

Authority, rebellion and subordination in Chaucer's the nun's priest's tale and t...



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The plight of the oppressed in medieval England was paramount to the emergence of iconic works of fiction. In turn, the future comprehension of feudal society is dependent upon these works. To rely on monastic chroniclers alone, in understanding the state of their world, would be to absorb works that were largely created under the authority of the magistrate (Prescott, 1998). The multidimensional nature of works by artists such as Geoffrey Chaucer and the Wakefield Master, precede the mechanical consensus of courtly writings. Chaucer lived between two systems, of aristocracy and urban life. It would be an understatement to say that he was culturally aware of both his position within society and that of those whose social rankings were above and below him (Strohm, 1994). The Canterbury Tale's, printed in 1483, was written at a time of economic and political adversity in England's history. The Nun's Priest's Tale, fragment VII of the Tale's, follows the familiar outplay of the vain cock and cunning fox and fragments of reality etch their way through its theatrical compounds; such as the Peasant's Revolt of 1381. Although the Second Shepherd's Play was written almost a century after The Canterbury Tale's, in the late 1400s, it casts a familiar reflection on the misfortunes of peasant life. The play was written by a man known merely as the Wakefield Master who, like Chaucer, had a tendency to acknowledge the forgotten and downtrodden man. The play surveys the financial shortcomings of three shepherds as they face the theft of their sheep, against a climatic backdrop of the Nativity. The play touches on the issue of enclosure; which was the transformation of a grain based to sheep based economy in the late 15th century that sparked social and financial uncertainties (Kiser, 2009). The two tale's exhibit the social constraints and economic conflicts of their time through an array of

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dramatic illusions. Chaucer and the Wakefield Master patrol the boundaries of reality and fantasy using vernacular speech and humour that is both uncouth and energetic to portray social order and revolution.

The ideal of social order, and how to control it, was a continuous concern for medieval England. The Wakefield Master's Second Shepherd's Play acts as a remark on social conventionality. However, the standards of the play cycle of which it was contained, traditionally upheld a crushing sense of conformity (James, 1983). The Wakefield cycle consisted of thirty-two plays carefully ordered from the world's creation to judgement day; abiding by the chronological order of the bible. This necessity of literary structure was typical of the societal hierarchy of the middle ages. The play worked to inhibit social pressures through religious indoctrination, by upholding the common ideal of the social body. The social body symbolized structured society under the figurative head of the magistracy; and often it was combined with religion to complement the body of Christ (James, 1983). It worked under the presumption that communal subordination meant physical survival, and the structure needed constant reaffirmation; like the transubstantiation of Christ in the Eucharist (Sinanoglou, 1973). The actual progression of the plays can be mirrored in its content, people are ordered from angels, men, then women, then animals. The structure of Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales also displays a predictable medieval chain of command; naturally, The Knights Tale is the first to be told in the sequence. Furthermore, The Nun's Priest's Tale allocates little of its content to the life of the impoverished widow before the story is directed towards the luxurious life of Chanticleer, the cock. Chanticleer is elaborately described; " Lyk asure

were his legges and his toon/...And lyk the burned gold was his colour” (1863-2864) (Chaucer, 1915). The Blasphemous virgin birth’s and vulgar comedy of The Second Shepherd’s Play marked a turn of the cycles towards popular culture in the early 16th century. The plays became satirical outlets for political and social observation, veiled in an orthodox tone. The traditional reaffirmation of the social body became a threat to authority, and Chaucer and the Wakefield master parody this through the reconstruction of social order.

Both The Nun’s Priests Tale and The Second Shepherd’s Play, although printed at different points in England’s history, produce an unbounded awareness of social revolution. The farcical element of The Second Shepherd’s Play asserts ideas of Utopian change. The physical progression of the play cycle is mirrored in its hierarchical content and it serves as a reflection of oppressive class structure. The three Shepherd’s always speak in chronological sequence, first second and third, distorting ideas of three estates model of the clergy, nobility and commoners of the 14th century (Strohm, 1994). Like the social body, revolution is in need of constant renewal and quasi-religious reincarnation. Mak is representational of misplaced rebellion; he steals the sheep of his fellow sufferers. He does this instead of directing his anger towards the true causes of his unhappiness; pastoral enclosure and his social superiors. His theft is presented as basic human nature and acts as a longing for Utopian change in a nonsensical world; in which manorial lords have taken small peasant property and turned it into larger units for pasture. Chanticleer in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, a counter-revolutionary member of the aristocracy, also misplaces his blame,

directing focus towards himself rather than the rebel; Daun Russell the fox. In the Wakefield Play, the Shepherd's speak tireless laments on the economic and domestic oppression of their lives, but Mak has done what they have not; he has acted out while they have remained docile like the flocks of sheep they govern.

The Peasant's Revolt of 1381 played a huge part in the political and financial tribulations of Chaucer's England. In 1381 Kentish rebels lead by Wat Tyler, often described in literary accounts under the pseudonym Jack Straw, advanced on London, rioting and murdering upholders of economic and judicial power (Prescott, 1998). This was caused in part by the collecting of obscene taxes and uneasy labour. Although its reference in The Nun's Priest's Tale is fleeting, its resonance overpowers the social reception of the entire tale. Textual accounts of the revolt were plagued with dissonance and complexity, chroniclers twisting reports for social gain. Many texts describe the rebels in Latin, a criticism of their unworthiness, but Chaucer uses vernacular language of the peasants, lessening social distance. A notable writer on the revolt was John Gower, and critiques have noted that Chaucer parodies his accounts of the rebellion in The Nun's Priest's Tale (Justice, 1994). Gower's work on the revolt represents its typical fictitious description and this may have prompted Chaucer's use of him as an easily parodied example. Like many accounts of the revolt, Gower describes the rebels as 'wild' and 'inaudible' and that " Their throats were filled with all sorts of bovine bellows..... with the devilish voice of peacocks" (Gower, 1992). The rebels could only 'bellow' with the 'devilish voice' of birds, like the self-important animals on Chaucer's widow's farm. Justice (1994) describes this

technique as rendering inaudible anything the rebels might have said. The Second Shepherd's Play, set in a progressively advanced England, also presents similar accounts of the over-taxing of the peasantry; "we are so haymd,/ffor-taxed and ramyd" (Hopper 1962, 15-16). The two plays together highlight the inevitable repetition of class struggle in a feudal society.

The idea of the "crowd" as a socio-political construct is abundant in writings on revolution (Prescott, 1998). The crowd represents the inevitable catastrophe of human nature; something that was avoided in medieval England. Gower (1899) quantified that "There are three things of such a sort that they produce merciless destruction when they get the upper hand... the third is the lesser people, the common multitude for they will not be stopped by either reason or discipline". It wasn't only peasants who made up the crowd of the revolt of 1381; however it was less controversial for writers to describe them that way, to place as many possible social rankings between themselves and the insurgents. This insists rioters are not capable of independent action, instead controlled by individual extremists (Prescott, 1998). They are a shepherd's flock that has drifted away from their masters into the hands of a false prophet; like Mak in the Second Shepherd's Play. The concept of the crowd assumes the idea that high society is made up of educated individuals, versus the barbarianism of the impoverished masses. Medieval England was a time of understanding human nature, rather than "the cult of the individual" seen in the renaissance (Roney, 1983).

Ferenbacher (1994) describes Chaucer's Chanticleer as a "western man trying to maintain his dignity in the face of basic human nature". These tales parody their era's construction of peasants as tragically human, and rebels

as exclusively lower class, which serves as humorous when one considers the authorities that have arisen from successful historic rebellions.

The medieval concept of the evil of man is displayed as tragically human and is manipulated through moralistic illusions. The Second Shepherd's Play uses evil as a binary from which good is derived. Since Augustine, a western concept of evil was the "absence or distortion of good" (Evans, 1990).

Augustine's own account of stealing a pear from a neighbor's Orchard can be likened to Mak's theft. Augustine's vision was that "Everyone knows, that stealing is wrong; even a thief will not let others steal from him without protest" (Evans, 1990). It is insinuated that pleasure comes from theft in itself; the social construct of the 'evil in all' is embodied in Mak's conscious choice. Mak's malevolence is heard in the harshness of the shepherd's proverb upon discovering the stolen sheep-baby; "Ill spon weft, lwys / ay commys foull owte" (587). Chaucer's pleasant barnyard, "But such a joy it was to hear them sing, /When the bright sun began to spring," (2878-2879), is very different from the apocalyptic weather of the Wakefield play; "the weders full kene./And the frostys so hydus / thay water myn eeyne". The shepherd's world is aged and cruel. However, the interjection of the revolt in The Nun's Priest's Tale suggests the peacefulness of the barnyard isn't all that it seems. The peasants were often described as "inhabitants of hell" or "instruments of the devil" (Prescott, 1998), and the Nun's Priest's states they "yolleden as feendes doon in helle;" (3389). The angel in the Second Shepherd's Play also announces "That shall take fro the feyd/that adam had lorne:" (638). Chaucer's 'feendes' and the Wakefield's 'feyd' uses devilish imagery to construct a mock polar of morality. Both tales indicate Adam and

Eve's, or humanities, fall from grace. Similarly, Daun Russel in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* may be representational of the flattering tongue of the devil. *The Wakefield play* mirrors the Corinthians "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light" (Cor, 2: 13-14, KJV). The sheep represents the birth of the devil, a false prophet. It is the 'enclosure' of the pastoral economy that proved prosperous for some and devastating for others, masquerading "as an angel of light". Mak, however, is something worse than a false representative of Christ; he is truly satanic as a false representative of the king, "what! ich be a yoman / I tell you, of the king;"(201). These religious overtones are not only culturally necessary, but a comment on the 'evil' of those who defy the will of god and the will of the king.

The literary parody of religious indoctrination suggests medieval subjects weren't as easily swayed by the guilt of moral teachings as the church might have believed. The nun's priest hides behind theology rather than glorifying it, the mechanical prayer ending of the tale seeming strained and unnecessary; "And brynge us to his heighe blisse! Amen." (3446). The *Night's Tale* of the *Canterbury Tale's* condemns the elaborate morality of the aristocracy, and *The Miller's Tale* comments of the absurdity of the poor rabbles. The nun's priest however, offers a solution to where to place one's self within medieval society. The widow's life is humble, quiet and upholds a kind of rustic simplicity; far away from the strife of the gentry and wicked of the barnyard. In the original source of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, the *Roman de Renard*, *Chanticleers* owners were wealthy. This intentional change made by

Chaucer could be an attempt to highlight the plight of living a normal, simple, Christian life, amid the mayhem of medieval realities. Contrarily, in the Second Shepherd's Play the years have proved unprofitable for the modest rural man and religion is used to echo their poverties. Mak's language is blasphemous, " God looke you all thre!", and unlike cycles of the time, the Nativity is not at the linear centre. The displacement of Christ in medieval England is personified and the Wakefield master hints at faiths powerlessness in the face of economic devastation. Nevertheless, the conclusive birth of Christ could also mark a return to the fruitfulness of the spiritual minimalism. Post-enclosure turned out to be quite effective in the long term of pastoral enterprise and the birth foreshadows this (Allen, 2000). Both Chaucer and the Wakefield master poke fun at the necessity of morals in literary expression.

Class struggles and periodical horrors are often safely conveyed through the medium of animal fables. The fables of Aesop served as quick moral teachings, often told by Greco-Roman peasants to convey an imbalanced distribution of power (Rothwell Jr, 1995). Aesop tells a similar tale to the nun's priest; that of the Eagle and the Fox. The eagle eats the foxes cubs, before accidentally setting its own nest alight; the fox then eating it's nestlings as they fall to the ground. Aesop's eagle, like Chanticleer, is a symbol of status and authority and is equally self-destructive; both birds burn down their kingdoms and allow those beneath them to obtain power through the self-immolation of the aristocracy. Fable has no meaning alone but is understood via a return to reality. Animal imagery was also used abundantly in accounts of the Peasant's revolt; peasants often being

compared to wild beasts. Chaucer parodies this common misconception; “Ran cow and calf, and eek the verray hogged” (3385), this being almost identical to Gower’s line; “some sound the bellows of cattle, some let out the horrid grunt of pigs”(Gower, 1899). Chaucer’s animals live a lavish lifestyle, contrary to the widow’s “ful symple lyf” and the structure of these two pastoral tales is allocated via separation. The worlds of the Wakefield shepherd’s and Chaucer’s farm animals are cut off from the rest of medieval society. Chanticleer’s kingdom is in a “Yeedr.... enclosed al aboute” (2847) and although their fields were physically large, the concept of ‘enclosure’ in the Second Shepherd’s Play is similarly confining. The shepherd’s use lonely laments displaying their isolation, directly addressing the root causes of their economic uncertainties; “ffor the tylthe of oure landys/lyys follow as the floore”. Harsh local language displays the discomfort of enclosure, using words like “land-lepars” (Happé, 2007). Mak is repressed, longing for his absent flock, and this can be seen in his fathering of many children as an insufficient replacement. The shepherds of The Second Shepherd’s Play have been domesticated, like Chaucer’s peasants, before their transformation into animals. Like in The Nun’s Priest’s Tale humans become animals, Mak referring to the sheep-baby as his ‘heir’. The two tales work under the assumption that if animals can act like humans, then humans can act like animals (Knight, 1986). The animal fable not only reiterates the social prejudices of the medieval upper class, but the animalistic nature of the typical medieval man.

The solipsism of medieval life, specifically in the rural economy, is incarnated in dream-vision. A medieval account of solitude, being alone in one’s mind, is

seen in the isolated soliloquies in the Second Shepherd's Play ' as the shepherd's " walk/thus by myn oone" (41) personifying the loneliness of enclosure. The first account of dream-vision was Cicero's Somnium Scipionic, around the 4th century. Cicero's dream experience focused on the individuals psyche as being in turmoil and distress. This has been viewed as representing the rational nature of authority against the realistic psychological needs of the people (Russell, 1988). Pertelote in the Nun's Priest's Tale uses Cicero's account to foster a clinical diagnosis of Chanticleers distress. Chaucer's characters are always present within their own dreams; the fact that he uses this technique in his time foreshadows future develops in human psychology, of dream interpretation as ' clinical'. Biblical dreams were simply the word of god. In the middle ages, the issue was whether or not God was actually speaking. Chanticleer's dream is a polar of free will, god has mapped out his path but like humans he must determine how he gets there. Medieval England was a time of archetypal determinism and Chanticleer's vanity determines largely what he does. Both tale's Mock mediums in which " man uses to dignify his existence in the world" (Finlayson, 2005). It suggests a lack of control over anything substantial in medieval life. A medieval account of character differs from modern literature and could involve astrology and theory of the humors such as melancholy, phlegm etc; and these things were all pre-determined focusing on the modern idea that temperament stems from biological makeup. Dream imagery is used to communicate ultimate realities of medieval life that couldn't be comprehended by the simple human mind.

The tragedy of human nature was harnessed by medieval society to maintain essential subordination. Chaucer and the Wakefield Master employ the conventional genres of their era in order to parody the necessity of their existence. The causes and repercussions of the revolt of 1381 and pastoral enclosure of the 15th century are exemplified through satire and imagery and the result is an avant-garde social commentary. Social and economic uncertainties in the two tales are dramatized to ensure absurdity and realities are hauntingly intertwined. The Wakefield Master and Chaucer act as literary Robin Hood's; pioneers in giving the deprived multitudes what they lacked; a voice.

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