Among the best liked and most widely known sections of *The Canterbury Tales* is the Nun's Priest's story of the regal Chanticleer and the lovely Dame Pertelote. For a long time critics have realized that this tale skilfully reflects facets of its teller's character, but only recently have detailed attempts been made to suggest just what sort of person Chaucer intended his audience to visualize as the Nun's Priest. Since Chaucer did not include in the "General Prologue" a portrait of this Pilgrim, whatever view one takes of the Nun's Priest must be based on the comments to and about him by the Host, on his own short comment to the Host, on the Narrator's brief remark about him, and on the superb tale which he relates to the company. This is to say that any acceptable portrait of Chaucer's Nun's Priest must of necessity derive primarily from the personal interplay during the Canterbury pilgrimage.

The high comedy for the reader and for Chaucer the poet lies, of course, in the Host's missing the subtler points of the tale and holding up to ridicule the meek little priest who has superbly defended him.

Recent criticism has presented the Nun's Priest to us as a brawny and vigorous man with stature and muscles which justify his serving for the duration of the pilgrimage as one of three bodyguards for the Prioress and the Second Nun. This view is based, first, on an acceptance as direct description of the Host's extreme comments in the Nun's Priest's Epilogue concerning the physical prowess of the priest; and, second, on the existence of documents which show that contemporary travel was particularly dangerous for women, even nuns--the assumption being that the Prioress and the Second Nun would therefore need husky bodyguards for protection. While the documents concerned are of great interest to anyone working with *The Canterbury Tales*, it is true of course that Chaucer was not always controlled in his writing by a desire for historical accuracy. Accordingly, even the presence of more numerous and apt documents of this nature than are available could not dictate a brawny physique for the Nun's Priest. And whatever the extent to which Chaucer may have had in mind the perils of the road when (and if) he wrote "preestes thre," he was sufficiently unmindful of those perils when he wrote the "Nun's Priest's Prologue" to reduce the Prioress and the Second Nun to one male attendant "the Nonnes Preest."

Where but one brief explicit statement is available--and that one to the effect that this Pilgrim is "swete" and "goody"--considerable difference of opinion concerning the Nun's Priest is at least permissible, if it can be supported. Thus, the purpose of this paper will be to maintain through a reexamination of the pertinent passages
that the Nun's Priest is most convincingly visualized as an individual who is scrawny, humble, and timid, while at the same time highly intelligent, well educated, shrewd and witty. As an important part of this portrait, the Host's remarks in the "Nun's Priest's Epilogue" will be considered as broadly ironic, and Harry Bailly will assume a larger role in the dramatic interplay surrounding the Nun's Priest's performance than he has hitherto been granted by the commentators. Numerous suggestions made by other critics concerning this dramatic interplay--most notably those by William W. Lawrence--will be used here. However, no one, so far as I can find, has previously called attention to the important and easily acceptable function of the "Nun's Priest's Epilogue" when it is read as broad irony on the part of Harry Bailly. Such an interpretation of that Endlink serves as foundation for the argument presented here; and, as will appear at length below, it furnishes a reasonable explanation for the unanswerable question which arises if the "Nun's Priest's Epilogue" is taken as straightforward description: namely, why would the Host, who has prudently retreated before the Miller's impressive strength and the Shipman's evident hardihood, feel free to speak rudely and contemptuously to a large and muscular Nun's Priest? The supposition of a patronizing attitude on the part of the henpecked Host towards a man who is under the supervision of a woman, the Prioress, is simply not adequate explanation for the extreme rudeness and contempt of Harry's remarks to the Nun's Priest, if the latter is conceived of as possessing strength sufficient to make Harry fearful of physical violence.

The order to be used here for the fragments of The Canterbury Tales is that set forth recently and convincingly by R. A. Pratt, whereby Fragment VII comes immediately before Fragment III and after Fragment II. The Nun's Priest occupies the final position in Fragment VII, in many ways as carefully prepared a fragment of the Canterbury collection as is the first. The Host, up until the time that he calls upon the Nun's Priest for a story, has fared rather badly on the pilgrimage. After his success in the "General Prologue" and his pleasure arising from the "Knight's Tale," he was successfully challenged by the Miller, somewhat annoyed by the Reeve's "sermonyng," and shortly thereafter threatened by the Cook. Then his satisfaction with the Man of Law's performance was quickly dampened by the Shipman's revolt against his authority. Though the latter's tale concerning the merchant of Saint Denis restored the Host's good spirits, he seemed not too pleased with the sobriety resulting from the miracle related by the Prioress. Next, his patience was strained beyond its limits by the Pilgrim Chaucer's "Sir Thopas," and he was moved to a lengthy recollection of his domestic woes by the "Melibeus." In the succeeding instance, he was offered no relief by the Monk, whose tragedies he found exceedingly boring. Finally, when the Monk haughtily refused to relate gayer material, Harry impolitely turned upon the Nun's Priest with a demand that this cleric "Telle us swich thyng as may oure hertes glade."

Looked at in this fashion, the sequence and the nature of the performances in Fragments I, II, and VII seem to have been considerably influenced by Chaucer's desire to represent a regular rise and fall in the Host's spirits, with the humorous deflating of the Host as a steady theme running through the three successive fragments. Though this surmise may be open to debate, the fact should be noted that in the course of the first three fragments, Harry plays an important role in connection with every Pilgrim's recital. The point is that through these three successive fragments the Host's reactions are a vital part of the drama surrounding the various Pilgrims' performances. We therefore may not be far wide of the mark if, in trying to derive an acceptable portrait of the Nun's Priest, we examine that Pilgrim and his tale as they reflect against and fit with the Host's recent behavior; and we should bear steadily in mind that in this section of The Canterbury Tales the continuity of very probably nine and certainly four of the preceding recitals is beyond dispute. Particularly important here are the Host's behavior before and reaction after the immediately preceding performance, that of the Monk.

From this line of reasoning--based upon consideration of relationships which Chaucer certainly must have been aware of as he wrote--the following view is deduced as a defensible statement concerning the character of the Nun's Priest and the function of his tale in their dramatic context. The Host is the central figure in the personal interchanges surrounding the Monk's and the Nun's Priest's performances. He addresses the physically impressive Monk with a lengthy sexual joke; the Monk, by means of his dull tragedies, then rebuffs the Host for the latter's disrespectful and vulgar jocularity towards him. The Host therefore gladly seconds the Knight's interruption of the Monk's series of tragedies, but is again left with injured feelings when the Monk refuses to
comply with his demand for a merry tale about hunting. As a consequence, the Host quickly turns upon the feeble and timid Nun's Priest as a cleric upon whom he can safely vent the displeasure which the Monk has caused him. The Nun's Priest meekly accepts the Host's brusque orders for a merry tale, and then brilliantly carries them out. In the tale he even subtly challenges two of the Host's attackers: he offers direct rebuttal for the theme of the prose narrative told by the Pilgrim Chaucer, and he satirizes both the manner and the matter of the Monk's recital. Though the Host may not realize that he has thus acquired a defender brilliant though physically weak, the gaiety of this tale dissipates most of Harry's displeasure, which arose most recently from his treatment by the Monk. Then, in the "Epilogue" which follows the Nun's Priest's Tale, the Host completely regains his good spirits, for there he is able to use successfully, in a broadly ironic manner, something of the same sexual joke to which the Monk earlier took exception. The high comedy for the reader and for Chaucer the poet lies, of course, in the Host's missing the subtler points of the tale and holding up to ridicule the meek little priest who has superbly defended him.

The analysis to support the statement in the preceding paragraph should begin with the performance by the Pilgrim Chaucer. To dispel the sobriety that has fallen upon the company as a result of the Prioress' story, the Host begins to jest; then he calls upon Chaucer for a merry tale, after having poked fun at him for his large waistline and his quiet manner. Chaucer proceeds by means of the burlesque "Sir Thopas" and the moralistic "Melibeus" to repay the Host in two complementary ways for his mockery. First, the Host's disgust with the entertaining and skilful "Sir Thopas" and his hearty approval of the interminable "Melibeus" make humorously apparent Harry's sad lack of the literary critical ability upon which he prides himself. Second, Harry's approving the "Melibeus," which has as its theme female "maistrye," and his consequent lengthy account of the difficulties he suffers at home under his wife Goodelief's "maistrye," make him a laughing-stock, for he lacks the critical insight to note the very point of that story which his own marital experience puts him in a position to refute.

Following his revelations of the bitter life Goodelief leads him, the Host turns to the Monk: "My lord, the Monk . . . be myrie of cheere, / For ye shul telle a tale trewely." As has not, I think, been noted elsewhere, from the first of these lines one should perhaps understand that the Monk's facial expression and manner indicate considerable displeasure, for my lord the Monk certainly has no reason to be pleased with the treatment he has received on this pilgrimage. When, after the "Knight's Tale," the Host with due regard for "degre" called upon the Monk for a story, the drunken Miller rudely took over the Note the repetition here of the emphatic affirmative "yis" in place of the usual "yes." Also, though it is true that for the Host to request a merry tale, or for another Pilgrim to promise one, is a frequent occurrence in The Canterbury Tales, a noteworthy part of the unction here may rest in the Nun's Priest's echoing the Host's earlier unsuccessful command to the Monk to be merry. The Nun's Priest thus may be saying, in effect, "Even though the Monk would not do as you told him, I will." If such a reading is defensible, then already we can see that the lowly Nun's Priest is unsympathetic towards his high-ranking fellow churchman. As will appear shortly, there is considerable evidence in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" of his lack of sympathy for the Monk. In any event, in his answer here, the Nun's Priest is running no risk of incurring the Host's wrath; and the Narrator's calling him "swete" and "goodly" serves to emphasize the accommodating haste with which he has just accepted Harry's orders.

But, though the Nun's Priest may be weak in body and fawning in manner, there is nothing wrong with his intellect and education. In complying with the Host's request, he relates what is in many ways the outstanding story in the whole collection. And in so doing he manages to include two clear implications which reveal his own point of view and which can also be taken as defenses of the Host. In the first place, the story presents a husband who is right and a wife who is wrong in the interpretation of Chanticleer's dream. Further, though the ostensible moral of the story is that one should not be so careless as to trust in flattery, the Nun's Priest slyly places greater emphasis upon another point:

Wommennes counsils been ful ofte colde;
Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo,
And made Adam fro Paradys to go,
Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese.
But for I noot to whom it myght displese,
If I conseil of wommen wolde blame,
Passe over, for I seyde it in my game.
Rede auctours, where they trete of swich mateere,
And what they seyn of wommen ye may heere.
Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne;
I kan noon harm of no womman divyne.

These antifeminist aspects of the tale represent the Nun's Priest's ways of hinting his dissatisfaction at being under the "petticoat rule" of the Prioress. But they also serve another important function: they are the Nun's Priest's efforts to comfort the Host, who at home must cope with the dictatorial Goodelief. Further, they furnish a direct answer to the theme of the prose tale told earlier by the Pilgrim Chaucer, wherein Melibeus was greatly aided by his wife's counsel. Though Harry Bailly--favorably impressed by the fact that Prudence advised Melibeus to avoid strife, while his own wife urges him to do violence upon both his serving boys and his neighbors--may have failed to notice any incongruity between his praise on the one hand of a story which preaches that a husband should accept his wife's advice, and on the other his unpleasant situation at home, the Nun's Priest quickly saw the point. Therefore, by means of his story, the brilliant gaiety of which contrasts sharply and perhaps purposefully with the lengthy and dull "Melibeus," he makes clear that a husband is not always wise in following his wife's counsel. As J. B. Severs has shown, Chaucer's originality in the tale consists largely in his changes to emphasize just this point. Also, we should note that in the last lines of the passage quoted above, the Nun's Priest does not really withdraw his derogatory comments about women's counsel; rather, he furnishes authority for such views, for in suggesting that his listeners read the authors who treat such matters, he has in mind the same antifeminist writings from which Jankyn read to the Wife of Bath, writings which most certainly do not present a sympathetic view of women's counsel.

The second implication present in the tale is directed against the Monk, who, as we saw, completely discomfitted the Host. The Monk's confidence and general affluence are in as striking contrast with the Nun's Priest's timidity and poverty as is his fine palfrey with the latter's lean and foul nag; thus, it is not unnatural for the Nun's Priest to feel certain twinges of antagonistic jealousy toward his wealthy fellow churchman, and in his tale to hold up the Monk to subtle ridicule. The story of Croesus was one of the dull tragedies related by the Monk, and when Chanticleer refers to this story we are tempted to see a parallel between the strutting manner of both the outrider and the cock. Later, the Nun's Priest says:

For evere the latter ende of joye is wo.
God woot that worldly joye is soone ago;
And if a rethor koude faire endite,
He in a cronycle saufly myghte it write
As for a sovereyn notabilitee.

In connection with this passage we observe that this same commonplace idea of mutability was the central theme of the Monk's performance; and the Nun's Priest's calling such a routine concept a "sovereyn notabilitee" is almost certainly a thrust at the Monk's sententiousness and pomposity. One other passage by the Nun's Priest seems to apply unfavorably to the Monk. In his account of Samson, the Monk said:

Beth war by this ensample oold and playn
That no men telle hir conseil til hir wyves
Of swich thynge as they wolde han secree fayn,
If that it touche hir lymes or hir lyves.

Here, of course, is a typical antifeminist statement which a careful listener might well recall upon hearing the Nun's Priest's mock apology, quoted above, for speaking ill of "wommennes conseils." And the Nun's Priest seems eager to help his audience arrive at this connection when he shifts in his remarks from "reading" to
"hearing" authors who have treated the woman question: "Read authors who treat such material, and you may hear what they say about women." Also, the Nun's Priest attributes the low opinion of women's counsel to Chanticleer, and thus once again equates the Monk with the cock, who, according to the Monk's words, should not have told Pertelote about his dream.

It seems clear, then, that in carrying out the Host's orders the Nun's Priest by the wonderful gaiety and charm of his story avoids any possible blame for not being merry, and that by the two implications present in his tale he goes further in his efforts to please, defend, and comfort the Host. Whether or not Harry understood these implications is not clear, but certainly he seems considerably mollified when he addresses the Nun's Priest in the "Epilogue" to the latter's tale.

Before we examine that Endlink, however, what of the claim by various editors of *The Canterbury Tales* that Chaucer meant to cancel it? This claim has been supported by three factors: first, the Endlink does not appear in most of the manuscripts; second, certain lines in the Endlink repeat matters present in the Host's remarks to the Monk in the "Prologue" to the "Nun's Priest's Tale;" and, third, as Manly and Rickert felt, cancellation seems "to be supported by the fact that the Host's words to the Priest after the tale suggest a different type of person from that suggested by his words [before the tale]. . ." But, as Tatlock argued, the manuscript situation may well result from patchwork by the scribes, and for Chaucer repetition of an idea is not infrequent, especially when as here actual verbal repetition is extremely limited. Further, the seeming conflict in the Host's comments as to the type of person addressed is present only if the Endlink is taken as straightforward description. Consequently, the claim for cancellation is not convincing, and, as we shall see, to throw away this "Epilogue" would be to lose its possibly ironic function and thus to rule out what may be one of Chaucer's carefully developed high points in the dramatic interplay among the Pilgrims. The Endlink in question may be quoted in full:

"Sire Nonnes Preest," oure Hooste seide anoon,
"I blessed be thy breche, and every stoon!
This was a murie tale of Chauntecleer.
But by my trouthe, if thou were seculer,
Thou woldest ben a trede-foul aright.
For if thou have corage as thou hast myght,
Thee were nede of hennes, as I wene,
Ya, moo than seven tymes seventene.
See, whiche braunes hath this gentil preest,
So gret a nekke, and swich a large breest!
He loketh as a sperhauk with his yen;
Him nedeth nat his coulour for to dyen
With brasil, ne with greyn of Portyngale.
Now, sire, faire falle you for your tale!"
And after that he, with ful merie chere,
Seide unto another, as ye shuln heere.

We see here that as a result of the gaiety of the Nun's Priest's "murie tale of Chauntecleer," the Host has lost much of the pique which he earlier felt because of the Monk's outdoing him. He therefore compliments the Nun's Priest for his narrative ability. But Harry still has not forgotten the rebuff dealt him by the Monk. To wipe away the memory of this loss of dignity, and to reestablish himself in the eyes of the company, he now directs at the Nun's Priest something of the same sexual jest at which the Monk earlier took offense. In so doing, Harry continues to use the second person singular familiar pronouns, a device he would surely not have employed if his intent here were solely to praise the Nun's Priest. It seems much more likely that this time his jest is ironically employed, in that the frail and timid Nun's Priest, of whom the Host feels not the least fear, lacks completely the appearance of vigorous manliness which Harry attributes to him in this "Epilogue." Thus the Host evens his score with the Monk, to his own satisfaction at least, at the expense of another churchman, and then condescends in the last line of his
speech to address the Nun's Priest with a respectful "yow." Consequently, he is ready to call upon the next storyteller with his usual "ful merie chere."

My main contention, then, is that the dramatic interplay surrounding the Nun's Priest's performance depends upon a conception of this Pilgrim as frail, timid, and humble. Further, the Host plays a vital and consistent role in the interchanges which accompany the narratives presented in Fragment VII. A Nun's Priest fit to serve as a muscular bodyguard for the Prioress and the Second Nun would hardly have meekly suffered Harry's contemptuous attitude in calling upon him, or the Host's leering insinuations in commenting upon his story. Nor, in view of that attitude and those insinuations, is it likely that the physically impressive Nun's Priest who emerges if the "Nun's Priest's Epilogue" is taken as actual description would have been sufficiently eager to please the Host as to furnish him with a gay tale including implications which almost certainly represent retorts to Harry's most recent attackers--the Pilgrim Chaucer and the Monk--and which offer Harry some comfort for the female "maistrye" that he experiences at home. Finally, the interpretation set forth in this paper presents an explanation which in no way conflicts with Chaucer's usual method in handling his Pilgrims, and which accounts satisfactorily for the general similarity of the Host's remarks in the "Nun's Priest's Epilogue" and in his earlier address to the Monk.

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