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Converging of Traditions and Usability of the Short Story: Orality and Frame in the *Canterbury Tales*

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Foreword

The present work aims at pointing out those aspects of the *Canterbury Tales* that are ascribable to the literary tradition of the frame narrative collection, which had established itself successfully in Europe. In particular, the analysis intends to relate those aspects and the characteristics typical of this tradition to the oral dimension present in the examined work, and to the choice of the *narratio brevis* genre made by Chaucer for the composition of what is considered to be one of the masterpieces of English literature. This paper takes into consideration literary and historic-literary parameters, as well as linguistic and historical ones: all aspects that, as far as England is concerned, are even harder to be looked at individually, in particular with reference to the Middle Ages. Starting with theoretical and general premises the analysis enters into the specific situation of the short fiction genre and of the medieval narrative collection, to further focus on the example of Chaucer's work.

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The short story or tale, be it fictional or non-fictional, is the oldest narrative form. S*torytelling* was among primitive and ancient cultures a means to acquire and pass on knowledge and experience, thus enabling the formation of the identity of the people. The knowledge, the view of the world, and the beliefs of a certain culture were thus encoded and

transmitted orally through generations, relying on collective memory. This culture used to be transmitted in narrative forms that we would call *short stories*, and medieval as well as modern short narrations descend precisely from the oral tale characteristic of ancient and primitive cultures. Primitive man shared with his community oral tales that would relate the experience of his relationship with the surrounding world, with the cosmos, and the first encounters with the spiritual dimension of life, what Charles May calls "the sacred". (131)

In medieval literature and culture there is a merging of different traditions which are adjusted to new needs and functions. In this historical period the *narratio brevis* has an important role and occurs in various kinds of texts from different traditions (Classical, local, Christian, Oriental), among which I will briefly mention the most important ones: *exempla*, hagiographies, sapiential texts such as proverbs, sayings and *sententiae*, Provençal *vidas*, French *fabliaux*, Breton *lais*, and Tuscan novelle. But even *romances* often have an episodic structure (deriving from the composite nature of their subject matter, and I am referring here in particular to the Arthurian matter), so that some smaller narrative units enjoy a certain amount of autonomy and self-sufficiency compared with the work of which they constitute a part. During the Middle Ages, in fact, the short narrative text, in its written form, is usually included in a longer text or collected in compilations. It is therefore important to study the evolution of the genre of the short tale bearing in mind its relation with the collection of narratives. In this perspective, the most influential traditions in the development of the short narrative during the Middle Ages have been the Christian tradition of parables, hagiographies and *exempla*, and that of sapiential texts and of exemplary tales of frame narratives.

The *exemplum* is an anecdote intended to offer and indicate a model of behavior, be it positive or negative, and for this didactic nature is primarily used in sermons and homiletic texts, drawing inspiration from the role of the evangelical parables. It is not a prerogative of the religious sphere though, but it is widely used also in didactic writings, such as the "*specula principis"*, or the collections of sapiential texts. The *exemplum* is in other words a short narrative with a moralistic or didactic purpose, and therefore has a typically explanatory and illustrative, exemplifying,

function in the use writers and intellectuals made of it, just as the definition itself suggests.

Another literary phenomenon that has certainly and greatly contributed to the success and diffusion of the short story and of the frame narrative collection is represented by the Oriental tradition of frame narrative, which spread all over Europe starting from Spain. This tradition originated in Arabia around the VII century A.D., when the *Pañcatantra*, an Indian collection of stories, was translated into Arabic, and whose Sanskrit original is unfortunately lost. In the translation process, the Arabs re-named the collection *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, and added a new element to it, one destined for great success: the frame narrative, that is a main story inside which smaller individual narratives are embedded.

Medieval Europe came into contact with this tradition through Spain, which was the main spreading center of the Arabic culture, in particular thanks to the extraordinary translation work carried out by the famous "School" of Toledo. But besides being an important center for translation and spreading, Spain was in the Middle Ages also a center where works inspired by the Oriental narrative tradition were produced, and these texts represent milestones in the development and spreading of the frame narrative throughout Europe. The most important and most influential text in this panorama is certainly the *Disciplina clericalis* written by a Petrus Alfonsus in the first half of the XII century. It is a collection of thirty-four *exempla* framed by a dialogue between an Arab and his son, a master and his disciple. This work has a very strong narrative character although it appears to be closer to the sapiential text for its didactic purpose. Petrus Alfonsus is certainly a very peculiar figure: he is a *judío*, that is a Jew, converted to Catholicism, and around the years 1110-1115 goes to England, where he becomes a physician at Henry I's court. Among the most interesting aspects of this work is certainly that regarding its formal structure: the *dispositio* of the subject matter is not immediately intelligible, but Petrus Alfonsus randomly follows a sort of order and structure, so much so that critics talk of lack of organization with regard to his work. As a matter of fact, this is a feature characteristic of the Arabic literature that was certainly his model.

The Arabs had towards the arrangement of the subject matter a very

different approach than that of the Western tradition, which follows the Aristotelian theory of the unity of action, which has to be represented as finished and complete. As Katherine S. Gittes explains (239-240), the Arabs sought inspiration for the organization of their matter within mathematical principles, and among their greatest intuitions precisely in the field of mathematics was the concept of the infinite, of immensity and boundlessness, so that they "saw the whole as less confining, and less structured, un- limited in its potential and neither more nor less important than the part" (240). This concept find its way through literary texts in the form of a presentation of narrative episodes not clearly linked to one another, but held together by an organizing structure external to the narratives and called frame, which is usually free and open.

This preference for an open structure is not only characteristic of medieval Arabic literature, but also of the European literature that draws inspiration from or is influenced by it, such as the above mentioned *Disciplina clericalis*, and other later works, such as the *Decameron* by Boccaccio or the *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer. Thirteenth-century England was very open and sensitive towards cultures and traditions coming from countries other than France, and in particular towards Italy and Spain. This century thus witnesses the development of the frame narrative which spread from Spain, but found in Italy one of its highest expressions through the above mentioned *Decameron* by Boccaccio. Two of the greatest English writers of the XIV century chose to adopt this narrative structure: John Gower in his *Confessio Amantis*, and Geoffrey Chaucer in the *Legend of Good Women* and in the *Canterbury Tales*, the work which consecrated him as the father of English literature.

As Piero Boitani points out in his book *La narrativa del Medioevo inglese* (Narrative of the English Middle Ages), Sklovskij identifies "due tipi fondamentali di collezioni di storie, ambedue, ad un certo punto, presenti in Europa: l'uno è basato su un artificio narrativo motivato (ritardo e disputa hanno uno scopo preciso, che tende ad essere drammatico); l'altro è basato su un artificio narrativo (la cornice) occasionale o

di puro intrattenimento" (162).[1] Whereas both Gower's work and Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* clearly belong to the first group of motivated artifice, because the main story is intended to delay the unfolding of the action in the main story through the narration of stories, the *Canterbury Tales* display an occasional artifice, because the narration of the tales on the part of the pilgrims has the only purpose of entertaining the company during the journey to Canterbury. This work thus shows how in England there developed a narrative taste that goes beyond the moralistic or didactic purpose of a text.

As narrated in the General Prologue, the work tells how twenty-nine pilgrims gathered in Southwark, London, at the Tabard's Inn, to go on a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury. The innkeeper, who immediately takes on a leading role in the story, suggests that to make the journey more pleasant each pilgrim tell two stories on their way there and two stories on their way back, and he promises as a reward for the best story a dinner offered by all the other pilgrims on the return from Canterbury. The innkeeper thus emerges as the moderator of the main action, the narration of stories during the pilgrimage, and as the judge of the same stories in view of the awarding of the prize.

The work is unfinished, and has reached us in ten fragments; in much the same way, the pilgrims' journey also remains unfinished, because we will not see them reach Canterbury, since the narration breaks off before that. But what is mainly affected by this incompleteness is precisely the innkeeper's project. Not only it is not completed because the journey itself is not completed, but the plan itself is abandoned in the course of the narration. The innkeeper soon begins to realize that it is unlikely that the pilgrims will manage to tell two stories each, and he is therefore forced to change the plan, so that the pilgrims will tell only one story each. At the beginning of Fragment X he announces that only one tale is missing to complete this new plan of his, but this tale is the twenty-fourth, not the

[1] "Two fundamental kinds of collections of stories were both present, at a certain point, in Europe: one is based on a motivated narrative artifice (delay and dispute have a precise purpose, which tends to be dramatized); the other is based on a narrative artifice (the frame) that is occasional and merely entertaining", (my translation).

twenty-ninth, and it turns out not to be a tale, but a meditation of the Parson.

Thus, the tales are not in thematic relation with the main action, or with the motif of the journey and the pilgrimage. The only connection between the internal and the external narration is represented by the transition passages—links—from the frame to the tales. These links, in turn, are not only connections between the two levels of the narrative, but they also have the function of authenticating the story. The frame, which consists of the General Prologue and the links, is meant to represent a real and realistic situation (at least hypothetically).

A tool by which this interpretation can be made possible is supplied precisely by Chaucer's character. He presents himself as narrator of the main narrative and first person narrator, since he is also one of the twenty-nine pilgrims, the protagonists of the adventure. He tells the story remembering it from memory and he relates the exact words with which they were told, "Whoso shal telle a tale after a man, / He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan / Everich a word," (I, Prologue, ll. 731-733)[2], and the dialogues between the pilgrims as well as the description of the pilgrims themselves.

Chaucer-narrator-pilgrim had supposedly been eyewitness to the events he relates and this alone should suffice to convince the audience of the real dimension of the story. As Walter J. Ong explains in his article "Orality, Literacy, and Medieval Textualization," the legal proceedings in 14th-century England were largely based on orality: "Oral witnesses could certainly not be forged, and they could be rigorously cross-examined to expose other falsifications. So one rated oral testimony higher than texts" (4). This practice is representative of the role held by orality in the English society and culture of the time. Medieval literature and culture are pervaded by orality: this is also due to the fact that more often than not their realization was exclusively oral. Not all the stories that were read or recited were later also written down. This is more true in England, where after 1066 and the Norman Conquest of the island, the Anglo-Saxon vernacular ceased to be used for writing, and especially for

[2] Robinson (24). All the quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* are from the edition of F. N. Robinson indicated in the References.

writing literature, and survived only as a spoken language among the people of Anglo-Saxon descent. The first works to be written in English after the Conquest appear at the beginning of the 13th century and show clear signs of an oral culture, which makes extensive use of formulaic techniques and rhetoric devices with a mnemonic function, such as alliteration. Only around the mid-14th century English becomes the official language, and writers who choose to use it in the composition of their works increase in number, but these texts are mainly intended for oral performance, although new awareness begins to spread seeing English as a language with equal literary dignity as French, Latin or Italian.

This peculiar socio-linguistic situation is also reflected in the *Canterbury Tales*, where the tension between orality and writing is a main motif. By rendering the main story events real and authentic, Chaucer convinces us that the twenty-nine pilgrims have really told these tales orally during the trip to Canterbury. The dialogues between the pilgrims which precede or follow the tales, pressing and requesting or commenting them, or that interrupt them at times (as in the *Miller's Tale* and the *Summoner's Tale*), have the function of representing the oral reality of these narrations. Moreover, the individual narrators-pilgrims cram their tales with elements characteristic of oral communication: calls to attention, exhortations to listening, direct questions to the audience, use of the second plural person, deictics, accumulation of elements and details, and a certain taste for digression.

The tale that probably best illustrates this picture of pilgrims telling stories to each other on their way to Canterbury is the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. There is a big disproportion between the Tale's prologue and the tale itself compared with the other Tales: the *Wife of Bath's Tale*'s prologue is, in fact, about twice as long as the tale (Prologue: ll. 1-856, Tale: ll. 857-1264), whereas in all the other cases the prologue, or the introduction, is short and consists of a brief exchange of comments and words which works as a transition from one tale to the next, and from the external to the internal narration. The Wife of Bath, on the other hand, uses the 856 verses of her prologue to tell the pilgrims about her love life and her five marriages; as she tells about herself, the Pardoner intervenes to spur her to proceed with the tale, in much the same way as the young student in the

Disciplina clericalis. At the end of the prologue and before the actual tale starts, we witness a dialogue among some of other pilgrims: the Friar comments on the length of the prologue and thus a squabble is sparked off between him and the Summoner, which is a prelude to the *quiting* that will involve them at the end of the *Wife of Bath's Tale.*

In this brief but colorful autobiography, the Wife of Bath also includes the narration of a tale she used to tell her husbands, in a system of Chinese boxes that allows a glimpse on the unlimited potential of narration and storytelling. This artifice is reiterated during the narration of the tale, where at one point she claims to be bored and tired of the tale she is telling (the adventures of a knight at the court of King Arthur who is forced by a promise to marry an old woman who is in fact a fairy, and turns into a beautiful girl after the wedding), and she then changes tale and tells about King Midas in the version of Ovid, but eventually resumes the tale of the Arthurian knight. The old woman of the tale, in turn, makes a speech to the knight which is in fact a real philosophical and moral oration starting with religious considerations on Christ's message, and then moves on to quote Dante, Seneca and Boethius. The taste for digression characteristic of oral communication, and so typical of medieval culture and literature, could not be better represented here.

If all these elements attest to the pre-eminent role of orality in this great literary work, it is also necessary to underscore how the strong tension between orality and writing that we find in the *Canterbury Tales* is likewise dominating and informing. Chaucer-narrator who tells about the pilgrimage with an effort of his memory, remembering, also tells us clearly that this work is a book. As Boitani has pointed out, the Knight has a "lapsus rivelatore" (327), a slip of the tongue, when he says: "But of that storie list me nat to write" (v. 1201),[3] and there are more of these slips, like at the presentation of the *Miller's Tale* when Chaucer intervenes, disclosing the coarse nature of the tale and pointing out that it should not be ascribed to him, but to the teller, the Miller, and he invites us to turn the page if we do not wish to hear the tale: "And therfore, whoso list it nat *yheere*, / *Turne over the leef* and chese another tale" (vv. 3176-3177).[4]

[3] Robinson (1957: 29).
[4] Robinson (1957: 48). My emphasis is intended to point out the contradiction

Moreover, Chaucer-author intrudes at the end of the work and interrupts the long meditation of the Parson, thus delivering us an ending which has the flavor of a testament, and where he explicitly talks about books. And the *Canterbury Tales* are without any doubt a book, but the individual tales have almost certainly had an oral realization, read or recited possibly in the presence of John of Gaunt, or even of the Royal Court, where Chaucer had worked as officer for a long time. After all, the independent nature of the tales allows an episodic reading and narration. That this book used to be read aloud is information that we receive from Chaucer himself, who states precisely in the epilogue: "Now preye I to hem alle that *herkne* this / Litel tretys or *rede*" (vv. 1082-1083).[5]

The oral characteristics I have been pointing out so far, however, can be both an indication of a fictional representation of orality, and the remnant trace of an original orality of the work. Given the fragmentary state in which the work has reached us, we have no way of knowing whether Chaucer had in mind to take the text up again and revise it, and polish it up. There is no doubt that even if this was the case, he probably would have confined himself to remove and discard only those that Boitani calls "smagliature, sfasature" (331), gaps, breaks of continuity, or inconsistencies (*write* instead of *tell*), but he certainly would not have reduced the oral character of the narration which is clearly wanted and sought for.

In this work Chaucer in fact represents two instances of storytelling: that of the pilgrims who tell stories on the way to Canterbury, and that of Chaucer telling about the pilgrimage. By definition, storytelling is an interactive oral performance that the narrator offers to a physically present audience. It is a communicative process whereby the narrator presents a story to his audience which does not have a passive role, but is called to recreate in their mind the reality of the story, so that the story itself finds completeness in the mind of the listener. This emerges clearly in the *Canterbury Tales* where the pilgrims identify with the stories that are told to them, become keen on them or are bored or amused by them; in any case they all contextualize the stories according to their own personal life

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between *yheere* 'to hear' and the turning of the page, *turne over the leef*, a gesture which obviously refers to reading.

[5] Robinson (1957: 265). My emphasis calls attention to *herkne* and *rede*.

and experiences, and to their values and beliefs.

Chaucer makes sure to build a dialogue with his audience as well: in the first place, he presents himself as narrator, witness and character, and in the second place, he intervenes in his capacity as the author as well as the narrator of the work, so that we can visualize in our minds not only the tales told by the pilgrims, but the pilgrimage story itself and the narrative game organized by the innkeeper, and finally the oral performance of the work.

This stratagem has a precise purpose: provide a portrait of the reality of literary production and realization of the Middle Ages; Boitani rightly observes that "la finzione interna dell'opera—il racconto orale di un pellegrino ad altri pellegrini—riproduce una realtà socio-letteraria, la relazione del testo e dell'autore col loro pubblico originario" (330-331).[6]

In order to obtain this, Chaucer chooses the literary form of the oral narration (the tales told by the pilgrims) integrated in another narrative also of an oral nature (the frame, the pilgrimage). The frame narrative is thus particularly apt for this kind of representation: it allows Chaucer to create two communicative levels which are both fictional and mimetic expression of a reality he personally lived in his time. Boitani writes that "non è detto che i diversi livelli narrativi debbano per forza essere delle parallele che non si incontrano mai" (331);[7] and in fact, Chaucer makes them meet thus assigning to orality the function of pulling the strings of the narration towards the same spot.

Another reason that might have driven Chaucer to use the genre of the tale and of the frame narrative lies precisely in the nature of the genre. The *narratio brevis* is the privileged space for experimentation, both on a thematic and stylistic level, and on a functional and aesthetic level. This usability and versatility derive from the fact that it is a genre which still maintains strong links with orality, and thus leave room for spontaneity and digression. Moreover, like Pietro Taravacci writes, "la [sua] con-

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[6] "The internal fiction of the work—the oral tale of a pilgrim to other pilgrims—reproduces a socio-literary reality; the relation of the text and its author with their original and intended audience", (my translation).

[7] "the different narrative levels do not necessarily have to be parallel lines that never meet", (my translation).

naturale episodicità ben si adatta a diversi contesti e a differenti finalità" ("Introduzione" to the *Sendebar*, 40).[8]

In virtue of this, the tale is the ideal genre to represent variety and diversity. The *Canterbury Tales* have been interpreted as a gallery of the fourteenth-century English society, as Ermanno Barisone defines it, "la vasta e multiforme epopea della società medievale inglese, colta nel periodo in cui questa stava passando dal feudalesimo all'organizzazione nazionale" ("Introduzione" to *Racconti di Canterbury*, V).[9] Through the General Prologue and its characters, this work thus offers a portrait of the varied social stratification reached in England at the time. This gallery of social types finds it *raison d'être* not only in the purpose of representing mimetically the world where Chaucer lives, but it is also functional to another intention of the poet, as are the tales.

Chaucer chooses a short form of narrative not only to create vivid and effective cameos, but also to measure himself against and venture upon the writing of the tale in its various forms circulating in the Middle Ages. Thus, among the *Canterbury Tales* we have *fabliaux* (*Miller's Tale*, *Reeve's Tale*, *Cook's Tale*), *lais* (*Franklin's Tale*, *Wife of Bath's Tale*), *exempla* (*Friar's Tale*), sermons (*Parson's Tale*), even short epics (*Knight's Tale*) and *romances* (*Wife of Bath's Tale*), in the wake of the short *romances* composed in England at the time, such as *Sir Perceval of Galles*, of which Chaucer pilgrim gives a pungent parody through his tale, *Sir Thopas*. Chaucer then composes a representation of the variety and of the level of stratification reached by the genre, which is used for different functions, styles, tones and themes, and in different contexts.

The variety of sources Chaucer draws upon for his tales also shows the versatility of the genre, which is particularly suitable to absorb new traditions, themes, forms, and to introduce them into a given culture. Since it is not strictly codified, but instead essentially determined by its content and function, the tale or short story especially lends itself, even today, to

[8] "[Its] connatural episodic nature is very suitable to diverse contexts and to different aims", (my translation).

[9] "The vast and multiform epic of medieval English society, caught in the moment when it was passing from feudalism to a national organization". (My translation)

experimentation and to be used as a pioneering means to introduce novelties.

Moreover, to paraphrase Maria Corti, since orality releases through the formulaic technique "un'energia che si auto genera" (Frye cit. in Corti, 11),[10] it generates a potentially unlimited narration. In the same way, the frame narrative, as an open structure which does not define or limit its parts, its units, produces a sense of boundlessness so that there is not a real end of the narrations. For these reason, the innkeeper's plan, being so structured and defined, is doomed to fail: and it fails not once, but two, three times.

Whatever the reason may be for which the *Canterbury Tales* remained unfinished, Chaucer was certainly well aware that these characteristics of the short tale and of the frame narrative. In this perspective, the *Canterbury Tales* are, among other things, also a meta-literary fiction: they reproduce the reality of the heterogeneous and mostly of the oral dimension of medieval literature, which manifests itself both within the works and in their realization and fruition.

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[10] "A self-generating energy", (my translation).

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