

Knight's Tale lecture 2: Faculty of English, October 2009

You are lucky to be reading Chaucer. For most of you, this term will be the first time that you have encountered his work. Read him deeply and long: he is a very great poet indeed, and you may well go away from that reading saying, why did nobody tell us about this before? He is capable across six and a half centuries of giving you – me, us moderns - enormous pleasure, formidable intellectual challenges, and he is neither an easy poet or a comfortable one. But he is, above all, fun, and the pursuit of rational pleasure is one of the things a University education ought to be about.

Most moderns come to Chaucer through the *Canterbury Tales*, though few people read them all, as they should. But *for us* they do contain his most approachable work, Now, a lot changes in 600 years. To take just one example: Chaucer's audience, or Shakespeare's, did not think of the self in the same way as we do. They were far less interested in what we call 'characters': they were more concerned with the roles people play, and the imperatives those impose on them, than the 'Freudian' self. And this is highly relevant to a consideration of characters in the Knight's tale and CT as well as Troilus. So DO NOT USE 'Character' as the only way or even an important way into mediaeval and renaissance fiction. Equally, naturalism or realism, which we value highly, were constructed differently then. This does

not mean one approach is better than the other, just that we will get far more out of old art if we make an honest attempt to understand how it was expected to work. After all, our attitudes and expectations, and certainties, are going to look pretty dated even twenty years from now.

Chaucer's reputation for a century after his death, in fact, rested more on *Troilus and Criseyde* than on the unfinished *CT* about which he seems constantly to have changed his mind over the longish period when he was working on it. For *CT* is an experimental work. There are few models for it, and some idea of *CT* as a whole is helpful before we look at *KT*.

2. *CT* is a **frame*** story – a form which immediately allows the possibility of irony and complex cross allusion. Other examples are Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which Chaucer knew well, or Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, or Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. But Chaucer's radical innovation was to make his story tellers a cross section of the society of his day, including and transcending the conventional division of society into the three **estates*** of those who work, those who fight, and those who pray. And then he places them on a highly symbolic yet naturalistic pilgrimage, starting from a real inn in Southwark, kept by a real landlord. Lots of metafictional bells are being rung. Pilgrimage is the one area in that highly rank-ordered society where a Knight

could rub shoulders with a Miller. This device allowed Chaucer to give each teller the sort of tale that would be **decorous*** to him or her: in all decorum, a Knight might not tell a scatological fabliau, or a Miller a dignified and philosophical romance, and usually in literary experience those two extremes of high seriousness and belly laugh would be kept rigidly apart. But because of his frame he can make different narrative genres, normally kept distinct, bump up against, knock sparks off, each other. Thus your expectations of what those different genres will, and can, do is challenged. One of the most interesting features of the design of CT as we have it is that it contains *all* the forms of narrative available to a mediaeval poet, and in no other work are they held within a larger story with its own beginning, middle, and unfinished end: a story, in fact, which is, at least partly, about storytelling.

The tales are decorous to their tellers; but clearly Chaucer's ideas of the possibilities of the teller/tale relationship did develop, as we can see from his probable change to the tale given the *WoB*, from the *MillT* or the *Pard T*. Even so, *Ship T* has a female narrator, 2nd Nun does not even appear in Prol, her tale has a male narrator, and Nun's Priest is not described in Prol. So leave the 'biographical'/'character' link of tales to tellers on one side. If you play it here, you make the Knight a time traveller: the narrator says he *saw* the temples in Book

III. The Knight never wrote anything: he was himself written.

Decorum is the more than adequate key for the time being

4. Even so, look at **portrait** of Kt in Prol

Gen Prologue line 43ff.

A KNYGHT ther was, and that a worthy man, That fro the tyme that he first bigan To riden out, he loved chivalrie, Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie. Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre, And therto hadde he riden, no man ferre, As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse, And evere honoured for his worthynesse. At Alisaundre he was, whan it was wonne. Ful ofte tyme he hadde the bord bigonne Aboven alle nacions in Pruce; In Lettow hadde he reysed, and in Ruce, No Cristen man so ofte of his degree. In Gernade at the seege eek hadde he be Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarye. At Lyeys was he and at Satalye, Whan they were wonne; and in the Grete See At many a noble armee hadde he be. At mortal batailles hadde he been fiftene, And foughten for oure feith at Tramysene In lystes thries, and ay slayn his foo. This ilke worthy knyght hadde been also Somtyme with the lord of Palaty Agayn another hethen in Turkye. And everemoore he hadde a sovereyn prys; And though that he were worthy, he was wys, And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.	
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He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde	
In al his lyf unto no maner wight.	
He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght.	
But, for to tellen yow of his array,	
His hors were goode, but he was nat gay.	
Of fustian he wered a gypon	
Al bismotered with his habergeoun,	
For he was late ycome from his viage,	
And wente for to doon his pilgrymage.	

a) First, notice the stress on ‘fighting for our faith’, or in ‘his lord’s war’: on, in fact, the proper use of arms in legitimate or **Just War** in the defence of Christendom, as articulated by the theologians and all too rarely followed in practice. There was much contemporary argument about concepts and applications of chivalric values and the use of arms – a real problem, given that at the forefront of most English and French people’s minds was that terrible war between those two countries, Christian against Christian, in which the strategic aims of each side were to destroy their opponent’s tax base that paid for the war, which meant burning the countryside and terrible suffering for the poor and the peasants. It is on just such a notorious raid that the Knight’s son, the very attractive Squire, has been, and the point for point contrast, without comment, of those two descriptions in the GP alerts us to the way in which *juxtaposition* in mediaeval art is a way of generating meaning – for which of the two figures is morally superior? yet which man do we find more attractive? So those comfortable abstract nouns – **freedom, trouth, honour, courtesy** - which are so reassuring, become problematic as soon as we have to

put them up against specific situations, actions and choices. We all approve of 'trouthe' in the abstract, but how each of us might define it in a specific situation *on the ground* might be much more of a problem. I'd suggest that one reason for Ch beginning with the portrait of Kt and following it with that of Sq is that it lays out the ground for much of the detailed discussion of those issues in the tales that follow. What *is* a true, courteous, honourable *action*? *Is* there an absolute value? Or is the world, are human beings, much messier, much more ambivalent than those ideals might have us believe? In other words, do the abstract words by which we value things have ANY real meaning, and how do they operate?

b) Then, all those Crusades. Many Englishmen were on many of them – Henry Bolingbroke fought with the Teutonic Knights in Lettow and Pruce, for example: this would make it all seem very close to home, and many of that first audience must have wondered who this man was: 'Where did we meet?' But a moment's checking shows that no one man actually could have been on them all: we are being presented not with an individual, but with a vividly realized type to whom individuals can relate their own experience. Chaucer in the CT frame is quite fond of playing this trick on us, of closing the gap between the fictional and the real, of making us realize that just as we interpret stories and see more than any of the figures within them, so *we too* are

in a story that can be interpreted, and not necessarily in the way we expect.

Finally, notice, the Kt puts down marker for all other Kts in *CT* - including Theseus; as does Clerk for Clerk, Sq. for Sqs.

KT probably predates the very conception of *CT*: it certainly predates most of the tales, and was probably once called 'Palamon and Arcite'. Though it must be classed as a romance, with the interest in the ethics of chivalry and love as they affect individuals in problematic situations that that genre implies, it is a very ambitious poem and stretches the boundaries of its genre to address some pretty serious issues.

A story set in a remote Pagan period, plugging in to two of the great Classical stories, the Fall of Thebes and the career of Theseus, offers Chaucer two huge advantages. The first is that a literate audience already know a context, and are able with irony to look back on a past of which they know the outcome, as the characters do not. That setting also has the great advantage that in the poem *a priori* Christian escape routes are ruled out for characters: issues of destiny, fortune, freewill, suffering have to be worked out from first principles with no recourse to the consolations of Christian religion and revelation. The poem also questions other certainties too often taken for granted: it is no

accident, any more than it was for Shax, who went back to this poem twice, in *MSND* and *2NK*, that Chaucer stresses that Theseus marries an Amazon, and that Emily is also an Amazon: Amazons traditionally subvert all normal ideas of gender and sexual politics, while Theseus is configured as the paradigmatic male knight, conqueror and just ruler. That puts those issues on the table too.

d) Sources:

One source Chaucer used is Statius' Latin epic, the *Thebaid*, and, for his plot, part of Boccaccio's *Teseida* (Chaucer sometimes follows it word for word, which raises questions about how we should think about originality and translation in pre-modern writing and art). But he could not have written *KT*, or *Troilus and Criseyde*, without very detailed knowledge of **Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy****, which he translated at about this time. That is one of those books you really must know, as it underlies so much European writing down to about 1800: for over 1200 years it was on every civilised person's reading list. Boethius discusses questions that are with us now – Freewill, predestination, good, evil, chance, the existence of God - and Chaucer uses his book in his poem to open up issues which were highly controversial to his contemporaries, as well as of enduring importance: issues of Fortune, Free Will, Predestination – and the power of love, sexual, political and cosmic. *The Knight's Tale* is full of the influence of the *Consolation*. There are three places where use of Boethius is particularly concentrated - each, significantly, a speech by a person within the prison of the Tale, seeking to understand his predicament. The speeches of Arcite at 393-414, of Palamon at 445-75, and of Theseus at 2129-83 are all on a related theme: how Providence stands in relation to man's happiness. Arcite is sure that God's providence does all for the best, but cannot understand it; he sees himself as an example of a man stumbling around blindly seeking what turns out to be false happiness - exactly the sort of confusion *Philosophia*

describes in the *Consolation* (III, prose 2). The balanced contrasting speech of Palamon, however, shows no such perspective; he takes the position 'Boethius' did at the beginning of the *Consolation* (cf. I, metrum 5) and cries out against the cruel gods who allow the innocent to suffer. But Theseus blames neither God nor himself. By looking carefully at the divine plan and the principle in the universe whereby the perfect and stable God modulates his purposes through agents who, as they get further removed from his perfection, become less and less stable and perfect, he shows that there is an established order which men must obey and which does turn all to good. This is exactly what Philosophia does in Boethius IV, prose 6 and metrum 6. Clearly the common interest in these speeches means we have to look at them as reflecting on each other; Palamon's and Arcite's are rhetorically and structurally contrasted and obviously present irreconcilable opposites - and the irony that in earthly terms it is the one who complains about the cruelty of the gods who eventually wins the lady. (One wonders whether there is a further irony, in that, however symbolic of harmony the marriage may be, the happiness of marriage is a false felicity in Boethius's analysis.) At the end, however, it is Theseus's view, which shows the limitations of those of Arcite and Palamon, that we are left with; and its nobility is much enhanced by the contrast.

The high seriousness of the poem's agenda is signalled in its very first line, 'Whilom, as olde stories tellen us': the appeal to a respectable and authoritative tradition suggest we sit up straight and pay attention. And the response to the poem in the Canterbury frame is interesting: we are told it is the gentils, the cultured people, who most appreciate its pathos, its irony, and its philosophical seriousness. It is indeed a work which demands our detailed attention and skilful, not casual, reading. That is signalled not only by its length and high diction, but also by its division into four books, on the model of

Classical epic. (successive afternoons?) Each book takes something over half an hour to read aloud, and each except the last ends with an unresolved question or issue as a sort of trailer to keep audience discussion going. The last book's closure, which I shall come to in a few minutes, however, is curiously guarded, and asks us to reconsider the nature of the imaginative experience we have just had and what we thought we had learned from it.

Not a lot happens in a poem of 2250 lines. The poem begins when a war has just finished, and Hippolyta has been won by Theseus' sword, and immediately another war, a Just War according to mediaeval definitions, is undertaken against Thebes. The peace between Athens and Thebes is only finally made when Palamon marries Emily – *not*, note, because she loves her, or she him, but because by such marriage Theseus can achieve a *political* settlement. Love and politics are never far apart in medieval and renaissance life or literature. It is an age when love, real or literary, is politicised and politics is eroticized. And order in the heavens, order in the state, can be conceptualized and figured in human marriage, the concord of a discord, the balancing of Mars and Venus – to quote, among others, Lucretius, and the painting Botticelli* derived from the opening of his great poem on the Nature of Things

SLIDE venus and Mars

- and Shakespeare

Structure and design

The poem is designed, like most mediaeval poetry, to be heard by a listening, plural, audience, many of whom in the first audience the poet might know. And that immediately raises the question of performance, of body language and of all those things we can *never* know about poetry that is heard. But that orality does *not* exclude a single reader later, of course, and we must recognise the sophisticated anticipation of those two quite distinct audiences, working in different ways, in all mediaeval court poetry.

I want you to notice the importance of structure and narrative blocks, the clear marking of the structure of the tale, so that a listening audience, not all of whom will be paying attention at the same time, can grasp the narrative. This is a normal feature of mediaeval narrative and art: you see how it is built, and we are never allowed to forget that the tale is a construct, with certain issues highlighted by its form.

Look at the symmetries of Chaucer's design:

Knight's Tale: outline structure

Book 1: opening: Theseus and Ypolita Marriage/reconciliation of strife between warring realms 	→ 	Book 1 (end): Paradox: irreconcilable conflict: partial view of LOVE	
 	 	Book II (end): Theseus' ironic glance at randomness of LOVE Theseus' control; Theseus as agent of 'destinee'	←

 	 →	Book III (end): Irreconcilable conflicts of gods' promises Saturn's control. A rational mechanism for the 'destinee' Theseus exemplifies at the end of II	LOVE, order, control
 		Book IV (end): Egeus' speech on random 'transmutacioun' (where Boccaccio leaves the tale) Theseus' speech on ultimate purpose and LOVE	 ←
Book IV (close) Palamon and Emelye Marriage/reconciliation of strife between warring realms —		 Leading to an overview of <i>whole</i> Tale, reflecting on it as 'storie', on our sequential perception of it, and on Theseus as ruler and knight	

→ Issues:

Love and Friendship* (→ideas of Friendship* - v the imperatives of love?)

Love and politics

Power (Theseus and the Gods) → Just Ruler

Fortune and Destiny

I talked earlier about character.

How to represent human beings in fiction is discussed in most of the *artes poeticae*, and they drew on two sources: what Classical poets did, and the contemporary academic habit of systematic classification and analysis. The good poet, being *varius et semper idem*, will delight and

inform his audience by the way he 'amplifies' (i.e. elaborates) his work (*amplification*) and *descriptio* is one way of amplifying. Geoffroi de Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* (Chaucer's - with some irony? - *deere maister soverayn*'), and Matthieu de Vendome's *Ars Versificatoria* both discuss description. Matthieu says the poet must aim at a picture that is credible: three eyes simply will not do. He then must choose between an external description, where he will show the appearance of a person, or an internal, where he will outline the possession (or not) of such characteristics as *ratio* (reason), *fides* (faith) *patientia* and *honestas*. The distinctive quality of a person consists often in attributes: name, nature, fortune, social condition, occupation, disposition, judgement, situation, action and speech. In section III of his book, Geoffroi gives examples of how the picture might be completed through the device known as *effictio****HANDOUT**, a convention specifically applied to literary portraiture, particularly of women. One should begin at the top of the head and work down, feature by feature, employing appropriate metaphor and simile and word-play, until 'her leg is graceful in its length, and her tiny foot joyfully dances at its own littleness'. There is no *chiaroscuro* (variations of light and shade) in the description; it is all vivid, sharp, evenly lit, like the figures in an illuminated manuscript. Moreover, it is all objective; the metaphors and similes, even, relate the perfections of the person to referents such as snow, ivory, jewels, gold, the sun, stars, and so on. It is in exactly in this way that we get our first glimpse of Emelye. The id or ego of the person (had such concepts been invented) could hardly be handled by such a method. The concept of literary character, then, tends to externalize what we would internalize. (This makes it perhaps easier to see why allegory was so popular.)

Clearly, behind such character-drawing lie important assumptions about its place in the economy of narrative. The poet's control of his material is absolute; he shapes it to his own design, to which he often explicitly alludes; second, the persons are merely one element in the total conception, and subserve the interests of the whole. They must never become, or even seem, independent, and the action of the poem puts them under inescapable constraints. Third, naturalistic description is not really a goal - though vividness may be. Thus it is the meaning of the

whole work to which ultimately our attention will be directed, rather than to a narrow appreciation of character for its own sake.

Chaucer never challenged these basic assumptions even though he treats the rhetorical manuals with confident freedom - as any good poet would. In his entire work, Chaucer gives us only a few *effictiones* - for example, the comic one of Alisoun in *The Miller's Tale*, where the comparisons all link her with animals and food – in other words, appetite and the body - and the serious one of Blanche in *The Book of the Duchess*. Elements of the *effictio* stress the inappropriately attractive femininity of the Prioress in the *General Prologue* – and just in passing we might note that *all* the descriptions in the Prologue deliberately break the rhetorical rules for a very interesting reason: by so doing their clumsiness can characterise the undescribed narrator as a moral idiot, a man of no judgment or competence.

The Knight's Tale has two longish personal *descriptions*, balanced in method, form and length, but they are of characters with mere walk-on parts, Emetreus and Lygurge, in Book III. These are objective, heraldic and symbolic, rather than personal; the colours and animal similes prepare us for the tournament in which they are to take part. We have no formal portrait of Theseus: we see him only in action, action which is prejudged for us by the epithets 'noble' and 'gentle' prefixed to his name, and the categories 'duc' and 'conquerour'. Arcite and Palamon completely lack any detailed physical presence we can visualize; as in Theseus's case, we see them by their roles, simply as young knights and lovers, and at the beginning they are distinguishable neither by syntax or coat armour:

Two yonge knyghtes liggyng by and by,
 Bothe in oon armes, wroght ful richely.
 (153-4)

It is evident that while we can - and should - visualize the two kings in order to be able to grasp the splendour and seriousness of the set-piece tournament, in the characters that really matter in the Tale Chaucer deliberately makes us look at roles and actions rather than at personal details. Similarly with Emelye; we might expect a full-scale *effictio*, but

instead the only objective information we receive about her in the twenty lines of her first appearance (177-97) is that she was an early riser, had yellow hair in a long braid right down her back, and was gathering flowers to make a garland. The rest of these lines concentrate on subjective responses - 'fairer than the lily', 'fresher than May', 'singing in a heavenly way like an angel'. The imprecision of the correlative leaves Emelye deliberately vague, yet the similes show how people - the audience - might react to her if they saw her. We learn nothing at all about Emelye herself at this point. It is through the action, then, rather than description that Chaucer explores the roles and values in which he is really interested.

The lack of naturalism extends further. As in many poems, Chaucer gives his characters long, elaborate speeches, at significant points in the narrative, quite unlike anything that *could* be spoken under stress or on the spur of the moment. Frequently they have elaborate rhetorical articulation, their range of reference deliberately reflects on and deepens our view of the narrative, and no distinctive style is developed for each speaker. The artificiality is obvious. But an analogy with opera may help; people don't sing like angels if they are dying of tuberculosis, they don't naturally cast their thoughts in rondo form if they think they have been cuckolded, and action and consequence certainly don't stop while they get it off their chest. But we accept the unrealistic convention of the aria in opera with no trouble, and the speeches in many poems work in an exactly similar way. The action - often very abbreviated- brings us to a crucial point in its development, and then either the narrator or one of the characters he is controlling may take off into an elaborate *tour de force* of eloquence which discusses and 'places' his situation and the story so far. The action halts. This technique is as noticeable in *The Knight's Tale* as it is in *Troilus*.

It is more important that we know that Arcite and Palamon are knights, brothers in arms, and in love, with contradictory loyalties, than that we should know what they like for breakfast or the colour of their hair; it's more important that Emelye is a young Amazon, reluctant to marry, than we know what exactly she looked like: we can do that for ourselves. And

note that as the two young men look at her they do not see the same thing: Arcite sees a woman, while Palamon sees *through* the woman to the goddess: their loves for her are formally contradictory but materially different. It does matter in the poem that in that sight of Emily, you get several of the key ideas of the poem coming together: the prison from which the two men look out is the prison of our limited knowledge in this world, Arcite sees the material and sensible, while Palamon the Platonic original, and both are true while they seem contradictory, and the vagueness of Emelye, her devotion to Diana, the goddess of the changing moon that symbolises Fortune, her desire to belong to no-one, figure perfectly the role of chance and fortune in the poem and in the universe which the poem, after Boethius, clearly addresses and which will be a major theme in the *Troilus*.

And now the key figure of Theseus. He matters more as conqueror and ruler who has to mediate the order of the heavens to the realm he rules than he does as person. Yet on this basis Chaucer builds an impressive figure. His speeches have a wisdom, a humour and a sanity - and a seriousness - that we do not find in Boccaccio's Teseo, who's quite incapable of the profundity of Theseus's last speech. Theseus is quickly moved to pity, readily postponing his long-awaited homecoming to avenge wrong - just like the pagan emperor Trajan, who in both Langland and Dante got to Heaven Though easily moved to anger, he's yet capable of reflection, and a knowledge of his own mistakes which allows him to show mercy. He is deliberately linked, in his championing of justice, with the Divine Ruler. (And, indeed, his action, in the way it limits the freedom of Arcite and Palamon's behaviour, is parallel on the human level with the divine control of human parameters in general.) Chaucer deliberately adapted Teseo into something like the ideal ruler. In Theseus we have a picture of what true gentility, nobility, chivalry and rule ought to be like. Theseus's last speech (2128-31) provides the climax and denouement of the Tale and shows him in judgement.

The build-up to it, and its position at the climax of the most 'epic' and 'heroic' of the four books of the Tale, indicates that Chaucer intended it

to be given close attention. What Boccaccio originally gave Teseo as a conclusion, Chaucer transfers to Egeus. A narratorial intervention, to suggest an overview or interpretation of the Tale, would be nowhere near as effective as giving the speech to a person *within* the imagined pagan world, who has to make sense of the events on what are believably his terms. This allows the audience, who, simply by living in a world with a different set of assumptions, do *not* share those terms, to look with detachment at the argument and at the narrative of which it is a part. Moreover, it is not just a philosophical discussion, but is set in a political context and so is part of a public political action. Theseus has been built up through the Tale to emphasize his knowledge, wisdom, power and mercy - as a human analogue of the divine all-seeing wisdom, as all rulers ought to be - and there is nothing in this speech which is inconsistent with the type of figure he is or the type of utterance he has been given so far; rather, it is a natural conclusion to it. Highlighted by Egeus's facile emphasis on mere change, it immeasurably deepens the issues and attempts to see behind mere vicissitude, which the events could (and for Egeus, do) exemplify, to some notion of causality and purpose.

The speech's structure reflects its narrative context, in a parliament where political action has to be taken. (Criticism of it for not keeping on a consistent theoretical level is, therefore, beside the point.) It moves from an argument about general ideas, through exemplification, to a series of general conclusions. It then quite properly turns to the special applications of these ideas; philosophy must in the end take account of the everyday problems of living in this 'wrecched world'. Theseus may see further and wield more authority than anyone else in the Tale, but he is still human, still limited - as are we all - in knowledge. He is still, in fact, in the prison of this world, and his wisdom is perhaps the best that can be gained without the revelation of God in Christ that is - in terms of this poem and its rhetorical decorum - not open to him. The audience, however, by *having* this revelation, *can* perhaps see a little further. They will certainly notice the irony that, despite the neat conclusion to the story of Arcite and Palamon, the married couple have lost at least eight years of their lives which no Theseus can give back, and

the road to this conclusion has been paved with suffering. The human condition, even for the man who seeks wisdom, like Theseus, is still subject to time and loss. The only alternative to an Egeus-like resignation (or despair) is Theseus's faith in the *ultimate but incomprehensible* goodness and purpose of the universe.

Burt what about those quarrelsome gods in Book III? I have put a long note on the gods on the handout, the main point of which is to stress that for mediaeval and renaissance people the gods effectively personified the operation of the planets on the earth, and were one of the channels by which the Divine Will was mediated to earth. The description of their temples make this idea utterly clear: if you simply look at the description of what is painted there, it matches exactly what we see in the lovely sketches of the Gods and their children in the Mittlealterliches Hausbuch of 1476. Chaucer's ironic point is that these inscrutable superhuman beings or forces have limitations on their knowledge and freedom just as we do on ours; Mars and Venus can make promises that seem to be contradictory, and quarrel about it, but what they do not know is how Time, as represented by the aged Saturn, can make both promises stand. Again, it's the irony of perspective: the same sort of irony that Theseus perceives at the end of Book 2, when he takes control, as he should, of the two knights who are breaking the peace in his domain, and points out that

'She wot not of al this hoote fare,
Iwys, than doth a cokkow or an hare.'

The ironic comedy of the KT stresses the limitedness of human knowledge and vision, and like Dante, whom Chaucer had clearly read before he wrote this poem, sees the reality of human pain and suffering with a fundamentally comic, or, to use a better word invented by Tolkien, 'eucatastrophic', world view. As a contemporary of Chaucer's memorably said, 'All shall be well, all manner of thing shall be well.' – even though the poem squarely recognises the reality of suffering and the apparent lack of purpose in it all.

The KT, then, opens up quite a number of issues – love, fortune, freewill, knowledge and understanding - that Chaucer will develop over the next few years in *Cant Tales*. While it must be seen as originally quite independent, its later position in the frame story does give it an *additional* dynamic and in that position it sets a major part of the agenda of the unfinished *Canterbury Tales*. It puts on the table, as if almost for discussion, a view of the Universe as a place that ultimately has meaning, even if we can only now discern it dimly. It stresses that all is held together by a cosmic love that moves the sun and other stars, as Dante put it. The high romance is immediately followed by a fabliau that offers a complete and pointed contrast in every way - in setting and time, in persons, in values. In *The Miller's Tale* we are firmly thrust into contemporary England - precise details are given - which we take to be comprehensible and meaningful. Yet... the cleverness of Nicholas's plot, even if it had gone according to plan, would have ensured that he could never have enjoyed Alisoun on more than one occasion. His intellectual pursuits are a fraud and are used fraudulently. John understands nothing, not even the basic tenets of his religion, and is the *senex amans* to boot. Finally, the least guilty of all, John, gets the worst punishment and the scorn of his neighbours; the most guilty, Alisoun, gets off scot-free. In this picture of an apparently everyday world, so comfortably secure (unlike the precarious past, where cities fall and realms are destroyed), lurk madness, unreason, injustice. It is a symptom of a meaningless, anarchic and amoral universe.

The detailed echoes of KT in the Miller's Tale are so well known as not to need rehearsing again: but the Miller's telling us he will 'quite' KT alerts us to the conceptual antagonism between them too. The Miller's Tale's world view is the opposite of KT's, unmeaning versus meaning: and in real life you – you, I - have to choose one or the other. There is no third term. The stakes are quite high. And against that background we read on into the world of the symbolic pilgrimage, and have to try to make sense of the kaleidoscope of persons and situation and types of story that are there: as used to be said of *The News of the World*, all human life is there. And then, finally, the

Parson's Tale, where again we can be pretty sure Chaucer intended to place it as a conclusion, provides a detailed diagnosis of what is wrong with man and an assurance of the forgiveness of a loving God.

The Knight's Tale and *The Miller's Tale* then, I see as setting up a dialectic about the nature of the world man inhabits and the nature of his motivating passions which, with great subtlety and profundity, the rest of the book explores. The *General Prologue* has already hinted as much: it opens with the spring morning topos which usually signals a poem about love, and immediately connects this causally with the metaphor of the pilgrimage. Love of one sort or another, from the terrible picture of *The Reeve's Tale*, where the actions of sexual love are used for hate, from the selfish and deceptive *cupiditas* through to the cosmic love which moves the stars, is a recurrent topic. Chaucer's friend Gower, with complete orthodoxy, saw love as the binding force not only in human society but also in the universe. Chaucer takes the same view. Like Gower, his poetry tackles the great questions: who are we? What are we? And what, if anything does it all mean? And you have to respond to those questions too: you have not got the option to duck them unless you choose to live the life of a cabbage, growing in bulk and not in wisdom. One of the reasons we read literature is that it gives us a line on our own experience, helps us articulate our own uncertainties: and offers no easy answers, only endless possibilities. Enjoy Chaucer.