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# Wrestling for the Ram: Competition and Feedback in *Sir Thopas* and *The Canterbury Tales*

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*The Canterbury Tales* comprises a series of diverse narratives framed within the context of two organizing principles: a pilgrimage and a competition. The competition is established in the *General Prologue*, and each of the twenty-four tales that make up the bulk of the text is in effect an entry. The competition is most conspicuous in the frame narrative, consisting of the introductions, prologues, and epilogues to the tales, as the pilgrims offer comments in the form of criticism or support for each speaker's entry. The guidelines that determine one's standing in the competition, however, are never clearly explained; they emerge instead from the feedback offered by the pilgrim audience. The purpose of this essay will be to explore the significance of competition and feedback in *The Canterbury Tales*, by applying historical evidence of literary competition in the fourteenth century to a discussion of the frame narrative, especially the prologue and epilogue to Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*. This may reveal the extent to which Chaucer's competing pilgrims reflect or parody his experience of poets competing under the patronage system of Medieval England.

The storytelling competition established at the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales* has already been the subject of some limited critical speculation.[1] Derek Pearsall rightly observes the prominence of the competition in comparison to the other framing device, the pilgrimage:

> It might be argued that in planning to bring the pilgrims back to Southwark, and in making the point of their journey the completion of the tale-telling competition and the awarding of the prize to the winner, Chaucer has relegated the religious pilgrimage to a secondary role. (240)

Indeed, the religious pilgrimage seems conspicuously understated throughout the bulk of the *Canterbury Tales*, especially in light of the competitive antagonisms dramatized at every turn throughout the frame narrative. In a general sense, Katherine Gittes points out

that "using a storytelling contest as a device to generate stories is reminiscent of other frame narratives like the *Seven Sages*, which uses stories as part of a debate"(121). What I am interested in, however, is not Chaucer's use of a storytelling competition as a device simply to generate stories, but as a device to draw attention to formal and thematic differences between the stories generated, and the range of audience response to these differences. Furthermore, the presence of a prize, "a soper at oure aller cost"(GP 799),[2] however remote from the bulk of the text, raises questions about the effect of financial motivations on the composition of poetry, a concept Chaucer was no doubt familiar with. Finally, Patterson reminds us that the storytelling competition is "a contest that gives full play to social antagonisms and grants unexpected authority to the voices of the socially ignoble"(122). This forces us to consider where *else* in late medieval England, besides perhaps in a wrestling match, a Miller could hope to compete on equal footing with a Knight.

The division of Chaucer's career into two periods, respectively influenced by French and Italian verse, has been a commonplace of criticism for centuries. As Pearsall demonstrates in *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, this sometimes facile-sounding division is relatively well supported by the existing evidence, and cannot be easily discarded. During the first period, while in service to Prince Lionel and later the royal household, Chaucer completed or was working on *The Romaunt of the Rose, The Book of the Dutchess*, and *The House of Fame,* all three of which are written in tetrameter couplets derived from French romance models.[3] These poems all show signs of a distinctively literary aspiration to elevate verse from its traditional existence strictly for the purpose of oral performance; however, it is impossible to dissociate Chaucer's function as poet

during this time from the culturally ascribed role of court "maker." The court maker's poetry "distinguishes from the more noisy and general performance recital of 'gestes' by professional minstrels"(Pearsall 186), and would probably have eschewed accompaniment and been received in court with greater attention. Pearsall elabourates this distinction as follows: "the role of the poet in this age of residual orality (when the conventions of oral delivery continue still to be dominant) is not that of the old performer-minstrel, but that of a new kind of performer-participant, part of the group, not a mere entertainer"(173). Still, the performer-participant poet of court making was constrained within a prescribed linguistic framework by the expectations of the practice: "the "maker" offered a ritualistic rehearsal, with minute variation, of familiar tropes of socially valuable modes of speaking and feeling"(Patterson 119). Also, the octosyllabic line has a distinctively sing-song quality, and this early poetry of Chaucer's was still much closer to the style of minstrelsy than the pentameter he would later adopt as his preferred form of expression.

The transitional role occupied by the court maker, somewhere between minstrel and man of letters, had frustrating consequences for any poet in Chaucer's England with aspirations towards patronage.[4] Richard Firth Green's definitive book, *Poets and Princepleasers,* provides a comprehensive view of the historical context for this question. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the minstrel had been responsible for the performance of both music and poetry; however, by Chaucer's time this role had been split and "the traditional role of the professional minstrel was usurped…by a new breed of amateur household poet"(Green 103). Minstrels continued to receive aristocratic and royal patronage, but strictly in their socially devalued capacity as musicians, mere

entertainers. The amateur household poets, or makers, of which the young Chaucer was no doubt one, did not inherit a share in the court's munificence along with the minstrel's role as performing poet. Green explains this in light of recent changes in the tastes of the aristocracy, who were growing increasingly involved in literary pursuits, including both an interest in history and the classics, as well as in games of courtly love poetry. As a result of this change, the performing poet was no longer seen as someone separate from and unequal to the court audience, which stripped the role of its mystique as well as its financial reward. As Green points out:

> The reason for this is not difficult to understand: whereas a man may be willing to pay entertainers to play before him, he will be less ready to reward directly companions who join with him in communal play…The minstrel might cry 'largesse' quite openly, but not the circumspect household poet. (127)

Because of this newly communal and thus unrewarded status, the court poet could not hope to win patronage simply for the composition of frivolous verse, instead "the writer's only hope of receiving an actual payment for his work lay either in writing to a specific commission or in preparing a suitably impressive presentation copy"(Green 203). Both of these were formidable tasks, and records of their actual occurrence are rare, at least in England.

Taking into account Chaucer's upbringing in the midst of this transition, scholarship has been divided over his possible receipt of literary patronage. External evidence is unequivocal; no record exists of his having ever accepted money for his poetry: "amongst the nearly five hundred surviving Chaucer life-records edited by Crow and Olson, not a single one gives him the title of poet or links him with any kind of poetic activity"(Green 6). However, Chaucer's work shows some internal evidence of his having written under the auspices of royal or aristocratic benevolence. Throughout

Chaucer's work there are subtle and not so subtle manifestations of what Joseph Loewenstein has dubbed "the bibiliographic ego," further defined by Kathryn Kerby-Fulton as: "any manifestation of authorial self-consciousness which serves to establish, protect, or market the author" including occasions of "overt literary mendicancy"(Kerby-Fulton 79). Kerby-Fulton's paper "Langland and the Bibliographic Ego" looks at some of the more prominent examples in Chaucer's work, such as the "Prologue to the Legend of Good Women" and the "Complaint to his Purse." She rightly observes that the former instance "provides scope for some delicate grumbling about the plight of the poet in the world of courtly patronage"(80) and the latter appears to have been "written to entice patronage"(82). It remains entirely possible, however, that Chaucer never actually received any direct remuneration for his poetry, and internal references to patronage may instead represent what Kerby-Fulton calls "rhetorical applications of petitionary conventions"(82). Whichever side of the debate over *literary* patronage one enters, what is certain is that Chaucer spent most of his life employed in some capacity by the royal family, either as a courtier or in a variety of official roles. Whether these appointments were in any sense connected to his literary abilities is also widely contended; on the one hand, poetry may have won him favour and attention, and on the other, his official duties would have prevented him from writing poetry, as Pearsall observes:

> "There is no suggestion that his annuities and gifts and offices were the reward for his poetry; indeed the job at the customs, with its stipulation that Chaucer must keep the records in his own hand, might well have stopped a lesser man from writing poetry altogether. (180)

In addition to the probability that Chaucer was never paid to write poetry, we must also admit the possibility that he was offered a commission or patronage position and turned it

down, preferring to write on his own time unconstrained by "the obsequiousness that went with the acknowledgement of patronage"(Pearsall 189).

Chaucer's early experiences with the competition between poets engaged in court making, then, was not necessarily marked by a system of direct financial reward for the best verse, instead, the social competitions being enacted for political rather than literary favour were refracted through the literature. This was manifested in various ways, including the everyday diversions such as those detailed by Green: "Some medieval games, it is true, seem to have existed solely as a vehicle for flirtation…but more interesting are those which involved some kind of literary skill: the setting of riddles, for example, or even the competitive improvisation of verses"(116). Thus, when Green speaks of "the cutthroat competition for court patronage,"(104) he is describing a place where there exists a single source of wealth, the lord or "stremes hed / of grace"("Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan" 43), below whom all courtiers are competing supplicants. This was where Chaucer found his audience, aptly described by Pearsall as his "listening and reading public, whose tastes and responses both acted as an encouragement in the task of writing and also had an influence in shaping the manner in which that task was carried out"(178). Participation in the "game" of court poetry, however, does not necessarily mean Chaucer was its prisoner, as we find in the writing of later poets under the Tudors. For someone as discerning about his art as Chaucer, the very idea of patronized poetry would probably have entailed some difficult compromises, a tension examined by Steven Justice in "Inquisition, Speech, and Writing."[5] Justice observes: "patronage employment, while recognizing and rewarding talent, underemploys it, stupefying the beneficiary," and this "both marks the experience of meritocratic advancement and displays the fissures in

meritocratic faith in the bureaucratic culture of late-medieval England"(5). This disagreement between faith in the possibility of meritocratic advancement and frustration at the narrow confines within which merit is measured was one of the defining themes of the era. It is often reflected explicitly in Chaucer's poetry, for instance in his treatment of the idea of "gentilesse" as social merit in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and "Gentilesse."

For the court maker, in his newly defined role as a performer/participant before peers, the measure of artistic "gentilesse," or poetic merit, would have come from one source: audience feedback. In Paul Strohm's words: "the idea of art without audience would probably have seemed either contradictory or absurd to Chaucer, if in fact he could have entertained it at all"(47). For Chaucer, it was clearly the audience that licensed the poet to speak, as revealed by his various references to the fate of speakers who have "noon audience" and are shamed into silence (*Melibee* 1045/"Nun's Priest Prologue" 2801). Indeed, Chaucer often seems virtually obsessed with the power of the audience, as noted by Lerer in *Chaucer and His Readers*: "throughout his major narratives Chaucer presents a class of readers and writers subjected to the abuse of their audience"(3). This is no doubt because, at least at court, poetic merit was measured by the speaker's ability to engage the audience. This audience was also no longer as passive in its feedback responses as the audience of a minstrel two centuries before, according to Green:

> The essential mystery had gone out of the story-teller's role; no longer could he exploit the theatrical possibilities of a privileged position to manipulate the response of an admiring audience. Chaucer's literary abilities did not set him apart from his fellows at court; on the contrary, they gave him an entry into an aristocratic society thoroughly conversant with the conventions binding the poet's imaginary world and confident in its role of literary arbiter. (111)

The additional presence of a patron or lord would in effect have magnified the poet's sense of subjugation, since the audience would in that case become something more than

a "literary arbiter," licensing the poet not only to speak, but also to eat and remain alive. Even in the absence of an actual authorizing patron or lord, the *idea* of a patron still pervades Middle English poetry written for social equals, as most of Chaucer's seems to have been.[6] Given the effect of patronage systems on medieval society and literature, constraining discourse within well-defined rings while intensifying competition, it is easy to imagine Chaucer finding an obvious analogy in the low country sport of wrestling for the ram. References to wrestling occur twice in *the Canterbury Tales*, first in the *General Prologue* description of the Miller: "At wrastlyng he would have alwey the ram,"(548) and the second in the *Tale of Sir Thopas:* "Of wrastlyng was ther noon his peer, / ther any ram shal stonde,"(740).[7] These may not be direct allegorical references to the overall storytelling battle that frames them, but they certainly evoke the image of that struggle, especially with the present and prominent prize standing by, symbolizing the tantalizing wealth of the patron.

The second "period" of Chaucer's poetry is strongly influenced by the Italian poets, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Pearsall describes Chaucer's first encounter with the great poets of the Italian Renaissance (probably around 1373) as a kind of awakening for him, imagining the very moment when he (Chaucer) first came into contact with them and was suddenly overwhelmed. This attractive fictionalization is based on an appraisal of the impoverished state of literature in England during Chaucer's youth, and the sudden and remarkable impact the Italians had on the poetry he was writing. Part of this awakening was "the revelation to [Chaucer] of an acknowledged nobility in the vocation of poet, in which he was in the service of neither court nor church, neither an entertainer nor a propagandist"(Pearsall 103). Equally liberating for Chaucer was the discovery of

iambic pentameter. The outcome of his encounter with Italian poetry, especially Boccaccio's, was an apparent determination to import this literary treasure to England.

> "Chaucer's career as a poet can be seen, and very significantly seen, as the achievement of something comparable for the English language, and equally as effecting, in England, the transformation of the bard and *trouvere* into the 'man of letters', the poet with a public voice in the commonwealth." (Pearsall 104)

Chaucer would also have encountered the notion of "laureation" for the first time in Italy. Green notes the significance of laureation not just to Chaucer, but to general literary history: "One of the most important events in the history of the poet's search for recognition was the formal laureation of Petrarch by Robert of Sicily in 1341"(209). Petrarch himself actually arranged for his own laureate coronation in imitation of the Roman tradition, with some crucial errors noted in Earnest Hatch Wilkins' *Life of Petrarch*:

> In the days of imperial Rome there had been held on the Capitoline, once in every five years, a multiple contest that included a contest in poetry, the winner receiving a crown of oak leaves. According to the inaccurate tradition that Petrarch accepted, the crown was of laurel, and the last poet to have received it was Statius. (24)

Petrarch himself was thus responsible for establishing the laurel crown as a symbol of poetic prominence, and we have him to thank for a title much preferable to "poet oakiate". The palpable result of Petrarch's coronation was that it made him "the most famous private citizen then living"(Wilkins 29), something that could hardly have been lost on Chaucer or any other practicing poet. Lerer defines laureation as "the public, official sanction of *poetic prowess*"(30 emphasis added). The idea of poets aspiring to "prowess," which necessarily entails competition, would not have been anything new for Chaucer the courtier, but the association of prowess with true prestige and even literary immortality was something he would previously have found only in the classics, and only in continental literature. According to Pearsall the effect of this change is witnessed by

*The House of Fame*, which, although written in the tetrameter form of his early poetry, reveals Chaucer's changing view of the poet's potential role in English culture. Entering the House of Fame, Chaucer sees, "the great poets of the past stand upon pillars in rows…The honour given to poetry in being placed in such majestic surroundings comes directly from Chaucer's contact with the Italian poets and would be unimaginable in any previous writing in England, at least in English"(Pearsall 117). It is also in the *House of Fame* that the laurel makes its first appearance in English literature.[8] The social aggrandizement of laureation stood in sharp contrast to the meager rewards and limited freedom Chaucer had previously associated with poetic prowess. Laureation was to patronage what courtly making was to wrestling in the mud for a ram. In these ascending spheres of competition, each successive increase of potential reward requires exponentially greater ability and tenacity to reach the prize. Because of this, Lee Patterson views Chaucer's emulation of the Italians and aspiration to become a "poete" as a losing battle. Patterson reads the *Tale of Sir Thopas* as a sign of surrender, defaulting Chaucer into "an identity that is inevitably in opposition to that of courtly 'maker' but that can now lay no claim to the august title 'poete'"(123).

In light of the humour and exquisite *lightness* of *Sir Thopas,* however, I am unable to read it as an act of resignation. Chaucer did not *fail* in his ambition to become a "poete," as opposed to a "maker," because he never entertained serious aspirations to laureation. Piero Boitani describes Chaucer's ironic posturing before the laurel in similar terms: "In the *House of Fame*, Chaucer promises-humorously and humbly-to kiss the laurel, Apollo's tree," however, "Chaucer does not proclaim-and he never will-that he will be crowned with laurel"(156). For Chaucer, the figure of the laureate poet was

something to be reached for, but never to be grasped. This is because the laureate poets were from other times and other places, and the concept would have been incompatible with the type of literature produced in England before Chaucer.[9] This is especially ironic considering the concerted effort on the part of Chaucer's fifteenth century inheritors to write him into the role of England's first laureate, something that was only possible after his death.[10] However, Chaucer's own engagement with the Italian literary models was not concerned with a trophy such as laureation as an end; instead it was simply a means to imagine the poet's vocation outside the confines of court making.[11] On the other hand, Chaucer was no more able to escape his historical context than any other poet, which caused the humanist, literary initiative inspired by Boccaccio and Petrarch to become conflated with tropes of court making and patronage in his later work. The epitome of this melange is the *Canterbury Tales,* and it is in light of these various spheres of poetic competition that I propose to read *Sir Thopas*.

Throughout the frame-narrative of the *Canterbury Tales* the pilgrims offer each other feedback in the form of opinionated responses, dramatizing the newly defined role of the audience of peers in licensing each poet to speak. By transforming the homogeneous courtiers of the court maker's audience into a handpicked cross-section of medieval England's most diverse class, Chaucer increases the possibilities for narrative variety as well as character development in the frame. One pilgrim stands out, however, both in his abstention from the contest and his ubiquitous influence in guiding its course: the Host. It is the Host who first suggests the literary competition that makes up the *Canterbury Tales*, and he is thus responsible for delineating the rules and for introducing the prize, the ram for which they will be wrestling:

And which of yow that bereth hym best of all--
That is to seyn, that telleth in this caas
Tales of best sentence and moost solaas--
Shal have a soper at oure aller cost. (GP 796)

Chaucer also informs us in the *General Prologue* that the Host is delegated the role of judge and mediator of the contest:

And that he wolde been oure governour,
And of oure tales juge and reportor,
And sette a soper at a certeyn pris,
And we wol reuled been at his devys
In heigh and lough; and thus by oon assent
We been acorded to his juggement. (813)

The role of the Host in the *Canterbury Tales* is therefore analogous to that of a patron at court, with significant differences.[12] As the pilgrims' "governour" and dispenser of "juggement" there is no question that the power of a patron is in his hands in this contest; however, the Host is merely guardian of the purse, not the actual source of wealth, and he enjoys his influence "by oon assent" which can hardly be said of any medieval ruler.[13] Since the feedback following each tale comes most consistently from the Host, he becomes a spokesman for the audience as a whole, as indicated by *The Parson's Prologue:* "oure Hoost hadde the wordes for us all"(67). This may be read as an effacing usurpation of the audience's voice, or simply as a narrative device employed by Chaucer for the sake of brevity, allowing him to funnel the effects of audience feedback into the mouth of a single character, saving him twenty-eight speeches. The governance of the competition, however, is not democratic, and in the end it will only be the Host's voice that counts.

Ironically, the Host's most ruthless exercise of his power occurs in the instance of *Sir Thopas*. He begins in the *Prologue to Sir Thopas* by mocking Chaucer and commanding him to "telle us a tale of myrthe"(706). Chaucer meekly obliges with a

"rym I lerned longe agoon"(70), a brilliantly crafted yet grotesque parody of tail-rhyme romance poetry, which ironically also deprecates aspects of Chaucer's own practice. The *Tale of Sir Thopas* is not allowed to finish, however, since the Host rudely interrupts in the middle of the action with his now critically notorious outrage: "namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee…/ Myne eres aken of thy drasty speche. / Now swich a rym the devel I biteche! / This may wel be rym dogerel"(919).[14] What has just occurred is the failure of a poet to please either his audience or his patron, which results in immediate censor and censure. This is, of course, a carefully constructed dramatization on Chaucer's part, as noted by Gaylord "unlike other elements, the *Thopas* seems to have been composed in order to have been interrupted"(1979 p83). The Host's ensuing demand for a tale with some "murthe or som doctryne"(935) relates directly back to "best sentence and moost solaas,"(798) which were the original criteria established by the Host in the *General Prologue* for the judging of the tales. The Host's interruption of *Sir Thopas* thus reveals it as exemplary of the kind of tale that does not make the cut, failing to fulfill the criteria of "sentence" and "solaas." Without this harsh feedback, the reader would be left ignorant of the significance of these criteria. It is particularly interesting that the Host's response to *Sir Thopas* is to bar Chaucer not from speaking, but from rhyming, since this suggests a definite formal hierarchy by which the tales are being judged. Evidently rhymes are at the pinnacle, followed by "geeste," or alliterative verse, and finally prose, which is valued "at the leeste,"(934) since it represents a complete withdrawal from formalized expression.[15] By this reckoning there is a minimum aesthetic standard that one has to meet to be allowed to compete using rhymes, and the minstrelsy associated with tail-rhyme romance does not meet that standard.

Just as poetic merit was determined in Chaucer's England by the feedback of the audience and patron, the Host's feedback in *the Canterbury Tales* functions as fictional quality control, determining poetic merit among the pilgrims.[16] So far I have been using the word "feedback" simply to indicate the praise and blame responses Chaucer employs throughout the frame narrative to give a sense of relative standing in the competition. There is, however, a greater depth to the function of feedback within *the Canterbury Tales*. There has recently been considerable research in the physical, natural, and social sciences into the operation of "feedback loops," some of which may add to our understanding of Chaucer's use of feedback in the *Tales*. A feedback loop is any cycle or system in which some part of the output is returned to the beginning, affecting further output. Feedback loops have been identified throughout the natural world, from population ecology and capitalist economics to behavioural psychology and political science. These feedback loops come in two distinct forms, positive and negative. Positive feedback loops amplify themselves indefinitely, since their output increases their input, which in turn further increases their output. The classic example of a positive feedback loop is the whine of microphone feedback through a power amplifier. In literature, an excellent description of positive feedback occurs in Shakespeare's Hamlet, when Hamlet describes his parents' relationship before his father's murder: "Why, she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on"(1.2.143). Positive feedback loops can also be found at work historically among poets engaged in social and literary competition. Anthony Marotti's New Historicist article on Elizabethan court poetry, "Love is not Love," contains one such example:

> Sidney's (exaggerated) social prestige enhanced the contemporary value of his sonnet collection, elevating the form in the hierarchical literary system. But…the equation could work the other way: just as social status could bring aesthetic merit in its train, so

> aesthetic merit could confer a kind of social prestige. This belief is yet another version of the wish for a social system in which abilities count more than birth, and gentlemen are made not born. (418)

In this example, social prestige and literary aesthetic merit reciprocally amplify one another, in an escalating attempt on the poet's part to write himself into laureateship; this is another variation of the meritocracy model found in Chaucer's "Gentilesse."

The second model is the negative feedback loop, which has a stabilizing rather than an amplifying effect. A negative feedback loop is defined in *The Academic Press Dictionary of Science and Technology* as "any control system in which feedback is used to compare actual performance with a standard representing the desired performance"(Morris 812). This is an exact description of the Host's feedback within *the Canterbury Tales*. The actual performance of each pilgrim is measured against the performance desired by the highly demanding audience. This seems to strike at the heart of the function of *Sir Thopas* within *the Canterbury Tales*, since *Sir Thopas* represents the tale that strays furthest from the standard of desired performance within the competition, which is why it is interrupted the most rudely. By staging this great ironic self-sacrifice of his own poetic persona, Chaucer seems to be establishing a system of quality control that reflects directly on the rest of the tales. This relationship goes beyond simple contrast, since the example of *Sir Thopas*' serves as a signpost or deterrent for the other pilgrims, actively contributing to the success of the other tales in the competition.[17] This is precisely what research has shown negative feedback loops are meant to do: "when negative feedback is employed, the system with feedback is found to possess improved characteristics relative to the nonfeedback version"(Considine 1204). Although Chaucer lacked the terminology I have been using to describe these dynamics, it would not have been terribly difficult for him to deduce the basic principles of

feedback from observing competition among poets at court.[18] A later analogue can be seen in Charles Darwin, whose observations of finches on the Galapagos Islands allowed him to deduce the theory of evolution through natural selection. The competition that leads to evolution in Darwin's theory is also driven by a series of feedback loops, operating at the level of population genetics.[19] It was Chaucer's genius to weave these crucial elements of active competition and feedback into his masterpiece, making it a static text that paradoxically also seems to be evolving.

Thus far I have argued that Chaucer's framing of the *Canterbury Tales* as a storytelling competition, with the inclusion of *Sir Thopas* as a negative feedback loop, reflects in various ways his experience of competition among poets in late medieval England. This reading views the text as primarily *reflective*, but it is also in some respects *prescriptive*. Although he seems loathe to admit it--"Chaucer never claims anywhere in his canon that he has written something wholly new"(Koff 37)--Chaucer was most likely aware of the relatively unprecedented innovation of his poetry in the English language. He was probably also aware that he was being imitated fairly early on, and there is a well-documented awareness in Chaucer's work of the ability of literature, both in style and content, to proliferate through its influence.[20] Since the *Canterbury Tales* seems to have been Chaucer's final project, it is reasonable to assume he was writing it with a mind towards its possible influence on English literature after his death. Observing the various literary trends at work during his life, Chaucer may have picked up on competition and audience feedback as important factors in the continuing development of English literature, which is often prone to stagnation, as he well knew.

The historical role of active and opinionated audiences in shaping medieval literature is one of the foremost themes of Green's *Poet's and Princepleasers*:

> That the aristocratic audiences of the fourteenth century were generally more literate, more knowledgeable about literary matters, more familiar with the conventions of love poetry, and more likely to include practicing poets than those of earlier centuries, might be held to account for some degree of artistic self-consciousness in the poets who catered to them, might indeed be seen as a stimulus towards greater literary sophistication and technical brilliance. (113)

Chaucer's emphasis on competition and the importance of audience feedback could therefore be read as prescriptions, a kind of blueprint for how to build towards a continually evolving ideal of literature.[21] The *Canterbury Tales* could therefore be read as a form of literary Utopia, in which all members of society are potentially brilliant poets, regardless of vocation, able to perform and also to provide the audience feedback necessary to ensure a high standard of performance.

My emphasis on Chaucer's emphasis on the necessity of competition and audience feedback in poetry may seem exaggerated, or, in the context of *Sir Thopas,* masochistic; however, Chaucer and I, ostensibly, have good reason to do so. When evaluating the usefulness of competition and audience response, it is important to consider the possible outcome of their complete removal from poetry. This is not difficult to do, for us, because there is considerably less emphasis on these elements in poetry today than there was in Chaucer's time,[22] partially because we associate poetry with reading as much as reciting. For Chaucer, however, writing "is virtually synonymous with "speche" and "tunge,"(Gaylord 1981 p322), and the inevitable and palpable consequence of relaxed competition and disregard for the audience's response was the further proliferation of doggerel. This is what prompted Chaucer to remind us of "the oft-forgotten presence of the audience in the literary equation, and the ability of that audience to redefine or even

to reject outright a literary text"(Daileader 27). Furthermore, I would argue that the Host's response to *Sir Thopas*, though considerably dramatized, is directly based on Chaucer's personal experience as a young poet. It is, in essence, a staging of every performing poet's worst fear. Although we associate him with high-esteem and veneration, "the father of English poetry," Chaucer's early experiments with verse are unknown to us, and it is unlikely that the *Romaunt of the Rose,* attributed to the late 1360s, sprang fully mature from his pen. It is easy to imagine the young Chaucer, eager to play the games of courtly making, reciting his verses to some opinionated individual, who thought nothing of putting him forcefully in his place. As brutally scornful as the Host is of Chaucer in the *Thopas/Melibee* link, the comedy of the scene seems to come from a mature place, beyond any fear of ever incurring such a tirade again. From this privileged vantage, at the end of a life dedicated in no small degree to the composition of literature and the study of versification, Chaucer would have been free to reflect on the ultimate value of early encounters with hostile audiences during his struggle to distinguish himself. It was, we might say, with the ram in his hands that Chaucer composed his ode to wrestling.

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[1] Paul Strohm's *Social Chaucer* discusses the framing of the *Canterbury Tales* as the result of a "literary imperative, which is to create a socially diverse group drawn from the most dynamic fourteenth-century

social strata, whose social and vocational conflicts will provide good possibilities for staging a diverse collection of tales." (68)

[2] Besides the possible connotation of a "free lunch," Chaucer's choice of prize creates a competitive framework with no runners up, where everyone loses (but doesn't lose much) except the winner, who is never announced.

[3] Pearsall cautions: "References to Chaucer's debt to the French poets may suggest a cunning mosaic made out of their leavings, and Chaucer is not at all unwilling on occasion to encourage this fiction, as in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* (F. 66-83). But in reality he makes all new and in so doing makes the French poets, rather unfairly, seem stilted and contrived"(85).

[4] See for instance Green: "there is very little evidence that the enlightened attitude towards literature implied by the very word 'patronage' was commonly to be met with in medieval courts; the king might employ tailors, armourers, goldsmiths, tapestry-makers, and painters; he did not, on the face of it at least, employ poets"(11).

[5] Although Justice's discussion of scribal patronage rather than literary patronage, the effect would have been the same, since payment in both cases requires conformity to the limitations of the work being patronized.

[6] Strohm: "Although current consensus regards Chaucer as writing mainly for social equals, we would, as Elizabeth Salter reminds us, be wrong to deny him any audience in the inner circles of the court." (51)

[7] "Skeat glosses the word *ram* here as "the usual prize at a wrestling match"; and *stonde* as "to be placed in sight of the competitors." (Williams 148)

[8] This is noted by Piero Boitani in *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*: "Thus, the evergreen laurel appears for the first time in English poetry, its shade protecting the mysterious song, the 'vois memorial' of the Muse"(156).

[9] Lerer points to the *Clerk's Prologue*, where the Clerk pays tribute to "Faunceys Petrak, the laureit poete"(31), emphasizing from the start that Petrarch is dead: "What strikes us here is not so much a critical description of the man or of his works but a simple fact. Petrarch is dead. He…shows us most pointedly that to become such a laureate-and in fact to be a poet at all-is to be dead…Poetry, it has been said, is something that goes on only in the perfect tense…"Poseye" to Chaucer and his contemporaries was a literary project toward which the living could only aspire"(30).

[10] In "Writing Like the Clerk: Laureate Poets and the Aureate World" Lerer details the fascinating conflation of the words "aureate" and "laureate" in the minds of Fifteenth Century Chaucer imitators such as Lydgate, who came to associate the benefits of laureation more and more with financial gain, and created an entire mythology around Chaucer's role as England's first laureate, which, of course, he wasn't. "Chaucer is the laureate *because* of his finesse with words, and it would seem that by the later fifteenth century *laureate* and *aureate* have become virtually interchangeable terms"(Lerer's emphasis 47). The association of poetic prowess with getting paid, however, is not something we can hold Chaucer accountable for.

[11] It could be argued that this emphasis on process over product finds its clearest expression in the *Canterbury Tales*, a religious pilgrimage that ends before the shrine is reached, and a storytelling contest without a winner.

[12] For my reading of the Host, I am indebted to Lerer's discussion of the *Clerk's Prologue:* "I suggest we read it as an allegory of commission, that is, as an exploration of relationships of power and powerlessness that define the quality of patronized literature. To do so, I suggest, too, that we see the Host as Chaucer's patron of the piece, as something of a sovereign of the Canterbury court"(31).

[13] In the *Clerk's Prologue*, the Host reiterates his authority and the pilgrims' promise to yield to it: "for what man that is entred in a pley, / He nedes moot unto the pley assente"(10). As Benson's footnote concurs, this is a reminder that they are involved in a game with specific rules, broken at the participants' peril.

[14] Gaylord draws attention to the word "dogerel" with the observation: "insofar as surviving written evidence can tell, Harry Baily has here invented a word. Familiar, all too familiar, as its meaning and exemplars may be today, at the moment of the utterance of *Sir Thopas* it must be taken as indicating something extraordinary"("Dogerel" 85). Whether Chaucer invented the word, or was simply the first to record it, it is appropriate that *Sir Thopas* exists as our first definitive example of what doggerel rhyme looks and sounds like. Gaylord's comment that today doggerel is "all too familiar" seems to imply that the appraisal of rhyme as crappy or stupid requires a modern sensibility, but I would argue that *Sir Thopas*

suggests otherwise, and probably reflects a relatively common attitude towards much of the era's vacuous rhyme.

[15] I don't mean to suggest that this is an appraisal of the relative value of verse and prose in general. Rather, the hierarchy is established within the specific context of *this* competition. Such value judgements are necessarily provisional, determined by the external circumstances within which the forms exist.

[16] The *Oxford Dictionary of Current English* describes "feedback" as "public response to an event"(317), the same response that I have argued was experienced by Chaucer as instrumental to the determination of merit in various literary spheres. What is truly remarkable, however, is that the word "feedback" *does not exist in the OED*. This means it is a recent coinage, but presumably the concept of feedback, as distinct from simply "response," which does not necessarily have any effect, is much older.

[17] Another way *Sir Thopas* adds to the aesthetic merit of the system as a whole is simply by contrast, since it makes the rest of the *Tales,* and indeed most of Chaucer's poetry, look and sound so good. In Gaylord's words: "The return of couplets is a return to fresh air, and now, after the *Thopas*, everything seems in sharper focus, more immediate and brimming with life"("Dogerel" 104).

[18] For those who would argue that this scientific approach was beyond Chaucer (*please*), I would point to his *Treatise on the Astrolabe* and well-documented interest in alchemy.

[19] If the models offered by the natural sciences seem too far removed from application to literature and culture, feedback is also studied by behavioral psychologists, who define it as "any kind of direct information from an outside source about the effects of one's behavior"(Morris 812). Certainly the Host's complaint in the *Thopas/Melibee* link that his "eres aken" would qualify as a direct effect of Chaucer's "drasty speche"(923).

[20] Pearsall: "Chaucer was also beginning, during these years [mid-1380s], to win a measure of public recognition as a poet. Some of this recognition is in the form of poetic imitation"(130).

[21] Benson has also picked up on this possibility: "in the larger contrast between *Melibee* and *Thopas*, Chaucer is not comparing bad to good, but illustrating different ways of using language… we can be sure that neither represents the poets own *ideal of literature*"(43 my emphasis).

[22] Two notable exceptions to this gross generalization are Spoken Word or Slam poetry, and hiphop lyrics, both of which are written for recitation in highly competitive oral settings, where the audience's reaction actively determines the fate of each speaker.

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