The Proverb as Embedded Microgenre in Chaucer and *The Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf*

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Because current genre theory lays such heavy emphasis on fluid mixing among and within genres, this essay asks what might be learned by attending closely to a set of sharply delineated generic boundaries, those created when small but complete and recognizable genres ("microgenres") are embedded within longer genres, a nearly universal and yet under-theorized practice in medieval literature. Focusing on the proverb and drawing upon Bakhtin's spectacularly ambitious outline for a final major work, "The Problem of Speech Genres," the article uses examples from *The Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the anonymous Middle English *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf* to demonstrate that the proverb's brevity and its clearly defined, yet voice-permeable, boundaries enable a variety of important effects. Embedded in longer works, medieval proverbs act as generative miniature theories that transform the situations to which they are applied. They indicate courses of action, encapsulate worldviews, console and reconcile their recipients to the ways of this world, and mediate for fictional characters and for readers the overwhelming variety of lived experience.

KEYWORDS genre theory, proverb, Bakhtin, Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf*

The proverb as embedded microgenre

As though haunted by ancient and neoclassical doctrines of generic purity, contemporary genre theory lays great emphasis upon fluid mixing among and within literary kinds. Despite the diversity of opinion in other spheres, the contributors to a 2009 English Institute conference agree in their view of genre as "flexible, open-ended, and active"; "Genre today is most notable for its fluidity" (Warhol para. 5, 20). Discussion of medieval genres has taken the same direction: in an essay described not long ago as having "some claim to being the single most influential statement in this

field over the past three decades" (Hiatt 293), Hans Robert Jauss posited that "the so-called mixing of genres — which in the classical theory was the merely negative side-piece to the 'pure genres' — can be made into a methodologically productive category" ("Theory of Genres" 81). Jauss's rather tentative proposition gathers force in a more recent statement: "Mixing genres … may turn out to be the fundamental trait of Middle English literature," and thus in dealing with medieval works, we might "reconceptualize genre as a mode of mixing" (Hiatt 291).

Mixing is not, however, the most precise of terms when applied to literary texts, as Jauss's skeptical qualifier, "so-called," attests. With its connotations of blending, it suggests that generic combination results in internal boundaries that are blurred or obscured. For example, Alistair Fowler offers a culinary analogy for the way in which "generic mixture" stops short of complete amalgamation: "As sometimes in cookery, effort may go into blending ingredients in such a way that they remain partially indistinguishable" (191). Perhaps genre in medieval literature can be fruitfully re-conceptualized as "a mode of mixing," but not without a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of the many different ways in which medieval genres mix it up with one another. Few would now disagree that an emphasis on fluidity of generic categories represents a justified resistance to sterile exercises in taxonomy or that attention to the fluid mixing of genres within literary works has proved stimulating and productive. Given the weight of the current emphasis on mixing, fluidity, and open-endedness, however, it seems worthwhile to ask what close attention to distinct and clearly marked generic boundaries can contribute to our understanding of medieval genre.

The boundaries I propose to examine here are not the ever-elusive taxonomic lines between classes of texts, but rather the internal boundaries produced by the nearly universal yet under-examined practice in medieval works of incorporating smaller genres into larger ones. I draw upon a variety of theoretical models, first among them a late work by Mikhail Bakhtin, the great theorist of open-endedness and unfinalizability, in which, surprisingly enough, "clearly delimited" and even "absolute" generic boundaries play a central role. Much less influential than the famous genre essays in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin's "The Problem of Speech Genres" offers untapped resources for medievalists interested in the workings of genre.[1] An abstract for a dazzlingly ambitious but unrealized final project, "Speech Genres" argues powerfully that when a smaller ("primary") genre is incorporated into a longer and more complex work, the result is a change in speaking subject, and thus the boundaries around the smaller genre are not fluid, but "clearly delimited" and "real," marking "so to speak, an absolute beginning and an absolute end" (71). I hope in turn to show how these sharply defined boundaries contribute to a variety of important effects in medieval literature. They serve as generic frames, identifying the incorporated form and linking it to the performative tradition from which it arose. As virtual quotation marks, they draw attention to crucial changes in voice, and yet, despite their sharp definition, these internal boundary lines are also porous and voice-permeable. In the case of the proverb, the tiny but recognizable genre on which I will focus here, well-marked boundaries also call attention to the form's extraordinary compression and what Bakhtin calls its "finalized wholeness" as an utterance ("Speech Genres" in *SG* 76–77). The brevity and completeness of meaning compressed into proverbs

enable them to offer "a 'set' on the world" outside the text (Colie 115) — a miniature worldview — thereby making more manageable for authors and fictional characters the overwhelming variety of lived experience.

If *mixing* remains an overarching if somewhat imprecise term for all generic combination, we are free to seek a more suitable word for the incorporation of clearly delineated generic wholes into longer works. Some terms in current use share the disadvantages of *mixing* for our purposes, as when Wai Chee Dimock describes the "percolating," "streaming," and "migration" of one genre within or into another, images consistent with her vision of genre as a "fluid continuum" (para. 101, 102). Less original but better suited to present purposes is her reference to "embedded" features (para. 102), a metaphor borrowed from grammar (Frow 41–42; Fowler 179). A syntactically embedded phrase or clause keeps its separate formal integrity — it does not "blend" with the rest of the sentence — but it often transforms the meaning of the whole: "a single man *in possession of a good fortune* must be in want of a wife." The embeddable forms themselves I call *microgenres*, by which I mean recognizable verbal forms capable of circulating on their own and yet short enough to appear in their entirety (or very nearly so) within the compass of longer works.[2] A comprehensive treatment of the many microgenres that nestle within much longer medieval texts might include charms, curses, riddles, jokes, songs, elegies, epigraphs, orations, letters, and brief narrative anecdotes, but I limit my discussion here to the proverb,[3] drawing my examples from the poetry of Chaucer and from the anonymous prose *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf* (c. 1492), the Middle English version of a multiform medieval Latin work that deserves to be better known, and not only for its spectacular display of dueling proverbs.[4]

As is obvious from its name, a salient characteristic of the embedded microgenre is the miniature size that allows it to appear in its entirety in longer works. Although Bakhtin holds that genres can range in length "from the single-word rejoinder to a large novel" (*SG* 81–82), a single-word proverb seems unlikely, especially since proverbs are so often bipartite in structure (Dundes). In Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, however, Pandarus urges the lovesick Troilus to action with a proverb just two words long, "Unknowe, unkist" (1.809), a version for lovers of the still-current and structurally similar expression, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."[5] In two words, the proverb completes its reasoning, points to a course of action, and entices Troilus with the promise of a reward, Criseyde's kiss. Although it may seem a minor criterion, size often serves as a significant determinant of genre. Fowler points out that in cases such as the sonnet, "genre often determines length precisely" and thus "size counts as a critical factor from a generic point of view" (62). The Middle English expressions termed *proverbes* by their users, both historical and fictional, seem on average to have hovered somewhere around eight to twelve words in length.[6] This brevity is by no means incidental to the proverb's identity. As Rosalie Colie observes in her classic study of genre theory in the early modern period, an aphoristic form such as the proverb "sums up a mass of experience in one charged phrase"; it "compresses much experience into a very small space; *and by that very smallness* makes its wisdom so communicable" (33, 34; emphasis added). Its compact size and distinct framing confer upon the medieval proverb its ability to preserve its boundaries and its generic integrity as it infiltrates a large variety of longer medieval genres, from the private letters

of the Pastons and the Datini archive in Florence to the longest and most prestigious of literary works.

From brief letters to multi-volume tomes, medieval works quote copiously from authoritative sources, and anonymous proverb tradition represents just one among a number of quotable wisdom sources, including the biblical, patristic, and classical texts that circulated primarily in written form among the most highly literate. In addition to frequent quotation in literary works, excerpts from these various wisdom sources were also compiled into minimally framed or unframed collections or commonplace books. Sometimes the designations "literary work" and "proverb collection" shade into one another: despite their narrative frames, both Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* and *The Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf* quote so very profusely that they reach a point of near saturation and can usefully be regarded as proverb collections.[7] Medieval school-children learned to read and write by translating proverbs and other excerpts from wisdom sources to and from Latin, and among their first schoolbooks was a collection of metrical wisdom expressions, the *Distichs of Cato* (Orme; Duff and Duff). Thus, vernacularized quotations from the ancients, the Bible, and the church fathers were in wide oral and written circulation alongside untraceable popular expressions, and medieval authors make little distinction among these various wisdom sources. In Chaucer's usage *proverbe* applies equally to anonymously circulating popular expressions and to compact citations from learned texts: the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* cites a "proverbe" from the "Almageste" of Ptolemy, for example, (III.325–27) and, of course, biblical proverbs appear under the same generic term, as when the Wife cites "That ilke proverbe of Ecclesiate" (III.651). In *Melibee*, expressions such as "Seneca seith," "Caton seith," and "Salomon seith" alternate freely with "the proverb seith" and "men seyn."

As a result of these historical conditions, no taxonomic lines can reliably isolate the anonymous, widely circulating expressions we commonly associate with the modern word *proverb* from wisdom expressions quoted from biblical and other known written sources; our microgenre resists definition and classification as deftly as any genre many times its size. At the outset of his 1931 book, *The Proverb*, Archer Taylor notoriously stated that "an incommunicable quality" tells us whether a given expression is a proverb. Similarly, B. J. Whiting indexed hundreds of Middle English proverbs in a 1968 volume whose introduction states that his selection principles included "a sense of recognition, a pricking of the thumbs, which says that a statement is proverbial" (xiii-xiv). Both Taylor's "incommunicable" yet apparently recognizable quality and Whiting's pricking thumbs are, I think, anticipations of Jauss's "horizon of expectation": they acknowledge that the term *proverb* refers to a recognizable family of related expressions that, in Jauss's words, "cannot be deduced or defined, but only historically determined, delimited, and described" ("Theory of Genres" 80). Whiting cannot define the proverb; instead he delimits or indexes expressions identified within a stipulated chronological period ("before 1500"). Like Jauss, Taylor and Whiting assume that even in the absence of a logically rigorous definition that would distinguish the proverb from all other types of speech and writing, external and internal markers nevertheless alert audiences familiar with a particular tradition of proverb use that a proverb is being performed.

In Middle English works, textual markers such as "Men seyn" or "I have herd say" identify proverbs, distinguish them from the surrounding contexts, and affirm

their wide circulation among speakers and writers. In a particularly definitive act of framing, many Chaucerian speakers identify the microgenre in question: "Lat this proverbe a loore unto yow be," advises Pandarus (*Tr* 2.397); "Therfore I wol seye a proverbe," announces the narrator of *The House of Fame* (1.289); according to the Monk, "This proverbe is ful sooth and ful commune" (VII.2246); "Wel may that be a proverbe of a shrewe!" exclaims the Wife of Bath (III.284); "Remembreth yow of the proverbe … " the Parson intones (X.155). In the absence of modern quotation marks, the elaborate framing that proverbs so often receive in medieval texts marks their boundaries and establishes their self-contained generic wholeness. Internal features also help to distinguish proverbs from other kinds of sentences: "Bet[ter] is x than y" is a frequent structure in Middle English proverbs, for example, and proverbs also make abundant use of the structural parallels and distinctive sound patterns evident in "Unknowe, unkist." Antitheses, internal rhyme, alliteration, and other aids to memory are common as well. Whether the proverb is embedded in a literary text or cited spontaneously in conversation, these features all work to signal that the form in question requires a reception different from that accorded to the sentences of the surrounding context.

An anthropologist who studied existing societies with active proverb traditions has posited that the "perception of proverbiality" that results from a combination of external and internal cues is much more important in shaping reception than an utterance's actual prior history, even if that history could be known. On the basis of her fieldwork with Spanish-speaking residents of Los Angeles, Shirley Arora concluded that an expression "will *function* as a proverb, with all the accompanying weight of authority or community acceptance … as a direct result of the listener's perception, right or wrong, of its 'proverbiality'" (6; emphasis in original). Cognitive scientist Richard P. Honeck affirms the same point: when his researchers confronted experimental subjects with made-up proverbs such as "Not every oyster holds a pearl," or "A net with a hole in it won't catch any fish," the subjects recognized the genre and did not, for example, look around for the oysters or nets ostensibly under discussion.[8] The role played by this "perception of proverbiality" in reception testifies to the fundamental importance of genre in the conferring of meaning: proverbs achieve their full effects only when they are recognized as proverbs — that is, by virtue of their genre.

A particularly vivid example of the elaborate framing that contributes to the "perception of proverbiality" in late medieval works is the attention lavished on a proverb in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, a narrative ordinarily quite concise in its headlong forward momentum. The tale's narrator offers a proverb to explain Alison's choice of Nicholas over Absolon as lover:

> But what availleth hym as in this cas?
> She loveth so this hende Nicholas
> That Absolon may blowe the bukkes horn;
> He ne hadde for his labour but a scorn.
> And thus she maketh Absolon hire ape,
> And al his ernest turneth til a jape.
> Ful sooth is this proverbe, it is no lye,
> Men seyn right thus: "Alwey the nye slye

> Maketh the ferre leeve to be looth."
> For though that Absolon be wood or wrooth,
> By cause that he fer was from hire sight,
> This nye Nicholas stood in his light. (I.3385–96)

After six lines that sum up the relative positions of the two aspiring lovers, Chaucer devotes a full line to identifying the *proverbe* by genre and affirming its truth (I.3391). The next line adds the proverb marker, "Men seyn," and guarantees fidelity of transmission by adding "right thus" (I.3392). After citing the proverb itself, set off in modern editions by editorial quotation marks, the narrator walks the listener or reader through its application to the relatively distant Absolon and the live-in lodger Nicholas (I.3395–96). In Jauss's words, the proverb affords "retrospective insight into the course of things" ("Alterity" 218); its mode is "resignation or irony."[9] It offers the consolation of popular philosophy: whatever Absalon's level of frustration (be he "wood or wrooth"), experience shows that his losing out is simply how the world goes. While Jauss ("Alterity"), and more recently Christopher Cannon, suggest that rueful consolation after the fact is the primary use of the embedded medieval proverb, I will argue that it is just one use among others of equal or greater significance.

Although the tale's narrator assures us that "Men seyn right thus," we may question the actual status of the Miller's *proverbe*. Chaucer is famously playful about his sources and very likely made up some of the expressions he solemnly labels as old, wise, and common sayings. In *Troilus*, he attributes the proverb, "The newe love out chaceth ofte the olde," to an otherwise unknown Zanzis "that was ful wys" (4.414–15). Whiting's index locates only two instances prior to 1500 of the Miller's expression about the advantage enjoyed by the lover who is nearer: one in the passage in question and the other shortly thereafter in the work of Chaucer's known reader and friend John Gower.[10] Gower calls the expression an "old sawe," but whether because it was already in circulation as a wisdom expression or because Chaucer said it was, we cannot know. Thus we are left to judge whether Chaucer found or invented this specialized analogue of the widespread medieval expression, "Far from eye, far from heart" (Whiting E213). Either way, it is the "perception of proverbiality" that gives the expression its effect.

Whatever the actual origins of this and similar expressions, the verbal marking Chaucer and other medieval authors give them at the point of textual *production* finds its counterpart in the many pointing hands, *nota bene*'s, and other manuscript notations that call attention to the reception of proverbs by scribes and other readers. Imported into written texts from prior oral and written performances and graphically set apart in manuscripts, medieval proverbs embedded in longer texts resemble the "inset songs" studied by Ardis Butterfield. Like *embedded*, the term *inset* acknowledges the generic integrity of the form within a form. Butterfield shows how in long narrative works like *Troilus* lyric forms imported from other contexts and modes of presentation work powerfully to dialogize the written narrative in which they are embedded, as well as providing important clues to how medieval songs were actually performed ("Medieval Genres" and "Mise-en-page"). Medieval proverbs too were performed, as we are reminded when Pandarus uses the word as a verb: "thise wise clerkes that ben dede / Han evere yet proverbed to us yonge, / That 'firste vertu is to kepe tonge'" (3.292–94). The model of Bakhtinian dialogue that Butterfield applies to

inset songs applies also to the inset proverb: both bear out Bakhtin's insistence that users of language get their utterances from "other people's mouths" where they have served "other people's intentions" and consequently they are already "shot through with intentions and accents" ("Discourse" 294, 293) so that new speakers must re-inflect these always already voiced utterances for their own purposes.

Bakhtin's outline for a culminating project, "The Problem of Speech Genres," builds upon his now-familiar theory of dialogism and takes it in fresh directions highly relevant to the study of medieval genre. The influential earlier essays collected in *The Dialogic Imagination* tend to subordinate what I am calling microgenres almost entirely to their functional role in dialogizing the all-engrossing novel. In "Discourse and the Novel," Bakhtin acknowledges that their past history and formal integrity as independent genres is what makes embedded forms so valuable to the novel: they are used "precisely because of their capacity, as well worked-out forms, to assimilate reality in words" (321). Despite granting their prior status as "well worked-out forms," however, and acknowledging their ability "to assimilate reality in words" — surely not a minor capacity — Bakhtin, in these earlier essays, is nevertheless most interested in "incorporated genres" as the first among many sources of the novel's "stratification" and *heteroglossia*. He parallels generic stratification (the importation into the novel of language from a separate genre) to "professional stratification": the importation of "the language of the lawyer, the doctor, the businessman" into other discourses (289). His metaphors reveal how very difficult it would be to draw boundaries around language from any of these incorporated genres: he speaks, for example, of "a spring of dialogism that never runs dry" (330). He writes that it would be "impossible" to enclose in quotation marks the various languages integrated so fully into the novelist's own: "the boundaries are deliberately flexible and ambiguous, often passing through a single syntactic whole, often through a simple sentence, and sometimes even dividing up the main parts of a sentence" (308).

The genre essays collected in *The Dialogic Imagination* were written between the 1930s and the early 1950s, the products of Bakhtin's fruitful "third period" as designated by the scholars who have mapped his career (Morson and Emerson 63–100). A product of his "fourth" and final period, "Speech Genres" was drafted in 1952–53, posthumously published in Russian in 1979, and translated into English in 1986 in the collection *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (*SG*). Bakhtin had neither the health nor the time to undertake the long project there envisioned, and thus we are left with only his outline. In about forty dense but lucid pages, he lays out his ambitious program for expanding genre theory to encompass the whole of human speech, oral and written, including "all literary genres (from the proverb to the multivolume novel)" (61). In addition to breaking new ground, "Speech Genres" also attempts to draw together what Bakhtin considered most valuable in his earlier writings. To reconcile this late essay to Bakhtin's previous work would be a sizeable project in itself, however, and thus I address deviations from Bakhtin's earlier thought only when directly relevant to my analysis.[11]

Its theoretical developments make "Speech Genres" even more useful to medievalists than some of Bakhtin's best-known earlier work on genre. In it he finally lets go his near-worship of the modern novel as the one true site of complex dialogic effects. "Speech Genres" places all literary and nonliterary verbal forms on the same

spectrum, the differences among them a matter of degree, with primary or simple genres at one end and secondary or complex genres at the other, the latter including not just complex literary genres, but legal, scientific, and philosophical, and other kinds of writing and formal speech that incorporate primary genres (61–62). Bakhtin acknowledges the existence of "literary genres," but by taking as his fundamental division the difference between simple and complex forms, he de-emphasizes the literary/nonliterary distinction that was of so little concern to medieval readers and writers and yet has preoccupied generic taxonomists in more recent centuries. Bakhtin's model also operates independently of another perpetually troublesome duality in the study of premodern texts: it makes no special distinction between spoken and written language. What moves an utterance toward the end of the spectrum made up of "secondary genres" is not high literary status, but the complexity that results from the incorporation of smaller genres, oral or written, into larger ones.

Thus the theoretical program outlined in "Speech Genres" is well adapted not only to medieval culture in general but also to the medieval proverb in particular, a verbal form impossible to pigeonhole as literary or nonliterary — it is regularly claimed by rhetoric and folklore as well as by literature — and one that circulates equally freely in speaking and writing. It would far exceed the scope of this essay to evaluate Bakhtin's epic claim that *all* verbal communication falls into speech genres: "We speak only in definite speech genres, that is, all our utterances have definite and relatively stable typical *forms of construction of the whole*"; "Even in the most free, the most unconstrained conversation, we cast our speech in definite generic forms, sometimes rigid and trite ones, sometimes more flexible, plastic, and creative ones" (78; emphasis in original). Whether or not Bakhtin's theory of genres can encompass all human speech, it serves its purpose here by providing further insight into some important qualities of the proverb.

"Speech Genres" argues that the Saussurean theory of linguistics is misleading in its claim that we generate actual speech (*parole*) by slotting words into linguistic structures prescribed by the abstract system of language (*langue*). If this were true, Bakhtin argues, if we had to generate every new utterance by fitting individual words into an abstract linguistic system, we would scarcely be able to communicate at all — we would sound like beginning language learners and not like fluent adult speakers. In Bakhtin's view, the Saussurean theory treats each speaker as though he or she were "the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe" (69), when in reality the primary source of our speech is the speech of others. He holds that the basic unit of human expression is not the sentence, a linguistic unit most often preceded and followed by other sentences without a change of speaker, but rather the utterance (spoken or written), which Bakhtin defines by two key characteristics, both of them relevant to our discussion of embedded microgenres.

First, as a departure from the amorphous incorporated genres that permeate the language of the novel in Bakhtin's earlier thought, his interest turns, in "Speech Genres," to utterances that possess "quite clear-cut boundaries … so essential and fundamental they must be discussed in detail" (71). A change in speaking subject determines these boundaries, and thus the utterance has "so to speak, an absolute beginning and an absolute end" (71). This change of speaking subject defines a fresh act of communication by "framing the utterance and creating for it a stable mass

that is sharply delimited from other related utterances" (76). Second, unlike the sentence, the utterance possesses "a special semantic fullness of value" (74), a "finalized wholeness" (76) that enables some sort of response, broadly defined to include not just verbal replies positive and negative but also tacit understanding, responsive action, and other forms of acknowledgment. It must be said that this is "finality" of a somewhat temporary, relative, and Bakhtinian sort: his metaphor is of one speaker's "relinquishing the floor to the other, as if with a silent *dixi*" (72), but the emphasis is nevertheless on the wholeness of an utterance as a communication that has finished meaning and awaits the response of its addressee.

The "finalized wholeness" of an expression such as "Unknowe, unkist" is thus a matter of its having said everything it has to say, thereby enabling the hearer or reader to respond by assenting, demurring, silently reflecting, or taking action in the world. If a sentence is bordered by a change in speakers, or if the addressee (listener, reader) pulls it out of context for a particular type of response, it becomes a one-sentence utterance: "When the sentence figures as a whole utterance, it is as though it has been placed in a frame made of quite a different material" (*SG* 74). Each utterance, however short or long, is individual, but "each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances" (60; emphasis in original). Bakhtin terms these stable types "speech genres": a speech genre is "a typical form of utterance" (87). In "Speech Genres" Bakhtin supplies an element that Butterfield finds oddly missing from Jauss's theory of the "horizon of expectations": Jauss's theory fails to take literally those audiences whose expectations are said to create that horizon ("Medieval Genres" 186). By contrast, Bakhtin's speakers, utterances, and addressees are real: "The most complex and ultra-composite work of a secondary genre as a whole (viewed as a whole) is a single integrated real utterance that has a real author and real addressees whom this author perceives and imagines" (*SG* 98–99).

As a precis for a much longer work, "Speech Genres" by no means solves every problem it raises, and Bakhtin was still working over the question of how and when utterances are able to penetrate other utterances. What exactly happens to the "real," "clearly delimited," and "so to speak, absolute" boundaries of primary utterances like the proverb when complex genres "absorb and digest" them (62)? One can imagine possible solutions such as subordination (the embedded utterances would become sub-utterances) or else fictionalization (while the whole work is a "real" and "single" utterance, its embedded genres would become fictive or ostensible utterances). Bakhtin's proposed solution is much more interesting than either of these possibilities: when complex genres "absorb and digest" simple ones, the "clearly delimited" boundaries of the embedded utterances become porous; they are no less real and they maintain their exact positions at the utterance's beginning and end, but they are transformed into membranes permeable to voices by a kind of osmosis. Bakhtin's exposition of this key point is worth quoting at length:

> Intonation that isolates others' speech (in written speech, designated by quotation marks) is a special phenomenon: it is as though the *change of speech* [i.e. speaking] *subjects* has been internalized. The *boundaries* created by this change are weakened here and of a special sort: the speaker's expression penetrates through these boundaries and spreads to the other's speech, which is transmitted in ironic, indignant, sympathetic, or reverential tones

(this expression is transmitted by means of expressive intonation — in written speech we guess and sense it precisely because of the context that frames the other's speech, or by means of the extraverbal situation that suggests the appropriate expression). The other's speech thus has a dual expression: its own, that is, the other's, and the expression of the utterance that encloses the speech. (92–93; emphasis in original)

Bakhtin originally reserved the kind of "double-voicing" described here for the novel alone, and, as we have seen, in his earlier work the novel's "incorporated genres" lost their firm boundaries and their generic integrity and became merely instrumental to the larger genre's mesmerizing effects. In "Discourse in the Novel," incorporated genres serve mainly as fluid feeder streams to that "spring of dialogism that never runs dry" (330). But in "Speech Genres" they retain their boundaries and the crucial quality he calls their "finalized wholeness." Even if in Bakhtin's view they lose some of their traction in the world by their removal to hypothetical or fictional settings ("They lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterances of others," 62), embedded forms are nevertheless bounded by firmly placed but permeable quotation marks, literal in modern writing and virtual in earlier writing and in spoken language.

Without its brevity within defined boundaries and the recognizable change in voice that modern editors indicate with quotation marks, the proverb could not achieve its "special semantic fullness of value" or "finalized wholeness" as an utterance (*SG* 74, 76–77). This quality was noticed in the proverb long before Bakhtin claimed it for all utterances in "Speech Genres," though it has been conceptualized in intriguingly diverse ways. An observation attributed to the Brothers Grimm holds that a proverb is "not the product of solitary meditation, but rather in it a long-felt truth breaks forth like lightning."[12] As we have seen, Colie credits the compression of much experience into a very brief form for the proverb's ability to transmit an insight in a sudden revelatory flash. She acknowledges the self-sufficiency of adages and other early modern genres by calling them "tiny subcultures with their own habits, habitats, and structures of ideas as well as their own forms" (116). Another writer gets at the quality in question by likening the proverb to "a miniature plot with its logic of closure" (Beecher 30). Flash of lightning, subculture, plot with closure — all these analogies speak to what Bakhtin calls "finalized wholeness" and "semantic fullness of value." Even more suggestive for my purposes is the proposition from cognitive science that a proverb functions as a miniature theory, a formulation that testifies to its self-sufficient completeness and also captures its generative quality (Honeck). A proverb can be applied to an infinite number of new situations, and, once applied, it transforms the situation. In the next section, I hope to show how the ideas forwarded here illuminate the special qualities of the medieval proverb in its role as embedded microgenre.

Proverb use in Chaucer and *The Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf*

To begin with a relatively straightforward illustration of the double or multiple voicing of a proverb, we may return briefly to the passage quoted earlier from Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* in which the narrator uses a proverb to explain the respective success and failure of two lovers in wooing Alison. How we hear the proverb performed

will of course depend in large part on how we hear the narrating voice from which its virtual quotation marks distinguish it. How much irony leaks from the narrator's voice through the porous boundaries of the proverb, which purports to be a piece of timeless wisdom that can explain why one lover succeeds and the other is left to "blowe the bukkes horn"? Despite the totalizing explanation offered by the proverb ("Alwey the nye slye / Maketh the ferre leeve to be looth"), the tale itself suggests that Nicholas's proximity is not his only superior asset in Alison's eyes, and that living outside his beloved's house is hardly the worst of Absalon's liabilities. In this reading, the narrator's voice flows through the (modern editorial) quotation marks and infuses the proverb with irony, not just at the expense of Absalon, for whom its retrospective consolation could only work in concert with a large gap in self-knowledge about his charms as a lover, but also at the expense of the proverb's solemn and portentous dispensing of wisdom. The Miller's send up of the proverb re-enacts in miniature his send up of received literary authority in his response to the Knight's Tale.

Its habitual tone of solemnity and its black-and-white quality ("Alwey") open the proverb up to ironic uses that are among the easiest for modern scholars to spot because they accord with modern preconceptions about the form as the bearer of trite truisms that invite irony, especially in works of high culture. But skillful proverb use requires more than recalling and intoning received wisdom; it lies in *applying* the experiential truth most relevant to the situation at hand. Had all other things been equal, increased distance from Alison could have worked to Absalon's advantage, as noted by opposing expressions such as "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," a version of which goes back to classical antiquity.[13] Its repertoire of contrastive advice is sometimes cited as evidence that proverbial wisdom is bunk: Robert Scholes writes, for example, "Brought together, 'Look before you leap' and 'He who hesitates is lost' can hardly function as guides to conduct" (45).[14] But what consistent body of practical recommendations could possibly hold true across the infinite variety of human experience? The existence of opposing proverbs testifies that practical wisdom (or in the example from *The Miller's Tale*, humorous mock-wisdom) lies in the ability to select the right formula for action or explanation in a given situation.

With its wealth of proverbs and memorable proverbial imagery (K. Taylor), *Troilus and Criseyde* offers subtler examples of the voice-permeable membranes that surround proverbs and instances more integral to the work as a whole than the Miller's proverb. A semantic counterpart of Pandarus's tiny proverb "Unknowe, unkist" (1.809) turns up in Criseyde's thoughts as she deliberates at length whether to give up the independent widowhood in which she is "wel at ese" (2.750) and risk her peace and her reputation by accepting the love of Troilus. She hears in her mind a potential torrent of spiteful voices from outside herself: "thise wikked tonges ben so prest / To speke us harm" (2.785–86). An internal voice of self-protection cites a proverb urging against rash action, "Ful sharp bygynnyng breketh ofte at ende" (2.791, cf. Whiting B200, B201) — that is, "one who is too keen at the beginning often breaks by the end" — and a second proverbial image also counsels caution, "who may stoppen every wikked tonge / Or sown of belles whil that thei ben ronge?" (2.804–5).

After five stanzas in which negative voices from without carry on a dispiriting dialogue with internal voices recommending only withdrawal and self-protection, at last Criseyde's mind clears, and a new stanza sends it in a new direction:

> And after that, hire thought gan for to clere,
> And seide, "He which that nothing undertaketh,
> Nothyng n'acheveth, be hym looth or deere,"
> And with an other thought hire herte quaketh;
> Than slepeth hope, and after drede awaketh;
> Now hoot, now cold; but thus, bitwixen tweye,
> She rist hire up, and went hire for to playe. (2.806–12)

Modernity's jaded view of the proverb may make it a surprise that the result of and evidence for Criseyde's achieved mental clarity is a fresh proverb — another version of the "nothing ventured, nothing gained" formula for decisive action with which Pandarus urged on Troilus. Criseyde's own reception of this new proverb suggests the kind of sympathetic understanding and (in this case very tentative) movement toward action that helps to define Bakhtin's completed utterance: the proverb offers a fresh view of the situation, prompting "an other thought" about love so strong that it makes her heart quake. Fear plunges her back into indecision until another embedded microgenre, Antigone's love song, further moves her to a mental state in which love "gan … synken in hire herte," and "she wex somwhat able to converte" (2.901–3).

Bakhtin's focus in "Speech Genres" on the change of speakers as the determinant of boundaries between utterances prompts us to ask to what degree the proverb embedded in Criseyde's reflections represents a genuine change in speaking subject: "He which that nothing undertaketh, / Nothyng n'acheveth, be hym looth or deere" (2.807–8). ("Be hym looth or deere" is a universalizing doublet, the equivalent of "Alwey" in the Miller's proverb.) Do we hear Criseyde's own voice as she mentally echoes the innumerable earlier voices that have uttered the same proverb, or, as the editorial quotation marks would suggest, is it the voice of a separate speaking subject that urges her on to take a risk? One can imagine a highly complex voicing in which the male speaker ventriloquizes the voice of a wary but gradually emboldened female character, who quotes an utterance replete with the collective voices of the many who have already uttered it. The proverb's boundaries set it off in a significant way from the surrounding sentences that record Criseyde's own vacillating reflections, and thus it can preserve to some degree the sententious voice of wisdom and certainty it inherits from medieval proverb tradition. As an embedded ("absorbed") form, however, its "greatly weakened" and "permeable" boundaries allow us also to hear it spoken with the lingering trepidation and cautious new confidence of one whose thoughts finally clear after a period of deep anxiety and mental confusion. To borrow another useful term from "Speech Genres," while the embedded proverb retains many of its own accents, the fictional speaker has "re-accentuated" it with the intonations of her own voice (91).

As so often with Chaucer's proverbs, the versions of "nothing ventured, nothing gained" that help to move both of the poem's lovers to action signify at the level of the whole work as well as locally in its fictional speeches. As we have seen, Pandarus cites a version to Troilus ("Unknowe, unkist"), and Criseyde cites to herself the version just examined. In the poem's final book, the third player in this triangle of betrayal, Diomede,

engages in internal debate of a very different sort: he "goth now withinne himself ay arguynge" how best and most efficiently to set his "hook and lyne" to "fisshen" Criseyde (5.772–77). Although something in the austerity of her manner suggests to him that she may have left a lover in Troy and thus not be open to new advances, he finds a proverb to move him to action all the same, "'But for t'asay,' he seyde, 'naught n'agreveth, / For he that naught n'asaieth naught n'acheveth'"; that is, "It doesn't hurt to try; nothing ventured, nothing gained" (5.783–84). In all three cases, the proverb's self-containment or finalized wholeness lifts it out of its context so that it can move Chaucer's characters one step closer to consequential action in their world. Versions of "nothing ventured, nothing gained" proliferate in *Troilus* because the whole poem asks its reader to contemplate what of lasting value can be gained by one who ventures in love or in any other human endeavor when all is subject to this "false worldes brotelnesse" (5.1832).

In *The Canterbury Tales*, where the framing of microgenres echoes and interacts complexly with the larger narrative framing of the embedded tales,[15] Chaucer dramatizes the social dynamics of medieval proverb use in ways that reveal how differently proverbs function in a culture of "strong tradition-bearers," to borrow a term from John Niles.[16] The prologue to *The Cook's Tale* includes a brief fictional example of the social use of proverbs in the form of agonistic exchanges or "dueling proverbs." The Host casts aspersions on the food sold in the Cook's shop and then urges him to tell his tale without being angered by his jesting ("be nat wroth for game" I.4354). The Host then defends his derogatory remarks (and belies his pretext of jesting) with the proverb, "A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley" (I.4355). On one narrative plane, the Host uses this proverb to justify his insults to the Cook; on another, it adds to the playful but extended justification the poet himself offers for his violation of literary decorum by following up a chivalric romance with a series of racy fabliaux. The Cook responds to the Host with an equal and opposite proverb, "'Sooth pley, quaad pley,' as the Flemyng seith" — "a true jest is a poor jest." For a London Cook to draw upon the authority of a "Flemyng" has implications for the exchange's specific historic moment, and many of the proverbs in *The Canterbury Tales* seek to mediate rivalries over social standing or occupational status, as in this pretended rapprochement between Host and Cook.[17]

The Cook's exchange with the Host establishes him as a practiced wielder of proverbs, and his unfinished tale fictionalizes in more detail the process that leads from a proverb to action in the world. The tale's master victualler is increasingly frustrated by the riotous behavior of his apprentice, Perkyn Revelour, and yet only determines how to act when "hym bithoghte, / … Of a proverbe":

> But atte laste his maister hym bithoghte,
> Upon a day, whan he his papir soghte,
> Of a proverbe that seith this same word:
> "Wel bet is roten appul out of hoord
> Than that it rotie al the remenaunt."
> So fareth it by a riotous servaunt;
> It is ful lasse harm to lete hym pace,
> Than he shende alle the servantz in the place. (I.4403–10)

Here the proverb serves, not as retrospective and rueful acknowledgment of the inevitable way of the world, but rather as a miniature theory that transforms the

situation for the master and moves him to action. As Kenneth Burke describes them in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, proverbs provide "equipment for living"; they codify a wide variety of strategies for their own use, strategies "for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off evil eye, for purification, propitiation, and desanctification, consolation and vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands or instructions" (304).

Lest the proverb start to seem like a personal preoccupation of Chaucer's rather than, as I would argue, a significant form of moral and practical deliberation in medieval culture, I look briefly at a far less well known framing tale, the Middle English version of *The Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf*,[18] to show how dueling proverbs can represent dueling perspectives on human life. Genres are often said to encapsulate worldviews; this capacity is all the more remarkable when possessed by a microgenre as tiny as the proverb. Paul Hernadi uses the proverb to illustrate this important property of genre, observing that the expression, "Where there is a will, there is a way," implies a world "totally susceptible to human desires," whereas the "no less 'valid' proverb," "Man proposes, God disposes," offers an opposing view of the forces that govern human lives (180–81). As we have seen, Colie too conceives of each generic viewpoint as "a 'set' on the world" (115), and thus mixed genres "combined various 'sets' on the world into a larger collective vision" (21). The proverb contest that begins *The Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf* makes use of our microgenre for just this purpose: to polarize proverbial wisdom according to worldview and thus demonstrate that wisdom is relative and situational, not monologic or absolute.

Although allusions to the existence of earlier Latin versions of the *Dialogue* are fairly widespread by the twelfth century, the work is extant only in widely varying fifteenth-century Latin manuscripts and printed editions and translated into an extensive array of vernaculars in the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Middle English text survives in one copy printed in 1492, and, like many but not all versions of this multiform work, it stages five verbal contests between the biblical patriarch and the ragged and foul-mouthed medieval peasant Marcolf (Marcolphus). These verbal contests make use of five different microgenres — genealogies, proverbs, riddles, arguable propositions, and arguments on both sides of an issue (*argumentum in utramque partem*) — set into a narrative frame in which Marcolf first appears at Solomon's court, then Solomon visits Marcolf's rural hut, and finally the two of them take their differences to the streets of Solomon's kingdom and play them out before his subjects. The first and best known of these verbal contests is a duel in proverbs, a much longer analogue of the agonistic exchange between Host and Cook in *The Canterbury Tales* and a brilliant example of the way in which opposing proverbs can serve to condense opposing world views.

Unlike the rest of the work in which the verbal contests are more fully integrated into the narrative, in the "proverb contest" the exchanges follow one another in rapid stichomythic alternation, mediated only by the speakers' names. Solomon challenges Marcolf to an "altercacion" or formal disputation in which he tests the peasant's ability to respond to his own authoritative scriptural wisdom (29). This show-stopping contest runs to 138 exchanges in the longest Latin manuscript versions and to about 85 in the printed versions including the Middle English text. Many of

these exchanges resemble the dueling proverbs exchanged by Host and Cook in *The Canterbury Tales*:

(70a) S: "Whoo to that man that hath a dowble herte and in bothe weyes wyll wandre."
(70b) M: "He that wolle two weyes go muste eythre his ars or his breche tere."
(71a) S: "Of habundaunce of th'erte the mouth spekyst."
(71b) M: "Out of a full wombe th'ars trompyth."
(81a) S: "Alle reyght pathys goon towardes oon weye."
(81b) M: "So done alle the veynes renne towardes the ars." (39)

But while the agonistic exchange of proverbs between the Host and Cook airs tensions and occupational rivalries between two speakers of roughly the same social location, the exchanges between Solomon and Marcolf represents a contest between the divergent worldviews of the *rex* and the *rusticus*, the two poles of medieval social and political life. Thus their exchanges of opposing proverbs sum up two deliberately polarized perspectives on experience:

15a S: He that soweth wyckydnesse shal repe evyll.
15b M: He that sowyth chaf shal porely mowe.
36a S: "He that stoppyth his erys from the crying of the pore people, oure Lord God shall not here hym."
36b M: "He that wepyth afore a juge lesyth his terys. (31, 33)

In exchange 15, Solomon offers a moralizing abstraction while Marcolf draws on the world of concrete experience. In 36, Solomon hears the weeping of the dispossessed but is not himself among them; Marcolf's perspective is that of the shedder of futile tears before a harsh judge. Many of Solomon's proverbs voice wise, idealized, and resolutely monologic truths ("Alle reyght pathys goon towardes oon weye"); Marcolf's scurrilous responses attack Solomon's monologism with images of duality or multiplicity and urge an alternative ethics in which material bodily necessity overrides abstract idealism. The verbal contests in the *Dialogue* represent rival views of what constitutes wisdom and what kinds of knowledge matter. Crude as his proverbs are, the worldview encoded in Marcolf's responses has an authority of its own and its experiential wisdom has the power to disrupt and demystify the sententious wisdom it opposes (Bradbury, "Rival Wisdom").

The proverb is thus a Bakhtinian speech genre *par excellence*: a relatively stable type of utterance distinctly bounded on either side by a change in speaking subject. As we have seen, users of medieval proverbs often emphasize this change of voice when they explicitly attribute them to other speakers and writers, using formulas such as "men seyn," "the wise man seith," "as clerkes seye," or "thus clerkys seyth yn her wrytynge" (see, e.g., Whiting E213, E216, F51). Proverbs are "filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances" in the same genre (*SG* 91); their way of meaning is profoundly shaped by "echoes and reverberations" of prior uses of the same expression. Despite its miniature size, the proverb is exceptionally complete within itself, the kind of response-ready whole utterance that Bakhtin stipulates. Unlike the grammatical sentence that can be mechanically repeated with no change in meaning, a proverb means something different each time it is uttered by a new speaker with a new purpose and a new addressee, even if its wording remains exactly the same.

I have argued that many of the effects proverbs achieve, they achieve by means of their genre. When embedded into longer works as microgenres, they open those longer works up in vital ways to new perspectives and worldviews. Among the notes that Bakhtin continued to make until shortly before his death is a thought that moves toward reconciliation of his new emphasis on boundaries and "finalized wholes" with his earlier conception of open-ended dialogism. The meanings of completed utterances are whole, but they are never really final, because every utterance, and every "type of utterance," which is to say every genre, carries a surplus of potential meanings waiting to be activated in the minds of listeners or readers. He writes, "Even *past* meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) — they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future developments of the dialogue" (*SG* 170; emphasis in original). Past works, including those of Chaucer and even the anonymous *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf*, will never be exhausted as long as readers continue to activate new meanings from their infinite surplus, and the greater and more complex the work, the greater that surplus. One source of that surplus of meaning, complexity, and capacity for renewal lies in a work's microgenres, not least among them that tiny little powerhouse so beloved by medieval readers and writers, the proverb.

Notes

1   Writing in 2000, David Duff offers a concise account of the extent to which the agenda outlined in "Speech Genres" has now been realized in the form of speech act theory and discourse analysis; as he notes, however, each of these theoretical developments "involves a shift of focus from the category of genre *per se*, and in this sense the central thrust of Bakhtin's programme arguably still remains unfulfilled" (82–83).

2   I lay no claim to originality for so obvious a term; the only precursors that I have yet found, however, are a passing reference to "local or microgeneric effects" in Fowler 183; and Molino, where *microgenres* are distinguished from *macrogenres* on the basis of size, but without attention to embedding.

3   Two precedents for my interest in proverbs as microgenres are Jolles's "simple forms" and Jauss's "little literary genres of the exemplary" ("Alterity" 211). Jolles argues that his small forms (including the proverb) give rise to larger and more complex genres, but neither he nor Jauss gives sustained attention to generic embedding.

4   A Latin manuscript text of the *Dialogue* as originally edited by Walter Benary appears in a revised edition with substantial commentary by Ziolkowski; for a recent edition of the Middle English, see Bradbury and Bradbury. On Marcolf in Middle English, see Green.

5   All citations from Chaucer's works are from Benson's edition, using fragment and line number for *The Canterbury Tales* and book and line numbers for *Troilus and Criseyde*. For the two-word proverb in *Troilus*, see Whiting U5; for the longer expression, see Whiting N146, "He that undertakes nothing achieves nothing."

6   As a rough indicator, the twelve non-Chaucerian expressions quoted by the *MED* to illustrate the meaning of *proverbe* range from three to fourteen words and average about eight. The eighteen expressions Chaucer explicitly calls *proverbes* range from five to twenty-five words (both extremes occur in *The Parson's Tale*, X.155–56 and X.362) and average about twelve words.

7   See Bowden and Cannon on *Melibee*; B. Taylor on *The Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf*.

8   Honeck and Temple 86; Honeck 128. Bradbury, "Transforming Experience" relates their research to *The Canterbury Tales*.

9   See "Aphorism" in the appendix to Jauss, "Alterity" 228.

10 Whiting S395, citing Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 2.1899–902.

11 Morson and Emerson give a brief overview of the place of "Speech Genres" in Bakhtin's evolving thought on genre (290–94). For guidance in working through Bakhtin's densely argued text, I am obligated to Morson and Emerson; to Michael Holquist's introduction to Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*; and to Frow.

12 Jauss attributes this quotation to Jacob Grimm ("Alterity" 218); Jolles attributes it to Wilhelm Grimm (127).

[13] Propertius, *Elegies*, 2.33c.43: "Semper in absentis felicior aestus amantes" (Passion is always more favorable toward absent lovers).

[14] Cf. Cannon's more recent comments on the "wholly self-contradictory" nature of proverb collections as an indication of the "fundamental *uselessness*" of proverbial wisdom; like Scholes, he cites an example that "can hardly recommend a course for action" (410; emphasis in original).

[15] See Ferster for a concise and cogent overview of these larger generic issues in *The Canterbury Tales*.

[16] See Niles 174, referring to storytellers who "stand out for their large repertory and authoritative style."

[17] See Wallace 167 and Butterfield, *Familiar Enemy* 217–18 on Flemings; Latré on this particular proverb; Lindahl 44–61 on proverbs and social mediation in *The Canterbury Tales*.

[18] All citations of the Middle English *Dialogue* are by page number from Bradbury and Bradbury.

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