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Chaucer’s Framing Device of the *Canterbury Tales*

PART II

**Toshinori Hira**

“GOD SENDE MYGHT TO MAKE IN SOM COMEDYE”

Of the group of men and women who happened to put up at the Tabard Inn with the fictitious Chaucer staying at the same Inn to make with devout heart a pilgrimage to Canterbury he speaks that “pilgrimes were” these men and women, “That toward Canterbury wolden ryde.” So, he had a congenial spirit in these pilgrims. Both the fictitious Chaucer and every pilgrim had in common the religious purpose of a pilgrimage to St. Thomas Becket. It may be interpreted, therefore, that with the “merrie tale” Chaucer assigned to his Parson he was to “knytte up” all the holiday storytelling. A symbolic meaning is given to the Canterbury pilgrimage; the Parson never lets the rest of the company forget that the way to Canterbury leads to the way to the celestial Jerusalem. The Parson reminds his fellow pilgrims of penitence for the sin of going astray from the right road to Jerusalem.

We are not sure of the truth of Chaucer’s original plan but we are told that a

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pilgrimage formed a fitting opportunity for merrymaking in the later Middle Ages. It seems likely that nearly every pilgrim did not make a pilgrimage for penitence purposes, no matter how pious was his or her motive. Zephyr in springtime has a "sweete breeth"; it gives buoyance to all living beings.

I(A) 11 So priketh hem nature in hir corages.

We derive from the Tale of Beryn suggestion as to how the pilgrims enjoy themselves over travelling. The Host mentions:

"Then al this aftir-mete I hold it for the best
to sport & pley us," quod the host, "eche man as hym lest,
And go by tyme to soper, & [than]e to bed also;
So mowe wee erly rysen, our journey for to do."

The medieval pilgrims must have been gay and rowdy; their chatters must have been jolly and silly and their tales merry and frivolous. So Chaucer's company of pilgrims, cheerful and jolly, makes merry over travelling. Full of human frailty and absurdity are many of the tales the pilgrims relate. These humorous fabliaux, amusing tales of coarseness and indecorum are balanced with the serious or pious tales of the glory of God or god of Love, told of a mortification of sin or a legend of the god of Love's saint. The Knight having finished speaking on the "high sentence" told of the knightly subjects, the drunken Miller insists on telling his "cherles tale" which gives contrast to the Knight's "high sentence." Criticisms have suggested that game is balanced by seriousness and comedy by tragedy. The "cherles tale" and "storial thyng" concerning noble deeds must have been arranged on the principle of contrast, but it may be conceivable, at the same time, that the amusing is contrasted with the serious in terms

17/ Cf. Canterbury Tales, II (B), 988f.


19/ See, for example, E. Legouis, Geoffrey Chaucer, tr L. Lailavoix, New York, 1963, pp. 143f.
of a contrast as seen between the noble and the ignoble. Through all types of pilgrims and the kinds of tales suited mostly to their tellers' occupations and social standings there runs the evidence of the social contrast between the noble and the ignoble. In the Prologue to the **Canterbury Tales** we read:

I(A) 37 Me thynketh it accordaunt to resoun

To telle yow al the condiçoun

Of ech of hem (i.e. sondry folk), so as it semed me,

And whiche they weren, and of what degree,

And eek in what array that they were inne.

Nevertheless, whenever Chaucer approaches to matters, whether chivalrous or religious, which were not customary with the court circles, or affairs which were controversial at his time, he always keeps aloof from these unconventional matters, or makes no reference to these controversial affairs. He avoids taking sides in the matters; he sees both sides of them. Without partiality, as he himself says, he sees the matters as they are.

I(A) 731 Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,

He moot rehearse as ny as evere he kan

Everich a word, if it be in his charge,

Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,

Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,

Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.

Undoubtedly Chaucer's realism, as some recent writers have suggested, is due to his broad-mindedness. This modern approach leaves what we should rather say of a social and historical background of medieval literature out of consideration. His realism is undoubtedly in part due to his character but in part to a historical background to Chaucer literature. In the Middle Ages when education and culture poorly developed and few people had a thought of their own selves a reading audience did not expect the poet to express the ideas and feelings peculiar to the individual poet. The poet had to speak for his audience and readers; he had to adapt himself to his audience who expected him to speak for them. Literature in which the medieval audience and

20/ See, for example, Brewer, op. cit., pp.190-191.
readers found pleasure varied according to the social distinction. The storyteller, whether “court-man” or “burgeys,” related a tale pleasing to his audience and readers. Rightly remarks the Host to the fictitious audience:

VII (B²) 2801 Whereas a man may have noon audience,
Noght helpeth it to tellen his sentence.

Thus Chaucer's impartiality is not necessarily due to his capacious mind. Chaucer is a court poet. So he need not have written a fabliau which afforded pleasure to the middle-class men if he had not sympathized in their realistic way of thinking. Chaucer's tales, courtly and religious, were popular among the courtiers of the King's court while Langland's Piers the Plowman seems to have not been known among them. In Chaucer's day, however, men of the newly-risen middle class came to rank among courtiers. It seems probable that in Chaucer's audience were comprised the merchant princes, such as Chaucer's usurious Merchant, such wealthy landholders as the Franklin who lived on dainty food, clerics like Chaucer's "fair prelaat" and a Thomas Pynchbek who was representative of sergeants of the law. These middle-class men may have formed a heterogeneous element in the well-bred circles, although not a few of them seem to have considerably assimilated to courtiers in thinking and feeling. Apart from their "gentilesse," Chaucer knows well what his audience and readers expect of him. He almost always represents himself as a humble or silly person. In AG Prologue to the Legend Queen Alceste defends the fictitious Chaucer against the reproach of the god of Love, by saying:

340 sire, for that this man is nyce,
He may translate a thyng in no malyce,
But for he useth bokes for to make,
And taketh non hed of what matere he take,
Therfore he wrot the Rose and ek Crisseyde
Of innocence, and nyyste what he seyde.
Probably being conscious of his audience Chaucer does not portray the fictitious Chaucer to the life. In the court circles of the later Middle Ages a storyteller was still regarded as an entertainer. By a paradox the Franklin's apology for not being refined in speech illustrates his creator's stand on storytelling.

\[\text{V(F) 716} \quad \text{sires, by cause I am a burel man,} \]
\[\text{At my bigynnyng first I yow biseche,} \]
\[\text{Have me excused of my rude speche.} \]

The courteous Franklin relates a tale of the virtue of patience, which is derived from one of the "Breton lays,"

\[\text{V(F) 712} \quad \text{Whiche layes with hir instrumentz they (i.e. Britons) songe,} \]
\[\text{Or elles redden hem for hir plesaunce.} \]

But the substance of the Franklin's Tale is about "the bond that highte matrimoigne," unconventional to the courtly love ideas.

Tales which in rich variety are found in the Canterbury Tales, observed from the Church's point of view, may be divided into the "enditynges of worldly vanitees" and the "legendes of seintes," "omelies" or "moralitee." The "noble" stories and the "cherles" or "murie" tales are all of them the tales "that sownen (tend) into synne." Chaucer may have intended to bring out in contrast the difference between "moralitee" and "worldly" tale. It may be conceivable, if so, that Chaucer constructed his Canterbury Tales, balancing "fables" or "ydel" stories by "vertuous mateere." Regarded from a religious standpoint it may appear reasonable that Chaucer assigns to his Parson a treatise on penitence which answers the proper purpose of pilgrimage, and lets the Parson put a religious conclusion to the vanity theme of the tale nearly every pilgrim related. The right road to the celestial Jerusalem is recommended to the best attention

24/ See Canterbury Tales, VII (B²), 696-704.
25/ Cf. I. Robinson, Chaucer and the English Tradition, Cambridge, 1972, p. 69. The author urges that after Chaucer began to tell of a humane love in real life he freed himself from the responsibility of entertaining his court readers.
27/ Courtly love traits in the Franklin's Tale are observed by Dodd in his Courtly Love, pp. 248f. See also F. N. Robinson, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd. edition, Boston, 1957 pp 9-10
of the company:

X(I) 46  I wol yow telle a myrie tale in prose
To knytte (knit) up al this feeste (merriment), and make an ende.
And Jhesu, for his grace, wit me sende (grant)
To shewe yow the wey. in this viage (journey),
Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage
That highte Jerusalem celestial.

The Parson's Tale is the last in the series. The Host calls upon the Parson to tell his tale, by saying: "every man, save thou, hath toold his tale." So the pilgrims quite naturally expect the Parson to "enden in som vertuous sentence." Thus the pilgrims prayed the Host that "he sholde to hym (i.e. the Parson) seye / That" they "to telle his tale hym preye." Chaucer never lays bare his thought. The fictitious Chaucer, also, when the company is approaching Canterbury, never refers to his true motive of piety from which he set off for his pilgrimage, although he reckons time with "artificial day."

X(I) 2  The sonne fro the south lyne was descended
So lowe that he nas nat, to my sighte,
Degreês nyne and twenty as in highte.
Foure of the clokke it was tho, as I gesse,
For ellevene foot, or litel moore or lesse,
My shadwe was at thilke tyne, as there,
Of swiche feet as my lengthe parted were
In sixe feet equal of proporcioun.

In his Retractions, however, Chaucer himself repents of having gone astray from the road to Jerusalem through the sin of having written of "worldly vanitees." The penitent's theme is the repentance of which the Parson reminds the pilgrims. As has been suggested, therefore, repentance is admitted to be the all-absorbing theme of the Canterbury Tales. It is a favorite theme with the religious Chaucer criticism. But we feel that Chaucer abruptly added his Retractions to the close of the Parson's Tale.

Chaucer makes a formal retraction of all his writings, not to mention the *Canterbury Tales*. Undoubtedly excluded are religious tales, such as the Parson's Tale and the Prioress's and the Second Nun's. Indeed there is a symbolic connection between the Parson's sermon on penitence and Chaucer's own repentance. But Chaucer's repentance is preceded by the Parson's conclusive sermon on penitence for having gone astray from the right road to Jerusalem. It is certain that Chaucer never wrote the Parson's Tale on the plan of placing all the secular tales in a religious framework of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Chaucer's penitent declaration is additional; it must have been made at the end of his life. Thomas Gascoigne, a clergyman, who was Chancellor of Oxford University 1434-44, referring to Chaucer's Retractions, advises men to repent their sins before they can not expiate them. Some view regarding Chaucer's Retractions is that the Retractions is the kind of the sincere penance which was done by a man who with advancing age came to meditate on the next world, and a man who made plans for a pilgrimage to Canterbury with devout heart. The religious view of the *Canterbury Tales* is true only in respect of the plan of placing the "ydel" stories or the "enditynges of worldly vanitees" in the framework of the heavenly pilgrimage. Yet Chaucer's mind is, it seems, now religious, now irreligious. A mere contrast, as we have seen, is afforded by the "vertuous sentence" against the "ydel" story. Chaucer expresses the doubt and questioning of an incredulous mind as well as the Church's authority of revealed truth. So we can hold an opposite view as to such religious views that some writers take of the symbolic meaning which lies behind the framing device of the *Canterbury Tales*. We hardly can easily grasp Chaucer's plan of the Canterbury pilgrimage. In the General Prologue, undoubtedly, we are told that each pilgrim according to the Host's plan tells four tales to beguile away the tedium of the journey, two on the way to Canterbury and two on the way home, and the best story-teller is to be given a supper at the expense of his fellow pilgrims when the company comes back from Canterbury to the Tabard Inn.

I(A) 796 which of yow that bereth hym best of alle,
That is to seyn, that telleth in this caas
Tales of best sentence and moost solaas,
Shal have a soper at oure aller cost

30/ Ibid., p. 101
Heere in this place, sittynge by this post,  
Whan that we come agayn fro Caunterbury.  
And for to make yow the moore mury,  
I (i.e. the Host) wol myselven goodly with yow ryde,  
Right at myn owene cost, and be youre gyde;  
And whoso wolde my juggement withseye  
Shal paye al that we spenden by the weye.

Chaucer left his *Canterbury Tales* half-finished. The Host cannot decide as to which story is the story of "best sentence" or "moost solaas." Moreover Chaucer's questioning about the divine will and the next world gives grounds for a suspicion that he was less concerned with the authority of revealed truth. The Knight tells of the sufferings and the doubts as to divine providence with which was filled Palamon who rivalled with his cousin Arcite for love for Emily, but was left alone in the prison after Arcite was released from it. Palamon ruminates his misfortunes and calls out gods for divine justice.

I(A) 1313  
What governance is in this prescience,  
That giltelees tormenteth innocence?  
And yet encresseth this al my penaunce,  
That man is bounden to his observaunce,  
For Goddes sake, to letten of his wille,  
Ther as a beest man al his lust fulfille.

Palamon protests against God's providence by which divine justice is unfairly distributed among all living beings. Many innocent men like him are ordained by the divine will to suffer while beasts ordained to fulfill their pleasure. Palamon's questioning about providence bears a parallel to fourteenth-century men's refusal to accept the divine will on the basis of experience. Complaint of the medieval lords against the divine will is noted in *Piers the Plowman*.

B, x, 111  
Whi shulde we that now ben • for the werkes of Adam  
Roten and to-renede (be destroyed)? • resoun wolde it neuere.

Besides questioning about divine justice we find specific criticism of the idea of heaven and hell. There seems to have been many people who refused to accept the
doctrine of immortality on the basis of human experience. They seemed to have a belief in what they saw and heard. Reference is made to people’s disbelief in the unseen in a Wyclifite tract.\(^{31}\)

...many men wenen that ther is no helle of everelastynge peyne, but that God doith but threten us, and not to don it in dede.

The Knight’s words as to the place where Arcite’s soul dwells are in accord with the agnostic views on the question as to the after life with which medieval people seem to have been familiar. In the *Knight’s Tale* we read:

I(A) 2809 His (i.e. Arcite’s) spirit chaunged hous and wente ther,
As I cam nevere, I kan nat tellen wher.
Therfore I stynte, I nam no divinistre (theologian);
Of soules fynde I nat in this registre (volume),
Ne me ne list (I had no pleasure) thilke opinions to telle
Of hem, though that they writen wher they dwelle.

Like men whose faith was wavering Chaucer, though brought up as a good Christian, may have become a man who believed in what he could see and hear.\(^{32}\) Chaucer himself gives expression to unorthodox thinking about the after life in the Prologue to the *Legend*.

BF 4 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 weyes witen,
But as he hath herd seyd, or founde it writen.

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31/ Quoted by Thomas in her *Medieval Skepticism*, p. 71.
32/ T. R. Lounsbury asserts that Chaucer was doubtful about the doctrine of immortality. See his *Studies in Chaucer*, vol. II, New York, 1962, pp. 514-515. Cf. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 682; this skeptical passage is considered as a kind of jest relief. Thomas urges that Chaucer mirrored faithfully the questioning of his age as to the fundamental articles of Christianity. See her *Medieval Skepticism*, pp. 84f. Chute never refers to Chaucer’s skepticism in her *Geoffrey Chaucer*. The same is said of Brewer. His *Chaucer* gives no reference to Chaucer’s skepticism.
As is seen in line 3: “I acorde wel that it ys so,” the passage is diluted in favour of the Church’s view but raises doubts about the probability of Chaucer’s believing in the place to which nobody had ever been. It may well be conceived that Chaucer valued his own “experience” above the “auctoritee” of revealed truth. Skepticism arose a criticism on the miracle of Transubstantiation. The mystery of the Eucharist was in opposition to reasoning that what rationalists could not appeal to their practical knowledge was false. A good many skeptics, such as Wyclif, refused to believe in the consecrated bread, although many of them were urged to recant and abandon their views. John Ball was accused of preaching against the Eucharist. Those heretics did not consider the consecrated bread as the body of Christ in view of their experience. To those practical minds, therefore, the substance they could accept was rather “accident,” the outward appearance of bread which, after the whole “substaunce” of the bread was converted into the body of Christ by the priest who was easy to err, remained as it was.33 Chaucer jestingly refers briefly to the controversial dispute about the Eucharist in his Pardoner’s Tale. The efficacy of the consecrated bread in the Church is reduced to that of cooked food.

VI(C) 534

O wombe ! O bely ! O styntkyng cod (stomach),
Fulled of dong and of corrupcioun !
At either ende of thee foul is the soun.
How greet labour and cost is thee to fynde (provide) !
Thise cookes, how they stamp (pound), and streyne (press), and grynde,
And turnen substaunce into accident,
To fulfille al thy likerous (greedy) talent (appetite) !

Here the whole “substaunce” of food materials, cooked by grinding or pressing or by heat or boiling, is turned into the delectable food to eat which is different in outward appearance, that is, “accident.” So in view of his use of the word “accident” for cooked food it may well be considered that Chaucer was not less concerned with the views of Wyclif or a Wyclifite on Transubstantiation.

Besides explicit expressions of doubts on doctrines34 Chaucer, again, describes the

33 Various literature of Chaucer’s contemporaries, both English and French, on the subject is found in Thomas’s Medieval Skepticism, pp. 77–78.
inconsistencies of individual clergymen whom the bourgeois or immoral way of living and the Church's precepts which clergymen ought to obey or practice, but were difficult to be carried into practice led into moral corruption. As is satirized by Chaucer the inconsistencies are conspicuous all the more because clergymen are those who must detach themselves from all worldly things or care for men's souls. Of himself Chaucer's Pardoner impudently says:

VI(C) 439

What, trowe ye, that whiles I may preche,
And wynne gold and silver for I teche,
That I wol lyve in poverte wilfully?
Nay, nay, I thoghte it nevere, trewely!
For I wol preche and begge in sondry landes;
I wol nat do no labour with myne handes,
Ne make baskettes, and lyve therby,
By cause I wol nat beggen ydelly.
I wol noon of the apostles countrefete;
I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete,
Al were it yeven of the povereste page,
Or of the povereste wydwe in a village,
Al sholde hir children sterve for famyne.
Nay, I wol drynke licour of the vyne,
And have a joly wenche in every toun.

Chaucer obviously is well aware of the inconsistencies of human beings. It is most likely that he describes those erring clergymen from the viewpoint of man. Chaucer gives us the pleasant pictures of corrupt clergymen who realize that they disregard the regulations the Church expects them to obey, or that they have adverse views about the doctrines the Church fosters. Chaucer's Monk or Pardoner is understandably human. Each values worldliness above otherworldliness. Each lives on his own principles, not on moral principles. The Monk pays little attention to the bidding of St. Augustine or St. Benedict. He is of opinion that "By cause that it was old and somdel streit" he "lat olde thynges pace, / And heeld after the newe world the space (meanwhile)." He acts up to his opinion; he loves "venerie." Chaucer

never advocates a religious reform, nor does he condemn his corrupt clergymen. He feels much concern about the inconsistencies of sinful human beings. He vividly portrays his erring clergymen. He seemed to sympathize with them in their apologies for, or their opinions about the immoral way of living.

Dan John, the monk, in the Shipman's Tale is one who is socialable and crafty; his mercenary preoccupation puts to shame even a merchant. The monk cheats the miserly merchant out of his money; with him he claimed cousinship for the sake of the identity of the native district. The merchant's wife asked him for a loan of a hundred francs. On the pretext that he must buy certain beasts to stock a place the monk in secret borrowed the hundred francs of her husband. But the monk no doubt placed the hundred francs at her service and when the merchant came to see him he pretended, he said to the merchant, to pay the money back to the merchant's wife. Certainly she received the money, but the monk succeeded in winning her favour by means of the hundred francs he obtained by fraud. When her husband spoke to his wife a harsh word about the money repaid she said on a thing which the monk paid:

VII(B2) 402  "Marie, I deffie the false monk, daun John! I kepe nat of his tokenes never a deel (bit); He took me certeyn gold, that woot I weel,— What! yvel thedam (success) on his monkes snowte (snout)! For, God it woot, I wende, withouten doute, That he hadde yeve it me bycause of yow, To doon therwith myn honour and my prow, For cosynage, and eek for beele (good) cheere That he hath had ful ofte tymes heere."

Like the Pardoner, greedy, self-seeking but pleasant is the friar of the Summoner's Tale; he is flesh and blood. He says one thing and does another. Finding it a good excuse that friars hold in scorn all the world's pleasures the friar makes a display of his holy poverty. He collects alms even from a poor man called Thomas; it can

36/ Wyclif urges the medieval Church institution reform: for example, the return of Church endowments, and the abolishment of Papacy, hierarchy and monasteries, distribution of ecclesiastical property among poor laymen, and denounces the prelacy, and rests his doctrine on the Bible. F. D. Matthew compiled the English writings of Wyclif into The English Works of Wyclif Hitherto Unprinted (London, 1880).
readily be imagined that he begs rich folk for alms as is seen in the description of the pilgrim Friar. The friar speaks about the value of a mendicant's prayer:

III(D) 1873  
We lyve in poverté and in abstinence,
And burell (lay) folk in richesse and despence (expense)
Of mete and drynke, and in hir foul delit.
We han this worldes lust al in despit.
Lazar and Dives lyveden diversly,
And divers gerdon hdden they therby.
Whoso wol preye, he moot faste and be clene,
And fatte his soule, and make his body lene.
We fare (behave) as seith th'apostle; clooth and foode
Suffisen us, though they be nat ful goode.
The clennesse and the fastynge of us freres
Maketh that Crist accepteth oure preyeres.