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Discovering the Truth of Passion

Geoffrey Chaucer's works span a wide range of subjects, including explorations of love, social injustice amongst classes, and the conflict between fate and free will. His scope changed with each work that he created, and he often juggled multiple, complex ideas meant to challenge and teach his audience. Despite his eclecticism throughout these diverse works, there is a common unifying theme that Chaucer revisits time and again: the concept of storytelling. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Book of the Duchess*, and *The Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer makes use of frame narratives as a means to present his work, often using the narrator to explicitly comment upon issues of storytelling and story consumption. While the majority of Chaucer's time spent on developing these ideas is centered on the narrative frame, he also introduces these elements, to a marginal extent, into the main plots of his works. By examining Chaucer's allusions to storytelling across multiple works, we are able to piece together a glimpse of his thoughts and opinions about storytelling in general, but also his views concerning the relationships between the storyteller, the story, and the audience that consumes it.

In all four of the works being examined, Chaucer uses the form of a frame narrative to structure his stories, so he creates unnamed narrators who only serve to introduce the concept that this figure (the narrator) is telling the reader a story, and within these frames they introduce the theme or purpose of telling their story. This choice in itself primes the reader to think of the actual act of storytelling; Chaucer effectively brings the idea of storytelling to his audience's

mind by presenting his narrators as outside of the main plot at the point when they are telling their stories to the reader, who is also outside of the main plot—this creates an interesting mirroring effect where the narrator and the reader both occupy a similar perceptual space and role as observer and consumer of the story. Aside from their positions as observers or translators, these narrators always have dialogue specifically directed towards the reader. An example of this is found in the opening lines of *Troilus and Criseyde*: “Before we part my purpose is to tell / Of Troilus, son of the King of Troy,” (page 3). These lines create a direct link between Chaucer’s narrator and the reader. This interaction, perhaps above all else, shows Chaucer’s intent to bring the very subject of storytelling to the forefront.

The narrators of these frames all share a couple of key characteristics: they are unnamed and either self-deprecating or they attempt to displace any sense of their own authority or accountability for the content of their story. By leaving his narrators nameless, Chaucer defines their identities not as individuals, but specifically as narrators; their role as storyteller is their only identity. The narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* is nothing more than a translator:

And so I ask all lovers to excuse
My story, not of my own feeling sung,
But taken from Latin into my own tongue.

Therefore I wish for neither thanks nor blame (45).

This is significant because the narrator makes it very explicit that he is distanced from any accountability for the story itself. The whole story, in fact, comes from a completely different source than our narrator, who is simply recording the story in English. He is also self-deprecating in his lack of confidence in his own writing abilities and his admittance to a lack of knowledge in matters of love: “And though I speak of love unfeelingly / That’s nothing new; no wonder I am

duller / Than he; a blind man is no judge of colour” (*Troilus*, page 45). He is indeed writing about a subject that he knows nothing about, yet for some reason this character finds it important to tell the story anyway. This self-deprecation and avoidance of accountability becomes interesting when we consider why such a narrator would tell the reader this story in the first place.

The concept of authorial intent is one of Chaucer’s main themes when dealing with storytelling; authorial intent is simply the reason(s) that drive a storyteller to tell a story. This is a concept that feels very intuitive when considering Chaucer’s role as an author. Of course he is concerned with his own authorial intent. As any well respected author would, we assume that Chaucer has many reasons for telling the stories that he does and for the ways in which he tells them. He reflects these ideas in his narrators who, because of their lack of authority, accountability, and their general self-deprecation, often struggle with their roles as storytellers; yet, given all of their flaws as narrators, they seem to possess a sense of purpose in telling their stories. As lost or unskilled as they may be, they all have some kind of understanding that the story that they narrate has a purpose. The narrator in *The Book of the Duchess* feels inspired by his dream, and with that inspiration he transforms his dream into a poem for others to experience and consume:

Thought I, “This is so queynt a sweven
That I wol, by processe of tyme,
Fonde to putte this sweven in ryme
As I can best, and that anoon.” (lines 1330-1333)

The narrator in *Troilus and Criseyde* tells his story specifically for lovers: “But if this bring delight or ease distress / For any lover that may read this story, / Mine be the labour and be

love's the glory!" (page 3). Not only is his purpose, at least in the beginning of the poem, to entertain and bring comfort to sorrowful lovers, but to glorify love. This purpose becomes complicated as the poem progresses however. To end *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer's narrator makes a dedication, not to love, but to religion:

Thou One and Two and Three and Never-ending,
 That reignest ever in Three and Two and One,
 Incomprehensible, all-comprehending,
 From visible foes, and the invisible one,
 Defend us all! (page 309)

This is quite unexpected considering that the narrator has emphasized the glory of love throughout the majority of the work. It is evidence that, in "reality", the narrator's true intent in telling the story is to warn against the dangers of love. He asks for protection not only from our visible foes, which for *Troilus* would be the invading Greek army, but also from our invisible foes, which would be Criseyde, who betrays *Troilus*. This conflict between the glorification of love and comfort for lovers in the former half of the poem and the warning against the treachery that is possible in love throughout the latter shows a careful rhetorical strategy on the part of Chaucer's narrator, which establishes another of Chaucer's main themes: the interaction between authorial intent and the audience.

Onno Oerlemans, in his article "The Seriousness of the Nun's Priest's Tale," explores the relationships between the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* as they are all "simultaneously tellers and audience" (page 321). Through such a relationship, we are able to see the importance of the interaction between authorial intent and the "constraining conditions at the moment of writing [or storytelling]" (321). So, there is an important balance between the narrator's or

writer's purpose in telling a story and what they must achieve for their audience; for Chaucer himself, Oerlemans argues that this is a balance between "the ability of his texts both to delight and to instruct" (321).

Keeping this balance in mind, the discrepancy between the narrator's beginning and ending focus in *Troilus and Criseyde* makes sense as a rhetorical strategy because he must first make the poem appealing to his target audience: lovers. His original purpose is to "help" lovers by "sing[ing] their pain," yet he also speaks of "Serving the servants of the god of love" and of love's "glory" (page 3). This creates in the reader an understanding that the tale is specifically for sorrowing lovers, yet it will provide comfort through telling a sorrowful tale of love, while still placing love high upon a pedestal. This is the main constraining condition imposed upon the narrator by his target audience. He must appeal to them in order for them to experience the poem because otherwise his intent will not matter if there is no audience willing to listen, which Chaucer deals with explicitly in the prologue to the Nun's Priest's Tale: "When there's a man who has no audience, / It doesn't help that his tale has substance" (lines 2801-2802). So by the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the reader should expect a final note of comfort for lovers, but all they receive is a prayer asking for protection. It is then possible that the intent of the narrator is to warn his audience of the sorrows that love can cause without really providing much comfort or glorifying love. Through this narrator, Chaucer explores the balance between intent and the way in which he appeals and manages his audience in order to fulfill his purpose of teaching a lesson about love.

The balance between intent and audience constraint is also dealt with heavily in the general prologue to *The Canterbury tales*:

For this you all know just as well as I do:

Whoever tells a tale after a man,
 He must repeat, as closely as he can,
 Every last word, if that is his duty,
 Even if he has to speak quite rudely,
 Or otherwise, he makes his tale untrue,
 Or makes things up, or finds words that are new. (lines 730-736)

The narrator's intent is expressed as telling an account of his experience on his pilgrimage to Canterbury, and he deals with his audience's constraint of propriety. His intent is to tell his tale as true to life as possible in order to create a portrait of life and society, so he must by necessity portray the other pilgrims as they truly were. To embellish or alter the other characters in a way to make them more socially acceptable would ruin his authorial intent. So, to address this issue, the narrator explicitly confronts the issue with his audience in the form of a disclaimer. This issue of accountability and authority in storytelling speaks to the way in which Chaucer portrays the usage of storytelling, specifically writing and reading.

Putting aside the frames of Chaucer's works, many of his characters make references to famous authors. This is by far the most common form of reference to both reading and writing in these works. An example of this usage can be seen in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" where Chauntecleer argues against Pertelote's use of Cato as a source to back up her own argument:

Though he bade us that no dreams should we dread,
 By God, in many old books, men have read
 From many men of more authority
 Than Cato, may I thrive prosperously,
 Who say the reverse of his evidence (lines 2973-2977)

This portrays the usage of writing and reading as a source of authority. By being well read, Chaucer's characters are able to invoke great minds in order to support their own ideas and arguments. Because this is the most common portrayal of writing within the main plots of these works, it shows us that Chaucer "eulogises books as bearers of traditional knowledge, which they extend beyond the lifespan of any individual witness" (Borch, page132). This shapes writing as a means of teaching and imparting knowledge above all and indicates the importance that Chaucer placed on the ability of writing and storytelling; there is certainly an underlying theme throughout Chaucer's works that writing is a better form than oral storytelling simply because it allows a story to last and be easily transmitted to a wider audience without alteration.

While this portrayal focuses on the historical aspect of writing as a means of preserving great works and ideas, this in no way suggests that Chaucer is only concerned with this type of writing. In fact, it is only one aspect of this historical preservation that seems to matter when we take into account Chaucer's portrayals of writing across all four of these works: the true significance of storytelling is that it deeply affects both the teller and the consumer. Through these works, Chaucer develops an argument not only for the importance of storytelling as a means of affecting the teller and consumers, but he also argues for the value of all types of storytellers. If we only view Chaucer as interested in historical works preserved for the sake of citing authoritative sources, we would ignore not only his self-deprecating narrators who make up the frames of his works, but also each of the pilgrims within *The Canterbury Tales*. Particularly in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's use of narrators specifically from lower classes mixed in with narrators from upper class society creates an even playing field where all storytellers should have an equal voice. So, to Chaucer, it is of the utmost importance that

anyone has the opportunity to become a storyteller; this also implies that anyone can have a story worth sharing.

Both of the dream visions, *The Book of the Duchess* and *The Parliament of Fowls*, contain a heavy emphasis on the importance of both the teller and the consumer being personally affected by their stories. The experiences that each of these narrator's undergo are perhaps the closest connection between reading and experience possible, which could not be suggested more than by falling asleep on the book that influences one's dream experience: "Swich a lust anoon me tooke / To slepe, that right upon my booke / I fil aslepe" (*Duchess*, lines 273-275). The structure of these visions follows the same pattern: the narrator reads a book, they have a dream that is influenced by their reading, and the resulting "experience of the dream vision has indeed advanced the narrator beyond the state in which he began: as writer, he manages to redefine "reading," or, rather, he succeeds in reappropriating "reading" for himself as a grand, universal process of which he has now become a part" (Miller, page 539). The narrator of *The Book of the Duchess* is so affected by his growth from reading that he becomes inspired to write down the dream that the reader has just finished reading, effectively shifting from being a consumer of stories to a teller of stories. The narrator of *The Parliament of Fowls* is similarly inspired by his dream. He not only produces the story that the reader has just read, but he also finds that his desire to read has been exponentially increased because his reading affected him on such a personal level: "I wook, and other books took me to / To rede upon, and yet I rede alwey" (*Parliament*, lines 695-696).

This concept of stories having a deep, meaningful, personal impact that influences an individual's actions and perceptions of the world is the ultimate focus of the dialogue that occurs between these works when we examine Chaucer's allusions to storytelling. Not only is this an

underlying justification of the importance of writing throughout Chaucer's works, but it also significant that Chaucer emphasizes the importance of a diverse range of storytellers from all ranges of society and positions of authority or knowledge. These ideas are in the forefront of Chaucer's mind in all of these works, and the incredible effect of this is that it allows his audience to see a glimpse of the real passion behind Chaucer as an author. Storytelling is important to Chaucer as an individual, but it becomes apparent when examining his works that it is his desire to spread his passion to others through his justification of writing from such a diverse range of characters.

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