

CHAUCER'S CONSTRUCTIONAL METHODS IN THE GENERAL PROLOGUE

By R.J. Beck

A great deal has been written about the framework of *The Canterbury Tales*, and the superiority of Chaucer's product to other mediaeval collections of tales, by Boccaccio or Sercambi; the results are admirably summarised in the introduction to Bryan and Dempster's *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*. Something has also been said about the various categories into which the individual portraits fall; J.M. Manly in *Some New Light on Chaucer* discusses Chaucer's debt to the characters of actual contemporary personages, while W.C. Curry in *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences* establishes a physiognomical bridge between the outward physical appearance of certain pilgrims and their inward moral qualities. But even such valuable contributions as these have been put forward as single theses, and not considered as alternative methods of presenting character. I believe – and hope to show hereafter – that Chaucer consciously rang the changes on a number of different methods of building up his individual portraits. Thirdly, very little, if anything, has been written about Chaucer's artistry of arrangement in positioning his portraits within the framework of the General Prologue.

The relative proportions allotted to appearance and character in the portraits vary considerably from one pilgrim to another: were it not for the illustration in the margin of the Ellesmere MS, we should have no idea of what the Poor Parson looked like, though we know a good deal about his character; the portrait of the Squire, on the other hand, concentrates on his physical appearance, his dress, and his social and military accomplishments. The most obvious method of connecting these two basic elements of character and appearance was that postulated by the mediaeval physiognomists: outward bodily manifestations provide a clear indication of inner moral character. Four out of the final group of pilgrims listed in GP 542-4 fall within this category: the red hair, large mouth and short arms of the Miller – even the wart on the bridge of his wide-nostrilled nose – indicate a man of large appetites and fiery temper; the Reeve, like other choleric men, is thin of body, quick of wit, and easy to anger, while his pipe-stem legs betray the *senex amans*; the Pardoner's thin hair, clean chin and high-pitched voice show him to be 'a geldying or a mare'; but best of all is the Summoner, to whom Chaucer gives not merely

all the symptoms of *gutta rosacea* – gruff voice, swollen eyelids, advanced depilation and multiple sores – but also provides the established medical treatments of the day and three of the main causes of the Summoner's malady – wine, women and onions.

The second category is that proposed by Manly – the portraits based to a greater or lesser degree on living people. It has been established from surviving records that a certain Harry Bailly owned the Tabard Inn in Southwark during the 1380's, and that a 'Roger Ware of London, Cook', was alive in 1377. And it seems probable that Chaucer, in creating his Shipman, would think of Peter Risshenden of Dartmouth, owner of a barge called the Maudelayne, who figured in a famous piracy trial between 1386 and 1394; or of Gilbert Maghfeld, a rich merchant from whom Chaucer is known to have borrowed money. And he may well be punning on the name Pynchebek in GP 326 in his portrait of the Sergeant-at-Law; or even remembering himself as a young squire on 'chyvachie' in Flanders, Artois and Picardy. But it is impossible at this distance in time to estimate the extent of such debts, and very easy to overestimate their literary importance.

More interesting than these individualisations are the idealisations; three by type-character and three by subject. Chaucer produces, as might have been expected, an ideal representative of each of the main and interdependent levels of mediaeval society: a knight representing the military caste; a parson representing the ecclesiastics; and a ploughman to stand for the agricultural labourers. The knight's task – clearly brought out in *Piers Plowman* – was to protect both the Church and the workers; the priest's to care for the spiritual well-being of both knight and labourer; and the ploughman's to feed both knight and priest. Chaucer probably chose a poor parish priest as his ideal ecclesiastic for the very reason that such a man would be in close contact with the agricultural labourers; and strengthened the tie by making his priest the brother of his ploughman.

Idealisation by subject is also threefold. The Knight has fought the heathen in the three main centres of crusading activity open to him in the fourteenth century: in Southern Spain and on the neighbouring North African coastline in the 1340's; in the Eastern Mediterranean based on Cyprus in the 1360's; and as a respected veteran with the Teutonic Knights in the Baltic area during the 1380's. The Wife of Bath has visited four international centres of pilgrimage – Jerusalem, Rome, Cologne and Compostella, 'ferne halwes couthe in sondry londes'; a lesser one at Boulogne which Chaucer himself may have visited with his patron, John of Gaunt, and the Black Prince; and is now off to Canterbury to see the shrine of St. Thomas, the most popular of all centres of pilgrimage in pre-Reformation England. Thirdly, the authorities cited in the portrait of the Doctor

are also divided into the three main groups from which the fourteenth century drew its medical knowledge: the founding fathers of medicine in the classical world; the Arab writers of the tenth and eleventh centuries; and near-contemporary British writers like Bernard Gordon, John of Gaddesden, and Gilbertus Anglicus.

One form of linkage between appearance and character that we are surprised *not* to find in the General Prologue, particularly in the portrait of the Wife of Bath, is the astrological; but the connection between St. Venus' Seal and Dame Alison's amorous proclivities is saved for the Preamble. What the portrait of the Wife does contain, however, are certain satiric connections between character and costume. It is not merely that the Wife's taste in clothes is as loud as her personality. She flouts the Sumptuary Laws and dresses with great care and at considerable cost; the bigger anything is, the better she likes it. But there is a strong suspicion that the Wife's dress was amusingly provincial and out-of-date in the eyes of Chaucer's courtly audience – and had intentionally been made so; wimples were out of fashion, except for nuns, while riding astride had been replaced by the side-saddle introduced by Anne of Bohemia. This satiric connection is even more marked in the portrait of the Prioress: her name and facial characteristics are those of a heroine of Romance; she apes courtly manners and courtly fashions, keeping forbidden pets and wearing prohibited jewellery; and she reveals a most unseemly span of forehead to Chaucer's roving eye!

Turning from the internal construction of the individual portraits to Chaucer's grouping of them in the General Prologue, we see that he took certain predictable steps: the Knight's portrait begins the gallery just as his tale begins the pilgrimage, and for the same reason, that he is the most socially-acceptable pilgrim; affinity of business interests keeps the Guildsmen together, and attracts the Franklin to the Sergeant-at-Law; but it is not certain whether the Pardoner is drawn to the Summoner for this reason, or by a community of rascality, or merely by a desire to harmonise the popular songs of the day. More important for the future of the pilgrimage than these affinities are the antipathies which result in the Miller/Reeve and Friar/Summoner pairs of tales: but of these antipathies we naturally see very little before the very end of the General Prologue, when the cavalcade sets out, headed by the Miller, and with the Reeve, significantly, bringing up the rear.

Chaucer's second major motif in *The Canterbury Tales* – the first being mutual antipathy – is the Marriage Debate. Apparently, this idea of having a progressive discussion of the marital relationship did not occur to Chaucer until the whole project was well under way, and the resultant movement of some tales and the amendments and even cancellations of

the tellers' portraits that this entailed have damaged the structural unity of the General Prologue considerably; the character-sketch of the Second Nun was obviously crossed out when the life of St. Cecilia was transferred to her from some 'unworthy son of Eve', and the resultant half-line gap was hastily filled by the words 'and preestes thre', preserving rhyme and metre at the expense of mathematics. The unfinished state of the whole project, in addition, leaves Chaucer's constructional plan imperfect; it seems probable that the five guildsmen listed in GP 361-2 would eventually have been treated in the same way as the physiognomia/churl group in GP 542-4 – their characters would have been sketched in the General Prologue, motivated in the links, and confirmed by some suitable tale. But this was not to be. However, by looking at the first six complete portraits, which are largely uninfluenced by any of these damaging considerations, we can see Chaucer's powers of arrangement at work.

The Knight, the Squire and the Yeoman form a single social and military group; and each in his way is dedicated to his calling. The Knight and the Squire are linked by blood, but separated by a generation; the Yeoman is separated from both by degree, but is linked to them by service and a common military expertise – which had found so telling an expression at the battles of Crécy and Poitiers, won by English bowmen. This triangularism is repeated in the portraits of the Prioress, the Monk and the Friar. All are ecclesiastics, but all have lost their vocation; the Prioress is worldly in dress and manners, the Monk in his love of hunting, and the Friar in his lechery and greed. Prioress and Monk belong to the same class, but are separated by sex; while the Friar, like the Yeoman, is lower in the social scale than his two predecessors – indeed, Chaucer makes him more of a churl with his *fabliau*-tale than we might have anticipated.

One element in some of the portraits which provides a link of another sort is the trait of character which looks forward to confirmation in the tale. Amid the Prioress's courtly manners and worldly concerns, her 'conscience and tendre herte' are striking; but it is these qualities rather than the others which are brought out in her sentimental story of a child's martyrdom. Links like this – and the partial deafness of the Wife of Bath, which is manifestly a back-projection – give rise to the interesting supposition that Chaucer was sometimes more concerned to match the teller to his tale than the tale to the teller.