

**Authority and Subversive Narrations:
Rereading the *Canterbury Tales***

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The immediate social situation and the broader social milieu wholly determine—and determine from within, so to speak—the structure of an utterance. (V. N. Voloshinov)

Because that's where the money is. (Willy Sutton, 1930's bank robber, responding to a reporter's question about why he robbed banks)

For those of us steeped in the Tiber or in Archimedes' tub, it may seem strange to apply the word "classic" to a text written toward the end of the medieval era and but a few generations from the beginning of the Renaissance. Within the frame of English literature, however, there can be few candidates more appropriate than Chaucer and his work for the status of "classic" if we wish to retain some of the spirit of what that word meant and still means to us today. Certainly some would observe that Shakespeare would have to be considered *the* classic English writer, but his world, some two centuries after that of Chaucer, was a markedly different one, a world already turned upside down by the Protestant Reformation, the (re)discovery of America, and the dawning Copernican Revolution, as well as by technological advances such as the printing press

and developments in navigation and cartography that allowed people to explore the world and to share their (re)discoveries of it with a mass audience. In many ways, then, Shakespeare's world bears more resemblance to our own, some 400 years later, than to Chaucer's some 200 years earlier.

Within the Chaucer corpus, it is the *Canterbury Tales* that most are familiar with, and this is largely the result of its happy marriage of "lowbrow" and "highbrow" qualities, of its impish, juvenile merriment and consummate literary richness. While Chaucer was clearly worried, at least later in life, about this work's celebration of scandalous behavior and offered his Retraction to it, apologizing should it mislead men and women and "sowen into synne," its very human portrayal of seemingly contemporary characters and personalities enables us to see the Middle Ages not as it is often misrepresented, as a time of utter darkness and interminable misery, but as a time very much like our own, a time filled with love and regret, chivalry and greed, merriment and remorse. And like many literary works that would later follow, Chaucer's *Tales* captures the society of his world by allowing its classes and estates to represent themselves through representative types in their own particular and identifying modes of speech and narratives. Certainly his characters are more than mere types, as their disturbing and endearing idiosyncrasies make them come alive as believable flesh and blood, but we can nonetheless identify estate-specific speech acts as an author-intentioned casting of social types through their discourse. Indeed, we may go so far as to say that the tales reflect "not on the way preexisting persons create language but on the way language creates people" (Leicester 10).¹ Tracing the pilgrims' various modes of discourse, it is useful to think in terms of the *heteroglossia* that Bakhtin famously discerns in the novel:

The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized. . . . each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a

wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). (262-63)

Moreover, one can trace even in the seemingly monologic hegemony of privileged literary and stylistic categories an archaeology of dissent and dialogue:

The strength and at the same time the limitations of such basic stylistic categories become apparent when such categories are seen as conditioned by specific historical destinies and by the task that an ideological discourse assumes. These categories arose from and were shaped by the historically *aktuell* forces at work in the verbal-ideological evolution of specific social groups; they comprised the theoretical expression of actualizing forces that were in the process of creating a life for language. (270)

While Bakhtin indicates that the language of poetry, in contrast to that of the novel, usually functions as a self-enclosed “Ptolemaic world” in which the poet’s voice is in control to such a degree that all “alien discourse” is effectively silenced or contained, he also observes that one can find heteroglossia in the satiric and comic poetic genres, especially “in the speeches of characters” (285-88). This is certainly the case with the *Canterbury Tales*. We should consider as well that the biographical subject Geoffrey Chaucer himself enjoyed a rather fragmented social self:

He [was] the son of a rich merchant, but one educated in noble households; a king’s squire, but one who fulfilled the duties of a clerical administrator; a modest servant of the Crown, but one who numbered among his friends some of the king’s closest associates. . . . [W]hat the evidence reveals is a Chaucer on the boundary between distinctive social formations. Not bourgeois, not noble, not clerical, he nonetheless participates in all three of these communities. (Patterson 39)

In this essay, I am interested in tracing a few features of the *Canterbury Tales*' competing narrative strategies, strategies that bear witness to a struggle for control and the social forces that lie behind this struggle. In Chaucer's work, this is provided by the storytelling contest among pilgrims who happen to meet at the Tabard Inn and decide to enjoy their journey through the diversions of one another's tales. While posited as a kind of game, the personal investment and risk that the characters have increasingly at stake make this struggle a sociologically significant one. Recent studies of Chaucer have been eager to apply a number of critical tools that have been fashioned in the forge of current political/critical debates, especially issues of ethnicity and gender to reveal the sociological forces at work in Chaucer's time and in his writings. But whether we are discussing "Pagans, Tartars, Moslems, and Jews" (to quote the focus of one such work) or outing "Chaucer's Queer Nation" (to quote another), we need to recognize that explicating literary texts, especially "classic" texts that have endured all manner of interrogations, involves as much the projection of the critic as the unveiling or revelation of the author.² This is particularly the case with the *Canterbury Tales*, which have been "deauthorized" by Chaucer as a distancing technique to protect himself against reprisals from authority for penning such scandalous tales (Kendrick 131), and, more essentially, as an element of narrative play to enable the tales and their tellers to operate in an unfolding drama, with the author retired behind the curtain and watching as if from the wings. The two most common modern English cognates for *auctor(itas)*—author and authority—need to be separated, for we should not think of the author/narrator as the primary authority in his own narration. Indeed, it is a character, Harry Bailly, the Host of the Tabard Inn, who becomes the primary authority figure throughout the *Tales* as the narrator Chaucer depositions himself from the locus of power. At bottom of the narrative tensions that unfold throughout the course of the journey lay professional rivalries, personal vendettas, men's and women's mutual disappointment in one another, clashes of social estates, competing literary rubrics, and a

company-wide rebellion of absolute authority, as represented by the Host, Harry Bailly.

When the Host first proposes his game at the Tabard Inn, so caught up in the jolly spirit of the group that he decides to join them in their pilgrimage, he imagines the journey ahead:

“And wel I woot as ye goon by the weye,
 Ye shapen yow to talen and to pleye;
 For trewely, confort ne myrthe is noon
 To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon.” (I, 771-74)

Recognizing that the authority he enjoys at the inn terminates at his own door, he seeks to maintain the position of authority on the road as the “tales judge and reportour” by seeking the pilgrims’s consent: “And if yow liketh alle by oon assent / For to stonden at my juggement” (777-78), “And if ye vouche sauf that it be so” (807). The only power that the Host has over the pilgrims is that which they freely give to him, and presumably they can take it away as easily as it was given—immediately, and with little deliberation: “Oure conseil was nat longe for to seche. / Us thoughte it was noight worth to make it wys” (784-85). What is important for the pilgrims is not who wins or loses, nor is it the way they play the game, for they all operate under different principles of aesthetics and motivations for telling the tales they do. What matters is that they simply play and make themselves “myrie.” While personal affronts will later radically alter the nature of the game, at this point the pilgrims have little at stake whether they win or lose, “a soper at oure alle cost.” To propose and endorse a contest amidst the “Greet chiere” that the Tabard’s fine “vitaille” and “Strong wyn” affords is one thing, however; to realize it in the stark sobriety of a road trip is quite another. The ground rules are set in an atmosphere quite different from the one that the tales will be told in, and a proper understanding of the contest needs to proceed dialogically,

phenomenologically—as it unfolds through the successive tales in the context of time and experience through the competing subjectivities of the characters, rather than as monologically prescribed by the Host.

The Host offers a rubric to his proposed tale contest, in which each pilgrim shall tell

“Of adventures that whilom han bifalle.
 And which of yow that bereth hym best of alle—
 That is to seyn, that telleth in this caas
 Tales of best sentence and moost solaas—
 Shal have a soper at oure aller cost.” (795-99)

What most perceive to be the crux of this rubric lies in the statement “of best sentence and moost solaas,” and these two terms can be simply expressed as “the most delightful morality” and “the most abundant mirth” (Gaylord 229). Although the implication is that both qualities should be simultaneously present, this expectation is clearly abandoned in Fragment VII of the *Tales*, where Harry Bailly alternately asks for tales of mirth and morality. While this alteration may provide a means of organization for Fragment VII, it doesn’t operate similarly in the other fragments and thus cannot be read as the unifying principle for the *Tales* as a whole. Another important criterion within the Host’s rubric is to tell “Of adventures that whilom han bifalle,” and this suggests the “lore of the past” that Walter Benjamin identifies as one of the two archetypes for the storyteller. There are several reasons why the Host establishes this temporal projection: (1) imaginatively removing themselves from present circumstances will “short with oure [their] weye;” (2) medieval aesthetics is largely dependent upon *auctoritas*, the authority of the past; and (3) squabbles would arise among the pilgrims were they to set their stories in the present. Even so, while most of the tales either begin or end with “Whilom” (“Once” and roughly equivalent to today’s “Once upon a time”) or include an equivalent in the first few lines (Scheps 117), many pilgrims

do draw upon their personal experiences and upon one another for raw material for their stories. This at once violates the concept of *auctoritas*—that “stories are to be repeated, or recelebrated, rather than invented *ex nihilo*” (Allen and Moritz 58)—and threatens the peace among the party of pilgrims. In Fragment III the Wife of Bath claims that “Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me” (1-2); the Reeve echoes traits of the pilgrim Miller in his tale of Symkyn; and when the Friar threatens to “Telle of a sumonour swich a tale or two / That alle the folk shal laughen in this place” (842-43), the Summoner equally vows to “telle tales two or thre / Of freres” (846-47). The Host continually asserts his role as peacemaker and “governor” to keep the tales within his prescribed parameters, but he is repeatedly undermined. Even after he intercedes between the ecclesiasts, declaring “In compaignye we wol have no debaat” (1288), they continue to bicker. When he finally instructs the Friar to “Tel forth youre tale,” he in effect acknowledges that he is no longer able to control either the company or the contest. A similar editorial concern that develops and is undermined as the journey progresses is the Host’s obsession with time. He repeatedly insists that the tellers “Beth fructous, and that in litel space” (X, 71), but even this guideline is pushed aside by the Wife of Bath’s enormous prologue—a personal one at that—and by the voluminous didactic treatises of Chaucer and the Parson.

The microcosm of medieval estates and the juxtaposition of vying professions that the General Prologue sets up suggest that the contest will not go as smoothly as Harry Bailly imagines. A more subtle clue that the contest will not go as planned is the description of the Miller, whom Alfred David has called the “defender of poetic license” (223). A “janglere and a goliardeys,” the Miller is identified in the prologue as a teller of obscene stories, and the reader is thereby forewarned. Even more importantly is the Miller’s role as a sort of Pied Piper: “A baggepipe wel koude he blowe and sowne, / And therwithal he broghte us out of towne” (I, 565-66). That the Miller is the one to bring the company away

from the established community—and that through a bagpipe—is significant, for it functions as a metaphor for what he does with his tale: brings the company away from the absolute authority and order of the Host's "juggement" and narrative edicts. In the Middle Ages, the bagpipe with its many horns was a symbol for promiscuity, and it certainly adumbrates what the Miller's own tale will deal with. This choice of instrument also establishes social milieu: "Trumpets and horns were used only by the nobility; the universal folk instrument was the bagpipe" (Grout 72). Just as revealing is the Host's effective renunciation of power when he asks the pilgrims to "draweth cut" to determine who shall begin the tales. Although this is a smart move politically so as not to play favorites or snub any of the company, it does introduce the element of chance and acknowledges forces larger than himself that will come to shape the story contest. Drawing straws is, after all, a rather equalizing, democratic way of shaping policy, and it establishes the power that the various wills of the pilgrims collectively will obtain. To understand how the contest changes through the course of the journey, Fragment I is particularly useful as it includes the range of problems that beset the Host throughout the pilgrimage.

As the very first of the tales, the Knight's has a primacy that exudes its influence—either directly or indirectly, through its themes, subjects, and style—on all of the remaining tales. After his tale is told, and "al the route" declare it "a noble storie / And worthy for to drawn to memorie," the Host asks the Monk "to quite the Knyghtes tale" (I, 3110-12, 3119). The Host thereby establishes it as an aesthetic benchmark, and so doing effectively undermines his position as absolute authority and arbiter of literary protocol. It is also important to notice that the Knight's Tale is indeed "drawen to memorie" by the pilgrims, for it will be magnified, echoed, and parodied in the later tales. As will be seen, this significance creates an ethical and aesthetic debate that pre-empts the original storytelling contest and enables the introduction of personal and present circumstances. The next tale will come not from the Monk, however, but

from the Miller, who disrupts the established order (paradoxically, aleatorically determined) and insists upon telling the next one. Doing so, he sets up a chain of events and “quitings” wholly at odds with what was intended by the Host. His claim that “I kan a noble tale for the nones, / With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale” is immediately undercut by his admission that “I am dronke” (3126-27, 3138), and it suggests that the term “quite” is shifting semantically from the Host’s original usage. Indeed, one of the most salient methods of undermining the Host’s authority is this shift in the conception of “quite” or “quiting”—intended initially by the Host to mean “repay” by way of a reciprocal tale, but intended by the Miller to mean reply by way of parody from an existentially different social point of view. As Bakhtin notes, “every concrete act of understanding is active: it assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system” (283). Given the Miller’s state of inebriation, we might consider his contribution an example of *heterogroggia*.

The tale that follows answers the Knight’s romance of chivalry with a fabliau of lusty incontinence. Specifically, the honorable love triangle of Arcite, Emelye, and Palamoun is answered by the dishonorable one of Nicholas, Alisoun, and Absolon; the desired lady is transposed from an “aungel” maiden “fressher than the May with floures newe” to a “wezel” and “joly colt” with “a likerous ye;” and the tournament of 100 “noble” and “Wel armed” knights is reduced to a scatological tit for tat. Even the rhetoric is parodied. One instance of this parodying is the encyclopedic precision that enumerates the trees used for Arcite’s funeral pyre (“As ook, firre, birch, aspe, alder, holm, popler, . . .” [I, 2921-23]) and the materials Absolon uses to wipe his arse-sullied lips (“With dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes” [3748]). A similar trope is the *blazon*, or use of heraldic description to present the characters. Thus the Knight’s account of Lygurge’s “Blak . . .berd,” “manly . . .face,” “yellow and reed” eyes, “lymes grete,” “brawnes harde,” and “shuldres brode;” and Emetreus’ “crispe heer,” “nose . . . heigh,” “eyen bright,” “lippes

rounde,” and “face yspreynd” with “frakenes” (2130-54, 2157-78) is answered by the Miller’s stock of Alisoun’s “smale y pulled . . . browes,” “mouth . . . sweete;” and Absolon’s golden “Crul . . . heer,” “rode . . . reed,” “eyen greye,” “hoses rede,” and shoes “With Poules wyndow corven” (3233-70, 3314-24). This stylistic echoing is further displayed in the tales’ formulaic conclusions. Where the Knight’s Tale ends “Thus endeth Palamon and Emelye; / And God save al this faire compaignye!” (3107-08), the Miller’s Tale closes:

Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
 For al his kepyng and his jalousye,
 And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye,
 And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.
 This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte! (3850-54)

The response to the Miller’s Tale suggests a fairly appreciative audience: “Diverse folk diversely they seyde, / But for the moore part they loughe and pleyde” (3857-58). Only the Reeve (formerly a carpenter) takes umbrage, and thus he carries the semantic shift of “quite” even further to exact revenge in what is slowly becoming a *guerre de le plume*: “ful wel koude I thee quite / With bleryng of a proud milleres ye” (3864-65). As the Miller *adapts* the Knight’s matter and technique and turns it to parody, so the Reeve in turn *adopts* the Miller’s to use against him: “Right in his cherles termes wol I speke” (3917). The Host can not effectively prevent this quarreling, which is nothing less than subversion of his original plan to make the pilgrimage “moore mury,” and by extension, of his absolute rule as “governour” and “juge.” Regaining some semblance of power through editorial clout, he objects to the Reeve’s prologue as it delays his story and instructs him to “Sey forth thy tale, and tarie nat the tyme” (3905). The Host’s concept of a proper and well-ordered story contest is yielding to more realistic and immediate demands. For the Reeve, the immediate demands are rather clear.

Where the Knight's and Miller's tales appropriately abide by the Host's original edict to tell tales "Of adventures that whilom han befalle," and further preface their accounts by declaring them as stories/fictions (the Knight's "as olde stories tellen us," and the Miller's "a noble tale"), the Reeve locates his story in a real and immediate present:

At Trumpyngtoun, nat fer fro Cantebrigge,
 There gooth a brook, and over that a brigge,
 Upon the whiche brook ther stant a meelee;
 And this is verray sooth that I yow telle . . . (3921-24)

To underscore this transposition of the tale's locus from fiction into reality the Reeve echoes the formulaic ending of the previous two tales; but rather than a synopsis that explains "Thus" endeth the characters, his is a stylistic appropriation intended to insult a fellow pilgrim: "Save al this compaignye, grete and smale! / Thus have I quyte the Millere in my tale" (4323-24). This tale and its "jape" appeals to the Cook, who is so delighted that "For joye him thoughte [the Reeve] clawed him on the bak" (4326). He suggests that the company carry on the nature of the stories to an even more ribald and scandalous extreme: "God forbede that we stynte heere" (4339). His ensuing narrative confirms the Cook's intentions as he begins to tell of a wyf who "swyved for hir sustenance," but the fragment ends as soon as he begins.

"Thus endeth" Fragment I of the *Canterbury Tales*: the Host's original story contest has been subverted through supplantation of a real present for a fictive past; through redefinition of "quiting"—from reciprocate, to parody, to revenge; and through deflation of the genres—from romance, through fabliau, to an abandoned tale so scandalous, it hints at being pornographic.³

The variant manuscript orders and the incompleteness of the *Tales* itself makes it impossible to discern the devolution of the story contest *in toto* as clearly as can be done within Fragment I, but by the end of the first

fragment both Harry Bailly and his imposed aesthetic order have lost all of their original power. In the remaining fragments they will be reasserted, and thus Fragment II, for example, echoes the very beginning of the General Prologue by opening with a chronos of the Zodiac to reaffirm that order and Providence rule the universe. Appropriately, it is the Host who observes “tyme wasteth nyght and day,” and who reminds the company of his power when he addresses the Man of Law:

“Telle us a tale anon, as forward is.
 Ye been submytted, thurgh youre free assent,
 To stonden in this cas at my juggement.” (II, 34-36)

As we have seen, this “juggement” will continue to be controverted. The storytelling contest of the *Canterbury Tales*, then, is best approached developmentally rather than teleologically, for each tale determines the context and affirms or redefines the literary criteria of the next. Analyzing these differences in terms of the Aristotelian model, which would have been the rubric used in Chaucer’s time—*causa efficiens* (teller), *materialis* (sources), *formalis* (style and structure), and *finalis* (intention) (Minnis 55-56)—we find that the pilgrims’ tales are certainly divergent on all interpretive levels. As they each have their own tale, so they each have their own reasons for telling it (*causa finalis*) and their own poetics to tell it with (*causa materialis* and *formalis*). With “gentle, pathetic tales of trial and submission” answered and inverted by “churlish, comic tales of rebellion against authority,” one critic sees in Chaucer’s work a “highly sublimated and disguised version of the child’s consolatory dialectic of playlets involving repeated role-reversals” in which the child (teller) identifies with and rebels against the “father” (authority) (Kendrick 133).⁴ The story contest becomes teller-dependent, absorbed into the tales/fictions which it prompts, and this calls for both a tale-centered and dramatic reading of the collection.

In discussing the differing aesthetics that the various pilgrims represent, it becomes necessary to address the appropriateness of the tales to the tellers as a reflection of those aesthetics. This leads us to the dramatic principle of the *Canterbury Tales*, which Kittredge has perceived as a “Human Comedy” with the pilgrims as *dramatis personae*. Although to locate the informing principle of the *Tales* in the dramatic interplay between the characters is probably making too strong a case out of the comparatively thin narrative frame, this approach does remind us that the pilgrims stories “may be affected or determined” by the teller’s “momentary relation to the others in the company, or even by something in a tale that has come before” (154-66). Lumiansky develops this “movable stage” even further when he observes that “the simple suiting of tale and teller” is often conjoined with an “externally motivated dramatic situation” (usually, professional rivalry) and “extended self-revelation” (e.g., the Wife of Bath’s and Pardoner’s *confessiones*). Just as the tellers are types of medieval society, so are their stories “types of medieval storytelling” (6-7). Although this is largely dependent upon their station in life, education, and occupation, there is an aesthetic endowment beyond what we would find in the pilgrims’ real life counterparts, and so an investigation of these vying aesthetics must be found within the text itself and not in a historical approach that attempts to uncover a too-literal, estate-specific poetic. To refer, briefly, to a crucial debate in Chaucerian studies, that between Lumiansky (who attributed the fabliaux, because of their lowest common denominator appeal, to the lower social classes) and Nykrog (who argued that the fabliaux, as parody of an aristocratic genre, were a parody that only the aristocracy could dare to fashion), we should observe that Chaucer himself employs the mythology of an appropriate pairing between teller and tale as a kind of social shorthand. To read these tales in the spirit of this social mythology, then, even if the teller-tale match-up is reductive and sociologically misleading, we need a willing suspension of critical and historical disbelief—but only to a degree. Battening down the hatches completely against the tales’ historicity would

prevent us from recognizing the Miller's Tale, for example, as "not merely a challenge to aristocratic aesthetics but an act of political resistance directed against seignorial exploitation" (Patterson 40), or mistaking the Wife of Bath's five marriages as fictive hyperbole rather than as a real and "not so very unusual" response to the demographic collapse and marital/sexual disruptions that the plague wrought upon 14th-century England (Brown and Butcher 44-45).

The great variety of genres that we find suggests that the pilgrims are indeed operating under different rubrics, or evince the social "stratifications" of genre and the "*professional* stratification of language," to employ Bakhtin's terms (288-89 original emphasis). Because of "Chaucer's own eclectic handling of the literary types," and because we have only 24 (rather than the promised 120) tales, it becomes difficult to establish a precise taxonomy of all the tales (Ruggiers 46-47). Nonetheless, a few patterns do emerge:

Courtly Romance: Knight, Squire

Fabliaux: Miller, Reeve, Merchant

Exemplum: Pardoner, Friar

Breton Lai: Franklin

Saint's Legends: Prioress, Second Nun

Tragedy: Monk

Beast Fable: Nun's Priest

Moral and Didactic Treatises: Chaucer's Melibee, Parson

(Ruggiers *passim*)

What to make of the other stories is a bit more problematic. The Wife of Bath's Tale, for example, is a chivalrous story set in the mythic times of King Arthur; is it a romance, then, or a Breton Lai? Is the Tale of Sir Thopas a parody of the romance? Are the prologues of the Wife of Bath and of the Pardoner to be read as *confessiones*? Add to this catalogue such types as "Pious tales about saintly persons" (but who are *not* saints)

and “Tales of whatever sort with added didactic elements” (Ruggiers 47), and it becomes even more confusing. To employ a food analogy, it is as if one set before one’s dinner guests a nice bowl of miso soup, followed by a Caesar salad with freshly grated Parmesan, then a plate of enchiladas smothered with nopalita salsa fresca, followed by a plate of sweet and sour Pad Thai, then a plate of pita bread with tahini and tabbouleh, followed by a plate of couscous and fried grubs, then raw buffalo tongue, and kept up this patternless pattern throughout a whole evening. Each dish might be wonderfully delicious in itself, but one’s guests would surely be left wondering and bewildered. And, to be fair, delighted, dazzled, and full. We should similarly recognize, then, that just as the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole is a rather protean collection with an encyclopedic display of various genres with inconsistencies in its manuscripts, so the tales themselves often demonstrate a chimerical morphology and the tellers themselves their own individual and inconsistent aesthetics.

According to medieval rhetorical theory, “the proper business of a poet and critic, and the distinguishing quality of the craft of poetry, is the artful ordering of words: style or diction, or, in the rhetorician’s jargon, *elocutio*” (Payne 41). Among the most salient features of style in verse are rhyme and meter, and thus we should not be surprised that the Host makes comment on them. When the pilgrim Chaucer proposes to tell a “rym I lerned longe agoon,” the Host responds, “Ye, that is good,” and prepares himself to hear “Som deyntee thyng” (VII, 710-11). Harry Bailly, however, has a preference for metrics and rhyme other than what pilgrim Chaucer offers. The most common rhyme pattern of the *Canterbury Tales* is that of the rhymed couplet; in addition to its use in the General Prologue and the links between tales, it is used in the tales told by the Knight, Miller, Reeve, Cook, Wife of Bath, Friar, Summoner, Merchant, Squire, Franklin, Physician, Pardoner, Shipman, Nun’s Priest, Canon’s Yeoman, and Manciple. The next most common pattern is that of *abab bcc*, and this appears in the tales told by the Man of Law, Clerk, Prioress, and Second Nun. Rhyme scheme becomes important in

understanding the story contest because only two of the tales have a pattern unique to themselves—Chaucer’s *Sir Thopas* (*aab aab*) and the *Monk’s Tale* (*abab bcbc*)—and these are the only tales severely derided by the Host. Although the Host objects to the Monk’s *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* because of its “hevynesse”—“Youre tale anoyeth al this compaignye. / Swich talkyng is nat worth a boterflye, / For therinne is ther no desport ne game” (2789-91)—with Chaucer’s tale, the protest is explicitly against the poetics: “Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!” (930). Given the Host’s obvious preference for rhymed couplets (he speaks exclusively in them) and the narrator Chaucer’s ability to write in this mode (the General Prologue, the links between the tales), one wonders why he—as pilgrim—does not do so. The pilgrim Chaucer’s protest that “it is the beste rym I kan” (928) is, of course, ironic, but it also suggests that just as we distinguish between the authorial and narrative Chaucer, so we need to differentiate Chaucer the narrator from Chaucer the pilgrim. Chaucer as pilgrim character, we must remember, is the direct creation of the narrator, not of the author. Once again, the Host must modify the story contest, this time to accomodate Chaucer’s wooden ear, and he asks him to “telle in prose somewhat.” The “litel” Tale of Melibee that follows effectively takes his piece out of the question of poetics, and thus the Host is able to repond only to the tale as moral (“I hadde . . . my wyf, hadde herd this tale!” [1893-94]), and not as aesthetic performance.

The Host’s suspension of disbelief that enables an emotional investment in the Tale of Melibee reflects the evolution in his style of governance as he becomes “less of the egocentric tyrant and more of the generous public servant” (Pichaske and Sweetland 180). He had been given precedence for this from the very beginning with the Knight’s Tale, where he learns that a wise governor must modify even his own rules to suit the occasion:

“The lord hath of his heigh discrecioun
Considered that it were destruccioun

To gentil blood to fighten in the gyse
 Of mortal bataille now in this emprise.
 Wherefore, to shapen that they shal nat dye,
 He wol his firste purpos modifye.” (I, 2537-42)

As we have seen, this is a principle well placed at the beginning of the pilgrims’ journey and the story contest, a lesson that Harry Bailly must (and does) take to heart as he negotiates the rocky terrain ahead.

The *Canterbury Tales* defies a unifying principle, and should we be pressed to discern one in the story contest, it might be in its constant threat of subversion and aesthetic entropy—which is to say, in its refusal to be contained. Ironically, the seeds of dissension lie in the Host’s own edict of “sentence” and “solaas,” for this dichotomy immediately polarizes the range of stories, as evidenced in the very first two tales, the Knight’s chivalrous romance and the Miller’s ribald fabliau. Certainly, it would be hard to expect a single tale to offer both moral elevation and merriment, per the Host’s requirement, and the social reality will intrude and make itself felt. Even the narrator’s apologia for potentially offensive material—that “The wordes moote be cosyne to the dede”—is more of a justification for “stylistic diversity and freedom” than for a “naturalistic imitation of reality” (Mehl 143). What obtains is an impressive compendium of literary forms and an anthology of critical thought. As the narrator has it: “Diverse folk diversely they seyde” (I, 3857). The “gentils” object to the Pardoner’s proposed “ribaudye,” the Shipman insists that the Parson should not “springen cokkel in our clene corn,” the Franklin interrupts the Squire to praise his “eloquence,” and the Knight is in “greet disese” from the Monk’s *de casibus* catalogue. These reactions point to individual rubrics for literary tastes, and the Host in turn modifies his rubric to suit the particular moment and the particular teller: of the pilgrim/character Chaucer he asks for something in “geeste,” of the Canon’s Yeoman for an account of his master’s “pryvetee,” and of the

Squire for “somewhat of love.” Rather than Literary Lord over his fellow pilgrims, the Host has been forced by his fellow pilgrims to be exactly what he is: a host—one who accommodates others and makes them comfortable.

Many critics have pointed out that “the storytelling contest supplants the pilgrimage” (Owen 8), but we should also recognize that this supplantation is itself displaced at the end by a tale that corrects the pilgrims’ errant focus and properly re-orientes their journey’s sense of purpose. Paradoxically, the pilgrims subvert the Host’s secular governance only to arrive at a religious one by the Parson, and this returns them to the proper intent of their journey. The Parson’s tale does effectively “knytte up al this feeste and make an ende” (X, 47), and thus “instead of concluding with Harry Bailly’s choice of a winner” we are given the Retraction (McGerr 109). In this sense, the Host’s loss of control in the first fragment can be seen as an inverse miniature for the entire collection: where at the end of Fragment I his authority is overrun and ignored by tales that increasingly reduce man to his sensual and beast-like nature, at the end of the *Tales* itself he relinquishes control to a tale which asserts man’s spirituality and the dominion of God. This re-inscribes a transcendent order and in effect allows the reader to arrive at the true end and ultimate goal for which the pilgrimage to Canterbury is but a means, and all of the merriment the pilgrims make along the way ultimately “nat worth a boterflye.” Applying Sutton’s Law not to overlook the obvious, if we regard pilgrimage as a kind of spiritual investment, it is in the vault of heaven that the pilgrims will find their savings and their salvation: “Because that’s where the money is.”

Notes

¹ Leicester’s argument, however, focuses on the textuality of the pilgrims’ voices, contending that the “road-side drama approach” suffers from “the confusion of

voice with *presence*.” He further offers that “the relation . . . between tales and the frame, or between the tales and their historical or social background, needs to be reversed” (9-11 original emphasis).

² For recent gender approaches, see Burger and Laskaya; for an approach foregrounding ethnicity, see Schildgen. An excellent overview of various critical reinterpretations of Chaucer throughout history is provided by Trigg.

³ Overt subversion of the Host’s rubric is not the only fun the pilgrims have at Harry Bailly’s expense. In the Miller’s and Reeve’s tales the Host is also mocked when the characters refer to those whom they cuckold as their “hooste.” In the Miller’s Tale, Nicholas requests the Carpenter John to “Feede me drynke,” and when the Carpenter returns he addresses him as “John, myn hooste, life and deere” (I, 3501). Similarly in the Reeve’s tale, John says to Symkyn: “But specially I pray thee, hoste deere, / Get us som mete and drynke, and make us cheere” (4131-32). Less subtle than these references is the Cook’s outright apology to the Host in his Prologue: “Herry Bailly, . . . / Be thou nat wroth, . . . / Though that my tale be of an hostileer” (4358-60).

⁴ This kind of narrative play is reminiscent of Bakhtin’s formulation of the carnivalesque and of Bettelheim’s work on the psychological function of fairy tales. Authority is interrogated yet reconfirmed, a procedure found indeed throughout the *Tales*.

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