THE AESTHETIC PROBLEM OF DISTANCE

IN CHAUCER'S MERCHANT'S TALE

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PREFACE

This thesis is concerned with the definition of aesthetic distance as well as an application of the concept of aesthetic distance to Chaucer's Merchant's Tale. After aesthetic distance is defined as the result of the interaction of the devices an artist employs to control and manipulate viewer response and the experiences and perceptions the viewer takes to a work which determine his degree of ego-involvement in that work, the study then focuses on the element of point of view in the Merchant's Tale. I believe that the most important control Chaucer creates to establish and maintain aesthetic distance in the tale is in his use of three vantage points from which the tale is related.

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IN CHAUCER'S MERCHANT'S TALE

Although Geoffrey Chaucer lived six centuries ago, he is still acclaimed for his skill in creating varied types of literature. His stories range from noble tales of courtly love (Troilus and Criseyde is a good example) to bawdy fabliaux (The Miller's Tale is a typical one), and all of them are considered art. These works have been studied from many technical points of view. One wonders then, since there is great interest in the philosophy of art, why aesthetic distance has not been treated in depth in relation to Chaucer. Within the last five years Paul Ruggiers[1] and Robert Jordan[2] have written book-length studies which attempt to define the essential features of Chaucerian narrative. However, neither of them concentrate on the concept of aesthetic distance. Nevertheless, it would seem that Chaucer's skill in the management of aesthetic distance is partly responsible for his stature as an artist and his enduring position as the third poet of England.

The concept of aesthetic distance is itself an old one. The name "aesthetics" (from the Greek aisthesis, meaning "sense perception") was first given to what earlier philosophers had called either the theory of beauty or the philosophy of taste by Alexander Baumgarten, a minor German philosopher, in his Philosophical Meditations Concerning Some Things Pertaining to Poetry published in 1735. He chose "aesthetics" because he wished to emphasize the experience of art as a means of knowing.[3] Half a century later, Immanuel Kant published his aes-

thetic theory under the title Critique of Judgment. Since then the problems of aesthetic response and distance have been central to the philosophical discussions of art. An object of an "entirely disinterested...satisfaction," Kant said, "is called beautiful."[4] His term "disinterested" refers to what Philo Buck speaks of as the objectification in art because of a perfection of form, which allows the mind to "stand aloof and contemplate [the work] in its entirety."[5]

During the century and a half since Kant's publication, numerous philosophers have expounded aesthetic theories based on the idea that "the power of an artifice to keep [the viewer] at a certain distance from reality [can] be a virtue rather than an inevitable obstacle to ...realism."[6] In 1912, Edward Bullough formulated the theory of "psychic distance" in his monumental essay, "Psychical Distance as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle." His theory assumes a psychological state that a spectator either puts himself into or is induced into by observing some object. An object is an aesthetic one as a result of the spectator's state of mind, and it is because a work is "psychically distanced" that it can be enjoyed by the viewer. Furthermore, Bullough's concept of "psychic distance" deals with making sure a work is not "over-distanced," which would allow it to be improbable, empty and absurd, preventing viewer response to it; nor "under-distanced," which would make the work too personal to be enjoyed as art. Ideally, the viewer's attitude allows for "antinomy," or the "utmost decrease in distance without its disappearance."[7]

According to the aesthetic theory of Sigmund Freud, the viewer's relation to a work of art is one of "sublimation" since he experiences a "mildly intoxicating kind of sensation" which allows him to "forget" for

a moment the "hardships of life."[8] Of a slightly different bent, how-
ever, are the theories of John Dewey and Leo Tolstoy. Dewey dis-
cusses aesthetic distance in terms of intense viewer emotional involve-
ment, because the viewer must "re-create" the art object before it can
be perceived as art. He must go through the same "process of organi-
zation the creator of the work consciously experienced."[9] Tolstoy, too,
bases his aesthetic theory on emotional response, since a viewer of an
art object "is capable of experiencing the emotion which moved the man
who expressed it."[10] Eliseo Vivas, however, objects to theories based
on emotional response, contending that distance should be defined in
terms of "attention." One is near an object when the mind interacts
with it, and for the time his attention is controlled by that object.[11]

Few of these theories, it seems to me, discuss explicitly the re-
lation of the artist to the work: they define this relation in terms of
viewer reaction. Wayne Booth, however, indicates the artist's role by
defining aesthetic distance as "...many different effects...in a work of
art which control the viewer's involvement and detachment along vari-
ous lines of interest."[12] Since it is my contention that the artist's role
ought to be defined in terms of technique the artist employs if one is to
treat scientifically the aesthetic problem of distance, I have formulated
an operational definition of the term which will allow me to do so:
Aesthetic distance is the result of the interaction of the devices the
artist employs to control and manipulate viewer response and the ex-
periences and perceptions the viewer takes to a work which determine
his degree of ego-involvement[13] in the work.

Each artist occupies a certain position in relation to his work,
and the viewer stands at a distance determined by his own attitudes

which are conditioned by the artist's manipulation. The more skillfully the artist has executed the technical aspects of an art work, the nearer he is to the work. For example, the viewer of the <u>Miller's</u> <u>Tale</u> is not overtly aware of the technique Chaucer employs to manipulate him, which is a tribute to the skill of the artist. The single point of view, the one plot growing gracefully from the other, the converging of the dual plots at the climax of the tale, and the terse, unified action, move the tale both smoothly and swiftly. The viewer is only slightly conscious of the foreshadowing details (although he has subconsciously stored them away for future reference) and the development of the plot. For the purposes of this study, I have used the term <u>technical</u> <u>control</u> for this concept of the devices employed by the artist to regulate viewer response.

Just as the artist creates controls to regulate viewer response toward any work of art, the viewer takes to a work certain attitudes, perceptions and values which condition his responses. Because of the artist's technical control, there is an optimum distance at which the viewer should be positioned. Optimum distance refers to the position a viewer would take if his response to any work is proper. The first response to any art object should be one of empathy. This response should result from the viewer's understanding of the artist's treatment of the art object and the viewer's ego-involvement toward the object of that treatment.

The more a viewer responds to any element of a work, the more he becomes ego-involved. For example, the greater the distaste the viewer of Chaucer's <u>Merchant's</u> <u>Tale</u> feels for January when he tells May that any treatment of a woman is justifiable in marriage (assuming

that this idea is unethical according to the viewer's value system), the more he becomes ego-involved with January. But this attitude of disgust for the character is proper, because of the artist's treatment of him, unless the viewer's distaste is so great that it does not allow him to appreciate the rest of the tale. Unfortunately, though, the viewer cannot always maintain this proper position, since he takes to a work of art his varied experiences. For example, Shakespeare has created Othello, a character toward whom the viewer should respond since he is an admirable man destroyed by his noble intention to protect what he perceives as his honor, as well as by his overwhelming jealousy. Yet there are other characters whom Shakespeare treats so that they also should command attention: Iago, the villain, and Desdemona, the naive wife who dies at the hands of her husband, are examples of these. Nonetheless, an extremely jealous husband viewing Othello may become so concerned with the plight of the protagonist that he cannot empathize with other characters and situations. In any work of art, then, optimum distance lies between the points within which a viewer may respond to one element and yet remain receptive to the work as a whole. (This concept, of course, depends upon the essential changelessness of average human nature over the ages.) Therefore, the position the viewer himself takes can be an important one in the total achievement of aesthetic distance. I have used the term psychological response for this concept of viewer-reaction to a work of art.

The greater the artistic achievement, the more evidence there is of the artist's technical control and the more probability of a proper ego-involvement or psychological response on the part of the viewer. An artist who has created a valid work of art has been able to shape

the creation realizing what position is proper for the viewer. Psychological response will follow, then, from technical control. Although the concepts are interdependent, however, viewer ego-involvement does not necessarily mean that the artist achieves expert technical control. A viewer may become deeply ego-involved in a work that is highly emotional, sensational, or obscene, because he cannot feel neutrality toward it. For example, the viewer of John Cleland's _Fanny Hill_ is likely to become greatly ego-involved in some of the erotic scenes of the book because the action extends beyond the limits of human decency and because such scenes are sustained with orgiastic continuity. Yet the work is classed as pornography rather than art because the technique is not well controlled: Cleland has failed in creating devices to regulate viewer response.

The two concepts which have been referred to here as technical control and psychological response are useful in demonstrating the aesthetic theory that the interaction of these concepts results in aesthetic distance. I will use these concepts to discuss Chaucer's artistic achievement in the _Merchant's Tale_.[14] Since it seems to me that the most critical control device Chaucer employs to regulate viewer response in the _Merchant's Tale_ is in point of view, I will focus on point of view. In doing so, I will distinguish between three vantage points from which the tale is told.

Although criticism has been written on various aspects of the _Merchant's Tale_, critics have not concentrated on the aesthetic problem of distance. Those who reprehend the tale for its "lasciviousness" and yet respect it as art discuss other elements to demonstrate its artistic merit. During this century much of the commentary on the

tale has been focused on the organic unity or disunity of the tale.
Kittredge interprets the tale as "the perfect expression of the Mer-
chant's angry disgust,"[15] and any discrepancy between what the
Merchant narrator says and what he is expected to say or do is consid-
ered dramatic irony. His view is upheld by Sedgewick,[16] Dempster,[17]
Lumiansky,[18] and Tatlock.[19] More recent commentators, however,
have challenged this view, asserting that it is not to debase Chaucer's
art to admit that the Merchant's Tale may not be structurally unified.
Jordan labels it "a gathering of independent parts held together only by
very loose bindings,"[20] but he praises the tale for its unified moral
viewpoint. Bronson, too, defends the view that the Merchant's Tale is
a work of art without organic unity, since its tone seems contrary to
the attitude of the Merchant narrator.[21]

Other critics have discussed the narrative art of the tale.
Ruggiers and Jordan are the most recent of these. Ruggiers believes
that Chaucer's narrative method creates in the tale "a level of con-
trolled satire nowhere else achieved in the Canterbury Tales."[22] In
Jordan's treatment of his subject, he makes a statement concerning
distance most relevant to my study. "Chaucer's narrative method, "
he says, "serves to distance...[the viewer] from the characters in the
Merchant's Tale."[23]

Through Chaucer's narrative method, he creates unique points of
view in the Merchant's Tale. A question which has inspired much
scholarship and encouraged speculation is whether or not the tale is
told from the point of view of the Merchant. I believe, as Jordan does,
that it does not matter to which Canterbury pilgrim the tale is assigned
--none will fit--since the tale falls into "four or more clearly defined

sections about marriage" and does not "'characterize' a single, unified pilgrim personality."[24] Kemp Malone, too, concludes "that the Merchant's Tale is told for its own sake." The Merchant tells his tale, not in character, "but as the author's mouthpiece."[25] The work is developed with great technical skill through the use of several points of view which lend the tale a variety of tones, each employed as the situation demands,[26] to evoke and regulate certain viewer responses.

While the tale is told from an omniscient point of view, the viewpoints may be further divided in terms of types of narrators: I classify them as the chorus-narrator, the ironic naive-narrator, and the omniscient-narrator.

Chorus-Narrator

The chorus-narrator serves the same purpose as does the chorus in Greek drama--that is, as an instrument of the expression of emotion over crucial actions and deeds. Just like the Greek chorus, the chorus-narrator is a link with the audience to make the viewer feel closer participation in the drama, to provide him with a sense of community involvement in the issue of the action, and to interrupt the action and remove the tale a step from reality. Yet Chaucer's chorus-narrator does more: it also serves as a mock-heroic foil by providing grandeur and seriousness when absurdity and levity are appropriate.

The voice of the chorus-narrator is first heard during the wedding feast after Damyan is introduced to the viewer as a "lovesick" man whose pain May will eventually ease. The voice addresses Damyan, January, and God, bidding God to warn January of the danger of having the squire in his service (ll. 1783-1794).[27] It next makes an

impassioned address to Fortune which has "deceived" January by striking him blind (ll. 2057-2068); then it laments the fact that a man may be "blindly deceived" though he may have a hundred eyes as Argus does (ll. 2107-2110); and it finally invokes Ovid, who wrote the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, lovers who, against all odds, find a way to meet (ll. 2125-2131).

At the opening of the Merchant's Tale, Chaucer has set the stage for a high tragedy by presenting a "worthy," prosperous knight, whom the viewer senses may fall from his lofty estate because of some hamartia, or tragic flaw. The first twenty-two lines are structurally like the beginning of Euripides' Hippolytus,[28] which also presents, through exposition,[29] a biographical sketch of the protagonist. Yet as January is skillfully developed, he appears foolish rather than wise, lecherous rather than "worthy," and his tragic flaw is his blindness to the truth--his desire to believe that he can cultivate his soul by feeding his bodily lust. The discrepancies between what is expected and what is learned of January are great, and as a result initial appreciation for his integrity alters rapidly as the tale unfolds. Hence, by the time the chorus-narrator interrupts the action, the artist has carved January down to a sliver of an image; however, he has placed him on a stage set for "tragedy." Through the juxtaposition of tragic and comic elements, Chaucer is able to develop January's situation as comical.

Each time the chorus-narrator speaks, the address, positioned amid the affairs of January and his young wife, becomes inappropriate because of Chaucer's expert technical control. For example, the "O sodeyn hap! O thou Fortune unstable!.../Why hastow Januarie thus deceyved..." (ll. 2057, 2065) is not an inappropriate manner in which

to address Fortune, against whose forces man is defenseless; but the overstated concern it expresses for January reinforces the triviality of his plight. [30] January, never aware of his own delusions, asks advice of others wiser than he and refuses to listen to it. After requesting aid in choosing a wife, he then selects one himself, having considered only her superficial beauty. And once he is married, he justifies his lewd acts toward his wife. A tragic character could have weaknesses similar to January's; however, throughout the tale January is caricatured rather than treated sympathetically, and therefore appears comical. The result, then, of each passage, is not so much an impression of the concern it seems to express for January, but rather of the absurdity of expressing it in an elevated manner. Nevertheless, the humor in each passage depends upon an awareness that in contrast to this situation are moments appropriate for such elevated appeals. [31] Such a moment occurs when Sophocles' chorus warns Oedipus Rex of the danger inherent in locating the murderer of the slain king.

Although technical control is expert, the viewer is not deeply ego-involved when the tale is told from the point of view of the chorus-narrator. Because the viewer has become accustomed to the regularity with which one trivial incident follows another, and because human beings are secure with order and predictability, the lofty outcries of the chorus-narrator break the rhythm abruptly. In so doing, they shatter viewer-illusion by removing the tale a step from reality and by somewhat preventing viewer-involvement. For example, the tale proceeds smoothly, describing January and his marriage preparations, then the wedding feast, during which the viewer is introduced to Damyan, who, "... so ravysshed on his lady May... swelte [s] and

swown $\left[s\right]$" (ll. 1774, 1776). Leaving him, the artist presents for the
first time the chorus-narrator whose moralistic voice warns January
of Damyan. Because the viewer has seen January's image diminish so
appreciably that he experiences little respect for him, the appeal to
January to "... se how thy Damyan..../Entendeth for to do thee vileynye./
God graunte thee thy hoomly fo t'espye!"(ll. 1789, 1791, 1792) from the
narrator does not strike a responsive chord in the viewer; he neither
sympathizes with the concern for the welfare of January nor feels open
opposition to it. Rather, he is surprised that anyone so dignified as
the chorus-narrator would take such a stand for January. Psycho-
logical response, nonetheless, is not neutral, because each chorus-
narrator passage, taken with the rest of the tale, provides the viewer
a sense of the moral significance of the fall of a man, whether or not
his plight compels pity and fear. This achievement is a result of the
artist's treatment of January as a character with a touch of Everyman
--as a human being insecure enough that he convinces himself that God
will justify his lechery if he is married.

Ironic Naive-Narrator

The second point of view which may be considered as a means of
examining aesthetic distance is that of the ironic naive-narrator. In
literature of the last century and a half the naive-narrator is the osten-
sible author of a narrative whose implications are much plainer to the
viewer than to the narrator himself.[32] In the Merchant's Tale, the
ironic naive-narrator is the reverse of the modern naive-narrator, for
he is conscious of the effects of his comments and, furthermore, apolo-
gizes before he presents them. He appears disarmingly innocent when

there is a passage of comic obscenity to be related. Readers of the
Canterbury Tales are familiar with this narrator, because he first
appears in the General Prologue to the tales as "Chaucer the Pilgrim"
(ll. 725-746),[33] and again in the Prologue to the Miller's Tale (ll. 3181-
3186). In both contexts his function is to apologize for relating bawdy
incidents which, in being true to the pilgrim who has told them origin-
ally, he must do. Integrity will only permit him to report honestly.

In the Merchant's Tale, the ironic naive-narrator appears three
times. He first intrudes after the marriage of January and May
(ll. 1962-1966); again when May climbs the pear tree to meet Damyan
(ll. 2350-2353); and finally, he appears to describe the activity of
Damyan and May in the pear tree (ll. 2362-2363). Each time the narra-
tor speaks, expertise in the artist's handling of material that could be-
come pornographic in the hands of a less skillful artist is evident. For
instance, Chaucer, in the first intrusion, leaves much to viewer imag-
ination. After the concrete descriptions of the amorous husband's pre-
parations for bed by taking aphrodiasics, close-up details of his repul-
sive physical features, insight into his philosophy that a woman is
property and that sex is violence inflicted upon her,[34] the artist
reveals that January requests May's affections. After his request, the
ironic naive-narrator says:

> But lest that precious folk be with me wrooth,
> How that he wroghte, I dar not to yow telle,
> Or wheither hire thoughte it paradys or helle.
> But heere I lete hem worken in hir wyse
> Til evensong rong, and that they moste aryse.
> (ll. 1962-1966)

As the narrator describes January's activity, the action is made to
appear distasteful, and the ironic naive-narrator retires to his corner,
tongue-in-cheek, suggesting through what he refuses to say, that May

is repulsed. This passage displays the artist's skill because his fore-shadowing details (which the viewer has subconsciously stored away for reference) and his careful selection and presentation of other details are likely to evoke various proper viewer responses. Chaucer could not have achieved the same effect through a detailed description of the scene in point. It accomplishes its end by whetting the curiosity so that the mind reconstructs its own conception of January's corruption.

It is natural to recall January's justification for his relations to-ward his wife--nothing is wrong which takes place under the yoke of matrimony; and to recall how ludicrous the artist's creation of January is: acquiring a wife is a business transaction; a wife must be no more than twenty years old (though her husband may be sixty); one can choose a wife indiscriminately as long as she is of "...fair shap and...fair visage" (1. 1580). As a result, it is logical to assume that January's treatment of May is tasteless. Therefore, the ironic naive-narrator's comment serves, through what is omitted, to reinforce previous im-pressions that January is a man short of scruples and integrity. Also, since a few details, treated sensationally, could have made the passage appeal to "prurient interests," this passage, partly owing to its reti-cence, stands as a monument to Chaucer's ability in technical control.

The viewer becomes deeply ego-involved in the ironic naive-narrator passage when the narrator conceals from the viewer whether indifferent May regards responding to her husband's request as "para-dys or helle" (1. 1964). Since the details of January's bristly face, with "slakke skyn aboute his nekke" (1. 1848), and his broken singing voice make him appear so unlovely, the viewer becomes sympathetic toward May, despite the fact that it has been implied earlier that she intends

to cuckold January. Both of their actions appear somewhat "immoral."
Hence, the viewer becomes ego-involved on two levels: first because
of his distaste for the couple's mutual lack of "morality," and second,
because of his distaste for January and concern for May. While May is
without "governaunce or gentillesse" (1. 1603), January is much worse.
Regarding this as the case, the viewer is forced into alliance with May.

In the next ironic naive-narrator intrusion, the speaker asks
that the ladies not be offended with him for his description of Damyan
and May's activity in the pear tree. He says, "Ladyes, I prey yow
that ye be not wrooth" (1. 2350). Again Chaucer has carefully prepared
for viewer response. The effect of the narrator's having admitted that
what he plans to say will be ludicrous-- "I kan nat glose, I am a rude
man" (1. 2351) --is that the erotic incident is completely disarming
rather than offensive when it is related. The artist limits the comment
to two lines: "And sodeynly anon this Damyan/Gan pullen up the smok,
and in he throng" (11. 2352-2353). Since the scene is neither as erotic
nor as prolonged as might have been expected, judging from the elabo-
rate preparations Damyan and May make for that moment, it is the
discrepancy between the anticipated and the resulting action which
allows the artist to elicit a complexity of responses, the first of which
may be only "rapt attention."[35]

Yet the effect of this ironic naive-narrator passage on the viewer
is not that of deep ego-involvement. The suddenness of the action dis-
poses of any tenderness in the relationship, and while the viewer
neither identifies nor sympathizes with either character, he also is not
repelled enough to become greatly ego-involved. The action, however,
is certainly abnormal[36]--it is hard to imagine Damyan's thrusting

himself upon May in a pear tree. Therefore, the viewer is probably shocked into spontaneous laughter, or into some other response proper to comedy, by the baldness of the statement, and because the characters have only superficial human emotions.[37]

Another element which somewhat prevents deep viewer ego-involvement is the balance between the actions of Damyan and May and the previous actions of January. Throughout the tale descriptions of January's actions have made him appear unpleasant enough so that the viewer is not overly concerned with his plight even when he is cuckolded, and viewer attention is diverted from the details of the powerfully graphic action of the youth to moral questions raised by their actions. In other words, the viewer's attention focuses on the poetic justice of January's cuckoldom.

Omniscient-Narrator

Though the Merchant's Tale employs the omniscient point of view, only passages not discussed here as chorus-narrator or ironic naive-narrator passages will be referred to as remarks of the omniscient-narrator. This narrator is the all-knowing maker, who is not restricted to time, place, or character, and is free to move and comment at will. In the Merchant's Tale, he is always first person and occasionally his attitudes creep into the tale. The cumulative tone effect is one of objective seriousness but the narrator's statements are consistently underlined by subtle ironies which, when viewed in the light of the caricatured characters, leave the viewer with the impression that the tale is comical rather than tragic. This narrator tells the January story with a limited amount of vivid detail and carefully

handles through summary that which he chooses not to focus on. He

quickly dispenses with January's wedding preparations:

> I trowe it were to longe yow to tarie,
> If I yow tolde of every scrit and bond
> By which that she was feffed in his lond,
> Or for to herknen of hir riche array.
> (ll. 1696-1699)

But he gives a full account of the wedding itself:

> But finally ycomen is the day
> That to the chirche bothe be they went
> For to receyve the hooly sacrement.
> Forth comth the preest, with stole aboute his nekke,
> And bad hire be lyk Sarra and Rebekke
> In wysdom and in trouthe of mariage;
> And seyde his orisons, as is usage,
> And croucheth hem, and bad God sholde hem blesse,
> And made al siker ynough with hoolynesse.
> (ll. 1700-1708)

The omniscient-narrator concentrates on the wedding since it is to take

on ironic significance as the characters reveal themselves to be most

unconscious of the moral responsibilities symbolically bestowed upon

them through the religious ceremony.

When the tale is related from the point of view of the omniscient-

narrator, it becomes evident that it is more than just a farce. Unlike

the Miller's Tale, which is farcically funny with little moral signifi-

cance, the Merchant's Tale is true comedy because ironies which

evolve can suggest much about the human condition. As stated earlier

in this study, with the material at hand Chaucer could have created a

tragedy: Shakespeare's King Lear in his old age also suffers from a

blindness of the heart. Yet while Shakespeare treats Lear compassion-

ately, revealing a man who, through adversity, retains human feelings,

Chaucer chooses to make of January a caricature from whose plight

grows philosophical, moral, and religious implications.

After the omniscient-narrator introduces January's desire for

marriage, he adds: "Were it for hoolynesse or for dotage,/ I kan nat seye..." (ll. 1253-1254),[38] and a few lines later repeats a fact that has been mentioned once before: January is old, which implies that out of his senility has grown his desire for marriage. When the two friends offer advice, their arguments present the "points of view human nature instinctively corroborates"--the aspirations of religion and romance in which "life's actions exist for an ultimate idealized good, opposing the less rationalized instincts of the fabliau world in which appetite exists only for gratification."[39] The artist continually develops this conflict and January's blindness is revealed, for whenever he speaks he justifies his own actions. But the opposite of what he believes to be true about himself and his motives is what the viewer constantly perceives to be true about him.

Because January so desperately wants an excuse to marry, his delusions lead him to believe that he is marrying to please God; yet these delusions are handled curtly. Chaucer manipulates him so that each of his actions appears just as foolish as the one before. However, his "notion" that marriage is "so esy and so clene" (1. 1264) "that I shal have myn hevene in erthe heere" (1. 1647) must surely be the artist's masterstroke to make January appear fatuous, since a "wise" elderly man should have developed a more realistic attitude toward life than January has.

The viewer's ego-involvement toward these discrepancies is great. What strikes the viewer most is that this senile man assumes the privileges of youth, and furthermore, abuses them. It is not likely, for instance, that a youth would "buy" a wife and build a paradise garden around her to guard her jealously against the world.

Eventually questions arise in the mind of the viewer regarding the responsibilities of one human being (or spouse) to another. Consequently, psychological response is far from neutral.

Technical control is at its best in the final stages of the tale after January has been cuckolded. Here the omniscient-narrator gives the final touches to January's moral blindness. When January's physical sight is restored by Pluto and he vehemently accuses May of an illicit relationship in the tree, her elaborate excuse tempers his next accusation. By degrees he admits his own blindness. "Me thoughte he dide thee...[swyve]..."(l. 2386), he says, and when May accuses him of ungratefulness, he retracts his accusation, begging that she return to him. Yet he is never consciously aware of his blindness. Though Chaucer depicts no character but Justinus as the least bit admirable, January stands as a monument to the artist's ability to suggest what it means to be morally blind. January's willingness to be convinced that he has not been duped reveals his desire to remain deluded about his own morals and ethics. The element of tragedy evident is that any man would hide from the truth with such great desperation.

Yet, toward this portion of the tale the viewer is not greatly ego-involved. He has expected the cuckolding since it has been well foreshadowed when the narrator has revealed May's concern for Damyan's love malady. Also, there has been no indication in the tale that May is a moral woman--as is the Clerk's Griselde or the Franklin's Dorigen--and Damyan does not appear to be the ideal courtly lover. Finally, because the viewer knows January's nature, he experiences neither surprise nor sentiment. He leaves the tale feeling that nothing significant has happened to change the relationships that have existed

among the characters before the crisis: the comic world is returned to order. Though January has been duped, he has experienced only momentary discomfort. And since the climax of the tale is predictable from the standpoint of poetic justice, the viewer reserves his ego-involvement to reflect upon the questions raised by the tale.

That Chaucer is a great literary artist becomes evident through examinations of his work. Although there is a lack of criticism concerning the aesthetic problem of distance in Chaucerian literature, such a study seems relevant since the artist's ability to control viewer response is an important element in determining whether or not an art object is universal. A viewer may respond to any creative work, but art should not incite the emotional responses which are caused by the sensational, pornographic, sentimental or propagandistic.

That there are a number of elements and devices which contribute toward making the Merchant's Tale a work of art I do not question. However, as I have pointed out in this study, it seems to me that the most important control which Chaucer employs to create aesthetic distance is in point of view. Also, because I believe that aesthetic distance may be discussed more scientifically if it is described both in terms of the artist's technique and the viewer's response, I have demonstrated this idea in this study.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Paul Ruggiers, The Art of The Canterbury Tales (Madison, 1967).

[2] Robert Jordan, Chaucer and the Shape of Creation (Cambridge, 1967).

[3] Israel Knox, The Aesthetic Theories of Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer (New York, 1958), p. 169.

[4] Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment (1790), tr. J. H. Bernard (London, 1931), p. 55.

[5] Philo Buck, Literary Criticism (New York, 1930), pp. 54, 55.

[6] Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago, 1961), p. 122.

[7] Edward Bullough, "Psychical Distance as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," The Problems of Aesthetics, ed. Eliseo Vivas (New York, 1960), pp. 397-399.

[8] Sigmund Freud, "Sublimation," Problems in Aesthetics, ed. Morris Weitz (New York, 1959), p. 627.

[9] John Dewey, "Having An Experience," A Modern Book of Esthetics, ed. Melvin Rader (Seattle, 1960), pp. 183-186.

[10] Leo Tolstoy, "Emotionalism," Problems in Aesthetics, ed. Morris Weitz (New York, 1959), p. 613.

[11] Eliseo Vivas, "A Definition of the Aesthetic Experience," The Problems of Aesthetics (New York, 1960), pp. 407-408.

[12] Wayne Booth, p. 123.

[13] Cf. Carolyn W. Sherif, et al., Attitude and Attitude Change (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 65: "Ego-involvement is the arousal, singly or in combination, of the individual's commitments or stands in the context of appropriate situations, be they interpersonal relations or a judgment task in life or an experiment."

[14]The _Miller's Tale_ has been considered an ideal work to examine in discussing Chaucer as a creator of art (rather than a creator of pornography) because of his treatment of the "gross subject matter in the tale. Yet the _Merchant's Tale_ is also an appropriate one to analyze for aesthetic distance. It, like the _Miller's Tale_, contains all the elements of a "dirty story" -- sex, impotent old age, female cunning--but in addition it is a most ambitious work developed with a complex plot and symbolic structure. Coghill states that "almost every effect in Chaucer's previous work...seems to be present in final form" in the _Merchant's Tale_. Cf. N. Coghill, _The Poet Chaucer_ (London, 1949), p. 169.

Since it has been thus recognized as a good example of artistic expertise, analyzing should prove illuminating, for only when an artist has expert technical control is aesthetic distance possible.

[15]G. L. Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," _Modern Philology_, IX (1912), 451.

[16]G. Sedgewick, "The Structure of the _Merchant's Tale_," _University of Toronto Quarterly_, XVII (1948), 340.

[17]Germaine Dempster, "The Original Teller of the _Merchant's Tale_," _Modern Philology_, XXXVI (1938), 1-8.

[18]R. M. Lumiansky, _Of Sondry Folk_ (Austin, 1955), p. 12.

[19]J. Tatlock, "Chaucer's _Merchant's Tale_," _Modern Philology_, XXXIII (1936), 367.

[20]R. Jordan, "Chaucer's Sense of Illusion: Roadside Drama Reconsidered," _English Literary History_, XXIX (1962), 19-33.

[21]B. Bronson, "Afterthoughts on the _Merchant's Tale_," _Studies in Philology_, LVIII (1961), 583-596.

[22]Ruggiers, pp. 109-120.

[23]R. Jordan, _Chaucer and the Shape of Creation_ (Cambridge, 1967), p. 142.

[24]Ibid., pp. 137, 148 (This idea is valid if one realizes that the tale could reasonably be related by any of a number of the pilgrims; however, it could hardly be aptly assigned to such characters as the Wife of Bath, the Prioress or the Knight).

[25]Kemp Malone, _Chapters on Chaucer_ (Baltimore, 1951), p. 228.

[26]Jordan, Chaucer and the Shape of Creation, p. 150.

[27]The Merchant's Tale, Chaucer's Major Poetry, ed. A. C. Baugh (New York, 1963), p. 449. Subsequent line references to the Merchant's Tale and other Canterbury Tales alluded to in this study will be documented in the text of this paper.

[28]Cf. Edward Wagenknecht, The Personality of Chaucer (Norman, 1968), p. 47: (The chorus and exposition are structural elements of Greek tragedy. Chaucer, however, did not read Greek nor study Greek drama. Nevertheless, he was familiar with the structural devices of the genre since he read Latin and studied Seneca whose work was modeled after Greek drama).

[29]These lines are related by the omniscient-narrator. This point of view will be treated later in this study.

[30]The same voice is heard in the Nun's Priest's Tale when Chauntecleer is about to fall prey to the fox, with an identical comic effect. However, Chaucer appeals to Fortune in more "tragic" narratives as Troilus and Criseyde, the Knight's Tale and The Man of Law's Tale. The philosophical contemplations on fortune and free will which pervade Chaucer's work are reflections of ideas from Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy which Chaucer translated.

[31]Jordan, Chaucer and the Shape of Creation, p. 144.

[32]William Thrall, et al., A Handbook to Literature (New York, 1960), p. 300. (This point of view is employed as a device for irony, either gentle or savage, or for pathos. Representative examples of the use of this point of view are Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal.")

[33]He has been so labelled by Chaucerian critics because he is the persona of the poet Chaucer.

[34]Chaucer's descriptions are concrete visual ones much like some of those in relatively recent literature. The death scene in Flaubert's Madame Bovary is a good example of this very graphic type of representation.

[35]Cf. Eliseo Vivas, pp. 407-411: "When the self disappears in an intense experience of rapt attention," one is affected by a complexity of emotional reactions simultaneously.

[36]Cf. Leonard Potts, Comedy (New York, 1948), p. 46: "It may be said that whereas tragedy deals with the unusual but normal, comedy deals with the abnormal but not unusual."

[37]Cf. Potts, pp. 46-47: Potts asserts that the comic character is caricatured, "being designed as to stress the eccentricity of the individual."

[38]Although this pose of innocence makes the passage suitable for a naive narrator, the remark cannot be distinguished in this study as an ironic naive-narrator comment because there is not an apology offered for the comment before it is made and no "comic obscenity" is related.

[39]Ruggiers, p. 112.

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