

Chaucer's Religious Skepticism.

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Abstract

Among the many issues raised in Chaucer's literary works, religious skepticism in particular is dominant. This skepticism seems to be enhanced by an overwhelming sense of uncertainty, mutability, and doubt leading to currents of thought that question theist assumptions, particularly skepticism, and naturalism. Being a "mirror to his age" Chaucer's skepticism could be easily traced through an extensive utilization of astrology, astronomy, and mythological figures as decisive forces and possible controllers of this world. This becomes so important when Christianity assigns total control of the universe to God. We may then assume that Chaucer deliberately exposes his doubt through a frequent questioning of man's destiny and free will with a heavy articulation on paganism which was not totally off the scene in Chaucer's England. His treatment of these issues provides a testimonial evidence to a widening split in the theologian doctrine among the public, and within his own mind. *The Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and *Book of The Duchesse* are only examples that provide ample evidence to his religious skepticism.

Keywords: Chaucer, skepticism, Christianity, Universe, Canterbury Tales

The second half of the Fourteenth Century which covers the whole life span of Chaucer was a time of economic and social upheaval. It witnessed four great events in the history of England: The Black Death of 1348-9, the issuance of The Statute of Laborers, The Statute of Servants in 1349, and The Peasants Revolt in 1381. The Black Death is said to have reduced the population by as much as a third, and inscribed a death-haunt on the consciousness of the survivors. Chaucer tells us of the "Reeve" in *The General Prologue* that men were "adrad of hym like deeth" (1.605). Moreover, the Black Death is said to have infused doubt into the religious doctrine hastening the transition of the "Age of faith" into an age of religious skepticism and doubt. In fact, the plague, the harshness of life, and the oppressive measures of authorities, contributed much to this skepticism as G. Gardner argues:

"It was an age that we would have hated much had we been living in. We would have hated its opinions, customs, superstitions, cruelty, and its disfigured intellect...England's great poet of gentleness and compassion walked everyday in a city where the fly-bitten, bird-scarred corpses of hanged criminals-men and women, even children-draped their shadows across crowded public squares.... All medieval religious doctrine was unbelievable; in fact, and though we find no evidence that skepticism to say nothing of atheism was ever seriously argued in the late middle ages. Thousands were baffled and helpless"¹

Thus, the once firmly established foundations of faith began to be shaken and people looked outside the Bible for satisfying interpretations to their aggravating miseries. It would stand to reason then to suspect a split in the religious mind of the public to which Chaucer is a true representative. To this effect, T. Whittock asserts ". . . but we need not look outside Chaucer for evidence of religious skepticism and doubt."² A close investigation of *Book of The Duchesse, Troilus and Criseyde*, and *The Knight's Tale*, will testify to Whittock's notion. Nevertheless, the recurrence of this skepticism contrasts with the general opinion about Chaucer as "a comfortable optimist, serene, and full of faith."³

Curiously enough, the paganism of the past was not totally off the scene in Chaucer's England. It actually contributed a great deal to the full development of this skepticism. One commentator sees paganism in Chaucer as a sign of religious doubt that continued to pervade his mind. A mind that must be indeed strong to rise above juvenile credulity, and maintain a wise infidelity against the authority of the pervading religious doctrine. However, he was able to make room for the synthesis in his mind and literature.⁴

P. G. Ruggiers too affirms that "The Middle Ages managed to salvage the ancient gods by accommodating them into their own customs and beliefs."⁵ Amazingly enough, this dualism was not denied by the Church.⁶ In fact, "Chaucer's age accepted all the Bible as literal truth, and there is no reason to suspect that Chaucer himself did not do likewise. Yet, in spite of the Biblical authority, there existed a gnawing doubt in his mind."⁷

In *The Legend of Good Women*, "The Prologue" Chaucer explicitly expresses his confusion and doubt about what theologians consider as literally true.

*A thousand tymes have I herd men telle
That ther ys joy in hevene and peyne in helle,
And I acorde wel that it ys so;
But, natheless, yet wot I wel also
That ther nis noon dwellyng in this contree,
[That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe. [1-6]*

A thousand times I have heard it said that in heaven is joy and in hell pain; and I grant well that it is so. Nevertheless, I know this well, that there is no person dwelling in this land who has been in either hell or heaven, or who can know of them in any other way than as he has heard tell or found it written, for no person can put his knowledge to the test. (Modern English Translation)

Moreover, he "believed for a time in the reality of astral influence, and, in God's use of to bring about his effects in the world."⁸ In the *Knight's Tale*, Saturn conveys his role of bringing disasters and catastrophes and even the plague:

*My deere doghter Venus," quod Saturne,
"My cours, that hath so wyde for to turne,
Hath moore power than woot any man.
Myn is the drenchyng in the see so wan;
Myn is the prison in the derke cote;
Myn is the stanglyng and hangyng by the throte; [2453-58]*

"My dear daughter Venus," he said, "my course which circles so widely has more power than any mortal comprehends. Mine is the drowning in the pale sea, mine the imprisoning in the dark cell, mine the strangling and the hanging by the throat; the murmurs, the groaning, the churls' rebellion, the secret poisoning. I make vengeance and full chastisement when I dwell in the sign of the Lion. Mine is the ruin of high mansions, the falling of towers and walls on the miner and the carpenter. When Samson shook the pillar, it was I who slew him. And mine are the cold maladies, the ancient plots; my aspect begets the plague." (Modern English Translation)

Nevertheless, Chaucer's religious views are not easy to judge as he writes "little that can be recognized as ostensibly religious in material or impulse."⁹ But we may be certain that "there persisted a gnawing doubt in his mind."¹⁰ A doubt that has long occupied writers of the middle ages, from St. Thomas Aquinas and Boethius onwards. These writers have shown a great interest in a variety of religious issues, especially the controversial ones of predestination and freedom of the will. Apparently, such controversy stemmed from a joint belief in the oneness of God, and in a multitude of gods as well. According to J. Gardner; "except among the well educated, Christianity and the old pagan religion were interlocked like two tree trunks grown together."¹¹ P. G. Ruggiers affirms that "the middle ages managed to salvage the ancient gods by accomodating them into their customs and beliefs."¹² Naturally, Chaucer is no exception.

Similarly, Chaucer seems confused at times and unable to decide whether or not man should be held responsible for his actions as Christianity maintains. His treatment of both issues conforms to the general atmosphere of uncertainty and skepticism prevalent in his time. His frustration at the complexity of them is well noticed throughout many works of his.

The narrator of *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, explicitly admits his inability to solve the matter in light of the fact that greater without authorities than him have long debated the question ever settling it one way or another.

*Witnessse on hym that any parfit clerk is
That in scole is greet altercacioun
In this mateere, and greet disputisoun,
And hath been of an hundred thousand men
But I ne kan nat bulte it to the bren,
As kan the hooly doctour Augustyn
Or Boece, or the bisshop Bradwardyn. [3236-42]*

You may witness it from any perfect scholar that there is great difference of opinion in the schools and great disputation about this matter, and there always has been among a hundred thousand people. But I cannot sift the wheat from the chaff, as can the holy doctor Augustine or Boethius or Bishop Bradwardine. (Modern English Translation)

The narrator, who is probably a persona for the author behind him, goes out of his way to safeguard against such a lapse when he assertively warns his audience that the moral and intellectual issues involved ought not to be taken lightly:

*But ye that holden this tale a folye
As of a fox, or of a cock and a hen
Taketh the moralite, goode men
For Seint Paul seith that althat written is,
To our doctrine it is yewrite, ywis;
Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille. [3438]*

But you who maintain this tale to be foolishness, about nothing but a fox and a cock and a hen, take the moral, good sirs. For St. Paul says that all that is written is written for our learning, in truth. Take the fruit and leave the chaff. And now may the good God, if His will be so, as says my lord, make us all good Christians and bring us to His heavenly bliss. Amen 3446 (A Modern English Translation)

Chaucer's audience, then, are meant to take to heart what the Nun's Priest suggests throughout his tale especially, destiny that may "nat beenn eschewed!" [3338]. If that be so, we may venture to say that such a view of Destiny can only reflect a deep sense of pessimism and a resignation, even fatalism on the part of the author. This view which Chaucer's audience are encouraged to adopt, seems to throw shadows of skepticism and confusion over his readiness or ability to accept as unquestionable the theologians' assertion that man is free and morally responsible, a creature. Thus, one tends to agree with the observation that Chaucer's obvious concern with the issue of predestination versus free will stems from an urge on his part "to point out the difficulty of reconciling God's

foreknowledge of events as controller of man with man's free will."¹³ Moreover, he seems to intentionally cast shadows of skepticism over his readers or listeners. In fact, he appears to have no ready answers for the relationships between the powers affecting the life of humans, human desire, free will, the stars, Fortune, Destiny, and Providence, nor did his books, sources, or the harsh details of daily life around afford him any.

He even expresses his scorn for the inadequacies of all scholarly theological analysis of the problem.¹⁴ His skeptical mind looked beyond what the emotional religious devotion could offer. Moreover, he demonstrates his deep dissatisfaction with the apparently "baseless speculations of theology."¹⁵

In *The Knight's Tale*, Palamon explicitly admits his inability to comprehend the issue. He even decides to leave it for the theologians assuming that they have a better understanding.

*The answer of this lete I to dyvynys,
But wel I woot that in this world greet pyne ys. [1323-4]*

The answer to all this I leave to theologians, but well I know that on this earth there is great sorrow! (A Modern English Translation)

Chaucer's religious skepticism initially starts with the first of *The Canterbury Tales* as Theseus' victory is assigned to Fortune not to God:

*Lord, to whom Fortune hath yiven
Victorie, and as a conqueror to lyven, [915-16]*

Lord, to whom Fortune has granted victory and to live as a conqueror, your glory and honor grieves us not. (A Modern English Translation)

However, this doesn't go without a warning to the fickle nature of Fortune and her false wheel:

*Thanked be Fortune and hire false wheel,
That noon estaat assureth to be weel. [924-6]*

Thanks to Fortune and her false wheel that does not ensure prosperity to any estate. (A Modern English Translation)

Continually, Chaucer asserts his religious doubt in many instances and utilises dieties, Fortune, and the stars extensively as controllers of man. In *The Knight's Tale*, while being prisoners, Arcite emphasises their roles and even pledges his cousin Palamon to submit to their wills.

Fortune hath yeven us this adversitee.

*Som wikke aspect or disposicioun
Of Saturne, by som constellacioun,
Hath yeven us this, although we hadde it sworn
So stood the hevene whan that we were born.
We moste endure it; this is the short and playn. [1086-91]*

This adversity was given to us by Fortune. Some evil aspect or disposition of Saturn by some constellation has given us this, though we had vowed it should not be. So stood the heavens when we were born, and we must endure it; this is all." (A Modern English Translation)

However, Chaucer recounts God as a controller when Arcite says:

God helpe me so, me list ful yvele Pleye [269]

"So God help me, I have very little stomach for sport!" (Modern English Translation)

The final moments of the pilgrimage to Canterbury end by an allegorical setting to *The Parson's Tale*.

*I meene Libra, always gan ascende,
As we were entryng at thropes ende.
For which our Hoost, as he was wont to gye,
As in this caas, oure joly compaignye, [11-14]*

I mean the sign of Libra, did ascend, as we were entering a village-end; whereat our host, since wont to guide was he, as in this case, our jolly company. (Modern English Translation)

In fact, this very indicative setting bears strong evidence to the running dispute between religious doctrines and religious doubt in Chaucer's mind.¹⁶ Libra -the scale- strongly indicates the day of judgement. This becomes so important when we know that the pilgrimage is at an end by the setting sun and the unknown village which the pilgrims are near at. In fact, the name of the village remains unknown forever, as when we depart this world. E. T. Donaldson maintains:

"To the medieval mind, the allegorical implications of a pilgrimage were obvious, so medieval literature encounters the common place that this life is but a pilgrimage-from birth to death, from earth to heaven, the Celestial City to which every Christian soul aspires."¹⁷

This conception was earlier stressed in the first of the "Tales" by Chaucer's Knight saying:

*This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo,
And we been pilgrymes, passing to and fro. [2847-8]*

This world is but a thoroughfare of woe, and we are pilgrims passing to and fro;
(Modern English Translation)

As attributed to Chaucer, this skepticism was enhanced by an overwhelming sense of uncertainty and mutability which marked the middle ages. M. Bowden argues "in the Middle Ages, what one believed in on Monday was not necessarily the same as what one believed in and acted upon on Tuesday"¹⁸. The Church too with the worldliness of its members added much to the aggravating situation on the social, political, and religious levels.¹⁹ A closer look into Chaucer's religious characters as portrayed and satirized in *The Canterbury Tales* will undoubtedly prove this worldliness, and wantonness in the very members of the Church. However, he conservatively expresses his discontent by writing "little that can be recognized as ostensibly religious in material or impulse"²⁰

Chaucer's own confusion and religious doubt is reasserted in the final moments of the last day of pilgrimage. At this crucial point, Chaucer assigns the last of his tales to the Parson who is actually the last to see for a dying person. Chaucer's own doubt is clearly evinced in keeping the nearby village unknown forever. The allegorical interpretation behind this intention bears strong evidence to the running dispute between religious doctrines and religious doubt in Chaucer's mind. This is especially true when we come closer to Chaucer questioning how the world is run.²¹

Notes

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