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## SOME GENERIC DISTINCTIONS IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

PAUL STROHM

Chaucer critics have been interested in such categories as "romance" and "fabliau" more because these terms offer a way of grouping tales according to modern perceptions of similarity than because Chaucer depended on them.<sup>1</sup> Chaucer himself was more interested in another order of distinctions based on the degree and kind of fictionality among his Canterbury tales—distinctions involving the use of such terms as "tale," "storie," and "fable."

The practice of making distinctions on the basis of fictionality has precedents in ancient and medieval rhetorical and grammatical theory. In rhetorical terms, Chaucer's tales are really narratives or

*narrationes*, and rhetoricians and grammarians recognized different kinds of *narrationes*. Quintilian, for example, divides *narratio* into legal pleading and other forms, and is typical in describing these other forms as the invented tale with an improbable plot (*fabula*), the invented tale with a realistic plot (*argumentum*), and the exposition of actual events (*historia*).<sup>2</sup> Chaucer's scheme is by no means so formal or so tidy, but he does follow the rhetoricians and grammarians by doing some categorizing of his own. While Chaucer has no truly inclusive and unambiguous term like *narratio* ("narrative" does not enter

<sup>1</sup> Apart from references to the *Romance of the Rose* (which is called a "romance" because it is written in the vernacular), Chaucer uses "romance" only five times: in the *Book of the Duchess* to refer to a collection of tales including Ovid's *Ceyx and Alcione* (48); in *Troilus and Criseyde* to refer to a romance of Thebes and possibly to Statius's *Thebaid* (2. 100) and in a general way but again with an implication of great age (3. 980); twice in *Sir Thopas*, once very generally (B<sup>2</sup> 2038) and once to introduce a list of romances and heroes of romances including "Horn child and . . . Ypotys, / . . . Beves and sir Gy, / . . . sir Lybeux and Pleyndamour" (B<sup>2</sup> 2087-90). Only in this final instance are we given any sense of a flourishing contemporary genre, and the genre is that of the popular metrical romance, which Chaucer ignores except for his parodic *Sir Thopas*. Chaucer and his contemporaries use neither *fabliau* nor close derivatives in English. All references to Chaucer's works are to F. N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2d ed. (Boston, 1957). Here and elsewhere, I have made regular use of J. S. P. Tatlock and A. G. Kennedy, *Concordance to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Washington, D.C., 1927).

<sup>2</sup> "Et quia narrationum, excepta qua in causis utimur, tres accepimus species, fabulam, quae versatur in tragoediis atque carminibus, non a veritate modo sed etiam a forma veritatis remota; argumentum, quod falsum sed vero simile comoediae fingunt; historiam, in qua est gestae rei expositio" (*Institutio Oratoria*, bk. 2, chap. 4 [vol. 1, p. 225 in H. E. Butler's edition (Cambridge, Mass., 1958)]). Quintilian, however, limits the applicability of these distinctions by offering all of these kinds of narrative as preliminary studies for the rhetorician. He does not incorporate them into his formal discussion of *narratio*, which is considered as one of the traditional categories of *inventio* or ways of ordering material (bk. 4, chap. 2). In the works of other rhetoricians popular in the Middle Ages, descriptions of *fabula*, *historia*, and *argumentum* are included in the formal discussion of *narratio* and occupy an increasingly large proportion of that discussion. See *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, bk. 1, chap. 8 (p. 22 in Harry Caplan's edition [Cambridge, Mass., 1954]); Victorinus, *Explanationum in Rhetoricam M. Tullii Ciceronis, in Rhetores Latini Minores*, bk. 1, chap. 19. (p. 202 in C. Halm's edition [Leipzig, 1863; Frankfurt, 1964]); Martianus Capella, *Liber de Arte Rhetorica*, in Halm, p. 486. Descriptions of the kinds of narrative were also transmitted in various forms by grammarians (see, for example, Priscian, *Praeexercitamina*, in Halm, pp. 551-60).

the English vernacular until the sixteenth century),<sup>3</sup> he often uses "tale" inclusively to describe all the Canterbury narratives. Within the general category of "tales," Chaucer also uses "storie" in the sense of *historia* to describe narratives with true or exceptionally venerable plots, "fable" and perhaps at times a restricted sense of "tale" to describe narratives with invented plots, and "tretys" to describe one Canterbury narrative with little dependence on plot of any kind.

All readers of Chaucer are familiar with his use of "tale" in the inclusive sense which it shares with *narratio*. On several occasions, Chaucer himself refers to his whole work as a "tale" or collection of "tales": near the end of the *General Prologue* he apologizes for failing to "set folk in hir degree / Heere in this tale" (A 744-45), and in his *Retraction* he asks forgiveness for "the tales of Canterbury, thilke that sownen into synne" (I 1085). The near-contemporary testimony of manuscript headings and endings and other fifteenth-century allusions supports this tendency to refer to the work as a collection of "tales."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, either the teller or another pilgrim calls every Canterbury narrative except that of the Second Nun a "tale" at least once, and manuscript

headings and endings also support this practice.<sup>5</sup>

Chaucer's use of "tale" is undoubtedly based on the general sense of OE "talū" and ME "tale" as an oral account of any kind (*OED*, "tale," 1.3: "That which one tells; the relation of a series of events"). Since the Canterbury narratives are all represented as oral accounts and because most of Chaucer's other poetry was in fact written for oral delivery, he was presented with unusual opportunities to put the word to literary use. He does in fact use it more frequently and in more important contexts than his fellow Middle English poets, and ultimately even extends its meaning beyond situations where narratives are told aloud. When the narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* finds a book containing "written fables / . . . that clerkes had in old tyme / . . . put in rime" (*BD* 52-54), one is the "tale" of Ceyx and Alcione, so called even though written down. When Chaucer speaks of "the tales of Canterbury," then, he is reaching for a sense of the word which encompasses all kinds of narrative, spoken and written, "true or fictitious" (*OED*, "tale," 1.4).

Within the general category of "tales," Chaucer offers more precise distinctions. When describing narratives which are either historical or have the sanction of great antiquity, for example, he uses "storie" along with or in place of "tale." He clearly uses "storie" in this sense to describe saints' legends or stories from the Bible (as when we learn the Pardoner "wel koude . . . rede a lessoun or a storie" [A 709]),<sup>6</sup> and when the Merchant cites the "storie" of Judith [E 1366]), and to describe old stories

<sup>3</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter, *OED*) places the earliest example of "narrate" in the seventeenth century, "narration" in the fifteenth century, and "narrative" in the sixteenth century.

<sup>4</sup> Of the six manuscripts with English titles (Fi, Ha<sup>2</sup>, Ha<sup>3</sup>, Hg, Ht, Se), all refer in one way or another to "tales of Canterbury." Of the three with Latin titles, one uses *liber* and one uses *narratus* to refer to the whole, but all return to *gesta* and *fabula* and *fabulae* (fairly close Latin equivalents for ME "tale") for their collective description of individual narratives: En<sup>3</sup> refers to "liber . . . de gestis Peregrinorum," Ch to "narratus . . . de Gestis Peregrinorum," and La to "prologus fabularum Cantuar." Of the manuscripts with English endings, all those using any generic word for the whole (D1, E1, Fi, Ha<sup>2</sup>, Lc, Mm, Ph<sup>2</sup>, Pw, Ry<sup>2</sup>) retain "tales." In the manuscripts with Latin endings, *gesta* and *fabula* and *fabulae* again predominate: Ma refers to "fabule Canter," Ra<sup>2</sup> simply to "fabula," To to "fabula de Caunterburie," Ii to "liber . . . de gestis Peregrinorum," Ne to "tractatus . . . de gestis Peregrinorum," and Ad<sup>1</sup> to "narraciones huius libri" (see John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, eds., *The Text of the Canterbury Tales* [Chicago, 1940], 3:528-31; William McCormick, *The Manuscripts of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* [Oxford, 1933]). For a sampling of fifteenth-century references to "tales of Canterbury" and "Canterbury tales," see Caroline Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion* (Cambridge, 1925), 1:27, 39, 62; 3:6.

<sup>5</sup> "Tale" and *fabula* are again used in English and Latin passages, respectively, with very few exceptions: *cronica* to describe the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Second Nun's Tale* (He), *cronica* and *miraculum* to describe the *Prioress's Tale* (Ha<sup>3</sup>), *narratio* to describe the *Physician's Tale* (En<sup>3</sup>) and the *Parson's Tale* (Ad<sup>1</sup>), "rime" to describe *Sir Thopas* (Cx<sup>1</sup>, Ne), *sermo* to describe the *Parson's Tale* (La), *tractatus* to describe the *Parson's Tale* (Cx<sup>1</sup>, Ii, Ne, Tc<sup>2</sup>), "tretys" to describe the *Manciple's Tale* (Bo<sup>2</sup>) (see McCormick).

<sup>6</sup> On "storie" in A 709, see Karl Young, "Chaucer and the Liturgy," *Modern Language Notes* 30 (1915): 97-99.

from history or accepted as history (as in the case of the "storie" of Alexander [B<sup>2</sup> 3821] or Aeneas's "story" of Troy [*LGW* 1152–54]). He also uses "storie" to describe certain venerable narratives, fanciful or mythological rather than historical, but with a certain quasihistorical authority deriving from age (the Knight speaks of "many a wonder storie" painted in the temple of Diana [A 2073] and the Manciple speaks of the "storie" of Apollo's victory over the Python [H 128]). By a kind of final extension, he is likely to apply "storie" to any literary or historical source. In some cases, he refers to his source as a "storie" without claiming the same identity for his own "tale," the difference apparently residing in the amount of fictionality he has introduced in the process of composing or "enditing."<sup>7</sup> For example, the Knight refers to his narrative as a "tale" (A 2966), but suggests in his reference to "olde bookes . . . / That al this storie tellen moore pleyn" (A 1463–64) that his source is a "storie." (The pilgrims later compliment the *Knight's Tale* by calling it a "storie" [A 3110–11], but this is a designation the Knight does not claim.) Similarly, the Man of Law plainly refers to his own narrative as a "tale" taught him by a merchant (B 133) and at other points calls his narrative a "tale" (B 1116, 1125), but at one point in the narrative (evidently referring to the true source of the tale in Trivet's *Chronicle*) inserts "as seith the storie" (B 969). Chaucer causes his narrators to make the same distinction in the *Squire's Tale* (compare F 6, 8 with 655) and the *Physician's Tale* (compare C 105, 302 with 161, 258), and outside the *Canterbury Tales* he develops it extensively in *Troilus and Criseyde*. These senses of "storie" as history, pseudo-history, and source overlap, but one point

is certain: through authority or antiquity, "stories" are to be taken as something more than outright inventions. This respectful attitude toward "stories" is so pervasive that it can even be used as the basis for a joke, as when the Nun's Priest insists of his beast fable that "This storie is also trewe, I undertake, / As is the book of Launcelot de Lake" (B<sup>2</sup> 4401–2).

Chaucer clearly reserves the word "storie" for at least three Canterbury narratives: the *Prioress's Tale*, the *Monk's Tale*, and the *Second Nun's Tale* (in a fourth case, that of the *Clerk's Tale*, Chaucer's usage is mixed, alternating between "tale" and "storie"). In his courteous address to the Prioress, Harry Bailly requests a "tale" (B<sup>2</sup> 1640). The Prioress agrees, but explicitly states in her prologue that "To telle a storie I wol do my labour" (B<sup>2</sup> 1653), and nowhere calls her narrative a "tale." In response to Harry Bailly's request for a "tale" (B<sup>2</sup> 3115), the Monk offers a choice of one or two or three "tales" followed by a "lyf," or else a series of "tragedies":

. . . I wol doon al my diligence,  
As fer as sowneth into honestee,  
To telle yow a tale, or two, or three.  
And if yow list to herkne hyderward,  
I wol yow seyn the lyf of Seint Edward;  
Or ellis, first, tragedies wol I telle . . .

[B<sup>2</sup> 3156–61]

He holds both "lyf" and "tragedie" apart from the general run of "tales." Later, he defines "tragedie" as "a certeyn storie, / As olde bookes maken us memorie" (B<sup>2</sup> 3163–64). In the course of his tragedies, he uses "storie" five times and "tale" only once, and then to refer to the resumption of a narrative (B<sup>2</sup> 3487). Finally, no one calls the Second Nun's "lyf of Seinte Cecile" (G 554) a "tale." The Second Nun herself refers to the life of Saint Cecilia as a "storie" on four different occasions,

<sup>7</sup> The process of amplifying and animating source material which underlies the word "enditing" as Chaucer usually uses it is admirably described by Robert O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics* (New Haven, Conn., 1963), esp. pp. 60–90.

though three are ambivalent in that they might refer to her source or to her own creation. When she praises “hym that at the seintes reverence / The storie wroot” (G 82–83), “storie” probably refers to her source. But when she asks for forgiveness “that I do no diligence / This ilke storie subtilly to endite” (G 79–80) and promises that men “may after reden in hire storie” (G 35) about her victory over the fiend and that “men may in her storie see” (G 86) the virtues implicit in her name, “storie” could refer either to her source or to her creation. It probably refers to both, for when the Second Nun denies that any subtle process of “enditing” has taken place and insists that she is simply translating (G 24–26, 78–84), her words suggest that her narrative remains close enough to its source to be considered a “storie” rather than a “tale”.

Despite the fact that each of these three narratives belongs to what both medieval writers and modern critics would recognize as a distinct literary kind (the *Prioress's Tale* is a miracle, the *Monk's Tale* is a collection of tragedies, and the *Second Nun's Tale* is a saint's legend), their association as “stories” is not fortuitous. All three narratives are meant to be taken as expositions of actual events, and all depend on their historicity for their ultimate effect. When the Prioress asserts that the bounty of the Lord “by the mouth of children . . . / Parfourned is” (B<sup>2</sup> 1647–48), she clearly means for her story to be a corroboration of this statement. She further underscores its historical truth by associating it with the martyrdom of Hugh of Lincoln, “slayn also” (B<sup>2</sup> 1874). When the Monk warns his readers to “Be war by thise ensamples trewe and olde” (B<sup>2</sup> 3188), he presumably means what he says about truth and age. No medieval reader would have had cause to doubt the historical nature of any of the seventeen tragedies except that of Hercules, and Hercules is treated as if he

were a historical figure. The inclusion of four contemporary tragedies—those of Pedro of Castile, Pierre de Lusignan, Barnabo Visconti, and Ugolino—further fortifies the effect of true stories being brought forward to show that fortune will fail “whan men trusteth hire” (B<sup>2</sup> 3955). The Second Nun is also plainly depending on the historical nature of her story of Saint Cecilia when she presents Cecilia as “ensample of goode and wise werkes alle” (G 105). Like the Prioress and the Monk, the Second Nun seeks contemporary verification for her “ensample,” saying that Cecilia's home became the church of Saint Cecilia, “In which, into this day, in noble wyse, / Men doon to Crist and to his seint servyse” (G 552–53).

This insistence on historicity finally sets the narratives of the Prioress, the Monk, and the Second Nun apart from “tales” with which they have other elements in common. For example, the *Man of Law's Tale*, the *Prioress's Tale*, and the *Second Nun's Tale* all have to do with Christian adversity, and the *Man of Law's Tale* shares elements of the miracle with the *Prioress's Tale* (consider the act of divine vengeance on the perjured British knight, B 659–79) and elements of the saint's life with the *Second Nun's Tale* (both Constance and Cecilia undergo a series of trials). Furthermore, the *Man of Law's Tale* has its own semblance of what I have called “historicity,” moving as it does among actual places like Rome and Syria and Britain and among quasihistorical persons like the “Sowdan” of Syria and Alla, “kyng of al Northumbrelond.” Still, the narratives of the Prioress and the Second Nun are presented as “stories” and that of the Man of Law as a “tale” based on a “storie,” and this essential difference in conception is reflected in the manner and tone in which the Man of Law's narrative is written. While Manly finds the Man of Law's

narrative only slightly more fully furnished with rhetorical devices than the narratives of the Prioress or the Second Nun,<sup>8</sup> the Man of Law's narrative is in some senses more artificial than either of the others. The Prioress and the Second Nun set out, respectively, to tell and translate "stories" already known, but the Man of Law shows a keen consciousness of the whole process of "enditing"—of turning a source (B 969) into an original tale. He comments constantly on questions of amplification and abbreviation (B 232, 701–2, 990, 1069–71, 1116–17, 1124–25), and on problems connected with the ordering of events in the narrative (B 246–49, 900–901, 953–54, 984–87). The ultimate effect of such an accumulation of comments on literary matters is to promote a sense of the Man of Law's narrative as a "tale" (B 1116, 1125) but not a "storie": a new creation, the parts of which the literary artist has disposed at will.

The same kind of distinction separates the Monk's "stories" from the Knight's "tale." As "stories," the Monk's narratives include numerous indications of the historicity of the events they describe, such as mention of sources (B<sup>2</sup> 3438, 3445, 3909–11), references to places where omitted material has been treated (B<sup>2</sup> 3509–16, 3648–52), and even an explicit refusal to invent a fact which is unknown (B<sup>2</sup> 3596). The *Knight's Tale* is nominally based on "olde stories" (A 859), and is of course based on one not-so-old story in particular, but makes no strong claims of faithfulness to any source. As in the *Man of Law's Tale*, the reader encounters constant emphasis on abbreviation (such as A 886–87) and selection (such as A 1201), and reminders—many of them humorous—of disposition of material for artistic effect (such as A 1661–62). In short, as in many

of Chaucer's "tales," the reader of the *Knight's Tale* encounters a shift in emphasis from the preservation of an old approved "storie" to the process of "enditing" or making a work of literature for its own sake.

As Chaucer tends to replace "tale" with "storie" to describe narratives with historical or quasihistorical plots, so on one occasion does he use "fable" to describe narratives with invented plots. The pilgrim with the strongest feelings about such narratives is the Parson, and when Harry Bailly asks him for a "fable" he replies:

Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me;  
For Paul, that writeth unto Thymothee,  
Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse,  
And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse.  
Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,  
Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?

[I 31–36]

As I understand the Parson's words, he is not simply refusing to tell a moralized animal story (a secondary sense of ME "fable"), but is refusing to tell a narrative with a fictitious plot (the primary sense of "fable").<sup>9</sup> This reading of "fable" as "narrative with a fictitious plot" seems to me desirable not only because of contemporary usage, but because it is harmonious with Paul's equation of fables and doctrinal lies and with the Parson's own insistence that those who "tellen fables" must necessarily "weyven soothfastnesse." It is further supported by what I take to be the Parson's refusal to deal with any kind of plot on any terms. In lines 35–36 the Parson rejects the allegorical method as an approach to literary creation (though he is willing to use it in his narrative as a means of interpretation). He will sow no chaff at all, but

<sup>9</sup> See "fable" in Hans Kurath and S. M. Kuhn, *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1952–); Stephen Manning, "The Nun's Priest's Morality and the Medieval Attitude toward Fables," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 59 (1960): 403–16; Stanley J. Kahrl, "Allegory in Practice: A Study of Narrative Styles in Medieval Exempla," *Modern Philology* 63 (1965–66): esp. 108–9, where Kahrl makes a very pertinent distinction between *fabula* and *historia*.

<sup>8</sup> "Chaucer and the Rhetoricians," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1926 (London, n. d.), p. 107.

wheat alone; that is, he will not cloak morality in an invented "fable" but will expound it directly.<sup>10</sup> Appropriately, he will offer his fellow pilgrims a straightforward exposition of "moralitee and vertuous mateere" (I 38), avoiding invented plot as much as possible.

One must say that the Parson avoids invented plot "as much as possible" instead of "altogether," because even his narrative has its near brushes with invented plot. Seen broadly, it has a design but not a plot; it treats penance under the three headings of contrition, confession, and satisfaction, and includes an extended account of the seven deadly sins as an adjunct to the discussion of confession. On a more local level, though, the Parson offers a number of short illustrations to support his points. Any one of these illustrations might have become an *exemplum* with a free-standing plot. At least one, an illustration of patience, actually does:

A philosophre upon a tyme, that wolde have beten his disciple for his grete trespas, for which he was greetly amoeved, broghte a yerde to scoure with the child; and whan this child saugh the yerde, he seyde to his maister, "What thenke ye do?" "I wol bete thee," quod the maister, "for thy correccioun." "For sothe," quod the child, "ye oghten first correcte youreself, that han lost al youre pacience for the gilt of a child." "For sothe," quod the maister al wepyng, "thow seyst sooth. Have thow the yerde, my deere sone, and correcte me for myn incpacience." [I 670-73]

Compared with such contemporary manuals of religious instruction as *Handlyng*

*Synne*, though, the Parson's narrative and its ultimate sources in the *De Poenitentia* of Raymond de Pennaforte and the *Summa de Vitiis* of Guilielmus Peraldus<sup>11</sup> are remarkably restrained in their use of fully developed *exempla* with invented plots.

Appropriately, considering its rejection of invented plot, the Parson's narrative is the major instance in which manuscript headnotes and endnotes resist the ordinary "tale-*fabula*" formulation. It is often called "tale" and "*fabula*," but in Ad<sup>1</sup> is called "*narracio*," in La is called "*sermo*," and in Cx<sup>1</sup>, Ii, Ne, and Tc<sup>2</sup> is called "*tractatus*."<sup>12</sup> Modern critics have also been divided, some calling it a "sermon" (it begins in sermon-like fashion with a text, a theme, and a division of the theme) and others calling it a "manual" or "treatise" (it is long for a sermon, and its closest analogues occur among manuals of religious instruction).<sup>13</sup> The most conclusive evidence on this issue is offered by Germaine Dempster, who points out that "Chaucer himself calls it a treatise (I 957, 1081), not a sermon."<sup>14</sup> Chaucer applies the word "tretys" to only three of his works—the *Parson's Tale*, the lightly plotted *Tale of Melibee*, and the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*. With its emphasis on reasoned exposition, "tretys" is the perfect designation for a narrative which is a "tale" only with respect to its oral nature, and which is neither "storie" nor "fable" in its rejection of plot.

In order to make a general point about "tale," "storie," and "fable," I have thus far run the risk of making Chaucer's usage seem more orderly than it actually was. If Chaucer really meant "fable" to describe

<sup>10</sup> In reference to the Parson's rejection of "fables," D. W. Robertson argues that "the warnings to Timothy concerning fables were taken during the Middle Ages as applying to fables without any meaning or to fables whose meaning was heretical" (*A Preface to Chaucer* [Princeton, 1962], p. 335). Restated in medieval terms, Robertson's argument is that the Parson would have no objection to Boccaccio's three kinds of fables which have hidden meaning, but only to Boccaccio's fourth kind, which "contains no truth at all, either superficial or hidden, since it consists only of old wives' tales" (*Genealogy of the Gods*, from Charles G. Osgood, ed. and trans., *Boccaccio on Poetry* [New York, 1956], bk. 14, chap. 9, pp. 48-51). Nevertheless, the Parson's words suggest to me that he is explicitly rejecting *all* invented plots.

<sup>11</sup> As shown by Kate O. Peterson, *The Sources of the Parson's Tale*, Radcliffe College Monographs, no. 12 (Boston, 1901).

<sup>12</sup> See McCormick, n. 4 above.

<sup>13</sup> It has been called a "sermon" by Coolidge O. Chapman in "The Parson's Tale: A Medieval Sermon," *MLN* 43 (1928): 229-34 and by Robert O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance* (n. 7 above), p. 157. It has been described as a manual by H. G. Pfander, "Some Medieval Manuals of Religious Instruction in England and Observations on Chaucer's Parson's Tale," *Journal of English and German Philology* 35 (1936): 243-58.

<sup>14</sup> Germaine Dempster, *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Chicago, 1941), p. 724.

narratives with invented plots, some explanation is required for his infrequent use of "fable" in his writings. Most likely, he was able to avoid "fable" by making "tale" do most of its work. While "tale" in most contexts plainly means "any oral narrative," it also receives a secondary meaning through some of the contexts in which Chaucer withholds it. By replacing "tale" with "storie" in the case of narratives with historical or quasihistorical plots, he creates for "tale" the more limited meaning of a narrative with an invented plot, as opposed to a narrative of fact (as in *OED*, "tale," 1.5). Thus, Chaucer's audience might have concluded by default that any of his narratives which is called a "tale" and which is not called a "storie" had a plot which was fabulous to begin with or had been significantly modified by its latest author.

This secondary sense of "tale" was evidently at least partially apparent to Chaucer's contemporaries. Lydgate, the most extensive medieval commentator on Chaucer's work, pays him elaborate compliment in the *Siege of Thebes* by describing the *Canterbury Tales* and telling how he joined the pilgrims at Canterbury and added a tale of his own.<sup>15</sup> With regard to the relationship of his own narrative to the whole, he makes the common distinction between "tale" and "storie" already seen in the words of the Prioress and the Monk. As one of the "Canterbury talys" (line 18), it will be in the most general sense of the word a "tale," but its subject matter makes it in a more particular sense a "storie":

. . . sith of þour curtesye  
I entred am in-to þour companye,  
And admitted a talē for to telle . . .  
I wol reherce a story wonderful,  
Towchinge the siege and destruccioun

<sup>15</sup> Lydgate, *Siege of Thebes*, ed. Axel Erdmann, *EETS*, extra series, vol. 58 (London, 1911). Relevant passages also printed in Spurgeon (n. 4 above), 1:26–32.

Of worthy Theebes the myghty Royal  
toun . . .

[Lines 177–79, 184–86]

In his prologue, however, he uses "tale" in a more restricted way which seems to recognize its likely fictionality. After describing the variety of the original Canterbury narratives, he adds, "Al . . . was tolde forȝetung nought al, / Feynēd talis nor þing Historial" (lines 49–50). While the "feynēd" and "historial" matter might all be "tales," the syntax of the passage suggests a clearer distinction between the two kinds of narrative. In his later praise of Chaucer in the prologue to the *Fall of Princes*, Lydgate appears to refer indiscriminately to the Canterbury narratives as "talis" and as "stories" (lines 337–40),<sup>16</sup> but he goes on to make a more familiar distinction between Chaucer's and the Clerk's "tales" and the Monk's "stories":

In prose he wrot the Tale off Melibe,  
And off his wiff, that callid was Prudence,  
And off Grisildis parfit pacience,  
And how the Monk off stories newe & olde  
Pitous tragedies be the weie tolde.

[Lines 346–50]

Thus, Lydgate seems to employ the double usage of "tale" observable in Chaucer, treating it at times as an all-inclusive equivalent of *narratio* and at times opposing it to "storie" to describe a narrative with an invented plot.

However he refined his use of "tale," though, Chaucer offers us a number of narratives—most particularly three "stories" and a "tretys"—where the designation "tale" is contested or withheld. One benefit of being aware of such distinctions in Chaucer's literary terminology is that they offer a way of seeing fundamental differences in such superficially similar narratives as the Second Nun's "storie" and the

<sup>16</sup> Lydgate, *Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen, *EETS*, extra series, vol. 71 (London, 1924). Relevant passages also printed in Spurgeon (n. 4 above), 1:36–43.



Man of Law's "tale," the Parson's "treyty" and the Pardoner's "tale." Chaucer's awareness of the difference between narratives with and without invented plots together with the Parson's rejection of invented plots may even offer a partial explanation for Chaucer's *Retraction*, where the works for which he expresses his thanks appear to be mainly "stories" and

"treytyses." But whatever its application to scholarly and critical problems, awareness that not all the Canterbury narratives are "tales" in the same sense is relevant to an understanding of Chaucer's art as he conceived it.

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