

'WHAT SHOLDE I MAKE A Lenger TALE OF THIS?': LINGUISTIC AND STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF RHETORICAL QUESTIONS IN THE *CANTERBURY TALES*¹

Abstract

Rhetorical questions constitute an important element in the *Canterbury Tales* and are consistently used by the different pilgrims when telling their stories with diverse functions. However, there have not been any attempts so far to describe rhetorical questions and the functions they can perform in Chaucer's poem. In fact, while they are narrating their tales and interacting among one another, the *Canterbury* pilgrims employ a total of 111 rhetorical questions. The aim of this paper is twofold; on the one hand, it is aimed at determining the criteria that define rhetorical questions as opposed to ordinary questions. On the other, it attempts to determine for which functions rhetorical questions lend themselves by virtue of being rhetorical questions and, more specifically, which functions rhetorical questions fulfil in the "speech" of Chaucer's pilgrims. In this respect, although the analysis focuses exclusively on the *Canterbury Tales*, the results may likewise be applied to other examples found in different corpora.

Keywords: rhetorical questions, stylistics, *Canterbury Tales*.

Resumen

Las preguntas retóricas constituyen un elemento importante en los *Cuentos de Canterbury* y, cuando cuentan sus historias, los distintos peregrinos las emplean sistemáticamente con funciones diversas. Sin embargo, hasta ahora no ha habido ningún intento de describir las preguntas retóricas y las funciones que pueden desempeñar en el poema de Chaucer. De hecho, mientras están narrando cuentos e interactuando entre ellos, los peregrinos de *Canterbury* emplean un total de 111 preguntas retóricas. El objetivo de este artículo es doble: de una parte, pretende determinar los criterios que definen las preguntas retóricas en oposición a las preguntas ordinarias. De otra, intenta determinar a qué funciones se prestan las preguntas retóricas por el hecho de ser retóricas y, más específicamente, qué funciones cumplen las preguntas retóricas en el "discurso" de los peregrinos de Chaucer. En este sentido, y aunque el análisis se centra exclusivamente en los *Cuentos de Canterbury*, los resultados pueden aplicarse igualmente a ejemplos hallados en corpora distintos.

Palabra clave: preguntas retóricas, estilística, *Cuentos de Canterbury*.

1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: WHAT IS A RHETORICAL QUESTION?

Both ordinary questions and rhetorical questions are characterised by being linguistically realised by the interrogative mood. However, while ordinary questions typically expect to elicit

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a verbal answer from the addressee, rhetorical questions do not. In fact, rhetorical questions differ from ordinary questions because:

- (i) the speaker already knows the answer to their question—as opposed to ordinary questions, where the speaker is genuinely interested in obtaining information from the addressee, either a truth value (in yes/no questions) or a missing piece of information (in *wh*-word questions).
- (ii) it is quite common for the speaker to give an answer to their own question. There are cases where the answer to the question is not explicitly stated but easily retrievable by the addressee, as in the following example: “Is the sky blue?”. In this example, the obvious answer is “yes, it is” and it is easily inferred by the addressee.
- (iii) the speaker does not suspend their conversational turn so that the addressee(s) can provide the corresponding part of the adjacency pair: question-answer. In other words, rhetorical questions do not follow the pattern “question-answer” in two different conversational turns and realised by two different interlocutors as ordinary questions normally do.

In the following example from *The Franklin's Tale* (vv. 1621–24), the speaker poses a real question since he genuinely does not know the answer to his question, does not provide an answer himself and suspends his conversational turn, even if no answer is in fact given by any of the other pilgrims:

Lordynges, this question, thanne, wol I aske now,
Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?
Now telleth me, er that ye ferther wende.
I kan namoore; my tale is at an ende.

(*The Franklin's Tale*, vv. 1621–24)

It is quite significant that the Franklin chooses to end up his tale with this question to “lordynges”. Indeed, *the Franklin's Tale* is about nobility itself and this final question is aimed at making noblemen reflect about the real meaning of “nobility” after listening to a tale where the most noble character is not born “noble.” What is more, the Franklin ends his tale “by emulating the aristocratic convention of raising a question for debate” (Howard 1978: 272) even though he is not an aristocrat himself.

As opposed to this case, there are two cases in the corpus that are more difficult to identify either as rhetorical or ordinary questions. In fact, these two examples seem to partake of features which are characteristic of both ordinary and rhetorical questions. As in the case of ordinary questions, neither speaker seems to know the answer to their own question — this is especially so in the case of the Knight, who addresses his question to lovers:

Yow loveres axe I now this question
Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamoun?
That oon may seen his lady day day by day,
But in prison he moot dwelle alway;
That oother wher hym list may ride or go,
But seen his lady shal he nevere mo.
Now demeth as yow liste, ye that kan,
For I wol telle forth as I bigan.

(The Knight's Tale, vv. 1347–1354)

However, as is the case with rhetorical questions, the conversational turn is not suspended and both the Knight and the Clerk go on narrating their stories, without giving any of the interlocutors the chance of replying. Given that neither speaker interrupts their narrative, these two cases have been included within the corpus. Furthermore, in the case of the Clerk (see example below), it may be argued that he provides an answer to the question himself by means of a rhetorical question, whose easily inferred answer is “a sturdy housbonde could devyse no moore”:

But now of wommen wolde I axen fayn
If thise assayes myghte nat suffise?
What koude a sturdy housbonde moore devyse
To preeve hir wyfhod and hir stedfastnesse,
And he continuyng evere in sturdinesse?

(The Clerk's Tale, vv. 696–700)

In short, rhetorical questions are clearly different from ordinary questions even if they are linguistically expressed by means of the same mood. In fact, possibly in order to make this distinction clear, in the 1580s the English printer Henry Denham invented a rhetorical question mark to use at the end of rhetorical questions. Its use, however, did not survive long (Truss 2003: 142).

It has traditionally been rightly argued that the main act speakers realise when uttering a rhetorical question is not an eliciting speech act but an *assertive* one, in other words, speakers are stating some information about a particular state of things (Sadock 1971, 1974; Green 1996; Han 2002, Lausberg 1990; Schrott 2000 just to quote a few). Furthermore, rhetorical questions generally have “the illocutionary force of an assertion of the opposite polarity from what is apparently asked” (Han 2002: 202).

On the other hand, rhetorical questions are linguistically realised by means of the interrogative mood. The choice of such a linguistic realisation is highly meaningful since the use of one mood instead of another is not arbitrary. As pointed out by Sperber and Wilson (1995: 180), the interrogative mood *per se* indicates a determinate “propositional attitude”:

An utterance does more than express an explicit propositional form: it expresses this form in a certain linguistically determined mood. [...] Mood is linguistically encoded, but just as the logical form of an utterance underdetermines the propositional form expressed, so the mood of an utterance underdetermines the propositional attitude expressed.

Likewise, Schrott (2000) rightly argues that we cannot neglect the importance of the linguistic choice in the realisation of rhetorical questions. In other words, even if rhetorical questions are commonly used to express an assertion, the fact is that the speaker does not use the declarative mood to do so, which is meaningful in itself.

If rhetorical questions are identified with assertions, the importance of the inference process is severely neglected. Therefore, I consider rhetorical questions as interrogative acts whose illocutionary power is exploited for the indirect expression of an assertion. The interrogative act triggers an inference process that leads to the assertion. [...] *With this strategy, the speaker invites the interlocutor to join him in his line of argumentation and adopt the indirectly presented assertion.* (Schrott, 2000: 273–274) (my emphasis)

In the present paper, we adopt Sperber and Wilson’s and Schrott’s view that a particular linguistic form is meaningful in itself. The use of the interrogative mood in the realisation of rhetorical questions is vitally important and produces two effects. On the one hand, it activates in the addressee’s mind a frame according to which the speaker requires his/her

participation —as in ordinary questions. On the other, the choice of the interrogative mood is a mechanism through which speakers involve the addressee(s) in their discourse so that they can make the same inferences. This explains why the rhetorical question is one of the strategies employed in what can be defined as the *persuasion discourse* typical of certain genres such as debates or sermons, as in the case of the *Parson's Tale* or in the *Prologue* of another “noble prechour”: the Wife of Bath.

The term *rhetorical* is therefore highly appropriate since it combines both the similarity and the differences between ordinary and rhetorical questions.

1.1 Criteria to identify rhetorical questions in the present corpus

As ordinary questions, rhetorical questions are linguistically realised by means of the interrogative mood and they “cannot be linked to a specific type of interrogative sentence” (Schrott 2000: 272). Then, what distinguishes them from ordinary questions? Han (2002: 203) mentions some of the formal tests provided by Sadock (1971, 1974) to show that rhetorical questions “differ formally from information-seeking ordinary [...] questions”. For instance, introductory terms like “after all” can be used with rhetorical questions while they are not acceptable with ordinary questions. Han (2002: 203) provides the following example: “after all, do phonemes have anything to do with language?”. On the other hand, the use of the prepositional phrase “by any chance” can be used with ordinary questions but not with rhetorical ones. For instance, it would be extremely odd to hear the following example:

Speaker: Have you seen Charles by any chance? He is in the kitchen.

In the present corpus, there are in fact some features that characterise rhetorical questions as oppose to ordinary ones.

- (i) Use of the adversative conjunction “but” (or synonyms such as “save”), which provides an answer within the question itself, as illustrated by the examples below:

Who feeleth double soor and hevynesse
But Palamon, that love destreyneth so
That wood out of his wit he goth for wo?

(The Knight's Tale, vv. 1454–6)

Who rubbeth now, who froteth now his lippes
With dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes,
But Absolon? (*The Miller's Tale*, vv. 3747–9)

Who saved Danyel in the horrible cave
Ther every wight save he, maister and knave,
Was with the leon frete er he asterte?
(*The Man of Law's Tale*, 473–5)

This January, who is glad but he? (*The Merchant's Tale*, 2412)

- (ii) Use of the comparative: as in (i), the comparative implies the answer within the question, as illustrated by the following examples, where the inferred answer would be “nobody else”:

This sotted preest, who was gladder than he?
(*The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, v. 1341)

Who is so trewe, and eek so ententyf
To kepe hym, syk and hool, as is his make?
(*The Merchant's Tale*, vv. 1288–9)

Who was so welcome as my lord daun John,
Oure deere cosyn, ful of curteisye?
(*The Shipman's Tale*, vv. 68–9)

- (iii) Use of formulaic expressions: more than a linguistic feature *per se* as (i) and (ii), formulaic expressions such as “what nedeth wordes mo?” or “who koude tell ...?” were surely identified by Chaucer's audience and readers as rhetorical questions with a clear implicit answer. In other words, when hearing one of these questions, nobody would have actually answered: “nobody could tell”.

Who koude ryme in Englyssh proprely
His martirdom?
(*The Knight's Tale*, vv. 1460–61)

Who kouthe telle, or who kouthe endite,
The joye that is maked in the place
Whan Theseus hath doon so fair a grace?
(*The Knight's Tale*, vv. 1872–74)

What nedeth gretter dilatacioun?
(*The Man of Law's Tale*, v. 232)

Most of these formulaic rhetorical questions are introduced by an interrogative pronoun—quite commonly either “who” or “what”—and followed by a modal or semi-modal verb. In the present corpus, the most frequent formulae are the ones below:

(a) Rhetorical questions with a modal verb:

What should I ...?
Who koude / kan ...?
Who would wene ...?
Who shal ...?

(b) Rhetorical questions with a semi-modal verb:

What helpeth it?
What nedeth ...?

In fact, these type of formulaic rhetorical questions are also common in other medieval poems written in languages other than English, such as *El Cantar del Mio Cid* where the narrator uses this type of questions to describe “wealth and pomp that surpass the imagination of the audience” (Schrott 2000: 273–274):²

Los que fueron de pie cavalleros se fazen;
El oro e la plata ¿quién vos lo podrié contar?³
(*El Cantar del Mio Cid*, vv. 1213–1214)

(iv) The speaker provides an answer to the question immediately after the latter is posed, even if the interlocutors can easily infer the answer themselves:

Is nat this a curse vice? Yis, certes. (The Parson's Tale, 559)⁴

Occasionally, the interlocutors cannot really infer the answer on their own and the speaker dispels any doubts they might have:

² Schrott rightly argues that this element is typical of the “*técnica juglaresca*” (i.e. the minstrel's technique).

³ Translation provided by Schrott: “Those who had fought on foot now rode on horseback, and who could reckon the value of the silver and the gold they seized?”

⁴ In fact, the Parson provides an answer to all his rhetorical questions.

This chanon was my lord, ye wolde weene?
Sire hoost, in feith, and by the hevenes queene,
It was another chanoun, and nat hee.

(*The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, vv. 1088–90)

It should be taken into account that the characteristics described above are not mutually exclusive but can be used in combination. For instance, the speaker can use an adversative conjunction in the question and answer it nonetheless. In the example below, the speaker (the Man of Law) answers his own question explicitly by means of a rhetorical question that includes the use of the adversative conjunction “save” and another explicit answer: “no wight but God”.

Men myghten asken why she was nat slayn
Eek at the feeste?⁵ Who myghte hir body save?
And I answer to that demande agayn.
Who saved Danyel in the horrible cave
There every wight save he, maister and knave,
Was with the leon frete er he asterte?
No wight but God that he bar in his herte.

(*The Man of Law's Tale*, vv. 470–76)

The features above are characteristic of rhetorical questions in the present corpus. However, there are numerous examples where the only feature that allows us to identify an interrogative sentence as a rhetorical question is the fact that the speaker does not suspend his conversational turn and the interlocutors are not given the chance of replying to his question. In all these cases, the answer to the rhetorical question is implicit⁶ and has to be inferred by the interlocutors. The process of inference or correct interpretation of the speaker's implicature has a varying degree of difficulty. In some cases, inference is facilitated by the fact that the reply to the rhetorical question is common knowledge. In the example below, the Merchant asks why Fortune has deceived January. His audience

⁵ In this case, however, the first question might be interpreted as a reported question rather than a rhetorical one.

⁶ In the case of (i) and (ii) the answer to the rhetorical question is also implicit but the process of inference is facilitated by the speaker's use of linguistic marks such as the adversative conjunctions “but” or “save” or the comparative.

(both the pilgrims and the “real” audience) would immediately know why: because Fortune is changeable and whimsical and we cannot trust her.

Why hastow January thus deceyved,
That haddest hym for thy fulle freend receyved?
(*The Merchant's Tale*, vv. 2107–8)

The same can be stated of the Monk's question also with regard to Fortune:

“Lo, who may truste on Fortune any throwe?
(*The Monk's Tale*, 2136)

The same is also true of the Wife of Bath's famous question: “Who peynted the leon, tell me who?” (*The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, 692), which her audience would immediately associate with the lion's question when he saw a picture of a man killing another lion. Even though the answer “men” is never explicitly provided, it is nonetheless easily retrievable for the interlocutors. In case there might be any doubts and her audience is not able to make the right inference, the Wife follows her Prologue by arguing that things would have been totally different had women been the writers:

By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.
(*The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, vv. 693–95)

In the following section, we shall consider what functions these rhetorical questions carry out and why the Canterbury Pilgrims (or Chaucer) prefer using a rhetorical question instead of any other linguistic realisation.

2. FUNCTIONS OF RHETORICAL QUESTIONS IN THE *CANTERBURY TALES*

Rhetorical questions seem to lend themselves better for carrying out particular functions than the other moods —i.e. the declarative or imperative— given the fact that, even if they express an indirect assertion, they can also exploit the force of the interrogative mood. In this section we shall focus on the different functions that rhetorical questions can perform while trying to explain why rhetorical questions are more suitable than other linguistic realisations to carry out these functions.

It goes without saying that the different functions described in the following paragraphs can be performed simultaneously without excluding one another. However, for the purpose of clarity, in those cases where several functions are performed simultaneously, we shall focus on the most outstanding function.

Thus, one of the main functions performed by rhetorical questions is the speaker's expression of *admiratio* (Lausberg 1990: 768), as in the following example:

Who kouthe telle, or who kouthe it endite,
The joye that is maked in the place
Whan Theseus hath doon so fair a grace?
(*The Knight's Tale*, vv. 1872–74)

In this case, rhetorical questions are more suitable because:

The pragmatic potential of the rhetorical question to activate the interlocutor and make him join the speaker in his inference is exploited for a fictional re-creation of the oral performance [...] The salience and appealing force of the rhetorical question is clearer compared to other linguistic means expressing the same notion of infiniteness (Schrott, 2000: 274)

This involvement of the hearer in the speaker's narrative by means of the interrogative mood makes rhetorical questions especially suitable not only to express admiration but also grief, since the audience is invited to participate in the speaker's feelings towards his characters' suffering. These questions help create a more effective and emotional atmosphere, while appealing to the audience's sympathy:

Who feeleth soor and hevynesse
but Palamon, that love destreyneth so
that wood out of his wit he goth for wo?
(*The Knight's Tale*, vv. 1454–56)

What kan now faire Venus doon above?
What seith she now? What dooth this queene of love,
But wepeth so, for wantynge of hir willie,
Til that hir teeres in the lystes fille?
(*The Knight's Tale*, vv. 2663–66)

Parallel questions can become quite ironic and humouristic when the subject of grief is ridiculous, as is the case of Absolon's scatological

suffering in the *Miller's Tale* or of Chauntecleer's death in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. However, both the Miller and the Nun's Priest employ analogous rhetorical questions which echo "serious" ones such as the ones employed by the Knight or the Man of Law, namely:

Who rubbeth now, who froteth now his lippes
With dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes,
But Absolon?

(*The Miller's Tale*, vv. 3747–49)

O destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed!
Allas, that Chauntecleer fleigh from the bemes!
Allas, his wyf ne roghte nat of dremes!
And on a Friday fil al this meschaunce.
O Venus, that art goddesse of plesaunce,
[...]
Why woldestow suffre hym on thy day to dye?

(*The Nun's Priest's Tale*, vv. 3338–46)

This expression of grief can also be reinforced by interjections such as "allas" or "lo" as in the examples below:

[...] Allas, What myghte she seye?

(*The Man of Law's Tale*, 608)

Allas! Mankynde, how may it bitide
That to thy creator, which that the wrogthe,
And with his precious herte-blood thee boghte,
Thou art so fals and so unkynde, allas?

(*The Pardoner's Tale*, 900–3)

Likewise, these questions are generally characterised by the fact that they do not contribute to the temporal development of the narrative. Quite the contrary, these questions seem to cause the temporary suspension of the narrative action. Such a suspension is also observed in the verbs used, semantically characterised by belonging to the group of mental processes, that is, processes of "feeling" or "experience" instead of material processes of "action", which are the processes that typically contribute to the progression of the narrative (Downing & Locke, op. cit. 112 and Downing, 2006).

Thus, we can distinguish the use of "feeleth" ("feels") or other mental processes as "see", "know", "stand" or "look" in the following example, where the only present material process "lead" appears in the passive voice

("hath be lad"), contributing thus to the temporary suspension of the narrative:

Have ye nat seyn somtyme a pale face,
among a prees, of hym that hath be lad
toward his deeth, wher as hym gat no grace,
and swich a colour in his face hath had,
men myghte knowe his face that was bistad,
amonges alle the faces in that route?
So stant Custance, and looketh hire aboute."

(*The Man of Law's Tale*, 645–651)

Stylistically, it is important to point out that these questions often coincide with the climax of the story, suspending the action at its peak. The previous example clearly illustrates the way the speaker (the Man of Law) involves his audience in the narrative with the aim of creating *pathos* through the activation of a mental schema —i.e. a situation the audience is familiar with as part of their world knowledge. This active involvement of the audience in the narrative is again facilitated thanks to the use of the interrogative mood since it also activates the mental frame of question-answer and the interlocutors feel the need to take an active part in the narrative.

A clear example is the Man of Law's account of the slaughter of his heroine's companions, followed by a myriad of rhetorical questions aimed at reinforcing the climax and at directing the audience's sympathy towards the main character:

Men myghten asken why she was nat slayn
eek at the feeste? Who myghte hir body save?
[...] Who saved Danyel in the horrible cave
There every wight save he, master and knave,
Was with the leon frete er he asterte?

(*The Man of Law's Tale*, 470–5)

This 'sensationalist' character also contributes to keep the audience's attention, which is vitally important in an oral competition among so many participants.

Other rhetorical questions employed to suspend the narration are those traditionally associated with the tropes of *amplificatio* and of *abbreviatio*. These questions can be used to introduce a more extensive description, as in the example below:

Why sholde I noght as wel eek telle yow al
the portreiture that was upon the wal
withinne the temple of myghty Mars the rede?
(*The Knight's Tale*, vv. 1967–9)

The use of the interrogative mood together with a formulaic question (easily identified by the audience as a rhetorical strategy characteristic of minstrels) has the power of involving the audience but also of making them follow the narrator as he wishes, since the audience's inferred response would be "yes, why not?"

Alternatively, these questions can also express the need to avoid "futile details", thus appealing to the audience's imagination.⁷

What sholde I tellen of the roialtee
At mariage, or which cours goth biforn;
Who bloweth in a trumpe or in an horn?
(*The Man of Law's Tale*, vv. 703–5)

What nedeth it of kyng Anthiochus
To telle his hye roial magestee,
His hye pride, his werkes venymus?
(*The Monk's Tale*, vv. 2575–77)

Again, the audience's involvement is mainly achieved through the use of the interrogative mood, as rightly argued by Schrott:

Through the interactive power of the rhetorical question, the fictional narrator integrates the audience into his story. [...] Here, rhetorical questions as interrogative acts are highly activating, but the interlocutor implied by the strategy usually remains silent. The interaction is clearly dominated by the speaker who guides his interlocutor to the assertion he wants to evoke. (Schrott, 2000: 274–5)

From a pragmatic point of view, the choice of abbreviating our speech can be regarded as a negative politeness strategy since it expresses the speaker's wish not to impose too much on the addressee's freedom, especially in the case of extensive conversational turns. Ironically, however, on many

⁷ Sometimes, the speaker's purpose is quite the opposite. That is, instead of avoiding unnecessary details, he embarks on a full description. This would also be recognised by Chaucer's audience as a rhetorical strategy, known as the trope of *occupatio*.

occasions, the *topos of abbreviatio*⁸ is in fact a way to expand the turn while at the same time preserving the speaker's face.⁹

Closely related to the previous functions, rhetorical questions can also allow the speaker to express his modesty and inability to describe. Traditionally, this strategy is known as the *topos de modestia*, illustrated by the examples below:

Who koude ryme in Englyssh proprely
His martirdom?

(*The Knight's Tale*, 1460–61)

Who koude telle yow the forme of daunces
so unkouth, and swiche fresshe contenaunces
swich subtil lookyng and dissymulynges
for drede of jalouse mennes apercevynges?

(*The Squire's Tale*, 283–6)

Even though it is merely a rhetorical strategy, the use of the interrogative mood in order to express the *topos de modestia* is a powerful device to present the speaker as a “cultivated” narrator, able to use what Harry Bailey defines as features of “heigh style”. Therefore, the prevalence of these questions in discourse becomes a sign of prestige and self-presentation of the speaker in front of his or her audience. In fact, the implied answer to the rhetorical question (inferred by the interlocutors) is “nobody could tell”. After that, however, the speaker does tell, which implies he is an extremely capable narrator, who can tell his tale “in English proper”.

Indeed, “cultivated” speakers like the Knight, the Man of Law or the Monk make a good use of all these devices described in the preceding paragraphs. However, as argued by A.S. Ambrisco (2004: 210),¹⁰

The Squire's egregiously bad deployment of *occupatio* and other rhetorical tropes has been one of the most noted features of the text

⁸ Quite significantly, the Wife of Bath does not employ any *topos de abbreviatio* throughout her speech, reinforcing the stereotype of the excessively talkative woman.

⁹ The term “face” refers to the public self-image as defined by Brown and Levinson (1983) in their Politeness theory.

¹⁰ We shall not enter here what stylistic purposes might Chaucer have had for this “strained use of a rhetorical trope he elsewhere employs appropriately”. However, the reader is invited to read Ambrisco's illuminating paper on this topic.

[even though he is described as] the only poet recognized as such among the *General Prologue's* portraits.

Another of the most common functions performed by rhetorical questions is persuasion. As in the previous cases, the use of the interrogative mood allows the speaker to involve the audience and lead them towards the "proper" inference. These questions are characteristically related to particular genres such as the sermon. This explains why they are so frequent in the *Parson's Tale*, which is in fact a sermon. Discursively, these rhetorical questions can also be followed by a statement where the speakers answer their own previous question.

What difference is bitwixe an ydolastre and an avaricious man, but
that an ydolastre, per aventure, ne hath but o mawmet or two, and
the avaricious man hath manye? For certes, every floryn in his cofre
is his mawment.

(*The Parson's Tale*, 748)

Significantly, the statements that accompany these "persuading" questions are usually modified by adverbial elements like *certes* ("certainly"). The use of such adverbial elements contributes to reinforce the truthfulness and certainty of the statement and therefore to the persuasion of the interlocutors. This kind of modification is for example one of the main mechanisms employed by the Parson in eleven out of the sixteen rhetorical questions he uses throughout his speech.

In conclusion, rhetorical questions in *The Canterbury Tales* can perform a wide variety of functions apart from the traditional persuading role commonly associated with them. Other functions are linked to rhetorical tropes such as those of *occupatio*, *abbreviatio* or *amplificatio*, which not only suspend the narrative but also appeal to the interlocutors' imagination.

Rhetorical questions can also be used for the creation of dramatic *pathos*. This is achieved by suspending the narrative action in order to involve the interlocutors in the most dramatic moments of the tale. The speaker can also employ rhetorical questions to express his grief towards the suffering of the characters in his or her tale.

Quite significantly, this grief can also focus on the speaker's own personal suffering. Given the fact that the interrogative mood helps to involve the interlocutors in the speaker's speech, the use of rhetorical

questions as expressions of one's own suffering is an extremely suitable device through which the speakers implicitly demand the interlocutor's sympathy and solidarity. In terms of politeness, they act as a clear strategy of *positive politeness*¹¹ (Brown & Levinson 1983) since they bring the speaker and interlocutors together, who thus become part of a common group.

Remarkably, there are only three cases of rhetorical questions used to express the speaker's personal suffering or very private information. As argued in a former paper (Maíz 2004: 85), this becomes one of the many common features shared by the prologues of the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner, who become parallel figures.

What wiste I wher my grace
was shapen for to be, or in what place?¹²
(*The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, 553–4)

Who wolde wene, or who wolde suppose,
the wo that in myn herte was, and pyne?
(*The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, 786–7)

What, trowe ye, that whiles I may preche,
And wyne gold and silver for I teche,
That I wol live in poverte wilfully?
(*The Pardoner's Prologue*, 439–41)

3 STYLISTIC EFFECTS DERIVED OF THE USE OF RHETORICAL QUESTIONS IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

In the first two sections, we have focused on the criteria used to identify rhetorical questions in the corpus as well as on the functions performed by rhetorical questions in this corpus. In the present section we shall concentrate on the stylistic effects achieved thanks to the use (or lack of use) of rhetorical questions throughout the pilgrim's interventions.

¹¹ Positive politeness strategies refer to those strategies by means of which speakers create solidarity with the addressees, showing an interest in their affairs and a belonging to a common group. Negative politeness strategies, on the other hand, are aimed at establishing a respectful distance between speaker and addressee and the avoidance of imposition on the addressee.

¹² Even though the Wife of Bath is expressing her own suffering, the question might also be considered as formulaic, similar to modern questions like "why me, Lord?"

To start with, it is quite remarkable that there is a group of pilgrims who do not use any rhetorical question whatsoever during their intervention: the Friar, the Summoner, the Physician, the Cook, the Prioress and the Second Nun. The fact is that these pilgrims and others like the Nun's Priest, the Reeve, the Manciple or the Shipman either do not use rhetorical questions or hardly ever use them in their speech. It is difficult to determine whether this absence is intentional on Chaucer's part. However, the truth is that it might be interpreted as a sign of their sociolinguistic lack of prestige, since their speech does not show any of the marks of "high style" but quite on the contrary. In fact, in his *General Prologue*, the narrator includes all of them in the social group that he defines as *churles*. *Churles'* speech therefore is presented as lacking the main features of a more refined and cultivated way of talking, associated with those pilgrims whose social status is higher, such as the Knight, the Monk or the Man of Law.¹³

Significantly, the Wife of Bath also employs a great deal of rhetorical questions throughout her *Prologue*, in an attempt to persuade the audience of the benefits of marriage, her main "occupation":¹⁴

Wher can ye seye, in any manere age,
that hye God defended mariage
by expres word? (*The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, 59–61)

And certes, if ther were no seed ysowe,
virginitee, thanne whereof sholde it growe? (ibid, 70–71)

As already commented, this type of rhetorical question is traditionally linked to genres such as the sermon, which explains why both the Pardoner and the Friar—whose occupation is directly related to the delivery of sermons—ironically refer to the Wife's overuse of this rhetorical device:

"Now, dame," quod he [the Pardoner] "by God and
by seint John! Ye been a noble prechour in this
cas." (*The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, 165–6)

¹³ Of course, the higher number of rhetorical questions in these tales can also be due to the genre of the tale itself. This is especially obvious in the case of the Monk's and the Parson's Tales, who are sermoning to their audiences. As has already been explained, the use of rhetorical questions is a mark of persuasive discourses, as sermons typically are.

¹⁴ In fact, while the rest of the pilgrims are identified by their occupation (i.e. the Miller, Manciple, Monk, etc.), the Wife's occupation seems to be "marriage".

Us nedeth nat to speken but of game,
and lete auctoritees, on Goddes name,
to prechyng and to scole eek of clerge.

(*The Friar's Prologue*, 1275–7)

The scarcity of rhetorical questions in the tales of some of the pilgrims makes it more noticeable when rhetorical questions appear at particular moments of the tale itself. This is especially significant in the *Miller's Tale*. In fact, in the *Miller's Tale*, the three rhetorical questions employed by the speaker are all used to characterise Absolon, one of the main characters, and they accompany the three central moments of his 'unfortunate love affair'. His first visit to Allison's window (*The Miller's Tale*, 3361–70), his useless wooing "but what availleth him as in this cas?" (ibid, 3385) and finally, the most climatic moment of all, the moment when Absolon kisses Allison's buttocks:

Who rubbeth now, who froteth now his lippes
with dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with
chippes¹⁵, but Absolon [...]? (ibid, 3747–9)

In contrast with the above, the fourth climatic moment in Absolon's affair —i.e. his revenge against the other lover —is not accompanied by any rhetorical question since he finally decides to abandon words and move into action. It is only when he abandons his attempts to be a courteous lover that he is really successful.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This paper has analysed a corpus of 111 rhetorical questions present in Chaucer's work *The Canterbury Tales*. The first objective of the study was to establish a set of criteria which would allow us to identify rhetorical questions as opposed to ordinary questions, since both of them are linguistically realised by the interrogative mood. These criteria can be summed up as follows:

- (i) As opposed to ordinary questions, rhetorical questions do not entail the suspension of the conversational turn; that is, the speaker does not give the addressee the chance of replying to the question.

¹⁵ Notice as well the accumulative effect of the prepositional phrases, which help contribute to the suspension of the narrative.

- (ii) As opposed to ordinary questions, the speaker knows the answer to the question himself. This answer can be explicitly provided by the same speaker (in a “fake” adjacency pair) or be included as part of the question itself —e.g. by means of linguistic units like “but” or the use of the comparative, amongst others. If the answer is not explicitly provided, it can be easily inferred by the audience, usually because it is part of their world knowledge, as in the example “is the sky blue?”.

Secondly, this paper aimed at analysing the different functions performed by rhetorical questions in the *Canterbury Tales* and why rhetorical questions are more suitable for the realisation of these functions than other linguistic forms.

Traditionally, rhetorical questions have been linked to the discourse of persuasion. In fact, this is also one of the functions performed in the tales, especially in those tales which belong to specific genres such as the sermon. However, there are other functions besides persuading which are also performed by rhetorical questions throughout the tales, namely:

- (i) expressing admiration (e.g. for the characters)
- (ii) expressing grief (e.g. for the characters and occasionally, for the speakers themselves)
- (iii) enriching the description (trope of *amplificatio*)
- (iv) shortening the description so as to “spur” the audience’s imagination (trope of *abbreviatio*)
- (v) expressing modesty (even if it is “false modesty”)

As we have seen, rhetorical questions are especially suitable to perform these functions given their “double nature”. In fact, even though they are assertions, they also retain their power to involve the addressee and guide them to make the inferences intended by the speaker because of their linguistic realisation through the interrogative mood. Likewise, this involvement of the audience is especially useful when trying to win their favour and solidarity, as in the expression of admiration or grief.

Finally, we have also explored some of the stylistic effects derived from the use of rhetorical questions in the *Canterbury Tales*, such as the reinforcement of the three climactic moments in the *Miller’s Tale*. The present analysis may be limited in the sense that it only focuses on a specific corpus. However, it offers a point of departure for the application

of these results to other corpora and shows that the study of rhetorical questions is more than worth its while.

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Appendix

This appendix lists the rhetorical questions present in the different tales (used by the pilgrims as narrators). The title of each tale is followed by the verses where rhetorical questions are present. The edition of the *Canterbury Tales* used is Benson's *The Riverside Chaucer* (3rd edition), published by Oxford University Press.

The Tales are in the same order they appear in *The Riverside* edition.

The Knight's Tale: vv. 1028–29, 1380, 1454–56, 1460–61, 1870–71, 1872–74, 1967–69, 2652–53, 2663–66, 2820–21.

The Miller's Tale: vv. 3370, 3385, 3747–3749.

The Reeve's Tale: v. 4144.

The Man of Law's Tale: vv. 232, 374, 470–71, 473–75, 484–87, 491–94, 498–501, 608, 645–50, 694–96, 703–5, 932–37, 939–42, 1114–16, 1135–38.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale: vv. 21–3, 34, 53–4, 59–62, 71–2, 115–17, 129–32, 213–4, 553–4, 692, 786–7.

The Clerk's Prologue and Tale: vv. 383, 457–9, 696–700.

The Merchant's Prologue, Tale and Epilogue: vv. 1288–89, 1295, 1338–39, 1955, 2065–66, 2107–8, 2125–27, 2412.

The Squire's Introduction and Tale: vv. 283–6, 298.

The Franklin's Prologue and Tale: vv. 803–5, 1550, 1165.

The Pardoner's Introduction, Prologue and Tale: vv. 439–41, 879, 900–3.

The Shipman's Tale: vv. 68–9.

The Prioress's Prologue and Tale: v. 575.

The Monk's Prologue and Tale: vv. 2136, 2401–2, 2575–7, 2646–50, 2663–66, 2667–70.

The Nun's Priest's Prologue, Tale and Epilogue: vv. 3346, 3350–51.

The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale: vv. 754–72, 838, 905–6, 1004–5, 1088, 1407–8, 1221, 1283, 1341.

The Manciple's Tale: v. 121.

The Parson's Prologue and Tale: vv. 167, 196, 202, 212, 264, 302, 414, 559, 577, 600, 604, 701, 704, 748, 766, 885, 932.