

Girdles, belts, and cords: a leitmotif in Chaucer's General Prologue

Lawrence Besserman

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Contrast, cross-referencing, and the use of leitmotifs (of words and things) are among the most important devices that make Chaucer's General Prologue the masterpiece of complex, vivid, and dynamic portraiture it is universally acknowledged to be. Here are just a few of the scores of contrastive pairings, triplings, or even broader and variously significant associations that readers carefully attending to what Chaucer the Pilgrim reports from the Tabard Inn have found: 'worthy' and 'worthynesse' used as leitworter in the description of the 'verray, parfit gentil knyght' (43, 47, 50, 64, 68) but also used in reference to the Friar (243, 269), Merchant (279, 283), Franklin (360), and Wife of Bath (459); the observation that the Prioress's wimple is neatly pleated (151), while the Wife of Bath, too, is 'ywympled wel' (470); and that the Friar shuns 'a thredbare cope' (260), while the Clerk wears a 'thredbare ... overeste courtepy' (290); references to gold used for personal ornament (Prioress [160], Monk [196]), mention of absent gold, i.e., money (Clerk [298]), in medicinal preparations (Physician [443, 444]), in the figurative expression of an ideal priest (Parson [500]), and gold used in the figurative description of a cheating Miller (563). (1) In the present note I wish to draw attention to a leitmotif in the General Prologue that has hitherto been overlooked: the girdles, belts, and cords that bedeck some of the Canterbury pilgrims and are conspicuously absent from the costumes of others.

From first to last, the pilgrims who wear girdles, belts, or cords do so either to hold up their purses or weapons or else for sartorial display. (2) Thus the Yeoman carries his sheaf of "bright and kene" peacock arrows "under his belt ... but thriftily" (104-05). And although the Man of Law rides "but hoonly in a medlee cote," the silk girdle (ceint) with small ornamental bars that Chaucer mentions in the next line of his portrait (328-29) adds a stylish touch to his attire. Perhaps the Man of Law is simply too "great a purchasour" to have anything so practical and common as purse, keys, or dagger in full view, suspended from a girdle; his ceint is probably just for show, a badge of status. (3) The pilgrim who rides "in his compaignye," the Franklin, whom Chaucer describes next, may at a first glance seem to be more practical than his wealthier and loftier friend in regard to his use of a similar clothing accessory. The only details Chaucer gives of the Franklin's costume are these: "An anlaas and a gipser al of silk/Heeng at his girdel, whit as morne milk" (357-58). Noting that the short dagger (anlaas) stuck through a pouch or purse (gipser) was fashionable amongst knights and gentlemen in the fourteenth century, Alfred David has suggested that Chaucer bestows these accoutrements upon the Franklin to signal his "harmless pretentiousness" and sustain the "note of luxury and softness" that runs throughout his portrait. (4) But as Planche points out in his *History of British Costume*, the fourteenth-century fashion of wearing daggers stuck through pouches was adopted by ladies at "tournaments and public shows" and was in turn "eagerly caught at and imitated by the fops and gallants of the day"--Chaucer's satire here may be even a bit sharper than David warrants. (5)

The Five Guildsmen, portrayed immediately after the Franklin, also carry pouches that, like the Franklin's, are also suspended from girdles, with both pouch and girdle "wrought ful clene and wel ... everydel" (I [A] 367-68). Costume takes up just three out of the twenty-three lines of the Shipman's portrait, and a laas ('cord') is featured:

[He rood upon a rouncy, as he kouthe,]
 In a gowne of faldyng to the knee.
 A daggere hangyng on a laas hadde he
 Aboute his nekke, under his arm adoun. [390-93]

What the reader will have noticed is that none of the pilgrims mentioned above belongs to that group of characters in the General Prologue who are associated with the Church. (6) Chaucer very pointedly draws our attention to the girdles, belts, and cords of the secular pilgrims in the General Prologue, while leaving the girdles of the religious figures conspicuously out of sight. (7) (Surely at least the Prioress, Monk, and Friar should have worn them as part of their habits.) The irony of this reversal, given the shameless worldliness (or worse) of most of the religious figures on the road to Canterbury is especially sharp; for the girdles of religious in the Middle Ages stood for a variety of spiritual and-ethical values, including chastity, faithfulness, truth, righteousness, and spiritual preparedness. (8) By omitting ecclesiastical girdles, belts, or cords in his portraits of the spiritually lax or corrupt churchmen on the Canterbury pilgrimage, Chaucer obliquely signals the failure of these figures to embody the aforementioned values. (9) Reporting instead on the "mundane" girdles of the secular pilgrims is Chaucer's way of foregrounding that omission.

(1) For these and other examples, see, inter alia, Harold F. Brooks, *Chaucer's Pilgrims: The Artistic Order of the Portraits in the Prologue* (1962; London: Methuen, 1965); Ruth Nevo, "Chaucer: Motive and Mask in the General Prologue" *Modern Language Review* 58 (1963): 1-9 on gold; and Robert K. Presson, "The Aesthetic of Chaucer's Art of Contrast," *English Miscellany* 15 (1964): 9-23. All line references to and quotations from Chaucer in the present essay follow *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1957).

(2) On the history of girdles, belts, and cords as accessories of medieval English costume, see J. R. Planche, *History of British Costume from the Earliest Period to the Close of the Eighteenth Century*, 3rd ed. (London: Bell, 1874) 145-46 and passim; Iris Brooke, *English Costume of the Later Middle Ages: The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (London: Black, 1935) 14-28; and

Phillis Cunnington and Catherine Lucas, *Occupational Costume in England from the Eleventh Century to 1914* (London: Black, 1967) 356-60.

(3) Cp. Alisoun in the Miller's Tale, who, like the Man of Law, wears a "ceynt ... barred al of silk" (I [A] 3235), but in addition wears a girdel ('belt') from which there hangs a leather purse, "Tasseled with silk, and perled with latoun" (I [A] 3250-51). On ornamental cinctures in fourteenth-century dress, see Brooke 14-28.

(4) See Alfred David, "Sentimental Comedy in the Franklin's Tale," *Annuaire Medievale* 6 (1965): 21-22; citing the 1849 edition of Planche.

(5) See 145-46 of the edition of Planche cited in n. 2, above.

(6) Of the twenty-two portraits in the General Prologue (which actually describe a total of twenty-six pilgrims, since the Five Guildsmen are rendered in a group portrait and the Second Nun and "preestes thre" omitted), seven (for a total of 320 lines) are devoted to religious figures (Friar, Parson, Pardoner, Summoner, Monk, Prioress, Clerk) and fifteen to secular ones (but for only the slightly larger total of 349 lines). These and other interesting observations on the structure of the General Prologue are made by Thomas A. Kirby, "The General Prologue," in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, rev. ed., ed. Beryl Rowland (New York: Oxford UP, 1979) 243-70 (250 for the above statistics).

(7) On the girdles of medieval English ecclesiastics, see Mrs. Charles H. Ashdown, *British Costume During XIX Centuries (Civil and Ecclesiastical)*, 3rd ed. (London: Jack, 1910) 332-58 (girdles of monks and friars); and George Clinch, *English Costume from Prehistoric Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Methuen, 1909) 245-46 (girdles of nuns).

(8) On the symbolism of ecclesiastical girdles, see *Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Vestments" and "Popular Devotions"; and references and discussion in Lawrence Besserman, "Gawain's Green Girdle," *Annuaire Medieval* 22 (1982): 87-90.

(9) The values that ecclesiastical girdles symbolize are most fully embodied in the Parson, a religious figure described (like his fellow ecclesiasts, but for opposite reasons) without reference to girdles, belts, or cords. Though the Parson would have worn a cingulum ('girdle') when serving mass, there is no reason to expect him to travel the road to Canterbury wearing one. Indeed, unlike the other ecclesiastical figures, he is portrayed at length with no indication whatsoever of either his clothing or physiognomy--all substance and no surface. The Ellesmere miniatures, however, show girdles on the Parson and Chaucer, as well as on the Reeve, Manciple, Wife of Bath, Merchant, Squire, Canon's Yeoman, Second Nun, and Nun's Priest; on the other hand, the Man of Law's "ceint of silk" is omitted (see Edwin Piper, "The Miniatures of the Ellesmere Chaucer," *Philological Quarterly* 3 [1924]: 241-56).

Besserman, Lawrence

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