

1963

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Recommended Citation

Green, A. Wigfall (1963) "Structure of Three Minor Poems by Chaucer," *Studies in English*: Vol. 4 , Article 10.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng/vol4/iss1/10

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STRUCTURE OF THREE MINOR POEMS BY CHAUCER

by A. Wigfall Green

Three minor poems of Chaucer on abstract subjects, "Truth," "Gentilesse," and "Lak of Stedfastnesse," like many of Chaucer's other poems, indicate a sensitiveness, conscious or unconscious, to the number *three*. The dictum of Brink that "The nucleus of Chaucer's poems in isometrical stanzas is built up, as Bradshaw was the first to recognise, in such a manner that the total number of stanzas is divisible by three,"¹ is no revelation in so far as these poems are concerned, for Chaucer was following the form of the French ballade, constructed also on the basis of three.

I

"Truth" is a typical ballade: it contains three stanzas; although an envoy appears in only one manuscript and the authorship of the envoy is questioned by some scholars, it appears to be the work of Chaucer. Each of the four parts contains seven verses of five feet each rhyming ababbcc, or rime royal. The tripartite division appears in the rhyme scheme: ab/abb/cc, or ab/ab/bcc or aba/bb/cc. The three stanzas are equivalent to the three rhymes, abc. If, however, we consider the pattern of rhyme to be ab/ab-bc/c, or ab/ab/b/cc—the former justified by the separation of the refrain from the rest of the stanza, and the latter by the recognition of the rhyme of the refrain with the preceding verse—the four divisions equate the three stanzas and the envoy.

¹Bernhard ten Brink, *The Language and Metre of Chaucer Set Forth*, 2nd ed., rev. Friedrich Kluge; trans. M. Bentinck Smith (London, 1901), p. 255; G. H. Cowling, "A Note on Chaucer's Stanza," *RES*, II (1926), 311-317.

Except for the refrain, "And trouthe thee shal delivere, it is no drede," no rhyme is repeated in the poem.

Entirely apart from the meter, many of the verses are tripartite in thought, sometimes aided by punctuation and alliteration:

Reule wey thyself, / that other folk / canst rede;
 Stryve not, / as doth the croke / with the wal.
 The wrastling / for this world / axeth a fal.
 Forth, pilgrim, forth! / Forth, beste, / out of thy stall
 For thee, / and eek for other, / hevenlich mede;
 And trouthe / thee shal delivere, / it is no drede.

Just as the concluding couplet of a lyric is often the personal reaction to the established stimulus, so the envoy of this poem is the humorous *applicatio* of the sober admonition of the three stanzas. Miss Rickert believes that the application appears in *Vache*, a friendly name for Sir Philip la Vache, possibly known by Chaucer.² If, however, it can be postulated that *Grisel* in the verse, "Lo, olde Grisel lyst to ryme and playel" contained in "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan," is a delightful self-portrait, it may be true that Chaucer is aiming the swordpoint of satire at himself when he says, "Therefore, thou Vache, leve thyn old wrecchednesse." If so, the personal reaction to the stimulus, the *conclusio*, is another excellent example of self-ridicule by Chaucer, or ridicule of Everyman including Chaucer.

Words are seldom repeated in this poem: *prees* in verse 1 reappears in verse 4, and *sothfastnesse* in verse 1 prepares for *trouthe* in each of the four refrains. In imagery, *beste* in the injunction, "Forth, beste, out of thy stal" in verse 18 leads naturally to the injunction in verse 22, "Vache, leve thyn old wrecchednesse." The second stanza contains three images apparently taken from adages: admonition is given not to trust in Fortune, "that turneth as a bal," not to "sporne [spur or prick] ayeyns an al [awl]," and not to strive and break like the earthen "croke with [crook against] the wal." Other adages are used, like that in verse 16: "The wrastling for this world axeth a fal." Antithesis is common: *Flee-dwelle*, 1; *Suffycè-smal*, 2; *Gret-litel*, 10; and *hoom-wildernesse*,

²Edith Rickert, "Thou Vache," *MP*, XI (1913), 209-225; cf. *Chichevache* [Lean Cow], "The Clerk's Tale," 1188.

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17. Alliteration seems to have been used at times as a rhetorical device: "For hord hath hate," 3, and "Daunt thyself, that dauntest others dede."

2

The Harley 7333 manuscript of "Truth" contains a heading, "Moral balade of Chaucyre." Interestingly enough, the Harley 7333 manuscript of "Gentilesse" contains a similar heading, "Moral Balade of Chaucier."³

Like "Truth," "Gentilesse" contains three stanzas, each rhyming ababbcc, with no rhyme repeated except in the identical refrain of the three stanzas, "Al were he mytre, croune; or diademe." In "Gentilesse," however, there is no envoy; the tripartite division is, thus, perfect.

The word *gentilesse* in the refrain of each of the first three stanzas of "The Complaint of Venus" creates a bond between this poem and "Gentilesse."

The link between the title, "Gentilesse," and the refrain is remote, but there are stronger ligatures: the title appears in the first verse of the first stanza, and *gentil*, which also appears in the first stanza, is repeated in the second; *vertu*, used twice in the first stanza, reappears in the second stanza, and *vertuous* appears in the third. *Vyces* of the first stanza becomes *vyce* in the second and third stanzas. In the first stanza, with alliteration and antithesis, Chaucer asserts the duty of man who would possess "gentilesse": "Vertue to sewe, and vyces for to flee." In the second stanza he states, with good balance of phrase, that one who pursues "rightwisnesse" or "gentilesse" must be "True of his word" and "Clene of his gost" and guard against the "vyce of slouthe." In the third stanza he says that although vice may be inherited, man may not bequeath "vertuous noblesse" to his heirs. The word *heir* of the second stanza reappears three times in the third stanza.

Abstract virtues are often rhyme words: *gentilesse*, *dignitee*, *rightwisnesse*, *besinesse*, *honestee*, *richesse*, *noblesse*, and *magestee*—a device also used effectively in "Truth."

³Eleanor Prescott Hammond, *Chaucer: A Bibliographical Manual* (New York, 1908), pp. 372 and 402; *A Parallel-Text Edition of Chaucer's Minor Poems*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, Chaucer Soc., 1st Ser., Nos. 57-58 (London, n.d.), p. 428.

Largely because of its envoy, "Truth" has more charm than "Gentillesse," but the structure of the latter is more skillfully wrought.

3

"Lak of Stedfastnesse," in Shirley's manuscript R 3, 20, Trinity College, Cambridge, called a "Balade Royal," like "Truth" contains three stanzas and an envoy, each rhyming ababbcc. The refrain of each of the three stanzas is "That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse." Unlike "Truth," in which the refrain of the envoy is identical with that of the three stanzas, the refrain of the envoy of "Lak of Stedfastnesse" is "And wed thy folk agein to stedfastnesse," appropriate because it affords variety within a definite pattern and because the envoy is addressed to King Richard II.

Each division rhymes with the other divisions; no rhyme is repeated except in the refrain. The delightful compound *up-so-down* and the rhyme words of each of the four couplets are from Old English; all other rhyme words originated in Latin and entered the English language through the French. The rhyme of this ballade is more facile than that of the other two: because of *dissensioun*, *collusioun*, *oppressioun*, *dominacioun*, and *extorcioun*, in every *regioun* all is *up-so-down* through *permutacioun*, and *castigacioun* is necessary; because of *wilfulnesse*, *fikelnesse*, and *wrechdednesse*, there is no *worthinesse* but only lack of *stedfastnesse*. Both *word* and *world* are used twice in the first stanza, and *world* is repeated in both the second and third stanzas. The first stanza with *wilfulnesse* is linked to the second with *wilful*. *Truth* is used twice in the third stanza and once in the envoy; thus poem and envoy are neatly linked, and "Lak of Stedfastnesse" is united with the ballade "Truth."

Alliteration is used infrequently but masterfully: "SOMTYME this world was so stedfast and stable." Synonym sometimes becomes rhetorical decoration, as in "stedfast and stable": "fals and deceivable," "wrong or oppressioun," and "trouthe and worthinesse." In the third stanza dual contrast is effective: "Fro right to wrong, fro trouthe to fikelnesse."

The three poems on abstractions, although similar in construction and rhyme, have variety of tone and philosophy. The range is exemplified in the seriocomic envoy in "Truth" and the earnest plea to King Richard II in "Lak of Stedfastnesse."