

AN ANALYSIS OF THE COMIC CONTENT  
OF CHAUCER'S CANTERBURY TALES

OCT 27 1939

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OF CHAUCER'S CANTERBURY TALES

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Bachelor of Arts

Northeastern Teachers College

1936

Submitted to the Department of English  
Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

1939

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## PREFACE

Throughout my study of Chaucer's best known work, the Canterbury Tales, I have tried to keep in mind certain questions regarding the essential greatness of that work-- questions which could not fail to occur to any lover of Chaucer. Upon my ability to answer, in some small measure, only a few of those questions depends any success of my own contribution to the reasons for the Tales' constituting so important and imperishable a landmark in English literature and in the great literature of the world. Realizing the inadequacy of any endeavor to analyze and define the greatness of any work of art conceded to be great, I can still hope that the evidence I present may be added to that which has already been garnered, if it does not actually shed any new light upon the problem whose solution many have attempted.

Two of the most important questions regarding Chaucer's peculiar power, to me, are: What is one of the specific qualities of his work which best account for the greatness of the Canterbury Tales? In what way does it explain the freshness and charm of the Tales which will be continually delightful to the readers of Chaucer? So closely related are these questions, that an answer to one would have much bearing upon the answer to the other.

I feel that one statement will contribute much toward the answers I have in mind. That statement has been prompted

by my taking one of the most outstanding qualities, if not the most outstanding quality, of the man Chaucer and the work which is so richly an expression of the man. I have gone to Meredith as one of literature's greatest commentators upon that one quality for the term which will help me to make the statement. That, in a fair way an answer to both questions, is that Chaucer is rich in the Comic Spirit.

Comedy abounds in the Canterbury Tales, for that work is as definitely the real human comedy as ever Balzac conceived it.<sup>1</sup> In Chaucer is found a humor that in its universality and ageless variety may be perceived by the most commonplace and unreflecting mind, and also a humor that is as fresh and limpid and sparkling in our day as it was in Chaucer's. Furthermore, there is wit of the subtlest kind, which may be grasped by only the keenest and most alert minds of any age. There is satire at its urbanest. By every definition of comedy that I have been able to find, Chaucer's mastery of the comic art is consummate; by every element of comedy that I have been able to discover, there is but little of the comic artist lacking in Chaucer.

My purpose in writing this thesis is a three-fold one. First of all, it is my plan to point out and classify those elements of the comic in the Canterbury Tales which may readily be understood by anyone at all familiar with the

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<sup>1</sup> John Livingston Lowes, Geoffrey Chaucer (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1934), p. 204.

English language, with English attitudes or ways of thinking in Chaucer's day and ours, or simply with man's dealings with man.

My next plan will be to take up in detail those qualities of Chaucer's comedy which are designed to appeal only to those who are capable of seeing the things which lie far below the surface of human relationships, who are fully aware of the presence of the Comic Spirit in all our living, and who are conscious of the Comic Spirit as one of the finest emanations of our humanity. It is these subtleties in Chaucer which are the keenest and most pervasive and provocative elements of his comedy that have been most ignored or neglected in the innumerable studies that have been made of his writings.

Finally, I propose to discuss those qualities of Chaucer's comedy which have insured him his rank in English literature as one of its foremost humorists, and to determine through that discussion just what contribution Chaucer has really made to English letters and to English life. For these qualities stand out as important in scope and significance as any other qualities of his greatness--exquisite imagery, vivid characterization, effective story-telling, and mastery of the best acknowledged poetic principles--to name only a few.

## CHAPTER I

## A WORKING DEFINITION OF COMEDY

Since the words comedy and comic are connotative of laughter--whether the laughter be thoughtful or thoughtless, god-like or but an efflux of sheer earthy exuberance, silent and restrained or noisy and unrestrained, an effusion of a solitary individual or of a company of individuals--it is extremely difficult to explain seriously a thing never meant to be serious. Still it is necessary that some kind of working definition of comedy be set up before any real progress can be made in a classification of the different elements of the comic as they occur in the Canterbury Tales. The first source of information would naturally be the dictionary.

But it is necessary to go even further after the dictionary definition has been found. The etymology of the words in question is of far-reaching significance. The word comedy has its origin in the Greek word kōmos, literally a festal procession. At once a picture is brought to the mind of an occasion of mirth and singing and dancing, gaiety and spontaneity and freedom from the ordinary cares of life, an abandonment of seriousness for a time and a complete surrender to the spirit of revelry. This is not a difficult picture to conjure up in the imagination, for festal processions in all parts of the world today have the selfsame accompanying features. And always, lurking in the back of



the mind, is the thought of laughter as a force which inevitably accompanies such an occasion.

Of the different definitions of comedy listed in the dictionary, the following is most applicable to the function of comedy that we have in mind, from a generic as well as from an etymological standpoint: "...an event, situation, or the like, providing amusement,"<sup>2</sup> (The kind of amusement to which we have reference is, of course, amusement of a humorous nature.) This definition, however limited, enhances the idea of comedy as a phase of life conducive to laughter.

The word comic (from the Greek word kōmikos, the adjective derived from the noun kōmos), like the noun from which it is derived, suggests a rustic revel, a sort of jamboree, when everyone dropped for a time the very thought of work and care and entered whole-heartedly into the business of sheer enjoyment. The definition given of the word that best fits our purpose is: "...that element in art or nature which provokes mirth."<sup>3</sup> The conception of the adjective comic, which strictly means that which relates to comedy, is a modern usage generally confined to the sense of "laughter-provoking," the laughter to be considered as humorous laughter.

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<sup>2</sup> Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language (G. & C. Merriam Company, Springfield, 1935), p.535.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica,

...the phenomena connected with laughter and that which provokes it, the comic, have been carefully investigated by psychologists, in contrast with other phenomena connected with the emotions. It is generally agreed that the predominating characteristics are incongruity or contrasts in the object, and shock or emotional seizure on the part of the subject.<sup>4</sup>

If we are to accept the definition of the comic as the stimulus of laughter, rather than as an outgrowth of laughter, that is, of laughter in its most elemental sense, we are made cognizant of the fact that none but the most undeveloped of living human beings--and there are none of that genre today except very young infants, who laugh because they are tickled or through sheer exuberance of spirits, or possibly idiots--would be wholly devoid of a sense of the comic. In his very awareness of any incongruity in the ordinary or extraordinary situations or relationships of life which strike him as amusing, man may be conscious of the existence of the comic. The ability to detect incongruities and absurdities may or may not grow with man's advancement in education and experience; it may or may not be developed as he grows older and more disillusioned; he may or he may not, as he grows older, cease laughing at the things which amused him as a child. But a sense of the comic is there just the same, and if the comic is as "broad as life," his sense of the comic is no broader than life's real meaning to

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<sup>4</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., New York, 1929; 14th ed.), p. 99.

him. Only those who have mastered the art of living have perfected their realization of the comic in all life.

So in varying degrees do we find this consciousness of the comic in all men's lives. To some men it means no more than a capacity for seeing the "funny side" of something, an ill-formed ability to associate ideas, events, and relationships in such a way that they may recognize grotesqueness, absurdity, and incongruity. Such men are but little different from children in that anything out of the ordinary that is not too shocking, saddening, or terrifying to their senses is "funny." To other men it is an essentially keen and alive awareness of the presence of the Comic Spirit in its cool, detached appraisal of men and the doings of men. Men like these are the real philosophers, seeing in themselves as in others genuine "laughing-matter"; their sympathies are broad and genial and mellow, or theirs would not be the laughter that is characterized as "thoughtful." The men of this second group are fully able to laugh with the same zest at most of the things which provoke mirth in men of the first, for indeed they are but advanced members of that first group; but the men of the first group are blissfully unconscious or even resentful of the things which tickle the risibilities of the second. There is another group of men who, borrowing these terms from Meredith, are too "overblown, pretentious, hypocritical, bombastical, pedantic, fantastically delicate, deceived, hoodwinked, idolatrous, vain, absurd, and in general offenders of

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sound reason, fair justice" to appreciate the fine flavor of the things which delight the men of the second group mentioned. It is because of what they are that they afford such never-ending sport for the Comic Spirit. One thing must be said in their defense, however, and that is that even these men are not without their sense of the comic; proof of this lies in the fact that somewhere, somehow, they too may be reached and made to laugh.

The next logical step in the development of this definition of comedy is the discovery of those things which are laughable and the devices which are used to provoke laughter. Such a discovery may best be brought about by a close study of such allied types of the comic as humor, wit, satire, irony, sarcasm, and the relation of conscious and unconscious humor. There is such frequent overlapping of some of these types that at times we may experience considerable difficulty in giving our final classification to some particular element of the comic. Generally speaking, however, we may be safe enough in what we have to say about it.

Humor is the picturization of the ludicrous as it is in itself. Nature and accident are the main sources of its growth; in its utter naturalness, it has a remarkably close affinity with the simplest and most elementary conditions of life and human nature, and it can be the outgrowth of prac-

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<sup>5</sup> George Meredith, An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1897), p. 83.

tically any of life's allotted distortions. As it occurs in a man's writings, it is modeled after the absurdities which man has taken to himself or of the ridiculous in situation and character. It may be considered a possession of all kinds and conditions of men and will continue their possession just so long as they have eyes to see, ears to hear, and minds to grasp the countless absurdities that are born out of nature and man's continual intercourse with man. It may be necessary sometimes that we have an understanding of the differences in nations and races and periods of history before we may understand the enjoyment of situations or characters that have been humorous to other men. Occasionally time does bring about such subtle changes in our attitudes toward the situations from which humor once arose that we can no longer understand what humor once lay in these situations. But basically the humor remains the same. Almost by definition it is tinged with a sympathy for those things we observe in people and situations which make us laugh, and it is often involved with some confession of our own human weaknesses. It enables us to feel more keenly the flaws in life's pattern, but it also enables us to accept them more graciously.

If humor pictures the laughable as it is in itself, wit strips from the laughable all pretensions by comparing it or contrasting it with something else. The element of comparison is also involved in humor, but that in wit is more labored.

The product of human labor and ingenuity, wit serves to heighten a sense of the absurdity of one thing by pointing out some sudden and startling resemblance or dissimilarity to another, which sets off in bold detail that at which we laugh. It is more often accidental; it is artificial because it is born of conscious endeavor and is expressed mainly in speech or in writing, while humor may be developed in situation alone. It belongs to one whose mind is nimble enough to twist realities about, and it is a product of a more or less refined or civilized person. It is difficult to tear it from its personal or social setting and enjoy it to the full. It is even more difficult to credit it with any of the deeper or simpler origins of humor. "Wit is the product of consistent human reason detecting an inconsistency."<sup>6</sup>

Satire, at least the kind of satire that is capable of arousing man's laughter, can accomplish widely varying results. At times it can be useful in effecting a consciousness of the need of correction through the amusement it affords by its incisiveness and its penetration to the heart of man's foibles and manifest stupidities. Or it can be a purely fine art when it simply arouses a laughter of scorn, but humorous laughter nonetheless, through effecting the same consciousness. It is when it is used to arouse man's disgust,

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<sup>6</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. II, p. 884.

hatred, anger, fear, or inhumanity, that it ceases to belong to the comic. Only so long as it is carefully handled so that it is not too barbed or bitter, may it be identified as conscious comedy on the part of its creator; even then it sometimes passes over into comedy, through no intent of its creator, with changing perspectives as the result of the passage of time. In its skepticism and cynicism and mockery, it may be wit at its most trenchant. Like wit, it may require the master's touch and delicacy, or it may defeat its own purpose.

Irony, whether gentle or malicious, may afford us laughter through a quick perception of an intended implication which is just the opposite of the literal sense of an expression. The laughter may be, and often is, of three kinds: laughter at the seeming innocence or ignorance which show in the surface appearance of the statement; laughter at the real implication which lies below the surface; laughter at the paradox of strangely blended ingenuousness and subtlety, a laughter of genuine admiration over the exquisiteness of the whole.

Throughout his Canterbury Tales, Chaucer reveals masterful strokes of these allied types of comedy to a degree that is truly remarkable. First of all, he is so plainly close to the good, common earth and so unmistakably the possessor of a generous streak of human commonness--one of man's most endearing and least despicable of traits--his comprehension

of the world of men is so broad that his scope is all that world. He is never ashamed of or appalled by what H. G. Wells has quaintly pronounced the "jolly little coarsenesses" of life; rather he revels in them, rejoicing in the true, coarse texture of actual, physical, material life; nor is this rejoicing that of the satyr or sensualist, but a delight born of a close kinship with the people of the earth.

This quality does bulk large in Chaucer's sense and use of the comic. At any rate, it has been accorded the greatest recognition by many critics of his writings. But he also excels in subtleties of the most brilliant nature, some of the finest examples in all literature of flashing, scintillating thrusts which aim true and go deep. In these he shows his real sense of the comic more than in anything else, for in them he is the acute analyst of the conditions which do not loom up mightily in the panorama but which lie deep below the surface. The final outcome of much that he has to say, he leaves to the reader's own imagination or knowledge of life. It is that treatment which makes his comedy the more enthralling to the reader who would know more of the drama of the men and women about him.



## CHAPTER II

## THE HUMANITY OF CHAUCER

Laughter exists as one of man's inalienable rights. The thinking man who contemplates it as one of man's most characteristic and fundamental possessions naturally asks himself one question concerning it before he attempts to gauge its force as a humanizing experience. That question, briefly, is: What is the essential nature of laughter?

In order to answer that question, we would if possible go back to the very beginnings of man's association with his own kind, to trace in some way the development of laughter as an emotional experience. One of the very first things we would probably discover would be that there is a kind of laughter in which all men may take part, men of all ages, races, nations, beliefs, cultures, and standards of conduct. What is responsible for that laughter? From what does it originate?

If we were to attempt to analyze the laughter of man at his most primitive, we would find that it springs almost wholly from his sense of the incongruous, his ability to detect absurdities in the situations of every-day life.

The humorist is the one who is capable of presenting these incongruities and absurdities to us in his depictions of the relationships in life in such a way as to seize upon this propensity of ours for immediate and irrepressible

laughter. His chief means of evoking this response lies in the mastery of such elemental devices as: unconventional-ity, spite, malice, impudence, devilment, ribaldry, smut-tiness, obscenity, whimsicality, extravagance, insincerity, nonsensicalness, and slapstick. These devices named simply explain why laughter is the possession of all kinds and con-ditions of men and why it will always be the privilege of human beings to laugh at the absurdities which require no other fostering than man's continual intercourse with man.

Adults retain in varying degrees the aptitude they possessed as children for laughing at things out of the or-dinary. Eastman states in one of his four laws governing humor that

...children at play reveal the humorous laugh in its simplest and most omnivorous form. To them every untoward, unprepared for, unmanageable, in-auspicious, ugly, disgusting, puzzling, startling, deceiving, shaking, blinding, jolting, deafening, banging, bumping, or otherwise shocking and dis-turbing thing, unless it be calamitous enough to force them out of the mood of play, is enjoyable as funny.<sup>7</sup>

Of this quality in men's experience Chaucer is keenly aware, as shown in his linking up of untoward circumstances and wholly different characters so as to produce some jolt upon the imagination. The matter of bringing together a company of strangers like the company he assembles in the

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<sup>7</sup> Max Eastman, Enjoyment of Laughter (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1956), p. 3.

Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, characters generally incongruous when taken all together, is sufficient evidence of his knowledge of man's inner amusement over any heterogeneous collection which suggests the possibility of future clashes or conflicts. The Canterbury pilgrims could as easily have been a small group of people of kindred tastes and temperaments and even members of the same class and profession; groups of such nature, having many things in common and travelling for a common purpose, were only customary during the Middle Ages. But Chaucer realized that to invest his characters with many allied interests would have detracted from the suggestion of humor born of incongruity at the very beginning of the Tales. Our first reaction to the picture of a group consisting of individuals who are dissimilar in so many respects is rather one of amusement and curiosity than anything else. Even if not all of them are endowed with a touch of the comic in themselves, we are on the look-out for new manifestations of the comic in their interrelationships as we become more familiar with them. Not only is our interest whetted and sustained, but we are continually prepared for the unexpected. Even when we know that a collection of oddly assorted characters has not been brought together for the purpose of comedy, we watch them closely through all their associations with one another and with an interest that has some tinge of amusement. We are amused, as children are amused, to see such a striking array of creatures who

are practically out of touch with one another. The power of the humorist to make us cognizant of their many differences is the quality of his work that confers an idea of rollicking good humor and jollity, brought to us before we have taken any further note of the adventures of the group we are reading about. There is a distinct feeling of fun to come in the thought of such people as the bouncing Wife of Bath, the coarse-grained Miller, the squeamish Prioress, and the indelicate Summoner, all riding together in the same company for a distance so considerable that they cannot help having adequate time to reveal more of themselves to one another. In our companionship with them, ours is the real camaraderie.

But even in so diverse a crowd we could hardly look for the fun we are anticipating, if the treatment accorded its members were lacking in realism. Everything that is said about each of the pilgrims must shed some interpretation of him, for the more we can be made to feel that here are characters drawn from life and altogether like people we have known in life, the greater our chances of savoring their sayings and doings. In fact, they must be a part of us and something within our own experience. Then even though we are unfamiliar with the one great undertaking that binds these people together, we can still be made to feel that undertaking as an authentic reflection of life. And it is in the realism of his humor that Chaucer is at his best. It is

almost needless to state that the entire framework of the Tales, along with many of the inset tales, could only have been taken directly from the English life of Chaucer's day, a life bearing many arresting resemblances to our own today. If we have not all known people like the young Squire, the bleating, effeminate Pardoner, or the rascally Manciple, we have still known people nearly enough like them for us not to doubt their realness, for their particular brand of individuality is universal. They are reality.

There may be still another appeal to these commonest aspects of our laughter. A feeling of superiority to the person or the thing we laugh about sometimes goes with our laughter and into it. There may be either contempt or sympathy in that feeling, but first of all, we need to convince ourselves that our own reaction to the situation in which the object of our laughter finds himself would be different; likewise we must feel that a person who becomes the object of our laughter may exhibit a quality we ourselves possess, but that our own sanity would prevent our exhibiting that quality in that way. The fun is much funnier if there can be the least bit of gloating in the thought that we are superior, in one respect at least, to the person who is or who has done the thing which arouses our mirth. The most illiterate and degraded Georgia poor-white can still feel superior to the poor-black at whom and at whose predicament he laughs; the fact that he knows enough to

laugh may be all the proof he needs of his own superiority. A child, from what he considers his own superior point of vantage, laughs at one who slips and falls. A man may laugh at that which he has outgrown or put aside since he has, as he thinks, come into greater wisdom and knowledge of life. Or he laughs at anyone whose differences he regards as inferior differences. For these reasons the simple man would be prone to laugh at what he judged the affectations of the Friress, her manners a decided contrast to his own, at the young Squire, the dandy of the company, with his flaring sleeves and his sighing for love, as at a stage of adolescence with which he is familiar but which he has long since passed, or at the effeminacy of the Pardoner which he believes so inferior to his own rugged manliness.

Again it sometimes helps if we are able to feel a warm and vital sympathy for the one who is the means of our amusement, a sympathy growing out of a feeling of likeness with him. Paradoxically, there may be a need of a feeling of equality with him alongside a feeling of superiority to him. If we can be made to feel that but for the grace of our own divinely endowed attributes, he is exactly what we might be under similar circumstances, we are the more pleased. We chuckle over him, realising that he is what we could be but are not. This sympathy offsets the cruel side of our humor and engenders a deeper and more delicate perception of the absurdities of others, which is conducive to a richer and

more refined efflux of the spirit which prompts our first laughter, softening what would otherwise be mere scorn and derision. It is the thing which renders the simple man incapable of a sarcastic outlook through the mellowing of insolence and toploftiness. It is this capacity for sympathy which enables humor to diffuse itself so subtly throughout all nature in such a way as to reveal life to us at its most humorous; it is one of the most wholesome attributes of humor. To capitalize on it, the humorist, even when he seems most pitiless in exhibiting the absurd, must show a living tenderness for the humanity whose absurdities he is apprehending. Chaucer can induce a chuckle from the simplest man in making him reminiscent of the follies of his own youth by a reminder of the Squire's youth. There can be enjoyment in a similar vein in the sympathy which goes out for the choleric Reeve when a follower of his former craft is ridiculed before the entire company and the hope that he will requite himself well for the insult he has suffered.

Other qualities of man's sense of the comic reduced to its lowest terms find their expression in the grossest of man's nature such as a fondness for vulgarity, obscenity, coarseness, roughness, and a kind of action which may best be described as "slapstick." The fact that they may be objectionable to some does not offer any excuse for omitting the mention of them. It may safely be said that almost every man, and not necessarily to his discredit, does possess a

streak of the gutter among all the other different qualities which together make up his personality. No doubt it is one of the qualities which may at times go toward leavening the lump of his otherwise individual dullness. Throughout the folk-tales of primitive, ancient, mediæval, and modern peoples there run the threads of coarseness and obscenity. As children we are fascinated by the mention of what we understand to be taboo, and the fascination never quite leaves us. "We become gross for the sake of a return to primitive nature; we tell shocking stories in an attack on the eternal refinement of others; or to slip out of our own refinement; we enjoy smut as a camper enjoys dirt; we indulge imaginatively in a stress on sex, which we no longer allow ourselves."<sup>8</sup> So we are tickled by the fornication and adultery and even by the mention of perfectly natural physiological details not openly discussed today in such tales as those of the Miller, the Reeve, and the Summoner, secretly entertained by the divulging of what is forbidden. Roughness in others interests us about the same way. Things which ordinarily disgust us can be most amusing at times, depending largely upon the crowd or the mood in which we find ourselves. The Miller's and the Summoner's drunkenness can be hilarious to both drinker and teetotaler. The brawling of the two young clerks and the miller and his wife can be

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 267.



riously funny to both the man who revels in a good fight and the man who takes his pugilism vicariously. Nor is there any need of withholding a good laugh at the account of Nicholas' branding, and this is slapstick at its grossest.

These few characteristics of the most elemental comedy are those from which our simplest, most naive, and most essential laughter well up. They are all close to earth, sometimes so close to it that they may all but be mixed in its clay. They are none of them far removed from the earliest conceptions man forms of his fellow-men. The subtleties of wit and satire are too much for them. They have furnished the greatest part of man's amusement from the earliest times. In their simplicity, lie their realness and their force. They motivate almost every smile and laugh which comes between a grin and a guffaw.

Many of these qualities, when encountered in writing, may be considered as no more than invitations to the belly-laugh. They are not especially hard to understand or to use, and yet few writers of comedy have used them to fullest advantage. Rather they have shrunk from using them, fearing perhaps that they would be condemned as catering to the lowest in man's loudest laughter. Chaucer is restrained by no such compunctions. He may have written of many of his characters and situations with his tongue in his cheek, no doubt. He apologizes profusely for his being forced to speak of many things, excusing himself on the grounds that

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,  
 He moot reherce, as ny as evere he kan,  
 Everich a word, if it be in his charge,  
 Al speke he never so rudeliche or large;  
 Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrew,  
 Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.<sup>9</sup>

But his apologies only serve to accentuate the idea that he enjoys immensely the delineation of the simplest incongruities and vulgarities, which do spell his essential humanness. Knowing all classes of people of his day, but knowing well the people who constitute the simplest of organisms, he really addresses the man of the street and the countryside and the man who can understand something of the nature of the first two men. In this earthiness there is a delightful blend of Anglo-Saxon gusty vulgarity, Celtic devilment and ribaldry and spontaneity, and Norman sprightliness. But it is more the keynote of an individuality that has knit itself close together with the common life of the times, an earthy vigor at its completest and most expressive.

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<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales (ed. by F. N. Robinson, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Student's Cambridge Edition; Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, 1933), ll. 731-6, p. 27.

## CHAPTER III

## THE SUBTLETIES OF CHAUCER

We come now to those finer aspects of comedy which invite the laughter of the thoughtful man. Comedy, in its broadest sense, is for anyone who is at all capable of discerning incongruities which, to him, are amusing or humorous. But the quintessence of comedy is for those who have the mental apprehension of whatever is far beyond and above that which is generally seen in the ordinary relationships of life.

The setting up of standards for laughter as a basic emotional expression is not especially difficult. Far more difficult is the determination of the things which arouse the laughter of the thoughtful man. For certainly his faculties for being amused or entertained or diverted by what he finds pleasingly humorous in life and in the arts as interpretations of life are more sharply alert and more vibrantly alive than are those of ordinary men. It is for this reason that we must exercise great care in considering the sources of his laughter.

This does not mean that the devices for evoking the child-like and primitive sort of laughter, which were discussed in the preceding chapter, can fail to stimulate the more cultivated man as well. The fact that he is not ashamed of man's humble beginnings proves that he is not disdainful of those devices; he may indeed rejoice in them more heartily

than do his less discerning fellow-creatures, seeing in them a means of reflecting upon the vast comedy of humanity of which he forms a part. Into his reading of them he brings an ebullience of good spirits, which makes them the richer for his acuter perceptions.

But the richest pleasures which comedy confers upon him are much subtler and much less easily defined than any of these simplest devices of the humorist. Some explanation of the man himself might better aid an explanation of the greatest satisfactions which lie in his laughter.

The comedy of humanity is the one never-ending source of delight to the man of thought who knows how to laugh. He senses it, in the terms of Meredith,<sup>10</sup> as a "means of reading swiftly and comprehensively" all life, a means to the "correcting of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dulness, and of the vestiges of rawness and grossness to be found among us." To him, a study of it can act as an "ultimate civilizer and polisher." Because of it he does not confuse mere sentimentality and genuine emotion; he loves man the more warily and with an honesty that will not allow him to "offend reason." In speculating upon how the Comic Spirit acts upon this man, we form a better estimate of the man himself. And in knowing him better, we have a more nearly accurate conception of what comedy must be before it can bring forth his laughter.

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<sup>10</sup> George Meredith, The Egoist, "Prelude" (Constable & Company, London, 1934), p. 4.

More sensitive to the incongruous as it exists throughout all life, this keener observer of human affairs is able to detect the ludicrous in situations of which the average man would be scarcely aware. In both nature and art he divines the most startling of incongruities in what appear the most innocent and natural of relationships. Life, as he sees it, is made up of the most colossal incongruities. But he is neither appalled by them or shocked into regarding life as a huge joke; rather, they make life the pleasanter for him, and boredom with the world as he finds it is warded off. In the mind at least, he is not restrained by the conventions which bind him to the men about him. He knows that much of the joy which comes to him through his reading of other observers of human phenomena lies in the very unconventionality of their observations.

If he is to be made to laugh, the thoughtful man must be willing to meet the comic writer half-way, and sometimes more than half-way. He is the more captivated by that which has cost him the expenditure of some effort, finding one of his rewards in the thought that he has had to expend effort. For him comedy exhibits its most highly artistic nuances. His sensibilities make possible a keener zest and appreciation for the exquisiteness of wit, satire, irony, sarcasm, fantasy, and unconscious humor; the rare delight which they spell for him is hardly understandable to the less cultivated man.

It is to this kind of man that Chaucer addresses himself when he brings into the Cantarbury Tales those delicate distinctions which the average man does not or cannot grasp. Apprehending them is the real test of his quick-wittedness. A few illustrations of these subtleties will bear out the assertion that though Chaucer is for all men, his best is reserved for the one who would seek the more tenuous, surer, and more piquant attributes of Chaucer's humor.

As to the Comic Spirit's endowing one with the power and the grace to read life "swiftly and comprehensively," what better example is there in all Chaucer than the picture of a band of men and women riding along the highroad between London and Canterbury? Almost to a man each person of that company epitomizes the foibles, the credulities, and the faults of his own particular class; taken altogether the pilgrims are representations drawn on a grand scale of these same qualities as they show themselves in humanity. Vice and virtue, grossness and refinement, stupidity and intelligence, all are treated with a joyous twinkling over man's surprising egotism, for in Chaucer's appraisal of them all is felt the presence of the Comic Spirit as the efflux of the pilgrims' rich humanity. The Monk, the Friar, the Prioress, the Summoner, the Wife of Bath, the Host, and all the other members of that colorful array of figures so drenched in life appear as gloriously amusing actors in a splendid pageant not of medieval England but of the whole world.

Steeped in life as they are, they could never be considered as puppets of a creator's will. We would no more have them different than would Chaucer; for we rejoice in the worst of their failings as making them so vividly human in a thing torn from life and saturated with its comedy. We smile sympathetically and even proprietorially over them, seeing in each of them something of ourselves as well as all mankind.

Then, adding to the wealth of the already joyous human comedy, are the most beautifully wrought subtleties of comic expression which Chaucer's mastery of humor has left for him who would labor to seek their riches--wit, satire, irony, exaggeration, caricature, and even mere nonsense. Occasionally it is hard to differentiate among them, to see where one ends and another begins, and to pigeon-hole them neatly into their proper classifications; the reader may still take pride in the thought that he has caught something which he might have missed.

Considerable discussion of these qualities of higher comedy will follow in succeeding chapters of this thesis, but the chance of pointing out a few in this chapter cannot very well be passed up.

Three passages gleaned from the Canterbury Tales might be mentioned as fine illustrations of pure wit. They are:

And fro the bench he droof away the cat

He hadde maad ful many a mariage  
Of yonge women at his owene cost

In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon  
 That to the offrynge bifore hire sholde goon;  
 And if ther dide, cortyn so wrooth was she,  
 That she was out of alle charitee.

The first line, from the Summoner's Tale, merely describes an action of a Friar before seating himself in the home of one of his parishoners. So delicately shaded is its wit that one might miss the full import if he failed to reflect upon so simple a bit of natural history as a cat's love of comfort; had he done that, he might have missed a very penetrating insight into a man's character.

The second passage is found in the description of the Friar in the "Prologue." If wit can be a trick played upon the imagination, as some writers upon comedy have asserted it is, the reader might have pondered long upon this passage until it dawned upon him in a sudden burst of enlightenment that the Friar had arranged for many a marriage of convenience --the convenience being, of course, for the Friar, possibly fearing a discovery of his uneclesiastical doings, at the cost of losing the favors that had been his. And that is only one way of interpreting the word "cost":

The last four lines, from the account given in the "Prologue" of the Wife of Bath, lend a beautiful interpretation of their own to her character. Seldom have ostentation and the contrast between devotion and a towering worldly wrath been so exquisitely compacted as they have in these four lines.

Since satire is one of the predominating types of comedy in the Canterbury Tales, it is a rather hard matter to



made a sudden choice from all the abundance presented.

These three examples, however, are three of Chaucer's best:

'A wyf! a, Sainte Marie, benedicite!  
 How myghte a man han any adversitee  
 That hath a wyf? Certes, I kan nat seye.  
 The blisse that is betwixe hem tweye  
 Ther may no tonge telle, or herte thynke.  
 If he be poyre, she helpeth hym to swynke;  
 She kepeth his good, and wasteth never a deel;  
 Al that hire housbonde lust, hire likoth weel;  
 She seith nat ones "nay," whan he seith "ye."  
 "Do this," seith he; "Al redy, sire," seith she.

For al so siker as In principio  
Mulier est hominis confusio,--  
 Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,  
 "Woman is mannes joye and al his blis."

For now the grete charitee and prayeres  
 Of lymytours and others hooly freres,  
 That serchen every lond and every streem,  
 As thikke as notes in the sonne-beem,  
 Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,  
 Citees, burghes, castels, hysse toures,  
 Thropes, barnes, shipnes, dayeryes--

The first two passages, the one from the lips of the dotard January in the Merchant's Tale, the other spoken by Chanticleer to Pertelote in the Nun's Priest's Tale, are magnificently cutting satires upon womankind in general; the first renders the more ridiculous her impatience and contrary notions when spoken by one who is trying hard to deceive himself, the second holds up to scorn her ignorance. Ridicule, but a ridicule that is not so biting as it might have been, is the kind of satire which impels our laughter here.

The third selection, spoken by the Wife of Bath in the opening lines of her tale, almost becomes sarcasm, so brittle

is it. A certain lively imagery of friars roaming about the countryside, blessing everything they come across--for a price, of course, is the satire that compels our broadest smiles.

And for the blessed irony, which lies in the most innocent of statements, wherein one thing is said and another implied, a gleeful holding back upon the part of the writer and a gleeful reaching forward on the part of the reader, what levellier imputations than in these lines:

She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye.

Therefore in stede of wepyng and preyeres  
Men moote yove silver to the povre freres.

The person of the toun hir fader was.

The hidden meaning of the first line, which pertains to the Wife of Bath, becomes at once apparent when we associate two ideas, the idea of the Wife's various pilgrimages to different shrines throughout Europe and the idea of her interest and experience in the arts of love. The double-entendre of a statement, so innocent on the surface, which may be literally interpreted as a comment upon the Wife's rather questionable past, is the kind which can still provoke a furtive snicker in many crowds, once it has been perceived.

The next two lines, from the description of the Friar in the "Prologue," are so maliciously and deliciously innocent in appearance that they might almost be taken as an open invitation to make contributions to the needy that penance

may thus easily be bought and one spared the pains of remorse. We can wonder how many people have taken those lines just that way.

The last laconic remark anent the parentage of the miller's wife in the Reeve's Tale could all too easily be passed over and nothing amiss suspected if the reader failed to recall that celibacy was one of the vows of the Catholic clergy. Should that happen, the reader has missed one of Chaucer's merriest asides.

When we name exaggeration as a type of the comedy which appeals to the more discerning man, we take a chance of being so pinned down to cases that it is with difficulty we proffer our explanation. Exaggeration is so primitive a type of comedy, someone might argue, that we have no right to assert that it could be outside the reach of the ordinary man. There is a type of exaggeration, however, which the common man cannot comprehend because it is based on a joyous accentuation of a thing, which to him would be far-fetched. None but the most acutely perceptive of men could relish the sheer earthy exuberance of the account of the sweating Yeoman who overtakes the pilgrims at Bighton under Blee.

His bakeneȝ, that was all pomely grys,  
 So swatte that it wonder was to see...  
 The hors eek that his yeman rood upon  
 So swatte, that unnethe myghte it gon.  
 Aboute the peytrel stood the foom ful bye;  
 He was of foom al flekked as a pye....  
 A elote-leef he hadde under his hood  
 For sweet, and for to keep his heed from heete.  
 But it was joye for to seen hym swete!  
 His ferheed dropped as a stillatorie.

Lewes has this to say of him:

...never elsewhere has a hot and sweating human being been metamorphosed with such delectation into a masterpiece.... The Canon's Yeoman sweats magnificently, gloriously; it was like looking on one of Nature's wonders to observe him. And Chaucer's individual, peculiar quality lies in large measure in that eager appetite of his for life, to which nothing was common or unclean. One meets it everywhere.<sup>11</sup>

Or there is the bubbling merriment of the lovely exaggeration, both of overstatement and understatement, to be found in the extravagant Tale of Sir Thopas. In this last named, a wholesome disregard for facts, as something to be dropped from consideration for the time, goes hand in hand with the satire upon medieval romance. At times sheer folly prevails, falling away once to sheer nonsense when the giant threatens to kill Sir Thopas' horse. What common man could see in these details much beyond what he would class as "silly"? What thoughtful man could fail to laugh at the ecstatic let-down they afford from the world of actualities? For the real lover of humanity, who finds in man the most revealing of the world's lore, can at times come nearer to childhood's estate than can the grown-up child who refuses to relapse into what he considers immature attitudes.

It is for this last reason that some men may perceive more readily the subtleties in Chaucer's fantasy. Running ahead of his compeers by several centuries, Chaucer saw fantasy as an exquisite blending of the realities of human

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<sup>11</sup> Lewes, op. cit., 238.

comedy and the unrealities which accentuate so admirably our human peculiarities. A charming world of make-believe becomes the background of the tales of the Wife of Bath and the Squire. The Wife of Bath's Tale looks back to a time when Britain was "fulfild of fayerye," a time which contrasts sharply with her own. The Squire's Tale takes us to a mysterious, remote, and fascinating East, whose color and excitement charm us away from the prosaic life-pattern of our own design. If we smile over these two tales, we would prefer our smiles to be simple and child-like and not too knowing.

And with the conclusion of this list of Chaucer's subtleties, a list by no means exhaustive, we may feel that we have attained in a fair way a glimpse of the "Goddess foyson" which has proved Chaucer the master of enlightened comedy. Not only do they serve to enliven the real purpose of the Canterbury Tales for one who would read intensely, but they also act as an enlivening force which glorifies the whole comedy of human experience.

## CHAPTER IV

THE CHARACTERS OF THE CANTERBURY TALES

In setting forth the main principles governing humor,

Max Eastman states:

...The first law of humor is that things can be funny only when we are in fun. There may be a serious thought or motive lurking underneath our humor. We may be only "half in fun" and still funny. But when we are not in fun at all, when we are in "dead earnest," humor is the thing that is dead.<sup>12</sup>

It follows then that we first must be brought into a definite mood if the writer of comedy is to succeed in his purpose of injecting humor into a situation. We must be precipitated into a spirit of fun from the very start. In order to accomplish this, the writer will see that his exposition of the situation will be in complete harmony with whatever idea we are to gain of the development of his theme as we read for further details. This is true no less of comedy than it is of tragedy. And if the prevailing note of tragedy is to be one of high solemnity and seriousness, that of comedy must be one of lightness and spontaneity, exactly opposite. Everything in the situation--setting, characterization, subject-matter, and style--must be a direct invitation to the reader to prepare himself for laughter.

In the "Prologue" to the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer presents a situation capable of advancing the conception of the joviality and exuberance that are to manifest themselves as

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<sup>12</sup> Eastman, op. cit., 3.

the story develops. There is some seriousness in the situation, of course: a pilgrimage to the shrine of a sainted martyr to seek relief and cure for sickness or affliction does not suggest the idea of much mirth and hilarity. It is soon enough apparent to the reader, however, that the objective of the pilgrimage is but one of the minor incidents of the entire story, that its sole use is as a means of bringing the characters together.

The first fourteen lines of the "Prologue" deal specifically with the setting as regards time. This passage generates its own particular appeal to the reader's imagination, a realization of the truly proper time for starting a journey of such nature. Soft breezes blow. The woods are putting forth their first feathery green, the fields are fresh and green and flower-enameled, and the whole landscape is one that affords the greatest of pleasure to the human senses. The sun is bright but not hot. There is a tang in the air but no chill. Small birds "maken melodye" from roadside shrub and tree and in the pleasant meadows beyond. Days like this evoke a laughter of abandon that wells from no more than our sheer animal spirits, pleased by every satisfaction that is sensuous.

Then, too, we must try to understand some of the driving restlessness that must have animated so many people of medieval England, pent up as they had been during the long, cold winter months when there was so little of the life and gaiety

that they loved and few of the means we of today have <sup>OKLAHOMA</sup> satisfying the urge for that life and gaiety. <sup>AGRICULTURAL & MECHANICAL COLLEGE</sup> Traveling <sup>LIBRARY</sup> during the spring of the year offered an excellent <sup>October 27 1939</sup> opportunity for this long-stored restiveness. Pilgrimages to the shrines of various saints furnished an excellent excuse for traveling.

For those who had the means of making pilgrimages, there were many gathering-places throughout all England-- churches, town-halls, market-places, taverns, and castles. Chaucer chose an inn as the place of assembly for his pilgrims, knowing with that peculiar passion of his for humanity that few other places could have served more admirably as a focus of general warmth and geniality and roistering, devil-may-care outflowing of good spirits. Much of the real life of England daily passed in review in and around such a tavern as the Tabard, conveniently situated near England's largest city and on one of England's principal thoroughfares. As in any fairly large stopping-place today located similarly in such favorable surroundings, the guests were reasonably free of any feeling of restraint or fear of the prying eyes and wagging tongues of neighbors. It is interesting to note that none of the married men of the company are accompanied by their wives and that most of the members of the company are strangers to all the rest. Conventions that had been carefully regarded at home, where the more settled members of the company probably served as models of respectabil-



ity, could be ignored for the time being.

As a matter of convenience it is perhaps better, at least easier, to divide the heterogeneous crew assembled at the Tabard and following the road from London to Canterbury, into certain groups according to the principal classes of medieval English society and occupational types; thus more attention may be given to the different essentials of the comic which are to be found in each group and in the members of each group. This division has been made according to Manly's statement regarding the arrangement into groups made by Chaucerian scholars.<sup>13</sup> They are: the upper classes, represented by the Knight and the Squire; the various church types by the Monk, the Friar, the Prioress, the Nun, the Nun's Priest, the Parish Priest, the Clerk, the Pardoner, and the Summoner; the professional classes by the Sergeant of the Law and the Doctor; the country folk by the Franklin, the Reeve, the Miller, the Knight's Yeoman, the Plowman; the provincial townsfolk by the Wife of Bath and the Shipman; the city folk by the Merchant, the Manciple, the five city tradesmen and their Cook, the Host of the Tabard Inn, and finally Chaucer himself.

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John Matthews Manly, Some New Light on Chaucer (Henry Holt & Company, New York, 1926), p. 71.

### The Upper Classes

Chaucer's splendid portrait of the Knight is not invested with much of the comic. Rather he stands out among Chaucer's men and women as a symbol of grandeur and nobility of spirit.

With the Knight's son, the young Squire, it is different. His whole being is one of Chaucer's richest expressions of a universality that combines discerning laughter and sympathy. There is nothing of the fop about him; although he is the typical young man of fashion of the day with his long, embroidered coat and absurdly flaring sleeves, one feels that he possesses sterner qualities meriting anyone's respect. Romantic, sentimental, melodramatic, he is the eternal adolescent, whose doings and feelings have delighted more than one humorous writer. An older and soberer man may see much of his own youth in the Squire, smiling a little sadly and perhaps superiorly at the magic joyousness which allows the young man to sleep "nawore than deoth the nyghtyngale." The Squire's creator undoubtedly created more than a mere character in the Squire. He must have created some of his own lost youth, smiling as he did so but sighing too.

### The Church

About a third of the pilgrims are connected with the Church. Most of them Chaucer handles satirically, with the sort of satire that makes us nod and smile knowingly and

then suddenly reflect that we have not been so tolerant as he who has done the satirizing. For the satire in most of these admirable portrayals may be directed against our own inherent and acquired weaknesses, and we writhe just a little and smile not quite so god-like the next time.

The Prioress was doubtless a contemporary type, but Chaucer has ascribed to her characteristics which add a dash of real individualization. Devout as she is, she seeks in every way and at all times to imitate the manners of the great ladies of the court. As a result she appears to us as just a little mincing and affected and fastidious, a decided contrast to the strapping Wife of Bath. The picture she presents is one deliberately planned to catch the sardonic amusement of one who has witnessed another's unremitting aping of the elegant mannerisms of someone considered worthy of emulation. Her very name, Madame Eglantine, smacks of a fastidious observance of all the niceties. A boor would regard her with a mixture of clucking impatience and grudging respect. In only one particular does she differ from the great ladies whose manners she apes--her swearing. Her strongest oath, by seinte Loy, so greatly different from the "good mouth-filling oaths" of the court ladies, is mentioned with the same affectionate contempt that would lie behind the mention of a twentieth-century divine's most forcible ejaculation of "Goodness, gracious!" Lowes has stated<sup>14</sup> that

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<sup>14</sup> Lowes, "The Prioress's Oath," Romantic Review, vol. X (1914), pp. 368-81.

this oath of the Prioress' may have only meant that she was accustomed to stronger language and that St. Ioy was her favorite saint because of his great personal beauty and love of personal adornment. In either case there is enough of a gentle dig to add to the already entertaining picture.

When Chaucer speaks of the Prioress' speaking French "ful faire and fetisly-- After the scole of Stratford-atte-Bowe," he is simply making fun of the French spoken at Stratford, to the English of that place as excellent as the French of Paris. We are pleased today by a similar account of someone's fumbling attempts to turn a pretty phrase in a language with which he is not wholly familiar.

In the minutely detailed account of the Prioress' table etiquette, Chaucer bears down with the gentlest malice upon her too elaborate manners; he also implies by contrast the crudities prevalent at that time even among people of the upper classes, a contrast which could be considered nothing less than wit. An irony that renders its victim the more intensely human appears in the sally at the Prioress' sentimentalism in the lines which tell of her love for the small dogs accompanying her and in the unconscious hypocrisy within her nature when she voices her approval of the cruel treatment accorded to the Jews of her story.

There is no other indication of the Nun's Priest's character than his evidently being a person of discriminating taste and sly humor, a blithe and merry man, as judged by the

the words of the Host in the prologue to the Nun's Priest's tale and by the general jollity of the tale itself.

✓ There exists a faint resemblance between the Monk and the Friar. Chaucer handles the characterization of both with a rather gentle disdain and a delicate irony which, aside from certain more obvious implications, can hardly be appreciated by one who is not fairly familiar with the history of ecclesiasticism in Europe during the Middle Ages. Indeed it is doubtful if there is much said of the two churchmen which would appeal to a less refined sense of the comic in any age, Chaucer's included.

✓ The Monk and the Friar are essentially convivial figures, delighting in the company of people such as those among whom they are travelling. Both are hearty, zestful men, worldly-wise and a little cynical, with appetites closely bordering upon grossness. Their daily lives are at variance with the lofty religious principles professed by their calling. As fond as the Monk is of hunting and sports and of moving about continually, he cares little for the simplicity and austerity of the cloister with its meditation and prayer; good works and charity and labor among the lowly offer them both but little more attraction.

✓ Good living is evinced in everything about the Monk, his horse, the jingling bells of his harness, the richness of his apparel, his rolling plumpness. He affords a picture of good clean, healthy animal and solid English beef. To

the Host, as shown in the prologue to the Monk's tale, the Monk appears one of a rakish, philandering genre of the clergy, a participant in sly amours.<sup>x</sup> Certainly this idea is not wholly inconsistent with the finely drawn portrait of the Monk as he appears at the Tabard.

✓ No less a lover of good living is the Friar, yet more is implied than is actually said about his epicurism. The lines which speak of the Friar's acting as an arranger of marriages—

He hadde mad ful many a mariage  
Of yonge women at his owene cost

veils an irony whose comprehension might easily be missed unless we stopped to consider the nature of that cost, in a statement as delectably laconic as that in the lines which tell of the parentage of one of the characters in a pilgrim's tale. His lenience in regard to such holy matters as the hearing of confessions and the assigning of penance makes him generally well-liked wherever he goes, and he usually chooses to go among only those who have the means of lining his pockets.<sup>y</sup> In the single line "unto his ordre he was a noble post" and the lines

For unto a poure ordre for to yive  
Is signe that a man is wel yshryve,  
For if he yaf, he dorste make avaunt,  
He wiste that a man was repentaunt;  
For many a man so harde is of his herte  
He may nat wepe althogh hym soore smerte.  
Therefore, instede of wepyng and prayeres,  
Men meete yeve silver to the poure freres.<sup>15</sup>

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15 "Prologue," ll. 225-232.

there is an innocent malice so sly that their causticity escapes one unfamiliar with certain other writings of the same period wherein is deplored at great length the avarice and mock humility of the mendicant friars, whose begging had become something more than a general nuisance. The hypocrisy of the Friar is further attested by the assertion that he is on good terms with every tavern-keeper and barmaid throughout his licentiate; the wheedling of the poor out of their very means of subsistence arouses a disgust not untinged with admiration and amusement. His animosity toward the Summoner renders him the more laughable to us; an animosity of this nature between two members of the same institution who should be laboring toward the same purpose, is always ludicrous to the onlooker, who knows little of the causes of intestine strife. Charged with venom as the tale he tells of a summoner, it is the more provocative of mirth because of this strife and has none of the bombast which makes the Monk's tale a little boring.

Withal both Monk and Friar are completely likable, even lovable, for the failings which so largely characterize them. They impart a sense of common failings that makes for fellowship, and they should be appreciated as expressions of the human comedy which entertained Chaucer so immensely that he could take few things too seriously. Each man stands out clearly in detail as just missing the classification we would like to ascribe to him as a charming rogue; a few more minutiae, and the outline would have been blurred. It is not

stretching a point to say that a composite of these two might easily be found to contain certain lovable qualities of that most splendid rascal of all literature, Sir John Falstaff.

That there is a cruel side of humor, which makes humor none the less delightful, is well brought out in the vignette of the Clerk of Oxford. There are times when humor is so closely akin to tears that we waver between a clucking sympathy and a laughter that is half ashamed. Lesser personages, lacking the grandeur of the mighty who go down in the history of man's struggles against fate as tragic figures, must serve, through their mischances, only as the heroes of pathetic little interludes; quite often there is a strange, unaccountable blend of the comical with their pathos.

We can sense the poignancy in the life of the Clerk, barren and threadbare as it would seem to most of us, yet as rich and full to himself as the lives of many others far better situated. There is, nevertheless, something absurd in the living cartoon of him. Spare, lean, stooped, and hollow-eyed from his hours of study, he appears a strange, shrinking figure in that company of bourgeoisie with whom he rides, most of them gay and sprightly with a middle-aged sprightliness, most of the over-fed and plucky. In his improvidence he must borrow from his friends and patrons the very means of existence and the books he loves. We may even grin as the comfortable burghers grinned at his freakishness, and we can even see some justification for their grinning despite



our respect for him. Again we have a grimace of superiority at the peculiar caught in his own peculiarities.

There is no such grimacing at the figure of the poor Parson. There is an amiable reproach in Chaucer's contrast of him with the other churchpeople of the party, a shade of the comical in that reproach if one of the means of high comedy is to make us effect our own reforms by becoming conscious of our own weaknesses. Not only does one have more respect and admiration for the Parson, the member of the Church about whom Chaucer has the most good to say, than for any other pilgrim; he also finds him one of the most likeable of the pilgrims, even one of the most lovable. Chaucer's love for him and his brother, the Plowman, must have been warm and encompassing.

There is rough humor of a malicious nature in the Host's disdainful reference to the Parson as a "loller," the Lollards being then in general disrepute. We may be sure that the Parson would have requited this insult in full in his sermon had Chaucer not undoubtedly left off before finishing that work. One might grin over this insult, sympathizing the while with the Parson when the Shipman, as worldly a rascal as is found in Chaucer, comes to the rescue of the Host during the altercation between Host and Parson, as at the use the Parson makes of a mild oath while reproving swearing. The same sort of enjoyment is the response to the satire upon a quality of medieval poetry in the Parson's

sarcastic allusion to the "rum, ram, ruf" sort of alliteration. When the Host calls upon him for a tale, all previous fears of a "predicacioun" are realized to the full. The humor of this situation is a wholly rollicking commentary upon a facet of human nature, the patience with which people have for ages heard out the most wearisome harangues.

The Summoner is a thoroughly disreputable hanger-on of the Church. His principal duty appears to have been the citing of delinquents to the ecclesiastical court in order that penances, usually of a pecuniary nature, may be exacted. In the Middle Ages such minor officials of both the ecclesiastical and the secular courts were usually hated throughout the land because of their unmerciful preying upon the poor and ignorant. Not only did they accept bribes for bringing false charges against the innocent, but they also brought false charges on their own account in order to obtain bribes to let the charges drop. Some of the basest of their tricks are exposed in the Friar's Tale. One of these is the hiring of panders, quite often harlots, to spy upon those thought guilty of committing various sins. Another is the forging of documents summoning to court offenders, whom the summoner then proceeded to blackmail privately.

Low comedy of a certain type often proceeds from no more than physical distaste and repugnance. It is difficult to explain just how or why an object which should be generally repulsive can at the same time be amusing, but an under-

standing of this particular facet of humor is not necessarily implied in the ability to identify it. This does not mean that everything that is ugly or loathsome or detestable may be considered mirth provoking, but frequently when these adjectives may be applied to an individual, that individual may be the stimulus to another's laughter. So it is with the Summoner. Among all of Chaucer's characters he stands out as a caricature of everything that is vile. The comments upon his sly lechery hardly give rise to the laugh of ribaldry which greets any waggish allusions to the lewdness of the Friar, for instance, although there may be a knowing grin over the simile of the sparrow's lechery. Reading aloud in a mixed company the description of his physical appearance, we tend to exchange smiling affirmations of revulsion. Chaucer is so evidently fascinated by the details of the Summoner's fiery red face, dotted with white-headed warts, his swollen, red eyelids, scraggly beard and scabby eyebrows, that the comparison to a cherub is a delightful hit of rustic irony. From the mention of the onions, garlic, and leeks of which he is fond, we might even smile over a malady that has been widely exploited within recent years by the advertisers. The effects of the Summoner's wine-bibbing are told with the whimsicality which goes into the relation of a subject which is always funny. His reiteration of the one Latin phrase he knows, rolled on his tongue in all the drunken rollick of consciousness, and the grotesquerie of the garland of flowers

upon his head, looking for all the world like the sign of an ale-house of the day, are the artist's deftest strokes in the comical portrait of the besotted reveler. In the irony of the observation that proof of the Summoner's generosity lies in the fact that

He wolde suffre for a quart of wyn  
 A good felawe to have his concubyn  
 A twelf monthe and excuse hym atte fulle.<sup>16</sup>

there is a type of comic exaggeration, commonly known as understatement, which illustrates Chaucer's rare command of biting drollery.

When he speaks of the Summoner's betraying to any drinking-companion whom he might fancy the secrets of the Church, as in the directions for the buying off of the arch-deacon's curse of excommunication, Chaucer goes just a step beyond mere personal satire and strikes out, cautiously but wittily, at the officials of so sacrosanct an order in the Church who not only countenance evil practices but even encourage them to fatten the graft. The Summoner indulges freely in the same sins for which he hales others into court, and his indulgences are brought about partly by his knowledge of the cupidity and hypocrisy of his superiors. Another proof of Chaucer's merrily devastating irony lies in the reflection upon the Summoner's disclosures of ecclesiastical racketeering, "But wel I woot he lyed in

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<sup>16</sup>

"Prologue," ll. 649-51.

dede." To many that statement might mean Chaucer's condemnation to proceed from earnest orthodoxy, but a closer scrutiny will reveal a charming and merry iconoclast.

The word gentil, the first adjective used in the sketch of the Pardoner, is spoken satirically, and smoothly contemptuous, albeit tinged with an amused admiration for the knaveries he practices, is the treatment Chaucer accords him throughout all his appearances in the Tales. Numerous comic writers have made use of contrast as a means of conveying dramatic irony. A systematized contrast heightens the maliciousness in the study of the Pardoner and his friend the Summoner. Although greatly alike in their rascalities, they are quite dissimilar in other respects. Each appears the more ridiculous when ranged alongside the other, the Pardoner dainty, effeminate, bleating, the Summoner strident, coarse, brutal. The fripperies of the Pardoner's dress are fully offset by the dirty, disheveled attire of his villainous confrere, and the contrast is rendered more mirthful by the mind's listening to the furious caterwauling of the tender love-song "Come hider, love, to me!" in which the Pardoner's falsetto and the Summoner's liquor-husky bass are so oddly blended.

Additional contrast is intimated in the sex-life of the two men. The Summoner is as "lecherous as a sparwe," but the Pardoner is obviously a eunuch. There is a suggestion of his impotence in what is said of him in the "Prologue."

This suggestion is borne out in his talk with the Wife of Bath in the prologue to her story; it may be gathered from the Summoner's anxious questioning of the Wife that he is seriously pondering the advisability of marriage when he hears her comments upon the sex relationship between husband and wife. We laugh with a rank and racy sort of glee at the obviousness of this sex-joke, savoring it with the same zest of temporary release and return to animalistic gustiness and pleasure in a topic which is one of society's most rigid taboos.

In speaking of the fake religious relics carried about by the Pardoner, Chaucer again affects a pious innocence, which adds to the pervasiveness of his humor in the chuckling over the poor humanity which can subscribe to such fallacies. Further illumination is furnished by the mention of the Pardoner's canniness in wangling funds from the superstitious country parsons, the age-old joke at the duping of the rustic and the ease with which he yields up his hard-earned funds to the glib-tongued fakir. Some of Chaucer's most pleasurable imagery is found in the lines in the prologue to the Pardoner's Tale in the deliriously funny picture of the yokels tumbling down the aisles to crowd about the Pardoner and his nostrums for all ills and evils; no modern patent-medicine vendor's crowd could be more ludicrously human.

### The Professional Classes

The slight raillery which sparkles through what might otherwise be a dull rendition of the characteristics of the Sergeant of Law and the Doctor discloses Chaucer's fine, deep appreciation of the absurdities of the two men; it proves that intellectual qualities may be handled with the energy of high spirits and a kind of pressure of physical vitality, which in itself is humorous in its very human abandon. There is a genial impatience over the pompousness and officiousness of each man, this in spite of Chaucer's respect for them and for the professions they follow. There is no knowing to what extent he accepted various legal and medical theories, most of them handed down from the time of Aristotle, but we may be convinced that he is making game of some of them.

The Doctor is represented as something of a babler, his talk centering largely in the glories of his profession and his own eminent qualities. On this basis, the Doctor may be assumed to be a very problematical character, probably something of a fraud. Chaucer heets at the mercenary, grasping streak in his nature in the double meaning of the lines

For gold in physik is a cordial;  
Therefore he lovede gold in special.

The satire in the allusion to the Doctor's failure to read the Bible and to comply with its precepts is scarcely obscure, the science of medicine having been advanced much

during the Middle Ages by the Jews and Saracens, infidels to the general church-people. The shrewdness of Chaucer's observations upon the two professional men has something of the tang of Swift's most trenchant satire. More could have been said of them, but the comments could obviously go no further or they might have been considered too pointed. A man of intelligence of the Middle Ages, however, like one of modern times, would have no less respect for professional people, in spite of the fact that he might choose occasionally to ridicule them.

#### The Country Folk

In the four rural folk--the Franklin, the Miller, the Reeve, and the Plowman--Chaucer has manifested the greatest of his varied gifts, the ability to draw with broad, telling strokes and without prejudice, a composite picture of rural England itself, as it had been for centuries, as it was to continue for centuries to come, and finally as it was to pass over into a pleasant phase of our own American life. Each man of the four represents a distinct type of the agricultural life of any age, skillfully individualized as is each man in his outstanding traits. At least two of the men bear touches of the yokel which at times verge upon the comic, but these touches are too sympathetically handled for us ever to feel that Chaucer is simply making fun of his char-



acters. Laugh at them we must, but our laughter is not like Chaucer's if it is disdainful.

The Franklin is the forerunner of the country gentleman so well loved of subsequent English fiction. Bluff, good-natured, sober, robustious, loving the good life, we may interpret his character from the lines we read of him. We like him for his ruddiness and sanguine temperament, as Chaucer has made sure we shall. There is almost a touch of mirthful slapstick away back behind the lines when we imagine his displeasure and the woe his cook must have known whenever the sauce lacked in sharpness. He merits our sympathy in another bit of human comedy when he laments the money he has wasted upon his roistering son; that thoroughly "modern" note is one of Chaucer's greatest touches of universality. There is also a certain poking of fun at what may be regarded the social ambitions of the Franklin in the wishful remark of his lacking in "gentillesse." The sly dig is charged with the same twinkling malice that made convincing the noveau riche hero of Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme.

In his defects, the Miller attains his comic personal-ity. Without ever trying, he is the unconscious comedian in everything he says and does. He fits our mood at the time we read of him, and so we like him playfully, however much he might pall upon us if we were forced to put up with him for any length of time. His every conspicuous characteristic is exaggerated to the degree of absurdity. It is sheer

earthly joy to have known him, down to the wart upon his nose with its tuft of red hair and the hard head which could break through doors at "a rennyng," for his physical appearance takes hold of our most gleeful and child-like amusement. Delightful, too, is the role he assumes of the rustic provider of fanfare, riding ahead of the pilgrims and merrily piping them from the town.

We laugh not so whole-heartedly over the portrait of the Reeve. There is something sardonic in Chaucer's presentation of this man, an impish pleasure in the details of his summing-up. He is petulant, snappish, a bit puling, given to petty embezzlements, and as we grimace a little at the thought of him we acknowledge our own superiority to him. The contrast between him and the Miller is so deliciously brought out, that we are even rather thrilled, as children are thrilled, at the sudden flaring-up of rancor between them. It is not until we read the prologue to his tale that we really sympathize with him, even pity him in his old man's helplessness. So deftly has Chaucer prepared us for the telling of two of his best tales that almost we feel that the two have acted independently of the master.

The character of the Plowman is a revelation of simple goodness. Genuine, unaffected, and rugged, he is as thoroughly admirable as the type he represents. So enchanted are we by his universal homeliness that we love him for the contribution he makes to the whole human comedy.

## The Provincial Townsfolk

Some of the greatest characters in all literature are great because they are infinitely rich in those qualities which belong to the comical. It is often in character drawing that the greatest triumphs of humor are achieved. Witness Sir John Falstaff, Wilkins Micawber, and Ichabod Crane, to name only three characters who will survive any test the comic analyst wishes to make. The Wife of Bath exhibits Chaucer's most masterful strokes. Robust, loquacious, preening her middle-aged charms with the arrogance and coquettishness of a young girl, she is one of Chaucer's most splendid creations. Her realness is the greatest thing about her. There is at least one Wife of Bath in every community. We have all seen dozens of her counterpart if we have looked about us at all.

There is a jovial irony in the line referring to the Wife's deafness. "But she was somedel deaf, and that was scathe." Why is it a pity? Is it that she can remain oblivious to any protestation made during her harangue? Is it merely that she possesses the faculty--one might say "happy faculty"--of being impervious to any objection to her domination of the crowd? (For a time she does dominate it almost as completely as does the Host.) Chaucer leaves it for us to guess. The two lines telling of her cloth-making are almost as cleverly ambiguous. Since the West Country weavers

were not in particularly good repute because of their cheating, however, according to Manly,<sup>17</sup> the satire is directed against a whole locality rather than against one person.

Swaggering and domineering is the Wife in her religious offices, as in other aspects of her life, so that none dare precede her in her offering at mass. Respectably married as she has been, and proud as she is of her respectability, she would even have us look upon her many other amours as quite comme il faut; besides the five husbands she has outlived, she has had other lovers and has undoubtedly known on her pilgrimage through life, as on her religious pilgrimages, "muchel wandrynge by the weye."

In the first lines of the prologue to her story, the Wife dwells at some length upon the respective merits of experience and authority, bandying cleverly the cant of the schools as she must have learned it from her fifth husband, a clerk. In her analysis of the relationship between husband and wife, there is a wonderful blending of the old wives' commonsense and the analytical student's pungent observations upon human destinies. The air of unquestioned authority with which the Wife propounds her judgments is but one of many indications of her aggressiveness. There is some honest doubt in her mind as to the validity of her last four marriages, but she attempts to justify her stand with a bewildering array of scriptural injunctions. Her revelation of her matrimonial

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<sup>17</sup> Manly, edition of Canterbury Tales (Henry Holt & Company, New York, 1928), p. 527.

experience is a little more intimate than should seem natural, but Chaucer has exploited these intimacies to emphasize her real character. Manly has stated that

... her revelation of her acts, motives, and character belongs to the general stream of mediæval satire on women, and includes all the most striking features of that satire.<sup>18</sup>

### The City Folk

A rich figure among Chaucer's collection of rich figures is the Merchant. Lordly, disdainful, pompous, and not a little stuffy, he sits high on his horse, glancing out over the band of people who are to accompany him on his pilgrimage. Sententiously he sounds his businessman's platitudes and euphemisms; loftily but condescendingly he presents his well-garbed person to the company, keeping nothing back from them save the shadier means whereby he has acquired his wealth and the fact that he owes much to various creditors. And yet there is something reassuring about the man, spurious as he no doubt is. Before we have thought of him very much, we unconsciously find ourselves comparing him with the high-middle-class Forsytes of a much later age and literature; and we realize that we can never quite laugh him off, for he epitomizes a rising order based upon an acute consciousness of property.

The Manciple does not offer very much of the comic. As

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 574.

Manly has stated:

...Of the thinly drawn figures the Manciple is perhaps, after the Second Nun, the thinnest. He is not an individual; he is not even a well-drawn, rounded type: he is merely a stalking horse from behind which Chaucer shoots a playful arrow at his learned masters of the Temple--capable of managing great estates but not wise enough to defeat the low cunning of their servant. The tale he tells is not appropriate to him and is indeed a very early chip from Chaucer's workshop, hewn off when he was still struggling to master the rhetorical principles and practices of Mathieu de Vendome and Geoffroi de Vinssauf. The only time the Manciple exhibits any trait of humanity--in any sense of the term--is when he offers a drink from his gourd to the quarrelsome Cook.<sup>19</sup>

So little is said, after all, of the five city tradesmen, the Haberdasher, the Carpenter, the Weaver, the Dyer, and the Tapestry Maker, that they may be treated as a group here, as they are treated in the "Prologue." Undoubtedly Chaucer meant to do more by them: there are too many hints in the lines about them. But for some reason which no one may guess, he never gave any further delineation of their separate characters. As we smile a little over the mention of the pretentiousness of the men's wives, the barest hint of some satire Chaucer must have had in mind of woman's social ambitions, we wish that we could have seen more of the men in question.

The picture of the Cook is much better and more clearly

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<sup>19</sup> Manly, Some New Light on Chaucer, 253.

defined. It is richer in its passing phase of the rich comedy of humanity. Obscene as is the man in his obvious delight in filth for filth's sake, we meet his obscenity with a half-hearted grin as over something forbidden.

And now the burly form of the Host stalks into view, Chaucer's rarest, richest characterization. No other one of the group who rode out to Canterbury is so amazingly, consistently, and arrestingly the individual. Later developments throughout the Tales are in perfect accord with the picture we first have of him in the "Prologue": his domination of the entire company; the different attitudes he shows toward the different pilgrims; his personal reactions to the tales and to the side remarks of various individuals. Sometimes he bullies. Sometimes he badgers until he arouses stinging rebukes. Again his tone becomes genuinely deferential. Not only do we listen to him; we actually hear his voice. He is as ripely and as intensely human as the Wife of Bath, and far more individual. When he laments the temerity of his wife Godelief, we sneaker over the thought of another of those henpecked husbands who have caught our amused pity from the time of Socrates. In his utter masculinity, we like him for his very masculine weaknesses and faults. He really serves, more than does the institution of the pilgrimage, as the motivating force of the whole human comedy we witness. The enviable role, one of the very few like it in all literature, which he enjoys as a sort of combined master

of ceremonies and interlocutor not only renders the comedy of his personality the more sparkling but that of the entire company as well. Lowes has said of him:

...The Prologue gives us the pilgrims in statu quo ante; their own actions along the road reveal their characters; but (to propound an axiom) it is only when you see yourself as an innkeeper or a butler sees you that you know the whole truth about yourself. In either case, you are apt to be sadder as well as wiser. And Chaucer, with that art of his which shares with great creating nature, has shown us the pilgrims not only through his own and through each other's eyes, but also through the eyes of Harry Bailly...with an astuteness ripened through long years of observation in a London inn he accommodates his words to the several pilgrims with unerring nicety:

'My lady Prioresse, by youre leve,  
So that I wiste I sholde yow nat greve,  
I wolde demen that ye tellen sholde  
A tale next, if so were that ye wolde,  
How wel ye vouche sauf, my lady decre?'

So, again, with a courtesy this time touched with that benignant affability with which the man of the world indulges the scholar, the Host addresses the Clerk of Oxford:

'Sire Clerk of Oxenford,'oure Hooste sayde,  
'Ye ryde as coy and stille as dooth a mayde...  
This day no herde I of youre tonge a word.  
I trowe ye studie aboute som sophyme...  
For Goddes sake, as both of bettre cheere!  
It is no tyme for to studien heere.  
Telle us som myrie tale, by youre feye!'

But---

'Sire Monk, nameere of this, so God yow blesses!  
Your tale now is that is that is...  
Sotchikilly; nere clynkyng of youre belles,  
That on youre bridel hange on every syde,  
By hevens kyng, that for us alle dyde,  
I sholde or this han fallen down for sleep.'



Read the words of the Host, which precipitate a double explosion, in the Prologue to the Shipman's Tale; read what he says, after hearing the sad story of Appius and Virginia, for the most engaging embodiment I know of the attitude of a typical audience at melodrama; and above all read his impassioned outburst in the Monk's Prologue on the monstrous regiment of Godielief his wife. For with the pilgrims, Chaucer declares and demonstrates, the Host spoke 'as lordly as a king.' But at home--le roi est mort! vive la reine! And never did brow-beaten husband unpack his heart with more soul-satisfying words.<sup>20</sup>

Of all the measures of the power of the humorist, the greatest is his ability to laugh at himself. So very, very few people possess that ability, after all, no matter how loudly their laughter rings out at the characters of others or the situations into which those others are plugged. No truer philosopher exists than the man who is able to join whole-heartedly in the merriment he himself affords. Chaucer rises to this occasion in all the beautifully sly digs he takes at himself.

Somewhere, sometime, within his experience, the writer of this thesis has heard the statement made by one who claimed to know and to love Chaucer that Chaucer was an exceedingly shy and retiring man, preferring his books and his thoughts to the company of others, shunning others in fact. This could hardly be regarded as anything less than libel. For, first of all, we have the record of Chaucer's multifarious activities in the fields of law, diplomacy, business, court affairs, and governmental pursuits. Knowing men as he knew

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<sup>20</sup> Lowes, op. cit., 204.

them, he was able to talk with people from every walk of life. We have his own statement in the lines of the "Prologue," when he first speaks of the heterogeneous group which had gathered at the Tabard:

And shortly, when the sonne was to reete  
So hadde I spoken with hem evericheon  
That I was of hir felaweshipe anon....

That is the most beautiful thing about Chaucer, his "felaweshipe" with the whole world, making it possible for the Canterbury Tales to be everything that they are. What timid man would have been able to speak easily and naturally with such widely varying types of people as the Prioress and the Miller, drawing from them confidences they would have disclosed to no one else in the company?

But if Chaucer knows when and how he may talk with these pilgrims, he also knew when to be silent, taking his satisfaction in the role of onlooker, while at the same time a participant, at the comedy in which he found himself. The Host, whose attention has been centered in the more demonstrative of the pilgrims, suddenly notices this silent and unobtrusive figure for perhaps the first time, during the lull which follows the Prioress' Tale--

... 'What man artow?' quod he.  
'Then lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,  
For evere upon the ground I se thee stare.

'Approche neer, and look up murely.  
Now war yow, sires, and lat this man have place! ✓  
He in the waast is shape as well as I;  
This were a popet in an arm tenbrace  
For any woman smal and fair of face.

He semeth elvyssh by his contenance,  
For unto no wight deeth he dallance.

'Sev now somewhat, syn oother folk han sayd,  
Telle us a tale of myrthe, and that anon!'  
'Hooste,' quod I, 'ne both nat yvele apayd,  
For oother tale certes kan I noon  
But of a rym I lerned longe agoon.'  
'Ye, that is good,' quod he. 'How shal we heere  
Som deyntoo thyng, me thynketh by his cheere.'

And here we have one of the most enjoyable bits of Chaucerian humor, a self-bantering merriment over his own corpulency and habit of falling into periods of abstraction. We are also afforded our first and best glimpse of Chaucer's countenance and are quick to note the elfish spirit which can light it up. At the Host's interruption of the Tale of Sir Thomas, we obtain another view of the genial patience and tolerance of a man mighty in his knowledge of human nature. The Canterbury Tales could never have attained their place in the great comedies of the world, had Chaucer omitted himself from them.

Lusty, swinging, vigorous, we find all these subtle analyses of the Canterbury Pilgrims in their comedy of human life, breathing of the closeness and mellowness and warmth of earth, fervent with the mild and genial sympathy for mankind as the most laughable of all creatures, ringing with the reflection of life as a thing to be gloried in, loved, and laughed over. The tales these pilgrims tell, discussed in the following chapter, are as great as the raconteurs themselves, no lesser emanations of comic humanity.

## CHAPTER V

## THE TALES OF THE PILGRIMS

For one who has made his first acquaintance with Chaucer through reading the "Prologue" of the Canterbury Tales, it would be a decidedly novel experience to pause long enough to make a guess as to the nature of the tale each pilgrim is to tell before he takes up the reading of the Tales themselves. In some cases he would be a little surprised, in one or two cases he might be somewhat shocked, once he had gone ahead with his reading; but generally, he would not find many of his guesses far amiss. What other tale would the Miller tell, for instance, but a tale as entertainingly gross as himself? Who but the Wife of Bath would have told her tale, with its all too painstakingly clear emphasis upon the need of a wife's dominance to make a marriage a successful one?

Some of the tales, of course, do not exactly suggest their narrators. It would be more apropos to state that some of the characters introduced in the "Prologue" do not exactly suggest the tales we later find them telling. Some shifting about in the assignment of certain tales to certain characters was made by Chaucer after his first outline had begun to take more definite form, shiftings which might not always be easily understandable. In many cases, however, we may be fairly sure that the original plan of teller and tale remained unchanged. In any event, we are not greatly concerned with

that phase of Chaucer's work. Our analysis consists largely in determining two things: more of the comic revelation of those characters in whom we are primarily interested for the roles they play in Chaucer's comedy of humanity; the comic content of the tales themselves.

In order to present a more detailed analysis of the comic element of the pilgrims' tales, it is worth while to arrange these stories according to certain classification. The arrangement depends entirely upon the general nature of the tales, not upon any chronological order established by the various editors of Chaucer's works.

The twenty-four inset tales and fragments of tales may be divided roughly into the following groups: the fabliaux; the moral tales; the courtly epic; the courtly romance; the beast-epic; the fantasies; the legends; the tale of classical origin; the literary satire; the contemporaneous anecdote; the sermon. Each group will be discussed separately in the order listed. In some cases it has been necessary to treat certain end-links, prologues, and epilogues with the stories.

## The Fabliaux

Like the ballad, the fabliau is distinctly a product of the common people. For hundreds of years, in the Orient and later on in Europe, its appeal was chiefly to the lower classes, and its characteristics easily show the lower-class mind. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it probably attained its greatest popularity, and during that time great collections of this type of folk-tale were made and preserved in writing. Outstanding characteristics of the fabliau are its low, coarse wit and humor, its curious mingling of yokel skepticism and yokel naivete, and the usual victimizing of some person or persons through another's duplicity or horse-play. Quite often it is a clever folk-satire on some august personage or institution. Frequently any filth it contains is partly compensated for by its cleverness and briskness of exposition and denouement. Favorite topics, apparently, are faithless wives, jealous husbands who are often made cuckolds, and rascals whose sins may or may not find them out. Love, marriage, death, or religion--none of these does it hold too sacred for its satire. The list of things which it does not hold too repulsive would be longer. It may even tend to glorify man's grossest instincts and behavior, and the material with which it deals is usually of the most concrete and tangible.

Seven of Chaucer's tales are fabliaux: those of the Miller, the Reeve, the Cook, the Shipman, the Summoner, the Merchant, and the Manciple. All of them are Chaucer's own enlargements of stories which have come down to him, as Lowes states, "in varying degrees of directness, through long tradition--tales, it may be, which had lived on men's lips for centuries, passing current in every tongue, and worn down to their bare nucleus."<sup>22</sup> One of the tales is a combination of the best features of two fabliaux. That Chaucer could recognize and make use of the best that each tale had to offer, that he could bring into his own elaboration such penetrating wit, splendid characterization, and swiftly moving action, are but further and positive proofs of his comic genius. Every one of these "cherles tales" bears the unmistakable flavor of Chaucer's originality; any dilation upon source material would only be a digression.

The Miller's and the Reeve's tales have many qualities in common, closely linked as they are by the dramatic intensity of their narrators' open hostility to one another. Chaucer's canniness in bringing into the telling of each tale all of the malice and spite and scorn which each man is capable of feeling has more than strengthened their position as two of the world's superlatively great "dirty" stories. The real fun of the Miller's Tale is the gullibility of the

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<sup>22</sup> Lowes, op. cit., 216.

jealous carpenter and the cunning of "hende Nicholas," not in the lechery which motivates the trick. In the Reeve's Tale, a kind of comic poetic justice, crude as it is, provides the real material for laughing purposes. The comic interest of each tale rests largely upon the adroit manipulation and complete success of rogues' tricks.

Aside from its obscenity, the Miller's Tale possesses many of the qualities which go into the making of an exceptionally well-finished short-story or comic drama. The graphic portrayal of the carpenter, his wife, and their boarder, accomplished with all the precision of the portraiture of the Canterbury pilgrims, provides our first glimpse of the whole ludicrous situation. After Nicholas' dalliance with Alison during the carpenter's absence and her promise of future favors, Absolon is introduced for new complications. The main thread of the story is then resumed. The trance which Nicholas stages and his revelation to the carpenter of an impending second deluge are examples of a knowing knavery which is beautifully grotesque. At the grave concern of the carpenter over Nicholas' seizure and the zeal with which he dispatches the instructions for the preparation of the flood we are prone to laugh boorishly, a laughter in which pity and anticipation and superiority are all mingled.

Then, at the very time when Nicholas and Alison are engaged in enjoying the fruits of their deception, Absolon calls upon Alison, as superb a comedy scene in itself as in



any well-drawn comedy. The result of this call is that he is made the victim of a joke unwarrantably vile and unwarrantably funny. The means he takes of avenging himself is equally so. Nicholas' branding and desperate careering about the room offer a slap-dash action that surpasses many a stage comedy depending upon humor at its crullest. At Nicholas' frantic cry of "Water!" the sleeping carpenter awakens and, thinking that the flood has come, cuts the ropes which suspend his tub, bringing himself swiftly down to earth, literally and figuratively. With the catastrophe of the central action thus brought about, the story concludes in a gust of ribaldry and bedevilment of the poor carpenter.

The plot of the Reeve's Tale is equally ingenious and the portraiture of the miller, his overbearing wife, and their bawdy daughter as excellent as that of the Miller's Tale. Country cunning and craft are admirable overtones of this rollicking story, as in the clever plan of the two clerks to prevent the miller's cheating and the cleverer ruse of the miller in cutting the reins of their horse. The subsequent proceedings are told in the neatly-balanced and economically-worded style that has made this type of story popular among the common people for centuries. The homely wit of the miller anent his ability to outwit the clerks, whose literacy he scorns, and the details of his merry-making occasioned by his cleverness, merry-making in which the clerks must perforce take part, chagrined as they are, fur-

nish hilarious comedy on a slightly higher plane than that furnished by the sordid account of the clerks' dishonoring of his house. The lively brawl which concludes the story is given in such a glory of realistic detail that we joy in every word of its rich, clear imagery.

One quality in particular, in each of these tales, stands out as vigorous and compelling in its realistic human comedy-- the abundance of deft characterization. In the Miller's Tale, the descriptions of three of the characters are handled with a sprightly joyousness that is not rivaled by the picturization of any of the pilgrims. Nicholas the Clerk is the antithesis of the Oxford Clerk of the "Prologue." Sly libertine and deceiving scamp that he is, he still bubbles with an animalistic merriment, conducting himself not so much in the way Chaucer would have him act as in the way he would naturally act. The portrait of Alisoun is charming in its delicacy and freshness. Chaucer has even gone beyond the conventional means of picturing feminine leveliness, which have so palled upon many readers from the time of the medieval romance on down to today's romantic and sugary love-story; Alisoun becomes the more vividly outlined against the background of a small medieval town in the briskness of Chaucer's own country-side similes used in telling of her person and dress.<sup>23</sup> In Absolon there is the perfectly drawn likeness

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<sup>23</sup> Lewis, op. cit., 218.

of the typical rustic fop, a type as eternal as anything Chaucer ever set down. There is even a smile over the mention of Absolon's being something of a jack-of-all-trades, the smile with which we usually greet the idea of such rustic versatility. Since he is a little too dainty and mincing and squeamish for what we arrogantly regard our own plebeian tastes, we derive a secret pleasure in anticipating for him a disaster quite like the disaster he does meet, guffawing our approval when he meets it and ashamed a moment later for our guffawing. So enjoyably does Chaucer paint this one type character that he becomes for us one of the most individualized of all Chaucer's characters.

The characters of the Reeve's Tale are disclosed with the same startling realism but with an even more earthy vigor. "Deynous Symkyn," the miller, is even more low-browed and swaggering than is his prototype, the Miller of the "Prologue." It is as though the Reeve, in telling the tale which pays off his score to the Miller, savors the accentuation of every coarse trait with the relish peculiar to men of his type, an exaggeration which builds to the comedy of the whole. The understatement regarding the miller's wife are no less fine-grained irony than are the overstatements regarding the miller. Of noble kin is she, the Reeve laconically remarks, the daughter of a priest, a man who had taken celibacy as one of his vows. The double meaning of the remark about her genteel bringing-up in a nunnery is all too easily perceived,

the nunnery being the only home the woman could have known. Her haughtiness arises from nothing more than her being continually on the defensive against any allusion concerning her ignoble birth.<sup>24</sup> We might well fancy the word "wench" to have been coined for the plump and robustious daughter, so true to that conception is the picture of the comely slattern that we are given. We would not have to seek far in our search for a family like them in any rural section of our own country, for their universality is the most beautiful part of them.

The Cook's Tale is only a fragment, and its chief attraction is another fine comic portrait in the person of its central character, Perkin the reveler. There is not enough of the story for us to form any guess as to its plot, but we at once assume that it was intended to be another merry tale similar to those of the Miller and the Reeve. The supposition that Chaucer, in keeping with his other attributes of the comic genius, might have chosen deliberately to tantalize his readers by withholding something they had come to expect or that he did not want to over-do this particular stroke of comedy in this particular instance might not be too wildly theoretical. At any rate, we have simply the words of the old scribe that "of this Cokes tale naked Chaucer na more."

The Shipman's Tale is slightly more refined in tone than

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 221.

the tales of the Miller and the Reeve, but it has none of the redeeming moral imputations, however vague they are, of these tales. The young monk, Dan John, is one of the most ignoble of Chaucer's hypocrites. Not only does he violate the duties of his calling, but he evinces the utmost ingratitude and deceit in his betraying of the merchant who has extended to him such hospitality and so many favors. He extricates himself gracefully from all embarrassment, causing us to be only faintly amused by his duplicity. The story is not the best that Chaucer can make it, nor is it wholly in harmony with the Shipman's moral character, seeming a little too tame for the last named. We may infer that the Shipman is merely carrying out a view he may previously have formed that most women may be regarded as potential prey and most husbands as potential cuckold and that any interloper clever enough to take advantage of these two facts is well justified so long as he is not apprehended.

Both the Summoner's Tale and his prologue show how excessively vindictive the man can be when enraged. The unsavory account of the place reserved in hell for friars is more vicious than his coarse tale of the loathsomely hypocritical friar. The story of the friar's preying upon the poor, his simply consummate effrontery, his feigned humility and piety before those whom he would impress, is scorching in its mocking irony, but it affords a sardonic laughter. Again we have the drollery of humorous understatement in the

friar's professed ignorance of the simplest comforts in view of the ascetic life he must lead. His sanctimonious condolence, assurance, and remonstrance enable us to see even more clearly the humor of the whole laughable situation. We are a bit smugly satisfied with the gross insult he receives, and there is almost a moralizing nod or two over the ingenious plan of the lord's servant which adds to the friar's humiliation, admitting that we, the refined, would never think of so gross a thing. Looking back over the story, we laugh again, a more naive laughter this time, over the thought that the friar's outburst of wrath is wholly at variance with the sin he has denounced so vigorously.

The main impression we receive from the Merchant's Tale is that it is a magnificent satire on women. The cynicism is the Merchant's, not Chaucer's, albeit there is an overtone of Chaucer's mellowed badinage of the sex. However Chaucer may have regarded Griselda, of whom we have heard in the tale just before the Merchant's, as exemplifying a noble trait of womanhood, we feel that he must have thought it necessary to demonstrate that women who embody that idea are not too numerous. The famed Chichevache that feeds on patient wives does not run any immediate risk of foundering, he has been careful to point out in his envoy to the tale of Griselda. And now the Merchant, whose wife bears a close comparison to the shrewish mate of the Host, comes forward with his arraignment of the vices of woman, which we sense will serve as the pre-

amble to a tale which will offset the goodness of Griselda. The Host's eager permission to the Merchant to hold forth is prompted partly, we may be sure, by his wistful reflections upon the contrast between his own nagging Godelief and the patient Griselda; he must hear more of wives, good and bad.

Chaucer's interest shows itself more in his convincing characterization of the daddering January than in anything else in the Merchant's Tale, a characterization that is satire at its urbanest, though tinged with an irony that is none too gentle, and we comprehend the comedy of January better than the comedy of anything else. Having spent his life in debauchery, the senile rouse is seized by the sudden whim that he must make his last years happy by marriage, and by the perverse notion that marriage will even purify his life of its dross. When he calls in his brothers and their friends for advice, he is really seeking their approval, a gesture so thoroughly human that no human being should be able to smile over it without wincing a trifle. The counsel of one brother, Justinus, is replete with old saws and maxims, so twinkling in their homely wisdom that they could not be called gull. Uttered by the Merchant these lines take on the finest and most delicately shaded irony:

For who can be so buxom as a wyf?  
 Who is so trewe, and eek so ententyf  
 To kepe him, ayk and hool, as is his make?

and

A wyf wol laste, and in thyn hous endure,  
 Wol lenger than thee list, peraventure....  
 A wyf! a! Sainte Marie, ben'eite!  
 How mighte a man han any adversitee  
 That hath a wyf? certes, I kan nat seye.  
 The blisse which is botwixte hem tweye  
 Ther may no tonge telle, or herte thinke.  
 If he be povre, she helpeth him to swinke;  
 She keepeth his good, and wasteth never a deel;  
 Al that hir househonde lust, hir lyketh weel;  
 She seith nat ones 'nay,' when he seith 'ye.'  
 'Do this,' seith he; 'al redy, sir,' seith she.

And so January reconciles himself with every assurance that he must wed. Furthermore his wife must be young and beautiful. His utterances call to mind a pithy old saying, serious in its humor, regarding the lack of fools comparable to an old fool, a country epigram which Chaucer himself might well have coined here, so well does he know its context. An even greater understanding of this phase of the human comedy which Chaucer understood so keenly comes to us in the quaint saws regarding the marriage of "crabbed age and youth," in the malice of Justinus' remark that the sorrows of marriage serve as the earthly tribulation which brings man the nearer to heaven, in the old man's boasting of his youthful ardor, and in the quizzical allusion to what the Wife of Bath has had to say about the relationship between husband and wife. The stinging satire on the nuptial celebrations of January and May, overcast as it is by pity for the young bride, makes clear the absurdity of the thing that is foredoomed to failure. In the fascinating portrayal of May, we find another



expression of the sympathy both for woman and for youth that meant so much to Chaucer's realization of the human comedy.

Distasteful as are the details of the old man's coltishness, we know that they are no more than the predications of an earthy comedy that would be relished by most of the listeners to the Merchant's Tale; indecencies, they are, but the "innocent indecencies" of a rather unsophisticated risqué story. The concupiscence of young Damien and May are of the same genre, told with the same gusty vulgarity. [The conversation between the gods Pluto and Proserpine and the craftiness of May in riding down January's accusations are less elemental comedy, more self-contained in their irony, and calling for a greater degree of intelligence in interpretation.] although not without the realm of the common man's sense of the comic. Although the tale is lewd, its lewdness is not wholly noxious, for a sort of poetic justice in it does prevail, as in the Reeve's and the Summoner's tales, and its pungent observations upon the comic in man more than compensate for its immorality.

The comedy of the Nunciate's Tale is another comedy of the faithless wife and the jealous husband, although lacking in the vigor and exuberance of the other tales of similar nature; it is a little more fragile and delicate than the tales of the Miller and the Reeve and is little more than a charming fantasy and moral fable. Its main attraction, aside from the story itself, is in the coarse, blunt truths of its

maxims regarding marriage and the advisability of knowing just how to handle unpleasant truths, maxims potent in the force of man's worldly wisdom.

### The Moral Tales

Next to the fabliaux, the group of tales loosely designated the "moral tales" comprise the largest number of the stories of the pilgrims. In this group may be listed the tales of the Sergeant of Law, the Friar, the Clerk, the Pardoner, Chaucer's own Tale of Melibeus, and the tale of the Monk. There may be some disregard for other classifications of the inset tales in listing the Monk's Tale as one of this group, but the tale does contain many of the essentials of the moral tale, even though it consists of a series of short tragedies.

The Man of Law's Tale is a highly sentimental and ✓ saccharine story of great strength in the face of suffering and eventual reward of virtue, the kind of tale in which many have taken pleasure and one offering ample opportunity for the kind of moralizing in which a pompous or perhaps none too honest man delights. The concession that the Man of Law makes to Chaucer in the introduction to his prologue, with its tone of mock deference, is a capital bit of self-bantering on Chaucer's part. The railing prologue, which could hardly be said to have any connection with the story which

follows, but strengthens the opinion we have previously formed of the Man of Law from what we have read of him in the "Prologue." We can hardly concede him to be more than an officious egotist, bombastic, opinionated, condescending, intolerant, and not a little tiresome. The greatest smile that he allows us is brought about by the satisfaction that Chaucer has succeeded admirably in deflating the type he represents. The tale he tells is hardly more than a sequence of romantic incidents, and its central figure, Constance, is too inhumanly pure and good for us to take more than a casual interest in plot and characterization, neither offering anything of real value from a comic vantage.

The discernment of the comedy of the Friar's Tale depends much upon the interest in the tale and its narrator before ever we begin our reading of it. That interest has been whetted by the sudden flaring-up of antagonism between the Friar and the Summoner. We are first aware of each man's antipathy for the other toward the conclusion of the Wife of Bath's long prologue when the Friar chides her for her loquacity and the Summoner promptly calls him to account for his interruption. Angered, the Friar promises that he shall tell a tale about a summoner that will make the company laugh, and the Summoner assures him that he can retaliate by telling a story that is wholly uncomplimentary to the other's profession. The Host succeeds in making peace for a time, but we may know that the quarrel will be resumed.

It is necessary to understand that the enmity between the two men is something more than a personal matter. Manly has given an excellent explanation of the fundamental causes of their open hostility.<sup>25</sup> The Summoner belongs to an organization known as the secular clergy, consisting of those who have taken explicit religious vows and are members of world-wide organizations, holding authority directly from the Pope and independent of the jurisdiction of any national church. Open hostilities would naturally flare up between separate ecclesiastical organizations existing side by side within the same state; the religious clergy were continually infringing upon the rights of the secular, and the secular clergy took every opportunity to restrain the power and influence of the other. When the Friar boasts that his order is outside the Summoner's jurisdiction, the Summoner's stinging repartee is, "so been the women of the styves." Since their mutual dislike has grown so since they have been brought together, we can expect their quarrel to culminate in such a way that Chaucer will accomplish his purpose of showing up both professions by the skillful device of making each one lay bare the pretensions of the other. For that reason alone, the tales of the Friar and the Summoner are more than merely entertaining anecdotes.

The Friar begins with a blasting statement: "Ye may

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<sup>25</sup> Manly, edition of Canterbury Tales, 536.

we know by the name "That of a summoner may no good be sayd," and continues with merciless exposure throughout; so scathing is this exposure that at times we feel a derisive pity for the Summoner and catch ourselves looking pleasantly forward to the time when he shall have requited himself and his profession. The definition of a summoner is one of Chaucer's deepest thrusts, depending not upon any play of words or double meanings, but flaying the most fundamental failings of a man's conscience. Whereupon even the Host, accustomed as he is to riding rough-shod over others' feelings, is taken aback by the brutal indictment and, sensing that it may provoke a renewal of the quarrel, calls upon the men to hold their peace so that the tale may proceed. A slang term "syngen"--"Thay those who were haled before the archdeacon for various offenses sholden syngen, if that they were hent"--makes the description of the archdeacon's punishments still more waggish, especially since it touches upon the recalcitrance of those who are wounded where man is most sensitive--the purse. We derive an enjoyment that is almost physical, almost first-hand, in reading of the craftiness of the summoner of the tale; one or two lechers are spared upon condition that they keep him informed of the lecheries of others; various harlots in his employ also keep him informed; summons which he has forged provide additional means of lining his pockets. The enjoyment is intensified at the mental picture of the Summoner's writhing under the insults dealt to his

profession and becomes upon laughter when he, smarting until he can no longer restrain himself, shrieks out his imprecations upon the Friar at the end of the tale. The whining humility of the summoner in the tale before those whom he has fleeced, his arrogance to the helpless, is told with all the gusto of a born raconteur whose forte is mimicry. The dialogue between the summoner and the fiend is a masterpiece of dramatic realism, and we joy in every word of it. Shameless as he is, however, the summoner at first seeks to keep secret his detested calling. "He dorste nat, for verray filthe and shame, Say that he was a somonour, for the name." Pleasingly whimsical are the hints by which the fiend eventually discloses his identity; his recital of his methods inveigles the summoner into a frank confession of his own extortions. A mischievous mirth sparkles in the fiend's contempt for theological abstractions, and a momentary thrill shoots out in the suspense before the catastrophe of the tale. Old Mabley, whose indignant resistance to the summoner's demands is seen in a light both ludicrous and pathetic, wishes both the summoner and her new pan, which he covets, at the devil (unless he "wole him repent") with all the vituperation of which an old wife is capable. But the summoner's boast that he has no intention of repenting and his subsequent seizure by the fiend and transportation to hell, "Ther-as that somonours han hir heritage," has the same chillingly ecstatic effect as that of little devils dancing with their screaming prey

toward hell-mouth in an old play. The conclusion of the Friar: "And prayeth that thise sumonours hem repente Of hir mysdedes, or that the feend hem hente!" is a masterful blending of malignancy and smugness, one of the most human remarks of any one of Chaucer's characters.

The Clerk's Tale of the patient Griselda is a skillful retelling of Petrarch's Latin version of a story in Boccaccio's Decameron.<sup>26</sup> In this tale, Chaucer would not resist the chance to make sport of the commonly accepted situations and qualities which have made many a medieval story told with a similar moral in mind so amusing to modern readers. One of the group of "marriage tales," the tale of Griselda provides the Clerk with an excellent means of evening up the score between himself and the Wife of Bath for what that self-appointed authority upon her sex has had to say of clerks' ignorance of women; in this tale it is the man who holds the reins in the household and the woman who dutifully acquiesces to everything that her lord wills. In the sweeping gallantry which the Clerk pays the Wife--

...for the Wyves love of Bathe--  
 When lyf and al her seote God mayntayne  
 In high maistris, and elles it were scathe!--

there is packed an irony which is one of the liveliest flashes of humor in Chaucer, an irony which must have blocked, for a time at least, any remonstrance from the Wife. A beautiful

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<sup>26</sup> Manly, op. cit., 590.

wit sparkles through the droll injunction to wives not to bear with their husbands too patiently lest they fall victims to the fabulous monster that lives upon patient wives. No less beautiful is the thinly veiled satire behind Griselda's bevine acceptance of tribulation and her husband's unmitigated audacity in determining her love and loyalty, both exaggerated to such lengths that one wonders how a medieval listener even could have heard it without raising some question. Far more human than anything else in the whole story is the reaction of the people to Griselda's changing fortunes; and this, too, has come in for its share of illumination.

The tale which the Pardoner tells is a type of exemplum based on a sermon on avarice; the whole irony of this sermon becomes the more perceptible when one sees how avarice is his own chief sin, as the Pardoner himself confesses. The enjoyment with which he plainly dwells upon the long account of the roistering of the Flanders revelers and upon the summing up of man's worst sins is the sort of enthusiasm which has made many such sermons well received; "good" people often experience vicarious thrills in such accounts of man's sins, morbidly fascinated by every sordid detail while assuring themselves that they are hearing what will do them the most good. That one idea could not fail to impart to us a more socialized reading of the comic, which we might have missed in the other tales. The dramatic intensity of the story so impresses the company which has first cried out "Nay! let him



telle us no ribaudye..." upon the Host's proposal that the Pardoner tell a tale, that the Pardoner's audacity in offering his spurious relics to the very people to whom he has disclosed his wiles is hardly malapropos. So unclerically has the cleric's tongue been loosed by his libations, as Lowes has remarked,<sup>27</sup> that he must cry his wonder-working relics to the entire crowd, and the comedy which ensues is as titillating as any twentieth-century revue skit of the insurance salesman who attempts to sell his policies at a funeral. The singling out of the Host to be the first of the penitents and the sudden outburst of vulgar denunciation which almost culminates in a brawl before the Knight interposes fittingly concludes the whole ludicrous aftermath of the tale.

In its rather wearisome and lengthy observations upon human life, Chaucer's Tale of Melibeus runs a close second to the Parson's Tale. His description of it as "a lytel thyng" is a thoroughly Chaucerian dash of genuine humor. The Host has broken in upon the poet's account of the valiant knight Sir Thopas with the rude exclamation that he is so weary of the display of ignorance in the tale that his ears are aching. We can understand why the Host, a man of rather orthodox views, after all, should resent a reguish take-off on popular medieval romances, having no idea that the story was a parody; but we are at some loss to explain why a tale like the Tale of Melibeus can proceed its exhausting length without interruption. Chaucer has more than avenged himself, we

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27 Lowes, op. cit., 203.

may believe, for the Host's interruption of his first tale. Present-day readers may laugh not so much at the tale itself as at the thought it suggests of the patience with which man has been able to hear out things like this "moral tale vertuous," grinily thankful when the soporific treatise has finally dragged itself to a dreary conclusion. The most genuine touch of the comic throughout the tale may be felt to be Dame Prudence's superhuman patience and reasoning with her husband, another flashing thrust of satire at the impatience and unreasonableness of wives.

What affords us our keenest amusement in the Monk's Tale has nothing to do with the tale itself but with an event connected with its narration. The Host has listened to the moralizing Tale of Melibeus with remarkable patience and an interest which would surprise us if we failed to consider that his is the middle-class Englishman's love of moralizing. It has given him another chance to speak of his termagant wife, lamenting the indignities she has heaped upon him but taking an odd pride in lamenting them. In rather high spirits as the result of these searily wise reflections, he now turns to the Monk, expecting a "merry tale" which shall restore the general jollity of the company. But the Monk meets this expectation with a series of tragedies, some of which would be of sufficient interest to a more speculative listener but which are generally monotonous and lugubrious enough to rasp the nerves of most of the company. No doubt the Monk glories

in this appalling recital of man's woes and would have gone happily on through the hundred tragedies at his disposal, had not the usually courteous Knight felt called upon to check the flow. The reader who pauses long enough to imagine the Host's discomfiture and disappointment can feel an upward curving of the corners of his mouth, for he has experienced another trick of the humorist who is artist enough to know when he can build an amusing situation simply by leading us on and then withholding from us the very thing we are expecting.

### The Courtly Epic

Only one of the tales told by the Canterbury pilgrims would come under this classification, the Knight's Tale, which, according to Manly "was originally composed as an independent work and not for use as a Canterbury tale." <sup>28</sup> Manly's comments upon the source material for this tale and upon the general characteristics of the courtly epic may be used to good advantage here in carrying out the objective of determining such comedy as does exist in the first tale told by one of the pilgrims:

...The source of Chaucer's story of Palemon and Arcite is undoubtedly Boccaccio's Teseide, a long courtly epic in twelve books....

...Boccaccio's Teseide is a fine example of the courtly epic. It is full of brilliant and elaborate de-

criptions of sieges, and battles, and social functions, and of long and eloquent speeches. Partly by eliminating these features, and partly by confining his narrative strictly to the love story of Palamon and Arcite, Chaucer has reduced the length of the poem to about one-fifth of the original, has simplified its structure, and given it the qualities of a metrical romance instead of those of a courtly epic. The interest of Boccaccio's poem lay chiefly in its rich elaboration; that of Chaucer's lies chiefly in dramatic situation. The characters are, with the exception of Theseus, drawn in simple outline. This is doubtless due, not to any lack of development of Chaucer's power of characterization, but to the requirements of the story itself. Emelye has necessarily no individuality, not so much because of her youth, but because she is merely the prize for which the two noble kinsmen contend. They in their turn are necessarily so much alike that the reader is as little able to choose between them as is Emelye herself. In brief, the story in Chaucer's hands becomes primarily a presentation of the conflict between love and the closest conceivable bonds of friendship, in which, although love is for a time triumphant, the claims of friendship are finally reasserted in the end.<sup>29</sup>

The chief comic element of the Knight's Tale is in the thinly disguised satire which may be found running as a fine thread throughout the story. This satire is aimed primarily at some of the outstanding qualities of the medieval courtly epics and romances, qualities which have already been discussed briefly. Even in a tale distinctly more artistic and effective than the source from which Chaucer obtained the material for this story, his own wisdom, saturated with keen intelligence, would impel him to make sport of many of the properties of such a tale as he has chosen to have his Knight tell. However greatly those properties may have been held in respect by the medieval aristocracy, we find them not only

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 539.

dull in the main but even lacking in the logic and common-sense of the average fabliau. One of the most striking proofs of Chaucer's comic genius is that he could treat certain necessary details of a type of literature with such outward seriousness that most readers could take them seriously, and with such inward levity that a conscientious search by some readers could not fail to unearth that levity.

At the beginning of the Knight's Tale, the account of the noble ladies who escort Duke Theseus upon his return to Athens, with their piercing lamentations and their swooning before they can ever state the cause of their sorrow, is done in the best approved manner of the medieval epic. It is done so well, in fact, that it is so much over-done, deliberately, we may feel sure, as though Chaucer has obtained an impish satisfaction in making this one situation as un-life-like as possible while keeping it in accordance with accepted styles. The Duke's overwhelming pity and gentle treatment of these ladies and utter ruthlessness toward the conquered Thebans, so inconsistent but so very human in a single character, suggests a rare touch of the comic in the irony that will not let even a great man escape the omnipresence of the Comic Spirit, but the touch is there all the same. The imprisonment of Palamon and Arcite for no other crime than the defense of their own city another stroke of the unreasonableness of this paradoxical duke, even though we might see such an act differently if we made a close study of the workings

of ancient or medieval justice.

Other artificialities and highly colored romantic details, such as the terrific effect the sight of Emily produces upon Palamon and Arcite, the stilted dialogue throughout the tale, the lengthy description of the arena where the two pitiable languishing of the two after they have seen Emily, and the horrible shedding of blood in the forest fight, all are treated with the same hyperbole, which must have furnished Chaucer with a great deal of ironic amusement. No finer proof that he must have satirized the style of the writers of this type of literature by imitating it, could be offered than the contrast between that style and Chaucer's own. For what one statement could be more unlike the artificial language of the courtly epic and more like Chaucer than the beautiful compactness of the relation of Arcite's death, "His spirit changed hous"?

### The Courtly Romance

The Franklin's Tale and the Wife of Bath's Tale may be classified as courtly romances, the type of literature which provided genteel entertainment for the medieval ladies of court and castle, along with their male companions when the latter were not too busy hunting or fighting or attending to such matters of state or worldly affairs which sometimes occupied them. It is the kind of thing with which many a

troubadour enthralled his listeners, and in it may be noted many of the qualities of the courtly epic. These same qualities Chaucer has treated with the note of rather ironic exaggeration which marked his treatment of much of the Knight's Tale. Told by the Franklin, a member of England's rising rural middle class, the tale somehow takes on a tone which might be considered as more nearly bourgeois than aristocratic. The maxims with which it abounds are a little more homely, more close to earth and to life, than would probably be found in the romance which would have appealed only to members of the nobility. Furthermore, there is a decided lack of that sticky sentimentalism which has spoiled what, for more modern readers, would have been an otherwise good story. A number of times Chaucer has added piquancy to the tale by charming little side glances, rich in an effervescent humor as are most of his asides. In one line, for instance, "This is as much to seye as it was nyght," following a long, elaborate description of the setting of the sun, we find a type of understatement which is decidedly comic. The same type of telling thrust has been used by many later writers of making fun of long rhetorical flights of fancy.

Chaucer was too essentially human not to have missed putting a filip of the ridiculous into the exquisite picture of the lady Derigen upon the cliffs overlooking the sea, who weeps for fear that her husband's ship may be dashed to pieces upon the rocks beneath. It calls to mind instantly

that other ridiculous picture of the mother who sat weeping in the cellar at the thought that some day a rafter above might crush her child to death. The account of the love-longing of Aurelius is permeated with a subtle irony of amusing exasperation on Chaucer's part, which must be felt rather than read; this episode is dismissed finally with the bland statement:

Dispayred in this torment and this thought  
 Lete I this woful creature lye;  
 Chese he, for me, whether he wol live or dye.

The long, long debates upon love and fidelity and the keeping of one's pledge, so diverging to medieval lovers, we can not find boring because of the thought that in them is a pleasing satire upon the elaborate and fanciful designs embroidering many a medieval romance.

The Wife of Bath's Tale carries us back, through the long centuries since man's enslavement to actuality began, to a time when human destinies were closely interwoven with the caprices of supernatural beings who are no mere. The double meaning of the opening lines of her story offers as smartly stinging a rejoinder as any of Chaucer's most scintillating repartee. Nottled by the Friar's interruption, she cannot pass up the opportunity of retaliating with a smart dig at his profession by blaming the passing of the fairies upon the coming of the friars and other holy men.

The main purpose of her tale is to settle once and for all, to her way of thinking, a long-mooted question of happi-



ness in marriage, the question of whether the husband or the wife should rule. She has already spoken of its "wo" in her prologue, and she now proceeds to drive unerringly to the heart of her solution.

The story progresses smoothly until the knight of the tale, having had his death penalty revoked by the queen for a year and a day, begins to seek an answer to the queen's riddle, "What thyng is it that women moost desiren?" And now follows an entertaining digression upon the question the Wife has debated in her prologue. Rapidly she sketches her own various answers to the question, alluding to the tale of Midas' wife as she no doubt has learned it from the fifth of her husbands. This delicate satire of her allusion to the story as though she has a first-hand acquaintance with Ovid can scarcely be missed; it is too exquisite and eloquent a commentary upon one of woman's (and man's) commonest pretensions. So intent does the Wife become in the answers to the riddle that are vouchsafed the knight that for a time she loses herself in her old means of settling important matters by a personal application.

The Knight's return to the court with the crone who has given him the answer to the riddle and the assembly of ladies is hastened by the Wife, as though she can no longer wait to produce the electrifying answer of what constitutes joy in marriage. Having answered the queen's riddle, the knight is startled to hear the hag who has furnished him the answer demanding that he wed her, as the fulfillment of his pledge

to her. Dramatic as this scene is, we can still see the gleeful comedy of the knight, now swaggering and expostulating wildly, now squirming and pleading desperately to be released from his pledge. We laugh at precisely the same situation in the denouement of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, and so long as the condition of matrimony exists man shall laugh at it as one of life's prime incongruities.

Many readers, most fellow human beings, would view the account of the wedding of the knight and the boldsme with a secretly will, secretly malevolent, sort of exuberance, their perception of the comic sharpened by a feeling of superior pity. Their risibilities would be vastly tickled by the scene of the wedding-night when the lady attempts to assuage his loathing for her, uttering many assurances of faithfulness, ironically true, and concluding with the command to kiss her. The knight has consented, after due deliberation, to make the best of the worst and to allow his wife full sovereignty in their marriage. The surprise ending--which, of course, is no surprise--follows: the crone becomes a radiant young woman, and the two, we may be positive, "lived happily ever afterward." The answer to the riddle of "What thyng is it that women moost desiren?" is that

Women desiren to have sovereyntee  
 As wel over hir housbond as hir leve  
 And for to been in maistris hym above....

It underscores the Wife's point admirably, and she now rests

upon her hard-won laurels. No disputant comes forward, and we may be reasonably sure that Chaucer meant us to be sure that none has the courage at this time to attempt to disprove her magnificent assertion. Even the Friar is silenced so far as any views upon conjugal bliss are concerned and centers his whole attention upon making game of another member of the company.

### The Beast Epic

Our interest in animal stories of the kind in which animals are endowed with human attributes and failings is no modern thing. From the earliest times men have been fond of stories of birds and beasts that speak and act like men and women while generally keeping their own more natural impulses and dominant traits. Sometimes they serve to render more effective a practical maxim as in Aesop's Fables and the beast-epic-fables of an even more ancient vintage. Again they form a handy device for the satirist who wishes to ridicule men and women under the convenient guise of animals; such tales may provoke anyone's laughter, even the laughter of those who are the objects of their satire, and may be read freely and without the restraint which often accompanies varieties of satire which may be felt to be more personal. Chaucer has chosen the beast-epic for his fascinating medieval satire upon the absurdities of man for the Nun's

Priest's Tale. The tale may be taken as something of a satirizing of the conventional epic, too, for the style throughout may properly be considered as mock heroic.

Setting is an important detail of the tale's charm, tremendously effective in making its sparkling comedy more realistic. The details of the widow's monage are as pleasingly accurate as the lovely paintings of de Borri in the Tres Riches Heures. The limpid beauty of the imagery evoked in the lines telling of Chanticleer and his wives is as thrilling as the description of Emily and the May garden in the Knight's Tale and imparts a feeling of the irresistible joviality that is to pervade the tale. As he is first made known to us, Chanticleer, far surpassing the average cock in his lusty crowing, is the embodiment of galline lordliness, the last word in barnyard joie de vivre.

In al the land of crowyng nas his peer:  
 His voys was murier than the murie orgon  
 On messedayes that in the church gon:  
 Wel sikerer was his crowyng in his logge  
 Than is a clokke or an abbey orlogge.  
 By nature he crew eche ascencoun  
 Of the equynoxial in thilke toun;  
 For whan degree fiftens weren ascended,  
 Thanne crew he that it myghte nat been amended.

Good living and the continual homage of his wives find rich expression in the song bubbling over with the happiness of one that wants for nothing in this world:

But swiche a joye was it to here hem synge,  
 Whan that the brighte sonne bigan to sprynge,  
 In sweete accord, 'My lief is faren in londe.'

These lines are followed by Chaucer's whimsical offhand statement that beasts and birds of that time could truly speak and

sing, a waggish reminder that we must accept this necessary condition of his animal story.

Then Chanticleer has his frightening dream, and little by little we are convinced of the plausibility of the impossible and are led into the plausible impossibility of the conjugal disagreement, with all its show of erudition. When Chanticleer relates the dream to her, Dame Pertelote at once becomes a typical though a very learned hausfrau, kindly solicitous for her husband's welfare but scolding him for his lack of moral courage. With her knowledge of "home remedies," she can recommend everything that a good human wife would give her human husband under similar circumstances--save for the digestives of worms. Through all her counsel we hear at one and the same time the anxious queries and triumphant diagnosis of a rather harassed but patient human wife and the concerned and sympathetic clucking of a small gold-colored hen. Chanticleer's lordly self-assurance feels deeply the lash of his small wife's scorn when she asserts that his dream has been caused by nothing more than cholera. Chaucer must have delighted so in writing of the squabbling of his two stimulatingly human fowls that at times the anthropomorphism becomes twisted or illogical, as in the phrase relating to Chanticleer's groaning and in Pertelote's list of the qualities desirable in a husband, her reference to herself as a "woman," and her contemptuous question "Have ye no mannes herte, and han a berd?" These human touches,

however, but further humanize an eloquent satire upon married life.

But there is still more satirizing of man in the tale, an impudent satirizing that is both capricious and philosophical in spirit. This time the target is medieval scholasticism. The domestic wrangling of Chanticleer and Pertelote concerning the cock's dream assumes the intellectuality of two scholarly disputants, each fowl finding an interpretation of the dream in accordance with his temperamental and characteristic way of surveying life. Each one presents only one aspect of the problem, the aspect which appeals to him most and with which agreeable study has made him most familiar. Chanticleer has nothing to oppose Pertelote's sound medical lore but his overwhelming ego and a few citations of old authorities. When he speaks of the "verray proeve" of what he has cited to Pertelote, he, like many another medieval scholar in considering experience superior to authority, is more impressed by the statements of those of high reputation than by the experience which has been subjected to scientific regulation. The long series of anecdotes he offers are, according to his way of viewing the matter, sufficient proof of the truth of these statements; hoping to overpower Pertelote's argument by sheer force of long-windedness, he rides down the protest she may have registered at one point in his treatise with a statement, "I gabbe nat, so have I joye or blis!" which, to him, clinches the argument. He then proceeds

happily with his "auctours," terminating his elucidation with a fine gibe at Portelote's ignorance, a salty marital jest, in his false translation of "In principio, Mulier est hominis confusio" as "Woman is mannes joy and al his blis."

Having closed his argument with a sweeping galline flattery, Chanticleer flies down "fro the bees" and emerges into the barnyard with his wives. There galline nature re-asserts itself, and we have the ever delectable barnyard comedy of the rooster, preening and posturing, majestically summoning his harem to view the choice morsel of food he has just found, which he gobbles down as soon as they have gathered around him, and the hens, singing their contentment in the luxury of their dust-bath. Chanticleer himself sings more merrily than does the mermaid in the sea, for--another hearty Chaucerian aside--"Physiologus seith sikerly How that they syngon well and myrily."

The apostrophizing of the colfox that has lain in wait for Chanticleer throughout the night and the frenzied outcry of the frightened hens when Chanticleer is borne off, the latter compared to the lamentations of the Trojan ladies, the shrieks of Hædrubal's wife, and the wailing of the Roman senators' wives is so inimitable a satire upon the heroic style of the epic that for a moment we almost take it on all seriousness. Then we are swiftly and breathlessly plunged into the slapdash, country comedy of yelling rustics, barking dogs, and screaming geese, which brings us back to

the happy realization that, after all, this terrible furor is no more than a commonplace incident which has transpired within a poor widow's barnyard. Not until Chanticleer has managed by a clever artifice to free himself from the fox's grasp and the narrator of the story has pointed out its moral, do we really see how wholly applicable it is to one of the besetting follies of mankind. The strut of rooster and man are then readily recognizable.

### The Fantasy

Only one tale, the Squire's Tale, may be listed as belonging wholly to this classification. In essence, it is but little more than a fairy-tale, a type of literature which has enchanted both child and the child in man as far back in man's history as there is any knowing. Each tale has as its background the ever-entrancing realm of make-believe, the fulfillment of man's escape from the humdrum round of daily activities.

The Squire's Tale is one of the most beautiful of Chaucer's creations with regard to story and artistic finish, as well as immensely enjoyable for its eerie and elfin flavor. Beyond a light jesting at the gaping crowd, typifying man's often ludicrous curiosity, and a slight tendency to mock once again another feature of many medieval romances, the pangs of unrequited love, the story has little of the



really comic to offer. In this case it is as well. A thing so bizarre and fresh and delicate, with its background of Oriental mystery, as the fragment would have lost something had any great deal of the human comedy pervaded it.

### The Legends

Two legends, the Prioress' Tale and the Second Nun's Tale, are based upon legends current in Europe during the time of Chaucer. Both exhibit a strong religious motif, and both are specific examples of old themes which have had new life injected into them by Chaucer's freshness and tender vivacity. But neither tale displays any perceptible comic tendencies, with the exception of the mild irony which may be found in the Prioress' sentimental observation regarding the goodness of churchmen--

This abbot, which that was an holy man,  
As monkes been, or elle oghte be.

and the strange contrast between the sentimentality throughout the tale and the evident relish with which the Prioress comments upon the cruel punishments visited the Jews of the story.

### The Tale of Classical Origin

Like the two tales listed in the preceding section, the Physician's Tale does not offer any definite and tangible evidences of the comic. There is no prologue to the tale whereby we might obtain any further analysis of the Physician's character, and so the portrait of the man remains for us what it has been in the Prologue, little more than a tantalizing and provocative glimpse of a creditable professional man who has still a dash of the charlatan. The tale which Chaucer assigns to the Physician is appropriate enough. One statement by Root regarding the tale's appropriateness might be considered interesting although hardly illuminating:

...One cannot refrain a smile at Ten Brink's ingenious suggestion that its 'desperate, bloody ending' is appropriate to the character of the Doctor and professional acquaintance with violent remedies.<sup>30</sup>

### The Literary Satire

When the Host calls upon Chaucer, as one of the pilgrims, for a tale, the response is naturally one that must be handled with the utmost delicacy by Chaucer the writer. He could very easily have told the finest tale of the entire collection, of course. The reason he does not do so is readily apparent. On the other hand, being Chaucer, he cannot

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Kilburn Root, The Poetry of Chaucer (Houghton, Mifflin & Company, New York, 1906), p. 219.

and will not tell the worst tale of the lot. Finding a half-way point between best and worst is even quite difficult. So Chaucer has done the best thing a writer could possibly do under similar circumstances. He has given us a tale that is Chaucer at its subtlest and keenest, a tale that enables us to understand even more of the man behind it, withal a tale that would hardly pass for anything that would be of interest to the pilgrims, no one of them excepted, in view of what we have already learned and guessed of their divergent tastes.

The Tale of Sir Thopas is the type of burlesque romance which no reader could possibly take for a serious attempt on Chaucer's part, its overtones so muted that its delicious absurdities offer nothing whatever that the listeners to the tale can take hold of, so that it succeeds beautifully in outlasting the patience of the audience hardly longer than until the introduction has been made.

Aside from a slight making fun of the bourgeois Flemings whom the English nobility detested so cordially, Sir Thopas is a superb satire upon the typical metrical romance of the Middle Ages with its lengthy and gusty sighings over what succeeding ages have come to look upon as utter trivia, its multitudinous digressions, and its great improbabilities. Nor is content all that is satirized. In planning his romance along the lines of the typical metrical tale of medieval times, Chaucer makes sport of its customary and conven-

tional verse form, its style and technique, and even its general pattern. It is as though Chaucer has had one fine fling at something that has assuredly amused him for some time, a gesture which every rational human being has longed at some time to make.

There might even have been an additional motive in the tale. In Manly's opinion,

It seems highly probable that Chaucer's primary object in writing was not so much to burlesque the minstrel romances as to produce a satire of the countrymen of Sir Thopas, and that his contemporaries enjoyed its subject matter even more than its form. In making ridiculous one of the bourgeois knights of Flanders, Chaucer was sure of appealing to both the aristocracy and the London public. The Londoners hated the Flemings and were always ready to share in any sort of amusement at their expense.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the tale the broad drift of absurdity, mounting sometimes to plain nonsense, the precursor of that nonsense which, according to Chesterton, had its real flowering in Victorian England, is endowed with such reasonableness that at times we almost miss that absurdity. In the person of the tale's hero, Gilde Thopas, is achieved the blasting of everything for which bourgeois nobility stands. Moliere achieved no greater result in his Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme. The comic understatement of the selection of peace-loving Poperinghe as the birth-place of Thopas must contained an irrepressible irony for the scornful aristocracy

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<sup>31</sup> Manly, edition Canterbury Tales, 629.

of London. The mock-serious delineation of Thopas--the comparison of his face to a kind of fine white bread, his complexion to a dyestuff, and the saffron hue of his hair and beard to a coloring for meats and pastries, his shoes of Cordovan leather, brown Bruges hose, and fine silk robe costing "many a jane"--is a fresh comic rendition of the customary delineation of a character in a medieval romance, it is true, but also one the aim of which would be to ridicule the people who interpreted things largely in the terms of commercial possibilities. The same thing has been used to create smiles of superiority and scorn by scores of present-day writers who pride themselves upon being thoroughly "modern." The sophisticated literateur who introduces a description of an article in a mail-order catalogue into his racy story of corn-belt rustics has accomplished no more dazzling an effect than has Chaucer when he extols the commercial value of the herbs growing in the forest through which Sir Thopas rides:

The lycorys, and cetewale,  
 And many a clowe gylofre,  
 And notemuge to putte in ale,  
 Wheither it be moyste or stale,  
 Or for to leye in cofre.

In the forest there is the lair of many a wild beast. Remembering the old tales, we would be more prepared for a wild boar, a wolf, or at least a bear, but the wild beasts that tempt Thopas' prowess, it seems, are "bothe bukke and hare." In the centuries that have passed since Chaucer, constant repetition of this particular type of understatement, a

common kind of rustic witticism, after all, has tended to make it appear a little childish today; it is only when we look upon it as Chaucer's first readers looked upon it that we really see it as funny, for deridingly funny it is.

Overcome as he is with love-longing, the gentle knight over whom so many maidens have sighed, spurs his horse forward in a most unknightly fashion--another give at a pretentious knight-errantry. Somewhat later the animal is given "good forage" while Thopas rests himself from the fatigue of his ride on a mossy bank. As Chaucer must have intended they should, these lines bring to mind a rich picture, a veritable cartoon and caricature in one, of the gallant adventurer jogging along with a bundle of hay behind his saddle; the one word "forage" has accomplished that much. It is not altogether malapropos to state that another word, "clamb," telling how Thopas remounted his horse, suggests a picture that would be laughable to anyone the least familiar with horses. So fierce is the knight's bearing that no one dares approach him at that time, not even "wyf ne childe," and again we laugh at the deliberate ineptitude of a child-like understatement.

But in the land of Bayerye there is one who is foolish enough to try Sir Thopas' patience. This is the great giant, Sir Oliphant--a pun? or more than just a pun, a clever play upon a name that suggests certain possibilities, a trick antedating a quality of the Restoration drama? Sir Oliphant

threatens to slay the knight's horse, the action an absurd twisting of the usual giant's habits and one of the earliest of the "innocent bystander" jokes. The dialogue which follows, Sir Thopas' promise to return upon the morrow when he has come back wearing the armor he has been so absent-minded as to leave behind and to pierce the giant's stomach, rises to so delightful a pitch of nonsensicalness as to seem merrily idiotic. Probably in all literature fewer expressions are richer in meaning or possessed of more comic imputation than the terseness of one phrase, "with sydes smale," telling how Sir Thopas came riding again into town.

A child-like fantasy, as pleasing as it is ridiculous, goes into the few lines which deal with Thopas' resting and refreshment upon gingerbread and licorice and sweet wine; the same spirit dominates the detailed list of the accouterments donned, or rather into which he is assisted, in preparation for the coming struggle, and in the great round oath on "ale and bread" which the Childe swears, the last named the final summing-up of the doughty namby-pamby-ness which makes up Sir Thopas. Again the hero mounts his horse, a dapple-gray, obviously a draft animal; again he rides toward the forest, the horse ambling ruminatively along to the probable accompaniment of a great clanking as Thopas jounces up and down and from side to side in his saddle. And then the picture suddenly fades, for the Host can stand no more of such absurdity and with all the outraged patience of the forth-

right roars out,

'Ha moore of this, for Goddes dignitee!  
 ...'for thou makest me  
 So wery of thy verray lowednesse  
 That, also wisly God my soule blesse,  
 Mine eres aken of thy drasty speche,

and the hilarious travesty remains one of the three fragments of tales told by the pilgrims--to our regret.

### The Contemporaneous Anecdote

The Canon's Yeoman's Tale is a caustic expose of alchemy by one of its victims. It is thought possible that Chaucer himself might have at one time fallen a prey to some rogue who claimed to be able to transmute baser metals into gold, a counterpart of the canon who overtakes the pilgrims upon their return journey. This theory has been advanced by several Chaucerian scholars. If that were true, there is no reasonable ground for the supposition that Chaucer seeks serious revenge in the Yeoman's denunciation of the pseudo-science. Chaucer's humor is too tolerant for him to take more than a tolerant view of the imposture in the tale; his comedy consists more in deflating such tricks than in denouncing them. Indeed, he would be more the philosopher than ever since he chooses to laugh at himself, a kind of laughter at which many a would-be humorist has balked. The fascination he evinces for the shallow trumperies of the alchemist in the Yeoman's Tale is impelled partly by admiration, for



what person imbued with the Comic Spirit can be wholly free from a certain admiration of rascals and rascalities? The exuberance of the Yeoman's narration does not suggest the zest of the reformer; rather it suggests the zest of the brilliant analyst of the comedy to be found in human affairs.

There is a genial flow of comedy in the long rambling account the Canon's Yeoman gives of the secrets of the craft he has followed and in the tale of the duping of a priest, a comedy that catches but another human being in the toils of his own avarice and gullibility. There is some confusion, of course, in the rather disordered sequence of events, confusion for the pilgrims and for us. We may suppose reasonably enough that they are hardly disillusioned by his revelation; if the average man or woman were that easily persuaded to abandon false schemes and dreams and measures, the human comedy would lose something. With Chaucer, we can be more glad than despairing for the countless deceptions which man has practised upon man. How else could many of us enrich our own lives with the presence of the Comic Spirit?

#### The Sermon

In a previous chapter, some comment was made upon the nature of the comedy connected with the Parson's Tale. Chaucer's high regard for the man is reflected in the tribute paid him the lines,

Upon this word we han assented soone,  
 For, as it seemed, it was for to doone,  
 To enden in som vertuouse sentence,

which at the same time is a reflection of Chaucer's noble seriousness (a quality worth considering here, as prone as many of us have been to disassociate him from it in our reading of the Tales).

A quiet humor gleams through the first situation we notice in connection with the Parson's long-winded sermon. That is when the Host, probably fearful of the inevitable, suggests that the Parson make his tale as brief as possible, for "the sonne wole adoun"; whereupon the Parson launches into his "meditacioun," which must have lasted well into dusk. That any passage throughout the rather tedious but logically worked out treatise upon sin and penitence has any possible comic connotation, present-day students would be at a loss to say. Probably the best that could be said of the sermon and of Chaucer's leave-taking is that, to Chaucer, they are the serious and fitting conclusions of the comedy of man, which we have witnessed. "Goddes feyson" lacks little, after all, in the treatment of man in his entirety.

## CHAPTER VI

## CONCLUSION

"The advance of civilization has possibly tended to develop the more kindly sort of laughter." If this statement may be taken as literally true--and no reasonable person will deny that it is true, there being no need of digressing long enough to attempt a definition of civilization--might it not also be made reversible? The statement that the development of a more kindly sort of laughter has possibly tended to advance civilization, then, would be equally true.

Chaucer has been called the father of English poetry, a label which presupposes a great deal and which somehow tends to rank him on a level below succeeding great English poets. Might it not be more nearly correct and just to call him the father of modern English comedy, in view not so much of our definition of comedy as of our enjoyment of it?

Before Chaucer, the English sense of comedy had been, in the main, a raw, brutal sort of thing, selfish and unkindly, with a harsh, derisive jeering born of scorn and mockery as its keynote. We have but to turn to some of the morality plays and interludes of the Middle Ages to see how true this

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<sup>32</sup> Ashley H. Thorndike, English Comedy (The Macmillan Company, New York, 1929), p. 13.

is. One of the prevalent ideas of what constituted a good laugh, for instance, was a sound beating. Another was the inevitable victimizing of some person, as disclosed by a study of the fabliaux.

Or we might take into consideration the long, appalling list of actions which afforded amusement to the lower and middle classes and even to those who had been given every opportunity for the development of their finer attributes: bear-baiting, cockfighting, public executions of the grimest sort, public brandings, whippings, and other punishments visited upon those convicted of different crimes, the deliberate infliction of torture and abuse and indignity upon the old, the infirm, the insane, and others who deviated in some way from the norm of accepted custom and standard. True, these amusements, or most of them, were to continue for centuries after Chaucer's time as they had been going on for centuries before.

But, with Chaucer, cultivated men began to see more and more that there are other things at which men may laugh, other devices for tempting man's mirth and jollity, gaiety and good humor.

This brings us to the reflection upon Chaucer's real purpose in writing the Canterbury Tales. It could not have been that he was writing them for posterity; they do not betray that self-consciousness. Had that been so, he could have and would have as easily presented a picture of the

society of his day much more definitely drawn-to-scale through all its ramifications. Nor was his purpose that of worldly gain or fame. There was no need of the former for Chaucer the man, no real desire for it in Chaucer the philosopher of humanity. As for the latter, there is every reason to suppose that Chaucer would not have preferred the Fables to be very widely circulated because of numerous passages which might have been questioned by the powers that were of his day; that these passages were not deleted is sufficient proof that they were not generally read during his lifetime.

There was only one real purpose, then, in his writing of the Canterbury Tales. He wrote them simply because he enjoyed writing them. He wrote them for his own enjoyment and for the enjoyment of an inner circle of friends, men much like himself although lacking in his essential greatness and power. It does not require any great task of the imagination to picture this small group of men of centuries ago. Their faces may be a little blurred, perhaps, and we may even tend to invest them with some of the touches of our own twentieth century. But they do chuckle over most of the same lines which cause our chuckling; they exchange glances and grins and grimaces; at times they laugh slyly; at times they bellow forth uproariously, finding full satisfaction at some pleasing dig or choice obscenity in rumbling belly-laughes. Or again they may nod wisely or sigh in deep and sincere

sympathy. In their enjoyment, the poet finds his best reward. In their admiration, the artist finds his best stimulus to the creation of something more for them to admire.

It was these men, we may be sure--the men who were brought so closely into the realization that man's greatest laughing-matter is man himself and the foibles and follies and incongruities he creates--who kept Chaucer and his works alive. Any man so steeped in the Comic Spirit, so warmly alive to humanity and loving it in Chaucer's own way that he can create as Chaucer created, may be assured of a certain immortality in his friends. The circles of acquaintances widen with every generation, until the tremendous impact of one man's genius is felt upon English letters and then upon English life. In a sense, the other creators of comedy which has become literature--Shakespeare and Dekker, Fielding and Sterne and Jane Austen, Thackeray and Dickens and Meredith, and in America Mark Twain--have become disciples, consciously or unconsciously, of Chaucer, making use of his gifts of tolerance and geniality, rich understanding, and ripe understanding for everything and anything touched by the spirit of comedy. Through them all, our laughter becomes a more refined emanation of ourselves. We no longer need laugh rawness or brutality or mockery as the dominant tones of our mirth. There are too many aspects of life and humanity ever

which we may laugh in other and more humane moods to bring these usually undesirable qualities into play.

Chaucer's essential contribution to English letters--no, to English life--then, has been this: In his role of comic artist, he emerges as a real civilizing force.

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typed by David White