

Chapter 1

Introduction

1 Chaucer and his poem

For most readers the *Canterbury Tales* mean the General Prologue, with its gallery of portraits, and a few of the more humorous tales. What we retain is a handful of remarkable personalities, and such memorable moments as the end of the Miller's tale. These are worth having in themselves, but it requires an extra effort to see the significant relationship among them, and to recognize that their bewildering variety is Chaucer's technique for representing a single social reality. We may compare the first part of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, where our impressions can be so dominated by Falstaff, Hotspur and Hal as to leave Henry and the problems of his reign in shadow. The comparison is the more suggestive in that Shakespeare has recreated the England of Chaucer's last years, when a society that is essentially that of the *Canterbury Tales* was shaken by usurpation, regicide and civil war. Both poets describe a nation unsure of its identity, distrustful of traditional authority, and torn by ambition and materialism into separate spheres of interest. For both, the drives and interactions of individual personalities express a loss of central control, a failure of hierarchy which affects society at all levels.

Shakespeare's focus is always on a single "body politic," and though his characters span all levels of society, their situations are determined by a central crisis of monarchical authority. Chaucer's project is harder to define. He shows us nothing of Shakespeare's royal Westminster, and gives us only a glimpse of his chaotic Eastcheap; and though profoundly political in their implications, the *Tales* offer no comment on contemporary politics. But the Canterbury pilgrims, too, are a society in transition, their horizons

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enlarged by war and commerce, their relations complicated by new types of enterprise and new social roles. What holds them together is a radically innovative literary structure, a fictional world with no center, defined by oppositions between realistic and idealistic, worldly and religious, traditionalist and individualist points of view.

The plot of the *Tales* is simple enough. In early April, the narrator is lodged at the Tabard in Southwark, ready to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket at Canterbury, when a group of twenty-nine pilgrims arrive at the inn. The narrator is admitted to their number and provides portraits of most of the group, each of whom embodies a different aspect of English society. The host of the Tabard, Harry Baily, decides to join the pilgrims, and proposes a game to divert them on the road: all will tell stories, and the best tale will be rewarded at journey's end with a supper at the Tabard. The bulk of the poem consists of the tales of twenty-three pilgrims, interspersed with narrative and dialogue which link their performances to the frame of the pilgrimage journey.

The literary form of the story collection, in which narratives of diverse kinds are organized within a larger framing narrative, had a long history, and had been treated with new sophistication in Chaucer's own time. But neither the *Confessio Amantis* of his friend John Gower, which was in progress during the early stages of his own project, nor Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which he almost certainly knew, exhibits anything like the complexity of the *Tales*. The social diversity of Chaucer's pilgrims, the range of styles they employ, and the psychological richness of their interaction, both with one another and with their own tales, are a landmark in world literature. In no earlier work do characters so diverse in origin and status as Chaucer's "churls" and "gentles" meet and engage on equal terms. In the *Decameron* "churls" exist only as two-dimensional characters in stories told by an aristocratic company. In the *Romance of the Rose*, the thirteenth-century love-allegory which was the greatest single influence on Chaucer's poetry, the low social status and coarse behavior of "Evil-Tongue" and "Danger" is allegorical, defining them as threats to the progress of the poem's courtly lover. But Chaucer's churls exist on the same plane of reality as the Knight and Prioress. Some are undeniably beyond the pale in ordinary social terms, and their membership in the pilgrim company gives them a voice they

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could acquire in no other way. Under the rough authority of the Host, and the wide-eyed, uncritical gaze of the narrator, characters as mean or unsavory as the Manciple and Summoner take part in a dialogue in which no point of view is exempt from criticism and conventional social values have frequently to be laid aside.

The narrator is one of the most remarkable features of the *Tales*. He is at once the most innocent and most knowing of men, seemingly guileless as he points to the revealing traits of speech and behavior in his fellow pilgrims, yet astute in filling the gaps created by their reticence, and placing them in relation to the issues affecting their world. Naiveté aside, this narrator must resemble the historical Geoffrey Chaucer, a poet uniquely qualified by background and experience to produce a work so broad in its social vision. He was the son of a successful merchant who had served the crown as a customs official. As an adolescent he entered the service of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster and wife of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, second son of Edward III. Still in his teens, he was captured while serving with Edward's invading army in France, and ransomed by the King. From the mid-1360s until his death around 1400 he served the crown, visiting France and Italy on diplomatic missions, working as a customs official, sitting on various commissions and for a term as a Member of Parliament, and acting as Clerk of the Works, in charge of the maintenance of various royal buildings. He was in close touch with the worlds of law, commerce, diplomacy, and warfare, and with the life of the court and aristocracy. He was also one of the most learned laymen of his day, and one of the most European in outlook, fully at home with French culture, and ahead of his time in appreciating the brilliant achievements of fourteenth-century Italy. And though his poetry rarely says so directly, he was acutely aware of the grim realities of English politics.

In the last years of Edward III, the heavy taxation required by long and unsuccessful wars, charges of corruption against high officials, and hostility to the wealth and power of the Church were dividing the country. The "Good Parliament" of 1376 indicted several prominent courtiers and financiers, but its attempted reforms had little effect. In the late 1370s a series of poll taxes brought to a head the longstanding grievances of the laboring classes, who, since the labor shortages caused by the terrible plagues of 1348–49, had seen repeated

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attempts to control their wages and mobility. In 1381, under the pressures of taxation, anxiety about foreign competition in the cloth trade, and a concern for legal rights, the Peasants' Revolt broke out in several parts of southern England. In London many buildings were burned, including the sumptuous palace of Chaucer's patron John of Gaunt, and a mob killed dozens of Flemish merchants and cloth-workers. Richard II, who had assumed the throne at the age of ten in 1377, showed courage and judgment in negotiating with the rebels, but his later years were marred by favoritism and financial irresponsibility. The Parliament of 1386, in which Chaucer sat as a member for Kent, demanded many reforms, and when Richard refused to accede, battle was joined between the king's supporters and his chief opponents. The rebel lords, who included the future King Henry IV, having gained a victory at Radcot Bridge in Oxfordshire and marched on London, became the so-called Lords Appellant of the "Merciless Parliament" of 1388, in the course of which a number of Richard's friends and financial backers were sentenced to death.

Chaucer seems to have maintained good relations with the Court through three troubled decades, though his friends included men deeply involved in the conflicts of the time, some of whom lost their lives. And apart from two disparaging references to the Peasants' Revolt, his poetry never addresses contemporary political issues. He was clearly troubled by the effects of commerce and social mobility: restlessness, ambition, and a concern with power are pervasive among the Pilgrims, and are always suspect. But in matters of practical politics, his view of established authority seems to have been fundamentally conservative.

On religious questions, too, Chaucer is reticent. In a period of mounting hostility to the established Church, he confines his criticism to the specific excesses of the Friar, Pardoner, and Monk. He never addresses the condition of the episcopal hierarchy, or urges any reform more radical than the renewal of fundamental Christian values outlined in the Parson's tale. However, it is likely that he was responsive to evangelical tendencies at work among the lower clergy and laity. Throughout the later fourteenth century the reformers known to their opponents as "Lollards" (mumblers [of prayers]?), inspired by the largely anti-establishment theology of John Wycliffe, sought to free religious practice from the sanctions of the Church

hierarchy, and placed a new emphasis on the individual conscience. Though attacked as heretics, their concern to distance religion from worldly institutions had a broad appeal. Chaucer's clear preference for the simple, private piety promoted by the Nun's Priest and the Parson, as against the elaborately self-dramatizing religiosity of the Man of Law and the Prioress, would be fully consonant with Lollard sympathies. We may note that in the "Epilogue" that follows the Man of Law's tale in several manuscripts, the Parson is openly accused of Lollardy, and makes no attempt to deny the charge. The accusation is based on his aversion to the swearing of religious oaths, a typical Lollard attitude with which Chaucer shows sympathy elsewhere. It is possible, too, that the capping of the tale-telling game with the Parson's austere penitential treatise indicates sympathy with the reformers. Certainly Chaucer's friends included the so-called "Lollard Knights," courtiers and men of affairs who gave protection to Lollard preachers and maintained certain distinctive practices and beliefs. The extent of their Lollardy is hard to gauge, but several in their wills requested simple funerals and graves, and asked that money from their estates be given to the poor rather than providing rich funeral feasts or bequests to religious institutions. Such austerity did not prevent their pursuing successful careers as soldiers, diplomats and land-owners, but the contradiction is no greater than that presented by Chaucer's own "Retraction" to the *Canterbury Tales*, in which much of that work and the bulk of his earlier poems are repudiated as "worldly vanitees."

But if Chaucer's position on major questions remains elusive, the form of his poem and its treatment of character are themselves vehicles of serious social criticism. A major project of the *Tales* is the testing of traditional values. In the General Prologue a hierarchical model of society, defined by traditional obligation and privilege, provides a tentative framework, but few of the pilgrims can be said to embody traditional roles in a recognizable form, and theirs are the least palpably real of Chaucer's portraits. More often the rejection or usurpation of traditional roles provides an index to social mobility: again and again such "modern" tendencies as the secularizing of the religious life, or the aspirations of the professions and guilds, take the form of an emulation or appropriation of the style and prerogatives of gentility. Such pretensions are often only a veil for self-interest,

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but they point up the inadequacy of traditional categories to define the hierarchical position of newly powerful commercial and professional groups concerned to claim a status and dignity of their own. Faced with so many forms of “worthiness,” the narrator must finally concede his inability to set his characters “in their degree,” the place where they “stand” in traditional social terms.

Chaucer was well situated to appreciate this crisis of values. Familiar as he was with many areas of his society, he was primarily a courtier and a gentleman, for whom courtesy, honor and truth constituted social norms. He would have agreed with the Wife of Bath that gentility bears no inherent relation to birth or fortune, but he clearly saw it as more readily compatible with some ways of life than with others. Hence his portraits of such emergent “gentles” as the Merchant and the Man of Law mix respect for their professional and public functions with a keen awareness of how easily these can coexist with covert or self-deceiving materialism and self-aggrandizement. He would probably have conceded them the status of gentlemen, but there is no clear line between their world and that of the equally professional Shipman and Physician, though the one is perhaps a pirate and the other something of a charlatan.

But if the usurpation of gentility and its prerogatives disturbs Chaucer, the chivalric and courtly ideals are themselves scrutinized in the course of the poem, and it is made clear that they harbor their own inherent contradictions. In keeping with Chaucer’s concern for hierarchy, the Knight, highest in rank among the pilgrims, opens the competition with a tale that promotes the virtues of Theseus, conqueror and knightly hero *par excellence*. Unabashedly an argument for chivalry as the basis of social order, the tale nevertheless shows chivalry repeatedly unable to contain or subdue disorder, largely because its only resource is authority imposed from above and reinforced by armed power. Ultimately, the tale is a searching exploration of the limits of the chivalric ethic as a political instrument. Other tales extend this critique to courtly values in general, not only by parody, as in the Miller’s rejoinder to the Knight, but by focusing on them directly, as when the Wife of Bath uses the standard of *gentillesse* to expose an Arthurian knight’s failure to exhibit true courtly conduct. The Squire’s tale, the imaginative vision of a knight in embryo, shows naiveté and confusion coexisting with real virtues

in a young mind that takes courtly values wholly for granted. And the Franklin, a man (like Chaucer) at home on the border between the courtly and practical worlds, subjects the ethical contradictions of the courtly code to a peculiarly modern scrutiny, showing that much of what seems foolish in the Squire's performance is inherent in the courtly ideal itself.

And of course the world of the *Tales* includes a number of characters who are not courtly, for whom the narrator feels a need to apologize and whose coarseness he carefully disowns. The importance of the opposition of "churls" to "gentles" is established by the opening cluster of tales, in which the Knight's cumbersome celebration of order is challenged by the brilliant and broadly salutary parody of the Miller, and this in turn by the largely *ad hominem* thrust of the Reeve. The descent from highly serious poetry to parody to personal attack implies a breakdown of social order that ends in the flight of the Cook's wayward apprentice; as the Cook's narrative disintegrates into the random particulars of London lowlife, we are left at an immense distance from the ceremonial world of Theseus. The social oppositions defined in this opening sequence do not appear again in so clear-cut a form, but their implications pervade the entire poem.

The tension between large, public concerns like those of the Knight and the narrower vision of the churls is also expressed in a contrast of literary genres. Like the Knight, the gentle Squire and Franklin tell tales that can be defined as *romance*, centered on the world of chivalry and courtly idealism. The typical mode of the churls, brilliantly exemplified by the Miller's and Reeve's tales, is the *fabliau*, a short comic tale, often deliberately coarse, which normally deals with a bourgeois or lower-class world and emphasizes action, cleverness, and the gratification of instinct. This opposition of genres, too, is clearest in the opening sequence; in later tales romance and fabliau elements are often combined with one another, or adapted to other concerns. In the Merchant's history of the marriage of January a grotesque attempt at romance is gradually transformed into the fabliau of the elderly hero's betrayal. The Wife of Bath describes her own marital history in terms that are very much those of the world of fabliau, but then, through her intense imagining of a life in which women would be valued at their true worth

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and treated with real *gentillesse*, she transcends that world. From the rough-and-tumble of her fifth marriage she emerges into an equilibrium of mutual respect, and the passage from her prologue to her tale is simultaneously a passage from fabliau to romance. Romance becomes self-critical in the hands of the Franklin, and fabliau is a vehicle for satire in the Summoner's rejoinder to the Friar. And the tale of the Shipman, who dwells on the border between the world of the professionals and that of the churls, is in effect an upper-class fabliau, pragmatic and mechanical in treating economic and sexual motivation, but deceptively subtle in presenting the private world of its merchant protagonist.

There is a broad pattern in the interaction of romance and fabliau in the *Tales*, an increasing tendency to expose the contradictions and absurdities of the one accompanied by a perceptible rise in the dignity of the other. The shift expresses an increasingly pragmatic approach to the social reality the poem engages, an uneasiness with traditional categories and a desire to bring emerging social forces into confrontation. A broadly similar opposition can be observed among the tales of religion. The first of these, the Man of Law's tale, presents itself as a religious counterpart to the Knight's, comparable in solemnity and historical perspective, and similarly committed to affirming order in the face of the uncertainties of earthly life. The Man of Law's Custance is an emperor's daughter and the "mirror of all courtesy," and her story has been aptly described as "hagiographic romance." The rich rhetoric of prayer and sentiment in the Prioress's tale is similarly indebted to courtly poetry. At the opposite pole are the Nun's Priest's Aesopian fable of the cock and the fox and the spare penitential treatise of the Parson. Together they present a daunting challenge to religious emotionalism and high style, as the blunt colloquialism and materialist skepticism of the churls debunk the ideals of romance.

But the tales of Man of Law and Prioress, whatever their effect as vehicles of religious sentiment, also express distinctive points of view toward the world. The Man of Law's horror of the familial tensions that continually threaten his Custance, and the broader anxiety about earthly justice that pervades his tale, at times getting the better of his faith in Providence, are the preoccupations of a man who knows these problems at first hand. The Prioress's tale is

marred by a violence and anti-Semitism that are no less horrible for being virtually invisible to the Prioress herself, and expose the emotional privation behind her façade of genteel and complacent piety. The social and spiritual complexities revealed in the process of tale-telling are the real focus of both performances, and remind us of the importance of character as a vehicle of social criticism, the extent to which we must rely on the often distorted vision of the pilgrims themselves to gauge the bearing of great issues on their lives.

Chaucer goes to extraordinary lengths to show the obstacles to vision and knowledge posed by the pilgrims' existential situations, and we may compare his perspective to that of the great Franciscan philosopher of the previous generation, William of Ockham. "Ockham's razor" is often said to have severed philosophy from theology: this is an exaggeration, but his denial of the necessity of natural secondary causes (since there is nothing God might effect through a secondary cause that He is not equally able to accomplish directly), and his confinement of *scientia*, or real knowledge, to the sphere of observation and logical inference, tend in this direction. They allow us to affirm little about the relation of created life to God beyond the acknowledgment, through faith, of his omnipotence and goodness, and the ethical imperative of obeying his commands. Chaucer accepts similar constraints for his characters. Theseus' evocation of the benevolent "First Mover," insofar as it is more than a political gesture, is a leap of faith, and a pervasive concern of the *Tales* as a whole is the psychological effect of living with no more immediate confirmation of order and providence than such a leap provides. Some characters simply refuse to consider "Who hath the world in honde"; others reveal their anxiety in such neurotic forms as the Man of Law's vacillating attitude toward Providence or the Pardoner's compulsive blasphemy; and the Nun's Priest, apparently after serious thought, seems to have made peace with the likelihood that the large questions of providence and self-determination are unanswerable.

Cut off from a sure sense of relation to the divine, or of their place in a traditional hierarchy, the pilgrims question their own status. Many of the tales are essays in self-definition, attempts to establish values and goals that lead to startling revelations. The Knight,

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whose tale begins as an apology for chivalry, finds himself unable to bring it to a satisfying resolution, and is carried steadily toward a confrontation with the horror of violence and death which challenges his chivalric values. The Wife of Bath, trying to justify a life of striving for mastery in marriage, becomes half-aware that her deepest need is to be recognized and valued as a woman, something of which her society seems incapable. The Pardoner flaunts his success as a religious huckster and defies the taboo effect of his sexual abnormality, but gradually reveals a religious inner self that accepts the paradoxical guilt of the scapegoat, an agonizing display that illustrates the intolerance of a Christian society. In all these cases the tale-tellers' struggles are rendered more painful by a vision of order or harmony or forgiveness that seems to hover just out of reach.

The elaborate context in which Chaucer's characters live and think is again a landmark in literary history. To compare the Wife of Bath or the Pardoner with the embodiments of lechery and hypocrisy in the *Romance of the Rose* on whom they are modeled is to see at once the greater depth and complexity of Chaucer's creations. The noble company who tell the tales of the *Decameron* are social equals with no personal history, charming but limited by their very urbanity. Their relations with one another and with the tales they tell exhibit none of the interplay that gives the *Canterbury Tales* their rich complexity. The closest equivalent to the dense social and psychological medium in which Chaucer's characters function is the *Inferno* of Dante, and their self-revelations are often as powerful as those of Dante's sinners. But Dante's characters are necessarily static, fixed forever in the attitudes defined by their besetting sins; Chaucer's are alive, able to exercise their imaginations in ways which unexpectedly open up new dimensions in their lives. Their condition is one of radical uncertainty and vast possibility.

The project of tale-telling is of course what keeps the lives of the pilgrims open-ended, and the juxtaposition and interaction of the tales are the basis of the poem's structure. To address the difficult question of the pattern that emerges as the sequence of tales runs its course, we may divide the poem into a series of broad movements. The first is bracketed by the tales of the Knight and the Man of Law, the two major attempts in the poem to address the problem of order. The Knight's tale, as I have suggested, is undone by