

Chaucer

The Canterbury Tales, "The Miller's Tale"

The Fall and Rise of the English Language

- 1066: NORMAN INVASION: LINGUISTIC "APARTHEID"
 - English: a SPOKEN language only
 - French: language of business and the state
 - Latin: language of the Church and international communication
- 1154: Anglo Saxon Chronicle abandoned
- 1204: KING JOHN breaks with France
- 1337-1453: Hundred Years War between England and France
- 1356: RICHARD II addresses the peasants in English
- c. 1400: Ellesmere Manuscript, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*
- 1415: Battle of Agincourt: Large parts of France ruled by English-speaking king
- 1422: HENRY V writes his will in English
- c. 1477: Caxton's Imprint, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*

TRANSITION: MS to PRINTED TEXT



Ellesmere Manuscript c. 1400



William Caxton's Imprint, 1477

Chaucerian Contexts

SOCIAL: The rise of the "middling" class:

- Shifting concepts of value;
- Increasing secular power;
- English Nationalism.

INTELLECTUAL: early Renaissance (Italian):

- Emphasis on human potential;
- Early Empiricism;
- "Rediscovery" of Classical literary & philosophical heritage;
- Revival of Classical sources, genres, and forms.

Chaucerian Contexts: Literary

▪ Estates Satire

- The ridicule of vices for the general benefit of society (satirist as surgeon);
- 3 Estates: Church, Nobility, the rest of us
- Lampooning of each group on the grounds of stereotypes or generally-accepted characterizations, especially HYPOCRISY
 - Church: dissipated, lecherous, falsely pious
 - State/Nobility: dishonourable, foppish
 - Layfolk: brutish, stupid, grasping

Chaucerian Contexts: Literary

▪ (French) Romance:

- Adventure, trials
- Courtly Love
- Chivalric Values: courage, grace, loyalty, honour
- Classical and historical sources: Greeks, Romans, Charlemagne, Crusades

▪ "The Miller's Tale" is a response to "The Knight's Tale" of chivalric honour of men in competition for the love of a lady.

Courtly Love: Masculine Identity

- "Winning" the favour of a Lady
 - Deeds
 - Quests
 - Martial prowess
- Women as "trophies" that demonstrate masculine power

Social MOBILITY

- "MIDDLING CLASSES"
 - Secularization of **education**: Growing class of clerks, scholars, administrators who do not easily fit into the established social hierarchies;
 - Equipped with talents and knowledge that allows them to circumvent the standard means of defining
 - Masculinity;
 - Social value and rank.
 - The Scholar and the clerk both transgress numerous social boundaries in their pursuit of Alisoun
 - Chivalric competition for a lady transferred to the Common estate

REGULATION OF SEXUALITY

- A woman's sexuality is **REGULATED** as an asset belonging to her father or husband;
- Safeguarding **LINEAGE** in a system based on **INHERITANCE** of property
- Alisoun, the young, clever and rebellious wife of an older, well-off but unlearned man, is a "weak link" in the chain of inherited wealth

The Fair and the Foul: A Husband's Conundrum

But what is the good of even a careful guardian, when an unchaste wife cannot be watched, and a chaste wife ought not to be? For necessity is a faithless keeper of chastity, and **she alone really deserves to be called pure, who is free to sin if she chooses.**

If a woman be fair, she soon finds lovers; if she be ugly, it is easy to be wonton. It is difficult to guard what many long for. It is annoying to have what no one thinks worth possessing"

(Theophrastus, *The Golden Book on Marriage*).

WORLD-TURNED-UPSIDE-DOWN

- Social breakdown;
- Collapse of systems of value and meaning and fall into absurdity;
- REVOLUTION?



Questions for Next Day: 3 Middling Gentlemen

- WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE of the 3 men who compete for Alisoun's affection? What does each represent and why do we see them all together?
 - Consider:
 - The scolar, hende (handsome) Nicholas who is well-versed in secret pleasures, is "sly and ful privee" (93);
 - The lovesick clerk, Absolon, who would pounce on Alisoun like a cat (238-39) and whose obsession with clothing is described at length (211-230);
 - The carpenter, Alisoun's old, "sely jalous" (296) husband.
- SO WHAT: What is the RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN the depiction of these men and our assessment of Alisoun, the unfaithful wife?

Questions for Next Day: "Low" Comedy

- WHAT: What is the role of "low" humour in the story?
- Consider:
 - The Miller's claim that he's too drunk to be responsible for his tale (Prologue, 30-32) and the Narrator's assertion that it's the reader's fault for reading on if we find the tale offensive: "Blameth nought me if that ye chese omis" (Prologue, 73)
 - The Miller's drunkenness and churlishness in his Prologue (12-19);
 - The complicated con in which the carpenter is convinced that there will be a flood that will kill his wife (409-17);
 - The humiliation of Absalon when he kisses Alisoun's behind (619-633) and Nicholas's fart joke and his punishment when he puts his own behind out the window for a kiss (695-705).
- SO WHAT: What is the RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN this farly, bowdy humour and the ideals of chivalry and gentlemanly honour as espoused in the Romances and the Knight's Tale? What is the "butt" [target] of the joke: the "low" classes, the ideal of chivalry, the reader who laughs, something else?

Questions for Next Day: Violence

- What is the role of violence in the tale?
- Consider:
 - Nicholas's assault on Alisoun in which he catches her by the "quainte" (168) and his response to her subsequent protests (175-82);
 - The description of Alisoun as elegantly soft and sexual (126-36) and simultaneously girded for battle (157-59);
 - The fact that both the carpenter and Nicholas himself are injured in the course of Nicholas's "clever" ruses.
- SO WHAT: What is the RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN violence and the moral or social standing of the characters? Does violence play a didactic (teaching) role?

Questions for Next Day: Knowledge

- What is the significance of KNOWLEDGE and LANGUAGE or TALENT in the tale?
- Consider:
 - Nicholas's ability to bend both Alisoun and the carpenter to his will by using words—"spak so faire" (181)—and his authority as a scholar (405-13);
 - The carpenter's belief that schooling makes a person mad (345-44);
 - Absalon's status as the parish clerk, barber-surgeon and excellent musician (218-230);
 - Alisoun, who is not educated at all, but who takes part in Nicholas's ruses.
- SO WHAT: What is the RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN knowledge or education and morality?
