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# Individual Spirituality and The Canterbury Tales: An Analysis of the Philosophical Connection Between The Tale of Melibee and The Parson's Tale as It Operates within the Narrative Framework

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Individual Spirituality and The Canterbury Tales: An Analysis of the Philosophical Connection  
Between The Tale of Melibee and The Parson's Tale as It Operates within the Narrative  
Framework

A Thesis

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by

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Dedicated to Charlene H. Martin—for teaching that creativity is the root of all intellect.

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## Abstract

An analysis of both the placement and the philosophical connections between *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale* suggests that a highly individual spiritual philosophy is being presented within *The Canterbury Tales*. This philosophy is exemplified via an analysis of both the role of *The Tale of Melibee* within the work, and the manner in which it is historically developed. The highest form of individual spirituality is revealed within *The Tale of Melibee*, through the spiritual developments occurring within the character Melibeus and his wife Prudence. This development serves to unify the exemplified extremes of satire and spirituality presented throughout the work, as well as to illustrate the manner in which the individual human being develops his or her own individual spirituality through an active engagement with life, which in turn promotes a unity of the aforementioned extremes.

*The Canterbury Tales* is one of Geoffrey Chaucer's most well known and well studied work; yet despite its popularity *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale* remain two of the least studied tales within the work. Modern scholarship has suggested a myriad of possible meanings and interpretations of both of these tales, with most scholars either asserting that the two works are either parodic or satiric. Yet despite the research done on the individual tales themselves, there has been surprisingly little work done regarding their possible meaning as conjoined tales operating within the cohesive narrative framework that comprises *The Canterbury Tales*. An analysis of the relationship between the central philosophies presented within these two tales, viewed in relationship to the rest of the work, suggests that they serve to illustrate a key part of Chaucer's overarching message concerning the development of human spirituality in *The Canterbury Tales*. When the possibility that Chaucer may have been tentatively presenting a highly individualized spiritual philosophy that was largely unexplored in his time—a philosophy based on the relationship between the individual human being and the divine—is presented, it becomes evident that *The General Prologue*, *Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale* serve as brackets within which the spiritual philosophy of *The Canterbury Tales* are developed and explored. The existence of such an overarching spiritual theme is immediately highlighted by the establishment of the pilgrimage theme, which is established in the *General Prologue*, while the human aspects of Chaucer's spirituality are developed via both the character portraits and the pilgrims telling of their tales.

The connection between the inward spiritual journey and the pilgrimage in medieval literature has been examined by many scholars and is a traditional theme explored not only by Chaucer but by William Langland, Margery Kemp, and to a slightly lesser degree the Gawain-Poet and Boccaccio (Dyas10-11). Yet Chaucer's presentation of spirituality within the

framework of a pilgrimage-tale differs from the traditional presentation of the pilgrimage in medieval literature in that *The Canterbury Tales* frequently seems to unify the temporal and the spiritual, suggesting that knowledge of the spiritual world can neither thrive within the individual, nor be obtained by the individual, without an equal knowledge of the temporal world. In a similar fashion, many of the tales within *The Canterbury Tales* demonstrate that the temporal world deteriorates when an equal knowledge of the spiritual world is not understood. In order to view this theme as it operates within *The Canterbury Tales* it is necessary not only to analyze the relationship between the tales themselves but to illustrate the connections which develop between the tellers of the tales and the Host, who ultimately provides the narrative framework in which *The Canterbury Tales* is developed. Understanding the philosophical connections between *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale*, as well as the relationship that develops between the characters in Chaucer's pilgrimage, makes it possible to view *The Canterbury Tales* as a cohesive work, in which the centrality of Chaucer's spiritual theme can be demonstrated. Before this theme can be examined, however, it is necessary to understand the historical currents which surrounded Chaucer during his lifetime. It is entirely possible that the rapidly changing sociopolitical structures of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in concert with a growing dissatisfaction with the corruption evident in the established church hierarchy, served as the impetus which made Chaucer's spiritual philosophy possible.

Chaucer himself was born in 1342 to a financially successful family. This fact may have contributed to Chaucer's development of a unique outlook on both spiritual and temporal matters, as the shifting economic grounds in England during the middle half of the 1300's permitted for the first time the rapid growth and development of a proverbial "fourth estate" (Strohm, *Social* 5-23) comprised of an increasingly populous and influential middle class. The



increasingly solid presence of this “fourth estate” can be supported by numerous parliamentary documents dating from the fourteenth century, which indicate that the upper ranks of the formerly rigid social hierarchy were quickly becoming open to an increasingly populous middle class. Chaucer’s father, a successful wine merchant, belonged to this class, and as a result was able not only to secure a solid education for his son, but was also positioned in a manner which allowed him the opportunity for social advancement within the widening economic ranks. Chaucer’s own economic advancement led him through numerous jobs, beginning as a low-level retainer in the household of the Countess of Ulster. Throughout his life he steadily climbed through the ranks of his society and gained an increasingly solid political standing as his social and diplomatic responsibilities increased. It is possible that this unique social position—and in discussing the uniqueness of this position it may be worthwhile to note that by the time of Chaucer’s death the increasing “bureaucratization” of the recently developed “civil service section” resulted in a dramatic decline in the former capability for upwards social mobility, a trend which would not be seen again until the Renaissance (Strohm, *Social* 11)—allowed Chaucer to offer a wide and experienced-based commentary on all three of the traditional English estates during his composition of *The Canterbury Tales*. In addition to Chaucer’s ability to offer a widely informed social commentary, the correlation between Chaucer’s social position and the “travel theme” of *The Canterbury Tales* may be illustrated. Unlike some of his contemporaries, as Chaucer moved upwards socially he was entrusted with increasingly delicate diplomatic duties. These duties necessitated a great deal of travel throughout Europe, which resulted in his exposure to a wide variety of cultures, literatures and philosophies. Such exposure clearly has an influence on Chaucer’s writing within *The Canterbury Tales*, evinced not only by the “travel theme” of the work, but also by the influence of other writers, such as Dante and

Boccaccio.

In addition to the developing changes in the social stratification of English society, the fact that Chaucer's birth occurred only six years prior to the Black Death may also have had an impact on the development of his spiritual philosophy, as the massive amount of deaths resulting from this plague caused a shift in spiritual and religious perception within his society. Within four years the Black Death killed an estimated fifty percent of the population of Europe, though England was less severely affected. Many historians have noted that the recurrence of such an event remained a constant threat in the minds of the generations that followed. While there is little textual evidence to suggest that Chaucer was influenced by the Black Death during the composition of *The Canterbury Tales*, and certainly not to the extent to which Boccaccio was influenced during his composition of *The Decameron*, it seems possible to assert that the general air of uncertainty prevalent within both European and English society would have contributed to a shifting awareness of mortality and a corresponding shift in contemplation of the spiritual. The vivid description of the ulcer on the Cook's shin in the *General Prologue* hints at such awareness of mortality, and may be indicative of Chaucer's ability to present various elements of his society honestly while simultaneously satirizing them. Elements of death and violence are also present in *The Tale of Melibee*. In this tale the reactions of Melibee and his wife result in the spiritual and the satiric becoming more closely fused when Melibee, the somewhat ignorant and apparently hen-pecked patriarch who may serve as a Chaucerian Everyman, is led from his desire for vengeance into an acceptance of the Christian ideal of forgiveness.

Despite the textual ambiguity concerning any possible influence by the Black Death, what is certain is that the sheer number of deaths resulting from this plague was the central cause of a severe labor shortage in England. This labor shortage resulted in an increased demand for

higher wages from the peasantry. It is possible that the social unrest prevalent within the lower classes of English society during this time was fueled not only by the increasing demands resulting from labor shortages but also by the increasingly open social hierarchy from which the peasantry was largely barred. Regardless of the exact causes behind the social tensions, the repressive legislation and the increased taxation by Richard II that followed as a result of this civil unrest ultimately culminated in the Peasant's Revolt of 1381. This revolt clearly had great deal of influence on both John Gower, a contemporary of Chaucer and a staunch opponent to the revolt, and on William Langland. Although Chaucer himself was not as clearly unsympathetic to the peasant's cause as Gower, there are distinct echoes within *The Canterbury Tales* indicating that Chaucer was not only aware of the situation but was also actively contemplating it during the construction of the *Tales*. This is most notably in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, in which Chaucer makes direct mention of Jack Straw<sup>1</sup>.

The social tensions prevalent in almost every level of English society during Chaucer's lifetime would almost certainly have had an impact on his views of both human society and spirituality. These factors increase the likelihood that *The Canterbury Tales* contains multiple layers of meaning, which can be borne out when the shifting conception of the pilgrimage as it was viewed in Chaucer's time is examined, as well as by the radically diverging opinions which modern scholars voice concerning Chaucer's work. It may be that these increasing tensions and uncertainties made it necessary for Chaucer to construct a deliberately ambiguous text with regards to his own spiritual philosophy, particularly when the bloody conclusion to the Lollard movement is considered. Before any analysis of the spirituality contained within *The Canterbury Tales* can be examined, however, it is necessary to examine one of the most prevalent opinions

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Straw was one of the known leaders of the Peasant's Revolt.

regarding its ultimate meaning: namely, the argument that *The Canterbury Tales* is a work of pure satire. In order to examine the spirituality of *The Canterbury Tales* it is necessary to illustrate the manner in which the elements of satire function alongside the deeper spiritual philosophy presented within the work.

Although there have been many arguments regarding the placement of *The Canterbury Tales* in the genre of satire, and although it is impossible to deny that many of the tales themselves are purely satiric, the central argument for labeling the *entire* work as a satire focuses on the shifting social attitudes regarding the pilgrimage in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Understanding the religious turmoil in England at the time when Chaucer was organizing *The Canterbury Tales*, and understanding the shift in opinion regarding the pilgrimage, are of central importance when it comes to illustrating the manner in which Chaucer unites the temporal with the spiritual within his work. Without placing *The Canterbury Tales* in the proper historical context this temporal-spiritual fusion becomes invariably tied to the textual evidence alone, and therefore remains both radically ambiguous and speculative.

The final historical factor contributing to the development of Chaucer's spiritual philosophy within *The Canterbury Tales* can be evinced by an analysis of the religious turmoil prevalent in England during his lifetime. This turmoil encapsulated the shift in religious attitude within the mainstream English society. Although the general conception of Chaucer's time held by popular readers is that it was an age of absolute faith in the established Church doctrine, much of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were in fact dominated by a growing trend of skepticism, in which the blatant excesses of the clergy were attacked from many quarters and many of the teachings and tenants were called into question, most notably evinced by the reforms proposed by John Wycliffe and the Lollards (Thomas 3-5). Although Wycliffe and his followers

called for broad-ranging reforms, to such a degree that they are sometimes called the forerunners of the Protestant Reformation, the direct relation that these proposed reforms have on Chaucer's writings—and on the spiritual philosophy developed within *The Canterbury Tales*—can be illustrated primarily through an analysis of the changing views of the pilgrimage in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Lollards central arguments against the pilgrimage is centered on three main points: that there was no ultimate merit in the holy places themselves, that the actual journey to holy places was a “pretext for immoral behavior and a misuse of human energy and resources” (Dyas 143), and that the pilgrimage itself was unnecessary as the true pilgrimage was the “moral journey of obedience, lived out day by day in the calling assigned by God” (Dyas 144). Further historical evidence suggests that by the latter half of the fourteenth century the popular conception of the pilgrimage itself had deteriorated from a respected spiritual journey, in which man's literal journey to a sacred location directly mirrored his metaphysical journey towards a greater spiritual truth, into a vacation-like journey dominated more by curiosity than by any sense of heightened spiritual passions (Zacher 1-7). This shifting in attitude has prompted several scholars, particularly John M. Bowers, to propose that *The Canterbury Tales* is at best purely satiric and at worst a polemic attack against English society. Consider the following statement, made by William Thorpe in his testimony<sup>2</sup> to Archbishop Arundel:

Also, sire, I knowe wel þat whanne dyuerse men and wymmen  
wolen goen þut aftir her owne willis and fyndingsis out on  
pilgrimageyngis þei wolen ordeyne biforehonde to haue wiþ hem  
boþe men and wymmen þat kunnen wel synge rowtinge songis,

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<sup>2</sup> William Thorpe was suspected of being a Lollard. *Although The Testimony of William Thorpe* was not published until 1407, several years after Chaucer's death, historical evidence shows that the interrogation itself predated the publication by several years. It is not unreasonable, then, to assume that the content of this testimony was known prior to its publication.

and also summe of þese pilgrimes wolen haue wiþ hem  
baggenpipis so þat in eche toun þat þei comen þour□, what wiþ  
noyse of her syngyng, and wiþ þe soun of her pipinge, and wiþ þe  
gingelyng of her Cantirbirie bellis, and wiþ þe berkyng out of  
dogges after hem, þese maken more noyse þan king came þere  
away wiþ his clarioneris and manye oþer mynystrals. And if þese  
men and wymmen ben a moneþe oute in her pilgrymage, manye of  
hem and half □eere after shulen be greete iangelers, the tellers and  
lyeris (Thorpe, qut. in Bowers).

This statement echoes the Lollards disdain for pilgrimages, a subject that recurs frequently not only in the writings and preaching of the Lollards, but also in the assertions made by orthodox preachers. Furthermore, there are many similarities between Thorpe's statement and the statement made by Dominican preacher John Bromyard: "There are some who keep their pilgrimage not for God but for the devil. Those who sin more freely when away from home or who go on pilgrimages to succeed in inordinate and foolish love, those who spend their time on the road in evil and uncharitable conversation make their pilgrimage away from God to the devil" (qtd. in Dyas 143). Thorpe's assertions mirror many of the pilgrims presented in *The Canterbury Tales*, particularly the bagpipe-playing Miller, and singing Pardoner and the Summoner, and the Monk with his bridal bells. Similarly, the Host's tale-telling competition on the way to Canterbury—complete with a purely temporal reward offered to the teller of the best tale—is in keeping with the statement made by Bromyard.

These statements and others like them are clearly illustrative of the shift in opinion regarding the spirituality of the pilgrimage in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and are

among the most frequently cited by scholars who assert that *The Canterbury Tales* is a work of pure satire. Yet such assertions often fail to answer the clear themes of spirituality presented within the opening lines of *The General Prologue*, as well as the spiritual message presented in *The Parson's Tale*. The most common answer is to place *The Parson's Tale* itself in the realm of satire (Knapp 103-105). However, to accept the assertion that *The Canterbury Tales* is a work of pure satire largely negates the possibility that there is a deeper metaphysical philosophy underlying the entire work, a philosophy that can be shown through an analysis of the interconnectedness of the numerous tales. Even Peggy Knapp, in her attempt to paint the Parson as a satirized image of a Lollard, is forced to admit in the end that “the tale does not fully deliver what the *General Prologue* and the intertext have led us to expect” (112). This failure is equally evident in the arguments of scholars who would place *The Parson's Tale* as the central work in *The Canterbury Tales*.

Much like the scholars who suggest that *The Canterbury Tales* is a work of satire, those who argue that *The Parson's Tale* is actually the central work of *The Canterbury Tales* or “the only part of *The Canterbury Tales* worth reading” (Raybin and Holley ix), are frequently forced to contend with similar interpretive problems due to the structure of the text. In this structure the character of the Parson is clearly painted as the best of the religious characters, yet even so it is difficult to deny the elements of satire that surround both the character and his tale. The view which proposes that *The Parson's Tale* returns the pilgrimage to its traditional orthodox meaning and redeems the previous satiric elements of *The Canterbury Tales* with “a hopeful vision of salvation” (Raybin and Holley xi), fails to account for the presence of the other more clearly satiric tales to begin with, save to conclude that Chaucer's intention in writing was ultimately to redeem the tale in the end. Unfortunately, this view of the Parson proverbially knitting up *The*

*Canterbury Tales* fails to take into account the *Retraction* that follows directly after it. Indeed, this inconsistency has prompted one scholar to go as far as to propose that it should be “untied from *The Canterbury Tales*” in order to “preserve its [*The Parson’s Tale’s*] integrity as Chaucer’s treatise on penance and the seven deadly sins” (Vaughan 72). These difficulties and layers of ambiguity make it evident that Chaucer was not presenting a conservative spiritual philosophy which was entirely in keeping with the established doctrine of the time. Yet at the same time it cannot be denied that there are distinctly spiritual elements throughout the text. The debate concerning whether Chaucer intended *The Canterbury Tales* to be understood as a predominantly spiritual work or a work of pure satire can therefore be said to be in many ways emblematic of the split in opinion regarding the role and significance of the pilgrimage.

The fact that *The Canterbury Tales* itself is largely rife with philosophical and ideological contradictions, which range from the seemingly pious conclusion presented in *The Parson’s Tale* to the multi-layered complexities presented in the more bawdy and humoresque tales such as *The Miller’s Tale* and *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, to the apparent outright negation of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole in Chaucer’s *Retraction*, has clearly been the impetus that fuels the debate concerning its meaning. However, the entire debate has its roots in one of the most common trends in modern scholarship, namely the tendency of many scholars to assume that any ideological or philosophical issue must have a definite “either/or” conclusion.<sup>3</sup> This tendency apparently has its roots in early Greek mathematics, philosophy, and particularly in the study of logic as it was developed by Aristotle. Despite some relatively modern philosophical refutation of the overall effectiveness of the “either/or” argument in all fields of research it is further

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<sup>3</sup> The “either/or” argument is based on the assumption that a.) A thing cannot both be and not be simultaneously (the principle of non-contradiction); b.) A thing is identical to itself (a tautology); and most significantly to this argument c.) The assumption that a thing must exclusively be either A or B, with no possibility that a third option exists.



ingrained in most western cultures, due largely to the fact that many everyday linguistic exchanges and scenarios are presented within an “either/or” frame. This primarily logical principle has largely been misapplied throughout the history of academia, particularly in the field of literature, resulting in the formation of a generally unrecognized tendency to negate the possibility that a literary work, as distinct from a traditional ethical or philosophical assertion, can in fact be both A and B by virtue of its author’s distinct beliefs and intentions. Understanding the meaning that can be derived from Chaucer’s presentation of the *General Prologue*, *The Tale of Melibee*, and *The Parson’s Tale*, both as they function within *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole and as they function as individual tales, will make it possible to reconcile the elements of comic satire found within the *Tales* with the theological, political and philosophical implications that exist alongside the comedic satire. This understanding will provide a more thorough and comprehensive view of Chaucer’s intention, and the overarching philosophy that is presented in the construction of his work.

These intentions can best be illustrated by examining the emerging interconnectedness between the purely spiritual knowledge presented in the pilgrimage theme and human actions within the temporal world demonstrated by the actions and interactions of the pilgrims. The interconnected nature of this temporal/spiritual knowledge is shown by the link which develops between *The Parson’s Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee*, but can only be fully understood when the characters’ interactions with one another, and particularly with the Host, are examined in concert with the moral elements contained within their tales. Before this analysis can take place, however, it is necessary to examine the manner in which the theme of spirituality is presented in the *General Prologue*, and the way in which that theme forms the narrative structure of *The Canterbury Tales*. By analyzing the connections between *The General Prologue*, *The Tale of*

*Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale* it is possible to synthesize the clearly satiric elements present in *The Canterbury Tales* with the existence of a deeper spiritual philosophy which, rather than strictly adhering to either the reforms espoused by the Lollards or the traditional teachings of the Church, unifies elements of both viewpoints while simultaneously presenting a third viewpoint regarding human spirituality.

*The Canterbury Tales* was unfinished by the time of Chaucer's death, and the exact order of these tales has been subject to speculation. The *General Prologue* and *The Parson's Tale*, however, are universally accepted to be the first and last entries in *The Canterbury Tales*. This structure can be proven by the textual evidence presented in the *General Prologue*, which clearly establishes the beginning of the pilgrimage which forms the framework of *The Canterbury Tales*, and by the Host's statement that "every man, save thou, hath toold his tale / Unbokele and shewe us what is in thy male; / For trewlwy, me thynketh by thy cheere / Thou sholdest knytte up wel a greete mateere."<sup>4</sup> (X, 24-28), which clearly indicates the beginning of the final tale. Although several scholars have argued that there is no overarching theme within *The Canterbury Tales*, it seems evident that these assertions are not true, as many of these arguments seem to contradict themselves. Notably, Harold Bloom argues that any attempt to discover a unifying theme in the subject matter of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole "breaks down over the whole series, and has been effectively refuted" (10). Yet within two paragraphs of this assertion Bloom is forced to claim that "the moral insight, moreover, gives rise, in the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, to an analysis of social rank in terms of economic behavior which is remarkable for its penetration and prescience" (11). To assert the presence of a "moral insight" in the *General Prologue* and

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<sup>4</sup> All textual citations from *The Canterbury Tales* are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer, Third Edition*, edited by Larry D. Benson.

then to assume that this insight either vanishes throughout the rest of the work, or else is focused solely on the economic behavior of the characters within the *General Prologue*, seems to come perilously close to falling into the logical fallacy of the principle of non-contradiction<sup>5</sup>. Yet the textual presentation of both the opening of the *General Prologue* and the character portraits make it clear that there are distinct moral judgments being made regarding both the characters and, by extension, the tales that they tell. These judgments are made as a result of the direct response of the reader to the information presented within the text, rather than being confined to the particular viewpoints or interpretations of any individual character. It is therefore possible to assert the presence of an overarching moral theme within *The Canterbury Tales*. Furthermore, the imagery presented in the opening lines of the *General Prologue* suggests that this moral theme transcends the purely temporal socioeconomic portrait illustrated by the representation of the three medieval estates in the numerous character portraits. This moral-spiritual connection can be evinced when the aforementioned evidence is examined in conjunction with the spiritual theme established by David Raybin.

The argument proposed by Raybin examines the allusive themes presented in the *General Prologue* as they relate to the overall spiritual structure of *The Canterbury Tales*, positing a progressive structure to the *Tales* which begins with the *General Prologue* and culminates with *The Parson's Tale*. This argument begins by examining the metaphor of the flower that Chaucer presents in the opening lines, “Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote / The droughte of March hath perced to the roote, / And bathed every veyne in swich licour / Of which vertu engendred is the flour” (I, 1-4). Raybin claims that the flower envisioned here by readers becomes a “symbol

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<sup>5</sup> In logic, the principle of non-contradiction states that a thing cannot simultaneously be and not be. With regards to *The Canterbury Tales*, there cannot simultaneously be a moral insight contained within it and not be an overarching moral theme resultant from this insight.

of beauty, faith, perfection of all kinds, and, at the opposing extreme, the transience of all such earthly excellence.” He claims that “the implied metaphor extends smoothly into visions of springtime renewal, paschal rebirth, nascent love, and wondrous adventure” (11). The spiritual implication which surrounds this imagery becomes a metaphor for the pilgrims journeying to Canterbury, and constantly remains in the background of the socio-economic and political elements prevalent throughout the individual tales. This nature-based imagery reaches its conclusion in *The Parson’s Tale*, with the Parson’s metaphoric use of a tree in his sermon on penitence. As the Parson states: “And this is fruytful penitence agayn three thynges in which we wratthe oure Lord Jhesu Crist; / this is to seyn, by delit in thynkyng, by recchelesness in spekyng, and by wikked sinful werkyng. / And agayns this wikked giltes is Penitence, that may be likned unto a tree” (X, 110-112). He continues to develop this metaphor by likening the root of the tree to contrition, the stalk and branches to confession, and the fruit to satisfaction. The act of confession is examined in length by the Parson in his sermon on the Seven Deadly Sins and his proposed remedies. In his argument Raybin claims that the “fruyt of Satisfacioun” (X 113) that is discussed in the opening of *The Parson’s Tale* is a direct link back to the spiritual themes intoned by the opening of the General Prologue. He, with several like-minded scholars, claims that this link between the structure of the General Prologue and the corresponding structure presented in the opening of *The Parson’s Tale* definitively proves that *The Canterbury Tales* was meant to be a didactic spiritual work.

This argument is supported by Donald R. Howard’s assertions that the flower in medieval art and literature is a figure which symbolizes the unity of the earthly and the heavenly in a series of concentric configurations, as well as “hierarchy, plentitude, and order which encompasses all that is diverse and mutable” (207). He claims that the complexities of the concentric circular

design present in the medieval conception of the flower are infinite and that in choosing the image of a flower to begin *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer is mirroring his entire work to the ptolemaic design of the universe. He further proposes that the concentric circles presented by this flower imagery would have led medieval readers to the concept of a microcosm-macrocosm image, in which man is inscribed within the center of the zodiac. This image is further heightened by the pilgrimage theme. As Howard states, “A pilgrimage, though a linear journey, was made by many pilgrims to a central shrine; all roads lead to Jerusalem in a wheel-like pattern.” (202-205). While this slightly convoluted argument might be a bit overstated, the possibility of a repetitious circular pattern comprising the overarching structure of a text has been demonstrated in the works of the Gawain-Poet, as well as Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. It may be that the unfinished nature of *The Canterbury Tales* has made it difficult for scholars to draw inferences about the structure of Chaucer’s work, and the possible influences that this structure may have had on his overarching philosophy. Yet at the same time the continuous presentation of the individual human being as the central force moving the narrative, when viewed alongside the repeating allusions to spirituality and higher morality implicit in almost every tale, does suggest that there is a cyclical pattern to *The Canterbury Tales* and that this pattern is undeniably hinged on the interactions of human beings in the temporal world as they journey towards a spiritual destination. These factors—the temporal and the spiritual—suggest that *The Canterbury Tales* contains a dual-layered cyclical structure.

The presence of such elevated spiritual themes, operating alongside the temporal and comedic themes present in almost all of the tales, suggests that Chaucer is presenting “two patterns which govern the *Canterbury Tales*, its series of oppositions and the responses they cause” (Condren 12). By the presentation of these two opposites the reader is led to synthesize

the temporal and the spiritual as he or she follows the progression of the pilgrims from the Tabard Inn to Canterbury Cathedral. This synthesis can be illustrated by the connections which arise between *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale*.

In order to understand this connection it is necessary to consider the overall structure of *The Canterbury Tales*. Edward I. Condren proposes that the structure of *The Canterbury Tales* follows “a symmetrical ring structure” (17) in which the underlying similarities between every pair of opposites can be seen best in Fragment VII.

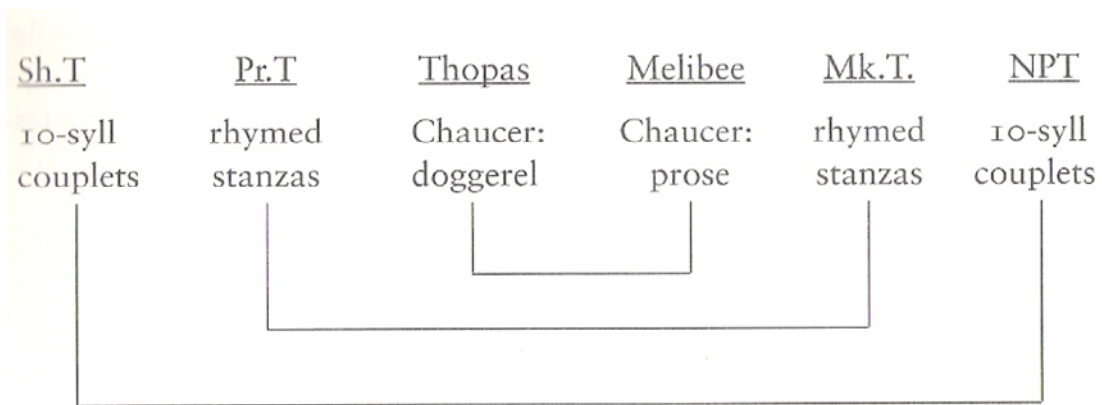


Figure 1

The medieval tendency towards a repeating structure in literature, in which the most important aspect is established at the beginning of the work and repeated at the end, is a well known literary convention which has been used since ancient times. This tendency can be most clearly illustrated in the works of the Gawain-Poet, most notably in *Pearl*. Although Condren's illustration only focuses on Fragment VII, I propose that a similar cyclical structure encapsulates *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole. The presentation of a spiritual theme, as well as the use of spiritual imagery in the *General Prologue* and its close repetition in the *Parson's Tale*, constitutes ample proof that Chaucer intended to do more than merely present a comedic satire. Yet to reduce the entirety of *The Canterbury Tales* to the Parson's homiletic presentation on

penitence negates the possibility that Chaucer may have been presenting a deeper spiritual philosophy. The social and religious turmoil prevalent in English society during Chaucer's lifetime, as well as the almost universally-recognized ambiguity of his own views and beliefs as they are presented within *The Canterbury Tales*, makes it unlikely that he was merely parroting the established spiritual views of the Church. This assertion is supported by the presence of the *Retraction* following *The Canterbury Tales*.

Yet it is equally unlikely that Chaucer was voicing his support of the radical reforms proposed by the Lollards. This can be supported by the largely negative portrayal of the Lollards within *The Canterbury Tales*, which is made evident by the Host's comments to the Parson in the epilogue of *The Man of Law's Tale*. During this epilogue, the Host stands upon his stirrups and says the following:

“Goode men, herkeneth everych on!  
This was a thrifty tale for the nones!  
Sir Parisshe Prest,” quod he, “for Goddes bones,  
Tell us a tale, as was thi forward yore.  
I se wel that ye lerned men in lore  
Can moche good, by Goddes dignitee!” (II, 1164-1169)

The Parson responds “Benedicite! What eyleth the man, so synfully to swere?” (II, 1170-1171), which prompts the Host to mockingly exclaim that he “smelle a Lollere in the wynd” (II, 1173). Even if it is possible to argue that the Host is an unreliable character, he is (along with Chaucer the Pilgrim) one of the central characters who provide the narrative-framework structure that makes up *The Canterbury Tales*.

The presence of such a comment from the Host, rather than from a clearly negative character such as the Summoner, makes it evident that Chaucer himself was not likely entirely sympathetic with the Lollards. Yet despite the Host's comments, there is little evidence that the Parson is meant to be a representation of the Lollards. The most damning evidence to the contrary, in fact, is the Parson's emphasis on confession. The Lollards claim that the sacrament of confession is unnecessary, while the Parson states that it is the "stalke that bereth braunches and leves" (X, 112) of the metaphoric tree of penitence. Again, this repetitious dual structure—in which two negative images are proposed, the ridiculed image of the Lollards voiced by the Host and the short-tempered image presented by the Parson's interactions throughout the text—leaves the final determination up to the reader while simultaneously suggesting that neither extreme is the absolute ideal.

The Parson's lack of positive presence throughout the tales further suggests that he is not the ideal character which readers should aspire to emulate, despite his extremely positive character portrait in the *General Prologue*. We are told in the *General Prologue* that the Parson is a kind, humble, and pious man who prefers to lead by example. Yet in instances throughout the tales where an example of kindness or moral actions would have been appropriate, the Parson remains conspicuously absent. One scholar claims that the Parson "doesn't intervene when harsh words and insults are exchanged; leaves it for the Knight to make peace at the end of the Pardoner's tale; is silent over the abusive treatment which the Friar and Summoner get at each other's hands; and is not in the picture at all when the Cook falls from his horse and is publicly humiliated" (Howard, *Idea* 378-79). This conspicuous absence of the kindly and virtuous qualities that Chaucer attributed to the Parson in the *General Prologue* can therefore be viewed as conclusive evidence that Chaucer's spiritual views somehow transcend the rhetorical



homiletics that are espoused by the Parson in his sermon.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore possible to conclude that the image of spirituality presented in the *General Prologue* and *The Parson's Tale*, both of which are clearly spiritually motivated but largely devoid of individual humanity and human interactions, are incapable of encapsulating the entirety of Chaucer's spiritual views as presented within *The Canterbury Tales*. This lack of conclusion that has bothered so many scholars, and has resulted in a wide division in scholarship between the belief that *The Parson's Tale* is the key to understanding *The Canterbury Tales* and the belief that it is merely another part of Chaucer's social satire. Yet despite this dichotomy the connections between the *General Prologue* and *The Parson's Tale* are evident, as are the spiritual overtones linking the two.

It seems evident that there is a similar concentric-ring structure illustrating Chaucer's presentation of the spiritual as it is unified with its opposite, the temporal, within *The Canterbury Tales*. This structure begins with the *General Prologue* and concludes with *The Parson's Tale*, as the two most spiritually-oriented tales presented, yet it culminates with *The Tale of Melibee*, in which the spiritual and the temporal are ultimately unified by Melibee's shift from temporal based vengeance-oriented to spiritual based forgiveness-oriented, and the relationship between the two that is necessary for spiritual growth and development is illustrated. While the connection between the *General Prologue* and *The Parson's Tale* has been discussed, as has the manner in which *The Parson's Tale* fails to adequately sum up the spiritual message of *The Canterbury Tales*, it is necessary, therefore, to examine *The Tale of Melibee*.

An examination of the spiritual message contained within *The Tale of Melibee* demonstrates Chaucer's fusion of the temporal and the spiritual as a means of developing

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<sup>6</sup>This negative portrayal of the Parson himself, however, does not lessen the spirituality contained within the sermon itself any more than the clear corruption in the medieval clergy can be said to lessen the reverence held for the Church itself.

individual spirituality. This tale functions as the centerpiece to the cyclical structure of *The Canterbury Tales*<sup>7</sup>, and as a result seems to demonstrate the existence of a philosophy espousing the supremacy of individual human spirituality. It is in this connection between the *General Prologue*, *The Parson's Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee* that the multitude of independent fragmentary tales which comprise *The Canterbury Tales* begin to synthesize and form one comprehensive tale. In *Pearl* the return to the waking world after a revelation of truth seems necessary for the spiritual growth of the Pearl-Dreamer, just as the Parson's spiritual guidance and the human interaction on the pilgrimage are necessary for the spiritual growth of the pilgrim—who may in fact be synonymous with the reader by the end of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Understanding the meaning that can be derived from Chaucer's presentation of *The Tale of Melibee*, both as it functions within *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole and as it functions as an individual tale, will make it possible to reconcile the elements of comic satire found within the *Tales* with the theological, political or philosophical implications that exist alongside the comedic. This understanding will provide a more thorough and comprehensive view of Chaucer's focus on individual spirituality, and the overarching philosophy that is presented in the construction of his work. These intentions can best be illustrated by examining the emerging interconnectedness between the purely spiritual knowledge contained in the pilgrimage theme and actions within the temporal world demonstrated by the actions and interactions of the pilgrims. The interconnected nature of this temporal/spiritual knowledge is evinced by the link which develops between *The Parson's Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee*, but can only be fully understood when the characters interactions with one another, and particularly with the Host, are

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<sup>7</sup> Similar in many ways to the central point in the *erber* of the dream garden of *Pearl*, perhaps, in that it encapsulates the central thesis behind the story while still leaving the rest of the story to be fulfilled by a necessary return to the temporal.

examined in concert with the morals contained within their tales. Before this analysis can take place, however, it is necessary to examine the process by which *The Tale of Melibee* was included in *The Canterbury Tales*. Examining the history of *The Tale of Melibee* and the implications surrounding its inclusion and placement in *The Canterbury Tales* will provide a framework for understanding the layers of meaning contained within both *The Tale of Melibee* itself and within the interactions between the Host and the tale-tellers.

*The Tale of Melibee* is a nearly exact translation of the French text by Renaud de Louens titled *Livre de Mellibee et Prudence*. The French text is in turn a redaction of the Italian work *Liber consolationis et consilii* by Albertano of Brescia. Historical evidence suggests that both tales were constructed or commissioned for the benefit of young men, the young son of Renaud's patroness and Albertano's own son, as a means of teaching effective reasoning and argumentation (Ellis 106-107). This evidence alone suggests that Chaucer, with his adaptation of Louens's work, had the importance of mutual dialogue in mind when developing the philosophy of *The Canterbury Tales*. Tracing Chaucer's sources for *The Tale of Melibee*, particularly when they are considered alongside the uncertain date of its inclusion into *The Canterbury Tales*, is also one of the most essential factors surrounding the radically divergent scholarly debate regarding *The Tale of Melibee's* meaning, as the date of inclusion provides information concerning the historical currents prevalent at the time. The suggested date of *The Tale of Melibee's* inclusion in *The Canterbury Tales* ranges from 1366 to 1394. The omission of certain passages regarding the political danger that accompanies child rulers present in Louens's work suggests that *Livre de Mellibee et Prudence* was translated during the transition of power from the dying Black Prince, Edward III, to his ten year old son, Richard of Bordeaux. This reference indicates that the work was very likely translated between the summer of 1372 and the summer

of 1377 (Matthews 222-25). This evidence can then be compared to Melibee and Prudence's considerable lack of individuality or individual character development. Their lack of individual character, particularly when coupled with the fact that Melibee is described simply as "A young man...myghty and riche" (VII, 967), suggests that they function at least in part as a representation of the state. Further thematic and textual evidence regarding the importance of heeding wise and proper council indicates that there is a thread of political interest running through the tale. This evidence includes the importance of exercising prudence and wisdom in decision-making as symbolized by the names given to the characters Dame Prudence and her daughter Sophie,<sup>8</sup> as well as the importance of faith and forgiveness. The thread of political interest is further developed within *The Tale of Melibee* when the inclusion of this tale is viewed alongside the increasing military tensions between England and France and the ensuing economic, political and social difficulties of the time (Stillwell 435-438).

In contrast to the possibility that *The Tale of Melibee* serves as a political allegory, certain scholars have asserted that it is nothing more than "a thing incapable of life, under and process of interpretation, a lump of the most inert 'first matter' of medieval pedantry" (W.P. Ker, qtd. in Foster, *Communal Response* 409) and have claimed that critics and readers alike tend to perceive *The Tale of Melibee* as a proverbial "lump in their oatmeal" which scholars have "never been tempted to substitute...for the *Wife of Bath's Tale* or the *Nun's Priests Tale*" (Foster, *Melibee*, 397-98). In this article Edward Foster constructs his argument around Trevor Whittock's assertion that "The *Tale of Melibee* is an enormous bore, and the bane of commentators. Some critics mutter a soothing nothing before it and hastily pass on to the next tale; others more openly

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<sup>8</sup> "Sophie" is a variation on the Greek "Sophia," which literally means "wisdom." This name was not present in *Livre de Mellibee et Prudence*, suggesting that Chaucer is making an allegorical claim about human nature and actions in his presentation of this character.

confess their bafflement and exasperation. The critics who deal with it are split between those who regard the *Tale of Melibee* as another burlesque or painful leg-pull and those who regard it as a seriously intended piece of moralizing quite in keeping with the dull homiletics of the time” (qtd. in Foster, *Melibee* 398). This assertion, along with the suggestion that any attempt to apply a deeper meaning to *The Tale of Melibee* is “an enterprise [which is] the last infirmity of the noble critical mind—the impulse to find hidden genius where none is apparent” (Foster, *Melibee* 399), clearly demonstrates the aforementioned tendency of modern scholars to confine a work of literature to that purely logical either/or paradigm. This fact is clearly confirmed when Foster insists that “defense of the tale generally falls into two categories: those who argue that medieval readers and hearers found such narratives more congenial than we do in this degenerate age and those who take the tale to be some kind of clever or elaborate Chaucerian joke” (*Melibee* 399). It further suggests that there is a dangerous trend among many scholars who study of *The Canterbury Tales*: the tendency to reduce the significance of a tale, due to either its verbosity or the supposed impenetrability of medieval culture. Viewpoints such as this have prevented *The Tale of Melibee* from being explored fully, and as a result of this omission our ability to understand and explore the meaning of *The Canterbury Tales* has thus far been diminished.

Given the probability that there is a distinct political subtext woven throughout *The Tale of Melibee*, it is easy to see how the impact of tale would have decreased in both comprehensibility and significance between 1372 and 2010. This does not, however, negate its overall importance to the radical degree which scholars such as Whittock, W.P. Ker and Foster claim. The assertion that *The Tale of Melibee* functions solely as a strange Chaucerian homiletic or a political mouthpiece might be enough to allow most scholars to simply label the tale as such, and as a result summarily dismiss the possibility of it containing any greater meaning within *The*

*Canterbury Tales*, were it not for evidence suggesting that Chaucer at one point almost certainly intended the tale to be told by the Man of Law rather than Chaucer the Pilgrim. As V.A. Kolve notes in *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*:

The tale is in prose and manages almost entirely without the aid of a narrative plot, employing the briefest of quasi-allegorical events—a man has his home broken into by three enemies, who beat his wife and wound his daughter—as an occasion for a long, elaborate debate on the wisdom of taking revenge upon those who do one injury. It avoids both rhyme and “story,” in the way the *Introduction* suggests the Man of Law intends to do. And since it’s *sic et contra* of proverb, precept and legal maxim, its great burden of learning, and its close imitation of formal counsel giving would suit the Man of Law’s profession well. (474)

Furthermore there is significant evidence suggesting that Chaucer, in addition to originally assigning *The Tale of Melibee* to the Man of Law, at one point actually intended for *The Man of Law’s Tale* to open *The Canterbury Tales*, following a slightly shortened version of the *General Prologue* (Cooper 63-65, Matthews 230). Chaucer’s rearranging of the order of his tales, and the moral/spiritual subtexts that coexist alongside the political allegories in *The Tale of Melibee*, seems to provide significant proof that that Chaucer intended this tale to serve a far greater purpose than that which scholars have thus far attributed to it. By examining the textual and thematic connections existent between *The Man of Law’s Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee*, *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson’s Tale* it will be possible to elucidate the overarching philosophical messages hidden within the many layers of *The Canterbury Tales*.

First, there is the connection between the Host's interactions in *The Man of Law's Introduction* and his interruption of *The Tale of Sir Thopas*. The Host's comment in the beginning of *The Man of Law's Introduction* is one of the few places in *The Canterbury Tales* where the passage of time is directly mentioned. The Host notes that the sun "The ark of his artificial day hath ronne / The ferthe part, and half an hour moore" (II, 2-3) allowing him to conclude that it is "ten of the klokke" (II, 14). This can be compared to the *General Prologue* in which "that day bigan to sprynge" (I, 822) and the *Parson's Prologue*, in which the continued passage of the sun marks the day at "Foure of the klokke." (X, 5). Marking the passage of time in this way serves to string the tales together within their narrative framework. It also indicates that *The Canterbury Tales* does have an overarching spiritual philosophy connected to the concentric narrative of tales, as oppose to one single, linear tale playing the predominant role in expressing Chaucer's views. This repeated emphasis on the passage of time, therefore, strongly suggests that Chaucer intended *The Canterbury Tales* to follow a specific pattern. The reader's comprehensibility of the central theme or moral functioning within the collection of the *Tales* grows as the collective wisdom and experience of the pilgrims increase through the telling of each tale. This moral element connects the tales and the tellers, suggesting that each individual tale within *The Canterbury Tales* simultaneously possesses its own moral or message and further contributes to the illumination of the larger message contained within the collected *Tales*. By viewing *The Canterbury Tales* through *The Tale of Melibee*, and by understanding the way in which that individual tale functions as one of the main unifying elements within the narrative framework of the *Tales*, Chaucer's overarching philosophy regarding the significance of human interaction can be understood. Human spirituality, then, can only grow through these necessary interactions.

By marking the passage of time Chaucer captures the attention of the reader, thereby directly linking the *The Man of Law's Introduction* to *The Parson's Tale* and *Prologue*. As it is generally accepted by scholars that *The Parson's Tale* was intended to conclude *The Canterbury Tales*, the possibility that *The Tale of Melibee* would have actually begun *The Canterbury Tales* in the place of *The Knight's Tale*, when it served as *The Man of Law's Tale* and when *The Man of Law's Tale* immediately followed the *General Prologue*, is highly suggestive of Chaucer's stylistic intentions. If the content of the original first tale, which was then *The Tale of Melibee* as told by The Man of Law, was meant to mirror the content of *The Parson's Tale* then this suggests that Chaucer may have been developing an even stronger cyclical pattern. This original order of the tales therefore seems highly significant given the tendency of medieval authors to propose the most important feature of a thing, moral, or tale in the beginning of a sequence and then to repeat it either exactly or in a similar manner at the end of the sequence. Chaucer has already shown himself to be an astute handler of geometric patterns in literature, exemplified best by the parodic mimicry linking the spherical figures in *The Knight's Tale* with the less elevated spherical figures appearing in *The Miller's Tale*. As a result, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that at some point Chaucer might have considered presenting the moral that he envisioned driving *The Canterbury Tales* in such a frame.

In fact, there are textual allusions within *The Knight's Tale* which suggests that a similar cyclical structure exists despite the reordering of the tales, between the spiritual themes presented in *The Parson's Tale* and the spiritual themes contained within *The Knight's Tale*. This connection is evident when the following lines of *The Knight's Tale* are examined in conjunction with the themes of the Parson's sermon.

We witen nat what thing we preyen heere;



We faren as he that drunken is as a mous.  
A drunken man woot well he hath a hous,  
But he noot which the righte wey is thider,  
And to a dronke man the way is slider.  
And certes, in this world so faren we;  
We seek faste after felicitee,  
But we goon wrong ful often, trewely. (I, 1260-1267)

Arcite's lament at being in prison and his philosophical belief that men "seek faste after felicitee" but "noot which the right wey is and goon wrong ful often becomes a metaphor for mankind's spiritual pilgrimage, and his relation to God and Salvation according to medieval conceptions. In addition to this philosophical lament, in the previous lines Arcite questions God's "purveiaunce," or providence, introducing a distinctly Christian undertone to *The Knight's Tale* despite the fact that it is being told in a pagan setting and is based on Boethius' book *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Furthermore, within this passage Arcite makes use of the more general and encompassing term, "we," when discussing mankind's condition. Although he is speaking to Palamon in this passage the themes introduced by the questioning of God's "purveiaunce" indicate that Chaucer has a much broader group in mind than the two cousins. The connection between Arcite's lament and the Parson's sermon, then, is evinced in the following lines:

"Manye been the weys espirituels that leden folk to oure Lord Jhesu Crist and to the regne of glorie. / Of whiche weyes ther is ful noble wey and ful convenable, which may nat fayle to man ne to woman that thurgh synne hath mysgoon fro the righte wey of Jerusalem celestial; / and this wey is cleped Penitence..." (X, 79-81). The Parson's emphasis on the "righte wey to Jerusalem celestial" not only demonstrates a connection between Arcite's statements in *The Knight's Tale*

and the spiritual message of *The Parson's Tale*, it also reunites the spiritual concepts that were presented in the structure of *The General Prologue* with the multitude of stories that comprise *The Canterbury Tales*, thereby maintaining the cyclical structure presented in the construction of *The Canterbury Tales*.

In addition to the passage of time linking *The Man of Law's Tale*, *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale*, the reoccurrence of variations of the word "lewed," which is listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as meaning both "unlearned" and "vulgar," might be said to draw an extremely vague connection between *The Man of Law's Tale* and *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and between the Man of Law and Chaucer the Pilgrim. The Man of Law's statement "But natheless, certeyn, / I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn / that Chaucer, though he ken but lewedly / On meters and on rymyng craftily, / Hath seyde hym in swich Englissh as he kan" (II, 45-49) seems to bring to mind the Host's later declaration that he is wearied by "thy verray lewednesse" (VII, 921) following *The Tale of Sir Thopas*. This evidence is extremely thin. It might be based more on the possibility of vocalization or oral readings of *The Canterbury Tales*, and the tendency of the ear to pick up on similarities and reoccurrences in words or speech patterns. Michael Foster's suggestion that the debate occurring within *The Tale of Melibee* might prompt a parallel debate to occur among the "hearers of *Melibee*" (*Melibee*, 420-421) suggests the possibility that at least some oral recitation of *the Canterbury Tales* did occur. This possibility of oral recitation is in keeping with Renaud and Albertano's construction of the original texts as teaching devices, particularly given the role of active debate and rhetoric practiced by Prudence within the tale (Foster, *Communal Response* 409).

It has already been established that *The Tale of Melibee* was at one point intended for The Man of Law, and that it was at one time meant to open *The Canterbury Tales*. This indicates that

*The Tale of Melibee* is not merely a convoluted Chaucerian joke played on the Host for the interruption of *The Tale of Sir Thopas*. Less certain are the reasons why Chaucer switched the teller of *The Tale of Melibee* from The Man of Law to Chaucer the Pilgrim as late into the composition of *The Canterbury Tales* as 1396 (Matthews, 230). The interactions between the Host and the Parson, and then between Chaucer the Pilgrim and the Host, are the means by which Chaucer the Pilgrim and *The Tale of Melibee* come to serve as the chief representations of Chaucer's philosophical message within *the Canterbury Tales*. This is particularly evident when that emerging philosophy is viewed alongside the conclusions of *The Parson's Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee*. Understanding the correlation between the morals presented in these two tales can best be elucidated by an examination of the contrasts of the characters who tell them.

Consider the numerous parallels that arise between *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale*: both are the only tales written in prose rather than poetry, both are the longest tales in *The Canterbury Tales*, both have suffered from a lack of scholarly interest due to their length and apparent incomprehensibility, both may function as "joke pieces" due to their verbosity, and most importantly both are the tales in which the moral element or message is the most dominant (Owen Jr. 267). These similarities suggest a strong connection between the tales. Chaucer's development and presentation of the contrasts that then emerge between Chaucer the Pilgrim and the Parson, as illustrated by their interactions with the Host, suggest one possible reason why *The Tale of Melibee* was given to Chaucer the Pilgrim rather than The Man of Law.

The Parson is described by Chaucer the Pilgrim as being the most ideal member of his estate. He is presented as a character who strictly observes his duties as a parish priest, although his strictness is said to be balanced by his kindly tolerance, humility, and understanding. According to the *General Prologue* he prefers to lead his parishioners by example, as opposed to

ascribing to the practice of renting out a parish in order to live luxuriously. In contrast with many of the other members of the clergy represented in *The Canterbury Tales*, including the Friar and the Monk, the Parson neither possesses nor exhibits a desire to gain material wealth. This fact is reinforced when it is stated in the *General Prologue* that the Parson is unwilling to excommunicate his parishioners for unpaid tithes. According to Chaucer the Pilgrim's account the Parson demonstrates extreme consideration in his treatment of sinners, and he exhibits no subservience towards those who are wealthy or influential (Lumiansky 239-245). Aside from the Parson's character portrait versus his actions within the text raising questions about Chaucer's own views on religion, the series of character portraits presented in *The General Prologue* raises questions about the veracity of Chaucer the Pilgrim's observational astuteness. The narration given by Chaucer the Pilgrim which constitutes the *General Prologue* suggests that he is either a considerably dense character or that he possesses a particularly strange sense of humor. Exemplifying this is the fact that he reaches conclusions about certain characters well after a medieval reader would have become aware of the conclusion. This is notably evident in the belated conclusions that he draws about the Yeoman's occupation, as well as his tendency to misinterpret the telling signs appearing around the characters, such as the Latin inscription on the Prioresses brooch. While Chaucer's presentation of Chaucer the Pilgrim is likely part of the comedic element of *The Canterbury Tales*, it does raise questions about the reliability of Chaucer the Pilgrim's observational skills. It also gives credence to the suggestion that the Parson is in some ways satirized throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. The growing synthesis between the temporal and the spiritual can further be illustrated by a comparison between the Parson and Chaucer the Pilgrim.

Until Chaucer the Pilgrim is called upon to tell his first tale, the reader's perception of his character is developed from the manner in which he presents the other characters. From his commentary in the *General Prologue* it can be inferred that he is a "genial, sociable fellow who moves easily among any group of people" to whom we can attribute "a lively and delightful sense of humor" (Lumiansky 83-84). This assessment of his personality is later confirmed by the Host when he exclaims that the company then should expect to hear "some deyntee thing, me thynketh by his cheere" (VII, 711). In addition to his genial and cheerful nature, his actions demonstrate that he possesses a sense of humility that exists alongside his lively humor. This is best exemplified by his lack of response to the Man of Law's teasing statement: "Chaucer, though he kan but lewedly / On meters and on rymyng craftily, /Hath setd hem in swich Englissh as he kan" (II, 47-49) and by his response to the Host following his interruption of *The Tale of Sir Thopas*. Following *The Tale of Sir Thopas* the Host declares "By God...for pleynly, at a word, Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!" (VII, 929-930). The lengthiness and repetitiveness of *The Tale of Melibee* prompts scholars to assume that it is a revenge piece; however, those who assert that view often negate the correlation between the characters acting within the narrative and the philosophy that arises through the tales that they tell. These qualities of humility and understanding are ironically more evident in Chaucer the Pilgrim than in the Parson, to whom they were originally ascribed. The contrast in both description and action between these two characters, as well as the comparisons that can be drawn between the characters' tales, suggest that Chaucer is commenting on the dichotomy between the temporal and the spiritual in this set of interactions. From this emerging dichotomy it has been suggested that *The Tale of Melibee* acts as a direct address from the author to the reader, in which Chaucer

is presenting his readers directly with one of the most central theme of *The Canterbury Tales* itself (Farrell, 61-62).

*The Tale of Melibee* itself opens with the injuring of Melibeus's wife and daughter while he "for his desport is went into the feeldes hym to pleye."<sup>9</sup> (VII, 968) and immediately launches into a lengthy dialogue between Melibeus and Prudence that first touches on the importance of taking the advice of wise councilors and then develops into an authority-laden plea for mercy and forgiveness of one's enemies. Over the course of this dialectic it is proposed by Prudence that the invasion of Melibeus's home and the subsequent injuring of his family is the result of his own sinfulness. As she states:

Thou hast doon synne again oure Lord Crist, / for certes, the three  
enemys of mankynde—that is to seyn, the flesh, the feend, and the  
world— / thou hast suffred hem entre in to thyn herte wilfully by  
the wyndowes of thy body, / and hast nat defended thyself  
suffisantly agayns hire assautes and hire temptaciouns, so that they  
han wounded thy soule in fyve places; / this is to seyn, the deedly  
synnes that been entred into thyn herte by thy fyve wittes. / And in  
the same manere our Lorde Crist hath woold and suffred that thy  
three enemys been entred into thyn house by the wyndowes and  
han ywounded thy doughter in the forseide manere" (VII, 1419-  
1425).

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<sup>9</sup> It might be significant to note that "pleye," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, has distinct sexual overtones. This interpretation is heightened in *The Tale of Melibee* first when Prudence states that Melibeus has "ful ofte assayed my grete silence and my grete pacience, and eek how wel that I kan hyde and hele thynges that men oghte secreely to hyde" (VII, 1088) and then when she discusses Melibeus's sinfulness as the cause of the injuring of his family.

The link between the “fyve places” that Melibeus’s soul is wounded, due to the entry of sin through the “fyve wittes,” and the five physical injuries done to Sophie has lent to the suggestion that the entire tale is a work of pure allegory, which in turn suggests that it serves as a means of extracting revenge upon the Host (Strohm, *Melibee* 32-42).<sup>10</sup> This assertion might have been enough place *The Tale of Melibee* firmly in the category of allegory, were it not for the fact that both its teller and its moral lesson is placed as a functioning piece within the larger narrative framework of *The Canterbury Tales*, rather than simply within the limits imposed upon it by placing it solely as a revenge-response to the Host.

Like the entire message of repentance and piety presented in *The Parson’s Tale*, Prudence’s dialectic is a lesson in the proper conduct of Christian morals. However, by his actions within *The Canterbury Tales* the Parson negates relevance of equal moral interactions between characters, and as a result ultimately negates the possibility of debate and compromise. Though *The Tale of Melibee* is long, its lengthiness can be read as being equally comedic, particularly given the apparent intellectual obtuseness of Melibeus when it comes to understanding the point being presented in an argument. The comedic element is further illustrated by the chattering convolution of Prudence’s explanations. Of greater significance to understanding Chaucer’s philosophy is the fact that while Prudence actively engages in mutual discussion the Parson conducts an abstract and removed sermon, as though he were speaking from the pulpit. This may be the reason that Chaucer has the Host actively engage with Chaucer the Pilgrim following *The Tale of Melibee*, expressing a wish that “Goodelief, my wyf, hadde herde this tale!” (VII, 1894), while he concludes *The Parson’s Tale* with the ultimate negation of

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<sup>10</sup> It is also vaguely reminiscent of the “five points” of the pentangle on Sir Gawain’s shield in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, perhaps further suggesting a connection between Chaucer’s writing and the wirings of the Gawain-Poet.

*The Canterbury Tales* that is detailed in the *Retraction*. The Parson's sermon, which in the true form of a sermon speaks down to the audience and leaves no room for debate or interpretation, makes it almost impossible to sustain a dialectic connection with the world, necessitating a withdrawal of both art and proactive community. It therefore seems possible that the *Retraction* following *The Canterbury Tales* functions in much the same way as *The Tale of Melibee* following *The Tale of Sir Thopas* does; it acts simultaneously as a nod to the superior importance of Christian moral philosophy and as a means of illustrating the ultimate result that arises—the complete, and almost monadic, disconnection between the individual and the world—when such a philosophy is allowed to consume the very human interactions that permit its growth and development. The fact that *The Tale of Melibee* is told by Chaucer the Pilgrim following *The Tale of Sir Thopas* serves to heighten the significance of ordinary human understanding and interactions in the development of this comprehensive philosophy. It includes both a presentation of the ardent moral beliefs taught by the Christian religion and the free and easy enjoyments that can be found among the interactions within the secular world. As a result of this relationship, *The Tale of Melibee* illustrates the most central philosophy in *The Canterbury Tales*: the implicit necessity of both the proverbial “human pilgrimage,” encapsulated by the mutual interactions that occur between peoples and the spiritual and intellectual learning that results from those interactions, and the development of the individual's relationship with God, illustrated by the literal pilgrimage that is the driving force within *The Canterbury Tales*.

As a result of the connections between the *General Prologue*, *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale*, it is therefore possible to conclude that Chaucer is offering a spiritual philosophy which fuses the spiritual and the temporal. This fusion demands an active, yet morally-aware participation in the temporal world in order to achieve individual spiritual growth.



By tracing the interactions between the Host, Chaucer the Pilgrim and the Parson it is possible to see that the main thrust of Chaucer's moral philosophy is found primarily in the interactions between individual characters rather than in any one of their tales. These interactions are the means by which the framework of *The Canterbury Tales* is established, and are the driving force behind the development of Chaucer's spiritual philosophy. This philosophy apparently has the ability to transcend the traditional gender barriers of Chaucer's time, and is ultimately revealed to be a synthesis of both spiritual and temporal/comedic matters. The fact that *The Tale of Melibee* was given to the most common man in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer the Pilgrim, rather than to the supposedly learned Man of Law, it heightens the impact of that moral knowledge by making it accessible to the common man, and supports the placement of *The Tale of Melibee* as the climactic center of a cyclically-structured *Canterbury Tales*. Furthermore, the fact that it follows *The Tale of Sir Thopas* allows for the possibility that the greater moral knowledge can only be attained through an active engagement with life, and that one form of knowledge ultimately cannot exist and thrive without the other. As a result *The Canterbury Tales* can be said to be both satiric and spiritual and, because of its cyclical and dual-leveled structure, it illustrates that both elements are necessary for a fuller understanding of the nature of the spiritual pilgrimage that is human life. The spiritual growth of the individual human being can therefore be said to be in direct relation with the divine, just as that growth can be said to be conditionally connected to the human being's growth within the temporal world.

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