

Chaucer's fascinatingly oblique style of description of his pilgrims in the General Prologue of *Canterbury Tales* is nowhere more artful than his portraits of two rather unsavoury survivors, the Physician and the Shipman. While described little in terms of appearance, they are revealed as characters in the description of the conduct of their professions, much of this by what seem to be a subtly conveyed second hand account of their own boasts. Chaucer's indirect method of description using fine details set against what remains unsaid but implicit, reveals those characters as products of extreme life events, so that while they are undoubtedly skilled in their trades they have been made cynical and nearly amoral by harsh experience. In his exposition of these pilgrims, much of Chaucer's method is in the details.

His description of the Shipman is framed between his port, probably Dartmouth, and his ship the *Magdalen*, and begins with a brief but telling account of the initial impression he would have given to his fellow travellers. By showing us the tanned man in rough clothes, armed with a dagger on a rope, riding a poor horse in worse style, the dominant feeling is one of acute discomfort, both in being on land and being in this company. His poor appearance is in great contrast with, for example, the Franklin, with his fine dagger hanging beside a silk pouch on his girdle, and the fine livery of the Haberdasher and his fellow guildsman whose descriptions precede the Cook and the Shipman. Chaucer groups the Shipman with the sorry drunken Cook with this unflattering visual image and concludes the direct description with the irony of "and certainly he was a good felawe". This first impression is necessary to understand the character but is only one aspect of the Shipman to which Chaucer adds further perspectives.

The third person account of his theft of wine and ruthless drowning of his victims at sea could well be the retelling of first person boasts, with which the Shipman would have attempted to disabuse his companions of any notion that he is of little account. Apart from an obvious aside concerning his lack of conscience, the incidents are intended to impress but not completely repel, as they are couched in excusing, softening terms, "If that he fought, and hadde the hyer honde/By water he sente hem hoom to every lond" is a particularly lyrical way of describing the ultimate way to handle trouble makers at sea, and he is further seen to be merely fooling a dozy merchant who should have been more on guard. If indeed Chaucer's pilgrim is reporting a stray boast of the Shipman, it is wryly humorous that an attempt to impress the other travellers would, in combination with his rough appearance, more likely just make them watch their backs.

The portrait of the Shipman remains incomplete and unbalanced with the failure of his boasts to reveal his true talents, but Chaucer completes the synthesis with a quite straight passage praising his navigational skill and paying homage to his experience. The Shipman may well be a dangerous, thieving pirate but then again he knows the sea and its dangers and survived many a storm and as such is "hardy" and "wys to undertake". No matter what uses he puts it to, and these are probably not wholly above board, Chaucer's pilgrim

has found out the Shipman's true worthy features, even if these present less as a boast than the more heartily expressed crimes.

To fully expose his character, the Shipman, Chaucer gives three distinct pictures which are contrasting yet are combined to reveal the fully rounded portrait of a survivor in a world where a conscience is a liability. For all his rough appearance he is a skilled man, but one who uses his talents in what seems to be piracy. The tale he tells later reflects a very worldly and cynical outlook on life and, being at the expense of a merchant, echoes his theft of wine in the General Prologue. The Shipman's tale also suggests a reluctance to part with money which may account for his refusal to dress more handsomely for the pilgrimage, when the circumstances suggest that perhaps he does have the resources to do so. By building up this picture in successive layers there is the continuous impression that this mariner is going to be a more complex and interesting fellow than first appearances suggest. The final kink in this portrait is that such a one should be on a pilgrimage to a religious shrine at all, but it appears for all his need to make fellow pilgrims respect and even fear him, the "gentil maryneer" feels some need to atone for the necessary evil in his life with a form of penance.

The Physician is also a survivor of a dangerous life who has achieved excellence in his field, but Chaucer is clearly not as impressed with the practical achievements of this doctor as he is with the mariner. Howard (16-17) has suggested that the Black Death which devastated England when Chaucer was five, became an important early fixed memory, and implies an influence on his writing. While this is somewhat speculative, the pestilence at least seems to be the key to the personality of Chaucer's complete practitioner.

In the shadow of the plague the claims for the Physician's prowess as a healer are clearly ironic, even though couched in perfectly good medieval medical theory. To claim the knowledge of each malady is at least conceivable, but the definitive causes and cures elude us all to this day. It is further unlikely that the correct drugs for each condition will be those from which he and his chemist will most profit. His grandiose appeal to fully fifteen ancient and modern authorities is the same sort of pomposity so brilliantly punctured by Chaucer in the "Nun's Priest's Tale". Chaucer goes to a lot of detail and length about his excellent grounding in astrology and Galenic medicine compared to two lines concerning his dress and none upon his appearance, and it may be because he wants to concentrate on the passages which are, if not "by way of indirect discourse the Doctor's own estimate of himself," (Curry 28) then at least what he would like others to believe.

That the major aim of this man's theoretical medicine is to gain profit is clear in the small details Chaucer inserts to amplify the learned discourse of the Doctor. His longstanding deal with the apothecary and the joke "for gold in physik is a cordial/therefore he loved gold in special" show his association of medicine and great profit especially in times of pestilence. There is a striking difference between the long winded astrological, herbal and likely expensive treatment his patients receive and his own personal health secrets of

practical common-sense, exemplified by his temperate eating habits. He is perhaps not the last quack to discover that simple and practical advice on health is not nearly as profitable as complicated practice based on high theory.

The effect of the plague on this learned physician who survives his patients appears to be that he becomes a success financially but a failure to himself as a medical man. He becomes not only so cynical that he continues to give high claims to cures with a poor track record, but also appears to become reconciled to a cruel God and cruel fate. That "his studie was but litel on the Bible" is not surprising given the Pagan and Muslim flavours of his craft, but it also may indicate his disillusionment and resignation about a God who allows a tragedy like the plague. This is further shown in his morbid tale where everyone ends up dead or exiled and he counsels to "beth war, for no man knows whom God wol smyte!" (line 278) reflecting the hopeless view with which his dealings with the plague have left him. His true faith becomes therefore in money, not in God, and so his profits from the pestilence are hoarded as a hedge against cruel fate. He has somehow managed not to catch the plague, perhaps by treating images rather than patients, but his good fortune has left him cynical, corrupt and acquisitive.

Chaucer's method of revealing the characters of these two shady customers depends on the little details. By reporting and commenting on indirect accounts of what are probably the Shipman's and the Physician's own words he builds up these two complex characters into really surprisingly similar men for two so disparate in first impression; both dealing in death for profit and shaped by bitter experience into loss of conscience, cynicism and parsimony. Chaucer rounds out the Shipman by improving the visual appearance and his ill-conceived boasts of foul play with the account of his skill as a navigator; while for the Doctor he corrects the overinflated view the Physician claims for himself with details revealing his true motives. These characters are so real that, while we may wonder at their presence on a pilgrimage at all, there is no argument that they may have great need of the penance.

LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED.

Bowden, M. A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. New York: MacMillan, 1948.

Chaucer, G. Canterbury Tales. Ed. A. C. Cawley. London: Dent, 1975.

- - - . The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales Ed. J. Cunningham. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.

- - - . The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales Ed. R. T. Davies. London: Harrap, 1953.

Curry, W. C. Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences. London: Allen and Unwin, 1960.

Howard, D. R. Chaucer. New York: Dutton, 1987.