The Central Message of *Chaucer's Retraction*

The length and the abstractness of *Chaucer's Retraction* can be deceiving and misleading, it can potentially lead readers to believe that the Chaucer's retraction is trivial and insignificant. The strong religious references may even deter the reader from exploring further. And because the text is disconnected and isolated from other tales and other parts of The Canterbury Tale, people can even treat it like the unfinished *Cook's Tale*. One of the most vital messages of *The Canterbury Tales* is hidden in *Chaucer's Retraction*: Since Geoffrey Chaucer possess the awareness and honesty like the Pardoner, he has the guts to confess his sins. And his intention is not to just confess *his* sin or ask for *his own* forgiveness, but he hints that the readers should also ask for the mercy of God to forgive their sins.

The identity of speaker, Chaucer, is central to the meaning of the retraction. In this passage of *Chaucer's Retraction*, "And if ther be any thyng that displea-se hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unknnynge and nat to my wyl" (1082-1083, *Chaucer's Retraction*). Chaucer asserts that anything that offends the reader should be imputed to his lack of ability and not to his will. Here, it is the second time that Chaucer has made the similar type of claim in *The Canterbury Tales*. In Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Topas*, the Host interrupts Chaucer's tedious tale by saying "Namoore of this, for Goddes dignittee,/ for thou makest me/So weryof thy verray lewednesse (906, *Sir Thopas*). Chaucer responds with "Why so? Why wiltow lette me. / Moore of my tale than another man/ Syn that it is the beste tale I kan" (926-928, *Sir Thopas*). Chaucer claims that he has told the story the best of his ability, "the beste tale I kan."

Ironically, no one in the history of the literature would doubt Chaucer's ability to compose poetry with complex ideas. The readers are fully aware that Chaucer has the ability to tell a magnificent and profound tale. Is Chaucer lying? What is important to point out is that we

must distinguish the *author* Chaucer and the *character* Chaucer in the poem. They are completely different people: the author, Geoffrey Chaucer is unquestionably one of the greatest English author and poet of all time. He is the first author to finish his masterpiece in the vernacular English language. The reason why we are still reading Chaucer's text today is because the greatness and the inherited values and ideas embedded in this rich text.

On the other hand, the character Chaucer in the book is a completely different character. He is a story teller, and he tells the worst tales among all pilgrims. In *The Tale of Sir Topas*, each stanza is intentionally filled up with clichés and absurdities. This is a symbolic move on Geoffrey Chaucer's part. The character Chaucer is a representation of writers, especially the writers who do not have the skill to compose fresh rhymes or innovative thoughts, who continue to write clichés and conventional expressions. Those writers are precisely who Geoffrey Chaucer criticizes and makes fun of because there is no profound literal value or an attempt to solve social problems. In contrast, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is precisely the opposite: the tales resembles an entire society, high and low, male and female, old and young, Christian or pagan, educated or ignorant, town and country. They are certainly amusing tales to read on the surface, but the political implication and social satire under the surface are why *The Canterbury Tales* stands out from all other books.

The author Geoffrey Chaucer mocks the character Chaucer and his conventional writing. It is clear to see what kind of literature Geoffrey Chaucer admires or what kind of author that he despises. In lines 1084-1085 of *Chaucer's Retraction*, "Wherefore I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes;/ and namely of my translacions and enditynges of worly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retractiouns," It is evident that speaker is not the same untalented storyteller Chaucer as in *The*

Tale of Sir Topas or *The Tale of Melibee*. Apparently, Geoffrey Chaucer, the author is the speaker of the retraction because he confesses that he is the author who translates and edits all previous tales, the "translacions and enditynges of worly vanitees."

The main purpose of his retraction is intended to "preye for me that Ctrist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes." But what is Geoffrey Chaucer guilty of? He is merely a writer exposing all "worly vanitees." Why does Chaucer beg for God's forgiveness? In *Chaucer's Retraction*, he says, "as is the book of Troilus; the book of the Duchesse; the book of Seint Valentynes day of the Parlement of Briddes; the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne" (1086-1090). According to the notes in Larry Benson's edition, "sownen into synne" means "tend toward, are conductive to, sin" (310). The implication of his previous quotation is that all his writings and previous books are "tend toward, are conductive to, sin." But if Chaucer wants to confess to God and ask for his own forgiveness, he can easily burn all his books that he thought are most sinful. If he plays it safe with God, it is not necessary to publically explain his sin to all his readers at the end of the book.

The end of the book is usually reserved for conclusions or the imperative points that the readers can extract from the whole book. But why does Geoffrey Chaucer choose to include his confession at the end and let his audience read it? What does he want the readers to gain from the end of his book?

From his action of letting the revocation stand in the same book with the poems "that sownen into synne," we can detect an important message that Chaucer attempts to send to us readers. The key idea is that Geoffrey Chaucer's intention is not to ask God to forgive *himself* and to repent *his* sins. Instead he asks God to forgive the sinful characters that he has created and also to forgive the sinful readers.

Geoffrey Chaucer is as not sinful as the Pardoner or those corrupted pilgrims and dishonored characters in his poem. The pilgrims have all committed sin when they took part in this pilgrimage, not for spiritual or religious reasons, but for "maken ernest of game" (3186, *The Miller's Prologue*). They attend the pilgrimage for social interactions and selfish pursuits. They embody sinful individuality that battles with religion.

The Pardoner is perhaps the most corrupted and the most sinful character in the poem. In his prologue, he frankly confesses that he is a fraud motivated by greed, gluttony and avarice and that he is guilty of all seven sins. Even though he is essentially a hypocrite in his profession, he is at least being honest as he makes his confession. On the other hand, although other pilgrims are also guilty of sins as well like the Pardoner, they don't admit their sins or make confessions like the Pardoner. The role of the Pardoner in the story is to get men to call on God for forgiveness of their sins. Interestingly, Chaucer's role in the retraction is extremely similar to Pardoner's, he calls on God for forgiveness of his sins; he also calls on God for forgiveness of the pilgrims' sins. Chaucer is similar to the Pardoner in a way that they both share the unique awareness of their own sin whereas the pilgrims and the readers do not.

Theoretically, the author, Geoffrey Chaucer has a full control of all the characters in his book. He could have made every character virtuous and perfect, like the "verrayu, parfit, gentil knight." If every pilgrim behaves like the Knight and if there is no sin committed, there would be no need to ask for forgiveness in *Chaucer's Retraction*. But Geoffrey Chaucer does not have the power to do that, "I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unknnoynge and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyd better if I hadde had konnynge" (1082-1083, *Chaucer's Retraction*). This passage implies that if Chaucer has had the power, the "konnynge," he would easily have written better, and he would have easily create all virtuous characters and the world

would be perfect and beautiful. But what kind of power or "konnynge" does he refer to? And since no one would have doubted on Chaucer's literal talent or poetic ability—he obviously has the literal power. So what power or "konnynge" does he lack in this context?

Chaucer has his choice to make his characters virtuous or sinful. But to realistically reflect the human reality and the social condition of life, sin is an inevitable and inseparable part of humanity. Chaucer has no power and therefore no "konnynge" to control his characters from committing sins if he accurately portrays his characters from the fourteenth century society. Even in *The Knight's Tale*, arguably the most moral story about love, honor, chivalry and adventure, Arcite and Palamon are also embodiments of sins such as anger, jealousy, violence and injustice upon closely examination. From the original sin of Adam and Eve, to "Radix malorum est cupidatis," the sins are basic elements of human lives and all of us have committed a sin in our life time.

In Geoffrey Chaucer's opinion, other authors of the Medieval literature have often only created moralizing and unrealistic characters. In contrast, he makes most of the characters realistically sinful. Most of the characters are nothing like the Knight. Why doesn't he just create moralizing characters and tell noble stories? After Knight's noble story, why does the Miller jump in and break the pattern of social status, telling a vulgar and sinful story?

In *The Miller's Prologue*, when the Reeve objects Miller's tale because he was once a carpenter, this story seems potentially vulgar and immoral because Miller is very drunk and everyone knows that he would not tell a tale of nobility like the Knight. This is a purposeful interruption and a critical turning point of the poem created by Geoffrey Chaucer. At that moment, Chaucer's response is the following:

> Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
> Hir tales alle, be they better or werse,
> Or ells falsen som of my mateere.
> And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere,
> Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
> For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
> Of storial thing that toucheth gentillesse, (3173-3179, *The Miller's Prologue*)

Chaucer says that he is merely here to retell the story. When he asks the reader to "turne over the leef and cheses another tale; For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale, Of storial thing that toucheth gentillesse," his intention is precisely the opposite. He invokes readers' curiosity to read further into *The Milller's Tale*. Furthermore, for the readers who have read all the tales, we know that there is no "grete and smale" tales "that toucheth gentillesse" even if the reader skips the Miller's Tale. The tale after *The Miller's Tale* is *The Reeve's Tale*, which is much more vulgar and offensive. What Chaucer encourages is exactly the opposite of skipping the sinful stories, but to read all the vulgar tales and accept the reality, hoping the readers will see their own sins while reading.

Why does Chaucer predict the readers may want to skip the vulgar or the sinful tales? It is also a very important question that Chaucer poses for the readers. We, the readers, like the pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales, most likely would not confess our sin and only laugh at others. The readers are mostly likely not going to identify with the sins that Chaucer reveals in his poem. However, it is reality that the readers all have committed many similar sins from the book. The readers are just as sinful as the pilgrims. However, the readers do not possess the awareness or have the guts to confess their sins like Geoffrey Chaucer or like the Pardoner.

The tale before the retraction is *The Parson's Tale*, which focuses on abstract virtues and the goal of the pilgrimage: immortality and heaven. The Parson also lists the Seven Deadly Sins:

pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony and lechery. And he directs man toward penitence and confession. Essentially, *The Chaucer's Retraction* is parallel with the Parson's view. It is significant that the first sin of the Seven Deadly Sins is pride, and pride is the arguably the worst form of sins because it could potentially prevent us to see our other sins. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines pride as "high, esp. an excessively high, opinion of one's own worth or importance which gives rise to a feeling or attitude of superiority over others; inordinate self-esteem." It is precisely the pilgrims' pride, their sense and attitude of superiority over the Pardoner, preventing them to see their own flaws and sins. It is the readers' pride, our feeling of superiority over the characters and pilgrims in the book, preventing us to see our own sins in our life.

On one level, the pilgrims merely treat the tales as amusing stories by constantly encouraging each other to tell "moral tales." They do not realize their own sins are reflected in the tales that they tell or the tales that they hear. On another level, the readers, including myself, would likely consider this book as amusing. For example, readers may only find *The Miller's Tale* to be humorous: the characters are dumb, their farts are ridiculous, and the miller is just a drunken and vulgar man. We may not realize that the fabliaux also happen in our lives and in our contemporary society: many rich old men like the carpenter prefer to marry young and beautiful women; many scholars like Nicholas pursue and desire courtly love.

Essentially, Chaucer, the master of English language, advises us to realize our own sins in our lives after the completion of *The Canterbury Tales*, which is the central message of the book. Sins exist in everyone regardless of their social rank or different occupations. By looking through the characters' nobility or aristocracy and looking past readers' own hypocrisy, we may

find our sins, and Chaucer sincerely wishes the readers would follow his act, admit their sins, and ask for God's mercy and forgiveness.

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