



Spring 2008

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### **Recommended Citation**

Block '09, Jessica (2008) "Between Tales and their Tellers," *The Delta*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/delta/vol3/iss1/7>

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## Between Tales and Their Tellers

Jessica Block

The Host's motives and the roles he occupies as self-appointed leader of the pilgrimage to Canterbury and as host of the tale-telling competition are up for debate, as noted by several Chaucerian critics. Most agree that the Host remains a powerful force throughout the *Canterbury Tales* and that he only disappears from the forefront of the *Tales* because he has been wrapped into its core, as William Keen suggests. Following his rousing speech, which finalizes the General Prologue, the Host surfaces only occasionally and speaks in minute bursts. It is all the more important, then, that we as readers and interpreters keep in mind the function of these bursts as well as the Host's behind-the-scenes duties. The Host does not take a backseat on the journey, but drives the *Tales* along to further his own agenda, occasionally interrupting the pilgrims to make his presence known and to remind both pilgrims and readers of the power he wields over the group. In effect, the Host's bits of dialogue are not simply disruptive, but are a cohesive agent between the tales. Although the Host is never more at the forefront of the *Tales* after the General Prologue, he serves as a unifying force throughout, while pursuing his own agenda: to make not a pious, but an amusing and financially rewarding journey to Canterbury. Chaucer distinguishes the Host from the other pilgrims in several ways, the first of which is allowing the Host to be "the first character (except the narrator) to speak in his own voice" (Keen 6), when he proposes the tale-telling contest to the pilgrims. Chaucer also saves the Host's General Prologue portrait for what Keen calls the "emphatic final position" (5) and refrains from encouraging physiognomy in the Host's portrait. Although Chaucer remarks that the Host is "A large man. . .with eyen stepe" (I. 753), the Host's portrait, unlike the descriptions of several other pilgrims, is mostly "built up out of

what he says and does rather than what he looks like" (Williams 1149). Chaucer treats the Host no differently from his other characters in referring to him primarily by occupation, but he does distinguish him by earnestly affirming the Host's fitness for his job.

Other pilgrims' portraits are rife with irony about their abilities to properly perform their duties, but Chaucer emphasizes the Host's capability on multiple occasions. Although the reader is unaware until reaching the Cook's Prologue, Chaucer distinguishes the Host from all of the other pilgrims by giving him both a first and a last name—Harry Bailly. Through these names, Chaucer simultaneously degeneralizes the Host and indicates that his personality suits his role as leader. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, in Chaucer's time, common definitions for the transitive verb "harry" were "to overrun (a place or territory) with an army; to ravage by war or invasion; to lay waste, sack, pillage, spoil." The Host, in the least war-like sense, does these very things. He invades the group of pilgrims, inviting himself along to Canterbury, and in doing so, he spoils the purpose of the pilgrimage, devout thought and reflection. A fourteenth century definition of "bailey" given by the *OED* is "court wall of a castle" which enclosed the outer court. The definition of the related term, "bailiff" is also suitable for Harry: "An officer of justice under a sheriff, who executes writs and processes, distrains, and arrests." One might claim that the denotations of these names do not exactly fit the Host, but their connotations capture his essence exactly; he is an invader whose governance surrounds the pilgrims and a self-appointed officer who guides them on their journey, attempting, often in vain, to ensure that his regulations are followed.

The term "host" had several meanings in Chaucer's time. The most apparently suitable of these definitions for the Host is, of course, "[a] man who lodges and entertains for payment" (*OED*), but Dolores Cullen prefers an ecclesiastical definition to describe

the Host. She bases her book-length argument on the assumption that Chaucer intends the reader to interpret "host" as "[t]he bread consecrated in the Eucharist, regarded as the body of Christ sacrificially offered" (*OED*). Cullen writes, "I believe that the character in the *Canterbury Tales*, that we know as *the Host*, is the covert personification of this Eucharistic Host, as he leads the pilgrims" (24). In discerning Chaucer's intent, we must keep in mind that he was very conscious of his language and that he associates abundant irony with the religious in his *Tales*. Certainly, the ecclesiastical connotations of the term "host" did not escape him, and are significant as word play on some, most likely ironic, level. However, we cannot go as far as Cullen has, concluding that the Host is meant to be perceived seriously as a Christ figure. Evidence that the Host had only an extended business transaction in mind is far more substantial.

The Host is the owner and operator of the Tabard Inn, located in Southwark, where the pilgrims board before embarking on their journey to Canterbury. John David Burnley takes Chaucer's statement, "A fairer burgeys was ther noon in Chepe" (I. 754), to indicate the Host's social aspirations, as the Host does not live in this prosperous commercial region. Indeed, Chaucer illustrates the Host's penchant for finery, noting that the Host provides his guests with strong wine and the best food (I. 749-50), though Chaucer makes no comment on the cost of these luxuries. Muriel Bowden remarks that in the fourteenth century, London inns were subject to numerous laws, some of which limited the fee a hosteler could charge for his services; but "[c]omplaints about high costs in inns outside of London were numerous. . .and the Tabard is too much in the medieval luxury class to be inexpensive" (292). The Tabard's social rank also gives credence to the belief that Harry strives to be more than a middle-class hosteler. His borderline eccentric enthusiasm and his ability

to flatter only aid his ability to attract and appease a variety of guests.

When he first speaks to the pilgrims, the Host is "hearty, polite, and full of convincing concern for their comfort and enjoyment," says Keen (13). Deciding that, "[f]or trewely, confort ne myrthe is noon / To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon; / And therefore wol I maken yow disport" (I. 773-75), the Host illuminates what he perceives to be a problem among the company and effortlessly solves it. As Keen observes, "The success of any paid guide to pleasure is directly proportional to his ability to convince his customers that in his estimation they are very special people" (13). Accordingly, the Host does not claim the inspiration for the competition as entirely his own; he rather presumptuously insinuates that he drew the idea from the pilgrims' own plans: "And wel I woot, as ye goon by the weye, / Ye shapen yow to talen and to pleye" (I. 771-72). The scheme apparently works, perhaps due in part to the Host's assurance, "But ye be myrie, I wol yeve yow myn heed!" (I. 782).

As the pilgrims wordlessly consent to take part in the contest in which they will tell four tales apiece, the Host outlines the rules that they also unquestioningly accept. The Host will decide the winner based upon which tales are of the "best sentence and moost solaas," and that their teller will receive a supper at the Tabard, to be paid for in part by all the other participants (I. 797-801). Keen notes that it cannot hurt a guide's cause "if he can also make [the pilgrims] believe their charm is so irresistible and his desire to join them so intense that he is willing gratuitously to offer his services" (Keen 13), which the Host does. For good measure, the Host notes that he is so glad to join their company, "I wol myselven goodly with yow ryde, / Right at myn owene cost, and be youre gyde" (I. 803-4). The Host's ease in convincing the pilgrims to adopt his merry proposal shows that he is perfectly charismatic and fully fit to flatter such a motley band of travelers.

Some Chaucerian critics insist that Harry Bailly is linked to a real-life counterpart who operated a London inn; however, discouraging the association of Chaucer's character with any actual person seems to be more common. Kemp Malone insists that any influence Chaucer drew from a living model is merely superficial (187), noting that:

The host at every turn shows himself to be a character of fiction. His salient characteristic in the frame story is impudence, or "rude speech and bold," as Chaucer calls it. Such impudence as his belongs to broad comedy, in which servants habitually insult their masters and the masters take it with the utmost meekness. No such impudence befits an innkeeper in real life. (191)

Although this impudence does not appear until the pilgrimage has begun, Chaucer exposes the Host's unique ability to secure an extraordinary amount of compliance from the pilgrims when he proposes the tale-telling competition and its terms.

It seems, then, that Chaucer has created the Host as a character uniquely able to command, unite and direct the pilgrims in generating entertainment for their journey, thus establishing the frame for the tales. In the process, Chaucer has made the Host "the one person toward whom each pilgrim's thoughts have turned" (Keen 6) and the readers' focus as well. Once the Host speaks, he "is hardly ever out of sight and sound, the only Pilgrim of whom this can be said" (Carruthers 64). Though he is never more in the foreground as in the General Prologue, the Host remains an omnipresent force. While distinguishing the Host from the other pilgrims with a leadership role and a clear portrait in the General Prologue, Chaucer has established the character and motives that frame the Host's actions throughout the *Tales*.

Although they both are apparently able to enrapture a crowd, the Host, unlike the Summoner, does not brag about his ability to manipulate; nonetheless, if one keeps in mind Chaucer's

penchant for irony, it is clear that the Host's enthusiasm for joining the pilgrims is exaggerated. It is with good reason that Harry veils his truest aim in proposing the competition—maximizing his financial profits from the large group. The pilgrims, many of whom are of low social classes, would probably not agree to part with their money without a convincing reason: the prospect of a free supper.

The supper will not be purchased from just any establishment, but from the Tabard upon the pilgrims' return from Canterbury. Barbara Nolan states, "Harry's ultimate goal in generating the fictions of the Canterbury journey is to collect the price of twenty-nine suppers, minus his own small contribution to the winner's meal at the end of the trip" (165). Many critics agree with Nolan's description of the Host's bottom line, but Cullen takes an opposing stance: "Monetary intrusions present a Host whose money pouch is a prominent feature of his appearance; we see it every time he comes into view. But he was not invested in this way by Chaucer" (57). Cullen seems to believe that misinterpretations and an eagerness to follow superficial trends lead critics and readers alike to false conclusions about the Host, but this cannot be the case. Knowing that Chaucer is a master of subtlety, the reader should expect that Chaucer will not be blatant and therefore must use Chaucer's numerous hints to infer that the Host's motives are selfish.

As Keen points out, "[t]hat Harry will make money from his acts is undeniable; indeed, he has already collected one bill from the pilgrims" (13). As an innkeeper, the Host provides a prime service for which, naturally, he expects to be paid. He will not provide the prize supper without cost; rather, Keen remarks that Harry stipulates that all will pay a portion of the bill:

Harry is a clever manager of people when he is on his own grounds as is dramatized by the way in which he achieves this profitable arrangement without calling the

pilgrims' attention to all he has to gain. First, he promises that his service will "coste noght" (I, 768), and, in a sense, it will cost nothing, for the Host is merely putting himself in the position to receive payment for the final supper. . .[.] not suggesting that the pilgrims will pay him anything extra for carrying out the duties of guide. (14)

The pilgrims do not even catch on when Harry exacts the charge of all expenses incurred during the trip upon those who object to his decisions or break his vague rules (I. 805-6). Although the "fine for disobedience" is "no certain matter," as Keen remarks (14), Harry does his best to instigate rebellion from the Miller, the Franklin, and others. As Celia Williams writes, "He keeps his eye on prosperity and his finger on the pulse of his company. . .we watch him trying to badger the raconteur into revolt. . .no doubt hoping to get expense money" (1149). Indeed, Harry's façade melts before the second tale is told, and he ceases to refrain from insulting the majority of his company in one way or another.

Just as Harry criticizes, he also praises, but in order to further his own ends. Williams notes that Harry is "deferential to superiors. . .He is quite sincere in his praise of the worthy knight" (Williams 1150), and, indeed, Harry seems to favor the knight over all of the other pilgrims. Harry knows that he must recognize the knight's social superiority in order to keep him on the journey, a move that may ultimately fatten his purse. However, Harry does not defer so much to the knight as to relinquish his superiority in the realm of the contest, as Keen recognizes:

The Host might easily have stressed the privilege of telling the first tale by stipulating that the pilgrim who drew the longest cut would begin; instead, he has made it the penalty commonly associated with drawing the shortest straw. It would seem that Harry Bailly's attitude toward the Knight is more complex than has been recognized. . .he lessens the threat of disgusting

obsequiousness toward his betters by demonstrating his power to penalize them. (Keen 17)

The method of the drawing, which Helen Cooper suspects Harry rigged (82), supports critics' assertion that the Host has a plan to increase his income long-term—to raise his social status and thus heighten the Tabard's prestige. Although Harry ingratiates himself most with the Knight, he is not the only pilgrim on the receiving end of Harry's best manners. Burnley points out that the Host acts with "exaggerated courtesy" toward the Prioress, who most likely has sufficient wealth as well (209). Certainly, in sidling up to the noble Knight and the Prioress, the Host was seeking connections to a social class above his own. A move like this could increase his income for the long-term, drawing greater numbers of more elite guests than he already hosts.

Despite evidence to the contrary, Cullen maintains that the Host's motive for joining the pilgrims is not financial, but religious. Gaylord counters Cullen's theory, noting, "As Chaucer describes him and his proposition in the General Prologue, it is clear that Harry is seeking diversion and entertainment exclusively; there, between lines 747-809, some form of 'myrthe' or a closely related word such as 'chiere' or 'playe' occurs fifteen times" (232). Thomas Richardson also believes that the Host cannot be religiously motivated, stating that Harry is "the only traveler who does not make the journey under the pretense of undertaking a pilgrimage" (324). Though Harry obviously recognizes that a pilgrimage is religious in nature, he never states that *he* intends to seek spiritual enlightenment in traveling to Canterbury, only mirth.

Although the Host states that he desires to provide merriment for all, he is clearly most concerned about his own entertainment. As Gaylord notes, "He insists first of all that the artist capture his audience's attention and hold it, whether his burden be 'sentence' or 'solaas'" (231), but as Owen points out, Harry, as judge, would ride nearest to the speaker and would likely

be one of few travelers able to hear whole tales. Neither Harry nor the pilgrims acknowledge the impracticality of the competition despite Chaucer's allusion "of the Host riding in the midst of the group, the current storyteller near him, and some pilgrims—like the Cook when he is sleeping off a night's debauch—not listening" (Owen 7-8). In the days without voice-amplifying devices, the chance that such a large group could possibly hear a speaker over long distances, not to mention over the noise of thirty horses clopping along, is slim. However, Harry has subtly countered this problem by declaring himself the sole judge of the competition, and therefore, the only person who must hear every word (Carruthers 64). Chaucer gives the impression that Harry's idea for the competition was impromptu, so it seems, then, that Harry has an uncanny ability to think quickly—a trait that undoubtedly stems from his innkeeping experience—leaving the eager pilgrims little to question.

Harry may be nearest to the speaker and able to hear what is said, but he certainly does not care to listen to every word. Harry prevents certain pilgrims from telling their tales and allows others to go on, regardless of whether the other pilgrims are enjoying the tales. Though the Host initially only stipulates that the tales should be amusing, provide helpful advice, or offer some combination of the two, his inter-tale comments make clear the types of tales he enjoys and those he loathes. Harry detests frivolous tales such as the Tale of Sir Thopas, preferring those that serve his needs. Halting Chaucer the pilgrim mid-sentence, Harry criticizes his first tale as "drasty. . .nat worth a toord" (VII 2120) and demands that he tell something "[i]n which ther be some murthe or som doctryne" (VII 2125). By doing so, Chaucer the pilgrim is thankfully able to escape further browbeating; though The Tale of Melibee is burdensome in its length and theme, Harry the "hen-pecked husband" (Malone 199) finds something useful in it (Gaylord 227). He states, "I hadde levere than a barel ale / That

Goodelief, my wyf, hadde herd this tale! / For she nys no thyng of swich pacience / As was this Melibeus wyf Prudence" (VII. 1893-96). It is apparent from this instance that the Host seeks not only morals and entertainment from the tales, but a tale that speaks to *him*.

The Host often lets the pilgrims know what type of tale he would like to hear, and most, like the Clerk, oblige. Though Harry requests that the Parson "ne breke thou nat oure pley" (X. 24), the Parson refuses to tell a fable and decides to "turn the storytelling, the device by which the Host has led the pilgrims away from their religious commitment, into a devotional exercise" (Owen 27), after criticizing the "wrecchednesse" of the previous tales (X. 34). The Host wishes the Parson well, but "Like most of [the pilgrims], he has little interest in the devout aims of the journey" (Zacher 98). As the Parson elucidates,

the Host has drawn the pilgrims into a tighter though scarcely more devout fellowship. . . He has helped debase the purpose of the pilgrimage and in a way substituted himself for Becket, the miracle-worker the pilgrims seek, who was revered for his powers as a mediator of conflicts. (Zacher 98- 99)

Most critics accept that Harry is the contest sponsor and judge, but others like Cullen jump to even more significant, but ultimately improbable, conclusions. Although Cullen is not alone in suggesting that Harry, as leader of the pilgrimage, is a Christ-figure, she takes this view to the extreme, and "[i]t must quickly be said that the Host does not carry the pilgrims toward God, because it is obvious they would have gone to Canterbury without him" (Richardson 343). Although the Host has convinced the pilgrims that he selflessly desires to lead them to Canterbury and enjoy their company, it cannot be clearer to the reader that the Host is ultimately directing them to a new destination, the Tabard, so that

they will purchase another supper from his inn. In the meantime, he will be entertained by their vies for a self-purchased prize.

Harry Bailly may reign over the pilgrims' competition, but he cannot hijack the *Tales*, as he has only as much power as Chaucer the poet allows him. As Chaucer's literary tool, Harry Bailly is "his primary agent, and, in a sense, he is a free agent because most of the time he speaks in his own voice, while the narrator recedes into the shadows" (Keen 11). However, Chaucer reappears from time to time to rein in Harry. For example, after the Knight has finished his tale, Harry "invites the Monk to follow on — the highest ranking of the ecclesiastics, at least in his own estimation, to follow the highest ranking layman. Hierarchical ordering, however, is not to be allowed to control the world of the pilgrimage" (Cooper 92), and Chaucer forces Harry to abandon this method. Carruthers comments that this narrating dichotomy may lead to confusion over "who is meant to be heard," but deduces that it is Chaucer we hear all along, as Harry is only "an extension of . . . Chaucer the poet, the real author of the game" (53-56). It seems to me, as many critics have also suggested, that Harry acts as Chaucer's representative, and at times, his alter ego within the *Tales*.

Harry is in the unique position of acting not only as a narrator, but also as an audience; however, he is *not* a literary critic, as some authors have suggested. Literary criticism requires a certain degree of analysis or interpretation, and Harry does neither of these. Much like an audience—and a harsh one at that—the Host approves of or dismisses tales, disregarding the author's supposed "right" to tell a tale in whole if he is not enjoying it—one might argue that no such right exists in the *Canterbury* context, for the pilgrims acquiesce to tell tales at Harry's whim. Richardson points out, "Harry reacts directly to only eight out of twenty-three (twenty-four?) tales, and in only two cases (the *Monk's Tale* and *Thopas*) does he say why he does or does not like the story"

(Richardson 332). These brief responses hardly qualify him as a literary critic, but his comments do serve a purpose: "For all their relative brevity, the links between the tales serve several purposes: they tie the tales to each other and to the pilgrimage frame; they provide dramatic continuity; they develop the character of certain pilgrims. . . and they establish Harry Bailly as the key principle of unity" (Hallissy 295). While we must never forget that Chaucer is the ultimate director of the *Canterbury Tales*, he creates the Host as an internal editor and director of the tales who unites the pilgrims in a unanimous vow to return to the Tabard.

The other pilgrims may take on the lead role of tale-teller, but Harry is undoubtedly present throughout the *Tales* as their director, representing Chaucer the poet. On the surface, Chaucer does not give Harry unlimited power, as many of the pilgrims, the Parson especially, successfully challenge his authority and power. Nonetheless, Harry triumphs by significantly influencing the pilgrims on a deeper level by transforming "the character of the journey itself. Once the Host has won the agreement from the pilgrims for his 'voirdit,' the destination is no longer the shrine of Thomas a Becket in Canterbury; it is the Tabard Inn in Southwark" (Richardson 324). By pursuing his own interests, the Host actually connects the devoutly disparate pilgrims in competition, but not in piety, proof that he has little interest in religion. From the Host's characteristics, as outlined in the General Prologue, and his statements and actions, we can determine that he is motivated by business sense to impose the competition, which ultimately leads back to his inn, upon the pilgrims.

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