avarice.

This first passage on pardoners sums up most effectively the abuses commonly practised by pardoners in the fourteenth century. Firstone is depicted as a preacher, "as he a prest were" (C I 66), an office categorically denied to

1. Cf. The Pardoner's Tale, VI (C) 423-424.

pardoners.² Worse than this, when he preaches he does so with the connivance of that same parish priest who should be guarding his flock from such wolves as pardoners, "The parsheprest and the pardoner parten the seluer", (C I 79). By contrast, Chaucer's pardoner "made the person and the peple his apes", [I(A) 706]. Secondly, Langland's pardoner claims, or is represented as claiming, greater efficacy for his indulgences than they really have:

And brouȝte forth a bulle with bisshopis
seles,

And seide that hym-selue myȝte asoilie hem
alle

Of falsnesse of fastinges of vowes to-broke.

[C I 67-69].

This is the first of three references to bishops in this passage that implicates them in the pardoner's deception of the parishioners. This second abuse is more serious, for it carries with it the suggestion that the pardoner deceives people into thinking that he can absolve them

2. G. R. Owst Preaching in Mediaeval England,
Cambridge, (1926), p 104.

a poena et a culpa. Since penance involves the acts of contrition, confession and satisfaction, the pardoner's indulgence is really only valid for the removal of the temporal punishment, or poena, which remains after the culpa, or moral guilt, has been removed by the sacraments of confession and absolution.³ Here the pardoner is guilty of the worst abuse for which the friars were so strongly attacked. The pardoners pass over the sincere contrition which is such an important step to grace, and aggravate a situation which leaves people unafraid of the consequences of sin, for they may buy salvation. Later on, in the pardon scene (C X), Truth purchases a pardon á pena et á culpa for Piers and his heirs forever, which suggests that only God can pardon sinners in both the temporal and spiritual senses. The true pardon is granted to those who actually do good and recognize their real function on earth. But even in the pardon scene the implication is that Do-wel is not sufficient for a pardon a culpa, because of the orthodox concept of original sin. One cannot stress

3. A. L. Kellogg and Louis A. Haselmeyer, "Chaucer's Satire on the Pardoner," PMLA, vol. 66, (1951), p.251-252.

too strongly the importance to Langland of this second abuse, for, as in his attack on friars, the abuse of confession and denial of real contrition, represent the slow erosion of the real prop and path to salvation. While the friars had drugged man's conscience, the pardoners blind man's eyes.

It is significant to note how Langland has emphasised the reader's awareness of the pardoner's deception by strengthening the alliteration in part of the first passage on pardoners, an emphasis which suggests a certain contempt for his victims:

He bonched hem with his breuet and blered

here eyes,

And rauyte with his ragman rynges and

broches.

Thus they geuen here golde glotones to

kepe,

And leueth such loseles that lecherye

haunten.

[B Prol. 74-77].

This is as close as Langland comes to a realistic picture of the operations of a pardoner. Yet it is a strong portrait of officially authorized hypocrisy, for the greedy pardoner holds salvation in one hand while grasping for

gold with the other and blinding the people with false promises of salvation. Langland alludes too to the pardoner's gluttony and lechery, thus identifying him with the three socially worst of the deadly sins as Chaucer had with his Pardoner.

As was mentioned earlier, the pardoner operates with the authorization of the bishop and the connivance of the parish priest. Langland's attack on pardoners is also a comment on the abuse of the episcopal office and the pastoral function:

Were the bisshop blessid other worth bothe
 hus eren,

Hus sele sholde noyt be sent in deceit of
 the puple.

Ac it ys noyt by the bysshop that the boye
 precheth,

The parsheprest and the pardoner parten the
 seluer.

[C I 76-79].

Skeat (Vol. 2 p.11) suggests that "by the bysshop" (C I 78) is ambiguous and ironic. That is, in one sense the pardoner preaches without the bishop's leave, and in another sense he is sure not to preach against the bishop

since the bishop is a party to the pardoner's spoliation of the parishioners.⁴ The corruption of the pardoner is a result of the poor example set by a higher authority and a failure of that authority to guard his diocese. On the local level a failure of the pastor brings about the damnation of his flock through ignorance and deception.

In this first passage on pardoners there is one difference in Langland's choice of words in the three texts which is worthy of comment. A Prol. 71 reads, "He bonchede hem with his breuet". The B Prol. (line 74) also uses the word "bonched". In the C-text however, we find "He blessedde hem with hus breuet" (C I 72).⁵ The term "blessede", though poetically weaker, may be considered as a technical term here, and indicate both an usurpation of the pastoral function of benediction as well as a salutary blessing with a letter of indulgence to suit the pardoner's baser purpose of preaching for profit. On the other hand, there seems to be a certain grim irony

4. But see MED bi, prep. 6a, 7a. There is no sense in which "bi" is recorded as meaning against. The opposite is implied, that is, by means of; through; with.
5. The word "blessede" does not appear to be either a scribal error or a gloss. See Skeat's edition of the C-text, EETS vol. 54 (1873), p.5, in reference to C I 72, where "blessede" occurs in MS. Phillipps 8231. See also George Kane, Piers Plowman: The A Version, London, 1960, p.181 note to A Prol. 71. The word "blessed" in various forms, occurs in four other manuscripts.

in the use of "blessede" which suggests a more sophisticated appreciation of the pardoner's corruption than does "bonched". The pardoner's blessing raises false hopes of salvation among his audience, and it does so with the highest ecclesiastical authority, that of the Pope himself.

The second reference to a pardoner occurs when Meed's marriage charter is to be witnessed. The first witness is the allegorical figure of Wrong, followed by the symbolic figures of wrong:

In witesse of this thyng Wrong was the

ferste,

And Peres the pardoner of Paulynes queste,

Bette the budele of Banneburies sokne,

Reynald the reue and redyngkynges menye,

Munde the mylnere and meny mo othere.

[C III 109-113].

While the origin and particular allusion of "Paulynes" is obscure,⁶ the choice of the name Piers for the pardoner seems a deliberate attempt to heighten the contrast between Piers the Plowman, symbolic of Christ

6. Skeat, (1886) Vol. II, p.35-36. See also OED Pauline, sb B, 1.

and the good, and this pardoner, doubtless as hypocritical as the grasping pardoner of the first passus.

The third reference to pardoners shows them taking pity on the fugitive Liar:

He was nawher welcome for hus meny tales,

Ouer-al houted out and yhote trusse,

Til pardoners hadden pitte and pullede

hym to house.

[C III 227-229].

The care that the pardoners bestow on Liar, and the language with which their care is described, aids in our identification of pardoners with lying:

Thei woshe hym and wypede hym and wonde

hym in cloutes,

And sente hym on Sonnedayes with seeles to

churches,

And gaf pardon for pans pound-meel a-boute.

[C III 230-232].

While the alliteration of the first passage on pardoners in C I was harsh, as though demanding attention, here there is a soft, lulling sound as Liar is restored to health. Yet this passage loses none of its effect by being soft-toned, for the language is highly suggestive of the lying persuasiveness of an accomplished pardoner, dispensing salvation by the pound. Again the inclusion

of the seals of authority that the pardoner carries involves criticism of the establishment that permits and encourages his abuses. The care which the pardoners bestow on him is a comic parody of the parable of the Good Samaritan.⁷ Yet the comedy has its grim side, for by assisting Liar and sending him out to tell more lies, the pardoners are continuing the circle of evil and regenerating the false hope of salvation for all.

The last reference to pardoners occurs only in the B-text, (B V 648-649), at the end of the long passus on the Seven Deadly Sins. Piers addresses the assembled pilgrims on Truth and her seven sisters, the seven virtues. He tells the pilgrims that unless they are sisters to one of these seven, they will not get in at any gate where Truth lives. A cutpurse, an "apewarde" and a "wafrestre" do not want to go on the pilgrimage, but Piers forcefully pushes them (B and C-texts) in the direction of the good. Piers tells them that through the intercession of Mercy (the Virgin Mary) and her son (Jesus), they might gain grace. In other words, grace is accessible to the sinners through God's pardon and not through any temporal agency. A

7. John Lawlor, Piers Plowman: An Essay in Criticism, London (1962), p.24.

pardoner, a temporal agent of the church, breaks in:

'By seynt Poule,' quod a pardonere 'peraventure

I be nou^{te} knowe there,

I wil go fecche my box with my breuettes and

a bulle with bisshopes lettres!'

[B V 648-649].

which contrasts both with the message about grace and the character of the good Plowman. The pardoner's oath on St. Paul is perhaps an ironical touch for it reminds us of the earlier pardoner who was of "Paulynes queste" (C III 110) and was foremost among the wrongdoers.

This is a fitting conclusion to Langland's treatment of pardoners, for this fellow has entirely missed the point of the references to Mercy and her son. He has totally ignored the relevance of Pier's speech on the seven virtues and instead has illustrated both his motives, and those of all pardoners, and the moral blindness from which he suffers. Perhaps this is ironical in the light of the first passage where a pardoner blinds the eyes of his congregation. For now this pardoner's eyes are dimmed by the glare of gold. His final hope, as he scrambles to prepare for the pilgrimage to Truth, is that his reputation will not have preceded him to that country so his earnings are likely to be much greater than usual. The pathetic

and social nature of the pardon has been narrowed down to the selection of the one best man, Piers, symbol of the good life of Do-wel and representative of:

Alle lybbyng laboreres that lyuæn with her
hondes,

That trewlich taken and trewlich wynnem...

[B VII 62-63].

But the chief thing to observe about the pardon that Truth has purchased for Piers is, as noted above, that it is absolute. That is, it absolves the penitent from temporal and spiritual guilt as only God can, so the presumption of pardoners who claim a wider efficacy for their pardons is seen as a gross enormity and a pretension to being able to dispense spiritual power "pound-meel".

The second, and possibly most important, reference to Truth's pardon occurs when a priest offers to construe Pier's pardon, and says he will render it in English. The priest's assumption that the pardon would not be in English seems appropriate since Latin was the common clerical language. Furthermore, his assumption helps us to ~~associate~~ the priest not with the true spiritual pardon, but with temporal power of papal decrees. Piers then opens the pardon with the shadowy figure of the

Dreamer looking over his shoulder to give an eye-witness account. Truth's message, and the whole meaning of salvation, is laid bare in two simple lines:

Qui bona egerunt ibunt in uitam eternam:

Qui uero mala, in ignem eternum.

[C X 287].

Then there occurs that dramatic action on the part of Piers that has caused so much debate among critics. In the A and B-texts Piers tears up the pardon in anger after the priest has said he can find no pardon. In the C-text this action is omitted, perhaps because the meaning of the scene is plain without it and its inclusion would confuse the issue.⁸ Another commentator feels that in tearing up the pardon Piers is rejecting the active life for the contemplative life.⁹ The argument is that the poet was carried away by the dramatic force of his poem and was consequently led to forget the wider implications of the allegorical significance of the poem. This critic

8. R. W. Frank, Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation, Yale Univ. Press (1957), p.27.
9. E. T. Donaldson, Piers Plowman: The C-Text and Its Poet, Yale Univ. Press (1949), p.162-163.

suggests that Piers' anger is the result of his disappointment at such a "commonplace sanction for his manner of life".¹⁰ The problem with this last suggestion is that at one moment it finds Piers angry with the priest who fails to recognise that this pardon is as effective as any from the Pope, and at the next finds Piers in agreement with the priest.

A more reasonable explanation of the pardon and its destruction seems to be that it serves the function of an effective dramatic device. It is not really a pardon at all, either literally or figuratively. Piers' action in tearing it symbolises his rejection of temporal indulgences of the sort hawked by the pardoner. Piers' anger is directed at the ignorant priest who suggests such temporal indulgences and so contributes to the pardoner's work of misleading people.¹¹

10. E. T. Donaldson, Piers Plowman..., p.162-163, n.8.

11. R. W. Frank, "The Pardon Scene in Piers Plowman", Spec., Vol. 26 (1951) p.323-324.

But this is a critical point in the poem and suggests levels of meaning beyond an interpretation of the behaviour of Piers and the priest. On the surface, the pardon is no pardon at all, for it releases from Hell only the just man. Yet even the just man sins seven times a day (B VIII 22), so who is to be saved? The difference in attitude between the priest and Piers seems to stem from their differing attitudes towards authority and God's love. For the priest comprehends only the letter of the law and the letter of the pardon.¹² Piers seems to comprehend the spirit. The juxtaposition of what is measurable (the law) and what is measureless (God's love and mercy) is being made here. The pardon was purchased not from Rome but on the cross by Christ.¹³ The priest's failure is not only a failure of learning, but a failure of faith in Christ. On the other hand, Piers' anger may simply be because the pardon states no more than the "kynde knowyng" in Piers' own heart.

12. Nevill Coghill, "The Pardon of Piers Plowman", PBA vol. 30 (1944) p.319.

13. Coghill, *idem.*, p.318-319.

Hence the pardon is both irrelevant and unnecessary to the man of faith. The priest's legalistic interpretation, with a trust in earthly authority, points out his great failure as a shepherd of God's flock, for he has not realised that God's mercy releases the sinner from the rigours of earthly law and transcends those laws.

This dramatic point functions as a clear and satisfactory conclusion to the Visio and prepares our way for entry to the Vitae of the poem. In the Visio Langland has been concerned with false friars, false hermits, false pardoners. But above all he has been concerned with Lady Meed who is so vividly contrasted with Holy Church. The theme of the Visio has been to demonstrate a course of action which leads to damnation, the desire for earthly reward. Such a course was clearly adopted by the pardoners. By contrast, Langland has juxtaposed an ideal which will lead to salvation; a belief in doing good or Do-wel, through honest work and duty. The pardon has served as an emphatic pronouncement of a simple fact of spiritual life, and as such is both an effective and dramatic way of rounding out the vision of the Field Ful of Folke. The confusion in the world, with which the poem began, indicated a need for pardon and reform. The Visio ends with that need

fulfilled.¹⁴ The suggestion that Piers rejects the pardon because he understands its deeper significance, and not because the priest disputed it,¹¹ would not account for the seemingly reflex gesture of anger which results in the destruction of the paper pardon. In neither the A nor the B-texts is there any warning of what is about to happen. There is no break between the priest's interpretation and Piers' anger:

"And do yuel, and haue yuel hope thow non
other

But after thi ded-day the deuel shal haue
thi sowle!"

And Pieres for pure tene pulled it
atweyne... [B VII 114-116].

What Langland seems to imply is that there is a vast gulf between the real, spiritual Truth implied in the only true pardon that there can be, and the entirely

14. H. W. Wells, "The Construction of Piers Plowman", PMLA Vol. 44 (1929), p.131.

11. John Lawlor, "Piers Plowman: The Pardon Reconsidered", MLR Vol. 45 (1950), p.455

inadequate apprehension of this Truth that is subscribed to by those who should know the way to Truth, the priests, friars and pardoners of this world. Instead they are blind. The simple logic of the pardon is not clear to their eyes. This is supported by an examination of the text at B XIX (C XXII) and the phrase redde quod debes, or "pay what thou owest", (C XXII 187). We are reminded by this of the act of contrition made sincerely, and of the blindness of pardoners and of the priest particularly in the pardon scene. For this passage deals with true belief and faith:

And blessed moten thei beo in body and in
 soule,
 That neuere shullen seo in syht as thou
 seost nouthe,
 And leelly by-leyuen al this ich loue hem
 and blesse hem;

Beati qui non uiderunt, et crediderunt.'

[C XXII 179-181].

Then Christ teaches about Do-best and grants Piers a pardon to absolve everyone of all kinds of sin if they pay what they owe. The implication, on the anagogical level, is that Christ has paid for the pardon of mankind

by his sacrifice. True belief in this power is the only pardon there can be, provided it is supported by Do-wel, Do-bet and Do-best:

Payeth now parfitliche as pure treuthe
wolde.

And what persone payeth hit nat punysshē
he thenketh,

And demen hem at domesday bothe quyke and
dede...

[C XXII 194-196].

The phrase redde quod debes implies Langland's belief that a pardon is ineffectual unless the culprit makes restitution. But further the restitution must not only be temporal but also spiritual. No amount of papal indulgences, no amount of money to purchase these, will bring the buyer one step closer to salvation. Langland's concern with the pardoner and Piers' anger at the priest seem to bring this point home, for both are blind to Truth, and both are guilty of interfering with the souls they should be protecting, the pardoner through greed and the priest through ignorance.

In two other references to papal indulgences which are worth noting, the spirit of the pardon is reinforced.

At C X 317-329 the Dreamer grants that the Pope has some power to dispense pardons. But he says that Do-wel exceeds all pardon and pilgrimages to Rome, and all bishops' letters, an echo of the seals and letters of the pardoner in C I. But this section concludes with a reference to prayers and penance which can save souls:

And so ich by-leyue leelly lordes forbode

elles,

That pardon and penaunce and preieres

don saue

Saules that han synged seuene sithes

dedliche.

[C X 327-329].

Without proper penance, by trusting in easily purchased pardons, there can be no salvation.

Finally, near the end of this passus on pardons, William concludes with an apocalyptic note. At the dreadful day of Doom when the accounts are called in, a sackful of pardons and bishops' letters will avail you not at all:

...bote Dowel ous helpe,

Ich sette by pardon nat a peese nother a

pye-hele!

[C X 344-345].

The contrast between Truth and Liar is complete. Salvation is open to all who will read and understand Piers'

pardon:

That after oure deth-day Dowel reherce

At the day of dome we dude as he tauhte. - Amen.

[C X 350-351].

References for Pardoners and Pardons

- Nevill Coghill, "The Pardon of Piers Plowman",
PBA, vol. 30 (1944), p.303-357.
- R. W. Frank, "The Pardon Scene in Piers Plowman",
Spec. vol. 26 (1951), p.317-331.
- A. L. Kellogg and Louis A. Haselmeyer,
"Chaucer's Satire of the Pardoner",
PMLA, vol. 66 (1951), p.251-277.
- John Lawlor, "Piers Plowman: The Pardon Reconsidered",
MLR, vol. 45 (1950), p.449-458.
- H. W. Wells, "The Construction of Piers Plowman",
PMLA, vol. 44 (1929), p.123-140.

Monastic Orders

The relative mildness of Langland's treatment of monks, and the scarcity of references in Piers Plowman to monks, has contributed partly to the theory that Langland was a monk himself.¹ While it is true that there are relatively few references to monks, compared with those on friars, Skeat notes only three references to monks in his index of proper names. There are in fact eleven occasions on which the word "monk" or its plural form, is used in both the B and C-texts. The ratio of benevolent to derogatory references to monks is 2 : 1, yet the few derogatory remarks attach Lechery and Avarice to monastics (B III 132, C IV 169). On the whole though, Langland commends the monks for their control of their numbers (B XX 262), unlike the friars who wax out of number, and he praises the cloistered life (B XV 269), though on occasion he condemns the religious who have become roamers-about:

Ac meny day, men telleth bothe monkes and chanouns
 Han ride out of a-ray here ruele vuel yholde...

(C VI 157-158)

Wrath gets short shrift from the monks (B V 169), and there is even a note of nostalgia in a description of the quiet cloistered life where "alle is buxumnesse," (B X 300-303).

¹ Morton W. Bloomfield, "Was William Langland a Benedictine Monk?" *MLQ*, Vol. 4 (1943), p. 57-61.

On occasion Langland's remarks on monastics are coupled with the fourteenth-century condemnation of possessioners "That out of couent and cloistre coueyteth to dwelle" (C VI 152). This attack seems to spring largely from two references to Constantine at C VI 176 and C XVIII 220, for these refer to the legend that the Emperor Constantine endowed the Church with large parcels of land:

Whenne Constantyn of hus cortesy. holykirke dowede
 With londes and leedes lordshupes and rentes,
 An angel men hurde an hih at Rome crye -
 "Dos ecclesie this day hath ydronke venym,
 And tho that han Petres power aren poysoned alle."

(C XVIII 220-224)

While it could be argued that "Petres power" refers specifically to the Pope and the apostolic succession, there is no doubt that what is being attacked is the excessive concern of the church with possessions and property, for the text continues:

A medecine moste ther-to that myghte amende the prelates,
 That sholden preye for the pees and possession hem letteth;
 Taketh here londes, ~~ye~~ lordes and leet hem lyue by dymes..

(C XVIII 225-227).

This seems to be an appeal to the civil lords to remove the great estates from the Church, and it seems to warn the clergy to live by their proper dues, the tithes.

There is an earlier reference to Constantine, at C VI 176, which introduces the idea of the perversion of possessions and a prophecy that the monastic orders will one day "have a knock on here crownes and in-curable the wounde," (C VI 178). The B-text, more explicit, for it refers to "Gregories god-children," (B X 325), an allusion to the introduction by St. Augustine in 596, sent by Pope Gregory the Great, of the monastic state in Britain. In addition to this, the B-text refers to the Abbot of Abingdon (B X 326), an appropriate reference to the whole monastic state, for Abingdon is said to have been the site of the first establishment of monks in England.² The story of Constantine is said to have been a popular weapon in the hands of the Lollards who were busy attacking possessioners at least until 1370.³ Thus the basis of Langland's concern over monastic abuses is the by now familiar dichotomy between caritas and cupiditas. The undue concern of regulars implies a lack of concern with spiritual life:

Lytel hadde lordes a-do to ȝeue londe fro here aires
 To religious, that han no reuthe thauh hit reyne on here
 auters (C VI 164-165)

This concern for wordly pursuits may be illustrated by an examination of some specific references to monastic abuse.

²•Skeat (1886) II p.70, in reference to C VI 177.

³•Skeat, loc.cit. p.232, in reference to C XVIII 220

Langland criticises those religious who wish to wander about outside their cloisters with the commonplace metaphor⁴ similar to that of Chaucer's Monk:

Right as fisshes in flod whenne hem faileth water,
 Deyen for drouthe whenne thei drye liggen,
 Ryght so religion roteth and sterueth,
 That out of couent and cloistre coueyteth to dwelle.

(C VI 149-152)

The activities of monks in worldly affairs, "Lederes of lovedaies" (C VI 159), their flouting of injunctions against riding and hunting (C VI 160-161), and their pride in lordly status, (C VI 162-163) recall almost exactly Chaucer's portrait of the Monk. But the chief difference in Langland's treatment is that the abuses are generalised as being typical of the monastic state as a whole. They are not personalised nor made humorous in the way that Chaucer has made a genial figure of his Monk. Instead there appears to be a tone of bitterness in the Biblical quotation that Langland so readily supplies, which reminds us of monastic injunctions against riding:

Hii in curribus et hi in equis: ipsi obligati sunt,
et ceciderunt. (C VI 173)

There is in this, as elsewhere in Langland, a generalised and apocalyptic overtone, practically unrelieved by joy, and a condemnation that is universal and explicit.

⁴Skeat, (1886), vol.I, p.67.

By contrast, and perhaps referring to less exalted monastics, the figure of Wrath in C VII (B V) complains of the severity of the monastic life with its fasting, fish and "feble ale," (C VII 151-161). Wrath declares that he no longer wishes to dwell among the monks, and this is perhaps indicative of Langland's regard for the salutary effects of discipline.

In recommending a life of moderation for monks and friars Langland quotes a commentary on the book of Job:

The nature of brute animals condemns thee, for
 common food suffices and from fat (excess)
 comes iniquity. (C XVIII 52)

The poet warns the wealthy to reflect before heaping endowments upon those who apparently have enough:

Yf lewede men knewe this Latyn a litel thei wolde
 auisen hem

Er thei amortiseide eny more for monkes other for chanons.

(C XVIII 53-54)

For charity begins at home, and one's first duty is to one's family and afterwards to others in need:

Help thi kynne, Crist bit for ther by-gynneth charite,
 And afterwards awaite hoo hath moost neede,
 And ther help yf thou hast and that halde ich charite.

(C XVIII 61-63)

The implication of this, together with some earlier lines, is

that the monks are least in need and least deserving our charity:

For God had hus blessedde as the book techeth,
Honora patrem et matrem, ut longeus sis etc.

To helpe thy father formest by-fore freres and monkes,
 And er preestes other pardoneres other any ~~pe~~uple elles.

(C XVIII 58-60)

There is a curious difference between the B and C-texts at this point. As we have seen, the C-text condemns the endowment of undeserving and already wealthy religious folk. The B-text, however, after condemning the practice of wealthy laymen who endow wealthy religious, goes on to say that the only people who perform the text Dispersit, dedit pauperibus, etc. are the poor friars:

If any peple perfourme that texte it ar this pore freres!
 For that thei beggen abouten in buildynge thei spene,
 And on hem-self sum and such as ben her laboreres,
 And of hem that habbeth thei taken and ~~3~~yue hem that ne
 habbeth. (B XV 321-324)

Such a passage is an anomaly in the catalogue of invective against the flattering friars that forms a large part of the poem. One can only feel that the poet, normally vitriolic whenever mentioning friars, is describing the ideals under which fraternal orders were formed, rather than the friars of his day who not only flattered the rich for money, but begged

from the poor as well and certainly never gave anything away.

To return to the monks, Langland says that by perfect living monks can become as equals with the apostles (B XV 409-410), a passage that has no parallel in the C-text. By living in humble houses and with little substance as the ancient saints and holy men did (B XV 413-415), the monks would spread grace throughout society. To love perfectly, Langland says, the monks should remain in their cloisters to pray:

Her preyeres and her pena^unces to pees shulde brynge
Alle that ben at debate and bedemen were trewe.

(B XV 419-420)

They should not ride about the country like lords, nor hunt, nor become involved with the world, all of which are characteristic of Chaucer's Monk.

Many of Langland's comments on monks apply also to nuns. The first prophetic warning to monastics who break their rule includes the nuns:

Ac γ ut shal come a kyng and confesse zow alle,
And bete γ ow, as the byble telleth for breakyng of
 γ owre reule,
And amende γ ow monkes moⁿviales, and chanons,
And putte γ ow to γ oure penaunce ad pristinum statum ire.

(C VI 169-172)

This passage is touched with the nostalgia of recalling a lost

golden age, an element that is not uncommon in the poem. Yet the poet can not be accused of sentimental yearnings for the past. He looks forward here to a renewed golden era, as he does at the end of the poem when Conscience becomes a pilgrim to seek Piers who can destroy Pride and create a situation in which friars will not flatter from need.

In the Confessio Ire we find that Wrath has an aunt who is a nun and abbess (C VII 128). Wrath claims to have been the cook in the abbey kitchen, and has prepared soup for the prioress and other ladies, (C VII 130-132). But we learn that the broth that Wrath prepared, was like the figure of Wrath himself, symbolic of the scandals and squabbles among the sisters:

'..... dame Iohane was a bastarde,

And dame Clarice a knyghtes douhter a cokewold was hure
syre,

Dame Purnele a prestes file prioresse worth hue neuere;

For hue hadde a childe in the chapon-cote hue worth

challenged at eleccion.'

(C VII 133-136)

In the description of the fighting among the sisters, Wrath the cook is made to make a word-play on his culinary art, "Of wykked wordes I, Wrath here wortes i-made" (B V 162).

The B-text adds a comment about Pope Gregory IX's injunction forbidding any prioress from hearing the confession

of nuns:⁵

Seynt Gregorie was a good pope and had a gode forwit,
That no priouresse were prest for that he ordeigned.

(B V 166-167)

The practice was prevented, Langland feels, because women would be unable to keep confessional secrets to themselves since they seem unable to keep any secret,⁶ "Thei had thenne ben infamis the firste day thei can so yuel hele conseilie," (B V 168).

In addition to strong attacks on immorality among nuns, Langland questions their integrity and alludes to the apparent strain, in a social sense, of a cloistered life. While illustrating only very generally the Wrath stirred up among nuns, Langland refers more explicitly to carnal sin. He seems to imply that monastic orders have become so lax that, instead of expulsion for immorality, a nun might only become the subject of cloister gossip. It can be no accident that made Langland choose the name Purnele for his "prestes file"

(C VII 135), for in the six references to this name in the C-text there are suggestions of pride, promiscuity, vanity

⁵ Skeat (1886), Vol. II, p. 80, in reference to B V 166.

⁶ For remarks on antifeminism in the Middle Ages see G. R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Mediaeval England, Cambridge, 1933, p. 375-404 and J. D. Peter, Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature, Oxford, 1956, p. 86-91.

and vulgarity.⁷ The reader is given no chance of overlooking the association of the name of a nun with corruption among the clergy.

Perhaps we might conclude this discussion of Langland's monastic orders with the general advice and warnings found in B X. The poet takes as his text Matthew VII, 3-5, "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye....?" (B X 262f), and advises abbots and priors to amend themselves, and to be what they only appear to be, before attempting to serve others. Significantly, the long diatribe on monastic clergy in B X is followed by Scripture's vision of the three temptations, the pride of life, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes, in B XI. The Dreamer's vision in this passage is of "Mydlerd," or the same Field Ful of Folke with which the poem begins. In this visionary land the Dreamer's guide is Dame Fortune, attended by "two faire damoyseles" (B XI 11) who are carnal lust and lust of the eyes. Just as religious characters formed part of the "mase" between Heaven and Hell in the Prologue, so now the Vision of Scripture is a logical elaboration on the abuses of monastics. For in his attack Langland has shown how the clergy have succumbed, in one way or another, to all three temptations. We saw Pride and Wrath among the monks, Lust among the nuns and covetousness

7. See ^{C VII 111} C VI 129; C VII 3, 135, 367; C XVIII 71. This last reference is to priests who spend money on concubines, and echoes the reference to C VII 135, above.

motivating all the monastics who "han yuel dispended," (B X 325), the goods of this world. Yet nowhere does Langland advocate the abolition of monasticism. Rather he looks forward to a time when the regulars will be made aware of their proper duties on earth; when, like the clerks, their covetousness will be directed towards the poor and needy who really require their prayers and help; when, finally, they are capable of a deep charity which will spell the end of cupiditas. Among the monastics, the least abused of Langland's ecclesiastical figures, we find that Utopian strain that is occasionally a characteristic of this poem. The poet is neither a reactionary nor a revolutionary. He hopes instead for a state of affairs which accords with the high ideals of the founders of monasticism, a restoration rather than a reformation.

References for Monks

Morton W. Bloomfield, "Was William Langland a Benedictine Monk?" *MLQ*, Vol.4 (1943), p.57-61.

Parsons and Parish Priests

For Langland the terms parson and parish priest are synonymous. The attack on these characters is three-fold. The parsons set a bad example to their flocks, they are covetous and concerned with worldly possessions and they are ignorant of the meaning of some of the sacraments and Biblical

texts so they cannot guide their flocks. Other elements of interest in the attack on priests are the struggle between mendicants and regular, beneficed clergy, and a noticeable frequency of agricultural metaphors. This last will be examined as examples occur in a study of the three-fold attack on priests.

The first reference to parsons accuses them of collusion with pardoners to divide the silver collected from the parishioners. Instead of guarding his flock from the wolf who is the pardoner, the priest encourages the deception of his flock while complaining to the bishop that he is poor since the plague. He would like to live in London, "To singe ther for simonye for seluer is swete," (C I 84).¹

The theme of avaricious priests is carried on in the next reference which deals with the text Fides sine operibus mortua est, (C II 184). The attack is on clergy who are chaste in themselves but lack charity because they are encumbered with greed. The condemnation is fairly general and seems to encompass many elements of the priesthood:

Many chapelynes arne chaste ac charite is away;
 Aren no men auarousere than hij whan thei ben auanced;
 Vnkynde to her kyn and to alle cristene,
 Chewen here charite and chiden after more.

¹•It appears that chantry-priests were not necessarily better off than rural vicars, but would have had more leisure time and fewer responsibilities. See Kathleen L. Wood-Legh, Church Life in England under Edward III, Cambridge, 1934, p.122-123.

Such chastite withouten charite worth cheyned in helle!

Many curatoures kepen hem clene of here bodies,
Thei ben acombred with coueitise thei konne nouȝt
don it from hem,

So harde hath avarice yhasped hem togideres.

(B I 188-195)

If anything, the C-text is a stronger condemnation of the priesthood, for it restores the suggestion of a wolf in a sheepfold that is found in A, "And encombred with couetyse thei conne nat out crepe," (C II 192).

Conscience's attack on Meed in C IV concerns priests on three occasions. First Conscience says that Meed provides livings for parsons (C IV 187), and allows them to keep concubines and bring children into the world unlawfully (C IV 188-189) like the parson who fathered the miller's wife in the Reeve's Tale. Then we find:

For Mede hath knyht clerkes and couetyse to-geders
That al the wit of this worlde ys woxen in-to gyle,

(C IV 211-212)

which image of knitting or binding together is consistent with the previous one which shows avarice locking together curates and covetousness. Meed claims that priests who teach people ask for "mede" lawfully (C IV 279-280), but throughout this passage she plays about with the meanings of her name. However, Conscience reminds the king of ^{the} measurable and the

measureless aspects of Meed.² Measurable Meed is not a reward at all, but a just payment for service, or "mercede," (C IV 292-293). The measureless Meed is of two kinds, one which is bribery and represents a "reward wholly disproportionate to the merits of the recipient,"³ and God's reward to the virtuous:

'There aren two manere of medes my lorde, with ~~your~~ leve.
That one, god of his grace graunteth in his blisse
To tho that wel worchen while thei ben here.'

(B III 230-232)

But the other aspect of measureless meed is "To meyntene mysdoers" (B III 246), and it is this aspect with which Lady Meed has been concerned. Conscience on the other hand, has cleverly fused the world of obligation and corruption with the idea of an abundant fountain of mercy which is God's reward to those who do well.

Conscience then moves from a concern with covetousness to a warning about priests who go hawking and hunting. The B-text is more colourful here and suggests that priests should rather hunt with placebo and dirige, while the C version omits the hunting reference:

² John Lawlor, Piers Plowman: An Essay in Criticism, London, 1962, p.30.

³ Lawlor, loc.cit., p.29.

Prestes and persones with placebo to hunte,
 And dyngen upon David eche a day til eve.
 Huntynge or haukynges if any of hem vse,
 His boste of hys benefys worth bynome hym after.

(B III 309-312)

This is one of the few occasions when Langland makes a positive comment on how priests should behave, rather than simply attacking their abuses. But even here the hunting metaphor juxtaposed with the warning against literal hunting is suggestive of the way some priests behave.

In the next passus, (C V), Reason is called to advise the King about dealing with Meed. Reason insists, against some opposition, (C V 105-107), that no mercy be shown to Meed:

Til klerken couertise be cloth for the poure, (C V 114),
 and,

Tyl that lerede men lyue as thei lere and techen... (C V
 118)

The terms "klerken" and "lerede men" are general terms here and imply any religious folk. The A and B texts actually use the terms "prestes" and "prechours" respectively, but the C-version is more general and no less critical.

The passus which deal with the Seven Deadly Sins, (B V and C VII) are the most interesting for our investigation of parsons and parish priests. In the section dealing with Wrath, the disputes between mendicant friars and parish priests over

the hearing of confessions is brought to the surface. From our point of view the B-text is the more interesting here because not only does it deal specifically with parsons, but the dispute is introduced with a horticultural image. Wrath is introduced as having once been a friar and in that capacity had the job of gardener in his convent. He grafted shoots, but the grafting consisted of attaching lies to "limitours," which shoots or lies grew to bear leaves of low speech "lordes to plese," (B V 139). Soon his shoots blossomed everywhere, but especially "in boure to here shriftes," (B V 140). Now, it seems that the fruit of this labour is that parishioners prefer to confess to the friars rather than to their parish priest (B V 141-142), and so a conflict develops (Wrath) between the friars and the priests:

And now persones ham parceyued that freres parte with hem,
 Thisè possessioners preche and depraue freres.....

(B V 143-144)

The C-text differs in emphasising the friars' insistence on the imperfect knowledge of the parish priests and hence on the greater efficacy of confession to friars. So the debate continues until Wrath waxes great to "walke with hem bothe," (C VIII 124).

One other figure in the Seven Deadly Sins which concerns parsons is that of Sloth. In his passage on Sloth (B V 392-428), Langland seems to have adopted a technique similar to that used

in condemning the learning of friars in B XIII, C XVI. Just as many general comments on the abuses of friars precede the portrayal of a particular "doctor," so too the personification of Sloth as a priest has not materialised until the general ignorance and covetousness of priests has been shown to the reader; until, as it were, the groundwork has been laid for particularising the attack on priests. This technique seems to suggest a form of logic that argues from universals to particulars, from an assertion to an example. And so Sloth, "al bislabeled with two slymy eigen," (B V 392) drags himself onto the parade of Deadly Sins, and we soon learn that he had been a priest "passynge thretti winter," (B V 422) but, because of his sloth, he is unable to sing, or read saints' lives or recite from the psalms. His sloth is directed away from spiritual things that require a disciplined effort, for he is quite up to chasing hares in the field or making a reckoning with the reeve. And here again are the references to hunting and the farming life, and with them the echoes of conscience's reprimand on hunting (B III 309-312) and a foreshadowing of the ploughing metaphors of C XI 199 and B XV 122. This slothful priest knows his country lore, but is too lazy to learn canon law. Langland is attacking the ill-equipped and ignorant priests who are not fit to guard or lead their flocks. How different from Chaucer's parson whose energies are bent upon walking out in all weathers to visit

his sick parishioners rather than pursuing game over the plough or swapping idle stories "atte nale," (C VIII 19).

A significant passage which includes a priest is the Pardon Scene in B VII and C X, for we have a representation of an English priest beside one described as "the ideal, actualized in Christ" who is Piers himself:⁴ That is, Piers represents the popes, bishops and parish priests in the secular tradition who have succeeded to the apostolic tradition of the patriarchs, prophets, disciples and Christ. In the pardon scene the priest fails to realise that Piers represents more than a literal ploughman because he lacks the faith to perceive grace.⁵ Thus his reaction on seeing the pardon, the last part of the Athanasian creed, was "ich can no pardon fynde," (C X 288). It has been suggested that the wicked priest is the cause of Piers' anger and his subsequent destruction of the physical pardon.⁶ The text ne solliciti sitis (Luke 12, vs.22) is appropriate because the priest's failure is the result of too much concern with the world, (B VII 125-126). It is further appropriate in that all the bad priests examined have been concerned with the world at the expense of their spiritual charges.

⁴ D. W. Robertson Jr. and Bernard F. Huppé, Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition, Princeton, 1951, p.7.

⁵ Robertson and Huppé, Piers Plowman, p.93.

⁶ loc.cit., p.95.

But more fundamental to Langland's criticism of priests is that the priest in this scene, a representative of the type or group of parsons, has failed to recognise grace or the true significance of Piers' and Truth's pardon; that is, the apostolic dignity of Piers and the grace of Redemption.⁷ So Piers is pushed to the point of exclaiming:

'Lewed lorel!..... litel lokestow on the bible,
On Salomones sawes selden thow biholdest
Eice derisores et iurgia cum eis, ne crescant etc.'

(B VII 136-137)

It is the priest who is of little faith for he has "seen the visible symbol of the law but has not seen through the eyes of faith the invisible substance of the law,"⁸ that is, grace and salvation through the redemption, by Christ, of mankind.

Thus Langland's attack passes from the purely physical ignorance and bad example set by priests and their covetousness, to something much more fundamental as a failure, the doctrinal and religious blindness which makes priests imperfect pastors of Christ's flock.

Let us conclude now with an examination of some of the images that Langland uses in discussing evil priests, rather than a continuing systematic covering of all the references to priests which would demand excessive space. The metaphor about ploughing referred to earlier is found at C XI 199 and deals with the true functions of priests:

⁸.loc.cit., p.95.

Prelates and preestes and princes of holy churchē
 Sholde doute no deth nother dere yeres,
 To wenden as wyde as the worlde were,
 To tulien the erthe with tonge and teche men to louye.

(C XI 196-199)

The implication here is that the priests cultivate love among their followers by true teaching. This image does not occur in either the A or B-texts, yet it is surely appropriate to suggest that the title of the poem and the moral function of its chief character are very much in keeping with the metaphor used here to invoke priests to do their proper duty. Another ploughing image is found at B XV 122 but not in C, where Langland reminds us of the injunctions which forbid priests to wear swords and attacks priests who will not say masses for the dead with good will unless they receive silver for it:

Ac a portous that shulde be his plow placebo to segge,
 Hadde he neure seruyse to saue syluer ther-to seith
 it with yvel wille!

(B XV 122-123)

In this passus the priests are dealt with at some length and with images of gardening and farming. Langland felt just as holiness and honesty spread from the church through the right-living of its representatives teaching God's law, so too:

Ri^{to}ht out of holicherche alle yueles spredeth,
 There linparfyt presthod is prehoures and techeres ,

(B XV 92-93)

and he illustrates this with reference to a tree. If some of
 its boughs bear no leaves in summer there is something amiss:

Ri^{to}ht so persones and prestes and prehoures of holy
 cherche,

That aren rote of the ri^{to}ht faith to reule the peple;
 Ac there the rote is roten reson wote the sothe,
 Shal neure floure ne frute ne faire leef be grene.

(B XV 97-100)

Almost exactly the same sentence is echoed by Chaucer in his
 description of the Parson:

For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste,
 No wonder is a lewed man to ruste.

(I (A) 501-502)

And so Langland advises priests to abandon the pursuit of
 learning and the desire for fine clothes and not to receive
 tithes "of vntrewe thinge ytilied or chaffared" but to set
 an example to the followers in the parish - for he says ^{that} to
 preach, but not to practise what one preaches, is hypocrisy:

For ypocrysie in Latyn is lykned to a dongehul,
 That were bysnwed with snowe and snakes wyth-inne.

(B XV 109-10)

The importance of an example to his followers is stressed
 frequently in the poem, as it is in Chaucer's description of

the Parson. Earlier Langland had said, in reference to priests, that if they were ignorant they could not lead the other ignorant men:

Si cecus ducit cecum, ambo in foveam cadent, (C XV 125)
and now, attributing a quotation to St. John Crisostom⁹ he says:

Si sacerdocium in tegrum fuerit, tota floret ecclesia;
autem corruptum fuerit, omnium fides marcida est.

(C XVII 271)

Most of the images examined seem to have stressed two things; the importance of the pastoral function of priests, and the relevance of priests to a rural society as the exemplars of the good shepherds and ploughmen. However, there is one other image which I think is worth noting before concluding with one more reference to Sloth, and this is the image of keys found at B XII 107-129, for it stresses the duty of priests as guides to Christ's treasure and the sacred office of a priest as a successor to the apostolic tradition and the guide to salvation. The concept of access to grace through the clergy is implicit in this image, for the clergy keep the keys to Christendom, which is Christ's treasure, and they are the successors on earth to St. Peter in Heaven who keeps the keys to the gates of paradise. The ignorant man may not gain access without guidance:

⁹ Skeat (1886), Vol. II, p. 217, note to C XVII 271.

Hadde nevere lewed man leve to leggen honde on that
chest,

But if he were a preste or prestes sone patriarke or
prophete.

(B XII 116-117)

But if there is a failure in the guide, if there is a failure of duty by those entrusted with the sacred office of pastor, then Langland feels that evil will spread rapidly among mankind.

This leads us to one final comment on priests at the end of the poem, and which represents one of the ubiquitous hints of earlier directions that Langland so often adopts. In B XX, C XXIII, as the Dreamer approaches Unity, he sees a siege in progress with Conscience pressed hard by the armies of Anti-Christ. In a passage dealing with Sloth we find:

Sleuth with his slyngge an hard saut he made,
Proude prestes come with hym moo than a thousand,
In paltokes and pyked shoes and pisseres longe knyues,
Come agein Conscience; with Coweityse thei helden.

(B XX 216-19)

Thus in four lines we have an echo of the passus on the Seven Deadly Sins and priests identified with three deadly sins, Pride, Sloth and Avarice. There is too, an echo of the injunctions about clergy wearing weapons (B XV 121). As we saw in his treatment of friars, Langland has saved his most biting comments until the end. The generalised priests are

now made specific in what follows immediately as an attack on Irish clergy:

'By Marie,' quod a mansed preste of the marche of Yrlonde,
 'I counte namore Conscience bi so I cacche syluer,
 Than I do to drynke a draughte of good ale!'
 And so seide sexty of the same countreie.

(B XX 220-223)

But it is not just the Irish clergy who are the cause of all the trouble in the Church and in society:

Conscience cryed, 'helpe Clergye, or ellis I falle
 Thorw inparfit prestes and prelates of holicherche.'

(B XX 227-228)

Again Langland summarises the abuses, that a particular group practices, at the end of the poem. The only remaining reference to priests in the final passus concerns their struggle with friars over confessions (C XXIII 273-286). In other words there were good priests as well as bad ones, but it is a sense of shame which makes the parishioners confess to friars rather than to their parsons.

We have seen how, in Langland's view, the priests play their part in the moral erosion of society by the bad example they set, by their ignorance and by the cupidity that blinds them to their real duty. Surely it is no accident that Grace makes the priesthood "haiwarde," (C XXII 334), while he and Piers set out to "tulye treuthe," for Grace has given the

priests "witte" to win their livelihood "by labour of
tounge," (C XXII 232). So it is the priests who should be
the guardians of the flock, and the tillers of the earth,
as is the humble ploughman who is Piers in Langland's poem
and the parson's brother in The Canterbury Tales.

III. COMPARISONS

A. Characterisation

We have been concerned so far with the treatment which Chaucer gives to his separate religious figures and with the treatment that Langland accords to groups of religious figures. This may serve as our first point of comparison between the works of these two authors. In The Canterbury Tales we are often made aware of a narrative framework in which various characters operate. The portraits of the General Prologue are filled out, often in psychological depth, by the tales related by the characters of the Prologue. But we are constantly called back to the literary device which unites these characters, the pilgrimage. Beyond this, Chaucer's characters are handled with a skill that blends individuals with types. This is achieved by illustrative details of dress, speech or behaviour which make persons out of his characters, and by references to a religious life that in many cases has been more or less neglected. Quiet asides, such as the Wife of Bath's remark about friars (III (D) 878-881) or the Prioress' remark about monks (VII 642-643), remind us both of the dramatic entity which this pilgrimage creates, and of religious ideals which are only gently insisted upon. Thus characterisation, and interaction between the characters, such as the quarrel between the Friar and the Summoner, are

elements of Chaucer's work that are largely absent from Piers Plowman. Langland rarely portrays an ecclesiastical figure in humanly observable terms. Two exceptions to this are the scene in C XVI in which a gluttonous friar holds forth on virtue, and the passage on sloth which describes a priest (C VIII 1-34). By contrast most of Langland's figures occur as types of ecclesiasts whose behaviour is typical of the abuses which the poet attacks. For example, the word "faitour" is frequently associated with friars until the reader almost anticipates the line which the poet will adopt the next time a friar appears in a scene. Chaucer, on the other hand, portrays a flattering, lying friar, in the Summoners' Tale, as he goes about the actual process of soliciting funds from a poor, grieving couple. Chaucer's friar in the Summoner's Tale resorts to the use of French. He greets Thomas' wife in a manner that has courtly overtones, a process which not only parodies the courtly code of behaviour, but also juxtaposes two kinds of servitude, one, to God, who is neglected, and one to women in courtly terms:

"Dame," quod he, "right weel,
 As he that is youre servant every deel,
 Thanked be God, that yowre yaf soule and lyf!
 Yet saugh I not this day so fair a wyf.

In al the chirche, God so save me!" (III(D) 1805-1809)

This is a type of sophistication which is rare in Piers

Plowman. However this is not to ~~suggest~~ that Langland was incapable of writing authentic colloquial speech, nor that he had no recourse to French. The use of French in Piers Plowman is equally ironic and incongruous:

Of alkin libbying laboreres lopen forth somme,
 As dykers and delueres that doth here dedesfille,
 And dryuen forth the longe day with 'Dieu vous
 saue, Dame Emme!' (B Prol.222-224).

Similarly, landless labourers will not deign to dine on yesterday's food, but must have everything fresh, "And that chaud and pluschaud for chillyng of here mawe" (C IX 335).

However, a fundamental difference between Chaucer's figures and those of Langland lies in the type and extent of characterisation - Chaucer's Monk is characterised in terms of metaphors of food and hunting. His Summoner is characterised by physical details about his face and the coarse foods he consumes. Symbols of lechery are abundant in the description of the Pardoner while a tone and manner of all that is "semely" characterise the Prioress. Langland's method is more direct and often dependent upon overt statements and the association of a word with a figure:

'Ther is a surgen in the sege that softe can handle,
 And more of fisik by fer and fairer he plastræth;
 On frere Flaterere is fisician and surgien.'

(C XXIII 313-315).

Elsewhere Langland characterises the friars by language suggestive of flattery. But it is the language itself, the choice of particularly alliterative and suggestive patterns, that operates to portray flattery as much as the action described:

Thanne com ther a confessor coped as a frere
 To Mede that mayde myldelich he sayde,
 'Thauh lered men and lewede had layen by the bothe,
 And falshede yfounded the al this fourty wynter,
 Ich shal a-soily the my-selue for a seem of whete,
 And ȝut be thy bedman and brynge a-down conscience
 A-mong kynges and knyȝtes and clerkus, if the lyke.'

(C IV 38-44)

The characterisation is thus linguistic and explicit rather than implicit or dramatic. A more subtle author might have omitted to mention that friars entered Unity by "Hende-Speche" (C XXIII 354), and have been content with the friar's absolution of Conscience which illustrates flattery in action (C XXIII 363-367). However, as some critics point out, Langland seems concerned with clarity and intelligibility, so that his poetic lapses may be defended on the grounds of his seriousness of purpose.¹ While this may appear to suggest that Chaucer was less concerned with instructing his audience morally, let us hasten to add that the object of this study is not to examine motives but to examine differences of a

¹Elizabeth Salter, Piers Plowman: An Introduction, Oxford, 1962, p.32-33 and p.33 n.1.

literary nature and differences of attitude.

A technique of characterisation that is common both to Chaucer and Langland is that of the association of figures with each other. In the General Prologue of The Canterbury Tales, the Knight, the Squire and the Yeoman form a sub-group of related interests. The Prioress travels with another nun and three priests. The Parson is seen in company with a humble plowman, his brother in the flesh and the spirit. The Summoner travels in company with the Pardoner, his brother in sin. In Piers Plowman the association of figures functions in a more overt symbolic manner. Sometimes we see literal figures coupled together, such as the priests who connive with pardoners to rob the parishioners, and the Bishops and bachelors who forsake their proper charges and go to London to "serve the kynge and hus seluer tellen" (C I 90). At other times a literal figure is connected with an allegorical figure. For example, friars confess Lady Meed and summoners run about her, while the only people who take pity on the fugitive Liar are the pardoners. But though the method of association is common to both works, the manner is different for reasons suggested earlier. That is, Chaucer's figures associate with each other in humanly recognisable terms. They are seen as particular persons performing specific acts. Langland's figures function as generalised, impersonal allegorical figures in such a way that the reader

clearly understands the implication of the statement being made. Though the figures are generalised, the acts of abuse remain specific.

One critic, writing of the confession scene in Piers Plowman (B V, C VI-VII), and the treatment of the deadly sins, suggests that Langland combines the abstract and the concrete by directing his satire at all social levels. Thus, as the confession proceeds, some of the figures become "different characters from different social classes,"² a process which satisfies both the artist and the moralist. Wrath, who was "Sum tyme a frere" (B V 136) working in the garden, later becomes a cook in a convent and then becomes a monk, "A-mong monkes I my^gte be" (B V 169). Similarly, Sloth, who has been an idle fellow passing his days "atte ale" (B V 410), goes on to say that he had been a priest "passynge thretti wynter" (B V 422). Thus Langland's satire suggests that all mankind can be included in his attack on sin by a combination of the abstract and the specific.³ In Chaucer this process has its parallel in the blend of the typical with the individual in each separate character. The ideal and the real are juxtaposed in many of the ecclesiastical characters who form part

²Morton W. Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins, Michigan State College Press, 1952, p.197.

³Bloomfield, loc.cit., p.198.

of the progress to Canterbury, a group which in itself is a large cross-section of society.

B. Irony

The application and extent of the use of irony by Chaucer and Langland is markedly different. In drawing his characters Chaucer demonstrates a far more deliberate and conscious use of several kinds of irony than Langland. For example, there is irony in a situation which finds both the Friar and the Summoner posing as moralists when each is as guilty of lechery and covetousness as the other. There are ironical and ambiguous statements about the Friar's value, "Unto his ordre he was a noble post," (I(A) 214) and the Pardoner's sense of the religious, "He was in chirche a noble ecclesiaste," (I(A) 708). There is a form of irony in syntactical ambiguity (amphibolia) that was noted earlier, though a play on a word seems to have been involved in our example, as well as the irony which suggests that the Friar knows the publicans better than the beggars do (I (A) 240-242).

Dramatic irony is a frequently recurring element in Chaucer's work. The Summoner whose curse brings down the unwary in the General Prologue, is himself trapped by the curse of a sincere widow. The friar of the Summoner's Tale cautions the peasant Thomas on the evils of Wrath, and then is so wrathful that he can barely contain himself. In the Shipman's Tale a merchant offers a monk the free use of all

his goods, not realising the extent to which the monk will have the freedom of the merchant's wife as well as of his money. Perhaps the most pathetic examples of dramatic irony occur in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. A duped priest invokes God's blessing upon Satan, or a canon whom we take as a model for the Devil, and then asks what the formula for producing gold will cost him. The reader is made to feel that he knows that the cost will be everlasting torment, for he has sold to Satan not only his peace of mind in this life, but also his soul and any chance of heavenly bliss that he may have had before. In doing this he invokes God, St. Mary and all the saints to bless the canon, and says he will have their curse if he fails to gain the secret formula.

Harry Bailly is ironically the victim of his jocular attempt to elicit a bawdy story from the dignified Monk, because his method of persuading the Monk to tell a merry story is the very method which will arouse the Monk's sense of propriety. There are gentle ironies and ambiguities in the portrait of the Prioress, for there is the juxtaposition in herself and the office she represents, of the lady, of Romance and the bride of Christ. Her motto ~~suns~~ sums up the ambiguous love that her life represents. But the irony is bound up not only with the motto, but by the physical aspect of a gold ornament as well. In examining the Prioress' conscience we

are aware of the ironical anomaly between the sentimentalised feelings she has for suffering mice and dogs and her apparent lack of sympathy for suffering humanity. Perhaps there is further irony in that she is not sentimental in telling her Tale. Her triumph is perhaps that of a genuine religious feeling which shines through her Tale despite herself.

Irony is not Langland's chief weapon of satire, but on occasion his ironical method is linguistic and direct. For example, the friar's farewell to the Dreamer, "'I bikenne the Cryst" (B VIII 59) is an unconsciously ironic statement of the way to Truth. On the other hand, a gluttonous friar-doctor is portrayed in the act of drinking wine and eating the best food while elaborating on Do-wel, (CXVI 112); the technique is somewhat similar to Chaucer's, yet still more direct and obvious. There is a grim irony of understatement in the final passus when a friar, asking to be admitted to Unity, declares, "'Conscience knoweth me wel and what ich can don'" (CXXIII 337), for Langland has been at pains throughout his poem to show how the friars' confessional practices undermine conscience and by-pass contrition. The pardoner's oath on St. Paul (B V 648) is an ironical echo of the pardoner of "Paulynes doctrine," (B II 108), who was first after Wrong to witness Meed's marriage charter, and is now eager to be first on the pilgrimage to Truth for covetous reasons. The pardoners' moral blindness to Mercy and Truth,

and their consequent despair of salvation, are their reward for blinding the eyes of their congregations with seals and bulls and promises of salvation (B Prol.74). They are as blind to their own damnation as the duped priest in Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman's Tale. Thus, generally in Piers Plowman irony does not serve a specifically dramatic function as it appears to in The Canterbury Tales. On the occasions that he uses irony, Langland's method is one which makes irony the product of statements and echoes which, consciously or unconsciously, emerge, often great distances apart, when a figure reappears. But the reappearance of a satirised figure is handled in a quite different manner from Chaucer's treatment. In Piers Plowman the re-emerging figures are never recognisably the same figures who are condemned in earlier references. This is because Langland makes no attempt to portray particular individuals in his satire. His attack is on types, on the abuses rather than the abusers. The diminished use of irony is the result of the nature of his poem which is not dramatic in the sense that the Canterbury Tales are. The unity of Piers Plowman is not the product of a narrative or dramatic sequence. His themes are of greater importance and his narrative is made to serve his themes.⁴ Consequently his characters are diminished in human terms and irony is an element of less importance to figures who more often symbolise an abuse in an abstract manner.

⁴Salter, loc.cit., p.46-7; 55.

C. Metaphorical Language and Imagery

The chief difference between each poet's use of metaphorical figures is one of kind rather than degree. Chaucer's images range from the homely references to food and hunting in the portrait of the Monk, to the academic and astrological symbols associated with penance in the Parson's Tale and lechery in the Pardoner's portrait. Langland's strength is in simple but forceful analogies, stated in terms universally recognisable, which unite "doctrine and daily experience."⁵ An examination of specific images used by each author will illustrate this difference.

The Monk's portrait in the General Prologue is richly endowed both with images of food and of hunting. No doubt some of the expressions the Monk uses to show his contempt for Biblical texts condemning hunters were conventional, but they add point, for they are expressions and images of food:

He yaf^{nat} of that text a pulled hen,

That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men(I A 177-178).

In the Friar's Tale a summoner in his quest for gold becomes the victim of Satan, hunter of souls. A similar fate befalls the blind priest in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale which combines the metaphor of his spiritual and symbolic blindness with his entrapment by Satan. There are images from mediaeval

⁵ John Lawlor, Piers Plowman....., p.261-262.

bestiaries which symbolise the Pardoner's lechery, such as a goat, a hare and a gelding, while his Tale draws upon several ancient analogues for the metaphorical figure of Death and the symbolic death caused by riches that forms the theme of his Tale.⁶ A quest for gold was similarly the undoing of a priest in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale as we have seen.

The metaphor of the pilgrimage is seen at work on three levels in the Canterbury Tales. The pilgrims are depicted on an imagined journey to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket, "the hooly blisful martir," (I (A) 17), to give their thanks in an atmosphere of the regenerating year. Besides serving as a convenient literary device, the pilgrimage also represents a journey through life, and Chaucer's variety of characters represent a reasonable cross-section of society. On an anagogical level the pilgrimage represents the journey of the soul of man seeking God. In one sense Chaucer's ecclesiastical figures demonstrate the working of human will in their choice of good or evil, but one does not feel that the metaphor of life's journey is the object or dominant theme of the Canterbury Tales. We have seen how the Parson, both in his own Prologue and his Tale, referred to "thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage," (X (1) 50 and X (1) 80), reminding his listeners of the spiritual journey that all mankind undertakes. Such an interpretation is appropriate to the character of the Parson and the impression we have of him in the General

⁶W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, ed., Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1941, p.415-438.

Prologue. But it is difficult to assess the extent to which Chaucer is always conscious of the multiple levels on which the pilgrimage metaphor operates. One feels that his view is that of the sinner on the inside looking outwards, that he is more prepared to engage our sympathies for his genuinely human characters than to arouse our hostility for ecclesiastical abuse. The metaphor seems to serve the drama as a kind of backcloth of ultimate reality but does not dictate its progress.

The search for Truth and the pilgrimage of life are more fundamental to Piers Plowman. The Dreamer, or Will, is undeniably in search of the right way to Truth and he has as his guide the figure of Piers, a figure who operates at different times on each level of allegory. The single pardoner who is named in the poem is also called Piers. Surely he serves as a foil to the humble ploughman who eventually resembles Christ? The ploughman offers his services as a guide on the pilgrimage to St. Truth, and warns of the dangers on the way. (C VIII 182-282). But the way to Truth and the dangers he mentions are all expressed in consciously allegorical and religious terms. The expression is that of the orthodox church and is imposed upon the narrative. At the end of the poem Conscience says he will become a pilgrim,

"To seke Peers the Plouhman that Pruyde myghte destruye"
(C XXIII 382). But by now the ploughman has moved from being the humble guide to the very way to salvation, that is Christ.

We have seen that the pastoral metaphor was well developed in the portrait of Chaucer's Parson. Two notable examples of the pastoral metaphor are found in Piers Plowman. In condemning the need which makes vagabonds become hermits, the poet describes real need which makes man humble, for need is "louh as a lomb," (C XXIII 36). Bishops are attacked for their failure as shepherds in Latin terms very similar to the image used by Chaucer's Parson:

Sub molli pastore lupus lanam cacat, et grex

In custoditus dilaceratur eo. (C X 264)

The bishops allow summoners to rob the people and corrupt the shepherds with threats of proceedings and writs of excommunication.

Just as the metaphor of hunting is developed in various places throughout Chaucer's work, so is it too in Piers Plowman. Priests are exhorted to hunt with placebo. If they engage in hunting literally they will lose their benefices. (B III 309-312). The priest who is depicted as Sloth engages in hunting for the hare, (C VIII 32). His failure as a priest is made worse by his lack of learning:

Ac ich can fynde in a felde and in a forlang an hare,
And holden a knyghtes court and a-counte with the negue;
Ac ich can nouht constrye Catoun ne clergialliche reden.

(C VIII 32-34)

His life as a landed squire is in direct contrast with that of

Chaucer's Parson and with the energy and humility incumbent upon God's shepherds.

In conclusion, one may say that Langland's use of metaphor is both scriptural and more consciously didactic than Chaucer's. Chaucer ranges ~~widmore~~ ^swidely in his use of metaphor, yet his treatment does not appear to suggest the attitude of urgency or seriousness that colours such scenes as the conventional onslaught on Unity that we find at the end of Piers Plowman, or even the homely but effective ploughing of the half-acre, with its blend of the personification of Hunger and a display of rural types (C IX).

D. Word Play

A danger that lies in the search for multiple levels of meaning in a single word is that one may impose upon the text meanings which may have been far from the poet's mind. A second danger is that one may allow one's ingenuity to supply meanings which take one away from the character of the poem into a world furnished with cryptic meanings which satisfy no-one and distort the poem. However there are occasions on which the use of a particular word is a deliberate pun or an example of verbal repetition to create a certain effect.

In the Summoner's Tale the word "grope."¹ appears three times, and twice in the Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale.

¹ OED, Grope, V., 2a and 2c, 3b.

In the Summoner's Tale the word first has the figurative meaning of searching out a man's conscience in confession:

Thise curatz been ful necligent and slowe .

To grope tendrely a conscience... (III (D) 1816-1817)

On the second occasion the word means a literal search for something hidden:

"Now thanne, putⁱⁿ thyn hand down^{by} my bak, "

Seyde this man, 'and grope wel bihynde.....'

(III (D) 2140-2141)

Finally, the third time the word occurs it is used in an indecent sense as Thomas is about to deliver his gift to the friar:

And whan this sike man felte this frere

About his ~~t~~wel grope there and heere... (III (D)
2147-2148)

The effect of the combination of a play upon two meanings of the word "grope" and its repeated use, is to increase the effect of the joke played upon the hypocritical, flattering friar. Less effective and more obvious is the repetition of a sound, or the use of homophones or near homophones for punning effect. An example of this is found in the Summoner's Tale;

Fro Paradys first, if I shal nat lye,

Was man out chaced for his glotonye;

And chaast was man in Paradys, certeyn.

(III (D) 1915-1917).

There is irony in this admonition of gluttony since the friar has only recently "ordered" his lunch. Earlier the friar had claimed that only the friars were pure:

Who folweth Cristes gospel and his foore,
But we that humble been, and chast, and poore.....

(III (D) 1935-1936).

Later, the friar is "chaced," (l.2157) out of Thomas' house and he storms off in anger after his sermon against Ire.

There is one notable Latin example of word-play in Chaucer, also in the Summoner's Tale. The friar accuses possessioners of greed and gluttony and makes a joke on their prayers after eating:

When they for soules seye the psalm of Davit;
Lo, "buf!" they seye, "cor meum eructavit."

(III (D) 1933-1934)

13. The hypocrite is oblivious to the fact that he has just commanded a delicate meal and is as bad a glutton as any he condemns. But further, the play on the word eructavit suggests the gift delivered to the friar by the peasant, Thomas.

Langland also makes use of a Latin pun against friars:

Ac me wondreth in my witt whi that thei ne preche,
As Paul the apostel prechede to the people ofte,
Periculum in falsis fratribus!

(C XVI 74-75)

A similar pun is made against the friars at B XI 87 where

Langland quotes from Leviticus XIX 17.² Non oderyis fratres secrete in corde tuo..... In both cases the humour is bitter and heavy, unlike the jokes against friars in Chaucer's work which are less didactic.

In Chaucer's portrait of the Clerk of Oxford there is a play upon the word "philosophre":

But al be that he was a philosophre,

Yet hadde he but litel gold in cofre, (I (A) 297-298)

which mocks the alchemical philosophers who are portrayed later in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale:

And every man that oght hath in his cofre,

Lat hym appere, and wexe a philosophre. (VIII (G) 836-837)

The canon in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale promises to repay the priest's kindness in lending him a mark by showing how he "can werken in philosophie," (VIII(G)1058). The pun still exists, but the nature of this canon's "philosophy" is now quite clear to all but the priest.

In the portrait of Chaucer's Parson we have seen how the word "ensample" was used three times and in both its literal and metaphorical senses. The priest's life and work is an example to his flock, and he draws upon a series of exempla to preach. On the other hand, when the word occurs again in the Pardoner's Prologue, we are aware of the difference in

² Skeat (1886) Vol.II, p.167-168.

motives between the use of exempla by the Parson and by the Pardoner. For the Pardoner has already made known his "entente," (VI(C) 423), so that when he says "Thanne telle I ham ensamples many oon," (VI(C) 435), we are aware of a fusion of good and evil in his activities; the good is the pious response elicited by his stories, the bad is his motive for eliciting this response which creates a generous impulse in his listeners. The Pardoner's echoed oath upon St. Ronyan (VI (C) 320), is a form of verbal repetition which is perhaps a deliberate mimicry of the Host and may be part of the reason for Harry Bailly's anger at the Pardoner who has made fun of him and fooled him. But the repeated oath is ironic too, for it is an unwitting joke against the Pardoner's own emasculate state even though it is ambiguous.³ There are numerous other occasions in Chaucer's treatment of ecclesiastical figures where a pun is made upon a single word, such as "fair" applied to the Monk or the word "conscience" applied to the Prioress. Similarly, there are often occasions when the repetition of a word for effect (traductio) is employed. An example of this is the word "semely" that we saw used three times to describe the Prioress. Another example as we have just seen, is the use of "ensample" three times in the Parson's portrait.

The problems that face an investigation of word play in Piers Plowman are attested to by the length of Bernard Huppé's

³•R. P. Miller, "Chaucer's Pardoner.....," loc.cit. p.236.

well known essay on the subject.⁴ An exhaustive enquiry on this topic is certainly neither possible nor really desirable. We must be concerned instead to examine a few examples relevant to Langland's treatment of ecclesiastical figures while avoiding the pitfalls previously alluded to.

Whether or not we agree that word play "is used to give coherence to the whole poem,"⁵ that is, that it has a distinct structural function in giving unity to Piers Plowman, there are many examples in which a repeating pattern of words or ideas serves to bind together a verse paragraph or a section of the poem. For example, in CI, the idea of preaching is extended to draw a comparison between St. Paul's preaching and that of the friars and a pardoner. Amid the confusion of the Field Full of Folk, the preaching:

That Paul prechith of hem proven hit ich myghte,

Qui turpiloquium loquitur ys Luciferes knave. (CI 39-40)

becomes the jangling preaching of friars "Prechyng the peple for profit of the wombe," (C.I. 57) and a pardoner impersonating a priest (CI 66), all with a single motive, the search for wealth.

A pun is sometimes used to extend a metaphor in the poem. The agricultural metaphor which describes Piers as a

⁴ Bernard F. Huppé, "Petrus id est Christus: Word Play in Piers Plowman, the B-Text," ELH, Vol.17(1950), p.163-190.

⁵ Loc.cit., p.199.

"procuratour" a "reve" a "prower" and a "plouhman," (CXXII 258-260) is extended by a play upon words associated with ploughing:

'My prow~~er~~ and my plouhman Peers shal beo on erthe;
And for to tulye tre~~ut~~the a te~~o~~me shal he have.'

(C XXII 260-261)

Piers "te~~o~~me" will consist of the four gospels, the four great oxen who with four other "stottes" will plough and harrow the field of Holy Scripture to teach faith, (C XXII 262-272). Thus the team⁶ becomes the theme⁶ of Christ's work through the Bible. A similar extension of an idea was seen at work in the scene in which Wrath was a gardener, (B V 136-142), grafting lies upon friars to cause trouble with parsons. This serves to heighten the contrast with the Tree of Charity in B XVI on which the leaves are "Lele-Wordes" (B XVI 6) and the fruit is Charity. The play on William Jordan's name has already been noted as an element in the attack on friars, but a part of the line "Ich shal Iangly to thys Iordan with hus Iuste wombe" (C XVI 92) involves a complicated play upon the idea of Christ jousting against Satan to fulfil justice:⁷

⁶•OED, Team, 5b, 3, and Theme, 5b, 1a, 2.

⁷•John Lawlor, Piers Plowman....., p.272-273.

Tyl plenitudo temporis tyme ycome were,
 That Elde felde efte that frut other fulle to be rype,
 That Iesus shulde Iuste ther-fore in Iugement of Armes,
 Who sholde fecche this frut the feend other Iesus self.

(C XIX 127-130).

The word "Just" applied to the friar describes his swollen belly as a flagon distended or blown out. The antithesis of this excessive measure is the fullness of time in which justice will be done by the Incarnation of Christ after the Crucifixion.

There are numerous single examples in Piers Plowman of word-play involving simple words such as "cardinal", (CI 132-134) "words," (B V 162), and "fratribus," (C XVI 75), all of which help Langland emphasise his themes while reflecting a mind in which "there flourishes a strong argumentative zeal."⁸

E. Conventional Devices

It is perhaps by their use of conventional devices that Chaucer and Langland are most clearly differentiated. The opening lines of the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales are conventional in the picture of spring which heralds a new birth, or a renaissance for the dried-up life of winter. The tone of these opening lines is expansive, comprehensive and joyful. Above all they imply a general feeling of joy among all mankind in England who journey from "every shiresende" (I(A) 15) to give thanks at a national religious shrine.

⁸•John Lawlor, Piers Plowman..... p.271.

Langland's opening is also typical of the dream convention in which a man falls asleep lulled by elements in nature, the birds, the breeze or, in this case, the murmuring of a stream. But Langland's vision takes us immediately from the peaceful world of the Malvern hills into the confused world of man toiling or cheating, lying, flattering and suffering. The air of depressing confusion in a sense sets the tone for the rest of the poem, until, at the end, we see the world of earlier vision clearly divided between the confusion of anti-christ's besieging army, peopled by priests and friars, and the attempt at order within Unity or Holy Church. Langland's opening vision presents a scene already familiar in the tradition of the Miracle Play.¹ Other elements of tradition also found in Piers Plowman are the obvious traditions of the teachings of the church, the four-fold allegorical system found earlier in Europe; a traditional alliterative metre and the figure of a humble ploughman which was familiar in contemporary sermons.² There are also traditional rhetorical devices found in Piers Plowman, such as commutatio³ which involves the reversal of the order of the first half of the line in the second half; "Doctours of decree and of dyuyn maystres," (C XVIII 113) and adnominatio⁴ in which word roots with different inflectional endings are repeated; "And til prehoures prechyng be preued

¹ H. W. Wells, trans., The Vision of Piers Plowman, London, 1938.

² Wells, loc.cit.

³ Elizabeth Salter, Piers Plowman..... p.38.

⁴ loc.cit., p.37.

on hemselven," (B IV 122). The passage in which this line occurs in all three texts is an example of the extensive repetition of the initial word of a line. Clerks, monks, priests and bishops are attacked with accumulative force, a technique suggestive of sermon oratory⁵ (C V108-124).

But it is in their handling of character, as we have seen, that Chaucer and Langland differ. The figures who people Piers Plowman seem cast in a predetermined mould. The parade of allegorical figures, such as the Seven Deadly Sins who are somewhat mechanical repetitions of the abstract vices in the Miracle Plays, is relieved by Langland's descriptive alliteration. Nevertheless, none of these abstractions has the warmth of personality that is a feature of Chaucer's characters. Conscience, Reason and Patience all debate or argue with an air of severe detachment. The reader is always sure of being able to grasp the point of view from which they debate. Ambiguity is not in their make-up.

The Canterbury Tales are written in the tradition of stories framed by an embracing device, that of a journey, though argument is offered to suggest that Chaucer need not have been familiar with European sources for this device.⁶ His handling of portraits is an improvement beyond the inflexible mediaeval tradition "extolling the physical beauty of isolated individuals of the upper classes,"⁷ for his portraits

⁵ loc. cit., p.38-39.

⁶ S A, p.2.

⁷ S A, p.4.

like Langland's, range over a wide cross-section of society but, often unlike Langland's, they are imbued with a flavour of realism which gives them life. It is true that the Parson is cast in the mould of the ideal shepherd and that his Tale

is a conventional treatise on penance and sin,⁸ so that the inclusion of this Tale in the pilgrimage framework is somewhat mechanical and artificial. But if the majority of Chaucer's ecclesiasts are drawn to conventional models, they are drawn in a different manner. The Prioress, though she repeats convention by invoking the Virgin Mary before her Tale, is a distinctly separate personage from the nuns in Piers Plowman who commit sins or are guilty of petty behaviour at a remove from us:

Ich have an aunte to a nonne and to an abbodesse;

Hem were leuere swouny other swelte than suffry eny
peyne.(C VII 128-129)

We are not drawn into sympathy with them while we may be with Chaucer's Prioress.

Both of Chaucer's friars are a dramatic reflection of contemporary abuse. They are seen in action and in close detail. The portraits are formed through colloquial speech which incorporates dramatic tension between the speakers. Langland's friars are drawn only occasionally in a manner which

⁸.Morton Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins, p.191. See also SA, p.724, n.5.

suggests action. Rather the drama and tension are products of Langland's isolated examples of harmonious alliteration:

Thenne com ther a confessour coped as a frere,

To Mede ~~that~~ mayde myldelich he sayde.... (C IV 38-39)

Chaucer's Pardoner has the immediacy of a figure present before us, though his Tale of a typical narratio on avarice.⁹ But Chaucer's particular skill seems to be his ability to combine a traditional homiletic narrative with the treatment of its narrator, for whom Radix malorum est cupiditas. By contrast Langland's pardoners seem to beat the reader over the head with their bulls and indulgences, yet never climb out of their pulpit or remove the masks which hide their humanity and their weaknesses.

⁹Bloomfield, op.cit. p.193.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that Chaucer's method of characterisation concentrates our interest on the person satirised, while Langland's method concentrates on the abuses which he is concerned to reveal. Thus the dramatic tension in the Canterbury Tales is more a product of the tensions created between the characters within the framing narrative than the result of the subject matter of the related Tales. In Piers Plowman the dramatic tension, if we may call it that, is the result of an atmosphere of urgency with which the poem is invested. However, both poets are orthodox in their religious views and do not appear to be paving the way for the Reformation. Chaucer seems to be concerned with showing the way things are and Langland with this and the way things should be in a far more urgent manner.

While the metaphorical images and traditional expressions of each poem often overlap, ~~as with~~ the use of a humble ploughman, Langland's images and expressions are more frequently homely and familiar than Chaucer's. Chaucer ranges further afield for his analogies to contemporary behaviour and his poem has perhaps less depth allegorically. This, too, seems to be the result of a difference in concern over spiritual abuse.

While word-play is incidental to Chaucer, and when used lends comic or ironic overtones to a portrait, for Langland

it has an almost structural importance which suggests that it is a mode of thought behind the creation of Piers Plowman. Thus Langland's poem is more overtly argumentative, possibly even intellectual, despite his plea for the downtrodden and deprived people on the land.

Langland's use of irony in his presentation of ecclesiastical figures is seldom dramatic, though we have seen an ironical situation in the satire of the gluttonous friar-doctor. In the Canterbury Tales, on the other hand, Chaucer's use of irony keeps before the reader the distinctions of the ideal from the real in his ecclesiastical figures, a distinction which contrasts their professed and expected behaviour with their actual behaviour.

Finally let us conclude by saying that the greatness of Langland's art is a function of his concern to involve the reader spiritually rather than dramatically. Piers Plowman is a work which can never be approached casually. It demands our constant awareness of the shifting levels of meaning upon which its figures move. Langland's ecclesiastical figures, while often more remote and less engaging than Chaucer's, are nonetheless the product of timely reflections upon the decaying practices of the old Christian ideals. They are also the product of a serious concern to arouse in the reader an awareness of this decay, both socially and spiritually. While Langland's figures may be more remote, his methods of

portraying abuse are not. They are rather the direct expressions of a deeply disturbed man fighting for the just treatment of the many against the corruption of the few. Throughout this study reference has been made as often as possible to the C-text of Piers Plowman. A comparison of the parallel passages in B, and in the A-version where this applies, does not substantiate the view that the C-text is more moderate in its treatment of authority or ecclesiastical figures. Rather, the reverse is true, for Langland often sacrifices lines of good poetry in the interest of pointing up his attack with force and clarity, or introduces additional passages which are not poetic but do express a message strongly and directly. An example of this is the grammatical digression at C IV 313-408 which deals with the different kinds of Mede and with the rule of kings. He is not at pains to protect the Church or authority, and does not appear to have allowed his age to soften his concern over spiritual prostitution.

Chaucer's treatment of ecclesiastical figures is no less orthodox than Langland's. The satire on ecclesiastics in The Canterbury Tales is, if anything, unconsciously reactionary rather than radical. In modern terms Chaucer's work, and his artistic portrayal of character, create a poem to which we can frequently return. Though the Canterbury Tales draw on a wider range of disciplines than Piers Plowman, this does not

diminish the reader's enjoyment. This is largely the result of an artistic skill which draws heavily upon situations common to the lives of all mankind for a satiric display of the lives of a particular group at a particular time in history. Like that same Church which Chaucer criticised, his figures seem to survive the passing of time. Though such characters as pardoners and summoners are gone from this world, the skill with which they are drawn in the Canterbury Tales makes them live on in our minds as people who could really have existed in the fourteenth century and who Chaucer, though critical of their greed, attempted to understand with a tolerance and insight that are the marks of great art.

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