TELLABILITY AND POLitenESS IN 'THE MILLER'S TALE'
FIRST STEPS IN LITERARY PRAGMATICS

Pragmatics has so far been thought of as one of the new frontiers of Linguistics. Very broadly speaking, pragmaticists are those linguists who are interested in language as action. They ask, not what language is or what language means, but how — under what circumstances, thanks to what mental processes — language does what it does. Such phenomena are at least as much sociocultural as linguistic, and these linguists often have a training in Sociolinguistics or even Anthropology. For much of the time they study, not so much different linguistic forms, as different sociocultural contexts in which one and the same linguistic form can do different things. A doctor examining a patient suffering from a hand injury might ask him, 'Do you think you could open a window?' Precisely the same utterance might be used by a professor in a stuffy seminar room, but the type of effect achieved in the world would be very different. A pragmaticist tries to say why. He sees a linguistic utterance as part of an ongoing sociocultural continuum which is at once the source and target of that utterance's active force.

The time now seems ripe for a Literary Pragmatics. Drawing positive inspiration from Linguistics, this would also channel the widespread dissatisfaction with literary formalism. On a formalist view, 'Literary Pragmatics' would be a contradiction in terms. The formalist makes a sharp division between an aesthetic, literary heterocosmos — 'the world of the poem' — and the real world, has a low estimate of the chances of real interaction between real writers and

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real readers, and heavily emphasizes the deviance of what he calls 'poetic' or 'literary' or 'artistic' language from what he calls 'ordinary' or 'normal' language. To the pragmaticist, the formalist — the Russian Formalists, the American New Critics — will not seem stupid or straightforwardly wrong. For one thing, a writer's real-world intention, and the appropriate or likely response of a real reader, can sometimes be open to discussion. For another, some texts are themselves written on formalist premises and repay analysis along the same lines. Nevertheless, in his most censorious mood the pragmaticist will see in formalist criticism certain evasions of responsibility. He will try, by dint of strenuous historical and philological scholarship, to arrive at some approximation of the writer's intended impact, insisting that even works written on formalist premises adopt, in those very premises, what is a strategy of behaviour towards, and in, the real world.

Formalist criticism, reluctant to see this, and with its talk of exclusively literary properties, bears the signs of its own history in the world. Russian Formalism arose in the first place as a safe type of scholarship during the time of Czarist censorship, its attempt to avoid some of the dust and heat of life finally brought it into bad odour with the proponents of Socialist Realism — an observation which is not, of course, intended to equate Socialist Realism with Literary Pragmatics. Similarly, one of the reasons why New Criticism was so enormously popular within the American educational system was that it insulated the teaching of literature from the political task of culture formation during the 1930's there was a reluctance to go against the American traditions of pluralism, federalism and diversity, a reluctance to set up a national canon of required reading for students from so many varying backgrounds, the New Critical ban on the discussion of content and value was therefore accepted all too readily.

What's more, the pragmaticist will still occasionally detect the formalist evasions living a new lease of life in more recent critical fashions such as Structuralism, Deconstruction, Reader-Response Criticism and even Speech-Act theories of literature. Literary structuralists tend to transfer the acts of writing and reading, not, like New Critics, to a 'dramatized' author and reader but, still more radically, to the language or culture itself, a mysterious self-perpetuating entity which is at once the element we live in and our very substance, which we can do nothing to change. Deconstructionists tell us that language always fails to mean, never gets a grip on reality, a creed which severs all connection between text and real world even more effectively than the aesthetic ambiguities and paradoxes detected by the formalists. In some Reader-Response critics, the determinacy of meaning is quite denied, the idealized reader, and the actual text, are both embedded in history as little as possible, and the

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range of interpretation open almost amounts to a *jouissance* of the kind delighted in by Roland Barthes. In *Speech-Act* theories of literature the formalist heritage sometimes makes itself felt in the notion that the literary work is not really a speech act at all, but the imitation or dramatization of a speech act, the conditions which must be fulfilled if a speech act is to be felicitously carried out are not simply modified, but altogether suspended, between writer and reader there is a 'sincerity gap', the literary work not 'taking effect' in the real world.

The literary pragmatist's first aim, then, will be to demythologize the concept of literature. He will point out that expressions of the form, 'The poem shows that', 'The poem makes us', 'The idea of the poem is that', etc. are actually metaphorical, and that agentless passive constructions such as 'In this poem the truth is seen to be that' or 'In this poem a sense of X is balanced against a sense of Y' conceal more than they reveal. They conceal what an anthropologist would call the residual orality of all texts. The process of discourse between writer and recipient. All texts address real-life meanings from their creators to their recipients, and a creator's estimate of the text's reception by its likely recipient can affect its formation. The literary pragmatist wants to soften the divide between what, as the result of the nineteenth century specialization of the term, we call literature, and all other texts. He recognizes, of course, the institution of literature, and will spend most of his time discussing texts which carry the literary cachet. But not the least of his concerns will be with how this comes to be awarded, and he will also develop a genre or text-type classification according to which the so-called literary texts would often have features in common with sermons, gardening handbooks, restaurant menus, weather forecasts, political speeches etc. Literary scholarship and linguistic scholarship will in fact come much closer together than has often been the case.

One factor which is fundamental to texts of all kinds has to do with politeness. In narrative texts, an even more fundamental factor is what has been called tellability. Texts may have any number of other features for which we can admire them or dislike them or find them interesting, and they can do many different things in the world. In a full pragmatic analysis such features and such action would be of central concern. Here, I shall take the risk of illustrating the pragmatic frame of mind by discussing tellability and politeness.

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4 Cf Fokkema, *Theories of Literature*, pp 136-64

5 Cf Roger D. Sell, 'The Drama of Implied Author and Reader. A Formalist Obstacle to Literary Pragmatics', forthcoming

6 Cf Walter J Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London Methuen, 1982) Ong (pp 41-2, 161) speaks eloquently of the speaker-audience interrelation and real-life meanings of oral epic, but has a low estimate of the strength of residual orality in printed texts. In my own view, he has been too much persuaded by texts written on formalist premises, and by those formalist critics whose teachings he himself laments. Literature can still, in Donne's words, 'mingle souls'. Moreover, it can even be usefully informative and, as Ong's own analyses of written textuality shows (p 150), encourage the growth of consciousness.

alone, the prerequisites for action of any kind by a narrative text My examples will be from Chaucer’s ‘Miller’s Tale’

If a literary text’s potentiality for action in the world is to be realized, that action has to be initiated in the relationship between the reader and the writer, who in the case of ‘The Miller’s Tale’ is now of course dead and buried. Especially in a predominantly narrative text, however, the writer-reader relationship will not be the pragmaticist’s only focus. He will also examine most carefully the action within the story, since it is in reference to this ‘text-internal’ action that the writer-reader relationship defines itself. At this point we can introduce some narratological terminology developed by Gérard Genette. He speaks of what happens inside the story as being intradiegetic, and of what happens outside the story, between reader and writer, as being extradiegetic. The literary pragmaticist, I’m saying, will be interested in the intradiegetic level as also giving access to the crucial extradiegetic level.

But any discussion of ‘The Miller’s Tale’ must immediately recognize that there is not one intradiegetic level but two. There is the miller himself, one of the pilgrims in the so-called pilgrimage framework, who tells his story to the other pilgrims on the road to Canterbury. Because Chaucer himself tells us about the miller and the other pilgrims, Genette would say that they exist at the first intradiegetic level. And then there are the characters within the miller’s story, at the second intradiegetic level, fictions within fiction. But although the characters within his story are very lively at their second intradiegetic level, the miller himself is also very forceful in his relation with the other pilgrims at the first intradiegetic level. The events at the second intradiegetic level, within his story, are in fact of consequence for relationships at the first intradiegetic level, between the pilgrims. Furthermore, and in somewhat the same fashion, what happens at both intradiegetic levels is of consequence for the extradiegetic relationship between the writer and the reader.

Now on the one hand, then, a writer sometimes creates a narrator or a narratee or both that are quite distinct from the writer himself or any likely reader. What they narrate or hear is intradiegetic, but at the second extradiegetic level, for they themselves are also intradiegetic, with names of their own, at the first level. We have absolutely no hesitation in assigning them their place within the intradiegetic material with reference to which the real author establishes his relation with the real reader. But furthermore, and somewhat more complicatedly, a writer can also create, for narrator or narratee or both, ironical personae which, though on one view purporting to represent the writer or the reader as they really are, on a deeper view are nevertheless seen to be still quite, or partly, distinct. The tell-tale irony signals become quite unmistakable. Here too, then, we are dealing with intradiegetic material, handled by the real writer, responded to by the real reader. The real writer and the real reader are implied ‘beyond’ the ironical personae, providing the standard by which they are actually perceived to be ironical in the first place.

On the other hand, if a narrator or narratee persona emerges from a text

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without any such intradiegetical and ironical distinctness, we have no choice but to take this persona as it comes across. In such a case the picture the writer implies of himself must be assumed genuine, even if not complete — just as we all reveal true but limited aspects of ourselves in the various roles or contexts we may find ourselves in during a lifetime. Or, similarly, we can only take the implied reader as the writer's honest conception of his extradiegetic recipient. In other words, unlike narratologists still showing traces of formalism, the pragmatist will not regard the writer and reader ultimately implied by a text as still somehow 'not' the real writer and reader. They are the real writer and the real reader as the writer intended them for the purposes and duration of communication. Without them as agreed points of contact, communication cannot take place, even if, in other times or places, the real-life writer and reader have other traits. Even if, because of some historical, social, philosophical or other difference, we do not recognize ourselves in the authorial conception of the reader, we do not necessarily reject communication with the writer. For the purposes of communication, and with the aid of our historical, social, philosophical or other understanding, we can internalize his conception of us, 'become' the reader he wants, even though we at the same time remain ourselves. The implied reader can become an aspect of ourself, which we can reject, modify or even fully integrate. And this is not, the pragmatist will be very quick to add, a uniquely literary phenomenon. Even in coffee-room chat, we temporarily adopt the roles in which our fellow-language-users cast us. Literature is not different from any other type of communication.

In the case of The Canterbury Tales, E. Talbot Donaldson once argued that Chaucer creates and steadily maintains an intradiegetically distinct ironical narrator persona that of a naive man of bourgeois tastes and very little moral discrimination, who admires success and enjoyment of almost any sort. By extension, this 'simple pilgrim' figure would speak to an intradiegetically distinct reader who he thought would understand him, a man of much the same calibre as himself. John Major, however, argued that these ironies are more intermittent, an occasional and very amusing self-deprecation on Chaucer's part. And probably most readers feel that we hear Chaucer's own voice for very much of the time, and that we ourselves, granted obvious differences in knowledge and beliefs, are remarkably like the reader this Chaucer genuinely seems to believe in. It has actually been argued that, because of Chaucer's historical moment in time, midway between what Northrop Frye describes as two different radicals of presentation, the oral delivery of epic and the impersonality of the printed page, our sense of communication is even stronger than normal for a printed text. Bertrand H. Bronson concludes.

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In perhaps no other poetry ever written has an author established between himself and his audience a bond so immediate, so personal, so amusing, so teasingly full of nuance, so deceptively transparent, so delicately elusive — in a word, so highly civilized.

The literary pragmatist wants to know to what end the intradiegetic materials are used in this relationship. What, as a result of the writer's use of them, does the reader do? Well for one thing, and obvious though it may seem, he probably soon decides to sit down and read the text to the end. Whatever else he could have done in the world he does not do, and he goes on not doing it for as long as he reads. It is rather as if he got stuck in a conversation with somebody, or, more accurately, in a particular kind of conversation, where one party, in this case the writer, does all the talking. The writer has what linguistic pragmatists call an exceptionally long turn. Turn-taking in ordinary conversation follows certain patterns, and exceptionally long turns, narratives in particular, have to be explained and justified in special ways. Natural narratives, i.e., spontaneous narratives in everyday speech, require that the teller not only tell the story but also use diction, story-structure and choice of comment in such a way as to attract and keep the listener's attention and tacitly request permission to speak and continue speaking. He has to convince him that the incident he is narrating is in some way or other interesting, that it's worth telling — tellable. So too with literary narrative.

I have no space here to examine the use of diction, story-structure and choice of comment in 'The Miller's Tale', one model for such analysis is to be found in the sociolinguistic research referred to in footnote 14. Instead, I shall take for granted that all these details have had their effect and try to suggest how a literary pragmatist would describe the tellability which results.

To understand this, we need only borrow another concept from the linguistic pragmatists. They speak of 'ritual equilibrium'. They have shown how in normal social intercourse people often contribute apparently empty remarks simply in order to preserve group solidarity, to establish alignments of opinion, or mitigate disagreements. More generally, we might say that human beings have some instinct for peaceful relations, and for things being done in a regular, usual manner. We do have considerable interest in ritualizing a secure status.

14 Cf. the same author's 'Chaucer's Art in Relation to his Audience', in Five Studies in Literature (Berkeley: University of California Publications in English, 1940). Bronson takes very literally those remarks, scattered throughout Chaucer's works, purportedly addressed to an envisaged circle of people attentively present during a recitation of his verse. But even scholars who are more sceptical about original oral performance have no hesitation in describing Chaucer's own tone or the reactions of a likely reader. Dieter Mehl, for instance, in 'Chaucer's Audience', Leeds Studies in English, X (1978), 58-74, shows how the running commentary of the pilgrim-listeners, and particularly of the host, are a stimulus to reader involvement in the weal and woe of the characters at the second intradiegetic level.
Quo On the other hand — and this may be something which linguistic pragmatists have not yet fully come to terms with — we all know that human beings sometimes seem to have another instinct, perhaps equally strong, for quarrels and adventure. What the pragmatist version of narratology will emphasize is that human behaviour becomes tellable, worth putting into a story, when these two instincts are seen in opposition, so that the ritual equilibrium of daily life is threatened. A stable situation does not itself constitute matter for narrative, unless as a starting-point for, or background against which to assess, those dynamic departures from normality which make for story proper.

I hasten to confess that, for ease of presentation, I am very much simplifying my account of tellability here, and in at least two respects. First, certain types of narrative have tellability which, as I shall again hint later on, is less than obvious. In this case no small part of the storyteller's art consists in never allowing us to doubt that his material is interesting nevertheless. Realistic novels are one case in point, though on an Aristotelian view all stories are of course satisfying to the extent that they are probable, which may seem to mean, in my terms, not obviously tellable — a paradox I hope to wrestle with elsewhere. Secondly, it may be useful to distinguish between, on the one hand, an 'initial' tellability, of which I speak here, i.e. tellability as residing in curiosity-arousing instances of ritual equilibrium under threat, and, on the other hand, tellability as 'point' — the ultimate point or moral of the story, something which is open to interpretation. Interestingly enough, there has already been at least one attempt to account for the differences between different readers' accounts of a story's point pragmatically, in terms of the different preconceptions they bring to bear and the different contexts in which they read.16

Limiting our account to 'initial' tellability, then, we can say that the story the miller tells is in many ways a typical fabliau about adultery whose tellability derives in the first instance from adultery's being a departure from the social norm of marriage. This prime abnormality, however, is compounded at many points along the way: the abnormality occurs in what, even on its own terms, is an abnormal fashion, seeming to threaten every kind of status quo imaginable. The very first narrative development is representative, introducing the adultery motif, but by leaving the most expected follow-up aside. Nicholas makes a direct pass at Alisoun — 'he caught her by the queynte'17 — but she resists his advance and he immediately starts to make his extraordinary plan. Very pointedly, this involves cuckoldling the carpenter, not by taking the golden opportunity afforded by his business trips to Osney, but in a most complicated way, when he is spending the night in his own house. Indeed, there rapidly comes a point where the accumulating abnormalities in the miller's story strain our sense of probability. Or, to put it more positively and in the spirit in which we actually take it, the essential tellability comes from the witty flouting of probability, from the way in which the improbable is made to seem moment-

16 Gerald Prince, 'Narrative Pragmatics, Message, and Point', Poetics, XII (1983), 527-36
tanly probable even though, at the same time, we know that it’s not A classic example of the anti-Anstotelian tall story

I say this is how ‘we’ take it. More exactly, of course, it is so taken both by us, extradicetetically, and intradicetetically by the other pilgrims. Moreover, the way in which this material of the second intradicetic level is taken by the pilgrims at the first extradicetic level is also part of what we, the readers, have to take extradicetetically, so that the question of tellability here arises once more. In this case, tellability resides in the miller’s disruption of the slender ritual equilibrium obtaining between himself and the other pilgrims, particularly the host, and most especially the reeve. His drunkeness clashes with an implied norm of moderation. When the host is inviting the monk to tell the next story, the miller thrusts himself forward, in total disregard of good manners. And his tale, so obviously aimed at the pilgrim reeve, is a boastful affront of superlatively cunning grossness. The only character in the story who escapes unscathed is Alisoun, and the miller’s strong implication is that the only man worthy of such a dainty morsel as Alisoun would be the teller of the tale himself.18

With both the first- and second-level extradicetic materials, then, initial tellability is a matter of obvious abnormalities in events or behaviour. Now even if they had been less obvious, a narrative that comes to us labelled as literature will perhaps be accepted in the faith that its tellability will ultimately reveal itself. Unlike a natural narrative, a literary narrative is written down in a definitive form. We assume that its teller went to some trouble to do the best he could. And we know that his text has survived the ordeal of selection by a publisher and, often, the test of time. In all types of discourse a pragmaticist can follow the workings of what the philosopher H P Grice has called the Cooperative Principle unless there is strong evidence to the contrary, people assume that a speaker is telling them as much as they need to know for the purposes of the exchange, that he is not being deliberately misleading, that everything he says is relevant to the main drift, and that he will avoid unnecessary obscurity, ambiguity, proximity and disorder.19 With a text endorsed as part of the institution of literature, people may be even more predisposed to believe in its cooperativeness.20

In my own view, however, some Speech-Act theory of literature overemphasizes the consequences of this readerly predisposition. People at certain times in their own lives or during certain periods of history, and people with a certain life-style, are perhaps more prepared to read on than others. Many people, perhaps the majority, find life all too short. Especially as the pace of

18 As Gerald Prince would perhaps say (see n 16), this, as far as the miller is concerned, is his story’s ultimate ‘point’. As far as the reeve is concerned, the point is perhaps that the miller is a most pernicious scoundrel. As far as the other pilgrims and the extradicetetic reader are concerned, the point is that the miller is a scoundrel, but an admirably, and somewhat endearingly, clever one.


20 This is a major argument in Pratt, Literary Discourse
modern life increases and the backlog of books to be read becomes ever more daunting, and especially for types of fiction where intrinsic, 'initial' tellability is deliberately less than obvious, readers are less and less prepared to be patient with authors. If a work of literary fiction still wins a hearing it will not be by virtue of the literary label and tellability alone — not even immediately obvious tellability. Nor will all the other qualities a narrative may have be sufficient, and neither will its mode of action in the world make much difference. On the contrary, as the prerequisite for any such action it must also have, in addition to everything else, a most carefully judged degree of politeness. This, the essential temper or stance adopted *vis à vis* the reader, has actually been of crucial importance for texts in all periods.

As I've said, linguistic pragmatists have shown that in normal social intercourse turn-taking follows certain clear conventions. They've also shown that a very large part of our everyday speech is affected by a desire to preserve face, not only our own but other people's. We avoid suggesting that our addressee's liberties should be in any way impinged upon, or that his self-esteem and system of values should be in any way questioned. Hence our indirect speech acts, or hedging. 21 The doctor asking, 'Do you think you could open a window?' was asking his patient a direct, real question about his manual capability and expected the answer, *yes, no or perhaps*. The professor used the same utterance as an indirect speech act, hedging his command to his students so as to make it seem less of an imposition. Again, and as I've already hinted, linguistic pragmatists have dwelt at great length on the workings of the Cooperative Principle we do try to make our contributions to discourse as helpful as possible, we try to do the decent thing by our hearers. It would therefore be most surprising if such an extended turn as a narrative speech act were not experienced partly in terms of its degree of politeness. And in fact many of our deepest intuitions about authors have to do with just this question, representing perhaps the most direct consequence of our participation in the literary speech act. Perhaps I need hardly add, that if we feel Dickens can be cheeky, or George Eliot importunate, or Pope politely impolite, it would be worth trying to pin these impressions down. Moreover, each period of literature to some extent has its own politeness conventions, closely tied up with changes in broader social norms and in the role of the writer in society. Here too is a vast field for pragmatic research.

I would suggest a division of politeness into selectional politeness and presentational politeness. A writer who maintained absolute politeness of selection would scrupulously observe all the taboos and conventions of social and moral decorum. He would never choose anything to say, or any words to say it in, that would be in the least bit offensive to his likely readers. He would in no way challenge their tastes, dignity or importance. A writer maintaining absolute politeness of presentation would observe the Cooperative Principle at all costs, so that his readers would never be in the slightest doubt as to what was happening, what he meant, or why something was tellable. If he did flout this

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21 See Brown & Levinson, 'Politeness'

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principle, the point of what he was saying would be easily ascertainable through obvious implicature

I said, though, that a writer must have a most carefully judged degree of politeness Absolute politeness will never do! As with the tellability of the intradiegetic materials, so here too a kind of ritual equilibrium must be at once observed and not observed Too much selectional politeness makes for obsequiousness, too much presentational politeness is merely dull, both of them failings which are especially distasteful in speech acts where the speaker is allowed to monopolize the floor as a literary author does if we go on reading him

Obsequious over-selection would quite rule out much satire and irony in literature Part of the special excitement of a text can come from the author's treading a knife-edge on this most delicate matter Fielding, in *Tom Jones*, knows exactly when and exactly how to cast his reader in the role of a blockhead

Dull over-presentation, again, is fatally limiting Certain elements of surprise, suspense or intellectual and moral stimulus can often be achieved only at the expense of informational efficiency Indeed, certain text-linguists have argued that there is always a trade-off between, on the one hand, efficiency — the help a writer gives a reader in making a text understandable — and, on the other hand, effectiveness — the impact made on the reader 22 In the context of this argument, to speak of effectiveness of impact is not, I must stress, to refer to the fact that items of information have a greater or lesser degree of *intrinsic* impact It is perfectly true that, as my discussion of tellability has already shown, the information conveyed by the miller's tale is increasingly unpredictable Moreover, the intrinsic impact of information will be an obviously central point in a contrast I shall later make between 'The Miller's Tale' and 'The Reeve's Tale' For the time being, however, what I am calling, with de Beaugrande and Dressler (see footnote 22), effectiveness and force of impact is not something that can be specified in terms of a quantitative theory of information The point is only that one and the same piece of information, quite regardless of whether it is intrinsically more expected or less expected, can be presented more or less clearly, more or less directly, more or less efficiently, so that, as a direct consequence, the reader himself has to do more or less work in grasping it and its connections The more work he does, the more he is involved and, perhaps, in this sense surprised — insofar as the text didn't make whatever it was immediately plain Here too, then, is another aspect of the knife-edge of politeness Too much information without helpful links will be merely too baffling to be integrated But unproblematic integration in easy stages will leave the reader with too little to do for himself Ezra Pound's Cantos riskily verge on the former extreme, some of Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads on the latter

In terms of its selectional politeness, the story told by Chaucer's miller in

one sense takes a huge risk. An essential part of the reader's experience of it can only be that it is in very bad taste. Or rather, it starts with one sort of bad taste, taking great relish in the prospect of adultery and describing Alisoun as a most sexy little piece, moves on to a different sort of bad taste, in the blasphemous delight it takes in Nicholas's abuse of the scriptural narrative of the flood and in the entirely unreligious reasons for the church-goings of both Alisoun and Absolon, and ends with another sort of bad taste — the anal-erotic scatological farce of Absolon's misplaced kiss and the penetration of the hot iron rod. A complete pragmatic analysis would set the tale in its full mediaeval context, and might well find that these three sorts of bad taste have been arranged on a rising scale of offensiveness, a crescendo corresponding to the movement of the story towards its climax of action. At all events, they are each recapitulated in the miller's unabashedly abrupt conclusion —

Thus swyved was the carpenteres wyf,
For al his keping and his jalousey,
And Absolon hath kist her nether ye,
And Nicholas is scalded in the toute
This tale is doon, and God save al the route!"
Like other fabliaux, however, the miller's story can be thought of, not only as about the lower orders of society, but also as originating from the lower orders. This could be felt to sanction the bad taste, even bad taste as fantastically energetic as the miller's. Nor did the putatively low social origin of the genre restrict its popularity. Mediaevalists tell us that fabliaux were enjoyed by all ranks of society,24 a finding confirmed at the first intradiegetic level of The Canterbury Tales. In the prologue to 'The Reeve's Tale', Chaucer says that Oswald the reeve was the only pilgrim not amused by the miller's story, for which he of course had personal reasons of his own. The prologue to 'The Miller's Tale' itself confronts its readership directly. The miller, Chaucer says, 'told of his cheval's tale in his manere', so that the reader of gentle birth should not blame him, Chaucer, for it. Chaucer simply gives a true report of the miller's 'harlotrye', and if the reader finds this not to his taste he can turn over the pages until he finds a story he likes better.

The miller's story, then, is a deliberate challenge to socially accepted standards of decorum. But in the first place, societies have ways of containing and even encouraging such challenges — one thinks of the great carnivals, or of the Twelfth Night antics of the Lord of Misrule. Chaucer's society accommodated fabliaux through the explanation in terms of its own social structure. Such cultural sanctioning for literary assaults on fundamental institutions or assumptions, perhaps most obviously operative for fabliaux, parody, documentary realism and satire, must always be a major factor in the literary pragmatist's assessment of selectional politeness.

And in the second place, an author may hedge selectional impoliteness by introducing indirection into his speech act. 'These are not my own words' is the standard gambit here used by Chaucer; the construction of more than one intradiegetic level, of a fictional frame for fiction, may at least in part be a consequence of pragmatic considerations of politeness. Our impression of Chaucer himself is that he is being much more polite towards us than either Nicholas towards the carpenter or the miller towards the other pilgrims. 'Read another of the stories if you don't like this one,' he continues, a piece of sham advice no more likely to be followed by the reader than the professor's 'Do you think you could open a window?' is likely to be answered by his students with a round negative. Chaucer has saved his own face: we cannot blame him. And he has saved our face: he neither impugns our fine sensibilities nor prevents us from enjoying the 'low' tale.

Moving on now to the knife-edge of presentational politeness, we can be grateful that pragmatists, psycholinguists, text-linguists and discourse analysts have illuminated at least five phenomena which must be crucial in any assessment of the degree to which a writer observes the Cooperative Principle.

and of his reasons for flouting it. First, discourse deixis specific linguistic means (often actually described as ‘metalinguistic’ in function) used in a text so as to help its recipient keep a track on where it’s going. Secondly, salience markers the formal linguistic means by which a text keeps certain things mentioned more in the foreground of the recipient’s awareness and others more in the background. Thirdly, frames (including, I would suggest, frames for people or fictional characters), scripts, scenarios and schemata mental representations of the world and of human behaviour, which the recipient either has, or constructs, and to which he refers the on-going text as the only means of assimilating it to his world view. Fourthly, sectional boundaries significant breaks, linguistically marked, in the coherence of space, time, characters, events and worlds. Lastly, communicative dynamism the way in which ‘old’ information is related to ‘new’ information by the structure of individual sentences and by the textual interrelation of sentences in sequence.

This last phenomenon calls for special attention, since one of the most central concerns of pragmatic narratology will be to assess the ‘old’ and ‘new’ items of information for their more precise psychological status. The point is, that some givens are more given than others, that which was given longest ago being now, paradoxically, least given of all. Thus W L Chafe oversimplifies when he says that the given is only what readers are at present conscious of. A more adequate account begins to be elaborated by Charlotte Linde, who points out in particular that the choice between *it* and *that* depends on which side of the most recent discourse node the referent occurred. The fullest account so far, and the one which underlies the discussion I am about to attempt of the miller’s story’s climax, is presented by Gillian Brown and George Yule. ‘New’ they define as something either ‘brandnew’, i.e. completely unknown to the reader/hearer, or ‘unused’, i.e. known to the hearer reader but not so far brought into the discourse. They then speak of ‘infrastructures’, i.e. entities which


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the speaker assumes the hearer can infer from a discourse entity which has already been introduced — e.g. 'The driver' in 'See that car over there? The driver must be drunk'. Finally they speak of the 'evoked', which is either 'situational', i.e. something salient in the discourse context — e.g. 'I', 'you' — or 'textual'. The 'currently evoked' is a textual entity which was 'new' immediately before the current 'new' was introduced. The 'displaced-evoked' are textual entities which were introduced prior to that. I suggest that a narrator who wishes to introduce an element of suspense, surprise or mystification will sometimes, impolitely trading off efficiency of information for effectiveness of impact, accord a brandnew or displaced-evoked entity a linguistic treatment normally reserved for an inferrable or currently evoked. This is what happens in the case of 'This carpenter' in the passage I shall now discuss.

As an example of how Chaucer flouts the Cooperative Principle for force of impact the climax of 'The Miller's Tale' is rich indeed — four marvellous lines for which non-pragmatic types of analysis provide, it seems to me, an inadequate explanation or encomium.

'It help! water! help, for Goddes herte!'
This carpenter out of his slomber sterste,
And herde oon crien 'water' as he were wood,
And thoughte, 'Alas' now comth Nowelis flood!'

There is an extraordinarily radical break in coherence here. The carpenter is sleeping in his tub up in the attic. He has ascended thither, on Nicholas's advice, to await a second Noah's flood. When it comes, he will cut the ropes suspending his tub and merely float out through the roof. We have heard nothing about him, however, for 169 lines, more than a quarter of the total length of the tale, in which space we have had the tight-packed and absorbing business of Nicholas and Alisoun abed, the love-struck Absolon's kissing Alisoun's rear end through the bedroom window, Absolon's scheme for revenge, and Nicholas's decision to substitute his own bottom for Alisoun's when Absolon requests a kiss the second time. Our character frames for Alisoun, Nicholas and Absolon have all been developed in heightened detail — as for instance in Absolon's sweetening his mouth in readiness for the first kiss and his subsequent angry revulsion. Furthermore, whereas we knew what Absolon was going to kiss as soon as Alisoun herself knew, whereas we knew what was going to touch Nicholas's bottom almost as soon as Absolon did, whereas, in other words, in each of these incidents the character frames of both participants were fully activated throughout, in the present case the Nicholas frame is in calculably more topical than the carpenter frame. When we do remember the carpenter we have almost certainly forgotten that his current world-view involves a specific expectation about water, not least because that expectation was always so foolish that we never took it seriously. We have been made to think about it, not from within the carpenter frame but from within the Nicholas frame, as a glorious ruse to make a cuckold. Similarly, now, we can attach water only to the still active frame of Nicholas the burnt-bottomed. The essence of the joke, of course, is then pure pragmatics: the different signifi-
cances one and the same verbal utterance can carry for people with different world-views or within different contexts.

Yet we get no discourse deixis — no metatextual comment to the effect ‘This brings us back to the carpenter’ — nothing to help us across the gap from Nicholas’s bottom to the tub in the attic. On the contrary, the coherence break actually takes place in the middle of a couplet, as if there were no break at all — previous breaks of any magnitude have coincided with a new couplet. And our plight is further deepened by the miller’s characteristic ‘this’. Momentarily we may even take this as gesturally deictic at the first intradiegetical level, the miller pointing at the reeve. Of course, we soon integrate it, either as a non-deictic definiteness marker, or as symbolic or empathetic deixis. But even so, this integration cannot be confirmed until we reach ‘his slumber’, especially since, in combination with the word order, ‘this’ also upsets the workings of communicative dynamism ‘This carpenter’ sounds as if it ought to be the thematization of an immediately preceding rheme — the currently evoked, in Brown and Yule’s terminology — whereas what it actually does is to evoke an entity that is now very deeply displaced, for which the normal and most cooperative treatment would be rhematization with the definite article e.g. ‘This shout woke up the carpenter’. The miller’s textual strategy seems to throw the carpenter right at us, his salience forcefully increased by his being the subject of an active verb, and increased further still by the combination of ‘this’, which has the semantic feature plus proximateness, with ‘sterete’ in the minus proximateness past tense. The effect here is as if ‘sterete’ is forced up what one salience analyst calls a cline of dynamism into the present, as with the interplay of plus proximateness and minus proximateness in the so-called free indirect style sometimes used by modern novelists.

The literary pragmatist will emphasize that the effectiveness of a story is directly related to the amount of work the reader has to do in forging the links by which to understand it. Sometimes, clearly, this will be a matter, not only of force of impact due to impolite inefficiency of presentation, but also of the unpredictability of the information itself (cf. p. 505 above). One major reason why ‘The Miller’s Tale’, which in surface linguistic style is so similar to ‘The

32 In terms of the philosophy of speech acts, ‘This carpenter’ does not satisfy the felicity conditions for its assertion-intent position. There ought to ‘exist one and only one object to which the speaker’s utterance of the expression applies’, and the hearer must be given sufficient means to ‘identify’ the object from the speaker’s utterance of the expression. Searle, *Speech Acts*, p. 82


34 Longacre, ‘Spectrum and Profile’. This effect may be all the more intense in view of the fact that sterete has a contracted third-person-singular form in the present sterit.

Reeve's Tale', actually seems far more forceful, is that the frames we have to link up are, as I've partly shown, so sharply separated from each other in our minds At the climax of 'The Reeve's Tale', the character frames of all the participants are included in the scenario of one and the same narrow bedroom In 'The Miller's Tale', there are three scenarios on different levels the street (Absolon), the bedroom (the adulterous couple), and the attic (the carpenter)

But as if all this weren't enough, just when our carpenter frame has provided us with the irresistibly comic surge of comprehension, the carpenter himself confuses us (momentarily) by mixing up his frame of the flood with what in our own theological schemata is almost its typological opposite Nowel — Christmas — the beginning of man's redemption When we realize that the carpenter is thus 'doubly' wrong about the water, the comic enlightenment makes another, and climactic surge And obviously, such effects resulting from our implementation of the various frames are made still sharper by the fact that, as so often at a Chauceran climax, there is a rapid switch to empathetic direct speech, we are given the speech or thought of each party verbatim, so that we have to move, as it were, from right inside one character frame to right inside the other

Some of my own readers are perhaps beginning to feel by this point that my talk of frames, thematization, proximateness and so on is becoming forbiddingly technical Perhaps I have in any case said enough about tellability and politeness to suggest something of the literary pragmatist's concerns I conclude, therefore, with two important points made very briefly

First, the present article has only scratched the surface It has only begun to give an account of tellability and politeness, and has only used isolated examples The next, and highly problematic, step could be to ask whether one can move from such isolated examples to an account of overall styles in such matters 36 And the study of tellability and politeness is itself only a preliminary, as I said at the outset, to an examination of the action they enable the text to perform in the real world This will entail a radical re-appraisal of literary theory, a recognition that didactic, hedonistic, sociological, ideological and psychological accounts of the function of literature must be interrelated — the notion that literature has one, all-embracing function and set of properties is decidedly unpragmatic 37 The pragmatist may in any case prefer to work

36 Cf Roger D Sell, 'Politeness in Chaucer: Suggestions towards a Methodology for Pragmatic Stylistics', forthcoming.

37 Some of the scholars moving towards a Literary Pragmatics have been, to my way of thinking, too exclusively ideological in their analysis This applies, for instance, to Roger Fowler, Literature as Social Discourse: The Practice of Linguistic Criticism (London: Batsford Academic and Educational Ltd, 1981) Siegfried J Schmidt, 'A pragmatic interpretation of "fictionality"', in Pragmatics of Language and Literature, ed Teun A van Dijk (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1976), and 'The Empirical Science of Literature: ESL A New Paradigm', Poetics, XII (1983), 19-34, and 'Empirical Sociology of Literature and the Arts', ed Cees van Rees, Poetics, XIII (1983), 285-487 On the other hand, of course, analysis has to begin somewhere, and these scholars clearly feel that ideology is as good a place as any At least their Literary Pragmatics is free from the formalist overtones which can occasionally be detected in the work of Teun A van Dijk and Richard J Watts Cf Sell, 'A Formalist Obstacle', forthcoming For some idea of the penetration of Literary Pragmatics outside the Anglo-Saxon
inductively. Which thing or things does this particular text seem to have achieved and be achieving? And what about this one? And so on.

Secondly, Literary Pragmatics is not in the least revolutionary. Many literary scholars have acknowledged the essential point of reader-writer interaction all along, and many scholars have already reacted against formalism. The biggest change will be seen in scholars who make Literary Pragmatics their field of special study. Their work, I've hinted, will become something more like the work of linguistic pragmatists. Not everyone will go this way, however, and Literary Pragmatics provides only one perspective, albeit an important one, among many others. It can cast light on problems in various other areas of specialization, textual editors are already debating whether the Folio and Quarto versions of King Lear are not perhaps both fully Shakespearian and 'final', and simply written for different contexts, the pragmatist will certainly have something to say here. But equally, Literary Pragmatics is dependent on other specializations for its own survival. Specializations which provide accurate information about authors, their meanings, and the action potential of those meanings. I permit myself, therefore, two wishes. Long live Literary Pragmatics! Long live Textual Criticism, Philology, Biography, Sociology, History of Ideas, History of Taste, Source Studies, Translation Studies and so on as well.

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frame of reference, see Marcello Pagnini, Pragmatica della letteratura (Palermo: Sellerio editore, 1980)
