

## CHAUCE AS A MASTER OF THE SHORT STORY

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Geoffrey Chaucer has enjoyed a long reign as a prince of story tellers. It would be difficult indeed to find a critic or historian of English literature who would deny to Chaucer his place of preeminence among writers of narrative verse in English. There are those who would place him below Shakespeare and Milton in the ranks of the great poets of England, but for the art of pure narrative—not dramatic or epic poetry but simple, straightforward narrative—there would be few who would deny to Chaucer his rightful rank at the head of all tellers of tales in verse form. Chaucer told his stories so well that poets since his time have continued to draw on his “well of English undefiled.” Shakespeare retold Chaucer’s story of Troilus and Cressida for the Elizabethan playgoers, Dryden put parts of Chaucer’s verse into what he considered the more polished lines of the Restoration era, Wordsworth retold selections for the readers of the Romantic period, and in our own times we have had modernizations of Chaucer’s stories into both prose and verse.<sup>1</sup> “The proof of the pudding is in the eating,” and if Chaucer’s stories are so well told that succeeding generations have found them worth repeating, then they have met a test that is undeniable—they are interesting stories; and it is especially important to note that in rendering Chaucer’s narratives into the language of the present, so that he may be read by the general to whom the original must unhappily remain caviar, his work is made available to those who do not read him for his language, or even for his verse, but for the story; for once translated much of the poetry is lost.

What does remain, however, is a story so well told that it is always of interest; or rather, this is what remains of the best of Chaucer’s stories, for like Homer he sometimes nods, and it would be a rash enthusiast who should claim that all of the heterogeneous stories

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<sup>1</sup> The prose version is *The Modern Reader’s Chaucer* by John S. P. Tatlock and Percy MacKaye, which has been selling steadily since it was first issued by MacMillan in 1912. The other volume, *Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, which is rendered into verse by J. U. Nicolson, has gone through several editions, even appearing for sale over drug counters.



which Chaucer told to his contemporaries still interest us today. Taste changes in entertainment, even as it does in clothes, and many of the qualities which gave a fashion currency in the fourteenth century no longer please. The conventions of courtly love poems now appear artificial to our more realistically minded readers, and much of our literature will perforce appear uninteresting to posterity. So it is with some of the stories of Chaucer, those which were written not for all time but for an age.<sup>2</sup> However, there are so many of Chaucer's narratives which have always been of interest that we need not worry over the others. Moreover, our concern is with Chaucer as a narrator, as a master of the short story, and it is upon his work in this particular field that this study centers. Perhaps since our interest here is only with the narrative art of Chaucer, we should not concern ourselves with his verse; however, it would be very unwise for the reader who has approached Chaucer only through the medium of a modern version to assume that he has been granted a full and complete view of the story. Good as the stories may be in modern English, they are even better in the original, for it is not just what is said that makes a passage memorable, but often the manner of the saying.

Perhaps, first of all, when we think of the stories which Chaucer has told us of his age, we call to mind his characters. Plot and setting are in our consciousness also, but they loom in the background; it is the characters that we think of first. Chaucer had the gift of giving life to his portraitures, and they are so real and vivid that we remember them as we do people we have met. So real do they appear that the late Professor Manly, convinced that Chaucer had depicted people whom he had actually known, began to track down the identity of the Canterbury pilgrims with successful results that read like a detective story.<sup>3</sup> Whether Chaucer actually knew the people he has pictured so vividly, of course, does not alter the result; what does matter is that he possessed the artistry to so present them that we feel, after reading about them, that we have known them.

Just as real as the characters, the backgrounds give the stories a verisimilitude of a high order. Whether Chaucer is describing the humble cot of a poor widow, the abode of a miller, or the palace of a wealthy nobleman, there is a fidelity of delineation that makes the

<sup>2</sup> One type of literature with which Chaucer concerned himself was the love vision. For a full treatment of the manner in which Chaucer conformed to the fashions of this genre see the discussion of the love vision poems of Chaucer by W. O. Sypherd, *Studies in Chaucer's House of Fame*.

<sup>3</sup> John M. Manly, *Some New Light on Chaucer* (New York, 1926). Professor Manly is particularly convincing about the Prioress and the Man of Law.



reader feel that he has actually seen the place; he does not just feel that he has heard a description of it or seen a picture; there is the feeling of having the actual scene itself before the eyes.

As to plot, Chaucer was often as ingenious as with the development of setting and character. *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale* have plots that are wonderfully well constructed, and there is a carefully blocked out plot in the lengthy narrative told by the Knight that shows the handiwork of a skilful craftsman.

Moreover, Chaucer tells his stories not with skill alone, but with a skill that is enhanced with a fine sense of humor. His stories, when he wishes to make them so, are amusing and funny. He appears to be a master alike of comedy and tragedy; for all types of stories, embracing a wide gamut of emotions, are to be found in his work. He knew how to play in various keys. Probably humor is the most perishable of literary productions, but the humor of Chaucer—perhaps because of its vigor—still appears fresh. Anyone who can recall a group of undergraduates delving into some unassigned portions of the fabliaux does not need to be reminded that Chaucer is quite able to elicit bursts of laughter. His humor, not just the gusty humor of the fabliaux, but the finer humor, or should we say more refined humor, of Chanticleer and Pertelote is still amusing; and, of course, the only test of humor is just that. When something ceases to amuse it is no longer humorous to us, however funny it may have been in the past, and the fact that so much of Chaucer's humor is still fresh proves his greatness in this respect.<sup>4</sup>

Because of these qualities which make Chaucer so successful a story teller he has been often praised for his mastery of the art. We hear him praised more often as the forerunner of the English novel, however, than of the short story. *Troilus and Criseyde* is usually spoken of as either the first novel in English or as the first step toward the novel. Sometimes it is even called the first psychological novel, and no praise that has been given to this masterpiece can be said to be undeserved. It does appear as a bit odd, though, that Chaucer, who wrote *The Canterbury Tales* with all its marvellous variety of short stories, should be more often singled out for his importance in the development of the novel. Of course, it has been pointed out before that many of the qualities of the short story are to be found in Chaucer. J. B. Esenwein has credited Chaucer with having here and

<sup>4</sup> One will appreciate this even more if he will reread some of the humorous writers of the past few decades. Much that once appeared very funny now seems a trifle shopworn.



there "the methods and effects which we now credit to the short story."<sup>5</sup> In another place, Brander Matthews, commenting on the relative merits of Chaucer and Boccaccio, stated, "In the technic of story telling the English poet was the better craftsman; he had a unity and a harmony to which his Italian contemporary could not pretend."<sup>6</sup> In selecting the stories to be considered as examples, however, Matthews included a story by Boccaccio, but nothing from Chaucer. C. Alphonso Smith, who also made a collection of stories to be studied as representative types, followed Matthews in omitting Chaucer.<sup>7</sup> It appears that Boccaccio is more often mentioned as a precursor of the modern short-story writer than Chaucer, and that he is more often presented for study. The reason seems to be that Chaucer is not thought of in connection with the short story as readily as Boccaccio is, because Chaucer wrote in verse, while Boccaccio wrote his short narratives in prose.

Admitting at once that this is a legitimate distinction, one is tempted to see, nevertheless, just how well the short narratives of Chaucer shape up when they are judged by short story standards. Chaucer wrote all kinds of stories: the long romance of love and adventure, the fabliau, the exemplum, the saint's legend, the miracle of the Virgin, the romantic legend, the episodical romance, the fable, the parody, the tractate, the moral discourse, the Breton lay, and the tragedy—in short, just about every type of story known to man in that day and time became a part of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer's age, moreover, did not regard these stories in the way we do, and if we find the long prose story of *Melibee* dull, it does not follow that Chaucer's audience did. We do find, however, that some of the stories are indifferent or dull from our point of view; on the other hand most of the stories, by far the greater part, are still of interest. Judged by any standards of the present they are still good stories. The question then arises, what are the standards by which we measure a modern short story?

It should be safe to take the specifications for the genre as given by Professor Pattee, author of the standard history of the American short story. Pattee has outlined the requisites of a modern short story as follows:

(1) The story must be short, one that can be read at a single sitting.

<sup>5</sup> *Writing the Short-Story* (New York, 1908), p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> *The Short-Story* (New York, 1907), p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> *Short Stories Old and New* (New York, 1916).



(2) There must be compression; backgrounds must be sketched, not elaborated.

(3) There must be unity, a single line of action or a single situation.

(4) The story must have immediateness; from the very start the reader must be given the nature of the situation and characters.

(5) There must be a continuous momentum, no let down until the end.

(6) The characterization must be such that the characters will reveal themselves.

(7) The story must have versimilitude, impressing the reader as natural and true.

(8) There must be style. The writer must have a distinction in phrasing.

(9) There must be culmination, the story having an object toward which it constantly moves.

(10) The story must have "soul." "It must shed light in some way upon the human tragedy or human comedy."

These ten requisites, paraphrased from Pattee, give us a measuring rod to apply to the stories of Chaucer.<sup>8</sup> It may not be fair to a writer to judge his work by the standards of a generation more than five hundred years later than the period in which he wrote, but it is as a master of the short story that we are considering Chaucer, and the short story as a type of literature is a fairly recent thing. If we are to establish Chaucer as a master in this genre, and not just as a narrator of short pieces, then we may apply our standards. This surely is a test as difficult as we could subject him to, and it will be seen that he bears the examination well.

Plot, setting and character must all be present. There must be the total effect, and the story must conform to this description as given by Edgar Allan Poe:

A skilful artist has constructed a tale. He has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but having deliberately conceived a certain single effect to be wrought, he then invents such incidents, he then combines such events, and discusses them in such tone as may best serve him in establishing this pre-conceived effect. If his very first sentence tend not to the outbrining of this effect, then in his very first step has he committed a blunder. In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Development of the American Short Story* (New York, 1923), pp. 365-7.

<sup>9</sup> "Hawthorne and the Story-Teller's Art," *The Book of Poe* (New York, 1934), p. 124.



Obviously such early efforts of Chaucer as *The Monk's Tale* must be ruled out at once, as is also the case with the stories comprising *The Legend of Good Women*. Of these last, a few might be construed as examples of short story art. The best appears to be the story of *Dido*. The *Lucrece* is good, and the *Thisbe* is a well done example of narrative art; however, there is none which fits into the category of the true short story as do the best examples from *The Canterbury Tales*. Not all of these may be considered, for some were never finished, and others are hardly short stories, but many of them will be found to be representative of a high narrative art.

The unfinished stories, those of the Cook, the Squire, Chaucer's own account of Sir Thopas we shall not consider; likewise, Chaucer's lengthy moral discourse about Melibee, the series of tragedies that make up *The Monk's Tale*, the Parson's tractate, and the Saint's legend of Cecelia as told by the Second Nun do not fall within our scope. Neither can *The Man of Law's Tale* be rightly considered as a short story, for there is no unity of situation, no immediateness of purpose, and no continuous momentum, but a sprawling tale comprised of a number of episodes. They are narratives that are short, not short stories; therefore, we may confine our consideration to the sixteen tales that are left, tales as varied as the people who tell them.

It is necessary in studying the tales to sever them from the *Prologue* and the *Links*, for these play a great part in the concept of the characters as Chaucer has portrayed them. The *Prologue* gives us clear cut portraits, and in the *Links* these portraits come to life in a dramatic fashion. The structure of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole, the combining of the separate stories into a dramatic framework, has given the narrator a fuller scope in building up his characters than he could have achieved through the medium of the separate tale. The device is one that has been employed by some of the most successful of our own story tellers, for it is precisely the method which was followed by Owen Wister in weaving his western narratives into the complete structure of *The Virginian* and by O. Henry when he turned his stories of Central America into the intricate and involved plot of *Cabbages and Kings*. The device had been used before Chaucer, and it is such a successful one that it is likely to be used again and again. This, however, is not the short story proper; so let us forget, if we can, the *Prologue* and the *Links*, and turn our attention to the individual stories, regarding each separately. Although Chaucer had a general scheme in mind all along, no doubt, and although the tales



were probably written in groups in which they "maintain such a notable integrity,"<sup>10</sup> each can be read with pleasure without the reader's having any knowledge of the others.

*The Knight's Tale*, with which *The Canterbury Tales* begins, is one of the longest of the stories; moreover it is a romance, a tale of chivalry. The description is wonderful; one can never forget the scene on the morning of the tournament, the very hustle and bustle of the "yemen on foote, and communes many con with short staves, thikke as they may goon;" nor the excitement of the moment as the weapons and armor are prepared: "Of hors and harneys noyse and claterynge ther was in hostelryes al aboute." All is told with an economy of detail that comes from true art alone; it is as if Chaucer has said to the reader, "Here, see for yourself:"

The paleys ful of peples up and doun,  
Heere thre, ther ten, holdyng hir questioun,  
Dyvynynge of thise Thebane knyghtes two.  
Somme seyden thus, somme seyde, "it shal be so";  
Somme helden with hym with the blake berd,  
Somme with the balled, somme with the thikke herd;  
Somme seyde he looked grymme, and he wolde fighte;  
"He hath a sparth of twenty pound of wighte."  
Thus was the halle ful of divynynge,  
Longe after that the sonne gan to sprynge.<sup>11</sup>

These realistic touches with which the poem abounds make a story greatly interesting which might not be so otherwise, for it must be admitted that in this account of Palamon and Arcite the characterization is vague. The two noble kinsmen appear much alike, no doubt because they really were so in actual life, but whatever the reason, the reader misses that sharp and clear delineation of character that makes so much of Chaucer memorable. And Emily,

That Emelye, that fairer was to sene  
Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,  
And fresher than the May, with floures newe—

remains pretty much the traditional heroine of romance. That is not to say that the characters are not well drawn; they are, and one has the feeling that they are real. They are, however, less clearly real than is usual with Chaucer's people. Theseus, the king, is perhaps

<sup>10</sup> C. Robert Kase, "The Shifting Positions of Groups G and DE," *Three Chaucer Studies* (New York, 1932), p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> *The Knight's Tale*, ll. 2513-22, Robinson's *Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Cambridge, 1933). Hereafter cited as *Complete Works*.



most strongly drawn. As Professor Shelly has pointed out, the characters are subordinated to the action and the setting.<sup>12</sup> All that could be asked for in such a tale, however, is there, and the conception is carried out on the grand scale. Few writers could have put so much into the space of this narrative as Chaucer has, and when we apply our rod of measurement to this story we find that it stands up well. There is the single situation of the plight of the two friends, turned enemies over their love for the same lady, which is made apparent to the reader at once. The story moves steadily forward; the characters reveal themselves by word and action; there is a sketching in of background that makes the scenes vivid to the eye; and all is told in a straightforward style that makes the vastness of the actions and the settings appear real. Last of all, there is, as in all of Chaucer, that which we call "soul," that shedding of light on life. We shall not need to mention this last again, for in all of the tales, even the fabliaux, there is something that is of the tragedy or comedy of life itself.

*The Miller's Tale*, which follows the Knight's, is one of the tales of humor, a rough tale told by a crude and bawdy individual. It is one of those stories of which Lounsbury has said:

The incidents themselves may be of the kind, as Clough said, which are still relished in public-houses in farming districts; but the accessories with which they are invested by the poet take them out of the realm of vulgar narrative, and appeal to the literary sense with a charm that few productions on more elevated themes inspire.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately this story along with the other "vulgar" tales of its kind, is frequently dismissed by the prudish, but however much we may wish that Chaucer had confined himself to stories that would satisfy the most refined taste, there can be no doubt that this tale of the student and the carpenter's wife has all the component parts that a good short story should have; it is a masterpiece of its kind. Professor Lowes has pronounced his approbation of this story, and it well deserves his enthusiastic comments.<sup>14</sup> Truly this story and the other fabliaux deserve the praise of Professor Shelly: "In management of plot, in handling of character, and in rendering of background or setting, they are the work of one of the world's great storytellers."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *The Living Chaucer* (Philadelphia, 1940), p. 234.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas R. Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer* (New York, 1892), viii, pp. 363-4.

<sup>14</sup> J. L. Lowes, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York, 1934), p. 216.

<sup>15</sup> Shelly, *op. cit.*, p. 244.



An examination of *The Miller's Tale* reveals that it is short; it can be read easily at a single sitting. Moreover it is tightly compressed; the background is sketched in briefly but tellingly. The unity is of a single action, that of the schemes of the student and the attractive young wife to manage to outwit her husband, the "riche gnof," out of which comes the situation which brings the story to a rapid finish. It is plot construction of a high art. The situation arises naturally and spontaneously from the actions of the characters; once the machinery is set in motion the plot unfolds of its own accord, as it were. There could be few better examples of what Poe called "single effect."

As to the actual unfolding of the plot itself, it begins with an immediateness that makes the reader aware of the complications before he has turned the first page. There is the situation made apparent: "a riche gnof that gestes heeld to bord" has taken into his house young Nicholas, a handsome clerk. The gnof has an attractive wife, Alisoun, of whom he is very jealous because she is "wylde and yong" and he is old. Chaucer wastes no time in getting his story underway. There is a continuous momentum. The wife and the clerk plot to circumvent the old husband, and the situation becomes complicated when Absolon, the parish clerk with an eye for beauty, also desires to pay court to the fair wife. The characters reveal themselves by their actions. Nicholas, being sly, is able to play upon the superstitions of the unlearned carpenter. All four of the principal characters stand out clearly in the memory. John, the husband, who is stupid but good-hearted; Nicholas, youthful and gay, and knowing much of love; Absolon, more worldly than religious, and more interested in the ladies than in the censer, which it was his duty to swing before them at the church; and Alisoun with "hir body gent and smal"—they all stand out clearly in the memory long after the story is finished.<sup>16</sup>

There is more than vivid characterization, however. The story is told with those little touches which give it versimilitude. John's providing Nicholas and himself with a large quart of "myghty ale"; John's concern for his wife, whom he feared might be drowned in the

<sup>16</sup> Chaucer's description of Alisoun:

"There nys no man so wys that koude thence  
So gay a popelote or swich a wenche."

is well put into modern English by Nicolson thus:

"So gay a little doll, I well believe,  
Or such a wench, there's no man can conceive."

J. U. Nicolson, *op. cit.*, p. 90.



flood he had so guilelessly been convinced of; and Robyn, the prentice, who seeking to find if Nicholas were ill, searched about the door until

An hole he foond, ful lowe upon a bord  
Ther as the cat was wont in for to crepe.

There are other homely descriptions, and in such little touches Chaucer makes the setting and the action appear likely. All of this is told in a style which is the poet's own, a style peculiarly adapted to the medium of the short story, for Chaucer is a master in dealing with deft and telling revelations, a few words of description that imply or suggest much more to the imagination. And could there be any doubt that this story, "vulgar," or "bawdy" as it may be, sheds light upon the comedy of life. Everything considered—vivid characterizations, well-constructed plot, unity of situation and action, versimilitude—this fabliau seems to bear well the most rigid tests which we might apply to a modern short story.

*The Reeve's Tale*, which is the same type of story (and therefore likely to give offense, unfortunately) is, nevertheless, another excellent example of the art of story-telling. The plot, of course, is unified, presenting the single situation of a dishonest Miller, who attempts to rob two young clerks and is roundly repaid by them. It gets under way immediately. We are introduced to the Miller's family, and no sooner are they well established in our minds than the "yonge povre scolers two" appear on the scene. Having been informed of the Miller's trickery, we know what to expect. The culmination of the story, like that of the *Miller's Tale*, gains speed as the narrative progresses, until there is almost a rushing of events as the situation is brought to a conclusion. Once again the action of the plot grows naturally out of the situation, so that the rapid succession of actions is released, not forced. Chaucer was a past master at the art of creating situation, so that a stream of events is released which flows to its natural conclusion. Therefore the humor is spontaneous also; the actions appear inevitable, because the stage has been set first by a master of the craft.<sup>17</sup>

The five characters in this story are presented to us briefly, but we know them nevertheless. The Miller ("As any pecok he was proud and gay") deserves to be repaid for the dishonesty of his ways, for

<sup>17</sup> It seems that the finest of our humorists have all realized this, for the cleverly staged situation which gives birth or release to a train of humorous events is to be found in the most amusing stories of Mark Twain, Dickens, O. Henry, and, later, P. G. Wodehouse.



"A thief he was for sothe of corn and mele." Moreover he was a bully of whom everybody was afraid—"Ther dorste no wight hand upon him legge." The Miller's wife also was "proud and pert as is a pye," and she was haughty to her neighbors, reminding everybody of her superiority because she had been in a nunnery. The Miller's daughter is described realistically, Chaucer telling us that her nose was somewhat flat like her father's. Allen and John are drawn only slightly and with scarcely any differentiation between them; yet they are real enough for Chaucer's purpose, and when the dishonest miller is put to grief and the whole family humiliated, the reader feels—as doubtless did the neighbors, whom he had robbed and bullied, and whom his wife had "high-hatted"—that retribution has been done.

The setting in which this tale takes place is told in so compressed a manner and the details are so adroitly sketched that it is difficult to select passages of description, and yet the room in which the Miller lived with his family is fully revealed. As Professor Shelly has said, "All this is a bit of so-called seventeenth-century Dutch or Flemish realism done with a few swift strokes by a fourteenth-century English artist a hundred years or more before the so-called beginning of the English Renaissance."<sup>18</sup>

Turning to the tale told to the pilgrims by the Wife of Bath, we find a story that we must admit is not so interesting as the character who tells it. As Kittredge has said: "The Wife's tale of What Women most Desire is a famous old story, which is extant in several versions. As she tells it, it becomes an illustrative exemplum, to enforce the moral of her sermon."<sup>19</sup> The tale, moreover, is an episodical romance, and has the fault of not being as close-knit as we should desire. The setting is changed repeatedly, and even though some of the descriptions are well sketched in, it lacks the definite nature of description that we are accustomed to look for in Chaucer. Because it is a fairy story the individualization of the characters becomes blurred. The young knight remains a type, and although there is versimilitude in the conversations the story can not rightly be classed as an example of short story art.

*The Friar's Tale*, which likewise introduces the supernatural, is closer to the requirements of the short story. It is true that it partakes of the nature of the anecdote, but so for that matter do many of the better stories of O. Henry. This account of a summoner who

<sup>18</sup> Shelly, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

<sup>19</sup> G. L. Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, 1915), p. 191.



meets with a "feend" whose "dwellyng is in helle" and who ends in disaster is realistically told. Even the minor characters stand out. The old woman, whom the summoner tries to impose upon by collecting a fine, appears clearly, and when he threatens to take away her "newe panne for dette," she cries out: "Thy lixt!" and says:

. . . by my savacioun  
 Ne was I nevere er now, wydwe ne wyf,  
 Somoned unto youre court in al my lyf;  
 Ne nevere I nas but of my body trewe!  
 Unto the devel blak and rough of hewe  
 Yeve I thy body and my panne also!

She appears in the story for only a few lines and yet she is real. The same is true of the cart driver whose cart is stuck in the mud.

The cartere smoot, and cryde as he were wood,  
 "Hayt, Brok! hayt, Scot! what spare ye for the stones?  
 The fend," quod he, "yow fecche, body and bones,  
 As ferforthly as evere were ye foled,  
 As muche wo as I have with yow tholed!  
 The devel have al, bothe hors and cart and hey!"

But when the horses succeed in pulling the cart out, he changes completely and cries:

That were wel twight, myn owene lyard boy.  
 I pray God save thee, and Seinte Loy!  
 Now is my cart out of the slow, pardee! <sup>20</sup>

He appears on the scene for a few minutes, and that is all we see of him, but he continues to live for us because he is just as real as any person we might happen to meet. Because the minor incidents of this story have such striking versimilitude, and because it does have the unity of a single action, even though that action is of an anecdotal nature, it appears a fairly good example of the art of the short story—not the highest by any means—but still a creditable performance.

Another story even more anecdotal is that of *The Summoner's Tale*. The account is of a trick played upon a friar, but it is not the story itself that is of interest, but the manner of the telling. As Professor Shelly has observed, "Chaucer has depicted a whole household and set before us a bit of domestic life in dramatic fashion." <sup>21</sup> Thomas, his wife, and the friar are all well drawn, and as it should be, they reveal themselves naturally through their conversation. The

<sup>20</sup> *Complete Works*, p. 110, ll. 1544-1565.

<sup>21</sup> Shelly, *op. cit.*, p. 252.



friar is out to get all that he can for himself in the way of worldly goods. Thomas, who is an invalid, has seen more of the friar than he can bear, particularly since his wife happens to be one of those women who dote on members of the clergy. The minor characters are very real also, and the setting is sketched in firmly.<sup>22</sup> This story, however, despite its characterization, its setting, and its versimilitude, must be ranked lower as an example of short story art than *The Miller's Tale* or *The Reeve's*, for it is anecdotal in character.

*The Clerk's Tale*, on the other hand is no anecdote, but a story with a well-worked-out plot. The plot, it must be admitted, seems improbable today, and the characters seem unreal, too, in their psychological reactions, but that is because we are judging them by the standards of today. Judged by the standards of its own day the story loses its improbability. Walter and Griselda are well drawn, although difficult for the modern reader to accept. Although the fact that Griselda came from the peasant class and that Walter was a noble should establish a partial understanding of their actions, it is nevertheless difficult for the reader today to fully comprehend them. Walter's actions seem inexcusable, and Griselda's patience passeth understanding. A story which to the average reader of Chaucer, is difficult to accept as probable, can hardly be called entirely successful. On the other hand, there is a unity of action in the plot, and the characters reveal themselves well. Background, character, and plot—all are here. Technically *The Clerk's Tale* is a good example of the short story, and as such, it cannot be excluded because our modern taste finds that it cannot echo the enthusiasm of the Host, who called it "a gentil tale."

*The Merchant's Tale* is another one of the fabliaux, the story of January and May. It obeys very well the rules for the short story, for it is centered about a single situation, the impossible marriage of an old man to a young and beautiful girl. There is a wonderful description of the palace of the wealthy old man, the wedding-feast, and, later, the garden in which the climax of the story occurs. The plot, which begins immediately with the old man's stating his intentions to wed a young maiden, has a continuous momentum, which culminates in the sudden exposé in the garden. The three leading

<sup>22</sup> Professor Shelly has commented on the way in which the squire offers his lord the solution to the problem, suggesting that perhaps he was a fourteenth century Jeeves. "And one might smile to think that we may have here the germ of those humorous modern stories in which the omniscient butler or the very superior gentleman's gentleman answers all the questions." *The Living Chaucer*, p. 254.



characters reveal themselves naturally by their words and actions. January is shown as an old fool, a seeker after the joys of the flesh, who wishes to marry so that he will not feel that he has committed a sin. He is stupid, vain, and foolish; but on the other hand, he is generous, and, as is shown by his concern over the welfare of the members of his household, considerate. When we see him, sitting up in bed and trying to sing, we say that he is ridiculous; but when we find him bearing his blindness with fortitude, we admit that he has admirable qualities, too.<sup>23</sup> He is more than just an old roué. As for young May, she appears an attractive person physically, who is too fresh and lively to be imposed upon with the curse of an old husband. It must be said, however, that she is not individualized, but rather typed; and the same may be said about Damian, her lover, who is shown as a typical young squire. Since all three of the leading characters do exhibit qualities far from admirable—January's foolish lechery, May's infidelity, and Damian's intrigue—the story does deserve Professor Patch's comment: "There is a story of successive strokes of sarcasm and bitter irony all concentrated in episode and discussion."<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, it must be remembered that in this tale Chaucer has done what so few writers are able to do within the narrow confines of the short narrative; he has created a real character with the shadings of good into bad that one finds in human nature, and January remains a distinctive individual whom the reader is not likely to forget. This vivid characterization, together with the well-sketched background and the ease of the narrative, makes this a notable example of short-story telling.

*The Franklin's Tale* is another story of interesting characterizations. This narrative, which is an example of the Breton lay, pictures three people of honor and a high sense of duty. In this account of Arveragus, who holds fast to truth, of Dorigen, who is a perfect picture of feminine fidelity, and of Aurelius, who is in love with her, but who, nevertheless, is too noble and generous to hold her to a rash promise, we have three well developed characters. They show that Chaucer was just as capable in depicting "gentillesse" as he was in showing the more lowly qualities to be found in the fabliaux. There are no lost strokes in this picture of a loving wife whose concern for the welfare and safe return of her husband causes her to become

<sup>23</sup> Professor Shelly has given a full and convincing discussion of Chaucer's depiction of January as more than a dotard, as a character having good points along with his weaknesses. *The Living Chaucer*, pp. 257-9.

<sup>24</sup> Howard R. Patch, *On Rereading Chaucer* (Cambridge, 1939), p. 226.



involved in a predicament from which she is extricated only through the noble natures of both her husband and the other man who has fallen in love with her. There is a continuous action centered about a single situation in which the characters reveal themselves. The culmination of the plot shows three people who are too noble to forsake honor or to take an advantage over another person. Here truly is a story with "soul," and this portrayal of gentle people, acting finally not from selfish interest but from what each believes to be the honorable course, is not just a well-told story, but an affirmation of the nobility of human nature at its best.

In *The Physician's Tale* we have a less successful effort. The plot is anecdotal in nature, and, owing to the very nature of the story itself, there is little culmination. The characters do not have an opportunity to reveal themselves individually, and we have, therefore, a number of types—the wicked judge, the false witness, the kind father, the beautiful daughter. Although the story is told with Chaucer's usual economy of style, it can hardly be considered as a good example of the short story when judged by modern standards.

*The Pardoner's Tale*, which is an account of three thieves and their undoing, is an example of the exemplum. It is one of the best known of all Chaucer's stories, and although it has blemishes which weaken its structure as a short story, it is nevertheless a very fine narrative. There is the lengthy denunciation of drunkenness and gambling which retards the momentum, and prevents any immediateness of action, but which we would not wish away, for, as Emile Legouis has said, ". . . this would mean losing the amusing recital of the practices of this dealer in indulgences, and the evidence of the skill with which he mixes the most orthodox sermon with the most impressive story, in order to further his own ends."<sup>25</sup> Furthermore the versimilitude of the characters and setting more than makes up for any digression from the narrative. The riotous life of those who "daunce and pleyen at dees bothe day and nyght" is introduced with so comprehensive a description of a fourteenth-century "night club" of shady reputation that one feels he has seen the

. . . tombesteres

Fetys and smale, and yonge frutesteres,  
 Syngeres with harpes, baudes, waferes,  
 Whiche been the verray develes officeres  
 To kyndle and blowe the fyr of lecherye,  
 That is annexed unto glotonye.

<sup>25</sup> *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London, 1913), p. 183.



Once the actual narrative gets under way it proceeds in the direction of the culmination with the guidance of a master, and we have a single situation presented of three thieves who attempt to do each other out of a treasure and accomplish the deaths of themselves. The background is sketched in vividly. One scene which appears especially real is the visit of a thief to an apothecary shop to buy poison. His excuse that he wishes it to kill some rats and a polecat is so perfectly natural that we can understand at once the ready acceptance of his statement by the apothecary. Chaucer has done his job well. We know the characters; we see the settings; and we are carried along by the narrative. The only point which could give rise to censure of this story is the already mentioned digressions of the Pardoner, and if one is ready to admit that it is necessary to establish the character of the narrator of the story as well as the persons who perform the actions in the plot proper, then there can be little reason to rule this story out of the genre.

*The Shipman's Tale*, which is another one of the fabliaux, is one of the best examples of conformation to the modern short story form in *The Canterbury Tales*. It is almost a little comedy of manners. There is the wealthy merchant or successful business man, who is so engrossed in making money that he has little time for his beautiful young wife. There is his friend, a monk, "a fair man and a boold," who visits him frequently, and is popular with the household servants, because, besides his gay nature, he is generous with his tips. The third character, the wife, is beautiful and likes to dress in the very latest fashion. From her desire to wear the most stylish and expensive clothes comes the situation with which the plot develops. While her husband is away on business, she borrows money from the monk, who outwits her just as she deserves. There is an economic compression of background, a unity of situation, and an immediateness of plot which gives the story continuous momentum. Above all, the three characters appear real, and the action evolves out of character naturally and swiftly. It is the sort of story that one so frequently finds in the work of Guy de Maupassant, but it is told with a sense of humor and an understanding that further reveal Chaucer's humanity.

*The Prioress's Tale* is a miracle of the Virgin, and although the choice of subject is one that does not prove so interesting to the modern reader, it is still a moving story of pathos. The tale is simply told, and the little boy who is murdered and his widowed mother are



revealed clearly. Particularly fine is the description of the school at which the small child is taught to read. There is a compression of descriptive setting and character portrayal, and the culmination of the plot arises naturally out of the nature of the characters. There is more in this pathetic tale of a little boy who sang his praise of the Mother of Christ, however, than tenderness and devotion, for as the Prioress tells it the story becomes more than a narrative of innocence. As Professor Shelly has pointed out, it becomes "a story of religious bigotry, of the hatred of Jew and Christian, of vengeance, and cruel retribution."<sup>26</sup>

*The Nun's Priest's Tale* is one of the best known of all Chaucer's stories and rightly so. The gist of the story was current long before Chaucer. "Originally a fable, told to point a moral, it had found its way into the famous beast-epic built around the fascinatingly wicked character of Reynard the Fox."<sup>27</sup> Chaucer in the same manner as our own "Uncle Remus" gave human motives and characteristics to the animals that form the characters in his story. The conception is carried out with consummate skill, and Chanticleer and Pertelote talk naturally like husband and wife. To quote Professor Shelly:

They are cock and hen, no doubt, but cock and hen with very human attributes. Pertelote is described as a gracious lady. She is called 'faire damoysele Pertelote,' and from the first we are made aware that she is a lady in the high courtly tradition. But she is also the typical housewife who likes to manage her husband, lecture him, and keep watchful eye upon his diet.<sup>28</sup>

Thus the narrative unfolds naturally for us. The long account of the meaning of dreams and the discussion about dream allegory between Chanticleer and his wife now seem entirely too long and detract from the movement of the story, but there are other touches which are delightful in the conversation. Perhaps Chaucer invented the art of misquotation, used so successfully by O. Henry, when he had Chanticleer say:

For al so siker as In principio.  
Mulier est hominis confusio,—  
Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,  
'Woman is mannes joye and al his blis.'<sup>29</sup>

After we have become thoroughly acquainted with the two main characters, Chaucer takes us swiftly through the brief action in which

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 266.

<sup>27</sup> Robert D. French, *A Chaucer Handbook* (New York, 1932), p. 257.

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 260.

<sup>29</sup> *Complete Works*, p. 242, ll. 3163-6.



Chanticleer is carried off by the fox and rescued by his own wit. The art with which versimilitude is given to the story is great, and one of the best effects is achieved in the description of the crowd running after the fox. Plot, character, and setting are admirably handled to make a great story. It must be admitted, however, that in this tale the lengthy digressions of conversation spoil the immediateness of situation, and though there is unity, there is so much of the dialogue about dreams at the beginning that the plot suffers thereby.

*The Canon's Yoeman's Tale*, likewise, has some digressive material in the denunciation that the Yoeman makes of his master and of alchemy in general. Also the description of how various metals are used in alchemy prevents the story from getting under way with an immediate momentum. In fact, the division of the story into two parts almost precludes its inclusion in the category of the short story, although the second half of the narrative is an excellent account of how an alchemist defrauds a priest. It reminds one of the "Gentle Grafter" stories of O. Henry, for the priest in wishing to get precious metal from base is seeking something for nothing, and the alchemist like a modern "confidence man" plays upon this desire to trick him thoroughly. The characters are well drawn, and the narration of how the alchemist cleverly tricks the priest is so well pictured that the scenes live before the eyes of the reader:

He putte this ounce of coper in the crosselet,  
And on the fir as swithe he hath it set,  
And caste in poudre, and made the preest to blowe,  
And in his werkyng for to stoupe lowe,  
And he dide er,—and al nas but a jape;  
Right as hym liste, the preest he made his ape!  
And afterward in the ingot he it caste,  
And in the panne putte it at the laste  
Of water, and in he putte his owene hand,  
And in his sleve (as ye biforen-hand  
Herde me telle) he hadde a silver teyne.<sup>30</sup>

Here Chaucer has explored one of those aspects of human nature which is with us always, and although we no longer have alchemists, there are always with us those who are ready to buy "gold bricks" of some more modern sort of bait. Interesting as this story is, however, we cannot accord it an unquestioned place in the short story form. Character, setting, and plot it has, but it lacks the complete unity and the continuous momentum so necessary to the genre.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264, ll. 1308-18.



*The Manciple's Tale*, or the fable of the crow, is really not a short story proper, although many of the stories appearing in our current magazines are after the same pattern. There is really no characterization, and the plot is more anecdotal than we like that of a short story to be. There is a single situation, compression, and unity of action, but on the whole the tale is narrated more to point a moral than anything else. As an example of the short story it cannot be said to be among Chaucer's successful efforts.

With a consideration of these stories from *The Canterbury Tales* we agree with John Masefield, who has said:

Apart from the beauty and the power of the concept, Chaucer is a master story-teller in at least a dozen stories: that is, he can hold an audience by the interest of his fable, surprise them by the depth and purity of his sincerity, which speaks from the very heart of the imagined character, win them by living description, and fill their World of Imagination with persons of force and fury, and others of beauty and gentleness.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, we have seen that more than four hundred years before Edgar Allan Poe, Chaucer was writing tales which are such perfect examples of short story art that they have not been withered by age or staled by custom; in fact, they challenge comparison with the best of O. Henry, Bret Harte, and our contemporary tellers of the short story. There could be no more rigid test. Chaucer was a master story teller in his day, and after the lapse of centuries he remains a master story teller.

<sup>31</sup> *Chaucer* (New York, 1931), p. 28.