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## Source and Theme in the *Shipman's Tale*

Joseph R. Millichap

The literature concerned with Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale* is divisible into two general categories; earlier scholars consider the complex problems of the sources and the assignment to a narrator, while more recent critics attempt thematic and evaluatory judgments based on the analysis of characterization, plot structure, and verbal texture.<sup>1</sup> The discoveries of these later critics have contributed much to the understanding of this complex narrative; in particular, Janette Richardson's recognition that the tale's sordid surface is, in her terms, "... a mere facade of bawdry"<sup>2</sup> provides a key distinction; for in the *Shipman's Tale* Chaucer presents a bawdy story which masks a highly moral purpose in its pervasive irony. Recent criticism does not fully utilize the extensive earlier scholarship on the tale's sources, analogues and assignment because this work appears complicated and inconclusive. Indeed, the complex literature about the problem of the narrator does promise little insight into the tale's meaning. Yet a careful reconsideration of the source problem confirms the ironic reading of the tale. The present study combines the scholarly and critical approaches by reconsidering Chaucer's thematic purposes in his alteration of source materials; it concludes that variations between the *Shipman's Tale* and its analogues demonstrate Chaucer's complex and ironic treatment of morality in a traditional narrative framework.

The conjectural nature of any treatment of a source or sources for the *Shipman's Tale* must be remarked at the outset. The basic plot, classified as the "Lover's Gift Regained" by folklorists, exists almost universally in popular tradition.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Chaucer may have discovered his source in several places. The closest literary analogues are found in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (VIII, 1) and Sercambi's *Novelle* (XIX).<sup>4</sup> Both are concise, amusing stories analogous to Chaucer's tale in basic plot, but quite different in mood, characterization, setting, imagery, and many details. These differences, coupled with uncertainty about Chaucer's knowledge of either work, cause some scholars to reject the stories as sources and to posit a lost French source. For example, John W. Spargo states "... there is not a priori reason why the *Shipman's Tale* should not have been taken over almost verbatim from an Old French *fabliau*."<sup>5</sup> Other scholars, including Robert A. Pratt, William W. Lawrence, and Albert H. Silverman, accept one or the other of the Italian stories as Chaucer's probable direct source.<sup>6</sup> Even a cursory perusal of this extensive scholarship indicates the impossibility of demonstrating Chaucer's source. Therefore, it seems best to treat Boccaccio's and Sercambi's narratives as close analogues and to treat Chaucer's variations as points of emphasis important for an understanding of his thematic purposes in the *Shipman's Tale*.

The most immediately observable difference is the length of treatment. Chaucer's tale is approximately two and one-half times as long as Sercambi's which, in turn, is longer than Boccaccio's. This extra length is used essentially to extend characterization; the characters and their backgrounds are described in much greater detail, while conversation, gesture, and non-essential action are also increased. Most earlier commentators have observed that Chaucer's version is centered about characterization rather than action, but they have not gone on from here to see how this emphasis transfigures the tale's entire thematic purpose. Boccaccio's and Sercambi's tales of bawdry concentrate on the humor of the action, making only the most general and humorous moral comments. Their characters are *fabliau* types: the single-minded lover, the foolish husband, the venal wife. In Chaucer's tale all three are made more human and complex, and the multiple ironies of the bawdy situation reverberate into the moral sphere.

Almost every point of differentiation between the Italian analogues and the *Shipman's Tale* works toward the amplification of ironic moral connotations. For example, in both Boccaccio and Sercambi the lover is a soldier, a German mercenary serving in Italy, whose conduct is somewhat extenuated by his dangerous occupation and his loneliness in a foreign country. The soldier is only an agent, an easy-going military type who is rather shocked by the wife's cupidity. Chaucer makes the third party of the triangle a monk who participates fully in the downfall of the wife and evokes the full sordidness of the affair by betraying his religious vows. Janette Richardson has demonstrated how all the religious images, especially the avowals of love on his "profession" and his "porthors," demonstrate the unchristian attitudes of Daun John and the other denizens of St. Denys.<sup>7</sup>

Sir John also betrays his vows of friendship to the merchant. In the *Decameron* the two men are more acquaintances than friends, while in the *Novelle* they are not even acquainted. Chaucer makes them old friends from the same town, and the monk even claims "cosynage," or kinship, with the merchant, repeatedly swearing eternal brotherhood.<sup>8</sup> Chaucer is at some pains to show the merchant as a competent businessman, a loyal friend, and a reasonably good husband. The increased emphasis on the friendship underlines the moral shabbiness of his betrayal at the hands of friend and wife.

Mr. Silverman sees the husband as triple loser, "... for he becomes a cuckold, loses his money, and ends up ridiculously accepting his own wife's favors as compensation."<sup>9</sup> He is all of this and more because, pathetically, he recognizes his position. This revelation is also stressed in variations from the analogues. The lover does not ask the husband if he may repay his wife during his absence, as in Sercambi; no witness exists to verify the lover's story, as in both Sercambi and Boccaccio; the lover does not tell of the repayment in the wife's presence, nor does he tell the husband the money was unused, as in both analogues. Sir John cares not whether his story is believed by the husband. In Chaucer's version the wife has spent the money and cannot return it to her husband. All of this can only lead the



merchant to suspect the conduct of his wife, but he sadly sees there is "no remedie" (427).<sup>10</sup>

Another dramatic difference in characterization involves a minor figure. In both analogues the soldier employs a go-between to treat with his love object; Daun John and the wife of St. Denys bargain more directly, yet during their negotiation a third party is present, a young girl.

A mayde child cam in hire compaignye,  
Which as hir list she may governe and gye,  
For yet under the yerde was the mayde. (95-97)

The identity of the girl is problematic. Is she the wife's child or merely a servant? The first supposition is tempting as an indication of the wife's total depravity, but nowhere else are the couple's children mentioned.<sup>11</sup> Actually the young girl as servant is a less blatant, though still quite effective, symbol. The "mayde child" represents the innocence which the two scheming adults have lost. In particular, she obliquely presents the Christian sexual attitude; the monk should be celibate in accordance with his vows, and the wife should be chaste within the bonds of marriage after the pattern of the "Mooder-Mayde," Mary. The inclusion of this innocent child in her corrupt affairs is indication enough of the wife's moral, as well as financial, bankruptcy.

The deletion of the go-between also removes any sense of decorum in the relations of wife and lover. In the analogues the lover initiates the action, while in the *Shipman's Tale* the wife solicits the attentions of the monk as boldly as a street-walker. But she is finally seen as more disreputable than a prostitute for the mitigating circumstance of economic necessity is removed. In the stories of Boccaccio and Sercambi, the money is unspent, and even its intended purpose is unclear; in Chaucer's version the wife spends the money on clothing; her husband's assurance that she lacks "noon array ne no vitaille" (247) implies that her accusation of niggardliness is false and that her desire for a greater wardrobe is only vain and reckless extravagance. Chaucer's altered ending doubly emphasizes her whore's role; because she does not have the money she must pay off the debt by selling her favors to the suspicious merchant.

Ye shal my joly body have to wedde;  
By God, I wol nat paye yow but abedde! (423-424)

The Wife does not lose the money, but she does lose every scrap of honor, dignity, and grace.

The question of sources for the *Shipman's Tale*, like so many problems in Chaucerian scholarship, cannot be answered conclusively. Yet the differences between the tale and its earlier analogues increase both complexity and irony, and a careful consideration of them supports the sophisticated reading given the *Shipman's Tale* by contemporary critics. This long overdue re-evaluation of the tale is

an interesting and important part of contemporary recognition of Chaucer's subtle and ironic art.

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### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For a fairly complete bibliography on the *Shipman's Tale* see Albert C. Baugh's *Chaucer* in the Goldentree Bibliographies series (New York, 1968), p. 75.  
The more important studies of sources include:  
Robert A. Pratt, "Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale* and Sercambi," *MLN*, LV (1940), 140-145.  
John W. Spargo, *Chaucer's Shipman's Tale: The Lover's Gift Regained* (Helsinki, 1930).  
\_\_\_\_\_, "The *Shipman's Tale*," in W. F. Bryan and G. Dempster, eds., *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Chicago, 1941), pp. 439-446.  
Considerations of the assignment problem are:  
Philip Appleman, "The *Shipman's Tale* and the Wife of Bath," *N & Q*, CCI (1956), 372-373.  
Robert L. Chapman, "The *Shipman's Tale* Was Meant for the Shipman," *MLN*, LXXI (1956), 4-5.  
William W. Lawrence, "Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," *Speculum*, XXXIII (1958), 56-68.  
\_\_\_\_\_, "The Wife of Bath and the Shipman," *MLN* LXXXII (1957), 87-88.  
Hazel Sullivan, "A Chaucerian Puzzle," in *A Chaucerian Puzzle and Other Essays*, ed. N. G. Lawrence and J. A. Reynolds (Coral Gables, 1961), pp. 1-46.  
Frederick Tupper, "The Bearings of the Shipman's Prologue," *JEGP*, XXXIII (1934), 352-372.  
More critical studies include:  
Murray Copland, "The *Shipman's Tale*; Chaucer and Boccaccio," *ME*, XXXV (1966), 11-28.  
Bernard S. Levy, "The Quaint World of the Shipman's Tale," *SSF*, IV (1967), 112-118.  
Janette Richardson, "The Facade of Bawdry: Image Patterns in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," *ELH*, XXXII (1965), 303-313.  
Albert H. Silverman, "Sex and Money in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," *PQ*, XXXII (1953), 329-336.  
Michael W. McClintock, "Games and The Players of Games: Old French Fabliaux and The *Shipman's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 5 (1970), 112-136.
- <sup>2</sup> Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 303.
- <sup>3</sup> See Mr. Spargo's listing of analogues in *Chaucer's Shipman's Tale: The Lover's Gift Regained*.
- <sup>4</sup> Both are conveniently printed by Mr. Spargo in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*. Decameron, VVIII, 2 also resembles Chaucer's story but not as closely.
- <sup>5</sup> *Chaucer's Shipman's Tale: The Lover's Gift Regained*, p. 56.
- <sup>6</sup> See the works cited above. Mr. Pratt is particularly convincing in his case for Sercambi's *Novelle* (XIX) as Chaucer's source.
- <sup>7</sup> Richardson, *op. cit.*, 309-311.
- <sup>8</sup> Ruth M. Fisher, "'Cosyn' and 'Cosynage': Complicated Punning in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," *N & Q*, CCX (1965), 168-170 makes a reasonable case for a pun on "cousin" and "cozen." It is possible that the word is a distant echo of the relationship of two cousins in the *Knight's Tale*, Palamon and Arcite.
- <sup>9</sup> Silverman, 331.
- <sup>10</sup> Line numbers refer to the numbering for Fragment VII in F. N. Robinson, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Second Edition (Boston: 1957), pp. 156-160.
- <sup>11</sup> See Copland, 22.