**Chaucer – genre critic**

**Reading Chaucer’s Tales as realistic depictions of medieval life misses a vital point – that Chaucer is using and parodying a rich mix of literary genres. So argues Kathleen McPhilemy.**

The Canterbury Tales has been described as an anthology of medieval genres. Nowhere is this more evident than in ‘The Miller’s Tale’. As well as courtly romance and the fabliau, there are references to the biographies of saints, secular and sacred songs, the mystery plays, scriptural texts and goliardic satire. Far from being a realistic tale of everyday life among the churlish and emerging petty bourgeois classes, ‘The Miller’s Tale’ is a highly intertextual and self-aware mix of literary genres. As much as any postmodernist, Chaucer foregrounds form and genre, revealing not only their hidden assumptions but also the flaws and inconsistencies in the society from which they spring.

**Whose tale is it?**

In the Miller’s ‘Prologue’, Chaucer draws our attention to the Miller as a fictive narrative voice, who ‘tolde his cherles tale in his manere’. By pretending to disown the tale, he encourages the reader to accept a narrator who is both the Miller and Chaucer. As the Miller, he gives us hackneyed proverbs, the drooling description of Alison and the dismissive comment on Absolon: ’somdeel squaymous/Of fartyng and of speche daungerous’. However, the tale far exceeds the capacity of someone who habitually opens doors by ‘rennyng’ at them ‘with his heed’. It is Chaucer, subtle and ironic, who parodies courtly love, satirises religious attitudes and develops characters beyond stereotype to consistent psychological realism.

**Goliardery in the tale**

In addition to being a head-banger, the Miller was, according to ‘The General Prologue’, a ‘janglere and a goliardeys’. Both terms describe people who tell tales of ‘synne and harlotries’, but the term ‘goliard’ referred to clerics or clerical students, who composed comic tales in Latin which were often blasphemous parodies of scripture. Much more appropriate as a description of Nicholas than the Miller, this is another example of how Chaucer uproots genres from their normal context and forces us to consider their characteristics. Traces of goliardery in the ‘Tale’ include blasphemous allusions to the Bible. Alison’s threat to Absolon, ‘Go forth thy wey, or I wol caste a ston’, echoes the story of the woman taken in adultery, threatened with death by stoning. Jesus says, ’Let him who is without sin cast the first stone’ (John, Chapter 8). Here it is the adulterous woman who threatens to throw a stone. Although typical of the carnivalesque world of the poem, this is a reminder of the attitude to sexual misconduct which prevailed in the real world.

**Sacred texts misused**

Another goliardic moment evokes yet another genre. The Miller promises to tell the ‘legende and a lyf/Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf’. The most famous carpenter and wife were Mary and Joseph; moreover, ‘a legend and a lyf’ was the way to describe the biography of a saint. The misuse of genre terminology is ironic because biographies of saints and suchlike were exactly what the pilgrims should have been listening to. Even the songs Nicholas sings are loaded with significance. ‘The Kinges Noote’ brings in the secular lyric, while ‘Angelus ad virginem’, a song about the Annunciation, represents the sacred. Again, the reference is ironic and blasphemous in the context of a tale about a man who is no angel visiting a woman who is very far from a virgin.

**The mystery play**

A relatively new genre – the mystery play – also appears in this tale, with references to Pilate, Herod and the story of Noah and his wife. These dramas, performed by different guilds, were one way illiterate people could gain knowledge of the gospels. However, they were not always an accurate reflection of the Bible, as is suggested by John’s hazy understanding of the story of the Second Flood. Nicholas exploits this ignorance with frequent references to Noah and his suggestion that it would be better if Alison, like Noah’s wife, ‘hadde a ship hirself alone.’ There is an implicit criticism of the inadequacy of the mystery plays as a way of teaching Christianity and of John’s declaration, ‘blessed be alwey a lewed man/ That noght but oonly his bileve can’. Some scholars believe that Chaucer was secretly a Lollard sympathiser and thus in favour of Wyclif’s translation of the Bible into English, which brought the gospels directly to the individual without the mediation of the Church.

**Courtly romance parodied**

Courtly romance, played straight in ‘The Knight’s Tale’ and parodied here, is the most closely scrutinised genre. It generally features knights in impossible quests to win the love of ladies who are frequently married to someone else. One explanation of this tradition is that because marriage – at least in the moneyed or landed classes – was based on wealth and property, courtly love offered a way of including romance in people’s lives. However, courtly romance in real life would have been regarded as the pursuit of an adulterous and sinful relationship. If, as in ‘The Knight’s Tale’, the courtship is honourable and the goal marriage, the lady is likely to be remote, unattainable and increasingly idealised, to the point where many courtly love lyrics are almost indistinguishable from poems written about the Virgin Mary. It is unlikely that courtly romance ever had much to do with real life; consequently, those who tried to lead their lives according to its rules were likely to get themselves into a considerable muddle.

Absolon is a classic example of the danger of taking literature too seriously. Courtly language and the courtly love game have disguised from him the true nature of his enterprise and the murky ambiguity of his desire. With his ’smal rubible’ and his ‘lyght waget’, he is a ‘myrie child’, ‘jolif’ but never ‘hende’. Presented in terms which reduce and diminish him, he is a provincial fop not a knight, a narcissistic boy rather than a lover. His conduct is equally laughable. He casts longing glances at the women in the church, refusing to take their offering out of a misplaced sense of ‘curteisie’. ‘Curteisie’, linked to the idea of the ‘courtly’, is exactly what Absolon cannot understand, because he is, despite his skills as a legal clerk and a barber-surgeon, a churl. ‘Curteisie’, the prologue reminds us, is for gentils, ‘harlotrie’ for churls. Absolon tries to follow the courtly love code: he sends Alison gifts and uses intermediaries ‘meenes and brocage’. However, the gifts are unglamorous, ‘wafres, piping hoot out of the gleede’ and the intermediaries unsuccessful. His heroic deeds amount to taking the highly inappropriate role of Herod in the mystery play; his serenade annoys John rather than delights Alison and, since he sings it outside the ground floor window of John’s house in the middle of town, completely contradicts the requirement for secrecy. (The noble medieval audience may have reflected that the possibility of keeping secrets in a crowded medieval castle was equally unrealistic.) Eventually, Absolon reaches his final battle; however, instead of a fight to the death with lance and sword, this is an unpleasant encounter between a hot plough coulter and a bottom which occurs not before the fair lady is won but after she is renounced in disgust.

Absolon retreats from the physical and carnal realities of love with his illusions shattered, ‘His hoote love was coold and al yqueynt’. Chaucer has demonstrated the distance between the ideal of courtly love and reality. This gap is shown equally sharply in Nicholas’s first encounter with Alison. Nicholas, a potential cleric, is no more suited to the role of courtly lover than Absolon. He uses the language of courtly romance, ’For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille’ as an instrument of seduction, but his actions as he ‘heeld hire harde by the haunchebones’ reveal the real, if unstated, goal of all courtly love quests.

**Fabliau features**

If fantasies of courtly love were one way of escaping the strict rules and harsh realities of everyday life, fabliau was another. Though they may have gleaned their plots from folk sources, fabliaux were a literary form. Featuring common people, they revolved round fraud, trickery and sexual misdeeds. Stock characters included the stupid peasant, the adulterous wife, the rascally student and the venal priest. Many fabliaux were written for nobles to mock the churls or those with aspirations to the bourgeoisie and, superficially, this is true of ‘The Miller’s Tale’. On the other hand, those who mocked Absolon would, on reflection, realise they too are being mocked. Furthermore, Nicholas, the only character with any pretensions to gentility, also gets his comeuppance.

The subversive nature of the fabliau upsets the hierarchies and expectations of reality. Although set amidst the detailed trivia of ordinary life, (the ‘shot-wyndowe’ and the hole ‘Ther as the cat was wont in for to crepe’) it is not ordinary life. Alison gets away with adultery in a sequence of extraordinary events. In the free space of fiction, Chaucer can explore sexuality, love, marriage and power relationships between men and women, themes which recur in many of the Tales.

Some argue that Chaucer is adapting an already outdated French genre; others regard Chaucer himself as the master of the fabliau. In my view, Chaucer goes beyond our expectations of the genre by developing stereotypes into individuals. In a typical fabliau, John, for example, would be perceived as simply comic, appropriately rewarded for his arrogant stupidity. Many critics think this is what Chaucer intended and that modern readers are mistakenly sentimental if they feel sorry for him. On the other hand, John transcends his stereotype at the moment when he believes everyone is going to drown. His first thought is not for himself, but Alison: ’Allas, my wyf!/And shal she drench? Allas, myn Alisoun’. However superstitious, gullible and besotted he may be, here his love for his wife is touching.

**An early novelist?**

In his use of psychological realism and descriptive detail, Chaucer is often said to have anticipated a much later genre, the novel. Nevertheless, it is not by holding a mirror up to life, but through the kaleidoscopic juxtaposition of literary forms that he forces the reader beyond a naïve enjoyment of storytelling to engage in his ironic critique of medieval society.

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