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What Happens in the Links?
Framing Judgment in Context

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Introduction

Scholars of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* have focused much of their research on the interpretation of individual tales in the collection. The meaning behind these tales is clearly important to the work as a whole, as the *Tales* discuss grand themes that run throughout human life. The choice of themes and arguments in each pilgrim's tale can also reflect back on the pilgrim's own motivations and ideas. However, in searching for some greater meaning for Chaucer's collection, it is important not to leave out the framework within which the tales exist. The links that join the tales to one another, arguably the portions of the piece that are the most original to Chaucer, do not always receive the same kind of attention that is focused on the most popular tales. In a work that is so complex, with its layered narration and interactions between tale and teller, the tales cannot possibly stand on their own, containing all of the meaning behind the work. The links have the potential to be particularly revealing in terms of how the audience should read the entire story of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrimage, because they ground the tales in specific circumstances.

The framework within which the pilgrims tell their tales, including the *General Prologue* and all other prologues and exchanges, shows the reader that the only judgment that human beings can make of one another is a limited one that is based purely on evidence gathered through interaction. Although Chaucer does not seem to advocate a relentlessly religious ideal, he does make the point to include some grand moral themes as a standard for the tales. He also makes a point; however, that meaning will not be the only standard. Any person's judgment of another, then, can only be based on an impression about the balance of two things – the ideal that everyone should follow and

the real conditions in which someone lives. Any judgment beyond such an assessment would be a judgment of the core character of a human being – a very murky idea. Such a judgment is by nature outside of the complicated realm of humankind and only possible for One who is outside of that realm.

At the end of the *General Prologue*, Chaucer makes it clear that the idea of judgment is central to his work and natural to life. Though the tales make up the bulk of the work, the audience cannot forget that there is a context for them – a contest. Chaucer is inviting judgment by setting up circumstances that call for the reader, through Harry Bailey, to judge (at the very least) the pilgrims' tales. He also seems to be giving his audience a gift – telling them exactly how to read his collection of stories, and assuring them that there will be some sort of overarching idea behind it all. He asks his readers to judge his characters' stories by considering which has the best meaning, while being the most enjoyable. The *Tales*, however, are not so quick to give up the secrets of their author's own meaning.

Chaucer sets the rules for his contest through the standard that Harry Bailey sets out:

And which of yow that bereth hym best of alle -
That is to seyn, that telleth in this caas
Tales of best sentence and moost solaas -
Shal have a soper at oure aller cost
Heere in this place, sittynge by this post,
Whan that we come agayn fro caunterbury (Chaucer 796-801).

What the contest should be, then, is a discussion of abstracts that will in the end yield a final answer (the winner). However, it should also be a pleasant way for the pilgrims to while away the time on the way to Canterbury – no boring lectures are welcome in Harry Bailey's contest. This first concession of “sentence” to “solaas,” meaning to pleasure, through having the pilgrims tell tales that are pleasant as well as meaningful, is a hint as

to how Chaucer will derail his own contest as a mechanism for judgment. Rather than a discussion that will end up with a moral absolute against which every tale and teller can be judged, the contest will turn into a balancing act between what the tales mean and how they are presented, between something meaningful and something a bit more mundane. Any judgment of the tales themselves will have to take this two-part standard into consideration.

If all of the tales were taken in isolation, it might be possible to identify which one has the meaning that rings the truest. It would then be easy enough to judge everything else against that absolute idea and see where each stands. The obstacle that Chaucer is setting in front of his readers is that he is giving the tales a context. Nothing exists in a vacuum, and these tales certainly do not. From the very beginning, they are set in the context of a situation that will color the way that the audience feels about them. The obstacle grows as the characters get sidetracked altogether and follow the standard of “solaas” – quitting other pilgrims and telling japes – rather than the standard of “sentence” that so pervades the *Knight’s Tale*. The only way that the reader can judge by both standards is to respond to their intuition about how each pilgrim blends the two standards into his or her story, and what that mix seems to say about the teller.

This limit, as to how the reader can judge the tales, also restrains what judgment can be carried back to the pilgrims who tell the tales. Just as the standard for the tales encompasses more than one idea, the standard for judgment of a person encompasses many – it is, in fact, more complicated, as it arises out of what people say and do, as well as biographical information such as social position and profession. On top of all of these clues that are more like muddled pieces of a puzzle than neat portions of a picture,

judgment is always based on the situation at hand – judgment will often be the product of situational context, such as what is going on at the time, what led up to that time, and what the person doing the judging already feels.

The reader's judgment of the pilgrims, then, will come as much from the context of the tales in the contest as from the tales that are simply a glimpse into their perspectives about life. It will come from the evidence that the audience can gather from the links, and how those clues relate to the content of the tales. The reader knows nothing of the pilgrims' lives before the pilgrimage, aside from what they themselves reveal through prologues and exchanges with other characters. Though the reader catches some insight into the inner workings of some of the pilgrims through these confessional moments, they can in no way do more than infer a history of the characters, and so will always be missing some of the crucial puzzle pieces.

It is the links that provide the context that will shade the audience's understanding of the characters, and so limit any judgment of them that the audience could make. Chaucer has already set up the idea that judgment cannot be universal by preventing the reader from finding one final truth amid all of the perspectives of the tales. "...the stories are clearly not going to form any kind of single picture, and they are much too highly individualized to fit together in any predictable way (Cooper *Structure* 3)." So, the audience is conditioned for the idea that what judgment can be made will be by nature relative to the situation. Now, Chaucer is providing that situation for this particular discussion, giving it roots in either a piece of someone's history or a momentary exchange. Either way, whether it is a confessional-type prologue or a heated argument that refuses to die down, many of the links ground the discussion of abstracts in the real

world. Any judgment derived from that discussion will naturally be limited by what impressions are made in the moment.

As if judgment under these circumstances were not complicated enough, Chaucer recognizes that each individual will judge differently – there may be a definite set of pieces to the puzzle of each person, but the way that each individual arranges those pieces will be different depending on that person’s own leanings and characteristics, as well as any preconceptions. Chaucer’s evidence may give a clue, but that is really all it is – he is passing along fragments, and it is up to each reader to put them all together as she will. The author certainly has his own opinion that he would advocate about who among his pilgrims is the best and who the worst, but he is careful to leave his alter ego, his Pilgrim Chaucer, remarkably silent on the issue. By making him a recorder of facts more than a participant in any of the links, the author Chaucer is carefully avoiding any of his own leanings bleeding into the reader’s. It is as if the audience is in the action, witnessing what was said and done, and left to form an impression from it.

So though the links may seem on their faces to reveal more about the pilgrims and to help the reader to gather the evidence that she needs to make a more complete judgment, they do not. They are in fact limiting what judgments the reader can draw from the work as a whole about the characters within it. The clues that Chaucer gives his audience are limited – they are momentary glimpses that only reveal a piece here and there about who a character may be. How the reader processes these clues and fits them all together will depend on what is happening in the situation and what that reader brings to the table. It is impossible for one individual to take a comprehensive and objective study of another and form any kind of timeless judgment.

Through these methods, Chaucer shows his audience how relative judgment and ideals must be. Though it is necessary in life to try to find and live up to some kind of ideal (Chaucer gently mocks Harry Bailey for being too stuck in the “solaas” part of his own standard), the pure “sentence” must be left to God himself. It is clear from the setup of the *Tales* that there will be some form of each judgment (Harry Bailey will judge the one standard, God the other). It is also clear from the *Parson’s Tale* that Chaucer is handing the judgment of meaning over to God at the end of the work. Regardless of whether the work is truly finished, it is fairly certain that the Parson was meant to be the last tale before reaching the religious destination – Harry Bailey himself says that they now lack “no tales mo than oon (Chaucer *Pardoner’s Prologue* 16).”

According to Cooper, “[t]he secular is given a generous weighting, but it is balanced by the sacred (*Structure* 74).” Neither Harry Bailey nor God Himself is associated with both, so the reader cannot rely on any guidance from them. The only other possible judge in Chaucer’s setup, and the one who is closest to the reader in his nondescript nature, is the Pilgrim Chaucer. Unfortunately for any reader who is looking for a final verdict, this pilgrim alter ego of Chaucer the author simply gathers evidence. The audience must also rely only on such evidence, just as they must accept that whatever judgment that they can make from it will be by its nature limited.

The *General Prologue* provides one kind of evidence, a very cursory and surface-based one. Its limitations generally come from the fact that it invites a kind of social judgment from the start with its ironic portraits, but then picks apart that social order by making the audience realize the kind of preconceptions and snap judgments that are involved. The rest of the links, including other prologues and many of the character-to-

character exchanges, provide a different and somewhat telling kind of evidence – how the pilgrims interact and in some cases, some of their personal histories. This evidence, too, is limited – it, more than anything else, stems directly from the moment, especially in the case of the heated exchanges leading to quitting matches.

In realizing that many of these clues are limited, and realizing that they flow into the tales by which the audience is supposedly meant to judge the pilgrims with very little delineation, the audience must also realize just how little they truly know about these characters, and how impossible it is to make a thorough judgment of them. A few of the portraits in the *General Prologue* make this limitation clearer than others – the Monk’s, the Knight’s (especially when taken together with the Squire’s), the Prioress’s, and the Wife of Bath’s. In terms of telling links, the Prologue of the Wife of Bath, the exchange between the Summoner and the Friar, the exchange between the Manciple and the Cook, and the Pardoner’s links are all particularly helpful.

The General Prologue

From the opening of the *General Prologue*, and of the *Canterbury Tales* itself, the mingling of ideal and earthly is evident. The famous opening lines bring together these two elements of existence so naturally that it gives the impression of the heavenly sphere and the terrestrial sphere coexisting without a clear or rigid line between them. The one simply flows into the other, as nature’s rebirth gives way to the divine urge to go on pilgrimage within twenty lines. Given this coexistence, it seems only natural that Chaucer would invoke his standard of “sentence” and “solaas,” as these criteria lean more toward the spiritual and the earthly, respectively. The world that Chaucer seems to be

setting up is a world in which everything matches perfectly. It is only later that the audience realizes just how little everything actually matches up.

The *General Prologue* makes up the societal context of the tales (the links will be more situational in nature). Appropriately, it is the section that provides the audience with biographical data about the pilgrims. In keeping with his collecting all different types of literature, Chaucer also appropriately introduces his pilgrims in the loose form of an estates satire – the appropriate hierarchy is present, and many of the descriptions have their base in profession or social traits. The irony of this format invites the judgment of the reader, but in the end, it confuses the reader's ability to judge the pilgrims directly. The limited nature of the portraits and the Pilgrim Chaucer's silence in judgment make the application of a single abstract rule impossible. The only concrete thing that the audience can truly get from the *Prologue* is a first impression.

The most important function of the *General Prologue* in terms of the basic plot of the *Tales* is to give the reader a feel for the characters – it presents the “who,” one of the basic foundations of any story. The biographies of the characters lend some legitimacy to the whole work, and also begin the process of setting a natural, real world context for the tales. It seems innocent enough, but with the two-piece standard of “sentence” and “solaas,” it begins to take away the audience's power to judge the pilgrims. Bowden notes that “Chaucer shows us both sides of the picture, the ‘falsnesse,’ ‘the leccherye,’ the ‘gloutenie’ and ‘drunkenesse’ of some of the pilgrims, together with the dignity and genuine devoutness of others (26).” He begins to show the reader the range of his characters across the scale from one standard to the other, from Parson to Pardoner and everything between.

The *Prologue*, like all of the tales that follow it, comes from a literary tradition – the estates satire. The pure form of such a genre makes direct judgments of its subjects, making it a particularly appropriate form to use to kick off the *Tales*. Though it is not a pure satire, with its absence of direct moral judgments from the author, it still asks the reader to judge through the ironic tone that it uses to describe the pilgrims. A pure estates satire would also make the judgment relatively easy, as its only standard would be the one of “sentence.” According to Mann, “[w]here the satirists use concrete detail, it is not neutral, but illustrative of failings; where they are not criticizing failings, they offer generalized moral advice rather than instruction in a trade (15).” Such a satire is based in a very black-and-white, one-dimensional view of the world. It is likely that with the ironic tone that Chaucer the author uses, he is in fact making a social commentary, indicating that there are some abstract values that are worth following to some extent.

It is when the reader attempts to bring this commentary back to the individual that she runs in to trouble. The portraits do supply the reader with some background information, and it is in fact helpful in contributing to some kind of picture of the characters, but the bits of information are not nearly enough to form a comprehensive view of a person, and the nature of those pieces of information shows just how much the two-sided standard confuses judgment – a character who is enjoyable to read about may be somewhat of a rascal, and a boring character may have the most depth. The information that Chaucer gives the audience may in fact be telling information, but much of how it is interpreted is not based on any kind of absolute. The fact that a character is smooth-talking could mean that he is bad at his job, but it does not mean that such a judgment can be carried back to say that he is an altogether bad man (the difference

between “solaas” and “sentence”). In general, one type of trait, rather than a balanced picture of all traits, is presented in each portrait.

After all, only the most prominent or pertinent traits of a character will show at first acquaintance. If the setting is jovial, one’s most saintly qualities will not generally make themselves known. Though different individuals will show different leanings in the same situation, any traits that a character displays will depend upon the situation. Any judgment of those particular traits will then depend upon how much importance the person doing the judging places on those traits. If a person cares very much about religion, then a less than pious character will not make a great impression, regardless of who that character truly is as a whole.

As with the tales, there is no actual indication in the text as to how to judge a character, giving the reader no absolute by which to judge. There are enough individual combinations of character traits that there can be no single abstract that can apply to them all. It is true that there are idealized characters in the *Prologue*, the Parson and his Ploughman brother being the most obvious. They are presented in a way, however, that shows how impossible it is to push that abstract ideal on every individual. The Parson himself recognizes that where he is gold, most of the rest of the world is iron to begin with; where his brother is somewhat isolated from the social world, the rest are very much a part of it. The others can never successfully follow either ideal. The only way that the readers can really judge is by a first impression, which is by nature a mix of true character and context.

Overall, there ends up being a sort of sliding scale on which the reader can place each character, with meaningful characteristics at one end and purely earthly

characteristics at the other. There can be no purely good or purely bad in this kind of scheme, as there may be traits that the reader must respect (such as cleverness) that are not necessarily indicative of any greater meaning, good or bad. So, where any reader places each character on a separate, relative good/bad scale will have to depend on what kinds of interactions happen, and the personal leanings of the judge. As Mann notes, “[Chaucer] shows us a world in which our view of hierarchy depends on our own position in the world, not on an absolute standpoint (7).”

The Monk

The portrait of the Monk is a perfect example of this confusion of judgment in the biographies of the *General Prologue*. His portrait exemplifies how the social context within which a person lives dictates in a large sense how he is seen, regardless of what he is truly like. It also pushes the dichotomy between “sentence” and “solaas” to its limits, making it difficult to judge purely by one or the other, and making it obvious that solely one or the other is not enough. As with most of the portraits, the Pilgrim Chaucer does not make any complete judgments. He passes along information about what happened, making it seem as if the reader is actually listening to the Monk boast, hearing him say how he “yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,/ That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men,/ Ne that a monk, whan he is reccheles,/ Is likned til a fish that is waterlees- / This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre (Chaucer 177-181).” Thus, Chaucer the author leaves it up to his reader how to judge the Monk, based on how highly the individual weighs each of the character traits in the picture that she draws from them.

The Monk is consistently compared with the Knight, arguably one of the noblest characters in the whole piece. Yet, the Knight is considered (most commonly) as one of the ideal characters, while the Monk ranks lower. While this monk is clearly far from perfect, and may deserve this lower place on the scale, it is important that the reader understands just what is fueling the comparison. An overwhelming amount of the evidence that the reader has is related to how he fulfills his professional duties, “[and] it has been noted before that the profession often determines what we regard as sinful in a character (14).”

Readers normally get the impression that the Monk is something of an inappropriate figure – a purportedly religious individual who is lax in his duties with no apologies whatsoever. It is clear through his own words that he deserves some censure for ignoring his professional duties. The severity of the censure will depend on how much value society places on his care for his profession, and on individuals carrying on their own duties in general. In Chaucer’s world, the structure made it incredibly important that an individual conform to the standards of his class. What Chaucer is craftily suggesting (many of the morals of the tales support it) is that an estates ideal, a social concept, is not necessarily the best way to judge individuals at their cores. In this case, preconceptions rule how the Monk “should” be judged, but they do not necessarily mean truth. The hierarchical structure itself undermines its capabilities for applying absolutes – what is acceptable for the Knight is not acceptable for the Monk, but that judgment is based purely on social frameworks, not on some moral absolute.

It is also in the Monk’s portrait that the possible dichotomy between the standards of “sentence” and “solaas” is at its strongest. In almost no case will the meaningful and

the most enjoyable parts of life line up, so that something satisfies both pieces of the standard at once. The Monk is no exception – the fact that he is lacking in one area does not mean that he is in any way lacking in the other. Many would consider the Monk one of the more personable characters, in fact. Mann notes that “although the evidence for the Monk’s weakness for fine clothing is beyond doubt, Chaucer emphasizes the attractive results of this weakness in a way that makes it difficult to respond with simple moral disapproval (21).”

Because of the differences between how the Monk looks under each of these standards, his portrait highlights just how difficult it would be to infer true character from only one or the other. If judged purely on what meaning his life has, the Monk would possibly be judged fairly harshly, as he ignores the religious duties with which he is entrusted. If judged purely on more earthly qualities, the Monk would likely get high marks, being a jovial fellow. Either judgment would only be based on one idea or the other. The only appropriate judgment, then, is based on a mixture of these two types of qualities, based on the limited evidence regarding either that can be gained through interaction.

How any individual views the mix of qualities will dictate how the individual judges the Monk. The Pilgrim Chaucer does give the Monk his approval, in a way, but it has the effect of passing along the Monk’s tone in speaking than of giving the audience any kind of real judgment, and it is far too ridiculous to be taken seriously. It is important to “...distinguish between what is presented as fact, and what is merely suggested by the narrator’s choice of vocabulary (Mann 36).” He is naively passing

along information about the Monk. It is not uniform, nor does it paint a complete picture, because it is the most dominant traits that are in play when the company meets and forms.

The Pilgrim Chaucer does not make a true analysis of his subject because he cannot do so – all he can do is pass along to his readers the impression that the Monk makes upon first acquaintance. How each individual reader interprets the impression, whether or not each would like to be around the Monk, depends really upon what stands out more to that reader. If the religious laxity has the most influence, then the reader's concept of the Monk will fall lower down on the scale. If his joviality makes the strongest imprint, he will redeem himself somewhat in the eyes of that reader.

The problem with judging the Monk based on the biography of his portrait, then, is the fact that any reader's conception of him will be bound up in any preconceptions that the reader holds. They may be social ideas or the readers own values, but they will always influence where the character falls relative to the other pilgrims. He may have trouble fulfilling his professional duties, but just how much of an issue that particular character trait becomes will be affected by the reader's initial and overall reaction to his portrait. What the individual reads into his portrait will affect judgment, showing just how limiting the context in which someone meets a character can be.

The Knight

Although the Knight is widely acknowledged as one of the most idealized characters, judgment of his own character is not as easy as it first appears. The reasons for the difficulty are different from the difficulties in judging the Monk. The reader's initial impression of him is the image of a venerable old man, generally granting him a

positive impression. The social context again comes into play, this time to limit him from being an absolute ideal. The reader also must realize that the impression is coming mainly from the respect that is felt for his position and appearance, less from other facts about him. The audience infers that his appearance supports his character as a truly devout man, and it may be so. However, the list of battles, notoriously questionable in nature, shows just how an idealized feeling does not always translate into the real world. The Knight cannot be absolutely free from judgment.

One of the ways that the social context makes it difficult to label the Knight an absolute ideal is that part of what the reader is drawn to is the fact that he fulfills his social position. While it is a clue to his character that he does what he is supposed to do, the reader must realize that following a social ideal does not mean that one is the best person. Chaucer is careful to emphasize just how good of a knight the Knight is. It is his knighthood that defines him, and it is that standard against which he is held in the *Prologue*.

The social context has a second function when the Knight is judged together with the Squire – the comparison, both being the perfect version of their own status, shows just how difficult it is to hold them to the same absolute standards. The Knight is a sample knight, and the Squire a sample squire – each is somewhat of an ideal in his own right. Yet, they could not be more different. The Knight is reserved where the Squire is gay, the Knight respectable where the Squire is pleasant. “[He] rides a carefree way to Canterbury, and has our, as well as the poet’s, indulgent approval of his gay young spirits (Bowden 81).” Both have good characteristics, making it confusing which characteristics

should be used to judge whether each is truly a good person – again, the social scale does not line up directly with the judgment scale.

Along with judging the Knight against the social ideal of his position, the reader finds herself inevitably judging him on the factors that Chaucer emphasizes – his ascetic appearance and reserved nature. Naturally, these qualities should yield him a kind of respect. It is important to realize two things – one is that such a characteristic does not automatically mean that the rest of the character is good. The reader is drawn to the quiet wisdom of this pilgrim and assumes that it means that he is a good Christian and a good man. It might be a very reasonable assumption – Chaucer’s Knight does seem to be in general a worthy (in the truest sense of the word) fellow. It is necessary to realize that at home, the Knight could indeed be a belligerent old man prone to withdraw from the world. The only evidence that Chaucer truly gives the reader could be interpreted any sort of way, depending (partly) on the reader’s degree of cynicism.

The Knight, like the Monk, leans farther toward one end of the “sentence” / “solaas” (or meaningful to pleasant) scale than the other – their leanings are fairly opposite, in fact. It would be tempting to assume that the Knight’s position makes him a better man, but it is important to remember that there is that other side to the scale, and that it is valuable in its own right. The Knight may have meaningful characteristics that are very valuable, but it does not make him the most amusing person to be around. Amusement, as the Host points out, is also a valuable thing when going through the trials of real life. Perhaps in the situation of a road trip, the Monk’s position on a relative scale would in fact go up at the expense of characters such as the Knight and the Clerk.

This idea highlights another – that ideals, along with their meanings, do not always translate well into real world conditions. If that idea is true, then no matter how good the Knight's intentions, no matter what the meanings behind his actions are, he will not necessarily always do good by acting on them. The list of battles in which Chaucer involves his Knight highlights this possibility. Though the battles are mostly recognized as crusades and most likely natural for the Knight, there is some question as to the validity of some of these battles for actually doing any good.

The tone of Chaucer's depiction of the Knight shows that it is likely that he is motivated by the Christian ideals of the crusades as much as by his social position. It is unlikely from the grave tone that he is a mercenary bent only on violence and profit. The problem is that these purer motivations of the Knight's still lead him into questionable battles. His pure intentions do not translate into totally pure actions, because the real situation is tainted. Purity of intentions does not necessarily mean much to the world at large, and is not necessarily helpful to the rest of the world. Surely the people under attack, even in a fully sanctioned crusade, would argue that war is not a good thing.

Though it is likely that the Knight deserves his position as one of the most respected pilgrims, it is not wise of the reader to accept the idea with little scrutiny. Upon looking further into the clues that Chaucer leaves for his readers regarding the Knight's character, the reader will realize that much of the impression comes from the Knight's social context and the emphasis of certain traits, and so it is primarily on this impression that the reader ends up judging. Looking deeper suggests that the good nature of the Knight does not necessarily make him as helpful to all of society as the reader

would originally assume, and could make the task of trying to get at his true character and worth much more difficult.

The Prioress

The Prioress is an interesting character to try to judge. Chaucer's treatment of her shows that she is far from perfect, but it is also gentle. Where it gests, it gests only lightly. The traits that are the most emphasized about the Prioress are associated with her social role, again pulling the reader into judging traits that are only limited pieces of the puzzle – corner pieces, perhaps, as they are important, but still only pieces. It is in the Prioress's portrait that the idea of the questionable nature of evidence and the differences that can exist in interpretation is most obvious. Along with the interpretation of such evidence, the impression that her personality quirks make depends in many ways on the individual who is observing them.

The social role of the Prioress strongly defines how the reader initially views her character, and it is difficult to separate those traits from her character. Conceptually, someone in a religious order is supposed to be separated from the outside world, and so not affected by it. In ideal social terms, it is the same. The reader will then be tempted to judge the Prioress largely on how well she isolates herself from the world. Meaning in her life should be all religious, and her life should be meaningful, not pleasurable. Yet Bowden notes that "...she is always kept charmingly dignified, even when the poet writes of her with sharp wit (95)."

In reserving any purely moral judgment, Chaucer takes away the need to judge the nun on her nun-like behavior, or lack thereof. He makes it clear that in every standard,

there will be a bit of “sentence” and a bit of “solaas.” The real world will reach the Prioress in her nunnery, just as it will reach the Knight in his castle and the Monk in (or outside of) his monastery. It is not right for the reader to judge her solely on how well she lives up to one standard, but must at least consider the other and how they blend together in the person that is the Prioress.

When all of these things are considered, the reader will realize that she does not know if the Prioress believes in or is faithful at least in spirit to her God. The emphasis on the social rules involved in being a religious figure clouds the reader’s judgment of what is really behind those rules. Admittedly, the Prioress should not be defying her order if it represents her faith, but the fact that owning dogs is one of her biggest offenses should show the reader how little those rules really prove. Her giving in to earthly wishes does not mean that she has no real religious feeling, simply that she has understandable foibles. Even so, it is not fair to say that it makes her a bad person.

It is here that the reader should realize just how unreliable the types of evidence that the Pilgrim Chaucer has passed along are. They may in fact be the most obvious things to notice about the woman, but they are not necessarily the most important in judging who she really is, and they can be interpreted in different ways. Her Latin saying is the most apparent of these dual-meaning clues. It is always noted that it could be something very appropriate to a nun, but it could also carry a double meaning that is incredibly inappropriate. In truth, many of the bits of information that the Pilgrim Chaucer passes along are this way. They are not decisive – the reader cannot look at one and know that it means something specific about the character.

Such unreliable evidence is prevalent in the *Prologue* in general, though it is perfectly displayed here. Often, a particular piece of information or a specific observation is up to any number of different interpretations, and it is necessary to know more to make any kind of reasonable judgment. Even with more extensive knowledge about a character, judgment still remains limited by what is yet unknown. The reader can study all of the instances in which the Prioress is mentioned, dissect each passage in which she plays a part (just as the Pilgrim Chaucer could observe her continuously throughout the journey if he wanted). Yet, it will still be impossible to know outright, with any real kind of certainty, if the Prioress wears the phrase as a naïve testament to her devotion or as a subtle clue to her disobedience to her religion.

Some of the further observations that critics have made about the Prioress involve her (arguably) endearing personality quirks – e.g. her overfondness for unfortunate mice. These quirks are more pieces of the puzzle, and it may seem that they would present a better picture of her character as a whole. Here, too, the silence of the Pilgrim Chaucer speaks volumes. Rather than making any kind of outright judgment of her, he passes along what he has learned, presumably exactly as he learned it. Placing her on a scale between the meaningful and the less meaningful will prove difficult, depending on how harshly her quirks recommend her – is she truly a deeply feeling person, or is she overly concerned with all things earthly, including a mouse in a trap.

Placing her on a scale of relative judgment would prove even more difficult. To do so, one would first have to figure out what impression she gets about the Prioress, then further decide just how much of a problem that impression is. At best, she is a silly woman, a little too wrapped up with what is going on outside of her convent walls; at

worst, a showy woman who cares nothing for anything of real substance and flaunts her disobedience. Whether she is better or worse must depend upon how much weight the reader places on her imperfections and, frankly, just how annoying her silliness is.

Overall, the tone of this portrait is mostly noted as gently criticizing, but largely indulgent. It is probable that Chaucer meant for her to be placed fairly high on the relative scale representing judgment between good and bad. It is important to note, however, that there is always that criticism lurking underneath that impression. The reader has to remember that any judgment that comes from this portrait has its grounds in the social context – preconceptions based on what a nun should be, faulty evidence that leads neither one way nor the other clearly, and dominant quirks that are less helpful than they seem in aiding judgment.

The Wife of Bath

The Wife of Bath is one of the loudest personalities of all of the pilgrims. Her portrait is difficult to judge mainly because of this larger-than-life personality that dominates every impression the reader draws. The fact that one side of the “sentence” and “solaas” standard so dominates what the reader knows of the character should tip her off to the fact that there is likely more to the Wife of Bath. Hers is also one of the most extreme, most ridiculous pictures, making it difficult to trust the extreme evidence that is presented about her. As with many of the other portraits, rather than studying her characteristics, the Pilgrim Chaucer simply passes them along, allowing the audience to form its own impression by assembling the same image of her that he sees.

Very little of the evidence that describes the Wife of Bath has anything to do with more than superficial characteristics. Very much of it is wrapped up in her physical presence. It is not hard to figure out which end of the spectrum she is on – her life is strongly connected to earthly pleasures. Yet, the very prevalence of this kind of evidence should alert the reader to the fact that she does not have enough information to form a well rounded judgment. It would all be guesswork, carrying her sensual characteristics back to an idea that she is not a good Christian, or her many pilgrimages back to an idea of her lack of true piety.

The sheer volume with which the Wife jumps off the page drowns out, for that moment, any other ideas that the reader may have about her. It becomes very difficult to either approve or disapprove of her. The only thing that can really be done is to laugh. This natural reaction to her ten-pound head scarf or her brightly-colored stockings makes it difficult to even focus on making any kind of meaningful judgment of her character. If one were to even try, it would be incredibly difficult to get past it all.

The evidence that one has to look at is not only clouded by the Wife of Bath's personality, but it is also hard to imagine using it as a real basis for judgment. Her evidence, like the Prioress's, is not clear. Where the Prioress's pointed in many possible directions at once, the Wife of Bath's is too unreal to point in any reasonable direction at all. She is a bundle of extreme character traits that, when examined altogether, make a very strange picture.

Because of the extreme nature of these clues that the Pilgrim Chaucer passes along to the reader, it is difficult to evaluate what each means, or if each means anything at all to what kind of a person she really is. Each bit of evidence is so blown out of any

real proportion, any relationship to normal life, that it seems unreasonable to take any at face value. It certainly cannot be reasonable to take those bits of information and try to infer meaning from each.

The Pilgrim Chaucer does not help at all in this regard. Rather than giving the reader some opinion on how to take the Wife of Bath, rather than analyzing which of the traits that he is passing along are really meaningful, he simply conveys them all as he experiences them. The audience is left to see the whole picture unmitigated and unadulterated, and so make of it what they will.

Like the Monk, the Wife of Bath boasts of her own opinion of herself. Though her claims may be an interesting study for students of psychology, they do little to help the reader judge her. At their base, they can do little but add one more trait to the bunch – pride. Whether or not she deserves her proud claims is unascertainable in the moment in which the reader knows her. The reader cannot dismiss the possibility that she may in fact live up to her own claims, leaving anyone intent on judging her at square one, no closer to her real character than if she had remained utterly silent.

As with the Monk, the Pilgrim Chaucer seems to be approving of the Wife's claims. He certainly does not question them. Yet, it is not because he truly believes that she is what she says that she is. It is because he makes no judgments of his own. Instead, he passes on an exact picture of what he sees, leaving that image to form an impression on the reader. He is naïve, or at least without judgments of his own, because he cannot have an opinion that will color the way that any reader sees the character. Were he to make assessments of his own, it would influence the reader's basic impression. It goes along with the point that part of judgment will necessarily be the opinions that each

reader brings with them to the piece. If the reader is more indulgent, the bombastic nature of the Wife of Bath will not do much damage to her image in the eyes of that reader. If the reader has no tolerance for pride, that is the element of her personality that such a reader will focus on, and it will lend a negative shade to that reader's impression.

The Wife of Bath is a particularly difficult character to pinpoint. She is full of life and fun, and so pleasant to read about, and presumably to be around. Such a strong first impression that is weighted strongly by one type of evidence makes it seem like the reader has a handle on her portrait, but what it should do is show the reader just what is missing from any assessment that she can make. The extreme nature of what evidence the reader can gather should make the reader question its validity as a true measure of her nature. The fact that the Pilgrim Chaucer is silent, other than to pass along what he sees of her, only adds to the idea that it will all be relative.

The Links

In the links that make up the remainder of the framework of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer sets up another context, more based on the actions and words of the pilgrims than on their basic appearances. This part of the context further derails the possibility of using the storytelling contest as a way to judge the pilgrims. The interaction between the links and the tales further strengthens the idea that it is impossible to separate the two pieces of the standard and judge by both – in the real world, actions and perspectives do not match up to any ideal any better than personality traits do. The audience may assume that the responses of the pilgrims in a variety of situations will allow for the collection of

more evidence about their characters. Any judgment is obscured, however, by how the links ground the tales in a moment rather than in abstract discussion. It is thus limited.

The reader must realize that the circumstances in which the links happen will naturally affect what clues she can gather. The most obvious idea is that the traits that are brought out will depend upon what is happening at the time. It also gives the reader the sense that there is some kind of history behind the pilgrims, possibly leading up to how they act. Regardless of how much their histories and personal circumstances could explain them, the actions of the pilgrims along the way to Canterbury make it clear that the tales will not serve as pure evidence for judging their characters. It is through the links that the contest degenerates from a discussion of ideals and perspectives on life into something much less abstract. The personal insults make it very difficult to abstain from choosing sides, and objective judgments become impossible. As in the *Prologue*, the Pilgrim Chaucer is relatively silent, making it clear that it is the reader's impression that will make the judgment.

As in the *General Prologue*, the reader must realize that the traits that the pilgrims display in the specific situation of the pilgrimage are not the only traits that make up their characters. What traits the pilgrims display through their actions at any one point is grounded in the situation. The links, then, provide the root from which the actions flow. The Reeve himself says that he would not normally speak in such low terms when he tells his tale, but that the insult from the Miller made it necessary. Whether or not the reader finds it necessary for him to tell a bawdy tale to "quit" the Miller's, his noting the idea should make the reader think. It may be that by nature the Reeve is angry (shown by his willingness to get embroiled in an argument), but it may also be that in the absence of the

insult, the Reeve would have told a story about love or some other more meaningful idea. There is simply no way to know if that other side to his personality exists, because the moment did not call for him to show it. As Cooper notes of the *Tales* in general, “[j]udgment depends on the reader’s picking up cues in the text, and some of them are deeply ambiguous (*Canterbury Tales* 29).”

The idea of there being some kind of explanation for what traits show is also connected to the idea that each character has not only another side, but also a history behind whatever his or her true nature is. The reader should then realize that it is not reasonable to try to judge someone’s whole character without knowing the entirety of their histories. Although it would be simple to say that a good person is a good person no matter what, Chaucer makes it evident enough that the real world is not simple. There could be a generally good person who has suffered some trauma that has made her view life in a particular way (the Wife of Bath). Judging her actions in a situation against the actions of someone who has not lived her life would be unfair to her. Some of the prologues are of a confessional type, and so they provide some of the histories. The reader must still be careful in using these histories as clues to the characters – they, like everything else, are limited.

Whether they are composed of the circumstances or the glimpses into the pilgrims’ personal histories, it is the links that contain all of these clues that actually taint the abstract discussion that the tales seemed meant to be. In tempering how the reader interprets the tales, the links make it clear to the reader that there is no abstract value that is applicable wholesale in the real world. There will always be some mitigating circumstances that make it difficult to know just what anything actually means.

In fact, from what clues the reader does get in the links, she will naturally begin to choose sides (especially in the arguments) and end up feeling more than actually judging. Once the reader is pulled into the situation, there is no way to pull back and see the larger picture, no way to act or think objectively. The reader will find herself reacting to the impression that she gets upon first reading about the situation. Any analysis afterward will always be grounded in that first reaction, so the only judgment that is possible by any individual is based mainly on that first impression that is based on the character and the context in which the reader meets him or her.

Because it is up to the reader, the reader's pre-existing opinions will always factor into the judgment. If a reader thinks very poorly of what amounts to spitting contests, the exchange between the Friar and the Summoner will make them seem immature in that reader's eyes, and result in a harsh judgment. If another reader naturally feels for the plight of the Friar, he will judge the Summoner more harshly than otherwise.

The links between the tales continue to cause the reader to question whether a thorough and objective judgment is possible for any one individual. Whereas the *General Prologue* provided the reader with some clues about the pilgrims in the form of appearance, profession, and status, the remainder of the framework provides the reader with clues about how the pilgrims act and what perspectives they have on life. Because of these links providing a situational context, the reader must realize that the traits that are displayed are not the entirety of the characters and that there is likely an explanation for every action. Through these links, the contest becomes less about abstracts or ideals and more about how it mixes with everyday life. The reader naturally finds herself being drawn in by the situation and must therefore find it difficult to render a judgment that is

based on anything but an impression. Carrying that impression back to a true judgment would involve conjecture and guesswork, making it unlikely to produce an accurate idea of any of the characters.

Wife of Bath's Prologue

The Wife of Bath is easily one of Chaucer's most dynamic characters – it is for that reason that her portrait is so difficult to objectively judge. The link that involves her, her prologue, is no more easily judged. Though it undoubtedly provides the reader some sort of insight about her through her descriptions of her marriages, the information does not prove to be quite the clue to her character as one would hope. Just as the links as a whole provide some context that grounds the tale telling in that moment, her history roots her character in some background, making it difficult to know just how to make an assessment of her. The fact that she is so one-track about what she is saying shows just how little her tale, as she tells it, has to do with abstract discussion. Because of how argumentative the Wife of Bath is, it is nearly impossible for the reader to avoid taking a side in her discussion with the Clerk and authorities in general.

The most striking thing about the Wife of Bath's prologue is that it is a very personal history and in some ways very revealing. She has very concrete opinions, all of which she takes the opportunity to air before telling her tale. She disparages all recognized authority, using her own experience instead to guide her. In that sense, it is a jab at using abstract ideas to apply to individuals – after all, every individual's perspective on life is shaped somehow. The Wife of Bath's perspectives on female dominance in a marriage come at least partly from her experiences with her five

husbands. Mann notes that “[o]nce again, Chaucer endows a character with a past, and a past which has resulted in the present, which has conditioned the actions and personality of the pilgrim in the present (143).”

Once the reader knows of her history, rather than having an easier time judging, she will have a more difficult time. Many of her traits may be clear in the prologue – pride, scorn for authority; yet, all of these traits are a function of the discussion that she is having at the time. They may be dominant in her character, but they will not make up all that she is, and should not be used to define her core character. She pleads her own case, noting “For wel ye knowe, a lord in his household,/He nath nat every vessel all of gold;/Somme been of tree, and doon hir lord servyse (Chaucer 99-101).”

The history itself also gives clues for how to regard her, but the very existence of a history makes her perspectives understandable, even if not safe from judgment. It affirms the idea that nothing will exist in isolation. The audience cannot use the tale itself as a way to judge the character, because any hint that she can find in the tale will always be tied to some other clue. The heroine of her story may discuss grand themes such as love and social status, but it may be the power that she holds over the knight that draws the Wife to this tale. Though it is fair to say that there are some abstract morals in the world that should be followed somehow, the degree to which they must be followed is not clear, and any kind of history or situation provides a mitigating circumstance that must be taken into account. Yet the reader must also be careful of being too lenient with her – the only side of the story that can be known is her impression of it.

As the Wife sets up her tale with such a one-track argument, the audience cannot know her entire history, and forming a complete picture is impossible. It is not the

meaning that she assigns to life (the reader will never know if she even searches for one beyond her concern with dominance), but the way that she sees a specific aspect of life that is very important to her. It is the area of life that has made the most effect on her, but it is not fair to use it alone to judge her.

The fact that she interprets her own tale in a way that is different from how readers might shows just how focused she is on a single idea, making a wider discussion and a wider judgment unfair to attempt. The tale itself would seem to advocate equality and mutual observance in love; the Wife uses it to advocate female superiority. It is not for the reader to tell if the Wife of Bath was attracted to this tale solely because she can mold it to suit her purpose, or if she has some higher ideal of love as well. Either way, her focus on one facet of her tale means that it cannot be participating in any kind of larger abstract discussion. With all of the other pilgrims treating their tales similarly, no absolute moral abstract will ever emerge, and the reader will stay in the dark as to how to judge any of them.

It is also because of the fact that she basically pleads a case that the reader finds it difficult to avoid feeling some kind of intuitive reaction – the audience will either feel for her plight or disagree with her completely. Regardless of what the particular reader feels, the point is that the emotional response to her prologue will make it difficult to take a step back and use it in an objective assessment.

It is worth noting that here, as in the *General Prologue*, the reader's own biases will naturally dictate part of the response to the Wife. Not every reader will react in the same way to her questioning of accepted authorities or her ideas about the way that women are supposed to act in a marriage. Certainly not every woman will feel it right to

trick one's husband, but some may think it justified depending upon the husband. Not only is there no absolute dictated by the *Tales*, but there is no absolute that is held by all of the audience.

Also as in the *Prologue*, the Pilgrim Chaucer is little help. He does not indicate any way in which the reader should make a judgment. Instead, he merely passes along her diatribe in all its glory. The reader's reaction, then, is based purely on the impression that the image makes, how she strikes the reader as she is envisioned. In that case, her question of "Who peyntede the leon, tel me who (Chaucer 692)?" carries special meaning for the reader – as Cooper says, it serves as "...a reminder that the lion's point of view has its own legitimacy (*Canterbury Tales* 151)."

The main thing that the Wife of Bath's prologue accomplishes is that it attaches her perspective in her tale to some type of history, some reason. It is much more difficult to make a decision about her when there are reasons thrown into the mix – it makes for more components to the decision, more facets to the judgment. Rather than making her tale into a part of a larger discussion, the Wife turns it into an argument for an idea that is near and dear to her heart, and shows the reader just how little power the tales will have as clues for judgment of their tellers. Rather than pulling all of the information about the Wife together to form a picture, it creates another impression, making the reader realize just how much there could be left to know.

Friar/Summoner Exchange

The main factor of the exchanges between the Friar and the Summoner is the venomous nature of their argument. Though it is a fair bet that the argument is very

telling of both characters, it is also true that it sidetracks the audience (as it does the pilgrims) from the objective at hand – forming a judgment of tales that should represent abstract perspectives. As a result of their continuing the attacks rather than telling tales that are more generally applicable, the reader can never know just what tales they would have told in a neutral situation. Even more so than with the Wife of Bath's prologue, this exchange makes it very difficult not to get caught up in the sides – there is an even stronger emotional reaction that clouds any kind of objective judgment that might have been possible otherwise.

By its nature, an argument will bring out some of the worst qualities in people. Where discussion can lead to better understanding and improvement through new perspectives, an argument is generally past the point where anyone will listen and into more personal ground. The argument between the Friar and the Summoner certainly has more personal grounding. Though there could be a component of long-standing professional rivalry, the problem will be a function (at least partly) of the situation as well.

When the Friar and the Summoner give into the argument, they are forgetting entirely about trying to contribute to the discussion or get at a final moral. Instead, each is focused on merely “quitting” the other – after all, the Summoner is so blinded by anger that “lyk an aspen leef he quook for ire (Chaucer 667).” In such a hostile situation, the most negative characteristics are bound to be highlighted, hiding any other, more positive traits that they might have. The reader may end up with a good idea of how crass or quick to anger each of these characters is, but the circumstances do not allow for any

other side (if they have one) to show, and so the audience is left with an incomplete, possibly skewed picture.

There is no way of knowing if the Friar, left to his own devices and not spurred by the words of the Summoner, would have told a very valuable and meaningful tale that would have countered his dubious portrait from the *General Prologue*. Though it does not seem likely, it is not out of the question, and the reader must realize that it is so. Therefore, it is in this exchange that the storytelling as a mechanism for judgment truly begins to break down. In fact, it is in the course of the exchange between the two pilgrims that the links begin to literally spill over into the tales themselves, with each character interrupting the beginning of the other's story.

Beginning with the *Miller's Tale* and the *Reeve's Tale*, the "japes" and "quitting" matches have continued to spiral out of control and become more and more ridiculous. This exchange is part of the continuation of that trend. The tales are too extremely slanted toward making a point against another pilgrim, and away from making a point about life in general, to be taken seriously at all as evidence of the pilgrims' overall characters. It is similar to the Wife of Bath's ten pound head scarf and scarlet stockings – it is all just too much. The reader cannot be expected to sort out all of the intricate relationships between what the pilgrims are saying and what they are meaning, and what they are saying just to annoy another pilgrim. They are reacting to their environment, rather than to the task at hand (winning the storytelling contest), and so the evidence that the reader can gather is somewhat corrupted.

Again, the Pilgrim Chaucer holds back his own judgment of who is the worse of the two, or if they are the worst of the bunch for all their incessant bickering. He does

not point at any one idea and either agree or disagree with it. He merely passes along what he is witnessing, professedly with no alteration whatsoever, and presumably what jumps out the most on first appearance. In doing so, he is allowing (forcing, really) the reader to get caught up in the argument, to form some kind of opinion of her own. If the impression that the reader gets on first reading the passage is that the Summoner is more terrible than the Friar, then it is upon that relative impression that the reader will form any judgment, not on any complete or objective analysis of both characters.

In making the argument stem from some kind of insult, the author Chaucer is also pulling his audience emotionally in another way. It is only human nature, after all, to want to answer back. Very few people would be likely to turn the other cheek, so to speak – instead, most would become angry, just as the pilgrims do. In this sense, it serves the same type of purpose as the Wife's history – it provides an understandable backstory to which the reader will respond on some level. It gives the ideas roots, making them inseparable for the purpose of judgment.

It would probably be a fair assessment to call these two pilgrims crass if taking only their tales and the nature of their interactions into account. In trying to make a more complete judgment of the characters, a reader must realize that how the audience is viewing them is based very much on the situational context – how they are acting is based partly on what is going on around them. In using their tales as any kind of evidence, the reader must realize that at this point, the abstract discussion has broken down fairly completely, and the reader must be careful about how she is viewing what clues to their characters are available. The reader must also realize that she is being

pulled into the argument between the two pilgrims, making her far from an impartial judge.

Manciple/Cook Exchange

This particular exchange (just before the *Manciple's Tale*) has the potential to say a lot of things. One of its functions, however, is to modify how the reader will see the *Manciple's Tale* and so to make judgment of the Manciple more difficult. The situation in which the Manciple finds himself has a strong effect on what moral he chooses. Because there is such a strong connection between the two, it is difficult to tell if he would have a different perspective without the influence of the extenuating circumstances. Whether or not the reader agrees with the Manciple's moral will depend upon how she feels about the argument that precedes it. Therefore, how she feels about the Manciple himself will depend upon how she sees that argument.

Although the circumstances that lead up to the *Manciple's Tale* do not bleed into the text of the tale itself as happens with the Friar/Summoner exchange, it is clear that there is a connection between the two. The Manciple made a comment to the Cook that he later regretted, and proceeded to tell a tale about a bird who was punished for speaking. It seems unlikely that the subject of the tale was not spurred by the happenings beforehand. Cooper observes that the fact “[t]hat he regrets is one speech in the course of the pilgrimage and tells a story against ever opening one's mouth, is of a piece with his inscrutability (*Canterbury Tales* 103).”

It is still possible, even in light of the similarity between the exchange and the following tale, that the moral of the *Manciple's Tale* is just a confirmation of his taciturn

nature. In the *General Prologue*, Chaucer does not provide much information of substance. The Manciple is quiet and inconspicuous (whether by nature or because it suits his purposes to avoid notice). It very well may be that the Manciple's choice of tale is an indication that he was drawn to the moral of it. The point is that it is almost impossible to know for sure what his motives in telling the story were, making it difficult to use it as any kind of evidence of his character.

If the reasons for the Manciple's choice are grounded in the situation that leads up to it (even if it is just bringing a dominant trait more to the forefront), then there is likely much more behind this pilgrim's perspective on life. If that is the case, the perspective that he presents through his tale is a skewed one. Focusing on the one idea makes it likely that other parts of the Manciple's character are shadowed by it, leaving the reader with an incomplete picture.

The way that the reader interprets the Manciple's interactions and his interpretation of his own interactions depends on the impression that the reader gets from the argument between the Manciple and the Cook itself. That impression rests partly on how one feels about the Cook, adding another subjective layer to judgment. The situation (the Cook being drunk and perhaps deserving the treatment that he gets) also shades what the audience will feel. It will not be a logical reaction, but one that is based on a general impression of the whole situation.

In his role as reporter, the Pilgrim Chaucer passes along what happens between the two pilgrims in a manner that is true to life. It is as if the entire scene is being carried on in front of the reader, leaving the reader to interpret what is going on and how she

feels about it. Witnessing that argument (presumably) exactly as it happened will not allow the reader to judge the tale that follows impartially.

Because the argument is likely to have been at least the immediate cause for the Manciple's choice of tale, how the reader reacts to the argument will in part dictate how the reader reacts to the tale itself. How worthy the moral of keeping silent seems will depend upon whether the reader thinks that the Manciple was rude or whether he was right in telling off the Cook. Regardless, some kind of impression is involved in the judgment of these pilgrims as a whole.

The first image that the reader receives of the Manciple generally produces a less than positive impression. He is a relatively quiet man, leading some to believe him taciturn. Because of that clue to his character, it is possible that the reader will see the tale as a confirmation of what is seen in the portrait. It may also be deeply rooted in the situation that leads up to the tale. There is no telling whether or not there is more to the Manciple than what is seen through what clues the reader has.

Pardoner's Prologue

The *Pardoner's Tale* is unique within the *Tales*. It is possibly the tale that is least in harmony with the image that the audience has of its teller. It seems like it would be easy because of this very discrepancy to confirm his position as the lowest of the rascals. In fact, it is probably a good indication of his sorry moral condition. However, the fact that it is his mishandling of his religious duties that defines him leaves much unexplained. The fact that the rest of the company specifically asks him to tell a moral tale must be considered, as it is bringing out the worst in him. In the end, the emotional

reaction is likely to be the strongest with this pilgrim, and is likely to make up a large part of the audience's judgment.

Because the Pardoner tells a moral tale while declaring up front that he does not believe a word of it himself, it seems like the culmination of his mockery of his trusted position. Naturally, a mockery of such an important component of life as religion should not be taken lightly, and it may very well say a great deal about the Pardoner's character that he is willing to be so disingenuous. The problem with using only this fact as a basis for judgment is that it is so extreme that it is unlikely to be the entirety of the story.

There is much about the Pardoner that is unknown – the reader can only hazard a guess as to what makes that Pardoner who he is. Since the Wife of Bath's prologue made the character's history important to how the reader saw her, it is necessary to at least think about what might cause this pilgrim to be so repugnant.

When the reader considers the context in which the Pardoner tells his tale, it must lessen the disgust that she feels for the Pardoner at least to some degree. He does not set out specifically to mock his job or to undermine it. He is merely concerned with profit and unconcerned with his duties. It is the rest of the pilgrims who wish for him to tell the type of story that he tells – they plead “Telle us som moral thing, that we may leern/ Som wit, and thane wol we gladly heere (Chaucer 325-326).” It might be that he would have told the kind of crude tale that would go along with how the audience sees his character if left to make the decision himself. While such a tale would not have been very moral, it would at least take away the component of undercutting his own religion that is arguably the most disturbing thing about the character.

Even when the Pardoner tells the rest of the company of how he tricks the congregations to whom he preaches, he says nothing of trying to undercut their faith. He is not trying to destroy anything. All he cares about is what he can make out of a situation, according to his own words. Though it should not redeem him in the reader's eyes, it should make him slightly less sinister. Cooper also comes to his defense, if only slightly, noting that nothing has forced him to correct his actions. Though the estates structure and society in general would call for him to be a moral man, the structure itself has fallen apart somewhat in Chaucer's time. While no excuse for the Pardoner's bad behavior, it is part of an explanation. Cooper notes that "[b]y belittling [the spiritual peril of the congregations], the Summoner is spreading a heretical cynicism, for which Chaucer, while correcting him (to the reader) with a statement of the true doctrine, indicates that there is only too much excuse in the way excommunications and absolution are misused (*Canterbury Tales* 53).

The reader may still place him low on the scale of good to bad, and he is clearly focused more on "solaas" than on "sentence." Yet, it is important to at least consider that there might be other factors that determine the pilgrim's true character that any one individual will never fully understand. The individual is limited to the opportunities to observe what the situation presents – in this case, the situation is what called for the Pardoner to tell a moral tale, despite his professed lack of actual moral feeling or motivation. The complexities and nuances of an entire existence will never be available to individuals, and without them, a complete judgment is not possible.

The emotional reaction to the Pardoner is often overwhelmingly negative. Along with the Summoner, he is seen as inhabiting the lowest level of the social and moral

scales that serve as part of the base for the *General Prologue*. He just comes across as a slimy character. Given the information that the reader has, it is not an unreasonable assumption of his character. It is, however, based largely on impressions.

The reader only knows a few key facts about the Pardoner, among them an unfortunate appearance and the flouting of the solemn rules by which he is supposed to live. These traits make the audience suspicious of him from the start, and cause a sort of bias against him right at the beginning. Whether or not he deserves the harsh treatment that the reader gives, it is important for the reader to realize that the feelings that she starts off with will cast a shadow on everything else that involves the character, regardless of how limited the information is.

It might be that the Pardoner is one of the best examples for the idea of snap judgment, and how limiting it can be. In the end, the reader has less concrete evidence than the story seems to provide, and yet she feels like she has a good handle on who the Pardoner is. He is really defined, however by a few key, generally negative qualities. Though the context in which he tells his story should not forgive him of his faults, it does show how context plays a part in just how individuals see each other. The strong reaction that the reader is likely to have to the Pardoner also makes it difficult to judge anything about him objectively, and it is important to note, even if a logical analysis would lead to the same conclusion.

Conclusion

Much of the critical literature regarding Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* has come in the form of analyses of the more popular tales. It is true that these pieces are worth

studying in isolation from the rest to some extent, because they provide (in some cases) stunning examples of their type. Not only are they of some pure literary value, but they also take up and discuss some large themes that are natural to human existence. The reader can also use the tales as a kind of starting point for how to read the pilgrims themselves, as what they say will make up some part of who they are. However, to perform any kind of study of possible meanings for the *Tales*, the reader must not leave out the framework that brings the tales themselves together – the *General Prologue* and all of the other links between tales. Though Chaucer modifies his chosen tales to suit his purposes, the most original literature is in the links, and so they must be particularly important in reading the piece as a whole.

It is through the existence of these links, which naturally modify the way that the reader will read the tales, that Chaucer introduces the idea that individual judgment will never be thorough or complete, but will always be limited by context. He sets up no specific moral framework by which he wants the reader to judge, yet he is careful to discuss moral themes, and make the idea of “sentence,” or meaning, crucial to the whole setup. In fact, it is only through the balanced standard that he sets up of “sentence” and “solaas” that the reader can make any judgment. The recognition that both meaning and earthly concerns are parts of real life limits any ability to judge beyond the mix of those two aspects of any individual. Trying to judge the very value or true nature of any person is to be left to a higher power, who would, by definition, not be limited to only what is included in the tales or the links, an omniscient third party.

Chaucer relentlessly reminds his audience that the *Tales* actual constitutes a competition, that judgment is natural in the world that he presents. Because of this setup,

the reader at first believes that there will be a winner in the end, which can be used to judge the rest of the content of the story. The problem for readers is that Chaucer complicates his standard in a way that makes it impossible to come up with a consensus as to which perspective is the best. The focus shifts away from finding an absolute meaning from the beginning, with Harry Bailey asking the pilgrims to consider “solaas” as well as “sentence.”

From here, the idea of context interacting with meaning begins. The context for the *Canterbury Tales* becomes the storytelling contest used to evade the dullness of a long journey. Rather than a pure discussion of abstract morals that will produce a final idea, the discussion becomes more common and tied much more to situations that happen along the way. There is no telling how that discussion relates to the pilgrims’ own more permanent perspectives. The pilgrims become obsessed at different points with one idea or another, making it difficult for the reader to glean any real meaning from what they say, aside from how it relates to what produced it.

Any assessment that the reader can make will be based, then, on the impression that forms from what clues can be gathered along the way. Even these clues are limited in nature – they cannot tell the entire story of a person. It is up to the reader to evaluate how important or meaningful any bit of evidence is, so it is a subjective process, not an objective judgment. What evidence can be gathered will come from the framework around the tales, as it provides the particular context here.

As the judgment is subjective, much will also depend upon the reader’s own pre-existing notions and opinions. The reader will not know as much as God, and she can certainly see beyond the surface interpretations of Harry Bailey, so she can only take the

information that the Pilgrim Chaucer passes along to make her assessment. It is because the author sets his namesake character up as a reporter, not an analyst, that the reader is allowed to form some kind of impression that is not shaded by his own understanding. “He can [as a result of the setup] record impartially the secular idealism of courtesy and chivalry, the ineradicable human addiction to the physical facts of living, and the religious imperative to turn from things of this world to God (Cooper *Canterbury Tales* 20).” Because he is naïve or non-individualized, it is as if the reader is in his place. Because the reader knows little about his own opinions, it is the audience’s opinion that comes into play, and the audience’s impression that forms the basis for judgment.

Just as judging on a first impression is dangerous, making any real judgment based on these clues, these momentary insights, will lead to problems. The reader is lulled into a sense of security thinking that the more information that Chaucer provides about the pilgrims, the better she will know them. The problem is that the clues do not fit together in any definite way. Without knowing everything about each character, there is no way to know what the picture should end up being.

Chaucer does not let his pilgrims off the hook completely. Just because the judgment will end up being limited and relative to context, rather than based on some absolute ideal, does not mean that there is no ideal. It is simply that human beings will find it difficult to determine that ideal. Striving for it is still worthwhile. It is too little to live life purely concentrating on the mechanics of daily life and making them more enjoyable, as Harry Bailey does. It is too much to take on any real level of judgment, as that is reserved for God. The contest never comes to fruition – that is, there is no judgment even of the tales themselves, no conclusion, but merely the arrival at

Canterbury. So in the end, Chaucer may leave interpretation of meaning open, but he makes it clear that "...there is a higher vision possible, and it is there that Chaucer ends (Cooper *Structure* 104)." The ideal has the last word, in the *Parson's Tale*, but this pilgrim, himself an individual, will yield in final judgment to the deity that the audience never actually sees, but whose presence is felt through his servant.

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