The Parson's Tale

The *Parson's Tale:* Religious Devotion and Spiritual Feeling

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When it launched in 2011, an app about confession became one of the most popular in the iTunes store. Aimed at Catholics, it contains a series of questions intended to help users prepare for the sacrament of penance—the practice in which Catholics confess the ways they have sinned against the teachings of the Church to a priest, who then prescribes an appropriate penance in order to help the sinner receive forgiveness. The confessional app prepares Catholics for this encounter by reminding them of the ways they could have sinned, such as by committing one of the Seven Deadly Sins. So, for example, it asks users "Have I spoken behind someone else's back?" This app provides a useful point of entry into Chaucer's *Parson's Tale.* Generally understood as belonging at the end of the *Canterbury Tales* (followed only by the envoi), the *Parson's Tale* was once thought to be a sermon, but it is now generally recognized as what Lee Patterson terms a "manual for penitents"—a text designed, like the confessional app, to help penitents prepare for confession (338).

The nature of the *Parson's Tale* makes it stand out among the *Canterbury Tales,* and the Parson remarks upon the uniqueness of his tale explicitly in his Prologue. When the host asks him for a "fable" (ParsP 29), the Parson reacts strongly to this term, scorning "fables and swich wrecchednesse" (ParsP 34), which he associates with verse forms and falsehoods. Instead of telling a fable, he says, he will tell "a myrie tale in prose" (ParsP 46). The tale that follows is divided into three sections, each corresponding to one stage in the sacrament of penance: contrition (feeling remorse for a sin), confession (describing this sin to a priest), and satisfaction (making amends for the sin).

The first section (ParsT 75-386) lists six things that should move a person to contrition. These include a hatred of sin, which is evoked through striking descriptions. For example, a woman who is beautiful but sinful is compared to a gold ring in a sow's nose (ParsT 154-56). The next section is by far the longest (ParsT 387-1028). It covers the Seven Deadly Sins, here presented in the *saligia* order (based on the first letter of their Latin names: *superbia/*pride*, accidia/*sloth*, luxuria/*lechery*, ira/*ire*, gula/*gluttony*, invidia/*envy*,* and *avaritia/*avarice) that was established in the thirteenth century.[1] Each sin is matched with its corresponding virtue which, using a medical metaphor that was common in writing on penance, is described as its remedy. The tale then lists some conditions of a proper confession. The next section, on satisfaction, discusses the

importance of charitable work (almsgiving) and fasting (ParsT 1029-1080). Through this three-part structure, the tale explores all the fundamental steps of the sacrament of penance.

Tools

Manuals for penitents, which circulated widely in medieval England, contain lists that a penitent could use to decide what needed to be confessed to a priest. So, Robert Mannyng, the author of *Handlyng Synne,* announces that he writes so that "lewde men" "kun knowe þer ynne / Þat þey wene no synne be ynne" ["the unlearned" "can discover through [his text] the sins that they haven't realized they were committing"] (43; 55-56). The *Parson's Tale* is unusual among these in that it is cast within a fictional framework. Also unusual are the circumstances of delivery that it implies, with the Parson encouraging the other pilgrims to investigate their sins while on horseback. It was, however, not uncommon for a spiritual advisor such as the Parson to recite such a text out loud for the benefit of a person preparing for confession.

The requirement of confession in the Catholic Church was first codified in a significant way at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which mandated annual confession for all Christians who had reached the age of majority—generally placed between seven and fourteen. In the centuries that followed, Christians were expected to meet with their priests at least once a year to reveal their sins, and those who failed to do so were threatened with excommunication and the loss of the promise of salvation. The seven deadly sins, which are described in detail in the *Parson's Tale,* provided the typical structure for these encounters, but other frameworks were used, including the five senses.

Contemporary illustrations and accounts suggest that medieval confession was often more tumultuous than its modern analogue; the penitent would kneel directly in front of the priest (the confessional booth was an Early Modern innovation), sometimes thronged closely by others, potentially within earshot, awaiting their own chance to confess. The wealthy, on the other hand, would appoint confessors for themselves and their families—an arrangement that offered greater privacy. Those who delayed confession became a point of concern for the Church; Caesarius of Heisterbach, in his twelfth-century *Dialogus Miraculorum,* told a cautionary tale of a monk who delayed and suffered intense, searing pain until he told his sins to a priest (Herbert 352). Concerns also emerged over those who tried to confess to anyone aside from their own parish priests, and who the Church suspected were motivated either by shame or by hopes of receiving a lighter penance.

But while many postponed confession, others had to be cautioned against making it too frequently or over insignificant sins; Jean Gerson, in his fourteenth-century *De Remediis*, complained of over-scrupulous penitents: "They exhaust themselves and their confessors with repeated confessions, especially of light and unimportant sins" (III. 585 c-586 b qtd. in Tentler 77). As confession became increasingly emphasized in medieval England, a priest like Chaucer's Parson could find himself very busy indeed, especially at the penitential season of Lent, with some parishes needing to bring in itinerant friars to help manage the workload at particularly busy times.

The requirement of annual confession, of course, meant that medieval penitents were expected to reflect on their sins deeply, to resolve to stop committing them, and to describe them in depth to a priest, and there has been considerable debate over whether this process (and the literature that promoted it) was oppressive, and—if so—in what ways. In the past century, this debate came to a head at an important conference on medieval religion in 1972. There, Thomas Tentler described medieval manuals for confessors as a form of "social control," "intended to bring guilt down on people who deviate" (124). Medieval confession, in Tentler's model, was aimed at controlling people's behaviours. Leonard Boyle responded that Tentler's claim was "all too negative and sweeping" and stressed that these manuals were not "intended" to to enforce "conformity to the regulations of the hierarchy" of the Church itself, but rather to "the law of God" (129). Tentler responded that while he differed from Boyle in his "attitude toward ecclesiastical authorities," he nevertheless held that confessors' manuals were "designed to present a coherent system in which [hierarchical and priestly authorities] can order, threaten, persuade, and control" (136).

In this debate, the question over whether medieval confession was oppressive was not about whether it controlled a person's behaviour or imposed strict obedience to Church doctrine—this was accepted by both sides; rather, it hinged on whether confession was understood strictly, or even primarily, as means of bringing a penitent closer to salvation. Those studying medieval confessional texts often focus, like Tentler does, on the ways in which this literature supported the power of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to change penitents' behaviour. Yet among those who have this focus, some find that there were also, within this body of writing, moments of liberation from this hierarchy. In their chapter on confessional literature, Marjorie Curry Woods and Rita Copeland draw on Tentler's views but find a subversive quality to the "narrative exempla and the petty but memorable details of ordinary life" that confessional literature offers (406).

Yet the issue of whether medieval confession was insidious in some way becomes more complicated when we examine the concept of control. It is perhaps common to think of the control enacted through confession in Tentler's terms, as an ecclesiastical authority effecting "behavioural change," but for Michel Foucault, this is only one aspect of it (134). Foucault noticed what he considered a compulsion to confess among his contemporaries in mid-twentieth century France, and posited that an effect of the medieval Church's emphasis on confession was that confessional practices had become "deeply ingrained" to the extent that they were no longer felt strictly as the effect of an authority enacting behavioural change. Instead, the process of confession created a sense of liberation (60). This sense of liberation, though, is different from that produced by the subversion described by Woods and Copeland, as it is created and conditioned by the same system that is purportedly being escaped.

Foucault held that, by demanding that people speak the "truth, lodged in [their] most secret nature," medieval confession was key to "the procedures of individualization," effectively an acknowledgement of oneself (as separate from a group). In this model, then, medieval confession was not oppressive in any straightforward sense; while it constrained behaviour, it was felt as a liberation, and it led to an awareness of the self, although this awareness was deeply conditioned by the system that created it (59).

If confession, and the literature that supported it (including the *Parson's Tale*), promoted a kind of individualization among medieval people, this is worth looking at more carefully, since "individualization" is considered by some to be a fundamentally modern process, one that separates the modern from the medieval. The nineteenth-century historian Jacob Burckhardt famously argued that a medieval person "was conscious of himself only as member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation," and that the "individual" ("individuum") was discovered only in the Early Modern period (143). For Burckhardt, medieval religion was particularly antithetical to individualism (*ibid.*).

These ideas resurfaced in various iterations in English literary studies, perhaps most famously in Stephen Greenblatt's ground-breaking *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. Greenblatt spoke of the "well-documented limitations" of Burckhardt's work (161), yet echoes of Burckhardt can be heard in his claim that the literature of the Early Modern period reflects a new emphasis on the self: "an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process" (2). The idea that the Early Modern period was one of "increased self-consciousness" has been challenged by medieval historians and literary scholars alike.**[2]** Medieval confession might provide further grounds for challenging the ideas of scholars like Greenblatt if, as Foucault suggests, it contributed to "the procedures of individualization" (59).

Foucault's ideas about confession have other implications for the study of medieval literature. For Foucault, the new emphasis on confession in the thirteenth century led to a "metamorphosis in literature," from "trials" of bravery or sainthood to "a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself. . . a truth" (59). This model, in which confessional texts like the *Parson's Tale* represent a move from tales of bravery to those of individuals, sounds much like the models of the medieval period put forth by W. P. Ker (1908), R. W. Southern (1953) and others. For Southern, and those he influenced, the dawn of the twelfth century brought with it an "urge towards a greater measure of solitude, of introspection and self-knowledge"—one that was accompanied by new types of writing, characterized through their "warmth and intimacy" (227, 228). Southern, drawing on the work of Ker, describes this model as a shift from "epic" to "romance" (219).

But this model has been challenged by various scholars. These include Robert M. Stein (2006) and Sarah Kay (1995), the latter of whom considers the temporal and formal overlap between medieval "epics" and "romances" as evidence that the model is too reductive. Deeply introspective works from before the twelfth century, like Augustine's *Confessions* and the Anglo-Saxon confessional prayers designed for penitents preparing for confession, also point to the limitations of any model that casts literature prior to the twelfth century as somehow less individual than that which follows it. The question of whether confessional texts like the *Parson's Tale* contributed to a kind of "individualization," then, can be an important one for how we approach characterizations of the medieval period and its literature.

Text

One question that emerges from these debates is that of how consistently the *Parson's Tale* upholds the system of confession in which it participates. Does it offer some moments of "liberation" from this system in Woods and Copeland's terms, and, if so, what are these? Central

to these questions is whether we are meant to take the Parson and his teachings at face value. While most of the portraits of Chaucer's pilgrims in the General Prologue are understood as exhibiting a characteristic Chaucerian satire (and, therefore, as undermining somewhat their subjects), the Parson's is often said to lack it, presenting instead a figure of unimpeachable virtue who escapes the narrator's scorn. The absence of this satire could be read as offering support for the figure of the Parson, and, through it, his tale, and therefore as an endorsement for the system of control that the *Tale* dramatizes.

For some, the tale represents a rejection of tales in favour of eternal truths. In the prologue to his tale, the Parson states that he rejects "fables and swich wrecchednesse," and his *Tale* is distinct from the others in having no real narrative, or characters in any traditional sense (ParsP 34). These qualities have led some, such as Traugott Lawler (1980), to argue that the *Parson's Tale* represents a departure from the act of tale-telling (147-156). Read this way, the *Parson's Tale* acts as a reproach, both to the pilgrims who have been telling tales, and, at a meta-narrative level, to the reader, who has thus far been complicit in their telling. So, the *Parson's Tale* could be thought of, in Tentler's terms, as propping up a system aimed at enforcing control to Church doctrine by rejecting tales in favor of moral teaching at both a narrative and meta-narrative level.

Of course, by encouraging the audience to reflect on its sins, the *Tale* could be thought of in Foucault's terms as contributing to a process of "individualization." The process of considering each sin requires one to reflect on oneself alone—on one's persistent habits and past actions—and it could therefore foster an awareness of the qualities that separate oneself from a group. So, for example, the extended passage warning against pride in dress might prompt reflection on a reader's own over-elaborate dressing, which would, in turn, emphasize the reader's distinctiveness from others, ultimately leaving the reader with a greater sense of individuality (ParsT 412-437). This reflection is, fundamentally, conditioned by the Church and ultimately aimed at destroying the same qualities that it seeks to identify, so, in Foucault's model, it cannot be taken as a liberating.

Nevertheless, the tale and its teller might in some ways subvert the system they supposedly work to promote. Although the Parson explicitly denounces fables, and aligns his own tale with moral truths, some have suggested that his contribution is nevertheless a form of entertainment in its own right. Arvind Thomas has argued that the tale draws on the style of both confession manuals and sermons and, in this mingling of styles, creates a kind of "diversion" from the otherwise pedantic form of manuals for penitents (431). Such a "diversion" could theoretically act to subvert the conventions of these manuals. Still, a blend of lively tales with elements of sermon writing exists in other manuals for penitents, such as *Handlyng Synne* and *Jacob's Well*, which suggests that this body of texts was full of its own diversions. The appearance of such features in the *Parson's Tale* is therefore not necessarily a sign of subversion.

Perhaps a more likely place to find subversion is suggested by the Host's twice-repeated accusation that the Parson is a "Lollere," a term used to designate the supporters of John Wyclif (MLT 1173, 1177). Wyclif and his followers criticized the established Church on many grounds, including that it put too much emphasis on the saints, that members of its clergy were overly concerned with earthly riches, and that it restricted translations of the Bible out of Latin. For these and other beliefs, Wyclif was condemned by Pope Gregory XI in 1377. If the Parson is cast

as a supporter of Wyclif, then he is a representative of what the established English Church of the day felt was one of its most significant threats.

But it is hard to say how seriously we are meant to take the Host's accusations of the Parson's associations with Wyclif. After all, when he makes this suggestion, the Host is trying to silence the Parson, and his accusation might be intended for this purpose alone and no other. Yet the Parson's portrait in the *General Prologue* might contain some hints of Lollardy. Katherine Little finds "Wycliffite undertones" in the portrait's emphasis on pastoral instruction, and in the Parson's dependence on the Bible and a literal interpretation of scripture (we are told, for example, that he "trewely wolde preche" "Cristes gospel" [GP 481])—two approaches that Lollards valued (86-87). Yet the Parson's portrait cannot be read as wholly Lollard; the Parson is described in the context of a pilgrimage, a practice that Lollards firmly disavowed (Pitard 306).

The *Tale* itself has been read variously as both highly orthodox and as exhibiting Wycliffite sympathies. As a manual for penitents, it strongly promotes medieval confession, a practice that Wyclif's followers denounced. And yet some, including Peggy Knapp (97-98) and Frances McCormack (39-104) find traces of vocabulary associated with Lollardy in the tale. Lollard associations, whether in the tale itself, or in its teller, work to undermine the foundations of the Church and its position on confession and, in so doing, subvert somewhat the immense control that the Church had over medieval lives.

The question of whether the *Tale* and its teller work to subvert the system of medieval confession is caught up in broader questions of Chaucer's supposed resistance to the established Church of his day. The Lollard movement has often, though not unproblematically, been taken as proto-Protestant, and as a harbinger of the Reformation and the dawn of the Early Modern period. The tendency to read the *Parson's Tale* as exhibiting Lollard sympathies, or as otherwise challenging the established Church, is likewise part of a wider tendency to cast Chaucer as a Proto-Protestant figure. As Linda Georgianna notes, attempts to read Chaucer in this light cannot be separated from scholars' ongoing desire to envision him as an emblem of the emerging Reformation, and of modernity itself. As we approach the question of subversion in the *Parson's Tale,* and in Chaucer's others tales, we must therefore keep in mind the ways in which this question has been traditionally shaped by a desire to find elements of the Reformation and of the "modern" in Chaucer.

Transformation

1. For Foucault, an emphasis on confession in the thirteenth century led to a change in literature, from "trials" of bravery or sainthood to "a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself. . . a truth" (59). Think of some texts that you've encountered from before this supposed change (such as those from the eleventh and twelfth centuries) and some texts from after it (such as those from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries). Do these texts support Foucault's model of literary change? What objections might be raised to this model?
2. In the prologue to the *Parson's Tale,* the Parson avows that he rejects "fables and swich wrecchednesse," choosing instead to tell "a myrie tale in prose" (ParsP 34, ParsP 46).

How is the *Parson's Tale* different from others in the *Canterbury Tales*, or from other medieval tales that you've read?

3. Does it matter for how we read the text if the Parson is linked to John Wyclif and his followers? Does it matter for how we view Chaucer and his legacy? Why or why not?
4. By asking readers to reflect on their behaviour, manuals for penitents like the *Parson's Tale* encourage intense self-reflection. How does this kind of reflection compare with that encouraged by contemporary behavioural assessments, like personality quizzes or educational self-assessments?
5. Why might some scholars associate qualities like "introspection" and "self-knowledge" with modernity? What objections might be raised to this association?
6. Does a text like the *Parson's Tale*, which offers a catalogue of sins that a medieval penitent might have to confess, give us insight into the kinds of sins medieval penitents committed? Why or why not?
7. In your own words, define "social control." Do all literary texts enforce "social control" in some way?
8. The *Parson's Tale* is generally understood to be the last of the *Canterbury Tales*. What is the significance of this tale's placement at the end of the work?

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Notes:

[1] For more on the development of the Seven Deadly Sins, see Bloomfield.

[2] For further reading on this topic, see Aers.