



Title	Chaucer's Framing Device of the Canterbury Tales PART II
Author(s)	Hira, Toshinori
Citation	長崎大学教養部紀要. 人文科学. 1977, 17, p.107-119
Issue Date	1977
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10069/9665
Right	

This document is downloaded at: 2019-04-20T02:39:31Z

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.¹⁶ The Parson reminds his fellow pilgrims of penitence for the sin of going astray from the right road to Jerusalem.

X(I) 75 Oure sweete Lord God of hevene... amonesteth (admonishes) us by the prophete Jeremie, that seith in thys wyse: / Stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of olde pathes... which is the goode wey, / and walketh in that wey, and ye shal fynde refresshyng for youre soules, etc. / Manye been the weyes espirituels that leden folk to oure Lord Jhesu Crist, and to the regne of glorie. / Of whiche weyes, ther is a ful noble wey and a ful covenable (suitable), which may nat fayle to man ne to womman that thurgh synne hath mysگون fro the righte wey of Jerusalem celestial; / and this wey is cleped Penitence of which man sholde gladly herknen and enquire with al his herte.

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

16 / See Chute, *op. cit.*, pp. 308-309.

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.¹⁷ 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:

227 "Then al this affir-mete I hold it for the best
 To sport & pley us," quod the hoost, "eche man as hym lest,
 And go by tyme to soper, & [thanne] 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.

Kyng Alla, which that hadde his
 mooder slayn,
 Upon a day fil in swich repentance
 That, if I shortly tellen shal and
 playn
 To Rome he comth to receyven his
 penance;

And putte hym in the popes ordinance
 In heigh and logh, and Jhesu Crist
 bisoghte
 Foryeve his wikked werkes that he
 wroghte.

18/ See G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, Oxford, 1961, p. 333.

19/ See, for example, E. Legouis, *Goeffrey 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 condicioun
 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 reherce 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,²⁰ 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.

Probably being conscious of his audience Chaucer does not portray the fictitious Chaucer to the life.²⁴ In the court circles of the later Middle Ages a storyteller was still regarded as an entertainer.²⁵ By a paradox the Franklin's apology for not being refined in speech illustrates his creator's stand on storytelling.²⁶

V(F) 716 sires, by cause I am a burel man,
 At my bigynnyng first I yow biseche,
 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,"

V(F) 712 Whiche layes with hir instrumentz they (i.e. Britons) songe,
 Or elles reddem 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.²⁷

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.

26/ Cf. *Legend of Good Women*, Prologue BF, 66-67.

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,
 Degreës nyne and twenty as in highte.
 Foure of the klokke it was tho, as I gesse,
 For ellevene foot, or litel moore or lesse,
 My shadwe was at thilke tyme, 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*.²⁸ 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*.

28 / See Chute *op. cit.*, pp. 309-310. See also G. K. Chesterton, *Chaucer*, London, 1949, pp. 270f.

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.²⁹ 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.³⁰

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

29 / See M. E. Thomas, *Medieval Skepticism and Chaucer*, New York, 1950, p. 100.

30 / *Ibid.*, p. 101

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

Chaucer left his *Canterbury Tales* half-finished. The Host can not decide as to which story is the story of "best sentence" or "moost solaaas." 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-rende (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

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 "expeience" 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 "substance" 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 stynkyng cod (stomach),
 Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun !
 At either ende of thee foul is the soun.
 How greet labour and cost is thee to fynde (provide) !
 These cookes, how they stamp (pound), and streyne (press), and
 grynde,
 And turnen substance into accident,
 To fulfille al thy likerous (greedy) talent (appetite) !

Here the whole "substance" 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.

34/ Cf. Chute, *op cit.*, p 200.

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 wyne 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.³⁵ 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

35/ Cf. Brewer, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-137.

never advocates a religious reform, nor does he condemn his corrupt clergymen.³⁶ 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 poverte 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 hadden 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 clenness and the fastynge of us freres
 Maketh that Crist accepteth oure preyeres.

(昭和51年9月29日受理)