

ETHOS, PATHOS, AND LOGOS OF CHAUCER AND HIS PRIORESS

Rachel Share

Elizabethtown College

Rhetorical analyses of Geoffrey Chaucer's works typically proceed from a medieval standpoint, with analysts often "combing through Chaucer's works and tabulating the figures in them that are also listed and described in the manuals [from Chaucer's time]" (Payne 270). However, Chaucer composed *The Canterbury Tales* at a time when rhetorical scholarship had all but lost its classical roots. Thus, Chaucer himself and his medieval audience were largely unaware of the rhetorical theories that grew out of ancient Rome and Greece. Nevertheless, their culture was inevitably touched by classical rhetorical theories since the theories found in the medieval rhetoric manuals are indebted to older theories. It is perhaps in this way that Aristotle's rhetorical theories appear in *The Canterbury Tales*. Through his keen use of what Aristotle termed ethos, pathos, and logos, Chaucer the narrator not only persuades his audience of the problems with their hierarchical society, but he also explores the problems of rhetoric, revisiting the one issue that had plagued ancient rhetoricians like Aristotle for centuries: the morality of manipulating language to manipulate people.

I suggest that whereas Aristotle advised the use of ethos, pathos, and logos to construct the most effective argument, Chaucer takes an unconventional approach, relying mainly on the more human appeal, pathos. Appeals to ethos and logos are certainly not lacking in *The Canterbury Tales*, yet they fail in a traditional sense—painting Chaucer the pilgrim-narrator (distinguished from Chaucer the poet)¹ as a bumbling simpleton with no apparent grasp of common sense (ethos and logos). The feelings that this bumbling, seemingly brainless narrator manages to evoke revive his credibility as a speaker, though, and his credibility inevitably undermines the credibility of many of the characters within *The Canterbury Tales*, especially the Prioress.

Further, I suggest that the narrator's ability to dictate how persuasive, or not, the other characters will be signifies an important alteration that Chaucer made to Aristotle's rhetorical principles. According to Aristotle, ethos should not be affected by any previous knowledge of the speaker. In *The Canterbury Tales*, however, "The Prioress's Tale" fails because it comes from a character the audience already seems to know, as a result of the narrator's detailed description of her in "The General Prologue." Clearly, Chaucer the pilgrim's descriptions of the pilgrims affect their later appeals to ethos, often hindering their ability to communicate their message with believability. Despite the success of other appeals, like emotional appeals in "The Prioress's Tale," the Prioress's attempt at persuasion inevitably fails because of the interconnectedness of all three appeals. Chaucer the pilgrim is the main exception to failed attempts at persuasion in *The Canterbury Tales*; he manages to gain the trust of the audience, despite the semblance of unsuccessful appeals to ethos and logos. In the end, it is his characterization as a flawed, albeit honest, individual that leads to his unique appeal to pathos.

Chaucer the Pilgrim's Uniquely Derived Credibility

Aristotle identified ethos as an ethical appeal, one that a speaker uses to invite an audience's trust by establishing himself or herself as full of "good sense, good moral character, and goodwill" (Aristotle

213, 2.1). Unlike Chaucer the poet, the narrator draws not on his poetic brilliance but on his common humanity to establish himself as a credible speaker: he is a decent, truthful character who gains trust, largely because the audience intuitively more than he does and his density likely makes the audience feel at ease, at home in a nonthreatening literary environment. Thus, rather than establishing that he has good sense and good moral character, as Aristotle would advise, Chaucer the pilgrim implies that he has goodwill, as a dimwit like himself could have nothing but good intentions. Chaucer the narrator's credibility grows strong, rivaling the credibility of great rhetors of old through the use of entirely different tactics. Rather than declaring his strengths to bolster his credibility, he displays his supposed density, implying his honesty and integrity and making a more innovative, literary appeal to ethos.

Chaucer the pilgrim's appeal to ethos begins as "The General Prologue" starts, largely functioning through diction and style. The first eighteen lines, famous for their eloquence and grand style, quickly yield to more colloquial language, as Chaucer the pilgrim uses the first-person pronoun "I" for the first time (1.20). Relieved of the elevated diction and syntax of the first dozen and a half lines, the narrator's self-introduction is framed as if the audience is being told an intimate story and it was likely received warmly by its medieval audience because the narrator seems to tell it out of an artistic duty, not from political motivations. Here, he addresses his audience of readers: "To take oure wey, ther as I yow devyse [. . .] To telle yow al the condicioun" (To take our way as I will tell you [. . .] To tell you the conditions of all [of them]; 1.34–38).² By referring to the medieval listening audience in these lines, Chaucer the pilgrim emphasizes that he is the messenger, devoted to the task of telling the reader about the Canterbury pilgrimage as precisely as possible. He appeals to ethos by depicting himself as the trustworthy middleman whom the audience relies on to learn about what happened on the way to Canterbury.

Chaucer the pilgrim continues to appeal to ethos with frequent humble remarks, as he says, "My wit is short, ye may wel understonde" (1.746). Never claiming to be intelligent like the Clerk from Oxford or moral like the Parson, both fellow pilgrims, the narrator's humility contributes to his credibility in an unorthodox way. Chaucer the pilgrim's portrayal is not unlike that of an innocent child, as he is perceptive but unaware of the meaning behind what he perceives. Perhaps because we question little of what he says, since such a simple-minded person could not possibly have ulterior motives, the gates are opened for an effective type of persuasion because it comes unannounced and undetected. The establishment of ethos continues as Chaucer the pilgrim often makes comments like "as it semed me," implying that he does not discount his own biases, only serving to make him more credible because he is so truthful (1.39). His artistic integrity is particularly clear at the end of "The General Prologue," when Chaucer the pilgrim apologizes for the tales if they are offensive, confessing that he feels obligated to reproduce the characters' words as accurately as possible:

But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
That ye n'arete it nat my vileinye,
Thogh that I pleyedly speke in this matere,
To tell yow hir wordes and hir chere,
Ne thogh I speke hir wordes properly.
For this ye knowen al so wel I:
Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot reherce as ny as evere he can
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large;

Or elles he moot telle his tale untrewe. (1.725–35)

(But first I pray you that, of your courtesy, you do not attribute it to my coarseness. Although I speak plainly on this matter, telling you their words and their behavior; nor though I speak their words exactly. For this you know as well as I: Whoever tells a tale after another, He must repeat each and every word, as nearly as he can, if he is able to. However rude and inappropriate it be or else he must tell his tale untrue.)

The narrator's self-proclaimed honesty and delicate integrity establish an ethos that is reinforced by his very manner of speaking. He has a way of telling the tales, for instance, that makes the audience forget he's retelling them; he disappears from the stories, except for an occasional "I gesse," making it feel as if the pilgrimage is unfolding as Chaucer the pilgrim tells it (1.82). The medieval audience, then, likely forgets that the narrator is telling the tales after the fact, thus forgetting that Chaucer the pilgrim, in turn, may be forgetting important details or confusing the events that happened. If the narrator had repeated that he was relaying the events of the pilgrimage from memory, his appeal to ethos might have been affected negatively because the audience might have questioned the accuracy of the details provided. Likewise, the tales are so appropriate to their tellers' characters that the narrator's voice is overtaken by the voice of the characters we are meant to believe originally delivered the tales. This is another technique that contributes to the narrator's credibility, if only because doing the opposite—telling the tales in his own voice—may have caused the audience to question what was being told and if Chaucer was accurately recalling what the tale's teller had said.

Chaucer the pilgrim's appeal to pathos complements his appeal to ethos. Aristotle described pathos as an emotional appeal to help persuade the audience that "come[s] through the hearers, when [it] stirs their emotions" (Aristotle 182, 1.2); it becomes clear that Chaucer relies heavily on this technique. Interestingly, the ongoing humility tactic that would seem to result in zero credibility results, instead, in a unique appeal to pathos. Early in "The General Prologue," the reader learns that the narrator overlooks the flaws of his fellow pilgrims, describing the Monk as a true man's man and skirting the fact that the Monk neglects his position's duties, for instance. Chaucer the pilgrim depicts himself as inferior to the audience because he is so easily conned by the obviously corrupt Monk, a technique that invites pity from his medieval audience. For example, late in the narrative, when the pilgrim is asked to tell a tale, for the first and only time throughout the collection the host interrupts a tale—because Chaucer's is too boring (1.919–25)—thereby belittling him. This strategy conceals that the fictional Chaucer is purposely described this way to make the tales more persuasive.

The narrator appeals to *logos* throughout *The Canterbury Tales* as well, particularly through the use of enthymemes and examples. Aristotle described *logos* as a rational appeal, supported mainly by the use of the rhetorical syllogism, known as the enthymeme. In fact, Chaucer the pilgrim uses an enthymeme to help describe the Monk in "The General Prologue":

He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,

That seith hunters ben nat holy men [. . .]

And I seyde his opinioun was good:

What sholde he studie, and make himselven wood. (1.177–84)

(He did not care a plucked hen for that text which says

that hunters are not holy men. And I said his opinion was good: What should he study for, and make himself crazy?)

The narrator observes that the Monk does not adhere to tradition, choosing to hunt despite authority figures, like Augustine, who deemed hunting an activity unfit for monks. He uses the example of

Augustine to support his enthymeme, demonstrating that people like Augustine can pore over books and work to serve the world, but sensible people like the Monk do not have to do the same, “‘Therefore’ [. . .] if the Monk likes hunting, he ought to hunt” (Huppé 22). The logic that the likeability of an activity should render it permissible (which could be construed to allow *mala in se* crimes like rape or robbery) is clearly faulty, hence highlighting the narrator’s gullibility. Yet again this obscures the poet’s plan to increase the credibility of Chaucer the pilgrim by highlighting the weaknesses of his fictional self.

Additional appeals to logos strengthen Chaucer the pilgrim’s naive persona, such as a reference to Plato in the early pages of *The Canterbury Tales*: “Eek Plato seith, whoso can him rede, / The wordes mote be cosin to the dede” (1.741–42). The narrator meant to use this Platonic reference in support of literary realism, but Plato really meant that words, though they relate to reality, are nevertheless a few steps removed. Chaucer the pilgrim’s jester-like persona is reinforced by his misapplication of Plato’s ideas, making the feat of persuasion easier for the true poet behind *The Canterbury Tales*.

Ethos, Pathos, and Logos: The Prioress’s Failed Appeals

Chaucer the pilgrim’s strong relationship with the audience leads to the rhetorical destruction of some of his fellow pilgrims, including the group’s own lady of faith. With the promiscuous Wife of Bath as the only other female pilgrim in the *Tales*, one might guess that the Prioress would easily attain more credibility than her boisterous counterpart, but the Wife of Bath’s honesty—obnoxious or not—trumps the Prioress’s superficiality. Described in the “The General Prologue” as an exceedingly proper lady, the Prioress delivers a tale about a devout Christian schoolboy who is murdered by Jews for singing a song in praise of the Virgin Mary. The tale, at first glance pious and therefore fitting for a nun to tell, attempts to persuade the audience of the importance of strong Christian faith and the sinfulness of the Jews.

Initially, it appears that the Prioress establishes a level of credibility. The Prioress’s initial appeal to ethos comes in the prologue of her tale, when she calls on the Lord to assist her in telling it: “O Lord, oure Lord, thy name how merveillous / Is in this large worlde y-sprad—quod she—” (Oh Lord, our Lord, your name how marvelous is spread in this large world—she said; 1.453–54). By using the possessive pronoun “oure,” the Prioress includes the rest of the pilgrims in her appeal to the Lord, giving them a stake in the tale she tells. In effect, she is demonstrating that she does not question the morality or the religious fervor of any of the characters, thus establishing her goodwill toward the pilgrims. The Prioress next reduces herself to a one-year-old child, unable to proceed without the help of her Lord:

But as a child of twelf monthe old, or lesse,
That can unnethes any word expresse,
Right so fare I, and therfor I yow preye,
Gydeþ my song that I shal of yow seye. (1.453–54)
(But as a child of twelve months old, or less, who can
hardly express any word, Right so I fare, and therefore I pray you to guide my song
which I shall say of you.)

The Prioress indicates her deep respect for the Lord by describing herself as childlike in his presence, demonstrating her piety and hence indicating to the audience that she is of good moral character. Her use of the formal second-person pronoun “yow” when addressing the Lord shows her humility and

respect for him, inviting the respect of her audience. Finally, her use of the stately *rime royale* stanzas paints her as a proper, dignified woman, and hence a credible speaker.

The Prioress's appeal to ethos is closely linked with her appeal to pathos, as the forging of both relies heavily on the Prioress's choices of tale and language. "The Prioress's Tale" begins with the general description of a Christian town in Asia:

Ther was in Asie, in a greet citee,
Amonges Cristen folk, a Jewerye
Sustended by a lord of that contree
For foule usure and lucre of vileynye,
Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye. (1.488–92)

The Prioress creates a tale in which a community of Christians is literally divided by a Jewry, something that would evoke pity toward the Christians and enmity toward the Jews from a crowd of Christian pilgrims on their way to pay homage to a well-known Christian saint. Stripping them of their humanity, the Prioress associates the Jews with heinous words like "vileynye," "foule," and "hateful" (1.490–92). Members of the lower class in her pilgrim audience, such as the Miller or the Reeve, would surely be stirred by the Prioress's mention of the Jews' money-lending practice, something the Church forbade Christian followers from doing because it was seen as a sinful activity. Leviticus 25:35–37 in the Old Testament, for instance, reads:

And if thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee; then thou shalt relieve him: *yea, though he be* a stranger, or a sojourner; that he may live with thee.

Take thou no usury of him, or increase: but fear thy God; that thy brother may live with thee.

Thou shalt not give him thy money upon usury, nor lend him thy victuals for increase. ("PlainBible")

The poorer pilgrims in particular, like the Miller and the Reeve, would probably be the most bothered by this practice, which left the Jews wealthy and prosperous. The first stanza of her tale paints the Jews as wicked, creating pathos by polarizing the Christians and the Jews through the negative words used to describe the latter. Moreover, the Jewry is described as free and open at either end, another appeal to pathos because it indicates that the Jews are free to come and go as they please, making the crime eventually committed against the boy seem all the more atrocious because the Jews could have avoided listening to the boy's irritating song.

Just as the Prioress's word choice serves to undermine the Jews, her diction evokes pity for her main character, "the litel clergeoun," who also happens to be the son of a widow (1.503). The image of this boy's "litel scole of Cristen folk" that stood on the far end of the city (meaning the children walked through the Jewry to get to the school) strongly appeals to pathos (1.495). The Prioress continually depicts the Christians as innocent and good and the small Christian boy as helpless and devout. Repetition of the word "litel," for instance, emphasizes how young the boy is, making his murder even more dreadful.

Moreover, the Prioress's description of the boy's devotion to the Virgin Mary creates pathos. Determined to learn the "Alma Redemptoris," a song of praise for Mary, the boy asks an older school-boy for help. Although the younger boy will get beaten for neglecting his other studies, he is intent on learning Mary's song before Christmas. Portrayed as a martyr and an inspiration for other Christians, the boy is murdered by the villainous Jews on his way home from school one day. The Prioress quotes the devil as speaking directly to the Jews before the boy is murdered, telling them to kill the boy

because of the song he is singing in their area of the town. The description of the boy's murder dehumanizes all of the Jews, overlooking the fact that only one person actually committed the murder:

This cursed Jew him hente and heeld him faste,
And kitte his throte, and in a pit him caste.
I seye that in a wardrobe they him threwe
Where as these Jewes purgen hir entraille. (l. 570-73)

(This cursed Jew seized him and held him fast, and cut his throat and cast him in a pit. I say that in a privy they threw him where these Jews empty their bowels.)

As if slitting the boy's throat is not enough, the cursed Jews carelessly throw his body into a ditch where the Jews empty their bowels. Following the description of the "litel clergeoun" sweetly singing praises of the Virgin Mary, this heinous act surely evokes strong feelings of pity for the boy because, according to Aristotle's ideas, the boy's piety and innocence make him seem extremely unworthy of the suffering that is inflicted upon him. The appeal to pathos continues following his murder, as the Prioress describes the boy's mother, the "povre widwe," searching for her child the entire night (l.586). Miraculously, when she finds the boy he is still living, kept alive by a grain that the Virgin Mary had placed in his mouth so that he would be able to continue singing the song. As the rest of the Christian community comes to see the miracle of the Virgin Mary, the child sings and speaks until a monk removes the grain from his mouth, at which point the young boy dies:

This holy monk, this abbot, him mene I,
His tongue out caughte and took away the greyn,
And he yaf up the goost ful softly.
And whan this abbot had this wonder seyn,
His salte teres trickled down as reyn,
And gruff he fil al plat upon the grounde. (l.670-75)

(This holy monk, this abbot, him I mean, took away the grain with his tongue caught out and he softly gave up the ghost. And when this abbot had seen this wonder his salty tears trickled down like rain and face down ward he fell flat upon the ground.)

In a final grand appeal to pathos, the Prioress describes a holy monk who is so moved by the small boy and the miracle that he falls to the ground in tears. Her tale, dominated by its emotional appeals, nonetheless contains appeals to logos.

Sprinkled with references to biblical figures, such as Jesus and the Virgin Mary, the Prioress's appeal to logos is mainly made up of examples, undoubtedly evoking credibility for herself as well as her tale. In fact, she ends her tale by providing an example of a boy in England who was murdered by Jews:

O yonge Hugh of Lincoln, slayn also
With cursed Jewes, as it is notable—
For it nis but a litel whyle ago— (l.684-86)

The example plucks the tale from the fictional to the historical, as the pilgrims and the medieval listening audience would both be aware of Hugh of Lincoln, purportedly slain just a century before by Jews in England. According to Aristotle, this type of example, which he called "the mention of actual past facts," is more valuable than "the invention of facts by the speaker" because it cannot be refuted (Aristotle 222, 2.20).

Despite her grand and deliberate Aristotelian appeals, the Prioress's attempt to persuade her audi-

ence is ravaged as a result of her contradictory nature and the distance that the trustworthy narrator establishes between himself and the Prioress. Though “The General Prologue” and “The Prioress’s Tale” are separated, Chaucer the pilgrim’s description of the Prioress in “The General Prologue” is so detailed that it remains fresh in the reader’s mind, serving to undercut the nun’s later Aristotelian appeals in her own tale. The entire description in “The General Prologue” paints the Prioress as more courtly than religious, more secular than spiritual, hence undermining her credibility as a pious woman and thus destroying the persuasiveness of her tale. Ever the enthusiast, the narrator introduces the audience to the Prioress with praise of her impeccable table manners. In fact, the majority of her portrait in “The General Prologue” describes her physically, not spiritually, creating a tension between the woman and her profession. She is described as having a beautiful smile and voice. She speaks French, a mark of refinement, and eats her food daintily. She also dresses rather extravagantly, but most noteworthy is the bracelet she wears, which is made of bright coral beads and boasts a golden brooch that says “Love conquers all” in Latin. Chaucer’s medieval listening audience would certainly recognize this quote from Virgil’s *The Eclogues*. Virgil, a Latin poet, was a pagan who meant love in the romantic sense; hence this reference to Virgil undermines the Prioress’s religious credibility. One is led to believe that her description might turn to the spiritual with the line “But, for to spoken of hire conscience” (l.142). Yet this description also hinges on the worldly, concentrating on the Prioress’s pity for animals and indicating that she gives them her food scraps as evidence of her piety. A seemingly sound appeal to logos, this logic falls apart when one considers social conduct of the times. Pets, deemed a distraction, were banned from convents, in one of which the Prioress would have lived, and the fact that she gave her food to animals instead of the poor shows her lack of charity (Hallissy 28).

The Prioress also appeals to logos with the admission that the saint she most often prays to is “Seynte Loy.” However, at the time that Chaucer wrote, this saint was known to send women who prayed to him visions of future husbands (Condren 193). Not surprisingly, women prayed to him for secular, not religious purposes—in hopes of seeing their husbands. Thus, the Prioress’s mention of this saint calls into question the source of her piety.

Finally, the Prioress’s overall use of an ad hominem argument in her tale, which argues by attacking the person (or group of people) rather than the person’s argument, also hurts her appeal to logos by undermining her very argument. If she truly wanted to persuade people that Catholicism is superior to Judaism, it would have been more effective to address Judaism itself and not denigrate those who practice it. Her use of ad hominem, a logical fallacy, exposes the Prioress’s irrationality—a characteristic that certainly undercuts her credibility. The Prioress’s appeal to logos, then, is ruined because it reveals inconsistencies in her character. Her overall appeal to ethos is equally faulty.

One of the Prioress’s most apparent appeals to ethos is her request that the Lord and the Virgin Mary help her tell the tale. Ordinarily, asking religious figures for help in expressing oneself would have bolstered her credibility, making it seem as if she does not have a hidden agenda. However, with the Prioress’s portrait from “The General Prologue” in mind, the biblical references and pious language seem artificial, and the Prioress herself seems superficial because she was depicted primarily as a courtly lady, not a lady of religion. Moreover, the Prioress’s use of the informal second-person pronoun “thy” when addressing the Lord and the Virgin Mary (l.453–80) indicates that she is confused about her relationships with both, especially since she later uses the formal second-person pronoun “yow” to address them (l.486–87). Often, the use of the informal pronoun would indicate to a medieval audience that the Prioress has an intimate relationship with the Lord, thus furthering her appeal to ethos because

she is a woman of good moral character. However, the Catholic Church would have frowned upon use of the informal because it signifies a lack of respect for the Lord.

Chaucer the pilgrim's treatment of the Prioress also damages her appeal to ethos. The trusted narrator creates distance between himself and the Prioress, something that subtly indicates to the audience that he does not trust everything that she is saying. In the beginning of her tale's prologue, for instance, as Chaucer the pilgrim narrates the tale in the Prioress's voice, as he does with all of the other characters' tales, he uncharacteristically inserts a "quod she" into the text (l.454). Though seemingly trivial, this phrase is significant because not only is it atypical for the narrator to add this, but it comes in the midst of the Prioress's appeal to ethos by demonstrating her unwavering faithfulness. The "quod she" reveals that Chaucer the pilgrim, ordinarily wholly accepting of his fellow pilgrims, does not want to be quoted on record as attesting to the Prioress's piety. It is a serious blow to the Prioress's credibility, undermining her appeal to ethos before her tale has even begun.

The Prioress's choice of tale may also be interpreted as part of her appeal to ethos. Like the Knight, who selected a dignified tale to express his honor and virtue, the Prioress attempts to tell a tale about piety to express something about her faith. Full of hateful images and a bigoted message, though, the Prioress's tale further undermines her credibility as a true lady of faith. Additionally, her reference to the grieving mother, Rachel, within the tale highlights a striking aspect of the Prioress's character, ultimately tarnishing her appeal to ethos. The Prioress describes the boy's grieving mother as a "newe Rachel," unknowingly pointing to the growing irony of her tale, which is meant to praise the Virgin Mary and condemn the Jews (l.627). The Prioress fails to see that the Virgin Mary and Rachel, very important figures to the religion, were both Jewish; hence the anti-Semitism of her tale is entirely inappropriate. Her failure alludes to her lack of self-awareness and shows that her understanding of her own faith is superficial. The clumsy repetition of the word "mercy" in the last few lines of "The Prioress's Tale" confirms this, as she uses pious language and themes without truly comprehending them: "That of his mercy, God so merciable / On us his grete mercy multiplye" (l.688–89). Following a tale in which an entire community of Jews was murdered for one individual's crime, this mention of God's mercy once again reveals the Prioress's blind ignorance of her own faith, stripping her of all credibility and leaving her true character bare for the audience to see. Additionally, her harsh ending shows that she denies others the same grace she seeks: "Had she known a real feeling of the spirit of grace as Chaucer understood it her tale must have ended with a conversion. For a Christian audience such an ending would have signified spiritual renewal and life, rather than tortures and death" (Zitter 281). But her tale ends with the brutal slaughter of an entire Jewish community, not the Jews' conversion to Christianity. The Prioress is unfamiliar with the true concept of grace and the Christian faith in general; therefore, she comes across as a speaker who is not to be trusted. Her appeals to ethos and logos futile, the Prioress's last chance of persuasion rests on her sweeping appeal to pathos.

Had the tale been told by a more reliable character, its emotionality might have had a chance at being persuasive; yet the emotional appeals in "The Prioress's Tale" ultimately fail because they come from an untrustworthy, emotionally superficial character. And even though her vocabulary is sentimental, her tale is "heavily formulaic in exaltation of the Virgin Mary," at the expense of genuine emotions (Condren 204). Like the bracelet with the gaudy brooch, the Prioress's appeal to pathos is mainly for show. In fact, it reflects back on the very bracelet worn by the Prioress, as the boy's description includes references to jewelry and the color green, like her bracelet: "This gemme of chastitee, this emeraude, / And eek of martyrdom the ruby bright" (This gem of chastity, this emerald, and also the bright ruby of martyrdom; l.609–10). Using the colors of her bracelet to symbolize his chastity, the

Prioress draws attention to herself in this appeal to pathos. The Prioress describes the boy as if his preserved chastity is more praiseworthy than his faithfulness, as “We may doubt that the seven-year-old clergeon’s struggle to preserve his virginity was especially difficult, but the excessive attention the Prioress gives it makes us see *her* instead of him, and turns the green of her beads into a badge of chastity” (Condren 203). Praising the boy’s virginity, then, and comparing him to her coral-beaded bracelet is the Prioress’s way of drawing attention to herself, hence highlighting her superficiality once again. Her appeal to pathos becomes distracting and ineffective, hindering her ability to persuade.

Like the tension between her profession and her identification with courtly women, the Prioress’s language is split between pious and figurative language, the presence of each undercutting the other and, yet again, weakening her appeal to pathos. The same pious language that helped to establish the Prioress’s credibility as a speaker is damaging to her tale when combined with earthly language because of what each type of language implies about the Prioress. Her language of faith, such as appeals to the Lord and Virgin Mary, implies her spirituality. Yet her earthly language calls this spirituality into question. When she describes the boy’s murder, for instance, the Prioress focuses more on where his body was disposed of than the atrocity itself: “The mortal action receives less attention than the privy where the murderer discards the body; the privy, in turn, less than the acts which normally occur there; and those acts bring greater dishonor to the Jews than the murder they commission” (Condren 208). Another example of the Prioress’s physical, rather than spiritual, focus comes at the end of the tale when the holy monk speaks directly to the boy. Rather than asking the boy why he continues to sing, the monk questions how he is physically able to sing. Her split focus on the worldly and the otherworldly is distracting and damaging to the Prioress’s ability to persuade. Although the Prioress does not know it, her elaborate appeal to pathos is impaired.

Loaded Fiction: The Effects of *The Tales* on Rhetoric

Chaucer’s use of classical rhetorical techniques to shape his audience’s impressions of the pilgrims is not merely sophistry. In the midst of all this tale-telling and bantering, the poet delivers a subtle yet resounding commentary focused on the same flawed society for which he wrote. More specifically, the duality of the Prioress’s character, established with the help of rhetorical appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos by both the Prioress and Chaucer the pilgrim, contributes to the irony that Chaucer the poet builds in the collection. Irony, which is created by revealing differences in what is said and what is understood, is the backbone of *The Canterbury Tales* and it is particularly evident in the character of the Prioress because of her twin natures: worldly woman and holy nun. Though a nun, the Prioress is often more concerned with looking and acting like a proper lady. Through the creation of the Prioress and the development of irony, Chaucer is able to comment on problems within the Church at this time period, without explicitly saying so and angering the Church. Moreover, through the interactions of all of his fictional pilgrims, Chaucer is able to engage himself and his medieval audience in discussions about the structure of their society without fear of repercussions.

Chaucer wrote at a time when status was everything, as his was a society that was fundamentally divided into those who were gentils—and those who were not (Du Boulay 475). Nonetheless, Chaucer embraced colloquial language, ironically attempting persuasion in tongues the nobility snubbed. Indeed, his use of the vernacular may have made him more persuasive, as it was one of his most important appeals to ethos. Additionally, Chaucer’s depiction of the pilgrims—dialects and all—enables the audience to witness the variety of ways in which rhetoric can be used. The most extreme

examples are the Parson and the Pardoner. On the one hand, the Parson refuses to fully engage in the tale-telling:

Thou getest fable noon y-told for me;
For Paul, that wryteth unto Timothee,
Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse
And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse. (1.31–34)
(You will get no fables told from me; for Paul, who writes to Timothy to reproach those who wave aside truthfulness and tell fables and such wretchedness.)

The Parson agrees to speak to his pilgrim audience in prose, admitting that “I can nat geste—rum, ram, ruf—by lettre” (I cannot jest—rum, ram, ruf—by letter [i.e., alliteration]; 1.43). The Parson continues on to deliver a lengthy and rather boring treatise dealing with sin and morality. His description and “tale” demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the person who, moral or not, is reluctant to use eloquent words, poetry, and rhymes to manipulate people. The Pardoner, on the other hand, admits that he has no problem using words to his advantage, regardless of the truthfulness of what he says:

Thus can I preche again that same vyce
Which that I use, and that is avaryce.
But though myself be guilty in that sinne,
Yet can I maken other folk to twinne
From avaryce, and sore to repente. (1.427–31)

Through these two characters, Chaucer polarized, magnified, and essentially revived the classical debate about rhetoric. Perhaps what is so captivating about *The Canterbury Tales* is not just Chaucer’s retelling and sharpening of older stories, such as *The Romance of the Rose*, but his unearthing of ancient rhetorical theories and issues and his adaptation of them to the medieval era. And so, his medieval audience got not the heated dialogues between Socrates and the Sophists, for instance, but a literary exploration of life in medieval society. Unlike rhetorical theorists before him, Chaucer presents his ideas about language and persuasion through his own fictional character, not through authority figures or by extensively citing the classical theorists. By using words to mimic others and in doing so revealing truths about human nature, Chaucer raises the rhetorical bar and becomes a theorist who plays the rhetorical game. Rather than arguing that words should be used only to represent transcendent truths, like Aristotle’s teacher, Plato, Chaucer becomes a rhetor himself. And rather than searching for Plato’s ideals, Chaucer holds a mirror to his medieval British society. Ultimately, *The Canterbury Tales* is a clever man’s attempt at changing medieval perceptions of society and class structure. Interestingly, in doing so, Chaucer expresses opinions on the power of language, hinting at the importance of rhetoric and, more significantly, the importance of using rhetoric for the common good.

Composed at a time when Aristotle’s theories were likely unknown, Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* nonetheless contains Aristotelian appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos—only framed and balanced in an untraditional way for irony. Its serious purpose hidden under a guise of bawdy humor and sheer entertainment, Chaucer’s collection questions a wide variety of medieval issues, such as the conduct of the Church and the obsession with class. While the world will never know for certain the extent of Chaucer’s familiarity with Aristotle’s rhetorical theories, it is clear that although he never published a handbook explicitly on rhetoric or delivered a speech setting forth his theories on rhetoric, Chaucer was undoubtedly an important medieval rhetor and thus has much to contribute to rhetorical theory. Aware or not of Aristotelian rhetoric, Chaucer puts a unique literary spin on ethos, pathos, and logos, con-

tributing to the ongoing rhetorical dialogue and channeling the classical theorists' concerns about the ethics of rhetoric.

Notes

¹ The term "Chaucer the poet" is used in this essay to refer to what the modern-day reader would simply call the author. It is distinguished from "Chaucer the narrator" and "Chaucer the pilgrim," terms used to refer to the persona Chaucer the poet created in the *Tales*. The latter terms are used interchangeably in reference to this fictional Chaucer.

² The translations provided in this essay are my own, developed with the aid of *A Chaucer Glossary* and the footnotes in the particular edition of *The Canterbury Tales* with which I worked. As I had only one Chaucer class as an undergraduate student, the translations are admittedly not perfect—nor are they meant to be. They are intended to assist the reader in understanding the rhetoric of Chaucer (and indeed to bolster my own credibility by offering textual proof).

Works Cited

- Aristotle. "From Rhetoric." *The Rhetorical Tradition*. 2nd ed. Ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001. 179–240.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. 2nd ed. Ed. V. A. Kolve and Glending Olson. New York: Norton, 2005.
- Condren, Edward I. "The Prioress: A Legend of Spirit, a Life of Flesh." *Chaucer Review* 23.3 (1989): 192–213.
- Davis, Norman, Douglas Gray, Patricia Ingham, and Anne Wallace-Hadrill. *A Chaucer Glossary*. New York: Oxford UP, 1979.
- Du Boulay, F. R. H. "The Historical Chaucer." *The Canterbury Tales*. 2nd ed. Ed. V. A. Kolve and Glending Olson. New York: Norton, 2005. 473–92.
- Hallissy, Margaret. *A Companion to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*. Westport: Greenwood, 1995.
- Huppé, Bernard F. *A Reading of The Canterbury Tales*. New York: State U of New York, 1967.
- Payne, Robert O. "Rhetoric in Chaucer: Chaucer's Realization of Himself as Rhetor." *Medieval Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Medieval Rhetoric*. Ed. James Murphy. Berkeley: U of California P, 1978.
- "PlainBible." *The Bible: King James Version*. 13 June 2007 <<http://www.plainbible.com/>>.
- Zitter, Emmy Stark. "Anti-Semitism in Chaucer's 'Prioress's Tale.'" *Chaucer Review* 25.4 (1991): 277–84.