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CHAUCER'S HOST IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

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ABBREVIATIONS

- "Clerk's P." ("Clerk's Prologue")
- "E. to Man of Law's T." ("Epilogue to Man of Law's Tale")
- "G.P." ("General Prologue")
- "I. to Man of Law's T." ("Introduction to Man of Law's Tale")
- "Knight's T." ("Knight's Tale")
- "Man of Law's T." ("Man of Law's Tale")
- "Monk's P." ("Monk's Prologue")
- "Monk's T." ("Monk's Tale")
- "Pardoner's T." ("Pardoner's Tale")
- "Parson's P." ("Parson's Prologue")
- "Parson's T." ("Parson's Tale")
- "P. of Monk's T." ("Prologue of Monk's Tale")
- "P. of Nun's Priest's T." ("Prologue of Nun's Priest's Tale")
- "P. of Prioress's T." ("Prologue of Prioress's Tale")

CHAUCER'S HOST IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

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There has been a considerable effort on the part of some twentieth century critics of Chaucer to find a satisfying element of unity in the fragments which constitute The Canterbury Tales. In the main, this effort has taken two approaches: that of attempting to find unity in the dramatic element of the work, and that of seeking to establish unity in an allegorical reading of the Tales. R. M. Lumiansky and Ralph Baldwin, respectively, illustrate the approaches indicated. The mutual exclusiveness of their approaches raises a question, a question which suggests a third approach: Why can not the dramatic and allegorical elements of The Canterbury Tales be united in their movement toward a common goal -- the presentation of man in the context of a reality both physical and spiritual?

The dramatic element of the Tales, the "game" of tales presided over by the Host, must be seen as an integral part of a higher spiritual drama presented in the allegory, a drama more properly presided over by the Parson to whom the Host gives place when the Pilgrimage nears its end. Harry Bailly, key figure in the dramatic structure of the Tales, and spokesman for secularity, must be seen as the counterpart to the Parson, key figure in the allegorical structure of the Tales, and spokesman for spirituality. The unity of The Canterbury Tales, then, lies in Chaucer's portrayal of the tension between the profane and the sacred, a tension dramatized in the conflict (largely latent through most of the Tales) between the Host and the Parson.

A consideration of the "General Prologue" and "The Parson's Prologue" and "Tale," two portions of The Canterbury Tales which are complete and which indicate an overall plan for the work, bears out the argument that the tension between the sacred and the profane lies at the heart of Chaucer's vision. It is in the "General Prologue" that the dramatic (and profane) framework for the Pilgrimage is established by the Host. Chaucer hints at the spiritual aspect of the ritual in the imagery of the opening lines, and strongly indicates a conflict between sacred and profane values in his ironic portrayal of several Pilgrims. However, Harry Bailly is temporarily given authority over the Pilgrims, and it is not until we reach "The Parson's Prologue" and "Tale" that Chaucer explicitly turns the drama of the Pilgrimage inward to consider the universal pilgrimage toward "Jerusalem celestial." At the end of the journey, the Parson finally emerges as the proper host and guide of the company.

In addition to his rôle of secular foil to the spiritual purposes of pilgrimage, the Host has other functions. In one sense, he is seen as natural man, neither grossly sinful nor excessively spiritual, possessing the potential to move in either direction. More importantly, in his rôle as governor and judge, Harry Bailly both parodies and prefigures the Parson's more proper hostship. Ultimately, the Host is seen as having been the unconscious agent of Providence throughout, the means by which the Pilgrims have been moved through a series of self-revelatory tales toward the Parson's judgement at the end of the Pilgrimage.

CHAPTER I: TOWARD A CRITICAL POINT OF VIEW

While the individual tales or sometimes groups of tales which constitute the bulk of Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales continue to be of great interest to scholars and are, therefore, much written about, the Tales taken as a whole, despite the fragmented nature of the work, continue to attract the attention of at least a few critics in search of unity. This is not to say that those who seek a larger meaning in the Tales are departing radically from an orthodox or universally accepted 'right' reading of Chaucer's work, but rather to indicate that such scholars are giving their attention to an aspect of the Tales so universally assumed as to have been grossly oversimplified or ignored. It is often too easy or convenient, especially for those interested in only a part or perhaps a particular aspect of The Canterbury Tales, to explain the larger structure with, at best, vague or general references to the allegorical nature of the Pilgrimage to Canterbury, or with, at worst, suggestions that the Pilgrimage provides a convenient framework for a series of tales, loosely related but full of 'realism'.

It is obvious, of course, that there are numerous facets of interest in a literary masterpiece like The Canterbury Tales and that no single analysis can include them all in a comprehensible way. Nevertheless, the aim of proper criticism, be it of a part of the work or the work as a whole, should be, in Northrop Frye's phrase, "the recovery of function, not of course the restoration of an original function, which is out of the question, but the recreation of function in a new context."¹ This new context, for

¹Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, College ed. (1957; rpt. New York: Antheneum, 1967), p. 345.

the twentieth century critic, is primarily an aesthetic one, hence the effort by some to find a satisfying unity in the various elements presented in The Canterbury Tales. Insofar as medieval writing is rooted in the theocentricity of the age and the fourfold approach to the Scriptures, ascending from the literal or historical level of comprehension at the beginning, through the allegorical and tropological levels of interpretation and application in the middle, to the anagogical level of understanding at the end, the twentieth century critic of The Canterbury Tales is well advised to bear in mind at all times the last of these categories. At the level of anagogy we are presented with what Frye calls the "self-contained literary universe," the unifying container for all else in the work.

"When we pass into anagogy, nature becomes, not the container, but the thing contained, and the archetypal universal symbols, the city, the garden, the quest, the marriage, are no longer the desirable forms that man constructs inside nature, but are themselves the forms of nature."¹

For the Middle Ages anagogy represented not merely poetic truth, as it does in Frye's context, but also reality, the Logos of the universe, the universal Word or highest Truth.

Any discussion of the literal or allegorical elements in The Canterbury Tales, therefore, must take place within Chaucer's vision of Reality or Truth. The approach thus becomes inclusive rather than exclusive. For example, no one will dispute the fact that Chaucer presents an array of characters realistically drawn and admirably set down. Nor can there be serious doubts where the broader allegorical significance of the Tales is

¹Ibid., p. 119.

concerned. These are not mutually exclusive aspects of the work, but rather, different facets of an entirety. Our real concern, ultimately, must be the relationship between the two within the context of a meaning larger than either.

In a completed work of art all parts work together to further the central vision or conception of the artist. In the case of The Canterbury Tales, though incomplete, we are given the framework, literal and metaphoric, within which Chaucer's vision is clearly indicated. What is lacking is the proper co-ordination of various tales and groups of tales with each other and to some extent with the framework by which they were to be bound together. As such, the fragmented body of Chaucer's Tales, despite the remarkable degree to which it does make clear a central vision, will continue to provide enough questions to allow for all manner of speculation concerning the tales and their tellers. But Chaucer himself proceeds to "knytte up wel a greet mateere" with his final spokesman, the Parson, who tells us that the broader allegorical purpose of "al this feeste" is

To shewe ... the wey, in this viage,
Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage
That hight Jerusalem celestial.
("Parson's P.", ll. 49-51)¹

And in the "General Prologue" Chaucer gives us a complete and detailed outline of the dramatic framework which is intended to provide unity and coherence on the literal level. Here the purpose is more mundane, and it is suitably proposed by the worldly Host, who at the beginning of the Pilgrimage stands as much apart from the Pilgrims as the Parson seems separate from them

¹References throughout are to The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, F. N. Robinson, ed., 2nd ed. (1957; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961).

at the end. The Host will ride the "round-trip" with the Pilgrims as "governour" in a contest of tales. The winner, by the Host's decree,

Shal have a soper at oure aller cost
Heere in this place, sittynge by this post,
Whan that we come agayn fro Caunterbury.
("G.P.," ll. 799-801)

However, these statements of purpose immediately raise questions concerning unity: How does the dramatic element serve the allegorical as it undoubtedly should and would had the Tales been completed? And how did Chaucer intend to unify the diverse "middle" of his work with the metaphorical framework established by the "General Prologue" and "The Parson's Tale?"

The answer to these queries may well lie in the rôle of Harry Bailly, key figure in the dramatic framework, particularly as seen in relation to the rôle of the Parson, key figure in the metaphorical structure. It is in the relationship between these two figures, one an obviously secular figure and the other just as obviously a spiritual one, that Chaucer portrays the duality of human experience as well as the conflict for human allegiance between the spirit and the flesh, heaven and hell, God and the devil. Furthermore, it is in the relationship between the secular Host and the spiritual Parson that we begin to see how Chaucer intended the dramatic and metaphoric elements of his work to move toward a common goal -- the presentation of man subject to the corruptions of the flesh yet subject to grace as well if he will only understand

... that God hath creat alle thynges in right ordre,
and no thyng withouten ordre, but alle thynges been
ordeyned and nombred; yet, natheless they that been
dampned been nothyng in ordre, ne holden noon ordre.
("Parson's T.," l. 218)

The rôle of Harry Bailly has not escaped the attention of the critics thus far. After all, he is a prominent figure in Chaucer's cast of characters and any critic concerned with the Tales as a whole cannot

escape paying him some attention. Too frequently, however, the Host is relegated to the status of unifying device in the dramatic structure, or, where the allegory is concerned, to the rôle of motivating force upon others on the Pilgrimage, yet himself somehow outside the field of metaphoric consideration. Two well-known critics, R.M. Lumiansky (in Of Sondry Folk¹) and Ralph Baldwin (in The Unity of the Canterbury Tales²) are representative of these tendencies.

Lumiansky feels the powerful thrust of Chaucer's poetry in the "General Prologue". He cannot ignore the obvious suggestion of spiritual purpose in Chaucer's imagery of Spring. Nevertheless, he argues for a "broadened point of view" in Chaucer's opening lines and subordinates the spiritual significance of pilgrimage to the more immediate natural and social attractions of journey and vacation:

... behind this broadened point of view from which Chaucer examines a pilgrimage there lies the whole question of man's relationship to religion (the after-life) and to nature (this life). The implication is that most people perhaps cannot successfully deal with religion, represented here by pilgrimage, unless the spiritual aspects of religion are modified by natural earthly considerations, represented here by the coming of spring.³

Thus Lumiansky chooses to ignore the functions of allegory, tropology, and analogy in the medieval concept of literature and focuses instead on the literal or historical level, on character in his search for unity in The Canterbury Tales.

¹R.M. Lumiansky, Of Sondry Folk (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1955).

²Ralph Baldwin, "The Unity of the Canterbury Tales," *Anglistica*, 5 (1955).

³Lumiansky, p. 17.

In choosing to see Chaucer's Pilgrim's as "actors in a drama," Lumiansky follows in the tradition of G.L. Kittredge. Kittredge, too, was seeking a unifying principle. His approach must be regarded as similarly one-sided:

Structurally regarded, the Canterbury Tales is a kind of Human Comedy. From this point of view, the Pilgrims are the dramatis personae, and their stories are only speeches that are somewhat longer than common, entertaining in and for themselves (to be sure), but primarily significant, in each case, because they illustrate the speaker's character and opinions, or show the relations of the travelers to one another in the progressive action of the Pilgrimage.¹

Lumiansky, in similar fashion, makes character his "steady center of focus" and hence argues for the dramatic principle as the unifying element in The Canterbury Tales.

Harry Bailly, being the first speaker other than the narrator, is seen as starting the drama with his novel plan for entertainment. While recognizing the Host as a character in his own right and "... no mechanical master of ceremonies, to be used only as background ...," Lumiansky, nevertheless, identifies his major function in mechanical terms: "There can be no doubt that the drama of the Canterbury Pilgrims is made possible in large part by Chaucer's use of the Host as unifying device."² Lumiansky recognizes little potential for larger meaning in Harry Bailly's rôle, and this despite the outrageously secular interest the Host champions throughout the "drama." Rather than elevating the Host to the higher level of debate between the secular and the spiritual in his exchanges with the

¹G.L. Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," MP, 9(1911-1912), 435.

²Lumiansky, p. 26.

Parson, Lumiansky chooses to reduce the Parson to the level of petty strife with the Host. In this context the merry-making and irreverent Harry Bailly is seen as finally receiving his just deserts in a long, dull sermon from the Parson. Lumiansky writes:

Although all readers may not be convinced that there is 'solas' as well a 'sentence' in the Parson's 'merry tale in prose,' we can hardly avoid granting him our admiration for the skill with which he repays the Host for ill-mannered behaviour."¹

Lumiansky gives us a very narrow view, not only of the Host, but also of The Canterbury Tales.

Ralph Baldwin takes a much broader approach to the Tales, attempting to define unity in terms of the allegory. He recognizes the dual nature of the journey to Canterbury but from the outset subordinates the dramatic element almost entirely to a metaphorical reading. Where others like Lumiansky pay too much heed to the reality of nature and the corresponding fact of human instinct and emotion, Baldwin leans heavily toward the opposite approach, choosing to see all of Chaucer's imagery as indicative almost exclusively of moral and religious order:

The life of the mediaeval Christian ... was framed by Creation and Doomsday, the covers for the liber vitae of mediaeval man. It should be no surprise to find The Canterbury Tales is bound, metaphorically, in just that way. It is April, it is spring-time, it is beginning; ... with the inchoative seasonal-religious metaphor, where the mirror of Nature could not but reflect divine order.²

However, just as those who focus on the dramatic aspect of The Canterbury Tales cannot ignore entirely the presence of metaphoric suggestion,

¹Lumiansky, p. 245.

²Baldwin, p. 27.

so Baldwin, cannot disregard entirely the realistic portrayal of Chaucer's Pilgrims. But he turns away from this element as deliberately as Lumiansky turns from the allegorical.

Where Lumiansky sees Chaucer's primary concern as being the development of character and drama, Baldwin sees Chaucer as merely having to maintain a degree of respect for character if his satire of human foibles is to be made effective:

For the satirist to remain a judicious expositor and not a mere ranter, there is demanded a measure of respect for the human beings whose foibles he lays bare; for the novelist to realize his characters, to make them more than limnings or caricatures, the pith of compassion and the core of charity must be central to the depiction of his personae. This regard for his creatures Chaucer seems to have had to an unusual degree.¹

Thus, while not denying another side to Chaucer's art, Baldwin nevertheless commits himself to ~~an~~ unyielding focus on Chaucer's allegory.

Our hospitable and voluable Host and his warm and serviceable inn are all but lost in the vacuum of Baldwin's "time-space continuum." As Baldwin describes it,

The scene of meeting at the inn is a past definite. In introducing his new friends Chaucer suspends time ... and creates a kind of vacuum, a time-space continuum, in which he surveys his companions not as he sees them but as he will have seen them.²

Because the company at the Tabard remains fixed in our minds as first we see it, each individual vividly characterized, Baldwin argues that the "circumstances of travel" are but an illusion and that the Pilgrims, in

¹Ibid., p. 38.

²Baldwin, p. 56.

one sense, never leave Southwerk. All this is illuminating and useful but it exhibits a tendency to intellectualize Chaucer's meaning at the expense of the reality which Chaucer and the Middle Ages recognized as more than an "objective correlative," not to mention that such a reading is much too exclusive of Chaucer's natural love for life and character.

In dealing specifically with the Host later in his study, Baldwin comes much closer to striking a proper balance between the dramatic and allegorical elements in The Canterbury Tales. Here he hints at Harry Bailly's function in the larger context of the Tales, as "a pilgrim not by pious intent but through accident," and the only one among the Pilgrims "whose destination is not Canterbury but Southwerk."¹ Here Baldwin recognizes at least one of the Host's rôles to be that of secular counterpart to the pious Parson. "Of all the pilgrims he alone is patently motivated by secular considerations,"² Baldwin states, and he goes on to say later that the Parson, who recognizes the Host's position for what it is,

... replaces the Host ultimately as docent because this is the function of a priest, not an innkeeper, and all the pilgrims to Canterbury in becoming pilgrims to the Heavenly Jerusalem must take the 'way' or 'via' of Penitence.³

A more recent critic, Rodney Delasanta, has considered the rôle of the Host even more seriously, suggesting that his part is instrumental in developing the theme of judgement in The Canterbury Tales.⁴ Though

¹Baldwin, p. 61.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 92.

⁴Rodney Delasanta, "The Theme of Judgement in The Canterbury Tales," MLQ, 31(1970).

Delasanta's treatment of the Host is brief, and deals primarily with the manner in which the Host's self-imposed rôle of judge over the Pilgrims provides a parody of the higher judgement toward which the Pilgrimage moves, it also implies that Harry Bailly, in conjunction with the Parson, functions to bring the Canterbury Pilgrimage to its proper destination.

It is precisely in the rôle of a consciously secular opponent to the essentially spiritual concerns of pilgrimage, while at the same time an unconsciously subservient instrument of Providence, that the Host must be seen. It is this function of Harry Bailly which critics like Lumiansky do not appear to recognize and which scholars like Baldwin pass over too lightly. Harry Bailly combines within one character the means whereby not only the drama of The Canterbury Tales is provided with a unifying voice, but also the means whereby the allegory of the work is given focus and direction. Furthermore, in recognizing the centrality of the Host to both the dramatic and allegorical aspects of Chaucer's conception of the Pilgrimage to Canterbury, we also find in him the unifying link between the dramatic and the metaphorical, a fact not often recognized by those who speak of unity in The Canterbury Tales.