

THE CANTERBURY TALES — THE COMEDY OF MARRIAGE IN CHAUCER'S FABLIAUX

According to Joerg Fichte, "The object of comicality is anything that questions a culture as system, *i.e.*, either the relapse into nature or the isolation of a culture from nature, that is, a culture presented as an absolute."¹ Also, for Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and his World*, "Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, ... from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality."² "Chaucer's poetry", Derek Brewer says, "is also notable for the hospitality it offers to the unofficial cultures; to secular and lower-class elements, to folk-tale, folk-humour even of a coarse kind (as in some *fabliaux*), and to the laughter he raises often enough against the official culture"³. In fact, the official ecclesiastical culture revealed its weakness particularly in its treatment of sexual love and of women, themes of great importance in the Middle Ages. The character who attacks clerical culture most decisively, subjecting it to laughter, is precisely the Wife of Bath, with her five husbands. She feels it is her right to acquire property through marriage and to control it unchecked, at the same time following her amorous inclinations in freedom; thus, she stands up eloquently for sensual enjoyment of sexuality and turns against all anti-feminist doctrines.

If the literary form *par excellence* of the aristocratic class was the romance, in counterpart the middle class invented the *fabliau*. "*Fabliaux* tended to be ribaldly comic tales. They were satirical, in a rough and ready fashion, often at the expense of the clergy. Their caustic attitude towards women may have been a reaction against the apotheosis of women in the tradition and cult of courtly love."⁴ The scenery is fairly reduced and the

¹ In the Preface to *Chaucer's Frame Tales. The Physical and the Metaphysical* by Joerg O. Fichte (ed.), Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen and D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1987, p.7.

² In M.Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by H. Iswolsky, Cambridge, Mass., 1965, pp.122-3.

³ In *Geoffrey Chaucer. The Writer and his Background*, ed. by Derek Brewer, Cambridge, 1990, p.15.

⁴ The entry **fabliau** in J.A. Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Penguin, 1985, p.257.

characters are, in general, just three: the famous triangle of husband, wife and lover. As to the subject-matter, this genre treats human passions like love, avarice and jealousy in a very elementary way. Given their interest in the real facts of life, the vocabulary is often sharply realist or naturalist, frequently including obscenities. The climax usually involves the final acting-out of some trick, accompanied by delightful surprise and reversal.

The Chaucerian *fabliau* seems to possess specific narrative rules. The time is the present, thus the tale becomes a report on contemporary life. The place is usually the familiar environment of town or village. The settings are, for the most part, English — The social setting is the world of the petit-bourgeois, the world of tradespeople. The author's descriptive tone is usually one of condescension or contempt; indeed, the systematic belittling of bourgeois ignorance and stupidity in the *fabliaux* makes us suspect that they are basically an aristocratic taste. Another important element in Chaucerian comedy is the assumption that there are no values, secular or religious, more important than survival and the satisfaction of appetite. Characters are not asked to be noble or to be good, but to be smart. The social and moral norms are often openly subverted.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, four *fabliaux* — the *Miller's*, *Reeve's*, *Merchant's* and *Shipman's Tales* — seem to have a closer generic identity; they are not only comic tales of low life involving trickery, but they all have to do with marital relations. In all of them a bourgeois husband is tricked into contributing, unwarily, to a free offer of his wife's favours to a clever young man. The husband usually belongs to the world of trade. The wife is younger and still with some unsatisfied sexual potential, but she is not promiscuous. The "intruder" usually belongs to a different class (he is a student or a cleric, belonging to an intellectual elite and being, therefore, more clever) and he is temporarily (as a lodger or guest) accommodated in the couple's house.

In his *Tales*, Chaucer gives us a blunt warning that if the subject-matter is immoral and we may well disapprove of it, we can "Just turn the page and choose another sort", "Do not blame me if you should choose amiss.", he says⁵. This fourteenth-century

⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, translated into Modern English by Nevill Coghill, Penguin Books, 1977, p.104.

poet, like a modern artist, adopts a morally neutral stance in judgement of his subject-matter: his only obligation is to the way things are: "... I speak plainly and with no concealings"⁶.

The Miller's Tale is one of Chaucer's greatest achievements in the genre; the genial *gusto* with which it is told and its high spirits compensate for the nasty and painful events it describes. It is a good example of those medieval stories in which the characters are all put at the same level in the end. The old Oxford carpenter is not only seen as a cuckold but as a lunatic. His pretty young wife, Alison, as the Miller says, "was truly poked" (taken advantage of). Absolon, the parish clerk who admires her, has been humiliated by having kissed "her nether eye". And Nicholas, the student lodger and the original plotter, was "branded" on the bum. Neither money nor position can change the fact that we are all sinners and bound to be laughed at. Laughter seems to humanise people by levelling them.

Another quality in the tale is that of lyricism, especially the exuberant travesty of courtly language and behaviour. In reality, Chaucer is using some of the medieval rhetorical conventions to parody *The Knight's Tale*, a courtly romance. The situation in *The Miller's Tale* parallels that one, in so far as in it there are two young men who are rivals for the same girl's love. This tale shows that the love of Palamon and Arcite for Emily is admirable, but it has touches of absurdity: for Emily knows nothing of either of them. Also, the lust of Nicholas and Absolon for Alison has nothing in common with the worship that the courtly lovers offer to Emily. In *The Miller's Tale*, we find the incongruence of such a decorative and elegant device as the *effictio* in the general tone of bawdiness.⁷ Alison is described as the heroine would be in a romance, but Chaucer only stresses her difference by presenting her as suitable for a lord to go to bed with or for a mere yeoman to marry. In fact, Alison is a much fuller character than Emily, simply because she is more human. The inadequate use of cliché will also serve to parody a lyrical convention. For example,

⁶ *Ibidem*, *The Prologue*, p.39.

⁷ On this subject see J.D. Ferreira's *Uma Retórica da Tolerância. Os Processos da Ironia na Obra de Chaucer*, Lisbon, 1981, pp.213-16.

Nicholas is characterised with the adjective "gallant", usually applied to courtly lovers. As usual, Chaucer takes advantage of the multiple meaning of words: "gallant" does not only mean "courteous" and "gracious" but also "pleasant" and "clever". The imaginative invention of Nicholas's trick of the carpenter certainly confirms this.

The same cannot be said of Absolon, who has been given the role of the passive courtly lover. Absolon's *effictio* immediately gives him an effeminate, thus comic, image, deserving of his final punishment: the golden curls, the ruddy face, the grey eyes are traits common to every female character in medieval poetry. The description of his elaborate outfit only adds to the general ridicule of this parish clerk.⁸ Besides, the fact that "He was a little squeamish in the matter / Of farting" becomes a hint for what is going to happen to him later on, when his courteous humility is transformed in a comic humiliation.

But John, the carpenter, is the most notable example of the tale's fertility of comic invention. Set up at the start as that traditionally licensed victim of satire, the old man who marries a young wife, he is portrayed as richly complacent and gullible. His readiness to accept Nicholas's fantastic story of the coming flood shows his simple faith or stupidity⁹. The biblical account of the Flood has also been obscenely parodied: the tub (or 'ark') has facilitated licentious activities — activities for which God had originally sent the Flood. The symbolic water which washes away sin, serves to cool the bum of a sexual sinner. Therefore, there is no sign of social retribution for adultery; every moral effort is frustrated by wit.

The Reeve's Tale is an answer to the Miller's. In fact, the story is not original. There is an earlier version of it in a French *fabliau* of 1190-94; and, among many other French and German versions, there is one by Boccaccio himself in the *Decameron*. *The Reeve's Tale* shows the victory of the young over the old, of sexual aggressiveness over the established order of possession. While old men are fools, both old and young women are accomplices rather than victims. The reversal of morality, which makes us laugh, comes

⁸ See *The Miller's Tale*, p.108.

⁹ See *The Miller's Tale*, pp.111-117.

when respectability is made a fool of by unscrupulous rascals who win both the money and the women. The pattern of the story shows no concern with justice, decency, honesty or generosity. The husband's trust and hospitality are shamefully betrayed; his humiliation is taken to its extreme by his wife and daughter's collusion. Chaucer's version is interesting because it offers a full recognition by everyone of what has happened. Those who trick the householder are Cambridge students; the educated mind is presented in this poem as superior. Nevertheless, the miller, being a plain sensible man, thinks that all intellectuals are silly, as most plain men do. His derision for the students is clear: "The greatest scholar is not the wisest man"¹⁰.

Among the many sub-genres of provençal poetry there is the *aubade*, or the early morning song, expressing the lovers' parting sorrow. But Chaucer uses this medieval convention, with humour and irony, in unpredictable situations. The effect caused by the farewell verses between Alan and Molly in *The Reeve's Tale* is obviously parodic: "Alan grew tired as dawn began to spring; / ... 'Bye-bye', he said, 'sweet Molly ...The day has come, I cannot linger here"¹¹. These verses could initiate an *aubade*, but, in the context of the story, they can only suggest a parody of the form.

The Reeve's Tale has often been considered the Chaucerian version of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. In fact, the story is a succession of vengeful retributions. In the first episode, the students, trusting their intellectual superiority, believe they will not let themselves be robbed by the cunning miller; but the truth is that they fall for the miller's trick. In the second, the students are forced to spend the night at the miller's, but they take full advantage of the lack of space; this is the ironic reversal of Simkin's expectations. The irony results also from the language which is used: the words "miller", "mill" and "grinding of the corn" have here a sexual double meaning. In fact, the tale can be summed up as the student's intention of "grinding the corn in the miller's mill", which they end up by materialising both in the literal and in the metaphorical plans.

¹⁰ *The Reeve's Tale*, pp.128 and 130.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p.133.

Another tale, *The Shipman's*, is remarkable for several reasons. It opens with a shrewdly cynical analysis of middle-class marriage from the wife's point of view: "The silly husband always has to pay, / He has to clothe us, he has to array / Our bodies to enhance his reputation, / While we dance round in all this decoration. / And if he cannot pay,... / Or won't submit to such extravagance, / ...Then someone else will have to bear the cost / Or lend us money, and that's dangerous."¹² This introduction could even be considered as the summary of what is to follow. The moral critique is only implicit and comprises the two related worlds of lust and avarice.

The blandness of the tale is an important characteristic: everyone is politely diplomatic, careful not to offend. The scene between the wife and the monk in the garden is a beautifully decorous comedy of manners; the monk's playful insinuation of her husband's inadequacy in bed encourages the wife to speak of her other dissatisfactions; they exchange vows of secrecy. The wife sees what she does as a perfectly reasonable business transaction¹³. The merchant's avarice is not stressed except by his wife; but she is to be deceived by the monk, who borrowed the money from her husband so that he could spend the night with her. She has now to pay her husband in the same coin as she paid the monk. So the hundred francs has gone the rounds, and so has the wife. This tale gives a good insight into the power of money and into the nature of sex as a commodity.

All three characters seem to be blind to spiritual reality. In this sense, this is Chaucer's most highly developed attempt at defining the nature of the bourgeois mercantile *ethos*. The merchant's literal-mindedness seems, in effect, to save him from the knowledge of the deceit practised on him. While he is intent on preserving and increasing his material wealth, his wife and Sir John represent the hedonistic, pleasure-oriented world view typical of the *fabliau*. Money is for both characters only a means to achieve the end of self-gratification, while money for the merchant is his plow.

Sir John does not seem to conform to the image of the monk; it corresponds more to that of the priest: he is lecherous and willing to buy the love of the lady. His

¹² *The Shipman's Tale*, p.174.

¹³ See *The Shipman's Tale*, pp.176-177.

knowledge of the ways of the world and his astuteness make him achieve his goal: to make love to the merchant's wife by using the merchant's own plow. The merchant, in his turn, is depicted as a loving husband. Trusting in the bonds of friendship, he grants his "dear cousin" John access to his treasure and his wife. The merchant's wife, though, is close to the stereotype: she complains about her husband's sexual neglect and stinginess; she is only interested in obtaining money; and she is ready to make the sex for money exchange the basis of her marital relations. There is a good number of verbal *double entendres*: the seemingly precise and unambiguous mercantile terms such as "business", "loan", "affair", "pay", "debt", "merchandise" are infused with sexual meaning. For example, the use of the word "tally" is essential for the understanding of the tale's joke. The mutuality in marriage is, thus, degraded to the marriage contract, according to which the husband pays for the sexual services of his wife.

The major plot element is, therefore, deception. The wife herself becomes the real victim of her own deceptive strategies, in an unexpected reversal; even though the deception is at first solely directed at the merchant. Another unexpected feature is the wife's reaction, turning the seemingly hopeless situation into a victory; her presence of mind in the moment of confrontation is admirable¹⁴. Thus, *The Shipman's Tale* develops a single episode in a circular fashion; in the end everything stays the same and no one changes — marriage has been preserved.

The Merchant's Tale is the masterpiece among the four *fabliaux* in *The Canterbury Tales*. The theme, that of the *mal marié*, the old man who marries a young wife, is even older than Ovid. It is also identified with the predicament of the Merchant himself, who develops it with savage irony. The wife's adultery with a younger lover comes to a climax in Chaucer's blending of two common themes from popular folk story: The Fruit Tree Episode, in which a blind husband's sight returns in time for him to see his wife copulating up a tree; and the Optical Illusion, in which a wife, when her husband catches her with a lover, persuades him that his sight is defective. Both situations are typical of the

¹⁴ See *The Shipman's Tale*, pp.184-5.

literature of sex: the first shows sexual determination in spite of the ludicrous physical difficulty; the second demonstrates the persuasive power of a wife to deceive her husband. The chief target of the satire is the old husband, January, a knight, whose senile lust is presented with clinical accuracy and devastating bitterness.

Much of the sophisticated fun of the poem lies in Chaucer's subversion of literary and religious values by employing them in bizarre circumstances. The summary of the tale situates us in a perfect courtly romance of the thirteenth century; in an aristocratic *milieu*, we witness the typical Romanesque triangle: the husband, the wife and the lover. The young Damian is also the typical courtly lover; he loves secretly: "Secretly took his purse and billet-doux, / Couched in the sweetest phrases that he knew, / And put it in her hand with nothing more / Than a long sigh, as deep as to the core;"¹⁵ But, after this first noble presentation, the purpose of the story becomes the adultery itself and the satisfaction of the lovers' sexual desire. Thus, from perfect romance we slide into the purest *fabliau*.

In the first place, we have the introduction of the comical motive of the *senex amans*. In the winter of life, to which his name symbolically points, January marries a young woman, May (whose name is also symbolic of her youth), being from the start subject to deceit and ridicule, to the punishment of a poetical justice: "O January, what might it thee avail / Though thou couldst see as far as a ship can sail? / As well be blind and be deceived as be / Deceived as others are that still can see."¹⁶ The adjective "blind" had in the Middle English the double meaning of "blind" and "deceived". Physical and metaphorical blindness is, therefore, central in the structure of the poem.

In the second place, January's garden reflects the gardens of the Bible: the Garden of Eden or the *hortus conclusus* of the *Chant of Chants*; it is the symbol of a celestial paradise or, in contrast, a false paradise of earthly pleasures. January has obviously conceived it in order to extend the pleasures of the bed, thus completely subverting the celestial garden. It is also in the garden that courtly love becomes sinful love, through the comic episode of seduction taking place there. A second Fall is actually represented; even

¹⁵ *The Merchant's Tale*, p.393.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p.397.

the 'forbidden fruit' is there and May claims to have a wish for one: "I long so terribly / To eat a little pear, it looks so green."¹⁷ Thus, the central theme of the tale seems to be the deception of those who only believe in the senses or in false sensual love.

These *fabliaux* are not presided by a caustic and biting spirit like the one characteristic of satire, but stupidity and vanity are punished and a certain intelligent humour and a playful capacity prevail above everything else. By means of the dramatic irony and by the manipulation of words, Chaucer is able to transform the bawdy jokes of the continental popular culture in delightful literary texts. If, however, we still do not approve of the poet's 'humorous tale', we can always follow his advice and "Just turn the page and choose another sort". It should by now be obvious that I wished not to do so.



¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p.403.