

"CHAUCER TRANSFORMED EVERY GENRE HE USED"

The Canterbury Tales is an undoubtedly a richly textured work that draws in and combines many different elements of many genres. As a collection of tales it forms a rich tapestry woven from a selection of threads that neatly cover the spectrum of Chaucer's society, and utilises a range of styles which are appropriately diverse and which suit the personality of each individual storyteller. But the casually adopted view that Chaucer utilised a separate genre for each of his tales is an over-simplification of a far more subtle overall generic scheme. For a start, Caroline D. Eckhardt explains that up to the twelfth century, Medieval statements about genre, such as those of Isidore of Seville, Bernard of Utrecht, Honorius of Autun and Matthew of Vendome, usually accounted for no more than four identifiable poetic genres. In the thirteenth century, Geoffrey of Vinsauf and John of Garland extended these lists, though not by much. At this time, the concepts of tragedy and comedy had little to do with humour or pathos, but were instead measures of the movement of fortunes of the characters involved, as well as their social status; Geoffrey of Vinsauf describes comedy as "a rustic song dealing with humble persons, beginning in sadness and ending in joy"(CTC 181) and tragedy as a work "showing the misfortunes of grave persons, beginning in joy and ending in grief"(CTC 181). By today's standards, these interpretations of genre seem rather constrictive. In all likelihood Chaucer was of the same opinion - his manipulation of the generic guidelines that he had inherited through the literary tradition is subtle, extensive, and witty. Like a painter who produces a vivid and kaleidoscopic work from a palette of primary colours, in *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer continually merges, mixes, adds to and detracts from the standards of generic form to create a work which, as whole, defies being categorised into a specific genre.

The first fragment of the *Tales* offers a particularly useful insight into the way in which the poet demonstrates the endless range of possible styles and tones that can be inherent within a limited number of genres. "The Knight's Tale" is,

perhaps, one of the most easily categorised tale in the work. There is no escaping the form of the *romance* here; as if the Chaucer-artist were painting by numbers, the tale features heroes, lovers, duels, deaths and marriages as standard icons of the chivalrous ideals of the genre. These, however, do not constitute the only way in which Chaucer sets up his first tale as a certain "standard". The tale itself is a retelling of Boccaccio's *Teseida*, and as such provides a perfect example of the potentially dualistic nature of each tale, as intrinsically both old and new. Furthermore, the very presence of *The Knight's Tale* satisfies the expectation of the reader in the same way that its conclusion satisfies in accordance with the rules of the genre. For "The Knight's Tale" itself has already been foreshadowed by the opening of the entire work, in the general prologue. Chaucer's opening is considered by many critics to parallel the opening to Guillaume de Lorris' and Jean de Meun's *The Romance Of The Rose* so closely that Chaucer cannot have intended anything other than a direct reference to, or parody of, the romantic work. The parallel descriptions of springtime culminate in the "Then" line, which Chaucer remodels from a romantic and sexual statement to one of pious religious desire. In one sense, the idea of the constant morphing of expectations is already in play at this point: Chaucer uses extant images and ideas, only to switch from an expected conclusion to one which satisfies his own needs in terms of the work as a whole. Furthermore, to introduce the reader to the tales in such a way also sets up an expectation of romantic genre and, in satisfying this with his first tale, Chaucer plays on the idea of this particular genre being nothing more than formulaic systems in which we as readers know clearly what to expect from the outset. The image of the heap of dead men, unable to be burned or buried, is paid particular attention to as the essential catalyst for the story that then follows, possibly as a representation of a form which is effectively dead but which none will yet fully lay to rest. There is almost certainly an air of contempt towards this genre, as Chaucer highlights its limitations by directly playing off *The Romance Of The Rose* against *Teseida* - an interplay in which we can only notice the recurrence of standard romantic

conceits - such as imprisonment in high towers.

The precedent for variety that Chaucer sets up with the introduction of his pilgrims also prepares the reader for the traditional style of the first tale. That such a tale of chivalric romance should be told by a Knight is unsurprising. Larry D. Benson explains that in Chaucer's romance

there is little attempt at creating lifelike characters: the invariably noble heroes and heroines are more types than individuals, and their actions, manners, emotions, and speech represent an ideal of aristocratic conduct... the effect at which the romancer aims is not that of a convincing representation of life but rather of an ideal image of what life might be if all behaved as nobly as the heroes and heroines of the romance. (RC 7)

This description of characters as possessing more type-identity than token-identity extends outwards from the Knight's tale itself and infiltrates the general prologue by attributing the Knight with exactly the same principles and ideals that we might expect of him if he were part of the tale itself.

Having falsely established his work as primarily operating within the parameters of the romantic genre, Chaucer defies expectations with the second of the tales, "The Miller's Tale". The tale comes with its own warning: "whoso list it nat yheere,/Turne over the leef and chese another tale"(MTP 3176-7) mirroring the way in which the Knight's tale is foreshadowed - yet with an opposite intent. The tale that follows constitutes a *fabliau*, which Benson describes as "a brief comic tale in verse, usually scurrilous and often scatological or obscene"(RC 7). Certainly, the actions of Nicholas, who "anon let flee a fart/As greet as it had been a thonder-dent"(MT 3806-7) would have no place in a typical romance. However, the themes are familiar - the whole is something of a scaled-down, ruder and cruder version of the preceding tale, with love having been replaced by

lust, and fair, noble duels having been replaced by cowardice and cunning. Notably, the metre and simple rhyme scheme remain the same throughout both of these tales and their prologues - one which is in many ways more suited to the colloquial nature of fabliaux than of the grandiose themes of romances. As such, Chaucer has already prepared himself for this shift in genre and general attitude. A complete change of direction would have been too much of a distinct leap at this early stage of the work; Chaucer has, on the other hand, been preparing the reader for his second tale since his opening. Moreover, the rhyme scheme performs a uniting role between the two tales, and Chaucer's technique of transforming and merging genres really begins to take effect.

"The Reeve's Tale" takes this process of generic metamorphosis to yet another level. As another fabliau, it instantly counteracts any assumption that we may have built thus far that each tale will be told in a unique genre. However, the third tale is undeniably a far darker affair than the second; in this case, even humorous conniving has been eschewed as a method of satisfying lust, having been replaced by a far more straightforward case of rape. Chaucer demonstrates, at this stage, the potentiality for complete metamorphosis of tone between two tales which effectively operate within the boundaries of a single generic and stylistic construct. Furthermore, he also undercuts the point emphasised by the adjacent placement of "The Knight's Tale" and "The Miller's Tale" by offering a third point of reference which, in essence, minimises the impact created thus far over the first section of the work. As Benson suggests, "The Reeve's tale reminds us that the Miller's tale is as idealized as the Knight's"(RC,8). In this way, Chaucer shrewdly and almost paradoxically creates a pattern of mutation which works *backwards* from the first tale as well as forwards, so that the tales continue transforming in the reader's mind as he reads onwards. The missing section of "The Cook's Tale" causes a problem in terms of analysing the ways in which this pattern might progress; nevertheless, Benson argues that this tale "promises to be another fabliau, even more scurrilous than those just told, and it seems to carry the downward movement of Fragment I to

its furthest extreme"(RC,9). We can, therefore, make an educated guess that this was the general trend which *The Canterbury Tales*, at least initially, was following.

With regards to the question of the extent to which he "transformed every genre he used", the most important effect that Chaucer achieves here is one of making us question how far we can trust the notion of genre itself. In essence, even within the span of the first three or four tales, Chaucer exposes the illusion of genre as being objectively definable. A given genre can only be a subjectively interpreted field as, without comparison to other texts in search of similarities and dissimilarities, a text's genre would be impossible to determine. It is possible that *The Canterbury Tales* in part constitutes an attack on the stilted, highly formal and delineated generic ideas suggest by those such as Isidore of Seville, Bernard of Utrecht et al.

Throughout the *Tales*, Chaucer continually develops his genre-shifting ideas, confounding expectations again and again. Some of the most extreme examples of generic shifts include the "The Nun's Priest's Tale" which moves through *beast fable* and *mock epic* before concluding with a range of moralistic conclusions typical of a fable, its original style. "The Parson's Tale" also stands out as a complete change of direction, though of course the sober, didactic style is perfectly suited to the teller. The Parson even appears to be arguing for the superiority of his own method of storytelling: "Of whiche weyes there is a ful noble wey and a ful convenable, which may nat fayle to man..."(PT,79). Benson argues that this tale "is not actually a tale nor even a sermon"(RC 21) demonstrating another way in which the delineations between different methods of storytelling become blurred. The recurrence of the romance in the form of "The Wife Of Bath's Tale" exemplifies the range of possibilities within the boundaries of a genre; the tale is in many ways more supernatural than that of the Knight, though a far more important difference between the two is the Wife of Bath's vision of an ideal society is one in which the ethical decisions made by individuals constitute the most important factor in determining their own fortune.

The Knight, in contrast, leaves the fate of his characters to the Gods. Therefore even within this simple type of story we have the utmost variation in terms of theme and overall message. In fact, the action of "The Wife of Bath's Tale" springs from a moment in which tradition is not followed: "dampned was this knyght for to be deed,/By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed".

Adhering to convention, then, is illustrated as a negative approach - one which results in death without allowing for the further possibilities of choice that follow in the story. This is highly appropriate within a tale which contradicts the values of the earlier romance. In this sense, Chaucer is not so much transforming every genre he had to hand, but turning them in on themselves, blending, morphing and deconstructing them until they resist all meaning, in order to create a work on a greater scale which truly supersedes the boundaries of such simple categorisation.

The Riverside Chaucer, Ed. F. N. Robinson 1987, Oxford University Press

A Companion To Chaucer, Ed. P. Brown 2002, Blackwell Publishers

The Romance Of The Rose, Guillaume de Lorris & Jean de Meun (C. Dahlberg translation) 1971, Princeton University Press