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Humor and satire in The Canterbury Tales

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HUMOR AND SATIRE IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

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Chapter 1

HUMOR, SATIRE, TALES, AND TECHNIQUES

Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales[1] are humorous and satiric, but the humor and satire are usually addressed in very general terms by critical scholars. The critical literature regarding humor and satire in general and The Canterbury Tales in particular says little about how the humor and satire work, possibly because both their nature and the operation of their techniques in a work are so difficult to pinpoint and explain. Nevertheless, such an undertaking is possible--and worthwhile.

There are several steps necessary in approaching the humor and satire in The Canterbury Tales. The first is to define the terms; the second is to explore the theories regarding their nature. The third is to explore the relationship between the two. These steps are necessary before any particular "Tale" can be classified as humorous and satiric. The fourth step is identification of the techniques of humor and satire; this is necessary before their operation in the "Tale" can be pinpointed. The fifth step is to show exactly how these techniques work in any particular one of The Canterbury Tales.

Four of the "Tales" will be considered here. The four, "The Miller's Tale," "The Pardoner's Tale," "Sir Thopas," and "The Nun's Priest's Tale," are representative of Chaucer's use of humor in extremely different contexts, namely the fabliau, satiric exemplum, parody, and beast fable, respectively. These are the most significant types of "Tales." For instance, "The Merchant's Tale" is another fabliau but is less effective than "The Miller's Tale"; other "Tales" have parodic elements but lack the consistent application of "Sir Thopas" and "The Nun's Priest's Tale." These are the best humorous "Tales"; since they are part of the whole which is The Canterbury Tales, however, they may also be analyzed in reference to the remainder of the "Tales" where appropriate. In addition, all of the "Tales" use humor and satire to some degree, and the following general discussion of the nature of humor and satire could be applied to each.

The problem with discussing the nature of humor and satire is that it is extremely difficult to develop a theory about their essential elements. There have been numerous attempts to write about the theory behind humor--what is funny and why. There is little agreement among critics, however; in fact, very few scholars have defined humor. Additionally, there is often confusion of terms such as wit, humor, comedy, and satire, partly

because the terms tend to be undefinable and partly because they overlap. Still, an attempt must be made to define the terms humor and satire as they will be used in application to The Canterbury Tales.

Although they both call it comedy, critics as separated in time as the ancient Aristotle and the contemorary James K. Feibleman supply definitions of humor. Aristotle defines it as "an imitation of an action that is ludicrous and imperfect."[2] Feibleman says it "consists in the indirect affirmation of the ideal logical order by means of the derogation of the limited orders of actuality."[3] These definitions are a good place to start because they address one of the crucial issues regarding humor; something is funny because it reveals man's limitations, either mental or physical, and thus holds up his imperfect humanity for comparison with the perfect ideal. Unfortunately, these definitions are inadequate alone and very quickly lead to the theories about the nature of humor which are much broader in scope.

Before discussing these theories, however, it is necessary to ascertain the relationship between wit, humor, and comedy and to defend the choice of the term humor to represent whatever it is that makes people laugh at something funny. The most common distinction made

between wit and humor is that wit is more intellectual and critical and that humor is more emotional and humane.[4] Thus, wit may be subsumed under humor where it varies only in degree of feeling. The distinction between humor and satire is that, as Charles R. Gruner points out, satire as more critical, more aggressive, more truthful, more intellectual, more specific in its historical context, and more specific in its subject than humor.[5] Obviously, this places the two terms at either end of the same continuum rather than as antitheses measured on completely different scales. Any distinction at all between humor and comedy is likewise difficult to justify because the words are essentially synonyms. The only real difference is that the term comedy is sometimes applied to a specific form of drama, comedy (as opposed to tragedy). Thus, it becomes a term used to designate a genre. When defined this narrowly, any other type of literary work would technically contain humorous elements but not be a comedy. In reality, humorous or comic elements are the same thing--what people find funny in any literary work.

Why they find something funny is the question which plagues most of the theorists on humor. There are many theories, but they fall into several general types. Patricia Keith-Spiegel does an excellent job of listing both the types and the writers who have postulated,

modified, or criticized each of them over the years. Essentially, men laugh at the humorous because laughter is an instinctual biological and evolutionary response; because they feel superior, surprised, or ambivalent; because they see the incongruity in life; or because laughter is a means of psychological relief and release of tension. (It must be noted, though, that people laugh for other reasons than finding something humorous, i.e., nervousness, physical disease, etc.) Aristotle was the first man to insist on the presence of a feeling of superiority as part of a theory; Hobbes and, more recently, Bergson also included it in their theories. Hobbes also thought surprise was a large part of the theory.[6] Bergson included incongruity and psychological release.[7] Of course, Freud was the most thorough investigator of the psychoanalytical theory.[8]

Though it is not necessary to go into specific detail regarding the theories of humor, it is necessary to pinpoint any element which is absolutely essential. Otherwise, there is no basis for finding anything humorous in The Canterbury Tales. Incongruity would be the first essential ingredient. A reader must see that words, behaviour, actions, etc., are either not what they could be (when held up to the ideal) or not what they should be (when held up to a social norm). The second is surprise;

a reader must be caught short, must have a new awareness or realization that something in life is incongruous. These two must go together; otherwise, a reader can be aware of the disparity between the real and the ideal without finding a situation humorous. The last is release of tension. After he becomes aware of the incongruity, the reader laughs (chuckles, snorts, etc.).

There is a question as to whether an audience response is necessary for humor. Obviously it is--nothing is funny unless someone thinks that it is. The question then becomes one of degree. If one person thinks something is funny and aother does not, which is right? Does the majority rule so that if most people find something funny, it is? The critics do not address this sticky question, probably because it is patently unanswerable; however, it is certainly generally recognized that there is no humor without a response to it.

The question of whether a person must feel superiority to experience humor is marginal, but in general it holds true. A man laughs if someone else is embarrassed by slipping on a banana peel; not (usually) if he himself is. The psychology of humor is complex, though; a man may laugh because he wants to save face--or he may laugh because he really does think it is funny that he himself fell. It may be possible to feel superior to

aspects of oneself and laugh at those aspects in oneself as well as in others. As Elder Olson points out, a feeling of superiority may lead to reactions other than laughter.[9] A man may feel superior and kill six million Jews the way Hitler did. A man may feel superior and still react with compassion and not laughter. Superiority may be involved, but the humor may be pointing out simply the superiority of the ideal condition over the real human condition, and this leads back to a manifestion of the incongruous, the disparity between the real and the ideal.

The question of whether humor is aggressive is also marginal. There are instances where humor is bitter and aggressive, but this does not have to be the case. Laughter can be at another's expense, as it often is in satire, but it may also occur without malice. Seeing someone slip on a banana peel appears to be a universally humorous situation.

To recapitulate, incongruity, surprise, release, and an audience response are always necessary in humor. Feelings of superiority and aggression may or may not be present. There are of course many other elements which may be present. These techniques are often used to serve the purposes of both humor and satire and therefore will be discussed after the nature of satire and its relationship to humor are explored.

The nature of satire is highly contested. Of all the definitions, Edward W. Rosenheim, Jr.'s serves as the most comprehensive base. He says that satire is "an attack by means of a manifest fiction upon discernible historic particulars."[10] That satire needs an object of attack seems to be uncontested. Chaucer attacks and criticizes many things in The Canterbury Tales, including the "church, chivalry, courtly love, and idealism"[11] and corruption, hypocrisy, pretension, pride, etc. The specific objects of attack will be discussed in the section on each specific "Tale." The presence of "manifest fiction" in all literature--humorous, satiric or otherwise--seems to be well-established; thus, the existence of fiction may be argued a posteriori. Surely The Canterbury Tales may be perceived as fiction.

There may be some question, however, as to whether "discernible historic particulars" as Rosenheim defines them are necessary. He would contend that the characters in The Canterbury Tales must have been specific historical people in order for the work to be satiric. This stance appears to be a little extreme. Certain characters could have been based on real people, but their satiric effect is not lost because the reader of the The Canterbury Tales does not know exactly who they were. Thus, Patricia Meyer Spacks can say that the "historic particulars" do not have

to be "discernible."[12] Instead, Chaucer could have, as Augustin Hamon suggests, concentrated in one character resemblances which were seen in many and thus created one character who seems to the reader to be both real and a type.[13] Leonard Feinberg has a lot to say about the nature of character in satire, and his comments are relevant with regard to the historic particularity of satiric characters. He feels that satire needs to use the external and typical aspects of the character; it does not need deep insight into the character because this creates sympathy rather than ridicule. In this way, detachment is maintained. He says, "The satirist also wants his audience to make quick judgements about his characters." Thus, the satirist has ample reason to simplify and therefore not reveal a complex character. Feinberg also notes that satiric characters rarely grow or change. They either resign themselves to the world or get worse. (It seems they could do both.)[14] The application of the criterion of historical particularity will occur within the context of the analysis of each "Tale."

There are also three areas where Rosenheim's definition does not address the absolutely essential ingredients in satire. One area is the necessity of wit and/or humor as an absolute criterion for satire. Northrup Frye would say that they are necessary[15] as

would Hamon.[16] Whether called wit or humor or surprise[17] or incredulity, there is something in satire that brings the reader up short and promotes the realization that something unexpected has happened in the work, something which often makes the reader stop and think. The reader may not actually laugh, though several critics feel (though they do not explain why) that much of The Canterbury Tales is humorous.[18] Thus, whether the reader is just stopped short or whether he laughs out loud, there is some kind of emotional reaction involved which Rosenheim does not take into account but which seems to be essential in satire (and, obviously, in humor).

The second area is the presence of an implied norm and the presence of the answer to the situation. The answer seems self-evident. Obviously, it is impossible to attack something without implying that it is undesirable. Yet, it does not follow that the work must then posit what is desirable.[19] The answer to the situation satirized does not have to be provided a posteriori, for many obviously satiric works do not provide the answer. Where the reader or the critic can get into trouble is in assuming that in attacking the undesirable the satirist must imply the desirable or the norm and/or provide a solution. Chaucer does not always do this in The Canterbury Tales.

The third area involves the global question of whether satire is a genre in itself or whether it exists as part of another genre. Sheldon Sacks feels it is a part of another work rather than a form in itself, and this seems reasonable.[20] Satire may be seen as a minor to a major component of a work, but it is a component.

In review, for a work to have a satiric component, it must have an object of attack, it must be fiction, it must have some historical context, it must have humor, and it must imply a norm. (It may or may not provide a solution to the problem being satirized.) These elements must be present in satire.

After looking at the nature of humor and satire, it becomes obvious that they are related in several ways. Most apparently, humor must occur as a part of satire by the definition being applied here. As James W. Nichols correctly notes, "The effect of many satiric tactics is to make the object of the satire amusing."[21] The humor helps make the reader more aware of the satire. They ask some of the same questions. Is humor corrective? conservative of norms?[22] Is satire?[23] Finally, the relationship is even more strongly reinforced when the techniques used for either are listed. They are often identical. Some of the better lists are in Richard

Boston, Cooper, Freud, Gruner, and Allan Edwin Rodway.[24]

Feinberg's book, An Introduction to Satire, does by far the best job, however, of listing and explaining the use of these techniques. He makes extensive reference to their application in both humor and satire. Therefore, this book will be used as the framework for study of the operation of both in The Canterbury Tales. He lists the main techniques as incongruity, surprise, pretense, and superiority. Of the specific techniques, he lists mechanical references, animal references, pseudo realism, bodily references, distortion, externality (detachment), brevity, condensation, overstatement, exaggeration, reductio ad absurdum, caricature, understatement, contrast, disparaging comparison, cliche twisting, paradox, unexpected honesty, unexpected (false) logic, irony, verbal irony, burlesque/parody/travesty, disguise and deception, symbol, allegory, small misfortunes (slapstick), unmasking, ignorance, banality, insult and verbal hostility, and puns.[25] Chaucer uses different techniques in different "Tales," but they are all there. The four "Tales" from The Canterbury Tales to be discussed here are especially fruitful for the intensive study of the specific operation of the techniques of humor and satire in a literary work.

Notes--Chapter 1

Humor, Satire, Tales, and Techniques

[1] The primary text used in conjunction with this thesis is: Geoffrey Chaucer, from The Canterbury Tales, in The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (1933; rpt. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961), pp. 17-265. The name of any particular "Tale" will refer to any reference to that particular "Tale," character, etc., wherever the reference may occur within the text.

[2] Lane Cooper, An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy: With an Adaptation of 'The Poetics' and a Translation of the 'Tractatus Coislinianus' (1922; rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969), p. 228.

[3] James K. Fiebleman, In Praise of Comedy: A Study in its Theory and Practice (New York: Horizon Press, 1970), p. 178.

[4] Elder Olson, The Theory of Comedy (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 21-22.

[5] Charles R. Gruner, Understanding Laughter: The Workings of Wit and Humor (Chicago, Illinois: Nelson-Hall, 1978), pp. 93-115.

[6] Patricia Keith-Spiegel, "Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues," in The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues, eds. Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee (New York: Academic Press, 1972), pp. 5-14.

[7] Henri Bergson, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1937). The references are scattered throughout the book.

[8] Sigmund Freud, Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1916).

[9] Olson, p. 8.

[10] Edward W. Rosenheim, Jr., "The Satiric Spectrum," in Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Ronald Paulson (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 306.

[11] Allan Edwin Rodway, English Comedy: Its Role and Nature from Chaucer to the Present Day (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975), p. 51.

[12] Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Some Reflections on Satire," in Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Ronald Paulson (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 361.

[13] Augustin Hamon, The Technique of Bernard Shaw's Plays, trans. Frank Maurice (1912; rpt. Folcroft Library Editions, 1971), p. 37.

[14] Leonard Feinberg, Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1967), p. 234.

[15] Northrup Frye, "The Mythos of Winter: Irony and Satire," in Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Ronald Paulson (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), pp. 233-48.

[16] Hamon, p. 13.

[17] Feinberg, pp. 143-44.

[18] Janet Adelman, "That We May Leere Som Wit," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Pardoner's Tale: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Dewey R. Faulkner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 96; Gilbert Keith Chesterton, Chaucer (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1932), p. 274; Gordon Hall Gerould, Chaucerian Essays (Princeton, New Jersey; Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 71; Howard Rollin Patch, On Rereading Chaucer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1939), p. 15.

[19] Feinberg, p. 14.

[20] Sheldon Sacks, "From: Toward a Grammar of the Types of Fiction," in Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Ronald Paulson (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 334.

[21] James W. Nichols, Insinuation: The Tactics of English Satire (Paris: Mouton, 1971), p. 130.

[22] Robert Bechtold Heilman, The Ways of the World: Comedy and Society (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1978), pp. 19, 24-25.

[23] Feinberg, pp. 253-62, 273-74.

[24] Richard Boston, An Anatomy of Laughter (London: Collins, 1974), pp. 50-52; Cooper, pp. 228-59; Freud, pp. 18-113; Gruner, pp. 5-7; Rodway, pp. 38-42.

[25] The following are the page numbers for references to techniques in Feinberg:

The Four Major Techniques

Incongruity, pp. 101-42.

Surprise, pp. 143-75.

Pretense, pp. 176-205.

Superiority, pp. 206-25.

The Remaining Techniques

Mechanical references, pp. 46-47.

Animal references, pp. 52-55.

Pseudo realism, pp. 61-62.

Bodily references, pp. 64-71.

Distortion, pp. 90-91.

Externality (detachment), pp. 93-95.

Brevity, p. 95.

Condensation, p. 97.

Overstatement, pp. 106-8.

Exaggeration, pp. 105-8.

Reductio ad absurdum, pp. 112-16.

Caricature, pp. 99, 116-19.

Understatement, pp. 119-23.

Contrast, pp. 124-30.

Disparaging comparison, pp. 130-33.

Cliche twisting, pp. 135-38.

Paradox, pp. 139-42.

Unexpected honesty, pp. 143-44.

Unexpected (false) logic, pp. 150-56.

Irony, pp. 157-75.

Verbal irony, pp. 178-83.

Burlesque/parody/travesty, pp. 184-92.

Disguise and deception, pp. 192-98.

Symbol, pp. 198-201.

Allegory, pp. 202-05.

Small misfortunes (slapstick), pp. 209-12.

Unmasking, pp. 212-15.

Ignorance, pp. 215-18.

Banality, pp. 219-20.

Insult and verbal hostility, pp. 220-25.

Puns, p. 223.

Chapter 2

"THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE"

"The Miller's Tale" is a fabliau; a fabliau is a short, funny, indecent--either sexually or excrementally--story.[1] However, in Chaucer's hands, the fabliau becomes much more, for "there is nothing in the fabliau tradition that dictates the introduction of courtly conventionalism in the 'Miller's Tale.'"[2] Chaucer chooses to make the "Tale" a "parody and burlesque of courtly love"[3] and thus a burlesque of the romance in general[4] and of "The Knight's Tale" in particular.[5] When he combines the fabliau and romance, "the traits of the different styles are carefully exploited for the humor, the satire, the irony they produce when placed together."[6] Chaucer also goes far beyond the fabliaux in his descriptions[7] and characterizations.[8] The end result is that "The Miller's Tale" is both a fabliau and a burlesque and is, of course, humorously satiric.

As humor, then, the "Tale" must have incongruity, surprise, release, and audience response--and it certainly does. As is often the case with Chaucer, however, both the required criteria and the optional techniques (both major and minor) of both humor and satire overlap to a

large extent in this and all the other "Tales," making it difficult to approach them in a systematic way. Therefore, only those aspects of those required criteria which do not fit under one of the optional techniques will be discussed for each of the "Tales."

In "The Miller's Tale," release is the only mandatory criterion requiring special consideration. Though all of the humorous "Tales" give psychological release, the sensual and ribald fabliaux such as "The Miller's Tale" are especially adept at providing it. The obscene bodily references manage to remain tasteful because "pornography ceases to be sordid as soon as it stimulates laughter--that is, the social and distanced judgment which keeps the ethical universe in order."[9] Nevertheless, they allow the reader to experience catharsis; he may enjoy the forbidden without guilt. He may also breathe a sigh of relief that the butt of the joke in the "Tale" is not him but the Miller.[10]

The criteria which are optional in humor, superiority and aggression, are also present in "The Miller's Tale." Surely the reader feels superior to the cuckolded Miller, the cunning Nicholas, and the dandified Absolon; Alisoun is the only character who escapes this fate. Much of what these characters do to each other is certainly aggressive,

yet their actions are funny to the point of slapstick and certainly justified.

For there is behavior in the "Tale" which deserves the reprobation of the satire present. Ironically, the satire is not of adultery or carnality[11] as might be expected. Rather, Chaucer attacks "conventional attitudes toward sex, learning and religion."[12] He also attacks any attempt to apply the courtly ideal to everyday life. In addition, "bourgeouis churlishness," jealousy, astrology and its misuse, [13] gullibility, and dandyism[14] are criticized. James W. Nichols sums up the satiric situation best in saying that the contrasts between "The Knight's Tale," "The Miller's Tale," and "The Reeve's Tale" invite the reader to criticize the everyday world and courtly conventions and to find an implied norm in the middle ground between the "Tales."[15] Thus, Chaucer is providing a norm (which satire requires) and even proffers a partial solution (which is not required) that man not violate what is natural (i.e., an old man should not take a young wife; man should not regard natural, physical sex as an abomination). As usual, though, he does not provide an overt answer to undesirable social behavior (i.e., parasitic clerks, fastidious dandies); he simply implies that the behavior should be avoided.

Nor does he, as Edward W. Rosenheim, Jr. would demand,[16] provide much historical particularity. It is possible that Robin, the carpenter's knave in the "The Miller's Tale" (ll. 3431-71), represents the Miller of the pilgrimage as a young man in the household of the Reeve of the pilgrimage, thus justifying the Reeve's vindictive retribution in his "Tale."[17] The detail adds fun to "The Miller's Tale," but it is, after all, fictional historical particularity and only a hypothesis at that. George Williams suggests that Chaucer put himself into the "Tale" in the person of Nicholas (with his similar interest in the stars, astrolabe, abacus, books, music, etc.), but as a starting point for characterization, not as autobiography.[18] Even if he did, the fact is superfluous, for this knowledge adds little to the humor or moral of the "Tale." Obviously, historical particularity is not necessary for the humor and satire in "The Miller's Tale," for it has been a successful and highly acclaimed fabliau for several centuries without it!

What is necessary are at least some of the techniques Leonard Feinberg catalogues. In this particular "Tale," Chaucer uses animal references, bodily references, caricature, understatement, irony, burlesque/parody/-travesty, and puns. Using these few tools, he builds one

of the best-structured and funniest stories ever constructed.

Though Chaucer uses relatively few of Feinberg's techniques in "The Miller's Tale,"[19] he uses each of them extensively. Animal references, then, are common, with most of them contributing significantly to humorous characterization since the animal usually represents some aspect (usually reprehensible) of man. The animalistic description of Alisoun (ll. 3234-58) probably represents Chaucer's most superb use of this technique. The weasel has particularly profound implications. Not only is Alisoun directly compared to this animal, but an implied comparison is also carried through in the description of her black and white ermine-like clothing; the similar markings on the swallow she is compared to; her plucked and arched eyebrows much like the weasel's; her frolicking; and her description in terms of the words mast and bolt, bringing to the mind's eye the long, lean look of the weasel sitting upright. Additionally, medieval folklore portrayed the weasel as lustful, sexual, and associated with witches; in fact, the name Alisoun was a common name for a witch. Finally, the weasel was viewed as an omen of bad luck and presaged the Biblical flood, a wonderful irony considering the plot of "The Miller's Tale."

~~Tale.~~" It is so unexpected to see this comparison made, but the result is so effective!

Alisoun is also compared to a sheep (l. 3249), a kid, and a calf (l. 3260), comparisons which serve to highlight her appearance but do not illuminate her character. She is twice compared to a colt (ll. 3263, 3282) with the implication that she is skittish--and serviceable to man.

Two of the other characters in "The Miller's Tale" are also described in animal terms. The comparison of Absolon to a lamb mourning after its mother's teat (l. 3704) is surely ludicrous (and just as surely fitting, given his oral obsession)[20] as is his comparison to the gray-eyed goose (l. 3317)[21] and the faithful turtle dove (l. 3706), when it is the woman in the courtly love tradition who is usually so described.[22] When he is called an ape (l. 3389), he is portrayed as a dupe, as is the Miller in the "General Prologue" (l. 706). The Miller is also compared once to a red fox (l. 552) and twice to a sow (ll. 552, 556) in the "General Prologue," with the implication that he is crafty, lascivious, a drunkard, and a thief. The fact he always won the ram at wrestling might indicate sexual as well as physical prowess.

Two other animal references need special attention in light of their possible humorous contribution to "The Miller's Tale." The first is the reference to oxen in a

plow in "The Miller's Prologue" (ll. 3159-62). Beryl Rowland feels it may have a double meaning: either not for all his oxen would the Miller trouble himself to decide if the Reeve is a cuckold or since oxen and cuckolds both have horns, the Miller would not image that just because there are oxen in his plow that he himself--or the Reeve--is a cuckold. Understanding this passage could lead to an appreciation of the erudite, witty humor involved. Rowland also deals extensively with the problem of interpreting the black sheep in the Noah story.[23] Not only is the explanation confusing, but it does not add appreciably to appreciation of the the humor in "The Miller's Tale."

Some of the other animal references are brief but still possibly humorous and slightly obscene. Absolon sees himself as a cat and Alisoun as a mouse (ll. 3346-47); the servant looks in on Nicholas through a nole the cat uses (l. 3441). When the three tubs float on the flood, John will swim after Alisoun like a duck after a drake (ll. 3575-76). Is this comic reversal of the norm? When Absolon rises at cock's crow, is this a comic way to say Absolon is as lecherous as a rooster (ll. 3675, 3687)?

Chaucer also uses a plethora of bodily references (which are usually obscene), but since they hinge upon

word play and puns, most of them will be considered under the punning technique. The remainder are so general that they are easily missed, but they should not be discounted. These references to forbidden parts of the human anatomy include: loins (ll. 3237, 3304), haunche bones (ll. 3279, 3833), hole (l. 3732), ers (ll. 3734, 3755, 3800, 3802, 3810), of course the infamous fart (l. 3806), toute (ll. 3812, 3853), and euphemistic nether ye (l. 3852). As noted earlier, these references allow the reader vicarious enjoyment and psychological release.

Obviously, caricature is not out of place in a literary world where animals and bodies are used to exaggerate and illuminate character. Heroine-like, with his gray eyes and fair hair (like Sir Thopas) and his preoccupation with cleanliness and courtly manners, Absolon is certainly the ludicrous dandy. Broad shouldered, stocky, with a pug nose, and unexpectedly carrying a weapon, the Miller present a gross, but not repulsive, image. How incongrous he appears in his white baker's apron and a sword![24] Walter Clyde Curry feels that the humor is enhanced by knowing that the details of his description are based on physiognomic principles with his round red face, nose, and large mouth identifying him as a quarrelsome lecher, liar, drunkard, glutton and jangler[25] in much the same way as the animal references

identify him as such. Thus, the humor is doubly enhanced.

The humor is also enhanced by understatement. Anticlimax is a form of understatement, and "The Miller's Tale" uses its capacity to surprise to good advantage for humorous purposes. There are three excellent and specific instances of the use of this technique in the "Tale." The first is Alisoun's designation as a wench after the long courtly--but also earthy--description of her person (ll. 3352-54).[26] The second is the revelation of Absolon's squeamishness at the end of his description (ll. 3337-38).[27] The third is the friars' singing following on the heels of Nicholas and Alisoun's frolicking (ll. 3650-56).[28] David sees the latter situation as reflecting a balance in life, the norm, which includes the spiritual and the sexual.[29]

Irony is probably the most heavily used humorous technique in "The Miller's Tale." It starts in the apology in the "Prologue to the Miller's Tale" where, ironically, the reported event that Chaucer is disclaiming is itself a fiction.[30] Much of the irony revolves around sex. The two most outstanding ironies are "(1) the irony of the husband's credulity and of his unconscious help to the lovers, and (2) the irony of the lover's shouting of that very word which he should have avoided

most carefully."[31] It is ironic that Nicholas uses the sinfulness of marital sex to get even more sinful adulterous sex;[32] John cannot sin with his own wife so that Nicholas can. It is supremely ironic that the first flood punished lechery; the second flood is a means to it.[33] There is another masterful ironic reference if the reader is erudite enough to catch it, namely the blacksmith's swearing "by Seinte Note" when Absolon shows up so early in the morning for the hot coulter (ll. 3766-71). The allusion reveals that the blacksmith realizes that Absolon is coming from unsuccessful pursuit of his carnal desires. The joke is that Saint Neot was a cleric who got up very early to visit churches and relics in an attempt to overcome his carnal desires.[34]

At the start of the "Tale," it is incongruous for Nicholas to sing the religious "Angelus Advirginem" (l. 3216) in his secular amorous world and ironic for him to sing of virgins when he will be chasing a woman who certainly is not one. Near the end, it is ironic that the song the friars sing celebrates spiritual nuptials whereas the lovers, Nicholas and Alisoun, are celebrating union of an entirely different sort.[35] It is ironic that John shows such concern for Alisoun since she is an accomplice in his betrayal[36] and also that he tells her a secret she already knows (ll. 3603-05).[37] In addition, John is

jealous of Absolon, not of Nicholas as he should be.[38] John is helpless to punish Nicholas; this is done by Alisoun's other lover, Absolon. Also, "Nicholas is not punished for his real crime, adultery, but rather receives the blow intended for Alisoun."[39] Nicholas' desire to bring misfortune to Absolon leads to his own misfortune.[40] Finally, Absolon's declaration of love to Alisoun is overheard by Nicholas, not John as would be expected; it is doubly ironic that Nicholas hears it at all because Absolon thinks Alisoun is alone.[41]

Many critics cite the outcome of "The Miller's Tale" as a superb example of poetic justice, though Joseph A. Dane is careful to note that the justice <u>is</u> poetic and aesthetic, not moral.[42] This justice is ironic. Thus, "The misdirected kiss appropriately rewards Absolon's fastidiousness, especially since his fastidiousness does not extend to morality."[43] In the end (pun intended), the physical lover gets physical abuse and the aesthetic lover gets aesthetic abuse.[44] Helen Storm Corsa feels that Absolon, the sweet talker, gets his punishment in the mouth; Nicholas, the man of sexual action, gets his on the buttocks.[45] Though many critics feel Alisoun is not punished, Ian Robinson feels that all of the characters get what they deserve and that Alisoun's punishment is that the story is about her.[46] In the final analysis,

Judson Boyce Allen and Theresa Anne Moritz sum up the situation by noting that the intentions in "The Miller's Tale" are lawless, but the results are just.[47]

Though "The Miller's Tale" is not nearly the parody of romantic form and content that "Sir Thopas" is, it still burlesques some of the techniques of the romance. For instance, though it is not the standard description, the description of Alisoun in the "Tale" (ll. 3239-70) is nevertheless the conventional inventory or catalogue listing "the categories of the archetype: the fairness, the eye, the bent brows, the hue, the voice, the mouth, the carriage, the silken costume, the jewelry, the accomplishments."[48] A similar catalogue exists for Nicholas (ll. 3190-3220) and Absolon (ll. 3312-38). Of course, these descriptions also burlesque the rhetoric of formal courtly descriptions.[49] Absolon's speech is also a burlesque of the conventional courtly diction (i.e. ll. 3698-3702) with its flowers and herbs in the burlesque of the Song of Songs.[50] There is an obvious comic effect in "this imported poetic diction";[51] surely the Song of Songs is incongruous in this context.[52] In fact, "when we find in this farmyard setting words like 'derne,' 'gent,' 'rode,' 'love-longinge,' 'brid,' or 'oore' we are aware that a whole tradition of knightlore preserved in love songs is being exploited for its

incongruous and comic effect."[53] The scene where Nicholas grabs Alisoun by the pudendum, then strokes her, and then kisses her is a inversion of the usual courtly order of events (ll. 3279, 3304-05).[54] The bed scene is a burlesque of the traditional courtly feast of food or love.[55] In truth, all of Absolon's wooing--the serenades, the messages, the gifts, plus his loss of sleep and his actually getting down on his knees to Alisoun--burlesques the courtly love convention.[56]

"The Miller's Tale" also contains a considerable amount of burlesque in the form of religious travesty, presumably to highlight the worldliness of its characters. Some of the travesty is obvious; "The Miller's Tale" is a travesty of the Biblical flood. Some of the travesty has been mentioned under other techniques. Most of the remainder is covered in Gellrich's article on the juxtaposition of religious imagery and sexual activity in the "Tale." He notes that the juxtaposition of religious and erotic action in the "Tale" establishes "a basic comic incongruity between spirituality and carnality."[57] The result of this religious burlesque is comedy.

The final technique which Chaucer uses in "The Miller's Tale" is word play; he is an absolute master who uses several different types. One, punning, is most

prominent. To start, there is a pun on John's being inquisitive of Alisoun's privetee (ll. 3163-64) because the word means either her private affairs or her private parts.[58] After Nicholas grabs, strokes, and kisses Alisoun, he plays his psaltery (ll. 3304-06). This is undoubtedly a witty metaphor for playing Alisoun as well[59] and thus part of a pun on the word pleyeth.[60] In fact, every time the word is used it has a second, sexual meaning. Solas implies sexual as well as other pleasure throughout the "Tale"; bisynesse has a similar sexual innuendo.[61] Die can mean to cease living or to have an orgasm; thus, Nicholas' courtly threat to die of love-longing is complemented by his bawdy threat to ejaculate (l. 3280). When Absolon dances (l. 3328), he can either be physically dancing or having sex; in both cases, he would cast his legs about (l. 3330).[62] There are some other, minor, double meanings, but they add little to the depth, meaning, or humor of "The Miller's Tale."

There is also one instance of double meaning affecting an entire phrase and one triple pun in "The Miller's Tale." The phrase "I may nat ete na moore than a mayde" (l. 3707) may mean that Absolon can eat no more than a maid can eat; in other words, he has lost his appetite in the courtly tradition. Or it could mean that

he can eat nothing but a maid with eat in this context having obvious obscene connotations. Regarding the triple pun, when Nicholas says to Alisoun, "For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille," (l. 3278), spille can mean to die, to speak or pour forth, or to ejaculate.[63] All of the meanings certainly apply and contribute to the comic incongruity in "The Miller's Tale."[64]

The above are strict puns, or significatio, as they were called in classical rhetoric. Chaucer also uses two other related rhetorical techniques in his word play. One is the repetition of a word with multiple meanings where maybe one or two of the meanings predominate in any given context but the innuendo of the other meanings remains. This is the classical rhetorical device of traductio.[65] The most apparent and effective use of this technique is in the word hende applied to Nicholas. In the courtly love tradition, the word means nice, courteous, gracious, etc. But it also means handsome, clever, near-at-hand, ready-handed, etc.[66] At the start of the "Tale," the first meaning applies, but as Nicholas institutes his clever, under-handed plan, the other meanings are added, giving the word new ironic depth. E. Talbot Donaldson thinks that the term hende, in addition to being a multiple pun, is also an example of cliche twisting. "A conventional epithet of praise," the term is humorously

degraded in the context of "The Miller's Tale."[67] A similar situation exists with respect to queynte where the word can mean cunning, skillful or artful; to quench; and pudendum.[68] Thus, in line 3276 it means pudendum; in line 3605 it means cunning and pudendum;[69] in line 3754 it means quench, but the previous sexual overtones carry over; for "when we have been reminded of the sexual meaning, it can never be wholly absent."[70]

The other classical rhetorical device is adnominacio, where minor letter changes produce similar words with different meanings[71] and the words then recall each other in a manner similar to that discussed above. There are two instances of this witty--and in both cases, triple--word play in "The Miller's Tale." The first is where Nicholas tells John he will saven his wife. Paula Nuess notes the saven-save, savouren-savour and swyven-screw similarities which could be perceived in the mind of the reader[72] (rather than on the written page). Of course, Nicholas will do all three though he portends to do only the first. The second is where Absolon uses the trite word bird when addressing Alisoun (ll. 3699, 3805). Bird can mean bird, bride, or maiden, and again all three meanings are implied in the reference.[73]

Word play is particularly effective in "The Miller's Tale" since it does contribute so much to the bawdy humor. There is so much more than bawdy humor to the "Tale," however. Given a blatant sexual situation, adultery, Chaucer goes on to comment on love, marriage, and general deportment between the sexes. Chaucer walks the tightrope between fabliau and exemplum, sentence and solas, and stays on the wire because he does see both sides of an issue, because he has tolerance and respect for struggling and imperfect men and women, and because he manipulates the tools of his trade in such a way that balance is maintained. The satire says things are not as they should be; the humor makes this truth easier to take; and the reader gets both pleasure and instruction from "The Miller's Tale."

Notes--Chapter 2

"The Miller's Tale"

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Chapter 3

"THE PARDONER'S TALE"

"The Pardoner's Tale" is probably the most satiric "Tale" in all of The Canterbury Tales; it is not the most humorous. Obviously, it stands opposite the humorous "Miller's Tale" at the satiric end of a continuum, and it will be analyzed accordingly.

Of the criteria for satire which "The Pardoner's Tale" fits, attack is the first. "The Pardoner's Tale" attacks many things, the two major ones being the hypocrisy of the Pardoner and the abuse of the institution of the Church which grants pardonerships. (It is important to note that Chaucer does not attack the institution of the Church itself but rather its abuse by corrupt humanity.) It addition, it attacks the stinginess of the host,[1] the gullibility of the Pardoner's audiences,[2] and the betrayal of the audience by the Pardoner and of each of the rioters by the other two.

The next criterion is the historical particularity. The Pardoner may not have been based on any real person; and several critics feel he was not.[3] However, the Pardoner certainly fits Leonard Feinberg's conception of a satiric character, whether he is based on a real man or

not. Regarding the abuses perpetrated by pardoners, a similar situation exists. It is unlikely that this "particular" abuse took place, but there are plenty of similar "discernible historic" abuses.[4] Robert Dudley French points out that corrupt churchmen like the Pardoner and the institution of the Church were both heavily satirized in the fourteenth century because of extensive abuse.[5]

Thus, in "The Pardoner's Tale," the Pardoner's behavior and the abuse of the Church's power are seen as undesirable. "The Pardoner's Tale" implies that actually being what one appears to be is preferable to the Pardoner's hypocrisy and that nonabuse of religious institutions is preferable to abuse. However, it does not provide a solution to the problem of abusive pardoners.[6] As stated before, however, this is not an absolute criterion.

Of Feinberg's main techniques, the technique of surprise is particularly relevant since humor can spring from surprise. In "The Pardoner's Tale," the surprise may spring from the disbelief that the Pardoner would be so brazen as to reveal his deception before the story and then turn right around and try to deceive his audience in exactly the same way at the end. Of the specific techniques Feinberg lists, Chaucer uses brevity,

condensation, overstatement, exaggeration, reductio ad absurdum, false logic, contrast, cliche twisting, unexpected honesty, irony, burlesque/parody/travesty, unmasking, insult and verbal hostility, puns, bodily references, and animal references in the "The Pardoner's Tale."[7]

The application of Feinberg's techniques in this "Tale" is fairly easy. Chaucer uses some of them in a general way. For instance, the whole tale is brief and condensed. One of the major categories of technique is incongruity, which can spring from something being inappropriate and thus can lead to amusement. This seems to be what is happening when the Pardoner lists his bulls--from popes, cardinals, patriarchs and bishops (ll. 342-43). This is overkill. Therefore, it is also overstatement, which is a means of exaggeration; and both overstatement and exaggeration are powerful satiric tools. (This is just one instance where the satiric techniques overlap. There are many.) Additional exaggeration is used in "The Pardoner's Tale" with regard to the description of the Pardoner.[8] At one extreme, Paull F. Baum thinks that the picture drawn of the Pardoner is historically accurate; it is not an exaggeration.[9] At the other, Howard Rollin Patch thinks that the Pardoner's own description of himself is grotesque;[10] the grotesque stems from exaggeration.

(Alfred David thinks that the Pardoner's sermon is also grotesque.[11]) Without belaboring the point, it would seem that the Pardoner is a caricature in Feinberg's terms: oversimplified and exaggerated.

Finally, "The Pardoner's Tale" also contains the minor techniques of reducio ad absurdum and using unexpected--or false--logic. Both of these techniques are listed under the major technique of incongruity and both apply to the section on swearing (ll. 639-47) where the Pardoner argues that swearing is a worse sin than murder because "Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain" was the second commandment and "Thou shalt not kill" came after it. How ludicrous!

The technique of contrast seems so simple and so obvious that it may be overlooked; but it does reveal incongruity, and it is used in "The Pardoner's Tale." It may contribute to the humor because contrast leads the reader to see the unexpected, which may surprise and amuse him. It is a component of irony because "ironic detachment helps reveal and heighten the contrast between appearance and reality."[12] In this "Tale," one contrast is between what the Pardoner says and what he does. Another is the ethical contrast between the old man and the three young rioters.

Chaucer uses another minor technique which Feinberg lists under incongruity, namely cliche twisting, to create a delightfully ironic and unexpected turn of phrase. Instead of saying "Let's eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die," the two rioters who have just slain the third say essentially, "Let's eat, drink and be merry, and then we will bury the body" (ll. 883-84).[13]

Another major component in both humor and satire is surprise, and "The Pardoner's Tale" uses it. The Pardoner achieves it through unexpected honesty. The reader would not expect the Pardoner to reveal his secrets and then turn right around and try to use them after he had. This is distortion; and in this case, Feinberg's remark that "the <u>untruthful</u> remark is the expected one, so that the truth suddenly strikes us as a surprise"[14] certainly holds true.

Feinberg lists dramatic irony under surprise as an unexpected event, and irony is the most saliently used technique in "The Pardoner's Tale." Some of the irony applies to the "Tale" in general, and some applies in specific parts. In the general vein, Judson Boyce Allen and Theresa Anne Moritz say that there is irony in the fact that the exemplum is a powerful story but the pilgrims do not understand or benefit from it.[15] There certainly seems to be no indication that they do. In the

sermon, the Pardoner ironically preaches against the same vice he practices--avarice (ll. 427-28).[16] It is ironic when the Pardoner deliberately appeals to the avarice of his audience while decrying it in the "Tale" when he says that the relics will increase their worldly goods (ll. 360-76).[17] Raymond Preston and John Gardner see that good for his audience can come from the evil, avaricious intent of the Pardoner.[18] Paul G. Ruggiers feels it is ironic that the point of his own story is lost on the Pardoner and that the Host is called wicked by a confessedly wicked man.[19] It is ironic that the Pardoner himself drinks but preaches against drinking--and other gluttonous excesses. Even when he preaches against curses, he uses curses as examples; surely he and his audience enjoyed this cussing vicariously (ll. 651-55). One of the most outstanding observations about the irony is Bertrand H. Bronson's that the beginning and end of the "Tale" give the irony; otherwise, all that is present is a strict moral story at the center of the exemplum and no satire.[20]

The major irony is that the three rioters seek death in order to slay him and they end up being slain.[21] They seek death but do not recognize it when they find it; and when they find it, they stop looking.[22] Ironically, they do end up living and dying for each other as they

said they would in their oath (ll. 703-4). In the final analysis, Stephen A. Barney sums up all this irony by saying, "We know more than the rioters do."[23]

Around the major irony are many minor ironies: In "The General Prologue," it is ironic that the Pardoner is described as "gentil" (l. 669) but proves to be the opposite, as partly revealed in his friendship with the despicable Summoner.[24] Worse yet, the two of them are "ironically singing a popular song of carnal, rather than spiritual, love." After a discussion of the types of eunuchs--not all of them physical--Robert P. Miller correctly notes that the Pardoner is the type of eunuch that should not be in Church (i.e., a priest, a voluntary celibate, is the type who should), yet the Pardoner does most of his preaching in Church.[25] In the "Tale" itself, it is ironic that the Host asks the Pardoner for a merry tale when the Pardoner's profession should prompt him to ask for a serious one.[26] The Host expects to be shaken by an immoral tale; instead he is shaken by a moral one. In a like manner, the rest of the pilgrims expect to be presented with a risque tale and instead are presented with a moral one. It is ironic that the Pardoner is out of control of his own spiritual life, yet he is the one that offers spiritual security to anyone who falls off his horse--because he can grant a pardon before that person

dies (ll. 931-40). Finally, the Host asks for a joke and merriment at the start of the "Tale;" does not seem to get one; yet does finally get one at the end. The business about the kiss at the end is a joke on both the Host and the Pardoner.

Janet Adelman uses the term parody to refer to a technique very similar to dramatic irony but which is actually travesty; her comments are worth summarizing. She calls "The Pardoner's Tale" a "parody of the truths it purports to be about." Thus, the three rioters are a parody of the Christian trinity; the tree where the gold is found is a parody of the tree in Eden and the cross; the corn used to make the poison that kills two of the rioters is a parody of the mustard seed in the Bible; the Pardoner's being a eunuch is a parody of the priest who is celibate; the Pardoner's being compared to a dove is a parody of the Holy Spirit; and the cooking is a parody of the Eucharist. Obviously, Adelman views the "Tale" in eminently Christian terms.[27] D. W. Robertson even suggests that the sermon is a parody of a sermon.[28]

The last major category Feinberg uses is superiority, and "The Pardoner's Tale" makes use of several of its techniques. One is unmasking; undoubtedly, the Pardoner is unmasked. Then the reader gets to feel superior to him. Another is insult and verbal hostility. This

certainly occurs, particularly between the Host and the Pardoner at the beginning and end of the "Tale." Closely related is the technique of punning. The problem with puns for the modern reader is that he may miss something Chaucer's contemporary audience would have perceived. Still, Barney discovered two puns. When Chaucer refers to "the develes temple," he is using a word, temple, that could be derived from two Latin sources--taberna which means tavern and tabernaculum which means temple. At the end, when the Pardoner asks the Host to unbuckle his purse, he is also prompting him to expose his genitals (l. 945);[29] for purse could mean cock in the Middle Ages. This same reference is made when the Pardoner is described in "The General Prologue" as carrying a wallet on his lap (l. 686). Cake could also mean cock;[30] thus, there is a similar reference in the description of the Summoner's buckle made of a cake which immediately precedes the Pardoner's description in "The General Prologue."

And speaking of sexual references, they are components of the technique which could be called excremental and/or bodily references. Audiences laugh at the forbidden, and Chaucer surely knew this. There are several excremental references in "The Pardoner's Tale": wine making a toilet of a man's throat (l. 527), the execration of the body (ll. 534-37), and the references to

the Pardoner's buttocks and testicles and the hog's turd (ll. 948-55). Elbow makes the perceptive observation that this reveling in the body allows the audience a release from the large doses of irony which have allowed the detachment and control of much of the "Tale."[31] He neglects to note that these references occur mainly before and after the serious center of the "Tale."

Closely related to the excremental references are the animal references. These are not as well-developed as the fabliaux Feinberg discusses, but they still add to the satire of "The Pardoner's Tale." In general, animal references diminish men, making them subhuman; and then, presumably, the rest of humanity can feel superior to the person so described. The Pardoner is compared to a rabbit (l. 684), a goat (l. 688), and a horse (l.691) in "The General Prologue" alone! Miller views them as lecherous symbols,[32] as does Beryl Rowland, but two of the three animals also seem to be symbols of gluttony--"a goat will eat anything"; "he eats like a horse." The irony of comparing the Pardoner to a dove has already been discussed. In addition to animal references as direct comparison, there are also peripheral references to sheep (and other barnyard livestock) in the Pardoner's explanation of his relics (ll. 350-65), to vermin (rats and polecat) in the scene at the apothocary (ll. 851-58),

and to pigs in "The General Prologue" (l. 700) and at the end of "The Pardoner's Tale" itself (l. 955).[33] These carry with them certain connotations which are consistent with what is occurring simultaneously in the story: The Pardoner is trying to lead gullible sheep to buy his false relics; the rioters are vermin; the Pardoner is trying to give the Host and the pilgrims a bunch of crap!

And he certainly does try. He is the least sympathetic and most unredeemed--and unredeemable--of the pilgrims. Whereas Chaucer makes a humane, critical yet tolerant, portrayal of other pilgrims, he does not do so for the Pardoner. The Pardoner is revealed in all his cruelty, hypocrisy, and inhumanity, and it is obvious that Chaucer is much less tolerant of his behavior than of others'. Perhaps that is why the satire outweighs the humor in this "Tale" and why it is particularly bitter.

Notes--Chapter 3

"The Pardoner's Introduction, Prologue and Tale"

[1] Bertrand H. Bronson, In Search of Chaucer ([Toronto]: University of Toronto Press, 1960), p. 81-82.

[2] Janet Adelman, "That We May Leere Som Wit," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Pardoner's Tale: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Dewey R. Faulkner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 102. This thought is suggested by Adelman's comments on how the reader comes to identify himself with the Pardoner's audience.

[3] Paull F. Baum, Chaucer, A Critical Appreciation (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1958), p. 56; Muriel Bowden, A Reader's Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), p. 75; W. F. Bryan, Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1941), p. 408.

[4] Bowden, p. 74; Alfred L. Kellogg and Louis A. Haselmayer, "Chaucer's Satire of the Pardoner," PMLA, 66 (March 1951), 251-77.

[5] Robert Dudley French, A Chaucer Handbook (1927; rpt. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1947), p. 35.

[6] Raymond Preston, Chaucer (London and New York: Skeed and Ward; 1952), p. 236. Preston says that the problem is not solved, just dramatized.

[7] Leonard Feinberg, Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1967), pp. 46-223.

[8] French notes but does not expound upon this fact.

[9] Baum, p. 47.

[10] Howard Rollin Patch, On Rereading Chaucer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1939), p. 164.

[11] Alfred David, The Strumpeted Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 197.

[12] Feinberg, p. 239.

[13] Stephen A. Barney, "An Evaluation of the Pardoner's Tale," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Pardoner's Tale: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Dewey R. Faulkner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 91.

[14] Feinberg, p. 144.

[15] Judson Boyce Allen and Theresa Anne Moritz, A Distinction of Stories: The Medieval Unity of Chaucer's Fair Chain of Narratives for Canterbury (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1981), p. 52.

[16] Robert P. Miller, "Chaucer's Pardoner, the Scriptural Eunuch, and the Pardoner's Tale," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Pardoner's Tale: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Dewey R. Faulkner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 63.

[17] Durant Walte Robertson, Jr., "From: 'A Preface to Chaucer,'" in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Pardoner's Tale: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Dewey R. Faulkner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 118. Robertson does not label the element irony.

[18] Preston, p. 229; John Gardner, The Poetry of Chaucer (London: Feffer & Simons, Inc., 1977), p. 303.

[19] Paul G. Ruggiers, The Art of the Canterbury Tales (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), pp. 128, 180.

[20] Bronson, p. 84.

[21] Germaine Dempster, Dramatic Irony in Chaucer (Stanford University, California: Stanford University Press, 1932), p. 77; Nevill Coghill, The Poet Chaucer (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 160.

[22] Ralph W. V. Elliott, "The Pardoner's Sermon and its Exemplum," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Pardoner's Tale: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Dewey R. Faulkner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 30.

[23] Barney, p. 90.

[24] Baum, pp. 45-46.

[25] Miller, pp. 45, 54.

[26] Robert Kilburn Root, The Poetry of Chaucer: A Guide to its Study and Appreciation (1906; rpt. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1922), p. 223.

[27] Adelman, pp. 102, 96-100.

[28] Robertson, p. 3.

[29] Barney, pp. 90, 94.

[30] Gardner, p. 302; Gerould, pp. 56-57.

[31] Peter Elbow, Oppositions in Chaucer (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), pp. 138-40.

[32] Miller, p. 46.

[33] Beryl Rowland, Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World ([Kent, Ohio]: The Kent State University Press, 1971), pp. 101, 142-51, 65-66.

Chapter 4

"THE PROLOGUE AND TALE OF SIR THOPAS"

Critic after critic concedes that "Sir Thopas" is, in Alfred David's words, "one of the most delightful and perfect parodies in English literature."[1] They also agree with Ruth Van Arsdale that the parody is "of the medieval metrical romance."[2] However, that is as far as they seem willing to go. A few mention one or two of the techniques used in the parody, or burlesque, but none of them pull all of the techniques together to show why the "Tale" is so funny.

But it is funny, and it is satiric. Regarding the humor and satire first in general terms, Chaucer does use the essential humorous techniques of incongruity (particularly) and surprise; these will be covered in detail with the other techniques.

Chaucer's satiric attack in this "Tale" is very subtle; he is not criticizing the knightly code of ethics but rather its ludicrous misapplication by a pretender to the position of knight. He gently attacks many of Sir Thopas' attempts at fulfilling the knightly role such as his listing of accomplishments and loves,[3] his arming for battle, and his search for adventure. His courtliness

is exaggerated and thus satirized.[4] Chaucer is also poking fun at himself. Leaving analysis of his persona aside for the moment, it is adequate to note that the author of the exquisite Canterbury Tales ironically produces bad art in the two "Tales" ("The Tale of Sir Thopas" and "The Tale of Melibee") which he attributes to himself. This surprises the reader and upsets his expectations and thus leads to both humor and satire.

Regarding historical particularity, the reference to Sir Thopas' birthplace in Flanders is part of it and part of the parody, but it is likely, as Thomas J. Garbaty proposes, that any other historical particularity is lost to the modern reader--to his detriment in fully understanding the humor.[5] In terms of norms, as is typical of Chaucer, he implies that Sir Thopas is not behaving as a knight should, but he does not present any particular code of chivalric behavior for him to follow instead. Of course, the point is that the code is adequate for the right people and that Sir Thopas should be subscribing to an altogether different code of behavior.

The major satiric techniques from Leonard Feinberg which Chaucer uses most intensively in "Sir Thopas" are incongruity (the unexpected) and superiority. The specific techniques are mechanical references, animal

references, bodily references, exaggeration, caricature, understatement (anticlimax), contrast, disparaging comparison, cliches, irony, burlesque/parody/travesty (of course), unmasking, and puns. He uses the specific techniques in differing degrees.[6]

There is much violation of expectation in the "Tale," all of which produces incongruity and some of which appears under more specific techniques. These instances run throughout the "Tale" and create a strong basis from which to investigate the other techniques. Thus, the first and most noticeable instance is the name of the knight himself--Sir Thopas. This is not the traditional or expected name for a knight. Additionally, the name has intense symbolic meaning which furthers the humor and satire in the "Tale," for the gemstone topaz was a charm against lust in the Middle Ages,[7] an ironic fact since Sir Thopas turns out to be all talk and no action in the sexuality department and is in fact described in very feminine terms.[8] Topaz is even a feminine name. These latter two facts undercut his knightly masculinity and possibly insinuate homosexuality. Therefore, "Sir Thopas" is "replete with sexual imagery, while completely lacking in sexual encounter."[9] In fact, at one point Sir Thopas' sexual drive is so strong that he falls asleep![10] Expectation is surely unfulfilled in this situation.

Moving on to other instances, another is in Sir Thopas' being from Flanders when he would be expected to be from Brittany, known for producing brave, strong knights. Another is that instead of riding through a mysterious forest full of exotic plants, Sir Thopas rides through a forest full of common herbs.[11] Wrestling and archery are not the expected heroic pursuits, and Sir Thopas even uses a "lower class" hawk for hunting[12] and uses "lower class" oaths (l. 1974).[13] When he swears an oath, he swears on bread and ale, not aristocratic objects such as peacocks and herons.[14] Despite John L. Melton's contention that the carbuncle at Sir Thopas' side is a sword,[15] it is more likely that the carbuncle is a symptom of venereal disease as Dolores L. Cullen contends and that it is part of the absurdity in the "Tale" that Sir Thopas forgets his sword in arming himself and ridiculously swears on his shield instead.[16] Elizabeth Eddy summarizes the effect best in saying that Sir Thopas' "effeminacy and bourgeois tastes are surely the major sources of incongruity and laughter."[17]

Throughout all of this, the reader gets a feeling of superiority in disparagingly comparing the courtly ideal to the ridiculous, inferior courtly pretense in "Sir Thopas."[18] He feels superior to the inept Sir Thopas. He also feels superior to the Host as the inept critic who

wrongly, as R. M. Lumiansky sees, condemns Chaucer's craftsmanship in the "Tale."[19]

A writer of Chaucer's time would not be expected by the modern reader to use the technique Feinberg refers to as mechanical references, but Chaucer does according to at least two critics. Ann H. Haskell contends that the description of Chaucer and Sir Thopas as puppets uses this technique to humorous effect, noting that Chaucer is called a poppet in the General Prologue; Sir Thopas is described as wood which could mean wooden or mad; his clothes and armor are described in diminutive terms; his riding motion is mechnical; he is so small he escapes through the gras (grass); his oath on his birthplace is a reference to a town known for making puppets; and Sir Thopas is described as elfish.[20] The evidence fits, and such an interpretation does add to the intellectual and emotional enjoyment of the "Tale." In addition, Helen Storm Corsa compares Sir Thopas to Bergson's mechanical man who trots around on his horse a lot but never moves.[21]

The animal references have prompted much attention from the critics. The most heavily critiqued is the reference to the buckke and hare which Sir Thopas hunts (ll. 1945-46). These animals are important to the humor in terms of their symbolism. The hare is a symbol of

virile sexual productivity;[22] its fecundity is truly ironic when Sir Thopas is viewed as homosexual, effeminate, and/or chaste. What a contrast! Since the stag is also a virile animal, the same holds true for it. There is some disagreement as to the implication of the goat as well as the hare and deer in this stanza. Beryl Rowland contends that the insinuation of the goat, another fertile, lecherous symbol, produces a "triple significance which underlines the ridiculousness of the hero's aspirations."[23] There seems to be no reason to deny this meaning which simply adds additional wood to the fire of contrast created in this stanza. Of course, the most humorous, ironic effect is produced when the wild beasts Sir Thopas hunts turn out to be the tame rabbit and deer. Though one critic contends that these animals should be viewed as wild beasts,[24] most agree that this is not the case, that the deer and hare are not dangerous animals[25] and that Chaucer makes a superb use of surprise, understatement, and the unexpected in the stanza where this particular animal reference appears.[26]

There are five additional animal references in "Sir Thopas" which require attention. The first is the other reference to the hare in the "Tale." This is where Sir Thopas is staring at the ground searching for a hare (l. 1886). Rowland contends that it is an idiom implying

that Chaucer is stupid to be looking for the quick hare without the use of dogs and also that it represents a bad omen, implying that Chaucer is anticipating bad luck in the telling of the "Tale,"[27] which, of course, he does encounter. The next reference is to the ram (l. 1931). W. Thomas Ross feels that the reference is not sexual.[28] However, Van Arsdale feels that sexual innuendo is shown in the ram and the horse.[29] It probably is shown in both. The references to spurring the horse will be discussed at length under the pun technique. The bird references (ll. 1956-61) have general individual significance. The sparhauk and papejay are known for their raucous cries and thus add to the humor of the "Tale" when they appear inappropriately in the description of a romantic scene. The male thrustelcok (even his name is suggestive!) and the female wodedowve are connected by the pun on lay and thus constitute a clever but gentle obscene reference. The final animal reference is to the elephant in "Sir Olifant's" name; it is only significant if it is the obscene, sexual reference Cullen contends.[30]

And it probably is. There are obscene references in this "Tale," but the problem in dealing with them is that all but one appear under the guise of double meaning and thus also use the technique of punning. Thus, they have

arbitrarily been placed under that category. The exception is the Host's usual use of foul language in saying that Sir Thopas' "drasty rymyng is not worth a toord." (l. 2120). People do find this expression of the forbidden laughable.

Ralph W. V. Elliott and Dwight Macdonald say that "Sir Thopas" contains cliches.[31] However, they do not give examples, and most of the cliches are not twisted as Feinberg requires. Nevertheless, cliches are easy to find and should be mentioned because they do add to the humor of the "Tale." The most blatant ones are the effeminate conceits used in the description of Sir Thopas (ll. 1915-21). The humor and satire elicited from this description have already been discussed.

The irony in "Sir Thopas" is subtle and diffuse. To refer again to Chaucer and his persona, it is ironic that the teller of "Sir Thopas" is told that he has less literary merit than the other pilgrims when in fact he is a good storyteller[32]--the same good storyteller who tells the rest of the "Tales." Two areas which elicited considerable critical comment actually are a part of the irony, which is why they may have given critics so much trouble. One is the hints of femininity and/or homosexuality. John Gardner thinks that Sir Thopas is a caricature of the homosexual;[33] Van Arsdale thinks he is

effeminate but not homosexual.[34] In truth, it is most likely that the effeminate, homosexual, and ineffective sexual references all work together to create in Sir Thopas an ironic contrast to, and parody of, the ideal, virile knight.

The other major ironies involve Sir Thopas's ineffectual preparations for battle and his ineffectual sexual pretenses. Robert Kilburn Root notes the irony of Sir Thopas' actions being interrupted before any battle is fought;[35] there is extensive preparation but no ultimate action. Along the same lines, Chauncey Wood addresses the irony of the sexual overtones in the "Tale" at some length. He points out that "Sir Thopas" "has sexual imagery enough to accord with what the Host would expect from a presumed lecher, but the tale is devoid of any sexual encounters." Sir Thopas' being born in Flanders is even a sexual innuendo, for many of the prostitutes in England were Flemish.

There are two more minor ironies. First, it is ironic that the Host asks for a merry tale and is disappointed in the one which is told--one which purports to, but in fact does not, satisfy his expectations.[36] This is similar to the situation in "The Pardoner's Tale" later, where the Host asks for a merry tale from a pilgrim who should, and does, tell a serious one which turns out

to be somewhat merry after all. Secondly, it is an ironic comment on the size of Sir Thopas and on his inappropriate dress when Chaucer states that it takes many coins of a small denomination of money to buy his clothes.[37]

Much of the satire in "Sir Thopas" is of the romance genre itself, and the genre is appropriately discussed under Feinberg's technique of paraody. Chaucer is satirizing the literary form as much as anything else.[38] As Lane Cooper correctly notes, the comic effect of a disjointed story--a characteristic typical of the romance--is more easily attained in a short work such as this.[39] However, the "Tale" is not as disjointed as it appears. It is to Chaucer's credit as a consummate artist that it appears that way when in fact it is quite structured. J. A. Burrow gives a detailed explanation of how there are actually three fits, each shorter than the first, as the "Tale" "narrows away" in mathematical proportion, thus explaining apparently random rhyme forms and allowing a harmonious conclusion to the "Tale" even though it is interrupted. He thinks it is part of Chaucer's (ironic) joke that the harmony lacking in many other romantic ballads in obtained in the apparently jangling "Sir Thopas."[40]

There is parody of verse form "scrupulously copied in derision from current models."[41] E. Talbot Donaldson

feels that the "parody of the romances is linguistic as well as literary,"[42] as does Eddy.[43] However, the only example the former gives is the word worthy being most bastaradized as worly. Elliott also notes the burlesque of the diction in "Sir Thopas," particulary in the gentle (and possibly ineffectual and unmanly) oaths Sir Thopas uses, such as par ma foy (l. 2010), on ale and brede (l. 2062), with its Eucharistic overtones, and par charitee (l. 2081). He also feels that it is beneficial to contrast these oaths to the Host's (ll. 2109, 2119) and Sir Olifant's (l. 2000),[44] which are much more sacreligious and vicious. It is also important to note the contrast between the stringent oath of the narrator (l. 2126) and the innocuous curses of Sir Thopas.

Paull F. Baum notes unusual end rhymes which he considers part of the parody. There are several places where the rhyme and spelling Chaucer uses in "Sir Thopas" are not the rhyme and spelling he uses elsewhere. For instance, chivalry/drury (ll. 2084-85) uses a variant of his normally-used word for chivalry, and the same holds true for Thopas/gras instead of grace (l. 2021) and plas/solas instead of place (ll. 1971-72). Thus, the language is bastardized. Baum also goes on to note that in general what appears to be doggerel is not and is in fact another part of the ridiculous misjudgment of the

Host.[45] Alice S. Miskimin notes that often, as in two of the three examples above, Chaucer drops the final e and is thus making a comment on its superfluous retention.[46]

Eddy notes that "the constant possibility of a stanza with an unintentional humorous anticlimax was exploited by Chaucer in 'Sir Thopas.'"[47] The stanza referring to the wild beasts of hare and deer is an excellent example of this (l. 1945-46); the stanza giving emphasis to Sir Thopas' semely nose is another (l. 1916-19).[48]

The main person who is unmasked--and ridiculed-- in connection with "Sir Thopas" is the pretentious Sir Thopas himself. The Host is also unmasked, for he does not see the burlesque in the "Tale" and in his criticism of "Sir Thopas" and "Melibee" reveals that he is unqualified as a literary critic.[49] Of course, it is then ironic that he sets himself up as judge of the stories in The Canterbury Tales.

The last of Feinberg's techniques which Chaucer uses in "Sir Thopas" is puns. Word play has been the most heavily explored and critiqued of Chaucer's techniques in "Sir Thopas," yet it is probably quite true that the modern reader misses many of them and thus part of the humor. Every single instance of his word play is probably sexual. The possible pun on the word "pryck" is the one mentioned most often. Some critics think the word does

not have a sexual connotation as well as its literal Middle English meaning of spurring a horse. Some think it does. For instance, Van Arsdale thinks there is no ribald meaning except in the reference in line 1969. On the other hand, Wood feels that there is irony and humor in Chaucer's "using it often and with enthusiasm, all the while permitting its overtones to ring hollow, for there is no 'prickying' performed other than in the equestrian sense."[50]

Ross sees the reference to Poperying (l. 1910) as a pun on a town in Flanders and also the penis. He also notes that when Sir Thopas sleeps in place (l. 1971), he is sleeping in a vagina; when he is born in Poperying, he is born in the marketplace and in a vagina or pudendum. On the other hand, he says that there are places where the implication could be sexual but is not, namely in the references to Sir Thopas' standing in the lady's grace, to the steede at six points in the "Tale," and to the lance (l. 2011).[51] However, there does not seem to be any reason to exclude these from words with double meaning if double meaning is possible--and it is in each case. Surely it is humorous for the ineffectual, effeminate Sir Thopas to be sleeping with his penis in a woman's vagina, to be prickyng a woman as well as a horse, or to be attacking the virile Sir Olifant with his lance/penis.

A final sexual reference may be to the gold shield protecting a carbuncle, which Cullen feels represents a symptom of venereal disease. She even thinks the name of the giant, Sir Olifant, is a reference to a disease of excessive swelling and distention--often of the genetalia.[52]

And why couldn't it be? Meaningful word play is a significant part of the humor in "Sir Thopas" and is one of the many ways in which Chaucer condenses so much meaning, satire, and humor into such a short "Tale." Chaucer parodies language and genre and satirizes the misapplication of the medieval knightly code of behavior using all of the linquistic tools he has available; that is why "Sir Thopas" is truly such a parodic masterpiece.

Notes--Chapter 4

"The Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas"

[1] Muriel Bowden, A Reader's Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), p. 44; Alfred David, The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 217; Thomas J. Garbaty, "Chaucer and Comedy," in Versions of Medieval Comedy, ed. Paul G. Ruggiers (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), p. 185; Robert Kilburn Root, The Poetry of Chaucer: A Guide to its Study and Appreciation (1906; rpt. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1922), p. 34; Chauncey Wood, "Chaucer and 'Sir Thopas': Irony and Concupiscence," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 14 (Spring-Winter 1972-73), p. 397.

[2] Helen Storm Corsa, Chaucer: Poet of Mirth and Morality (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), p. 199; E. Talbot Donaldson, Speaking of Chaucer (University of London: The Athlone Press, 1970), p. 24; Garbaty, p. 175; Donald R. Howard, The Idea of the Canterbury Tales (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1976), p. 122; Glending Olson, "A Reading of the Thopas-Melibee Link," Chaucer Review, 10

(Summer Spring 1975-76), p. 147; Margaret A. Rose, Parody//Meta-Fiction: An Analysis of Parody as a Critical Mirror to the Writing and Reception of Fiction (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 97; Ruth Van Arsdale, "The Chaste Sir Thopas," American Notes and Queries, 13 (September-June 1974-75), p. 146.

[3] Bowden, p. 45.

[4] Elizabeth R. Eddy, "Sir Thopas and Sir Thomas Norny: Romance Parody in Chaucer and Dunbar," Review of English Studies, 22 (1972), p. 408.

[5] Garbaty, p. 188.

[6] Leonard Feinberg, Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1967), pp. 46-223.

[7] John Conley, "The Peculiar Name Thopas," Studies in Philology, 73 (1976), p. 43.

[8] Van Arsdale, p. 146.

[9] Wood, p. 397.

[10] W. Thomas Ross, Chaucer's Bawdy (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1972), p. 64.

[11] John Gardner, The Poetry of Chaucer (London: Feffer & Simons, Inc., 1977), p. 307.

[12] Bowden, p. 131.

[13] Ralph W. V. Elliott, Chaucer's English (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1974), p. 268.

[14] Ann H. Haskell, "Sir Thopas, the Puppet's Puppet," Chaucer Review, 9 (Summer Spring 1974-75), p. 254.

[15] John L. Melton, "Sir Thopas' 'Charboncle,'" Philological Quarterly, 35 (1956), pp. 215-17.

[16] Dolores L. Cullen, "Chaucer's the Tale of Sir Thopas," Explicator, 32 (September-June 1973-74), Item 35.

[17] Eddy, p. 409.

[18] Derek S. Brewer, "Gothic Chaucer," Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Derek S. Brewer (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1974), p 20.

[19] R. M. Lumiansky, Of Sondry Folke: The Pragmatic Principle in the Canterbury Tales (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1955), pp. 90, 94.

[20] Haskell, pp. 253-56.

[21] Corsa, p. 200.

[22] Ross, p. 102; Wood, p. 393.

[23] Beryl Rowland, Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World ([Kent, Ohio]: The Kent State University Press, 1971), p. 92.

[24] Richard Leighton Greene, "The Hunt is up, Sir Thopas: Irony, Pun, and Ritual," Notes and Queries, 13 (1966), p. 169.

[25] Wood, p. 393.

[26] Elliott, p. 340; Gardner, p. 308; Van Arsdale, p. 146.

[27] Rowland, p. 96.

[28] Ross, p. 187.

[29] Van Arsdale, p. 147.

[30] Cullen, Item 35.

[31] Elliott, p. 172; Dwight Macdonald, ed. and intro., Parodies: An Anthology from Chaucer to Beerbohm--and After (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 3.

[32] Garbaty, p. 187; Rose, pp. 97-98.

[33] Gardner, p. 308.

[34] Van Arsdale, p. 146.

[35] Root, p. 201.

[36] Wood, pp. 397-98, 389, 398, 401.

[37] Elliott, p. 358.

[38] Paul G. Ruggiers, The Art of the Canterbury Tales (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 21.

[39] Lane Cooper, An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy: With an Adaptation of 'The Poetics' and a Translation of the 'Tractatus Coislinianus' (1922; rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969), p. 257.

[40] J. A. Burrow, "'Sir Thopas': An Agony in Three Fits," Review of English Studies, 22 (1971), 54-58.

[41] Nevill Coghill, The Poet Chaucer (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 151.

[42] E. Talbot Donaldson, "The Manuscripts of Chaucer's Work and their Use," in Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Derek S. Brewer (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1974), p. 106.

[43] Eddy, p. 405.

[44] Elliott, p. 284.

[45] Paull F. Baum, Chaucer's Verse (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1961), p. 92.

[46] Alice S. Miskimin, The Renaissance Chaucer (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 117.

[47] Eddy, p. 408.

[48] Garbaty, p. 185.

[49] Lumiansky, pp. 90, 94.

[50] Greene, p. 167; Gardner, p. 308; Van Arsdale, p. 147; Wood, p. 400.

[51] Ross, pp. 95, 165, 64, 157, 209, 208, 129.

[52] Cullen, Item 35.

Chapter 5

"THE NUN'S PRIEST'S PROLOGUE AND TALE"

"The Nun's Priest's Tale" is a mock heroic epic--and and that means it is a burlesque of the epic and the epic hero. It is also a mocking parody of the sermon and allegory.[1] In addition, it is a beast fable. Chaucer has combined the mock heroic epic and beast fable, however, to create what many scholars believe to be the best of The Canterbury Tales.

They also believe it is one of the most difficult to interpret and understand. This is one "Tale" where the moral must be addressed, too, because it is involved so intimately with the satire. The "Tale" invites the reader to look for meaning, but when he does, he finds a multitude of meaningful morals. Each moral involves criticism of one or more aspect of human nature or behavior. Charles Muscatine best reveals most of the objects of attack in the "Tale" in saying that, "Through tragedy, eloquence, heroics, science, court flattery, courtly love, domesticity, dreams, scholarship, authority, antifeminism, patient humility and rural hullabaloo, there is scarcely a Chaucerian topic that is excluded from its purview and its criticism."[2] Morton Bloomfield adds,

"Marriage, women, love, learning, philosophy, male pride, human pretentions are all targets of the Nun's Priest's Tale."[3] It denounces women; it exposes the antifeminist Nun's Priest; it refutes irrational, vain, sensual, self-indulgent conduct; and it undercuts fatalism.[4] The "Tale" also satirizes the abuses of classical rhetoric.[5] Further, as Peter Dronke and Jill Mann point out, "Much of his satire is directed against the absoluteness and rigidity of abstract intellectual thought."[6]

In the final analysis, the most fun of all is that Chaucer satirizes the very attempt to find meaning.[7] The whole idea of "sentence" is mocked.[8] In a similar vein, the moral may be, paradoxically, that fiction writing itself may be vanity, but the moral can only be experienced through written fiction.[9] Ironically, in looking for a moral in this welter of satire, the critics are trapped into being as pompous and pedantic as Chauntecleer.[10]

Obviously, Chaucer more than fulfills the requirement for an object of attack in "The Nun's Priest's Tale." Muscatine feels that "the tale celebrates the normality of differences," the relativity of life.[11] Thus, the requisite norm in satire is provided. But, if Chaucer

gives much help in providing a solution to the problem of being human, the reader is wished good luck in finding it!

He will have no problem, however, in finding historical particularity in this "Tale," for there is plenty. At the very least, there is a direct reference to Jack Straw pursuing the Flemish in the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 (ll. 4584-87)[12] which serves to compare the mayhem of the barnyard scene with that of the Revolt[13] to humorous effect. There is also a direct reference to Geoffrey Vinsauf (l. 3347).[14] Beryl Rowland thinks the reference to the fox as Russell (l. 4524) is a slam at fox-like friars of the same name in Chaucer's contemporary society.[15] Noting that historical references are obscured over time and that they loose meaning and humor as a result, J. Leslie Hotson goes on to say he thinks that "The Nun's Priest's Tale" definitely satirizes actual events in contemporary medieval society as well as human frailty. He contends first that Russell is specifically a col-fox as a play on the proper name of a two men, Richard and Nicholas Colfox, the latter of which was a political murderer (thus the list of traitors rather than murderers in the "Tale"). Secondly, he contends that the action in the "Tale" parallels and thus satirizes further political intrigue between Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray.[16] He makes a very convincing case, leading the

reader to a greater appreciation of the "Tale" and the witty mind that could place this historical particularity into the framework of "The Nun's Priest's Tale," get away with rather strident political satire, have some fun, and still maintain organic unity.

Chaucer uses many of the same techniques from Leonard Feinberg in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" that he used in "The Miller's Tale."[17] The major technique of incongruity is the only one which needs special attention. Of the minor techniques, Chaucer uses animal references, caricature, understatement (anticlimax), contrast, paradox, irony, burlesque/parody/travesty, small misfortunes (slapstick), and word play.

The basic incongruity in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" is that of animals behaving like humans![18] This is simply magnified by the use of erudite and rhetorical language which intensifies the mock-heroic aspect of the "Tale."[19] It is incongruous to treat the affairs of a chicken as if they were important.[20]

Since this <u>is</u> a beast fable, animal references abound. In terms of the main "characters," Rowland notes that the fox represents the devil who traps the sensual. Interestingly, she does not make any comment on the symbolism of the cock. Obviously, however, Chauntecleer is a symbol of egotistical vanity (cockiness) and lechery.

There is one instance of very clever use of materials in the owl/ape reference in the second dream exemplum (l. 4282). The owl is an ill omen, a bird of death, a symbol of unclean sensuality. The ape is a symbol for the devil. In conjunction, they may create a triad with the ass "whereby human vanity is satirized in the figure of an ape riding an ass and holding an owl."

Two other significant references are those to the hound and dog, where the high-class hound (l. 4090) in Chauntecleer's dream befits the mock-heroic epic and the low-class dog in Pertelote's catalogue of evil things (l. 4122) befits her earthy reality. The mention of the widow's swine, cows, and sheep (ll. 4020-21) serves to highlight her poverty; the poor Nun's Priest's riding a jade (l. 4002) serves to highlight his.

The other animal references are less significant, though not uninteresting. The Host's saying that the the Monk's "talkying is nat worth a boterflye" (l. 3980) is an obvious Middle Age judgmental idiom. The bear, as a representative of terror, appears in Pertelote's treatise on dreams (l. 4125). The murdered man in Chauntecleer's first dream exemplum was sleeping in an ox's stall (l. 4187). Chauntecleer sees a butterfly right before he sees the lurking fox (l. 4464).[21] Finally, the dog, cow, calf, hogs, ducks, geese, and bees (ll. 4573-82) are

part of the hubbub (a hubbub that definitely smacks of slapstick) at the end of the "Tale," but they have no more profound significance.

The reference to the Nun's Priest as a hawk in conjunction with his description as a brawny man with a thick neck and big chest needs attention. First of all, the comparison to a hawk aligns him with a bird of prey, making him a free, aggressive, unpriestly character. However, a hawk may also be under the control of a master who uses it for hunting, a subservient position not unanalogous to that of the Nun's Priest under the Prioress. Thus, the Nun's Priest is portrayed very ambiguously. The result of this ambiguity is a controvery as to whether the Nun's Priest is a big, brawny man or whether this portrait is ironic.[22] Though he rides a lean horse, there is no indication that he is so, and his being a manly man would certainly add to the pathos of his subservient situation.

Though the Nun's Priest's portrait is not a caricature, those of Chauntecleer and Pertelote certainly are. Caricature is intrinsic by virtue of the fact that the "Tale" is a beast fable[23] where birds represent some exaggerated aspect of man. In this case, the main caricature is of the glorious Chauntercleer with his flashy "dress," pedantic learning, and extreme vanity.

The picture of Pertelote is less flashily drawn, but surely her earthiness and sexuality are extreme.

The first major contrast in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" is between the miserable poverty of the widow's world and the courtly pageantry of the fowl's.[24] The reason for this is patently obvious; "her meager life is all used to sharpen the humor of the elaborate mock-heroic treatment of the cock and his lady."[25] At the end, the only human utterances from her world are "Out! Harrow! and Weyle-away!/Ha! Ha! the fox!" (ll. 4570-71),[26] certainly words in direct contrast to the previous rhetorical diction of Chauntecleer's world.

There is an almost allegorical contrast between Pertelote's experience and Chauntecleer's authority,[27] her earthiness and his egomania. They are both extremes, and the contrast brings him down at the same time it ridicules her.[28] Their relationship is a matter of natural versus intellectual, common sense versus rationalization,[29] and both sides are satirized. However, as he so often finds with Chaucer, the reader cannot be sure which side is being attacked. Surely, Chaucer was an advocate of a balance, the Golden Mean. When the epic and mundane are contrasted, the reader must acknowledge the virtue and limits of both.[30]

"The Nun's Priest's Tale" uses the technique of unexpected anticlimax causing surprise more extensively than any of the other "Tales" considered here. The first occurs immediately in the description of the widow, who is characterized as leading a simple life not because she is virtuous but because she is so poor she has no other choice (ll. 4015-18). The second is when the Nun's Priest makes an apostrophe first to Destiny, then to Venus, and finally to the pedantic Geoffrey of Vinsauf (ll. 4528-42).[31] The repetion of Friday as a significant day for important events accompanies this descent down the scale from important to less important ending with Chauntecleer, the least important yet made important by association. This makes both ends appear ludicrous. It is anticlimactic when Pertelote gives her speech on medieval science and ends with "a most unromantic domestic familiarity: 'For Goddes love, as taak som laxatyf.'" (l. 4133).[32] Chauntecleer's subsequent rejoinder that he hates laxatives coming at the end of his soliloquy on dreams is similarly anticlimactic.[33] The reader is further startled by the reference to Pertelote's beautiful red eyes (l. 4351). After all of the rhetoric of the soliloquy, Chauntecleer jumps down and jumps Pertelote (l. 4367), thus deflating the rhetoric.[34] Finally, the Nun's Priest starts with a

list of traitors, moves on to a treatise on destiny and free will, and finally moves down to the anticlimactic statement that "My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere," (ll. 4416-42).[35]

"The Nun's Priest's Tale" also uses an unusually large amount of paradox. It is a paradox that both Pertelote and Chauntecleer are right about the dream; the dream is true, but the knowledge gained through it must be used. The clever, witty mistranslation (ll. 4353-56) involves another supreme paradox because the quote is right and the translation is wrong. The Latin in the translation really means that woman is man's confusion (or downfall). The quote is really right, however, because it says <u>why</u> woman is confusion and downfall--because she is sexually attractive. Paradoxically, again, the reader likes the rhetoric used in the "Tale" while at the same time he finds it ridiculous because it is excessive. Thus, there is "celebration of the very virtuoso rhetoric that is debunked."[36]

The above paradoxes verge on being ironies, but there are plenty of ironies to go around without including them under that technique. There are three types of irony in "The Nun's Priest's Tale": specific irony within the "Tale," general irony within the "Tale," and irony between the pilgrims in the "Tale." Within the "Tale," it is

ironic that Pertelote is wrong about the significance of Chauntecleer's dream even though she is accurate in her scientific and medical knowledge.[37] In fact, "the whole situation of the cock--he believes in dreams, he does not listen to his wife's wisdom on dreams, he is so pleased with his victory over his wife who does not believe in dreams that he ignores his own lesson and falls into the trap--is profoundly ironic."[38] It is ironic that the fox is as much a prey of pride and flattery as the cock.[39] In fact, "the [ironic] reversal of parts of flatterer and dupe is the very core of the story."[40]

More generally, it is ironic that the medium of vanity is language but it is also Chauntecleer's salvation[41] because he talks himself out of his predicament with the fox. The supreme irony is that "the mock magnification of the small is actually not mock at all, but real. These little subrational creataures can win out over fate and are bigger, not smaller than life."[42]

The mock-heroic aspects of "The Nun's Priest's Tale" will be considered under burlesque because that is what they create. Incongruity is attained when the great are compared to the small,[43] and what a felicitous effect is created here as a result. Critics have pondered over the digressions in the "Tale," sometimes feeling that they are

useless,[44] but Lawrence L. Besserman feels that they fulfill three functions: they slow the tempo, increase suspense, and "enhance the mock-heroic tone."[45] Other, specific, details do the same thing. Comparing Chauntecleer to a lion (l. 4369) is a heroic simile.[46] Chauntecleer sings like the Homeric Sirens (l. 4460).[47] The listing of traitors (ll. 4416-19) is a burlesque of apostrophic, exclamatory catalogues. Pertelote is described as courteous, discrete, debonaire, and companionable (ll. 4061-62) and withdraws her love from Chauntecleer because of his cowardice (ll. 4098-4101) in the obviously courtly tradition--but she is a chicken! Most obviously, the hens' lamentation on Chauntecleer's fate is compared to that of the women of Troy, Carthage, and Rome in the epic manner (ll. 4545-63).[48] Finally, the prophetic dreams (ll. 4087-97, 4160-4346), the hunt (ll. 4465-4530), and the pursuit (ll. 4565-91) are all part of the epic tradition.[49] "The whole situation is exaggerated for comic effect."[50]

Chaucer could not leave witty word play out of this "Tale" any more than he could leave it out of any of the others. The word play no critic seems to have mentioned is that on Chauntecleer's name. It must mean <u>sing</u> or <u>chant clearly</u>. This name is certainly appropriate since the merry Chauntecleer does exactly that; it is just as

certainly ironic since his singing is his downfall and since he does not listen clearly to himself (i.e., he pays no attention to the authorities he quotes on the validity of dreams.)

The most obvious word play is in the ambiguity in the word divyne in the phrase "I kan noon harm of no womman divyne." (l. 4456). It can mean (1) that clerical women are harmless, (2) that a man can never know how a woman will sin, (3) that the Nun's Priest knows how the Prioress has sinned but cannot tell because he is her confessor,[51] or (4) that the Nun's Priest cannot harm a clerical woman. The play comes specifically from meanings of kan as be able or know and divyne as guess or clerical in different combinations in conjunction with the word harm. This is probably one of the best lines in the English language for depth of wit.

Chaucer uses his usual puns, though there are certainly fewer in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" than in the other "Tales" considered here. They tend to be just as obscene, however. The first is the play on the word stone with the meaning of testicle applied inappropriately to the chaste priest. This pun appears in the "Epilogue" where the perpetually bawdy Host blesses the Nun's Priest's britches and stones and/or testicles (l. 4638). The characterization of Pertelote as compaignable is part

of the parody of her as the ideal romantic heroine but is also part of a bawdy reference to intercourse (l. 4062). Ride in line 4357 has an obvious sexual connotation, and fethered in line 4367 has meaning as an avian ritual and as intercourse. Serve has the second meaning to copulate (l. 4534), and corage has the second meaning of sexual prowess (l. 4642).[52] In the line referring to the fox lying in wait "As gladly doon thise homycides alle" (l. 4414), gladly means happily and habitually.[53]

Chaucer uses the witty, clever type of humor more in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" than in any of the other "Tales;" he also attacks more subjects (though perhaps not as bitterly). The wit springs from his manipulation of language to serve certain satiric purposes. Surely, his use of humor and satire culminates in "The Nun's Priest's Tale."

Notes--Chapter 5

"The Nun's Priest's Prologue and Tale"

[1] Judson Boyce Allen, "The Ironic Fruyt: Chauntecleer as Figura," Studies in Philology, 66 (1969), 35.

[2] Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1957), p. 242.

[3] Morton W. Bloomfield, "The Wisdom of the Nun's Priest's Tale," in Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives: Essays Presented to Paul E. Beichner, C.S.C., eds. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 76.

[4] Paul A. Shallers, "The 'Nun's Priest's Tale': An Ironic Exemplum," English Literary History, 42 (1975), 322.

[5] Robert B. Burlin, Chaucerian Fiction (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 230.

[6] Peter Dronke and Jill Mann, "Chaucer and the Medieval Latin Poets," in Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Derek S. Brewer (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1974), p. 179.

[7] Shallers, p. 322.

[8] Derek S. Brewer, "Gothic Chaucer," in Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Derek S. Brewer (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1974), p. 3.

[9] Burlin, p. 233.

[10] Alfred David, The Strumpeted Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 279.

[11] Muscatine, p. 241.

[12] Derek S. Brewer, Chaucer in his Time (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1963), p. 50.

[13] S. S. Hussey, Chaucer: An Introduction (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 6.

[14] Derek S. Brewer, "The Relationship of Chaucer to the English and European Traditions," in Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical Studies in Middle English Literature, ed. Derek S. Brewer (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1966), p. 29.

[15] Beryl Rowland, Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World ([Kent, Ohio]: The Kent State University Press, 1971), p. 55.

[16] J. Leslie Hotson, "Colfox vs. Chauntecleer," in Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Edward Wagenknecht ([Boston, Massachusetts]: [Boston University], [1958]), pp. 98-117.

[17] Leonard Feinberg, Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1967), pp. 42-223.

[18] Thomas Wallace Craik, The Comic Tales of Chaucer (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1964), p. 81.

[19] Donald MacDonald, "Proverbs in Chaucer's Comic Tales: The Function of Comic Application," Speculum, 41 (1966), p. 464.

[20] Rama Rani Lall, Satiric Fable in English: A Critical Study of the Animal Tales of Chaucer, Spenser, Dryden, and Orwell (New Delhi: New Statesman Publishing Company, 1979), p. 27.

[21] Rowland, pp. 44, 36-39, 159, 120, 142-43.

[22] R. M. Lumiansky, Of Sondry Folke: The Pragmatic Principle in the Canterbury Tales (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1955), pp. 110.

[23] Thomas J. Garbaty, "Chaucer and Comedy," in Versions of Medieval Comedy, ed. Paul G. Ruggiers (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), p. 182.

[24] Robert Kilburn Root, The Poetry of Chaucer: A Guide to its Study and Appreciation (1906; rpt. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1922), p. 214; Paul G. Ruggiers, The Art of the Canterbury Tales (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 188.

[25] Ellen Douglass Leyburn, Satiric Allegory: Mirror of Man (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 61.

[26] Peter Elbow, Oppositions in Chaucer (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), p. 102.

[27] Burlin, p. 228; Elbow, p. 95.

[28] Ruth R. Wisse, The Schemiel as Modern Hero (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 50.

[29] Donald R. Howard, The Idea of the Canterbury Tales (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1976), p. 284.

[30] John Gardner, The Poetry of Chaucer (London: Feffer & Simons, Inc., 1977), p. 314.

[31] Burlin, p. 231.

[32] Musacatine, p. 240.

[33] Ruggiers, p. 189.

[34] Elbow, pp. 104, 110.

[35] Helen Storm Corsa, Chaucer: Poet of Mirth and Morality (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), p. 217.

[36] Elbow, pp. 105, 107, 110, 113.

[37] Walter Clyde Curry, Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences (New York: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 221.

[38] Bloomfield, p. 76.

[39] Craik, p. 85.

[40] Germaine Dempster, Dramatic Irony in Chaucer (Stanford University, California: Stanford University Press, 1932), p. 68.

[41] Elbow, p. 98.

[42] Bloomfield, p. 89.

[43] John P. McCall, Chaucer Among the Gods: The Poetics of Classical Myth (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979), p. 141.

[44] John M. Fyler, Chaucer and Ovid (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 127.

[45] Lawrence L. Besserman, "Chaucerian Word Play: the Nun's Priest and 'His Woman Divine,'" Chaucer Review, 12 (1977), p. 69.

[46] Craik, p. 71; McCall, p. 141.

[47] Trevor Whittock, A Reading of the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 244.

[48] Craik, p. 81; Gardner, p. 313; Hussey, p. 189; Lall, p. 36; McCall, p. 141; Root, p. 218.

[49] Bloomfield, pp. 76-78.

[50] Gardner, p. 314; Whittock, p. 245.

[51] Besserman, p. 70.

[52] W. Thomas Ross, Chaucer's Bawdy (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1972), pp. 238, 211, 47, 61, 217, 87, 199-200, 64.

[53] Paull F. Baum, "Chaucer's Puns: A Supplementary List," PMLA, 63 (1958), 168.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

In all of The Canterbury Tales considered here Chaucer could very capably take his sources and manipulate them to his own uses to very effectively portray fallible but lovable humanity through humor and satire. The emphasis is different in each of the four "Tales": "The Miller's Tale" emphasizes the bawdy; "The Pardoner's Tale" emphasizes the satire; "Sir Thopas emphasizes the language; and "The Nun's Priest's Tale" emphasizes everything. The final result is the same, however; Chaucer has created one of the few literary masterpieces to have endured from his time to the present.

Chaucer was a master of his art, and The Canterbury Tales is so artistically and technically superb that the reader barely realizes how his many effects are being achieved unless he stops to look at the work in detail. There are many details of each of The Canterbury Tales that could have been explored; critics have analyzed and argued extensively over the Tales and probably still have only begun to understand a part of their meaning completely. This analysis of the humor and satire in four of The Canterbury Tales is incomplete also, but it is a

step in a direction which few critics have taken in their journey to understand The Canterbury Tales.

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