Orality and the Satiric Tradition in *The Pardoner's Tale*

Luis Alberto Lázaro
Universidad de Alcalá de Henares

One might reasonably suppose that Geoffrey Chaucer, being a court poet in the final rounds of the Medieval Period, was a representative of a literate class of writers. It is a well-known fact that he knew how to read and write,[1] and he was also, beyond doubt, familiar with the literary tradition of his age; he had even translated some French poems and was well acquainted with Italian and classical writers's works. Therefore, it is logical to assume that Chaucer was intellectually detached from the pure, mainstream oral style, stranger to the orally composed and orally transmitted literature. Critics have sometimes regarded his poetry as a peculiar combination of orality and literacy,[2] reflecting the culture of his society in a period in which the oral tradition was still thriving, although writing was slowly transforming into an artifice of instruction and entertainment; that is to say, akin to an age in which orality was giving way to textuality. The main aim of this paper is to emphasise the characteristics of orality that can be found in Chaucer's written work, establishing a connection between these remains of an oral culture present in his literary output and the satiric tradition of the Middle Ages.

When we consider Chaucer's use of the oral satiric tradition, we are dealing with two vague terms -orality and satire- which can be understood in distinct manners, liable to create some confusion. To avoid this, I will briefly elaborate on the meaning of these two concepts in view of how they are used in this paper. As far as orality is concerned, several scholars have studied the oral tradition in literature from different perspectives, and have even distinguished various levels or degrees of orality.[3] Here I will resort to a broad interpretation of the term and refer to all those literary works which are orally produced, orally transmitted, or both. Similarly, it is never easy to pinpoint a precise definition of *satire*. On the one hand, it has a specific and technical meaning which alludes to a kind of literature with distinctive formal characteristics (usually called *classical satire* or *formal verse satire*); it includes the poetic satire synthesised by Horace, Juvenal and a number of British poets from the Renaissance and neo-Classical periods. But, on the

other hand, the word *satire* might have a more general meaning which reflects a mocking spirit or tone, a quality of art that manifests itself in any form of writing (be it a poem, a play, a novel), and whose intention is to criticise the foolishness or wickedness of a society or its members. This alternative general meaning is the one I will employ here.[4]

Even though the meaning of the terms *orality* and *satire* have been briefly discussed in the context of this paper, there still remains a third difficulty that arises from the particular conditions of the period we are dealing with: the Middle Ages. It is not easy to discern exactly what types of satirical writings existed in Britain over that period of time. Since they were usually profane and oral, most of them are lost and only some examples remain preserved to this day in a few manuscripts. But, one can be almost certain that satiric performances illuminated the dining halls of lords and animated the marketplaces of common stock, as Richard M. Wilson confirms in his book entitled *The Lost Literature of Medieval England*. Fortunately, not everything was lost. A variety of satirical forms from the oral tradition have survived; thus, we sometimes find satiric intention in existing proverbs, goliardic poems, sirventes, fables, fabliaux, sermons, popular songs, ballads, flytings, mystery plays, farces, amusing anecdotes, and interludes.[5]

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* clearly illustrates many features of this oral satiric tradition. To begin with, it must be remembered that it was usually delivered orally; Chaucer himself recited his lines in front of a courtly audience, entertaining his listeners with biting stories about unscrupulous clergy or dissolute women. In addition to that, it is a collection of tales narrated by different pilgrims making their way to Canterbury. This means that for each tale, there is a particular narrator and a cheerful, actively participating audience, two basic elements of oral literature. Moreover, this book can be considered as an anthology of different literary genres characteristic of the Middle Ages, in which various forms of satirical compositions from the oral tradition occupy a prominent site: the mock-epic fable of Chanticleer and the fox in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, the fabliau-type stories, or the satirical burlesque of Chaucer's own tale about Sir Thopas. It would be quite a task to analyse all these tales here; therefore, to illustrate my point, I will limit myself to a brief discussion of *The Pardoner's Tale*, a masterpiece of social satire on hypocrite pardoners and their own sinful conduct stigmatised by corruption.

The first thing that attracts attention is that Chaucer puts great emphasis on oral performance in this tale. Three different audiences are represented. As I have mentioned before, Chaucer the poet recites his tale about the Pardoner

in front of his courtly audience. But at the same time, the poem is about a Pardoner who is performing in front of the pilgrims gathered in a tavern. Thus, the courtly audience has the privilege of listening to Chaucer playing the role of a Pardoner who interacts with a mixed crowd. He is telling them a story that he knows by heart, "For I Kan al by rote that I telle" (332), the common technique that preserves stories in the oral culture. As if the Pardoner were an actor, the pilgrims see him actively performing, revealing his fraudulent activities and boasting about his skill in preaching. Soon, in the Pardoner's Prologue, this character gives his fellow pilgrims a demonstration of his eloquent style and makes us believe that he is addressing another audience, his congregations in the churches he frequents. Consequently, there are three levels of oral performance here, in other words, a speech within a speech within a speech.

What Chaucer is actually accomplishing here with this technique of oral self-revelation is to permit the character to expose himself. Instead of criticising him directly, Chaucer creates a situation-stage so the villain, in the atmosphere of holy intentions, is practically compelled to confess his dishonesty. Hearing the truth pronounced by the lips of one of the pardoners is an effective method, sublime and effusive that steers the audience into believing in rampant curruption within the Church. This was a convention of oral satire in the Middle Ages, a standard which would continue to be used beyond that period, for example, in those soliloquies of Elizabethan plays in which the villain edges to the extreme of the stage to unmask or to expose himself to his audience.

If this kind of oral satiric performance is evident in the Pardoner's Prologue, a different type of oral satire can be encountered in the last scene, where the Pardoner intends to cash in on the audience's ingenuity and sell them his pardons and relics. Surprisingly, the Pardoner tries to cheat those who have just digested his accounts of dishonest practices. Furthermore, he wants the Host to be the first to dish out the money. The Host bluntly refuses and in a rough, laced-with-insults manner, he defies the Pardoner. His tirade is comic and full of obscene language; the Host, for instance, swears that he would rather have the Pardoner's testicles in his hands than relics (951-3). The whole scene is part of the sharp, keen criticism Chaucer wants to transmit, since people have already learnt the lesson and they know how to deal with an unscrupulous impostor. This is not the only linking passage in the book that contains a verbal bout between two pilgrims.[6] These passages remind us of the medieval flyting, a cursing match or competition in verse between two poets who hurl abuse at each other at country fairs or festivals alike. We know that

Scottish poets of the late Middle Ages were particularly fond of the form,[7] but analogous poetic compositions can be found in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, in the Provençal *tenson*, or in the Spanish *coplas de picadillo* by Juanito Valderrama and Dolores Abril, or Pepe Blanco and Carmen Morell. Anyway, "Vulgar abuse was probably part of a medieval jester's and minstrel's courtly repertoire" (Brewer, *English Gothic Literature* 139).

Verbal tournaments are also an ingredient of the first forms of dramatic plots: the mysteries. In some plays of the cycle of York there are funny satirical dialogues which show the common medieval antifeminist attitudes. A famous flyting of this kind can be found in the play concerning Noah, *Processus Noe Cum Filiis*,[8] with the comic dialogue between Noah and his wife who refuses to step into the arc, putting at peril the future of the whole human species. Another example of the same can be found in *Secunda Pastorum*[9] *(The Second Shepherds' Pageant)* where we witness a comic exchange between Mak, the thief, and his wife Gyll. Whatever the case might be, flytings or satirical dialogues in a mystery play, they are both forms of medieval oral entertainment which resemble the comic linking passages in *The Canterbury Tales*.

Another basic form of oral entertainment is the jest or an amusing often scornful anecdote, which frequently serves a dogmatic purpose. *The Pardoner's Tale* abounds in jokes. From the very beginning, the Pardoner appears as a humorous person who has a reputation for funny stories. That is why the Host, after having heard the Physician's sad tale about the poor Virginia, implores the Pardoner to tell a more cheerful story or some jokes without delay: "Telle us som myrthe or japes right anon" (319). The Pardoner agrees to do this with glee, but not without ransom, for he tows in a drink. This quaintly sets a mood of bawdy atmosphere, a tavern-like performance, where mores and norms are relaxed by the spell of an entertaining travelling comic charlatan - a trickster who will surely make the pilgrims laugh. Some of his best jokes are included in his sermon, when he describes a glutton's throat as if it were a lavatory (526-8), or talks about the human stomach filled up with excrement and dirt, sending forth foul smells and sounds from either end: "O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod, / Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun! / At either ende of thee foul is the soun" (534-6). There is also the philosophical pun when he describes the arts of cookery (538-40), the description of the drunkard whose breath stinks and whose snoring sounded of something like "Sampsoun, Sampsoun!" (554), and the joke about the wine-merchants who adulterate strong expensive wine by mixing it with cheaper ones (562-72). With these jokes the Pardoner tries to sneer at greed, denounce debauchery, or

expose dishonesty; but, in fact, they backfire on him because he practises the very same vices he preaches against.

These jokes are part of his demonstration sermon, where the Pardoner exhibits his exuberant eloquence, his *ars praedicandi*. Medieval sermons, even though survived in written form, are related to the spoken word, because they were conceived for oral performance. The Pardoner's sermon is a wonderful parody of medieval oratory, with the frequent use of *alas*, the grandiose *exampla* of historical figures (Lot, Herod, Adam, Attila), and the learned references to biblical and classical authorship. Other characteristic ingredients of the medieval sermon are also present:

- The opening theme of the sermon, his famous maxim "Radix malorum est Cupiditas" (334).
- The *examplum* which illustrates the moral character of the sermon (the old story of the three rioters from Flanders, which is part of the European and Oriental oral tradition).
- The peroration or application of the *examplum* to the lives and conduct of the people: "Now, goode men, God foryeve yow youre trespas, / And ware yow fro the synne of avarice!" (904-5).
- The concluding formula: "And Jhesu Crist, that is oure soules leche, / So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve, / For that is best; I wol yow nat deceyve" (916-918).

Sabine Volk-Birke demonstrates how the peculiarities of sermons reverberated in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*. She discusses the structure of the sermon, its illustrative narratives, its typical syntactic patterns (parallel constructions, comparisons, if-clauses), and rhetorical figures (repetition, asyndeton, polysindeton, comparisons, contrasts).

One of the features of sermons, found in many other forms of oral performances is the use of formulas and set phrases which help the speaker establish a rapport with the audience, get them involved, or seek their sympathy. The Pardoner follows these rhetorical rules to the utmost and opens his speech while addressing his first audience - the pilgrims - with the phrase: "Lordynges, . . ." (329); and, then, as he addresses his second audience - the congregation in a church - with: "Goode men . . . taak of my wordes keep" (352). Likewise, on different occasions he asks his audience to be quiet and listen to him with expressions such as: "But herkneth, lordynges . . ." (454), or "Now hoold youre pees! my tale I wol bigynne" (462). All these formulas are usually intertwined with some remnants of colloquial language. If the speakers needed their lay audiences to comprehend, they resorted to the simple, straightforward language and reduced their speech to its bare

essentials. This conversational style dominates the Prologue in which the Pardoner speaks to the other pilgrims and the folks in the church.[10] However, when the occasion calls for it, he can revert to exuberance in style and use of much more elaborate rhetoric, as was mentioned above, the "hauteyn speche" (330) he refers to at the beginning of his performance.

In his book *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong lists other characteristics which clearly distinguish oral expression from written language; and it is interesting to note how Chaucer's satire employs all these oral features. Ong states, for example, that oral expression is additive, whereas, the written is subordinative, and he alludes to the first chapter of Genesis, with its sequence of coordinating conjunctions: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was void . . . and darkness . . . and the Spirit of God . . ." etc. If we were to analyse the first lines of the *Pardoner's Prologue*, we would notice that there is very little grammatical subordination, since most of the sentences are coordinated with the conjunction *and*. In fact, there are nine *ands* in the first eighteen lines; that is to say, there is one *and* every two lines. This is usually combined with the constant use of series, lists or additions, like: "Bulles of popes and of cardynales, / Of patriarkes and bishopes I shewe" (342-3) or "If that this boon be wasshe in any welle, / If cow, or calf, or sheep, or oxe swelle . . ." (353-4). The latter quotation also shows another characteristic of oral language observed by Ong: repetitions with variation. Here we have the repetition of the if-clause.[11]

These oral devices and other characteristics of ordinary speech that could also include such devices as the hyperbole, the kinetic rather than mimetic imagery, the sententious style, etc., make up the core of *The Pardoner's Tale*. All this demonstrates that Chaucer's poetry is, to a large extent, the creation and product of an oral culture. Though he is acquainted with the culture of highly educated spheres, fortunately, he is also very well versed and no stranger to the oral tradition. And I mean "fortunately" because it is this oral tradition that makes his poetry far more lively, far more incisive, and overly effective.

And it is no coincidence that these oral strategies are so masterfully invoked in Chaucer's satirical writings, with *The Pardoner's Tale* as the supreme expression of such. What Chaucer so artfully does here is to follow the medieval satiric tradition, which mainly took up an oral form. The lack of written records containing satirical compositions ranging from this period might be partly a consequence of the destruction that some manuscripts suffered, but it is mainly due to the "status quo" of the period. A medieval English satire is generally associated with popular, non-canonical literature

which originates among illiterate, or only partly literate people, hence incapable of deciphering the written word. It is basically part of the repertoire of minstrels and troubadours who travel from town to town, reciting or singing compositions that needed not to be written but remembered. These medieval English satirists did not aspire to imitate the refinement and elegance of classical texture, tailored by such masters as Lucilius, Horace, or Juvenal.[12] On the contrary, they preferred a more personal invective, a ribaldly comic narrative, a malicious parody, a spicy joke, or a popular song, mostly to criticise the corruption in the church and the scandalous conduct of licentious women. It was fortunate that Chaucer, literate and erudite, has chosen these oral satirical forms to be the yoke of his literary output, and has preserved them on paper for centuries.

NOTES

[1] As Barry Sanders says: "Miniatures show him with a pen hanging from his gown" (114).

[2] Derek Brewer speaks of an "unusual blend of orality and literacy" (85), and Barry Sanders also sees in *The Canterbury Tales* an interplay between orality and literacy, though he puts the stress on the literate side of the coin.

[3] Among the most recent representative studies in this field one could mention those by Jan Vansina, Melville Jacobs, Ruth Finnegan, Paul Zumthor, Walter Ong, and John Miles Foley.

[4] There are numerous studies on the nature of the satire. To cite some of the most renowned ones in the English-speaking world we could mention those by Robert C. Elliott, Gilbert Highet, Alvin B. Kernan, Arthur Pollard, Hugh Walker, or David Worcester.

[5] For a detailed description of some of these satiric forms see also Piero Boitani's *English Medieval Narrative in the 13th and 14th Centuries* and Patricia Shaw's "Elementos humorísticos en la literatura medieval inglesa, 800-1400."

[6] See, for instance, the rows between the Miller and the Reeve, or the Friar and the Summoner.

[7] Examples of true flytings are *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie* or *Flyting betwixt Montgomerie and Polwart*.

[8] A version by the Master of Wakefield is edited by A. C. Cawley (14-28).

[9] See A. C. Cawley's edition (43-63).

[10] See, for example, the expression "Thus spitte I out my venym" (421).

[11] For further details about these echoes and repetitions in oral poetry see Menendez Pidal's *Romancero hispánico* (1: 58-62), Paul Zumbor's *Introducción a la poesía oral*, and Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Poetry in Africa* (265-266).

[12] It is true that we have some samples of a much more formal or sophisticated satire of classical inspiration written in monasteries: John de Hauteville, for instance, wrote an allegorical poem in Latin hexameters entitled *Architrenius* (c. 1184), where he criticises the vices and corruptions of his times; and also at the end of the twelfth century a Benedictine monk from Canterbury called Nigel Wireker wrote another allegorical work, *Speculum Stultorum*, which attacks ambitious monks and religious orders.

WORKS CITED

Boitani, Piero. *English Medieval Narrative in the 13th and 14th Centuries*. Trans. Joan Krakover Hall. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1982.

Brewer, Derek. *English Gothic Literature*. London: Macmillan, 1983.
————. "Orality and Literacy in Chaucer." *Mundichkeit und Schriftlichkeit im englischen Mittelalter*. Eds. Willi Erzgraber and Sabine Volk. Tubingen: Narr, 1988. 85-119.
Cawley, A. C., ed. *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle*. Manchester: Manchester U P, 1958.
Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. Ed. F. N: Robinson. 1933. 2nd ed. London: Oxford U P, 1957.
Elliott, Robert C. *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U P, 1960.
Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Poetry in Africa*. 1970. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford U P, 1976.
————. *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1977.
Foley, John Miles. *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology*. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1988.
Highet, Gilbert. *The Anatomy of Satire*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U P, 1962.
Jacobs, Melville. *The Content and Style of an Oral Literature*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971.
Kernan, Alvin B. *The Plot of Satire*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale U P, 1965.
Menendez Pidal, Ramón. *Romancero hispánico*. 1953. 2nd ed. 2 vols. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe. 1968.
Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. Londres: Methuen, 1982.
Pollard, Arthur. *Satire*. Londres: Methuen, 1970.
Sanders, Barry. "Lie It as It Plays: Chaucer Becomes an Author." *Literacy and Orality*. Ed. David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1991. 111-128.
Shaw, Patricia. "Elementos humorísticos en la literatura medieval inglesa, 800-1400." *Estudios literarios ingleses: Edad Media*. Ed. Fernando Galván. Madrid: Cátedra, 1985. 85-106.
Vansina, Jan. *La tradición oral*. Trans. Miguel María Llongeras. 1967. 2nd ed. Barcelona: Editorial Labor, 1968.
Volk-Birke, Sabine. "Literacy and Orality in Late 14th-century Vernacular Sermons and in Chaucer." *Anglistentag 1988*. Eds. Heinz-Joachim Müllenbrock and Renate Noll-Wiemann. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1989. 209-219.
Walker, Hugh. *English Satire and Satirists*. London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1925.
Wilson, Richard M. *The Lost Literature of Medieval England*. 1952. 2nd ed. London: Methuen, 1970.
Worcester, David. *The Art of Satire*. 1940. New York: Russell and Russell, 1960.
Zumthor, Paul. *Introducción a la poesía oral*. Trans. Concepción García-Lomas. Madrid: Taurus Humanidades, 1991.