

Trading the 'knotte' for loose ends: the 'Squire's Tale' and the poetics of Chaucerian fragments

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The Squire's Tale belongs to that perverse realm of literature that offers critical asylum to contentious and antithetical interpretations. On the one hand, Chaucerians such as Alfred David, Jennifer R. Goodman, and David Lawton regard it as the poet's genuine attempt at romance; on the other hand, writers like Robert S. Haller, Stanley J. Kahrl, Robert P. Miller, and Joyce E. Peterson view the tale as the poet's ironic critique of inadequate social or aesthetic sensibilities represented by the Squire's flawed narration. Such contrasting assessments of the poet's tone constitute an especially formidable obstacle to critical dialogue, since the disagreement over tone is also a controversy about what genre the tale represents: is it romance, for example, or burlesque of romance? Undoubtedly the tale's incomplete state renders the argument still more difficult to resolve, as is true of debates over other Chaucerian fragments, and perhaps the controversy will remain irreconcilable. Nevertheless, such conflicting readings of the tale often share two important points of consensus that may lead to a better understanding of the tale as a fragmentary form and of Chaucerian fragments more generally - an understanding that circumvents the impasse created by critical polarities. First, a number of critics on either side of the issue concur that Chaucer left the tale intentionally incomplete (e.g., Goodman, Haller and Peterson).(1) In any case, no one has satisfactorily explained how so massive a narrative, if it were finished as the Squire projects it in his final lines, could have been embedded in its entirety into the Canterbury Tales.(2) Second, many who have written on the Squire's Tale assume, at least implicitly, that the tale has an aesthetic value as it stands, that it is in effect a successful fragment.(3)

Both points of consensus reflect a common assumption about the viability of literary fragments, and that assumption at least partly explains why the Squire's Tale, as Lawton (106-29) and Donald Baker (3, 59-74) attest, has enjoyed until recently a largely favorable reception over six centuries. The same may be said of the Chaucerian corpus, the bulk of which is in a fragmentary state. But the reception of the Squire's Tale is particularly remarkable because, as internal evidence indicates, the narrative is truncated farther from its point of textual closure than is any other Chaucerian work. Even the very brief Cook's Tale, at best a beginning, appears to leave less untold. In addition, the Squire's Tale is replete with internal fragmentation and everywhere emphasizes its incomplete nature. For these reasons, it offers enlightening perspectives for studying, more generally, the fragments of a poet who had a habit of leaving things successfully undone. Using the Squire's Tale as a representative Chaucerian fragment and as a point of focus, this essay attempts to define those perspectives as well as some of the more significant features of the poetics of Chaucerian fragments. It is not intended to offer a reading that settles standing arguments about the Squire's Tale; if anything, it rather suggests why such arguments persist. More extensively, but without formidable theorizing, it suggests the importance of an audience-oriented perspective in approaching Chaucerian fragments whether we are studying features common to literary fragments in general, features reflecting the medieval literary milieu, or those features specific to Chaucer. As Marjorie Levinson so aptly observes in her study of Romantic fragments, "The object of the [fragment] is . . . the substitution of a reading for a writing" (26).

I

The Squire's Tale is not only a fragment within a fragment (V [F]) within a fragment (the Canterbury Tales); it is also internally fragmentary in many ways. To a large extent, its internal incompleteness results from the Squire's heavy use of rhetorical devices, like the modesty topos and occupatio, which have received much critical attention (e.g., Haller, Kahrl [201ff.], and Miller [226-27]). But the full implications of the Squire's dependence on these devices deserve reiteration and further emphasis: as employed by the Squire, these rhetorical mannerisms allow the narrator to break away from or pass over potential subject matter. Because of his pervasive use of such devices, the Squire leaves incomplete nearly everything he discusses, nearly every avenue of tale-telling and every tale he starts.

He continually flirts with the rich matter of romance in the opening scene of King Cambuscan's birthday festival at court, apparently intending this introduction to provide a framing device for a series of embedded tales about the royal family, yet he never develops what he begins, even in the frame tale. For example, he implies that in the beauty of Cambuscan's daughter, Canacee, there is a tale unto itself, but he cannot tell it because he is incapable of the necessary rhetoric (34-41).(4) Nor can he relate the fine trappings of Cambuscan's court because he hasn't the time (63-75). Even so, when a visiting knight brings four magic gifts from his lord to honor Cambuscan, the Squire makes a virtual tale of the knight introducing those presents: "And for his tale sholde seme the better, / Accordant to his wordes was his cheere, / As techeth art of speche hem that it leere" (102-04). Predictably, though, the Squire goes on to regret that he cannot reproduce the fine rhetoric of the knight - yet another part of his tale untold. (He nevertheless manages 58 lines of paraphrase as if they were direct quotation of the knight!) There is another tale in the splendid dancing and revelry of the feast, but the young narrator cannot relate that either because he claims not to be "a feestlych man as fressh as May" (281), though his portrait in the General Prologue tells us he is just such a person (I. 92). Still more tales could be had in the dreams of the drunken courtiers, except that, as the Squire regrets, their heads are full of "fumositee," which yields dreams of "no charge" (358-59); nevertheless, he cannot resist mentioning this unpromising narrative material too. Apparently he sees a tale everywhere, even in Canacee's walk through the royal garden on the morning after the feast, but following considerable detail about her walk, he cuts short that tale to get to the "knotte," or point, of his larger tale (401), which of course he never gets to. All he delivers is half of a falcon's love story that the bird itself relates to Canacee.

As if to complement the Squire's menu of half-realized subject matter, the magic gifts from the visiting knight suggest an indefinite number of untold tales as well. It is not just that these gifts are rich with narrative possibilities about magic. More importantly, three of these supernatural gifts are vehicles to take the Squire into previously unavailable realms of narrative. The magic ring opens up the world of birds; it yields their language and their stories. The mirror grants access to the world of thought, to the secrets of enemies and unfaithful lovers. The horse of brass will take one anywhere in the known world; indeed, the horse makes the potential narratives of the Squire's Tale almost unlimited.

While we are presented with one potential but unrealized story after another, the Squire and his characters keep us ever conscious of tale-telling. Along with the youth's frequent mention and abandoning of potential narratives, along with his repeated references to his own narrative tasks, the people at court frequently allude to old stories which will not be retold either. In their efforts to explain the magic gifts, they refer to the stories of Pegasus and the Trojan horse (206-11); to accounts by Alhazen, Witelo and Aristotle on mirrors and reflections (232-35); to Achilles who had a spear comparable to the magic sword (238-40); to Moses and Solomon who possessed knowledge and skill akin to that given by Canacee's ring (250-51). In sum, depending on how one counts such things, there are in the 664 lines of the Squire's performance about 40 explicit references to tales, tale-telling, and the narration of the tale itself - all serving to remind us of what could be told. We are left in the end with a sequence of many miniatures of the Squire's Tale itself: numerous scraps, fragments that suggest stories not opted for, stories not to be. As John Hill observes, "Because [the Squire] does not feel able to tell the all of something, he will tell none of it in one case and only gesture toward some of it in the other. Amusingly, an impossible totality in each case justifies an emptiness . . ." (80). All the world is a story, the Squire implies; or rather, all the world could have been a story, but for that very reason nothing ever gets finished. The paradox of the Squire's Tale is that its narrator must leave so many things unfinished in order to finish.

II

Since the literary history of the tale attests to a positive reception, it is worth considering whether the tale's incompleteness generates its special appeal. At the beginning of this century, R.K. Root suggested,

A considerable part of the attention which this tale has received is due, I fancy, to the very fact that it was left half told. . . . With such a beginning, what is not possible? The imagination roams through limitless fields of pleasing conjecture. . . . Any conclusion which Chaucer, or any other poet, could have written would have been barren and commonplace compared with our vague imaginings. (267, 268)

Root's comments on the reader's imaginative experiences and his hyperbole elevating the authorship of the reader's imagination above the poet's text anticipate the value of reader-response criticism in studying the tale. For example, the tale's pattern of leaving one subject for another, as well as its eventual truncation, creates an effect similar to that of serial fiction which, as Wolfgang Iser has remarked, intensifies the reader's ideational processes by strategic cuts in the narrative line (191-92). Serial fiction often cuts and restarts several synchronous narratives - a technique that must owe some debt of influence, however indirect, to medieval interlaced romances. Serial narrative prompts its reader not only to imagine the continuation of the cut narrative lines but to fill blanks between the several synchronous narratives, and thus creates a field of "vague imaginings," to borrow Root's phrase. In the Squire's Tale, of course, such cuts never lead to resumption, whereas in serial fiction the resumption necessitates another cut to restore the intensity of ideation. The Squire's Tale, in contrast, forms a sequence of ideational inclines without subsequent declines effected by continuation or closure.

Like any finished narrative, the tale also has points of indeterminacy which the reader is prompted to flesh out, those which Roman Ingarden calls "spots of indeterminacy" of "represented objects." Quite simply, these are any of the many details that are necessarily omitted in the textual representation of objective reality (Ingarden 246-71). Certainly the Squire's uses of the modesty topos and occupatio, as well as his many acknowledgments of his incomplete efforts, play upon and intensify the reader's ideation at such points of textual indeterminacy. Moreover, the missing text of the fragment obviously can further augment an intensified ideational process.

However, the missing text can also undo, forestall, or suspend many of the inferential processes ordinarily involved in supplying imaginative constructs for textual indeterminacies. For example, the "blanks" or "gaps" in a text, which Iser identifies as prompts for intensified reader response, may remain unfilled in the reading of a fragment because such blanks are ordinarily created and delimited by two or more unconnected segments of text: in order to draw an inference that fills a blank, the reader generally requires at least two determined and distinct textual segments between which the blank resides (Iser 182-85). Fragments will often present one such segment without a second, which would have been realized in the text that is missing.

Nevertheless, even lacking a second segment to signal the blank, the reader may recognize from a single segment a clear invitation to fill textual gaps. For example, the Squire forecasts that "Cambalo" will fight "in lystes with the bretheren two / For Canacee er that he myghte hire wynne" (668-69). Is this "Cambalo" the same as Canacee's brother "Cambalus" (line 656)? There are many possible explanations for this passage, but let us consider just two likely avenues for response. The passage is immediately remarkable because it raises the possibility of (1) incest or (2) a doubling of names as happens elsewhere in the Canterbury Tales with Robyn, Alisoun and Janekyn. One cannot eliminate the possibility of incest, since the Man of Law has brought up the subject of a Canacee who had an incestuous relationship with a brother (II. 77-80). (Given Chaucer's penchant for irony, neither can one take the Man of Law at his word that Chaucer would never pen such a scurvy tale.) If, on the one hand, this "Cambalo" is thought to be Canacee's brother, the reader might complete or interpret the text in light of cultural taboos, or in terms of cultural differences between occident and orient, assimilating the incest theme into the already established exoticism of the tale (no doubt with an imperfect notion of "orientalism"). Yet, as John Fyler points out, incest (not to mention doubling) was a common feature in romance (2), so that another reader, aware of that fact, might complete the text in terms of known generic affinities.⁽⁵⁾ If, on the other hand, this is another instance of name-doubling (Cambalus-Cambalo, Canacee-Canacee), a different framework of inferences would be prompted as happens, for instance, in the reader's refining and redefining any one of the three Alisouns from the Miller's and Wife of Bath's performances by comparisons with the other two. Either way, in the mention of Cambalo winning Canacee, the reader sees immediately a point at which heightened interpretive activity is invited but lacks critical information to direct and complete an interpretation, to fill a textual gap. Metaphorically speaking, in this kind of situation the reader's interpretive activities can progress like a space probe: indefinitely, on a journey with only one terminus - its inception.

At the same time, in other ways, the reader of a fragment can attempt interpretive closure through an activity which, for present purposes, can be called "improvisation." To take the most obvious example of such improvisation, the incomplete metaphor of

Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrimage is, as John Norton-Smith observes, adequately projected for it to be regarded as complete (80). The audience can conceptualize it as a whole and thus formulate an aesthetic response not just to the realized text but also beyond that to the conceptualized text. In this way too, the audience further extends its own interpretive role and experience of the text. (Such an experience is no doubt similar to that of the serial reader who imagines, when arriving at the end of an installment, how the story might continue.)

Yet, as clear as the projection of the Canterbury Tales may seem, it is hardly univocal or definitive because there are at least three projections, suggested at beginning, middle, and end respectively: four tales from each pilgrim, with two stories going to Canterbury and two returning (I. 791-95); "a tale or two" per pilgrim (V. 696-98); and one tale apiece (X. 25). In addition, although the Canterbury Tales has an ending as well as a structure defined by the Host's plan(s) and the pilgrimage journey, its incomplete middle is rendered still more ambiguous by spontaneous variables like the Miller's insurrection against the Host, the Friar-Summoner spat, or the more remarkable entrance of the Canon's Yeoman, who represents an extension of the initial closed set of narrators.

These equivocal aspects of the projected whole distinguish the effect and appeal of the successful fragment from its unsuccessful counterpart because an entirely unambiguous projection, for all intents and purposes, would render the fragment identical in its effect to the completed poem. This is very like what happens with the Monk's Tale. Lacking a unifying structure that transcends its individual tales, the Monk's collection, in and of itself, is not incomplete and contains no internal indication that it is a fragment - only the Knight's interruption identifies it as incomplete. Of all Chaucer's fragments, it invites the least speculation (or interest) about its intended whole; the reader is left only to imagine a still larger collection of De casibus tragedies, a redundancy to be sampled by a reader (one hopes) rather than inflicted wholesale upon a live audience. More engaging than the Monk's fragment, the House of Fame, for instance, leaves the reader to assume an interpretive role like that which might have been played by the "man of gret auctorite" appearing in the poem's last line. In a different but likewise fruitful vein, Sir Thopas allows the reader to predict humorously the unrealized horror of its continuation, even as it retains a marked indeterminacy in the inherent unpredictability of nonsense as its subject matter. Whatever its strategy, the successful fragment generally creates the illusion of being, in some sense, the better because it is incomplete, though the reader may remain unaware that this effect is an illusion.

As with the Canterbury Tales, the House of Fame, and Sir Thopas, the reader of the Squire's Tale can improvise to extend the text by conceptualizing a whole for it from a partially ambiguous set of precedents in the existing narrative. At least three major features of the tale imply the structure of that unfinished whole: first, the inception of the frame tale, concerning the gifts brought to court; second, the embedded narrative about Canacee and the falcon; and third, the Squire's concluding projections for continuing the tale. As already noted, the magic gifts brought by the visiting knight will initiate within the frame story a number of narratives about the royal family. When the Squire interrupts the tale of Canacee and the falcon, he summarizes that plan:

Thus lete I Canacee hit hauk keypyng; I wol namoore as now speke of hir ryng Til it come eft to purpos for to seyn How that this faucon gat hire love ageyn Repentant, as the storie telleth us, By mediacion of Cambalus, The kynges sone, of which I yow tolde. But hennesforth I wol my proces holde To speken of adventures and of batailles That nevere yet was herd so grete mervailles.

First wol I telle yow of Cambyuskan, That in his tyme I many a citee wan; And after wol I speke of Algarsif, How that he wan Theodora to his wif, For whom ful ofte in greet peril he was, Ne hadde he ben holpen by the steede of bras; And after wol I speke of Camhalo, That faught in lystes with the bretheren two For Canacee er that he myghte hire wyne. (651-69)

Straightforward though it is, this structural projection is hardly unambiguous, allowing for potential variants as does the frame of the Canterbury Tales itself. Hence, Haldeen Braddy sees the tale as a series of "boxed" incidents within a frame tale (290); Goodman identifies it as a "composite" romance (134); and Helen Cooper anticipates that it will be an "interlaced" romance (145).⁽⁶⁾ But the common significance of these various perceptions of structure is that they all imply an interwoven structure which builds a whole by the inevitable fragmentation of its numerous alternating narratives. While there are significant differences between fragmentation and fragmentary literature, the two become one in the interlaced structure of the Squire's Tale: the fragmentation of interlacement results

in a multifariously incomplete tale, in more than one fragment because, when the tale is truncated, several avenues or potential avenues of narrative are truncated. The reader is left, then, with a wealth of improvisational possibilities grounded in a commonly perceived feature (interwoven narratives) of a partial structure.

The Squire's plan for continuation also assures the poem of another essential aspect of audience response to the fragment, if it is to be self-standing. Writing on Romantic poetry, and specifically on Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," D. F. Rauber identifies a crucial ingredient for a certain type of fragment like the Squire's Tale. This type is

part of a whole which cannot be apprehended, and this is clearly the type which expresses the infinite. In a fragment of this . . . type it is necessary, if the maximum effect is to be gained, that the reader be absolutely convinced of the reality of the unapprehended whole. But, by the nature of the situation, this conviction is hard to establish completely in the poem itself. Consequently, such a fragment really needs a preface in which the required conviction can be secured. Coleridge has given us the perfect example in his introduction to "Kubla Khan." . . . [T]his introduction is a part, and a necessary part, of the poem. (220)

The introduction to which Rauber refers is, of course, Coleridge's famous prefatory explanation of how the poem's composition was permanently interrupted by a visitor from Porlock. We cannot know for certain whether or not Coleridge's "excuse" is a fiction, which is to say we cannot know whether "Kubla Khan" is an intentional or unintentional fragment. But either way, Rauber's insight about convincing the reader "of the reality of the unapprehended whole" is applicable to the Squire's Tale (which, like "Kubla Khan," cannot be proved either intentionally or unintentionally incomplete).(7) The Squire's projection of stories yet to come serves a function like Coleridge's introduction to "Kubla Khan." Though we may doubt that Chaucer ever had a plan for the whole, we are convinced by the projection that the Squire as fictional narrator does have such a plan. The grand design manifests itself in his forecast, while the texture of style and detail is sufficiently established in the existing narrative. Thus the Squire's Tale provides multiple perspectives on its own fragmentary status, revealing unfinished constructs at any narrative level: in the frame tale of the four gifts; in the interrupted embedded tale of Canacee; and even in the final half-sentence beginning Part Three. As such, the tale is a rhetorical miniature of the Canterbury Tales, which is likewise a framed composite incomplete at several narrative levels: as a "whole," in its ten fragments, and in its incomplete tales.

The various incomplete facets of the Squire's Tale and its projected continuation combine to form a common feature of the literary fragment in general: whereas a completed poem is necessarily a finite work in some sense, an incomplete poem (at least the successful one) can present itself as an infinite work in a sense. "A work that is never consumed," notes Levinson, "can never be exhausted" (215).(8) The idea that the incomplete poem has the advantage of suggesting the infinite is also a concept more often applied to Romantic authors, like Coleridge, who sometimes favor organic development over finished product. However, Rauber's observation on the aesthetic advantages of the fragment in Romantic poetry has more general applications: the fragment offers a formal solution to the problem of how "to embody the infinite in a finite, discrete sequential medium" (214-25). Without confusing the distinct metaphysics behind medieval and Romantic conceptions of the infinite, one can at least conclude that Chaucer, like the later Romantic poets, has come upon a similar formal solution - the fragment - to a similar formal problem. The introduction of the magic gifts into the Squire's Tale, especially the horse that can take one anywhere, the persistent reminders of tales left untold and of everything that could have been told, the projection of what is to be told - all such aspects of the Squire's Tale suggest that Chaucer was experimenting with strategies to elude the formal limitations of textual and narrative closures, in effect to elude the finite in a finite text.(9)

In the sense of the infinite lies one of the peculiar appeals of the fragment. If its unfinished state frustrates an audience's desire for the satisfaction of closure, it compensates by satisfying an audience's conflicting desire to sustain the experience of the text. This is especially true of longer fragments - narratives, say, as opposed to lyrics. For as long as it can impress itself upon the memory, the fragment affords the pleasurable, partially defined experience of being in the middle of a book even when readers have "finished" it. As a world of story, as a narrative just opened and never closed, the Squire's Tale ends with the impression that one is entering the middle of a book - not to mention a young man's literary career, as the Franklin's afterword to the Squire might suggest:

"In feith, Squier, thow hast thee wel yquit And gentilly. I preise wel thy wit," Quod the Frankeleyn, "considerynge thy yowthe, So feelyngly thou spekest, sire, I allow the! As to my doom, ther is noon that is heere Of eloquence that shal be thy peere, If that thou lyre; God yeve thee good chaunce, And in vertu sende thee continuaunce . . ." (673-80)

Whatever status we assign to the Franklin's words - ironic or serious comment, interruption or no - they emphasize as much what the Squire has to offer, through "continuaunce," as what the Franklin has already heard.(10)

Similarly, because the middle of the Canterbury Tales is ambiguously structured and replete with reminders that it is unfinished, readers can retain the feeling that they are never finished reading the work, that they are, in the words of Robert Boenig, "part of the way somewhere" (174). Such a response is probably akin to the initial fourteenth-century reception of the Tales as a work in progress, as an open-ended (or open-middled) narrative whose structural possibilities reshaped and refined themselves with each newly experienced fragment, or installment, from the evolving, unapprehended whole.(11)

In fact, at the very moment when the Squire breaks off, an apparent reshaping of the grand plan for the Canterbury Tales also takes place. Harry Bailly reminds the Franklin, "wel thou woost / That ech of yow moot tellen atte leste / A tale or two, or breken his biheste" (696-98). Evidently the Host's original plan for four tales apiece will not be realized. It seems more than coincidence that the Host trims his own colossal ambition so soon after the aborting of the Squire's grand plan, which is too large to be realized within the framework of either the Host's storytelling contest or Chaucer's frame narrative. In essence, this scene contains an image of the artist at work - a persistent Chaucerian fiction most often realized in the various versions of "Geoffrey," who constitutes the primary image for the audience's perception of the poet. In the Canterbury Tales, Geoffrey the pilgrim is joined by three other pilgrims who seem to offer particularized images of their author's ambitions: the Monk, Harry Bailly, and the Squire. All three attempt to construct long narrative sequences, or compilations, and find their plans subject to change and practical necessity; all three, then, personify concerns which affect the shape and outcome of the Canterbury experiment, affording us a perspective on the poet's strategies for the Canterbury Tales as a work in progress. Like the Squire's and Monk's performances and Harry's shrinking ambitions, the Canterbury Tales is curtailed by realistic constraints without relinquishing its vision, or projection, of the unattainable.

III

If the posture of an unapprehended whole and the sense of the infinite are more general features of the successful fragment, other features and appeals of the Squire's Tale and Chaucerian fragments are grounded more specifically in the medieval literary milieu. For instance, while "accidental" fragments of medieval literature may invite little modern critical examination for their own sake, we might expect that their prevalence would have significantly affected the general reception and perception of books by medieval audiences. The very precarious nature of manuscript survival, what with lost leaves and lost gatherings, would have rendered such audiences more ready to accept the fragmentary status of a given work, more receptive to its features as suggestion rather than as actualization of the whole. And whereas modern book owners might have little use for a physically defective text, medieval book owners would have numbered any manuscript, defective or otherwise, among their treasures. More importantly perhaps, the popularity of certain "inconclusive" genres - the debate poem which leaves its issues unsettled, poems like the Franklin's Tale ending with a demande question to stimulate further discussion, and especially the dream narrative whose conclusion is in essence the interruption resulting from waking up - suggests a ready reception in the medieval milieu for open-ended fiction.

John Lydgate's response to the Squire's Tale illustrates such a ready reception for fragmentary fiction. In the Temple of Glas, as Lydgate depicts the sights of the temple, he alludes to the Squire's fragment, along with the Knight's Tale and other Chaucerian pieces, as if to grant the Squire's fragment the status of a finished piece:

And vppermore depeint men myghte se, Hov with hit ring, goodli Canace Of euere foule the ledne & the song Coud vndirstond, as she welk hem among; And hou hit brothir so oft holpen was In his myschefe bi the stede of bras. (137-42)

At first glance this allusion seems to imply that the Squire's Tale was completed. But as Lydgate's modern editor J. Schick observes, Lydgate could have derived his allusion from the existing lines of the Squire's fragment (81n137-42). The reference to Canacee draws upon the details of the tale which do exist, while the reference to Canacee's brother Algarsif is a sketchy one that reveals no more knowledge of the story than would be gained from reading the Squire's projection. In fact, Lydgate's versification and diction suggest that he had Chaucer's text at hand as he wrote his own lines. Here again are the Squire's words:

And after wol I speke of Algarsif, How that he wan Theodora to his wif, For whom ful ofte in greet peril he was, Ne hadde he ben holpen by the steede of bras. . . . (663-66)

Chaucer himself apparently encouraged his audience to regard fragments as if they were complete. In his Retraction, he speaks of the House of Fame, the Legend of Good Women, and even the Canterbury Tales as if they were completed works.⁽¹²⁾ In so doing, he implies an attitude very different from the more prevalent modern attitude toward wholeness as a touchstone for aesthetic assessments.⁽¹³⁾ Though modern readers generally respond in aesthetic terms to Chaucerian and other medieval fragments, the more professional and scholarly of them are still inclined to fret over the incompleteness of such works, thus to an extent impeding critical inquiry over the issue of wholeness. Witness, for example, the very considerable - and generally inconclusive - discussions about why a particular Chaucerian poem is incomplete, reasons that may or may not have anything to do with the author. Witness, also, the persistent urge to establish the "correct" and "final" order of the Canterbury Tales. In Chaucer's poetics, wholeness is not a necessary, and perhaps not even a desirable, criterion. Accordingly, even an obviously finished work like the Parliament of Fowls can end by promising to settle its issues next year - presumably in another poem that the poet had no intention of writing.

Even so, if Chaucer's fragments sometimes run against modern critical sensibilities, they also depart in some respects from earlier medieval aesthetic principles as defined by such authors as Boethius and Geoffrey of Vinsauf, whose theories emphasized such qualities as proportion, symmetry and, as an implicit consequence, wholeness. While such qualities emerge in that complete and very Boethian poem, Troilus and Criseyde, as well as in some of Chaucer's shorter narratives, they are rejected in the sprawl and spontaneity of the Canterbury Tales, as becomes particularly evident when we compare the Tales to its symmetrically structured counterpart, the Decameron. In effect, the poet's fragments question the necessity of arriving at proportion and symmetry.

The asymmetry and disproportion of the Tales, as well as the characteristically lopsided form of fragments, should not necessarily surprise us, though, even in an author like Chaucer who was undoubtedly aware of Boethius's and Vinsauf's theories.⁽¹⁴⁾ Umberto Eco's remarks on medieval theory versus practice suggest a plausible and practical explanation for the coexistence of theoretical perfection alongside conspicuously "imperfect" works:

On the one hand there was a geometrically rational schema of what beauty ought to be, and on the other the unmediated life of art with its dialectic of forms and intentions. . . . [T]he very verbalism and idealism of medieval aesthetics expressed the dualistic mentality of the age, its continual tension between the theory of what ought to be the case and the contradictions of life. (118)

The Canterbury Tales is a virtual metaphor for "the unmediated life of art with its dialectic of forms and intentions." The fiction of the pilgrimage is represented by a pilgrim-poet who defers the structuring role to an aggressively subjective innkeeper, to unruly scoundrels, and to the happenstance of a sixty-mile horseback journey, among other variables. This halting, fragmentary pilgrimage is superimposed upon the much fainter image of the ideal: the hypothetical perfection of pilgrimage as the spiritual life successfully consummated. Chaucer's pilgrimage, counterpointing spiritual against aesthetic structures, reminds us that what is spiritually, or hypothetically, realizable and desirable may be aesthetically undesirable and unachievable.

At the same time, and perhaps just as importantly, the influence of theories of symmetry, proportion and such may have expedited medieval audiences' processes of improvising toward a conception of a whole from fragmentary literature. Accustomed to assessing the whole in terms of its parts and vice-versa, a medieval audience might more readily project and assess a whole from an incomplete set of parts. The experience of the listening audience with oral delivery might also hone that audience's skill in projecting a whole,

particularly in the case of longer works delivered in installments, where there would have been no guarantee that all members of that audience would be present for all parts. In such cases, oral performance of longer poems might require an audience to image a whole from parts.(15)

Of course, from a pragmatic point of view, one cannot ignore the fact that Chaucer, more than most of his contemporaries, was an experimenter, and experimenters are apt to leave a project when one of two things happens: either they find out that an experiment will not work, or that it will. His penchant for experiment might have drawn impetus from his contemporary audience's familiarity and comfort with fragments as well as from their facility to "improvise," to project the whole in the part.(16)

In any case, Chaucer was not alone in exploring alternatives to proportion and symmetry of the whole and to alternative conceptions of wholeness. Also indicative of such alternative conceptions in later medieval aesthetics was the practice, apparently a frequent one, of completing or continuing a work begun by another author. The Roman de la Rose, perhaps Chaucer's favorite poem, was a fragment later completed by a second poet in a tone rather dissonant with that of the first. With similar liberty, Lydgate continues or extends the Canterbury Tales in the Siege of Thebes, as does the author of the Tale of Beryn.(17) In his Testament of Cresseid, Robert Henryson does much the same thing with the obviously finished Troilus, and in like fashion an anonymous author's love poem purports to continue Lydgate's Temple of Glas in two of the manuscripts.(18) Since Chaucer, too, so often extended or reshaped the work of others, realistically he must have expected the same future for his own poetry. William Nelles has argued that the Squire's projection is Chaucer's invitation to other writers to continue the tale.(19) Indeed, as a work whose projected length defies completion within the Canterbury context, the Squire's Tale may be the poet's challenge to his contemporaries or posterity to continue or refashion. In such an invitation, the Squire's Tale, like the Canterbury Tales, expands the poet's and audience's participation in literary history and tradition.

As much as any such works, the Squire's Tale partakes of the fragment tradition in that it ends with a projection explicit enough for the tale to be regarded as *fait accompli*, yet flexible enough to allow for another hand to continue with the unfinished work. Hence John Lane in his 1616 Continuation of Chaucer's "Squire's Tale" and Spenser in the fourth book of the Faerie Queene. In this respect, the difference between Spenser's and Milton's responses to the tale is insightful. On the one hand, Spenser welcomes the chance to extend a projection while writing a colossal fragment himself; his impetus is as medieval as his sensibilities. On the other hand, Milton in "II Penseroso" chooses in a more modern vein to lament a work never finished: "Or call up him that left half told / The story of Cambuscan bold . . ." (109-10). To some extent, Spenser and the medieval authors just mentioned seem to retain, as they read, a sense of storytelling as an unclosed process as well as a sense of an untold story in a story told (and the Squire's Tale, as we have seen, foregrounds the storytelling process). As readers who are continuators, they simultaneously value and devalue the sense of an ending.

The practice of continuing another's literary venture, as if a text's point of closure were mutable, bears an obvious resemblance to practices in other arts, especially architecture. One thinks immediately of the medieval cathedral evolving vertically over the years, functioning as a fragment for generations of worshippers. But closer to home, the practice in literature is related to a medieval concept of the book. Many a book was of course a compilation. As manuscript evidence implies, the idea of the compilation seems to have been so influential that some fifteenth-century editors treated the Canterbury Tales as such. And as Doyle and Parkes emphasize, the final words of the Tales in the Ellesmere manuscript are, "Heere is ended the book of the tales of Caunterbury, compiled by Geffrey Chaucer, of whos soule Jhesu Crist have mercy. Amen" (190; my emphasis).(20) Whether these concluding words originated with Chaucer, a scribe, or an editor who saw himself as a compiler, they raise the same question: when is such a book finished? The answer is, when the compiler stops working on it.(21) Not coincidentally, in its promised panorama of narrative and subject matter (magic, love, jousting, warfare), the Squire's Tale likewise offers itself as the possibility of a book something like the Canterbury Tales, a collection unto itself, even as it urges continuation of one or another of its components. Moreover, the Canterbury Tales, as a collection with a narrator who allows his reader to read selectively, to "Turne over the leef and chese another tale" (1.3177), invites additional fragmentation in the reader's experience and perception of the text.(22)

Furthermore, the concept of compilation includes both fusion and disjunction of literature from various works and hands as well as fusion and disjunction by its reader. To fuse or to separate literary works, and thereby change their contexts, is to alter the possibilities of interpretation and response to literary texts. The Canterbury Tales was, of course, further fragmented in such a manner in its manuscript tradition. Certain manuscripts "anthologize" one or more of the tales. When a group of Canterbury tales is anthologized, those tales are sometimes chosen for similarities rather than contrasts - moral tales, for instance (Silvia 155-56). Thus the thematic tensions of contrast which belong to the "whole" Canterbury Tales are lost in such compilations while new effects are created. The compilation, then, alters the pieces it subsumes even as it helps to perpetuate and expand the role of those works in the literary heritage. Chaucer himself seems to have done as much when he "reused" his own material in this way. The self-standing tales of St. Cecilia and of Palamon and Arcite were embedded as the Second Nun's Tale and the Knight's Tale in the Canterbury plan. A similar history has been claimed for the Squire's Tale itself (Larson; David). In theory at least, any book might be subsumed in a compilation or continued by another hand, and thus no book, not even scripture, was necessarily or always to be regarded as finished object, as an inviolable, closed text. Even the Bible, the most authoritative of texts, had accrued as a cumulative, open text, and the vascillating, uncertain authority of the various Apocrypha challenged the security of scripture's textual boundaries. If, then, textual boundaries in general were not regarded as definitive, the medieval fragment could take its place more comfortably and authoritatively in the literary canon alongside genuinely complete works because either the fragment or the completed work could be "reopened" by another hand and thus be redefined in its totality.

IV

In a variety of ways, then, the Chaucerian fragment animates, intensifies, and protracts the audience's participation in the text. Some of the means to do so, in light of modern reader-oriented criticism, are more or less predictable; other means, which are more specifically grounded in the medieval milieu, require further exploration to broaden our understanding of the aesthetics of Chaucerian fragments. Be that as it may, participation is a two-sided coin. Readers do not simply "participate" in constituting a text or in the experience of that text; it is just as accurate - and quite another thing - to say that the text and the aesthetic apprehension of it become part of the reader's experience. In the case of the fragment, which lacks textual closure, the role that the literary work plays in the reader's experience has the potential to sustain itself as an open-ended experience, one which manifests itself most prominently in the continuation of the fragment by another hand. But such "continuation" is also manifest in the audience's responses to those indeterminacies created by what the incomplete, or unclosed, work overtly withholds: the choice of a mate after the conclusion of the Parliament of Fowls; the wisdom of the man of great authority, who first appears in the final line of the House of Fame; the answer to the Franklin's concluding demande. Activated by a withheld text, the reader's "continuation" is one of the quintessential features of the poetics of the fragment (to be distinguished from the excessively subjective, ill-informed speculation about alternatives to the more determined closed text - i.e., "what if the story had turned out differently?").

This phenomenon of continuation, and the authorial strategies underpinning it, is exceptionally well exploited in *Piers Plowman*, which persistently forestalls closure by means of its unsatisfying or incomplete answers to the dreamer-narrator's questions. As if to sustain his didactic, moral purpose beyond the reader's confrontation with the text into the reader's subsequent experience, Langland conspicuously withholds the spiritual restoration his dreamer ultimately seeks: in both the B version and the C revision, as Conscience sets off in quest of Piers the Plowman, the dreamer awakens abruptly and the poem literally "stops," leaving the reader (like the narrator) groping for the lost ending to a dream interrupted. The Squire's Tale, of course, sustains an aesthetic experience, rather than a moral purpose, but the mechanism and function of its truncation is otherwise similar to *Piers*. Langland's poem ends abruptly with its quest continuing; the Squire's Tale stops abruptly in midsentence as Part III begins. But in a crucial way the tale does not stop, for it breaks off in the middle of a metaphor of time in motion and as motion: "Appollo whirleth up his chaar so hye / Til that the god Mercurius hous, the slye - " (671-72). The final, incomplete sentence, which is restarting the narrative, offers a sense of grammatical, temporal and narrational continuation.

Especially significant, therefore, are the textual "endings" of successful fragments (as well as other poems clearly rejecting closure). Of

all the insights that the Squire's Tale affords about Chaucerian fragments, one of the most significant concerns the ending of the Canterbury Tales itself. There is a very considerable similarity between the "conclusions" of the Squire's Tale and the Canterbury Tales, a similarity that admits speculation about intentionality in a way that other fragments do not. It seems improbable that Chaucer inserted, into the verse of the Squire's Tale just before the final half sentence, a projection for the rest of the tale if he intended to continue the story. A few marginal notes would have served as a reminder of where he intended to take the tale. Rather, as Goodman observes, the Squire's projection at the end of Part II is a means to appease that reader like Milton who requires a conclusion (135). (It is noteworthy that unquestionably intentional fragments like the Monk's Tale and Sir Thopas also imply the narrators' similar ambitions to go well beyond their truncated performances.) The Squire's projection is Chaucer's signal of the end, the poet's way of stating that he is not going to finish the Squire's Tale.

That statement precisely parallels one that concludes the Canterbury Tales and prefaces the Retraction: "Heere taketh the makere of this book his leve," the heading informs us, after which, as noted earlier, Chaucer lists the Tales among his works as if it is finished - or as if he is finished with it. In effect, the Retraction constitutes at once both structural closure and an emphatic statement of discontinuation on Chaucer's part. Regardless of how earnest or conventional we take the repentance of the Retraction to be, that Retraction very strongly suggests that Chaucer discontinued work on the Canterbury Tales before he died, and there is no solid evidence for the assumption that the Canterbury Tales is incomplete because Chaucer died. The most obvious reading of the Retraction is the literal one that the poet took his leave of the unfinished Canterbury project just as he apparently took his leave of the Squire's Tale. From that reading, we might infer, as Root did about the Squire's Tale, that Chaucer recognized the efficacy of leaving the Canterbury Tales incomplete: "The more one considers the keenness of Chaucer's critical insight and the strange 'elvisness' of his character, the more strongly one suspects that Chaucer recognized this power of the incomplete, and deliberately left his tale half told" (269). In the Retraction he finds a way to do so with the entire Canterbury experiment. In repenting of telling "many a leccherous lay," he provides a literal reason why he does not finish the Tales. The Retraction's penitence is Chaucer's visitor from Porlock; the Canterbury Tales appears to be an intentional fragment.

If it is appropriate to conclude with a fragmentary speculation, I would offer an additional, less literal but more literary motive for the poet leaving the Tales incomplete. For all his talk of making clear his "entent," Chaucer is ever elusive of the critical pin that would fix a definitive interpretation upon his work. As an elusive poet, he finds in the fragment a definitive cure for definitive interpretation. Certainly we can say as much of the Squire's Tale, which has elicited antithetical and irreconcilable interpretations while invoking aesthetic admiration from both sides of the debate over whether or not the poet was treating seriously his subject matter and his Squire. And if, in order to settle the argument, we could call up him who left his tale "half told," we could hardly expect a resolution. Chaucer would probably give the debate a hearing, mull over the arguments on each side, smirk in both directions at once, and promise - like the lady eagle in the Parliament of Fowls - to choose the winner next year. After all, such debates delight only as long as they remain Unfinished because, whatever their specifics, they are most concerned with what literature leaves undone.

Notes

1 Of course, the circumstances leading to the tale and certain other Chaucerian fragments, being incomplete, cannot be established with certainty, and thus one can only tentatively classify Chaucer's fragments. For situations where such circumstances are known or confidently assumed, critics have proposed various taxonomies for fragments. Marjorie Levinson identifies four types: the "true," the "completed," the "deliberate," and the "dependent" (49-50). Balachandra Rajah (4-5) distinguishes among the "ruin," the "torso," and the "unfinished." Marshall Suther (4-5) classifies poetic fragments in still another way: verses separated from a larger existing group; verses written for a larger composition never completed; verses not considered wholes, and usually not published, by the author; published verses considered by critics to be in some sense fragmentary.

2 On the impossible length of the tale as projected, see, for example, Trevor Whittock (163-64).

3 Of course, not everyone finds the tale ultimately satisfactory. See, for example, Pearsall (141) and Gardiner Stillwell.

4 All citations of Chaucer are from Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*.

5 Elizabeth Scala suggests that the incest' theme plays upon the tale's fragmentariness: "if we think of the influence of the absent narrative of incest, the story not in the Squire's Tale is the story central to the Squire's Tale As one of the story's many proliferating details (the brass horse, ring, mirror, creel tercelet and lovelorn falcon), the potential incest narrative... serves to structure the tale we have by acting as another empty center . . ." (30-31).

6 Kathryn Lynch, who believes that Chaucer knew the *Thousand and One Nights*, perceives an oriental origin or influence for the structure of the tale (532, 538). But even if Chaucer knew the work, it is more likely that his contemporary audience would associate the Squire's fragment with the more familiar structure of the interwoven romance.

7 Root finds "Kubla Khan" and the Squire's Tale, as fragments, similar also in their intense appeal to the reader's imagination:

Let the magic horse, the ring, the sword, and the mirror be put to practical use, let their use result in any definite achievements or events, and they are immediately vulgarized. Once more the tyranny of the actual, if not the possible, shuts us in; and the boundless scope of the imagination is narrowed to nothing. An exactly similar case is presented by Coleridge's wonderful fragment, *Kubla Khan*, which deals, be it noticed, with the same Oriental dynasty as Chaucer's tale. . . . This poem is unfinished for the good reason that it could not be finished; it is essentially a fragment; and so great is Coleridge's art that the fragment may be said to constitute a distinct literary form. (268)

8 On the subject of the "infinite" in Romantic poetry, see also Thomas McFarland (27-33) and Wolfgang Riehle.

9 Scala suggests an alternative kind of infinitude evoked by the many beginnings offered at the end of the Squire's Tale:

Forging a symbolic relation of opening to closing, the ending of the tale seems able only to retell a series of events analogous or parallel to the circumstances which open the Squire's Tale initially and in this way return, somewhat compulsively, to the origins of its narrative. When the Squire says, 'And ther I lefte I wol ayeyn bigynne,' he points to beginnings, but those beginnings prove to be without origin, eternal regress. (35)

10 The debate over whether the Franklin interrupts the Squire is by now a large one. A very useful bibliography of the issue is provided by David M. Seaman (13n1). Adopting one side or the other of the debate is not critical to my own study. As Seaman suggests, even if the Franklin's words are not an interruption, that does not mean Chaucer intended to finish the tale (17). Perhaps, then, the Squire's concluding half-sentence and the Franklin's words constitute an authorial elipsis in place of the rest of the Squire's performance.

11 The discussion of the extent to which Chaucer circulated the *Canterbury Tales* in his own lifetime is still open. One persuasive piece of evidence that he did circulate the Tales is his "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton," in which he alludes to the Wife of Bath as a known literary figure. Manuscript evidence is less certain, though it can be interpreted as an indicator of at least a limited circulation in Chaucer's own time; see, for example, Charles Owen (106). It seems reasonable to assume that Chaucer did not keep the Tales a secret, especially since the work lends itself readily to "publication" in installments.

12 N. F. Blake suggests that most of Chaucer's fragments may have been finished poems but that their endings were lost in early manuscript transmission. Blake's argument is speculative and depends in large measure on the lack of definite evidence that Chaucer did leave his works unfinished. In any case, although my own study concludes with some speculation about intentionally unfinished works, its major points do not depend upon whether Chaucer's fragments have unintentional or intentional causes.

13 Of course there are numerous exceptions to this statement, including those critics cited above on the fragment, not to mention numerous fragmentary works of modern literature; however, modern critics tend to hold medieval literature apart from the emergence, or re-emergence, of the fragment in later periods.

14 Chaucer borrows from Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* in *Troilus*, I. 1065-71.

15 Brian S. Lee offers a contrary but pertinent perspective on orality and the undefined bounds of the Squire's Tale. According to Lee, the tale "is conceived in the oral mode" (191). And "Richard II's courtiers, if they were listening to Chaucer read his works, need not have known how long his book was: he might go on interminably for all they could guess, and perhaps for all they cared. But the reader who handles his manuscript can soon tell how far he is from an ending. The oral world that the Squire's Tale envisages does not presuppose an ending; but the Franklin's Tale, which implies the readership of a literate audience, does" (195).

16 On the relationships between Chaucer's "inconclusive" poetry and his experiments with narrative forms, see Larry Sklute (especially 3-4, 12).

17 John M. Bowers provides a useful examination of how these two continuations reflect differing contemporary concepts of the *Canterbury Tales* as a still open book, one to be added to.

18 The poem is included in Schick's edition of *Temple of Glas*.

19 With William Nelles, coeditor of this issue, I share a number of perspectives on the Squire's fragment, especially concerning continuators of the tale. His unpublished paper on the Squire has been helpful and influential in revising this essay.

20 On the relation of the Tales to the genre of the story collection, see Cooper (47-55). On the Tales as a compilation, see Doyle and Parkes (190-92) and A. J. Minnis (198-210).

21 To some extent the same could be said for many types of literature. As Suther remarks, "it is permissible to suppose that a great many works of art are 'finished' at the point where, quite simply, the author cannot think of anything else to do to them" (10). In the context of the visual arts, especially painting, the observation is almost a commonplace.

22 Donald R. Howard observes that this freedom to turn the leaf and choose another tale renders the book "different things to different people" (322). Doyle and Parkes acknowledge the compiler's freedom of *ordinatio*, the arrangement or rearrangement of received texts to create a compilation (190).

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