8-1979

Characteristics of the Narrator: Chaucer’s the Canterbury Tales

Gerald Cecere
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/masters_theses
Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Cecere, Gerald, "Characteristics of the Narrator: Chaucer’s the Canterbury Tales" (1979). Master's Theses. 1944.
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/masters_theses/1944

This Masters Thesis-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NARRATOR IN
CHAUCER'S THE CANTERBURY TALES

by

Gerald Cecere

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment
of the
Degree of Master of Arts

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
August 1979
INFORMATION TO USERS

This was produced from a copy of a document sent to us for microfilming. While the most advanced technological means to photograph and reproduce this document have been used, the quality is heavily dependent upon the quality of the material submitted.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help you understand markings or notations which may appear on this reproduction.

1. The sign or “target” for pages apparently lacking from the document photographed is “Missing Page(s)”. If it was possible to obtain the missing page(s) or section, they are spliced into the film along with adjacent pages. This may have necessitated cutting through an image and duplicating adjacent pages to assure you of complete continuity.

2. When an image on the film is obliterated with a round black mark it is an indication that the film inspector noticed either blurred copy because of movement during exposure, or duplicate copy. Unless we meant to delete copyrighted materials that should not have been filmed, you will find a good image of the page in the adjacent frame.

3. When a map, drawing or chart, etc., is part of the material being photographed the photographer has followed a definite method in “sectioning” the material. It is customary to begin filming at the upper left hand corner of a large sheet and to continue from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. If necessary, sectioning is continued again—beginning below the first row and continuing on until complete.

4. For any illustrations that cannot be reproduced satisfactorily by xerography, photographic prints can be purchased at additional cost and tipped into your xerographic copy. Requests can be made to our Dissertations Customer Services Department.

5. Some pages in any document may have indistinct print. In all cases we have filmed the best available copy.

University Microfilms International
300 N. ZEEB ROAD, ANN ARBOR, MI 48106
18 BEDFORD ROW, LONDON WC1R 4EJ, ENGLAND
CECERE, GERALD
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NARRATOR IN CHAUCER'S
"THE CANTERBURY TALES."
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY, M.A., 1979

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace," and as each period of history creeps into the tomorrow of its succeeding age, the ideas and the tastes of men undergo a corresponding mutation. A poet standing on the brink of a new era takes the risk of being relegated to oblivion by the changing standards and tastes of future readers. Chaucer, writing within the shadow of the declining Middle Ages, was faced with this shift of ideas and also with the peculiar danger of fashioning his claim to immortality in a language that within a comparatively short time would be foreign in his own nation. The fact that he survived these dangers is an indication that there are qualities in his work that can be seen and appreciated in spite of the barriers of language and the changing opinions of succeeding generations.

This widespread and consistent acceptance of Chaucer's poetry, particularly of The Canterbury Tales, indicates that it possesses a fundamental, universal theme, appealing to men of various times and social conditions. Kittredge states this in other terms when he says, "and as for modernity, what we mistake for that, is the everlasting truth, the enduring quality that consists in conformity to changeless human nature . . . For he knew life and loved it, and
his specialty was mankind as it was, and is.¹

Until recent years *The Canterbury Tales* has, for the most part, been treated as a group of tales loosely joined within an incomplete and imperfectly polished frame. The main objective of Chaucerian criticism seems to have been the careful study of individual tales as to source, fidelity to source, structure of the individual tales, and similar topics. The frame too has been minutely analyzed as the supposed path to Canterbury was mapped out and each pilgrim and each tavern along the way were explicitly identified, as the order of the tales was pondered and discussed.

In regard to this analytic approach Kittredge has said, "We read each tale by itself as if it were an isolated unit . . . Very seldom do we venture to regard the several stories from the dramatic point of view. Yet that is manifestly our paramount duty."² John Spiers, too, seeing the procession of Chaucer's pilgrims as the procession of the Human Comedy, advocates an approach to the work as a whole, and Ralph Baldwin, taking this synthetic approach, has found that

The CT has its own symmetry -- not of satellites running concentrically to a planet, nor as straggling offshoots to a root. Rather it is a STORY which has its stories so

¹George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), pp. 1, 2.
²Ibid., p. 151.
organically part of it that they prosecute its character and story line the while they have a narrative entity of their own. But that narrative entity is fully realized only in the context of pilgrimage. To divide the tales and the motif of the pilgrimage into a pattern of fiction and fact is to destroy the construct. 3

Accepting this proposition of Baldwin's one may evaluate The Canterbury Tales on the same basis as any other work of fiction. 4

The purpose of this thesis is to do this from one aspect of literary criticism, that of the narrative point of view. Such an approach involves a study of the Narrator, for it is from his point of view that the Tales are told.

While Chaucer the poet has been the subject of innumerable writings, Chaucer the Narrator of The Canterbury Tales is perhaps one of the most neglected and overlooked figures in English literature. An early bibliographical reference to the enigmatic Narrator is Henry Lüdeke's Die Funktionen des Erzählens in Chaucers Epischer Dichtung which appeared in 1928. 5 In this study of Chaucer's various narrators Lüdeke has found that among the works employing this device, only in The Book of the Duchess are there fewer direct references to the narrator than in The Canterbury Tales. He sees little character-


4 In this regard Spiers says, "Chaucer is indeed properly to be called a poet; but he bears a closer resemblance to the great English novelists than to Spenser . . . With Troilus and Criseyde and the Canterbury Tales Chaucer inaugurates the English novel; and, moreover, the Great Tradition of it." John Spiers, Chaucer the Maker (London, 1951), p. 201.

5 Henry Lüdeke, Die Funktionen des Erzählens in Chaucers Epischer Dichtung (Halle, 1928).
ization and consequently minimizes the role this figure plays in the entire structure of the poem. B.H. Bronson, writing in 1940 on "Chaucer's Art in Relation to His Audience," considers the characterization of the Narrator in the light of the oral tradition of literature. He reminds us that reading in the Middle Ages was a special function, not the individual, solitary experience it is today. Because Chaucer probably read his own poetry aloud, Bronson sees the description of the Narrator as a self-portrait mischievously distorted for the amusement of the audience to whom he was speaking and who could judge for themselves the appropriateness of both Chaucer's self-characterization and the Host's descriptive remarks. To Bronson, the Narrator of The Canterbury Tales is not an assumed persona or mask, but he is the poet himself there present and entertaining his audience by relating the Tales. The Narrator is at first glance the most transparent personality in the world, whose clarity seems to hold not the slightest possibility for concealment. Gradually, however, the reader catches through his lucidity subtle flashes of irony and a hidden ambiguity or humorous skepticism. All of this Bronson sees in direct relation to the oral tradition, with the poet-narrator as raconteur.

Ben Kimpel, in his essay "The Narrator of the Canterbury Tales," like Ludke, minimizes the importance of the Narrator. After listing

---


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
the various appearances of and references to the Narrator and after merely mentioning the opinions of other scholars, he concludes, without apparently examining or evaluating the evidence he has set forth, that the Narrator is not a definite enough personality to prove anything. Unlike Bronson, he discounts completely any identification of the Narrator with the historical Chaucer. E. Talbot Donaldson in Speaking of Chaucer sees an ambivalent Chaucer, now pilgrim, now poet, whose almost imperceptible shuttling from role to role achieves a "wonderfully complex, ironic, comic, serious vision of a world which is but a devious and confused, infinitely various pilgrimage to a certain shrine."8 Baldwin sees the same ambivalence noted by Donaldson, but with the first and third person narrators functioning simultaneously. That Edgar Hill Duncan also finds a dualism is evident in his use of the plural "Points of View" in the title of his essay, "Narrator's Points of View in the Portrait-sketches, Prologue to the Canterbury Tales."9

Kimpel's study seems rather superficial, not taking into account the important role that point of view plays in the evaluation of a piece of fiction, and it leaves the reader with the impression that he did not think his problem through. Lüdeke has, in a sense, given more weight to point of view, but because the nature of his study precludes it, he has not examined the relationship between the Narrator and the meaning of the poem, nor the function the Narrator

---


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
fulfills in conveying that meaning. Bronson's study of Chaucer's art in the light of the oral tradition, while not completely characterizing the Narrator, is valuable in its observations on this character as a caricature of the poet. This places the Narrator within the medieval tradition of the first person narrator. Bronson's thorough study of address, the poet's relation to his audience, is likewise of value in a study of the Narrator. Baldwin, Donaldson, and Duncan have opened the way to further study of the Narrator's place in the complete design and will consequently be discussed more fully in the succeeding chapters. None of these writers, however, has given a complete study of the character of the Narrator and the function he, because of his particular character, fulfills in the entire structure. This thesis, therefore, will, first of all, survey briefly and in general terms the importance and the function of narrative point of view in fiction, and determine the point of view assumed in The Canterbury Tales. Next, it will delineate the character of the Narrator as it is revealed in his intrusive comments and in his own tales. Finally, it will examine and discuss the function of the Narrator in the complete design of The Canterbury Tales.

Before proceeding with this study, the author wishes to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Dr. Robert Stallman for his kind interest and generous assistance.
CHAPTER II

POINT OF VIEW

In his Preface to The Portrait of a Lady, Henry James tells us that the house of fiction has many windows.\(^1\) Re-interpreting this comment, one may say that these windows are the various aspects of criticism, each of which gives an understanding of the meaning of a narrative from its own perspective and so contributes its part to comprehending the significance of the entire work. These "windows" may be the more nearly physical or tangible aspects of the text, such as words, images, sentence and verse structure, and the distribution of chapters, books, acts and scenes. On the other hand, the critic may look into the house of fiction through those elements which may not ineptly, though with some violence to the term, be called "metaphysical" since they are infused throughout the whole. These pervasive elements are plot, character, background or "universe" of the work, symbolism, and the narrative point of view, and the relation of these to the total effect or significance of the work. It is the last of these, the narrative point of view and its relation to the total effect of The Canterbury Tales which is the object of this study.

Point of view or viewpoint is in its simplest terms the answer to the question "Who tells the story?" or "On whose authority is the story told?" It is the relation in which the narrator stands to the story and to his auditors or readers. Although the distinction is not always made, nor is it always necessary, point of view is actually composed of two complementary elements, voice and address. The voice of a work of fiction is the speaker, the one telling the story. It is what is commonly, in a more general term, called point of view. Address, its complement, refers to any specific direction to a hearer and the relation between speaker and audience presupposed by the social situation which environs the story.

The basic patterns of voice-structure can be broadly classified as the first person limited narrator and the omniscient narrator. The technique of the first person limited narrator is that in which a character concerned in the story, in either a major or a minor role, tells the story, using the pronoun "I." This narrator has the advantage of unquestionable, often eye-witness, authority, an asset of particular value in the case of a weird or otherwise hardly credible tale. Although its authority is limited, it is immediate and compelling, and this very limitation itself makes inevitable the selectivity necessary to any well-constructed piece of fiction. The casualness and the intimacy attained by the first person story teller allow room for informal comment on the happenings of the story as well as for necessary summarizing. A notable asset is the ability of this voice to create special desired effects such as irony or an indirect approach. The "I" furthermore, promotes intimacy and consequently
gives intensity and vividness to the events and feelings related. It serves also to cement the various episodes about a single focal point, giving coherence to the story.

On the other hand, the limited authority of the first person narrator is restricted; he can know his own thoughts, but has no way of recording the unspoken thoughts of other people. His analysis of himself is necessarily biased and self-characterization is difficult. This technique also presents the problem on the part of the author of making the tale congruous to the personality of its teller.

Contrasting with the first person limited narrator is the omniscient commentator. This voice is that of the author who knows everything, even the thoughts and sensations of his characters. While he must limit his omniscience to knowledge pertinent to the story, he can, nonetheless, present information of which no single character could be aware. This voice can, therefore, give a penetration into events and speeches which is lacking in a more circumscribed viewpoint. Other advantages of this type of narration are its breadth and its control. The former gives a sense of vast scope and is able to recount incidents far distant from each other in time as well as in space. The latter, control, is important in giving a coherent, balanced picture. It is the ability, possessed more fully by the third person than by the first, to control the scene by giving a long, panoramic view or a short close-up, according to the type of scene at hand.

The omniscient voice is capable of many differentiations. The narrator may enter freely into the minds of his characters, or he may
stand back and let them reveal themselves through their words and actions, presenting the story in an almost completely dramatic form. Even beyond these general differentiations, there will be variations, as each story presents its own problems regarding the point of view to be assumed.

Address, the second element of point of view, is complementary to voice in its reference to the audience rather than to the speaker. It is defined as

All that part of literary meaning which has reference to specific direction to a hearer and to the relations between speaker and addressee established or presupposed by such direction, or rather by the social situation which occasions and environs it.

Address is of particular import in the study of the work of an earlier writer like Chaucer because the fact of his primary concern with a listening audience, rather than with a solitary reader, exerts profound, if subtle, effects upon the art.

In oral literature the poet must be exact in his references and his transitions in order to avoid confusion, but, what is more to the point here, he has a unique opportunity for nuances and shades of meaning that will be recognized by the audience or caught in the tone of voice. "Obviously, the anticipation of a listening audience, containing many of the poet's personal acquaintances must significantly affect his work." We may validly assume that in writing, Chaucer was

---

frequently mindful "that this or that friend would appreciate such and such a stroke, and that it would be amusing to note the reaction of so-and-so at these particular lines."  

The preceding discussion of voice and address has implied some of the functions of point of view. This element of narration holds the story together; it is one among several principles of selectivity as well as of coherence; and, to a large extent, it determines the style of the narrative. Point of view also maintains tonal unity or consistency of attitude, the tone being in harmony with the character of the narrator.

The importance of point of view in its two elements of voice and address is evaluated by J. Craig LaDriere

In the analysis of a speech or literary composition nothing is more important than to determine precisely the voice or voices presented as speaking and the precise nature of the address, . . . for in every speech, reference to a voice or voices and implication of address . . . is a part of the meaning and a frame for the rest of the meaning, for the interpretation of which it supplies an indispensable control.  

He further compares the various types of voice-structure and address in literature to the basic colors of a palette in painting and to keys in a musical composition. "The whole tone and character of a composition

---


4LaDriere, op. cit., p. 441
is set by the writer's choice among them." Gordon and Tate agree that the tone of a narrative will be almost entirely controlled by the point of view from which the story is told, and Percy Lubbock says, "The whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, I take to be governed by the question of the point of view -- the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story." Point of view is not the only approach to criticism of a work of fiction; it is, however, an important and enlightening one, the study of which will almost assuredly give new insight into the work.

THE VOICE ASSUMED IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

The voice assumed in The Canterbury Tales is ostensibly that of the first person narrator. As early as line 20 of the General Prologue this voice is identified: "In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay." In the subsequent twenty-one lines the pronoun I is used six times, me twice, and you twice. This in itself would seem to be sufficient to establish the voice without further investigation. The voice-structure of The Canterbury Tales is not, however, so simple as it may appear on the surface to be; it is rather a highly complex, mature, and possibly unprecedented use of voice. This artistic

---

5 ibid., p. 443.


complexity has been commented on by E. Talbot Donaldson (1972), Edgar Hill Duncan (1954), Ralph Baldwin (1955), and Donald Howard (1976). These critics find an ambivalence or dualism of voice.

Donaldson in his identification of the reporter of the Tales as "the chief agent by which the poet achieves his wonderfully complex, ironic, comic, serious vision of the world" suggests an ontological separation of Chaucer the poet, Chaucer the pilgrim, and the historical Chaucer. He continues

The fact that these are three separate entities does not, naturally, exclude the probability -- or rather the certainty -- that they bore a close resemblance to one another, and that, indeed, they frequently got together in the same body. But that does not excuse us from keeping them distinct from one another, difficult as their close resemblance makes our task. 8

This trichotomy of the historical Chaucer, Chaucer the pilgrim, and Chaucer the poet creates the levels of moral realism and literary realism wherein what ought to be can be evaluated simultaneously with what is, thus causing a tension productive of irony.

Baldwin in The Unity of the Canterbury Tales discovers this same dual role of poet and pilgrim, but with the first person and the omniscient narrators operating simultaneously in a voice combination, which appears in primitive saga but rarely thereafter. This dual distance is seen as a literary device lending depth to the speech situation, allowing for playfulness and irony. Baldwin's main

support for this theory is found in the montages of time and of space. In the descriptions of the pilgrims in the General Prologue he points out at least thirty references which are not bounded by the circumstance of voice focus. These portraits begin at line forty-two, very early in the Prologue; the locus is evidently the Tabard, and the time is the evening on which Chaucer first became acquainted with the twenty-nine. There are, however, thirteen equestrian references as well as other details which would hardly have come to the Narrator's knowledge on so short an acquaintance. According to Baldwin, the first person narrator is here operating simultaneously with the omniscient commentator. Rather than being considered a weakness, this is presented as the deliberate use of a rare combination of voice in literature, and one which, while localizing the pilgrim Chaucer, allows the poet Chaucer to work in concentric omniscience. Baldwin finds further support for his theory of voice-structure in the uniform use of the past tense in introducing the pilgrims: "The scene of meeting at the inn is a past definite. In introducing his new-found friends Chaucer suspends time - or that I further in this tale pace - and creates a kind of vacuum, a time-space continuum, in which he surveys his

---

9 Baldwin points out that lines 74, 94, 207, 271, 287, 328, 390, 496, 541, 615-16, 682-83, and 686 refer to the pilgrims on horseback or to their horses. The Narrator would not have possessed this knowledge before the group started out the next morning. Ralph Baldwin, *The Unity of the Canterbury Tales* (Copenhagen, 1955), p. 68.
companions not as he sees them but as he will have seen them.\textsuperscript{10}

There are several things to be considered in regard to the theories of voice-structure advanced by Donaldson and Baldwin, not the least of which is the problem of movement. This shuttling from first to third person, or alleged simultaneous operation which, as the following quotation will indicate, is actually a shift in voice, instead of being an artistic use of voice, could easily be a source of confusion and clumsiness of style. In the first ten lines of the description of the Prioress, for example, there would be five shifts, neither voice being held for more than three lines. This is illustrated in the lines below by indicating with "L" those lines containing information which would have come to the knowledge of the limited first person narrator in an evening's acquaintance, and indicating with "O" those belonging to the omniscient narrator. The combined letters "L-O" indicate that the Narrator might have learned this on first acquaintance but did not necessarily do so.

\begin{verbatim}
Ther was also a Nonne, a Prioress,\textsuperscript{L}
That of hir smyling was ful symple and coy;\textsuperscript{L}
Hire gretteste ooth was but by Seinte Loy;\textsuperscript{0}
And she was cleped madame Eglentyne.\textsuperscript{L}
Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne,\textsuperscript{0}
Entuned in hir nose ful semely,\textsuperscript{0}
For Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,\textsuperscript{L-O}
After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe, \textsuperscript{L-O}
For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe. \textsuperscript{11}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{10}ibid., p. 56.

\textsuperscript{11}All quotations from Chaucer are from \textit{The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer}, ed. F.N. Robinson, (Boston, 1961).
Of the subsequent lines of the portrait, lines 127-141 are limited to knowledge observable by the first person; lines 142-150 are omniscient; and lines 151-163 revert to the first person. This analysis illustrates the fact that what Baldwin calls a simultaneous operation of voice is actually a shift, for no statement can be both omniscient and limited at the same time.

Similarly, in the description of the Squire there are four shifts of voice in twenty-two lines. In the thirty-two line portrait of the Wife of Bath there are eight shifts, even making allowance for the fact that the Wife probably told a great deal about herself at supper that evening. The other sketches contain a comparable number of changes in voice, with the result that a reader consciously watching for this ambivalence would probably have the sensation of watching a ping pong match. The dual voice-structure suggested by Baldwin, Donaldson, Duncan, and Howard is, as the above analysis shows, actually somewhat clumsy and in fact probably not the voice used by Chaucer.

Baldwin's other proofs for his alleged simultaneous voice-structure, which has been seen to be not simultaneous but shifting, must also be taken into consideration. These proofs are the consistent use of the past tense in introducing the characters and in the links and the "character presentations which have the aura of familiarity rather than the quality of the coup d'oeil confrontation of an evening." The first of these limits the narrator while the second gives him a quality of omniscience. Duncan, although he agrees with Baldwin and Donaldson on the point of a dual voice-structure, does not
hold to this use of the past tense as a proof of this dualism. His comment is

Since the whole of the General Prologue and all the links are cast in the preterit tense, it would be sufficient to assume that within the fictional framework, the Narrator by the time he came to write, as author, his account of the imagined pilgrimage had discovered, by observation, conversation, the pilgrims' tales, their self-confessions, etc., all the details which he chose to include omnisciently in the introductory sketches.12

The Narrator of the Tales is obviously a keen observer and evidently a rather gregarious personality. It is not at all unlikely that by sundown he had gleaned a considerable amount of information about the pilgrims as well as having identified himself with the group.

And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,  
So hadde I spoken with hem everichon  
That I was of hir felawshipe anon.  
I (A) 30-32

What he learned in these conversations he would naturally include in his portraits but it is also likely that as author, supposedly recalling the pilgrimage, he would have included other details and characteristics which had come to his knowledge later. At least half of the details given in the description of the Wife of Bath are also included in her lengthy Prologue. Other sketches, too, include details which evidently came to the commentator's knowledge later through conversations or

---

observations. The description of the Monk includes lines that imply conversation. One can almost hear the Monk expounding his opinions of monastic life as the Narrator listens and apparently agrees with them:

He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen, 
That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men, 
Ne that a monk, whan he is receheles, 
Is likned til a fissh that is waterles, --
This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre, 
But thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre; 
And I sayde his opinion was good. 
I (A) 177-182

Duncan carries this idea so far as to credit the following lines (184-188) to the Monk rather than to the Narrator, who, if he actually said them, was merely paraphrasing the Monk:

What sholde he studie and make hymself coon wood, 
Upon a book in cloystre alwey to pours, 
Or wrynken with his handes, and laboure, 
As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served? 
Las Austyn have his stynek to hym reserved? 
I (A) 184-188

The same writer suggests the possibility of transforming a larger section of the portrait, all of lines 173-192, into a direct quotation of the monk by simply changing the pronouns from the first to the third person. He finds the same possibility in lines 215-232 referring to the Friar:

Ful wel biloved and famulier was he 
With frankelyns al in his contree, 
And eek with worthy wommen of the toun, 
For he hadde power of confessioun, 
As seyd hymself, moore than a curat, 
For of his ordre he was licenciat.
Ful swetely herde he confessioun,
And plesaunt was his absolucioun:
He was an esy man to yeve penaunce,
Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce,
For unto a povre ordre for to yive
Is signe that a man is wel yshryve;
For if he yaf, he dorste make avaunt,
He wiste that a man was repentaunt;
For many a man so hard is of his herte,
He may nat wepe, although hym soore smerte.
Therfore in stede of wepynge and preyeres
Men moote yeve silver to the povre freres.

Although these lines on the Friar are clearly intended to be an indirect quotation — "As seyde hymself" — Duncan's suggestion of the possibility of changing them to a direct quotation through a substitution of pronouns accounts for the Narrator's apparent foreknowledge or omniscience and thus helps to explain the montages of time and space which Baldwin considers as evidence of the use of both first person and omniscient narrators. The use of the past tense and the seeming extension of the limits of time and space are not, therefore, conclusive proof of an ambivalence of voice-structure.

The evidence given above for a single, not ambivalent, voice-structure is limited, and while it accounts for some of the omniscient lines, it by no means solves the problem of what voice has actually been assumed, for there are many omniscient references not accounted for by the use of the device of reported conversation or later observation. The most significant of these omniscient lines will be studied more thoroughly in the following sections.

The narrative voice of *The Canterbury Tales* is ostensibly that of the first person narrator, yet it has many references which are not
bounded by the limits of this commentator. On the other hand, the alleged shifting from voice to voice pointed out with apparent approval by Donaldson, Baldwin, Duncan, and Howard is in fact an inadequate explanation and one which suggests, though not intentionally, a rather clumsy handling of the narrative voice. The voice-structure of the Tales, then, remains to be identified.

As has been stated above, the omniscient voice may assume a variety of forms. One of these, infrequently used because of the high degree of skill necessary to control it, is that in which the reader sees the events of the narrative through the eyes of one character in the story and yet sees into these events more deeply than the character from whose view-point he is observing them. It is as if he were seeing simultaneously with the sight of the character and the insight of the author. Percy Lubbock has described this voice in an essay on "The Strategy of Point of View:"

...keeping mainly and ostensibly to the same point of view, the author has a chance of using a much greater latitude than he need appear to use. The seeing eye is with somebody in the book, but its vision is reinforced; the picture contains more, becomes richer and fuller, because it is the author's as well as his creature's, both at once. Nobody notices, but in fact there are now two brains behind that eye; and one of them is the author's, who adopts and shares the position of his creature, and at the same time supplements his wit. If you analyze the picture that is now presented, you find that it is not all the work of the personage whose vision the author has adopted. There are touches in it that go beyond any sensation of his, and indicate that someone else is looking over his shoulder -- seeing things from the same angle but seeing more, bringing another mind to bear upon the scene. It is an easy and natural extension of the personage's power of observation. The impression of the scene may be deepened as much as need be; it is not confined
to the scope of one mind, and yet there is no blurring of the focus by a double point of view.\textsuperscript{13}

This is probably the ideal voice since it provides both for the eye-witness authority of a foreground observer and for the larger vision and inscape penetration of an omniscient narrator. At the same time, it does not suffer from the liabilities either of a mere eye-witness account or of a straightforward omniscient narration. Its control, however, requires a high degree of technical skill as well as maturity of judgment.

A unique adaptation of this voice to first-person narration seems to be operative in \textit{The Canterbury Tales}. The first person narrator tells the story and the entire action is seen through his eyes, yet with a bi-focal, sight-insight kind of vision. While the "seeing eye" is with the Narrator, the "penetrating eye"\textsuperscript{14} belongs to the author, who shares it with the reader. There is no shift in point of view and no ambivalence of character.

The point of view assumed by Henry James in \textit{The Ambassadors} is, in a sense, very similar to that taken by Chaucer in \textit{The Canterbury Tales}. In both cases the entire action of the story is seen through


\textsuperscript{14}Penetration involves a searching mind that goes beyond the reach of the senses. "Discernment," \textit{Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary} (Springfield, Mass., 1972).
the limited vision of one character. James sees through Strether's eyes everything that happens in *The Ambassadors*, yet he and the reader with him, see into these events more deeply than does Strether. James's position, however, is within the mind of the main character, making him a sort of central intelligence through which all of the action is evaluated. Chaucer, on the other hand, never enters within the mind of his protagonist, but tells of the events of the story through the Narrator's recounting them, yet here as in *The Ambassadors* the author and the reader penetrate more deeply into the significance of these events than does the central character. Despite James's internal approach as contrasted with Chaucer's more external method, the two points of view are fundamentally the same and produce similar effects.

The disadvantages which Lubbock finds in this voice-structure, namely, lack of opportunity for dramatic action and inability to evaluate objectively the central character through whose eyes the action is observed, are obviated by the social situation of Chaucer's reading his own poetry before the court. Chaucer the poet, composing the *Tales* with an eye to reading them aloud, is able to present dramatic action ostensibly involving himself as pilgrim, and is also able to step back and regard the pilgrim objectively. This allows for dramatic and ironic effects which might not have been hit upon in a book written with an eye for the reader rather than for a live audience.

---

When this device of the "penetrating eye" is used, it is ordinarily combined with the third person narrator as, for example, in The Ambassadors or in James Joyce's "The Dead." Chaucer the author, however, has chosen to stand behind the first person, adding his insight to the limited sight of Chaucer the pilgrim, and the result is that "the reporter is usually unaware of the significance of what he sees, no matter how sharply he sees it. He is, to be sure, permitted his lucid intervals, but in general he is the victim of the poet's pervasive -- not merely sporadic -- irony."

---

THE FUNCTION OF THE "PENETRATING EYE"

IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

This consideration of point of view has so far touched only upon externals and the type of omniscience that reveals facts which would be unknown to the limited narrator. The "penetrating eye" has a much more important function in its ability to discern subtly hidden meanings. It sees more deeply than the merely seeing eye and it is in this searching beyond the reach of the senses that this voice attains its true significance. The analysis of four of the better known portraits in the General Prologue will reveal the various ways in which this bi-focal sight penetrates a description and discovers implications unperceived by the Narrator. These analyses are based primarily upon the following studies: A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, by Muriel Bowden; "The Secret of Chaucer's Pardoner," by Walter Clyde Curry; Speaking of Chaucer, by E. Talbot Donaldson; and Some New Light on Chaucer, by John Matthews Manly. Since the following sections are a summary, or in some cases a paraphrase, of these studies, only the direct quotations will be documented.

THE MONK. A Monk ther was, a fair for the maistrie
An outridere, that loved venerie.
I (A) 165-166

The phrase "for the maistrie" meaning "extremely" is here used adverbially to modify the adjective "fair," a word which Robinson defines as "fair, good, lovely, excellent, specious." "Extremely excellent"
is a fitting, redundant expression of the Narrator's opinion of the Monk. The "seeing eye" of the Narrator observes the Monk and is obviously impressed by the man, his possessions, and his accomplishments, but the "penetrating eye" of the author and the listener or the reader sees the significance of the details which the commentator so naively reports.

There can be little doubt that the poet and his auditors were well aware that being an outrider, the officer of the monastery who rode about to inspect the granges, was a duty that had become synonymous with many of the abuses of the monastic spirit. It was one of the abuses denounced by Wyclif and condemned or satirized by other writers of the time, including Langland and Gower. That Chaucer as well as his audience was cognizant of this is evidenced in lines 179-181 of the General Prologue:

Ne that a monk, whan he is reccheles,  
Is likened til a fissh that is waterles, --  
This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre.

The line "a fissh that is waterles" appears substantially in Vox Clamantis and in Piers Plowman as well as in Wyclif's writings, so the audience could hardly have missed the implication in Chaucer's

---

17 John Gower, Vox Clamantis, Lib. IV, 281-282.  
18 William Langland, Piers Plowman, C. Passus VI, 147-152.  

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
use of the simile. Gower in Mirour de l'Omme refers to monks in terms similar to Chaucer's:

That monk is not a good cloisterer
Who is made keeper or seneshal
Of some office which is outside;
For he must have a horse and saddle
To run about the lands.20

The line "How shall the world be served," the Monk's rationalization for his riding out of his monastery, contains the irony of ambiguity. While the Monk and the Narrator interpret it as the Monk's rendering service to those in the world who need him, the audience sees the Monk enslaved to the world he professes to have renounced upon entering religious life.

The poker-faced references to the Monk's horse, boots, belled bridle, and stable were undoubtedly not lost on the listeners, nor was the description of the Monk's garb:

I seigh his sieves purfiled at the hond
With grys, and that the fynest of a lond;
And, for to festne his hood under his chyn,
He had a gold ywroght a ful curious pyn;
A love-knotte in the greter ende ther was.
I (A) 193-197

While the Narrator admired the Monk's attire, the listener caught the significance of the luxurious clothing, so out of harmony with the

monastic ideal. A few lines later, attention is called to "His bootes souple," but the fact that he was wearing these boots is revealing, for soft, unwrinkled, "souple" boots, being very expensive, were worn only by the gentlemen of the court. In fact, William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, in his injunctions to the convents of his diocese severely reprimanded the Austin Canons for their worldly dress and especially for the wearing of fine boots. Those whom Chaucer was entertaining could not have helped being aware of the consistent and violent criticism, in literature as well as in Church documents, of the rich clothing of many of the clergy and religious. Gower in Mirour de l'Omme had said

The monk of the present day wears a habit which is a beautiful adornment to the body, and for vain honour he is clad in a furred cloak. Let the monk be filled with consternation who makes himself handsome for the world, who wears the finest wool furred with costly grey squirrel rather than a hair shirt.22

And the Council of London in 1342 had reproached religious with

21Gilbert White, Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne (New York, 1897), pp. 397-402. Although these injunctions were addressed specifically to the Austin Canons, they were equally applicable to the other religious orders. This same episcopal document condemns outriding, hunting, the keeping of hounds, and "foppish ornaments" and garments edged with costly furs.

22Cited by Muriel Bowden, op. cit., p. 112.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
wearing clothing "fit rather for knights than for clerks." 23

The Monk "yaf nat of that text a pulled hen, / That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men," but his contemporaries were of a different mind, or at least were aware of a different mind, on the subject. The belief that hunters were sinful men was a common one during the Middle Ages. Its actual origin lay possibly in a confusion of terms which resulted in the word *venator*, a killer of beasts in the arena, being applied also to a hunter of game. Though perhaps erroneous in its origin, the belief was tenaciously preserved by the people. Four lines in the portrait refer to the Monk's love for hunting, and to his swift hunting dogs. The Narrator is impressed by these: "Grehoundes he hadde as swift as fowel in flight." But the nobles who were listening to the story were doubtless aware of the repeated attempts, usually unsuccessful, to ban hunting dogs from monasteries, as well as of the official ecclesiastical prohibition of hunting. Ramona Bressie suggests a possible allusion to Leicester Abbey, the abbot of which was "A Governour Wily and Wys," William de Cloune. So famous a hunter was Cloune that Edward III together with the prince and many lords made it a practice to hunt with this abbot every year and to visit the abbey frequently. Leicester Abbey was renowned for its stables, which were at least once put in order by

the king, a munificent patron of the abbey.

The Monk's strong points, those elaborated on and admired by the Narrator, are all physical: "a manly man," "a lord ful fat and in good poyn," (an expression ordinarily applied to horses and dogs), "nat pale as forpyned goost." The Narrator admires, but the "penetrating eye" sees the incongruity of this description to the Monk's calling to a spiritual life.

The irony of delayed definition and of the telling detail recalls to mind the opening line of the portrait: "A Monk ther was, a fair for the maistrie." The "extremely excellent" now takes on a satirical tinge - physically excellent, excellently dressed, possessing excellent horses. In view of the rest of the sketch, the interpretation of "fair" applied to the Monk, rather than being "excellent," is more fittingly "specious - outwardly pleasing; showy; apparently but deceptively fair; appearing well at first view."

THE PRIORESS. If the Narrator was impressed with the imposing masculinity of the Monk, he was overwhelmed with the gracious femininity of the Prioress. Donaldson calls attention to the adverb ful, meaning "very" which appears seven times in the first twenty-one lines of the portrait. The Prioress is very simple and coy; she sings the Office very well, intoning it in her nose very prettily; she speaks French very nicely; she is very courteous, very pleasant and very

---

pleasing; "and so on, down to the last gasp of sentimental appreciation. Indeed the Prioress may be said to have transformed the rhetoric into something not unlike that of a very bright kindergarten child's descriptive theme."  

The portrait of the Prioress is a masterpiece of delicately poised satire and demonstrates what is probably the most urbane use of the "penetrating eye" voice-structure in the entire work. The Narrator is evidently charmed by the nun and his description of her is aimed at evoking a similar admiration from his listeners, yet there are overtones in the portrait which the fourteenth century audience would certainly have perceived. The very fact that the Prioress was on a pilgrimage at all is the poet's first satiric thrust; for nuns were absolutely forbidden to leave their cloisters to go on pilgrimages, even though they might have vowed to do so.  

The keynote of the piece is sounded in the second line in the words "symple and coy." The Narrator is calling attention to her quiet, modest demeanor; coy did not have the implication of coquetry which it bears today. The courtly audience, however, could not have missed the nuance in the expression, for these words were a convention of the medieval romance and had nothing to do with nuns. This allusion is extended in the description of the Prioress's appearance:

---

25 Donaldson, op. cit., p. 3.


Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas,
Hir mouth ful smal, and thereto softe and reed;
But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;
It was almoost a spanne brood I trowe.

I (A) 152-155

This is the conventional description of the heroine of medieval romance. An almost identical picture appears in Gower's *Confessio Amantis* where the Lover is feeding upon the sight of his lady's Countenance:

He seth hire front is large and plein
Withoute frounce of eny grein,
He seth hire yhen lich and hevene,
He seth hire rode upon the cheke,
He seth hire rede lippes eke.28

According to medieval standards, a broad forehead was a sign of beauty, but in the case of a nun, the forehead should have been covered.

It may be because the Prioress "peynd hire to countrefete cheere / Of court" that "Hire grettest ooth was but by Seinte Loy."
The allusion here is probably to St. Eligius, also called "Eloi" or "Loy," who had originally been a courtier and an artist of distinction. He was apparently a man of physical beauty and a lover of personal adornment before he withdrew from the world. His charm became legendary, and if the allusion is to him, for this Prioress to swear by him is most apropos, and the line is a masterstroke of subtle irony.

The least gentle section in this sketch is that referring to the

28 Cited by Bowden, op. cit., p. 95.
"smale houndes." Even ladies of the court were discouraged from keeping pets, and nuns were absolutely forbidden to do so. To feed them roast meat and wastel-bread, a fine quality bread eaten only by the rich, was an extravagance not to be easily excused. Nor does the poet lightly excuse that other extravagance, sentimentality, as it is manifested in the Prioress's weeping over an injured dog or a dead mouse. The pilgrim, as usual, is more indulgent here than is the poet.

Ten lines are devoted to a detailed description of the Prioress's manners at table. There are reasons on the part of both the unsophisticated Narrator and the gently satirical poet for devoting such a large section of the portrait to something that could have been summarized in a line or two. The cataloguing of each mannerism in detail emphasizes the naivete of the pilgrim, who does not seem to be completely at home with the etiquette of polite society and so minutely records each point he observes in the Prioress. The poet designedly elaborates on these details, for this section is taken directly from The Romaunt of the Rose. In its original context it is an account of the wiles a woman uses to attract
and to hold her lover.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{29}Bowden, op. cit., p. 96. The lines from \textit{The Romaunt of the Rose} cited by Bowden are:

\begin{quote}
She should behave well when at table
In manner fit and convenable;

***
'Tis well she take especial care
That in the sauce her fingers ne'er
She dip beyond the joint, nor soil
Her lips with garlick, sops or oil,
Nor heap up goblets and then charge
Her mouth with pieces overlarge.
And only with the finger point
Should touch the bit she'd fain anoit
With sauce, white, yellow, brown, or green,
And lift it towards her mouth between
Finger and thumb with care and skill
That she no sauce or morsel spill
About her breast cloth.

Then her cup
She should so gracefully lift up
Towards her mouth that not a gout
By any chance doth fall about
Her vesture, or for glutton rude,
By such unseemly habitude,
Might she be deemed.

Nor should she set
Lips to her cup while food is yet
Within her mouth.

And first should she
Her other lip wip delicately,
Lest, having drunk, a grease-formed groat
Were seen upon the wine to float.
\end{quote}
If "symple and coy" is the keynote of the portrait of the Prioress, its epitome is found in the ambiguous inscription on her brooch, *Amor vincit omnia*. Whether this refers to earthly love or to heavenly love is left to the reader to decide. Lowes penetrates the character of this enigmatic woman of religion when he says:

Now is it earthly love which conquers all, now heavenly; the phrase plays back and forth between the two. And it is precisely that happy ambiguity of the convention -- itself the result of an earlier transfer -- which makes Chaucer's use of it here ... a master stroke. Which of the two loves does "amor" mean to the Prioress? I do not know; but I think she thought she meant love celestial.

**THE PARDONER.** The Narrator's description of the Pardoner, unlike those of the Monk and the Prioress, is completely objective. The pilgrim is favorably impressed with the preceding two religious figures and tries to convey his feeling to his audience. In the portrait of the Pardoner, however, "gentil" is the only word which attempts to give more than a two-dimensional picture, and this word, used so frequently, is more of a convention than a meaningful term in this context. The reader suspects that even the short-sighted Narrator was not "taken in" by the Pardoner, but the Narrator himself says nothing to intimate this. He simply describes what he sees and hears. The "penetrating eye," here aided primarily by contemporary

---

history and the medieval science of physiognomy, fills in the missing dimension.

With hym ther rood a gentil Pardoner
Of Rouncival
I (A) 669-670

The word Pardoner in the fourteenth century had become synonymous with the abuses of that office, so the very mention of his profession classified this man as very likely a scoundrel. Whether official or self-appointed, all pardoners seem to have been characterized by the same lucrative hypocrisy. Pope Boniface IX, writing at the same time as Chaucer, described the pardoners in terms strikingly similar to Chaucer's:

"Thus," continues the Pope, "they proclaim to the faithful and simple people . . . the real or pretended authorizations which they have received; and irreverently abusing those which are real, in pursuit of infamous and hateful gain, they carry further their impudence by mendaciously attributing to themselves fake and pretended authorizations of this kind."31

The fact that the Pardoner was from Rouncival serves to emphasize his dishonesty since this reference may well be to the convent of St. Mary Roncevall, which had become so notorious for its abuses that in 1379 the Crown seized the buildings and lands of this convent and issued a writ for the arrest of anyone proved

to have collected alms as Proctor of this Hospital and converted them to his own use.

This Pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wax,
But smothe it hung as dooth a strike of flex;
By ounces henge his lokkes that he hadde,
And therwith he his shulders overspradde;
But thynne it lay, by colpons oon and oon.

I (A) 675-679

Swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an bare.

684

A voys he hadde as smale as hath a goot.
No berde had he, ne nevere sholde have;
As smothe it was as it were late shave.

683-690

To the uninitiate, these lines describing the Pardoner's physical appearance and his voice are merely a description of a singularly unattractive person. But to anyone versed in the medieval science of physiognomy, as was Chaucer and undoubtedly his audience as well, there are extremely important connotations in these physical characteristics. The straight, thin, wax-yellow hair, which the Pardoner tries to make the most of by spreading it out, indicates a lack of virility and an effeminacy of mind. One manifestation of this effeminacy is the Pardoner's desire to be fashionable in his dress:

But hood, for jolitee, wered he noon.

* * *
Hym thoughte he rood al of the newe jet;
Dischevelee, save his cape, he rood al bare.

I (A) 680, 682-683

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
The glaring eyes told the medieval audience that this was a "man given to folly, a glutton, a libertine, and a drunkard." His voice, like his hair, reveals his effeminacy as well as the fact that he is a eunuch; and, according to the tenth century physician Rasis, a man who has never had a beard is worse than "foolish, lustful, and presumptuous." 32

In his description of the Pardoner, the Narrator has said none of this; he does not seem to have included any nuances in the portrait, yet anyone familiar with the reputation of the Pardoner and with the science of physiognomy would have caught the implications immediately, as the pilgrim audience seems to have done, and as the court audience surely did.

Thus the "penetrating eye," seeing beyond the senses, is able to interpret the character of the Pardoner through a completely objective, two-dimensional description of him.

THE SERGEANT OF THE LAW. An approach different from that of the three preceding portraits is taken in the description of the Sergeant of the Law. Although attempts to identify the Prioress have been made, there is still doubt as to whether or not she was actually intended to picture Madame Argentyn of St. Leonard's convent, and

there seems, furthermore, to be no particular reason why Chaucer should have chosen to depict a specific nun. The portrait interest is centered about the Prioress as a nun, not as an individual. The Monk and the Pardoner, too, are primarily types, not specific persons. In the case of the Sergeant of the Law, on the other hand, there is evidence for believing that the center of interest lies in a particular individual who was well-known to but unpopular with the court audience.

Tracing a possible model for a description written some six hundred years ago is an extremely difficult task, in most cases almost an impossibility. The Sergeant of the Law, however, offers probably the most encouraging subject for this task. Since these lawyers were the most eminent in their profession, having been summoned to this high degree by a special writ from the king, there are legal records at least complete enough to record their official careers. During Chaucer's time there were only about twenty Sergeants of the Law in active practice; of these, one, Thomas Pynchbek, meets the qualifications of a prototype for Chaucer's Man of Law. Pynchbek had been a Sergeant of the Law since 1376 and he actually was "ful often in assise." Records indicate that he dealt extensively in land and that he ordinarily acquired his property in fee simple. His extra-ordinary knowledge of the law can be explained by the requirements of his office, for sixteen years of study and the practice of law were prerequisite to being named a Sergeant of the Law. Further evidence substantiating an identification of Pynchbek with the...
Chaucer figure is the fact that the poet was doubtless acquainted, at least indirectly, with Pynchbek, and this contact, according to the records of it, had not been of an amicable nature. 33

If the identification of the Sergeant of the Law with Pynchbek can be accepted, and there seems to be good reason for accepting it, there is a new facet added to the versatile voice-structure of the "penetrating eye." As the Narrator describes the Sergeant "war and wys," admiring the wariness and the wisdom

Discreet he was and of greet reverence --
He semed swich, his wordes weren so wise.
I (A) 312-313

the audience was able to apply the description to Pynchbek, coloring their interpretation by their opinion of the man. Muriel Bowden suggests that Pynchbek had probably earned the censure of contemporary homilists on the charges ordinarily leveled, and justly so in most cases, against lawyers. These men were accused of using their superior knowledge to take advantage of the people, who were at their mercy; of never pleading a case unless they received exorbitant fees, and of frequently accepting bribes; and of contriving to get lands under their control, thus cheating the rightful heirs. In this case, the "penetrating eye" reads into the lines "In termes hadde he caas and doomes alle / That from the tyme of kyng William were falle"

33 The Pynchbek home was located near that of Chaucer's sister-in-law, with the result that the poet knew him at least by hearsay. Pynchbek had offended Chaucer's friend Sir William Beauchamp by denying his claim to the Pembroke estate. The lawyer was later chief baron of the Exchequer and signed a writ for the arrest of Chaucer for a small debt. John Matthews Manly, Some New Light on Chaucer (New York, 1926), pp. 154-156.
the implication that he used his knowledge to questionable advantage. The lines "For his science and for his heigh renown, / Of fees and robes hadde he many oon," innocent sounding in themselves, suggest, when they are applied to an individual who is wealthy but unpopular, or who may be suspected of dishonesty, that he has more fees and robes than can be legitimately accounted for. And if the court audience considered Pynchbek's land dealings to be suspect, they would have caught the nuance in "So greet a purchasour was nowhere noon."

Chaucer's little joke about the lawyer's seeming to be busier than he was throws the character into momentary bold relief, and the audience, applying this to the officious Pynchbek, would undoubtedly have found more than subtle humor here.

A possibly more direct reference to the over-clever Man of Law is found in the pun on his name in line 326: "Ther koude no wight pynch at his writing." This pun probably would have delighted an audience who had identified Pynchbek with this Sergeant of the Law.

The subtlety of voice-structure and the humor in this sketch depend almost completely upon accepting Pynchbek as the pattern according to which the Sergeant of the Law was delineated. Manly has shown that because of the limited possibilities for this prototype and because of Pynchbek's unpopularity, this supposition is probably a valid one and the portrait of the Sergeant of the Law offers a new scope for the "penetrating eye" in its ability to apply
the details of the description to a specific individual.

OTHER FIGURES. The preceding study of the Monk, the Prioress, the Pardoner and the Sergeant of the Law has demonstrated the functioning of the "penetrating eye" in seeing beyond the senses and revealing hidden meanings in the details so innocently recorded by the Narrator. These four sketches do not by any means exhaust the potentialities of this voice. It functions throughout the entire frame of the Tales. A few salient examples from other portraits will illustrate the pervasive presence of the "penetrating eye." The five Guildsmen are "clothed alle in o liveree," and "hir knyves were chaped noght with bras / But all with silver wroght ful clene and weel." Even these slight references to clothing may have called to the minds of the listeners the fact that ordinary tradesmen -- and these do not impress one as extraordinary -- were forbidden to wear a knife ornamented with a precious metal.

Only two lines of the description of the Cook refer to anything besides his culinary talents: "But great harm was it, as it thoughte me, / That on his shyne a mormal hadde he," The one word "mormal" tells more than all the rest of the description together, for this was a type of dry scabbed ulcer which was generally understood to imply drunkeness (consistent with his later conduct on the pilgrimage) and other habits of immorality.

Another character whose morality is revealed in a seemingly objective description of his appearance is the churlish Miller.
Shamelessness is implied in being "a stout carl," while "His berd as any sowe or fox was reed / And therto brood, as though it were a spade" reveals a treacherous nature. The wart on his nose marks him as a shameful fornicator and his black, wide nostrils are a sign of lust and anger. His later conduct confirms the inference, drawn from "His mouth as greet was as a greet forneys," that he is a prodigious babbler and a liar.

The Friar is characterized as "a wantowne and a merye" in a neat pun on "wantowne," which Robinson defines as "Wanton (lit. "ill-governed"), undisciplined; unruly; lascivious, lewd;" but also as "sportive, merry." Another well-placed play on words is found in the concluding couplet of the portrait of the Doctor:

For gold in physik is a cordial,  
Therefore he lovede gold in special.  
I (A) 443-444

"Gold in physik" may refer to aurum potabile, a well-known and excellent remedy, or to the gold which the avaricious Doctor loved so well that he collaborated with the apothecary in making a dishonest profit of it.34

The "penetrating eye" is, then, the voice-structure used in The

34 The facts in the analyses of the last five portraits are taken substantially from Muriel Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (New York, 1948).
Canterbury Tales in order to reinforce the limited, almost opic vision of the naive first person Narrator. This voice gives depth and rich meaning to the picture presented and allows a wide scope for irony and good-humored satire. John Spiers's comment on the General Prologue gives an appropriate summary of the use of voice and address in the presentation of the characters, especially of the ecclesiastics:

The art is in seeing exactly what each is in relation to what each ought to be; an art of exact contemplation but not in a void. That the criticism is implied itself implies an audience which shared the same social and moral standards as the poet. The art is as much in what is left unsaid as in what is said; and what is said consists in the simple juxtaposition of statements which it is left to the audience to know how to relate. How alert, intelligent and civilized Chaucer's audience must have been to understand exactly what is left unsaid, to see the point of the irony.  

The art and the subtlety of the voice-structure of The Canterbury Tales hinge on the obtuseness of the Narrator in regard to what he sees and hears, for the limited, naive Narrator is essential to the ironic effects produced by the "penetrating eye" voice-structure. 

The naivete of Chaucer the pilgrim is a foil for the sophistication of Chaucer the poet and of the audience. But this artistic function of the Narrator is but one aspect of his role in the poem. Of equal importance, or possibly of greater importance, is the role this narrative persona plays in conveying the meaning or total effect of the poem.  

---

In this chapter the Narrator has been seen as merely a naive spectator painting verbal portraits to which his listeners are able to add a third dimension unperceived by the raconteur. The artistic function of this Narrator has been shown through the analysis of several portraits. In the following chapter additional characteristics of the Narrator will be more fully delineated with a view to discovering his function in the scheme of the entire poem.
CHAPTER III
CHARACTER OF THE NARRATOR

The group of thirty pilgrims to Canterbury was well on its way, and several tales had already been told, when suddenly the Host spied a quiet, roly-poly fellow jogging along with the company.

And thanne at erst he looked upon me,
And seyde thus, "What man artow?" quod he;
Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,
For evere upon the ground I se thee stare.

What manner of man was this reticent traveler? And, more important, who was he?

His name was undoubtedly Chaucer, for he is the "I" of Chaucer's poem, and, as such, he is the first person narrator through whose eyes the entire action is observed. The other pilgrims, however, evidently did not identify him with the Chaucer whom they knew as a poet, and the author of The Legend of Good Women. The Man of Law reveals this when he refers to Chaucer in his prologue:

I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn
That Chaucer, though he kan but lewedly
On metrer and on rhyming craftily,
Meth seyd hem in swich English as he kan
Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man;

II (B) 46-50
But neither he nor anyone else makes any connection between the poet and the thirtieth pilgrim.

A brief comparison of the known facts of the life of the historical Chaucer and the description of the Narrator given in the links and in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* will reveal that absolute identification of the two is not likely. The Chaucer whose life can be reconstructed from the records of his time spent most of his life in the service of the nobility. By the time he was twenty-four, he was already embarked upon a successful career at court where one of his later duties was to be entertaining the nobles by reading poetry. He was a diplomat and a civil servant under three different kings, receiving monetary support and royal favors from all three.

A comparison of this picture of Chaucer which is gleaned from historical records and the picture he gives of himself in *The Canterbury Tales* is fascinating as well as enlightening. In spite of the fact that he quickly became acquainted with the other pilgrims, Chaucer the Narrator is reticent - "For evere upon the ground I se thee stare." He is diffident, for when asked for a tale he apologetically says,

"Hooste," quod I, "ne beth nat yvele apayd,
For oother tale certes kan I noon,
But of a rym I learned longe agoon."

B² 1897-1899
When his little "rym" is interrupted by the Host and called "rym
dogerel," the Narrator is piqued:

"Why so?" quod I, "why wiltow latte me
Moore of my tale than another man,
Syn that it is the beste rym I kan?"

And, most significant of all, in the General Prologue he shows him­
self amazingly naive in his evaluation of the other pilgrims, especially
of the Monk and the Prioress.

A man with a career in court life, diplomacy, and civil service,
and who had, furthermore, maintained his favorable status under three
very unlike kings could hardly have been the same timid fellow who
trailed along to Canterbury all but unnoticed. A student of the
Inner Temple and a page, later a squire, in the royal household would
have been familiar enough with protocol not to have to apologize

"Also I prey yow to foryeve it me,
Al have I nat set folk in hir degree
Heere in this tale, as that they shoide stonde,
My wit is short, ye may wel understande."

The squire whose duty it was to entertain the nobles would hardly
be expected to recite "rym dogerel," and "a naif Collector of Customs
would be a paradoxical monster."\(^1\)

\(^1\)George Lyman Kittredge, quoted by E. Talbot Donaldson in
Are the two "Chaucers" then irreconcilable? Is there no point of contact between the poet Chaucer and the Narrator of *The Canterbury Tales*? On the contrary, they are completely reconcilable and the point of contact is to be found in that element of point of view which is the literary phenomenon of address.

It is a generally accepted fact that Chaucer wrote primarily for a listening audience and that he probably told his own tales to the nobles, as is shown in the illustration of a manuscript of *Troilus and Criseyde*, which shows Chaucer, looking very much like his own description of himself, reading to a courtly audience. Chaucer is ever conscious of this relationship with his listeners and he keeps them aware of his connection with them as well as with his characters. It is this consciousness which lends charm and humor to his narratives:

> The "I" in his poetry never means anyone else than Geoffrey Chaucer, then and there visibly present. He may distort the picture, and make himself out six kinds of a fool and dulldard; but all the while he is talking about himself, and that is where much of his mischief lies.  

Chaucer the Narrator of *The Canterbury Tales* is a caricature of the Chaucer who was visibly present and telling the *Tales*.

According to the convention of the oral tradition of literature, the first person narrator was expected to share the personality of

---

his creator, as did the commentator in The Divine Comedy, Confessio Amantis, and Piers Plowman. Chaucer, however, in depicting himself, chose to throw his own personality traits off balance just enough to give them a humorous distortion. So his natural deference becomes a sort of snobbishness; his affability, over-readiness to please. His practicality turns into Babbittry and his perception, into inspection. His absent-mindedness is distorted by "My wit is short, ye may wel understonde."³

It is not only in his self-characterization that Chaucer caricatures himself, but also in his choice of tales he siezes the opportunity for a bit of burlesque. As both the author and one of the story-tellers competing for the free supper, Chaucer was faced with a dilemma as to what type of tale to put into his own mouth. If it was the best, he would appear to be egotistical, and if it was the poorest, his telling it would be absurd. On the other hand, there would be no appeal in a mediocre yarn. So, of the three avenues which appear to be the only ones open to him, Chaucer took

³Donaldson, op. cit., pp. 10-11. Charles Muscatine sees in the narrator of The Book of the Duchess the embryo of the Canterbury Narrator: "Chaucer was to develop this inadequacy of his Narrator as lover - or as anything else - in poem after poem ... This pose creates a discrepancy between the known sophistication of the poet and the obtuseness of the part he has made for himself. In this perspective the characterization of the Narrator becomes overtly humorous...Here are the makings of him who rimed the tale of Sir Thopas." Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition, p. 104.
the fourth. He avoided the dilemma by telling "a rym I lerned longe agoon," "The Tale of Sir Thopas." This put him out of the competition for the free supper because the Host, who was judge in the game, considered it to be the worst of the tales: "Thy drasty ryming is nat worth a toord!" The court audience, on the contrary, not taking it at its face value but seeing in it a delightful burlesque of a kind of romance with which they had become sated, would have voted it the best. "Every ridiculous feature of the tenth-rate romance is exploited with glee -- its exaggerations, its love of insignificant detail, its prolixity, its capacity for consuming hours in 'passing a given point.'" Of the ironic unfitness of this tale to its teller, Chesterton has written, "Chaucer has distributed caps to fit the heads of the whole company; and when he reserves the dunce's cap for himself, it is all the more fitting because it does not fit."^5

The Narrator of The Canterbury Tales is, therefore, a caricature of the poet Chaucer in both his personality and in his choice of "The Tale of Sir Thopas." This places him within the medieval tradition of the first person narrator who shares the personality of his creator, a fact that will prove significant in discovering the total meaning of the Tales.

A part of the tradition of oral literature, which was universal


before the invention of the printing press, was, as mentioned above, the convention of the first person narrator. The audience expected the persona, or "mask," to resemble the real story-teller. In more serious works, especially those which have withstood the test of time, this persona assumed a universality in that it not only resembled the author but it also represented mankind in general. The best known examples of this type of persona among the works contemporary with Chaucer's are Long Will of Piers Plowman; the protagonist of Pearl, who is mankind whose heart has been set on a transitory good; the old man seeking an impossible earthly love in Confessio Amantis; and Dante of The Divine Comedy. Of the personal and universal elements in the last-named protagonist, Leo Spitzer writes:

For the story that Dante had to tell, both aspects of his composite "I" were necessary: on the one hand, he must transcend the limitations of individuality in order to gain an experience of universal experience; on the other, an individual eye is necessary to perceive and fix the matter of experience.6

This role of a narrator as a universal or Everyman character was comprehended by medieval auditors because it was a tradition generally accepted:

In the Middle Ages, the "poetic I" had more freedom and more breadth than it has today: at that time the concept of intellectual property did not exist because literature

dealt not with the individual but with mankind: the "ut in pluribus" was an accepted standard.  

It would not have been extraordinary if Chaucer had written in this tradition, making his Narrator a representation of himself and at the same time a representative of mankind. The existence of the convention, though, does not mean that he necessarily followed it. The character of the Narrator himself must be analyzed in order to determine whether or not he belongs to the Everyman tradition.

A more modern name for Everyman, and one which is more applicable to the personality of the Narrator, is the Average Man, "homo, not very sapiens." Socially the Average Man of The Canterbury Tales is among the bourgeoisie, the middle class, looking admiringly to the upper classes and at the same time feeling his superiority to those beneath him on the social scale. His moral values are not clearly defined, and he bases his standard of excellence on material success, whether it be exterior form or financial wizardry. His achievements are ordinary; he is outstanding neither in wisdom nor in material attainments. It is through the eye of the Average Man, supplemented by the "penetrating eye" of the author, that the reader sees and evaluates the motley assembly of pilgrims as well as the entire action of the pilgrimage. The Narrator is sincere and naive,

---

7. ibid., p. 415.
and though seeking after good, is unable to evaluate accurately what
he finds.

In his relations with the members of the upper class, represented
by the Knight and the religious figures, he is deferential as well
as admiring. The Knight is "a verray parfit gentil Knight," the
embodiment of all the ideals of chivalry: "Trouthe and honour,
freedom and curteisie." More than half the portrait, twenty lines
out of thirty-six, is devoted, not to describing the Knight himself,
but to an impressive catalogue of his victories. The undistinguished
Average Man is so overwhelmed with the accomplishments of this
"worthy man," that he tells relatively little about him as a person.
Throughout the pilgrimage the Narrator keeps the Knight on his noble
pedestal, more an ideal than an individual.

The tone of the portraits of the Prioress and of the Monk reveal
this deference and admiration in the Narrator's close observation of
the manners of polite society as they are manifested by the Prioress
and in his eagerness to agree with any opinion the self-confident
Monk may advance. What the Narrator says when he indirectly quotes
the Monk has the distinctly dogmatic air of a parrot-like agreement
with the opinion of another because of his own lack of ability to
think independently.

This same attitude of unthinking approval for the values that
important people subscribe to is discovered in the Narrator's reaction
to the Friar, even though he does not seem to be so completely
deceived by the Friar as by the Monk. He does, nonetheless, admire the efficiency and the finesse which Hubert shows "in undermining the fabric of the Church by turning St. Francis' ideal inside out." The same tone that was found in the portrait of the Monk is echoed in

For many a man so hard is of his herte,
He may nat wepe, although hym soore smerte.
Therfore in stede of wepyng and preyeres
Man moot yeve silver to the povre freres.  
I (A) 229-232

Donaldson aptly summarizes the Narrator's reaction to the upper class pilgrims:

... and indeed, if this is sophistication, it is the kind generally seen in the least experienced people — one that reflects a wide-eyed wonder at the glamor of the great world. It is just what one might expect of a bourgeois exposed to the splendors of high society, whose values, such as they are, he eagerly accepts.10

Toward the members of his own class, the Average Man can afford to be a bit patronizing. He can mix some good-humored jesting with his admiration for their success. The Sergeant of the Law is, after all, not so busy as he makes himself out to be:

9ibid., p. 5.
10ibid., p. 4.
Nowher so bisy a man as he ther nas,
And yet he semed bisier than he was.

Nevertheless, he is a man to be looked up to because of his amazing knowledge and because "Of fees and robes hadde he many oon." The five Guildsmen, too, have doubtless been successful in their respective trades, and now all of them are worthy to be elected aldermen, not only because of their wisdom, but also because of their wealth:

Everich, for the wisdom that he kan,
Was shaply for to been an alderman.
For catel hadde they ynogh and rente.\(^\text{11}\)

Chaucer slips in his little joke about them in his reference to their wives who are already playing the role of "Madame" in their imaginations. Even the pompous Merchant "sownynge alwey th'encrees of his wynnyng," is "a worthy man with alle," though his worthiness probably lies more in his ability to conceal his debts than in anything else.

Far less is said about Epicurus's own son, the Franklin, than about his lavish cuisine. This catalogue of food, like those of the Knight's victories and the Prioress's table manners, is a series of gasps of astonishment and wonder from the wide-eyed Narrator. One

\(^{11}\) This line, however, could also be interpreted simply as a reference to the ordinance passed at the beginning of the fourteenth century requiring that a man have at least three horses in order to be eligible for the office of alderman. Ann B. Fullerton, "The Five Craftsmen," Modern Language Notes, LXI (1946), p. 522.
has the impression that the Narrator may have once been a guest of the Franklin and has never forgotten the experience.\textsuperscript{12}

The Sergeant of the Law with his fees and robes, the Guildsmen with their "catel and rente," the Merchant with his ability to live well in spite of his debts, and the Franklin, who has the best cuisine in the countryside, all merit the rather dubious homage of the Average Man. It is only the poor Clerk of Oxford who excites his condescending pity:

\begin{quote}
\textit{But al be that he was a philosophre,}
\textit{Yet hadde he but litel gold in cofre.}
\textit{I (A) 297-298}
\end{quote}

The Narrator recognizes the rascals of the lower classes for what they are, but theirs is a lucrative rascality and to some degree excusable on that account and, above all, on the score of their good fellowship. The Miller has a golden thumb, part of the stock in trade of any successful miller. Men may fear the Reeve like death, but none can deny his shrewdness in his business. Not only does he know how to get the best out of a farm, but he has a kind of genius for rascality as well:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Manly suggests that this Franklin may represent Sir John Bussy, a wealthy landowner, whom Chaucer may actually have visited in his Lincolnshire home. Some New Light on Chaucer (New York, 1926), pp. 162-168.}
\end{quote}
Wel koude he kepe a gerner and a bynne;  
Ther was noon auditor koude on hym wynne.  
I (A) 593-594

A talent especially to be noticed is his graciousness in lending his master the very money that he has quietly embezzled from him.

The Pardoner, like the Reeve, is commendable for the cleverness with which he plays his hypocritical but very profitable role. The sailor is a "good felawe," even though "of nyce conscience took he no keep." The Summoner is "a gentil harlot and a kynde; / A better felawe sholde men noght fynde." Chaucer the pilgrim doubtless relished the conversation of the Wife of Bath for "In felawshiphe wel koude she laughe and carpe."

What is the Narrator's reaction to the Parson and the Plowman, both considered, along with the Knight, as ideal figures? He is as impressed with their excellence as he is with the real or supposed excellence of the other pilgrims, but it is in his reaction to the Parson that he reveals most clearly his fluid, chameleon-like moral character. At first reading of the portrait of the Parson, one would conclude that the clergyman's goodness had won the esteem of the Narrator and the latter is redeemed from his other errors of judgment by his ability to recognize a truly good character when he meets one. A comparison of the portrait of the Parson with those of the Monk and the Friar, however, will reveal a striking similarity in tone, one
which shows a lack of ability to distinguish excellence from speciousness, and which makes the Narrator's approval of the Parson's virtue no more praiseworthy than his agreement with the Monk's questionable opinions and the Friar's irregular moral principles. It has been noted that while conversing with the Monk, the Narrator nodded unquestioning assent to all of his opinions, and his paraphrase of the Friar's conversation reveals the same agreement. He acts in the same manner when talking to the Parson. The portrait of the Parson as well as those of the Monk and of the Friar can, with no violence to the imagination, be read as reported conversation and a parrot-like repetition of the other person's opinion, in this case, the truly pious sentiments of the Parson rather than the rationalizations of the Monk or the braggadocio of the Friar. There is no essential difference between

The reule of seint Maure or of seint Beneit,  
By-cause that it was old and som-del streit  
This ilke Monk leet olde thynges pace,  
And heeld after the newe world the space.  
I (A) 173-176

or

For unto swich a worthy man as he  
Acorded nat as by his facultee,  
To have with sike lazars aqueyntaunce.  
I (A) 243-245
This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf,
That first he wroght, and afterward he taughte.
Out of the gospel he tho wordes caughte
And this figure he added eek therto,
That if gold rust, what shal iren do?
I (A) 496-500

Cannot these lines

For if a preest be fould, on whom we trust,
No wonder is a lewed man to ruste.
I (A) 501-502

and

Well oght a preest ensample for to yeve,
By his clenesse, how his sheep sholde lyve.
I (A) 505-506

be as much reported conversation or paraphrase of someone else's idea

as

How shal the world be served?
Lat Austyn have his swynk to him reserved!
I (A) 187-188

and

For many a man so hard is of his herte,
He may nat wepe, although hym soore smerte.
Therfore in stede of wepynge and preyeres
Men moot yeve silver to the povere freres.
I (A) 229-232

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
In his reactions to the other pilgrims, therefore, the Narrator shows himself to be the undistinguished, diffident Average Man, one whose values are not clearly defined and who is easily swayed by the opinions of others.

Ben Kimpel contends that "the Narrator in the Canterbury Tales is not a definite enough personality to prove anything." The converse of this has been shown to be true. The fact that the Narrator is not a definite personality is very significant to his role in the Tales, for it identifies him with the colorless Average Man and as such he becomes a universal character, a part of the Everyman tradition. The Narrator possesses the qualities of both the empirical and the poetic "I" described by Spitzer. As a caricature of Chaucer he possesses the individuality necessary to concretize his experiences and as the universal Average Man he transcends the limitations of individuality in order to universalize his experience.

THE NARRATOR'S "TALE OF MELIBEE." If a study of the characteristics of the Narrator is to be complete, the tales he tells within the dramatic action of the entire poem must be taken into consideration. The primary function of "The Tale of Sir Thopas" lies, as has been seen, in the appropriate inappropriateness of the tale to the teller.

---

and in the opportunity it provides for a burlesquing of a popular type of romance. "The Tale of Melibee" performs a different office in the entire scheme of the poem; it is the form and the content of this tale which are significant in helping further to highlight the character of the teller and discover the meaning of the whole poem.

"The Tale of Melibee" is ordinarily ignored in the discussion of The Canterbury Tales, being passed over as a "long, moralistic prose tale." The little that has been written about it gives the impression that the "Melibee" is a step-child who cannot find its proper place in the family, and one which it would be better to pass over with as little comment as possible. The few critics who have written on the tale, in an attempt, usually, to explain away "Chaucer's literary sin," present a variety of conjectures about its meaning and the reason for its being included in the Tales. It has been called a political tract designed to dissuade John of Gaunt from invading Castile, a revenge upon the Host for interrupting the "Tale of Sir Thopas," a satire on moral writing comparable to the satire on romance preceding it, a plea for peace in the turbulent Middle Ages, and a moral allegory.

There is no evidence, either in the text or extraneous to it, to show that the pilgrims and the medieval audience found "The Tale of

Melibee" as tedious as does the modern reader, or that they did not subscribe to its principles. As a matter of fact, this type of literature was popular during the Middle Ages and those things in it which the modern reader finds tedious were enjoyed by Chaucer's contemporaries. This taste for moral allegory is one stage in a swing of the pendulum of literary taste from the earlier interest in lyric feeling or in action, to the taste of Chaucer's contemporaries, which showed a growing interest in the analysis of human motives and knowledge of the human heart, and into the modern period with its interest in the psychological novel. This tale is included in even the most fragmentary versions of The Canterbury Tales, which is another reason for our assuming that Chaucer's audience undoubtedly did like "The Tale of Melibee." Furthermore, Chaucer himself showed sufficient interest in this genre to translate into English the Livre de Melibee et de Dame Prudence.  

Bronson considers the assignment of this tale to the Narrator as a counterbalance to the jest of "Sir Thopas" and a means of revealing the fundamental solidity and deeper seriousness of the poet's own character, for the Narrator to Bronson is always unquestionably the poet Chaucer there present. He says also that it places the teller on a level with the Parson as one of the two persons on the pilgrimage who are soberly concerned with the conduct of life in its most

---

important aspects. This critic is of the opinion that, while some of Chaucer's more serious-minded friends would have enjoyed "The Tale of Melibee," it was not for the general audience, and it could on this account easily be omitted from The Canterbury Tales if the audience was not inclined toward this tone of moral seriousness.

The dramatic context of the tale does not give a complete answer to the problem of why it is included or what it is intended to mean. It does, however, shed some light on these questions. That it was not intended as a joke or a satire is evidenced by its length. "Sir Thopas" was interrupted as soon as enough had been told to get its point across, but Melibee perseveres through nine hundred twenty-six lines, far more than enough to be humorous and more than sufficient to kill any humor that may have been intended. The Host's enthusiastic acceptance of the story and his comment on it show that he, and undoubtedly the rest of the pilgrims with him, had been attentive to the tale:

I hadde levere than a barel ale
That Goodlief, my wyf, hadde herd this tale!
For she nys no thyng of swich pacience
As was this Melibeus wyf Prudence.

---

16 K. Bronson, "Chaucer's Art in Relation to His Audience," in Five Studies in Literature (Berkeley, 1940), pp. 41-42.
"The Tale of Melibee" has occasionally been suggested as part of the marriage group, but if this were intended, it is not likely that the Host would have wanted his wife to hear it, since Melibee is so completely submissive to Dame Prudence. An analysis of the content and the theme of the tale will reveal that Melibee's submission was not to his wife qua wife so much as to Dame Prudence as a symbol of human prudence, that pseudo-virtue which determines its choices on the basis of the proximate good which will result.

"The Tale of Melibee" is cast in the form of a moral debate, with the story element being almost negligible. Melibee's daughter has been wounded by three enemies and he, determined upon revenge, consults his friends, who counsel vengeance. Melibee's wife, Dame Prudence, then comes to the fore and the rest of the tale is composed of her advice to her husband, interspersed with short sections in which Melibee agrees with her counsel. Dame Prudence's arguments favor clemency toward the culprits and a peaceful settlement of the affair, and it is in the reasons she gives for so acting that the theme of the tale is revealed. In general, her reasons for not repaying evil with evil lie in the fact that certain great men have said this is the way to act and that this manner of acting will be the most profitable to Melibee.

One of the first points of Prudence's long, one-sided debate is her advice concerning counselors and whose advice to accept and whose
to reject. She supports her ideas with eighteen quotations given in
the following order: quotations from Solomon, the book (Bible),
Tullius, the book, Solomon, Tullius, Cato, the book, Isope, Seneca,
Solomon, Petrus Alphonsus, a philosopher, Tullius, Solomon, Cassiodorus,
the book, and David. As is evident from even a cursory glance at
these names, there is no hierarchy of authority and no logical order
of argument. The weight of her argument lies in the fact that many
famous men agree with her, but the authority on which these men spoke
and the context of their words seems to be irrelevant.

Her argument against war is that war will bring about its own
vengeance, peril, and other damages without number, of which Melibee
is not now aware. She continues,

"... thou shalt considere that this wrong
which that is doon to thee is engendered of
the hate of thyne enemys / and of the vengeance
takynge upon that wolde engendre another
vengeance, and muchel sorve and wastynge of
richeeses."

B 2580-2581

In her consideration of the causes of their misfortune she goes
beyond the mere human or "near" cause to acknowledge God as the "far"
cause of all things, even this suffering. This apparently should
bring her reasoning beyond the limits of mere human prudence but it
fails to do so because of her self-interested motive for accepting
this decree of God and not seeking revenge:
"and, deere sire, for as muchel as ther is no
man certein if he be worthy that yeve hym
victorie . . . or naught, after that Salomon
seith; / therefore every man sholde greetly
drede werre to bigynne."

Further reasons which Dame Prudence sets forth for clemency
toward enemies are the dangers of losing riches or good name. She
quotes St. James as saying that by concord and peace small riches
increase, whereas by debate and discord great riches are lost. When
Melibee decides that rather than wage war on his enemies he will take
their wealth and send them into exile, his wife warns him that this
is much against reason, for he is rich enough and has no need of
other man's goods. Furthermore, he may on this account be reputed as
covetous "which is a vicious thyng and oght been eschued by every good
man." In no place in the tale is there a consideration of acting upon
principle; right and wrong are determined solely by the result of the
action.

The tale ends with Melibee's complete submission to Dame Prudence,
grateful that God has sent him a wife of such discretion. He forgives
his enemies, not without reminding them once more of their guilt and
of his magnanimity, and he concludes by giving the reason for his
action, the reward that will accrue to him:

"Therefore I receyve yow to my grace, / and
foryeve autrely alle the offenses, injuries,
and wronges that ye have doen agayn me and
myne, / to this effect and to this ende that
God of his endless mercy / wole at the tyme
of oure dynge foryeven us oure giltes that we
han trespassed to hym in this wrecched world."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
While this is in itself a legitimate, even laudable, motive for forgiveness, ("Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy."\(^{17}\)) in the context of the entire tale, where every motive is aimed at the benefit that will accrue to Melibee, this final, supposedly supernatural motive is likewise reduced to the level of self-interest. Nowhere in the entire tale does either Melibee or Dame Prudence transcend the limitations of the good rational man or rise above the mediocre level of doing good solely for the reward connected with it or in order to avoid the evils consequent to evil.

Although the "Melibee" was a later work, one probably belonging to the Canterbury period, it is commonly believed to have been translated independently and later included in the *Tales*. Whether or not it was translated specifically for the *Tales*, its assignment to the narrative persona is most appropriate, for its theme is similar to the theme of the life of the Average Man, who does not think independently but is swayed by the opinions, valid or invalid, of those whom he considers greater than himself. He is a superficial and near-sighted person whose decisions are governed by the proximate and apparent good, and who does not rise above mediocre self-interest. The thinking reader will discern the fittingness, intentional or unintentional, of the tale to the teller.

This interpretation of "The Tale of Melibee" is more of a suggestion than a conclusion, and it considers the tale from one

\(^{17}\) Matt. 5,7.
limited aspect only, that which applies directly to the purpose of this thesis. It does not contradict the conclusion arrived at by others, but merely suggests a new point of departure for the study of the tale, a consideration of the theme of the tale.

Besides its appropriateness to the character of the Narrator, the theme fulfills another purpose in its contribution to the theme of the entire poem. This will be considered in the next chapter.
CHAPTER IV

FUNCTION OF THE NARRATOR

The Average Man Narrator is well-chosen from an artistic standpoint not only because of his peculiar adaptability to the voice-structure of the "penetrating eye," and the unparalleled opportunity he gives for irony, but also because of the tonal unity he is able to add to the poem. The point of view given by this Narrator is singularly effective in its transparency and its fluidity, not possessed by any other character in the poem. The incongruous, yet representative, crowd of pilgrims seen through the eyes of the Parson would have had a moralistic tone and would undoubtedly have lost much of the charm of Chaucer's Human Comedy because of this. On the other hand, it would be impossible to have an artistic arrangement of tales retold by a low type narrator such as the Miller or the Reeve. A skillful, perceptive interpretation would be incredible to the character and the entire work would be colored by the narrator's churlish outlook on life. The Average Man, however, has a perspective from which he can validly, if not intelligently, view all three strata of society. His moral character is fluid and his transparency allows the other characters to reveal themselves objectively.
Chaucer the naive pilgrim serves his master well from the viewpoint of art, but this function is less important than the contribution his character makes to revealing and realizing the theme of The Canterbury Tales.

In order to ascertain the theme of a poem the critic must frequently study the work in its own historical context, for even though the theme be universal, it is made concrete in the fashion of its own time. A brief consideration of the medieval mentality will, therefore, be helpful in determining the theme of The Canterbury Tales.

During the Middle Ages the Church reached a point of development where it could confidently reach outward and draw material things to itself, and in doing so, it began to establish the Christian culture which dominated Europe from the eleventh to the fifteenth or even sixteenth century. The people of that time lived characteristically, in the aura of Christianity, *sub specie aeternitatis*. Therefore, to them

The City of God was made quite as visible, quite as "palpable," as the city of London, and, in a sense, more real . . . The life of the medieval Christian, then, was framed by Creation and Doomsday, the covers for the *liber vitae* of medieval man.¹

¹Ralph Baldwin, *The Unity of The Canterbury Tales* (Copenhagen, 1955), p. 27.
Chaucer was writing at the end of the fourteenth century, a time when this Christian mentality was still prevalent in Europe. Life was seen as a preparation for eternity and man was considered less as an individual than as a member of a great society. As is to be expected this Weltanschauung or world view of medieval man carried over into the literature of the period. As has been noted in Chapter II, literature dealt primarily with mankind rather than with the individual, as does the more self-conscious and self-centered modern writing. The medieval literary tradition accepted the protagonist of a work as a universal or Everyman character, the representative of mankind. It has been established that the Narrator of The Canterbury Tales, showing himself by his words and attitudes to be the almost mythical Average Man, belongs to this tradition and is in the poem the personification of mankind.

This universality in the character of the protagonist is an important means by which a universal theme is given to the entire work. As was noted in Chapter I, the whole tone and character of a narrative is ordinarily set by the point of view. The Canterbury Tales, largely because of the universal character of its protagonist, is not merely the story of Geoffrey Chaucer and twenty-nine other specific human beings who rose at dawn on April 17, 1387, and set off for the shrine of St. Thomas at Canterbury. It is rather the pilgrimage of Everyman from the sunrise of his birth until the sun is "Degrees nyne and twenty as in highte." In the company of his
fellow human beings he wends his way toward the Celestial City of which Canterbury is but a type. The entire pilgrimage is a symbol of mankind's pilgrimage through life toward the eternal city. This symbolism recurs significantly and subtly enough to give the poem depth and meaning without moralizing. The medieval mind, while enjoying the story itself and the contemporary humor, would have recognized also this universality, since it belonged to the literary tradition of the times: "The medieval audience is ready and able to see effortlessly beyond the surface representation of forms and image to a higher reality and to see the concrete itself as a metaphor and symbol."  

"The Canterbury Tales is the Human Comedy of the Middle Ages in which the object of the poet's contemplation is the human order as in itself it is, an integral part of a divinely established natural order ... The procession of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims is the procession of the Human Comedy ... it has both a timeless and a temporal aspect."  

This recognition of the integral relationship of the human order with nature is indicated in the opening lines of the General Prologue. The wave of new life which sweeps over nature also inspires man to action: "Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages." These lines not only bring man in contact with the

---


natural world, but they establish a relationship with the super­
natural world as well. Baldwin sees behind this conventional
spring beginning the ancient Christian conviction that this time
of the year was not only the occasion for natural and human be­
ginnings but that March and April were particularly synchronized
with the Redemption. He continues, "It is a dependable moment for
beginning anything if we consider it from the liturgical point of
view as that time of the year in which man's chance for salvation
is restored to him, it becomes inevitable that 'thanne longen folk
to goon on pilgrimages.'"4 This largeness of view and harmony
between the natural and the supernatural worlds is characteristic
of the catholic temper of the ages of faith.5

Although The Canterbury Tales is incomplete, there is definite
textual evidence of a master plan in the construction of the whole
poem, from the General Prologue, which can be nothing but first,
to the Parson's Tale, which internal evidence places last: "Sir
preest ... every man, save thou hast toold his tale." The text
of the General Prologue and the links establishes the Knight's Tale
as the first to be told, and within this tale can be found the first
statement of the poem's universal theme. In the words of the

---

4 Baldwin, op. cit., p. 25.

5 An interesting comparison between the opening lines of CT and
of Eliot's "Waste Land," each taken as representative of its age is
given by Spiers in Chaucer the Maker, pp. 100-101.
venerable Egeus

This world nys but a thurghfare of wo,
And we been pilgrims, passyng to and fro.
I (A) 2847-2848

The middle section of the poem, though unfinished, shows evidence of Chaucer's working the dramatic action, tales and links, into his master plan. The juxtaposition of those tales which are definitely grouped reveals an effort on the part of the pilgrims to find an answer to some of life's problems, or at least to offer their various theories on these subjects. In the first fragment the Knight tells of chivalry and courtly love. The tale is well-received by all, especially the "gentle folk":

When that the Knight had thus his tale ytoold,
In al the route nas ther yong ne oold
That he ne seyde it was a noble storie,
And worth for to drawen to memcrie;
And namely the gentils everichon.
I (A) 3109-3113

Yet the love extolled in this tale is by its nature artificial.
The dream of the past ennobled love and made it more or less a gallant, yet soulless game. Palamon, Arcite, and Emilie play this game exactly according to the rules or conventions, and this bathes them and the whole situation in an aura of unreality and artificiality.

The Knight no more than finishes his tale of idealistic, courtly love when the Miller and the Reeve bounce upon the opposite side of
the scale and present the other extreme, thus requiring the
Knight's Tale as the Miller puts it:

"By armes, and by blood and bones,
I kan a noble tale for the nones,
With which I wol quite the Knyghtes tale."
I (A) 3125-3127

Their burlesque of the courtly love tradition topples idealism off
its pedestal and presents love as lust and a good joke as well.
Having heard the two extremes, the audience is left to form its
own conclusions as to the true nature of love.  

In the so-called Marriage Group is seen this same pull of
thesis and antithesis as one tale advocates the supremacy of woman
in marriage and another proclaims that man should be supreme. In
this group the Franklin seems to supply the synthesis in the theme
of his tale, yet one would question the solution to a life problem
when it is given by one who cannot distinguish happiness from pleasure:

For he was Epicurus owene scne,
That heeld opinion that pleyn delit
Was verraily felicitee parfit.
I (A) 336-338

Thus the pilgrims wend their way along life's path, seeking a
key to life's puzzles or demonstrating their entanglement in its

---

6William C. Stokoe, "Structure and Intention of the First
Fragment of the Canterbury Tales," University of Toronto Quarterly,
21 (1952), pp. 120-127.
lures. The Narrator, too, takes his part in this dramatic action and offers his solution in "The Tale of Melibee." This story, as has been seen, offers human prudence as the key to happiness and advocates a standard of conduct which is suave in its self-seeking, and, though ostensibly wise, it is the answer of "homo, not very sapiens."

It is only at the end of the entire work that mankind is put on the straight road to happiness by the Parson, the spiritual leader who now, with the consent of all the pilgrims, takes over as conductor of the pilgrimage, in place of the Host, who is the symbol of the temporal and the earthly. In his prologue the Parson completes the symbolism of the Canterbury pilgrimage as the pilgrimage of mankind to the eternal city:

"I wol yow telle a myrie tale in prose
To knyte up al this feste, and make an ende,
And Jhesu, for his grace wit me sende
To shewe yow the wey, in this viage,
Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage
That highte Jerusalem celestial.
   X (I) 46-51"

His tale, which is not a tale but a sermon, resolves the action of the entire pilgrimage by offering a synthesis for all the theses and antitheses found on the pilgrimage, whether in the tales or in the lives of the tellers. The text of the Parson's sermon rounds out the symbolism of the pilgrimage:

"Stand ye on the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, which is the good way, and walk ye in it, and ye shall find refreshment for your souls.
   Jeremias 6, 16"
In his sermon the Parson enumerates and explains the capital sins as the seven great obstacles on the road of life, and he sketches the whole plan or map of life in the story of creation, the fall, and the redemption. There is an admonition appropriate to each pilgrim as well as a general exhortation to self-knowledge and repentance.

Throughout the entire framework of the Tales, the pilgrims are periodically reminded of the passage of time, usually by the Host's carefully noting the position of the sun as an incentive to proceed with the story-telling while there is yet time. This preoccupation with time becomes an image readily transferrable to the universal theme of the poem. In the Prologue to the Parson's Tale the Narrator notes significantly that

\[
\text{The sonne fro the south lyne was descended}
\]
\[
\text{So lowe that he nas not, to my sights,}
\]
\[
\text{Degrees nyne and twenty as in highte,}^7
\]
\[
X (I) 2-4
\]

and within the tale itself the Parson takes up this idea of time's passing quickly and irretrievably in his description of the sin called tarditas. This is the sin and great folly of being too long-tarrying before turning to God. He compares one guilty of this sin with a man who has fallen into a ditch, a homely comparison, but one appropriate to the pilgrimage motif.

Although a study of the text gives probably the most reliable

---

^7 i.e. about four p.m.
indications of theme, it is not the only evidence that can be ad-
vanced in support of the pilgrimage symbolism of The Canterbury
Tales. Charles Muscatine in Chaucer and the French Tradition
studies the style of Chaucer's poems in relation to their meaning.
He classifies the larger form of The Canterbury Tales as belonging
to the tradition of Gothic art with its basic form of juxtaposition.
This juxtaposition in the style of the poem is deliberately employed
to emphasize the contrasts which bear out the meaning of the work:

Chaucer quite consciously abandons the ex-
clusive classification and reasoned sequence
-- "Al have I nat set folk in hir degree" --
to produce pairings and contrasts that span
virtue and vice, heaven and earth. His modi-
fications of convention both within and between
the portraits produce not only the "real life"
of naturalistic criticism, but also the tension,
detail against form, observed nature against
formulated order, that supports his deepest
meaning.

Using a study of the style of the poem as his approach to
discovering its meaning, Muscatine comes to the same conclusion as
has been reached through an analysis of the text, the Canterbury
pilgrimage is symbolic of the pilgrimage of human life.

The coordination and linearity of Chaucer's
form, his "heye weye" through life, with its
various juxtaposed versions of experience,
is invested with a second typically Gothic
quality, the tension between phenomenal and
ideal, mundane and divine, that informs the
art and thought of the period. . .

Muscatine, op. cit., p. 171.
The pilgrimage frame, with the prologue and links that define it, is likewise ambivalent; it is both realistic and symbolic. This ambivalence is in the symbolic conception of life as a pilgrimage alongside the concrete existence of the Canterbury road.9 The style and form of the poem can be added to the universality of the Narrator and the internal textual evidence as an indication of universality of theme in The Canterbury Tales.

That Chaucer should have chosen a pilgrimage as a means of concretizing his universal idea is not unexpected, as this device was a common frame in contemporary literature, and the symbol of a pilgrimage representing human life occurs in his writing at the beginning of Chaucer's poetic career and again near the end, almost forming a frame to his own literary life. Among Chaucer's earliest writings is the poem "An A B C," a prayer to our Lady translated from Guillaume Deguilleville's Le Pelerinage de la Vie Humaine. That the significance of this title remained in the poet's mind is in one of his last poems, "Truth" or "Blaude de bon Conseyl" (c. 1386-1390) where the symbolism is more fully developed:

Her is non hoom, her hoo but wildernesse: Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beste, out of thy stall!
Know thy contree, look up, thank God of al; Hold the heyes wey, and lat thy gost thee lede; 10 And trouthe thee shal deliver, it is no drede. 17-20

9 Ibid., p. 168-169.
10 Ibid., p. 168.
Although the use of this symbolism in other poems does not prove its use in *The Canterbury Tales*, it does indicate, significantly, that Chaucer had the general symbolism in mind and actually used it during the same period in which the *Tales* were written, and it points, therefore, to a great possibility of his using it in his masterpiece.

With the pilgrimage representing human life, the character of the pilgrim Narrator fulfills a crucial role in the theme of the poem, for unless the Narrator represented a universal character, the universality of the theme would be destroyed, or at least immeasurably weakened. A concrete, limited protagonist without any deeper reaching symbolism would limit the theme of the whole work, whereas a universal character, such as the Narrator has been shown to be, gives this quality to the entire poem. Leo Spitzer's comment on Dante as narrator may be here repeated in reference to Chaucer as a fitting summary of the role of the Narrator, because of his personal and universal character, plays in the poem:

For the story (Chaucer) had to tell, both aspects of his composite "I" were necessary: on the one hand, he must transcend the limitations of individuality in order to gain an experience of universal experience; on the other, an individual eye is necessary to perceive and fix the matter of experience.\footnote{Spitzer, op. cit., p. 416.}

\footnote{Spitzer, op. cit., p. 416.}
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This study of characteristics of the Narrator in The Canterbury Tales has revealed Chaucer's use of an unprecedented voice-structure which may be descriptively called the "penetrating eye" since it allows the reader to see beyond the Narrator's limited vision and discover meaning in his commentary of which the Narrator himself is apparently unaware. Chaucer in adopting this voice has chosen as his narrative persona the mythical Average Man, who, while being a caricature of Chaucer, is at the same time a universal character. This double aspect of the Narrator's character, following the medieval literary tradition, allows for the presentation of realistic experiences recounted by the circumscribed Chaucer caricature and also for a universality of theme which is lent to the situation primarily by the universality of the Narrator-protagonist. The meaning of The Canterbury Tales and the reason for its widespread and consistent acceptance despite a changed language and continually changing ideas lies in the universal symbolism inherent in the entire poem. The Canterbury pilgrimage is the pilgrimage of Everyman, wending his way in the company of his fellow men toward a common goal.

81
REFERENCES

Books


REFERENCES (Continued)

Books


Spiers, John, Chaucer the Maker. London: Faber and Faber, 1951.


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
REFERENCES (Continued)

Articles


Spitzer, Leo. "Note on the Poetic and the Empirical 'I' in Medieval Authors," Traditio IV (1946), 411 ff.