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Palindromic Structure in the “Pardoner’s Tale”

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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. 3

Some palindromes were very complex. As a palindrome of palindromes, the Latin sentence “Anna 
[mappam 
madidam, mutum] 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.

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 Testament and Homer’s Iliad. 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, eventually connecting to the limits, or could be narrative events, characters, phrases, words or words for words for words.


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 ana, “up,” and γνώση, “a leading,” indicates “an elevation of the mind above earthly things,” 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.?
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 spiritual exaltation. It was a spiritual journey, which, to some extent, insisted that he maintain an elevated view.

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.9
The letter teaches the deed; what you believe, allegory;
Tropology, what you do; what you strive for, anagogy.

The reader enters at one of the ends of the palindrome, traditionally called the “wings,” where Littera 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.

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 introduotoriis scientiarum. 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 he was. (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 “The 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.” 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.”

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 palindromic

Chaucer’s tale features palindromically arranged characters, settings and words that progress toward a central space. There are five pairs of characters. First, three living rioters set dryne in a tavern (VI.663), where they are interrupted by the ringing of a bell Bifor 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 Bifor 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 “smooth his art arwo” like a palindromic, 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 closing of the tale, the boy’s statement “checks” the first pair in quasi mathematical

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

16 Collette, 41.

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 tent after returning from Egypt, is the grove where God appeared as three men and Sara laughed. These historical trees are those on the lefte 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 byf gained for mankind by Christ on Calvary. This understanding is attested to at the oak by right there ye shal hym fynde./ God save you, that boghte agayne 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 “pardoners,” from French par donner, “by giving,” and is how the false traytour Deeth (699) is slain, an interpretation that is foreshadowed by the Pardoner when he says, “Til Crist hadde boght us with his blood agayn mankynde eternally” (501).

The anagogical level is apparent at the epicenter in three letters t within thattook? 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 too, 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 rioutours thre (661) (followed by the pun erst er perhaps for “Easter”) and the closing of the tale where they can be seen in And whence 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-ka” 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.offer... for “Geoffrey” or “Geffrey,” at Cometh up, ye wyves, offreth of yourw wolfe! (910-12) substituting the Greek gamma, y, for g as he did with yifes in the Pardoner’s Introduction (295),19 while incorporating the well-loved te-te-te as et-et-ile, 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 l 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), analogically, 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 town, unto a pothecarie,
And pryde hym that he hym wolde selle
Som poysoun, that is 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-undo and his rattes (italics); the in pothecarie and he in myghte (bold); hym that and that he (gray); he hym and boy son in poysoun (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, “oraision” (French “prayer”) for poysoun 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 “Pardoner’s Tale” in a series of synnes (II. 692-718), a pun on the Greek prefix syn, “same,” which indicate analogous pairs or similitudes. Preceded by so greet an empirce 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

18 The central oak as kai equals et equals and can be seen as the root of “pan[its]” in Latin “bread,” with oo suggesting “blood,” which coordinates with the “bread and wyn ful prively” (797).

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 le 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 that (696) and that is the yate of alle (713); this synne (696) and that is (713); Soothly he that (695) and these two synnes as seith (711); a synful man that (700) and seith Salomon (709); and thou comest into thy (702) and three instances of come: that first cometh (708), this synne comith (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 shall long been with me in paradys."
Certeis, ther is noon so horrible synne of man that it he may in his lyf be destroyed by penitence, through 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_iie" (underline), with be de and ed by for bebe (italics) and the Nativity. The center, estroy (bold), or Latin-French "est roye," "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 you, that bothe 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, wrote the following lines in the Preface to his *Fables Ancient and Modern*:

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 ojit of Nature, though everything is alter'd.\(^2\)

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 have our Fore-fathers and Great Grand-dames all before us, as they" 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 ill as III if a = I (bold); and and-dam, with dam as a second and as hinted by ever the same and later in the passage (underline); 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 ojit 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 'it)-sa (gray), all similitudes of the verb "to be" (See is ever the same); the series in-in and the series 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

within ter within alter'd. It actualizes the opening words “We have our Fore-
fishers 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 palindrone 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 palindromic of this pair.

Framed by the similitudes ed...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 l, 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-eu-ne-Un (82), with
gree in greevous, perhaps “Greek,” immediately preceding the lower-case v,
which is the Greek μ, or letter n, to spell en, “one.” This line ends in
pennaunce (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.
25 These five “one” figures, 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-eu-ne-Un, that have un and Un, en
and ne, and center ev in greevous.

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...l and
the series o-t-o-t...o (see into) (bold); thi and thi (gray); d al 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,
and 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 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 palindromes. 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 waumen 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 χι. 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
seven pair of apostrophes to Mary as noon but in yow, ladi deere...thi
presence appere (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
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 palindromic 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 alphabetae.”

It is a line palindromic 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... as “a-b-c” and litterarum a, heard as “litera Roma,” or “Roman letter” (gray); and the sound of “In e” and the Greek letters alpha beta[al]. When the central dum is translated as the Middle English “now,” a pictogram of “one” used by Chaucer, the center holds “un- onE-pro[to],” or 1-1-1, and the wings a-b-c.

Its mate circles back to include the beginning title:

“merci jubile. Amen. Explicit carmen” and ABC.

The pairs center licit ca, or “as 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.

REFERENCES


