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Was It Funny?: The Serious Implications of Nolan's Voices

The issue of voice in Chaucer's "The General Prologue" in *The Canterbury Tales* is one of wide debate and fine tuning on the part of many scholars through the years. In Barbara Nolan's "'A Poet Ther Was': Chaucer's Voices in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*," she explores other scholar's determinations of voice before introducing her own version of the "three major 'authorial' voices" (513). For Nolan, these voices function to reveal the ways in which Chaucer changed and reworked the ideas behind medieval poetry. Nolan presents seven sections that define and explain her compelling vision of Chaucer's three voices: the clerk voice, the pilgrim-poet voice, and the host voice. However, through the compartmentalization of Chaucer's voices, Nolan's argument is weakened. In her essay, the comedic presentation of Chaucer's overlapping voices, which add an important aspect to Chaucer's agenda, is rarely acknowledged.

In the prologue Chaucer acts as what Nolan describes as "a quick-change artist, a shape shifter" (518). From one section to the next, he takes on the attitudes of different poetical ideologies of the time. His voices range from that of high literary conventions to the low. At one moment Chaucer describes the conflated "Aprill with his shoures sote" and, several lines later, begins to humorously describe the "Wel nyne and twenty in a companye" (1, 24). His quick shifting from one voice to the next is obvious, as Nolan points out through the use of sectional divisions. However, her explanations of these first

shifts deal with two voices, the clerk's and the pilgrim's. To Nolan, the juxtaposition of the two highlights the difference between "heightened, philosophizing" and "events occurring at random" (520). While the argument is part of her attempt at exploring the human condition at work in the voices of the prologue, she avoids humor, a major aspect of humanity. In E. Talbot Donaldson's "Chaucer the Pilgrim," the comedic features of the work are far from overlooked. Donaldson argues for the difference between the pilgrim and the poet, maintaining the pilgrim as "the chief agent by which the poet achieves his wonderfully complex, ironic, comic, serious vision of the world" (504). While envisioning the prologue as the incorporation of two major voices and the third body of the poet, a somewhat weaker argument in light of Nolan's historical presentation of poetic conventions and three dominant voices, Donaldson does not overlook the comedy.

According to Nolan, the pilgrim's humanity is regulated by the narrative statement, "My wit is short" (746). By excusing himself in such a way, she maintains that Chaucer the pilgrim establishes a "common humanity" (523). This humanity encompasses the idea that the pilgrims will never obtain the truth that they seek because their understanding is based on the "limited powers of observation...and a language essentially different from...the truth it seeks to express" (522). The implicit joy that Chaucer the pilgrim finds in describing his traveling companions is all together avoided for the sake of her weighty argument. If Chaucer is working to establish a "common humanity," then Nolan ignores one of the major ways that his voice allows him to become an equal participant in the pilgrimage. She does assign him as a "trickster," but again upholds his seriousness by proclaiming him "as part of God's service" (527).

Donaldson, on the other hand, allows that one of the more entertaining facets of Chaucer the pilgrim is “the pleasure he takes in his own jokes, however small” (508).

When Nolan acknowledges the humorous aspects of Chaucer’s work, it is only with a more serious agenda looming in the background. In her final section, “The Host’s Voice,” she proclaims that he develops “fiction for the sake of play and mirth and also for financial profit” (528). However, the idea of comedy remains limited by her desire to compartmentalize the voices at work in the prologue. For Nolan, the humor of the host is available to contrast the voice of the pilgrim and highlight “human consciousness of a universe that emanates from God” (531). Still, Donaldson’s argument achieves the same universal sentiment without the flippant mention of humor. He finds that the depictions of opposing voices are “made harmonious in Chaucer’s wonderfully comic attitude...” (511).

While Nolan’s argument for three voices in the prologue offers insight into the changing of poetical conventions, her need to separate the three into distinct sections restricts her view of Chaucer’s comedic intent. By weighing the voices with only serious purposes and rarely touching on Chaucer’s incorporation of humor, she avoids an important aspect of *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer the poet surely intended to produce a work with sober implications. However, he also created a poem that “must have produced an exquisite and most ingratiating humor” (Donaldson 510). To limit the humor to the Host and occasionally the pilgrim is to avoid an important aspect of the work.

Works Cited

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