



Title	Chaucer's Framing Device of the Canterbury Tales PART I
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Citation	長崎大学教養部紀要. 人文科学. 1975, 16, p.79-91
Issue Date	1975
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10069/9649">http://hdl.handle.net/10069/9649</a>
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# Chaucer's Framing Device of the *Canterbury Tales*

## PART I

TOSHINORI HIRA

### “YE SHAPEN YOW TO TELLEN”

As a possible literary analogue of, or parallel to, the *Canterbury Tales* Giovanni Sercambi's *Novelle* is pointed out by Robert A. Pratt and Karl Young,<sup>1</sup> who argue that there is, though we have no authentic proof for this, a fair possibility of Chaucer's designing his *Canterbury Tales* on the model of Sercambi's *Novelle* (the earlier version of his collection of tales is said to have been written in 1374), with which Chaucer may have had an acquaintance. The *Novelle* is similar in its fundamental schemes to the *Canterbury* collection save for Chaucer's pilgrims's suitability of their tales.<sup>2</sup>

Sercambi, a follower of Boccaccio, adopts the device of an escape journey from the ravages of a plague as a narrative framework. The Lucchese citizens of various stations and occupations, though the number of them is not mentioned, who assembled in the church of Santa Maria make a journey through Italy till the ravages of the plague will have abated. Elected a leader of the Lucchese travellers, unlike Chaucer's Host, Aluisi, a prominent citizen, does not ask the travellers to tell their stories suited to their stations or characters, but advances the suggestion that the fictitious Sercambi becomes an official storyteller. Sercambi accepts the proposal advanced by the leader. Thus *Novella I* begins; the tale was being told when the travellers had left Pisa behind them.

On the other hand, Chaucer's tales are told by a group of heterogeneous pilgrims at the request of the Host to the pilgrims. The Host himself tells no story in the whole course of the pilgrimage, that is, even on the evening of the fourth day when

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1 / W. F. Bryan and G. Dempster ed., *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, London, 1958, pp. 33f.

2 / *Ibid.*, p. 31.



Of whiche I have an hundred in my celle.  
 Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,  
 As olde bookes maken us memorie,  
 Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,  
 And is yfallen out of heigh degree  
 Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.

Chaucer assigns to the Monk the series of tragedies told by a single storyteller which the poet composed, it is held, before 1387 when the composition of the *Canterbury Tales* was begun, although the poet appends the tales of Padro of Spain and Padro of Cyprus, those of Bernabo and Ugolino to the collection of tragedies when the series of single tragedies is assigned to the Monk.<sup>3</sup> However the single narration of the type has undoubtedly lost its appeal to Chaucer in much the same way as the *Legend*. It may be therefore that Chaucer in the Prologue to the *Nun's Priest's Tale* makes the Knight bring the Monk to a halt; the Knight grows impatient at the Monk's tedious tragedies.

VII (B<sup>2</sup>) 2780 "Ye," quod oure Hooste, "by seint Poules belle!

Ye (i.e. the Knight) seye right sooth...

2788 Sire Monk, namoore of this, so God yow blesse!  
 Youre tale anyeth al this compaignye.  
 Swich talkyng is nat worth a boterflye,  
 For therinne is ther no desport ne game.  
 Wherfore, sire Monk, or daun Piers by youre name,  
 I pray yow hertely telle us somewhat elles;  
 For sikerly, nere clynkyng of youre belles,  
 That on youre bridel hange on every syde,  
 By hevene kyng, that for us alle dyde,  
 I sholde er this han fallen doun for sleep,  
 Although the slough had never been so deep;  
 Thanne hadde your tale al be toold in veyn.  
 For certainly, as that thise clerkes seyn,

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3 / See E. P. Hammond, *Chaucer*, New York, 1933, p. 258.

Whereas a man may have noon audience,  
 Noght helpeth it to tellen his sentence.

The difference between Sercambi's collection of tales and the Canterbury collection is that Sercambi the traveller as a storyteller tells the stories of various places which the Lucchese travellers visit, whereas Chaucer's pilgrims including the fictitious Chaucer tell the stories of various types adjusted to the narrators's stations and occupations or their characters. Concerning a group of narrators Boccaccio's *Filocolo* or *Ameto* with which Chaucer was well acquainted, may possibly have had some influence on Chaucer's design of framing the Canterbury tales, but the framed stories of both romances of Boccaccio are told of one subject, love. They are told by a group of storytellers. But the storytellers are not drawn from various classes of society; they, though organized into a group, tell their stories in a wooded meadow or in a shady spot near a city, not in the course of a journey as Sercambi's company does in the *Novelle*.<sup>4</sup> In this respect Boccaccio's *Filocolo* or *Ameto* are less parallel to the *Canterbury Tales* than the *Novelle*.

Apart from the possibility of Chaucer's knowing about Sercambi's *Novelle*, it is conceivable that the ideas for adopting the device of a group of miscellaneous pilgrims as narrators came into Chaucer's mind from an actual Canterbury pilgrims. Having resided in Greenwich "ther many a shrewe" was "inne," and of which he complained: he was "dul as ded, Forgete in solytarie wilderness," on the road to Canterbury, Chaucer must certainly have seen Canterbury pilgrims go on a journey on horseback, presumably talking a gay talk with each other; as Langland puts a merry-making pilgrimage in *Piers the Plowman*:

C, i, 47 Pylgrimis and palmers · plyghten (agreed) hem to-gederes,  
 To seche saint Iame...  
 Wenten forth in hure (their) way · with meny vn-wyse tales,  
 And hauen (had) leue (leave) to lye (tell) · al hure lyf-time.

Apart from the question as to whether or not Chaucer actually went on a pilgrim-

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4 / For a summary of *Filocolo* see H. M. Cumming, *The Indebtedness of Chaucer's Works to the Italian Works of Boccaccio*, New York, 1967, pp. 1-3; *Ameto* is compactly summarized by H. M. Cumming; see *ibid.*, pp. 36-38.

age to Canterbury, the ideas for presenting various types of tales in terms of their narrators of every class of society whom he himself saw and had some previous acquaintance with in actual life may have occurred to the mind. Much of this we can know from what the Host says:

I (A) 769       Ye goon to Caunterbury—God yow speede,  
                   The blisful martir quite (repay) yow youre meede (reward)!  
                   And wel I woot, as ye goon by the weye,  
                   Ye shapen (intend) yow to talen and to pleye;  
                   For trewely, confort ne myrthe is noon  
                   To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon;  
                   And therefore wol I maken yow disport,  
                   As I seyde erst, and doon yow som confort.

The Host makes a proposal of story-telling: each pilgrim tells two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back; the Host proposes himself as “governour” to the company; the pilgrim who most entertainingly tells the stories of “high sentence” or “solas” is awarded a supper at the Tabard when the company comes back from Canterbury.

### “TALES OF SENTENCE AND SOLAAS”

I (A) 3178       he (i.e. the reader) shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,  
                   Of storial (historical) thyng that toucheth gentillesse,  
                   And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.  
                   Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.  
                   The Millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this;  
                   So was the Reve eek and othere mo,  
                   And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.  
                   Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame;  
                   And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game.

As Chaucer himself says the readers can make any choice among the chief types of medieval tales. Chaucer employs the device of a pilgrimage for the collecting the

medieval tales of every important type — the conventional romance of love, the pious tale and the coarse fabliau. Pilgrims of the knightly class, such as the Knight and his son, tell the aristocratic romances; the churchmen like the Parson and the Prioress relate the ethical treatise and the saint's life; men of the middle or lower class who are the Merchant and the Miller narrate the realistic fabliaus of anti-feminism. Indeed the *Canterbury Tales* are an extensive collection, abundant in the tales of "solas," "high sentence" and "vertuous subject matter."<sup>5</sup>

However, every chief type of medieval tales, when judged according to the narrative purposes responding to the medieval social structure, can hardly be composed by a single poet. The aristocratic romances are the tales expressing the tastes and the habits of thought in court circles; the pious tales are the tales which speak for the Church's teachings; the frivolous fabliaux are on the other hand the stories which are told of love as immoral as that of a romance, but express a realistic viewpoint on women and are sometimes a satire directed at courtly love. Chaucer was a man of the court. At the same time he does his share in developing the bourgeois type of short story. A courtly poet was not expected to introduce the vulgar stories of the type which reflects the sentiments of men of the newly-risen class and their realistic way of life into the courtly poetry. His central concern should undoubtedly be to speak for the conventions of court circles and the teachings of the Church.

Chaucer knows, though he pretends to have known "not what he was saying" as is his usual way, all there is to know about what "matere" the courtly poet should choose for his poetry. In the Prologue to the *Legend* Queen Alceste defends the fictitious Chaucer by saying that:

F 412 The man hath served yow (i.e. the god of Love) of his kunnyng,  
 And furthred wel youre lawe in his makyng.  
 Al be hit that he kan nat wel endite,  
 Yet hath he maked lewed folk delyte  
 To serve yow, in preysinge of your name.

This bears a close parallel to the promise made by Gower that abandoning the task of setting the world to right, he hereafter writes on Love: "Fro this day forth I... /

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5 / D. S. Brewer, *Chaucer*, London, 1953, p. 128.

speke of thing is noght so strange, / Which every kinde hath upon honde, / And wherupon the world mot stonde (depend), / And hath don sithen (since) it began, / And schal whil ther is any man; / And that is love, of which I mene / To trete (*Confessio Amantis*, I, 9-16)." The god of Love is represented as having the attributes consistent with the Christian deity. The Medieval Church that obtained civil domination by her wealth and power established herself in every class of secular society. So the courtly poet sings to the praise of God. Chaucer, again, bears in mind that all his writings should answer the purpose of Christian religion. In his *Tale* Chaucer's Parson says:

X (I) 1081      Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse. / And if ther be any thyng that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette (describe) it to the defaute of myn unkonnyng, and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn (fain) have seyde better if I hadde had konnyng. / For oure book seith, "Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine," and that is myn entente.

As occasion arises, therefore, Chaucer makes an apology to his audience and readers for his introducing a "churl's tale" or a "rude speech" into his poetry.

I (A) 725            I pray yow, of youre curteisye,  
That ye n'arette (not ascribe) it nat my vileynye (ill manners),  
Thogh that I pleynly speke in this mateere,  
To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere,  
Ne thogh I speke hir wordes proprely.  
For this ye knowen al so wel as I,  
Whose shal telle a tale after a man,  
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan  
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,  
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large (broad).

Adapting himself to courtly conventions he apologizes for telling the coarse stories

of his rude men. However, his apology is, it may be so interpreted, indicative of his sympathetic interest in them. He is in favour of courtly conventions. Pilgrims of the middle classes, together with their unconventional stories, are made the object of the courtly readers' laughter. It seems likely, however, that the reverse is the case. He converts the satire against the unconventional into a satire against the conventional. Following the accepted pattern of courtly love, the Merchant, for instance, in his *Tale* relates young squire Damian's love for May, a wife to January. But the Merchant betrays a conformity to the conventions of courtly love by his satirical view of woman and his praise of marriage. He satirizes courtly love concerning the wiles and plausible excuse of woman. He puts the words of high praise for marriage into the mouth of January, who, like the narrator, seems to have risen from the merchant class to knighthood. The Merchant praises:

IV (E) 1267                    certainly, as sooth as God is kyng,  
    To take a wyf it is a glorious thyng,  
    And namely whan a man is oold and hoor (hoary);  
    Thanne is a wyf the fruyt of his tresor.  
    Thanne sholde he take a yong wyf and a feir,  
    On which he myghte engendren hym an heir,  
    And lede his lyf in joye and in solas,  
    Where as thise bachelers synge "allas,"  
    Whan that they fynden any adversitee  
    In love, which nys but chilydyssh vanytee.

His *Tale* is of the mixture sort.

Of course, not a few of the newly-risen men are thought to have been comprised in Chaucer's audience and readers as the result of their assuming greater prominence (as is seen in the portraits of the Canterbury pilgrims of the new class). The Franklin, for instance, who came to be admitted into knighthood, having twenty pounds' worth of land,<sup>6</sup> seems to try to adapt himself to aristocratic virtues; he is awfully angry with his son for his having no knightly accomplishments of young squires in the Link between the *Squire's Tale* and the Prologue to the *Franklin's Tale* (V(F) 688-694). The Franklin's *Tale* told of Arveragus and Dorigen is of the

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6 / See W. Stubbs, *Select Charters*, ed. H. W. C. Davis, 9th ed., Oxford, 1957, p. 448.

courtly-love type and of the bourgeois practical type as well. In his *Tale* the ideal of courtly love is compatible with that of the bourgeois marriage. The lady Arveragus served and the wife he took are united in one person.

V (F) 791        Heere may men seen an humble, wys accord (agreement);  
                   Thus hath she take hir servant and hir lord, —  
                   Servant in love, and lord in mariage.  
                   Thanne was he bothe in lordshipe and servage (bondage).  
                   Servage? nay, but in lordshipe above,  
                   Sith he hath bothe his lady and his love;  
                   His lady, certes, and his wyf also,  
                   The which that (Who) lawe of love acordeth to.

The courteous Franklin himself apologizes for his managing to adapt himself to aristocratic virtues.

V (F) 709        This olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes  
                   Of diverse aventures maden layes,  
                   Rymeyed in hir firste Briton tonge;  
                   Whiche layes with hir instrumentz they songe,  
                   Or elles redder hem for hir plesaunce,  
                   And oon of hem have I in remembrance,  
                   Which I shal seyn with good wyl as I kan.  
                   But, sires, by cause I am a burel man,  
                   At my bigynnyng first I yow biseche,  
                   Have me excused of my rude speche.

So, the realistic, frivolous (judged by the courtly standards of love) fabliaux reflecting the bourgeois sentiments undoubtedly presented an appeal to Chaucer. It seems almost certain that he shares in the practicality and sordidness of the middle-class men.

Several years earlier before Chaucer got started on his *Canterbury Tales* he seems to have begun to show an interest in low life and human love, which can be traced in the *Parliament of Fowls*, *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Palamon and Arcite*. Conspicuous became his sympathies with human love as the years rolled on. Apart from

the dubious question as to what kind of love tidings was to be found by him in the *House of Fame*, it seems likely that he was to tell of "love's folk," faithful to Love and faithless to Him as well.<sup>7</sup>

673 When we be come there I (i.e. the Eagle) seye,  
 Mo wonder thynges, dar I leye (bet),  
 And of Loves folk moo tydynges,  
 Both sothe sawes (words) and lesinges (deceits);  
 And moo loves newe begonne (started),  
 And longe yserved loves wonne,  
 And moo loves casuely  
 That ben betyd (betide).

It seems likely that he in the *Parliament* comes back to the subject matter and directs a criticism against the conventionalized courtly love,<sup>8</sup> which he does by allowing the goose, it is commented, representing the middle class to speak on questions of love. The goose deliberately speaks, presumably against the courtly code of love.

564 And herkeneth which a resoun (argument) I shal forth brynge!  
 My wit is sharp, I love no taryinge;  
 I seye I rede (counsel) hym (i.e. the lover), though he were my brother,  
 But she (the lady) wol love hym, lat hym love another!

The duck is also of the same vein of sarcasm. He comments:

590 That men shulde loven alwey causeles,  
 Who can a resoun fynde or wit in that?  
 Daunseth he murye that is myrtheles?

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7/ Cf. P. G. Ruggiers, *The Unity of Chaucer's House of Fame*. Printed in *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. E. Wagenknecht. New York, 1959, p. 302. See also W. Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, tr. C. A. M. Sym, London, 1963, pp. 110-114.

8/ Cf. C. O. McDonald, 'An Interpretation of Chaucer's Parlement of Foules,' *Speculum*, XXX, p. 457.

Who shulde recche (care) of that is recheles?

The waterfowl's way of thinking came, as the noble falcon puts it, straight from "the dunghill." Chaucer for the first time speaks, though under the disguise of fowls, for the middle-class men who fail to understand that the love which is dictated by the passions is by no means a queen passion in the meaning of the courtly code. But he never bring the love debate to a conclusion.

In the *Troilus and Criseyde* next to the *Parliament* the infidelity of sordid Criseyde to her courteous lover was, it is interpreted, to settle the dispute on love among the fowls of the *Parliament*,<sup>9</sup> although the goddess Nature of the *Parliament* may be interpreted as holding a position as Christian deity or love deity who is to adjust the love dispute.<sup>10</sup> It may be possible to imagine that Chaucer chose the Troilus story of the medieval Trojan saga instead of a love dispute. Chaucer's infidelity to the god of Love is indicative, by a paradox, of his approval toward the bourgeois conception of human love. Lovely Criseyde is worthy of courtly love, but she is at the same time an ordinary woman of calculating disposition who thinks much of herself. Her happiness is sought in a regard for her interests. As she realizes that circumstances were favorable to the Greeks, she resolves that "To Diomedé" who can be expected to protect her she "wol be trewe,"

V. 1023    Retornyng (Revolving) in hire soule ay up and down  
           The wordes of this sodeyn (impetuous) Diomedé,  
           His grete estat, and perel of the town,  
           And that she was allone and hadde nede  
           Of frendes help.

On the other hand, courteous Troilus, though having something human, values chivalry and honour above everything else. He holds his love for Criseyde in a high regard. It may be possible to conceive that Troilus, seeking everlasting happiness, holds things unstable in the world in light esteem, but the fact is probably that his sorrow of love is caused by his lady's faithfulness to her own well-being. Notwith-

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9/ Cf. J. L. Shanley, 'The Troilus and Christian Love' in *Chaucer*, ed. E. Wagenknecht, pp. 393-395.

10/ C. O. McDonald, *loc. cit.*

standing repentance for his sin against the god of Love Chaucer pokes fun at him in the Prologue to the *Legend*. The satire lies in a pretence of his innocence.

G 344           he wrot the Rose and ek Crisseyde  
Of innocence, and nyste (knew not) what he seyde.

As with the *Franklin's Tale* the *Knight's Tale* deals with courtly love, yet it is also of the bourgeois type.<sup>11</sup>

Whether or not Chaucer, when later using his story of "Palamon and Arcite" for the *Knight's Tale*, made a revision of the story is not known, but this traditional romance is all that can be desired as is seen in lines 2789-2791: "trouthe, honour, knyghthede, / Wysdom, humblesse, estaat, and heigh kynrede, / Fredom, and al that longeth to that art." Nevertheless, his sympathy is with the bourgeois. Theseus's satirical speech on love seems to be an expression of Chaucer's sympathy. Generous Theseus, a noble man of dignity and love experience, who is of opinion that he who loves, young or old, is nothing but a fool, thinks the love of Palamon and Arcite for Emily who never knew of their love for her to be absurd,<sup>12</sup> and offers the terms at which a winner in combat, Palamon or Arcite, takes Emily to wife.

I (A) 1855       Upon my trouthe, and as I (i.e. Theseus) am a knyght,  
That wheither of yow bothe that hath myght, —  
This is to seyn, that wheither he or thow  
May with his hundred, as I spak of now,  
Sleen his contrarie, or out of lystes dryve,  
Thanne shal I yeve Emelya to wyve  
To whom that Fortune yeveth so fair a grace.

According to the courtly code, however, marriage is to be sought outside love.<sup>13</sup> With relation to the problem of love and marriage the *Knight's Tale* has a resemblance to the *Franklin's Tale*; in both *Tales* Chaucer presents the courtly conception of love in relation to the bourgeois ideal of marriage. Theseus's promise

11/ Cf. H. R. Patch, *On Rereading Chaucer*, Massachusetts, 1959, pp. 205f.

12/ Cf. C. Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, California, 1957, pp. 185f.

13/ See W. G. Dodd, *Courtly Love in Chaucer and Gower*, Massachusetts, 1956, pp. 5-6.

of marriage is borrowed directly from Boccaccio's *Teseida*, known as an original of the *Knight's Tale*, although a marked change in the description of vivid and charming Emily is made for a mere conventionalized conception.<sup>14</sup> As for the marriage for love in the English court it is well-known that, after having served Joan, Edward, the Black Prince, took her in marriage,<sup>15</sup> but the *Knight's Tale* shows a mixture of the criticism of courtly love with the bourgeois ideal of marriage.

(昭和50年9月26日受理)

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14/ W. F. Bryan and G. Dempster, *op. cit.*, p. 98. For some changes Chaucer made see W. G. Dodd, *op. cit.*, pp. 238f.

15/ See M. Chute, *Geoffrey Chaucer of England*, New York, 1956, pp. 53-54. Cf. D. Brewer, *Chaucer in his Time*, London, 1963, pp. 74-75.