THE THEME OF JUDGMENT
IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

By Rodney Delasanta

Despite some recent animadversions on the architectonic function of the Parson's Tale, most critics since Ralph Baldwin have agreed that the Parson's answer to the Host's call to "knytte up wel a greet mateere" (X.28) makes a suitable finish for the Canterbury Tales. Penance, however besmirched its motives, is the final reason for pilgrimage; and the interposing of a visible sign of grace in the person of a holy confessor between the penitents and their destiny, if not obviously appropriate to us moderns, was strikingly significant to the pilgrims:

For, as it seemed, it was for to doone,
To enden in som vertuous sentence,
And for to yeve hym space and audience.

(X.62-64)

Time—finally—for them to make earnest out of game; time for the "seke" to "seeke."

But the "sentence" to which they agree is teasingly ambiguous: although its primary meaning here is obviously rhetorical, it also carries suggestions of the judicatory. That the pilgrims had been preparing

1 E. Talbot Donaldson, "Poetry and Sin in Medieval English Literature," a paper read to the Medieval Section of the MLA convention in December, 1968.
2 The Unity of the "Canterbury Tales" (Copenhagen, 1955), pp. 83-105.
3 Quotations from Chaucer are from the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957).
themselves for judgment—albeit of a variety ironically Chaucerian—was evident from the moment they assented to the Host's offer in the General Prologue to "stenon at my jugement" (I.778). They agree "that he wolde beenoure governour, / And of our tales juge and reportour" (I.813-14), that "we wol reuled been at his devys / In heigh and lough; and thus by oon assent / We been acorded to his jugement" (I.816-18). Moreover, whoever would be "rebel" to his "jugement / Shal paye for al that by the wey is spent" (I.833-34). Accordingly, the Host gathers together the pilgrims "alle in a flok" (I.824) and promises them that whoever tells the best tale of sentence and solace "Shal have a soper at oure aller cost" (I.799) when they return from Canterbury. In the course of the journey, the pilgrims forget neither his judicial authority nor his promise of prandial reward. The Clerk, for example, responds to the Host's uncouth command to tell a tale with the acknowledgment that "I am under youre yerde; / Ye han of us as now the govern- ance, / And therfore wol I do yow obeisance" (IV.22-24). The Squire too agrees to the Host's command to "sey somwhat of love" so as not to "rebelle / Agayn youre lust" (V.2, 5-6); the Franklin "wole obeye / Unto your wyl" (V.703-704); and the Knight urges his fellow pilgrims to prepare their stories after his in order to "se now who shal the soper wynne" (I.891).

Thus the Host is early characterized as judge whose decrees must be obeyed upon pain of punishment, but who will reward the most meritorious with a supper upon completion of the journey. A recognizable Chaucerian strategy begins to emerge, one that I shall attempt to define in the rest of this paper as still another parody of Christian teaching—in this case, the Last Judgment—and once again by means of a decoying strategy of realism intended to shake off all but those hounds willing to follow Chaucer down the labyrinthine way of his art. Kemp Malone recognized the Host as a figure of a servant who is also master—"telling the pilgrims what to do and the pilgrims obeying his orders in comic reversal of the customary relationship between an innkeeper and his guests"—without, however, recognizing the typological figure of another Servant-Master in the background. Moreover, that this servant-master should also establish himself as judge who will call the rebels among them to reckoning and, most important, will reward the best of them with a supper brings to mind the famous eschatological passage from

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1 "Reportour" here presumably means "that he was to report on their merits"; see Albert C. Baugh, ed., Chaucer's Major Poetry (New York, 1963), p. 255, n. 814.
the Gospel of Luke (22:27-30) which would seem to lend special paro-
odic relevance to these deceptively innocent details:

“For which is greater, he that sitteth at table or he that serveth? Is not he that sitteth at table? But I am in the midst of you, as he that serveth. . . . And I dispose to you, as my Father hath disposed to me, a kingdom; that you may eat and drink at my table, in my kingdom, and may sit upon thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

One need not conjecture that Chaucer knew the tradition of the escha-
tological supper well. The Parson overtly enjoins his fellow pilgrims to penance thus:

“I was atte dore of thyn herte,” seith Jhesus, “and cleped for to entre. He that openeth to me shal have foryifnesse of synne. I wol entre into hym by my grace, and soupe with hym,” by the goode werkes that he shal doon, whiche werkes been the foode of God; “and he shal soupe with me,” by the grete joye that I shal yeven hym. (p. 235; my italics)

This eschatological supper is, of course, a staple of biblical imagery, typologically foreshadowed in the paschal feast of the Old Testament, symbolically fulfilled in the eucharistic meal of the New, and utilized time and again by Jesus in revealing to his disciples the mysteri-
ous manner of salvation, the invitation, the preparation, and the com-
portment of the invited determining their destiny inside the Judg-
ment of God.

It should be remembered that the Christians of the Middle Ages were unceasingly being called to judgment, often with a suddenness that modern man—for all his Angst over the Bomb—can scarcely appre-
ciate. One needs only a cursory knowledge of the apocalypses visited cyclically upon medieval man to imagine his intimate acquaintance with doom: the rapine of foreign invasions and internal anarchy; the unvaccinable horror of plagues (the most ten ible of them having de-
sceded in 1348, at the very moment of the invention of gunpowder); the “justice” of an implacable capital punishment meted out for the most venial of offenses; and the superstitions of his pagan heritage often

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6 From the Douay-Rheims translation. It is noteworthy that Chaucer should refer to Harry Bailly's demeanor in the Reeve's Prologue as "lordly as a kyng" (I.3900) and that Harry should earlier have sworn "by my fader soule" (I.781).
reinforced rather than assuaged by contact with a mysterious Christian rubric. And, at the end of his suffering, the Final Judgment—with Jesus, the merciful Savior, giving way to the parousial Judge, separating on that \textit{dies irae} the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the cockle, and banishing those on his left into the hell-fire prepared for them from all eternity by the Father. The scene was sculpted deep into Christian man’s imagination, not only by the word, usually most voluble and terrifying during Advent and Lent, but also by the omnipresent art surrounding him during divine worship. Indeed, he often could not enter his church without passing through the great central doors beneath the mighty tympanum which drummed home the terrible lesson of man’s final end.

The design of that tympanum—its subject invariably the Last Judgment—was remarkably stylized from the thirteenth century on, as Emile Mâle has demonstrated,\(^7\) and it had a profound influence upon the popular and artistic imagination of the later Middle Ages. In the center we find the risen Christ, usually enthroned, lifting his wounded hands as if to pronounce his implacable judgment; surrounding him, angels blowing their apocalyptic trumpets or holding the instruments of his Crucifixion, and the Twelve Apostles ready to share in his judgment of the twelve tribes of Israel; near him, the figures of the Virgin and St. John kneeling in supplication for the fate of mankind; beneath him and to his right, the saved—following St. Peter with his key to the door of glory; to his left, the damned—herded by demons anxious to usher their prey into the mouth of Hell. Often in their midst—and of special importance to our purposes in this paper—we see the figure of an angel with scales in hand weighing the virtues and vices of a trembling soul in the balance. Although the details are generally standardized, the scene remains essentially dramatic, for Jesus seems not to have completed his judgment; the tombs of the risen dead are half open; St. Peter has not yet unlocked the door; the Virgin and St. John continue their supplication; the devil attempts to upset the justice of the scales by weighing it in his favor. The moment, in short, is suspensefully penultimate (Baldwin, p. 90).

Such too is the moment of the Canterbury pilgrimage as Chaucer conceives it at the “thropes ende” (X.12). Stylizations of thirteenth-century apocalyptic art have given way to a characteristic fourteenth-century realism which masks its larger intentions in deceptive details,

but the moment—to use Baldwin’s word again—remains penultimate.

“Almoost fulfild is al myn ordinaunce” announces the Host (X.19).

“For every man, save thou,” he tells the Parson, “hath toold his tale. / Unbokele, and shewe us what is in thy male” (X.25-26). In one sense the tales have served as a necessary prelude to the judgment of the Host, but in another sense the tales, by being inadvertently confessional, will serve as prelude to the absolution of the Parson and to the greater Judgment beyond for which the pilgrimage is itself preparation. In the case of the Reeve, the Wife of Bath, and the Pardoner, for example, their Prologues are unequivocal confessions, public and strident, although their intentions are obviously self-aggrandizing and self-justifying rather than penitential. And the Host too by the end of journey comes to intuit that earnest has indeed emerged from these games and that his function as ironic judge over humanity in microcosm enjoins him to fulfill his sentence somewhat more seriously. The japes of his earlier demeanor give way to the recognition of the need for knitting up well “a greet mateere,” and the Parson, whom he had earlier dismissed as a “Jankin” and Lollard and whose preaching he succeeded in aborting, now becomes the delegate of his “sentence.” Nor does the real significance of the Host’s offer of a “soper” in the General Prologue escape the attention of the holy priest, for he agrees to “knytte up al this feeste” (X.47) by insisting on “the sentence” of his “meditacioun” and preaching to the pilgrims of sin, confession, and judgment.

If the dramatic occasion clearly prepares the pilgrims for judgment, the imagery of the Parson’s Prologue supports the same intention. We learn immediately, for example, that day is falling and that the sun was no more than “Degrees nyne and twenty as in highte” (X.4). E. T. Donaldson reads the figure as appropriately recapitulatory of the original twenty-nine pilgrims, but, in conjunction with some of the other extraordinary numerals of this prologue, it obviously means more. Russell A. Peck, “Number Symbolism in the Prologue to Chaucer’s Parson’s Tale,” ES, 48 (1967), 205-15, interprets the numbers “as metaphors of the spiritual welfare of the pilgrims in the company” (p. 207). He points out that, according to numerological exegesis, twenty-nine, as well as eleven, connotes “imperfection, concupiscence, and spiritual decrepitude . . . in short, a sign of sin” (p. 207), whereas thirty is a “Christian marriage number and a sign of fruitfulness and the active life” (p. 208), and twelve “a number of spiritual regeneration and fulfillment” (p. 212). Six, like thirty, he also reads as a marriage number and as a number of the soul. This pioneering article, more directed to numerological lore than mine, conveniently confirms the Judgment motif I have been suggesting by reference to the rich implications of the numerological symbols that I have pursued in a different (and less exhaustive) but complementary way. See especially Peck’s eminently satisfying reading of the time of day in the Parson’s Prologue (“foure of the clokke” in some manuscripts, “ten of the clokke” in

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cer's puzzling reference to Libra in line 11 would seem to suggest that—whether or not in error about the moon's exaltation—he attaches a symbolic significance to this zodiacal sign which, here in the coda of the pilgrimage, must at least equal the importance he had attached to the Ram in the General Prologue. The fact that the sun should be descending into the last thirty-degree segment of its daily revolution through the heavens while Libra is in the ascendancy suggests the penultimate moments of temporal decline on the one hand and the coming of eternal Judgment on the other. Because there are twelve zodiacal signs, each governs thirty degrees of the celestial circumference—an obvious fact with which Chaucer shows familiarity in his Treatise on the Astrolabe when he teaches his son Lewis that "every signe is de-partid in thre euen parties by 10 degrees" (p. 551) and, a little later, "evermo generaly the houre inequal of the day with the houre inequal of the night contenen 30 degrees of the bordure" (p. 552).^9

Thus, in the Parson's Prologue twenty-nine serves conveniently as a number expressing the experience of the twenty-nine pilgrims with their final allotment of light before the always (and almost) coming on of the night. That their time left for "earnest" is agonizingly short before night and Judgment descend is strengthened by some curious details. As the sun descends,

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ellevene \text{ foot, or litel moore or lesse,} \\
\text{My shadwe was at thilke tyme, as there,} \\
\text{Of swiche feet as my lengthe parted were} \\
\text{In sise feet equal of proporcioun.} \\
\text{(X.6-9)}
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These curiously constructed lines mean simply that if Chaucer's height were divided into six parts, his shadow would extend a distance of eleven such parts. Again, the numerals carry the theme of the penultimate. In medieval art, the mystical numbers seven and twelve signify, respectively, temporality and eternity. Seven, the sum of four (the number of the body with its four elements) and three (the number of the soul), expresses the number of ages allotted to man. With this allotment is associated the practice of the seven virtues and of the seven sacraments (even the seven supplications of the Pater Noster), as well as the others) as relevant to the above. Four, for example, stands as a warning to the pilgrims because it is "a number of Fortune, a number . . . intimately associated with the world" (p. 210).

^ See Robinson's note to paragraph 4, lines 16 ff. (p. 870).
seven corporal and the seven spiritual works of mercy—all of which militate against the seven deadly sins.  

Twelve, on the other hand, a multiple of the above four and three, heralds the Universal and Eternal Church transcending time—the triumph of the Mystical Body through its Head who is eternal life itself. Thus, the twelve tribes of Israel foreshadow the Twelve Apostles who will sit in judgment upon them and who, in their multiples of 144 and 144,000, represent the apocalyptic number of the saved before the throne of the Lamb. As a pilgrim to the City of God who has heard all but one story, Chaucer sees himself and his generation in the penultimate stage of human life: almost fulfilled is the “ordinance” of his judge. If his temporal body of six parts casts a shadow of eleven feet, there remains only the final step to the temporal finality of seven and to the eschatological finality of twelve.

That latter finality is zodiacally complemented by the reference to Libra at line 11. The sign of Libra is the scales; and we have already seen that a traditional detail of thirteenth-century tympanums was the figure of the angel weighing the virtues and vices of the defendant in his apocalyptic scales. The ascending Libra of the Parson’s Prologue thus betokens for the Canterbury pilgrims approaching Judgment, parodically foreshadowed in the function of the Host, temporally fulfilled in the role of the Parson, who unequivocally calls the pilgrims to penance and judgment, and still awaiting the parousial Judge himself who, as the Parson warns, “may nat been deceyved ne corrupt.” What we find at the “thropes ende” is Chaucer gathering his pilgrims under the tympanum of his own art.

To objections that the above reading may credit Chaucer with a subtlety that belongs more properly to the critic than to the poet, I should like to conclude with evidence from traditions that surrounded him, and even with evidence from his less imaginative work, that would point to these themes as pertinent to his artistic concerns. It is obvious that Chaucer would have known the symbol of the scales not only from the omnipresent figure of the weighing angel on the tympanums, but also from zodiacal lore as well—a lore that would have been known to him both “scientifically” and iconographically. It is significant, I believe, that even in a work of no artistic pretension, his Treatise on the Astrolabe, the contrast of Aries (the Ram) and Libra (the Scales) could be useful to him. In explaining the readings of the heavenly bodies in terms of the sun rising and setting, he writes that

10 See Mâle, pp. 11-12, but also Peck, p. 213, n. 28.
“every degre of Aries by ordir is nadir to every degre of Libra by ordre” (p. 552). He uses the same contrast in his example of the “special declaracioun of the houres of planetes”: “The xiij day of March fyl upon a Saturday, peraventure, and atte risyng of the sonne I fond the secunde degre of Aries sittying upon myn est orisonte. . . . Then fond I the 2 degre of Libra, nadir of my sonne, descending on my west orisonte . . .” (p. 553).

Iconographically, the Middle Ages associated the signs of the zodiac with considerably more than celestial “science,” and it is hardly presumptuous to assume that a major poet would have been privy to that iconography. Indeed, in many medieval cathedrals the signs are to be found on the tympanums themselves, often conspicuous in their association with the judging Christ and Apostles. Long ago James Fowler noted the preservation of these figures on the chief doorways of the abbey church at Vézelay, the cathedrals of Amiens, Sens, and Rheims, and on the English churches of Iffley in Oxfordshire and St. Margaret’s in York.11 Curiously overlooked in his catalogue is the startling evidence at Canterbury Cathedral itself of the sign of Libra personified as a judge in his robes. And although this judicatory emblem does not appear on any Last Judgment portal, it is to be found—even more significantly—inlaid as a pavement medallion among the other zodiacal signs on the very spot of St. Thomas à Becket’s shrine (emptied of its glory, of course, by Henry VIII’s rapaciousness) behind and to the left of the high altar, not many feet in front of St. Augustine’s chair. The date of the medallions, or roundels as they are also called, is almost certainly the first quarter of the thirteenth century, and the origin of these splendid pieces is probably Italian, thus further underscoring the universality of the symbol of the judging Libra. It is noteworthy that such a representation also exists conspicuously at Merton College, Oxford, again as a Judge in his robes holding the scales, and although that sculpture is post-Chaucerian by almost a hundred years, it attests to the traditional association between scales and judgment which, I contend, is the intention of line 11 of the Parson’s Prologue.

As Male has pointed out (p. 376), that traditional association is as old as humanity itself, finding expression in ancient Egyptian and Indian art. Among the ancient texts that Chaucer could conceivably have

known to exploit the association are those of the Old Testament and of the Fathers of the Church. In that most typologically apocalyptic book of the Old Testament, the Book of Daniel (whose name means the judgment of God), Daniel interprets for King Belshazzar the meaning of the handwriting on the wall in the second of the three phrases thus: “Thou art weighed in the balance and art found wanting” (5:27). (It is evident that Chaucer knew the Book of Daniel, certainly well enough to allude to it in his own work. In the Man of Law’s Tale, a passage presumably original with him—because it is not found in Nicholas Trivet, his source—is an apostrophe to Daniel’s adventure in the lion’s den: II.470-76.) Among the Fathers of the Church, we find allusions to the figure both in the East and West. St. John Chrysostom warns that “in that day our actions, our words, our thoughts will be placed in the scales, and the dip of the balance on either side will carry with it the irrevocable sentence.” St. Augustine too used the metaphor: “Good and evil actions shall be as if hanging in the scales, and if the evil preponderate the guilty shall be dragged away to hell.”

If those critics are right who would interpret Chaucer’s use of the Ram in the General Prologue as naturally provocative to pilgrimage, then it is equally appropriate to interpret his use of Libra in the Parson’s Prologue as supernaturally judicatory of pilgrimage. For it is the ascendancy of the scales of Libra which will bring justice and judgment to the City of Man and certify him for residence in the New Jerusalem. And if, up to this point, Chaucer has written straight with crooked lines, the Parson’s Tale that follows will decode his calligraphy by unambiguously unfolding the significance of the eschatological motif. The Parson reminds the pilgrims in great detail that among other “causes” that ought to move a man to contrition is the approach of Judgment:

For, as Seint Jerome seith, “At every tyme that me remembreth of the day of doom I quake; for whan I ete or drynke [the eschatological supper again], or what so that I do, evere semeth me that the trompe sowneth in myn ere: ‘Riseth up, ye that been dede, and cometh to the juggement.’ ” O goode God, muchel oghte a man to drede swich a juggement, “ther as we shullen been alle,” as Seint Poul seith, “biforn the seete of oure Lord Jhesu Crist;” whereas he shall make a general congregacioun, whereas no man may been

12 Quoted in Mâle, p. 376.
absent. For certes there availleth noon essoyne ne excusacioun. And nat oonly that oure defautes shullen be jugged, but eek that alle oure werkes shullen openly be knowe. And, as seith Seint Bernard, “Ther ne shal no pledynge availle, ne no sleighte; we shullen yeven rekenyng of everich ydel word.” There shul we han a juge that may nat been deceyved ne corrupt. (p. 231; my italics)

It is to be noted that as a result of this holy exhortation Chaucer himself comes forth repenting his sins—both personal and literary. The Retraction is as much a confession in dramatic response to the Parson’s call—inside the confines of the Canterbury pilgrimage—as it is a Pisgah view of Chaucer’s whole life. And it is in perfect keeping with the motif of Judgment enunciated above that we should hear his last words—his very last words in the Canterbury Tales—as a prayer for benign sentence: “that I may been oon of hem at the day of doom that shulle be saved.”

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14 One is tempted to think that the Canon’s embarrassed flight from the pilgrimage is relevant here.