



Geoffrey Chaucer, Iconography in the Prologue to Canterbury Tales

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ABSTRACT - Opening with the description of the month of April, The Prologue to Canterbury Tales introduces the frame story in which the pilgrims agree to tell two tales on way to Canterbury and two on way back. Belonging to diverse professions, they are thirty in number including the narrator and represent all types and shades of 14th century society except the highest and the lowest. He has brought them together for the holy pilgrimage. While portraying them, Chaucer has shown his minute observation, telling about their idiosyncrasies, features, habits, clothes and the traits typical to the class. It is his art of characterization, his accuracy in description of things and people, delicacy of perception, insight, he creates the living human characters, the real ones as they were in Chaucer's day.

Keywords: Iconography, Portraiture, Characterization, Corruption.

Writing from the experiences and observations of life, Chaucer achieves a reconciliation of art with prudence. Constantly whilst reading the Prologue to Canterbury Tales, we feel that we need more understanding of Chaucer's philological, linguistic and stylistic resources. The levels of narration and the kind of characterization deserve more consideration as "The variety of Chaucer's devices has perhaps not been sufficiently recognised" 1. His interest in character and his art of character drawing are things that transform his prologue into something beyond what one usually finds, in the genre. It is his way of presenting and unfolding character, describing the iconographic details that his art flourishes and attains perfection. Details which seemed tedious and inept become meaningful and coherent.

The Prologue written between the years 1384-88 has a decorum of style and is a work of art in its own right, independent of the tales. It is an interesting example of Chaucer's use of iconography. It has a chance- encountered folk of "nine and twenty" pilgrims. The representatives from the world of chivalry and knighthood, church and religious order, various professions such as law, medicine, etc. various crafts such as carpentry, weaving, cooking, cloth making, agriculture, trade and commerce, shipping and the like are present in the Prologue. Chaucer's folk moving towards Canterbury are a grand procession. We come across a cross - section of the whole of the 14th century society of England - a knight, a Squire, a Prioress, a Marchant, a Monk, a Friar, a Clerk of Oxford, a Sergeant of Law, Carpenter, a Franklin, a Weaver, a dyer, a Shipman, a Cook, a Doctor of Physic, a wife of Bath, a Manciple. A glance at these reveals and suggests their personality in full. Almost all of these have universal appeal by the iconographic descriptions. Their portraiture has

concrete details to the exact drawing of the features and gestures and the choice of emblems. The poet, in his endeavour to give a complete and comprehensive picture of contemporary society, directs his gaze not to any one aspect of his characters, but all its wide and variegated life. He described each of his pilgrims with the appurtenances of his rank and his individual traits. His personages are not photographic only to have a temporary appeal but they are portraits which have a universal appeal. All this is done with artistic care and the pilgrimage of Canterbury is a reflection of the manner in which the pilgrimage of life was generally carried out in Chaucer's England.

The Prologue opens with a cheerful April Morning.

WHEN THAT April with his shoures soote.

x x x x x x

Inspired hath in every hold and heet

x x x x x x

And snale fowele maken melodye

So x x x x x

So priketh hem Natur in hir corages.

The description of spring prepares us for the double view: regeneration and love- love which all pilgrims acknowledge and which is symbolized in "The hooly bisful martir." Very much more, however, is implied in these lines. The pilgrims are a part of the spring time regeneration and the little birds also experience the regenerative powers of spring : then people long to go on pilgrimages. The 14th century people were more interested in travel than in the practice of religion. The setting is iconographic. The details arranged render a photographic image and are helpful with a view to developing the idea.

The same kind of "Characterization" by means of iconographic details appears throughout the Prologue and what is most characteristics of Chaucer is his tendency to mingle details of an iconographic nature with other details.

Iconographic details are the details whose meanings are supplied by the contexts in which they appear. The emphasis is not only to literal portraiture but also on the abstract qualities suggested by the details of the description. The emphasis on underlying abstractions was characteristic of the art and literature of the period.

The Prologue shows clearly how trifles may reflect personality. The gathering of characters from various callings is painted body and soul. Each picture that he has drawn stands for a full portrait. These portraits are drawn in bold clear lines. Splashes of colour arrest the eye as we go from portrait to portrait. Another device that the poet makes use of is the physical details of the characters. They are boldly marked facial peculiarities - the wart surmounted by the tuft of hair on the Miller's nose or the Summoner's pimply face or the broad forehead of the Prioress. He paints what he sees and sees what he paints. Even when he paints types, he gives impression that he is painting someone whom he happens to have met. He adds details to details and the Prologue becomes a wonderful "Picture gallery, the first and the finest of specimen, we have in English literature to the literature of Characters. The sketches of the "Spectator" and "Tatler", The types of the "Gult Hournbook" and of the Earies Microcosmographic, the humours of Ben Johnson's comedies are later attempts in the same literary art, but they are less subtle and suggestive than Chaucer's Portraits.

It is due to Chaucer's use of iconography that the description of pilgrims becomes highly symbolical. The typical and the individual traits are cleverly combined. The abstract type is made visible as real as embodied in the individual. The knight is a paragon of what a proper knight should be. The knight was a "Worthy" man. The Knight's worth is further emphasized by the observation that in his whole life, he never spoke rudely to anyone. "He was a very parfit gentil Knight" (72). While his knighthood is eulogised, Chaucer bewails the fact that most of the knights of his times remained at home "in delights and sins". The praise bestowed here is either on the glories of an imagined past or on the qualities of some actual figure.

The squire comes before us as a fashionable top. He is a likely candidate for the order of knighthood. He is in a coat embroidered as a meadow :

A lovyer and lusty bachelor
 With looks cruller as they wee leyd in presse
 x x x x x x
 Embrouded was he, as it were a meede.
 Alful o fresshe floures whyte and reede.
 x X X X X X

Syngynge he was, or floytynge, al the day:
 He was as fresh as is the monthe of May.

It contrasts with a Knight's maturity and experience. The poet reflects the fading chivalry of the Middle Ages represented in the person of the knight, and the rising chivalry of his own times reflected in a young squire.

The Prologue to Canterbury Tales has incongruously described characters in an iconographically described setting. The row of beads, worn by the Prioress around her arm stands out in strong relief against her robes. It was of coral and every tenth bead was green and appended to the beads was a brooch of gold. The description begins:

There was also a Nonne, a Priouress.

This is to imply that she was not simply a nun, but also a prioress - the head of nuns. what follows is an amusing anti-climax.

That of her smylyng was ful simple of coy.

"smyling ful simple and coy" suggests a young girl in the presence of young men rather than a prioress. The name Eglentyne, a wild rose, is also a little unexpected as a name of prioress.. not entirely appropriate for this Prioress. Smiling cannot be taken as a primary attribute of a Prioress, however simple and quite it might be. We have a lady's not very elegant efforts to "sing" French :

Ful weel she soong the service dyvne.
 Entuned in hir nose ful seemly,
 And Frenssh she spakful faire and fetisly
 After the scole of Stratford ate Bowe.
 For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe.

It emphasizes the nun's unsuccessful efforts to make herself a lady of the world. Far from being the manners of great - lady, who would doubtless have shown small concern for such trivial matters, or the manners of a prioress, they are the manners of a social climber who wishes to form a reputation for being ladylike.

There are many other details and also table manners upon which a nun is "worthy of reverence" Since the subject is nun, her life should have been dedicated to meditation and devotion and to charity.

..... if that she saught a mous

Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bleede.

We are furnished with other details of the lady's small spoiled dogs, another courtly affectation, and of her tears if anyone struck one of the, or kicked it concluding it with a sarcasm. "And all was conscience and tender here." So the "nun's conscience is, in effect, consistent with the iconography of her table manners. "She has a "Soft and reed" and a broad forehead which was regarded as a indication of stupidity or lack of discretion. Then, the crowning attribute is the motto on the brooch: 'Amor vincit Omnia! it is true that amor can mean either charity she is capable of. These distinctive traits are made possible by a pervasive tendency to think in allegorical terms and they serve only to enforce an idea. The action of weeping over a mouse in a trap is not something the prioress does on the pilgrimage or at the Tabard. It has a revealing quality and through the portraiture of the prioress, Chaucer sneers at conscience, false pity and sentimentality of the women of the upper strata of his times.

Such characters as this are elongated.

In a similar fashion, almost all the Canterbury pilgrims are described. Chaucer reflects corruption rampant in the church through the Monk, the profligacy and debauchery through the Friar and the like. The economic scene is represented by the Merchant, the Shipman, the guildsmen, and the draftsmen. The wealth of the wife of Bath is a symbol of the prosperous cloth industry of the time and through her, Chaucer satirizes certain undesirable qualities in women: voluptuousness. peevishness, inordinate desire to dominate, despotism, sensuality, garrulity. She went on pilgrimage not out of religious consideration but in all probability for sexual gratification.

What is lovely about the Prologue is not the matter but the manner. The wife of Bath appears with a "hair dress of ten pounds of weight". We cannot turn our eyes off her hose of "fynx scarlet reed. "tight and smooth and the Summoner's pimply face that frightened children and a wart surmounted by the tuft of hair on the Miller's nose. Thus, there is a lot of emphasis on the physical appearance of characters but almost each of his characters has one typifying action, one abstract quality that is emphasized, details are suggestive and help with a view to developing the idea. A few more examples will suffice to demonstrate it. The miller proudly carries a "sword and bokeler" and is a "Jangler" and thief:

Ful byg he was of braw, and eek of bones,

The proved well for over al ther he cam

At wraslynge he wolde have always the ram.

The details arranged in the description of the Miller suggest gluttony and treachery as well as contentiousness.

The reality which underlies the description of the miller, is not the reality of an individual, nor even that of a type: it is the harsh reality of discord nourished on gluttony. vainglory, and avarice as seen in one

segment of fourteenth century life. In fact, the picture as a whole is a combination of convincing details and conventional iconographic motifs.

The Franklin's conception of "gentilesse" is thus consistent with the entirely superficial nobility of a wealthy man of the middle class who is "Epicurus own sone".

Since the poet's aim is not merely to photograph his characters, he employs a variety of details.

The sounds are at his disposal as well as colours. He listens with equal pleasure to the jingling of the bells on the Monk's palfrey, to the pretty snuffing speech of the prioress, to the affected lisp of the Friar, to the pardoner's voice. "as small as health a goot.

This calls attention to abstractions which may manifest themselves in human thought the action. "The iconographically described Character" is a close relative of the personified abstraction. Such abstractions are very common in Chaucer's poetry although their presence is not always obvious at glance.

The poet's desire to reform is manifested in his act of exposing their peculiarities. He is concerned to reveal the nature of each entity.

His humour is harmonious, with his love for concrete detail and his informal conversational tone. Men are men even if they are friars. Man is a complex character. "Chaucer knows that human character is a much more complex blend than is usually painted. The characters in the Prologue represent universal greed, selfishness, and weaknesses. Mankind is ever the same. Only titles alter and not things. His recognition of human failings is his recognition only and never judgement. His philosophy of life is based on a knowledge of the curious working of human nature and this gives to his humour a peculiar flavour.

It is Chaucer's use of iconographic details along with physical and individual traits that serves to develop and elaborate the implication in the prologue. The description of the pilgrims becomes symbolical as there is an emphasis on the underlying abstraction in almost each of the Canterbury pilgrims.

Thus Chaucer is an artist and he works by artifice in a very different context.

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