



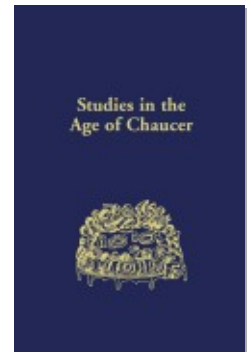
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*The Structure of The Canterbury Tales* by Helen Cooper  
(review)

Charles A. Owen Jr.

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while challenging received opinion, her method and interpretations will long provide models for students of this rich “period of equilibrium or balance in spirituality” (p. 263).

RICHARD K. EMMERSON  
National Endowment for the Humanities

HELEN COOPER. *The Structure of The Canterbury Tales*. London: Duckworth, 1983. Pp. viii, 256. £24 in UK only.

Helen Cooper's *The Structure of The Canterbury Tales* has as its basis some important ideas. She views Chaucer's work as growing out of the literary and social conventions of his age and proposes to find in his handling of conventions, especially in the variations from convention, important clues to his meaning. She begins with the genre of the story collection, proceeds to two chapters on *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole, devotes a chapter to *The Knight's Tale*, another to the relationships of tales within the different fragments, and a third to the more general thematic resonances, before concluding that *The Canterbury Tales* defies formulaic definition, that it refuses to find conclusive answers in *The Parson's Tale* and the Retraction, that it “demands to be looked at whole.”

The chapter on story collections concentrates on the “key problems of structure and morality.” It ends up considering the three late-fourteenth-century authors whose principal works are collections: Boccaccio, Gower, and Chaucer. Chaucer, who was influenced by the other two, distinguishes his collection from the others by avoiding abstract patterning and by including two characteristics “that have no parallels anywhere,” the variety of genres included and the story telling contest. The two features reinforce each other. The contest implies that we are experiencing superior, if not the best, examples of each genre, and the variety gives a multiplicity of perspectives and a sense of the partial truth necessarily present in each. In a later chapter titled “An Encyclopedia of Kinds,” Cooper finds parallels for *The Canterbury Tales* in the *Summa* and in Menippean satire. She thus puts a consistent emphasis on the all-inclusiveness of the work; the characters of the *Prologue* reflect the estates of medieval society as the stories in the collection do the possibilities open to the medieval story teller.

Cooper tends to discount the relationship between the pilgrim and the tale and so gives little attention to the third characteristic that distinguishes Chaucer's collection from the others. She emphasizes the ideal figures in the *Prologue*, the Knight, the Parson, and the Plowman, with the Clerk as a fourth to reflect Chaucer's interest in learning. These characters, and to a great extent the others as well, define themselves in relation to social roles in a world where the distinction between "those who fight, those who work, and those who pray" is paramount. "As in the General Prologue, so in the tales: the aims and methods are not those of psychological exploration but of poetry: of imagery, language, genre, manipulation of convention, and so on" (p. 80). As a result, the longest chapter in the book, "Links Within the Fragments," is also the least satisfactory. This chapter, which is more than a third of the book, suffers in three ways, from the paucity of comment on the moments that are clearly dramatic, from the procrustean forcing of some of the relationships, and from the obvious nature of some of the others.

While recognizing that *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is, more than any other, "psychologically as well as rhetorically appropriate for its teller," Cooper gives little attention to the Wife's *Prologue*, where the play with convention is most exuberant. The Wife's discussion in her tale of what women most desire receives only passing notice, and the extent to which her interests have distorted the genre of Arthurian romance almost beyond recognition goes unmentioned. Instead Cooper comments on the fairy-tale elements in the story and finds in the ending, influenced by the discussion of "gentillesse," a "higher level of idealism than the opening had seemed able to encompass" (p. 129). She thus ignores the return of the Wife as an intense dramatic presence in the concluding prayer of her tale. Similarly, in the case of the Pardoner, the *Prologue* and the quarrel with the Host are largely ignored. Instead we get the effort to connect the Physician's digression on governesses, not with the historical events in John of Gaunt's family, but with the Pardoner, "the avaricious drinker who preaches against avarice and drunkenness." This connection depends on Cooper's, not Chaucer's description of the Pardoner in the wolf-and-shepherd imagery that brings the Physician's digression to an end. Cooper's final point about *The Pardoner's Tale*, that it differs from the other "moral" tales by concerning itself exclusively with vice and evil, needs qualification: there is, after all, the encounter with the old man.

The discounting of the dramatic element does not have the same effect in the discussion of *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, for here there is no prologue

portrait, no pilgrim presence. Yet Cooper finds a narrator expressing himself through the tale only slightly less vividly than in the confessional prologues, a narrator whom she sees finally as Chaucer's double. The genres, styles, and themes of all the other tales find themselves reflected in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. She points out the reflection of Melibeus in the debate on dreams, of *The Monk's Tale* in Chauntecler's fall from high estate, of *The Man of Law's Tale* in the textbook rhetoric that accompanies the fox's seizure of the cock. The sexual prowess of the cock and the narrator's antifeminism have their reflections in the Wife of Bath and the tales on marriage she initiates, as well as in the fabliaux. Moral commentary which abounds reflects the overt morality scattered through the other tales. It is only glancingly appropriate to the beast fable's animals who with the narrator "chuk it up" wherever they find it. *The Nun's Priest's Tale* represents for Cooper the whole work in miniature with its multiplicity of genre and relativity of value, with its fusion of "sentence" and "solaas."

An appreciation of the changes Chaucer made in the assignment of stories plays some part in the book, and even the changes in overall plan come in for occasional consideration. Cooper considers it probable that the Man of Law telling the Melibeus was once the first tale (pp. 16, 40, 63, 120-21), sees the Wife of Bath as most likely interrupter in *The Man of Law's Epilogue* (p. 124), and as original teller of *The Shipman's Tale* (p. 67), even at one point regards *The Parson's Prologue* as a complementary pair with *The Man of Law's*, intended to open and close the storytelling (p. 63). She is aware of the conclusion, reached by Manly and Rickert in 1940 (p. 57) and by Doyle and Parkes in 1977 (p. 61) about "the lack of an established order in the whole collection." She goes so far as to question the morality of *The Parson's Tale*: "An interpretation of *The Parson's Tale* that sees it as the ultimate revelation of Truth has to ignore the text" (p. 204). She points out that the final word of *The Parson's Prologue* is "grace," in contrast to the "synne" that dominates and brings the tale to an end. Yet though the plan of her book and occasional insights take her in the direction of seeing *The Canterbury Tales* as fragments reflecting the stages of a developing plan that never came close to completion, she never considers this view of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole. She accepts the Ellesmere order as, if not Chaucerian, "probably the best there could be" (p. 154). The result is a book that occasionally breaks new ground but does not carry out its own plan with sufficient rigor and depth.

CHARLES A. OWEN, JR.  
University of Connecticut