

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.

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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