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The Form of the *Canterbury Tales*

What do we mean when we talk about literary form? The word "form" was as multivalent in the later medieval era as it is in our own. Chaucer's great Italian predecessor, Dante, wrote explicitly about form, dividing it into two principal areas, the *forma tractatus* and the *forma tractandi* (the form of the treatise and the form of the treatment or, broadly speaking, genre/verse form and style/tone).[1] In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer used the word "form" to refer to kinds of language ("the forme used in his langage" [*The Squire's Tale*, v.100]), to manners and conventions ("the forme of daunces" [*The Squire's Tale*, v.283]), to illusory shape-shifting ("'For we,' quod he, 'wol us swiche formes make'" [*The Friar's Tale*, v.1471]), to the general shape of existence or behavior ("the forme of al this thing" [*The Squire's Tale*, v.337], "in swich forme endure" [*The Franklin's Tale*, v.1161]), and to creation and making ("Thus kan I forme and peinte a creature" [*The Physician's Tale*, vi.12]). In a recent book about forms, Caroline Levine writes that "'form' always indicates an arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning, or shaping . . . It is the work of form to make order."[2] If we think of literary form as a flexible concept that describes the shape or pattern of a text, it encompasses many different aspects of the *Canterbury Tales*. For Chaucer, the play of varying forms constructs a dynamic and dialectical text. Most obviously, the form of the *Canterbury Tales* is a tale-collection, a framed compilation. In stylistic terms, the form of the *Canterbury Tales* moves between rhyme royal, heroic couplets, prose, the eight-line stanza, and tail-rhyme. Turning to genre, the forms of the *Canterbury Tales* include romance, fabliau, folktale, beast fable, saint's Life, penitential manual, miracle, tragedy, satire, history, sermon, and moral exemplum. Materially, the form of the *Canterbury Tales* varies between different manuscripts, between manuscript and print, and between different printed editions. The tales appear in varying orders; sometimes they are presented complete with detailed textual apparatus, while sometimes tales appear on their own or with other non-*Canterbury Tales* texts. And Chaucer's dynamic mixing of forms enacts socio-political

issues: the Miller's socially based interruption of the Knight is also an inter-ruption of romance by fabliau, and of the high style by the demotic voice. As Paul Strohm puts it in his discussion of the *Canterbury Tales*, "history, suppressed at the level of allusion, is reintroduced at the level of form."[3] Chaucer understood that form is not a surface layer, nor a decoration; rather, it is an integral part of the way that texts make meaning.

Chaucer and Medieval Form: The Road Not Taken

Late medieval poets, theologians, architects, painters, and compilers were fascinated by form. The Gothic cathedral figures as the ultimate embodiment of a late medieval philosophy that held that human artifacts, existing in time, could be models of divine realities. As Erwin Panofsky says, the Gothic cathedral "sought to embody the whole of Christian knowledge, theological, moral, natural, historical, with everything in its place and that which no longer found its place, suppressed."[4] Poets had similar ambitions. *Pearl*, a poem roughly contemporary with the *Canterbury Tales*, offers an ordered, formal perfection comparable to that of the great architectural monuments of the age. The poem is itself pearl-like, an "endles rounde" (738) whose last line echoes its first.[5] Each of its twenty stanza groups is internally unified by a concatenation word that recurs at the beginning and end of each stanza within that group; each verse is structured by a rigorous rhyme scheme as well as by loose alliteration. An extra stanza in stanza group xv deliberately inserts an ostentatious "flaw" and thus allows the poem as a whole to comprise 1,212 lines (twelve was the most powerfully symbolic biblical number). *Pearl* therefore contains 101 stanzas, in a formal reflection of the poet's elaborate interest in human *imperfection*. The *Divine Comedy*, like *Pearl* a poem about a vision of heaven overseen by a celestial female guide, similarly aspires to divine unity in its formal organization. Trinitarian in structure, the poem is divided into the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, and the whole poem is in *terza rima*, which means that each verse is three lines long and connects with the next through an a–b–a, b–c–b, c–d–c rhyme scheme. Each part (cantica) of the poem is itself subdivided into thirty-three cantos; there are one hundred cantos in total (because there is one extra introductory canto).

It should be clear, even from these brief descriptions, that the *Pearl*-poet and Dante saw intricate form as integral to the meaning of their work and that they embedded theological principles into the formal aspects of their great poems. The elaborate formal properties are an essential part of the poems' interest in the attempt to understand God's plan in the world. Chaucer, who knew the *Divine Comedy* well, was intensely interested in

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what Dante did.[6] The *House of Fame* – Chaucer's most experimental dream-vision poem and a crucial precursor to the *Canterbury Tales* – utilizes some of the formal techniques of Dante's poem: it too has a three-book structure and Chaucer's proems and invocations, highly unusual in English literature at this time, directly imitate Dante. This poem, however, functions as a parody, not a translation or reverent imitation of the *Divine Comedy*. Indeed, the whole poem openly challenges ideas of poetic authority, the value of the canon, and the superiority of classical culture. The books are of uneven lengths, and the poem is unfinished, breaking off in the middle of an idea and thus leaving the text radically open. Its replacement in its final section of a monumental castle with a porous, wickerwork house suggests that Chaucer does not rest easily with closed formal perfection. Indeed, the tumultuous end of the *House of Fame*, with its mass of pilgrim speakers shoving each other out of the way, contrasting with the earlier image of great *auctors* static on their pillars, paves the way for the radical formal experiments of the *Canterbury Tales*.[7]

Like his contemporaries and predecessors, Chaucer was well able to use form in a tightly controlled manner, but he tends to do so in highly equivocal ways. While the *House of Fame* spirals out of control, the political and formal order of *The Knight's Tale* proves to be a distorted reflection of its matter. *The Knight's Tale* is far more intricately patterned and symmetrical than Boccaccio's *Teseida*, its principal source. Each episode in the first half has a parallel in the second half, and the careful design of the tale mirrors images of order within the story, notably the elaborately constructed amphitheatre.[8] This formal arrangement of the poem reflects the Athenian Duke Theseus' attempt to order his own world. However, his efforts to impose order and control on the world fail over and over again and he constantly has to roll back his decisions in the face of the persuasion of others. His rules for the climactic tournament don't work; his beautiful temples reveal the horrors of war and sexual desire; the spectacular tomb he builds for Arcite is constructed by destroying the natural world and the habitats of nymphs, fauns, and minor gods. Despite its finely wrought structural symmetry, the tale is ultimately a story about the impossibility of suppressing either the disordering effects of desire or the random workings of fate or chance.[9] It teaches us to be suspicious of the illusion of order as the world is evidently not amenable to such control. These suspicions are immediately confirmed as the *Tales* in its entirety proves not to be an ordered whole, a symmetrically or circularly shaped text in the manner of *Pearl* or the *Divine Comedy*. When the Miller challenges the Knight, his interruption of the proposed order of tale-telling is "a subversion of form," as Lee Patterson puts it. We realize, in *The Miller's Prologue*, that the *Tales* is being presented

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as an entity with its own energy, which proceeds according to the demands of its own characters, who will interrupt, speak over each other, tell tales of different lengths, and generally pull the text first into one shape, and then into another. Patterson describes this as the replacement of "the principle of hierarchy" by "an internally generated and self-sustaining principle of 'quiting'."[10] This responsive form is dynamic and unpredictable, resisting externally imposed structure.

Of course, the *Tales* does not "really" have its own energy and is not "really" directed by the whims of the pilgrims: the appearance of disorder is crafted by Chaucer to reflect a particular social and aesthetic philosophy, a worldview that values multiplicity rather than homogeneity, movement rather than stasis, self-ordering systems rather than hegemonic authority.[11] Chaucer's control over the appearance of chaotic disorder and internal self-regulation is visible to us in miniature in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, one of two tales told by the "Chaucer" pilgrim himself. When we first read or hear *Thopas*, it seems to be a hilarious mess. It is the only poetic Canterbury tale not written in the ten-syllable, five-stress line that Chaucer had introduced into English verse and that had become a cornerstone of his poetic art. It is the only time in Chaucer's writing that he ever uses "tail-rhyme," the form of many popular romances. This makes the tale sound like what the Host calls it: "rym dogerel" (*Thopas*, VII.925). However, a closer look reveals a far greater degree of craft than first appears in its form. The tale is divided into three sections, sometimes marked as "fitts." The first is eighteen stanzas long; the second is nine stanzas long; and the third is interrupted after four-and-a-half stanzas.[12] In other words, each section is exactly half as long as the preceding one: the tale proceeds on a principle of half-lives, ever dwindling, but holding out the prospect of never quite coming to an end at all. The ever-reducing form also mirrors the increasingly thin content, as the teller loses his way more and more dramatically. The Host's interruption of this "drasty speche" is thus emphasized as a master-stroke of the author, Chaucer, the puppeteer behind Harry Bailly's naturalistic-seeming intervention. He is mocking the tale that his persona is telling, but he is also reminding us of the separation between author and avatar, and of his own aesthetic control of the material. Rather than using formal patterning to reflect God's creation on earth, he uses it to make jokes, to be irreverent: the form that he uses does not reflect perfection but diminishing possibilities. He also here ostentatiously stages his ability to perform in the voice of another, to step into someone else's shoes. Chaucer's aesthetic choices, crystallized in his construction of multiple narrators and voices, were driven by an understanding of perspective: what you see, and what you say, are determined by where you are standing. In the *Canterbury*

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Tales, as in other artistic, scientific, and economic endeavors in the later Middle Ages, "relativity replaces hierarchy as the basis of order and identity."[13]

While Dante and the *Pearl*-poet use form to reflect their ambitious aspirations for their poems, Chaucer uses it altogether more playfully. He is just as interested as they are in demonstrating his own precise and brilliant understanding of the potential of form, but, unlike those fellow-poets, Chaucer refuses to attempt to use poetry theologically. He is not interested in constructing his poem as a model of truth, following an architecturally perfect plan. Rather, formal fragmentation and variety, the subversion of one form by another, and an insistence on the dynamic movement of the text, lie at the heart of Chaucer's art. Chaucerian aesthetics are driven by a focus on texts as incomplete, open, and subject to change, appropriation, and interpretation. Literature is alive, kinetic and, above all, multiple.

The Other Road Not Taken

The tale-collection form, however, was not inherently or necessarily a genre of multiplicity and diversity. This becomes clear if we briefly examine some other examples, many of which are characterized by internal homogeneity rather than variety. In John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, a vernacular tale-collection written at the same time as the *Canterbury Tales*, all the tales are in a single voice as one intellect – Genius – tells all the stories. Those stories are consistently inspired by a didactic motivation, as Genius seeks to educate Amans, Gower's lover-persona. Equally, the verse form is unvarying and there is far less generic range than we see in the *Tales*. Chaucer himself also wrote two tale-collections in which every tale is told by the same narrator and for the same ostensible purpose. These two texts – *The Monk's Tale* and the *Legend of Good Women* (*LGW*) – are comic models of how *not* to write a tale-collection. Both were probably written before Chaucer embarked on the *Canterbury Tales*, though *The Monk's Tale* was later incorporated into this text, perhaps precisely because it functions as a formal parody of the *Tales* itself.[14] In both collections, every tale follows the same pattern and is supposed to generate the same meaning, and both peter out in an unspectacular fashion, as audience (in the case of *The Monk's Tale*) and teller (in the case of the *Legend*) lose interest in these repetitive stories.

Any veteran of the late medieval schoolroom would be well aware of the problems of trying to force stories to fit morals: the study of Aesop's *Fables*, a foundational text in the curriculum, encouraged exactly this questioning of the relationship between narrative and set moral meaning.[15] Medieval students and writers were therefore cognizant of

the problems of twisting interpretation into a pre-ordained direction. In Gower's *Confessio*, which groups together tales as illustrations of each of the Seven Deadly Sins, Genius is arguably inconsistent in the nature of his didacticism, and Gower himself may indeed be encouraging readers to question the nature of the relationship between tale and alleged moral.[16] Such understated unease, however, is quite different from Chaucer's ostentatious parody. In his univocal collections, Chaucer took the lessons of the schoolroom to their logical extreme, demonstrating that very different stories can arbitrarily – and ludicrously – be forced into the same patterns, and in the process suggesting that the very idea of homogenizing stories and imposing an authoritative moral on to them is problematic. *The Monk's Tale* and the *Legend of Good Women* devastatingly enact the intellectual limitations of pushing round story pegs into square hermeneutic holes.

The *Legend* is designed as a monolithic text. It is commissioned by Alceste, the consort of the God of Love, who orders the Chaucer-figure to write according to her direction, as a penance for writing the supposedly anti-feminist *Troilus and Criseyde*. He must now spend his time:

> In makyng of a glorious legende
> Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves,
> That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves;
> And telle of false men that hem bytraien.
>
> (*PLGW* F, 483–86)[17]

Chaucer responds with a series of classical stories, including the stories of Dido, Cleopatra, and Medea, all of which overtly do indeed illustrate this moral. However, many of the women are deeply inappropriate subjects, and their well-known stories can only be made to work in this narrow context by brazenly omitting crucial elements (e.g. Philomela and Procne's murdering and serving up of Procne and Tereus' son to Tereus).[18] And in the end, telling the same story over and over again apparently bores the narrator so much that he gives up, cutting off his story on the word "conclusioun" (*LGW*, 2723).

The Monk similarly sets out to tell a series of stories that exemplify a particular, defined genre:

> "Tragedye" is to seyn a certein storie,
> As olde bokes maken us memorye,
> Of him that stood in greet prosperitee,
> And is yfallen out of heigh degree
> Into miserye, and endeth wrecchedly.   (VII.1973–77)

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He informs his audience that he has a hundred of these in his repertoire. The series of examples that he then gives to illustrate his basic point unvaryingly follows the pattern of success turning to failure, happiness to sadness, prosperity to wretchedness. The differences between the protagonists – some clearly deserve their fate, others are innocent victims; some are punished by God, some by man; some cause their own downfall, others are wholly pitiable – are generally ignored by the Monk, illustrating the difficulty of using multiple specific narratives to illustrate an unchanging moral. The wit and self-assurance with which Chaucer subverts the ostensible purposes of the *Legend* and *The Monk's Tale*, turning them into parodies of the collection form, demonstrates his lack of interest in writing in one voice or in the service of one agenda.[19]

When Chaucer decided to write a tale-collection voiced by multiple tellers – the *Canterbury Tales* itself – he was following in the footsteps of Giovanni Boccaccio. The tale-telling group of the *Decameron*, written in the middle of the fourteenth century, comprises ten people, each of whom tells ten stories across ten days, with a different theme each day. We thus end up with a formally "perfect" collection: a hundred stories, like Dante's hundred cantos. However, Boccaccio emphatically does not have the theological aspirations of Dante, and the tone of his text, with its initially naturalistic setting in plague-ridden Florence and its often-outrageous fabliaux, is similar in many ways to parts of the *Canterbury Tales*. The ten tellers, though, are not differentiated to anything like the same extent as the Canterbury pilgrims. Most significantly, all of Boccaccio's tellers come from the same social class: they are leisured aristocratic men and women, related to each other, friends, with servants who wait on them. It is hardly surprising, then, that we do not see the kinds of personal conflicts in the frame, nor the kind of aggressive generic parodies in the stories, that we see in the flamboyantly varied *Canterbury Tales*.[20] And while the tales in all of these other collections are supposed to illustrate a particular moral or theme, the tales of the Canterbury project have no such limitation. The Host's directive is simply for tales of "best sentence and moost solaas" (1.798). The extraordinary variety of content and voice that follows his command is enacted through Chaucer's breathtakingly diverse play of forms.

The Road to Canterbury

In the *Canterbury Tales*, then, Chaucer realized that he could do something startlingly different with the exceptionally capacious and flexible tale-collection form. Levine has remarked that "each form can only do so

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much," but that "when forms meet, their collision produces unexpected consequences."[21] These collisions are at the heart of Chaucer's art. It is difficult to overemphasize how interesting and surprising the play of styles and the composition of Chaucer's pilgrim company are. No one had ever done anything remotely like this before: suddenly, a Cook's voice was given equal weight to a Squire's, a Miller challenged a Monk and a Knight for narrative precedence, and urban and ecclesiastical trade rivalries were played out through the clash of genres and styles. Instead of the monolithic voice of Genius or the socially homogeneous voices of the *Decameron*, the audience is confronted with an innkeeper master of ceremonies and a tale-telling company that spans the social world, albeit with a particular concentration on what we might think of as the middling classes. This is the poetry of social degree, enacted through Chaucer's delight in the juxtaposition of forms.[22]

The importance of the play between and across forms is neatly demonstrated in the example of *The Knight's Tale*, which initially existed as a stand-alone text. Sometime in the late 1380s, Chaucer decided that his version of Boccaccio's *Teseida* would work better as part of a bigger collection. The poem that he had called "the love of Palamon and Arcite" (*PLGW* F, 420) became *The Knight's Tale*. That formal decision changed the possible meanings of the text in multiple ways: they became dependent on the tale's relationship with other *Canterbury Tales*.

The tale's most important relationship is with *The Miller's Tale*, as mentioned above. The effect of the juxtaposition of these different kinds of story (romance and fabliau) is not simply to demonstrate the different values of these genres – the one interested in idealism and order, the other in pragmatism and wit; the one set long ago and far away, the other in the here and now.[23] Rather, we read *The Knight's Tale* itself differently once we have read the surrounding tales. To give one example: the heroines of the first two tales of Fragment 1 have the contrasting roles of idealized virgin and available adulteress. Both are controlled by an older patriarch, sought by two suitors, and end up united with one of them. But once we know Alisoun, Emily's lack of freedom is far more obvious to us. She wants never to marry, preferring "to walken in the wodes wilde" (1.2309), but she is denied that option. Alisoun, on the other hand, chooses her lover. In the world of *The Miller's Tale*, women, it seems, can have some control over their own destiny, while in the world of *The Knight's Tale*, they are wholly subjugated to male political power. The woman who is revered, adored, and seemingly respected has far less autonomy than the woman who is openly lusted after, grabbed by the "queynte," and vulgarly propositioned. Romance, in other words, proves not to be an idealizing form at all, unless you happen to be a knight.

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The Form of the *Canterbury Tales*

The meanings of *The Knight's Tale* are also altered within the larger context of the unfolding *Canterbury Tales*. Once we look at *The Knight's Tale* in conjunction with other Canterbury experiments, we are encouraged to see just how socially inflected the Knight's perspective is. The very genre of romance is challenged by *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, in which the questing knight turns out to be a rapist, and an old, ugly woman of low estate is the ethical center of the story, the preacher of Christian *gentillesse*. Romance is also ridiculed by *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, which pastiches both chivalry and courtly love. *Thopas* and the *Tale of Melibee* – the two tales told by the pilgrim Chaucer – can be read as a pair of anti-war stories, with *Thopas* mocking romance as a genre that glamorizes pointless, self-aggrandizing violence.[24] The pairing of *The Knight's Tale* with the concluding *Parson's Tale*, the other book-end of the *Canterbury Tales*, encourages us to think about the two characters together: both represent the traditional, already nostalgic world of the three estates and feudal hierarchy whose perspectives are repeatedly challenged by the varied, often urban or mercantile, tellers in the Canterbury *compaignye*.[25] The Knight's interruption of the Monk's tragic stories about the downfall of great men points up the Knight's own desire for the happy-ever-after convention, typically enacted in romance's usual conclusion of marriage, children, and dynastic continuity. Indeed, every tale in the collection reflects and comments on other tales, so that the text in its entirety is a hermeneutic hall of distorting mirrors.

Chaucer's fascination with the possibilities of juxtaposing forms is played out in miniature in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. This is yet another tale with a claim to be a tale-collection in its own right, but this time the miniature collection functions as an example of how to do it properly. It appears in Fragment VII, a fragment often described as the "literature group": a series of contrasting formal experiments.[26] That variety is epitomized in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. Like the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, the tale goes through a series of genres, embeds stories inside frames, and frequently holds back the progress of the "main" plot through digression. Although it is ostensibly an Aesopian beast fable (complete with the associations of schoolroom debate and multiple interpretations discussed above), the first part of the tale moves from the story of the farmyard, which is itself an allegory, to dream vision and debate involving humoral and medical theories. One of the characters, the rooster Chauntecleer, then tells an exemplum about some travelers, one of whom has a dream-vision. He goes on to recount the story of a saint's life and discourses about dream theory and then about Hector and Achilles before we return to the frame story. Even there the narrator frequently loses focus on his beast fable to apostrophize and to cite authorities, as do the characters themselves. As Chauntecleer's story reaches its climax, the beast fable transforms into

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a mock-epic, complete with a long histrionic comparison to the falls of Troy, Carthage, and Rome. We briefly move to contemporary history with Chaucer's one certain reference to the Rising of 1381, before the beast fable is completed and the narrator gives us a moral and an ambiguous biblical reference, allegedly to help our interpretation. As is the case throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, different voices, genres, and ideas are all presented as potentially being of equal importance. Discursive hierarchy is abandoned. Contrasting genres, styles, and subject matter share the same narrative space: tragedy and humoral theory; epic and sermon; laxatives and the death of kings; dream theory and farmyard politics; xenophobic murder and free will; the fall of Troy and the sex lives of chickens – all occupy the same narrative level. The power of the tale lies precisely in its variety, its performance of different genres, its luxuriating in rhetoric itself, and its resistance to fixed meaning or easy interpretation. At the same time it is also Chaucer's "premier instance of self-parody," as he quotes from and reframes many of his own texts, alongside an intimidatingly diverse set of sources.[27]

As in the *Tales* as a whole, this juxtaposition of genres and registers is freighted with class- and gender-based implications. While tragedy and epic belong to the high style, and were associated with the lives of kings and heroes, beast fable is a more popular genre, accessible even to children, and Pertelote's quasi-medical pronouncements about purgatives parodically represent the interests of uneducated women rather than courtly men. Yet these different kinds of discourse are given equivalence in the structure of the tale, and they are all ventriloquized by a narrator of relatively low degree, who is himself one of the many voices of an author of higher social status. While Chaucer consistently refuses to make direct political statements in his texts, in the form and structure of this tale and of the *Tales* as a whole, we can discern a principle that multiple voices should all have their chance to be heard. This is an aesthetic principle, but it is socially and politically fraught. In both *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, and the *Canterbury Tales* overall, Chaucer stages for us the value of listening to diverse discourses and voices.

Reading Chaucer's Forms: Rhyme Royal

The variety of the *Tales* encourages us to think about how form can be utilized and exploited on a micro-level too, and throughout his career, Chaucer was interested in this sort of experimentation. He tried out different line lengths (principally four- and five-stress) and different stanzas and rhyme schemes. In some individual poems he mixed different kinds of meter (*Anelida and Arcite*) or embedded distinctly framed songs, letters, invocations, and proems within a longer narrative (*Troilus and Criseyde*). Each form comes with its own

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