Forum Talk

(1) An Interesting Man in Interesting Times

An Interesting Man

Chaucer was born to a family of London wine merchants. His father was a freeman of the City, wealthy and influential. He didn't follow the family trade but joined the household of a royal prince and princess. He married the daughter of a Hainaulter knight in the service of Edward III's wife Philippa. Chaucer's wife, also called Philippa, was lady-in-waiting in the households first of Edward's queen, and then John of Gaunt's wife, Constance of Castile. Philippa's sister, Chaucer's sister-in-law, was the mistress of John of Gaunt, Edward's younger brother.

In career terms, Chaucer was first a page and then a squire, then a diplomat travelling abroad on the king's service, then an administrator and bureaucrat. He withdrew from public life to live in Kent for a few years, then returned briefly to government administration before retirement. He was supported by annual payments from the royal household and from John of Gaunt's household, suggesting he was a valued and useful servant. He had a decent but not stellar career, and he also seems to have had a talent for getting into trouble. There is evidence of money troubles: debts of various kinds, not much property. There are perhaps job problems: a robbery; an accusation of a mysterious trespass; a court case about a *raptus*, which might be anything from a misunderstanding to a rape. Chaucer often relied on influential friends at court to help him out, but was thus exposed to the ebbs and flows of court and City politics. There may have been marriage problems: before his wife died in 1387 after twenty years of marriage, they may have spent most of their lives apart.

Paul Strohm: 'a rather self-contained and private-minded civil servant: time server in customs, member of diplomatic missons but head of none, lost in the crowd at the moment of his wife's social apotheosis, least qualified shire knight in his parliamentary term, expendable factionalist in the civic broils of 1386'.

Interesting Times

Chaucer was born in the golden age of the fifty-year reign of Edward III in the 1340s, a kind of fourteenth-century baby-boomer. Yet when Edward died in 1377, Edward's grandson, a boy

king of ten, inherited the throne, as his own father, the Black Prince, had died the year before. The boy king Richard II survived a revolt, the 1381 uprising. The English church in the same decade was dealing with its first serious heresy, the Wycliffites or Lollards. As well as their heretical views on the Eucharist, the Lollards demanded Church reform. A related group undertook the translation of the Bible into English. As the English Church worked out how to respond to the Lollards, the Catholic church was split by the Western or Papal Schism (from 1378 onwards) when three separate candidates claimed to be the true pope. As he grew up, Richard proved to be an unpredictable, increasingly tyrannical king, complete with those clichés of late medieval kingship: court favourites and unsuitable advisers. Richard's first wife died childless, and his second wife was a very young French princess: there was no heir and much rivalry amongst those who might succeed him. There were frequent attempts by his nobles to force him to govern more in the common interest, including perhaps a brief temporary deposition in 1388. Finally, in the last months of Chaucer's life in 1399, King Richard was deposed and killed by his cousin, Henry of Derby, son of Chaucer's patron John of Gaunt.

An Interesting Literary Career

When he began as a poet, Chaucer decided to write French and then Italian genres and narratives in English: but this was not simple translation or imitation but rather creative adaptation. He ignored well-established English genres and styles, and also made snobbish jokes about highly respected types of English poetry. He was not very good at finishing things, giving up on two poems, the *House of Fame* and *Anelida and Arcite*. Despite his many many influential friends at court, he doesn't seem to have written or translated a poem for a patron in any clear sense – there is no real evidence for commission or dedication to a patron (despite the clear appetite for translation into English in this period). He doesn't seem to have made much of an effort to circulate his works, even *Troilus and Criseyde*, his long narrative masterpiece: this he dedicates to two friends. Much of his literary fame occurred in the generation after his death.

He undoubtedly wrote on topics and stories which would have appealed to courtiers and nobles: courtly love, women's subjectivity and autonomy, *gentilesse*, the question of free will, satirical depictions of those above and below on the social scale. But his main audience were knights and squires in the royal household, and civil servants in London and Westminster. These were a kind of self-taught intelligentsia, not university educated but nonetheless interested in philosophy, in

religion and theology, in history. These sorts of readers pushed poetry in English to include new subjects: pity and emotion, the nature of love, ethics and gentility, prudence and wisdom, true nobility, social harmony. For some of these men, poetry in English could supply a 'common voice' to serve the 'common good'. Chaucer's friend John Gower writes what he calls 'a book for England's sake', using love poetry and short narrative *exempla* to educate everyone from king to commoner. William Langland, in his dream vision *Piers Plowman*, creates a titular figure who is both a lowly peasant, St Peter, the Good Samaritan and Christ himself, and a dream-vision narrator who dreams his way into the Easter Passion narrative and down into Hell itself. The *Gawain*-poet takes his dreamer, in the poem *Pearl*, to the edge of heaven to talk to the dead, whilst his *Gawain and the Green Knight* tests out the possibilities of the romance genre, turning it inside out. In the 1380s, poetry in English could give voice to ideas and explore issues that the discourses of other institutions (the court, the church, the law, the university etc) could not. But that common voice appears only indirectly in Chaucer's poetry, and perhaps common voices are being satirised to some degree in the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer is interested in all of these subjects, but often obliquely, satirically, quizzically, sceptically.

(2) The Experimental *Canterbury Tales*

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is undoubtedly a masterpiece, yet it is also an unfinished and fragmentary work-in-progress. The *General Prologue* envisages a grand plan, with each of the pilgrims telling two tales on the way to Canterbury and two tales on the way back in Harry Bailey's story-telling competition. But when Chaucer died in February 1400 he was a long way from finishing this project, if he ever intended to finish it at all.

Most of the extant tales were complete and connected both to their teller and to a point on the pilgrimage by prologues and epilogues. But some tales are interrupted by other pilgrims within the fictional world of the *Tales* and hence exist 'unfinished' (for example Chaucer's own *Tale of Sir Thopas*, the *Monk's Tale* and the *Squire's Tale*) and one, the *Cook's Tale*, was left unfinished in actuality. One narrative, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, is told by a character who doesn't appear in the *General Prologue*, whilst another, the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, is told by a character barely mentioned in it. So although the *Canterbury Tales* is indeed one of the foundations of

English literature, it is also one of its more provisional in-progress experiments.

Chaucer's Twin Experiments

We know from references Chaucer made in his other works that he wrote the narratives which we now call the *Knight's Tale* and the *Second Nun's Tale* <u>before</u> he started work on the *Canterbury Tales* framework (i.e. the narrative frame created by the *General Prologue* describing the various pilgrims and the start of the journey, as well as the various link passages, prologues and epilogues which create the fiction of stories told by a group of pilgrims on the road). Having come up with this structure, Chaucer was in the process of incorporating pre-existing stories into this new work.

Research into the surviving medieval manuscripts of the *Tales* shows that Chaucer re-allocated some tales from one pilgrim to another, and also that he revised and changed some of the stories as he worked on the *Tales* project. It may also therefore be the case that Chaucer wrote the narrative which we now call the *Merchant's Tale* before he had decided who would 'tell' the story of January and May. Moreover, though he composed a prologue (in which the Merchant describes his own unhappy marriage) and an epilogue (in which Harry Bailey, the innkeeper in charge of the storytelling contest, discusses the behaviour of his own wife), it may be that Chaucer had not yet revised the narrative much to take account of the allocation of this tale to the character of the Merchant. This may explain some of the unexpected shifts in tone, voice and point of view in the *Tale*.

Chaucer, it seems, was engaged in two sorts of literary experiments at once. He experimented with a narrative framework in which different tellers were allocated to particular stories, allowing us to interpret each story in the light of the teller's fictional identity. This framework also allows us to see one story as being told in response to another, building into an ongoing debate (for example the collection of tales often called the 'Marriage Group'). In some cases Chaucer wrote longer autobiographical prologues (such as those of the Wife of Bath and Pardoner, both of them stereotypes brought to life and individualised) in which much is exposed about their respective narrator's psychology. In these longer prologues, Chaucer explored the idea of what Alastair Minnis calls the fallible author, 'bearers of authoritative materials and methodologies' who are paradoxically fallible, deviant and mobile. Minnis sums up what

Chaucer was working his way towards with these two characters: 'Chaucer, I suspect, was intrigued by fiction's power to deceive— or, at best, to offer alternatives to what, in his culture, passed for truth. This would explain his evident fascination with the moral disquisition of a character who is set up for condemnation in the strongest terms (the Pardoner), and his willingness to put words of the most profound wisdom into the mouth of a character who embodied some of the most virulent antifeminism of his time (the Wife of Bath).'

That's one sort of experiment (tale and teller, the dramatic principle, fallible authors) which is driving the *Canterbury Tales*. But Chaucer had already begun another experiment, this one trying out different types of literary style within different types of narratives. The *Canterbury Tales* is rightly famous for bringing together many different genres (for example *fabliau*, romance, moral exemplum, and beast fables) in its collection of stories. Yet its individual narratives are also experiments *within* genres, exploring the effects of contaminating one genre or subject-matter with styles of narration from another.

(3) Different manners in the *Merchant's Tale*

An Unconventional Fabliau

The narrative we now call the *Merchant's Tale* contains characters and events familiar from the world of *fabliau* (short comic narratives popular in the Middle Ages). There is a young maid, an amorous squire, an old husband, as well as sexual desire and behaviours of various kinds which might seem shocking in light of conventional morality. Yet it is also has features not usually found in the conventions of the *fabliau* genre. Mythological gods and goddesses like Venus, Pluto and Proserpina seem to inhabit the same fictional reality as this Italian knight and his household, and we would not usually expect to meet gods and goddess in a *fabliau*. We are both entertained and disoriented by the seeming mismatch between what we expect of a *fabliau* and what we get in the story, and between *what* is being narrated and *how* it is being narrated.

Different *Maneres*

Especially in the second half of the *Tale*, there are many potential discrepancies between the events which are being recounted and their representation, either in what the characters say about

their actions, or in how the narrating voice represents or describes the events, or in the comments which the narrating voice interjects into his own narrative. Before he makes an address to Damian the squire, the narrating voice announces that he will to speak to him 'in this manere' (656). This announcement signals that a particular *manere*, a particular convention or style of writing, will be used.

In this case the *manere* is an apostrophe (meaning literally the turning away of speech from one audience to another). Here the narrating voice turns away from telling the story to a collective audience in order to address Damian in particular. Damian is apostrophised as if he were a lovesick courtly lover in a romance, the narrating voice's questions about Damian's behaviour highlighting the predicament of a lover who must love in secret. But *is* he a courtly lover? Do his actions, and the way those actions are presented in the story, 'deserve' this apostrophe? If not, why not? Why should one style be appropriate and another not?

The story is full of identifiably different *maneres* like this, often conventions of narrative and rhetoric which Chaucer's readers would have recognised from the romances and dream-visions which he himself had written earlier in his career. January's sudden blindness, for example, is cited by the narrating voice as an instance of how quickly good fortune can turn into misfortune. The narrating voice responds with an exaggerated and histrionic apostrophe in which he laments Fortune's ability to deceive us by making us believe that we will be able to keep our good fortune. Chaucer had used apostrophes like this in his earlier poem about an ill-fated love affair, *Troilus and Criseyde*. There are also examples of *chronographia* (a self-consciously poetic or rhetorical description of the passing of time) and also extraordinary comparisons in which things like the wedding feast or May's appearance or January's garden are said to supersede famous figures or notable instances in history, myth and literature. Chaucer is here sending himself up, and perhaps sending the literary up too.

Stylistic Ups and Downs

Stylistic effects such as these are entertaining – we recognise the funny combination of incongruous styles (rather like the 2014 film *What We Do in the Shadows*, in which a group of vampires are not presented in expected fashion, as in the *Twilight Saga* for example, but filmed in the style of a fly-on-the-wall documentary). And as well as being funny, this unexpected or

defamiliarising combination can make us think. The *Merchant's Tale* keeps us on our toes – we can never be sure where the style of the narrative will take us next.

Damian, for example, writes a love letter to May 'In manere of a complainte or a lay' (669), that is in the style of a fashionable love poem in complicated verse forms. Here the surprise is first elevation: Damian is much more cultivated than we might expect (especially given some of the crude descriptions of January's lust and the bawdy nature of Damian's behaviour in the pear tree). Later on May reads the letter and then rips it up and throws it into a toilet. She does this in practical terms in order to keep it secret, but the trajectory of the letter provides a good symbol for Chaucer's stylistic play here. What is first unexpectedly elevated becomes suddenly polluted (in a very literal way!). Such a trajectory also leads us to consider what is more appropriate in this fictional world, that a lusty squire should write a poem, or that a poem should be flushed down the loo?

Chaucer's Drama of Style

These discrepancies of style and content are often thought to be ironic in some way, whether this is irony directed at the Merchant by Chaucer or by the Merchant at the characters in his story. Likewise they are sometimes seen as satirical, using comedy to expose and emphasise these characters' flaws and vices, and also perhaps the pretensions of those who cloak base desires in the trappings of courtly love. Yet these explanations don't really quite capture the comedy and bafflement created by Chaucer's mixture of styles. We are left to puzzle over whether the walled garden in which couples have *al fresco* sex can really be one of January's 'honeste thinges' (816) or whether the language of the Song of Solomon alluded to in lines 929–32 can be rightly called 'lewed wordes' (937, i.e. words which are foolish, or ill-mannered, or even lascivious).

The shifting of styles and various discrepancies make even a consistent irony or consistent satirical intention seem doubtful: Chaucer's amusements are often local and localised.   Like January at the end of the story, who lets what he has seen in the pear tree 'passe out of mind' (1178), we are left doubting our own conceptions and judgements. Chaucer's first experiment, his drama of style (as the title of C. David Benson's 1986 book on the *Canterbury Tales* calls it), is, in the *Merchant's Tale*, as important as his second experiment, the dramatic relationship

between each teller and their tale.

[10 mins]: resources