

# Forum

*Forum Policy:* Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than 1,000 words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

## The Friar's Tale and the Wife of Bath's Tale

To the Editor:

Penn R. Szittyá's article, "The Green Yeoman as Loathly Lady: The Friar's Parody of the Wife of Bath's Tale" (*PMLA*, 90, 1975, 386–94), provides fresh insights, but we find that Chaucer is even more skillful than the author suggests. Szittyá fails to explore the full moral import of these adjoining tales. Rather than presenting a "totally new moral environment" (p. 391) following the Wife's performance, the Friar's Tale seems more the reverse perspective of the same medieval morality expressed earlier.

Admittedly, three fourths of the Wife's story heretically disrupts sacred medieval hierarchy by giving women *maistrie* over men; however, approximately one fourth is the *gentillesse* lecture. Neither Chaucer's Parson nor Boethius would disagree with its unerringly orthodox thesis: "Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentillesse" (D 1117). The knight in the Wife's story *applies* what he learns from this lecture to his relationship with women, but the substance of the lecture (which is Chaucer's addition to his sources) concerns not the relative dominance between male and female, but orthodox goodness.

Placing the *gentillesse* lecture beside the yeoman's lecture about evil reveals more than a "rough parallel" (p. 391). While the Wife's moral instructor teaches the essence of orthodox goodness, the Friar's counterpart teaches the essence of evil from a traditionally orthodox viewpoint. Precisely, what *maistrie* does the yeoman claim? He presents evil (1) as parasitic, a deprivation of goodness (D 1487–88; see also *Boece*, Bk. III, Prosa 12, 179); (2) as having limited power (D 1489–90, 1494–96); and (3) as eventually contributing to goodness (D 1482–86, 1496–1500). If, for the Friar, "the *maistrie* that governs the world is . . . of the devil over Mankind" (p. 391), perhaps Szittyá should acknowledge that this *maistrie* is dependent, restricted, and ultimately contributes to goodness.

Our point, then, is that the paired morality lectures—on one level, at least—transcend the narrators' personality clash. The lectures do not so much parody as they present a moral diptych: two sides of medieval morality—the essence of goodness and the essence of evil.

Several character and plot parallels that Szittyá does not cite make a stronger case for the moral significance of these juxtaposed lectures. The protagonists, in their respective tales, follow a diametrically opposed moral progression. The knight becomes increasingly moral, the *somonour* increasingly immoral.

The parallels begin slightly earlier than Szittyá suggests. After "And so bifel" (D 882, 1375), Chaucer introduces a mortal on horseback who attempts to misuse a defenseless woman. The knight's rape seems unpremeditated (D 884–88). Conversely, the *somonour*, immoral purpose fixed in his mind, is hell-bent on extortion (D 1376–78).

Szittyá delineates some parallels after this point, but misses others. After encountering their moral instructors, the protagonists strive toward very different goals; the knight intently seeks to avoid death (D 1006), while the *somonour* greedily plans to rob an "old wydwe . . . Feynyng a cause" (D 1377–78). The knight is consistently *passive* in his relationship with the Loathly Lady, whereas the *somonour* relates *actively*, initiating and solidifying his alliance with the yeoman. Apparently repulsed by the Loathly Lady's appearance, the knight neither initiates conversation nor is at all inquisitive about her. In contrast, possibly drawn by the yeoman's attractive appearance, the *somonour* actively seeks a bond. The knight's "problem" is *less* crucial, not "considerably more crucial" (p. 389), to the medieval mind than the *somonour*'s naïveté; the *somonour*'s untoward curiosity, which Szittyá labels "hyperinquisitive[ness]" (p. 391), leads to his spiritual damnation, whereas only the physical life of the knight is threatened.

The mortals request instruction, but a sequential shift intensifies a moral cleavage. As Szittyá cites, the knight is "constrained" to pledge *trouthe* (p. 388). But note that the knight, desperate to save his life, asks for instruction *before* pledging *trouthe*; the Loathly Lady's counsel is conditional on this vow. Very different is the Friar's *somonour*, who is promised nothing by the yeoman in exchange for his voluntary *trouthe* (p. 388). Unlike the knight, he solicits instruction *after* swearing *trouthe*, adding with moral abandon, "spareth nat for conscience ne synne" (D 1422). This reversal illustrates the *somonour*'s entrenched commitment to the yeoman. One might say that the yeoman teaches "fair may be

foul," the Loathly Lady "foul may be fair." The Wife's story lacks a parallel to the recommittal scene in which the *somonour* willingly reiterates his allegiance to the yeoman (D 1523–29). Here the character development of the knight, a "rapist . . . rehabilitated" in Szitty's appropriate terms (p. 390), provides a striking moral contrast.

The protagonists' contrasting moral progressions are even more meaningful when the *maistrie* versus free will theme is explored. The Loathly Lady, in accordance with her desire, assumes *maistrie* over the knight. She imposes a rigid time limit on his quest, forces *trouthe*, and manipulates marriage. The knight "may nat do al as hym liketh" (D 914). Now the yeoman, despite his disappointingly unproductive day, does *not* act according to his desire—to seize mortals even at considerable inconvenience (D 1476–79, 1500, 1454–55).

Szitty's statement that, for the Friar, the "only real *maistrie* is the devil's" (p. 393) requires three qualifications. First, as established, the devil claims only restricted *maistrie* and, tellingly, acts accordingly. Second, the devil's "only real *maistrie*" cannot be isolated without simultaneously including the *somonour*'s responsibility which Szitty cites earlier: the mortal forfeits "the freedom of his soul by his vindictive greed" (p. 389). The yeoman has *maistrie* solely because, and only after, the *somonour* rejects repentance and forsakes his free will (D 1439–40, 1630–32). Third, although the yeoman ultimately dominates the *somonour*, the devil lacks total *maistrie*. Two mortals, minor to be sure, but integral to the tale, are untouched. The yeoman quickly abandons the pious carter (D 1570); the old widow—outnumbered in the presence of evil—refuses to surrender *self-maistrie*, thus retaining her freedom. In fact, the devil depends upon and needs confirmation of her curse (D 1626–29) before his one genuinely aggressive act: "this foule feend hym hente" (D 1639).

Seen in tandem, then, the Friar presents damnation after the Wife's heretical "salvation." Nevertheless, the most concentrated juxtaposed moral statements, possibly in the entire Canterbury collection, are the paired morality lectures which form a moral diptych of medieval morality: orthodox goodness and evil.

For these additional and somewhat variant reasons, we affirm, with Szitty, Chaucer's brilliant decision to allow the Friar the next word after the Wife's performance. Chaucer gives us abundantly more than the "game" (D 1279) the Friar promises.

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Mr. Szitty replies:

Regarding moral discussions in the Forum, the Apostle Paul leaves no room for doubt that "from con-

troversies and disputes of words . . . arise envies, quarrels, blasphemies, base suspicions, the wranglings of men corrupt in mind and bereft of truth" (1 Tim. vi.4). Having no wish to be thought corrupt in mind or bereft of truth or, for that matter, an ingrate, I was, when I began my reply to Carole Brown and Marion Egge, determined to address only large issues and to shun bickering. However, I discovered that I was being chided for what I took to be (apologies to Wimsatt and Beardsley) the Unintentional Fallacy, that is, for saying some things I did not say, and hence I found I could not treat the larger issues without registering at least a faint bicker, which subsequently grew, as these things do, into a two-part quibble, which follows.

Part One: The major point of Brown and Egge's argument is put in the following sentence: "Rather than presenting a 'totally new moral environment' (p. 391) following the Wife's performance, the Friar's Tale seems more the reverse perspective of the same medieval morality expressed earlier," I would like to take issue with its language, not because I wish to quibble like an Ephesian, but because it is the most convenient way of pointing out some major misunderstandings that influence their argument throughout. Regarding their first clause, I do not say that the Friar's Tale "presents a 'totally new moral environment' following the Wife's performance." What I do say is that "if his tale is a recasting of hers, he sets it, with its parallel characters, in a totally new moral environment" (p. 391). The difference is important: the Friar does not (as Brown and Egge have me saying) simply tell a moral tale, which differs from the Wife's; he retells *her* tale, with its shapeshifters, magical forest, metamorphoses, and troth-plighting, but set in a new context and provided with a radically different ending. Brown and Egge think I see his strategy as like the Clerk's, who simply responds to the Wife; in fact, I see his strategy as like the Miller's, who, hearing a romantic tale he cannot stomach, debunks its wishful and unrealistic values by retelling it as a *fabliau*—in short, by parody.

Part Two: Brown and Egge imply in the statement above that "moral environment" (my phrase) is equivalent to "medieval morality" (their phrase), and they imply that to say, as I do, that a tale has a different moral environment from another is equivalent to saying that it has a different "morality." But that is not the case: a tale may contain a moral environment without "expressing a morality," at least one as reductive as "orthodox evil." My point was not that the two tales point different morals but that in similar situations, similar acts produce different results—troth-plighting, for example, or magical transformation of a companion. In the moral world of the Wife's Tale, everything leads to the knight's "bath of blisse" at the end; in the world of the Friar's Tale, everything leads to the *somonour*'s disappearance into the fires of hell.