Chapters on Chaucer
Malone, Kemp

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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THE CANTERBURY PILGRIMS (CONCLUDED)

THE CANTERBURY TALES, as the name implies, is a collection of tales, held together by a frame story, the story of a pilgrimage to Canterbury during which various pilgrims tell tales for the edification and entertainment of the company. The frame story takes 3180 lines, somewhat less than a sixth of the whole. This figure includes the 858 lines of the general prolog and the 828 lines of the wife of Bath’s prolog. These two prologs, taken together, make more than half the frame story. Both of them, though including a certain amount of narration, are chiefly concerned with other matters. The general prolog gives us descriptions of individual pilgrims, and the wife of Bath’s prolog is primarily a piece of self-characterization, the most famous and most elaborate example of this device to be found in the Canterbury Tales.

It is the contention of some scholars that the tales which the pilgrims tell are also examples of self-characterization, in that the personality and point of view of a given narrator come out in his choice of a tale and in the way he tells the tale of his choice. Kittredge in his fifth Johns Hopkins lecture formulated this theory in the following dictum (Chaucer and his Poetry, p. 155):

Structurally regarded, the stories are merely long speeches expressing, directly or indirectly, the characters of the several persons. They are more or less comparable, in this regard, to the soliloquies of Hamlet or Iago or Macbeth. But they are not mere monologues, for each is addressed to all the other personages, and evokes reply and comment, being thus, in a real sense, a part of the conversation.
If this dictum is right, it follows that the stories in the Canterbury collection are not there for their own sakes, so to speak, but for use in characterizing the persons who tell them. They are a mere device to give us more information about the characters of the frame story, namely, the Canterbury pilgrims. Kittredge accepts this consequence of his dictum when he says, "the Pilgrims do not exist for the sake of the stories, but vice versa" (p. 155).

If this was actually Chaucer's intention, one can only say that he failed to carry it out. Very few of the tales in the collection have much value for the characterization of their tellers. Chaucer shows, it is true, a due sense of propriety in assigning tales to pilgrims; thus, the gentry tell stories befitting their social respectability, and the smutty stories are put in the mouth of the common herd. But it would be a great mistake to interpret a given story as serving primarily to characterize its teller as an individual. Indeed, some of the tales seem quite unsuitable to their tellers as we find them described in the general prolog. In the following pages I will take up the various tales in terms of their function as pieces of self-characterization, beginning with the only tale in the collection which the author expressly marks as such: the pardoner's tale.

The pardoner's tale not only befits the teller but also makes an integral part of his characterization of himself. The integration is clearly marked as such in the text itself, and one can be in no possible doubt of the author's intentions. The doctor of physic has just told the sad story of Virginius and Virginia, and the host, at the end of his comments on teller and tale, complains that the fate of poor Virginia has almost broken his heart. He considers three remedies for his heartburn, or cardiacle, as he calls it: a dose of medicine, a draft of ale, and a merry story. He chooses the third of these remedies and calls on the pardoner to administer it:
The pardoner is perfectly willing to tell a merry tale, but the gentils of the company object, because they fear that his mirth will be ribaldry. They ask for a moral tale instead. The host says nothing; in other words, Chaucer, having got a comic effect with the host's heartburn and the remedies proposed for it, has no further use for the device and drops it, and the host with it.

As for the pardoner, he yields. "All right," he says, "but surely I may be allowed to think of something proper while I drink." When he begins, he prefaces his tale with the long piece of self-characterization which I discussed in Chapter IX above. He ends this preface or prolog as follows:

Next comes the tale, a sermon which, as the pardoner has been careful to explain beforehand, he is "wont to preach, for to win." The sermon ends with its practical applica-
tion: the preacher exhorts his congregation to beware of the sin of avarice, and, more particularly, to come forward with their money or other possessions, in return for which he will absolve them from all their sins:

C 913 I yow assoile, by myn heigh power,
Yow that wol offre, as clene and eek as clere
As ye were born; and, lo, sirs, thus I preche.

With the words, “and lo, sirs, thus I preach,” the scene suddenly shifts from the church and its congregation, with the pardoner in the pulpit, to the Canterbury road and the company of pilgrims. We are back in the frame story. And the pardoner’s statement that that is how he preaches marks his tale unmistakably as a picture of him at work, a demonstration of how he uses his powers to fill his pockets. Strictly speaking, the tale throws no new light on the character of the pardoner; we knew what his methods were already. But a demonstration brings things home to us as nothing else can do. The sermon, one of the most powerful in all the range of English literature, puts us for the time being under the spell of the pardoner, and we see, as nothing else could make us see, what manner of man he is and how he preaches for to win.

One other Canterbury pilgrim, the parson, preaches a sermon as his contribution to the sentence and solas of the company. It is of course appropriate that a parson for his tale should choose a sermon, and this particular sermon undoubtedly supports Chaucer’s characterization of the parson in the general prolog, confirming as it does Chaucer’s statement that the parish priest is a learned man, a clerk. The sermon deals with penitence; incorporated into it is what amounts to another sermon on the seven deadly sins. For the purposes of this chapter I recently read the parson’s tale from beginning to end at one sitting; my reading time was three hours and 21 minutes. If the
parson's tale adds anything to Chaucer's characterization of the parson in the general prolog, it does so by revealing that the worthy priest was long-winded.

But it would be a gross error to think of the parson's tale as told primarily to bring out the character of the teller. Here as everywhere we must be guided by our text, and the prime function of the tale is explained in its prolog, explained so clearly that the author's intention cannot be doubtful. The host says,

I 16 Now lakketh us no tales mo than oon. . . .  
Almost fulfild is al myn ordinaunce; 
I prey to god, so yeve him right good chaunc 
That telleth this tale to us lustily. 
Sir preest, quod he, artow a vicary? 
Or art a person? Sey sooth, by thy fey! 
Be what thou be, ne breke thou nat our pley; 
For every man, save thou, hath told his tale 
Unbokel, and shewe us what is in thy male; 
For trewely, me thinketh, by thy chere, 
Thou sholdest knitte up wel a greet matere. . . .

Chaucer has saved the parson to the last. He is to bring the Tales of Canterbury to an end. And this end must be devotional, pious, edifying rather than entertaining. The parson answers the host accordingly:

I 31 Thou getest fable noon ytold for me; . . .  
Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest  
Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?  
For which I seye, if that yow list to here 
Moralitee and vertuous matere, 
And thanne that ye wol yeve me audience, 
I wol ful fayn, at Cristes reverence, 
Do yow plesaunce leefful, as I can. . . .  
And therfor, if yow list, I wol nat glose. 
I wol yow telle a mery tale in prose 
To knitte up al this feeste, and make an ende. . . .

All the pilgrims agreed that this was a good way to end the pilgrimage:
Upon this word we han assented sone,
For, as us semed, it was for to done,
To enden in som vertuous sentence,
And for to yeve him space and audience;
And bede our host he sholde to him seye
That alle we to telle his tale him preye.

This action of theirs, otherwise unexampled in the story of the pilgrimage, has the artistic function of emphasizing the chief feature of the concluding tale of the collection: its *vertuous sentence*. Chaucer brings the action about by having the priest snub the host rather sharply¹ and then turn to the company as a whole, saying that he would consent to speak of "morality and virtuous matter" if they cared to hear such a tale and would listen to what he had to tell. The host takes all this meekly enough and does what he is told to do:

Our hoste had the wordes for us alle:
Sir preest, quod he, now faire yow bifalle!
Sey what yow list, and we wol gladly here. . . .

And now the parson tells his tale, to knit up a great matter. And from a medieval point of view the matter was indeed knit up well.

From the parson we shift over to the wife of Bath. In her prolog the wife gives her views on wedded woe and wedded bliss. Here I will say nothing about the woe, and not much about the bliss. It will be enough to point out that the wife and her fifth husband actually achieve wedded bliss in the end, after the husband duly submits to her authority. In her tale the wife tells the pilgrims about another wedded pair who have the same experience. In this case, however, the husband yields to argument or

¹ "Thou wilt get no fable told through me . . ." The host had laid himself open to this rough answer by using the oath "for cokkes bones" (line 29) in addressing the priest. Compare lines B 1165 ff., where a like oath moved the priest to rebuke the host expressly.
persuasion; in other words, his wife uses methods very different from those of the wife of Bath, though it all comes out the same in the end. Our notions of the wife of Bath are based on the prolog of her tale, naturally and properly enough, for there she characterizes herself expressly and we must believe what she says. When we come to the tale as distinct from its prolog, we get into a different world, the world of Arthurian romance, with a royal court, a knight for hero, and a heroine who proves to be a shape-shifter and miracle-worker from fairyland. Here the wife of Bath is not at home, and if it was Chaucer’s intention to have the wife tell a tale as well suited to her as the pardoner’s and parson’s tales are to them, his choice of a tale for her was not altogether happy. Moreover, that part of the tale most sympathetic to the wife of Bath as we find her in her prolog takes a course strangely at variance with her own practice, as I have already pointed out. The long speech which the loathly lady makes to her husband, the speech which turns him from a rebellious into an obedient mate, is marked by a sweet reasonableness and a gentle persuasiveness alien to the character of our Alice, who reports it indeed, but only as the mouthpiece of the author, not in her own right.

We conclude that Chaucer gave this Arthurian romance to the wife of Bath, not because it was just the tale to bring out her characteristic qualities, but because its theme and particularly its ending could be linked with her views on marriage and her final achievement of wedded bliss. These features of the story kept it from being a complete misfit and enabled Chaucer to end the tale with a passage in the wife’s best vein:

\[
\text{D 1257}
\begin{align*}
\text{And thus they live, unto hir lyves ende,} \\
\text{In parfit joye; and Jesu Crist us sende} \\
\text{Housbondes meke, yonge, and fresh abedde,} \\
\text{And grace t’overbyde hem that we wedde.}
\end{align*}
\]
And eek I preye Jesu shorte hir lyves
That wol nat be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nigardes of dispence,
God sende hem sone verray pestilence.

Be it noted, however, that this passage, except for the first line and a half, belongs to the frame story, the transition to which is marked by the word “us” (that is to say, women, of whom the wife here makes herself the spokesman).

Two other passages in the tale likewise give us the full flavor of the wife’s personality: the opening passage of 25 lines, in which the wife manages to attack her fellow-pilgrim the friar, who has offended her by his comments on her prolog; and the long passage about the various things that women love most (D 925-982). One may say that although Chaucer did not fully integrate prolog and tale, he did what he could to make the tale fit the prolog. But this way of putting the matter would hardly do him justice or make clear his actual procedure. For him the tale, not the teller, came first, in spite of Kittredge and his followers. The wife of Bath’s tale is told for its own sake. The wife tells it in her own characteristic style wherever this style serves well to bring out points inherent in the narrative or readily added to it. But wherever the economy of the tale as such is best served by a style or tone different from that characteristic of the teller, Chaucer without hesitation, and almost without thought, adopts that style or tone, turning the teller into a mere mouthpiece of the author’s. For Chaucer the tale is the thing.

Chaucer seems to have changed his mind about the tale to be given to the wife of Bath. Certainly he wrote the shipman’s tale for a woman, and that woman was surely the wife of Bath, since we have no other serious contenders for the honor, and since various things in the tale go well with the wife’s prolog. But though the woman of the tale
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gets the better of her husband, she does so thanks to a rascally monk who gets the better of her, and this fly in her ointment may have moved Chaucer to give the wife of Bath another tale, a tale in which the triumph of womanhood was complete. This done, he gave the wife’s old tale to the shipman, but without making the needful revision of the text. No doubt he would have made this revision had he lived to finish his undertaking, but the transfer of this tale from the wife of Bath to the shipman shows clearly enough that for Chaucer the tale was there for its own sake, not for the sake of the teller. In the same way, Chaucer wrote the tale of St Cecilia for a man, but afterwards he assigned it, without revision, to the second nun, if one may go by the rubrics in the manuscripts. Such treatment of a tale cannot be reconciled with the dictum of Kittredge quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

The only other woman on the pilgrimage was the prioress. She told the tale of the little boy who was killed by the Jews because he sang a song in honor of the Virgin as he passed through the Jewish quarter on his way to and from school. Although his throat is cut, the Virgin by a miracle keeps him alive and allows him to sing again and thus to lead his mother to his body. The story belongs to a very large and popular group of tales then current, tales of miracles wrought by the Virgin. Such a tale is very appropriately told by a nun, and, as Kittredge has pointed out, the tenderheartedness of the prioress makes a tale about a child especially suitable for her. On the other hand, this tenderheartedness of hers does not go very well with the story of a murder, much less the murder of an innocent child. A woman who weeps at the sight of a dead mouse is hardly the right person to tell a tale of throat-cutting and torture. Moreover, the devotional quality which marks the prioress’s tale is not what one would
expect after reading the description of the worldly lady in the general prolog. A courtly tale would be more consistent with Chaucer's characterization of the prioress. But, as I have said before, Chaucer is not deeply concerned with consistency. The story of the little clergeon is told for its own sake, and it is given to the prioress because a nun seems a suitable person to tell it. The earlier characterization of the prioress as a tenderhearted worldling is simply dropped. It is several thousand lines away, and the reader or hearer has probably forgotten it by this time.

Even more drastic is the treatment given to the monk, though Manly surely overstates the case when he says (New Light, p. 261),

Chaucer completely threw over the one described in the Prologue and substituted for him a gloomy and uninteresting person, who retains nothing of the original brilliant figure except the horse with its jingling bells.

Here Manly overlooks the description of the monk which the host gives when he calls on him to tell a tale, a description wholly consistent with the one in the general prolog. But when the monk himself begins to speak, two characteristics appear which are not found in the earlier passages: loquacity and erudition. First let us look at the evidence for the monk's loquacity:

B 3155 This worthy monk took al in patience,  
And seyde, I wol doon al my diligence  
As fer as souneth unto honestee  
To telle yow a tale, or two, or three.

This readiness to tell "a tale, or two, or three" seems a little too much of a good thing, and one has the feeling that here is a man who likes to talk interminably. Our impression becomes a conviction when we read the next four lines:
And if yow list to herkne hiderward,
I wol yow seyn the lyf of seint Edward;
Or elles first tragedies wol I telle,
Of whiche I have an hundred in my celle.

The monk does not actually say that he will first tell 100 tragedies and then the life of St Edward; but his words make it evident that he has a very large stock of story and is perfectly willing to give the pilgrims the full benefit of it.

In this passage so much is made of the monk’s loquacity that one is surprised when nothing comes of it later on. Most of the seventeen tragedies that the monk actually tells are extremely short, and when the knight stints him he does so because they are tragedies, not because they are long. The host then takes charge and, after performing in his usual impudent way for a while, calls on the monk to tell another story:

B 3995 Sir, sey somwhat of hunting, I yow preye.

This proposal takes us back to the monk of the general prolog, who, as you will remember, is described as first and foremost a hunting man. And since the host asks the monk to keep on talking, one would expect a second monk’s tale. When Chaucer was stinted of his first he told a second; why not the loquacious monk? But no. The monk proves to be not so loquacious after all:

Nay, quod this monk, I have no lust to pleye;
Now let another telle, as I have told.

Indeed, the monk is the only pilgrim in the whole story who declines to tell a tale when the host asks him to tell one. We must conclude that Chaucer made the monk loquacious for comic effect and then decided not to have him exhibit his loquacity — a very wise decision, no doubt.

The monk’s erudition is another matter. It comes out in the lines I have already quoted, and grows steadily more
impressive as the monk's prolog and tale proceed. The worthy prelate, having mentioned the tragedies which he has on file, goes on to define the word *tragedy* for the benefit of the pilgrims, few of whom had ever heard of such a thing before if they were like the host:

B 3163 Tragedie is to seyn a certain storie,
    As olde bokes maken us memorie,
    Of him that stood in greet prosperitee
    And is yfallen out of heigh degree
    Into miserie, and endeth wrecchedly.
    And they ben versifyed comunly
    Of six feet, which men clepe exametron.
    In prose eek been endyted many oon,
    And eek in metre, in many a sondry wyse.
    Lo! this declaring oughte enough suffye.

He follows up this admirable medieval definition with an apology for the order in which he tells his tragedies, an apology strongly reminiscent of Chaucer's apology in lines 743-746 of the general prolog. The tragedies themselves are preceded by an introductory stanza which reads thus:

B 1381 I wol bewayle in maner of tragedie
    The harm of hem that stode in heigh degree,
    And fillen so that ther nas no remedie
    To bringe hem out of hir adversitee;
    For certein, whan that fortune list to flee,
    Ther may no man the cours of hir withholde;
    Lat no man truste on blind prosperitee;
    Be war by thise ensamples trewe and olde.

The learned character of this stanza, and of the monk's tale in general, is manifest, and the erudition of the monk stands in sharp opposition to what Chaucer says of him in the general prolog. There is no need to labor the point. Chaucer assigned this tale to the monk because monks are supposed to be learned, and the monk's tale is undoubtedly a suitable one for a monk to tell. But it does
not suit at all the hunting man and scorner of books of the general prolog, and its assignment to him nevertheless shows with perfect clarity that the tale is there for its own sake, not as a device for the characterization of its teller.

The tale of the canon’s yeoman, on the other hand, is rooted in the teller’s own experiences, as servant to an alchemist. The integration is so complete that it has affected the manuscript record, which labels the yeoman’s account of his own master, and his story about another alchemical canon, as parts one and two of a single tale. Nevertheless the character of the yeoman remains throughout a matter of incidental interest only. The words put in the yeoman’s mouth have for their whole point and purpose the exposure of alchemy for what it is: a fraud and a delusion. Of this tale least of all can one say, with Kittredge, that it exists for the sake of the teller.

The clerk’s tale of patient Griselda is one which fits the teller so perfectly that it seems needless to comment on the matter, beyond exclaiming over the inspiration that brought the two together in Chaucer’s mind. But the author chose to add to the tale two stanzas and an envoy markedly inconsistent with the character of the clerk as we find him described in the general prolog. The clerk of Chaucer’s description is still speaking when, after he has told the tale, he points out the moral lesson to be drawn from it:

E 1142

This storie is seyd, nat for that wyves sholde
Folwen Grisilde as in humilitee,
For it were importable, though they wolde;
But for that every wight, in his degree,
Sholde be constant in adversitee
As was Grisilde; therfor Petrark wryteth
This storie, which with heigh style he endyteth.

For, sith a womman was so pacient
Unto a mortal man, wel more us oghte
Receyven al in gree that god us sent,
For greet skile is, he preve that he wroghte....

In other words, Griselda represents not the ideal wife but the ideal Christian. Her humility makes her accept her troubles in the faith that God knows best. She is so conscious of her own unworthiness that she takes for true what her husband tells her and does what he says without repining, however much it makes her suffer, and when she learns the truth she takes her new-found happiness not as her just deserts but as something that has come to her by grace:

E 1093 O tendre, o dere, o yonge children myne,
Your woful mooder wende stedfastly
That cruel houndes or som foul vermyne
Had eten yow; but god, of his mercy,
And your benigne fader tenderly
Hath doon yow kept.

Walter does not deserve such praise, of course, but Griselda in her humility looks to others for virtue, not to herself.

The clerk's tale, then, has nothing to say, at bottom, on the subject of marriage. Still less does it deal with the question of whether the husband or the wife should rule. The tale originally ended without any reference whatever to the wife of Bath and her views about marriage. But Chaucer was never the man to resist making fun, and he changed the tale by adding a second ending, an ending meant to be funny. Here it is:

E 1163 But o word, lordinges, herkneth er I go:
It were ful hard to finde nowadayes
In al a toun Grisildes three or two;
For, if that they were put to swich assayes,
The gold of hem hath now so bad alayes
With bras, that thogh the coin be fair at ye,
It wolde rather breste atwo than plye.
For which heer, for the wyves love of Bathe,
Whos lyf and al hir secte god maytene
In heigh maistrye, and elles were it scathe,
I wol with lusty herte fresshe and grene
Seyn yow a song to glade yow, I wene,
And lat us stinte of earnestful matere—
Herkneth my song, that seith in this manere.

Grisilde is deed, and eek hir pacience,
And bothe atones buried in Itaille;
For which I crye in open audience,
No wedded man so hardy be t'assaille
His wyves pacience, in hope to finde
Grisildes, for in certein he sha fallie.

O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence,
Lat noon humilitee your tongue naille,
Ne lat no clerk have cause or diligence
To wryte of yow a storie of swich mervaille
As of Grisildis pacient and kinde,
Lest Chichevache yow swelwe in hir entraille.

Folweth Ekko, that holdeth no silence,
But evere answereth at the countretaille;
Beth nat bidaffed for your innocence,
But sharply tak on yow the governaille.
Emprinteth wel this lesson in your minde
For comune profit, sith it may availle.

Ye archewyves, stondeth at defence,
Sin ye be stronge as is a greet camaille;
Ne suffreth nat that men yow doon offence.
And sclendre wyves, feble as in bataille,
Beth egre as is a tygre yond in Inde;
Ay clappeth as a mille, I yow consaille.

Ne dreed hem nat, do hem no reverence;
For though thyn housbonde armed be in maille,
The arwes of thy crabbed eloquence
Shal perce his brest and eek his aventaille;
In jalousie I rede eek thow him binde,
And thou shalt make him couch as doth a quaille.

If thou be fair, ther folk been in presence
Shew thou thy visage and thyn apparraille;
If thou be foul, be free of thy dispence,
To get thee frendes ay do thy travaille;
Be ay of chere as light as leef on linde,
And lat him care and wepe and wringe and waille.

The brilliance of this new ending is such that nearly all students of the Canterbury Tales are swept off their feet. But luckily for our understanding of the tale, the old ending was not canceled. The two endings stand together, and can be compared by anyone who feels so inclined. A little study, I think, is enough to convince any reasonable person that the old ending goes with the tale and belongs to it, whereas the new ending has no real pertinence to the theme of the tale and actually clashes with the effect which the tale as a whole was intended to produce. Moreover, as I have already said, the new ending does not fit the character of the clerk, into whose mouth it is put. In the general prolog the clerk is thus described:

A 303 Of studie took he most cure and most hede.
    Noght o word spak he more than was nede,
    And that was seyd in forme and reverence,
    And short and quik, and ful of hy sentence.
    Souning in moral vertu was his speche,
    And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche.

There is no trace of reverence, of hy sentence, or of moral vertu in the second ending of the clerk’s tale. This ending is Chaucer pure and simple, naked and unashamed. Its rubric in the manuscripts, Lenvoy de Chaucer, shows how people felt about it in Chaucer’s own day. When Chaucer added the new ending to the tale he showed that fun-making meant more to him than consistency of tone and a unified effect.

The satirical passage on wives which Chaucer added to the clerk’s tale leads directly to the prolog of the merchant’s tale, the first line of which echoes the last line of the envoy:
E 1213 Weping and wayling, care, and other sorwe
I know ynoth, on even and amorwe,
Quod the marchant, and so don othere mo
That wedded been, I trowe that it be so.
For, wel I woot, it fareth so with me.
I have a wyf, theworste that may be;
For though the feend to hir ycoupled were,
She wolde him overmacche, I dar wel swere.
What sholde I yow rehe.re in special
Hir hye malice? she is a shrewe at al.
Ther is a long and large difference
Bitwix Grisildis grete pacience
And of my wyf the passing crueltie.
Were I unbounden, also moot I thee,
I wolde never eft comen in the snare.
We wedded men live in sorwe and care;
Assaye whoso wol, and he shal finde
I seye sooth, by seint Thomas of Inde,
As for the more part, I sey nat alle.
God shilde that it sholde so bifalle!
A! good sir hoost! I have ywedded be
This monthes two, and more nat, pardee;
And yet, I trowe, he that al his lyve
Wyfles hath been, though that men wolde him ryve
Unto the herte, ne coude in no manere
Tellen so muchel sorwe as I now here
Coude tellen of my wyves cursednesse.

The merchant's wedded woes are of course meant to be funny. In general, husbands whose wives are too much for them get no sympathy but become figures of fun. Certainly that is what happens to them in our older literature, however it may be in actual life. For the purposes of this prolog, the merchant loses all the dignity and self-importance ascribed to him in the general prolog; he lays bare to the host and the other pilgrims his most private sorrows with a frankness familiar in stage comedy but less often found in ordinary public gatherings. The conversation of the merchant is described in the general prolog as follows:
His resons he spak ful solemnely,  
Souning alway th'encrees of his winning.

How differently he talks in his own prolog! But this very difference makes his speech funnier than it could otherwise be. When this distinguished importer and banker, when this eminent man of business, when this discreet person who knows how to hold his tongue, when this merchant tells the pilgrims what an awful wife he has, and what a mistake he made in getting married, the comic effect is far more striking than it would be if an ordinary man had so unburdened himself. The greater the departure from normal and proper conduct (that is, from the realities of ordinary life), the greater the comic effect.

The merchant's prolog is closely parallel to the words of the host after Chaucer's tale of Melibeus. In both cases a husband unbosoms himself about his wife, and in both cases the disclosure is tied to the preceding tale, a tale which in both cases deals with a wife notable for patience. The host and the merchant each contrasts his own wife with the patient and altogether admirable heroine of the tale that has just been told. In this way an exceedingly serious and edifying story is followed by a comic passage, giving an effect which students of the drama call comic relief.

In the general prolog, the merchant is a dignified and important person; in his own prolog, he is somebody to be laughed at; when he tells his tale, he is a savage satirist. For subject he takes the marriage of old January and young May and what comes of it, truly a subject fit for satire, and one to which the merchant does full justice. Here as always in such stories the husband gets no sympathy, but the merchant attacks poor January with a ferocity hard to parallel in such tales. The bitterness and cynicism of the merchant's tale have no counterparts elsewhere in Chaucer's writings. It will hardly do, how-
ever, to say that Chaucer used the tale as a device to characterize its teller. Even Kittredge admits that the merchant is "the last man from whom so furious an outburst would be expected" (op. cit., p. 202). Here Kittredge is thinking of the character which Chaucer gives the merchant in the general prolog. If we set this characterization aside and look only at the merchant as he appears in his own prolog, we find him consumed with hatred of his wife, whom he describes as a complete shrew. His tale, to agree with this characterization, ought to center its attack on a shrewish wife. But in the actual tale young May is anything but a shrew and gets off lightly; the merchant concentrates his fire on her dotard of a husband. We conclude that the merchant's tale is told for its own sake, and that the merchant when he tells his tale is speaking, not in character, but as the author's mouthpiece.

Four of the tales are motivated by quarrels among the pilgrims. The miller starts the pattern by getting drunk and telling a story in which a carpenter serves as victim or butt. The reeve, who is a carpenter by trade, takes offense and pays the miller back by telling a tale in which a miller is put to shame. Later on, the friar and the summoner have it out in like manner. The motivation for both quarrels is slight. We have to do with a quarrel device, suitable for comic effects, but not meant as serious characterization of the pilgrims who do the quarreling. In broad comedy no true motivation is needed or expected for anything that happens. The flimsiest excuse is enough to set going an uproariously funny series of actions, and no reader or hearer can reasonably ask for more plausibility than the comic conventions require. Likewise, the four stories which the quarreler tell are not properly taken for four monologs serving as self-characterizations of the respective pilgrims.

The miller and the reeve tell tales dealing with student
life, the miller choosing Oxford, the reeve Cambridge. But Chaucer does not mean to imply that these two churls, as he calls them, the miller and the reeve, were at home in the academic settings which they so admirably recapture in their stories. They serve as the author's mouthpieces, and their status as churls gives him an excuse for putting smutty stories in their mouths. His apology for including such stories is first made in the general prolog and is then repeated in the prolog of the miller's tale:

A 3167  What sholde I more seyn, but this millere
   He nolde his wordes for no man forbere,
   But tolde his cherles tale in his manere.
M'athinketh that I shal reherce it here.
   For goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of evel entente, but that I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or worse,
Or elles falsen som of my matere.
   And therfore, whoso list it nat yhere,
Turne over the leef, and chese another tale; . . .
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amis.
The miller is a cherl, ye knowe wel this;
   So was the reve, and othere many mo,
And harlotrye they tolden bothe two.
Avyseth yow and put me out of blame;
   And eek men shal nat make earnest of game.

The last line of this apology is Chaucer's true defense of what he is doing: one must not take entertainment or amusement seriously. The rest of the passage is comedy. When Chaucer said that he was very sorry indeed that he had to tell this smutty story, but in the interests of scientific accuracy he could do no other — when he said that, he did not expect his readers to take him at his word; he expected them to laugh. Again, when Chaucer said the miller was a churl and told a churl's tale (that is, a smutty tale), he did not expect this excuse to be taken at its face value. No doubt churls tell smutty stories, but
people of higher rank do too. In fact, Chaucer himself must have liked the smutty stories he included in the *Canterbury Tales*; if he did not like them, why did he include them? The tales which the four quarrelers tell beset them well enough, in some ways, but far from perfectly. Thus, apart from the smut, there is little about the miller’s tale particularly characteristic of the miller and there is much not at all characteristic of him. These four tales are all told for their own sakes, not to bring out the characters of their tellers. So far as they have any characterizing function, this function is incidental, a mere by-product of the tale-telling.

The cook’s tale gives every indication of besetting the teller exceptionally well, but Chaucer left it unfinished; indeed, he barely began it. The other unfinished tale, that of the squire, goes well enough with the squire’s characterization as a lover in the general prolog. The host when he calls on the squire for a tale harks back to this characterization:

F 1

Squier, com neer, if it your wille be,
And sey somwhat of love, for certes, ye
Connen theron as muche as any man.

The squire responds with a love story, as requested. It is worthy of note, however, that the squire in the course of his tale disclaims any true knowledge of love. He says,

F 275

This noble king is set up in his trone,
This strange knight is set to him ful sone,
And on the daunce he gooth with Canacee.
Heer is the revel and the jolitee
That is nat able a dul man to devyse.
He moste han knowen love and his servyse,
And been a festlich man as fresh as May,
That sholde yow devysen swich array.
Who coude telle yow the forme of daunces,
So uncouthe and so freshe countenaunces,
Swich subtil loking and dissimulinge
For drede of jalous mens aperceivinges?
No man but Launcelot, and he is deed.
Therfor I passe of al this lustiheed.

Here the squire calls himself a dull man, ignorant of love and love's service, in direct contradiction to Chaucer's and to the host’s characterization of him. Line 281 in particular gives one pause when compared with line 92 of the general prolog:

He was as fresh as is the month of May.

Can it be that in lines F 279 ff. Chaucer had himself in mind, forgetful of the fact that the young squire is supposed to be telling the tale? If the lines really describe Chaucer, the squire here serves indeed as the author's mouthpiece. Like characterizations of the poet have been assembled in Chapter VI above.

The squire’s father, the knight, since he was a great champion of Christendom against pagan foes, might well have told a tale that dealt with one of his campaigns or with the crusades of others. Instead, he too tells a love story, and the action of his story is put in remote pagan times. It seems evident that Chaucer paid little heed to his characterization of the knight when he gave him a tale to tell. On the other hand, a knight would serve admirably as mouthpiece for a tale of chivalry, and this the story of Palamon and Arcite undoubtedly is, in spite of its classical setting. Again, the knight as the ranking member of the company of pilgrims was the logical man to tell the longest and most impressive tale that Chaucer had on hand; namely, the poet's reworking of Boccaccio's Teseide. We conclude that the knight was given this particular tale in virtue of his knighthood, his characteristics as an individual playing only a minor part in the selection of a tale for him.
The tales given to the manciple and the physician both have a vague appropriateness, but hardly more. The cunning manciple tells a story dealing with duplicity, and the learned physician draws from learned sources. But if the manciple had told the physician’s tale one could still say that he told a story dealing with duplicity, and if the physician had told the manciple’s tale one could still speak of his tale as more or less learned in character. One can find no compelling reason for the assignment to these two pilgrims of the particular tales they told.

Four tale-telling pilgrims remain: the nun’s priest, the franklin, the man of law, and Chaucer himself. The characterization of the nun’s priest is very brief, and restricted to the headlink and endlink of his tale. The tale itself is so very Chaucerian that one is inclined to call the priest Chaucer’s deputy and let it go at that. The franklin’s tale is very suitable for one of the gentils among the pilgrims, dealing as it does with courtly love, honor, gentility, and a threefold rivalry in generosity. I see no special link with the franklin as an individual, however, and find it reasonable to believe that the tale was given to him because of his station in society. In other words, he serves as the author’s mouthpiece, and the tale he tells throws light on his social milieu rather than on his personality.

The case of the man of law makes serious difficulties. When the host calls on him for a story, he replies,

\begin{verbatim}
B 39 Hoste, quod he, depardieux ich assente,
To breke forward is not myn entente.
Biheste is dette, and I wol holde fayn
Al my biheste; I can no better seyn.
For swich lawe as man yeve the another wight,
He shoeld himselfen use it by right;
Thus wold our text; but natheles certeyn
I can right now thrihty tale seyn.
\end{verbatim}

From these words one would conclude that the man of law,
although he recognizes his obligation to tell a story, is not ready to tell one at the moment. He continues,

    But Chaucer, though he can but lewdly
    On metres and on ryming craftily,
    Hath seyd hem in swich English as he can
    Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man.

After this one expects the man of law to propose that Chaucer tell the next tale instead of himself. But actually this proposal is never made. The man of law goes on, instead, to give a list of Chaucer’s works, and he follows that up by naming some stories that Chaucer did not tell! He gets back to himself by adding that he too refuses to tell such stories. This brings him once more to the point, and he says,

    But of my tale how shal I doon this day?
    Me were looth be lykned, doutelees,
    To Muses that men clepe Pierides . . .
    But nathelees, I recche noght a bene
    Though I come after him with hawe-bake;
    I speke in prose and lat him rymes make.

On the face of it these lines indicate that Chaucer has just told a tale in verse and that the man of law is about to come after him with a tale in prose. Actually Chaucer does not tell a tale at this point, and the tale that the man of law tells is in verse. It has been conjectured that Chaucer when he wrote the man of law’s prolog intended to have him tell the tale of Melibeus. We have no way of knowing the truth of the matter, but the conjecture seems plausible. In any case the tale finally assigned to the man of law, the story of Constance, is a pious legend in no way connected with the character of the teller as described in the general prolog. The story is surely told for its own sake, not as a means of throwing light on the man of law.

Of all the pilgrims who told tales on the way, only
Chaucer himself now remains. Our text does not provide a set description of him, but we get a few touches here and there. He tells us at the start something of significance about himself:

A 30 And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,
   So hadde I spoken with hem everichon
   That I was of hir felawship anon.

We gather that he was a friendly, sociable man. The host, however, gives him another character later on:

B 1893 He semeth elvish by his contenaunce,
   For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce.

How seriously we are to take this I cannot say, but when Chaucer tells us "My wit is short" (A 746) we may be sure the item is there to raise a laugh, not to give us a piece of serious characterization. See my discussion in Chapter VIII above.

But what of the two tales that Chaucer himself tells? It seems highly unlikely that he put either tale in his own mouth as a device for giving his readers further insight into his personality. On the contrary, both tales are surely there for their value as entertainment (Thopas) or instruction (Melibeus) as the case may be. They throw light, of course, on Chaucer's tastes and interests (as do the other tales of the collection), but this is a mere by-product, not their point and purpose.

We have come to the end of our survey of tales and tellers. Our conclusion cannot be doubtful. The dictum of Kittredge cannot be maintained. In one case, that of the pardoner, the story, though told primarily for its value as such, also serves as part of the teller's characterization of himself. In no other case does the story have this function, and though a couple of the tales befit their tellers so well that one is tempted to turn them into pieces of indirect
self-characterization the temptation must be resisted. It will not do to read medieval works of art in modern terms. More precisely, Chaucer’s methods of characterization must be determined by objective study of his text, in the light of the customs that governed story-telling in his day. In the last three chapters of this book I have tried to make such a study. It is obviously incomplete, but I hope the reader will find it of service in his own study of one of the world’s greatest story-tellers.