

Final
CHAUCER'S DEVICES FOR SECURING VERISIMILITUDE
IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When one reads the Canterbury Tales, he feels that he is reading about real people engaged in a journey which actually occurred. He notes their dress and manners, becomes interested in their conversations, and sympathizes now with one, now with another in their quarrels. This verisimilitude which conspicuously differentiates Chaucer's writing from that of his contemporaries is achieved in various ways, three of which will be discussed in this study. One of Chaucer's devices for giving life-likeness to the journey is occasional reference to time and place. At three points on the way from London to Canterbury the poet refers to a specific time of day, and once he names a day of the year. Interspersed throughout the "General Prologue" and the "Links" are allusions to places passed on the journey. Preeminent among Chaucer's devices for achieving verisimilitude is characterization. Nothing serves to make the characters more lifelike or human than distinguishing physical characteristics, such as the wart on the Miller's nose, the long, thin legs of Oswald, the Reeve, and the forked beard of the Merchant. Details of dress, such as the fur

bands on the Monk's gown, the pleated wimple of Madame Eglentyne, and the red stockings of the inimitable Wife of Bath, greatly add to the individuality of the characters. Another factor which distinguishes the pilgrims is the superlative quality of each, although it is not necessarily a virtuous quality. For example, the Reeve is exceedingly sharp in his business transactions but at the same time so cunning that there is not an auditor who can catch him in any dishonesty. Another phase of characterization which contributes to the individuality of the pilgrims is comment on peculiarities of temperament and disposition, such as the hauteur of the Wife of Bath:

In al the parisshes wif ne was ther noon
 That to the offrynge bifore hire sholde goon;
 And if ther dide, certeyn so wrooth was she,
 That she was out of alle charites.¹

Finally, dialogue gives reality to the journey, particularly in the quarrels between the Miller and the Reeve, the Host and the Cook, and the Friar and the Summoner; in the recurrence of the same theme as the basis of several stories; and in the comments of the Host. When one considers these evidences of verisimilitude, it is not surprising that many people have felt that Chaucer was describing an actual group of pilgrims making an actual pilgrimage to Canterbury.²

¹"General Prologue," ll. 448-452.

²John M. Manly, Some New Light on Chaucer, p. 70.

In fact, so lifelike are the characters who traveled the Canterbury road with the poet that scholars have searched various record books of the fourteenth century, confidently expecting to find the prototypes of the pilgrims whom he described. Out of such research has come evidence that tends to prove that Chaucer based at least six of his characters on real people. As a conclusion to this study, this evidence will be considered; however, such evidence is not absolute proof. It is rather a tribute to Chaucer's marvelous ability to capture the spirit of human nature as no English man of letters had done before him. What a gulf is there between the conventionalities of the Garden of the Rose and the vibrant pulse of the Canterbury Tales, the result of a lifetime of observation of all kinds of people in all ranks of society.³ From the perspective of six hundred years scholars can point to Chaucer as the first great English realist.⁴ A recent popular study of Chaucer presented this conclusion:

. . . Chaucer's pilgrims . . . are alive now. They have walked out of England and into immortality because they were born of a universal rather than a contemporary truth, and they are citizens now of a more enduring town than either London or Bath. Although they are deeply rooted in their own generation down to the most minute details of their dress and appearance, there is no antiquarian quaintness about them, because

³Marchette Chute, Geoffrey Chaucer of England, pp. 240-241.

⁴Ibid., p. 240.

Chaucer did not stop with the cut of their shoes or the manner of their speech. He knew them in their hearts.⁵

It is this approximation to reality which sets Chaucer's Canterbury Tales above other literary works built around a framework. As a matter of fact, the framework device is not original but had been used before as it has been used later. The idea of joining a series of stories by putting them into a common framework is a very old one and doubtless originated in the East.⁶ Examples of this are an English collection called The Seven Sages, an early Latin work The Disciplina Clericalis by Petrus Alphonsus, Ovid's Metamorphoses, and Gower's Confessio Amantis; and even Chaucer's Legend of Good Women, composed immediately before the Canterbury Tales, is a collection of tales.⁷ Even though all these works were in existence before Chaucer began to write the Canterbury Tales, it has been suggested that the Decameron of Boccaccio was the work which furnished him a model.⁸ The differences between the two works are more pronounced, however, than are their similarities. Whereas Chaucer's stories are told by a lively group of diverse travelers riding along the highway

⁵Ibid., p. 245.

⁶Walter W. Skeat, editor, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Vol. III, p. 271.

⁷F. N. Robinson, editor, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 2.

⁸Ibid., p. 751.

on horseback, Boccaccio's tales are narrated by ten ladies and gentlemen of the Court, sitting idly in the stylized garden of a villa outside the city of Florence.⁹ The purposes for which Chaucer's pilgrims ride to Canterbury are almost as many as there are travelers, but all Boccaccio's characters are fleeing the plague. It is this fiction of a pilgrimage which helps to differentiate Chaucer's plan from that of Boccaccio and others who had used a framework; therefore, if we are searching for a model, we are more likely to find one where the pilgrimage idea had been used than elsewhere. On that basis the Novelle of Giovanni Sercambi is a likely choice. The similarity between this work and the Canterbury Tales is evident in some general aspects in that Sercambi's pilgrims have the counterpart of Harry Bailly in one Aluisi; they are engaged in a leisurely journey; they are a motley congregation like that which gathered at the Tabard Inn; during the time they are not listening to tales their conversation is comparable, although not equal, to the clash of personalities and the verbal encounters of Chaucer's pilgrims.¹⁰ Furthermore, the novelle are interspersed with caustic comments by the author similar to the Wife of Bath's condemnation of jealous

⁹Karl Young, "The Plan of the Canterbury Tales," Kittredge Anniversary Papers, p. 405.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 408-414.

husbands and the words of the Host and the Merchant relating to the shrewishness and deception of wives; and finally, despite the fact that the novelle are all told by the author himself, the other pilgrims share in the general entertaining, and Sercambi, like Chaucer, represents himself as a member of the company.¹¹ But these similarities could be merely coincidental, and it is true that though the number of Sercambi's pilgrims is not known, it is obviously large and wanders all over Italy;¹² whereas Chaucer's pilgrimage is limited to the fifty-six mile stretch of road between London and Canterbury. But if there was a literary source for the framework of the Canterbury Tales, it is more likely to have been the Novelle of Giovanni Sercambi than the Decameron of Boccaccio. Whether Chaucer took the idea for the pilgrimage from another work or not, however, is unimportant. The fact remains that it had been used, but never before Chaucer had it ceased to be a framework and come to be a real occurrence experienced by living people.

At any rate, the pilgrimage idea was a flash of genius, for it contributed vastly to the realism of the situation, since holy pilgrimages were frequent in medieval England.¹³ The idea of the pilgrimage also afforded Chaucer the

¹¹Robinson, op. cit., p. 2.

¹²Young, op. cit., p. 408.

¹³J. J. Jusserand, English Wayfaring Life, p. 339.

opportunity to assemble a group representative of many classes of medieval society. Whether all classes would have mingled as Chaucer's pilgrims do is idle to discuss, although one authority insists that they would have.¹⁴ Although the higher nobility and royalty are not included, the life of the court is represented by the Knight and his son and by Chaucer himself, who creates the atmosphere of the narrative and who certainly knew court life,¹⁵ inasmuch as he had served as a page in the household of Prince Lionel, son of Edward III, and probably in the retinue of John of Gaunt in France. Regular and secular clergy, which played such an important role in the life of the day, are liberally included, and the professions of law and medicine, the merchants, guildsmen, officials of the manor, provincial town-folk and peasants are also represented.¹⁶ The choice of Canterbury as the destination of the pilgrims was doubtless due to the fact that the shrine of Thomas a Becket was the most popular one not only in England but in Europe as well.¹⁷ Indeed, the burial rites were scarcely said over Becket's body before pilgrims began flocking in ever-increasing numbers to visit his shrine.¹⁸ Thus we see that before

¹⁴Ibid., p. 357.

¹⁵Robinson, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁷Sidney Heath, Pilgrim Life in the Middle Ages, p. 169.

¹⁸Jusserand, op. cit., p. 349.

Chaucer had written a line of his manuscript, his choice of a pilgrimage to Canterbury as the framework for the Tales gave an air of reality to the work. The fact that the pilgrimage seems like the actual experience of real people is the consummation of verisimilitude.

CHAPTER II

VERISIMILITUDE OF TIME AND PLACE

Of Chaucer's various means of securing verisimilitude, references to the season of the year, to the initial meeting place of the pilgrims, places passed on the road to Canterbury, and the time of day in the "General Prologue" and "Links" may be first considered. By this simple device of reference to time and place Chaucer achieves the illusion of mobility. It is that ingenious creation, the Host, who most often reminds his flock of pilgrims and, incidentally, us that this is a journey, and we must hasten.

In the first few lines of the "General Prologue" Chaucer indicates by astronomical allusion that the pilgrims set out on their journey to Canterbury sometime after the eleventh of April:

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye

Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.¹

¹"General Prologue," ll. 1-12.

By the expression "the yonge sonne" is meant the sun in the first part of its annual course.² Since we know by the statement in "The Man of Law's Prologue" that April 18 is the second day of the journey, the half course in the Ram, which "the yonge sonne" has completed, must be the second half, which is in April, because the sun entered Aries, the sign of the Ram, on March 12, and would have finished the first half course toward the end of that month and the second half on April 11, when it moved into the sign of Taurus.³

Here in these few lines Chaucer has captured the spirit of spring. In every shire of England the April showers have bathed the new plants to hasten their flowering, and gentle breezes have stirred the tender green shoots in wood and field. It is the season of regeneration, of renewed activity. Even the birds are so affected by the season that they sing all night.⁴ It is little wonder that folk "longen to goon on pilgrimages." Spring is the perennial season of travel, of seeking new adventures. In England in the Middle Ages one did not go traveling merely for pleasure; so in order to satisfy the longing aroused by the new season to visit strange places, many people went on journeys with the ostensible purpose of visiting a holy shrine.⁵ Thus there

²Robinson, op. cit., p. 752. ³Ibid.

⁴Henry B. Hinckley, Notes on Chaucer, p. 4.

⁵Chute, op. cit., p. 247.

are assembled a motley group of travelers at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, going to Canterbury, presumably for the purpose of praying at the shrine of St. Thomas a Becket, though certainly all are not motivated by religious devotion. The gentle Knight doubtless is going to give thanks for a safe return home from the wars, but it is probable that the Wife's chief reason for making the pilgrimage is to find a sixth husband. Men such as the Miller and the Reeve are likely using the pilgrimage as an excuse to travel.

The device of naming the Tabard Inn in Southwark as the meeting place of the "company of sundry folk" is one of the principal means by which Chaucer achieves verisimilitude. There were many inns in this particular section of London, and after the murder and canonization of Becket their number tended to increase for the accommodation of the many pilgrims going to Canterbury.⁶ Apparently the chief of these inns where Canterbury pilgrims assembled was the Tabard of Chaucer.⁷ It was just across London Bridge; consequently, they could avoid the early morning traffic into the city when they set out.⁸

Here Chaucer's jolly group is solicitously attended by the bustling Host at supper, who, mindful of the fact that the pilgrims will seek lodging in London again when they

⁶John Sauncers, Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, p. 11.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Chute, op. cit., p. 247.

return from Canterbury, serves them an excellent meal and strong wine. After the travelers pay their bills, the merry Host, becoming even jollier, entertains them with jokes and stories, and as the glasses are repeatedly drained, the entire company relaxes in a mirthful mood. In this genial atmosphere the Host, smiling benignly on the travelers, compliments the group on its unparalleled conviviality and then declares that he has thought of a plan to insure their happiness on the journey. Moreover, it will not cost anything. Then he unfolds his plan of the story telling contest and even declares he will ride with them on their journey and be their guide and judge of the stories, with everybody subject to his will. Finally he delivers his master stroke, the strategy of an astute business man. The prize for the best story will be a supper paid for by the other pilgrims at his inn on their return from Canterbury. The plan is enthusiastically adopted, and after the customary last cup of wine is drunk, the pilgrims hasten to bed, looking forward to the morrow.

At daybreak of the following morning the Host wakens his guests, and they set out on their journey. Soon they reach St. Thomas' Watering Place, a well or pool about two miles from London, dedicated to Thomas a Becket, where it was customary for travelers to stop to water their horses.⁹

⁹Francis Watt, Canterbury Pilgrims and Their Ways, p. 68.

Probably the Cook, the Miller, the Summoner, and perhaps others of the party also take advantage of the opportunity to visit the tavern nearby for one last draught of London ale before leaving the city.¹⁰ Here the Host directs the drawing of lots to determine who shall tell the first tale. Commanding all the pilgrims to gather around, he reminds them of the agreement of the preceding evening. Then he holds aloft straws enough so that everyone may draw to determine who will have the honor of telling the first tale. Thus clever Harry Bailly gives everyone the chance to draw but arranges that the lot shall fall to the Knight, whom the Host recognizes as eminent in rank and also as one who can be depended upon to keep his word. Without further ado, the Knight welcomes the opportunity and begins his tale of courtly love as the pilgrims turn their horses toward Canterbury, nearly sixty miles from London.¹¹

The road over which they are going to travel must have been the best known and most frequently traveled road in England, because it was the route through populous Kent to the seaports from which one embarked for the Continent.¹² Although the narrative does not mention stopping places, Chaucer's pilgrims, being average travelers, probably stay where countless other pilgrims have stayed before them on their three and a half days' journey, the first night at

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 82.

¹²Ibid.

Dartford, the second at Rochester, and the third at Ospringe, arriving at Canterbury on the fourth day.¹³ After they leave St. Thomas' Watering Place, the next references to time and place are made by the practical-minded Host, who impatiently interrupts the Reeve in his metaphorical discourse on old age:

Sey forth thy tale, and tarie nat the tyme
Lo Depesford! and it is half-wey pryme
Lo Grenewych, ther many a shrewe is inne!
It were al tyme thy tale to bigynne.¹⁴

To say that it was half wey prime was the medieval way of saying that it was half past seven o'clock, for prime referred to the time between six and nine in the morning.¹⁵ Since Deptford (or Depesford) is only three miles from London Bridge and Greenwich about a half a mile farther on, the Host's impatience for the story-telling to begin anew is unreasonable,¹⁶ for in this short journey the Knight and the Miller have already told their stories.

The next reference to time occurs the following morning in the introduction to "The Man of Law's Tale." Once more it is the Host who calls attention to the passage of time. Even though the morning is far spent, the story-telling has apparently not begun, and since the contest is to the Host's advantage, he commands the Man of Law to begin at once:

¹³Ibid. ¹⁴"The Reeves' Prologue," ll. 3905-3908.

¹⁵Watt, op. cit., p. 88.

¹⁶Ibid.

Our Hooste saugh wel that the brighte sonne
 The ark of his artificial day hath ronne
 The ferthe part, and half an houre and moore,
 And though he were nat depe ystert in loore,
 He wiste it was the eightetethe day
 Of Aprill, that is messenger to May;
 And saugh wel that the shadwe of every tree
 Was as in lengthe the same quantitee
 That was the body erect that caused it.
 And therefore by the shadwe he took his wit
 That Phebus, which that shoon so clere and brighte,
 Degrees was fyve and fourty clombe on highte;
 And for that day, as in that latitude,
 It was ten of the klokke, he gan conclude,
 "Sire Man of Lawe," quod he, "so have ye blis,
 Telle us a tale anon, as forward is."¹⁷

An explanation of these lines is that the "artificial day" was that part of the day during which the sun was above the horizon.¹⁸ The Host, by observing the sun, sees that it has run its course to the fourth part of the day plus a little more than half an hour. Furthermore, he looks around him and sees that the length of the shadows of the trees and the height of the trees themselves are equal; thus he concludes that the sun's altitude must be forty-five degrees, or that the hour must be about half way between sun-up and noon.¹⁹ In this manner he determines that it is ten o'clock. Since he also states that it is the eighteenth of April, modern astronomers can check the Host's, and, incidentally, Chaucer's, calculations to see if they are accurate or purely fictional. On April 18, 1387, the sun was in the

¹⁷"Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale," ll. 1-34.

¹⁸Skeat, op. cit., p. 132.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 133.

sixth degree of Taurus.²⁰ When the sun reaches this zodiacal position and shines at a forty-five degree angle, it is, indeed, two minutes until ten. When we consider that the Host's calculation of time is verified by modern scientific investigation, we appreciate Chaucer's faithful observance of verisimilitude. ✓

The next place reference comes in "The Monk's Prologue."²¹ Again the Host is annoyed by the tendency of the pilgrims to loiter along the way, and he urges the storyteller to begin his tale, for

"Loo, Rouchestre stant heer faste by!"²²

The second day's journey is drawing to a close. Rochester, thirty miles from London, is probably where the pilgrims spend the night of April eighteenth, for in two days they could have covered a distance of thirty miles, and the town would doubtless have offered adequate accommodations for travelers.

The next place referred to is Sittingbourne, forty miles from London.²³ The Summoner declares that he will tell two or three tales of friars before the company reaches Sittingbourne; hence his statement must have been made in the forenoon of the day, for probably the company plans to

²⁰Ibid.

²¹This order is according to the Skeat arrangement.

²²"The Monk's Prologue," l. 3116.

²³Robert D. French, A Chaucer Handbook, p. 198.

have lunch at that place and then go on to Ospringe to spend the last night of the journey.²⁴

On the final day of the pilgrimage two small villages near Canterbury are mentioned. The first of these, a hamlet near Blean Forest, is Boughton-under-Blean, where a Canon and his Yeoman overtake the pilgrims. Having seen them leave the innyard at Ospringe that morning and wishing to join them on their journey, the two have ridden hard the five miles lying between Ospringe and Boughton-under-Blean in order to catch up with them. The second village is a place called Bob-up-and-down at the edge of Blean Forest, which is mentioned in "The Manciple's Prologue."²⁵ From the crest of a hill the pilgrims could see the tower of Canterbury Cathedral; so the journey is fast drawing to a close.²⁶ By the time the Manciple's tale is told, it is four o'clock. This fact is determined in the same manner that the previous time reference was determined. First Chaucer calculates that the sun is about twenty-nine degrees high; then he states that his own height is to his shadow in the proportion of about six feet to eleven.²⁷ This amounts to the same thing as the former calculation, since the angle whose tangent is six elevenths is twenty-nine

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Watt, op. cit., p. 128.

²⁷Skeat, op. cit., p. 444.

degrees.²⁸ Since the date is known to have been April 20, 1387, simple calculation by modern mathematicians has proved that it was indeed four o'clock in the afternoon. Once again our poet has carefully chosen details to establish verisimilitude.

Thus we see how by an occasional reference to time and place Chaucer completely dispels the atmosphere of fiction and creates the atmosphere of reality.

²⁸Ibid.

CHAPTER III

VERISIMILITUDE IN CHARACTERIZATION

That which contributes most to the verisimilitude of the Canterbury pilgrimage is the lifelikeness of the characters who compose the merry "company of sundry folk" gathered at the Tabard Inn. These people seem real because Chaucer was not content with a mere silhouette but has shown us the whole person--his speech, his appearance, his manner of dress, his prejudices, conceits, grievances and peculiarities of temperament--and finally, he has distinguished them by attributing a superlative quality to each. To seven characters in particular Chaucer has applied that which is the essence of individuality, a name. In the "General Prologue" Chaucer refers to the Prioress as Madame Eglentyne and the Friar as Hubert. In the "Links" he gives names to the other five. The Host calls the impudent Miller Robin, and he in turn calls his arch-enemy the Reeve, Oswald. The Cook gives his own name, Roger, and also supplies the full name of the Host, Harry Bailly. By some means the Host learns that the Monk's name is Piers, and he calls the Nun's Priest John. Although the Wife is scarcely in need of a name to make her any more distinctive, she refers to herself as Dame Alice. Four of these specifically named are also

located with respect to their geographical origin. Most explicit of all these origins is that of Harry Bailly, Host of the Tabard Inn in Southwark, a suburb of London. From the convent of Stratford-atte-Bowe in Middlesex comes Madame Eglentyne. The Reeve hails from Baldeswelle in Norfolk, and the Wife resides in St. Michael's parish near Bath. Six others are also individualized with respect to locality. They are the Pardoner, who comes from the hospital of the Blessed Mary of Rouncivale, near Charing Cross; the Clerk, who is a student at Oxford; the Shipman, whose probable home is Dartmouth; and the Man of Law, the Cook, and the Manciple, who undoubtedly live in London. In addition to individualizing the characters by names and origins Chaucer in several instances hits upon a detail of dress, which is an index to the character of the individual: the red stockings of the Wife of Bath are indicative of her lascivious nature and quite in keeping with her gat-teeth; the silk gown of the Physician reveals his wealth; on the other hand, the threadbare cloak of the Clerk shows his poverty and complete disregard of superficialities in preference to books; the Flemish beaver hat of the Merchant is a key to his worldly success and pompous demeanor; the Friar's cloak "rounded as a belle out of the presse" intimates his self-indulgent love of good food and other luxuries; the pleated wimple of the Prioress and the fur-trimmed gown of the Monk suggest their worldly vanity; and the

richly-embroidered coat of the Squire is in keeping with his gaiety and youthfulness. The result of Chaucer's careful attention to detail is a gallery of verbal portraits of characters who refused to remain within the covers of a book but walked out of the Tabard Inn almost six centuries ago into the stream of life and have remained there ever since. Indeed, Chaucer envisioned his characters so clearly that a recent author has written:

. . . after the dust of six centuries they are still as real and familiar as the day they met each other at the Tabard Inn.¹

In evaluating the lifelikeness of the Canterbury pilgrims, however, it is necessary to make a few reservations. For example, the Knight is an ideal figure, totally lacking in faults of temperament characteristic of human beings. One authority contends that Chaucer describes him as if he had in mind some specific knight, since he knows how many battles he has been in and where they were fought, what kind of mount he is on, and even that his coat of mail has marked his tunic underneath.² (But he has spoiled the effect of individuality by the line.)

He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght.³

Compared to that lowly churl, the Miller, the Knight is

¹Chute, op. cit., p. 243.

²Ibid., p. 249.

³"General Prologue," l. 72.

admirable, indeed, but far less human. Likewise, the Squire, although subject to the disquieting influences of romantic love--lying awake by night dreaming of his lady, whose favor he has tried to win by fighting fiercely in war--is, after all, merely a pleasant epitome of a courtly lover.⁴ The Knight's servant, the Yeoman, is undoubtedly an admirable forester but entirely lacking in traits which would make him a memorable individual. He is dressed in green, wears a Christopher around his neck, and carries a mighty bow, but in all likelihood so did most foresters of the fourteenth century. Two other characters, the Parson and the Plowman, Chaucer has made well-nigh perfect--the Parson not only preaches, but faithfully follows, Christ's teachings, and the Plowman abides strictly by the commandments to love God with all his heart and his neighbor as himself; thus the poet has virtually removed them from the realm of human nature. [It is regrettable but true that the better the characters are, the less interesting and the less realistic.⁵] Hence it is that in a consideration of the life-likeness of the Canterbury pilgrims these five serve more as contrasts to the individuality of their traveling companions than as examples themselves.

⁴Robinson, op. cit., p. 754.

⁵Chute, op. cit., p. 254.

In an analysis of Chaucer's pilgrims it is convenient to separate them into occupational groups. On this basis the largest portions are ecclesiastics. With the single exception of the Parson they are perhaps as individualistic a group of fictional characters as any in literature. For instance, the Prioress is a charming picture of harmless vanity. Her physical description is in keeping with Chaucer's best conventional pattern.⁶ She has a shapely nose, blue eyes, a small, soft, red mouth, and a high, fair forehead. It is rather in what else Chaucer says about her that we find the real clues to her personality. In the first place, she is wearing the usual nun's habit with one slight variation, which reveals a world of innocent pride. Her wimple, instead of being plain, is pleated, undoubtedly to draw attention to her high, fair forehead, considered so desirable by ladies of the period that some even plucked their hairlines to achieve it.⁷ Her rosary is a very beautiful one, indeed--coral interspersed with green beads for the Paternosters. From it hangs a lovely golden brooch inscribed with a capital A followed by the Latin motto, Amor vincit omnia. A great deal of aspersion has been cast at Chaucer's Nun because of this brooch, which, together with the pleated wimple and the exposure of the broad

⁶Sister M. Madeleva, Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays, p. 7.

⁷Chute, op. cit., p. 250.

forehead, were probably against strict discipline, but its inscription applied to religious, quite as well as to romantic love and carried no implication whatever that the Prioress was not chaste.⁸ Though the Prioress is a little vain, it is not impossible that the Church and the world should rest side by side in her soft heart. Chaucer's portrait of the Nun is definitely sympathetic, the picture of one who excels in femininity. This trait is revealed nowhere so much as in the description of her affection for her little dogs, which, incidentally, she was permitted to keep by virtue of her position, since keeping pets of any kind in a nunnery was clearly against the rules.⁹ In spite of her sentimental nature she tries to appear sophisticated and to imitate court behavior and be deemed worthy of respect. The French she speaks is quite correct but lacks the proper accent, for it is purely academic.¹⁰ In keeping with her daintiness in dress her table manners are correct almost to the extreme. What a ludicrous picture one gets of her eating at the same table with the uncouth Miller! With respect to her harshest oath "by Seinte Loy," a great deal has been written; probably it is merely another example of her essentially gentle nature, although it has been pointed out that this particular oath might have been chosen because

⁸Robinson, op. cit., p. 755.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

the personality and character of Saint Loy were pleasantly in keeping with the personality and character of the Prioress.¹¹ For all her human frailties the Prioress is a delightful character and doubtless a pleasant traveling companion. She has no great human weaknesses but vanity, and therein lies the difference between a lifelike character and a lay figure. If Chaucer's portrait of the Nun is sympathetic, his portrait of that noble ecclesiastic the Monk is not so. By a subtle change of tone in the description, the Monk's vanity, unlike the Prioress', becomes disgusting. To satisfy his vain impulses he wears a gown whose sleeves are trimmed with very fine fur and an elaborate pin with a love-knot in it to fasten his hood. His boots are expensive and well-made, and he rides upon a richly-equipped horse. On the horse's bridle are bells, which jingle merrily as the fat Monk rides along, his eyes gleaming like hot coals in his shiny, bald head. His corpulence is the result, no doubt, of gormandizing fat roasted swans, in accordance with his sensuous, intemperate nature. His rosy skin is evidence enough that he does not remain within the cloister. Indeed, he scoffs at the vows of his order, which advocates manual labor for moral discipline; rather, he loves hunting and keeps fine greyhounds for this purpose. Labor is not for him. In this description Chaucer has

¹¹Ibid.

epitomized worldly pride and personal satisfaction. The Monk is an eminently successful man, one who has risen almost to the top in his chosen field.¹² Chaucer even calls him a lord, a title usually reserved for abbots and bishops.¹³ Despite the Monk's obvious disregard of monastic rules, he is not wicked, merely worldly.¹⁴ That licentious member of the secular clergy, Hubert, is both. His only virtue seems to be that he sings very well, albeit his merit is in ballad-singing rather than in intoning the divine services. Among his order he is the best beggar of all. To attain this doubtful honor he is contemptibly unscrupulous. For example, he affects such a cheery greeting that a widow without even a shoe will give him her last coin. Furthermore, he does not waste his time with poor folk and lepers; rather he associates with the rich and with victuallers. The barmaids and the innkeepers in his shire are more familiar to him than the poor and needy. He also manages to make a profit by setting a price on absolution for those able to pay. Besides the fact that he excels in begging, he excels in seductiveness. When he talks, he lisps a little in order to sound alluring, and he always carries pins and pretty knives to earn the favor of attractive women. Thus he finds it necessary to get husbands for a great many

¹²Kemp Malone, Chapters on Chaucer, p. 174.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 175.

young women whom he seduces. When he plays the harp after singing, his eyes twinkle in his head just like stars on a frosty night. He is as strong as a wrestler, but incongruously his neck is as white as a lily. Thus Chaucer has drawn a lively, vivid picture of a Friar, who is able to administer the affairs of his parish in an admirable manner but who has chosen to satisfy his own greed and lust instead.

✓ In contrast to these two well-fed, self-complacent clerics is the hollow-eyed, starved-looking intellectual, the Oxford Scholar, still pursuing his theological studies.¹⁵ Represented here is a great devotion to learning but complete indifference to personal appearance. His coat is threadbare, and he rides upon a lean old nag. The Clerk spends all the money he can get on books, not clothes, for he had rather have books than anything else in the world. To have twenty black- or red-bound volumes of Aristotle is the height of his ambition. How our poet must have sympathized with his fellow book-lover! The Clerk's speech is sensible and based on moral themes. He is the ideal man of learning, for Chaucer states unequivocally, "gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche."¹⁶ Of the ecclesiastics the Summoner and the Pardoner remain to be considered; of the two it is difficult to decide which is more disreputable, but the

¹⁵Robinson, op. cit., p. 759.

¹⁶Chaucer, op. cit., l. 308.

doubtful honor usually goes to the Pardoner.¹⁷ In appearance it is also difficult to determine who is more repulsive. Probably, however, the Summoner is. He is so ugly that he frightens little children. His face is fiery-red, for he has a kind of leprosy, which has resulted in the loss of his eyebrows and beard, a swelling of the eyes so that they are almost shut, and a mass of reddish pimples on his face.¹⁸ Thus his body bears the marks of his lecherous disposition. It is little wonder that he is frightening. With his voice, louder than any trumpet, he joins the Pardoner in singing love songs. As the pilgrims leave the Tabard Inn, the Summoner sets a garland of flowers large enough for an alehouse signpost upon his head and carries by his side in the manner of a shield, a cake. When he has his fill of wine, the Summoner, an utter fool, can speak a few stereotyped Latin phrases which he has learned in his official duties as bailiff in the archdeacon's court. A lascivious, drunken lout, he will surrender his concubine for a whole year to anyone who will give him a quart of wine. Since he gorges himself with garlic, leeks, and onions, he is an exceedingly repulsive traveling companion. The Summoner's friend, the Pardoner of Rouncivale, has long,

¹⁷George Lyman Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry, p. 211.

¹⁸Walter C. Curry, Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences, pp. 43-44.

stringy, yellow hair and glaring eyes. When he speaks it is in a small voice like the cry of a goat. Not only does he have no beard, but he never will have, for he is a eunuch. To compensate for his impotency he makes a brave show of virility, singing love songs in a pitiable attempt to distract attention from his defect. Also, he wears a little round cap over his stringy, yellow hair instead of a hood, in order to appear fashionable and debonair. Upon his cap is sewn a vernicle, a religious talisman, bearing a copy of the picture of Christ, which was supposed to have been miraculously imprinted upon a handkerchief preserved at St. Peter's in Rome.¹⁹ This is a kind of advertisement, for his business is selling pardons, which he claims are hot from Rome. Indeed, there is no pardoner in the land so successful as he, or perhaps so unscrupulous as he. According to his own confession he carries various spurious relics, such as a pillowcase which he vows was Our Lady's veil and a glass jar full of pigs' bones which he exposes as the bones of a saint. Thus, playing on the ignorance of poor country parsons, he makes fools of them and enriches himself. In church he reads the Scripture very well, and he is particularly good in singing the offertory. But even this office is motivated by a selfish purpose. It is simply to sweeten the tongue so that he may

¹⁹Skeat, op. cit., p. 56.

preach well and induce the people to be generous with their silver. Perhaps it is in the delineation of the Pardoner that Chaucer reaches the height of his powers. This ecclesiastic is an utter scoundrel and admittedly cares nothing whatsoever for the sincerity of repentance of those who buy his relics.²⁰ His aim is strictly to make money.²¹ Being proud of his skill in deceiving people, he can not refrain from boasting in his prologue about his powers. After all, he has nothing to lose, for he will probably never see these people again, met by chance as they are. They, with the exception of the Parson and the Flowman, are not the kind of people upon whom he practices his tricks anyway, and the character of the Parson warns him that he had better not venture into his parish with his counterfeit relics.²² In any case, the company recognize him for the rascal he is, for when the Host calls upon him for a story, they speak, almost as one, in dissent, taking it for granted that the Pardoner will tell a ribald tale. At the conclusion of the tale which he does tell, probably the best short narrative poem in the language,²³ he is so moved that he has a conscientious moment and adds surprisingly:

²⁰George L. Kittredge, "Chaucer's Pardoner," Atlantic Monthly, LXXII (December, 1893), 830.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

I yow assoille, by myn heigh power,
 Yow that wol offre, as clene and eek as cleer
 As ye were born.--And lo, sire, thus I preche.
 And Jhesu Crist, that is oure soules leche,
 So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve,
 For that is best; I wol yow nat deceyve.²⁴

But the mood can not last, and he briskly assumes an air of jocularly to escape from his own conscience. Declaring that he has relics and pardons, which he has just brought from Rome, he turns to the Host as the most sinful of the pilgrims and urges him to give an offering and receive absolution.²⁵ It is inconceivable that he is serious, for he has just confessed his deceit, and the Host is the last person he would expect to dupe. But Harry Bailly, characteristically missing the humor, is incensed at the Pardoner's suggestion, and replies to him with unparalleled vulgarity; whereupon the Pardoner becomes so angry that he is speechless. Since the whole jest has completely escaped the literal-minded Host, he can not understand the Pardoner's anger.²⁶ The tension is mounting in a quarrel that neither wants; so they are pleased to kiss and make up in accordance with the Knight's command.²⁷ That the Pardoner is eloquent Chaucer tells us in the "General Prologue"; possibly he had good intentions at one time, but now he is completely

²⁴"The Pardoner's Tale," ll. 913-918.

²⁵Kittredge, "Chaucer's Pardoner," Atlantic Monthly, LXIII, p. 930.

²⁶Ibid., p. 833.

²⁷Ibid.

debased. Although the Pardoner could never be a likable character, he is deeply human, perhaps more so than any other pilgrim.

In depicting the professional men Chaucer relied more upon character description and suggestion than upon physical details. As a result the only information that we have about the appearance of the Physician and the Man of Law is that the former is very richly attired in what must have been a striking costume of red and blue cloth lined with taffeta and silk, and the latter wears a coat of mixed color held with a silk belt ornamented with small metal bars. The Doctor doubtless is wealthy since he has devoted himself to accumulating money rather than curing the sick. Like most of the followers of Averroes he has little use for the Bible and its teachings, which are contrary to his inordinate cupidity. A plague he welcomes, because business is at its height then, and he can add to his hoard of gold. He works hand in glove with the pharmacist; that is, each sends the other business. In all the universe there is not another doctor like him. Not only is he acquainted with the ancient medical authorities but he is thoroughly versed in astrology and is familiar with the four humours; therefore, he is able to diagnose every ailment and prescribe proper remedies. Thus Chaucer individualizes the Physician by showing us his greed and utter lack of humanity. His fellow professional, the Man of Law, very wise, discreet, and highly esteemed--at

least he seems so--rides along. No lawyer is quite so busy as he; yet he seems busier than he actually is. He has served in numerous legal capacities, which include appointments by order of the King. For his skill he has earned many presents. He is at his height in buying land and drawing up papers in which no flaws can be found. Like the Physician, he is all mind and no heart. He can quote all the statutes by rote and can even give all the cases and decisions from the time of William the Conqueror down to the present. This specific reference to the Norman is a device for achieving verisimilitude, because it associates the fictional Man of Law with the historical Conqueror.

The provincial townsfolk are represented amply by the Wife of Bath and the Shipman.²⁸ Of the Wife of Bath it has been written: "Of all Chaucer's characters she is one of the freshest and breeziest, and she has all the brazen assurance of an untamed shrew."²⁹ Her face is bold, fair, and red, and when she smiles or talks, which is often, she reveals wide gaps between her front teeth, which, to the medieval man, indicated a passionate, sensual nature. Although she is rather large, she sits easily upon her horse as it ambles along the Canterbury route. Her dress is

²⁸Manly, op. cit., p. 71.

²⁹William E. Mead, "The Prologue of the Wife of Bath's Tale," Publications of the Modern Language Association, XVI (1901), 390.

flamboyant and in poor taste. She wears a fine wimple and a hat as broad as a buckler or a shield, carefully-tied red stockings, a riding skirt to protect her dress, new shoes, and a spur upon each heel. On Sundays she wears an exaggerated headdress, which, if not stylish, is certainly impressive in the fine texture of its cloth and in its weight--perhaps as much as ten pounds, Chaucer declares. This hyperbolic description is Chaucer's chief means for calling attention to the Wife and establishing her as a real individual. Even though the statement is an exaggeration, the Wife would doubtless wear a conspicuous headdress, one just a little larger than anyone else wore. It is at church that she has the best opportunity to indulge her love of ostentation. Without a whit of charity in her heart but in her typically brash manner she precedes everyone to the altar to present alms and is in a state of immediate anger if anyone dares try to go before her. Here is the typical socially-ambitious bourgeois matron. In her spare time the Wife pursues her trade of weaving, at which Chaucer declares she is even better than those of Ypres and Ghent, seats of the thriving Flemish wool trade.³⁰ Her fondness for pilgrimages is attested by the fact that she has been thrice to Jerusalem and has visited Rome, Boulogne, Cologne, and the Shrine of St. James at Galicia, all of which were

³⁰Robinson, op. cit., p. 764.

popular resorts of pilgrims.³¹ Because of an altercation with her fifth husband, who boxed her roundly on the ear for tearing up his favorite book, she is deaf; otherwise, she is a lusty, healthy woman. Indeed, she has outlived five husbands and is willing to accept a sixth if he can be found, for it is in the art of love-making that the Wife excels all others. Perhaps it is the hope of finding a new husband instead of religious devotion that takes her on this journey to Canterbury. Her vulgar wit, which is an important part of her personality, makes her excellent company on the pilgrimage.³² Here Chaucer has captured in the Wife the lust, the selfish ambition, the utter lack of discrimination typical of people who presume a superiority they will never possess. Chaucer implies that the other provincial townsman, the Sailor, hails from Dartmouth, a port from which particularly bold and adventurous seamen embarked.³³ As sailors went in the fourteenth century, this one was unsurpassed in his knowledge of the harbors and anchorages, in the handling of a ship, and in reckoning tides and streams. No one from Hulle, a seaport in Yorkshire, to Cartagena, a Spanish seaport, exceeds him in nautical skill.³⁴ He is familiar with harbors from Gootlond, an

³¹Ibid., p. 765.

³²Mead, op. cit., p. 390.

³³Manly, op. cit., p. 198.

³⁴Robinson, op. cit., p. 762.

island in the Baltic Sea off the coast of Sweden, to Fynystore, a cape near the westernmost promontory of Spain.³⁵ Bold and wise, he has been in many a storm at sea. Being somewhat unscrupulous, he is not averse to stealing from the store of wine which he is transporting in his ship, the "Maudelayne," and in the event of any battles at sea he makes his prisoners "walk the plank," in keeping with the barbaric custom of the time.³⁶ [Chaucer's little device of recounting the name of the Seaman's vessel achieves a verisimilitude comparable to that achieved by naming certain other characters.] On the pilgrimage he wears a gown of a very coarse cloth and rides uneasily upon his nag, as any sailor naturally would. Hanging from a cord about his neck is a dagger, a weapon which is doubtless not for ornamental purposes, in view of Chaucer's statement that the sailor had been engaged in many battles at sea. [Thus the poet brings life to this Shipman by his apparent personal knowledge of his ability as a navigator and fighter and his predilection for stealing wine from the ship's store.]

The Franklin, the Miller, and the Reeve are the representatives of the country folk. The Franklin, the most excellent of sub-landowners, presents a handsome appearance with his white beard and ruddy complexion as he rides along

³⁵Hinckley, op. cit., p. 31.

³⁶Robinson, op. cit., p. 762.

the dusty road to Canterbury. Unsuitable though it is for traveling, his costume is girded by a milk-white belt from which hang an ornamental dagger and a silk game bag; but little the Franklin cares for conventional traveling dress, for he is the leading dignitary of his shire, having served as its administrator as well as its representative in Parliament. He is a St. Julian in his community, keeping his table always set with baked fish, fat birds, pungent sauces, fine bread, and excellent ale. So discriminating a gourmet is he that he changes his menus in accordance with the seasons. Indeed, he is a noble example of an English squire. Despite all these attainments, however, there is still something which he desires, and that is that his son should have the same fondness for "gentillesse" that he has. But to his utter dismay his son is a ne'er-do-well, and the Franklin naturally fears that an honorable line based on the power of landholding seems destined for extinction.³⁷ The poet reveals this flaw in the Franklin's happiness in the discussion that arises following "The Squire's Tale." The Franklin commends the Squire for being the kind of young man he wishes his son were, who, instead, wastes his possessions in gambling and squanders his opportunities for social advancement by talking to pages and stable grooms.

³⁷Gordon Hall Gerould, "Social Status of Chaucer's Franklin," Publications of the Modern Language Association, XLI (1926), p. 279.

Thus Chaucer, by giving this insight into the Franklin's disappointment, distinguishes him as a real human being capable of success in the affairs of the world but not in personal life. That specimen of brawn and no brains, the lusty Miller, conducting the pilgrims out of town to the tune of his bagpipe, reaches perhaps the apex of physical distinction. A wrestler, surpassed by none, he can knock a door off its hinges by butting it with his burly head. The phrase "short-sholdred" probably means that the Miller's shoulders are square and reared up so high that his head appears to be resting directly upon them.³⁸ His beard is red as a fox and broad as a spade, his nostrils as black and wide, and his mouth resembles a furnace. As if these characteristics are not marked enough, Chaucer points out yet another feature which surpasses them all:

Upon the cop right of his nose he hade
 A werthe, and theron stood a toft of herys,
 Reed as the brustles of a sowes erys.³⁹

*of brown
 Char*

The Miller is that sort of individual who assumes that all jokes have their basis in sex, and he is amply supplied with his brand of jokes. The comical effect of the clownish Miller is heightened by the fact that, like the Knight, he carries a sword and shield but doubtless he could not have defended himself with them, because this art of self-defense

³⁸Curry, op. cit., p. 80.

³⁹"General Prologue," ll. 554-556.

was restricted to members of the nobility. He is reasonably honest, as millers go, but he is by no means squeamish, and at every opportunity he steals grain and takes his toll three times if possible. The Miller, then, is totally lacking in any aesthetic quality which might differentiate him from the licentious, drunken, illiterate oaf that he is. Chaucer has outdone himself in his portrayal of a character who is all too real and familiar. The Miller's antagonist the Reeve has the advantage of managing a manorial estate in Norfolk near Baldeswelle; so he has been able to secure a good mount, a large dappled-gray horse named Scot. Chaucer writes as if he had visited the Reeve's manor, for he relates that his house is upon a heath well-shaded by green trees. From there the Reeve manages his lord's estate in such a crafty manner that he is slowly accumulating a hoard of private wealth and yet contrives to lend the lord money that is actually his. So cunning is he in bookkeeping, however, that no auditor can catch him in any dishonesty. The Reeve wears a long blue topcoat and carries a rusty sword, which he is undoubtedly too cowardly to use if, indeed, he is not too old to manipulate. Despite all these particulars about the Reeve, it is his physical description that makes him most memorable. Standing at opposite poles from the Miller in general appearance, the Reeve is slender, choleric, and clean-shaven. His hair is cut round by his ears and clipped short in front like a priest's, but it is

his legs which are his most outstanding physical feature. Very long, they are completely without calves.] Indeed, they are so lean they look like two staffs. Hence the Reeve appears a true-to-life character because Chaucer has embodied in him those qualities peculiar to people who cannot resist the temptations offered by positions of authority--he is a thief and a tyrant; yet at heart he is a coward.]

Representing the city folk are the Merchant, the Cook, the Manciple, and the Host of the Tabard Inn.⁴⁰ There is probably no more pompous character in literature than the Merchant with his Flemish beaver hat; his beard, divided in the middle; clothes of varied colors; and neatly-clasped boots. Sitting his horse proudly, the Merchant has the air of one who conducts important and mysterious business transactions. Such a knack for borrowing and lending has he that no one can surmise when he actually is in debt. He has no peer in buying and selling money on the exchange at a profit. Indeed, profits and ways to increase profits are all his talk. To anybody who will listen he airs his view that the sea should be kept open between Middleburg, on the Dutch coast, and Orwell, close to Harwich, so that there will be no menace to his shipping. He seems real because he is a crass materialist, obsessed with the idea of making money.

⁴⁰Manly, op. cit., p. 71.

Another townsman, the Manciple, who is a purchasing agent for a College or an Inn of Court, excels in cleverness, for he succeeds in making fools of the thirty lawyers whom he serves by buying provisions for them so wisely that he not only makes ends meet but manages to make a profit for himself as well. Chaucer obviously enjoys the irony that permits an uneducated man like the Manciple to trick men able to administer a shire, manage a great estate, or handle large amounts of money. Even though Chaucer fails to describe the Manciple's dress or physical appearance, he, nevertheless, creates a lifelike character by pointing out how a man of his stripe is oftentimes capable of duping those superior to him intellectually and socially. Next among the townsmen is the Cook, who accompanies the five Guildsmen. He has no peer in the culinary art, for he can roast, fry, boil, stew, and bake good pies. Understanding the proper use of condiments, he can boil whole chickens and season them properly. But Chaucer is not content with this distinguishing characteristic; selecting a most repulsive detail to make the Cook seem lifelike, he points out a running sore upon his shin, which indicates his lecherous nature. His business competitor, Harry Bailly, that incomparable extrovert, is, as one would expect, large, with protruding eyes, and a very manly posture--an appearance altogether like that of an imposing burgess from Cheapside. Obviously he is the type of man who takes charge of affairs

and handles them with dispatch. He is the logical medium through whom to present the plan of the Tales, and it is quite in keeping with his unabashed confidence in his ability that he presents the plan, nominates himself for the position of judge and guide, and begins to give orders as lord of all he surveys almost before the pilgrims have a chance to understand what it is that they have agreed to. His infectious cheerfulness catches them in its spell, and it is probably in immense enjoyment of the lark that they turn over the management of their affairs to an innkeeper for a while. Thus the company of sundry folk retire for the night, eager to begin the journey on the morrow. And it is a group of people who seem real that go to bed on the night of April 16 in the Tabard Inn in Southwark--real, because Chaucer used a few simple devices in an apparently (casual manner) to achieve the effect of verisimilitude. He could do this because

For many years he had been meeting people of all classes and all types, and he had been watching them with so fascinated and affectionate an interest that he knew them better than they knew themselves. He knew the furniture in their houses and the cut of their clothes, the turn of their speech and the very color of their minds. He knew them all--the rowdy ones and the quiet ones, the dignified professional men and the drunks, the girls with plucked eyebrows and the cackling old men with thin necks, the knaves, the fools, and the innocent. (He knew and loved them for the one quality they all had in common, the fact that they were alive.⁴¹)

⁴¹Chute, op. cit., p. 240.

CHAPTER IV

VERISIMILITUDE IN CONVERSATION

One means by which the Canterbury Tales are made to seem like an account of the actual experiences of a group of people is through the record in the "Links" of conversation of various kinds among the pilgrims on their journey. Quarrels between certain characters lend a particularly vivid tone of reality to the trip. As the travelers jog along the Canterbury road, they begin to act as twenty-odd individuals engaged in a leisurely excursion to a common destination might act. Although many converse in a friendly fashion, the more fractious ones of them quarrel with one another. The fact that the subject of mastery in marriage recurs in the conversation of several characters is natural and in accordance with a real situation. Lively as the debate on this theme is, the conversation which is most life-like and which lends the greatest measure of verisimilitude to the Canterbury Tales is the Host's. Indeed, the stories themselves almost become subordinated in interest to the lively dialogue of the pilgrims.

The quarrels which rage between the Miller and the Reeve, the Host and the Cook, and the Friar and the Summoner are not represented as having arisen after the pilgrims met

at the Tabard; rather they seem to be feuds of long standing, which have their origin in conflicting business interests of the various parties concerned.¹ The first of these quarrels, that between the Miller and the Reeve, occurs during the first day of travel. After the Knight has completed his tale, there is a general murmur of praise for such a noble story, and the ever-enthusiastic Host, well-pleased with the way his scheme has begun, calls upon the Monk as the ranking ecclesiastic to tell a story. Before the Monk can begin, however, the Miller, who is so drunk by this time that he can hardly stay on his horse, cries out in a raucous voice reminiscent of the rowdy Pilate of the mystery plays, swearing his favorite oath:

. . . By armes, and by blood and bones,
I kan a noble tale for the nones,
With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale.²

The Host, mindful of the amenities, first tries gentle persuasion and begs Robin to desist, for there are others socially superior to him who should first tell a tale. But the Miller is not to be denied, and he swears "By Goddes soule" that he will either tell his tale or go his way alone. By this time the Host sees that it is useless to argue further, and he too cries out in angry reply:

¹Manly, op. cit., p. 102.

²"The Miller's Prologue," ll. 3125-3127.

. . . Tel on, a devel way!
Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome.³

The Miller is not so intoxicated, however, that he does not realize that his tale will be offensive to some of the company; so he disclaims any responsibility for it. He says he can tell by the sound of his voice that he is drunk; therefore, if he speaks amiss, it is the Host's wine that should be blamed and not he. Then he announces that his tale will be of a carpenter and his wife, in which the carpenter is made a fool of by a clerk. Immediately there is a protest, not, as might be expected from the London carpenter but from the Reeve, who in his youth had been a carpenter.⁴ It seems unlikely that he is so fastidious as to object to the Miller's tale, which promised to be vulgar; rather he must have some reason to feel that the Miller is deliberately singling him out as the object of a jest. Since the Miller calls the Reeve by name, "leve brother Osewold," he must have known him before; apparently the acquaintance was not a pleasant one. The basis for a quarrel between the Miller and the Reeve could easily have lain in their connection with a medieval manor. In the organization of most manors there was a mill as part of estate.⁵ All the grain produced on the manorial farm had to be ground there.⁶ If the Miller and the Reeve had lived

³Ibid., ll. 3134-3135.

⁴Manly, op. cit., p. 96.

⁵Ibid., p. 97.

⁶Ibid.

on the same honor, probably some difference had arisen between them at the mill, particularly if Robin had taken more than his share of grain. And Robin probably had done so, since Chaucer says of him in the "General Prologue":

Wel koude he stelen corn and tollen thries⁷

and since millers, in general, had a reputation for dishonesty. We have already learned from the "General Prologue" that the Miller leads the procession and the Reeve brings up the rear. Perhaps they intentionally ride as far apart as possible because of their hostility to one another. At any rate, as soon as the Miller announces the subject of his story, the Reeve objects. He protests against the vulgar, drunken speech of the Miller, declaring that there are many other subjects, and admonishes the Miller for speaking evil of any man and especially of his wife. Of course, the Miller is delighted to have angered the Reeve; so he thrusts again. Taking refuge in a proverbial expression, he makes a sly insinuation about the Reeve's marital affairs:

"Who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold."⁸

He hastens to explain, though, that this is not necessarily true in the case of the Reeve. Everyone knows, he says, that for every unfaithful wife there are a thousand true

⁷"General Prologue," l. 562.

⁸"The Miller's Prologue," l. 3152.

ones. The Miller declares that he too has a wife, but he is not going to court trouble by suspecting that she has made a cuckold of him. "Leave well enough alone," is his philosophy. Thus the first round goes to Robin in his quarrel with the Reeve.

When "the tale is doon," most of the company laugh at the joke played on the carpenter, except, of course, the Reeve, who is still angry. He declares his intention to avenge the insult by telling a story in which a miller is made a cuckold, but he does not get under way immediately, for the Reeve is a coward at heart. In part his cowardice may be one reason for his riding as far from the Miller as possible, since he is doubtless well aware of the latter's wrestling prowess. At any rate his cowardly disposition deters him from pressing the argument too far, and instead of launching into a rebuttal to the Miller's story, he begins to speak in figurative terms, of old age. After several minutes of this metaphorical monologue the Host, eager to get on with the business in hand, commands Oswald to begin his tale and waste no more time. Being thus commanded by the Host, the Reeve announces that, after all, he is going to repay the drunken Miller, who has made a carpenter the butt of a joke. And he is going to speak in churl's terms to answer Robin, who, he fervently hopes, will break his neck. Peevishly he adds that the Miller can see a mote in his eye but can not see a beam in

his own. This inadvertent admission of the truth in the Miller's insinuation about cuckoldry must have delighted Robin, who has goaded the Reeve to such a point that he speaks thus impulsively. Oswald, up to this point, has got rather the worse of the argument.

The Reeve's vulgar tale proves highly amusing to the Cook, who slaps Oswald on the back, declaring that it would be a pity to stop the merry stories now; so he proposes to tell about an incident which occurred in his city. At once the Host, while giving him leave to tell a tale, takes the opportunity to cast aspersions on the Cook's shop and on his practices as a victualler. He accuses him of selling juiceless pastries and many a twice warmed-over meat pie. Continuing his attack, the Host asserts that many travelers have become ill after eating his parsley served with stuffed goose, insinuating that it is difficult to distinguish the parsley from the flies which infest his shop. After making all these insulting remarks, the Host attempts to play to the Cook by saying that his words, though true, are all in fun and he hopes that there will be no hard feelings. Roger seems to be a good-natured fellow, for he does not, in fact, get angry and even admits the truth of the Host's remarks, but he adds sourly that "a true jest is no jest."⁹ Furthermore, he promises to get even with Harry Bailly by telling

⁹Robinson, op. cit., p. 792.

a tale about an innkeeper before he is through. Since the Cook calls the Host by name, he doubtless knows him well. Their enmity probably stems from the fact that they are competitors in victualling, for at one time in London hostlers were not allowed to serve food; but the law was evidently not in effect, at least in Southwark, where Harry Bailly kept his inn, for he has just served the pilgrims a sumptuous meal. At any rate, the Cook feels that Bailly has robbed him of business that is rightfully his, and he derives some satisfaction from at least beginning a tale that is to satirize innkeepers.

On the second day out from London the Friar and the Summoner engage in a bitter battle of words. Doubtless the origin of this quarrel lies in the traditional enmity between the secular clergy, represented by the Friar, and the regular clergy, represented by the Summoner. Since friars were not subject to the jurisdiction of the diocesan officials, the Friar was free to go about the country begging alms and administering certain rites of the Church. Naturally this freedom was deeply resented by the archdeacon of the diocese, and his sentiments would have been shared by the summoner, the bailiff of the archdeacon's court.¹⁰ In addition to this professional enmity Chaucer's Friar and Summoner may feel a personal animosity growing out of what

¹⁰Manly, op. cit., pp. 102-103.

the Friar would have considered transgressions of the Summoner in his parish. The Friar's friends have probably added to the dislike between the two by reporting unfair treatment by the Summoner, and the Summoner and his friends undoubtedly have a great deal to resent from the Friar. At any rate, the two have obviously been enemies prior to the pilgrimage to Canterbury, and they continue their quarrel on the journey at the first opportunity. This chance comes following the Wife's "Prologue" when the Friar sneeringly declares that this is indeed a long preamble to a tale. Any comment by the Friar is sufficient excuse for the Summoner to make a sneering reply, and he swears by "Goddess armes two" that a friar and a fly are just alike, always falling into every matter which is none of their business. Naturally, the Friar does not particularly relish being compared to a fly, so he seizes upon the only means of retaliation easily at hand and declares that he will tell a tale or two of a summoner that will make everyone laugh. Childishly the Summoner declares that he will tell two or three tales of friars, fit to make the Friar very angry. After this interruption the Wife tells her story; then the Friar begins to speak, and from the first it is plain that he intends to disparage the Summoner. He openly declares:

"I wol yow of a somonour telle a game.

Pardee, ye may well knowe by the name/
That of a somonour may no good be sayd."¹¹

Not content with this emphatic disparagement he continues with a satirical definition of a summoner, describing him as one who distributes summonses for fornication and is beaten at every town. At this point the Host, alarmed by the viciousness of the Friar's attack, tries to intervene, but the Summoner stops him, declaring that he will get even when it comes his time to tell a tale. When the Friar completes his derogatory tale of a Summoner, his fellow cleric is so angry that he stands up in his stirrups, shaking with anger like an aspen leaf. Addressing the company, he asks but one thing. Since they have heard this false Friar lie, it is only fair that they give him a chance to retaliate. Referring to the Friar's boast that he knows hell, the Summoner asserts that it is little wonder, since friars and fiends have much in common. Everyone has heard, he says, the story of the millions of friars in hell abiding under the tail of Satan. Thus the Summoner's vulgarity silences the Friar for a time.

But it is not only by quarrels that Chaucer enlivens the journey to Canterbury and gives to the situation a sense of verisimilitude, but by a spirited debate carried on through the tales. The voluble Wife of Bath has agitated a discussion of marriage by detailing her personal

¹¹"The Friar's Prologue," ll. 1279-1281.

experiences and relating a tale to prove that the wife should have "maistrie" over her husband. Apparently the topic is of personal interest to several of our travelers, for it recurs again and again before they reach Canterbury. Only six of the pilgrims deal directly with the subject of "maistrie," but it must have absorbed the interest of the entire company. Although the Wife of Bath makes the first vigorous defense of woman's mastery over her husband, Chaucer has considered the subject in his "Tale of Melibeus" and the Nun's Priest has dealt with it in his tale of Chauntecleer and Pertelote.¹² The Wife of Bath's tale is, in a sense, a poetic counterpart to the tedious "Tale of Melibeus," for in each story the husband gives himself up to the authority of his wife and so is extricated from an embarrassing position.¹³ The Nun's Priest, who is subject to a lady as his ecclesiastical superior and possibly does not enjoy being in the retinue of the elegant Prioress nor riding on a lean old nag, while her little dogs have fine white bread and solicitous attention, takes up the challenge of the tale of "Melibeus."¹⁴ At any rate, there is a fine irony in his story which illustrates the ill effects of trusting a woman. In bringing up the question of "maistrie" in her "Prologue" the Wife is, therefore, actually defending her sex against

¹²William Witherle Lawrence, "The Marriage Group in the Canterbury Tales," Modern Philology, VI (October, 1913), 248.

¹³Ibid., p. 252.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 254.

this previous attack rather than introducing a new topic for discussion.¹⁵ The marriage tales which follow are obviously told with her in mind. By this subtle clash of ideas upon marriage the dramatic spirit of the Tales is considerably heightened. Naturally the Wife defends the idea that mastery in marriage should rest with the woman. No one is better qualified than she to answer the question, for she has made a profession of marriage. Her harangue is particularly disquieting to the Clerk, against whom she has aimed some especially pointed remarks, such as:

. . . it is an impossible
That any clerk wol speke good of wyves.¹⁶

The Clerk bides his time; then he presents his answer to the Wife's challenge. At first his purpose is not obvious, but as he portrays the patient Griselda, the complete antithesis of the Wife of Bath becomes apparent.¹⁷ Although she has asserted that no clerk can speak well of wives, he not only speaks well but presents one who is the very model of wifely fidelity and womanly fortitude in the face of affliction.¹⁸ Yet it remains for the Clerk to crush the Wife with his masterpiece of satirical oratory. When he has finished his tale, instead of merging quietly into the

¹⁵Ibid., p. 248.

¹⁶"The Wife of Bath's Prologue," ll. 688-689.

¹⁷Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry, p. 195.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 194.

background he turns suddenly to the Wife and proposes with an amused air to recite a song which he has composed in her honor and in honor of the cause which she champions. Then he delivers his address to all married women, admonishing them to follow the precepts of the Wife of Bath. The piece is, of course, unparalleled irony, the thrust of a skilled logician and a master of rhetoric.¹⁹ The last line of the Clerk's ironical advice to wives, to let their husbands "wepe, and wryng, and waille" is echoed by the Merchant in his prologue.²⁰ Despairingly the Merchant cries that he has more than enough of weeping and wailing, for

"We wedded men lyven in sorwe and care."²¹

Thus his own sad experience prompts him to present another side of the marriage question. The satirical tale of the tyrannical, blind, old January, cuckolded by fair, young May, is a reply to the Wife's heresies in that it is as if one of her husbands has come back to earth to give his side of the case.²² By this time the Host feels that the marriage issue has been discussed long enough and he attempts to change the subject by calling upon the squire to tell a

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 199-200.

²⁰"The Clerk's Tale," l. 1212.

²¹"The Merchant's Prologue," l. 1228.

²²Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry, p. 202.

tale of love; but the Franklin when his turn comes reverts to the issue and confidently brings it to a triumphant conclusion. Neither the husband nor the wife has mastery in the perfect marriage, he declared, but each defers to the other, and so they live together in mutual love and forbearance. Thus the Franklin refutes the Wife's theories, but one can imagine that she is still haughtily defiant as the pilgrims ride merrily on the road to Canterbury town.

Although the quarrels and opposing points of view regarding mastery in marriage contribute heavily to the verisimilitude of the Canterbury Tales, it is the conversation of Harry Bailly that affords the greatest degree of reality. The Host is the counterpart in English literature to that fixture of Greek drama, the Chorus. He serves as an interested commentator upon the stories, as a background against whom the quarrels and arguments over "maistrie" are connected with the pilgrimage, or simply as the vehicle through whose comments the poet is able to lend continuity, humor, mobility, or dramatic effect to the action.

As an energetic man of business he is particularly averse to wasting time. He is intent upon proceeding according to schedule; thus it is very distressing to him that at ten o'clock on the morning of the second day the story-telling has not yet begun. He calls upon the pilgrims

to waste no more time "for the love of God and of Seint John."²³ Then he delivers a rather trite lecture upon the folly of wasting time, unmindful of the fact that if there is any lecturing to be done, there are others in the company better fitted than he to do it. But it is just this lack of restraint, this complete unconsciousness of his own limitations that makes him a successful innkeeper and a pleasant traveling companion. He admits that he is not an educated man, but he has kept his ears open, and he pompously quotes a commonly-known proverb from Seneca to bolster his point:

. . . "los of catel may recovered be,
But los of tyme shendeth us."²⁴

Then he refers to a homelier proverb, comparing loss of time to the loss of virginity. Another interesting phase of the Host's character is his confidence in his ability as a literary critic. He freely passes judgment on each tale that is told, sometimes showing little discrimination in his commendation. But Harry Bailly has deep regard for educated men, and, when the Man of Law has finished his story, Bailly stands up in his stirrups and announces that that was a good tale indeed. Then he calls upon the Parson, another learned man, to tell a tale "for Goddes bones," swearing "by Goddes dignitee" that learned men excel in

²³"Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale," l. 18.

²⁴Ibid., ll. 27-28.

story-telling.²⁵ The Parson, naturally, is shocked at the Host's language and demands to know why it is necessary for him to swear. Like everyone else the Host does not enjoy having his shortcomings pointed out publicly, and he quickly turns the criticism from himself by calling the priest a derisive nickname, "Jankin," and insinuating that he is a Lollard, a follower of John Wyclif.²⁶ Then swearing again, the Host scornfully tells the company to listen, for they will surely hear a pious sermon. But the Shipman interrupts and declares that he will listen to no sermon and that there will be no theological questions discussed here. Let it suffice that they all believe in God. Instead he will tell a merry tale that will wake all the company, and it will not be encumbered with philosophy, or medical terms, or legal allusions.

This tale, too, is pronounced good by Harry Bailly, who now turns deferentially to the Prioress and asks her to tell a tale if it please her. For the first time he asks a favor humbly. Harry Bailly is one to recognize social position and to pay respect where respect is due. But his perception is not very keen and ironically enough he fails to recognize in his company the presence of a literary genius or to realize the delightful satire

²⁵Epilogue to the Man of Law's Tale," ll. 116ff.

²⁶Skeat, op. cit., p. 166.

inherent in Chaucer's tale of Sir Thopas. As the story drags on, the Host rudely interrupts, declaring the rhyme to be worthless, nothing more than a waste of time. To waste time is clearly against Harry Bailly's principles. One suspects that Chaucer knew the genial Host would not appreciate the humorous satire of the tale of Sir Thopas, but he could not resist the impulse to irritate him. At any rate, to be fair the Host gives Chaucer a chance to tell another story. Chaucer obliges with the "Tale of Melibeus," which the Host apparently likes, for he asserts that he had rather his wife, Goodelief, had heard this tale of patient Prudence than to have a barrel of ale. As if welcoming the opportunity to complain about his maltreatment, he gives a very amusing picture of his shrewish spouse. "By Goddes bones" he swears that when he beats his serving boys, she brings him great clubs and urges him to kill them and break their bones. She is duly resentful of every imagined slight and calls him a milksop because he does not rush to avenge the supposed impertinences. Tauntingly she suggests that she should wear his dagger and that he should take her distaff and spin. How delightful the pilgrims must have found this entertaining picture of a domestic comedy! Harry Bailly, the intimidating browbeater of loitering pilgrims and poor story-tellers, is terrified of his own wife. His generous offer to guide the pilgrims to Canterbury is not to be wondered at; the desire

to escape from the termagant to whom he is married must have been a strong motive. One of the least attractive of the Host's traits is an innate vulgarity which he exhibits in his comments to the Monk. Before that noble ecclesiastic can get under way with his contribution to the story-telling, Bailly makes some indelicate personal remarks concerning his virility and the great loss to the world in his being a religious instead of a married man. Churchmen, he says, may make Venus' payments better than ordinary laymen. Though the Host would hardly have borne this garrulity in anyone else, he does not consider his discoursing on extraneous matters a waste of time. All this impertinence the Monk listens to placidly, and when Harry Bailly concludes his indelicate musings, he launches into a series of dreary tragedies. The entire company is doubtless bored, but the Host is not so bold as to interrupt the Monk as he did Chaucer. In fact, only the Knight has the social position to warrant such an interruption. Since the Knight condemns the Monk's story, the Host feels it will be permissible for him to add his judgment; so he declares "by saint Foules belle" that the Monk talks too much. And he frankly admits that had it not been for the jingling of the bells on his bridle, he should have fallen down in sleep. His setting himself up as a literary judge is, of course, absurd in view of the fact that he, an uneducated man, is presuming to weigh the merits of stories

told by the Knight, the Prioress, and the Monk, all of whom are better educated than he. Turning to another cleric, the Nun's Priest, whom he addresses familiarly as Sir John, Harry Bailly commends the Priest for the same potential ability to beget fine children that he saw in the Monk. Thus the Host's essential vulgar nature manifests itself, despite his respect for the Prioress and his awe of the Knight.

His lack of education and his presumption as a literary dictator are nowhere more obvious than in his pompous commendation of the Physician's tale. In fact he is so wrought up by the tragedy that he begins swearing as if he were mad:

. . . "by nayles and by blood
This was a fals cherl and a fals justise."²⁷

Praying God to bless the Physician's noble body, he impressively uses several medical terms, albeit incorrectly. He declares that the Physician's story has so grieved his heart that he has a cardynacle, meaning a pain in the heart;²⁸ and he prefaces his next statement, a demand for some remedy, with the oath, "by corpus bones," to show off his Latin learning. He would doubtless have been embarrassed had he realized that his syntax was

²⁷"Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale," ll. 288-289.

²⁸Robinson, op. cit., p. 834.

hopelessly wrong and that he should have sworn "by corpus Domini" or "by Christes bones."²⁹

When the Host turns to the Clerk of Oxford for a tale, it is in a condescending manner of the man of the world toward the cloistered scholar. Harry Bailly, gregarious fellow that he is, can not understand anyone as meditative as the Clerk, and he reproves him for his quiet, coy manner, like that, he declares, of a bride. The practical-minded Host, wishing to avoid hearing a tedious tale such as two other educated men, the Monk and Chaucer, have told, cautions the Clerk in advance not to speak in rhetorical terms, nor in a high style, nor to preach or tell a sad story, but to tell a merry tale instead.

After the Clerk finishes his story, the Host is moved again to swear "By Goddes bones" that he had rather Goodelief had heard this story than to have a barrel of ale. Then wistfully he adds,

"As to my purpos, wiste ye my wille;
But thyng that wol nat be, lat it be stille."³⁰

The Host's reference to his marital unhappiness prompts an outburst from the Merchant on the incomparable woes of his married life, which is only two months old. The Host listens to this tale of bitter disillusionment in wedlock and then declares almost triumphantly that though his wife is indeed

²⁹Skeat, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

³⁰"The Clerk's Tale," ll. 1212.

a shrew, she, at least, is not unfaithful. If she is not, fidelity seems to be her only virtue. Harry Bailly says she has many more vices which he would recount to the company, but there is the danger that someone will tell her, for women deal in such talk. This is obviously a direct thrust at the Wife of Bath, for it is inconceivable that the Prioress would repeat gossip. Even if he were not afraid of the Wife's tongue, however, he could not repeat them, for he swears his wit will not suffice to describe them all.

Following this outburst, the Host turns to the Squire in the obsequious manner in which he had previously addressed the Prioress and the Knight and asks him graciously to tell a tale of love if it so please him, for he flatteringly says that he is supremely qualified to do so. Again Harry Bailly exhibits one of the most contemptible bourgeois traits, fawning deference to a social superior. Unlike the Miller, who is courteous to no one and who cares nothing for propriety, the Host is painfully aware of the fact that he is not a gentleman, and he has a vain desire for gentillesse. But he conceals this desire from the Franklin by a pretense of indifference. In reply to the latter's lament that his son does not cultivate the friendship of gentlefolk from whom he might learn gentillesse, the Host retorts brusquely:

"Straw for youre gentillesse!"³¹ Characteristically, the Host is quick to discount that which he would most like to have. It is the old story of the fox and the grapes.

One of the most amusing and realistic incidents of the journey occurs on the last day, as the pilgrims draw near to Bob-up-and-down. The Cook, who is so inebriated that he is almost asleep, falls behind the rest of the pilgrims, leaving his horse to his own devices. The Host, noticing him in the rear, calls the attention of the company to his condition and makes several derogatory suggestions as to its cause. Realizing that he is totally unable to tell a story, the Host takes advantage of his situation and declares that he must or pay the penalty. Luckily for the Cook, the Manciple comes to his aid and agrees to tell a tale in his stead. But in agreeing to tell a tale, the Manciple curses the Cook and insults him by alluding to his foul odor. Roger, intoxicated as he is, becomes enraged at these words, and for lack of speech, begins to shake his head vigorously at the Manciple; whereupon his horse throws him down. There he lies until someone picks him up and, after much effort and shoving back and forth, sets him in the saddle again, and the pilgrims continue on their way. When the Manciple's tale is told, the Host looks around with a self-satisfied air and declares that his plan

³¹"The Squire's Tale," l. 695.

is almost completed, as only one person, he believes, has not told a tale, the Parson. There is about enough time for him to tell a tale before the travelers reach Canterbury, but he must make haste before the sun sets. This is where we leave the pilgrims, with whom we have had a jolly trip along the Canterbury road, interested in their quarrels, agreeing first with one and now with another in the discussion of "maistrie," and being scolded and enlightened in turn by the Host of the Tabard Inn, whom Chaucer has brought to life in a journey that we are convinced for the moment actually occurred.

CHAPTER V

IDENTIFICATION OF FICTIONAL WITH REAL CHARACTERS

So real are Chaucer's characters that some scholars are convinced that the poet was depicting actual contemporaries of his. Working from this conviction, they have set about examining all kinds of fourteenth-century records in an attempt to find the original of such characters as the Prioress, or the Shipman, or the Reeve of Norfolk. Minute examination has produced evidence that six of the Canterbury pilgrims seem to have characteristics very similar to those of actual personages of Chaucer's day. But such evidence is merely speculative, and it is not wise to assume that because Chaucer probably knew William Shuchirch of the King's Chapel at Windsor and because Shuchirch experimented with alchemy, he is necessarily the model for Chaucer's Canon, who also is an alchemist.¹ However, such conjectures are interesting and, in some instances, almost convincing. Certainly Chaucer did not work in a vacuum; he undoubtedly drew from a lifetime of observation of human beings of all ranks of society. But this is not to say that he consciously chose real people to

¹Chute, op. cit., p. 243.

portray each of his characters. At any rate, if he did portray real people in some of the Canterbury pilgrims, it is merely another evidence of his gift to record life as it is without any attempt to judge, condemn, or reform.

The Host of the Tabard Inn is the character whose original might most safely be identified, for there was a Harry Bailly who kept an inn in Southwark in Chaucer's time.² Whether or not he kept the Tabard, however, is not known.³ According to records his wife's name was not Goodelief but Christian; however, this disparity does not disqualify Harry Bailly as a living contemporary of Chaucer and the Host of the Tabard Inn. In the first place, Chaucer might not have wished to identify exactly such an ill-tempered woman as Goodelief. Also, Harry Bailly's wife named Christian might have died by the time Chaucer was writing, and the Host might have taken another wife named Goodelief.⁴ That Harry Bailly, hosteler, was still living in 1387, the year generally conceded to be that in which the pilgrimage occurred, is proved by three legal documents, referring to Harry Bailly, innkeeper, of Southwark.⁵ It is surely not probable that a small town like Southwark had two innkeepers named Harry Bailly at the same time; therefore, it appears that the real Harry Bailly furnished a

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Manly, op. cit., p. 81.

⁵Ibid., p. 82.

model for the Host of the Canterbury Tales.⁶ Certainly he is the most highly individualized character of all--indeed, he is the only one whose full name is given--and it is reasonable to assume that as such he must have been drawn from a living model.

Another of the characters about whom Chaucer gives such particular details that it seems he must have had an actual person in mind is the Reeve. In the first place, he states that the Reeve is from the shire of Norfolk, near a town named Baldeswelle. Also, the poet writes as if he had actually visited the manor on which the Reeve lives and seen his house, for he describes it as being situated upon a green heath and surrounded by shade trees. Futhermore, Chaucer's Reeve has been in charge of the estate on which he lives since his lord was twenty years old. The statements regarding the Reeve's home and his management of an estate seem to be based on personal observation, and the first suggests that Chaucer had some reason for assigning Baldeswelle as the Reeve's origin; else why should he choose an insignificant village far from London?⁷ If basis for Chaucer's choice of Baldeswelle can be established, it seems probable that he had in mind an actual Reeve. In the fourteenth century the hamlet of Baldeswelle was part of the vast Pembroke estates.⁸ In 1368 the second

⁶Ibid., p. 83.

⁷Ibid., p. 86.

⁸Ibid.

earl of Pembroke came of age and the following year went to the Continent in the service of the Prince of Wales and, except for brief visits home, remained abroad until his death in 1375.⁹ These circumstances are in close agreement with the statement that the Reeve had managed the estate since his lord was twenty years old. At the time that the custody of the earl's estates in Kent was granted to Sir William de Beauchamp, Chaucer was serving as one of Beauchamp's mainpernors.¹⁰ That some of the Pembroke estates were mismanaged is known, because Sir William de Beauchamp's management was investigated in 1386-7.¹¹ Whether or not the Norfolk portion, which the Countess of Pembroke administered, was mismanaged is not definitely known, however.¹² But Chaucer may have served as a deputy to investigate the Pembroke lands and hence may have learned about the scoundrelly Norfolk Reeve.¹³ As has been pointed out, the description of the Reeve's residence surely reads as if it were written from personal observation. That Chaucer may have known Baldeswelle through Sir Richard Burley, who married the owner of the manor of Whitewell in Baldeswelle is also possible.¹⁴ Burley lived in Kent, and his brother sat on the bench with Chaucer.¹⁵ Also, one of Chaucer's

⁹Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰Robinson, op. cit., p. 767.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 768.

mainpernors in the great customs of 1382 was Richard Baldewell, who might have been from Norfolk.¹⁶ At any rate, that Chaucer was familiar with this Norfolk village and thus knew the Reeve, upon whom he fashioned the crafty, cowardly, senile Oswald, appears likely.

A third character who seems to have had a living counterpart is the Sergeant of the Law. In Chaucer's day a Sergeant of the Law was a very distinguished barrister, and there were very few lawyers who attained that high position.¹⁷ From extant documents it seems that the number who held that honorable title in the period during which Chaucer wrote the "General Prologue" was eleven.¹⁸ Since, therefore, Chaucer had such a limited number of lawyers upon whom he could have modeled his, the original, if there was one, should be easily determined. Although much of the description could have applied to any Sergeant of Law, Chaucer's Sergeant had distinguished himself in two ways: he had been a justice in assize and a notable purchaser of land. Conversely had Chaucer's Sergeant of the Law attained other notable positions, such as king's sergeant or justice of the king's bench, they would doubtless have been mentioned, so the list of possible models is further reduced.¹⁹ In fact, scholars have eliminated all

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 148-149.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 147-148.

but seven men, of whom only one seems the likely model, Thomas Pynchbek.²⁰ Examining his career in the light of Chaucer's description of the Man of Law, we see that the facts correspond exactly.²¹ Furthermore, there are several probable connections between the careers of the two men. If Chaucer was a student of the Temple, he likely met Pynchbek there, since they were of about the same age.²² Too, the center of the Pynchbek estates was in Lincolnshire, where Chaucer's sister-in-law, Katharine Swynford, lived.²³ Since there is reason to believe that Chaucer's wife spent a great deal of time with her sister in the eighties, Chaucer's attention was probably attracted to the neighboring Pynchbek family, which was rapidly becoming wealthy.²⁴ Moreover, Pynchbek and Chaucer seem to have been political enemies.²⁵ All these reasons might have influenced Chaucer to use Pynchbek as his model, but there is a fourth reason that probably was the deciding factor. Sir William de Beauchamp asked four eminent lawyers, of whom Pynchbek was one, to render a decision on whether he had any claim to the Pembroke estates.²⁶ Only Pynchbek seems to have spoken, and his verdict was that Beauchamp had no right whatever.²⁷

²⁰Ibid., pp. 149-151.

²¹Ibid., p. 151.

²²Ibid., p. 154.

²³Ibid., pp. 154-155.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., p. 155.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 155-156.

²⁷Ibid., p. 156.

Since Chaucer and Beauchamp are known to have been friends, Chaucer would have resented the judgment for his friend's sake and might have drawn the subtly uncomplimentary portrait of the Man of Law through the eyes of his angered friend.²⁸ Then there is the moot point of whether Chaucer intended a pun on Pynchbek when he wrote:

Therto he koude endite, and make a thyng,
Ther koude no wight pynche at his writyng.²⁹

Substantiation of the assertion that Pynchbek was the model for the Man of Law may lie in the fact that he is described as being in the company of the Franklin, and that the probable original of the Franklin was a neighbor of Pynchbek's, Sir John Bussy of Kesteven in Lincolnshire.³⁰ This conclusion was arrived at by a comparison of the description of Chaucer's Franklin with the careers of the Members of Parliament for this period, since he was known to have been a Member of Parliament. On that basis eight candidates were found, of whom Sir John Bussy is the most likely.³¹ He was knight of the shire, a Member of Parliament, and sheriff and sat on commissions of peace several times with Pynchbek himself and other times with Pynchbek's associates.³² Since Bussy's home was only about five miles

²⁸Ibid. ²⁹"General Prologue," ll. 325-326.

³⁰Robinson, op. cit., p. 261.

³¹Manly, op. cit., pp. 160-162.

³²Ibid., pp. 162-163.

from the chief manor of Chaucer's sister-in-law, it is entirely possible that Chaucer visited him there, particularly in view of the fact that the Franklin was famous for his hospitality.³³ In any case, it is notable that Chaucer gives an entirely sympathetic description of him, one of the few characters who is both realistically and sympathetically treated. Personal acquaintance may have been responsible for this complimentary portrait.

The Shipman of the Canterbury pilgrimage has been identified tentatively with two seamen of Dartmouth, from which seaport Chaucer implies that he comes. Since his barge was called the "Maudelayne," it is possible that the Shipman was either George Cowntree or Peter Risshenden, both of whom commanded a vessel of that name from Dartmouth during the late fourteenth century.³⁴ It may be that Chaucer was not acquainted with either of the "Maudelayne" masters, only with the name of the ship, but since everyone had heard of its probable owner, John Hawley, an eminent Dartmouth citizen, it is possible that Chaucer portrayed the Shipman as if he were one of Hawley's piratical captains.³⁵ In 1386 Piers Risselden, undoubtedly the same man as Peter Risshended, commanded a vessel which joined a ship commanded by John Hawley in a daring capture of

³³Ibid., p. 168.

³⁴Ibid., p. 180.

³⁵Ibid., p. 173.

three French vessels in the English Channel. There was a great deal of excitement at court about this breach of peace,³⁶ and thus there is reason to believe that Chaucer introduced the Shipman with this buccaneering in mind.

Last of the characters which can be identified with more degree of certainty than of doubt is the Prioress. It is evident from Chaucer's minute description of her in the "General Prologue" that here is a particular person, one whose name is Madame Eglentyne, whose greatest oath is "by seinte Loy," who is fond of pets, who speaks French with the accent of her convent of Stratford-atte-Bowe, and who has other characteristics peculiarly her own and not those of a generalized type of person.³⁷ The Prioress' convent is the Benedictine nunnery of St. Leonard's at Bromley, Middlesex, adjoining Stratford-Bow.³⁸ In the earliest extant record of Geoffrey Chaucer there is a reference to this nunnery, for Countess Elizabeth of Ulster, in whose household he was a page, visited the convent in 1356.³⁹ In the year 1375 a sister of Queen Philippa, Elizabeth of Hainaut, died at the convent, leaving a will in which she bequeathed to Madame Argentyn a pair of lyntharbs and a psalter.⁴⁰ Obviously it would have

³⁶Ibid., p. 180.

³⁷Ibid., p. 202.

³⁸Robinson, op. cit., p. 756.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 204-205.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 205-208.

been easy to change Argentyn to Eglentyne, and, indeed, the lady of the will like the lady of the "General Prologue" is called "Madame." This similarity, however, it must be admitted, may have been purely coincidental.

Whether Chaucer modeled these particular characters on real people is actually unimportant, but the fact that he has portrayed them so realistically that scholars have identified them with actual people is a tribute to the poet's capacity for creating living, breathing characters. Actually they are certainly not any more realistic than the Wife of Bath or the Pardoner, who could have been modeled on real people also. However, we do not require any evidence to convince us that they are real people. Chaucer, the artist, has created this illusion by references to their dress, their physical appearance, and their mannerisms, and he has created the illusion of a real journey by references to the time of day and places passed and by recording the conversation of the characters as they rode casually on their way to Canterbury town ever directed and managed by the Host of the Tabard Inn.

APPENDIX

The scholars largely responsible for the identification of fictional with real characters, discussed in Chapter V, are Professor John M. Manly of the University of Chicago and his colleague, Professor Edith Rickert. Professor Manly delivered a series of lectures at the Lowell Institute in Boston in 1924, in which he first revealed the results of their research. These lectures were later published in a book entitled Some New Light on Chaucer. He refers to many medieval documents which were examined in search of information--letters; early histories; rolls of Parliament; Subsidy Rolls of Southwark; Life Records; Victoria County History of Yorkshire; Beverley Chapter Book; Calendar of Close Rolls, 1374; Blomefield's History of Norfolk; statutes; Sir John Fortescue's treatise, De Laudibus Legum Angliae; Calendar of Patent Rolls for 1391-96; Feudal Aids for 1428-1431; Richard the Redeless; The Libell of English Policy; wills. Modern definitive works pertaining to the Middle Ages were also consulted. In this manner Professors Manly and Rickert established reasonable proof for their claims. To be sure, Professor Manly admits that these assertions about Chaucer's characters are subject to doubt. Nevertheless, through these scholars' untiring efforts, a great

deal has been added to our knowledge of fourteenth-century life and thereby to the works of Chaucer.

Incidentally, it was Professor Rickert, who perceived that the Host tells us his wife's name Goodelief, when he says:

I hadde lever than a barel ale
That Godelief, my wyf, hadde herd this tale!

All editors had previously written "goode lief" as two words, believing them to be words describing wife.

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