

## CHAUCER - A MEDIEVAL WRITER?<sup>1</sup>

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For literary historians with only few exceptions (e.g. J.W. Mackail, W.P. Ker, A.C. Spearing) Geoffrey Chaucer is unquestionably and exclusively a medieval poet. The belief that his literary production undoubtedly makes part of medieval English literature seems firmly established and any doubt about it futile. In spite of this aprioristic attitude towards the problem of the relationship between Chaucer and the Middle Ages there are at least two major elements which may make one doubt how correct it is to take Chaucer's medievalism for granted. The first one, which would demand a careful consideration of some Italian literary works of the time and will not be dealt with in this essay, is Chaucer's familiarity with the contemporary Italian texts. They represent instances of the early Renaissance in European literature, whereas the literary production of English writers of Chaucer's age taken as a whole seems to make part of the literary Middle Ages. The importance of this fact cannot be neglected even if we agree with C.S. Lewis that it was just a "process of medievalization" that Chaucer applied to the Italian literary material which he studied and partly re-wrote. The second element is the fact that there is a gap between *The Canterbury Tales* and the rest of his work. The Chaucer of *The Canterbury Tales* is no longer a writer of dream visions and courtly poems, but a man of letters who descends into the real world and presents himself as a writer interested in the world of solid empirical reality, which seems to deserve that man observe it and describe it such as it appears. Before going on to examine Chaucer's text itself<sup>2</sup> and to try to determine his relationship to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, let us first see what is meant by the two terms.

Trying to establish the criteria which would help us classify literary works of art according to literary periods, we are certain to face serious difficulties. Whatever these criteria might be, they are always to some extent arbitrary and that is why "any periodisation, while sufficiently 'objective' or 'real', is partial" and the relative degree of its objectivity consists in "the coherence between the criteria initially picked and the facts to which they are supposed to apply".<sup>3</sup> The literary historian Jean Rousset, for example, believes that notions of literary periods are no more than "un moyen d'investigation" or "hypothèses de travail".<sup>4</sup>

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1 The article represents a shortened version of a B.A. dissertation carried out under the supervision of Prof. Meta Grosman.

2 We have decided to limit our discussion to the *General Prologue*, and only occasionally, when it seems relevant to what is being discussed, some other parts of *The Canterbury Tales* will be mentioned as well.

3 Guillén: *Second thoughts on currents and periods*, p. 486.

4 *ibid.*, p. 482.

These facts must especially be taken into account when we deal with the artistic production of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance for the simple reason that the borderline between the two is particularly hazy. A good illustration of the problem is Huizinga's well-known belief that medieval culture runs into or beneath the Reformation of the 16th century as well as his proposal to consider the Middle Ages and the Renaissance not only as separated by a vertical line but rather as flowing horizontally together.<sup>5</sup> In short, the two periods cannot be treated as segments of time occupying a precisely delimited space on the time axis, but as something much more complex, which refuses to be described and temporally located with exactness.<sup>6</sup> Some historians, like Jacques Le Goff, have gone as far as to affirm there is no need to seek differences between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance because they do not exist.<sup>7</sup>

Although it seems necessary to give up the idea of static periodisation and of literary periods as homogeneous segments of time, the concept of literary periods as dynamic units<sup>8</sup>, not rigorously separated from one another, is not only useful, but also appears to correspond to the reality of the historical development of European literature.

Speaking about the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, is essential to bear in mind that Renaissance man differs from medieval man in his attitude towards himself, the world around him and transcendence, which are elements of major importance when one wants to determine the essence of any literary period or a historical period in general. In the Middle Ages, the basic characteristic of man's existence was believed to be its misery, therefore the emphasis was laid not on *this* life, but on the *next* one. The earthly life of a human being, who is burdened by original sin, is anything but perfect; it is subject to time and cannot last forever,

5 The eminent medievalist Paul Zumthor is also of a similar opinion when he asserts: "Comme d'autres termes créés par les historiens dans leurs premiers défrichements, pour mettre en perspective le passé, MOYEN ÂGE et MÉDIÉVAL n'ont qu'une valeur opératoire sommairement quantitative, et ne comportent aucune dénotation qualitative" (Zumthor: *Essai de poétique médiévale*, p. 7). And, in the following passage, Johan Huizinga himself goes even farther: "Periodisierung der Geschichte ist, wenn auch unentbehrlich, so doch von untergeordneter Bedeutung, immer ungenau und schwankend, immer in gewissem Grade willkürlich. Farblose Benennungen der Zeitalter, die man äusserlichen und zufälligen Zäsuren entnimmt, sind die wünschenswertesten" (Huizinga's quotation taken from: Garin: *Introduzione*, p. XXIII).

6 Huizinga: *Autunno del Medioevo*, p. 391.

7 "The long period relevant to our history [...] seems to me to be the long stretch of the Middle Ages beginning in the second or third century and perishing slowly under the blows of the Industrial Revolution - Revolutions - from the nineteenth century to the present day. The history of this period is the history of pre-industrial society. Prior to these extended Middle Ages, we face a different kind of history; subsequent to them, we confront history - contemporary history - which is yet to be written, whose methods have yet to be invented. For me, this lengthy medieval period is the opposite of the hiatus it was taken to be by the Renaissance humanists and, but for rare exceptions, by the men of the Enlightenment. It was the moment when modern society was created out of a civilization whose traditional peasant forms were moribund but which continued to live by virtue of what it had created, which was to become the essential substance of our social and mental structures. Its creations include the city, the nation, the state, the university, the mill and the machine, the hour and the watch, the book, the fork, the underclothing, the individual, the conscience, and finally, revolution. It was a period which, for western societies, at least, was neither a trough in the wave nor a bridge between the neolithic era and the industrial and political revolutions of the last two centuries, but was, rather, a time of great creative growth, punctuated by crises, and differentiated according to the region, social category, or sector of activity in its evolutionary chronology and processes". (Le Goff's quotation taken from: *Medieval literature*. Part Two: The European Inheritance. The New Pelican Guide to English literature, pp. 80-81)

8 Guilléen: *Second thoughts on currents and periods*, p. 480 ff.

whereas the other life, which one is to live when one has "shuffled off this mortal coil" knows no such limits, is eternal and therefore worth our constant attention. So, all man's forces should be directed to the pious contemplation of what is beyond him and which can only guarantee his everlasting happiness which is to come when he leaves this world. This does not imply that medieval man was ignorant of the reality around him or that he did not care about the material world in which he lived. What seems to have continually accompanied him is the presence of the transcendence that is beyond him and upon which he is absolutely dependent. Everything that belongs to empirical reality has the function of standing for something that transcends it, the physical serves as the reminder of the meta-physical and what makes part of our earthly experience is merely a reflection of something that goes beyond it. Therefore the distinctions such as that between the near and the far-away or the real and the imaginary have no value at all, the only antinomy that really matters is the one between the human and the divine. The latter is deemed omnipresent and there is no element in the material world which would not reflect the divine. Everything we can perceive in the empirical reality with which we are surrounded is only a more or less enigmatic reflection of something dominant beyond us. The phenomena of this world are nothing but symbols which are sent to us by the divine will and which we can interpret with only relative certainty.<sup>9</sup>

In the Renaissance the situation becomes different. Metaphysical symbolism gradually disappears and this world does not have only the function of representing something that stands beyond it, but is looked upon as a place by which an experience that is in itself worth living is conditioned. That is why the reality of this world becomes more and more important and starts to be looked upon as something harmonious *per se* and therefore worth man's observation.<sup>10</sup> The artist's interest becomes more and more limited to the representation of the "sensible" world, in which man has a central position. That is why he no longer observes nature and the world in order to see in it a reflection of the metaphysical, but in order to describe it such as it appears.<sup>11</sup> Human society and the complexity of human relations become a crucially important object of observation.<sup>12</sup> His interest in this world, however, does not at all deny the transcendent. It would be wrong to think that the Renaissance was an irreligious or even atheistic period, as some scholars are inclined to believe.<sup>13</sup> The fact is, however, that the ideas about man's salvation, redemption, his eternal life, original sin, etc. lost their central significance.

In short, the new importance that man attributes to himself, the shift of his interest from the metaphysical to the physical and the diminished role of

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9 Cfr. Eco: *Arte e bellezza nell'estetica medievale*, pp. 67-68.

10 This new interest in nature may be seen as leading to an increase in detailed studies of its different elements; a very representative example to mention here is Leonardo da Vinci's study of human anatomy.

11 The new importance and harmony attributed to the sensible world in the Renaissance makes Arnold Hauser (*Storia sociale dell'arte* (II), p. 11 ff.) affirm that Renaissance works of art, which try to imitate such harmonious reality, always look homogeneous and complete wholes, whereas, for example, Gothic art is typically characterized by addition, which means that a Gothic work of art consists of relatively independent parts; the detail seems to be more important than the whole and coordination more than subordination. This point should probably provide extremely fertile ground for the discussion about where Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* belong.

12 Hauser: *Storia sociale dell'arte* (II), p. 5 ff.

13 This can be said not only of Burckhardt, but also, for example, of Bayle and Voltaire before him.

transcendence can be considered the crucial differences between the Renaissance and the Middle Ages.

Underlining the significance of this world is an element present throughout the *General Prologue*, which is set in a specific, locally and temporally determined reality rich with allusions to the concrete world in which Chaucer lived. This empirical reality, however, is continually juxtaposed with the transcendent as represented by the Church as the institution through which man as an earthly creature is connected with what is beyond him. This continuous contrast between empirical reality and the reality beyond it can be understood as the opposition between two worlds, one of which plays a crucial role in the Middle Ages and the other in the Renaissance. Chaucer as the author of *The Canterbury Tales* is chiefly concerned with the observation and the description of the concrete reality that surrounds him, and not with allegorical dream visions or re-writings of chivalric romances; nevertheless, the text is densely populated with elements that draw our attention to the intangible world of the transcendent (e.g. the idea of pilgrimage, a great number of the pilgrims are in some way or other professionally connected with the Church, the contents of some stories is of a religious nature, etc.). But in the end it is our empirical reality that is given the main stress and that appears as the object of close observation or study. The transcendent does exist and Chaucer continually reminds us of this fact, but the centre is now somewhere else, i.e. in the reality of this world. The existence and the importance of the transcendent are recognized, but man consciously dedicates himself to the active life, in which the transcendent is known to be present, but not lived for. For Chaucer empirical reality does not have only a subsidiary function and does not stand as a symbol of something that goes beyond it, but has a value *in itself*.

It is important to bear in mind that this new interest appeared at a time when in England the Church influenced every aspect of life. To factually illustrate the significance of this institution, enormous in terms of the number of its members, it might be useful to present the following data, although historians do not agree about the number of ordained people in England in Chaucer's time: "In the thirteenth century, according to one historian, there were about 40,000 ordained members of the church (male) out of a population of about three million. On the other hand, a historian of the fourteenth century assesses the number of ordained members of the Church altogether as one-fifth of the population. This would amount to as many as 600,000, a number difficult to accept immediately. [...] It is fairly certain that at the time of the Reformation the Church owned one-fifth of the country's land and employed about one-tenth of the labour force."<sup>14</sup> In view of such a significance ascribed to the Church in that period, Chaucer's stress on some most profane aspects of earthly reality should have a meaning of its own.

Chaucer continually speaks about this world, but there are constant allusions to the one which is beyond it. This can well be observed at the very beginning of the *Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*. It opens with a paean to spring which is the time of year in which every living cell in nature may be affected by the process of reproduction and when life starts to germinate:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,

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<sup>14</sup> Hussey: Chaucer's England, p. 56.

And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
 Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,[...] <sup>15</sup>  
 (ll. 1-8).

Zephyrus, a west wind that helps plants grow, is explicitly mentioned,<sup>16</sup> but the reader can here also notice reference to other forces which are generally associated with reproduction and the conception of new life. As Cook's suggestion indicates, an allusion is hidden in the name of April, which was regarded as Aphrodite's month "both by traditional association and by one of the two ancient etymologies."<sup>17</sup> In such a period when new life appears everywhere

Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,  
 And palmers for to seken straunge strondes,  
 To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;[...]  
 (ll. 12-14).

The people who present themselves as pilgrims, appear eager to participate in the process of procreation in one way or another. It should not be overlooked that Chaucer's very first description of reborn nature appeals to the senses, and not to the spirit (e.g. "shoures soote" (1.1), "sweete breeth" (1.5) "and smale foweles maken melodye" (1.9)), but it must be noted that the sensual and the spiritual spheres are continually being juxtaposed. For example, the writer uses the noun "corage" in reference to the birds rejoicing in spring as well as to himself as a Canterbury pilgrim:

And smale foweles maken melodye,  
 That slepen al the nyght with open ye  
 (So priketh hem nature in hir corages) [...]  
 (ll. 9-11);  
 In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay  
 Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage  
 To Caunterbury with ful devout corage, [...]  
 (ll. 20-22).

Helen Cooper is right in her observing that "the pilgrimage has a potential for spiritual renewal to match the physical regeneration of the sick",<sup>18</sup> but the fact is that the spiritual renewal seems here of only secondary importance. The principal idea of the pilgrimage is to participate in the process of procreation and enjoy it. The idea of religious regeneration is presented as a rather faint echo of regeneration in the physical sense, but it must not be neglected. "The *Canterbury Tales*, most of the time, is much more a secular work than a religious one. The claims of the spirit are not entirely disregarded, however".<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> All the quotations from *The Canterbury Tales* are taken from F.N. Robinson's edition.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. Chaucer's *Book of the Duches*: For both Flora and Zephirus/They two that make floures growe,... (l. 402-403).

<sup>17</sup> Hoffmann: Chaucer's Prologue to Pilgrimage, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Cooper: *The Structure of The Canterbury Tales*, p. 74.

To make the whole journey more pleasurable, Harry Bailly, the Host at the Tabard Inn of Southwark, where the group of pilgrims pass the night, and a member of the riding company, suggests that every pilgrim should tell two tales on the journey towards Canterbury and two on the way back. The important thing is that the purpose of the story-telling is "to shorte with oure weye" (l. 791). The pilgrim who will tell the best stories, which means the most instructive and entertaining ones, or, as Chaucer phrases it, "Tales of best sentence and of moost solaas" (l. 798), will be rewarded with a free supper when the company of pilgrims returns from Canterbury to the Tabard. There is no religion, no piety, no holiness that would make a story win the prize. It appears clear that one of the two principal reasons why the pilgrims will be telling stories,<sup>20</sup> an activity which was sharply criticized by moralists of the time, is that of sheer amusement, the other being that of instruction. No act of worship, which one would imagine as befitting a pilgrimage, takes up any moment during the journey.

The fact that the pilgrimage is to end with a supper at the Tabard, in a very secular and down-to-earth way indeed, adds a new element to the wordliness of the situation, which is expected to be pervaded with religious feeling. What is puzzling here is that the book of Chaucer's tales ends in fact with *The Parson's Tale*. Is this merely a sign that Chaucer did not manage to carry out what he had planned (if he really had)? Does he want to show his fondness of Lollardism and its ideals, of which the Parson may well be considered an example? Does he want, after all, to remind the reader of the crucial role of transcendence? Or, is he again only being ironic?

Concerning the Parson, about whom Chaucer writes:

To drawn folk to hevene by fairnesse,  
By good ensample, this was his bisynesse.  
(ll. 519-520)

and adds:

A bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys.  
(l. 524),

and who, like the Plowman, represents the ideal Christian, it must be said that he is held in high regard by Chaucer, who severely criticizes the corruption of the contemporary Church and defends true Christianity. This might serve as a starting point for a discussion about Chaucer's relationship to Lollardism, which can be regarded as the precursor of the Reformation. The latter is considered to represent the religious aspect of the beginning of the Modern Era, whereas the secular one is thought to be represented by the Renaissance. What links the two is probably the fact that both believe in a *novus ordo*, the Reformation in the renewal of *christianitas*, and the Renaissance in the renewal of *humanitas*.<sup>21</sup> It is true that

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> This fact should provide a suitable starting point for the application of Hauser's idea, mentioned in the first chapter that in a medieval work of art the emphasis is placed on the detail, whereas the whole is neglected. On the contrary, in the Renaissance the stress is shifted to the structure as a whole. To establish the position of the Chaucer of *The Canterbury Tales* a detailed analysis would be necessary; however, the fact that his collection of tales seems to be based on expansion might make Chaucer in this respect more of a medieval writer. It may be of use to bear in mind also the idea put forward by an eminent Chaucerian scholar that Chaucer actually never intended to finish his *Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer had close relations with some "influential patrons of the Lollards"<sup>22</sup> and was most likely a keen sympathizer of the movement, but from *The Canterbury Tales* it is impossible to state his exact attitude towards it. However, one thing is certain: he was a most severe critic of the corruption of the Church, which can, for example, well be seen in his introductory descriptions of the Pardoner and the Summoner, the latter of which is quoted below:

A SOMONOUR was ther with us in that place,  
That hadde a fyr-reed cherubynnes face,  
For saucefleem he was, with eyen narwe.  
As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe,  
With scalled browes blake and piled berd.  
Of his visage children were aferd.  
(ll. 623-627)

On the other hand, Chaucer treats in a totally different way those characters who are far from being corrupt, but merely fail to live up to the supposed moral standards for the simple reason that the human spirit in them is trying to liberate itself from the chains of the transcendence-oriented world. An ideal example which might help us illustrate this point is his portrait of the Prioress. The writer, who describes her with considerable fondness, stresses primarily those characteristics of hers that are of sensual appeal; at the very beginning of her description Chaucer tells us that her smile "was ful symple and coy" (l. 119); then we learn that she was "madame Eglentyne", which is the name of a heroine of popular French romances and therefore has profane connotations. Ironically, it rhymes with the adjective "dyvyne":

And she was cleped madame Eglentyne.  
Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne."  
(ll. 121-122)

After telling us something about her nose, lips, breast and her manners, Chaucer states:

"Ful semyly hir wymful pynched was,  
Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas,  
Hir mouth ful smal, and therto softe and reed;  
But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;"  
(ll. 151-154)

To make her portrait complete, Chaucer does not forget to mention her brooch with the following concise and expressive inscription: "Amor vincit omnia." One may, of course, argue that it might be the divine love which is intended. This possibility can certainly not be denied, although, considering the rest of what is said about the Prioress, such an implication should probably be thought of as nothing else but ironic.

Chaucer's continuous emphasizing of the characteristics of this world instead of that of transcendence can also be seen when we look at the figure of Harry Bailly, the inn-keeper and the guide of the riding pilgrims. For example, in *The House of*

21 Chabod: Il Rinascimento, p. 78.

22 Robinson's Notes to *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 663-664.

*Fame*, it is an eagle that guides the poet Chaucer on a celestial lecture tour, whereas in *The Canterbury Tales* the function of the leader of the company of pilgrims is, significantly enough, given to the Host. It should not be very difficult to notice the enormous difference between the inhabitant of celestial heights and the owner of the Southwark inn, who is described in most material and earthly terms:

A semely man OURE HOOSTE was withalle  
For to been a marchal in an halle.  
A large man he was with eyen stepe-  
A fairer burgeys is ther noon in Chepe-  
Boold of his speche, and wys, and wel ytaught,  
And of manhod hym lakkede right naught.  
(ll. 751-754)

Coming down to earth in a denotative as well as connotative sense could hardly be better illustrated. Harry Bailly has no characteristic of the eagle and neither those of, let us say, Vergil, whom Dante, predominantly a medieval poet, chooses as his guide through the three reigns of the other world. When Chaucer introduces Harry Bailly as the pilgrims' guide, he comes down to the "world of fact" and "solid material reality"<sup>23</sup> in a most decisive way.

Keeping in mind this fact, one may find Chaucer's idea of the "profane pilgrimage" to be an ironic equivalent to the largely diffused medieval idea of man's life as a pilgrimage at the end of which one meets transcendence in the form of God. World literature saw a full development of this concept in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which is separated from Chaucer's idea of pilgrimage in *The Canterbury Tales* by an enormous gap. If one wants to compare the idea of pilgrimage as it is developed in Chaucer's work and its medieval version present in Dante's major work, such a comparison can only be drawn *per negationem*.

A pilgrim diametrically opposed to Harry Bailly is the Knight, who is the first character to be portrayed as well as the first one to tell his story. He seems to be a perfect example of a medieval nobleman. There has been much debate among Chaucerian scholars about why he is the first of the pilgrims to be described. One opinion is that this is because he has a conspicuous social position, which should be stressed by placing him in front of anyone else in the travelling company. Another explanation does not take into account chiefly "his superior social position", but rather the "beauty of his virtues".<sup>24</sup> One may, however, explain his position in *The Canterbury Tales* by the fact that he differs from the rest of the pilgrims in one important point, which seems to be his *differentia specifica*: It is not a high social position, which the Prioress, for instance, also has, or the beauty of virtues, which can be attributed, for example, to his son as well, that would greatly distinguish him from other pilgrims; it is the fact that he belongs to a different world than the rest of the company. His world is rather that of the past than the present.<sup>25</sup> A list of his heroic deeds, which include his fights in the King's service, against pagans and the like, is presented, and the reader can immediately see that all his heroic actions took place in distant lands and at apparently distant times. It is said about him:

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<sup>23</sup> Winny: Chaucer Himself, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Bowden: Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> Strojan: Spremnna beseda, p. 94.



This ilke worthy knyght hadde been also  
Somtyme with the lord of Palatye  
Agayn another hethen in Turkye; [...]  
(ll. 64-66)

The knight lacks the realistic detail that other pilgrims have. He is said to be "a verray, parfit gentil knyght" (l. 72), but the few words about his outward appearance present him in a different light:

Of fustian he wered a gypon  
Al bismotered with his habergeon, [...]  
(ll. 75-76).

He is more of a figure that escaped from a museum than a man with whom the wandering company share their time. In his tale appear the following lines, which reflect a typically medieval mentality pervaded by the conviction that our earthly life is anything but perfect and that true happiness may be experienced only when we leave this world for good:

This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo,  
And we been pilgrymes, passyng to and fro.  
Deeth is an ende of every worldly soore.  
(ll. 2847-2849)

Chaucer, for whom the Knight's mentality is equally distant as his heroic deeds, can only revive his figure as an ideal or even an aesthetic fiction.

This essay must not be brought to an end if we do not stop for a moment at the figure of the pilgrim who has Chaucer's name and to whom Chaucer may have also yielded his identity. He is very different from the rest of the pilgrims ambling towards Canterbury in that his main concern is neither the pilgrimage in the sense of a religious journey nor the pilgrimage as an opportunity to enjoy all the pleasures offered by this world, but, quite literally, close observation and detailed description of the empirical reality dominated by the riding pilgrims. He presents himself as a detached observer able to notice all details of the pilgrimage towards Canterbury. Given the fact that his main interest is the observation of human relations, his words that his intention was to go to Canterbury "with ful devout corage" (l. 22) can only be heard as an ironic echo to the rest of what he says about himself and about the pilgrimage.

Harry Bailly looks upon him with mild scorn, encourages him to "look up murily" (l. 698) and asks him, "Telle us a tale of myrthe" (l. 706). Chaucer then decides to tell the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, which is a literary as well as a social satire. In it he burlesques the popular metrical romance written in tail-rhyme and satirizes the contemporary Flemish knighthood. Sir Thopas, the hero, is presented in much detail and can be understood as a *reductio ad absurdum* of popular chivalry. He is extremely different from the ideal pilgrim Knight introduced in the *Prologue* and discussed above. The nonsense of his actions and the absurdity of his behaviour cannot represent an aesthetic ideal, but can only be mocked. Ridicule is exactly what Chaucer as the narrator of *Sir Thopas* wants to achieve, but he is

misunderstood by the rest of the company and especially by the Host, who is totally unable to catch the point and interrupts the teller:

Nameore of this, for Goddes dignitee, [...]  
(l. 919)

asking him to choose another tale:

Lat se wher thou kanst tellen aught in geeste,  
Or telle in prose somewhat, at the leeste,  
In which ther be som murthe or som doctryne.  
(ll. 933-935)

What Chaucer decides to narrate is *The Tale of Melibee* which is a direct translation of the French *Livre de Melibée et de Dame Prudence* of essentially religious contents. It is a dull text which, judging from the Host's reaction, seems to have suited the listeners' taste, but not the teller's. We may say together with D.S. Brewer that it "is the voice of the age rather than of Chaucer".<sup>26</sup> The voice and taste of Chaucer are so radically different from those of the age that he can only provide a close translation of a medieval text if he wants to satisfy the expectations.

Let us remember that *The Canterbury Tales* for centuries did not become famous, whereas Chaucer's other works, in which he distances himself from the Renaissance mental structure much more than in the *Tales*, immediately brought him considerable fame. Chaucer as the writer of *The Canterbury Tales* cannot be identified with the society he lived in, as he surpassed the principles on which it was based. Therefore reading his *Canterbury Tales*, we realize he is "a writer who speaks to society rather than for it."<sup>27</sup> It seems probable that the difference between the Chaucer of the *General Prologue* and the contemporary England should mainly be perceived as that between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

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<sup>26</sup> Brewer: Chaucer, p. 177.

<sup>27</sup> Palomo: Chaucer, Cervantes and the Birth of the Novel, p. 65.

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