In Praise of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

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John Hardy

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INTRODUCTION

When he addressed the topic, "English as a University Subject", W. W. Robson claimed: "The things we are dealing with are, in some intimate way, of their very nature value-containing, or value-transmitting, or value-demanding objects – whichever is the appropriate term: to ignore this seems in some important sense to ignore *them*."[1] This states why English is important as a university subject and, beyond that, what good literature can offer. Here Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* must have an assured place; though, in view of this, why have so many English departments crossed Chaucer off their syllabuses? As a product of the creative imagination, the "value" it offers can only be realized from reading the work. In considering it in the pages that follow, I shall take issue with criticism I don't agree with, believing that the testing of differing opinions can only add to understanding and appreciation.

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Chaucer was a subtle ironist in observing the world that passed before him. The tales his pilgrims tell as they journey on horseback towards Canterbury delineate a wide variety of characters inhabiting a richly peopled world. John Dryden likened this to "God's plenty" since it captures in its imagined life a seemingly inexhaustible variety of the drama of human existence. Among varying attempts to analyze and evaluate its significance, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* has been justly praised on both sides of the Atlantic. It has not only been rated "the most celebrated storytelling event in world literature", but described as "part of the permanent literary and sub-literary culture of English-speaking people".[2] Either assessment should have been enough to prevent Chaucer being omitted from English syllabuses, while both should encourage the participation of a wide readership, whatever the initial difficulty of encountering a fourteenth-century text. Reading the first magnificent lines of the General Prologue in the original rather than in translation should, like the poet's genius in introducing his subject, engender a wish to move forward with renewed commitment.

Collections of stories constituted a common literary form during the Middle Ages, of which Boccaccio's *Decameron* is a prime example. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* thus continues a tradition; but in how it does so consists its achievement. In her extensive account of medieval literature, Margaret

Schlauch said the "marked element of drama in Chaucer's frame story distinguishes it from all others of its kind".[3] Despite more recent attempts to play down its dramatic element, this also exists in the inherent quality of the writing.

In Boccaccio's *Decameron* a social group leaves plague-ridden Florence for a country retreat, and there tells stories to pass the time. The use of a pilgrimage as the framework for his tales allows Chaucer to exploit a greater social range of narrators. Also different is the consummate artistry of how his pilgrims come together. His "sondry folk" meet at the Tabard Inn and "by aventure yfalle / In felaweshipe". This exemplifies how Chaucer's work develops from within. No unlifelike design brings them all together; they then try to form a kind of fellowship, as people usually do. The pilgrim-poet seems proud to declare, having "spoken with hem everichon / That I was of hir felaweshipe anon".

Without being developed like characters in a nineteenth-century novel, the pilgrims are instead analogous to *dramatis personae* who exist individually within their own skin. Despite their agreed "fellowship", their variety leads to individual differences or personal dramas as they journey on their way. Because of their variety, it would be naïve to assume all had the same motive for making the journey. The Prioress or Second Nun would have had a religious intent. The Man of Law might simply have been content to be seen in such a company. The Merchant was presumably making the journey to get away from his hated wife. Harry Bailey, the Host of the Tabard, whom all agreed, when he proposed it, should be in charge, was taking the opportunity of getting away for a while from his overbearing wife by joining "so myrie a compaignye", since he had seen none merrier "this yeer". Harry Bailey appears to have regarded the pilgrimage as more a holiday festival than of religious significance, always insisting on the opportunity for "game". He it was who initiated the tale-telling. As he says, "confort ne myrthe is noon / To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon".

Chaucer's ability as a poet can be seen in the first lines of his General Prologue as he wonderfully evokes an awakening of life. His description of the coming of Spring – of the "vertu", of the quickening, enlivening power transfusing itself throughout the natural world – is suggestive in its vital energy of Chaucer's creative genius. The pilgrimage is a response to this vital quickening or engendering force, as well as a means of bringing a varied group of characters together. In the Host's suggesting that on their return a "soper" will be given for the best tale told, "Heere in this place,

sittynge by this post", this local touch, from that part of London the boy Chaucer grew up in, aids in giving the concreteness of seeming reality to his imagined world.

A "dramatic element" soon becomes apparent not only from the tales the pilgrims tell, but from differences in character, occupation and social status as the pilgrims rub up against one another during their journey. The Miller interrupts the Host's attempt at a seemingly more orderly procedure by having the Monk speak after the Knight. Being of a different social level, he parodies the Knight's Tale by telling of a different love-triangle that would answer to his own experience of a more down-to-earth kind of existence. The subsequent anger of the Reeve towards the Miller arises not merely from their opposing occupations but because of the tale the Miller tells. This the Reeve takes as critical of his own personal life, and then tries to get his own back on the Miller (unsuccessfully, it must be said) by telling a tale exposing a quarrelsome and drunken miller. There are many other, though often less obvious, dramatic moments during the on-road drama, though one that is also deeply felt is that between the Friar and the Summoner. Of different religious orders, they set out to ridicule each other in the tales they tell. The Summoner's Tale achieves what it sets out to do in one of the *Tales*' more grotesquely comic moments. Far more surreptitious is the backhander the Wife of Bath gives the Friar, who had laughed at her Prologue.

Even the two women in orders on the pilgrimage are revealed as different in their religious sensibilities; while the Nun's Priest, though not described in the General Prologue, is contrasted with the opinionated and impressively mounted Monk in terms of his horse and character, as well as in the quality of the tale he tells. Another implicit yet dramatically developed contrast, which has been overlooked by critics, is that which the pilgrim-poet establishes between himself and the Host, whose pedestrian outlook and responses lack the intelligence and sensibility of the poet's own. Despite his description of the Host as a "large" man "with eyen stepe", as both an important citizen of his district and as like "a marchal in an halle", Chaucer's intention would appear to be as pilgrim-poet subtly to establish his own literary and creative sense by contrast with that of the Host, who was formally voted in charge of the pilgrimage the poet was describing.

Difference of opinion, wherever it occurs, adds to the drama of the *Tales*. Though the Miller's Tale does not get the level of assent the pilgrims

accorded the Knight's Tale, it generates a positive response despite its mocking echo of that "noble storie":

> Whan folk hadde laughen at this nyce cas
> Of Absolon and hende Nicholas,
> Diverse folk diversely they seyde,
> But for the moore part they loughe and pleyde.

"Diverse folk diversely they seyde", far from being a commonplace remark, suggests what gives authenticity to the virtual world of Chaucer's pilgrimage. As his "sondry folk" react to the tales and to one another, the work comes alive, both in embracing different attitudes, and in recording different voices. Murray Copland perceived this in his essay on the Reeve's Tale, saying Chaucer's phrase "is no mere stock gesture; the energy is the energy with which Chaucer subscribes to and substantiates this apparent platitude – which in him becomes an insight".[4]

An example of "diverse folk" saying diverse things occurs in the Squire's Tale. The magical gifts presented to the great Cambyuskan during his birthday feasting do not feature in a distinct storyline, and the tale's immaturity as narrative in lacking a fictional center is acknowledged by its youthful narrator in mentioning its shortcomings. The dramatic account promised of various battles never eventuates. But what generates most interest is the magic horse of brass which the "strange knyght" rides into the hall when he brings gifts from the king "of Arabe and of Inde". According to the knight,

> This same steede shal bere yow evere moore,
> Withouten harm, til ye be ther yow leste,
> Though that ye slepen on his bak or reste,
> And turne ayeyn with writhyng of a pyn.

As it stands in the hall, people swarm about it wondering

> How that it koude gon, and was of bras;
> It was a fairye, as the peple semed.

Different people have different views, saying it was like Pegasus, or like the Trojan horse. One was fearful "som men of armes been therinne, / That shapen hem this citee for to wynne". But

> Another rowned to his felawe lowe,
> And seyde, "He lyeth, for it is rather lyk
> An apparence ymaad by som magyk,
> As jogelours pleyen at thise feestes grete."

Such difference of opinion creates a sense of drama. The different voices are like the voices heard in a play. And indicative of his handling of crowd scenes is Chaucer's ability in recording the on-road drama to make the whole pilgrimage seem like a moving stage on which different voices are heard.

This analogy with drama is indicative of how the poem is to be imagined; which means its imaginative dimension should not be circumscribed by a literalist approach. This would inhibit the Reeve hearing the tale of the Miller, which he regarded as personally so offensive. Chaucer's pilgrimage imagined a large cavalcade journeying to Canterbury on a fourteenth-century road from London, where pilgrims could not have ridden much more than two abreast. A literalist interpretation would mean the Reeve, who always rode "the hyndreste of oure route", would not have heard the words of the Miller, who rode at the head of the group, and with his "baggepipe" led the pilgrims "out of towne". Nor should one argue, as H. Marshall Leicester does, that every word of every tale only comes out of the mouth of the assumed narrator. In opposing "Leicester's razor", one should in a sense remember how Johnson defended Shakespeare against the criticism his plays suffered from defenders of the so-called "unities". Johnson countered the "objection arising from the impossibility of passing the first hour at Alexandria, and the next at Rome" by pointing out that such a critic must imagine that "his walk to the theatre has been a voyage to Egypt, and that he lives in the days of Antony and Cleopatra". Johnson's "he that imagines this may imagine more" serves to question such literalism and anticipates Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith".[5] Chaucer's great poem should, accordingly, not be subject to anything less.

The Wife of Bath and the Pardoner, in giving an existential immediacy to what they utter, far exceed the stock figures of medieval drama. In creating such characters, who dramatize in different ways their individual existence, Chaucer was developing an ability, evident elsewhere in the *Tales*, where characters seem involved in contributing to their own story. Subject to being old John the carpenter's wife, that younger Alison in the Miller's Tale is seemingly able to act in a personal way and become a player in her own story. In the Shipman's Tale the merchant's wife, who feels so neglected

and sexually slighted by her husband, and so convinced that she is missing out on life, becomes a means of influencing her own story to achieve the end she desires. In the Second Nun's Tale, the extreme belief leading to Cecilia's martyrdom heralds a wished-for escape from her own body that the Nun feels almost irredeemably burdened by sin. That such tales and their supposed tellers are given such dramatic life in Chaucer's pilgrimage to Canterbury suggests his work in some way begins to anticipate that great age of drama which was to occur within a couple of centuries with Shakespeare.

Chaucer's best tales are truly dramatic in conception and expression, which can be illustrated from an analysis of the Franklin's Tale. This will be undertaken not only because of the depth of its human drama, but also because it has been criticized for not conforming to traditional ideas. Chaucer can seem less trammeled by these than many other writers of the period often appeared to be. He thus remains open to such experience as answers to what today we can respond to. His tales often have a "value" that is not so much traditional as continuing in its relevance. This accords with another point Wallace Robson made in his lecture when he was agreeing that F. R. Leavis's "continuity" seems a more satisfactory term than "tradition" because "it brings out, as 'tradition' of itself does not, that we are to be concerned with ensuring a life, which being life implies growth". Robson claimed: "To a larger extent than we always remember, the civilized man must constantly create, and re-create, the things he contemplates." He added: "We must try to imagine our subject-matter, English literature, as an ideal totality; to see the present in the past, no less than to see the past in the present."[6]

Chaucer's wide experience of society as it was developing in the fourteenth century, which included not only an early period in service to the king but later important appointments outside the royal household, singularly fitted him, given his intelligence, to respond to what was passing before him. By producing such a classic as the *Canterbury Tales*, he prompted Dryden's phrase "God's Plenty"; and adopting this phrase for the title of her book, Ruth M. Ames wrote: "Medieval society, like most societies, provided neatly labeled boxes, but a great number were open at both ends, and Chaucer, like other interesting people, was not locked in."[7] It is therefore refreshing to encounter in recent commentary Paul Strohm's sentence: "Chaucer's very success in opening his text to materials of varied ideological implication is what persuades me to disagree with those critics

who minimize the possibility of escape from a single hegemonic or dominant ideology."[8]

An author of Chaucer's quality, about whom such a comment can be made, is clearly one to read, and clearly one to include in English courses. It is, however, ironical that Chaucer was included in them at a time when some influential critics insisted that he should be read as a medieval author. Donald Howard based his large book on the assumption that the Parson's Tale should be the basis for estimating the *Tales* as a whole. This meant that undue attention was paid to the Parson's Tale, so that its strictures on human behavior in its disquisition on the Seven Deadly Sins have been used to devalue individual tales. Howard assumed that in writing his poem Chaucer had in mind "the way a Christian must come to terms with the world", and he therefore interpreted the pilgrimage as "a highway passing from one's home to the destination". He saw the tales themselves as "things of the temporal realm, an unuseful and untrustworthy kind of knowledge" – in effect "expected to be lies" because "Canterbury tales".[9] Lee Patterson, in his scholarly discussion of the Parson's Tale as an example of medieval repentance literature, went so far as to suggest that it "becomes not simply the last element of a sustained poetic enterprise but a crucial and even decisive piece of evidence about the moral worth of Chaucer himself".[10]

What ought rather to be considered is not only the value of the individual tales as works of the creative imagination, but the significant additions which Chaucer can make to his sources. This was one way he opened his texts up. In the tale of the Wife of Bath, for example, Chaucer has transformed what surrounds that final kiss. In the Clerk's Tale, consideration of a few lines he adds to his source material allows us to infer that the poet was not unconscious of an inequality of gender and hence power that could lead to domestic abuse by a husband. In the context of the tale, Griselda's exemplary virtue is exposed to the torments of a husband who had such an unstoppable impulse as Walter's "lust".

Notes

1. *Critical Essays*, London, 1966, p.37.

2. Carl Lindhal, *Earnest Games: Folkloric Patterns in the Canterbury Tales*, Bloomington, Ind., 1989, p.2; Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*, London, 1985, p. xi. Chaucer's text is as quoted in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen ed. Larry D. Benson, Boston, 1987.

3. *English Medieval Literature and its Social Foundations*, Warsaw, 1956, p. 256.

4. "*The Reeve's Tale*: Harlotrie or Sermonyng", *Medium Aevum*, 31 (1962) 31.

5. *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales*, Berkeley and Oxford, 1990, p. 6; *Johnson on Shakespeare* (Yale Works of Samuel Johnson) ed. Arthur Sherbo, New Haven and London, VII. 76-77; *Coleridge: Select Poetry & Prose*, ed. Stephen Potter, London, 1950, p. 248.

6. *Critical Essays*, p. 26.

7. *God's Plenty: Chaucer's Christian Humanism*, Chicago, 1984, pp. 3-4.

8. Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1989, p. xii.

9. *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1976, pp. 44, 68, 174.

10. "The *Parson's Tale* and the Quitting of the *Canterbury Tales*", *Traditio*, 14 (1978), 380.

CHAPTER 1

TALES OF THE KNIGHT, MILLER AND REEVE

I

After providing the best of food and drink, next morning the Host of the Tabard Harry Bailey, having ridden a few miles, stops at a watering-place for horses to draw lots to see who will tell the first tale. His general complaisance is reflected in his words:

> "Sire Knyght," quod he, "my mayster and my lord,
> Now draweth cut, for that is myn accord.
> Cometh neer," quod he, "my lady Prioresse.
> And ye, sire Clerk, lat be youre shamefastnesse,
> Ne studieth noght; ley hond to, every man!"

The Knight draws the shortest straw, but the pilgrim-poet will not guess "Were it by aventure, or sort, or cas" – by chance or fortune, luck or destiny – that the noblest of them, the first described in the General Prologue, gets the opportunity of going first. A refusal to be too definite reflects how events in the first tale develop, answering to what may be deemed to be life's circumstances, where no final outcome can be assured.

Chaucer's portrait of the Knight emphasizes his substantial worthiness: "he loved chivalrie, / Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie", and his warlike exploits are highlighted. These, according to Maurice Keen, would have described "true crusades against the infidel", and he notes not only how widespread among knights was "crusading experience", but that John Beaufort, Earl of Somerset and John of Gaunt's eldest illegitimate son by his mistress Katherine Swynford, was "a noted crusader".[1] John of Gaunt, Edward III's fourth son and brother of the Black Prince, was Chaucer's patron, and Chaucer's wife Philippa was Katherine's sister. When Chaucer says the Knight had "riden, no man ferre / As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse", this would appear complimentary. But since his irony can be very subtle, is some question prompted by the Knight's appearance, whose

"gypon" or tunic was "Al bismotered with his habergeoun"? This would seem to suggest not only the dedicated intensity of his fighting, but a single-minded devotion in coming straight from campaigning in order "to doon his pilgrymage". Yet does it also suggest that by this time such knighthood was becoming somewhat outdated? Paul Strohm has noted that the later fourteenth century saw "a demotion of the knights and a promotion of certain categories of tradesmen", that "the gentility of the knights" continued to be affirmed, but that they were "denied their aristocratic status".[2] Tournaments had become social events of martial prowess, where the intention was to avoid injury and blood-letting, yet provide a spectacle to appeal to both sexes. During the days of Edward III splendid tournaments were still held; and in 1390, when Chaucer was Clerk of Works, he was responsible for erecting the lists and scaffolds for the jousting at Smithfield.

The Knight, a man of war, is accompanied by his son, "a yong Squier",

> A lovyere and a lusty bacheler,
> With lokkes crulle as they were leyd in presse. . . .
> So hoote he lovede that by nyghtertale
> He sleep namoore than dooth a nyghtyngale.

These figures represent two aspects of masculinity in the chivalric life which, as the Knight observes, do not favor or admit competition:

> O Cupide, out of alle charitee!
> O regne, that wolt no felawe have with thee!
> Ful sooth is seyd that love ne lordship
> Wol noght, his thankes, have no felaweshipe.

The conflict such aspects of the chivalric life could lead to forms the subject of the tale, producing armed conflict between two brother-knights, Palamon and Arcite, who fall in love with the same maiden. Their conflict is only resolved, in so far as it can be resolved, by a staged and formal encounter according to the knightly code; and then, finally, by the death of Arcite. The good duke Theseus of Athens organizes the potential resolution, himself seemingly existing above the maelstrom involving "love" and "lordship". Victorious in his battles, he had won his wife Ypolita, the "faire, hardy queene of Scithia" by conquering her in his war against the Amazons. On this subject neither the Knight nor the pilgrim-poet ventures any further, the Knight claiming he has so much more to tell that he will not hinder others the opportunity of telling their stories in their hope of winning the promised "soper".

The Knight's observation on "love" and "lordship" occurs when Palamon and Arcite are about to fight in "the grove" over their love for Emily. These cousins were found alive among the dead when Theseus waged war against the cruel Creon of Thebes because he would not allow some distraught women to bury their dead husbands, "But maketh houndes ete hem in despit". Riding to Thebes with his "white baner large" displaying "the rede statue of Mars, with spere and targe", Theseus, "of chivalrie the flour", slew Creon "manly as a knight / In pleyn bataille"; but because of the background of war between Athens and Thebes he would not allow the brother-knights to be ransomed, putting them "in prison / Perpetuelly".

After years "in a tour, in angwissh and in wo", one May morning they both glimpse Emily walking in a garden that was adjacent to their prison. She "fairer was to sene"

> Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,
> And fressher than the May with floures newe –
> For with the rose colour stroof hir hewe.

These brother-knights are prepared to fight to the death for a maiden who knows nothing of them, or the pangs of their love-longing. Though Palamon first saw Emily, saying, "I noot wher she be womman or goddesse", he is troubled when Arcite sees her and becomes enamoured, refusing to support him according to his oath to a brother-knight. To this Arcite denies being bound since Palamon thought Emily was a goddess, whereas his "is love, as to a creature". Each knight calls the other "fals" as the bond between them is shattered, though it is Arcite who would seem to show by his attitude what has been designated "a certain naked self-interest".[3] In the years that follow, each in different ways escapes from prison, and they meet by chance in a grove where Palamon, overhearing Arcite declare his love for Emily, "thoughte that thurgh his herte / He felte a coold swerd sodeynliche glyde". He is prepared, though unarmed, to encounter Arcite, but Arcite, in keeping with their knightly code, persuades Palamon to wait till he can bring "harneys" for them both so that they can fight on equal terms for Emily.

Out hunting with his queen and Emily, Theseus comes upon the two runaway knights fighting so fiercely that they are up to their ankles in blood. Learning of their rivalry in love for Emily, Theseus exclaims:

> She woot namoore of al this hoote fare,
> By God, than woot a cokkow or an hare!

Saying “Who may been a fool but if he love?”, Theseus echoes the maxim, “It is not granted to love and be wise”. Persuaded by the ladies to spare the two knights, he admits how mighty is “the god of love” -- “Ayeyns his myght ther gayneth none obstacles” -- and recognizes both knights in what they are doing are being true to their feelings. Theseus determines the laws of chivalry will provide the means by which their conflict is resolved. He proposes that in a year’s time each lover return with a hundred knights to decide his right to Emily “by bataille”. This he spells out according to his knightly code:

> And this bihote I yow withouten faille,
> Upon my trouthe, and as I 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.

Emily exists as a pawn in the serious love-contest, though courtesy as a cornerstone of chivalry ensured a deep respect for the lady.

As the Knight continues the story, his description of events leading up to the battle rings with conviction. In describing how readily each hundred would be gathered, the well-travelled Knight’s enthusiasm for his profession can be heard:

> For every wight that lovede chivalrye
> And wolde, his thankes, han a passant name,
> Hath preyed that he myghte been of that game;
> And well was hym that ther to chosen was,
> For if ther fille tomorwe swich a cas,
> Ye knowen wel that every lusty knyght
> That loveth paramours and hath his myght,
> Were it in Engelond or elleswhere,
> They wolde, hir thankes, wilnen to be there –
> To fighte for a lady, benedicitee!

Vivid as Technicolor are the descriptions of the leading knights that accompany Palamon and Arcite: “Lygurge hymself, the grete kyng of Trace”, and “the grete Emetreus, the kyng of Inde”. The might and grandeur they evoke suggest the ensuing conflict will be the battle of the ages. Though the love-triangle constitutes the ostensible subject, so all-consuming is the

fashioning of horses, weapons and armor for the contest that it seems the Knight's absorbing interest to the exclusion of all else:

> Ther maystow seen devisynge of harneys
> So uncouth and so riche, and wroght so weel
> Of goldsmythrye, of browdynge, and of steel;
> The sheeldes brighte, testers, and trappures,
> Gold-hewen helmes, hauberks, cote-armures;
> Lordes in parementz on hir courseres,
> Knyghtes of retenue, and eek squieres
> Nailynge the speres, and helmes bokelynge;
> Giggynge of sheeldes, with layneres lacynge.

Varying opinions are expressed of the two leading knights and their followers, but these do not include any reference to who deserved to win Emily. What provoked comment was rather which of the knights looked most warlike and likely to win:

> Somme helden with hym with the blake berd,
> Somme with the balled, somme with the thikke herd;
> Somme seyde he looked grymme, and he wolde fighte:
> He hath a sparth of twenty pound of wighte.

This wider audience of bystanders and their responses, like someone noticing the huge "sparth" or battle-axe, further contributes to the virtual reality of Chaucer's world.

The preparations and announcements Theseus makes for the forthcoming contest, while seeking to keep its grandeur uncontaminated with the ugly inhumanity of war, raise the world of knighthood to epic proportions.

The contest for Emily is to be staged within a prescribed space and definable limits. She will become the victor's prize, yet behind such a pronouncement is also a sense of what fortune dictates, the vagaries of life seemingly influenced by the will of the gods.

Deference to the gods is displayed in the magnificent arena Theseus spares no expense in constructing, with the eastern gate dedicated to Venus, the western to Mars, with the northern wall having an oratory to Diana. The temples exhibit "the noble kervyng and the portreitures" reflecting the varying fortunes associated with these gods. And the parts they play in the ensuing action – with Venus and Mars recalling a conflict between "love" and "lordship" -- follow on from the visits those involved in the love-

triangle make to the respective shrines. Mars as the mighty god of war is the deity whom the Knight, who killed so many in battle, would naturally associate himself with, and it is Mars that Arcite turns to for help. His temple portrayed

> As is depeynted in the sterres above
> Who shal be slayn or ells deed for love.

Displayed on Theseus's banner, Mars represented "lordship", though when in bed with Venus he had been caught by her husband Vulcan, an episode to which Arcite later refers in the hope of gaining Mars's sympathy for his own plight as unrequited lover. Theseus remains nominally supreme as both lord and lover, but this episode involving these gods emphasizes the difficulty of having those associated with love and/or lordship conjoined or united.

Venus as the goddess of love embraced the fire of desire. In her temple could be seen "all the circumstances / Of love". To Venus Palamon made his plea. Though not seeking "tomorwe to have victorie", he wanted to have "fully possessioun / Of Emelye", to have his ardent love fulfilled. H. Marshall Leicester has questioned the appropriateness of Palamon's words, but there is nothing inappropriate in the plea this lover makes to the goddess. Venus was "traditionally at war with chastity" in also embracing desire.[4] The difficulty with Leicester's analysis is that it appears contrary to what Palamon is asking of Venus; and a further problem concerns his view that Arcite's "stance is a kind of mirror image" of Palamon's, whose "system of assumptions" he shares.[5] This tends to downplay the difference illustrated by the text between the knights and their various pleas in pursuit of Emily. Not only is the tone as well as the terms of address of each different, but it is hard to imagine Arcite saying he would rather be dead than see his rival possess Emily.

Not to be "possessed" is what Emily sought in going to the shrine of Diana. Her desire was "to walken in the wodes wilde, / And noght to ben a wyf and be with childe". Diana was worshipped as a goddess of both hunting and childbearing, and what Emily appears to fear is pictured in the description of Diana's temple where a woman in labour, whose "child so longe unborn, / Ful pitously Lucyna gan she calle". Recognizing how much the two knights love her, Emily begs

> That al hire hoote love and hir desir,
> And al hir bisy torment, and hir fir
> Be queynt, or turned in another place.

If she must have "oon of hem two", she asks it be "hym that most desireth me". When the fire on the altar produces "blody dropes" and causes concern, Diana appears, saying,

> Thou shalt ben wedded unto oon of tho
> That han for thee so muchel care and wo.

When Diana vanishes, Emily has no option but to leave.

Though the tone of Arcite's approach to Mars is very different from Palamon's to Venus, he is also ardent in expressing his love for Emily. He asks Mars to have pity, given the "peyne" and "hoote fir" Mars must have felt for Vulcan's wife, and he wishes the god to recall the sorrow that was in his heart

> Whan Vulcanus hadde caught thee in his las,
> And foond thee liggynge by his wyf, allas!

Does this presage things will turn against Arcite at the moment of his bliss? Arcite's appeal is clearly more forthright in praying for victory:

> And do that I tomorwe have victorie.
> Myn be the travaille, and thyn be the glorie!

The human contest is preceded by a contest "in the hevene above" when Venus and Mars dispute which of the knights will be victorious in having his plea answered. It takes old Saturn to quell such strife by telling Venus that Palamon "Shal have his lady, as thou hast hym hight", even though "Mars shal helpe his knight". Behind events on the ground, which Theseus seeks fairly to judge, larger forces appear at play to bring the issue to its destined conclusion. Saturn says his "cours, that hath so wyde for to turne, / Hath moore power than woot any man". Is how the Knight drew the straw to tell the first tale suggestive of how things will happen in the love-contest? Will Palamon win Emily by chance or some quirk of destiny? Besides having Mars on his side, Arcite engages in the contest on the day of the week presided over by Mars. Palamon, however, after long suffering, does finally gain Emily. This satisfies Venus, and is perhaps felt by the tale's audience as not inappropriate, given he had first spied Emily.

Theseus "at a window set, / Arrayed right as he were a god in trone", determines no-one is to fight to the death, or bring a lethal weapon "into the lystes". He declares "he that is at meschief shal be take / And noght slayn, but be broght unto the stake". With this effort to avoid bloodshed, Theseus not only gains the people's loud approbation, but fashions the contest as tournaments had become in Chaucer's time by being limited to a show of strength. Details of the bout are nevertheless described by the Knight with apparent relish in noting "men who kan juste and who kan ryde". Chivalric fighting is clearly an idea he can embrace:

> In goon the speres ful sadly in arrest;
> In gooth the sharpe spere into the syde. . . .
> Ther shyveren shaftes upon sheeldes thikke;
> He feeleth thurgh the herte-spoon the prikke.

And when the combatants meet, with Arcite fighting like a tiger and Palamon more fiercely than any lion, the contest has its share of blood-letting in the epic account of Palamon's being taken:

> The stronge kyng Emetreus gan hente
> This Palamon, as he faught with Arcite,
> And made his swerd depe in his flessh to byte,
> And by the force of twenty is he take
> Unyolden, and ydrawen to the stake.
> And in the rescus of this Palamoun
> The stronge king Lygurge is born adoun,
> And kyng Emetreus, for all his strengthe,
> Is born out of his sadel a swerdes lengthe,
> So hitte him Palamoun er he were take.

Theseus declares Arcite has won Emily, and among the gods Venus weeps at the outcome till Saturn says, "by myn heed, thou shalt be esed soone". This occurs when Pluto sends "a furie" at Saturn's request to frighten Arcite's horse. It leaps sideways, throwing him headlong to the ground just as, with helmet off, he is riding "endelong the large place / Lokynge upward upon this Emelye", while she, given the turn of events, is casting a friendly eye on him. Arcite lies as if dead, "His brest tobrosten with his sadel-bowe". Though treated with all imaginable care, he eventually dies, but not before a moving scene with Emily lamenting his loss:

> Allas, the wo! Allas, the peynes stronge,
> That I for yow have suffred, and so longe!
> Allas, the deeth! Allas, myn Emelye!

> Allas, departynge of oure compaignye!
> Allas, myn hertes queene! Allas, my wyf,
> Myn hertes lady, endere of my lyf!
> What is this world? What asketh men to have?
> Now with his love, now in his colde grave
> Allone, withouten any compaignye.
> Fare wel, my sweete foo, myn Emelye!
> And softe taak me in youre armes tweye,
> For love of God, and herkneth what I seye.

This reference to the starkness of death, contrasting with the potential for love and life, gives to this tale a decidedly tragic dimension. The Knight's Tale is not just a tale of courtly love circumscribed within a chivalric world. What Arcite says to Emily when on the point of death illustrates what the contest has cost him. The tale sounds depths of what may darkly become one's fate in life, and how events can defeat the greatest human hopes by prompting human conflict. Arcite, however, maintains the honorable spirit of knighthood in now pressing the claims of Palamon. He tells Emily there is none

> So worthy to ben loved as Palamon,
> That serveth yow, and wol doon al his lyf.
> And if that evere ye shul ben a wyf,
> Foryet nat Palamon, the gentil man.

At this extreme moment, when the terribleness of death causes such parting, Arcite re-establishes a fellowship between the knights ruptured by their rivalry for Emily.

Theseus's means of controlling the action had sought to unite what had been fractured between the brother-knights by invoking the chivalric code. But could it have led to a satisfactory resolution of the love-triangle, given Palamon had sought death to prevent seeing Arcite win his beloved Emily? Could all have been resolved if both lovers remained alive? Chaucer recognized, unlike the Knight who welcomed the contest, the inevitable conflict as well as the virtue chivalry could give rise to. The Knight lamented "love ne lordeshipe . . . have no felawsshipe', but Chaucer by his tale was clearly aware of this. It is therefore necessary to question such statements as the following: "The Knight's thesis about life . . . is the thesis that is undoubtedly Chaucer's."[6]

Various were the reactions to Arcite's death: "Shrighte Emelye, and howleth Palamon". Emily weeps "bothe eve and morwe", while Palamon

remains in extended mourning. Once not wanting to get married or have either of them, Emily is no longer a pawn to the outcome of the contest, having become a devoted mourner of him who would by his victory have been her love. The general sorrow acquires an epic dimension in being declared greater than when Hector was brought "al fressh yslayn, / To Troye":

> "Why woldestow be deed," thise wommen crye,
> "And haddest gold ynough, and Emelye?"

Even Theseus needs to be cheered by his old father Egeus, who reminds him

> This world nys but a thurhfare ful of wo,
> And we been pilgrymes, passynge to and fro.

The earlier juxtaposition of prison and garden may be a way of "talking about the 'wele' and 'wo' of human life, about the bewildering range of experience that lies within Fortune's gift". V. A. Kolve suggests this, "imprisonment" including that from which "no ransom is possible" because "its walls are co-extensive with human life".[7] This is a perceptive remark, though the image Egeus uses is that of a pilgrimage, suggesting the inescapable woes of life's journey, which resonates with the central image of the *Tales*. Yet in order to make "vertu of necessitee" Theseus later says:

> Why grucchen we, why have we hevynesse,
> That goode Arcite, of chivalrie the flour,
> Departed is with duetee and honour
> Out of this foule prisoun of this lyf?

The magnificent funeral to honor Arcite is an aspect of what must be undertaken in a futile attempt to counter the irrevocability of death. Such display is but one kind of resistance that can be made; another is to acknowledge we are "pilgrymes", what Egeus says all have to come to terms with in a world that is "a thurghfare ful of wo". Having honored Arcite with such a funeral, it was left to Theseus after a lapse of years to bring together Emily and the still-mourning Palamon. Though he seems to be straining somewhat in attempting to reconcile an immutable order with the inescapable experience of what happens in the world, Theseus pragmatically declares that mourning for Arcite is now beside the point, and that Emily should wed her "owene knyght" Palamon, who faithfully has served and loved her for so long. The Knight ends by informing the assembled pilgrims that "Emelye hym loveth so tendrely",

> And he hire serveth so gentilly,
> That nevere was ther no word hem bitwene
> Of jalousie or any oother teene.

For the Knight the tale achieved a noble end in their perfect union.

Is his ability to reconcile things according to his code analogous to his riding out "no man ferre"? Any irony on Chaucer's part is not directed against chivalry's virtues, but against leaving unrecognized the kind of challenge that can be implicit in aspects of chivalry's world. Opposition exists between one "regne" and another in the implied threat to Athens of a Theban dynasty, just as love can produce in certain circumstances a seemingly unresolvable conflict. Being acclaimed by young and old as "a noble storie", and especially by "the gentils everichon", it would seem there was a gap between the degree of enthusiasm shown by the "gentils" and the response of some others. Does this, then, indicate something we need to be aware of as we read the tale today?

It seems indeed open to debate that the Knight gives voice to Chaucer's own philosophy or "thesis about life". And to what extent are we to accept that the Knight's Tale, as Paul Strohm suggests, "finally rejects a conception of history as a record of human accomplishments and embraces a conception of providential history subject to intervention from above"? If this is meant to suggest a transcendent dimension to the Knight's Tale, that would seem undercut by reference to the god Saturn as "that force of chaos beyond apparent order". Phrases such as a "providential arrangement in mankind's interest", or "a conception of providential history", would appear somewhat questionable given the reference to "cronyism and sharp dealing among the gods"[8]

II

Looking for something to match the tale just told, the Host turns to the Monk as a worldly churchman to tell the next tale:

> Now telleth ye, sir Monk, if that ye konne,
> Somwhat to quite with the Knyghtes tale.

His concern for preserving order by having the Knight succeeded by a pilgrim of rank is upstaged by the Miller, whose intervention is a notable moment in England's cultural history. Paul Strohm notes Alfred David

called the Miller's Tale "a literary Peasants' Rebellion", noting his "compact phrase is true to the social dynamism of the Miller's intervention".[9] After the elaborately crafted Knight's Tale, it introduces another level of life into the *Tales*. The Host tries to prevent the drunk Miller from speaking:

> Abyd, Robyn, my leeve brother;
> Som bettre man shal telle us first another.
> Abyd, and lat us werken thriftily.

But the Miller violently objects: "I wol speke, or elles go my wey." At this the Host says: "Tel on, a devel wey! / Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome." This use of "fool" was arguably harsh language to one of the lower classes, notwithstanding it occurred in the context of a pilgrimage.

The Miller's parodying of the Knight's Tale is among the most brilliant of the *Tales*' stories. Described in the General Prologue as "a janglere and a goliardeys, / And that was moost of synne and harlotries", the Miller says he will tell "a legend and a lyf"

> Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf,
> How that a clerk hath set the wrightes cappe.

Any ill-feeling the Miller might have experienced is directed towards someone of his own status, the Miller's vocational opponent being the Reeve who, having been a carpenter in his youth, exclaims: "Stynt thy clappe! / Lat be thy lewed drunken harlotrye." From the violence of his reply it would appear the Reeve had indeed been cuckolded, but the Miller tries to placate him without forgoing a deft use of *double entendre*:

> Leve brother Osewold,
> Who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold.
> But I sey nat therfore that thou art oon;
> Ther been ful goode wyves many oon,
> And evere a thousand goode ayeyns oon badde.
> That knowestow wel thyself, but if thou madde.
> Why artow angry with my tale now?
> I have a wyf, pardee, as wel as thow;
> Yet nolde I, for the oxen in my plogh,
> Take upon me moore than ynogh,
> As demen of myself that I were oon;
> I wol bileve wel that I am noon.
> An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf

> Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.
> So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,
> Of the remenant nedeth nat enquire.

This use of "pryvetee" clearly applied to a wife's "privy parts".

The exchange between the Host and the Miller, and then between the Miller and the Reeve, injects into the pilgrimage a sense of a more earthy and less sophisticated world than that of the Knight and his tale. The Reeve is someone, as the General Prologue relates, no one could get the better of; but Robyn the Miller clearly does in providing the carpenter of his tale with a servant called Robyn, who can see what is going on in the carpenter's house. He sees through a hole in the door the clerk Nicholas gaping at the stars, and like the Miller of the same name was "a strong carl", who had Nicholas's door off its hinges at once ("atones").

Possessed of great strength and able to break through any door by running headlong at it, the Miller can be seen breaking through a social and literary door by his drunken intervention. He is adamant his "noble tale" will "quite" or get its own back on that of the Knight, and this kind of "answering", often subtly present from tale to tale, imparts a potentially dramatic liveliness to the entire work. The Miller's Prologue provides an example of the on-road drama, where disagreements from time to time threaten the "fellowship" all embraced at the start. Such bonding was earlier called in question by the tale of the brother-knights. Knowing what is coming Chaucer enters his apology for what churls like the Miller and Reeve will say, but society was beginning to move beyond the vertical class structure of feudalism, something the recent rebellion initiated by Watt Tyler inherently challenged. That Chaucer was able to respond to a more broadly based society indicates a creative ability that clearly owed something to his own origin and busy life as a courtier and administrator, as well as his own sympathies and interests.

Paul Strohm, without wishing to overemphasize historical events, points out that what had been a vertically structured society in previous centuries, where loyalties existed as "ties to a social superior", was by the fourteenth century being replaced "in favour of horizontal agreements between persons in similar social situations". He relates of Chaucer that "the structure of late medieval social relations provides an interpretive context for events in his life and themes in his poetry at least as rich as that offered by particular moments in political history". And he sees that "a special property of the *Canterbury Tales* is the extent to which its generic and stylistic variety is

couched in polyvocality, in its embrace of separate and distinctive voices as a means of asserting social difference". The *Canterbury Tales* is polyphonic "because of divisions in the author's experience of society", which is "bound up in its identity as a social text".[10]

The parodic nature of the Miller's Tale can be located broadly in events and echoes that provide a dramatic counterpart to the Knight's Tale. It can even be located indirectly in certain details of language. E. Talbot Donaldson long ago pointed out how "long before Chaucer's time 'derne love' was already in potentiality what it becomes in actuality in Nicholas, a device for getting away with adultery, if not really a sort of excuse for indulging in it". He states: "Nicholas's aptitude parodies an ideal already devalued through misuse in the vernacular; and since even at its most exalted the courtly code of secrecy might be described as crassly practical, his aptitude also parodies that of more genuinely courtly lovers."[11]

The Miller's Tale's descent into rudeness might have made the "gentils" baulk for a moment, but its recent description as "such a scurrilous poem" as calls "human nobility . . . sharply into question"[12] is clearly out of sympathy with the tale's undoubted brilliance. Its love-triangle contrasts in essence with the interminable love-longing of those brother-knights, while Emily's lack of interest and desire contrasts with Alison's readiness to be loved. One aspiring lover is Absolon, a parish clerk and natty dresser with many accomplishments, whose "love-longynge" parodies that of a courtly lover:

> Fro day to day this joly Absolon
> So woweth hire that hym is wo bigon.
> He waketh al the nyght and al the day:
> He kembeth his lokkes brode, and made hym gay.

Absolon swears "he wolde been hir owene page", but his description as a courtly lover is undercut by his being "somdeel squaymous / Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous".

Absolon had first noticed Alison at church as he went around

> Sensynge the wyves of the parisshe faste;
> And many a lovely look on hem he caste,
> And namely on this carpenteris wyf.
> To looke on hire hym thoughte a myrie lyf,
> She was so propre and sweete and likerous.