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Geoffrey Chaucer , Edited by Maurice Hussey
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Introduction

Even though Chaucer spent the last fourteen or fifteen years of his life, and of the fourteenth century, composing and revising *The Canterbury Tales*, he was far from having completed the general plan when he died. Instead of recounting four tales by each narrator he had not even run round the company of pilgrims once, and he left such people as the Five Guildsmen and the Knight's Yeoman silent.

In most cases he was careful to assign a suitable tale to each narrator and to introduce them in a piece of verse continuity (we know these as the 'link passages'). Yet since some of the links are missing, the complete order of the tales is in doubt. Certain blocks stand up as substantial units, such as the closing group which embraces the following tales: *The Second Nun's Tale*, *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, *The Manciple's Tale* and *The Parson's Tale*. These stories late in the sequence are not popular and familiar, but the Canon's Yeoman's is the most lively of the group. It follows close upon the Second Nun's, as the opening line states. Where her tale told of the early days of Christianity, his throws a satirical light on the dark side of Christianity in the Middle Ages. It is, in addition, a piece of extremely full self-revelation by the narrator, smothered at times in regret and doubt but at others breathing the fresh air of optimism and longing for wealth.

With the Knight's Yeoman silent, we are glad to have a servant's idea of the world, and the Canon's Yeoman has a very special craft to represent, which was bound to prove interesting to every hearer and reader: the study of alchemy, which was partly a science and partly a magical practice.

The long narrative poem falls into two not very distinctly separated parts: a prologue and a tale. At the beginning, while the pilgrims are making their way through Kent and have recently paused at one of the stopping-places, an overheated rider pursues them. He is the yeoman or servant of a canon who is a part-time

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alchemist. First of all, he serves to introduce his master who is anxious to join them. When Harry Bailey, the Host, questions the Yeoman in detail, he discovers a man devoid of mystery and wealth, for he turns out to manifest only suspicion and poverty. The sales talk continues. It seems that the atmosphere of a pilgrimage induced people to lay bare their souls and reveal their confidences. The Canon, who fears exposure, hears it coming in his servant's tone of voice. He flees as quickly as he came and nobody cares.

Left alone, the speaker continues his prologue, with further self-revelations, and begins to explain the life of a laboratory steward of the fourteenth century, and to show both the hopes and the despairs of his life as they shoot through his troubled and overheated mind. When this at last comes to an end, the tale begins. The central figure is a canon, though the Yeoman is at pains to say that it is not his master. There seem, later on, to be reasons for not accepting this denial, but they are not important. The Yeoman tells of a series of three different experiments with base metals and silver, and how in this way the Canon tricked a priest into thinking that mercury could actually produce silver under heat and pressure. He had, of course, hidden a quantity of silver to be released at the correct moment and knew all the time that the genuine metal would appear at the end of his experiments. A lively narrative it is, but one that is also remarkable for the quality of the occasional reflections on the nature and purpose of alchemy, and an excellent example of self-revelation and rapid, colloquial couplet verse.

The Tale

No matter how many of Chaucer's tales we know before we arrive at *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* for the first time, it must come as a slight surprise. One could almost assume that the poet expected readers to wonder why a new narrator had been sprung

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upon them, and to go on to wonder how many others might be necessary before the book was completed. Although it does not stand in the highest rank of tales, it has a considerable originality, and as an attempt at explaining some of the actions of scientists of the period it is far too valuable to ignore.

Exactly why an alchemist was introduced we shall never know for certain, though it has often been assumed that Chaucer himself had been cheated by one and that he wanted an opportunity to release some of his own pent-up feelings. This may very well be, since a canon of Windsor named Schuchirch was known to have practised as an alchemist, although it cannot now be ascertained whether he was active during the period of Chaucer's stay in that town on official business. If we could accept the legend that Chaucer was tricked by the canon, it would explain some of the poet's financial difficulties at about this time and help us to understand at once why his alchemist had ecclesiastical status. In this case the Yeoman's powerful complaints against his master become a dramatisation of the poet's own emotions of shame and regret: they are emphasised enough in the poem to allow such an explanation.

Another explanation for the tale's existence may be that Chaucer required a rogue tale again to maintain the balance of his long poem, and among the company he had no suitable narrator left who had not yet spoken. The topic of alchemy was popular in the 1390s, but in order to employ it in the sequence of tales a special narrator was necessary. This increase in his number of pilgrims allowed him to make the grand total of travellers 33, which is a finely symbolic number, consisting of two threes (three being the number of Trinity) and employing the number both of Christ's years on earth and of the cantos in the three sections of Dante's *Divina Commedia*.

F. N. Robinson, who is responsible for the most important modern edition of Chaucer's works, feels that there is no relation between *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and its predecessor, apart from

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the first lines that locate it in sequence in the most external manner. Yet with a further glance back at that predecessor, *The Second Nun's Tale*, we can question that judgement. The Second Nun told of the martyrdom of St Cecilia, known to us as the patron saint of music. Her steadfastness in the face of her tortures makes her an object worth our attention. When they attempted to roast her in a bath,

> She sat all coold, and feelede no wo.

With this miraculous immunity she becomes a foil to the alchemists who sweat at their experiments throughout the Yeoman's story. Later she succumbs to the sword and triumphs over death in the manner of all martyrs. Here she succeeds spiritually where the alchemists fail: they have been sweating to change the nature of metallic dross to sovereign metal and to find the principle of life itself, but without success. Those who spend their lives in these experiments are shown to be in danger of losing their complexions from the heat, and Chaucer uses this image of physical discomfort to symbolise the deeper inner disorder and confusion from which they all suffer. (It must be noted that 'complexioun' has a much fuller meaning than the modern word, referring to a spiritual and moral beauty much more than skin deep. Alchemists, in short, were endangering their souls.)

In the note to line 861 a further resemblance between the tales is discussed. But there is a quality about *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* which is more outstanding and which subordinates it to the apparently inexhaustible *General Prologue*, the most succinct statement of so many of the poet's themes and ideas. In the lines about the Parson occurs this figure of speech:

> If gold ruste, what shal iren do?

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The proverb means that if the clergy fail in their own conduct they cannot maintain a moral leadership over their people. To give visual point to the case of the Prioress, Chaucer provided her with a gold brooch; in the case of the Monk it is a gold pin. Both ornaments were forbidden and symbolise their wearers' casual attitude towards ecclesiastical restrictions. The presence of so many ecclesiastical people in the alchemical workshops, searching for gold, makes the same point. Yet there is a cause for hope nevertheless. It was held by some researchers that the secret of making gold would only be revealed to those who were pure in soul. Bad as the two canons and the priest probably are, Chaucer wants the reader to keep an open mind and to review the problems of the uses of knowledge and riches with an alert judgement. In its own time, alchemy was not only a topic for burlesque; it was an exacting science with a carefully controlled order of activities and it ranged over problems of creation whose solution might at any time be revealed by God to man. It was, in fact, a type of creation with its own laws, principles and theology.

The finer aspects of the science are not elaborated by the narrator, who is presented as an ignorant man, unlikely to advance far in his profession, but it is through him that the story emerges. In his procedure we can discover the whole art of dramatic monologue which creates a narrator and tells a story at the same time. The Yeoman here is caught at a moment of momentous decision: he is going to abandon his master (he has good reason). In order to make up his own mind he makes his grievances explicit to himself, and the reader is able to follow his reminiscences and understand his motives for action. He is a blower of the bellows and a sweeper of the floor, and he rarely shows any greater understanding than these functions would give him. His manner of speech, the speed at which he goes ahead with his recollections and his narrative, is made perfectly plausible. He is inclined to repeat himself and ramble on, mixing warnings and regrets with lists of herbs and other experimental ingredients,

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alternating comic and pious remarks and reliving his life in a hurry. To make him stand up as a verbal creation, who exists only in the words given into his mouth by the poet, Chaucer retains the different styles of the laboratory steward, the homespun philosopher and the science lecturer in one man who has been rushed on to the scene on horseback to fulfil an engagement. The changes of mood and the false starts are not necessarily signs of hasty composition: they are the natural expression of a disordered and disoriented man, and they achieve the purpose of inviting the reader to ponder on the problems of the scientist.

The smaller matters of the laboratory come clearly out of the poem. The Brueghel frontispiece shows the keen-eyed investigator and his apparatus, and the miseries of this world come out of the poem extremely simply:

> lat swepe the floor as swithe,
> Plukke up youre hertes, and beeth glad and blithe.(383–4)

The duplication at the end and obvious jingle of the couplet catch the shallowness of the man and his baseless optimism about what he is doing. He has got nowhere in all his apprenticeship and his time is slipping away. The Wife of Bath looked back upon the past with her own vivid regrets:

> I have had my world as in my time.
> But age, allas, that al wole envenyme.

What the Yeoman has lost most obviously is his complexion; and this we are told on three occasions. What worries him more is that the outcome of so much labour is delusion:

> We faille of that which that we wolden have,
> And in oure madnesse everemoore we rave. (405–6)

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That is all there seems to be in it for the best of them. The Yeoman is not as thoroughly grounded in the subtler implications of his craft as his master, so that he seems to be prattling into the void like the babbling Miller, Reeve and Pardoner or, above all, the Summoner, whose Latin was of the same superficial order:

> Ay '*Questio quid juris*' wolde he crie.

This is the kind of man that narrates the tale. We may regret that he reveals nothing that is irrelevant to his theme. Brueghel's picture draws our attention to the penniless wife and children taken to the poorhouse as a comment on the lack of money, while the experiments for gold proceed unabated. There is perhaps one aspect of the man that is not totally suppressed by the need to present the world of the laboratory. When he comes to describe the deluded victim, Chaucer suddenly opens up a vein of romance, and imputes to the priest a range of emotions proper to the young lover in the tales of courtly love:

> Was nevere brid gladder again the day
> Ne nightingale, in the sesoun of May,
> Was nevere noon that luste bet to singe;
> Ne lady lustier in carolinge (789–92)

The Yeoman has lost the track of his story: many readers will remember the mood of the Squire in his efforts to 'stonden in his lady grace' when they read this incongruous outburst. It is correct for the Squire, but it is a kind of perversion of the emotion to sing of love in the pursuit of gold. The mood of *The General Prologue* returns; the tale that comes so late in the sequence is seen to be part of the working of the same purpose.

The Yeoman is made to break out into this passage, I believe, to show the world of romance as an escape from the mundane and familiar. Where the more learned men saw a world of romance in

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their speculations about the loves of chemical elements (a subject to which we shall return at the end of this Introduction), he was too earthy to understand, and he was left, as compensation, with the loves of squires and maidens, and the music of nightingales.

Chaucer rarely fits the teller to the tale with more completeness than he does here. What he is doing is to build up the man and his world at the same time, showing, as he does so, a knowledge of his scientific subject that no other poet of his time could rival. Nobody could ask more than this from even the most familiar of *The Canterbury Tales.*

There remain a number of problems. At the opening, the Yeoman enters with his master who we may here call Canon I. In a few minutes the Canon flees as fast as he came. Incompetence as well as dishonesty seems to be imputed to him and he prefers not to brazen it out. Once he has gone the harangue develops. When at length the Yeoman embarks upon the tale proper, we are assured that the charlatan who conducts the three experiments is not the same man at all but another, whom we may call Canon II.

An interpretation of this has been suggested in which the tale might even be a direct recounting of the Canon's last exploit before meeting the Pilgrims. Canon and Yeoman are both hurrying away to prevent discovery by the victim of the experiments and the confidence trick. They try, however, to give the impression that they wish to join the company and have hurried with only this in mind. It then emerges that the Yeoman is too indiscreet, and the Canon departs. Left alone, the Yeoman cannot resist blurting out the whole story, but realises that he is revealing too much of his own dishonesty. He then finds that it is necessary to cover up his own part, invents Canon II and asks with all innocence:

> This chanon was my lord, ye wolden weene?
> … It was another chanoun, and nat hee. (535, 537)

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More Information

If he really is another man, why, we ask, does the narrator express himself with such animus against a complete stranger:

> the devel out of his skin
> Him terve, I pray to God, for his falshede,
> For he was evere fals in thoght and dede (720–2)

To put it plainly, how does he know? The accent of truth is there, and one must assume that the two canons are indeed the same man and the Yeoman is either trying to shield his former master or else creating a situation in which all canons are one canon, all alchemists one alchemist, and all of them only human beings with problems of conscience. Poetically, the two people are to be identified and there seems no reason for continuing the pretence that they are distinct people.

Just at the turn of the fifteenth century, when the tale was written, there were special reasons for the serious discussion of this topic. Very soon afterwards, in 1403, alchemy became illegal in England, so discussion of it in the 1390s must already have had a sharper edge than we might suspect. Further, about seventy years previously, Pope John XXII had issued a papal decree against alchemy, so that when Chaucer was writing it was poised between a sin and a crime in public estimation. To show a number of priests engaged in it was most meaningful to the instructed members of the writer's audience. One might exaggerate the position and say that the poem is a harbinger of official decree and the poet an unacknowledged legislator.

Crime or not, the subject is treated throughout the poem as a form of folly and blindness:

> Ye been as boold as is Bayard the blinde,
> That blondreth forth, and peril casteth noon. (860–1)

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Images of folly and blindness are found in other parts of the poem:

> O sely preest, O sely innocent,
> With coveitise anon thou shalt be blent.
> O gracelees, ful blind is thy conceite, (523–5)

where it evokes the spiritual state of gracelessness and shows the sinfulness of the pursuit as well. At first the canon's activities savour more of confidence trickery than fully extended alchemy:

> To muchel folk we doon illusioun,
> And borwe gold, be it a pound or two,
> Or ten, or twelve, or manie sommes mo. (120–2)

But the money is partially sunk back into the business and, we are made to feel, the investors are too gullible to be treated honestly:

> Lo, swich a lucre is in this lusty game.

From 'game' it becomes a matter of greater earnestness. Phrases like 'sliding science' and 'elvisshe craft' emerge, together with the name of Judas and other images of treachery to show us what the poet is doing. The complexity of the problem is conveyed in a passage which has, I believe, some of the complexity that we are accustomed to find in the couplet verse of the eighteenth century:

> 'In the suburbes of a toun,' quod he,
> 'Lurkinge in hernes and in lanes blinde,
> Whereas thise robbours and thise theves by kinde
> Holden hir privee fereful residence,
> As they that dar nat shewen hir presence;
> So faren we, if I shal seye the sothe.' (104–9)

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