

**The Yeoman Transmuted: An Evaluation of Penitence and Poetry****Frank N. Schleicher**

&nbsp; The relative paucity of commentary on the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* has never caused much distress in the critical community. Beginning with Kittredge, modern readers have noted and appreciated the roadside drama played out when the Canon and his servant race onto the Pilgrims' stage. It is one of the freshest and certainly most entertaining moments in the *Canterbury Tales* and has modern readers quick to register their delight with this flash of penultimate brilliance. What critical debate there exists around the tale centers on a relatively few points. One particular approach attempts to discern a cause behind the hasty arrival of the alchemical pair. Baldwin, for example, suggests that the Canon has just attempted a particularly unsuccessful bit of transmutation *cum* con artistry and has been forced to beat a hasty retreat out of town to find cover with the Pilgrims (Baldwin 242). Other approaches concern themselves with the relationship of the teller to the people in his tale in general, but more specifically, with the identity of the mysterious Canon in the *Yeoman's Tale*. Some, again like Baldwin, consider him the Yeoman's former master (236). Others claim that the Canon of Part Two represents the kind of thief that the Canon of the *Prologue* is on his way to becoming (Reidy, 31-37). Still another point of view holds that the wicked beguiler of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is none other than the devil himself (Gardner, 1-17). On another level, commentators have indulged in

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a certain biographical license with the *Tale* and suggested that Chaucer himself may have been swindled by a neighboring Canon and took his particular literary revenge by writing a tale which damns false canons. Closer to the point are the observations which note the shifted tone at the *Tale's* close. Pointing out that the Yeoman's final comments sound much more like Chaucer than they do like that of an untutored servant, many observers have directed attention to one of the work's genuine cruxes.

Temporarily setting most of these concerns aside, I would like to propose a different and perhaps skewed approach to the *Tale*. Without dismissing the traditional controversies and observations, I would like to examine the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and *Prologue* by asserting that the *Tale* may be more interesting and more important than the traditional disputes would seem to allow and that a genuine inquiry into the Yeoman's character and story and their relationship with the other stories of Fragment VIII and the *Tales* outside Fragment VIII will bring to the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* a fuller, more appropriate place in the unity of the *Canterbury Tales*. In this context, I choose to accept the Parson's gracious admonitions at face value and subject my reading of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and certain other of the *Canterbury Tales* to the rigors and rewards of penitence as outlined in the *Parson's Tale*.

If the *Parson's Tale* is essential to the whole of the *Canterbury* journey because it shows us the fullest explication of the terms and condition of penitence, then the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is necessary because it details the actions and psychology of incomplete penitence moving toward completion. Whatever the precise cause of the Canon's and Yeoman's haste at the beginning of their encounter with the pilgrims, they are both "enveloped in

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synne." Whether they want to hide themselves in and among the pilgrims or to insinuate themselves into the company of travelers so as to defraud them of their precious gold by means of that "slidyng science," the Canon and his servant are clearly up to no good. The pilgrim narrator senses this immediately and sounds the first note of warning in his description of the alchemist Canon.

Al light for somer rood this worthy man,

And in myn herte to wondren I bigan

What that he was, til that I understood

How that his cloke was sowed to his hood;

For which, whan I hadde longe avysed me,

I demed him som chanoun for to be. (VIII. 568-73)

The emphasis on deliberate evaluation, "wondren in herte," and the detail pointing out that he was "som" canon, encourage the reader to proper scepticism. The Yeoman confirms these suspicions when he reveals the truth about his former employer and the Canon rides away "for verray sorwe and shame" (702).

"A!" quod the Yeman, "heere shal arise game;

al that I kan anon now wol I telle.

Syn he is goon, the foule feen hym quelle!

For nevere hereafter wol I with hym meete

For peny ne for pound, I you biheete." (VIII. 703-7)

In the classic sense, the Yeoman has made the first step toward genuine conversion. He has renounced the sin he has lived by for so long and begun the movement toward full and complete penitence. As if to make public his confession and to call our attention to its particular nature he goes on:

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And yet, for al my smert and al my grief,

For al my sorwe, labour, and meschief,

I koude neverre leve it in no wise.

Now wolde God my with myghte suffise

To tellen al that longeth to that art!

But nathelees yow wol I tellen part.

Syn that my lord is goon, I wol nat apare;

Swich thyng as that I knowe, I wol declare. (VIII. 712-19)

He freely admits that despite all its pain and grief, he has never before been able to abandon his trade. Even now, his renunciation has an almost "accidental" quality to it. The Yeoman's free tongue and Harry Bailey's persistent inquiries have drawn out more and more compromising revelations, until it is not so much the Yeoman who denounces the Canon, as it is the Canon who recognizes that he has been exposed and must flee or be subject to the kind of examination he most loathes. This sudden separation strikes the Yeoman with the power of unexpected grace, and he responds by promising a complete inquiry into his past, without fully realizing what this will entail.

The revelations, confessions, and insights which follow generally flesh out the experience of a man whose conscience is not fully penitent, not yet fully prepared to lose an affectionate grip on his sins. While the Yeoman will *tell* all, he is not entirely prepared to *abandon* all. His trade, now lost, still appeals to him, with a poignancy which is not lost on the careful reader. Throughout the first and second parts of his *Tale* proper, he draws himself back to the fondness he feels for his "cursed craft" (830) and, moreover, to the emotions it has inspired in him and will impress upon his audience. On the one hand he is willing and able to confess the consequences of his servitude and hold himself up as a fallen *exemplum*.

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That slidyng science hath me maad so bare

That I have no good, wher that evere I fare;

And yet I am endette so therby,

Of gold that I have borwed, trewely,

That whil I lyve I shal it quite nevere.

Lat every man be war by me for evere! (VIII. 732-37)

But this insight is still rudimentary; its main concern is with worldly loss and gain. On the other hand, the penitent Yeoman also stumbles into a confession of pride in his profession. The epic catalog that follows shortly after the opening of his *Tale* does more than enumerate the mechanics of alchemy correctly or no it shows the Yeoman still engaged by and even delighted with the rhythms and mysteries of the transmutation.

Ther is also ful many another thyng

That is unto oure craft apertenynng.

Though I by ordre hem nat reherce kan,

By cause that I am a lewed man,

Yet wol I telle hem as they come to mynde ...

Oure lampes brennyng both nyght and day,

To brynge aboute oure purpose, if we may:

Oure forneys eek of calcinacioun,

And of watres albificacioun;

Unslekked lym, chalk, and gleyre of an ey,

Poudres diverse, asshes, donge, pisse, and cley,

Cered pokketes, sal peter, vitriole,

And diverse fires maad of wode and cole;

Sal tarte, alkally, and sal preparat,

And combust materes and coagulat; ... (VIII.784-88, 801-11)

Although I have broken off the long quotation awkwardly, the passage still exercises its power

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over the Yeoman and over the reader. These passages of description and incantation seem almost to draw the Yeoman back to his old ways, if only temporarily, and extend a certain persuasive power over the reader as well, nearly convincing him that the spells might work and surely reinvoking the mysterious charm of the alchemical life. The rhythm and the sheer force of physical description are charming, but they prevent the Yeoman from severing the ties with his past he needs to.

In the second section of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, something else begins to happen. Now engaged in the telling of his tale proper, having made first a kind of confession born of fortunate accident and incomplete contrition, the Yeoman begins to tell the story of "another chanoun" (1090). Whether this asserted identity is true or not is probably irrelevant, although Gardner's suggestion that this new canon is none other than the devil is interesting and may heighten the reader's sense of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* as a complete encounter with sin. What is interesting is the way the teller begins to react to his *Tale*. Although the *Tales* exhibit other instances of the teller's reaction to, and judgments of, his story, only the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* goes quite as far as it does. No fewer than three times in the second part of his story, the Yeoman interrupts himself to proclaim that he has grown tired of his *Tale*. First, of his Canon, he assures his audience that "it dulleth me to ryme," going on to admit that the lies they practiced now cause him great "shame" (VIII. 1093, 1095). Later, describing the means by which a skillful alchemist can deceive his unwitting dupes, the Yeoman once again strikes the note of weary surrender.

It dulleth me whan that I hym speke.

Of his falshede fayne wolde I me wreke,

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If I wiste how, but he is here and there;

He is so variaunt, he abit nowhere. (VIII. 1172-75)

Too weak to seek physical vengeance against such duplicity and this is appropriate in the Christian context the Yeoman will attempt to withdraw one more time.

All to symple is my tonge to pronounoe,

As ministre of my wit, the doublenesse

Of this chanoun, roote of alle cursedness

He semed freendly to hem that knewe hym noght,

But he was feendly both in werk and thoght,

It weerieth me to telle of his falsnesse ... (VIII. 1299-1304)

Thus, as the *Prologue* and *Tale* progress, the Yeoman moves from fortunate separation and free self-revelation to reluctant narration. The planned retelling of his sinful craft has worn down the narrator. He wants out. He wants to be done with it. His past is too strong a claim on his present and he finds it impossible, by virtue of his fate and by virtue of the emotional attachment he expresses in the first part of his *Tale*, to escape the consequences of sin.

Having lived by the con, the Yeoman is now required to suffer by the con. Put another way, sin is its own punishment. From what the pilgrims know, the Yeoman has spent much of his life in the service of the false and of alchemy. Even his visage has been altered by this work until "wher my colour was bothe fressh and reed, / Now is it wan and of a leden hewe.... And of my swynk yet blered is myn ye" (VIII.727-30). But more than his appearance has changed. Although he has been presented with the moment

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of grace when the Canon departs and he is able to confess his former wrongdoings, he has become enamored of the sins he would like to renounce and despise. As a consequence, he suffers them fully. They drain him, tire him, weary him, and prevent him from achieving the kind of complete contrition which is essential to the actions of "penitence." He is not a condemned man but merely the average sinner who confesses freely but who in his heart is unwilling to renounce completely his own "secree of secrees." Having spent years appealing to the lesser good in other men and

inculcating in them a love of something they will never be able to possess, he now finds that his own "con" has possessed him. Almost in proportion to the degree to which it attracts the Yeoman, it wearies and drains him. In this sense, he is punished by his own desires and made to endure the rigors of sin. The effect of sin, we learn from the Yeoman, is to change him, to alter his desires until the actions of grace in "Penitence" require that he root out the cause of "alle cursednesse."

This reading of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* has implications for other tales in the Canterbury collection. Because it is united physically with the *Second Nun's Prologue* and *Tale* in Fragment VIII, a reading of the Yeoman's psychological and spiritual state produces some fairly close ties with the Second Nun's injunction to seek cut and perform the works of "fiethful bisynesse" (VIII.23), and with the grounds and actions of conversions in her *Tale*. Both the Yeoman and the Second Nun are concerned with the consequences of "bisynesse." For the Nun, the source of all evil lies in "ydelnesse" (VIII.2), which should be avoided at all costs.

... by hire contrarie hire oppresse,

That is to seyn, by leveful bisynesse,

Wel oghten we to doon al oure entente,

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Lest that the feend thurgh ydelnesse us hente. (VIII. 4-7)

While it would be convenient to conjecture that "ydelnesse" here puns on "idolness" or idolatry and thus connects the *Second Nun's Tale* to the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* by way of man's idolatrous love of gold, the *Tale* forges another, more fundamental connection. The *Second Nun's Prologue* and *Tale* are both concerned with "leveful bisynesse," that is to say, with the prudently conceived and carried out actions of the faith-filled will, i.e., with the best possible actions of the Christian in a tempting world. Thus, the *Second Nun's Tale* presents a "moment" of full and appropriate action. The characters in the *Tale* know precisely when and how to act. Immediate obedience to good counsel faithful busy-ness is appropriately rewarded. Valerian is not "right anon" struck down by Cecile's angel (VIII. 148 ff.) because he acts quickly and submits himself to Cecile's counsel. Again, his conversion to the faith is immediate and fruitful because "he anon, withouten tariynge, / Dide his message," confessed his mission to Urban, and saw the vision of "An oold man, clad in white clothese cleere, / That hadde a book with lettre of gold in honde" (VII. 187 ff., 201-2). Time after time, this is the pattern. Immediate action informed by faith results in conversion, good fortune, and finally the reward of the "rose reed" "palm of martirdom."

In contrast to these proper concerns of "faithful bisynesse" stand the kinds of "bisyness" found in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. Here all the actions and incantations, all the "leveful bisynesse," produce no results or, rather, results which only aggravate. Working with fellow practitioners of the dark science,

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the Canon's crucible invariable "tobreketh, and farewel, al is go!" (VIII.907). Working a con on his local targets, the Canon's schemes are ultimately foiled, and he winds up so poor that he can barely clothe himself. As Harry Bailey says,

... "*Benedicitee!*"

This thyng is wonder merveillous to me,

Syn that thy lord is of so heigh prudence,

By cause of which men sholde hym reverence.

That of his worshipe reffeth he so lite.

His overslope nys nat worth a myte,

As in effect, to hym so moot I go!" (VIII. 628-34)

For all their "business," the Canon and his Yeoman fail, because they have chosen the wrong kind of action, an action based on the methods of the con. In the *Second Nun's Tale's* conversion, the turning away from an old life to a new and better one results first from an act of belief. Valerian accepts what Cecile tells him and acts on it by going to Urban. Tiburce rejects the worldly opinion of Urban, and he too acts by going to and submitting himself to the spiritual leader's actions. In each case, conversion results from Cecile's "grete light" (100), her good counsel, and the immediate, active obedience of her catechumens. Belief then follows the admonitions of good counsel and the newly converted quickly engage in the urgent business of the faith. The *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* inverts this order. Although Valerian sees no miracle until he has praised "chaast counsel" (191) and demonstrated his contrition, the foolish priest of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* first abandons the teachings of his faith, including the Pardoner's admonition, then "sees" the phony alchemical miracle (the falseness of which wearies even the *Tale's* teller), and then

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benefits from the false "counsel" of the Canon. Thus it is that the conversions of the *Second Nun's Tale* are genuine while the turnings of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* mere suspicious cons. Valerian, Tiburce, and the foolish cleric all want proof to establish the grounds of their faith. But only Cecile replaces these human demands with a treasure stored elsewhere. She alone demands belief as a condition of proof. The Canon, in contrast, feeds the rapacious desire for proof with spurious evidence until the demands for just counsel and faithful belief have been swallowed up by the victim's growing avarice. The Canon and his Yeoman make use of the psychology of conversion until the former finds that he can "turn away" no

longer and leaves the Canterbury pilgrims rather than be exposed to the examinations of conscience invoked by tale-telling and the latter has had his ability to convert to a more proper relationship between faith and actions, counsel and "bisynesse" crippled by seven years with his Canon.

Within Fragment VIII, this analysis helps the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* stand as something more than roadside drama, Chaucer's revenge against false Canons, and/or a strange journey into the irrelevant world of alchemy. As a tale of conversion, the exercise of a "con" and "bisynesse," it fits in naturally with the *Second Nun's Prologue* and *Tale* as another perspective on the demands of "Penitence" and conversion. Outside Fragment VIII, this reading of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* sheds light on the Yeoman and his relationship to the tellers of other tales on their way to the closing admonitions of the Parson. Although slightly outside the scope of this kind of inquiry, it seems worthwhile to look at one example of the

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way the notions which inform the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* may be active in other tales as well.

Almost inevitable is a comparison between the Yeoman and the flaxen-haired Pardoner. Both characters make their livelihood one successfully, the other not by duping unwitting gulls. Both are con-men and professional storytellers. But the differences between the two are important. The Pardoner's hypocrisy is baldfaced; he enjoys the ability to root out cupidity for his own benefit. He pursues neither authentic counsel nor genuine belief and seems remote from any contrition or even from the occasion of contrition which presents itself to the Yeoman. The Canon's Yeoman, on the other hand, ultimately takes no joy, finds no refreshment, in his evil; he is compelled to pursue it, confess it, be trapped in it, even as he says it "werrieth me to telle" (VIII, 1. 1304). As professional storyteller, the Pardoner plays on his audience's knowledge that the love of money is the root of all evil. He cajoles, improvises, threatens, and cons until he reaps his monetary rewards. The Yeoman, on the other hand, plays *to* his audience's desire for virtually unlimited wealth and comfort. He brags, demonstrates, lies, and fools his "marks" until he too is satisfied. One apparently preaches against the love of money, the other ostensibly relies on it; but each character is trapped by *cupiditas* as surely as if he had been his own victim.

At the level of their relationships to their own tales, a more subtle and more difficult distinction separates the Pardoner from the Yeoman. Put one way, it could be said that the *Pardoner's Tale* is the telling of its teller, i.e., that the *Tale* is fashioned by and under the complete control of its teller. He has designed it to earn himself a comfortable

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living; and this is precisely what it does. This quality of perfect rhetorical mastery is, I think, part of what aggravates Harry Bailey at the close of the *Tale*. He knows that he has been trapped by the Pardoner's carefully constructed double bind, and he can see no rational grounds for escape, so he responds irrationally with what has to be the most violent display of the bawdy in Chaucer. The Yeoman, however, cannot quite manage his *Tale* as does the Pardoner. His is not quite the same position of strength. Put another way, it could be said that the Yeoman is the teller of his telling, i.e., the material of his *Tale* is not entirely under his control. Protestations that he knows too little of alchemy to tell his listeners much only result in lines and lines of alchemical wizardry which seem to hold as much power over the teller as over his listeners. This is not rhetorical mastery over material, but, as described earlier, the literal wrestling of his conscience with the effects of seven years' service to sin. This may also mark the possibility that the Yeoman is literally and figuratively closer to the *Parson's Tale* than the Pardoner is. As the Yeoman recites his tale, the reader watches him wrestle with his attachment to alchemical sins; as he watches the Pardoner practice his finely honed skill, he sees no such struggle. The one is engaged with his story and with false as well as good counsel. The other seems, as yet, incapable of using his own good counsel for anything more than bait.

Having turned attention to the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* itself first, then to its Fragment as a whole, and finally to the possibility for interpretation in *Tales* outside the Fragment, it becomes appropriate to ask just why Chaucer the poet chose to place this particular tale in the hands of this character at a point so near the

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Parson's close and the author's retraction. Something more than the lessons of good counsel are being put forward in the closing stages of the *Canterbury Tales*, and the careful reader feels this as he moves from the *Second Nun's Prologue* to the retraction. A sense of heightened seriousness and pervasive melancholy makes itself felt in almost the same way that the impending loss of Virgil hangs over the reader as he approaches the moment when Dante must say,

Ma Virgilio n'ave lasciati scemi

di se, Virgilio dolcissimo patre,

Virgilio a cui per mia salute die'mi;

ne quantunque perdeo l'antica matre,

valse a le guance nette di rugiada

che, lagrimando, non tornasser atre. (Singleton, XXX. 49-54)

The *Canterbury Tales* are moving towards this moment too; and just as Dante must give up his poet-guide and experience *Paradiso* without Virgil, Chaucer the poet will soon set aside his poetry with the twofold injunction of the later tales. He will first let his voice slip through in the closing lines of the *Manciple's Tale*.

Thyng that is seyð is seyð, and forþ it gooth,

Though hym repente, or be hym nevere so looth.

He is his thral to whom that he hath sayd

A tale of which he is now yvele apayd.

My sone, be war, and be noon auctour newe

Of tidynges, wheither they been false or trewe,

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Whereso thou come, amonges hye or lowe,

Kepe wel thy tonge and thenk upon the crowe. (IX. 355-63)

Admonishing himself and would-be poets to silence, he will next use the *Parson's Tale* and retraction to place all man's labor poetry included in its proper place, renouncing even "the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne" (X.1080). He hopes instead that,

This blisful regne may men purchace by poverte espritueel, and the glorie by lowenesse, the plentee of joye by hunger and thirst, and the reste by travaille, and the lyf by deeth and mortificacion of synne. (x. 1080)

Renouncing the reign of this world and embracing "Penitence" as the best of all worldly counsel, Chaucer, I take it, bows out of the *Canterbury Tales*.

But before the poet can graciously absent himself from the tales of his telling, he will most likely leave his readers with something more than the gruff dismissal of the *Manciple's Tale* or the prudent exhortations of the Parson. This is what transpires in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. More than a few critics have noted the abrupt shift in voice and the subtle Christian rationalizing at the close of the Yeoman's story. In response to this, it is, I believe, proper to hear the voice of Chaucer the poet sounding in the Yeoman's words. And there can be no better moment or character for the poet to choose to "put on." Poet and alchemist are very closely related. Both attempt to make something refined and fair out of the rather routine dross of human experience. Both are something of con

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artists who have fallen in love with their work and can be parted from it only unwillingly and perhaps by outside intervention. Both feel compelled to do what they do, not out of love of wealth, but out of an attachment to their work that nearly amounts to an act of faith.

Poetry becomes the philosopher's stone of the poet; it is the thing against which he measures all human experience. But its wisdom is not complete, has been obscured by the ancient philosophers, lest its fullness be discovered and prove the misdirection and undoing of many men. Thus Chaucer retreats from the pursuit of poetry, chastened like the Yeoman, telling his readers:

Thanne conclude I thus, sith that God of hevene

Ne wil nat that the philosophres nevene

How that a man shal comne unto this stoon,

I rede, as for the best, lete it goon.

For whoso maketh God his adversarie,

As for to werken any thyng in contrarie

Of his wil, certes, never shal he thryve ...(VIII. 1472-78)

The attachment is still strong and pleasing this is not yet the stern "kepe wel thy tonge" of the *Manciple's Tale* but the time of its passing has come.

It is fair to note that the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is a genuinely more pivotal story than generally recognized. It is closely bound to all of Fragment VIII by the terms of faith and understanding in the exercise of good counsel. It is linked to other tales not immediately its neighbors by the way in which it practices the artistry of the con. And it is linked to the artistic whole of the Canterbury stories by the way in which the figure of the

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con artist is made to stand for the poet. It is, finally, a moment in the *Tales* when our experience and the poet's are allowed to cross for a moment and become one.

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