

The Interplay between the Secular and the Sacred in *The Canterbury Tales* and Old English Poetry

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Abstract

The writings of Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400) are greatly influenced by former literary works, especially those by the Roman poets Boethius, Ovid and Cicero. His poetry treats contemporary themes within a framework that draws upon plots and subjects from preceding literature. However, Chaucer's later work *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400) tackles subjects and employs characters that reflect the spirit of England's Middle Ages. *The General Prologue*, among other tales that form Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, treats the themes of the age through a context that creates an amalgamation of the mundane and the divine. The work deals with both religious and secular questions. A similar amalgamation is also evident in major earlier Old English poems as *Beowulf* (ca. 700-1000), *The Dream of the Rood* (ca. 700-900), *The Battle of Maldon* (ca. 991), *The Wanderer* (ca. 975) and *The Seafarer* (ca. 900). This paper aims to examine the impact of employing secular and sacred aspects on English Medieval literature, particularly Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and the major Old English poems.

Keywords: The Canterbury Tales, Beowulf, Old English Poetry, Medieval Poetry

1. Introduction

The Canterbury Tales is a satirical work in which Chaucer depicts a wide cross-sectional scene of the life and people of England in the Middle Ages. The work displays different features and detailed descriptions of the life of a group of pilgrims "of sundry folk" (25), who vary in "degree" and "array" (40-1), coming "from every shires ende/ of Engelond, to Canterbury they wende" (15-16). Their goal is to visit the relics of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury, who "hem hath holpen, whan that they were seke" (18). The spiritual revival Chaucer's pilgrims seek through visiting the shrine of St. Thomas Becket isn't therefore the only reason that they go on pilgrimage. The poem states that the Saint helps them to achieve a physical revival as well through his powers that can cure the pilgrim's bodily illnesses. The poem in this context declares from its early opening the poet's intentions of treating both secular and religious aspects of the time.

2. The Mundane and the Divine in *The Canterbury Tales*

The pilgrims set forth on pilgrimage in April, the beginning of spring, with one eye on earth attempting to feed their senses, and another on heaven attaining the grace of God through fulfilling one of their religious duties. In his discussion of the notion of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages, Matthew B. Goldie, in *Middle English Literature - a Historical Sourcebook*, states that "the spiritual, moral, physical, and pecuniary aspects of pilgrimages were the subject of debate throughout the Middle Ages" (Goldie, 32). He adds that the "popular belief in the efficacy of visiting shrines of saints for curative reasons remained strong" (Goldie, 32). The pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* embody the concept of pilgrimage in England's Middle Ages. Their trip manifests the spiritual and sacred value of pilgrimage. Nevertheless, they also show that this trip involves a physical revival since April is the spring season that pleases the eye and feeds the senses "with his showres soote" (1) and "sweete breath" (5), and it is the time that they visit saints' shrines to recover from sicknesses. Spring in this respect is a source of inspiration of both the secular and divine love. Corinne Saunders states that "Spring inspires new life, warmth and sexual desire (one meaning of 'corage'); yet it can also kindle desire for another kind of regeneration, that of the spirit, and hence the intention to set forth on pilgrimage" (Saunders, 129). Pilgrimage and spring are introduced early in *The General Prologue* to emphasize themes of the love of the worldly and the worship of the divine. These themes keep recurring throughout the other parts of *The Canterbury Tales*.

The General Prologue introduces thirty pilgrims engaged in an act of religious devotion. They intend to go "to Canterbury with ful devout corage" (22), i.e. full devoted heart. Their journey is motivated by a pure religious impulse. Their trip is expected therefore to have a pure religious nature. However the pilgrims are arranged in the text in accordance to their social rank, a classification reflecting the Middle Age's secular social hierarchy. This incident lays more emphasis on the amalgamation between the secular and the divine in the poem. Chaucer would have deliberately created this fusion to emphasize the inseparability between the need to reform the church and that to reform the society since reformation is a major theme of *The Canterbury Tales*. The work depicts the imperfections of different secular and religious characters. By doing so Chaucer aims to show and attempts to reform their vices, thus those of the society.

Chaucer gives the Knight a priority and ranks him first among the pilgrims. He introduces him before the other characters in *The General Prologue*, and assigns him as the first tale teller. In doing so Chaucer proves commitment to the social hierarchical order of the Middle Ages. The pilgrims are supposed to begin their tales

while being on their way to Canterbury, and class division plays an influential role in who tells the first tale. In his view of the concept of pilgrimage in "The Social Literary Scene in England", Paul Strohm states that "the pilgrimage itself is, after all, a social as well as religious event, with individuals interacting according to their social perspective as expressed by their class (or rank) and vocation" (Strohm, 15). *The General Prologue's* characters represent a wide section of Chaucer's society where the Knight occupies an advanced position. In this respect, the Knight is given advantage due to worldly beliefs though he embodies the concept of the Christian knight who "no Cristen man so ofte of his degree" (55).

The choice of the Knight from another point of view can be seen as a manifestation of other ideological authorities of the age. Medieval man believed in the capricious powers of fortune. Jill Mann explains this in his article "Chance and Destiny" stating that "Chaucer's thinking on the question of whether the world is governed by 'Fortunows hap' or a benign ordering power, is fundamental to his most serious poetry" (Mann, 109). E. M. W. Tillyard in *The Elizabethan World Picture* argues that "the Middle Ages derived their world picture from an amalgam of Plato and the Old Testament" He adds that this picture is "being perpetually subjected to the conflicting claims of this and another world" (Tillyard, 4). The interplay between the pagan and the religious with respect to fortune in *The Canterbury Tales* surpasses the condition of amalgamation to reflect a clash between the mundane and the divine – a clash between the heathen gods and Christianity, or between classical fortune and heavenly fate as *The Knight's Tale* suggests.

The character of the Knight is rather controversial. He fights the heathens for the sake of Christianity. He comes from the battle field and directly joins the pilgrims paying no attention to the war clothes he wears as he attempts to catch up with the travelers. He is presented in *The General Prologue* as pious and even flawless. Nevertheless, in *The Knight's Tale* the Knight expresses a belief in fortune that contradicts Chaucer's view of him as a perfect Christian knight in *The General Prologue*. The belief in fortune is manifested even before the beginning of *The Knight's Tale*. At the end of *The General Prologue*, and while the pilgrims are on their way to Canterbury, they agree to the inn's keeper's suggestion to spend their time telling stories and to decide the first teller by drawing lots. Falling on the Knight, the lottery anticipates the significance of fortune and its role in *The Knight's Tale*, the first of *The Canterbury Tales*.

From the very beginning of *The Knight's Tale* and as soon as Chaucer establishes the widows' scene, he introduces Fortune as a decisive force that leaves no room for the exercise of free will. The concept of fortune is reflected in the eldest widow's speech to Theseus in the poem. Paying attention to the intervention of fortune, the widow reminds Theseus that it is fortune that has given him victory and made him conqueror:

Lord, to whom Fortune hath given
Victorie, and as a conqueror to lyven,
.....
Thanked be Fortune, and hir false wheel,
That noon astaath assureth to be weel. (57-8, 67-8)

For the Christian audience of *The Knight's Tale*, some sense of the survival of the ancient gods could be present. This sense resulted from the medieval blending of Christian belief with an acceptance of some influence of classical gods over human life, including the goddess of fortune. This attitude was tolerated by the Church which tried to create a balance between paganism and Christianity by accommodating the compromising view that fortune was a "facet of God's providence" (Ruggiers, 155). It seems however that Chaucer struggles to maintain the paganism of his characters distinct from the Christian view that fortune functions within the frame of God's providence.

During their holy trip of going and returning from Canterbury, the pilgrims tell secular stories. The characters themselves have different backgrounds; some are secular while others religious. However, some religious tales presented by religious figures, *The Clerk's Tale* for instance, are told within a secularized religious context. The tale employs secular figures to convey Christian virtues. The tales' tellers and their tales create a mixture of the divine and the mundane. In this regard, Corrine Saunders argues that "the Canterbury pilgrimage encompasses the two extremes, opposing figures like the ascetic Clerk and Parson, and the virtuous Knight freshly back from the Crusades, with the Wife of Bath, seeking a sixth husband, or the corrupt Pardoner, hoping to fill his purse" (Saunders, 129). These two opposing extremes intensify the reader's recognition of the fusion of the secular and divine in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

T. P. Dolan argues that Chaucer "may have felt that the distinction drawn between religious and secular was a false one" (Dolan, 63). So, through stating emphasis on the secular features of the religious characters in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer is aware of changing the prevailing view of his time – that the clergy maintains a religious view that cannot be violated by the mundane – and establishing a new view that allows the secular and the sacred to mingle together within the same person. This is evident in characters such as the Nun, the Monk and the Friar in *The General Prologue*. This view, however, was contradicted with some degrees by another view by one of Chaucer's contemporaries. William Langland's use of the term 'religion' was a strict one. For him it "distinguishes members of religious orders from the secular clergy by reason of their strict observance of a rule

in order to serve God exclusively" (Dolan, 62). Unlike Chaucer, Langland's view leaves no room for the meeting of the secular and the sacred in the religious person.

Corinne Saunders suggests another kind of balance between the earthly and the heavenly. She depends in her argument on the notion that each tale either introduces a religious figure and theme, or mundane ones. This can be perceived as a reflection of the diversity of the society of her time rather than being a proposal of an existing clash between the secular and the sacred authorities. She states that:

The idealism of the Knight is balanced by the corruption of the Pardoner, the asceticism of the Parson by the worldliness of the Prioress, the bookish authority of the Clerk by the experience of the Wife of Bath. The tales, like their narrators, span the different spheres of society, from secular to religious, from the lower-class world of the Miller's tale to the aristocratic one of the Knight's; they span too the sweep of history, from the world of ancient Greece to the fourteenth century. (Saunders, 193)

Evidences of the interplay between the secular and the sacred in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* have proved obvious presence in the characters' conduct, speech and thought. However, the integration of the worldly and the heavenly is also prominent in the characters' clothes. Clothing is established as an aspect that functions intelligibly as to evoke and emphasize the concept of the interplay between the mundane and the religious aspects of the characters. *The General Prologue's* Nun is the most striking example relevant to this notion. The clothing of the Nun is presented by Chaucer as:

Ful fetis was hir cloke, as I was war.
Of smal coral aboute hir arm she bar
A peire of bedes, gauded al with greene;
And theron heeng a brooch of gold ful sheene,
On which ther was first writen a crowned A,
And after, *Amor vincit omnia*. (*The General Prologue*, 157-62)

Laura F. Hodges, in *Chaucer and Clothing*, argues about the possibility of seeing "a nun or prioress dressed in secular, luxurious garment in the Middle Ages... [But there was also those] who dressed according to their convent rules" (Hodges, 72). She attributes this to the 'socio-economic' factors that opposed the religious rules, determining what the nuns wore. Nevertheless, the socio-economic factors and the convent rules overlap in the representation of Chaucer's Nun, who is covered modestly by a "ful fetis" cloak, while wearing "a brooch of gold ful sheene" on which there was written "*Amor vincit omnia*". The statement written on the brooch, meaning 'love conquers all,' implies two extremely opposite possibilities of earthly love and divine love. The interplay between the secular and sacred makes it hard here to determine whether she is fallen in the love of a worldly figure, or the love of Christ.

Chaucer's tales vary between presenting secular and divine love. These opposing types of love are sometimes the motive that allows the *Tales* to flow and interchange between the representation of the sacred and the mundane. In this respect, Corinne Saunders argues that:

The secular and the sacred, and particularly secular and sacred love, function as leitmotifs in the *Tales*, from the *Knight's Tale* onwards – here, desire opens onto the sublime and raises existential questions, while in the Miller's bawdy parody, *fin' amors* and high idealism are replaced by the most basic of sexual urges, and in the *Reeve's Tale* sexuality becomes an economic transaction. Other tales – the Second Nun's, the Man of Law's, the Prioress's, the Clerk's – deal directly with divine love, and sometimes with the rejection of human love. The question of different kinds of love and related questions of gender, marriage and religious vows of chastity, recur across the *Canterbury Tales*. (Saunders, 193)

3. The Interplay between the Secular and the Sacred in Old English Poetry

Evoking interplay between the Christian and the mundane in literary works is not purely Chaucerian addition. It belongs to an earlier stage of Medieval literature, particularly the works of the Old English poets. After the conversion of a large number of the English people into Christianity in 597 AD by Saint Augustine, poets started to inject their new religious beliefs into their traditional heroic corpus. *Beowulf*, the oldest English epic written about five centuries before Chaucer, draws on different Christian themes including good and evil. Although pagan heroism is at the heart of its thematic concern, however it is intersected with Christian elements in different occasions.

Beowulf is an epic that offers a documentary view of the heathen world before Christianity. It basically reflects the theme of heroism, and the life of warriors who live and die for fighting. The warriors of the pagan times mirror a world vague of belief but in the ideals of war since Christianity was not spread yet. However, *Beowulf* mixes between these two contradictory beliefs in war and God. It is believed that the poet who wrote the work was a converted Christian who wrote a heroic pagan poem injected with Christian values. The author's knowledge of the story of creation is disclosed early in lines (105-114) where he classifies Grendel among "Cain's clan" (106). Later the speaker of the poem announces that the Shieldings have no knowledge of God, and that they turn to "pagan shrines" (175) and "idols" (176) to help them conquering their enemies:

Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
offerings to idols, swore oaths
that the killer of souls might come to their aid
and save the people. That was their way,
their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts
they remembered hell. The Almighty Judge
of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,
was unknown to them. *Beowulf* (175-183)

However, before the scene of the fight between Beowulf and Grendel, the author reports a religious discourse by Hrothgar, the king of the Shieldings, in which he reveals his faith in God, only to give an opposite view of that given earlier that the Shieldings are disbelievers in God. This interplay between paganism and Christianity has resulted from the intrusion of a heroic story with a heathen background in the Christian world of the Writer:

... Now Holy God
Has, in His goodness, guided him here
To the West-Danes, to defend us from Grendel.
This is my hope; and for his heroism
I will recompense him with a rich treasure. (381-5)

Beowulf also creates a similar discourse in which he violates the ancient pagan beliefs in fortune and its powers, and confesses his faith in the "just judgment" (441) of God. Beowulf addresses the Shieldings in the scene before the fight:

... I hereby renounce
Sword and the shelter of the broad shield,
The heavy war-board: hand-to-hand
Is how it will be, a life-and-death
Fight with the fiend. Whichever one death fells
Must deem it a just judgment by God. (436-41)

Besides, the terminology used to describe the epic's characters is derived from both worlds of heathenism and Christianity. In this respect Fred C. Robinson states that "many of the terms used to describe Grendel, such as *eoten*, *Pyrs* and *ylfe*, come directly from pagan Germanic demonology, but the poet also draws on Christian concepts of evil, associating the monster with hell and the devil" (Robinson, 149). Christian terminology in this context is used frequently to introduce the heathen monster. In one place Grendel is depicted as "a fiend out of hell" (100), in another as a dweller among "Cain's clan" (106) and in a third place as a "God-cursed brute" (121). *The Dream of the Rood* is another Old English poem that creates an intermixture of the heathen world and the Christian tradition. The work dramatizes the Christian story of Crucifixion. In spite of that the theme of *The Dream of the Rood* is essentially religious; the author encloses it firmly within a pagan framework of Germanic heroic ideals. The relationship between Christ and the Rood in the poem is a reflection of the strong bond that binds the lord and his retainers under the concept of *comitatus* in Old English tradition. Expectations of obeying the lord are highly significant in the reaction of the Rood to Christ's orders. Sarah Larratt Keefer comments on the concept of obedience in the text stating that:

This kind of obedience would have been highly evocative of the obedience expected in epic tales of a warrior by his leader, and so the audience of *The Dream of the Rood* would have been encouraged to associate the relationship between the Rood and Christ with something that they knew from their own cultural stories, that being the *comitatus*, or warband, whose fighters owe their allegiance and obedience to their own earthly lord. (Keefer, 26)

Other examples of the interplay between heathenism and Christianity are evident in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Both poems begin with describing the wretchedness of their protagonists who wander in the sea away from their lords and kinsmen, who are lost in wars or on other worldly occasions. The relationship between the speakers and their lords in the poems is a manifestation of the pagan tradition of *comitatus*. Nevertheless, both poems end with a Christian note, in which the protagonists reject the vanity of their transient secular life for the sake of Christian salvation. They represent the exploration of "the dilemma faced by the Christian living in the world" (Sauer, 127). They embody therefore the concept of *contemptus mundi*; or contempt for the world. Michelle M. Sauer in his book *British Poetry Before 1600* argues that the two poems are examples of this concept (127). The search for the heavenly Lord in this context is their compensation after losing their mortal earthly lords. This statement situates the poems within the works that seek reconciliation, not clash, between the pagan and Christian faith. They echo *The Dream of the Rood* in which the earthly lords and the heavenly Lord are reconciled in the figure of Jesus Christ.

The heavenly Lord is also what Byrhtnoth, the lord of the [Anglo-Saxon](#) warriors in *The Battle of Maldon*, seeks when he is mortally wounded in the battlefield. The poem is a good example of the reconciliation of the love of

both; the heavenly Lord and the earthly lord. Byrhtnoth dies with a sign of loyalty to his Christian Lord. Meanwhile, his retainers choose to die in the battlefield to revenge their lord's death; emphasizing their willingness to perish loyal to him, showing love for their earthly lord:

He looked up to heaven:
"I thank Thee, Lord of all peoples
For all those joys that I on earth have known.
Now, my Maker mild - I have most need
That thou to my ghost should grant good.
That my soul to Thee may journey,
Into thy kingdom - O lord of the Angels,
May pass with peace - I do desire of Thee
That the hell-fiends may not hurt it."
Then hewed at him those heathen men
And at both those men that stood him beside,
Aelfnoth and Wulfmeer - both fell;
Then beside their liege - their lives they yielded.

(*The Battle of Maldon* 172-85)

In his commentary on England at the time of the battle of Maldon in his book *The Anglo-Saxon State*, James Campbell argues that "secular and religious centralisation went hand in hand" (Campbell, 162). Graham Caie in "The Shorter Heroic Verse" recognizes the amalgamation between the secular and religious in Anglo-Saxon England as the emergence of the Germanic ideals in the tenth century "that is undoubtedly connected with political needs of the Saxon rulers to create a united kingdom by claiming a common Germanic heritage with a great past and ideals of loyalty to God and king" (qtd. in Treharne, 141).

4. Conclusion

Medieval poetry has a strong tendency of creating interplay between the secular and the sacred. The examination of this concept illustrates that the reason of this amalgamation lies in the fact that the Christian world of the times tolerated the pre-Christian concepts, and reconceptualized them through melting some of the notions of the pagan world in the Christian discourse of the Medieval Age. Medieval poetry in this respect has become a medium that stores the heathen and Christian beliefs by creating an interplay that permits both to fuse together within a literary body that creates a harmony between the two opposing forces of the mundane and the divine.

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