

[Essays in Medieval Studies 2](#)

[Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold. Works cited appear at the end of this file.]

page 40

**Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*:
The Idea!**

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To review recent scholarship on the tales of Canterbury, I found myself reading the work of many intelligent and learned colleagues. Having spent a few years on Chaucer studies myself, I already knew something about what was in print and about what Chaucerians were saying at conferences. I am happy to report that Chaucer scholars now have few settled opinions about things Chaucerian: not even his standing as an ironist of some kind is secure; and a growing number of scholars think that Chaucer here and there drops his mask, while a few still think that Chaucer never adopted a mask in the first place. So feel free to enter the fray: all is in flux. But I am unhappy to report that not even major studies of the tales have more than a passing impact on occasional reviewers and ourselves. This seems both a curious and an appalling affair. I would like to explore it as a way of suggesting the state of *Canterbury Tales* studies; and I would like to focus mainly on the biggest of recent works Donald Howard's *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (although I understand that Professor Kolve has begun publishing his massive study of Chaucer and medieval pictorial art).

What does Donald Howard say that should call us to attention? My rereading of Howard's *Idea* raised at least six areas for contention. I will go through them singly, more or less as they still occur to me, but in hopes of avoiding the fate of Chaucer's Monk.

page 41

1) Chaucer meant most of what we have as the tales of Canterbury to assume the Ellesmere order and to look largely as the Ellesmere does: with junctures, headlinks, and abrupt beginnings much as we have them. Chaucer's conception is complete, although the actual work is incomplete.

2) The form of the tales is like an illuminated capital, with a miniature or miniatures inside an interlace. Only this analogy is a schematic approximation: the *General Prologue* and the pilgrimage story, along with the *Parson's Prologue and Tale*, constitute an outer form, inside which the wandering by the way of tellers, tale-tellings, and tales implicates an interlace at the level of subject and theme as we move from tale to tale and group to group.

3) Also we have the idea, the form, of a remembered pilgrimage within which is the memory in each pilgrim's case of a tale. And we have a pilgrimage or a labyrinth-like wandering as the progress or perhaps the structure of the Work.

4) This fiction of a remembered pilgrimage and of remembered tales has contextual implications: we recall a whole a book with beginning and end, much as we see a highly structured, symmetrical whole when we look at a Rose window. The idea of a whole implicates ideas of order and time, of Creator and created, of eternity and change ideas recalled through the opening images of spring and flowers. Stylistically, however, this whole with its cosmic implications is expressed paradoxically as unfolding in time, in a state

page 42

of continual obsolescence the outcome of which is not known (unlike the distinct sense of closure and pastness we have at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*).

5) The tales of Canterbury, then, concern the world in time and its ways, as experienced or as relevant to at least three domains of life: the public, the domestic, and the private. This division reflects an organization of the tales and the fragments into five parts, following the main junctures in the Ellesmere manuscript and allowing the *Physician's* and the *Pardoner's Tales* to "float." We have within groups, moreover, an organization by pairs; and across groups we have a kind of metathematic impetus that places the *Melibee* above all tales of noble, public character, the *Second Nun's Tale* above the *Melibee*, and the *Parson's Tale* beyond all the tales another book, in effect, to be read differently from the Canterbury book, and to be used as a way of reflecting back in memory upon the whole of the Canterbury book and its parts.

6) This leads us to bookness and so to Howard's final contribution in this list of mine. Bookness for medieval readers implies at least three things: leaves to turn at will; facing pages; and wholeness despite the heterogeneous nature of a book's contents. Schematically this means a mode of selection, of reading or not whatever is in front of one, which can imply that finally nothing is skipped, because within a book's wholeness everything encyclopedically leads to everything else anyway. Moreover, this bookness means a mode of presentation in what we can consider

page 43

paired texts: simultaneously seen pages facing pages becomes the analogue for this pairing of texts. Finally, bookness means a grounding in ideas of Book: God's Book, Nature's Book with attendant cosmological or metaphysical trappings.

In the course of these contentions, or of ideas like them if I have misunderstood Howard, we have many observations about tellers and tales that any critic of any tale must consider. But in ten years now Howard's book has had a negligible impact on Chaucer studies generally and on *Canterbury Tales* studies in particular at least this is so when we look to the impact of work by illustrious predecessors in the field: by G. L. Kittredge, Ralph Baldwin, R. M. Lumiansky, Charles Muscatine, Robert O. Payne, D. W. Robertson, E. T. Donaldson and, belatedly, Robert Jordan. These scholars were responsible either for inventing or popularizing major notions in *Canterbury Tales* studies: the marriage group, the double pilgrimage, dramatic interplay, a mixture of high and low French style, Chaucer's rhetorical poetics, neo-patristic context and intent, Chaucer's persona, and non-organic, especially Gothic, analogues for Chaucer's structural and thematic aesthetic. I think there is much in Howard's work that compares well in scope, novelty, and ambition with anything major written on Chaucer. I hope I have already conveyed some feel for that to you. Why, then, has Howard's work had a negligible impact aside from his positive influence on a few graduate students?

I suppose the reasons are many, as is the case with odd neglect in humanistic letters or, perhaps, in any field carved up by specialists. We are many and we are much more specialized than we used to be much more, even, than we were twenty years ago when I considered my first graduate course. In the last ten years, to keep within the period since California published *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer studies have branched out into many reconsiderations: manuscript and textual editing, with a school of editors devoted to shifting the scholarly text from the Ellesmere tradition of Manly, Rickert and Robinson to the tradition of the Hengwrt Manuscript; social history has come to the fore in such works as Janet Coleman's *Medieval Readers and Writers, 1350-1400*, and Richard Firth Green's *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages*; Jill Mann and others have worked further in the literature of estates satire, showing us how Chaucer draws us into an engagement with, rather than a judgment of, characters; we now have major studies unearthing clerical and scholastic literary theory theory that is primarily neo-Aristotelian moral philosophy or that springs from exegetical traditions of *accessus*. I think here mainly of Alistair Minnis's and Judson Boyce Allen's books the latter collaborating with Theresa Anne Moritz on *A Distinction of Stories: The Medieval Unity of Chaucer's Fair Chain of Narratives for Canterbury*; we have continuations of *explication de texte* in search of controlling puns or rhetorical and cognitive armature some pairing of thematic terms or implied terms around which tales or groups of tales revolve

(as in the hoary *sentence* and *solaas* pair); we have new literary terminology drawn from structuralism and deconstruction, along with an interest in hermeneutics all of which is known as Theory; we have a new literary history that concentrates on the culture of major texts and translations, such that Chaucer's use of his sources is also a commentary upon them and perhaps a deliberate violation of them; and of course we have much in the way of notes and queries.

Even this ruined list suggests that Chaucerians are busy in intellectually demanding ways. We are so busy, I venture to say, that we have neglected to read each other as sympathetically as we should. Perhaps this is so because there are too many of us producing too much for any of us to read. But I think this is only part of the answer. We have not read even our big books well because, I fear, we are impatient with them; we do not feel the time is ripe for them; or we simply find their pretension more annoying than anything they achieve. Moreover, a big book that is largely literary critical in its sensibility, if not so in its subjects, has a rough time in our world of refreshed literary, intellectual, and social history. Finally, the philosophical vanguard for Chaucer studies generally and the *Canterbury Tales* especially is moral philosophy, not aesthetics see J.D. Burnley's notable *Chaucer's Language and the Philosopher's Tradition*.

These are satisfying guesses, I think, but still more should be offered. We need to consider the imponderable but altogether real

issue of style. In our gossipy profession, a book that is thought to be in the wrong style finds bogs of rejection or indifference in its way. I have frequently enough heard Howard's book characterized as often intelligent but all too self-indulgent. Finally, we should consider the resistance raised by Howard's most startling proposal: that the Ellesmere manuscript reflects Chaucer's intention, not his fragmentary starts. Both within and outside the new textual studies, that claim is treated by many as so preposterous that no professional reply is necessary (aside from a few remarks by early reviewers). This problem is one for group psychology and for students who consider how researchers form cohesive groups around key ideas: to wit, the *Tales* are incomplete by far and highly fragmentary, therefore literarily fluid, in the best manuscripts we have no matter which manuscript tradition we choose. I happen to agree with that consensus, but I admire Howard's bold thrust into this dragon of *Canterbury Tales* studies a thrust, by the way, that does not commit him to a moral scheme for the tales, although it makes him look for wholeness, if not unity, and for an ascending set of values here and there emergent in the tales (from *Melibee*, to *Second Nun*, to *Parson*).

Perhaps our new, exciting, but disparate professionalism is really to blame for any particular instance of neglect. I would like to end these ruminations by indulging a little psycho-professionalism, if that term is not too painful to hear, and by a reflection upon our place in the world at large (such as it is). Our Chaucerian literary studies as well as

our textual, philological, and prosodic efforts justify us but lack a focus that readily justifies them in any clear way to the university at large or to intellectual culture generally. This is a dispiriting thought and perhaps one of the points of retreat into hermetic meditations that propose radical doubt on Chaucer's part about the possibility of knowing anything or making anything significant in poetry or prose. Textual studies, social history, unearthings of medieval literary theory that is largely ethical and exemplary in nature these becomes our fall-back positions, our highground if we despair of actually experiencing Chaucer's poetry intensely and immediately as meaningful, as saying or showing us something about ourselves and our world. Possibly we can get Chaucer's poetry to reflect a static or even a crumbled and changing version of *his* world as though that poetry formed nothing more than an artifact impressed with the enigmatic marks of a former age. Perhaps, then, we can solve Chaucer's poetry if only we can see it in the right medieval way, perhaps even presuming something incredible: that Chaucer wrote his poetry to suit medieval commentaries on Virgil or Ovid a presumption that excludes medieval poets from working in any intuitive or creative or psychological way congenial to us and to our ideas about creativity.

If that were so, I think we would find ourselves simply unable to read medieval poetry as poetry. We would be reduced to decoding that poetry much as though it were an ancient and anomalous script. The experiences of generations of readers their

reactions to humor and liveliness, to boldness and voice in Chaucer would have to be put down to corporate delusion, to a sad history of misunderstanding and enthusiasm a result I find amusing but do not for a moment credit.

What I wonder is this: why 'solve' Chaucer's poetry? Why not approach him and his work in a state of negative capability? I think we largely cannot do so because we *would* be professional, at least, in a world in which we find it difficult to justify ourselves or what we do, not to mention

the literature we teach. Moreover, as professionals, we have lost faith in New Criticism, yet remain wedded to it in our ideas of style, organic form, and unity this is so even in our more bizarre structuralisms and deconstructions. Having lost faith, yet wishing to remain professional, we fall back upon some form of literary history, social history, or textual history a general movement in literary studies, by the way. As a profession we have not forged a literary aesthetic to replace the New Critical enterprise we are strangely happy to discredit. But lest we lose ourselves in the bewildering variety and expanse of social and historical studies, not to mention the study of scholastic traditions and meanderings, we try to pin Chaucer underneath something: insisting on new determinisms to replace the old mechanisms of literary history. Perhaps the antidote to all of this is a deprofessionalizing for a time of what we do: a move toward intelligent amateurism and to a potentially exciting freedom from the need to *explain* the literature we confront, discuss, and point to as best we can. Perhaps in some such way we can become alive again to Chaucer, to his

page 49

tellers, and to his tales. Perhaps we can even bring that double life to our students and to the place of literature generally in our universities and in whatever intellectual culture there is outside of academe. Neither literary criticism nor literary history of whatever kind is a good substitute for the power of literature itself. It is the literature Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in all of its variety and maddening power that justifies us. We do not justify that literature. I think, finally, that we should be happy for any book that tries to breathe life into our thinking and into our reading of Chaucer, thus trying to confront the life that is in Chaucer's work. It is on this note that I must recommend *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* to you--a work half-way between the professional Chaucerian's and the engaged amateurs. One can emerge from it with a quickened sense, not of Chaucer studies, but of Chaucer and his tales.

page 50

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