

XVII

Chaucer: II

The Canterbury Tales

If Chaucer had never written anything more than the works considered in the preceding chapter, he would have been recognized as a great poet, but he would not have been so popular a poet since his popularity today rests in large measure upon the *Canterbury Tales*.¹ Any one who knows anything about Chaucer knows the *Canterbury Tales*. He knows the General Prologue with its wonderful portrait gallery of pilgrims, and he knows at least some of the tales. And he would be willing to admit perhaps that such a work deserves closer acquaintance.

The Framed Tale

It would seem that about 1387 Chaucer, having finished or laid aside the *Legend of Good Women*, conceived the idea of writing a collection of stories of more varied character. He doubtless had on hand some material suitable for his purpose, such as the *Palamon and Arcite*, which in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* he had said was little known, and "the lyf also of Seynt Cecile," mentioned in the same place. The idea of binding a collection of stories together in a framework is a familiar one in literature. It extends from ancient India to Uncle Remus. Chaucer's plan was to relate 120 stories and have them told by a group of pilgrims, thirty in number, journeying from London to Canterbury. Each pilgrim agrees to tell two tales each way. Harry Bailey, the Host of the Tabard Inn, where Chaucer and the other travelers assemble, agrees to go along and act as master of ceremonies. It was an admirable method for bringing together people of various types and different social classes. The group includes a knight and an esquire, his son, professional men like the doctor and the lawyer, a merchant, a shipman, various representatives of the religious orders such as the prioress, the monk, the honest parson, and the friar, a substantial farmer, a miller, a reeve, a London cook, and several craftsmen, not to attempt a complete list. Nearly all are described with such particularity as to suggest that in some cases at least Chaucer was drawing his portraits from individuals in real life.² How the suggestion for such a plan came to him, if not from experience, we cannot say. Boccaccio had used a somewhat

¹ Full critical apparatus is provided for the study of the *Canterbury Tales* in J. M. Manly and Edith Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales* (8v, Chicago, 1940). A new collection of *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* has been prepared by a group of scholars under the editorship of W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago, 1941).

² For one or two plausible identifications and a number of interesting speculations see J. M. Manly, *Some New Light on Chaucer* (1926).

analogous idea in the *Decameron*, a collection of a hundred stories told by ten people of the gentle class who have retired within a palace to escape the plague. It is unlikely that Chaucer knew the *Decameron*, since if he had known it he would certainly have made use of it. In any case, Chaucer's plan admits of greater discrepancies among the pilgrims, greater variety in the stories they can appropriately tell, and greater opportunity for incidental adventure. A closer analogy is found in the *Novelle*³ of Giovanni Sercambi, written about 1374. Here we have actually the device of a pilgrimage, with a leader and by-play among the pilgrims, but the stories are all told by the author. It is unlikely that Chaucer was acquainted with this collection for the same reason as that which we have alleged in the case of the *Decameron*. At present we can best believe that Chaucer's plan for the *Canterbury Tales* was a happy idea of his own.

Earlier
Examples

The plan laid down in the General Prologue was only partially carried out. There are but twenty-four tales, and of these, two are interrupted before the end and two break off shortly after they get under way. Even before Chaucer laid aside the work, possibly about 1395, there are indications that he had altered his original intention. At the beginning of the *Parson's Tale* the Host says, "Now lakketh us no tales mo than oon," showing that Chaucer then had in mind only one tale from each pilgrim. There are many marks of the unfinished state in which he left the work. In putting his life of St. Cecilia in the mouth of the Second Nun he neglected to make the necessary revision and she accordingly refers to herself as an unworthy *son* of Eve. The Man of Law says he will speak in prose, but instead he tells the story of Constance in well-turned stanzas. The *Shipman's Tale* was apparently written for the Wife of Bath, with the result that this "good felawe" whose beard had been shaken by many a tempest alludes to himself as a woman; and some students have seen equally clear evidence that the *Merchant's Tale* was originally intended for one of the religious pilgrims.⁴ Small matters like this are not serious. What is much more troublesome is the fact that we cannot now tell in what order the tales would have ultimately been arranged.

The
Unfinished
Character
of the
Work

The beginning is clear enough. When the party has ridden a short distance out of town Harry Bailey bids them draw lots and by good luck or manipulation the lot falls to the Knight to tell the first tale. He relates the story of the love of two friends, Palamon and Arcite, for the same lady. When he finishes, the pilgrims all express enthusiastic approval and the Host, pleased at so good a start, calls upon the Monk to tell the next tale. But the Miller is drunk and unruly and insists on telling his story in spite of all entreaty. His indecent tale is about a carpenter, and when he finishes, the Reeve, who "was of carpenteris craft," takes offense and tells an equally

The
"Groups"

³ Karl Young, "The Plan of the Canterbury Tales," *Kittredge Anniv. Papers* (Boston, 1913), pp. 405-417, and Robert A. Pratt and Karl Young in *Sources and Analogues*, pp. 1-81.

⁴ The present writer believes that the evidence clearly points to the Friar ("The Original Teller of the *Merchant's Tale*," *MP*, xxxv (1937). 15-26); for a dissenting opinion see Germaine Dempster, *ibid.*, xxxvi (1938). 1-8.

vulgar story about a miller. Chaucer has evidently an eye to contrast and means to offset the seriousness of the Knight's story with these two in a lighter vein. The Cook next exclaims with glee over the Reeve's story and offers to tell a joke about an apprentice in the city. But Chaucer must have felt that three humorous stories in a row would be too many and stopped after fifty lines. Up to this point the sequence of tales is clear; the incompleteness of the *Cook's Tale*, however, leaves us with no hint as to what was to follow. Other stories are bound together into groups in a similar way, but the arrangement of the groups is not indicated. In some of the stories and links there are occasional allusions to the time of day and to places along the way. These apparently guided scribes or editors, as we should say, of manuscripts, but there is great variation among the early texts. Modern editions usually follow the arrangement of the Ellesmere manuscript or adopt an arrangement of the groups that does least violence to the local allusions. The precise order of all the tales is something which at his death Chaucer himself had not settled.

*Dramatic
Character*

The *Canterbury Tales* is more than a collection of stories. It is a pageant of fourteenth-century life, a *comédie humaine*, in which a group of thirty people of various classes act their parts on this mundane stage in such a way as to reveal their private lives and habits, their changing moods as well as their prevailing dispositions, their qualities good and bad. Much of this life is revealed not by the stories they tell but by their behavior along the road and their remarks by the way. Chaucer never lets us forget that the stories in his collection are part of a pilgrimage, incidental to it in fact, and in the links between the tales he accomplishes his end in a variety of ways. Most important is the part played by Harry Bailey, the hearty, boisterous Host, with his frankness, his rough humor, his unconscious profanity which so shocks the Parson, and his good sense. He twits the pilgrims, draws the shy ones out, shows a clumsy deference to those entitled to it, smooths over differences, and keeps the company generally in good spirits. There are, of course, quarrels, and these are used most effectively to introduce some of the stories. The Reeve's resentment of the Miller's tale has been mentioned. A similar feud breaks out later between the Friar and the Summoner and results in the telling by each of them of a story defaming the other's calling. A humorous and realistic touch is given when some story proves tiresome and the speaker is cut short. The effect is particularly ironic when it is Chaucer's own story that the Host objects to, but it is a useful device, too, when the lugubrious tragedies of the Monk threaten to weary the reader as well as the original company. One of the most realistic incidents is that in which the pilgrims are overtaken at Boughton-under-Blee by a Canon and his Yeoman. The Yeoman talks too freely about his master's private affairs and the Canon rides off "for verray sorwe and shame." Whether the Yeoman tells a story because Chaucer noticed that his pilgrims were short one of their thirty or because he saw an opportunity of using in this way his knowledge of the frauds practised by alchemists we shall never

know. In any case, the incident contributes much to our feeling that a minor drama is being unfolded all along the route.

A lesser unity is achieved at least once within the whole by the concentration in a fairly close sequence of several stories which deal in one way or another with the problem of marriage. The question is opened by the Wife of Bath, whose philosophy of life is distinctly earthy. She has had five husbands and is not unwilling to take a sixth. She openly renounces the idea that virginity is to be preferred by all to matrimony. But she is equally frank in describing her former husbands and in telling how she maintained the upper hand over all of them. Her theory, confirmed by practice, has been that happiness in marriage depends on the acceptance of the wife's mastery, and the story she tells of the knight and the loathly lady is meant to illustrate and enforce this view. Any debate that might have been provoked by a doctrine so contrary to medieval notions is prevented by the quarrel between the Friar and the Summoner, which bursts into flame as soon as she has finished, but when each has told his story and cooled his wrath the Host calls on the Clerk for a tale. The tale which he tells is one of a woman's submission to her husband, the story of Patient Griselda, whose patience was finally rewarded with happiness. There is sharp contrast at least between the Wife's and the Clerk's stories. The Merchant next tells the story of January and May, a fabliau about an old man who marries a young wife and is shamefully tricked by her. It introduces a somewhat different marriage problem. The *Squire's Tale* which follows is a fragment of Eastern romance and has nothing to do with marriage, nor has the *Franklin's Tale*, which is a story of generosity and honor put to a severe test. But in the story told by the Franklin the married life of Arviragus and Dorigen is so harmonious and happy, and their relations are governed by such mutual tolerance and forbearance as well as confidence and love, that it is easy to see in it the ideal solution of the marriage relationship. Their vows express this forbearance and in a long aside the Franklin voices the conviction that

Love wol not been constreyned by maistrye.
Whan maistrie comth, the God of Love anon
Beteth his wynges, and farewel, he is gon!

The "Marriage Group," as the sequence here surveyed is called, is brought to a close with the *Franklin's Tale* and it is thus natural to suppose that the views of the Franklin were those of Chaucer himself.⁵

⁵ The existence of a Marriage Group was first suggested by Miss Hammond (*Manual*, p. 256), but the full exposition of the idea is due to Professor Kittredge, in an article called "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," *MP*, ix (1912), 435-467. A number of scholars deny a conscious intention on Chaucer's part to present a marriage "group," and point out that various aspects of marriage and "maistrie" in marriage are presented in several other tales as well. Full reference to the scholarly literature on the question will be found in the bibliographies mentioned on p. 249.

An
Anthology
of
Medieval
Literature

Viewed merely as a collection of separate pieces, the *Canterbury Tales* in its extent and variety offers a remarkable anthology of medieval literature. The courtly romance is represented well enough by the *Knight's Tale* or the story of Constance told by the Man of Law, not to mention the fragmentary *Squire's Tale*, while we have in *Sir Thopas* a parody of the more popular type of romance, such as *Guy of Warwick* and *Bevis of Hampton*. The *Franklin's Tale* is a Breton lay, with its setting in Brittany, its fidelity of true lovers, and its element of the supernatural or marvelous. The *Physician's Tale* of Virginius and his daughter, whom he kills to save her honor, is the retelling of a classical legend, like many examples in Old French literature and like Chaucer's own "Ceys and Alcyone" in the *Book of the Duchess*. The *Wife of Bath's Tale* is a folk-tale which was often given literary form. The coarser type of story is represented by a quarter of the collection, by the fabliaux of the Miller, Reeve, Merchant, and others. Two widespread religious types appear in the saint's legend (St. Cecilia) told by the Second Nun and in the miracle of the Virgin related so beautifully by the Prioress. The Monk's numerous examples of great men who have fallen from their high estate to misery and death are tragedies, as the Middle Ages understood the word, while the story of the three rogues told by the Pardoner is an exemplum, one of thousands of such stories with which preachers adorned their sermons and pointed a moral. The sermon or didactic treatise, though hardly to be considered a tale in the most liberal sense of the word, is represented by the *Parson's Tale* and by Chaucer's own second attempt, the *Melibeus*. Finally, we have a truly magnificent example of the beast fable, familiar to every one in the Middle Ages through *Reynard the Fox*, in the story of Chauntecleer and Dame Pertelot which the Nun's Priest tells. Without forcing matters we might note that there are even examples of the short lyric in the "Envoy" to the *Clerk's Tale* and the "Invocation to Mary" at the beginning of the *Second Nun's Tale*. The *Canterbury Tales* is a miniature five-foot shelf of medieval literature.

Chaucer's
Character
as a Poet

When we look at Chaucer's poetry as a whole and try to comprehend its character in its larger aspects, we must recognize that this character was due partly to his environment, partly to himself—the mysterious combination of hereditary qualities that made him the kind of person he was. Environment made him a court poet. He wrote for the circle in which he lived; therefore we see him as a graceful occasional poet and a teller of tales. The tastes of the court, as we have said, had been formed on French literature⁶ and as his environment determined his education and literary background, so he was attracted by, and his literary tastes were almost wholly formed upon, the literature of France and Rome and later of medieval Italy. He scarcely refers to English writings, and when he does it is to parody the romances or to refer somewhat humorously to riming rum-ram-ruf. Of course he was the heir of previous centuries of English civilization and of a language adequate for his purpose, but what he owes to previous English

⁶ Cf. the note on Richard II's books on p. 142.

writers is slight in comparison with his debt to French and Latin and Italian books. Others had translated and adapted French works before, but nobody else, either in his own day or before or after his day, so completely transferred to English the whole spirit of polite literature in Europe. This much of his poetic character comes from the accident of environment; the rest comes from himself. Environment could not make him the incomparable storyteller that he was. And environment alone will not account for the largeness and sanity of his mind. It may have taught him to keep his own counsel on political and public questions or to keep his opinions on such matters out of his poetry. But it may be that he was not easily wrought up over issues which at times provoke the quiet laughter of the gods. He was by nature tolerant, gentle, whimsical, good-humored, at all events in his poetry. And he had an incomparable sense of humor. His humor is all-pervasive. It flickers and glows and occasionally flashes like lightning in a summer sky. At times he seems unable to repress it, as when in the *Book of the Duchess*, a poem upon a sad occasion, he offers the God of Sleep the best gift he can think of, a feather bed, if he will make him sleep like Alcyone. But this is only at times. When the occasion really calls for it he can be serious, and he is capable of deep pathos.

Chaucer is sometimes denied the rank of a great poet on the ground that he lacked the higher seriousness, that his poetry is without great themes nobly conceived. It is true that he is not given to lofty and impassioned sentiments. His *Paradise Lost* is but the earthly paradise that Troilus lost, and his *Purgatorio* is generally such as lovers and lesser mortals experience in this life. But no one can deny the dignity and seriousness of the *Troilus* at certain great moments in the poem. We know that he was capable of moral earnestness and deep feeling, and if he chose more often to be cheerful and in general to devote himself to lighter themes, there are some students of medieval literature—and not the least devoted among them—who rest content with his choice.