

The Monk's Tale: The Aristotelian Appraisal

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A literary work expresses the spirit of the age in which it is written for it is a complex interaction of social and cultural factors, not an isolated phenomena. From the time immemorial, religion and philosophy have been the chief agents of literature. Especially, the medieval England in which Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) lived was bound by the medieval culture of Europe by religion, war, poetry, science, philosophy, and the institution of feudalism. The philosophical ideas which Chaucer assimilated in the *Canterbury Tales* are numerous in their sources and are interfused with the christian perspectives of his age. However, this immortal collection contains the Aristotelian concepts, too. Considering the fact that the triumph of the medieval age was the synthesis of the Aristotelian philosophy and Christianity in the name of Thomism, the *Canterbury Tales* reflects conciously or unconsciously the Aristotelian concepts.

At first, Chaucer was widely read and admired as the learned, philosophical poet by his contemporaries. Thomas Usk called him "a noble philosophical poet."¹⁾ In his day, this epithet implied learning in natural science as well as in metaphysical science. However, as time passed, this philosophical bent of Chaucer has been ignored by the critics and readers for lack of the knowledge of his age, and for the difficulty of comprehending Middle English idiom. As a result, Chaucer was treated not as a profound mind but rather as a unique story-teller for entertainment. Even a modern critic, Gilbert Hightet stated that, "Chaucer was not a deep or intellectual student of the classics. What he taken from them, is always simplified to the point of bareness."²⁾

As a matter of fact, contrary to Hightet's view, Chaucer was a man of scholarly taste, and of erudition. His works bear witness to no small reading in astronomy and astrology, in alchemy, in medicine, in philosophy, in theology as well as in the classic authors in his day. The Monk's Tale among the twenty-four tales of the *Canterbury Tales* can be one illustration of Chaucer's erudition, and it also reflects the Aristotelian concepts in its plot and theme.

Plot

The Monk's Tale consists of seventeen separate stories of tragedy. As a narrative, the

1) Thomas Usk, "Testament of Love(1387)," *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1357-1900*, 3 vol. ed. C. F. E. Spurgeon(Cambridge, 1952), vol. 1, p.8.

2) Gilbert Hightet, *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influence on Western Literature* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1949), p.95.

Monk's Tale is weak, and as art it cannot hold its own with the majority of the *Canterbury Tales*. It is made up of a series of brief tragic stories gathered from widely divergent sources—from contemporary events to the Bible. As a whole, it becomes a dismal and monotonous narration for the pilgrims, which makes the Knight declare that he could bear no more of these tragedies. Nevertheless, the Monk's Tale has its own seriousness, and shows Chaucer's concept of tragedy. Defining the concept of tragedy, the Monk said he would tell of men of high degree, who fell from their estate:

I wol biwalle, in manere of tragedie,
 The harm of hem that stode in heigh degree,
 And fillen so that ther nas no remedie
 To brynge hem out of hir adversitee.

(B² 1991-1994)³⁾

Lucifer: He tempted himself into believing he could be like God. By an act of choice, man lost the great privilege of a harmonious relationship with God, and by his act opened himself to the burden of time, death and alienation from God. From high estate, because of sin, he therefore fell into hell. Once one of the brightest angels, he is now Satan living in misery.

Adam: Adam's sin, being an act of a creature against the Supreme Creator, is too grievous an offense for a human being to redress. God's mercy provides a solution by which a God-made-man assumes the guilt and pays supreme penalty on behalf of mankind. In God's Providence Adam's fall becomes a fortunate defect, but it brings about the Incarnation of Christ, who becomes man in order to restore the equilibrium, the relationship between man and God.

Samson: He was consecrated to God, renowned for strength, he disclosed his secret to his wife and was deceived. With his hands, he slew a lion. He tied three hundred foxes together and set their tails afire so that they burned all the grains of his enemies. With an ass' jawbone he slew a thousand men. To quench his thirst, a well sprang from this bone. He carried off the gate of Gaza and governed Israel for twenty years. But he told his wife that his strength lay in his hair and she divulged his secret to his foe. So while he slept, his hair was cut and then he became a prisoner. But one day at a festival in a temple, he made his last great effort—he lifted the pillars of the hall and destroyed the temple. All his foes were killed and he with them. So the warning of the story:

Beth war by this ensample oold and playn.
 That no men telle hir conseil til hir wyves
 Of swich thyng as they wolde han secree fayn,
 If that it touche hir lymes or hir lyves.

(B² 2091-2094)

3) F.N. Robinson, ed. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), 265 pp. All the subsequent textual references of the *Canterbury Tales* are drawn from this edition.

Hercules: He was renowned for his strength. He killed the lion, Arpies, stole the golden apple from the dragon which guarded them, and brought Cerberus away. He killed the fiery serpent, Cacus, Antaeus, and the bear. But his sweetheart Dianira sent him a shirt which made his flesh fall off:

Lo, who may truste on Fortune any throve?
 For hym that folweth al this world of prees,
 Er he be war, is ofte yleyd ful lowe.
 Ful wys is he that kan hymselfen knowe!
 Beth war, for whan that Fortune list to glose,
 Thanne wayteth she he man to overthrowe
 By swich a wey as he wolde leest suppose.

(B² 2136-2142)

Nebuchadnezzar: Twice, he conquered Jerusalem and made the Israelites his slaves. Among these was Daniel, interpreter of dreams and who refused to bow down to idols. But Nebuchadnezzar suddenly behaved like a beast until God released him from this state. Since then, he thanked God whom he previously scorned.

Belshazzar: He gave a great feast and as he drank he saw the handwriting on the wall. Only Daniel could interpret the writing. It meant, he said, that Belshazzar would be visited with great pain for scorning God. His kingdom would be given to the Persians and Medes. That same night Belshazzar was slain.

Zenobia: Queen Zenobia, even from childhood, killed wild beast and wrestled with men. She would be no man's slave. She married Odenatus and had two sons. She ruled them. But was finally conquered by Aurelius of Rome who made her march in the streets to mark his triumph and her own downfall.

Peter of Spain: He was beaten by his own brother and deceived and killed by trickery.

Peter of Cyprus: His own men envied his many triumphs over the heathen and killed him while he slept.

Barnabo of Lombardy: Once the Duke of Milan, his nephew and son-in-law had him killed.

Hugeline of Pisa: He was imprisoned with his three children, the eldest barely five years of age. He had been falsely accused by the Bishop and the people turned against him. The whole group was starved to death. First, the boy of three died. He was followed by the other two and finally by their father.

Nero: Nero had the world enthralled and was the proudest of rulers. He burned Rome for amusement and killed the senators to hear men cry. He maltreated his own family. In youth he had a tutor who had him learned and gentle. He later bled Seneca to death for teaching him goodness. But Fortune was stronger than Nero and she decided that he should fall. So the people rose against him and he fled. He ran into a garden where two peasants built a fire. He pleaded to them to kill him, but he was forced to kill himself.

Holofernes: In his time, he was the greatest of military men. He ordered the worship of Nebuchadnezzar, but Eliachim refused to obey. But one night as Holofernes lay drunk, Judith cut off his head.

Antiochus: He was proud and hated God's people. He decided to march to Jerusalem. But God punished him with great pain and made him fall from his chair. He injured himself so badly that time he had to be carried about. Worms crept over his body and he began to smell. He finally died. Thus he was punished for his overvaulting pride.

Alexander: He was a world conqueror with leonine courage. He ruled twelve years and was then poisoned by his own people.

Caesar: He rose to royalty through labor and wisdom. He conquered many lands and defeated Pompey who was later brought to misfortune—his head was cut off by a traitor. When Caesar returned to Rome, Brutus and others conspired against him. He was killed at the Capitol. Thus his good fortune turned to misfortune.

Croesus: Croesus was once led to a fire to be burned. But a heavy rain extinguished the fire, and he escaped. Believing in Fortune for his escape, he decided to make war. One night he dreamt that he was on a tree. Jupiter washed him and Phoebus brought him a towel. His daughter interpreted the tree to be the gallows, the washing the rain. Croesus, she said, would be hanged. And sure enough, he was. Thus, Fortune, when she is trusted most, fails.

Before starting to tell tragedies, the Monk excuses himself telling the stories as they come to his memory:

But tellen hem som bifore and som bihynde,
As it now comth unth my remembraunce,
Have me excused of myn ignoraunce.

(B² 1988-1990)

As the monk declares, there is no tangible organized structure in relating the tragedies, but rather they are formed by the Monk's mental association. Nonetheless, some critics try to find the organizing principle of the tale. P.G. Ruggiers divided the tales into two groups; one is composed of nine tales of tragic betrayal such as Samson, Hercules, Peter of Spain, Peter of Cyprus, Bernabo, Hugelino, Holofernes, Alexander, and Caesar; the other forms the rest of the eight which give different causes of their downfall.⁴⁾ On the other hand, W.C. Strange sees the tale in five distinctive groupings: Group I which includes Lucifer, Adam, Samson, Hercules, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, illustrate the idea of tragedy as a fall from high estate brought about by Fortune, acting as the agent of a just God; Groupe II which includes Zenobia, Peter of Cyprus, Bernabo, and Hugelino, reflects a direct contradiction of the idea of Fortune presented by the first Group; Group III which includes Nero, Holofernes, Antiochus, re-assert Fortune as a manifestation of

4) P.G. Ruggiers, "Towards a Theory of Tragedy in Chaucer," *Chaucer Review* 8 (1973), pp. 89-99.

God's justice, like the first Group; Group V is Croesus who caps the Monk's Tale by holding both of these versions of Fortune.⁵⁾

These divisions according to the role of Fortune or according to the cause of their fall seem to me rather arbitrary. Rather, the structure of the tale, as the Monk tells, can be seen according to his memory, or his mental association. The working principle in constructing tragedies is the law of similarity in its sources or material. The law of similarity, which Aristotle established in *On Memory and Reminiscence*, means that one recalls on object because it is either similar or dissimilar (another law of contrast), or because the two objects were originally perceived by him closely in time and space:

A picture painted on a panel is at once a picture and a likeness; that, while one and the same, it is both not the same, and one may contemplate it either as a picture, or as a likeness; that is, while one and the same, it is both of these, although the 'being' of both is not the same, and one may contemplate it either as a picture, or as a likeness....

Insofar as it is regarded in itself, it is only an object of contemplation, or a presentation, but when considered as relative to something else, e.g. as its likeness, it is also a mnemonic token but if the soul perceives its qua related to something else, then,—just as when one contemplates the painting in the picture as being a likeness, and without having (at the moment) seen the actual koriskos, contemplates it as a likeness of koriskos.

The opposite also occurs, as happened in the cases of Antipheron of Oreus and others suffering from mental derangement; for they were accustomed to speak of their mere phantasms as facts of their past experience, and as if remembering them. This takes place whenever one contemplates what is not a likeness as if it were a likeness.

Mnemonic exercises aim at preserving one's memory of something by repeatedly reminding him of it; which implies nothing else (on the learner's part) than the frequent contemplation of something as likeness, and not as out of relation.⁶⁾

Here, we are not sure whether the Monk had in mind the law of similarity or not in narrating the tragedies, but the result is that they are told according to law of similarity. Basing on the principle that like produces like, the Monk's Tale falls into two categories which repeat its cycle once more; the tragedies which involve the Biblical characters and the tragedies which involve secular characters. The first six tragedies of Lucifer, Adam, Samson, Nebuchadnezzar, and Belshazzar involve all Biblical characters with the exception of Hercules who is rather a mythological character. And the next six—Zenobia, Peter of Spain, Peter of Cyprus, Barnabo, Hugelino, and Nero—are all secular characters. This pattern of combination, the Biblical and the secular, repeats itself once again; Holofernes and Antiochus are the Biblical characters, and the next three—Alexander, Caesar and Croesus are the seculars. By this kind of dynamic patterns, the Monk has tried the variation in

5) W.C. Strange, "The Monk's Tale: A Generous View," *CR* 1 (1967), pp. 167-180.

6) Aristotle, *On Memory and Reminiscence*, Chap. 1, 450^b 21-451^a 14. The references to the works of Aristotle are based on *Aristotle: I & II* in the series of *Great books of the Western World*, vol. 8 & 9 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952)

his serious and monotonous stories and wants to show that the tragic fall always comes in when one follows the "fickle" Fortune. In this division, the Monk also achieves a sort of poetic integrity in his handling of Fortune. He deals with Fortune as the agent of God in the tragedies of the Biblical characters and Fortune as pagan deity in those of the secular characters.

Theme

The theme of the Monk's Tale could be stated in this manner: the fickleness of Fortune brings instability in life, so do not trust a blind prosperity. The moral of such examples of tragedy is:

For certein, whan that Fortune list to flee,
 Ther may no man the cours of hire withholde.
 Lat no man truste on blynde prosperitee;
 Be was by thies ensamples trewe and olde.

(B² 1995-1998)

This theme is closely connected with Chaucer's understanding of tragedy. He defined tragedy in the Monk's Prologue as follows:

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie
 As olde books maken us memorie,
 Of hym that stood in great prosperitee,
 And is yfallen out of heigh degree
 Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.
 And they ben versified communely
 Of six feet, which men clepen exmetron.
 In prose eek been endited many oon,
 And eek in meetre, in many a sondry wyse.

(B² 1973-1981)

As a matter of fact, Chaucer's knowledge of tragedy is the simplification of the Aristotelian concept of tragedy, but Chaucer made a mistake by attributing hexameter to the meter of tragedy:

A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions....

Tragedy acquired also its magnitude... and its meter changed then from trochaic to iambic... The iambic, we know, is the most speakable of meters, as is shown by the fact that we very often fall into it in conversation, whereas we rarely talk hexameters....

There remains, then, the intermediate kind of personality, a man not preeminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgment, of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity;

e.g. Oedipus, Thyestes, and the men of note of simiaar families.⁷⁾

According to Aristotle, hexameter is the epic meter, whereas iambic is the meter of tragedy. Or since Chaucer was reciting tragedies, not performing them, he might have changed to hexameter which is proper for reciting intentionally. Chaucer's modification of the concept of tragedy according to Aristotle is attested by J.W.H. Atkins who opines that;

Chaucer's conception of tragedy was neither fixed nor completely thought out, seems... probable. But this may be said that he at least modified the idea that the tragic 'fall' was due solely to the caprice of Fortune. Similarly in the Monk's Tale frequent reference are made to the influence of Fortune: thought at the same time various disasters are also ascribed to sins of pride, misgovernment and the rest. And this conception of the tragedy of Fortune, as a nondramatic form of literature with an indeterminate tragic hemartia, was handed down to Renaissance times to be ultimately transformed by Aristotle's teaching and Shakespeare's dramatic genius.⁸⁾

On the other hand, P.G. Ruggier rationalized Chaucer's change of the concept of tragedy by asserting that, under the influence of Ovid, the *Roman de la Rose*, Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer "gravitated" towards softer versions of tragedy, searching out "redemptive factors and alleviating tragic austerity by pathos," thus:

We observe that he was writing his tragedies out of a fairly coherent set of principles, adapting them to the conventions and the spirit of his time. That these principles were ultimately Aristotelian and perhaps Theophrastan he would not have known. Nonetheless, definition of tragedy, as well as of comedy, derived from Aristotle's lost dialogue on *Poets*, had been handed on through Varro to Suetonius, and there after, through the fourth century grammarians, to the next age.⁹⁾

After establishing that Chaucerian tragedy is ultimately based on the Aristotelian concept of tragedy, if we analyze the Monk's Tale in terms of the theory of Aristotelian tragedy, most of the stories fit the general scheme of the Aristotelian tragedy. The plot is that of the great man, who undergoes degradation either by the forces of destiny or Fortune, or by some flaw in his own character such as pride and misjudgment and the like. The subject matter is serious, the protagonists are empeors, kings, and conquerors. The action moves from good to bad fortune, and sometimes involves reversal. The emotional value, however, is that of edification induced by the contemplation of sorrowful affairs, whereas that of the Aristotelian tragedy emphasizes the function of catharsis. The style is consonant with the subject matter, that is to say, elevated, exclamatory, and ornate. G.F. Else also writes:

7) Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449^b 24-28; 1499^a 20-27; 1453^a 8-11

8) J.W.H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase*(London, 1961), pp. 160-161.

9) P.G. Ruggier, *Ibid.*, p. 92.

cf. Ruggier bases his analysis on A. Philip McMahon's "Seven Questions on Aristotelian Definitions of Tragedy and Comedy," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 40 (1929), pp. 97-198.

...it remains apparent that in general Aristotle is the ancestor of the tradition. All the more striking is the vulgarization of his functional requirement—which, be it remembered, is only for the best tragedy—into a general rule that tragedy must or does represent only kings. A social or political prejudice enters here, a disposition to read off the worth and significance of a man's actions from his place in a rank-list, which is far removed from Aristotle's thought but congenial to the Hellenistic and Imperial periods, the Middle Age, and the Renaissance. The persistence of the tradition shows its popularity but not any real understanding of Aristotle.¹⁰⁾

Chaucer's seeming lack of deep understanding of the Aristotelian concept of tragedy which several critics pointed out, is due to the spirit of his age, Christianity, not due to his lack of learning. So the many models of the Chaucerian tragic figures are drawn from the spiritual traditions. Chaucer might have preferred to make tragedy merely one episode in a larger pattern of the reconciliation of man to God.

From the analysis of the Aristotelian concepts reflected in the Monk's Tale, it is evident that Chaucer assimilated the Aristotelian concepts in the Monk's Tale. How much the Aristotelian philosophy determined Chaucer's own attitude towards life is difficult to determine with precision because Chaucer was a universal mind who absorbed various influences and created his own philosophy of life. Nonetheless, at the least, it may be said that Aristotle and Chaucer were compatible in several points and Chaucer found in Aristotle a congenial spirit whether consciously or unconsciously. At its most, the Aristotelian philosophy forms one of the fundamental basis of Chaucer's thought. In effect, this study contradicts the view that Chaucer was not a profound mind. Chaucer can be truly asserted as a moral-philosophical poet, not a simple story-teller, which is to reaffirm his significance as a serious poet in the history of English literature.

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10) G.F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*(Cambridge, 1957), pp. 368-388.