

# Polyphony in The Canterbury Tales: Chaucer, Debate, and Polemic

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## **Polyphony in *The Canterbury Tales*: Chaucer, debate, and polemic**

**Dr. Jonathan Fruoco**

There is a long tradition of formal debate in medieval literature, as I'm certain you all know, and Chaucer's own writings perfectly align themselves with this particular tradition since it often provokes the confrontation of different worlds, each defined by its own logical structures. The notion of debate is thus, in my opinion, fundamentally dialogical in Chaucer's work, for the poet illustrates oppositional structures by a remarkable use of polyphony: his narrator (often his narrative persona) engages in dialogue with the characters he encounters and manages to expose different voices, each one representing a particular perspective (on literature, spirituality...) without submitting them to the monological will of the poet.

It's noteworthy that Chaucer decides to set his *Canterbury Tales* during a pilgrimage that is to say on the road. The chronotope of the road is indeed perfect for Chaucer since it not only gives his poem a great stability but also reinforces his use of polyphony. For it is on the road, at the exact same space and time junction, that people from different classes, situations, religions, genders, and ages come across. It is one of the only places where these people, who would normally be separated by social hierarchies or distances, meet. Chaucer uses this chronotope in *The Canterbury Tales* to justify the presence of all these different people at the same place. But the pilgrims themselves are not dramatic characters. Each is a model of efficiency in his/her particular trade and possesses most of its vices or virtues – something inspired by medieval estates satire. The Knight is, for example, an almost idealized representation of his order: he is described as an admirable, noble and courtly man, defending the values of chivalry, but his military curriculum is a tad too impressive to be believable. He is supposed to have fought in Latvia, Russia, in Granada, in Turkey... And the same is true for the Friar, who becomes the symbol of corruption and hypocrisy within the church. Chaucer thus portrays several generic characters (although some do seem bigger than life) to which he attributes tales. But he actually composes a poem whose narrative structure transcends the great literary movements of the time. If we go back to a Bakhtinian reading of the *Tales*, we realize that Chaucer's existence within the diegesis reduces the force of the author's voice: he becomes one of the characters, and his voice is no more important than the one of his fellow pilgrims: he cannot even finish his first tale. Chaucer's frequent deployment of the 'modesty

topos' is often associated with a form of grotesque realism<sup>1</sup> whose purpose is to diminish the strength of his poetic persona. In *The House of Fame*, for instance, Geoffrey barely interacts with the world he is visiting and his own physical description as a rather 'paunchy' fellow, who knows very little about love and who does not seem to be interested in sudden spiritual elevation, gets him further and further away from Dante in *The Divine Comedy*. And it is particularly interesting to note that Chaucer's persona is no longer in contact with the values of courtly love in *The Canterbury Tales*. The various portraits of the pilgrims are accordingly held together by a nonspecific narrator, capable of adopting and responding to various perspectives; and this narrator shows a surprising interest in villains, thieves, and rogues. Such characters are barely present in Chaucer's writings before the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, but we suddenly find ourselves with four in a bunch, which marks as Nevill Coghill remarked 'a sudden crescendo of crooks' (Chaucer, Coghill & Tolkien, 1958/1965, 14). The narrator seems fascinated by the sins and crimes of his fellow travelers and even describes the Pardoner as 'a noble ecclesiaste' (GP, l. 708), which is rather surprising.

Chaucer thus transforms his narrator into a character embodying the traditional characteristics of the 'fool' figure, namely a polemical lack of understanding of the conventional nature of the world. Indeed, Mikhail Bakhtin tells us that the 'fool' is a major 'vector of incomprehension' that exemplifies linguistic variety in a work of fiction. Polemic, or willing incomprehension, could thus be considered as one of the best ways to stimulate polyphony since it gives the author the chance to represent the world with the words of someone who does not understand its conventional nature, or refuses to understand it. Since Chaucer is free from the conventions of courtly poetry in the *Tales*, he positions his narrative persona in such a way as to allow him to be confronted with different literary genres, different social classes, and professions, and thus with hypocrisy, lies and other similar forms of language. The 'fool' is accordingly always in a dialogical opposition to a religious, political or poetical discourse whose nuances he does not entirely understand. Chaucer uses this persona to provoke an extradiegetic dialogue between different literary genres, each one associated with a pilgrim/tale and with a complete aesthetic of its own. He gives free reins to a cacophonous literary diversity exemplified by a remarkable plurivocality and polyphony. We jump from the Merchant's Tale's rhetoric to the elegant simplicity of the Clerk's Tale; from the grace and spirituality of hagiography to the obscenity of the fabliau. What Chaucer does here is actually creating a unique poetic for each tale.

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<sup>1</sup> The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, the lowering of all that is abstract, spiritual, noble, and ideal to the material level.

The central position of the ‘Chaucer pilgrim’ allows the poet to represent different perspectives through the eyes of this character and because he does not comprehend what is obvious to everyone else, it gives the author the chance to externalize and to put those different social languages and their structural logic into perspective. Chaucer turns *The Canterbury Tales* into an integral and multiform reflection of his time. Now, can this linguistic microcosm be considered as prefiguring one of the principal constituents of the novel as a genre? I like to think so, but I’m very interested to hear what my esteemed colleagues here might say on the subject.