

CHAUCER'S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN PROLOGUE

Chaucer is a great story-writer though his art lies not so much in the originality of matter as in the novelty of treatment. There appear poetry, wit, irony, laughter and also moralising in his artistic handling of the available material. While narrating a tale, a pilgrim story teller is influenced by the situation in which he is prompted to tell a tale. The main thread of interest is all the time kept in view and the subsidiary threads simply help in substantiating the main issue by comparison and contrast explicitly and cutting descriptive passages to the minimum plunges into the heart of story. He has an edge over his Italian master Boccaccio who introduces in 'The Decameron' story tellers belonging to the same aristocratic class of society - fashionable ladies and gentlemen. Chaucer also holds an advantage over his English contemporary Lower whose narratives in 'Confessio Amantis' are put into the mouth of a single narrator. Hence Chaucer achieves

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a variety of tone and point of view, unimaginable in Boccaccio or Lower.

Chaucer does not make the telling of tales an excuse or a camouflage for other more 'sinister design', moral, ethical, political or otherwise. Some of his tales are amusing, others revolting. Some tales are lyrical in their sweetness, others are utterly absurd. He takes genuine delight in telling each of the stories. If he tells a tale that is moral in 'The Pardoner's Tale', for instance, it is not the moral that grows out of the tale rather it is the tale that grows out of the moral. Besides, he enriches his tales with irony, suspense, humour etc. to the interest of the reader. Drawing all that is best in the vital English story telling tradition and transmitting them with the art of Dante, the humanism of Petrarch and the humour of Boccaccio, he never allows his readers to waver even for a minute. One feels that perhaps Chaucer could not have disagreed with no other great

humorist of English literature, J.B. Shaw, when he said that if it was only for the sake of art, he would not have cared to write even a single sentence. Chaucer's art, unobtrusive and almost spontaneous, is great in its lack of deliberation and is, without exception, always subservient to the immediate. His art is great but it is primarily the art of story-teller.

Chaucer keeps his eyes fixed not only on the characters he creates but also on the readers who pore his 'Canterbury Tales'. He is willing to take them on and all on the pilgrimage, if they are willing to keep to the rules of the game. As we read we feel sucked by a centripetal force as it were to the crowd. Once we are there Chaucer will not spare from his roguish sense of humour. Reading 'The Pardoner's Tale' we feel we have not been spared from his irony. On being requested to tell a moral tale, the pardoner agrees on the condition that he may be allowed to booze his tongue with wine.

contd.