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Author(s): Gerhard Joseph

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CHAUCERIAN "GAME"—"EARNEST" AND THE "ARGUMENT OF HERBERGAGE" IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

by Gerhard Joseph

While apologizing for the inclusion of the Miller's narrative in *The Canterbury Tales* (A 3170-86),[1] Chaucer the pilgrim makes a distinction that reverberates through the entire sequence. He invites the reader to "Turne over the leef and chese another tale" if such a "cherles tales" as he is about to encounter should wound his sensibilities. Elsewhere among the tales the fastidious reader may find many a "storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,/ And eek moralitee and hoolyness." Above all, the audience must not mistake the intention behind the more frivolous stories: "men shal nat maken ernest of game." The Chaucerian narrator here presents a fourteenth-century version of the *ludicra-seria* topos that Ernest Curtius has traced through classical and medieval literature.[2] Because the relationship of jest and seriousness is crucial in Chaucer's art, a preliminary exploration of its implications should prove useful. But I should like to undertake such a tentative examination indirectly—by measuring the "game"-"ernest" collocation against a division which sometimes parallels it: Chaucer's differentiation of human space. I will argue that Tales informed by the spirit of "ernest" have at times another conception of space, the "herbergage" or lodging of this world, than those told in "game." The most telling illustration of this difference appears in Fragment I. Here one of Chaucer's most beautifully serious stories, the *Knight's Tale,* is followed immediately by three fabliaux, one of which, *Miller's Tale,* has long been recognized as Chaucer at his most playful and bawdy. Because of such a direct confrontation Fragment A may be read as a paradigm of the "game" - "ernest" opposition and the "argument of herbergage" implicit in *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole.

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1. All references to Chaucer's poetry are to *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer,* ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957).
2. "Jest and Earnest in Medieval Literature" in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York, 1953), pp. 417-35. The Host also uses this "proverbial" (Robinson, p. 683, note to l. 3152) locution in the *Manciple's Prologue* (I 100).

I

When Chaucer the pilgrim distinguishes "ernest" from "game," he asserts a polarity that many of the tales do not particularly support. One can think of several narratives—and the *Knight's Tale* is one of them—in which "high sentence" is leavened with comic and playful ingredients. Still, for the purpose of analysis, we can grant that Chaucer's narrative sequence does seem to include two kinds of stories, if we allow for a certain amount of overlapping—those which show the fourteenth-century mind largely in a mood of high seriousness and those motivated primarily by a medieval propensity for jest. That on balance the *Knight's Tale* would seem to belong in that former category is confirmed by its serious sense of space.

The *Knight's Tale* moves through four earthly enclosures that give way to one another as the locales of significant action: the prison tower in which Palamon and Arcite contend verbally for the right to Emilye, with whom they have both fallen in love (Part I); the grove in which Palamon and Arcite come upon one another and in which they try to slaughter each other before the intercession of Theseus (Part II); the temples of Venus, Mars, and Diana within the amphitheatre that Thesus has built for the clash of two hundred worthies (Part III); and the arena itself in which the climactic tournament takes place (Part IV). The Tale is thus organized scenically: the division of the narrative into four sections parallels the replacement of one enclosure to another.

There are several qualities to be noticed in the spatial progression. For one thing, while both the prison and the grove are merely functional and neutral spaces unconsecrated by any conscious ritual, Theseus goes to elaborate lengths to dignify the tournament in his amphitheatre, to give it the widest possible metaphysical significance by associating it with a human devotion to Venus, Mars, and Diana. Furthermore, the enclosures of the Tale get progressively larger: we move from the cramped "tour, that was so thikke and stroong," to a grove in which Palamon and Arcite can maneuver in single combat, to the three temples of the amphitheatre, and finally to the "noble theatre" itself of which "The circuit a myle was aboute,/ Walled of stoon, and dyched al withoute" (1887-88). The point of such gradual widening is clear: the larger the arena in which violent passions can play themselves out, the less destructive and the more susceptible to ritual they become. Mere decorative elaboration makes for order, a fact that Theseus surely understands. It is for this reason that he moves the combat from the grove into the massive arena

with its temples; it is for this reason that he disperses the single combat between an enraged Palamon and Arcite over a company of two hundred knights.

If spatial expansion becomes a process which can mitigate the fury of the passions, the Tale's insistence upon expansiveness of time reinforces such a movement towards order. Within the prison cell there is no temporal lapse between the first sight of Emilye and the quarrel that breaks out between Palamon and Arcite. When, however, the two knights meet in the grove, they agree to a postponement of their combat because Palamon is unarmed. Arcite would, he insists, have preferred to kill Palamon immediately (1603), but because Palamon is unequipped the two knights separate "til amorwe" at which time Arcite brings two sets of arms to the grove for the fight to the death (1621-35). While the ritual of chivalry whereby an armed knight will not strike an unarmed one is responsible for the day's delay, there is something unpremeditated and grudging in the knight's adherence to that ritual. But after Theseus interrupts the carnage in the grove, he deliberately consecrates time under the aegis of Venus, Mars, and Diana, putting the next clash of the two knights off for a year. The transformation of the day-long delay halfheartedly agreed upon by the knights into Theseus' insistence upon a year's wait indicates the movement from accidental to conscious ritualization of time. It is through such a continuing consecration, via expansion, of both space and time that Theseus attempts to bring a temporary, a limited perfection into the confusion of this life, to sublimate an irrational duel to the death into a magnificent tournament in which no knight will be seriously injured (2538-60).

But if the *Knight's Tale* mediates between extremes of life conceived as cramped prison tower and impressive amphitheatre, we are still left with the question of which metaphorical enclosure essentially captures the Knight's vision of life this side eternity. The Boethian flavor of the *Knight's Tale* has long been recognized. And despite the attempt of Theseus to turn the neutral spaces of this life into consecrated arenas, we are ultimately left with the impression that the *Knight's Tale* is Boethian in nothing so much as in its sense of human space as prison. In the *Consolation of Philosophy* Boethius' enslavement to a worldly vision until he is gradually enlightened by the arguments of Lady Philosophy has its physical extension in the prison cell where she first visits him. As Richard Green has concisely described the trope, "The author's own literal imprisonment becomese a figure of the soul's imprisonment in the

body, the bondage imposed by the demands of the passions, the enslavement to Fortune in her deceitful favors."[3]

In the *Knight's Tale* Chaucer uses the prison in which Palamon and Arcite find themselves as a correlative for the larger prisons of this life in somewhat the same way as Boethius. The Theban women at the opening of the narrative announced the theme of man's enslavement to Fortune when they complain to Theseus,

> Now be we caytyves, as it is wel seene,
> Thanked be Fortune and hire false wheel,
> That noon estaat assureth to be weel.
>
> (924-26)

And the tale contains numerous additional references to man's generalized dependence upon the whims of Fortune. What is as a matter of fact striking about Palamon and Arcite when we are first introduced to the working of their minds is the extent to which they are *unlike* a Boethius chained within his complaint at Fortune's whimsicality. Certainly Theseus' sentence for them—life imprisonment with no possibility of ransom—seems arbitrary and excessively harsh. But when Palamon cries out his "A" at the first sight of Emilye, Arcite thinks he is complaining about their lot and reproves him therefore:

> Cosyn myn, what eyleth thee,
> That art so pale and deedly on to see?
> Why cridestow? Who hath thee doon offence?
> For Goddes love, taak al in pacience
> Oure prisoun, for it may noon oother be.
> Fortune hath yeven us this adversitee
> Som wikke aspect or disposicioun
> Of Saturne, by som constellacioun,
> Hath yeven us this, although we hadde it sworn;
> So stood the hevene whan that we were born.
> We moste endure it; this is the short and playn."
>
> (1081-91)

In reply Palamon explicitly disavows Arcite's inference that it is Fortune's prison which has called forth the cry. Palamon and Arcite, that is, do not come to inhabit the all-inclusive Boethian prison *until* they suffer the fetters of a courtly love. Palamon does not become

3. See William Frost, "An Interpretation of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*," *RES*, 25 (1949), 290-304; and Charles A. Owen, Jr., "Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales:* Aesthetic Design in Stories of the First Day, *English Studies,* 35 (1954). 49-56.

excessively conscious of his literal imprisonment until, as he puts it, "I was hurt right now thurghout myn ye / Into myn herte, that wol my bane be"/ in his passion for Emilye. Once the rival lovers are so enslaved, the physical cell widens unto the whole world becomes a prison that keeps them from Emilye. When Arcite is released through the intercession of Perotheus, the lifelong exile from Athens to which Theseus commits him is a more terrible confinement than the one Palamon will continue to know. "Thyn is the victorie of this aventure," Arcite apostrophizes. "Ful blisfully in prison maistow dure,—/ In prison? certes nay, but in paradys (1235-37). Palamon will at least be able to see Emilye daily and a changeable Fortune may permit him to attain her at some time in the future, since, unlike Arcite, he will be near her. Chaucer, that is, splits into the exile of Arcite and the continuing imprisonment of Palamon the single fate of Boethius, who knew both exile and imprisonment.

The ultimate prison of the *Knight's Tale* is a spiritual one, the maze of doubt within which Palamon wanders when he addresses the "crueel goddes that governe / This world with byndyng of youre word eterne" (1303-04). Like the Troilus of Book IV whose extended questioning of "predestinatioun devyne, and of the liberte of fre will" (IV, 953-1085) indicates his exile from the mind of "Jove," Palamon entertains the belief that man is confined in the "table of atthamaunt" of "crueel goddes." He never quite goes as far as Troilus' assertion that God's foreknowledge destroys "oure fre chois every del"; the typically Chaucerian swerving, "The answere of this lete I to dyvyny's" rescues Palamon from the adamantine determinism that paralyzes Troilus. But the metaphysical doubt, the ultimate trap in the Christian attempt to comprehend godhead, is clear enough in Palamon's agonized cry: "What governance is in this prescience/ That giltelees tormenteth innocence? (1313-14). Both the *Troilus* and the *Knight's Tale* thus vividly exemplify a progress from the prison of the senses to the more serious prison of the mind and spirit; enslavement by a courtly passion leads directly to religious despair.

The strong medicine with which Lady Philosophy in Books IV and V of the *Consolation* cures Boethius of his spiritual ills, the *vigour and strengthe of wit* that make it possible for man to surmount the "necessitee of destyne" and to understand the concomitant operation of free will and the providence of God, has its equivalent in the "Firste Moevere" speech of Theseus (2987-3074). Once man has won through to an understanding of the "faire cheyne of love"

by which the First Mover binds together an apparently chaotic universe, he can triumph over Fortune in all her guises. He will find it possible

> To maken vertu of necessitee,
> And take it weel that we may nat eschue,
> And namely that to us alle is due.
>
> (3042-44)

The contrary of such serenity is "wilfulnesse," the mental torture that makes "this foule prisoun of this lyf" (3061) all the more palpable as prison.

The accidental death of Arcite suggests that even the consecrated amphitheatre of Theseus cannot completely order the forces of chaos that shatter man's best laid plans. Despite the ceremonial forms by which Theseus attempts to make it possible for us to love our cage, man in the *Knight's Tale* finds it all but impossible to escape the formidable jailer, Fortune. Man carries his prison with him, nor is he out of it until at his death he makes his way to the eighth sphere. Only then will he find a wholly comfortable lodging in the ultimate enclosure of the Tale that Theseus evokes, the ordered cosmos itself which only the First Mover fully comprehends.

The *Miller's Tale* has of course been recognized as a subtle "quiting" of the Knight's performance by a social inferior who finds in the elevated sentiments and sombre nobility of the Knight mere laughable affectation. Specifically, the Nicholas-Absolon-Alisoun triangle has been seen as a veiled parody of the Palamon-Arcite-Emilye triangle, and the absurd love-making manners of Absolon as a very explicit reduction of the courtly love that the Knight praises (reservedly, to be sure) in his Tale.[4] But transcending this critique, which chiefly reflects the inability of one social class to comprehend the values of another, is a more fundamental attack: the Miller, the Reeve, and the Cook advance a radically different conception of human space and the possibility of unrestrained "pley" within that space. In the *Knight's Tale* literal enclosures come to shadow forth the Boethian prison from which none of us can escape until death releases us; in such a prison Fortune's arbitrary sway makes it difficult for Palamon and Arcite to attain the object of their desires. But in the fabliaux such obstacles as do exist when a *senex* tries to fence in a young colt of a wife are easily broken down. John the carpenter in the *Miller's Tale* attempts to keep potential lovers from

4. Introduction to Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (New York, 1962), p. xxiii.

Alisoun: "Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage, For she was wylde and yong, and he was old (3224-25). But all to no avail. In the fabliaux, enclosures, far from being the prisons that keep lovers from their ladies, actually become the essential arena for the joyous union of man and wench. One of the important meanings of the all-purpose "hende" assigned to Nicholas is that he is "at hand," i.e., that he is actually a boarder in the carpenter's house.[5] It is this proximity that makes it possible for him to be "hende" in other senses of the word. And precisely because Absolon must woo Alisoun from the *outside* of John's house, he does not stand a chance against his rival Nicholas inside:

> Ful sooth is this proverbe, it is no lye,
> Men seyn right thus, "Alwey the nye slye
> Maketh the ferre leeve to be looth."
> For though that Absolon be wood or wrooth,
> By cause that he fer was from hire sight,
> This nye Nicholas stood in his light.
>
> (3391-96)

It may indeed be argued that in such sexual games as the fabliaux describe, spatial arrangements all but triumph over character: the proximity of one player and the distance of the other from Alisoun are almost more important than characterization as an index of who "deserves" her.

The *Reeve's Tale* not only supports the Miller's implication that social enclosures are utterly congenial to human delight but even extends that insight to argue for the infinite expansiveness of space within such enclosures. After the miller of that tale has stolen the half bushel of flour from the students John and Alan, they ask him for "berberwe and . . . ese, as for hir peny" (John the carpenter in the *Miller's Tale* had also been undone by such taking in of boarders). In reply the churlishly anti-intellectual miller mocks the learning of the student's in the Tale's crucial passage of dramatic irony as he grants their request:

> Myn hous is streit, but ye han lerned art;
> Ye konne by argumentes make a place
> A myle brod of twenty foot of space.
> Lat se now if this place may suffise. . . .
>
> (4122-25)

5. Paul E. Beichner develops this point in "Chaucer's Hende Nicholas," *Medieval Studies,* 14 (1952, 151-53 and in "Characterization in *The Miller's Tale,*" *Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales,* ed. Richard Schoeck and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame, Ind., 1960), pp. 124-25.

And of course the students do "make a place" for themselves quite handsomely in the energetic bed-hopping that closes the Tale. The *Knight's Tale* has insisted upon the substitution of the arena for the prison and the grove in order to make more palatable the realization that we do inhabit "this foule prison of this lyf." In the fabliaux there is no need for a progressive enlargement of enclosures; the initial little room will do as the most comfortable of "herberwes" from which we have no desire to escape. Far from being a prison, such enclosures are adaptable to the wishes of the carefree young who make, as the youthful John Donne has said, "one little room an everywhere."

What the Cook's contribution to this *debat* would have been we cannot know: the fragmentary tale of Perkin Revelour does not provide enough evidence for a plausible projection. But the Cook's prologue does suggest that he understands the spatial emphasis of the *Reeve's Tale*. His interpretation, which hints at one direction his own fabliau might have taken, gives a name to the argument I have been describing:

> "Ha! ha!" quod he, "for Cristes passion,
> This millere hadde a sharp conclusion
> Upon his argument of herbergage!
> Wel seyde Salomon in his langage,
> 'Ne bryng nat every man into thyn hous';
> For herberwynge by nyghte is perilous."
>
> (4327-32)

The Cook alludes in his phrase "argument of herbergage" only to the "argumentes" of l. 4123—to the question of whether space is or is not expansible for the miller's overnight boarders in the *Reeve's Tale*.[6] It is my contention that the "argument" transcends that local

6. William C. Stokoe, Jr., "Structure and Intention in the *First Fragment of The Canterbury Tales*," *UTQ*, 21 (1952), 126, has remarked that the miller alluded to in the Cook's Prologue is not the one from the *Reeve's Tale* but rather Chaucer's Robin Miller. In the concluding line of the *Reeve's Tale* (4324), the Reeve exults, "Thus have I quyt the Millere in my tale." It is this line, Stoke argues, that the Cook picks up in his Prologue as he "awarded the decision to the wrong wrangler" in 4327-38. Charles A. Owen, Jr., "The Design of *The Canterbury Tales*," *Companion to Chaucer Studies* (Toronto, 1968), p. 195, summarizes Stokoe's argument approvingly.

My own feeling is that the miller referred to in 4327-38 must be the one in the *Reeve's Tale* rather than Chaucer's Miller. For one thing, were Roger of Ware alluding to Chaucer's Miller in the line. "This millere hadde a sharp conclusion/ Upon his argument of herbergage," he would probably have used the present or the present perfect tense to describe an action that has

issue and is a controlling principle in the entire structure of Fragment I. Briefly, the Fragment asserts that the quantity and quality of space is relative to the perspective of the human mind contending with it. For the "ernest" pilgrim who manages to see things from the perspective of eternity, human space is dreadfully narrow, a prison with which we must make do and which we can make bearable through carefully ordered rituals. But for the actor or observer who views the world as "game," a cramped "twenty foot of space" easily widens out to become a room "a myle brood," world enough and time for the acting out of a lighthearted human drama.

Moving beyond Fragment I, we see that Chaucer can make the same point within a single Tale and capture the opposing perspectives within the mind of a single pilgrim. That the Nun's Priest, for instance, responds to life partly in "ernest" and partly in "game" reveals itself in the different conceptions of space that govern the frame of his tale and the tale proper. We hear his official homiletic voice as he describes the poor widow's farm and her mature acceptance of a constricted lot. Everything points to the narrowness of her physical circumstances to which in Christian patience she has come to accustom herself: the cottage itself is "narwe," the yard in which she keeps her few animals is "enclosed al aboute/ With stikkes, and a drye dych withoute" (B^2 4011-38).

But if the Nun's Priest in his serious cast of mind implies that the world is a hard and straitened place for the widow, the spirit of jest that invades his voice once he moves from the frame into the story of Chauntecleer and Pertolote makes for a very different notion of space. The insular vanity of the one and the wifely self-assurance of the other preclude their awareness that the farmyard might in any way be circumscribed or limited. They act as if their enclosure were a sufficient and elastic arena perfectly suitable to the strutting and domestic bliss of their easy lives. The widow cramped by her

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just taken place rather than the past tense of narration; for another, there *is* no "argument of herbergage" between Chaucer's Miller and Reeve—their stories both support Solomon's warning: "Ne bryng nat every man into thyn hous," while there is, as I have shown, an "argument of herbergage" *within* the *Reeve's Tale*. Finally, the Cook's allusion to the miller in 4335-38 puts the issue beyond dispute:

> I pray to God, so yeve me sorwe and care
> If evere, sitthe I highte Hogge of Ware,
> Herde I a millere bettre yset a-werk.
> He hadde a jape of malice in the derk.

Surely it is only the miller in the *Reeve's Tale* who "hadde a jape of malice in the derk"; the reference cannot possibly be to Robin Miller, the pilgrim.

poverty and the littleness of her cottage world has come to make virtues of such necessities; when Chauntecleer and Pertolote feel any constraint, they merely move to a more comfortable spot in the farmyard. "Oure perche," Chauntecleer complains mildly, "is maad so narwe, allas," a fact that makes the treading of Pertolote somewhat awkward within the henhouse itself. But all that Chauntecleer and Pertolote have to do is to "fley doun fro the beem" and the feathering and treading that they both desire is readily available—"twenty tyme" (4359-67). Like the students of the *Reeve's Tale* they can ignore the limitations of space. The miller's little space and the widow's farmyard are thus containers of hyperbolic sexual energy. The saturnalian release within such little rooms humorously buckles (I intentionally borrow the multiple associations of Hopkins' word) the Boethian doctrine that because all of the world's a prison, moderation of desire is man's wisest course. (Similarly, applying the argument of herbergage to the *Troilus* would involve a discussion of whether its narrator is essentially committed to Pandarus' "litel closet" [III, 663] and the game of love that flourishes therein or to the Boethian denigration of "this litel spot of erthe" [V, 1815] during Troilus's retrospective glance over his life from the perspective of the eighth sphere.)

Of course, such a formulation is too allegorically strict to encompass the multiple uses to which Chaucer puts his space. He certainly does not systematically or inevitably link the "herbergage" theme and the "ernest"-"game" poliarity in every Tale. Nor, for that matter, are space and figures of spatial enclosure always to be received in a moral or ontological dimension. All narrative must take place somewhere and a good deal of Chaucerian space is primarily functional; it serves as a realistic social and physical context for action. I am merely trying to suggest that Chaucer's limited spaces frequently approach the condition of metaphor and that, when this occurs, the "game"-"ernest" opposition presents one possible context within which to examine them. One thinks, for example, of such "gameful" places as the garden in the *Merchant's Tale* and such serious ones as the boat upon which Custance travels in the *Man of Law's Tale* or the simple house of Grisilde's father with its nearby oxen stall in the *Clerk's Tale* as additional Chaucerian enclosures whose meanings would be illuminated by the perspective I am advocating.

II

While the argument of herbergage flourishes among some of the tales and within the temperament of individual pilgrims, at its most resonant it is one of the structural principles of the frame within which the tales are narrated, the pilgrimage from London to Canterbury. We begin at the Tabard Inn, a "herberwe" that is blessed, as the Host assures the assembled pilgrims, with an exceptionally "myrie compaignye"; and the tales are spun out as the pilgrims move towards the shrine of Thomas Becket. These terminal herbergages of the journey are *loci* for the antagonistic attitudes towards life and space I have defined. Even pilgrims of high seriousness cannot but join in the Host's contest, given the convivial spirit that the Tabard encourages; even the most worldly and earthy of churls cannot but be reminded of the last things as the company makes its way toward the serious space of the martyred saint.

The Host is the appropriate governor of the group precisely because the competing narrative ideals of "ernest," associated with the shrine of Becket, and of "game" associated with the Tabard, vie with each other in the directions he gives to the pilgrims. His initial aesthetic standard as he announces it in the *General Prologue* seems morally orthodox enough: he tells the company that the prize meal will go to the pilgrim who fashions "Tales of best sentence and moost solaas" (A 798). But "solaas," while it may refer primarily to the serious consolation of Boethian or Augustinian doctrine can just as well include the merry consolation that a Nicholas finds with his Alisoun. And in the links between the Tales the Host is apt to call for a "myrie tale," a tale told primarily for its capacity to entertain rather than for the sake of any lesson it might be thought to inculcate. The most striking instance of the Host's disavowel of "high sentence" appears in the Prologue to the *Pardoner's Tale* where he calls for "som myrthe or japes" from the Pardoner only to be reproved by the gentils, who insist instead upon "som moral thyng" (C 318-26).

In his instructions to the pilgrims the Host can most readily be seen as a surrogate of Chaucer, the artist. For we must finally speak of the divergent aims of "ernest" and "game" in Chaucer and of the counterpoint of structures that these aims can help to explain in the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. In the *General Prologue* Chaucer himself is caught up in the ample sense of time and space that the comfortable "herberwes" of this world encourage: he will

have time to write a hundred and sixteen or a hundred and twenty tales. The Host will decide which pilgrim deserves to

> have a soper at oure aller cost
> Heere in this place, sittynge by this post,
> Whan that we come agayn fro Caunterbury.
> (A 799-801)

This insistence upon concrete spatial arrangements back at the Tabard and the suggestion that the pilgrimage is a two-way affair —a movement towards the shrine of the martyr but also away from that serious spcae back towards a "herbergage" of good food and merry company—indicate the worldly self-confidence of Chaucer the artist. But by the time of the *Parson's Prologue* the comfort of an earthly "herberwe" has become a cold one indeed. The original intention of Chaucer may have been to take the pilgrims back to the Tabard, but the *Parson's Prologue* offers no congenial lodging. As the sun sinks the pilgrims are merely entering a nameless "thropes ende." And the confident plan of Chaucer in the *General Prologue* has been seriously constrained by the exigencies of time: he must be satisfied with the illusion rather than the fact that, as the Host puts it, "Now lakketh us no tales mo than oon. / Fulfilled is my sentence and my decree . . ." (I 16-17). The intention of four tales for each pilgrim, two going to and two coming from Canterbury, has been modified by Chaucer's recognition that his own space is more limited than he might at a more expansive time have imagined. "Every man, save thou," the Host tells the Parson, "hath toold his tale." Even this is not literally true, but at any rate the singular "his tale" indicates a severe scaling down of Chaucer's earlier plan. The closing admonition of the Host to the Parson epitomizes this contraction of the Chaucerian world, the growing sense of temporal and spatial constraint that the pilgrims (and the readers) feel as the pilgrimage draws to its close:

> But hasteth yow, the sonne wole adoun;
> Beth fructuous, and that in litel space,
> And to do wel God sende yow his grace!
> (I 70-72)

This climatic awareness of the "litel space" we have for our fruitful creations in this world would seem to suggest that Chaucerian space-time is in an ultimate sense closer to that of the *Knight's Tale* or the Nun's Priest's frame rather than to that of the fabliaux. "Ernest" seems gradually to drown out "game" as the company moves towards

the Jerusalem Celestial of the *Parson's Prologue* (not even to consider the extreme asceticism of the Retraction). But such is not entirely the case. We do not read the Tales only as if they were sequentially on a pilgrimage; we respond to them also as if we were in retrospect to judge them all at once and to decide with the Host which of the pilgrims deserves the prize meal. Our standards, like his, are mixed enough. Like him, we are apt to be torn between "ernest" and "game," between the very different perfections of, say, the *Knight's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale.*

For, finally, we do not take the warning of Chaucer the pilgrim not to "maken ernest of game" as face value either in the local context within which it first appears or in its larger application to the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. The easy, "proverbial" separation of "ernest" and "game" in the prologue to the *Miller's Tale* is obviously naive. As so often when we hear the conventional sentiments of Chaucer the pilgrim, we suspect that the moral imagination of the poet behind him ranges beyond the convention. It may be going too far to say that the apology for the inclusion of the *Miller's Tale* is a piece of out-and-out mockery, but at the very least Chaucer the pilgrim's facile mouthing of a platitude masks the artist's complex understanding of the aesthetic issues involved. And in the completed *Tales* the reader is struck by a like impression of wise comprehensiveness. As we read we come to know an orthodox Chaucer who, while allowing the play impulse a large measure of freedom, insists in his art upon the ultimate subordination of play to the serious business of life, the pilgrimage to Jerusalem Celestial. But in other moods we sense that for Chaucer "game" is prior to "ernest" in all art,[7] or that at any rate the two impulses are so inextricably interwoven in the human personality that an attempt to unravel them would be the height of folly. Chaucer's greatness lies precisely in

7. The argument of Johan Huizinga (*Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* [New York, 1955]) that the opposition of seriousness and play is largely illusory may be relevent to such a reading of *The Canterbury Tales.* According to Huizinga all human cultural activities (certainly all art) involve contests of one sort or another, and play is an, if not *the,* essential element in all such contests. From this perspective—though Huizinga never alludes to Chaucer—the comic rivalry of Nicholas and Absolon for Alisoun, the bitter contest between Palamon and Arcite for Emilye, and the larger competition among the pilgrims for the prize meal would all be different tonal gestures of *homo ludens,* the agonistic animal. And the "little rooms" of the fabliaux, Theseus' amphitheatre, and the Tabard Inn would be less and more ritualized versions of what Huizinga elaborately defines as "playground" (*Homo Ludens.* pp. 10 ff.).

such a humane inclusiveness. Germane to that "God's plenty" is a paradoxical vision, his simultaneous recognition that jest and seriousness are antithetical principles and that they are completely inseparable in the human condition and therefore in the highest art.[8]

Herbert H. Lehman College of the City University of New York

8. Curtius' summation of what happened to the "jest and earnest" topos in the Middle Ages would seem to suggest that Chaucer's double perspective is representative of his age:

> . . . the polarity "jest and earnest" is, from the late antique period onward, a conceptual and formal schema which appears not only in rhetorical theory, in poetry, and in poetics, but also in the circle of the ideal of life established by the panegyric style. . . . But, having determined this, we can take a further step. The testimony already discussed itself permits the assumption that the mixture of jest and earnest was among the stylistic norms which were known and practiced by the medieval poet, even if he perhaps nowhere found them expressly formulated. We may, then, view the phenomnon as a fresh substantiation of the view that the Middle Ages loved all kinds of crossings and mixtures of stylistic genres. . . . (*European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages,* p. 424).