Chaucerian Figures: An Overview

by James Como (November 2017)

Canterbury Tales Illustration, Victor G. Ambrus, 1995

Three impediments prevent our age from fully appreciating the achievements of Geoffrey Chaucer (1343?-1400), especially *The Canterbury Tales*: the apparent strangeness of the prevailing literary conventions of his day (along with the remoteness of

medieval society), his Middle English, and Rhetoric. The first requires that a reader work, at annotations and other commentary: but it is do-able. The second has proven to be effectively translatable.[1]

But the last is a sticking point. Together 1/ the roots and morphology of Geoffrey's inherited rhetorical theory, 2/ its ubiquity in the Middle Ages (and then in the Renaissance, dominating the schools, in particular Shakespeare's), 3/ its demanding detail (and often the misrepresentation of that detail by scholars who might have known better), and, finally, 4/ the poet's command and unrelenting use of it. Together these four items make reading Chaucer and comprehending his art a daunting task.

And for many readers, nothing from the precincts of rhetoric is more daunting than . . . repetitio, isocolon, exclamatio, apostrophe, occultatio, frequentatio, asyndeton, commoratio . . . (The Greek names, e.g. homoeoteleuton, a personal favorite, are even more fun.) In short, to know *The Canterbury Tales* one simply cannot get around figures of speech, nor should one want to: figures form the contours of Chaucer's landscapes. These 'colours', however, are not the only figures that matter, or even those that matter most. The great rhetoricians from Geoffrey's distant and nearer past, along with—especially with—the twentieth century scholars who have contended with them and their influence on him and his art, are the guides who, at the end of the day, have given us a Chaucer who surely approximates the poet-in-his-time and the rhetoric-in-the-poet: its roots, ubiquity, difficulty, and Chaucer's command of it. So, to serve my dual focus, I offer a study (albeit abbreviated) and a story, replete with conflicts and plot twists.

Here are Chaucer's own references to rhetoric in the *Tales*: wry and *faux* self-deprecating (and thus very deceptive), revealing a double-edged vision of the handbooks that abounded in his day and a sophisticated conception of narrative voice.[2]

    That whan thy worthy kyng Richard was slayn
    With shot, compleynedest his deeth so soore,
    Why ne hadde I now thy sentence and thy lore.
    The Friday for to chide, as diden ye?
    For on a Friday, soothly, slayn was he.
    Thanne wolde I shewe yow how that I koude pleyne
    For Chauntecleres drede and for his peyne.
    (Nun's Priest's Tale. VII.3347-3354)

    God woot that worldly Joy is soone ago;
    And if a rethor koude faire endite.
    He in cronycle saufly myghte it write
    As for a sovereyn notabilitee.
    (Ibid, 3206-3209)

    Myn Englissh eek is insufficient.
    It moste been a rhethor excellent.
    That koude his colours longynge for that art.
    If he sholde hire discryven every part.
    (Squire's Tale, V.37-40)

    As techeth art of speche hem that it leere.
    Al be it that I kan nat sowne his stile.

Ne kan nat clyrmben over so ehlgh a style . . .
        (Ibid, 104-106)

        Telle us som murie thyng of aventures.
        Youre termes, youre colours, and youre figures,
        Keepe hem in stoor til so be that ye endite
        Heigh style, as whan that men to kynges write.
        (Clerk's Prologue, IV.15-18)

        But, sires, by cause I am a burel man,
        At my bigynnyng first I yow beseche,
        Have me excused of my rude speche.
        I lerned nevere rethorik, certeyn;
        Thyng that I speke, it moot be bare and pleyn
        I sleep nevere on the Mount of Pernaso,
        Ne lerned Marcus Tullius Scithero.
        Colours ne knowe I none, withouten drede,
        But swiche coulours as growen in the mede,
        Or elles swiche as men dye or peynte.
        Colours of rethoryke been to me queynte. . . .
        (Franklin's Prologue, V.716-726)

"Queynte' he says. And I say, do not believe a word of it.

Of course the cultural conversation with rhetoric and
rhetoricians began long before Chaucer arrived on the scene.
The classical influences, for example, were few but pervasive:
Aristotle (slightly), Cicero (his De inventione, sufficiently
popular to have been translated into vulgar tongues, and
Oratore; dozens of manuscripts of the former found their way
into medieval libraries), pseudo-Cicero's Rhetorica ad
Herennium (an enormous and enduring influence, perhaps the
greatest influence on 'grammarians', schoolboys and poets),

Priscian (De praeexercitamentis rhetoricus and Institutionum grammaticum) and Aesop's fables, by way of Avianus (probably 5th c. The last two would have been studied in snippets and perhaps imitated by medieval schoolboys, whereas they would have gotten their Cicero and Herennium both first-hand and by way of anthologies).

The transitional period (through most of the eleventh century) shows inconsistencies. 'Grammaticus' became the name for a headmaster, a post held by such men as Alcuin, Bede, and Boniface (Marianus Victorianus defined grammar as "the lore of interpreting poets and story-writers and the theory of writing and speaking correctly"). But the study of *ars poetica* as such was neglected, which can come as no surprise when we note the following definitions: "a means of conveying hidden truth to the uninitiated" (St. Jerome), "the art of telling lies skillfully" (St. Augustine), and, most enlightening of all, "the re-fashioning of old stories into something new by means of fancy and ornament" (Isidore of Seville).

At first rhetoric fared no better, reverting to mere declamation, with students writing as elaborately as possible on old themes: not much of a conversation. Prose works were put into verse and tropes and figures became part of a system of grammar. To be sure, in the eighth century Alcuin had instituted Ciceronian concepts in schools as well as at Charlemagne's court, but Martianus Capella personified Rhetoric as a pompous, decorated woman, carrying weapons with which to wound her enemies. How not? Though Isidore of Seville dealt briefly with arguments and proofs (mostly neglected by others), he devoted most of his effort to schemes, tropes and meter under the heading of "grammar."

Then, in the twelfth century, John of Salisbury arrived. In his *Metalogicon,* a product of the influence of Hugh of St.

Victor, John regarded rhetoric as the "beautiful and fruitful union between reason and expression" and defined 'eloquence′ as "skill in uttering appropriately what the mind wishes to express." He wrote, "hither *grammatica* will continue to include *poetica*, or *poetica* will be lost to the liberal studies."[3]

Thereafter on the continent (though, as we shall see, probably not yet in England: but let us not forget Chaucer-the-traveler) there arrive contemporary handbooks. The *Poetria nova* (1220), heavily dependent on the *Herennium*, and Matthew of Vendome's *Ars versificatoria*, coming a half generation earlier than Geoffrey's work, would have done the heavy lifting. Other writers from the transitional period (see especially Miller's introduction to his chapter on Medieval Literary Theory in his *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds*) would have influenced some of the medieval "grammarians" but not have been directly studied by schoolboys.

These books were not simply lists of tropes and figures to be formulaically applied by unimaginative versifiers. Certainly these theorists knew their Cicero, and especially their *ad Herennium*, but they also knew narrative and dramatic art, structure and tone, voice and its varying distances from subject-matter, and they knew too the play of their work within social norms and literary conventions. In short, these writers of what we refer to as 'handbooks' (not entirely without reason: having one at hand would be helpful, then *and* now) were not naïve. Rather they were learned, having gone to school themselves on the classical authors and the transitional giants, some of whom encompassed most of the learning there was both to teach and to know.

Contemporary attention begins in 1926, when John Matthews Manly delivered a Warton Lecture on English Literature entitled "Chaucer and the Rhetoricians." He proposed a number of hypotheses concerning Chaucer's background and practice and implied what he believed to be certain very definite attitudes held by Chaucer towards the rhetoricians. We may be sure that Manly's title presents an appealing image. One could easily see the schoolboy Geoffrey busily marking off rhetorical colors in Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova*, even though that was likely not possible then. As a young poet he would seek to apply the doctrine he had worked so hard to assimilate; then as a mature creative artist, he would rebel against, and even laugh at, the practice he had taken so seriously during the early part of his career. In short, "Chaucer and the Rhetoricians" presents the picture of a life-long and deliberate battle against a doctrine which would probably bind and asphyxiate, rather than nourish, creative genius.

A good deal of significant scholarship thereafter taught us much about Chaucer's preparation and art and about medieval 'poetic' theory. Questions about his attitude towards his own art had been settled, we thought, until along came dissenters: Marie P. Hamilton (1932), Richard McKeon (1942), Dorothy Everett (1950) Ernest Curtius (1953), and Ralph Baldwin (1955). These scholars, without directly attacking Manly's bookkeeping but departing from the anti-rhetoric hostility of Manly (who had enlisted Chaucer on his team by citing examples of Chaucer's mockery of Geoffrey of Vinsauf) and of Charles Sears Baldwin, provided a bigger picture of rhetorical theory and its influence than one at ground level.

Thanks to Hamilton, Manly's method of naïvely counting tropes and figures to demonstrate the extent of rhetoric in a passage(no matter their context or application) was done.

Then came James J. Murphy, with "A New Look at Chaucer and the Rhetoricians" (1964). That a major rhetorical influence occupied for the duration a part of Chaucer's consciousness was not then in dispute. Rather Murphy substituted Evrard de Bethune's *Graecismus* (1212) for the *Poetria nova* as the dominant influence on Chaucer; and he did—presciently, as we shall see—question both the availability of rhetorical handbooks in Chaucer's day and the sort of schooling (as described in Faral's foundational commentary and collection from 1924) that young Geoffrey might have had. In the event, the game was afoot.

3.

And Chaucer knew it. His mind, like his soul, seems to have been as big as the world and all its learning, or at least as much of it as he had encountered. Did he fail to notice anything? Or forget anything? Or fail to use anything he knew? (Probably, but only because he didn't live long enough: like Leonardo, though less so, he had an aversion to closure.) And all of this attention-paying, retention, and application included the rhetoricians, not formulaically but knowingly and with pinpoint purpose.

So the *Tales* should offer ample justification both for the judgment of Chaucer made in the fifteenth century as "the fader of modern eloquence" and "the first to enlumine our language with flowres of Rhethoryke" (Lydgate) *and* for the opinion that, not at all naively but quite deliberately, he very well knew his rhetoric and how to deploy it.

Since even the most excitable reader can grow weary of figure-hunting here is a simple list of tropes and figures within *one*

very limited passage, lines 669-714 of the General Prologue, wherein we are introduced to the Pardoner. (I assign to the reader the task of looking them up: perhaps online in the *ad Herennium*, 4.19-69): *pronominatio* (669), *interpretatio* (670), and within 16 lines (675-690) we have an *effictio*, 5 *imagos*, 2 *continuatios,* a r*epetitio*, another *interpretatio,* a *correctio,* an *abusio*, 3 *significatios*, and another one each of *descriptio*, *circuitio*, and *notatio*