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Renate HAAS

CHAUCER'S *MONK'S TALE*:  
AN INGENIOUS CRITICISM OF EARLY HUMANIST  
CONCEPTIONS OF TRAGEDY

In all probability, Chaucer (ca 1343-1400) was the first poet to experiment with tragedy in the vernacular. What could have given him the incentive to this novel enterprise has long been a riddle to scholars, who find especially the *Monk's Tale* in need of a "generous view"<sup>1</sup>. The most obvious reason, however, has gone almost completely unheeded, namely the revived interest in ancient tragedy, in particular Senecan tragedy, which was then beginning to spread from the Italian centres of early humanism and Avignon to other countries<sup>2</sup>. In the first part of my article, I shall, therefore, trace the slow progress on the levels both of form and of content made by Nicholas Trevet, Italian scholars and poets, including Petrarch and Boccaccio, and English classicizers, and show that much of the new insight into tragedy can be found in Chaucer's work<sup>3</sup>. In the second part, I shall analyse how Chaucer in the *Monk's Tale*, its *Prologue*, and the following *Prologue to the Nun's Priest's Tale* experiments critically with the current conceptions of tragedy, and thus will strive to rehabilitate this underrated *Tale* as a brilliant response to the most advanced literary and philosophical discussion of the age.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., W. C. Strange, "The *Monk's Tale*: A Generous View", *Chaucer Review*, 1 (1976), 167; P. G. Ruggiers, "Notes towards a Theory of Tragedy in Chaucer", *Chaucer Review*, 8 (1973), 92; and A. Clough, "Medieval Tragedy and the Genre of *Troilus and Criseyde*", *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 11 (1982), 212-213. All my references to Chaucer are based on the edition by F. N. Robinson, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (London 1957<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>2</sup> The connection was mentioned *en passant* by W. Creizenach in his *Geschichte des neueren Dramas* (Halle 1911), I, p. 519. For his "dramatic" reading of *Troilus and Criseyde*, J. Norton-Smith assumes that Chaucer studied Seneca's tragedies with the help of Trevet's commentary but does not relate this to the full Trecento context. See his *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London 1974), pp. 162 ff.

<sup>3</sup> An earlier version of the first part of this paper was given at the "Erstes Symposium des Mediävistenverbandes"; Tübingen, 1984.

However, before entering into any detailed examination, two possible misunderstandings should be dealt with. First, the fact that Chaucer at the end of the *Monk's Tale* paraphrases Boethius' "definition" of tragedy<sup>4</sup> does not necessarily exclude other influences or references, particularly as it can be demonstrated that Boethius' "definition" actually played an important role in the early humanists' attempts at a fuller understanding of tragedy<sup>5</sup>. Second, I wish to avoid giving the impression that Chaucer made an intense study of Seneca's tragedies or of Mussato (1261-1329), whom I frequently mention because of his pioneer work. What is far more likely is that Chaucer refers to the contemporary discussion and thus especially to Boccaccio and Petrarch. His dependence on Boccaccio has long been established, because in fifteen manuscripts the *Monk's Tale* is labelled "De casibus virorum illustrium", but no satisfactory explanation has yet been suggested for the Monk's terming Petrarch his "maister" in line 2325. In no way has the fact been taken into account that Lydgate (ca. 1370-1450), greatly interested in ancient tragedy since his early years<sup>6</sup>, associated the following works with Chaucer's "ful pitous tragedies": Seneca's tragedies, Cicero's "many fressh dite", Petrarch's "book.../ Off too Fortunys" and Boccaccio's "fall of pryncis"<sup>7</sup>.

## I

The heightened interest in tragedy must be seen as part of another revival (others had preceded) of interest in classical writers. It was greatly advanced when the Paduan judge Lovato de' Lovati, searching the libraries in the vicinity for ancient manuscripts, discovered the Codex

<sup>4</sup> Although in the context of *De Consolatione* II, pr. ii, the sentence, "Quid tragoediarum clamor aliud deflet nisi indiscreto ictu fortunam felicia regna vertentem?" was not intended as a definition, it was taken as such for many centuries.

<sup>5</sup> Mussato had already made his master Lovato start from this in the *Evidentia Tragediarum Seneca*. See F. Novati's edition in his "Nuovi Aneddoti sul Cenacolo Letterario Padovano del Primitivo Trecento", *Scritti Storici in Memoria di Giovanni Monticolo*, eds. C. Cipolla et al. (Venice 1922), p. 188.

Questionable as it may be, the term "early humanists" will be retained here because it helps to focus on the new aspects.

<sup>6</sup> In *Troy Book* II, i.e. only about ten years after Chaucer's death, Lydgate added a long excursus (842-916), which describes the staging of ancient tragedy in great detail, though rather confusedly and which, according to Norton-Smith (p. 168, n. 23), seems to derive from Trevet. See also III 540 ff. Ed. H. Bergen (London 1906-35).

<sup>7</sup> *The Fall of Princes* I 246-71, ed. H. Bergen (London 1918).

Etruscus of the works of Seneca at the end of the thirteenth or in the first few years of the fourteenth century. Soon after this, in 1315, Cardinal Niccolò Albertini of Prato, one of the most influential papal politicians at the court of Avignon and patron of Petrarch's father, asked the English Dominican friar Nicholas Trevet to write a commentary on Seneca's tragedies, and as early as 1317 we find it registered in the papal library. These beginnings already indicate what important men were attracted by the new study of Seneca and how quickly they communicated across national borders. A detailed analysis of the English classicizers of the first half of the century might therefore provide further information about the interrelations between Italy, Avignon and England in the case of tragedy, too. Chaucer himself visited Florence, one of the centres of Seneca studies, on his first diplomatic mission to Italy in 1372-73. At that time, the former papal secretary Coluccio Salutati, the most important humanist after Petrarch and an ardent admirer of Seneca's tragedies, was either in Florence or in its vicinity. In 1382, a few years after another Italian mission of Chaucer, Salutati, now Chancellor of Florence, had to deal with an incident which may illustrate the state of enthusiasm reached. Two university scholars had become involved in a bitter dispute, because both wanted to lecture on Seneca's tragedies at the same time, and Salutati did not think it below his station to settle the quarrel<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Creizenach, *Geschichte*, I, p. 518.

Mussato (1261-1329) was one of the most influential men of Padua and headed several embassies to the Pope and the Emperor. He dedicated his *Evidentia Tragediarum Senecae* to Marsiglio, the famous anti-clerical political philosopher, who assisted King Louis the Bavarian against Pope John XXII and his successors. His Latin tragedy *Ecerinid* was directed against Cangrande della Scala and was the principal reason why, at the instigation of the bishop of Padua and the rector of its university, Duke Albert of Saxony, he was crowned with the laurel. Within a few years, two professors — one from Padua, the other from Bologna — wrote a commentary on the *Ecerinid*.

There is no need to detail the influences of Dante (who may have got into contact with the studies of the circle around Mussato through Giovanni del Virgilio), Petrarch and Boccaccio. Friends of Petrarch composed commentaries or mnemonic verses on Seneca's tragedies, e.g. the Augustinian Dionigi de' Roberti, who taught in Naples, and Pietro de Muglio, who taught in Padua and Bologna. The anonymous *De Casu Caesena* (1377, called a tragedy in the second earliest manuscript) dealt with the destruction of Cesena, in which John Hawkwood (with whom Chaucer had to negotiate) played an important part. The tragedy planned by the nobleman Giovanni Manzini della Motta was to treat the fall of the house della Scala. Antonio Loschi, who about 1388 wrote his Latin tragedy *Achilleid*, was in the service of the house della Scala, later of the Visconti etc. W. Cloetta, *Beiträge zur Litteraturgeschichte des Mittelalters und der Renaissance* (1890-91; rpt. Leipzig 1976), *passim*; for Mussato and Loschi see also J. R. Berrigan, "Early Neo-Latin Tragedy

In their search for a fuller understanding of ancient tragedy, the early humanists were confronted with enormous difficulties as far as both form and content were concerned. And here we must start our survey in order to see why in the sixty to seventy years of intensified study up to Chaucer's day relatively little was grasped theoretically and why old and new often stood side by side, so that many statements about tragedy from this time still strike us as typically medieval.

Unfortunately the reconstruction of ancient tragedy had to be based on Seneca's tragedies, which were models of the mixing of genres current since the age of Augustus, which had been imitated by important epic poets (such as Lucan and Statius) and by Boethius, and about which there is even today doubt whether they were originally intended for staging at all. Furthermore, the theoretical statements which had come down from antiquity were a confusing jumble. They were derived from different systems of thought and often reflected the stage practice of late antiquity (e.g. *pantomimus*, recitation, prevalence of music and dance over the dramatic action). Some had been falsified in the process of being handed down, and some had become scarcely comprehensible since the meaning of relevant terms had changed. Thus for instance, the adjective *dramaticus* had taken on the broader meaning of 'dialogic', after the performances of tragedies and comedies had died out<sup>9</sup> — which meant among other things that Seneca's tragedies could no longer be distinguished generically from philosophical dialogues such as his *De Tranquillitate Animi*, and were passed on without due regard to their genre.

In this respect, however, the Codex Etruscus gave a decisive impulse; for it prefaced Seneca's tragedies with a *notamentum* that again drew attention to their genre. Furthermore, the Codex contained numerous glosses on the diverse metres of the tragedies, which had the effect that the current broadening of the concept of tragedy to include epics such as the *Aeneid* and *Thebaid*, characterized by the hexameter, became ques-

in Italy", *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Lovaniensis*, eds. J. IJsewijn / E. Keßler (Leuven 1973), pp. 86-93.

The considerable number of richly illuminated codices of Seneca's tragedies dating from the fourteenth century is another indication of a distinguished readership.

<sup>9</sup> In the fourth century, e.g., the grammarian Diomedes attributed Vergil's first and third eclogues, both dialogic, to the "genos dramaticon", for which he also used the traditional, dead adjectives "mimeticon", "imitativum" and "activum"; similarly Servius. See P. Klopsch, *Einführung in die Dichtungslehren des lateinischen Mittelalters* (Darmstadt 1980), p. 112.

tionable, and one tried again to differentiate between tragedy proper and a broader use of the word.

Yet metre, which had so far been neglected in defining tragedy, did not prove the simple master key to the peculiarities of the genre. For in his tragedies, Seneca certainly had used the hexameter, though rarely. He had adopted Horatian metres and his metres, in turn, had been imitated, for instance, by Boethius in his *Consolation*. Studies of Boethius' metres (e.g. by Lupus of Ferrières) were already available in the fourteenth century, and Trevet, Lovato and Mussato seem indeed to have used them. Yet recourse to these studies very probably created more problems than it solved. For how was one to establish a generic distinction between Seneca's tragedies and the *Consolation of Philosophy*? The *Consolation* may be considered a philosophical dialogue with inserted lyrics, and recently an expert on the reception of Seneca has even suggested that Boethius, writing in an era when there were no longer theatrical performances, might have tried to outdo Seneca (his most important Latin model beside Cicero) with a kind of "super-tragedy"<sup>10</sup>. Thus, we may note the five-part structure of the *Consolation*, its dialogues, its interspersed "choral odes" in Senecan metres, and the numerous other echoes of Seneca. This explains why Mussato, in discussing the metres of tragedy in the *Evidentia Tragediarum Senecae*, also cited the *Consolation* and ranked its author among the tragic poets<sup>11</sup>. And to take an example from Chaucer's day, the chorus which a certain Giovanni Manzini della Motta quoted in a letter in 1388 as an example of the tragedy he was then working on is composed in a metre which cannot be found in Seneca, but can be found in the *Consolation*<sup>12</sup>.

What great importance the early humanists already attached to the metres (later, as is well known, they were to become the cause of a regular *querelle*) can be seen in Petrarch. In his *Invective contra Medicum* he demonstrates his opponent's lack of culture among other things by pointing out that he would in all probability not know what a tragedy

<sup>10</sup> P. L. Schmidt, "Rezeption und Überlieferung der Tragödien Senecas bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters", *Der Einfluß Senecas auf das europäische Drama*, ed. E. Lefèvre (Darmstadt 1978), p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> Ed. Novati, "Nuovi Aneddoti", pp. 189 ff. (Here, in contrast to the recent edition by A. C. Megas, the echoes in Guizzardo's commentary on the *Ecerinid* are also given on the same pages.)

<sup>12</sup> It is the *trimeter dactylicus catalecticus in syllabam cum Adonio*, used in *Consolation* I c. ii. See Cloetta, *Beiträge*, II, pp. 80-81 (also giving the beginning of the chorus).

was and what the change from the tetrameter to the iambic had signified (whereby he alludes to Aristotle's explanation of the origins of tragedy)<sup>13</sup>. Despite Petrarch's proud words the full significance of the metres for tragedy as for comedy, which throughout the centuries had been seen as complementary, was still lost to the early humanists. Thus, Boccaccio and other poets were also led to experiment with tragedies and comedies in prose, which Seneca had used in the generically confusing Menippean satire of the *Ludus de Morte Claudii* (still considered a tragedy, for instance by Boccaccio)<sup>14</sup>.

Chaucer's Monk, therefore, is well at the forefront of his age, when he deals with the question of metre in his introductory definition without being able to find a satisfactory solution:

And they ben versified comunely  
Of six feet, which men clepen *exametron*.  
In prose eek been endited many oon,  
And eek in meetre, in many a sondry wyse. (1978-81)

In view of the uncertainty prevalent at the time it would be unwise to dismiss this conception as typically medieval because of the emphasis on the hexameter. One should rather have a closer look at the final syllable of the word, which is stressed by the rhyme. "*Exametron*" is a Greek form, by which Chaucer seems to allude to the "Graecomania" of many an early humanist. Mussato had already employed Greek words in Greek letters in his treatises. In the case of Boccaccio it may suffice to recall his Greek or semi-Greek titles. Petrarch tried to learn Greek and made an effort to obtain copies of Euripides and Sophocles. English classicizers, too, wished to be able to read Greek, e.g. Richard de Bury, who had met Petrarch in Avignon, avidly collected ancient manuscripts, and gave the title *Philobiblon* to his defence of pagan literature.

Trevet attempted to explain the purpose of the choruses, and, in studying the functions of the metres, Mussato already recognized the importance of the speeches as an expression of the characters. In this he seems to have been helped greatly by Horace's *Ars Poetica*, which he

<sup>13</sup> *Prose*, eds. G. Martellotti et al. (Milan 1955), p. 656. A direct reference to the *Poetics* follows on p. 658.

<sup>14</sup> See Boccaccio's *Ameto*, subtitled a comedy, which is a bucolic and allegorical narrative with individual and antiphonal songs; the prose dialogue *De Casu Caesenae*; or Salutati's declamation about Lucretia's suicide (Cloetta, II, p. 145 and 54-67). For Boccaccio's comment about the *Ludus* see *Il Comento alla Divina Commedia*, ed. D. Guerri (Bari 1918), II, p. 79.

quotes<sup>15</sup>. Although he speaks of “dyalogos”, “trialogos”, and “tetralogos”, he nevertheless uses expressions such as “narratio” in the same context, which shows how hard it was to differentiate between epic and dramatic forms. His tragedy *Ecerinid*, written in Latin in 1314, which is modelled on Seneca with its five acts, choral odes in Seneca’s metres etc., still contains diverse epic elements (e.g. indications of the change of place through narrative verses) and in its very title imitates epics such as the *Aeneid* and *Thebaid*. The principal reason why a clear demarcation from the epic proved so difficult was that the ancient performance was imagined as mere recitation, with or without pantomimic support from actors. In its full form, this concept (which corresponded to classical variants in stage performance that had become predominant in late antiquity) contained the synchrony of language and bodily presentation, though not combined in the actors themselves. For the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, however, the emphasis still lay so strongly on the reciting poet that the gestures and miming of the actors remained just accidental and could easily be disposed of in their own “tragedies”. Thus, Mussato, in spite of following Seneca, also compared himself with Statius, whose *Thebaid* he imagined as having been recited on the stage, too<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, the question of performance was accorded far more interest than in the preceding centuries<sup>17</sup>.

Instead of considering the interplay of the speeches, the early humanists concentrated on their rhetoric — an aspect not specific to the genre but which the traditional definitions, the taste of the age and the quality of Seneca’s tragedies highlighted and which was to become of central importance in the Renaissance itself. In part, they experimented with highly declamatory speeches, as did Mussato in the *Ecerinid* and Loschi in the *Achilleid* (ca. 1388), the first two Latin tragedies modelled

<sup>15</sup> “Harum [i.e. tragediarum] cuiuslibet contextus variis metrorum generibus varias reddit auribus intendentium concinnitates iuxta modorum loquendi prolationes multifarias, quarum communior est deploratio seu lamentatio. et harum aliarumque tragediarum materia principalior est de infortuniis conquestio: tota querulosa narratio metris iambicis descripta est ...” (Ed. Novati, p. 188) Shortly afterwards Mussato explains with the help of l. 79 of the *Ars Poetica* why the iambic is especially suited to express ‘the passion of a disturbed mind’.

<sup>16</sup> “Carmine sic laetam non fecit Statius urbem, / Thebais in scenis cum recitata fuit.” *Fourth Epistle*, quoted from M. Pastore-Stocchi, “Un Chapitre d’Histoire Littéraire aux xiv<sup>e</sup> et xv<sup>e</sup> siècles: ‘Seneca poeta tragicus’”, *Les Tragédies de Sénèque et le Théâtre de la Renaissance*, ed. J. Jacquot (1964; rpt. Paris 1973), p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> See Trevet; Dante’s son Pietro and Boccaccio in their commentaries on the *Divina Commedia*; Lydgate; and the drawings in fourteenth century codices.



on Seneca. Salutati wrote a declamation about Lucretia's suicide, in which the father and the husband, speaking together, try to dissuade her from her plan and then her answer follows. This *Tragedia de Lucretia*, as it is called in a fifteenth century manuscript<sup>18</sup>, was translated by Lydgate and incorporated into his *Fall of Princes* II 1058 ff. at the wish of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. And to take an example from fourteenth century France: Philippe de Mézières (who was a friend of Petrarch and recreated his story of Griselda almost at the same time as Chaucer<sup>19</sup>) repeatedly defined tragedy as "piteuse lamentation et declamation" and wrote an *Oratio Tragoedica seu Declamatoria ... in Passionem Domini Nostri*<sup>20</sup>.

On the other hand, Boccaccio amongst others did write highly dramatic passages in works he did not describe as tragedies or comedies and without formulating a concept of the dramatic. Thus, for instance, in the *Elegia di Madonna Fiametta* he closely imitated the dialogue between the passionate heroine and the moderating nurse in Seneca's *Phaedra* — a type of scene which was to become characteristic of Italian Renaissance tragedy<sup>21</sup>. Concerning the *Decamerone*, Vittorio Russo has pointed out various elements from Seneca and stressed that it was not by chance that several of the *novellas* were adopted by several Renaissance writers of tragedy<sup>22</sup>.

In view of the existing confusion it is not at all surprising that the Monk still considers tragedy a "storie" and that Chaucer himself in almost one and the same breath calls *Troilus and Criseyde* a tragedy and yet commands it to show humility towards the great epic poets of antiquity (V 1786-92). It was not least the authority of Dante which supported traditional epic concepts of tragedy and comedy, as is impressively demonstrated by Boccaccio's criticism of his title *Divina*

<sup>18</sup> Cloetta, I, p. 145.

<sup>19</sup> It seems to have been Philippe himself who dramatized his story of Griselda in 1395, perhaps in connection with his endeavours to bring about the marriage between Isabella of France and King Richard II. Also the *entremés* about the first crusade, which was performed in 1378 on the occasion of the visit of the Emperor, and about the fall of Troy in 1389 may have been initiated by Philippe. See L. Hibbard Loomis, "Secular Dramatics in the Royal Palace, Paris, 1378, 1389, and Chaucer's 'tregetoures'", *Speculum*, 33 (1958), 242-255.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. *Le Songe du Vieil Pelerin*, ed. G. W. Coopland (Cambridge 1969), p. 114, and *Livre de la Vertu du Sacrement de Mariage*, 136'. The *Oratio Tragoedica* (Bibliothèque Mazarine 1651, ff. 129-210) has not yet been edited.

<sup>21</sup> H. J. Tschiedel, "Die Italienische Literatur", *Der Einfluß Senecas auf das europäische Drama*, p. 86.

<sup>22</sup> "Il Senso del Tragico nel *Decameron*", *Filologia e Letteratura*, 11 (1968), 29-83.

*Commedia*<sup>23</sup>. Chaucer, too, may have “rethorike sweete” in mind, when he uses “dite” in the glosses on tragedy and tragedian in the *Boece* and “enditen” in the Monk’s introductory explanation of tragedy, and when, in the Monk’s final paraphrase of Boethius’ “definition”, he adds “in syngyng” to the original wording.

One of the most rhetorical forms of speech, even a set piece, was lamentation, and this had for a long time been regarded as an essential part of tragedy<sup>24</sup>. Lamentation again was not a trait exclusive to the genre, but through Seneca’s tragedies attention could certainly be focused on it. Loschi, for instance, closely imitated laments from the *Troades* in his *Achilleid*. Philippe de Mézières more or less equated tragedy with lamentation in his definition quoted above, and Deschamps apostrophized the tragic poets within a series of typical figures of lamentation in poems 206 and 503. This line, too, as is well known, was to be continued in the poetic theory and practice of the Renaissance.

Chaucer, likewise, emphasizes the aspect of wailing both in the Monk’s comments about tragedy and Harry Bailly’s criticism and uses a variety of elements of lamentation in the “tragedies” themselves. In accordance with contemporary concepts, he stresses the lamenting with regard to the reciting “poet”, i.e. the Monk (1991, 2663 and 2687), as he did at the beginning of his “litel tragedye” *Troilus and Criseyde* with regard to his own persona (I 6-14). There, independently of Boccaccio, Chaucer ironically stylized himself as a lamenter, who has to invoke Tesiphone instead of the muses, because a sorrowful tale requires a “drery feere” and a “sory chere”. In his serious imitation of this Chaucerian passage in *Troy Book* III 5423-57, Lydgate again makes explicit the association of tragedy with rhetorical lamentation, recited by the poet in the theatre. Because of the close linking of tragedy with rhetorical lamentation, Lydgate also mentions tragedy when dealing with rhetorical *pronuntiatio*, and the ultimate source for this complex of ideas may have been Horace’s extensive treatment of it in the *Ars Poetica* (101 ff.), one of the “Bibles” of the early humanists:

<sup>23</sup> Boccaccio argues that in a comedy the poet must not speak in his own person, that it is divided into scenes, not “canti”, and that it is intended for presentation in the theatre (which he still imagines as recitation). But in the end he accepts Dante’s classification as a broader understanding of “comedy” based on the definition according to the plot, as given in the *Epistle to Cangrande. Comento* I 114-16.

<sup>24</sup> See Boethius’ “definition”, also various medieval definitions, several of which contain the formulation “carmen luctuosum”, or the above quotation from Mussato (n. 15).

An heuy mateer requereth an heuy cheer;  
 To a glad mateer longeth weel gladnesse;  
 Men in pronouncyng mut folwe the mateer —  
 Old oratours kan bern herof witesse, —  
 A furious compleynt vttrid in distresse:  
 This was the maner, as poetis do descryue,  
 In his tragedies whan Senec was alyue.

(*Fall of Princes* VI 3346 ff.)

As can be gathered from Lydgate's formulation "compleynt", the close linking of tragedy with lamentation anything but facilitated the delimitation of tragedy, because various kinds of lamentation, both independent or as parts of larger works, already existed. And these difficulties had been increased through the broadening of what was considered the appropriate subject matter of tragedy to include love (e.g. by Dante in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* II iv 8 and in Loschi's *Achilleid*). Love had traditionally been associated with comedy or the protean elegy, but its eligibility for tragedy could well be substantiated from Seneca. In order to picture the tangle confronting the early humanists, one need only consider how they were to distinguish between the presentation of Dido in the *Aeneid*, where about one half of Book IV is made up of long monologues and dialogues, or in Ovid's *Heroides* and a Seneca tragedy. Another widening of tragic subject matter, namely up to the recent past (which can be seen in Mussato's *Ecerinid*, *De Casu Caesena*e and Manzini's planned tragedy about the fall of the house of Scaliger) did not make the demarcation easier either, because it brought tragedy even closer to rhetorical historiography than it had already been. Both extensions can be found in Chaucer: to love in *Troilus and Criseyde*, to the recent past in the tragedies of the two Pedros, of Barnabo and Ugolino.

It was only in the combination of contentual and structural criteria that important theoretical advances were made in the fourteenth century. However, this does not apply to the division into five acts. The humanists were aware of it; Mussato, Loschi and others imitated it, but they could not yet penetrate to its inner function. Vilaragut, therefore, again replaced the word 'act' by 'book' in his translation of Seneca's tragedies into Spanish. Probably Chaucer's restructuring of the proem and nine parts of Boccaccio's *Filostrato* into the five books of *Troilus and Criseyde*, which up to now has not been satisfactorily explained, is also to be seen in this context<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> This does, of course, not exclude the model of Boethius' "tragedy" *De Consolatione*.

What was really important for future developments was that the traditional pattern of happy beginning and sad ending was brought into closer connection with Fortune. This was already implicit in Boethius' "definition" (not least as a consequence of the impact made on him by Seneca) and became now more prominent through the intensified study of Seneca, as can be seen from Mussato. He even made a further step by rediscovering a decisive reason why the heroes of ancient tragedy were of high rank (because this made possible a greater tragic "fall") — thus foreshadowing the restrictions of Renaissance poetics<sup>26</sup>. How closely Fortune and tragedy were linked for the Trecento may further be illustrated by the fact that Giovanni Manzini della Motta (whom we have already mentioned) used a chorus about the fickleness of Fortune to give an idea of his planned tragedy about the fall of the house of Scaliger. So Chaucer's close linking of "tragedy" with the "unwaar strokes" of Fortune is not as new as it has seemed to some Chaucerians.

What was fascinating about Seneca's Fortune imagery over and above its poetic beauty was its content, as on the whole it was the message of the tragedies which appeared in a new light and which attracted the fourteenth century so much (thus also intensifying research into the formal aspects of tragedy). For a multitude of reasons, men had developed a special sensibility towards Seneca's Stoic determinism, underlying his grand Fortune metaphors, and towards his powerful heroes. Fortune, Stoic determinism and fortitude were, however, to be found in Seneca's philosophical writings as well (though less impressively there), so that from the point of view of the message, too, the distinction between his tragedies and philosophical dialogues was blurred.

*Litterati et sublimes*, including English classicizers, discovered new subtleties in Seneca, which they could apply to the burning problems of theological and philosophical discussion<sup>27</sup>, but it was Petrarch's *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae* which beat all. In this philosophical dialogue, Petrarch closely imitated the Stoic dialogue *De Remediis Fortuitorum*, then still ascribed to Seneca, and, though he obviously knew

<sup>26</sup> See D. George, *Deutsche Tragödientheorien vom Mittelalter bis zu Lessing* (Munich 1972), pp. 34-38, and Cloetta, II, p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> See for England A. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge 1982), pp. 43-48, and J. Coleman, "English Culture in the Fourteenth Century", *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*, ed. P. Boitani (Cambridge 1983), pp. 46-49.

better, availed himself of the goddess Fortune of pagan popular tradition to appeal for once to the *vulgares*, but was himself enticed by her<sup>28</sup>. *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae* deeply shocked his contemporaries and up to the present century Petrarch was repeatedly even judged to despise Christianity. In spite, or rather because of its shocking effect, *De Remediis* quickly spread beyond the leading circles so that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it surpassed all other works of Petrarch in renown.

This said, it should now be obvious why Lydgate (*Fall of Princes* I 246-71) associated Chaucer's tragedies not only with those of Seneca but also with Petrarch's "book.../ Off too Fortunys". Furthermore, an explanation can be found for his mentioning Tullius' "many fressh dite". Lydgate might have been thinking of Cicero's philosophical dialogues, possibly the *Tusculanae Disputationes*, which Petrarch admired and which, along with Seneca, were the principal source of his Stoicism. On the other hand, as far as Boccaccio's orthodox *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* is concerned, Chaucer seems to have been the first to recognize its affinities with contemporary concepts of tragedy. However, he did not remain the only one to do so. (See, over fifty years later, the Spaniard Iñigo Lopez de Mendoza<sup>29</sup>.)

While Trevet, still typically medieval, thought that the good of tragedy rested in the "correctio morum per exempla", Mussato hoped that its representation of the fickleness of Fortune would guide people towards a kind of Stoic *ataraxia*<sup>30</sup>. In his eyes, this attitude still remained part of a Christian framework, although in the *Ecerinid* he depicted a cruel and absolute tyrant and in its final chorus almost too bluntly alluded to Seneca's celebration of worldly renown. Yet it had been precisely the crimes and obscenities, the close connections with pagan religion and philosophy which had made the Church Fathers, in particular Augustine and Tertullian, condemn tragedy and thereby contribute considerably to its decline. Therefore, it is no wonder that Mussato was vehemently contradicted by the Dominican Giannino of

<sup>28</sup> Francesco Petrarca, *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae*. *Zweispachige Ausgabe in Auswahl*, ed. R. Schottlaender (Munich 1975), p. 26; K. Heitmann, *Fortuna und Virtus* (Cologne 1957), pp. 11 ff.

<sup>29</sup> Cloetta, I, p. 44.

<sup>30</sup> "Vox Tragici mentes ad contingencia fortes / Efficit, ignavus diluiturque metus, / Vincit in adversis semper constantia rebus, / Non habet hanc, illis qui rude pectus habet." (Quoted from George, *Tragödien-theorien*, p. 34.)

Mantua and that their dispute was much publicized. The controversy about the revival of tragedy and heathen literature in general, thus started, was to flare up again and again until it eventually raged between the Florentine humanists and Savonarola. Both Petrarch and Boccaccio felt the need to defend tragedy and to differentiate and refute Boethius' disdainful dictum of the "scaenicae meretriculae" (*Consolation* I pr.i)<sup>31</sup>.

The strictly orthodox had good reason indeed for their opposition because the humanists in their enthusiasm for ancient literature were often not aware of the contradictions between its ethical standards and those of the Christian faith. Thus in the official speech which he delivered as leader of the deputation sent from Milan to King John the Good in order to congratulate him on his release, Petrarch quoted from the *Thyestes* and attributed the King's capture by the English to Fortune, which shocked one part of the audience while captivating the other. Amongst the latter, incidentally, was the Crown Prince, who later as Charles V was to commission the early French translation of *De Remediis* (in which Petrarch had employed King John as one of his rare modern *exempla*)<sup>32</sup>. In his final chorus of the *Achilleid*, based on the famous chorus "Fatis agimur: cedit fatis" in the *Oedipus*, Loschi — like Seneca — even ventured to assert that God could not change 'whatever is woven by the fates on high'<sup>33</sup>. That these and similar "heretical" lines of Seneca deeply affected men almost against their will may be illustrated from Boccaccio, who quotes them repeatedly<sup>34</sup>.

With the greater awareness of Seneca's heathen traits even the humanists occasionally felt misgivings about his character. Was it at all possible that the tragedies had been written by the philosopher who throughout the centuries had been appropriated as "paene Christianus"? The scope of the œuvre, the mention of two Senecas by the rediscovered Martial, certain peculiarities of the *Octavia*, etc. seemed to suggest a separation, and since one had no idea of a *Seneca rhetor*, one distinguished between a *Seneca philosophus* and a *Seneca tragicus*. First indications of this separation can be found in Petrarch and Boccaccio and it was so well substantiated by Salutati and others that it prevailed far into the sixteenth century.

<sup>31</sup> *Invective contra Medicum*, in *Prose*, p. 660; *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium Libri*, ed. V. Romano (Bari 1951), II, p. 696 ff.

<sup>32</sup> Cloetta, II, p. 86; Heitmann, pp. 29 and 39.

<sup>33</sup> A. Mussato, *Ecerinis*, ed. L. Padrin / A. Loschi, *Achilles*, ed. A. da Schio, introd. and transl. J. R. Berrigan (Munich 1975), pp. 186-187.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., *Comento alla Divina Commedia* III 16 and *Genealogie*, ed. cit., I, p. 25.

Chaucer's Monk, therefore, is well in line with the avant-garde when he exhibits a certain caution towards the traditional high esteem for Seneca's character (2498). Like the Italian humanists this does not prevent him from applying himself to tragedy and from expecting positive effects from its presentation of the fickleness of Fortune.

## II

Seen against the background sketched so far, the *Monk's Tale* no longer appears to be a mere experiment in form, which is extremely boring to the modern reader, but an ingenious response to the most advanced contemporary literary and philosophical discussion.

The enthusiasm of the international élite may perhaps have induced Chaucer to experiment with tragedy in a series of short narratives quite early in his career<sup>35</sup>. Later, however, in his most mature phase, he seems to have viewed the fashionable form rather critically and thus, after having ironically employed it in *Troilus and Criseyde*, may have been tempted to put it to the full test by assigning it to a certain teller, by presenting audience reactions, and by relating it to other tales and their effects on the listeners. Having tried his hand at so many different styles and genres, Chaucer will have been the more conscious of the inadequacies of the current definitions of tragedy. As has been shown above, the criteria were scanty, and since one had not yet developed a proper concept of the dramatic, a *clear* demarcation from various other forms was still impossible, in particular from epics, rhetorical historiography, elegy, and philosophical dialogue. Moreover, tragedy had again become highly controversial because of its pagan implications, and when working on the Canterbury collection, which he concluded with the *Parson's Tale* and his *Retraction*, Chaucer could well have been very sensitive to this. Writing English tragedies did not merely mean presenting a sad end, "a sorweful cas" "*saufly*" in a chronicle with "faire enditing", "As for a sovereyn notabilitee", as the Nun's Priest mocks at certain "rethors"<sup>36</sup>, but it meant introducing into English literature a potentially dangerous form. Tragedy, which had been held in highest esteem by the ancients, like the particularly low *Priapeia* raised funda-

<sup>35</sup> For the old theory of an early origin of the tragedies see R. K. Root, "*The Monk's Tale*", *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Chicago 1941), p. 615.

<sup>36</sup> 3204 ff.; italics mine.

mental questions about reviving classical forms and about the functions of secular literature in general with ultimate poignancy.

A first dexterous move in Chaucer's critical testing of tragedy is its being assigned to the Monk. This is certainly appropriate, if one takes the contemporary context into account. Beside jurists, administrators and men of affairs, it was primarily high-ranking or particularly learned churchmen who cherished the ancient works, including tragedy, and neither in the *General Prologue* nor in the prologue to the tale does Chaucer tire of accentuating the prominent status of his Monk<sup>37</sup>. He points out that Daun Piers holds "after the newe world the space" (*General Prologue* 176), and with his predilection for the sports of the nobility, exquisite food and splendid, fashionable array, he would indeed fit perfectly into a Renaissance court as it is often envisaged, or into one of the papal courts of the fourteenth century, which in their combination of worldliness and classicizing drew heavy criticism upon themselves (e.g. that of Clement VI).

Tragedy has for the Monk the advantage of allowing him to react to the innuendoes of the Host in accordance with his role. It not only permits him to pose as a spiritual guide (he offers the tragedies as an alternative to a "lyf of Seint Edward") but as a very progressive and artistic one at that. Since the Monk knows that the "manere" which fascinates the international élite is still hardly known in England outside certain circles, he first explains to his audience what a tragedy is, as Chaucer himself found he had to add glosses on "tragedy" and "tragedian" in the *Boece*. The Monk is correspondingly proud — see his ostentatious use of a Greek word and the condescending, "Lo, this declaryng oghte ynogh suffise", with which he concludes his introduction (1982). Also in his apology for his ignorance, in case he should confuse the chronology, he seems to assert his learning indirectly. The self-stylization which tragedy allows on account of its novelty is further heightened by its sublime character. The Monk can deal with "popes, emperours, or kynges", in short, *viri illustres* and thus perhaps remind the educated of Petrarch and Boccaccio, who included this key phrase in titles of their works. Like the great ancient poets and the three most admired Italians of his century, he can avail himself of a rare, elevated metre and of "rethorike sweete", which goes especially with lamentation.

<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., Chaucer's designation of him as "lord" in the *General Prologue* 172 and 200, the frequency of addresses by "lord", "sir", "daun", and "ye" in the prologues to the *Monk's Tale* and *Nun's Priest's Tale*, Harry's enquiry after his house by his "fader kyn" ...



(Compare his closing characterization of tragedy by "in syngyng crie ne biwaille" and the "*I wol biwaille ...*" with which he makes his entrance as a tragic lamenter<sup>38</sup>.)

Yet, however proud Daun Piers may be of his knowledge, he does not escape his author's irony. His showy Greek "*exametron*" is, in fact, the most common of Latin metres and he presents it in a way which, though correct, looks illogical (six feet = 'six-metre'). The pedantic repetition between the prologue to, and his programmatic beginning of, the tale do not make him appear brilliant either. By such means Chaucer sows doubts about the excellence of Daun Piers's learning, even before he lets him actually embark on his tale. Since he has made it clear in the *General Prologue* that the Monk is not prepared "Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure", his knowledge of tragedy appears due more to his contact with the right people than to his own studies. Assigning tragedy to a small-scale or perhaps even pseudo-humanist, of course, opens up great possibilities for critical experimentation and further ironies. While the Monk in telling his tale continues in his pose of superior learning and refinement, referring, for instance, to Persian sources (2248) and a mysterious Trophée, who sounds impressively Greek (but who in connection with the 'trophies' of Hercules is more probably a mere misreading, 2117), he is an ideal medium for bringing out the weaknesses of tragedy.

Formal deficiencies in the current definitions show in the fact that exemplary narratives can be taken from diverse sources and hardly need any adaptation. They may vary greatly in length and Chaucer makes them range from a mere eight verses to well over one hundred. That he was fully conscious of deficits in this respect seems to become evident in his calling *Troilus and Criseyde* ironically his "litel" tragedy (V 1786). Thus on several occasions, he has the Monk refer to more comprehensive versions (2319 ff., 2459 ff., and 2719 ff.) or use the *praeteritio* (2311, 2355, 2575 ff. and 2647 ff.). In the tragedy of Caesar, he makes a point of digressing for "a litel while" into a lament for Pompey. Once, after having met the requirements for tragedy, he makes the Monk declare his task as fulfilled (2458). Furthermore, it is still not clear whether tragedies bewail "noon oother maner thyng" but the falls of "regnes that been proude", as Boethius' "definition" suggests (2761-64), or whether they bewail individuals "that stoode in heigh degree" (1975-94), or what the

<sup>38</sup> Italics mine.

relation between the two ought to be. The Monk, at any rate, chooses great individuals and in some tragedies adds the ruin of their realms, while in others he does not. The impression that the *Tale* is mechanical and at the same time rather formless, which modern readers cannot help gaining, may therefore be the result of Chaucer's critical experimentation and for the most part intended.

Still more energetically, Chaucer probes into the philosophical implications of tragedy. Where Daun Piers blunders most is in his presentation of Fortune, which, as has been shown above, was really the crucial point both of the various ideas about tragedy and of more general philosophical controversies of the age. At first, in the prologue to the tale, the Monk defines tragedy traditionally as a *casus*, without a single mention of Fortune. Then, in his programmatic beginning, he follows Boethius' "definition" and contemporary conceptions, mostly derived from it, and accentuates the fickleness of Fortune (see "list") as the irresistible cause of the fall into adversity, out of which one cannot be brought by any "remedie". Without noticing the differences or caring about Fortune's relation to God, the Monk — apparently for the sake of completeness — goes on to employ Lucifer and Adam for his first two tragedies. In doing so, he more or less presses those *casus* which in the Christian view have determined the history of mankind and which are the "classic" examples of the free will God permits his creatures, into the heathen, deterministic pattern presented just before — again without realizing the discrepancies. Though the Monk does concede with Lucifer that "Fortune may noon angel dere" and that he fell for his sin, this does not make him reconsider either the definitions or the attribution. Nowhere in the Adam tragedy does he refer to Fortune, nor does he speak of sin but merely a secularized "mysgovernaunce". Chaucer's audience, however, may have noticed the contradictions, especially those members of it who remembered Boccaccio's *De Casibus*. Warned by the first two examples, which are rather gross, they would have been sensitive to the inconsistencies and weaknesses which follow. In several later tragedies, Fortune is again missing altogether. Her relationship to God remains unclear throughout. At one time, she appears completely pagan (for example, when she laughs in amusement at Nero's suicide), at another, she and God are mentioned in one and the same breath. The Monk's philosophical confusion reaches a climax with his last example (in the best manuscripts) when he includes a

prescient dream and nevertheless goes on stressing that Fortune overthrows her victims whenever she chooses (see "unwaar strook")<sup>39</sup>.

Apart from Lucifer and Adam, Daun Piers never sees the ends as eternal damnation ("helle"), although in various cases this would have been the correct Christian interpretation. Rather he continually bewails the loss of greatness, which he has already emphasized in earlier passages. Compare his lament for the great conqueror Alexander:

Who shal me yeven teeris to compleyne  
The deeth of gentillesse and of franchise,  
That al the world weilded in his demeyne,  
And yet hym thoughte it myghte nat suffise?  
So ful was his corage of heigh emprise.  
Allas! ... (2663 ff.)

Far from criticizing Alexander's hubris, the Monk devotes to him words reminiscent of Jeremiah's wailing about Israel, "quis dabit capiti meo aquam et oculis meis fontem lacrimarum / et plorabo ..." — a formulation which had passed into the matins of Passion Sunday and many religious laments<sup>40</sup>.

Yet, the more Daun Piers stresses the worldly glory of his heroes, the more frustrating their falls become, in particular when unequivocally attributed to the arbitrariness of Fortune. In other words, instead of transcending the tension between the glorification of the hero and the presentation of his inability to prevent the final catastrophe, which is basic to tragedy, Chaucer accentuates it through his half-learned and undiscerning Monk, who does not dream of manifesting human greatness in failure and suffering. To a Christian audience the paradox of tragedy becomes the more agonizing as the Monk not only abstains from subordinating Fortune to God but, with the exception of the first two examples, also finishes with the catastrophe in this world. No consoling vistas into the beyond are opened up. Particularly disconcerting is the case of Antiochus, for, notwithstanding the fact that his punishment has made him recognize God as the Lord of every creature, he has to die a miserable death, unrelieved by any spiritual comfort.

However, the more agonizing the falls of the heroes become and the

<sup>39</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the contradictions see R. K. Delasanta, "'Namore of this': Chaucer's Priest and Monk", *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 13 (1968), 123-126.

<sup>40</sup> See R. Haas, *Die mittellenglische Totenklage* (Frankfort 1980), p. 98.

more the philosophical confusion grows, the more Chaucer also undermines the teaching tragedy might convey. It gets more and more difficult to draw a positive moral from the Monk's stories. In his programmatic introduction, the Monk has exhorted the pilgrims to "be war by these ensamples trewe and olde". Apart from the admonition not to "truste on blynd prosperitee", he has then not specified the lesson to be learnt and, tellingly enough, has not given it any explicitly Christian colouring. But if the "unwaar strook" of Fortune is the ultimate fact, what use is there then in not trusting her? in not confiding too much in one's lover or in self-knowledge (two morals which the Monk distils from several tragedies)? in taking a warning from a prescient dream? The advantage of a purely secular *ataraxia*, which the Monk, like Seneca and some early humanists, might have aimed at, does not become clear from the *Tale*. Chaucer makes his small-scale humanist spoil this possible secular moral not only by his general tangle of contradictions but above all by committing the blunder of bringing in God's grace several times. In the case of Nabugodonosor, Daun Piers even lets God's grace provide a "remedie" against the worst consequences of the fall, which is completely at variance with his understanding of Fortune tragedy in his programmatic beginning and cannot but discredit both the genre and its teaching.

After Chaucer has got his would-be humanist completely entangled in the snares of the contemporary concepts of tragedy and in so doing has given another variation on the existential themes with which he is concerned in the *Canterbury Tales* — such as fate, predestination, grace, free will, love, virtue, and the functions of knowledge —, he continues his evaluation of the fashionable form in a more direct way, by subjecting it to audience criticism. Instead of providing "solas" and of effecting Stoic calm, he lets the Monk's offerings provoke energetic resistance. As in the whole of the *Canterbury Tales* there are only two other stories which are interrupted by listeners, the violence of this criticism is the more conspicuous. In the best version, it is the Knight who stops the Monk and he is seconded by the Host, which means that Chaucer makes the highest-ranking secular pilgrim and one of the lowest agree in their rejection of the tale of the highest-ranking churchman. The reasons for their opposition are, however, poles apart. The Knight is touched because he understands and revolts against the gist of the tale. The Host is untouched and frustrated because he is devoid of understanding.

The Knight, who may be of a similar, more or less educated worldliness as the Monk<sup>41</sup>, seems so chilled to the marrow that he forgets his usual meekness. He objects to the tragedies because of an excess of "hevynesse" (which may for him be exacerbated by the fact that former leaders of his were among the *exempla*) and as an antidote he demands a story built on exactly the opposite pattern: a rise from "povre estaat" to permanent "prosperitee".

The lack of understanding on the part of the uneducated Harry Bailly could be expected from his general directing of the storytelling game, but it has been specifically prepared for by Chaucer in the *Prologue to the Monk's Tale*. There he has made the Host reveal himself to be a hen-pecked husband, who has no desire to prove himself a hero, but is forced by his wife to behave "lik a wilde leoun, fool-hardy". In his unresponsiveness Harry is an ideal medium for yet another play upon the current concepts of tragedy, for in his parrot-like repetition of words from the Monk's last sentence and the Knight's criticism, which he binds together by some comment of his own, Chaucer can parody the most important criteria for tragedy: The would-be humanist's rhetorical self-stylization, his "syngyng", strikes Harry merely as a "lowde clapping". Insensitive to the poetic beauty of the Fortune image in which the Monk has just excelled himself, he takes it literally and is unable to comprehend its message. In contrast to the avant-garde, the novel idea of "tragedy" leaves him cold, but he seems to have grasped that it means a considerable amount of lamentation, which is not to his taste in a tale. Whatever "historic" dignity the examples may have, the pragmatic Host sees no "remedie" in bewailing and complaining "That that is doon". This may, if at all, be justified in lent, concerning one's sins (*Clerk's Prologue* 24). In contrast to other tales, e.g. the *Physician's Tale*, the "hevynesse" here annoys Harry as being a complete lack of "desport" and "game". Finally, the calm that the Monk's tragedies have produced in lively Harry is mere sleepiness.

After Chaucer has concentrated his dramatized criticism of tragedy on its negative effects on the audience, which have culminated in reactions both from the Knight and the Host that seem almost contrary to their

<sup>41</sup> For an emphasis on the manifestations of an un-Boethian interest in purely earthly happiness in the *Knight's Tale* which does away with the philosophical discrepancy felt by various scholars between his own tale and the alternative that he suggests to the Monk's tragedies, see E. C. Schweitzer, "Fate and Freedom in *The Knight's Tale*", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 3 (1981), 13-45, esp. 44.

characters, he concludes by returning to the teller. When the Host, starting from the sound premise that one can present those matters best which one has in one's heart and head<sup>42</sup>, suggests Daun Piers should change to a story about hunting, Chaucer makes him imply a discrepancy between the gloomy tragedies and their worldly teller. This incongruity has been strongly felt by modern critics, too, and it certainly proves puzzling as long as one does not view it as part of Chaucer's evaluation of tragedy and the contemporary enthusiasm for it. While Harry considers the Monk's choice of story inappropriate to his actual character, his own and the Knight's reactions, of course, also prompt doubts about the appropriateness to what the Monk should ideally be. Chaucer further encourages his readers to think along these lines through a telling piece of irony. He lets the Host crown his dismissal of the tragedies by the irrefutable argument that "Whereas a man may have noon audience,/ Noght helpeth it to tellen his sentence". This point, for which Harry refers to "thise clerkes" and which he may simply remember from the preceding *Tale of Melibee* (so that Chaucer-the-pilgrim would be one of his "clerkes"), is, in fact, a biblical echo. Thus, Chaucer makes someone as worldly and unlearned as an innkeeper blame the highest-ranking churchman among the pilgrims, who *ex officio* should spread the 'good spell' but is proud of his secular pseudo-learning, for the "hevynesse" of his tale using a Biblical proverb.

Chaucer continues to sow doubts about the appropriateness of tragedy through his presentation of the Monk's final response. Daun Piers turns down the requests for "somwhat elles", with the words, "I have no lust to pleye". Unlike other "intellectuals", Chaucer-the-pilgrim and the Clerk, whom the Host also thinks he must rouse from their ruminations and admonish to join in the "pleye" with cheerfulness, the Monk after all is neither prepared nor able to do so fully. The Clerk seemingly complies with Harry's preliminary injunctions in a brilliant performance; Chaucer-the-pilgrim modestly offers a second tale, which passes Harry's requirements. Daun Piers, however, refuses to gratify the wishes of his listeners, and one reason may be his pride in his modern learning, which makes him decline to descend (as he will view it) to the vulgar entertainment of a story about hunting or the philosophical insipidity of the Knight's alternative. A deeper reason might be that he

<sup>42</sup> This reading of ll. 2803-4 was suggested by M. Lehnert, *Geoffrey Chaucer: Die Canterbury-Erzählungen* (Leipzig 1981), p. 436.

has succumbed to the sin of *acedia*, as has been suggested by several critics<sup>43</sup>, who have, however, failed to notice the new traits. If Daun Piers is a victim of *acedia*, this is seen less in traditional terms (as an offence against God's commandments) than as a sadness about the wickedness of the world and Fortune's unfair blows — as "worldli hevynesse", to pick up both the criticism of the Knight and the Host and Lydgate's formulation in connection with Petrarch's *De Remediis*<sup>44</sup>. This would mean that the Monk's tragedies not only fail to instruct and delight his audience but proceed from a sinful state of mind that they perhaps even aggravate further — a conclusion which would constitute a devastating criticism of the fashionable form.

While Chaucer does not grant his readers a glimpse into the Monk's soul and leaves it to them to decide for themselves, he uses another means of giving focus to his assessment of tragedy. As the fact that he has made a small mind experiment with the fashionable form might detract from his criticism, he provides a counterbalance by endowing the Monk and his *Tale* with certain traits that were known from Petrarch and by playing on them in the context as well.

Reference to "maister Petrak" recommended itself, because although he had just written a comedy called *Philologia* in his youth, and no tragedy, he was the most prominent advocate of the "newe" thought, with which tragedy was intimately linked<sup>45</sup>. In particular his *De Remediis*, as has been shown above, offered striking parallels to the current concepts of tragedy and was moreover one of the most progressive and most controversial works of the age. Boccaccio, for example, had used it as evidence for the value of secular literature in *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* XIV<sup>46</sup>, and Charles V of France had commissioned a translation of it the year before Chaucer started work on the *Canterbury Tales*, whereas Salutati, otherwise a great admirer of Petrarch, attacked its philosophical shortcomings in *De Fato, Fortuna et Casu* in 1396-99, i.e.

<sup>43</sup> E.g. D. E. Berndt, "Monastic *Acedia* and Chaucer's Characterization of Daun Piers", *Studies in Philology*, 68 (1971), 435-450.

<sup>44</sup> *Fall of Princes* I 266. For Petrarch's novel interpretation of *acedia*, which seems to have informed Chaucer's, see E. Loos, "Die Hauptsünde der *Acedia* in Dantes *Commedia* und in Petrarca's *Secretum*", in *Petrarca*, ed. F. Schalk (Frankfort 1975), p. 178.

<sup>45</sup> By highlighting the references to Petrarch, I do not, of course, want to deny other humanistic influences and references. In particular Boccaccio's more strictly orthodox *De Casibus* may have given Chaucer suggestions for his criticism. See P. Boitani, "The *Monk's Tale*: Dante and Boccaccio", *Medium Aevum*. 45 (1976), 50-69.

<sup>46</sup> Ed. cit., II 710-11.

when Chaucer was still working on the *Tales*. Shortly after Chaucer's death, the German translator of *De Remediis* thought it advisable to dissociate himself from any notions in the work that the reader might find offensive and the anonymous English adapter did not refrain from significant alterations<sup>47</sup>. That Chaucer himself, though impressed by the renowned "lauriat poete, ... whos rethorike sweete / Enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie", was by no means overwhelmed, but thought Petrarch's novel ideas and literary achievements a challenge to be met becomes obvious both in his use of Sonnet 88 in *Troilus and Criseyde* and his handling of Petrarch's story of Griselda, which is anything but slavish and shows some reserve towards Petrarch's understanding of the functions of high secular literature<sup>48</sup>. Having, then, realized the affinity between Petrarch's *De Remediis* and the current concepts of tragedy, Chaucer could not only heighten his criticism of tragedy but also make it reflect on Petrarch.

Thus, in his presentation of the role of Fortune, which was central both to the concepts of tragedy and *De Remediis*, Chaucer makes his Monk get astonishingly close to Petrarch, as he, too, seems to be captivated by the goddess Fortune of popular ancient tradition. In important places, e.g. his programmatic introduction, Daun Piers greatly stresses her fickleness and the finality of her working, without subordinating her to God (or any god). On the other hand, again like Petrarch, the Monk does not strive to exclude Christian notions altogether, with the result that pagan and Christian elements intermingle and contradictions arise. While, however, great Petrarch could gloss over such discrepancies and dazzle his readers, Chaucer's would-be humanist fares badly. Unwittingly he simplifies everything and so the contradictions multiply, especially when he introduces those tenets that most of the early recipients of *De Remediis* seem to have missed desperately and that the English adapter from the beginning of the fifteenth century could not help inserting, i.e. God's grace and life after death<sup>49</sup>. In the hands of the blundering Monk, therefore, the recently revived Fortune of popular pagan tradition and also the determinism of

<sup>47</sup> R. Coogan, "Petrarch's Latin Prose and the English Renaissance", *Studies in Philology*, 68 (1971), 270-276; Heitmann, pp. 11-13 (where also evidence of the Emperor's keen interest in *De Remediis* is adduced).

<sup>48</sup> See A. Middleton, "The Clerk and His Tale: Some Literary Contexts", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 2 (1980), 121-150.



classical Stoicism lose much of their attraction. Even more so does the Stoic view of man, which is almost totally perverted.

His sensitivity to the vicissitudes of life and his difficulties in fully, not merely rationally, accepting them as part of God's plan — experiences which the imagery of the emancipated pagan Fortune could so well express —, nevertheless led Petrarch, like ancient Stoics, to an assertion of man's moral autonomy and greatness. Having acknowledged his limits, man could and should fashion his life within them, and models for this were to be found in the "viri illustres" of earlier ages, above all of classical Greece and Rome, which Petrarch thought in most respects far superior to his own time<sup>50</sup>. Sham humanist that he is, Daun Piers naturally has to imitate Petrarch's concern with and even glorification of the great ancients — allowing his author to make *his* contribution to another vital complex of the controversy. Petrarch's innovation of studying exemplary figures as manifestations not so much of eternal truths as of human possibilities and greatness still continued to prove exciting and provoking. Boccaccio, for example, had received a decisive impulse for his *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* from Petrarch's *De Viris Illustribus*, and soon after Chaucer's death the English adapter would be so vexed by Petrarch's use of heroic ancients in *De Remediis* that he substituted saints and biblical figures<sup>51</sup>.

By making his Monk present tragedies, Chaucer even allotted to him a classical form excellently suited for celebrating heroes and human greatness in general, because, owing to its nature and its long neglect, tragedy had not undergone so much Christian assimilation as other genres (e.g. the epic), and by imitating Senecan tragedies, Trecento poets (Mussato, Boccaccio and Loschi) had already progressed in this direction. Chaucer none the less manages to make his sham humanist thoroughly spoil the effect of hero worship. He does let him praise his *viri illustres* and *clara femina*, and in a way which has been felt to be very forward-looking, closer to Spenser than to Chrétien<sup>52</sup>, but then questions the value of their heroism with still greater impact. Instead of asserting human greatness in failure and suffering, he has the Monk present his *viri illustres* just as helpless victims — be it of an absolute

<sup>49</sup> See Coogan, pp. 275-276.

<sup>50</sup> See E. Keßler, *Petrarca und die Geschichte* (Munich 1978), pp. 102 ff.

<sup>51</sup> See Coogan, p. 276.

<sup>52</sup> A. Middleton, "Chaucer's 'New Men' and the Good of Literature in the *Canterbury Tales*", in *Literature and Society*, ed. W. Said (Baltimore 1980), p. 45.

Fortune, chance, God's punishment, or the consequences of their own mistakes —, that is, again as examples of the *vanitas vanitatum*. Since he, like his model Petrarch, has no eschatological comfort to offer, the final impression, as the Knight testifies, is one of excessive "hevynesse".

Chaucer's basic irony concerning hero-worship consists, of course, in his transferring of the sublime tragedy from the coteries of the international, Latin élite to the story-telling game of the mixed lot of his English pilgrims — a stark contrast that he accentuates beyond his mini-humanist by saturating the whole context with ironies. Thus he immediately places before the Monk's series of heroes from world history two mock-heroic figures from English low life: the Host, who is forced by his wife to rage "lik a wilde leoun", and Goodelief herself, a frustrated Amazon, who — like the defeated Cenobia — would gladly exchange her distaff for a weapon. He even makes unheroic Harry utter a view that echoes Petrarch's basic conviction that "This world is nat so strong, it is no nay,/ As it hath been in olde tymes yoore", as cited by the Clerk in a prominent place (*Clerk's Tale* 1139-40, determining the moral to be drawn from the story of Griselda). Harry, however, offers a very prosaic explanation for the weakness of the present generation and recommends a simple remedy. Afterwards it is to this critic that Chaucer assigns the longer evaluation of the tragedies, while the Knight represents the estate that holds the traditional claim to heroism.

Moral philosophy was to Petrarch a central concern of his literary activities and *De Remediis* was the tract to sum up and crown his teaching. Here he aimed not so much at glorious heroism but at its modest foundation, sober acceptance of one's bounds. Accordingly, like the classical philosophers, above all the Stoics, he again and again urged the need for self-knowledge, so that the Monk's emphasis on it may be more than merely proverbial. Moreover, in the *Clerk's Tale*, Chaucer has already introduced an instance for comparison. In contrast to *De Remediis* and the *Monk's Tale*, Petrarch's lesson "that every wight, in his degree,/ Sholde be constant in adversitee" is in *Seniles* XVII 3 and the *Clerk's Tale* (1145 f.) not a more or less pagan *ataraxia* but is well integrated into the Christian world-view. None of the pilgrims has therefore objected to the tale of Griselda (on the contrary, Harry applauded it in an earlier version), and in the envoy, the Clerk himself has just playfully contrasted the idealistic exaggeration of Petrarch's Griselda with English fact, the Wife of Bath and "hire secte". The Monk's similar teaching, on the other hand, is ill received. Chaucer

makes it cause rather than calm anxieties, as did Petrarch's *Remedia*, which do not seem to have provided the majority of their early readers with "remedies".

Chaucer culminates his critical questioning by personal allusions to Petrarch. Through his role of moral teacher as also through his literary activities in general — his stylistic refinement, far-reaching studies, hero-worship, fictional correspondence with great ancients ... — Petrarch tried to exalt his own person, and succeeded. He won himself a seat in the pantheon of literature, and in historic reality managed to get crowned with the laurel, which had cost him considerable attendance on the mighty and met with harsh criticism in certain quarters<sup>53</sup>. In the *Monk's Tale*, then, Chaucer can be said to test the value of Petrarch's most advanced means of self-glorification — revived, radically pagan thought and high style — by experimenting with them through his Monk and making the small mind fail. The Monk's intention and his use of the means even appear to proceed from a dangerous, sinful state of mind — again one which Petrarch was the first to analyze in himself in a new way. While Petrarch was still capable of self-criticism and realized certain dangers in what he was doing, the simple Monk is not. Even if he may, like his "maister", be committed to "venerie" in its oblique meaning, his pseudo-learned worldliness keeps him nevertheless far from real communication and true life.

How Chaucer extends his critical reflections about tragedy into the broader context of the *Canterbury Tales* cannot be studied here. Suffice it to point out a few of the closest parallels, e.g., to start with, his presentation of traditional "remedies" in the concluding *Parson's Tale*. The *Tale of Melibee* and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, which frame the Monk's performance, are of course among the ones most replete with resonances. In the *Tale of Melibee*, Chaucer-the-pilgrim, in an ornamented prose, the "style clerghial"<sup>54</sup> most fit for his station, has attempted to teach a primarily secular prudence, which nevertheless rests on Christian faith. Part of this prudence consists in overcoming one's anger and grief and so preventing further evil, and the tale, though not producing at once the corresponding behaviour in Harry, has certainly met with his warm approval and apparently not offended the sensibilities of more delicate minds. Chaucer's playing with highly controversial

<sup>53</sup> See E. H. Wilkins, "Die Krönung Petrarca's", in *Petrarca*, ed. A. Buck, (Darmstadt 1976), pp. 121-123 and 164-166.

<sup>54</sup> See D. Bornstein, "Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* as an Example of the 'Style Clerghial'", *Chaucer Review*, 12 (1978), 236-254.

philosophical notions such as fate, foreknowledge, prescient dreams etc. in the mock-heroic *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the echoes of the *Monk's Tale* have often enough been analyzed<sup>55</sup>. In our context, just the Nun's Priest's final parody of the pattern considered basic to tragedy — the fall from happiness to wretchedness, brought about by Fortune — should be mentioned. Whereas in the *Monk's Tale* Chaucer has shown its formal and philosophical deficiencies in a way that has grated on the nerves of the Knight, not to mention many a later reader, in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* he perverts it good-humouredly. For he gives the "tragedy" an unexpected twist into "comedy", as he did at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* where he even made a point of his wish "to make in som comedye"<sup>56</sup>. Chauntecleer's fall, which the great lament makes appear final, can after all be "remedied", and in bringing about the reversal not only Chauntecleer's ingenuity and the whole rural community, men and animals alike, play a part, but so does Fortune, who turns out to be a sheer metaphor. Together with Harry, who in an early version is delighted with the tale, generations of readers have felt that the Nun's Priest's ending and the wealth of his whole story are much more suited to capture the fullness of life than either the Monk's tragedies or the Knight's similarly simplistic alternative.

In Chaucer's extreme test, the fashionable tragedy, in whose basic pattern he seems to have realized the embodiment of pagan superstition and philosophy, fails. Though in a high style, the Monk's offerings still do not delight his immediate (i.e. fictional) audience and though closely relating to existential questions and philosophy, they still do not convey a valuable teaching. In other words, in them greatness and woe, "ernestful matere", do not appear to become an object of pleasure and use through "art poetical". However, as an example of Chaucer's critical wit, as a radical experimentation with the most progressive literary and philosophical premises and endeavours of the greatest minds of his century and to a certain degree of himself, the *Monk's Tale* with its context even today may provide both "ernest" and "game".

University of Duisburg  
Dept. of English

<sup>55</sup> See e.g. Delasanta, pp. 117-132 and C. C. Watson, "The Relationship of the *Monk's Tale* and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*", *Studies in Short Fiction*, 1 (1964), 277-288.

<sup>56</sup> *TC* V 1788. Chaucer seems to allude to a more widely felt uncertainty about the demarcation between tragedy and comedy, which can be seen from the fact that several works, e.g. *De Casu Caesanae*, are called a tragedy in one manuscript and a comedy in another. See Cloetta, I, p. 67.