

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Master's Essays (1922 -)

Dissertations, Theses, and Professional
Projects

7-1969

The Function of Harry Bailly in the Canterbury Scene

Hwaja Kim

Marquette University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/essays>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kim, Hwaja, "The Function of Harry Bailly in the Canterbury Scene" (1969). *Master's Essays (1922 -)*. 1355.

<https://epublications.marquette.edu/essays/1355>

THE FUNCTION OF HARRY BAILLY IN
THE CANTERBURY SCHEME

by

Hwaja Kim

An Essay Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts

July, 1969

Marquette University

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

INTRODUCTION

"...it (Gothic art) compels the spectator to be constantly changing his view-point and permits him to gain a picture of the whole only through his own movement, action and power of reconstruction."¹

The permanent joy of critics and readers in recreating The Canterbury Tales ever since it was produced by Geoffrey Chaucer might be due partly to the multi-facets of the work. Wherever critics and readers stand to look at the The Canterbury Tales, the perspective compels them to constantly change their view point, permitting them to have a new sight just like viewing a work of Gothic art as the above quotation tells. Or, partly because it is "always modern"² every changing age can interpret the tales according to its taste and viewpoint. This great work of art truly transcends time and place and it is, no doubt, because Chaucer has discovered the universal principles of human nature and the core of the meaning of life.

The purpose of this paper is to see from one angle the Canterbury scheme with the hope of getting a glimpse of the whole.

Every literary work is essentially the creation of a structure and the aesthetic fulfillment will be determined by the degree in which the formal actualization has been harmonious and complete.³ It is generally agreed among the critics since Ralph Baldwin that The Canterbury Tales has a very high degree of completeness and beauty in the artistic whole even though the plan as presented by the Host is not even half realized on the outward journey. Chaucer's original design which is presented in

"the General Prologue" constituted departure from an inn at Southwark; an arrival at Canterbury and a return to the Inn. It would be meaningful to see the coherence of this outer structure with the internal idea of pilgrimage that Chaucer expresses through Parson's words: "Now shaltow understands what is behovely and necessarie to verray perfit penitence. And this stant on three thynges; Contricioun of herte, Confession of Mouth, and Satisfaccioun." The access to salvation for the Christian and the requirement for the pilgrimage is confession, contrition, and satisfaction. We can say that the form and idea of The Canterbury Tales make an ultimate whole by assuming that the road from Tabard Inn to Canterbury is the process of each pilgrim's natural "confession" to the public under the leadership of Harry Bailly, the most natural and realistic man of the world. Later the Parson, the most spiritual man who only asks penitence of the pilgrims assumes leadership. It would not be too far-fetched in this process to assume that when Chaucer first planned to make the pilgrims return to the Tabard Inn and mentioned the great feast they were going to have, this meant the "satisfaction" of body and soul, because the end of the pilgrimage should be for life itself and not just for the pilgrimage.

Harry Bailly has been noticed by critics as a functional character in the Canterbury scheme. Maurice Hussey stated that the medieval convention of a supernatural guide is taken over by the Host, whose authority derives from his long familiarity with human impulse and behavior in an environment as unmistakably actual as himself.⁴ Kemp Malone

took Harry Bailly mostly as a master of ceremonies and further he mentioned that Harry is the link between the individual tales and the story of the pilgrimage . . . Through him a collection of tales becomes a unified work of art.⁵ Recent criticism has given more depth to the characterization and function of Harry Bailly. Paul Ruggiers, for one has been quite precise in propounding that "the Host is something of a guide, something of a referee, something of a master of revels."⁶

This paper will attempt to show the function of Harry Bailly as a guide and natural confessor who brings forth from other pilgrims their true selves through his own naturalness and game play. Evidence of this is found in his character and situation as shown in "the General Prologue"; his game play; in his relationship with the pilgrims between the tales, and finally in his ultimate function as a deliverer of the pilgrims to the Parson.

This study proposes only the functional aspect of Harry Bailly without commenting on the psychological aspect.

THE FUNCTION OF HARRY BAILLY IN THE CANTERBURY SCHEME

Harry Bailly, his character and situation

The portrait of the Host is first mentioned in "the General Prologue" and is introduced by means of a rapid sketch:

A semely man OURE HOOSTE was withalle
 For to han been a marchal in an halle.
 A large man he was with eyen stepe-
 A fairer burgeys is ther noon in Chepe-
 Boold of his speche, and wys, and wel ytaught,

And of manhod hym lakkede right naught.
 Eek therto he was right a myrie man,
 And after soper pleyen he began,
 And spak of myrthe amonges othere thynges,⁷
 (I (A) 751-759)

Greet chiere made OURE HOOST us everichon,
 And to the soper sette he us anon.
 He served us with vitaille at the beste;
 Strong was the wyn, and wel to drynke us leste.
 (I (A) 747-750)

In this brief description of the character and behavior of the Host, we can see that he has an ability to make others feel at ease, and also we can see that he is a professional, sociable and worldly inn-keeper busily entertaining and feeding his guests. We see that he is a very perceptive character, straightforward in his words and actions, and above all, a merry man with some education.

As a keeper of an inn, he is an expert in providing for human needs:

He served us with vitaille at the beste
 (I (A) 749)
 The chamberers and the stables weren wyde
 (I (A) 28)

We can see why at the Tabard a guest is "esed atte beste" and relaxes and be himself.

However, his situation has more significance. It should be noted that Chaucer introduced him singularly and apart from the pilgrims in "the General Prologue". This is significant because even though the Host was with the pilgrims from the beginning, he was separated from the original pilgrims. He is not one of those who "longen to goon on pilgrimage" but he participates in the pilgrimage because he is motivated by secular considerations. Again, however obscure or mixed might be the

motives of the pilgrims, their destination is Canterbury. On the other hand the destination of the Host is not Canterbury but the Tabard.

It is the Host who suggests the game to the pilgrims:

That ech of yow, to shorte with oure weye,
 In this viage shal telle tales tweye
 To Caunterbury-ward, I mene it so,
 And homeward he shal tellen othere two.
 (I(A) 791-794)

The important thing we should notice is that the suggestion of the game by the Host is not wholly for himself but for the pilgrims as the following quotation shows:

And therefore wol I maken yow disport,
 As I seyde erst, and doon yow som confort.
 (I(A) 775-776)
 And for to make yow the moore mury,
 I wol myselven goodly with yow ryde.
 (I(A) 802-803)

Like a keeper of an inn where people can be wholly secular and get some physical comfort by drinking, eating, resting, and sleeping, the Host is going to be the keeper or the guide of the pilgrims to make them merry with the role given to him by the pilgrims as "oure governour and of oure tales juge and reportour". Since this is a game, he is to decide who gets the prize and he is to "sette a soper at a certeyn prys." With his norm of judgment - that their tales should be a "sentence and solaas" - the prize for telling the tale of "best sencence and mooste solaas" will be an expense-paid supper by all the rest, we see that Harry is fully prepared with his worldly "flok" in the natural world.

Harry Bailly, a game master

And wel I woot the substance is in me,
 If any thyng shall wel reported be.

(VII (F) 2803-4)

Even though every pilgrim is supposed to tell a tale according to his condition and his nature, or as Chaucer related in "the General Prologue", that their "words moote be cosyng to the dede," some physical and spiritual sickness that has motivated them to go to Canterbury prevents them from being themselves. So, Harry has to play a very subtle and skillful game to make every one of them as natural as he can be. He himself is doing his best to be natural in understanding, judging, interpreting and linking the tales and tellers. Because, as the above quotation shows, he knows whether or not each pilgrim's report is true to his character and station, and also because his words and behavior are bold, we can get, through his game play, a more vivid and heightened understanding of human nature.

At the outset, he is very cautious and serious. To make the situation perfect, he reminds the pilgrims of his role several times before the journey starts. With such cautions to make the situation natural, Harry has the pilgrims draw straws to see who shall tell the first tale. The Knight seems "chosen" to speak first by Harry's consciousness of social rank. Harry, the worldly man of the Inn, is naturally concerned about social rank. He asks the Knight to draw the lot first calling him "my mayster and my lord."

When the Knight completes his tale, Harry is glad because the game is "wel bigonne" and then he turns to the Monk, next in social rank to the Knight. But since the Monk must of necessity tell a serious tale, which could not offer a sufficiently effective contrast to the Knight's, the poet devises an interruption of the Host by the drunken Miller.⁸ Harry, as complete tavern-keeper, knows not only the deference to be paid to men of rank, but also the more delicate diplomacy of dealing with a drunken man. By allowing the Miller to proceed in his tale, Harry (more like Chaucer) keeps up his game of artistic balance and diversity.

In "the Reeve's Prologue", Harry sees that the Reeve becomes too serious in his remarks on old age. When he recognizes the somewhat scholarly knack of preaching in the Reeve, which does not suit him, Harry says:

The devil made a reve for to Preche;
 Sey forth thy tale and tarie nat the time.
 (1(A) 3903-4)

There is, in "the Prologue of the Cook's Tale," evidence of a Cook-Host personal relationship. Therefore, when the Cook volunteers to tell the tale, Harry agrees, but feels called upon to warn the Cook that the tale must be "good". Since Harry knows that the Cook has sold many twice-cooked pies in his cookshop, he asks the Cook to tell a tale as a true individual: "Now tell on, gentil Roger by thy name," Because Harry personally knows the Cook, Harry does not want to hurt him by his revelation of Cook's trick, and he cautiously says: "But yet I pray thee, be nat wroth for game; a man seye ful sooth in game and pley."

When Harry calls on the lawyer to tell a tale, he uses legal terminology: (italics mine)

Sire Man of Lawe, "quod he," so have ye blis,
 Tell us a tale anon, as forward is
 Ye been submytted, thurgh youre free assent,
 To stonden in this cas at my juggment,
Acquiteth yow now of youre biheeste,
 Thanne have ye do youre devoir atte leeste.
 (II (B') 32-38)

Harry addresses a professional man in the proper professional terms to remind him of his stature and others to know what will follow, and at the same time prides himself on his knowledgeability. This technique is also shown in the cases of the Clerk and the Physician.

Harry, in "the Friar's Prologue," surprises us with the sense of decorum.⁹ When the Friar says "I wol yow of a somonour telle," Harry tells him: (italics mine)

A! Sire, ye sholde be hende
 And curteys, as a man of youre estaat;
 In compaignye we wol have no debaat.
 Telleth yourre tale, and lat the Somonour be.
 (III (D) 1286-89)

The relationship between the learned Clerk and Harry is quite admirable:

I trowe ye studie aboute som sophyme;
 But Salomon seith 'every thyng hath tyme.
 For Goddes sake, as beth of bettre cheere!
 It is no tyme for to studien heere.
 Telle us som myrie tale, by youre fey!
 (IV (E) 5-9)

Harry asks the Clerk to be more practical and realistic. To teach him the balance of life, Harry urges him to tell a merry tale in the plain style- one that will be neither boring nor excessively moral. Harry feels a certain condescension typical of the practical man of affairs

toward the supposedly impractical man of books.

When Harry hears the full confession of the Merchant:

A! goode sire Hoost, I have ywedded bee
 Thise monthes two, and moore nat, pardee;
 And yet, I trowe, he that al his lyve
 wyflees hath been, though that men wolde him ryve
 Unto the herte, ne koude in no manere
 Tellen so muchel sorwe as I now heere
 koude tellen of my wyves cursednesse.

(IV(E) 1233-39)

he readily gives the Merchant permission to tell his tale, because he likes nothing better than to draw personal revelation from the pilgrims.

After "the Squire's Tale", the Franklyn laments saying:

"Where he (his son) myghte lerne gentillesse aright." Here Harry interrupts the Franklyn. In Harry's estimation, the Franklyn's station in life does not concern "gentillesse." Harry does not allow him to put on airs. "the Franklyn's Prologue" reasserts the idea that the Franklyn is a plain, uncultured fellow to whom the niceties of speech are too 'queynte.'

Harry, in commenting on "the Physician's Tale," very shrewdly exposes the incongruity between the tale and the real character of the Physician. Harry says:

I pray to God so save thy gentil cors,
 And eek thyne urynals and thy jurdones,
 Thyn ypocras, and eek thy galiones,
 And every boyste ful of thy letuarie;
 God blesse hem, and oure lady Seinte Marie!
 So moot I thee, thou art a propre man,
 And lyk a prelat, by Seint Ronyan!
 Seyde I nat wel? I kan nat speke in terme;
 But wel I woot thou doost myn herte to erme,
 That I almost have caught a cardynacle.

(VI(C) 304-13)

In this passage Harry is subtly making fun of the Physician's hypocrisy in telling a story not proper with his real character. The last line shows that it is not the sad story of Virginia which causes Harry's pain at the heart; the Physician causes it, that is, the Physician's hypocrisy in telling a moral tale which his own practices rob of any sincerity.¹⁰

Now Harry turns to the Pardoner after "the Physician's Tale." In Harry's game play, the Pardoner stands at the climax. Harry asks the Pardoner to tell a "merie tale" in order to cure his heart's pain. The 'gentles' of the company, however, know only too well what to expect when a pardoner undertakes to tell a 'myrie tale'. So they cry out:

Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!
 Telle us som moral thyng, that we may lere
 Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly heere.
 (VI(C) 324-26)

Granting both Harry's and the 'gentles' wishes, the Pardoner himself starts to game play with all the pilgrims. After his "honest hypocritic"¹¹ game, the Pardoner feels it a safe jibe to offer Harry a bargain-price for his pardon, saying that Harry is "moost envoluped in synne." Harry's retort is vehement. A notable thing is that Harry does not impugn the Pardoner's relics, but instead stigmatizes the man himself as a living lie. His contempt, not rage, is what renders the Pardoner speechless.¹² Thus physically-handicapped and mentally-distorted Pardoner represents an unintentional self-revelation. Here we see Harry fulfilling his function as a game master forcing self-exposure in diverse ways. With the Pardoner the game is a very dramatic one because both Harry and the Pardoner know

that the other is playing a game. Finally Harry says: "I wol no lenger playe with thee, ne with noon oother angry man."

After "the Prioress' Tale", Harry asks Chaucer to tell a tale. When Chaucer says: "oother tale certes kan I noon, But of a rym I lerned longe agoon," Harry gladly accepts him to tell with rhyme, expecting "som deyntee thyng." But Harry cuts Chaucer short in "Sir Thopas" because it is too unnatural and Harry scolds for Chaucer's "drasty ryming." Harry's instinctive distrust of the narrative ability of Chaucer is shown.

In the "Prologue to the Monk's Tale," Harry begins to rally him on his general air of well-fed prosperity and physical fitness. Because of Harry's consciousness of the Monk's social rank, he repeats: "But be nat wrooth, my Lord, though that I play. Ful ofte in game a sooth I have herd seye!" It also is another raillery. Harry confidently expects a "merry" tale from the Monk. All Harry's weighty words is a reminder to him to tell a suitable tale. But he tells the solemn sequence of the "tragedies." And the Monk is stopped by the Knight. This time Harry directly asks the Monk to tell a hunting story which fits the character of the Monk.

Harry's technique to make others confess is revealed during the conversation with Yeoman. At the end of the Yeoman's revelation, the Canon says to the Yeoman:

Hoold thou thy pees, and spek no wordes mo,
For if thou do, thou shalt it deere aby.
Thou sclaundrest me heere in this compaignye,
And eek discoverest that thou sholdest hyde.
(VIII(G) 693-96)

But after hearing this threat of the Canon, Harry says to the Yeoman:

"telle on, what so bityde. Of al his thretyng rekke nat a myte!"

Finally the fanatically self-protective Canon flees from Harry's goading interest and the Yeoman gets new independence and freedom. Here Harry shows indirectly that only through honest confession can man get freedom.

In the "Manciple's Prologue," we see the earthly way of reconcilliation under the guidance of Harry. After Harry sees the Manciple rallying the drunken Cook, Harry says:

But yet, Manciple, in feith thou art to nyce,
 Thus openly repreve hym of his vice.
 Another day he wole, peraventure,
 Reclayme thee and brynge thee to lure;
 I meene, he speke wole of smale thynges,
 As for to pynchen at thy rekenynges.
 That were nat honest, if it cam to preef.
 (IX(H) 69-75)

The Manciple gives the drunken Cook another drink and the Cook thanks the Manciple as if he has forgotten completely his anger at the Manciple. Harry concludes this scene: "O thou Bacus, yblessed by thy name, / That so kanst turnen erdest into game! / Worshipe and thank be to thy deity." (IX(H) 69-75) Through this process we can see clearly the nature and the limit of the worldly confession under the leadership of Harry. And this is the final feast of "solaas."

What Harry Bailly or Chaucer offers in all those direct and indirect confessions of the pilgrims, is the opportunity to see human beings first in their private selves with their dominant passion or passions suggested or described, and in the greater or less degree of implication with the community.

In those cases, the pilgrims either retort or submit to Harry. By doing so they reveal themselves, and because this is a public confession, they are revealed, enlightened and realized through others or themselves, or through the behavior of the leader, Harry. And many times catharsis and even temporary reconciliation on earth are worked out.

Harry Bailly, a deliverer

We note towards the end of the Canterbury pilgrimage, predominately sober attitudes are dictated, first by expedience in the tale assigned the Manciple and then, by moral prudence in the tale. This is to call attention to the coming transition and also to prepare for it.

Finally, in the last link, the mood of transition appears first with the termination of the natural day. Harry becomes the leader "whan that day to sprying," but, in the last link, the "sonne from the south lyne was descended." The time has come to rest the body and keep the soul awake. They begin their pilgrimage from the Tabard Inn, the most worldly place. Now they are "entryng at a thropes ende," approaching their spiritual destination Canterbury, the holy place, where the inn keeper cannot be a leader. The transition from the mood of festivity to one of great sobriety is also seen.¹³

Harry, who apprehended the situation clearly, says:

Lordynges everichoon,
 Now lakketh us no tales mo than oon.
 Fulfilled is my sentence and my decree;
 I trowe that we han herd of ech degree;
 Almost fulfilled is al myn ordinance.
 (X(I) 15-19)

And asks the Parson:

Artow a vicary?
 Or arte a person? sey sooth, by thy fey!
 Be what thou be, ne breke thou nat oure pley;
 For every man, save thou, hath toold his tale.
 (X(1) 22-25)

Thou sholdest knytte up wel a greet mateere.
 Telle us a fable anon, for cokkes bones! }
 (X(1) 28-29)

It is also very important to see the attitude of the Parson when he is asked to tell a fable by Harry:

Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me;

 For which I seye, if that yow list to heere
 Moralitee and vertuuous mateere,
 And thanne that ye wol yeve me audience,
 I wol ful fayn, at Christes reverence,
 Do yow plesauce leefful, as I kan.
 (X(1) 31-41)

Now the general air of "solaas" gives place to "sentence."

The Parson is firm in his conviction that it is God's will and that he is not under the guidance of Harry:

And Jhesu, for his grace, wit me sende
 To shewe yow the wey, in this viage,
 Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage
 That highte Jerusalem celestial.
 (X(1) 48-51)

Finally, as Harry is appointed leader by their full assent, the pilgrims again fully accept the Parson. They instruct Harry to convey their decision to the Parson and bid "oure Hoost" to let the Parson be their guide. Harry nonchalantly invites the Parson to tell "youre meditacioun" and gives the Parson the information he receives from the pilgrims in order that the Parson can "knytte up wel a greet mateere"

and "make an ende." This scene accentuates the respective roles of the Host and Parson, the one a guide in the ways of the world, the other a guide in the spiritual way.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

The importance of the function of Harry Bailly lies not only in the linking of the tales to make a unified work of art but also in his relation to the whole thematic scheme. Charles Muscatine said that: "The coordinateness and linearity of Chaucer's form, his 'heye' weye' through life, with its various juxtaposed versions of experience, is invested with a second typically Gothic quality, the tension between phenomenal and ideal, mundane and divine, that informs the art and thought of the period."¹⁵ This pattern of juxtaposed view can be applied to the function of Harry Bailly and that of the Parson. Harry can be representative of the physical world, the natural confessor while the Parson is that of the spiritual world representing "sentence."

Up to this point, Harry has been the virtual leader of the pilgrims - guiding them and in a way, making them "confess" and reveal themselves. Now Harry's duty is taken over by a spiritual man in order to complete the cycle of realization, penitence and salvation. The natural leader must necessarily give way to a spiritual leader to realize the element of salvation. Thus Harry Bailly has fulfilled his function - as a guide to Canterbury and in the course of the journey to serve the pilgrims to bring about self-confession and self-realization through the links and their tales.

But because there still remains the problem of the region of "satisfaction," the question arises. Are the pilgrims going to go back to the Tabard to celebrate their satisfaction of body and soul? Is there going to be a winner in the telling of the tales? Through the function

of Harry and the Parson, Chaucer makes manifest the point of confession and salvation. And we can then assume that if there is going to be a feast, the feast will be for everybody, for it is said in Proverbs 28:13:

He that hideth his sins,
shall not prosper: but he that
shall confess, and forsake them,
shall obtain mercy.

Footnotes

- 1 Paul G. Ruggiers, The Art of the Canterbury Tales, (Madison, 1967) p.5.
- 2 W. Robertson, A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspective, (Princeton, 1961), p. 1
- 3 Ralph Baldwin, The Unity of the Canterbury Tales, (Copenhagen, 1955) p. 11
- 4 Maurice Hussey and A.C. Spearing, An Introduction to Chaucer, (Cambridge, 1965), p. 22
- 5 Kemp Malone, "Harry Bailly and Godlief", ES, Vol. XXXI, (1950), p. 215.
- 6 Ruggiers, p. 21.
- 7 F. N. Robinson, ed. The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, (Cambridge, 1957). All references to the Canterbury Tales are from this edition.
- 8 Robert Kilburn Root, The Poetry of Chaucer, (Boston, 1922), p. 177.
- 9 Ruggiers, p. 91
- 10 R. M. Lumiansky, Of Sondry Folk, (Austin, 1955), p. 200.
- 11 Root, p. 233.
- 12 Bertrand H. Bronson, In Search of Chaucer, (Canada, 1960), p. 82.
- 13 Ruggiers, p. 4.
- 14 Hussey, p. 94.
- 15 Charles Muscatine, Chaucer, and the French Tradition, (Berkeley, 1966), p. 168.

Bibliography

- Baldwin, Ralph. The Unity of the Canterbury Tales. Copenhagen, 1955.
- Bronson, Bertrand H. In Search of Chaucer. New York, 1960.
- Dempster, Germain. Dramatic Irony in Chaucer. New York, 1959.
- Gaylord, Alan T. "Sentence and Solaas in Frangment VII of the Canterbury Tales," PMLA, 1967.
- Hoffman, Arthur W. "Chaucer's Prologue to Pilgrimage." ELH, XXI, 1954.
- Huppe, Bernard F. A Reading of Canterbury Tales. New York, 1964.
- Hussey, Maurice and Spearing, A.C. An Introduction to Chaucer, Cambridge, 1965.
- Legouis, Emile. Geoffrey Chaucer. New York, 1961.
- Lowes, John Livingston. Geoffrey Chaucer. Oxford, 1933.
- Lumiansky, R. M. Of Sondry Folk. Austin, 1955.
- Malone, Kemp. Chapters on Chaucer. Baltimore, 1951.
- _____. "Harry Bailly and Godlief," ES, XXXI, 1950. pp. 209-215.
- Muscantine, Charles. Chaucer, and the French Tradition. Berkeley, 1966.
- Payne, Robert O. The Key to Remembrance. New Haven, 1963.
- Preston, Raymond. Chaucer, London, 1952.
- Robertson, W. A Preface to Chaucer; Studies in Medieval Perspective. Princeton, 1961.
- Root, Robert Kilburn. The Poetry of Chaucer. Boston, 1922.
- Ruggiers, Paul G. The Art of the Canterbury Tales. Madison.