

Chaucer at the Edge: Middle English and the Rhetorical Tradition

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No one could call Chaucer a marginal poet; but he was at the edge in one important sense, on the boundary between the unprized vernacular in which he chose to write and the high Latin rhetorical tradition. It was thus both a cultural edge and a temporal one, in so far as rhetoric makes its presence most strongly felt in England in the Renaissance. It is indeed a commonplace of early modern scholarship that the principles of formal rhetoric were unknown in England before the sixteenth century: they arrived with humanism, and enabled all the glories of Elizabethan literature, the transformation of poetics found in Spenser and Sidney and Shakespeare. Medieval poetics are generally assumed to operate in an entirely separate sphere; and it is true that much medieval criticism focuses on other issues, notably of translation and interpretation. Sixteenth-century writers themselves, however, praised Chaucer precisely for incorporating the rhetorical tradition into English: he was the English Virgil, the master-poet, or the English Cicero, master of rhetoric. They praised him not least for his *decorum*: the Classical concept of appropriateness, and a key humanist term. If some of his writings, not least some of the Canterbury tales, did not look very Virgilian, they could still be admired on precisely those grounds; and admired he most certainly was.

Much recent criticism implies, or states, that Chaucer was no longer read by the end of the sixteenth century, but that could hardly be less true. The accessibility of his works in print gave them a dissemination they had never achieved in his own time: Thomas Speght's 1598 edition of Chaucer was the fifth large folio edition of the poet's works to have been published since 1532, and it was reprinted four years later. The number and range of quotations and allusions from the period demonstrates that the volumes were not bought just for show. Caroline Spurgeon's index of Chaucer criticism and allusions has recently been supplemented to provide more detail of early modern printed references, and it lists thousands of citations, ranging across all his works, from the *Romance of the Rose* to the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*.¹ Ballad versions appeared of some of his tales, and numerous dramatizations were made of his works for both public and private stages in England; there was even one of *Troilus* in Welsh. It was scarcely possible to mention Chaucer without describing him as a laureate poet, the father of English poetry. The paratexts provided in

¹ C. F. E. SPURGEON, ed., *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion 1357-1900*, 3 vols (1908-17; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), and JACKSON CAMPBELL BOSWELL AND SYLVIA WALLACE HOLTON, eds, *Chaucer's Fame in England: STC Chauceriana 1475-1640* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2004). For an overview, see HELEN COOPER, 'Poetic Fame,' in *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, ed. BRIAN CUMMINGS AND JAMES SIMPSON (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 361-78 (361-9).

Speght's edition also set out to explain just why he deserved this reputation – what it was that made him great. This is set out in particular in the preface written by Francis Beaumont, the father of the dramatist. There, he focuses in on Chaucer's capacity for writing with decorum:

How much had hee swarved from Decorum if hee had made his Miller, his Cooke, and his Carpenter [i.e. the Reeve], to haue told such honest and good tales, as hee made his Knight, his Squire, his Lawyer, and his Scholler tell?²

The remark probably looks rather commonplace to us. The adaptation of tale to speaker is one of the most obvious, and the most appealing, things about the *Canterbury Tales*, even though from the time of G.L. Kittredge onwards it invited one of the longest-lasting, and I would argue most misleading, ways of reading the work: that is, to interpret the tales as if they were soliloquies revealing the characters of the speakers. That was a reading that followed almost inevitably from the premises of the nineteenth-century realist novel, and it not only proved very convenient for teaching purposes but for many decades enshrined itself as orthodoxy. An increasing number of critics have been arguing firmly against it in recent years,³ but it is still important to emphasise that such psychological interpretations were not what Beaumont was talking about. He was making a much broader point about Chaucer's principles of writing, and using phrasing that meant a great deal to his Renaissance readers.

That word 'decorum' is crucial. Decorum had indeed come to be regarded as *the* quintessential quality of good style. Beaumont was not using it in its modern sense, as his immediate citation of the 'Miller's Tale' shows, and his broader argument about how the principle of decorum is fully compatible with 'these filthie delights of the baser sort of people' is illustrated by Classical writers as well as by Chaucer. The word meant not politeness or good manners, but social propriety, *appropriateness*, in a much wider sense. It had entered the English language only recently, in the mid-sixteenth century, in the wake of the rediscovery of various of Cicero's works on rhetoric and of Erasmus's use of them. The pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and Cicero's own *De oratore* had been familiar in the Middle Ages, and they refer to the need for appropriateness in speech or writing, but they do not use the crucial word: one should write or speak appropriately, 'apte', but they do not elaborate on that at all extensively. The work that was crucial for bringing 'decorum' to the forefront of early humanist criticism, and the only one of Cicero's actually to use the word, was his *Orator* (a work distinct from the *De oratore*), which was rediscovered only in 1421. It is widely credited with kick-starting the Renaissance interest in rhetoric, and, as a

² *The Workes of...Geffrey Chaucer* (1598), Preface (unfoliated). Quotations from Chaucer's text are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, general ed. LARRY D. BENSON (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

³ For instance, C. DAVID BENSON, *Chaucer's Drama of Style* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); A.C. SPEARING, *Textual Subjectivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 101-36; HELEN COOPER, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (London: Duckworth, 1983), 72-90, and *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 15-23.

consequence, enabling the great flowering of early modern literature, English literature included. That in turn raises the question of whether in exemplifying such principles Chaucer was just doing what came naturally, warbling his native woodnotes wild; or whether he was consciously working with that idea in mind, whatever his specific term for it. Linked to both answers, at least in the premisses held by some present-day early modernists, is the question of whether he could have been writing 'good' literature in that humanist, rhetorically alert sense.

There has been a long debate over whether or not Chaucer knew the Classical rhetoricians, a debate that goes back at least to J.M. Manly's *Chaucer and the Rhetoricians* of 1926, which declared that he did not. In the course of the fourteenth century, the study of rhetoric seems largely to have been squeezed out from the trivium between grammar and logic, and there was a gap in the copying of what we think of as the standard medieval rhetorical works in England for much of the century. The recent work of Martin Camargo has however uncovered a marked revival in interest in those works during Chaucer's poetic career.⁴ It is much less plausible to argue now, as Manly did, that Chaucer knew Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* only in anthologized extracts – in passages such as provided him with the analogy in *Troilus* between mental structures and the construction of a house, or that enabled him to cite its author by name in the 'Nun's Priest's Tale' to head his parodic summary there of its lament for Friday. Parody itself bespeaks deep familiarity: for Chaucer, the models of rhetoric were not to be taken straight. This is true even of his reference to the narrower issue of the colours of rhetoric, those figures of thought and speech such as get a mention in the Prologue to the 'Franklin's Tale', when he has his speaker insist, in a nice rhetorical flourish (a *captatio benevolentiae*: *Canterbury Tales* V.723-6), that he never learned rhetoric and knew no colours except those of flowers or paintings, in a kind of inside-out metaphor that likewise contradicts itself.

Those colours, however, as the Franklin's formulation suggests, are predominantly matters of stylistic ornament. Rhetoric itself, and decorum with it, are altogether bigger than that, in a way that has been strongly argued recently in particular by Rita Copeland and Mary Carruthers. Copeland, in one of the few essays to look at Chaucer's rhetoric as distinct from those ornaments of style, describes rhetoric as 'a fundamental way of thinking and constructing experience... a site for negotiating the largest categories of thought, representation and social being';⁵ and decorum, as the basic principle of rhetoric, is at the root of that issue. It is therefore bigger even than ideas of authorship, which have received more concentrated attention recently in relation to Chaucer.⁶ At its simplest, decorum meant that the style should fit the subject, the audience, the speaker and the occasion, a set known as the circumstances; but it was much more than that. The entry for 'decorum' in Richard

⁴ MARTIN CAMARGO, 'Chaucer and the Oxford Renaissance of Anglo-Latin Rhetoric', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 34 (2012), 173-207, summarizes the debate as well as offering a major revision.

⁵ 'Chaucer and Rhetoric', in SETH LERER, ed., *The Yale Companion to Chaucer* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 122-43 (123, 125).

⁶ See further A.J. MINNIS, *The Medieval Theory of Authorship* (London: Scolar Press, 1984); on Chaucer, especially pp. 190-210.

Lanham's *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* includes the insistence that it is different from other aspects of rhetoric in that

as a stylistic criterion [it] finally locates itself entirely in the beholder and not the speech or text... Decorum is a gestalt established in the perceiving intelligence... It thus becomes – and clearly was for classical education – not only a rhetorical criterion but a general test of basic acculturation... It *creates* the social reality which it reflects... We create, with maximum self-consciousness and according to precise rules, an intricate structure of stylistic forces balanced carefully as to perceiver and perceived, and then agree to forget that we have created it and to pretend that it is nature itself that we are engaging with. Rhetorical theory has spent endless time discussing how to adjust utterance to this pre-existing social reality without reflecting how that reality has been *constituted* by the idea of decorum.⁷

I am not claiming that Beaumont had Lanham's formulation fully worked out in his mind, though the passage does give a good sense of why the Renaissance should have made the idea of decorum so central; but it does invite further thought about this comment in relation to Chaucer. I want to argue that Chaucer had in a manner of speaking read Lanham – or at least had come to similar conclusions.

The immediate stimulus for the lecture underlying this article lay in a seminar series on the trivium held in Cambridge early in 2014, and in particular in a notable paper given by Kathy Eden with Colin Burrow as the respondent. They were speaking about the concept of decorum from Cicero to Erasmus – or rather, about decorum *in* Cicero and Erasmus: there was no conception that anything might have happened in between. Both speakers highlighted decorum as what decisively separated Renaissance from medieval writing, and which enabled a new enlightened species of discourse, the rebirth of good style for the first time since the ancient world. Specifically, they highlighted the idea of adapting style to circumstances, to the time, place, addressee, subject, purpose and so on, as being new. I found this rather disconcerting, as I had long been using Beaumont's comment as a way into Chaucer, and most particularly for how one might understand how Chaucer might have understood what he was doing: his *intentio auctoris*, which becomes the most slippery of all concepts when one is dealing with an author who specializes in the use of fallible surrogate authors. It should also be a key to how he might have been understood by the ideal readers he speaks of, the Gowers and Strodes of fourteenth-century London. So the question seemed to need deeper investigation.

To deal with the most practical matter first: the claim that decorum emerged into the European consciousness only after 1421, with the rediscovery of the text of Cicero's *Orator*. In fact, parts of the work, including the passage on decorum, had been known to medieval scholars through an art of rhetoric composed by Julius Victor, a fourth-century writer whose

⁷ RICHARD A. LANHAM, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 2nd edn (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2nd edn, 1991), 45-6.

work was crucial in transmitting Classical rhetorical ideas to the Middle Ages.⁸ The word itself was therefore not entirely inaccessible; but the idea does not depend on the word alone. Cicero uses it only once, and other major rhetorical works, Quintilian or the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, never do so. Ideas of appropriateness, of aptness, were none the less widespread in both the Classical and medieval periods, to the point where Mary Carruthers uses ‘decorum’ as a key concept in her *Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages*. Where well-known Classical texts are concerned, Horace’s *Art of Poetry* is about almost nothing else; and he, like Cicero and Quintilian and numerous medieval writers, use abundant synonyms to express a similar idea. Geoffrey of Vinsauf was not the least of these; so was John of Garland, on whom more below, and whose work, like Geoffrey’s, was being read and used as part of the revival of interest in rhetoric towards 1400.⁹ Both writers were English by origin. Geoffrey is frequently named as ‘Galfridus anglicus’, and he may have written his *Poetria Nova*, which was designed as an update of Horace for a new age, in England. One epitome of the work, also probably English, starts out with an insistence that style should be matched to subject matter, should be *conueniens et ydoneum*, fitting and appropriate.¹⁰ Geoffrey’s own preferred term is *proprie*, appropriately;¹¹ and that is typical of other medieval treatises, *proprie* meaning not propriety of manners, but according to the properties of the particular discourse. Even the idea of the adaptation of style to circumstances was widespread – though it should be noted that the word itself has two meanings. The circumstances given the most emphasis in Cicero relate to forensic rhetoric, as a scheme for describing the character and actions of a defendant, and from there they were borrowed into the context of confession, so that priests might elicit from penitents the details of their sinning; but those *ad hominem* senses existed alongside the stylistic. It is style that Albertanus of Brescia has in mind in his treatise on good speaking, the *Ars loquendi et tacendi*, in which he offers a mnemonic summary in a single leonine hexameter of the principles – the rhetorical circumstances – that the speaker must bear in mind:

Quis, quid, cui dicas; cur, quomodo, quando requiras.¹²

You must consider who you are that speaks, what you say, to whom you speak, why, in what manner, and when.

⁸ MARY CARRUTHERS, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 79; and see also p. 114.

⁹ CAMARGO, ‘Chaucer and the Oxford Renaissance’, 179-81.

¹⁰ MARTIN CAMARGO, ‘What goes with Geoffrey of Vinsauf? Codicological clues to pedagogical practices in England, c. 1225 – c. 1470’, in J. F. RUYSS, J. O. WARD and M. HEYWORTH, eds, *The Classics in the Medieval and Renaissance Classroom* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 145-74 (170-1).

¹¹ Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, ed. EDMOND FARAL, *Les Arts poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe Siècle* (repr. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1962), 194-62, line 1842-3; translation by MARGARET F. NIMS, *The Poetria Nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute, 1967).

¹² Latin text at <http://freespace.virgin.net/angus.graham/Loquendi.htm> (accessed 17.4.15). The line is offered at the very start of the work as a summary of its contents.

Albertanus is best known in Chaucerian circles as the author of the *Liber consolationis et consilii*, the original of the *Melibee*, the prose tale Chaucer assigns to himself in the *Canterbury Tales*. It is not impossible that Chaucer knew the line: the brief *Ars loquendi* often circulated together with the longer *Liber consolationis*, but his own principal or only source was a French translation of the *Liber*. Albertanus' injunction none the less testifies to a broad conception of decorum by which it encompassed every idea of fittingness, of the apt or the proper; ultimately even, in Carruthers' terms, of beauty. Its focus is on the social context of speaking, on the need for speech to establish itself in what Lanham describes as the balance between the perceiver and the perceived. Geoffrey of Vinsauf himself paraphrases the same idea (lines 1845-7). The idea was sufficiently widespread, moreover, for it to appear outside the context of rhetorical treatises. It is there, for instance, in the ekphrasis of a personified Rhetoric in Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus*, where she comes complete with both a principle of appropriateness, and a detailing of the circumstances.¹³ A concept of stylistic decorum was well entrenched in medieval critical thinking, even if the word itself was missing.

There are other sources too that express comparable ideas rather differently about the adaptation of style to circumstance, to subject, purpose and audience (Albertanus' *quid, cui, cur*). More explicit and widespread was the closely linked idea that style should be pitched in three levels, low, middle and high (*quomodo*). Augustine offers one of most widely disseminated of these analyses, in his *On Christian Doctrine*:

He then who, in speaking, aims at enforcing what is good, should not despise any of those three objects, either to teach, or to give pleasure, or to move. And when he does this with elegance and propriety, he may justly be called eloquent... [quoting Cicero] 'He, then, shall be eloquent, who can say little things in a subdued style, in order to give instruction, moderate things in a temperate style, in order to give pleasure, and great things in a majestic style, in order to sway the mind.'

And yet, while our teacher ought to speak of great matters, he ought not always to be speaking of them in a majestic tone, but in a subdued tone when he is teaching, temperately when he is giving praise or blame. When, however, something is to be done, and we are speaking to those who ought, but are not willing, to do it, then great matters must be spoken of with power, and in a manner calculated to sway the mind. And sometimes the same important matter is treated in all these ways at different times, quietly when it is being taught, temperately when its importance is being

¹³ Latin text at <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/alanus/alanus2.html> (accessed 17.4.15), III.215-26; translation in *Readings in Medieval Rhetoric*, ed. JOSEPH M. MILLER, MICHAEL H. PROSSER and THOMAS W. BENSON (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1973), 225. The work sometimes circulated together with the *Poetria Nova* in particular when Geoffrey's work was promoted as a poem in its own right rather than as a pedagogical treatise (CAMARGO, 'What goes with Geoffrey of Vinsauf', 148-9).

urged, and powerfully when we are forcing a mind that is averse to the truth to turn and embrace it.¹⁴

Here, the overriding circumstance is purpose, the 'why' of speech: a plain style is to be used for teaching, a high style to move the hearers. Chaucer demonstrates that he knows all about how high style should be deployed to move, not least when he parodies it – when his transition into high style is so overtly self-conscious that it is impossible to ascribe to any sort of naturalism. The Pardoner's outburst against the accumulated sins of the rioters is a notable example:

O cursed synne of alle cursednesse!
O traytours homycide, o wikkednesse!
O glotonye, luxurie, and hasardrye!
Thou blasphemour of Crist with vileynye
And othes grete, of usage and of pride!
Allas! mankynde, how may it bitide
That to thy creatour, which that the wroghte,
And with his precious herte-blood thee boghte,
Thou art so fals and so unkynde, allas?

CT VI.895-903

If high style is to be defined on the page (as distinct from in the minds of the hearers) in terms of its density of rhetorical colours, this is about as colourful as it is possible to get, from that long series of apostrophes to the punning and variation on 'Allas, mankynde' to 'unkynde, allas'. But this, of course, is Chaucer; he may (through the fictional Pardoner) be showing off here – he is showing off – but not for any Classical or Augustinian purpose. This is high style that has completely lost touch with any direct persuasive purpose on the author's part, or with the purpose it claims to be serving within the tale, the notional *cur dicas*, of turning people against sin: this is rather all part of the Pardoner's spiel to get money. And with that, the basic *ethical* function of rhetoric, emphasised by every single writer of every period, likewise disappears.

The most immediate connotation of the three styles in the Middle Ages was however a social one: you should keep in mind who you are that speaks and to whom you speak, *quis, cui dicas*. This is the principle that underlies every formulary, for instance – those collections of model letters and exercises. The idea was so familiar that Chaucer allows even the Host to know about it, as he demonstrates in his injunctions to the Clerk to avoid jargon ('termes') and non-literal language:

Youre termes, youre coloures, and youre figures,
Keepe hem in stoor til so be that ye endite
Heigh style, as whan that men to kynges write.

¹⁴ On *Christian Doctrine* IV.17, 19, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st series vol. 2, ed. PHILIP SCHAFF (repr. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979).

Speketh so pleyn at this tyme, we yow preye,
That we may understonde what ye say.

CT IV.16-20

On behalf of the pilgrim audience, Harry Bailey places comprehension as the top priority; he knows the Clerk is trained in rhetoric and so can do all the elaboration, but to do so would not be appropriate, not decorous, now, on the pilgrimage, and the Clerk should accordingly keep those rhetorical figures associated with high style for when he is writing to kings. The explicitness of that statement, and its association with Latin literacy through the person of the Clerk, makes Chaucer's familiarity with the idea of appropriate or proper levels of style explicit – and 'propely' is in fact Chaucer's own preferred term, as *proprie* is Geoffrey of Vinsauf's – just as the Franklin's remark about the colours of rhetoric, or the Pardoner's rhetorical firework display, bespeak a familiarity with ideas of rhetoric as ornament.

The Host's formulation points too to a different but very widely disseminated definition of the three styles. This one is again social, but it is more specifically linked to poetry and its genres and subjects, *quid dicas*: it is given its grounding in Virgil, and came down to the Middle Ages by way of the widely known commentary of Donatus and its many recyclings in *accessus ad auctores*. This related the styles to the three works of Virgil: high for epic, as in the *Aeneid*; the middle style for farming (for the purposes of Chaucer or the Renaissance, it is perhaps better thought of as the franklin or landholding level), as in the *Georgics*; and low style for pastoral, with the shepherds of the *Eclogues*. The scheme was widely familiar wherever Virgil himself was familiar, and Virgil was the foundation figure for the literary culture of Europe; so it is no surprise that it should have been picked up by medieval rhetoricians. Foremost among those was John of Garland, an Englishman working in Paris around 1230, who gives the scheme its fullest elaboration in his 'Wheel of Virgil'.¹⁵ John's wheel characterized the levels of style in terms of their appropriate characters, names, animals, implements and locations, all drawn from Virgil. This kind of schematic analysis might seem a very long way from Chaucer (who may well not have known it directly), but once allowance is made for the differences between Classical and English genres, it offers a very useful analogy for his own kind of decorum, specifically of the matching of style to genre. He uses his own English equivalent of high style for *Troilus* and the 'Knight's Tale', his works that come the closest to Classical epic; his fabliaux, by contrast, are written in a much lower style. A middle style is in evidence in tales such as the Man or Law's or the Franklin's or the Clerk's, though as it is more varied and therefore harder to exemplify, it is omitted from the table below, which shows the parallels between what John of Garland was extracting from Virgil and how Chaucer plays his own levels of style.

	<i>High style</i>		<i>Low style</i>	
	<u>John of Garland</u>	<u>Chaucer</u>	<u>John of Garland</u>	<u>Chaucer</u>
<i>character</i>	soldier, governor	knight, duke	shepherd, farmer	millor, summoner

¹⁵ *The Parisiana Poetria of John of Garland*, ed. and trans. TRAUOGOTT LAWLER (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 40-1.

<i>name</i>	Hector, Ajax	Troilus, Theseus	Tityrus	Alison, Jankyn
<i>animal</i>	horse	horse/steed, lion	sheep, cow	mouse, sheep, mare
<i>implement</i>	sword	sword	crook, plough	thwitel, coulter
<i>place</i>	city, camp	city, garden	pasture, field	yard, fen, town
<i>tree</i>	laurel, cedar	laurel, cedar	beech, pear-tree	pear-tree

If some of those items seem obvious (of course there are no dukes in the ‘Miller’s Tale’, nor coulters in the *Aeneid*), Chaucer takes the idea still further. It is easy to extend his lists of variants across the generic range of the tales:

	<i>High style</i>	<i>Low style</i>
<i>bird</i>	lark, nightingale	cock, swallow
<i>group</i>	company	route
<i>woman</i>	lady	wench

The bird that wakes you up, in other words, is the lark in Chaucer’s high-style tales, the commonplace cock in the fabliaux; birdsong belongs to the comparatively exotic nightingale in the high romances, as against the screechy swallow. Even the word for the company of pilgrims varies with the speaker, from ‘company’ to ‘route’. More interesting still, however, are words that appear in tales that we would want to assign, on the basis of their speaker or genre, to the high or low style, but that change meaning as they cross from one form to another: sliding terms such as ‘trouthe’, which in high style means a pledged word, in the low-style tales a cash contract; or ‘pitee’, compassion in the serious tales, but little more than casual sex in the ‘Merchant’s Tale’.

Chaucer also, however, moves decisively beyond what John of Garland does, or was able to do. John is limited by his use of Latin; but English in the fourteenth century was developing in ways that offer a unique potential for emphasising stylistic difference, whereby difference of register is indicated not just by the associations of particular objects but very often by the etymologies of the words themselves. Chaucer thus builds the contrast of style not only into his selection of *things*, but into the words that express them. His high-style list relies heavily on romance-derived words compared with his low-style, which specializes in words of Old English derivation. It is evident not only in words such as duke, lion, laurel and cedar; but even in the choice of close synonyms, the French ‘city’ against the germanic ‘town’, the French ‘garden’ (cf. *jardin*) against the germanic ‘yard’ (OE *geard*). It is not an absolute distinction – Middle English, for instance, kept the germanic ‘lady’ and ‘knight’ despite their high social status. It is however a marked pattern across the whole of the *Canterbury Tales* – and indeed across the whole English language as it was developing in the fourteenth century, though Chaucer seems to have been the first to realize its full implications for rhetoric. Thus the Knight’s tale famously has a much higher proportion of romance words than the Miller’s or the Reeve’s, so that its Classical setting and its high style, its lexical, social and generic levels, become inseparable. Similarly, in the fabliaux, the everyday germanic vocabulary is of a piece with their social and generic level and their contemporary urban settings.

'Consider who you are that speaks' is the first of Albertanus' rhetorical circumstances; but the speakers of the *Canterbury Tales* are not the real author, as the *artes poeticae* assume, but those varied pilgrims with all their different social and moral levels. The *gentils* on the pilgrimage properly use a higher style than the churls, and Chaucer, for all his associations with sophisticated London or courtly audiences, encompasses both. He addresses the disparity directly in his disingenuous passages of apology (or advertisement) in the General Prologue and the Miller's Prologue.

But first, I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
That ye n'arete it nat my vileynye,
Thogh that I pleyedly speke in this mateere,
To telle yow hir wordes and hire cheere,
Ne thogh I speke hir wordes proprely.
For this ye knowen al so wel as I,
Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe....
Eek Plato seith, whoso can hym rede,
The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede.

(CT I.725-36, 741-2)

Speaking 'proprely', for a man who purports to be giving a word-by-word account of someone else's words, may result in some very improper talk. Hence, in the Miller's Prologue, Chaucer, in his quasi-fictional role as reporter, warns his audience that a 'cherles tale' is to follow with language to match; but he beseeches 'every gentil wight' among them,

For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
Or elles falsen some of my matere.

(CT I.1371-5)

Accuracy requires attention to the properties of the speaker, and the Miller is a churl telling a churl's tale; so Chaucer adapts his style accordingly, to make it appropriate, decorous, right down to the patterns of etymology governing the tale.

The question of appropriate vocabulary brings with it further issues, with Chaucer's recognition that words do not have single fixed meanings but can vary with context. However much he may appeal to Plato's principle that 'the word moot be cosyn to the dede' (a debate that itself goes back to Plato's *Cratylus*, and had been argued over ever since), he is acutely conscious that words do not necessarily have any straightforward fit with the concepts they express; and the issue of the equivalence or otherwise of word to deed raises a

whole new set of problems and opportunities that are unique to someone writing in English. The opportunities are already apparent in those lists, in the way in which words that look like synonyms can have very different connotations depending on their etymological origins. Chaucer discusses this explicitly too, this time in the mouth of the Manciple, where he again uses Plato as his point of departure for speaking 'propely' (the derivations of the key words are indicated):

The wise Plato seith, as ye may rede,
 The word moot nede accorde with the dede.
 If men shall telle propely a thyng,
 The word moot cosyn be to the werkyng.
 I am a boystous man, right thus seye I,
 Ther nys no difference, trewely,
 Bitwixe a wyf that is of heigh degree, (germanic)
 If of hir body dishonest she bee,
 And a povre wenche, oother than this – (germanic)
 If it so be they werke bothe amys –
 But that the gentile, in estaat above, (romance)
 She shal be cleped his lady, as in love;
 And for that oother is a povre womman, (germanic)
 She shal be cleped his wenche or his lemman. (germanic)
 And God it woot, myn owene deere brother,
 Men leyn that oon as lowe as lith that oother.
 Right so bitwixe a tittleles tiraunt (romance)
 And an outlawe, or a theef erraunt, (germanic)
 The same I seye, there is no difference.
 To Alisaundre was toold this sentence,
 That, for the tirant is of gretter myght,
 By force of meynee, for to sleen dounright,
 And brennen hous and hoom, and make al playn,
 Lo, therefore is he cleped a capitayn; (romance)
 And for the outlawe hath but smal meynee,
 And may nat doon so greet an harm as he,
 Ne brynge a contree to so greet meschef,
 Men clepen hym an outlawe or a theef.
 But, for I am a man noght textueel,
 I wol noght telle of textes never a deel;
 I wol go to my tale, as I bigan.

(CT IX.207-67)

English, with its uniquely rich set of near-synonyms deriving from that dual origin, was uniquely placed to exploit different levels of style with exceptional subtlety, to exploit the different connotations of words with similar meanings; and the late fourteenth century was the first moment when it could be done so generously, when the absorption of French- and

Anglo-Norman-derived words was at its peak. Chaucer, moreover, calls attention to the academic nature of this discussion, from its opening appeal to Plato down to the Manciple's closing reference to his not being 'textueel'. It is the first appearance of the word in English, and here it might be translated as 'not a critical theorist' – as much a lie where Chaucer as real author is concerned as is the disclaimer of rhetorical knowledge he gives to the Franklin.

If Chaucer recognized the theoretical and ethical problems of the slipperiness of language, however, it was the opportunities inherent in the richness of the consequent mix that shaped his poetic practice. The scheme of socially diverse storytelling at the basis of the *Canterbury Tales* provides him with the perfect medium for displaying such richness. How it works is demonstrated in tale after tale that shows decorum in accordance with Copeland's formulation of it as a 'fundamental way of thinking and constructing experience... a site for negotiating the largest categories of thought, representation and social being'. So the Knight tells a 'noble story' set in Classical Athens with a plot concerning love and war, composed in a vocabulary strongly inflected towards courtly French and philosophical Latin, and with exotic imagery of angels and lions and tigers; and so creates a world in which high ideals can both exist and be tested to destruction. The low-ranking Miller's fabliau is packed with everyday scenes and things in both the narrative and imagery, in a largely germanic vocabulary, to produce a world that values instant gratification and replaces questions of fate and providence with random accidents. The Second Nun tells a saint's life in which the dominant vocabulary, often derived from Latin as the language of the Church, is one of concepts or non-material things, where value inheres in the spiritual. But once the principle of decorum is established, it can be gloriously broken. That is what happens in the Merchant's tale, where the fabliau genre and the high vocabulary are at odds; in the misdirected rhetorical showmanship of the Pardoner; and perhaps best of all in the animal fable told by the socially ambivalent Nun's Priest, in a style that follows decorum not for the tale but for the individual line, switching from the hen-run to the mock heroic in an instant, and incorporating Geoffrey of Vinsauf along the way.

It is worth recalling, in conclusion, Richard Lanham's remark quoted earlier in this article about decorum locating itself in the beholder rather than in the speech or the text. It is notorious that Chaucer has received widely differing interpretations over the centuries: interpretations that vary precisely with the beholder. Behind that phenomenon is his endlessly fertile reinvention of the principles of decorum, reinventions in ways that the Classical rhetoricians never thought of, and which indeed the mixed nature of the English language helped to make possible. His familiarity with established ideas of decorum, appropriateness, might make his achievements more notable, to those who believe that such knowledge is essential for a fully eloquent stylistic accomplishment; or perhaps a disappointment for those who believe that inherent and untutored genius of such high order is more remarkable. His integration of the rhetorical basis of decorum with a newly-evolving language of mixed etymologies and registers is, however, all his own, and it is that that turns his work into the masterpiece that set the standard for future generations of English writers.