THE HUMOUR OF CHAUCER

by

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As the purpose of this essay is to seek a definition of humour and to discuss it with relation to Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales, it might be well to begin with a study of the word itself. The most interesting fact revealed by such a study is that Chaucer himself had no idea of "humour" in our modern sense; he had no word for what this essay seeks in his poetry. To him "humour" had its original meaning as taken from the Latin; that is, moisture or liquid. From this humble beginning the word has gone through a long and curious evolution. We shall touch on only those changes that have reference to our subject. The word was applied in medieval physiology to the four chief fluids of the body (blood, phlegm, choler and melancholy), by the relative proportions of which a man's physical and mental qualities were held to be determined. It was soon transferred to the mental qualities arising from these humours and came to mean temperament or disposition. The next step was to apply the word to a particular disposition, in addition to its original meaning of moisture and its physiological application. Used in the plural, humour then came to mean whims, moods, fancies. It is at this point that our modern use of the word begins to appear. The whims, moods
and fancies of others arouse our laughter. We find the New English Dictionary explaining "humour" in the modern sense as "the quality of action, speech or writing which excites amusement; the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing and of expressing it in speech, writing or other composition." At once, though we are on familiar ground, we find ourselves in difficulties. The word, throughout its whole history, has shown a tendency to become more general in application, to attach to itself new ideas; but that very expansiveness which has so enriched it in the past gives it today a baffling vagueness. Humour is a loose term used, as the dictionary definition would suggest, to include ideas as far apart as a music-hall joke and the characterization of Alceste.

The first task of this essay, then, will be to limit the meaning of "humour." There are two possible methods of procedure: to state at the outset a definition of humour and to justify by explanation the manner in which the word is defined; or to explore with the reader certain trains of thought from which shall emerge a definition of humour. The latter method is preferable. Through discussion, the reader is enabled to obtain an understanding of humour in its origin and development and in its relation to other laughter phenomena. Such an understanding no definition could give him, no matter how carefully amplified and explained.

The starting point is suggested by the dictionary explanation of humour: "a quality . . . . which excites amusement."
The outward manifestation of man's amusement is laughter. Several questions immediately present themselves. What is laughter? What causes it? In the laughter of amusement, may we distinguish several different kinds of laughter? What is the relation of humour to laughter?

Seeking answers to these questions, we find that a great deal has been written about laughter. In fact, the number and diversity of theories as to the origin and cause of the phenomenon are bewildering. The discussion set forth here does not pretend to either original or exhaustive. It is merely a brief presentation of what seems to be the most logical approach to a very difficult subject.

Writers on laughter appear to agree on its physiological basis. It is a repetitive and rhythmical interruption of the breathing process, consisting of alternate contractions and releases of certain muscles of the larynx, the diaphragm and the face; it is audible and varies in duration according to its intensity. Experiments have shown that the organic effects of laughter are not limited to the organs of breathing; the heart-beat increases and the blood-vessels dilate in proportion to the amount of energy that is expended in the outburst. For our discussion the important aspect of the physiological basis of laughter is the release of energy. This release varies in amount, a fact which is particularly


noteworthy and will have a bearing on later phases of our argument.

When we come to the ideas advanced as to the cause of laughter - its stimulus, the unanimity which marked opinion on the physiological basis disappears, and we are confronted with varying theories. These theories may be reduced to two categories: one, the superiority theory which locates the cause of laughter in the heart, may be labelled the emotional stimulus; the other, the contrast theory which locates the cause of laughter in the head, may be labelled the mental stimulus.

The supporters of the superiority theory think that laughter is stimulated in man by any cause that will make him feel superior, especially by the discomfiture, misfortunes or folly of others. Reference to this theory may be found in Plato and Aristotle but the most interesting discussion of it appears in the work of Thomas Hobbes. Speaking of laughter, he says:

"Also men laugh at the infirmities of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated ..... I may therefore conclude that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of eminency in ourselves by comparison with

the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.

Hobbes' argument has continued to have its supporters down to the present day when its two most eloquent defenders are perhaps Sidis and Ludovici.

On the other hand, the supporters of the contrast theory believe that laughter is roused in man by surprising contrast between what he expects and what he sees, or in other words, by the perception of incongruity. Kant was perhaps the first to give definite expression to this theory in his Critique of Aesthetic Judgment when he wrote:

"Something absurd must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty convulsive laugh. Laughter is affection arising from a strained expectation reduced to nothing."

Among the modern writers, Bergson and Smith have done most to suggest how these two theories - the superiority and the contrast - may be reconciled. Basing his argument on certain ideas to be found in Bergson's book, Smith suggests that laughter has undergone a development parallel to that which takes place in the child as he grows to a man or to that


6. Smith, W., op. cit.
which has taken place in man as he has changed from a barbarian to a civilized being. Considering laughter from the genetic standpoint, he remarks:

"The laughter of a child . . . . is generally the spontaneous ebullition of his well-being; he does not will to laugh; nor has his laughter social implication. It is devoid in its origin of mechanical control and social intention. As the child develops, his play with other children imbues his laughter with social consciousness, which it soon reflects. He learns the value, as weapons, of mockery and ridicule. But he does not lose completely the earlier laughter of childish well-being. Furthermore, if he grows into a well-rounded man, his laughter acquires a reflective element and becomes what Meredith aptly calls 'the richer laugh of heart and mind in one.'"

The supporters of the superiority theory concentrate on the earlier stages of the development of laughter, when the stimulus is largely emotional; the supporters of the contrast theory, on the later stages when the stimulus is largely mental. The healthy child laughs because his well-being has reached a peak which demands release. He has a feeling of superiority, not over any particular person or thing, but merely because of that moment of physical poise. As he grows older, his laughter becomes egoistic in a hostile sense, the laughter of esteem for self and contempt for others. He laughs at the discomfiture of his fellows and his own self-esteem is increased thereby.

1. Ibid., p.55-56.
At this stage, the superiority stimulus is at its most prominent. Later still, as his mind develops and becomes quicker in association and comparison, he laughs in response to a new stimulus, to the contrast between image and perception, between what he expected to see and the visible fact. "[His] nervous energy," to quote Dr. Smith, "is concentrated upon a certain end which reason leads [him] to expect will result from the given circumstances. Suddenly there is a collision between that massed nerve force and an end incongruous with or in disproportion to that expectation. The now superfluous energy discharges itself by the spasmodic contraction of certain muscles which we call laughter." The superiority stimulus is still there but it is rapidly becoming secondary to the contrast stimulus. Moreover, the superiority stimulus need no longer produce laughter of esteem for self, and contempt for others. Just as in the first stages, the child had a feeling of superiority not over any particular person or thing but merely from a moment of physical poise, so the adult in the later stages may have a feeling of superiority which need not arise from the inferiority of others but which probably comes from a moment of mental poise brought about by the act of perception.

It is of interest to note here the connection between the physiological basis and the causes of laughter. Laughter entails a release of energy in response to a stimulus. With the child, where the stimulus, a feeling of superiority, is

1. Ibid., p. 63-64.
emotional, the release of energy will be at the maximum; with the adult, where the stimulus, a perception of incongruity, is mental, the release of energy will fall short of the maximum. While the child laughs, the adult smiles. The adult indulges in a hearty laugh involving a complete release of energy only when he laughs in response to an emotional, not a mental, stimulus, when he becomes for a space of time a barbarian, enjoying to the full his neighbour's discomfiture.

The two theories, then, can be reconciled and our first two questions, what is laughter and what causes laughter, are thereby answered. We are agreed that laughter is a physiological phenomenon and that the act of laughing releases energy. There are two possible stimuli: the feeling of superiority and the perception of incongruity. The former will be the sole stimulus only in the youngest of children and the latter, only in the most cultivated of adults. It is probable that in nearly all laughter both stimuli will be present, superiority as an emotional stimulus and contrast as a mental. At times, the superiority stimulus will be predominant; at times, the contrast.

These conclusions suggest ideas that lead to the answers to our two remaining questions. What different kinds of laughter are there in the laughter of amusement? We can classify the different kinds according to the stimuli that provoke them. What is the relation of humour to laughter? We can identify humour by the particular kind of laughter which it excites.
A close scrutiny of the stimuli enables us to divide the laughter of amusement into five classes: 1. the laughter of physical well-being; 2. the laughter at the surprising; 3. the laughter at the ridiculous; 4. comic laughter; 5. humorous laughter.

The first, as we have seen, is purely physiological. It is the only kind possible to a very young child and it is a kind in which he may continue to indulge throughout his life. The stimulus is a feeling of superiority.

The second and third divisions are very closely linked; one blends into the other imperceptibly. Both the laughter at the surprising and the laughter at the ridiculous have as their emotional base the stimulus of a feeling of superiority; and here the feeling arises not from physical well-being from something which the laugher observes. The laughter at the surprising is that which is roused by anything odd or unusual in appearance or by a mechanical repetition: the removal of a hat by a gust of wind, a stutter in someone's speech. If in addition to the element of surprise, we have an intellectual element, a contrast between image and perception, the laughter of surprise becomes the laughter at the ridiculous. Let us suppose a sudden gust of wind plucks off the hat of a pompous and portly gentleman. We laugh, not so much at the unexpected removal of his hat, as at the sudden pricking of his balloon of dignity, at the contrast between his former dignified and self-satisfied air and his now dishevelled and distraught appearance. Although the perception of contrast
has appeared, the feeling of superiority still occupies an important place as a stimulus. We perceive the ridiculous aspect of the portly gentleman and laugh with a pleasant sense of our own immunity.

The fourth aspect of laughter is that which engages the attention of the writer of comedy. It is the ridiculous viewed in its social aspects, the abnormal in character regarded in its social relations. The absurdities of men, the individually abnormal, are regarded with relation to society, the socially normal; and the contrast excites comic laughter. The pomposity of our portly gentleman, for example, when contrasted with his comparative unimportance in society becomes a comic subject. Our emotional feeling of superiority is still there, but it is rapidly taking a less important place. Our attitude has become somewhat detached and judicial. The important stimulus here is the perception of incongruity.

In the last division, we approach the type of laughter which interests us most, that of humour. The humorous is still the ridiculous - as was the comic - but it is the ridiculous viewed, not socially but individually, not judicially but sympathetically. The abnormal in character while it is regarded against a background of the socially normal is regarded as an integral part of a complex whole. The stimulus is still the perception of incongruity but our attitude has changed. The feeling of superiority now occupies a very unimportant place. If it is present at all, it is very indefinite; it appears, as we pointed out before, as a result
of the mental well-being produced by the act of perception. And the feeling which has replaced that definite feeling of superiority noted in the laughter of surprise, in the laughter at the ridiculous and, to a lesser degree, in the laughter of the comic is a feeling of sympathy. We look at the pompous man, perceive his pomposity, — and admit our own likeness to him. The attitude has been well described by Meredith:

"If you laugh all round him (the ridiculous person) tumble him, roll him about, deal him a smack, and drop a tear on him, own his likeness to you and yours to your neighbour, spare him as little as you shun, pity him as much as you expose, it is the spirit of humour that is moving you."

Here, then, is the province of humour within the empire of laughter. Like all other laughter, that roused by humour is still a physiological phenomenon and entails a release of energy. Like the laughter of the ridiculous and the comic it is roused by a perception of incongruity, a contrast between image and fact. But unlike all other laughter, it is freed from self-regarding superiority. Laughter which began as utter egoism in the sense of well-being ends in humour which entails an escape from self. We have stamped the old word "humour" with a new meaning: when we look for humour we look for the ability to see, without rancour or condemnation and with sympathy and understanding, the incongruous in

character and action and to exhibit that incongruity in such a way as to arouse laughter which, purged of its grosser elements of egoism and superiority, has a reflective warmth.

Our definition of humour suggests some interesting lines of thought, an exploration of which may clarify our idea. In the first place, the ability to see the incongruous can come only with the maturity of the individual and the race. Dr. Smith observes this when he remarks:

"And as humour comes late into the life of a ripened individual, so it came late into the life of the world; it is a creation of our modern civilization which has had time and energy left over from the processes of living, to devote to reflection and emergence from self."

There are two reasons for the late appearance of humour: the mental complexity of the process involved and the attitude of detachment inseparable from it. Humour is impossible to the child and the barbarian; both are handicapped by the simplicity of their mental processes and by the incapacity to be detached from the urgency of their own feelings and ideas. To perceive the incongruous, the mind must be quick to perceive similarity and contrast; it must be able to think on two or more planes. Moreover, to that ability to perceive relationships, there must be superadded a kind of mastery over one's own feelings, a mastery which might be called detachment. This attitude implies a philosophy of life which will enable the humorist to look

1. Smith, W., op. cit., p.145.
with understanding and without impatience upon the contradictions he observes in man. Coupled with this detachment, is another attitude which at first seems its opposite, that of sympathy. As a matter of fact, without detachment, sympathy in the real sense of the word is impossible. If we cannot escape from the point of view of self, we are too absorbed in our own feelings and reactions to be able to experience imaginatively the feelings and reactions of others. And before we can regard a man with sympathy, we must be able to approximate his point of view. The sympathy of the humorist must be such that he finds no man, no aspect of life unfit for his study. Wherever he sees men caught in the noisy whirl of life, there will he find his inspiration. Whenever he sees his fellows "wax out of proportion, overblown, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate;" when he observes them "self-deceived, or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly;" or when he finds they are "at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another," the spirit of humour will move him to exhibit those incongruities so that we may laugh at them and yet own their likeness to our own perversities. And as the humorist observes the absurdities of the men about him, he spares no one. He sees potentialities of laughter in the human conduct.

of all people, even those closest and most beloved.

The proper place for an examination of Chaucer as a humorist, for a decision as to whether or not he has the required detachment, sympathy and range will be at the end of this essay, when, after having examined the Canterbury Tales in the light of our definition, we are ready to give our conclusions. But our discussion of humour has shown that a certain complexity of mind is a necessary part of a humorist's equipment. How can we reconcile this with Chaucer's supposed naiveté?

According to Professor Kittredge, there has been no more persistent legend than that of the naiveté of Geoffrey Chaucer. Yet, Kittredge points out, "few facts of history are more solidly established than that Geoffrey Chaucer, in his habit as he lived, was not naif." He was living in an age which markedly resembled our own. Troubled by unrest among the labouring classes, by rumours of war, by religious scepticism and evangelism, his world, if we except certain mechanical contrivances the possession of which gives us a false feeling of superiority, was fully as complex as our own. It is even possible that the cultivated man had a more complex habit of

1. "You may estimate your capacity for Comic Perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love, without loving them the less, and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes." Ibid. p.72.

mind in Chaucer's time than he has to-day. "The chief
difference," says Professor Kittredge, "between the fourteenth
century and our own, in intellectual matters, lies, I think,
in a different attitude toward specialization. Our tendency
is to exhaust one subject, if we can, and ignore the rest;
theirs was to aspire to an encyclopaedic grasp of the universe." ¹
Unhampered by the sense of futility which multiplicity of
detail has helped to give the moderns, Chaucer's mind ranges
over the whole panorama of human life and knowledge, and is
quick to grasp essentials, supple in perceiving similarity and
contrast. Any naiveté to be perceived in Chaucer is assumed,
and we observe it because he wishes us to do so. He finds an
appearance of naiveté useful in detaching interest from himself
and focussing it on the Pilgrims. He does everything he can
to make the situation in the Tales dramatic, to draw our
attention to the actors at the front of the stage. After his
initial work of making us of "hir felaweiship anon," he withdraws
to the rear of the procession, there to remain in the background
until the Host speaks to him. Moreover, in assuming an appearance
of naiveté, Chaucer knows that he is giving his humour additional
effect. He has not only the complexity of mind which enables
him to see the incongruities of life but also the artistic
insight which makes him aware of the method by which to present
those incongruities. Just as the matter of humour lies in
contrasts, so its manner lies in inversion. The tragi-comedy

¹ Kittredge, G.L., op. cit. p.7.
of life is best depicted by a man who has apparently no sense of its quality. It is so shown that we cannot miss its contradictions; and our sense of those contradictions is deepened by the seeming artlessness of the artist. Should the reader be confused by this naïveté of manner, and miss the subtlety of mind which prompts its use, he himself becomes a subject for humour. He stands in "that peculiar oblique beam of light .... illuminated to the general eye as the very object of chase and doomed quarry of the thing obscure to him."

From an examination of the phenomenon laughter, we have framed a definition of humour: the ability to perceive the incongruous in life and to present it in such a way as to arouse the sympathetic laughter of the reader; and we now approach the *Canterbury Tales* to learn, with the help of our definition, what we can of the humour of Chaucer.

It may be asked: why confine ourselves to the *Canterbury Tales*? Why not include the *Hous of Fame* and *Troilus and Criseyde*? There are several reasons for our choice. In an essay of this description, it is obviously necessary to limit the subject. An extremely interesting study could be made of the development of Chaucer's humour, beginning, let us say, in the *Hous of Fame* and ending in the *Canterbury Tales*, but such a study would take us far beyond the confines of this essay. All we can attempt to do here is

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1. Meredith, G., op. cit. p.84.
to discuss Chaucer's humour as it is found at the peak of its development in the *Canterbury Tales*. The humorist must look upon the world and perceive its incongruities; in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer has given us the world of his time, for the Pilgrims are as representative a collection of men and women as it is possible to imagine. In the *House of Fame*, there is humour; but it is humour working upon material which Chaucer found too intractable for further development. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, there is humour which is extraordinarily complex and as mature as anything found in the *Canterbury Tales*; but it is humour which plays only upon three people in a limited number of situations. In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's humour is at work on all life, on men and women of all ranks and conditions who meet one another in ever shifting and changing relationships. We have before us, to borrow Professor Kittredge's phrase, "a micro-cosmography, a little image of the great world." It must be remembered, also, that the *Canterbury Tales* was planned and for the most part written when Chaucer had reached the full maturity of his powers; and in this work, we are likely to see his humour at its best and most characteristic.

Considering the *Canterbury Tales* from the point of view of Chaucer's humour, we find that its structure presents a peculiar problem in classification. The work naturally falls into two distinct parts: the Prologue and the Tales. In the Prologue, Chaucer in his own person is speaking to us and describing the Pilgrims as he sees them. As the pictures grow
before our eyes, we become absorbed in them; we perceive the absurdities, the contradictions, the essential humanity of these people whom we at once laugh at and like. The whole Prologue is bathed in the steady glow of Chaucer's humour. In the Tales, however, the pictures have come to life. Chaucer has ceased to speak in his own person; he has withdrawn to the background of the stage upon which his creations move; he is, as he insists over and over again, only the reporter. In the Prologue, he says:

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot rehearse as ny as ever he kan
Everich a word, if it be in his charge.  1.

And again, in the Prologue to the Reeve's Tale:

..........for I moot rehearse
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or worse,
Or elles falsen some of my matere.  2.

The situation has become a dramatic one. The Pilgrims laugh and dispute their way through the pilgrimage, each revealing his character by his relationship with the others and by the tale he tells. Chaucer's humour is still to be perceived in the creation of these people, it is still all-pervading, but it is less direct; it has moved back a step, so to speak. Such a retreat has its advantages. If the humour is less direct, it is more subtle; and if Chaucer is less in physical evidence, he is more spiritually pervasive. We miss the peculiar flavor of his humour if we do not get a sense of him

2. I (A) 3173-3175.
behind the Tales as the invisible creator of the Pilgrims, placing them in the "oblique light" of his humour which touches and illuminates now, the Wife, now the Miller, now the Monk and now Chaucer himself, who "short of wit" rode in pleasant obscurity at the end of the procession. It must have tickled Chaucer immensely to have created himself. No doubt he enjoyed the contrast between the Chaucer that the world knew and the Chaucer that the Pilgrims knew. He must be relishing now the last perfect touch to his little joke as scholars argue over whether the Chaucer the Pilgrims knew was the real Chaucer!

The Prologue and the Tales, then, each present a different problem. In both, Chaucer's humour may be perceived at work upon the Pilgrims, but the approach and manner are different.

With our definition of humour once more in mind, let us approach the Prologue. As we read the familiar words, we realize the difficulty of the task. We are to try to analyze a quality that is subtle and pervasive, so diffused that it defies extraction. We feel ourselves made captives of Chaucer's gently bland ambiguity. But as we read again and again, striving to reach some idea of the manner of Chaucer's humour, we perceive that there are certain definite types of incongruity in which Chaucer is interested. These are:

1. Incongruity between the individually abnormal and the socially normal. Strictly speaking, we are all individually abnormal, and there is no such thing as the socially normal, which exists, if anywhere
only in the mind. Nevertheless, there is a certain social norm to which we all approximate; and too great a variation focusses upon us the attention of the humorist. It is in such divergences that he finds his material: in a scholar who develops his mind at the expense of his body; in an athlete who develops his body at the expense of his mind.

2. Incongruity between the real and the apparent. There is no wish here to give these two words any subtle philosophical connotation. By the real, we mean simply the thing as it is, and by the apparent, the thing as it seems to be. A humorist would perceive the incongruity between the fear a man actually felt and the blustering manner with which he sought to disguise that fear.

3. Incongruity between character and profession. By character is meant the qualities attached to a human being. To use modern examples, should a detective show stupidity or a judge corruption the contrast between the character and the profession which demands those qualities the character lacks would be a subject for humour.

4. Incongruity between qualities in character. This type consists of a certain delicate disorganization within character itself. Callousness allied with sudden flashes of tenderness, tolerance linked with a fitful shrewishness, any combination where the
elements do not seem complementary would supply material for humour.

It will be noted that these four types of incongruity fit in with our discussion of the contrast theory; there is the contrast between what we expected to see and what we actually do see, the perception of incongruity. Let us examine some portraits of the Pilgrims to discover if, in presenting these incongruities to us, Chaucer arouses laughter which is sympathetic.

The first type of incongruity is, as might be expected, exemplified by more Pilgrims than is any other type. However, the Clerk, the Miller and the Franklin will serve our purpose. The Clerk, long a student of logic at Oxford, varies from the social norm in being too intellectual. This over-devotion to learning and his indifference to other aspects of life make him so individually abnormal as to be material for humour. Chaucer must have known many such men, scholars so preoccupied with their studies that they neglected material comforts and possessions. Chaucer smiles at the impractical nature of scholars as he describes the thinness and shabbiness of his Clerk:

As leene his hors as is a rake,
And he nas right fat, I undertake,
But looked holwe, and therto sobrely
Ful thredbare was his overeste courtepy. 1.

He emphasizes the unworldliness of the student and has a twinkle in his eye for the general unprofitableness of

1. I (A) 287-290.
of scholastic research:

For he hadde geten hym yet no benefice,
Ne was so worldly for to have office. 1.

But al be that he was a philosophre,
Yet hadde he but litel gold in cofre. 2.

Chaucer's smile at the Clerk is so gentle that it almost eludes us. This Clerk borrows money and spends it on books. His love of learning has made him a man apart; his general air of abstraction and seediness, his indifference to outward appearances so amusingly reflected in his own physical appearance and that of his horse make him a humorous figure. But lest we underestimate the man, lest we fail to appreciate the other side of the Clerk's unworldliness, his humility in the presence of greater knowledge and his eagerness to impart what he knows to those who are ignorant, Chaucer finishes the portrait lovingly with one line:

And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche. 3

Like Chaucer, we smile at the Clerk, but our smile is tempered with appreciation of his virtues.

The direct opposite of the Clerk in every way is the Miller. The Clerk is incongruous because, in comparison with the average man, he is too intellectual; the Miller, on the other hand, catches the attention of the humorist because he is too animal. He is incongruous in his physical coarseness

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1. I (A) 291-292.
2. I (A) 297-298.
3. I (A) 308.
and assertiveness. He is as burly as the Clerk is thin:

Ful byg he was of brawn and eek of bones. 1.

He was short-sholdred, brood, a thikke knarre. 2.

His head was used for a very different purpose than the Clerk's:

Ther was no dore that he nolde heve of harre
Or breke it at a rennyng with his heed. 3.

Where the Clerk spoke but little and that quietly, always "sownynge in moral vertu," the Miller was loud-mouthed, a "jangler and a goliardeys," always talking of "synne and harlotries." The Clerk was unworldly but the Miller was shrewd, cunning and self-seeking:

Wel coude he stelen corn and tollen thries. 4.

Chaucer does not treat the Miller so gently as he does the Clerk. His touch changes to suit the subject. Whereas the portrait of the Clerk is given in infinite delicacy of line, that of the Miller is painted in with rough, bold strokes. Yet though the Miller's crudities are described frankly, they do not repel us. At close quarters his loudness would grate on us, as it did on some of the Pilgrims, but he is so downright, so unashamed in his roguery, that we cannot help liking him as Chaucer did. In spite of ourselves, we admire his physical energy, overpowering as it is. Besides he could blow a pipe!

His vigor in so doing as he escorted the company out of town

1. I (A) 546.
2. I (A) 549.
3. I (A) 549-550.
4. I (A) 562.
must have been the source of considerable satisfaction to himself and resigned amusement to the Pilgrims. We laugh at the Miller as we perceive the incongruity of his blatant vulgarity, but in our laughter there is liking and a kind of reluctant admiration. His complacency, his absorption in his own physical grossness, his obliviousness to the reactions of others are somehow impressive.

Our third example is the Franklin. He occupies many official positions in the county and performs his duties with dignity:

At sessiouns ther was he lord and sire;
Ful ofte tyme he was knyght of the shire. 1.

........................................
A shirrev hadde he been, and a countour.
Was nowher swich a worthy vavasour. 2.

It is not his whole character and way of life that presents a subject for humour but rather one aspect of them: his devotion to food. For a man to like good food and to take an interest in the preparation of it is natural and even commendable; but when he allows his love of food to become an obsession, he becomes abnormal. As if to emphasize the incongruity of such an over-devotion, Chaucer spends twenty-two lines describing the passion of the Franklin for delicacies of the table as contrasted with seven lines on his physical appearance and his offices. It is the Franklin as a gourmand whom Chaucer finds amusing:

1. I (A) 355-356.
Wo was his cook but if his sauce were
Poynaunt and sharp and redy al his geere.  

The Franklin's failing is a weakness in which we all share.
Carried to an extreme, we find it laughable, but, as we laugh,
we own our own likeness to the Franklin as did Chaucer whose
figure, if we are to believe the Host, showed the effects of
his appreciation of good food.

The two most interesting examples of our second
type of incongruity - that between the real and the apparent -
are furnished by the Man of Law and the Merchant. The man of
Law is depicted as being "war and wys." He gives the
impression of being a man of excellent judgment, who fulfills
his many duties with efficiency, and who, so great is the
demand for his services, is always employed.

Justice he was ful ofte[n] in assise,
By patente and by pleyn commissioun.
For his science and for his heigh renoun,
Of fees and robes hadde he many oon.  

Here we have the Man of Law as he wished the world to see him.
But, Chaucer wonders, is he really as wise as he appears?

Discreet he was and of greet reverence -
He seemed swich, his wordes weren so wise.  

Is he really so burdened with an excess of work?

Nowher so bisy a man as he ther nas,
And yet he seemed bisier than he was. 

1. I (A) 351-352.
2. VII 700.
3. I (A) 314-317.
4. I (A) 312-313.
5. I (A) 321-322.
Chaucer's shrewdness perceives the real beneath the apparent and presents them both to us in the Man of Law who looked so much wiser and busier than he actually was. There is no hint of disillusionment in Chaucer's shrewdness, however, no attempt to criticize or to wish for a change in the Man of Law. There is merely an air of kindly acceptance tempering his amusement at these discrepancies which appear in men.

When we come to look at the Merchant through Chaucer's eyes, we perceive a contrast similar to the one noted in the Man of Law. The Merchant is a shrewd business man; he knows how essential to the success of his ventures are an air of confidence and an appearance of prosperity.

Upon his heed a Flaundrysh bever hat,
His bootes clasped faire and fetisly.
His resons he spak ful solémpnely,
Sownynge alwey th'encrees of his wynnyng. 1.

To all appearances, he is the successful merchant. But who knows?

Ther wise no wight that he was in dette,
So estatly was he of his governaunce
With his bargaynes and with his chevysaunce. 2.

Again we are made to realize that the outward semblance of confidence may cover inward uncertainty. We smile as we perceive the incongruity, not with any feeling of superiority but rather with a deepening sense of the riddle of human character. For we must own our likeness to the Man of Law and the Merchant; what we know ourselves to be and to have done is

1. I (A) 272-275.
2. I (A) 280-282.
very often at variance with what we would have other men think of our character and know of our actions. Our amusement at the incongruity to be observed in the Man of Law and the Merchant is mingled with sympathetic understanding.

The third type of incongruity is one which seemed to have a particular interest for Chaucer, especially in relation to officials of the church. Among the thirty odd pilgrims, we can number over a third as members of the clergy, regular and secular. Among the men of religion only the Parson is described as being, by his principles and life, fitted for the profession he follows. The Monk, the Friar, the Pardoner and the Summoner are living contradictions of the faith they preach. So mercilessly does Chaucer expose their hypocrisies and their villainies, so ruthlessly does he emphasize the incongruity between what they are and what they should be that at times his treatment loses the kindliness of humour and becomes satiric.

Of the group, the Monk receives the kindliest treatment. True, none of his divergences from the way of life prescribed for a holy brother is passed over. His love of hunting, of fine horses and dogs, of rich food and costly raiment, is described in detail. His physical appearance is the very opposite of what one would expect:

He was a lord ful fat and in good poynt,
His eyen stepe and rollynge in his heed
That stemed as a forneys of a leed.

1. I (A) 200-202.
He was nat pale as a forpyned goost.  

But his aberrations are described tolerantly. There is nothing hypocritical about the Monk. He is simply a man who physically and temperamentally is fitted to enjoy the good things of life and who has no intention of allowing the accident of his calling to keep him from doing so. Chaucer shows us the contradiction between his tastes and his calling in such a way that we laugh tolerantly, won over by the Monk's frank enjoyment of his "grehoundes," his "deyntee hors" and his "fat swan."

The Friar does not fare so well at Chaucer's hands. The description of his villainy is satirical. He is revealed as hypocritical, avaricious and lecherous.

He knew the tavernes wel in every toun,  
And everich hostiler and tappester  
Bet than a lazar and a beggestere.  

He was the bestes beggere in his hous.  
For though a wydwe hadde noght a sho,  
So plesaunt was his "In principio,"  
Yet wolde he have ferthyng er he wente.  

He hadde maad ful many a mariadge,  
Of yonge women at his owene cost.  

We are moved to laughter at the completeness of his roguery and at the contrast between this roguery and the honesty he should have displayed. And yet, though Chaucer is roused to satire

1. I (A) 205.  
2. I (A) 240-243.  
3. I (A) 252-255.  
4. I (A) 212-213.
by the corruption of the Friar, a touch here and there indicates a certain relaxing of his attitude when he regards the Friar not as an official of the church but as a man. He was a rogue but he was a wanton and a merry one; he was a hypocrite but "well koude he synge and pleyen on a rote;" he was greedy but

His eyen twinkled in his heed aryght,  
As doon the sterres in the frosty nyght.  

Chaucer castigates without mercy the baseness of the Friar, but for the man he has the laughter of humour. The Pardoner resembles the Friar in that he captures our admiration almost against our will. His physical appearance is repellent:

This Pardoner hadde beer as yellow as wex,  
But smothe it hung as dooth a strike of flex;  
Swich glarynge eyen hadde he as a hare.  

And his hypocrisy is sickening:

And thus, with fayned flatterye and jupes,  
He made the person and the peple his apes.  

His cynicism and utter baseness fascinate us but repel us. If they alone are considered, the incongruity between what the Pardoner is and what he should be is too dreadful ever to arouse the laughter of humour. So complete, however, is Chaucer's detachment that, even while he enumerates the iniquities of the Pardoner, he is able to appreciate the rascal's wit, shamelessness and eloquence. The rhyme of "Rome" with "to me" would indicate

1. I (A) 267-268.  
2. I (A) 675-676.  
3. I (A) 684.  
4. I (A) 705-706.
that Chaucer is laughing at the impudent shamelessness of a Pardoner who, although so lately come from Rome, blithely carols a love-song:

... ther rood a gentil Pardoner

That streight was comen fro the court of Rome. Ful loude he soon "Com hider, love to me!" 1.

When admitting the Pardoner's ability as a reader, Chaucer again touches on the shamelessness of the rogue:

Wel coude he rede a lessoun or a storie,
But alderbest he song an offertorie. 2.

Despicable as the Pardoner is in almost every respect, Chaucer takes such delight in the impudence of the villain that in spite of ourselves we are moved to the laughter of humour.

Our last type of incongruity is the most subtle and most delicate of the four. It is the incongruity of disorganization within the character itself, when one quality exists side by side with another quality in some degree antipathetic to the first. The pilgrim who best exemplifies this delicate disorganization is the Lady Prioress. There is nothing actually incongruous about the Lady Prioress's being a nun. She is saintly in character and gentle of speech. The incongruity lies,

1. I (A) 669, 670-671.
2. II (A) 709-710.
3. The good Parson, who though "benygne" and "ful pacient" could "synbben sharply," provides another interesting example.
4. There is no positive conflict between the character of the Lady Prioress and her profession. Recent research has done much to correct the formerly held view that the Lady Prioress was lax in matters of discipline and morals. Compare Sister Madeleva, Chaucer's Nun and other Essays, New York. 1925.
to borrow Professor Lowes’s phrase, in the "delightfully imperfect submergence of the woman in the nun." She has chosen to become a nun, to cut herself off from all worldly interests and to dedicate her life to the service of God; yet, side by side with her real devotion to her calling, there exists a gentle interest in the manners of the world from which she has removed herself, an interest which makes her bearing courtly and her table manners dainty. And although all her interests are now with the church and all her love consecrated to the worship of God, her nature urges her to seek something animate on which to lavish her affection:

Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde.  

But sore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,  
Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte;  
And al was conscience and tendre herte.  

Chaucer smiles as he depicts these exquisitely delicate contradictions in the character of the Prioress but his smile has a tender admiration.

The four types of incongruity and examples of each have now been considered. In each example, we have observed that Chaucer, while presenting the incongruity in such a way as to evoke our laughter, at the same time manages to arouse liking for the particular pilgrim being described. Before leaving the Prologue, it is interesting to note the devices which Chaucer uses in revealing these incongruities. As Chaucer is speaking directly to us in the Prologue, we are able to obtain there more definite examples of his method than in the Tales where he addresses us indirectly through the medium of his creations.

2. I (A) 146, 148-150.
The three most important devices used are overstatement, understatement and irony. In using overstatement, Chaucer draws attention to his object by describing it in obviously exaggerated terms; in using understatement, he obtains his effect by employing very restrained terms; and in using irony, he startles us by saying the direct opposite of what he intends. 1

As has been pointed out above, Chaucer's artistic insight made him realize that just as the matter of humour lay in incongruities, the manner lay in inversion. If the humorist presents the incongruity simply as it is, it may escape the reader's notice. He must attract attention to his point by describing it as more than it is, as less than it is or as the direct opposite of what it is.

There is a good example of over-statement in the description of the Franklin when Chaucer chuckles at that worthy man's love of good food, and says that in his house it fairly snowed baked meat:

> Withoute bake mete was nevere his hous
> Of fleshe and fleshe, and that so plenteous
> It snowed in his hous of mete and drynke. 2

The size of the Cook's mouth is likewise exaggerated:

> His mouth as greet was as a greet forneyes. 3

And the youthful enthusiasm of the Squire is made greater:

> So hoote he lovede that by nyghtertale
> He sleep namoore than dooth a nyghtyngale. 4

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1. P. 15.
2. I (A) 343-345.
3. II (A) 559.
4. I (A) 97-98.
The classic example of understatement is found in the description of the Shipman when his manner of killing his enemies is described thus:

If that he faught, and hadde the hyer hond,
By water he sente hem hom to every lond.  1.

But there are other examples. The religious scepticism supposedly common among the physicians of the time is indicated in the following line:

His studie was but litel on the Bible.  2.

And the comprehensive knowledge of love possessed by the Wife of Bath is lightly touched on:

Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce.  3.

Of the device of irony, however, we can find more examples than of the other two devices put together. As an instrument to illuminate the diversities of character, the device seemed to suit Chaucer's genius. The Monk, for example, is a "fair prelaat," the Friar is a "noble post" to his order, 4, 5 the Merchant is a "worthy man" and the Pardoner is "gentil." 6, 7

The hypocrisy of the Friar is revealed by the mordant irony of

1. I (A) 399–400.
2. I (A) 438.
3. I (A) 475.
4. I (A) 204.
5. I (A) 214.
6. I (A) 283.
7. I (A) 669.
the following passage in the last four lines of which we are given the Friar's own train of thought:

He knew the tavernes wel in every toun,  
And everich hostiler and tappestere  
Bet than a lazar or a beggestere;  
For unto swich a worthy man as he 
Accorded nat, as by his facultee,  
To have with sike lazars aquyntaunce.  
It is nat honest, it may nat avaunce,  
For to deelen with no swich poraille,  
But al with riche and selleres of vitaille.  

Later, the dishonesty of the Maniciple and his success in fooling his learned employers are similarly dealt with:

Now is nat that of God a ful fair grace,  
That swich a lewed mannes wit shal pace  
The wisdom of an heep of lerned men?  

Having examined the material and the manner of Chaucer's humour in the Prologue, let us now turn to a consideration of the Tales. The four types of incongruity which were observed in the Prologue are present here in a more highly developed form. Our perception of the Miller's animality, for example, is sharpened by the coarse fabliau he tells. Our recognition of the contrast between the real and the apparent is confirmed when, on hearing his tale, we learn that, beneath his exterior of confidence and prosperity, the Merchant is a bitter, disillusioned man. Our knowledge of the Friar's unfitness for his work is increased as we listen first to his altercation with the Summoner, and second to his tale at the latter's expense. And our interest in the subtle disorganization of character observable in the portrait of the Prioress is

1. I (A) 240-248.  
2. I (A) 573-575.
increased as we realize that her tale emphasizes that disorganization: she tells a conte dévot, a perfect tale for a nun, but in it her womanly feeling finds an escape in her pity for the mother and the little boy. Chaucer's humour, then, continues to work upon the four types of incongruity and to present them to us in ever growing and developing detail. Interesting as an observation of this growth might be, we must turn our attention to new incongruities which appear in the Tales as a result of the method of presentation.

This method of presentation is dramatic. Whereas in the Prologue, Chaucer is the talker, in the Tales he is the listener. The description of character in the Prologue is changed to dramatic action in the Tales. As we watch the different acts of this human comedy succeed each other before our eyes, we perceive new incongruities in addition to those we have already observed. They are incongruities which arise as a result of the relation of one human being to another and are as varied and numerous as are the permutations and combinations possible in a highly complex society. So diverse are they that to classify them would be impossible. Each new situation presents a new example. We shall select three of the most interesting illustrations and discuss them in detail.

The first one occurs early in the Tales. Harry Bailly, the host, who is the self-appointed master of ceremonies, has had the pilgrims draw lots as to who shall tell the first tale. To the satisfaction of everyone, the lot falls (whether by accident or design) upon the Knight. The chivalric romance he
relates is a fitting one for a man who "loved chivalrie, 
trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie." The whole tone 
of the long tale is given in the last few lines:

And Emelye hym loveth so tendrely,  
And he hire serveth al so gentilly,  
That nevere was ther no word hem bitwene  
Of jalousie or any oother teene. 2.

Now the tale is a very long one; it is generously 
decorated with descriptions of the temples of Mars and Venus, 
of the tournament grounds and so on. The whole action of the 
story is guided by the ideals of chivalry. Palamon and Arcite 
are knights before they are men and Emelye, whom they serve 
"gentilly," is a lady before she is a woman. There is a 
certain air of unreality about this courtly tale.

How do the Pilgrims receive this tale? With interest 
and appreciation, it would seem:

Whan that the Knyght has thus his tale ytoold, 
In al the route nas ther yong ne oold  
That ne seyde it was a noble storie  
And worthy for to drawen to memorie. 3.

They all think it was a "noble" story and "worthy" to be 
remembered. The words chosen to describe it are words fitted 
to the Knight himself and are the little tribute of the 
Pilgrims to the Knight's nobility of character. But at the 
end of this passage comes a very significant line:

And namely the gentils everichon. 4.

1. I (A) 45.  
2. I (A) 3103-3106.  
3. I (A) 3109-3112.  
4. I (A) 3113.
Everybody, especially the gentles, thought it a good story. Chaucer had his eye on those who were not gentles, the Miller, the Cook, the Shipman and their friends. These "cherls" must have become restive during the Knight's tale, not only because of its length, but also because of the people, the life, the whole system it depicted. The chivalric code was to the "cherls" an artificial, an almost incomprehensible way of life. Such refinements, such "gentilesse" were not only unknown in their life but unsuitable to it. As the Cook, the Shipman and the Reeve listened to the Knight's tale, they must have felt rise in them all the uneasy hostility, all the contempt with which most men, especially ignorant ones, regard a system the direct opposite of their own, The implied reflection upon their particular way of life makes them cling all the more fiercely to it. But the Knight, after all, is the Knight, a representative of the ruling class of their world; and the story itself is interesting, the adventures of Palamon and Arcite sufficiently entertaining. Out of respect for the Knight, the churls conceal their uneasiness under the implied criticism of their manners. Only Chaucer, whom nothing escapes, observes that everybody, especially the gentles, has enjoyed the story. But there is one churl who is unable to conceal the effect the Knight's story has had on him. This is the Miller, who is so drunk that he forgets discretion:
The Millere, that for drunken was al pale,
So that unnethe upon his hors he sat,
He molde avalen neither hood ne hat,
Ne abyde no man for his curteisie. 1.

Given boldness by liquor, he roars, with oaths, an offer to
tell a tale:

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 wol now quite the Knyghtes tale." 2.

Note here the deliberate use of the word "noble" the very
epithet used by the Pilgrims to describe the Knight's tale.
The Miller is going to repay the Knight's tale with one of
his own, with a tale in which men and women as he knows them
are depicted. The attitude of these men and women to each
other is the very opposite of "gentilesse." His tale, too,
is going to be at the expense of his traditional enemy within
his own class, the Reeve. Anger has on the Reeve an effect
similar to that which drink has on the Miller. It sweeps away
his self-restraint and causes him to retaliate with an indecent
tale at the Miller's expense. The quarrel of the Miller and
the Reeve is intensely dramatic but it should not make us lose
sight of the contrast between the Knight's tale and the Reeve's
and the Miller's tales.

Chaucer's humour is at work here; he rouses our
laughter at the contrast between the men, the worthy and
dignified Knight on one hand and the rascally and jangling

1. I (A) 3120-3123.

2. I (A) 3124-3127.
Miller and Reeve on the other, and between the tales, the tale of gentilesse and that of harlotry, and, above all, between the two modes of life which these men and these tales represent. He perceives with amusement the unaccountable contradictions of a world in which one set of men can be governed by a code diametrically opposed to that which rules another set. One code lays great emphasis upon certain conventions which compel a man to be brave in battle, honest in his dealings with other men and humble in his worship of his lady. To such an extreme are these conventions carried that the people who are governed by them seem to lose the humanity that even a slight falling away from the code would give. With the other set of men, there is no lack of humanity but rather an excess. The rule is every man for himself; one is as brave as it is safe to be, as honest as circumstances compel, and as humble with women as suits one's convenience. Through Chaucer's eyes, we see the incongruity between these two codes, and, with his help, achieve a smiling acceptance of such a contradiction. Both codes had their proper place in Chaucer's world; both fitted the people who held them.

Our second example of incongruity arising from the dramatic nature of the Tales occurs in the contrast between the Merchant and the Squire and their respective tales. It lies in the difference in outlook between a young man and a middle-aged man, between one who is young and hopeful, enthusiastic about the future, and one who is old and despairing, embittered by the past. The picture of the Squire
in the Prologue is instinct with youth and ardor:

A lovyere and a lusty bachelore,
With lokkes crulles as they were leyd in presse.
Of twenty yeer of age he was, I gesse.  

Embrouded was he, as it were a meede
Al ful of freshe floures, whyte and reede.

He was as fresch as is the month of May.

But the picture of the Merchant is a carefully restrained one. The Merchant presents a certain exterior to the world; we can only guess what is going on behind the mask of confidence which he assumes. He has learned to hide what he is thinking and feeling from the world about him. It is only after he has listened to the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, and has heard the Clerk's neat rejoinder to the Wife in his tale of Griselda, that the Merchant, unable to stifle the bitterness and pain which he has so far concealed, bursts out:

"Wepying and waylyng, care oother sorwe
I knowe ynoth, on even and a-morwe,"

Quod the Marchant.

"A! goode sire Hoost, I have ywedded hee
This moneths two, and moore nat, pardee;
And yet, I trowe, he that al his lyve
Wyflees hath been, thogh that men wolde him ryve.
Unto the herte, ne koude in no manere
Tellen so much sorwe as I now heere
Koude tellen of my wyves cursednesse!"

He goes on to tell a story which is not remarkable for its

1. I (A) 80-82.
2. I (A) 89-90.
3. I (A) 92.
4. IV (E) 1213-1215.
5. IV (E) 1233-1239.
plot - a very ancient and indecent jest - but for the merciless satire with which the Merchant depicts the dotard January. The whole tale is an expression of his own utter disillusionment about women, love, even life.

And side by side with this tale, Chaucer places the one told by the Squire. The Host turns to the young man and asks him for a tale about love.

"Squier, come neer, if it youre wille be
And sey somwhat of love; for certes ye
Konnen thereon as muche as any man." 1.

The Squire is modest but offers to do what he can to fulfill the Host's request. He thereupon embarks upon a highly imaginative romance of Cambuscan and the Brazen Horse. It is a tale of adventure and enchantment, full of magic, of joy and wonder, of all the youthful dreams which thronged a "brain, new-stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay of old romance." The fragment of the Squire's Tale is the very antithesis in atmosphere and outlook of that told by the Merchant. In this juxtaposition, Chaucer has drawn our attention to the contrast between illusion and disillusion, between idealism and cynicism, between youth and age. We cannot change these aspects of human nature even if we wished to do so. But our knowledge of them can give us a subtle pleasure as we contemplate the drama of life, a pleasure that is touched with sadness.

"The stroke of the great humorist," says Meredith, "is world-wide,

1. V (F) 1-3.
with lights of tragedy in his laughter." A sense of the truth of Meredith's words comes to us as, even while we are aware of the tragedy of the Merchant's disillusionment and the poignancy of the Squire's dreams, we find in these two, their tales, and their attitudes to life, a contrast which rouses, if not the laughter, at least the smile of humour.

Our last example of incongruity presented by the Tales is an extraordinarily complex one. It resembles the other situations already examined in that it contrasts differing points of view, it embraces four. The subject discussed is marriage; and the four people who contribute to the discussion are the Wife of Bath, the Clerk of Oxford, the Merchant and the Franklin.

The Wife of Bath opens the discussion by declaring in her Prologue and illustrating in her Tale the doctrine that a happy marriage depends on the wife's being head of the house and the husband's acknowledging her sovereignty. The Wife speaks from experience; she has had five husbands and has mastered them all. The Clerk, when opportunity offers, replies to the Wife by telling the tale of the patient Griselda, which depicts the complete subjugation of a wife in marriage. He sets up again the orthodox tenet that marriage is based on wifely obedience. The contrast between these two opposing doctrines gains in force and subtlety if we keep in mind the promulgators. The Wife is the living

1. Meredith, G., op. cit. p. 78.
illustration of her own theory and one of her victims has been a clerk, a fellow alumnus of our Clerk. Voice very loud, her jovial face shining with excitement, she relates with relish her adventures in marriage. The Clerk is pale and quiet, controlled in manner and speech. He is in the midst of his tale before the other pilgrims realize the significance of his story. At the end, he admits that it is difficult to find a Griselda:

It were ful hard to fynde now-a-dayes
In al a toun Grisildis thre or two. 1.

And then he ironically advises all wives to follow the example of the Wife of Bath, and to let their husbands "wepe, and wrynge, and waille" as much as they like.

The Merchant speaks next and the burden of his complaint is the unhappiness of his married life. His wife is anything but a Griselda:

"Ther is a long and large difference
Bitwix Grisildis grete pacience
And of my wyf the passyng crueltee." 2.

And if a man allows his wife sovereignty, he obtains, as the Wife of Bath's Prologue shows, not happiness, but merely surcease from strife. To the Merchant, there is no happiness obtainable in marriage:

"We wedded men lyven in sorwe and care." 3.

The marriage argument might end on this note, did not Franklin, when his turn comes, propose a solution. There must

1. IV (E) 1164-1165.
2. IV (E) 1223-1225.
3. IV (E) 1228.
be no talk of sovereignty in marriage:

Wommen of kynde, desiren libertee,
And nat to been constreyned as a thral
And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal. 1.

Both Wife and Clerk are answered here; as for the Merchant he is given his reply in the picture of Arveragus, who, when married, "Iyveth in blisse and in solas." If there is mutual forbearance and love between husband and wife, there will be happiness. But even as we listen to the Franklin's gently worded pronouncements on marriage, our eyes are on the Wife, the Clerk and the Merchant. For the Wife is what she is, a bouncing, jovially domineering woman; and being what she is, she will demand the sovereignty. And the Clerk is what he is a quiet scholar who has little or no experience of the practical necessities of life - especially married life; and being what he is, he will continue to pay homage to a way of life that is impractical and to wax ironical over those who reject it. And the Merchant? Men like the Merchant will continue to marry wives who in age and temperament are unsuited to their husbands, and to live to repent their folly. And the Franklin will continue to pour counsels of moderation into unheeding ears.

As Chaucer watches the marriage act of his comedy play itself out, he shares with us his realization of the incongruity between differing attitudes to a given question, and shows us those attitudes as the inevitable outcome of

1. V (F) 767-769.
individual temperament. These differing attitudes or outlooks can never be completely reconciled; if they could, we should cease to be human beings, and become machines. In their existence and their irreconcilability, in their contradictions and absurdities, the humorist delights. And in laughter at this type of incongruity, there can be no doubt of our sympathy, no doubt of the absence of a sense of superiority; we ourselves, in our individual differences and differing personalities, are providing the material in which the incongruities are perceived.

As has been pointed out before, the incongruities just discussed arise when human beings come into contact with one another, in short, in their social relationships. It is this fact that makes Chaucer's dramatic presentation of the Canterbury Tales a necessity as well as an inspiration. It was only by giving his Pilgrims free rein that Chaucer could accomplish his purpose. Once he has created his characters, he allows his creations, by action and interaction of their personalities, to make situations that will shed light not only on individual perversities but also on the incongruities of any organized society of men. Whereas, in the Prologue, Chaucer used the devices of over-statement, understatement and irony to give point to his perception of incongruity, here, in the Tales, he uses the dramatic method. Should we find the devices used in the Prologue, these devices will be used by the pilgrims, not by Chaucer himself. They may be used to give point to the individual pilgrim's humour but to Chaucer's only
indirectly, in the sense that the pilgrim is his creation. Once we have realized the necessity of dramatic presentation, the reason for Chaucer's deliberate self-effacement becomes at once clear. We must lose all sense of him as a person and think in terms of the Pilgrims he has created. Only by effacing himself can Chaucer create the illusion that the Pilgrims are real people with himself among them, and illuminate for us the incongruities between human personalities revealed in their contacts with one another.

So far, in discussing the *Canterbury Tales*, we have made only passing reference to the fabliaux, which present a special problem in our study of humour. It is impossible to ignore their presence; there are six fabliaux among the twenty-four tales. Chaucer considered the type so important that he used the fabliau more often than any other literary form, either the romance of chivalry, or the beast-epic, or the legend or the mock-sermon. There is no doubt that the effect of the fabliaux upon the Pilgrims, as it is upon us, was to arouse laughter.

Diverse folk diversely they seyde,  
But for the moore part they loughs and pleyde. 1.

But what kind of laughter was it? Was it humorous laughter? The general opinion seems to be that it was. Root, speaking of Chaucer's humour, says:

"Chaucer's humour is as protean in its variety as any other of his qualities. It ranges from broad farce and boisterous horse-play in the tales of the Miller and the Summoner to the

1. I (A) 3856-3857.
sly insinuations of the Knight's Tale. ¹

The fabliaux, according to Robinson, "were realistic in character, generally humorous, and often indecent."² And Kittredge speaks of the Summoner's Tale as containing a "vivid and deliciously humorous account of the methods of a begging friar."³ Wherein does the humour reside? Do the jests themselves arouse "humorous laughter?"

Let us turn to the first two fabliaux and review rapidly their plots and the circumstances in which the tales are told. The Knight has just finished his story and the Host invited the Monk to take his turn, when the drunken Miller, unable to control any longer the pugnacity which liquor and the chivalric tale have combined to produce in him, breaks in and insists on telling a tale. With a drunken chuckle at his own wit, he says that his story will be a "legende and a lyf" and will tell

"Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf, ⁴ How that a clerk hath set the wrightes cap."

The Reeve, who has been a carpenter, is furious at the implied insult. A quickly-angered man, he turns upon the Miller with:

"......... Stynt thy clappe! Let be thy lewed dronken harlotrye. It is a synne and eek a greet folye

². Robinson, F.N., op. cit. p.V.
⁴. I (A) 3142-3143.
Immediately a bitter quarrel is under way. The Reeve's protests merely stiffen the Miller's resolve and increase his determination to point his story at his traditional enemy, the Reeve. He proceeds to tell the story of how a carpenter is tricked by his wife and her lover Nicholas; there is a subsidiary plot in which Absolon, a second lover of Alison, is first tricked by and then tricks Nicholas and Alison, and which adds considerably to the general indecency of the tale. There are many incongruities in the story, the most important being that between confidence of the carpenter in his wife and Nicholas and the treachery of the pair. This incongruity raises a laugh at the expense of a carpenter who is fooled by his wife. It is plain that the Miller is directing this laugh at the Reeve. Had not the Reeve said it was a sin to scandal men and their wives? The Reeve, in defending wives, has only shown his own credulity and made himself the butt of the Miller's joke. The Miller concludes his tale with a malicious leer at his enemy:

They seyde, "The man is wood, my leewe brother;"  
And every wight gan laughen at this stryf.  
Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf.  

The incongruity necessary for humour is present, but is the sense of superiority absent? Is there the needed sympathy? The carpenter is the victim of the joke, and through him the

1. I (A) 3144-3148.  
2. I (A) 3848-3850.
Reeve who writhes at his humiliation before the Pilgrims:

Ne at this tale I saugh no man hym greve,
But it were only Osewold the Reve.
By cause he was of carpenteris craft
A litel ire in his herte ylaft;

The laugh which is raised at the expense of the carpenter of the story, of his wife and of her lover, and even of Absolon, is surely the laughter of ridicule. There is in it a feeling of superiority, a kind of malicious pleasure at the plight of another which arises from our own immunity. It is the laugh of which Meredith speaks, describing it as "a big round satyr's laugh, that flung up the brows like a fortress lifted by gunpowder." It is not the humorous laugh, "showing sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity." Not all the pilgrims would join with equal heartiness in the laughter at the expense of the Reeve. The Miller, the Cook, the Shipman and the Wife would laugh uproariously; but the more cultured members of the procession, the Knight, and the Monk, would refrain from hearty laughter. To them, there would be something undignified about the hearty guffaws of the "cherls;" and their laughter would be tempered by a slight diffidence at the thought of ridiculing one of their own party. Chaucer catches the atmosphere perfectly when he says:

Diverse folk diversely they seyde,
But for the moore part they loughe and pleyde. 3.

1. I (A) 3859-3862.
2. Meredith, G., op. cit. p. 82 et seq.
3. I (A) 3857-3858.
That the Reeve feels humiliated by the laughter about him is shown by his retaliati0n, the only way in which he can compensate for being made to feel inferior. There is no doubt about the note of personal revenge:

This dronke Millere hath ytoold us heer
How that bigyled was a carpenteer,
Peraventure in scorn, for I am oon
And, by youre leve, I shal hym quite anoon;
Right in his cherles termes wol I speke.
I pray to God his nekke mote to-breke;
He kan wel in myn eye seen a stalke,
But in his owene he kan seen a balke. 1.

He will make the Miller look foolish. He proceeds to do so by relating a tale which caps the Miller's. Whereas the carpenter is betrayed by one clerk, the miller is deceived by two; he is doubly fooled, both as to wife and daughter. "Thus," says the Reeve,

Thus is the proude millere wel ybete, 2.

Lo, swich it is a millere to be fals!
And therfore this proverbe is seyd ful sooth,
"Hym thar nat wene wel that yvele dooth." 3.

Thus have I quyt the Millere in my tale. 4.

Thus he has revenged himself upon the Miller! And surely the proverb refers to his former remark to the Miller when he pointed out to that stubborn sinner the folly and evil of taking ill of other people.

1. I (A) 3913-3920.
2. I (A) 4313.
3. I (A) 4318-4320.
4. I (A) 4324.
It is well to note that Chaucer comments specially on the Cook's reaction to the Reeve's tale:

The Cook of Londoun, whil the Reve spak,  
For joye him though he clawed him on the bak. l.

It took the robust taste of the Cook to enjoy two such tales and to enjoy them at the expense of two of the other Pilgrims. The Cook wants to take part in the fun and to add to the general debacle by making the Host the victim of a "litel jape that fel in our citee."

Two other fabliaux, those of the Friar and the Summoner, cause the same type of laughter as do those of the Miller and the Reeve - the laughter of ridicule. The Friar and the Summoner begin to quarrel during the Wife of Bath's Prologue and can hardly wait until the end of her tale for the opportunity to attack each other. Both men are bitterly angry; and both tell tales in which the other and his trickeries are held up as an object of merciless ridicule. There is not enough detachment here to raise the laughter of humour. The two men are too much at the mercy of their feelings to be humorists; and the laughter they wish to excite has too much esteem for self and contempt for others to be admitted as the laughter of humour.

The Shipman's tale relates how a merchant was doubly cheated by a monk, of his wife's favors and of his gold. There is some thought that this tale was written, not for the Shipman, but for the Wife. Professor Tatlock suggests that,

1. (A) 4325-4326.
by this story of the merchant duped, Chaucer meant to start a quarrel between the Merchant and the Wife; while Professor Manly, noting that the Merchant's tale shows signs of being intended for a member of a religious order, adds the idea that Chaucer may have meant the Monk to retaliate. These two suggestions make fairly clear the purpose of the tale; but, even if we ignore them, it cannot be denied that the interest in the story hinges on the tricking of the merchant by his wife and the monk, additional excitement being supplied by the tricking of the wife by the monk. As in the other fabliaux discussed, the fun lies in the humiliation of a victim, in the contrast between his unsuspecting trust and the plot against him; and the joke is given additional point by the close resemblance of the victim to one of the pilgrims. It must be concluded that the laughter of the pilgrims at this fabliau as at the others would be the laughter not of humour, but of ridicule.

The remaining fabliau, that told by the Merchant, is not inspired, as were four of those we have already considered, by motives of revenge. The Merchant, after listening to the Wife of Bath's tale of woman's sovereignty and the Clerk's of woman's humility, breaks into speech and, having inveighed against women, tells a tale which is an


elaborated version of the "Pear Tree Episode." There are many contrasts to provide material for laughter: January's age joined to May's youth, his feverish passion and her cool indifference. But the attitude of the Merchant to the people he portrays is a bitterly cynical one. He castigates man's folly and woman's frailty with all the fury of a man who has been himself deceived. It is his own folly that he satirizes in that of January. His attitude is one of complete and utter contempt for himself and January, and the laughter the tale arouses reflects that contempt. Such laughter has no tinge of the humorous. It is the laughter of satire, the "satiric rod" that makes its victim "writhe and shriek aloud," even as the Merchant himself winces of his "owene soore." If the tale he tells does not stir the laughter of humour, neither is the Merchant a laughable figure. There is tragedy in his disillusionment. The only laughter of humour which appears in connection with the Merchant is aroused by the incongruity between his cynicism and the Squire's idealism, between his tale of disillusionment and the Squire's dream of romance.

What conclusions are to be reached concerning humour in the fabliaux? Contrary to generally held opinion, there is no humour - as we have defined it - in the stories of the fabliaux. These stories are usually indecent jokes played upon a victim whose predicament excites laughter in the hearers of the tale. It is laughter at the humiliation of another, and has in it too much of the sense of superiority to be anything

1. Meredith, G., op. cit. p.72.
but the laughter of ridicule.

Is there, then, no humorous laughter connected with the fabliaux? One source has already been indicated in the incongruity between the Merchant’s fabliau and the Squire's romance. And still another was discussed earlier in this essay in connection with the contrast between the contrasting codes of the Knight and the Miller. The Knight and Miller are both Englishmen on a pilgrimage to the same shrine, yet there is a delicious incongruity in their differing attitudes to life. A third source of humorous laughter becomes evident as we scrutinize Chaucer’s attitude to the fabliaux. Before he begins the Miller’s tale, he warns us that he is going to repeat the story, word for word. It is a "cherl’s" tale but tell it he must, if he is not to falsify some of his matter. However, should the reader not wish to read this improper tale, he may, now that he has been warned, turn over the pages and choose another story:

And thersfore, whoso list it not yhere, Turne over the leef and chese another tale; For he shal fynde yowe, grete and smale, Of storial thing that toucheth gentillesse, And sck moralitee and hoolynesse. 1.

If he chooses wrongly, he is not to blame Chaucer:

Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys. 2.

Now observe the predicament of the reader. Should he ignore Chaucer’s challenge and skip the tale, he becomes, in his false delicacy, in his priggishness, in his blindness to an

1. I (A) 3176-3180.

2.
important though crude side of man's - and his own - nature, a subject for humorous laughter. And Chaucer smiles gently at him. Should he take up the challenge, read the tale and be so shocked thereby that he refrains from laughing and turns away in disgust, he is again a subject for humorous laughter. In the first place, he was warned not to read the tale; in the second, his unwillingness to admit the coarseness to be found in human nature becomes, in the face of the undeniable existence of that coarseness, incongruous. Again Chaucer smiles at him. And for such a reader, there is no humour in the fabliaux. But should he take up the challenge, read the tale, and, freeing himself from his puritanic scruples, indulge in a hearty laugh at the expense of the Miller, the Reeve or the Friar, there comes to him, even as that loud laughter of ridicule dies away, another kind of laughter, the laughter of humour. It is a laughter which can spring only from an acceptance of all the incongruous elements in human nature. These fabliaux, indecent as many of them are, reveal an aspect of man which the process of civilization has brought under control but which still exists and at times seeks an outlet. The laughter they excite is the laughter of barbarians and children, spontaneous, hearty and merciless. We can all be barbarians and children; to refuse to admit it is to make ourselves ridiculous. And we are the better for finding an outlet in laughter at the fabliaux. The paradox is that before the

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1. Cazamian, L. The Development of English Humour, New York, The MacMillan Company, 1930. p.113. "There is the release of mind from the seriousness of life, the joy of irresponsibility and primitiveness, the salutary sense of the rebellion and Saturnalia of character, the occasional fit of drunkeness which ancients regarded as part of the hygiene of a sane man."
laughter of humour emerges we must first experience the
laughter of ridicule that admits our kinship with the Reeve
and the Miller. Our acceptance of this kinship both makes us
aware of the incongruous elements in man and human life and
imparts to the laughter raised by that sense of the incongruous
a tenderness, almost a pity, which makes it humorous.

Chaucer's humour is to be considered next with
relation to the Rime of Sir Thopas and the Nun's Priest's Tale.
In both, apart from the incidental humour arising from the
tales in relation to their tellers, there is a new kind of
humour which arouses the purest kind of humorous laughter.
In the material discussed so far, Chaucer has been found to
observe the incongruities in man and life and to exhibit those
incongruities heightened and emphasized; his love of men and
his acceptance of their perversities, his delight in life and
his acceptance of its contradictions, enable him to make our
laughter humorous. In the Rime of Sir Thopas and the Nun's
Priest's Tale, however, he turns his attention to two literary
forms: the metrical romance and the beast-epic. Noting the
inherent weaknesses of the metrical romance, he was inspired
to write a parody. To do so, he deliberately creates incongruit-
ties. Interested by the beast-epic, he conceived the idea of
relating a farmyard incident as if it were a heroic tale. In
the tale, he constantly keeps before us the contrast between
"the barnyard and the bower." He takes, then, two literary forms
and by creating incongruities in his use of them, he excites
a laughter which, because it is no longer raised by the
absurdities of our fellow-men, is completely free from any feeling of superiority. In the other material, only Chaucer's essential kindliness of nature kept his fun from being satiric. But here, the sole stimulus is perception of incongruity. Here, no human being is pilloried; the victim is not a person but a literary form. The escape from the personal point of view is complete and our pleasure is purely an intellectual one, at the other extreme from the laughter of pure egoism. But if humorous laughter gains in purity by being freed from the personal aspect, it also loses in depth. It loses those elements that can make humorous laughter have tears in it; it loses the poignancy of the Prioress's portrait and the tragic lights of the Merchant's; it loses the sense of the tragic in the comic which softens humorous laughter and makes it spring from both mind and heart.

Before dealing with the humour arising from Chaucer's parody of the metrical romance, let us note the humour in the deliberate contrast between Chaucer the poet and Chaucer the pilgrim, between the Canterbury Tales, his creation as a poet, and the Rime of Sir Thopas, his tale as a pilgrim. Chaucer the pilgrim is seen through the eyes of the Host

Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,
For evere upon the ground I see thee stare.  

He semeth elyssh by his contenaunce,
For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce.

1. VII 696-697.
2. VII 703-704.
He is shy, diffident and abstracted, riding with downcast eyes and taking little part in the conversation of the Pilgrims. When the Host asks him for a tale of mirth, Chaucer the pilgrim prepares to tell a tale but first apologizes for his lack of invention:

"Hooste," quod I, "ne beth nat yvele apayd, For oother tale certes kan I noon, But of a rym I lerned longe agoon." 1.

He knows only one tale and that a rime he learned a long time ago. Encouraged by the Host, he overcomes his diffidence and plunges into the Rime of Sir Thopas. The Host and the Pilgrims listen in growing dismay to the absurd tale while Chaucer jogs happily through the first "fit" and begins with relish the second. At last the Host declares he can stand no more of it and commands Chaucer in most peremptory fashion to stop such doggerel:

"Namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee," Quod oure Hooste, "for thou makest me So wery of thy verray lewednesse That, also wisly God my soule blesse, Myne eres aken of thy drasty speche. Now swich a rym the devel I biteche!" 2.

Chaucer, the diffident pilgrim, is so short of wit that he does not perceive what is wrong with his tale and asks with an injured air why he is not to be allowed to finish.

"Why so?" Quod I, "why wiltow lette me Moore of my tale than another man, Syn that it is the beste rym I kan?" 3.

1. VII 707-709.
2. VII 919-924.
3. VII 926-928.
The Host gives him an unvarnished answer:

"By God," quod he, "for pleynly, at a word,
Thy drasty ryming is nat worth a toord!
Thou doost noght elles but despendest tyme." 1.

Now Chaucer the poet was anything but shy. When he is speaking in his own person to us in the Prologue, he tells us that before nightfall he has become acquainted with all nine and twenty Pilgrims. Moreover, his public life was such as precluded shyness. And as for his lack of invention, his creative powers are evident in the Pilgrims and their Tales, to say nothing of his other works. Such was Chaucer's temperament, however, that he enjoyed and depicts for our pleasure the contrast between what he actually was and what the Pilgrims thought him to be. And he carries the joke to its farthest limit. Not content with reciting in doggerel the only tale he knows, he pretends to be ignorant of the cause of the Host's interruption, and to be so stupid that he does not perceive the absurdity of the Rime of Sir Thopas. His affected obtuseness sharpens our sense of the incongruity between the Chaucer the poet and Chaucer the pilgrim.

In the Rime of Sir Thopas, Chaucer half-parodies, half-burlesques the metrical romances which were so popular a form in his day. The tale has been called a literary satire. The word in connection with this work is a misnomer. It suggests that Chaucer was ridiculing the metrical romances and that he hoped by his ridicule to effect a change. Nothing was farther from his attitude or purpose. He liked these romances; he enjoyed

1. VII 926-928.
their wild tales of adventure, their naïveté and their leisurely progress just as much as his contemporaries did, but he recognized their faults. The idea occurred to him of making fun of the romances by writing an imitation in which their weaknesses would be heightened and exaggerated. His only purpose was to amuse himself and his readers by laughing at the faults in style, construction and characterization which were rife in the romances.

The modern reader is seriously handicapped in his appreciation of the humour of the *Rime of Sir Thopas*. He is not, as were the Pilgrims, familiar with the metrical romance and acquainted with all its peculiarities of style and construction. Moreover, he is no longer living in a world where the feudal system functions and where knights as part of the social order are taken for granted. He fails to get the subtlety of Chaucer's humour in this poem because he finds difficulty in thinking on the required number of planes. When Chaucer parodied the faults of style and construction of the metrical romance, he had a clear idea of the metrical romance type; and when he burlesqued the hero, he had a clear idea not only of the metrical romance hero but also of the knight of his time, whose courage and dignity are reflected in the portrait of the Knight. We can perceive the incongruities created in the *Rime of Sir Thopas* only if we have a familiarity with metrical romances and mediaeval life sufficient to allow us to think on two or three planes at once.
The most complex series of incongruities is furnished by the characterization in the *Rime of Sir Thopas* and is easily observable by a comparison of the knight of mediaeval chivalry, the knight of metrical romance and Sir Thopas. Fortunately, Chaucer has given us in the Knight a description of a "verray, parfit gentil knyght,"

That fro the tyme he first bigan
To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.  1.

He was brave, had many battles to his credit, and had fought both for his lord and his religion. On the other hand, the knight of the typical metrical romance is recklessly brave and exceptionally fierce and he kills an impossible number of giants. No danger is too great for him and his fierceness awes every opponent. So fierce and powerful is Guy of Warwick's father that

In all England ne was ther none
That durste in wrath ayeenst hym goon.  2.

And so brave is Sir Perceval that he rushes to fight without any armour on:

Up ryses syr Arthoure,
Went to a chamboure
To fuche doune armoure
The childe in to dyghte;
Bot are it was doune caste,
Ere was Percyvelle paste,
And on his way folowed faste
That he solde with fyghte.  3.

1. I (A) 74-77.
But Sir Thopas? He is so awe-inspiring that Chaucer says of him:

For in that contree was ther noon,
That to him durste ride or goon
Neither wyf ne childe. 1.

He is so fierce that women and children dare not approach him! And, unlike Sir Perceval, he prefers to fight his giant another day:

The childe seyde "Also moote I thee,
Tomorwe wol I meete with thee,
When I have myn armoure;" 2.

Where the mediaeval knight would have been brave and the Knight of metrical romance reckless, Sir Thopas is discreet and cautious!

Chaucer's Knight bore himself modestly and was careful of his speech:

And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.
He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
In al his lyf unto no maner wight. 3.

The knight of metrical romance swaggered and swore excessively:

"In dedes of armes, be God on lyve!
Ye are countyd worthe odur fyve,
God a mercy, syr!" seyde hee. 4.

Chaucer parodies these oaths by making Sir Thopas swear in a very unimaginative and bourgeois fashion:

And there he swoor on ale and breed
How that the geaunt shal be deed,
Bityde what bityde. 5.

1. VII 804-806.
2. VII 817-819.
3. I (A) 69-71.
5. VII 872-874.
Moreover, in appearance, Chaucer’s Knight shows the effect of his hard work:

His hors were goode but he was nat gay,
Of fustian he wered a gypon
Al bismotered with his habergeon,
For he was late ycome from his viage. 1.

But the knight of the metrical romance is always magnificently dressed and armed:

A gypell as white as milk,
   In that semely sale;
And syght an haulberk bryght,
   That rychely was adyght,
      With nayles thykke and smale. 2.

Sir Thopas’s raiment also has an unsmirched appearance, difficult to preserve in the actual stress of fighting:

And over that his cote-armour
   As whit as is a lilye flour,
      In which he wol debate. 3.

It would be possible to go on quoting parallels all of which would show, like those already given, how Chaucer finds cause for laughter at the knights of the metrical romances. Compared with real knights, they are foolhardy in battle, bombastic in speech and over-magnificent in attire. Chaucer burlesques them by describing Sir Thopas, the incongruities of whose characterization can only be perceived against a background of the metrical romances and of medieval life.

1. I (A) 74-77.


3. VII 866-868. The whole description of the dress and arming of Sir Thopas presents a difficult problem. Professor Manly argues that it is full of absurdities intended as a burlesque, but his case is by no means clear. Compare Robinson, F.N. Chaucer’s Complete Works. p.845.
Not only in the delineation of the heroes of metrical romances are amusing faults to be found but also in the structure and style of these poems. The stories told are full of digressions and unmotivated events. Time and again the action is left suspended while the poet wanders on, giving us long, itemized lists of trees and birds, or of a knight's accoutrements; or is interrupted by a totally unexpected happening or coincidence. An example of each will be sufficient for our purpose. Such digressions as the following from the Squyr of Lowe Degre were common:

On every braunche sat byrdes thre.
Syngynge with great melody,
The ruddock, the woodwale,
The pee, and the popinjaye,
The thrustele sange both nyght and daye,
The marlyn and the wrenne also,
The swalowe whippyng to and fro. 1.

Chaucer, tongue in cheek, pauses on the verge of telling us about the dreadful misfortune which befell Sir Thopas to recite a list of birds:

The briddes synge, it is no nay,
The sparhawk and the papejay,
That joy it was to heere;
The thruste lock made eek his lay,
The wodedowve upon the spray
She sang ful loude and cleere. 2.

And two of these birds - the sparrow hawk and the popinjay - do not sing!

Sir Thopas's sudden falling in love is a good instance of an unexpected happening. Nothing has been said to prepare us for such an eventuality. On the contrary, we have been told

2. VII 766-771.
that maids might cease to think longingly of him, for, though
he was "fair and gent in bataille and in tourneyment" yet "he
was chast and no lechour." Imagine our surprise, then, when
Sir Thopas begins to wail;

"O seinte Marie, benedicite!
What eyleth this love at me
To bynde me so sore?" 1.

And he has fallen in love with a woman he has never seen.

Ipomydon, it is true, fell in love with a woman whom he had
not seen but whose beauty he had heard praised. Chaucer
carries the comedy a step farther; Sir Thopas has only dreamt
of his lady; he does not even know that she exists.

In the style of the metrical romances the most
glaring fault was the indiscriminate use of stock metaphors.
These stock metaphors had accumulated owing partly to their
use by mediocre poets and partly to the exigencies of an
elaborate stanza-form. For example, a favorite metaphor to
use in describing the complexion was "lylye flour." The
_Geste of Kyng Horn_ has the lines:

So whit as eny lylye flour,
So rose-red wes his colour. 3.

Chaucer makes this type of metaphor ridiculous by describing
Sir Thopas thus:

Whit was his face as pandemayn;
His lipped rede as rose; 4.

1. VII 784-786.
2. The Life of Ipomydon, Weber, H., Metrical Romances;
Printed by George Ramsay and Co. for Archibald Constable and Co.,
4. VII 725-726.
He has substituted for "lylye flour," "pandemayn" which means white bread. The uncompromising bourgeoisie of white bread is in amusing contrast to the mincing aristocracy of lily flour.

From the foregoing discussion, it will be seen that Chaucer's parody of the metrical romances gains in point when we compare it with passages from those romances. To appreciate his humour, as he heightens and exaggerates the faults of the romances, we must have a knowledge not only of the metrical romances but also of Chaucer's attitude to them. It is like seeing on the stage a woman whose persistent garrulity is an exaggerated echo of a friend's talkativeness. One laughs at the woman without loving the friend the less, or wishing to reform her. We read Sir Thopas, and, perceiving from its absurdity, the characteristic faults of the metrical romance, we laugh at the parody without liking the metrical romance the less.

And what of the Pilgrims? Did they find Chaucer's Rime of Sir Thopas humorous? It is very unlikely. Only the Clerk would have the subtlety to perceive what Chaucer was doing. He must have looked very speculatively, indeed, at the seemingly shy and stupid pilgrim, who told a romance so atrocious that its faults must have been premeditated. The other Pilgrims would be merely bored. For them, as for the Host, it was "drasty ryming." The humour in the tale is for the reading audience who find laughter in comparing the Rime of Sir Thopas with the metrical romance and Chaucer the poet with Chaucer the Pilgrim. The very unconsciousness of the
Pilgrims as to the trick played on them heightens the humour of the situation.

The Nun's Priest's Tale is an even more interesting illustration of Chaucer's humour at work than is the Rime of Sir Thopas. In the metrical romances, the incongruity between the heroes and their prototypes already existed. Chaucer merely drew attention to this incongruity by parodying the metrical romance. In the Nun's Priest's Tale, however, he takes a well-known story which had in it as a tale and literary form nothing of the incongruous. It is the familiar tale of the cock who was seized by a fox and made his escape by inducing his captor to open his mouth in speech. The story is to be found both in fables and in an incident of the beast-epic known as the romance of Renard. This simple story supplied the material from which Chaucer developed the Nun's Priest's Tale, a masterpiece of humour. He set to work to create in the tale incongruities which arouse laughter but which are so delicately balanced one against the other that they never offend the reader's sense of the fitting.

In the first place, the cock's adventure is presented against a background of universal history and divine providence. All the omens that come to the great before disaster come to the cock. He is warned by a dream of approaching misfortune and of an implacable enemy:

"Now God," quod he, "my swevene recche aright,
And kepe my body out of foul prisoun!
Me mette how that I romed up and doun
Withinne our yerd, wheer as I saugh a beest
Was lyk an hound, and wolde han maad areest
   Upon my body, and wolde han had me deed."  1.

When his wife ascribes his dream to internal disorders, he quotes the examples of Cipioun, Daniel, Joseph, Pharao, Cresus, Andromache, great people of the past to whom dreams were sent as warnings of disaster. But he casts aside his fears, and, like many illustrious heroes before him, goes to his doom full of the pride that is to bring about his fall:

"I am so ful of joye and of solas
   That I diffye bothe sweven and drem?"  2.

Real he was, he was namoore aferd.  3.

One day Chauntecleer, "in al his pryde," is strutting with his seven wives in his wide domain when

..... sodeynly hym fil a sorweful cas,
For evere the latter ende of joy is wo.
God woot that wordly joye is soone ago.  4.

The catastrophe thus prepared for is related in the grand style. Destiny is addressed:

0 destinee, that mayst not been eschewed!
   Allas, that Chauntecleer fleigh fro the bemes!
   Allas, his wyf ne roghte nat of dremes!  5.

Venus is reproached for deserting her faithful worshipper:

0 Venus, that art goddesse of plesaunce,
   Syn that thy servant was this Chauntecleer,
And in thy servyce dide al his poweer,

1. Vll 2896-2901.
2. Vll 3170-3171.
3. Vll 3177.
4. Vll 3204-3206.
5. Vll 3338-3340.
Moore for delit than world to multiplye,  
Why woldestow suffre hym on thy day to dye?  1.

The lamentation of the women is described at length:

Certes, swich cry ne lamentacion  
Was nevere of ladyes maad whan Ylion  
Was wonne, and Pirrus with his streite swerd,  
Whan he hadde hent kyng Priam by the berd,  
And slayen hym, as seith us Eneydos,  
As maden alle the hennes in the clos,  
Whan they had seyn of Chauntecleer the sights.  2.

The contrast between the actual incident and its method of presentation, a farmyard catastrophe painted on a world-wide canvas, is exquisitely humorous. And just as the fall of a great hero — of a Hector or an Achilles — causes a tremendous reverberation in his kingdom and great preparations to avenge his capture, so it is with Chauntecleer:

Ran Colleoure dogge, and Talbot, and Gerland,  
And Malkyn, with a dystaf in hir hand;  
Ran cow and calf, and eek the verray hogges,  
So fered for the berkynge of the dogges  
And shoutyng of the man and wommen eke,  
They ronne so hem thoughte hir herte breeke.  
They yolleden as feendes doon in helle  
The dokes cryden as men wolde hem quelle;  
The gees for feere flowen over the trees;  3.  

It semed as that hevene sholde falle.  4.

The gathering clamour mounts until the very heavens are shaken with the magnitude of the catastrophe — the capture of a cock.

This device of creating a contrast is extended with great subtlety to the characters of Chauntecleer and Pertelote. The farmyard incident assumes the proportions of a world tragedy; the cock and the hen have the thoughts and feelings of a knight.

1. WII 3342-3346.  
2. WII 3355-3361.  
3. WII 3383-3390.  
4. WII 3401.
and his lady. The blending of cock and knight, hen and lady, is exquisitely done. Never are we quite allowed to lose our sense of the bird in the man, of the man in the bird. Just as we are about to do so, a word awakens us to the contrast between the two. The method of treatment is a perfect example of humour: we are made to think constantly on two planes — the animal and the human. To keep a delicate balance between the two, to create the atmosphere of chivalry in the barnyard, is the work of a master, one whose mind delighted in just such complexities.

In our first sight of Chauntecleer, we can perceive the knight in the bird:

His comb was redder than the fyn coral;  
And batailled as it were a castel wall;  
His byle was blak, and as the jeet it shoon;  
Lyk assure were his legges and his toon;  
His nayles whitter than the lylye flour,  
And lyk the burned gold was his colour.  

His voys murier than the murie orgon  
On messe-dayes that in the cherche gon.

Chauntecleer's voice and colorful appearance reminiscent of the descriptions of knights and squires. We need go no further afield than Chaucer's own Squire:

Embrouded was he, as it were a meede  
Al ful of fresshe floure, whyte and reede.  
Syngynge he was, or flottyng he al the day.

And in Pertelote, we almost forget the bird in the picture of

1. Compare with discussion of the epithet "lylye flour" on page 65 above.  
2. Vll 2859-2864.  
3. Vll 2851-2852.  
4. I (A) 89-91.
The Mediaeval Lady:

Of whiche the faireste hewed on hir throte
Was cleped faire damoysele Pertelote.
Curtys she was, discreet, and debonaire,
And compaignable; and bar hyrslef so faire,
Syn thilke day that she was seven nyght oold,
That trewely she hath the herte in hoold
Of Chauntecleer loken in every lith.

It might be Emelye or Dorigen described here. Between Chauntecleer and Pertelote, there was such perfect accord that it was a joy to hear them sing together for, lest we should be losing our image of the birds in the man and woman, in

"...... thilke tyme, as I have understonde,
Beestes and briddes koude spoke and synge." 2.

When Chauntecleer confides his dream to Pertelote, she bursts into speech, and, reproaching him for his credulity, analyzes his symptoms and prescribes the remedy. Women cannot love a coward she maintains; they all desire

"To han housbondes hardy, wise, and free,
And secrée, and no nyhard, ne no fool,
Ne hym that is agast of every tool,
Ne noon avauntour, by that God above!" 3.

The qualities she describes are those that were expected of lovers in the works on courtly love. Pertelote the damsel is linked to Pertelote the hen by the talkative shrewdness of Pertelote the woman. She examines her husband's symptoms, states their cause and prescribes certain herbs which she will

1. VII 2869-2875.
2. VII 2880-2882.
3. VII 2914-2917.
show him. We have just heard the damsel; here is the woman—it might be the Wife of Bath:

"I conseille yow the beste, I wol nat lye,
That bothe of colere and malencolye
Ye purge yow; and for ye shal nat tarie,
Though in this thun is noon apothecarie;
I shal myself to herbes techen yow
That shul been for youre hele and for youre prow."

And here is the hen:

"A day or two ye shul have digestyves
Of wormes, er ye take youre laxatyves.

Pekke hem up right as they growe and ete hem yn."

In this tale, then, Chaucer has metamorphosed a simple fable into one of the earliest and finest of mock-heroic poems. There is to be perceived the contrast between the unimportant farmyard incident and the heroic vein in which it is related, between the changing images of the hero and heroine: now as cock and hen and again as knight and lady. Binding these two images together, there is a kind of shrewd humanity about Chauntecleer in his deception of his wife and about Pertelote in her lecturing of her husband. The addition of this shrewd humanity to the fundamental images is very characteristic of Chaucer. He is perfectly capable of having a third plane of thought even while he is most absorbed in fascinating us by his adept presentation of the two planes at the forefront of his mind. A man—like a cock—may be without

1. Vll 2945-2950.
2. Vll 2961-2962.
3. Vll 2967.
4. Vll 3163-3166.
5. Vll 2908-2969.
a peer, a hero of great physical courage and prowess but he will not be above deceiving his wife - quite harmlessly - or closing an unpleasant argument by a reference to her surpassing beauty:

"Now let us speke of myrthe, and al this. Madame Pertelote, so have I blis. Of o thyng God hath sent me large grace; For whan I se the beautee of youre face, Ye been so scarlet reed aboute youre yen It maketh al my drede for to dyen." 1.

And a woman - like a hen - may be courteous, discreet, a lady of beauty and taste but she will not be above nagging her husband a little:

"Have ye no mannes herte and han a berd?" 2.

We watch the drama of the barnyard unfold before our eyes, and, as we hear the clamour raised by the Greek chorus of hens, there comes to us a feeling of that relativity which is the very essence of humour. Our own self-importance is but a reflection of Chauntecleer's, our catastrophes are as trivial and quickly forgotten as his fall, and our world is only a little larger than his barnyard.

Now that the Canterbury Tales have been considered in the light of our definition of humour, what conclusions can be drawn as to the humour of Chaucer? It has become increasingly evident that all the qualities which we have attributed to the humorist are merely growths from something much more basic: the poet's attitude to life. When we ask ourselves if Chaucer has detachment, sympathy and range, we are only trying to find

1. VII 3156-3161.
2. VII 2920.
out if he has a philosophy of life. We are attempting to find the roots of the plant by examining the shoots.

That Chaucer has the required qualities our study has shown. The dramatic method used in the Tales is the essence of detachment. So complete a mastery has Chaucer over his own feelings that he effaces himself completely; the man who takes his place among the Pilgrims has nothing in common with the poet save his outward appearance. The real Chaucer is above the Pilgrims in a kind of "mental watch-tower" from which he observes their absurdities. Yet the fact that he has been and will be again a part of the whirling life below him adds to his detachment a feeling of sympathy. He has known the youthful illusions of the Squire and the disillusioning experiences of the Merchant. He has felt the conflict between reality and appearance which was observed in the Man of Law.

And we feel, as we compare Chaucer the poet and Chaucer the public official, that here is something of the same disorganization of character as was observed in the portrait of the Prioress. Moreover, his detachment gives his sympathy range. He depicts not only actual experiences but imaginative ones. By escaping from the personal point of view, he has been able to experience imaginatively the loves and hates of all men, and to set down the incongruities to be observed therein. He has eyes both for the delicacy of the Prioress — "She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle" — and for the grossness of the Canon — "But it was joye for to seen hym swete."
From what attitude to life do these qualities - sympathy, detachment, range - spring? It is an attitude that we come to feel as we read and reread the Tales. Chaucer does not state it definitely; he may not have consciously worked it out, but it permeates the Tales. It is one of acceptance. There is nothing insipid about this acceptance; it is lively and at times ironical. Chaucer accepts the stubborn contradictions in man, the persistent unaccountability of fate, not resignedly but with a lively interest in what new perversity will appear. The natural outcome of such a philosophy is that Chaucer should be understanding and tolerant.

Chaucer's attitude of acceptance gains in value when we consider with what complexity of mind it was coupled. His was not a philosophy based on limited experience or knowledge. It was a philosophy which was all-embracing. The world held much to surprise Chaucer but nothing to destroy his lively relish in its riddles or to shake his serene acceptance of their insolubility. His philosophy enabled him to observe steadily and clearly the layer upon layer of incongruities which his subtle mind perceived in life. As he looked at the Miller and the Knight, for example, he saw incongruity not only in the juxtaposition of the two men and their tales but also in the codes which they obeyed.

Chaucer, then, in his philosophic acceptance of life and his quick understanding of its complexities, shows himself to be a humorist of the first order. That he had no name for the quality which so permeated his work was an advantage.
Humour, when its method is clear, runs the danger of becoming mechanical. The very fact that Chaucer's mode of presenting life was not stamped as humorous gave his work the naturalness which is its chief charm.
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