

CHAUCER'S HOST: WHAT HAVE WE BEEN MISSING?

Let's say you are reading a story where the main character offers to guide a group of pilgrims on their journey, and he promises a banquet when they reach their destination. Do you hear an echo of the Heavenly Banquet promised in the Bible? Would you suspect the *guide* is intended to resemble Christ? What if he also takes charge and sets down rules for the trip? Would you figure the author meant these *details* to identify the figure as Christ? You may never have read Chaucer's poetry, or you may have forgotten what was assigned in your English class long ago, but the basic action I've just described *is* the basic action that sets the scene for the *Canterbury Tales*.

At his introduction, the guide, who is called "the Host," provides food and shelter for the travelers. The group, a mixed bag of about thirty characters, agrees to follow where he leads. Once they set out on their trip from London to Canterbury—a distance of about sixty miles—the group never pauses to eat or sleep. There are no details of road conditions, or weather, or incidents within towns. Depicting the English countryside and townspeople along the way would have been easy enough, but obviously not what Chaucer planned.

The pilgrims tell stories. Their stories *are* the *Canterbury Tales*. Their guide requires these narratives to add interest to the trip, and each offering acquaints us with the storyteller.

After many tales have been told, the Host declares there is only one more to hear and indicates the pilgrim who will "knit up" the day's adventure. He also urges haste because the sun is setting.

When that last story is over and we reach the end of the book, oddly enough, Chaucer does *not* describe the arrival at Canterbury, which we had assumed to be their ultimate destination. When I first read this, I thought I had been inattentive, but it's true. The Canterbury pilgrims never reach Canterbury! Can you see this as a symbolic journey with life portrayed as a pilgrimage—and Christ, "The Host," as guide?

Chaucer provides many clues to the Host's alternate identity—if we look

for them. Looking for clues, searching for a hidden meaning, was popular entertainment in the Middle Ages. That's when Chaucer wrote the *Tales*. This technique is called "allegory," telling a story on two (or more) levels at the same time. Allegory is deliberately obscure. Pursuing the second, the obscure meaning, was a challenge.

Actually, even ancient writers were known to employ literary "double talk," and it's still used today. Books like Orwell's *Animal Farm* or C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* fables qualify. Some people even see Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* sending a message below the surface of the plot.

Penetrating "below the surface" is the secret, because another use for allegory is to purposely conceal a message. If a writer wants or needs to express an idea, he could give it an innocent, even comical, surface story that covers dark currents underneath. (*Gulliver's Travels*, for example, has been read as a political protest.) I believe Chaucer, in his *Canterbury Tales*, disguised strong words critical of authority, and here is how and why he did it, and how I reached that conclusion.

First, how did the idea come to me? Near the end of the *Canterbury* General Prologue—that's where all the pilgrims are introduced—Chaucer makes a point of describing how words must be carefully chosen. The poet asserts that Christ is known to speak "broadly" without meaning to offend. That assertion seemed trivial, commonplace. But only seven lines later the very last traveler is introduced; he is "the Host." Because of my Catholic upbringing, "Host" is a word that got my attention. And when this character's first action is to set a supper of the best food and strong wine before pilgrims, my mind's ear heard echoes of poetry describing the Eucharist—the Host—the consecrated bread of the altar. Description of the repast brought the image of Christ to my mind's eye. I had little doubt that this was what Chaucer, who was steeped in Catholicism, intended. Even before the pilgrims set forth, close reading revealed "clues" that led to ultimate confirmation.

The first evidence comes before the pilgrims begin their journey. They

enjoy an evening in the Tabard (the designated shelter for the night), where the Canterbury Host tells them he will ride with them *at his own cost*. He is willing to pay whatever the cost. More than once he declares he will be their judge and will tolerate no rebellion. He lords it over the pilgrims, insisting they agree to his terms without any discussion. And, strangely enough, the entire assembly, whether of high or low estate, *unhesitatingly* agrees to the dictates of this apparent tradesman!

A closer look at these compatible folk reveals an assortment of individuals ranging from a distinguished knight and a refined nun who oversees a convent, down through various lower classes: clergymen, craftsmen, business people, and a humble man who transports dung. Is it likely that such a diverse group would *unhesitatingly* agree to *anything*? Yet their action makes complete sense if viewed as humankind having no choice but to accept God's will.

We are not dealing with "free will," but with life's turns over which we have no control. An instance in the Bible tells of the rich man who planned to build a bigger barn and enjoy his great wealth. The Lord tells him the plan won't work, because today is the last day of his life! Or, think of an inspired artist who begins what he assumes will be his masterpiece, but it is left unfinished at his *untimely* demise. The familiar quote—Man proposes, but God disposes—says it all.

Back to Chaucer. How would he describe the Host's physical appearance while sequestering a figure within? The answer is with few human limitations. We are told nothing of his voice, his hair, his face, his clothing. We learn only that his stature is "large" and his eyes are "stepe," that is, eyes high, elevated, wide-open. These bare details evoke more the image of an icon rather than a man. He is a majestic figure such as that of Christ sculptured on the tympanum above Judgment Portals of many Gothic cathedrals. The unusual characteristics of his eyes also bring to mind an *all-seeing* God.

Prominence given this fictional Host coincides with a prominent piece of history. The presence of Christ within the Eucharistic Host was proclaimed as a dogma in 1215 by Pope Innocent III. In response to the proclamation, the annual Feast of Corpus Christi (Body of Christ) was instituted and became mandatory in

the Roman Church calendar in 1312. Popularity of the celebration grew as time went on.

A splendid procession became the traditional central element of the festivities. Whole villages or communities took part. (Today, in many places, the procession still dominates the celebration.) The feast day began as the Eucharistic Host was elevated, raised up, and then ceremonially carried out of doors, followed by dignitaries, clergy, and guildsmen from various trades. While Chaucer lived, observances became even more elaborate; the procession would pause at designated sites—the steps of a church, for example—while biblical dramas were performed. The procession would then resume and move on to the next stopping place and drama. The day-long undertaking ended with the return of the Host to the church from which it had set out.

Now let's compare Chaucer's plan for the Canterbury journey. He tells us that, as the pilgrimage begins, "up rose our Host" and gathered the pilgrims together. And what types are found among his pilgrims? There are—as in the Corpus Christi procession—dignitaries, clergy, and guildsmen from various trades. Tales told by each pilgrim as they travel can be seen to parallel the succession of Corpus Christi dramas. And, the conclusion of the poet's plan, announced by the Canterbury Host, is similar to that of the feast day: the Eucharistic Host and Chaucer's Host both will return with their respective entourage to the point from whence they came. A creative likeness can be seen with the Host as the central figure in Chaucer's poetry and within the church ritual.

Additional evidence of Christ's presence within Chaucer's Host is found in the chatty exchanges that link one traveler's story to the next as they journey. Statements that seem awkward or puzzling in these exchanges become clear when given a religious sense. For example, let's look at the Host's given name. It is heard only once. The Pilgrim Cook addresses the Host with:

Herry Bailly, by thy faith

The name is *never* seen again. Why bother to give a name and then not use it? On first thought it may seem pointless, but I cannot picture Chaucer just tossing in something without purpose. Non-use of his given name demonstrates that repetition of *Host* was the poet's aim, making its significance hard to ignore or dismiss. If the Host had been referred to as *Herry* even now and then he would be merely another character. The Eucharistic possibilities, and therefore the Christic identity, would not exist.

Chaucer's creativity touches even words that appear trivial. In this case, both the first and last name are also ordinary Middle English words. Their significance can be seen as *herry* can speak of giving praise to God. Though not a word familiar to us today, Chaucer's poetry gives examples elsewhere using the term. "God they thank and herie [praise]" and "[He] herieth [praises] Christ, who is King of Heaven." The name is a small but potent ambiguity covertly praising God.

And, *bailly*, the second name, is defined as a figure of authority, an administrator. Together the words identify the Host as a *praiseworthy leader*. It is a small link in a chain of clues. Though commentators feel comfortable in calling the Host "Herry," that is not *Chaucer's* plan; he *never* does.

Now let's ponder the term "substance" in lines that have been difficult to decipher. The Host states:

And well I know the substance is in me,
If anything shall well-reported be.

Substance, here, has been interpreted as being able to understand, but that sense is not truly apparent. Instead, let's pursue *substance* as associated with theology.

The primary definition of the word in the Oxford English Dictionary says: "Essential nature, essence; *esp. Theol.*, with regard to the being of God, the divine nature or essence." That entry quotes the Athanasian Creed (1325) regarding Christ, "He is God, of the *substance* of the Father." In addition, the first

entry in the Middle English Dictionary says *substance* is "used of the incarnate Christ."

When the poet declares *substance* to be "in" the Host, this also supports *Transubstantiation*. Scholastic Theology describes the "accidents" (the attributes or qualities) of bread that can be seen, while the "substance" (or essence) mystically becomes the body of Christ.

The standard attitude toward many other words spoken by the Host is that they are comical. He is often characterized as a pompous bully. The poet's skill encourages this impression by allowing a mask of ambiguity.

Such "comical" evidence is promoted when criticism regarding the Host's Latin is seen as ignorantly humorous because of supposedly faulty endings. *Corpus dominus*, for example, Latin experts say should be *corpus domini*, which means "the Lord's body." But if Christ is saying these words, this is a unique situation. He is referring not to another person, but to *His own body*. Chaucer's inspired solution is to use *all nominative endings!* Perhaps such inspiration came from allusions in prayers where *Dominus Deus*, means "the Lord God."

And what of the "oaths" the Host utters? Remember that the poet inserted a disclaimer about Christ's words; though they may be strong, they are not meant to offend. When this character utters, "for God's worshipful passion," and "by the cross," if he is an ordinary man, we would take such phrases as blasphemy. If spoken by Christ, however, rather than curses, they are allusions to his personal experience—to crucifixion!

One such oath is outstandingly noteworthy: "Harrow!" said he, "by nails and by blood!" *Harrow* can be just an exclamation of debatable origin, but it can also be deeply serious. When the word is associated with "nails and blood," it is a graphic statement of God's plan for man's salvation. Simply put, God's Son would harrow hell by nails and by blood. This was dramatized in the medieval play called "The Harrowing of Hell." Christ's destiny to *harrow* hell—to burst its gates—was portrayed as His action after being crucified. Chaucer and his contemporary playgoers knew that Christ had been born to die, and, in the words

of the play, He "the godhead went into hell, / And harrowed it." Thereby the souls of the just were freed to enjoy the bliss of paradise.

Our last consideration will be the Host/Pardoner confrontation which is ordinarily read with emphasis on humor. In a moment of apparent comedy, the Pilgrim Pardoner seems to reveal embarrassing information about the Host. Offering to absolve (pardon) each pilgrim of his or her sins, he says first of the Host:

I advise that our Host here shall begin
For he is most enveloped in sin.

"Enveloped" is hand-picked by Chaucer; sins are *external* to the Host; sin surrounds, envelops him. Christ is often said to take all our sins upon Himself. Sinfulness, closely associated with Christ, is external to His being; it *envelops* Him—as it does our Host. Here again we find a comic surface that needs to be penetrated in order to discover the presence of Christ.

We see the poet has embedded indications of a dual figure within the character of the Host. It takes only carefully reading with an open mind to be aware of them.

- ◆ Writing at a time of growing celebration of the presence of Christ within the Eucharist (the Real Presence), Chaucer depicts pilgrims journeying and telling stories that parallel Corpus Christi activities. But their guide has a second, concealed identity.
- ◆ He is of grand stature and keen vision.
- ◆ The guide, whose given name means *leader worthy of praise*, is, however, referred to only as *The Host* throughout the *Tales*.
- ◆ *Substance* being *in* the Host announces His divine nature.
- ◆ Latin used by the Host is understandably unique when Christ, in the first

- person, speaks of Himself.
- ◆ Apparent curses concerned with Christ's passion are seen as personal references to crucifixion.
 - ◆ "Harrow" points directly to Christ's role in man's salvation.
 - ◆ The Host enveloped in the sins of men is a traditional image of Christ.

When we acknowledge that the figure of the Host, by the potential of allegory, contains both an innkeeper and Christ Himself, the next question is: *why* did the poet devise this covert plan?

Why such an elaborate effort to disguise Christ? Chaucer is not just an entertaining storyteller. The entirety of his writings show him to be a man of spiritual depth, as well. In the *Canterbury Tales* he creatively sets forth an affirmation and a dissension.

First is the affirming of Christ within the Host. The complexity of the numerous depictions demonstrate His presence.

Once this identity is established, the dissension is simple. I shuddered when it leapt out at me. It involves only the Host's problems with his wife. We have not mentioned her before, because she is not part of the pilgrim company. She is never seen but merely commented upon in two brief snatches of the Host's conversation. And who do we recognize as the Host's wife? Who is the traditional Bride of Christ? *The Church*. As a beleaguered husband, the Host reports his wife's faults, but breaks off, hesitant to say too much. The concern is the same for Chaucer. He dare not have his dissent regarding the Church become obvious. There would be a heavy price to pay.

So how could he keep his criticism from being obvious? Again a comic image—that of an apparently henpecked husband—provides a distracting surface characterization. What is it that the Host confides? He laments that his wife is cruel, demanding, quarrelsome, unfeeling. If his words are those of an innkeeper, we see a dreadful married relationship. Now, with the power of

allegory, read the words again, but this time as if uttered by Christ accusing the Church: She is cruel, demanding, quarrelsome, unfeeling. These traits are an apt description of the medieval Church's power and the widespread action of the Inquisition, which functioned through much of the Continent during the 1300s. We are prompted to ask where is the love and justice of Christ's teachings? But such a question could not be spoken aloud in the fourteenth century without risking severe consequences. Under cover of allegory, however, a courageous poet could express his fears and frustrations.

The depth of the *Tales* has not been clear to many. With a surface so entertaining, it would seem unnecessary—perhaps even impertinent—to look for more. It is only reasonable, however, to expect that a medieval work from a writer of high reputation would incorporate a second level to discover and interpret.

Several factors have prevented the underlying spiritual content of the Canterbury pilgrimage from coming to light. To begin with, the poet aimed for obscurity. In addition, over time, readers lost interest in Chaucer and his antiquated language. Moderns developed prejudice toward allegory. And, in the long run, readers being satisfied with the standard interpretation and comic possibilities, the religious alternatives have mainly been avoided.

Chaucer, wordmaster and allegorist extraordinaire, constructed his ultimate work, the *Canterbury Tales*, by intertwining an often humorous overlay to conceal its deep spirituality. He had developed allegory to a height perhaps never seen before—or since. The vastness of his poetic genius has yet to be appreciated.

The Canterbury Host is more than a tradesman, an innkeeper. It is time to remove literary blinders and see the second image that we have been missing. It is time to see a dual portrait in Chaucer's Host—both the Canterbury innkeeper *and* Christ, the guide of pilgrims.

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