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Wife of Bath, Pardoner and *Sir Thopas*: Pre-Texts and Para-Texts

Paul B. Taylor

The *Canterbury Tales* are neither a miscellany of medieval narratives nor a concatenated roadside drama of a group of pilgrims. The meaning of each tale interacts with the sense of the work as a whole, and it is the context of a telling that informs it with purpose and directs reading. A reading directed by the conventions of genre constrains and deforms interpretation, for the constant refiguring of ideas in the tales dupes generic expectations and frees possibilities of narrative form that carry well beyond convention. Chaucer's own term for freeing of form to carry new sense is "conjoining" (fragment VIII, 951),¹ by which he means a refraction of a term or form to refigure sense.² The refigured form I call a para-text, a word borrowed from my colleague Gregory Polletta,³ and the text it refigures is its pretext. A good many of the *Canterbury Tales* are para-texts in the manner in which they counter, or oppose another text. A para-text *answers* another text by its imitative

¹ All references to the *Canterbury Tales* are to the edition of F. N. Robinson, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd edition (London: Oxford U. Press, 1957).

² R. M. Jordan, "The Question of Genre: Five Chaucerian Romances," *Chaucer at Albany*, ed. Rossell Hope Robbins (New York: Burt Franklin, 1975), 77-103, uses the French *conjointure* to describe the process by which Chaucer, like Crétien de Troyes, elaborates traditional forms for philosophic, moral and comic purposes.

³ *Paratextualité* is the term that Gérard Genette uses for all that which *surrounds* a text, including title, book-jacket, and so forth (*Palimpsestes*, Paris: Seuil, 1982, p. 8 ff). For what I call *pre-text* and *para-text*, Genette uses *hypertexte* and *hypotexte*; that is, one text united to an anterior text by reflecting its form, or alluding to its structure, as Joyce's *Ulysses* to Homer's *Odyssey*. Much of the critical terminology I use derives from my colleague G. T. Polletta, though responsibility for imprecision in its use is wholly mine.

form and style, and in doing so lends to the original text, or pre-text, ideas not retrievable in its own style or form until revealed by the paratext. A paratext, then, is a *refraction* (a term I prefer in this context to “deconstruction”) of another text or texts, conjoining a narrative form with ideas typical of other narrative forms, or genres. Joyce’s paratext of Homer, for an example, conjoins epic conceptions with a Dublin narrative. The relationship between Homer’s and Joyce’s works is transitive, so that a reading of the first through the form of the second allows the second to be read as well through the first.

In the *Canterbury Tales*, the complex relationship between the performances of the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, and Chaucer the Pilgrim exemplifies the para-textual structure of the work as a whole. The Wife establishes her tale as an illustration of those preoccupations with *maistrise* revealed auto-biographically in her prologue, and that self-revelation provides a text through which her Breton *lai* must be read; that is, as a public and universal figure of a private and personal argument. That personal argument lends sense to her tale beyond its generic conventions. So too the Pardoner uses a “moral” tale to exemplify his confessed intent to spew out “venym under hewe/of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe” (VI, 421–22), and thus he opens his text to both read and be read through its prologue pre-text. In both cases, however, the task of reading is complicated by the teller’s display of self. Wife and Pardoner alike strain interpretive access to their tales by drawing much of their audience’s attention to themselves. Of course, the challenge to reading is precisely here; and the audience is forced to read both parts of performance as a single text, and the pilgrim’s reaction to those performances reveals failures of reading, which, in each case, join the text.

The argument I propose in the remainder of this paper is that the performance of the Wife of Bath comprises a pre-text for the Pardoner’s performance, and that the Pardoner’s performance of reading and refiguring the Wife’s is Chaucer’s pre-text for performing. His *Sir Thopas* is a refraction of both texts and invites a reading through them.

The canon of criticism on *Sir Thopas* emphasizes the tale’s reflection of both its own occasion for performance and its context in the order of telling, but denies it *sentence*, or a serious purpose and idea. It is variously seen as a joke on the Host’s aversion to homosexuals (Lumiansky, 1951), a burlesque of bourgeois knighthood (Scheps, 1966), a satire of the literary tastes of his audience (Gaylord, 1967, and Whittock, 1968), inane nonsense serving to contrast with the sober truth of *Melibee* (Howard, 1976), a figuring of idle *solaas* (Allen and Moritz, 1981), and a

purposely-constructed “worst” tale to serve as a joke on an audience expecting to hear the “best” tale from Chaucer himself (Kooper, 1984).⁴ I would argue, to the contrary, that Chaucer’s literary purpose in *Sir Thopas* is so serious that it establishes a criticism of not only Wife and Pardoner, but of pilgrimage itself.⁵ A seriousness of purpose despite however one may respond to his form is made clear in Chaucer’s reaction to the Host’s interruption of *Sir Thopas* and his request for another tale. “Ye woot that every Evaungilist,” Chaucer explains patiently to the Host,

“That telleth us the peyne of Jhesu Crist,
 Ne seith nat alle thyng as his felawe dooth;
 But nathelees hir sentence is al sooth,
 And alle acorden as in hire sentence,
 Al be ther in hir tellyng difference.
 For somme of hem seyn moore, and somme seyn lesse,
 Whan they his pitous passioun expresse –
 I meene of Mark, Mathew, Luc and John –
 But doutelees hir sentence is al oon.”

(VII, 943–52)

(Proving his point in the act of making it, Chaucer forces two different stress structures on *sentence* in lines 945 and 946 without altering the word’s semantic force.)

This remark has little relevance to *Melibee*, which is a slavish parroting of a source well-known to Chaucer’s audience, but it does retrieve *Sir Thopas*, the tale just told. The comparison with Scriptural versions of

⁴ R. M. Lumiansky, *Of Sondry Folk* (Austin: U. of Texas Press, 1955), 87–8; Walter Scheps, “Sir Thopas: The Bourgeois Knight, the Minstrel and the Critics,” *TSL*, 11 (1966), 35–43; Alan Gaylord, “Sentence and Solaas in Fragment VII of the *Canterbury Tales*: Harry Bailly as Horseback Editor,” *PMLA* 82:2 (1967), 226–35; Trevor Whittock, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1968), 213; Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1976), 309 ff.; Judson Boyce Allen and Theresa Anne Moritz, *A Distinction of Stories* (Columbus: Ohio State U. Press, 1981), 215; E. S. Kooper, “Inverted Images in Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*,” *Studia Neophilologica*, 56:2 (1984), 147–54. Jordan, *op. cit.*, p. 81, labels *Sir Thopas* a self-parodic form of “conjointure”. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 152, reminds us that “in calling something a parody we are ... freeing ourselves from the demands of poetic seriousness.”

⁵ Urs Dürmüller, *Narrative Possibilities of the Tail-Rime Romance* (Bern: Francke, 1975), p. 221, shares Jordan’s appreciation of Chaucer’s mastery of the form, and denies any intent on Chaucer’s part to deride the genre, but he does not consider to what effects Chaucer’s mastery attains.

the Passion of Christ invests *Sir Thopas* with a *sentence* that has escaped the Host, and can even suggest that the “tellyng difference” of the form of *Sir Thopas* does not disqualify it as a para-textual gloss to the Gospels.⁶ Chaucer had made a comparable alignment of his own with scriptural style in the General Prologue (I, 739), noting that “Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ,” where *ful brode* means “figuratively.” By paratactic implication, then, *Sir Thopas* contains *in sondry wise*, a meaning comparable to the Passion. As such, as well as in form and style, the tale *corrects* the Wife’s and the Pardoner’s readings of quests; or rather, the readings that can be generated out of their performances. The refraction of those performances is effected by a mimetic structure and style.

The Wife’s tale is of a quest in which a knight saves his life by finding the answer to a question about women’s desires. Such a quest figures pilgrimage, even though the act of devotion that incites it is *fin amor*. Both plot and theme reach well beyond the Wife’s avowed concern for domestic *maistrie*, so that the tale deceives the intent of the teller. The Hag’s exchange of a body-saving reply for a marriage-promise places the knight’s body in another peril. She saves him from this threat with moral instruction on the topic of *gentillesse*. Her success secures for them both a marriage that promises common profit. The marriage-bed lesson is a refiguring of the original riddle, a converting of its superficial triviality into an issue of soul-saving import. So, without having to realize what she is doing, the Wife of Bath conjoins the Breton *lai* to a range of ideas alien to the historical possibilities of the genre.

The Pardoner seizes upon the Wife’s style and upon what he reads in the form of her tale, and sets up her performance as a pre-text for his own. He imitates her display of self in a private revelation, followed by a quest-tale that reads hers in a way that raises its possibilities of interpretation to another critical context.⁷ In his display of self he shortens and intensifies a self-portrait, avoiding the Wife’s lengthy autobiographical form. He abstracts himself as a figure of cupidity, answering the implications of the Wife’s self-portrait as one of concupiscence. He exhibits self-avowed viciousness of character to screen the implications of his tale, so that his listeners are seduced into mistaking a reading of the figure of the Pardoner for a reading of his tale. Having set up a misread-

⁶ Cf. Augustine, *De Doctrina* II, 10–11, where he argues that different understandings and different expressions of Scripture complement one another.

⁷ The Pardoner’s interruption of the Wife’s *Prologue*, to thank her for exposing women’s vicious methods of mastery, trivializes her narrative sense by a calculated misreading that both masks and marks his reading of her.

ing of his tale, he proceeds to tell a story which turns on a number of misreadings: Death misread as person, an old man misread as Death, and a heap of gold, a figure of the death the rioters seek, misread as a commodity. A quest to kill Death reads quite naturally as a salvific quest for eternal life, for which gold is an apt emblem. Thus, the quest of the three rioters figures pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas Becket, a rehearsal of the passing of the soul from this world to the next whose penitential process comprises contrition, confession, and satisfaction – thought, word and deed, if you will. The Pardoner’s prologue deforms that process and progress to grace into viciousness of intent, hypocrisy of word and selfishness of deed; and the Pardoner vaunts his success. The quest in his tale is a success. Gold causes the death which it figures, but the death of the rioters does not liberate saved souls to eternal life.⁸ All of this sketches a reading of the Wife’s tale and a refiguring of its theme into a criticism of pilgrimage. The knight’s quest to save his life in the Wife’s tale is refigured by the rioters’ quest to kill Death, and the questers in each tale misunderstand the necessary moral and spiritual implications of their search. The shape-shifting Hag instructs the knight, and when he responds correctly she accords him a gift of beauty and fidelity which figure the grace accorded to those who submit their wills to Divine instruction. The rioters’ fatal misreading of the Old Man’s instruction counters the optimism of the Wife’s ending. The rioters’ obtuseness concerning the nature and goal of their quest mirrors the Pardoner’s own view of his audience. The Host’s scurrilous attack on him at the close of his performance only confirms the Pardoner’s implication that the pilgrims cannot read the truth behind either his posture, his tale, or their holiday excursion to Canterbury. The Wife’s self-serving propaganda for the acts of love, though they issue no fruits, makes of her a figure of wasted quest; the Pardoner’s wry boast that he will have a jolly wench in every town invites his audience to speculate on the issue of *his* love-acts. Now, while the Pardoner’s tale refigures the Wife’s performance as a reading of it, his own challenges his audience’s reading. Whether or not he feels that his audience is incapable of reading him, it can be argued that the Parson and the Nun’s Priest respond later in their tales to the Pardoner’s challenge. Before them, however, Chaucer uses the occasion for tale-telling to refigure, in erotic comedy to match the Pardoner’s tragedy of spirit, the Pardoner’s quest-tale and, by associa-

⁸ Cf. The Wife’s figuring of the perfection of virginity as gold (III, 100) and the Prioress’s golden “A” which figures *Amor*, and finally, the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (VII, 3021) where gold figures death.

tion, the Wife's as well. If the Pardoner had prefaced his tale with an abstracted self-portrait, Chaucer does him one better by allowing the Host's portrait to stand as pretext for his narrative. Appreciating the Pardoner's challenge to read figures, Chaucer generates a tale out of the Host's reading of his own person as figure:

“... What man artow?” quod he;
 “Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,
 For evere upon the ground I se thee stare.”
 (VII, 695–97)

Then, turning to the pilgrims, Harry exhibits Chaucer:

“This were a popet in an arm t'enbrace
 For any womman, smal and fair of face.
 He semeth elvyssh by his contenance,
 For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce.”
 (VII, 701–4)

This bit of verbal dalliance of Harry's part contains a number of elements which inform Chaucer's tale that follows. I need point out only two of these to make my point. The first is the allusion to venery, in both its modern senses, in the image of the hare. Though Sir Thopas will ride soon through a forest full “of bukke and hare” (VII, 756) on his pursuit of the elf-queen, the image of the hare engages a number of texts and contexts in the *Canterbury Tales*. Appropriately, the image always binds together religious and sexual preoccupations. Of the Monk it is said in the General Prologue that “of prikyng and of hunting for the hare/Was al his lust...” (I, 191–92). The Pardoner's features that signal an unnatural sexual character include the detail that “swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare” (I, 684). The Friar's tale links the Summoner's harlotry to the fact that he “wood were as an hare” (III, 1327–28). Finally, in the Shipman's tale, the lecherous monk characterizes wedded men in leporine terms, sleeping long in the *fourme* because of their sexual weariness (VII, 104).⁹

A second image which serves Chaucer in the designing of his tale is contained in the adjectival form “elvyssh”, used to poke fun at Chaucer's facial expression. Elsewhere in Middle English, *elf* and *elfish* regularly link sexual with magical powers.¹⁰ The “marriage” of metals and the

⁹ Beryl Rowland, *Blind Beasts* (Kent, Ohio: Kent U. Press 1971), 87–102, elaborates on the implications of concupiscence in the hare image.

¹⁰ R. W. V. Elliott, *Chaucer's English* (London: André Deutsch, 1974), 325, notes that, since elves are malign beings, the use by the Host of this adjective

process of “multiplying” in alchemy are described as “*elvyshbe craft* and *elvysshe nyce lore* in the Canon’s Yeoman’s tale (VIII, 751 and 842). Constance is accused of being an elf by Donegild in the Man of Law’s tale (II, 754) to explain the monstrous son she is accused of having issued. The Wife of Bath contrasts the present with a magical pre-Christian past: “. . . ther as wont to walken was an elf,/ Ther walketh now the lymytour himself. . . / Ther is noon oother incubus but he” (III, 873–80). The Wife reclaims that past in her tale whose heroine is an elf-queen (III, 860) who shifts in and out of hag-shape. As far as I can discern, this is the first elf-queen in English literature. Indeed, female elves are rare before Chaucer’s day.¹¹ The switching of sexual identity for a figure of sexual power is what we might expect from the Wife, recalling her own pursuit of husbands. So, when the Host calls Chaucer “elvish” because he lacks dalliance (a term with certain sexual overtones), he means ironically to chide him for a lack of sexual vitality (one recalls that he misjudges the sexual nature of both the Monk and the Nun’s Priest).

“Hare” and “elf” nucleate a text for Chaucer; that is, the two words and their contextual associations throughout the Canterbury tale-telling sessions, if not throughout the Middle English literary corpus, establish a kernel of thematic suggestions, and inform the text that can contain them. To Harry Bailly’s display of him, Chaucer responds with a tale whose form is a quest for a love-object endowed with magical powers. Like the knight of the Wife’s tale and the rioters of the Pardoner’s tale, Sir Thopas seeks something he has never seen. The Wife’s knight finds an elf-queen without being able to realize her significance to his quest; Sir Thopas has a signification for quest without ever seeing its object. As if to underline the comedy implicit in such a quest, Chaucer performs his tale as an irregular metrical romance adroitly conjoining that form with ideas figured more cleverly than either Wife or Pardoner did, or might have done.¹²

Sir Thopas is only the third quest tale told on the Canterbury road, and so sets itself up to be read through as well as a comment upon the

is “ironic”. The *MED* defines *elf* as a “supernatural being having powers for good and evil, a spirit, fairy, goblin, incubus, succubus, or the like.” It cites the *Medulla* gloss: *satirus: an helfe*.

¹¹ The Middle English romances and ballads seem to feature only male elves, such as those in Child’s ballads, 1 and 4, and the king of fairy in *Sir Orfeo*, etc.

¹² Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1976), 24, notes that the romance genre “appears to be designed mainly to encourage irregular or excessive sexual activity.”

other two.¹³ Its allusive and mimetic style links its form to a number of other tales, but particularly to the Wife's and Pardoner's performances. Allusions to the Pardoner and his tale are especially critical. Where the Pardoner swears to have "licour of the vyne" (VI, 452), while his mouth is full of beer (VI, 456), Sir Thopas swears on ale and bread (VII, 872) while he is drinking wine (VII, 851). The three rioters meet the Old Man as they are about to tread over a stile on their hunt for Death (VI, 712), and Sir Thopas pricks over "stile and stone/An elf-queene for t'espys" (VII, 798–99). This sort of directed aping aligns the two texts, the latter drawing attention to particular features of the former. The plot of *Sir Thopas* is both comic and erotic in its mirroring of the other quest tales. All three are directed to objects never seen, but which some authority establishes the existence of. For Thopas, that authority is but a dream, but dreams, as the Nun's Priest's Chantecler discovers, are likely to be reified by experience. The elf-queen, like the goals of the other quests, figures the goal of pilgrimage, *grace*, a word comically insisted upon in the text by the forced rhyme of *Thopas* with *grace* (*gras*) (VII, 830–31).

The plots of all three tales turn on a particularly significant structural element, that of the opposer or diverter of quest. Each of the quests is diverted or retarded by a screening force which doubles as an instructor to the quester on the nature of his quest. The Hag instructs the knight happily and converts his quest from a trivial domestic quibble to a spiritual understanding of marriage. The Old Man instructs the rioters tragically, since they misread his directions and misdirect their quest. Hag and Old Man stand in pertinent contrast, since the success of her instruction allows her to retrieve youth and beauty, while the Old Man's wasted counsel matches his wasted age. Thopas's quest is temporarily blocked by a three-headed giant named Olifaunt, whose instruction is in his figure rather than in his words. The Parson explains that many-headedness is a figure of a woman, such as the Wife herself, who marries often: "... If a womman hadde mo men than oon, thanne sholde she have moo hevedes than oon" (X, 922). Olifaunt also figures the Pardoner's cupidity, for Chaucer uses the term elsewhere in a context which

¹³ Larry D. Benson, "The Order of the *Canterbury Tales*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 3 (1981), 77–120, argues convincingly that the Ellesmere order of the tales represents Chaucer's final intention, and this would place *Thopas* after the *Pardoner's Tale*, which follows long after the Wife's. Be it as it may, the ordering is not essential to my argument, for the para-textual relationships between the three tales is independent of their order of performance, though the dramatic interplay between the tellers is heightened by a reading of *Sir Thopas* as the last of the three.

reflects the imagery of the Pardoner's tale. In his translation of Boethius, Book III, Prose 8, line 27, *olifaunt* "elephant" figures the weight of earthly goods which counters man's attraction to heavenly goods. In the following Meter, Lady Philosophy extends the idea as she chides Boethius for his cupidity: "Certes ye ne seke no gold in grene trees, ne ye gadere nat precyous stones in the vynes. . . . But folk suffren hemselve to ben so blynde, that hem ne reccheth nat to knowe where thilke goodes ben yhidd whiche that thei coveyten, but ploungen hem in erthe, and seken there thilke good that surmounteth the hevene that bereth the sterris." Sir Thopas is as undaunted by figure and as unenlightened by sense as the three rioters are undaunted by Death and unenlightened by the Old Man's identification of it as gold.

The quest in the Wife's tale is achieved happily in an embrace of beauty and wisdom. The quest in the Pardoner's tale ends bitterly in a death which was not the death sought. Sir Thopas's quest is unachieved because disrupted, not by Olifaunt (whom Thopas does not read as either gaoler or protector of the value he seeks), but by a Harry Bailly who stops the tale at the point where Thopas is armed for the decisive encounter. So, as if aping his own hero, Chaucer re-arms himself with instruction to the Host on reading texts, and then continues with the tale of *Melibee*.

However comic or even absurd we are tempted to think this stepping of character out of story is, it contains the kernel of Chaucer's serious *sententia*. Chaucer casts the Host in the role of Olifaunt in order to dramatize a moral implicit in his tale. Neither espousing the Wife's fantasy optimism, nor condoning the Pardoner's caustic pessimism, Chaucer figures the Host's interruption as blocked or failed pilgrimage; disruption ends a quest, but not questing. Even the subversive narrative of the Pardoner cannot prevent continued renewal of the journey of the human soul toward grace.¹⁴ One foppish knight may indeed figure those whose purpose on the road to Canterbury is seasonal rather than festival, but the feast remains, unspoiled and available.

If Sir Thopas is retrievable as *sentence*, it is because of its para-textual refraction and correction of the Wife's and the Pardoner's opposing meanings. The apparent bare and idle *solace* of *Sir Topas* is as much a challenge to reading as the apparent waste of character of the Pardoner. Chaucer's reading converts that waste to fruit in a form which challenges

¹⁴ Cf. Corinthian 6.8: "God's grace can be received by honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report, as deceivers and yet true" (*ut seductores et veraces*).

his audience to see profit in his “drasty speche”. That the challenge can be met is proved by Edmund Spenser’s reading of *Sir Thopas* which informs his own Chaucerian para-text, *Faerie Queene*.