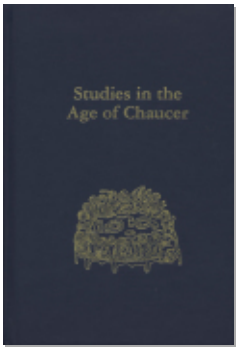
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Hybrid Discourse in the *General Prologue* Portraits

Thomas J. Farrell
Stetson University

THE TWO CHAPTERS DEVOTED to the *General Prologue* in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales* substantiate recent interest in the framing of the *Canterbury Tales* and a more long-standing concern for the sources of its portraits' details.[1] But Chaucer's experiment with the structure of discourse in the *Prologue,* especially in the series of portraits at its center, receives scant attention in that reference work, as indeed in the sixty years of scholarship that it summarizes. Nor do earlier summaries of scholarship suggest models of portraiture that adequately account for the strikingly "new art" in the *Prologue*'s narration, the hybridization of different discursive registers within the narrative.[2]

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[1] Robert R. Raymo, "The General Prologue," in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales,* ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, 2 vols. (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2002–5), 1:1–85, discusses the portraits individually, but not the construction of the whole. Helen Cooper also discusses the Prologue in her chapter "The Frame," 1:1–22. Although both of them rightly address current interest in the *Decameron* as a source for the *Prologue,* Boccaccio provides no models for the kind of narrative description we find in the *Tales.* As Thomas G. Bergin notes, "Individual characterization is sketchy and to an English-speaking reader who approaches the *{Decameron}* looking for something like the *Canterbury Tales,* may be a little disconcerting." *Boccaccio* (New York: Viking, 1981), p. 292.

[2] Charles A. Owen Jr., "Development of the Art of Portraiture in Chaucer's *General Prologue,*" *LeedsSE* 14 (1983): 116–33, referred to the "whole new art" (p. 116) of the Prologue's portraits, an art built in part from "the indirections, the many different ways we receive information," including "the voice of the pilgrim" (p. 126); but the novelty he identified has remained substantially unexplored.

While Robert A. Pratt and Karl Young noted in 1941 that the thirty-one highly generic descriptions in Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie,* produced more or less mechanically from a standardized menu of physical or moral traits, are "comparable" to those in the *Prologue,* they add that "one could hardly suggest, however, that [Benoît] served as a model" for the *Prologue:*[3]

> Achillès fù de grant beauté
> Gros ot le piz, espès e lé,
> E les membres granz e pleniers,
> Les ieuz el chief hardiz e fiers;
> Crespes cheveus ot e aubornes.
> Ne fu mie pensis ne mornes:
> La chiere aveit liee e joiose
> E vers son enemi irose.[4]

Narratologists employ various taxonomies in describing this technique but agree about its orientation to entirely external and objectified information; subjectivity is not the point.[5] Anyone who knew the *Roman de Troie* could readily understand Derek Pearsall's warning that the *General Prologue*'s series of portraits might similarly constitute "a recipe for certain disaster, for repetitive schematisation and yawning monotony, something that a deranged *rhétoriqueur* might have dreamed up."[6]

[3] "The Literary Framework of the Canterbury Tales," in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales,* ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (1941; rpt. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1958), p. 5.

[4] *Le Roman de Troie par Benoit de Sainte-Maure,* ed. Léopold Constans (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1906), vol. 1, pp. 267–68, lines 5157–64. "Achilles was very handsome. He was big-chested, broad and imposing. His limbs were large and powerful. The eyes in his head were keen and bold. He had curly auburn hair. He was not at all given to brooding or sorrow: his face was cheerful and happy; but he was wrathful towards his foe." The series of portraits in Benoît stretches through lines 5093–582, about two hundred fewer lines than Chaucer devotes to the pilgrims. Benoît is drawing on the possibly even less engaging antecedent in *Daretis Phrygii de Excidio Troiae Historia,* ed. Ferdinand Meister (Wiesbaden: Teubner, 1873), p. 16.

[5] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 248, names such narration "extradiegetic heterodiegetic"; for Dorrit Cohn, "The Encirclement of Narrative: On Franz Stanzel's *Theorie des Erzählens*," *Poetics Today* 2 (1981): 157–82, it is "authorial third-person." Cohn's article builds on the simpler model discussed in her *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 179. See also Genette's *Narrative Discourse Revisited,* trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 121, which cites Cohn's article.

[6] *The Canterbury Tales* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 56.

The Riverside Chaucer adduces further parallels, like the sculptures outside the Garden of Love in Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose.*[7] But Guillaume, though a better poet than Benoît, also avoids what Chaucer provides (as critics have long recognized) with some consistency: the depiction of a character's self-understanding.[8] Guillaume's Vielleice does not tell us what Age thinks about being old. In contrast, another, more recently proposed antecedent to the *Prologue,* the Confession of the Folk from the A-text of *Piers Plowman,* does allow its personifications ample scope for expressing their subjectivity:[9]

> "I haue [ben] coueit[ous]," quaþ [þat caitif], "I [bi]knowe [hit] h[e]re,
> For sum tyme I s*er*uide symme at þe nok
> And was his p*re*ntis ypliȝt his p*ro*fit to loke.
> Ferst I lernide to leiȝe a lef oþ*er* tweiȝe;
> Wykkidly to weiȝe was my ferste lessou*n.*"

Langland's use of Coveitise's directly quoted discourse is extended further in the B-text, which develops a dialogue between Coveitise and Repentaunce.

> "Repentedestow eu*er*e," quod Repentaunce, "or restitucion madest?"
> "ȝis: ones I was yherberwed," quod he, "wiþ an heep of chapmen;
> I roos whan þei were areste and riflede hire males."
> "That was no restitucion," quod Repentaunce, "but a robberis þefte;
> Thow haddest be bettre worþi ben hanged þ*er*fore."
> "I wende riflynge were restitucion for I lerned neu*er*e rede on boke,
> And I kan no frenssh in feiþ but of þe ferþest ende of Northfolk."[10]

[7] *The Riverside Chaucer,* gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 798, which cites earlier work tracing this and other influences. I consistently cite this edition of Chaucer's works.

[8] Jerome Mandel, "Other Voices in the 'Canterbury Tales,'" *Criticism* 19 (1977): 338–49, identifies passages in which "Chaucer reveals an attitude not his own in words that are not his own" (p. 341); he does not use the term "free indirect discourse" but is clearly enough interested in something like that phenomenon. While Mandel's early recognition that characters' voices can appear in narrative in different forms and for different purposes is significant, the fact that he finds only three such passages testifies to the limited value of searching for FID in the Prologue.

[9] Helen Cooper, "Langland's and Chaucer's Prologues," *YLS* 1 (1987): 71–81, argues that *Piers* A influenced the shape and content of the *General Prologue.* Her argument focuses on the Prologue to *Piers,* but she also notes that "[T]he third analysis of society in the A text is done on the basis not of profession but of sin, in the confession passus, and this too provides some analogues to the General Prologue" (p. 76).

[10] The first passage quotes George Kane, ed., *Piers Plowman: The A Version: Will's Visions of Piers Plowman and Do-well,* rev. ed. (London: Athlone Press, 1988), Passus V.114–18; the second passage quotes George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, eds.,

By allowing Coveitise to speak for himself, Langland points his joke a great deal more sharply, and it is not entirely surprising that his reference to provincial French will find its echo in Chaucer's *Prologue.* Such a dramatized self-presentation, also deeply imbibed in Jean de Meun's continuation of *Le Roman de la Rose,* obviously influenced several of the *Tales* and their prologues in rather straightforward and well-documented ways.[11] But the technique characteristic of the *General Prologue* is far more indirect: the longest explicit quotation from a pilgrim is the Summoner's "Purs is the ercedekenes helle" (I. 658). The *Prologue* chooses very consistently to present a single narrative discourse that blends those pilgrims' voices, and other forms of discourse, into a distinctively hybridized narration.

Because of my primary interest in that process of hybridization, I am not in this essay much concerned with the vexed issue of the pilgrim persona in the *Prologue,* that is, with "a fictional individual to whom the first-person pronouns of the narratorial discourse consistently refer."[12] Despite the familiarity of the cheerful and slightly dim-witted pilgrim character, such a narrator need not be imagined as always present and is demonstrably not present in many parts of the portraits.[13] The critical literature has long recognized two strands in the *Prologue*'s narration, whether the difference is imagined cognitively (as in E. Talbot Donaldson's poet/pilgrim distinction), or temporally (as in present-tense recorder of a past-tense interlocutor with the pilgrims crucial for both David Lawton and H. Marshall Leicester Jr.), or vocationally (as in Barbara Nolan's distinction between clerkly and pilgrim voices).[14] The con-

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Piers Plowman: The B Version: Will's Vision of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best (London: Athlone Press, 1975), Passus V.230–36.

[11] The debt of the Pardoner's Prologue to Faux Semblant (*Sources and Analogues,* ed. Correale and Hamel, 1:269–77) and of the Wife of Bath's Prologue to La Vieille 2:353–55 and 366–79) indicates clearly enough Chaucer's interest in Jean's technique.

[12] A. C. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Representation of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 120. Spearing wishes to moderate and reduce invocations of such narrators in medieval texts. He extends the argument of David Lawton, who notes (to different ends) that "a voice of narration is not a narrator-*persona:* it is the index, and prime mover, of a performance." *Chaucer's Narrators* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), p. 101.

[13] This very old argument, traceable back to Bertrand H. Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), pp. 3–33, has recently been reinforced in Spearing, "Textual Performance: Chaucerian Prologues and the French *Dit,*" in *Text and Voice: The Rhetoric of Authority in the Middle Ages,* ed. Marianne Børch (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2004), pp. 21–45.

[14] I cite especially influential discussions of the Prologue's "narrator" from the huge literature: E. Talbot Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," 1954; rpt. in *Speaking of Chaucer*

tinuing widespread narratological reliance on Gérard Genette's definition of the narrator as the one "who speaks," emphasizing the narrator's voice and thus (implicitly) the narrator as a character, tends to elide that distinction.[15] To avoid confusion on that account, I follow other theorists who have found a different term for texts that, like the *Prologue,* sometimes present themselves as voiced and sometimes as written, that sometimes come to us personalized and sometimes not. Mieke Bal defines the *narrative agent* as whatever subjectivity "expresses itself in the language that constitutes the text," whether it takes the form of an "external narrator" or a "character-bound" one. Along the same lines, F. K. Stanzel subsumes both "personalized" and "unpersonalized" narrators under the term "narrative agent."[16] Since the central issue through most of this essay is the incorporation by the narrative agent—pilgrim-Chaucer or not—of other forms of discourse, the more general term is appropriate to my argument. In its latter stages, however, I want to consider moments at which identifiable motives shape the process of hybridization. To highlight the ways that such motives personalize the narration, I will at that point have recourse to the more familiar term

(New York: W. W. Norton, 1970): 1–12; Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators,* pp. 99–105; H. Marshall Leicester Jr., "The Art of Impersonation: A General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales, PMLA* 95 (1980): 213–24; Barbara Nolan, "'A Poet Ther Was': Chaucer's Voices in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales,*" *PMLA* 101 (1986): 154–69. See also Thomas J. Garbáty, "The Degradation of Chaucer's 'Geffrey,'" *PMLA* 89 (1974): 97–104. Leicester, pp. 217–18, particularly emphasizes the concept of "voice" made an issue by Spearing (see note 36 below).

Spearing's critique of automatic invocations of "the narrator" frequently proceeds by delineating the different kinds of subjectivity encoded within texts: the juxtaposed presence of a seriously textual subjectivity and a comic parody of that poet (often inflected as if for oral performance) is consistent with Spearing's distinction between the subjectivities of a writer of poems and a minstrel performer of them in *Havelok* (*Textual Subjectivity,* pp. 48–67); see also his discussion of Robert Mannyng (pp. 15–17).

[15] Genette, *Narrative Discourse,* p. 186. Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 86–90, builds much of his synthetic discussion of narration on the foundation of Genette's two basic questions, *Who speaks?* and *Who sees?* F. K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative,* trans. Charlotte Goedsche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), notes: "The unreliability of the first-person narrator is not, however, based on his personal qualities as a fictional figure, e.g., character, sincerity, love of truth, and so on, but on the ontological basis of the position of the first-person narrator in the world of the narrative" (p. 89).

[16] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative,* 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 16–22. Stanzel, *Theory of Narrative,* p. 48. Neither usage is entirely unproblematic: Bal oddly uses "narrator" interchangeably with "narrative agent," while Stanzel includes a third category, called reflectors, in his narrative agent; Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited,* pp. 114–22, records various objections to that tripartite system.

narrator, by which I always mean a "personalized" or "character-bound" mode of narration.

In the *Prologue,* then, the narrative agent describes the pilgrims largely by combining within what is formally his own narration other strands of discourse (in principle unlimited and in fact very large in number), of which I am particularly concerned with two: the voices of the pilgrims and the common opinions of his society as expressed in widely practiced and frequently anonymous textual genres, especially estates satire.[17] The tremendous influence of Jill Mann's demonstration that Chaucer used estates material pervasively has lent perhaps too much authority to her frequently reiterated claim, based on the fairly simple narratology available to her in 1973, that Chaucer's merely partial incorporation of material from such texts effectively disabled the sort of moral criticism that estates satire existed to articulate. More recently circulated narratological principles make it easier to recognize that Chaucer made complex use of estates commentary, just as he did with the language of the pilgrims, within a single narrative and for his own purposes.

Most obviously, one might turn to discourse theorists for such analysis. Over the last thirty-five years, however, two tendencies have turned that field in directions likely to prove less useful for medievalists. First, theorists have attended overwhelmingly to narrative strategies for incorporating characters' mental lives, a form of hybridization that is generally agreed to have begun in the nineteenth century and that dominates the modernist novels most often mined for examples.[18] As a result, the incorporation of external textual discourses within narrative has largely been ignored, and—this is the second tendency—an extraordinary amount of energy has gone into the definition of the phenomenon now usually called free indirect discourse (FID), which is, predictably, the modernists' favorite technique for recording their characters' mental lives.[19] Analysts of older discourses will quickly recognize that both the

[17] The classic treatment, about which I will have much more comment, is Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the "General Prologue" to the "Canterbury Tales"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

[18] Cohn, *Transparent Minds,* signals her interest in mental phenomena clearly enough in her title. Monika Fludernik, *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1993), demonstrates that "early free indirect discourse examples . . . are almost without exception examples of *speech* representation" (p. 96).

[19] FID occurs when the pronouns, temporal adverbs, and other deictic signals of a character's speech have been reoriented away from an original speaker to match those of the narrative agent. My discussion is largely based on Fludernik, *Fictions of Language,*

definition and the practice of FID have changed over even the last two hundred years.[20] As a result, while Chaucer does occasionally use FID as it is now defined, his practice differs significantly in two ways: he employs what its later history allows us to see as a very narrow subset of FID, and, perhaps in compensation, he employs a wide range of related techniques of hybridization not susceptible to analysis as FID.

Discourse theorists have begun to notice these problems. In her detailed study of FID and other "languages of fiction," Monika Fludernik emphasizes that FID frequently records not the precise language assigned to a character, but a summary of many speeches, a distinctly shaded interpretation of speech, a précis of a more complex speech-act, the sort of speech that might be imputed to a character (rather than an actual speech-act), or the kind of thing that people generally say in a given situation. In these ways it resembles, as Fludernik notes, both direct (quoted) discourse and indirect discourse.[21] The category of "what people usually think" might well enable the analysis of textual discourse within FID structures, but such discussion has remained embryonic. Moreover, Fludernik's recognition of the similarities between FID and other strategies for incorporating a variety of discursive forms leads her to doubt "whether the *form* of free indirect discourse is all that important or whether the attempt to distinguish it from other forms of speech and

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who cites this example from D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow:* "He stayed the afternoon with the girl, and wanted to stay the night. She, however, told him that this was impossible: her own man would be back by dark, and she must be with him." The two clauses after the colon represent the girl's speech, **My own man will be back by dark and I must be with him* (I adopt the asterisk from historical linguistics to indicate a reconstructed utterance, one not recorded in any text but usefully posited to explain the form that does occur in the text).

[20] Richardson, for example, sometimes printed FID within quotation marks (a practice that continued in Austen and later writers). In the second letter of *Clarissa* we read the eponymous heroine's recapitulation of a conversation with her older sibling: "My sister made me a visit there the day after Mr Lovelace had been introduced, and seemed highly pleased with the gentleman. . . . 'So handsome a man!—O her beloved Clary!' (for then she was ready to love me dearly, from the overflowings of her good humor on his account!) 'He was but too handsome a man for *her!*' " (*Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady,* ed. Angus Ross [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985], p. 42). In "Austen, Joyce, O'Brian, and Chaucer's Squire: Bakhtin and Medieval Narratology" (forthcoming in *MedPers* 23 [2008]), I argue in more detail the insufficiency of FID for medieval texts and discuss hybridization in the portrait of the Squire.

[21] Fludernik discusses these topics, summarized to suit my own purposes, in *Fictions of Language,* pp. 398–432. See also Genette's related concept of "pseudo-iteration" in *Narrative Discourse,* pp. 121–23.

thought representation'' has been worth the effort scholars have given it.[22]

In contrast, scholars building on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin have been articulating and developing insights about hybridized texts for several years. Bakhtin himself described ''pseudo-objective'' discourse, a category in which the author's objective narrative suddenly exhibits the ''subjective belief system of his characters, or of general opinion'' and that, although broader than FID, like it assumes grammatically predictable forms.[23] Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson have extended that principle by describing what they call the ''pseudo subjective'' statement, a concept readily applied to the description of Criseyde standing in the Trojan temple.

> she let falle
> Hire look a lite aside in swich manere,
> Ascaunces, ''What, may I nat stonden here?''[24]

Although it is not difficult to find in the critical literature analysis of Criseyde's ''speech'' in this scene, the adverb ''ascaunces'' emphasizes that she remains silent; her words are a narratorial invention, translating her body language into English.[25] That makes it a ''pseudo subjective'' statement, one describing an attitude perfectly appropriate to a character in language suitable to that character, but never actually spoken because the character knows better (as Criseyde certainly does) than to utter such words aloud: a pseudo-subjective statement thus constructs an indirect diegetic commentary on the character.[26] While Fludernik simply notes that discourse can be used in this way, Bakhtin's approach

[22] Fludernik, *Fictions of Language,* p. 79. Genette, *Narrative Discourse,* pp. 171–73, divides narrative discourse into ''narratized,'' ''transposed,'' and ''reported'' categories, combining ID and FID under ''transposed.'' He does not grant what most readers would, the frequently greater fidelity of FID than ID to the supposed original discourse.

[23] ''Discourse in the Novel,'' in *The Dialogic Imagination,* ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259–422 (305).

[24] *Troilus and Criseyde* I.290–92.

[25] T. E. Hill, *''She, This in Black'': Vision, Truth, and Will in Geoffrey Chaucer's ''Troilus and Criseyde''* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 60–61, seems to criticize her word choice.

[26] *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 335–36. I will discuss Chaucer's use of the technique in the portrait of the Friar, below.

has much more substantially proven its value in analyzing such passages.

Just as Bakhtinian analysis avoids the overemphasis of voice in FID, it also usefully emphasizes the workings of less familiar forms of hybridization. When Helen Phillips recognizes FID in Chaucerian narrative, she confidently explains how it enables a satirical strategy: "The Friar's portrait shows Chaucer's language offering the reader opportunities for moral judgment, without explicit condemnation from the narrative voice. . . . the Free Indirect Discourse . . . captures the Friar's own topsy-turvy values in the disdain for sick lepers."[27] But her response to a different technique of hybridization in the portrait of the Guildsmen differs significantly:

> Wel semed ech of hem a fair burgeys
> To sitten in a yeldehalle on a deys.
> Everich, for the wisdom that he kan,
> Was shaply for to been an alderman.
> For catel hadde they ynogh and rente,
> And eek hir wyves wolde it wel assente.
> (369–74)

This time, her reaction is much more tentative: "As often with Chaucer's satire or social comment, we do not know from whose point of view these rich men seem to have the wisdom to be civic leaders." She has some suspicion that "it is the guildsmen's own viewpoint that is being represented and mocked," but only when she is able to adduce some historical evidence will she conclude that this portrait also satirizes the Guildsmen.[28] In other words, because the Guildsmen's portrait does not use the more familiar technique of FID, her recognition and acceptance of a satirical narrative position is more hesitant, and perhaps less complete, than in the case of the Friar. But rather than obscuring the satire, the choice not to employ FID in this passage might be seen as creating interesting repercussions not possible in FID. There is no question that it contains the requisite "discourse of alterity" which signals

[27] Helen Phillips, *An Introduction to the Canterbury Tales: Reading, Fiction, Context* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 41–42.

[28] Phillips, *Introduction to the Canterbury Tales,* p. 33, citing Brian W. Gastle, "Chaucer's 'Shaply' Guildsmen and Mercantile Pretensions," *NM* 99 (1998): 211–16.

some form of hybrid discourse;[29] all readers learn something of the Guildsmen's desires in these lines. But whereas FID (as practiced by Chaucer) would necessarily signal something the Guildsmen *said,* the less determinately hybridized technique used in this portrait usefully requires us to consider whether it represents the Guildsmen's words, their thoughts, or their inarticulate (even subconscious) longings. And the discourse also suggests the desires of the Guildsmen's wives for civic prominence, present in a way no analysis of the "speaker" of those words—and therefore no model of FID—can account for.[30] The wives are not on the pilgrimage, so their ideas cannot be presented directly: but we sense their assent (or is it incitement?) to the social and political advancement of their husbands despite our inability to know whether it was reported by the Guildsmen themselves, or intuited—or invented—by the narrative agent. That kind of meaning is not FID, but, understood as hybrid discourse, it gives pungent narrative pleasure.

Bakhtin developed his ideas about hybrid discourse and the related concept of the character zone in "Discourse in the Novel." Although completed in 1935, that essay (like his succeeding discussions of novelistic discourse) remained unpublished until 1975 and existed only in Russian until 1981;[31] consequently it had no influence on the major developments in discourse theory as it stands today. Yet his work is unquestionably relevant to those theorists even while it stands outside their usual concerns. Fludernik, who published her major study in 1993, never makes Bakhtin's ideas central to her argument, but she stops several times to note how his concepts are "very enlightening" despite a tendency among linguists to apply them too simplistically.[32] For all of

[29] Monika Fludernik argues that FID is defined first by a reader's recognition of a "discourse of alterity" like the one that Phillips's comment evidences, and then by "alignment of 'personal' referential expressions to the deictic center of the reporting discourse" and the absence of a verb plus complement structure. "The Linguistic Illusion of Alterity: The Free Indirect as a Paradigm of Discourse Representation," *Diacritics* 25 (1995): 89–115 (95).

[30] Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), also notices this intrusion: "The Gildsmen's wives take an interest in their husbands' careers for excellent reasons" (p. 65). Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators,* has also found that classification as FID can unhelpfully obscure "kinship with other narratorial comments" (p. 4).

[31] Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 354–56, provide a good bibliography of Bakhtin's work; it lists "Slovo v romane" as being written in 1934–35 but first published in the collection *Voprosy literatury i èstetiki* from 1975, the year of Bakhtin's death.

[32] *Fictions of Language,* pp. 324–25. Bakhtinians have also been slow in responding to discourse theory: Charles Lock argues that FID was essentially moribund by 1929, thus ignoring the debate ignited by Banfield in 1982, and asserts that " 'dialogic' is Bakhtin's

those reasons, we need to consider Bakhtin's definition of hybrid discourse: "[A] hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two 'languages,' two semantic and axiological belief systems."[33] He establishes the basic function of the technique by analyzing this passage from the opening of Book II, chapter 24 of Dickens's *Little Dorrit:* "That illustrious man and great national ornament, Mr. Merdle, continued his shining course. It began to be widely understood that one who had done society the admirable service *of making so much money out of it,* could not be suffered to remain a commoner" (Bakhtin's italics).[34] No FID occurs in this example; instead, a constructed discourse—the "hypocritically ceremonial common opinion about Merdle"—is suddenly disrupted by an entirely unmarked shift to the register and opinion of the narrative agent.[35] Even without formal designation of a new speaker, that language obviously clashes with the sense of the original and, with its increased specificity and directness, radically shifts the style. The passage provides a subtle, complex satire: hardly deigning to impugn Merdle, whose values are so obviously at odds with those of the agent that saying so would be otiose, the satire

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word and radically altered concept for what had been termed by Vološinov quasi-direct speech" (p. 85); he thus ignores the more specific and relevant terms from "Discourse in the Novel": double-voiced and hybrid discourse. "Double Voicing, Sharing Words: Bakhtin's Dialogism and the History of Free Indirect Discourse," in *The Novelness of Bakhtin: Perspectives and Possibilities,* ed. Jørgen Bruhn and Jan Lundquist (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2001), pp. 71–87 (85).

[33] "Discourse in the Novel," p. 304. The discussion of hybrid constructions is central to this essay, occupying pp. 301–20; Bakhtin's examples of hybrid discourse range chronologically from Rabelais to Dickens and include Pushkin, like Chaucer a writer of verse narrative.

[34] "Discourse in the Novel," p. 306. I have used the text of Dickens in the form presented by Bakhtin. My analysis extends Bakhtin's comments on the passage.

[35] Ibid., p. 306. Bal, *Narratology,* pp. 31–34, identifies a special category ("Non-Narrative Comments") for what she calls "argumentative" statements within a narrative, emphasizing the ideological work they perform (32). Her dubious attitude toward such work is a recent phenomenon; such statements appear frequently in epic as a generically overt and appropriate invocation of social norms, as in "þæt wæs gōd cyning!" (*Beowulf* 11b). It is no surprise, then, that theorists of genre, especially those grounded in epic, respond more generously and effectively to the expression of widely shared social attitudes: see Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel,* trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), p. 66; Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations,* trans. Harry Zahn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 87; and Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination,* p. 35. As Bakhtin's examples help to show, much of what Spearing demonstrates in medieval narrative is much more widely true.

reaches out to those obsequious strata of society whose language has blinded them to Merdle's selfishness. The relevance of such analysis to the *General Prologue* is striking: sudden shifts in the way we imagine the narrating voice, complex ironies and satires whose main target is not overtly castigated at all and which allow for criticism of various parties to the flaws under discussion—all of these are also part of Chaucer's new art. Recognizing how much "the ceremonial language of official pronouncements" has contributed to the mocked opinion about Merdle, moreover, Bakhtin suggests how the analysis of hybrid discourse can readily account for such social and textual influences in the *Prologue.*[36]

In addition, hybrid discourse is interested in the gradual instantiation or partial presence of a hybridized discourse within the narrative. Bakhtin's central insight—"The word in language is half someone else's"—highlights an awareness that all language is borrowed; all language is shared.[37] His principle of the "character zone," which might more generally be called the "discourse zone," helps to explain how that borrowing and sharing works, presenting partial expressions of the "specific points of view on the world" articulated by different characters or different social groups.[38] Bakhtin defines a character zone as a "sphere of influence on the authorial context surrounding [a character], a sphere

[36] "Discourse in the Novel," p. 306. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity,* p. 10 n. 9, argues that Bakhtinian approaches have encouraged an obsession with voice rather than writing in our reading of medieval texts that "has been almost entirely harmful." Here I argue that the problem is neither specific to nor ineradicable from Bakhtinian approaches, but I concur that many extant Bakhtinian readings use his terms, including voice, in too freely metaphoric a manner. Fludernik, *Fictions of Language,* seems to agree, arguing that "stylistic interaction between the narrative and the reported discourse can no longer be discussed without reference to Bakhtin's dialogic principle, a concept that has suffered much critical sleight of hand" (p. 7). Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators,* sees that Bakhtin could contribute to "a modern reading of Chaucer's narratorial voices" (p. 2); for Lawton, however, Bakhtin's key term is *heteroglossia,* problematically used by Bakhtin to describe both an irreducible fact of language and two different narrative techniques developed along with the novel. I have addressed Bakhtin's multiplicity of terms in "Bakhtin, Liminality, and Medieval Literature," in *Bakhtin and Medieval Voices*, ed. Thomas J. Farrell (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), pp. 2–4.

[37] "Discourse in the Novel," p. 293.

[38] Ibid., p. 291. For Bakhtin, language always carries values and ideology: In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 88, he argues that "human thought becomes genuine thought, that is, an idea, only under conditions of living contact with another and alien thought, a thought embodied in someone else's voice, that is, in someone else's consciousness expressed in discourse." See also the discussion in Jørgen Bruhn and Jan Lundquist, "Introduction: A Novelness of Bakhtin?" in *The Novelness of Bakhtin,* ed. Bruhn and Lundquist, pp. 11–50, esp. p. 34.

that extends—and often quite far—beyond the boundaries of the direct discourse allotted to him."[39] To the extent that that influence is present, the narrative will be nudged away from the values concomitant with its usual linguistic register: wholly, or not at all, or anywhere in between. Since (as in FID) neither formal or any other markers distinguish hybridized narration, we cannot identify exactly where one ends and another begins without analysis. As Morson and Emerson explain, "In essence, 'quotation marks' are a matter of degree"—a truth even more potent in medieval texts that had not yet begun to use modern punctuation practices.[40] And, crucially, those different discourse zones do not all possess equal importance:

> The language of the prose writer deploys itself according to degrees of greater or lesser proximity to the author and to his ultimate semantic instantiation: certain aspects of language directly and unmediatedly express (as in poetry) the semantic and expressive intentions of the author, others refract these intentions; the writer of prose does not meld completely with any of these words, but rather accents each of them in a particular way—humorously, ironically, parodically and so forth; yet another group may stand even further from the author's ultimate semantic instantiation, still more thoroughly refracting his intentions; and there are, finally, those words that are completely denied any authorial intentions: the author does not express *himself* in them (as the author of the word)—rather, he *exhibits* them as a unique speech-thing, they function for him as something completely reified.[41]

Bakhtin would argue that, in the full novelistic tradition which is his principal concern, the point of hybrid discourse is usually comic deflation of language that pretends to self-sufficiency.[42] But even in pre-novelistic texts, hybrid discourse typically effects a kind of deflation quite unlike the denunciations typical of medieval genres that rely on direct criticism, like estates satire. First, although such indirect attacks eliminate a certain characteristic vitriol, criticism is by no means ne-

[39] "Discourse in the Novel," p. 320.

[40] *Mikhail Bakhtin,* p. 326. On the ambiguity in medieval manuscripts between different forms of discourse, see Howell Chickering, "Unpunctuating Chaucer," *ChauR* 25 (1990): 96–109, esp. 97–99.

[41] "Discourse in the Novel," p. 299. Bakhtin's word "prose" here is a synonym for what he elsewhere and more accurately calls "novelistic discourse," a concept not dependent on formatting on the page.

[42] See the key insight in "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," in *The Dialogic Imagination,* p. 49, that "novelistic discourse is always criticizing itself."

gated. Second, since the narrator's whole performance will articulate a system of values constantly available for the reader's comparison, some figures may (like Merdle) be spared any explicit condemnation without suggesting in any way that their behavior is acceptable.[43] Third, passages employing hybrid discourse are likely to identify multiple targets who must share in the criticism offered: the reader is implicitly invited to consider how various, perhaps unsuspected entities may have contributed to society's sorry state, and is given a fair amount of latitude to distribute blame among them.

The effects of hybrid discourse understood in these terms are quite clear: "Thus a prose writer can distance himself from the language of his own work, while at the same time distancing himself, in varying degrees, from the different layers and aspects of his work. He can make use of language without wholly giving himself up to it, he may treat it as semi-alien or completely alien to himself, while compelling language ultimately to serve all his own intentions."[44] Language used in that manner, while borrowed from and shared with its original speaker or generic form, no longer belongs to its original context: once hybridized, its primary meaning becomes its meaning within the writer's intention.[45] Hybrid discourse—a strategy for refracting the intentionality of an extant discourse to a different, authorial intention—thus leads us away from a conundrum created by our most sophisticated scholars and theorists, who have asserted repeatedly—but without noticeable effect on the reading habits of most Chaucerians—that the presence of the Monk's voice, or the absence of an explicit narrative condemnation of the Physician's behavior, radically reduces or eliminates the possibility

[43] Chaucerians have long recognized how "the narrator's whole performance will articulate a system of values." A good recent example may be found in Alcuin Blamires, "Chaucer the Reactionary: Ideology and the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales,* *RES* 51 (2000): 523–39.

[44] "Discourse in the Novel," p. 299. Many critics, invoking Bakhtin and specifically the concept of *dialogue* primarily as manifestations of poststructuralist thought working against discursive authority, minimize this strain in Bakhtin's analysis. Yet a recognition that authors privilege language they more fully agree with must be the starting point for any ideological analysis of texts. Bakhtin's treatment of Dickens demonstrates that a satirical purpose requires either the direct presentation of authorial ideas or an authorially approved narrative subjectivity.

[45] Fludernik, *Fictions of Language,* explicitly endorses the Bakhtinian notion that premodern fiction "juxtaposed a univocal author's voice (which united in itself the positions of authorial omniscience, omnipresence, and reliable evaluation of the story world) with the characters' utterances as 'reported' direct speech, subordinating the alterity of figural language to its own mastery of and by the narrative discourse" (331).

of moral judgment of such characters.[46] Our most learned models for reading the *Prologue* are willing to suggest that when the narrator tells us that he approved the Monk's opinions, those opinions acquire a certain irreducible validity, because "the speaker's amused enjoyment of the Monk's forthright humanity is too patent to let us see him as just a moralist."[47] Or they tell us that if Chaucer does not itemize "the high cost of the drugs, or their ineffectiveness," then "the patient's benefit is not in question" and we have "no *evidence* that the doctor is a grasping charlatan" and must not imagine that the portrait satirizes him.[48] I will argue on the contrary that, because they are part of a recognizable narratological strategy, the ideas borrowed from the pilgrims' voices and the estates tradition must be evaluated within that strategy. A pilgrim's self-understanding is not a sufficient basis for judgment; nor does an incomplete evocation of estates commentary create an insufficient basis for judgment. Instead, I will suggest, the narrative strategy in which a character's idiosyncratic values or society's typical judgments are presented will usually provide a reliable guide to the significance that those discourses possess within the portrait. And the exceptions, discussed separately, will be cases in which the narrative agent's strategy becomes, for one reason or another, incoherent.

The Role of Character Voices

To address the most important issues in the analysis of the *Prologue*'s language, it will be convenient to discuss separately the hybridization of

[46] On February 8, 2005, I asked the online Chaucer discussion group (Chaucer@lists erv.uic.edu) how critically the *Prologue* treats the Monk; proposed answers ranged from "Not at all" to "Utterly." The admittedly self-selecting respondents confirmed the results of less formal questions asked at conferences over several years: something like 80 percent read the portrait as either entirely or heavily critical of the Monk.

[47] Leicester, "Art of Impersonation," p. 220. Maria K. Greenwood, "What He Heard and What He Saw: Past Tenses and Characterization in Chaucer's 'General Prologue,'" *L'articulation Langue—Littérature dans les Textes Médiévaux Anglais* (Nancy: AMAES, 1999), pp. 161–62, claims: "A Monk ther **was**, a fair for the maistrie, / An outridere, that **lovede** venerie" (her emphasis) uses two distinct versions of the simple past tense that allow us to recognize "Free Indirect Speech" in the second clause and that the Monk and the Friar "create an atmosphere of jolly fellowship by their frank worldliness." While the second claim illustrates my argument that acceptance of and attention to a pilgrim's voice has encouraged (excessive) tolerance, the first claim is very dubious on several grounds.

[48] Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire,* pp. 96, 98. I will discuss below the difficulty of quoting Mann in a way that is entirely fair to her argument and her genuine recognition of criticism of the pilgrims. The point I wish to isolate is her inappropriate insistence that prosecutorial incompetence by the narrator requires that we acquit the Physician on charges of colluding with the pharmacist to bilk his patients.

character voices and of textual materials, choosing exemplary portraits in which each of those strategies is dominant. My selections are heuristic rather than absolute of course, useful ways of organizing my analysis rather than distinct categories of portraits that appear in the *Prologue.* My discussions of them will inevitably overlap to some degree, but they allow for recognition of the *Prologue*'s strategies in distinctive terms.

As the first obvious example of incorporating a pilgrim's voice, as a particularly pointed one, and as a regular touchstone in critical discussion, the portrait of the Monk is a good place to begin:

> The reule of Seint Maure or of Seint Beneit—
> By cause that it was old and somdel streit
> This ilke Monk leet olde thynges pace,
> And heeld after the newe world the space.
> He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,
> That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men,
> Ne that a monk, whan he is recchelees,
> Is likned til a fissh that is waterlees—
> This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre.
> But thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre;
> And I seyde his opinion was good.
> (173–83)

The anacoluthon in lines 173–75 signals, at least in retrospect, a transition from the narrative description of the Monk out riding to the Monk's own analysis of his vocation. The shifting tenses and illocutionary verbs may lead us to suspect the presence of FID, but it is the unmistakable response to another speaker in line 183 that ultimately forces our recognition that we have been reading the Monk's opinion rather than any sort of narrative judgment. The claim that the Monk's just-cited opinion is "good" has energized many interpretive discussions of the narrator, from the critic who finds that line 183 "certainly means that [Chaucer] thinks it was bad," to the one who believes that "it discloses traditional ideology as made anachronistic by the practices and new language of thriving Christian institutions in 'the newe world.'"[49]

[49] I have quoted from, respectively, John V. Fleming, "Gospel Asceticism: Some Chaucerian Images of Perfection," in *Chaucer and Scriptural Tradition,* ed. David Lyle Jeffrey ([Ottawa]: University of Ottawa Press, 1984), pp. 190–91, and David Aers, *Chaucer* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1986), p. 18.

The disconnect between such irreconcilable opinions suggests that "I seyde his opinion was good" is less important as a verdict on the Monk than as a clear delineation for readers that the narrative agent has ceded control of the discourse to the Monk's character zone, and that we must therefore begin (or already have begun) to read the text differently. The next few lines, perhaps (to anticipate a point I will argue more fully in a moment) developing into FID, further encourage that tendency:

> What sholde he studie and make hymselven wood,
> Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,
> Or swynken with his handes, and laboure,
> As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served?
> Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!
> (184–88)

The injunction about Augustine provides no more certain information about the opinion of the narrative agent than "I seyde his opinion was good" did; it, too, most urgently invites readers' analysis of the Monk's ideas. And when the Monk's thoroughly hybrid discourse is recognized, it becomes susceptible to a direct, holistic evaluation within the *Prologue*'s discourse. Regardless of the relevance of old principles to the monasticism of the fourteenth century, his argument implodes. Whether or not serving the world had become a legitimate goal, his evident unwillingness either to study or to labor constitutes his calculation of how the world can serve him.

Having recognized the Monk's voice and the narrative treatment of it, we are more prepared for the Friar's portrait, which, while it signals the presence of the pilgrim's own words more clearly than any other, also embodies the fullest and subtlest range of strategies for incorporating the pilgrim's voice in the narrator's description:

> For he hadde power of confessioun,
> As seyde hymself, moore than a curat,
> For of his ordre he was licenciat.
> (218–20)

Critics have been quick to reconstruct from this free indirect discourse the hypothetical quotation lying behind it, *viz.* the Friar's comment to Geoffrey that **I have more power of confession than a curate, since I am licensed*

by my order. But other hybrid forms in this portrait have not been treated as fully. David Burnley is one of a few scholars reading a later tense shift as another signal of the Friar's proper voice:[50]

> For unto swich a worthy man as he
> Acorded nat, as by his facultee,
> To have with sike lazars aqueyntaunce.
> It is nat honest, it may nat avaunce,
> For to deelen with no swich poraille.
> (243–47)

The present tense of "is" and "may" (246), alongside the ring of self-justification in "honest" and "avaunce," the dismissive "poraille," and the greater rhetorical relevance of the last two lines to the Friar (the narrative agent has little reason to make such a comment) contribute to our sense that we are overhearing the Friar's self-understanding in these lines. But the specifically hybrid nature of these constructions and the difficulty of analyzing them as FID can be glimpsed by asking how much of the preceding sentence is the Friar's.[51] Specifically, how about the phrase "as by his facultee," which occurs before the tense shift and has long been a bit of a puzzle to editors and scholars? It is credible either as something the Friar might have said himself or as exactly the sort of corroborative detail that the narrative agent might borrow from familiar textual discourse about friars. Moreover, the different available senses of the word "facultee" encourage quite different responses. If it is taken to mean "a field of knowledge or experience," the passage is hybridized by the Friar's voice: his experience (he explains) has taught him the inappropriateness of associating with sick lepers. In that case, the narrative agent's other uses of hybrid discourse encourage us to read the whole passage from 243–47 as a bitingly ironic indictment of him. But if we read "facultee" in a different sense, as a "power [or] ability," then perhaps the narrative agent places the Friar above the lepers in order to

[50] *A Guide to Chaucer's Language* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), p. 50. See Fludernik, *Fictions of Language,* p. 194 and note 55 below. Simon Horobin, *Chaucer's Language* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), does not address such structures.

[51] Owen, "Development of the Art," p. 124, also addresses this question, but not in detail.

explain the unsuitability of his involvement with them.[52] That reading more or less creates the pilgrim persona in the passage—"worthy" is a frequently cited marker of that character's vocabulary—and the satire is somewhat muted. Thus, the genuine ambiguity of "facultee" is an effective strategy for creating a hybrid discourse that blurs our understanding of who is speaking. Both of those readings seem viable to me, although I suspect that the more carefully we consider the passage, the more of the Friar's voice we are likely to hear. But in that process, the possibility of exaggeration—of believing all of these ideas to be the Friar's beyond what we can effectively demonstrate—always remains. (I will return to a narrative willingness to have us overevaluate in my discussion of the Prioress, below.)

If passages like the one about his "facultee" urge caution in recognizing the Friar's discourse, others demonstrate that the Friar's subjectivity may be detected even when there are no overt signs that he is speaking or has spoken:

> In love-dayes ther koude he muchel help,
> For ther he was nat lyk a cloysterer
> With a thredbare cope, as is a povre scoler,
> But he was lyk a maister or a pope.
> Of double worstede was his semycope,
> That rounded as a belle out of the presse.
> (258–63)

There are no obvious markers of indirect or free indirect discourse; nor is there unusual vocabulary, most easily explained as part of the Friar's personal idiom or professional expertise, that signaled hybrid discourse in "It is nat honest." No one has suggested an original **I am like a master or a pope* comment from the Friar. But there is also no obvious reason for the narrative agent to concern himself with the Friar's participation in "love-dayes"; that extrajudicial system of conflict resolution in the later fourteenth-century forms no part of typical commentary on friars.[53] As a result, the remarkable series of five comparisons for the

[52] See *Middle English Dictionary,* "faculte" n. 2a and 1, respectively. The word can also mean "possessions" (n. 3), a sense that may seem more appropriate in the mouth of the pilgrim persona, but that nevertheless inescapably condemns a character sworn to poverty.

[53] John Webster Spargo, "Chaucer's Love-Days," *Speculum* 15 (1940): 36–56, and Josephine Waters Bennett, "The Mediaeval Loveday," *Speculum* 33 (1958): 351–70, cite negative and positive (respectively) connotations of the love day. Mann, p. 42, discusses the line entirely in terms of the Friar's possible sexual adventures.

Friar and his garment—rounded like a bell, it makes him look like a master or a pope, but unlike a cloisterer or a poor scholar—again suggests the possible presence of the Friar's character zone. As presented, the rhetoric is suspiciously awkward for the narrative agent, who has little reason to provide both positive and negative counterexamples to the Friar's dress. But, unlike the narrator, the Friar has good reasons for making, if only mentally, these comparisons. It is well within the Friar's purpose to cement his importance by contrasting his sumptuous clothing with that of "a cloysterer / With a thredbare cope." Unfortunately for him, that purpose is frustrated when the comparison reminds attentive readers and (above all) the Friar himself that both our overall impression of the Monk in the present company and the one detail of his clothing we are given—"his sleves purfiled" (193)—indicates that he is also rather splendidly dressed.[54] The Friar's first attempt to point out his superiority therefore points to an absence, and so he points again, more successfully, to "a povre scholer." Within some thirty lines readers will recognize that the Clerk provides the best possible example of inferiority to the Friar—at least in the Friar's terms—since "Ful thredbare was his overeste courtepy" (290). The more we are willing to hear this passage as hybrid discourse—as a representation not of the Friar's voice, but of his subjectivity—the more sense this part of the portrait will make.

Most complex of all, however, is a passage that we encounter immediately after learning about the Friar's self-proclaimedly superlative power as a confessor:

> Ful swetely herde he confessioun,
> And plesaunt was his absolucioun
> He was an esy man to yeve penaunce,
> Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce.
> For unto a povre ordre for to yive
> Is signe that a man is wel yshryve;
> For if he yaf, he dorste make avaunt,
> He wiste that a man was repentaunt.
> (221–28)

[54] Laura F. Hodges, "A Reconsideration of the Monk's Costume," *ChauR* 26 (1991): 133–46, incorporated as pp. 112–32 of her *Chaucer and Clothing: Clerical and Academic Costume in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales,* Chaucer Studies 34 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2005).

Spearing argues that the sentence in lines 227–28 is (using Banfield's term) "unspeakable," and therefore that it can only be a representation of the Friar's speech or thought: **I dare say that a man who makes a donation is repentant.*[55] This is a live possibility, but others also exist. It is certainly the Friar who dares, but who *tells* us that he dares? Perhaps the Friar, but the narrative agent also might so label the Friar's simpler statement that **I know that a man is repentant if he gives.*

That ambivalence prepares us for other difficulties in this passage. Although the couplet form combines with the markers of hybrid discourse to suggest the presence in 227–28 of the Friar's own words in some form, we are forced by the logical connections between them and the comments that surround them to recognize that those words are in fact part of a larger speech act whose boundaries are much less clear. The Friar's words, we will find, insinuate themselves gradually into and remove themselves gradually from the narrator's own language. To be more precise, the Friar's comments about those who give act as a gloss on, an expansion or explanation of, the preceding two lines, which are also, to some (perhaps lesser) extent, his words: **A gift to an order sworn to poverty is a sign of a good confession*—and therefore, **A man who does give must be repentant.* The first two lines articulate a principle that underlies the conclusion the Friar draws explicitly in 227–28. Two grammatical facts support this reading: the first "he" in line 227 arises from the antecedent "a man" in line 226, and the preterite form "yaf" in line 227 makes sense only as a reification of the hypothetical infinitive "to yive" of line 225.

The grammatical siphon, however, does not stop there. If we attribute the idea that **A gift to an order sworn to poverty is a sign of a good confession* to the Friar because we know that he made the following comment, which exists to explain that first one, then we must also find some means of explaining the causal "For" that begins line 225: the statement about signs of a good confession is itself concatenated onto the earlier

[55] "Textual Performance," pp. 35–36; see Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982). Spearing (p. 36) accepts the proposition that "the Friar's own views, and probably . . . his very words" are present in lines 225–28 (i.e., somewhat more of the passage than I am confident about). On the basis of verb tenses, Fludernik, *Fictions of Language,* p. 194, considers the whole passage from lines 225–32 and 243–47 to be either FID or possibly, in line 246, direct quotation. She does not consider the plausibility of the Friar articulating such ideas in either passage. Mandel, "Other Voices," pp. 342–43, attributes lines 225–32 to the Friar.

articulation of the Friar's ready willingness to give penance to a deep pocket. Rhetorically this hypothesis works fine: the ideas in these three couplets are quite coherent:

1. he was a lenient confessor when he expected a donation—
2. because a donation to the friars is a sign of a good confession—
3. because, since he did give, that man must have been repentant.

But while I have shown that (3) must represent something close to the Friar's words, and while it is certainly a useful hypothesis that (2) is at least a paraphrase of something he said, it is more than a bit of a stretch to imagine the Friar articulating anything that could readily be turned into (1): he is very unlikely to blurt out that **I am a lenient confessor when I can see a big contribution in the offing.* The Friar is, after all, not the Pardoner: such brazenness is not his style. Or, as Morson and Emerson explain the effect of pseudo-subjective discourse, "The author discovers that hypocrisy for him."[56] That is, the discussion of the Friar's willingness to give penance belongs to the same rhetorical register as the preceding couplet, in which references to his "swetely herde" confession and "plesaunt" absolution may be understood as the narrative agent's determination to invoke fourteenth-century stereotypes holding that friars were notable for an "eagerness to make money from hearing confessions."[57] The process of incorporating the Friar's voice proves so unobtrusive as to remain almost unmarked until an explicit statement—"he dorste make avaunt"—forces us to recognize its presence, developed imperceptibly from the narrative agent's analysis through words that become first some form of paraphrase and ultimately a close representation of the Friar's words.

And the same thing happens on the other side of the originally marked lines.

> For if he yaf, he dorste make avaunt,
> He wiste that a man was repentaunt;
> For many a man so hard is of his herte,
> He may nat wepe, althogh hym soore smerte.

[56] See note 26 above. Chaucer dis-covers the Friar's hypocritical understanding of Penance by connecting his words and practices in ways that he would not do himself.

[57] Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire,* pp. 47–48, lists several examples of this topos.

> Therfore in stede of wepynge and preyeres
> Men moote yeve silver to the povre freres.
> (227–32)

How much of that passage may we attribute to the Friar? The first two lines are, as we have seen, inescapably his in some terms. And we meet at the beginning of the last two couplets more direct logical connectors—"For . . . Therfore"—implying that what follows depends on what we have just read, and therefore implying some sort of connectedness with what we know that the Friar has said.[58] But the echo of biblical injunctions against hardening one's heart reveals the author here again gradually "dis-covering" the Friar's hypocrisy, firmly connecting what he actually said to the anticlimactic identification of "silver" as the appropriate substitute for weeping and prayers that concludes the passage.[59]

Hybrid discourse, then, marks the portrait of the Friar in several ways. Sometimes we hear the Friar's voice; at other times, only his character zone is invoked. As a result, the description of the Friar consistently blends what the character actually said with a narrative determination to ravel those ideas out to their logical conclusions. We read what the Friar said, and the conclusions deduced from or imputed to those beliefs, in a grammatical construction that identifies both of those discursive polarities clearly enough, but takes great pains to blur the boundary lines between them. As a result, the Friar's voice is made to contribute to a narrative statement about the Friar's excesses.

My interpretation of the Monk and Friar is not new, but its reliance on an analysis of the pilgrims' voices in the portraits to develop that satirical conclusion varies somewhat from prominent extant treatments of voice like Leicester's. He attends primarily to the Monk, agreeing "with most critics" that the Monk "is being half-quoted, that we hear his style, for example, in the turn of a phrase like 'nat worth an oystre!' " and that the Monk is satirized and criticized. But his emphasis falls elsewhere: "A sense of the positive claims made by the pilgrim's vitality, his "manliness," is also registered by the portrait. . . . The tensions among

[58] Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity,* notes of *The Man of Law's Tale* that the connective *For* "does not indicate mere sequence but purports to offer an explanation, and this constitutes yet another blurring of the distinction between story and storyteller" (pp. 129–30).

[59] Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire,* p. 49. See Psalm 95.8–9: "hodie si vocem eius audieritis nolite indurare corda vestra / Sicut in irritatione secundum diem tentationis in deserto ubi temptaverunt me patres vestri."

social, moral, and existential worlds are embodied in a single voice here, and they are embodied precisely *as tensions,* not as a resolution or a synthesis, for we cannot tell exactly what the speaker thinks either of the Monk or of conventional morality."[60] It is with the proposition that the presence of a single voice reduces all included ideas to dialectic tensions that I take issue: in hybrid discourse, such tensions are neither wholly equivocal nor necessarily irresolvable.[61] In a separate article, Leicester expresses a similar agnosticism about the Friar: "We can suspect all kinds of typical Mendicant vices, but we cannot prove them."[62] Perhaps not, but Chaucer's strategies are intended as poetic, not legal ones. The narrative agent, subtly hybridizing the Friar's words into a damning context, consistently undercuts any excuses for his behavior:

> And over al, ther as profit sholde arise,
> Curteis he was and lowely of servyse.
> (249–50)

[60] Leicester, "Art of Impersonation," p. 220.

[61] Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire,* also argues that the "method" of the Prologue "is not additive, but dialectic" (p. 190). But a Bakhtinian approach must disagree about the fundamental nature of the text. Matthew Roberts explains why readings based on dialogue are incompatible with those based on dialectic. "Poetics Hermeneutics Dialogics: Bakhtin and Paul de Man," in *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges,* ed. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), pp. 115–34 (responding to Paul de Man, "Dialogue and Dialogism," reprinted in the same volume, pp. 105–14). See also Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin,* p. 325.

A parallel issue arises in discourse theory: In *Unspeakable Sentences,* Ann Banfield sparked a sharp debate by insisting that the phenomenon she calls Represented Speech and Thought (somewhat narrower than FID) contains only one voice; passages from Bakhtin like the one I cite in note 44 above could be adduced in support of this idea. Brian McHale, "Unspeakable Sentences, Unnatural Acts: Linguistics and Poetics Revisited," *Poetics Today* 4 (1983): 17–45, rebuts this claim, arguing for the simultaneous presence of multiple voices in a text (pp. 35–37); he might use the passage cited in note 33 above to buttress that argument. The nondialectical nature of dialogism appears in the recognition that Bakhtin sees both one voice and two voices in hybrid discourse, and that the autonomy of a character's voice within the narration is often inversely proportional to the value allowed it.

[62] H. Marshall Leicester Jr., "'No Vileyns Word': Social Context and Performance in Chaucer's *Friar's Tale,*" *ChauR* 17 (1982): 21–39 (21). Leicester further approves Mann's verdict that "it is the constant use of ambivalent words which make it hard to subject the Friar to moral analysis." Mann's discussion of the Friar (*Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire,* p. 49) provides a useful reminder that *Le Roman de la Rose*'s portrait of Faus Semblant lurks not far beneath the surface of this portrait. The presence of that indisputably satiric text, more relevant to the next section of my essay, also contributes to the strongly condemnatory tone of the portrait; Malcolm Andrew, *The Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Volume II, Part One B, The General Prologue: Explanatory Notes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), pp. 217–21, records a consistent

Anyone who sees that profit is not the proper end of courtesy or humility gets the point: the Friar is in no way an admirable or even likable character, and Leicester (like everyone else) recognizes his deficiencies clearly.[63] To say so much is to acknowledge that, in the end, the Friar's self-analysis does not articulate meaningfully separate criteria for evaluation; within hybrid discourse, separate criteria are always inherently unequal. The narrative strategy reinserts the Friar into a social order that radically devalues his protestations.

Hybridizing Textual Discourse

Because the medieval textual discourses employed in the *Prologue* are diverse, and because the pilgrims stand in strikingly different relationships to the comments made about them by such texts, the uses to which those discourses are put vary significantly.[64] In this discussion, however, I will concentrate on the *Prologue*'s incorporation of estates satire, which appears more consistently than any other textual tradition, and which has, in the wake of Mann's famous argument about "Chaucer's *consistent removal of the possibility of moral judgement*" from the *Prologue,* influenced ensuing commentary most strongly.[65]

Mann's thesis is a good deal more subtle than that one comment might suggest: she achieves nuance by consistently shading such forthright claims with contrastive or less emphatic statements elsewhere. As a result, it can be difficult to quote her position with complete fairness. My primary concern is with the ensuing critical climate, one that postulates that the *Prologue* "is, as Jill Mann demonstrated conclusively a few years ago, an estates satire," but one that, repeatedly neglecting significant parts of its generic mission, becomes unable to articulate effective satire.[66] One cannot argue with Mann's evidence about Chaucer's debt

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critical emphasis on the Friar's hypocrisy. Throughout this article, I am greatly indebted to Andrew's extraordinarily complete and judicious discussions.

[63] "It is clear that by the fourteenth century many friars enjoyed, and society sanctioned, the worldly eminence their profession gave them without paying much attention to its ostensible spiritual justification" (Leicester, "'No Vileyns Word,'" p. 29). Again, "It is one thing to understand the Friar, it is another to like him" (p. 37).

[64] Ann W. Astell, "The *Translatio* of Chaucer's Pardoner," *Exemplaria* 4 (1992): 411–28, has demonstrated the dependence of the Old Man in *The Pardoner's Tale* on literary representations of Avarice. See esp. pp. 416–19.

[65] Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire,* p. 197.

[66] I quote H. Marshall Leicester Jr., "Structure as Deconstruction: 'Chaucer and Estates Satire' in the General Prologue, or Reading Chaucer as a Prologue to the History of Disenchantment," *Exemplaria* 2 (1990): 241–61 (246). Cooper, "Langland's and Chaucer's Prologues," p. 71, also considers Chaucer's Prologue to be "based on estates satire," and so discusses what is included in the portraits more than how it is included.

to the tradition—I will cite it at several points—but I want to argue that Chaucer's experiments with the use of borrowed language have reconfigured the possibility of moral judgment, not removed it. In the first two, relatively simple portraits discussed below, estates material appears not on its own terms but as part of a sophisticated and variable strategy of hybridization that rewards close examination. The social attitudes invoked in them do not "remove" moral judgment but reflect it in a variety of ways and in conjunction with a variety of alternative scales of evaluation.

The Parson is frequently read as an ideal figure constructed by the superimposition of a large red universal "Not" symbol on top of a straightforward list of pastoral abuses borrowed directly from the estates tradition. Significant articles have been written about that portrait's reliance on binary structures like the repeated "not / but" rhetoric it employs.[67] As a result, the Parson emerges as a paragon, along with his brother the Plowman by now the sole surviving members of the class of "ideal" pilgrims for some readers. The current consensus also reads the Parson as shaped by estates material, whose negative verdict on the clergy is consistently and unambiguously denied in the portrait. I find the portrait similarly unambiguous but less univocal: the usual concerns of estates discourse only become crucial relatively late in the portrait, and they are not the only constituent of the portrait's structure: the Parson's own voice certainly echoes as well. My interest continues to lie in the ways that the narrative agent employs various "discourses of alterity" to find, develop, and articulate his responses to and verdicts on the pilgrims he creates.

The third line of the portrait, "But riche he was of hooly thoght and werk" (479) delineates for the first time the Parson's combination of the mental and physical aspects of his vocation. Returns of that motif will demarcate three distinct sections or movements in the portrait. In the first movement, the priest is praised with a list of straightforward, positive terms dependent on generations of Christian moralizing about the qualities that a priest should have: "good . . . povre . . . lerned . . . Benygne . . . wonder diligent . . . pacient" (477–84). This language belongs to a very broadly understood Christian tradition rather than any narrow subset of it like medieval estates satire; the same list could be

[67] Eamon Grennan, "'Dual Characterization': A Note on Chaucer's Use of 'But' in the Portrait of the Parson," *ChauR* 16 (1982): 195–200.

used to praise a twenty-first-century cleric. In this first movement, the narrative agent gives priority to the Parson's preaching—"Cristes gospel trewely wolde [he] preche; / His parisshens devoutly wolde he teche" (481–82). Only afterward does he mention the Parson's holy works, like his unwillingness to extort payment of tithes through excommunication (486).

Those works are adduced in a structure that defines the Parson as good simply because he does not act badly: "he ne lefte nat . . . to visite / The ferreste in his parisshe" (492–94). The simultaneous appearance of an emphasis on work and the use of such negative and binary characterization is significant, because both are typical of the Parson's character zone, which, first appearing here, will in a few lines dominate the second movement of the portrait. That second section begins with a significantly reversed articulation of the motif: "first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte" (497). Although "the gospel" (498; see Matthew 5:19) is identified as the ultimate source of the *wroghte/taughte* complex, the narrator owes his awareness of that connection to the Parson's words.[68]

> Out of the gospel he tho wordes caughte,
> And this figure he added eek therto,
> That if gold ruste, what shal iren do?
> (498–500)

The dualistic rhetoric, further evidenced in the shame attributed to "A shiten shepherde and a clene sheep" (504), therefore derives from the Parson's voice.[69] Beginning with the invocation of the priest's "noble example" (496), the eleven lines of the second movement provide what amounts to self-characterization, employing a binary style that always emphasizes the Parson's deeds and minimizes attention to his previously emphasized preaching. Indeed, his point is that behavior is paramount because the people will inevitably attend to what a priest does rather

[68] Charles A. Owen Jr. argues that "the aphoristic pungency of the Parson's speech is in fact repeatedly imitated in the portrait by the strong consonance of the words wroghte and taughte." This is misleading: the *Prologue*'s past tense is due (as it would be in FID) to the hybridized status of the discourse. The Parson's words would have been **First I werche and afterward I teche,* in which consonance is much less striking. " 'Thy Drasty Ryming,' " *SP* 63 (1966): 533–64 (560).

[69] On the presence of the Parson's voice in these lines, see also Owen, *Pilgrimage and Storytelling in the Canterbury Tales: The Dialectic of Ernest and Game* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), pp. 74–77.

than what he says. These lines touch on preaching only to the extent that their language ultimately belongs to the Parson: he preaches that behavior is much more important than preaching.

At line 507, the narrative agent again emerges from the Parson's voice and finally—this is the third movement—addresses much more specifically the issues defined by estates satire. At the same time, the technique of negative characterization becomes much more intense: the narrator now lists ten denials that this Parson acts in the bad ways that other fourteenth-century priests are widely thought to act. Although such negative characterization is used first in the portrait of the Knight—"He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde" (70)—the extent of its use to characterize the Parson is unparalleled, and it goes a long way to explain the unusual length of this portrait. Here, as it always does, the technique signals approval of the pilgrim: at the extreme it gives us the "negative superlative" of "A bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys" (524).[70] Since the estates tradition makes its emphatically positive assertions to criticize the typical behavior of estate members, simple negation of those assertions tends to idealize the portrait, that is to render it simultaneously enthusiastic in tone and rather general in character: the Parson chose not to abandon his parish for more lucrative practice in London, he was not a mercenary, he was not spiteful to sinners, and so on.[71]

As a result, we garner little new information in the portrait's final section. Having already been told (in a widely praised early detail) that the Parson visited his flock incessantly, "Upon his feet, and in his hand a staf" (495), we cannot be surprised that he has not taken up a sinecure in a London chantry (509–10). What is new is the mimicry by the narrative agent of the Parson's rhetorical strategy and emphasis on deeds. In that rhetoric of redoubled contrast, the adversative conjunction necessarily has an important role; even so, its final appearance retains the power to surprise:

[70] Owen, "Development of the Art," pp. 127–29, discusses both the negative superlative and characterization through negation in the portraits of the Knight and Parson.

[71] In very different ways, both Grennan, "'Dual Characterization,'" and Ronald A. Sarno, S.J., "Chaucer and the Satirical Tradition," *Classical Folia* 21 (1967): 41–61, explore the dichotomies of good priest / bad priest constructed by the negative characterization as a technique of strengthening the narrator's specifically moral and satirical point.

> He waited after no pompe and reverence,
> Ne maked him a spiced conscience,
> But Cristes loore and his apostles twelve
> He taughte; but first he folwed it hymselve.
> (525–28)

The Parson avoids, we are told, the ill habits attributed to too many of his contemporaries by estates satire: he was a teacher of Christ's lore. But the more striking adversative of the final line disjoins that praiseworthy behavior—the basis of the narrator's initial praise—from an even better behavior, one whose value the narrator would seem to have learned from the Parson's emphasis on deeds as they are reflected in section 2.[72]

The fact that the portrait develops an increasingly strong emphasis on the practice of the tenets of Christianity, on what the Parson does rather than what he is (section 1) or says (section 2), is not often emphasized; the way in which the Parson has shaped that development has not been emphasized at all.[73] This portrait adopts the language of estates satire with full approval, but only after it has learned from the Parson's own discourse how to sharpen the previously rather bland praise—"A good man . . . of religioun" (477)—into a much more pointed commentary. Estates satire becomes a useful way of developing an originally rather banal set of ideas, instigated by the more specific emphasis provided by the Parson himself. Although there is nothing surprising about the narrative use of estates material here, the point of the portrait does not depend in any way on how much or how little of it is employed, on any oddities or omissions of common traits: the narrative agent has used "the kind of thing that people generally say" about parish priests not as an independently valid external standard of judg-

[72] Grennan, "'Dual Characterization,'" comments: "Critical perceptions of the Narrator either as naïve simpleton or holy fool are, therefore, inadequate in face of what his creator allows us to see of him here" (p. 199).

[73] Katherine Little, "Chaucer's Parson and the Specter of Wycliffism," *SAC* 23 (2001): 225–53, effectively discusses the Parson's preaching in the context of an emerging late fourteenth-century orthodoxy and the desire for a reformed priesthood; she does not address the importance attributed to works in the portrait. Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 7–11, has a complementary discussion of the role of exemplarity in the portrait of the Parson. See also Owen, "Development of the Art," p. 127.

ment, but as evidence supporting his own already formed impression of the pilgrim.[74]

The Clerk has been described as a slightly less perfect version of the Parson, the two of them forming in the first estate the equivalent of the pairing of Knight and Squire from the second.[75] The structure of the *Prologue* does not connect the two clerics, however, and the two portraits are constructed very differently. The opening gambit, that the Clerk is still at Oxford even though many years have passed since he first began his studies in the trivium, does not carry the narrative agent very far.[76] He then seizes on more promising material: a description of the pilgrim's poverty that plugs directly into widespread stereotypes of the poor student:

> As leene was his hors as is a rake,
> And he nas nat right fat, I undertake,
> But looked holwe, and therto sobrely.
> Ful thredbare was his overeste courtepy,
> For he hadde geten hym yet no benefice,
> Ne was so worldly for to have office.
> (287–92)

Mann traces responses to the estates tradition at half a dozen points in the Clerk's portrait, but it is more apparent in these lines than anywhere

[74] Little's emphasis on the relatively slippery definition of orthodoxy at this point is useful; it is in effect reinforced by the conclusion drawn by Douglas J. Wurtele, "The Anti-Lollardry of Chaucer's Parson," *Mediaevalia* 11 (1989 [for 1985]): 151–68, who demonstrates that the criticisms articulated in the portrait, while consistent with complaints made by the Lollards, also echo similar complaints made by churchmen whose orthodoxy was never in question. The agent pointedly declines to hybridize the kinds of statements—"*He never asked the flock to believe in an accident without subject*" (on one side) or "*He never impugned the sacraments administered by other priests*" (on the other)—that would have clarified the Parson's position in Wycliffite controversies. To anticipate my argument about the narrator's dependence on Chaucer's ideology, those would seem to be questions Chaucer wished not to raise. This provides at least one kind of answer to what David Aers calls an "open question" about the Parson's orthodoxy at the end of "Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee:* Whose Virtues?" in *Medieval Literature and Historical Inquiry: Essays in Honor of Derek Pearsall,* ed. David Aers (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 69–81 (81).

[75] Loretta Valtz Mannucci, *Fourteenth-Century England and the Canterbury Tales* (Milan: Coopli, 1975), notes as I have the importance of thought and work in the portrait of the Parson, "distinguishing him from the Clerk, who had not works" (p. 149).

[76] Andrew's summary of commentary in the "Explanatory Notes" to the *Variorum General Prologue* clarifies the inconclusive significance of what we are told about the Clerk's studies: "The additional implications which have been discerned here are conspicuously varied" (pp. 272–73).

else, largely because they employ more fully than the rest the strategy of negation so perfectly developed in the Parson's portrait.

For Mann, the mention of the Clerk's unbeneficed status is an important hesitation in the narrator's largely positive response: while it might reflect (on one hand) the Clerk's commendable unwillingness to go grubbing, or even bribing his way into a sinecure, it might (on the other) signal a rather orgulous unwillingness to take on the inevitably limiting responsibilities of parish work, the kind of work so admired in the Parson.[77] Mann moves quickly to disarm her opening assertion that the Clerk provides "an ideal representative of the life of study" by analyzing the ways the portrait limits its approbation of that life by emphasizing "the professional nature of the Clerk's studies" and his failure to "look beyond their immediate object to their ultimate goal."[78] In her reading, positive and negative reactions remain in balance or in tension.

As we encounter it, however, the narrative structure of the portrait develops a clear and approbative momentum. The points about which the narrator is most hesitant come first, and they pretty quickly become recognizable as a familiar, middle-class suspicion of intellectual pursuits. Old John the Carpenter responds to Oxford intellectuals more emphatically—"He saugh nat that" (I.3461)—but in much the same vein. The narrative agent directs our attention first to the Clerk's poverty, and estates texts quickly supply the details of thinness in both the Clerk's body and his clothing that support that verdict. Poverty results from the lack of a job. The hesitation over the cause of the Clerk's unemployment is real, but the narrative agent never engages concerns about whether the Clerk is too young to become a parson, does not really want to become a parson, or has been passed over by a system unresponsive to intellectual merit.[79] The narrative conclusion that the Clerk refuses to be "worldly" comprehends all of those possibilities and relies on that word's long and straightforward history before Chaucer's use of it here. To be worldly was to be "related to secular human activities or concerns, . . . not belonging or pertaining to the religious life, . . . [or] caught up

[77] Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire,* pp. 82–84.

[78] Ibid., pp. 74 and 84, respectively.

[79] D. W. Robertson, Jr. ed., *The Literature of Medieval England* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), glosses that "the Clerk had not obtained a parish, placed it in the hands of a vicar, and used the income to study" (p. 486); see Nicholas Orme, "Chaucer and Education," *ChauR* 16 (1981): 38–59 (51).

in or given over to secular human activities."[80] How unworldly is the Clerk? The agent uses a simple but frequently misread stratagem for suggesting the magnitude of that trait:

> For hym was levere have at his beddes heed
> Twenty bookes, clad in blak or reed,
> Of Aristotle and his philosophie
> Than robes riche, or fithele, or gay sautrie.
> (293–96)

Despite the generations of critics who have ingeniously explained how such a poor scholar could own a library worth fifty or a hundred times his income—perhaps "twenty" is rounded up from a lower number? or the Clerk saved by copying them himself? or rich friends presented them as gifts? or he bought them used?—the comment indicates nothing more literal than surprise that the Clerk, in the odd way of scholars, might actually think that twenty dry-as-dust volumes really were preferable to better clothes or some lively musical entertainment.[81] If later comments about the gravity of the Clerk's conversation are accurate, he will surely not have been boasting about his library. The comment works much less problematically as a narrative agent's reflection of perennial attitudes toward scholars, extensively paralleled in the estates

[80] *Middle English Dictionary, worldli* adj., definitions 3 a, b, and c (respectively). The passage about the Clerk is cited as the first example of 3c, but the other, closely related senses have all been in use since Old English, as has sense 4: "Reflecting or embodying the temptations, pleasures, allure, etc. of this world, profane."

[81] Robinson, in both his editions of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1933, 1957), hints that "*Twenty* is here of course a round number" (2nd ed., p. 658); Beverly Boyd, *Chaucer and the Medieval Book* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1973), argues that the Clerk could have copied from university-owned fascicles of books (pp. 90–92); Muriel Bowden, *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), suggests "[t]hat the Clerk also accepts monetary gifts from his friends is perhaps because of his expensive taste for books," and that he "would probably buy second-hand books at reduced prices, as many students do today" (pp. 156, 159); Martin Stevens, "The Ellesmere Miniatures as Illustrations of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,*" *Studies in Iconography* 7–8 (1981–82): 113–34, argues that the Ellesmere miniature of the Clerk, with books in each hand, implies that "he rides nowhere without a part of his treasured library" (p. 115); Anne Middleton, "Chaucer's 'Newe Men' and the Good of Literature in the *Canterbury Tales,*" in *Literature and Society,* ed. Edward W. Said (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 15–56, sounds a more reasonable note: "Not even the 'twenty bokes' we always attribute to him in memory necessarily belong to him, according to the grammar of the sentence" (p. 45); in the *Riverside,* Warren Ginsberg agrees that "the Clerk . . . does not have twenty books" (p. 811).

tradition.[82] It characterizes the Clerk as someone who *would* make such choices, not someone who has made them. We do not know how many books the Clerk owned, or the names of their authors, or the colors of their bindings: we do learn the more general point established by this familiar and obviously hyperbolic reaffirmation of the pilgrim's unworldliness.

Both the opening emphasis on poverty and the succeeding portrayal of unworldliness lead to a climax in the very small joke about the failure of the Clerk's learning to put any money in his pocket. Once the joke is made, however, the rest of the portrait, although it still relies heavily on the estates tradition, changes course radically. In the Parson's portrait, a reduplicated "but" clarified the narrator's emphasis; in the Clerk's, the same strategy significantly redirects the tenor of his ultimate evaluation:

> But al be that he was a philosophre,
> Yet hadde he but litel gold in cofre;
> But al that he myghte of his freendes hente,
> On bookes and on lernynge he it spente,
> And bisily gan for the soules preye
> Of hem that yaf hym wherwith to scoleye.
> (297–302)

Donaldson believes that "the logic [of 'But' in 299] is far from clear, and I suspect that its chief function is to express the narrator's difficulty in coming to terms with the Clerk's budgetary peculiarity."[83] The logic is, I have suggested, rhetorical, but Donaldson has nailed the function. The difficulty is overcome not by any actual "coming to terms," but by a simple abandonment of easy scorn for such idiosyncrasy in favor of a more sober validation of a different, more crucial set of traits: the Clerk's devotion (whose usual absence the estates tradition laments), the pithi-

[82] Estates texts typically praise bookishness in clerks, and even name Aristotle as an appropriate author (Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire,* pp. 74–75). Moreover, the unworldly bookishness usually associated with Chaucerian narrators would presumably generate a certain degree of sympathy for the clerk. Hence my emphasis on perennial attitudes, perhaps with a distinctly Chaucerian nudge about precisely which books the Clerk enjoys.

[83] E. Talbot Donaldson, "Adventures with the Adversative Conjunction in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales,* or What's Before the But?" in *"So meny people, longages, and tonges": Philological Essays in Scots and Medieval English presented to Angus McIntosh,* ed. Michael Benskin and M. L. Samuels (Edinburgh: privately printed, 1981), pp. 355–66 (362) .

ness of his expression (whose usual absence the estates tradition laments), the moral tone of his discourse (whose usual absence the estates tradition laments), and his cheerful participation in the activities of a scholar.[84] Perhaps the ghost of the Clerk's own voice is invoked in those descriptions of his speech; if so, the Clerk has, in a fashion analogous to the action of the Parson's portrait, gently pushed the tenor of the portrait in an appropriate direction. But the rhetorical strategy in this portrait distinguishes it from that of the Parson, even though both use estates material to fashion a positive characterization. The Parson rather famously lacks a physical description, and the narrative brings his inner being into consistently clearer focus. With the Clerk, the narrative agent false-starts by beginning with external appearances, but he soon dodges past that pointless emphasis to present a more significant and positive evaluation of his character. In each case, estates material appears only when it is useful to the narrator's judgment, and always in the service of that judgment.

In concluding my discussion of character voices, I sought to frame my argument as a confirmation of part of Leicester's response to the Friar and as a correction to the hyperbole that his theoretical model sometimes led him into. Similarly, Mann, even while noting that a scholarly life was "even more likely in medieval than in modern times to be associated with an 'ivory tower,' " concludes that "such an impression does not affect our admiration for the way in which the Clerk performs the role of the ideal scholar."[85] The narrative agent floats *topoi* contrary to that evaluation, and those ideas continue to enhance the complexity of the portrait, but they are finally subordinated to a positive judgment.

In Mann's argument, estates material is almost always a moderating influence: its presence encourages her to find the Clerk less admirable and the Friar less culpable than most other readers do. This tendency is attributable to both her careful comparison of typical estates texts to the *Prologue* and to a less defensible assumption that all discourses discernible in the text must carry equal authority, that is, that any attribution of greater authority to one discourse by a reader can only be arbitrary. My assumption, following Bakhtin, is that hybridization creates an array of discourses in hierarchical form. Therefore, the *Prologue*

[84] Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire,* pp. 75–79.
[85] Ibid., p. 74.

never presents estates material for its own sake: it never becomes an estates satire. Rather, the narrative agent frequently finds estates material a useful tool, deployed as a means of invoking readerly responses consonant with his rhetorical goals.[86] Although Chaucer recognizes that reality does not always conform to estates stereotypes (notably in the case of the Parson), he never challenges the fundamental accuracy of the tradition. So his occasional omissions of material common in fourteenth-century critiques of an estate do not indicate a new, more generous kind of estates satire, but the subordination of estates and other discourses to the narrative agent's goals. Those goals, whether praise, blame, or a combination of the two, always take priority over the material they employ. His strategy is more to hint than to accuse, but, as John Gardner has noted, "a comic writer's hints have special force."[87]

The portrait of the Sergeant at Law, adjacent to that of the Clerk, differs from the others less in its use of estates discourse than in the clarity and coherence of such narrative goals. The narrative agent never defines for the Sergeant the clear purpose that was consistently present in the portrait of the Parson and that developed during that of the Clerk. Partly for that reason, the Sergeant provides one of Mann's strongest arguments for the effects of omission of the victim, and (consequently) the elusiveness if not illusoriness of satire against him. She quotes Gower railing in *Vox clamantis* against a lawyer who "enjoys the delights acquired from the poor man's property, but counts the losses of the other as nothing" because, Gower explains, the lawyer's mind does not attend to the victims of his efforts. Mann then demonstrates how Chaucer's technique, by attending solely to the Sergeant's mind, erases our awareness of the victims of his behavior from the portrait, precisely because the Sergeant's consciousness does not reach so far.[88]

Beyond Mann's argument, there is also a body of legal literature whose tendency is pretty strongly approbative of the Sergeant, at least *as* a Sergeant at Law: according to Isobel McKenna, he is "an honour-

[86] J. Stephen Russell, *Chaucer and the Trivium: The Mindsong of the Canterbury Tales* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), argues that readings of the assembled details of each portrait "are *sense-makings,* unilateral attempts to connect details of the portraits to preconceived notions or ethical judgments about the characters" (p. 64).

[87] John Gardner, *The Poetry of Chaucer* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), p. 233. Gardner's comment is made about the portrait of the Squire.

[88] Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire,* p. 90, quoting *Vox clamantis* VI.347–50. She discusses the Sergeant in a chapter on omission of the victim (pp. 86–105), along with the Doctor of Physic, the Merchant, and the Guildsmen.

able leader in his field, a model of excellence for his profession."[89] A similar judgment that the Sergeant is "professionally correct" also appears in Laura F. Hodges's recent analysis of his costume, which, albeit more cautiously, confirms his characterization as a successful and powerful lawyer.[90] The significance of this evidence cannot be wished away: the claims for the Sergeant's professional skill, the echoes of his pride in his own accomplishments, and the substantial place that he has achieved in society must remain a significant element in his portrait. In all these ways, the Sergeant presents a significant challenge to any attempt to read the portrait as purely ironic, just as (and for much the same reasons as) he would have presented a challenge to anyone opposing him in court.

Hints of the Sergeant's character zone in the portrait are mostly restricted to individual legal terms. Words like *patente* and *pleyn commissioun* (315), *fee symple* (319), and *termes* (323) testify to significant legal experience and expertise and justify the claim that "his wordes weren so wise" (313). Yet the narrative agent keeps a greater distance from the Sergeant's voice than he did in the portraits of the Monk, Friar, Parson, or even Clerk. Thus a curious pattern emerges, one that will persist throughout the portrait: the agent is simultaneously impressed and unimpressed by the Sergeant, and the conflict between those two attitudes is expressed to a degree unmatched in any other portrait:

> Discreet he was and of greet reverence—
> He semed swich, his wordes weren so wise.
> (312–13)

The anticlimactic withdrawal of apparent praise effected by the narrative emphasis on surface has been a favorite locus of commentary by those wishing to read the portrait ironically, and that attitude appears as persistently as the strategies for reading it more favorably that I have discussed above:[91]

[89] "The Making of a Fourteenth Century Sergeant of the Law," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 45 (1975): 244–62 (262). McKenna's article, appearing just two years after Mann's book, does not cite it; nevertheless, their common emphasis on evaluation of the Sergeant in strictly professional terms is striking.

[90] Laura F. Hodges, *Chaucer and Costume: The Secular Pilgrims in the General Prologue* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 101–25.

[91] Joseph E. Grennan, "Chaucer's Man of Law and the Constancy of Justice," *JEGP* 84 (1985): 498–514.

> Nowher so bisy a man as he ther nas,
> And yet he semed bisier than he was.
> (321–22)

Such commentary must affect our response to the Sergeant, but it also shifts our sense of the narrative agent. By suggesting that the information he presents to us cannot be taken at face value, he undercuts his own authority, forfeits the invisibility usually associated with the role of agent, and becomes a "narrator," although this narrator is clearly not the dim-witted and gregarious "pilgrim-Chaucer": the comments that question the Sergeant's status have the appearance of perspicuity, and this narrator operates largely by creating significant and meaningful silences. But the presenter of the Sergeant's portrait has, deliberately or not, become at least potentially fallible, like the more recent novelistic narrators who have influenced our expectations, a subjectivity whose values cannot be taken as absolutely valid.[92] That narrator tells us how the Sergeant frequented the "Parvys," how rapidly he has acquired wealth and land, what he seemed like, and how he wore a simple coat and an opulent belt. And that narrator declines to tell us about the clients the Sergeant went to the Parvys to meet, or about how he accumulated that wealth, or about his values or ideology; that narrator (as Hodges notes) makes no mention about what most distinguished a Sergeant, the coif or "howve" that was seen as analogous to a knight's helmet and that Sergeants were always required to wear, even in the presence of the king.[93] Since that final omission—the literally missing mark of honor—strongly suggests significance in the earlier absences, we can reasonably wonder about the Sergeant's clients and his treatment of them. Mann reads the omissions as evidence that the case repeatedly made against the Sergeant must be rejected as "not proved"; but we have seen other, clearly satirical portraits that were not concerned to prove their subjects' vices. Hodges takes the opposite tack, arguing in effect that the Sergeant's innocence is also "not proved," since the professional acumen demonstrated by his formal humility and rich accou-

[92] Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity,* pp. 17–31.

[93] Hodges, *Chaucer and Costume,* pp. 107–11. V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), notes that the Ellesmere portrait of the Sergeant does include the *howve* (p. 290). The Sergeant is not among the ten illustrations discussed by Stevens, "The Ellesmere Miniatures," who notes in passing the depiction of the "medlee cote" but does not discuss the presence of the *howve* in the portrait (p. 116).

terments cannot make up for the absent coif with its implication that the personal honor expected in a Sergeant is also missing;[94] but we have not before seen the narrative agent reduced to such a tepid hint of blame for a pilgrim of whom he disapproves. It is true that the Sergeant is a complex case; but the narrative agent creates a significant part of the complexity by his refusal or inability to define the significance of the details he presents, to clarify the point of this portrait. It is not a matter of equivocation; the problem with the Sergeant is finally a narrative silence about who he is: "Of his array I telle no lenger tale" (330)—and not just of his array.[95]

Unless we consider the narrative intent in this portrait, then, we are at Dulcarnon. The kinds of flaws that drive the satire of the Monk, Friar, Physician, and Summoner are, as it were, inventoried, but satire of the Sergeant is never orchestrated as cogently as in those portraits. Since the agent who sometimes asserts that society's criticisms of its members do not apply to a specified individual still never denies their general validity, his willingness to raise questions about the Sergeant by invoking the stereotypes of the acquisitive lawyer who gives little thought to his clients must be meaningful; but his inability or unwillingness to make those objections plain also matters.[96] The oddity of this portrait is further evidenced by the presence of that open sore, the apparent reference to a real Sergeant at Law with whom the fourteenth-century Londoner named Geoffrey Chaucer had a minor legal entanglement:

> Therto he koude endite, and make a thyng,
> Ther koude no wight pynche at his writyng.
> (325–26)

Although the basic thrust of John M. Manly's old thesis that the portraits consistently describe Chaucer's fellow citizens has long since been discarded, at this one point it is still readily invoked, for the simple reason that no better explanation of these lines has ever presented itself: the political alignment of Thomas Pynchbeck, Sergeant at Law, appar-

[94] Hodges, *Chaucer and Costume,* p. 125.

[95] Hodges emphasizes the reticence of the portrait's concluding line, "I telle no longer tale" (ibid., p. 125). So does Leicester, "Structure as Deconstruction," although he mistakenly considers the "medlee cote" as "off-duty dress" (p. 249). See also Richard Firth Green, "Chaucer's Man of Law and Collusive Recovery," *N&Q* 238 (1993): 303–5.

[96] Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative,* pp. 290–91.

ently differed from Chaucer's, and he signed a writ for the poet's arrest in 1388.[97] But what a small-minded, halfhearted thrust those lines make! Unlike the Sergeant's, the agent's own writing already appears pinched by the Sergeant's power.

In fact, that explanation goes a long way to sorting out the apparent contradictions of this portrait. In other portraits that invoke a comparable sense of the pilgrim's importance, like the Knight's, the narrative agent clearly endorses that prominence as evidence of worthiness. Here the awe is granted more grudgingly, and is consistently qualified or circumscribed once it is invoked.[98] Unlike the Friar, the Sergeant will not provide the hybridized evidence to convict himself, and the narrative agent declines to treat the Sergeant as he has treated the Monk, the Friar, the Merchant, that is, to satirize the Sergeant openly. As Chaucer may have had reason to know, the Sergeant (unlike the Summoner) is both a dangerous man and a dangerous target of criticism. The narrator's reticence is ample testimony to the difficulty of criticizing such people, however dubious their achievements.[99]

In these ways, the portrait of the Sergeant differs from the others I have examined in structure and therefore in effect. Again the narrative agent ventriloquizes many discourses to make a singularly complex statement about a pilgrim: typical estates comments on the pilgrim's profession articulate—faintly—criticisms of lawyers that were in the air; the Sergeant's words are invoked, albeit at some distance, and only to suggest his legal learning; the rhetoric of costume offers both explicitly complimentary and implicitly critical testimony; and the voice of experience, *viz.,* of Chaucer's experience, emerges for a moment of confirma-

[97] John Matthews Manly, *Some New Light on Chaucer* (New York: Henry Holt, 1926), pp. 131–57, esp. 150–57; see also Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 386. Manly's interpretation is still cited by the *Riverside Chaucer,* p. 811, and has been repeatedly reinforced: Derek Brewer, *An Introduction to Chaucer* (London: Longman, 1984), p. 174, discusses the Sergeant among other evidence that the "portraits were certainly based on people in real life," and Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative,* also affirming the reference to a historical figure, further argues the smallness of the personal thrust of the joke and the difficulty of a purely critical reading of the portrait, although to ends different from mine (p. 291).

[98] Yet the awe is real: whether the elaborate introduction to Fragment II indicates that the Man of Law was originally the first tale-teller or simply arises out of a need to introduce him appropriately, he cannot be imagined as in any way a negligible figure.

[99] Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire,* makes something of the same argument—that social considerations interfere with criticisms that could be made—about the Friar (p. 54). But the evidence of the Friar's social position is, as I have shown, almost entirely presented as the Friar's opinion; the Sergeant is a very different case.

tion that the Sergeant is, like anyone so powerful, dangerous. What is different is the narrator's unwillingness in this portrait to take ownership of the praise or criticism implicit in many of those other voices, either to assimilate them fully to, or to distance them ironically from, his own discourse: the agent here is not, in the Bakhtinian phrase I quoted above, "compelling language ultimately to serve all his own intentions." As a result, the "apocryphal" voices noticed by Lawton, the fallen language discerned by Nolan, the tensions descried by Leicester, are more apparent here than anywhere else in the *Prologue.*[100] Criticism of the Sergeant is all around us, but because the narrator never combines it with his own voice, it must remain tentative, unanchored.

The Narrative Agenda

The *Prologue* frequently entertains different judgments about the pilgrims, but most often sorts through those differing opinions to a central or final emphasis, albeit one that is often complex. The rare moments of genuine ambivalence most often arise, as in the portrait of the Sergeant, not from the presence or absence of specific details of estates material, or of a pilgrim's voice, but from a failure by the narrative agent to present such material within a coherent plan, with what can reasonably be called a narrative agenda. "Agendas" have bad connotations nowadays, but it is useful to remember that a narrative agent necessarily has a narrative agenda. Most often, of course, it remains invisible by being unexceptionable: there is nothing noteworthy in the agent's determination to criticize corrupt or hypocritical churchmen, or to praise the humble industriousness of good ones.

But who sets the agenda? Since Michel Foucault described the "author function," or perhaps even since Wayne Booth invented the "implied author," narratologists have been wary of invoking the author directly. Bal's attitude is typical: "It hardly needs mentioning that this [narrative] agent is not the (biographical) author of the narrative," and of course the notion that ideas presented narratorially in the text cannot

[100] Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators,* pp. 99–100 (see pp. 13–14); Nolan, "'A Poet Ther Was,'" pp. 159–61; Leicester, "Art of Impersonation," pp. 218–19. In Bakhtin's terms, the strands of heteroglossia in this portrait are not brought into meaningful interaction with one another; they remain un-dialogized.

always be attributed to the author is quite sound.[101] But since *cannot always be attributed* is not equivalent to Bal's implicit *must never be attributed,* we might consider the terminology of Stanzel and Cohn (who preserve echoes of Bakhtin and countless earlier writers). Their use of the adjective "authorial" to classify unpersonalized narrative relies on a principle that has never been rigorously refuted: the narrative agenda is created by the author, who then designs a narrative agent suitable for its implementation.[102] Given that the *Parliament of Fowls* is an occasional poem, it makes perfect sense to ask when a court official named Geoffrey Chaucer might have thought such a poem appropriate: he was the author who decided to commemorate some occasion with it.[103] For those reasons, there is an inescapable sense in which the narrative agent is always a subset of the poet; the language of the Chaucerian agent necessarily depends in some terms on the language of Chaucer. Because of certain opinions held and choices made by Chaucer, as well as the accidents of his birth, the narrative agent of the *Prologue* writes in English, and in a specific London dialect that distinguishes him from the agents of other important poets who lived nearby. Moreover, the books that the agent makes use of as discourses of alterity in his text are all books

[101] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews,* ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 113–38; Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 74–77, discusses the implied author. Bal, *Narratology,* argues that the implied author is "the result of the investigation of the meaning of a text, and not the source of that meaning" (p. 18), but Booth himself emphasizes that the term "is capable of calling attention to [the text] as the product of a choosing, evaluating person rather than as a self-existing thing" (p. 74).

[102] Stanzel, *Theory of Narrative,* pp. 89–91; Cohn, "The Encirclement of Narrative," pp. 157–82. Later, in *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 125–31, Cohn notices that the separation of author and narrator has proceeded on an ad hoc basis and argues that it is a distinguishing element of fictional texts. But while the belief that the two can be forced apart is self-fulfilling, it is not therefore correct. In what sense does the peroration on the death of Jo in chapter 47 of *Bleak House*—"Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. . . . And dying thus around us every day"—not articulate Dickens's agenda? Or consider the first line of Yeats's "To Be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee" (which is, significantly, carved on a stone at Yeats's home at Thoor Ballylee): "I, the poet, William Yeats." Speaker, poet, author: how can we tell the dancer from the dance? Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity,* pp. 121–23, also notes the author's construction of the poetry in *The Man of Law's Tale.*

[103] Larry D. Benson, "The Occasion of *The Parliament of Fowls,*" in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield,* ed. Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 1982), pp. 123–44.

read by Geoffrey Chaucer, and the verse forms he employs mirror in unsurprising ways those in the books Geoffrey Chaucer's service to various courts had given him the chance to read. None of the attitudes expressed directly by the agent would have been unacceptable in the mouth of Geoffrey Chaucer. The agent's language is—presumably; the point is not susceptible of proof—not identical to the language of Chaucer, but the agent does not formulate any ideas that lie outside Chaucer's linguistic competence. Conversely, the limits of Geoffrey Chaucer's imagination will occasionally be reflected in the narrative voice, and his narrative agenda will begin to seem less legitimate than it was in the case of the Friar or Parson when readers begin to object to Chaucer's narrative goals.[104]

A sense of Chaucer's limited (and limiting) attitudes toward women has suggested to readers like Helen Phillips that the portrait of the Prioress expresses an illegitimate agenda: "Is there something sexist, a hatchet job, in the way he first devises an unmarried woman with some independent authority, analogous to a headmistress or college principal, and then undermines her dignity, implying that her air of having a position in life is false and what she really—naturally—wants is to attract men?"[105] "Yes," answers Phillips: in her reading, Chaucer's gender politics construct the faults we see in the Prioress. The issue of "attracting men" invokes the portrait's courtly values, a topic I too want to discuss. But before I do, let me note that two other similar volumes, also written by eminent Chaucerians, locate blame at both of the other positions on the rhetorical triangle of Author, Subject, Reader. Helen Cooper blames the Prioress herself: "the balance and substance of the portrait are clearly amiss for a nun, with their concentration on her imitation of 'cheere of court,' her table manners, her pet dogs, and the attractiveness of her appearance."[106] Derek Pearsall, meanwhile, censures the overcens-

[104] Although not often explicitly defended, this principle underlies a wide range of important critical commentary, beginning with the Retractions and more recently evidenced in the famous comment by Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," that "the fact that [Chaucer the pilgrim, Chaucer the poet, and Chaucer the civil-servant] are three separate entities does not, naturally, exclude the probability—or rather the certainty—that they bore a close resemblance to one another, and that, indeed, they frequently got together in the same body" (p. 1). The crucial opposing point, clearly articulated in Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), is to avoid using a misplaced reverence for a Chaucer whose congeniality is constructed by his canonicity to reinforce the ideology discerned in the text.

[105] Phillips, *Introduction to the Canterbury Tales,* p. 39.

[106] Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales,* p. 38.

orious reader. Having dismissed somewhat desperate efforts to fault her habit of swearing by a saint, he goes on: "There are many other details in the description of the Prioress that have provoked a raising of the eyebrows, but where the fuller effect is to oblige the reader to identify himself as a harsh and unjust moralist or at best as embarrassingly unsubtle."[107] These three authorities will provide useful touchstones of the critical climate for my own discussion, as I consider five or six different moments in the portrait that have generated direct criticism of the Prioress. In some of those moments she has been ably defended by critics like Pearsall; in others the kind of satire discerned by Cooper is still widely recognized. But I am less concerned with whether we should censure the Prioress than with why we want to, and in particular how narratorial strategies, strategies whose source must be Geoffrey Chaucer, encourage us to think of her in satirical terms. Phillips's comment about narration introduces a discussion ultimately headed elsewhere; I want to pursue the possibility that a Chaucerian narrative agenda loads the dice against the Prioress and therefore propels (or even *com*pels) criticism of her.

This is a tricky position to inhabit: it will occasionally require me to advance arguments for positions I do not hold, in order to test the limits of the traditional positions I have already outlined and to unravel the implications of some unusual features of the portrait. Nor do I want to rely entirely on a sense that the Prioress is for Chaucer an intractably feminine "Other." Although that may be true, it does not get at the peculiarities I want to discuss.[108] The Prioress is not the only pilgrim whose otherness makes the narrative agent palpably uncomfortable, but even the Pardoner is treated more comprehensibly, one might say more rationally than the Prioress. After mention of his duet with the Summoner, he receives an extended physical description:

> This Pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wex,
> But smothe it heeng as dooth a strike of flex;
> By ounces henge his lokkes that he hadde,

[107] Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*, pp. 68–69.

[108] Strikingly, touchstone feminist readings of the *Canterbury Tales* have little to say about the Prioress: Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) (in the "Feminist Readings" series), and Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992) all ignore her character.

> And therwith he his shuldres overspradde;
> But thynne it lay, by colpons oon and oon.
> But hood, for jolitee, wered he noon,
> For it was trussed up in his walet.
> Hym thoughte he rood al of the newe jet;
> Dischevelee, save his cappe, he rood al bare.
> Swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare.
> (675–84)

This description both generates and partially explains a growing discomfort in the face of the Pardoner's ambiguous sexuality and gender:

> A vernycle hadde he sowed upon his cappe;
> His walet, biforn hym in his lappe,
> Bretful of pardoun, comen from Rome al hoot.
> A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.
> No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;
> As smothe it was as it were late shave.
> (685–90)

We see the Pardoner much more fully than we see most of the other pilgrims—certainly more than the Friar, the Parson, the Clerk, or the Sergeant—and the unusual length of description occurs because of the intellectual flailing (note the three occurrences of "But") that finally leads to a desperate stab at analysis: "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" (691).[109] The narrator never achieves much insight, but at least his placement of evidence before his conclusion is methodologically sound.

The Prioress too comes under close observation, but the narrative proceeds very differently in her case. As I will show, the narrative agent invokes several textual traditions of dubious relevance. In addition, he repeatedly postpones telling us facts about the Prioress until an implication that structures our interpretation of those facts has been established. Both habits encourage us to form impressions, or even firm conclusions about the Prioress, before we have an adequate basis upon which to entertain them. A familiar critical *topos*—that the Prioress is

[109] Robert S. Sturges, *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), esp. pp. 21–33, explores the narrator's inability to make the Pardoner conform to the ideas he brings to the act of narration.

not *as bad* as we think, or that the portrait's satire is not *as sharp*—responds at some level to an awareness that the conclusions drawn in the portrait are not fully supported by its details. Considering the elements of the portrait in reverse order will highlight those two oddities.

The incorporation of written discourses is nowhere more obvious than in the Prioress's brooch, inscribed "amor vincit omnia" (162). Those words originally come, in a slightly different order, from Virgil's Tenth *Eclogue,* where they provide a highly indirect and wry observation about the losing battle that humans frequently wage against their sexuality.[110] Lowes's famous comment about the Prioress and her motto—"I think she thought she meant love celestial"—perhaps leans a bit heavily on this distant Virgilian context:[111] medieval readers would have been more aware that the phrase, now arranged in the Prioress's order, had been marshaled into the enormously prolonged and complex efforts to make classical literature serve the Church, in which context it really did speak of celestial love. Some readers may even have seen analogues to the Prioress's brooch: a thirteenth-century ring, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, contains the inscription "Ave Maria . . . Amor Vinci[t] O[m]nia."[112] But Chaucer probably knew the phrase best (and in the *Prologue*'s word order) from *Le Roman de la Rose,* a more satirical or cynical version of the Virgilian original.[113] Focused as we have been since Lowes on defining exactly what kind of *Amor* the bracelet names—which discourse, if any, emerges from the clashing repetitions of the

[110] Virgil, *Eclogue* X, 69. The addressee of the tenth *Eclogue,* Gallus, was an important military leader in the Civil Wars. Andrew, *Variorum General Prologue,* Commentary, p. 167, cites Leigh Hunt's mistaken attribution of the phrase to Ovid.

[111] John Livingston Lowes, *Convention and Revolt in Poetry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), p. 66. See also the discussion in Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales:* "'Amor vincit omnia,' reads the Prioress's brooch, and it would be a foolhardy critic who could say definitively what the words refer to, or what the pilgrim Chaucer who records them thinks they mean, or what the poet Chaucer wants us to think the Prioress thinks they mean" (p. 29).

[112] Hodges's *Chaucer and Clothing,* pp. 103–8, discusses the ring as evidence of the appropriately religious function of the brooch and its motto—including its appearance in Latin rather than a vernacular language—to balance the perhaps overly secular readings now common. To invoke one more strand of language in the passage, John Block Friedman, "The Prioress's Beads 'Of Small Coral,'" *MÆ* 39 (1970): 301–5, notes that coral was believed to act as a defense against demons.

[113] *Le Roman de la Rose,* ed. Félix Lecoy (Paris: Champion, 1982), vol. 3, lines 21,299–303, reinforces the military context already invoked in Virgil's language: Venus's flaming brand has already scattered the defenders of the castle and made possible the liberation of Bel Acueill, whose permission to pluck the rose is being sought before Cortaisie speaks the words "Amors vaint tout . . . et nous la devons recevoir," citing Virgil as source.

phrase—we may overemphasize the Prioress's ignorance about the meaning of her brooch, thereby suggesting a bit smugly that we know exactly what it means. We might rather recognize a hopelessly vain belief that she—or we—can control its inevitably multifaceted meaning.

More unanchored meaning appears quite clearly in the discussion of her famous countenance:

> But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;
> It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe;
> For, hardily, she was nat undergrowe.
> (154–56)

The standard understanding of these lines has been that the Prioress has a forehead some eight or nine inches wide. The dominant view appears to be that Madame Eglentyne was obese, but readers have also taken the phrase "nat undergrowe" to mean that the Prioress is extremely tall, or—among some male readers—that she has strikingly large breasts.[114] This is the kind of reading that almost makes Pearsall's argument for him: quite clearly, readers have imagined "nat undergrowe" in terms that suit their own not-very-subtle fancies, despite the absence of decisive textual evidence. The simple multiplicity of ways that "nat undergrowe" can be understood should weaken our certainty that any one of them must be right. Moreover, there is good evidence, never challenged, that the phrase "a spanne brood" must mean "three to four inches high."[115] These lines forge an impression that what is in fact a fairly ordinary forehead is a synecdoche for a body that is—must be—*somehow* extravagant. The narrative prods our imaginations about the parameters

[114] Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales,* argues that "'Nat undergrowe' cannot, in this context, mean 'well-proportioned'. . . . The Prioress is a *large* woman" (p. 38). Obesity in the Prioress has been in question since the 1930s: for a recent argument, see Chauncey Wood, "Chaucer's Use of Signs in His Portrait of the Prioress," in *Signs and Symbols in Chaucer's Poetry,* ed. John P. Hermann and John J. Burke (University: University of Alabama Press, 1981), pp. 81–101, esp. 95–97. Among those reading "nat undergrowe" as indicating a sexually desirable shapeliness are James Winny, ed., *The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 89; E. T. Donaldson, ed., *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader,* 2nd ed. (New York: Ronald Press, 1975), p. 1044; Bowden, *A Commentary on the General Prologue,* p. 95; and Friedman, "The Prioress's Beads," p. 301.

[115] I quote from the never-rebutted article by Stephen Knight, "'Almoost a spanne brood,'" *Neophil* 52 (1968): 178–80 (see 179), which I have endorsed in "The Prioress's Fair Forehead," *ChauR* 42 (2007): 101–11.

of Eglentyne's body—and so traps us into thinking of her primarily *as* a (female) body.

A similar narrative two-step characterizes the description of the Prioress's "conscience," which certainly augments an impulse to find her culpable:

> Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde
> With rosted flessh, or milk and wastel-breed.
> But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,
> Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte.
> (146–49)

The indulgence of her dogs is one of the Prioress's most evident weaknesses, and not even Pearsall defends it. But looking back a few lines, we can see that the narrative has again set us up to read the Prioress's canine sympathies in the harshest possible light:

> But for to speken of hire conscience,
> She was so charitable and so pitous
> She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous
> Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.
> (142–45)

We are the more ready to see her misplaced priorities with the dogs because we have already seen her tears spent on animals universally regarded as pests. But like the comment about the Clerk's books, this one is essentially rhetorical; it presents not a fact but an image of the Prioress's pity chosen to communicate a judgment about her sentiment. Not incidentally, that simile is the most effective setup possible for the agent's comments about her hounds, about whose treatment he professes more certain knowledge.

The hypothetical nature of the narrative comments on mice does not make indulging the dogs any less culpable; I just want to correct a surprisingly strong tendency to read the hypothetical image as reported fact. We have been told that "it is the suffering of a mouse which calls forth her sympathy," that "she wept when she saw a dead mouse and coddled her little dogs," that she "weeps out of charity and pity when she sees mice caught in traps," and that she reserved her sympathy for "a trapped mouse or a chastised pet" as if the two statements existed in

parallel.[116] Once again, the rhetoric whets our appetite for additional, more factual details to support the censorious attitude already evoked. Readers indulge in the cheap moralization chastised by Pearsall because the narrative amply encourages us to do so. Here perhaps more clearly than anywhere else, all three of the critics whom I cited earlier are correct. The Prioress is clearly at fault for keeping those well-fed dogs, *and* readers have been excessively censorious in generalizing that *culpa* into a lifestyle of indulging animals, *and* the narrative agent's hatchet has been at work clearing a broad path for such readers.

That pattern of putting the conclusion before the evidence matters in surprising ways to the narrator's early summary of the Prioress's character:

> sikerly she was of greet desport,
> And ful plesaunt, and amyable of port,
> And peyned hire to countrefete cheere
> Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,
> And to ben holden digne of reverence.
> (137–41)

As Phillips notes, we see in these lines "someone who has mastered the difficult social skills required of a woman in a position of authority, as a prioress was."[117] We also see undeniably that her mastery is skewed by the narrator's emphasis on the struggle with which it has been attained: the verbs "peyned," "countrefete," and "been holden" all suggest an unseemly class striving in the Prioress: "A Prioress who counterfeits courtly behavior becomes a counterfeit nun."[118] But let me explore for a moment how the counterargument—one of those arguments I do not actually want to make—would go. The *MED* cites this passage in its definitions of both "peynen" and "countrefeten," but in both cases em-

[116] Respectively: Bowden, *A Commentary on the General Prologue,* p. 99 (a reading called "highly influential" in Andrew's *Variorum* commentary); John Fisher, "Embarrassment of Riches," *College Language Association Journal* 7 (1963): 1–12 (2–3); Larry Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity: Inconclusiveness and Narrative Form in Chaucer's Poetry* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), p. 105; Phyllis Hodgson, ed., *Chaucer: General Prologue, The Canterbury Tales* (London: Athlone Press, 1969), p. 81. More subtly, Donaldson suggests that the Prioress's conscience "proves no more substantial than the little mouse caught in a trap that so arouses the Prioress' charity, pity, and tears" ("Adventures with the Adversative Conjunction," p. 361).

[117] Phillips, *Introduction to the Canterbury Tales,* p. 39.

[118] Wood, "Chaucer's Use of Signs," p. 92.

ploys it to illustrate a lesser degree of criticism: it suggests reading *peyned* to mean that the Prioress exerted herself, but without overreaching; *contrefete* is taken to mean the simple following of a pattern of behavior rather than passing one's self off as something false. Of course, the *MED*'s entries no more exonerate the Prioress than the fact that the Clerk praises Grisilde by calling her "So benigne and so digne of reverence" (IV.411): the difference between being worthy of respect and striving to achieve that sort of reputation will not, and should not, long escape the reader. The Prioress is praised with a series of damns that become much less faint with repetition. By itself, any one of those terms might escape commentary: it is the narrative agent's choice to iterate those verbs that generates our ability, our willingness—perhaps our need?—to read the kind of positive social skills delineated by Phillips as a sign of the Prioress's bad behavior.

The manner in which those skills are undercut raises a further complication: the Prioress's effort "to countrefete cheere / Of court" sums up not her exercise of authority in the convent but her table manners, and anyone who has completed a first class in Chaucer knows that her table manners are borrowed from the monologue of La Vieille in the *Roman de la Rose.*[119] This passage, with its brilliant hybridization of Jean de Meun's language with his own, has always flown under the critical radar, despite the fact that such language is so foreign to the presumable concerns of a Prioress. Nothing quite so drastic is found anywhere else in the *Prologue.* Most readers, falling for this narratorial ploy, have blamed the Prioress for, to cite an extreme example, "studying, with the aid of the *Roman de la Rose,* how to play the courtly lady."[120] If the Prioress were, like the Friar, being hoist by the petard of her own words anticipating or confirming what the narrator "knows" about prioresses (or women generally), the hybrid structure would presumably work in just that way. But here we all too often condemn the Prioress for paying more attention to the cleanness of her lips than her soul, not because *she* has identified table etiquette as the center of her spiritual life, but because the narrative agent describes her in terms borrowed from Geoffrey Chaucer's favorite poem. For generations, readers have understood the Prioress's values, or rather foibles, in the completely external terms defined by the Chaucerian narrator's invocation of Jean de Meun.

[119] *Sources and Analogues,* ed. Correale and Hamel, 1:15–18.

[120] Hope Phyllis Weissman, "Antifeminism and Chaucer's Characterization of Women," in *Geoffrey Chaucer: A Collection of Original Articles,* ed. George D. Economou (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 93–110 (104).

And it's not just that the Prioress does not get the joke: she *cannot* get the joke. After all, "Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe" (126). Since, as Pearsall quite rightly notes, "It would of course be more of a moral criticism of the Prioress if she had worked hard to cultivate Parisian French, as a way of keeping up with the *haute monde*" (69), the point of this detail is initially obscure.[121] But anyone ignorant of "Frenssh of Parys" must also remain ignorant of the advice on table manners offered by Jean de Meun in his portion of the *Roman de la Rose.* Since Jean's poem is written in Parisian French, no one who had read it could be said to lack knowledge of that language.[122] When we learn that "Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe," we also learn—again well before we know why it should be important—that the Prioress has not, cannot have read, the *Roman.* That pointed assurance constitutes one of the narrative agent's nastier moves—a legerdemain nastier still for being uncommented on so long. It supports a Chaucerian agenda having nothing to do with articulating the Prioress's concerns. Instead, the poet has provided for the narrative agent a satiric voice-over, with Woody Allen's *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* as analogue.[123]

One further anomaly about the portrait of the Prioress points explicitly toward an argument I actually do want to make. The first-person singular pronoun "I" appears in the portrait section of the *Prologue* fifteen times; of these, twelve exemplify what has been called "epistemological I" by introducing a clause indicating the parameters of the narrative's knowledge: "I gesse," "I trowe," "I saugh," "I undertake," "I woot," and so on.[124] Only one portrait—that of the Prioress—contains more than one occurrence of epistemological I. More pointedly, the epistemological use of "I" reaches a self-reflective peak here: "Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war" (157). The narrator's awareness of his awareness of the Prioress retrospectively warns us that we should have been more aware of his awareness of her; more specifically, we should

[121] Pearsall, *Canterbury Tales,* p. 69

[122] Jean was associated with the University of Paris through much of his life and wrote his portion of the *Roman* "selonc le langage de France" (line 10,613), which is the Parisian dialect of the Île de France.

[123] Donald Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), notes a similar connivance in the Pardoner's Prologue, by which that unsavory character creates an alliance with his audience (including us) and against the fools who are taken in by his chicanery (p. 350).

[124] Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators,* also calls such pronouns "epistemological," but he does not discuss line I.157 (p. 100).

all along have been considering how the narrative agenda skews our perceptions of the Prioress. When we do, we will quickly note the scant reliance in this part of his narration on the two sources that contribute so much to his other portraits. This pilgrim's voice barely registers: we hear the oath she swore but not what her oath affirmed. And estates discourse, while it does contribute to the passage on the dogs, for example, still plays a much smaller role than other textual voices like the *Roman de la Rose* and the attenuated citation of Virgil on the brooch, both of which import highly gendered attitudes into the portrait.

Because the narrative agent so substantially limits what we know about the Prioress, we never do know as much about her as we think. What Donaldson has well expressed—"many of our sympathetic responses to her are actually responses to the narrator's manipulation of her and of us"—is also true of our unsympathetic responses.[125] The bits that we do know have fostered the basic critical approaches to her character, which therefore have a degree of validity. But the gaps in our knowledge created by the narrative obtrusions reveal a hermeneutic circle. The portrait does satirize the Prioress's behavior: Cooper. But contradictory premises in that satire have implicated readers in its terms, leaving us too eager to display moral superiority: Pearsall, *contra* Cooper. And many of those contradictions are best understood as the products of a Chaucerian agenda unwilling to countenance an independently successful woman: Phillips, *contra* Pearsall. That's who the Prioress might be—if it were not for those moral failings: Cooper, *contra* Phillips. In other portraits, I have argued that an insufficient attention to the narrator's persistent hybridization has often led us to read carefully orchestrated complexity as irresolvable ambiguity. The same hybrid technique, however, employed with less relevant textual material, does render the Prioress truly unknowable rather than merely ambiguous.[126]

[125] "Cressid False, Criseyde Untrue: An Ambiguity Revisited," in *Poetic Traditions of the English Renaissance,* ed. Maynard Mack and George de Forest Lord (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982): 67–83 (69). Like many of his critics, Donaldson links the narratorial treatment of Criseyde and the Prioress: see "Four Women of Style," in *Speaking of Chaucer,* pp. 46–64, at 59. Robert Hanning, "The Theme of Art and Life in Chaucer's Poetry," in *Geoffrey Chaucer: A Collection of Original Articles,* ed. Economou, pp. 15–36, concludes that "our attempt to find the real woman behind the [courtly] mask" cannot succeed (p. 32).

[126] Among other characters manipulated by their narrators, perhaps Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* is most suggestive: "Lolita" is the fictitious persona (the character's given name is Dolores) structured by and giving structure to the understanding of the novel's narrator.

Many readers, acknowledging her flaws and shortcomings as a nun, take the Prioress to be a woman who is temperamentally unsuited to a cloistered and meditative life.[127] Her faults become the perhaps inevitable result of a class system that encouraged convent life for women regardless of a religious vocation. The portrait of the Prioress (read that way) becomes much like the rest of the portraits (read that way): it criticizes the pilgrim's flaws even while finding something human in her that Chaucer—or is it the foolish persona?—can approve. But this portrait shows very little evidence of that typically genial persona. A genuine narratorial intolerance of the Prioress resonates much more strongly than any meaningful approbation of her, and that intolerance is built deeply into the structure of the portrait. There is no statement here, as there will be for the Monk, that the narrator thought *her* opinions good; we rather strikingly do not hear the Prioress's opinions. And so we have concluded, perhaps—but not surely—correctly, that she has no opinions worth our attention. The vacuum thus created fills itself with a narrative manipulation of our response to both her strengths and weaknesses of character. As a result, judgment depends more on the reader's tendencies to indulgence or censoriousness than on the Prioress's own accomplishments and failings. The author's decision to hybridize texts more relevant to the gender politics of his own agenda than to her life makes it impossible to consider her with the seriousness that would make genuine evaluation possible.

Conclusion

A. C. Spearing has warned us about the dangers of reading Chaucer anachronistically:

In the *Canterbury Tales,* Chaucer really was beginning a movement that would culminate in the nineteenth-century dramatic monologue and the twentieth-century fallible narrator, but he was *only* beginning it. The culmination of that movement as a comprehensive system was far out of sight in Chaucer's time, and must have been beyond what Chaucer could have imagined, and probably

[127] Famously, Donaldson, *Chaucer's Poetry* argues that "she is a complex of qualities that make a most attractive woman but do not make a woman into a nun" (p. 1044). George J. Englehardt asserts that "the Prioress has been thrust upon her convent . . . by the wealth or influence of her family." "The Ecclesiastical Pilgrims of the *Canterbury Tales:* A Study in Ethology," *Mediaeval Studies* 37 (1975): 287–315 (291). Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity,* suggests that the Prioress is "deficient both as a nun and as a courtly lady" (p. 106).

beyond what he would have wished for. We need to resist reading back into Chaucer's own work the full development, so familiar to us, that he couldn't have envisioned, and the systematic practice that he never aimed at.[128]

In one sense, my approach differs from Spearing's: his italicized "*only*" (like the suggestion that Chaucer would have found, say, *The Sound and the Fury* an unnerving read) emphasizes the ways in which Chaucer remains outside the tradition of novelistic narration as we know it, while I begin from an interest in the possibility that "Chaucer really was beginning" to blaze that trail by experimenting with a hybridized discourse very uncharacteristic of his own age but which has since become naturalized for readers by the practice of countless novelists.

In another sense, however, my argument complements Spearing's in suggesting that we should not expect the same kind of sophistication from Chaucer as from those later writers. Chaucer's experiments with hybrid discourse are interesting partly because the norms developed by writers in a realistic or modernistic mode—like the codified principles of free indirect discourse—did not exist for him. Indeed, codification, what Spearing calls "systematic practice," seems very much the wrong kind of interest for Chaucer studies. Even a quick perusal of *Sources and Analogues* teaches us both how varied the influences to which our author was sensitive were and how little constraint he generally felt in making use of those influences.

Little evidence suggests that "perfection," in either the etymological or common meaning of that noun, worried Chaucer greatly. The Chaucerian canon contains many unfinished poems, and Spearing has more recently argued that even great and polished poems like the *Troilus* are better understood as experiments than as perfectly accomplished examples of a later kind of art.[129] If "it is obvious that [Chaucer's] satiric manner required a sophistication not usually possessed in the Middle Ages," then it is also true that his was an idiosyncratic sophistication, one that later writers did not share.[130] An innovator as consistent and effective as Chaucer was cannot be unsophisticated (any more than a

[128] Spearing, "Textual Performance," p. 23. Owen, "Development of the Art," concurs that Chaucer "could have had, I think, only a partial vision of what his efforts were leading up to" (p. 117).

[129] Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity,* pp. 74–75.

[130] Rosemary Woolf, "Chaucer as Satirist" (1959), rpt. in *Art and Doctrine: Essays on Medieval Literature,* ed. Heather O'Donoghue (London: Hambledon Press, 1986), pp. 77–84, discussing the *General Prologue* on p. 83.

Collector of Customs can be naive), but it is folly to expect him to be sophisticated in the ways we most readily expect.

The pervasive, determined combination of a wide range of discourses within the narrative constitutes Chaucer's principal innovation in the *Prologue,* the source of its distinctive sophistication (the etymological sense of that word is also at work). The overall success of that experiment has long been apparent, and our sense of its most striking examples—the Monk and Friar, for example—has very consistently depended on a sure if somewhat inarticulate recognition of the poet's ability to choreograph that variety of discourses into a satirical effect. The Clerk, Guildsmen, and Parson (and many others) are limned using much the same strategy, even if to a less spectacular, and frequently less satirical, end. We should note that the Prioress, too, demonstrates brilliance of technique, even if the ultimate effect in that portrait—the first first-estate pilgrim to be described becomes perhaps the least consequential member of the company—has led many readers to disapprove of this portrait, however great its technical mastery. In rejecting on ideological grounds what the poet has done, those readers exhibit a frequently invoked and wholly valid critical response. What matters is that we distinguish principled objection to what the poet has successfully carried out from the judgment that the poet has failed, or not done his task well, or has actually been trying to do something else: we need to be honest about our responses, and need to be clear which one we are making.[131] And finally, we cannot be surprised that Chaucer's experiments do occasionally fail. That an uncoordinated narrative agenda leaves the Sergeant (and perhaps others) an ambiguous figure ought not to startle readers of Chaucer; nor would I suggest that the incompleteness, the imperfection of that portrait, wholly negates what it accomplishes. At least it avoids that potential for "certain disaster" inherent in the *Prologue*'s plan, a disaster averted (as Pearsall continues) by consistently varying the technique from portrait to portrait.[132] Malcolm Andrew comes to a parallel conclusion, noting how methods of elucidation helpful at one point in the *Prologue* often prove to be inappropriate or unhelpful when applied more generally: "If we acknowledge that Chaucer's technique is not only subtle and elusive but also complex and vari-

[131] Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity,* frequently disparages critical readings in which he perceives the rejection of the content of a poem disguised as an attempt to unmask or ironize a fallible narrative persona: pp. 98–99, 113–16, 148–49, 202–5.

[132] Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales,* pp. 57–60.

ous, then we may be able to proceed to the recognition that each of these approaches is valid—though not absolutely or exclusively so."[133] Andrew cites Manly and D. W. Robertson Jr. as exemplifying the partially but not "absolutely" valid approaches of "contextualizing" and "moral commentary," respectively; contrarily, he cites Mann as exemplary in avoiding the fault of an "exclusive" approach.[134] In my reading, Mann's unstated assumption (picked up and stated, as I have noted, by other critics) that the *Prologue* can be read as an estates satire is another form of such contextualization, and the contention of various critics that any invocation of voice entails equivocation becomes as categorical as an insistence that all medieval texts promote *caritas.* Seduced by their historical and theoretical contexts into occasional but influential overstatement about the ambiguity created by complexity of discourse in the *Prologue,* some of our best scholars privilege what Andrew calls "a literal interpretation often based on tenuous reasoning while simultaneously demoting (implicitly or explicitly) what would otherwise be seen as clear (if by its very nature, unspecific) symbolic or 'poetic' meaning."[135]

The example of Dante (for all his poetic difference from Chaucer) suggests how we might extend Andrew's insight. The cantos of the *Comedy* are famously unique, each deliberately developed with imagistic and stylistic techniques that distinguish it from its neighbors: the Dantean narrative agent has defined a distinctive technique for each unit. So too the *General Prologue* portraits draw on various sources of information about the pilgrims, and develop those sources in different directions, also under the influence of distinctive narrative purposes. Dantists habitually read the cantos in isolation, as texts with distinctive rules and procedures. I have similarly urged that we must recognize the idiosyncratic design of each portrait to read it effectively. We can benefit from thinking of the portraits as such meaningfully juxtaposed but essentially distinct units even more fully than we already do.

[133] Malcolm Andrew, "Context and Judgment in the *General Prologue,*" *ChauR* 23 (1989): 316–37 (331–32).

[134] Ibid., pp. 321–28.

[135] Ibid., p. 324. The ability of scholars to trace in the *Prologue* resemblances to other expressions of medieval culture also encourages my sense that we are mistaken to read it as an estates satire. See, e.g., John Ganim, "The Literary Uses of the New History," in *The Idea of Medieval Literature: New Essays on Chaucer and Medieval Culture in Honor of Donald R. Howard,* ed. James M. Dean and Christian K. Zacher (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 209–26, who usefully asks "What happens if we think of the form of the General Prologue as akin to the ridings, processions, and entries that march through late medieval and early modern cities with so much regularity?" (p. 222).