The Names of the Canterbury Pilgrims

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In the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer gives names to only two of the pilgrims; and elsewhere he names only six others. Even when we add the Host and Chaucer to the eight named, the number is not very impressive, whether we take Chaucer's "nyne and twenty" or a larger number as comprising the company.

However, in examining the names of these few we may come to a partial explanation of why Chaucer did not name all the pilgrims; and at the same time, we may see something of Chaucer's intentions and accomplishments in writing the *Canterbury Tales*.

The Prioress, Madame Eglantine, and the Friar, Hubert, are the two pilgrims named in the Prologue. At the beginning of his description of the Prioress, Chaucer says, "And she was cleped madame Eglentyne" (I, 121), thereby giving us her name.[1] Chaucerians have speculated much about her name, which is ultimately derived from Latin **aculenta*, "prickly." *Eglantine* is also a name for the sweetbriar, or the wildrose. It is much more suitable for a heroine of a romance than for a prioress, but in the light of the lady's character and temperament the very incongruity of the name to its bearer is one of the delights of the Prologue. As a personal name, Eglantine appears in England as early as 1213; but it does not appear as the name of the sweetbriar until about 1400. Regardless of whether Chaucer was inspired by the name of the wild flower or by the name of a heroine of a romance, the fanciful name fits the Prioress perfectly.

Presumably the Nun's Priest, who tells the tale of Chauntecleer and Pertelot, is included in Chaucer's enigmatic "and preestes thre" (I, 164), who accompany the Prioress. After the Knight has interrupted the Monk's dreary accounts of the fall of great men, the

[1] All quotations are from F. N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957).

Host calls to the Nun's Priest, "Com neer, thou preest, com hyder, thou sir John!" (VII, 2810). While in the Middle Ages Sir John was a common name for any priest, that this priest is really named John is made clear in the narrator's remark introducing the tale:

> And thus he seyde unto us everichon,
> This sweete preest, this goodly man sir John. (VII, 2819–2820)

Since John is the name of both the Baptist and the Evangelist, it has double reason for being the most popular masculine name in Christendom. Here the coincidence of its being the Nun's Priest's name, even though Harry Bailey seems not to have known it, is in keeping with Chaucer's dealing with the priest as a type who is not described or individualized at all.

As far as his name is concerned, the Monk is treated very much as the Nun's Priest is, for the Host fumbles for his name too. When Harry Bailey calls upon him for a tale, he addresses him as "My lord, the Monk" (VII, 1924); and he goes on to say,

> But, by my trouthe, I knowe nat youre name.
> Wher shal I calle yow my lord daun John,
> Or daun Thomas, or elles daun Albon? (VII, 1928–1930)

Here we see the Host beginning with John, the commonest of names, and moving on to two less common ones as he apparently tries to guess at the Monk's real one. It is noteworthy that here he employs the names of three saints, two being apostles and the third being St. Alban, the first martyr of Britain. However, after the Knight's interruption, with careful courtesy the Host addresses the Monk as "sire Monk, or daun Piers by youre name" (VII, 2792), thus making it clear that Piers is the Monk's name – although we do not know how the Host learned it. In Piers, Chaucer chooses the name of one of the most popular of the apostles, and he uses the French form common in England after the Norman Conquest. The names of two favorite apostles are appropriate to the two religious men, the Nun's Priest and the Monk. That they also are common masculine names is in keeping with Chaucer's general practice of characterizing the pilgrims as representatives of types before making them individuals.

A third religious, the Friar, though, is given a name much more indicative of an individual than of a type, for at no time has Hubert

been very common in England. Professor Charles Muscatine has argued that Hubert is fitting for the Friar because it is the name of rascally clerics in the Old French *Roman de Renart* and other poems in the Renart tradition.[2] Perhaps the rise of something like a cult of St. Hubert (c. 656–728), Bishop of Liège and patron of huntsmen, contributed to bringing the name into a certain prominence in Chaucer's time. Altogether, though, we feel that whether Chaucer was influenced by the Renart tradition or by the popularity of the saint, Hubert is not an unsuitable name for the Friar.

Chaucer himself leaves us wondering about the Friar's name, because after finishing the characterization of the man he informs us, almost as if it were an afterthought, "This worthy lymytour was cleped Huberd" (I, 269). This bare statement stands disconnected from what precedes and what follows; but it is evident that Chaucer deliberately placed the description of the Merchant after that of the Friar, for he concludes his remarks about the Merchant with a final line that reminds us of his last statement about the Friar: "But, sooth to seyn, I noot how men hym calle" (I, 284). It is a distinction of the Merchant that he is the only pilgrim about whom this kind of statement is made.

While Chaucer the narrator tells us the Friar's name, the Cook reveals his own when he exclaims at the conclusion of the Reeve's Tale,

> I pray to God, so yeve me sorwe and care
> If evere, sitthe I highte Hogge of Ware,
> Herde I a millere bettre yset a-werk. (I, 4335–4337)

Hodge was a popular nickname for Roger; and the Host calls the Cook Roger when he speaks to him, and the narrator likewise calls him Roger (I, 4345, 4353, and 4356). But later in the lively episode in which the drunken Cook falls off his horse and cannot tell a tale, he is called only "thou Cook," "This Cook," "sire Cook," and "the Cook" (IX, 15, 20, 26, 46, 85, 88, 92).

It is also the Cook who gives us Harry Bailey's name (I, 4358). While the Host's is perhaps the most familiar name in the *Canterbury Tales*, it appears only this one time. Everywhere else Harry Bailey is addressed and referred to as the Host. Since Harry is a nickname for Henry, the Host has been associated with Henri Bai-

[2] "The Name of Chaucer's Friar," *MLN*, LXX (Mar. 1955), 169–172.

liff, an innkeeper in Southwark, 1380–1381;[3] but such an association is no value to us here, and the name seems suitably plain for the plain man who carries it.

While not a pilgrim on the way to Canterbury, the Host's wife, even though a type, for a moment becomes a real woman for the readers of the *Canterbury Tales*. After Chaucer's tedious moral tale of Melibee, the Host cries,

> I hadde levere than a barel ale
> That Goodelief, my wyf hadde herd this tale! (VII, 1893–1894)

Today's editors and scholars accept Goodelief as the name of Harry Bailey's wife, but at an earlier time Professor Skeat did not. He interpreted the words "goode lief my wife" as a phrase of four separate words meaning "my dear good wife."[4] Professor Kittredge related the name Goodelief with that of Godelieva, a virgin martyr of French Flanders noted for her wifely patience, whose day is April eighteenth.[5] Since in the Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale the narrator says that it is April eighteenth (II, 5–6), the connections are interesting; and scholars today generally take note of them. In the end, though, the irony in the name Goodelief, whether it means "dear to God" or refers to the patient saint – or both, is appropriately comical when we think of the Host's characterization of his wife.

When the Miller insists upon telling his tale immediately after the Knight's, the Host tactfully tries to quiet him and calls him by his name, "Robyn, my leeve brother" (I, 3129). Robin was a nickname, originally a diminutive, for Robert; and it was a favorite in England for nearly a thousand years. In the later Middle Ages, Robin was even more popular than Robert; so Chaucer's choice here is that of a common name to fit a common man.

It is the Miller who first calls the Reeve by his name: "Leve brother Osewold" (I, 3151). The narrator repeats the name twice, once immediately following the Miller's Tale (I, 3860) and again in relating the Reeve's words, "'Now sires,' quod this Osewold the

[3] Robinson, pp. 668 and 689.

[4] Walter W. Skeat, ed., *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford, 1894–1897), V, 244.

[5] John Matthew Manly, ed., *Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York, 1928), p. 635.

Reve" (I, 3909). Oswald probably never has been a very popular name, and it seems to have had but little currency around London during Chaucer's lifetime. Moreover, it is not found in the Norfolk records of the fourteenth century; but it was more common farther north, where undoubtedly St. Oswald (c. 605–642), King of Northumbria, and St. Oswald (d. 992), Archbishop of York, helped to popularize it. The Reeve Oswald has traces of northern dialect in his speech not inappropriate to his place of origin in Norfolk, and it can be added that his northern name goes fittingly with his northern speech.

The wife of Bath is well known by her name Alice, which she reveals in her Prologue, when she quotes what she would have one of her husbands say to her, "I knowe yow for a trewe wyf, dame Alys" (III, 320). However, after Jankin has floored her, he calls her "Deere suster Alisoun," a nickname of endearment (III, 804). Alice was very popular in the later Middle Ages in England; and because of its numerous appearances in the fourteenth-century records of Bath, Manly saw Chaucer's giving it to the Wife of Bath as perhaps of no particular significance.[6] Once again we see Chaucer's using a common but popular name for a plain person.

Most of us tend to think of Chaucer himself as going on the pilgrimage and relating all that he saw and heard, and it is perhaps with conscious effort that we remind ourselves that the first-person narrator is the narrator, the *persona*, and not necessarily Chaucer the man and the poet. The humor in the *Canterbury Tales* rises to one of its highest points when the Host calls upon Chaucer for a tale, for we think of Chaucer himself then as well as the pilgrim and the *persona*. However, Chaucer does not name himself anywhere in the work. Harry Bailey speaks to him bluntly, as if he did not know him and had scarcely been aware of his presence before: "What man artow?" (VII, 695). After addressing him with a contraction of *thou*, the pronoun used with inferiors and sometimes with equals, the Host does not again extend his courtesy in using either *thou* or *ye* in speaking to him. But when he can no longer stand the tale of Sir Thopas, he softens his interruption with thou: "Namoore of this, ... for thou makest me So wery ..." (VII, 909–911). He apparently does not know Chaucer's name even though the poet had come to the Tabard Inn alone before the crowd of pilgrims ar-

[6] Manly, p. 527

rived. Nor are the pilgrims aware of his identity, in spite of his having spoken to every one of them at the inn. The Man of Law makes it evident that he does not know that Chaucer is present when he refers to Chaucer and his poetry in the introduction to his tale. The very ambiguity with which Chaucer presents himself and relates his part in the pilgrimage only tends to increase the humor and irony of the narrative. But the scribes were meticulous to inform us of Chaucer's presence when they wrote such headings as "Bihoold the murye wordes of the Hoost to Chaucer" and "Heere bigynneth Chaucers Tale of Thopas" (p. 164). On the other hand, the "Retractions" are headed with a reference to "the makere of this book," while Chaucer's name appears below in the colophon: "Heere is ended the book of the tales of Caunterbury, compiled by Geffrey Chaucer" (p. 265).

Most of us today think and speak of the various pilgrims not by their names but by their generic titles: the Knight, the Squire, the Yeoman, and so on. And Chaucer the narrator also generally uses the generic designations: "the Knyght" (I, 845), "The Cook of Londoun" (I, 4325), "This dronke Millere" (I, 3150), "This worthy clerk" (IV, 21). The Host almost always addresses the pilgrims by their generic titles; but he often shows courtesy in such forms as "Sire Knyght" (I, 837) and "my lady Prioresse" (I, 839). On all occasions the Wife of Bath is addressed as "dame" (III, 164, 184, 830, 853, and 1270). But with no intention of discourtesy the Host refers to her as "the woman" (III 851); and the narrator speaks of her as "the wyf" (III 1269). In speaking to pilgrims he considers not his superiors Harry Bailey can be blunt and direct in addressing them: "Marchaunt" (IV, 1240), "Squier" (V, 1), and "Frankeleyn" (V, 696). In inviting the Monk to tell a tale, he courteously addresses him as "My lord, the Monk" (VII, 1924); but after the Knight's interruption, he rudely refers to "this Monk" (VII,2781). However, this is immediately softened by addressing him as "Sire Monk" (VII, 2788). The Knight sooths the tempers of the Pardoner and the Host by addressing them by the overly polite terms "Sire Pardoner" and "sire Hoost" (VI, 963 and 964). So we see the way in which the generic titles lend themselves to a great variety of distinctions.

While we are impressed by the names that Chaucer gave to selected pilgrims, we are even more greatly impressed by his lack

of concern for taking advantage of numerous opportunities in which the use of names would be natural and realistic. For example, in the quarrels that spring up between the Miller and the Reeve, the Friar and the Summoner, and the Pardoner and the Host, the use of names would seem to be very natural; but names play a very minor part in the quarrels, if they appear at all. The Cook's name is given in the prologue to his fragmentary tale, but it is not used later where it would naturally be expected when the Cook is too drunk to keep his seat on his horse. Since Chaucer usually did not use the pilgrim's names and since he used most of the names given only once, it is clear that he considered naming the pilgrims of but little importance in his overall plan.

Thus, we see that his naming the Host and eight of the Canterbury pilgrims follows no pattern and has but little intrinsic significance. Names appear only infrequently and often only incidentally, while generic titles prevail and are used generally by both the narrator and the pilgrims themselves. Without depending upon names, the pilgrims make perfectly clear their relations with each other through their use of generic terms with appropriate modifiers.

The derivations of the pilgrims' names appear to have no particular significance, and they have not been considered here. However in the names of characters in some of the tales there are interesting echoes of names of a few of the pilgrims. The Host addresses the Monk as "Daun John" and the Nun's Priest as "Sir John" after the Shipman has told his tale about the monk Daun John, but the Monk's and Nun's Priest's prologues are so widely separated from the Shipman's Tale that any carry-over in the names must be remote. The boy who is the servant of the carpenter in the Miller's Tale is named Robin (I, 3466, 3555), which is the Miller's name. Alison in the Miller's Tale may be very much what the Wife of Bath was in her youth, but Chaucer makes nothing of using the same name for the two women. In addition, it is curious, as Professor Manly noted many years ago, that the "gossip" of the Wife of Bath is also called Alice and Alison (III, 530, 548).[7] Since there seems to be no immediate accounting for the repetition of these names, we may presume that most likely they only represent the frequent use of popular names.

[7] Manly, p. 579.

In the end we may say that Chaucer was not particularly concerned about giving names to the pilgrims. They were ordinary people representing a cross-section of society, and most of the few that are named are given plain names well suited to the plain people who are primarily representatives of their class and who are individuals only secondarily.

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