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Chaucer's "Nether Ye": A Study of Chaucer's Use of Scatology in The Canterbury Tales

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Chaucer's "Nether Ye": A Study of Chaucer's Use of Scatology in The Canterbury Tales

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BY

Brook Wilson

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ABSTRACT

Chaucer's use of scatology throughout the Canterbury Tales offers a new frontier for Chaucerian research. To this date, no book-length work dealing exclusively with the scatological elements found in his works exists. Too often, the serious and artistic effects of scatology become lost in the great comedy the device generates. Furthermore, many readers and scholars seem to find themselves somewhat "squaymous" when confronted with the "nether ye" of Chaucer. While Chaucer employs scatology perhaps less frequently than Swift or Rabelais, his mastery of this device remains unquestionable.

Recognizing that the uses for scatology extend far beyond creating humor, Chaucer instead proves that the effects achieved with this device are multidimensional. This study focuses upon three tales quite heterogeneous in nature: the Summoner's Tale, the Miller's Tale, and the Prioress' Tale. Though different in many respects, these tales contain scatological elements that effectively show the range with which Chaucer used scatology. In the Summoner's Tale and the Miller's Tale, Chaucer develops both the characters and the plot around the scatological scenes. He also employs scatology to emphasize the theme of just rewards. In doing so, he relies heavily upon biblical parallels that satirize the characters' hypocrisy.

In the Summoner's Tale, Friar John loses sight of his spiritual goals and seeks wealth and social prominence. He

boasts of his order's association with the Holy Ghost and neglects the symbolic body of Christ, His people. For his neglect and his verbal flatulence, Friar John is rewarded with a fart and public humiliation. Both the fart and the subsequent cartwheel scheme are developed into a brilliant satire that ridicules the foundations of the entire mendicant order. Furthermore, Friar John's anger complements the Summoner's anger, revealing that both display a perverted sense of charity and grace.

The Miller's Tale also focuses upon a wayward religious figure. Like Friar John, Absolon shows a confusion of body and spirit. Obsessed with sensual pleasure, Absolon is a slave to his senses. That Absolon has lost sight of any spiritual goal is made clear when he swears an oath to the devil and seeks revenge. He also abuses his position in the church to satisfy his vanity and his sensual desires. In this tale, Chaucer uses language that calls to mind the Parson's warnings to wayward clergymen. Alluding to gold, "shiten shepherds," and sheep, Chaucer reveals that Absolon is the type of spiritual leader that the Parson warned about in the General Prologue. For worshipping his senses, Absolon is rewarded with two scatological tricks that effectively punish all five of his senses. As in the Summoner's Tale, Chaucer shows that the rewards for seeking earthly goals are not only insignificant but sometimes scatological.

In the Prioress' Tale, Chaucer handles scatology differently for a remarkable effect. In this tale, scatology becomes dark in order to elevate the effect of the miracle. Though entombed in excrement, the child rises to a divine level because of his adherence to Christian principles. Resembling the alimentary canal, the city's alley represents the journey from life into the afterlife. In order to escape life's excrement, one must hold fast to Christian virtues and keep sight of the "Jerusalem celestial." Showing that life can spring from dung, the little boy is blessed with the miracle because he has kept sight of his spiritual goal and has not cast his eyes downward.

Just as the Canterbury Tales concludes with the Parson's Tale, this study also ends with a focus upon this tale. In the Parson's Tale, Chaucer's view of salvation becomes clear. Sincere, humble penitence is the right path to salvation. The Parson's Tale reminds the reader that the Canterbury Tales involves a spiritual journey, not just a physical journey. In this treatise, the Parson states that many are the paths that lead to glory. Likewise, many are the ways of exposing hypocrisy. Chaucer puts the different views of his characters into proper perspective and shows that divine rewards are achievable if one holds firm to Christian principles. He also shows that the rewards of earthly pursuits are not only ephemeral, but sometimes scatological.

For Susan, Autumn, and Benji

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Too often educators never receive the tremendous thanks they deserve. For this reason, I would like to thank Dr. David Raybin for introducing me to the wonders of Chaucer's use of scatology. I would also like to thank Dr. John Simpson and Dr. William Searle for their suggestions and encouragements. Finally, I cannot give enough credit to Dr. Timothy Shonk, whose dedication to professionalism gave shape and focus to my otherwise arrant and inconclusive writing.

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INTRODUCTION

From the General Prologue to the Parson's Tale, Chaucer employs scatological words, images, and scenes for numerous purposes. While other writers frequently limit their uses of scatology to the development of coarse humor, Chaucer discovers new and vital uses for a device that has as its foundation a universal aspect of mankind. Scatology plays an important role in the Canterbury Tales in that its primary elements complement his approach to and his structure of the Canterbury Tales. The Canterbury Tales is both thematically and structurally about a journey. While the structure of this work depends upon the erratic behavior and advancement of the pilgrims, a dominant theme of the Tales involves a more ethical conduct and a stronger dedication than what the pilgrims display. Culminated in the Parson's Tale, Chaucer's theme of salvation through humble, sincere penitence represents the ultimate aim of the Canterbury Tales. Chaucer shows that the reward is divine if one adopts this concept and keeps one's eyes fixed upon heavenly goals. However, he also reveals that when one's eyes are cast downward upon earthly gain and glory, the rewards are not only ephemeral, but sometimes scatological.

Chaucer's view of salvation focuses not on the end result (heaven), but rather on the means of attaining that end. Chaucer uses scatology frequently throughout the Canterbury Tales because it also involves a journey toward an end. Too often one focuses too intently on the end

result of scatology and forgets the process behind the result. People do not eat and drink for the mere purpose of producing waste. Rather, they do so for the nourishment and enrichment of their bodies. Likewise, Chaucer does not lace the Canterbury Tales with scatological elements merely to add coarse humor to his work (although this is certainly one effect), but instead to improve it. Chaucer's use of scatology gives tremendous impact to both the divine and humiliating rewards his characters earn.

Because of the focus and length of this work, I have selected the three tales best representing not only the diverse uses of scatology but also the impact it gives to the rewards. The Summoner's Tale, the Miller's Tale, and the Prioress' Tale all contain wayward religious figures and scatological elements that function similarly. These three tales involve religious figures who exhibit a perversion of charity. For example, in the Summoner's Tale, Friar John stresses the giving of alms instead of encouraging sincere penitence. By seeking revenge, he also shows no charity toward Thomas. Like Friar John, Absolon in the Miller's Tale also reveals a lack of charity in his demand for physical retribution for the scatological pranks played on him. The most shocking perversion of charity comes from the Prioress, who shows more generosity to dogs and mice than she does to an entire race of people.

These religious figures appear misguided in the search for heavenly grace. While Friar John seems incapable of

showing any mercy, the Summoner also displays a distorted sense of mercy when he prays that everyone receive grace except "this cursed Frere." In the Miller's Tale, Absolon is greatly misdirected in his search for grace. Instead of seeking grace from the Virgin Mary, Absolon seeks grace from a very mortal (and married) woman, whom he has idealized as in the courtly tradition. Furthermore, like Friar John and the Summoner, Absolon retaliates when affronted instead of acknowledging his own failures and repenting for them. Once again, the Prioress surprises the reader by her distorted search for grace. Since the Prioress is the most sensitive and compassionate of these characters, one expects her to show mercy. However, her attitude toward Jews is extremely merciless as they are brutally condemned and massacred in her tale.

Finally, these religious people also display some confusion in the body's relationship with the spirit. Because his order boasts of their spiritual association with the Holy Ghost, Friar John denies the importance of the body to the spirit and grossly neglects the physical needs of Christ's people. Conversely, Absolon displays almost no regard for spirituality but is obsessed with physical bodies. Reflecting the Miller's own preoccupation with physical bodies, Absolon is absorbed with physical appearances and is virtually a slave to his senses. While the Prioress is described as being overly concerned with her own appearances, the little clergeon in her tale lacks total

physical description. Receiving not even a name, this little boy is an allegorical character, whose purity and humility anticipate the resulting miracle.

In the Summoner's Tale and the Miller's Tale, Chaucer's use of scatology is deliberately blatant in the satire of clerks. Both tales contain religious figures, who, in their worldliness and vanity, have lost sight of their spiritual goals. Both abuse their religious authority and neglect their duties in order to satisfy their worldly appetites. Chaucer shows that the reward for such religious hypocrisy is not earthly satisfaction but earthly unpleasantness in the form of scatological humiliation.

He accentuates this theme by centering the tales' plots around the scatological scenes. In the Summoner's Tale, the first scatological image presented in the prologue establishes the direction that the tale will follow. It also foreshadows both the first scatological trick and the subsequent cartwheel scheme, which Alan Levitan has discovered to be a parody of the Holy Ghost's windy descent to the Apostles at Pentecost (236-246). The Miller's Tale, Chaucer's most scatological tale, provides a heavy focus upon characterization. In particular, the characters of Alisoun and Absolon appear conceived with the two window scenes in mind. Furthermore, Chaucer employs two secondary scatological elements, Nicholas' need to urinate and his thunderous fart, to link the two plot lines of the tale. A parody of religious figures is also in evidence. Susanna

Greer Fein notes that Chaucer emphasizes Absolon's idolatry of Alisoun by suggesting a comparison to Mary's relationship to the Trinity (302-317). As in the Summoner's Tale, the Miller's Tale shows that a dedication to worldly desires ends in earthy humiliation.

While the scatology in these two tales evokes humor, it elicits no hope, probably because both tales "quyte" the tales preceding them, the Knight's Tale and the Friar's Tale. Since the Summoner's Tale and the Miller's Tale are designed for retribution, the characters in these tales also seek redress. After Friar John and Absolon have scatological tricks played on them, they become angry instead of penitent. Friar John goes to the lord for revenge, and Absolon finds a hot poker. Both fail to grow and falter once again. Their opportunities to repent are lost.

The Prioress' Tale, however, does show hope for divine rewards in its scatological scenes. Even though the tale is told by a rather worldly religious figure, who laces the tale with anger and retribution, it offers promise because of the miracle. Unlike the previous two tales, the Prioress' Tale contains scatology that takes on a decidedly darker tone. In this tale, a little boy is murdered and cast into a privy, increasing the pathos surrounding the boy's plight and intensifying the effect of the miracle. The miracle occurs because the boy, unlike Friar John and Absolon, is steadfast and unwavering to his cause and

duties. Like Chaucer's ideal portraits of the Parson, the Plowman, and the Clerk, the little boy is cheerful in adversity and generous with what little he has--his voice. Though entombed in excrement, the little boy rises to a divine level, showing that heavenly rewards are achieved if the motives are spiritual and selfless. There is also evidence that the Prioress herself merits some pardon because of her chillingly naive but sincere motives. Unlike Friar John, the Summoner, and Absolon, the Prioress does not intend to hurt or offend. She does not seek self-glorification but simply wishes to offer praise. Nevertheless, the Prioress fails to comprehend the greatheartedness that the little child exhibits.

The miracle of the child is also complemented by the story's central metaphor, the city. The city resembles the alimentary canal in that it is "free and open at eyther ende." The alimentary canal produces waste and energy just as the city's alley produces a murder and a miracle. Furthermore, the alimentary canal involves both a progress toward an end and a transformation. Representing the journey from life into the afterlife or the Holy Jerusalem versus the earthly Jerusalem, the city contains all the chaos and filth one encounters on the spiritual journey to "that highte Jerusalem celestial." The only escape from the misery of the world comes from focusing upon this heavenly reward and by not casting the eyes downward.

Using the diverse views of his characters to emphasize different facets of waywardness, Chaucer reveals just how lost one becomes when one strays from spiritual goals. In his tale, the Parson states,

> Many been the weyes espirituels that leden folk to oure lord Jesu Crist and to the regne of glorie./ Of which weyes, ther is a ful noble wey and a ful convenable, which may not fayle to no man ne to womman, that thurgh synne hath mysgoon fro the righte wey of Jerusalem celestial. (79-80)

Chaucer's use of scatology contributes to this message by revealing its antithesis: the many ways one can stray from righteousness. It also offers an efficient means of exposing this waywardness. More importantly, Chaucer's scatological elements reveal the disparity between rewards. If one focuses upon the "Jerusalem celestial," the reward is glorious and eternal; but when this vision is eclipsed by temporal desires and ambitions, the reward becomes abominable.

THE SUMMONER'S TALE

Too often, scatology is simply viewed as a crude device used to elicit some form of ribald comedy, and the fact that there exist so few critical works focus upon with scatology corroborates this belief. While it is true that Chaucer uses scatology to make the Summoner's Tale triumphantly comical, it is also true that the manner in which he uses it makes the Summoner's Tale one of the most complex satires in the whole collection. Within the last twenty years, such scholars as Alan Levitan, Jay Ruud, and Ian Lancashire have discovered that Thomas' great fart is much more than just a rude prank. Instead, these scholars perceive it as a profound parody of biblical foundations and an elaborate mockery of the religious hypocrisy displayed by the mendicant friars.

During the Middle Ages, much controversy erupted over the legitimacy of mendicant friars. This group of friars, influenced by Joachim de Flora in the thirteenth century, believed that they were the forerunners of the third age of New Testament history, the age of Eternal Gospel or Holy Ghost (Levitan 236). Arnold Williams notes that because they believed themselves to be directly associated with the Holy Ghost, these roving beggars felt superior to the parish priests and directly competed with them, taking away much of their revenue and undermining their credibility. They further claimed superiority because of their professed asceticism. The mendicants, existing solely through the

receiving of alms, were to practice evangelical poverty. They could not possess valuables, some even forbidden to touch money. To get around this, most friars travelled with secular companions who assisted in the collecting. Some even devised special sticks in order to transfer the money into their possession. In addition to practicing evangelical poverty, they also performed parochial preaching, heard confessions, and controlled much of the learning (Williams 65-73). Also, because of their association with the Holy Ghost, they professed the abilities to speak in tongues and to receive divine revelations (Levitan 240).

While these activities and abilities appear remarkable in theory, in actuality they were rarely practiced or performed by these friars. In fact, most of these friars were extremely corrupt and very worldly. For instance, Jill Mann complements Williams' historical examples of the friars' corruption by offering a profusion of literary stereotypes of friars that depict them taking bribes to absolve great sins. She also cites examples that portray their lechery, their contention with the parish priests, and their tendency to associate only with the wealthy and influential (37-54). Because of their proclivity towards avarice and backbiting, they grew to find themselves objects of scorn and ridicule. Some people, William of St. Amour and Richard FitzRalph for example, even perceived them as false prophets or representatives of the Anti-Christ

(Williams 66). Nevertheless, by Chaucer's time the mendicants were looked upon as intruding nuisances and paragons of hypocrisy.

In the Summoner's Tale, Chaucer uses a prodigious fart as not only a just reward for a friar's religious hypocrisy, but also as a fitting satire of the friar's assumed biblical authority. Chaucer initiates his attack on friars with the Summoner's revelation in his prologue of the scatological place prepared for friars in hell:

> 'And now hath Sathanas,' seith he,'a tayl
> Brodder than of a carryk is the sayl.
> Hold up thy tayl, thou Sathanas,' quod he.
> 'Showe forth thyn ers, and lat the frere se
> Where is the nest of freres in this place!'
> And er that half a furlong wey of space,
> Right so as bees swarmen from an hyve,
> Out of the develes ers ther gonne dryve
> Twenty thousand freres in a route,
> And comen agayn as fast as they may gan,
> And in his ers they crepten everychon.
> (1687-1698)

By establishing the friar's relationship with the devil's arse, Chaucer invites the reader to believe in a similar identity between friars and anuses. In fact, in the haste with which they return to the devil's ass after being released, the friars in hell seem almost at home there. The Summoner concludes his prologue by stating, "So was the

develes ers ay in his mynde--/ That is his heritage of verray kynde" (1705-1706). If an anus is indeed the true heritage of a friar, then Friar John's rash and unscrupulous haste as he eagerly plunges into Thomas' buttocks provides no surprise.

In order to condemn Friar John's hypocrisy, Chaucer first must show that he indeed merits such a scatological gift. He accomplishes this by filling the friar with "so much verbal flatulence" (Pearsall 223). This friar's flatulence overwhelmingly dominates most of the dialogue in the tale. In fact, the tale opens with the friar preaching a sermon that expounds the benefits of giving "trentals" to him rather than to the regular clergy:

> Excited he the peple in his prechyng
> To trentals, and to yeve for Goddes sake
> Wherwith men myght hooly houses make
> Ther as divine servyce is honoured,
> Not ther as it is wasted and devoured,
> Ne ther it nedeth nat for to be yeve,
> As to possessioners that mowen lyve,
> Thanked be God, in wele and habundaunce.
> (1716-1723)

By disparaging the regular clergy and by glorifying his own order, Friar John assumes a type of arrogance that simply begs for a humiliating fart. Furthermore, as he goes about his poking and prying, there is a kind of unctuousness that also qualifies him for the gift. Upon arriving at

Thomas' house, the friar proclaims, "Deus hic!" (God be here), shoos the cat, sets himself "softe adoun," embraces and kisses the wife, and immediately criticizes the priests: "Thise curatz been ful necligent and slowe/ To grope tendrely a conscience/ In shrift" (1816-1818). After ordering his dainty meal, he learns of their child's recent death. Undaunted by this depressing tone, the friar capitalizes on it to explain why he and other members of his order were blessed with a revelation of the child's ascension to heaven:

> Oure orisons been moore effectueel,
> And moore we seen of Cristes secree thynges,
> Than burel folk, although they weren kynges.
> We lyve in poverte and in abstinence,
> And burel folk in richesse and despence
> Of mete and drynke, and in hir foul delit.
> We han this worldes lust al in despit.
> (1870-1876)

Not yet satisfied with this round of self-glorification, Friar John proceeds to deliver over seventy more lines of wind on the "rightwisnesse" and "clennesse" of evangelical poverty. Ironically, all of this extended sermonizing on poverty is delivered solely for John's purpose of acquiring wealth. Furthermore, while John consistently vilifies the opulence of the regular clergy, he himself never strays any distance from the subject of receiving alms. In fact, his words reveal little

distinction between collecting money and preaching salvation:

> I walke and fisshe Cristen mennes soules
> To yelden Jhesu Crist his propre rente;
> To sprede his word is set al myn entente.
> (1829-1832)

While Friar John claims that his intent is to spread Christ's words, in actuality he is motivated by greed. Here, he shows perversion of charity by using Christ's name to collect money which he will obviously keep himself or spend on the comforts of his "covent." What makes Friar John so hypocritical is that he spreads his words only by "glosynge" Christ's words. Taking advantage of his listeners' inability to understand or translate scripture, the friar chooses to deliver his own interpretations, which, no doubt, are slanted in his favor:

> I have to day been at youre chirche at messe,
> And seyd a sermon after my symple wit,
> Nat al after the text of hooly writ;
> For it is hard to yow, as I suppose,
> And therfore wol I teche yow al the glose.
> Glosynge is a glorious thyng, certeyn,
> For lettre sleeth, so as we clerkes seyn.
> (1788-1794)

Another affectation he adds to his speech is the feigned gentility he attempts to generate by sprinkling in his language dainty French phrases and esoteric Latin

expressions (Lindahl 119). By emphasizing the falseness of both the sound and the meaning of the friar's speech, Chaucer lends import to the lord's future remarks concerning the "soun" and "savour" of a fart. Both the friar's speech and a fart are winds, but a fart at least is genuine. While Friar John's words are sweet to the ear and make him appear urbane and sincere, they completely lack truth in their meaning and in their delivery. On the other hand, the sound and substance of a fart are decidedly real. Since the friar has been so false with his own wind, it is appropriate that he be subjected to a wind that is not necessarily sweet in sound or substance, but one that is blatantly real. Nevertheless, material gain is the friar's motive for glossing scripture and for using stilted language. He also believes that collecting "rente" takes priority over communicating Christ's love and compassion.

That Friar John is so loquacious about himself and his order suggests that he is either incapable of conversing openly with others or, more likely, that he is totally indifferent to the concerns of others. By distancing himself from the needs of those people he serves, he also avoids true commitment to his faith. If he were to fulfill his duties to his faith by helping the needy and by living in evangelical poverty, he would lose what wealth and prestige he had already acquired. Therefore, instead of consoling the grieving mother over the loss of her child, Friar John resorts to glorifying himself and his order.

Instead of comforting the sick Thomas, he provokes him into a rage.

Anger is yet another way in which Chaucer proves the hypocrisy of the friar. Upon arriving at Thomas' house, the friar is informed by the wife that Thomas has been "as angry as a pissemyre" (1825). Knowing that he will not receive any donation from an angry man, John promises just a "word or two" on wrath in hopes of appeasing him so that he will give (Pearsall 226). After first digressing on the sanctity of his order because of their poverty and asceticism, the ineptitude of the priests because of their wealth, and the salvation that comes through giving, the verbose friar finally concludes with his sermonette on the deadly sin of ire. Ironically, the three exempla he uses in his lecture do not support his argument that those guilty of wrath will be punished. Instead, his support shows that those in the company of a wrathful person are punished (Ruud 130). In essence, this sets the stage for what ultimately happens to Friar John, for he too will suffer the presence of an angry man.

Unable to escape from the incessant prating of this windy friar, the bedridden Thomas grows further incensed until he discovers the means whereby he can relieve himself of two winds that have been paining him. Surprisingly enough, the inspiration for this cure comes from the source of pain itself--the mouth of the friar. Having persistently harped on the need to build more churches, Friar John

relates how he is experiencing problems with his building's "fundement":

> And yet, God woot, unnethe the fundement
> Parfourned is, ne of oure pavement
> Nys nat a tyle withinne our wones. (2103-2105)

Reminded of a problem with his own "fundement," the pressure above his anus, Thomas seizes the opportunity to give the friar hands-on experience with this problem.

After listening to the friar's foul wind for an exorbitant amount of time, the enraged Thomas determines to challenge the stench of this friar's "false dyssymulacioun" (2123) with an equally foul blast of his own. Knowing full well that the pretentious friar will respond to this rude affront with anger, Thomas hopes to show just how much hypocrisy the friar's sermon contained. He also wants to reveal that this mendicant is filled with greed and not the Holy Spirit; thus, he forces the friar himself to demonstrate the extent to which he would go to receive a gift:

> And doun his hand he launcheth to the clifte
> In hope for to fynd there a yifte.
> And whan thise sicke man felte this frere
> Aboute his tuwel grope there and heere,
> Amydde his hand he leet the frere a fart--
> Ther nys no capul drawynge in a cart
> That myghte have lete a fart of swich a soun.
> (2152-2161)

Guessing correctly on how the friar would respond, Thomas watches gleefully, one would imagine, as the friar puts on a terrific performance of pure rage:

> The frere up stirte as dooth a wood leoun,
> "A, false cherl," quod he, "for Goddes bones!
> This hastow for despit doon for the nones.
> Thou shalt abye this fart, if that I may."
>
> . . .
>
> He looked as it were a wilde boor;
> He grynte with his teeth, so was he wrooth.
> (2152-2161)

In this passage, one hears echoes from the friar's own sermon of wrath: "Withinne thyn hous, ne be thou no leoun" (1989). When Friar John becomes as angry "as a dooth a wood leoun" upon receiving Thomas' gift, he reveals his hypocrisy at its fullest. He has become what he preached against. Furthermore, Chaucer uses the same boar simile to depict John as he previously used to describe Thomas (2160 and 1829). When Thomas transfers his anger onto John, the animal image follows suit and foreshadows even further decline in the friar's sense of self-importance and even in his social stature. In accordance, John's facade of obsequiousness and gentility is also stripped away to reveal his true "boorish" nature (Lindahl 119). Also, one must recognize the congruent causes of Thomas' and John's angers. Thomas is outraged at John for his "false dyssymulacioun," and John is incensed at Thomas for his false gift. Both are

angered by wind. Once again, the friar's own mouth serves to discredit all the humility and spirituality that he has previously proclaimed.

In fact, he betrays himself in just one line: "A, false cherl," quod he, "for Goddes bones!" (2153). All of John's earlier affected subservience is now revealed as just another sham. By pronouncing Thomas a "cherl," the friar not only comments on Thomas' behavior, but, as Linda Georgianna points out, he also makes a class distinction:

> By pronouncing Thomas as a "cherl" the friar makes a belated attempt to put the villager in his feudal place as a social inferior. . . . But "cherl" is primarily meant, especially in the context of the friar's visit to the lord's court, as a stinging reference to Thomas's social class as a commoner rather than of noble birth (Havely, p. 147, Burnley, pp. 150-151). This usage marks its first use in the tale, but from now on the term "cherl" will be repeated insistently by each new character, appearing ten times within 137 lines, an extraordinary density far greater than anywhere else in Chaucer. "Cherl" is, in fact, the dominant term of the passage, and the key to its concern with social status and social transgression. (152)

The phrase "Goddes bones," moreover, reveals even more falseness in the friar. In his essay on the friar's sin of

wrath, Jay Ruud notes that this oath exemplifies "the most wrathful kind of swearing, the sinful 'dismembrynge' of Christ" (142). While this phrase is an excellent illustration of the friar's sin of wrath, it perhaps reflects an even deeper corruption in the friar, a total rejection of the premise that his basis of authority stems from the spirit rather than the body. For him, as he professes anyway, the physical body must be denied even basic nurturing so that the spirit is nurtured instead. In fact, he displays an almost perverse attitude of disregard toward the body:

> I am a man of litel sustenaunce;
> My spirit hath his fostryng in the Bible.
> The body is ay so redy and penyble
> To wake that my stomak is destroyed. (1844-1847)

In revealing that his spirit is sustained by the Bible, Friar John implies that he has been filled with the Holy Spirit just as the Apostles were at Pentecost. Therefore, he also believes that there must be an almost total separation of body and soul. Here the mendicants' foundation is greatly at fault, for a dominant concept of Christianity emphasizes the mortality of Christ's body. Even the fundamental Christian ritual of taking communion (the ingesting of Christ's blood and body) represents this basic principle. In essence, then, Christianity does not view the spirit of Christ and the body of Christ as separately as the mendicants do. In fact, Christ's body and

all its parts are viewed as holy objects. Therefore, when the friar blasphemes Christ's bones, he also blasphemes his spirit.

With this concept in mind, one can further recognize the tremendous importance Chaucer's use of scatology holds in this tale. When the friar tells Thomas of the inferiority of his church's "fundement," he unknowingly reveals the weakness of the whole mendicant order's foundation. In their preoccupation with spiritual matters, they grossly neglected the other symbolic body of Christ, His people. Instead of curing hunger and sickness, they tried to cure souls by receiving alms and "trentals." Since Friar John, like his mendicant brothers, has been so remiss in nurturing (or even recognizing, for that matter) Christian bodies, the only fitting punishment for such negligence must come from the body itself. Richard Neuse best explains why a fart is indeed the best punishment for John:

> The fart is something <u>physical</u> emanating from the <u>body</u>, and as such it represents the body's revenge against the friar, whose entire existence, as we have seen, is predicated on the pretense that the body does not exist, or exists only as an instrument for achieving spiritual perfection, divinity. (216)

Not only is Thomas' fart an appropriate retribution for neglecting the body, it also provides Chaucer with the means

of developing a series of reversals. After the scatological affront, Friar John retrieves his companion and immediately proceeds to the lord of the village "To whom that he was alwey confessour" (2165). While Friar John always heard the lord's confession, now the lord will hear John's confession. Brazenly interrupting the lord during his meal, the friar promulgates Thomas' offense and openly reveals the true cause of his rage. Instead of viewing Thomas' fart as a personal insult to himself, the friar deems it an offense against his entire "covent": "as that this olde cherl with lokkes hoore/ Blasphemed hath oure hooly covent eke" (2182-2183). Here, one must remember the condition set down by Thomas before he released his gift:

> On this condicion and oother noon,
> That thou departe it so, my leeve brother,
> That every frere have also muche as oother.
> This shaltow swere on thy professioun,
> Withouten fraude or cavillacioun. (2132-2135)

The friar is beside himself with rage because of the impossibility of honoring the condition:

> This false blasphemer that charged me
> To parte that wol nat departed be
> To every man yliche, with meschaunce. (2213-2215)

Once again, the friar's own mouth prepares his ultimate humiliation. By revealing the condition Thomas placed upon his gift and the difficulty presented in fulfilling it, the friar forces the lord to examine the matter more deeply.

After giving the friar's dilemma intense thought, the lord develops a growing sense of admiration for Thomas' ingenuity:

> How hadde the cherl this ymaginacioun
> To shewe swich a probleme to the frere?
> Nevere erst er now herde I of swich mateere.
> I trowe the devel putte it in his mynde.
> In ars-metrike shal ther no man fynde,
> Biforn this day, of swich a question.
> Who sholde make a demonstracioun
> That every man sholde have yliche his part
> As of the soun or savour of a fart. (2218-2226)

Linda Georgianna denotes in the lord's growing respect for Thomas the improvement of the adjectives describing him:

> Thomas is at first "this cherl" (line 2218), then a "nyce cherl" (line 2232) and a "nyce proude cherl" (line 2227), "nyce" meaning not "foolish" but rather the opposite, "sophisticated" or "elegant" as today a solution in mathematics might be called "nice" by mathematicians (Havely, pp. 147-148). Finally, the lord ends with an accolade to Thomas: "What, lo, my cherl, lo, yet how shrewdly/ Unto my confessour today he spak." (169)

Essentially, the friar's plan of revenge backfires; for instead of finding Thomas worthy of punishment, the lord has

observed the superiority of Thomas over the friar. Furthermore, another reversal occurs when the lord is bested by the lowly squire, Jankyn. Unable to discover the solution to the problem himself, the lord deems the answer impossible and completely dismisses the issue. However, Jankyn, whose expertise lay in his ability to "karf" (2244), claims that for a new "gowne-clooth" he can bring about a resolution:

> "My lord," quod he, "when that the weder is
> fair,
> Withouten wynd or perturbynge of air,
> Lat brynge a cartwheel heere into this halle--
> But look that it have his spokes alle;
> Twelve spokes hath a cartwheel comunly--
> And bryng me thanne twelve freres, woot ye
> why?
> For thrittene is a covent, as I gesse.
> Youre confessour heere, for his worthynesse,
> Shal parfourne up the nombre of his covent.
> Thanne shal they knele doun by oon assent
> And to every spokes ende, in this manere,
> Ful sadly leye his nose shal a frere.
> Youre noble confessour--there God hym
> save--
> Shal holde his nose upright under the nave.
> Thanne shal this cherl, with bely stif and
> togh

As any tabour, been hyder ybrought;
And sette hym on the wheel right of this cart,
Upon the nave, and make hym lete a fart.
And ye shul seen, up peril of my lyf,
By preeve which that is demonstratif,
That equally the soun of it wol wende,
And eke the stynk, unto the spokes ende,
Save that this worthy man, youre confessour,
By cause he is a man of greet honour,
Shal have the first fruyt, as resoun is.
(2253-2277)

Jankyn's cartwheel solution completes the series of reversals developed by Chaucer. The friar finds that confessions do not always end in easy penance, and the lord discovers that ingenuity and wisdom are not limited to the nobility.

Ultimately, Friar John reaps what he has sown, as implied by what Jankyn refers to as "the first fruyt." Abusing his religious authority and neglecting his duties to pursue worldly gain and prestige, Friar John receives exactly what he deserves--scatological humiliation. Also, Jankyn's cartwheel scheme not only completes the friar's total humiliation, but also satirizes the heart of his order's authority by parodying the Apostles' windy reception of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost. In 1971, Alan Levitan first recognized the satiric importance of Thomas' fart and Jankyn's cartwheel. Using Dante's Paradiso and Pentecostal

iconography displayed in medieval illustrations, Levitan finds a correlation between friars, Pentecost, and wheels. From Paradiso, he finds examples of friars' relationships to wheels in Cantos X, XI, and XIII. In Canto X, Dante describes a glorious wheel of lights, and Levitan explains that "The 'lights' that make up this wheel consist in twelve famous and sometimes controversial men" (241). Also, in Cantos XI and XIII, wheel images are associated with St. Thomas (a Dominican), St. Francis (a Franciscan), and St. Bonaventure (another Franciscan). From four medieval illustrations that depict the Apostles at Pentecost, he relates how the twelve Apostles, arranged in a circle, receive divine grace from a source in the center of their circle (241-244). Jankyn's wheel, with the twelve friars placed at the spoke ends and John at the hub, is a parody of Jesus surrounded by His twelve Apostles. However, Friar John and his twelve brothers are actually false apostles that have corruptly used the Holy Spirit for their own gain. Therefore, instead of receiving divine grace that comes from the Holy Spirit like a great wind, all that John and his friars receive is a foul blast of "soun" and "stynk" from a very human anus (236-244).

Since Levitan's analysis of the satiric and thematic properties of scatology, other critics have disclosed even more uses for the scatological elements in this tale. Ian Lancashire, for example, builds upon Levitan's Pentecostal theme by exploring how "Thomas' first gift recalls events in

the lives of Moses and Elijah that Pentecost fulfills" (18). Friar John compares himself to Moses and Elijah by relating how their holiness enabled them to receive divine revelations (1854-1893). Pleading for the gift of forgiveness for the Israelites, Moses is placed in a "clifte" and is allowed to see the "back parts" of God (Exodus 33:18-23). Similarly, when Elijah is on Horeb (another name for Sinai), he too receives a revelation of hearing a "still, small" voice of God after a great, godless wind shatters rocks all around a certain cleft, Elijah's cave (I Kings 19:11-12). Studies have also suggested the scatological elements' relationships with doubting Thomas and Abraham. Roy Peter Clark notes that "Chaucer's description of the groping of Thomas' body by the greedy friar utilizes language and images commonly associated in medieval art and literature with the groping of Christ's body by doubting Thomas" (164). He also explores St. Thomas' legend as a church builder and contrasts it with Friar John's desire to build "sumptuous friaries for his own physical gratification" (164). In regards to Abraham, Jay Ruud observes two scatological elements in the Summoner's Tale that echo "Paul's equation of the inheritance of Abraham with that of the Holy Spirit" (136). The first image is that of the friars in the devil's arse in contrast to Abraham's holding many little souls to his bosom. The second image invites a comparison between Friar John's groping down Thomas' back and swearing an oath and Abraham's

servant's placing his hand under Abraham's thigh and swearing an oath (138-140).

The final image Chaucer develops in the Summoner's Tale is the portrait of thirteen friars huddled against a man's anus. In many ways, this image mirrors the first image developed by Chaucer in the prologue to this tale. In the tale's prologue, the first image Chaucer creates is a vision of a nest of friars in the devil's arse. Also, it was previously noted how the friars were released to scurry about only to return to this anal environment. In many ways, the pattern of Friar John's actions is congruent with the pattern of actions displayed by the prologue's friars. For example, in the prologue, the friars are expelled, scramble about, and return to the anus. In the tale, Friar John scurries about from house to house, dives into Thomas' buttocks, is expelled, and flits over the lord's house. Having established in the prologue that the friar's heritage was an anus, Chaucer constructs his imagery in a fashion that comes full circle. Where is the last place the reader envisions the friar?--at his destiny, an anus.

Chaucer's use of scatology in the Summoner's Tale grows even more complex when one considers the teller of the tale. It has already been noted that Friar John condemns himself with this own mouth. Essentially, the Summoner does the same. The Summoner reveals the hypocrisy of Friar John by focusing on his language and his anger. However, if one examines the coarseness of the Summoner's language and the

obvious hatred he displays toward friars, he must recognize that the Summoner is as hypocritical as the friar in his tale. The Summoner's hypocrisy is also revealed in his prologue. Showing a pronounced lack of mercy, the Summoner declares "God save yow alle, save this cursed Frere!/ My prologe wol I ende in this manere" (1707-1708). Here, the Summoner's "entente" is clear--he wishes damnation upon all friars. Interestingly enough, the tale he "quytes" shows only one sum sent to hell while his tale shows thousands of friars in the most scatological region of hell, the devil's own ass. The scatology found in his tale does not contribute to his own righteousness. Instead, it merely accentuates his repulsiveness.

With scatology, Chaucer effectively reveals that both the Summoner and the friar have lost hold of their true Christian principles. Desirous of wealth and prestige, Friar John focuses too intently on worldly gain, and, therefore, receives a very earthly gift. A fart is the perfect gift for him in that "it wasteth litel and litel awey" (2235) just as the meaning of his words does. Furthermore, that the fart comes from the body strengthens the friar's punishment for neglecting the symbolic body of Christ--His people. Also, scatology enables Chaucer to create the perfect satire against the mendicants' biblical authority; whereby he shows that they are not the inheritors of a divine wind, but a very mortal wind. Finally, the scatology found in this tale reveals that the Summoner is

just as imperfect and hypocritical as the friars he attacks. On the surface, it appears that Chaucer uses scatology in the Summoner's Tale for humor; and while it does make the tale extremely comical, it also drives home a stronger message. When penitence, charity, and mercy are forgotten or perverted, the divine rewards are lost, leaving only the dregs of an earthly reward.

THE MILLER'S TALE

Chaucer uses more scatology in the Miller's Tale than he does in any other tale. Part of the reason for this is that the Miller is telling the tale. In the General Prologue, the Miller is described as a rather crude individual, one given to barroom brawls, barroom language. The scatology found in his tale supports that portrait. Just as the Summoner's words reveal much about his own personality and his own imperfections, the Miller's language also illustrates Chaucer's description of him as a "cherl." The ribaldry that the scatology creates in this tale reflects the precise type of humor that obviously appeals to the Miller.

However, as in the Summoner's Tale, scatology is used for much more than ribald humor. Just as the plot of the Summoner's Tale is centered around the scatological scene, the two plot lines of the Miller's Tale are also centered around and actually coalesce in the scatological scenes. Scatology plays a paramount role in characterization, as the characters of Alisoun and Absolon appear created specifically for the two window scenes. Once again, Chaucer shows that the pursuit of an earthly ideal inevitably ends in earthly unpleasantness. Like Friar John, Absolon is a religious figure who neglects his duties and loses sight of his spiritual goals. While the friar pursues wealth and social prominence, Absolon seeks fine clothing and the affections of a married woman. Because his objective is a

mortal being, who naturally performs scatological actions, it is only fitting that the use of scatology be increased and intensified. For his love of money and power, Friar John receives a fart in the hand. For his idolatry of an earthly woman, Absolon receives oral contact with Alisoun's "ers." Furthermore, because Absolon is obsessed with his senses, he is punished by receiving scatological affronts to all five senses. Like Friar John, Absolon responds to these insults by becoming angry, which further reveals his lack of charity and mercy. Finally, Chaucer adds focus to Absolon's corruption by alluding to the Parson's words concerning wayward clergymen. Thus the tale concludes with a reference directed toward the proper goal.

While the Miller's Tale has met many attacks for its graphic use of scatology, Peter Beidler offers not only a justified defense of these scatological scenes, but also a tribute to them: "the Miller's Tale is successful because of those scenes, rather than in spite of them" (91). In fact, Chaucer apparently constructs many of the story's main elements around the two window scenes. Three of these major elements explored in this study, as are expected in fablieaux, are the characterization, the plot, and the theme.

Initially, one might be skeptical upon hearing that the characters of Alisoun and Absolon are constructed primarily to make the window scenes successful. However, upon closer examination, one will note that not only do their outward,

more obvious traits and descriptions contribute to these scenes, but that minor and subtle details figure in as well. For example, a great deal of effort is taken in portraying the dress and physical description of Alisoun. Thirty-seven lines carefully delineate her dress from head to foot. Keeping in mind that the Miller is telling the tale, Chaucer is assiduous in emphasizing those parts of the body that hold the Miller's attention, thus drawing the audience's attention to those parts as well. Essentially, Chaucer dresses Alisoun so carefully in order to emphasize the window scene, in which all of this apparel is completely stripped away, exposing a very real woman with all the complete but previously hidden parts.

Chaucer breaks from the convention of describing a beautiful woman in the fashion of descending catalogue (Kiernan 1). This common method of description portrays a woman's physical features in a descending manner, starting at her head and moving downward to her feet. For example, in the General Prologue, the first woman described is the Prioress (118-162). With her, Chaucer devotes a seemingly exorbitant amount of detail to her head, her oral activities in particular, before moving downward to her breast, her cloak, her arm, and the brooch hanging from her arm.

Alisoun's description, in contrast, begins at her pubic region, in particular her silk-striped girdle:

> A ceynt she werede, ybarred al of silk,
> A barmclooth eek as whit as morne milk

> Upon her lendes, ful of many a goore;
> Whit was her smok, and broyden al bifore
> And eek bihynde, . . . (3235-3239)

From there, the catalogue moves up to her bonnet, her collar, her eyes, her brows, and then back to her girdle with a purse hung appropriately at her loins. After this, the Miller describes her through her activities in an up and down fashion from her mouth to her legs:

> But of hir song, it was as loude and yerne
> As any swalwe sittynge on a berne.
> Therto she koude skippe and make game
> As any kyde of calf folwynge his dame.
> Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth,
> Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth.
> Wynnsynge she was as is a joly colt,
> Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt.
> (3257-3264)

The catalogue ends with her shoes, but once again the description ascends and suspends as the Miller notes that "Hir shoes were laced on hir legges high" (3267). Commenting on this unique method of description, Kevin S. Kiernan explains Chaucer's purpose in this method:

> This greatly emphasizes the part of the body in question, and it also greatly emphasizes an audience's sense of participation in the act of inspecting the beautiful body. This is occasionally embarrassing to the

> audience, and it is meant to be. Instead of reading a sterile catalogue, the audience suddenly finds itself in the undignified act of ogling. More important, a stereotyped description has come alive. (2)

By dwelling on the girdle, the apron, the loins, and the smock, Chaucer indeed invites the audience to explore those same areas that the Miller finds so delightful. Even more important from a scatological standpoint is the fact that Chaucer quickly, almost teasingly, switches the description of Alisoun's anterior to her posterior: "and eek bihynde." This flitting reference suggests that the churlish Miller knows exactly what is back there, and in a sense, it foreshadows that more attention will be paid to that part of the anatomy in the future.

Another important feature of Alisoun's characterization is the amount of animal imagery used to describe her. The first animal image used in her description is that of a weasel, followed by a sheep, a swallow, a kid, a calf, and a colt. The focus lies more upon the barnyard variety of animals, emphasizing in particular their youth and spiritedness. Not only is Chaucer successful in transferring these qualities of newness and playfulness onto Alisoun, but he also creates a sense of naturalness and earthiness about her. In turn, what makes Alisoun so desirable is that she is not some idealized, ethereal being but a real and very accessible woman. Chaucer's animal

imagery furthermore prepares the reader for a later display of her casual attitude toward sexual needs and bodily functions. These animals exhibit no qualms or uneasiness in regards to sex or to excrement. Why, therefore, should the reader expect so much more from Alisoun?

While this type of animal imagery does indeed lend a sense of naturalness to Alisoun, it might also appear to give to her the quality of total innocence as well. However, one must recall the very first animal image used to describe her--the weasel. Certain connotations of the weasel can also define her character. The weasel is the wildest of the animals in the catalogue, and it is a very beautiful animal, one desired and prized for its fur. Though a very lovely creature, it is also capable of inflicting some pain. Even more important is that is survives by being sly and cunning.

Virtually all these qualities of the weasel apply to Alisoun. Initially, all the men desire her primarily because of her beauty. In truth she has actually been trapped and held "narwe in cage" (3224) by her aged husband, John. This forces her to use her wits and cunning to deceive John, and ultimately it delivers the emotional pain of cuckoldry upon him. More importantly, her cunning is shown in her deceiving Absolon into kissing her backside, which again delivers emotional pain to him when his foolishly unreal vision of love is unmercifully demolished. It is important to note, however, that Alisoun in no way

causes any physical pain. What physical pain Nicholas and John experience is brought upon them by other men--or in John's case by himself. Another vital point is the fact that by limiting the amount of physical pain to a hot smack on the "toute" and a fractured arm, Chaucer does not lose any of the comedy he has worked so diligently to achieve (Benson and Andersson 5). Finally, David Williams notes another connotation associated with the weasel, sexual in nature: In medieval lore, the weasel "was thought to conceive and deliver its offspring through the mouth" (232). Here, Chaucer establishes the mouth in affiliation with two desires--the desire for food (the first stage of the alimentary process) and the desire for sex. This knowledge also directly corresponds with the already abundant food images associated with Alisoun and corresponds with Absolon's frequent rubbing of his mouth and the oral/genital and nasal/anal contact.

Chaucer makes Alisoun a very delectable creature, as is witnessed by the numerous food/drink images connected to her. Morning milk, sloeberries, pear trees, mead, and apples all are offered to make her a savory morsel indeed. One must also note the many flower images associated with her: "She was ful moore blisful on to see/ Than is the newe pere-jonette tree" (3247-3248). The "newe pere-jonette tree" is obviously the pear tree in its full spring bloom, and the pear's shape symbolic of the womb. Later Chaucer compares her to the primrose:

She was a prymerole, a piggesnye,
For any lord to leggen in his bedde,
Or yet for any good yeman to wedde.
(3268-3270)

Flowers, of course, are the reproductive organs of plants that develop into fruits that later on can be eaten. Though she does not conceive or produce offspring, she is portrayed as a potential fertility symbol. The relationship between these images plays a paramount role in regards to the upcoming scatological trick--and especially in the characterization of Absolon.

Like Alisoun, Absolon is given specific character traits that would ensure the success of Chaucer's scatological tricks. The first and most relevant aspect of Absolon's character is his obvious oral fixation and his association of love with eating (Beidler 94). As previously noted, Alisoun is consistently described in terms of food. It is only appropriate, therefore, that Absolon be infatuated with eating. When Absolon initiates his courtship of Alisoun, he solicits her favor through music, food, and drink:

He syngeth, brokkynge as a nyghtyngale;
He sente hire pyment, meeth and spiced ale,
And wafres, pipyng hoot our of the gleede.
(3377-3379)

As a reward for all his effort, Absolon receives nothing but scorn. In fact, Chaucer phrases Alisoun's disregard for

Absolon in an extremely derogatory manner:

> But what availleth hym as in this cas?
> She loveth so this hende Nicholas
> That Absolon may blowe the bukkes horn;
> He ne hadde for his labour but a scorn.
> (3385-3388)

Earlier in Absolon's description, Chaucer remarks that "he was somdeel squaymous/ Of farting, and of speche daungerous" (3337-3338). The arrangement of farting and speaking in this sentence is rather unique and draws attention to itself. David Williams comments upon this structure and expounds upon another character trait revealed in these lines:

> The rhetorical force of these lines, coming as they do . . . is emphasis through juxta-position. Farting and speaking, although antithetical, have a certain relation to each other. . . . By such emphasis an association of the two dissimilar functions, speaking and farting, is suggested and reenforced by the close grammatical relation they are given in the lines. . . . The rhetorical force of the lines would seem to suggest, then, that Absolon associates speaking and farting, or at least has trouble distinguishing one from the other and is wary of both. (231)

If Absolon does indeed have difficulty differentiating between speaking and farting, then the scatological trick played upon him would not seem so surprising because he would also have a natural confusion of the mouth and anus. Chaucer, however, greatly overshadows this presumption by making Absolon so fastidious, especially in regards to hair and oral hygiene. Also, by reemphasizing Absolon's association of love with eating, Chaucer makes Absolon's mistake even more surprising by intensifying Absolon's oral anticipation immediately prior to the window scene.

When Absolon discovers that John is supposedly out of town, he reveals that

> My mouth hath icched al this longe day--
> That is a signe of kissyng atte leeste.
> Al nyght me mette eek I was at a feeste.
> (3682-3684)

In anticipation of this long-awaited event, Absolon carefully grooms himself, taking special care of his breath:

> But first he cheweth greyn of lycorys,
> To smellen sweete, er he hadde kembd his heer.
> Under his tonge a trewe-love he beer,
> For therby wende he to ben gracious.
> (3690-3693)

Upon arriving at the window, he calls Alisoun "honycom" and "sweete cynamone" (3698, 3699), says he hungers for her as "dooth a lamb after the tete" (3704), and vows that he "ete na moore than a mayde" (3707). Once Alisoun consents to a

kiss, "This Absolon gan wype his mouth ful drie" (3728) before kissing "hir naked ers/ Ful savourly (3734-3735).

Surprisingly enough, Chaucer chooses not to describe the taste sensations Absolon experiences upon kissing his lady's backside. Rather, he reveals that it is Absolon's other obsession that informed him of his dreadful mistake--Absolon's obsession with hair. In fact, the first description given to Absolon concerns his hair:

> Crul was his heer, and as the gold it shoon,
> And strouted as a fanne large and brode--
> Ful streight and evene lay his joly shade.
> (3324-3326)

Later, it is revealed that he even barbers: "Wel koude he laten blood, and clippe, and shave (3326). Beidler notes

> That Absolon is a barber suggests that his concern for beautiful hair extends to others as well; that he shaves patrons suggests that he may find beards as offensive as he finds unkempt head hair. (95)

Beidler further postulates that Alisoun's cleanness and freshness of face are what first attract Absolon to her (95). What better trick, then, could be more offensive to one so overly concerned with his mouth and his hair? Instead of relishing a clean, sumptuous feast of her lips, he instead experiences a rough and probably odoriferous encounter with her "berd" and "nether ye."

Furthermore, Chaucer is careful not to limit his scatological insults to just one or two of Absolon's senses. In fact, after the second window scene Absolon suffers indignities to all five of his sense (Beidler 98-99). As noted, Absolon's sense of touch was offended by having his face come into contact with a "a thyng al rough and yherd" (3738). Without much elaboration, one can easily perceive what indignities his senses of taste and smell must have encountered after he lingeringly explored with his tongue his lady's posterior. The second window scene completes the insults to Absolon's remaining and more dominant senses of sight and sound. Reminded of Absolon's squeamishness of farting and dangerous speech, one must note that Nicholas' fart was not some innocuous little puff of vapor, but one "as greet as it had been a thonder-dent/ That with the strook he was almoost yblent" (3806-3808). With one masterful "strook," Chaucer thereby finalizes his affronts to Absolon's senses by nearly deafening and blinding him with Nicholas' prodigious fart (Beidler 98-99).

Nicholas' thunderous fart is also serviceable to Chaucer in more ways than merely a fitting punishment of Absolon:

> It has long been recognized that the tale consists of two separate plot lines, each of which is complete in itself, and each of which is extant as a separate story in medieval literature. The first is the flood

> plot: a lover, by predicting a coming flood, gets rid of a husband so that he can enjoy the sexual favors of the wife. The second is the kiss-and-burn plot: a promiscuous woman and her lover are surprised by a second lover who, after he is tricked into kissing the buttocks of the first lover, returns to burn those buttocks with a hot poker. (Beidler 96)

The first plot line has already been completed--John, the carpenter, has been securely stowed away while his wife is "swyved." Absolon, knowing that the same trick will be played on him again, is ready with the hot coulter to complete the second plot line. Nicholas' fart, which resembles a clap of thunder, and subsequent cries for water bring the two plot lines together for a dramatic and supremely comical climax. The sleeping carpenter awakes and severs the ropes that suspend not only himself but both plot lines.

In order to bring the two plot lines together and to make the second window scene a success, Chaucer employs yet another scatological element that often goes overlooked:

> This Nicholas was risen for to pisse,
> And thoughte he wolde amenden al the jape;
> He sholde kisse his ers er that he scape
> And up the wyndow dide he hastily,
> And out his ers he putteth pryvely

Over the buttok, to the haunche-bon.

(3798-3803)

After a night of intense love-making, Nicholas, no doubt, would be quite fatigued and naturally very hesitant to leave both his lover and his bed. Chaucer somehow had to have Nicholas out of bed and in proximity of the window at the exact moment that Absolon returned to the window. To accomplish this, he uses perhaps the most common reason for getting up in the night, the need to urinate. Moreover, the act of urination, falling water, further reminds the reader of another supposed flood. Thus, the two plot lines are linked not only by the part but also by Nicholas' need to "pisse" and his placement near the window.

In fact, Chaucer apparently found these middle of the night excursions so effective in moving along plot lines that he chose to use them again in the Reeve's Tale. In the Reeve's tale, one must remember that had not the miller's wife "gan awake, and wente hire out to pisse" (4215), then John the clerk could not have moved the cradle and tricked her into coming to his bed to give her "So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yoore" (4230).

Chaucer clearly employs scatology to link and further his plot lines, but more importantly he uses it to emphasize certain themes in the Miller's Tale. It has already been noted that the scatological trick played on Absolon was appropriate to his characterization. However, this trick is appropriate in a thematic sense as well. Like the friar in

the Summoner's Tale, Absolon held a position in the church. He was not only a representative of the church and its doctrines, but also a man who, by his order, was to practice and exemplify moderation, perhaps even asceticism. There is, however, very little in Absolon's behavior that reflects true spirituality. In fact, Absolon is portrayed as a man wholly given to the pleasures of his senses (Beidler 99). This type of hedonism is displayed throughout the tale as Absolon is consumed with satisfying temporal desires. In particular, his absorption with things fine and delicate, such as food, drink, and music, reveals that he is motivated by his senses rather than by his spiritual obligations. As previously observed, Chaucer heightens Absolon's already over-active senses in order to intensify the punishment Absolon deserves for worshipping his senses. Kissing Alisoun's ass and enduring Nicholas' fart are, as Peter Beidler puts it,

> Chaucer's means of demonstrating that the reward for such worldly behavior is not heavenly bliss, but scatological, as well as eschatological unpleasantness. (99)

Furthermore, Chaucer extends Absolon's punishment through the actions he performs after his discovery:

> And on his lippe he gan for anger byte,
> And to hymself he seyde, "I shal thee quyte."
> Who rubbeth now, who frotheth now his lippes

With dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth,
with chippes,
But Absolon, that seith ful ofte, "Alas".
(3745-3749)

Here, one must note the abuse he inflicts on his mouth--biting his lips and abrasing them with such coarse and indelicate materials like dust, sand, straw, etc. In essence, he physically performs the acts of penitence or contrition. Interestingly enough, this act of repentance and cleansing was preceded by a false and mocking act of penitence when "This Absolon doun sette hym on his knees" (3726) in front of Alisoun's window in hopes of receiving her grace: "Lemman, thy grace, and sweete bryd, thyn oore!" (3726).

Undoubtedly Chaucer is indeed satirizing Absolon's misplaced devoutness. Absolon sings, dances, plays instruments, frequents taverns and barmaids, and spends an exorbitant amount of time preening and primping himself, all to satisfy his vanity. While these actions reflect an unseemly preoccupation with worldly diversions, they are not, in themselves, especially heretical. What is heretical in Absolon's nature is his idolatry of Alisoun. Instead of seeking the divine grace of God through the Virgin Mary, Absolon entreats the affections of a very mortal (and married) woman whom he has somewhat deified.

Commenting further upon Alisoun's relationship with Mary, Susanna Greer Fein explores a unique comparison

between Alisoun and her men and Mary and the Trinity:

> Chaucer also seems to invite a ludicrous negative comparison of the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: stupid old doting John, clever young Nicholas, and sanctimonious effeminate Absolon, bearer of "grace." The analogy is by no means a developed one, only suggested by the comedy's situational likeness to the holiest of Christian mysteries--Mary as chaste bearer of the triune Deity, the "chambre of the Trynyte." The general set-up--a triad of men vying for the "bower" of one woman--implies a perverse antithesis to the divine mystery of Mary's relationship to the Trinity, the woman being the eternal Eve and the men all bumbling mortals. (311)

Fein arrives at this conclusion after thoroughly investigating an often unnoticed symbol--the "trewe-love" that Absolon placed under his tongue before visiting Alisoun. While most scholars perceive the truelove as just another of Absolon's many breath fresheners, Fein focuses upon the plant's religious significance. Apparently in medieval folklore, the truelove plant, which resembles a four-leafed clover, was more than merely a goodluck charm. It was an herb that represented divine love as well as divine grace. Also, due to the arrangement of the plant's four leaves, Absolon has literally placed in his mouth a

representation of the cross, which, in turn, denotes the Father, Son, Holy Ghost, and Mary (Fein 302-314). This action suggests that Absolon pays inadvertent homage to the perverse Mary's womb as he places a symbolic plant in the dark, warm cavern of his mouth.

Absolon's placing the truelove under this tongue before he humbly submits himself to the "divine" Alisoun emphasizes the extent to which he has elevated her. Absolon views Alisoun in terms of holiness, repeatedly inserting phrases rich with religious imagery. When he initiates his courtship of Alisoun, the first blessing he requests of her is pity or mercy: "Now, deere lady, if thy wille be,/ I praye yow that ye wole rewe on me" (3361-3362). Ultimately, Absolon's viewing Alisoun as such an ethereal being coincides with his role of courtly lover. His ardent reverence for his lady typifies the courtly tradition of idealizing a woman. Just as Friar John assumed a scholarly and reverent demeanor to attain his gift, Absolon presents himself as a foppish courtier to obtain Alisoun. Both assumed false identities for illicit gain, and both received scatological realities for their deceptions. Absolon's affectations of courtliness play an even more important role when one recalls that the Miller's Tale is used to "quyte" the Knight's Tale. Representing the crude Miller's approach toward romance, Nicholas' shockingly direct but successful advances offer a neat parody of Absolon's artificial, unnatural conception of courtship. Alisoun's scatological

prank not only punishes Absolon for his misdirected reverence and courtly affectations, but it also functions to "quyte" the idealized portrait of Emily in the Knight's Tale. Commenting upon both of these concepts, Peter Beidler explains the full effect of this scatological trick:

> The Miller, apparently annoyed by this highly idealized portrait of womankind, is anxious to show in Alisoun Emily's realistic counterpart. . . . What better way would the Miller have had of demonstrating his rejection of Emily's refined values than to have Alisoun present her bared buttocks out the window at, in effect, both the Knight and his idealized Emily. . . . Alisoun's bared buttocks thrust out of the window showed to all the world how the Miller felt about real, live, sensual women. . . . More important, Alisoun's actions at the window also demonstrate the Miller's contempt for Absolon. . . . He fancies himself a courtly lover. . . . Can there have been a better way for the Miller to convey his scorn for Absolon than to have Alisoun shove her buttocks into his face? The insult would have been effectively conveyed if Nicholas had (as in the analogues) presented his buttocks, but how much more effective is the rejection

> if Alisoun, the object of his unholy desires, presents hers. (93-94)

In regards to Absolon's "unholy desires," Chaucer also carefully establishes the time when Absolon goes to receive his blessing: "Til that the belle of laudes gan to rynge,/ And freres in the chauncel gonne synge" (3655-3656). Absolon's journey to his mistress coincides with the time that he should be offering his morning's prayers, reinforcing the concept that Absolon is greatly mistaken as to whom he should be worshipping (Beidler 94).

The time that Absolon courts Alisoun is vital in yet another way. The two occasions that Chaucer actually shows Absolon wooing Alisoun occur at night--in total darkness. While the darkness remains an absolute necessity to the success of the scatological trick, it also complements Absolon's mistaken sense of duty. In truth, Absolon has not only been blinded by love, but he has also lost total sight of his perspective. In pursuing what he hoped would be sublime love, he has actually been moving deeper into moral blackness. Only after the humiliation of his misdirected kiss does Absolon recognize the extent of his blindness: "Alas," quod he, "alas, I ne hadde ybleynt!" (3753). Here, there is a definite pun on the word <u>ybleynt</u>. Although the translation of the word means abstained, one can easily perceive that Absolon also wishes he had not been blinded by his desires. In many ways, this self-induced blindness parallels Chauntecleer's blindness in the Nun's Priest's

Tale, which, by the way, contains scatological elements explored in my later discussion of the Prioress' Tale. In the Nun's Priest's Tale, Chauntecleer is flattered by Russell the fox into closing his eyes, after which he is captured. Ultimately, he escapes by flattering the fox into opening his mouth. Both Chauntecleer and the fox suffer because of their vanity. In a sense, Absolon does the same.

In discovering Alisoun's backside, Absolon also discovers the cure for his "love-longynge":

> His hoote love was coold and al yquent,
> For fro that tyme that he hadde kist hir ers
> Of paramours he sette nat a kers,
> For he was heeled of his maladie.
> Ful ofte paramours he gan deffie,
> And weep as dooth a child that is ybete.
> (3754-3759)

While Absolon's weeping suggests repentance, one shortly discovers that Absolon's sobbing stems more from anger than from regret. Interestingly enough, even though Absolon has been cured of his malady of love-longing, he continues to move farther away from spiritual redemption. Instead of seeking comfort through sincere repentance and contrition, Absolon allows a darker side of himself to emerge by vowing revenge. Once again, like Friar John, Absolon resorts to revenge, which further illustrates his corruption. Though the fire of Absolon's passions have been quenched, the fire of his wrath has just ignited.

To complement the heat of Absolon's anger and to show his moral decline, Chaucer utilizes a succession of fire and hell images. Absolon initially swears an oath to the devil:

> "My soul bitake I unto Sathanas,
> But me were levere than al this toun," quod he,
> Of this despit awroken for to be. (3750-3752)

After giving his soul to Satan, Absolon proceeds to the place that most resembles hell--the blacksmith's shop, the only place open in this hour of darkness, the place where fire, smoke, and fumes abound. This transformation in Absolon from a dandyish courtier to a hell-bent avenger is so remarkable that even Gerveys, the simple blacksmith, perceives the change in Absolon:

> What, Absolon, for Cristes sweet tree,
> Why riseth ye so rathe? Ey, benedicitee,
> What eyleth yow? . . . (3767-3770)

Absolon's ailment extends much deeper than the outward, superficial display of anger. Obviously, as a representative of the church, Absolon should have abstained from soliciting the delights of a married woman, but more importantly he should have been setting an example of how to live a Christian life. While the scatological trick played upon him was indeed a demeaning and humiliating experience, it does provide him with a second chance for reforming his own life through practicing the humility and selflessness by which Christ lived. Moreover, it provides him with the opportunity to exercise Christ's ultimate tenet--

forgiveness. Instead of choosing the way of Christ, however, Absolon opts to follow the devil's way by getting revenge and inflicting pain.

Absolon's impiety and mercilessness is further accentuated by contrasting his inferiorities to the purities of gold. At the blacksmith's shop, the concept of gold is introduced. When Absolon asks Gerveys for the hot coulter, Gerveys responds with an allusion to gold:

> Gerveys answerde, "Certes, were it gold
> Or in a poke nobles alle untold,
> Thou sholdest have, as I am trewe smyth.
> Ey, Cristes foo, what wol ye do therwith?
> (3794-3797)

In that last line, one might wonder whether "Cristes foo" is just a mild oath or a direct address, given Absolon's recent associations with the devil. Nevertheless, the concept of gold is indeed implanted in Absolon's mind, for when he returns to Alisoun's window, he entices her out with gold:

> "Of gold," quod he, "I have the broght a ryng.
> My mooder yaf it me, so God me save.
> Ful fyn it is and therto wel ygrave.
> This wol I yave thee, if thou me kisse.
> (3794-3797)

Absolon's use of gold to accomplish his devilish (as well as scatological) deed reveals the extent of his corruption in that he readily and falsely swears upon his "mooder" (Mary?) and upon God. More importantly, Absolon's

use of false gold brings to mind what the Parson says of gold:

> That if gold ruste, what shal iren do?
> For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste,
> No wonder is a lewed man to ruste.
> And shame it is, if a preest take keep,
> A shiten shepherde and a clene sheep.
> Wel oghte a preest ensample for to yive,
> By his clennesse, how that his sheep sholde lyve
> (500-506).

Virtually every line of warning to wayward clergyman the Parson spoke of in the General Prologue has found its ultimate culmination in Absolon. Not only is Absolon a "foul" parish clerk, but through the scatological trick he has also become a "shiten shepherde." Furthermore, instead of having gold to give to Alisoun, he really has only iron, actually defective iron in the process of being mended. Just as Absolon uses gold to get revenge, he has also used his position in the church to satisfy his vanity and his worldly appetites. By abusing the church in such a way and by swearing to the devil, Absolon, much like the biblical Absalom, commits treason against the church. Also, like his biblical counterpart, Absolon receives his ultimate punishment from an ass. Here, one must recall that the biblical Absalom met his downfall from riding on an ass. While riding his ass under the branches of a large oak tree, Absalom got his head caught in the branches and was left

hanging. This enabled Joab's men to kill Absalom (2 Samuel 18:9-15). Being a well-read Christian man, Chaucer probably was familiar with this account. In fact, the parallels between the Miller's Tale and this biblical account seem to suggest that Chaucer varied both the ass and the hanging (John's suspension from the ceiling) in his own story.

Another way in which the Parson's words relate to the window scenes can be found in the sheep imagery. One must recall that in the first window scene Absolon yearned for Alisoun like "a lamb after the tete" (3704). If Alisoun is a ewe to Absolon, is she therefore the "clene sheep" being led by the "shiten shepherde" that the Parson referred to? If so, one can perhaps find some exoneration for her less than respectable actions. Sheep are notoriously wayward and weak creatures who demand constant guidance. Of all the characters in the tale, Absolon emerges as the one figure whose duties involve such guidance. However, instead of tending to her spiritual well-being, he pays improper attention to her body. He gives her cakes and mead instead of direction and scripture. This suggests, then, that Alisoun might merit some form of pardon.

Perhaps Alisoun is spared redress because she is the one character who is true to her own nature and calling. As already noted, Absolon suffers because of his fastidiousness and because of his abuse of his position. Nicholas suffers not because he violates another man's wife, but because he departs from his calculated cleverness to perform a simple

and scatological prank. Ironically, playing his scatological trick upon Absolon only makes him vulnerable to the scatological revenge planned by Absolon. John suffers because he not only violated nature and convention by marrying so young a wife, but also because he departs from his skeptical and ignorant nature to participate in Nicholas' intelligently conceived plan (Gallacher 45). Alisoun, however, has remained constant in her nature throughout the whole tale. Painted gloriously in earth tones and detailed subtly with pastoral beauty, Alisoun never betrays the honest naturalness of her character. In fact, her portrait defies complexity. She wears her sexuality like a garland of "piggesnyes," and she is as spirited as the calf or colt that comprises her sketch. Even her dialogue is simple and natural. When confronted by John about Absolon's singing to her, she rather nonchalantly responds, "Yes, God woot, John, I heere it every deel" (3369). Furthermore, after having her backside osculated "ful savourly," her only response is a twittering but triumphant "Tehee" (3740).

Essentially, this simple but ornery "tehee" reflects the tone of the entire tale. In the Miller's Tale, life is celebrated in a most honest fashion. No matter how seriously the scatology is used in this tale, its element of genuine comedy is never lost. Furthermore, it contributes to the gamesome spirit of the characters so that even their defeats and shortcomings become amusing rather than

despairing. This view of life basically represents the Miller's attitude toward life. As Esther Quinn notes, "to him, life--and the pilgrimage--is all pleasure and in no sense penitential" (67). She does note, however, that the tale abounds with religious language and comments upon its usage:

> Although the uses to which this language is put are hardly devotional, the structure of the tale--the exposure and punishment of folly--is not inconsistent with a broadly conceived religious view. (67)

Scatology's role in both the structure and the theme of this tale is paramount. As shown, the tale is specifically structured around the scatological events. More importantly, the religious theme is not lost in the scatological scenes but actually exposed by them. Absolon has lost sight of any heavenly goal in his pursuit of sensual gratification and is rewarded with scatological debasement.

THE PRIORESS' TALE

As stated in the introduction to this study, the Canterbury Tales involves a journey toward a holy city. Chaucer constructed this pilgrimage in a fashion so that the final tale would be told within sight of the pilgrim's earthly destination, Canterbury. That the last tale is told near Canterbury and not at Canterbury suggests not an end, but further travel. Also, the theme of penitence in the Parson's Tale does not focus specifically on heaven, but rather on the means of attaining that reward. The Prioress' Tale dramatically exemplifies this theme. Not only does the reader witness actual attainment of the heavenly reward, but he also is reminded of the work still to be done on earth. Scatology's role in this theme figures prominently in that the privy the boy is cast into represents the dregs of the earthly condition in contrast to the purity of the heavenly kingdom. Furthermore the city and its streets represent all the hazards and filth encountered on the journey toward the holy, eternal city. It has already been noted that Chaucer uses scatology to further plot lines, to develop characters, and to promote certain themes. While the scatology used in the Summoner's Tale and the Miller's Tale produces light-hearted and ribald humor, it evokes dark humor in the Prioress' Tale. Moreover, instead of using scatology to mock religious hypocrisy and worldly vanity, Chaucer employs it to glorify righteousness and humility in the Prioress'

Tale. Thus, Chaucer's use of scatology transforms from a device used to humiliate to a device used to glorify.

Both the Prioress and her tale have been an enigma and a consternation to critics for years, and the varying and disparate criticism on her perpetually prompts the question, "Will the real Prioress please step forward?" Chaucer constructs the Prioress in a fashion that seems to defy concrete and absolute definition. Though given to a life of religious orders, the Prioress gives the impression of being very worldly. Though described as sensitive to the point of being sentimental, she relates a tale filled with violence and obvious anger. Though given a position that demands authority and administrative skill, the Prioress displays child-like innocence. Though seemingly consumed with oral activities and fastidiousness, she delivers a tale decidedly excremental in nature. In accordance with such conflicts, Chaucer's use of scatology in her tale also contrasts with his previous uses of it. Generally, scatology is used to create ribald humor, or it is used to "quyte." However, in the Prioress' Tale, it is used to create a type of dark comedy. In dark humor, scatology, it seems, can elevate rather than reduce.

There is very little to laugh about in the Prioress' Tale. However, the ideal of a corpse singing <u>O Alma redemptoris mater</u> while ensconced in a pit or ordure is indeed ludicrous and darkly comical. One does not usually expect to find holy miracles springing from toilets.

Furthermore, by placing the murdered innocent child in repulsive excrement, Chaucer not only elevates the pathos surrounding the child's plight, but he also makes the miracle more uplifting. Interestingly enough, in the Nun's Priest's Tale, Chaucer shows another person buried in excrement. To show the dark comedy of both of these burials and to point out how both the horror and the ascension are intensified in the Prioress' tale, this other example demands a brief glance.

In trying to convince Pertelote of the portentousness of one's dreams, Chauntecleer uses the example of the man who dreamed of his death and subsequent burial in dung: "'A carte ful of donge ther shaltow se,/ In which my body is hid ful prively" (3018-3019). Of course, the dream comes true, and his body is indeed found in dung: "And in the myddel of the dong they founde/ The dede man, that mordred was al newe" (3048-3049). While many would find this image morbid and tragic, there exists a type of dark humor about it. Generally a man's death is associated in terms of solemnity, reverence, and dignity. Elaborate pains are taken on the body before it is placed in a surrounding festooned with flowers and mementos. A procession of mourners files past the deceased; a death knell sounds the solemnity of the occasion, and a tombstone marks the final resting place.

Initially, anyway, the deceased in Chauntecleer's story receives none of these considerations. His funeral procession consists of oxen, his hearse is a dung cart, and

his body is encased in excrement. Why is this man treated so irreverently? Perhaps Chaucer wishes to show man's proximity to dung and the corruption of the body. In the Middle Ages, people were constantly surrounded by excrement. It was found in the city streets, in the barnyards, and like today of course, in the center of one's own body. Despite the ever-presence of dung, man retains a particular aversion to it and spends considerable effort avoiding it. How ironic it is, then, that the man in Chauntecleer's story be entombed in the substance he has perpetually eschewed.

While this type of humor is dark in the Nun's Priest's Tale, it grows even darker in the Prioress' Tale because it involves a child and a heap of human excrement. Furthermore, the motives for these two murders are quite different. The man in Chauntecleer's story was murdered for his money: "My gold caused my mordre, sooth to sayn" (3021). On the other hand, the child was slain for his exuberance in praising the Blessed Virgin. The child in the Prioress' Tale not only shows the utter senselessness of the murder, but also reveals a type of adult ruthlessness that actually promotes the death of innocence. Also, Chaucer emphasizes the physical weakness of the child by consistently describing him with the diminutive "litel": "A litel clergeoun seven yeer of age" (503) went to a "litel scole of Cristen folk" (495) to receive "his litel book lernynge" (516). In using the child's innocence and weakness, Chaucer is perhaps developing the theme that true

blessedness can occur only when one adopts these child-like traits.

In many respects, these same child-like traits appear in the Prioress. What distinguishes the Prioress from Friar John, the Summoner, and Absolon is her naivete. She is unaware that her mannerisms raises questions about her integrity as a nun. Likewise, she fails to see the horrible implications of her tale. Indeed, much has been written on the anti-Semitism in her tale. R. J. Schoeck perceives the Prioress as a hypocrite "whose charity was too much of this world" (257). Emmy Stark Zitter comments that "if Chaucer meant the Prioress' Tale to criticize anti-Semitism, he simply would not have made the story work so well" (277). Maurice Cohen goes as far as to say that the Prioress' Tale is a "paradigmatic anal-sadistic--and anti-Semitic--fantasy" which displays "sadomasochistic, sexually ambiguous characteristics of anal erotism" (232). While these views may hold some validity in regards to her distorted sense of grace and charity, Donald Howard's view of the Prioress and her tale seems most accurate:

> Madame Eglantine has no idea that there is anything questionable about her tale. She is like those well-behaved ladies who cannot understand why America doesn't just drop its atomic stockpile on the Soviet Union--it is dreadful, but funny too; it is only frightening <u>en masse</u>. One can interpret the Prioress's

> Tale as a droll study in the banality of evil, but it was exactly that banality multiplied en masse which produced in Chaucer's time, as in our own, a mass slaughter of the Jews. Banality, in itself usually funny, is only chilling in this abstract way, in retrospect. (278)

Although naivete does not exonerate the Prioress' misconceptions, it does delineate her character. Unlike the other characters in this study, the Prioress has no ulterior motives for telling such a tale. She simply wishes to relate a tale that, she thinks, honors Mary. Like the little clergeon who sings Christian praises in the heart of a Jewery, the Prioress is ignorant of her tale's offensiveness. Furthermore, the Prioress' shallowness reflects some of the attitudes and mannerisms of her time. Like a child who adopts both the values and prejudices of his parents and peers, the Prioress assumes the mores and biases of her age. Also, her tale contains the same type of shocking cruelty that children are sometimes capable of displaying. Nevertheless, the innocent wrongdoings of the Prioress greatly clash with the overt deception and malice of Friar John, the Summoner, and Absolon.

Since there have been so many dark and sinister speculations on her, I feel impelled to offer a merciful opinion of her. Though she does appear lax in conforming to the strictures of her position, she is not outright

contemptuous of her vows as are the other religious figures. She seems to exhibit the type of understanding that comes from rote memorization. She knows the words and the perfunctory actions, but she cannot synthesize these concepts with anything beyond her own limited range of knowledge or experience. If the Prioress' tale is a "fantasy," as Cohen suggests, it is not a "sadomasochistic, anal-erotic" fantasy, but rather a wish-fulfillment, whereby she once again becomes a child. This concept, of course, is echoed in the Wife of Bath's Tale, in which the Wife wishes to recapture her youth. The Prioress, appearing uncertain and perhaps fearful of her role as an adult and Christian leader, seems to seek the security of childhood innocence and nescience. Though past the age of accountability, the Prioress perceives herself as having the same innocence as the little clergeon; and ultimately she wishes for the same reward as the little boy's. The fact remains, though, that she is not a child; and for her inability to understand this fully, she deserves mercy, not condemnation.

The child is blessed with the miracle of the Virgin because he is imbued with innocent, humble reverence. There are no pretentions or affectations about his singing. He simply wishes to praise Mary. That he does not understand what he sings suggests that simple, unqualified faith triumphs over the profoundest set of theological justifications and rituals. Therefore, it can be surmised that, in order to receive such divine gifts, one must

embrace his faith with this child-like innocence and humble sincerity. Chaucer suggests, as John Hill notes,

> the superiority of the young and helpless over the adult and murderous--as well as the efficacy of pure song over intellectual understanding--both in the expression of and service to truth. (101)

In essence, the purity of the child is sustained by juxtaposing the malice and constant suspicion of the adults with the child's love and genuine innocence. Though the child's song is performed by rote, the motive for his singing springs from heartfelt adoration for Mary. Conversely, the adults, both Christian and Jew, are conditioned by prejudice and a sense of brutal justice. To emphasize the antithesis of these two worlds, Chaucer not only portrays the child's savage murder, but also adds further degradation in his being thrown into a privy full of human excrement. Man is more offended by his own excrement than he is by that of animals. While many animal manures have useful and beneficial properties, human waste has no value and is actually a contagion. The child's being cast in human ordure not only makes the child's death more horrific, but also intensifies the phenomenon of the miracle by having the child transcend from the lowest and basest level of the human condition to a plane reserved for the divine. This concept is further alluded to in the image of the jewel lying in dung:

That in that place after hir sone she cryde
Where he was casten in a pit bisyde.

. . .

This gemme of chastite, this emeraude,
And eek of martirdom the ruby bright,
Ther he with throte ykorven lay upright,
He Alma redemptoris gan to synge
So loude that al the place gan to rynge.
(605-613)

The fact that a jewel (the child) is discovered in dung does not diminish the value of the jewel. In fact, this contrast increases the jewel's uniqueness and hence its value. Likewise, the miracle of the dead child singing in the privy is not denigrated by the scatological element but rather heightened.

Here, a parallel can be drawn to the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. Explaining his craft, the Canon's Yeoman states that among the many materials used in the attempt to create gold are "Poudres diverse, asshes, donge, pisse, and cley" (807). David Raybin notes that the alchemist attempts to create "transcendent beauty" from elements "that are not simply the dregs but are also the substance of the human body" (199). He further observes that the poet also uses these materials to create beauty. Essentially, Chaucer does the same in the Prioress' Tale. In fact, this beauty is more pronounced because of the success of the miracle. Alchemy fails because it is rooted in human knowledge and understanding.

In fact, the Yeoman even warns against seeking to know things forbidden to man. The miracle succeeds because only a divine power can transform excrement into beauty.

There is also a more organic explanation for the miracle's occurring in the privy. In many ways, the physical structure of the city resembles the body--open and free at either end with excrement in the center: "And thurgh the strete men myghte ride or wende,/ For it was free and open at eyther ende" (493-494). Furthermore, the alley imagery, like the alimentary canal, confines and restricts the action in the tale. It is this section that produces evil and goodness--the murder and the resulting miracle. Similarly, the alimentary canal produces excrement and the miracle of food's transformation into energy. Both processes, the manufacture of feces and the generation of energy, are vital to the overall health and strength of the body. Moreover, the process of digestion greatly resembles one of Chaucer's basic principles--the separation of fruit and chaff. After the ingestion of food, the alimentary operation begins to extract from the food what the body needs, what is good for the body. That which is not needed and that which can be toxic to the body is efficiently transported out. This cycle of repletion and evacuation is indeed miraculous, and both actions, though opposite in nature, are equally important.

With this concept in mind, one could also conclude that the city metaphorically represents the journey from life

into the afterlife. Life is the narrow passage full of much goodness but also full of much excrement that one must travel through in order to reach the miracle of afterlife. In this regard, the city reflects the contrast between the Holy Jerusalem and the earthly Jerusalem. Commenting on city imagery in context to the whole Canterbury Tales, Donald Howard explains its significance:

> The movement of The Canterbury Tales from one city to another can be seen . . . as a movement from the city of the world to the city of God . . . True order being a quality of the eternal city, the earthly city by contrast was disordered, mutable, and hence comparable to a wilderness: it was sometimes associated with confusion. . . . The wilderness suggests "the world," whether as a primeval state or as the "misery of the human condition" which tests virtue. The "Way" is then a passage through a wilderness (the world) to a city (eternal life). (70)

The city in the Prioress' Tale functions precisely in the same manner. The little boy leaves the chaos and excrement of the earthly city to meet his reward in what the Parson calls "That highte Jerusalem celestial" (51).

In order to obtain this reward, however, one must not curse the shit but sing praises for all he receives. The boy's life dramatically supports this concept. In the

fittingly brief sketch of the boy's short life, one recognizes his unflappable sense of acceptance paired with a determination to improve and to give thanks. Being fatherless, the boy therefore embraces the wisdom and guidance offered by his mother, whose own tenderness and love reflects Mary's love and compassion: ". . . and he forgat it naught,/ For sely child wol alday soone leere" (511-512). Upon hearing Alma redemptoris, the boy accepts his inability to understand the song but resolves to learn it by rote in order to praise Mary. Also, knowing he will be scolded and beaten for neglecting his studies, the little boy focuses instead on the importance of honoring Christ's Mother:

> Now, certes, I wol do my diligence
> To konne it al er Cristemasse be went--
> Though that I for my prymer shal be shent,
> And shal be beten thries in an houre,
> I wol it konne Oure Lady for to honoure.
> (539-543)

Not allowing life's excrement and all its unpleasantness to daunt his spiritual resolve, the boy not only learns to accept it as a normal encounter along his journey, but also as an incentive to reach higher.

There exists yet another similar explanation as to why Chaucer sets the miracle in excrement. For the most part, dung is considered a totally lifeless substance, a substance capable of improving life in the botanical world, but a dead

substance, nevertheless. Through science, modern man has come to realize that dung is not at all dead, but teeming with life in the form of microorganisms. Unable to explain scientifically how certain life forms emerged in the natural world, medieval man employed a different rationale--spontaneous generation. In fact, the belief in spontaneous generation extended beyond the Elizabethan Age. Shakespeare's Hamlet, for example, notes that "the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a god kissing carrion . . ." (II.ii, 181). If medieval man marvelled at life's miraculously springing from carrion, then it is logical to assume he would be equally amazed at life's springing from dung, though medieval man understood the basic working of dung as fertilizer.

In the natural world, life is perpetuated and spread in a variety of forms. One of the most important methods of spreading life involves excrement. Animals and birds ingest seeds and disperse them in new locations when they defecate. In fact, certain plants rely entirely on this method of reproduction. For example, the seeds of the bird pepper plant will not germinate until they have undergone digestion--hence the name bird pepper.

This seeming digression on spontaneous generation and bird peppers holds great relevance to Chaucer's Prioress' Tale. First, it has already been noted that unlike animal manures, human waste has no beneficial properties. It is neither a useful fertilizer nor a disperser of life. By

taking something so totally worthless and seemingly lifeless and using it as the foundation from which a beautiful child arises into a better, eternal life, Chaucer relates a miracle that is not only inspiring but beautiful. Second, one must remember the specific object that sustained the child's life and allowed him to sing--a seed:

> And whan that I my lyf sholde forlete,
> To me she cam, and bad me for to synge
> This anthem verraily in my deyynge,
> As ye han herd, and whan that I hadde songe,
> Me thought she leyde a greyn upon my tonge.
> Wherfore I synge and synge I moot, certeyn,
> In honour of that blisful Mayden free
> Til from my tonge of taken is the greyn;
> And afterward thus seyde she to me,
> 'My litel child, now wol I fecche thee
> Whan that the greyn is fro thy tonge ytake.
> Be nat agast, I wol thee nat forsake.'"
> (658-669)

In having a seed's bringing life to a child entombed in excrement, Chaucer not only effectively shows the miracle of life springing from dung; he also reveals how this new life was removed from the dung and was spread into those who witnessed the miracle. Furthermore, this gift of the seed can be seen as a symbol of God's gift to mankind. There is little doubt that the little clergeon is a Christ figure: he is without his real father; he is very pure; he neglects

certain duties to fulfill his spiritual duties (Christ's teaching in the temple, Mark 3:31-35); he is not only killed but grossly humiliated by Jews; his life is sustained briefly before ascending to heaven, and he leaves behind a gift that came from his mouth--his word. Just as "greyn" (bread) is the staff of the body's life, so is God's word the staff of one's spiritual life. Furthermore, the seed is suggestive of Christ's promise of heaven. When asked for an earthly comparison of heaven, Christ offered this comparison:

> It is like a mustard seed, which a man took
> and threw into his own garden; and it grew
> and became a tree; and the birds of the air
> nested in its branches. (Luke 13-19)

Chaucer also very subtly incorporates the role of the church in regards to this gift. Represented by the abbot and his "covent", the church's role involves the nurturing of this seed, God's word. In fact, one of the major actions performed by these religious men involves watering:

> And whan they hooly water on hym caste
> Yet spak this child, whan spreynd was hooly
> water,
> And song <u>O Alma redemptoris mater</u>. (639-641)

If the gift of the seed is indeed the word of God, then it remains the church's obligation to follow Christ's Great Commission, to spread the word and to baptize (Matthew 28:19-20), to plant the seed in the heart of man.

Although the tale ends with the proper burial of the little boy, the theme of the tale suggests a continuation. Just as Christ's work did not end with His ascension to heaven, the miracle of the child's journey into eternity also reminds all of those who witnessed the sight that they too have a journey to make. As previously noted, the Canterbury Tales also ends on a similar note. Donald Howard explains this ending:

> the ending forces our attention not back to a moment which has passed, but back to the whole action of the pilgrimage and forward to the future of man's pilgrimage--to each man's death and to the heavenly city. (122)

As stated in the introduction to this study, scatology does not involve just ends, but rather a journey toward ends. It involves a cycle of repletion and evacuation which never ceases until the body finally does. In the Prioress' Tale, scatology plays an integral role in the little boy's achievement of his reward. Excrement may not be a very pleasant aspect of life, but it is a very real part of everybody's existence. The Prioress' Tale shows that one can rise above life's excrement if one cheerfully accepts it as part of the journey and keeps sight of the ultimate goal. Even though the scatology used in this tale is dark and sinister, it dramatically elevates the miracle and carries home the theme of the tale. While the plots of the Summoner's Tale and the Miller's Tale are centered around

blatantly scatological scenes, the plot of the Prioress' Tale is centered around a miracle that is based upon a scatological element. Chaucer uses this scatological element not to disgrace or deflate, but rather to exalt. Ultimately, the Prioress' Tale represents Chaucer's gift for turning ugliness into beauty.

CONCLUSION

As stated throughout this study, the Canterbury Tales involves a journey. Structured upon a physical journey toward a religious shrine, the Canterbury Tales also takes the reader on a spiritual journey toward the holiest of all destinies--paradise. While this theme is suggested throughout the various tales, it emerges to the forefront in the Parson's Tale. Asked to "knytte up wel a greet mateere" (28), the Parson delivers his treatise on the nature of sin and penitence, which puts the entire pilgrimage in proper perspective. Up to this point, the pilgrims have been both led and misled by Herry Bailly. They have heard much wisdom and learned great lessons, but the journey has also been marred by insults and retaliations. Fairly competent at directing the entertainment for the journey, the Host finds himself uncertain of his spiritual leadership and relinquishes his authority to the Parson, who gladly accepts it.

In the very straightforward Parson's Tale, the errors of the characters in this study are elucidated. Speaking of what displeases God, the Parson points out three examples:

> And this is fruytful penitence agayn three thynges in whiche we wratthe oure lord Jesu Crist,/ this is to seyn, by delit in thynkynge, by recchelesnesse, and by wikked synful werkynge. (109-110)

Guilty of "delit in thynkynge" (erotic thoughts), Absolon worships his senses and abandons his spiritual goals and duties. He becomes a slave to his body and his senses. The Parson warns of this:

> And the same Seneca also seith, "I am born to greeter thynges than to be thral to my body, or than for to maken of my body a thral."/ Ne a fouler thral may no man ne womman maken of his body than to yeven his body to synne. (144-145)

The Parson also reveals a very interesting portrait of the reward that comes from worshipping the senses:

> For certes, delices been after the appetites of the five wittes, as sighte, herynge, smellynge, savorynge, and touchynge./ But in helle hir sighte shal be ful of derknesse and of smoke, and therfore ful of teeres; and hir herynge ful of waymentynge and of gryntynge of teeth, as seith Jesu Crist;/ hir nosethirles shullen be ful of stynkynge stynk. And as seith Ysaye the prophete, "Hir savoryng shal be ful of bitter galle." . . . (206-208)

Though a description of hell, this reward is identical to Absolon's. He is blinded and deafened by Nicholas' fart, and the "gryntynge of teeth" is reminiscent of the abuse Absolon gives to his mouth. His nostrils are positively

full of "stynkynge stynk," and his sense of taste is more than bitterly offended.

To some degree, Friar John also worships his senses, as he relishes fine clothing, meals, and nice houses. Furthermore, he abuses and blasphemes Christ's symbolic body in the attempt to fatten his own. Though the fulfillment of the cartwheel scheme is never made known, its effects would be similar to those Absolon experienced, given John's position at the cartwheel.

Absolon, Friar John and the Summoner are also guilty of the second sin the Parson spoke of--"recchelesnesse in spekynge." As repeatedly noted, the friar consistently betrays his evil intentions with his own mouth; the Summoner's wicked intentions are exposed as being worse than the friar's. Absolon's recklessness in speaking resembles the Friar John's. Both feign gentility in order to accomplish unholy goals. Friar John assumes a scholarly, pious facade to procure wealth while Absolon mimics the courtly traditions of romance to obtain Alisoun's affections. When angered by the scatological tricks, Absolon and Friar John are betrayed by their language, which reveals not only their true natures but also their true intents. In fact, all of the characters show anger in their speech, which reveals their hypocrisy. They are guilty of what the Parson calls,

> the synne of double tonge, swiche as speken
> faire byforn folk and wikkedly bihynde,

> elles they maken semblant as though they speeke of good entenciouns, or elles in game and pley, and yet they speke of wikked entente. (643)

Commenting upon the reward for angry speech, the Parson relates that

> Malisoun generally may be seyd every maner power or harm. . . ./ And ofte tyme swich cursynge wrongfully retorneth agayn to hym that curseth, . . . (618-619)

Friar John's and Absolon's rewards best exemplify this concept. Friar John curses Thomas for the fart in his hand and now awaits a fart in his face. Absolon seeks revenge for the first scatological prank and receives another as a second reward.

Finally, all of these characters are guilty of the third transgression, "wikked synful werkynge." To some degree, all the characters display a perversion of charity, a confusion of the body and spirit, and a distorted sense of grace. These faults all contribute to their sinful workings, and the evidence found in the Parson's Tale reveals that they have all missed the point--they have lost sight of their spiritual goals and have drifted away from righteousness. Their waywardness is further intensified in their repeating of these offenses. Friar John and Absolon are given opportunities to acknowledge their own shortcomings and to repent, but instead they subject

themselves to further humiliation by seeking revenge. The Prioress also has the opportunity to tell a beautiful tale that would indeed glorify Mary; however, she uses this chance to air her own anger and prejudice. She is incapable of displaying the same kind of mercy for which she prays at the end of her tale:

> Praye eek for us, we synful folk unstable,
> That of his mercy, God so merciable
> On us his grete mercy multiplie,
> For reverence of his mooder Marie. Amen.
> (686-690)

Even though the Prioress' waywardness is clearly evident, her intents are more admirable than the other characters'. She wants to honor Mary. The others are motivated by greed, lust, and revenge. Furthermore, unlike the Summoner, she prays for mercy for everyone because "we synful folk unstable" are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.

The Parson's Tale contains scatological imagery that vividly portrays their inability to abandon their sinful workings:

> And yet moore foul and abhomynable, for ye trespassen so ofte tyme as dooth the hound that retourneth to eten his spewyng./ And yet ye be fouler for youre longe continuyng in synne and youre synful usage, for which ye be roten in youre synne as a beest in his dong. (137-138)

Here, scatology's role takes on new meaning. In the Parson, Chaucer created perhaps the holiest of all the pilgrims:

> the Parson stands out as the true embodiment of Christian ideals; he not only preaches, that is, uses the language of Christianity, but he lives accordingly. His life is structured in conformity with Christian ideals. (Quinn, 66)

Using the "language of Christianity," the Parson incorporates scatological images and phrases into this language. Although his tale is filled with scatology, the good Parson is never accused of vulgarity or obscenity--yet his creator is! In essence, the Parson states that many are the paths that lead to glory. Likewise, one could also say that many are the ways of exposing unrighteousness, scatology being one of the best. Even though these characters are wayward, they still support the concept that all of God's workings are for good. This concept is explained in the Friar's Tale:

> For somtyme we been Goddes instrumentz
> And meenes to doon his comandementz,
> Whan that hym list, upon his creatures,
> In divers art and in diverse figures.
>
> . . .
>
> And somtyme be we suffred for to seke
> Upon a man and doon his soule unreste,

> And nat his body, and al is for the beste
> Whan he withstandeth oure temptacioun,
> It is a cause of his savacioun,
> Al be it that it was nat oure entente
> He sholde be sauf but that we wolde hym
> hente. (1483-1500)

Enabling Chaucer to reveal the extent of his characters' folly, scatology proves useful in accentuating the insignificance of earthly rewards and impels one to seek higher rewards. Chaucer's use of scatology also offers a new facet to his view of salvation. Just as his allegories, fablieaux, fables, etc. present new facets of this view, scatology does the same. Although he is praised for using such a diversity of literary forms and devices, he is still criticized for using scatology.

For centuries, the scatological elements found in the Canterbury Tales have either been vociferously condemned or politely excused by such notable Chaucerians as Robert Kilburn Root, John Matthews Manly, and Haldeen Braddy as one of Chaucer's unsavory idiosyncrasies (Beidler 90-91). This study refutes these views by demonstrating the artistic contributions that scatology lends to the work. That Chaucer did not use scatology frivolously becomes obvious when one recognizes the wide range of effects scatology produces. The three tales explored in this thesis reveal scatology's multiple nature. Scatology's unpleasant nature offers the perfect recompense for religious hypocrisy and

vanity. Since scatology involves man's lower nature (as well as his lower anatomy), it complements man's baser motives and actions. As evidenced in the Summoner's Tale and the Miller's Tale, the recompense for corruption and deception is as ignoble and demeaning as the offenses themselves. Conversely, Chaucer exploits scatology's progressive nature in the Prioress' Tale to show that righteousness and humility lead to divine rewards.

To emphasize scatology's versatility, I have deliberately avoided any prolonged discussion on its obvious achievement of ribald humor. Though Chaucer definitely used it for this effect, he found even more important and diverse uses for scatology. As this study illustrates, Chaucer used scatology for plot and character development, for satire and parody, for metaphors and similes, and for themes. For nearly five hundred years, the full effects of Chaucer's scatological elements have eluded critics. In fact, Alan Levitan's Pentecost theory in 1971 represents the first major attempt to raise scatology from the depths of insignificance to which it had been relegated. Since then, scholars such as Peter Beidler, Roy Clark, and Ian Lancashire have portrayed Chaucer's scatological scenes as main issues, issues that these and other contemporary scholars appear more willing to address.

Nevertheless, to this date no book-length work dealing exclusively with Chaucer's use of scatology exists. To my knowledge, this thesis may very well be the single largest

work that focuses exclusively on these scatological elements. If so, there is still much work to be done in this area, for these meager pages do not begin to do justice to the scatological elements found elsewhere in the Canterbury Tales. For example, an exploration of the Host's scatological words would reveal scatology's effectiveness in revealing the Pardoner's hypocrisy. Also, Pertelote's praise of laxatives in the Nun's Priest's Tale could be developed into a treatise on penitence, whereby the sins are removed in one great purge. As stated previously, scatology offers a new frontier for Chaucerian research. Just as the Canterbury Tales concludes on the note that the journey is not yet over, this study does the same.

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