

Desire, Violence, and the Passion in Fragment VII of *The Canterbury Tales*: A Girardian Reading

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The most successful attempts to demonstrate the unity of Fragment VII of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the longest and most diverse grouping of tales as they have come down to us, have treated it as a statement of Chaucer's artistic principles. Alan Gaylord's influential view of this as "the Literature Group" emphasizes how the links between these six tales give us, through the Host of the tale-telling contest, Harry Bailly, a counterexample of how Chaucer would have us read his tales: "if Harry is the Apostle of the Obvious, Chaucer is the Master of Indirection" (235). Adroitly pursuing the Master of Indirection further into his self-presentation as teller of the two tales at the center this fragment, Lee Patterson has argued that Chaucer frames a modern vision of autonomous literature as opposed to the courtly or didactic and represents, through the recurrent figure of the child, a corresponding subjectivity that both transcends and suffers history ("What man artow?" 162-4). Yet beyond their author's literary aims and subjectivity, I want to argue, the tales of Fragment VII as a group also address a problem in the world outside the text—the problem of human violence—and probe the potential of literature to perpetuate or remedy this problem.

In the late fourteenth century, violence on a large scale held English attention as spectacular victories against the French early in the Hundred Years War were followed by a series of costly, disastrous campaigns. In order to pay for an unprecedented state of

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continual war-readiness, the Crown experimented with a new form of per-person taxation that, in turn, became the immediate cause of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, some of the worst of which Chaucer could well have witnessed from his London home. Many of his works show an obvious concern with violence on scales both large and small. The two tales he assigns himself in the middle of Fragment VII, in particular, have recently been emphasized as indicating his stance against the war.² That these two tales could be read as opposing the war with France is, I think, a consequence of a subtler analysis of violence that extends to the rest of this fragment and beyond. Indeed, the problem of the unity of Fragment VII offers merely a circumscribed place to begin an interpretation of Chaucer's representations of violence.

At the center of Fragment VII, between its two middle tales, is a narrative link that provides a clue to a critique of violence that goes beyond mere opposition to war. As Chaucer the pilgrim is telling his parodic romance of Sir Thopas, he is rudely interrupted by an uncomprehending Harry Bailly, who demands that he tell a different tale. "Gladly," replies Chaucer, "by Goddes sweete pyne!" In the tale he will tell of Melibee, "Goddes sweete pyne," Christ's Passion, will be the fundamental model for how to respond to an act of violence. But before he proceeds, the pilgrim warns his audience not to blame him if his version of the tale is not the same as others they have heard. He cites as an analogy the differences between versions of the Passion:

For somme of hem seyn moore, and somme syen lesse,
Whan they his pitous passioun expresse—
I meene of Mark, Mathew, Luc, and John—
But douteles hir sentence is al oon. (949-52)³

²See Scattergood, Yeager (108-121), and Lowe (94-101), also Blamires's extension to a rejection of "the combative ethos" of romance (264). For an alternative view of Chaucer's attitude toward war see Pearsall (42-46).

³Line numbers refer to Fragment VII of *The Canterbury Tales* unless specified otherwise. Chaucer's text is cited from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

Chaucer's *Melibee* is in fact a close translation of a French translation of Albertanus of Brescia's *Liber consolationis et consilii*, close enough that such a disclaimer would not seem necessary for anyone who happens to know the French source. The emphasis on "sentence," a word repeated five times in the surrounding 18 lines, has been taken by "exegetical" critics as positing a stable, consistent meaning behind this and all of Chaucer's tales when read spiritually instead of literally, that is, according to a narrowly conceived version of Augustinian hermeneutics that simply reduces them to a given set of doctrines.⁴ Resolving the differences between the four gospels, however, was seen as no simple matter in the Middle Ages; exegetes constantly revisited the subject. Moreover, as the key to the meaning of the entire Bible, and indeed of all history, the gospels were held to be infinitely meaningful, a mountain of significance ever rising before the interpreter.⁵ Thus if the existence of four different gospels required a doctrine of stable meaning behind them, it was also an invitation to an endlessly fruitful work of interpretation. If Chaucer implies a hermeneutic here, it is one that would appear even narrower than that of his "exegetical" critics, but that proves in the end much more open and productive. For the "sentence" of all of the tales of Fragment VII (and others besides), not just the *Melibee*, rests deeply on the gospels, and in particular on the Passion as a key to understanding and healing violence. Increased devotion to Christ's Passion is one of the central facts of late medieval European culture. In order to illuminate its significance for Chaucer's treatment of violence, however, I will look not to the wide of array of medieval experiences and understandings of the Passion, but to literary critic and cultural theorist René Girard, whose work follows from a reading of the Passion that has been present throughout the Christian tradition, although often obscured by other, competing interpretations. Chaucer's tales provide, I think, evidence for the presence of this

⁴See Robertson (367-9); among many responses, see Patterson ("What Man Artow? 152-4) and Wallace (*Chaucerian Polity* 227).

⁵See de Lubac (234-41 and *passim*).

Girardian interpretation in the late Middle Ages, while Girard's formulation provides a powerful tool for unfolding Chaucer's engagement with the gospels and his times.⁶ Girard holds that the sufferings of Christ, as told in the gospels, enable the supreme unmasking of the violence at the foundation of human culture from the perspective of its innocent victims. At the risk of overreading, I would suggest that Chaucer's oath in response to the Host gives significance to his own symbolic suffering in being interrupted, so that Chaucer locates himself in the position of an innocent, Christlike victim, insulted and mocked through Harry's colorful language, enabled by suffering to be a witness.

Exposure of the truth of human violence is necessary, according to Girard, because it has been concealed through the forms of culture, beginning with myth and ritual and extending to more sophisticated literature and institutions. Concealing violence is, indeed, a determining function of these cultural forms. In the first three tales of Fragment VII, *The Shipman's Tale*, *The Prioress's Tale*, and *Sir Thopas*, which belong to the genres that make up the bulk of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole—fabliau, religious tale, and romance—Chaucer displays tendencies in these genres, and in larger cultural practices related to them, to mythologize violence. Whether each tale succeeds in exposing such tendencies when taken on its own is perhaps doubtful, but becomes more likely when they are seen together, and more likely still in connection with the three tales that follow. After Chaucer's crucial representation of the poet as victim, and the *Melibee's* explicit treatment of how to answer an act of violence, the final two tales of the fragment, those of the Monk and the Nun's Priest, explore the potential for disarming literary responses to violence through the modes of tragedy and comedy.

“Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out.”

(John 12:31)

⁶See especially *Things Hidden* (141-262). Cesáreo Bandera discusses the significance of late medieval devotion to the Passion from a Girardian perspective (233-52).

The Shipman's Tale has, on the face of it, the least to do with violence of any tale in Fragment VII.⁷ Indeed, as a fabliau, like the tales of the Miller, Reeve, and Merchant, that of the Shipman is noteworthy for its lack of a violent conclusion. In this elaborate version of the folktale type known as “the lover’s gift regained,” a merchant’s wife trades sexual favors to their friend, the monk Daun John, in return for a loan of one hundred franks, which the monk, in turn, borrows from the merchant. The duped merchant suffers neither physical violence nor even the shame of knowing he has been cuckolded; the lecherous monk gets off scot free; and the unfaithful wife satisfies her husband, who is angry merely that he didn’t know the monk had repaid the hundred franks when he brought up financial matters with him, by inviting him to “score it upon my taille” (tally stick or sexual member). The magic of the market seems to have deferred the typical end of a fabliau’s sexual rivalry. Patterson goes so far as to argue that the mercantile world of exchange that dominates the tale, having first assimilated the domestic sphere to itself, then reconstitutes it and saves the merchant’s honorable innocence (*Subject of History*, 349-65). On the other hand, more usual readings of this tale emphasize the traces within it of a source of ethical standards by which the judgment that is not explicit within the tale could be supplied by interpretation. Gail McMurray Gibson, in a particularly persuasive example, has shown how the meeting of wife and monk in which they agree to break their vows calls to mind Mary Magdalen’s encounter with the resurrected Christ in the garden, so that “the prostitute-made-saint is replaced by a contemporary Magdalen who will contract to prostitute herself both within and without her marriage” (109). The tale certainly calls for ethical judgment, but by displacing the grounds for it outside of the tale itself, and by deferring the violence of suffering and retribution through exchanges of

⁷In the sequence of *The Canterbury Tales*, however, issues of violence are already very much on the table. The tale that precedes the Shipman’s in the Ellesmere order, that of the Pardoner, is one of the most violent and issues in the frame narrative’s most chilling confrontation, between the Pardoner and the Host, which has been suggestively analyzed from a Girardian perspective by John M. Bowers as an episode of scapegoating (774-6).

money and sex, the tale shifts the focus of judgment away from its characters and toward systems of desire in which they are caught up. Mary Magdalen was thought in the Middle Ages to be the prostitute from whom Jesus expelled seven demons, and we might ask, extending Gibson's argument, What are the demons that inhabit the prostitute of this tale, as well as her lovers?

The tale begins with a lengthy description of the wife's expensive, seemingly insatiable desire for clothes, the desire that we later discover has led her into the debt that makes her ask Daun John for a loan. Fashion offers an especially clear example of what Girard calls mimetic desire, that is, desire that originates in a perception of another's desire for the same object—wanting something simply because someone else wants or has it. Girard's theory of culture begins by positing that all human desire, beyond what is necessary for bodily survival, is mimetic. Chaucer, by focusing first on the wife's devotion to fashion, cues an analysis of mimetic desire in all three characters that, while unnecessary to the story and lacking in the closest analogue (Boccaccio's *Decameron*, day 8, story 1, which might be Chaucer's source), is at the same time completely at home in it. What motivates the wife's desire for clothes is not said to be keeping up with other women—though this can be assumed—but rather her husband's "worship" (13). Her vanity in wanting to be "arrayed" by him thus imitates her perception of his desire for her. Moreover, he too is introduced in the context of a competition for public honor signified by making a trophy of his wife. From the outset we see them both caught up in a world of mimetic desire, a world that becomes most potent through money.

Money is the sign of all others' desires, and the merchant's single-minded devotion to it, emphasized throughout and so basic that it would seem to need no explaining, is nonetheless given, within the structure of the tale, a mimetic origin. Before we know anything about the merchant except that he is rich and generous and perhaps resents having to spend so much on his wife's clothes, the description of the monk dwells at curious length on his seemingly greater generosity, especially with money, when he

visits the merchant's house. Emphasizing his liberality, rather than just the indulgence of worldly pleasures monks were often criticized for, only makes him a more powerful model of desire that has achieved its object to a point of self-sufficiency: "Free was daun John, and manly of dispence" (43). In the order of the tale, then, the merchant's desire for money begins in a perception of the monk. Conversely, the tale quite clearly locates the monk's desire in his imagination of the merchant. When the wife greets Daun John in the garden by teasing him for being up so early, his reply ends:

"I trowe, certes, that our goode man
Hath yow laboured sith the nyght bigan
That yow were nede to resten hastily."
And with that word he lough ful murily,
And of his owene thought he wax al reed. (107-11)

He is taking the opportunity for a come-on, but his words and his embarrassment suggest that it comes not from simply conceived, spontaneous lust, but from a rivalrous fantasy. Thus the tale's rivals, besides being from the same village and calling each other cousin, are quite carefully constructed as mirror images: a merchant whose religion of money is modelled on the monk, and a worldly monk projecting himself into the merchant's bed.

Chaucer has already explored such close, mimetic rivalry in *The Knight's Tale*, where the imitation of each other's desire makes any difference between Arcite and Palamon arbitrary and leads to a crisis in which one of them must eventually be sacrificed for the sake of the larger social order.⁸ In *The Shipman's Tale*, the preservation of order through the exchange of money, while it avoids outright violence, is far from establishing peace in any positive sense. Commodification of relationships leaves no one innocent.⁹ More important, however, the tale takes to a more anthropological level the theological problem of free will and necessity through which *The Knight's Tale* frames its answer to

⁸Laurel Amtower explores this dimension of *The Knight's Tale* from a Girardian perspective.

⁹Chaucer associates the rise of commerce closely with the fall from an innocent, peaceful state in his lyric "The Former Age."

the problem of violence. The tale's relatively harmless resolution is attributable not to Providence but to the market, and its humor is overshadowed, not by moral judgment of the characters as individuals, but by the disclosure that mimetic desire leads them to be dominated by a system that puts each into competition and potential conflict with all others. The violence of such a dynamic will escalate, as the next tale in Fragment VII implies, until it is met with a more severe response.

“How can Satan cast out Satan?” (Mark 3:23)

Religious devotion, debased in *The Shipman's Tale*, becomes excessive in the next one. *The Prioress's Tale* belongs to a category of medieval religious tales that tell of miracles attributed to the Blessed Virgin, and like many of them it concerns a stereotypical act of violence by Jews. In an unnamed city in Asia Minor, Jews hire one of their own to cut the throat of a seven-year-old boy who had taken to singing a song in praise of the Virgin on his way to and from school through their ghetto. By her miraculous intervention, the boy remains alive, and continues singing, until a mysterious grain she had placed on his tongue is removed by the local abbot. Meanwhile the Jews are tortured and executed. Most of the tale, however, concerns the piety of the boy, the pathos of his bereaved mother, and the wonder of the miracle. Critical debate remains divided over how to interpret the tale's apparent anti-Semitism. One approach attributes it to Chaucer but attempts to excuse it as a result of his choice to explore the emotional dimensions of a kind of story that requires a stereotypical enemy. The other main approach attributes it instead only to the immediate teller of the tale, the Prioress, and finds that Chaucer exposes her misguided piety through satire. Because Jews had been expelled from England a century before Chaucer wrote, the relevance of satirizing anti-Semitism is perhaps questionable. And almost every element in the tale has parallels in similar stories that were evidently popular in England at the time and carry no hint of satire. On the other hand, explicit decrees of the church had declared the stereotypical accusations against

Jews to be lies, and although of course this did not stifle them, it establishes that opposition to them would not be unprecedented. In addition, as many have shown, the portrait of the Prioress in Chaucer's General Prologue gives abundant reason to suspect her devotion.¹⁰ I am more inclined to see the dubious piety of the Prioress as an invitation to give more subtle attention to the victimization of the Jews in her tale, but rather than simply saving Chaucer by blaming the Prioress, I think we can also find in the tale an understanding that follows from the analysis of desire in *The Shipman's Tale* of just how persecution of the Jews is related to the rest of the tale's picture of religion.

The single largest element in Prioress's tale that is unparalleled in any of the surviving analogues offers a guide to Chaucer's diagnosis of the violence here. Whereas in other versions the boy is old enough to learn the offending song in a class at school, Chaucer makes him only seven and adds an older boy whom he begs to tell him the meaning of this song he has heard the older children singing. When he finds out it is a song in praise of the Virgin, he resolves to memorize it instead of learning his primer, even though he cannot understand the words. Though the older boy does not seem to be particularly fervent in his devotion, and can only provide a simple explanation of the song, he figures as a model and rival that highlights how intensely mimetic the little boy's piety is. His mother had already taught him a fervent devotion to Mary, and the Prioress comments on the readiness of simple, innocent children to learn by imitation (495-515).¹¹ Twice the tale says he learned the song "by rote" (522, 545). Moreover, the boy's devotion reflects that of the Prioress herself, who, in the prayer that forms a prologue to her tale, has shown herself to be fixed on imitating the Virgin Mary. As exquisite as her praise of Mary's devotion is, it also hints at envy of Mary's motherhood, hints that are

¹⁰For a summary of scholarship on the tale, especially the question of anti-Semitism, see Boyd and Fradenburg.

¹¹Medieval conceptions of childhood emphasized that up to the age of seven children are incapable of making rational choices and learn primarily by imitation (Shahar 24, 172). Girard notes that children are easily scandalized because they imitate readily (*Things Hidden*, 417).

developed in the tale's strong identification with the emotions of the murdered boy's mother. The oddest feature of this prologue, the Prioress's comparison of herself to a one-year-old, professes modesty and innocence at the same time that it perhaps signifies a propensity to imitate like a child. The tale's emotional fervency thus arises from a web of imitated desire, and its violent potential is foreshadowed when the little boy says he will learn the song even if it means being "beaten thrice in an hour" for not learning his primer.

Indeed, this imagination of an obstacle that only makes his desire more intense implies another aspect of mimetic desire, for which the gospels use the word scandal (often translated "stumbling block"). When the model of desire is a particularly overpowering one, as here in the whole chain of models from the older boy to the Virgin herself, it becomes a rival so strong that it prevents successful appropriation of the object and tends to eclipse it as the focus of attention, resulting in "all kinds of destructive addiction, drugs, sex, power, and above all morbid competitiveness, professional, sexual, political, intellectual, and spiritual, especially spiritual" (Girard, "Satan" 198). The little boy's scandal is figured powerfully, I think, in the grain that must be removed from his tongue in order for him to die. At the moment he should have died, he tells the abbot, the Virgin told him to keep singing her song, laid the grain on his tongue, and promised to fetch him when it is removed. Many interpretations of the grain have been suggested by reference to biblical and medieval symbolism.¹² Without drawing any significance from outside the tale, however, the grain can serve as an image of how obsession with the song is an obstacle that keeps the boy stuck in a sort of devotional prison, unable to stop singing. The Virgin herself, then, plays a complex role that includes being both the object of his scandalized piety and his deliverer from it (much as Christ is for his disciples in the

¹²See the notes to line B.1852, pp. 160-1 in Boyd. W. W. Skeat's odd old suggestion of a parallel to the three seeds that Seth was said to place under the tongue of Adam and from which grow the trees that provide the wood of Christ's cross perhaps resonates best with my interpretation.

gospels). Once the abbot takes the grain away, the little boy gives up the ghost “full softly” (672). The dramatic reaction of those who witness his death is worth quoting at length:

And whan this abbot hadde this wonder seyn,
His salte teeris trikkled down as reyn,
And gruf he fil al plat upon the grounde,
And stille he lay as he had ben ybounde.

The covent eek lay on the pavement
Wepyng, and heryng Cristes mooder deere,
And after that they ryse, and forth been went,
And token away this martir from his beere. (673-80)

Imitating his death and continuing his act of worship must be construed, at least in part, as a positive sort of mimesis on the part of the crowd. Thus they all share in the benefit the boy receives from the removal of the obstacle. Yet the crowd's powerful release of emotion in response to his death, and its vaguely cleansing and unifying effect, also resemble what Girard finds to be the more usual resolution of mimetic rivalry and scandal: the arbitrary choice of a single victim against whom everyone else's violent energy is directed. The death of this victim, this scapegoat, has such power to restore peace to the community that the dynamic of unanimous violence is repeated in sacrificial ritual. Of course we cannot see the boy as a scapegoat or his eventual death as a sacrifice in any simple sense. For one thing, the significance of his death is complicated because he dies twice. Yet his two deaths share some features that can, in turn, shed light on the significance of the death that falls between them, that of his first killers, the Jews.

If the boy is scandalized by his own piety, it is even more of a scandal to the Jews. Rather than giving a subtle, psychological portrayal of what motivates their rivalry, however, the tale represents them simply as inspired by Satan.

Oure firste foo, the serpent Sathanas,
That hath in Jues herte his waspes nest,
Up swal, and seide, “O Hebrayk peple, allas!
Is this to yow a thyng that is honest,

That swich a boy shal walken as hym lest
 In youre despit, and synge of swich sentence,
 Which is agayn your lawes reverence?" (558-64)

Girard interprets Satan in the Gospels as the figure of scandal, a linkage made explicit in Jesus' rebuke to Peter, "Move behind me Satan, because you are a scandal to me" ("Satan" 200, citing Mt. 16:23). Yet we do not need to supply such an explicit equation in Chaucer's reference to Satan in order to find the dynamics of scandal. Satan's words appeal to the Jews' sense of rivalry as a people with their own laws from which they derive honor. The boy is a scandal, not just in the broad, modern sense of a disgrace but in the specific, New Testament sense of an obstacle on which their conflictual drives focus. A parallel between scandalizing effect of the boy's piety on himself and on the Jews is reinforced by the fact that it leads in each case to involuntary speech, for the tale asks us to imagine Satan as a swelling within the Jews' hearts that leads to utterance by their mouths.¹³ In both the boy and his killers, being scandalized is manifest as a state of spiritual possession. Whereas the cause is represented in the boy's case by an innocuous grain, in the Jews it is symbolized as Satan. This opposition is crucial because it shows the phenomenon of scapegoating from two different perspectives, the victim's and the persecutor's. The boy is exposed as a scapegoat for the Jews—a randomly chosen, innocent victim—in that his offense is distinct only in degree, not in kind, from that of any other Christians; he merely draws attention to himself and is vulnerable. What they all see as his guilt, the tale represents, from the victim's perspective, as innocence (even if it also, as I am arguing, exposes problems of excessive devotion). The unifying effect of scapegoating is shown only before the boy's death: the Jews act as one through a chosen representative and, more dramatically, speak as one the voice of Satan.

¹³Chaucer usually uses the word "swell" to refer figuratively to a feeling in a person's chest or heart; in most of these cases it forces speech (*Canterbury Tales* III.967, IV.2306, X.391 and 398; see also I.2743 and 2752).

In the persecution of the Jews, on the other hand, scapegoating is concealed behind the persecutors' perspective of the Jews' unquestioned guilt, which demands punishment. It is easy for us to see how the tale's accusation against them fits into the pattern of the "blood libel" against Jews that circulated among Christians in the late Middle Ages, and that the medieval church had declared by the thirteenth century to be a lie (Schoeck, 251-2). Girard calls such violence-justifying accusations "stereotypes of persecution" and finds in them recognizable patterns of distortion that arise from their usefulness in enabling the scapegoat mechanism. Among these are accusing the scapegoat of crimes against those it is most criminal to attack, such as children, and choosing as scapegoat a minority group, such as the Jews (*Scapegoat*, 1-23). In Chaucer's tale, of course, these elements are given, and the question of what attitude the tale takes toward them depends rather on details of how it represents the Jews' crime. That they throw the boy's body into a privy, for instance, has been read as satiric exaggeration of the crime's brutality. Explicit demonization might also be seen as a telltale excess, but then again demons were a favorite device of religious tale and drama. Of course it is difficult even to guess how such details would have registered with Chaucer's original audience. More telling, I think, is the symmetry between the murders of the boy and of the Jews, which, though inverse with regard to guilt, is direct in the actions of the persecutors. Like the Jews, the Christians act as one through a chosen representative, the provost:

He cam anon withouten tariyng,
 And herieth Crist that is of hevene kyng,
 And eek his mooder, honour of mankynde,
 And after that the Jewes leet he bynde. (617-20)

The anaphora of these lines conveys, with a frightening inevitability, the religious sanction given to this violence, less conscious even than the Jews gave to theirs. Least conscious, however, and the greatest sign of the persecutors' unanimity, are the stereotypes of persecution that pervade the tale, beginning with the first stanza, which describes how the Jewish community was sustained by the local lord for the sake of their

moneylending, “Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye” (492). Here we glimpse how violence against the Jews was part of negotiating their continuing presence. David Nirenberg, in his recent study of both annual, ritualized violence and larger, cataclysmic violence against Jews in Iberia, concludes that “although they differed in stridency and despair, Holy Week riots and plague massacres were alike in that they were both part of the same violent mechanisms by which the Christian majority articulated the terms of coexistence and made it possible” (245). The violence against Jews in *The Prioress’s Tale* falls somewhere between these two poles in that it is ritualized through legal rather than liturgical authority but leads to real rather than just symbolic slaughter. Again, it is difficult to distinguish how much of an analysis of scapegoating mechanisms is performed *by* the tale on its own culture and how much can merely be performed *on* the tale as it reflects its culture. What comes through most clearly, perhaps, in this picture of mimetic rivalry leading to conflict that is resolved through scapegoating, is the potential for excessive piety to require and justify violence. Readings of the tale that attribute its anti-Semitism to the Prioress have located this potential in her character, but I am suggesting that she too is seen as participating in a dynamic of human desire and violence that goes deeper than individual character.

The effect on the Christian community of the killing of the Jews is elided in favor of the effect, as we have seen, of the boy’s eventual death. The abbot, in removing the grain from his tongue, repeats the role of the provost in torturing and killing the Jews. We could see in this displacement a suppression of the truth of religious violence under the veil of the sacred. On the other hand, the parallels, reaching back to the role of the Jewish murderer in acting for his community, suggest rather an exposure of such violence, one that recognizes the phenomenon of scandal and opens the way toward a non-violent response to it. The removal of the enigmatic grain on the boy’s tongue, then, frames the question, Is there a response to scandal, to mimetic rivalry, other than violence?

“Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” (Matthew 26:52)

The Tale of Sir Thopas told by pilgrim Chaucer has long been recognized as satire or parody of the chivalric romances that were perhaps second in popularity only to Marian miracle stories in Chaucer’s time—and probably first among his own circle of merchants and nobility. A tissue of romance conventions, the tale’s every detail, beginning with a knight named after a minor gemstone, invites laughter. The early-seventeenth-century poet Michael Drayton shows awareness of the tale’s humor by beginning his mock-epic *Nimphidia* with a reference to *Sir Thopas* along with Rabelais. More recent readers have extended Chaucer’s ridicule to chivalric ideals themselves and thus to the war with France (e.g. Scattergood 290, 294). The critique behind Chaucer’s parody appears even more radical when we see how this tale continues the analysis of mimetic desire from the preceding two tales.

Comparison to the great hero of mimetic desire, Don Quixote, makes this aspect of *Sir Thopas* clear.¹⁴ The parallel seems to have been noticed first by Drayton, who tells how his own Fairy King’s exploits exceed those of “Don Quishott” and “Sancha Panchas” in a stanza that recalls this one of Chaucer’s:¹⁵

Men speken of romances of prys,
Of Horn child and of Ypotys,
Of Beves and sir Gy,
Of sir Lybeux and Pleyndamour—
But sir Thopas, he bereth the flour
Of roial chilvalry! (897-902)

Richard Hurd, in his 1762 *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, develops his view that Chaucer’s poem is a burlesque through a list of parallels with Cervantes. Referring to this same stanza, he comments: “And, lastly, as Cervantes, after the example of the Romance-

¹⁴Girard begins his exposition of the theory of mimetic desire with *Don Quixote* in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 1-17.

¹⁵See “Nimphidia,” lines 273-80.

writers, will have it, that his knight surpasses all others of ancient fame, so Dan Chaucer is careful to vindicate this high prerogative, to his hero" (340). The crucial difference between Cervantes and previous romance-writers, of course, is that he places this claim only in the mouth of his hero, whose conscious imitation of everything romantic animates the entire story. Indeed, such revelation of the mediated nature of desire, unfathomed in conventional romance, places *Don Quixote*, according to Girard, at the origin of the "novelistic" tradition (*Deceit* 17). *Sir Thopas* does not go so far in its revelations, but almost. The knight's preparations to fight the giant Sir Olifaunt begin with this request:

"Do come," he seyde, "my mynstrales,
And geestours for to tellen tales,
Anon in myn armynge,
Of romances that been roiales,
Of popes and of cardinales,
And eek of love-likynge." (845-50)

We are invited not just to compare Sir Thopas to other heroes of romance, but to imagine him, like Quixote, consciously imitating them (along with popes and cardinals for good measure).

Listening to romances is not unprecedented within romances, but the tale draws attention to its hero's mediated desire in other ways as well. More than once is he called "child," which, again, is not uncommon in romances for an aspirant to knighthood but could, especially coming after *The Prioress's Tale*, indicate that he is prone to imitation. That Sir Thopas comes from Flanders fits Chaucer's parody not just because of the Flemings' poor reputation for chivalry, but, as David Wallace proposes, because "it suggests, to Chaucer's audience, the vigorous imitation of nobility in the land of the non-noble" ("In Flaundes" 74). Most interesting is the knight's fall into "love-longynge." It begins, before he has encountered any lady, while he is out "prikyng" and hears birds singing; that is, it seems to have no object, only a model, namely, all of the examples of literary love brought to mind by this conventional setting. Two stanzas later he says he

has dreamed that an unspecified elf queen will be his lover. When he goes off to search for one, his desire has been given no other possible cause than the idea, transmitted by the sort of poem that this one is mocking even in its verse form, that this is what knights do. The real object of his desire, in fact, is not an elf-queen but rather the same as his model: simply to be a knight. And this combination of model and object is not another character in the tale but rather a whole genre and the discourse it idealizes. Sir Thopas has been scandalized by romance. Whereas *The Shipman's Tale* hints at the potential of the fabliau as a genre to propagate mimetic rivalry under concealment, and *The Prioress's Tale* comes closer to identifying the contagious dangers of the piety inherent in its kind of tale, *Sir Thopas* exposes (to laughter) how desires are shaped by a form of discourse.

It is a short step from the mimesis propagated by romance to showing that mimetic rivalry is at the root of chivalry itself, as *The Knight's Tale* does. For a more positive attempt to intervene within the genre of romance we might perhaps look to *The Franklin's Tale*, where the chain of generous acts that resolves its crisis constitutes a disavowal of such rivalry. Nonetheless, *Sir Thopas* perhaps goes further than these romances to negate, by way of parody, the romance mythology that justifies violence. Although *Sir Thopas* is interrupted before it gets to the anticipated battle, the influence of the chivalric notion of honor in perpetuating violence will be dealt with more seriously in the next tale, the *Melibee*.

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)

The old idea that the prosaic length of the second tale Chaucer gives himself to tell makes it some kind of joke has been generally rejected in favor of readings that take it as a serious, even central statement of his vision.¹⁶ Certainly the principles of response to real violence it articulates are crucial to the development of this theme in Fragment VII. In

¹⁶For a summary of criticism see the introduction to the explanatory notes in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 923-4.

Melibee himself we see a further representation of the forces that perpetuate violence, while his wife, Prudence, provides a model of how to confront these forces.

While Melibee was in the fields, three “old foes” broke into their house, beat Prudence, and gravely wounded their daughter, Sophia. The dialogue between Prudence and Melibee that makes up the long middle of the tale centers on her advice that he imitate the patience seen above all in Christ’s Passion, seek peace, and ultimately forgive his enemies. Here is the simple answer for confronting violence, though of course practicing it in any given situation is far from simple. The tale’s interest lies in how Prudence turns Melibee from his immediate impulse toward vengeance, one that is initially nurtured by counsel he solicits from men of his community. In questioning Melibee’s interpretation of the physicians’ advice that “oon contrarie is warisshed [cured] by another contrarie,” Prudence exposes the core of his motivation: “For right as they han venged hem on me and doon me wrong,” says Melibee, “right so shal I venge me upon hem and doon hem wrong; and thanne have I cured oon contrarie by another” (1276, 1281-2; see also 1522-5). All we ever hear about his enemies’ motive is what Melibee assumes it to be: vengeance. They are the model and justification for his own vengeance, as he reiterates in response to Prudence’s speech about patience. Both times Prudence responds by asserting that his desires have clouded his thinking. The point of the physicians’ proverb, she explains in the first instance, is that “wikkednesse shal be warisshed by goodnesse, discord by accord, werre by pees, and so forth of othere thynges” (1289). She focuses on his misdirected desires again when she ventures an explanation of why God would have allowed this villainy to occur. The three enemies, she reasons, signify the three temptations—the world, the flesh, and the devil—and Sophia’s five wounds signify the five senses in which Melibee has been wounded by turning away from Christ to worldly goods. Though his covetousness is not here analyzed as mimetic, we might recall the world of *The Shipman’s Tale*. Prudence’s task, then, is not only to make a logically compelling case for her advice about how to restore peace to

the community, but to rescue Melibee's heart from being caught in conflictual mimesis. The tale, that is, approaches the problem of violence by focusing not on what to do about the evil of Melibee's enemies, but on what to do about the evil in himself, a reorientation strongly linked to the Christian focus on the Passion and its remembrance in the anti-sacrificial ritual of the Eucharist (Bandera 250-1).

Prudence's main strategy to change Melibee's heart is to offer herself as an alternative model of desire, but she mixes it with other tactics and in the end is not completely successful. In order to talk Melibee into pursuing peace, for instance, she adds that it would lead to greater prosperity as well. Switching from a bourgeois to a chivalric set of values, he objects that such meekness would not uphold his honor. At this Prudence pretends to be angry, imitating Melibee and making herself a rival in pursuit of his honor. The result is Melibee's new self-awareness of his anger and willingness to go along with her: "I am redy to do right as ye wol desire" (1702).¹⁷ After winning Melibee's consent, Prudence is even more successful in offering herself as a model to his enemies, who are "ravysshed" when she shows them "the grete goodes that comen of pees" (1729). Once Melibee's enemies submit themselves to him, however, he does an about-face, threatening to take their goods and exile them, and turns to forgive them only after Prudence preaches the honor in generosity and the good politics of courtesy, concluding with a two-handed exhortation: "Wherfore I pray yow, lat mercy been in youre herte, to th'effect and entente that God Almighty have mercy on yow in his laste juggement. For Seint Jame seith in his Epistle: 'Juggement withouten mercy shal be doon to hym that hath no mercy of another wight'" (1867-9). On one hand, Prudence perhaps succeeds in transferring Melibee's mimesis from his supposedly vengeful enemies to a forgiving God through herself as intermediary. But on the other hand, the threat of judgment presents him with an overpowering model of vengeance, against whom rivalry is futile.

¹⁷David Wallace offers a somewhat different reading of this exchange as part of an illuminating explication of Prudence's rhetorical strategies throughout the tale (*Chaucerian Polity* 243).

Reciprocity rather than patience seems still in the end to move Melibee, whose words to his adversaries at the close of the tale predicate his forgiveness on his their repentance and put him in a position of mastery.

All of the initiative to choose patient suffering over reciprocity, then, remains with Prudence. David Wallace's recent, groundbreaking interpretation of the tale places it in the context of Chaucer's experience of politics, in both England and his travels to Italy, as a guide to maintaining a healthy body politic despite masculine tendencies toward despotism. Throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, Wallace sees Chaucer placing hope in peacemaking counsel that comes consistently from wives (*Chaucerian Polity*, 214-46 and *passim*). We have seen that Chaucer's treatment of the dynamics of violence in Fragment VII does not find women, such as the wife of *The Shipman's Tale* or the Prioress, immune to mimetic rivalry. But the *Melibee* does suggest a strong connection between such rivalry and masculinity, and a corresponding link between the alternative, the patience of the Passion, and the feminine. Girardian theory has not, to my knowledge, taken issues of gender into rigorous account, and I will not attempt to do so here.¹⁸ Obviously, though, women have less power in a patriarchal society and are more routinely victimized, just as it is Melibee's wife and daughter who suffer violence to their bodies, not just their honor. And, perhaps as a result, they are more likely to stand in solidarity with victims. For both Girard and Chaucer, I think, the fundamental lesson of the Passion in dealing with violence is the imperative to suffer persecution patiently, exposing the victims' innocence and forgiving their persecutors. That this is not a purely

¹⁸Girard's brief comments on feminism in an interview with James Williams imply that he sees violence as fundamentally male in some sense ("Anthropology" 275-6). Pursuit of this thesis would require historicization like that begun by Wallace as well as Felicity Riddy, who claims that "Anger in late-medieval aristocratic culture is part of the construction of masculinity: in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, for example, anger is a mainspring of chivalry; it is what drives knights to their greatest demonstrations of prowess. Peaceableness, on the other hand, is a feminine attribute in which women were trained" ("Women talking" 116).

female role for Chaucer, however, is clear from his representation of himself, not just through the tales he tells, but in the links that precede them.

I suggested earlier that the Host's interruption places Chaucer the pilgrim in the position of a victim, its significance marked subtly with his oath "by Goddes sweete pyne" (936). Thus in response to Harry Bailly's domineering leadership, Chaucer takes the side of victims, like the old man who is similarly interrupted by Melibee's other counsellors when he speaks against war. Earlier, before Harry asks Chaucer to tell his first tale, following and perhaps imitating *The Prioress's Tale*, the Host's puzzling description of our narrator implies an incipient act of scapegoating:

"What man artow?" quod he;
 "Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,
 For evere upon the ground I se thee stare....
 He semeth elvyssh by his contenance,
 For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce." (695-7, 703-4)

The Host accuses him of being antisocial, a grave sin in Harry's universe, and tries to mark his otherness by identifying something vaguely "elvyssh" and thus different about his appearance or bearing. In a minor, playful way suitable to the context of a tale-telling game, Chaucer is being marked as a potential victim, a role he embraces by telling a parody that the Host is predictably unable to appreciate. In the *Melibee*, then, Chaucer the pilgrim responds to the violence of being interrupted, while through the whole episode Chaucer the poet places himself in the position of a victim in order to speak for victims. The next tale-teller will also be made a victim of interruption, and we might ask how the Monk's litany of "tragedies" also constitutes a response to violence.

"My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here and watch with me."

(Matthew 26:38)

Tragedies, according to the Monk at the start of his tale, bewail the story of a fall from prosperity in order that we might beware the strokes of Fortune. After seventeen of them,

the Knight interrupts, “for litel hevynesse / Is right ynough to mucche folk, I gesse” (2769-70). Such stories, he continues, cause him “greet disese.” The Host picks right up on this assessment and takes it further, adding that “no remedie / It is for to biwaille ne compleyne / That that is doon” (2784-6). As usual, the Host guides us by indirection, for a remedy is perhaps just what these tragedies offer. Indeed, the Knight’s words also imply a medicinal function of tragedy, good in small doses, like an inoculation of suffering or “disese” in order to ward off, or at least prepare for, greater suffering. The Host, however, refuses to suffer listening to tragedy. In refusing to take the place of a victim, he forces that role on the teller of the tragedies, so that, like pilgrim Chaucer, the Monk becomes a victim of the Host’s scorn. Unwillingness to hear a tragedy initiates an opposite response that blames and rejects the teller—makes a scapegoat of him—in order that the pilgrim company may proceed with its game. In a minority of manuscripts, thought to preserve an earlier version of this link, the Host does all the interrupting, making such a dynamic of persecution is even clearer. The addition of the Knight, however, as a listener more willing to suffer tragedy (though not enough to hear all hundred that the Monk claims to know), clarifies the two alternatives, either accepting the heaviness of tragedy as a remedy or rejecting it as poison. At the horizon of such a notion of tragedy’s function is the semantic range of the Greek word *pharmakos*: poison, remedy, and scapegoat.¹⁹

Thus the monk is a victim in need of his own remedy. But do his tragedies offer anything more than just a taste of the suffering that flesh is heir to? Beyond the minimalist definition that the Monk himself gives, it is notoriously difficult to discern a pattern to his stories. The blame assigned to the protagonists for their falls varies from great to none. God and Fortune are not clearly distinguished and become almost interchangeable as agents of downfall. There is barely enough consistency for the Monk

¹⁹Chaucer appears to have been the first to bring a derivative of this word into English, by way of Old French and Medieval Latin, as “fermacie” (*Canterbury Tales* I.2713), meaning a purgative medicine (*Middle English Dictionary* s.v. “farmacie”). He would not have known, of course, the meanings of the word in Greek.

to draw the lesson at the end of his last tragedy that Fortune always brings down the proud who trust in her. Yet one pattern that becomes increasingly prominent in these catastrophes is the part played by rivalry. Rivalry between brothers causes ruin in two of the “modern” instances, Peter of Spain and Bernabo Visconti, and betrayal by envious subordinates brings down a third, Peter of Cyprus, as well as Julius Caesar. More common, however, is transcendent rivalry against God or Fortune. Such rivalry is unremarked but implicit in the opening, eight-line tragedies of Satan and Adam. With Nabugodonosor and Balthasar, however, we get Daniel’s explanation that both must be punished for essentially attempting to take God’s place. Though one is given the chance to learn and be restored and the other is not, the lesson is the same. Rivalry with Fortune is explicit with Nero, “For though that he were strong, yet she was stronger” (2521), and even moreso with Antiochus, who (like Dr. Johnson’s mad astronomer) imagines that he can attain the stars, weigh each mountain, and restrain floods. Alexander the Great is credited, rather than blamed, with taking on the office of Fortune or God to topple pride. Finally, Croesus becomes the supreme rival when, after Fortune delivers him from execution, he thinks himself immune to death. Such a pattern helps explain the tale’s alternation, or even confusion, of Fortune and God; if each is largely constructed as a transcendent rival—and hence punisher—of human ambition, then the difference between them, and indeed the theology that would be the basis for making a distinction, is displaced outside what is an anthropological frame of reference. Rather than articulating a notion of Providence or divine judgment of sin, this tale points to a human dynamic, human violence that pursues those who, like all of the protagonists here after Adam (especially the one woman, Zenobia), prosper by might. The Monk himself is one whom Chaucer the pilgrim in the *General Prologue*, and even moreso the Host in the prologue to this tale, had seen as a “myghty man” (1951). Whether we attribute to him a self-conscious attempt to expose the consequences of living by might, or see in the tale an

unconscious reflection of the worldview that such a life projects, his own fall underlines the point.

With the introduction of Fortune into the tale comes the proverb, “Ful wys is he that kan hymselfen knowe” (2139). The pride of these heroes, their rivalries with Fortune/God, grow from a particular lack of self-knowledge. Yet even if the tale’s divinities are human projections, the gods of human violence, there remains great mystery about the allotment of suffering. Though Croesus’s pride blinds him to the meaning of the dream that warns him of his fall, nothing indicates he had a way out anyway. More than its representation of the endlessly repeated fall of the mighty, what makes Chaucer’s version of the tragic view of life intolerably heavy when taken straight is its sense of the radical limitations of human knowledge and power. Within those limitations, the only reliable knowledge we are capable of is humility and our only effective power is patience. Happily, he reaffirms these lessons in a comic chaser meant to answer the requests of Knight and Host for something to make hearts glad.

And immediately the cock crowed. (Matthew 26:74)

Even more than the other tales of Fragment VII, that of the Nun’s Priest resists and exceeds a brief analysis aimed at bringing out a theme common to them all. Tragedy is here surprised by comedy when Chauncleer the proud cock tricks his way out of catastrophe, yet the tale yields morals like those of *The Monk’s Tale* about pride and self-knowledge which, while clearly not the end of the story, are also not to be disregarded. Much of the tale’s humor comes from overloading a simple beast fable with tragic motifs, learned discourse, and high-flown rhetoric, all of which mocks the most ambitious attempts to understand the human predicament. The fact that the main characters are not human beings but two chickens and a fox underscores the tendency that Girard has pointed out for the structures of comedy to “deny the sovereignty of the individual more radically than either god or destiny” (“Perilous Balance” 125). A beast fable is comically

appropriate to the insight that, to a large extent, we are programmed, not by instinct, but by all of the discursive and generic forms that come in for parody in the amplified course of this simple story. Comedy confronts the riddle of violence, first of all, with the humility that we are all caught up in systems that make us both victims and perpetrators.

Indeed comedy, broadly speaking, even more than tragedy, depends on lightning reversals between victor and victim. The trick by which Russell the fox loses his prey also perhaps saves him from the barnyard mob that is in clamorous pursuit. Chaucer compares their clamor, in fact, to the mob that killed dozens, perhaps hundreds of Flemish clothworkers in London during the Peasants' Revolt, a clear instance of scapegoating violence that he likely witnessed at close range. His only reference anywhere to the violence of 1381, it comes at the conclusion of a series of tales that have diagnosed the pathways of mimetic rivalry that lead to such persecution and exposed discourses that would mythologize it. He adduces one more such discourse, perhaps, in the last line that describes the general barnyard commotion: "It semed as that hevene sholde falle" (3401). Apocalypticism is the most violent discourse of all, and "the rising of the commons in land" was often taken as an apocalyptic sign.²⁰ Chaucerian comedy fundamentally opposes apocalypticism by its lack of closure. Here the Nun's Priest quietly mocks the attempt either to glamorize or to demonize violence under the name of the sacred apocalypse. [section missing here]

Girard has suggested that "Laughter is the only socially acceptable form of *kartharsis*" ("Perilous Balance" 124). The tales of Fragment VII expose and reject violent means of purging the conflicts that desire leads to, either through chivalric warfare, religious persecution, or the distributed violence of the market. Instead, *The Tale of Melibee*, *The Monk's Tale*, and more boldly *The Parson's Tale* and Chaucer's *Retraction*

²⁰This is the first line of an apocalyptic poem "On the Earthquake of 1382" (Wright vol. 1, 252).

counsel self-scrutiny and repentance. More boldly still, in the face of violence, and in some mysterious fashion to undo what does it, Chaucer would have us laugh.

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