

**HETERODOXY AND HUMOUR IN THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE:
A STUDY OF THE TALE'S CLERICAL SATIRE**

by

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis, *HETERODOXY AND HUMOUR IN THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE: A STUDY OF THE TALE'S CLERICAL SATIRE*, is to demonstrate the following: first, that Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* ought to be considered in light of the ecclesiastical debates of the late fourteenth century; second, that Chaucer deliberately avoids having the tale suggest an either orthodox or heterodox affiliation; third, that the function of the tale is to satirize the ecclesiastical debates it invokes. With regard to the first of these aims, I will argue that six of the *NPT*'s more substantial deviations from its source text, the *Roman de Renart*, allude to a variety of contentious issues that both orthodox and heterodox figures often addressed in their sermons and/or religious tracts. With regard to the second of these aims, I will examine the strategies employed in the *NPT* that allow the tale to maintain a neutral position in each of the issues it raises. For example, the *NPT* often speaks to points on which heterodox and orthodox writers concurred, thereby preventing its contemporary audience from detecting either a heterodox or orthodox sympathy and allowing the tale to speak without commitment. Finally, concerning the third of these aims, I will contend that Chaucer's purpose in invoking the ecclesiastical issues but offering no allegiance to either the heterodox or orthodox side is to satirize not one group in the debates, but rather the debates themselves. Moreover, the *NPT* generates a light-hearted parody of the debates, rather than a mean-spirited attack, by framing their discussion within the fantastic, non-threatening realm of the *fable* and by avoiding the appearance of partiality and/or dogmatism. The tale therefore succeeds in its declared purpose of entertaining its

audience and it contributes to the *Canterbury Tales*' "peaceful conclusion" described by Charles Muscatine and to the *Tales*' "purpose in comedy" described by Laura Kendrick.

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INTRODUCTION

Having examined the individual attempts of Pamela Gradon, Anne Hudson, and Lynn Staley¹ to locate and define the affiliations between certain late fourteenth century/early fifteenth century texts and Wycliffism, or, more broadly speaking, Lollardy, I am obliged to concede that several obstacles impede any attempt, including my own, to argue for such affiliations. These obstacles, all of which are implicitly or explicitly acknowledged by the aforementioned critics, shall serve as my starting point, or preface, but not for the reason that I wish to quickly be done away with them –quite the opposite. What is most interesting about these “obstacles” is that while they make it impossible for me to arrive at any quick and easy conclusions about the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, just as they made it impossible for Gradon and the others to do the same for their own objects of study, they are also precisely the forces that open, or uncover, the text in question to intriguing new possibilities of meaning, a point to which I shall soon return. Of course, this is by no means surprising, for what is often an impediment to the critic’s reading is conversely yet equally an invaluable device for the author’s writing.

Prior to my elaboration on this last point, though, let me begin with the first (and perhaps most obvious) of these obstacles which make my task so much more arduous. The first obstacle is this: once I have located what appears to be a moment of anti-sacerdotalism in the NPT, I must, before drawing a bold, straight line between the text and Wyclif, concede that anti-sacerdotalism predates Wyclif and, indeed, the whole of the fourteenth century. While it is true that Wyclif was nothing less than the heresiarch of England’s late fourteenth century, at least from the church’s point of view, it is not true that any and all disparaging dispositions towards the church, any anti-clerical

invective, can be thought of as a corollary, that is, a natural and immediate consequence, of Wyclif's views. Owst has made it abundantly clear that anti-clerical sentiment contributed significantly to the thematics of Medieval literature, especially pulpit literature, well before Wycliff took up, or was handed, the torch.² Moreover, people from within the orthodox camp such as John Bromyard, a "pillar of orthodoxy," as Owst describes him, were as determined as any Wycliffite to purge the church of corruption, incompetency, and vice of all kind. Bromyard, "who sat in judgement of the arch-heretic of the day [Owst is here referring to the Blackfriars Council of 1382, established to investigate Wyclif's work] is not afraid to declare openly that 'prelates lead more folk to the devil by the corruption of their foul behaviour and example, than ever to God by preaching or holiness of life'."³ In fact, and this is a particularly important point, commenting on the content of William Swinderby's tracts, Swinderby being one of the more notorious of the Lollard preachers, Owst asks "Was there a single eminent preacher of the day on the side of orthodoxy who was not speaking, even writing for the future instruction of others, in precisely the same strain [as Swinderby]?" (*Preaching in Medieval England* 125). A mark of contempt towards the prelacy, then, carries no necessary signification of Wycliffism.

The second of these obstacles is that it was not until Archbishop Arundel put into law *De Heretico Comburendo* in 1401 and, more importantly, the *Constitutions* of 1407-8⁴ that heresy was clearly defined.⁵ Until that time, it was possible, as Hudson notes, "to write or speak on questions without commitment --questions that later divided the 'orthodox' from the 'heretic'" (Hudson 394). To speak of moments of "heresy" in the

NPT is therefore something of a misnomer, for at the time of the NPT's production,⁶ "heresy" had been assigned no distinguishing character, no verifiable meaning. This is not to say that no accusation of heresy could be made before 1401, since we know that several were,⁷ but rather that a certain flexibility, even uncertainty, attended the term. Moreover, we know that official Church investigations of suspected heresy were sporadic, that divisions among high-ranking members of the clergy often thwarted the enforcement of legislation against the Lollards, and that while much of the machinery to repress Lollardry may have been in place before 1401, the willingness to utilize that machinery was often lacking, or partial.⁸

The third obstacle is that most literary texts, including *Piers Plowman*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the *Parson's Tale*, and others, are exceedingly difficult to locate, at least permanently, upon the orthodox/heterodox axis. These texts, as Gradon, Staley, and Hudson have so clearly shown, are impossible to immure once and for all within the halls of either acquiescence or dissent. Indeed, the tone of these works oscillates, or, as Staley defines it, "negotiates," between heterodoxy and orthodoxy. In *Piers Plowman*, for example, while on the one hand there is a noticeable absence of sympathy for Wyclif's more notorious heresies, such as his views on the eucharist, the existence of purgatory, and the social function of the church, there is, on the other hand, a pronounced hostility towards the friary and an unmistakable advocacy of clerical poverty, the last of which is expressed all too clearly in

Take her landes, ye Lordes, and let hem lyue by dymes.
 If possessioun be poysoun and imparfit hem make,
 Good were to dischargen hem for holicherche sake,
 And purgen hem of poysoun or more perile fale.⁹

Here, the tone is Wycliffite, but even this assertion, innocuous and valid as it may seem, is problematic, for Gradon argues quite convincingly that the congruities one might find between Langland's text and Wyclif's own works are coincidental. As she puts it, "*Piers Plowman* is less concerned with the inculcation of theories, orthodox, heterodox, or heretical, than with a prophetic vision of a corrupt society and its eschatological doom" (Gradon 177). The anti-mendicant satire and calls for church disendowment were drawn not so much from Wyclif as from Langland's own perspective, a claim which, whether right or wrong, draws also from the first "obstacle in reading" I described.

The *Parson's Tale* is no less difficult to locate on the orthodox/heterodox axis. Inimical to Lollard and Wycliffite thinking alike was the notion of taking a pilgrimage,¹⁰ and the Parson, while *on* a pilgrimage, tells a tale that emphasizes the value of confession, which, no less than the notion of pilgrimage, was looked sourly upon by most Wycliffites. On the other hand, the Parson exemplifies several of the qualities Wyclif ascribed to the *praedicator evangelicus*, the ideal clergyman: poor, dedicated to his congregation, living by example, and so on.¹¹ There is, therefore, no strict allegiance to either Wycliffite or orthodox doctrine, no way of ignoring what can only be called textual equivocation (and I do not mean to suggest a certain level of duplicity, a connotation often associated with the term).

Where there is a kind of equivocation in the text, there is equally an inconsistency in and between Wyclif's work¹² and, for instance, Lollard doctrine, which brings me to the fourth obstacle. Once the claim is made that any given passage is indicative of heterodox sympathies, there immediately arises the problem of what, precisely, is entailed or

signified in the term “heterodox.” There is first the question of membership; do we invoke Wyclif himself, or those who aimed to popularize his views (Purvey, Ashton, etc.), or those who supported the Peasants’ Revolt (John Ball), or anyone directly or even vaguely associated with the Lollard movement?¹³ To believe that they are all invoked is to believe that a certain homogeneity, a unanimity, defined the group, which we know to be untrue, if only by the fact that Wyclif, Purvey and other significant figures quickly recoiled from any association with the Revolt (and it has never been entirely clear to what extent Lollards or Lollard sympathizers were involved in the riot).¹⁴ There is second the question of doctrine; by “Lollard,” for example, are we speaking of the sum total of Wyclif’s *oeuvre*, or are we speaking of something like the *Twelve Conclusions* that were nailed to the door of Westminster in 1395 or of the *Twenty-Five Points* drafted in 1388? If it is the *Conclusions* or *Points* to which we refer, then the concession has to be made that the concurrency between these texts and those written by Wyclif is far from perfect. There is, as Gordon Leff explains, “no trace of Wyclif’s theoretical premises” in the Lollard manuscripts, and, as well as containing a far more virulent attack on any kind of pomp, ceremony, and religious imagery than Wyclif ever showed, these Lollard texts “express an essentially moral rather than theological standpoint” (Leff 576), which, again, is uncharacteristic of Wyclif’s writings. Of course, there is also considerable agreement between the *Points*, the *Conclusions*, and Wyclif’s writings. The *Points*, for example, concur with Wyclif in so far as the church hierarchy is condemned, clerical poverty is advocated, and Scripture is regarded as the sovereign, universal source of truth.¹⁵ The *Conclusions* are often in accordance with Wyclif as well, especially in terms

of the emphasis given to the simplicity of clerical living, individual spirituality rather than institutionalized sacramentalism, and lay dominion in the place of ecclesiastical dominion.¹⁶ To say, though, that a perfect equivalence exists between Wyclif's works and the more popular of the Lollard manuscripts is, strictly speaking, untrue. That the former inspired the latter, that the impression of Wyclif is noticeably stamped upon the face of Lollardry, is without question (Purvey, one of Wyclif's greatest admirers, contributed more than any other to the drafting of the *Points* and, in his confession before the church in 1401, fully acknowledged his indebtedness to Wyclif);¹⁷ that the similarities between Wyclif's opinions and those contained in the *Conclusions* and the *Points* are many is also without question; that we are confronted with the problem of establishing what the terms Wycliffite or heterodox entails, though, still remains.

Indeed, there is no way to weave a thread of study through any of the aforementioned obstacles in such a way that the obstacles will never snag, so to speak, claims made about the NPT's connections to the heterodoxy, the tale's possibility of having *a tempore* Wyclif. To despairingly walk away from the entire endeavour, though, simply because we are confronted by problems of definition would be to blind ourselves to an entire dimension of the text, a dimension that, while admittedly difficult to measure in terms of precise degrees of heresy or heterodox commitment, is nonetheless a discernible, even beckoning, facet of the text.

I say "beckoning" for this reason: we have to consider what significance any Chaucerian text might have held to his own audience, the audience of the late fourteenth/early fifteenth century English society. To where might their thoughts have

been taken, beckoned, by the words and ideas offered in the text? Needless to say that Chaucer's audience, diverse as it was, did not move like a flock of birds in flight; that is, we cannot assume a unity and/or harmony of intellectual reaction among them. What we can say, however, is that, as Hudson explained in her own analysis of the *Parson's Tale's* connections to Lollardy,

Chaucer has deliberately chosen to surround his Parson with a suggestion of Wycliffism, a suggestion that no contemporary reader or listener could have missed. That he was utilizing language that could appear entirely outside any context of heterodoxy, or drawing upon satirical and idealistic traditions that long antedate Wyclif, is not an answer to this. To an educated Londoner, for whom Chaucer was writing, such language, such satire and the unabashed admiration for such ideals must have *recalled* Wyclif and his followers
(italics added, 392).

It is this notion of a text "recalling," summoning, suggesting, beckoning towards, that shall serve as the primary premise of my examination of the NPT. The function, then, of my claims as to the significance of any given passage shall not be to determine their exact heretical weight, for the obstacles discussed above render that hope ultimately unachievable, but rather --and the difference is no less subtle than it is important-- the function of my claims shall be to determine whether the passages in question would invoke Wycliffism, would weigh close enough to heterodoxy that Londoners would hear something more, something suggestive, in the words of the NPT than the familiar tale of a prideful cock and a treacherous fox. As well, and just as important, I want to look at where and how the NPT seems in conflict with Wycliffism, or heterodoxy, as I wish to make clear that like the *Parson's Tale* and *Piers Plowman* the NPT fluctuates between orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

Having described the corridor of critical study I intend to follow, I do not wish to leave the impression that I have cunningly sidestepped the obstacles, or conveniently hastened them into the margins as though they can and will contribute only incidentally to my argument. What I have done is to acknowledge the necessary perimeters in which my study, and any of its kind, must operate, but at the same time I hope to have shown that the perimeters are not so small, or reductive, that worthwhile study cannot be generated, that a certain latitude cannot be found. Further, I wish to return to the comment I made concerning the dual function of these obstacles: the fact that they may serve as both a hindrance to the critic and a device for the writer, or text (which of the two --writer or text-- is really served is largely a question of the critic's theoretical perspective). The obstacles I have described amount to problems of definition: i.e., what constitutes heresy, what does Wycliffism entail, where is the dividing line between heterodoxy and orthodoxy. While problems of definition can often make the critic's task something of a trial, a trial wherein the specifics --the constituent terms-- of a claim or statement are bandied back and forth until a plausible --but not necessarily "true"-- verdict of meaning can be reached, those same problems of definition are, if you will allow me to indulge myself in larger matters of poetic theory, undoubtedly one of the contributing factors that make *poesis* possible. More to the point, the meaning of a word, the figurative value of an image, the referent of a pronoun, the tone of a passage, all of these carry an uncertain, ultimately indeterminable, signification in the literary text (allowing critics a space in which to work). Working without permanent, fixed definitions is precisely what allows Chaucer and his contemporaries to write "without commitment," without clear,

unmistakable affiliation to either side of the ecclesiastical debate of his period. The text can therefore be read as lacking firm commitment but offering provocative suggestion. From another perspective, we might say that the text is composed of a collection of potentials, potentials of semantic value, and that these potentials are realized, actualized, only by the interaction between text and audience, word and ear. The historical context, of course, informs what the ear receives, or at least what the ear does with the received word, and I shall accordingly structure my essay to include whatever historical context is germane to the study.

Ultimately, I hope to make clear that the NPT is, first, worth examining within the context of the ecclesiastical debates of its period, and, second, that the tale's orthodox/heterodox designation oscillates between the two poles of the axis, that the NPT is an example, no less so than the *Parson's Tale* or *Piers Plowman*, of the kind of equivocation that allows a text to be thoroughly immersed in the debate, yet definitively aligned to neither side. More, I will where necessary address the issue that, though heterodoxy is, by definition, markedly distinct from, or directly opposed to, orthodoxy, we find that in the late fourteenth century ecclesiastical debates, where and how the heterodox representative (such as Wyclif) differed from the orthodox (such as Bromyard) is neither consistently nor perfectly clear.¹⁸ Finally, in my conclusion, I will argue that Chaucer's intention is to avoid having the tale assume either a heterodox or orthodox tone, and that the neutral position produced by this avoidance is integral to the tale's satirical purpose.

ENDNOTES

¹ See Anne Hudson's *The Premature Reformation*, especially pp.390-445, Lynn Staley's *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, especially pp.1-38, 84-127, and Pamela Gradon's "Langland and the Ideology of Dissent."

² G.R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England*, pp.1-47 and *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, pp. 250-340.

³ Quoted in Owst, *Preaching*. See pp.67-69.

⁴ To know which of the two legislations had a greater impact upon the Lollard movement is difficult to determine. On the one hand, *De Heretico Comburendo* "marked a new stage in the official attitude towards Lollardry" (Leff 595), decreeing that anyone found guilty by due canonical process of heresy, possession of heretical material, or relapsing into errors of thinking previously recanted would be burned. In addition, increased power was given to the bishops to arrest and detain suspected heretics. See Leff's *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages, v.II*, pp.596-605. On the other hand, the *Constitutions* is more specific in the acts it deemed heretical, containing thirteen articles that left little room for ambiguity, articles that explained, for example, what exactly were considered false doctrines on the sacraments and which of Wyclif's teachings were considered heretical -- in fact, all were. See Leff, pp 569-574.

⁵ Leff correctly points out that at the Black Friars Council of 1382, twenty-four propositions from Wyclif's *De Eucharista* were condemned as heretical, and therefore some notion of what could and could not be said was established, but, as Leff also points out, it was not until Arundel's arrival (upon his return from his two year exile from 1397-1399) that all of Wyclif's works were examined, "resulting in a comprehensive list of 267 articles censured as heretical or unsound" (Leff 498). See also Hudson, pp. 393-411. It is worth noting, however, that Margeret Aston, in her biography of Arundel, finds him to be less than fanatical in his persecution of heretics, although she acknowledges that "before, as after, his exile, [he] showed himself to be the moving spirit in favour of new, severer penalties" (Aston 334). In Aston's view, Arundel's office marked a new urgency, a new vigorousness, in the repression of heresy, but at the same time history tends to vilify Arundel without recognizing certain political and sociological factors outside of Arundel's control and/or already in place at the time of his ascension to office. See Aston, pp.320-336.

⁶ Pearsall puts the date at somewhere between 1396-1399, the "mature phase of the composition of the tales" (Pearsall 230).

⁷ For a thorough account of the heresy trials between 1382 and 1415, see Leff, pp.559-586. See also Malcolm Lambert's *Medieval Heresy*, pp.243-283.

⁸ As Lambert so clearly demonstrates in his study, "...the failure of bishops to follow [then Archbishop] Courtenay's vigorous lead and the absence of a fully co-ordinated machinery of repression was decisive for the continued existence of Lollardry. The preachers were not adequately checked; the bishops did not react quickly" (Lambert 261). Further, in terms of the House of Commons' reaction, "Anticlerical sentiment, a

taste for the vernacular, and an unwillingness to be ruled overmuch by the ecclesiastics accounts for some of the unwillingness to press home the repression of Lollardy” (262).

⁹ B xv, 564-7. For discussion, see Gradon’s “Langland and the Ideology of Dissent,” pp185-187.

¹⁰ I shall deal with principles of Wyclif’s works and the more popular Lollard texts in the following chapter.

¹¹ *De Veritate*, iii. 41/21-2. References to Wyclif’s works are, unless otherwise identified, to the editions of the Wyclif society where these are available.

¹² In terms of the inconsistencies found in Wyclif’s own work, Leff’s examination finds, for instance, that “At times [Wyclif] denied the sinful priest any power since the only true priest was eternally free from mortal sin; at others he conceded that there could be benefit even from the ministrations of the wicked” (Leff 526). These “antinomies,” argues Leff, are “never fully resolved” (526).

¹³ Lambert provides a more detailed measure of the distinctions between various Lollard “sects.” He underlines some of the disparities between, for example, the “academic” Lollards, or “proto-Lollards,” men such as Nicholas Hereford, Philip Reston, John Aston, and John Purvey, and Lollards belonging to the laity, whose main contention was with the wealthy upper clergy. See Lambert, pp.243-253. Lambert also goes into some detail concerning the various “strands of belief” that characterized the Lollard movement, noting that “the variety of belief ...was a consequence of the preaching strata in the movement from the proto-Lollards of academic circles to the simpler chaplains and laymen, and it was implicit in a theology that urged every man to seek his own guidance in the open Scriptures” (Lambert 259).

¹⁴ Walsingham drew a direct link between the teachings of Wyclif and the Revolt (see *Historia Anglicana* II pp.22-23) and one Lollard responded to the charge that his kind were behind the Revolt with “ignoraunce of Goddis lawe is cause of ale meuyng and vnstabilite in the comoun pepel ...redi to rebelle agens her souereyns” (Cambridge University Library S li.6.26 fol 19.). For discussion of how modern historians tend to downplay the Lollard influence upon the revolt, though, see Hudson’s *Lollards and Their Books*, especially pp.158-165. Also, see my Chap. Three on the issue of the Peasant’s Revolt.

¹⁵ I am here relying on the comparison of texts done by Hudson in her *Lollards and Their Books*, which also looks at the Lollard text the *Lanterne of Lizt* (dated somewhere between 1409 and 1415). See Hudson, pp.165-171 and 126-132.

¹⁶ See Leff, pp.582-585.

¹⁷ Contained in *Fasciculi Zinaniorum*, ed. W. W. Shirley, Rolls Series (London 1858), pp.383-407. See also my n.19 in Chap. Two.

¹⁸ That Bromyard was considered to be among Wyclif’s most vocal opponents is stated in J. Hurter’s *Theologiae Cathol. Nomenclat. Lit. ii* (1906), col.680. See also T. Fuller’s *Hist. of Univ. of Camb.* (ed.1840), pp.69, 122, where he suggests that Bromyard’s Chancellorship at Cambridge was “[in] design, to ferret out the Wyclivists.” Quoted in Owst, *Preaching*, 68-69.

CHAPTER ONE

That the work of critics like Gradon, Hudson, and Staley has provided the impetus, as well as the critical groundwork, for my own work with the NPT is true, yet I can hardly argue that their work has provided the justification for my own choice of text. In other words, the question of what features, what indications, are present within the NPT that would warrant an investigation of the type I intend to pursue is still open. *The Parson's Tale*, *The Book Of Margery Kempe*, *Piers Plowman*, all are to varying degrees implicated in the matter of heterodox affiliation, whether it is that the narrator personifies certain Wycliffite ideals of the clergy, as is the case of the Parson,¹ or whether it is that the author of the text was brought before the ecclesiastical court on suspicion of Lollard sympathy, as is the case of Kempe,² or whether it is that the text was thought by dissidents to champion, or at least affirm, their cause, as is the case with *Piers Plowman*.³ These are each sufficient grounds from which to initiate an investigation. What warrants an investigation of the NPT in the heterodox/orthodox context is that, as I intend to demonstrate in the second and third chapters of my study, several passages in the NPT allude directly to contemporary ecclesiastical debates. Prior to my discussion of those passages, though, I must lay some necessary groundwork, for if I am to speak of the period's ecclesiastical debates, there is no avoiding the most prominent figure within those debates, that is, Wyclif.

Wyclif's *oeuvre*, a vast accomplishment of more than twenty texts, excluding his sermons, voiced several of the predominant anxieties, intellectual concerns, and social complaints of his peers, both in the academic arena and among the laity,⁴ and gave direction, a specific wording and identity, to the movement later to become known as

Lollardy.⁵ The official reaction of the Church to his writing was gradual, incremental, but ultimately decisive and clear, culminating in the total censure of his doctrine. His conflict with the church, at least in terms of the publication of his texts, began in 1377, when a papal condemnation of eighteen articles from his *De Civili Dominio*, containing Wyclif's views of lordship and church wealth, was issued. In 1381, following the papal example, a twelve-man commission appointed by the then Chancellor, William Barton, prohibited the teaching of Wyclif doctrine on pain of excommunication. By this point, Wyclif had published *De Ecclesia*, which outlined his position on clerical poverty and raged vehemently against the corruption of the church, *De Veritate Sacre Scripture*, which elaborated upon the basic premises of his philosophy, particularly on the absolute sovereignty of the Bible, and *De Potestate Pape*, which professed an absolute, unqualified denial of the existing church hierarchy. In response to Barton's commission, Wyclif put together his *Confessio*, defending his views and undermining the legitimacy of his adversaries' objections, to which the church promptly replied with the convening of the Blackfriars' Council of 1382, where a further twenty-four articles of Wyclif's writings were condemned as heretical. It was not until after Wyclif's death (in 1384) that Arundel, in 1407, ordered a comprehensive investigation of Wyclif's entire body of work as a requirement of his *Constitutions*, and, once completed, the investigation concluded with a condemnation of a massive two-hundred and sixty-seven articles from Wyclif's thought. Finally, in 1428, Wyclif's body was exhumed and thrown into the nearby river at Lutterworth by order of the Council of Constance.

It would be too enormous a task and (as it would eventually become) too great a digression to encompass the entirety of Wyclif's work and thought within the frame of my own study, and so I will confine myself to those of his principles that are immediately relevant to the study at hand. I confess from the offset, though, that my representation is necessarily fragmentary, that it likely fails to adequately convey the complexities, the system of logic, and many of the more enticing theological implications of Wyclif's thinking. Discussion of Wyclif's indebtedness to Augustine, to Aquinas, his opposition to certain nominalist suppositions,⁶ I must defer to others, for were I to engage in such an endeavour, we would quickly have to leave far, far behind any investigation of the NPT.

Having said this, I want to begin with the central premises, the basic groundwork, of Wyclif's thought, and move from them to the implications more germane to my own study. First and foremost, Wyclif held the Bible's truth to be inviolable, sacrosanct, to be sovereign and absolute, meaning that in no way could, or should, it be modified to accommodate changing political and/or social circumstances.⁷ It was, if I may employ a classical comparison, paradigmatic of the Platonic ideal, or form, in so far as it was universal, unchanging, complete in and of itself. Also, as with the Platonic form, the Bible, because some of its truths were difficult to discern, often required the faculty of reason in order for the truths contained therein to be grasped by the human mind --that is, reason *and* study.⁸ The Bible was not to be apprehended in isolation (Wyclif was never an advocate of *scriptura sola*), but instead through the medium of existing investigations, theological tracts, even polemical works. Of course, these secondary sources could serve only as aids, devices that might or might not illuminate certain passages and/or tenets;

they were never to be considered as perfect statements of truth in and of themselves, but only in relation to their conformity with Biblical text. Items of human invention such as papal bulls and decretals were empty of divine sanction: *Quarta conclusio ...quelibet pars scripture sacre est infinitum maioris auctoritatis quam aliqua epistola decretalis, patet sic: quelibet epistola decretalis est condita per aliquem papam ...; quelibet pars sacre scripture immediate et proxime autorizatur per deum, igitur conclusio.*⁹ Another of Wyclif's fundamental premises was that there were three mysteries to the human mind: the identity of the elect and the damned, the period in history when the day of judgement would arrive, and the time in life when a man or woman would die.¹⁰ It is the first of these mysteries that for our purposes carries the more interesting implications, and it is to the implications of the aforementioned premises that I would now like to turn.

The implications of Wyclif's thinking were far-reaching, but clear, immediate, and necessary consequences/extensions of his basic premises. The first is that the authority of the existing church was entirely dependent upon its strict conformity to Scripture¹¹ and that, in fact, the individual Christian ought to pursue his/her own theological studies¹² (aided by his/her own reason and the available literature provided by the clergy –the *true*¹³ clergy, those whose works coincided precisely with Biblical doctrine). Moreover, the church ought to bear allegiance only to Christ's teachings and the Bible, not to the pope,¹⁴ whose hierarchical position was an affront to the individual's own legitimate endeavour to become self-taught in matters of Scripture. Indeed, the whole notion of a hierarchy was, to Wyclif, an artificial construct, an institution designed to perpetuate ignorance of the Scriptures among the laity, and because the hierarchy was

fundamentally false, lower priests had as much right, and as strong a duty, to preach as did the prelacy, or higher ranking clergymen.¹⁵ Because, considering the first of the three mysteries, there was no way to determine who was elect and who was damned, then any given priest or prelate, despite having been officially ordained, could offer no conclusive evidence towards the legitimacy of his title (*Simpliciter autem maximam potestatem inter viantes habet filius adoptionis qui est excellentius heres regni*).¹⁶ There was indeed no need to be a cleric, no need to be ordained, in order to preach.¹⁷ The distinction between priest and layman was unnecessary, false (*Quod secundum obiectum de laycis, patet logico quod lacus potest esse papa*).¹⁸ To preach was the undeniable, rightful mandate of any and all Christians.

More, if Christ stands as the example for the clergyman, then it follows that clerical poverty is paramount;¹⁹ thus opulence, pomposity, and any manifestation or show of greed were unpardonable and among the worst of sins committable by the preacher.²⁰ One should undergo suffering (and this includes all Christians, preacher or not), or at least make do with a modest living, rather than strive for gain, wealth, and reputation.²¹ Because priestly avarice was the most dangerous of sins, possession, lordship, ought to be in the hands of secular rulers, particularly in those of the reigning monarch.²² The priest's role was only to assist the Christian in his/her pursuit of Biblical understanding, and not to involve himself in secular affairs.

These were, among others (particularly his views on the eucharist), the articles the church found to be the most reprehensible, the most subversive within Wyclif's work. The church's system of hierarchy was nullified, its wealth was shown to be proof of its

corruption, and its *raison d'être*, the preaching of the gospel, was removed and remanded to the individual. The Lollards, a motley group comprising preachers and laypersons alike, soon rallied to the cause of reform, urgently called for by Wyclif. Nicholas Hereford, an Oxford Master of Arts, and academics like him, most notably John Purvey and Philip Repton, took it upon themselves to popularize and promote Wycliffism, and of course, for this action, they were each brought before the church, on separate occasions, and forced to answer for their heresies.²³ Lower-ranking priests, men such as William Thorpe and Richard Wyche, travelled the countryside in search of converts, and they too were eventually brought before an ecclesiastical commission on charges of heresy.²⁴ To account for each and every trial is impossible, as several have no written documentation, but what is certain is that these trials contributed significantly to the context, to the prevailing character, of Chaucer's period,²⁵ especially in the years between the Peasants' Revolt, an event that galvanized the church into more widespread and determined repression of Lollardry than had been practiced previously (and an event thought by the church to have been instigated by Lollard sympathizers),²⁶ and the first consigning to the flames of a convicted heretic, William Sawtry, in 1401 under Arundel's *De Heretico Comburendo*.

There are two examples of the church's official response to Wycliffism that are of particular interest and that are typical of the years surrounding Arundel's *Constitutions*. First, there is the example of Nassington's translation of the *Speculum vitae* in 1384, "an entirely orthodox work of piety [that] was submitted to the chancellor of Cambridge for a learned judgement for fear that it was heretical" (Swanson 262). There is also the case of

the *Dives and Pauper*'s text, which was said in an investigation headed by Bishop Alnwick in 1429 to contain "multi errores and hereses quamplures,"²⁷ and yet, as Hudson is quick to point out, "its orthodoxy would seem assured by the fact that Abbot Wethamstede paid for a making of a copy of it for St. Albans" (*Lollards and Their Books* 125). Nassington's case and that of *Dives and Pauper* are perhaps the most revealing of the period and the latter is discussed at some length by Hudson. These cases reveal two things: first, that determinations of orthodoxy or heterodoxy were as problematic for the church investigating committee as they are for the modern critic, and, second, that a certain censoriousness, or hypercriticism, characterized certain investigations of texts, and I emphasize "certain" for the simple reason that just as many cases of *laissez faire* investigations can be found as hypercritical ones.²⁸ What is important is that we can fairly assume that Chaucer, though he may not have known of Nassington's case specifically (and obviously could not have known of the *Pauper* case), very likely knew of similar cases, of how, more to the point, a text's orthodox determination was in the hands of its unpredictable audience, of how, for example, people such as Joachim of Fiore, Olivi, and Eckhart were accused of heresy "in spite of themselves, and posthumously, through the debasement or misinterpretation of their ideas" (Leff 494). Interestingly enough, a copy of the *Canterbury Tales* was displayed by the prosecution in a heresy trial as evidence of heresy. While historians now look at the case "as an instance of neurotic officiousness on the part of the bishop's minions,"²⁹ Hudson maintains that "if the confiscated copy of the *Tales* had included, for instance, the Pardoner's Tale, or, even more, the Parson's Tale, it could on rigorous interpretation of

[Arundel's] *Constitutions* have been rightly regarded as indicative of heresy" (*Lollards and Their Books* 149).

Of course, the above does not amount to a full description of the historical context. No such context is possible, especially within the confines of this study. No mention has been made, for example, of King Richard II's apparent efforts to promote an absolute monarchy, of the rise and impact of the Free Spirit movement, of the development of the Nominalist school and how it was perceived by some to harbour heretical thought, of the refusal of the peasant class to be forced back into a pre-plague condition of life, of the renewed and intense preoccupation among the nobility with social standing and the ideals of chivalry that emerged as the plague began to recede, and so forth. We have, in short, only examined a perspective of late fourteenth century life. What I am primarily interested in, though, is that in Chaucer's time, particularly the period surrounding the production of the *Canterbury Tales*, England was in a condition wherein the traditional locations of authority were being questioned from both outside and within, wherein unconventional, unorthodox ideas surfaced and not only were the focus of discussion and debate, but also were the matter (meaning both the cause *and* the substance) of several vernacular texts.

I do not wish to leave the matter of context, or necessary groundwork, at this.

Consider the last lines of the NPT:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,
 As of a fox, or a cok and hen,
 Taketh the moralitee, goode men.
 For seint Paul seith that al that writen is,
 To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
 Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille
 (VII 3438-3444).³⁰

Here, I turn to Owst's *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*,³¹ the most acute, the most comprehensive, study of the construction and dissemination of sermon material of which I know. Because the NPT fits so neatly into the moral exemplum classification, a classification upon which Owst spends considerable time, it is only appropriate that we recognize the findings of his work.

To the question of how to understand the closing remarks to the NPT, we find in Owst several possible answers. The first is that there was a well-established precedent, or tradition, among preachers of the late fourteenth century³² to qualify and/or justify their use of a fable to carry the moral of a sermon. I quote Owst here in full, since not only does his evidence speak for itself, but more, the parallels between the NPT's language and that of Owst's chosen examples are so striking:

[In] Nicholas Trivet's and Thomas Walley's ...Book of Moralizations of the Metamorphoses of Ovid ...[we find that] a statement in the Second Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy is unblushingly perverted to mean 'that we must oftentimes make use of fables, enigmas and poems, that some moral sense may be extracted therefrom.' ...If we turn to John Bromyard, later in the fourteenth century, we shall find him discussing in the Prologue to his *Summa Predicantium* the actual propriety of employing for such a purpose the pagan myths and fables with which his volume teems. He begins by quoting presumably from Peter of Blois to the effect that, 'in the cases of herbs, no one seeks to find out in what land, or in the charge of what gardener, or by what culture they grew, provided that they possess healing power.' So should it be with the health-giving exemplum

(Owst, *Literature and Pulpit* 180).

At the risk, though, of labouring the similarity, I shall point out that just as the same use of organic imagery in Bromyard's text cannot be missed in the NPT's "taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille," so is the reference to St. Paul in Trivet and Walley unmistakable in the NPT's "For seint Paul seith that al that writen is, / To oure doctrine it

is ywrite, ywis.” It would seem, then, that the Nun's Priest is simply working within the boundaries of an established literary convention, and in doing so, the character of the Nun's Priest is firmly identified as belonging to that class of preachers who took advantage of the fable genre in their sermons, as did Bromyard and several others before and after him. We can claim, therefore, that the function of the closing lines of the NPT is to locate the narrator's identity, as described above, and to attach to the tale, to the moralization, a familiar ring, one that would call to mind Bromyard's *Summa Predicantium*, for instance.

This raises some interesting questions, questions such as how should our perception of the end lines be modified by the fact that, as Owst goes to some length to demonstrate, “Most of ...Bromyard's moralizations were strictly in the form of relentless satire at the expense of the social pests of the day” (*Literature* 207) and that “Satire [such as Bromyard's] was, for the whole, the province of the clergy ...Neither rank nor power shielded men from their attacks; all classes of society [were] pilloried by them. The abuses in State and Church, *especially the latter* ...moral rottenness in clergy and laity, all served as materials for satire” (Owst, italics added 218)?³³ If we are to connect the NPT's closing lines to people such as Bromyard and identify the Nun's Priest as belonging to his kind, then is it not also possible, even urged by the text, to consider the connections between the Nun's Priest and the satirical tradition to which Bromyard belongs,³⁴ keeping in mind that within the *Summa Predicantium* there is an abundance of indictments of the clergy, particularly the bishops, that are, as Owst so dramatically describes them, “terrific and overwhelming” (*Preaching In Medieval England* 36)?

In her *Chaucerian Play*, Kendrick also examines the closing lines of the NPT, placing them in a pattern of disavowals initiated in the GP with

But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
 That ye n'arrete it nat my vileynye,
 Thogh that I pleyedly speke in this mateere,
 To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere,
 Ne thogh I speke hir wordes proprely
 (I 725-729).

Soon after, in the Miller's Prologue, we are given

And therefore every gentil wight I preye,
 For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye,
 Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
 Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
 Or elles falsen som of my mateere
 (I 3171-3175).

This line of thought is carried through to the NPT's

But ye that holden this tale a folye,
 As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,
 Taketh the moralitee, goode men
 (VII 3438-3440).

Kendrick explains how

If the gentle interpreter tends to make earnest out of game by reading 'up' for the sentence, a 'churlish' interpreter, such as Chaucer's Miller, does the opposite and makes game out of earnest by reading 'down' for solas, which often involves putting the lowest possible interpretations on sacred images and texts
 (Kendrick 16).

The pattern of disavowals, then, allows Chaucer to distance himself from the "vileynye" of certain tales by cleverly transferring the onus upon the reader; the churl will read down of his own accord, while, likewise, the gentle reader will choose to read up. As the

narrator says in the last lines of the Miller's Prologue, "Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame; / And eek men shal nat maken ernest out of game" (l 3185-3186).

Kendrick goes on to explain that reading and writing for *solas* is a property of the Carnavalesque tradition, a style of art and a social event designed specifically to purge rebellious inclinations by temporarily destabilizing the existing patterns and structures of authority. Yet rather than being violent, or meant to uproot, the destabilizing process was playful, and the intention was for a kind of cathartic release, a flushing out of tensions and anxieties that had accumulated as a result of the uncertainty and dissension that marked the years surrounding the production of Chaucer's work: "In these unstable times," Kendrick writes, "Chaucer wrote the CT to renew the productive forces of English society and at the same time, through controlling play, to stabilize the late fourteenth century social order" (161). Thus, by examining a group of examples of Medieval goliardic and jongleuresque play, with particular emphasis given to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Kendrick is able to immerse the entire comic dimension of the *Canterbury Tales*, that dimension which contains most of the work's potentially rebellious elements and of which the NPT is indeed a part, into an artistic tradition that aims for the same sort of "peaceful conclusion" described by Muscatine.³⁵ Any and all elements of rebellion or subversion the tales may contain are "harmless," "temporary," and serve mainly to "satisfy the audience's illicit desires" (128), which, once satisfied, allow for "Chaucer's ultimate aim: to promote social stability" (129).

There is no doubt that destabilizing, subversive, rebellious features are a property of the Carnival tradition,³⁶ but I am surprised to find that Kendrick fails to address the

heterodox/orthodox dimension of the *Tales*, a dimension that (though not necessarily Carnavalesque) would still, presumably, belong somewhere within the “rebellious” category and a dimension that is shown to exist by, among others, Hudson and Jeffreys (the latter finding ample evidence of Wycliffite influence in both the *Tales* and Chaucer’s other pieces, particularly the *House of Fame*).³⁷ Kendrick is therefore perhaps too narrow in her defining of “rebellious” and too quick to contain the comic tales, including the NPT, within the parameters of the Carnival tradition.

To return to the text in question, then, what I want to examine is this: first, where the NPT is located within contemporary ecclesiastical debates and/or the Wycliffite context; second, how its late fourteenth/early fifteenth century audience might have rated its orthodox and/or heterodox affiliation. The second of these is perhaps the more difficult to achieve, as whatever argument a modern reader can derive from extant texts or documents will, at some point, be necessarily infused with his/her own speculative assertions, an unavoidable problem recognized by Owst, Hudson, Staley, and indeed all critics seeking to understand the medieval audience’s reception of texts now in modern hands. To facilitate my task, and to lend my assertions greater legitimacy, I will consider how closely passages in the NPT resemble Wyclif’s own writings and those of orthodox figures, especially Bromyard, the former representing the heterodox pole and the latter the orthodox. Of course, even this notion of a measurable gulf separating these two men is problematic, for while it is true that Bromyard stood in judgement of Wyclif at the Blackfriars Council and is said to have despised Wyclif, it is also true that Wyclif and Bromyard were not entirely incompatible in terms of their ecclesiastical views, a point I

shall now address in reference to the NPT in my second and third chapters. To Kendrick I will return in my conclusion, for I find that, despite my objection to her not recognizing the heterodox/orthodox dimension of the NPT, several aspects of her work are pertinent and helpful to my own. Here, I have introduced those ideas to which I will refer and upon which I shall elaborate throughout my study.

ENDNOTES

¹ See Hudson's *Premature Reformation*, pp.391-392.

² See Lynn Staley's *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, pp.16-18.

³ In a letter by John Ball to an anonymous recipient in Essex in 1381, we find that the letter "...evidently implies the familiarity of its recipients with some form of the poem we know as *Piers Plowman*; the purpose of the letter was certainly to encourage the recipient to action, and, according to Walsingham, violent revolt" (Hudson 399). Walsingham and Knighton are the two most famous, most alluded to, contemporary chroniclers of the age, Walsingham with his *Thomae Walsingham Historia Anglicana* and *Chronicon Anglie* and Knighton with his *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*. The two men, though, often split company with their interpretations, or characterizations, of the more notorious figures of the age. Walsingham, for instance, thought of Wyclif as a man actively involved in the recruitment of disciples and the dissemination of his ideas, whereas Knighton perceived Wyclif to be more passive, one who gained adherents simply by virtue of his ideas. See Swanson, p.241 and 253. Further, the reliability of both chroniclers has lately been put to question, Hudson, for example, pointing out that from the examinations of Knighton's and Walsingham's work by modern historians "It emerges that [Knighton's and Walsingham's] chronology is less than completely reliable and that, even when it is correct, many of the entries were written some years after the events and therefore with the benefit of hindsight." See Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, pp.43-44. To return to Ball, though, Owst has found that Ball, and others of his ilk, often appropriated popular poems and songs to their cause, for, as Owst argues, "there is evidence to show that perilous liberty of popular song-writing ...was eagerly seized upon by the more 'socialist' priests, until, in the hands of wandering fanatics of the Church as John Ball, [the] rude verse became at length the song of actual revolution" (*Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, 221). See also pp.287-296.

⁴ A more detailed account of Wyclif's influence among the laity is available in Swanson, pp.252-259, wherein Swanson demonstrates that "An appeal to the individual to search out the truths of Scripture for himself [one of Wyclif's central tenets, see my discussion] was part of the drawing power of Lollardy; it was most effective for the self-taught, for those who had lately become literate and for those in a trade which required literacy" (253).

⁵ For much of my information on Wyclif's career, I rely upon the biographical work in Leff's text and Rudolf Buddensieg's introduction to the Wyclif Society's 1905 edition of *De Veritate sacre Scriptura*.

⁶ For discussion of Wyclif's connections to these earlier thinkers, see A. Gwynn, *The English Austin Friars in the Time of Wyclif* (1940), pp.249-269.

⁷ To this principle Wyclif devotes all of *De Veritate Sacre Scripture*.

⁸ *De Veritate* I, 136

⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 375.

¹⁰ *De Ecclesia* 251

¹¹ *De Civili Dominio* I, 375

¹² *De Veritate* I, 387; II 141, 145, 166

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- ¹³ Wyclif went to lengths to define the *trewe prechours of þe gospel, hewiþ upon þis rootem ...wiþ þe swerd of þe gospel* (quoted in Hudson, *Lollards and Their Books* 166).
- ¹⁴ *De Blasphema* 114-15; *Sermons* I 165-6
- ¹⁵ *De Veritate* I, 348; II 138-9
- ¹⁶ *De Officio Regis* 142
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 149
- ¹⁸ *De Potestate Pape* 272
- ¹⁹ *Omnes sacerdotes Christi, pape, cardinales, episcopi, abbates, priores vel eius subditi, tenentur Christum in evangelica paupertate* (*Opera Minora* 20); *De Veritate* III, 5
- ²⁰ *De Civili Dominio* I, 59
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, II, 150
- ²² *Opera Minora* 153-8
- ²³ See *Fasciculi Zinaniorum*, 310-41. See also Leff, p.569.
- ²⁴ Thorpe, who was thought by Foxe in his *Acts and Monuments* to be among the more prominent preachers targeted by the church, never recanted, despite having been arrested in 1397 and later brought to trial before Arundel in 1407. See *Acts and Monuments*, pp.600-618. See also Leff, p.599.
- ²⁵ Leff's list and discussion of the cases following the Revolt is one of the more comprehensive. See Leff, pp.560-605, the subchapter entitled "The Condemnations of Wyclif and Oxford Lollardry."
- ²⁶ See Leff, pp.563. Archbishop Sudbury was killed in the Revolt and replaced by Courtenay, who acted with speed to intensify the will to repress the Lollards, some of whom reportedly said that Sudbury deserved to be murdered on account of his attempts to silence Wyclif. See Leff, p.564.
- ²⁷ Quoted in Hudson, *Lollards and Their Books*, p.125.
- ²⁸ Swanson, for example, outlines several cases of *laissez faire* investigations, investigations such as that of Walter Brute wherein Trefnant, bishop of Hereford, "...was slow ...and somewhat easily satisfied by a generalized confession of orthodoxy" (261).
- ²⁹ See Hudson's *Lollards and Their Books*, p.142.
- ³⁰ This and all subsequent citations are taken from the *Riverside Chaucer* edited by Larry Benson.
- ³¹ In conjunction with his *Preaching in Medieval England*.
- ³² I am here referring to Bromyard and Nicole Bozon, both of whom make extensive use of the fable, and both, according to Owst, seem to have inherited the penchant for the genre from Odo of Cheriton. See Owst *Literature and Pulpit*, pp.204-207.
- ³³ Swanson's work confirms Owst's, but Swanson points more specifically to the lower clergy, coming to the conclusion that "[for] the second category of early Lollard evangelists, consisting of chaplains, unbeneficed priests and lower clergy in general, ...Lollard tenets fell on fertile soil." See Swanson, pp.248-251.
- ³⁴ It must be said about Bromyard that he was in many ways typical of his period; that is, he was in many respects a "pillar of orthodoxy" (Owst *Preaching in Medieval England*, p.36), even serving with the bishops of the ecclesiastical court for the investigation of Wyclif's works, whom Bromyard openly despised, and yet by the same token Bromyard is exceedingly critical of certain of the church's practices, of the widespread ignorance

and opulence among clergymen. Owst, whose *Preaching in Medieval England* could well serve as a compendium of Bromyard's work, addresses the issue of Bromyard's complexities in detail. See Owst, pp.36-39, 45-50, and 65-71. Much of what can be said of Bromyard can be said of Bozon, whose *Contes Moralizes* Owst examines, finding that "Besides the Natural History, the animal fables, and the rest, [Bozon] is interesting for the violence of his attacks on abuses in the Church and State" (Owst 302). The Nun's Priest, by virtue of the fact that he employs the animal fable, by virtue of the fact that he uses the language employed by Bromyard (and others) for his disavowal, can in some respects be placed in Bromyard's circle. This is certainly not to say that the Nun's Priest is a facsimile of Bromyard, or Bozon, but rather that Chaucer may well have had them, or preachers like them, in mind for the construction of his character. Satire directed towards the church was, in Chaucer's period, mostly the "province of the clergy" (Owst 218) and it was from the pulpit sermon, or exemplum, or fable, that this satire flowed. See Owst, *Literature and Pulpit* pp.210-286.

³⁵ I will come back to Muscatine and his notion of the "peaceful conclusion" in my own conclusion.

³⁶ See M. Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, especially pp.21-53. It is, of course, Bakhtin's sense of Carnival with which Kendrick is working.

³⁷ Among other aspects, Jeffrey is interested in the connections between 1) Wyclif's theory of interpretation and the *House of Fame*, 2) Wyclif's theory of dominion and the *Tale of Melibee*, 3) Wyclif's restructuring of grammar and logic and the *House of Fame*. See Jeffrey's "Chaucer and Wyclif," pp.109-42, in *Chaucer and the Scriptural Tradition*, ed. Lyle Jeffrey (1973).

CHAPTER TWO

What I find especially intriguing about the NPT is the effort made by the text to locate itself within certain contemporary debates, debates that by their very subject matter recall a number of the more inflammatory Wycliffite, heterodox contentions. In order to appreciate this contemporizing move, though, we must first acknowledge the extent to which the NPT is divergent from its source, for in its divergencies the contemporary character of the tale is most perceptible. Once having accomplished that, I want to look at what exactly constitutes the “debates” in which the NPT is immersed and how the NPT responds to those debates. But first, on the question of the source, there has been considerable research done, and I will here provide a synopsis of that body of scholarship so that I may follow the history thereof to a working induction regarding the function and *personae* of the tale.

I begin with Petersen, as hers was the first detailed study of the sources Chaucer had available to him for the NPT. Her contention, simply put, is that the NPT is more closely allied to the German *Reinhart Fuchs* than it is to the French *Roman de Renart*.¹ She recognizes that Chaucer contributed much of his own artistry to the cock and the fox tradition, but finally believes that the NPT and *Reinhart Fuchs* share a “simplicity of treatment” (Petersen 118) that the *Roman de Renart* lacks.

As well designed as her argument is, though, Chaucerians appear to be moving further and further away from it. Pearsall, for instance, declares that “[Petersen’s] analysis of story elements ...is suspect” and that “her judgement of what is important and what is unimportant is not always secure” (Pearsall 16). Lecompte, much in agreement with Pearsall, regards Petersen’s study as hopelessly antiquated in its methodology. More

importantly, however, Lecompte maintains that Petersen's work fails to account for the strong possibility that medieval authors could "invent things and coincide in invention." Had Petersen taken this into account, Lecompte speculates, then she would have been less likely to draw strict conclusions from the agreement between the NPT and *Reinhart Fuchs*, against the *Roman*.

Muscatine announces that he has "no sympathy with the theories of common, primitive sources and isolated versions" (Muscatine 238). Chaucer's source "can have been nothing less than the *Roman de Renart* itself." He believes that there exists abundant biographical evidence to assume that Chaucer could well have obtained a copy of the *Roman*, despite the fact that such a possession would be uncommon. If we take into consideration the fact that Chaucer's life, in the travels he made and in the personal connections he had, was entirely "uncommon," as well as the fact that so much of Chaucer's work was in the French tradition, then it is more than just possible --it is likely-- that Chaucer was working directly from the *Roman*. What Muscatine is referring to by "isolate versions and common sources" is the position held by some scholars that Chaucer's source was some form of an unknown intermediary, or an offshoot, of either the *Roman* or *Reinhart Fuchs*.

Sisam is really the strongest voice for this "unknown intermediary" argument. He proposes that an oral form of the story, in which names and settings are changed, certain situations are reversed, and old phrases are modified in one way or another, is the genuine source. Sisam does concede, though, that there are several, unmistakable parallels between the NPT and the *Roman*. He notices, for example, that

Avoi! cries Pinte in the *Roman* where Chantecler says he is frightened by

his dream, and *Avoy!* cries Pertelote at the same place in the NPT
(Sisam xxv).

Another parallel is to be found in the fox shouting *Maugre vostre* at his pursuers in the *Roman*, and *Maugree youre heed* in the NPT (Sisam xxv). Unlike Petersen, however, Sisam believes that the NPT is more closely connected to the *Roman* than it is to *Reinhart* and therefore the intermediary follows from the French tradition rather than the German.

Flinn, responding to Sisam, points out that the distinctions between the NPT and the *Roman* do not necessarily require the positing of an intermediary, that it is entirely plausible that the distinctions to be found are the product of poetic license. We know from Chaucer's other work that he is more than capable of expanding, amending, and often improving a source text, and thus it stands to reason that Chaucer has done the same with the NPT. This, it seems, is the most convincing of all the theories proposed. The textual similarities between the NPT and the *Roman* are too many and too close to maintain that the source was anything other than the *Roman*. Moreover, we can easily credit the deviations in Chaucer's text to the author's desire for novelty, to what might be called an *anxiety of influence*, to borrow a phrase from H. Bloom.

More than to satisfy a desire for novelty, the tale is constructed such that once we submit the narrative *corpus* of the tale to dissection, it becomes immediately apparent that we can divide from the skeletal plot, the one element Chaucer did indeed borrow, a collection of allusions and digressions that lend a historically specific character to the tale, a late fourteenth century *personae*. More specifically, in the character development of Chauntecler, in the dialogue between himself and Pertelote, and in the descriptions of

Russell and the “povre widow,” there is a marked effort to immerse the tale within the milieu of contemporary ecclesiastical questions. Of course, it hardly needs saying that each of the *Tales* is in some way reflective of Chaucer’s period, some more than others, and that each of them borrows from a source text. The NPT, however, is unique, or at least outstanding, in the extent to which the source material is a screen, and exterior justification, for a clear engagement in certain concerns and “debates” of late fourteenth century English society.

I would like to begin with the character of Chauntecler, for his is the example that most clearly illustrates this notion of being embroiled within a debate and yet resistant to easy designation of “camp.” He is introduced in the *Roman* the instant after Renard’s presence in the farmyard frightens the hens into their coop,

Quant sire Chantecler li cos,
 Et une sente lez le bos,
 Entre piex en la croerre,
 Estoit alez en la poudriere.
 Mout fierement lor vint devant,
 La plume el pie, le col tendant,
 Si demande par qual reson
 Eles s’en fuient en meson

(1267-1274).

Herein, there is little elaboration on his *effictio*, except to say that he has feathers reaching down to his feet and that there is a certain aura of majesty, or at least finery, to his appearance. By contrast, Chauntecler is given twenty-two lines of description in the NPT, a description that speaks of his having a “gouvernaunce” (2865), rather than a dunghill on which to walk,² and that emphasizes his ostentatious show:

His coomb was redder than the fyn coral,
 And batailled as it were a castel wal;
 His byle was blak, and as the jeet it shoon;

Lyk asure were his legges and his toon;
 His nayles whitter than the lyle flour,
 And lyk the burned gold was his colour
 (2859-2864).

Further, he is cast in religious imagery:

His voys was murier than the murie orgon
 On messe-dayes that in the chirche gon.
 Wel sikerer was his crowyng in his logge
 Than is a klokke or an abbey orlogge.
 (2851-2854).

More, whereas in the *Roman* Chauntecler's rebuttal of Pinte's explication of the prophetic reliability of his dream is given as

Pinte, fait il, mout par es fole,
 Mout as dite fole parole.
 Cuidiez que je soiue sorpris
 Et que la beste est la porpris
 Qui par force me conquerra?
 Dahez ait qul verra!
 Ne m'as dit riens ou ge gaingne,
 Je ne croi mei mal me viengne,
 Je n'avre mal por itel songe
 (1443-1451),

the NPT allocates just fewer than two-hundred lines (2970-3160) to Chauntecler's response, and, of course, what most clearly distinguishes this passage in the NPT from its counterpart in the *Roman* is that while the latter amounts to an angry, abrupt dismissal, the former, with its penchant for oratorical flair, its citing of scriptural and secular authority, its exhaustive list of *exempla*, is very much in the style of preaching, albeit an inflated, somewhat zealous style.

Is this characterization of Chauntecler as priest, and of his speech as preaching, warranted by the text? Are there not competing elements in his development, none of

which attains dominance? Perhaps Chauntecler is best described as a melange, or mosaic, of portrayals, sometimes a noble prince, sometimes more beast than human, and this patchwork of representations allows some critics to perceive him as a foil to Troilus, others to interpret him as a parody of the Monk, others as yet another husband figure contributing to the marriage debate. How Chauntecler is representative of the clergy has been examined at length by Charles Dahlberg, who finds that well-entrenched within Medieval literary convention “the cock is made the symbol of the best of the three estates, the orders of chivalry, priesthood, and marriage; the cock thus represents the ideal knight, priest and husband.” However, “the most traditional of these equations in Christian literature is that connecting the cock with the priest” (Dahlberg 282). Dahlberg then compares the NPT to one of John of Sheppey’s fables in which the cock is identified as priest, and, from that comparison, Dahlberg contests

This particular fable offers parallels to the NPT which are closer in time than those of any suggested analogue. The cock, like Chauntecler, is lazy (“Expecta vsque cras”); he has a wife (“Galline vxori sue”), whose judgement he impugns (“Tanquam vna de stultis mulieribus locuta es?”); and the fox seizes the cock by the neck (“Gallum sumens per collum”) and he carries him off into the woods (“asportuait ad siluam”)

(Dahlberg 284).

Dahlberg is not alone in his reading of Chauntecler as priest. Mortimer Donovan maintains that “the key to the *moralite* is hidden in the identification of Chauntecler as a holy man and Daun Russell as heretic and devil” (Donovan 498). Coolidge Chapman refers to the passage in the NPT quoted above and argues that it belongs to an extended parody within the tale of “the kind of preacher that so many authors of *artes praecandi*

warn against --a man with great rhetorical skill but no personal conviction" (Chapman 473). Chapman goes on to conclude that Chauntecler's

"sermon" lacks the formal features of the medieval sermon, but at the end of the tale, Chaucer leaves us with a sense of Chauntecler's personality and an impression of his style as sermonistic and highly rhetorical; he quotes authorities, narrates several exempla, assumes a didactic tone, and is garrulous in his presentation (Chapman 475).

More, Susan Gallick, in her study of the styles of usage in the tale, looks at how and where Chauntecler adopts a sermonizing style (among others) and interprets Chauntecler's speech in context of the fact that "Medieval preachers often addressed their congregations in the didactic style as they tried to connect in logical and informative fashion the different parts of the sermon" (Gallick 233).

There can be no doubt, though, that Chauntecler is inconsistently portrayed. Even his "being," or "essence," swings pendulously as the narrator plays with the contradiction of Chauntecler as beast ("My tale is of a cok") and as nobleman ("Thus roial, as a prince is in his halle"). For the purpose of my own study, however, I will focus on the ecclesiastical quality of Chauntecler, all the while recognizing that though his portrayal cannot be confined to any one reading, nor can his priestly role be ignored.

To return, then, to the passage quoted earlier from the NPT, I find that while the parody Chapman spoke of is present, a contemporary of Chaucer's would, as well as recognizing the obvious parody, afford to the passage, and to Chauntecler in general, a more intricate, divaricating reading. The move to this assumption is warranted (and here I must point out again my indebtedness to Owst's work on the subject) by the fact that in the years between Wyclif's career and Arundel's *Constitutions* the question of who ought to preach

was among the most contentious, widely debated issues of the time.³ I say “divaricating,” because the closer we look at Chauntecler’s character and speech, the more we are forced to concede that he offers no coherent, plain response to any given issue; his character seems to branch in several directions, sometimes seemingly sympathetic to the portions of Wycliffite doctrine it conjures up, and other times not.

For example, that a chicken would inflict upon his wife a lengthy, involved sermon is the logical extension (though an absurd, comical extension) of Wyclif’s argument that it was the moral duty of his peers to flout the episcopal license, to preach “withouten leefe of byschoppes,” and without formal training.⁴ Wyclif’s position was as clear (*Sacerdotis simplices et fideles contra prohibitionem episcoporum, et absque predicandi licentia possunt predicare cum voluerint*)⁵ as it was well-known, having been fervently taken up by the more outspoken, popular Wycliffites such as William Swinburn.⁶ We cannot leave it at this, however, for, as Hudson’s study of the church’s response to Wyclif’s assertion demonstrates, the “common sentiment” within the church was that eventually “every lewde man is becomen a clerke and talkys in his termys,”⁷ *lewde* meaning uneducated, displaying ignoble behaviour, or of low birth.⁸ That Chauntecler is able to distinguish between a *somnium naturale* and a *somnium coeleste* and do so by directly referring to secular and scriptural authority⁹ would suggest that he is not so uneducated, that, at least, he has some grasp of dream lore. Conversely, that Chauntecler is entirely susceptible to less “academic” concerns, to carnal thoughts of his wife,

For whan I feele a-nyght your softe syde
 Al be it that I may nat on yow ryde,
 For that oure perche is maad so narwe, allas
 I am so ful of joye and of solas,

That I diffye bothe sweven and dreem
(3167-3171),

and that these lurid thoughts distract him from his sermon to the point of his dismissing altogether the *sentence* of his own speech seems a wonderfully comic way to justify the church's apprehension. More to the point, though, the church held that the *lewde* man would be only vaguely familiar with Biblical verse, would misconstrue passages, and would be a poor pretender to the title of priest.¹⁰ Walter Hilton, canon of Thurgarton, put the matter succinctly:

And perchaunce some of thaim when thai have herd or rede a litele of haly write or has gettyne a litele cynnyng of techyng of holy fathers, alstite thai make thaim-self doctours and wille teche other men, nogth that thai have fulfilled in werkes, bot that thai haf herd and sene in bokes.¹¹

Again in comic confirmation of the church's apprehension, Chauntecler ends his sermon by first invoking one of the "techyng of holy fathers," that is, the first words of the Gospel of St. John and of the Book of Genesis: "In Principio" (3163), and then moving to a complete misunderstanding of "Mulier est hominis confusio" (3164). His confusion could be taken ironically, as though he well knew that Pertelote would fail to understand him, but in keeping with what *lewde* meant with regard to the clergy (and Chauntecler's demeanor and discourse is that of a preacher, albeit a comical representation), that is, unable to read Latin and/or lacking the scholastic training required of a clergyman,¹² I think we are more likely meant to take Chauntecler's confusion to mean that he "has herd" the phrase somewhere, or that it was "sene in bokes," but that glimmer of exposure, unfortunately, marks the extent of his understanding of the phrase.

This alone places Chauntecler somewhere within the debate, but the issue was far more involved, and Chauntecler's role far more complex, than to leave it at this. In terms of the debate, Wyclif went further than to deny the legitimacy of episcopal licenses, for correlative to his argument was the assumption that the layman was not just a priest in his own right, but also his own pope,¹³ and when we turn again to Chauntecler we find that within the confines of his yard, his "gouvernaunce," he is indeed the prelate, the ecclesiastical authority, the one who, unlike Pertelote, can and does employ Biblical precedent and scripture to argue his point. Interestingly, Donovan finds that within Medieval literary tradition and contemporary Christian exegesis there is a precedence wherein widowhood is equated with the Church of Christ, a precedence which, among other reasons, leads Donovan to believe that "the 'povre widow' in whose care Chauntecler lives so peacefully suggests herself as the Church" (Donovan 505). Within that "Church," Chauntecler is prelate; he even claims a kind of direct link between himself and God (as, suggestively enough, a papal appointment assumes), declaring to Pertelote that God has spoken to him directly through his dreams, as God did to Daniel and Joseph,

I pray yow, looketh wel
 In the olde testament, of Daniel,
 If he heeld dremes any vanitee.
 Reed eek of Joseph, and ther shul ye see
 Warnynge of thynges that shul after falle
 (3127-3131).¹⁴

Where Chauntecler's "papal" role becomes most interesting, though, is in the fact that Chauntecler embodies three of the signs of corruption that Wyclif assigns to the pope in Rome:¹⁵ ostentatious show, which is made abundantly clear in Chauntecler's *effictio*, the

seduction away from moral behaviour, which for Chauntecler is evident not just in the fact that he is distracted from his path by Pertelote, but in the fact that he “feathers” her no less than twenty times; and arrogance, or pride, which is precisely what allows Chauntecler to be caught. Further, a point that is emphasized in nearly all of Wyclif’s tracts was that the pope, and indeed ecclesiastics of every rank, were bound to a life of evangelical poverty: *Omnes sacerdotes Christi, pape, cardinales, episcopi, abbates, priores vel eius subditi, tenentur sequi Christum in evangelica paupertate.*¹⁶

Chauntecler, whether we perceive him as prelate or priest, is veiled in the suggestion of pomp, indulgence, and wealth (at least whatever of these three is available to a chicken). He is with “Sevene hennes for to doon al his plesaunce” (2866).

What it is that Chauntecler is designed to represent, then, cannot easily be defined. On the one hand, he exemplifies certain Wycliffite notions of the corrupted prelacy, while on the other hand, his example illustrates the church’s leading apprehensions concerning unlicensed preaching. As a character who wavers between competing representations, as a character defined by duality, he can serve as ammunition for either side of the debate. That he is defined by duality is, I believe, most evident in the fact that his physical description is drawn from two directly opposed traditions, both of which were current in Chaucer’s time. The first was to use the chicken as the example of the ideal preacher, and it is in the works of Alexander Neckham, *Owst finds*, that we first find the preacher appearing as a cock, “with his comb and wattles, his morning crowing, his authority in the fowl-house, all carefully delineated in the picture to represent the right homiletical qualities” (*Owst* 7). Each of these traits is prominently displayed in Chauntecler: his

“coomb was redder than a fyn coral / And batailled as it were a castel wal” (2859), “In al the land, of crowyng nas his peer” (2850), and the yard, as mentioned before, is “his governaunce,” “his pasture” (3185) where “on is toos he rometh up and down” (3180). It is therefore tempting to think of Chauntecler as having been sketched from this figure. It is equally tempting to think of Chauntecler as belonging to the tradition explored at length by Charles Dahlberg, a tradition wherein “Chauntecler’s colours, red, black, azure, white and gold, are those which are associated with the priestly life ...[but] the principal one, gold, was taken by the *Allegoria* to represent ‘*vita sacerdotis*,’ which could be smirched by vice” (Dahlberg 286). Each of these traditions, or character blueprints, clearly acts upon the construction of Chauntecler, but it is equally clear that neither determines him, that to neither is he limited. He is in fact the conflation of the two variant *texts*, and it is precisely this conflation that makes Chauntecler such an intriguing character, one so adept at serving both the orthodox and heterodox sides of the *who ought to preach* debate.

Still, however, we cannot leave it at this, for while we can assert that Chauntecler can serve as material, or ammunition, for both heterodox and orthodox sides, we must concurrently acknowledge two things: first, as I mentioned in my introduction, that indictments of prelatric behaviour and calls for ecclesiastical reform came from figures within the orthodox camp no less frequently than they did from Wyclif’s; second, that without question Wyclif would be no less likely to disapprove of Chauntecler’s (in his role as preacher) lack of understanding (with regard to the *In principio* statement) or his bawdy, incontinent behaviour (with regard to his feathering Pertelote ~twenty times,

even). It is not simply a matter, then, of saying that here Chauntecler owes allegiance to that and here to this. The “that and this,” the orthodox and the heterodox, often converged.

Daun Russell’s example is the ideal illustration of this point, for while his behaviour, like Chauntecler’s, is intimating of an issue associated with Wycliffism, one I shall soon discuss, the line between Wycliffites and the orthodoxy on this issue was blurred. First, though, in so far as how Russell’s depiction in the NPT diverges from that in the *Roman*, we find a crucial point thereof. In the latter text, Renart makes no attempt to assuage or recapture Chauntecler, his angry response to Chauntecler’s jibes only that

La bouche, dist il, soit honnie,
 Qui s’entremet de noise fere
 A l’eure que il doit veillier
 (1632-1634).

By contrast, in the NPT we have

“Allas!” quod he, “O Chauntecler, allas!
 I have to yow,” quod he, ydoon trespas,
 In as mucche as I maked yow aferd
 Whan I yow hente and broghte out of the yerd.
 But, sire, I dide it in no wikke entente.
 Com down, and I shal telle yow what I mente;
 I shal seye sooth to yow, God help me so!”
 (3419-3425).

That Russell ends his plea with an oath, especially one of such affected sincerity, is worth looking at in some detail, for the offering of oaths (or the refusal to do so) was a matter on which Wycliffites were notoriously outspoken. Swinderby, for instance, perhaps the most outspoken of them all, was in 1391 brought before the bishop’s court to answer for his denouncement of oaths (among other articles);¹⁷ in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,

Kempe's adamant refusal to take oaths is treated as indicative of Lollardry;¹⁸ in the seven charges of heresy against Purvey, his position on oaths is given the same heretical weight as his advocacy of unlicensed preaching;¹⁹ in the register of Bishop Thomas Polton of Worcester, one of the questions to be asked of a suspect in an investigation of heresy was on the matter of oath-taking.²⁰ When a character such as Russell, one who is depicted as something of an anti-Christ, loving evil for the sheer sake of it,

Waitynge his tyme on Chauntecler to falle,
As gladly doon thise homycides alle
That in await ligen to mordre men.
O false mordroure, lurkyng in thy den!

(3223-3226)

is connected to the offering of oaths, it would seem a valid, sound claim to make that the link drawn between Russell and oaths bears an affinity to Wycliffite thinking, especially considering that several Lollards did colour the offering of oaths in an evil hue, a point most evident in the Lollard tract *The Prayer and the Plowman*, in which the anonymous author writes

Lord, thou geuest us a commandement of truth, in bidding us say yea yea, nay nay, and swear of nothing. Thou geue another of pooreness. But Lord he that clepeth himselfe thy vicar on earth, hath ybroken both these commandements, for he maketh a law to compel men to sweare, and by his lawes he teacheth that a man to saue his life, may forswere and lye.²¹

What hinders our rating of Russell's act, however, is the fact that the disparity between orthodox and heterodox thinkers on the matter of oaths was often negligible, even non-existent, and while this might seem something of a contradiction of the aforementioned examples of heresy charges, what it in fact illustrates is the absence of strict homogeneity among orthodox thinkers (just as such an absence defined the Lollard movement, which I

pointed out in my introduction), and an absence of definitive lines of division between the two camps. In an orthodox tract upon the Decalogue, for example, the unequivocal opinion is given:

Also thou schalt nout swere by diverse lymes of Criste an-ydel, as by herte and soule, by bones, woundes and his feet, ne by other lymes: for who so doth he despyseth and offendeth more Crist of hevene than dude the jewes that dyde Crist on the rode. Also, thou ne schalt nout swere by none creatures, as by sonne, by mone, by wynde, ne by none other creature that God ordeynede²²

and it is examples such as this that lead Owst to the conclusion that “upon the iniquities of swearing and the need for its denunciation the preachers, orthodox and unorthodox alike, are in perfect accord” (*Preaching* 416). More, in the homily-series known as *Jacob’s Well*, the sort of man who would employ “false othys” is described as a fox, “for a fox is a desseyvable beeste, and rathere he devowwryth and sleth tame bestys than wylde.”²³ It was in fact entirely commonplace among orthodox sermons for the fox to be used as a symbol of falsehood, “for they bigylen simple men, as foxes deseyven briddes that are simple, as hennes, geese and suche other, and lyven by falshed and ravyn, as foxes done.”²⁴ We could well argue, then, that the NPT’s sermon *exemplum* uses the fox in a manner echoic of this last example, and that thus Russell’s oath-giving is less an indication of Wycliffite thinking and more an example of a conventional literary/pulpit device. His offering of the oath serves only to confirm his falsehood, confirm that he “bigylen simple men” and “deseyven briddes.”

But this seems too quick, and perhaps too reductive, an answer. What I think would be more prudent to do is to look at what exactly Wyclif said of oaths and, in order to balance the view, what an orthodox figure who wrote and spoke extensively on oaths, such as

Bromyard, contributed. The former's position was moderate, on the one hand deprecating of excess in swearing, be it from force of habit or the belief that an oath lends greater weight to a statement, and, on the other hand, accepting the use of oaths in court, provided they be given in good conscience and not with the aid of a book upon which to swear.²⁵ The latter's position was much the same, for he writes in *Summa Predicantium* that swearing has become something of a trend,

[and] this is to be seen among those who consider themselves of high-breeding, or are proud. Just as they invent and delight in everything of the nature of outward appeal, so do they also in the case of vows and oaths ...Strange vows and swear words invented by them are already so common that they may be found daily in the mouths of any ribald or rascal as you may please.²⁶

The shared contempt between these two men for the perfunctory or rhetorical use of oaths is perhaps the best perspective through which to read Russell's use of oaths -- Russell's, as well as Chauntecler's, for three times Chauntecler swears ("By God, me mette I was in swich meschief" (2894), "By God, men may in oldes bookes rede" (2974), and "By God, I hadde levere than my sherte" (3120)), each time to add fervor, or rhetorical flair, to his preaching, a tactic which, as we can see, is precisely what both Wyclif and Bromyard deplored. That Russell attempts to affect a sincerity or lend a greater weight to his mollifying of Chauntecler's distrust and that Chauntecler swears either from an apparent force of habit or a desire to infuse expletory ornamentation into his sermonizing are examples of swearing and oath-giving that speak directly to both Wyclif's and Bromyard's respective reproaches, and that, most importantly, speak to a point upon which these two concur.

The possibility of such a concurrence leads me to the case of the farmer's widow, as her depiction, similar to Russell's, is cloaked in the raiment of a contemporary issue, but, no less audibly than in Russell's case, the widow speaks to a point of agreement between the heterodox and orthodox poles. Following the process established with Chauntecler and Russell, though, let me first acknowledge the distinction between the *Roman's* characterization of the widow and that of the NPT, because, again, it is within the properties of this distinction that the move to contemporize the tale within a collection of concerns, issues, or debates current to Chaucer's audience can best be discerned. In the *Roman*, the opening lines are as follows:

Il avint chose que Renart
 Qui tant est plain d'engin et d'art
 Et qui mout set de mainte guile,
 S'en vint corant a une vile.
 La vile seoit en un bos,
 Mout i ot gelines et cos,
 Anes marlarz et jars et oes.
 Et mesire Costant des Noes,
 I vilain qui mout ert garniz,
 Manoit mout pores du plaiseiz.
 Plenteive estoit sa meson
 De gelines et de chapons.
 Bien avoit garni son ostel,
 Assez I avoit I et el:
 Char salee, bacons, et fliches.
 De ce estoit li vilains riches,
 Et mout estoit bien herbergiez.
 Tout envorins ert li plaisiez,
 Mout I ot de bonnes cerises
 Et plusors fruiz de maintes guises:
 Pomes I ot et autre fruit

(1200-1229).

In the NPT, however, we read of the widow:

A povre wydwe, somdeel stape in age,
 Was whilom dwellyng in a narwe cotage,

Biside a grove, stondyng in a dale.
 This wydwe, of which I tele yow my tale,
 Syn thike that day that she was a wyf
 In pacience ladde a ful symple lyf,
 For litel was her catel and hir rente.
 By housbondrie of swich as God hire sente
 She foond hirself and eek hir doghtren two.
 Thre large sowe hadde she, and namo,
 Three keen, and eek a sheep that highte Malle.
 Ful sooty was hire bour and eek hir halle,
 In which she eet ful many a sklendre meel.
 Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel.
 No deyntee morsel passed through hir throte;
 Hir diete was accordant to hir cote.
 Repleccion ne made hire nevere sik;
 Attempre diete was al hir phisik,
 And exercise, and hertes suffisaunce
 (2820-2839).

Whereas the *Roman* paints a picture of the idyllic pastoral, the NPT draws a more mundane, accurate portrayal of the fourteenth century peasant class, emphasizing the poverty of the farmer's life and material surroundings, employing a more modest vocabulary of "suffisaunce," "litel" and "symple," and pointing to a lack rather than a surplus, as in "No deyntee morsel," "narwe cotage" and "namo" than three sows. In sharp contrast, the *Roman's* Costant enjoys an abundance and rich variety of provision, supping on "bonnes cerises" and "vilains riches." One is a "mesire," the other simply "povre," but, most importantly, one makes do "of swich as God hire sente," while her counterpart is laden with "pommis," "fruiz," "Char salee, bacons et fliches."

That emphasis here in the NPT is given to the idea of coping with basic supply, of living "In pacience ... a ful symple lyf," ought to be given our consideration, for the emphasis could well allude to what Hudson discovers to be "the most frequent biblical quotation used in Wycliffite writings, [that is] Timothy 6:8: 'And having food and

raiment let us therewith be content.”²⁷ Having identified the allusion, though, we ourselves cannot be “therewith content,” for while it is true that the Wycliffite notion of *vita apostolica* (humble, poor, simple living, in the example of the apostles)²⁸ is located within the widow’s description, it must in conjunction be recognized that from the orthodox camp came praise of the modest life as well, and with no less vigour.

Bromyard, for instance, advises the poor that when they should come in view of the wealthy’s opulent manner, to “say in their own hearts ‘I prefer my rustic poverty, with security and happiness, to those splendid banquets and robes with remorse of conscience, so many snares of men and demons and the fear of punishments in hell.’”²⁹ Bromyard, in fact, held that the departure from the modest life would lead gradually but inevitably to a state of wanton, unsuppressible avarice,³⁰ “for if [a man] have a house, he wants a village; if he have a village, he desires a whole city; If he has got the latter, he desires a country, and then a kingdom. To be sure, even if he have a whole kingdom, he will not be content, not even if he alone should have all the kingdoms of the world.”³¹

Bromyard’s words, and those of so many of his contemporaries, orthodox or not, bring Owst to conjecture that “[because] a continuous stream of scorn and reproof for all the current sources of pride and prestige in medieval society poured forth from the pulpits ...the ears of the people must have grown quite familiar with homiletic phrases that often sounded to them like so many threats of destruction for the powerful and rich”

(*Literature and the Pulpit* 236). Wyclif was in the company of numerous orthodox preachers, many just as ardent as he, in his advocacy of the *vita apostolica*; thus it would be prejudicial to assign the influence of the NPT’s opening lines to Wycliffism

and neglectful to claim that the lines, whatever their influence, speak strictly in favour of Wycliffite doctrine. Gradon, in her study of the Wycliffite influence upon Langland's work, finds that though Langland and Wyclif are aligned on this notion of the modest life (especially for, but not exclusive to, the cleric), evident in Langland's

Taket h hire landes, ye lordes, and leteth hem lyuve by dymes.
 If possession be poison and inparfite hem make
 (Charite) were to deschargen hem for holy chirches sake,
 And purgen hem of poison er moore peril falle
 (B xv, 564-7)

and in several other passages,³² she concludes that no necessary connection can be drawn between the two men's work, "for the idea [of modest living] was neither new nor novel when Wyclif advanced it" (Gradon 186). Gradon's finding is, I believe, crucial to our question of how Chaucer's audience would have rated the NPT's orthodox/heterodox affiliation, for while it is evident that portions of the NPT --those portions that markedly differ from the *Roman's* source material-- allude to the Wycliffite, ecclesiastical debate context, it is equally evident that Chauntecler's irregular, dualistic portrayal and the fox's and widow's reference to points of agreement between the orthodox and heterodox camps confine the modern reader's assessment of audience reception to the assertion that the NPT prevents itself, deliberately or not, from being designated as exclusively, or especially, sympathetic to one of the two sides.

ENDNOTES

¹ The latter was written sometime between 1174 and 1205, and the former sometime afterwards, though exactly how long is unknown. See “Les Particularites du *Roman de Renart*” in the introduction of the France Tosho edition (1983).

² See Patricia Terry’s translation of the *Roman de Renart* (Northeastern University Press, 1983), p.26.

³ See *Preaching in Medieval England*, especially pp. 1-48 and 96-144.

⁴ *Nullus, inquam, fidelis dubitat quin deus posset dare layco potentiam conficiendi ... Ymmo videtur iuxta testimonium Augustini, Crisostomi et aliorum sanctorum quod omnis predestinatus laycus est sacerdos, et multo magis devotus laycus conficiens, cum daret ecclesie sacrum ministerium, haberet rationem sacerdotis*

(*De Eucharista* 98-9).

Leff explains exactly how “this was tantamount to a denial of the priesthood as an order [and] as such it must be accounted the single most destructive and heretical feature of Wyclif’s writings” (Leff 520). Elsewhere, Wyclif argues that a preacher need not be ordained or instructed by the church to preach. See *De Officio Regis*, 149.

⁵ *Confessio* iii, 374

⁶ Swinderby was something of a celebrity among the Wycliffites, described (in Owst) by an anonymous historian as a man “who captured the affability of the crowd, and attracted their friendship to such an extent that they would say that never had they seen or heard anyone expound to them the truth like him; and thus he was revered as another god among them.” See *Preaching in Medieval England*, p.126. See also K.B. McFarlane’s *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity* (London 1952), p.135, where he describes Swinderby as “perhaps the very greatest of the Lollard evangelists.”

⁷ Quoted in Hudson, *Lollards and Their Books*, 156.

⁸ *Middle English Dictionary* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1972).

⁹ Robert Pratt examines the dream debate’s indebtedness to Robert Holcot’s *Super Sapientiam Salomis*, which, according to Pratt, was Chaucer’s primary source for the tale’s reflections on dreams. See Pratt’s “Some Latin Sources of the Nonnes Preest on Dreams” pp.539-560.

¹⁰ Another concern was for the hypocrisy the church attributed to most Lollard preachers. Hilton writes

Bot all thaire stody es outward for to seme haly to the sygth of the werld; and thair besy for to visete haly men and wyse men and see thaim, and for to here of thaim gud wordis of edificacione, that thaim mygth preche and telle the same wordis that thaim have herd to other men with avauntyng and vayne glory of thaim, that thaim can sai sa wele

(MS. Rawl. C. 285, fol. 69).

Owst looks at other texts which suggest that “the commonest portrait of the ordinary Lollard preacher as drawn by orthodox hands ...is that of the hypocrite, who feigns piety in order to indulge his secret pride or become the darling of the people” (*Preaching*, p.138). See also *Preaching*, pp.135-141.

¹¹ MS. Rawl. C. 285, fol. 69.

¹² *Middle English Dictionary*, 3rd def. To see Chaucer's uses of the term *lewed* elsewhere in the *Tales*, see GP I 502 ("For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste, / No wonder is a lewed man to ruste"); Squire's Tale V 223 ("As lewed peple demeth comunly / Of thynges that had been maad moore subtilly / Than they kan in hir lewednesse comprehende"); GP I 574 ("Now it is nat that of God a ful fair grace / That swich a lewed mannes wit shal pace / The wisdom of an heep of lerned men?"); Parson's Tale X 759.

¹³ *De Potestate Pape*, 226

¹⁴ Daniel 7-12 describes the vision given to Daniel on the fate of the Jews.

¹⁵ *De Potestate Pape*, 120-4

¹⁶ *Opera Minora*, 20. See also *Trialogus* 298, 302, 348; *De Veritate* III, 5; *De Blasphemia* 32-6.

¹⁷ The case is fully detailed in *Registrum Johannis Trefnant* (Canterbury and York Society, London 1916). See especially pp. 235-251.

¹⁸ Hoping to lead Margery into a confession of Lollard thinking, Archbishop Bowet confronts her with the opportunity to take an oath, "þow schaplt sweryn þat þu ne xalt tachyn ne chalengyn þe þepil in my diocese," but Margery refuses, "Nay syr, I xal not sweryn ...for I xal spekyn of God & undirnemyn hem þat sweryn gret othys wher-so-euyr I go vn-to þe tyme þat þe Pope & Holy Chirche hath ordeynde þat no mal schal be so hardy to spekyn of God, for God almighty forbedith not, ser, þat we xal speke of hym" and is able to evade the ensnarement. Quoted in Staley, p.149.

¹⁹ Fasciculi Zinanium, quoted in Leff, p.579. The FZ was completed sometime near 1439 (compiler unknown) and, though it contains several documents relevant to the opposition between the Church and Wyclif (confessions of accused heretics, lists of errors found by ecclesiastical investigators in Lollard texts, biographical information on Wyclif, Purvey, Aston, and others, etc.), it is generally regarded to have been compiled by chroniclers hostile to Wyclif and to the heterodox movement in general. See Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, pp.43-45.

²⁰ Worcester, St. Helen's Record Office, Reg, Thomas Polton. For discussion, see Hudson, *Lollards and Their Books*, pp.120-129.

²¹ Quoted in Russell's "Lollard Opposition to Oaths by Creatures," p.675.

²² MS. Harl. 2398, fol. 2b.

²³ *Jacob's Well*, p.118 (E.E.T.S. ed).

²⁴ MS. Roy. 8. C. I, fol. 130b.

²⁵ *De Officio Regis*, pp.218-19

²⁶ Quoted in Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, p.414.

²⁷ See Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p.338.

²⁸ *Trialogus*, 47

²⁹ *Summa Predicantium*: "Ministratio"

³⁰ For discussion of Bromyard on the merchant class, lordships, and other locations of greed he identified, see Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, especially pp.301-324.

³¹ MS. Camb. Univ. Libr. Li.iii. 8, fol. 149b.

³² See Gradon, especially pp.187-190.

CHAPTER THREE

There remain three substantial innovations upon the *Roman*'s source material that I want to examine, but because these innovations are different in character from the three already discussed, it is perhaps more accurate that they be called interjections, rather than innovations. Each of the NPT's Chauntecler, Russell, and farmer's widow diverges from the *Roman* mostly in terms of character development; that is, each of their *effictios* is modified and portions of dialogue are notably altered (the dream dialogue, Russell's comments after having lost Chauntecler). Where I will now move is to three segments of text in the NPT that have no immediate source in the *Roman*, that have the character more of an interjection, an interruption, than an innovation upon already existing material. The first of these segments is the theological digression made by the narrator; the second is the narrator's reference to the Peasant's Revolt; the third and final is the narrator's disclaimer regarding the use of *fables*, the same disclaimer that initiated my study. I am inclined to classify these segments as interjections, rather than as innovations, not only because they lack direct reference in the *Roman*, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because each of them generates a kind of abeyance, a temporary suspension, in the narrative action, much in the same way that an interjection in conversation temporarily detains the flow of thought or words, normally with the hope of adding something novel and/or significant to the discussion at hand. In each of the three cases this abeyance is achieved in a different way, but common to all is the sense of dislocation that occurs as a result of the action being interrupted, a point upon which I shall elaborate in the examination of each segment.

The first of these interjections occurs between the discussion on dreams and the encounter between Russell and Chauntecler. In the *Roman*, there is no halt, no lapse, in the narrative action, but instead a vivid, dramatic description of Russell's advance upon Chauntecler:

“Bele, fet il, ce n’i a mie,
 A fable ert le songe tornez.”
 A cest mot s’en estoit tornez
 En la poudriere au souleil,
 Et conmenca a cliner l’oil,
 Ne doute que gorpil s’i mete.
 Mes Renart qui le siecle abete,
 Si tost con il oi la noise,
 Besse la teste si s’acroise.
 Chauntecler s’est aseurez,
 Mout fu Renart amesurez
 Et vesiez a grant merveille.
 Et qaunt il voit que cil sonmeille,
 De lui s’apprime sanz demeure
 Renart qui tot le mont aquere
 Et qui mout sot de mauves tors.
 Pas avant autre sanz escors,
 S’en va Renart le col bessant

(1456-1473).

In the NPT, however, the narrative space between the dream dialogue and Chauntecler's capture is interrupted by, following a playful (and altogether humorous) comparison of Chauntecler to Adam and Russell to “the false dissymulour,”¹ a twelve line theological discussion of foreknowledge and free will:

But I ne kan nat bulte it to the bren,
 As kan the hooly doctour Augustyn,
 Or Boece, or the Bisshop Bradwardyn,
 Wheither that Goddes worthy forwityng
 Streyneþ me nedely for to doon a thyng,--
 ‘Nedely’ clepe I symple necessitee;
 Or elles, if free choys be graunted me
 To do that same thyng, or do it noght,
 Though God forwoot it er that I was wroght;

Or if his wityng streyneth never a deel
 But by necessitee condicioneel

(3240-3252).

F. Payne has looked at this passage in considerable detail and, by comparing its theological arguments to those in Bradwardine's *De Cause Dei*, Boethius' Book V of the *Consolation*, and Augustine's *De Libero Arbitrio*, each of which is invoked in the narrator's ponderous digression, Payne finds that all three "hooly doctour[s]" are satirized, but that of the three "it is the Boethian theory that engages the largest share of [the passage's] mockery" (Payne 210). I would like to add to Payne's findings, for while her study of the passage's connections to the respective works of Bradwardine, Augustine, and Boethius is no less exhaustive than it is persuasive,² she compares the texts in isolation, that is, without taking into account the larger context of the contemporary debate that surrounded the preaching of theology in the vernacular, a context we can hardly avoid, given the subject matter of the passage.

Though we cannot ignore it, the context is not easily defined. To begin with, Wyclif, in his basic premise that it was the duty of each Christian to be an avid theologian and to consult not just the "naked text" of the Bible, to operate not just in a *scriptura sola* vacuum, but also to afford serious consideration to existing theological studies,³ was never entirely clear on how important the use of vernacular was in those secondary sources (but having an English translation of the Bible was, of course, central to Wyclif's doctrine).⁴ He did believe that sermons offered only in Latin reflected the desire of the preacher, and most often a friar, to maintain a superior position to that of the "*sacerdos ruralis exiliter literatus*,"⁵ to, as Owst puts it,

...keep the fruits of his own labours to his equals, if not entirely to his own

orders, away from the half-literate priest or the layman, of whose progress in theological mysteries he became so jealous.⁶

More, Wyclif's sentiments were echoed by his followers, one saying

sith prelates as scribes, and religious as Pharisees sayen it falleth not to hem [the laity and simple priests] to know God's Law; for they sayen it is so high, so holy, so subtle, that all only scribes and Pharisees should speak of this law ...And these religious ben Pharisees, for they be divided fro common men of living.⁷

and another

They [those employing only Latin] hyden the trewht, as seith Isaie the profite --'this peple is of high sermone,' so that we may not undirstonde the sleghtnes of her tong in whiche is no wisdome.⁸

There was, though, among orthodox preachers as well a desire to speak of and from the Bible in the vernacular. The dilemma that these preachers faced was, as Hudson explains, that on the one hand they did not want to bear the mark of heterodoxy by employing vernacular in their discussion of the Gospel, but on the other hand it was necessary to preach in the language common to their audience:

thou in be þese dayis defendit and inhybyzt be somme prelatis þat men schulde techin þe gospel in Englych ...sithe it is leful to prechin the gospel in Englych, it is leful to wrytin it in Englych boþin to þe techere and to þe herere ...somme prelatis han defendyt me to techin þe gospel and to wrytin it in Englych ...I haue wretin þe gospel to you in wol gret drede and persecucion ...now prechinge and techinge of þe gospel and of Goddys lawe is artid and lettid more þan it was wone to ben.⁹

Where exactly the NPT's passage would fall into this debate is difficult to say. First, Wyclif was primarily concerned with the vernacular translation of the Bible and, as Owst's and Hudson's respective studies show, the Wycliffites were mainly concerned with the vernacular preaching of the gospel, and, as the above examples also indicate, not so much with the more esoteric theological considerations of foreknowledge and free

will. Second, the passage in the NPT is less a serious inroad, or incursion, into theological study and more a narrative after thought, a digression from the tale followed by the concession “I wol nat han to do of swich mateere; / My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere” (3253-3254). That the passage in the NPT is sympathetic to the Wycliffite call for increased vernacular literature drawing directly from, or commenting upon, the Bible is unlikely.

It would be premature, however, to leave the matter at this, for Wyclif’s insistence upon a vernacular translation of the Bible fostered years of pointed debate among orthodox ranks as to what and how the preacher ought to preach, a debate that finally culminated in Arundel’s prohibition, in the seventh article of his *Constitutions*, of any translation of sacred text into English:

*statimus igitur et ordinamus, ut nemo deinceps aliquem textum sacrae scripture auctoritate sua in linguam Anglicanam, vel aliam transferat, per viam libri, libelli, aut tractatus, nec legatur aliquis hujusmodi liber, libellus, aut tractatus jam noviter tempore dicti Johannis Wycliff, sive citra, compositus, aut in posterum componendus, in parte vel in toto, publice, vel occulte...*¹⁰

and, just as significantly, in the sixth article, in his the prohibition of any book, English or Latin, dealing with matters of theology that had not been approved by the archbishop or an appointed church investigator.¹¹ It is with this sixth article that we are concerned, for the NPT does something quite interesting with its theological digression. Specifically, because of the interjection, the action of the narrative is halted, creating a lapse, and during this lapse the audience is asked to associate the highly cerebral, theological thoughts of three of the church’s “hooly doctours” with, of all things, a chicken:

Thou were ful wel ywarned by the dremes
That thilke day was perilous to thee;
But what that God forwoot moot nedes be

After the opinion of certain clerkis
(3232-3235).

A kind of defamiliarization occurs in the somewhat incongruent, bizarre, but perfectly hilarious association. The familiar, whether we deem it to be the chicken or the theological tracts, is placed in an unusual, even alien, context, and thus we have either a chicken described in terms of high philosophy, or high philosophy explained in terms of a chicken. Either way, the result is, simply put, very funny. What occurs, then, is that the NPT, while not an example of the sort of vernacular literature hoped for by Wyclif and his kind, is nevertheless brought into the debate by playing with the question of what theological commentary, given in the vernacular or not, is appropriate. It is not an attack on the orthodox position, but rather, I believe, a playful --and quite humorous-- contribution to the debate. It amounts to the narrator facetiously asking whether our mock heroic Chauntecler is proper material for theological discussion, whether Chauntecler's example would be adequate matter for theological disputation in the universities (appropriate points of academic theological disputation being what Arundel's eighth article attempts to define).¹² Further, I say the passage is a contribution to the *debate*, and not an attack on the orthodox *position*, for the reason that (as I mentioned in my first chapter) the *Constitutions* was not designed until 1407, several years after Chaucer's death, and as Hudson's study demonstrates, the *Constitutions* marked the "terminal date" of the debate; it put into law the positions that in the years before 1407 and after Wyclif's death were evolving among the orthodox ranks.¹³ The NPT, while the debate is evolving towards a clearly defined position, contributes an interjectory

comment, one that, as I said earlier, aims to add something novel and/or significant to the discussion at hand, but does so quite jokingly.

Equally arresting of our attention, but perhaps not so amusing as the theological “study,” is the reference made to the Peasant’s Revolt in the description of the pandemonium following Chauntecler’s capture:

So hydous was the noyse, a, benedictee!
 Certes, he Jakke Strawe and his meynee
 Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille
 What that they wolden any Flemyng kille
 As tilke day was maad upon the fox
 (3393-3397).

Here, however, we cannot speak of this passage as an interjection rather than an innovation, for in fact both classifications apply. In the *Roman*, we do indeed find a description of frenzied activity following Chauntecler’s capture,

Par ou s’en va? Par ci tour droit
 Le vilain corent a exploit
 Et tuit crient: “Or ca, or ca!”
 Renart l’oi qui devant va.
 Quant Renart l’ot, si sailli sus,
 Si q’ua terre ne fiert li cus.
 Le saut c’a fait ont cil oi,
 Tuit s’escrient: “O ci, o ci!”
 Costant lor dist: “Or tost apres!”
 Les vilains corent a escles,
 Costant apeloit son mastin
 Que l’on apeloit Malvoisin.
 A corre c’ont fet l’ont veu,
 Et Renart ont aperceu
 (1587-1600),

and thus there exists a source in the *Roman*, a particular passage, from which the NPT draws its innovation. Where, though, we can think of it as an interjection, as an interruption, as something “wrenched into the poem,” as one critic puts it,¹⁴ is in the

manner in which this reference to a contemporary event, one of such brutal violence, generates a kind of dislocation between the imagined world of the *fable* and the actual world of the audience. In an interjectory moment, the audience's attention is forcibly drawn away from the safely distant, fantastic realm of the narrative and transported directly into an unsettling, contemporary event in the realm of the actual. The narrative flow speaks no longer of the fate of a chicken, and an imaginary chicken at that, but instead of the "Flemyngs" killed, implicitly referring to those, including the Archbishop Sudbury and the participants themselves, who were executed. Some critics, such as P. Travis, have found the five-line passage troubling, arguing that "Unless one finds human slaughter to be a sprightly witticism, no matter what one's political persuasion there is an unsettling dissonance in this casual juxtaposition of comic alarms and grotesque brutality" (Travis 215), whereas other critics, such as Pearsall, are less troubled with the insertion of the reference, arguing that the passage reflects Chaucer's contempt towards the riot's participants, that their comparison to unruly barnyard animals is entirely apt.¹⁵ At this point, it is not my intention to address the issue of whether the reference is suitable, whether it undermines the tale's declared purpose of "telle us swich a thyng as may oure hertes glade" (2810). That discussion I shall defer to my conclusion. Of immediate concern to me is whether the passage is indicative of either heterodox or orthodox sympathy, for in its condemnation of the rioters, that is, speaking of their indiscriminate, wanton murdering ("any Flemyng kille"), it would seem that the passage is reproachful of those implicated in the revolt.

Such a judgement, however, is immediately confronted with two problems of definition: first, in terms of “those implicated in the revolt,” the question of whether elements from the heterodox or orthodox camp were responsible for the revolt is not easily determined; second, in terms of determining orthodox or heterodox sympathy, indictments of the riot came from both the heterodox and orthodox sides. Regarding the first of these problems, on the one hand, certain leaders among the orthodoxy held that Wyclif’s teachings were instrumental in the riot. Walsingham’s chronicles, for example, allege that Wyclif’s views on ecclesiastical poverty and the corruption inherent in wealth were, in 1381, published *modo per se, modo per sequaces suos, modo scriptis, modo praedicationibus*, this last being *praedicationibus in vulgari plebe inexecrabiliter declamantis*,¹⁶ and according to both Walsingham and Knighton, John Balle was nothing less than a disciple of Wyclif’s (*Iohannes Balle, unus, ut dicebatur, de Iohannis Wyclyf discipulus*).¹⁷ More, in the *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, we find the alleged confession of John Balle to the effect that

*erat certa comitiva de secta et doctrina Wyclyff qui conspiraverant quandam condoederationem, et de ordinaverant circuire totam Angliam praedicando praedicti Wyclyf materias quas docuerat, ut sic simul tota Anglia consentiret suae doctrinae ... Unde adjecit quod nisi foret resistentia facta praedictis ipsi infra biennium destrueret totum regnum.*¹⁸

On the other hand, Owst’s study of the content of pulpit sermons given prior to and following the Revolt¹⁹ reveals that from the orthodox camp came abundant motivation for the poor to exact vengeance upon the wealthy, to take arms against an oppressive merchant and/or noble class. Bromyard, for instance, prophesied that

Many who here on earth are called nobles shall blush in deepest shame at that Judgement-seat, when around their necks they shall carry, before all the

world, all the sheep and oxen and the beasts of the field that they confiscated or seized and did not pay for. God himself, perchance, shall place the latter on them, He who shall bring to judgement all things whatsoever that have been done.²⁰

Another orthodox sermon holds that

Certes it semeth that it may not be with-oute grete outrage and synne that oon persone schal have for his owne bidy so many robes and clothinges in a zere of dyverse coloures, and riches, thorgh whiche many pore men and nedy persones myght be sufficiantly susteyned and clothed as charite asketh. And thit, if suche robes and clothes, after that thei have wered hem as longe as hem lust, were afterward geven to the pore nedy, and for love of God, it schulde it somewhat helpe to the soul. But thei beth geven comounliche to harlottes, mynstralles, flaterers, glosers and other suche; and that is grete synne.²¹

These and other examples of pronounced hostility towards the wealthy lead Owst to conclude that “We have at last a measure of the extent to which the preaching of ...orthodox churchmen of the day was ultimately responsible for the outbreak of the Peasant’s Revolt” (*Literature and Pulpit*, 304).

Regarding the second of these problems, we must keep in mind that while the church, first, maintained the Lollard influence to be that which precipitated the violence and, second, then exploited the example of the riot to gain increased support from secular powers to remove heterodox texts and the promulgation thereof from the public domain,²² Wyclif himself recoiled from any association with the riot and made a point, in *De Blasphemia*,²³ of speaking out against it, blaming the unruly mob for the fate they met at the hands of Richard II:

All things not to the will of the Lord must end miserably ...As all suffering results from sin, it cannot be denied that in this case the sin of the people was the cause.²⁴

It would therefore be no less impulsive than it would be imprudent to assume that within the passage in question resides an *either* orthodox *or* heterodox disposition, as figures

from both the orthodox and heterodox side contributed equally, or at least collectively, to both the incitement and the condemnation of the Revolt. We are perforce obliged to concede that, in terms of Chaucer's immediate audience's reception, the interjection of the Revolt reference would likely carry an open, indeterminate signification, that from it the narrator's inclination could be toward neither, either, or both of the two sides. His condemnation alludes to both Wyclif's own and the church's, and the condemnation itself could apply to either the Lollards reputedly behind the insurrection or the orthodox preachers who generated an atmosphere conducive to dissent.

On this topic of condemnation coming from both sides, I am brought back to the passage that prompted my study; that is, the disclaimer:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,
 As of a fox, or a cock and a hen,
 Taketh the moralitee, goode men.
 For seint Paul seith that al that written is,
 To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
 Taketh the fruit, and lat the chaf be stille
 (3438-3444).

In my introduction, I left open the question of how we ought to understand these lines, as I believe that only now, after some of the obstacles in interpreting certain passages have been examined and illustrated, can we afford to give this passage the attention it warrants. We have seen where and how the distinctions between orthodox and heterodox are not easily defined, are even non-existent; we have seen where passages that speak to the ecclesiastical debates of the period speak without exclusive or definitive affiliation to either side; we have seen where and why we are prevented from making conclusive remarks on the reception of certain passages in the NPT by Chaucer's contemporary

audience. Where I would now like to turn is to the last lines of the NPT, for their reading entails all of the above.

In the *Roman*, no such disclaimer is given.²⁵ Following the statement of the tale's lesson, the narrative generates a bridge between this tale and the next:

Renart s'en va toute une sente,
 Mout est dolent, mout se demente
 De coc qui li est eschapez,
 Que il ne s'en est saoulez.
 Renart se plaint de s'aventure[...]
 (1651-1655).

In the NPT, the passage is less an interjection in the narrative (the narrative, or tale, at this point having been completed) than it is an interjection in the text; that is, it is interjected immediately prior to the Epilogue, where the host, first, heartily congratulates the narrator and, second, teasingly comments on the host's "gret nekke ..and large breest!" (3456). The tale has come to an end, the moral provided, but before the narrator's audience are allowed the opportunity to comment on, or privately decide upon, their reactions, the narrator moves to intercede on the tale's behalf. The interjection, if I may employ the following analogy, is akin to a performance wherein subsequent to the blackout and final curtain the lead actor emerges from sidestage to ask of the audience, before it decides to either applaud, hiss, or indifferently exit the playhouse, to "keep in mind that...," to take into consideration a certain factor prior to submitting a verdict.

Why this interjectory move is made is considered by S. Manning, who views the passage through the perspective of the Medieval attitude towards the use of fables.²⁶ Owst, Hudson and Staley also examine in their respective studies how fables were perceived among orthodox and heterodox ranks, and they do this because the use of

fables, like the Peasant's Revolt, like the discussion of theological (especially, though not only, in the vernacular) subjects, like the matter of who ought to preach, like the matter of oaths, and like the matter of *vita apostolica*, immediately summons to mind the larger, intricate context of the contemporary ecclesiastical debates. As I discussed in my synopsis of his doctrine, Wyclif held Scripture, the uncorrupted, primary text of the Bible, to be the most direct path to self-illumination and to the truest comprehension of what it was to be Christian. Accordingly, the preacher should take

*exempla sacre scripture et pertinentis veritatis, non de fabulis falsis aut poeticis vel sompniis ludicriis, ut faciunt falsi fratres.*²⁷

Lollard texts are replete with angry criticism on the popularity and use of the *fable* --one of these criticisms I find especially apt as it is reproachful in particular of the *fable* that alludes to the Trojan war, an event that is in fact infused into the narrative of the NPT:

Lo heere Andromacha, Ectores wyf,
That day that Ector scholde lese his lyf,
She dremed on that same nyght biforn
How that the lyf of Ector sholde be lorn,
If thilke day he wente into bataille
(3141-3145).

Indeed, so numerous and direct are the connections between Chauntecler and Troy that one critic entitles her work "'To Make in som Comedye': Chauntecler, Son of Troy."²⁸

Significantly, one Lollard text reads: "þei schulden not preche cronyclis of þo world, as þo batel of Troye, ne oþer nyse fablis...,"²⁹ and another inveighs against those who

*iactant se facturos tam bonam predicacionem de historia Hectoris Troye, Achilles aut vnius talis pagani sicut de sanctissima historia ewangelica.*³⁰

Although Wycliffites did not regard the *fable* as especially pernicious, they did believe that its inclusion in the sermon, or its use to convey morals or truth, would in some way

vitiating Biblical truth and distract the audience's attention from the more relevant, more factual, scriptural texts.³¹ More, the refusal to employ *fables* was often regarded as indicative of Wycliffite thinking, as Staley's examination of Kempe's *fables* demonstrates.³²

The question of employing this literary form does not end here, though, for we find no less often from the orthodox side instances of hostility towards the form. Owst's study of sermon texts finds that

...few English orthodox moralists of the age failed to incorporate their own rebuke for the preacher of 'fablis and lesyngis' and indecencies in some section of their written sermons.³³

Nicholas de Aquavilla, for instance, disapproved entirely of "trufas et fabulas," maintaining that (in Owst's words) "the preacher's duty was to instruct, not to amuse or even terrify" (*Preaching* 236).

It would be an inadequate response, then, to assume that the narrator's decision to employ the *fable* implies an anti-Wycliffite sentiment, despite the fact that the Parson, seen by Hudson, for example, to embody certain Wycliffite sympathies, refuses to tell a fable:

Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me,
For Paul, that writeth unto Tymothee,
Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse
And tellen fables and swich wreccednesse
(X 31-34).

Similar to the case of the Peasant's Revolt (at least in the following aspect), condemnation for the matter in question flowed from either side; here, as in the matter of oath-giving, the heterodox and the orthodox converge, and as a result we once again are

left with a passage of indeterminable sympathy or affiliation, a passage to which a reader can assign no indisputable location in the related ecclesiastical debate without applying a measurable degree of contextual prejudice, that is, without discriminating in favour of either the heterodox or orthodox preacher's condemnation of the *fable*. I do believe, however, that to content ourselves with the fact that the questions of *fables*, the Peasant's Revolt, the theological digression, and indeed all of the passages examined leave us to concede that in each case heterodox or orthodox affiliation and/or sympathy is problematic to discern would be to rest with far too mechanical, far too unsatisfying, a reading of the NPT. Each case in isolation invariably leads to a variation upon, or a confirmation of, the aforementioned conclusion, but if we are to speak of how the tale would likely have been received by its contemporary audience, of whether, as I ask in my preface, the tale would come so close to heterodoxy that its audience would perceive something suggestive in it, we are obliged to look at the collective impact of the passages I have examined, rather than the individual heterodox/orthodox value of each. Whereas a modern reader, like myself, can remove from the tale individual passages and, through the immersion of each of those passages into a contained, selected mixture of pertinent historical contexts, arrive at something like a litmus test by which indications of degrees of heterodoxy and orthodoxy are measured, the NPT's contemporary audience would perhaps be less dissecting and/or calculating, less detached and/or exacting, in their reading. This is by no means to suggest that the latter reader affords to the text less attentive or earnest a critique, but instead, that the modern reader, rather, might, in the endeavour to generate plausible conclusions regarding what and how a given portion of

text signifies, fail to see the forest from the trees, fail to see how in co-ordination, or orchestration, the individual components of the machine operate to make the whole run. It is to this notion of the collective impact of the passages examined that I would now like to turn, for what I think we shall find is that the NPT does not weigh close enough to heterodoxy to be deemed dangerous or challenging, but rather, that the NPT ultimately holds true to its declared purpose of entertaining, of amusing, its audience, and that it achieves this end with its playful, non-committal, humorous allusions to the ecclesiastical debates.

ENDNOTES

¹ The comparison is also made to Cain and Abel. See Payne's "Foreknowledge and Free Will: Three Theories in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*," pp.210-212.

² Payne begins by defining each of the three theologians' respective arguments. Bradwardine offers the more radical determinist view wherein freedom is an illusion and God is ultimately responsible (as the cause) for all action and thought. Augustine holds that we are free to think and behave however we like, but that God has foreknowledge of all these things. Boethius offers the view of conditional necessity, wherein God's foreknowledge has no effect upon our actions but we are constrained in what we do by the action itself. When somebody walks, for instance, they must in fact be walking, that is, abiding by the rules of the *walk* action. Payne then explains how exactly Chauntecler's example parodies each of these views, particularly the last. See Payne, especially pp.205-209.

³ *De Veritate Scriptura* I, 378

⁴ Hudson finds that Wyclif was not explicitly concerned with the use of vernacular in sermons (or of the use of vernacular in general) until the last two years of his life. Even then, his primary focus was on the translation of the Bible. See Hudson, *Lollards and Their Books*, pp.144-154

⁵ *Sermones* I, 17

⁶ Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England*, 227.

⁷ MS Trin. Coll. Camb. 60, fol. 2b.

⁸ MS Laing 140, Univ. Libr. Edinburgh, fol. 3b.

⁹ MS Longleat f. 1rb-va.

¹⁰ Quoted in Hudson, *Lollards and Their Books*, p.148.

¹¹ See Hudson, p.146-47. See also Leff's *Heresy in the Middle Ages*, pp.570-71. Both Leff and Hudson employ the copy of Arundel's *Constitutions* in D. Wilkins' *Concilia Magnae Britannia* (1737), iii, 314-19.

¹² See Hudson, p.147.

¹³ In 1401, for example, the debate was still well under way with people such as William Butler, a friar, arguing that the participation of the laity (via vernacular texts) in theological questions was counter-productive, as they would be unable to grasp the more sophisticated ideas. He refers to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, arguing that "*quanto maior est populus, tanto minor vel remotior est intellectum*" (Butler's work is to be found in MS Oxford Merton College 68 fol. 202-204). Wycliffites responded with the argument that many of the laity are in fact literate and more than capable of understanding the more difficult concepts. It is better that these people "*ocupie hem and othere in redeyng of Goddis lawe and deuocion than in redeyng of lesyng, rebaudie and vanite*" (MS Cambridge University Library li.6.26. fol. 3).

¹⁴ See P.Travis's "Chaucer's Trivial Fox Chase and the Peasant's Revolt of 1381," p.215.

¹⁵ See D.Pearsall, p.147.

¹⁶ *Chronicon Anglie*, 311. Also, in *Historia Anglicana* ii, 11-12: *Wyclife et sequaces ejus ...longe lateque per patrias populum maculando suam praedicationem dilatasse; ita*

ut pene majores provinciarum eorum primo sequerentur errorem ...et majorem exempla minores sequerentur. Quoted in Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 66-67.

¹⁷ *Historia Anglicana*, ii, 32-3

¹⁸ FZ 272-4.

¹⁹ See Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, pp.287-307.

²⁰ *Summa Predicantium*, "Judicium Divinum." Quoted in Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, 302.

²¹ MS Harl. 45, fol. 164.

²² See Leff's "The Persecution of Wyclif and Oxford Lollardry" in *Heresy in the Middle Ages*, ii, pp.560-573.

²³ *De Blasphemia*, 189-99, 267-9

²⁴ Quoted in R.B. Dobson, ed. *The Peasant's Revolt of 1381, 2nd Edition* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983). Interestingly, Hudson sees a more equivocal Wyclif, pointing to his remark in *De Blasphemia* that the common people acted only somewhat outside of the law (*nec dubium quin punitores, licet maiores bonos instinctus habuerint, non plene fecerunt ad regulam, De Blasphemia* 190/15-17). Hudson believes Wyclif reserved most of his invective for the clergy who "got what they deserved" (*nec dubium quin tantum malum solum inicum sit dolorum, cum clerus infinitum maius demeruit, De Blasphemia* 190/14-15). See Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, pp.67-69.

²⁵ Of course, one tale in the *Roman* leads quickly into the next, but we find no apology or disclaimer at either the beginning or end of the *Roman*. In fact, the narrator rarely reveals himself, except for brief and indirect allusions to the contemporary French royal court. For discussion, see P. Terry's preface to her translation of the text (Northeastern University Press, 1983), pp.3-21.

²⁶ See S. Manning's "The Nun's Priest's Morality and the Medieval Attitude Toward Fables," especially pp.410-416. Manning, after having compared the NPT's disclaimer to the views on sermons including fables given by Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard, Augustine, Wyclif, and a few others, concludes, "I suspect that in the NPT Chaucer is poking fun at those who felt that a poem had to have some moral in order to justify its existence" (416).

²⁷ Laud Misc. 200, ff. 190r-v. Quoted in Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p.270.

²⁸ Lynn Staley Johnson's "'To Make in Som Comedye': Chauntecler, Son of Troy" (*Chaucer Review*, Vol.19, no.3, 1985). Johnson finds abundant evidence in the NPT of Chauntecler being compared to Troilus, Pertelote to Criseyde, and Russell to Paris. For instance, both Troilus and Chauntecler love "Moore for delit than world to multiplye" and both, notices Johnson, "are governed by their desires." More, both have bad dreams; both submit their dreams to advisors who dismiss the dreams as symptomatic of physical imbalances; both "are inspired to assume a martial air because of love" (431) and both exemplify the revolving nature of Fortune's wheel. Where Chauntecler parodies Troilus, see pp.233-241.

²⁹ Quoted in Hudson, *Premature Reform.*, p.270.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ See Hudson, *Premature Reform.*, p.269-272, 387.

³² The author of one Lollard text, for instance, describes a persecution of a peer for having preached “wipowte fables,” quoted in Staley, p.136. Further, Staley looks at how Kempe’s use of the bear fable, “a fable that is unlikely any Lollard preacher would have used” (120), is able to thwart suspicion of her own heterodox sympathies. See Staley, pp.119-121, 135-137.

³³ Owst, *Preaching*, p.80. On how and where the fable was used in pulpit sermons, see *Preaching*, pp.80-85, 300-302 and *Literature and Pulpit*, p.204-209.

CONCLUSION

Even if an investigator were hypercritical in his reading of the NPT --and, as I made a point of mentioning in my first chapter, investigators sometimes were-- I believe it is unlikely that the tale would be judged dangerous, subversive, or thought to contain a clearly articulated Wycliffite or heterodox affiliation. First, in its passages referring to oaths and the notion of *vita apostolica*, the NPT speaks to those articles of Wycliffite doctrine that were in agreement with the already prevalent sentiments of several orthodox figures. Second, in its passage referring to the Peasant's Revolt, the tale's position on the heterodox/orthodox spectrum is indeterminable, since the passage's condemnatory message was echoed and/or previously voiced by heterodox and orthodox thinkers alike. Third, and this is where the NPT differs most markedly from the Parson's Tale (which, Hudson argues, would certainly have aroused suspicion among investigators), I would suggest that were even the most hypercritical of investigators to detect a resonance of heterodoxy in any of the passages, that resonance is immediately dampened, or muffled altogether, by the passages being couched in what is unambiguously a story designed to amuse. The NPT is no articulated treatise, nor is it a fully-developed tract meant to persuade its audience of any given doctrine; it is the story of a chicken, one who proudly struts the barnyard pontificating upon dream lore and his own wealth of "wysdom," and who, by an "uncharacteristic" show of quick-thinking, narrowly avoids being eaten. If anything is being "subverted" in this tale, it is not one of either side in the ecclesiastical debates, but, rather, it is the debates themselves. The austere, serious-minded subjects of clerical poverty, prelatric corruption, theological study, and the proper form/use of oaths are, collectively, made to seem the stuff of parody. Further, I would suggest that because

the ecclesiastical debates are contained within the context of a *fable*, a fantastical, removed world, the audience can, as Troilus did, perceive the whole matter from a detached, distant perspective, one that (in the NPT's case) provides an intermission from those debates and the often venomous exchanges therein. This detached perspective, in combination with the humour inherent in the passages, is precisely what allows the tale's audience to giggle, even laugh aloud, at the whole affair. There is nothing necessarily dangerous either in the allusions themselves, since they are both non-committal and light-hearted, nor in the safely distant, safely imaginary, realm of the *fable*. Neither the heterodox nor the orthodox side is, at the exclusion of the other, singled out for abuse.

There has been considerable disagreement among critics, however, as to whether the allusion to the Peasant's Revolt, in particular, can be safely contained within the generally jocular tone of the tale. Paul Strohm, for instance, holds that the tale is characterized by a "hyper-literariness," an effort to construct the tale so much as a work of literary artifice, of pure *poesis*, that allusions to distasteful, upsetting contemporary events, such as the Peasant's Revolt, are not disturbing to the audience. Says Strohm,

The literary supersaturation of this tale in turn creates an environment of expectations within which even historically charged references like that to 'Jakke Strawe and his meynee' may be detached from their troubling social implications ...Its volatility substantially defused, Chaucer's reference is assimilated to the literary register of allusion and imagery in which the tale is arrayed.¹

Taking issue with Strohm, R. Fehrenbacher argues that though

the NPT repeatedly attempts to escape the realm of the historical ...by seeking refuge in the realm of the literary, the specter of Jack Straw and his meynee muscling their way into the text demonstrates how such attempts fail, and how history, attempt to gain it as one might, cannot be entirely banished from literature.²

In the case of the Peasant's Revolt, the historical does encroach upon the literary, the real upon the *fable*, and far be it from me to assume that I can resolve the debate as to whether this encroachment is ultimately detrimental to the tale's purpose to "Telle us swich thyng as may oure hertes glade," since not only do I believe the matter to be ultimately irresolvable, at least on an objective level, but more, I humbly confess that my own reading of how the "volatility" of certain passages is "defused" falls far short of the sophistication of Strohm's. But what I wish to contribute to the debate is this. In each of the passages examined in my study I perceive a deliberate effort to dispel some of the solemnity, the severity, of the ecclesiastical debates/issues invoked in each. The issues are drawn into the tale and, through the tale's facetious, non-committal treatment of those issues, they are presented for the audience's amusement. In the case of the Peasant's Revolt, the same parodying process is at work, except with a more challenging issue. Nevertheless, an issue that is particularly contentious (with regard to who was at fault, heterodox or orthodox preachers) and instantly sobering (by its very mention) is invoked with the aim of scuttling, or at least diminishing, that sobriety. I say "diminishing" because, especially in the case of the Peasant's Revolt, I do not believe that the intention is to transform the event into an altogether laughable one. Instead, the aim is more to dull its edge, so to speak, to demonstrate that its mere mention need not be divisive in effect or grave in tone. If nothing else, this understanding of what process is at work with regard to the reference to the riot is consistent with the process at work in each of the other passages pertaining to heterodox/orthodox context, generating a uniform design for all six of the passages.

Still on this topic of the *fable* and design, there is the matter of to what end the genre was employed by several of Chaucer's peers. I raised the question in my first chapter of whether the NPT falls into the satirical tradition from which Bromyard and Bozon drew. Both preachers, Owst shows, delivered several of their attacks on clerical vice and incompetence (among other topics) through the medium of the *fable*, particularly the animal fable.³ At least in portions of the portrayal of Chauntecler,⁴ the NPT seems designed to contribute to, or mimic, that clerical satire. Here, though, I am thrust directly into the question of intention and I have been reluctant, up until this point, to comment at length upon the intention, or design, of the passages in question, except to say that there is a contemporizing move in each, and that can hardly be said to reflect their ultimate design. I have chosen so far to explore how the passages might be received by their contemporary audience, even speculating on how a church investigator in particular might react. Prior to my discussion of what the tale is designed to do, a further obstacle must be added to those I have already explained in my preface. Within every tale, Donaldson explains, we are confronted with the question of whether we are listening to the voice of the tale's narrator, that of Chaucer the poet, Chaucer the pilgrim, or Chaucer the man.⁵ Is it, for example, the narrator who wishes to connect Chauntecler to certain ecclesiastical issues, with the intention, perhaps, of mocking one of his ecclesiastical peers? With that in mind, C. Watson believes that "Chauntecler stands for the Monk," pointing out that

the priest, remembering that the host has called the Monk a 'tredefowel,' may have decided to give the pilgrims a chuckle by making the hero of his tale a real one.⁶

There are several indications in the text that the tale is the means by which the narrator “quits” his peers. To his mockery of women’s counsel, that is, that “Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde” (VII 3257), the narrator adds “Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne” (VII 3265), a tactic which cunningly leaves the joke intact but protects the narrator from his superior’s reprisal, assuming it is to her that the remark is directed. Within the context of the *Tales*, wherein several of the characters bandy insults back and forth and often implicitly include challenges to one another’s social rank, all through the medium of their narratives, to think of the Nun’s Priest as practicing the same sort of game is entirely plausible. The narrator’s design, however, is only one among a network of intersecting intentions that collectively determine what the tale finally achieves.

To return to Bromyard and the satirical tradition he exemplifies, it seems that we are now speaking of Chaucer the Poet, since the question being asked is largely one of genre classification. There are, I believe, three distinct, but interconnected, designs that Chaucer the Poet had in mind for the clerical satire in the NPT. First, there is a call for some level of reform in the existing church such that those unqualified to preach (either by a deficit of skill or a surplus of vice) are removed or disciplined. This, perhaps, is the least prominent of the three designs, for there is nothing especially angry or spiteful in the tale’s clerical satire, and most would agree that Chaucer leaves his more biting indictments of clerical vice to his depictions of the Summoner and the Pardoner, neither of whom is cast in an imaginary, playful *fable*, nor at any time is even remotely likable. Whereas Chauntecler is comically vain and perhaps a little unrestrained, a little

salacious, in the love of his wife, the Pardoner “With feyned flaterye and japes, / He made the person and the peple his apes” (I 705-706), and the Summoner, for his part, “He wolde suffre for a quart of wyn / a good felawe to have his concubyn / A twelf month, and excuse hym atte fulle” (I 659-661). One is corrupt to the core and the other an ugly drunk, and both are unrepentant about their vices. By contrast, there is something admirable, something redeeming, in Chauntecler’s evolving from an individual governed by pride to one able to proclaim “For he that wynketh, whan he sholde see / Al wilfully, God lat him navere thee!” (VII 3431-3432).

Second, because the treatment of ecclesiastical questions is essentially light-hearted, I am compelled to agree with Muscatine, who, in his *Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer*, which has become something of a monument in Chaucerian criticism, argues that the tales work towards a “peaceful conclusion” (Muscatine 111), a world view that embraces Boethian and Christian faith. Although Chaucer moves through a series of alternatives to this world view, given expression in such genres as dramatic realism (exemplified in the Pardoner’s Tale), French courtly idealism (in the Knight’s Tale), and pathos (in the Clerk’s Tale and the Prioress’ Tale), he ultimately arrives at an ironic vision, with irony both comic and serious, that teaches the audience “perception and tolerance” and that “turns our attention to a stable world of faith in God” (113).

To develop his argument, Muscatine describes how Chaucer’s response to the sense of malaise and crisis that characterized the late fourteenth century differs from those of Langland and the *Pearl* poet. Specifically, Langland’s work is deeply immersed in the social issues and controversies of his time, the *Pearl* poet stands outside of social

context, and Chaucer's is "somewhere in between, involved yet objective, detached yet sympathetically removed" (145). Langland and the *Pearl* poet sit at opposite ends of a pole, whereas Chaucer holds a kind of Aristotelian mean, the position of a non-radical that can draw from the insights of either and yet be limited to the perspective of neither.

In the case of the NPT, I would suggest that Chaucer is "somewhere between" the heterodox and the orthodox, drawing from each, but aligned to neither. The intention in the NPT is not to disturb the audience with inflammatory remarks, but rather to lighten the mood surrounding the debates, to insert a less divisive and thereby more "peaceful" perspective, albeit a sense of peace with laughter.

This brings me to the third design, that is, to promote stability, or encourage a catharsis of emotion, through laughter. Kendrick, in her study of comic tales, particularly the Miller's Tale and the Franklin's Tale, writes

Chaucer's problem was the instability of late fourteenth-century English society. His solution was the play of the *Canterbury Tales*, in which a group of pilgrims, representative of major classes and estates of contemporary society, led by a Lord of Misrule, engage in a festive, springtime game that temporarily, intermittently subverts the piety of the pilgrimage and the hierarchy of real life and enables many of the churls to express their aggression and frustrated rivalry against gentles or against other churls, harmlessly, through the minifictions of tendentious jokes and through the more elaborate fictions of their comic tales, which dethrone the father and satisfy illicit desires

(Kendrick 128).

The NPT's priest is perhaps not best described as a "churl," and Kendrick is here, obviously, speaking mainly of the fabliaux. Where I think that Kendrick's work is useful to my own, though, is in her contention (which she goes on to argue at length) that laughter has both a releasing and a "dethroning" effect. The NPT "dethrones" the

austerity of certain ecclesiastical issues and invites its audience to release itself from the tension associated therein. The laughter, and the sense of release it generates, restores to the audience a certain peacefulness.

One critic wrote that the NPT is the “quintessence of Chaucer”⁷ and I would agree, as the tale accomplishes so well the “peaceful conclusion” described by Muscatine and embodies so completely the aim and process of good comedy. The tale, though entrenched within the tradition of clerical satire, carefully, ingeniously, avoids taking on either a blatantly heterodox or orthodox character and, at the same time, makes light of the ecclesiastical debates it invokes. Satire, wrote Swift, “is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own, which is the chief reason for that kind of reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it.”⁸ The NPT, through the “glass” of the *fable* and through its capacity to amuse without offending any one “face,” is, I believe, satire *par excellence*.

ENDNOTES

¹ Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), p. 165. See especially pp. 165-69.

² In his "'A Yeerd Enclosed Al Aboute': Literature and History in the Nun's Priest's Tale," p. 135. See also pp. 142-47, where there is quite a fascinating discussion of how the "howping and shriking" of the farmyard mob reflects the aristocratic attitude towards the peasant class.

³ See *Literature and the Pulpit*, pp. 179-80; 204-9; 253; 321.

⁴ Critics have explored several facets of Chauntecler's portrayal, which is why I say "portion." Where Chauntecler parodies medieval conventions of rhetorical style, see Susan Gallick's "Styles of Usage in the NPT." Where Chauntecler is a foil to Troilus, see Lynn Johnson's "'To Make in Some Comedye': Chauntecler, Son of Troy." Where Chauntecler is a parody of certain texts on dream lore, see Constance Heatt's "The Dreams of Troilus, Criseyde, and Chauntecler: Chaucer's Manipulation of the Categories of Macrobius Et Al."

⁵ See E.T. Donaldson's *Speaking of Chaucer* (New York: Norton 1970), pp. 1-12.

⁶ In his "The Relationship of the 'Monk's Tale' and the 'Nun's Priest's Tale'", p. 282. Watson also explores how the NPT is able to successfully "quit" the Mkt. See especially pp. 279-83.

⁷ Morton Bloomfield, "The Wisdom of the Nun's Priest's Tale," p. 70.

⁸ *Epilogue to the Satires* (1738).

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