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Chaucer’s Meagre Reference to The Variable World

PART III

TOSHINORI HIRA

HIS REFERENCE TO “WIL FRE AND DEVYNE”

Chaucer writes love, conventional and realistic alike, in his works. The same is true of divine love. He represents his Prioress as taking pains to be an ideal courtly lady. His lines of her good behaviour at table, for instance, are reproduced from those of La Vieille’s of Jean be Meun’s Roman de la Rose. Her compassion is represented by the motto graven upon a brooch “Amor vincit omnia,” which is derived from Virgil’s Eclogues. On the other hand, he shows his reverence towards the Blessed Virgin by a tale in praise of Her assigned to the Prioress. Hyperdulia is supposed to be reflected in the cult of the lady of courtly love. He sees both sides of love, “love celestial” and “cheere of court.” But there is a great gap separating the Prioress’s praise of the Blessed Lady from her pains of imitating a lady of romance or court. “Loves hete celestial” is the very opposite of love “of kynde.” He scarcely bridges the gap between them; he distinguishes religious love from romantic love. He describes the Prioress as a lady of fashion of the romantic sounding name of “Madame Eglentyne,” not an older woman in a nunnery, and at the same time assigns to her the tale of a saint told of a chorister-boy’s devotion to the Virgin, which is not suited, though related to her vocation, to her character. Another representative of the regular clergy is the worldly-minded Monk who places himself out of the pale of a monastery. Does Chaucer not put the problem of the Prioress’s love for the “blisful Queene” and “cheere of court” even more plainly in the descriptions of the Monk? The same Monk takes the view that he regards the rules of his monastery, under which he ought to live secluded from the world, work with his hands and prosecute his studies, as old-fashioned or hard and fast, and casting these rules aside as useless
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indulges in the delights of “prikinge,” “venerie” and the care of his “celle” to the neglect of practice of austerities. The fictional Chaucer agrees with the Monk in his views. Of course it is difficult to suppose that as Chaucer himself is courteous, the fictional Chaucer could, if disagreed with the Monk, take issue with him or throw the reproach into his teeth. Chaucer can deliberately make a fool of the Monk at best. The fictional Chaucer holds with the Monk that monastic regulations are “old and somdel streit.” Is the fictional Chaucer’s acceptance of the Monk’s opinion not indicative of the disclosure of Chaucer’s own real intention?

And I seyde his opinion was good.

Admitting that, Chaucer betrays secularism in laying stress on the good side of the character of a clergyman represented in the Parson. The Clerk of Oxford belongs in the same class with the Parson. It seems likely that the Clerk does duty as a curate in a parish church. Each is more of an idealized theory than flesh and blood. It is conceivable, no doubt, that such a worthy couple may have been encountered in Chaucer’s England, though historical counterparts for them could not be found. At the same time it can readily be imagined that since Chaucer describes these idealized characters, at any rate, as individual pilgrims of the company, they, like many another human character of his with faults, are frail, though differ from him or her in being less faulty, on human nature. It is reasonable that we expect frailty and fault from them. In any case, however, both, deprived of the human quality of frailty, are pictured, in reality, as filling the most requirements of the ideal cleric. Chaucer’s ideal portrayal of the two clerics is the expression of his faith in God. In this way, Chaucer himself, too, sees both sides of the question of faith. It consequently incurs a contradiction in his views. At one time, he expresses the orthodox view on the will and justice of “parfit wys God” and the grace and love of His “blisful moorder”:

O yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she,
In which that love up groweth with youre age,
Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte,
And of youre herte up casteth the visage
To thilke God that after his ymage
Yow made, and thynketh al nys but a faire
This world, that passeth soone as floures faire.
And loveth hym, the which that right for love
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Upon a crois, oure soules for to beye,
First starf, and roos, and sit in hevene above;
For he nyl falsen no wight, dar I seye,
That wol his herte al holly on hym leye.
And syn he best to love is, and most meke,
What nedeth fynede loves for to seke?

Thow Mayde and Mooter, doghter of thy Sone,
Thow welle of mercy, synful soules cure,
In whom that God for bountee chees to wone,
Thow humble, and heigh over every creature,
Thow nobledest so ferforth oure nature,
That no desdeyn the Makere hadde of kynde
His Sone in blood and flessh to clothe and wynde.

(His Invocacio ad Mariam of the Lyf of seynt Cecyle, which had been composed, presumably long before it was adapted for the Second Nun’s Tale, is interpreted as an expression of his respect for the Holy Mother. Another case in point is that of his translation of the A B C, which, though undertaken, Speght says, by request from Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster,2 may be taken as a manifestation of his piety.) And at another, he pronounces the doctrine of immortality to be a question. He questions the belief in the unseen, or what is said about heaven and hell.

wot I wel...

That ther nis noon dwellyng in this contree,
That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe,
Ne may of hit noon other wyeyes witen,
But as he hath herd seyd, or founde it writen;
For by assay ther may no man it preve.

Is this contradictory statement a mere whim of his? Or can’t he take a wide view of matters?

We are reminded of the “I” or “Geffrey” in Chaucer’s works. In the House of
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Fame Chaucer represents himself aloof from "his" fellows and worldly matters:

When thy labour doon al ys,
And hast mad alle thy rekenynges,
In stede of reste and newe thynges,
Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon;
And, also domb as any stoon,
Thou sittest at another book
Tyl fully daswed ys thy look,
And lyvest thus as an heremyte,
Although thyng abstynence ys lyte.

652—660

The Host's description of the pilgrim Chaucer in the Prologue to his Tale of Sir Thomas says that he is abstracted from his fellow pilgrims:

He semeth elvyssh by his contenaunce,
For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce.

VII (B²), 703—704

In the Parliament of Fowls, as in his other love poems, such as the Troilus which "maketh men to wommen lasse triste," Chaucer maintains that he for his part is not related to affairs of love.

al be that I knowe nat Love in dede,
Ne wot how that he quiteth folk here hyre,
Yit happeth me ful ofte in bokes reede
Of his myrakles and his crewel yre.
There rede I wel he wol be lord and syre;
I dar not seyn, his strokes been so sore,
But "God save swich a lord!"—I can na moore.

8—14

I, that God of Loves servantz serve,
Ne dar to Love, for myn unliklynesse,
Preyen for speed, al sholde I therfore sterve,
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So fer am I from his help in derknesse.
But natheles, if this may don gladnesse
To any lover, and his cause availle,
Have he my thonk, and myn be this travaille!

Tr, i, 15—21

The same indifferent tone is notable in both these lines quoted. In the Prologue to the Legend, likewise, he takes up the position that he refuses to stand on the side of supporters of the Flower against those of the Leaf or of the latter against the former.

And if it happe me rehersen eft
That they han in here freshe songes said,
I hope that they wole nat ben evele apayd,
Sith it is seyd in fortheryng and honour
Of hem that eyther serven lef or flour.
For trusteth wel, I ne have nat undertake
As of the lef agayn the flour to make,
Ne of the flour to make ageyn the lef,
No more than of the corn agen the shef;
For, as to me, is lefer non, ne lother,
I am witholde yit with never nother;
I not who serveth lef, ne who the flour.
That nys nothyng the entent of my labour.

AG, 66—78

Thus he keeps himself aloof, nearly always, from his fellow men and controversial matters, though he on occasion refers, humourously or implicitly to such matters. And he claims to be an outsider in a matter of controversy. This indubitably indicates that he is not incapable of taking only a one-sided view of a matter. Nevertheless he deliberately refrains from expressing an one view or its contradiction on the same question. His claim definitely shows that he avoids taking sides with anybody or any party in the question.

An attempt can be made for a reconciliation of two conflicting opinions of Chaucer about the doctrines of the faith. His view of the merits and demerits of the established faith may be judged, to a certain degree, from examples of the realities of
religious ideal in the world of the late fourteenth century. Some understanding, therefore, of his world of actuality is necessary for understanding what he believes. In the anonymous *Abuses of the Age* of the fourteenth century, ironical remarks on the prevalence of unbelief are made thus:

Vertues & good lyuinge is clepéd ypocrisie;
trowthe & godis lawe is clepud heresie;
pouert & lownes is clepud loselrie (profligacy);
trewe prechinge & penaunce is clepud folie.\(^3\)

1—4

This may seem to be paradoxical, but this indicates that to put it in another way heresy spread to dreadful extent enough to be a truth. As the *Sayings of the Four Philosophers* says, “the lond” must have been “lore-les” (without doctrine).\(^4\) Such being the case, it may be that few men of the day, cleric and secular alike, accorded with religious ideals. Many of them must have not striven to live according to them; some must have refused to accept them. True, a spirit of doubt and unbelief, though existed already in the thirteenth century, is observed in almost every manner of people. Again the same *Abuses* says:

rightwisdom is not dred,
and mercy is but scorned;
lesinges and fables ben clepude good lore,
and cristes gospel but a chape.
And thus for defaute (want) of trewe techinge,
men wenden to helle by many weies.

16—21

Langland reproaches the “hiegh men” who criticize dogmas of the Church for the wide-spread skepticism in *Piers the Plowman*.

I haue yherde hiegh men • etyng atte table,
Carpen as thei clerekes were • of Cryste and of his mightes,
And leyden fautes vpon the fader • that fourmed vs alle,
And carpen ageine clerekes • crabbed wordes;—
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And maken men in mysbileue that muse moche on her wordes.

B, x, 101–104, 114

The prelates who held high secular offices were indifferent to the performance of their spiritual duties. Criticism is given on prelates' repudiation of God in the Prologus to the Confessio Amantis:

He (i.e. Gregory) doth ous somdel forto wite
The cause of thilke prelacie,
Wher god is noght of compaignie:

Who that only for Cristes sake
Desireth cure forto take,
And noght for pride of thilke astat,
To bere a name of a prelat,
He schal be resoun do profit
In holy cherche upon the plit
That he hath set his conscience;
Bot in the worldes reverence
Ther ben of suche manie glade,
Whan thei to thilke astat ben made,
Noght for the merite of the charge,
Bot for thei wolde hemself descharge,
Of poverte and become grete;

Wherof the feith is ofte let,
Which is betaken hem to kepe.6


Gower openly criticizes the worldly avocation as injurious and prejudicial to the Church. On the other hand, his friend Chaucer keeps silent about the bishops and the system of prelatical government. Connected with the high secular offices, the bishops were many of them worldly men and may have been included in the "hiegh men" as Langland says who talked about Christ and His might as if they had been
learned men. Several bishops, William Wykeham, William Courtenay, Henry Spencer and Simon Sudbury, exercised authority over government. Said to have been sinful men, these bishops were related to the Pope, the King or his sons and served as Chancellors of England except for Spencer who assumed the leadership of the Flemish crusaders. So with the abbot and prior. Many abbots and priors of this age were also not as far above simple lay lords. Although these monks entered upon their monastic life in order to devote themselves to a divine vocation, they were in actuality addicted to worldly pleasures. They are criticized for their disobedience to monastic regulations. They, as did Chaucer's Monk, disregarded Church service as "old and somdel streit," and riding round their monastic houses lived like lords. William de Cloune, Abbot of Leicester, is, it is suggested, a model for Chaucer's Monk named Dan Piers, who is said to be fit to be an abbot. Abbot Cloune was a type of "prikasour" who delighted in paltry sports, and entertained highly Edward III and many a great prince when they were invited to hunting every year. Apart from the question as to whether or not Dan Piers was Cloune, the abbots or priors were the officials of both their monastic houses and their estates. An abbot like William Sadyngton while being in the service of the King was bent on estate management and made money out of the woollen industry, though an abbot gradually was not being used for public service. Equally the prioresses were the lords of the manors as well as the officials of their convents and identified their convents, more or less, with the polite world. They came from gentlefolk's background, so that we can well imagine that many of them, in spite of women vowed to God, had an inclination for an aristocratic life. Cases are on record in which Elizabeth of Hainault, sister of Queen Philippa, was numbered among the nuns of St. Leonard's governed by Prioress Mary. It seems likely that Chaucer, in creating his Prioress, had in mind Madame Mary as model, although he borrowed the name of Eglentyne from any one of her nuns. Madame Mary and her nuns seem to have belonged to the world of fashion. The Queen's sister is thought to have set the fashion in seconding the imitation of "cheere of court" at the Convent of St. Leonard's. Like Chaucer's Prioress many prioresses were in all probability evading the rule to go by in a lady-like way. There is indeed no knowing if they were the kind of nuns to be taught "an oreisun with iambleue (jingling) vp & dun" when they were young nuns. Addicted to worldly pleasures, they were for certain unsuitable officials of their houses. It is highly probable that they cared nothing for their duty to be confined in a cloister and went outside their cloisters for secular purposes. They probably
met with a hospitable treatment in manor-houses. The fourteenth-century literature is fertile in criticism of the corrupt prelates and prelatesses who had no faith in the accepted teaching of the Church. Many of the clergy, regular and secular, acted contrary to the Church’s teaching they should have fostered; far from setting a fine example of virtue to others, they sinned against God with a disregard for the sacred duties they were called upon to discharge. It was the Church that ought to be damned. As might naturally be expected of its ideal, however, it was inevitable that the Church’s teaching could hardly be given faithful practice. The Church taught that if a man could control his passions which hindered him from loving the divine, his will would be free. The characteristics of the precepts the Church taught others to follow were God-fearing, self-control, and freedom in God. Men’s inordinate desires were regarded as the sins against God. Control of men’s own desires is however ideal for the lot of most men governed by their animal instincts. Man is born to sin; few are capable of ruling their own passions. The majority of men, when judged according to the exacting ideal of men controlling their natural passions, are inevitably liable to err. Viewed in this light, this religious ideal could hardly be realized. It may in strictness be considered as having been well-nigh impossible of attainment. Distortion was inevitable. Man distorts it. In this respect, it is obvious that Chaucer’s Parson and Clerk, embodying the ideal of Clergy, are both not so much flesh-and-blood persons as theories. Poor as both are in worldly goods, they are, Chaucer says, contented with honest poverty, and never desire to be engaged for secular employment. Their joys are of the mind, and care for their learning and their clerical duties. These two are idealized as clerics should be. The small minority, to be sure, but almost every cleric is supposed to have not been everything that he should be. There were in village churches many a illiterate parish priest who had little knowledge of the Bible. Learning was a requisite to preaching. Other abuses which complaints are made against parish priests are absenteeism. Not all the parsons were absentee priests. From Chaucer’s portrait of the good Parson, however, it can easily be imagined that many parsons of the day left their ill-paid cures to the care of their curates in order to be engaged in secular occupations, such as chantry endowments, at which they could earn a good living. These worldly priests preferred leading an easy life to performing their strenuous duties they were called upon to discharge. More is said about worldly priests in the literature and fiction of the period. Likewise, most clerks, who were engaged as curates, were lacking in the strong virtue of Chaucer’s Clerk. They were depicted as lawless, licentious, and
frivolous. The sly Nicholas of the Miller’s Tale is the embodiment of all the frivolous clerks as they were understood to be. “Hende” Nicholas is ever “lusty for to playe.” Even if the minority were good clerks, they, when put in charge of dioceses, not always did their episcopal duties. They were liable to delight in leading the lives of worldly ease. Criticism on the higher clergy is offered in the writing of Brunton, Bishop of Rochester. A prelate is described as repudiating God.

...the young scholars, poor and often innocent in everything at the first, who before they grow rich are devout in their attendance at the churches, in their prayers and the many things they promise to God; but who, as soon as they have increased, and waxed fat and wealthy, repudiate God, their maker.

Chaucer’s rascally Pardoner of Roncevall furnishes us with the antithesis of the ideal churchman. The Pardoner, greedy, shameless and fraudulent, is a sinful man. Although he sins gravely and cannot be absolved, he is warm and human. It may well be thought that he was intended as an embodiment of the “bad” priests of the time. It is possible that the Pardoner who is described as coming from St. Mary Roncevall is actually a clerical pardoner. In 1387 the Order raised a scandal about the unauthorized sale of pardons. Probability is that some brother of the convent was the model for Chaucer’s Pardoner. Chaucer writes of his Pardoner as a scandalous preacher. The Pardoner boasts freely of his eloquent sermons preaching to the people only to deceive them. His sermons bring him in large profits. He unhstatefully affirms that he cheats the people by preaching against the sin of cupidity so that he may receive money through his sermons. He makes no scruple of telling that he will get thanks for trading in false relics and false pardons on the credulity of the people in order to make money. He does not care about substance or thing not seen. His concerns are to turn substance into accidents. In his Tale, the pardoner speaks humourously about the notion of Transubstantiation:

Thise cookes, how they stampe, and streyne, and grynde,
And turnen substauence into accident,
To fullfille al thy likerous talent !
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Chaucer poses the problem of Transubstantiation which provoked controversy, but reduces it to the problem how to cook. Admittedly, this reflects Wyclif's doctrine on Transubstantiation. It seems unlikely that Chaucer could have been unaware of his views on belief proper, Church abuses and her government. Wyclif was for some time past under the patronage of the Duke of Lancaster, Chaucer's patron. Theological debates of the time will prove a solid help to us.

NOTES


3. These lines from Abuses of the Age are available in Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries, ed. R. H. Robbins, New York, 1959, pp. 144-145. The text is slightly modernized.

4. Ibid., pp. 140-141.


12. The Land of Cokaygne in Historical Poems, p. 126.


In the Confessio Amantis, Prologus, 954-966, Gower writes—

Thus of his propre qualite
The man, as telleth the clergie,
Is as a world in his partie,
And whan this litel world mistorneth,
The grete world al overtorneth.
Therwhile himself stant out of herre,
The remenant wol noght acorde:
And in this wise, as I recorde,
The man is cause of alle wo,
Why this world is divided so.

18. See Owst, Preaching, pp. 105f.