Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*: The Position of Fragment VII

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Abstract

Most manuscripts of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* have placed the fragment that begins with *The Shipman's Tale* after Fragment VI. Thus, it is usually found as Fragment VII in most modern translations of Chaucer's tales. Although it is the longest tale-cluster in Chaucer's tales, the order of this fragment is still controversial. For instance, Henry Bradshaw insists that this fragment should be moved ahead and placed after Fragment II. On the other hand, most scholars believe that breaking the order of the tales as it exists in *the Ellesmere a Manuscript,* and as Bradshaw hopes, might ruin the thematic relationship among the tales in different fragments. This research investigates the position of Fragment VII in multiple manuscripts. It evaluates various critical perspectives on the issue and recommend moving fragment VII to be placed after Fragment II. I argue that some amendments to the order found in *the Ellesmere a Manuscript* and the ones that follow its order might reinforce the thematic relationship among the tales and does not ruin it.

Key words: Chaucer's canterbury tales; Fragment VII; Tales grouping

INTRODUCTION

One of the most interesting methods for appreciating *The Canterbury Tales* is through emphasizing the thematic relationship among the tales, highlighting the dramatic principles, tales "quiting," and the juxtaposition of the different portraits of the pilgrims. In the way to Canterbury, Chaucer's pilgrims establish a narrative frame that combines different ideas about religious and secular conducts. The narrative frame includes important debates and arguments between the narrators of the tales. Sometimes, these debates and arguments help us approach the tales in a systematic way, ordering and associating the tales into sections or fragments. Other times, we are not sure where to place some tales since we do not have enough textual evidence. Thus, the order of the tales is such a problematic issue that cannot be easily resolved.

It is widely understood that those who copied *The Canterbury Tales* after Chaucer's death do not totally agree on how the tales should be arranged. *The General Prologue* obviously comes first. *The Parson's Prologue* and *Tale* come last for sure. But it is really hard to arrange the tales in between unless we have a clear end-link that connects with another head-link in the tales. For example, at the end of *The General Prologue*, the narrator describes how "the cut fell to the knight," as we can see in line 845, and therefore we have to link *The General Prologue* to *The Knight's Tale*. Another link at the end of *The Knight's Tale* describes how the Miller breaks in to tell his story, and after that the Reeve, and then the Cook. *The General prologue*, *The Knight's Tale*, *The Miller's Tale*, *The Reeve's Tale*, and *The Clerk's Tale* are thus linked together to make up Fragment I. But *The Cook's Tale*, on the other hand, breaks off with no indication in the text as to what comes next. Other tales, however, are clearly linked to one another by connecting links while a few stand on their own with no explicit links to any other tale. Editors of the tales should, therefore, decide how to put these fragments into a whole. The recent arrangement given in Benson's *The Riverside Chaucer* that is based on *the Ellesmere* is the most common but is not the only one.

The recently popular edition of Benson's *The Riverside Chaucer's* offers some ideas about the artfulness of grouping the tales and the development of themes among tales related in larger structures of the tales in its explanatory notes. *The Canterbury Tales* in this book are grouped basing on *the Ellesmere a Manuscript "Group."* *The Ellesmere* refers to the Chaucer Society edition which goes against the "Bradshaw Shift" that moves Fragment VII (begins with *The Shipman's Tale* and ends with *The Nun's Priest Tale*) to an earlier position based on the "Lo, Rochester" statement before *The Monk's Tale* (Keiser, p.1142). The Bradshaw is issued by Henry Bradshaw in which he tries to arrange the different tales of Chaucer basing on time and geography as presented in the tales. Basing on "the Bradshaw Shift," Fragment VII should be positioned anywhere before *the wife of Bath's Tale* (fragment III). In other words, if we wholeheartedly believe in the "Bradshaw Shift," we should move fragment VII and place after Fragment II. Surprisingly, most manuscripts including *The Ellesmere*, for instance, keep this fragment after fragment VI and ignore "the Bradshaw shift."

The brilliant scholar of Chaucer, George Lyman Kittredge, not only ignores "the Bradshaw shift," but he also proposes a "Marriage Group" begun by the Wife of Bath and concluded by the Franklin (Kittredge, p.121). Kittredge's recommendations of a "Marriage Group" is broken and totally rejected if we accept the "Bradshaw Shift" or take into consideration all the original manuscripts of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales.* However, I do appreciate Kittredge's recommendations of building a thematically solid relationship among the tales. Kittredge's suggestions are really helpful in classrooms since it might be easier for students to create valuable remarks regarding the tales that deal with marital affairs as they study these tales in one unit. On the other hand, I do honor the order of the tales as they are linked together by Chaucer himself as it appears in the head and end-links we see in the tales. Thus, we need to compromise and come up with a solution that neither ruins the original order of the tales nor does it ruin the thematic or the geographic aspect of tales. This unique solution might be attained if we accept "the Bradshaw Shift" which moves fragment VII, which begins with *The Shipman's Tale* and place it right after Fragment II.

The Shipman's Tale as it is one of those tales, which are not connected to a previous one. This tale starts with the Shipman telling a tale that is not introduced by a prologue. In *The Shipman's Epilogue,* the Host praises the Shipman for the interesting fabliau he tells and asks the Prioress to tell another. It is also clear that after the Prioress is done Chaucer tells his tale which is followed by the Monk and then the Nun's Priest. These five tales are generally referred to as Fragment VII. However, the editors of the *Riverside Chaucer,* for instance, have indicated that this fragment might be placed after the Fragment II but they recommend its current position as Fragment VII because it is the position the *Ellesmere (a)* editors chose.

1. WHERE SHOULD WE PLACE THE FRAGMENT THAT BEGINS WITH *THE SHIPMAN'S TALE?*

Giving the fact that there is no direct textual evidence that might indicate where we should place this fragment, the question of where to place it remains an interesting topic for discussion. The question to be asked here is whether we should support "the Bradshaw Shift" which moves Fragment VII right after Fragment II or we should keep it in its "*Ellesmere a*" position as we teach Chaucer in our classrooms. I would like to argue in favor of "the Bradshaw Shift" that we should move Fragment VII forward and place it right ahead of Fragment III (begins with *The Wife of Bath*). My suggestions to move fragment VII to this earlier position is not only based on time and place elements as Bradshaw insists but they are more in favor of Kittredge's recommendations of enhancing the thematic relationship among the tales though the later never supported Bradshaw's notion. If we do move this fragment as I suggest, we partially enhance the thematic relationships among the tales and we also enhance the unity of time and place among them as suggested by Bradshaw. My suggestion might ruin the general order of the different fragments as they appear in most manuscripts, but it does not go far to break the obvious order of the tales inside the fragments as Kittredge's project does.

Many scholars accept the *Ellesmere a* ordering—which places FragmentVII after Fragment VI—as definitive as it represents Chaucer's intention of the tales' ordering. Some scholars believe that this order is based on a list left by Chaucer "to which *the Ellesmere a* editors had access" (Owen, p.237). If this assumption is true, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* we see in the *Ellesmere a Manuscript* is definitely complete. We can also add that Chaucer gives up the commitments he establishes in *The General Prologue* or at least reduces the work from four intended tales by each pilgrim to one tale. Unfortunately, the invalidity of such assumption becomes clear when we consider the fact that some of the twenty nine pilgrims do not tell a single story. As a matter of fact, *The Cook's Tale* is left unfinished. Thus, we can question the validity of the assumption that the order of *Ellesmere a Manuscript* comes directly from Chaucer. Thus, we can also question the perfection of *the Ellesmere* itself.

A careful look at earlier manuscripts such as *the Hengwrt* might question the validity of the tales' order in *the Ellesmere*. *The Hengwrt* is the first manuscript that puts Chaucer's tales together. It is very clear that *the Ellesmere's* editors follow the *Hengwrt's* editors in positioning the tales within the Fragments in particular

and in the sequence of the Fragments to some extent. There are only slight differences between the two manuscripts (Owen, pp.237-8). The close association of the two manuscripts adds to the probability that *the Ellesmere* order is copied from the *Hengwrt* (p.239). The set of glosses used in both manuscripts and the similarities in diction and places of these glosses might confirm the close relationship between the two manuscripts (pp.240-3). Both manuscripts become a kind of effort that reflects genuine interests in collecting the tales in a reasonable frame rather than being suggested by Chaucer himself. This is another point that confirms the invalidity of the assumption that Chaucer has left a list to which *the Ellesmere* editors had access. Instead, *the Ellesmere a* order becomes just like any other manuscript in which editors work hard to create an interesting relationship between the different tales. Once we look at *the Ellesmere a Manuscript* from this perspective and look at it to be a possible copy of the *Hengwrt*, we can question the order of the unlinked tales in this manuscript. At this point we can come to the conclusion that "*The Canterbury Tales* never existed as a neat pile of manuscript." The tales are full of contradictions that make it hard for us to agree on one final ordering for the tales. Such contradictions reflect the development Chaucer's plan of *The Canterbury Tales* went through as he was in the process of composing the tales (p.247).

Fragment VII that begins with *the Shipman's Tale* is the longest cluster of connected tales in the *Canterbury Tales*. Although most manuscript usually places Fragment VII after *the Pardoner's Tale* which is the last tale in Fragment VI, this order is not based on any head or end links provided by Chaucer himself. Interestingly, nineteen manuscripts place fragment VII after the Fragment VI and only one manuscript that I discuss later and which is considered unauthoritative one do place VII after fragment II. But all the nineteen manuscripts that placed VII after VI ignore the geographical and time hints that we see in the tales and disvalue the thematic relationship among the fragments and the tales. Many critics assume that we should not take these geographical hints as a final piece of evidence to group Chaucer's tales since we do not have a single piece of evidence that Chaucer "was interested in the geographical detail of the journey" to Canterbury (Cooper, p.277). Cooper's point of view is not surprising because if we do take these geographical hints into consideration, the result is that *The Ellesmere* and many other manuscripts fail to order the tales in a geographically satisfying manner.

It is likely that Chaucer intends to present *The Canterbury Tales* as presented on the actual Canterbury-London road at various times of actual days of the journey toward Canterbury. The times and places are scattered throughout the nine Fragments of the tales. Considering these time and geographical elements might unmistakably lead us to the conclusion that Chaucer has

a plan of ordering the tales in mind as he composes his poetry. In fact, "*The Ellesmere* order of the tales has long seemed unsatisfactory because it distorts the geographical order of allusions to towns and Chaucer would not have deliberately alluded to Sittingbourne" in Fragment III before he alludes to Rochester in Fragment VII which begins with *The Shipman's Tale* (Pratt, p.1141). We all know that Rochester is ten miles closer to London than Sittingbourne. Thus, the geographical references challenge the validity of *the Ellesmere a Manuscript* order.

However, some scholars who argue in favor of *the Ellesmere* emphasize "two other considerations. The first is the evidence of incomplete revision in the erroneous reference to 'prose' in B1 [II] 96", which suggests that The Man of Law may be the one who tells *Melibee*. The second point they emphasize in defense of *the Ellesmere* is the "feminine pronouns in B2 [VII]" at the beginning of *The Shipman's Tale*, which suggests that the teller of the tale might be the Wife of Bath rather than the Shipman. Unfortunately, Chaucer neither lived long enough to do obvious revisions on the teller of *Melibee* nor did he have the opportunity to revise the geographical content and pronouns agreements in his work. Thus, the feminine pronoun issue and argument on the possible teller of *Melibee* prove nothing to validity of *Ellesmere a*. Furthermore, the aforementioned points which are blindly considered by those in favor of *the Ellesmere* do not provide reasonable justification of the geographical issues that *the Ellesmere a* order causes. Hence, the appearance of Sittingbourne reference by the Summoner in Fragment VII lead Henry Bradshaw to suggest that we should amend *the Ellesmere a* order to move this Fragment forward and place it right after the Fragment II. Furnivall seems to support the "Bradshaw shift" when he argues that we can move "any group of tales" up or down basing on internal evidence (Pratt, p.1142).

Speaking of the end-link of *the Man of Law's Tale*, it is important to take into consideration Miss Hammond's notion of the true identity of the character mentioned in the end-link as it appears in *the O1 Manuscript*. The end-link mentions a name of character that begins with the letter (s) but is not finished in line 1179 of Fragment II (which is excluded from many other manuscripts). If the end-link includes the full name of the character, it might save us much debate. At the same time, the first letter of the character's name (s) makes it clear that the narrator of the following tale is not the wife of Bath for sure. The letter (s) narrows down the possibility to three pilgrims; the Summoner, the Squyer and the Shipman (p.1149).

Indeed, the language and sentiment of line 1190 of fragment I—"there is but litel Latyne in my mawe"—make it a suitable statement for "apilgrim whose petty willfulness has kept him, like the character in *The Shipman's Tale*." On the other hand, the Wife of Bath "is aware of her language limitation and the language in which she expresses her yearnings would be totally out

of character for the speaker in end-link" of *The Man of Law's Tale*. The Wife of Bath compares herself to barley-bread and humbly says that "Lord Jesus refreshed many a man" (III 146). "The richness of this imagery bespeaks a temperament and an imagination far beyond that of the pilgrim" of line 1183 in Fragment II (Keiser, p.198). We read in the end-link;

"He woldesoen som difficulte,

Or springe Cokkel in our clenecorne

And therefore, Hooste, T Warne thee beforn." (II 1181-84)

It is very clear that *The Squyer's Tale* does not fit into this group because the squire announces "it is pryme" in line 73 of his tale while *The Man of Law's Tale* begins when it is "ten at the clokke" as line 14 of the tale indicates (Pratt, p.1153). The possibilities of having the Squire or the Summoner next do not seem sound as well. As a matter of fact the tales told by the Summoner and the Squire are "integrated with prologues fitted to the respective personalities of these two tellers" (p.1154). Hence, the mysterious character that appears in *The Man of Law's Tale* should be the Shipman and *Ellesmere a Manuscript* order that places *The Wife of Bath's Tale* right after *The Man of Law's Tale* is invalid.

Because of all the aforementioned reasons, it is very clear that we can move Fragment VII forward and place it right after *The Man of Law's* Tale with a form of *The Man of Law's* Prologue in which the name of the pilgrim in line 1179 of Fragment II is 'Shipman.' Interestingly enough, *The Riverside Chaucer* editors seem to side with this opinion since they include the name of the mysterious character as the Shipman but they do not place *The Shipman's Tale* next. We read in the Riverside;

"Nay, by my fader soule, that schal he nat!

Seyde the Shipman, "Heereschal he natpreche;

He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche." (1178-80)

The Ellesmere a Manuscript does not seem to be satisfying for us by now. We might be more surprised to know that the end-link of the Man of Law is not included in the Ellesmere itself. "The absence of this of this end-link is very perplexing, especially for those who believe that the Ellesmere order is authoritative is, it would seem, to regard the end-link as cancelled" (Keiser, p.192). Some scholar have already spoken of the possibility that Chaucer cancelled the end-link himself. This argument seems invalid for the lack of evidence anyways.

The only manuscript that that places *The Shipman's Tale* right after *The Man of Law's Tale* is *the Selden* (p.194). Unfortunately, this manuscript is considered very corrupt one since it has very unsatisfying order for many other tales. However, the Selden manuscript shows the mysterious characterin line 1179 of Fragment II to be the Shipman. Many Chaucerian scholars including those who like the idea of connecting the Man of Law to the Shipman do not refer to *the Selden* because it is considered unauthoritative.

The order of the tales has been very controversial since George Leman Kittredge suggested his theory of the "Marriage Group" (Keiser, p.196). Critics, ever since, have been looking for the thematic relationships among the tales. There is a huge amount of criticism that investigates the juxtapositions of themes and attitudes among the tales inside the fragments and among the fragments themselves. The structural flexibility of the tales and the interplay of themes resulting from this flexibility are very important aspect of *The Canterbury Tales*. As a result many scholars have favored *the Ellesmere a* order because they believe that it reinforces the thematic relationship among the tales. However, emphasizing the thematic relationship does not require us to place some tales next to each other to create immediate juxtaposition of certain tales. For example, we can easily figure out the thematic relationship between The *Clerk's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* although it is very clear that the two tales are not connected since the latter is linked to *The Friar's Tale*. Similarly, *the Nun's Priest's Tale* offers some comment on the *Prioriess' Tale* but the two tales are not linked together. There is a huge distance between *The Night's Tale* and *The Summoner's Tale* but former jumps in to interrupt the Summoner (p.197). Therefore, inserting *The Shipman's Tale* and the other tales in Fragment VII between *The Man of Law's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* does not affect the thematic relationship among the various tales. It should be noted that *the Ellesmere* then is not justified as the only manuscript that reinforces the thematic relationship among the different tales.

2. THE THEMATIC RELATIONSHIP OF THE TALES SUGGESTS PLACING FRAGMNET VII AFTER FRAGMNET II

As a matter of fact, many scholars fail to see the positive sides of moving Fragment VII and place it right after Fragment II. Here, I am not talking about the obvious conclusion that positioning this fragment after *The Man of Law's Tale* might enhance the unity of time and geography between the fragments, but rather I am referring to the thematic importance of positioning fragment VII after fragment II. We all know that fragment I includes two fabliaux, *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale*. Moving Fragment VII and placing it after fragment II— which includes only one tale—might reinforce the thematic relationship among the tales in fragments I and VII. I would like to argue that it is really helpful for us as teacher of Chaucer to teach *The Shipman's Tale* right after we are done with *The Man of Law's Tale*. In doing so, students might have more appreciation for the fabliau as a literary genre since it is easier to remind students with the fabliaux they have just met in fragment I in this case. Moving Fragment VII to this earlier position might make the three fabliaux closer to each other. *The Miller's*

Tale and *The Reeve's Tale* have been already ordered next to each other in fragment I. The Cook and the Man of Law are next. If we move fragment VII forward, then *The Shipman's Tale* might be separated by only two tales from the aforementioned fabliaux while there might be a huge distance between the later and other two fabliaux of fragment I if we keep Fragment VII in its current position after VI as suggested by *The Ellesmere* and as it is copied in many other manuscripts.

The Shipman's Tale is a fabliau that involves sex and trickery in its basic structure. In fact, the tale echoes earlier tales in Fragment I. To be more specific, the tale is similar in content to *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale* (Cooper, p.278). The three tales deal with extramarital relationships by wives who have some kind of problem with their husbands. It is worth mentioning that the other two fabliaux juxtapose and quite each other while this tale stands alone with "no thematic relationship to other tales" (p.281). However, it might really help us as teacher of Chaucer if we teach *The Shipman's Tale* in a closer context to the other two fabliaux. This might be only attained if we move Fragment VII forward and attach it to the epilogue of *the Man of Law's Tale*. As a result, student might enjoy the comic spirit of the three tales or fabliaux. Moving fragment VII right after fragment II do, in fact, reinforce the thematic relationship among the three fabliaux which all revolve around sex and trickery.

My suggestion of connecting the three fabliaux might seem unsatisfactory to Paul Ruggiers who points out that *The Shipman's Tale*'s comic spirit is "far removed from that world of happy and triumphant sexuality of *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale.*" The tale reflects what he calls "the bourgeois mentality." In his opinion, the centrality of sexuality and money in *The Shipman's Tale* makes it more suitable "to the character of the Wife of Bath" rather than the character of the Shipman (Ruggiers, p.80). Ruggiers insists on the feminine tone of the tale. In his book we read; "At the outset of the story it seems to be her (Wife of Bath's) voice that we hear intruding upon the narrative" (p.81). I would like to argue that Ruggiers's point of view seems invalid especially when we consider Leonard Koff's notion of "double story tellers" in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

Koff's idea revolves around the true identity of the tales' original teller (Chaucer). He points out that we like to believe that it is the "Wife of Bath" who tells her story while it is Chaucer in fact who speaks for her (Koffp, pp.106-8). I would like to add that whether it is the Shipman or the Wife of Bath who tells the story of *The Shipman's Tale*, it does not matter. What matters is the basic component of the story itself; plot, character, language and so on and so forth. Even if we assume that it is the Wife of Bath who tells the tale and not the Shipman, this assumption might not change the story.

Nor does it add to it. Ruggiers' feminist assumption might be a misreading of the lines since it is really hard to judge whether some pronouns are meant to be masculine or feminine in Chaucer's times (Pratt, pp.1156-1158). However, even if we take those pronouns as feminine ones and see the feminine tone toward the beginning of the tale, such legendary tone might be ironic rather than realistic. Furthermore, I do recommend pointing out the similarities between the tales rather than explaining the differences. The comic spirit along with sex and trickery are basic components that *The Miller's Tale, The Reeve's Tale* and *The Shipman's tale* share. There is no way to explain these tales in class without drawing on those three elements.

CONCLUSION

As a matter of fact, the thematic relationship among *The Shipman's Tale, The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale* is so overt that we cannot deny. It is more likely to have these three tales in an earlier position of the tales and since the latter two tales were presented in Fragment II, we should place Fragment VII right after Fragment II. In other words, moving Fragment VII that begins with *The Shipman's Tale* forward and placing it right after *The Man of Law's Tale* (Fragment II) might not only solve the geographical and time issues in *The Canterbury Tales*, but it also reinforces the thematic relationship among its fragments without breaking the obvious order of tales inside the various fragments. This earlier positioning of this fragment goes partially fine with Kittredge's suggestions on enhancing the thematic relationship among the tales.

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