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# THE FUNCTION OF PITY IN THREE CANTERBURY TALES

by Wendy Harding

*Pity* is an important word in Chaucer's lexicon,<sup>1</sup> and the history of its reception illustrates how the poet's evocations of this emotion were duly remarked and admired by early readers. But over the past two centuries, readers have favored Chaucer's humor and irony while finding his pathos almost an embarrassment. Recently though, interest in Chaucer's art of pathos has revived, as scholars take up the challenge of understanding texts that are quite alien to contemporary literary aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> Robert Worth Frank's recent study of pathos in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* acknowledges the demands that these works make "on a modern reader's historical sense and imaginative sympathies" and sees them as an introduction "to modes of thinking and feeling central to fourteenth-century experience."<sup>3</sup> Several critics have begun to investigate Chaucer's pathos in its historical context, particularly its relation to late medieval devotional practices.<sup>4</sup> Feminist scholars have also focused attention on Chaucer's work in this vein, mainly because women are frequently at the center of his tales of pity. Nonetheless, while critics are beginning once again to view pathos as an important element in Chaucer's work, opinion is divided over the way pity functions.

While some studies argue that Chaucer's pathos conforms to conventional social and religious categories, others view it as upsetting medieval hierarchies. Among the latter, Jill Mann views pity as a dynamic force, capable of "overtun(ing) and obliterate(ing) the relationship between conqueror and suppliant."<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Frank sees it as confirming traditional structures. He argues, for example, that each of the Monk's seventeen short narratives may have evoked a sense of pathos, because "in a culture so hierarchical, the spectacle of loss of power or fame or riches may have been radically threatening and distressing."<sup>6</sup> Thus, according to one view, pity is a response that depends on medieval hierarchies, while, according to the other, it upsets conventional power relationships. The very different conclusions of these two discerning Chaucerian scholars illustrate the complexity of the function of *pity* in Chaucer's poetry.

Chaucer's scenes of pity can be broadly understood as those which represent, and generally attempt to evoke, an affective response to spectacles of suffering. These scenes are usually focalized through the consciousness of either the narrator or a character whose own emotive response works to move the reader. Although pity has several consistent features,<sup>7</sup> it operates according to variables such as the gender and social standing of the characters involved or the secular or religious orientation of the tale. To illustrate the variability of Chaucerian pity, this essay will examine three of the *Canterbury Tales*: first, the *Knight's Tale*, which introduces *pity* to the *Canterbury Tales* by representing it in a wholly social context, with little reference to Christian doctrine; second, the *Clerk's Tale*, where Chaucer experiments with pathos in a tale that treats at the same time a social and a spiritual problematic; finally, the *Parson's Tale*, which offers an example of pathos in an exclusively devotional context. In different ways, all three deal with the role of pity in hierarchical relations. An analysis of the manner in which pity functions in these three tales will help account for the contradictions in critical responses to Chaucerian pathos.

In the *Knight's Tale*, the discourse of compassion is employed in two distinct contexts: the lover's appeal to his mistress and the subject's appeal to the ruler. These different relationships are expressed in similar terms because the discourse of love borrows from the codes belonging to relations between lord and vassal. It remains to be seen whether, in these dissimilar social contexts, the words describe a similar dynamic.

The first scene of pathos in the *Knight's Tale* represents an appeal from subjects to ruler. Theseus is the epitome of regal authority, returning as the conquering hero from his victory over the Amazons with his bride Ypolita, "In al his wele and in his mooste pride" (A 895).<sup>8</sup> Immediately a hierarchical relation is established between Theseus and the other significant actors in the scene, the Theban women who kneel in the road crying and lamenting. The asymmetry between the supplicated and the suppliant, realized spatially in terms of the distance between the mounted conqueror and the kneeling wives of the defeated Argives, is one of the recurring features in scenes of pathos. The pathos of the situation lies not so much in the women's wretchedness as in the fact that, like the central figures of the Monk's tragedies, they are victims of Fortune who have fallen from high estate: "For certes, lord, ther is noon of us alle / That she ne hath been a duchesse or a queene. / Now we be caytyves, as it is wel seene" (A 922-24).

Theseus's response to their appeal illustrates that pity involves interaction between people of differing status, but not necessarily the overturning of hierarchies, whether of gender or class. The conqueror descends from his horse and raises up the prostrate women, yet I would differ with Jill Mann's reading of this scene as an illustration of the conqueror's

"subjection to 'pitee' as a subjection to women" (Mann 173). Rather, Theseus's emotive response depends on the similarity in rank between himself and the women: "Hym thoghte that his herte wolde breke, / Whan he saugh hem so pitous and so maat, / That whilom weren of so greet estaat" (A 954–56). It would be anachronistic to assume that Theseus's ready display of feeling is to be seen as in any way feminine. In literary and historical representations, medieval men are just as capable as women of displaying extravagant grief.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the ruler's reaction is characteristically masculine. He swears, "as he was trewe knyght" (959), to take vengeance on Creon. What follows does not tangibly alter the situation of the women. Theseus defeats Creon, destroys the city, and thereby ensures the burials of both the unburied husbands and the newly dead. Far from altering the patriarchal order, Theseus's response perpetuates it. In going to war against those who have wronged the widows, he causes more deaths and augments the numbers of grieving women. Rather than effecting any radical change in the social hierarchy, Theseus's response causes the poem to circle back to replicate the opening scene. Once again Theseus is the victorious hero while the women wail and lament.

This first illustration of pity in the *Knight's Tale* reveals it to be a quality that humanizes relations between the dominant and the dominated in that it calls for a degree of personal interaction. Nonetheless, pity does not change the social order; it is a virtue that moves from high to low and not the inverse. Like rain, pity comes from above, as the women's plea to Theseus recognizes: "Som drope of pitee, thurgh thy gentillesse, / Upon us wrecched wommen lat thou falle" (A 920–21). Like rain, it can neither be predicted nor relied on, although its release can be aided by an appeal to some quality that the pitiable share with the pitier, in this particular case, high rank.

In a subsequent scene featuring Theseus and his retinue and the two Theban knights, Palamon and Arcite, we find variations on the dynamic analyzed above. While out hunting, Theseus discovers the two knights in a grove fighting over their respective claims to Emily. After hearing Palamon's account of their circumstances, Theseus responds as an implacable judge:

Youre owene mouth, by youre confessioun,  
Hath dampned yow, and I wol it recorde;  
It nedeth noght to pyne yow with the corde.  
Ye shal be deed, by myghty Mars the rede!

(A 1744–47).

As yet, the scene is not associated with the pathetic. The narrator describes the combat in the discourse of heroic action; for example, the two knights are compared to wild boars (A 1699). But once Theseus has condemned the knights to death, the tone changes. The queen, Emily, and all the

ladies begin to weep for pity of the condemned men. As in the opening scene, compassion is awakened by the discovery of shared experience. Like the two Theban knights, the Amazon women have suffered defeat at Theseus's hands. At the sight of the "bloody woundes wyde and soore" (1755), the women cry, "Have mercy, Lord, upon us wommen alle!" (1757). The personal pronoun in this appeal illustrates how the women conflate the young men's suffering with their own.

This scene introduces a new element in the functioning of pathos, as shared experience prompts the Amazon women to take on the role of mediators between the judge and the condemned. Their pity functions horizontally, inspired by a perceived similarity between themselves and the suffering knights. This action temporarily blurs gender differences as the Amazons conflate the roles of woman and defeated warrior. Female sexuality is associated to wounded masculinity, a suggestion that is reinforced by Emily's subsequent vision in Diana's temple of the bleeding firebrand that predicts her future as a wife (2340).<sup>10</sup> The feminine function of mediatrix depicted in this scene depends on women's subordinate social role.<sup>11</sup> The mediatrix has no power to decide; she can only assume the role of suppliant and attempt to influence the one who possesses the authority.<sup>12</sup>

The women's intercession overturns the judge's decision, but can we also claim that it overturns the social hierarchy? Theseus shows mercy to the knights, finding common ground with them in recalling his former role as lover. But, while acknowledging his sympathy with Emily's would-be suitors and, like a confessor, forgiving them their "trespaas" (A 1813–18), Theseus does not upset the social order. The ruler's pity prompts him to issue imperial mandates that address the appeals of his subjects. He offers a peace treaty exacting a unilateral agreement that the knights will not make war on his country. Then, speaking "for my suster Emelye" (A 1833), as the man who by virtue of conquest and familial ties has the power and the right to dispose of her, Theseus describes the terms of another, larger scale battle to decide which of the cousins will claim the prize. The term he uses, "to darreyne hire by bataille" (A 1853), repeats exactly the words the two men had earlier applied to Emily. In both this scene and the similar one preceding it, Theseus's mercy does nothing to disturb the military, patriarchal order he represents. In fact, it restores the gender hierarchy by promising to restore the relationship between the knights and the Amazons to a vertical axis. The weaker of the two suitors will be eliminated and the victor will become Emily's husband.

But if Theseus's mercy fails to change the social order, it nonetheless makes it seem less brutal. Although his authority is not diminished by an atom, Theseus seems a less distant monarch because he responds to appeals for mercy. Pity creates an illusion of parity. The hierarchical relationship between those bestowing pity and those demanding it

remains unchanged, although, as Jill Mann points out, the word *pitous* applies to both.<sup>13</sup> In fact this semantic contradiction in the same word draws attention to a contradiction in the social order: the powerful are in a position to dispense mercy, while the only legitimate recourse of the disempowered is to evoke compassion. The lexical link that pity establishes between those who command and those who obey points to the ideological function of the concept.

The social utility of this illusion of equality between ruler and subject is seen in Theseus's speech on necessity, delivered in the interest of solidifying the alliance between Thebes and Athens through the marriage of Palamon and Emily. After describing the inevitable progression of life from its origins to its end, Theseus concludes by advocating the virtue of resignation to this divinely ordained order:

"Thanne is it wysdom, as it thynketh me,  
To maken vertue of necessitee,  
And take it weel that we may nat eschue,  
And namely that to us alle is due.  
And whoso gruccheth ought, he dooth folye,  
And rebel is to hym that al may gye."

(A 3041–46)

Theseus uses the first person plural to speak of those who are subject to necessity. But the implication of equality in the collective pronoun, of horizontal links between men and women, is limited to the observation that all are mortal and all are subject to the Prime Mover. The choice of the pronoun "we" in line 3043 seems to place the monarch at the same level as the subject, whereas, in fact, all take their place in a hierarchy, as the shift to the third person singular in line 3045 suggests. Indeed, the vertical order of society is represented as a product of God's providential design. Theseus's evocation of necessity elides the difference between rebelling against the monarch and rebelling against God. In fact, ideas of kingship in medieval society permit this equation. The King is God's appointee on earth, anointed like the biblical King David in the coronation ceremony. The monarch assures the link between the people and the deity, acting as God's representative on earth to assure justice, peace, and prosperity in the kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

*Pity* is invoked to a rather different purpose when Theseus employs the language of courtly love in asking Emily to show her "wommanly pitee" to Palamon (A 3083). Here this discourse seems to place Emily in a position of power in relation to her suppliant lover. But rather than allowing her any significant power, this appeal for pity offers the woman a graceful way to submit to the imperial will. In the discourse of courtly love employed in the *Knight's Tale*, pity makes patriarchal rule more acceptable in allowing

men and women to play at reversing power relationships.<sup>15</sup> Once Emily takes a turn at the role of superior and shows pity to her suitor, she will place herself in the subordinate role of wife.

Pity reinforces hierarchies in the *Knight's Tale* by representing them as instituted by human consent and human nature. As Gray has observed in analyzing the discourse of courtly love: "*pit  * may imply a giving of one's self, a generous self-sacrifice, an emotion which is both intensely human, an expression of benevolence and nobility of soul, and which is related to spiritual qualities of charity and mercy. It is a natural expression of that noble love which overflows from the 'gentle heart' and which is a 'shadow' of the cosmic love binding together the universe."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Theseus's speech on necessity represents the world in these idealistic terms, as held together by "that faire cheyne of love" (A 2991). This image is telling, for it represents the social hierarchy oxymoronically as a voluntary constraint. Indeed, power is that much more effective when it is felt to be willingly accorded. Like *pity*, love in relations between men and women or ruler and subject compensates for the rigor of the law, thereby resolving contradictions in the social order. Chaucer's poetry of compassion thus brings the conflicts depicted the *Knight's Tale* to a satisfying conclusion without significantly disturbing the hierarchies from which they arise.

Turning to the *Clerk's Tale*, we confront a work in which the operation of human and divine power does not mesh as easily as in the *Knight's Tale*. On the literal level the story portrays a wife and feudal vassal whose loyalty is relentlessly tried by her husband and lord. In addition, the Clerk insists that the tale is to be understood as an allegory of God's testing of the soul and as an exemplum of the patient endurance required of all Christians. But in Chaucer's version of the story of Walter and Griselda, this dual orientation is problematic. Rather than putting the human order in synchrony with the divine, the tale's pathos arises from the disjunction between the two orders. As Elizabeth Salter has memorably argued: "The Tale is constantly pulled in two directions, and . . . the human sympathies so powerfully evoked by the sight of unmerited suffering form, ultimately, a barrier to total acceptance of the work in its original function."<sup>17</sup> Salter attributes the tale's moral confusion to the realistic details Chaucer adds in order to heighten Griselda's pathos: "Viewed as a human document, the Tale is cruel, unnatural and unconvincing, and it is just this 'human view' which is irresistible to Chaucer, and which urges him to dramatise and then criticise what he has created."<sup>18</sup> This argument is appealing, but it creates the impression the work escapes Chaucer's control, that his own emotional engagement fractures the poem. On the contrary, I would argue that the sense of incongruity between the literal and the figurative levels of the *Clerk's Tale* is Chaucer's most original contribution to the Griselda story.<sup>19</sup>

On the human level, as many critics have objected, the relationship between Walter and Griselda is untenable. Nothing in Griselda's behavior ever justifies the severity of Walter's tests, so readers are left to guess as to his motives. Nevertheless, if we examine the progression of narrative episodes, an interesting pattern appears. There is a mirroring in the interactions between Walter and his vassals and Walter and Griselda that centers on the dynamics of power and pity. In the opening scene of the tale Walter's people present him with a request. They use the language of pathos—"we with pitous herte unto yow pleyne" (E 97): "Delivere us out of al this bisy drede" (E 134)—yet they do not so much seek an improvement in their own situation as an alteration in their lord's. The people argue that their continued security depends on the marquis supplying them with an heir; they exert pressure on their lord by invoking their feudal contract. As well as being a conventional gesture of appeal, their kneeling to Walter recalls the ceremony in which the vassal pledges allegiance to the lord. Their demand that he wed is ambiguously both servile and aggressive, in recognizing both his authority and his obligation: "Boweth youre nekke under that blisful yok / Of soveraynetee, noght of servyse" (E 113–14). Though not in any way altering their social position, the people's use of the semiology of pathos aids their attempt to constrain their lord's actions and at the same time rest within the bounds of decorum. The people's piteous appeal in fact masks their assertion of power. Although he has no wish to change his status, Walter is unable to find fault with their request.

Walter reasserts his authority by imposing conditions upon his acceptance. Like Theseus, the marquis invokes divine order in support of his own design and demands that his people trust in him as he trusts in God (E 159–63). This stipulation is a subtle reminder of the social hierarchy. Unless the people recognize his authority by accepting his choice without so much as a murmur, the agreement will be annulled. Yet the fact remains that Walter is not free to decide whether or not he will marry. The discourses of *pity* on the one hand, and of the divinely ordained order of society on the other, serve to make the constraints of the feudal system livable for both lord and subject.

This uneasy negotiation of power in the first part of the tale prepares for the conditions Walter imposes on Griselda. The marriage contract formulated by Walter gives him absolute power, thereby rendering impossible the replication of the subtle struggle of wills witnessed in his confrontation with the populace:

"I seye this: be ye redy with good herte  
 To al my lust, and that I frely may,  
 As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,  
 And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?"



And eek whan I sey 'ye,' ne say nat 'nay,'  
 Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?  
 Swere this, and heere I swere oure alliance."  
 (E 351-57)

Missing from this formulation is the idea of mutual consideration normally at work in contracts between man and wife or lord and vassal. In claiming unlimited mastery over his wife Walter exaggerates the vertical gap between ruler and ruled to grotesque limits. He dispenses with the illusion of parity normally provided by the discourse of *pity* in the lover's wooing of his lady or in the lord's relation with his vassal.

The series of outrageous tests that follow represent Walter's attempt to discover the extent of his own power, as defined in the brutally lop-sided marriage contract. To test Griselda's limits and, thereby, the limits of his own power denuded of any pretense of reciprocity, Walter willfully resists the moral pressure to act mercifully toward his subordinates. He represents the terrifying spectacle of justice deprived of mercy, of absolute and arbitrary power unadorned by pity. However, although Walter chooses not to display the pity appropriate to his status, the narrator assumes this function, providing an affective response to Griselda's suffering and reminding readers of the mercy needed to make the social hierarchy morally acceptable.

In social terms, Griselda's suffering makes no sense; her acceptance of Walter's will is so absolute that it has been described as terrifying, even surreal.<sup>20</sup> But Giselda's pathos has another, figurative significance that gives meaning to her suffering. In continuing to act according to her idea of what is right, professing love in the face of tyranny, Griselda demonstrates the self-sacrificing endurance of the saint or martyr. Textual allusions such as the references to a lamb (539), an ox-stall (207),<sup>21</sup> and one who goes naked "lyk a worm" (880),<sup>22</sup> valorize Griselda's behavior by linking her to Christ. The problem is that, unlike Christ, the saints, or the martyrs, the order she upholds is that of the tyrant himself, not of an alternative authority. This is one of the most painful contradictions of the *Clerk's Tale*. Chaucer portrays Walter in such a way that he seems to embody human injustice, until, at the end of the tale, as the "benign father" who restores everything he has taken from Griselda, he appears in a new light as a figure of divine benevolence. On the one hand, then, the *Clerk's Tale* can be seen as a negative exemplum, illustrating the horror of power when it is deprived of the mitigating force of pity. On the other hand, rather than demanding rebellion against tyranny, the tale finally valorizes acceptance and endurance, promising that in the divine scheme of reward and punishment, justice will prevail.

Pity in the *Knight's Tale* takes the form of mercy dispensed from above. Operating in this way, it mitigates the rigor of justice and thereby, para-

doxically, justifies inequalities in the social order. The pathetic spectacle of Griselda's suffering in the *Clerk's Tale* also upholds social inequalities because her endurance is made to seem admirable. But at the same time, Walter's unjust rule is called into question, for in response to his refusal to demonstrate mercy, the narrator demands pity for the heroine. In Chaucer's rendering of the tale, readers are made to feel the difficulties of submitting to an unjust regime and our sympathies are aroused against tyranny. Acceptance is rewarded at the end of the tale, but, in telling of the marriage of Walter's son, Chaucer's narrator includes a warning against the imitation of tyranny: "Al putte he nat his wyf in greet assay. / This world is nat so strong, it is no nay, / As it hath been in olde tymes yooore" (E 1138–40). This comment, absent from Chaucer's Latin and French sources,<sup>23</sup> recognizes the strain that Walter's rigor places on social ties. Here the narrator evokes the Golden Age as described, for example, in Chaucer's poem, "The Former Age." At the same time, he characterizes pity as appropriate to the softer world of contemporary experience.

The function of pity is more ambivalent in the *Clerk's Tale* than in the *Knight's Tale*, for when it shifts from a dynamic operating between characters to a dynamic involving narrator and reader, it draws attention to social inequality. Nevertheless, rather than demanding political change, the narrator asks for empathy. Compensation for innocent suffering is shown to be the prerogative of a more perfect, divine justice. In fact, in Chaucer's representation of pathos, contradictions in the social order can only be resolved through transcendence of the social order.

The different images of pity found in the *Canterbury Tales* come together in the multifaceted representation of God found in the first section of the *Parson's Tale*. In analyzing the representation of divinity I will pay special attention to passages that are additions to Pennaforte's *Summa de poenitentia*, Chaucer's principal source. As Thomas Bestul has argued, these additions update the penitential treatise, rendering it "more consonant with contemporary tastes and more suitable for the requirements of the private devotional reading that was coming increasingly into vogue."<sup>24</sup> The representation most immediately relevant to a study of Chaucer's pathos is of "the passioun that oure Lord Jhesu Crist suffred for oure synnes" (I 255), which is given as one of the causes for Contrition. In this meditation on Christ's suffering, we find a paradoxical image of divinity: Christ is represented as weeping "for pitee of good peple" (I 256) and, at the same time, requiring the reader's pity "in remembrance" of his suffering (I 254). To solicit pity, the narrator describes Christ's passion in a series of anaphoric phrases: "Thanne was he byscorned, that oonly sholde han been honoured in alle thynges and of alle thynges. / Thanne was his visage, that oghte be desired to be seyn of al mankynde, in which visage aungels desiren to looke, vileynsly bispet. / Thanne was he scourged, that

no thyng hadde agilt; and finally, Thanne was he crucified and slayn" (I 278–80). We can remark a series of reversals operating in this portrait. The first, seen in the opposition between "by scorned" and "honoured," recalls a feature of pathos already seen in Frank's comment on the *Monk's Tale* and noted in the representation of the Theban women: the focus on the victim's loss of status. The Parson's text magnifies the medieval reader's sense of discomfort at the spectacle of a precipitous decline in social standing, for the victim of ignominy is the noblest and holiest of men, the Lord of all creation. But unlike the falls recounted in the *Monk's Tale*, Christ's loss of status is due to no fault of his own, but to a reversal of justice signalled by the modal, "sholde han been honoured," and confirmed by the phrase "that no thyng hadde agilt." Christ thereby takes on another feature belonging to the *pitous*; like Griselda, he is the innocent victim of injustice. Moreover, the text represents another reversal that feminist critics have noticed in considering representations of the Passion in general,<sup>25</sup> the suffering Christ is feminized. As a wounded, passive victim, Christ assumes a role culturally associated with women, as we saw above in the Amazons' identification with Palamon and Arcite. In addition, the Parson's reference to the desirability of Christ's face seems to blur the boundaries between masculine and feminine. This portrayal of Christ evokes pathos and at the same time confounds the cultural hierarchies that pity depends on.

The apparent instability of values applies not only to the portrait of Christ, but also to the role of the reader in the text. Because of the failure of human justice, we are invited to distinguish ourselves from Christ's benighted executioners in recognizing the victim's divinity. But the recognition of Christ's godhead can do nothing to redress the values that have been overturned because readers are themselves responsible for the inversion: "And ye shul understonde that in mannes synne is every manere of ordre or ordinance turned up-so-down" (I 259). Thus, the *Parson's Tale* implicates readers in the pathetic spectacle in conflicting ways, evoking a sense of personal guilt as well as compassion. Christ's suffering is attributed not to the malice of his torturers, but to mankind collectively: "Now sith that Jhesu Crist took upon hymself the payne of alle oure wikkednesses, muchel oghte synful man wepen and biwayle, that for his synnes Goddes sone of hevene sholde al this payne endure" (282). Since Christ suffers in our place, we are told to weep not for him but for our own sins that cause his pains. The first person plural pronoun in "oure wikkednesses," characterizes readers as sinners, insisting on their heavy burden of obligation to the suffering God. The text thus casts readers in the dual roles of the pitying and the pitiable that are kept separate in the representations of pity examined in the other two tales.

We have already observed instability in the categories of social status

and gender and in the roles assigned readers in this text. A third aspect of the text's conflation of normally distinct roles is found in its representation of divinity. The evocation of the debt owed by mankind to Christ leads, not incidentally, to a different representation of his divinity in the same text. Along with the spectacle of God as sacrificial victim, readers are asked to consider Christ as a bountiful king who will reward man for his good works (283): "And for as much as Jhesu Crist yeveth us these thynges of his largesse and of his sovereyn bountee, therefore is he cleped *Jhesus Nazarenus rex Judeorum*" (284). Readers must therefore imagine a paradoxical God, at once abject victim and glorious king. Moreover, the first section of the treatise invokes yet another image, the spectre of Christ in Judgment, as he appears at the Apocalypse. The Parson conjures up a fearful scene in which the sinner's appeals to the lord for grace and mercy are of no avail: "The wratthe of God ne wol nat spare no wight, for preyere ne for yifte"; and therefore, at the day of doom there nys noon hope to escape. / Wherefore, as seith Seint Anselm, 'Ful greet angwyssh shul the synful folk have at that tyme; / ther shal the stierne and wrothe juge sitte above, and under hym the horrible pit of helle open to destroyen hym that moot bi-knowen his synnes" (168-70).<sup>26</sup> In portraying here the ugliness of sin, the terrors of hell, and the spectre of a judge without mercy, the Parson employs shock tactics to move readers. Insofar as readers recognize themselves as sinners, they are to imagine themselves in the role of victim and to be moved to pity and terror for their own suffering. But whereas the spectacle of punishment without mercy may seem unjust, here God's right to punish cannot be questioned. As portrayed in the *Parson's Tale*, God resolves all the contradictions observed in other representations of pity. The implacable judge, the suffering victim, and the merciful ruler are one and the same, and these normally mutually exclusive roles are justified by mankind's guilt.

The *Parson's Tale* brings together the whole range of contrasting images of pity and power found in the secular scenes of pathos from the *Knight's* and *Clerk's Tales*. In the evocation of Judgment Day, the angry and implacable Judge is opposed to the hapless condemned. In this final relation between Christ and sinners, the gap between the powerful and the pitiful is unbridgeable. More positively, Christ's other two personae establish links between God and man. Christ the King relates to mankind as a lord to his vassals. Christ crucified reverses this power dynamic, as his wounded, feminized body attracts the gaze and the compassion of the spectator. Yet though one is an inversion of the other, the two roles are interdependent, since Christ suffers in order to make possible his regal dispensation of grace and mercy. The terror aroused in readers by the image of God as implacable judge is assuaged by the contrasting images of the suffering and the merciful Lord. These different faces

of authority, kept distinct in the other two tales examined here, are reconciled in the *Parson's Tale* in a paradoxical version of divinity that resolves oppositions between God and humanity, lord and vassal, man and woman, judge and judged. From the perspective of the *Parson's Tale*, then, the contradictions observed in contemporary critical responses disappear. The multiple representations of Christ seem to uphold and dissolve medieval hierarchies at the same time.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study of Chaucer's various representations of *pity*. First, Chaucerian pathos derives from the rigidity of fourteenth-century social hierarchies. The *Knight's Tale* illustrates that suffering in and of itself does not provoke compassion, and consequently the pitiful have no power to effect change. In fact, *pity* renders social divisions acceptable by providing the oppressed with a discourse for interacting with the dominant. Moreover, as we see in the *Knight's Tale*, *pity* permits the asymmetrical operation of power by seeming to bring ruler and ruled closer together. Social inequalities are rendered more acceptable if the powerful show mercy toward the powerless. Hence, in the *Clerk's Tale*, the narrator appeals to readers to produce the response lacking in Walter, thereby calling into question the legitimacy of an authority without mercy. The *Clerk's Tale* advocates not only Christ-like endurance and humility for the weak but also God-like justice tempered with mercy for the powerful. The social body represented in the *Canterbury Tales* as divided by injustice and inequality is finally united in the *Parson's Tale* in the image of Christ that reconciles power and weakness, glory and humiliation, in one paradoxical icon.

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1. See Douglas Gray's Study, "Chaucer and 'Pite'," in J. R. R. Tolkien, *Scholar and Storyteller: Essays in Memoriam*, ed. Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (Ithaca, 1979), 173–203.

2. See, for example, Thomas H. Bestul, "The *Man of Law's Tale* and the Rhetorical Foundations of Chaucerian Pathos: *ChauR* 9 (1975): 216–26; Robert Worth Frank, Jr., "The *Canterbury Tales* III: Pathos," in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge, Engl., 1986), 143–58; Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London, 1991); *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, ed. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1990), passim.

3. Frank, 143.

4. See Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (London, 1972).

5. Mann, 172.

6. Frank, 149.

7. Wendy Harding, "Structure des modes pathétique et ironique dans le conte et le portrait de la Prieure des *Canterbury Tales*," *Bulletin des Anglistes Médiévistes* 43 (Summer, 1993): 726–40.

8. *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1987). All references to Chaucer's text are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

9. See, for example, the description of copious tears shed by all on the delivery of the crown of thorns to St. Louis's court: Jacques le Goff, *Saint Louis* (Paris, 1996). See also Froissart's description of the tearful response of the English lords, knights, and men-at-arms to the six burgers of Calais: Froissart, *Chronicles*, selected and translated by Geoffrey Brereton (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1968), 108.

10. This polysemous vision signifies the Amazon's sexual ambiguity and predicts the outcome of her love relations with both knights—the firebrand for Arcite's funeral pyre, the hymeneal blood for Emily's subsequent marriage to Palamon.

11. I take this to be a feminine function in late medieval culture because Mary is the archetype of the mediatrix.

12. We see this dynamic at work in Froissart's account of Queen Phillipa's appeal for mercy on behalf of the burgers of Calais. The dramatic suspense of this scene comes from Edward's prerogative to reject the appeal, as he has already rejected appeals from the knights and nobles. The pathetic spectacle of the pregnant queen humbling herself by kneeling before her husband is too touching to be ignored. (See Froissart, 108–09.)

13. Mann, 172.

14. See Le Goff, "Le Roi des Tres Fonctions," in *St. Louis*, 642–73.

15. The semantic fluidity of the term "pity" can be seen in Chaucer's repetition of the phrase, "pitee renneeth soone in gentil herte!" in very different contexts in the *Canterbury Tales*. First, it characterizes Theseus's magnanimity in responding to the Argive woman (A 1761); then in the *Merchant's Tale* (E 1986) it ironically describes May's "franchise" in consenting to commit adultery; and finally, in the *Squire's Tale* (F 479), the same phrase is used by the falcon to describe her yielding to the tercelet. In the first instance, as I have shown, power relations remain unchanged. In the second, May's situation remains ostensibly the same at the end of the tale except that she has managed to deceive her husband. In the third, the female falcon is very much the worse off for having taken pity on her suitor.

16. Gray, 176.

17. Elizabeth Salter, *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and the Clerk's Tale*, Studies in English Literature, 5 (London, 1962), 50.

18. *Ibid.*, 62.

19. Although my approach is different, I agree with Elizabeth Kirk, who suggests "that this conspicuous dislocation, so far from reflecting an oversight on Chaucer's part, is not the tale's flaw, but its essential mechanism": Elizabeth Kirk, "Nominalism and the Dynamics of the *Clerk's Tale*: *Homo Viator* as Woman," *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, 111–20.

20. Kirk, 117; Judson Boyce Allen and Theresa Anne Moritz, *A Distinction of Stories: the Medieval Unity of Chaucer's Fair Chain of Narratives for Canterbury* (Columbus, 1982), 193.

21. This detail is absent from Chaucer's sources. See Salter, 48.

22. This too is Chaucer's addition. See P. M. Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, vol. II, *The Art of Narrative* (London, 1972), 127.

23. J. Burke Severs, *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's "Clerkes Tale"*, Yale Studies in English, vol. 96 (New Haven, 1942), 288–89.

24. Thomas H. Bestul, "Chaucer's Parson's Tale and the Late-Medieval Tradition of Religious Meditation," *Speculum* 64 (1989): 606. As Bestul points out, we cannot be certain that these additions were made by Chaucer, because he may be translating from a compilation made by someone else; however, Bestul agrees with "Wenzel, Patterson, Lawler and others whose studies support the likelihood that Chaucer made the compilation" (606).

25. Notably Luce Irigaray, in her essay "La Mysterique": "And that one man, at least, has understood her so well that he died in the most awful suffering. That most female of men, the Son. And she never ceases to look upon his nakedness, open for all to see, upon the gashes in his virgin flesh, at the wounds from the nails that pierce his body as he hangs there, in his passion and abandonment. And she is overwhelmed with love of him/herself. In his crucifixion he opens up a path of redemption to her in her fallen state." *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, 1985), 199–200. See also Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London, 1993), esp. 55–63. Jill Mann builds her argument for the subversive power of pity on the correspondences between Christ and Chaucer's female victims (128–64).

26. Again, this passage has been added to Pennafort's *Summa* (Bestul, 606).