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CHAUCER'S AUDIENCE

By DIETER MEHL

What do we really know about Chaucer's audience? Most people would begin to answer this question by referring to the famous *Troilus*-frontispiece which shows the poet reading to a most distinguished gathering, including King Richard II, his wife and many nobles.¹ This charming picture raises several important questions instead of answering them. It is, for one thing, very hard to tell whether it has any precise documentary value though it has, at least partly, been responsible for the traditional idea of Chaucer as a court poet whose works must be understood to have been addressed to an audience personally familiar with the author, even read by the author himself so that there must have been a uniquely direct personal relationship between author, poem and audience. This idea has been very helpful in preventing too abstract and anachronistic literary notions about Chaucer's poetry and in directing the critics' attention to its personal and oral character. But there are several difficulties here. The famous drawing was probably made years after the death of the poet and most of his noble listeners. It may have its origin in apocryphal tradition, in vague memories of one famous occasion or in the poetry itself, with its vivid implication of a group of listeners. It is probable that even if the *Troilus*-frontispiece had been lost, a modern reader might, from the poems alone, arrive at a similar picture. There are, on the other hand, no clues as to whether the picture applies to *Troilus* only or to other works of the poet, but it seems unlikely that all his poetry and prose, composed over at least two decades and a half, were written for exactly the same group. Leaving aside the dramatic changes at the English court between 1370 and 1400, we think of Chaucer the poet as learning, developing, maturing and one would have to think that his audience too must have developed remarkably to appreciate all his works, from the *Book of the Duchess* to the *Parson's Tale*. Or was there a change of audience? I raise the question only to dismiss it as speculative and probably irrelevant. More precise, though in a different way, is the information we get from the poems themselves, and here, I think, it is particularly interesting to see that Chaucer, in several poems, discusses his own poetic activity, and this not only in general conventional terms, but with very specific reference to his poems. He obviously reckons with an audience that is familiar not only with his person, but also with his previous writings and with his reputation as an author. There had been nothing like this in English literature before Chaucer. Most poetry was anonymous anyway and no poet, so far as I know, refers to his own canon, his name or his public image in the way

Chaucer does. In the famous autobiographical passage in the prologue to the *Man of Law's Tale*, Chaucer's name is mentioned together with a long list of his tales that almost sounds like self-advertisement.² Does the passage make much better sense if we imagine it being read by the poet himself to his courtly audience? It would probably have raised an additional laugh because nowhere in the *Canterbury Tales* is there a suggestion that this Chaucer is the same man as the quiet pilgrim who offers in succession the most trivial and the most learned of all the tales. The passage might also strike Chaucer's audience as funny because it seems to have been particularly his brilliant mastery of rhyming that impressed contemporaries, but this effect does not depend on oral and personal delivery. A more elaborate literary self-portrait is given in the *Prologue* to the *Legend of Good Women*.³ Here again, the audience is expected to have read Chaucer's earlier poetry, including the *Troilus*, and to have thought about its moral significance. It seems likely that this *Prologue* is the poet's response to some actual criticism of his writings, but this can only be a guess and it is more important to see that Chaucer apparently cared so much about the reactions of the audience and the effect of his poetry; he takes every opportunity to enter into a discussion with his audience about the way his writings should be profitably understood. Even the provocative *Retraction* at the end of the *Canterbury Tales* seems to me not so much a sweeping rejection of his literary achievement, as a last earnest appeal to the reader against any possible misreading or undesirable influence of his poetry. Again, it would be tempting to ask whether the poet had any particular reason to fear that his "translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees" had done harm to certain readers, but it is hardly likely that our curiosity on this point will ever be satisfied and even if it were it would have little bearing on our own reading of these stories. The *Retraction* does, however, address an audience familiar with most of Chaucer's writings or at least with their titles, and an audience that can be expected to reflect about the moral function of poetry.

This has already led us a long way from the question of Chaucer's actual audience and perhaps quite naturally so, because the more closely we look at his poetry the more we realise that the historical audience, present on one or two occasions, was not foremost in Chaucer's mind when he wrote his tales, even those that enter into particularly close contact with his audience. It would, of course, be foolish to ignore the basic facts of Chaucer's association with the English court or to treat his works as if they were addressed to an eighteenth-century reading public. It is indeed fortunate that we know more about Chaucer's life than about Shakespeare's and have more documentary evidence of his public career than perhaps that of any other English poet before the seventeenth century.⁴ But the curious fact is how little our historical knowledge illuminates the poetry and vice versa. It is possible to reconstruct a fairly detailed biography of Chaucer, the competent public servant, administrator and trusted delegate of the court and even to make some fairly likely inferences as to his personal character, but the documents are completely silent about Chaucer's literary activity and we have to turn back to the texts themselves for more information about his audience. They, too, contain enough material for a detailed

portrait of Chaucer who emerges as a very definite personality from his poetry, and this is the man we, as readers, are really concerned with, whether we call him author, narrator or *persona*. But look as hard as we may, there seems to be no direct link between the two equally well documented personalities and perhaps this fact can help us to realise how different the actual person of the writer can be from the man implied in his work or from the first-person narrator. Something similar must, I think, be borne in mind when we discuss Chaucer's audience. We may discover which people Chaucer actually read to or who first read his works, but our own understanding and experience of Chaucer is largely directed by the fictional audience suggested by the poems, an audience with which every reader is invited to identify himself. Many recent critics have commented on the way Chaucer's poetry involves the reader by implying a close personal relationship between author and audience, a relationship that does not depend on the personal presence of the author or on oral recital, but is created afresh by every solitary reader who responds imaginatively to the text.

Something like this can be found in many popular Middle English romances. Here again, it is easy to confuse the historical circumstances and the fictitious audience of the poem. The romances are often addressed to a listening group; they give the impression of a social occasion, of romance-reciting as a communal experience, and this may well be a survival from earlier, orally transmitted stages of the text.⁵ But when the narrator of *Havelok* asks for a drink to get the romance going or when the *Gawain*-poet asks his audience to be quiet before he will proceed with the story, the actual situation has become a literary abstraction and part of the fixed text.⁶ Every time we read the poem we can visualize the story-teller and identify ourselves with the listening group. This gives these romances an air of spontaneity, even conviviality, but it can also be a means of directing the audience in its response.

Chaucer frequently uses the kind of direct address he found in the romances, but usually with very calculated effect. The second book of the *House of Fame* opens with a call for attention that almost sounds like Chaucer's parody of popular romances in *Sir Thopas*:

Now herkeneth, every maner man
That Englissh understonde kan,
And listeneth of my drem to lere,
For now at erste shul ye here
So sely an avisyon,
That Isaye, ne Scipion,
Ne kyng Nabugodonosor
Pharoo, Turnus, ne Elcanor,
Ne mette such a drem as this! (509-17)

The contrast between the salesman-like tone of the popular entertainer and the anything but popular subject of the poem is obvious and contributes to the humorous self-portrait of the narrator whose bookish inexperience and naive curiosity emphasize the grave importance of the revelation that is granted to him. The popular

address also suggests that everybody, not just the learned, should be interested in what follows.

In *Troilus*, the audience is addressed in less conventional and more varied ways, but often as a listening group. Thus, describing Troilus's first falling in love, the poet appeals to the common experience of the audience to endorse the validity of a proverb:

For ay the ner the fir, the hotter is, -
This, trowe I, knoweth al this compaignye. (I, 449-50)

More important is his repeated appeal to the "lovers" in his audience. I do not think that this tells us very much about Chaucer's actual public, but it clearly defines the kind of experience he wants to analyse and his concern for the right co-operation of his readers. This is very clear at the outset of the poem where the author asks his audience to make full use of their own experience in listening to Troilus' story:

But ye lovers, that bathen in gladnesse,
If any drop of pyte in yow be,
Remembreth yow on passed hevynesse
That ye han felt, and on the adversite
Of othere folk, and thynketh how that ye
Han felt that Love dorste yow displese,
Or ye han wonne hym with to gret an ese. (I, 22-28)

This is very different from the conventional call for attention because it reveals Chaucer's particular interest in the process of interaction between the text and the recipient.

Even more original is Chaucer's discussion of the historical problems raised by his story and again he enters into a direct dialogue with his audience whose reaction he tries to anticipate:

And forthi if it happe in any wyse,
That here be any love in this place
That herkneth, as the storie wol devise,
How Troilus com to his lady grace,
And thenketh, "so nold I nat love purchase,"
Or wondreth on his speche or his doynge,
I noot; but it is me no wonderynge. (II, 29-35)

This, in spite of its colloquial character, is clearly not a spontaneous argument meant for one particular occasion, but part of a carefully composed poetic text and thus independent of time and place. It puts every reader up to this day in the position of Chaucer's first audience, asking him to judge the poem by his own reflected experience. The author does not assume a position of superior knowledge or didactic omniscience, but he refers the reader to his own judgement and attempts to answer his possible objections.

He also tries to involve the listeners on a more emotional level, particularly at the end of the second book where he interrupts the narrative at a very important point to address the audience:

But now to yow, ye loveres that ben here,
 Was Troilus nought in a kankedort,
 That lay, and myghte whisprynge of hem here,
 And thoughte, "O Lord, right now renneth my sort
 Fully to deye, or han anon comfort!"
 And was the firste tyme he schulde hire preye
 Of love; O myghty God, what shal he seye? (II, 1751-57)

The passage is most remarkable for various reasons, but in our context especially as an example of Chaucer's concern for an emotional rapport between the audience and the fictional characters. It shows, like the beginning of Book II, the poet's awareness of some of the fundamental problems of all fictional literature, in particular the difficulties of establishing a common wave-length between the text and the reader on as many levels as possible, overcoming differences in individual experience, manners, language and temperament and thus removing any barriers between the audience and the fictional characters.

In this way the poem creates its own audience, an audience that is by its very nature fictional and timeless, but has an important function in directing and provoking our response. It suggests a range of expectations and qualities of mind which it partly satisfies, partly disappoints, and it invites every reader to ask himself how far he is qualified and prepared to join this imaginary audience.

The fiction of a close and immediate contact between author and audience is first of all an attempt to create the illusion of spontaneous story-telling, as if we were the first listeners and the story told for the first time. In *Troilus*, this is particularly important for our reaction to the characters because Chaucer involves us very closely in the process of adapting and bringing to life an account of long-gone-by and strangely disturbing events, an account that is far from complete and leaves much room for doubt and inference. Chaucer, at some important points, emphasizes the blanks in his source, he even invents such blanks where his source is more explicit.⁷ All this makes the reader aware of the author's difficulties and gives him a share in the development of the story. Although *Troilus and Criseyde* is a highly finished literary product, perhaps the most finished of all Chaucer's works, it gives the illusion of being created while we are following it. It is interesting to see, as I have tried to show elsewhere,⁸ how similar Chaucer's *Troilus* is, in this respect, to some eighteenth-century novelists, especially Fielding and Sterne. This is not a question of literary influence, but it shows that great story-tellers who reflect about the relationship between narrator, published text and audience, encounter similar problems and make use of similar devices. The eighteenth-century novelist, of course, lived in the age of the book, not the manuscript, but his stories were often read aloud in groups and were clearly meant to provoke discussion, not just mute acceptance. This is why Sterne's description of his narrative method fits Chaucer's poetry so well:

Writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation:

As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all; - so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. (*Tristram Shandy*, II, 11)⁹

To leave the reader "something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself", is, of course, the function of all good poetry, but Chaucer, like Sterne, does more than most other poets to make the reader aware of his responsibility and provoke him into active participation. In *Troilus*, this is a most important aspect of the characterization and moral evaluation.

The readers or listeners are first addressed as lovers and the poet seems to take for granted their expectations, based on the conventions of courtly love. But as the story proceeds, different attitudes towards Troilus' experience are very strongly voiced, chiefly by Pandarus' detached and pragmatic view of the lovers, later on by Troilus' own doubts and questionings, until the ending explicitly points out the limited range of earthly love, and now it is no longer the lovers to whose experience the poet appeals, but the "yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she, In which that love upgroweth with your age". The concept of love and of the lovers has deepened and those lovers who from the author's address at the beginning expected only a "great poem in praise of love", as C.S. Lewis called the book,¹⁰ have to reconsider their assumptions. The poet tries to educate the audience by leading it away from an easy acceptance of a moving story or a perfect hero and by giving it credit, at the end of the poem, for greater insight and wisdom than at the beginning where only sympathy for the sorrows of Troilus seemed to be asked for. Between these two points there are numerous occasions where the poet asks for the reader's imagination and judgement to supply what the text leaves open and where we feel that Chaucer, like Sterne, wants to "halve this matter amicably". Many discussions of the poem have, I believe, suffered from a too simple concentration on the narrator, the simple-minded, inexperienced, luckless lover who does not really understand what he is telling, whereas it is really the dialogue with the audience that produces the poem's complex effect.

In the *Canterbury Tales*, it is a more complicated process because story-telling and listening are made the subject of the whole collection and any comparison with other story-cycles that may have served as Chaucer's models shows that Chaucer has added to this part of the frame in an unprecedented way. We, as Chaucer's audience, are presented with another audience, an audience as mixed as the *Canterbury Tales* themselves and clearly intended as a kind of model reaction, something to agree or disagree with and to set off our own judgement. However Chaucer meant to finish the work, if at all, and however fragmentary the collection as it now stands may be, the fascination and the problems of story-telling are clearly one of the unifying themes, far more important, I believe, than the "roadside drama" enjoyed by some scholars or the spiritual debate

discovered by others.¹¹ The importance of this theme is very little affected by all the complications of the transmission and the difficulties of establishing the final order. The few bits of "plot" that the frame contains, the passing through known places, the intrusion of the Canon and his Yeoman or the squabbles between individual pilgrims, all serve the creation of narrative situations and influence our reaction to the various tales. We are not really interested in the personal fate of the pilgrims, but only in their qualifications as story-tellers. I agree with those scholars who believe that the frame is strictly subordinate to the tales. The tale is the thing, not the narrator, but the tale as something that involves the audience and calls for mixed responses. The delightful as well as illuminating continuation of the frame in the prologue to the *Tale of Beryn*, with the comic adventures of the pilgrims in Canterbury cathedral and in their hostel, demonstrates precisely what Chaucer did not do.¹² He did not invent any dramatic action for his pilgrims or any complicated personal relationships that could distract from their function as story-tellers or audience. The continuations do prove, of course, that Chaucer succeeded so well in giving individuality to his narrators that even for his contemporaries they assumed a life of their own outside the strictly functional frame of the *Canterbury Tales*. This is partly because Chaucer's pilgrims are not just lively story-tellers, but, at least some of them, listeners with very definite tastes and very articulate interests. The textual problems of the frame make it clear that it was always more this function of the pilgrims than their individual personality that was foremost in the poet's mind. The manuscripts vary a good deal in their ascription of certain tales and speeches, as if the identity of the speakers did not matter as much as the situation created by their presence.

To take a fairly obvious, but typical example: there is a passage in the *Canterbury Tales*, put in brackets in Robinson's edition because it was probably cancelled by Chaucer, but, the editor says, "there can be no doubt of its genuineness or of its interest to the reader of the *Canterbury Tales*".¹³ It is sometimes called *The Man of Law's Epilogue*, sometimes *The Shipman's Prologue*, but neither title has very much textual authority. I quote the whole passage:

Owre Hoost upon his stiropes stood anon,
 And seyde, "Goode men, herkeneth everych on!
 This was a thrifty tale for the nones!
 Sir Parissehe Prest," quod he, "for Goddes bones,
 Telle us a tale, as was thi forward yore.
 I se wel that ye lerned men in lore
 Can moche good, by Goddes dignitee!"
 The Parson hem answerde, "*Benedicite!*
 What eyleth the man, so synfully to swere?"
 Oure Host answerde, "O Jankin, be ye there?
 I smell a Lollere in the wynd," quod he.
 "Now! goode men," quod oure Hoste, "herkeneth me;
 Abydeth, for Goddes digne passioun,
 For we schal han a predicacioun;
 This Lollere heer wil prechen us somewhat."

"Nay, by my fader soule, that schal he nat!"
 Seyde the Shipman; "heer schal he nat preche;
 He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche.
 We leven alle in the grete God," quod he;
 "He wolde sowen som difficulte,
 Or springen cokkel in our clene corn.
 And therefore, Hoost, I warne thee biforn,
 My joly body schal a tale telle,
 And I schal clynken you so mery a belle,
 That I schal waken al this compaignie.
 But it schal not been of philosophie,
 Ne phislyas, ne termes queinte of lawe.
 Ther is but litel Latyn in my mawe!" (II, 1163-90)

This seems a particularly vivid bit of "roadside drama" and an example of realistic character portrayal. But the point is that the text neither makes it clear which tale has provoked this little drama or who is provoked by it to tell the next tale. There is good reason why it should follow the *Man of Law's Tale*, but whether the Squire, the Summoner or the Shipman is the speaker it is impossible to say although there have been elaborate theories about the genesis of the frame and the sequence of the tales at this point.¹⁴ It is clear that, for Chaucer's purposes, the passage would have fitted more than one character and more than one tale. What mattered to him was its function as a lively link between very different tales and as an illustration of very contrasting attitudes towards edifying stories. This function could be fulfilled regardless of the precise place of the passage within the whole collection, but there obviously came a time when Chaucer felt that this function had been taken over adequately by other links and so he probably discarded it. As it stands, without any definite context, it remains a lively sketch of the audience of the *Canterbury Tales*. The Host is genuinely impressed by the story they have just heard, whatever it may have been, although his tone suggests that the moral tale has not really affected him very profoundly and that his delight is of a rather superficial nature. The Parson's intervention gives rise to a brief clash that introduces an atmosphere of religious controversy and provides a colourful background for the following story. More important than the actual pilgrimage, hinted at by the Host's reference to the contract and his stirrups, is the illusion of a very mixed community, completely divided in moral and religious outlook, but united by their present function as an audience. The interruption of some low character serves to upset the proposed order of the tales: instead of the sermon asked for by the Host, we are going to hear a jolly story that makes no claims to learning or moral edification and appeals to a taste very different from that satisfied by the "thrifty tale". The theological conflict is reduced to the trite formula "We leven alle in the grete God". On this level everybody can settle down and listen to the next tale.

The passage seems to me particularly interesting because it shows Chaucer experimenting with the narrative situation and it illustrates his brilliant power to create the atmosphere of a listening group, of differing attitudes to the same text and of the spontaneity of story-telling. There are several similar passages in the *Canterbury Tales*, some brief, some more extended, and there are

the tales themselves with their frequent addresses to the audience. All this explains perhaps why the framework of the *Canterbury Tales* leaves in the minds of many readers and critics an impression as deep and vivid as the tales themselves although it makes up less than a fifth of the whole collection. We can hardly think of the tales without thinking of the audience and this should bring home the fact that a tale does not really exist without the audience, that it is part of a unique act of communication, not a self-contained entity.

The most striking fact about the audience of the *Canterbury Tales* is, of course, its extremely mixed character. It distinguishes Chaucer's collection from all previous story-cycles and it raises the intriguing question of the relation between the fictional and the actual audience. Derek Brewer has drawn attention to the fact that Chaucer in his own person never addresses his audience as "lordinges", as the *Canterbury* pilgrims frequently do,¹⁵ and he concludes that the fictional audience is of a lower degree than the actual audience. This is very likely anyway because we can hardly imagine Chaucer addressing his work to millers, reeves and summoners whereas he may well have had among his listeners men of higher aristocratic rank than any represented by the pilgrims. Even for the first audience of the *Canterbury Tales* there was thus a clear and provocative difference between their own tastes and expectations and those of the fictional audience. Chaucer evidently did not try to make the two identical or to gloss over the gap, but provides teasing opportunities for every listener to judge his own reaction by comparing it with that of one or two of the *Canterbury* pilgrims.

The Host is, of course, the most memorable of all the listeners. He does not even tell a story himself, but he has very definite views about the tales of others and even about the suitability of the tale to the teller. He makes sure that those pilgrims who are unlikely to have anything edifying to say stick to their own level. He does not object to a homily from the Parson, indeed he asks for it, but when the Reeve embarks on his trite and self-pitying sermonizing, the Host protests:

What amounteth al this wit?
 What shul we speke alday of hooly writ?
 The devel made a reve for to preche,
 Or of a souter a shipman or a leche. (I, 3901-4)

This is an interesting reminder of the correspondence of tale and teller, but also of the fact that each tale is submitted to a critical audience. There are tales the tellers just do not get away with: two of the narrators are stopped in the middle of their tales and most audiences through the ages will probably have agreed with the Host and the Knight and felt grateful to them for sparing us the remainder of *Sir Thopas* and the *Monk's Tale*.¹⁶ It is a most effective specimen of practical criticism and we as the audience are clearly invited to react in similar ways; though we cannot interrupt we can, as the author explicitly advises us to do, "turn over the leef and chese another tale" - this advice, by the way, shows again that Chaucer does not only address his actual audience, but has the anonymous reader in mind as well.

To return to the Host; he is, of course, by no means our standard of literary good taste or intelligent listening. His commonsense is refreshing and often very appropriate, but he is obviously unable to appreciate the more demanding moral and literary merits of some of the tales. Twice he applies a homiletic tale to his own domestic situation in a way that makes nonsense of the story. First, after the Clerk's tale of the patient Griseldis, the Host, in a stanza that Chaucer possibly rejected, voices his regret that his wife has not heard the tale.¹⁷ Now, however we read the *Clerk's Tale*, it is certainly not meant as a sermon against shrewish wives and the Host's crude misunderstanding even points to the real moral significance of the story. No intelligent reader will want to identify himself with the Host here. His words rather serve as a warning against a superficial reading of the tale.

The same kind of misapplication is repeated more elaborately after Chaucer's own prosaic *Tale of Melibee*, told at the Host's particular request. Again the Host says, almost in the same words, that his wife should have heard the tale and he proceeds to give a lively if conventional picture of the wife who wears the breeches at home and makes him live in mortal fear of her.¹⁸ The repetition suggests that Chaucer planned the reaction carefully and that this second one was perhaps an improvement on the first which he then discarded. Critics have seen the passage as a kind of comic relief, welcome after the heavy moralizing of the tale,¹⁹ perhaps like the *Miller's Tale* after the *Knight's Tale*. But more important is surely the pointed contrast between the Host's reaction to the tale and the reaction expected of the more discriminating reader. The didactic dialogue between Melibee and his wife Prudence is even less suitable as a tract against ungovernable wives than the *Clerk's Tale* and although the tale is a rather ponderous affair it would be completely mistaken to see it as a comic performance. It is perhaps the most bookish of all the tales, just as *Sir Thopas* is the most oral one, but the Host's at least partial approval also suggests that its didactic value is genuine and that it has something to offer even to the less instructed reader. He certainly does not interrupt the tale as he does Chaucer's first effort and his spontaneous reaction does draw attention to its moral purpose though his tone is so inappropriate. He has vaguely understood that to put Dame Prudence's rules of ideal Christian behaviour into practice would have radical consequences indeed for his domestic life and he thus, in a crude form, raises one of Chaucer's persistent questions, the relation between learned theory and cold day-light reality. It would therefore be too simple to reject the Host's reaction out of hand. Every reader has to make his own choice, but the Host provides a provocative standard and makes us see where the problem lies.

In the case of *Sir Thopas* we hardly need the Host to tell us that it is a ridiculously inept performance, though his insistence on the "drasty rymyng" does not describe our own objections, but is probably a piece of pointed self-mockery, like the reference to Chaucer's bad rhymes in the Prologue to the *Man of Law's Tale*, mentioned earlier, and at the same time directs the attention of the audience to the poet's consummate rhyming skill.

More intriguing is the second interruption because, in some versions at least, it is the Host who stops the Monk in the middle of his series of tragedies and prevents him from going on, though Chaucer seems to have changed his mind here and to have decided to let the Knight make the first attack on this dreary series of lamentable tales.²⁰ Again, we have one of those links that existed in different versions and was assigned to more than one speaker in turns. As it now stands it consists of two different kinds of audience reaction and criticism.

The Knight who, for whatever reason, in the final version has taken over from the Host, does not object to the tragedies because of their literary qualities, but because of the relentless piling up of misery. He has no belief in the cathartic values of tragedy and prefers to hear of people whom Fortune's wheel only carries up to let them stay there, a rather pathetic reaction to the idea of tragedy and perhaps one of the first explicit popular demands for a happy ending in the history of fiction, even at the expense of truth to life. The argument is simply that it is more pleasant to hear of fortunate people than of their sudden downfall, and it is just possible that Chaucer who, despite *Troilus*, is not one of our great tragic poets, here expresses some of his own doubts. The Knight's intervention, at any rate, again raises the fundamental problem of the entertaining and the educational value of literature. He is obviously affected by listening to so many tragedies, but he does not like feeling depressed.²¹

The Host who then takes up the protest, agrees with him about the uselessness of sad tales, but he carries the criticism even further. He does not so much criticize the tragedies as such, but makes fun of the Monk's image of Fortune covering her face with a cloud and even admits that he was just bored with the tales and, but for the jingling of the Monk's bridle-bells, would have fallen off his horse with sleep. His objection to the tales is a good deal coarser than the Knight's, as is his view of the relation between literature and audience: all the poet's labour is in vain if the audience falls asleep and thus cannot take any notice. The whole passage has a very complicated textual history, mainly connected with the inconsistent portrait of the Monk and the mysterious sudden appearance of the Nun's Priest who was obviously an afterthought.²² The only thing that was clear from the beginning is that one tale should be interrupted and another one introduced, but the whole group of tales to which this link belongs must have gone through several stages and the long criticism of the tragedies was an enlargement of the Host's much briefer comments in the first version.

Again I would suggest that the details of characterization and the ascription of tales and speeches to individual pilgrims were less vital for Chaucer than the general idea of an audience and its lively participation in the story-telling. Though the first function of the links was to provide transitions from one story to the next the opportunities they suggested for one-sided or at least questionable commentaries on the tales was from the first an important part of Chaucer's plan that remained constant through all the changes in the arrangement of the tales.

A last example of the Host's qualities as a literary critic and a provocative member of the audience is his reaction to the *Physician's Tale*.²³ It is a didactic tale of modest literary distinction and some critics have felt that it just represents Chaucer at his most conventional. I prefer to think, however, that Chaucer had an idea of the tale's weaknesses and he even exaggerated them a little to make it an example of the more simple-minded didactic tale addressed to naive and easily impressed minds. It goes straight to Harry Bailly's heart. No other tale makes such a spontaneous impression on him and meets his whole-hearted approval like this. It is the kind of effect every popular story-teller must dream of:

Oure Hooste gan to swere as he were wood;
 "Harrow!" quod he, "by nayles and by blood!
 This was a fals cherl and a fals justise.
 As shameful deeth as herte may devyse
 Come to thise juges and hire advocatz!
 Algate this sely mayde is slayn, allas!
 Allas, to deere boughte she beautee! (VI, 287-93)

Spontaneous indignation for the villain and tears for the victim; and this leads him to some rather trite observations about the unstableness of Fortune's gifts, but after he has got over the first shock he passes it off as a joke and praises the Physician in exaggerated terms, only to return to the deep impression the tale has made on him. The tragic effect has to be counteracted by some of the Physician's drugs, a drink of beer or a jolly tale:

But wel I woot thou doost myn herte to erme,
 That I almoost have caught a cardynacle.
 By corpus bones! but I have triacle,
 Or elles a draughte of moyste and corny ale,
 Or but I heere anon a myrie tale,
 Myn herte is lost for pitee of this mayde. (VI, 312-17)

Aristotle's theory of the almost physical impact of tragedy is taken literally here by the Host's fear of a heart-attack, but it is surely significant that it is the Physician's not very sophisticated story that shakes the Host so profoundly, and not one of the more ambitious and subtle tales. I find it difficult to believe that we are meant to react like the Host; his reaction is provocative and limited enough to make us wonder what should be the proper effect of such a story or whether the tale really merits the compliment of a near heart-attack. Is tearful pity the right attitude? It is interesting to note which areas of audience-reaction Chaucer investigates here. He seems less interested than, for instance, Boccaccio in discussing the more specific problems raised by the stories themselves; the "marriage-debate" is a scholarly fiction because the pilgrims never enter into a debate on the question of marriage; they are far more concerned with the literary and the affective aspects of the tales.²⁴ The themes that recur in many of the stories hardly ever give rise to more than passing comments by one or the other of the pilgrims. Even the Merchant's complaint about his domestic troubles is more important as a link between the *Clerk's Tale* and the *Merchant's Tale*

than as a contribution to a debate.²⁵ The only answer he gets is the Host's remark that his experience must qualify him as a storyteller and the Host's reaction to the *Merchant's Tale* shows that he has got what he hoped for. It is not the contents of the story, but the literary and emotional experience it provides that is the main object of Chaucer's scrutiny.

This also applies to another controversial passage, the words of the Franklin to the Squire after the fragment of the *Squire's Tale*.²⁶ Most modern critics agree in stressing the imperfections of the tale,²⁷ a firework display of romance-motifs that obviously fascinated earlier generations and should not be read as simple parody of courtly romances, but rather as the performance of a very young man who has already acquired all the outward trappings of the chivalric style, but only as fascinating decoration, not as something that is rooted in real experience. His immature competence is, however, genuinely admired by the Franklin who, for quite different reasons, seems to be unable to distinguish between courtly style and its real substance.

The state of the text makes it impossible to say whether the Franklin deliberately interrupts the Squire. There is no indication whatever that he has had enough and tactfully wants to bring the Squire's rhetoric to a halt, as has been suggested.²⁸ It is more likely, I believe, that he cannot any longer suppress his admiration and that perhaps he is not really interested in the plot but only in the Squire's demonstration of *gentillesse*. His words imply no criticism of the tale. The criticism lies in the person of the speaker who is so naively impressed by this show of aristocratic polish that he does not wait for the Host to give his verdict, but straightaway tells him that he has acquitted himself very creditably. It seems clear that Chaucer did not think it necessary to finish the story. It has served its purpose as a demonstration of a particular style and rather than inventing a personal drama between those two pilgrims we should again be teased into an assessment of our own, regardless of whether we agree with the Franklin or not. He has at least put his finger on where the story's achievement and limitations lie, on its particular class character, its almost elitist pre-occupation with a fictional world and an embellished rhetoric. It is significant that it appeals most strongly to someone outside the chivalric class, whose aspirations are revealed in the unqualified praise of the juvenile performance. It is a particularly good example of the way Chaucer is conscious of his audience and keeps us conscious of our own responsibility as an audience. He does not tell us what to think, but shows us different people reacting in different ways, as after the *Miller's Tale*:

Diverse folk diversely they seyde, (I, 3857)

He goes on, however, to say:

But for the moore part they loughe and pleyde. (I, 3858)

Those two lines are an excellent illustration of Chaucer's method. The reader is time and again reminded of his own freedom to judge

and interpret, but there is some gentle and often indirect guidance. Most pilgrims - and they were a very mixed crowd - enjoyed the *Miller's Tale*:

Ne at this tale I saugh no man hym greve,
But it were oonly Osewold the Reve. (I, 3859-60)

We should know best whether we want to join the Reeve in taking offence or enjoy the tale like the majority. And the same applies to nearly all the tales, indeed to all of Chaucer's poetry. He makes his audience the partner in a living and unpredictable dialogue in which Chaucer's text is but one half; the other half is made up by the reader's intelligent and imaginative response, but it is Chaucer's text that can provoke the intelligence and inspire the imagination in a way only the greatest literature is able to.

NOTES

This lecture was given at the Universities of York, Leeds and Sheffield. I am most grateful to my colleagues there for their generous hospitality and for the opportunity of discussing my ideas with them, in particular to Elizabeth Salter, Norman Blake, Arthur Cawley and Derek Pearsall.

In the first part of the lecture I have used some of the material from my article "The Audience of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*", *Chaucer and Middle English Studies. In Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. B. Rowland (London, 1974), 173-89. There is a more detailed and fully documented discussion of the subject in my *Geoffrey Chaucer. Eine Einführung in seine erzählenden Dichtungen* (Berlin, 1973).

- 1 On the significance of this famous picture see Derek Pearsall, "The *Troilus* Frontispiece and Chaucer's Audience", *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 7 (1977), 68-74. The article also includes a reproduction of the picture.
- 2 See *The Canterbury Tales*, II, ll.47-89. All references to Chaucer's text and all quotations are based on the edition of F.N. Robinson, 2nd edition (Oxford, 1957).
- 3 See *The Legend of Good Women*, F, ll.308-474 (G, ll.234-464).
- 4 See the invaluable collection *Chaucer Life-Records*, ed. M.M. Crow and C. Olson (Oxford, 1966).
- 5 On the oral character of the romances see my *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London, 1969), pp.7-13.
- 6 *The Lay of Havelok the Dane*, ed. W.W. Skeat, 2nd ed. revised by K. Sisam (Oxford, 1915), ll. 13-20; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2nd ed. revised by N. Davis (Oxford, 1967), ll.1994-97.
- 7 The most famous instance is Chaucer's refusal to tell us how long it took Criseyde to forsake Troilus for Diomedes (*Troilus and Criseyde*, V, ll.1086-92).
- 8 See my article "The Audience of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*" (referred to in the headnote above).
- 9 *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne, ed. Ian Watt, Riverside Editions (Boston, 1965).
- 10 *The Allegory of Love* (London, 1936), p.197.
- 11 See the thorough and imaginative discussion of the whole problem of the work's unity by Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976).
- 12 *The Tale of Beryn*, ed. F.J. Furnivall and W.G. Stone, *EETS*, ES 105 (1909).
- 13 See Robinson's edition, p.697.

- 14 See the variants given in Robinson's edition, p.891, and his comments, p.696-7.
- 15 See his *Chaucer*, 3rd edition (London, 1973), p.212.
- 16 *The Canterbury Tales*, VII, ll.919-66, and VII, ll.2767-2820.
- 17 See *The Canterbury Tales*, IV, ll.1212 a-g.
- 18 VII, ll.1889-1923.
- 19 E.g. Brewer, *Chaucer*, p.131.
- 20 See the textual notes in Robinson's edition, p.896.
- 21 The Knight's own tale, of course, borders on tragedy, but it is a very different kind of tragedy from the unsophisticated stories of the Monk, and the conclusion of the story puts the emphasis firmly on the final harmony of the outcome.
- 22 There is a comprehensive and original discussion of the whole complex issue in Heiner Gillmeister's *Discrecioun. Chaucer und die Via Regia* (Bonn, 1972), pp.160-94.
- 23 *The Canterbury Tales*, VII, ll.287-328.
- 24 This is not the place to join the debate about the existence of a "marriage group", started by G.L. Kittredge's seminal article "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage", *MP*, 9 (1912), 435-67. See the recent discussion in Howard's *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, pp.247-71.
- 25 IV, ll.1213-44.
- 26 V, ll.673-694.
- 27 See, for instance, Robert Haller, "Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* and the Uses of Rhetoric", *MP*, 62 (1964/65), 285-95, and the more cautious discussion by Derek Pearsall, "The Squire as Story-Teller", *UTQ*, 34 (1964/65), 82-92.
- 28 See Pearsall's article and A.C. Spearing's edition of *The Franklin's Prologue and Tale* (Cambridge, 1971), pp.5-8.