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Chaucer's Violent Comedy

Owing to a shared history in folk traditions, many Middle Ages tales, namely those with comic intent, have several aspects in common. Two texts that can be categorized as such are Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, and Chaucer's text, perhaps influenced by it, *The Canterbury Tales*. From the major plot points to the characters involved, and even sometimes to the purely comic elements such as the comic timing and resolutions, the comic tales in *Canterbury* take great inspiration from their parallels in Boccaccio, albeit with a distinct English focus. Though the comic tales in the two texts have much in common, a distinct point of divergence between the two can be found in Chaucer's inclusion of numerous scenes of intense violence that stand in contrast to Boccaccio's general lighthearted tone. Where Boccaccio's comic characters are generally duped or otherwise punished with ridicule, Chaucer's counterparts frequently endure surprisingly brutal attacks, though interestingly these attacks are still presented in a fully comic fashion. In this essay I will compare these points of divergence between the two authors, and show how Chaucer's violent comedy, brutal as it may be to a 21st century reader, introduces complex elements of commentary both from and consequently back towards the narrators of his comic tales that are otherwise missing in Boccaccio. Given that the amount of comic material produced by both authors is considerably vast, I will be focusing primarily upon Chaucer's fabliaux of *The Miller's Tale*, and to a lesser extent, *The Reeve's Tale*,

to argue my position, as each tale has a clear comic intention, and can also be adequately aligned with comic themes found in tales from *The Decameron*.

It is first pertinent to define what can be considered to be comic in medieval texts, to provide a framework in which to properly examine Chaucer's (and Boccaccio's) works. Though much of the comedy in Chaucer's writing is still appreciable to a modern reader, deciphering the comic intent built into the texts for the original medieval audience relies upon understanding the societal 'rules' of laughter for the time period. In the introduction to his text *Rabelais and His World,* Mikhail Bakhtin traces the most important elements of medieval comedy to historic folk culture, which was informed by elements of the carnivalesque, oral and literary parodies in Latin and the vernacular and "various genres of billingsgate: curses, oaths and popular blazons" (Bakhtin 5). Bakhtin describes folk culture as a collective "consciousness" (6) lived by all members of society that derived laughter from scenes of spectacle (as experienced in times of carnival), scenes which permeated popular folk tales in medieval Europe and beyond. Bakhtin builds upon his framing of medieval laughter by exploring the importance of the body (namely the lower body and its various functions) to folk culture, a trend which he regards as "grotesque realism" (18). Actions and functions related to the body presented in folk culture emphasize the "degradation" of whatever subject matter they're related to, a "lowering" which Bakhtin suggests is not "primitive", but rather sets the stage for cycles of societal rebirth and rejuvenation (24-26). This body-centric focus is of course the reason for the abundance of not only 'bawdy' jokes in medieval texts, but also repeated references to excrement, and eating/drinking (often in excess). Tales containing these themes spread across medieval Europe, creating a vast body of popular topics, character types and themes for authors to combine and modify as they saw fit.

Considering the subject matter of *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*, the two texts easily fit into the medieval folk culture comic framework that Bakhtin provides. Although written some 40 years apart by authors in different countries, there are numerous parallels that exist between the two texts through both plot structures and repetitive themes. Carol Heffernan argues in his essay *Parallel Comic Tales in the Decameron and the Canterbury Tales* that not only do the two authors take inspiration from the same European folk culture subject matter, but that Chaucer actually draws direct inspiration from Boccaccio's renditions in *The Decameron*. From both authors comic tropes such as cuckolded husbands, promiscuous clergymen and scheming learned youth appear again and again, to the point where Heffernan suggests that roughly one quarter of *The Canterbury Tales* can be read as having taken influence from Boccaccio.

Of Chaucer's tales that can be labeled as comic, *The Miller's Tale* stands a ways apart, in that none of the stories in *The Decameron* contain the same collection of similar plot points (the second flood, the arse kiss, the hot poker). Owing to its roots in folk culture however, many of the comic themes of *The Miller's Tale* exist in part in various tales by Boccaccio. Heffernan argues that *The Decameron's 3.4* is the closest to *The Miller's Tale* through the story's character's similar motivations and attributes (an egotistical pious cuckolded husband, a wife who easily assents to a younger man's advances and a scheming young learned man with an outlandish plan to accomplish a tryst). Though *The Miller's Tale's* relation to Boccaccio's writing is admittedly "distant", Heffernan labels it as a case of "memorial borrowing" on Chaucer's part (Heffernan 52). In this instance Heffernan's position is problematic in that it assumes quite a bit on Chaucer's part, though considering the sheer number of similarities

between the comic elements in the two texts in their entirety, their relationship cannot be ignored.

Having established the shared medieval comic space in which both these authors exist, I will now shift attention towards a major divergence between their comic approaches: the topic of violence. Considering the body-centric focus of medieval comedy, injury and death are recurrent themes in tales from folk culture. Chaucer's work differs from other medieval authors however, in that he seems to inject violent scenes with comic intent into tales where they did not exist in the folk culture source material. My argument here is not that Boccaccio refrains from using violence for comic effect - one need only look to the mistaken beating of the servant in *The Decameron's* 7.8 or the tooth-pulling scenes in 7.9 to find examples of this - but rather that Chaucer adds violence into tales where Boccaccio does not, despite the two authors drawing from the same tales in medieval folk culture. Returning to Heffernan's argument, from two comic tales that he regards as "analogues", *Canterbury's The Reeve's Tale* and the *Decameron's* 9.6, Chaucer's version includes a number of violent moments which in comparison to Boccaccio come across as superfluous to the overall story structure. For example, the host's daughter is already romantically associated with the traveller Pinuccio who eventually beds her in the night in 9.6. This can be compared to the same scene in *The Reeve's Tale*, where Alayn and the daughter are not only strangers, but he forcefully mounts her such that "it [is] to late for [her] to crie" (though despite not consenting she apparently comes to enjoy it) (*The Reeve's Tale* 4196). A similar divergence can be found in the concluding scene of each tale. The host in 9.6 is assuaged from violence on the visiting youths due to quick thinking on his wife's part and everyone is satisfied, whereas in *The Reeve's Tale* Alayn is first beaten by the host, and then a

brawl erupts in the bedroom resulting in the Miller being so badly beaten that he exclaims "Harrow! I dye!" (4307-8).

The effect of the added violence in both cases is additional humiliation on the part of the cheating Miller. As the plot favours the two Oxford clerks, the humiliation of the 'bed-tricks' episodes and the clerk's retrieval of their stolen grain satisfies the plot: they were wronged by the Miller, and subsequently achieved their revenge. Through the violence in the scene, however, the Miller is served a double-dose of retribution. His daughter's virtue is forcefully taken right beside him (her eligibility for a fine marriage is not only ruined, but her implied enjoyment of the evening suggests her personality has been corrupted to some degree as well), and he is then beaten in his own home (partially by the women of the house, no less). As the comic plot of the tale still functions without these moments of violence (as shown through Boccaccio's treatment), they instead primarily act as excessive attacks directly against the figure of the Miller that stand in contrast to the rest of the tales otherwise farcical tone. To fully explore the motivation behind comic digressions such as these, I believe it is most valuable to once again return to *The Miller's Tale* (though I will eventually circle back to the Reeve as well).

Some guiding context should first be established to properly 'place' *The Miller's Tale* within the larger framework of *The Canterbury Tales. The Miller's Tale* follows that of the Knight, though as shown in *The Miller's Prologue*, he was not supposed to have gone next as the host had already told the Monk he would be the next narrator - he merely forced his way in. The Miller's motivation for breaking into the host's order is quickly given, as he announces he wishes to deliver a "noble" tale to "quite", or respond to, that of the Knight (*The Miller's Prologue* 3126-7). Although the Miller attests that his rude intrusion is a byproduct of his drunkenness, his insistence to intrude specifically for the purpose of responding to the Knight

suggests that the themes of his story will not only be related to the story he told, and will likely provide a counterpoint to the previously discussed themes of courtly love, but may also include (potentially unflattering) commentary about the character of the Knight himself. The Miller's intended topic is also problematic, as he is going to "telle a legende and a lyf | Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf | How that a clerk hath set the wrightes cappe" (3141-3). The referencing of a [legend] and a [life] here evokes similar rhetoric of the elevated genre of the medieval Saint's Life, which is indeed 'noble' and an appropriate response to the subject matter covered by the Knight. The referencing of the clerk somehow fooling the carpenter ([righting] his cappe) immediately problematizes the topic, however, as the setup is an obvious gesture towards cuckoldry. This paradoxical juxtaposition of topics should further alert the reader that the Miller is doing more under the surface than merely telling a tale. Even the narrator detects something is amiss and warns the reader to skip the upcoming story as the Miller is apparently a well-known "cherl" (3171-82). It is necessary to point out that the Reeve also protests against the Miller's subject matter, though his objections ultimately go unheeded (this transgression is quite telling and I advise keeping it in mind for later). With all of these clues derived from the characters of the pilgrimage frame-narrative and the chaotic prologue, one cannot help but be suspicious of any ulterior motives built into *The Miller's Tale*, and to analyze these properly some closer reading of the tale itself is in order.

Regarding the topic of comic violence, three moments are of particular importance in *The Miller's Tale* - though it was earlier established that *The Miller's Tale* has no direct analogues in *The Decameron*, it is worth mentioning again that the tale which bears the closest resemblance in that text, 3.4, does not include any of these - these scenes, in the order which they occur are: Nicholas' seduction of Alisoun, Absolon's attack on Nicholas with the hot poker, and John

falling out of his tub. The first moment, Nicholas' seduction of Alisoun, is remarkable for it's aggression and it's brevity (and, perhaps for a modern reader, because it is actually successful). The encounter opens with Nicholas simply "[catching Alisoun] by the queynte" (*The Miller's Tale* 3276). The image this line invokes is one of graphic clarity. The physicality of the motion of catching a person, combined with the blunt assertion that the primary restraint is being applied to her 'queynte' is certainly violent. Alisoun's reaction immediately afterward, however, is comic, as she springs into the air like a colt, and then proceeds to give in to Nicholas' advances just as quickly as she initially rebuffs them (3282-92). Recalling the Miller's assertion that his tale was a response to the Knight's, this scene can be read as both a direct satire of the topic of courtly love, and a reflection of the Miller's own opinions of the Knight. Further recollection of the Miller's framing of the tale with the language of the Saint's Life genre suggests that grabbing a woman by the queynte can also be considered something noble and holy, a paradox that serves to only strengthen the scene's underlying satire.

The satire of courtly love continues through the character of Absolon, whose foolishness is outclassed only by his vanity. Though Absolon's presentation and behaviour is certainly a satire of a courtly lover, I am most interested in the violent conclusion to his role in the tale, where he vengefully "[smoots] Nicholas amide the ers" with a red-hot poker, thinking him to be Alisoun (3807-10). While the violence of the scene is readily apparent, I think it is necessary to take note of the specifics that are included to fully appreciate Absolon's intentions. Running the risk of coming across as crude, as one always does when dutifully exploring scenes like this in Chaucer, it matters that the poker is not just smote unto the ers (a la, the cheek or thigh), but rather, amide the ers (or as it is called at the end of the tale, the "nether ye" (eye)) (3852). The point here is that Absolon is aiming the poker, and he is going for a specific target. One also

mustn't forget that Absolon thinks he is assaulting Alisoun, a detail which when combined with

the specifics examined above reveals the truly brutal intentions of the rejected lover; he means to

destroy her. Stepping back and examining the details of the poker is also telling. The poker

which Absolon retrieves from the blacksmith is not just any piece of iron, it is specifically a

"kultour", a large blade meant to be mounted before a plow, and not only is it red-hot, but it's

sharp as well (3763). While it is unnecessary to discuss the damage that a specific piece of red-

hot farm equipment could do to a person's nether regions, what is most interesting here is the

weapon's relation to the Miller. Given the Miller's profession, he would certainly be familiar

with kultours, and only someone like him (one who was sufficiently acquainted with farming or

at least farm tools) could fully appreciate the corresponding detail in the story. What I mean to

say here is that not only is the attack with the poker brutal and personal, but the detail of it being

a kultour personally connects it to the Miller, and adds an extra layer of depth, perhaps even

intention, to the narrative; this is a tale not just told by the Miller, but told through his

understanding as well. The Miller's exact intentions meant through the whole scene with

Absolon and the poker are topics for further debate, though in the interest of brevity I will merely

suggest that they indeed confirm his churlishness and present an alternative (albeit far darker)

satire of figures from courtly love narratives.

  The final comic moment of interest to me, that of John's falling from the tub at the

conclusion of the tale, further supports the connections to the Miller as explored through the

previous two. In comparison to the poker scene, all John suffers when he falls to the floor is a

broken arm - a vast improvement over Nicholas' unfortunate situation (3819-23). The image of

John writhing in pain on the ground, whilst being mocked for his foolishness by the townspeople

at the behest of Nicholas and Alisoun is one of true humiliation. As this scene is directed towards

John, it is not meant as a jab at courtly love or by extension as a reference to the Knight. As Pearsall suggests in his essay *The Canterbury Tales II: Comedy* concerning comic tales, the fate of John is an "attack" against his character and his occupation, and can be abstracted as an attack against carpenters in general (Pearsall 168-9). Pearsall goes on to argue that one need not look further than the character who objected most strongly against the Miller in the prologue to his tale to find the target for this comic scene: the former carpenter, the Reeve. If the comic treatment of John's character is indeed an attempt on the Miller's part to take shots at the Reeve, then the previously discussed brutal treatment of the miller character in *The Reeve's Tale* can in turn be read as a personal response to such abuses.

Ultimately, upon closer examination, the purpose of Chaucer's seemingly superfluous comic violence is then to provide characterizing moments for the figures in the frame narrative. Considering the examples analyzed in *The Miller's Tale*, the comic violence is firstly reflexive upon the story's narrator. Whom the narrator chooses to abuse and how they go about doing so speaks volumes about their own character, which in the case of the Miller reveals just how churlish he is. This individual characterization also pertains to how the narrator feels about other tales that have been told, as evidenced through the Miller's consistent brutal satire of courtly love. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the moments of comic violence reveal the feelings of the narrator towards the other pilgrims in the frame narrative. The attacks exchanged between the Miller and the Reeve through their tales are a prime example of the (literal) verbal jousting that occurs between many of the characters, a function helps tie the seemingly disparate tales from the varied pilgrims together. While the pilgrims won't spring up and start brawling while on their way to Canterbury, the moments of comic violence in their tales help to reveal how they truly feel about one another. Returning to *The Decameron*, these personal attacks through tales

do not exist because the frame narrative seems to be far less important which respect to the action of each tale. Boccaccio does very little to characterize his frame narrators beyond giving them motive and means to tell his one hundred tales, and once the storytelling begins their individual personalities become almost entirely inconsequential (besides their names, which are usually literary/mythological allusions to what topics their tales will pertain too). Chaucer on the other hand pays heavy attention to the relationships between the characters in the frame narrative of *The Canterbury Tales*, and the moments of injected comic violence are just one tool he uses to add complexity and depth to their personalities and relationships. Armed with this knowledge, every violent comic scene from Chaucer then has the potential to communicate some form of social commentary when unpacked, and for this reason should definitely evoke more consideration from modern readers than just a hearty - albeit also somewhat guilty - chuckle.

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