Introduction to Geoffrey Chaucer

Achievements
Seldom has a poet been as consistently popular and admired by fellow poets, critics, and the public as has Geoffrey Chaucer. From the comments of his French contemporary Eustache Deschamps (c. 1340-1410) and the praise by imitation of the fifteenth century Chaucerians to the remarks of notable critics from John Dryden and Alexander Pope to Matthew Arnold and C. S. Lewis, Chaucer has been warmly applauded if not always understood. His poetic talent, “genial nature,” wit, charm, and sympathetic yet critical understanding of human diversity are particularly attractive. To D. S. Brewer, Chaucer “is our Goethe, a great artist who put his whole mind into his art.”

Yet sometimes this praise has been misinformed, portraying Chaucer rather grandly as “the father of English literature” and the prime shaper of the English language. In fact, English literature had a long and illustrious tradition before Chaucer, and the development of Modern English from the London East Midland dialect of Chaucer has little to do with the poet. Chaucer has also been credited with a series of firsts. G. L. Kittredge identified Troilus and Criseyde as “the first novel, in the modern sense, that ever was written in the world.” Its characters, to John Speirs, are also poetic firsts: Pandarus “the first rounded comic creation of substantial magnitude in English literature,” and Criseyde “the first complete character of a woman in English literature.” Others see Chaucer’s poetry as “Renaissance” in outlook, a harbinger of the humanism of the modern world. Such views reveal an element of surprise on the critics’ part that from the midst of Middle English such a poetic genius should emerge. In fact, typical discussions of Chaucer’s career, dividing it into three stages as it develops from French influence (seen in the dream allegories) to Italian tendencies (in Troilus and Criseyde, for example) and finally to English realism (in The Canterbury Tales), imply an evolutionary view not only of Chaucer’s poetry but also of English literary history. These stages supposedly reflect the gradual rejection of medieval conventionalism and the movement toward modern realism. Whatever Chaucer’s varied achievements are, the rejection of conventions, rhetoric, types, symbols, and authorities is not among them. Charles Muscatine has shown, moreover, that Chaucer’s “realism” is as French and conventional as are his early allegories. Chaucer’s poetry should be judged within the conventions of his time. He did experiment with verse forms, establishing a decasyllabic line which, to become the iambic pentameter of the sonnet, blank verse, and heroic couplet, is English poetry’s most enduring line. His talent, however, lies in manipulating the authorities, the rhetoric, and conventional “topics” and in his mastery of the “art poetical.” As A. C. Spearing notes, “Once we become aware of Chaucer’s ‘art poetical,’ we gain a deeper insight into his work by seeing how what appears natural in it is in fact achieved not carelessly but by the play of genius upon convention and contrivance.”

Such an approach to Chaucer will recognize his achievement as the greatest poet of medieval England, not as a forerunner of modernism. It will note his remaking of French, Latin, and Italian sources and treatment of secular and religious allegory as being, in their own way, as original as his creation of such characters as the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner. Chaucer’s achievement is in his ability to juxtapose various medieval outlooks to portray complex ideas in human terms, with wit and humor, to include both “heigh sentence” and “solaas and myrthe,” and to merge the naturalistic detail with the symbolic pattern. In this attempt to synthesize the everyday with the supernatural and the homely with the philosophical and in his insistence on inclusiveness—on presenting both the angels and the gargoyles—Chaucer is the supreme example of the Gothic artist.

Analysis
When reading Geoffrey Chaucer’s works one is struck by a sense of great variety. His poetry reflects numerous sources—Latin, French, and Italian—ranging from ancient authorities to contemporary poets and including folk tales, sermons, rhetorical textbooks, philosophical meditations, and ribald jokes. Equally varied are Chaucer’s poetic forms and genres: short conventional lyrics, long romances, exempla, fabliaux,
allegorical dream visions, confessions, saints’ legends, and beast fables. The characters he creates, from
personified abstractions, regal birds, and ancient goddesses to the odd collection of the Canterbury pilgrims
and the naïve persona who narrates the poems are similarly varied. Finally, the poems present a wide variety
of outlooks on an unusual number of topics. Like the Gothic cathedrals, Chaucer’s poetry seems all-inclusive.
Not surprisingly, also like the Gothic cathedrals, his poems were often left unfinished.

“Experience, though no authority,” the Wife of Bath states in the prologue to her tale, “is good enough for
me.” Unlike her fifth husband, Jankin the clerk, the Wife is not interested in what “olde Romayn gestes”
teach, what Saint Jerome, Tertullian, Solomon, and Ovid say about women and marriage. She knows “of the
woe that is in marriage” by her own experience. This implied contrast between, on one hand, authority—the
established positions concerning just about any topic set forth in the past by Scripture, ancient authors, and the
Church fathers and passed on to the present by books—and, on the other hand, the individual’s experience of
everyday life is central to medieval intellectual thought. It is a major theme of Chaucer’s poetry. Often
Chaucer appears to establish an authority and then to contrast it with the experience of real life, testing the
expected by the actual. This contrast may be tragic or comic; it may cast doubt on the authority or further
support it. Often it is expressed by paired characters, Troilus and Pandarus, for example, or by paired tales, the
Knight’s and the Miller’s. The characters’ long recital of authorities may be ludicrous and pompous,
Chaucer’s parody of the pedant, but the pedant may be right. After Chanticleer’s concern with what all the
past has said about the significance of dreams, readers probably sympathize with Pertelote’s comment that he
should take a laxative. Nevertheless, once the rooster is in the fox’s mouth, the authorities are proven correct.
Similarly, the sum total of the Wife of Bath’s personal experience is merely the proving, in an exaggerated
form, of the antifeminist authorities. As Chaucer states in the prologue to the Parlement of Foules, out of old
fields comes new corn, and out of old books new knowledge.

Related to the contrast between authority and experience are a series of other contrasts investigated by
Chaucer: theological faith versus human reason, the ideal versus the pragmatic, the ritual of courtly love
versus the business of making love, the dream world versus everyday life, the expectations of the rule versus
the actions of the individual, the Christian teaching of free will versus man’s sense of being fated. Again,
these contrasts may be treated seriously or comically, may be represented by particular characters and may be
brought into temporary balance. Seldom, however, does Chaucer provide solutions. The oppositions are
implicit in human nature, in the wish for the absolute and the recognition of the relative. As novelist and critic
Arthur Koestler comments on a modern political version of this dilemma (as represented by the extremes of
the Yogi and the Commissar), “Apparently the two elements do not mix, and this may be one of the reasons
why we have made such a mess of our History.” Chaucer’s poetic and highly varied treatment of these
nonmixers may help to explain why his poetry continues to speak to readers today.

Chaucer’s concern with these topics—a fascination not unusual in the dualistic Gothic world—imbues his
poetry with a sense of irony. Since the 1930’s, readers have certainly emphasized Chaucer’s ironic treatment
of characters and topics, a critical vogue that may be due as much to the fashions of New Criticism as to the
poetry itself. Yet Chaucer’s characteristic means of telling his stories clearly encourages such readings. One
can never be sure of his attitude because the poet stands behind a narrator whose often naïve attitudes simply
cannot be identified with his creator’s. Perhaps the creation of such a middleman between the poet and his
audience was necessary for a middle-class poet reading to an aristocratic audience, or perhaps it is the natural
practice of a diplomatic mind, which does not speak for itself but for another. Whatever the reasons, Chaucer’s
narrators are poetically effective. They provide a unifying strand throughout his varied work.
Scholar A. C. Spearing notes that “the idiot-dreamer of The Book of the Duchess develops into the
idiot-historian of Troilus and Criseyde and the idiot-pilgrim of The Canterbury Tales.” Later, he comments
that when Chaucer assigns the doggerel poem, “Sir Thopas,” to Chaucer the pilgrim as a joke, he “takes the
role of idiot-poet to its culmination.”

One result of the use of such narrators is that, in contrast with the contemporary dream vision, The Vision of
William, Concerning Piers the Plowman (c. 1362)—with its acid attacks on English society, the failures of
government, and the hypocrisy of the church—Chaucer’s poetry seems aware of human foibles yet accepting
of human nature. He implies rather than shouts the need for change, recognizing that in this world at least
major reform is unlikely. His essentially Christian position, hidden behind the naïve narrator and his concern
with surface details, naturalistic dialogue, and sharp description, is implied by the poem’s larger structures. They often provide symbolic patterning. The contrast in the Parlement of Foules between the steamy atmosphere of the temple of Venus and the clear air of Nature’s dominion or in Troilus and Criseyde between the narrator’s introductory devotion to the god of love and his concluding epilogue based on Troilus’s new heavenly point of view imply Chaucer’s position concerning his favorite topic, human love. Similarly, the traditional Christian metaphor identifying life as a pilgrimage and the Parson’s identification of Canterbury with the New Jerusalem suggest that the pilgrimage from a pub in Southwark to a shrine in Canterbury is a secular version of an important traditional religious theme. The reader of Chaucer, while paying careful attention to his realism which has been found so attractive should also be aware of the larger implications of his poetry.

Behind the medieval interest in dreams and the genre of dream visions lies a long tradition, both religious and secular, originating in biblical and classical stories and passed on in the Middle Ages in the works of Macrobiuss and Boethius. As a literary type, the dream vision, given impetus by the Romaunt of the Rose, was particularly popular in fourteenth century England. The obtuse dreamers led by authoritative guides found in such works as Piers Plowman and The Pearl (c. 1375-1400) are typical of dream visions and may have suggested to Chaucer the creation of his characteristic naive narrator. Certainly Chaucer’s four dream visions, as different as they are from one another, already develop this narrative voice as well as other typical Chaucerian characteristics.

**The Canterbury Tales**

Near the end of Troilus and Criseyde, Chaucer associates his “little tragedy” with a long line of classical poets and then asks for help to write “some comedie.” Donald Howard and others have seen this as a reference to the poet’s plans for The Canterbury Tales. Whether Chaucer had this collection planned by the time he had completed Troilus and Criseyde, The Canterbury Tales can certainly be understood as his comedy. If, as the Monk notes at the beginning of his long summary of tragic tales, a tragedy deals with those who once “stood in high degree, and fell so that there was no remedy,” in the medieval view comedy deals with less significant characters and with events that move toward happy endings. The Canterbury Tales is thus a comedy, not because of its comic characters and humorous stories—several tales are actually tragic in tone and structure—but because its overall structure is comic.

Like Dante’s The Divine Comedy (c. 1320) which traces the poet’s eschatological journey from Hell through Purgatory to Heaven, shifting from a pagan guide to the representatives of divine love and inspiration, and concluding with the beatific vision, Chaucer’s comedy symbolically moves from the infernal to the heavenly, through a variety of points of view set forth by differing characters on the pilgrimage road, the poem moves to the religious goal of the saint’s shrine in Canterbury Cathedral and the Parson’s direction of the pilgrims to “Jerusalem celestial.”

Although with differing effects, since the Christian perspective of Troilus and Criseyde lies beyond the narrative itself, Chaucer’s tragedy and comedy thus share a similar moral structure. Like the tragedy, The Canterbury Tales moves from an ancient story of pagan heroes to a Christian perspective. In Troilus and Criseyde the narrator develops from being the servant of the god of love to being a moralist who condemns pagan “cursed old rites” and advises the young to love him who “for love upon a cross our souls did buy.”

The collection of tales similarly moves from the Knight’s “old stories” set in ancient Thebes and Athens and relating the fates of pagan lovers to the Parson’s sermon beginning “Our swete lord god of hevene.” In contrast with the earlier poem, The Canterbury Tales is a comedy because its divine perspective is achieved within the overall narrative. Yet as in the earlier poem, this divine perspective at the end does not necessarily cancel out the earlier outlooks proposed. The entire poem with its multiplicity of characters and viewpoints remains.

Such an approach to The Canterbury Tales assumes that, although unfinished, the poem is complete as it stands and should be judged as a whole. Like the Corpus Christi cycles of the later Middle Ages, which include numerous individual plays yet can (and should) be read as one large play tracing salvation history
from creation to doomsday, *The Canterbury Tales* is more than the sum of its parts. “The General Prologue,” that masterpiece of human description with its fascinating portraits of the pilgrims, establishes not only the supposed circumstances for the pilgrimage and the competition to tell the best story but also the strands that link the tales to the characters and to one another. Although only twenty-four tales were finished, their relationship to one another within fragments and their sense of unity within variety suggest that Chaucer had an overall plan for *The Canterbury Tales*.

The famous opening lines of “The General Prologue,” with the beautiful evocation of spring fever, set forth both the religious and the secular motivations of the pilgrims. These motivations are further developed in their description by the pilgrim Chaucer. He again is the naive narrator whose wide-eyed simplicity seems to accept all, leaving the discriminating reader to see beyond the surface details. Finally, in his faithful retelling of the stories he hears on the way to Canterbury—for once his experience has become an authority to which, he explains, he must not be false—the narrator again unwittingly implies much about these various human types. Several of the prologues and tales that follow then continue to explore the motivations of the individual pilgrims. The confessional prologue of “The Pardoner’s Tale” and its sermon filled with moral exempla, for instance, ironically reflects the earlier description of the confidence man, Pardoner, as one “with feigned flattery and tricks, made the parson and the people his apes.”

It would be a mistake, however, to interpret the various tales simply as dramatic embodiments of the pilgrims. Certainly Chaucer often fits story to storyteller. The sentimental, self-absorbed, and prissy Prioress tells, for example, a simplistic, anti-Semitic tale of a devout little Christian boy murdered by Jews. The implications of her tale make one question the nature of her spirituality. The tales given the Knight, Miller, and Reeve also reflect their characters. The Knight tells at great length a chivalric romance, a celebration of his worldview, whereas the Miller and Reeve tell bawdy stories concerning tradesmen, clerks, and wayward wives.

Yet these tales also develop the larger concerns of *The Canterbury Tales* implied by Chaucer’s arrangement of the tales into thematic groups. “The Knight’s Tale,” with its ritualized action and idealized characters, draws from Boethian philosophy in its symmetrically patterned examination of courtly love, fate, and cosmic justice. The Miller then interrupts to “quite” or answer the Knight with a bawdy fabliau. Developing naturalistic dialogue and earthy characters, it rejects the artificial and the philosophical for the mundane and the practical. In place of the Knight’s code of honor and courtly love, elaborate description of the tournament, and Stoic speech on the Great Chain of Being, the drunken Miller sets the stage for sexual conquest, a complex practical joke, and a “cherles tales” involving bodily functions and fleshly punishment. In “The Miller’s Tale,” justice is created not by planetary gods but by human action, each character getting what he deserves. The Reeve, offended by both the Miller and his tale, then follows with another fabliau. His motivations are much more personal than those of the Miller: The Reeve feels that the Miller has deliberately insulted him, and he insists on returning the favor. Yet even in this tale Chaucer provides another dimension to the issues originally set forth by the Knight.

The clearest example of Chaucer’s thematic grouping of tales is the so-called Marriage Cycle. First noted by G. L. Kittredge and discussed since by various critics, the idea of the cycle is that Chaucer carefully arranged particular tales, told by suitable pilgrims, so that they referred to one another and developed a common theme, as in a scholarly debate. The Marriage Cycle examines various viewpoints on love and marriage, particularly tackling the issue of who should have sovereignty in marriage, the husband or the wife. The cycle is introduced by the Wife of Bath’s rambling commentary on the woes of marriage and her wishful tale of a young bachelor who rightly puts himself in his wife’s “wyse governance.” After the Friar and Summoner “quite” each other in their own personal feud, the cycle continues with an extreme example of wifely obedience, “The Clerk’s Tale” of patient Griselda. Such an otherworldly portrait of womanly perfection spurs the Merchant, a man who is obviously unhappy in marriage, to propound his cynical view of the unfaithful wife. The saint’s legend of the scholarly Clerk is thus followed by the fabliau of the satirical Merchant, and the debate is no nearer conclusion. Finally, the Franklin appears to “knit up the whole matter” by suggesting that in marriage the man should be both dominant as husband and subservient as lover. Yet the Franklin’s view is hardly followed by the characters of his tale. Interestingly, the two solutions to the issue of sovereignty proposed—those of the Wife of Bath and of the Franklin—are developed in Breton lays, short and highly unrealistic romances relying heavily on magical elements. Is it the case that only magic can solve this
typically human problem? Chaucer, at least, does not press for a definitive answer.

The great sense of variety, the comic treatment of serious issues, the concern with oppositions and unsuccessful solutions, and the lively and imaginative verse that so typifies The Canterbury Tales are best exemplified by “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale.” A beast fable mocking courtly language and rhetorical overabundance, the tale at once includes Chaucer’s fascination with authorities, dreams, fate, and love, and marriage, and suggests his ambivalent attitudes toward the major philosophical and social concerns of his day. The elevated speeches of Chanticleer are punctuated by barnyard cries, and the pompous world of the rooster and hen are set within the humble yard of a poor widow.

Here the reader is provided with a comic version of the detached perspective that concludes Troilus and Criseyde. After deciding that dreams are to be taken seriously and refusing to take a laxative, Chanticleer disregards his dream and its warning and makes love to his favorite wife in a scene that absurdly portrays chickens as courtly lovers. Interestingly, Chanticleer now cites a standard sentiment of medieval antifeminism: In principio/ Mulier est hominis confusio (“In the beginning woman is man’s ruin”), which alludes to the apostle John’s famous description of the creation (John 1:1). The learned rooster, moreover, immediately mistranslates the Latin as “Womman is mannes ioye and al his blys,” perhaps the Priest’s subtle comment on the Nun he serves or the rooster’s joke on Pertelote. Yet the joke ultimately is on Chanticleer when “a colfox ful of sley iniquitee” sneaks into this romance “garden.” Noting that the counsel of woman brought woe to the world “And made Adam from paradys to go,” the Nun’s Priest then relates the temptation and fall of Chanticleer and the subsequent chasing of the fox and rooster out of the barnyard. The adventure is full of great fun, a hilarious scene, yet strangely reminiscent of the biblical story of the fall of man. It is not clear what one is to make of such a story.

Although Chaucer was not the first author to create a framed collection of stories, The Canterbury Tales is assuredly the most imaginative collection. Earlier the poet had experimented with a framed collection in Legend of Good Women. His Italian contemporary, Boccaccio, also created a collection of stories in The Decameron (1348-1353), although scholars cannot agree whether Chaucer knew this work. Earlier collections of exempla and legends were probably known by the poet, and he certainly knew the great collection of Ovid, The Metamorphoses (c. 8 a.d.). Like Ovid’s collection, The Canterbury Tales is organized by thematic and structural elements which provide a sense of unity within diversity. Chaucer’s choice of the pilgrimage as the setting for the tales is particularly effective, since it allows the juxtaposition of characters, literary types, and themes gathered from a wide range of sources and reflecting a wide range of human attitudes. Here, perhaps, is the key to Chaucer’s greatness. Like the medieval view of the macrocosm, in which constant change and movement take place within a relatively unchanging framework, Chaucer’s view of the microcosm balances the dynamic and the static, the wide range of individual feeling and belief within unchanging human nature. The Canterbury Tales is his greatest achievement in this area, although earlier poems, such as the Parlement of Fowles, with its portrayal of the hierarchy of birds within Nature’s order, already show Chaucer’s basic view. Ranging over human nature, selecting from ancient story and supposed personal experience, with a place for both the comic and the tragic, Chaucer’s poetry mixes mirth and morality, accomplishing very successfully the two great purposes of literature, what the Host calls ‘sentence and solas,’ teaching and entertainment.