

**READING
THE
CANTERBURY TALES:
BAKHTINIAN APPROACH**

巴赫金的理论
与
《坎特伯雷故事集》

Liu Naiyin

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提 要

论著运用巴赫金的小说理论研究乔叟的《坎特伯雷故事集》。主要论点是:巴赫金重视社会意识氛围或历史环境与文学作品文本相互作用的重要性,强调“杂语性”(heteroglossia)是对话的基本条件,指出狂欢化导致对价值观念的重审,认为作者与主人公之间存在一种不同意识间的对话关系,这些论点为研究《坎特伯雷故事集》提供了新的批评工具。

全书共五章。第一章阐述论著的基本理论观点,分析了研究领域的现状,提出有必要正确理解巴赫金的理论,肯定了该理论运用于《坎特伯雷故事集》研究的可行性。

第二章讨论《总序》和作品中的香客乔叟。认为朝圣实质上是一次狂欢。香客乔叟具有狂欢的参加者与事件叙述者的双重身份,其中体现了巴赫金所说的客观的作者立场,即让不同人物充分表达自己观点的叙述方式。

第三章运用巴赫金关于狂欢与讽拟的理论,分析磨坊主的故事。并以此为例,指出《坎特伯雷故事集》中语境的变化导致意义的相对性与不稳定性,展示了多层意义的可能。

第四章以巴斯妇女和学者的话语为例,较为详细地探讨了话语中的双声现象以及不同话语和声音之间的对话形式。

第五章在前面论述的基础上对《坎特伯雷故事集》进行了简要的总体分析。认为作品充分利用了各种声音、语言和文学体裁,无论在内容还是形式上,都表现为一种社会现象,是其时代“杂语性”的缩影。

Preface

As a philosopher of language, Bakhtin shifts the focus of study from *la langue* (an abstract system) to *la parole* (the speech of individuals in a particular social context). The essence of language, he thinks, resides in its dialogic nature. Language is not fixed or frozen in meaning; it is dynamic and ever-changing. Meaning comes from dialogic interaction.

Applying his linguistic theory to the study of literature, Bakhtin emphasizes the interactions between four factors: author, text, reader and socio-political *milieu* to one another in determining the meaning of a literary work. This mutual relationship is also dialogic in nature. Bakhtin further points out the relationship between the "Carnivalistic spirit" characteristic of Western culture and the development of the modern novel. This spirit leads to mimicry, parody and comic satire which culminated, I think, in the novels of Henry Fielding. Bakhtin draws a distinction between the epic and the novel. The voice of the epic is

singular and monophonic, whereas the novel is composed of a plurality of voices and therefore polyphonic. The novel belongs to the modern democratic society in which dialogic interaction prevails among individuals from all walks of life whose speech is varied and many-voiced. The novel is therefore characterized by “polyglossia” or “heteroglossia.”

In his monograph *Reading the Canterbury Tales: A Bakhtinian Approach*, Mr. Liu Naiyin has made a good attempt at applying, critically and creatively, Bakhtin's theory to a more deepgoing study of Chaucer's masterpiece. It is a worthwhile subject and Mr. Liu has achieved a few new insights. Choosing some of the Canterbury tales as evidence, he has proved the validity and feasibility of the Bakhtinian approach and widened the sphere of its application. For example, dialogic interaction occurs not only between tellers of tales, but exists between some of the tales themselves, calling in question the truth and nullifying the emotional impact of each other. Likewise, there is a dialogic relationship between different *genres*, as employed in different tales, the most notable instance being that between the *Knight's Tale* (chivalric romance) and the *Miller's Tale* (*fabliau*). Thus we are led to a deeper understanding of the significant role genre plays in ascertaining the meaning of a text.

Mr. Liu reads Middle English quite well and he is good at the New Critic's practice of “close reading”—even in respect of Middle English texts. Besides, he has a reading knowledge of

PREFACE

Medieval Latin and Modern Russian. He is also well read in Marxist classics and Western literary theory. He writes Modern English prose with lucidity, fluency and urbanity. All these accomplishments help ensure the success of his research. It is my sincere hope that with the publication of Mr. Liu's monograph, Middle English studies in China will enter a new stage where Chinese scholars can carry on dialogic interactions on an equal footing with the world's first-rate specialists in this scholarly domain.

Li Fu-ning
June 30, 1998
Peking University

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Jan and Frank, two old friends of mine from Australia, sent me necessary reference books without my asking and their friendship and kindness will always be cherished and remembered. Dr. Huang Lan-fen, from La Trobe University in Australia, took the trouble of sending me the most recent information about developments in Bakhtinian scholarship. Prof. Carol Kaske, from Cornell University, discussed with me the feasibility of my project during her stay in China and sent me reference materials when she was back in the U.S.A.

Prof. Li Shuyan, among professors in Peking University, encouraged me and offered valuable advice. Prof. Shen Dan read part of the dissertation and made critical comments. I am also indebted to Miss Zhou Mohong, librarian in Peking University, whose unstinted help enabled me to have access to many valuable reference books that would otherwise have been hard to obtain.

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It should also be acknowledged that the writing of the dissertation has benefited very much from the legacy of Chaucer studies. Even those scholars that I argue against in the dissertation have enlightened me in one way or another. And when I think how incomplete my knowledge of Chaucer and Chaucer studies is, my gratitude to the Chaucerians that I have had access to goes beyond words.

And of course I would express my sincere thanks to my wife Wang Jiyun and my daughter Yueyue for their support, patience, sympathy and understanding while I was doing the writing.

Regarding the publication, I am grateful to East China Normal University for the fund offered to publish it. Many people, Prof. Zhang Minlun in particular, have rendered me valuable assistance that will always be remembered.

Liu Naiyin

June, 1998

East China Normal University

But thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre;
And I seyde his opinion was good.
What sholde he studie and make hymselfen wood,
Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,
Or swynken with his handes, and laboure,
As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served?
Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!

From the *Canterbury Tales* (I . 182 - 188)

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CHAPTER ONE

BETWEEN CHAUCER AND BAKHTIN

The task of approaching Chaucer's work as a whole and of the *Canterbury Tales* in particular in terms of Bakhtin's theory would not seem difficult for modern Chaucerians at first sight. Lars Engle, for example, finds Bakhtin an obvious resource in discussions of Chaucer¹ and claims that Bakhtin's map of social discourse seems made for Chaucer and especially for the *Canterbury Tales*.² Regretting that there is only one casual mention of Chaucer in Bakhtin's translated works, Engle says,

This is a pity, since Bakhtin could illuminate Chaucer's interest in inclusive dialogic forms and could also, more specifically, comment on Chaucer's recurrent delight in bringing together exalted sentiments with the literality of the sounds and smells of the "lower bodily stratum".³

Engle is not the only one who cherishes such a notion. David Lodge, in his *After Bakhtin*, remarks that though the *Canterbury Tales* is written in verse form, the qualities in the work which have made it seem, "in comparison to most other Middle English texts, so startlingly modern and accessible to modern readers, are precisely those qualities which Bakhtin characterizes as novelistic".⁴

Attractive as Bakhtin's theory may seem, its specific implications for an understanding of particular works by Chaucer are less easy to explore. Problems remain unrecognized before modern Chaucerians set out

earnestly upon the task of applying Bakhtin's theory in their treatment of Chaucer. And when they do so, they find themselves caught in a dilemma. Bakhtin's theory turns out, in the eyes of some Chaucerians, to be either full of uncertainties or ineffective as a critical tool for detailed analysis of any single literary work. David Lawton, for example, feels very strongly against those critics who "approach medieval narrators with tools imported from, and better suited to, the traditional novel". He observes,

The notorious example is that of the *Canterbury Tales* criticism, in which the portrait of an individual pilgrim given in the *General Prologue* has often been read as the key to the narratorial voice of the tale ascribed to that pilgrim as narrator: hardly any teller has been immune from a psychological reading based on portrait and tale together, and the tale has therefore been treated as an ingeniously ironic extension of the portrait.⁵

Lawton regards this as "an erroneous way of reading the *Canterbury Tales*", since "what applies to Moll Flanders will not necessarily apply to the Wife of Bath, still less to the Second Nun".⁶ We might think that those imported tools Lawton refers to include those from Bakhtin, but Lawton is one of those critics who, sensing the possible value of Bakhtin's theory, are not quite certain about it. In his study of Chaucer's narrators, Lawton claims that the study of the novel is relevant to a modern reading of Chaucer's narratorial voices, as there is a revised understanding of the novel very different from that which informs modern novelistic Chaucer criticism. This revised understanding of the novel is that by Bakhtin whose discussion of "heteroglossia", it seems to Lawton, "would lead an unprejudiced reader to see Chaucer as a novelist, not a poet".⁷ Yet, when dealing with practical problems,

Lawton is quite reluctant to make use of Bakhtin's terms in his analysis. He coins, for example, the term apocryphal voices instead of "heteroglossia", a key term in Bakhtinian theory, and explains his reason for it,

I prefer this term to heteroglossia.. Not only have I forsworn new-fangled terms; it also seems a pity to work so hard to establish multiple phenomena and then lump them together, or have one's translator lump them together, under a singular noun. Heteroglossia is a useful term in Bakhtin's argument because he aspires to tell a chronological story: the stages of the development of the "novel" as he has redefined it. I see no need to follow him in this, partly because most critical systems offering a narrative of chronological development are covert allegory and partly because heteroglossia, under the chronological pressure, has to be a sliding scale.⁸

This passage gives evidence to Lawton's doubts about the usefulness of Bakhtin's term in the treatment of any single work. Lawton also finds some of Bakhtin's terms in need of clarification or definition. For instance, Bakhtin thinks that heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel, is "another's speech in another's language", serving to express authorial intentions in a refracted way. Such speech is a special type of what he calls double-voiced discourse which serves "two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author". In such a discourse, as Bakhtin asserts, "there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions".⁹ Quite challengingly, Lawton claims that this definition of heteroglossia is a bit confusing since it brings together two definitions that ought to be separated,