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Humor in *The Canterbury Tales*

Geoffrey Chaucer is a great humorist in the tradition of the English literature. British essayist G.K. Chesterton appreciated Chaucer's greatest "national contribution": "the English sense of humour" (qtn in Bloom 22). Chaucer not only was the first author to write in English but also introduced examples of vernacular English with "low" topics it entangled (Bloom 19, 34). Being a healthy expression of ***joie de vivre,*** Chaucer's humor also served as a vent for difficulties in life and a tool for discussing serious topics without sounding too serious.

The critics unanimously distinguished the presence of humor in the Chaucer's Tales calling it the "medieval mirth" (Kendrick 2), "the human comedy" (Mann 181), "a finally comic view of life" (Hirsh 132), and "bubbl[ing] with the comic spirit" (Meredith). At the same time, they noted, "the tone of the poem is satiric, but the issues are serious indeed" (Bloom 99). It would be superficial to assert that a comic writer cannot be a moralist. The word 'wit' is derived from Old German ***witz*** that means "intelligence and acumen." There is no distinct boundary between humor and ingenuity, "the jester is brother to the sage" (Koestler 2).

Encyclopaedia Britannica defines humor "as a type of stimulation that tends to elicit laughter," which, in its turn, "provide[s] relief from tension" (Koestler 1). Human life is always subjected to multiple sources of stress and tension; in Chaucer's time, they were numerous, as well. However, Chaucer did not write about the Black Death that mowed down more than half of Europe's population, or about the split within the Cath-

olic Church, or about other social, political, and economic problems in England of the fourteenth century. ***In The Canterbury Tales***, Chaucer chose to depict the "whole English nation" as he knew it. All his pilgrims differ from each other "not only in their inclinations but in their very physiognomies and persons… Even the ribaldry of the low characters is different: the Reeve, the Miller, and the Cook are … distinguished from each other as much as the mincing Lady Prioress and the broadspeaking, gap-toothed Wife of Bath" (Bloom 20). By laughing at social classes, the author inflicts a kind of "corrective punishment" (Koestler 2). According to Bergson, "in laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate and consequently to correct our neighbour" (qtd. in Koestler 2).

Ruggiers writes about two types of comic tales in Chaucer's writing. The characters of the first type – Miller, Reeve, Merchant, and Shipman – are young and smart, and they outwit the old and dull people in sexual conquests. The other half of the tales – the Friar, Summoner, Pardoner, and Canon's Yeoman – are "nonsexual tales, comedies without lighthearted humor; these are, more frankly, unmasking" (75). In these "wry comedies" of the second type, Chaucer aligns characters according to religiously defined norms: clericals should be pious and moral. With no typical comic tokens such as obscene actions, swearing, or practical jokes, the author operates with satire and dry irony only. In the Pardoner's Tale, the moral is that greed is the root of all evil. The Pardoner is shown as a hypocrite who acts against what he preaches. Among his sins are greed, drinking, and gluttony; he deliberately deceives his parishioners in order to get money from them. After the Pardoner has told about his hypocrisy and shared the tale, he returns to his usual mode of cajoling money out of people's pockets. Ruggiers states that a poet can expose villains and write "comedies about damnation" demonstrating that "comedy does not exclude suffering; it makes capital of it but uses it for its own ends and with the right tone and attitude" (76).

In ***The Canterbury Tales,*** Chaucer used all possible genres, such as "epic, romance, fabliau, saint's life, exemplum, sermon, mirror of princes, peni-

tential treatise, tragedy, animal fable, Breton lay, confessional autobiography, Marian miracle—all these and more" (Bloom 98). One of the popular genres in the Middle Ages literature was satire on social classes – 'estates'. In the medieval society, 'estate' implied person's occupation and status.

A perfect example of the estate satire is the ***General Prologue*** of ***The Canterbury Tales*** that includes humorous portraits of almost each class. The characters are distorted deliberately. By exaggeration, the author makes the characteristic features more prominent; by simplifying, in turn, he takes away everything that is irrelevant for his task. By juxtaposing the customary notions and satiric caricatures, in the reader's mind, "[the reader] is made to recognize familiar features in the absurd and absurdity in the familiar. Without this double vision the satire would be humourless" (Koestler 3). For example, the clergy was regularly mentioned in the estate satire (Mann 17). Monks were expected to live modestly, and friars were the members of a Catholic religious order sworn to live in poverty on charitable donations. Naturally, it is funny to see the gluttonous prelate, "He was not pale as some poor wasted ghost./ A fat swan loved he best of any roast" (Chaucer lines 205-206), and Friar greedy for money, "Therefore, instead of weeping and of prayer,/ Men should give silver to poor friars all bare"(231-232). Doctors should cure people anytime and anywhere, so it is quite shocking to see the Physician so interested in money, "For gold in physic is a fine cordial, / And therefore loved he gold exceeding all" (15).

Subtle humor and irony are discernible in the physical descriptions of the pilgrims. The young Squire is handsome and ardent and "with locks as if they were pressed" (83). The Prioress is courtly, dainty, and quite; and her exquisite taste and manners are underscored by her speaking manner: "And well she sang a service, with a fine / Intoning through her nose, as was seemly" (125). The Wife of Bath has "set widely" "gap-teeth" (478), and the Miller's prominent feature was his nose with "a wart on which there stood a tuft of hair / Red as the bristles in an old

sow's ear" (571-572).

Explicitly comic is the fabliaux genre. Before Chaucer, the fabliaux were French comic tales in verse, simple in style and message. "Greed, hypocrisy, and pride are invariably punished, but so too are old age, mere slow-wittedness, and, most frequently, the presumption of a husband, especially an old one, who attempts to guard his wife's chastity" ("The Fabliaux"). Often the fabliaux were scatological or obscene and involved practical jokes and beatings. Within ***The Canterbury Tales***, the fabliaux group includes the tales of Miller, Reeve, Shipman, Summoner, and Merchant. Kolve asserts that, despite being "coarsely obscene" and "verg[ing] upon blasphemy," "Chaucer manages to create a narrative that is not only funny but also oddly innocent and imaginatively gay" (79).

The veil of humor enables Chaucer to say whatever he wants. Laughing can justify any intentions, and any use of words as "this is play." He intensifies that possibility by, for example, depicting the Miller as a person who has drunk too much and is not responsible for his words, "Blame it on ale of Southwark, so I pray" (Chaucer 32). Thirty lines down, the narrator makes a similar apology again and asks his readers to blame the Miller if something is "amiss" (73). Thus, the Miller's Tale received a double permissiveness.

Being quite realistic at the first sight, the frame of fabliaux implies that real people cannot be so gullible or so inventive and cunning ("The Fabliaux"). "The situations of medieval fabliaux were meant to seem artificial, not real" (Kendrick 61). The poetical form of the fabliaux amplifies the understanding that it deals with fictional events and, thus, it "meant to free Chaucer's art from certain demands we elsewhere legitimately make upon it" (Ruggier 79). The fabliau plots are short; they usually remind jokes; therefore, people are eager to laugh and not to take them too seriously.

The most vivid example of a fabliau in ***The Canterbury Tales*** is The Miller's Tale that tells the story of the romance between Nicholas, an Oxford clerk, and Alison, an 18-year old wife of the old carpenter John. A new addition to the old story of a love triangle is Absolom, a parish clerk, who is also in love with Alison. Inherent to every fabliau, the practical joke here is when at night the infatuated clerk climbs the window to kiss Alison, and she sticks out her rear end. The joke gets intensified when the clerk storms away to return with a hot iron poker and when knocking again receives a fart from Nicholas. The comic effect is produced by an unexpected turn of events and is finished by Absolom branding with the poker Nicholas, who cries "water, water" (Chaucer 629). According to Brewer, obscenities are the oldest form of humor, and in the case of The Miller's Tale, "the articulation of the insult into a fantastic story turns it into a classically comic structure" (88).

The Miller's Tale also mocks the courtly love by portraying Absolom as an aspiring Alison's page who sings serenades, plays guitar and patiently courts his lady. In response, he obtains only a "burning kiss" that, in its turn, is also a parody. The repetition of kisses, and not on the lips, intensifies the funny side of the situation. In addition, the Miller's Tale makes references to the Biblical story of Joseph and Mary: "For I will tell a legend and a life / Both of a carpenter and of his wife" (Chaucer 33-34). Biblical parody is interpreted by medievalists as "the imitation" in order to "implicitly reaffirm Christian doctrine" (Kendrick 29).

Along with the fabliaux, medieval Europe entertained itself with the ***double-entendre*** riddles (Smith 1). In that genre, people could use vernacular speech that was considered coarse and low within the ideology of Christianity. Indeed, riddles were obscene and crude. Medieval fabliaux and ***double-entendre*** riddles shared similar vocabulary where words referred to sexual intercourse and genitals and had euphemism from the everyday sphere. For example, 'head' or 'hard' were euphemisms for penis, 'hole' for vagina, 'will' referred to sexual desire, and 'smock' – to the lifting of garments prior to the intercourse (Smith 9). In the Mer-

chant's Tale, the old and blind husband, January, has his eyesight restored, and the first thing he sees is his wife, May, having sex with Damian. "Up to the tree his eyes he quickly cast, / And saw how Damian his wife had dressed/ In such a way as cannot be expressed" (Chaucer 1116-1118). When May begins to soothe January saying that a blind man could not see anything true, the husband's words become blunter, "But by my father's soul, I thought to have seen / How Damian right over you did lean / And that your smock was pulled up to his breast" (1149-1151).

Kendrick attributes that Chaucer's tendency to combine high and low to the medieval habit to balance the serious with the playful. According to Kendrick, humor was a mean to make life more bearable. After a pandemic of bubonic plague in the fourteenth century, a prolonged war between England and France, and difficult economic situation, people needed solace, and fiction was one of such remedies.

> Fiction is a paradoxical structure, a means of having it both ways, of conforming and rebelling, submitting and mastering at the same time, of being two or more. […] other fictions, which we might call ironic or comic, focus on the satisfaction of individual desires for power at the expense of public order or morality. (Kendrick 52)

In ***The Canterbury Tales***, Chaucer exhibited command of all genres of the medieval literature ranging from tragedy and religious lyric to parody, in which humor, juxtaposition, improvisation, and irony played the key roles. In ***The Canterbury Tales***, Chaucer used humor for the purpose of both entertainment and satire. Playfulness is intrinsic to Chaucer's best works; however, it does not indicate a lack of seriousness.

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