

## *Introduction*

### *Canterbury Tales* IV-V and Literary Value

This book represents, in some ways, a relatively straightforward literary critical endeavor, one that focuses on explicating a sequence of four pilgrim performances in the middle of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: those of the Clerk, Merchant, Squire, and Franklin. For some readers, this sort of monograph will require no explicit justification, but I suspect that, at this stage in the history of the study of British literature, others may harbor reasonable reservations about its value. Some may wonder what I have to contribute to the centuries-old project of *Canterbury Tales* criticism that does not merely retread much-worn tires. More skeptical readers (if they get even this far) may question my assumption that the project of Chaucer criticism – by which I mean interpretation of Chaucer for its own sake – is itself still worthwhile, even if I do have something new to add to it.

The first reservation is considerably easier to address than the second. In offering a reading of the sequence of tales that make up so-called Fragments IV and V, this book redresses an oversight in the critical tradition that derives from two of its very longstanding features. First, a mid-nineteenth-century editorial error divided the four tales between two fragments, thereby discouraging subsequent readers from considering the sequence as such – in the way that, say, Fragment I has been considered. When the tales have been read together, they are almost invariably analyzed as two pairs or as a component of some larger literary structure. Second, one such larger structure – the so-called marriage group – early in the twentieth century became perhaps the single most pervasive topos of modern *Canterbury Tales* criticism, thereby further discouraging focus on the sequence as such. For these reasons, despite the long and close critical scrutiny that the *Tales* has attracted, there has been no extended study (as far as I am aware) of the IV-V sequence as a unit. And in light of the manuscript evidence, this lack is all the more conspicuous, given the fact that, among the many intractable uncertainties surrounding Chaucer's composition of and intentions for the *Tales*, the stitching together of

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these particular pilgrim performances to form a four-part sequence appears to represent a very definite and striking artistic decision.

The trail of these preliminary justifications, moreover, has led me to adopt a pair of approaches to the sequence – one methodological and one conceptual – that has made this project somewhat less straightforward, more novel, and broader in its implications than it may initially appear. First, in honoring the fact that the basis of my claim for the unity of IV-V lies in recognition of the manuscript evidence in this regard, I have taken, so to speak, the bad with the good. I have accepted the limits that my understanding of this manuscript evidence imposes upon interpretation along with the interpretive vistas that the evidence opens up, limits that concern especially the kind of claims that can be made about the unity of the component parts of the tale-telling performances: the pilgrim portraits, prologues and epilogues, and narratives. Second, in considering what the IV-V sequence is about (in addition to, obviously, marriage and the status of women in the late medieval English patriarchal imagination), I have found it to be pervasively and centrally preoccupied with an oft-noticed career-long concern of Chaucer's, his anxiety about the value of his writing and of literary fiction in particular; and I have found that this concern – when viewed not just as a feature of each of the individual tales but also as the subject of a conflicted conversation staged by the sequence of pilgrim performances – becomes inflected in a way that requires a more fluid approach to literary value than has been typical of Chaucer criticism on the topic. Accordingly, drawing upon scholarship from the last few decades on the general matter of cultural value, I have developed a conceptual approach to Chaucer's agon with literary value in IV-V that, while by no means unprecedented, is at least unusual.

The subsequent two sections of this introduction present these methodological and conceptual approaches in turn, explaining their bases, rationales, and implications; indicating how they inform the chapters that follow; and supplying definitions of the terms that I use across the book. Next, after briefly touching on the relation between the focus of this book and the body of criticism on the IV-V tales that has been devoted to marriage, women, gender, and sexuality, I return (also briefly) to the more difficult reservation about this project: the question of what justifies, well into the first quarter of the twenty-first century, a book devoted to an investigation of the meaning and achievement of one portion of an uber-canonical work like the *Canterbury Tales*, regardless of the insights about that work thereby achieved. Both of these latter sections also provide some further glimpses of what is to come.

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Before launching into these matters, however, let me offer a preliminary sketch of the book's argument about IV-V. When we put this sequence back together, three of its features emerge as especially striking. First, Chaucer has collected within it the very four pilgrims whose social identities most overlap with those several identities that characterized his own social experience (discounting the pilgrim Chaucer, for whom the author does not provide such an identity). For, as has been often pointed out independently for each of the pilgrims, Chaucer was a squire and sometime courtier; his father was a merchant, and he himself worked for many years among merchants on the Wool Wharf; he resembled the Franklin at the time that he was writing the *Tales*; and, though not technically a clerk, he held clerky jobs and represented himself, in such efforts as the *House of Fame*, as clerk-like. Second, Chaucer has arranged the sequence's pilgrims to alternate youthful (or at least quasi-youthful) tellers with ones who represent more experienced, mature, and paternal (or quasi-paternal) perspectives. Third, and most obviously, when the tales are set side by side, one recognizes the overwhelming number of points of contact among them – close similarities of narrative, characters, and structure; apparent verbal echoes; thematic continuities; and generic duplication or inversion – along with their overriding concern with tale telling and fiction: a concern that explicitly suffuses the links and is as well, in one fashion or another, central to each narrative. Considering all these features together, this book argues that the IV-V sequence stages a dialectical grappling with the problem of literary value. More specifically, it contends that IV-V enacts a dynamically unfolding, conflicted meditation on how literary value may be construed in a way that justifies the time, energy, and expense devoted to the writing of fiction – a justification made in respect to other activities pertaining to other values, especially to economic value in the sense of making a living. Or, more colloquially, this book reads IV-V as a meditation on the conflict between writing and Chaucer's day jobs, with the latter understood to encompass the nexus of values associated with the specific normative masculine occupational identities of clerk, merchant, squire, and franklin.

In the chapters that follow, in describing the character of the IV-V dialectical trajectory and its provisional resolution, I necessarily encounter myriad local and often longstanding problems of *Canterbury Tales* interpretation, on some of which I take novel or at least atypical positions that I hope may further the understanding of the *Tales* in smaller ways. But what I most claim to offer in this book is neither this collection of incidental interventions nor the overall argument, but rather a detailed account of

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how the IV-V dialectic unfolds. Hence, whether readers find the journey through this book worth the effort will ultimately depend not on its beginning or its end but on the collective effect of the changing scenery that they encounter along the way, an encounter conditioned by the vehicle – my approach – in which they ride. I turn now to the two most distinguishing features of that approach.

### The IV-V Sequence and the Work Room

That the division of the IV-V tales into two fragments was a simple editorial error – for which the redoubtable Frederick Furnivall, in his over-enthusiastic embrace of Henry Bradshaw's ideas, was largely responsible – is an argument that I have pursued in detail elsewhere, and which to this point has received no challenge, as far as I am aware.<sup>1</sup> Here I briefly mention the three major points of this argument most relevant to this book's purpose and then consider their interpretive implications. In subsequent chapters I review the claims in this regard that are related to the respective component parts of IV-V and introduce any additional pertinent evidence.

First, as has been no secret to all the Chaucer editors familiar with the manuscript variations pertaining to the IV-V tales (including Furnivall), the passage that Furnivall divided to form the *Merchant's Epilogue* and the *Introduction to the Squire's Tale* – which he then used, respectively, to terminate Group E (Fragment IV) and begin Group F (Fragment V) – never appears so divided in the manuscripts (discounting a couple of non-exceptional exceptions). Rather, it constitutes a single, unbroken linking passage. To be sure, in this linking passage's variant versions the tales that it joins are not always the *Merchant's* and the *Squire's* (most notably, in Hengwrt the passage joins Merchant and Franklin). Yet the strongest reading of this evidence, by far, is that the version that joins Merchant and Squire represents the passage's original rendering.

Second, despite many variations, the three links that form the IV-V sequence – in addition to the Merchant-Squire passage, the Clerk-Merchant link (i.e., the *Merchant's Prologue*) and the Squire-Franklin link (i.e., the Franklin's words to the Squire at the end of the *Squire's Tale*) – travel together in the manuscript traditions. For example, in all fifteen manuscripts in which the Squire-Franklin link joins the tales of those two pilgrims, the Clerk-Merchant and Merchant-Squire links appear as such; and in all twenty-two manuscripts in which the Squire-Franklin link instead joins Squire and Merchant, the Clerk-Merchant link is absent

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and the Merchant-Squire link is either also absent or joins tales other than those of Merchant and Squire. Again, as with Merchant-Squire link, the strongest reading of the evidence by far is that the variations in the other two links that involve other tales represent scribal adaptations.

Third, the best explanation of the peculiar disposition of the links in Hengwrt and of the nature of the variation in this regard across manuscript traditions is that Chaucer composed all three links independently of and sometime after composing the tales that they join and, indeed, after composing most and perhaps all the rest of what survives of the *Canterbury Tales*. In Hengwrt, both the Merchant-Squire and the Squire-Franklin links are copied in the same light yellowish ink that contrasts dramatically with the darker ink of the text that surrounds them; the Squire-Franklin link has been squeezed into the space left on folio 137v following the final couplet of the *Squire's Tale*, while the inclusion of the Merchant-Squire link required the insertion of a new leaf (f. 153) between the already copied *Merchant's* and *Franklin's Tales*. In the process, both links were textually adapted to fit the exigencies of the already copied context into which they were squeezed, with Merchant-Squire altered to join Merchant and Franklin, and Squire-Franklin altered to join Squire and Merchant.<sup>2</sup> And the Clerk-Merchant link – which does not appear in Hengwrt – was either not received in time or was deemed unadaptable to any of the remaining gaps where it might have been inserted. Revealingly, when the Hengwrt scribe later copied Ellesmere, he addressed all these problems, placing all three links where we are used to encountering them, and repairing the text of the first two.<sup>3</sup> Altogether, this evidence suggests that the links were composed on single leaves separately from main body of the *Tales* materials, and, as Simon Horobin observes, this physical disposition, combined with the links' belated receipt by the Hengwrt production team and the confusion generated by the Man of Law's Endlink, accounts for the significant variations of the order of the IV-V tales in the manuscripts.<sup>4</sup>

In summary, the three links “form a single, if variant, textual intervention into the *Canterbury Tales*.”<sup>5</sup> This intervention we must either reject, as a whole, as inauthentic even in its original form, deeming all three links, following Norman Blake, to represent an instance of the scribal desire to complete that which Chaucer left unfinished; or accept, in the form shared by the manuscripts of Manly and Rickert's type *a* tale order group, as enacting one of Chaucer's post-hoc artistic decisions regarding the ever-developing structure of the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>6</sup> And if we choose the latter (as the vast majority of readers do, albeit tacitly, by accepting the divided

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IV-V sequence as authentic), we must also contend with the implications of the signs of hasty, retroactive adaptation in such an otherwise carefully copied manuscript as is Hengwrt. These signs, along with the fact that in Ellesmere the Hengwrt scribe returns the links to their authoritative places, support the view that Chaucer's writing of these links – and thus his construction of IV-V – was one of his *final* artistic decisions for the *Tales*. Although it is obviously possible that Chaucer had conceived the thematic and structural implications of the links long before he actually wrote them, it seems more plausible, given what appears to have been – from the evidence of his other tinkering – the evolving nature of the *Canterbury Tales* project, that much, if perhaps not all, of what the links accomplish represents Chaucer's retroactive realization of the artistic potential of such a sequence of tales.<sup>7</sup> It is this retroactive realization that this book seeks to describe.

As much as manuscript evidence enables my interpretation of IV-V as a unified authorial composition, therefore, it also compels me to acknowledge as likely what Donald Howard long ago dismissed as the “work-room” view of Chaucer's composition of the *Tales*: the view that emphasizes the status of the semi-linked collection as a work in progress, one guided by plans that evolved, probably opportunistically, in the course of composition, as Chaucer added to and altered the work in dialogue with his own creative process, and thus a work that was subject to open-ended revision at global and local structural and thematic levels right up until he gave up on it (or died). To the question, “how does one account for the presence of the General Prologue, for the work's overriding structure, for the dramatic interplay among the pilgrims, for the way the tales reflect the characters of their tellers – in short for the work's unity and complexity,” I answer: critics are adept at finding the complex unities that they assume to be present.<sup>8</sup> This is indeed the essence of what we do in a nutshell, even when the unities that we find are so complex that they are not really unities at all. And any such assumptions – even those that put aside authorial intention, whether of the new critical, poststructural, or historicist variety – are necessarily grounded on an imagined primal scene of composition: a scenario that posits which parts of the work were written when and with what other parts in mind, and what degree of global revision was performed once all the parts were put together.

For the vast majority of *Canterbury Tales* criticism on the tales of IV-V (as well as more generally), the imagined scenario is a totalizing one that posits that every component of each pilgrim performance (portrait, tale, and link) was written or at least revised with every other component in

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mind, and so each component is to be understood against the informing background of the other two. Each therefore may serve in practice as a kind of interpretive key for the others, so that, for example, the tale of Dorigen, Arveragus, and Aurleius may be understood to reflect the Epicureanism that the Franklin's portrait attributes to the teller, while, conversely, that tale's failures (so runs one avenue of interpretation) signal Chaucer's disapproval of the teller as his portrait describes him; and the Squire-Franklin link conveys both the nature of the tale's failures and of the moral or spiritual weaknesses of the teller, neither of which are fully evident on their own. This kind of totalizing assumption is virtually unavoidable for the kind of dramatic readings that were in fashion in Howard's day, but it is also typical of any study that finds intricate thematic connections among portrait, tale, and link – which is to say, most studies of the IV-V performances, by far.

To Howard's credit, he articulates this assumption explicitly as the ground upon which his monograph rests, whereas most studies of the *Tales* – before *and* after – just tacitly accept it.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, for some pilgrim performances, such as that of the Pardoner, the totalizing scenario does not seem unlikely, and in this book I make no assumptions about Chaucer's composition of any portion of the *Tales* other than IV-V. But for that portion, most basically because of the manuscript evidence pertaining to the prologues and epilogues that alone identify the tellers of its four tales, I find that the totalizing scenario does not adequately account for the significant degree of uncertainty about whether Chaucer ever thought to associate these tales with these pilgrims before authoring those prologues and epilogues.<sup>10</sup> I recognize that this degree of uncertainty is itself uncertain, and that it varies among the four pilgrim performances. By no means, therefore, am I claiming that manuscript evidence definitively indicates that Chaucer did not preplan the pilgrim/tale assignments in these instances. I am claiming, rather, that the uncertainty is ample enough to demand a position-taking on relative probability. And in my view – especially for the latter three tales, for which the pilgrim assignments rest wholly upon what seems a very late structural innovation – the more probable scenario is that Chaucer had not yet determined to associate the respective portraits and tales at the point at which he authored them in the form in which they have come down to us. Specifically, I am claiming that the most probable scenario – the one that most accords with the manuscript evidence – is that Chaucer determined the pilgrim assignments, especially those for the latter three tales, in the same late creative act that produced the IV-V sequence, and that before that moment Chaucer had

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portraits and tales but no definite plan for which pilgrim would tell which tale.

For those used to understanding the four tales of IV-V as eminently suited to their tellers in global and minute ways – from overall themes and narrative treatment to individual narratorial characteristics – this position may seem simply wrong, impoverishing of Chaucer’s artistry, and oddly self-defeating for a book that proposes to offer a reading of a sequence of four pilgrim performances as such. These objections merit individual responses.

Subsequent chapters present the specific evidence for each performance that, at the very least, casts some doubt on whether one may simply dismiss my position as wrong. Again, critics are adept at finding what they go looking for, and if we assume that Chaucer wrote, say, the *Merchant’s Tale* with the Clerk-Merchant link in mind, it is not difficult to fashion an interpretation that would appear to provide a definitive demonstration of this artistic unity of parts, when in fact it is the prior assumption of that unity that makes that interpretation possible. Moreover, for each of the IV-V performances there exists a longstanding minority critical tradition that has pointed toward certain inconsistencies among portrait, tale, and link – inconsistencies that other critics, under the sway of the totalizing scenario, have either ignored or understood as subtle artistic effects, typically species of irony. The ensuing chapters consider the merits of the claims of this tradition for the respective performances. Here I simply observe that among the few things about which most scholars of the *Tales* agree is that Chaucer compiled into this collection some earlier efforts that he had completed sometime before he conceived of the enclosing work – certainly before he wrote the *General Prologue* – and that he did so with very little adaptation to the new literary context. And, even more certainly, we know that when Chaucer wrote the *General Prologue* he did not have tales for all the portraits that he included, since some (e.g., the Yeoman’s) never received one. Given, therefore, that Chaucer wrote some number of tales without a teller in mind, and some number of portraits without a tale in mind, and some number of both tales and portraits without the links in mind that associate them, we can conclude that the totalizing scenario does not apply across the board for the pilgrim performances, and hence we have *a priori* reason to doubt it when there is evidence to the contrary.

About whether these assumptions about the composition of IV-V impoverish Chaucer’s artistry, my best response is this book itself, whose premise is that the intricate artistry of this four-tale sequence deserves a monograph-long explication. But, more specifically, I would counter that



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the totalizing scenario has its own impoverishing effects, from its tendency to understand portrait, tale, and link as interpretive keys for one another. For example, readings of the *Squire's Tale* that seek to understand that tale as the preplanned utterance of the pilgrim Squire as he is described in the *General Prologue* tend to limit themselves to what seems consistent with that portrait: hence, the long tradition of reading that tale as a dramatization of youthful, amateurish, and perhaps faulty tale-telling. But if we instead imagine tale and portrait as originally independent compositions, our readings of them are open to the wide range of possible meanings that they encompass on their own (or, in the case of the portrait, also within the literary context of the *General Prologue*). As virtually any seasoned reader of Chaucer would acknowledge, his writings tend to explore simultaneously many different subjects in complex ways that are not always easily assimilable to each other and that frequently possess more-or-less underdetermined conclusions. Resisting the impulse to make portrait, tale, and link wholly consistent with one another, therefore, helps us to compass this characteristic capacious open-endedness. Rather than explain away the apparent discrepancies in this consistency, we can follow where they lead.

It is this alertness to the independent meanings of each component of a pilgrim performance that, rather than scuttling this book's project at the outset, serves as one of its justifications. In my imagined primal scene of composition, the IV-V sequence arose as a kind of cento, the product of Chaucer's rereading of his own work – his looking over of some of the material that he was considering incorporating into the *Tales*, or material that he had written for the *Tales* but without final plans for how he would situate it.<sup>11</sup> In this scenario, IV-V was the result of a specific insight that Chaucer had about his own, already-composed work, a singular inspiration regarding which of these tales he should assign to which tellers, in what order the performances should appear, what thematic through-lines the links should enact, and what thematic contact points the links should activate between each of the tales and portraits, and among the four performances. It is this inspiration, this insight that Chaucer had about the relations among his own, already-composed work, for which this book seeks to account, and it is this book's basic contention that this inspiration is, by itself, a spectacular artistic achievement that reaches deeply into the heart of one of Chaucer's career-long concerns, one indeed fundamental to the literary enterprise then as now.

This inspiration of Chaucer's constitutes the informing idea of IV-V, but it is an idea that depends upon, rather than is foreclosed by, the work-room view of the *Tales*. For, according to my scenario for the primal scene

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of composition, Chaucer enacts this inspiration like the final layer of a parfait: it does not, by itself, alter what lies underneath (i.e., what was already written), but produces a final result that, on the one hand, may still be relished in each of its separate parts and, on the other hand, is something other than the sum of those parts.<sup>12</sup> Or, to use the more historically apt analogy that Robert Jordan long ago proposed for Chaucer's artistry generally, the form that Chaucer's idea for IV-V took was that of the gothic cathedral, in which "[t]he mode of relationship between whole and parts can be one which does not at any time rob the parts of integrity and completeness within their formal outlines"; and in which, conversely, the part, "in its wholeness and complexity" does not "detract from the integrity of the whole."<sup>13</sup> The totalizing scenario tends to occlude appreciation for this mode of relationship; it hampers our perception of how the different components of the tale-telling performances that constitute IV-V are at once independent compositions and constituent parts of an overall, if post hoc, artistic design. By insisting on harmonious consistency among the parts, the totalizing scenario obscures those parts' distinctiveness and thus also how that very distinctiveness (especially as it is carried by those aspects of tale, portrait, or link that are not easily assimilable to the other parts) contributes to the belatedly assembled whole.

Throughout this book, therefore, while my focus is on this artistic design, I impose upon myself the interpretive limit that disallows readings that depend on Chaucer's having a portrait in mind when he wrote a tale, a tale in mind when he wrote a portrait, or a link in mind when he wrote portrait or tale. (For some of the tales – the *Merchant's* in particular – I do allow for the likelihood that he had in mind one or more of the other tales.) This self-imposed limit has implications, obviously, for how I approach that perennially vexed question of *Tales* interpretation: the nature of the relation between pilgrim and tale. I must of course *a priori* preclude the so-called dramatic approach, in which one assumes that a tale is primarily designed to convey in some fashion the character of its teller. This mode of interpretation, dominant through much of the twentieth century, received in the second half of that century trenchant critiques from many quarters.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, although it has since faded as a critical orthodoxy and is now very rarely practiced in the bald manner most exemplified by R. M. Lumianksy, it remains, as A. C. Spearing has shown, to a significant degree an enabling principle in much – and perhaps most – criticism on the *Tales*, well into the twenty-first century.<sup>15</sup> As I review in subsequent chapters, while critics do not often anymore argue directly that a tale discloses a teller's character, they nonetheless typically understand aspects of the