

Chaucer Criticism

D. W. ROBERTSON, JR.

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Aside from a few illustrations, Donald R. Howard's *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* relies almost exclusively on secondary sources.¹ That is, the author has read a great deal of scholarship and criticism but has done very little original research, displaying only rarely first-hand information about fourteenth-century English society, its intellectual traditions, or its literary conventions. In Chapter I, in fact, he renounces historical interpretation, to concentrate instead on what *The Canterbury Tales*, as he puts it, *is*, and on the "mind" of Chaucer. Nevertheless, he does not hesitate to tell us from time to time what "medievals," as he calls them, thought about things, deriving this information from a selection of secondary materials. At the outset, an analysis of the Ellesmere portrait of Chaucer leads to the conclusion that the disproportionately small horse, and Chaucer's small legs, emphasize the head and torso to show that "the man and the poet loom over the fictional pilgrimage." Thus, as we learn in Chapter II, it is important to know the "idea" Chaucer had in mind when he wrote. The *Tales* reflect the idea of the pilgrimage, which is obvious enough, and they are, moreover, comic. For the idea of comedy Professor Howard uses the fourth-century definition of Evanthius, which he found in Cunliffe (1912). Except for some discussion of Dante, later medieval statements about comedy are disregarded. Comedy is said to imply "espousal of the world," an idea with which John of Salisbury might have agreed, but with the additional idea that this represents an unfortunate subjection to Fortune, or to Providential ill consequences.² But in Chaucer, Professor Howard assures us, the morality arises from the *Tales* as a whole, so that the basic idea he had in mind was that of "the book," although he concluded his book with another "book," the Parson's sermon.

The style of the "book" of the *Tales* is discussed in Chapter III, where we learn, without much astonishment, that although Chaucer related events in the past, he often used the present tense to create a sense of immediacy. Another stylistic device described is a "sense of obsolescence," especially in contrasting ideals thought to be characteristic of the past with a more reprehensible present. This is a common device of satirists and moralists, but Professor Howard does not examine events during Chaucer's lifetime to determine whether in this instance there was any basis for Chaucer's attitude. There is a diffuse discussion of irony, but again without any reference to medieval ideas about irony and its techniques. Part of the "idea" of the *Tales* is said to be "the search for the world," whose attractions are vividly revealed, especially in the "ideal" love portrayed in *Troilus*.

The "search" is examined further in Chapter IV on "Memory and Form," where it is described as being carried out on a "pilgrimage through the world," which is a part of the "idea" of the *Tales*. But the pilgrimage is a

memory of past experience, and, in this connection, a rather obscure argument is developed to show that the pilgrims in the General Prologue fall into "mnemonic groups." The author does not seem to be familiar with modern memory systems of the kind used by stage performers and card players. The tales themselves can be thought of as occupying a single day in a "symbolic" sense. But the individual tales "discredit each other." The form of the whole is that of a "memory," here compared, again obscurely, with circular designs like those of the so-called rose windows in cathedrals. This "form," we are told, also has a "structure," described in Chapter V. That is, the tales are arranged in pairs, like the Knight's Tale and the Miller's Tale, the latter discrediting the former, the Miller's Tale and the Reeve's Tale, the latter discrediting the former, and so on. This "binary" arrangement, with its "breaks" between the various fragments or groups, is said to form the basis of an "interlace" structure somewhat like that attributed by Professor Vinaver to certain romances. There follows a rapid and superficial survey of the tales, partly designed to show this structure, concluding with the Manciple's Tale, which leads us back to the General Prologue as we seek to remember the character of the Manciple. Thus, the "interlace" is "circular" before we reach the final "book" of the Parson's Tale. The "themes" said to be the basis for the interlace are things like Fortune, food, money, sex, "quitting," and so on. These are four subjects and a device, not themes. There are actual themes in the tales, like the foolishness of submission to Fortune, the ill effects of Mars and Venus (taken figuratively), the advantages of wise old age and the disadvantages of cultivating the old age of the Pauline Old Man, and so on; but these are disregarded, or even denied. However, we are offered one final analogy for the interlace structure, the labyrinth used for symbolic pilgrimages on cathedral floors. The final chapter discusses two tales of special significance, those of the Pardoner and the Parson, with emphasis on the former, which is treated with passionate expressionism, making it sound a little like a modern horror film with intense psychological realism. In general, the author is stubbornly obtuse to stylistic history and the perspectives it affords. The Parson's Tale is said to shed new light on the previous "book," so that we are forced to reflect once more on the tales we have read.

The above summary is a simplification of a diffuse and often verbose argument that almost continuously adduces complexities. It is designed, as your reviewer understands it, to enable the reader to become vicariously involved in the "book" of the *Tales*, so that reading it becomes an emotional experience somewhat like that provided by a novel, and it will undoubtedly appeal to those who relish experiences of this kind. In the course of the argument there are some dubious statements, some historical and some concerning the text. For example, we are told that chivalry was "obsolescent" and that Chaucer would have thought it to be so. From the perspective of history it is true that chivalric ideals would soon weaken and almost disappear, but Chaucer would not have known this. He and his friends were not familiar with mass warfare. Men like Clanvowe and Stury, not to mention Chaucer himself, would have thought the function of chivalry to be something like that of a modern defense establishment, and although they may well have thought that it had declined in England, they could observe without too much difficulty that it had begun to flourish in France. The Yeoman, who is dressed as a forester, is said to wear a "warlike costume." Although a reeve in the fourteenth century is by definition a manorial servant elected from among customary tenants, we are told that there were "no serfs" among the pilgrims. It is quite possible also to think of the Miller and the Plowman as serfs, remembering that the

social distinction between freemen and serfs was becoming blurred in the late fourteenth century. The Plowman's concern for his neighbors suggests strongly that he was a traditional manorial servant elected from among bondmen, and not a hired worker from outside a manor. If we accept this view, then the Parson, his brother, must have been a man of servile origin freed by his education.

The pilgrims are said to represent a "cross-section" of English society. This commonplace of criticism is true only in a very general way, for there are many gaps in the "cross-section." There are no bishops, abbots, archdeacons, or chaplains, although the last were very numerous and often unruly. There are no great magnates, officials of the royal household (except for Chaucer himself, who is not so identified), obstreperous local lords, like the notorious Lord John Fitzwalter of Essex³ or the almost indestructible Sir Matthew Gurney of Somerset,⁴ no stewards or other members of lay courts, no royal justices, apprentices at law, local lawyers, or filicers, no coroners, borough officials, city apprentices, and so on. Many familiar figures are, in fact, missing, and the problem of why Chaucer selected the groups he did has never been faced squarely; it has simply been obscured by a convenient generalization. The pilgrims are also said to be "types," but if this means that they are "typical," it is an absurdity. Chaucer himself is called a "bourgeois," although as a royal squire with war service he was very clearly a gentleman.⁵ He is said to have served as a J. P., as though this were an occupation. It is true that he was named on commissions of the peace, but this does not mean that he ever attended sessions, and if he did they would have not taken much time and would have been remunerative only if he had been unscrupulous, as his Franklin evidently was.

With reference to the text, the "end" sought by Palamon and Arcite in the Knight's Tale is said to be marriage, although neither Palamon's oath to make war on chastity all his life nor Arcite's dedication to wrathful passions sounds much like an anticipation of marriage. In this connection, critics of the tale often pay little attention to the text, which does not fit their theories, and the present discussion is no exception. The miller's daughter in the Reeve's Tale, who "chikke and well ygrowen was, / With kamus nose, and eyen greye as glas, / With buttokes brode, and breestes round and hye," is said not to be "sexually desirable," except perhaps for her hair. The urgent exclamation of Nicholas in the Miller's Tale—"for deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille"—is called "courtly love parlance," although Henry of Lancaster's use of it, as he describes it in his *Les Seyntz Medicines*, can hardly be called "courtly," and similar expressions were doubtless used by persons of all ranks. The Franklin's Tale is treated reasonably, if superficially, but the Franklin himself is described as a "genial country squire," as though he might have just emerged, country-fresh, from the pages of Mr. Fielding. It may be an exaggeration to say with one authority that the sheriff's tourn after 1388 became little more than "an instrument of extortion,"⁶ but there is enough truth in it, not to mention, in addition, examples of extortionate sheriffs earlier, like Robert Hacche and William Auncel of Devon,⁷ to make our very wealthy and self-indulgent Franklin look more than a little suspicious.

To say that the "form" of *The Canterbury Tales* is a memory is to do little more than to place it in the very large class of narratives in the past tense, and the construct of a circular interlace pattern is not very convincing, in spite of recent tendencies among literary critics to try to make almost any work of literature operate like *Finnegan's Wake*: by "a commodious vicus of recirculation." Before we can talk about form and structure in Chaucer's

work with any real conviction we shall need to devote much study to the history of classical forms in the Middle Ages, frequently transformed into modes, first in Latin literature and then in the various vernaculars. But this kind of study has hardly begun. In the present work Chaucer's wit, humor, and vigor suffer because of a failure to appreciate the specific relevance of what he had to say to fourteenth-century English life. More importantly, although the author does make notable concessions to Chaucer's moral ideals, he does not take them seriously enough to provide the necessary vantage for a humorous stance. Finally, it is unfortunate that Professor Howard did not devote more of his considerable energy and intelligence to primary research. It is to be hoped that university presses will in the future demand more such research, and the intelligent use of it, from their authors and that their assigned readers will be more alert to the need for it. If they do not do so, much Chaucer criticism is likely to remain frothy and insubstantial.

NOTES

1. Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1976).
2. *Policraticus*, 3.8, ed. Webb, 1.190-199.
3. See Elizabeth Chapin Furber, *Essex Sessions of the Peace 1351, 1377-79*, Essex Archaeological Society Occasional Publications, 3 (1953), pp. 61-62, 82-90.
4. Isobel D. Thornley and T. F. T. Plucknett, eds., *Year Books of Richard II: 11 Richard II* (Ames Foundation, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1937), pp. xiii-xvi and 170-174. In spite of his extortions and other felonies, Gurney was named on commissions of the peace and of oyer and terminer in 1381-85 and on peace commissions again in 1388-92. He became a member of King's Council under Henry IV, and died in 1406 at the age of 97.
5. Cf. N. Denholm-Young, *Country Gentry in the Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1969), p. 24. The word *bourgeois*, unless it means simply residents of boroughs and cities, makes little sense in fourteenth-century terms. Many members of the higher nobility had residences in London. London merchants were sometimes knighted, and many more of them would have been knighted if the Crown had had its way.
6. I. S. Leadam and C. S. Baldwin, eds., *Select Cases before the King's Council 1213-1482* (Selden Society, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1918), lxxxvi. On sheriffs generally, see lxxxiii-lxxxix.
7. Bertha Haven Putnam, ed., *Proceedings before the Justices of the Peace in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Ames Foundations, London, 1938). For Hacche, see pp. 63, 73-74, 76-77, 80; for Auncel, pp. 74-75, 77-78. See further, N. Neilson, *Customary Rents in Oxford Studies in Social and Legal History*, II (1912), pp. 140, 147-148; Helen M. Cam, *The Hundred and the Hundred Rolls* (London, 1930), 67-85, 106. For an amusing endorsement of the corruption of sheriffs by local lords, see John Smyth, *The Lives of the Berkeleys* (Bristol and Gloucester Archaeological Society, 1883), I, p. 307.