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J Daniel Byford

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HONORABLE MENTION: ESSAY

The Experience of Chaucer and His Tales

by J. Daniel Byford

There is a point to Chaucer that we often overlook: had he written the Canterbury Tales yesterday it would, no doubt, be at the top of the Best Sellers list tomorrow. In dismissing the relevant intentions of the Tales and instead pursuing the scholarly tidbits of information for information's sake, we run the risk of rendering out the matter but not the substance of the subject. Much of this well meaning pursuit has arisen from the fact that, to the general public, Middle English is a foreign language. Subsequently there has arisen a need to make the material contained in the Tales elucid and painstakingly clear. This process has hindered as much as helped the student in his attempt to understand Chaucer's intentions. Poetry itself, as it is viewed in the minds of all but a select minority, is essentially a foreign language. Considering these things it is not hard to understand the tremulous relevancy in which the Tales are held in the popular mind. Modern man, naturally accepting the easiest way to truth, finds the path which has traditionally been beaten towards Chaucer's door by no means easy to follow.

To say one understands Chaucer completely is a subjective and rather pretentiously based statement. It is much the same as that pretentiousness projected by Chaucer's "Host", Henry Bailly, who admits to be so well acquainted with literature and its artistically developed truths that he proclaims himself a judge worthy enough to decide which will be the best of the Pilgrims' presentations. To carry the analogy somewhat further, one wonders if the critic's motivation is not also similar, for Henry too is seeking confirmation and recognition for cleverness from his fellow "pilgrims". For centuries scholarly altercation has attempted an absolute definition of Chaucer's artistic and philosophical notions. Articles are being written and amassed even now to prove the validity of some subtle point or another. Not only thematic validity, but structural validity as well has been perused, ordered, revised and discharged continuously from Chaucer's day to the present. One wonders what Chaucer himself would think if he could read this constant banter of Chaucerian critics. About the only creditable point to be agreed upon is that all do recognize Chaucer's dramatic artistry and narrative genius.

The intentions of his work are no less relevant today; the implications of his presentation of the Tales seem no less meaningful than they were then. Even allowing for the problem of a foreign language, Chaucer's insight into humanity is readily available and his ability to present the Pilgrimage as a farce on human experience of divine intention needs but little explication.
Chaucer wrote for the select few in a medieval society and we cannot expect ever to know exactly what he meant five hundred years later. But we can be sure that Chaucer had observed and reflected a bright impression of human experience, and that even through the great mass of years the implications of the Tales have not dimmed, nor become less relevant. That he sees all men as pilgrims on a journey is quite obvious. That he sees life as self-explanatory and human experience as a synthesis of "tales" is imminent. Through his dramatic technique of presentation he allows the pilgrims to conceal or reveal as they deem, or as their natures compel them. The greatest irony in the Tales seems to arise from the pilgrims' decisions of whether or not to reveal themselves openly, or attempt to hide.

R.M. Lumiansky adequately explains the intentions of Chaucer's structural unity. In Of Sundry Folk the author/scholar lays bare the implications of Chaucer's choice of presentation. By unifying his Tales through choice descriptions in the General Prologue, reinforcing these with the echoing turn of events and interplay of characters in the Links, and by the tale itself (in relation to its teller and the company), Chaucer unifies the Tales into a veritable "moving stage" of dramatic activity. He creates an artistic reflection of the Pilgrimage that we are all metaphorically on. One only must see through a veil of years and estranged English words to see why Chaucer can laugh at his own presentations, especially that of Chaucer the pilgrim.

Lumiansky also sees three distinct operations occurring in this dramatic synthesis. He finds that the author either has presented a pilgrim by a simple relation of teller to tale, or has created this simple relation and added a further dramatic element: that of conflict of character; or Chaucer has allowed each teller the opportunity of revealing himself. But how Chaucer uses structural unity in this dramatic process is secondary to why he uses it. Resting on the how of it is as reductionist an interpretation as would be looking at the Tales as individual stories alone. In the individual tales and through his character sketches, Chaucer touches upon dominant themes and questions of his day. Love, both physical and spiritual, courtly and common, is perhaps foremost upon many of the pilgrim minds. He presents both his own musings on many themes and those of contemporaries (e.g. Boccaccio, Boethius, De Meund, etc.). In the guise of Fortune he presents variant notions upon the familiar argument of free will versus preordination. He also spends much time in disputation over contrary ideas on marriage and female sovereignty. Other themes on avarice, hypocrisy and false felicity (transient happiness) provide dramatic variety and narrative freshness, but the point again seems to be that the how of unity, this time thematic unity, is secondary to its inherent why. Those same themes cannot be separated from their presenters without a subsequent loss of dramatic, and ultimately thematic, intention. What is the use of a theme if one does not have a background, a reflective point, for it?

Chaucer's Tales must be heard as a single theme made up, composed -- brought to life! -- by all those inconstant, conflicting, human, variant voices. Those voices Chaucer heard around him; voices Chaucer rose above.

To extol the intricacies of difference in what is real and what is contrived in the Tales is to belabor the point. Above all we should recognize the fact that Chaucer meant the Tales as a reflection of the world as he saw it, as one man is capable of seeing it. The divine spark contained within the creative inspiration of the Canterbury Tales is the ability to mirror the consciousness of man and reflect the import of his actions and experience back to him. Chaucer ultimately points at the total subjectivity of human experience. This is, possibly, the only objectively valid statement anyone may make. Chaucer witnesses all life as a Pilgrimage, a journey from the city of men towards the habitation of the ultimate, of God. It is a destination that can never really be attained, for there, at the road's end, is only a grave and a "blissful", but dead, martyr.

The pilgrim's only consolation then is the satisfaction he may derive from the telling of tales, both his and others. How each character treats the tales on the pilgrimage is essentially a reflection of how men treat life. That Chaucer included himself as a pilgrim was a stroke of necessary genius. The author is that part of the pilgrim which has stepped outside of the narrative framework and seen above the structure, the how, of the pilgrimage, above the subjective tales of life. He is that part which observes all the actions and implications of pilgrims and their tales.

It is interesting to wonder at the real reason why Chaucer never completed the Tales. That there was not time is too shallow an answer. It is well to remember that he wrote for a select few, and I would venture that his writing was an avocation and primarily pleasure and enlightenment. Could it be he saw no real need to do so? -- that he, in not finishing them, more truly reflected the goal of a Pilgrimage which could never actually reach its destination? He had set up an almost impossible task in the General Prologue to tell nearly one hundred and twenty tales. Is this not then his setting out upon a journey he can never reach?

This is the subtle truth of Chaucer's artistic genius -- his own special genius of life: Chaucer and his Tales, when seen in good light, are not only themes and implications of experience, they are an experience. Chaucer created a beautifully structured farce to reflect the divine intentions of the experiential pilgrimage of all humanity.