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Sister Lucia Treanor

Grand Valley State University, treanol@gvsu.edu

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Palindromic Structure in the "Pardoner's Tale"

SISTER LUCIA TREANOR, FSE
Grand Valley State University

ABSTRACT

This paper explains the medieval writing process known as palindromic structure, a face of anagogy that, as far as we can determine, has largely been ignored in literary criticism. It begins by examining the "little verses" of Augustine of Dacia that were a staple of schoolboy studies, and demonstrates how the verses were used to teach the creative process to students of Latin composition. Then, after introducing Mary Douglas's criteria for identifying the structure, it sets forth Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale" as a well-balanced palindrome, arguing for authorial intentionality by referencing a section of the "Parson's Tale." It offers John Dryden's observations about Chaucer's characters—which he has written in palindromic structure—to show that later British authors were aware of Chaucer's method, and concludes by giving evidence that Chaucer knew some Greek.

INTRODUCTION

"Was it a rat I saw?" This startling question is a palindrome, a verbal design that reads the same backward and forward. Such constructions were composed by poets in Greek and Roman times, and by the Middle Ages were known as *versus diabolici*, because they are hard to construct.¹

Some palindromes were very complex. As a palindrome of palindromes, the Latin sentence

"Anna lenef mappam madidam, multum lenef Otto,"

"Anna holds a wet flag; Otto holds many," is a *tour de force*, so we have marked its pairs with a bold-italics-underline-gray sequence, starting in the center. Although many palindromes match single letters, like the central letters of the Latin word *scilicet*, "it is obvious," which mirrors c and c, i and i, until it gets to the middle l, Anna/Otto is closer to the Japanese palindrome, which is often made in a syllabary called *kana* that matches groups of letters, syllable to syllable,² probably deriving from ancient China,

¹ Harry C. Schnur, "The Factotum: Some Variations of the Latin Hexameter," *The Classical World* 53, no. 5 (1960): 155, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4344304>.

² Earnest W. Clement, "Japanese Palindromes," in *The Dial*, vol. 60, ed. Marianne Moore (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg, 1916), 499, [Google Book Search](http://www.google.com/books?id=...).

where characters indicated phrases or sentences, and patterned texts could be easily constructed.

In the Middle Ages, poets rediscovered the palindrome's Hebrew and classical symmetrical patterning as it appears in the Old Testament³ and Homer's *Iliad*.⁴ They fashioned poems and story collections by beginning at the center, where they placed a figure of significance. If they were religious, it might be the Latin *te-te-te*, heard in French as *t-t-t*, a pictogram of Calvary, or words for 1-2-3 indicating the Trinity. If they wanted to discuss their craft, it might be the Latin root *ar* for "art." Placed in the center, the figure became the capstone of a tight palindrome that proceeded outward in a series of similitude or antithetical pairs, loosening up as it went, and eventually connecting to the limits, or "wings." In its rudimentary form, known as ring composition, the schema was ABCDADCBA, and the pairs could be narrative events, characters, phrases, words or *figurae*. Seven identifying criteria for this type of design have been established by the late cultural anthropologist, Mary Douglas: an exposition, a split into halves, identifying parallel series, an ending, a latch, interior palindromes, and a central place that connects to the beginning and end.⁵ If we were to re-design our opening palindrome "Was it a rat I saw?" to craft a short story highlighting our discussion about religion and art, we might begin the mid-point like this:

Tobias looked at his liturgical calendar.

Was it art I saw?

Rather than answer, he smiled. No whispered word was spoken.

Although the author begins with the capstone, the reader of this construct starts from the ends (see "end" in *calendar* and *smiled. No*), and the pairs are *ar* and *Rat* as "art" (bold), *Was* and *saw* (gray), *sit* and *t I s* (underline), and *it* and *t I* (italics). The center, *art* (bold), connects to *ar* and *Rat* in the wings. The reader then moves outward through the story matching *figurae*, words, phrases, sentences, characters, settings and narrative events. The extremities, though, have to hold the word *ar* or *art*. This method, popular in the late Middle Ages, was used in the "Pardoner's Tale."

³ R. E. Longacre, "Interpreting Bible Stories" in *Discourse and Literature: New Approaches to the Analysis of Literary Genres*, ed. Teun Adrianus van Dijk (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1985), 182; J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

⁴ Whitman, Cedric, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1958).

⁵ Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition* (New Haven: Yale U P, 2007), 43.

By Chaucer's time, however, the construction had been refined so that smaller palindromes appeared in places other than the center, and sometimes were made as a matched pair and treated as items in the progression of the palindrome, like the mates of Anna/Otto. Eventually the whole work was conceived with a double return, so that its turn at the center was answered in the quarter-folds, as we see in the thirteenth century Franciscan *Canticle of Creatures*, or incorporated palindromes of the half within the whole, like Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

In addition, what constitutes a match had become "the other," that is, almost anything in any language that the reader could perceive as equivalent. Not only were trans lingual words and letters suitable, but also homophones, puns, opposites and word fragments, especially roots; and for these watchers of the sky, the position of a letter was irrelevant, so that *p* could equal *d* and *b*. But since analogy is slippery, the palindromist often placed exact similitudes or exact dissimilitudes at appropriate spots to assure seekers that they were on the right track, because he wanted them to succeed in finding the central place, especially when this was a religious exercise.

Palindromic structure was associated with the fourth sense of medieval exegesis, or anagogy, a level that leads the consecrated person to heaven in both its outward and inward appearances. The word *anagogy*, which comes from the Greek *ανα*, "up," and *αγωγη*, "a leading," indicates "an elevation of the mind above earthly things,"⁶ and its purpose is to assist the consecrated person, usually a monk, in raising his mind to God. As a part of medieval exegesis, it permitted the reader to have a kind of spiritual pilgrimage.

MEDIEVAL EXEGESIS

Medieval exegesis is a methodology for understanding sacred Scripture that first appeared in the third century and continued through the late Middle Ages. It posits three spiritual meanings beyond the literal, or letter of the text: the allegorical, tropological (or moral), and anagogical (or mystical). We are familiar with how the structure worked in the allegorical, which was usually applied to mankind, because Dante has given an example in his famous "Letter to Can Grande Della Scala":

For if we look to the letter alone, the departure of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses is indicated to us; if to the allegory, our redemption accomplished by Christ is indicated to us.⁷

⁶ Thomas Anthony Trollope, *An Encyclopædia Ecclesiastica*, vol. I (London: John Murray, 1834).

⁷ Dante Alighieri, "Letter to Can Grande Della Scala," quoted in Allan H. Gilbert, ed., *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden* (1940; repr., Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982), 202.

The Old Testament Israelites of Psalm 114 are recast as Christians. On the tropological level, these same Israelites become the souls of those who move from sin to grace, and on the anagogical, “consecrated souls” who abandon earthly concerns for heavenly ones:

if to the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from the woe and misery of sin to a state of grace is indicated to us; if to the anagogical sense, the departure of the consecrated soul from the slavery of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory is indicated.⁸

The anagogical raises the spiritual level higher, and thus leads to heaven. In the Middle Ages, this movement upward suggested traveling on the Way of Perfection, through the stages of purgation, illumination, and unification: the monk was to advance from worldly experience to religious awakening to spiritual exaltation. It was a spiritual journey, which, to some extent, employed skills acquired in meditation and *lexio divina*, or nightly reading of Scripture, where the monk learned to maintain a concentrated focus on the text and encountered multiple metaphors, but it was also a textual journey that insisted that he maintain an elevated view.

AUGUSTINE OF DACIA'S COUPLET

We are aware of this development and the ubiquity of the structure, because a Dominican named Augustine of Dacia reduced the “senses” of medieval exegesis to a little couplet, which was popularized by Nicolas de Lira:

Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,
Tropologia quid agas, quid tendas, anagogia.⁹
The letter teaches the deed; what you believe, allegory;
Tropology, what you do; what you strive for, anagogy.

The verses are a test of perception that is dependent on the recognition of detail, in this case, letter constructions set in pairs to make a palindrome:

Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,
Tropologia quid agas, quid tendas, anagogia.

The reader enters at one of the ends of the palindrome, traditionally called the “wings,” where *Li-ttera* can be heard in Greek as “the *ptera*,” “the wings.” The wings “teach the deed,” i.e., the compositional process, which is identified by name as its mate, *anagogia*, a word that holds two mini

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale: Les Quatre Sens de l'Écriture*, vol. 1 (Paris: Aubier, 1959), 23.

palindromes, *ana* and *gog*. When *littera* is re-heard as *Litter a*, “the letter *a*,” with the hint *ter* (Latin “three”) inside, it suggests “the letter *a* three times.” This detail at one end is paired with the three *a*'s of *anagogia* at the other. (We have indicated that thrice *a* and *a-a-a* are mates by putting them in italics.) There follow the letters of *gesta* and *te.das* (bold), with *g* as an inverted *d*—in the book-hand of the Middle Ages these letters would be graphic look-alikes; the figures *et* (part of the series *te-e.t-et* for “te-te-te”) and *te* (gray); *quid credas* and *agas quid*, which maintain the progress inward (underline); and the letters of *l.go.ia* and *logia* (italics). This leads to the center, *Tropo*, from the Greek *τρόπος*, “a turn,” Homer's word at the center of the *Iliad*, which describes the turning point of the palindrome, and, expanded, holds three (see *Tro* for “*tre*”) mini palindromes, *opo*, *olo*, and *polog*. Since a figure at the mid point needs to be repeated in the wings,¹⁰ *Tropologia*'s letters *po.g*, with a suggestion of *tre*, connect to similar letters *g.do* with *ter* in *Littera gesta docet* at one end, and *d.go* with *te* in *tendas, anagogia* at the other, which is about as equivalent as letters can get without being identical. At this point, the reader, usually a cleric, would decide on the best reading for *pog-gdo-dgo* with “*ter*.” Perhaps it is *g-o-d* as a Trinity, which would make the construct anagogical, because it leads to God in heaven.¹¹

Anagogy's purpose is transcendental and aesthetic: for the reader, it presents letters to be deciphered within a designated space, and if there is a likeness of God among the possibilities, the activity becomes a prayer, or perhaps a hymn, and merits grace. For the writer, it is a way of inviting God's assistance in the creative act of crafting the work right at the beginning. But, since only one palindrome comprehends the center of a poem or story, not all of its palindromes are religious. Some of them reference the arts and sciences, so the reader must aggregate the reasonable meanings for the centered letters before making a choice. In Augustine of Dacia's palindrome, there are several possibilities. Besides identifying the turning point, *Tropo* with *logia* suggests a rhetorical figure of speech, a medieval poetry that embellishes liturgical texts at Christmas and Easter, the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, and more. Since the mid point must connect to the wings in palindromic structure, the letters there need to be considered, and they are suggesting three. In choosing a Trinity of *g-o-d*, the reader of the little verses, with an elevated

¹⁰ Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, 43.

¹¹ Augustine of Dacia, a Dominican contemporary of Thomas Aquinas, offers this condensation of the first “Quaestio” of Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* in *De introductorii scientiae*. In the thirteenth century, the Dominicans were at the university in Paris, where there was an English “nation” faculty. See Alan B. Cobban, *English University Life in the Middle Ages* (London: UCL Press, Ltd., 1999, 81). Aquinas was there a total of ten years, although *la* was written at Rome (See Eleanor Stump, *Aquinas* [London: Routledge, 2003], xiii). As a Dominican, it is probable that Augustine knew the English word *God*.

view, makes the “best” selection and merits grace. This movement through the verses to a central point where God is seen is a textual pilgrimage, and it is one of the pilgrimages in Chaucer’s “Pardoner’s Tale.”

THE “PARDONER’S TALE”

Concerning pilgrimages, John Paul II has written that “[t]he whole of the Christian life is like a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father. . . This pilgrimage takes place in the heart of each person, extends to the believing community, and then reaches to the whole of humanity.”¹² And so the *Canterbury Tales*. Much has been said about its literal and allegorical pilgrimages, but little about its anagogical ones.

In her examination of the oak as a symbol in the “Pardoner’s Tale,” Carolyn P. Collette concludes that the location of the treasure “defines the major action of this tale as anagogical,” noting that, as a “narrative detail” and “a test of perception for the audience,” the oak allows the exemplum to perform as “an allegory of grace offered and refused.”¹³

She is understanding anagogy in its traditional function of leading to heaven. We hope to extend her analysis by demonstrating that that offer of grace is effected on the inside of the text by narrative detail set out as a palindrome.

Chaucer’s tale¹⁴ features palindromically arranged characters, settings and words that progress toward a central space. There are five pairs of characters. First, three living rioters *set* and *drynke* in a tavern (VI.663), where they are interrupted by the ringing of a bell *Biform a cors being caried to his grave* (665). At the end, the rioters (one dead) *sitte and drinke*, planning that *afterward we wol his body berie* (883-84), and finish as three dead rioters. The matching scenes are accompanied by the signal words *Biform* and *afterward*, and the latter is introduced by *thus spak that oon* (882) heard as “that to oon,” punned as “that two-one,” perhaps indicating the existence of an opposite complement.

Next, a boy enters the story, later explaining that death with *his spere* (677), a pun for “his peer,” or opposite complement, life, *smoot his herte atwo*, which might be heard as “smoot his art atwo” like a palindrome, which has two halves. Since life and death provide the distinguishing difference between the condition of the three rioters at the opening and at the close of the tale, the boy’s statement “checks” the first pair in quasi mathematical

¹² John Paul II (Pope), “Tertio Millennio Adveniente,” sect. 49, *Vatican Library*, Last modified 1994, <http://www.vatican.va>.

¹³ Carolyn P. Collette, “‘Ubi Peccaverant, ibi Punirentur’: The Oak Tree and the Pardoner’s Tale,” *The Chaucer Review* 19, no. 1 (1984): 43, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25093902>.

¹⁴ Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 196–202. Fragment and line numbers are in parentheses.

fashion. The boy is matched by his complement, the bottle man, who is accompanied by the suggestive preposition *unto*—*unto a man* (870)—perhaps a French-English “one-two,” something like the previous *-t oon*, to suggest the existence of its opposite.

As a token indicative of complements, *unto* is present for the next few pairs of characters. Both the *taverner* (685) and the *pothecarie* (852) dispense something:¹⁵ one offers drinks that quicken and the other poison that kills, with the *pothecarie* preceded by the token—*unto a pothecarie*. The *oold man* (713) and the *yongeste*, *which that wente to the toun* (837) repeat the signal *unto* as *toun*, with the coupling of young and old “checked” when the *oold man* says that he can not find a man who will *chaunge his youthe for myn age* (723-24). A second mention of the *olde man* (714) is again matched to the *yongeste*, who went forth toward the *toun* (804-05). Thus there are five pairs of characters who participate in moving the text inward: three live rioters and three dead rioters, the boy and the bottle man, the taverner and the pothecarie, and the old man and the youngest twice.

The structure enters a central arena that is bounded by “trees” and signaled by the demonstrative pronouns *this* and *that*, later confirmed by *And whan that this was doon* (882). The pronoun *this* of *this contree* (754) introduces a triple pun: “i.con three” and “i.con tree,” both predicted by the pun *ne as by my treete* (619), and the poor pun “contrary” for *con* with *tree*. Its mate, *that*, shows off *cam* with *tree* in *cam to that tree* (769). Within these “trees,” the opposite pairs *yonge* (759) and *olde* (767) and *lafe* (762)—literally the past tense of the verb “to leave,” punned here as the directional “left”—and *right* (765) are identified by *this* and *that* respectively. They flank the tree in the middle of the tale, which is an oak as predicted by *as olde bookes trete* (630): “Se ye that ook? Right there ye shal hym fynde./ God save yow, that boghte agayn mankynde” (765-66). The central position of *that ook* is signaled by the proximate word, *Right*, indicating that the text has passed the mid-point and moved to the right side of the palindrome as the reader sees it. What are the possibilities for *that ook*?

Noting the importance of the oak in the Old Testament, Collette points to Jacob’s commanding the Israelites to bury their idols and earrings “under an oak” at Sichem in Genesis 35:4, and to Joshua’s making a covenant for the people and setting up the Law of God under the same oak in Joshua 24:26.¹⁶ Known as the Oak of Moreh, “the Teacher Oak,”¹⁷ this tree at Sichem was Abram’s first stop after he set out for Canaan in Genesis 12:6. Because God appeared to him there, giving him the country to settle, Abram

¹⁵ I am indebted by my student, Chris Hanyok, for this observation.

¹⁶ Collette, 41.

¹⁷ Philologos, “Back to Mamre,” *Forward* (blog), Nov. 20, 2007, <http://www.forward.com>.

erected an altar; so this oak has sheltered a spiritual treasure as well as a material treasure. It's complement, the Oak of Mambre in Genesis 13:18, where Abram set up his tents after returning from Egypt, is the *grove* where God appeared as three men and Sara laughed. These historical trees are those on the *lafte* and the right of the mid point.

The tree in the center, *that ook*, can be heard (cued by *Se ye* heard as "Say") as "the took," past tense of the verb "to take," and an expression of *cupiditas*, "desire." As such, it is a fulfillment of the thrice-told theme *radix malorum est cupiditas*, and a suggestion of the original sin of Adam and Eve, who "took" the apple from "the tree in the middle" of the garden in Genesis 3:3. Analogically, *that ook* might also be punned as "that book" and refer to the Bible: "Looketh the Bible, and ther ye may it leere" (578).

The moral, or tropological level, is hidden in the reverse of *that ook*, or its missing opposite complement, "this gift," which is the saving "gift" of eternal *lyf* gained for mankind by Christ on Calvary. This understanding is attested to at the oak by *right there ye shal hym fynde./ God save yow, that boghte agayn mankynde* (765-66) with the letters of *l..fy*, or "lyf," surrounding and naming *hym* as "the Life" (John 14: 6). The gift of the salvation of mankind, the greatest pardon, is evident in the title "pardonner," from French *par donner*, "by giving," and is how the *false traytour Deeth* (699) is slain, an interpretation that is foreshadowed by the Pardonner when he says, "Til Crist hadde boght us with his blood agayn!" (501)

The anagogical level is apparent at the epicenter in three letters *t* within *thatook? Right*. Suggestive of the crosses of Calvary (*right* "thre" *ye shal hym fynde*), this figuration is similar to others that we have seen at the center of religious writings of the previous century. It is the true *tresor*, because it is counted: the "first" *t* in *tha* is *a*, an analogue for "one"; the second in *took* is *oo*, heard as "two"; and the third is *tri* within *Right*. A grace-filled choice, it connects to the opening of the tale where a "trio" of letters *t* can be found within *Thise riotoures thre* (661) (followed by the pun *erst er* perhaps for "Easter") and the closing of the tale where they can be seen in *And whan that this was doon* (882) (followed by *make us merie* perhaps for "Christmas"). The center expands to include *te-te-te* within *Se ye that ook?* when the *te* analogues "*et-at-kai*" are perceived, with the *o*'s of *ook* indicating blanks to be filled by *a* and *i*, prompted by *agayn*.¹⁸ So we agree with Collette that "the location of the treasure" at the oak, which is the mid-point of the palindrome, defines this tale as anagogical.

Chaucer has signed his work *y.e.offre...y* for "Geoffrey" or "Geffrey," at *Cometh up, ye wyves, offreth of youre wolle!* (910-12) substituting the Greek

¹⁸ The central *ook* as *kai* equals *et* equals *and* can be seen as the root of "pan[is]," in Latin "bread," with *oo* suggesting "blood," which coordinates with the "breed and wyn ful prively" (797).

gamma, *y*, for *g* as he did with *yiftes* in the *Pardonner's Introduction* (295),¹⁹ while incorporating the well-loved *te-te-te* as *et-et-lle*, the last, recalling a *figura* used by the author of "The Canticle of Creatures" and by Dante. This name is immediately followed by *Youre names I entre heer in my rolle anon*, entering not only his own name, but also *youre names* (the readers')²⁰ into his roll, or roster, as (and here is an aural pun signaled by *heer*) "a non" from the Latin *nonnus*, "a monk." The adept who has been able to appreciate *t-t-t* within *that ook Right* receives grace, qualifies as a spiritual religious person, and goes into the *blisse of hevene* (912), anagogically, that is.

Palindromes like this one are often "verified" somewhere else in the work, or sometimes in a subsequent work. In this case, Chaucer has presented his artistic token *unto* in one place and reiterated his palindromic structure in another. The token, with its analogues *toun* and *into*, appears as a match to *his rattes*, or "his rat est," Latin-English as "it is his art," at the point in the tale where the rioter goes to the apothecary:

And forth he gooth, no lenger wolde he tarie,

Into the toun, unto a pothecarie,

And preyde hym that he hym wolde selle

Som poyson, that he myghte his rattes quelle. (VI 852-54)

Framed by *le* in *lenger* and *el* in *quelle* (underline), the pairs of this palindrome are *Into-toun-unto* and *his rattes* (italics); *the* in *pothecarie* and *huc* in *myghte* (bold); *hym that* and *that he* (gray); *he hym* and *boy son* in *poyson* (underline); and *wo...s in wolde s-* and *Som* (italics). The center, *elle* (bold), connects to *le* and *el* in the wings and, as *El*, is a Hebrew name of God. When two letter puns are noticed, "oraison" (French "prayer") for *poyson* and "arttes" for *rattes*, the last line is also suggesting that prayer will appease his art. Notice how the interior text is converting the sense of the tale. We could ask again, "Was it a rat I saw?"

THE "PARSON'S TALE"

The "Parson's Tale" validates the palindromic structure of the "Pardonner's Tale" in a series of *synnes* (ll. 692-718), a pun on the Greek prefix *syn*, "same," which indicate analogous pairs or similitudes. Preceded by *so greet an emprise for to undertake to doon* (X.691), which puns "Greek" and emphasizes "unto" as *to un* and *to oon*, and entered by the pairs *wanhope* (692) and *fals hope* (719) followed by *the mercy of God* (692) and *turne to God*

¹⁹ The *y* for *g* is also an Anglo-Saxon trait seen in the poems of *Kynewulf*.

²⁰ He is entering Dante's name in *rolle anon*, when *lle* is converted to *te* and the Latin *r* is taken for the Greek *p* seen as *d*.

(718), the structure holds seven (not “deadly,” but “lively”) *synnes* that we have emphasized by an underline: the *synne that* (693) and the *synne that* (718); *This horrible synne is* (695) and *is lyk* (714); *alle synnes tha-* (696) and *that is the yate of alle* (713); *this synne* (696) and *that is* (713); *Soothly he that* (695) and *thise two synnes as seith* (711); a *synful man that* (700) and *seith Salomon* (709); and *thow comest into thy* (702) and three instances of *come: that first cometh* (708), *this synne comth* (706), and *Thanne cometh* (705). The central passage not only reminds the reader of the pardon for original sin obtained at Calvary, but also of the many pardons for individual sin given to “all” who repent:

... Crist, “I seye to thee, to-day shaltow been with me in paradys.”/
 Certes, ther is noon so horrible synne of man that it ne may in his lyf
be destroyed by penitence, thurgh vertu of the passion and of the
death of Crist. (X 703-04)

Framed by *Crist*, the palindrome matches *th.. is* and *si...th* (gray); *of* and *of* (underline); *an* and *an* (italics); *th* and *th* (bold); *it ne* and *iten* (gray); *may* and *pen*, as the Greek number *pent*, “five,” suggesting the inclusion of the letters *e* and *i* on either side of *may*, which make five letters, and suggest “Ma_ie” (underline), with *be de* and *ed by* for *bébé* (italics) and the Nativity. The center, *estroy* (bold), or Latin-French “*est roy*,” “He is the King,” as Christ the King, who is “trois,” the French “three,” or the Trinity.

In a structure that begins with the series *this* and *that* (like the “Pardoner’s Tale”); uses the token *to* to indicate similitudes (like *unto* of the “Pardoner’s Tale”); and hides Christmas while literally speaking of Calvary (like the “Pardoner’s Tale”)—in such a structure, it is remarkable that the central arena proffers *his lyf*, which is the same as *hym* within “lyf” in *right there ye shal hym fynde./ God save yow, that boghte agayn mankynde*. As John the Evangelist named him “the Life” is another name for Christ: “the way, and the truth, and the life.” Because there are likenesses of God at the center of the palindromes of the “Pardoner’s Tale” and the “Parson’s Tale,” these pilgrimages through the text are hymns, and thus merit grace.

DRYDEN’S PREFACE

Critical reception of the *Canterbury Tales* has suggested that Chaucer’s palindromic structure was evident to later writers. In 1700, for example, John Dryden, who had translated some of Chaucer’s poems,²¹ wrote the following lines in the Preface to his *Fables Ancient and Modern*:

²¹ Vinton A. Dearing, “Introduction” to *The Works of John Dryden: Poems 1697–1700* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000), 31.

We have our Fore-fathers and Great Grand-dames all before us, as they were in *Chaucer’s Days*: their general Characters are still remaining in Mankind, and even in *England*, though they are call’d by other Names than those of Monks, and Fryars, and Chanons and Lady Abbesses, and Nuns: For Mankind is ever the same, and nothing lost out of Nature, though everything is alter’d.²²

The passage is a palindrome that begins with a smaller palindrome within a larger one that is matched to a single word. In this case,

“We hāvē our Fore-fathēř and Great Grand-damēř all before us, ās thēy”

sets out *We* and *t.e* (bold); *ave* and *a...ey* (gray); *our* and *or.u* (underline); *Fore* and *before* (italics); *ther* and *all*, which might be “thre” and *lll* as *lll* if *a = l* (bold); *and* and *and-dam*, with *dam* as a second *and* as hinted by *ever the same and* later in the passage (underline); and *Gr* and *Gr* (italics). The center, *eat* (bold), might be read as “a *te*” and widened to a “*ter*” for the Latin *tertius*, “three.” It connects to *We* at the beginning, when *W* is seen as a double *lambda* and made into a *t* to make *te*, and to *t.e* at the end. The line is an allusion to the writers of the thirteenth century who centered *te-te-te* for *t-t-t* as a pictogram of Calvary. Then the whole palindrome can be read as follows:

We have our Fore-fathers and Great Grand-dames all before us, as they were
 in Chaucer’s Days: their general Characters are still remaining in Mankind, and
 even in England, though they are call’d by other Names than those of Monks,
 and Fryars, and Chanons and Lady Abbesses, and Nuns: For Mankind is ever
 the same, and nothing lost out of Nature, though everything is alter’d.

Framed by the *te* within “*ter*” palindrome and *te* within *ter* within *alter’d* (bold), the “characters” are the series *us-as-were* and the series *is-s...u* (with *ut*)-*sa* (gray), all similitudes of the verb “to be” (See *is ever the same*); the series *in-in-in* and the series *in-in-in* (underline); the series *an...d-and-and* and the series *an...d-and-and* (italics); *other...m* for “mother” and *Lady* (bold) (Notice *though they are call’d by other Names*); *than* and *d...an* (gray), when *d* is taken as the Anglo-Saxon thorn; *those* (for “Theos”) and the abbreviation *Ch* (for “Christ”) (underline) (hinted by *Christian* a few lines later); and *Monks* and *Fryars* (italics).

The center, *and* (bold) as an analogue for *et*, or *te*, is next to *Fry*, a pun for “try” or “tri,” “three,” and connects to the *te* within “*ter*” palindrome and *te*

²² John Dryden, *The Works of John Dryden: Poems 1697–1700*, Vinton A. Dearing, ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000), 37–38.

within *ter* within *alter'd*. It actualizes the opening words "We have our Forefathers and" twice: first as "and" (*et*) equals *We* equals *te*, and second as "s and" (in *Monks and*) equals the altered *-s alter'd* ("sa_d), with the last a pun for "Psalter." Monks and Fryars read the "sand," or minor arts—the bits of letters and figures—of the Psalter, and know anagogy by its Hebrew name, *sod*. The passage is signed by Dryden within *and Fryars*, *and*, when the letter *s* is taken as a *sigma*, which looks like *E*. So it seems that Dryden was aware of Chaucer's use of palindromic structure, his signature, and even his *ook* ("kai") hidden in *of Monks*, with the letter *f* signaling the Italian *fa*, "make," and the word *and* immediately following (See also *and look on Chaucer as a dry, old-fashioned Wit*),²³ with Dryden's name.

So by the late Middle Ages, the palindrome had become a primary tool for the crafting of fictive tales, which we hope to have demonstrated here in the "Pardoner's Tale," and supported by Chaucer's and Dryden's words, but how do we know that Chaucer knew the languages that make up some of the palindromes? For that we need to consider one of his poems.

CHAUCER'S GREEK

In the short poem "An ABC,"²⁴ fashioned as a prayer to the Virgin Mary, Chaucer advertises his knowledge of several languages, among them Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The work is a palindrome framed by the Hebrew *amen*, which proceeds toward the center by incremental pairs, including a litany of apostrophes to Mary that is counted in Greek and Latin. Close to the middle of the work, there is a pair of interior palindromes. We are interested in the central arena of the left side palindrome of this pair.

Framed by the similitudes *ed. . n* and *p. . ne* in *medicyne* (78) and *peynes* (83), there is a series of five "one" figures *my-nomo-my-en-Myn* (79–80), with *my* as a grammatical analogue for *I*, with *mono* and *en* as forms of the Greek "one," and a Latin *un*, "one," excluded by *Lat not*.²⁵ They are matched to another series of five "one" figures *un-en-ev-ne-Un* (82), with *gree* in *grevous*, perhaps "Greek," immediately preceding the lower-case *v*, which is the Greek *nu*, or letter *n*, to spell *en*, "one." This line ends in *penaunce* (82), which suggests the series of "five" when constructed as *pen* + (*a* + *un*), or *pen* + (1 + 1), or *pen*[t], in Greek, "five."

The lines lead to the epi-center of the left side palindrome (80–81):

²³ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁴ Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 637–40.

²⁵ These five "one" figurae, *my-nomo-my-en-Myn*, are themselves a palindrome with *my* and *Myn*, the Greek forms *mono* and *en*, and a central *my* that connects to the wings. They are mirrored in the other series of one's, *un-en-ev-ne-Un*, that have *un* and *Un*, *en* and *ne*, and center *ev* in *grevous*.

Myn hēle into thīn hand al I resygne.

Ladi, thī sorwe kan I not portre~~eye~~

With *My. . e* and *eye* at the end (gray), the pairs are *hele*, perhaps "Hellas," and *portre* (underline) perhaps as "carry three meanings" ("as *El*," "as Greece," and "as Helen"); *into* and *I not* (italics); the series *in-in-n. . . I* and the series *o.t-ot-t. . . o* (see *into*) (bold); *thi* and *thi* (gray); *d al I* and *Ladi* (underline); and *es* (Latin "is") and *e* (Greek "is") (italics). The center, *ygn* (bold), or "gyn," is the Greek root of "woman," which is verified by the next word *Ladi*, as well as by the sense of the line: *Myn hele into thin hand al I resygne*, when *hele* is taken for Hellas. Since the center also holds *gne* as "ben," Hebrew for "Son" (see *Ben to the seed of Adam* [182], and *That in this world ben lighted with thi name* [74]), it connects to the ends of the central arena, which began with *ed. . n* and *p. . ne*. Additionally, the framing figures of *eye* could be puns for "Eve" (see *ne failest nevere* [112]) in the mated palindrome. The beauty of this construct lies, as it does at the epi-center of the "Pardoner's Tale," in the word that is not there, the Middle English *wummon* with "man" within it, just as *Mary held Christ* within her womb (see *Was signe of thin unwemmed maidenhede* [91], with *unwemmed*, "unstained," punned as "one [word] woman" that was "made in Hele," or Hellas, and recalling the central word *resygne*).

Additional evidence of Chaucer's Greek can be seen in the Son's name, *Xristus* (161), which is spelled with the Greek *chi*. Indeed, the whole poem is an exhibition of Chaucer's Hebrew, Greek and Latin, with one equivalency in Anglo-Saxon: the *thorn*, a similitude for the letter *p*, is "verified" by the seventh pair of apostrophes to Mary as *noon but in yow, ladi deere. . . thi presence appeere* (17) or "as *p*" with the pun "thy *p* sense [as] a pair" on the left side, and by *With thornes venymous* (149), perhaps a poor pun as "been in us," on the right side.

But you may be thinking that this precision is problematic. What about the instability of medieval texts? We might suggest that some of the "errors" are not errors at all, rather reaches for a match, but in this, we should be guided by Derek Pearsall's advice that "very few things are susceptible of proof in matters of textual criticism."²⁶

It is probable that Chaucer revised the *Canterbury Tales*. In fact, Anne Hudson believes that "local motivation can often be discerned" in some of the changes.²⁷ While that does not mean that the structures observed in this

²⁶ Derek Pearsall, "Authorial Revision in Some Late-Medieval English Texts," in *Crux and Controversy in Middle English Textual Criticism*, eds. A. J. Minnis and Charlotte Brewer (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 1992), 44, *Google Book Search*.

²⁷ Anne Hudson, "The Variable Text" in *Crux and Controversy in Middle English Textual Criticism*, A. J. Minnis and Charlotte Brewer, eds. (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 1992), 50, *Google Book Search*.

essay do not exist or are corrupt, it does imply that occasionally they may be missing a pair, which would make it more difficult for the reader to discern the palindrome properly. In the long run, however, we have to work with what is available, and the task of “verifying” a particular palindrome when its center meets its wings may be the best device for establishing the viability of the text.

And so assisted by Augustine’s little verses, we have tried to show something of Chaucer’s quasi-formulaic compositional method. Bonaventure used it. So did Aquinas, Dante and Boccaccio. That Chaucer found its analogic qualities attractive is not surprising. Consider the Incipit after the ABC title:

“**Incipit carmen secundum ordinem litterarum alphabeti.**”

It is a line palindrome that centers the Latin adverb *dum*, “while” or “now” (bold), and features numerals before letters: *un*, Latin “one,” and *pro*, Greek “proto,” “first” (italics); *men* and *nem*, both of which hold the Greek *en*, “one” (underline); the letters *p..ca* as “a-b-c” and *litterarum a*, heard as “litera Roma,” or “Roman letter” (gray); and the sound of “In c” and the Greek letters *alpha bet[a]*. When the central *dum* is translated as the Middle English “now,” a pictogram of “onE” used by Chaucer, the center holds “unE-pro[to],” or 1-1-1, and the wings a-b-c.

Its mate circles back to include the beginning title:

“**merci ble. Amen. Explicit carmen**” and **ABC**.

The pairs center *licit ca*, or “ac licit,” “and is allowed,” perhaps to permit the joining of ideas from two pairs of a palindrome (as well as the merging of Christ and Mary at the center). The complements are *c-a-b* for “ABC” and the title ABC (gray); *Amen* and *a.men* (underline); the Greek *rho* and the Roman *r* (italics); and center a mini-palindrome, *ici*, perhaps the French adverb “here” (as a mate to the opening adverb *dum*) with the wings as—not a-b-c, but *b-a-s*, for *ici-bas*, “in this world,” which, way out on the extremities of the poem, may be the opposite of heaven for this *versus diabolici*.

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