

To the Editor:

Melvin Storm recognizes in a note (18) to his article the difficulty of accepting the Pardoner "as a literal threat to the pilgrimage" for those "who see the Pardoner's invitation as purely jocular." At the same time, he feels, their view need not preclude seeing the Pardoner as a "symbolic" threat. Of course literal and symbolic levels will necessarily reinforce each other, especially for an audience nurtured on biblical allegory. A careful reading of the Pardoner's invitation shows that the Pardoner, far from representing himself as a "surrogate shrine" (813), interested in making an alestake the terminus of the journey (814), is calling the pilgrims, however seriously or jocularly, to repentance and to recognition of their journey in spiritual terms. The quaestor's bag and Becket's shrine are not alternatives in the Pardoner's invitation; they enhance each other. For the pilgrims to kneel at every milestone, for them to be aware of their sinful proclivities and of the transience of life as they ride to the shrine and back to London, would not divert them from the martyr; it would strengthen his influence in their lives. Only in the emphasis on money does the Pardoner's invitation resemble his customary preaching.

The distinction between the Pardoner's ordinary preaching and his invitation to the pilgrims reestablishes the distinction he had made in the beginning. He had described his preaching for the pilgrims with a cynical sophistication that included the audience. His tone to the peasants in church had had an entirely different ring. Throughout the Prologue the two voices remain distinct. But the tale absorbs the complete talent of the man. No interruption reminds us that this is an example of his preaching. Only at the end, in the two pitches, the first an appeal to the peasant audience that the Pardoner's histrionics have created, the second the invitation to his real audience of pilgrims, does the distinction reestablish itself. Storm's comments on the Pardoner's cupidity in directing penitents away from God and on his physical and spiritual sterility present important insights into the Pardoner's nature. But Storm's association of the invitation with the Pardoner's habitual practices on a very different audience goes not only against the language of the invitation but also against the context of his previous remarks to the pilgrims. This context, the Pardoner's boasting of his success as a religious huckster, makes it difficult to see the invitation as anything but parody. The succession of outrageous projections, the pilgrims kneeling before the Pardoner at every milestone, a pilgrim breaking his neck and being absolved by the Pardoner as the

spirit leaves his body, reaches its climax in the singling out of the Host, "For he is moost envoluped in synne." Even if we take the invitation as seriously intended, it still has none of the incitements to spurious repentance that the Pardoner tells us he customarily deals in.

The misreading of the Pardoner's invitation extends to the role assigned the Host at what Storm terms "the turning point in Chaucer's pilgrimage narrative" (815). The Host did indeed in the General Prologue win the assent of the pilgrims to his proposal. But though he calls himself their "guide" (line 804), he does not have spiritual leadership in mind. Rather he initiates the storytelling "to shorte with oure weye"; he uses the words "myrthe," "pleye," "disport," "comfort" to characterize the leadership he will provide; he gets into a quarrel with the Parson over his inordinate swearing. In his encounter with the Pardoner, what is threatened is not the journey but the fellowship of the pilgrims. The Knight recognizes the nature of the problem in the words he uses to restore order (quoted by Storm): "As we diden, lat us laughe and pleye" (line 967). The Pardoner then does not seek to divert the pilgrims from their journey, nor does the Host's verbal assault on him contribute to the pilgrims' spiritual well-being.

CHARLES A. OWEN, JR.
University of Connecticut, Storrs

To the Editor:

I am writing to protest what seems to me a clear violation of the *PMLA* editorial policy, which "urges its contributors to be sensitive to the social implications of language and to seek wording free of discriminatory overtones." This lapse occurs in the essay by Melvin Storm in the October 1982 issue.

I am not a medievalist and am not qualified to assess the merits of Storm's ingenious argument. Although I continue to prefer Donald Howard's humane account of the Pardoner, I recognize that Storm's reading probably deserves airing. But his insensitive and offensive characterization of homosexuals does not.

Specifically, I object to his description of homosexuality as "perverse," to the sniggering tone of his comment that the Pardoner's "sexuality, to put it gently, is ambiguous" (812), to the blanket equation of sodomy with wastefulness and sterility, as in the statement, "Not only is he himself sterile, he is also the barren ground on which others waste their seed" (813), and so on.

Storm never distinguishes between his views and

what he thinks are Chaucer's. Hence the essay apparently endorses without reservation the noxious and antiquated attitudes that he attributes to Chaucer. This procedure is exactly equivalent to discussing the anti-Semitism in the Prioress' Tale or *The Merchant of Venice* without distinguishing the views of Chaucer or Shakespeare from those of the critic. I doubt seriously that *PMLA* would publish an essay that seemed to endorse the anti-Semitic views common in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Nor is it likely that *PMLA* would publish an article that seemed to advocate the misogyny that frequently pervades early literature. Neither should it publish essays that endorse the homophobic superstitions of earlier ages.

I want to make it clear that my quarrel is not with Storm's interpretation of the Pardoner but with *PMLA* for neglecting to enforce an editorial policy designed to ensure professional decorum. When this policy was announced in the May 1981 issue of *PMLA*, in the Editor's Column, it was described as "both strong, in that even innuendoes of meaning are to be discouraged, and inclusive." The policy was intended to prohibit sexist language, ethnic slurs, and demeaning references to race, creed, sexual preference, age, and physical disability. Unfortunately, the policy does not seem to be enforced very well.

CLAUDE J. SUMMERS

University of Michigan, Dearborn

Reply:

Scholars have long debated whether, as William Hyde argues, the Pardoner's self-revelation in his Prologue renders him without hope of deceiving the pilgrims at the end of his sermon. If, in fact, it does so, it would seem as likely to preclude Hyde's interpretation of the Pardoner as "travelers' insurance" as it would to preclude my own reading. I, however, subscribe to the critical tradition that sees the Pardoner's self-revelation as a deliberate attempt to heighten the challenge he has set himself: if through the power of his preaching he can obliterate the impact of his earlier honesty, he can then revel all the more in his skill, having bested an audience far more challenging than his usual peasant congregations. Hyde suggests, as have Curry and others, that the Pardoner may be attempting to compensate a sexual embarrassment. If so, then the heightening of the challenge implicit in the self-revelatory Prologue becomes even more likely, giving the Pardoner the opportunity to achieve the ultimate in upmanship.

Charles Owen, like Hyde, is concerned with the Pardoner's invitation to the pilgrims to take pardon "at every miles ende," although he seems uncertain whether to interpret the Pardoner's offering as a salutary spiritual service or as an "outrageous projection" that resumes a joke initiated for a fully knowing and participating audience in the Pardoner's Prologue. Owen uses his second reading of the passage as support for arguing a distinction in tone between the "two pitches." I cannot agree, however, that the Pardoner changes his tone so completely after saying, "And lo, sires, thus I preche," nor can I agree that the pilgrims were not meant to be drawn into the position of congregation during the Pardoner's sermon. There is too much in the tale itself that seems calculated to touch the pilgrims specifically. For instance, the invitation only five lines earlier, "Cometh up, ye wyves, offreth of youre wolle!" is surely a sly reference to the Wife of Bath, always eager, we recall, to be first at the offering. But others have debated these points at length and it would be impractical to review the discussion here.

Nor does the Pardoner's "benediction" ("And Jhesu Crist, that is oure soules leche, / So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve, / For that is best; I wol yow nat deceyve") cancel the potential impact of his subsequent invitation to the pilgrims to receive his own pardons. I argue elsewhere in print that the Pardoner is here merely distinguishing between indulgence *a culpa* and indulgence *a poena*, the efficacy of the former (that dispensed by Christ) not to be construed as obviating the purported efficacy of his own.

With respect to Owen's comments on the role of the Host, of course the Host does not have spiritual leadership in mind when he accepts the role of guide and arbiter in the General Prologue, nor is it likely that he has such leadership uppermost (if at all) in mind when he responds to the Pardoner's invitation. The Host's words and actions are of importance here, not his comprehension. It is to Chaucer, rather than to Harry Bailly, that we look for awareness of the spiritual significance of the Host's function, as, in fact, I point out in my essay: "We may wonder whether he fully realizes the significance of what he faces and the importance of his reply. . . . [T]he violence and decisiveness of the Host's response may result more from Chaucer's view of the gravity of the situation than from any immediate stimulus the Host receives" (815).

I am delighted to be reminded by the letters of my colleagues that Chaucer's Pardoner, after so many centuries and so many pages of criticism, remains as capable as ever of inspiring response and sparking critical debate. It is less pleasing to learn