

### The Arabic Frame Tradition

To the Editor:

When Katharine Slater Gittes says, in “The *Canterbury Tales* and the Arabic Frame Tradition” (*PMLA* 98[1983]:237–51), “The pilgrims are innocent purveyors of Chaucer’s sophisticated design” (247), she gives happy and concise expression to one of the basic patterns in the work. The characters are apparently free of the author’s control, yet what they will inevitably create meaning. She later suggests that Chaucer “plays with disorder, giving the impression that the arrangement is more arbitrary than it really is” (247).

The main thrust of her article, however, discounts the element of order and emphasizes instead the open-endedness. This open-endedness she attributes to Arabic influence and especially to the influence of Petrus Alfonsi’s *Disciplina Clericalis*. She points out that several of the tales are incomplete, that the number of tales and the number of pilgrims are contradictory in different parts of the work, and that the pilgrims never even reach Canterbury. “[D]isrupted expectations of order and symmetry . . . put to rest any notion that the scope of the work is foreseeably contained.”

Much of this “open-endedness” results from the fragmentary state of the *Canterbury Tales* at Chaucer’s death. Fifteenth-century editors did their best to conceal this incompleteness, and modern critics have accepted too readily the impression they strove to create. The two endings envisaged in the text, though contradictory, would each have brought the work to a clear conclusion. In his prologue the Parson, employing the very device by which the Host has distracted the pilgrims from religious purpose, that is, the storytelling, sets himself the task of showing the way “Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage, / That highte Jerusalem celestial.” The setting sun, the “thropes ende,” the lack of “no tales mo than oon,” the fulfillment of the host’s “sentence” and “decree” as well as almost all his “ordenaunce,” the Parson’s resolve “To knytte up al this feeste,” the pilgrims’ sense of the propriety of ending in “som vertuous sentence” all stress closure. In my view, the treatise on repentance and the seven deadly sins, with the attached retraction, was never intended by Chaucer to bring the *Canterbury Tales* to an end. But fifteenth-century editors saw in it a fitting conclusion, and most modern readers have agreed. Although with the retraction “the framing story disappears before the work ends” (245)—as it does in the *Disciplina*—the result is a judgment on the whole, a rejection of aesthetic

values, a thorough closure; nothing can conceivably be added.

The ending envisaged in the General Prologue, which puts much greater emphasis on the frame story, would have given the completed *Canterbury Tales* an even more decisive closure. The supper at the Tabard with the Host deciding which of the pilgrims had told the best stories would have called for an implicit review by each reader, a judgment of the judgment, as it were. It might well have involved comment on the Host’s verdict by the pilgrims. It would have emphasized ending by place (a full circle), time (completion of the pilgrims’ fellowship), and action (evaluation of what had transpired).

The contradictions implicit in the endings, like the explicit contradictions in number of tales and number of pilgrims, result from the evolution of the plan for the whole as Chaucer worked on it rather than from intentional open-endedness. But the unexpected within the whole—interruptions by pilgrims, challenges of the Host’s authority, intrusions by men like the Canon and his Yeoman—were an important part of Chaucer’s design from the beginning. The focus on the unit, which as Katharine Gittes points out may well stem from the general Arabic influence on medieval thought, is balanced by attention to the interrelation of parts. Each tale has importance in itself. But the portraits provide an audience, any member of which may respond.

One minor point. Although it is true that Chaucer mentions Petrus Alfonsi five times in the *Canterbury Tales*, all five references occur in the *Melibeus* in passages translated from the French of Renaud de Louens; they therefore do not imply direct influence.

CHARLES A. OWEN, JR.  
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To the Editor:

Katherine Slater Gittes’ article “The *Canterbury Tales* and the Arabic Frame Tradition” is an important reminder to medievalists that we have too often neglected the Arabic component of medieval culture. Vast worlds of Arabic intellectual achievement remain unexplored by most of us. The neglected territory is far vaster yet, however, for it is not only the Arabic frame tale that accepts incompleteness or openness as an aesthetic value, in contrast to the (stereotypical) Western concept of closed unity. Indeed, as has been demonstrated from an anthropological perspective by researchers such as Dorothy Lee (“Lineal and Nonlinear Codi-