INTRODUCTION

THE *GENERAL PROLOGUE* AND
THE CANTERBURY TALES

Nothing in descriptive literature can compare with the 857 lines of the *General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*. An introductory essay can do little more than consider some of the elements that Chaucer found ready to his hand, and then assert and illustrate an amazing complexity and originality.

The plan is audaciously simple. Put baldly: lines 1–34 tell of the upsurge of feeling with the renewal of Spring, when folk are stirred to travel. Chaucer describes how, one April evening, he fell in with some twenty-nine men and women met together by chance at the Tabard Inn in Southwark and all in the same mind to set out next morning on a pilgrimage to the shrine of St Thomas à Becket at Canterbury. The closing lines (720ff.) relate how, after supper, they agreed to the suggestion of Harry Bailey, their Host, that in order to shorten their journey they should all compete in story-telling. Every pilgrim should tell two stories on the way out and another two coming back—120 stories in all. The winner should have a supper at the company's expense when they returned to the Tabard. The Host proffered to act as master of ceremonies and adjudicator, and made preparations to accompany the party to Canterbury. When morning came, the pilgrims took to the road. The Host reminded them of their agreement; they drew lots, and it fell to the Knight to tell the first story.

Dovetailed between the opening and final passages is a list of the people involved. Lines 35–41 promise this

interpolation, 715–19 round it off. The pilgrims are introduced in succession and, apart from one group of five guildsmen, in single file. Each one is portrayed in a self-contained panel of text which consists of a catalogue of details, closely packed. These panels vary in length from the nine lines given to the Cook to the sixty-one devoted to the Friar. There is no transition from one portrait to the next and no variety from intervening discourse or action. An introductory formula is repeated monotonously, *Ther was* (10), *was ther* (6), *was* (2), *hadde he/she* (2), *they hadde*. The pilgrim poet was proposing merely to describe the way things happened, and what he saw and felt.

Chaucer died, his vast project unfinished, before his pilgrims could reach Canterbury, and with only twenty-three tales told.

One might expect from all this that the *General Prologue* would be static, uniform, lifeless and wearisome. The very contrary is the fact. Thanks chiefly to his introduction, Chaucer's pilgrims ride on in the imagination so irrepressible and full of vitality that it is hard to accept that theirs is a journey that never was. We are drawn into their high-spirited company at supper in the Tabard and along the fourteenth-century English road. For nearly six centuries now they have ridden on, as joyously alive as ever. They have inspired music; many of our great poets have fallen beneath their spell; scholars and critics still write about them unwearyingly; recently they have invaded the popular theatre.

The potential energy shown in the *General Prologue* springs into animated drama in the links between the tales, where these pilgrims provide their own high comedy, drink, jest and quarrel, reveal their past lives and their prejudices, and exhibit their animosities in their interruptions of each other's tales. Their characterization extends beyond the *General Prologue*. The confessions of the Reeve, the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner complete a

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portraiture as elaborate and subtle as could be expected of later fiction. Some pilgrims, e.g. the Franklin, the Miller, the Knight, disclose more facets of their character by the tales they tell. Harry Bailey, the Host, takes on fuller life as he presides, and controls, and passes comment. The portraits of the Nun's Priest and of Chaucer himself, omitted from the *General Prologue*, are eventually supplied. The *General Prologue* therefore is certainly not complete without the links.

Nevertheless the metamorphosis has already taken place in the *General Prologue*. Long before the end of it the stills have quickened, moved, and escaped from their frames. The magic cannot be explained. It is the purpose of the rest of this introduction briefly to survey that part of Chaucer's material that might be called 'stock' and then to comment on some of the seemingly inexhaustible evidence of the unrivalled manipulation it underwent.

THE POET'S INHERITANCE

Novelty of theme and style were not required of the medieval poet but rather the infusion of fresh life into a worn convention. Chaucer inevitably composed within the traditions, attitudes and manner of his age. From his earliest poems onwards, his originality is most apparent in the new use to which he turned what had been transmitted to him. The relationship of the *General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales* provides the finest illustration of all.

THE NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK

The narrative framework for a series of tales had a far-reaching ancestry. The medieval world knew the oriental collections of *The Thousand and One Nights* and *The Seven Sages*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* where the device also occurs. Chaucer and his friend, John Gower, were both

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experimenting in the late fourteenth century with the form which, some years before, Boccaccio had used repeatedly, in his *Filocolo*, *Admeto*, and *Decameron*. As in *The Canterbury Tales*, Boccaccio's excuse for the collection, the real purpose of the work, is the entertainment of a social group brought together by external circumstances; Boccaccio's tales are linked by connecting passages of narrative and conversation; all is under the direction of a presiding officer. Chaucer elsewhere drew considerable inspiration from Boccaccio, but with the narrative framework the resemblances are superficial. Boccaccio's tales are told in a garden in the *Filocolo*, in a wooded meadow in *Admeto*. In the *Decameron* some movement from place to place occurs, but there is doubt as to whether Chaucer knew the *Decameron*. Anyhow, Boccaccio's company in each work is only slightly individualized and the narrators belong all to the same social class. There is nothing in Boccaccio's framework comparable with the vivid representation from most walks of English medieval life in the lively company of 'sondry folk' who won literary immortality at the Tabard. It seems even less likely that Chaucer drew his chief inspiration from the framed tales of Giovanni Sercambi of Lucca. Sercambi's *Novelle*, c. 1385, based on an earlier work now lost, also described a large party of many callings and classes, journeying together, visiting shrines, and telling tales both on the road and when they stopped at an inn. Sercambi's people, however, are a characterless crew, and it was Sercambi himself who related the stories.

It was surely the inspiration of genius when Chaucer made his framework a pilgrimage and introduced all sorts and conditions of men whom he had met and observed in his own busy life. The secular pageant from actual workaday England could be plausibly assembled with such a common devotional intent. The different

social classes, and a range of human types and tastes, might reasonably be expected on such a journey. Chaucer's pilgrims so naturally expose themselves by the tales they select and by their reactions to the tales of others that sometimes one might well wonder whether the tellers exist for the sake of their tales, or the tales for the tellers.

PILGRIMAGES

Pilgrimages were an important feature of medieval life. Chaucer must often have seen a motley company assembling when he lived by London Bridge, just across the river from the Tabard, and pilgrim processions riding past his later house in Kent on their way to Canterbury. He must also have heard many a preacher censure pilgrimages as the occasion for pleasure and licence and unseemly behaviour. Nevertheless, whilst writing with all the apparent gusto of the holiday spirit, Chaucer was also composing within a literary convention. For generations back a pilgrimage had provided an allegory of the spiritual life. Some twenty years earlier, William Langland in *Piers Plowman* had first described his vision of the 'fair field', the earth set between heaven and hell. All kinds of fourteenth-century men and women were busy in it, and they were to rise in a throng, a thousand together, to go on a pilgrimage to seek St Truth, though many of them lost the way. In Chaucer's own day, Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* (II xxi–xxiii) illustrated spiritual progress in charity and humility by a parable of the difficulties a pilgrim must overcome on the road to Jerusalem. The idea of spiritual progress is also in Chaucer's mind. The opening of the *General Prologue* prepares for it; *The Knight's Tale* tells how

> This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo,
> And we been pilgrymes, passynge to and fro.
>
> (I (A) 2847–8)

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The Parson compares the earthly and the heavenly pilgrimage in the Prologue to the final Tale:

> And Jhesu, for his grace, wit me sende
> To shewe yow the wey, in this viage,
> Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage
> That highte Jerusalem celestial.
>
> (X (I) 48–51)

Some of Chaucer's pilgrims were seeking renewed spiritual strength from their visit to the holy shrine and a fresh start to live their lives in charity towards their neighbours, following the moral commandments and performing the works of mercy. Piety and not *wanderlust* is the theme of 14–18, 21–2, 78.

The great months for the pilgrimages to Canterbury were December when Thomas à Becket was murdered (29 December 1170) and July when he was formally canonized (1174). But the poem is set in springtime, the season, as Christian Latin and Troubadour poets had long told, when God's restoration of the earth symbolizes his restoration of man through the virtue of the Passion and Resurrection. This company at the Tabard, no less than Chaucer himself and his audience, lived their lives by the church calendar as well as by the solar one. Chaucer includes sufficient information to show us how his men and women conducted their pilgrimage of life according to status and calling when he describes how they behaved on the way to Canterbury. Judgment is withheld in the *General Prologue*, but these pilgrims are destined to appear ultimately to the audience in the light of the *Parson's Tale*, with its minute analysis of the Seven Deadly Sins and its cry for repentance and atonement.

THE SHAPE OF THE 'GENERAL PROLOGUE'

In the plan of the *General Prologue* Chaucer was not inventing but rather adapting a much used form derivable from the *Roman de la Rose*, part of which Chaucer

himself translated, This was one of the greatest source books of the Middle Ages. Probably between 1225 and 1230 Guillaume de Lorris had started the *Roman* in the shape of a vision. A lover in his dream wandered into a garden of enchantment, where the Rose, the symbol of his lady love, was jealously guarded. He encountered many allegorical characters, some encouraging, others warning him off. With the help of the God of Love, the Rose finally seems within grasp, but before the lover can pluck it the poem abruptly ends. It was continued forty years later by Jean de Meun. For some 15,000 lines before the lover was allowed to gain the Rose Jean de Meun, a scholar and satirist, commented on all that interested him in the contemporary scene, including the weaknesses of churchmen and women.

The first part of the *Roman* provided the shape for countless allegorical vision poems, including Chaucer's own *Book of the Duchess*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, and *The House of Fame*. There is a stock pattern of events and the technique of description is similar. In a certain season, usually Spring, the poet dreams that he sets out and presently falls in with company and meets with some adventure. The allegorical personifications of the *Roman* are presented like Chaucer's pilgrims later. They are introduced objectively in a succession of panels of text, individualized by facial and bodily appearance, attitudes and dress. Physical and moral defects are not forgotten. The poet adds his comments as he observes them and presently he is drawn into the action along with them. It was an easy step in the *General Prologue* to change the poet dreamer into a wide-awake narrator impersonating the poet, through whose mask the poet could also express himself from a standpoint undisturbed by emotional involvement, and to replace the personified abstractions with men and women who seem to belong to the London streets and the English countryside. It will be shown later

that Chaucer has actually transferred some of the details from the *Roman* to his own sketches.

THE SPRING OPENING

The details of a Spring setting were in themselves a literary commonplace to be found in scores of lyrics, vision poems and courtly romances. The stream of tradition had flowed unceasingly from classical antiquity. Chaucer was familiar with scientific treatises and encyclopaedias whence he could have drawn his particulars of the drought of March, the mounting sap, his zodiacal and astrological lore. Zephirus, Nature, and the hint of Flora (4) were from the ordinary stock of medieval rhetoricians, Roman and Carolingian poets, the wandering scholars and minstrels of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The symbolic life-giving figure of Nature (alias Venus or Spring) had appeared in many twelfth-century allegories; in *The Parliament of Fowls* Chaucer had been influenced by the conception of Nature in the *De Planctu Naturae* of Alanus de Insulis. It would be rash to claim an immediate source for Chaucer's lines. A passage from Book III of Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, from which Chaucer drew in his *Troilus and Criseyde*, includes the sun in the Ram, the mounting sap, the gentle zephyr, the flowers, the shoots, and the song of the birds. A description of Spring in the Middle English *Secreta Secretorum* contains all Guido's items and adds man's response: 'in this time sterith mannys blood'. Such analogues could probably be multiplied. Yet, despite its long ancestry and familiar associations, the opening still communicates that indefinable quality we call Chaucerian. This is partly conveyed by the rhythm. It resides also in the gentle humour of the love-sick and sleepless birds, who are linked by rhyme association with the restless would-be pilgrims (11, 12) and with the poet himself (21–2). Chaucerian too is the easy descent in

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eighteen lines from the high-sounding start, properly elevated to charm and win the attention of the audience just as the rhetoricians recommended, to the level of the familiar and conversational on which the narrative settles without any sense of stylistic shock.

THE SERIES OF PORTRAITS

A series of portraits was not a novelty. Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie*, one of the sources for Chaucer's own *Troilus and Criseyde*, contained an unbroken sequence of thirty heroes, but they all turned out very much alike in rank and occupation. More individualized portraits are to be found in the various series of allegorical figures after the manner of the *Roman de la Rose* or in the processions of the personified Deadly Sins; these were clearly a formative influence. Book v of *Piers Plowman* depicted the Seven Deadly Sins one after the other without intervening narrative or connective, and also assigned them to different occupations and professions.

THE SCHEME FOR THE PORTRAIT

The initial proposal (37–41) to describe the pilgrims fully according to their physical appearance, dress and equipment, social rank and character is set firmly in the rhetorical tradition. It was Chaucer's little joke to announce such an ordered, balanced and comprehensive scheme, the very precision of which serves to emphasize the actual disorder which ensues. Yet the popular medieval textbooks on the art of poetry, based on the doctrines of classical rhetoric, had taught Chaucer how to look at people. Two of the best known of these manuals, Matthieu de Vendôme's *Ars Versificatoria* and Geoffroi de Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova*, had provided as a guide a head-to-toe inventory of physical traits, items of dress and ornament, including lists of appropriate moral qualities. Chaucer in fact had imitated such prescriptions closely

in the early *Book of the Duchess*. Cicero's *De Inventione*, I xxiv–xxv, had established another model of analysis, by reference to which the Wife of Bath's portrait, for example, could have been drawn. Cicero's analysis proceeded under such headings as name, nature (bodily appearance and behaviour), manner, fortune (rich or poor, success or failure), habits (including dexterity and craftsmanship), feelings, interests, accidents (what had happened, or was happening), purpose, achievements, conversation. When Chaucer does include all, or a number of such aspects, he tends to arrange them carefully for some particular artistic effect. Most often he selects only a few. The vivid impression of pictorial representation he often achieves will, on closer scrutiny, prove not infrequently to be an illusion. Actually the portraits are rarely filled in (see Knight, Serjeant-at-law, Doctor, Parson, Plowman, Manciple). A single touch is often expressive of much that is left unstated.

STOCK FIGURES

Many of Chaucer's pilgrims show a family likeness to literary types familiar in the fourteenth century, some sprung from the particular abuses of the age, others from an awareness of human failings. Close relatives appear in contemporary verse and in innumerable tracts and homilies; ancestry can also be traced at times in allegories such as the *Roman de la Rose* and those personifying the Seven Deadly Sins.

While *The Canterbury Tales* was taking shape, the flood of vituperation against the evils of the times had risen to a new height. Analyses of the whole social organization multiplied; in these, the Three Estates, Feudal Aristocracy, Clergy and Commons, were a popular theme. The main target, the Church, had been assailed continually both from within and without; religious and secular clergy had united with laymen in condemning outstand-