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Aspects of Chaucer's Irony in 'The Friar's Tale'

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IN A substantial paper read at the recent Lausanne Conference of the I.A.U.P.E., P. Mroczkowski interprets 'The Friar's Tale' as 'basically a study in greed'.¹ His demonstration, fully supported by a number of parallels drawn from pulp literature, incidentally throws some interesting sidelights on Chaucer's irony. Perhaps it will be worth re-examining this particular and attractive aspect of the poet's technique, since it is of no mean importance to an understanding of the impact that certain passages of the Tale may have had on the contemporary reader.

Stressing why such a reader would normally expect a *limitour* to inveigh chiefly against cupidity and the havoc it works on the human soul, Mroczkowski turns to the opening lines of the Tale and submits that in the mouth of a mendicant the words describing the archdeacon as 'a man of heigh degree' might, by themselves alone, 'already put a knowing listener on his guard. Prelates were not exactly minions of the begging friars and archdeacons are mentioned at least twice in a derogatory manner in collections of exempla. It is accordingly just possible that the praise of the boldness with which this dignitary pestered sinners (in l. 1303) is another instance of Chaucer's pervasive irony'. This is pertinent and tends to confirm from the outside what internal evidence abundantly suggests. Indeed, there is hardly any doubt that we have to deal here with a brilliant case of Chaucerian irony. As with many another character throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, the poet endows the Friar with part at least of his own subtle gift.

Let us first recall that Chaucer's presentation of both the Friar

and the Summoner is tinged with humorous irony. Pronouncements like 'A bettre felawe sholde men noght fynde', spoken of the Summoner in the General Prologue,¹ and its almost exact counterpart, 'Ther nas no man nowher so vertuous' (251), referring to the Friar, make it quite obvious. Read within their immediate context (as of course they are meant to be) such apparent eulogies in fact mean the exact reverse of their face value. Now Chaucer reverts to the same trick again just before the beginning of the Tale when, in the Friar's Prologue, he calls master Hubert 'This worthy lymytour, this noble Frere' (1265), and the description of the archdeacon's zeal, though put in the mouth of the Friar himself, is written in a similar vein. One might even say that the irony implied in the whole passage is yet more subtle. It chiefly resides in an intentional ambiguity as to the archdeacon's actual (and unexpressed) motives. With but a very slight shift of emphasis, it might well appear as if his zeal were prompted by his own ardent desire to promulgate justice, he himself being disinterested—though bent upon punishing all sorts of transgressors. In other words, it might look as if his were no other than righteous zeal. So close is the borderline between such a portrait and the other side of the coin, that Skeat was led to interpret, 'Ther myghte asterte hym no pecunyal payne' (1314) as meaning 'No fine could save the accused from punishment'—which would of course suggest that the archdeacon's burning zeal had a moral basis, that he himself was incorruptible.

Yet even if the reference to 'a man of heigh degree' and its underlying hint has passed unnoticed, a sensitive listener might well prick up his ears when hearing how the archdeacon made some sinners 'pitously to synge'—and this all the more since the verb is repeated twice within this brief passage, first and foremost with reference to 'lecchours', who 'sholde synge if that they were hent' (1311). The very choice of this word, roughly the equivalent of 'wail', but with a humorous twist and, perhaps, ever so slight a connotation of blackmail, is particularly significant in conjunction with the deliciously irreverent image of the Bishops crossier used as a hook to catch the unlucky victims of the archdeacon's zeal. The latter, be it remembered,

... made the peple pitously to synge.
 For er the bisshop caughte hem with his hook,
 They weren in the erchedeknes book.

(1316-18)

Here, of course, a well-known piece of external evidence might help to put us on the right track. 'The bishop loves a cheerful giver,' says a thirteenth-century song, 'and cares for neither right nor wrong if he smell a bribe. . . . Nor is there less wickedness in the archdeacon: whomever he gets in his clutches he holds.' By hook or by book transgressors were caught and there was hardly any escape for them. But even failing such outward evidence, there is enough in the text of Chaucer, as a whole, to suggest unorthodox, if rather usual, practice. Hardly have we done with the archdeacon when we pass to mention of the summoner: 'He hadde a somonour redy to his hond' (1321). Now we know that we are going to hear a tale about a summoner ('I wol yow of a somonour telle a game'), and we may well remember that in the General Prologue we have an explicit passage proving what kind of relation existed between Chaucer's Summoner and the archdeacon, who was his superior:

And if he foond owher a good felawe,
 He wolde techen him to have noon awe
 In swich caas of the ercedekenes curs,
 But if a mannes soule were in his purs;
 For in his purs he sholde ypunysshed be.
 'Purs is the ercedekenes helle,' seyde he.

(635-58)

On the strength of such evidence we have a right to expect here a similar, though implicit, relationship between summoner and archdeacon, i.e. a case of 'like master, like man'.

This, by the way, would make it practically certain that Skeat was wrong and that 'Ther myghte asterte hym no pecunyal payne' is to be interpreted with Robinson, 'No fine escaped him, i.e., he never failed to impose one'⁴—in other words, the archdeacon's zeal was prompted as much by the urge of filling his pockets as by moral or canonical preoccupations. This is confirmed, moreover, by the unmistakable parallel between the

situation of the summoner and the archdeacon on the one hand, and that of the fiend (the would-be yeoman) and his master on the other—a parallel which is of great structural importance in 'The Friar's Tale'. When the summoner, who has an inkling that his new acquaintance and 'deere broother' knows the ropes, asks him for some advice on how to raise his income, the gay yeoman answers:

My wages been ful streite and ful smale.
 My lord is hard to me and daungerous,
 And myn office is ful laborous,
 And therefore by extorcions I lyve.
 For sothe, I take al that men wol me yive.

The summoner immediately exclaims: (1426-30)

Now certes, . . . so fare I.
 I spare nat to taken, God it woot,
 But if it be to hevy or to hoot.
 What I may gete in conseil prively,
 No maner conscience of that have I.
 Nere myn extorcioun, I myghte nat lyven.

(1434-40)

In other words, his own lord also was so exacting that the summoner was hard put to satisfy his claims and, however 'laborous' his office was, had to resort to his own little private bit of extortion. This retrospectively throws a highly dubious light on the archdeacon's doings. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that the relation between the yeoman-fiend and his master, the arch-fiend, is a significant projection (and representation) of that which actually tied the yeoman-summoner to his master the archdeacon. Needless to say that from such a viewpoint the irony implied in the eloquent enumeration of the sundry and diversified sins—ranging from wicchecraft to symonye and from diffamacioun to bawderye—that fall under the 'jurisdictioun' of the summoner's master, is rather a devastating one.

But we have not done yet with Chaucer's irony. It is no doubt significant that among all the sins so eagerly hunted out by our fervent archdeacon, such pre-eminence should have been given

to fornication. Not only does this particular sin head the whole list ('boldely dide execucioun/In punysshinge of fornicacioun'), but it closes it too, again with striking emphasis: 'But certes, lecchours dide he grettest wo.' Behind such emphasis there may well lurk another brilliant piece of subtle irony. If we take the shortest cut and turn to external evidence again, we immediately find a relevant parallel in an amusing story taken from the *Lanercost Chronicle*. A certain nobleman had a manor 'in the diocese of Glasgow, that was let out on farm to the peasants; who, being dissolute by reason of their wealth, and waxing wanton after their visits to the tavern, commonly sinned in adultery or incontinence, and thus frequently filled the arch-deacon's purse; for their relapses kept them almost perpetually on his roll'.⁵ Being thus continually 'in the erchedeknes book' (to use the Chaucerian equivalent), such lecherous people were in fact, as the story makes plain, the main source of his personal income. No wonder that he was eager for punishment ('Nay,' said the nobleman in question, '... thou, with the ransom of sin, hast sucked out the revenues of my farms'). Why our arch-deacon was especially keen on ransoming 'lecchours' turns out to be pretty clear: they meant the richest quarry and yielded the highest profits. Such conclusions, however, may also be reached without the support of contemporary analogues, within the very frame of the Tales; for Chaucer's text, we submit, is here again entirely self-sufficient.

It is obvious that the summoner of 'The Friar's Tale' is, in a way, the *alter ego* of Chaucer's own Summoner. If this is kept in mind, the emphasis on lechery (not as an end in itself, but as a means towards another end) takes on full significance. The definition of a summoner is given by the Friar in the prologue: 'A somonour,' he says, 'is a rennere up and doun/With mandementz for fornicacioun' (1283-84). The keynote to the summoner's proceedings, as illustrated in the Tale, is thus clearly struck: fornication is the corner-stone of the whole business, the axis round which the whole machinery of this flourishing enterprise turns. The gist of the system is given in a pregnant couplet:

He koude spare of lecchours oon or two,
To techen hym to foure and twenty mo.

(1325-26)

In accordance with this basically simple but efficient recipe, the summoner, we are told, 'hadde alwey bawdes redy to his hond' . . . that weren his approwours prively' (1339, 1343). How smoothly the system worked must be left to the text to relate :

He hadde eek wenches at his retinue,
That, wheither that sir Robert or sir Huwe,
Or Jakke, or Rauf, or whoso that it were
That lay by hem, they tolde it in his ere.
Thus was the wenche and he of oon assent;
And he wolde fecche a feyned mandement,
And somne hem to chapitre bothe two,
And pile the man, and lete the wenche go.

(1355-62)

In short, this yielded him 'the fruyt of al his rente'. That the summoner, to crown the picture, was himself 'a baude' (1354), was only to be expected.

If we now turn to Chaucer's Summoner again, we shall immediately see that lechery was the hallmark of his character : 'As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe' (626), says the poet, not to speak of the 'saucefleem' which has been shown by specialists to be directly connected with the Summoner's venereal propensities. Shall we not grasp then that the Summoner was, as it were, the victim of his craft, since lechery itself and constant intercourse with lecherous people was the shortest way, if not the only road, to a successful and lucrative career—and this not only for summoners, who were after all mere agents and commercial travellers, but consequently also for their masters 'of heigh degree', the archdeacons themselves? Can we doubt that the emphasis on punishing lechery, with reference to the archdeacon of 'The Friar's Tale', is a little masterpiece of sly Chaucerian irony?

But Chaucerian irony is multi-valent, and the ultimate piece of irony in which 'The Friar's Tale' is shrouded is to be sought elsewhere. This sharp and vivid denunciation of the summoner's lechery and covetousness, so efficient a piece of satire that our Summoner is hit in his sorest spot (so mad was he 'that lyk an aspen leef he quook for ire') is put in the mouth of a man who is himself given over to lechery and greed! Not to

mention the Wife of Bath's subtle *rapprochement* of a friar with an incubus, the General Prologue is unmistakable on the point: we know what the marriages of young women, made at the friar's cost, mean; that he was an *habitué* of taverns in every town and a favourite with the medieval equivalent of barmaids is clear; nor is his eagerness for haunting places where 'profit should arise' passed over in silence. The Friar, indeed, was certainly what Falstaff would call, saving your reverence, a whoremaster. Could it be perhaps that the enmity between the Friar and the Summoner, both as representatives of two opposite classes and as individuals, might have been also rooted in a reciprocal feeling of disloyal competition?

But for Chaucer's unique brand of humorous irony and compassion, his Human Comedy—if I may use a famous *faute de frappe*—might easily have turned into a Human Vomedey.

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NOTES

Prof. Mroczkowski's paper has been printed in *English Studies Today*, ser. II, Berne, 1961.

¹L. 648. All references are to the text of F. N. Robinson, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, second edit., Boston, 1957.

²M. Bowden, *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, New York, 1954, p. 269.

³*Ibid.*, p. 267.

⁴Robinson, p. 705.

⁵Bowden, pp. 270-71.

⁶In such a context, the repetition of 'redy to his hond', a formula which was already used in l. 1321 ('He hadde a Somonour redy to his hond') may have been intentional. In such a case, it would again ironically hint at the real situation: just as the bawds were the summoner's 'approwours', so was the summoner the archdeacon's purveyor.