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Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales, General Prologue

Question 2: The Ranking of Rank

The primary position of the knight--in both the catalogue verse as well as the telling of tales proper--offers an immediate indication of linear ranking. It is certainly possible to divide and subdivide and thus discover logical relationships within and between groups, explaining their relative positions in the general catalogue: Knight and squire and yeoman together provide a highly moral secular group; the prioress, monk, friar, a dubious religious group; the cook, skipper, doctor, weaver, parson and ploughman together form a group of Gildsmen and provide a transition to more mundane folk. And so on.

There is also an artistic consideration at work in the order of presentation, providing contrast: high morality with the mercenary, ostentation with modesty, sincerity with deceit; providing surprise: the *persona* narrator grouped with the lowest order of fellows; providing ironic juxtaposition: the impeccable preacher and his brother, the dung dealing ploughman.

These several and many groupings are testament to the depth and quality, the thoughtfulness of the "General Prologue"; but they are, nonetheless, divisions and subdivisions. Above all else, the governing principle that settles the verse catalogue is social ranking in real medieval world terms--the ranking the honest man on the street might offer--beginning with he held in

highest esteem and concluding with the lowest.

It is not entirely certain that the apology (line 743) refers to the "General Prologue" and not to the tale telling that follows, in which order of rank is clearly cast aside; allowing though that it does refer to the verse catalogue, the placement of the *persona* narrator seems problematical. If we examine closely his diction, description and asides, we find however an accent produced by the firm placement of tongue in cheek. An ironic voice. A *satirist's* voice. This being the case, we must, as he himself must, place the *persona* narrator above all others, for the satirist must necessarily assume the loftiest of positions, from which vantage the clearest view is offered; he must be capable of the sound judgements of one who knows human nature; he must be of a certain mind, that he might certainly pronounce those judgements on those beneath.

Question 7: Satire & Comedy

Satire attempts to expose wickedness, human folly, hypocrisy and pride and greed. It need not, by definition, be humorous--Horace hardly warrants a belly-laugh--but since its main weapon is ridicule (making the medicine easy to swallow?), humour is often an integral part.

Comedy alone is more benign, often less morally didactic, seeking to entertain the audience more than improve it. Comedy might expose a few follies, but it is above all else a celebration of life rather than a criticism of it--hence the conventional happy ending.

"The General Prologue" offers both comedy and satire. The

democratic spectrum of characters, high to low, suggests a love of humanity on the part of Chaucer; his particular selection, a love of character.

Nevertheless, though the *persona* narrator seems enchanted by his fellow travellers, endeared to them, gently and happily agreeing with them, the accent of irony can often be discerned. What sometimes seems like happy comedy is truly sombre satire, whispering its whisper. The whisper begs pardon regarding the catalogue and rank; the whisper is self-diminishing: the whisper of a simple man; the whisper agrees the monk should partake in earthly pleasures: "And I seyde his opinion was good," (184) offering further ponderings upon unmonk Monk activities. And, of course, it is the whisper that makes accomplices of we, the readers, for we share a certain knowledge with the narrator. It is the whisper that make us smile.