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CHAUCER'S MEAGRE REFERENCE  
TO THE VARIABLE WORLD  

PART I  

Toshinori HIRA  

According to the conventions of court circles Chaucer serves on 
the whole the god of Love and praises the lady.¹ Courtly love 
raised the lady to a goddess or queen. The lady, who is usually a 
woman of rank, is the object of her lover’s devotion and worship. 
So the lover is required to serve her like a knight is obliged to 
serve his lord or God.² The lady is the flower of flowers and is 
allegorized as a rose or daisy. 

... she [i.e. the daisy] that is of alle floures flour, 
Fulfilled of al vertu and honour, 
And evere ilyke faire, and fressh of hewe.³  

Again, Chaucer has a respect for Church authority and accepts her 
document. He does not deny the religious system of the Church. He 
knows well that nearly all his works except some works on philo-
sophy and religion should be revoked. They all belong to worldly 
vanities.  

¹) See HF, 615f. Chaucer's quotations in this paper are from Cambridge 
used to denote Chaucer’s works are those of Robinson’s edition.  
²) See I (A) 87-88; also Bernart de Ventadorn, quoted by W. G. Dodd in 
The System of Courtly Love, in Chaucer Criticism, ed. R. J. Schoeck and 
³) LGW, 53-55.
... our book seith, "Al that is written for our doctrine," and that is myn entente.4

The Church claimed that a literary activity should be performed for the service of God like all the other human activities. Chaucer shares in the minstrel's merriment and the jester's jocularity. Their tales only help folk to make for a sin. The minstrel and jester of the time were generally regarded as servants of the Devil.5 William of Nassington says:

I will make na vayn carpynge
Of dedes of armys, ne of amours,
As dus mynstralles and jeestours
That makys carpyng in many a place
Of Octovyane and of Isambrase
And of many other jeestes.

All if it myght sum men lyke,
I thinke my carpyng sail nott be,
ff or that I hold bot vanite.6

Probably, therefore, Chaucer lays emphasis on his Knight's service in the wars against the infidel.7 The Knight is truly perfect, as a knight ought to be. Many times he has fought for our faith in Christendom as well as in heathen countries. So also are the Parson and his brother, the Plowman. They are both the idealized portraits they ought to be. Chaucer assigns ideal portraits to the men who

4) X (I) 1083.
5) See Col. iii, 8. Langland regards a minstrel as a harmless man; see Piers Plowman, ed. G. Kane (London, 1960), A-Text, Prologue, 33-34.
7) See I (A) 51f.
represent the primary classes of feudal society. The knightly class is represented by the Knight and the Squire; the clergy by the Parson; and the labouring class by the Plowman. They render their respective duties as God ordains them to do their duties. The conception of class distinction was generally accepted to be ordained by God.

God has ordained three classes of men, namely, labourers such as husbandmen and craftsmen to support the whole body of the Church after the manner of feet, knights to defend it in the fashion of hands, clergy to rule and lead it after the manner eyes. And all the aforesaid who maintain their own status are of the family of God.8

The Parson who is a learned man and a good priest preaches Christ’s gospel to his parishioners,9 and does not seek chantry endowments. He remains at his parish and does not appropriate the revenue of his parish. Rather he gives to poor parishioners from his small revenue and offerings. The Plowman, too, who is an honest labourer, lives in peace and perfect charity, and does not doubt or complain of his duty. Without getting wages he is willing to render manual labour service, probably to the land of his lord.10 As for him Chaucer represents Geoffrey or I, on the whole, as a dull and simple-minded man who is so slow in his wits.11 Or he appears as a detached man, so indifferent, but so humble to his audience.

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8) Quoted from G.R. Owst, op. cit., p. 554. The same idea is found in Piers Plowman, A-Text, Passus VII.
9) In the description of his Parson Chaucer repeats ‘the Gospel’ or ‘Christ’s teaching’ three times; see I (A) 481, 498, 527.
10) See I (A) 531f.; also III (D) 1109f., III (D) 1584f., IV (E) 204f., VII (B3) 2821f., Form Age, 3f., Gent, 1f.
11) See the dialogue between the Black Knight and Chaucer in the Book of the Duchess, 1298f. Cf. the Eagle’s words to Geoffrey in the House of Fame, 729f.
He semeth elvyssh by his contenaunce,
For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce.\textsuperscript{12)}

He does not hesitate to apologize for introducing into his works what his audience does not expect of him. He begs his audience to forgive him. He has failed to put his Canterbury pilgrims in order in accordance with the social standings to which they properly belong, and he adds that he is a fool.

My wit is short, ye may wel understonde.\textsuperscript{13)}

Sometimes, however, Chaucer releases himself from the limits of the conventions to which he is obliged to be confined. He sees realities. There he could scarcely have failed to see that the conventions of the time were not followed. Few knights saw fighting; many of them were "given up to wantonness and ease."\textsuperscript{14)} Likewise, most parsons were "absent from their flock" and were busy with worldly pursuits. They must have appeared to make "a compact and indenture between them and the demons."\textsuperscript{15)} Many of plowmen, too, ceased to be the honest labourers.

But he [i.e. labourer] be heighliche hirid ellis wile he chide, |
That he was werkman ywrought warie the tyme,
And thanne curse the king & alle the counseil aftir
Suche lawis to loke laboureris to chast[e].\textsuperscript{16)}

Chaucer commits heresy against the god of Love. He, for example, treats Criseyde as a real human being. She betrays Troilus, her

\textsuperscript{12)} VII (B\textsuperscript{2}) 703-704.
\textsuperscript{13)} I (A) 746.
\textsuperscript{14)} Quoted from G. R. Owst, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 332.
\textsuperscript{15)} Quoted from \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 261-262.
\textsuperscript{16)} \textit{Piers Plowman}, A-Text, VII, 296-299. I somewhat modernized the spelling.
lover, when she has had illicit intercourse with Diomede, her new lover, Troilus' opponent.

\begin{align*}
    \text{Al be I [i.e. Criseyde] nat the first that dide amys,} \\
    \text{What helpeth that to don my blame awey?} \\
    \text{But syn I se ther is no bettre way,} \\
    \text{And that to late is now for me to rewe } [=\text{do penance}], \\
    \text{To Diomede algate I wol be trewe.}^{17)}
\end{align*}

Criseyde is an ordinary woman, with emotions and human love, though she is given by Chaucer a conventional lady feature.\(^{18)}\) Again, Chaucer makes the god of Love condemn him for his translation of the \textit{Romaunce of the Rose}, obviously by Jean de Meun.\(^{19)}\) In spite of his own testimony in the \textit{Legend of Good Women} Chaucer appears to have translated a fragment called A,\(^{20)}\) which does not contain Jean de Meun's satire on women. But Chaucer makes use of Jean's part of the \textit{Romance} in the description of Dame Alice in the \textit{Wife of Bath's Prologue}.\(^{21)}\) Whether Chaucer translated the heretical \textit{Romaunce} or not is not known, but the god of Love condemns his \textit{Romaunce}. It is

\begin{align*}
    \text{an heresyse ayeins my lawe,} \\
    \text{And makest wise folk fro me withdrawe.}^{22)}
\end{align*}

Similarly, Chaucer has his doubts as to the conception of heaven and

\begin{itemize}
    \item 17) \textit{Tr}, v, 1067-1071.
    \item 18) See \textit{Tr}, v, 806f.
    \item 19) See \textit{LGW}, 327-330.
    \item 20) Of the three fragments of the English \textit{Romaunt}, fragment A only is generally accepted as Chaucer's own. See W.W. Skeat, \textit{The Chaucer Canon}, Oxford, 1900, pp. 65f.
    \item 21) The \textit{Wife of Bath} exposes the weakness of woman and the art of love. Woman is a sinful feminine being; love is nothing but lust. Wise woman, therefore, uses her wiles in the treatment of man.
    \item 22) \textit{LGW}, 330-331.
\end{itemize}
hell. He never rejects unquestioned orthodox faith, but he does not refuse to accept the idea

That ther nis noon dwellyng in this contree,
That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe.23)

Nothing can prove the truth of the belief that there is joy in heaven and pain in hell. He may scarcely have accepted anything unless he could see or do it for himself.24) In reality sensuous pleasure came to be considered as a perfect happiness, while an abstemious life was gradually regarded as being old and strict.25) Chaucer’s Franklin, who is said to be Epicurus’ son, values sensuous pleasure above all. His pleasure lies in food delicacies.26) Chaucer’s Monk, too, derives no pleasure from the manual labour that St. Austin bids. He, instead, delights in hare hunting.27) Evidently Chaucer refuses to accept Boethius’ conception of Fortune, which Boethius reconciled with the Christian doctrine of providence.

... lat the unfoldynge of temporel ordenaunce, assembled and oonyd in the lokynge of the devyne thought, be cleped purveaunce ; and thilke same assemblynge and oonynge, devyded and unfolden by tymes, lat that ben called destyne. And al be it so that thise thinges ben diverse, yit natheles hangeth that oon of that oother; forwhi the ordre destynal procedith of the simplicite of purveaunce.28)

So Fortune is the executor of the will of God. Chaucer also adapts the Christian conception of providence to Boethius’ conception of Fortune:

24) See LGW, 10f.
26) See I (A) 335f.
27) See I (A) 184f.
28) Bo, iv, pr. 6, 73–82.
The destiny, ministre general,
That executeth in the world over al
The purveyance that God hath seyn biforn,
So strong it is...

Indeed, Fortune is strong. No man can overwhelm her power. She influences man's destiny. Boethius' conception of Fortune is determinism. Boethius held the office of Senator and was made sole consul under the patronage of Theodoric. Accused as a traitor, however, he was imprisoned and in 524 was put to death. In prison at Pavia he wrote the *Consolation of Philosophy*. He attributes his *prosperite* and *adversite* to Fortune. On the other hand, Chaucer's conception of Fortune is reversed. Chaucer interprets the upside-down world as having been caused by Fortune's error. Fortune is whimsical. Now she bestows her favour, now her disfavour. Adversity is by no means ordained; man's free will can choose his own destiny. This Chaucer did by choosing his friends. He makes Fortune request the best friend of his, presumably Richard II, to grant a favour to him:

... to som beter estat he may atteyne.

Whether Chaucer's appointment of the Clerk of the King's Works in 1389 was due to the petition or not is not certain, but the favour of his friend, the king or duke, worked on Chaucer's official appointment.

As for the actual world, however, Chaucer did not always describe it as it was. His references to realities, both literary and social, are so few. He attempted to hear the love tidings in the House of Fame, but left his attempt unfinished. Nor did he finish off the

29) I (A) 1663-1666.
30) See Fort.
31) Fort, 79.
32) See HF, 672f.
Tale of Sir Thopas.\textsuperscript{33} In particular, he does not make explicit reference to political and social realities. Rather he avoids referring to events to have to do with the governing classes. Undoubtedly attention is paid to social and religious events, such as the visitation of the Black Death, the Peasants’ Revolt, and Wyclif’s heretical ideas; as well as to political and military affairs, such as the chronic war with France, the effectiveness of the yeomen’s longbows, Edward III’s creation of the Order of the Garter, the King’s reliance on the Commons and the great merchant financiers for war expenses, a Henry le Despenser’s crusade of 1383, and the feud between the King’s faction and the Lancastrian and Baronial factions. To some of these events no reference is made; to some only meagre references. As a matter of fact, politically, religiously and socially, Chaucer’s world was so variable. Most of Chaucer’s contemporaries consider the variable world to have been transmuted from good to bad. John Gower, for example, Chaucer’s friend, who is addressed by Chaucer as a moral Gower,\textsuperscript{34} laments that

\begin{quote}
    The world is changed overal, \\
    And therof most in special \\
    That love is falle into discord. \\
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
    And thus to loke on every halve, \\
    Men sen the sor withoute salve, \\
    Which al the world hath overtake.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

It was a changing world from old to new, or from stability to restlessness. Chaucer, too, in parallel to his contemporaries, imitates

\textsuperscript{33} See VII (B\textsuperscript{2}) 919f.
\textsuperscript{34} See Tr, v, 1856.
from Boethius:

And now it [i.e. the world] is so fals and deceivable
That word and deed, as in conclusioun,
Ben nothing lyk, for turned up-so-doun
Is al this world for mede and wilfulnesse,
That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse.\(^{36}\)

\(^{36}\) Sted, 3-7.