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An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy as Exemplified in the Comic Characters of the Canterbury Tales

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AN ARISTOTELIAN THEORY OF COMEDY AS EXEMPLIFIED
IN THE COMIC CHARACTERS OF THE CANTERBURY TALES

by

Sister Clarice Asbury, S.P.

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
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INTRODUCTION

In this application of Aristotle's theory of comedy to Chaucer's comic characters in The Canterbury Tales, the present writer has made use of Aristotle's Poetics and Lane Cooper's carefully selected material as a foundation for the study.

Lane Cooper, in his Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, has written a book which aims to be of use to the general student of literature and to "help college students and others to understand comedies, in particular those dramas that have in them something of the Aristophanic type." He has included in this work everything he could find in Aristotle, in Plato, or in his successors that might aid in reconstructing Aristotle's views of comedy. He has illustrated this theory with examples from Aristophanes, Shakespeare, and Molière, and had intended including Chaucer.

This study is not concerned with all of the elements of comedy treated by Cooper, but deals particularly with Aristotle's comic types of character. Therefore, though plot and diction have been used only in so far

1 Lane Cooper, An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, with an adaptation of the Poetics and a translation of the Tractatus Coislinianus, New York, 1922, vii.

2 Ibid., x.
as they contribute to character, particular consideration has been given to
Aristotle's three great comic types: the buffoon, the imposter, and the
ironical man.

Upon what grounds does Lane Cooper base his Aristotelian theory?
He has not presumed the existence of a lost Aristotelian treatise on comedy
without careful investigation and without sound Aristotelian scholarship to
support his views. Writing cautiously, and admitting the possibility of
error, he has finally concluded with W. J. M. Starkie, W. G. Rutherford, and others that an Aristotelian treatment of comedy once existed. He says:

Take for example the statement in Rhetoric 1.11 that the
forms of the ludicrous have been analyzed in the Poetics and
the still more specific assertion in Rhetoric 3.18 that they
have been enumerated in the Poetics. On the law of chance,
there being six references from the Rhetoric to the Poetics,
one of these two might have come from the author himself, and
the other from a subsequent editor.....But on any assumption
short of universal incredulity we must contend that one person,
or more than one, familiar with at least two of the writings of
Aristotle, interested in the Rhetoric, and interested in the
ludicrous, was aware of a schematic treatment of the ludicrous
not then or now found in the Rhetoric, and not now found in the
Poetics, but then found in a work with some such title as the
latter.3

The work that seems to fit best with this theory of a lost treatise
on comedy is the Tractatus Coislinianus. The relationship between the Poetics
and the Tractatus was noticed by J. A. Cramer, who first printed the Tractatus

3 Ibid., 8.

4 W. J. M. Starkie, An Aristotelian Analysis of 'the Comic:'
Illustrated from Aristophanes, Rabelais, Shakespeare, and Molière, Dublin,
1920.

5 W. G. Rutherford, A Chapter on the History of Annotation, Contains
a text and explanation of Tractatus Coislinianus, London, 1795.
in 1839, from a tenth century manuscript, No. 120 in the De Coislin collection at Paris. Later transcripts of the manuscript appeared in 1853, 1880, and 1899. Kayser, who produced one of the best editions, and who was recognized as a competent judge of its worth, even by McMahon, who refused to accept it as a lost Aristotelian document, says: "Of the ancient commentaries dealing with Greek comedy, as no one will fail to perceive, the most valuable for an investigation into the history of the art of poetry is the Tractatus Coislinianus."6

There has been much speculation regarding the history of the Tractatus, but more important is the correlation of this treatise with work on ancient comedy and with Aristotle's theory of the art of poetry. Cooper suggests this correlation. He says:

With a slight shift, which can be made in the light of the direct references, or in the light of similar references in the Rhetoric and other works of Aristotle, the Poetics can be metamorphosed into a treatise on comedy; whereupon the authentic elements (if such there be) of the Tractatus Coislinianus become an addendum, subordinate to the main Aristotelian theory of comedy, and improperly estimated unless viewed in a perspective of the whole.7

In other words, Cooper holds that the scientific method employed by Aristotle in his investigation of tragedy would not be greatly modified in its application to comedy, if the Poetics were used as the chief tool and the Tractatus as supplementary. The essence of his procedure is to make the

6 Cooper, An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, 11.

7 Ibid., 17.
necessary shift in the *Poetics* and to work back and forth from principles in that work to examples in comedy.  

In a study of the application of Aristotle's theories of poetry to Chaucer, it is not unreasonable that the question of Chaucer's knowledge of the works of Aristotle should present itself. Was Chaucer familiar with the works of Aristotle? Some scholars believe that Chaucer picked up a medieval definition of tragedy which probably goes back to Aristotle, though it was common property in the Middle Ages. There is reference to tragedy in Chaucer's translation of Boethius and in the well known definition in the Monk's prelude.

*Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,*  
*As olde bookes machen us memorie,*  
*Of hym that stood in great prosperitee,*  
*And is yfallen out of heigh degree*  
*Into mysterie, and endeth wrecchedly.*

Speculating on this matter of Chaucer's knowledge of Aristotle, Marvin Herrick in his *Poetics of Aristotle* says:

Chaucer could not read Greek; but could he have seen one of the medieval Latin versions of the *Poetics*? Probably not. It is extremely doubtful if even the Clerk of Oxenford, with all his passion for Aristotle's books could have secured a copy of the *Poetics*. It is even more doubtful that his logically trained faculties could have appreciated the book, even had he secured it. He might possibly have known of the *Rhetoric*; the catalogue of Oriel College Library lists a commentary on this treatise in 1375, and Ranulf Higden, who died nine years before, mentions Aristotle's *Dialogue on Poets* and his *Tractate on Rhetoric*. But the *Poetics* is missing. Not until near the end of the 15th century

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8 Ibid., lb.

did the Greek text of the *Poetics* come to light in Italy. 10

Interesting as is this question of Chaucer's reading of Aristotle, one can only conjecture and theorize, but never attain certainty. The important point, for the present study is that, consciously or unconsciously, Chaucer created certain characters that fit neatly into Aristotle's types.

CHAPTER I

TYPES OF THE COMIC CHARACTER

Mention was made in the introduction of this paper of Lane Cooper’s metamorphosing the Poetics from a study of the rules of tragedy to a study of the rules of comedy. In quoting from An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, this slight shift has been kept in mind.

Aristotle defines comedy as "an imitation of characters of a lower type,—not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists of some defect or ugliness, which is not painful or destructive!" 1 Plato, on the other hand, assumes that the pleasure of the ludicrous arises from a certain malice at the sight of another’s misfortune. "When we laugh at the folly of our friends, pleasure, in mingling with envy, mingles with pain, for envy has been acknowledged by us to be mental pain, and laughter is pleasant; and so we envy and laugh at the same instant." 2 Hobbes 3 worked out this theory of Plato in his well known


3 Hobbes conceives the passion of laughter as a sudden glory, arising from a sudden realization of some eminency in ourselves, as compared with the infirmity of others or with our own formerly. His study is not as deep or as searching as that of Plato.
"degradation" or "self-glorification" theory. The laughter that has in it a malicious element does not satisfy Aristotle in his conception of the ludicrous. To Aristotle the quality that provokes laughter is an "ugliness," a "defect" or "deformity" which is not painful and does not in any sense debase another. Ugliness, defect, and deformity are primarily applicable to the physically ugly and the disproportionate, but may include the frailties, follies, and infirmities of human nature as distinguished from more serious vices or crimes. Aristotle would not consider a man of honor, or a villain, or a wretch bent under tribulation as proper objects of ridicule. The subject of the ridiculous, therefore, would be the moral vices of men who are neither held in high esteem nor in contempt, but men below the average who bear some amusing defect or idiosyncrasy of character.

S. H. Butcher remarks that Aristotle preferred the comedy in which personalities are minimized and in which generalized types are presented. Usually a dominant characteristic or a leading passion is used in such a way that the attribute becomes the man. The simple quality is isolated and exaggerated. A character so created, which exhibits an ideal, of covetousness, deceit, or whatever the quality may be, almost of necessity runs to caricature. This preference of Aristotle for generalized types has probably influenced the depicting of character down to Shakespeare's time and later.


5 Ibid., 376.
Benjamin Boyce in his study of the Theophrastan Character in England says:

... the Aristotelian doctrine of characterization by type came to be familiar to most people by observation and to some by literary experiment. There is the possibility, then, that the prose sketches of Theophrastus had influence upon Merander's drawing of type characters, thence, upon the similar work of Plautus and Terence and finally upon the taste of Elizabethan audiences and readers.

Georges Polti also traces the trend of Aristotelian influence in character depiction:

We know that the 28 studies of Theophrastus were drawn as La Bruyere says: "from the Ethics and Morals of Aristotle" and that "the foundations of the characters described therein come from the same source." The stream from that source may be followed across the centuries, from the day of the author of the Poetics to the moment when, swollen by tributaries which from every direction have brought to it Christianity with its amazing decrees, it became a vast theological river carrying the sum of all European moralities.

While considering this classical influence, one should examine the more immediate sources of the morality and mystery plays which also have left their mark. Graham Greene makes an interesting point in this matter when he says that many of Shakespeare's characters were really mouthpieces for a mood or for an attitude toward life:

... we are still in the period of the Morality: they are being acted yet in the country districts: they had been absorbed

6 Theophrastus was a pupil of Aristotle's and author of the famous Characters. His work will be discussed later.


8 Georges Polti, The Art of Inventing Characters, Franklin, Ohio, 1922, 247.
by Shakespeare, just as much as he absorbed the plays of Marlowe, and the abstraction—the Spirit of Revenge (Hamlet), of Jealousy (Othello), of Ambition (Macbeth), of Ingratitude (Lear), of Passion (Anthony and Cleopatra)—still rules the play. And rightly. Here is the watershed between the morality and the play of character: there is dialectical perfection. After Shakespeare, character—which was to have its dramatic triumphs—won a too costly victory. 9

The above passage might equally well apply to Chaucer, who gave evidence of familiarity with the moralities as is shown by the Pilate’s voice 10 of his Miller as well as in other places in his works. The abstractions illustrated by the Canterbury Pilgrims are similar to Shakespeare’s. Is there not the Spirit of Avarice (Pardoner), of Sensuous Pleasure (the Wife), of Brutishness (the Miller), of Nobility (the Knight), of Sensuality (the Friar), and of Courtesy (the Prioress and the Franklin)?

In addition to the requirement of generalized types, Aristotle demands consistency and truth to type. Consistency requires that every utterance of a character in a comedy should show his moral bent and the workings of his intellect. These two elements are listed by Aristotle as ἔθος and διανοία and hold second and third place respectively in his six elements of comedy. All of this should exhibit what a particular type of person is likely to say or do in a given situation. 11


10 Pilate’s voice refers to the loud-voiced, ranting Pilate of the early morality plays. Speaking of the Miller, Chaucer says: "But in Pilates voys he gan to crie," Robinson, Chaucer, (A) 2124, 56.

11 Cooper, An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, 183.
Though Aristotle demands consistency, he permits the device of assimilation to the worse, by debasing persons slightly and by distorting the character somewhat, provided that the effect is not painful "... for Comedy aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life."\(^{12}\) This rule was followed by Shakespeare, who lowered Sir John Falstaff, but not too far, for Falstaff remains comic as well as consistent. The device of assimilation to the better by raising a character while retaining the illusion of reality is also permitted. Chaucer and many others have used this device of assimilation to the better in creating animal characters such as Chanticleer, Pertelote, and Renard, the fox.

Before discussing the comic types individually, it will be useful to note briefly how the Greek philosopher, Theophrastus, demonstrates a number of the poetic laws of his master, Aristotle, in his famous Characters.

How did Theophrastus, a philosopher and teacher and scientist, happen to write his Characters?

... The answer will lead our discussion in the important direction of Aristotle. ... It is possible that the Characters were composed specifically to illustrate Aristotle’s ethical doctrines. The suggestion that the Characters were written in a light mood to entertain a group of friends or pupils is attractive. It would account for numerous resemblances between these pieces and the Rhetoric and Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle. ... In general the Characters seem to be the spirit of a man who observed life shrewdly but whose ways of thinking were so habitually along Aristotelian lines that, pedagogue as he was, he kept

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\(^{12}\) Aristotle, Poetics II. 4 tr. by Butcher, 13.
a good deal of schoolroom logic even in his jokes. . . . The Character at its best is a highly artificial form; . . . it represents a class, yet it must seem to possess the reality of a flesh-and-blood individual; it pleases by graphic detail and illuminates by hints, yet it must not be endangered by the merely local and temporary.13

The Character follows Aristotle's demand that poetry concern itself with the universal rather than the particular. The portrait "in losing its generality loses also, contradictory as it may appear, something of its clearness. It proves to be less truthful, as Aristotle has already remarked, than the poetical representation of men and events."14 Theophrastus, too, followed the theory of his teacher by noting the three states or degrees in respect to any moral quality according to which one may pick out three types of people, the central virtuous type and the two extremes of excess and defect. Theophrastus left pictures only of the extremes.

If used with discretion and if the comparison of Aristotle and Theophrastus be not stretched too far, a study of the Characters gives added confirmation to Lane Cooper's theories of the Aristotelian laws for character portrayal. Cooper himself says of the Characters: "Moreover it clearly is full of parallels to the views of Aristotle regarding comedy, and contains a little gallery of characters suitable to the comic stage—."15 But one must not expect to find Aristotle reflected in all pages of the Characters, for

14 Polti, The Art of Inventing Characters, 56.
15 Cooper, An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, 121.
Aristotle lacks the compression that is one of the essential features of the Character. His sketches are somewhat subjective for he often interrupts his description to explain emotions and investigate causes.16

While keeping in mind and applying the rules for general type characterization, the writer will consider three specific types. Referring to these types Cooper says: "It has been thought by some that Aristotle deemed the buffoon or low, jesting parasite, the ironical man or type of dissembled ignorance, and the boastful man or type of impostors or braggarts, as par excellence the characters (or ethes) of comedy."17

16 Boyce, The Theophrastan Character in England to 1642, 12.
17 Cooper, An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, 177.
CHAPTER II

THE IRONICAL MAN

Lane Cooper defines the Ironical Man as one who makes himself out as worse than he is. He says:

It will be remembered that in the Ethic., the Ironical Man and the Impostor or swaggerer confront one another in the two vicious extremes which flank the virtuous mean of Truthfulness. . . . In comedy the special kind of irony practiced by the Impostor's opponent is feigned stupidity. . . . The Eiron who victimizes the Impostors masks his cleverness under a show of clownish dullness—.1

Aristotle further compares ironic persons with impostors and boasters.

Ironic people, on the other hand, in depreciating themselves, show a more refined character, for it seems that their object is not to make gain but to avoid pomposity. They are particularly fond of disclaiming the same qualities as the boaster affects, that is, the qualities which the world esteems—as was the way, for example, of Socrates. . . . Sometimes irony itself appears to be boastfulness, as well as excess . . . .2

Since the qualities of cleverness and self-depreciation possessed by the Ironical Man are more elevated than the coarse, comic speech and acts of deception that characterize the Buffoon and Impostor, the Eiron will appear less frequently as a comic type and possibly will not have the general appeal

1 Cooper, An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, 263.

of the lower types. The Ironical Man, more refined in character, and subtle in his humor, will be appreciated by a restricted and more discerning clientele. Therefore, in the works of Chaucer it appears that none of his comic characters fits so neatly into this class of ironic men as does Chaucer's portrayal of himself in the *Canterbury Tales*. Though this paper has been limited to the *Canterbury Tales*, it would seem permissible to include in this study of Chaucer as the Ironical Man, his experiences with the Eagle in his dream poem, "The House of Fame," and to allude to the first trace of irony found in the poem, "The Book of the Duchess."

As early as the writing of "The Book of the Duchess" he is found slightly depreciating himself in the person of the dreamer. This man comes upon a knight who is mourning the death of his lady and is crying out that Fortune has checkmated him. He is reproved by Chaucer, the dreamer, for making such a fuss over merely losing a chess game. Marchette Chute remarks that if this were the only instance of Chaucer's unkind treatment of his own intelligence it might be explained as a literary device used to give the knight a chance to tell his story, but this is only the beginning of his "feigned stupidity."

The individual whom Chaucer represents himself as being is unquestionably naive, a trusting, foolish soul and automatically a butt. The portrait bears about as much resemblance to Geoffrey Chaucer himself, courtier, diplomat, justice of the peace, and member of Parliament, as his jokes on women bear a direct resemblance to his wife.3

With increasing power of characterization and humor, Chaucer tells in the second book of "The House of Fame" about an Eagle that swooped down from the clouds, grabbed him in its talons, and soared aloft in the twinkling of an eye, bearing him heavenward toward the House of Fame.

And with his grymme paws stronge,
Withyn his sharpe nayles longe,
Me, fleynge, in a swap he hente,
And with his sours ayen up wente,
Me carynge in his clawes starke,
As lightly as I were a larke.

Thus I longe in his clawes lay,
Til at the laste he to me spak
In manneis vois, and seyde, 'Awake!
And be not agast so, for shame!'

Chaucer, the creator of each feathery representative of "The Parliament of Fowles," from the royal eagle "who pierced the sun with his sharpe glanc" to the "water-fowlys who sat lowest in the dale" lay helpless in the claws of his own creature, the Eagle. Feeling Geoffrey grow cold with fear, the bird maneuvered him into position so that he could take his pulse with one talon while he balanced the frightened poet between heaven and earth with the other. Had the Wife of Bath hung thus in mid air, there would have been a scene of uproarious comedy, but to have the great Chaucer so treated is not only comic but it has the spice of being ironically comic. As they soared upward, the Eagle tried to put Chaucer at his ease, though he admitted that Geoffrey, as he so familiarly called him, was no light weight.

4 Robinson, Chaucer, "House of Fame" 541-558, 337.
And with words to comfort,
And sayde twyse, 'Seynte Marye!'  
Thou art noyous for to carye,
And nothyng nedeth it, pardee! 5

Chaucer feared as they rose higher that Jove might change him into a star, but the Eagle reassured him that Jove had other work to do. Possibly the Poet did not look too bright. While bearing Chaucer ever upward, this remarkable bird began to let fall from his beak words of wisdom and instruction, taking delight in his ability to make his high and intricate subject-matter simple to a simple man.

Telle me this now seythfully,  
Have y not proved thus symply,  
Withoute any subtilete  
Or speche, or gret prolixite  
Of termes of philosophie,  
Of colours of rethorike?  
Pardee, hit ought the to lyke!  
For harde langage and hard materes  
Ys encomriys for to here  
Atones; wost thou not wel this? 6

The feathered pedagogue hoped that Geoffrey appreciated this condescension.

It was not easy to modify his language to the uneducated and to one of limited intelligence.

'A hal quod he, lo so I can  
Lewedly to a lewed man  
Speke, and show hem swyche skiles  
That he may shake hem be the biles,  
So palpable they shulden be. 7

5 Ibid., 572-576, 337.
6 Ibid., 852-864, 340.
7 Ibid., 865-870, 340.
Chaucer was in a position to do little more than answer: "Yis!" Down on the
good old English turf he may at times have had the trying experience of being
cornered by some long-winded clerk with a desire to instruct, but never had
he been lectured while dangling in mid air from the claws of a bird. In
his precarious position it was not wise to show resentment when his accom-
plished guide asked if he would learn something of the stars.

With that this egle gan to crye
'Lat be,' quod he, 'thy fantasye!
Wilt thou lere of sterres aught?
'Nay, certeynly, quod y, 'right naught.'
'And why? For y am now to old.'
'Elles I wolde the have told.'
Quod he, 'the sterres names, lo,
And al the hevenes sygnes therto,
And which they ben.'

As Chaucer gazed awe-stricken on the "myriads with beating hearts of fire
that aeons cannot vex or tire," the suspicion dawned that the indefatigable
bird intended to name and place each heavenly body in an organized astronomi-
cal lecture. At the risk of being dropped for not being a star pupil, he cried: "Nay, certeynly, for y am now to old." Not only was the subject
too involved for his abilities, but he feared that the brilliancy of the stars
would make him go blind. The disillusioned instructor realizing that Chaucer
was incapable of profiting by the vast findings of scientific research, de-
sisted and flew onward silently toward the House of Fame.

8 Ibid., 991-1000, 341.
'And eke they shynen here so bryghte, Hyt shulde shenden al my syghte, To loke on hem.' 'That may wel be,' Quod he. And so forth bar he me A while, and than he gan to crye 

'Se here the Hous of Fame, lo!'10

The Tractatus states that laughter is aroused by assimilation toward the worse or assimilation toward the better.11 Chaucer has used both devices in raising the Eagle above his natural state and by debasing himself to a position inferior to the bird. Naturally this juxtaposition of characters creates the incongruity which is the heart of comedy. Here is one of Chaucer's lowly feathered creatures assuming an attitude of ill-disguised tolerance for the physical weakness and mental backwardness of his creator. The poet who has written such elegant verse in his "Troilus and Criseyde" and his "Knight's Tale" allows his eagle-teacher to choose speech without "subtilite," or "prolixite," or "figures of poetrise," or "colours of rethorike," that the simple Chaucer may the more easily understand. "Lo, so I can speke lewdedly to a lewed man." Robinson says in the notes: "While it is true that Chaucer's attitude toward books was that of a man of letters rather than a scholar, nevertheless, the range of his knowledge and the quality of his intelligence were such as to deserve the epithet "learned Chaucer."12 Is it

11 Cooper, An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, 225.
12 Robinson, Chaucer, 346.
not ironical, too, that the author of a treatise on astronomy should be instructed by a bird concerning the stars and should cry out that he was too old to learn?

Chute remarks that: "As Chaucer grew more experienced in his art, he entered into the game of insulting himself with increasing enthusiasm and it was this, along with what was believed to be his stumbling meter, that gave Chaucer for centuries the reputation of being 'naive.'"  

Not only is this scene of the poet and the bird touched with Chaucer's mellow humor, but it is the first indication of that talent for conversing in rhyme which found its perfection in *The Canterbury Tales*. Only a master of diction could retain the naturalness of talk in poetic rhythm. Those who do not read Chaucer in the original lose the flavor of this racy easy dialogue.

Chaucer depreciates himself also in the Prologue by making himself the most inconspicuous of the pilgrims. Most of the story tellers are described minutely in their persons, dress, and general character traits, but Chaucer says nothing about himself except that before the pilgrims had retired he had spoken to every one of them. Though effacing himself and silently observing the company, it was necessary that he talk with each of them that later he might include bits of past personal history as well as certain character traits.

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In "The Tale of Sir Thopas" the poet shows himself as the Ironical Man par excellence. When the Prioress had finished her story, the Host turned to Chaucer and teasing him asked: "What manner of man are you? Are you looking for a rabbit with your eyes always staring at the ground?" Then he called the pilgrims to make way for the man with the elfish look. Upon the Host’s request for a story, Chaucer seemed to be momentarily confused and confessed that he knew only one rhyme that he had learned long ago.

'Hooste,' quod I, 'ne beth nat yvele apayed,
For nother tale certes kan I noon,
But of a rym I lerned longe agoon.'
'Ye, that is good,' quod he; 'now shul we hoere,
Som deyntee thyng, me thynketh by his cheere.'

The "deyntee thyng" proved to be one of those interminable metrical romances that include in exaggerated figurative terms a detailed description of each of the characters of the tale, his accoutrements, and a minute account of his conquests. A few lines from Chaucer’s "Sir Thopas" will illustrate.

Sir Thopas was a doghty swayn;
Whit was his face as payndemayn,
His lippes rede as rose;
His rode is lyk scarlet in grayn,
And I you telle in good gertayn,
He hadde a semely nose.15

This gallant knight pricked through a fair forest where were found many a wild beast such as the deer and hare. The fearful forest contained great trees like the licorice shrub and ginger and clove and nutmeg bushes.

14 Robinson, Chaucer, VII 706-712, 197.
15 Ibid., 724-730, 198.
The songsters in the wood were none other than the sparrow-hawk and the pop­pinjay who made sweet ditties. Sir Thopas fell into a love-longing when he heard this singing and spurred on like a madman, making his fair steed sweat so with the spurring that men might have wrung out the water. So weary was Sir Thopas from riding over the soft grass that he laid himself down and dreamed of an elf queen.

On and on droned Chaucer telling of the deeds of Sir Thopas pressing forward on "his steede of dappull gray" until the Host unable to bear any more cried:

"Namore of this, for Goddes dignitee,"
... 'for thou makest me
So wery of thy verray lewedessee
That, also wisly God my soule blesse,
Myn eres aken of thy drasty speche.
Now swich a rym the devel I biteshe;
This may wel be rym doggerel..."16

Chaucer feigned indignation at this rude and ill-considered interruption.

"Why so?" quod I, "why wiltow lette me
Moore of my tale than another man,
Syn that it is the beste rym I kan?"17

Since it was the best rhyme that the poet knew, why was he not permitted to finish his tale like the other pilgrims?

"Sire, at a word, thou shalt no lenger rym."18

16 Robinson, Chaucer, VII 919-925, 200.
17 Ibid., 925-930, 200.
18 Ibid., 931, 200.
The Host realized that in this matter he must be firm. He and the others had endured too much of this "drasty rymynq."

Speaking of the charm of Chaucer's irony in this contribution of the poet's, Marchette Chute says:

Chaucer's tale of Sir Thopas is the funniest parody in the realm of serious English literature. To realize fully the murderous delicacy of Chaucer's performance, it would be necessary to read half a dozen of the Middle English metrical romances that he is parodying here; but even casual reading of Geoffrey's contribution shows the inimitable combination of the sober and the absurd that makes Sir Thopas a thing of such delight.19

The Host did not wish to discourage poor Chaucer, although in his position of master of ceremonies, he had to protect the pilgrims from being imposed on by well-meaning but ignorant dunces. He would give him one more chance by permitting him to tell a prose story provided that there was mirth and wisdom in it. Chaucer showing himself eager to please chose from his limited repertoire "a litel thyng in prose." Fearing another interruption he cried:

'And therfore herkneth what that I shal seye,  
And let me tellen al my tale, I preye.'20

The prose tale of Melibee though not so senseless as Sir Thopas, proved to be a lengthy dissertation on the virtue of patience and must have taxed the patience of many a pilgrim, yet the company stoically gave him a hearing even to the end. Chesterton commenting on the contribution says:

19 Chute, Geoffrey Chaucer, 297.
20 Robinson, Chaucer, VII 965-966, 201.
Then by way of a final climax or anticlimax he solemnly proceeds to tell a rather dull story in prose. Now a joke of that scale goes a great deal beyond the particular point, or pointlessness, of the Rime of Sir Thopas.  

The Aristotelian device of assimilation to the worse and to the better in character portrayal which Chaucer used in the scene between himself and the Eagle is used again in the story of Sir Thopas. The poet debases himself when he confesses to the Host that he knows only one rhyme, and lowers himself still further by the "drasty rym" and "doggerel" of his tale, Sir Thopas. Even the description of himself which he puts into the mouth of the Host lowers him somewhat, picturing him as a simple, timid, little man gazing ever on the ground.

Aristotle says: "Irony is more liberal or [refined!] than buffoonery; the ironical man jests for his own amusement, the buffoon for the amusement of another." It will be seen in a later study how buffoons are ever bent on raising a laugh, for they wish to be thought humorous or witty at any cost. The Ironical Man, too, will be unsparing of himself, but with a motive quite different. He seeks not to amuse the audience, but rather to use it for his own amusement as a butt for his jest.

As Chaucer drolly proceeded with his tale of Sir Thopas, he was as conscious of his audience as were any of the other story tellers, and watched


with repressed glee for the first signs of restlessness. His active brain was as creative in touching up this Sir Thopas romance, adding verse upon verse to this ridiculous parody, as it was when he conceived the charming tale of "Arcite and Palamon." With what inward chuckles he must have imagined the growing boredom of the company. Probably the Miller, the Wife, and the Cook would have been the first distracted, to be followed in varying degrees by each of the pilgrims; but the courteous Prioress would show sympathetic attention up to the blasting interruption of the Host. He had no doubt been waiting for an opportunity to write such an outburst, even as he had led the Eagle on to display his pompous learning. "No one suffered fools more gladly. . . . He was a polished adept in the dangerous diplomatic art of really getting some fun out of funny people."23

It had been mentioned that according to Aristotle the Ironical Man disclaims the qualities which the world esteems. In doing this he seems to discredit the judgment of the world and to set himself above it. One can see from this how irony had been considered by Aristotle as a form of boastfulness. Chaucer loved his pilgrims; he was their creator, but because of this relationship it was his right to play with them and to poke fun at them and even foist on them the dull tale of Melibee and the silly one of Sir Thopas. However, Chaucer not only provided amusement for himself in this role of simpleton, but he has down through the years delighted his readers with whom he has shared these pleasant jokes on the pilgrims and the bird. No one has

23 Chesterton, Chaucer, 87.
appreciated this irony of Chaucer's more truly than Mr. Chesterton who himself must have practiced this art of self-depreciation on many an unsuspecting braggart. He says:

The Chaucerian irony is sometimes so large that it is too large to be seen. . . . The joke is not that Chaucer is joking at bad ballad-mongers; the joke is much larger than that. . . . The poet is the Maker. . . . and Chaucer is the creator of the whole world of his creatures. He made the pilgrimage; he made the pilgrims. Out of him is all the golden pageantry and chivalry of the Knight's Tale; all the rank and rowdy farce of the Miller's; he told through the mouth of the Prioress the pathetic legend of the Child Martyr and through the mouth of the Squire the wild, almost Arabian romance of Cambuscan. And he told them all in sustained melodious verse, seldom so continuously prolonged in literature; in a style that sings from start to finish. Then in due course, as the poet is also a pilgrim among the pilgrims, he is asked for his contribution and he is struck dumb at first with embarrassment; and then starts a gabble of the worst doggerel in the book. It is so bad that after a page or two of it, the tolerant innkeeper breaks in with the desperate protest of one who can bear no more. . . . Now a joke of that scale goes a great deal beyond the particular point, or pointlessness, of the Rime of Sir Thopas. . . . Among the types and tides, the coarse Miller, the hard-fisted Reeve, the Clerk, the Cook, the Shipman, the Poet is the only man who knows no poetry. But the irony is wider and deeper than that. . . . It has in it all the mystery of the relation of the maker with things made. There falls on it from afar even some dark ray of the irony of God, who was mocked when He entered His own world, and killed when He came among His creatures.24

24 Chesterton, Chaucer, 18-20.
Aristotle permits a broader interpretation of the term impostor than is generally accepted by including every type of pretender from the vain boaster who is often harmless to the person of low character whose deception is malicious. Today, synonymous with the term impostor is the quack, or unskilled pretender, especially to medical knowledge, the charlatan who adds the implication of pretentious or flashy display, and the mountebank who bears the suggestion of buffoonery, but the boaster is not included. Aristotle in treating of this type says:

It seems that the boaster is one who is fond of pretending to possess the qualities which the world esteems, although he does not possess them, or does not possess them to the extent that he pretends. ... A person who pretends to greater things than he possesses if he has no ulterior object in doing so, seems to be a person of low character, as otherwise he would not take pleasure in falsehood; but he looks more like a fool than a knave. Supposing it be he has an object, if the object be glory or honor, the pretentious person, like the boaster is not highly censurable; but if it be money, or the means of getting money, his conduct is more discreditable. It is not a particular faculty, but a habit of choice, which constitutes the boaster; for it is by virtue of his moral state and his character that he is a boaster, as a person is a liar if he takes pleasure in falsehood for its own sake or as a means of winning reputation or gain. Thus it is that boastful people, if their object is reputation, pretend to such qualities as win praise or congratulation, but if their object is gain, they pretend to such qualities as may be beneficial to their neighbors. ... 1

1 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 4. 13-14, trans. by Welldon, 127-129.
Lane Cooper points out that impostors are numerous and important in the comedy of all times. "In a later age the braggart soldier, the deceitful slave, the scheming or pretentious rogue of every description, . . . all belong to this type. . . . Falstaff, the many sided, is likewise related to it. Molière's Tartuffe . . . is our chief modern example." He further quotes Aristotle as stating that pretence, if it takes the form of exaggeration, is boastfulness, and one who is given to it is a boaster or an imposter.

In Chaucer one finds examples of the impostor ranging from the mildly boastful Chanticleer, lord of the barnyard, to the hypocritical Friar in "The Summoner's Tale," who extorts gifts from the naive parishioners of the countryside. A few of these impostors or swaggerers will be studied with Aristotle's conception of the type in mind.

A. THE COCK AND THE FOX

Chaucer's mock epic, "The Nun's Priest's Tale," introduces the boaster Chanticleer and his wily adversary Sir Russel, the fox. Chanticleer warned in a dream of impending misfortune, was advised by his wise and loquacious wife, Pertelote, to forget his nightmares. Taking her advice he forgot the phantoms of the night, flew down from his perch, and walked about the yard confident and happy. As he chased a butterfly among the weeds, he became aware of a stranger crouching silently in the shadows and eyeing him intently. He would have fled in terror but the fox reassured him saying:

2 Cooper, An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, 264.
3 Ibid., 117.
"Alas, gentle sir, are you afraid of me who am your friend? I come to hear you sing; you have a voice as beautiful as an angel in heaven. Only one other could compare with you in this angelic art. Your good father (God rest his soul) sang early in the mornings and frequently to make his voice stronger he stretched out his neck and closed his eyes. Can you imitate your father in this?" Chanticleer, taken off his guard, shut his eyes only to find himself suddenly whisked on to the back of the fox and off to the near-by woods.

Professor Tatlock excellently translates into modern English Chaucer's delightful account of the chase.

The poor widow and her daughters heard these hens cry and lament, and started out at the door forthwith and saw the fox make toward the wood, bearing the cock on his back. "Out! alas! help!" they cried. "Ho! ho! the fox!" and after him they ran, and many another wight with her distaff in hand; ran cow and calf and the very hogs, so afeared they were for the barking of the hounds and the shouting of the men and women. They ran till they thought their hearts would burst, they yelled like fiends in hell, the ducks quacked as if they were being slaughtered, the geese in fear flew over the tree tops, a swarm of bees came out of the hive; so hideous was the noise, ah benedicite! . . . . They brought horns of brass, of wood, of horn and bone, and blew and bellowed in them, and so shrieked and whooped withal till it seemed as if the heavens would drop.4

Changing Fortune, however, suddenly favored the cock as he lay in the grasp of the fox. His mind had been active when he took what he feared was to be his last ride, and as they neared the woods, he said to the fox:

"Sir, if I were you I would taunt and defy the crowd by calling, 'Turn back

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you proud churls; may a pestilence fall upon you. Now that I am come to the wood's edge I will eat the cock." "In faith it shall be done," answered the fox; but as he spoke, the cock sprang from his mouth and flew high up to the tree tops. Sir Russel protested that he was merely playing and begged Chanticleer to come down that he might show him what he really meant, but the cock would not permit the fox to beguile him a second time.

Germaine Dempster points to this situation as an excellent example of Chaucer's use of dramatic irony.

The reversal of parts of flatterer and dupe is the very core of the story. Good dramatic irony must inextricably result from such a reversal. . . . this dramatic irony is heightened, first by the character of the fox as accepted in animal epics. His reputation as archmaster in deception not only makes a failure more amusing in itself, but makes it appear as the almost direct consequence of his last piece of cunning. For where could the cock have learned to handle the subtle weapon of flattery better than in the first half of the story where he falls victim to the artfulness of the fox? And second the dramatic irony is heightened by the amusing similarity of methods used first by the fox against the cock then vice versa: the eyes closed in one episode, and the mouth open in the other. 5

Chaucer's interest in character shows itself when treating of animals as well as with men. In this animal fable again he uses the device of assimilation to the better as laid down in the Tractatus. Chanticleer, Pertelote, and Sir Russel take on certain faculties of man such as thought and speech while retaining the characteristics of animals. It is the element of character and not the story that Chaucer stresses. Chaucer is more

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5 Germaine Dempster, "Dramatic Irony in Chaucer," Language and Literature, IV, September, 1932, 312.
concerned with characterizing Chanticleer, Pertelote, and Sir Ruel than with
the moral of the story. In this matter of character delineation, the device
of assimilation to the better to raise animal characters to man's status has
been used often by twentieth century authors. Joel Chandler Harris with his
Brer Rabbit, Robert Nathan in his delightful animal fantasies, and more re-
cently George Orwell in his Animal Farm, are only a few who have elevated
animals with striking effectiveness.

Both Chanticleer and Sir Ruel owed to ancestry and environment the
formation of the character which determined the roles they would play on life's
stage. Subtle influences made each the personality that destiny decreed when
in the widow's yard he was to meet his adversary face to face. The cock
hatched into a safe and respectable society from a noble, cultivated stock,
grew up to be the only "cock on the walk," and consequently the pride and joy
of a devoted following of hens. He lived but to crow and bask in the sun of
smiling Fortune. His boastful ways were the direct outcome of a long series
of barnyard advantages. The fox, on the other hand, "lived on the wrong side
of the tracks"—or rather on the wrong side of the fence. He sprang from
generations of thieves and cutthroats. The "slings and arrows of outrageous
fortune" in the guise of sticks, stones, and fashionable fox hunts had followed
him from the days of his birth. His great-grandfather's brush had hung from

6 A clever, satirical denunciation of Communism.
the saddle of a king and his grand aunt's sleek coat graced the shoulders of a duchess. If he himself had managed to evade extermination at the hands of a hostile society, he had his own keen wits to thank. Centuries of breeding had produced in Sir Russel, a fox, crafty and sly, superbly fitted to play the role of barnyard brigand.

Chanticleer appeared as the boaster during his pedantic dissertation on dreams. His long quotations from the classics must have quite dazzled his less-gifted wife though, womanlike, at the end of the discussion "she was of the same opinion still." Before hopping down from his perch, he complimented Pertelote, using in his pompous way a bit of Latin which he condescendingly translated with such a "broad interpretation" that he mistakenly reversed the meaning of his quotation.

For when I se the beautee of youre face,
It maketh al my drede for to dyen;
For al so siker is In principio,
Mulier est hominis confusio;--
Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,
"Womans joye and al his blis.'

Mrs. Dempster in illustrating another instance of Chaucer's dramatic irony shows that Chanticleer's downfall was due to self-confidence. This fault sprang from the cock's character of boaster.

Chanticleer, all through the argument about dreams, feels confident that he has the stronger support of the authorities. The logical conclusion of his argument is, of course, that he should be on his guard. But it happens that in the course of his speech, his pleasure in exhibiting his knowledge and cleverness had developed in him a certain self-satisfaction that quickly brings him to self-confidence. Because he has so brilliantly demonstrated that he should be afraid, he is not afraid anymore.

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7 Robinson, Chaucer, VII 3160-3166, 242.
8 Dempster, "Dramatic Irony in Chaucer," Language and Literature, IV, 1932, 313.
More malicious than the boaster, the fox fits into the class of wily impostors who live by their wits and whose end is personal gain.

A col-fox ful of sly iniquitee,
That in the grove hadde woned yeres three,
By heigh ymagnacions forncast,
The same nyght thurghout the hegges brast

Waitynge his tyme on Chauntecleer to falle,
As gladly doon th1se homycides aller
That in await liggen to mordre men.
O false mordrour, lurkyng in thy den!
O newe Scariot, newe Gerylon,
False dissymulour, 0 Greek Synon,
That brighthest Troye al outrely to sorwe! 9

Opportunity ever ready to further the designs of the wicked at last after three years of waiting gave Sir Russel his chance.

Oh Opportunity! thy guilt is great,
'Tis thou that execut' st the traitor's treason;
Thou sett' st the wolf where he the lamb may get;
Whoever plot the sin, thou point' st the season;
And in thy shady cell, where none may spy him,
Sits Sin to seize the souls that wander by him. 10

Making the most of the day's good fortune, Sir Russel lay in wait among the herbs when Chanticleer first spied him. As the cock started up in fright at sight of his natural enemy, the suave impostor spoke quietly:

'Gentil sire, allas! wher wol ye gon?
Be ye affrayed of me that am youre freend?
Now certes I were worse than a feend,
If I to yow wolde harm or vileynye! 11

Without giving Chanticleer time to reflect, the fox emitted his subtle flattery,


11 Robinson, Chaucer, VII 3264-3288, 243.
that honeyed poison that numbs the faculties of man intoxicating him with visions of his own excellence.

Byt trewely, the cause of my comynge
Was onely for to herkne how that ye synge.
For trewely, ye have as myrie a stevene
As any angel hath that is in heveme.
Therwith ye han in musysk moore feelynge
Than hadde Bocce, or any that kan synge.12

The fox will not only praise Chanticleer, but he will speak well of the rooster's departed parents. What father does not swell with pride at the report of good things accomplished by his son? What child is not elated at the rehearsal of the great deeds of his father? The fox failed to mention, however, that he was responsible for the early demise of these good parents.

'My lord youre fader—God his soule blesse!
And eek youre mudder, of hire gentilesse,
Han in myn hous ybeen to my greet ese;
And certes, sire ful fayn wolde I yow plese.

Save yow, I herde nevere man so synge
As did youre fader in the morwemyne.
Certes, it was of herte, al that he song.
And for to make his voys the moore strong,
He wolde so peyne hym that with bothe his yen
He moste wynke, so loude he wolde cryen,
And stonden on his tiptoon therwithal,
And streche forth his nekke long and smal.
And eek he was of swich descrecioun
That ther nas no man in no regioun
That hym in song or wisdom myghte passe.13

Had not Chanticleer been completely duped by this flattery and false protestation of friendship, he would have pricked up his ears at the comment that the cock's parents had been in the fox's house to his great content. This

12 Ibid., VII 3289-3295, 2h3.
13 Ibid., VII 3295-3311, 2h3-2hh.
insincere praise had no other end than to bring Chanticleer into the self-same house. Throughout the ages this kind of intrigue has been going on. "Won't you come into my parlor?" said the spider to the fly. Always there is the pretence of friendship; always the impostor is masquerading—the wolf in sheep's clothing. Aristotle says that it is by virtue of his moral state and his character that a man is an impostor and that it is a habit of choice that makes him love falsehood. All of this is clearly demonstrated in the fox.

With leering smile he assured the cock of friendship and swore that he would be worse than a fiend if he were to do him harm. He protested that he was charmed by the music of the rooster's voice though he was probably measuring the size of his drum sticks.

The two extremes of impostor as conceived by Aristotle have been used by Chaucer in this pleasant tale. The boastful cock and the hypocritical fox outwitted each other in turn; the one nearly lost his life because he failed to keep his eyes open and the other lost a chicken dinner because he failed to keep his mouth shut.

B. SIMKIN

The miller Simkin, another of Chaucer's impostors, appears in all of his pride and pretentiousness in "The Reeve's Tale." He may be included in this class of pretenders both as a swaggerer pretending to a higher station than his birth warranted, and as a downright impostor passing for an honest miller though an adept at thievery.

A millere was ther dwellynge many a day. As any peacock he was proud and gay.
Pipen he koude and fishe, and nettes beete,
And turne coppes, and wel wrastle and sheete;
Ay by his belt he baar a long panade,
And of a swerd ful trenchant was the blade.
A joly popperre baar he in his pouche;
Ther was no man, for peril, dorste hym touche.
A Sheffeld thwitel baar he in his hose.
As piled as an ape was his skullle,
A theef he was for sothe of corn and mele,
And that a sly, and usaunt for to stele.
His name was hoote deynous Symkyn.\textsuperscript{14}

One notes here many of the qualities of the Miller of the Prologue.
Like him Simkin could play the bagpipe and wrestle as well as fish and mend
nets and shoot. Here, too, is found that intolerable pride bolstered by a
brute strength that no one had the temerity to defy. All of this blustering
and bullying were merely an elaborate defence to hide his secret recognition
of his own inferiority. Lowes comments on Chaucer's laying open the real cause
of the pride of Simkin and his wife in a searching analysis of these two pre-
tenders.

His wife, says Chaucer, was of noble kin. 'The person of the
toun hir fader was.' ... Parsons then were celibates. ... And
so she had been fostered in a nunnery. And a subtle reading of
human nature underlies the next detail. For 'she was proud, and
peert as is a pye,' and stand-offish, and contemptuous: her in-
stinctive, defensive reaction to the stigma of her birth. But—
if anybody called her anything but 'Madame' Simkin (another infal-
lible touch) was ready with his arsenal!\textsuperscript{15}

An imposing picture the arrogant pair made as they strode off to
church clothed in their Sunday finery with heads carried high.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., I (A) 3925-3941, 67.

\textsuperscript{15} John Livingston Lowes, Geoffrey Chaucer and the Development of
His Genius, Boston, 1934, 221.
A full fair sight were the two together on holy days; he would walk before her with the tail of his hood wound about his head, and she came after in a scarlet petticoat, and Simkin wore hose of the like. No wight durst call her aught but 'dame'; no man so bold walked by the way that durst trifle or dally with her, unless he would be slain by Simkin with outlass or knife or dagger. For jealous folk are evermore perilous; leastways they would have their wives believe so. And eke, because she was somewhat smirched in her name she was repellent as water in a ditch, and full of disdain and of insolence. She thought ladies should treat her with respect, what with her gentle kin and her elegance that she had learned in the nunnery. 16

It is not necessary to take up the fabliau which tells how Simkin at first outwitted the clerks, stealing their grain, only in turn to have his family ignominiously disgraced by these young men. The character portrayal of the miller and his wife builds up a background preparatory to the later action of the story. Often in the intrigues of impostors there is introduced dramatic irony: that turning of the tables which results in the downfall and humiliation of the pretenders. Mrs. Dempster points once again to Chaucer's use of this device.

Dramatic irony is the very essence of the plot as Chaucer had it from his model. Chaucer's next step is the preparation of ironical effects by means of elaborate characterization. Some of the details in his introduction of Simkin and his family have, of course, a comic value independent of the rest of the story, partly because the Reeve is drawing a character that skillfully suggests the Miller of the General Prologue. Most of what is said is calculated to strike as strong a contrast as possible with the amusing denouement: the miller swaggers about armed with daggers and knives that he may look the more ridiculous when beaten by the clerks and receiving the decisive blow from his wife; he is jealous and foolishly proud of having married a woman of "noble kin" brought up in a nunnery that we may laugh the more at his misfortunes. . . . and finally, Simkin is not one of those common uninteresting thieves who would steal just for the sake of profit—he is an artist, a dilettante, one who knows all the scale from "curteous" to "outrageous" theft and enjoys

16 Tatlock and MacKaye, Reader's Chaucer, 66.
the practice of his art a hundred times more than the possession of 
a few pounds of meal. How very captivating to watch the process by 
which such a man is to be caught in his own net. 17

Aristotle, it has been seen, considers the impostor a person of low 
character who delights in falsehood. Simkin relished the pleasure of cheating 
not for the profit it brought him but for the satisfaction he derived from the 
deception itself. Here again, as was the case with the cook and the fox, his 
misfortune resulted from his character of impostor.

And therefore this proverb is said full sooth, 
"Hym thar nat wene wel that yvele dooth"; 
A gylour shal hymself bigyled be. 18

C. THE BEGGING FRIAR

The greatest of Chaucer's impostors, with the exception of the 
Pardoner, is that arch hypocrite in the Summoner's Tale, the begging Friar, 
whose motive in deception like that of the fox is personal gain. He is despicable because he masquerades under the cloak of religion. Moliere in his well 
known comedy, Tartuffe, eloquently denounces the religious hypocrite in words that are remarkably applicable to Chaucer's impostor and may serve as a pre- 
amble to the study of the begging Friar.

... I know nothing more odious than the whitened sepulchre of 
a pretended zealot, than those downright impostors, those devotees, 
for public show, whose sacrilegious and deceitful grimaces abuse with 
impunity, and make a jest, according to their fancy, of what men 
hold most sacred, those men who, from motives of self-interest, make 
a trade of piety, and would purchase honour and reputation at the

17 Dempster, "Dramatic Irony in Chaucer," Language and Literature, 
IV, 279.

18 Robinson, Chaucer, I (A) 4319-4322, 72.
cost of a hypocritical turning up of the eyes and pretended raptures; those men, I say, whom we see possessed with such an uncommon ardour for the next world, in order to make their fortunes in this; who, with great unctuous and many prayers, daily recommend and preach solitude in the midst of court; who know how to reconcile their zeal with their vices; who are passionate, vindictive, without belief, full of artifice, and would in order to destroy a man, insolently cover their fierce resentment under the cloak of Heaven's interests. They are the most dangerous in their bitter wrath because they use against us weapons which men reverence, and because their passion, for which they are commended makes them assassinate us with a consecrated blade. 19

This Friar supplemented his church supplication for alms by scouring the countryside begging something from each family.

Whan folk in chirche had yeve him what hem leste,
He went his wey, no lenger woulde he reste.
With scrippe and typped staf, ytukked hye,
In every hous he gan to poure and prye,
And beggeth mele and chehe, or elles corn,
His felawe hadde a staf tipped with horn,
A peyre of tables al of yvory.
And a poynel polysshed fetisly,
And wroot the names alwey, as he stood,
Of alle folk that yaf hym any good,
Ascaunces that he wolde for hem preye,
'Yif us a bushel whete, malt, or reye,
A Goddes kechyl, or a trype of chehe,
Or elles what yow lyst, we may nat chehe,
A Goddes halfpeny, or a masse peny,
Or yif us of youre brawn, if he have eny; 20

Nothing was too small to find its way into the great sack which his servant carried slung over his back. If a widow had but one blanket, he would beg a strip of it.


20 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 1734-1750, 113.
'A dagon of youre blanket, leeve dame,  
Oure suster deere,—lo! heere I write youre name,—  
Bacon or beef, or swich thyng as ye fynde.'21

The Friar resembled one of those large black ants that run into a house and pry into every crevice and corner seeking something to devour, only to hurry on to other hunting grounds. The promises of prayers for these poor people were as quickly forgotten as the names that were scraped from the tablets.

And whan that he was out at dore, anon  
He planed away the names everichon  
That he biforn had written in his tables;  
He served hem with nyfles and with fables.22

He came at last to a house where he had been more frequently and lavishly entertained than in a hundred others. With accustomed assurance and glib greeting, he addressed Thomas, the good man of the house, who lay sick.

'Deus hic! quod he, 0 Thomas, freend, good day!'  
Seyde this frere, curteisly and softe.  
'Thomas, quod he, 'God yelde yowl ful ofte  
Have I upon this bench faren ful weel;  
Here have I eten many a murie meel.'  
And fro the bench he droof away the cat,  
And leyde adoun his potente and his hat  
And eek his scrippe, and sette hym softe adoun.23

One can see here that the Friar was preoccupied with his own ease. Shelly, referring to this driving away of the cat, says: "... here is one of the homeliest and most effective bits of realism in all Chaucer. As Lowell said of it, 'We know without need of more words that he has chosen the snuggest corner.'"24

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21 Ibid., III (D) 1751-1754, 113.  
22 Ibid., III (D) 1757-1761, 113.  
23 Ibid., III (D) 1769-1778, 113.  
Thomas greeted him with disguised respect but added with a slight tinge of sarcasm:

"How han ye fare sith that March began?
I saugh yow noght this fourtenyght or moore."

It seems that only when the Friar's rations were running low, he thought of visiting the sick.

"God woot, quod he, 'laboured have I ful soore,
And specially, for thy savacion
Have I seyd many a precious orison,
And for cure othere frendes, God hem blesse!"

On the entrance of the good wife, he rose, greeted her courteously and affectionately, and then asked to be left alone with Thomas that he might treat of the affairs of his soul.

"I walke, and fishe Cristen mennes soules,
To yelden Jhesu Crist his propre rente;
To sprede his word is set al myn entente." 

As the wife turned to leave, as if by habit, she asked what should she prepare for his dinner. Instantly he answered:

"Have I nat of a capon but the lyvera,
And of youre softe breed nat but a shyvera,
And after that a rosted pigges heed--
But that I nolde no beest for me were deed--"

These few items made up his modest bill of fare. If it were too troublesome to kill the animals, let her serve what she had. He knew from experience that

25 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 1782-1784, 113.
26 Ibid., III (D) 1784-1788, 114.
27 Ibid., III (D) 1820-1823, 114.
28 Ibid., III (D) 1839-1843, 114.
all would be provided as he wished. The "shyvere" of bread and the "capon's lyvere" would, he knew, be surrounded by an abundance of delicacies. How this greed for food must have betrayed itself in his face. Though Chaucer does not describe his features, one may believe that in build he resembled the well-fed monk of the Prologue. Once his order was given, the gormand in him slyly winked and bowed to the ascetic. Probably with eyes raised to heaven and a look of repressed suffering on his face, he made the next comment.

'I am a man of litel sustenaunce;
My spirit hath his fostryng in the Bible.
My body is ay so redy and penyble
To wake, that my stomak is destroyed
I prey yow, dame, ye be nat anoyed,
Though I so freundly yow my conseil shewe.'

Thomas kept his thoughts to himself though possibly he questioned the choice of the Friar's menu for one whose stomach had been ruined by fasting. He probably was amazed at the smugness of one who earlier had confessed: "Heere have I eten many a myrie meel." One marvels at the credulity of the wife. The Friar's revelation of his infirmity—a confidence that he would share only with dear friends—showed with what finesse this hypocrite plied his trade.

As she turned to go, the wife asked him to pray for their child who had died two weeks before. Here again one notes his shameful neglect of these benefactors in their bereavement and Thomas' illness. He was at no loss for an answer.

29 Ibid., III (D) 1844-1849, 114.
'His deeth I saugh by revelacioun'
Saide this frere, 'at hoom in oure dortour,
I dar wel seyn that, er that half an hour
In myn avision, so God me wisse!30

Nothing daunted he spun one fabrication after another.

'And up I roos, and al oure covent eke,
With many a teere triklyng on my cheke,
Te Deum was oure song, and nothing ellos,
Save that to Crist I seyde an orison,
Thankynge hym of his revelacion.31

Moliere, it will be remembered, denounced those impostors who "from
motives of self-interest made a trade of piety, and would purchase honour and
reputation at the cost of a hypocritical turning up of the eyes and pretended
raptures."32

And moore we seen of Cristes secre thynges,
Than burel folk, although they weren kynges.
We lyve in povertie and in abstinence,

Oure Lord Jhesu, as hooly writ devyseth,
Yaf us ensample of fastynge and preyeres.
Therefore we mendynantz, we sely freres,
Been wedded to povertie and continence,
To charite, humbless and abstinence,
To persecucion for rightwisnesse,
To wepyng, misericorde, and clennesse.
And therfore may ye se that oure preyreres--
I speke of us, we mendynantz, we freres--
Been to the hye God moore acceptable
Than youres, with youre feestes at the table.
For Paradys first, if I sham nat lye,
Was man out chaced for his glotonye!'33

30 Ibid., III (D) 1854–1859, 114–115.
31 Ibid., III (D) 1863–1869, 115.
32 Cf. p. 33 of this thesis.
33 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 1871–1917, 115.
"Because they use against us weapons that men reverence and because their passion, for which they are commended makes them assassinate us with a consecrated blade" no defense against their machinations is possible. The "consecrated blade" had been pricking sharply and must have cut deeply into Thomas when during this harangue he recalled all of the goods that he had given to ungrateful, begging friars. Especially irritating must have been the fellow's complacent smugness. "We friars are more acceptable to the high God than you with your feasting at table." For long past had Thomas sat at his well-filled table and watched the fruits of his labor adding to the double chin of this abstemious friar. Disparagingly had the Friar spoken of others, possibly ecclesiastics, as "fat as a whale, and walkynge as a swan." Well might this metaphor have been applied to him as he rose, filled and satisfied, from a great dinner. Returning to the subject of prayer, the Friar tried to convince Thomas that for his health and welfare the "prayeres of charitable and bisy chaste freres maken hir sour to Goddes eres two." Lowes, commenting on Chaucer's vivid anthropomorphizing of God says: "The ear of God is little more than an abstraction. .. 'God's two ears' startlingly visualizes, humanizes God. And the daring familiarity which the Friar allows himself is not only an apt touch in a masterpiece of satirical portraiture but also, once more, an instance of Chaucer's imaginative coalescence with his subject."

34 Cf. Moliere p. 33 of this thesis.
35 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 1930, 115.
36 Ibid., III (D) 1939-1942, 116.
37 Lowes, Geoffrey Chaucer: His Genius, 239.
Thomas complained bitterly that he had not been benefited by these so-called holy prayers.

'God woot,' quod he, 'no thyngh therof seele I!
As help me Crist, as in a fewe yeres,
I have spent upon diverse manere freres
Ful many a pound; yet fare I never the bet.
Certeyn, my good have I almoost biset.
Farwel, my gold, for it is al ago!
The frere answere, 'O Thomas dostow so?
What nedeth yow diverse freres seche?
What nedeth hym that hath a parfit leche
To sechen othere leches in the toun?
Youre inconstance is youre confusion.
Holde ye thanne me, or ellesoure covent,
To praye for yow been insufficient.'38

The Friar was jealously trying to ward off any division of alms among the clergy of the neighborhood. Thomas must understand that many making supplication weaken the impetrative power of prayer.

'What is a ferthyng worth parted in twelve?
Lo, ech thyngh that is oned in hymselfe
Is moore strong than whan it is toscatered.
Thomas, of me thou shalt nat been yflated;
Thou woldest hanoure labour al for noght.
The hye God, that al this world hath wroght,
Seith that the werkman worthy is his hyre.
Thomas, noght of youre tresor I desire
As for myselfe, but that al our covent
To preye for yow is ay so diligent,
And for to buylden Cristes owene chirche.'39

The Friar could probably see that Thomas was still skeptical as to the medicinal value of the friars' prayers so he began to lay stress on the poverty of their convent and the need for alms if they were to build their


cloister. Here in a final burst of eloquence, he knelt down on one knee and begged for gold. "Without aid," he cried, "the friars must sell their very books. And if the holy intercession of the mendicants be lacking, then all will go to destruction—for if the friars be driven out—the sun will be taken from the world!"

"Yif me thanne of thy gold, to makeoure cloystre,'
Quod he, 'For many a muscle and many an oystre,
Whan outhere men han ben ful wel at eyse,
Hath been outhere foode, our cloystre for to reyse.

'Now help, Thomas, for hym that harwed helle!
For elles moste we outhere bokkes selle.
And if yow lakke outhere predicacioun,
Thanne goth the world al to destruccioun.
For whoso wolde us fro this world bireve,
So God me save, Thomas by youre leve,
He wolde bireve out of this world the sonne. 40

Does this portrait of the Friar meet the Aristotelian requirements for comic delineation? Chaucer has made this character ludicrous by debasing him to the status of pious hypocrite and yet has not distorted him to such a degree as to make a painful impression on the reader. The Friar is amusing without being revolting. One delights in watching this impostor at work. His talent for equivocation does not lie useless as does his breviary in an unfrequented cell. That ready tongue has won many a fatted goose, and roasted pig, and glittering gold piece.

Does every utterance and action of the Friar show consistency of character? From the moment when he "sette hym softe adoun" in the house of Thomas until "forth he gooth, with a ful angry cheere," he evinced the self-

40 Ibid., III (D) 2099-2114, 117-118.
indulgent impostor. A love of ease and good food revealed itself from the first, only a little later to be gilded by the pretence of piety. The veneer "which made a trade of piety" appears more odious than the sensuality which this cheap paint so poorly covered. Aristotle says that impostors "pretend to such qualities as may be beneficial to their neighbors, and can not be proved not to exist—for example, to skill in prophesying or medicine. . . ." It will be remembered that when the Friar was asked to pray for the deceased child, immediately he replied that he had seen the child carried to bliss in heaven. Aristotle's words "can not be proved" are pertinent for surely the laymen who were being duped had no way of proving the fraudulence of the alleged vision of the Friar.

Was the begging Friar typical of the friars of his day? He was, unfortunately, typical of a certain kind of friar. Chaucer probably took the traits of various individuals and by debasing the character somewhat produced this wheedling impostor. There is evidence from church history that reformation among the clergy, both secular and religious, was badly needed. Chaucer used a friar of this type because of the humorous possibilities such a character presented. He did much the same with the Friar of the Prologue, the Pardoner, the Summoner, and others, particularly the Monk. By slightly distorting the characters he made them comic.

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1 Cf. Molière, p. 33 of this thesis.
2 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. 13-14, trans. by Welldon, 127-129.
Is it correct then to accuse Chaucer of a sly attack against the Church in the presentation of these caricatures of churchmen? Chesterton has defended the poet by declaring that Chaucer ridiculed these clerics because they were not conforming themselves to the requirements of their religious state. Possibly Chaucer was championing the Church more by using the weapon of kindly wit and satire than Langland in his fiery denunciations. Bergson believes that correction is the essential function of comedy and Meredith agrees. Max Eastman, too, praises the benefits of the humorous. "Perhaps no force is more powerful than laughter" in revealing false values and preserving that which the years have found valuable." Chesterton in defending Chaucer in this matter says:

And the simple truth is that Chaucer satirizes the Monk for not being sufficiently Monastic. . . . The point is rather practical; because nearly all studies of this period are full of the suggestion that Chaucer, like his contemporary Wycliff, was a sort of morning star of the Reformation. . . . In the whole satirical sketch of the Monk, the point is, not that the Monk is sunk in monkish superstitions, but simply that the Monk is not monkish enough. . . . all Chaucer's denunciation is directed, not so much at a monk as at a runaway monk; and that not because he is a monk but because he is a runaway. He jeers at him for coming out of the cloister and partaking of the pleasures of the world. He jeers at him indeed in his own jovial fashion; making up an imaginary defence of the monk, which is full of a hearty hatred of work and the bother of reading books. Why, he asks, should the jolly fellow do any work at all? . . . To those troubled in spirit by the divine disturbance of humour, it will be obvious that Chaucer is simply chaffing a monk for his cheek in not being a monk at all.  


45 Chesterton, Chaucer, 239-240.
Who knows but some monkish hunter or some convivial friar of Chaucer's day may have recognized himself in one of these portraits, and laughing at himself with Chaucer have turned to a holy life? Much that Chesterton said of the Monk can be applied to the Friar. Chaucer is simply having a little fun chaffing this impostor Friar, and probably no one would have laughed more wholeheartedly with the genial Chaucer than the fun-loving, charming "father of friars," St. Francis himself.

D. THE PARDONER

Naturally it would be supposed that in a study of Chaucer's impostors the Pardoner, probably his greatest hypocrite, would appear. Because the element of the "painful" enters into the character of the Pardoner, he would not coincide with Aristotle's conception of the comic. Aristotle defines comedy as "an imitation of characters of a lower type,—not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists of some defect or ugliness, which is not painful or destructive." There are some comic angles to the Pardoner's character, but for the most it is a tragic personality almost fascinating in its repulsiveness. It was remarked before that Kittredge considers him "the one lost soul among the pilgrims."


47 Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry, 180.
Aristotle states in his *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Now they who exceed the proper limit in ridicule seem to be buffoons and vulgar people, as their heart is set upon exciting ridicule at any cost, and they aim rather at raising a laugh than at using decorous language and not giving pain to their butt. . . . The buffoon is the slave of his own sense of humour; he will spare neither himself nor anybody else, if he can raise a laugh, and he will use such language as no person of refinement would use or sometimes even listen to.¹

Aristotle remarks further that he who observes the mean in amusement is witty, but that he who goes to excess in pleasantness is a buffoon. Some qualify buffoons as witty, but Aristotle does not accept this judgment:

People whose fun is in good taste are called witty, a name which implies the happy turns of their art, . . . as it is never necessary to look far for subjects of ridicule and as excessive fondness for fun and mockery is pretty universal, it happens that not only true wits but buffoons are described as witty, because they are amusing. But it is clear from what has been said that there is a difference and a wide difference between the two.²

Having noted Aristotle's exposition of the buffoon, one may further clarify the term by indicating a few of the common traits of the class. It is well to remember that though all buffoons have a number of these general traits,

² Ibid., 130-131.
there are buffoons of several sorts with a variety of qualities which give them individuality. A wide range of these characters is found in Shakespeare alone; his buffoons, as illustrated by Dogberry, Polonius, Bottom, Falstaff, Juliet's nurse, Sir Toby Belch, Falconbridge, and others, are types within a type.

Garrulity appears to be a quality common to all, and probably springs from a certain pride and vanity evident in most members of the group. They crave notice and will obtain it either by an eccentric action, a loud voice, or a startling costume. They wish to stand out from the crowd and are not averse to indulging in ridiculous and undignified actions to gain an end. They are frequently actors of merit, and are willing to take a goodly amount of punishment to raise a laugh. Since they lack finesse, they use vulgar and offensive language. Though generally good natured, they are often hot tempered, and when offended break into wrathful demonstrations followed by a sudden return to their natural affability. Lacking in tact, they push in where others hesitate, as is illustrated by the Theophrastan buffoon, who accosting a man who had lost a great lawsuit, congratulated him. Officiousness is a common quality which shows itself in long discourses, offering advice gratis, and meddling to the extent of meeting the fate of Polonius. Though Aristotle denies them the quality of wittiness, Shakespeare, Molière, and others have conceived them differently and have created buffoons whose greatness lies in the cleverness of their wit. No general physical description of them can be given; for, like the Pied Piper's rats, they are of all colors, sizes, weights, and measurements, but always there is present some defect, or deformity, or mannerism, or idiosyncrasy which is a source of amusement.
Chaucer used the buffoon in creating a number of the great comic characters of all literature. A few of these will be studied in the light of Aristotle's theories.

A. THE MILLER

If one were to view a procession of medieval English guildsmen as it passed slowly and with dignity across the village green, he would see among the colorful group no more proud nor imposing figure than that of the miller who was the most important lay tenant of a medieval manor. Prominent in story and ballad, he has been pictured as a thrifty villager keen after his gains and not too honest in the collection of them. Muriel Bowden quotes Langland as referring to millers as thieves and ignorant rascals. Realizing the village's need of his service, the miller could exercise a shrewd independence, and either by craftiness or by browbeating, "wel koude he stelen corn and tollen thries;"

Chaucer's Miller, Robin, clothed in a white coat and blue hood, with a sword and buckler at his side, is introduced piping the Canterbury pilgrims out of town. Bowden says of his musical talent:

It is fitting that he plays the bagpipe as powerful lungs are needed for that instrument; the sounds Robin extracts from his bagpipe must be a perfect match for his coarse manners and loud speech. . . . No wonder the "piping" or stentorian trumpeting of such a

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3 Muriel Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, New York, 1948, 246.

4 Robinson, Chaucer, I (A) 562, 25.
self-important fellow is employed to lead the cavalcade out of Southwark! We are reminded of Master William Thorpe's complaint that pilgrims were over noisy with their bagpipes.5

Chaucer, in his terse, concise style, draws the portrait of this noble guildsman.

Ful byg he was of brawn, and eek of bones.  
That proved wel, for ever al ther he cam,  
At wrestlynge he wolde have alway the ram.  
He was short-sholdred, brood, a thikke knarre;  
Ther was no dore that he molde heve of harre,  
Or breke it at a rennyng with his heed.  
His berd as any sowe or fox was reed,  
And thereto brood, as though it were a spade.  
Upon the cop right of his nose he hade  
A werte, and theron stood a toft of herys,  
Reed as the brustles of a sowes erys;  
His nosthirles blake were and wyde,  
A swerd and bokeler bar he by his syde.  
His mouth as greet was as a greet forneys.6

Regarding these physical characteristics, Professor Curry draws interesting conclusions from the works of ancient physiognomists. He observes that a strong fellow, big of brawn and bone, with short forearms and high shoulders, broad and thickset as to build, was expected to be shameless and loquacious as well as bold and easily angered.7 One could readily accept Chaucer's description of the huge frame of the fellow, but would be rather skeptical of the door-breaking accomplishments of the 'carl' and would accuse Chaucer of exaggeration if instances of such brute strength had not been

5 Bowden, A Commentary on the General Prologue, 249.
6 Robinson, Chaucer, I 516-560, 25.
recorded in modern times. B. J. Whiting tells of a certain Riley, King of the Hoodlums, who commercialized his gift by splintering doors with his head for fifty cents or a dollar, depending upon the thickness of the planks. He cites also Breezy Thomas, a boy from the Congo, who could break doors and crack walls with his head, and also Will Carroll, who outbutted everything in the circus except the elephant. Every age must have its ivory-headed prodigies for Autrey Wiley remarks: "Butting heads aroused interest a thousand years before Chaucer's Miller showed his strength. The bishop of Ptolemus in the fourth century recounts how 'This man with his bare head would butt a ram were he never so stout and put him to the worst.'"

Chaucer's account of the prowess of his Miller is impressive, but his further embellishment of the portrait in which he presents the details of a detail is intriguing. Not only did the Miller have a wart on the top of his nose, but on this wart stood a tuft of hairs as red as the bristles of a sow's ears. P. V. Shelly says: "Was there ever a writer with such an eye for detail or with such an understanding of the force of the particular? Why the sow's ears? Are the bristles there redder than other bristles? I do not know, but I do know that the simile is incomparably forceful." "The miller is simply"


10 Shelly, The Living Chaucer, 197.
as Legouis has aptly summed him up, "one of the most vigorous sketches of an unmitigated brute ever drawn by poet or painter." 11

It would not be difficult to predict the conduct of such a character. The Miller asserted himself early in the Canterbury pilgrimage. When the Knight had completed his dignified story of the fresh youthful love of Palamon and Arcite for Emilie, pleasing all of his listeners with his tale of chivalrous adventure, the Host remarked that the game was well begun and to continue the good sport he would ask the Monk to contribute some lively piece. Interrupting the Host, the Miller, who had drunk himself pale and could scarcely sit on his horse, bellowed in his loud "Pilate's voice" that he would tell a tale to cap the Knight's story. The Host, noting his condition, tried to pacify him and divert him from his proposed contribution, but the fellow began to swear shamefully and threatened to leave the party. The Host, to keep the peace, acquiesced and truculently cried: "Tell on, a devil way! Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome." 'Now hearkneth,' quod the Miller, 'alle and some!' 12 Having broken down the Host's opposition, the drunken fellow warned them that if his story was ribald, they were not to chide him, for he knew by voice that he was drunk; let them blame the ale of Southwark. Then followed one of those churlish tales, racy, realistic, and comic which has in turn delighted and disgusted many men from Chaucer's age to this. Of

10 Shelly, The Living Chaucer, 197.
12 Robinson, Chaucer, I (A) 3134-3136, 56.
Chaucer's pilgrims it was said that different folk received the tale in different ways, but for the most part they laughed and no man took it ill but the carpenter. Chesterton succinctly commenting on the situation says: "Then the Monk is just about to begin his dignified recital of the deaths of the kings ... the drunken Miller roars him down with his cataract of coarse, not to say foul narrative (an admirably managed collision of comedy) as if the ruffian had thrown a pail of slops over the statelier story-teller."¹³

How does this crude fellow, swaying precariously on his jogging mount, and telling his churl's tale in his own fashion, coincide with Aristotle's conception of the ludicrous in general and of the buffoon in particular?

Chaucer in choosing the Miller, is using a type representative of his own day as well as a comic type that answers Aristotle's requirement of men below average as subjects of comedy. The philosopher preferred generalized types. Though Chaucer heightens the comic effect by particularizing the Miller, he retains the general qualities which make the type familiar. The heavy work of lifting sacks of flour would require great strength; this strength flowed from the Miller's powerful frame: "ful by he was of brawn, and eek of bones."¹⁴ The white coat would be associated with one working in flour, much as the white apron and cap are associated with cooks and bakers today. Reference to his stealing and his thumb of gold points to a joke

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¹³ Chesterton, Chaucer, 159.

¹⁴ Robinson, Chaucer, 25.
current in the Middle Ages about the honesty of millers. Though the Miller remains typical of his class, such graphic details as the broad red beard, the wide black nostrils, and the great furnace mouth give him the reality of a flesh and blood individual. (The question of whether Chaucer's characters represented real persons or were only types can never be satisfactorily answered. It has been said that possibly the pilgrims were nearer type characters in the Prologue and became individuals as they told their stories and above all in the revealing circumstances of the links between the stories.)

Chaucer follows Aristotle's rule by sketching on the powerful features of the Miller a blemish which, since it is not painful or repellent, has been a source of amusement to all who delight in the incongruous. Upon the firm, strong foundation of the Miller's brawn and bones, he set the broad, short shoulders, topped by a head so hard that he "could crack a door with his head at a running." From this head projected a large nose with a wart perched on its tip and on this wart there stood a "toft of herys, Reed as the brustles of a sowes erys!" As one contemplated this eminence with its bristles pointing skyward, he would be reminded of some tall battlement jutting out on a rocky promontory, its tower manned by sentinels whose "bristling" lances catch the last rays of the setting sun. (Fanciful thoughts such as these tormented Noyes' drunken sailors as they gazed on the isle of Mogadore.

Were they pines among the boulders
Or the hair upon his Cyclops' shoulders
We were only simple seamen, so of course we didn't know.)

15 Ibid., I (A) 555-556, 25.
These reflections might momentarily occupy one intrigued with the Miller's visage, but would be carefully concealed from the object of scrutiny, for one would not lightly call down upon himself the torrent of abuse resulting from the wounded vanity of the Miller who, though he acted like a buffoon, spoke like one, and looked like one, would be the last person in Chaucer's England to recognize himself in the portrait just completed.

Not only would a harmless physical defect or deformity be a fit subject for humor according to Aristotle, but a weakness or infirmity of human nature would likewise be included. S. H. Butcher says:

Certain imperfections, however, will probably always be looked on as permanent features of our common humanity. With these defects comedy amuses itself, discovering the inconsistencies which underlie life and character, and exhibiting evil not as it is in its essential nature, but as a thing to be laughed at rather than hated. 17

Did the Miller have such a defect? There is every reason to believe that he did. His difficulty in keeping his balance as he rode, the unmistakable indications in his voice, and other physical peculiarities point to intemperance and other faults that accompany it. Though able to meet the ordinary requirements of life, he was probably seldom entirely sober. Moreover, this condition would aggravate his natural boldness, insolence, and loquaciousness.

Here we have an example of the evil of intemperance exhibited not in its essential nature but as a weakness to be laughed at. It is not entertaining or funny to see a drunken husband beat his wife and children; here intemperance in all its ugly guise shows itself as truly evil. But to see an

intoxicated ruffian making himself foolish may give rise to laughter. The question naturally presents itself. Are drunken men really amusing? The general public has found them so, and authors both ancient and modern have used them as subjects of comedy. Shakespeare himself frequently introduced them into his plays; the classic Porter Scene in Macbeth\(^{18}\) with its undeniable comic relief is an illustration. If one remembers that under certain circumstances evil is to be laughed at rather than hated, the Miller's drunkenness will be accepted as a weakness provocative of mirth.

How did the Miller measure up to Aristotle's requirements of truth to type and consistency? To attain this truth to type every utterance of a character in a comedy should show his moral bent and the workings of his mind.

The Miller, that for drunken was at pale,
So that unnethe upon his hore he sat,
He molde avalen neither hood ne hat,
He abyde no man for his curteisie,
But in Pilates voys he gan to crie,
And swoor, 'By armes, and by blood and bones,
I kan a noble tale for the nones,
With which I will nowe quite the Knyghtes tale.\(^{19}\)

The Miller had shown himself a churl in every action and in nearly every word that he uttered. He would neither doff his hood nor hat for any man, nor wait for any man, but would cry out in his raucous voice until he gained his point. Some crude, ill-born characters will at least restrain themselves in the presence of women, and particularly if these happen to be nuns. Even intoxicated men have straightened their shoulders and adjusted

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\(^{18}\) Aristotle would not have approved of the mingling of comedy with tragedy.

\(^{19}\) Robinson, Chaucer, I (A) 3120-3128, 56.
their ties and tried to show a deference and courtesy when approaching religious women. The complete absence of any sensibility of this kind in the Miller points to the "unmitigated brute" mentioned by Legouis. 20 The rude interruption and the ribald story are perfectly consistent with the type. In fact, Chaucer excuses himself for rehearsing the Miller's tale by making the observation that he must tell all of the tales, good and bad, as the pilgrims would tell them or else falsify his material.

And therefore every gentil wight I preye,
For Goddes love, demeth not that I seye
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or worse,
Or elles falsen som of my mateere. 21

The Miller was not only consistent in his boorish manner and in his speech, but in this speech he exhibited one of the chief qualities of the buffoon by aiming "at exciting laughter more than at decorous language." He hugely enjoyed himself in the telling of the story and probably glanced now and then at his companions to see how they were receiving it. The loud guffaws of the Cook and the Shipman, and the ringing laughter of the Wife of Bath must have encouraged him. Whatever the refined people thought of the recital was kept to themselves. No one tried to stem the tide of this volcanic eruption. Aristotle says: "The buffoon will spare neither himself nor anybody else, if he can raise a laugh, and he will use such language as no person of refinement

20 Legouis, Geoffrey Chaucer, 170.
21 Robinson, Chaucer, I (A) 3171-3175, 57.
would use, or sometimes even listen to. This forced attention must have been unpleasant for some of them, for Chaucer records that it was received "by diverse folk diversely." Outwardly, at least, they hid their feelings for again Chaucer remarks:

Ne at this tale I saugh no man hym grewe,  
But it were only Osewald the Reeve.  

Osewald the Reeve was angry not because of the indecorous language, but because the Miller in his story had made fun of a carpenter. The Miller cared not a whit that he had given pain to the Reeve, who was by profession a carpenter.

The Miller ended his tale with a prayer that God would bless all of the company. "This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte!" Does not this ending produce a jarring note? Is there not a marked inconsistency in placing a prayer in the mouth of the rude and shameless Miller? Has not Chaucer disregarded the Aristotelian dictum of truth to type? Answering paradoxically, after the manner of Mr. Chesterton, one may say that Chaucer here is most consistent when he is inconsistent. Prayer in the mouth of the Miller appears untrue to type unless one understands that the Middle Ages were the Ages of Faith, and that every baptized Christian, be he ever so bankrupt morally, retained some glimmer of belief in the eternal verities. Even the Pardoner, considered by some as the one lost soul among the pilgrims spoke in deepest

23 Robinson, Chaucer, I (A) 3859–3869, 66.
24 Ibid., I (A) 3854, 65.
earnestness when he invoked upon the pilgrims the true pardon of Christ. 25 Not only is Chaucer's picture of the Miller a true picture of a miller, but it is a true picture of a Medieval miller. It was as natural for a miller then to go on a pilgrimage as it is for a miller today to see a prize fight. It was as natural for the medieval man to add prayer to his merry-making as it is for the modern man to exclude God entirely from his amusements. Chaucer is not only consistent in the Miller's speech, but his use of contrast, in the final line, between the prayer for the pilgrims and the ribald tale that precedes it is a master stroke of characterization.

The words, actions, and incongruities of the Miller, both physical and moral, reveal a character typical of his day, and equally typical of the vulgar buffoon such as Aristotle has conceived and defined him.

B. THE HOST

A type more universally recognized than that of the miller, is the host or innkeeper who from Chaucer's day to this has stood, smiling and genial, as he welcomes guests to the "wayside inns" of all the world. Driven in this streamlined age from his habitation in the city, he may yet be found here and there in the outer districts, possibly in some pretty valley town or sequestered little mountain village far from the rushing, teeming cities of men. (Today even the term "host" with its connotation of friendliness and hospitality has been supplanted by that of "hotel manager," a term suggesting effi-

25 Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry, 180.
ciency and more suitable to this day of big business.) It is with regret that one notes the passing of these figures, typical of that happy time before invention with its mass production had robbed man of much of the personal. If one would meet again these picturesque types of a vanishing age, he must turn to the ever-living realm of books. It is here that Chaucer's Host, Harry Bailey, stands in the doorway of the Tabard Inn crying joyfully: "Now lوردыges, trewely, ye bee to me right welcome, hertely." Chaucer introduces him in the following words:

A semely man Oure Hooste was withalle
For to han been a marchal in an halle.
A large man he with eyen stepe—
A fairer burgeys is there noon in Chepe—
Boold of his speche, and wys, and wel ytaught,
Eek thereto he was right a myrie man, ... 27

The Host is not only the chief character of the links between the tales, but he is the vivifying spirit of the whole drama who by his versatility becomes the spokesman for the company. What a list of accomplishments and occupations are mentioned by P. V. Shelly in speaking of the Host! He says:

He is Host, guide, master of ceremonies and of the revels, patcher-up of quarrels and keeper of the peace, diplomatist, literary critic, jester-in-chief, occasional philosopher and commentator on life, hempecked husband, and master of profanity ... The Host is the embodiment of the holiday spirit of the pilgrimage. ... He knits the pilgrims together and makes of them, for the time being, a fellowship. ... as he rides in their midst [he is] the symbol of the varied and abounding life

26 Robinson, Chaucer, I (A) 760-761, 27.
27 Ibid., I (A) 751-757, 27.
they represent, and the symbol too of the poet who made them and whose love of life was so intense and complete.  

Typical of the innkeeper of his day, he was a "right myrie man." It was part of his business to be merry and to content people, to acquaint them with each other, and to prepare some kind of entertainment that would help them pass the time pleasantly. Therefore, the Host began to make merry "whan that we hadde maad our rekenynges."  

Chaucer’s sharp eyes had been following the Host amidst all the bustle and the bookkeeping, and this seemingly innocent little comment with its slight tinge of irony says much about the thriftiness of the Host. Was there ever an innkeeper who failed to "reckon" the spendings of his guests? Indeed does not the cheering of the company with all that goes to make a gay recreation pay good dividends? Chaucer appreciated the Host and enjoyed him, but he was not fooled by his convivial spirit. All in all, however, there was no complaint among the pilgrims, and when the Host had complimented them on their merry company, they were well disposed to cooperate with him in his suggestions for diversion. He proposed that stories be told by each of the pilgrims going and coming from Canterbury, and that the one who told the best tale be given a supper on their return to the Tabard at the expense of all. The Host would himself be their guide to Canterbury and the judge of the stories, and anyone who did not abide by the rules of the game would pay the expenses of the company along the way. Here again the jolly innkeeper had nothing to lose, but, be it said in justice,

28 Shelly, The Living Chaucer, 221-228.

29 Robinson, Chaucer, I (A) 760, 27.
he was a super-showman ready to put on a first class entertainment for the travelers.

Showing his resourcefulness and foresight, he rose early and, like Chanticleer, led forth his flock, careful to see that all was orderly, and that each was well provided with the necessities along the way. Then was revealed his love for talk, which as the party rode on, became increasingly more lively. Never given to long monologues as were the Pardoner and the Wife, his pithy, racy speech hinted at the buffoon lurking beneath the surface. Far be it from him to ride on "dumb as a stone." The ball must be kept rolling, spirits kept high, ruffled tempers quieted, and sleepy riders goaded to participation in the sport. The whip of his sharp wit cracked over their heads, flicking lightly first one and then another, and even at times lashing out in anger, but never cutting too deeply. These flashes of temper and this spicy repartee mark the development of an individualized character which, while retaining the typical, has become a flesh-and-blood person. So real is the Host that many critics believe his portrait was taken from life. Manly holds this view in his *Some New Light on Chaucer*. Yet this particularization has been wrought so carefully that the general features of the type have not lost their clearness.

How closely does the Host conform to Aristotle's requirements for comedy? As a character, is he a man below average such as the classic law

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30 Manly has interesting and valuable material in his *New Light*. He emphasizes the individuality of the portraits and suggests historical counterparts.
demands? At first consideration it appears that the Host is average or even above average for has not Chaucer said of him "a fairer burgseys is there noon in Chepe—"? There is no evidence that these words were touched with the irony apparent in Chaucer's praise of the Monk. What Chaucer has done is to lower the Host slightly by means of the buffoonish speech that he places in his mouth.

Is there any blemish or defect that makes the Host ridiculous? Unlike the Miller, the Summoner, the Pardoner, the Wife, and others, he does not appear to have a physical deformity that is amusing, but he has defects of character that make good comedy. His habit of cursing and swearing by the use of such colorful oaths as "May God give this monk a thousand cartloads of bad years" and "by St. Paul's bell" as well as by the use of other expressions somewhat more offensive, was not in good taste but had no evil intent. P. V. Shelly makes this excuse for him: "As for the Host's swearing, to which only the Parson makes objection, it is a harmless sort of thing—a phase really of his heartiness and of his delight in forceful and picturesque speech, and not in any sense a sign of viciousness." Besides this addiction to cursing, the Host revealed another defect of character in that otherwise masterful personality. Though undaunted in spirit, bold of speech, and courageous in action, this "fair burgess," this "right merry fellow," this "seemly man fit to be a marshall in a banquet hall" was behind the closed doors of his own home—in abject fear of his wife! The Host, poor, henpecked Harry Bailey, had

31 Shelly, The Living Chaucer, 224.
married a shrew, he tells us, who had little patience and great pride. When it became necessary for the innkeeper to punish any of the boys in his employ, she brought forth great "clobbed staves" and cried:

'Slee the dogges everichoon,
And brek hem, bothe bak and every boon!'

And if a neighbor failed to show her reverence in church, she rushed home, furiously crying to her trembling husband:

'False coward, wrek thy wyf!
By corpus bones, I wol have thy knyf,
And thou shalt have my distaf and go spynne!'

'Allas' she seith, 'that euer I was shape
To wdden a milk-sop, or a coward ape,'

Then choosing the lesser of two evils, "for she is byg in armes," he must dash from his door to avenge her, and as at times he was "lik a wilde leon," fool-hardy, and a dangerous man with a knife, he feared that some day he would slay a neighbor. The Host must have dramatized this account with many a wry smile and flourish of his whip. He had a high sense of the ridiculous, typical of the buffoon, and would not spare himself if he could raise a laugh. His rehearsal of his marital experiences revealing the humiliating defect of cowardice in one so bold shows an incongruity of character which Aristotle deemed a requisite of comedy.

The point has been made that the Host's character was depicted by Chaucer chiefly through the medium of speech. He was one of Chaucer's great

32 Robinson, Chaucer, B * 3089-3090, 225.
33 Ibid., B * 3096-3100, 225.
talkers, and like others of his kind, was self-revealing in his loquaciousness. It was his witty, homely, forceful chatter that made him one of the great comic characters. Did the possession of that dominant quality of the buffoon—namely, the faculty to raise a laugh at one's own expense or at that of others—appear in the Host? Yes, his dramatization of his domestic troubles and his witty taunts at individual members of the group give evidence of it. A few examples of his shrewd comments and lively retorts will illustrate this incomparable talent.

He called on the Cook for a story though "it were not worth a bottle of hay," and curtailed the Monk's tale because "it was not worth a butterfly." Is there not a freshness and vigor in this figurative language reminiscent of the English countryside? Further, the Host complained that the Monk's tragic stories were so dull that if it had not been "for the clinking of the bells on the monk's bridle" the Host would have fallen down in slumber though the mud be ever so deep. Then to dispel the gloom that lay on the company, he called for a tale from the Nun's Priest.

"Com neer, thou preest, com hyder, thou sir John!
Telle us swich thynge as may oure hertes glade.
Be blithe, though thou ryde upon a jade.
What thogh thyn hors be bothe foul and lene?
If he wol serve thee, rekke nat a bene.
Look that thyn herte be murie evermo." 34

Each time that a serious tale saddened the travelers, the Host called for a cheery contribution as he had just done with the Nun's Priest, or he made everyone laugh by his witty comments at the expense of some one of the

34 Ibid., B * 4000-4005, 237.
pilgrims. When the Prioress had finished her pathetic account of our Lady's little "clergeon" martyred by the Jews, everyone was "wondrous sober" until the Host began to jest. Seeming for the first time to spy Chaucer, he cried:

'What man are you? Are you watching to see an hare? Ever I see you staring upon the ground. Come near and look up merrily. Now make way, sire,—give this man room! He is full shapely in the waist like myself, small and fair of visage; he were a dolly for any woman to embrace in her arms! He seems elf-like by his countenance, for he chats with no man... Tell us anon a tale of mirth,... Now me thinks by his face we shall hear some rare thing.'

The "rare thing" was delivered in Chaucer's delightfully ironic manner and so fatigued the company that the Host broke out with the cry: "You weary me by your silliness that mine ears ache with your rubbish-prate, God bless my soul! To the Devil with such a rhyme, well may men call it doggerel!" Not only did this lively tirade amuse the pilgrims, but in the description of Chaucer that preceded it, the Host has given posterity an immortal portrait of the poet.

While poor Geoffrey's Sir Thopas was tagged doggerel by the disgusted Host-critic, the Physician's story of the piteous death of the Roman maiden, Virginia, merited for its author a blessing as apt as it was witty. Mastering his emotion aroused by this sad story, the Host cried:

'I pray God save your gentle body, and your Hippocrateses and your Galens, and your jugs and vessels and every box full of your syrops. God bless them and our Lady Saint Mary!... 'Sblood! Unless I take a physic, or else a draught of musty and malty beer, or hear a merry tale forthwith, my heart is done for, in pity for this maid.'

35 Tatlock and MacKaye, Reader's Chaucer, 106.
36 Ibid., 109.
37 Ibid., 145.
The Host, in his fun-making at the expense of the Nun's Priest and the Monk showed himself most truly the buffoon, as Aristotle had conceived him, by aiming "rather at raising a laugh than using decorous language."38 Though the jibes that follow are not more humorous than others previously mentioned, they follow very closely the Aristotelian rule. The Host turned to the Monk as they rode and called out jokingly:

I vow to God, thou hast a ful fair skyn;  
It is a gentil pasture ther thou goost;  
Thou art nat lyk a penant or a goost.”39

With increasing lack of propriety, he bantered at the Monk, praising his great physique and swearing that if he were pope "every myghty man, though he were shorn ful bye upon his pan, sholde have a wyf."40 He didn’t blame the women for preferring religious folk to "poor shrimps" like himself. In an equally audacious vein he compared the Nun’s Priest to Chanticleer, using the jests of a buffoon. And yet the good-natured Host meant no harm, and surely the Nun’s Priest with his sense of fun was not offended, nor was the Monk, in all probability, for Chaucer tells us that he bore it patiently. The people of those days were not squeamish; a certain kind of earthy humor was as natural to them as saying their prayers.

The buffoon slyly winks at the pilgrims and the reader in many of the speeches of the Host, but is there evidence of buffoonery in the actions

39 Robinson, Chaucer, B * 3122-3124, 225.
40 Ibid., B * 3140-3142, 225.
of the Host? There is no direct statement concerning any ludicrous actions on his part, but one can imagine the grimaces and clownish gestures that must have accompanied his salty speech as he rose in his stirrups to address some particular pilgrim or to point his whip with a flourish at another. Undoubtedly when the drunken Cook fell from his horse into the ditch, the Host (who as innkeeper was experienced) had directed the heavy operations of re-seating the Cook. Perhaps he had helped with many a tug and push to hoist the fellow on his heaving nag.

This was a fair chyvachee of a cook!
Allas! he nadde holde hym by his ladell!
And er that he agayn were in his sadel,
Ther was greeet shovvyng bothe to and fro
To lifte hym up, and muchel care and wo,
So unweelyd was this sory palled goost.41

This scene would lend itself to a variety of ludicrously dramatic actions on the part of a talented actor who, even before the fall, had taunted the Cook with many a jibe:

'For many a pastee hastow laten blood,
And many a Jakke of Dover hastow scold
That hath been twies hoot and twies coold.
Of many a pilgrym hastow Cristes curs,
For of thy percel yet they fare the wors,
That they han eten with thy stubbel goos;
For in thy shoppe is many a flye loos.'42

And again immediately before the fall:

'Is ther no man, for preyere ne for hyre,
That wolde awake oure felawe al biynede?
A theef myghte hym ful lightly robbe and bynde.

41 Robinson, Chaucer, IX (H) 50-56, 267.
42 Ibid., I (A) 4346-4350, 72.
See how he nappeth! see how, for cockes bones,
That he wol falle fro his hors atones!
Is that a cook of Londoun, with meschaunce?'

'Awake, thou Cook,' quod he, 'God yeve thee sorwe!
What eyleth thee to slepe by the morwe?' 43

How realistically the Host pictured the shop alive with flies and
how he berated the Cook for imposing twice heated meats on the public! And
what fun he poked at the napping rascal swaying on his horse. Yet there was
no malice in this joking for he mollified the nodding Roger by saying:

'But yet I pray thee, be not wroth for game;
A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley.' 44

There is none of the rancid unpleasantness in this chiding that is found in
the Manciple's insulting, vulgar attack upon the Cook. The Host cautioned the
Manciple to have a care lest the Cook later retaliate:

'But yet, Manciple, in feith thou art to nyce,
Thus openly repreve him for his vice.' 45

The kindly Host evinced a good-natured endurance of the Cook and his weaknesses
and in so doing emulated his creator, Chaucer, of whom Shelly says: "No one
save Shakespeare knows men and women as he does or has his almost divine tol-
erance of them." 46 And Aldous Huxley agrees:

43 Ibid., I (H) 6-17, 267.
44 Ibid., I (A) 4354-4355, 72.
46 Shelly, The Living Chaucer, 16.
Where Langland cried aloud in anger, threatening the world with hell-fire, Chaucer looks on and smiles, and precisely in the same vein Gower sees an England given over to the devil... there Chaucer, with incurable optimism, sees chiefly a Merry England.47

At times the Host lashes out with more heat at some of the righteous Pilgrims than at those who are burdened with faults. Even the Parson came in for a share of the Host's sharp wit when he complained: "'Bless me! What ails the man, to swear so sinfully?'" for the Host barked at him: "'Ho Jonny-kin, ye are there are ye? I smell a Lollard in the wind. How now, good men, listen and stay a bit, for by God's worthy pains we shall have a predication. This Lollard here will preach us somewhat!'"48

From all of this clever comment and spicy repartee, one can note how Chaucer has brought to life through his incomparable speech the picturesque personality of the Host. One must remember, however, as Shelly remembers, that the Host was not by nature a low character as was the Miller. He has the respect of Chaucer and the Knight and probably most of the company. That he could speak "as lordly as a kyng" was demonstrated by his marked courtesy when addressing the Prioress and his adaptability of speech was shown by his according to each of the pilgrims that shade of deference in tone and word which best suited his age or station. Commenting on this quality in the Host, Shelly says:


48 Tatlock and MacKaye, Reader's Chaucer, 94.
He can quote Scripture and Seneca. In speaking to the Clerk he makes reference to terms, colors, and figures of rhetoric, and offers sound advice on the subject of style. And he lards his speech to the Physician with such technical terms as the Physician himself would use. 49

In summary one can point to the Host as an average man whom Chaucer debases slightly below the ordinary, in accordance with Aristotle, to make of him a character of comedy; this lowering is accomplished by means of the buffoonish speech which Chaucer places in his mouth. The poet's genius attained in the portrait of the Host an artistry unknown to Aristophanes, Menander, and other ancient writers of comedy; for in him Chaucer combined dignity and buffoonery and yet preserved consistency of character. Here is found a creation not only true to type but so real that one is tantalized with the query: Did Harry Bailey once live and revel in the joys of Chaucer's England, or is he the culmination of the poet's conception of the typical, jolly innkeeper of his day? Manly in his New Light declares that he did once frequent the old Tabard. He shows how of all the Canterbury Pilgrims the Host can be most accurately identified for "the Subsidy Rolls of Southwark for the year 1380-81 give the name Henri Bayliff ostyler Christian." 50 Those who differ from Manly may say that perhaps Chaucer merely took the name of a Southwark innkeeper without using the personality, and others may hold that the poet used a few outstanding traits of some known character to create a type. Be this as it may, the important point to consider is that whether he was taken

49 Shelly, The Living Chaucer, 225.

50 Manly, New Light, 77.
A good Wif was ther of beside Bathe,
But she was some of deaf, and that was soathe.
.
Her hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed,
Ful streite yteyd, and shoes ful moyste and newe.
Boold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe.
She was a worthy womman al hir lyve;
Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve,
Withouten oother compaigne in youthe,
.
Get-tothed was she, soothly for to seye,
Upon an amblera esily she sat,
Ywympled wel, and on hir heed an hat
As brood as is a bokeler, or a targe;
A foot-mantel aboute hir hips large,
An on hir feet a paire of spores sharpe.
In fellaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe.
Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce,
For she koude of that art the olde daunce.54

Chaucer sketches in these lines and others in the Prologue an objective picture of the Wife, throwing in a number of illuminating bits about her past. One learns that she was a well-known cloth-maker, surpassing the weavers of Ypres and Ghent. She had been three times to Jerusalem and had visited many a distant place where she had learned divers things. Having married five husbands, she was experienced in the joys and tribulations of wedlock. Though somewhat old-fashioned in her dress, she was careful about her appearance. As she proudly marched up the church aisle to make her offering, let no dog bark, and above all let no other good wife step ahead of her or "so wroath was she that she was out of alle charitee."55 It was well that she had a substantial foundation of bone and muscle to balance the ten pound weight headcovering which she donned for Sundays. Though gap-toothed, she was fair.

54 Robinson, Chaucer, I (A) 445-447, 24.
55 Ibid., I (A) 451-453, 24.
and bold of face, and of a ruddy complexion. As she rode, rocking easily to
and fro, her great hat which was as large as a shield must have made an inter-
esting picture bobbing rhythmically with the pacing of her horse. Were the
sharp spurs which she wore used to prick her jaded mount or were they merely a
final touch to her dress? Her "amblere" must have been a gentle animal and a
well disciplined one to carry his burden safely about the countryside, for
when the Wife launched into one of her lengthy monologues, she forgot the ways
of horses for the world of men.

What could be more lifelike than this picture of the Wife? She
passes before one in all her glory, with her great "targe" hat, and her ample
hips, and her red hose. From her bold red face to the sharp spurs on her soft
leather shoes there is not a detail that could be omitted and yet there is no
overcrowding of canvas that would detract from the clear-cut etching. She is
unforgettable just as she is.

In the Wife's Prologue, Chaucer no longer uses the method of direct
portrayal but allows her to give herself away and unconsciously paint her own
vivid portrait as she loses herself in her incomparable eight-hundred-line
monologue.

In every line of her Prologue and in the whole, one feels
Chaucer's delight in her creation. She is poured out, as it were,
'mit einem Uusse'; she is absolutely of a piece. There is nothing
quite like her. And her superb self-revelation, with its verve
and its raciness and its serenely ceaseless flow, no more to be
stopped (as the Pardoner found) than the course of a planet; and
above all her . . . 'profound, imperturbable naturalism'—all that
is one of the few achievements which actually create a personality.

56 Lowes, Geoffrey Chaucer; His Genius, 231.
Does the Wife meet Aristotle's requirement of characters below average as subjects of comedy? She has sprung from the thrifty middle class and probably, too, is representative of the cloth weavers of her time. Had she lived in the days of the French Revolution, she would very likely have joined the fishwives in their march on the Tuileries. At least the sentiments of "equality, fraternity, and liberty" were equally strong in her. Selected from this average middle class, she has been lowered through her outrageous speech sufficiently to emerge the great comic personality that she is.

In the Wife we have again great vitality and charm. The Wife as every one knows, is a superb creation. She is a world, God's plenty, all in herself. The Wife however is not an admirable figure when it comes to instruction or idealism; she cannot be taken as a leader in social reform.57

One agrees with Mr. Patch that the Wife cannot be taken as a leader in social reform, and the world is as well off without her revolutionizing of society by raising woman to a position of complete supremacy, but the world would be poorer indeed without the irrepresible life, love, and humor of this incomparable Wife.

Garrulity, a quality rooted deep in the nature of most buffoons, attained its full flowering in the Wife. Knowing her tendency toward loquaciousness, one asks, how did she manage to stem the on-rush of comment and advice that must have clamored for utterance during the story telling of the Miller and the Reeve? Possibly the torrent of her talk gained in momentum, the better to burst forth when her time came to begin her priceless eight-hundred-line prologue. She struck the keynote both to her prologue and her

57 Patch, Rereading Chaucer, 161.
tale when she announced in the first line of her long preamble that experience in marriage was enough for her. She prided herself on her marital wisdom which was as wide as the world of her many travels. No other woman of her time had plumbed the depths of the joys and woes in marriage as she had done. She would share with the pilgrims the fruits of this experience and would spare neither herself, her dead husbands, nor the company in the telling. Let no one take offense; all was to be said in fun and to entertain.

But that I praye to al this compagnuye,
If that I spoke after my fantasye,
As taketh not a grief of that I seye;
For myn entente is not but to playe.58

Marchette Chute has caught the spirit of this undaunted woman.

The Wife has so vast an enthusiasm for her subject and knows so much about it, that she surges along like some great natural force and is quite unstoppable. Not that any of the pilgrims would wish to stop her. . . . She is even more free in her language than the Miller and the Reeve, and there is nothing about her married life that she considers in the least deserving of reticence. . . . She is so frank in her enjoyment of her career that she is as irresistible as Falstaff, who was a coward, a cheat, and a liar but who nevertheless had a wonderful time of it. Chaucer has given the Wife of Bath his own irrepressible delight in living, and her whole discourse is one whoop of satisfaction over the fun she has had. . . . Every word she speaks during her flood of helpful advice about husbands gives her own character away, and it is only the Wife of Bath who does not know it.59

A few comments and several quotations from the Wife's lively, racy discourse will illustrate the garrulity for which she is famed, as well as the wit and humor so characteristic of her. She began her preamble by attacking an interpretation of the Bible concerning marriage which had recently come to

58 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D)189-93, 93.
59 Chute, Geoffrey Chaucer, 272-276.
her attention. Someone had said that since Christ had attended a wedding only once, He showed by His example that a woman should marry but once. The Wife had no sympathy for such ignorant views and interpretations. Did not God say: "Increase and multiply"? That noble text she could well understand and also the story of Solomon who had such a happy time with his many wives. She had no quarrel with those who preach that virginity is a higher state than matrimony, but she insisted that the nobler was only counseled and not commanded. She made no boast of her estate, but she did insist that she could serve God in her own way. The Lord used in his household wooden vessels as well as golden. Many a saint since the world began had lived a celibate life but she didn't envy any one of them. Let them be classed as bread of pure white flour and let the wives be considered barley-bread. And yet with barley-bread Christ had refreshed the multitude.

Paul dorste nat commanden, atte leeste,
A thynge of which his maister yaf noon heeste.
The dart is set up for virginitee:
Gacche whoso may, who renneth best lat see.
But this word is not taken of every wight.

Of myn estaat I nyl nat make no boast.
For well ye knowe, a lord in his household,
Ha nath nat every velhel al of gold;
Somme been of tree, and doon hir lord servyse.
God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wyse,

I nyl envye no virginitee.
Let hem be breed of pured whete-seed.
And lat us wyves hoten barly-breede;
And yet with barly-breede, Mark telle kan,
Our Lord Jhesu refreshed many a man.
In swich estaat as God hath cleped us
I wol persevere; I nam nat precius.60

60 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 73-148, 92.
The Wife followed her discourse on the merits of the various states by a summary of all that a wife had a right to demand of her husband, a summary so formidable that the Pardoner interrupted by swearing that though he was about to marry, he would wed no wife that year. Far from reassuring him, the Wife chuckling told him he hadn't heard the half of it. Before she finished, she would give him enough to meditate on for days to come.

'Abye! quod she, 'my tale is not bigonne
May, thou shalt drynnen of another tonne,
Er that I go, shal savoure dors than ale.
And whan that I have told thee forth my tale
Of tribulacion in mariage,
Of which I am expert in all myn age,
This is to seyn, myself have been the whippe,—
Then maystow cheze whethere thou wilt sippe
Of thiske tonne that I shal abroche.
Be war of it, er thou to ny approche;
For I shal telle examples mo than ten.
Whoso that nyll be war by othere men,
By hym shal othere men corrected be!' 61

Losing not a moment, she launched into a lengthy recital of her wily dealings with her husbands and of the gratifying results of her highhanded ways.

She reduced each of them to the necessary state of subjection by her remarkable and inimitable methods, and she cannot resist a chortle of joy as she thinks back on what she had put them through. 'O Lord! the pain I dide them and the wo.' Her technique was a complicated one and had many interesting angles, but the main idea was to get a husband on the defensive and keep him there. 62

Astute woman that she was, and experienced in the ways of intrigue and deceit, the Wife saw that he who strikes first wins the argument. Before her own misdeeds could be flung in her face, she must appear as the outraged wife guarding the sanctity of the home.

61 Ibid., III (D) 168-180, 93.
62 Chute, Geoffrey Chaucer, 273.
'Sire olde kaynard, is this thyn array?  
Why is my neighbours wyf so gay?  
She is honoured over al ther she gooth;  
I sitte at hoom, I have no thrifty clooth.  
What dostow at my neighbours hous?  
Is she so fair? artow so amorous?  

And if I have a gossib or a freend,  
Withouten gilt, thou chidest as a feend,  
If that I walk or pleye unto his hous!  
Thou comest hoom as dronken as a mous,  
And prechest on thy bench, with yvel preest?63

If the poor old fellow came home drunk, it was probably due to his effort to drown his domestic troubles. Of this weakness the Wife made capital by pretending that while he was under the influence of strong ale, the wretched husband had accused her of many misdeeds.

Lordlings, right thus I would stoutly affirm in my guile, to mine old husbands that they said in their drunkenness; and all was false, yet I took witness of Jankin and eke of my niece. O Lord! the pain and woe I did them, and full guiltless, by the rood! For I could bite and whine like a horse. I knew how to complain, though I was the culprit; else oftimes had I been undone. He who first comes to the mill, first grinds; I complained first and thus our war was ended. They were right glad to excuse themselves full hurriedly of things that they had never done in all their lives.64

Cowed by the torrent of abuse, the defenceless old men dared not protest as the Wife shrewishly rattled on in her own defence.

Thou seydest, this that I was lyk a cat;  
For who so wolde senge a cattes skyn,  
Thanne wolde the cat wel dwellen in his in;  
And if the cattes skyn be slyk and gay,  
Se wol not dwelle in house half a day,  
But forth she wole, er any day be dawed,  
To shewe hir skyn, and goon a-caterwawed.

63 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 235-248, 93-94.
64 Tatlock and MacKaye, Reader's Chaucer, 163.
This is to seye, if I be gay, sire shrewne, 
I wol renne out, my borel for to shewe. 
Sire olde fool, what helpeth thee to spyen? 
Thogh thou presse Argus with his hundred yen 
To be my warde-cors, as he kan best, 
In feith he shall nat kepe me but me lest, 
Yet koude I make his berd, so moot I thee! 65

Whether she reviled them when they were at home or revelled in unrestrained fun when they were abroad, she always enjoyed life to the full. She says of herself:

Stibourn and strong, and jolly as a pye. 
How koude I daunce to an harpe smale, 
And synge, ywis, as any nyghtyngele,  
When I had dronke a draughte of sweete wyn!  
But, Lord Cristl whan that it remembreth me 
Upon my yowthe, and on my jollitee, 
It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote. 
That I have had my world as in my tyme. 66

The time that her fourth husband spent Lent in London was just the opportunity to "goon a-caterwawed." Like the sleek cat that would show her fine fur, the Wife of Bath will don her gay scarlet dress and walk abroad to see and above all to be seen. That Lent was a time of penance did not seem to have impressed the unpenitential Wife.

My housbonds was at Londoun al that Lente; 
I hadde the bettre leyser for to pleye, 
And for to se, and eek for to be seye 
Of lusty folk. What wiste I wher my grace 
Was shapen for to be, or in what place? 
Therfore I made my visitaciouns 
To vigilies and to processiouns, 
To prechyng eek, and to thise pilgrimages, 
To pleyes of myraclcs, and to mariages, 
And wered upon my gaye scarlet gytes.

65 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D), 348-362, 95. 
66 Ibid., III (D), 455-474, 96.
Thise wormes, ne thise motthes, ne thise mytes,  
Upon my peril, frete hem never a deel;  
And wostow why? for they were used weel.  

Lowes, in commenting on the above lines and those where the Wife compares herself to a sleek cat, explains the poet's manner of creating that Chaucerian flavor which is as tart and fresh today as when his bright genius first distilled it.

Chaucer who wrote for the ear, heard (I think) as he wrote, every line he put in the mouth of his characters; and of these the most individual express that unique personal quality which marks them, in the idiosyncrasies, the idiom, and the very movement of their words. . . . nobody but the Wife of Bath could have uttered these lines. . . . The Wife of Bath was close kin to Geoffrey Chaucer. And if those last lines are not Chaucer himself to the core, then I have read the House of Fame, and the Troilus, and the greater Tales amiss. . . . And Chaucer's individual, peculiar quality lies in large measure in that eager appettence for life, to which nothing was common or unclean. . . . The relish in that twice repeated 'thise,' with its ineffable familiarity, is beyond words. 'Worms, moths, and mites' are simply worms, moths, and mites—only that, and nothing more. 'Thise wormes, thise motthes, thise mytes' have become intimates—brothers and sisters, like (with a difference!) Saint Francis' 'our brother, the wind, and our sister water' . . . Relish and the concreteness which Landor called 'body' in Chaucer go hand in hand.

The Wife of Bath considered it both thrifty and wise to look ahead and make provision for the future, whether the merchandise be food, or clothing, housing or husbands.

Yet I was nevare withouten purveiance  
Of mariaghe, n' of othere thyngez eek.  
I holde a mouses herte nat worth a leek  
That hath but oon hole for to sterte to,  
And if that faile, thanne is al ydo.

67 Ibid., III (D) 550-563, 97.  
69 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 569-575, 97.
Therefore, when her fourth husband died she followed him dutifully to the grave and wept the customary wifely tears, but under her veil she was admiring the spry young Jankin who was walking ahead of her following her husband's bier.

I weep algate, and made sory cheere,
As wyves mooten, for it is usage,
And with my covechief covered my visage.
But for that I was purveyed of a make,
I wepte but smal, and that I undertake.
To chirche was myn housbondes born a-morwe
With neighebores, that for hym maden sorwe;
And Jankyn, oure clerk, was oon of tho.
As help me God! whan that I saugh hym go
After the beere, me thoughtes he hadde a paire
Of legges and of feet so clene and faire
That al myn herte I yaf unto his hoold.
He was, I trowe, a twenty wynter oold,
And I was fourty, if I shal seye sooth:
But yet I hadde alway a coltes tooth.

Aptly has Chesterton tagged her "the great professional widow of literature." Five husbands were none too many for her.

Blessed be God that I have wedde fuye!
Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal.

What myn housbondes is fre the world ygon,
Some Christen man shal wedde me anon...

Though she was still in the matrimonial market, she realized that a certain amount of salesmanship was now necessary if the "sixth" was to be landed safely. Relentless age will not be bought off even by the merry Wife of Bath.

70 Ibid., III (D) 587-603, 98.
71 Chesterton, Chaucer, 77.
72 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 40-48, 91.
But age, alas! that al wole envenyme,
Hath me biraff my beautee and my pith.
Lat go, farewell! the devil go therwith!
The flour is goon, ther is namerre to telle;
The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle;
But yet to be right myrie wol I fonde.73

Chaucer touches these words of the Wife with a note of pathos as he did likewise those other plaintive words of hers: "Alas! Alas that ever love was synne!" Commenting on this line, Lowes says: "Chaucer understood her no less when he put into her mouth a cry which sums up half the passion and pain of the world."74 This note contrasting with her usual assurance and light-hearted chatter creates in the reader a sympathy that goes out to a real personality of flesh and blood and emotions. In her Chaucer has attained a perfect balance between the individual and the type.

Her eight hundred line digression is charming because of the many digressions within the digression. She began to tell of her fifth husband only to lose herself in a maze of fancies in which her thoughts ran ahead of her words. Suddenly she realized that she was far afield of her tale and stopping she groped hesitatingly for the thread of her story.

But now, sire lat me se, what I shal seyn?
A hal by God, I have my tale ageyn.75

Was there ever a more delightfully human touch than this bit of daydreaming, typical of the garrulous who lose themselves in the byways of their unending small talk? This outpouring continued for three hundred more lines before she

73 Ibid., III (D) 473-480, 96.
74 Lowes, Geoffrey Chaucer; His Genius, 233.
75 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 584-587, 98.
was ready to begin her story proper. No wonder when she drew breath the Friar laughed.

'No dame,' quod he, 'So have I joye or bliss
This is a long preamble of a tale!' 76

Before leaving this subject of the Wife's prowess as a talker, it will be interesting to note Shelly's comparison of the Wife with Chaucer's other characters who have similar talents in the speech arts.

Chaucer had a definite genius for portraying great talkers. The Eagle in the House of Fame, Pandarous, the Host, the Pardoner, the Wife of Bath, Madame Pertelote, Chanticleer, the Canon's Yeoman, are all "true men of their tongues," who talk with tremendous gusto and fluency. And the best of them are Pandarous and the Wife of Bath, with the palm going to the Wife of Bath for what is usually called "masculine" force and directness. No one, not even the Host, knows better than she how to call a spade a spade or does so more consistently... And it is one of the triumphs of Chaucer's art that he is able in this way to give the living voice of this dynamic woman and to follow in swift, sure verse the nervous energy and sudden turnings: of a mind and spirit so keen and active. 77

Is there too be found in the Wife of Bath a defect such as Aristotle deems useful for creating incongruity in the comic character? The Wife bears an infirmity which since it is generally considered not painful has been used to introduce amusing situations in the comedy of all ages. "But she was somewhat deaf, and that was scathe." With the Wife this misfortune does not lead to particularly ridiculous situations except that it accounts for her loud speech. But the story of the cause of her deafness presents a scene of high comedy. Commenting on this disability, Patch says:

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76 Ibid., III (D) 828-831, 100.
77 Shelly, The Living Chaucer, 223-224.
Profane, obscene, she shouts at everybody. And why not?—she is deaf, and she is the type that thinks noise means revelry and mirth. She has vast laughter, and ruthless inclusiveness. She must gather into her circle everyone within reach, jab this one in the ribs, chuck another under the chin, yell hoarsely at a third. She has the ecclesiastics purple with rage or with unseemly mirth. She stands (so she thinks) the quiet clerk on his head.

The reason for the deafness of the good Wife must be traced to her intolerance of any attack on women. It is none other than her youngest and favorite husband who inflicts on her this lasting misfortune. In her own blunt, racy style she tells us of the incident:

But now my tale, why I was beaten for a book, perdy as I told you. Upon a night Jankin, our goodman sat by the fire and read his book, first of Eva, for whose wickedness all mankind was brought to misery. . . . Then he read to me how Samson lost his hair in his sleep; his doxy cut it with her shears, through which treason he lost both his eyes. Then I tell you he read me about Hercules and his Dejanira, who caused him to set fire to himself. Nor did he forget the penance and woe which Socrates had with his two wives, how Xantippe cast foul water on his pate; this blameless man sat still as a stone, wiped his head and durst say no more than, "Ere thunder ceases, comes the rain." . . . He read with full good devotion about Clytemnestra, that for her wantonness treacherously caused her husband's death. . . . Thus in one way or other the husbands came to grief. . . . And then he told me of how one Latumius lamented to Arrius, his fellow, how there grew in his garden such a tree on which, he said, his three wives had hanged themselves with desperate heart. 'O dear brother, give me a slip from this same blessed tree,' quoth this Arrius, 'and it shall be planted in my garden.' He read about wives of later date, that some have murdered their husbands in their sleep. . . . And some have driven nails into their husbands' brains whilst they slept, and some have given them poison to drink. He spake more evil than heart can devise.

And there withal he knew more proverbs than in this world grow blades of grass. Quoth he, 'It is better to have thy dwelling with a lion or a foul dragon, than with a woman wont to chide.' 'Better it is,' quoth he, 'to dwell high in the roof, than down in the house with an angry woman.'

78 Patch, Rereading Chaucer, 161.
79 Tatlock and MacKaye, Reader's Chaucer, 168-170.
As Jankin continued this exacting and exasperating reading, a great storm cloud was settling on his wife's brow.

Who wolde wene or who wolde suppose,
The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne?
And whan I saugh he wolde nevère fyne
To reden on this cursed book all nyght,
Al sodenynly three leves have I plyght
Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke
I with my fest so took hym on the cheke
That inoure fyr he fil bakward adoun.
And he up stirte as dooth a wood leoun,
And with his fest he smoot me on the heed,
And in the floor I lay as I were deed
And whan he saugh how stille that I lay,
He was aghast, and wolde han fled his way.

Unable to endure any longer the pain and woe brought on by this endless recital, the good Wife rose up and tore three leaves from the cursed book, and to make an end to the evening's sermonizing took him on the cheek so that he fell backward into the fire. Notice that she "took" him on the cheek. This was no love pat but a strong "side swipe" such as an experienced boxer would deliver. Her husband had youth and agility in his favor and starting up like a lion he smote her a blow so hard that she lay on the floor as one dead. When he saw how still she lay, he was aghast and would have run away for fear, but even in the world of unconsciousness she seemed to exert power over him, for he stood looking down at her. She does not say how soon she regained consciousness, but may one not believe that some time elapsed before she gave external evidence of her returning powers, and that during this interval her active mind was planning how to gain the most from this seeming defeat? "Many

80 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 786-798, 100.
are the uses of adversity." May she not use this misadventure to extort from Jankin all that her heart desired? Though she did not intentionally "stoop to conquer," here was an opportunity for a master stroke of diplomacy!

This scene of the frightened young husband looking down on his prostrate wife who may be counterfeiting death for her own purposes reminds one of a later time when that other great buffoon, Falstaff, lay on the field of battle. Since the Wife of Bath and Falstaff have frequently been compared, it may not be too great a digression to recall briefly that other scene. Prince Henry walking among the dead and dying comes upon Falstaff lying supposedly stiff in death.

What, old acquaintance! could not all this flesh
Keep in a little life? Poor Jack, farewell!
I could have better spared a better man.
Oh! I should have a heavy miss of thee,
If I were much in love with vanity.
Death hath not struck so fat a deer to-day,
Though many dearer, in this bloody fray.

As the Prince slowly passes from the field, Falstaff rises and exclaims:

'Sblood! 'twas time to counterfeit, or that hot termagent
Scot had paid me scot and lot too. The better part of valour is
discretion, in the better part of which I have saved my life.61

Both Falstaff and the Wife of Bath are accomplished actors. Each
uses to advantage any and every situation. One should never underestimate the
resourcefulness of these two masters of deception. In all literature are there
to be found another pair such as these "gorgeous old sinners" as Lowes calls them?

Returning to the Wife and her distracted husband, one finds that, when the Wife had given her ill-mannered Jankin time to repent of his unmanly conduct, she slowly opened her eyes and with no diminution of spirit cried:

'O hastow slayn me, false theef?'
An for my land thus hastow mordred me?
Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee!'

Here is melodrama at its height! Here is an actress worthy of the professional stage! Here is a heroine rising to the realm of the heroic! Were not these plaintive words of the dying woman potent enough to soften a heart of stone?

"'Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee!" She had not long to wait ere the trembling culprit knelt crying:

'Deere suster Alisoun,
As help me God! I shal thee nevere smyte.
That I have doon, it is thyself to wyte
For yeve it me, and that I thee biseke!'

How complacently she received this plea and this promise of amendment one may guess. Yet though the fish were on the hook, she deemed it well to draw him gently and not to jerk too briskly on the line. Playfully then she struck him on the cheek and whispered: "Thief, thus much I am revenged. Now I will die; I can speak no more." Particularly ironic are her last words: "'I can speak no more.'" Is it possible that after all Jankin has suffered from that shrewish tongue, he will now permit it to beguile him? The latent chivalry in the poor lad rose to the surface. His wife's contrivings were about to achieve a decisive victory. Meekly he slipped his head into the noose—such power has woman when she seems most weak!

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82 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 799-803, 100.
83 Ibid., 803-810, 100.
But atte laste, with muchel care and wo,
He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,
To han the goverance of hous and lond,
And of his tonge, and of his hond also;
And made hym brenne his book anon right tho.
And whan that I hadde geten unto me,
By maistre, al the soveraynetee,
And that he sayde, 'Myn owene trewe wyf,
Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lyf;
Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estat';
After that day we hadde never debaat. 84

How significant is her last statement. "After that day we had not more quarrelling." Since she had the bridle in her hand what cause was there for further controversy? Thus ends the Wife's story of how she came to be deaf. There is no reason to believe that she considered the price she paid too high "to han the goverance of hous and lond, and of his tonge, and of his hond also."

It seems quite evident here that Chaucer in this hilarious scene of domestic turbulence measures up perfectly to Aristotle's demand that "the poet should place the scene, as far as possible, before his eyes. In this way seeing everything with the utmost vividness, as if he were a spectator of the action, he will discover what is in keeping with it . . . 85

Aristotle requires that characters be consistent. "For though the subject of the imitation, who suggested the type, be inconsistent, still he must be consistently inconsistent. . . . In the portraiture of character, the poet should always aim either at the necessary or the probable. Thus a person of given character should speak or act in a given way, by the rule of necessit

84 Ibid., 811-932, 100.

85 Aristotle, Poetics, XVII 1-2, tr. by Butcher, 61.
or probability..."86 Does the Wife of Bath show consistency both in her character and in the tale she tells?

The Wife says of herself that she followed her inclinations because of her constellation. She believed that the stars had decreed that she should be as she was. "For certes, I am all of Venus in feeling, and my heart is Martian. Venus gave me my love of pleasure and my wantonness, and Mars my sturdy hardihood."87 Since the Wife's ruling passion was pleasure and since Mars as well as Venus had dominion over her, one is not surprised to find her avid in following the dictates of Venus and unconquerable in her dealings with her husbands, owing to her Martian strength. A careful study of her Prologue shows that the acquisition and management of men, both in and out of matrimony was her chief business in life. Race, color, and station offered no obstacle when her heart was touched.

All were he short, or long, or blak, or whit;
I took no kep, so that he like me,
How poore he was, ne eek or what degree.88

Ever the same theme runs through her long monologue: to love and to be loved is enough for women, and wives should always have the governance. All that she did or said was consistent with this theory. In her frequent quoting from Scripture, she tried to show that theology gave its approval to her way of life. That she now and then had a doubt about the rectitude of her course was

86 Ibid., XV 4-7, 55.
87 Tatlock and MacKaye, Reader's Chaucer, 166.
88 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 624-627, 98.
revealed in that poignant cry: "Allas! Allas! that ever love was synne!" Shelly's shrewd comment on this exclamation of the Wife shows a penetrating insight into the character of this unpredictable woman. He says:

And it comes with tremendous dramatic effectiveness. It is a sigh from the depths, and one which shows that the Wife of Bath, though nine parts pagan, is Christian too and has her moments of doubt as to the welfare of her immortal soul. But such moments are brief. The depths are not profound. She is still lusty and strong, and healthy enough in spirit to brush aside such morbid misgiving and to rejoice.

The cry was smothered by her characteristic joy in living and her happy memories of the jolly times of the past.

But, Lord Crist! wan that it remembreth me
Upon my youthe, and on my jolitee,
It tikeleth me aboute myn herte roote.
Unto this day it dooth myn herte boote
That I have had my world as in my tyme.

Her only regret was that age had robbed her of her beauty and her pith; but undaunted, and with a merry smile, she would sell the "bran" of her advancing age as best she could and would welcome the sixth husband when ere he came.

Not only is the Wife of Bath consistent, but Chaucer has enriched her personality by attaining in her what Aristotle calls "consistent inconsistency." This difficult achievement when accomplished produces in the character greater depth and trueness to life. When a woman of decided opinion manifests a weakness or an inconsistency of character, she becomes not only more human

89 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 469-474, 96.
90 Shelly, The Living Chaucer, 222.
91 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 614, 98.
but more comic. It has been noted how the Wife subjected her old husbands in no uncertain manner to her iron will, and how through a master stroke she gained ascendancy over her rebellious husband, Jankin. Yet in spite of her boastful supremacy, every line of her Prologue shows her dependence on men. Legouis gives a careful estimate of this strength and weakness of the Wife.

The way in which she speaks of her prowess as a domestic tyrant warns us at once that it should be put down to boasting. She is anxious to startle and shock the other pilgrims. All her confidences are a sort of game, for she wishes to amuse her hearers... On the whole it is a complex character, and we do not know whether what she says of herself is true or exaggerated, or partly invention. Nevertheless, an inexhaustible fund of comic effects is supplied by the contrast between the immorality of her sayings and the dogmatic tone in which they are uttered, by her contention that women should be supreme, whilst her whole life is a proof to the contrary. She must be put in the same rank with Falstaff.92

The Wife went so far as to admit that at times she was inconsistent, as are women in general. Her good old husbands did everything to please her yet she berated them; her high-spirited young husband, Jankin, beat her and she loved him. Commenting on this she said:

Now of my fifthe housbonde wol I tell.  
God letes his soule nevere come in helle!  
And yet was he to me the mooste shrewes;  
That feele I on my ribbes al by rewe,  
And evere shal unto myn endyng day.

That thogh he hadde me bete on every bon,  
He kounde wynne agayn my love anon.  
I trowe I love hym best for that he  
Was of his love daungerous to me.  
We wommen han, if that I shal nat lye,  
In this matere a queynte fantasys;

92 Legouis, Geoffrey Chaucer, 174.
Wayte what thyng we may nat lightly have,
Therafter wol we crie al day and crave
Forbide us thyng, and that desiren we;
Presse on us faste, and thanne wol we fle. 93

One derives such pleasure from these comments of the Wife's because they are so true of human nature, and true not only of women in particular but of people in general; true not only of Chaucer's time, but even of today. Back through the ages to Eden's garden can one trace these words: "Forbide us thyng and that desiren we."

Is the Wife's story consistent with the Wife herself? The first lines of her tale are surprising, for instead of contributing another coarse fabliau such as those of the Miller or the Reeve, she tells a delicate Arthurian fairy tale dealing with the subject of courtesy and gentility. Has not the Wife whom Lowes credits with being "Rabelaisian before Rabelais, letting herself go with incomparable gusto and a frankness naked and unashamed" 94 stepped out of character in speaking of "gentillesse"?

A brief consideration of her story is necessary that one may determine whether the tale has been misplaced.

The Wife began by lamenting the disappearance of the elf queen and her jolly company of fairies who had danced merrily on the meadow green in the days of King Arthur. Now, due to the prayers of the friars, these little people of the forests had been driven to another world. Where fairies once hid beneath the bushes, tripped lightly over hill and dale, and peered eerily

93 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 503-520, 97.
94 Lowes, Geoffrey Chaucer; His Genius, 230.
from the tree tops, "Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself." One judges from the comments of the Wife that she considered the exchange of friars for fairies a poor one. Characteristically, she cannot even here begin her tale without this charming digression with its praise of fairies and its slightly satiric thrust at the friar who had but recently commented on the length of her pre­amble.

I speeke of manye hundred yeres ago. 
But now kan no man se none elves mo, 
For now the grete charitee and prayeres 
Of lymytours and otthe hooly freres, 
That serchen every lond and every streem, 
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem, 
Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures, 
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures, 
Thropes, bernes, shiphes, dayeryes— 
This maketh that ther been no fayeryes. 
For ther as wont to walken was an elf, 
Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself 
In underneles and in morwenynges, 
And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges 
As he gooth in his lymytacioun. 
Wommen may go now sauffly up and doun 
In every bussh or under every tree; 
Ther is noon oother incubus but he, 
And he ne wol doon hem bet dishonour. 95

At last the Wife reached the story proper. A young knight for a mis­deed had been summoned to court and condemned to death, but the queen had pleaded for him and the king had placed his fate in her hands. She promised him freedom if he could answer or find the answer to this perplexing question: What thing is it that women most desire? If at the end of a twelfth month he could not give the correct answer, he should die.

95 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 863–882, 101.
Sorrowfully the knight sought in every place and from everyone whom he met the solution to the riddle, but he could find no two persons agreeing together.

Somme seyde wommen loven best richesse,
Somme seyde honour, somme seyde, jolynesse
Somme seyde thatoure hertes been moost esed
When that we been yflatered and ypleased.
And somme seyen that we loven best
For to be free, and do right as us lest,
And that no man repreve us ofoure vice,
But seye that we be wise, and no thyng nyce. 96

And so it came to pass that the day came around when he must return to the queen. Journeying home sorrowful in spirit, he met an old woman who asked him the cause of his grief. Wearily the knight told of his fruitless search for the solution of this "woman question." Smiling she reassured him and promised to give him the true answer provided that, if it were in his power, he would grant whatever she asked of him. He readily agreed and soon stood before the queen and her court. "Silence was commanded to every wight, and the knight was bidden tell in full audience what thing mortal women most love. This knight stood not like a dumb beast, but anon answered the question with manly voice, that all the court heard it. 'My liege lady,' quod he, 'over all this world women wish to have sovereignty over their husbands as well as over their lovers, and to be in mastership above them.' "97

In all the court there was no wife, nor maid, nor widow but that agreed that the knight spoke truly. "At that word the old woman started up.

96 Ibid., III (D) 925-939, 102.
97 Tatlock and MacKaye, Reader's Chaucer, 174.
... Before the court, then, I pray you, sir knight,' quoth she, 'that you take me to wife, for you well know that I have saved your neck.' ... The knight answered, 'I wol full well that such was my promise, alas and alack! But for the love of God, pray, choose another request! ... But all this was for noght." And it came to pass that they were privately married for no one in the court could rejoice at the sad lot of the knight. And later when he answered each of her gentle questions rudely and cried out against her poverty and ugliness, and low birth, she began to speak quietly and patiently of true nobility.

'But when you speak of such gentility as is descended from ancient wealth, so that therefor you knights are men of breeding, --such arrogance is not worth a hen. Look who is ever most virtuous, openly and privily, and ever most inclines to do what gentle deeds he may; take him for the gentlest man. Christ wills that we claim our gentility from him not from our ancestors' ancient wealth. ... Your gentility comes only from God. Then comes our true gentility of divine grace, and was in no wise bequeathed to us with our earthly station.'

And in like manner she spoke of true riches and beauty and thus shamed him for his churlishness. After her reasonable defence of her age and her poverty, she asked him to choose whether he would have her old, ugly, and poor, and yet never displeasing in her conduct all the days of her life, or young and fair and possibly unfaithful. He answered:

'My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
I put me in youre wise goverance;
Cheseth yourself which may be moost plesance,
And moost honour to you and me also.'

98 Ibid., 175
99 Ibid., 175-176.
100 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 1230-1234, 106.
Then in the way of all fairy tales, when he had given himself into the power of this ugly old wife, she changed into a lovely young woman "as faire to seene as any lady, emperice, or queene"101 in all the world, and in the traditional ending of fairy tales they lived happily ever after.

In the manner of the time, the Wife of Bath ended her story with a prayer: "And may Jesu Christ send us husbands meek, young, lusty, and grace to overlive them that we wed. And eke I pray Jesu to shorten their days that will not be ruled by their wives. And old, angry niggards of money, God send them betimes a very pestilence!"102

It is not now difficult to answer the question of consistency in her story. She has used her story of womanly ingenuity, by which a wife in the days of the fairies finally obtained the mastery, to clinch the arguments of her Prologue. The tale reflects as in a mirror the mind and temper of the Wife, and the prayer with which she concludes leaves no uncertainty as to who are the sheep and who are the goats in this matter of husbands. Here are not found such charitable petitions as: "God save al this faire compaigne!" and "God blesse us and his mooder Seinte Marie!" and others with which most of the pilgrims ended their tales. Here is no preoccupation with life beyond the grave. Here, in her superb egoism, the Wife of Bath is more concerned with wedding bells than widow's weeds. It is significant that Chaucer did not refer to her as the "Widow of Bath" but as the "Wife of Bath."

101 Ibid., III (D) 1245-1247, 106.
102 Tatlock and MacKaye, Reader's Chaucer, 178.
Not only is the theme of her story consistent with her character, but the digression within the story proper where she tells the fable of Midas and his ass's ears is typical. Someone had answered the questing knight with the suggestion that perhaps women love most to be considered trustworthy. The Wife in her "aside" remarked that such an answer "was not worth a rake handle." "We women can conceal nothing, as witness Midas; will ye hear the tale?" Then she gleefully told of how Midas had two ass's ears under his long hair and how he had hidden this disfigurement from every living soul but his dear wife whom he trusted, and whom he begged to keep his humiliating secret. The good woman wished to obey her husband, but her heart burst with the dreadful news until she ran down to a near-by marsh.

She leyde hir mouth unto the water doun:
'Bewreye me nat, thou water, with thy soun,'
Quod she; 'to thee I telle it and namo:
Myn housbonde hath longe asses erys two!
Now is myn herte al hool, now is it oute.
I myghte no lenger kepe it, out of doute.'
Heere may ye se, though we a tyme abyde,
Yet out it moot; we kan no conseil hyde."

The Wife used this illustration to prove what she had earlier confessed in her Prologue, namely, that no secret was safe with her. She would reveal all of her husband's private confidences even if his life depended on her silence.

'I wolde han toold his conseil every deel.
And so I dide ful often God it woot,
That made his face ful often reed and hoot.

103 Ibid., 172.
104 Robinson, Chaucer, III (D) 973-981, 102-103.
For verry shame, and blamed hymself for he Had toold to me so greet a pryvetee.105

The objection may be raised that though the theme of the Wife's story is consistent and also the amusing anecdote about Midas, the discussion of "gentilless' is not in keeping with the Wife's character. Had the Knight, the Prioress, or any other of the genteel pilgrims praised the virtue of courtesy there would have been no inconsistency, but knightly discourse in the mouth of the coarse, buffoonish Wife is not fitting. True, it is difficult at first to reconcile this courtly language with her habitually vulgar talk. But possibly hidden down deep in her roguish old heart there may have been youthful ideals of higher things crusted over with the dregs and dust of human weaknesses which at inspired moments found utterance in refined speech. Lowes gives weight to this suggestion when he says:

Nor is it out of keeping when, in the Wife's own tale of Faerye which in its ending fits her Prologue like a glove, the old hag who is a lovely lady in disguise gives an exposition of gentilesse which sums up the noblest thinking of the Middle Ages upon gentle breeding and true courtesy. For the Wife of Bath had a mind as keen as a sword-blade, and could rise to the height of a great argument in the dramatic realization of the lofty conception which lay at the heart of her tale. Even we occasionally have great moments.106

From a study of the Wife of Bath’s prologue and her story, it is evident that she is a buffoon of the first order. She is shown as a typical medieval woman who through her unbridled speech lowers herself to the character type below average requisite for comedy according to the laws of Aristotle. She conforms closely to his definition of the buffoon by aiming at

105 Ibid., III (D) 538-542, 97.
106 Lowes, Geoffrey Chaucer; His Genius, 233-234.
"exciting laughter more than at decorous language." She lets herself go with such abandon that she spares neither herself nor her dead husbands in her eagerness to raise a laugh. Shouting of her most private domestic affairs to the housetops, she excels even the Miller in remarking "such things as no person of refinement would utter." "Is such a pest, such a combination of conjugal despotism, sensuality, garrulity, and peevishness possible?" asks Legouis.

The Wife shows consistency in her character, her story, the prayer with which she concludes her tale, and even in her quoting of Scripture. Chesterton notes this when he remarks: "It is thoroughly typical of him that he makes the Wife of Bath put out a torrent of turbulent, gross, egotistical discourse as coarse as a fishwife's and as personal as a Margate landlady's; and yet feels it perfectly natural that she pause to explain the correct Catholic doctrine about Virginity and the Counsels of Perfection. It was perfectly natural."

In addition to type characteristics both general and comic, the Wife of Bath possesses qualities peculiar to herself which make her a living personality, one of the great personalities of literature. She is a character not easily forgotten. Possibly no one has given a more succinct summary of this fascinating, complex creation of Chaucer's than Marchette Chute, who says: "The Wife of Bath is without doubt the most outrageous woman who ever walked into immortality."

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107 Legouis, Geoffrey Chaucer, 174.
108 Chesterton, Chaucer, 245.
109 Chute, Geoffrey Chaucer, 275.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

All art is an attempt to express the truths underlying facts once these facts are appraised and understood. It is a theory of art that frequently the conception of the artist is more true than the fact which he reproduces. The ideal character is sometimes more true than the actual, for the ideal often represents some law of truth.

Fact and truth are not synonymous; it happens now and then that the poet leaves the facts the better to tell the truth. One may learn more from the poet than from the historian, for the poet interprets and presents facts as they should be rather than as they are. Good literature may give a truer picture of life as it is normally lived than do the daily newspapers, for the papers often exhibit only a negation of law while the story may illustrate how law governs the destinies of man. In his Apology for Poetry, Sir Philip Sidney shows how great is the contribution of the true artist—the true poet.

I know not whether by luck or wisdom, we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him a maker. Which name, how high and incomparable a title it is, I had rather were known by marking the scope of other sciences. . . . There is no art delivered to mankind that hath not the works of nature for his principal object. . . .

1 Aristotle, The Poetics, XXV, 6 and 17, trans. Butcher, 101-107. " . . . if it be objected that the description is not true to fact, the poet may perhaps reply, — 'But the objects are as they ought to be'; just as Sophocles said that he drew men as they ought to be; . . . 'the impossible is the higher thing; for the ideal type must surpass reality.'"
so doth the astronomer look upon the stars, and by that he seeth, setteth down what order nature hath taken therein. So do the geometrician and arithmetician in their diverse sorts of quantities. . . . The lawyer saith what men have determined; the historian what men have done. The grammarian speaketh only rules of speech. . . . The physician weigheth the nature of a man's body, and the nature of things helpful or hurtful to it. . . . Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifteth up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature as are the heroes, demigods, cyclops, chimeras, furies, and such like; so he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit. 2

Much of this thought must have been inspired by the Greek classics. Sidney in his Apology quotes Aristotle's famous definition of poetry and substantiates his own theories of the excellence of poetry by frequent references to the ancients.

The exalted title of "the maker" which is stressed both by Aristotle and Sidney may without hesitation be applied to Chaucer. Though, like Shakespeare, he found many of his plots and characters ready made, like the Renaissance genius he so changed and embellished them as to produce distinct creations different from and often superior to the originals.

In the field of character portrayal no one, with the exception of Shakespeare, has surpassed him. Patch says:

There has been little discussion concerning characterization in Medieval literature. The average critic would probably assume that, with some few exceptions, it is negligible; and he would probably add that the great lack was in realism. Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims stand out in sharp contrast to their background only to be explained with reference to their author's genius. 3

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The difficulty of blending the type with the individual in this matter is further emphasized by Butcher, who says: "In a sense it [comedy] individualizes everything, no less truly than in another sense it generalizes all. What it can rarely achieve as a purely sportive activity is to combine these two aspects in ethical portraiture." It has been seen in this study how Chaucer accomplished this. Not only are his characters true because they are typical of the men of his day, but they are convincing because in their individuality they appear to be actual personalities. Croiset, too, in his study of the Greeks remarks that great characters must first be types and afterwards individuals. They should "all have an ideal character; for these traits are common to a whole class, and not distinguished from the complex reality except in so far as the poet's genius rises above particular details by an abstraction looking to the universal." Chaucer possessed such genius. August Strindberg, the Swedish playwright, in his well known Preface to "Miss Julia" remarks that even today the practice of this art of characterization is no less difficult. In protesting against conventionalized types, he says:

In the course of ages the word character has assumed many meanings. Originally it signified probably the dominant ground-note in a complex mass of self... afterward it became the middle class term for an automaton... while one remaining in a state of development—a skillful navigator on life's river, who did not sail with close-tied sheets, but knew when to fall off before the wind and when to luff again—was called lacking in character, and he was so called in a depreciatory sense, of course, because he was so hard to catch, to classify, and to keep track of.

5 Alfred and Maurice Croiset, An Abridged History of Greek Literature, New York, 1904, 257.
Chaucer's genius caught the fleeting traits of personality and fixed them in the amber of the typical. All pleasure-loving widows, seeking matrimony find their counterpart in the Wife of Bath, that delightful many-sided woman whose "heart was ever young and gay." All millers are reflected in the golden-thumbed Simkin and Robin, and yet how distinct are these two creations within the Tales themselves. All ironic men indulging in their quiet little jokes are mirrored in the great Chaucer himself. All hypocrites who smile and bow and lift their eyes to heaven hoodwink society in the persons of the Pardoner and the begging Friar, and yet how different are the personalities of these two archmasters of deception. All buffoons laugh and joke and are ridiculous in the guises of the Miller, the Host, and the Wife, and yet in these are found three worlds teeming with qualities that defy classification. And so it is with all of Chaucer's great characters. They give one a living picture of medieval England because they are typical of the best of Chaucer's day and at the same time they acquaint one with people more charming, interesting, exasperating, and intriguing than those who walk life's roads, for as Whitman says, a character may contain multitudes.

It has been noted how closely these portraits follow Aristotle's general rules for characterization. Some have been slightly debased, though not painfully so, to become comic, while others have been raised by assimilation to the better, as were the animals, to produce the incongruities that are the heart of comedy. Yet each of these has conformed to truth to type by being consistent.

The particular rules that governed specific types as Aristotle conceived them are equally well illustrated by Chaucer's people. Each buffoon
follows the classic conception, though the Miller seems to be more purely Aristotelian than the Host or the Wife, who, in so far as they are witty, depart from Aristotle, who would not concede wittiness to the buffoon. Chaucer, because he "was particularly fond of disclaiming the same qualities as the boaster affects," fits neatly into the philosopher's class of ironic men. It was shown, too, that Chanticleer by pretending "to greater things than he possesses" corresponds to Aristotle's conception of the boaster, while the fox and the begging Friar, both clever hypocrites, "by pretending to qualities as may be beneficial to their neighbors" conform closely to his ideas of the impostor.

Undoubtedly due to the deep insight that each author had into the essential nature of man, the poet succeeded in illustrating in his characters the principles that the philosopher had laid down hundreds of years before. One equally admires the genius whose giant mind worked out so carefully the theory of poetic art which has stood the test of centuries, and the poet whose fertile imagination has clothed these abstractions with a personality and individuality that place the Canterbury Pilgrims among the great literary creations of all time.
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The thesis submitted by Sister Clarice Asbury, S.P. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

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The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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