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# The *Canterbury Tales*: personal drama or experiments in poetic variety?

Readers sometimes neglect what is most extraordinary about the *Canterbury Tales*: its dazzling variety of stories and styles. Although story collections were a recognized literary form long before Chaucer (and were especially popular in the late Middle Ages, as shown by Boccaccio's *Decameron* and the *Confessio Amantis* of Chaucer's contemporary John Gower), no other example of the genre contains the radical literary individuality of the *Canterbury Tales* nor creates such complex relationships among its different parts. Chaucer himself had earlier used the form in the unfinished *Legend of Good Women*, but the *Legend* is a disappointment to some Chaucerians, largely because its stories of suffering women are so alike in approach and content. Uniformity also mars for many modern readers a story-collection within the *Canterbury Tales*: the several tragedies of the Monk are finally halted by the Knight because he says they are too pessimistic, though, as the Host suggests, their real fault may be their sleep-inducing monotony. But monotony is the last word one would use to describe the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. The work is energized by unexpected juxtapositions of styles and subject-matter, so that, for example, a long romance of ancient heroism comes before a short, witty tale of local lust and an account of alchemical swindlers follows a story about ancient martyrdom.

For many, the clearest signals of the variety of the *Canterbury Tales* are the sharply distinct tellers and their intricate relationships before, after, and sometimes during the tales. No other medieval story-collection has a frame that is so lively and dynamic. In contrast to the uniformly aristocratic company of the *Decameron* or the two speakers in Gower's *Confessio* (the Lover and Genius), Chaucer's pilgrim-tellers come from a wide range of clerical and lay estates: an exquisite squire rides next to scurrilous churls and a worldly businessman next to a poor but saintly parson. Like the rural retreat from the Florentine plague that occasions the *Decameron*, the Canterbury pilgrimage is presented as a real event, but unlike the Italian work, whose careful symmetry demands that each of the ten characters tell a tale on an assigned

topic on each of ten days, the English narrative permits violent interruptions and unexpected changes in direction.

The plan of tale-telling in order of social rank that is apparently intended by the Host is quickly subverted beyond repair when the drunken Miller insists that he, and not the Monk, will tell the second Canterbury tale and 'quite' the Knight's noble sentiments (I, 3120–7). But before the Miller can begin, the Reeve angrily speaks out, vowing to answer in kind the slanders he anticipates. As the journey proceeds, more surprises occur: two tales are abruptly cut off, while two others remain incomplete, perhaps deliberately so. A dispute breaks out between the Friar and Summoner during the Wife of Bath's performance (which also contains an interruption by the Pardoner), a quarrel they continue before and within their own tales. Later, two strangers ride up to join the company, and, soon after, the Cook is called upon for a story (even though an incomplete tale had already been assigned him in the first fragment), but he falls drunkenly from his horse before he can utter a word. Chaucer puts himself among this boisterous company and attempts two tales, yet the part he plays is that of benign incompetence familiar from his earlier works and he insists that he is only a reporter with no power over the words and actions of others (I, 725–38). As a result of such narratorial diffidence, the *Canterbury Tales* contains no logical order of events or explicit hierarchy of values, but all remains in flux and on the road.

The originality of Chaucer's frame narrative has encouraged many to see the relationship between the pilgrims and their tales as the central achievement of the *Canterbury Tales*. Although such an approach had been developing for over two hundred years, the most influential modern exponent of the so-called 'dramatic theory' was undoubtedly George Lyman Kittredge. In *Chaucer and His Poetry*, Kittredge argued that the individual tales are not told in Chaucer's own voice, but that each is a dramatic expression of the personality of its particular teller: 'the Pilgrims do not exist for the sake of the story, but *vice versa*. Structurally regarded, the stories are merely long speeches expressing, directly or indirectly, the characters of the several persons. They are more or less comparable, in this regard, to the soliloquies of Hamlet or Iago or Macbeth.'[1] Kittredge's view has been adapted and developed by later dramatic critics, but his central assumption – that the Canterbury pilgrims have complex, believable personalities that intimately inform their individual tales – is still widely accepted today, with few feeling the need to justify its validity.[2] The dramatic interpretation has surely contributed much to our understanding of the *Canterbury Tales*, especially by calling attention to its diversity, but the crippling limitation of the approach is that it can lead readers to concentrate on what is less interesting and less knowable in the work: the characters of the tellers instead of the poetry

itself. The special genius of the *Canterbury Tales* is not so much its frame narrative, fascinating as that may be, as it is the radical poetic experiments of the individual tales.

Those who see the *Canterbury Tales* as a drama of personality naturally make much of the magnificent descriptions of the pilgrims in the *General Prologue*; indeed, many readers in past centuries seem to have read no farther. Yet Chaucer's opening portraits are most extraordinary not because they give a full and realistic picture of late medieval English life (though they have much to tell us), still less because they contain psychologically believable individuals, but because of their literary skill and wit. The usual medieval character portrait is static and distant, as Chaucer himself demonstrates when he suddenly, and surely ironically, mimics it briefly to describe Criseyde, Troilus, and Diomede in Book v of *Troilus and Criseyde* (799–840). At its most elaborate, medieval characterization is often nothing more than an interminable list of the subject's physical parts, as in the following very brief excerpt from Paris's first sight of Helen, taken from the standard medieval history of Troy and itself adapted as a model of portraiture in an influential medieval rhetorical manual:

> He also admired how her even shoulder-blades, by a gentle descent to her flat back, with a depression between them, joined each side gracefully and pleasantly. He admired her arms, which were of proper length to induce the sweetest embraces, while her hands were plump and a little rounded, and the slender tips of her fingers, which were proportionally long, revealed ivory nails.[3]

In contrast to such methodical inventories, the portraits in the *General Prologue*, while equally detailed, are dynamic and vivid. The variety that marks the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole is fully present from the very beginning. Chaucer's pilgrims are arranged in no clear order or hierarchy, as his disingenuous apology ('My wit is short, ye may wel understonde': 1, 746) makes clear, and their descriptions vary in length, point of view, and tone. The longest (the Friar's) is sixty-one lines, the shortest (the Cook's) only nine; some emphasize what the pilgrim wears, some what he does, some what he thinks. Although the Knight is described quite formally from the outside, we go inside the mind of the Monk to share his private, rebellious thoughts. Chaucer does not restrict himself to a single consistent narrative voice in the *General Prologue*, as is sometimes claimed, but is variously naive and shrewd, devout and worldly – bluffly endorsing the murderous Shipman one moment, while slyly questioning the Physician's religious faith and business practices the next. The standards of judgement continually shift: the pretensions of the Merchant or the Man of Law produce social satire, while the

Pardoner is condemned and the Parson praised in strictly Christian terms. The portraits are built on memorable details and telling insights, such as the Prioress's careful table manners and unsophisticated French or the simple pleasures of municipal office enjoyed by the wives of the Guildsmen. Few readers can forget the Cook's 'mormal', the Miller's wart, and the Franklin's hospitality ('It snewed in his hous of mete and drynke': 1, 345), or the terrifying countenance of the Summoner and the odd appearance of the Pardoner.

Given such diverse and energetic portraits, it is all too easy to imagine the Canterbury pilgrims as fully developed and psychologically complex characters, like those we know from the realistic novel or film. Scholars have argued that Chaucer must have had real-life models and even suggested specific names, but the best studies confirm what some earlier readers understood – the *General Prologue* describes types rather than specific individuals. In the eighteenth century, Dryden and Blake argued that the Canterbury pilgrims illustrate universal categories of human nature, and in her *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, Jill Mann has shown that the portraits are largely based on material from the traditional descriptions of different occupational 'estates'.[4] As the labels Knight, Miller, Prioress, and even Wife suggest, the *General Prologue* describes professions rather than believable personalities, and many of its pilgrims are composite portraits of an estate. No single warrior could have fought all the battles attributed to the Knight, just as the Monk and Friar exemplify the full range (and not just some) of the vices associated with their respective callings.

Even when the *General Prologue* far transcends standard medieval portraiture and seems most complex, the result is not the rounded, believable characters required for dramatic interpretations so much as intriguing, incomplete puzzles. Chaucer often creates the illusion of life-like individuality through brief insinuations, as in the famous couplet about the Man of Law ('Nowher so bisy a man as he ther nas, / And yet he semed bisier than he was': 321–2) or the observation that 'ther wiste no wight' that the Merchant 'was in dette' (280). But such lines suggest more than they actually state. They are so framed that the reader may guess, but cannot certainly know, how busy the Lawyer actually is, or whether no one recognizes the Merchant to be in debt because he is not or because he has hidden it so well. Chaucer's most subtle portraits stubbornly avoid final judgement and thus allow a range of interpretation. The courteous and 'pitous' Prioress, for instance, has been seen as everything from a corrupter of holy office to an attractive, if sentimental, woman of style. Such diversity of opinion is a tribute to Chaucer's skill, but the reader who chooses any single view, and interprets the tale in its light, runs the risk of serious distortion because of a subjective reaction to a

brief and deliberately ambiguous portrait. The *General Prologue* rarely provides characterization that is specific or clear enough for the reader to have any confidence that it will be more than generally useful in understanding the tale that follows.

Chaucer's pilgrims are not developed much further in their later appearances on the road to Canterbury. When he so desires, the poet can create characters as complex and convincing as any in medieval literature, as we see most memorably in *Troilus and Criseyde*, but the frame of the *Canterbury Tales* suggests that he was not primarily concerned with the psychological depth or consistency of his pilgrim-narrators. Many of the pilgrims – such as the Squire, Physician, Second Nun, and Shipman – make only the briefest appearance, or none, outside the *General Prologue*. More revealing are the frequent inconsistencies between what we are told about a pilgrim in his or her portrait and what we discover later. Consider the contrast between the stiff, secretive Merchant in his portrait and the voluble husband who recklessly exposes his marital failure in the prologue to his tale. The pleasure-loving Monk of the *General Prologue* also seems to have little in common with the cleric of the same name who ignores the Host's suggestive repartee in order to tell his solemn tragedies; likewise, the old age of the Reeve, which is so important in the prologue to his tale, goes unmentioned in his portrait in the *General Prologue*. Of course, clever readers will be able to construct a consistent character out of even the most random and contradictory materials, but in so doing they must supplement what the poet has written with their own inventions, and thus they rarely agree with one another.

If most of the Canterbury pilgrims are relatively undeveloped and appear only briefly after the *General Prologue*, there are some striking exceptions. Three pilgrims especially, who are often at the centre of dramatic interpretations of the *Canterbury Tales* – the Canon's Yeoman, the Wife of Bath, and the Pardoner – come forward in the body of the work to give detailed accounts of their lives. Yet even though all three possess extraordinary narrative energy, and contribute much to the total effect of the *Canterbury Tales*, each is more a dramatic voice than a believable personality. We see a public performance rather than a psychological study. Like Chaucer's other pilgrims, the Canon's Yeoman, Wife of Bath, and Pardoner are essentially occupational types not individual subjects, and what they tell us about themselves has only a general relationship to their stories.

The *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* shows the flexibility of the Canterbury frame and its potential for narrative surprise. The pilgrims are travelling through 'Boghtoun under Blee' when they are suddenly overtaken by a hard-riding canon and his yeoman to whom the narrator responds strongly (for example,

'it was joye for to seen hym swete!': VIII, 579). The Host's initial questioning of the Yeoman results in extravagant praise of the Canon and his achievements, including the claim that he can pave the road 'al of silver and of gold' (VIII, 626). When Harry wonders why such a distinguished man is dressed in filthy rags, the Yeoman laments that his master will never prosper, and then begins to admit the failures that alchemy has brought. The Canon attempts to stop these revelations, but when he fails he flees the company 'for verray sorwe and shame' (702), leaving the Yeoman to tell all: 'Syn that my lord is goon, I wol nat spare; / Swich thyng as that I knowe, I wol declare' (718–19).

This scene is one of the most exciting moments in the frame narrative, and perhaps shows Chaucer extending the possibilities of the format at a late stage in the composition of the *Canterbury Tales*. But we should not confuse this with psychological realism. Why does the Yeoman change so quickly from excessive praise of his master to bitter condemnation? Why does he decide now, within minutes of joining the pilgrims, to confess everything to Harry Bailly? One could imagine circumstances and motives that would make such behaviour plausible – and many dramatic critics have – but Chaucer does not even bother to try. He is more interested in the result of the Yeoman's decision to confess than in establishing the inner motives that brought it about. As often, the primary purpose of this prologue is to introduce the subsequent tale.

The *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* itself has interested dramatic critics because its first half, which is less a story than a hodgepodge of alchemical lore, is said to be drawn from the teller's own experiences. Critics sometimes read Chaucer's tales as though they were as personally revealing as Browning's dramatic monologues, but, in fact, the *prima pars* of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is the only explicitly autobiographical episode not in a prologue in the entire *Canterbury Tales*:

> With this Chanoun I dwelt have seven yeer,
> And of his science am I never the neer.
> Al that I hadde I have lost therby,
> And, God woot, so hath many mo than I.           (720–3)

As the last line of the quotation suggests, however, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, though autobiographical, is only superficially personal. The Yeoman and his experiences are offered as a demonstration of the errors of many; he is not an individual but an exemplum: 'Lat every man be war by me for evere!' (737).

The first half of the tale is less about the Canon's Yeoman than about his profession. It tells us almost nothing special about the teller because its subject from first to last is the 'cursed craft' (830) and 'elvysshe nyce loore'

(842) of alchemy. Indeed, the word 'craft' occurs more often here than in any other tale. Thus dramatic narration need not mean genuine personal disclosure: as early as the *House of Fame*, Chaucer understood how effectively a vivacious speaking voice could present technical information, especially scientific lore. Although the Eagle who lectures 'Geffrey' so authoritatively on the way to the House of Fame makes the journey delightful for the reader, he is little more than a cartoon figure. Similarly, the colloquial, breathless, occasionally confused voice in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* defines no individual (the Yeoman has been judged at various times both stupid and shrewd), but instead illustrates the mixture of chaos and enthusiasm among all alchemists. The most memorable detail we learn about the Canon's Yeoman is purely external and generic (his leaden complexion from too much blowing on the fire). The voice performs its functions – it is flexible, aware of the audience, and lively. It has kept us interested while demonstrating the delusions of alchemy, but we have learned nothing idiosyncratic or personal about the Yeoman. The dramatic voice is nothing more, and nothing less, than a brilliant narrative device.

The second part of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, about another canon who tricks a greedy priest into believing he knows how to turn base metal into silver, is told in the same animated voice, with even more moral outrage: 'This false chanoun – the foule feend hym fecche!' (1159). Despite the teller's explicit denial, dramatic critics often assume that the Yeoman is actually speaking about his master; but the narrative logic is surely wrong (why would the confessing Yeoman suddenly turn coy?), and there is no reason to believe that the Canon and his Yeoman are crooks – everything we are told suggests they are victims of sincere belief in the science. The delight some readers find in developing such faint personal hints merely distorts the purpose of the work. The *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* reveals the folly of alchemy, not the folly of one or two individual pilgrims. It is an extended occupational portrait. The first part of the tale demonstrates one of the vices of alchemy (deluding oneself), while the second part demonstrates another (deluding others); the connection between the two is thematic rather than personal. Any sense of dramatic consistency of the tale is further undermined by its conclusion, in which a more learned and thoughtful voice than we have heard before assesses the pros and cons of alchemy before advising that men should wait for God to reveal its secrets (1388–1481). The different tone will bother only those who imagine that the tale has been told throughout by a complex and believable personality. In fact, the most interesting relationships are literary rather than dramatic; not between the Canon's Yeoman and his tale, but, for instance, between the sterile work and hellish fire of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and the fruitful work and divine fire of the preceding *Second Nun's Tale*.

The Wife of Bath is undoubtedly the most fully and consistently developed of the Canterbury pilgrims. Her prologue is the longest in the *Tales* and offers a clever defence of marriage as well as detailed and roughly chronological accounts of her five husbands. In addition to being of special interest to modern feminist critics, Alison was apparently a great favourite from the start. Chaucer himself cites her twice, in his *Envoy to Bukton* and within the *Merchant's Tale*, and it has been persuasively argued that her role grew over the years, perhaps in response to public demand.[5] If so, the Wife's evolution is something like that of Shakespeare's Falstaff, whom she resembles in so many other ways. Like him, she has an allegorical model, possesses great verbal powers, and represents an exaggeration of one aspect of human nature more than a convincing human being. Like Falstaff also, the Wife has moments of real pathos – the regret for her lost youth or her troubles with her fifth husband, Jankyn, for instance – but the reader never knows quite how to take these scenes because everything important we think we know about her comes from her own mouth.

Like the Canon's Yeoman, the Wife of Bath has a distinct speaking voice, though it is heard only in her prologue. In the first part, before the interruption of the Pardoner, the Wife produces a travesty of traditional Christian teachings about marriage with her brilliant spoof of medieval logic and biblical quotation. Question: Should one marry more than once? Answer: Christ's views on this are difficult to understand, but certainly God's 'gentil text' bidding us to 'wexe and multiplye' is clear enough – and look at all Solomon's wives (III, 9–44). Question: Is virginity commanded? Answer: If so, where would new virgins come from? And does not a household need wooden vessels as well as gold? And why then were humans given 'membres of generacion' (62–134)? The Wife's eclectic arguments never seriously engage orthodox belief, but their cleverness is thoroughly entertaining. Later, we see more evidence of her terrifying fluency when she repeats a speech used to overwhelm her old husbands that masterfully blends false reasoning ('And sith a man is moore resonable / Than womman is, ye moste been suffrable'), stunning vulgarity ('Is it for ye wolde have my queynte allone'?), and magnanimous generosity ('Wy, taak it al! Lo, have it every deel!': 441–5). Despite her initial claim to follow 'experience' rather than 'auctoritee', the Wife of Bath is an intellectual *manqué*, a would-be clerk, who, like Falstaff, is fully powerful only in discourse.

The other long autobiographical prologue in the *Canterbury Tales* is that of the equally verbal Pardoner. When he interrupts the Wife, the Pardoner calls her a 'noble prechour' (III, 165), a subject on which he is an expert. Now in his own prologue, he explains his use of the pulpit to impress the 'lewed peple' (VI, 437) and make them give him money. Like the expert

huckster he is, the Pardoner knows all the tricks of the trade. He puts on a multimedia show that includes papal bulls and fake relics, but his most effective skill is his use of words. His verbal devices include 'olde stories' (436), 'false japes' (394), and indirect attacks on his enemies (412–22); his showy Latin quotations (344–6) are balanced by a sniggering reference to a wife sleeping with two or three priests (369–71). The Pardoner is justly proud of his command of language. With his 'hauteyn speche' he makes his words ring out 'as round as gooth a belle' (330–1), and the effect is spectacular: 'Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne / That it is joye to se my bisynesse' (398–9).[6]

Like the Canon's Yeoman, the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner are primarily dramatic voices. Their prologues contain magnificent performances, but they do not reveal individual personality. Instead of believable human beings, the Pardoner and the Wife are verbal artists, skilled users of words. However much the reader enjoys their linguistic virtuosity, nothing that either says can be trusted. Most of what we know about them is what they themselves choose to tell us in their prologues, and a persistent theme of both is their ability to manipulate others with false speech. Because we have no way of verifying the truth of what either says, the reader who desires to define the 'real' Pardoner or Wife behind the performances can do so only subjectively. We may suspect that the Wife's final relationship with Jankyn was not as harmonious as she asserts, or wonder about the jolly wenches the Pardoner boasts of having in every town, but we can be no more certain about these claims than about anything else either says. As a result, critics can find justification for arguing that the Pardoner is everything from a damned soul to Christ-like, and that the Wife of Bath is either a lusty lover of life or a pitiful example of the wages of sin.

The mistake is to imagine that Chaucer has given a full and consistent human personality to either. Despite the many lines devoted to them, both the Pardoner and the Wife, like the other Canterbury pilgrims, are essentially occupational types. Although the Wife's *Prologue* may seem intimate because it concerns domestic life, all that she ever talks about is her profession – marriage. We hear nothing about weaving (her first vocation) and no details of the extramarital sexual encounters she hints at; other parts of her life, like her gossips or pilgrimages, are mentioned only when directly relevant to her husbands. The Pardoner is equally professional. For all his seeming revelations, his skill in the pulpit is really all that we know about him and the only subject of his apparently personal prologue. Although Chaucer has developed them far beyond their original models in the *Roman de la Rose*, the Wife and Pardoner retain an allegorical core: she is the standard nightmare of medieval antifeminism and he the corrupt preacher he boasts himself to

be. This is not to say that either is dull or simple. As allegorical figures such as Gluttony or Lady Meed in Langland's *Piers Plowman* demonstrate, literary dynamism is not the same as in-depth psychological realism. In fiction, as Dickens knew, it is often the fundamental purity of a characterization that makes it memorable.

Although the Pardoner and Wife of Bath are highly developed in their prologues, the relations between these pilgrims and their tales are not especially revealing. The *Wife of Bath's Tale* is much shorter than the preceding *Prologue*. The story of the old hag who wins back both youth and a vigorous husband can be read as the Wife's wish-fulfilment, if one so desires, but the voice of the teller has changed completely. The style of the tale is more reserved and objective than that of the prologue (only an early dig at friars reminds us of the earlier tone), and the idealistic speeches in the tale on gentility, poverty, and age sound nothing like the Wife's aggressive materialism and impudent self-assertion. The *Pardoner's Tale* is more closely connected to its teller (it purports to be his standard homily), but for all its use of preaching techniques, its resemblance to an actual sermon is only general. Moreover, while the melodramatic denunciation of the three tavern sins is clearly appropriate to a corrupt preacher, the profundity and quiet austerity of the exemplum of the 'riotoures' seem far beyond his understanding. There is no reason to believe that either part reveals anything about the Pardoner as a man. As with the Canon's Yeoman, the most fruitful relationships are literary rather than personal. Rather than pursuing the elusive psyches of even these highly developed pilgrims, the reader would do better to look closely at how the *Wife of Bath's Tale* differs from experiments with romance narrative elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales*. Similarly, one might compare the *Pardoner's Tale* with Chaucer's other forms of Christian instruction in the collection or even explore its internal juxtaposition of two very different kinds of religious poetry – the flamboyant denunciation in contrast to the haunting exemplum. We know very little that is certain about the personal lives of the Wife and the Pardoner, but the poetry of their tales is fully available for literary analysis and comparison.

Although few, if any, of the tales reveal the psychology of their pilgrim speakers in any significant way, Chaucer has so designed the *Canterbury Tales* that there is usually some kind of correspondence between teller and tale. The poet himself calls attention to this in a warning to fastidious readers before the *Miller's Tale*:

> The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe wel this.
> So was the Reve eek and othere mo,
> And harlotrie they tolden bothe two. (I, 3182–4)

Note, however, that the relationship Chaucer claims here is extremely broad and the general result of class rather than individual personality – a low-born pilgrim will naturally tell a low story.

The natural appropriateness of tale to teller is clearly demonstrated in the first fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*, the most finished part of the work and the best indication of what the whole would have been like had Chaucer lived to complete it. After the *General Prologue*, the noble Knight's philosophical story of chivalry, love, and 'gentilesse' is followed, as Chaucer warns, by three ribald fabliaux told by churls. Elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales*, a similar congruity between estate and kind of story is common. The two nuns tell religious tales, the Squire and Franklin tell romances, and the Pardoner and Parson explore the effects of sin. Sometimes the relationship may be even more specific. The voice of the pompous Man of Law has been detected in his highly rhetorical tale of the trials of Custance and that of the plain, clever Clerk in his story of Griselda.

But despite such general agreement, the intense, personal association between teller and tale automatically assumed by the dramatic theory is rare in the *Canterbury Tales*. The classical learning of the *Knight's Tale*, the polished art of the *Miller's Tale*, the moral delicacy of the *Friar's Tale*, the subtle cleverness of the *Summoner's Tale*, and the dogged didacticism of the *Monk's Tale* – none of these qualities, but rather their reverse, is suggested by what we know of the pilgrims outside the tales. Perhaps the most extreme disjunction of teller and tale is the contrast between the rough, murderous Shipman of the *General Prologue* and the cool, sophisticated art of the *Shipman's Tale*.

Given such loose connections between teller and tale, dramatic readings of the *Canterbury Tales* are frequently either banal (the *Knight's Tale* fits the Knight because it is about chivalry) or highly imaginative (the *Prioress's Tale* has been said to reveal its teller as a frustrated mother). Even worse, the approach sometimes leads critics to assume that the supposed limitations of a pilgrim mean that the tale assigned to him or her must be severely flawed or even deliberately bad. Tales so regarded are often moral or religious works, such as the tale of *Melibee* or the Prioress's, Second Nun's, Man of Law's, Physician's, and Clerk's tales, but others, including the *Squire's Tale* and *Franklin's Tale*, have been similarly dismissed. It is possible that Chaucer wanted some of these tales to be read ironically, but it is more probable that the dramatic approach is being used to support modern assumptions about what makes a good story.

Dramatic interpretations sometimes manage to trivialize Chaucer's greatest achievements by associating them too closely with their assigned tellers. A flagrant example is the attempt to read the Merchant into the extraordinary tale of the marriage of old January to 'fresshe' May. Neither the secretive

Merchant of the *General Prologue* nor the recklessly confessional husband of the *Merchant's Prologue* has much in common with the protagonist of the *Merchant's Tale*, despite the circular reasoning by which dramatic critics derive the biography of the Merchant almost entirely from the story of January, after which teller and tale are, not unsurprisingly, found to be in remarkable agreement. The relationship between the *Merchant's Prologue*, in which the Merchant briefly and bitterly condemns his wife of two months, and the tale that follows is introductory rather than psychological. The Merchant's complaints are a conventional piece of medieval antifeminism, not a significant revelation of individual personality. They serve to prepare the reader for a tale about married woe, but they do not begin to define the specific shape of that tale – the Merchant's problems with his wife are different from and more familiar than January's. It is reductive in the extreme to derive the complexity and dark brilliance of the *Merchant's Tale* from the simple disappointments of a new husband. January is one of Chaucer's greatest achievements in moral characterization, but the pilgrim Merchant is little more than a stock figure. The *Merchant's Tale* warns us to trust the tale and not the teller.

I am not, of course, arguing that the dramatic frame has no purpose in the *Canterbury Tales*, only that it, along with the portraits in the *General Prologue*, has been given too much of the wrong kind of attention by some readers. Chaucer often uses a pilgrim's voice to make complex information more lively, as we have seen with the antifeminism of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* or the alchemical lore of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. The frame narrative offers the reader a more ordinary, frequently comic world that is something of a relief between the powerful fictions of the tales themselves. If Chaucer's prologues prepare us only generally for what is to come, the dramatic episodes between pilgrims that conclude some tales are rarely their thematic or artistic culmination, though they are commonly so regarded. The coarse foolery at the end of the *Pardoner's Tale*, for example, during which the Host angrily insults the Pardoner, has often dominated critical discussions at the expense of the infinitely greater narrative of the three revellers. Like the Host himself, who is so active in these episodes, the frame often provides indirect and deliberately misleading comment on the tales, something like the grotesques in the margins of medieval manuscripts. For all its value and originality, the pilgrimage story should not become more important than the tales it encloses.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the frame is that its personal conflicts point to the more important literary conflicts of the tales themselves. When the drunken Miller interrupts to 'quite' the *Knight's Tale*, the human drama is only a brief and general moment of class antagonism (the two

pilgrims never actually address one another), but the resulting juxtaposition of their two different tales initiates the extraordinary artistic variety of the *Canterbury Tales*. Imagine how different the *Tales* would be if, as originally planned, the long and philosophical *Knight's Tale* were then followed by the interminable tragedies of the Monk. How many would want to read further? Instead, Chaucer uses the Miller's rudeness to establish the principle of literary diversity that enlivens and distinguishes the entire collection.

As I have suggested throughout this essay, the Canterbury tales are a series of literary experiments rather than a drama of personalities. The undeniable variety of the collection comes from the conflicting artistries of the tales themselves. Stylistically, not one of Chaucer's tales is much like any other. Each is a unique work with its own distinct poetic, a poetic that ranges from large literary elements, such as narrator and dialogue, down to the specifics of imagery, allusion, and vocabulary. Even more remarkable, the special artistry of an individual tale remains consistent throughout, almost as if Chaucer had created an individual poetic for each. I know of no other literary work so constructed, for the various tales are not parodies or only generally different; instead, each is a fully worked-out expression of a special kind of poetry. This radical stylistic variety, and not the relations between tale and teller, is the central achievement of the *Canterbury Tales*.

The *General Prologue* first prepares us for the coming drama of style with its many different kinds of pilgrim portraits, and Chaucer further shows us how to read the *Canterbury Tales* in the two works he assigns to himself – the clever parody *Sir Thopas* and the dull if worthy *Melibee*. Although much critical ingenuity has been spent trying to define the vague and contradictory figure of 'Chaucer the Pilgrim', the significant drama in this episode is the literary opposition of the two tales themselves. *Thopas* and *Melibee* reveal no clear pilgrim personality, but they do suggest the outer boundaries of Christian literature. Though a delightful exercise in aesthetic burlesque, *Thopas* is so self-indulgent and insubstantial, so empty of theme and *sentence*, that it risks confirming the worst fears of medieval moralists about the frivolity and falsity of poetry. In contrast, the admirable but plodding *Melibee* threatens to undermine its didactic mission by putting its audience to sleep. In the sharp artistic opposition of his own two tales, Chaucer both announces the dialectic of styles in the *Canterbury Tales* and suggests that the most effective poetry combines the moral meaning of *Melibee* with the literary skill of *Sir Thopas* – 'sentence' and 'solaas' (I, 798).

Chaucer's art of literary contrast and experiment is found throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. It begins with the juxtaposition of the Knight's and Miller's tales, whose differences go far beyond the change from romance to fabliau, and near the end we find an equally complex relationship between the paired

tales of the Second Nun and the Canon's Yeoman, which are opposite in form and theme, but share similar kinds of imagery. Chaucer even creates poetic variety within a single tale. The first part of the *Pardoner's Tale* (the sermon on the tavern sins) is as corrupt as it is skilful – a dazzling, manipulative, and superficial harangue designed to sell pardons, but one that offers no real understanding of sin or help against it. Yet the second part of the tale (the exemplum of the three rioters searching for Death) is completely different in tone and effect: the melodramatic rhetoric of the sermon instantly gives way at line 661 to a powerfully understated and symbolically charged narrative that succeeds as both an exciting story and a vehicle for serious Christian instruction. The two different kinds of artistry in the *Pardoner's Tale* suggest both the dangers and the opportunities of moral fiction.

The literary variety of the *Canterbury Tales* occurs even among tales that ought to be most alike. Although rarely discussed directly by critics, and then only generally, the radical stylistic differences among stories of the same genre are the clearest proof of the unique poetic sensibilities created for each of the Canterbury tales. The several romances in the collection, for example, are significantly different from one another. A similar literary variety occurs in the religious tales. The *Prioress's Tale* and the *Second Nun's Tale* both tell of an innocent martyr whose death is a triumph of Christian faith, yet the first is a lyrical exercise in affective piety, while the second is an austere and intellectual work that makes complex use of dialogue and imagery.

Perhaps the most surprising example of literary experimentation within a single genre occurs in the fabliaux. The *Miller's Tale*, *Reeve's Tale*, *Shipman's Tale*, and *Merchant's Tale* all contain the same basic situation (a husband is cuckolded by a younger man whom he himself has introduced into the household), yet no two share anything like the same artistry; rather each contains its own unique poetic voice, only a little of which can be attributed to the different tellers. The stylistic individuality of Chaucer's fabliaux is found in everything from their different narrators and wooing scenes to their special use of imagery and vocabulary. For instance, each of the fabliaux has its characteristic kind of speech: quick and witty exchanges in the *Miller's Tale*, flat and frequently inarticulate expression in the *Reeve's Tale*, sophisticated, manipulative dialogue in the *Shipman's Tale*, and long, often interior monologues of great psychological and moral depth in the *Merchant's Tale*. Or consider a more specific example: literary and learned allusions are virtually non-existent in the Reeve's and Shipman's tales, but extremely important, though completely different, in the Miller's and Merchant's tales. The allusions in the *Miller's Tale* are drawn largely from popular sources like contemporary songs or mystery plays, while those in the *Merchant's Tale* are more various and more learned (including its frequent use of biblical and

classic stories), introducing new standards of judgement, and perhaps also hope, to the sordid fabliau world of January and May.

The *Reeve's Tale* has sometimes been slighted by critics in favour of the more flamboyant *Miller's Tale*. But when the two are read together and compared as experiments in the possibilities of a genre, the special virtues of the *Reeve's Tale* become apparent, such as its glorious glossary and profound understanding of the physical and social constraints of ordinary life. Perhaps the clearest proof of the unique and accomplished artistry of the *Reeve's Tale* is the northern dialect spoken by the two Cambridge students. For this one tale and its particular poet, Chaucer creates an unprecedented and sophisticated literary device he never uses again. Some critics have also dismissed the *Shipman's Tale*, mistaking its individual, understated artistry for inferiority. The work lacks some of the famous literary elements of Chaucer's other fabliaux because its special accomplishments lie elsewhere, especially in the long dialogue of seduction between wife and monk whose cool calculation is unmatched elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales*.

Because it privileges relationships sanctioned by the frame narrative, the dramatic approach has hindered the detailed and wide-ranging literary comparisons between particular tales and among groups of tales sketched above. Such comparisons are essential to understanding the accomplishment of the *Canterbury Tales*, allowing us to recognize Chaucer's intricate drama of style. The *Canterbury Tales* is a collection of radically different kinds of poetry; each contributes a unique artistic vision, and thus a special view of the world. Even Chaucer's comic tales contain a challenging literary and thematic individuality. Too often the dramatic theory has concealed or trivialized the depth and the poetic range of the collection by asking us to dwell on the lesser thing (the pilgrims) rather than the greater (the tales themselves). Although the *Canterbury Tales* has been enjoyed for over six hundred years, the full achievement of Chaucer's experiments in poetic variety remains to be explored.

NOTES

1. George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), p. 155.
2. Influential recent studies of the *Canterbury Tales*, for all their theoretical sophistication, often accept many of the assumptions of Kittredge's dramatic approach: see, for example, H. Marshall Leicester, Jr's postmodern *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, 1990), and Lee Patterson's historicist *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, 1991). Whatever its limitations, the dramatic theory will persist in the teaching of Chaucer, if for no other reason than that it is so convenient for presenting the *Canterbury Tales* to students. For a recent survey of the distorting effects of the

dramatic theory on interpretations of the *Man of Law's Tale*, and an attempt to show what is to be gained by abandoning it, see A. C. Spearing, 'Narrative Voice: The Case of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*', *New Literary History*, 32 (2001), 715–46.

3. Guido delle Colonne, *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, trans. Mary E. Meek (Bloomington, Ind., 1974), p. 71.

4. Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge, 1973). The comments of Dryden and Blake are most conveniently found in *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, ed. D. S. Brewer, vol. 2 (London, 1978), pp. 66–7 and pp. 249–60.

5. R. A. Pratt, 'The Development of the Wife of Bath' in *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Croll Baugh*, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia, 1961), pp. 45–79.

6. There is a strong modern tradition of understanding the Pardoner not only textually but also sexually (assuming him to be, in some sense, a eunuch or a homosexual), an assumption that has only been intensified by queer theory. For arguments that question this approach, however, see my 'Chaucer's Pardoner: His Sexuality and Modern Critics' and Richard Firth Green's 'The Sexual Normality of Chaucer's Pardoner', *Mediaevalia*, 8 (1985), 337–49 and 351–8.

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