Desire in the Canterbury Tales

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Calling the *Canterbury Tales* a discourse of desire is a tricky business.

To label the poem this way is at once a complex formulation and something as simple as saying the tales are intensely interested in and self-conscious about language. At one point, this book was merely an essay on the Franklin’s Tale as the beginning of a language or “entente” group in the *Canterbury Tales*. But as I sought to understand the relation of “entente” and words “in pleye” in fragment 6, I found the issue already active well before the Franklin got hold of it. All of Chaucer’s tales are about language in different ways: the courtly prayers to the gods in the Knight’s Tale, the terms of poetic justice in the Miller’s and Reeve’s Tales, the binding oaths and intentions of the Friar’s Tale—not to mention the “principal entente” of the Pardoner’s story (6.432). Chaucer was deeply concerned with the interplay of the figurative and the literal, the play of the signifier, for his entire career.

Recognizing the ways Chaucer uses language for and against a tale’s purposes has forced me to rethink the introduction of the Canterbury pilgrims as narrators and how we understand their role in the tale-telling game. They are a notoriously difficult group to discuss. Whenever we begin talking about the pilgrims (indeed whenever we have to use the titles of their stories, all of which bear their names), we get caught up in the question of priority: the pilgrims or the tales? Which creates which? The tales create the pilgrims for us and give us the illusion of a speaking “voice,” yet
the tales bear the names of the pilgrims in advance of their telling. And while the General Prologue portraits may be creations of another order (estates satire, rogues gallery, iconography, physiognomy, observation, etc.), they tend to elicit expectations for what that name suggests. The tales, then, are situated as divided subjects burdened by the signifier in advance of what they say.

But the problem appears in what we say: it is nearly impossible to talk about the tales without also talking about the pilgrims and imputing to them intentions, if for nothing other than obedience to the game. But the minute we start talking about the Man of Law and what he does or presents in the Man of Law’s Tale, we have begun thinking of the tale as the intended/presented discourse of the Man of Law and giving that agency credit for what is different from what has come before. This is partially an effect of the tales’ titles and their connection to the fiction of different speakers (and thus what allows Chaucer to fake his irresponsibility for anything indecorous that they say). It is also a reflex of interpretive sophistication; we assure our audience that we are not merely imputing everything unproblematically to Chaucer’s intentions. But it is also, I want to suggest, what happens when they are put into a sequence, even an incomplete and fragmented one. I have tried to work against and around the problem by alternately assigning Chaucer responsibility for whatever connections are produced in the way tales pick up the signifiers in other stories. The more general Lacanian framework for reading the tales in terms of the circulation of the signifier—and thus giving the signifier agency—also helps alleviate the problem of treating the pilgrims like they are real people.

We have long been on the lookout for the ways the tales are related to each other as variations on plots, genres, and conventions. The models used to understand those relations have produced compelling readings of the poem, especially its most well-known parts. My goal in treating desire as the subject and mobile force behind the substitutive logic of the competitive tale collection has been to find a way to talk about those well-known stories and those less easily assimilated ones—the points at which a tale would seem to take off from the rest and do something entirely unconnected and different. Chaucer was always a genre-bending writer who invoked and exploded literary convention in the process of imagining his stories. He rarely simply uses a genre; more often, he remakes it, even when introducing it to his medieval English audience. In doing so, Chaucer identifies problems in genres we did not know they had, revealing how they work and work upon us. He often makes what is familiar—romance, exemplum, satire—different from itself with its very conventionality. Try-
ing to read the tales in order to discover a particular interpretive paradigm or set of themes has not led to entirely satisfying results. Much has been left out, which is unsurprising for a tale collection that is clearly incomplete. We have instead looked toward less restrictive models: the miscellany, the collection, figures that replicate the manuscript context in which the poem was conceived and promulgated. These are helpful models and are certainly capacious, but they locate agency outside of the poem when Chaucer has worked hard to dramatize its engine from within and to show the productivity of the failures of any “fynal answere” (5.987) on a variety of fronts. Hence my turn from models of reading to misreading as a way to talk about that productive force.

Part of the attraction of desire and misreading as a heuristic for Chaucer’s poem lies with us, as well as the fictions of the poem itself. We have desires on the Canterbury Tales, which the poem and its stories engage, and they arise in our readings—our productive critical misreadings—of Chaucer’s poem. Rather than standing above and firmly outside of Chaucer’s fiction, then, we have been caught up in its productive manner of producing more stories about and from the Canterbury Tales for a very long time.