THE ENDING OF CHAUCER'S NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE

The last three lines of the Nun's Priest's Tale contain an interpretative crux.¹ The Nun's Priest says that even those who do not like his tale can benefit from it, because, as St Paul says, everything that is written is written for our doctrine (Romans xv.4). That formula had achieved proverbial status in Chaucer's time because of the strength of the contemporary sense that the world was intelligibly analogical. Events on earth had parallels in the heavens, prophetic events in the Old Testament could be retrospectively understood from the New, and St Paul had said (or could be taken as saying) that divine providence had seen to it that moral good could be derived, not only from writings that were manifestly sacred or inspired, but from every text without exception. For Chaucer, the importance of the 'everything that is written' formula clearly went well beyond the characterization of the Nun's Priest: it is central to the Retractions with which he ended the Canterbury Tales.

When the Nun's Priest has said this, he, like most of the Canterbury pilgrims, closes his tale with a prayer. His prayer runs:

Now, goode god, if that it be thy wille,
As seith my lord, so make us alle good men;
And bring us to his heighe blisse! Amen.

The problem is the referent of 'my lord'.² In Chaucer's time, my lord could be used as a vocative of courtesy to an interlocutor, or qualified by a further phrase (my lord of Norfolk, my lord of Canterbury); otherwise, in Chaucer's writing and generally, it normally implied a relationship with a superior that is immediate, personal, and in some way exclusive.³ The only relationship of that kind that the Canterbury Tales show the Nun's Priest having is with the Prioress.

As a result, readers since Chaucer's time have looked for a suitable my lord among Chaucer's historical male contemporaries. Several early scribes glossed the phrase as referring to the Archbishop of Canterbury, who at the time of the composition of the Nun's Priest's Tale would have been William Courteney.⁴ In the early twentieth century, Manly suggested that the phrase referred to the bishop of London of the time, Robert Braybrooke, on the grounds that one of the nuns in the Prioress's convent at Stratford-at-Bow had her will proved in that bishop's commissary court.⁵ Relationships like these, however, would have been indirect (through the Prioress), official, and far from exclusive.

There are other problems with taking 'my lord' as one of Chaucer's
contemporaries. The problematic lines ask God, if it is his will, as ‘my lord’ says it is, so (i.e. through men taking to heart the profitable inner meaning of the tale, what the preceding lines call its ‘moralitee’ or ‘fruitt’) to make all the pilgrims good and bring them to heaven. Archbishop Courtenay and Bishop Braybrooke could hardly have refused to endorse the sentiments involved, but no amount of scholarly searching has shown that those sentiments were distinctively associated with either of them, or with any other late fourteenth-century bishop.

Nor is that the only difficulty. The Nun’s Priest’s words appear to conflate two passages from St Paul: first, ‘this is the will of God, your sanctification’; and second, that God ‘will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’. The prefatory ‘if it be thy wille’ appears to allow for difficulties in reconciling the two passages with what the Bible says, for instance, about what will happen to souls that find themselves on their judge’s left-hand side at the Last Judgement, but the passage contains no other element of commentary or explanation. The Nun’s Priest is therefore in effect saying that ‘my lord’ endorses what the Bible says. Fourteenth-century English bishops, however, like everyone else in the country, would surely have thought the Bible was above their endorsement.

If ‘my lord’ is neither a character in the Canterbury Tales nor a historical contemporary of Chaucer, the only alternative seems to be, as Robert Correale recognized on grounds similar to those above, that he is the author of the passages that the Nun’s Priest is echoing. Correale drew the natural inference, that ‘my lord’ is St Paul. There are problems, however, with that as well. First, although, as Correale points out, Chaucer does (once) have one of his characters speak of a saint as a lord, he never has any character speak of any saint as my lord. Second, although the Nun’s Priest quotes St Paul a few lines earlier, there is nothing in his tale to suggest that he felt that St Paul was his immediate personal superior in any way, or that he had any exclusive relationship with him, such as (say) St Paul being the patron saint of the convent at Stratford-at-Bow. Finally, there is a problem with the ‘heighe blisse’ that the Nun’s Priest asks for the pilgrims. The bliss, which must be that of heaven, is said to belong to ‘my lord’: it is ‘his’, and he is to bring the pilgrims to it. A saint, however, cannot confer the bliss that he possesses on others: he can only ask God to do so.

God, of course, can of himself confer the bliss of heaven on others; but ‘my lord’ cannot be the ‘goode God’ of the first line, because the ‘thy wille’ in that line would require ‘thy heighe blisse’ rather than ‘his heighe blisse’ in the third line. Setting out the problem, however, reveals the solution. Although the ‘heighe blisse’ cannot belong to God as the Father or as the Trinity, it can and indeed must belong to Christ. The grammar implies theological distinctions very like those made in Chaucer’s Retractions; in this case, the bliss of heaven can be attributed to Christ with greater theological propriety than it can to any or all of the other persons of the Trinity, since Christ earned that bliss for the redeemed by his death on the cross. Christ can also be understood as having
an immediate and exclusive personal relationship with every Christian. Furthermore and finally, Christ was readily understood in the Middle Ages as the ultimate author, as well as the ultimate subject, of all Scripture. Many passages in the Old Testament, particularly in the Psalms, were interpreted as spoken by him. Some of them can be surprising to modern eyes: St Ambrose, for instance, took the Psalmist’s ‘I am a worm and no man, the reproach of men and the outcast of the people’ (Psalm xxii.7) as spoken by Christ in anticipation of the Passion: ‘ipse quoque dominus ait: ego autem sum vermis et non homo.’

All this might have been recognized long ago, had it not been for one linguistic problem. During the Middle Ages, the influence of countless liturgical phrases had made it normal to refer to Christ as ‘Our Lord’ rather than as ‘the lord’ or ‘my lord’, and this is Chaucer’s own almost universal usage. The only Chaucerian characters who use my lord clearly of a divine person are Nature in the Physician’s Tale (lines 25–6) and the disguised devil in the Friar’s Tale (line 1427), both of whom seem to be referring to God as God, rather than to Christ. It has been suggested that Chaucer might have been prompted into an uncharacteristic usage by one of two passages in which Christ speaks of his Father’s goodwill towards men, the Lord’s Prayer and a passage in St John’s Gospel (John vi.38–9). Neither passage, however, is as close to Chaucer’s wording as the two passages from St Paul cited above, and moreover, as long as it appears that Chaucer would only ever speak of Christ as our lord, it would not matter if the Nun’s Priest’s words agreed verbatim with one of Christ’s best-known and most distinctive utterances: we would have to assume that the Nun’s Priest was quoting someone who was quoting him.

The notion that Chaucer would only ever speak of Christ as our lord is not, however, beyond question. There is precedent for my lord elsewhere in the Bible, in, for instance, some of the Old Testament passages that were taken to refer to Christ by anticipation. We may note particularly:

The Lord said to my Lord: Sit thou at my right hand
Until I make thy enemies thy footstool.

This is a hugely important passage, central to Jesus’s own definition of his role as Messiah, and a frequent point of reference in the early Church’s claims on his behalf in the New Testament. Commentators regularly took ‘The Lord’ in this passage as God the Father, and ‘my Lord’ as God the Son. Tertullian, for instance, says: ‘Animadverte etiam spiritum loquentem ex tertia persona de patre et filio: dixit dominus domino meo: sede ad dexteram meam.’ Passages like this must have encouraged reference to Christ as my lord, and he is indeed so referred to occasionally in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, by, among others, Wyclif and the authors of saints’ lives, religious poetry, and the York and Towneley mystery cycles.

There is even a second passage in the Canterbury Tales that may be interpreted in the same way. Chaucer as narrator says of the Knight in the General Prologue:
FUL WORTHY WAS HE IN HIS LORDS WARE.

If that 'his lords' were turned into direct speech, it would become 'my lords'. The identity of the person referred to has been and continues to be disputed. The phrase ought to refer to the King of England, the only late-medieval English lord entitled to wage war; but Chaucer's Knight conspicuously does not engage in the king's wars. He fights exclusively against Muslims, schismatics, and pagans, including fighting for 'oure feith' at Tlemcen in North Africa. These things seem to me to imply that the lord for whom the Knight was fighting was Christ, and that he would have spoken of Christ as my lord.

Even if this last consideration were rejected, however, I suggest that, since all the other possibilities seem to have been ruled out, the only way of making sense of the whole of the passage we have been considering is to take the Nun's Priest as referring to Christ in this unusual way.

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NOTES


2 I take it for granted that we should assume that lines like these will make sense, although, if Chaucer chooses to imitate the style of the endings of Latin liturgical prayers, that sense may well be unusually involved. Cf. the long ending of Chaucer's Retractions, addressed to Christ, which begins in English but leads to three words in Latin ('Qui vivis et regnas cum patre &c.'). Those words show which of the standard endings for Latin collects is to be supplied. If the right one ('Qui vivis et regnas cum deo patre in unitate spiritus sancti deus per omnia saecula saeculorum') is supplied, the grammar of the whole passage becomes coherent across the change of language. Riverside's note (p. 9641) gives only the last four of those words, and so makes nonsense of Chaucer's grammar.


6 1 Thessalonians iv. 3 (Douai Version).

7 1 Timothy ii. 4.


9 The convent was dedicated to St Leonard: Riverside Chaucer, p. 803.

10 Ambrose, Expositio psalmi, cxviii, Cl. 0141, littera 20, cap. 17, p. 453, linea 13. I owe
this reference to Professor James Marchand.


12 R. F. Patterson suggested that ‘my lord’ was Christ because he thought Chaucer’s ‘thy will’ echoed the ‘thy will be done’ of the Lord’s Prayer (*Chaucer: The Nonne Prest his Tale* (London, 1920), p. 88); G. H. Cowling suggested the same, but that the trigger was either the Lord’s Prayer or the passage from St John (*Chaucer: The Prologue and Three Tales* (London, 1934), p. 123), both cited in Pearsall, *Variorum Edition*, part ix, p. 258.

13 Psalm cix (cx).1.


15 *Advrsus Praxeum*, Cl. 0016, cap. 11, linea 52. I owe this reference too to Professor Marchand.

16 This is the result of a keyword search on *my lord* in the electronic *OED*.

17 General Prologue, line 47, a similarity pointed out by Cowling, *Chaucer*, p. 123.
