

A Little Chat on Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale"

Adrián MUÑOZ G.
El Colegio de México

The greatness of English Literature is due mostly to writers such as John Milton, William Wordsworth, Charles Dickens, William Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot. Their texts comprehend from the serious to the comical, from nature to human nature. But how different would English literature be if, way back into the fourteenth century, the major figure of Geoffrey Chaucer had not existed? The medieval world is extremely important in the minds of the Englishmen, and Chaucer depicted it sarcastically, vividly, yet just as it really was—with all of its vices and morals. No other written work is as significant as *The Canterbury Tales*. Nowhere can we find so well displayed and mocked Medieval England.

One of the tales I find among the most enjoyable is "The Miller's Tale"—comical, sardonical, exquisitely weaved... delightfully framed. For the time being we have an immense opportunity to gain a deeper insight of this work. After many a day trying to get hold of him, I finally ran into him inside a bookstore (he was glancing most interested through some Browning's illustrated edition of *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*). I denied to let him out, unless he might yield to an interview. Who am I talking about, you may ask? Chaucer himself, indeed.

—Good evening, Mr —

—*Sir, please.*

—Um, Good evening, *Sir* Chaucer.

—*Good ev'nen.*

—People around the world have been amused by your fascinating *The Canterbury Tales*, and many an essay has been written on them, concerning a number of topics. On this very occasion I'd be very glad if we could talk about a special favorite of mine, "The Miller's Tale", if you agree.

—I accorden.

—So then —several critics have linked this tale, as well as some others, with an old French type of writing, the *fabliaux*. How do you feel about this?

—Well, certes. I know some of these fabliaux, but mine tales have eek to doon with twelfth-century Latin comedyes, yet the tales I y-wrote are different. "Tis common that the fabliaux, and these Latin comedyes claimed only to entertain the public, whereas mine storyes are much more instructive. There is no *ars gratia artis* in 'em" (Olson 1986: 72). Not ev'rything is fun. Maybe thou coldst say that "The Milleres Tale" belong in the European form of folktale known as *Schwanke*. The *Schwanke* are concern'd with the basic human excesses of drinking, eating and sexing; they display the common social conflicts sich as landlord versus peasant, husband versus wife, trade versus trade, etcetera. But the *Schwanke* doon not only handle humour, they can als be didactic (Lindhal 1987: 125).

—And what exactly is it that your comedies, say, teach?

—Oo teaching only would not do. In this very tale, for example, what is important is the relation between deeds and effects, and als between the tale itself and th' others.

—So would you say that "The Miller's Tale" is about the distribution of justice?

—Certes, there is some kinde of justice, but dost thou think that this justice is "just"?

—Well, it is clear that "jealousy has been punished, pretensions have been uncovered, the trickster has been caught in his own trick, punishment has been made precisely to fit the crime, and the joyous cavorting of the village at the end of the tale signifies the restoration of disorder to order" (Storm 1964: 114).

—But remember that "sweet Alisoun" suffered no punishment at al.

—Well, that's true. So then, is justice a fictional one, or what?

—Justice is ne'er fair. Neither wold it be correct to say that there is dyvnye justice, or of whate'er kinde. In this tale, justice is provided by humans, and as sich, justice is neither fair nor perfect. T' understand better the complexitee thou must needs bear in mind that "The Milleres Tale" cometh right after the Knyghttes.

—O, yes. By the way, this a figure that you so much loved throughout the whole *Canterbury Tales*, didn't you?

—Ay, in some way. He is the wright that tendeth to restort whate'er disturbance, struggle or any kinde of trouble mighte arise amongst the compaignye. And yet, the Miller mocketh the Knyghttes worlde in his tale.

—How is that?

—At almost ev'ry point, both the world of the Miller and of the Knyght are thilke. A common topic in both tales, love, is in "The Knyghttes Tale" sumething of the sprite, whereas in the Miller's 'tis mainly likerous (Storm 1964: 110).

—O, I see. Maybe we could consider this as a game of counterparts, like in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

—Perchance in a certain sense. But in *The Canterbury Tales* this "game of counterparts" —as thou put it— helpeth to weave the coherence of al the work, so that it wold not be a merely *compilatio* of storyes. Besides, the playing of opposite views is not as recurrent as the conflict between characters. Thou canst notice that everychon character has a real life, that they doon not just exist as storye-tellers; they react againste th'offenses of other characters; they mighte appear bifor or afterwards telling thir own storye, which ever has an effect upon other characters, oo way or th'other. The *Schwank* folktale is like that —it beareth a double context, an *Internal social context* within the tales ech teller telleth, and an *allusive context* (Lindhal 1987: 129). In Blakkes Songes, on th'other hand, there are no narratours, just a poetical voix.

—And what was the point of framing the book within a cluster of pilgrims?

—Pilgrimage was most fit for bringing together a group of characters the most different amongst thimselves.

—This reminds me of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. To what extent is your work influenced by his?

—Nay! Mine work is not in the least influenced by this Italian writer. I doon noot a few of his works, but noot not this oo thou mentionest. No, the idea of bringing up together so many and so diverse personages is utterly mine.

—The reason, I assume, was to criticise all social classes.

—Al social classes of Engelsond besides beliefs, issues of love, and the way in which fortune worketh. In "The Milleres Tale" superstitious peple are criticised in the figure of credulous John the carpenter; Chirch itself is ridiculed by him and by coquetous Alisoun going a-flirting to Chirch after she has had an encounter with "hende Nicholas". Forsooth, that the clerk is a most likerous man is not par accident.

—I wonder why did you choose to make of Old John a carpenter.

—In regard to the supposed second coming of the Flood that mischievous Nicholay had predicted; wood-working is directly related to Noah's ark; so that whan Old John is waiting inside the tub, a comic inversion taketh place (Coote 1988: 190).

—Did you criticise thoughtfully?

—Nay, not so. Ich y-criticised not at al; it al was mine characteres deeds. I just y-noted down al I herd from hem. 'Tis the Miller, not me, that does al the criticism, as well as if there is any hars language, 'tis due to the characters nature. That is why ich y-apologised in mine 'Retractioun' for whate'er nasty worddes may harm th'auditours ears (Craik 1964: 2).

—Hey, you're becoming like the Miller, who blames his drunkenness on the Host's ale.

—Who, me?

—Yes indeed!

—Ho, ho! Not even so!

—Well, anyhow... Some minutes before you said something about certain teachings that your tale conveys; yet I am not very sure if there really is a moral lesson, I feel that the "carpenter is ridiculed, not as carpenter, but a doting and jealous husband and as a credulous and superstitious man" (Craik 1964: 6).

—That is right. But remember that I toldee that justice is not perfect, and that his being a carpenter helpeth construe the satire. Moreover, thou canst not sympathise with any character whatsoever. Had thou sympathis'd with John, the comic denouement wold lose al its strength. And it is als because thou not completely despise Alisoun that the plot worketh out well.

—Now that you mention it, why is it that Alison does not at all receive a punishment?

—Well, she just acts according to her "wylde and yong" nature. Hir husbunde is most oldd, and it was expected that so a nice, yong wyf wold cuckold him. Ev'ryun else payeth for thir sinne, so to speake: Old John is y-cuckolded because he trespassed the barrier of marryed love based upon so distante ages and due to his naivetee; the hende clerk is brutally punished because of his highte pride; and Absolon, "amorous Absolon", who at the thilke time ridicules romances, receiveth punishment in the very object of his vanity: his mouth.

—How exactly does this tale parody the Knight's?

—As alreadye ich saide: in "The Knyghttes Tale" love is regarded a most sacred thing; in "The Milleres Tale" it is vulgarised and trivialised. Therefore, the Knyghttes vies of courtly love seem "in retrospect less incredibly idealized, less impossible sentimentalized" (Storm 1964: 108).

—How did you manage to develop the plot? How does the climax work?

—Firste of al, there is tha fact of John being a carpenter and the saide relation between him and Noah. On th'other handde, whan Nicholas receiveth the "hote cultour" he screameth "Water! *Water!* Help, for Goddes herte!" The cryings awake the carpenter who is awaiting for the Flood and so cutteth the cord that holdeth his tub, breaking the floor whan falling down onto th'other personages. Moreover, when al three —Alisoun, Nicholas, and John— are inside the tubs, the "sely" John falleth asleep because of "weary bysinesse"; some time afterwards, the cuple of lovers are "In bysinesse of myrthe and of solas". Remembering some po'plar Spanish phrase used to descrie things

perform'd clandestinely, Alisoun and Nicholas are loving ech other "por debajo del agua", which "sely" John wol supposedely sail on.

—At the same time you do make allusions to everyday-use objects, such as oven-wafers, so that characters may appear convincing (Craik 1964: 14).

—Ay. In mingling realistic details with impossibilityes sikerly absurd, these impossibilityes turn to be just as believable as real events.

—What impossibilityes or absurdities, for example?

—Dos thou not think that it is absurd that Absolon is ony playing the fool outside the window, a-singing and romancing, whilst Nicholay and Alisoun are coupling?

—Yes, indeed.

—'Tis just as absurd as ich talking to thee.

—Why! Is it?

—There are like five hundred years between us twain. 'Tis impossible that we be having this chat! And yet we are, and 'tis als very likely that some readers may find this believable. I'd rather part now, for it is getting late and I ne'er go to sleep without writing something first.

—Any words for our audience before you leave?

—So long, and God save al the roote!

Bibliography

Chaucer, Geoffrey. 1996. "The Miller's Tale". *The Canterbury Tales. A Selection*. London: Penguin Classics, 105-126. [This edition comes with a brief glossary.]

_____. 1999 (1958). *The Canterbury Tales*. Ed. A. C. Cowley. Great Britain: Everyman. [This edition includes an appendix on pronunciation, grammar and versification.]

Coote, Stephen. 1988. *English Literature of the Middle Ages*. London: Penguin Books, 179-213.

Craik, T. W. 1964. "The Miller's Tale". *The Comic Tales of Chaucer*. London: Methuen, 1-29.

Lindhal, Carl. 1987. "License to Lie". *Earnest Games. Folkloric Patterns in The Canterbury Tales*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 124-155.

Olson, Paul A. 1986. "The Order of the Passion and Internal Order". *The Canterbury Tales and the Society*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 49-84.

Storm Corsa, Helen. 1964. "Modes of Comedy in the First Fragment". *Chaucer. Poet of Mirth and Morality*. [USA]: University of Notre Dame Press, 108-115.