Title

Towards a Native Medieval: Shared Themes of Visionaries, Tricksters, Resisters and Contact Between the Literature of the Middle Ages and the Indigenous Traditions of North America

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6gr3m9zr

Author

Cleaves, Wallace Thomas

Publication Date

2017

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Towards a Native Medieval: Shared Themes of Visionaries, Tricksters, Resisters and
Contact Between the Literature of the Middle Ages and the Indigenous Traditions of
North America

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Wallace Thomas Cleaves II

June 2017

Dissertation Committee:
      Dr. John Ganim, Chairperson
      Dr. Deborah Willis
      Dr. Michelle Raheja

The Dissertation of Wallace Thomas Cleaves II is approved:

_____

_____

_____
Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the members of my dissertation committee at the University of

California, Riverside: John Ganim for his infinite patience and his kindness in taking over

as chair of my committee, Deborah Willis for her support and encouragement throughout

this whole process, and Michell Raheja for being willing to step in when the focus of this

project shifted significantly. I should also thank Ralph Hanna for bringing me to UCR in

the first place and note my gratidude for the continued support of my colleagues, Paul

Beehler and Lash Keith Vance, which helped sustain me.

To my daughter, Moira

My wife, Melanie

And my mother, Nickie

You three are my foundation and my strength

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Towards a Native Medieval: Shared Themes of Visionaries, Tricksters, Resisters and Contact Between the Literature of the Middle Ages and the Indigenous Traditions of North America

by

Wallace Thomas Cleaves II

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, June 2017
Dr. John Ganim, Chairperson

This dissertation explores how an examination of medieval literature in comparison with Native American literature and the critical and anthropological techniques developed to access it can help to facilitate more balanced and innovative readings of those texts. To that end, this project addresses four different topics. It begins with an exploration of the mystical and visionary literature, specifically in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and compares the way her text has been received and perceived in contrast with the reception of the recorded mystical experiences of Black Elk and Handsome Lake, two well-known Native American visionaries. This is followed by an examination of the role of the trickster figure in the works of Chaucer, particularly in *The Canterbury Tales*, with attention to how the archetypal characteristics of this

anthropologically determined construct can help shed light on some of Chaucer's most

complex works and themes. This argument is further divided into three sections. The

first portion deals with the introduction and descriptions of the final group of Pilgrims in

the *General Prologue* who most closely conform to the archetype. This is followed by a

consideration of how their individual tales and the frame narratives surrounding them

invoke the qualities of trickster discourse. Chapter four explores Chaucer's deployment

of birds in his works, specifically as they embody qualities of the trickster and complicate

and even undermine the transmission of language and meaning. The fifth chapter

compares the Arthurian matter of Britain, particularly the texts of Geoffrey of

Monmouth, Wace and Layamon to the resistance narratives contained in *Black Elk*

Speaks and other accounts of the Battle of Little Big Horn to establish how such works

can be appropriated by the very colonizers they depict resistance to. The sixth and last

chapter explores the essential term of savagery and the relationship between the Icelandic

sagas and their depiction of the inherent violence and otherness of both the Skrælings and

the Vikings who encounter them.

Table of Contents

Introduction

> From the start then, I ask the historian to look upon Indian America as a kind of
> Middle Ages which lacked a Rome: a confused mass that emerged from a long-
> established, doubtless very loosely textured syncretism, which for many centuries had
> contained at one and the same time centers of advanced civilization and savage
> peoples, centralizing tendencies and disruptive forces.

> - Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Overture" *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques. (8)*

The medieval and the Native American have long been imaginatively linked in

popular and academic culture. Both the period of the middle ages in Europe and the pre-

contact era of indigenous culture in north America share an associational quality that sets

them apart from the modern era and makes them both symbolically rife as alternatives to

the contemporary world. Indeed, one of the most often cited events marking the close of

the medieval period is the voyage of Columbus, making that moment of contact a critical

dividing line for both cultures.[1] The medieval and the pre-contact period of indigenous

habitation of the Americans, itself often and problematically termed pre-Columbian, thus

form a syncretic fusion in their association with an era prior to their initial interaction.

Yet while these two cultures and periods share an at least partial chronological

association and an identification with the wider associative field of being pre-modern,

---

[1] Of course, other events are also often associated with the end of the period, most
particularly the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517. However, the
imaginative power of the date of 1492 is critical in that it links the emergence of the
modern period with the advent of the discovery of the New World, simultaneously
casting the pre-contact indigenous period of the Americas as symbolically connected to
the medieval. For a discussion of the frequent use of the voyage of Columbus and other
specific historical events as markers for the transition between the medieval and modern
period and the problems with identifying such events as representative historical
watersheds, see Merry Wiesner's *Early Modern Europe, 1450-1789 (2).*

they are deployed and understood in sometimes startlingly different manners. The middle ages are temporally distant, in both the dimensions of time and space, from a receptive American audience. Conversely, Native American literature and culture are both more geographically present and – in some cases at least, chronologically – near. Yet, we seem to perceive an innate distance between the works by and representing Native American culture that is not always present in our approach to works from the middle ages. We observe a more direct associative link between our own dominant culture and that embodied in texts produced half a millennium and a continent away than we do in the works that represent the indigenous culture of our own region and only a century or two removed. Critically, the medieval period in Europe, particularly the high and late middle ages in England where much of the literary tradition we still consume was originally produced, suffer from an inverse association to that we find with Native American literature and recorded culture. This may seem to be a particularly American conceit, but in fact the problem may be even more acute in Europe and England in particular where the reverse is true and the medieval becomes geographically local. The presence of the medieval, inscribed upon the landscape itself, makes a potentially inaccurate conflation of the medieval and the modern even more possible.

That critical distance, or the perceived lack of it, can lead us to interpret the texts of fourteenth century England as though the world they depict and were generated from is more familiar to us than that of the still present and local indigenous traditions that we often perceive as unfamiliar. To be sure, there is a logic to this in that those same medieval texts are often foundational works of the literary and cultural canon upon which

so much of our learned convention is based. We perceive them as present because they are foundational. Particularly the literature of the late fourteenth century in England in general and of Chaucer in particular is inherently familiar as it represents the moment when vernacular English came into its own. [2]

The perceived closeness of the medieval and the acknowledged distance from the Native American literary tradition are both a blessing and a curse. We tend to recognize how inappropriate it would be to impose our own values upon an authentic indigenous text that is the product of a radically different culture, but we may also be blind to the ways in which such texts are themselves mediated and influenced by the same sorts of concerns that we might more readily recognize in a text produced by the direct antecedent of the contemporary culture, no matter how distant that relationship is in actuality. On the other side, a familiarity with many of the underlying cultural traits of the medieval period, and particularly the shared linguistic conventions, can make the literature of late medieval England seem more familiar and immediate than is warranted.

This dissertation explores how an examination of medieval literature – primarily but not exclusively that in English and from the fourteenth century – in comparison with Native American literature and the critical and anthropological techniques developed to

---

[2]For a profound discussion of both the influence of Chaucer on the vernacular and a reexamination of his central role in its establishment see the collection of essays edited by Ursula Schaefer, *The Beginnings of Standardization: Language and Culture in Fourteenth-Century England.* For an even more radical reading, see Lynn Arner's *Chaucer, Gower and the Vernacular Rising: Poetry and the Problem of Populace After 1381.* She argues that the works of Chaucer and Gower encouraged the nonruling urban classes to appropriate social and political leverage in a manner that deeply affected the way English society developed.

access it can help to facilitate more balanced and innovative readings of those texts. Simultaneously, I hope to show that by reading these texts in common it becomes apparent that the literature of Native Americans – particularly that produced in the wake of initial contact and colonization – share many characteristics and concerns with the literature of the medieval period in a fashion that allows those works to be accessed more intuitively.

To that end, I address four different topics over the course of this dissertation. I begin with an exploration of the mystical and visionary literature, specifically in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and compare the way her text has been received and perceived in contrast with the reception of the recorded mystical experiences of Black Elk and Handsome Lake, two well-known Native American visionaries. This is followed by an examination of the role of the trickster figure in the works of Chaucer, particularly in *The Canterbury Tales*, with attention to how the archetypal characteristics of this anthropologically determined construct can help shed light on some of Chaucer's most complex works and themes. This argument is further divided into three sections. The first portion, which is chapter two, deals with the introduction and descriptions of the final group of Pilgrims in the *General Prologue* who most closely conform to the archetype. This is followed by a consideration of how their individual tales and the frame narratives surrounding them invoke the qualities of trickster discourse. In chapter four I explore Chaucer's deployment of birds in his works, specifically as they embody qualities of the trickster and complicate and even undermine the transmission of language and meaning. The fifth chapter compares the Arthurian matter of Britain, particularly the

texts of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace and Layamon, to the resistance narratives contained in *Black Elk Speaks* and other accounts of the Battle of Little Big Horn to establish how such works can be appropriated by the very colonizers they depict resistance to. The sixth and last chapter explores the essential term of savagery and the relationship between the Icelandic sagas and their depiction of the inherent violence and otherness of both the Skrælings and the Vikings who encounter them.

Mystical and visionary Literature

The initial chapter deals with the reception of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, both critically and among student readers. Both audiences tend to engage in readings of the text that rely on pathologizing the author or on other inauthentic reading strategies that distance the text from its historical context.

Curiously, the opposite is almost equally true of this extraordinary work. Kempe's text has, even from its initial editing by Allen, often been read and regarded in a deeply associative and sympathetic manner.[3] Even so, those who identify with the author or proclaim her as a sort of proto feminist icon also succumb to deeply ahistoric analysis as often as not. The truth of the text is that – at least in some aspects – it is the product of a culture at once as deeply removed from our contemporary academic ethos as works produced in entirely different and non-English or even European contexts. While invested deeply in Christian tradition, the faith on display in Kempe's book is in many ways far

---

[3] Though Hope Allen was also critically aware of her sympathy. Intriguingly, she was also interested in the Native American history, particularly that of the Oneida (Hirsh 231).

removed from contemporary Christian religious practice. In other ways, Margery Kempe reflects a tradition of visionary and mystical experience that exist throughout myriad religious traditions, both Christian and non, a number of aspects of which would be quite familiar to the Native American visionaries of the nineteenth century.

Recognizing that the assumptions a reader can bring with them about the text are as likely to provide a false sense of familiarity as they are to produce useful insight, it is worth examining the ways in which Kempe's book might be mediated by a comparative analysis with other cultures that also value and recognize the visionary experiences that is the central component of both her religious belief and her text. Usefully, a rich visionary literature exists in the culture of Native American and First Nations literature in the Americas. These texts share a number of potentially informative qualities with *The Book of Margery Kempe*, including surprising similarities in the way in which the central visionary experiences were received, perceived and explicated. Many also share the quality of mediation that is inherent in Kempe's work, having also been transcribed by literate English speakers from oral narrative accounts. We inherently recognize that we cannot apply the same sort of assumptions to texts written by or even about Native American and other indigenous communities who possessed strikingly different heritages about which we assume difference rather than familiarity.

The arresting parallels between these works, widely separated by time, geography and religious tradition point to the danger of assuming familiarity with text written by or for speakers of English from earlier eras with radically different underlying epistemologies and world views. By comparing *The book of Margery Kempe* with the

works produced by and through other mystical and visionary traditions, particularly the

records of Native American visionaries Black Elk and Handsome Lake, it may be

possible to retrieve a more authentic reading of the work that recognizes Kempe's visons

as the product of a particular cultural and religious environment that viewed them as

legitimate and potentially meaningful.

Tricksters and Their Tales

A rich analytical tradition exists around the figure of the Trickster, an

anthropological construct possibly first recognized by that name in the cultural traditions

of the Algonquin people by Daniel Brinton in 1885 or alternately by Franz Boaz in

1898.[4] The value of the trickster as both a cultural and a literary archetype was made

increasingly manifest through the work of a number of influential thinkers including Paul

Radin in conjunction with Carl Jung and perhaps most significantly by Claude Lévi-

Straus as part of his structural approach to anthropology. The trickster has become a

staple of both anthropological inquiry and literary criticism, but most often applied to

indigenous, folk and mythological texts, or to modern works of fiction fully cognizant of

the term's modern context.[5]

---

[4] Brinton clearly describes the archetype and is frequently credited with the coinage, but the term "trickster" in this context seems to have first been written by Boas (Hyde 355; Krupat 3).

[5] It is responsible to note at this point that there is an inherent and problematic cultural appropriation in the use made by anthropologists of indigenous, and particularly Native American trickster stories to formulate theories about culture. Gerald Vizenor points this out emphatically and eloquently in his chapter on "Trickster Discourse: Comic and Tragic Themes in Native American Literature."

> Tricksters liberate the mind, and they do so in a language game. Tricksters do not represent the real or the material. Tricksters are not alive in tribal imagination to

Yet, only occasionally is the anthropological model turned back towards the foundational literature of Europe after the classical period. Though trickster figures abound in the literature of the middle ages, few works explicitly employ the archetypal model to the works produced in a Christian context by the central authors of the period. This is curious as, particularly in Chaucer, we can easily recognize the figure of the trickster in a number of the pilgrim portraits he develops, most notably the rogue's gallery of the Miller, Reeve, Maunciple, Summoner, Pardoner, and Chaucer's own narrative alter ego. Their depictions in the *General Prologue* are rife with the sort of liminal and associative qualities that comprise the core of the trickster figure archetype, and the second chapter explores the ways in which these characters embody – often quite literally – the characteristics of the trickster.

The tales of these figures, and particularly the frame narratives within which much of *The Canterbury Tales* most powerful discursive action takes place, are also recognizable as trickster tales. The focus of the third chapter is on these tales and how they, particularly those deployed through the genre of fabliau, reflect every essential characteristic of the trickster through the internal portrayals of the representative

---

prove theories of the social scientists. Tricksters have become anthropologists, but no anthropologist has ever understood a trickster. Tricksters have become anthropologists if only long enough to overturn their theories and turn them into cold shit. But tricksters are not moral or functional. Tricksters are not artifacts. Tricksters never prove culture or the absence of culture. Tricksters do not prove the values that we live by, nor do they prove or demonstrate the responses to domination by colonial democracies. (Vizenor 70)

Nevertheless, there is a certain wonderful irony in applying the anthropological construction of the trickster back onto the literature of the colonizer in a "language game" that would immediately be recognizable to the archetype.

characters in the tales, the interaction of the pilgrims in the attendant frame narratives,

and in the narrative outcomes that Chaucer – the author – develops as a result of those

consequent interactions. Specifically, the tales of the Miller and the Reeve are dealt with

in response to one another, particularly in relation to their interacting frame narratives

and thematic "quiting," and also the tales of the Summoner and the Pardoner as

extensions of the theme of fabliau and frame narrative response.

The fourth chapter focuses on Chaucer's deployment of avian tricksters and the

particular role of birds in the anthropological literature related tricksters. The bird's

ability to simultaneously signify and elide meaning is explored in Chaucer's *House of

Fame*, the *Nun's Priest's Tale,* and the *Munciple's Tale*. In all three cases, and to an

increasing degree as these works progress, Chaucer positions the avians in his works to

demonstrate the challenges of constructing effective meaning through language, and the

dangers of utterance, culminating in the abnegation of language and even the authorial

process that closes the *Maunciple's Tale*.

<p align="center">**Resistance Narratives and Savage Contact**</p>

The final two chapters of the dissertation concentrate on explicitly colonial

narratives of the medieval period and the ways in which these works can serve as

templates for understanding how that contact can affect both the colonizer and the

colonized over a significant period of time.

In chapter five I explore the appropriation of the matter of Arthur in the British

tradition by the descendants of the very culture that initially displaced the peoples upon

which those legends were based. Despite layers of intervening invasion and cultural

<p align="center">9</p>

change, the story of Arthur is essentially a resistance narrative, glorifying a temporary

setback of the fortunes of the Anglo-Saxon invaders and even reversing the colonial

direction by spreading out into Europe. Several particular features of the resistance

narrative are common to both the matter of Arthur and resistance narratives from the late

nineteenth century, particularly those surrounding the Battle of Little Big Horn and

recorded in *Black Elk Speaks*. These features include a reliance on symbolic leaders,

extreme violence in moments where resistance is effective, and a prophesied return of the

pre-colonial order. The ways in which the Arthurian material has been appropriated can

serve as a model for understanding how similar acts of cultural annexation of even the

most problematic of resistance narratives is possible and how such appropriations are

inherently contradictory and conflicted.

The sixth and final chapter examines the Icelandic sagas and particularly the

interaction between the last of the Vikings and the indigenous inhabitants of North

America first encountered by Europeans, the Skrælings. These interactions were fraught

and violent, and despite the obvious appeal of the colonial project these texts sustain,

ultimately result in its failure. The moment of contact between these two cultures marks

a turning point for the Viking way of life and a foreshadowing of the fate of the

indigenous populations. For the Norse voyagers, this contact was a last grasping moment

of expansion before the process of reintegration with the larger Christian and European

hegemony took hold. In the end, the Viking settlers appear as alien and strange to their

descendants as the Skrælings they fought against, each now pejoratively associated with

savagery and otherness and revealing more about the way that such identities are permeable and inherently fragile.

.   My hope is that this project points to the ways in which reading the medieval literary tradition against and with the literature of indigenous populations in general and the Native American traditions of North America in particular can illuminate both those discourses and open up new ways of viewing and approaching these texts. Both are worthy of careful consideration that makes use of and recognizes the complex cultural and ideological fields surrounding each tradition. Perhaps incorporating the cognitive distance, anthropological conceits, and even postcolonial theory so often applied to Native American literature can provide new approaches to understanding medieval texts with already rich and deep scholarly traditions. Perhaps examining how those medieval texts have been received and incorporated into cultures far different from those that produced them can offer a way to understand both the potential hazards and opportunities that lay ahead as the works of indigenous authors, even or perhaps particularly mediated ones, find a place in the literary canon of English.

Chapter 1
Margery Kempe and the Danger of Bad Medicine:
Conflicts Between Visionary Beliefs and Modern Psychology

The Book of Margery Kempe, a pseudo autobiographical account (perhaps the first autobiography in English[6]) of the mystical experiences and pilgrimages of a middle class woman of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, has become common reading for any class dealing with medieval English literature, particularly those with a focus on women's or religious writings. The book is fascinating in that it allows readers access to a very personal glimpse into lay spirituality and into the extraordinary experiences of a nominally 'regular' person.

Likely because of the personal nature of the text itself, those reading it seem uncommonly prone to impart their own subjective lens into their readings of the text. It seems to invite personal reflection and to encourage a sort of contemporary engagement that is almost unimaginable in any other medieval text. *The Book of Margery Kempe* has been, since its very re-introduction into corpus of medieval literature, been a text that engenders and encourages a personal connection with the text and with Kempe herself. [7]

---

[6] Lynn Staley argues, in her 1996 introduction to the text, that this is perhaps not the best way to characterize the work, and that instead, "we might instead think of it as a fiction (the first novel?), and hence as the work of a self-conscious author, Kempe, who employed a character called Margery for as many and as varied purposes as Chaucer used Geoffrey throughout his poetry or as Langland used Will in *Piers Plowman*" (Staley Introduction). All quotations of Kempe's book in this chapter are from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, edited by Lynn. Staley for the TEAMS Middle English Texts Series. The tentative claim that it is one of the first autobiographical texts is enshrined in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Drabble 552).

[7] An excellent account of the deep connection with Kempe that Hope Emily Allen, the first editor and modern reader of the text, developed is described and contextualized in Dinshaw's *How Soon Is Now*? Particularly, Dinshaw focuses on the way in which

Thus, it seems not without precedent to begin this discussion of the text in a somewhat

unorthodox manner by relating something of my own experience with it, my observation

of the reactions others have had to it, and my own admittedly subjective interpretation,

informed by traditions likely not often available to many modern readers of the work. In

truth, this seems particularly fitting as *The Book of Margery Kempe* is all about personal

experience and the act of interpretation. Just as she seeks to negotiate a meaning for her

personal and spiritual experience that is both relevant and significant, we must seek to

comprehend her text in light of our necessarily limited understanding of her own

contemporary culture and through our own recognition of our preconceptions.

What I am really seeking to examine here is the interaction between a modern

audience and a medieval text, and the sorts of difficulties such an encounter engenders.

Margery Kempe, perhaps because of the inherently confessional nature of her narrative,

seems to invite a dangerous kind of identification that somehow encourages the modern

reader to examine her not as a construct of her own time and culture, but rather through

the anachronistic lens of modern popular psychology. The problem here is exacerbated

---

Kempe's text encourages such an association in chapter three, "In the Now: Margery
Kempe, Hope Emily Allen, and Me," wherein she also notes her own connection to the
other two titular figures. This will be developed more in a later section (Dinshaw 105-
127). For an alternate view that argues for the complication of the personal narrative in
light of the multiple scribal intercessors, Anthony Bale's article on Margery's scribe,
Richard Salthouse, makes the point that his influence on the text at the very least sheds
light on how it was perceived and received, "This is not to attempt to wrest the genesis of
the Book from Kempe, or to suggest that Salthouse "invented" the Book as we have it
today. Rather, by virtue of the fact that he read and copied the text, Salthouse leads us to
the kind of audience this manuscript originally had (and by extension the way Kempe and
her Book were received around or shortly after the time of her death)" (Bale 177).

by the fact that this is not only bad historical and literary critical practice, it is also bad psychology. On the other hand, we must recognize that we can only view the works of past eras through the clouded lens of our own perceptions. Rather than deny this or retreat from the necessary act of imperfect interpretation, it is more productive to broaden our referential field, to look outside of strict and normative channels of understanding, and to always be aware of the inherent difference between the modern audience and the circumstances that produced the text. To do so requires first an account of the reactions that audience characteristically has with the text.

I've been fortunate enough to have experienced the reaction of a modern audience to this book as both a student in a memorable graduate seminar and as an instructor in an undergraduate seminar I taught on mystical literature. What struck me on both occasions were the startling and anachronistic reactions of bright, knowledgeable and enthusiastic readers of the text and my own very different approach to the work. The discussion of Margery Kempe, in both cases, began with a retreat to pathology. She was diagnosed as suffering from post partum depression, schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, hysteria and a number of other real and imagined psychopathological conditions. I will discuss my own, still clearly subjective but in a radically different way, reaction to the text in due course. The most pertinent reaction to the text is the one that is seen again and again in both the academic response to the text and, admittedly anecdotally, in every classroom discussion of the book that I have witnessed.

This can hardly be surprising to anyone who has studied the history of the critical reception of Margery Kempe's book as this same pattern was followed by the critics who

first responded to the text when it was discovered in 1934 and subsequently published by Butler Bowden and then by the Early English Texts Society, making it available to a larger audience.[8] Scholarly reactions to the work have, particularly since the eighties, become increasingly sophisticated and aware of the dangers of this approach to the text, but more recent feminist, cultural and religious studies of the work tend to shy away from the underlying questions that the visionary experience itself necessitates.[9] This in turn creates a sort of potentially un-mined gap in the critical reception of the text that leaves out a deep consideration of the visionary experience of Kempe, not as it would be conceived of by a modern audience, but as it would be understood by a more contemporary understanding of the mystical encounter with a spiritual vision.

First, it seems necessary to concentrate on what I take to be a common, modern critical reaction to the text that engenders and sustains this elision, and then to discuss something of the internal textual reasons for this response before moving on to my own perspective, informed by a no less subjective but radically different position, later in my discussion. This in turn will lead to a discussion of how viewing such a text through a different, though no less inherently subjective, lens can perhaps lead to new

---

[8] The Butler Bowden version was published in 1936. *The Book of Margery Kempe, 1436, A Modern Version* by W. Butler-Bowdon, with an introduction by R.W. Chambers. Jonathan Cape, 1936. The next edition, *The Book of Margery Kempe. The Text from the Unique MS. Owned by Colonel W. Butler-Bowdon*, included some of the work by Hope Emily Allen.

[9] An extended discussion of the ups and downs of these trends appears in Becky R. Lee's "The Medieval Hysteric and the Psychedelic Psychologist: A Revaluation of the Mysticism of Margery Kempe in the Light of the Transpersonal Psychology of Stanislav Grof" *(Lee 102-126).*

understandings and appreciations of very old texts. This analysis first requires some account of the text of Margery Kempe's book and a discussion about the features of the work that render it so susceptible to problematic interpretation.

The *Book* and the Reaction

Our reception of Margery Kempe's book is made more complex by the fact that it was not really a part of our canon of medieval English literature until relatively recently. A few carefully excerpted fragments of her devotional passages were printed in early sixteenth century pamphlets but it was not until 1934 that the actual manuscript was discovered in the collection of the Butler-Bowdons, having passed to this old Catholic family from the library of the Carthusians of Mount Grace Priory[10]. Since this re-discovery, the text has increasingly become an important and popular work. What it most essentially offers is a fascinating look into the spiritual life of an 'ordinary' woman from a radically different time and social environment. The fact that the text offers such a significant look into the field of lay devotion and piety, particularly from the perspective of a woman whose existence had by and large been devoted to the domestic sphere, only makes the fact of so much contemporary and anachronistic criticism that much more disconcerting.

That is not to argue that she was an average person, in whatever respect that term might be applied. While not even a tangential member of the aristocracy or even the gentry, Kempe was nevertheless born into a fairly rarified mercantile circle. Margery

---

[10] For a solid discussion of the manuscript's history and provenance see the introduction of Anthony Goodman's *Margery Kempe and Her World* (Goodman 1-3).

Kempe was born around 1373 in Bishop's (later King's) Lynn, the daughter of John

Brunham, five times mayor, occasional Member of Parliament, alderman and all around

successful and upwardly mobile member of the emerging middle merchant class. We

know almost nothing of her unmentioned childhood, and surprisingly few personal details

are found in her text. She married John Kempe around 1393, and her own

autobiographical account of her life begins with this marriage, the subsequent birth of her

first child, and the troubling visions and spiritual crisis that ensued. A record of the Lynn

Holy Trinity Guild of Merchants' account rolls between the years of 1437 and 1439 do

have an entry for payments made by John Assheden for the entry of a Margery Kempe

into membership in the guild.[11] What little biographical support that does exist seems to

confirm much of what Kempe recounts in her text, and the general historical record

concords with her own accounts of external events.

The vision of Christ that saves her from the initial calamity brought about by the

birth of her first child, also begins a series of retreats and rapprochements with God. Her

newly awakened spiritual life is at odds with her husband's carnal appetites and the

demands of child rearing. This leads to her first interpersonal dilemma as her husband

reacts negatively to her transformation and is only convinced by her newfound spiritual

ardor and a bit of divine intercession. After some twenty years of marriage and fourteen

(largely unmentioned) children, she finally establishes a curiously mercantile agreement

with her husband to ensure the end of their conjugal relationship and then embarks on a

---

[11] This is attested to in the appendices to the Book of Margery Kempe developed by Hope
Emily Allen (Allen 358-359). See footnote 3 above.

series of encounters with notable religious personages and on a number of pilgrimages to places as far distant as Rome, Jerusalem and Santiago de Compostela.

She encounters notable hostility from her fellow pilgrims on these voyages, and her persecution by unsympathetic travelers and locals makes up much of her account. These persecutions continue as she returns to England and is beset with accusations of heresy. While there is little direct evidence that supports her account of her travails, there are also no clearly contradictory accounts. Particularly, her examinations by the bishops and archbishops are not present in any still extant record. However, such registers as still exist are selective and certainly do not constitute a negative proof (Stokes 9-68).[12] Her suffering is echoed by an extended visionary meditation on the Passion of Christ which concludes the first book.

A second much shorter book is added to this first, detailing her journey accompanying her daughter in law home to Germany and her visiting of several shrines en route. Again, she is consistently criticized by her fellows and eventually vindicated in a cycle that echoes the pilgrimage vignettes of the first book. She closes with a recitation of her normal (if lengthy) method of prayer.

All of this elides what is essentially the most compelling, if problematic component of her work. Margery Kempe's visionary experiences and the subsequent interactions with her community that her reactions to those visions engender create a

---

[12] For an analysis of the historical veracity of Kempe's own limited accounts of historically identifiable events and a discussion of the lack of documentary evidence for Kempe's trials and the significance, or lack thereof, of her absence in the records see Charity Stokes's "Margery Kempe: Her Life and the Early History of Her Book."

fascinating internal and external struggle. The visions are a source of confusion and self doubt as much as they are a reassurance. The anxiety which she feels in the wake of her experiences is replicated again and again by her own doubts and by the accusations of her contemporaries.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of Margery Kempe's mysticism is the outward display her devotion takes. Margery weeps, constantly. She cries in church, she cries on pilgrimage, she cries at weddings (seeing in them a spiritual union), when she sees children who reminder her of the childhood of Christ. The display is violent enough to draw the ire of many of her contemporaries who witness it, "Hir wepyng was so plentyuows and so contwnyng that mech pepul wend that sche mygth wepyn and levyn whan sche wold, and therfor many men seyd sche was a fals ypocryte and wept for the world for socowr and for wordly good" (1.3.295-8). [13] Her tears are copious enough to draw critique even from her supporters, though uncontrollable weeping was an established tradition amongst a number of thirteenth and fourteenth century continental female mystics.[14] Near the end of the first book, two priests who are nominal supporters set up a series of tests to determine whether her crying is genuine or a means of display. While she is vindicated in this test, the fact of her supporter's doubt makes it quite easy to

---

[13] All citations from *The Book of Margery Kempe* are from: *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Edited by Lynne Staley for the TEAMS Middle English Texts Series.

[14] The tradition of mystical weeping and its symbolic power is discussed by Mahoney in "Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power over Language." The reputation of these women, some of whom became saints, may have been a significant source of Margery Kempe's support from learned clerical authorities aware of the tradition (Mahoney 37-50).

see how a more modern audience could be skeptical of her tears, especially in light of developing trends of psychological interpretation.

Some of the earliest reactions to the complete text, appearing even before the 1940 publication of Meech and Allen's 1940 EETS text, set the tone of psychopathological dismissal. Writing in 1936, Robert Thurston dismisses her as "no more than a neurotic and self-deluded visionary who had nothing about her of that spirit of God." He concludes that she was the victim of a "pronounced hysteria" (Burns 241).[15] This diagnosis of hysteria, a conclusion which modern psychologists would likely be much less prone to throw around, would follow the text for decades.

Yet even in the early stages of criticism, some observant scholars noted the danger of this trend. Thomas Coleman noted in 1938 that "She is surely to be variously labeled as an eccentric, neurotic and psychopathic; but none of these terms explains her" (Coleman 499). While something of a dodge, this comment at least acknowledges the internal and consistent complexity of the work as a whole. While Kempe's peculiar form of mystical expression may not be an entirely familiar version of the mystical experience for those versed in the medieval English tradition, there is an overall coherence of

---

[15] This comment is originally from Robert Thurston's article, "Margery the Astonishing" published in *Month* in 1936. As these journals can be quite difficult to find, it is worth noting that these comments and a number of other early reviews are collected in George Burns's "Margery Kempe Reviewed," published in *The Month,* volume 171, in 1938. An even more accessible account of this early criticism appears in the introduction of *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, edited by Sandra J. Mc Entire. Also see Maureen Fries, "Margery Kempe" in *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, edited by Paul Szarmach, (227-9). For a discussion of how the texts initial reception was colored by the 30s and particularly by movements in women's consciousness and Freudian psychology, see David Wallace's, *Strong Women: Life, Text, and Territory 1347-1645*. (62).

thought that separates this work form the mere ravings of a lunatic. This is, to some degree evident in the creation of the text itself, under the care of two different amanuenses. The very fact that she was able to produce the text points to her ability to engage clerical support and even devotion.

Nevertheless, dismissal of Margery Kempe as a hysteric continued to be a normal feature of critical reaction. In 1961, David Knowles describes the work as the product of "the vivid imagination and relative memory of a sincere and devout but very hysterical woman." Further claiming that it has "little in it of deep spiritual wisdom, and nothing of true mystical experience" (148). No less a figure than Donald R. Howard dismissed her as recently as 1980, "For she was quite mad – an incurable hysteric with a large paranoid trend. To the medieval way of thinking this was not incompatible with real visions, but to the modern reader she is less interesting as a mystic than as a case history" (34-5).[16] While this at least acknowledges the distance between his own critical reaction and that of her contemporaries, it nevertheless engages in exactly the kind of armchair diagnosis that so frequently and problematically characterizes the reception of *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

Even savvy critics, aware of the dangers of engaging in such cross temporal diagnosis are still prone to fall victim to the impulse. Clarissa Atkinson discusses the

---

[16] This passage alone does not do justice to his tone of contempt. He introduces her work by saying "I suppose I should mention here another book dating from about the 1430s" (Howard 34). Throughout his discussion, he takes an adversarial tone and seems particularly annoyed that she doesn't mention any of the features of her journey.

danger and temptation of this kind of analysis in her book on Margery Kempe, *Mystic and Pilgrim*.

> Although the contributions of modern psychology and psychoanalysis are difficult and hazardous to apply to the minds and hearts of people in the distant past, Margery Kempe is extraordinarily attractive to the psychohistorian. The candor of her narrative and the quality of experience lend themselves without undue distortion to psychoanalytic categories. The distinctions between meditation and fantasy, vision and wish fulfillment, religious ecstasy and hysteria – never simple-are wonderfully blurred in the autobiography of Margery Kempe. Beginning with its opening pages, much of her book is susceptible to psychological interpretation. Indeed, given the manifest content of much of the author's experience, such interpretation is almost irresistible. (208-9)

And, indeed, even after this acknowledgement, the author goes on to diagnose "postpartum psychosis" and to, rather cleverly, note how in her vision "Like an effective therapist, Christ functioned as the loving mother and model parent necessary for Margery's recovery" (209). Such awareness of the potential dangers for applying modern analytical methods to medieval texts may mitigate the attendant desire to marginalize exactly the kind of popular belief systems that Margery Kempe represents, and Atkinson and other critics do, more or less successfully, negotiate these hazards. So, if it is indeed impossible to resist the impulse to analyze Margery Kempe, then it might be worth discovering if anything more productive than a simple dismissal of her hysteria can be developed.

Some of the more recent works on Margery Kempe with a psychological approach do manage to reconcile the medieval world with modern psychology without dismissing Kempe. Notably, Becky R. Lee uses the theories of Stanislav Grof on transpersonal psychology to argue "that Margery Kempe was a mystic, not despite her

hysteria but because of it" (126).[17] This argument is particularly appealing in that it understands that dramatic and extreme reaction to visionary experience is not generally understood as problematic within cultures that recognize and validate such a tradition. The danger of her visionary experience would not have been understood as internal or in any sort of proto-psychological tradition, but rather as an explicitly external threat.

Kempe's understanding of her experience, and indeed the likely understanding of much of her contemporary audience, would be in the context of a worldview that essentially accepted her claim of mystical, visionary experience at face value. The question would likely not be whether she experienced such visions or had such conversations, but rather whether the source of those experiences was divine or infernal in nature. Indeed, Kempe herself hints at this very dichotomy almost immediately within her own account of her visionary experience. It is telling that she foregrounds her account by noting that she sought out the opinions of others to confirm that her experiences were divinely instead of infernally conveyed. "And thei alle that sche schewed hyr secretys unto seyd sche was mech bownde to loven ower Lord for the grace that he schewyd unto hyr and cownseld hyr to folwyn hyr mevynggys and hyr steringgys and trustly belevyn it weren of the Holy Gost and of noon evyl spyryt" (54-57). This highlights the contemporary acceptance of the visionary experience while also pointing

---

[17] Transpersonal Psychology was a development of the 1960s stemming in part from the use of psychedelic drugs. The resultant 'transcendent' states of consciousness provided a platform for the exploration of other abnormal experiences of altered consciousness. This work also does a wonderful job of revising a number of earlier psychoanalytic approaches to the text.

out the inherent potential threat within any such mystical encounter, namely that while authentic, the experience might be inspired by the devil instead of by the divine.

The explicit threat, both in Margery Kempes' own understanding of the visions she has experienced and in the way in which her visions would likely be perceived by those to whom she imparted them was never about the soundness of her mind. Instead, the threat is entirely external and dependent upon the source of her visions. Tellingly, the church had developed a process for determining the source of problematic visionary experiences, as Rosalyn Voaden notes in her chapter "Mysticism and the Body," "The process developed by the Church for testing whether visions were of divine or demonic origin is based on the discernment of spirits – *discretion spirituum* – which is one of the charisms of the Holy Spirit mentioned by Paul in 1 Corninthians 12:10. Treatises on the discernment of spirits offered a kind of handbook for both clerics and visionaries, outlining he acceptable qualities of both vision and visionaries" (Voaden 399) . Voaden goes on to point out that these tests were both developed and applied particularly in response to women's visionary experiences.[18] Not only is Kempe's understanding of her experience, and the likely understanding of her contemporaries, focused on the good versus evil source dichotomy to the exclusion of any proto psychological understanding of the experience, but the very fact that the visions are occurring to a woman would likely

---

[18] Voaden's chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity* notes that the physically demonstrative and emotionally evocative visionary experiences of women were the particular recipients of such ecclesiastical tests, and mentions both Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich as examples of the types of mystical experiences most likely o trigger investigations into the source of the visionary experience. Notably, one key component in favor of divine impartation was whether or not the visionary had direct and clerical support and council.

have exacerbated the concern over the source of the experience at the expense of any other possible explanation. This is a very different set of concerns from what many modern readers are likely to recognize and so it represents a particular point of fracture in the interpretation and reception of the text.

Even analysis of her condition that takes into account the contemporary perceived dual possibilities of her visionary influence, either from the divine or the infernal, still employ language that presupposes mental illness. Alison Torn, in "Madwoman or Mystic – A Narrative Approach to the Representation of Madness and Mysticism in Medieval England," discusses the significance of this dichotomy, but still manages to construct the experience in a particularly modern and pathological form.

> The second metaphor Kempe uses in relation to her madness is spatial and is closely related to her dichotomous struggle between good and evil. Margery "had a thing in her conscience...which she so long concealed...the devil said in her mind... the dread she had of damnation on the one side and his sharp reproving on that other side, this creature went out of her mind" (Staley, 2001: 6-8). These spatial metaphors locate the devil/evil internal to Margery until she goes "out of her mind", the voice of the Devil pushes Margery into madness. (Torn 81)

This article follows Staley's tradition of dividing "Kempe," the author, from "Margery," the victim of madness, but takes that conceit one step farther by projecting onto the combined figure a sort of bicameral identity that seems to almost suppose a sort of schizophrenia on the part of the subject.

The term "madness" is itself problematic as well. While critic's such as Torn avoid the worst sins of atemporal psychoanalytic contextualization, the very terms the text of *The Book of Margery Kempe* uses to describe the internal mental condition of Margery can also lead to a potential overstatement of the texts own construction of its

subject as mentally unhinged. Madness is a complex term in the text and in contemporary

parlance, as likely to refer to excessive demonstration of feeling as to a loss of the

rational self.[19] Torn posits an interesting interpretation of Kempe's (again, here the author

as opposed to the subject) understanding of madness, noting that while there is clearly a

similarity and congruence between madness and spiritual revelation there is also a crucial

distinction that takes the form of a textual appeal to metaphor and simile.

> This distinction between spiritual passion and madness is reiterated later as "the
> said creature thought that she ran ever to and fro as if she had been a woman
> without reason" (Staley, 2001: 142). Kempe's awareness of the similarities
> between spiritual ecstasy and madness is seen not only in the use of metaphor, but
> also in the language ('crying and roaring'), descriptive actions also used to
> describe another woman's madness Margery attended. These narrative linkages
> tell the reader that there is similarity in the two experiences, but crucially, Kempe
> uses metaphor as a linguistic device to distinguish them. Kempe describes
> Margery's actions as if she were mad. What Kempe is clearly saying here is "I
> have reason, I am not mad, and I know that I am not mad because I acted as if I
> were mad". Kempe knows the difference between religious fervour and madness
> and communicates this through metaphor. (Torn 84)

Torn highlights an important facet of the contemporary understanding of the visionary

experience in this passage, the distinction between inspired and true madness. As she

points out, Margery Kempe (perhaps uniting both the subject and the author in this

particular case) sees her experience as distinct from true madness because she still has her

reason and an understanding of what had happened to her. Torn's analysis of Margery

---

[19] Specifically, it is used here in the sense applied to the term since its earliest recorded
use in English, from *Ancrene Riwle* in the late thirteenth century, "Of a person, action,
disposition, etc.: uncontrolled by reason or judgement; foolish, unwise. Subsequently
only in stronger use (corresponding to the modern restricted application of sense, from
which it is now often indistinguishable): extravagantly or wildly foolish; ruinously
imprudent" and thus not necessarily in the modern sense of the term (Oxford English
Dictionary).

Kemepe's understanding of her own problematic actions while under the influence of the visionary experience focuses on the difference between the two possible states as informed by the use of metaphor to differentiate them. Yet such distinction between seeming and authentic madness, separated only by an authorial addition of - in most cases - simile, serves rather to highlight the impossibility of distinction between the two states. The only true distinction in these passages is the authorial interpretation of the event, profoundly bound up with the truly inextricable link between narrator and experiencer.

While insightful, that may not be the entire story behind Margery Kempe's understanding of her condition. Her focus on "reason" and "knowing" suggest another possible criterion for discerning the critical distinction between both authentic and inauthentic mystical experience and between divinely and infernally inspired visions. The critical difference is that Margery Kempe's mystical experience can be and are interpreted, and not only by her but by those who contest and challenge her interpretations of them. The great paradox here, and perhaps Margery Kempe's cleverest strategy, is that she employs the very church authorities who would be called in to examine her claims to demonstrate that her visions are not only authentic but also divinely inspired.

There is a threat, implicit both to the individual and to the community, if the visionary experience is supplied by infernal powers. Margery Kempe sidesteps that potential threat by employing her own ability to interpret the visions she experiences and by co-opting the authority of the church into recognizing the very interpretability of the visions she has had, even if they do fall somewhat outside the expectations and traditions

of those experiences. That brings us nicely to the question of the difference between the

visionary experiences of Margery Kempe and standard medieval mystical practice. The

extreme nature of her text, which makes for such fascinating reading also makes it

difficult to place her work within an effective contemporary context.

<div align="center">**The Subversive Text and the Threat of the Visionary**</div>

One approach to this perceived division between Kempe's visionary experience

and both the contemporary and modern reader's expectations of such encounters is to

read Kempe's book as an artifact of subversion. Certainly, this claim is frequently

repeated in the text itself by Margery Kempe's detractors. The context here is

particularly significant as the early fifteenth century in England was a time of significant

religious turmoil. The teachings of Oxford theologian John Wycliffe led in the later part

of the fourteenth century to the Lollard movement, espousing among other things

translation of the bible into vernacular, monastic reform and general anticlericalism. The

Lollard heresy directly touched Margery Kempe. Her parish priest, William Sawtry,

became the first Lollard martyr in 1401.[20]

Margery was no Lollard. Her frequent pilgrimages alone would attest to this, the

act of pilgrimage being one of the most offensive practices in Lollard eyes. She

nonetheless espoused a kind of self authorized approach to religion that was very much

associated with that dangerous heresy. Arguably the most significant and dangerous

---

[20] The definitive account of Wyclif and Lollardry, as well as explanation of Margery
Kempe's orthodoxy despite her proximity to some decidedly contentious figures, is found
in Hudson's seminal text, *The Premature Reformation* (435). Also, Anthony Bale's
already mentioned article on Salthouse discusses the scribes potential influence on the
text.

event in her biography occurs when she is arrested and taken to Beverly to be tried, based

on her presumptuous knowledge of scripture and the fear that she is preaching. "On the

next day sche was browt intothe Erchebischopys chapel, and ther comyn many of the

Erchebischopys meny, despisyng hir, callyng hir "loller" and "heretyke," and sworyn

many an horrybyl othethat sche schulde be brent" (1.522912-15). She narrowly escapes

the same fate her parish priest had endured years before, and while this is textually

transformed into yet another opportunity for suffering and triumph over despair, the

incident points out the seriousness dangers of popular religious practice at the time

Margery Kempe was most spiritually active.

It is imperative to remember that this is also the period of active Lollard religious

subversion. While Margery Kempe is not at all a Lollard in her espoused beliefs, she is

frequently accused of such proclivities. This is significant because it points to the degree

to which, even in a Catholic (in the true 'universal' sense of that word) society, there was

an established movement and mechanism for popular religious subversion. In fact, the

most potentially damning of Lollard activities has a curious echo in what Margery does.

One of the main contentions of Lollardry was the belief that all should have access to the

Bible.[21] This led to active translation efforts and to some remarkable feats of

memorization. Some people, notably most often women much like Margery herself,

conventionally illiterate, but nonetheless schooled in the text and the interpretation of the

---

[21] Hudson (238-247).

Bible managed to memorize large sections of the bible in translation, in effect becoming living texts.[22]

There is something of this danger in Margery Kempe. Notably, despite her own illiteracy she is quite adept at citing texts in defense of her own display of religious devotion. She uses these works to provide a context for her extreme weeping, citing a significant number of representative models, but even more critically citing the texts in which those examples may be found.

> Also the same preyste red aftyrward in a tretys whech is clepyd "The Prykke of Lofe," the second chapitulo that Boneaventur wrot of hymselfe thes wordys folwyng, "A, Lord, what schal I mor noysen er cryen? Thu lettyst and thu comyst not, and I, wery and ovyrcome thorw desyr, begynne for to maddyn, for lofe governyth me and not reson. I renne wyth hasty cowrs wher that evyr thu wylte. I bowe, Lord, thei that se me irkyn and rewyn, not knowyng me drunkyn wyth thi lofe. Lord, thei seyn 'Lo, yen wood man cryeth in the stretys,' but how meche is the desyr of myn hert thei parceyve not." And capitulo *Stimulo Amoris* and *capitulo ut supra*. He red also of Richard Hampol, hermyte, in *Incendio Amoris* leche mater that mevyd hym to gevyn credens to the sayd creatur. Also, Elizabeth of Hungry cryed wyth lowde voys, as is wretyn in hir tretys. And many other whech had forsakyn hir thorw the frerys prechyng repentyd hem and turnyd agen unto hir be processe of tyme, notwithstandyng the frer kept hys opinyon. (3634-3646)

Margery Kempe is here noting the defense of her devotion through another's reading of these texts, but internally within her own authorial construct she is, quite cagily, developing a body of textual support. Kempe internalizes these texts within her own text in order to appropriate their authority. She uses both the titles of specific and well established devotional works and direct quotes from those texts that speak in support of

---

[22] Hudson (190-192). Also, for the influence of women on the Lollard movement see Mc Sheffre's book on the role of gender in Lollard communities (109-124).

her devotional mien. It may seem like Kempe is very much engaging in the same kind of

mnemonic devotional exercise that was characteristic of the Lollards, but in she is, in

fact, doing something quite different and ingenious that simultaneously challenges

established traditions while relying on the authority of those same mores.

Margery Kempe actually performs the very opposite act, or at least a very distinct

and different kind of translation, but her practice stems from a similar desire. Instead of

becoming a living book, she creates a book from her living experience. She is able to cite

and quote these texts because they were used by others in her defense, and so they are

simultaneously both her own and external to her. It is this active and vital nature of the

visionary experience that makes Margery so appealing to the modern reader and to her

own followers and supporters. The visionary experience is, by its very nature, alive and

interpretive. This is why it is so dangerous to the traditional, dogmatic religious

authorities. The possibility of direct personal revelation is appealing precisely because it

cuts the feet out from under the more established religious community, in her case the

Catholic church. Margery plays this game of subversion and containment quite well.[23]

She attempts to walk a path that lies solidly within the traditional and accepted dogmatic

system, but to claim it as personally her own. In this way, she acts to paradoxically

contain herself even while subversively relocating the authority for the beliefs she

espouses to her own direct religious experience.

---

[23] Though Greenblatt clearly intends this term within the cultural confines of the
Renaissance, the concept of subversion and containment described in his essay "Invisible
Bullets" (21-65) might conceivably be extended into the medieval period as well.

Though Margery Kempe repeatedly proves her orthodoxy and attempts to ground herself within the confines of established mystical practice, critics have made much of this potential resistance. Even Margery's attempts to incorporate herself within an established expressive mystical context by associating herself with early female mystics are read as a sort of intentional differentiation. Lynn Staley argues in *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* that:

> Her references to Saint Elizabeth's tears and to some of the details of Saint Bridget's life are intended to validate Margery's emotive piety and secular holiness. However, by underlining the antecedents for the *Book*, they also point up the ways in which it is fundamentally unlike those literary godmothers to whom Kempe nods. (172)[24]

This brings us to one of the most important and contentious features of the *Book*, and this occurs at a point where the potential of the visionary experience to be self authorizing and independent is perhaps most fully realized.

She essentially begins her text by noting that she is failed by orthodox religious procedure. Chastised internally by the voice of the Devil, she is also castigated so severely by her confessor that she becomes trapped in a spiraling cycle of despair. She is unable to find respite from her internal torment, and she is unable to fully unburden her conscience. She thus seeks help from outside the traditional religious community, instead relying on the models of popular and distinctly feminine lay piety. [25]

---

[24] Staley further discusses the references to these texts as an elaborate screen. This is part of her larger discussion of the distance between the subject, Margery, and the author, whom she calls Kempe.

[25] For an overview of more traditional forms of devotional piety and a selection of supporting documentary evidence, see *Women in England c. 1275-1525: Documentary Sources. Documentary Sources,* specifically the section on "Devotion" (46-56).

The crux of this problem is exactly the lack of authority that Margery Kempe endures. She is a woman, and therefore seen as largely incapable of higher spiritual thought, at least by her own agency. Furthermore, she is illiterate, in the most basic sense, though this is terrifically misleading. While she can not read, she displays a prodigious memory, and she has received a solid religious education, including the most popular devotional texts of the day. She gives something of a catalogue of books that she has heard, mentioning a number of Latin or Latin derived sources. "He red to hir many a good boke of hy contemplacyon and other bokys, as the Bybyl wyth doctowrys therupon, Seynt Brydys boke, Hyltons boke, Boneventur, *Stimulus Amoris*, *Incendium Amoris*, and swech other" (1.3389-3392). What is most impressive is her incorporation of this material into her own religious experience. Her presumed ignorance is thus another problem. While her detractors may not believe of her that she could know this material in and of her own understanding, she not only uses the material, she develops it. David Benson notes the central role in translation and transcription in Kempe's text.

> Given her claim to be ignorant of Latin, the implication is that these works were translated for her use by her clerical supporters. In turn, Kempe translated these written sources along with her meditations into public acts that were later recorded for all in her book. The persecutions of the saints are reenacted in her trials before English secular and ecclesiastical authorities, the life of Saint Bridget becomes a model for her own behavior, and affective identification with Christ's Passion is expressed on the streets of Lynn. (Benson 119)[26]

Margery Kempe effectively translates her knowledge of these texts into real mystical practice. She is working from a set of models which may not be entirely understood, but

---

[26] This is discussed in the context of *Piers Plowman* and the stirring urge both books express for reaching a larger audience. David C Benson.

which are nevertheless available to her and very much a part of popular religious expression. This may be something different and new in English devotional texts or it may possibly be remarkable because of the lack of survivals of similar works after the reformation.

What is most significant here is the fact that this lack of literacy is not a real barrier to mystical experience of Margery Kempe, or to her eventual project to compose her own account of her visionary experience. She is not abnormal or marginalized by the fact of her illiteracy, her work is simply different. Cheryl Glenn discusses the commonality of this condition and the potential power of such a disparate approach.

> Margery knew well what the written word and its strong oral component implied: she was literate despite her inability to read and write. That seeming paradox of "illiterate literacy" is a prominent feature of medieval popular literacy, a feature meriting reiteration…These popular literacy practices were text based without being text dependent; people used the information in texts without using the actual texts themselves; contact could be vicarious. In short, whereas our contemporary literacy practices are often concentrated on seeing and inscribing, medieval practices emphasized hearing and remembering. (Glenn 60-61)

Margery uses that prodigious memory to create a very different but no less extraordinary mystical text. While extraordinary, her act is not a necessarily subversive act, authoring her own text in a sui generis act of potential rebellion. Instead, she depends upon the enlistment of clerical amanuensis who both writes and, to a limited but significant degree authorizes the text by an act of complicity.

It is even arguable that there is a certain authority given to the text by virtue of its extra literate creation. Certainly, one can point to the sometimes stream of consciousness narrative that make portions of the account so compelling. More importantly though, the visionary experience itself is an essentially extra literary condition. Karma Lochri states,

34

in *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh,* that "The oral text is neither accurately rendered nor explicitly authorized by the written text. It lies beyond the capacity of the written text to apprehend except through various *signa* of the mystic's desire" (98).[27] The visionary is not authorized by the same text based authority system that normal Christian religion operates upon. The authority is direct and personal in nature.

Yet, while she does work in this curious space between textuality and direct personal revelation, Margery Kempe is very interested in the creation of her text. She also uses the power of the direct address and inspiration that the oral transmission of her work enables to construct a different kind of book. Margery herself believed that the work would reach a wide audience. She also viewed its construction as a direct command. "Aftyrward when it plesyd ower Lord, he comawnded hyr and chargyd hir that scheschuld don wryten hyr felyngys and revelacyons and the forme of her levyngs that hys goodnesse myth be knowyn to alle the world" (64-66) Another important element of Margery Kempe's work that is particularly extraordinary is that she truly does create a text that is a work of popular literacy. Unlike so many of the other mystical texts that we have, Margery Kempe's work was constructed and preserved on the margins of the Church's doctrinal control. Margery insists upon her own right to both have and interpret the visionary episodes she experiences. This intensely personal and even per formative

---

[27] Lochrie's book provides another interesting examination of the inherent paradoxes of the text. She produces a feminist reading of the text while explicitly not claiming Kempe as any kind of feminist, and applies current gender studies without loosing sight of the distance between her work and the text. This model helps avoid many of the pitfalls other modern readers tend to fall into by creating a necessary distance between authorial intent and readerly interpretation, even to the point of bricolage.

nature of the text may also be one of the reasons that her work provokes such strong

personal reactions from readers, a fact which will be addressed in more detail in the next

section. There is also an inherent challenge to any reader of her text, since Kempe so

clearly wishes to control both the vision and its reception.

This belief that not only her own personal experience but also her interpretation of

that experience would be of value to the rest of the world, and that her visions amounted

to a kind of revelation that would help make manifest the goodness of her god again

steers us toward an obvious pathological reading of the text. Narcissism and savior

complexes look very much like this and are components of a number of the hallucinatory

pathologies already mentioned as being ascribed to her. [28] One of the most useful ways of

using this psychoanalytic approach is to recognize that such pathologies have been a

constant part of the human condition and that they are not essentially 'abnormal' in the

sense of being outside of established systems of belief and the experience of any number

of individual across a broad spectrum of cultures and societies.[29]

So, the essential problem here is that she is attempting to be both the conduit of

the vision and the interpreter of it. Her own subjective state of mind is essential to the

---

[28] The evidence for or against a relationship between narcissistic behavior and mystical
and visionary tendencies is not entirely clear, though it does not appear that those who
report such incidents have any significantly discernible difference in "ego-grasping
orientation" from the standard population according to a survey of the relevant literature
conducted in "An Empirical Investigation of the Discriminability of Reported Mystical
Experiences among Religious Contemplatives, Psychotic Inpatients, and Normal Adults"
by Kenneth Stifler, et al. *(366-372).*

[29] For some evidence of the commonality of such experience see David T. Bradford's,
"Emotion in Mystical Experience" in the journal *Religion, Brain & Behavior.*

understanding of the vision, but only if we do indeed accept the fact that the vision is produced by her. This is the core fault of the pathological critique of Margery Kempe, not because the vision may indeed have been the product of her own, possibly compromised, mind, but because neither she nor her audience would have been likely to have understood her experience in this fashion. The visionary experience, while certainly participatory in nature, is not generally viewed by the mystic, or likely by the contemporary audience, as an entirely internal event. It is imperative that the vision come from an outside source, an authorizing agent of spiritual enlightenment, or possibly from an agent bent on more destructive intents.

The visionary system relies on externality as the authorizing force of the experience. The vision must come from an outside source to have power. But the visionary experience is also intensely personal, usually witnessed only by revelation to a singular visionary, and thus entirely dependent upon that interlocutor for expression and, to a lesser extent, interpretation. Yet, the vision, to have wider meaning to a larger culture, must adhere to shared symbols, expectations and interpretive traditions. Kempe's experience is somewhat different from the standard in part because she so fully desires to control and shape her own reception. She attempts this largely through personal appeal, attempting to make the supposed reader take on her own perspective. Cheryl Glenn notes her facility at bringing the reader into an associative relationship in her study of Margery Kemepe's rhetorical liaison with both the internal and external audience of the text, noting that, "Although Margery unknowingly relaxes conventional distinctions of genre and structure, she deliberately exerts distinctions of audience for

calculated rhetorical ends, especially between the authorial audience and the narrative

audience. Both her story and her character appeal to the authorial audience, though they

often perturb the narrative audience" (Glenn 544). [30] This desire to connect with her

imagined audience in effect invites the reader to engage with her subjectively, on a

personal level.

Thus, with any text but perhaps with the text of Margery Kempe and with other

visionaries like her, it becomes essential to also recognize one's own subjective position

and bias in analyzing any such text that purports to be visionary in nature. Such texts,

almost by definition, invite a similar act of interpretation from their audience as they do

from the visionary him or herself. It may be impossible to read such a text objectively,

and it may not be a particularly productive path at any rate. Part of the appeal of the

pathological reading of the mystical text is that it pretends to an objectivity that is itself

entirely extra-historical and anti –contextual. Rather than reading the text objectively, I

would like to suggest that it is in fact essential to read it subjectively, and to acknowledge

both the advantages and potential pitfalls of such an approach.

Subjectivity and the Asynchronic Text

It is worth examining a few of the critical features of *The Book of Margery*

Kempe, intentional and serendipitous, that make it particularly prone to subjective

readings. Perhaps the most significant of these is the book's ability to seemingly

---

[30] Glenn argues that her use of "instabilities" and tensions within the text particularly creates this effect in the article "Author, Audience, and Autobiography: Rhetorical Technique in the Book of Margery Kempe" (540-553).

encourage even modern readers to engage with it less as a work from a different age and distinct culture and instead to approach it in a subjective fashion much more appropriate to a contemporary text.

I am fortunate in this to have a ready model for the book's ability to reach across temporal distance at hand in the work of Carolyn Dinshaw. As she points out in her book *How Soon Is Now?*, Kempe's text is itself intently "asynchronic," starting from a particular passage where Margery argues strongly that the sorrow she feels for Christ's death is as present as if he had just died. Her attempt to understand, through Kempe's text "what it feels like to be asynchronus" (Dinshaw 107) is built on Margery's confrontation with a priest who attempts to console her weeping over a pieta by remarking that Jesus's death was in the distant past. Margery will have nothing to do with that notion and instead, in a manner familiar throughout the text, turns the tables on the priest by claiming her own greater connection to the spiritual event which is, to her, still present and immediate.

This encounter is Dinshaw's opening to discuss the more general temporal abnormalities of the text and to thus consider how that text replicates its asynchrony in readers and responders. Dinshaw argues that, Margery's entire text is located in an always present *now*, rather than rooted in a more linear and progressive understanding of narrative.

> In Margery's narrative world, past- present- future times are collapsed into a capacious *now* constituted of multiple times and attachments: the whole book is itself a memorial construction—dictated by Margery to several different scribes— in which not only chronological time but also thematic associations order the narrative sequence, and intensification (of themes, of Margery's own being) interrupts chronological progression. Margery seems in this particular episode to

> inhabit a time zone, an asynchronous *now*, different from that of the other people whom she encounters in Norwich. (Dinshaw 107)

Kempe's critical difference from her contemporaries is her inherent lack of concern for strict chronological progression. Her work is, in some ways intensely modern, artfully reorganizing time and sequence, creating meaning at the expense of logic. Kempe's asynchrony thus makes her work more prone to subjective identification in two significant ways. By *seeming* more like a modern text in its narrative sensibilities, it confirms for the reader that it is open to a reading based on our own sensibilities and expectations. By disrupting the temporal expectations of traditional narrative, it takes the text outside of its own historical context and even possibly encourages an atemporal reading.

These traits may be authorial craft, or they may be simply be a common feature of the depiction of the mystical experience. This makes a great deal of sense, after a fashion, as the mystical experience itself is often described as occurring outside of the regular perception of time. Atemporality is in fact one consistent feature of reported mysctical experience. F.C. Happold, notes that, "...the experiences of the mystics are not understandable unless one is prepared to accept that there may be an entirely different dimension from that of clock time or indeed of any other sort of time. For the mystic feels himself to be in a dimension where time is not, where 'all is always now'" (Happold 48).[31] His argument that an alternate model of temporal perception is in fact necessary to

---

[31] Though dated, Happold's approachable educational texts on theology are still widely read and cited, and his work represents a distillation of numerous mystical texts from across a wide variety of traditions.

comprehend the mystical experience seems to correspond with what Dinshaw and others

have noted in the text of Margery Kempe. By this argument, it may in fact be impossible

for Margery to not write in a structurally fractured manner that, by its very nature,

encourages a cross temporal identification of with the work and its author. It can hardly

be surprising that Kempe's own asynchronous model can often affect the sense of time

and space of her later readership. If we accept Happold's proposition that, for the mystic,

the "all is always now," then such readings of Kemp are in fact necessary to fully engage

with the work.

Dinshaw goes on to argue that Kempe's construction of the text in such an

asynchronous manner in turn opens up it to a variety of interpretive possibilities that in

fact make possible new ways of reading the text. "My hypothesis is that reading the

book's multiple temporalities opens up temporal avenues for postmedieval readers in

turn, but already we have encountered something like temporal bullying in the text itself"

(Dinshaw 108). She is, in fact, arguing that Kempe requires this of her readers. At the

heart of Dinshaw's analysis is a recognition of the relative impossibility of dealing with

the text of *The Book of Margery Kempe* without resorting to a subjective reading. In fact,

Dinshaw remarks that it is absolutely essential that we find some form of bond between

ourselves and Margery Kempe if we are to be able to understand her at all. She notes that

even a disciplined historical approach to her text assumes a degree of contemporary

identification. Indeed, they cannot be decoupled. At best, we read Margery Kempe

historically, "But this kind of historical understanding is made possible by a prior

experience of contemporaneity between us and Margery: if we did not already in some

sense connect with Margery's text, we could not even begin to understand or historicize her" (Dinshaw 116). This may also help to explain why it is so difficult to understand Margery Kempe from a contemporary perspective. Dinshaw positively argues that this connection through a perceived contemporaneity need not perpetrate some form of interpretive violence upon the text, but can instead by complimentary. However, that requires a clear sense the connection is, almost paradoxically, based on an awareness of that distance. She notes that, "…the interpretive gap can be crossed in ways that preserve the otherness of the past (the text) even as mutual intelligibility is recognized in the present. That is precisely the implication of the term 'noncontemporaneous contemporaneity,' used to describe such an interpretive situation. A hermeneutic connection can in fact be premised on distance" (Dinshaw *How Soon is Now* 116). But this pleasant state of affairs also assumes an ability to fully recognize and account for that distance. It could be argued that many of the critical attempts to understand *The Book of Margery Kempe* have only succeeded in recognizing the otherness of that past in the terms of contemporary alterity.

Additionally, Dinshaw notes that the tradition of identification with the subject of Margery Kempe goes all the way back to her first modern interlocutor, the editor of her text, Hope Emily Allen. Dinshaw argues that Allen, "felt a complex contemporaneity with Margery" that influenced her work on the text (Dinshaw 119-20). The argument developed goes one important step further, implicating Margery Kempe herself in the associational bond that developed between Allen and her subject, and perhaps by extension to so many others who have read Kemep over the years. Dinshaw notes that

Kempe's desire for acknowledgement, and particularly for recognition of the importance of her own spiritual activity, makes an ally of any reader captivated by her story.

> The web of association between and among late medieval mystical and other historical figures, places, and ideas was very intimate, and Allen felt deeply, personally implicated in it. She read the *Book of Margery Kempe* as Margery's own scheming for sainthood, as her own "active propaganda" for canonization: Margery's story in the book is the story of her constantly looking for a champion in this cause. In writing her story, Margery, in this sense, desired a reader such as Hope Allen, certainly Margery's latter- day champion of sorts. (Dinshaw 120)

In this reading, Kempe's desire to be understood, authorized (pun intended) and even canonized by and through her readers imparts on her text an extraordinary capacity to reach across temporal distance and engender identification and support. This may help explain why so many readers and critics of Kempe so directly and personally, and why it is so hard to approach the text with the sort of general objectivity that is expected, if not always helpful or even necessarily productive.

Whether its readers become champions, detractor, or would be therapists, *The Book of Margery Kempe* certainly appears to have an ability to connect more directly and viscerally with its audience than nearly any other contemporary text one could think to name. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is potentially problematic if that ahistoric identification leads us to impose upon the text our own flawed expectations. The paradox is that we can never approach a text in any way but subjectively. The trick, I think, and I believe Dinshaw is alluding to a similar interpretive strategy, is to instead attempt to recognize in our own reactions to the text those personal expectations that are helpful and may lead to new forms of understanding, and those which may lead us to misapprehend

or willfully read the text in a manner that cannot be supported by the text's own historical context.

Personal Perspective and the Recognition of Bad Medicine

In recognition of the inescapable subjectivity of the text, I will provide a brief, but hopefully illuminating digression recounting my own subjective reading of the text and the potential insights it allowed. It was in part because of my own unusual subject position and a familiarity with a strong and accepted visionary tradition and an early and sustained interest in psychology that I understood this text so differently from my colleagues, and I believe that the same insight may be useful from a critical perspective as well.

My own reaction to the text was strikingly different from what I observed in other readers and found in the critical literature, and I like to flatter myself that I have a unique perspective on this text. While neither medieval, a female nor a Christian, I did feel a curious sympathy for Margery. I was raised in a family with a long tradition of mysticism. My great, great grandmother was the locally famous (in Southern California) Narcissa Higuera, a member of the Gabrielino/Tongva Native American tribe and a tribal singer and medicine woman. My own father served as head of the Gabrielino/Tongva Shamanic Council, and I followed in his path. While neither of us claimed to be "medicine," or to have had visionary experiences we had known members of our family and our larger community who had walked this – often trying – path. I felt that this background and these associations gave me a particular insight into the experiences of Margery Kempe. I recognize the innate differences of the traditions involved here, but

my very awareness of that distance, I hope, insulates me to some degree from the danger of over-identifying with the experience of Kempe or of reading her work too much in the shadow of my own contemporary experience.

Most particularly, I immediately recognized a useful correlation between an experience I had seen several times within the traditional framework of the animistic and shamanic tradition and what I believed I was encountering through Margery Kempe's accounts. Specifically, her accounts of having visions both infernal and divinely inspired immediately struck me as roughly analogous to the understanding within my own family's tradition and in many Native American spiritual belief systems that "medicine," a challenging term roughly synonymous with spiritual power, could be both good and/or bad. On multiple occasions, I have heard members of my own and other tribes discuss a recognized spiritual leader with whom they vehemently disagreed, and not once in those encounters was the authenticity of that individuals claim to such standing questioned. Instead, what was debated was whether the individual was practicing "good medicine" or Bad medicine." To be clear these terms are complicated and the concept of "medicine" is both an artifact of pan-Indianism and open to a variety of sometimes contradictory interpretations, but it still useful as a long established and widely disseminated concept.[32] Most critically here, it provided a rough analog by which I, as a modern reader could react to Kemp's book and find subjective resonance without falling into the trap of over

---

[32] The use of the term "medicine" to denote "spiritual power" dates back at least to seventeenth century use by French Jesuits in their dealings with the Huron, Montagnais and Ottowa tribes of New France, particularly in reference to practitioners of traditional healing, according to S. William's *Encyclopedia of Native American Healing*.

identification. I knew that her experience was simultaneously like and distinct from my own, interpretable but epistemologically distinct.

Furthermore, I had an extra layer of interpretive distance that closed off another potentially dangerous and limiting approach to the text. My father, who had inculcated me in the tribe's traditions and spiritual practices, was also a clinical pediatric neuropsychologist. I grew up as a faculty brat in the psych department at Cal State San Bernardino, my vocabulary laced from infancy with terms like 'autism', 'schizophrenia' and 'manic depression'. On a more personal level, I put this knowledge to use many years later when I began to work as an educational remediation specialist. Mostly, I helped very bright college bound high school students who have Asperger syndrome or autistic spectrum disorders find compensatory strategies to deal with writing, composition and critical thinking deficits. Though I certainly don't claim to have any official training in the field of psychology itself, I kept up with relevant journals in the field for many years and consulted regularly with clinical psychologists and speech and language pathologists as part of my educational remediation practice, and I believe that I acquired about as much knowledge of modern psychology, at least within my specialized field, as any layperson is likely to acquire. Working closely with expert diagnosticians in turn has engendered in me a great deal of trepidation about the kind of pop-psych diagnosis of historical figures that I witnessed being applied to Margery Kempe.

So, my own, admittedly subjective, approach to this text and subsequent interpretation of Margery Kemep's experiences relied on a recognition of her work as part of the larger field of mystical and visionary experience, beyond even that of the

traditional Eurocentric framework. I did not feel the need to immediately consider her reported experiences as symptoms of some pathology, or even, as might be appropriate, with a healthy degree of skepticism. Having spent much of my life in and around a culture that instead privileges and values visionary experience, though also aware of the potential costs and problems associated with such experiences, I believe I may have had a more direct and less culturally mediated reaction to the text than most contemporary readers. And, while I could understand and even empathize with the impulse to diagnose and pathologize Margery Kempe, I was also perhaps much more cautious about attempting an armchair analysis of such an inherently complex figure at such a temporal and textual remove.

Instead, what I saw occurring was an odd conflict between two modes of popular expression. The modern audience can not help but view Margery Kempe through the lens of psychology. We have been taught to pathologize the abnormal behaviors of those in our communities, to regard those behaviors as symptoms of internal disease. Likewise, Margery Kempe's contemporaries were socialized to consider abnormal behavior in a religious context, as influence either divine or infernal in nature. Many Native American traditions have similar ways of recognizing the visionary experience, whether positive or negative, without dismissing or marginalizing it. However, it is terribly difficult for those inculcated in Western universalist psychological to recognize the limitations of that perspective when confronting cultures that employ a radically different perspective to make sense of such fundamental concepts as mental health, the self and even the nature of reality. It is only recently that savvy psychologists and psychiatrists who have dealt

with indigenous populations have increasingly begun to become aware of the limitations of such perspectives when dealing with a population that is significantly culturally distant from dominant Western models. Psychiatrists confronting the challenges of dealing with indigenous populations that do not necessarily share some of the most basic assumptions that underpin modern psychology and psychiatry, such as Dr. Tony Benning, note that attempting to employ the methodologies based on those assumptions find themselves confronting the limits of effective analysis.

> "Western psychiatry is forced into a mirror-like confrontation with itself when it comes up against a boundary with another culture whose epistemological and ontological premises, and whose cosmologies are different from its own. I would contend that this boundary also constitutes what we may conceptualize as a 'limit situation' since it is at this interface that Western psychiatry's conceptual limitations become particularly exposed and its assumptions of universality particularly problematized." (Benning 62)[33]

It is no less problematic to attempt to apply our modern, psychologically informed presuppositions onto Margery Kempe, a denizen of the fifteenth century, than it is to expect the treatments and therapies devised to explain and correct perceived disorders that may not even be recognized as inherently negative or problematic by a culture that bases its very conception of identity and self on radically different values.

A particular element of the epistemological worldview that appears to have been shared by Kempe's early fifteenth century Europe and by many (though certainly not all)

---

[33] This observation is made by the psychologist Tonny Benning, in his article "Envisioning Deep Collaboration Between Psychiatry and Traditional Ways of Knowing in A British Columbia First Nations Setting: A Personal Reflection," as a result of his work in the Frasier Valley region of British Columbia with a First Nations populations. It is strikingly similar to observations I heard from my own father who was both a pediatric neuropsychologist and practicing shamanic animist.

Native American, First Nations and likely many other indigenous societies is a recognition of the potential value of the visionary experience. What is strikingly different between the modern, largely academic mode of thought and the mystic accepting ontological viewpoints shared by Margery Kempe and many indigenous populations is the inability of the modern perspective to see value in abnormal behavior. The act of relegating visionary experience to the realm of disease largely precludes the ability to positively incorporate individuals expressing such differences into useful social roles. Even those critics who do take a more productive approach often focus entirely on social and cultural concerns at the expense of recognizing the important spiritual context of the work.

Seeing Margery Kempe as abnormal is exactly the problem. Her behavior, while extreme, is explainable within the contemporary framework of popular lay religious belief. It is also important to note that her behavior is not essentially viewed as aberrant; rather, it is seen as potentially dangerous within an established framework of doctrine. This is a particular binary system which she is engaged in. She is not predominantly viewed as mistaken or 'ill' by her contemporaries, but rather as potentially divinely or infernally inspired. While there are occasions where her authenticity is doubted, the most severe threats in the text appear when her visions are believed authentic, but to have been inspired by an infernal source. This in no way lessens the potential danger of her situation, but it does cast her tribulations in an entirely different light.

That is a view that is also shared by many far more mainstream contemporary religious communities throughout the contemporary world. According to a benchmark

2008 PEW survey on the religious landscape in America, belief in direct supernatural

intervention is not only common, it is prevalent. Significant majorities of the population

believe in the efficacy of spiritual practices and in the intercession of divine and infernal

beings in a manner that would likely be quite recognizable to Margery Kempe. Perhaps

the most telling element of the poll is in relation to belief in the existence and

intervention of angels and demons:

> Similar patterns exist with respect to beliefs about the existence of angels and
> demons. Nearly seven-in-ten Americans (68%) believe that angels and demons
> are active in the world. Majorities of Jehovah's Witnesses (78%), members of
> evangelical (61%) and historically black (59%) Protestant churches, and
> Mormons (59%) are completely convinced of the existence of angels and demons.
> ("U.S. Religious Landscape Survey") [34]

It is telling that this statistic speaks directly to the point that Margery Kempe's

interpretation of her visionary experience is in line with what a significant portion of both

her contemporary and even a modern audience might identify as common belief. Not

only is the intercession by spiritual entities accepted in both instances, but the possibility

of that intercession being with divinely or infernally inspired exists in both traditions.

The question, again, would not be whether the vision was authentic or not, but whether it

was a good or an evil visitation.

---

[34] The 2008 Pew Religious Landscape study surveyed over 35,000 Americans from all 50
states and across all denominations provides one of the most comprehensive views of
popular contemporary belief in the United States. There is no direct analog for visionary
experience in the survey, though a section of the survey was dedicated to "Belief in the
Supernatural." Among other results in this section, it was also reported that 79% of
Americans agree that miracles still occur today. There is also ample evidence of direct
intercessory belief, with 31% of Americans noting that they believe their prayers receive
"Definite and specific answers from God at least one a month."

Not only is there significant contemporary historical evidence that Margery

Kempe's beliefs were relatively commonplace, and not only is there a preponderance of

similar experience across a wide variety of spiritual traditions, but our own modern

society would largely recognize her experiences as existing within a framework of

spiritual beliefs shared by the vast majority of modern Americans. The problem is, quite

possibly, one of academic bias. Secularism is not as rampant in academia as is

sometimes believed, but there are significant atheistic and agnostic majorities,

particularly at research focused academic institutions that might explain some of the

disconnect that occurs in the interpretation of a work like *The Book of Margery Kempe*.[35]

Though perhaps uncomfortable to admit, it may be that the secularism of academic

culture makes it all the more likely that effective, objective evaluation of a text with a

demonstratively religious focus, especially one not as often studied in the context of

religious studies, might engender such problematic readings.

So the question remains of how to approach a text like Kempe's. Is it possible to

accept it as a within the contextual framework of the belief system that engendered it

without becoming so relativistic as to lose all ability to engage significantly with the

---

[35] While a much cited 2009 survey of religious beliefs among academics did find that the atheism and agnosticism of academics are often overstated, there is an interesting correlation, particularly in the area of those most likely to pursue significant research. "And whereas about 44.5 percent of community college professors and 38.5 percent of professors at four-year schools say they have no doubt God exists, the same is true for only about 20.4 percent of professors teaching at elite doctoral universities" (Gross & Simmons 114). While this by no means indicates that even a majority of research focused and publishing academics are non-religious, it does point to a possible and significant potential bias that could inform the interpretation of text like *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

work? Must reading the text through a necessarily subjective lens inform the reading in a manner that misunderstands the essential value of the work and relegates it to the province of pathology? Clearly, we can read biographical texts that depict visionary experiences and relate mystical encounters without anthologizing the authors. We do this all the time with text that are clearly outside of the our own often Western and European informed cultural milieu, and in such case the academic ability to objectively view such works as both other and still approachable. We need to read Margery Kempe with the same care with which we might read a work about mystical experiences of a wholly different culture wherein we would immediately recognize both our divide from its essential context and the necessity of understanding it within that context in order to be able to read it effectively.

Fortunately, such an interpretive pattern already exists, though certainly not without some significant internal problems. A wide range of scholars, both Native and of entirely European descent and perspective have engaged with a number of recorded works of Native American Spiritual expression. Recognizing the need to contextualize these works and the inherent problem of pathologizing them, such impulses appear to have been more frequently avoided. The practice of bad medicine, diagnosing and dismissing the visionary experiences of these mystics, is avoided. Simultaneously, the potential for understanding such complex experiences as the distinction between good or bad "medicine," and the product of a significantly different ontological conception of the world is made possible by the very recognition and acceptance of the underlying difference between the author and the reader.

Native Examples (Contra Contemporaneous Context)

Rather than viewing Kempe as an aberration in the mystical tradition or as a disturbed or pathological figure, it is more critically productive to see her as the product of a fundamental, if little understood human experience. While a number of features of Margery Kempe's work seem to place it outside of the normative religious experience of her contemporaries, it is hard to point to a single feature that is not found elsewhere in the record of late medieval mysticism. A number of the main tropes found in *The Book of Margery Kempe* can also be seen in the work of visionaries and mystics from radically different cultures. This sort of comparative approach is most important for understanding visionary literature as a 'normal' component of the human experience.

Thus, it may be of use to look at the visionary experiences of other cultures that incorporate such forms of direct spiritual contact in less formalized and potentially restrictive ways. There exists a curious record of visionary literature captured, however problematically, at the close of the nineteenth century in the American West. The visionary literature of Native Americans such as Black Elk and Handsome Lake enjoy a number of similarities with the work of Margery Kempe. These works are also the product of amanuenses who provide a link between the illiterate subject and the literate audience. More importantly, many of the same concerns over the visionary experience and its reception are expressed in these works.

A particularly useful comparative example occurs in the visionary experiences and literature of the Native American tradition as it was captured in the troubled period between the end of the eighteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century. For a variety

of social and cultural reasons it seems well understood that the recounted religious experiences of Native American mystics such as the Iroquois prophet Handsome Lake or the Lakota visionary Black Elk should not be dismissed as pathological. No doubt this is due in part to an ever-increasing awareness of dangers of cultural imperialism and a corresponding desire to embrace the values of multiculturalism. However, these cultural practices also benefit from the recognition that they are occurring in a completely different cultural context.

The distance of these texts is more cultural and ethnic than it is temporal, and it seems somehow inconsistent to deny a figure such as Margery Kempe the same kind of respect and consideration. I think it is entirely arguable that her milieu is at least as different and far removed from that of contemporary culture, despite misleading confluences of language and religion. By examining the literature of two prominent Native American visionaries, regarded both within and outside of their own cultural boundaries as relevant and inspirational, we can perhaps find a way to look at Margery Kempe with the same kind of objective respect.

I'll begin with the better known figure of Black Elk before moving on to the lesser known of these two figures, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Senecan prophet Handsome Lake. Both of these figures were members of essentially pre-literate societies confronting catastrophic contact with invasive white settlers. The accounts of the experiences of both men are, much like that of Margery Kempe, written down by members of the literate establishment. Nevertheless, again as with Margery

54

Kempe, the value of the visionary experience of these individuals and the worthiness of that experience to be recorded was recognized.

Black Elk

Examining the visionary experiences of Margery Kempe and comparing them with other visionaries, particularly that of likely the most famous Native American recorded visionary experience of Black Elk, it becomes clear that there are a great number of similarities between the accounts to a degree that is surprising considering the temporal, geographic and cultural differences that produced them. Even the methods of transmission have a certain similarity in that they were produced by amanuenses, who necessarily inform the texts with their own biases.[36] These are both mediated texts. In the case of Kempe, her work is mediated by priests, men who have significant authority over her, and who cannot have helped but be sensitive to the challenge of transcribing the visionary experience of a woman who has at multiple times faced significant charges of heresy. In the case of Black Elk, his work is translated and transcribed by a white man, with all the challenges that brings to the putting down of an account of genocide and resistance.

There are other structural similarities as well that demonstrate both the commonality of the nature of the visionary experience and the degree to which the recounting of it is an always vexed process. Both visionary experiences begin with an

---

[36] There is significant controversy over the accuracy and creative license of Neihardt in reconstructing Black Elk's account. The seminal work on this is Raymond NeDeMallie's *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt.*

account of bodily illness the precipitates encounter with the mystical. In the case of

Black Elk, the illness occurs in his youth.

> We stopped to get a drink from a creek, and when I got off my horse, my legs crumpled under me and I could not walk. So the boys helped me up and put me on my horse; and when we camped again that evening, I was sick. The next day the camp moved on to where the different bands of our people were coming together, and I rode in a pony drag, for I was very sick. Both my legs and both my arms were swollen badly and my face was all puffed up.
> When we had camped again, I was lying in our tepee and my mother and father were sitting beside me. I could see out through the opening, and there two men were coming from the clouds, headfirst like arrows slanting down, and I knew they were the same that I had seen before. Each now carried a long spear, and from the points of these a jagged lightning flashed. They came clear down to the ground this time and stood a little way off and looked at me and said: "Hurry! Come! Your Grandfathers are calling you!" (Black Elk 17)[37]

Black Elk is called to the vision, but significantly that call is preceded by a physical

debilitation that both risks the life of the visionary and also seems to make possible the

transition from the material to the spiritual realm. Margery Kempe notes that her visions

were initiated when she was, "towched be the hand of owyr Lord wyth grett bodyly

sekenesse, wher thorw sche lost reson and her wyttes a long tym tyl ower Lord be grace

restoryd her ageyn," (22-23). In both cases an illness is inculcated in the mystic that

makes possible the visionary journey, and this illness is recorded as a terrifying prologue

that serves both to raise the stakes of the mystical experience and to narratively bring the

mystic closer to the liminal space of visionary experience.

---

[37] Despite the controversy over the degree to which Neihardt altered or interpreted the narrative of Black Elk, I have chosen to follow the tradition of giving the primary attribution for the text to Black Elk.Black Elk, and John Gneisenau Neihardt's, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux.*

The visions imparted are also seen by their experiencers as central and vital, not only to themselves but to a much larger population. For Black Elk, the vision is a path to revitalization and survival for his tribe. By means of its dissemination, it appears that it will bring vitality and power to a people all too aware of the precariousness of their position.

> And a Voice said: "Behold, they have given you the center of the nation's hoop to make it live."So I rode to the center of the village, with the horse troops in their quarters round about me, and there the people gathered. And the Voice said: "Give them now the flowering stick that they may flourish, and the sacred pipe that they may know the power that is peace, and the wing of the white giant that they may have endurance and face all winds with courage." (Black Elk 26)

This passage of the vision acknowledges the precariousness of the visionary and his society by recognizing the need for peace, endurance and courage. For Kempe, the import is far more direct and less nuanced, but perhaps all the more ambitious for that. She is simply given a mandate from her spiritual benefactor that her vision should be shared. "Aftyrward whan it plesyd ower Lord, he comawnded hyr and chargyd hir that sche schuld don wryten hyr felyngys and revelacyons and the forme of her levyngs that hys goodnesse myth be knowyn to alle the world." (64-66) While sparse, it is telling that she views her experience as one of universal import, belonging to the whole of the, presumably Christian, world.

It is tempting to once again turn to pathology and see these instances as evidence of narcissism or a messiah complex, but in both cases there is great apprehension as a result of the experience. This may be one of the most important facets of a comparative approach that seeks to find commonality even across culturally and chronologically distinct examples of similar recorded experience. Such an approach necessitates

57

recognition that the experiences are not aberrant or pathological. They are instead deeply

significant, both to the visionary and to those who believe in the authenticity of the

visionary's experience. Importantly, they are not pleasant or easy, nor do they engender

certainty in the mystic.

At the beginning of her account, Margery Kempe recounts her own doubts about

the nature of her visionary experience and its meaning in her initial report of her illness

and subsequent despair. Black Elk faces a similar and perhaps even more prolonged

uncertainty. He is unable to tell others what has occurred, fearing that he will not be

believed and also because the vision is difficult to hold onto.

> Everybody was glad that I was living; but as I lay there thinking about the
> wonderful place where I had been and all that I had seen, I was very sad; for it
> seemed to me that everybody ought to know about it, but I was afraid to tell,
> because I knew that nobody would believe me, little as I was, for I was only nine
> years old. Also, as I lay there thinking of my vision, I could see it all again and
> feel the meaning with a part of me like a strange power glowing in my body; but
> when the part of me that talks would try to make words for the meaning, it would
> be like fog and get away from me. (Black Elk 37)

Black Elk expresses a fear of not being believed, which at least in part appears to be a

result of his marginal position, as a youth. There is a tempting parallel between his own

relative lack of status and that of Margery who likewise inhabits a marginal position as a

woman.

The visionary experience alters the receiver and separates him or her from

society. In Kmepe we see this in her domestic travails, the disintegration of her

connubial relationship and her constant persecution. Black Elk suffers a perhaps less

sever but still significant distancing as a result of his mystical experience, a detachment

even noted by other surviving members of his tribe. In Neihardt's account Standing Bear

58

also recounts his own experience of Black Elk's change after his visionary experience and the manner in which it altered him and separated him from his family and friends.

> But as we rode along together and talked, he was not like a boy. He was more like an old man. And I can remember his father talking to my father in our tepee while we were eating one evening. He said something like this: "Since my boy was sick, he is not the same boy. He has queer ways and he does not like to be at home. I feel sorry about the way he is, poor boy!" (Black Elk 40)

Just as is the case with Margery Kempe, the visions isolate him from family and friends. The telling difference here is that, in the case of Black Elk, the isolation occurs before the revelation to others of the vision.

It is a self-imposed exile, brought about by fear rather than by ostracism. Black Elk recounts how his continued reticence to share his visionary experience haunts and isolates him

> The fear was not so great all the while in the winter, but sometimes it was bad. Sometimes the crying of coyotes out in the cold made me so afraid that I would run out of one tepee into another, and I would do this until I was worn out and fell asleep. I wondered if maybe I was only crazy; and my father and mother worried a great deal about me. They said: "It is the strange sickness he had that time when we gave the horse to Whirlwind Chaser for curing him; and he is not cured." I could not tell them what was the matter, for then they would only think I was queerer than ever. (Black Elk 122)

As is the case with Kempe, Black elk does acknowledge an alternate explanation of his predicament, noting that even he wonders if he is "crazy." As with Margery Kempe's own acknowledgement of her seeming "madness," this is a term and an admission that should be treated with caution. It may be worth noting that "crazy" is not at all the necessarily pejorative term it might seem. The qualifying only denotes that, in fact, such a condition might be preferable to the visionary path. Additionally, a host of appellations

such as that of the famed Crazy Horse himself, demonstrate that "crazy" may also be associated with a kind of heroic bravery and nonconformity.

Perhaps most surprising is the resolution of Black Elk's predicament. He eventually comes clean to Black Road, who simply accepts what he has revealed and informs him that the problem is that he has not performed the vision and realized the horse dance before his people. Black Elk benefits from this early acceptance and leans on the authority of Bear Sings and Black Road who help him prepare his ceremony. Indeed, it is clear that Black Road and Bear Sings also wish to appropriate the songs that Black Elk has returned with, seeing great value in his vision and implicitly accepting its authenticity.

When his vision finally is enacted, the experience is transformative in a manner that is recognizable from the accounts of Kempe. The vision becomes more real than the actual, physical world.

> And as they sang, a strange thing happened. My bay pricked up his ears and raised his tail and pawed the earth, neighing long and loud to where the sun goes down. And the four black horses raised their voices, neighing long and loud, and the whites and the sorrels and the buckskins did the same; and all the other horses in the village neighed, and even those out grazing in the valley and on the hill slopes raised their heads and neighed together. Then suddenly, as I sat there looking at the cloud, I saw my vision yonder once again--the tepee built of cloud and sewed with lightning, the flaming rainbow door and, underneath, the Six Grandfathers sitting, and all the horses thronging in their quarters; and also there was I myself upon my bay before the tepee. I looked about me and could see that what we then were doing was like a shadow cast upon the earth from yonder vision in the heavens, so bright it was and clear. I knew the real was yonder and the darkened dream of it was here. (Black Elk 129-130)

Comparing this account of mystical experience with similar passages in *The Book of Margery Kempe* reveals a striking similarity.

> Thys melody was so swete that it passyd alle the melodye that evyr myght be herd in this world wythowtyn ony comparyson, and caused this creatur whan sche herd ony myrth or melodye aftyrward for to have ful plentyuows and habundawnt teerys of hy devocyon wyth greet sobbyngys and syhyngys aftyr the blysse of heven, not dredyng the schamys and the spytys of the wretchyd world. (244-248)

Both of these visionaries recount their mystical experiences as seeming more real and vital than their actual worldly perceptions. There is a telling inversion in both these accounts that prioritizes the spiritual world over the material, and in so doing demeans and repudiates the ordinary experience of mundane existence.

As a result of Black Elks confirmation through ritual, his status changes as a result of the performance of his vision in much the same fashion that Margery Kempe's fortunes alter as she is increasingly drawn into and incorporated within the church's establishment. He is reincorporated into the community and loses his supernatural dread of clouds. "The fear that was on me so long was gone, and when thunder clouds appeared I was always glad to see them, for they came as relatives now to visit me. Everything seemed good and beautiful now, and kind" (Black Elk 134). Furthermore, he is even granted enhanced status by his now established authority as a visionary. "Before this, the medicine men would not talk to me, but now they would come to me to talk about my vision" (Black Elk 135). His experience here is clearly distinct from that of Kempe as it is entirely possible for Black Elk to be drawn into the elite society of medicine men and to become a recognized healer and visionary. While Kempe does achieve a degree of notoriety and a following, there is always an underlying anxiety apparent in her text. For Black Elk, this anxiety occurs before his vision is shared and authenticated by the performance of ceremony, but largely absent until his latter accounts where he tragically

61

confides that he believes he may have failed his vision and his calling at the great expense of his people.

Yet for these distinctions, there are even more fascinating parallels between the accounts of Kempe and Black Elk. Perhaps the most troubling and emblematic spiritual activity of Kempe is her copious weeping. This too is a trait shared by Black Elk. He of course has cause to weep following the tragedies that befall his tribe, but the weeping is clearly described as a spiritual activity, and not only one that occurs spontaneously, but one that is sought out.

> Walking backwards to the center, I advanced upon the south. Until now I had only been trying to weep, but now I really wept, and the tears ran down my face; for as I looked yonder towards the place whence come the life of things, the nation's hoop and the flowering tree, I thought of the days when my relatives, now dead, were living and young, and of Crazy Horse who was our strength and would never come back to help us any more. (Black Elk 140)

Black Elk evokes weeping as part of his performance of ceremony, as a means of invoking memory of tragedy to generate new strength. For him and in his tradition, the significance and power of weeping do not even have to be explained. It is quite clear from the context that he expects his audience to know and recognize this fact. This is true even as his weeping becomes so intense it manifests as a physical threat.

> I cried very hard, and I thought it might be better if my crying would kill me; then I could be in the outer world where nothing is ever in despair.
> And while I was crying, something was coming from the south. It looked like dust far off, but when it came closer, I saw it was a cloud of beautiful butterflies of all colors. They swarmed around me so thick that I could see nothing else.
> I walked backwards to the flowering stick again, and the spotted eagle on the pine tree spoke and said: "Behold these! They are your people. They are in great difficulty and you shall help them." Then I could hear all the butterflies that were swarming over me, and they were all making a pitiful, whimpering noise as though they too were weeping.
> Then they all arose and flew back into the south.

Now the chicken hawk spoke from its bush and said: "Behold! Your Grandfathers shall come forth and you shall hear them!" (Neihardt 141)

The tears become symbolic of his connection to his people and emblematic of their overall suffering. While it may be dangerous to over emphasize the similarity between Black Elk's crying and Kempe's inspired weeping, especially that generated by her contemplation of Christ's suffering on the cross, they are both transformative experiences that empower the mystics who employ them. Black Elk also cries as part of a healing ceremony he conducts to help a young boy, successfully. "While I was singing this I could feel something queer all through my body, something that made me want to cry for all unhappy things, and there were tears on my face" (Black Elk 156). Black Elk manages to heal the boy, solidifying both his own claim to spiritual power and demonstrating the power of his redemptive suffering.

Again, it is tempting to overstate the significance of these similarities between the experiences of a late nineteenth century Native American and an early fifteenth century English woman. But, it is not the fact of the similarities of their experiences that is the precise point. Instead, what is critical is that these visionary experiences both reveal the challenges of relating to an account of mystical experience from a modern, rational and secular perspective. Yet, readers are far less likely to pathologize or dismiss the experience of Black Elk and to recognize the authenticity and value of his account of visionary practice. By recognizing the similarities between these two distinct and distant accounts, and recognizing the inherent bias of prioritizing one as more authentic or worthy, at least as that worth is based on a conception of the work as genuine and not the product of pathology, it may be possible to re-engage with Kempe's and other

marginalized or maligned texts, thus opening up new possibilities for productive associative readings.

Handsome Lake

Handsome Lake (1735-1815) was a Seneca leader who, suffering from alcoholism and the dissolution of his tribal way of life, experienced a series of visions in 1799 which became the foundation of the Ganioda'yo religion. The religion of Ganioda'yo is still practiced today by over 5000 members of the Iroquois tribes in upper New York, Ontario and Quebec[38], incorporating traditional rites with a modernizing ethic, influenced strongly by the surprisingly understanding Quakers who lived among them.

His visions provided a framework for incorporating traditional beliefs with a more modern, agrarian lifestyle. They focused on a series of proscriptions against a variety of sins, including drunkenness and the practice of witchcraft, and on maintaining close community ties and tradition while still maintaining a link to traditional culture. Not surprisingly, there was a degree of anxiety over this reform.

In a fascinating account of one of Handsome Lake's initial visions, the prophet is encouraged in his work by no less a figure than Jesus Christ. This is particularly revealing as Christ does not here appear as a divine figure, nor is the Ganioda'ya religion a Christian denomination. In fact, the vision of Christ specifically instructs Handsome Lake to continue in his traditional beliefs. Instead, Christ here acts in the role of a fellow prophet suffering anxiety over his reception.

> He asked Handsome Lake how the Indians received his teachings. When
> Handsome Lake said that half his people believed in him, Jesus declared, "You

---

[38] See John R Hinnels, *The Penguin Dictionary of Religions, 2nd ed.*

are more successful than I for some believe in you but none in me. I am inclined to believe that in the end it will be so with you. Now it is rumored that you are but a talker with spirits. Now it is true that I am a spirit and the one of him who was murdered. Now tell your people that they will become lost when thy follow the ways of the white man." (Wallace 244)

There is much to unpack in this statement, but perhaps the most critical point, and the one most relevant for this argument, is the internal acknowledgement within the vision of the difference between the experience of Handsome Lake and the experience of the spirit's own reception, that related by the vision of Jesus. The spirit of Jesus recognizes that no one will believe in him, but the authenticity of Handsome Lake's visions is recognized by everyone in his community. Though only half "received his teachings," even those who do not at least recognize him as a "talker with spirits."

Here we see the same kind of anxiety that Margery Kempe suffered, the fear of social alienation and questioning of the source of the visionary message that was received, but not in any way a dismissal of the visionary experience itself. As with Kempe, that anxiety and the subsequent attacks upon the visionary and the message are transformed into an authorizing force. The very trial of community recognition serves to reinforce the authenticity of the claim by providing an opportunity to display the commitment of the mystic and to engage in the kind of legitimating miracles that establish the authenticity of the message.

We can also see here the same anxiety over the source of the message. In the case of Handsome Lake, the visionary experience is not denied; rather it is the motivation of the supernatural agent which is questioned. Handsome Lake receives comfort from his spirit guide on exactly this issue.

> The guide now went on to lecture Handsome Lake. He praised him for reporting his vision to the people, repeated the warnings against alcohol and witchcraft, and deplored the human tendency to confuse dreams inspired by the Great Spirit with those instilled by the Devil. (Wallace 246)

Compare this with the experience of Margery Kempe upon her visit to Canterbury.

There, she engages in a discussion with monks who become annoyed with her obsessive

weeping. They challenge her, asking "What kanst thow seyn of God?" (627). Implicit in

this confrontation is the expectation that she will not be able to speak knowledgably.

Instead, she is able to relate scripture so successfully that she invokes an altogether

different and more dangerous response. After she demonstrates her knowledge she is

confronted by another monk. "Than a yong monke seyde to this creatur, 'Eythyr thow

hast the Holy Gost or ellys thow hast a devyl wythin the, for that thu spekyst her to us it

is Holy Wrytte, and that hast thu not of thiself.'" (631-3) When she demonstrates

scriptural knowledge her audience immediately points to an outside agency as the source,

a claim that, while inherently problematic nicely demonstrates the easy acceptance of

spiritually received information. [39]   The question is whether she is inspired by divine or

infernal agents. These concerns are reiterated again and again throughout the book, both

by external critics and be the author herself in moments of self doubt, as she is

consistently confronted with the possibility that her visions are indeed real, but sent from

the devil.

This incident precipitates one of the earliest and most serious threats to Margery

Kempe's life. She proceeds to tell a quite clever story about a man who is commanded

---

[39] As previously discussed and quoted (*The Book of Margery Kempe* 3634-3646).

by God to pay for chastisement. When he is latter chided by a collection of great men, he begins to laugh and reveals that they have saved him a considerable sum. This event precipitates a small riot and she is in danger of being declared a heretic and burned by an angry mob. Only the intervention of two mysterious young men saves her. The danger of her message is that it subverts the attempts of the religious authorities to control access to spiritual interpretation, and even more profoundly that it inverts any attempt to deny the authority of the visionary by recasting such critiques as penitential persecution. The denial of the vision is not really a culturally acceptable option. All that can be questioned is the source of the vision, and by standing up to persecution, the visionary automatically authenticates the mystical experience as divinely inspired by equating it with the central metaphor of Christ's own persecution.

Here we come to a crux of the understanding of the mystical experience. Rather than seek to deny the reality of the visionary experience, the consistent contemporary critique is of the potential source of the experience. While there is occasional doubt about the authenticity of the visionary experience, these are minor notes. The issue is not primarily a question of whether there was a vision or not, or even whether the vision is the agent of an outside spiritual force. Instead, the question is whether or not that spiritual source intends help or harm. Put simply, is it a good vision or an evil one. This is completely consistent with the kind of binary, even dualistic belief systems by which both Margery Kempe and Handsome Lake were encompassed.

By focusing on the authenticity of the religious experience we run the danger of completely misunderstanding the cultural context of the visionary experience in these

67

cases. Pathologizing Margery Kempe or Handsome Lake may be bad medical practice, but it also fails to recognize a major feature of the mystical experience, the danger of bad medicine. What I refer to here is the belief in both good and bad sources of spiritual power and inspiration, good and bad 'medicine,' to use that word as it is found in the Native American lexicon. This conflict between good and bad medicine is a concept well known in contexts of many Native American belief systems, and apparently in operation (though admittedly born of a radically different cosmology) in the theology of Margery Kempe's world.

The pun is, I think useful here in illustrating the central problem. By retreating to modern and popular beliefs in psychology we run the very real risk of removing the visionary experience from an essential understanding of the context in which it occurred. Questioning the visionary experience itself makes it nearly impossible to understand or engage with the real conflict the mystic experienced, that of proving that the vision was divine, good, and a source of weal instead of woe. Instead, we must read the texts in good faith, accepting the realities of their own perceived experience and interacting with them in a way that recognizes and validates the authenticity of that experience while also understanding that we must bring to it our own subjective perspective in order to work with instead of on the text to create new meaning.

Chapter 2
Chaucer's Trickster Figures

> "Ther was also a REVE, and a MILLERE,
> A SOMNOUR, and a PARDONER also,
> A MAUNCIPLE, and myself – ther were namo. (*General Prologue* 542-544)[40]

Arguably, the most compelling figures in Chaucer's masterwork are the liminal characters who make up the last group of pilgrims presented at the end of the *General Prologue*. This particular group of pilgrims, notably including the authorial avatar himself, both concludes and complicates the society that has been constructed through the preceding five hundred lines. Not only do these figures disrupt the already complicated depiction of social order that Chaucer began more than five hundred lines prior with his claim to, "Tell yow al the condicioun / Of ech of hem, so as it semed me, / And whiche they weren and of what degree," (38-40). These six figures at the end of the catalogue do not as easily fit into the categories of "condicioun" and "degree" as do the other figures in the "General Prologue," though of course there are numerous prior anomalies and complications. Still, this last group is particularly perplexing, especially as it does not form an obvious and coherent social unit in and of itself as had, arguably, all of the prior sub groupings.

Here, at the end, the catalogue has not been able to fix the relative status of each individual and to place them in an overarching and coherent order, leaving a segregated cadre of almost un-placeable individuals. The qualities this group does share are by and

---

[40] All citations of Chaucerian works are from *The Riverside Chaucer* with the specific text noted when not obvious by context.

large anti-social in the sense that they take advantage of the existing order for their own individual gain and act in an essentially parasitic manner on the society as a whole. David Lawton notes the significant rupture that occurs at the point of the introduction of these figures (and he significantly includes The Wife of Bath along with them) in the Prologue, and their subsequent effect on the rest of the poem:

> It seems to me that this conflict – between, on the one hand, poverty, discretion, and virtue and, on the other, avarice, easy speech, and vice – is one of the organizing principles of *The General Prologue*. This is especially so from line 445 onward. All the characters encountered from that point, with the exception of the Plowman, are those characters (except the Friar) who are most implicated in the frame of *The Canterbury Tales*: Wife of Bath, Pardoner, Summoner, Miller, Reeve, Manciple. These are the characters in whose persons – by devices such as interruptions, confessional prologues, or "quytyng" structures – the frame is made to impinge on the narrative and generates a framing drama of its own around it. (Lawton 31)

Lawton somewhat extends the field of problematic characters to a few members appearing previous to this last group, but by concentrating on this last group his point becomes even more obvious and clear. It significant that these final figures not only close out the composition of the pilgrim group, with the singular exception of the Host himself as an external but no less liminal figure, but are also the ones that by and large generate the frame narrative of *The Canterbury Tales*. It is as if their failure to be perfectly incorporated into the portrait series has provided them license to continue to resolve their identities through the rest of the text.

Furthermore, the appearance of these figures in the "General Prologue" at this final point in the introductions suggests the very openness of the text as a whole and intentionally compromises the cohesiveness of both the pilgrim society and of Chaucer's text itself. They are, in effect, a kind of narrative trick played upon the audience, and the

consequences of their inclusion, again both in the group and in the text, will both continually threaten and then allow for the reaffirmation of the whole throughout the various individual tales they tell and in the prologues and epilogues they disrupt. Their roles incorporate both subversion and containment in a fashion quite similar to that of other subversive literary characters such as those discussed in Greenblatt's "Invisible Bullets"[41] and also similar to the traditional role of an equivalent group of figures in a variety of mythic and folkloric traditions.

As is common with such figures, there are elements of internal consistency even within the problematic internal subdivisions of these last six figures. Taken in parts, it might make sense to group the Reeve and the Miller as they both occupy liminal places in the traditional village economy, and the Pardoner and Summoner both play facilitating roles in the clerical hierarchy. It is perhaps more difficult to link the Maunciple and the narrator together in a unit, though there is a certain logic to their association if Chaucer's own biographical connection to the courts is accepted. The Maunciple and perhaps the narrator Chaucer, as a reflection of his authorial counterpart, can also be tied to the city and the pursuit of commerce. Still, the group as a whole is notably not socially cohesive, and this lack of structure is likewise demonstrated in their individual and inherently disruptive natures.

---

[41] Greenblatt is expressly discussing the Renaissance, but his concept of subversion and containment seems equally applicable in this context.

Yet, I will argue that there is an even more prominent internal logic to this whole grouping. Each of these figures exists in a liminal space between more traditionally representative social stratum. They are all negotiators and, even more profoundly, parasitic, at least in their individual representation and arguably in the regular tropic expectations of their relative kinds. More particularly, they are, to borrow a term from the field of anthropology, "Trickster Figures," existing in a creative and generative liminal space between more representative groups, taking advantage of both sides but also creating something new and potentially valuable. It is also significant that this is a special group even within the already liminal confines of the pilgrim party, which is itself occupying a powerfully transitional space on the road to Canterbury.[42]

My argument here is that Levi-Strauss' analysis of the trickster figure in cultural mythology provides a useful lens through which to examine this Chaucerian rogue's gallery and to, perhaps better understand the problematic but essentially generative role they play in the text. The trickster is a challenging but also clearly, at least potentially, positive social force. It is thus necessary to first discuss, in brief, the qualities of the trickster and the cultural implications of the features these liminal figures share and to demonstrate the presence of these traits in the members of the final pilgrim group.

---

[42] Victor and Edith Turner discuss the liminality of pilgrimage and the particular importance of its disruptive potential in an otherwise significantly localized society (Turner 2-4).

Other Sources – Recognition of the Theory in Relation to Chaucer

Other scholars have noted the potential of using Levi-Strauss' structural analysis

of the trickster myth, formulated by analyzing Native American cultural models, to

examine the Canterbury Tales, but these acknowledgments have not been followed up

with systematic exploration. Of particular interest for this project is Peggy Knapp's

positioning of the Canterbury Tales as a "boundary" text, existing in a liminal space

between competing social models, and her recognition of the applicability of Levi-

Strauss' model to that paradigm:

> I consider the *Canterbury Tales* a boundary text, by which I mean one whose
> environment holds more than one configuration of power contending for
> preeminence as the fundamental way for its society to see life. Emerging social
> models, of course, have their singleminded partisans, just as the status quo does.
> But most people are capable of feeling the pressures of both the old and the new.
> Cultural struggles are waged for their allegiances and usually at their expense. At
> such times, works of art may perform a powerful mediating function. Some
> incorporate into one image an aspect of each contending force, like Levi-Strauss's
> trickster figures and other boundary walkers which seem to be both one thing and
> another (the coyote as linking the herbivorous grazing animals with carnivorous
> hunters by being a carrion eater). Such composite images create the illusion of
> solving a contradiction. Some of the Canterbury Tales facilitate change and make
> it less disorienting through the creation of images which incorporate both sides.
> Some submerge the markers for a subversive reading beneath those which ratify
> official codes. Some make the struggle apparent. All exert social force…
> (Knapp 8)

Knapp points out the capacity for both subversion and containment, again very much in a

"Greenblattian" sense, that is inherent in the trickster figure paradigm. She also

emphasizes the liminal and transgressive qualities of Chaucer's rogues and even suggests

the appropriateness of considering them through the same anthropological lens that is

used to explore the protean tricksters.

Particularly important in her formulation is the point that such figures only seem to solve the inherent contradictions they embody. This is a feature that is experienced in the *Canterbury Tales* in a number of ways, but most vividly through the problematic and often compromised ends of some of the tales and in the quitting that goes on between some of the representative figures, such as that which occurs between the Miller and the Reve. Not only do Chaucer's characters embody this liminal role, but the text itself is a kind of trickster narrative, complicating itself with recursive interactions and constantly threatening and reaffirming its own integrity.

Central to the textual play of Chaucer's great work is the use of humor in the text, embodied, in the most essential sense of that term, in the characters that generate the most problematic potential readings of society and are most willing to both personally and narratively transgress that society's rules. It is no accident that the most humorous moments in the text are generated by these liminial figures. Humor, particularly the trickster's quixotic brand of it, works largely through transgression of social norms and the breaking of taboos. It should not be surprising then to find that scholars from the mythic and folkloric tradition, particularly scholars of native and indigenous literature, have likewise recognized an analogue in the works of Chaucer. Cheyfitz, in his article, "The (Post) Colonial Construction of Indian Country," elegantly notes the inverse relationship:

> "The importance of kinship, which is the very fabric of Native societies, is highlighted through its comic violation by trickster, who engages in what Western readers or listeners might recognize as an extreme form of slapstick, particularly

of the ribald (scatological and sexual) kind, which has its parallels in such
Western literary figures as Chaucer and Rabelais…" (Cheyfitz 63)[43]
These violations exist in myriad forms in the *Canterbury Tales*, particularly in the tales of

the tricksters that compose the last introduced group of pilgrims. In this case Cheyfitz is

attempting to make use of his audience's familiarity with the works of Chaucer and

Rabelais to provide an effective analogy for understanding the role of the trickster figure

in Native American literature. However, it may be even more productive to reverse this

process and examine how an analysis of the features of the trickster figure based on

Native, indigenous, mythic and folkloric literature might enhance our understanding of

how similar figures are deployed in the works of Chaucer, and in particular the final

group of pilgrims.

Trickster Theory Applied

In his seminal work, *Structural Anthropology,* Claude Levi-Strauss used the

analytical tools of semiotic theory to open up and attempt to explain the symbolic logic

behind the mythic structures of culture. His goal, at least in part, was to attempt to

rationalize and explain the seemingly inexplicable and often superficially contradictory

elements of mythology. A particular portion of this theory, that focusing on trickster

figures, predominantly as they appear in the indigenous cultures of the American north

and south west, provides the key for understanding seemingly un-reconcilable mythic

tropes and memes

---

[43] Cheyfitz association of the trickster figure with the works of Chaucer is particularly
significant as it is essentially assumed rather than explicated.   It also represents a useful
moment of inversion where the anthropological concept is reflected from the realm of
Native American scholarship and interpretation back upon European analogues.

Our method not only has the advantage of bringing some kind of order to what was previously chaos; it also enables us to perceive some basic logical processes which are at the root of mythical thought. Three main processes should be distinguished.

The trickster of American mythology has remained so far a problematic figure. Why is it that throughout North America his role is assigned practically everywhere to either coyote or raven? If we keep in mind that mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution, the reason for these choices becomes clearer. We need only assume that two opposite terms with no intermediary always tend to be replaced by two equivalent terms which admit of a third one as a mediator; then one of the polar terms and the mediator become replaced by a new triad, and so on. (Levi-Strauss 224)

This quality of mediation is the essential characteristic of the trickster figure. It is also the connective feature that each of Chaucer's final six figures have in common. They each perform a mediatory role between different strata in society, between the spiritual and the material and even the most essential mediation between production of food and its consumption. Of course, Chaucer himself is the ultimate mediator, channeling the fiction of the pilgrim's tales to the reader, relying on a suspension of disbelief in the authenticity of the tale in order for his "earnest game" to work.

Briefly, though it will be touched upon in greater detail in this discussion, it is important to explain the liminal and mediatory status of each of these figures. To this end, I will take these six figures in the pairs in which they are first textually represented by association within the rhyming lines between 542 and 544. It is worth at least briefly acknowledging that this order, Reeve and Miller, Summoner and Pardoner, Maunciple and the textual Chaucer, is not replicated in the following expansions of each of the figures. Instead, they are presented in the order of Miller, Maunciple, Reeve, Summoner, Pardoner, with the narrator elided. This change must be authorially intentional, but it is not explained by any clear constraints of internal rhyme or meter as the only professional

76

title that is used in an end rhyme is that of "Millere," corresponding to the previous "mere" of line 541. Ostensibly, that could explain the why the Miller, presented first in the long descriptions but second in the initial listings, shifts order. However, that reasoning cannot explain why the Maunciple should intrude between the Miller and the Reeve.

Rather, I would propose a reading that there is a subtle doubling of association that is occurring in the relational juxtaposition of these portraits. The Reeve and Miller make a fine associational pair, both existing in the agrarian realm and associated deeply with the manorial economy, and are therefore presented together in the forecast of characters. However, in terms of their intercessionary roles, there is a clear progressive hierarchy from Miller to Maunciple, to Reeve based upon the figures upon whom each of these professions most associates with and, significantly, preys upon. The Miller lives among and depends upon the peasantry. The Maunciple, and urban type, works for an Inn of Court and thus associates with and preys upon a rising professional class. Finally, the Reeve takes on and imitates the manorial lord, finishing a sort of curious tour of the social stratum. In this way, Chaucer develops multiple associational references that inform his use of the different types in this section of the *General Prologue*, demonstrating the multiple and interdependent levels at which these trickster figures operate both as parasites and as intercessors.

The Reeve acts as intermediary between the lord of the manor and the peasants who provide the labor. Importantly, the Reeve was always of villein status (significant because his labor duties were traditionally recused as part of his compensation for

assuming the role) and thus a part of the village in a very real and binding way.[44] Yet, the Reeve was also assigned the duty of tallying the demesne account and actin in many ways as the manorial lord's proxy.

His position also allowed him to make much use of his lord's resources for his own enrichment, as is the case with Chaucer's exemplar of the profession who has his lord's demesne fully in his own thrall, "His lords sheep, his neet, his dayeree, / His swyn, his hors, his stoor, and his pultrye / Was hooly in this Reves governynge," (*General Prologue* 597-9). Importantly, Chaucer's Reeve not only acts as intermediary between lord and villain, he patently usurps the mastery of the manor. In this way, the Reeve is both liminal and transgressive, but also importantly he is clever and resourceful. These too are qualities of the trickster. His undermining of authority, his subversion of the "natural" manorial order, is likewise mixed with his containment of the agrarian society on which he depends. His governance is directed in his own interests, but it is governing nonetheless.

Likewise, the Miller was a liminal figure in the agrarian economy, presiding over what was effectively the lord's monopoly on the grinding of grain and often also collecting tolls for using attendant bridges over water features. Again, as with the Reeve, the Miller stands between the worlds of the village and the manor, thriving in the negotiated space, off the proceeds from his position. Those proceeds clearly exceed the

---

[44] A discussion of the Reeve's traditional role in village society and particularly evidence for the traditional villain status of the Reeve can be found in in the Lambdin's *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims in The Canterbury Tales* (289).

nominal and reasonable fees for the service provided, and Chaucer's Miller falls clearly into the pecuniary stereotype that so plagued the profession, "Well koulde he stelen corn and tollen threis; / And yet he hadde a thumb of gold, pardee." (562-3). Chaucer's use of the ironic commonplace that an honest miller has a thumb of gold points to the anxiety that the Millers liminal position evoked in the agrarian society.[45] Though the Miller did not produce the grain, it was unusable without his machinery and labor. Furthermore, the miller served as sort of intermediary proxy to the lord, applying his monopolistic perquisite. There is a doubled, or even as Chaucer indicates a tripled, threat in the person of the miller. He exacts the lord's toll and payment for his own labor, both widely recognized as legitimate if still resented appropriations, but also controlled the means of production and could thus siphon off yet another share from farmer with little threat of recourse.

Though certainly both the Reeve and Miller demonstrate enthusiastic self interest in their undertakings, they do nevertheless provide useful and essential services for the community. In this way they act as significant mediators in their communities. The Reeve provides governance and guidance that makes the agrarian society function and the Miller literally makes the production of food possibly by processing the raw grain into a usable form. They make the system work at the macro and the micro level, though they

---

[45] Meider traces the history of this phrase and its use in multiple literary texts as an exemplum of the sort of saying that now requires extensive explanation. Along the way, he develops an account of the frequent use of the phrase and the degree to which it displayed anxieties over the relationship between farmers and millers as a result of the near total control the later had over the former due to the monopoly on grinding grain (45-47).

are not clearly themselves entirely of the producing (peasant) or consuming (lordly) class, operating in the productive space in between.

As the Reeve and the Miller do, so the trickster must also maintain a foothold in both of the worlds in which he or she operates, embodying an inherent duality. Strauss notes that:

> "…the trickster is a mediator. Since his mediating function occupies a position halfway between two polar terms, he must retain something of that duality— namely an ambiguous and equivocal character. But the trickster figure is not the only conceivable form of mediation; some myths seem to be entirely devoted to the task of exhausting all the possible solutions to the problem of bridging the gap between two and one." (Levi-Strauss 226)

Thus, the egocentric and arguably parasitic nature of both of these characters is an essential feature. They exist in the form they take in Chaucer's work not because they are evil or bad, but because they are the best possible option for the continued working of the system, though not an entirely satisfactory solution at that. The great irony of these characters is that they do actually provide a useful service to their communities, despite the fact that their motivations are entirely self interested and even inimical to that community.

The placement of the Summoner and Pardoner in the final group further complicates the integrity of both the specific group and of the pilgrim company as a whole. Though these two figures (along with the Friar) are perhaps the most clearly negative and satirical inclusions. Much has been made of the avoidance of judgmental terms and obvious approbation in the text, but these two figures are clearly unsavory in both person and profession.

The seemingly curious lack of moral judgment throughout the descriptions of the individual characters that comprise the pilgrimage group has the effect of opening up the less savory characters to further authorial and audience identification. Jill Mann has noted the relationship between this un-prejudicial descriptive mode and the Chaucerian desire to compose the pilgrimage party of 'exemplary' figures, even exemplary rascals. "It is by ignoring effects that he can present the expertise of his rogues on the same level as the superlative qualities of his admirable figures." Even more than simply allowing the audience to accept the superlative level of skill these characters display, however well directed at larcenous ends that skill may be, Mann argues that this moral ambiguity further heightens the audience's awareness of the factors that define social relationships. "The overall effect of this method is rather to sharpen our perceptions of the basis of everyday attitudes to people, of the things we take into account and of the things we willingly ignore" (Mann 191). This curious effect of highlighting the ignored and focusing on the elided is also a quality inherent to a particular version of the trickster figure.

Considering the characters of the Summoner and the Pardoner as reverse analogs of the sacred clown or holy fool helps to make sense of their inclusion, both within the pilgrim party and in the text of the *Canterbury Tales* itself.[46] To be clear, it is not that

---

[46] Perhaps the best known version of this phenomenon in Native American society is the "Heyoka" from the Lakota tradition. These individuals were granted their special authority by virtue of having had visions of thunder beings. Balck Elk considered himself to be a Heyoka as a result of his famously recorded childhood visions. The Heyoka breaks taboos and does everything backwards, acting as a sort of mirror held up to the rest of the society, forcing it to examine its own contradictions and hypocrisies. For a more robust account of the Heyoka tradition see Elizabeth Hoffman Nelson's

they are holy or sacred, but rather that they are revelatory, as Mann implied, forcing an

uncomfortable awareness and introspection upon the audience.   The characteristic they

both share is a flexible acuity in their interpretative abilities, and in turn they force the

audience to confront assumptions and certainties. They can even, sometimes, willfully

re-interpret the moral boundaries of the world in which they exist. The Summoner

cleverly rationalizes his pecuniary punishments with a telling equivocation, "But if a

mannes soule were in his purs; / For in his purs he shoulde ypunyssshed be" *(General*

Prologue 656-7). His moral justification contains enough logic to serve as a damning

indictment of both himself and of his victim, and also of the whole society that is

complicit in both of their existences. The text achieves this profound critique while still

cleverly being contained within the rationalization of a truly terrible person. It is, in

another wonderfully "Greenblattian" equation, both subversive and contained, allowing

Chaucer – here the author and it is worth noting himself the greatest trickster of them all

– to safely hold up this mirror to society while maintaining a perfect deniability through

the double fictional distance of reported speech and fiction. The trickster embodies an

intellectual and even moral flexibility that is instructive and enlightening. By embodying

---

article on "The Heyoka of the Sioux" *in Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History: A Bio-bibliographical Sourcebook.* (246–248).

It is also worth noting that, while there was no specifically analogous tradition in Chaucer's England, there was a strong tradition of using humor in sacred plays to quite similar effect. A particularly enlightening examination of this tradition in The Second Shepherds' Play can be found in Jean N. Goodrich's chapter "'So I thought as I Stood, To Mirth Us Among': The Function of Laughter in The Second Shepherds' Play" in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, its Meaning, and Consequence* (532-545).

and illuminating the ethical ambiguities of the system that generated him, the Summoner serves a vital role by allowing satiric and critical social discourse.

This particular aspect of the trickster, a fluid moral stance that not only invites but almost requires its audience to critique and judge, may be what is most appealing to Chaucer. Emily Levine, the philosopher-comic (a particularly wonderful job title) articulated in her now famous 2009 TED talk "A (Trickster's) Theory of Everything," this essential quality of the trickster, "The trickster has a mind that's prepared for the unprepared [...] and has the ability to hold his ideas lightly so that he can let room in for new ideas or to see the contradictions or the hidden problems with his ideas." An essential characteristic of the trickster figure is the very plasticity and moral flexibility that makes him or her so problematic. It allows the trickster, and through the trickster the audience, to see the world as it truly is and, by seeing, question it. Again, Chaucer's rogues, and particularly his Summoner, caricature the moral certitude of the most fundamental institutions of medieval life, but they do this so well and with such aplomb that the audience cannot help but be drawn in, and so become complicit in the act of understanding.

The case for trickster status may at first appear more challenging to make with the Pardoner as he is perhaps the least sympathetic of the bunch, but he in turn embodies two specific qualities inherent in the trickster figure. He bridges the gulf between the spiritual and the material both by making (or at least pretending to make) the spiritual physically manifest in the relics he panders. In an admittedly problematic (and perhaps necessarily so) manner, he both simplifies and complicates the connection between heaven and earth.

This dualistic relationship, embodying both the sacred and the profane is another characteristic of the trickster. Lewis Hyde makes this point in his work, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art*:

> Furthermore, the cheating, stealing, lying that go along with this sacred/not-sacred position enables tricksters to perform a unique set of necessary tasks…from enlivening gods that have been deadened by their own purity to negotiating the otherwise necessary and impermeable divide between heaven and earth. It might be said that the trickster, like the psychopath, has a "rudderless intelligence," but if so it is a useful intelligence, for it continues to function when normal guidance systems have failed, as they periodically will. (158)

The Pardoner enlivens the sometimes staid sacred space, but even more importantly, he also accomplishes this through speech and voice. He is proficient in the telling of sacred stories and the performance of sacred song, mastering the outward forms of piety. In this way, he prefigures the Host's criteria for selecting those stories which have "best sentence and most solas" (CT GP 798), but of course his "sentence" is inherently compromised by the motive for his efforts.

> He was in chirche a noble ecclesiaste.
> Wel koude he rede a lessoun or a storie,
> But alderbest he song an offertorie;
> For wel he site, what that song was songe,
> He moste preche and wel affile his tonge
> To wynne silver, as he ful wel koude;
> Therfore he song the murierly and loude. (*General Prologue* 708-714)

The Pardoner perfectly flaunts the line between sacred and profane in a manner that is quintessentially "tricksterish." His transformation of holy word and sacred song into pecuniary gain and merriment makes his simultaneously appalling and appealing. The brazen nature of his transgressive behavior betokens an amorality and almost sociopathic disregard for both convention and authenticity, and even a lack of self preserving instinct.

84

Again, these are traits that, while seemingly inimical and self-negating, can be performatively instructive and which are common to the trickster in many cultures and forms.

A central characteristic of the trickster figure, as discussed in Lewis Hyde's *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art* is that the trickster figure has no innate way of "being," and lacks the essential instincts that guide most actors in the world. This is certainly an apt description of the Pardoner who appears infinitely adaptable in service to his own aims and ends, and also in his seemingly inimical willingness to both expose himself and create internal, even textual, conflict as he does in the conclusion to his own tale, nearly precipitating violence upon himself and also threatening to rupture the company. In the animal tales of the Southwest, this quality is often made manifest in Coyote's inability to recognize obvious danger and to thus fall headlong into it, forcing him to alternatively face disaster or creatively adapt and come out ahead.   For the trickster, this inauthenticity and lack of awareness is actually an adaptive quality for the trickster. Hyde responds to the inherent question, as mundane to the figure of the Pardoner as it is to Coyote, how can the lack of self preservation and even potential self abnegation be a positive trait?

> A first answer might be that whoever has no way but is a successful imitator will have, in the end, a repertoire of ways. If we can imitate the spider and make a net, imitate the beaver and make a lake, imitate the heron's beak and make a spear, imitate the armadillo and wear armor … imitate the fox and hunt downwind, then we become more versatile hunters, greater hunters... Perhaps having no way also means that a creature can adapt itself to a changing world. Species well situated in a natural habitat are always at risk if that habitat changes. One reason native observers may have chosen coyote the animal to be Coyote the Trickster is that the former in fact does exhibit a great plasticity of behavior and is, therefore, a consummate survivor in a shifting world. (Hyde 45-46)

The trickster, having no innate instinct or knowledge must learn and imitate, eventually acquiring a much broader range of abilities than those possessed by creatures that rely on instinct. Additionally, the trickster can adapt to changing norms and find a place in the new world order. The quintessential example of the Pardoner's self destructiveness and also his ability to adapt and survive comes later, at the conclusion of his tale and will be discussed in the next section. However, other elements in this initial presentation additionally hint at his imitative, adaptive and even protean nature. He is both liminal and potentially transgressive, the narrator noting in a rare suppositional intrusion "I trow he were a geldyng or a mare" (691), marking the Pardoner as ungendered and unfixed in the most essential way. This clearly textually reflects his infinitely flexible morality, which is his defining trait.

The description of the Pardoner actually closes the catalogue of characters in the *Prologue*, but both the Manciple and the narrator Chaucer also still remain from the original grouping of tricksters. The imitative and adaptive flexibility demonstrated in the figure of the Pardoner that is such an essential characteristic of the trickster is also present in the next figure in the final pilgrim grouping. The adaptive trickster is the role of the Manciple; he imitates and even refines the wit and cleverness of his masters and so becomes their superior, transgressing and reversing the hierarchical social norms. Chaucer refelects, "Now is nat that of God a ful fair grace / That swich a lewed mannes wit shal pace / The wisdom of an heep of lerned men? (*General Prologue* 573-575). In this way, he fulfills the already mentioned quality of embodying the informative transgression. His lewdness, coupled with his ability to play on the supposedly wise,

86

calls into question the assumptions that underlie the difference in status between his own

rank and that of the individuals he supposedly serves. His trick here is one that should be

familiar from many trickster tales, illuminating the foolishness of others by

outperforming them despite his own presumed inferior position. The initial invocation of

the divine in ordaining this state of affairs both authorizes and confirms the instructive

nature of the inversion

The Manciple also performs another interesting economic trick that is perhaps

even more importantly instructive. His economic prowess is, in the descriptive passage,

directly compared to that of his masters, who are accomplished but staid and steady

caretakers of other's wealth themselves.

> Worthy to been stywardes of rente and lond
> Of any lord that is in Engelond,
> To make hym lyve by his propre good
> In honour dettelees (but if he were wood),
> Or lyve as scarsly as hym list desire;
> And able for to helpen al a shire
> In any caas that myghte falle or happe.
> And yet this Manciple sette hir aller cappe. (*General Prologue* 579-586)

The Manciple's ascendance over these individuals is not so much dependent upon his

skill as it is upon his approach and technique. Whereas the men of law whom he serves

are, by nature conservative and sure in their commercial dealings, the Manciple is far

more creative and assertive. His success is explained in explicitly economic terms earlier

in the passage, the relevance of the preceding lines only becoming clear upon reflection

of tehm as in implicit critique upon the methodology of those staid stewards. The

Manciple, instead of being cautious, seeks out opportunity in the chaos of markets,

leveraging the space between cash and credit to his own advantage, "For wheither that he payde or took by taille, / Algate he wayted so in his achaat" (*General Prologue* 570-571). In short, the difference between the Manciple and his erstwhile employers is that he is an entrepreneur, one who takes educated risks in order to realize more substantial profits. John Hartley, in his essay "Paradigm Shifters: Tricksters and Cultural Science," notes than another characteristic of many incarnations of the trickster is an entrepreneurial spirit:

> For reasons that I hope will become clear, this scoundrel (and others of his type) makes a wonderful 'model' for an apparently very different figure that stalks the mythology of the creative industries; namely, the entrepreneur.
>
> The word '*entrepreneur*' literally means 'between-taker' (in French); the English-language idiom would therefore be the 'Go-Between.' This is indeed the role of Coyote and other 'tricksters' across many mythologies, including the Greek god Hermes…the Go-Between creator and transgressor of boundaries; messenger-god of communication, whose gifts in translation and oratory are founded on deception, serving him well as the god of commerce, communication ... and thieves. (Hartley 2-3)[47]

Though some might take issue with the implicit critique of entrepreneurial endeavors, the Manciple is certainly a fine embodiment of the Hermetic spirit, a go between with an entrepreneurial gift. Significantly, it is his ability to ingratiate himself between producer and consumer and to mitigate the potential for loss while maximizing the possibility of gain that makes him the consummate trickster that he is.

---

[47] Though this article, "Paradigm Shifters: Tricksters and Cultural Science," and journal, *Cultural Science Journal,* are more closely dedicated to economic theory than to literary analysis, the points made about the relationship between the trickster and the entrepreneur are certainly insightful and enlightening in this context (1-19)

Chaucer Himself(S)

Of course, this still leaves Chaucer, the narrator, himself. Leaving aside the question of division between the authorial Chaucer and his textual surrogate, he – in both instances – is a trickster. The narrator Chaucer plays with the intertextual audience in ways that will be discussed in a later section dealing with his specific tales and the complicating frame narrative conceit that envelops them. The authorial Chaucer is himself doubly a trickster as well. This is immediately apparent in the opening lines of the work which subvert what at first appears to be a poem evoking both a Mediterranean clime and the earthy generation of spring into an evocation of spiritual pilgrimage in an explicitly English setting. Beyond that opening conceit lays the even greater and often subverted fiction of the work being simply an account of what the author encountered. These textual details have been the subject of so much scholarly speculation that they scarcely need to be rehearsed here.

What may be more telling is to consider, at least in brief, Chaucer the author's own personal context and the degree to which he, as an individual even independent of his authorial identity, was himself a trickster figure. Primarily, what may be most telling and informative is the fact that Chaucer's historical biography places him at multiple junctures in society, at precisely the points where both the greatest social friction and the greatest possible opportunities existed.

Chaucer had risen from the recently recognized merchant class, through service to the royal household, to the even more recently created rank of esquire. Just as Chaucer

personally stood at the forefront of social entrepreneurialism, his works recognized the same yearnings within his society, and the strains that came with realigning the social order. Those interests are born out through the depiction of some of the most compelling characters of the *Tales*, particularly those who also inhabit the final group of tricksters with which his narratorial surrogate is identified.

An examination of the admittedly limited historical record on Chaucer finds that he existed, from early on in his career and through its heights, in a liminal space. Chaucer is placed in the new, gentle class of *esquier* by a household record of 1367 where he is put down to receive a royal annuity[48]. He is alternatively described in the record as *valettus*. These two classes were recently differentiated in the 1363 statute on Diet and Apparel where the rank of esquire lies just above *Vadlet*, the lowest rung which is considered gentry[49]. Thus, even in the records he is placed at a critical juncture between two significant social divides. These sumptuary laws lay out criteria for recognition of a particular social rank and the costuming privileges thereof. Such legislation was not actively applied[50], but it served to demonstrate the concern over the affectations of a rising gentle class whose place in the hierarchy was being actively determined.

---

[48] As Larry Benson points out in the introduction of *The Riverside Chaucer* (xviii).

[49] Nigel Saul discusses the relative status of these terms in *Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century* (16-17).

[50] In her book *The Fourteenth Century,* May McKisack points out that these rules were mostly observed in the flaunting of them (346).

The new and gentled esquire gradually took on characteristics of the chivalric class. The military origins of this class identified them with the knightly ranks. Though Chaucer's own military career was short and relatively unsuccessful (requiring the king to pay 16 pounds towards his ransom in 1360) he did arrive at his status at least in part through the traditional virtue of arms (Benson xvii). The arms that Chaucer and his peers bore in combat became coats of arms in the 1370s. Their coats of arms came to be recognized in the rolls of arms, and they became truly armigerous. [51] Chaucer himself has a coat of arms, "per pale argent and gules, a bend countercharged" which he bore in his role as a country gentleman in Somerset and Kent (Denholm-young 23-24).

The gentry began to assume greater prominence in government, both on the local and national level. Local peace keeping and judicial powers long assumed by local gentry became statutory in 1368[52]. Aside from Chaucer's direct service to the Royal family, he had an active political life as a country gentleman. His service in 1385 and 86 in the Kentish Peace Commission and his election to parliament (also in 1386) are examples of the rising influence an esquire could achieve outside of the court (Benson xxii-xxiii)..

This upward mobility was not without problems, both internally and externally. Within the newly established ranks conflicts arose, such as the landmark Scrope-

---

[51] Noel Denholm-Young covers transition to armigerous status in this period in *The Country Gentry in the Fourteenth Century: With Special Reference to the Heraldic Rolls of Arms.* (5-6).

[52] Mingay tracks the progressive establishment of these privileges into law in *The Gentry: The Rise and Fall of a Ruling Class* (28).

Grosvenor case. The Court of Chivalry presided over this affair to establish who had the right to bear the arms "azure a bend or." The Scrope family had achieved knighthood in battle, but had received the coat of arms for service to the Earl of Lincoln, and in any case had only reached these ranks in 1298 (Denholm -Young 133-134). Chaucer, attending the 1386 Parliament, gave testimony on behalf of the eventually victorious Scrope family (Benson xxiii).. The intensity of emotion evidenced in this case, its length (dragging on three years), and the resources pulled in to witness for one side or the other testify to the depth of feeling invested in the trappings of new-won gentility. The chivalric ethos as a whole was being co-opted by a rising order of new men who came from the ranks of a professional servant class and even from the ranks of the mercantile elite.

There was also legislation from above to curtail the excesses of newly arrived gentry. In the 1390s, Richard II tackled the difficult issue of livery, attempting to limit the use of this extra-personal badge of rank to the highest echelons of power. In 1390, he issued an ordinance in response to a Parliamentary petition, forbidding churchmen, "knights bachelor, esquires and others of less estate" from giving their servants livery to be worn outside of the household (McFarlane 122-123). This attempt to retain the aristocratic prerogatives displays the fear of social climbing that must have resulted from the enthusiastic adoption of noble trappings by the new gentry.

The mercantile endeavors that surrounded Chaucer's life, namely the wine import and wool export trade, were the two most vital areas of English commerce.[53] His family

---

[53] Griffiths discusses the importance of these two trades rather than Chaucer's relationship to them in the section on "The Later Middle Ages (1290-1485)" from *The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain* (184).

followed this pattern of success for several generations, allowing Chaucer a familiarity with the practices of fourteenth-century English mercantilism. His family also preceded him in government work, his father and grandfather both having worked at the customs house, though not at the level of Chaucer's customs service from 1374 through 1385 (Benson xx-xxii). His appointment at the customs house dealt with the rising royal tax on wool export, and in 1382 came to encompass the wine trade, thus putting him in position as the direct link between royal and mercantile political and economic structure. The king relied on these taxes to run his government and finance his wars. The interdependency of monarch and merchant was built on this agreement, the king providing the freedom necessary for business to prosper, and the businessman providing the revenue required to run his court and household. Chaucer stood at the nexus of this agreement, and presided over some of the shift in power in favor of the merchant - king alliance, reducing the direct power of the lords.

The power of this merchant-king alliance is reflected in the fear it caused the great magnates. Nicholas Brembre, occasional mayor of London, from whom the king borrowed substantial sums, was executed by the merciless parliament (Mc Kisack 429 & 437-438). His death was, at the very least, a reflection of noble antipathy to the growing independent power of the mercantile class and to the increasingly fraught relationship between king and commerce that served as a counter to the dependence of the crown upon the aristocracy. This often resented mercantile grab for power through financing of

the royal household was common during the Hundred Years War[54]. The need for a ready supply of cash forced the kings to find new ways to get around the demands of the barons. The merchants were only too happy to help circumvent the magnates in return for their own considerations. This quite naturally led to a more assertive merchant class, and the reactionary antagonism of the aristocracy was already in place.

As Levi-Strauss noted in his development of trickster theory, the figure of the trickster is, often aggressively upwardly mobile. This was certainly the case for Chaucer, who himself ascended through perhaps the most critical social barrier of his society to move into the class of the gentry. Critically however, as with the trickster figure, Chaucer's rise was based not on confrontation but on mediation.

> Thus, like Ash-Boy and Cinderella, the trickster is a mediator. Since his mediating function occupies a position halfway between two polar terms, he must retain something of that duality— namely an ambiguous and equivocal character. But the trickster figure is not the only conceivable form of mediation; some myths seem to be entirely devoted to the task of exhausting all the possible solutions to the problem of bridging the gap between *two* and *one*. (Levi-Strauss 226)

Chaucer, particularly in his role as a Minister of Parliament and member of the gentry of Kent bridged the gap between rural and urban. As a member of the royal household he also stood at the locus between the crown and its governments at a time of increasing tension and divide. In his mercantile role, he stood between the crown and commerce and also between England and its most significant trading partners. In a significant number of ways, Chaucer was a one man embodiment of the mediating, gap bridging trickster negotiating the complicated space between critical social distinctions. His

---

[54] Syliva Thrupp discusses how the war finances in particular led to this development in *The Merchant Class of Medieval London [1300-1500]*. (53-55).

awareness of this mediating role, operating in the spaces between polar opposites and contradictory identities is apparent throughout his works, but nowhere as clearly as in his portrayal of other, similarly liminal figures, and it is also apparent that he was quite conscious of the attendant challenges of those meditative positions.

Chaucer reflects many of the contemporary social concerns within his work in such a way as to shed light upon his own concerns and strategic positioning. The most immediately important audience to Chaucer must have been the group surrounding the royal household, his patron. He would then necessarily have been concerned with appealing to the tastes and sensibilities of this audience. He would also have found it wise, as Donald Howard argues, to align himself with this class socially. Chaucer may have found it prudent to repress his connections with the merchant class, a difficult prospect. Howard argues that, in his works, Chaucer is attempting to create an identification between himself and his aristocratic audience at the expense of his mercantile background, "It is the perennial problem of the bourgeois: he does not want to appear bourgeois in the eyes of the upper class, but he knows that the most bourgeois thing he can do is to show discomfort about his status or, worse, attempt to deny it" (Howard 342). He claims that Chaucer is intensely and painfully aware of his status as an ingénue within the royal court, and that he intentionally sets out to realign himself, denying his origins. This is a very Tricksteresque move indeed, concealing by display and using the power of humor to both deflect and draw attention to the critical issues of belonging.

> He presents with humor exactly those bourgeois qualities which the
> average bourgeois would conceal from aristocrats, makes them into

an elaborate joke, and parades it before the court . . . The real and necessary implication is that Chaucer himself really sees it all not from any bourgeois point of view but from that of true knights and ladies. (Howard 342)

While compelling, this view is intensely limiting. Chaucer does not seem to be trying to make his audience comfortable with himself, or with the bourgeois in general. He instead raises questions about the class structure, and its actual functionality and practicality. He heightens the sense of conflict within *The Canterbury Tales*, bringing to the fore an awareness of the social fluidity that Howard claims as the source of his discomfort. In fact, he seems to revel in the strength and versatility of the bourgeois. In the end, this is an even more quintessentially trickster maneuver, inverting the perceived order and focusing instead upon a more robust if rude model of self identification.

A perhaps more convincing argument is put forward by Paul Strohm in his seminal work *Social Chaucer*. Despite his discussion of Chaucer's ties to the Richardian party, Paul Strohm puts forward a different view of the authors self positioning. Central to his dismissal of the notion of Chaucer as a creature of the court is the fact that he did not really write for patronage.[55] Additionally, Strohm points out the fact that the *Tales* were apparently begun in the period immediately after his departure from London and the court scene. The implications of this are primarily of interest for Strohm in the light such timing sheds upon the creation of the fictive audience for the frame of *The Canterbury Tales*. But, the implication here is that, at least at the point of the works inception, Chaucer was not as close to the aristocratic centers of power, but was rather living the life

---

[55] This particular argument is discussed at length by Paul Strohm in his book *Social Chaucer* (50-51).

of a country squire. This, and the general middling level of the Chaucerian circle Strohm

posits, even when Chaucer was directly involved with the court, lead him to accept a

more egalitarian and open-minded view of Chaucer's interest in portraying bourgeoisie

concerns. Strohm's already mentioned preference for a view of the Chaucerian milieu as

containing more social climbers (intensely aware of the social order and its hazards) than

bluebloods, provides a more interesting space for the consideration of Chaucer's use of

the fabliau and the social and canonical consequences of his deployment of that genre.

This identification with the rural upwardly mobile is also critical in considering

Chaucer's narratorial identification with the trickster figures at the end of the portrait

series. Within the character sketches of the *General Prologue* are hints of the social

tensions that must have been a constant part of Chaucer's life. A close parallel to

Chaucer's own social position is found in the Franklin's description,

> "At sessiouns ther was he lord and sire;
> Ful ofte tyme he was knyght of the shire,
> An anlaas and a gipser al of silk
> Heng at his girdel, whit as morne milk.
> A shirreve hadde he been, and a contour.
> Was nowher swich a worthy vavasour." (*General Prologue* 355-360)

The Franklin falls into the strata of country gentry, as Chaucer did in his role as a

"knight" of Kent. Yet the description of the Franklin emphasizes a deeper investment in

projecting an aristocratic image than can be justified by his position alone. The dagger

and purse he wears mark him as a gentleman, as per the 1363 Sumptuary laws (Benson

813). Yet, the language applied to describe him is definitively feudal and noble. He acts

as "lord and sire" within his own sphere of influence, He also participates in the

proceedings of parliament, as Chaucer did. Most significantly, he is described as a

"vavasour," a feudal rank denoting vassalage to a more highly placed vassal. The term falls within the aristocratic sphere, just as his own power (at least on the provincial level) does. This term contrasts sharply with the appellation "Franklin", which he is called by, denoting free rather than gentle blood, although it was a conflicted term in its own right (Saul 18- 26).

While still in a position of precarious uncertainty, Chaucer nevertheless was himself perhaps the most successful trickster of all. He alone has made the leap from those who serve, even if in service to their own ends, to those who are served. His grasp may seem grasping to those of ancient and established lineages, but he nevertheless ended up on the right side of every divide in the social spectrum. He pioneers both a new English form of literary expression and is also on the forefront of a new wave of significant social energy and mobility that will eventually displace much of the feudal model. In both ways, Chaucer is constructing a new society, and this may be his most tricksterish quality of all.

Michael P. Carroll's influential critique of Lévi-Strauss's identification of trickster figures as largely carrion eaters and more potentially socially destructive in his essay "Lévi-Strauss, Freud, and the Trickster: A New Perspective upon an Old Problem," points out that there is another significant trickster figure that is largely unaccounted for in the anthropologist's works.

> But in many other stories, the trickster appears as a type of culture-hero,
> specifically as a transformer who makes the world habitable for humans by
> ridding it of monsters or who provides those things (such as fire or various ways
> of capturing animals) that make human society possible. In short, to borrow a

phrase often used by Levi-Strauss, the trickster is associated in these stories with
the origin of culture. (Carroll 301)

This form of the trickster, most commonly represented by the rabbit or hare in Native

American symbolic mythology is a more positive and generative form of the trickster

figure. The rabbit's creative energies, while disruptive, are essentially constructive. I

would argue that both Chaucer's personal and literary aspirations are indeed of the kind

that construct culture and "make human society possible."

Chapter 3
The Tales of the Tricksters, Fools and Fabliau

> From the remotest wilds of the northwest to the coast of the Atlantic, from the southern boundaries of Carolina to the cheerless swamps of Hudson's Bay, the Algonkins were never tired of gathering around the winter fire and repeating the story of Manibozho or Michabo, the Great Hare. With entire unanimity their various branches, the Powhatans of Virginia, the Lenni Lenape of the Delaware, the warlike hordes of New England, the Ottawas of the far north, and the western tribes perhaps without exception, spoke of "this chimerical beast," as one of the old missionaries calls it, as their common ancestor. The totem or clan which bore his name was looked up to with peculiar respect. In many of the tales which the whites have preserved of Michabo he seems half a wizzard, half a simpleton. He is full of pranks and wiles, but often at a loss for a meal of victuals; ever itching to try his arts magic on great beasts and often meeting ludicrous failures therein; envious of the powers of others, and constantly striving to outdo them in what they do best; in short, little more than a malicious buffoon delighting in practical jokes, and abusing his superhuman powers for selfish and ignoble ends. But this is a low, modern, and corrupt version of the character of Michabo, bearing no more resemblance to his real and ancient one than the language and acts of our Saviour and the apostles in the coarse Mystery Plays of the Middle Ages do to those recorded by the Evangelists. (Brinton 162)

This account of what would come to be recognized as the trickster figure comes from

Daniel Brinton's *The Myths of the New World*, published in 1868 and is widely held to be

the first description in English of the now widely recognized trickster figure from Native

American culture.[56] The thrust of Brinton's argument here is that the ubiquitous trickster

figure of Michabo a figure engendering both respect and laughter must be some form of

bastardized mythic hero degraded from a once noble past. Leaving aside Brinton's

obtuse dismissal of the clearly intentionally ambivalent figure of Michabo – though it is

---

[56] This is actually a bit complicated as, while Brinton is clearly describing a trickster figure, he does not actually use the term "trickster." Nevertheless, its origination is still often credited to him. Arnold Krupat discusses this misattribution in his essay "Trickster Tales Revisited, and credits Hyde with discovering the original source "in Franz Boas's introduction to James Teit's *Traditions of the Thompson River Indians* (1898)" (Krupat 3).

almost reassuring that he is equally dismissive of traditional Native American and medieval English culture – what is particularly baffling here is that he cannot recognize the value of either the multivalent trickster of Northeastern America or the significance of the lay appropriation of sacred texts that made the medieval Mystery Plays such a rich and influential artistic tradition.

It is particularly curious that Brinton would chose as his comparative analogy these seminal works of medieval drama, seeing in them a rough analog to the debased high spiritualism he assumes is part of the Michabo myth cycle. In both cases Brinton assumes that these playful tales have, through their humorous and transgressive qualities lost the value of some presumed superior narrative. He is of course just as wrong about Michabo as he is about the Mystery Plays. As the pioneering if somewhat fraught work of Claude Lévi-Strauss would later show, the trickster figure is always intentionally juxtaposed between opposite paradigms, such as the profane and the sacred, in order to mediate, resolve or even further complicate such oppositions.[57] The same is, of course, also true for the Mystery Plays, in that they were a productive and popular avenue for expression of spiritual belief through a medium that employed drama and humor to express a higher spiritual message.

Brinton's association of the trickster myth and its profane treatment of seemingly sacred myths, problematic as his critical underlying assumptions may be, with the mystery plays of medieval England is nonetheless insightful in that his analogy points out

---

[57] Specifically, the chapter "Magic and Religion," from *Structural Anthropology* (23-24).

that both these traditions make significant use of one of the most central aspects of the

trickster figure, the "sacred and lewd bricoleur" that Hynes identifies as one of the

essential roles of the trickster figure in the influential poly-cultural and cross disciplinary

survey of the trope, *Mythical Trickster Figures*.

> The sixth and … last characteristic of the trickster is his role as. The term
> "bricoleur" is here used in the sense offered by Claude Levi-Strauss.... The
> bricoleur is a tinker or fix-it person, noted for his ingenuity in transforming
> anything at hand in order to form a creative solution. Because the established
> definitions or usage categories previously attached to tools or materials are
> suspended/ transcended for the bricoleur, these items can be put to whatever
> inventive purpose is necessary…. The trickster manifests a distinctive
> transformative ability: he can find the lewd in the sacred and the sacred in the
> lewd, and new life from both. The Oxford English Dictionary suggests a parallel
> binary contrast here when it lists the original meaning of the word lewd as "lay,
> not in holy orders, not clerical." Thus, the fuller background against which the
> trickster transforms may be the contrast between sacred-clerical and lewd-lay.
> (Hynes 42)

The taboo crossing of the boundary between the profane and the sacred is not, as Brinton

thought, a debasement of a prior more perfectly orthodox conception of the mythic texts

of a culture. Rather, it is an essential feature of creative lay spirituality that makes

approachable the distant sacred and in doing so rejuvenates it.

The linkage between the trickster myths of the Michabo and the English mystery

plays is even more potentially illuminating considering that an examination of Chaucer's

tales of the trickster figures, those inimical characters who make up the final group of

pilgrims in the portrait series and among whom Chaucer tellingly places himself, must

begin with *The Miller's Tale*. Of course, this second tale in the sequence begins with a

disruptive *Prologue* in which the tradition of the Mystery Plays is directly invoked by the

seminal line, "But in Pilates voys he gan to crie," (3124) which directly equates the figure

of the Miller with the bawdy comic associative field of the Mystery Plays.[58] This often glossed reference is problematic in a number of ways, not least of which in that it creates such a rich set of associative glosses as to overwhelm the ensuing text.[59] But it does serve to connect the Miller's voice with the dramatic and performative tradition of the mystery plays, and with the mixed comic and sacred elements that were such essential characteristics of those plays.

There are other allusions to the Mystery plays within *The Miller's Prologue* and *The Millers Tale*, but even its inherent generic form evokes the plays, as Lewis notes in his essay "The English Fabliau Tradition and Chaucer's 'Miller's Tale.'" Lewis notes that such performative elements were a common feature of the fabliau in English, arguing that particularly *Dame Sirith*, possibly the earliest work of this kind in the English language, was constructed for performance:

> ...it is usually assumed that the poem was performed by a solo mimic, who would have taken all three parts, probably changing his voice as he did so. Indeed, because of the occasional lack of clear transitions (especially at 278-79), the solo mimic would probably have had to act as well, perhaps in collaboration with a dog. Thus, in addition to its dramatic method of characterization, the first English fabliau has overt characteristics of the drama in its form and in its relationship to the Interludium, and in view of these characteristics it is perhaps more than coincidence that "The Miller's Tale" has so many allusions to and patterns reminiscent of the mystery plays. (Lewis 249)

---

[58] See Kelsie B Harder's "Chaucer's Use of the Mystery Plays in the Miller's Tale" (237-244).

[59] See in particular Ralph Hanna's critique of Parker's gloss of this term and his argument that the reference evokes a rich and deeply problematic associational field related to the speech acts of the peasantry in the chapter "Pilate's Voice / Shirley's Case" from *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (267-279).

Lewis argues that entire genre of fabliau was significantly informed by a close relationship to dramatic performance. The performative qualities of the tale are equally inherent in the *Miller's Prologue*, and there is little doubt that Chaucer's contemporary audience would recognize these associative qualities. While none of the actual tales can as easily be imagined as dramatic works as are the prologues to those tales, they nevertheless do also have a certain theatricality.

Chaucer's evocation of the mystery plays informs not only the *Prologue*, but also *The Miller's Tale* itself. John Ganim notes in *Chaucerian Theatricality* the various possible interpretations for the textual allusions to the mystery plays and also suggests that the performative aspects of the tale are more significant and consequential, and that the work is significantly informed by and dependent upon the generic features of drama.

> The most common explanation for these allusions are either mimetic (the plays prepare the reader for the reaction of John to the cry of water or contribute to Absolon's character portrayal) or iconographic (we are meant to see parallels to Joseph and Mary or the Flood itself). Of course, these allusions also suggest a structural analogue: the action of the fabliau itself is very much dependent on "stage" technique, and Chaucer is indicating his dependence on another generic form entirely. (Ganim 38)

Ganim also notes that, in considering the context in which Chaucer was working, the biblical source material of the plays led naturally to a simultaneously juxtaposed and interrelated interaction between sacred and lewd episodes that were inherent to the text. "The various biblical episodes lent themselves to different kinds of representation and dramatic style. A striking alternation of serious purpose – high theology as high art – and of comic interlude – interludes that might have suggested their own version of the truth as well as reinforce the chief message - is shared not only by the plays and the *Tales* but by

many other medieval works as well" (Ganim 40) Again, as with the "sacred and lewd bricoleur" of the trickster myth, both the mystery plays and Chaucer in his imitation of their dramatic structure make use of the telling tension between these two extremes to generate more complex and varied interactions between works of varying generic sensibilities.

Chaucer skillfully deploys this association in particular in reference to the figure of the Miller in order to construct a radically different thematic and tonal direction for the work at this critical juncture following the staid and courtly *Knight's Tale*. In contrast, *The Miller's Tale* is essentially a challenge to both the social and natural order depicted in *The Knight's Tale*, and an answer to his a priori claim to literary merit through social status, and that trickster's challenge to establishment and order occurs both in the *Miller's Prologue* and through the performance of the tale itself.

Prologues and Fabliau

It is in the prologues to the tales of the tricksters, the narrative space for interaction between the figures introduced in the *General Prologue*, that much of Chaucer's most critical – in every sense of that word – work takes place. As informative as the introductory portraits are, both the tales associated with these figures and the framing narratives of those tales in which so much of the vital social action of the work is played out. It is surely not by chance that the prologues and epilogues to the tales of Chaucer's tricksters are some of the most noted and discussed portions of the work. The prologues and conclusions are themselves the liminal spaces of the text. They continue the work of the *General Prologue* in fleshing out the relationships between the various

pilgrims, but as often as not the interactions they display are moments of a particular sort of conflict, strife between signifying representatives of binary pairs. The miller quites the knight, and is in turn quited by the reeve. In the first instance, the miller's response is closely analogous to a trickster's bridging of the gap between opposite poles of an established binary, in this case between the gentle and the cherlish. In the case of the reeve, the intercession is between the two poles of the agrarian economy, each with mutually intersecting reciprocal and competing interests. This again calls to mind the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and his explanation for the proliferation of trickster tales:

> The trickster of American mythology has remained so far a problematic figure…
> If we keep in mind that mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of
> oppositions toward their resolution, the reason for these choices becomes clearer.
> We need only assume that two opposite terms with no intermediary always tend
> to be replaced by two equivalent terms which admit of a third one as a mediator;
> then one of the polar terms and the mediator become replaced by a new triad, and
> so on. (Lévi-Strauss 224)

Chaucer's tricksters ramify in the same way, with Knight and Miller acting as one poll, Miller and Reeve as another. The same process applies to the religious figures in the tales who also multiply and create seemingly endless dialogues and debates about the relative merits of their respective positions.

It is also critical to note that there are always at least two tricksters at work in these tales, the pilgrim who tells them and the narrator who reports them. Chaucer's surrogate narrator frequently inserts his own twists and tricks into these works, most particularly in the interactions that take place before and after the tales themselves in the prologues. Of course, there is always also the final layer of Chaucer, the author, on top of all of this, constructing yet another layer of illuminating deception upon the text.

Chaucer places himself in the company of the final six figures of the pilgrim, group, the tricksters of the tales, and he intrudes most profoundly as a narrator in the prologues, particularly in his initial intrusion in *The Miller's Prologue*. Here, the line between the narratorial, participatory Chaucer and the authorial Chaucer is also blurred as the tale deals explicitly with its own illusion of mnemonic orality and slips, at least momentarily, into a clearly textual mode with his imprecation to "Turne over the leef and chese another tale" (A 3177). It is also here that Chaucer lays the groundwork for the genre of both of the following tales, shifting from the complicated romance of The *Knight's Tale* to a wholly different and nearly antithetical generic mode in the following tales.[60]

Critical in recognizing the inherent mediatory qualities of these trickster tales is the consideration of their literary genre. *The Miller's Tale* belongs to the genre of the fabliau, as does that of the Reeve, and (by various accounts) at least four other complete Tales and at least one fragment, making this the dominant genre of the *Tales*.[61]   There is a preponderance of fabliau within the *Tales*, and the effect of the predominance of this single genre may be important in understanding the reception and centrality of *The*

---

[60] Susan Crane argues convincingly in "Medieval Romance and Feminine Difference in the Knight's Tale," that *The Knight's Tale* is primarily a work of romance in that "courtship and social order are central concerns of that genre" (62) and these are also the focus of the tale. Crane also succinctly covers the wider ranging debate over the genre of the tale and its alternate identifications as belonging to classical or philosophical romance.

[61] Thomas Cooke, in *The Old French and Chaucerian Fabliau: A study of their Comic Climax,* argues that both the fact of the predominance of fabliau in *The Canterbury Tales*, comprising over a quarter of the finished tales, and the possible significance of their ordering make the genre the dominant feature of the work as a whole (170-171)

Canterbury Tales, but it is even more central in establishing the importance of the trickster figure in the works and the connection between the genre and trickster tale.

The central identifying features of the fabliau are telling in and of themselves. *Even in The Riverside Chaucer*, Benson defines the genre with multiple references to "tricks" as a defining characteristic of the form. Many of the criteria he ascribes to the genre of fabliau would be equally recognizable as characteristics of traditional trickster tales.

> A fabliau is a brief comic tale in verse, usually scurrilous and often scatological or obscene. The style is simple, vigorous, and straightforward; the time is the present, and the settings real, familiar places; the characters are ordinary sorts -- tradesmen, peasants, priests, students, restless wives; the plots are realistically motivated tricks and ruses. The fabliau thus present a lively image of everyday life among the middle and lower classes. Yet that representation only seems real; life did not run that high in actual fourteenth-century towns and villages -- it never does -- and the plots, convincing though they seem, frequently involve incredible degrees of gullibility in the victims and of ingenuity and sexual appetite in the trickster-heroes and -heroines. (Benson 7.)[62]

There are clearly features of the genre that are also arguably distinct, particularly Benson's note that such tales feature everyday settings and characters rather than culture heroes. Though the reference to "trickster-heroes and –heroines" points to the fact that the central characters found in fabliau are often far from ordinary, in truth most of the trickster figures of mythology are likewise grounded in the real and commonplace. Indeed, the figures most frequently portrayed in trickster stories, particularly those of the anthropomorphized kind found in the Reynard tales of Europe or the coyote tales of the American Southwest, are those most familiar to the audiences they both entertained and

---

[62] This particular explanation of the genre comes from the explanatory introductory notes that precede the tales themselves, specifically from the section on *The Miller's Prologue*.

reflected. They were creatures who lived just outside of the human sphere of direct influence, creatures on the border between the domestic and the natural world. There is a kind of curious parallel between these liminal figures and the agrarian characters of the Fabliau, living closer to the land, more essential and natural, at least in seeming.

Importantly, Benson recognizes that the Fabliau, despite its commonly naturalistic setting, is no less a constructed space. The characters and plots are as intricately contrived as in any romance, and in fact the division between the two genres, and the expectations of audience, theme and significance that went along with those distinctions is precisely what Chaucer is contesting.

The presence of fabliau in *The Canterbury Tales* is itself innovative. The exact number of precursors to Chaucer's fabliau in the English tradition is a matter of some debate,[63] but by even the most generous definition, it includes only three extant examples. Only one of these, *Dame Sirith*, is significant in that it represents an addition to the fabliau tradition, and possesses an arguably particular 'English' character. In comparison with the rich French Fabliau tradition, which contains more than one hundred and sixty separately identifiable examples of the genre still extant,[64] the relative generic

---

[63] Depending upon the degree of leniency by which one defines fabliau, the number of extant examples of the genre which predate Chaucer varies between one and three. The singular view is represented in John. Hines, *The Fabliau in English* (43).
An acceptance of the inclusion of two more potential Fabliau can be found in Robert E. Lewis' "The English Fabliau Tradition and Chaucer's 'Miller's Tale" (241-255).
It is notable however, that Lewis gives only a cursory examination of *The Fox and the Wolf*, and *A Pennyworth of Wit* (the two other potential precursors) before engaging exclusively in a dialogue between *Dame Sirith* and the Chaucerian fabliau.

[64] The quantity of fabliau cataloged in French is extensively documented in:
Per Nykrog's Les *Fabliau: Etude D'histoire Litteraire et de Stylistique Medievale*.

poverty of the English fabliau is dramatically highlighted. The scarcity of fabliau in English does not vanish after Chaucer's re-introduction of it. Even including Chaucer's works, there are less than thirty extant fabliau in the English tradition by the end of the fifteenth century (Canby 200-214). The innovativeness of Chaucerian fabliau stands out against such a bleak landscape, and encourages consideration for why the genre and the trickster tales they deploy are so central to the work of *The Canterbury Tales*.

By sheer number, fabliau appears to be the most 'representative' genre of the central work of *The Canterbury Tales* despite the fact that the genre was rare in English. *The Miller's Tale, the Reeve's Tale, The Friar's Tale, The Summoner's Tale, the Shipman's Tale*, *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* and the fragment of *the Cook'sTale,* are all quite clearly fabliau. Other tales and particularly prologues also incorporate significant fabliau elements, particularly *The Wife of Bath's Prologue, the Merchant's Tale*, and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. The fabliau in Chaucer arguably even informs other tales not immediately associated with the genre, even such unsuspected a work as *The Franklin's Tale*.[65] To a degree, the fabliau – at least in English –can arguably be termed a Chaucerian genre in that he nearly introduces it in the form of English vernacular.

That is not to say that the genre did not appear in other prior manuscripts or even that the juxtaposition of the fabliau with other genres was uniquely Chaucerian. Carter Revard, in the context of his discussion of the frequent inclusion of fabliau in and

---

Nykrog's work was itself, a response to the earlier work of Joseph Bedier.in *Les Fabliau*

[65] Ben Parson's convincingly argues that there are fabliau elements even in tales as clearly not generic as the *Franklin's Tale* in his essay "No Laughing Matter: Fraud, the Fabliau and Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* (121–136).

110

amongst works of other disparate genres in a number of significant medieval

manuscripts, notes that Chaucer's mixture of genres and the play that ensues between

them could be not only intentional but precisely a significant organizational goal of the

text.

> Let me be more specific: in the case of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, it seems to
> me he deliberately set out to create a 'book of the Tales of Canterbury' that would
> be comparable to such an anthology as those we have been discussing. It would
> include both romances and fabliaux, and these would be juxtaposed rather than
> grouped by genres: first the Kinght's Tale, then the Miller's; first of Wife of
> Bath's Prologue, which is essentially a series of fabliaux told by their female
> protagonist. As the complications in these last to descriptions indicate, Chacuer's
> *Canterbury Tales* is a far more complex work of art than the 'anthologies' earlier
> discussed. Authorial viewpoint and dramatic viewpoints, for instance, are not
> merely 'added' elements: they transform the entire sense of reality and its
> representations in a Chaucerian work. (Revard 270)

Revard's argument here is that the manuscript tradition preceding and contemporary with

Chaucer had frequently made use of the same sore of generic juxtaposition so frequent

and central to the *Canterbury Tales*, and even more significantly used the contrasts

between them as a form of commentary. Chaucer's particular genius is that he embodies

this interplay by means of the frame and particularly the prologues, which allow him to

manifest the tensions between opposing ideologies, classes and other binaries through the

interplay of the pilgrim group. In this way, the prologues – which Revard notes

themselves are prone to turn into a form of fabliau – are also trickster tales in the sense

that they intermediate between oppositional genres and the attendant expectations such

juxtapositions create.

The fabliau in general and Chaucer's deployment of the genre in particular also

conform to an essential characteristic of the trickster form remarked on by Karl Kerényi

in his contribution to the seminal 1956 work of Paul Radin, *The Trickster*, which also

included essays by Carl Jung. Kerényi famously notes that the function of the trickster is,

"to add disorder to order and make a whole, to render possible, within the fixed bounds of

what is permitted, and experience of what is not permitted" (Kerényi 185). This

description succinctly captures one of the most critical roles of the fabliau as it is

deployed within the *Canterbury Tales*, and particularly as it appears within *The Miller's*

Prologue. In contrast to *The Knight's Tale*, with its focus on exquisite and controlled

order, both in narrative and structure, both the *The Miller's Prologue* and *The Miller's*

Tale introduce chaos and "add disorder to order." This notably occurs both through the

interaction between the pilgrim characters and also through the internally constructed

reaction to the text that is developed through significant moments of narratorial and even

authorial intrusion. Perhaps nowhere is this interplay between character, narrator and

author as apparent as it is in the *The Miller's Prologue*, the first work in the series that

corresponds to one of the trickster figures, containing the passage where Pilate's voice is

invoked.

Central to the consideration of Chaucer's use of the genre is its careful textually

constructed relationship to social class, and in particular its association with the

"cherles." Fabliau is explicitly tied to a literary underclass within *The Canterbury Tales*,

most definitively in *The Miller's Prologue.*

> What sholde I moore seyn, but this Millere
> He nolde his wordes for no man forbere,
> But told his cherles tale in his manere.
> M'athynketh that I shal reherce it heere. (3167-70)

Before we are even introduced to the genre of fabliau itself, Chaucer (the narrator, if not

the author himself) has identified it both as the work of a "Cherle," and as a tale he is

(however disingenuously) reluctant to include. Additionally, there is the element of

concern over the performative violence of the Miller's interruption of the tale telling

process. He will not be stopped from telling his tale, and he imposes himself upon the

elaborately constructed social order which is supposed to be mirrored by the order of the

tales. The Miller is thus not only a cherle, he is a multivalent one who threatens both the

pilgrim company and the fate ordained order of tales which so carefully echoed the social

hierarchy of the company. His act of narratorial intrusion is a perfect trickster intrusion,

forcing an impossible choice between maintaining a perfect hierarchical order and

containing the always already present impulse to defy that hierarchy.

Of course, the Miller is not the only invertive trickster here. Chaucer's elaborate

apology belies the centrality of *The Miller's Tale* to his project, even as it calls attention

to it. His protestation of non-complicity in its reproduction within his text parodies itself

in its effusiveness.

> And therefore every gentilwight I preye,
> For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
> Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
> Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
> Or elles falsen som of my mateere. (3171-75)

Chaucer so over performs the role of courteous narrator that it is impossible to believe in

his sincerity. His solution to the difficulty of presenting such 'unwanted' material is to

resort to a purely mechanical function of his media, the ability to efface a portion of the

text by turning the page,

> And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere,
> Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
> For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
> Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
> And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
> Blameth not me if that ye chese amys. (3176-81)

This often-cited passage, aside from its textual self referentiality, calls attention to the fact that the work is written down, belying the convenient fiction of the tale's original orality and its conceit that it is simply an account of other's speech. Even in the penultimate moment of the fabliau's effacement there is a recognition of its concretization, and the positive endurance of the Miller's subversive words. This tale lies amidst a collection of tales that "toucheth gentillesse" and it seems that it cannot help but contaminate them. Furthermore, this infection spreads to the reading audience, who now must actively and consciously choose to read *The Miller's Tale*.

The complicity of the audience in choosing to read the fabliau, a choice that seems over-determined in light of this protracted Chaucerian titillation, also forces the reader to acknowledge the class issues at stake in the work,

> The Miller is a cherl; ye knowe wel this.
> So was the Reeve eek and othere mo,
> And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.
> Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame;
> And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game." (3182-86)

The equation of literary style with social class is here unequivocal. This is a work of pure and puerile enjoyment, "harlotrie," outside the original qualifications of "sentance" and "solace." It is the kind of tale we are led to believe is fitting only for the ears of a "cherl," an uncouth member of society, whose literary tastes are not expected to match those of Chaucer's intended audience. Leaving aside questions of Chaucer's seriousness

on this point, it is telling that he explicitly emphasizes a connection between what will arguably be his predominate genre, and an explicitly non-gentle class. Despite the disclaimers and the halfhearted preemptive effacement of the fabliau, these works are central to the composition of the tales as a whole, and they bring the question of social representation by means of genre, if not necessarily that representation itself, to the forefront.

Chaucer is not writing here in a vacuum, there is at least a traditional continental social coding of the fabliau genre, especially in France. The fabliau is often focused on the depiction of middle class, bourgeoisie foibles, and as such is ingenuously linked with the "cherls" by reason of its subject matter, and its ribald tone. The actual social positioning of the fabliau is a vexed question, and the site of a minor critical battlefield. The original studies of the genre by Joseph Bedier at the end of the nineteenth century attempted to locate the origin and success of the fabliau within the bourgeoisie of thirteenth and fourteenth century France.[66] In 1957, Per Nykrog marshaled an argument for a primarily aristocratic audience, based upon characteristics of the Fabliau and their negative portrayal of the middle class, especially where the bourgeoisie transgress upon aristocratic privilege. He also focuses upon the close ties of the genre with that of the romance, viewing the fabliau as a kind of parody of that more explicitly aristocratic genre, but an oppositional form that is still very much interested in the replication of

---

[66] See Note 9 above.

social hierarchy.[67] In response to this binary opposition, later critical thought on the

subject seems to have embraced a kind of compromise position, which includes the

aristocratic / courtly origin of the genre, and its eventual co-option by the very class it

may have originally intended to slander. Jean Rychner, in response to Nykrog and

Bedier, attempted in the sixties to examine the differences between French fabliau

existing in multiple copies, in order to describe the evolution of the genre. His theory

posits a mutable fabliau that is adapted through time for the use of the growing

bourgeoisie literary audience from a courtly origin(Rychner 51). The issue of the social

use of the genre of fabliau is still a vexed question, but critical response seems to have

fallen decisively into an acceptance of the possibilities of the genre acting as a vehicle for

the discussion of issues related to class, social and economic divisions, and at least its

potential co-option from an aristocratic origin is conceivable by the bourgeois in service

of that debate.[68]

  Of course, the real testing ground of all these considerations is the text itself.

Those works are the next site of social location that requires description. Especially

within *The Canterbury Tales,* there is a plethora of social representation that may cast

---

[67] Per Nykrog's discussion of the relationship between the genres of romance and Fabliau
also appears in *Les Fabliau: Etude D'histoire Litteraire et de Stylistique Medievale*. (20-
25).

[68] Scott Vazsily's influential article on the fabliau elements in other genres, "Fabliau
Plotting Against Romance in Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale,'" also includes a useful survey of
later scholarly discussions on the genre of fabliau and the challenge of defining it. He
also draws heavily on Peggy Knapp's critical argument that the genre of the tales reflects
a literary competition between differing socio-political discourses, which is also relevant
to this argument.

light upon the Chaucerian projection of class ideals. The wide variety of characters in the

pilgrim party have obvious class alliances, but even more interesting may be the relative

degree of exclusion that the traditional orders experience. The old "three orders" of

antique medieval social theory are radically de-centered in the composition of the pilgrim

group. It is the appearance of these traditional figures which is representational in this

work. The Knight, with his son, is the only clear representative of the military

aristocracy, and his exact position is the source of some contention.[69] Although there are

a plethora of religious figures in the pilgrim group, they mostly fail to perform their

social roles adequately, and are instead more evocative of the discrepancy between

religious profession and appropriate conduct. The clear-cut figure of the Parson provides

a more holistic example of the religious, and as a man of learning and true spiritual

insight he seems to exemplify the order of those who pray. Most significant is the

singular depiction of the third order. The emblematic Plowman (who seems to cry out for

equation with Langland's eponymous character) is the sole representative of the

agricultural laborer, still far and away the most populous strata of society. Of course, he

is not provided with a tale, and his voice is even more significantly marginalized than that

of the bourgeoisie "cherls" who appear to make up the majority of the party.

---

[69] The discussion of the identification of Chaucer's knight is exhaustively carried out
inTerry Jones' *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary*. Another such
discussion appears in William B. McColly's, "Chaucer's Yeoman and the Rank of His
Knight."

Perhaps the best way to think of the social concerns presented by Chaucer's use of so many non-gentle characters is by considering the impact of their depiction in purely literary terms. This is the approach Paul Strohm takes in explaining the overwhelming presence of cherlish characters in *The Canterbury Tales*,

> ...he shows little impulse to put forward his pilgrims as persuasive representations either of his society as a whole or of his particular social group. Their composition is determined less by motives of historical or social representation than by a more immediate and more literary imperative, which is to create a socially diverse group drawn from the most dynamic fourteenth-century social strata, whose social and vocational conflicts will provide good possibilities for staging a diverse collection of tales. (Strohm 68)

Strohm is suggesting that it is not necessarily the actual class of the pilgrims and the social concerns their depiction raises that are of import to his literary project, but rather the range of artistic expression their employment in his work allows. They are quite simply wonderful subject matter. Yet this belies the clearly class-conscious interlude between the two seminal tales that generates the essential binary conflict that is so critical in the function of the succeeding fabliau. To function as it must, as a quiting, *The Miller's Tale* has to generate more than simple drama, it must create a coequal but inverted mirroring of *The Knight's Tale*.

Strohm does recognize and address the polarization of "gentils" and "cherls" into two opposing camps. *The Knight's Tale*, produced by the most explicitly constructed member of the upper echelons of society, serves well as a model for the first camp. The Miller, on the other hand, acts as the site of Chaucer's active differentiation between the two camps. He is both the representative of the "cherls" and the intermediary between them. This is significant in relation to his role as a generative trickster figure. He both

118

represents and generates conflicts between the category he represents and another, oppositional category, in this case that of the "gentils." Significantly, the tales cannot do the critical work that Chaucer imagines for them without this essential trick of generating meaning through opposition. Paul Radin's oft quoted profile of *The Trickster*, from his seminal work that drew on and included Carl Jung's work on the trickster archetype, notes this ability to generate meaning through opposition, particularly unconscious opposition, as the essential trickster characteristic.

> Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions, and appetites yet through his actions all values come into being. (Radin ix)

The Miller's generative trickery is doubled in Chaucer's own act of false elision of the tale, allowing the cherl's tale to both be present and absent from the work simultaneously. The trickster is as likely to appear in a divisive roll as he is to take the form of a mediator. But, in true trickster fashion, the choice need never actually be made as the tale is simultaneously presented and internally dismissed, allowing the audience to both uphold and subvert the generic integrity of the text simultaneously.

The Miller's Tale and Its Tricksters

The tale itself must be considered in the context of its *Prologue* and the following internal textual reception of the tale, but as it stands on its own it is hard to imagine a tale more perfectly attuned to the trickster's trope. Not only is it filled with the sort of infinitely ramifying and recursive trickery that is so characteristic of the trickster archetype, but the tale is itself an elaborate trick played simultaneously upon the internal

119

and external audience of the *Tales*. The Miller interrupts the Knight with a tale that at first appears, both in its subject matter and generic form, to be antithetical to work it seeks to "quite," yet even as it transgresses and questions the ordered symmetry of its predecessor it also reaffirms a central theme of divine justice.

The primary trickster is, of course, Nicholas. So many of the traits traditionally ascribed to the trickster figure are found in the character of Nicholas that he almost becomes a parody of the type. He is liminal in almost every conceivable way. He is a scholar but still a student and not yet a master. He lives within the household of another man as a boarder, a not uncommon state but still one which marks him as not quite independent. His mode of support is equally ambivalent, surviving "After his freendes fyndyng and his rente" (3220), on a mixture of income and the charity of friends. Though his amorous proclivities are clearly heterosexual in nature, his appearance is explicitly linked with femininity, appearing "And lyk a mayden meke for to see" (3202). But these are clearly only seemings as both his meekness and maidenliness are both illusions. This feminine quality is curiously explicitly linked to his amorous activities, specifically to his knowledge of how to conduct affairs and particularly how to do so discreetly, "Of deerne love he koude and of solas; / And therto he was sleigh and ful privee," (3200-3201).

The most critical of Nicholas's qualities though must be his specific art. His passion for astrology in particular is the central element in the tale as it directly connects to the divine order invoked by *The Knight's Tale* and provides both the impetus to the plot of the fabliau and the mechanism by which the prior tale can truly be "quited." There is even a further echo in the description of Nicholas's art, which is particularly

keen for determining "Whan that men sholde have droghte or elles shoures, / Or if men asked hym what sholde bifalle" (3196-3197). The first line recalls the opening of *The General Prologue* with its reference to droughts and showers, notably lines wherein Chaucer constructs the first moment of internal textual dissonance by ascribing a particularly non-English weather pattern to his poem about an English pilgrimage.[70] The second line is far more problematic in that the astrology of Nicholas claims that ability to determine or at least augur fate itself. In particular, the word "bifalle" again echoes the beginning of the introduction of the pilgrim group from *The General Prologue's* account that they "Bifil" (19) together at the Tabbard. Likewise, while the plot of *The Miller's Tale* appears chaotic and comedic, a seeming antithesis of the careful and courtly structure of *The Knight's Tale*, it is in truth as carefully constructed as all the other authorial acts of Chaucer which disingenuously claim randomness, from the construction of the pilgrim group to the ordering of the tales, yet result in meaningful and meaningfully disrupted regulation.

It is in the usurpation of divine providence that the tale's humor and its tragedies rest. Nicholas's reputation for prophecy is what allows him to enact his trickery. However problematic his usurpation of divine will in service to his amorous designs, his implicit claim to be able to interpret the will of God and the designs of fate is also an echo of a critical element of the preceding tale which the Miller seeks to "quite." The

---

[70] While Chaucer may possibly have been imitating Guido delle Collonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, in this evocation there is also a general tradition of borrowing this particular artistic phrase in southern European literature (Bowden 3). Regardless, the impossibility of a drought in March would have been immediately apparent to nay of Chaucer's likely audience.

claim to both the ability and the authority to divine the will of the divine is also made in *The Knight's Tale*. Charles Muscatine argues that the parliamentary address in that work focuses on "the principle of order which Theseus both invokes and represents throughout the tale. In a sense the representative of Fate on earth, the earthly sovereign interprets the will of the divine one…" (Muscatine 184). Thus, Theseus is too a kind of interpreter of divine will, acting after the fact to make sense of the seemingly chaotic signs, and to interpret them into the order which he constructs and by which he maintains his authority. In a perverse mirror image of this, Nicholas acts before the fact to misinterpret the divine will in service to his own romantic ends, yet in doing so he is – in a moment of fantastic Chaucerian irony – setting in motion a sequence of events that will meet out an equally perfect justice.

But the picture may also be more inherently and productively complicated. Derek Brewer argues that Chaucer's own views on the role of fate and issues free will were most strongly informed by Ockham's Nominalism, more skeptical and naturalistic than might immediately be apparent from the ordering of the work, and that the message of *The Knights Tale* may in fact be "that you stand a fifty- fifty chance of happiness" (Brewer 155). Brewer further argues that "In this poem many of the themes of Chaucer's earlier poems and thoughts about life come together; questions of love, of necessity and free will, of courtly life, of death, are seriously considered (not without some flippant asides), and are effectively resolved, by resolution, independence and acceptance"

(Brewer 155). [71] This reading provides grounds for a sort of synthesis between the two views of fate and the role of divine providence in these two tales, and one which fits well with the trickster's motif of making meaning out of chance and chaos, and specifically recalls Hynes "sacred and lewd bricoleur" aspect of the trickster figure. In both the case of the Knight and the Miller's works, it is not the divine, or at least it is not the divine aloe that gives meaning to the tale, it is the act of interpretation, sometimes willful and certainly self-interested, that makes possible the construction of meaning. The trickster creates chaos out of order and in turn reforms that chaos into meaning, and that is precisely what *The Miller's Tale* does to the theme of *The Knight's Tale*. Even more specifically, at least following Brewer's interpretation, the Knight – through Theseus – makes order of the natural chaos of his world. In perhaps an even more impressive trick, the Miller makes chaos out of pretended order, and then transforms that into an even more perfectly fit expression of divine justice.

    The Miller's Tale abounds with tricksters. As already noted, it begins with authorial, textual trickery and ends with the fine narratorial trick of responding to *The Knight's Tale* while appearing all the while to do the exact opposite. In between are all the characters of the tale, each in his or her own way a trickster figure. They each capture

---

[71] Brewer notes that Chaucer was at least influenced by contemporary strains of thought on the nature of divine will and fate by the interiorization of values that were part of Lollard thought – though he emphatically points out that Chaucer was part of multiple circles both friendly and inimical to Lollardry. He argues particularly that Chaucer subscribed to Ockham's Nominalism, "that mixture of skepticism and empirical 'realism.'" as opposed to the Realism of Aquinas and Wyclif (Brewer 141).

some facet of the trickster motif, often multiple features combined into a specific and at least self reflexively whole representation of a trickster motif.

Nicholas is ever the more perfect trickster figure in that this eventual justice is clearly not at all his intent. An essential quality of the trickster is that its actions spawn unintended consequences and are most often productive precisely when they are unintended. Again, this is precisely the sort of feature Paul Radin points out in his seminal work, arguing that "He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being" (Radin xxii). This could just as well be a description of Nicholas as it might be an account of Coyote or Michabo, for Nicholas encompasses the outcome of the tale, even to his own detriment –another common trait of trickster justice, through his own overreach and pride. He seems set upon this course by his interaction with the object of his affection, Alison, interpreting her conditional acceptance of his overtures as a sort of challenge, noting that "A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle, / But if he koude a carpenter bigyle" (3299-3300). In true trickster fashion, he then concocts an elaborate and overly complicated deceit that is at least as much about proving his superiority and creativity as it is about seducing Alison.

Alison herself is a strangely liminal figure, consistently depicted in terms of animal imagery. She seems almost to transform from one form to another in a fashion that itself echoes the mutable character of so many trickster figures. She is a weasel (3234) a sheep (3249), a swallow (3258), a kid or calf (3260), a colt, (3263), just to note a few examples, each entirely common and even domestic if still bestial. This depiction is

124

perhaps most troublingly embodied in the authorial intrusion considering her imagined

fate at the hands of her other suitor, Absolon, "I dar wel seyn, if she hadde been a mous, /

And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon" (3346-3347). Here, in particular, her changing

nature becomes a symbol of her seeming vulnerability in the tale. Yet, like the

transforming trickster of myth, her slipperiness and indefinablility serve her quite well as

she is the only figure to escape the fateful judgments of the tale. Alison too engages in

trickery, particularly in making a fool out of that selfsame suitor who would prey upon

her. For all his efforts, Alison treats Absolon with disdain, "And thus she maketh

Absolon hire ape, / And al his ernest turneth til a jape" (3389-3390). She in turn

imaginatively transforms him into a beast as well, particularly an ape – a dehumanized

diminution of mankind. In turn the second line also powerfully evokes the warning at the

end of *The Miller's Prologue* to "nat maken ernest of game" (3186) but turned on its

head, making a jest of his earnestness. Alison's slipperiness goes beyond her metaphoric

identification in the tale. She too is a trickster, turning the tables on those who would

take advantage of her and finding mockery in their most serious pretensions. She is

arguably the most successful of the tricksters in the tale as she alone escapes with the

least direct judgement, alone escaping from the tale's retributive ending.

In contrast to her fate, John the carpenter, her stock character of a jealous husband

fares the worst of all. If he is a trickster, he is of the worst kind, both self-deluding and

uninventively blasphemous. His lack of self-awareness is his initial failing, and in

tricking himself he engenders little narratorial sympathy. The authorial admonition that

"he knew nat Catou, for his wit was rude," (3227) along with his definitively churlish

status serve to diminish him as a potentially sympathetic character. Having failed to see the danger of the situation in which he places himself by marrying Alison, he elicits only the authorial condemnation, "But sith that he was fallen in the snare, / He moste endure, as oother folk, his care" (3231-3232). That the snare is of his own devising seems to be the critical failure here, though his trespass is in kind no different from that of Nicholas or Absolon. What is distinct is the cause of his self-delusion, which appears in his case to be pure foolishness. This is reinforced by the fact of his second trespass, his unreflective acceptance of Nicholas's strange and complicated trick of prediction.

Nicholas's false prediction is the core of the tale and the central act of trickery that makes possible the work's critical theme of order and justice resulting even from the most chaotic and unprincipled action. That theme is also the central point of the most common form of trickster myth, the explanatory origin story. The trickster often ends up constructing, or at least stealing, the critical elements of the physical and theological world as a result of accidental process. Lewis Hyde notes that "in spite of all their disruptive behavior, tricksters are regularly honored as the creators of culture. They are imagined not only to have stolen certain essential goods from heaven and given them to the race, but to have gone on and helped shape this world so as to make it a hospitable place for human life" (Hyde 8). The trickster, as a basic function of his character usurps the divine and brings it into the service of man.

The Miller's Tale acutely echoes this same process, but with the twist that the theft of knowledge is itself another trick. Nicholas at least pretends to have acquired knowledge of the divine will and to be able to foresee the coming catastrophe and also to

overcome it. Nicholas even makes use of one of the fundamental origin stories of the

Christian *Bible*, the flood narrative in service to his ploy. The story of the flood is critical

to *The Miller's Tale* in a number of ways, but perhaps most tellingly in that it cannot help

but reinforce the "Pilate's voice" of the prologue. The story of Noah and the flood is one

of the most evocative and critical episodes in the tradition of the mystery plays, and one

of the most reliably comic. It is also rife with cyclical allusions prefiguring the sacrament

of baptism, and critically Noah is a carpenter, as is Joseph with whom he is associatively

linked, and so too is John.[72] The referentiality of Nicholas's trick is astounding, and it is

equally astounding that John, the carpenter, falls into the trap that is set for him. This is,

of course, precisely the point. To Nicholas, and presumably to the audience, the

associative joke he is playing on John is so obvious that in falling for it he doubles the

pleasure Nicholas takes in having tricked him. By constructing a trick so patently, even

willfully allusive to the context of the story of Noah he makes the trick all the more

potent and painful. His trick transcends mere deception as it becomes instructive. The

---

[72] Beryl Rowland provides a solid survey of the literature on the numerous allusions to
the mystery Plays in *The Miller's Tale* in "The Play of the 'Miller's Tale': A Game within
a Game," and even argues that the often-repeated warning to "nat maken ernest of a
game" that introduces the tale may also allusively invoke the tradition of referring to the
plays as "games." Particularly interesting is Rowland's note that the play of Noah and
the Flood was so prominent in the play cycles as it prefigured baptism, and that Chaucer
may well be playing on allusions to events and characters in those plays, though
admittedly the association is with sections of the plays that dealt with the early life of
Jesus. However, Rowland also does note that this only strengthens the connection with
the story of Noah as "The aged Noah, a carpenter, singled out by God to be His servant
and fulfill His purpose for humanity, was considered to prefigure Christ. But he was also
the type of Joseph, similarity a carpenter, and chosen as the divine instrument.34 John
who, Nicholas implies, is also chosen by God, becomes the appropriate third
correspondence" (145).

point for Nicholas is to create a trick that not only accomplishes his immediate goal of satisfying his lusts, but also of proving his superiority and that indeed he, "koude a carpenter bigyle," and even more so that he could do so in a way that proved the almost karmic justice of his trickery.

This is the crux of Nicholas's trick, that it proves by its very obviousness that the one who falls victim to it deserves the attendant punishment. The carpenter compounds Nicholas's trick with his own exhortation of a lack of learning, noting that "Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee. /Ye, blessed be alwey a lewed man" (3454/3455). His acknowledgement of this fact of course makes him all the more complicit when he deigns to use that very knowledge, just as it also echoes the authorial note at the end of the *Miller's Prologue* that warns the reader not to read, knowing full well such a caveat must necessarily only increase the desire to do so. But here the warning comes from the subject himself who will betray his own counsel, making him even more deeply complicit and more clearly lacking in self-awareness.

John's lack of reflection is his defining characteristic and the trespass for which he eventually pays. It is first evident in his securing of a wife whom he cannot hope to please, as noted previously, but it is most profoundly on display in not only his failure to recognize Nicholas's trickery, but in his nearly willful acceptance of the trick. After setting his plot in motion with the counterfeit vision, Nicholas begins to implicate the carpenter in a series of humiliations which he should most easily be able to recognize. Following his somewhat enduring initial expression of concern for Alisoun (3522-3525) John is nevertheless parted from her both physically and imaginatively by Nicholas's

leading question, "'Hastou nat herd,' quod Nicholas, 'also /The sorwe of Noe with his felaweshipe, / Er that he myghte gete his wyf to shipe?'" (3538-3540). There are several layers behind this query, the first being that it is explicitly set out as a question to which John must himself find the answer. This further implicates John, and doubly so as he both must recognize and fail to understand the explicit reference that is being made here. That reference is quite clearly to the Noah and his wife of the mystery plays rather than the canonical biblical figure.

The problematic wife of which Nicholas speaks is an exegetical reference to the development of the character of Noah's wife which is clearly drawn from the mystery plays, particularly those from the York, Chester and Towneley cycles. That the reluctant wife of the mystery plays is the only form of the biblical story that John is likely to remember, as is clearly indicated by John's response to Nicholas's query if he recalls the story to which he can only respond, "Yis," quod this Carpenter, "ful yoore ago" (3537), is precisely the point. Noah's troublesome wife is an extracanonical creation most specific to the English mystery plays in particular.[73] That he only knows this version is not surprising, but his only passing knowledge may be more suspicious.

The carpenter's guild was explicitly responsible for performing the section of the mystery plays related to both the building of the ark in the York and Chester cycles.[74]

---

[73] V.A. Kolve appears to argue that the tradition of Noah's wife is a sort of sui generis construction emerging whole from the mystery play tradition (146). Both the Gnostic and Koranic traditions which problematise the figure of Noah's wife are argued as possible inspirations for the tradition seen in the mystery plays by Alfred David (99).

[74] According to Laura C. Lambdin and Robert T. Lambdin in *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims in The Canterbury Tales*.

Along with the plays related to Joseph in his role as the patron saint of carpenters, the professional identification between their ranks and Noah was firmly established in English drama of the period in which Chaucer was writing and should have been immediately obvious to John. That these two stories also bear parallels in *The Miller's Tale*, with Nicholas's parody of the role of Gabriel in the annunciation and John's clear association with Joseph, further deepens the eventual humiliation that the carpenter must face. Yet there is even another layer as other elements of the Noah tradition are also telling in understanding Nicholas's deployment of the story. Friedman notes that one of the prominent features of the Noah material was his subsequent sexually charged humiliation by his own son, a role that Nicholas not unproblematically takes in this conceit. "Tied to this New Testament material through Nicholas's plot, is the story of Noah's flood, described in *The Parson's Tale* as a punishment on mankind for sexual sin, with its sequel in Genesis 9 of the sexual humiliation of a father figure but Ham, Noah's bad son; on this biblical legend and its apocryphal amplifications may depend the final injury, humiliation, and mockery of John by his Oxford neighbors" (Friedman 163). Here is one more warning that John should heed but which he clearly fails to recognize. Nicholas's trickery is no simple thing, but rather a layered trap that generates its humiliation not only through the eventual and physical resolution of the plot, but also through the underlying mockery that the layers of associative insult heap upon the poor carpenter.

Perhaps also significant to the deployment of the Noah material from the mystery plays is the fact that his wife in those works is the sole voice of concern for those who are

left behind. Jane Tolmie notes in her article, "Mrs. Noah and Didactic Abuses," that the figure of Noah's wife in these plays acts as a singular voice of sympathy for the fate of those denied salvation from the flood, "The story of the Ark has its obvious cruelties; the inclusion of Mrs. Noah's resisting voice is one way of making these cruelties present and real for the audience. The Noah plays from York, Chester and Townley have investments of various sorts in those who are left behind, and these investments are often filtered through the voice of Mrs. Noah" (Tolmie 11). This sympathy is expressly not given by the carpenter to anyone but his wife. All others besides Nicholas and Alisoun are expressly denied the possibility of being rescued by what is arguably Nicholas's most confounding and bald-faced statement of all:

> But Robyn may nat wite of this, thy knave,
> Ne eek thy mayde Gille I may nat save;
> Axe nat why, for though thou aske me,
> I wol nat tellen Goddes pryvetee (3555-3558)

Nicholas's command that Robyn and Gille cannot be brought along, and his specific refusal to justify this decree creates a dual trap for John the carpenter. He must both fail to care enough for these members of his household to challenge this decree, and he must fail to recognize the paradox in Nicholas's statement that he will not divulge "Goddes pryvetee," which is expressly what his divinatory arts are dedicated to doing. Furthermore, these exclusions are actually part of the fantasy that Nicholas sets as a trap for John. Richard Daniel's notes that "Part of Nicholas' deception of John, the vision is stated in exactly the right terms to appeal to the old man's avarice: Nicholas offers him Alisoun and the world, with no competition. But John is so intent upon his vision of lordship of world and wife that he does not notice the inaccuracy of the comparison:

131

Noah and his wife were two; John, Nicholas and Alisoun are three" (Daniels 116). The temptation that leads John so easily into trickery is of the same kind as that which allowed him to marry Alisoun in the first place, an inability to see the consequences of his willful self-deception, and thus he is the perfect dupe.

Yet there is one last critical problem with the carpenter's acceptance of Nicholas's trick, and it also relates back to the notion of sympathy evoked by the reference to Noah's wife. John fails to remember the critical resolution of the flood with the rainbow being sent as a sign of God's promise to never again send a second flood. Here John's sin is compounded by both his failure to recall the essential conclusion of the biblical tale and by his failure to recognize that even the avenging divine appears to take pause at the level of pure destruction that ensues as a result of the flood. His offense is a trifecta of ignorance and a total failure of mercy combined with a ridiculously high self-regard. As noted previously, if John is any kind of a trickster in this tale the one he is fooling is himself. Of course, that is also a common feature of the trickster figure. As Radin noted, the trickster is "he who dupes others and who is always duped himself, (Radin xxiii), and Jung – in his appendix to Radin's Work says of the trickster that "He is both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being, whose most alarming characteristic is his unconsciousness. Because of it he is deserted by his (evidently human) companions, which seems to indicate that he has fallen below their level of consciousness. He is so unconscious of himself that his body is not a unity, and his two hands fight each other" (Jung 203). John the carpenter expresses this particular facet of the trickster trope, less

than conscious on all levels of awareness, personal, social and religious, fooling himself

at least as much as he is fooled by others.

The last character of the tale is Absolon, the parish clerk. In many respects he

echoes Nicholas, his competitor for Alisoun's affections, also playing music,

accomplished with a variety of learned skills particularly those of the barber and,

appropriately, a clerk (3326-3327). Yet he is also curiously fastidious, "But sooth to seyn,

he was somdeel squaymous / Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous" (3337-3338) in a

fashion that will of course play into his narrative punishment, but which also speaks to

his particular role as a trickster in the tale. With his curly hair, elaborate fashion sense

and overzealous desire to prove his amorous intentions, Absolon has long been regarded

as a particularly effeminate figure in the tale. Elaine Hansen's work, *Chaucer and the*

Fictions of Gender, notes his intense reaction to the kissing of Alisoun's nether regions

"suggests, however, that Absolon figures underlying issues that make effeminacy a

source of both masculine humor and masculine anxiety: in general the fluidity and

instability of gender difference and in particular the possibilities of homosexuality and

castration" (Hansen 229).[75] Fluid gender is yet another hallmark of the trickster,

particularly when the transformation between one sex and the other is simultaneously

both socially transgressive and illustrative of cultural mores. Victor Turner, the

influential anthropologist who formulated some of the seminal notions of liminality and

its relationship with ritual noted that "Most tricksters have an uncertain sexual status: on

---

[75] Hansen also, though somewhat critical of the remarks, gives an overview of the long
tradition of reading Absolon as a specifically effeminate figure in the work (229-230).

various mythical occasions Loki and Wakdjunkaga transformed themselves into women, while Hermes was often represented in statuary as a hermaphrodite" (Turner 580-581). While Absolon's gender shift is far more metaphorical than these examples, it is no less significantly indicative of his character's liminality. He undergoes a transformation as a result of his humiliation at the hands of Alisoun that transmutes him from effeminate lover to masculine avenger. As his gender is reversed so are his motivations, altered from love into hate. Cornelius Novelli argues that Absalom's intermediary encounter with Gerveys the smith, a sort of hyper masculine figure with whom Absolom has a significant enough friendship to enable him to call upon his direct material assistance without needing to justify his requisition of a red-hot coulter, represents this moment of transition in the text.[76] Significantly, this is also the moment where Absolon shifts from tricked to trickster, though not in a fully satisfactory manner.

Of course, his transformation is necessarily incomplete. While he is able to cause injury, his target is misplaced, and while he achieves some measure of vengeance, he is himself still further humiliated. Episodes of humiliation are also a common trope of the trickster figure, who quite often escapes direct physical punishment at the cost of humiliation. Laura Makarius, in her untranslated but often referenced article critiquing much western scholarship on the trickster figure notes that the trickster's humiliation is

---

[76] Cornelius Novelli specifically points to the interaction between Absolon and his friend the smith who provides him with the coulter as a transformative moment where the effeminate Absolon is made masculine through his association with the rough and ready figure of the smith in "Absolon's 'Freend so deere': A Pivotal Point in The Miller's Tale" (65-69).

often tied to creative or generative activities, "Le héros mythique transforme la nature et parfois, faisant figure de Démiurge, apparaît comme le Créateur, mais est en même temps um pitre, un bouffon à ne pas prendre au sérieux. Il arrête la course du soleil, pourfend les monstres et défie les dieux, et en même temps est le protagoniste d'aventures obscènes dont il sort humilié et avili" (Makarius 18).[77] Absolon is inherently generative in that it is his secondary love plot that actually engenders the main action and the conclusion of the tale. He is also responsible for the inadvertent and entirely unintended justice of the piece, which is also par for the trickster course.

Yet his action is also compromised by the simultaneous humiliation which Nicholas visits upon him by virtue of his own secondary and excessive trick. Nicholas's final trick, the singular one which backfires upon him, even begins with an excretory motivation. He only arises to from his amorous bed in order to urinate, "This Nicholas was risen for to pisse, / And thoughte he wolde amenden al the jape;" (3798-3799). Nicholas's impulse to excrete and his compulsion to engage in another trick are clearly and intentionally linked in these lines. The trick and his excratory impulse are one and the same for Nicholas, both arising from an almost instinctual need. As with John the

---

[77] Laura. In: *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, tome 175, no.1, 1969. pp. 17-46. Though no full English translation exists of Makarius' "Le mythe du « Trickster »," this passage is helpfully translated by Jean Campbell Reesman in a larger work on the role of the trickster figure in American fiction. "The mythic hero who transforms nature and sometimes, playing the role of a demiurge, appears as the creator, but at the same time he remains a clown, a buffoon not to be taken seriously. He checks the course of the sun, cleaves monsters asunder, and defies the gods; at the same time he is the protagonist of obscene adventures from which he escapes humiliated and debased" (trans. Reesman xiii).

carpenter, Nicholas needs not only to dupe the other, he must also prove his own inherent

and substantial superiority over them. His subsequent exchange with Absolon takes the

form of a mock combat, with Nicholas initiating the bout with this fart and in turn

receiving the business end of the blazing coulter.

> This Nicholas anon leet fle a fart
> As greet as it had been a thonder-dent,
> That with the strook he was almoost yblent;
> And he was redy with his iren hoot,
> And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot. (3806-3810)

For Absolon, his previously mentioned squeamishness about farting in particular is here

confronted in what must be simultaneously the most horrifying and satisfying fashion.

Not only is he farted on directly in his face at the very moment he expects to achieve his

longed-for revenge, but the origin of the flatulence is his reviled competitor for Alisoun's

affections. There is also the added factor of his necessary proximity to a masculine

posterior that may narratively reverse the masculinization of Absolon that so recently

took place. Simultaneously, however, he does achieve his vengeance, and on a more

fitting target in some respects. The combative language of the passage's "strook" and

"smoot" regenerate Absolon's masculinity and his agency even as the fart and the

proximity of a male posterior suppresses them. Thus, as is so often the case with the

trickster, he is both more and less as a result of his own trickery.

The punishment for Nicholas is both to be burned, with a wound, the seriousness

of which seems to be often understated, and even more profoundly to have been

outsmarted. Furthermore, he loses agency at this point, and in a fashion most particular

and significant to his role in the tale. While his utterance in response to his branding does

initiate the final and most potent trick of the tale, it is entirely and explicitly unintentional. His shout is a result of sheer impulse, acting "As he were wood, for wo he gan to crye, / 'Help! Water! Water! Help, for Goddes herte!'" (3814-3815). Even more critically, he is semantically linked with the fate of the carpenter by the use of the term "wood" to refer to his subjunctive mental state. This same term will be applied to the utterances of John at the end of the tale, and a careful reader cannot help but recognize that Nicholas would hate nothing more than to share his lack of agency.

The fate of John the carpenter results from the encounter between Nicholas and Absolon and it represents the ultimate trick of the tale, all the more powerful as it is not the result of any human agency. The conclusion of *The Miller's Tale* with its resolution of all the multiple trickster plots is the final trick itself. Throughout the tale the characters, particularly Nicholas, but also Absolon and John as well have been engaged in forms of blasphemy. Nicolas' case is the most obvious, in that he not only counterfeits a spiritual sign, he also transgresses by transgressing on the sacrament of marriage. Absolon explicitly begins his courtship of Alisoun in the church in a like form of trespass, which while not realized is still made more damning by his role as parish clerk. John's infringement upon the divine is both less active and more problematic. His is a sin of ignorance, having failed to learn his biblical lore, it is used against him by Nicholas. Having failed to understand the nature of God's mercy in the form of the rainbow, precluding any future flood, he falls victim to that same divine judgement he fears, but in misplaced fashion.

Yet, these blasphemies all come together to create an affirming message of divine order. Each trespass contains within itself the intrinsic seed of restoration. Through the conclusion order – after a fashion – is restored. In the end it is God's justice, or at least that of his agent in this particular case, Chaucer, which is meted out to each of the most offending individuals, and in poetic fashion. Chaucer makes this very clear in the conclusion, which contains a clear catalogue of their respective punishments.

> For every clerk anonright heeld with oother.
> They seyde, "The man is wood, my leeve brother";
> And every wight gan laughen at this stryf.
> Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
> For al his kepyng and his jalousye,
> And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye,
> And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.
> This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte! (3847-3854)

John's punishment is the first and the most significantly compounded. Suggestively, it is not his broken arm that is the punishment dwelt upon but rather his loss of reputation that is the critical rebuke. This is followed by the curious note that Alisoun has been "swyved," which hardly seems a punishment as she is both a clearly willing and even enthusiastic participant. Instead, here punishment is displaced onto her husband, perhaps in response to his "kepyng and his jalousye." While this frees her from direct consequence, Alisoun is also largely left without seeming direct agency in the tale. Yet, she is complicit in each of the acts that bring about the conclusion, in fact she is the only one who is instrumental in each of the other character's punishments. She is the instigator for each trick in the story, setting Nicholas the parameters of his task that then lead to his deception of her jealous husband, and also the initiator of the humiliation of Absolon and the motivation for the revenge deflected onto Nicholas. What may set her

138

apart is that her motivations are more direct and clearly in response to the actions of others. She lacks the agency of the other characters, and is objectified by each of them, but the last laugh, is hers. Indeed, she is the only one who can be imagined joining in the general response at the end.

It is also worth noting that Absolon's mentioned punishment is not the flatulence he receives from Nicholas, but rather the rebuke of kissing Alisoun's "nether eye." Nicholas's scalding is also received by dint of what Alisoun has set in motion with her single, impulsive, and significantly different trick. Unlike the other characters, she is not engaged in asserting superiority, whether that dominance be over other men or over fate, and so her punishment is simply to have had sexual intercourse, with a man of her own choosing – significantly and clearly chosen over Absolon whom she denigrates – and so, while seemingly lacking in the agency of the other figures in the tale, she becomes the central agent of fate in the tale. Joseph Parry notes the complexity of this subject in Chaucer's works in general and in the character of Alisoun specifically in his essay, "Interpreting female agency and responsibility in the Miller's Tale and the Merchant's Tale."

> However, in contrast to many of Chacuer's other treatments of this theme, his interest in reading female agency here, though it emerges from these female figures' central place in the playfully-portrayed drama of male desire, is made even more acute by the way that Alisoun and May are conspicuously *not* at the center of the retribution games each tale plays. Retribution games drive each of these tale's plots. In fact, each tale's plot culminates in a precisely administered system of requital among the tale's male figures, leading many readers to call the punishments the tale hands out "poetic justice." Yet both tales imagine exempting the female figures from retribution for their active complicity in adultery and deception, and thus, inquire with playful seriousness into the ways in which women thereby are or are not fully part of the systems in which we may conceptualize retribution and accountability of actions… (Parry 134)

Having already discussed how the trickster figure's fluidity of gender is enacted in the

tale through the liminal sexuality of both Nicholas and Absolon,[78] it is also worth

considering how Alisoun's gender, which makes her the singular outsider in this tale of

masculine competition sexual desire sets her apart and makes her powerfully liminal – in

the way that trickster figures always are – both agent and passive object, both victim and

retributor. Just as Alisoun is described by a constantly shifting sequence of animal

associations, metaphorically transforming throughout the tale, so too is she at the end so

slippery that she is both responsible and not for the conclusion of the tale. If she is an

agent, she is the agent of fate, no less so for her seeming lack of intention.

The tale's conclusion also fulfills another of the trickster's tropes, the

transformation from sacred to lewd and back again. One of the common traits of the

trickster is a decided liminality between the sacred and the profane. The sixth of Hynes

common characteristic trickster types is the role of the "Sacred and Lewd Bricoleur".

Hyne's heuristic guide to trickster figures notes specifically the way in which this

particular form of the trickster crosses the boundaries between lay and clerical devotion.

> Robert Pelton speaks of the trickster as "sacred bricoleur." Using the inverse logic
> of the trickster, I would make the suggestion that the trickster can also be a "lewd
> bricoleur." The trickster manifests a distinctive transformative ability: he can find
> the lewd in the sacred and the sacred in the lewd, and new life from both. The
> Oxford English Dictionary suggests a parallel binary contrast here when it lists
> the original meaning of the word lewd as "lay, not in holy orders, not clerical."
> Thus, the fuller background against which the trickster transforms may be the
> contrast between sacred-clerical and lewd-lay. (Hynes 42)

---

[78] See footnotes 20 and 21.

The bricoleur here is simultaneously the Miller, who successfully transforms his "cherl's tale" into a fitting response to the Knight's meditation on divine fate, and also Chaucer – the author – as well, turning a tale he himself urges his readers to elide into a central and generative work that thematically satisfies his own internal requirements of "sentence and solaas."[79] The transformation of the profane into sacred is, in effect, a restoration of Knight's order from the proceeding tale.

In fact, the tale the Miller produces is of comparable literary merit with that of the Knight, and it is even thematically linked to it. Patterson notes the literary merit of *The Miller's Tale* in his seminal work "'No Man His Reson Herde' Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the Canterbury Tales," and also argues that it is a fitting response to and thematic equivalent of the refined *Knight's Tale*.

> "…the Miller's witty, even elegant tale – an achievement that not even modern critics, who continue to wonder at the presence of so intelligent a tale in the mouth of so obviously brutish a teller, have been quite prepared to grant him – both proves that the peasant is not the inarticulate and brutal figure that that hostile representations had depicted and establishes a countervailing set of values. In place of the Knight's paranoid insistence on the continual need for supervision and constraint, the Miller describes (as we have all seen) a world that shatters all efforts at confinement but that nonetheless contains its own principle of equilibrium in a sense of natural fitness and decorum. (Patterson 137)

The Miller's Tale is essentially a challenge to both the social and natural order depicted in *The Knight's Tale*, and an answer to his a priori claim to literary merit through social status. Ralph Hanna argues, in the course of his mediation on "Pilate's Voice / Shirley's Case," that - like the rebellious peasants so simultaneously present and absent from

---

[79] I'm influenced here by Gaylord's long established account of the internal textual significance of those terms as a generative model for the tales from "Sentence and Solaas in Fragment VII of the Canterbury Tales: Harry Bailly as Horseback Editor" (226–235)

Chaucer's works - the Miller is more than able to construct meaning and perform a literary act. Hanna notes that, while the authorial intrusion that Chaucer instigates limits and deconstructs the subsequent *Miller's Tale,* "Yet this is not quite the whole story. For the Miller, like the peasant legalists the chroniclers of 1381 describe, proves thoroughly capable of manipulating writing, of instituting his own counter literary tradition. His evocation of the natural underwrites the most literary of all European fabliaux, one that even Patterson argues, draws upon and explodes written clerical discourse" (Hanna 278). As Hanna notes, not only does the Miller succeed in writing or having his tale written, he also both deploys and debates with the sacred. He is, again, the "sacred and the lewd bricoleur" that Hynes identifies as one of central trickster archetypes, and through him, so is Chaucer.

Laughter and the Popular response.

The reception of the Miller's fabliau within *The Canterbury Tales* is immediate and decisive. The conclusion of the tale is rife with laughter, which the Miller notes at the beginning of stanza, "The folk gan laughen at his fantasye;" (3840) which is soon doubled by the observation "And every wight gan laughen at this stryf..." (A 3849). These moments of communal laughter, problematic as they are at the expense of the pain of others, are also a hallmark of the trickster tale. The edifying humor of the trickster is further reinforced by the external audience of fellow pilgrims at the beginning of *The Reeve's Prologue*.

> Whan folk hadde laughen at this nyce cas
> Of Absolon and hende Nicholas,

Diverse folk diverseley they seyde,
But for the moore part they loughe and pleyde.
Ne at this tale I saugh no man hym greve,
But it were oonly Osewold the Reve.
By cause he was of carpenteris craft,
A litel ire is in his herte ylaft;
He gan to grucche, and blamed it a lite. (A 3855-63)

The Miller's Tale produces, foremost amongst its audience's response, laughter. Bedier's

original definition of the genre of fabliau in 1893 is traditionally reduced to his singular

classification of these stories as, "contes a rire en vers." Despite the problems with this

obviously overly simplistic definition,[80] the audience's laughter is key both to the success

of the story, and to the tales performance of the genre of fabliau. The success of the story

is in the basic human enjoyment that it engenders. As noted, it satisfies the first part of

the Host's dual Horatian qualifications of "sentence," by creating meaning out of what at

first appears to be an entirely frivolous tale, and "Solaas," by providing the troop with

laughter, perhaps the most obvious outward sign of appreciation and enjoyment.

Moreover, the tale does not appear to have actually offended the "gentle"

sensibilities of the representatives of societies highest echelons, "Ne at this tale I saugh

no man hym greve...". The only figure who is offended is the Reeve, and his reasons have

nothing to do with the literary merits of the genre. His antagonistic response is to create

yet another fabliau, not at all surprising, as we have already been told explicitly by the

narrator that he belongs to the same social – and, presumably, literary – strata, "The

Miller is a cherl; ye knowe wel this. / So was the Reve eek and othere mo..." (3182-

---

[80] A discussion of the problems with this classification appears in Hine's work *The Fabliau in English* (2-4).

3183). The fabliau is not directly the source of the conflict – though it must to some

degree be complicit in the fraternal breakdown as it allows for a protracted slandering of

representative characters – instead its source is the over-identification of an individual

with a fictional character that leads to the division, and that fracture is itself another layer

of social fiction that Chaucer engages in order to extend the work of The Miller's Tale

and to further develop the genre of the fabliau.

The fabliau seems to be somewhat rehabilitated by this continual re-enactment of

its form, in fact the momentum of the genre is so strong that it carries through to the end

of the first fragment. The Reeve's fabliau is in turn answered by the Cook's fragment, a

shard that is obviously the beginning of yet another example of this genre. In addition to

replicating itself through repeated use of its form, the fabliau is also generative of

discussion. It creates a response that while it at first appears to be based upon

distinctions, perhaps social in origin, by noting that "Diverse folk diverseley they

seyde..." in an often-quoted passage that reflects the disputed identification of the genre

of fabliau with the lower order, an association that is likely as fictional and artificially

constructed as the internal conflict between the Miller and the Reeve. [81] The following

---

[81] I base this comment upon the inclusion of a general discussion of the social
identification of the fabliau which seems to have peaked at some point in the 1980s and
early 90s. There was quite an industry in re-hashing the struggles of Bedier, Nykrog, and
Rychner. The consensus seems to accept the Rychnerian accommodation of possibilities,
and genreic appropriation towards the end of the flowering of the fabliau. Exemplary of
this discussion are the works listed below, the arguments in all three texts are remarkably
similar. Bloch covers the debate and is primarily interested in the resistance of the
fabliau to modern philology (11-14). See also Howard R. Bloch, *The Scandal of the
Fabliau,* John Hines, *The Fabliau in English*, which also includes Muscatine and
Schenk's contributions to the debate (22-5). Finally, Lewis attempts to ameliorate

line makes it acutely clear that this is not the case and that the tale actually generates a consensus, "But for the moore part they loughe and pleyde." The fabliau has engaged its audience, thw whole of it with the singular exception of another "cherl," and it has produced a conversation and achieved an overwhelmingly positive response.

In contrast to this example of reception, it is interesting to note the fictive audience's reaction to the first tale in the sequence, the high brow historical romance of the Knight. Blessed – or perhaps neglected – by a lack of narrative introduction to establish the merit of this tale, the frame only provides a hint at the works reception even after it is performed,

> "Whan that the Knyght had thus his tale ytoold,
> In al the route nas ther yong ne oold
> That he ne seyde it was a noble storie
> And worthy for to drawen to memorie,
> And namely the gentils everyichon." (A 3109-13)

There is no hint of the pure enjoyment we will find at the end of The *Miller's Tale*; there is only a set of adjectives which draw particular attention to the class of its teller, and perhaps its literary associations. This is a tale described as "noble," and "worthy," fit for "gentils." This description produces nearly every adjective associated with the aristocratic class, but it tells us little of the works actual literary merit. The only real evidence of this is an indication that the tale is to be remembered, and this is problematic in that it overtly draws the work away from the written text, and back into the field of performance. Finally, there is the indication that this work has been particularly class

---

Nykrog's position, and develops a discussion of his 1973 postscript to *Les Fabliau*, which recognizes the bourgeoisie adaptation of the genre (244-245).

coded and that its reception has depended somewhat upon individual allegiance to the values of that order. The narrators statement the tale was appreciated by, "namely the gentils everyichon..." undermines the sense of universal appreciation the passage has sought to build. The "everyichon" only serves to heighten the sense of exclusion as we recall how small a minority of the pilgrims actually constitute this class.

The Reeve's Response

The Reeve's Tale seeks to quite the Miller's Tale, and it too is a trickster tale involving bed switching and identity stealing inversion. It is a tale of trickery, but not quite a trickster's tale in the same way that *The Miller's Tale* is. The significant difference is that the Reeve's purpose and scope in quiting the preceding tale is entirely self-centered and focused only on returning a perceived slight. Reflecting this myopic focus, his tale centers on repeated incidents of misapprehension and self-delusion. If the Reeve is a trickster, his trickery is turned inward upon himself.

Other authors have noted the clear link between the production of literature and deception and trickery and the inherent link between the creative process and the trickster figure. In Michael Chabon's introduction to Lewis Hyde's Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art, the Pulitzer prize winning author argues that the quality of self-delusion is in fact the essential characteristic of the trickster. Speaking of Hyde's book and the theme of tricksters he notes:

> A great book, therefore, is in part an act of deception, a tissue of lies: a trick.
> Indeed it plays the fundamental human trick of finding, or discovering, or
> imposing, meaning in the senseless, pattern in chaos, fish and princesses and
> monsters in the heavens. That act of deception is at root a self-deception,
> conscious and unconscious, and without it life would be – life *is* – a terrible,

useless procedure bracketed by orgasm and putrefaction. Small wonder that we should have come, therefore, to revere the One who perpetrates that lie, who embodies the contingent and in so doing lends in the appearance of necessity. His name is Trickster. (Chabon xi).[82]

This definition encapsulates the twofold nature of the inherently liminal trickster's tale. As is the case with *The Miller's Tale*, such works can create meaning out of the seeming random chaos of the world. However, the inverse is also true and the teller of a tale is just as capable of finding meaning in what actually is senseless and random. Such appears to be the case in *The Reeve's Tale*, a work generated in response to a perceived slight – be it intentional or not – and which also inverts the tale it seeks to quite and does so with unintentional success, beginning with an attempt to generate meaning and devolving into meaninglessness.

For the Reeve, the meaning he creates from the story told by the Miller is one of personal defamation. He expressly seeks to quite the tale and the slight he perceives in it, and even more specifically to play an odd form of trick upon the Miller by creating a tale of a Miller being tricked.

> "So theek," quod he, "ful wel koude I thee quite
> With bleryng of a proud milleres ye,
> If that me liste speke of ribaudye.
> But ik am oold; me list not pley for age; (3864-3867)

The second line in particular points to the desire to trick the Miller through his tale, a strange fictive and displaced form of vengeance. Furthermore, the Reeve immediately begins his seemingly unintentionally ironic – on the character's part, though surely considered by Chaucer quite deliberately – claim that he will not speak of ribaldry, which

---

[82] This statement appears in Michael Chabon's foreword in – Hyde, Lewis. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art.*

in fact is the entire content of his tale. Even more telling is his rationale for his stance, his advanced age.

This quality, along with the profession of carpentry appear to be the critical reasons for the Reeve's umbrage to the preceding tale, yet it is the Reeve himself who turns the quality into a mockery with his bizarre outburst on the pains of aging. This goes on until interrupted by the Host who asks, "What shul we speke alday of hooly writ? / The devel made a reve for to preche" (3902-3903). The hosts antipathy to the Reeve's "Sermonyng" (3899) is based on his usurpation of clerical form, a theme which will be repeated regularly in his tale. This interjection then spurs Osewold on to tell his tale and to perform his own peculiar form of quiting.

> "Now, sires," quod this Osewold the Reve,
> "I pray yow alle that ye nat yow greve,
> Thogh I answere, and somdeel sette his howve;
> For leveful is with force force of-showve." (3909-3912)

His assumption that he will make a fool of the Miller through his tale, is not only presumptuous, it demonstrates his own lack of self-awareness. In seeking to avenge himself he admits to stooping to the Miller's level, even noting that his tale will be in the same register. "And, by youre leve, I shal hym quite anoon; / Right in his cherles termes wol I speke" (3916-3917). By using the Miller's own cherlish terms, the Reeve stoops to his level, but even more significantly, he makes his tale a mere imitation of the far more genuine and inventive tale of the Miller. As Paul Olsen long ago noted, at the core of *The Reeve's Tale* is an internal reversal, a self-inflicted trick that makes it more of a reflection upon the teller than its target:

> His technique is to disguise revenge as justice: by cloaking personal retribution in the garment of objective moral comment, he is able to pretend that he is concerned not so much with retaliation as with evil itself. In doing this he makes a mistake. The morality which he announces is more applicable to him that to his victim, and the opposition between what he says and what Chaucer says through him constitutes the real comic center of the tale's meaning. (Paul Olson 1)

The divine and inspired justice that concludes *The Miller's Tale* is entirely lacking in the story the Reeve tells. Instead, he tells a tale intended to point out the crude and base nature of his perceived accuser which only ends up confirming the Host's low opinion.

The Reeve is also depicted in *The General Prologue* as a "choleric man" (587), which is here confirmed, but also as kind of very base kind of trickster, one who preys upon an easy target. The revelation from the *General Prologue* that the estate he serves "Was hooly in thie Reves governynge, / And by his covenant yaf the rekenynge, / Syn that his lord was twenty yeer of age" (599-601) demonstrates that he hasn't had to work too hard to trick his erstwhile master. To be fair, he is adept at catching other tricksters, "Ther nas bailli, ne hierde, nor oother hyne, /That he ne knew his sleighte and his covyne:" (603-604) but his own tricks are somewhat less impressive. Yet, his experience appears to have taught him that trickery is easy and that he is quite good at it, by virtue of his long experience if nothing else.

He is, in short, the perfect dupe for Chaucer's own next trick, the mocking of those who would willfully misread and attempt to parody another. To accomplish this, Chaucer sets out to construct a work of intended caricature that instead reveals more about the failings of the teller than it does his target. This is exactly the kind of trickster tale, so common amongst the form, where the trickster is most fully engaged in tricking him or herself. It is a particularly common form in the North American Native tradition,

Rickett's notes in his classic essay on "The North American Indian Trickster," a figure who can alternate between shocking extremes of power and significance, but who very often ends up mocking the very creation he engenders.

> "Oftentimes he is the maker of the earth and/or he is the one who changes the chaotic myth-world into the ordered creation of today; he is the slayer of monsters, the thief of daylight, fire, water, and the like for the benefit of man; he is the teacher of cultural skills and customs; but he is also grossly erotic, insatiably hungry, inordinately vain and deceitful, and cunning toward friends as well as foes; a restless wanderer upon the face of the earth; and a blunderer who is often the victim of his own tricks and follies" (Ricketts 327).

This too is part of the trickster pattern, and is manifest in a number of odd characteristics internal to the tale. Many of the elements of the story he tells reflect rather poorly on the teller in ways that engender a comic effect but also clearly serve to illustrate the danger of telling a tale for a specific and antagonistic reason. The most significant difference between the trickster's tales of the Miller and the Reeve is that the Miller seeks to invert the tale in a fashion that is edifying. Because of this his trick is inclusive, bringing the audience into the joke and thus receiving a positive reception. The Reeve on the other hand in trying so hard and self-consciously to trick another ends up inverting only his stated end.

One particular expression of this self-delusion in *The Reeve's Tale* is its obsession with those who put on inappropriate social airs. Both the tale teller himself and the dupes of his story suffer from the sin of excessive and unreasoned pride in their own self worth. This sense of self worth is in both cases dramatically and even violently curtailed. Perhaps the strangest example of this pride within the tale itself, and one contextually

linked to the Host's complaint about the Reeve's usurpation of the ecclesiastical style, is

Symkin the miller's marriage to the daughter of the parish priest.

> A wyf he hadde, ycomen of noble kyn;
> The person of the toun hir fader was.
> With hire he yaf ful many a panne of bras,
> For that Symkyn sholde in his blood allye. (3942-3945)

This passage is clearly another assault upon the miller who takes pride in his wife's

parentage when he has in truth take in an illegitimate bride and paid a high price for the

honor. Symkyn the miller and Oswald the Reeve share a concern over their social

pretensions though they are of different status. [83]

There is a clear parallel between the Reeve and the victims of his tale, though it seems

clear that he himself is meant to be blind to such possibilities.

The Reeve's clear clerical concerns are also tied back to the introduction of his

tale and the sermonizing thateventually causes an interruption to his prologue. This

interruption is particularly productive because it reintroduces the authority of the Host,

but it does so in such a way as to directly link him with the exact same self-parody that

---

[83] Copland's essay on the Reeve's tale starts with Tolkien's questions about the work and goes on to discuss the centrality of the Miller's wife's parentage in the tale which over an eighth of the tale is given over to discussing. He argues that the entire tale is focused on humbling Symkyn's pride, specifically his social pride, which is his main vice. He also notes that the Reeve is rightly concerned with estate and that the millers concerns over his yeoman status are at least in part reflective of his own. "Nevertheless the rank was hardly one on which to build such social pretensions, not only from the point of view of an aristocratic audience but also from that of a Reeve (3865) who himself is rising socially, more unobtrusively but also more successfully: the use of the lofty word 'place' for the Reeve's house and grounds in the General Prologue is no, of course *belittlingly* but *admiringly* ironical" (Copland 17-18).

the Reeve is engaged in. As noted, the Host disrupts the Reeve's interminable treatise on

his own age and

> Whan that oure Hoost hadde herd this sermonying,
> He gan to speke as lordly as a kyng.
> He seide, "What amounteth al this wit?
> What shul we speke alday of hooly writ?
> (Reeve's Prologue 3899-3902)

And we might finish this with an emendation, "Or a lord out of a hosteller." The Host is

caught up in the selfsame self-parody through his assertion of possibly unwarranted

authority. The brilliance of Chaucer is apparent in that he uses the Host to bring out the

pretensions of the Reeve, and simultaneously displays a similar affectation on the part of

the Host. Yet the Reeve's significant plot point of the miller's wife's parentage may also

have another level of significance, and point to another target for his quiting. John

Plummer notes that:

> Specifically, in his portrait of the village parson, the Reeve uses the language of
> complaint literature (sermons, tracts, satirical poems, and conciliar edicts) in its
> attacks upon clerical corruption, especially simony. The echoes of complaint
> literature demonstrate once more, of course, how varied were the verbal sources
> of Chaucer's fictions. They may also allow us to measure more accurately than we
> have the role of the parson in the whole tale, and suggest as well another layer of
> significance in the tale's bitterness. (Plummer 49)[84]

The Reeve appears to have many targets for his ire, and that he also lays on an assault

upon clerical corruption is hardly surprising.

One particular feature of the tale that complicates the Reeve's stated objective to

make a fool of his representative character is that the miller still plays the role of the

---

[84] Plummer also notes that the real villain of the piece, and also perhaps the only truly
effective trickster, is the parish priest who has managed to marry off his illegitimate
daughter and to make the miller thank him for the honor (49–60).

trickster far more fully than do the other characters. While John and Aleyn seek to

discover his craft and thus prove their own superiority, this is more in the vein of

uncovering than of trickery. Not only does Symkyn the miller see through their

motivation, he seems to gleefully accept the challenge the situation presents. In a passage

that echoes Nicholas's gleeful plotting against John the carpenter in the prior tale,

Symkyn perversely inverts the narrative and provides us a glimpse inside the mind of a

consummate trickster who relishes the opportunity to turn the table on those who think

they are cleverer than him.

> This millere smyled of hir nycetee,
> And thoghte, "Al this nys doon but for a wyle.
> They wene that no man may hem bigyle,
> But by my thrift, yet shal I blere hir ye,
> For al the sleighte in hir philosophye.
> The moore queynte crekes that they make,
> The moore wol I stele whan I take.
> In stide of flour yet wol I yeve hem bren.
> The gretteste clerkes been noght wisest men,'
> As whilom to the wolf thus spak the mare.
> Of al hir art counte I noght a tare." (4046-4056)

The rich vocabulary of trickery the miller utilizes, "wyle," "bigyle," "blere," and

"sleighte," remind us that the whole point of the story is that John and Aleyn are

attempting to prove themselves against the most wily and tricky figure they know, the

miller, and that they in fact fail to accomplish this. One of the central ironies of the story

is that the miller does successfully turn the table on his would-be revealers by use of the

escaped horse ruse. At the precise moment that they believe they have prevented the

miller from tricking them by dint of their careful observations, he tricks them by

changing the game and coming at the trick from an entirely unexpected direction. In

truth, *The Reeve's Tale* demonstrates that Symkyn the miller is indeed a quite accomplished and clever trickster.

If the miller is tricked, he is tricked by himself, and also by those extensions of himself, his family, not by John and Aleyn. The Reeve's fictitious revenge against the miller comes not in the form of tricks that take him in, but rather through his vulnerability to drink, his daughter's misplaced affections and his wife's poor vision. Self-trickery is a constant theme in *The Reeve's Tale*. John and Aleyn trick themselves by believing they are so superior to the miller that he cannot fool them. The miller tricks himself by forcing his guests to stay overnight and pay for the feast and the drink that put him into the stupor that enables their bed switching hijinks. Both his family members trick themselves, his daughter by feeling an impulse of romance towards Aleyn who has clearly raped her – thus causing her to reveal the location of the stolen loaf – and his wife by mistaking her husband for the clerk and unleashing her physical violence upon the wrong target. Much of this action ensues as a result of John's sense of having been himself tricked, not only by the miller but also by his partner, Aleyn. Upon realizing that his friend has managed to take the miller's daughter without immediate repercussion he exclaims, presumably in sotto voce, "'Allas!' quod he, 'this is a wikked jape; / Now may I seyn that I is but an ape." (4201-4202). Not only does he feel betrayed by Aleyn's dangerous but successful assault, he appears to feel that he has tricked himself by not taking advantage of the situation, and immediately sets out to do so, thus setting in motion the rest of the bed games that ensue.

Much of the ribald humor of this scene relies on a mixture of sexual transgress

and mistaken identities. These are regular hallmarks of the trickster, who is often

associated with sexual excess and transgressive sexual behavior in general, but who also

often relies on misperception and deception in order to conduct such behavior in the first

place. The third type of trickster figure Hynes identifies in his heuristic guide to the

mythic figure is the "Shape Shifter" trickster:

> The trick-playing of the trickster clearly distinguishes itself from other forms of
> trickery by its frequent association with shapeshifting and situation-inversion. As
> shape-shifter, the trickster can alter his shape or bodily appearance in order to
> facilitate deception. Not even the boundaries of species or sexuality are safe, for
> they can be readily dissolved by the trickster's disguises and transmorphisms.
> Relatively minor shape-shifting through disguise may involve nothing more than
> changing clothes with another. (Hynes 36)

The Reeve's clerks are certainly of the latter sort, but even then with an edifying

distinction. Aleyn's assault on the miller's daughter is not actually accomplished by any

sort of ruse or trick, but rather by the simple expedient of pouncing upon her and finding

her to be eventually accommodating. John does use a trick to get the Miller's wife into

bed, but it is not a disguise so much as a displacement. His movement of the crib to the

foot of his bed is the least of all possible tricks, though effective nonetheless.

The more significant situation inversions that occur in the story are entirely

unintended and accidental, which may provide some useful clue as to how Chaucer

intends this tale to be read. The first is John's accidental tricking of Aleyn by dint of the

same crib ruse that brought the miller's wife to his bed. In this case, it is the miller who

receives the unintended confession as a result of Aleyn's own friend's ruse. Again, the

miller is not tricked but is instead let in on the deception, thus engendering the final

conflict. The last inversion is the wife's accidental assault on her husband in a final case

of mistaken identity. The fact that she mistakes his balding pate for the clerk's nightcap

seems to oddly mock his age, which is one of signs against which the Reeve took

umbrage in the first place. So too is the conclusion of the tale an odd and arguably

inverted resolution.

> Thus is the proude millere wel ybete,
> And hath ylost the gryndynge of the whete,
> And payed for the soper everideel
> Of Aleyn and of John, that bette hym weel.
> His wyf is swyved, and his doghter als.
> Lo, swich it is a millere to be fals!
> And therfore this proverbe is seyd ful sooth,
> "Hym thar nat wene wel that yvele dooth."
> A gylour shal hymself bigyled be.
> And God, that sitteth heighe in magestee,
> Save al this compaignye, grete and smale!
> Thus have I quyt the Millere in my tale. (4313-4324)

The Reeve is clearly here parodying the conclusion to The Miller's Tale with its

summation of the judgement visited upon each of the characters in the tale. Yet, there are

significant problems with each of the statements he makes. The miller does indeed end

the tale beaten and bloodied, but his assailants are not left unscathed, though this is

unnoted in the conclusion. Just a few lines prior it was noted that Symkyn seriously

injured Aleyn, "And on the nose he smoot hym with his fest. /Doun ran the blody streem

upon his brest; / And in the floor, with nose and mouth tobroke" (4275 -4277). This

rather dire fate is elided in the conclusion and all that is focused upon are the fates of the

miller and his family. The particular focus of the justice is also a pale reflection of what

was witnessed in the preceding tale. The Reeve concentrates on the mundanities of Aleyn

and John not having to pay for their grinding and having their way with the women of his

family, but the only note of justice is that delivered onto the miller, yet that note too is false.

The Reeve claims that "A gylour shal hymslef bigyled be." Putting the emphasis again on a wholly absent reversal of trickery that never occurs in his text. Unlike the Miller's conclusion, the Reeve's also makes direct reference to divine judgement, demonstrating that the Reeve at least understood the message of the Miller's work if not how to "quyt" it as he claims to have done. He even echoes the Miller's call at the conclusion of his tale, "and God save al the rowte!" (3854) which is also a problem as he must either exclude the miller from that company or simply mean it as a reflexive platitude.

Though the Reeve's tale at beginning and end focuses on the concept of inversion and trickery, the true trick in the tale is the one that the Reeve plays upon himself, taking The Miller's Tale personally and attempting, unsuccessfully to quite it. The following prologue to *The Cook's Tale* makes this explicit in two ways, though it lacks any account of the general response to the tale that was present for both the Knight's and the Miller's. First there is the Cook's articulation of the message of the story which he reduces to a platitude attributed to Solomon to not let strangers into one's house, which is followed by his declaration of the tale's success, "If evere, sitthe I highte Hogge of Ware, / Herde I a millere bettre yset a-werk. / He hadde a jape of malice in the derk" (4336-4338). The problem here is that the Cook is clearly one of the least reliable barometer for taste in the entire collection. His approbation can only have the opposite effect of denigrating what it

seeks to laud. This is made manifest and also exacerbated by the Host's denigrating

response to the Cook, and the Cook's response in return:

> But yet I pray thee, be nat wroth for game;
> A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley."
> "Thou seist ful sooth," quod Roger, "by my fey!
> But `sooth pley, quaad pley,' as the Flemyng seith. (4354-4357)

Following Bailly's assault upon his culinary acumen, the Host both rescinds and

accentuates his accusation by blurring the line between truth and jest. The Cook rejects

his ambivalent discourse and notes that truth makes a poor jest. This interesting phrase

may also reflect on *The Reeve's Tale*, as a form of unintended – but authorially complicit

– critique. Telling a story about a tricky Miller as a form of joke and as revenge is a

losing proposition. That the Miller is a trickster and corrupt is not a revelation but rather

a core competency for his profession, at least in the tradition of estates satire. This

problem is made even more manifest as the Cook now promises to lampoon the Host for

his comment, presumably in a manner akin to what the Reeve has just done. But this

revenge is doubly elided. The Cook says that he will tell a tale of an innkeeper, but will

save it for latter. Then, of course, his own tale is aborted after a mere fragment itself, and

the promised tale never materializes. The personal quiting of tales cannot stand even a

delayed iteration and falls apart upon this ground, leaving *The Reeve's Tale* adrift. If the

goal was to generate more tales and to continue the quiting, then the Reeve's work can

only be a failure, the trick played upon himself who thought he could avenge an imagined

slight through willful misreading of the Miller's text. His tale always reveals more about

himself than it does about others. The Reeve is Chaucer's trickster tricked, the unaware

158

fool who thinks himself to be much cleverer than he is and who pays the price of his

pride in making a spectacle of his own foolishness.

The Summoner's Tale and the Scatological Trickster

The Summoner's Tale develops many of the same thematic features found in *The*

Reeve's Tale, echoing and even amplifying its personal attacks, "cherlish" speech, and a

plot revolving around a would-be trickster who is himself tricked. However, it goes much

farther in its content and context, harkening back to the issues of fate and divine justice

that *The Miller's Tale* both contests and reinforces. Beyond even these two analogues, it

treads more fully upon potentially blasphemous grounds, turning the anticlerical satire up

another notch and even fully engaging in a substantial parody of the Pentecost.[85] The

material of the tale is associatively loaded and the greatest trick Chaucer may be pulling

off here is creating enough distance and deniability to enact the parody that concludes the

tale without obviously violating his own culture's religious taboos.

The key to Chaucer's trick is the figure of the Summoner himself, along with the

context of yet another internecine squabble between two figures from associated

professions. James Andreas notes in "Newe Science from Olde Bokes: A Bakhtinian

Approach to the 'Summoner's Tale'" the inherent trickster symbolism that is associated

with the Summoner in particular, and with the other ecclesiastical characters who misuse

---

[85] The two critical sources for the Pentacostal parody analysis are Levitan and Levy who radically altered the modern critical perception of the tale. See Alan Levitan's "The Parody of Pentecost in Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*" and Bernard Levy's "Biblical Parody in the *Summoner's Tale*."

their positions, and also why the crafting of an inherently unfettered personae is so critical to the tale Chaucer proceeds to tell.

> …the Summoner – like his fellow "noble" ecclesiastics the Friar, the Pardoner, and the Monk – is a sporting character, a character to be mocked with the impunity granted by the license of carnival. His festive connections are further reinforced by the totems with which he is associated, particularly birds like the jay and the finch, inevitably tokens of free, trickster spirits who can literally "fly in the face of authority." Friar John, as the ranking ecclesiastic in the tale of the Summoner, is the *agelast* or mark in the "game" and will be duly humbled and even humiliated for comic as well as Christian purposes. He is also associated with birds: he "chirketh as a sparwe / With his lyppes" (III, 1804-05) as he kisses Thomas's willing wife. Allusion to these particular birds, to whom trickery and thievery are often attributed, also anticipates the blasphemous parody of Pentecost in the tale, where flatulence displaces the Holy Spirit which is iconologically associated with the dove. (Andreas 143)[86]

The tale's bird imagery both reinforces the central, and potentially blasphemous pun on which the tale rests, and also provides a necessary distance, marking these characters as individuals not meant to be taken seriously. That Chaucer so powerfully and frequently signifies their lack of *dignitas* simply points wo how theoretically hazardous the blasphemy they enact may be.

Jill Mann makes the significant argument that our attitudes toward these figures, and in particular the most disturbing of them, the Summoner, are not based on moral judgments but rather on the simple likeability of the characters. She compares our reactions to the characters of the Friar and the Summoner, both figures who significantly transgress religious and social expectations in similar ways, but whom the audience reacts to in radically different manners.

---

[86] The next chapter, "Chaucer's Foules and Fools" will also deal with the relationship between trickster figures and avians.

For example, if we compare the portraits of the Friar and the Summoner, we find that many of the faults we attribute to them are identical: fondness for drink; parade of pretended knowledge; sexual license and the corruption of young people; the encouragement of sinners to regard money-payments as adequate for release from sin. Ye what is our attitude to them? I think it is true to say that our judgment of the Friar is less harsh than our disgust for the Summoner. The reasons for this, in a worldly sense, are perfectly adequate; the Friar's 'pleasantness' is continually stressed, he makes life easy for everyone, is a charming companion, has musical talent, he has a white neck and twinkling eyes and good clothes while the summoner revolts the senses with his red spotted face and the reek of garlic and onions. But although adequate for our reactions, these considerations are not in any sense moral ones. (Mann 192)

In short, the Friar is good company, whereas the Summoner is someone whom most would go to great lengths to avoid. But the critical feature of her argument is that the distaste we feel for the Summoner is not, or at least not only or even primarily, based on his moral failings.

There are at least two layers to this distancing, both in the unsympathetic portrayal of the main character and in the already established unreliability of the tale teller. Just as with the Reeve, the Summoner likewise quites the tale of the Friar, masking the more serious work of the tale in the trappings of another revenge comedy. The Summoner seeks to quite the tale of the Friar form much the same reason that the Reeve sought to respond to the tale of the Miller, but with a critical distinction. The Summoner accuses the Friar most specifically of lying, "Syn ye han herd this false Frere lye, / As suffreth me I may my tale telle" (1670-1671), and the tale he has told is clearly meant as an attack upon the Summoner specifically and his profession in general. Unlike the Reeve, his response is justified, at least insofar as he has an injury to quite, and the motivation for his own narrative is both legitimate and focused in this manner.

With such motivation, the Summoner engages in a tale designed to humiliate, and to do so in the most robust and effective way. Unlike with the Reeve's fumbling attempts, the Summoner successfully lampoons his target, both in his prologue and in his tale, an in both cases he does so using one of the most profound forms of inversion, associating the spiritual with the scatological. The scatological elements of the prologue and tale, namely the depiction of the friars inhabiting the devil's fundament and the concluding division of the fart, are representative of a common theme in trickster myths that seek to transgress the boundaries between the lewd and the sacred. Hynes notes that one of the most central features of the trickster in his role as "sacred and lewd bricoleur" is to efface the seemingly unassailable distance between fecal and holy:

> Last and certainly not least, the trickster is closely associated with the most profane of lewd profanations, excrement. Winnebago tradition includes the tale of the trickster being nearly blown to bits by an excess of stomach gas and finally being pushed rapidly toward the sky on an ever-increasing pile of his own feces. The cosmic counterbalancing that can be associated with this most profane profanation is clearly evident in the Tibetan story entitled, in its English translation, "Uncle Tampa Drops Shit on the Ruler's Lap." The story also illustrates the trickster's abilities as bricoleur, transforming shit into sacred object by the use of writing… (Hynes 44)

As Hynes importantly notes, the process works both ways, and just as the sacred may be profaned with excremental association, so too may the excremental be made profound. The tale repeatedly enacts both transformational modes, the former particularly through the friar's continual glossing and diminution of sacred and learned texts in service to his own pecuniary ends, and the later through the Summoner's own careful narrative construction that eventually turns scatology into high theology.

The Summoner also transforms the friar himself into metaphoric feces through a process of discursive analogy. Even before the tale proper begins, the Summoner makes this association plain by virtue of the brief interlude that commonplace that connects friars first with the infernal, "This Frere bosteth that he knoweth helle, / And God it woot, that it is litel wonder; / Freres and feendes been but lyte asonder" (1672-1674). The Summoner cleverly turns the Friar's own assertion of knowledge against him, damning him with the same jest. He then develops this with a further associative link that connects the Friar with the fundament, recounting the place where friars are thought to reside in hell, in the devil's own ass. The Angel's revelation in ther friar's vision invoking the devil to "`Shewe forth thyn ers, and lat the frere se / Where is the nest of freres in this place!'" (1690-1691) makes explicit the connection between the profession and the scatological profanation of the sacred. This is not merely a first salvo in his takedown of the Friar, it is also a necessary introduction of the tale's main scatological theme. In his article "'Goddes Instrumentz': Devils and Free Will in the *Friar's* and *Summoner's Tales*," Raybin notes that the eventual conclusion of the tale, which rests on the lord's court's decision in favor of the squire's interpretation of respective guilt depends upon the initial conflation of the friar with the scatological.

> The secular court's ultimate determination of Thomas's spiritual innocence leads a reader to redirect attention to the source that initially proclaimed the peasant's guilt. One soon discovers that for all his interest in the speck in another's eye, Friar John is himself implicated as potentially a devil's man. Th e earliest hints of this connection come in the *Summoner's Prologue*. First the narrator makes a direct assertion of a correspondence among devils and friars — "Freres and feendes been but lyte asonder" (III 1674). A vivid and witty description of friars inhabiting the devil's arse then points towards the scatology in the tale and suggests that a friar's interest in the contents of an anus connotes fiendish connections. The image of friars swarming about the devil's buttocks later will

color a reader's response to Friar John's groping of Thomas's cleft and his obsessive concern with fart division in the tale proper. (Raybin 104)

This initial joke sets the tone of the tale to come and also presages the tale's concluding conceit. The audience needs to make the initial connection between the friar and the fundament in order for Thomas's upcoming jest to be truly effective and so that the squire's eventual doubling of that joke will be profound.

The Summoner closes off the prologue with a mixed blessing and curse, reminiscent of the qualified invocation at the end of *The Reeve's Tale* and the more inclusive one at the conclusion of *The Miller's Tale*. "God save yow alle, save this cursed Frere! / My prologe wol I ende in this manere'" (1707-1708). True to his word, his tale is a form of curse, a blasphemous utterance that nevertheless falls most firmly not upon the one who uttered it but upon its equally sacrilegious and sanctimonious target. If the Summoner is damned by the Friar through his tale, the Friar will in turn be doubly damned by his erstwhile victim.

The tale itself is an artistic work of putdown. The characterization of the friar by the Summoner clearly touches on his victim's most sensitive nerves, specifically his revelation of the friar's most odious tricks. One of these even elicits a rare internal textual interruption where the line between the frame narrative and the tale is itself violated. The specific instance doubles the theme of textuality as the claim the Summoner makes is that the friar, rather than keeping a record of those to whom he owes prayers in return for donations, scrapes off the names he has written as soon as he is out of sight of his marks, "He planed awey the names everichon / That he biforn had writen in his tables; / He served hem with nyfles and with fables" (1758-1760).

It is the Summoner's accusation that the Friar resorts to this particularly onerous form of

trickery that elicits an interruption of the tale by the offended party.

> "Nay, ther thou lixt, thou Somonour!" quod the Frere.
> "Pees," quod oure Hoost, "for Cristes mooder deere!
> Tel forth thy tale, and spare it nat at al."
> "So thryve I," quod this Somonour, "so I shal!" (1761-1764)

This interruption in turn serves to double the opprobrium heaped upon the Friar and the

friar, both the frame and the tale versions, by dint of the host's own oath and charge to

not only continue but to "spare it nat at al." This makes it contextually quite clear that

the Summoner has his audience's attention and approval, and that he has hit his mark

quite well. It is also significant that the friar's sin in this case is to erase the written

record, to in effect efface the text of his faith, ever replacing it with new verbiage piled

upon the old palimpsest.

The friar's eventual trickery of Thomas echoes the erasing trick that causes the

external Friar's outburst and is of a particularly problematic kind in that it seeks to

interpret the sacred texts in a manner most favorable to his goal of fleecing the dying

man. Of a kind with his erasing of the names, the friar erases the authentic text and

replaces it with whatever best suits his purpose. "'But herkne now, Thomas, what I shal

seyn. / I ne have no text of it, as I suppose, / But I shal fynde it in a maner glose," (1918-

1920). The friar's continual glossing has an interesting parallel to the trickery of

Nicholas in the *Miller's Tale*, who uses his awareness of the limitations of his mark's

scriptural knowledge to make the most out of the attendant authority of the gloss.

All his glossing is in service to his own greed, a theme which will appear again in

the *Pardoner's Prologue* and *Tale* to even more profound effect. The trick that Thomas

165

will eventually play upon the Friar is engendered by the Friar's own greed, and thus makes a perfect recompense for his sins. Both the numerical division and the prize are set not by Thomas, but by the Friar when he urges the dying man to not divide his property up in twelve directions, "Nay, nay, Thomas, it may no thyng be so! / What is a ferthyng worth parted in twelve?" (1966-1967). Both the final division of the fart into twelve parts and the nature of the gift itself, which so wonderfully echoes the Friar's "ferthyng," make it clear that Thomas is responding to his malefactor in perfect kind.

The friar's greed appears to blind him to the fact that others may actually be as or even more conversant with the texts he so misuses and with the doctrine they enshrine. Thomas counters the friar's attempts to cajole yet more money out of him by correctly and clearly demonstrating his own knowledge of church doctrine. He is already shriven and needs no more help from the friar.

> "Nay," quod the sike man, "by Seint Symoun!
> I have be shryven this day at my curat.
> I have hym toold hoolly al myn estat;
> Nedeth namoore to speken of it," seith he,
> "But if me list, of myn humylitee." (2094-2098)

That he seeks out his own curate for this task reinforces his disillusionment with the more grasping religious orders who have failed him in his quest to be cured of his mortal illness. His ire appears not to be confined to the friar, but to extend to all those who would misuse the scripture and dogma of the church to their own ends. The friar is simply the last and most grasping representative, his glossing entirely false and itself representing a form of profanation of the sacred.

The source of Thomas's anger is quite clear from the text, "This sike man wax wel ny wood for ire; / He wolde that the frere had been on-fire / With his false dissymulacioun" (2121-2123). Thomas sees through the Friar's poor attempts to gloss religious doctrine in his favor. The nice rhyming pun of the friar being on fire echoes the upcoming farting/farthing word play, and critically it is the Friar's "disymulacioun," his falseness that upsets Thomas so and urges him on to his own act of trickery. Thomas promises the friar a final gift to assure his salvation but also further requires his promise to share it equally among his brothers. This clever condition both engenders the eventual conclusion of the tale, as the divvying up of the fart becomes the concluding conceit of the work, and it also further implicates the friar as he willingly swears to the conditions set by Thomas in his greed to get at the promised gift.

Thomas also implicates the friar by virtue of the grossly physical and demeaning nature of his trick, itself clearly scatological in nature as well. His language in urging the friar towards his imagined reward emphasizes the base, physical and excretory nature of the prize.

> "Now thanne, put in thyn hand doun by my bak,"
> Seyde this man, "and grope wel bihynde.
> Bynethe my buttok there shaltow fynde
> A thyng that I have hyd in pryvetee." (2140-2143)

The emphasis on "grope," "bihynde," and "buttok" not only serve as textual preparation for the jest, they should warn any careful person of the nature of the trick about to be played. In the article "Nominalism: The Difference for Chaucer and Boccaccio," Holly Boucher notes that Thomas ironically uses not the friar's flexible interpretation of

167

scripture to trick him, but rather his own inability to recognize the same sort of trick

being played upon him.

> Finally, however, the friar is undone not by his excessive glossing – although his
> longwindedness arouses Thomas's ire – but by his literalism. The friar enters too
> fully into his own game and forgets the power of words to spawn new meanings.
> When the friar gropes greedily in the foulest of Thomas's orifices searching for
> promised treasure, he takes Thomas at his word. In that lapse Thomas finds the
> opening to structure his own game. He glosses the friar's interminable
> interpretations with his own pithy comment, the loud and smelly fart, which
> serves as the epitome of an ephemeral text. (Boucher 218)

Thomas's trick is a perfect reversal of the friar's fumbling fraud, making the physical

reward he imagines he will receive an even more passing and transient 'gift.' His trick is

at once simple and, if it is possible to so term flatulence, elegant response to the windy

glossing of the friar. It is a trick in kind, but so simple and complete that it outdoes all

the clumsy and overcomplicated exegesis of the friar.

The rest of the tale hinges on the Friar's anger at having been tricked by the man

he hoped to fleece out of the rest of his property upon his deathbed. Whereas Thomas's

anger is internal, calculated and controlled, the Friar's is external and reactionary.

> The frere up stirte as dooth a wood leoun --
> "A, false cherl," quod he, "for Goddes bones!
> This hastow for despit doon for the nones.
> Thou shalt abye this fart, if that I may!" (2152-2155)

In the essay "Doubting Thomas in Chaucer's 'Summoner's Tale,'" Roy Clark notes that

this moment works on two levels, "The fart which replaces the expected gold symbolizes

the essential corruption of those who would dedicate themselves to the acquisition of

material things. The friar, who claimed the power of prophecy, could not foresee

Thomas's dirty trick; he reacts in his moment of enlightenment, not with a prayerful 'My

Lord and my God,' but with a wrathful 'for Goddes bones!'" (Clark 174). Thus the friar

is tricked and foiled in his pretense to trick another as his inability to perceive the coming

jest proves the inadequacy of his wit. The friar's lack of self-awareness and ability to

discern that his tricks are being spun back upon himself reflect the narratorial folly of *The*

Reeve's Tale. Both are unable to perceive that their own tricks are being turned back

against them, and their lack of perception, even more than the tricks played against them,

are the comic core of the works.

The friar seeks out sympathy in the house of the lord of the village. He finds

some comfort in the lady of the house's declaration upon hearing his story that "I seye a

cherl hath doon a cherles dede" (2206). Her class-conscious empathy for the Friar's

plight, doubling the critique of the friar's denunciation of the "false Cherl" emboldens

him to dig himself in a bit deeper and to more fully implicate himself.

> "Madame," quod he, "by God, I shal nat lye,
> But I on oother wyse may be wreke,
> I shal disclaundre hym over al ther I speke,
> This false blasphemour that charged me (2210-2213)

The friar again echoes his oath to make Thomas pay for his insult, and also equates his

trick with blasphemy, which both implicates him for his own sins and sets up the final

trick of the tale. Finlayson notes that this moment is also critical in that is sets up the final

possibility for a final recognition of the true blasphemy inherent in Thomas's gift at the

same point at which the tale dramatically changes its narrative tone and course.

> The first, and lengthiest, part of the tale, then, is a mixture of fabliau ribaldry and
> the comedy of the "biter-bit," with a satiric exposure of fraternal corruption that is
> Horatian rather than Juvenalian in tone. Laughter rather than outrage is the
> obvious response; and none of the exposures of the friar's corruption requires any
> special knowledge or learned exegetical analysis, since, even today, it is
> commonly assumed that clerics should be good—concerned for men's souls, not
> for money. However, the gift of the fart introduces a less traditional element to

this comic satire, and it is, ironically, the friar who notices it by his claim that the gift of the fart is blasphemy… (Finlayson 461)[87]

The friar thus becomes complicit in the final trick of the tale through his unconscious recognition of the inherent problem of Thomas's gift. But to truly become blasphemy, the trick requires one more step, a recognition of the only possible solution to the riddle that has been posed about how to divide a fart twelve ways, and which will make manifest the Pentecostal parody that is at the heart of the tale.

Tellingly, it is the squire and not the lord or lady of the house who comes up with the final trick, and the ultimate humiliation of the friar. The lord struggles to even comprehend how Thomas could have come up with such a challenge, pondering "'How hadde this cherl ymaginacioun / To shewe swich a probleme to the frere?" (2218-2219). His bafflement comically leads the lord to posit that the riddle must be the result of some form of demonic influence for he cannot compass that a mere cherl, a word repeated no less than four times in the space of the lord's musing, could arrive at such a confounding puzzle on his own. There is, of course, another layer of trickery here in that both the Summoner and Chaucer are mocking those who cannot – or perhaps will not – see the blasphemous resolution of the riddle. That obtuseness may be read as either protective distance or as ignorance, or as Glending Olsen argues in "Measuring the Immeasurable:

---

[87] Finlayson is somewhat critical of Szittya's reading and of the emphasis placed on the later division episode at the expense of consideration of the lead up to and the gift scene itself. In his article "Chaucer's Summoner's Tale: Flatulence, Blasphemy, and the Emperor's Clothes," he also questions the presumed piety of Chaucer's use of the device, noting, "The outrageous nature of these parodic events leaves inescapable the fact that "authoritative" biblical events, the revelations of God to Moses and the descent of the Holy Spirit, have been likened to a great fart" (467).

Farting, Geometry, and Theology in the *Summoner's Tale*," it may be part of the point of

the tale itself.

> This complexity of implication is what makes the end of the *Summoner's Tale* so
> rich, not least in regard to Chaucer's relationship to a fourteenth century mentality
> of measurement. Vitally concerned with accurate measurement in other contexts,
> notably the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, here he seems to be playing in an elusive
> way—critical in some respects, jovial in others—with intellectual efforts to
> apportion and quantify. Some kinds of measurement, of course, can be made
> easily. "What is a ferthyng worth parted in twelve?," asks Friar John (III 1967),
> trying to get Thomas to donate money exclusively to his own convent. That
> question of course anticipates the climactic parting in twelve, perhaps in a more
> philosophical way than has been acknowledged. John's division question has an
> easy arithmetical answer: a farthing parted in twelve, even though no such coin
> existed for exchange purposes, is worth ⅟48th of a penny. Thomas's division
> problem, as we have seen, is much more difficult and ultimately points to a unity
> that by dogma is indivisible. The farthing, the fart, the divine *flatus* of Acts 2
> parodied by the fart, the Holy Spirit symbolized by that biblical wind—here is a
> range from the material to the immaterial, the measurable to the immeasurable
> and incommensurable, that in the *Summoner's Tale* becomes a comic invitation to
> question how far principles, or ideologies, of rational measurement can be
> fruitfully applied. (Glending Olsen 422)

Indeed, Chaucer himself benefits from the obtuseness of the final trick, as Finlayson

notes, "Basically, *The Summoner's Tale* has been transformed from scatological but

tolerant fabliau issuing in humor —the continuing view of secular humanists—to a

complex, learned, and possibly theological figural exemplum. Chaucer the naughty has

become Chaucer the theologically radical but pious" (Finlayson 456). There is a potential

danger in even recognizing the joke that is being played here at the end of the tale, and

the multiple levels of displacement help to restrict the potential fallout from that

resolution.

In yet another moment of instructive inversion it is the servant who correctly

interprets Thomas's wishes and – perhaps more significantly – thus ultimately realizes

the comedy and the blasphemy of the work. Jankyn the squire is the one to discern both

Thomas's intent and to thus rehabilitate the cherl and castigate the Friar. His solution

cleverly implicates all the rest for he frames his declaration in questions and in

qualifications, noting "Twelve spokes hath a cartwheel comunly. / And bryng me thanne

twelve freres. Woot ye why? / For thrittene is a covent, as I gesse" (2257-2259). His

explanation both highlights and elides the nature of the Pentacostal parody that the others

have failed to discern, and the audience too must recognize and thus become complicit in

the joke for it to work. Importantly, the resolution also still requires the assent of the

elites.

> The lord, the lady, and ech man, save the frere,
> Seyde that Jankyn spak, in this matere,
> As wel as Euclide [dide] or Ptholomee.
> Touchynge the cherl, they seyde, subtiltee
> And heigh wit made hym speken as he spak;
> He nys no fool, ne no demonyak.
> And Jankyn hath ywonne a newe gowne --
> My tale is doon; we been almoost at towne. (2287-2294)

Here the resolution of the tale clearly reflects that of *The Miller's Tale*, this time with the

internal friar of the tale being the only one left out of the general approbation. Here it is

the gentils, the lord and lady in particular, who find merit in the squire's plan and thus

forgive the cherl and authoritatively remove the odium of demonic association from him,

instead noting that his trick is the result of a "heigh wit." That Jankyn wins a new suit for

his pains can only serve to further humiliate the friar who has seen no material gain

whatsoever for his pains.

  Returning to the squire's solution which transforms Thomas's scatological trick

into a profane parody, the transformation between sacred and scatological is precisely

what Chaucer is accomplishing in this tale. Penn Szittya, in the essay "The Friar as False

Apostle: Antifraternal Exegesis and the 'Summoner's Tale,'" argues that the potential

problem with the tale's conclusion – the fact that the squire's proposition for the division

of the fart does not fit with the thematic tone of the rest of the work – is related to the

interpretations of Alan Levitan and Bernard Levy that point to Chaucer's internal parody

of the Pentecost that is made possible by the multiple valences of the term *flatus*.

> The Old Latin version used by St. Cyprian, which is the oldest form of the
> African version known to us, reads in the place of the Vulgate's "tamquam
> advenientis spiritus vehementis," "*quasi* ferretur *flatus* vehemens" (italics
> added).7 It requires no Goliardic genius, I suppose, to make the association
> between a great wind and passed gas, but if we needed tangible evidence, here it
> is in the Old Latin *flatus*, whose venerable double meaning has passed on into
> modern English" (Szittya 23) [88]

In this case, the Squire's trick is a doubling of Thomas's, recognizing the inherent jest

that the "cherl" has managed to play on the friar. Not only has he tricked him into

receiving the flatulence, he has also caused him to display his ignorance of scripture and

exegesis. For all his vaunted learning, the real joke here on the friar is that he has not

---

[88] Szittya draws upon Alan Levitan's and Bernard Levy's contemporary work on the
Pentacostal parody of the descent of the holy Ghost in his essay "The Friar as False
Apostle: Antifraternal Exegesis and the 'Summoner's Tale.'". He helpfully notes that the
scatological elements of the tale are deeply connected to the more general
antifraternalism of the work.
> "One of the problems in unity has been the seeming irrelevance of the squire's
> proposal for the division of Thomas' ally, it is not really irrelevant, for its
> scurrilousness in keeping with the Summoner's primary purpose, which is to
> ridicule the friar. However, from a thematic standpoint it is not very well
> integrated with the rest of the tale, and the tone changes here from carefully
> controlled comedy to farce. Although it may be to come at antifraternalism
> through indirection, I would like to begin with this seemingly detached
> scatological anecdote that ends the tale. (Szittya 21-22)
Szittya also notes that Chaucer would have known of this form of the passage through
Augustine.

even managed to understand the nature of the trick that has been played on him. Thomas

performs the role of Hynes "sacred and lewd bricoleur" in this tale, transforming

sacrament to scat and back again, through the mediation of the squire who recognizes his

joke and plays upon it to further humiliate the friar and thus denigrate the truly lewd

figure in the tale, that selfsame friar who would himself profane the sacred for mere

profit.

There is an inherent danger to what is occurring in the tale that may be too often

glossed over by the commentators in the wake of Levitan's and Levy's recognition of the

Pentacostal inversion of the tale. Finlayson argues this explicitly, and points to the more

profound implications of the tale's ultimate trick, "…we can be sure that this *Tale*,

though it may "dissolve in humour," as Pearsall notes, has gone considerably beyond the

usual fabliau and satirical level of outraging sexual taboos to provocatively raise a

potentially dangerous question about the foundations of ecclesiastical claims to

"authority"— a question that is not confined to theology, but directly relates to biblical

narrative" (Finlayson 470). Perhaps the Summoner's greatest trick, and Chaucer's as

well, is that the blasphemy of the tale is displaced on to others. The friar of the tale is

made out to be the truly profane character as he cannot even recognize the inherent

sacrilege of his actions. Chaucer in turn displaces his own profanation of the sacred

through a double distance, setting the still problematic Summoner between himself and

his irreverent joke.

The blasphemy of the trickster and the profanation of the sacred is not, however,

confined to the *Summoner's Tale*. Within the *Pardoner's Prologue* and in the frame

174

narrative with which his eponymous tale ends the "sacred and lewd bricoleur" form of the trickster will once again appear.

The Pardoner's Tale

The Pardoner may be the most obvious and also the most complicated of Chaucer's trickster figures. He embodies the trickster archetype – quite literally through his liminal form – and both the frame narrative of his prologue and the conclusion of his tale, as well as the tale itself are trickster tales in the clearest sense. This tripled trickster figure most directly engages with all levels of the text as his deceit breaks out of the bounds of his tale and threatens the very fellowship of the pilgrims upon which the entire *Canterbury Tales* is based. Hyde argues that this ability to cross boundaries is in fact the most essential characteristic of the trickster:

> In short, trickster is a boundary-crosser. Every group has its edge, its sense of in and out, and trickster is always there, at the gates of the city and the gates of life, making sure there is commerce. He also attends the internal boundaries by which groups articulate their social life. We constantly distinguish – right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead – and in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction. (Hyde 7)

Every one of these boundaries and binaries is crossed by the Pardoner in the course of his tale and its frame. His tale touches on the seminal boundary between life and death, he transgresses against the social boundaries of the pilgrim group and in so doing threatens it, and he exists on every side of the attendant set of binaries, excepting the last which is in turn the theme of his tale. He is also the final pilgrim described in the *General Prologue* – at least before the figure of the Host, with whom he critically clashes – and

175

perhaps by virtue of that placement and by the nature of his textual performance the most

singularly representative trickster figure in the work.

He has also generated critical analysis that applies postcolonial theory to his tale

and considers his analogues in indigenous and specifically Caribbean colonial discourse

in Barbara Lalla's chapter, "The Trickster and Discourse," in her book *Postcolonialisms*.

In her introduction to that chapter she notes that "The scurrilous humor of the rogue, the

shameless moral gymnastics of the trickster, the posturing of the exhibitionist, the bold

taunting of the satirist who sings of corruption in high places are well known in

Caribbean discourse. Such discourse types and perspectives are also pivotal to Chaucer's

presentation of the Pardoner and his tale" (Lalla 274). Other authors have also pointed

out how closely the Pardoner hews to the traditional archetypes of the mythological

trickster in a variety of traditions both Christian and non.[89]

The Pardoner's physical description from the *General Prologue* has often been

discussed in relation to his tale and the frame narrative that envelops it. As with so many

of the other trickster figures in that tales themselves, the liminality of the Pardoner

extends to his gender. Robert Miller noted particularly his questionable status as a

---

[89] In **"*I Trowe He were a Gelding or a Mare*.** A Veiled Description of a Bent Pardoner,"
Gabriele Cocco makes an argument that the mythic figure of Loki in particular shares
many characteristics with the Pardoner, including his inclination to homosexuality, his
transformation into a mare and his trickster nature. She also argues that such analogues
were still available in Chaucer's time as a sort of folkloric repository holdover from the
culture of Old English. Though not substantiated, it is a compelling claim as it points to
the power of the archetypal trickster myth to survive even into the solidly Christian
fourteenth century in England.

eunuch based upon the authorial supposition "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" (691)

that figures him as either feminine or emasculated, despite the other contrary imagery

pointing to his lechery:

> The images of the hare, goat and horse - all common symbols of lechery - do not
> prevent notice that this man is also described as a eunuch. In choosing this
> descriptive detail Chaucer may have had in mind a concept used in several
> Biblical texts and dealt with by many patristic commentators. In such terms the
> rather extraordinary detail of eunuchry may be shown not to be haphazard. (Miller
> 182)[90]

At the core of this depiction is uncertainty, the foremost hallmark of the trickster figure.

The Pardoner's body itself is an amorphous construction, the ever-changing amalgam of

a kind that suggests the shape shifting ambiguity of the trickster. Barbara Lalla points out

the artificiality of his physical composition and how this is specifically focused on to

highlight his inherent liminality:

> The Pardoner's physiognomy is not only an odd assembly of suggestive attributes
> from the medieval bestiary but is also an invented body – one that is projected on
> him by conventions of the time, but also (and in contradiction) and invention of
> his own, as highly desirable sexually. Bearing in mind that the flesh is *visibilia*
> and a fabric, the Pardoner's body, which is also his costume, is highlighted
> throughout the discourse. (Lalla 299)

As an authorial and deliberate construction, the Pardoner signifies, in fact he overplays,

his identity as a trickster in physical form just as he over plays his trickery in the frame

narrative that surrounds his tale. He makes manifest the trickster so thoroughly that he in

---

[90] Miller's foundational article "Chaucer's Pardoner, the Scriptural Eunuch, and the
Pardoner's Tale," points to the spiritual interpretation of this term, that the Pardoner is
sterile in his inability to generate spiritual increase. But, he also discusses the various
ways that the term eunuch could dogmatically signify in the contemporary church, but the
critical point of his analysis for the purpose of this argument is that it was in itself an
extremely multivalent term that could be physically or metaphorically applied.

fact begins to elide the very trick itself. This elision is also central to the Pardoner and

his tale as his own representative narrative also begins with an edifying absence that is

also made present, a missing fabliau that appears at the very moment it seems to have

been omitted.

Even the structure of the Pardoner's Tale reflects the slippery nature of its teller.

In not only has a standard prologue, it also contains the interstitial *Introduction to the*

Pardoner's Tale. This extraordinary passage first promises and the rejects the sort of

humorous tale that has been associated with the other figures from the final group of

pilgrims. The introduction commences with a positive request for a humouroustale, even

in particular a fabliau. After the sad tale the Physician spins, the Host asks for a light tale

from the Pardoner to revive his flagging spirits.

> Thou beel amy, thou Pardoner," he sayde,
> "Telle us som myrthe or japes right anon."
> "It shall be doon," quod he, "by Seint Ronyon!
> But first," quod he, "heere at this alestake
> I wol bothe drynke and eten of a cake." (318-322)

The Host's motivation for his request, beyond his obvious enjoyment of the type, is not

entirely clear, but the sort of tale he seeks has clear antecedents and a generic precedent.

Nancy Owen commentary on the genre of the *Pardoner's Tale,* "The Pardoner's

Introduction, Prologue, and Tale: Sermon and 'Fabliau," lays bare the various

associations the Host's request entails, "Perhaps we can assume that the earthy Host is

asking for a tale like those of the Miller, the Reeve, the Friar, the Summoner, the

Merchant, or the Shipman; that he is asking, in fact, for & fabliau" (Owen 543). That the

Pardoner so easily agrees points to his amiable flexibility, the protean nature of his

character which is infinitely malleable. He seems more concerned with committing a bit

of gluttony than he is with the challenge of his story.

But the tale we expect is elided. The voice of the narrator in the *Miller's Prologue*

is mirrored in the next lines of the *Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale* as the prospective

audience gives judgement of the tale, but this time in advance of the actual telling:

> But right anon thise gentils gon to crye,
> "Nay, let him telle us of no ribaudye!
> Telle us som moral thyng, that we may leere
> Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly heere."
> "I graunte, ywis," quod he, but I moot thynke
> Upon som honest thyng while that I drynke." (323-28)

The Pardoner again agrees, and with as little compunction as before, and even doubles his

request to first take in some refreshment. To him, clearly, the two differing requests are

interchangeable. This again points to the Pardoner's liminality, and the flexibility of his

position, at home in any genre or style, all of them leading to the same end.

The Host is here set against the more refined tastes of the elites in a contest that

will only see resolution on the other side of the tale. The Host's call for the fabliau is

interrupted by the "gentils" who require a more serious work. The implications of this

moment of internal criticism is important for several reasons, not the least of which is the

subversion of the Host's literary authority posited at the end of *The General Prologue*.

The relevance of the gentry's assertion of their class based aesthetic sense to Chaucer's

presentation of the fabliau seems obvious. The genre is apparently undermined within

the frame tale, only in this case, the fabliau is completely excised. The reader is no

longer required to commit an act of textual violence upon the *Parsdoner's Tale* in order

to spare their delicate sensibilities. This is done for us by the "gentils" in an assertion of
internal textual control.

But, this is not the entire story. Though the fabliau is initially cut out from the
text it resurfaces at the end of the same tale which sought to suppress it. Nancy Owen
points out the importance of this return to genre, not only for its rehabilitation of the type,
but also because it reestablishes the Pardoner's relationship with the other tricksters of
whom he comprises a group:

> By a stroke of that rare genius which all readers applaud, Chaucer enclosed the
> Pardoner's sermon within what I shall call a *fabliau* framework. This last point
> requires emphasis because, as I intend to show, Chaucer's use of this fabliau
> framework puts the Pardoner more clearly and distinctly in a proper relationship
> to the other pilgrims; he becomes a figure, if possible, of even bolder relief.
> (Owen 543)

The fabliau will not only appear again, it will in fact significantly threaten the social
structure of the pilgrim group and create a moment of almost untenable textual
discomfort. Yet before that can occur, we must first encounter both the *Pardoner's
Prologue* and his *Tale* itself.

The extraordinary *Prologue* is a representative of the sermon he uses to ply his
trade, but more than that, it is an account by the consummate trickster of how the trick is
accomplished. He speaks directly of his specific methods, the tone and tenor of his voice,
his process and even the reasoning behind his approach. He is in effect letting the
audience behind the curtain to see what he does and how he does. His true trick is that is
not tricking anyone at all, but rather being – perhaps for this singular occasion –
absolutely transparent and true. It is this non-trick trick that provides the central appeal
of his tale even as it makes those who enjoy it equally a party to the trick itself. The

180

audience's enjoyment of this makes them as complicit as they must be after neglecting to

turn the page after *The Miller's Prologue*, and as John Ganim notes the Pardoner, "puts

on a performance of sorts for the delectation of his pilgrim audience, who become,

momentarily and unwittingly, akin to 'lewed peple'" (Ganim 58). He clearly takes great

pride in his trickery and brags that, "'By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer, / An

hundred mark sith I was pardoner" (389-390). Alone of all the other figures in the tales,

the Pardoner identifies himself here as a professional trickster. He is displaying his craft,

his acumen, and – problematically – also his motivation. He is explicit that there is no

hint of spiritual worth in his works, claiming, "For myn entente is nat but for to wynne, /

And nothyng for correccioun of synne" (403-404). He goes even farther in the following

lines noting that he will line his purse even at the cost of the poor servant and widow "Al

shoulde hir children sterve for famine" (451). This last and concluding line of his

strangely immodest self-villainization brings home the utter lack of internal morality that

the Pardoner somehow takes a pride in akin to his conceit in the craft of trickery. It is also

removes all possible moral implication to either his own admission – this is no

confession, it is instead a boast – or subsequently to the tale he will tell, yet curiously this

makes his discourse all the more appealing, as Robert Yusef Rabiee describes in

"Rhetoric of Hypocrisy: The Pardoner's Reproduction in His Critics,"

> The Pardoner is free to define a radical subjectivity that resists institutional
> categorization, a stance he can affect precisely *because* he uses an institutional
> cover to enact it. By refusing to be one thing or another, he allows himself a free
> space in which to pursue his own (undoubtedly avaricious) ends. The moral
> content of the Pardoner's Tale (whose logic, as a spoken moral exemplum, is
> *aural*) recedes into the background in light of his Prologue (whose logic, as a
> meta-commentary on processes of self-authorization and audience construction, is

textual). This intersection of textual and aural traditions makes possible a radical undermining of institutional power and opens up a discourse of pleasure: we forget the Tale's message and focus instead on the immediate pleasure of being conned, and the continuing pleasure of evaluating just *how* we were conned. (Rabiee 80-81)

The pleasure of the Prologue continues into the tale which is further complicated by the Pardoners penultimate lines, "For though myself be a ful vicious man, / A moral tale yet I yow telle kan, / Which I am wont to preche for to wynne" (459-461). The threefold message here reminds us of the complexity of what the Pardoner is attempting, and indeed claims to do on a regular basis, to feign morality in the service of winning.

The tale he tells thus must be understood as yet another form of trick, arguably devoid of any meaning by the explicit context in which it is told, and which the Pardoner goes to such pains to point out. Dereck Pearsall's playfully titled "Chaucer's Pardoner: The Death of a Salesman," points out that the subsequent tale must be read as an act of performance, with all the intendant consequences of that valence:

> The Pardoner thus creates in us a powerful response, and yet as a character he has no capacity for change or self-awareness, and no insight into himself. There is no inner consciousness, because there is no "within." He puts on a brilliant performance, but it is like that of a marionette, or a clockwork toy, which once wound up goes through its motions mechanically. This image of automatism is explicitly evoked by the existence of the Tale as a performance within a performance: the Pardoner does not actually tell a tale, but merely reproduces verbatim his habitual performance, even to the extent of including the homily and peroration, which are out of place here. It is as if he exists only in the act of performance. (Pearsall 361)

This surface existence is explicitly the claim the Pardoner makes for himself, and it must perforce also extend to the tale he tells in that it too must be a hollow construction. This is particularly vexing as there is, in truth, more sermon than tale in what he produces.

The tale does not actually commence at first, but rather the Pardoner begins with

an exemplum of the sort of sermon he claims to be so good at delivering, but one which

again serves primarily to emphasize the hypocrisy of his preaching. His diatribe against

food, and particularly against drink, after having just finished his own repast and having

twice remarked that he must be so refreshed before he can tell either his humorous or his

moral tale, runs from line 468 to 588. That more than a hundred lines are given over to

this internal sermon against the evils of wine in the clear context of having himself just

partaken of it. He then goes on for a succeeding 72 lines on the evils of gambling and of

swearing oaths before remarking "But, sires, Now wol I telle forth my tale" (660). The

delay and deferral of the tale serves to both provide an example of his craft and to remind

the audience of the purpose of the tale – at least for the Pardoner – which is never to

instruct, but merely to engender the sort of dread that will make it all the easier to fleece

his marks. In a final twist, it is worth remembering that the pilgrims who comprise his

fictional audience are themselves involved in a sort of gamble through their tale contest,

and that the sort of oaths he describes have been their constant companions, and that they

are all thus doubly complicit yet again.

Both these themes are reproduced in the tale that is, eventually, told. The rioters

who seek out death are constantly drunk, and it is their swearing – and subsequent

foreswearing to be sure – of oaths that sets them on their doomed course. The tale is also

a trickster tale in that involves each of the three revelers attempting to outsmart each

other and eventually all being tricked by themselves and by their nemesis, death itself.

Death and the trickster also have a long association. One specific quality of the fifth

characteristic of the trickster figure in his role as "Messenger and Imitator of the Gods,"

as noted by Hyne, is to act as intermediary between the world of the living and the dead:

> The trickster is often a psychopomp, a mediator who crosses and resets the lines between life and death; associated imagery may include skulls that get stuck on the inquisitive trickster's head, or skeletons that come alive and give chase. Most often associated with conducting individuals to restored life, he can also be the messenger of death. The Shoshone credit Coyote with bringing death itself into the world; other groups consider death the result of the trickster's fumbling accidents. (Hynes 40)

The death the Pardoner deals out fictively of course also echoes the internal spiritual

death he so boldly claims. He is here functioning in the role of "imitator" of the gods

mocking their divine power through his hypocritical use of the accompanying rituals.

Yet, contained within the trickster's appropriation of the divine there is always the

possibility of true inspiration and instruction. Thus, despite the Pardoner's continued

protests to the contrary, there is work in his tale that exists outside his own venal

intentions. In a sense, the Pardoner intends his sermon and his tale to be stillborn, having

been generated by his infertile eunuch spirit. Yet the tale he tells is as powerfully

instructive as any of the others. As Pearsall notes:

> But the trickery of the narrative is only the simplest level on which it works. The context provided for it by the Pardoner's prologue and homily, and by his very profession, makes it resonate with a much deeper note. For the death that the rioters find is no more than the physical correlative, an allegorical enactment, of the death that they have already undergone: "For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live" (Rom. 8:13). (Pearsall 362)

The real life in death and death in life of the tale rests in the fact that the story itself is

both simultaneously alive and inanimate. It is, despite the intent of the Pardoner, rife

with potential significance. This ambiguity is also noted by Barbara Lalla in her

consideration of the tale:

In "the Pardoner's Tale" the integration of *ribaudye* and *moral thyng*, of bawdy
secularity and sacred truth, is characteristic of its own age and is exploited to its
limit – but most subtly – by Chacuer in deconstructing the ideology of his time to
present *memento mori* as jest and jest as *memento mori*. In the context of human
suffering, humanity becomes both the subject and object of humor. (Lalla 305-
306)

The multivalence of the tale is its critical trickster characteristic, the ability to mean and

not mean simultaneously, to embody the paradox that is central not only in the

Pardoner's Tale but repeatedly throughout the larger work of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Nowhere is that paradox clearer than in the conclusion or epilogue to the tale.

The Pardoner moves so directly into his sales pitch that it is simultaneously

disruptive and unremarkable. His call, "Now, goode men, God foryeve yow youre

trespas, / And ware yow fro the synne of avarice! / Myn hooly pardoun may yow alle

warice," (904-906) brings back into focus the central paradox of his character and his

profession, that the material and the spiritual distinct, but in doing so he is, as did his tale,

actually offering a form of instruction. In the essay "'Disfigured is thy face': Chaucer's

pardoner and the protean shape-shifter fals-semblant (A response to Britton Harwood),"

Jane Chance points out how the Pardoner works on several seemingly contradictory

levels, both free and chained, filled with vice but still potentially serving a greater good:

For the Pardoner, abrupt behavior shifts seem to free him, allow him to
manipulate others by mis-using his understanding of human nature: hence he can
shift *personae* as often as he does in his tale in order to profit handsomely. On
another level, however, he must be fettered, or his vices understood: despite his
many guises, his many covers or "bodies," as it were, manifested through *his*
vices of drinking, swearing, avarice, nevertheless he is capable also of pardoning
sinners, and, by means of his single, homilizing vocation, capable of rousing and
testing their faith in a virtue analogous to Proteus's prudence. From a more
providential (and authorial) point of view, this nefarious Pardoner, like the
capricious goddess Fortune whom slippery Fals-Semblant also resembles, and like
the many-masked Devil-bailiff in the Friar's tale, also works *for* God: by testing

185

what we most value-and like the Devil-bailiff, by giving us the correct answers to the test ahead of time. Jean's god of love in contrast will fail to see under the surface because he remains blind and cupidinous-by definition; as will the worldly Host. (Chance 431-432)

Chance argues that the Host's eruption is a recognition of his like status to the Pardoner, and his reaction is certainly concerned with surfaces and appearnaces. The verbal assault that the Host levels at the Pardoner upon the completion of his tale turns the work back into a 'mini' fabliau. Like other representative so the genre, it is engendered by personal animosity that arises as the result of a perceived slight. The Pardoner's call to "Com forth, sire Hoost, and offer first anon, / And thou shalt kisse the relikes everychon, / Ye, for a grote! Unbokele thy purs'" (943-945) both implicates him in the need for such absolution and seems to suggest his susceptibility to such ploys, all compounded by a possible homosexual jest aimed at discomforting the leader of the group. That he chooses Bailey as his target reinforces the theme of inversion that runs through all of the trickster tales.

The pardoner's sly insult to the Host provokes a verbal barrage that runs the full gamut of excremental description, finishing up with an equation of the Pardoner's product with a "hogges turd." (955) Particularly interesting is the Host's deployment of the terminology associated with the very genre he originally sought to have performed. In effect, he creates a space for it here at the end of the *Pardoner's Tale*, and handles it so skillfully, that he renders his antagonist speechless, "This Pardoner answerde nat a word; / So wrooth, he was, no word ne wolde he seye..." (957-8). It is just as possible to read Bailey as successful here, not only in silencing the Pardoner and cutting off his trick, but

of engaging in his own be reintroducing exactly the sort of mirth he sought out in the first place.

Even more evidence of the Host's victory (and that of the genre of fabliau) is the response from the Pardoner's audience, now responding to Bailley's assault rather than the initial tale. They provide him with authority by laughing at his jest at the expense of the Pardoner, and provide a disruption that the Knight, "Whan that he saugh that al the peple lough," feels the need to quell. But, the knight does not appeal to sobriety, but rather to a prior period of frivolity,

> "'Sire Pardoner, be glad and myrie of cheere;
> And ye, sire Hoost, that been to me so deere,
> I prey yow that ye kisse the Pardoner.
> And Pardoner, I prey thee, drawe thee neer,
> And, as we diden, lat us laughe and pleye.'
> Anon they kiste, and ryden forth his weye." (VI 963-8)

The company's return to equanimity may be brokered by the Knight, but it is the appeal of frivolity and jest that make such healing possible, both characteristics of the fabliau. The Knight asks the Pardoner to join in the general merriment that has been created at his expense, and this ruse seems to work. Though the Knight's social authority is obviously an important factor in this return to company unity, the final form of that reconciliation mirrors the desires of the Host and his appeal to comic entertainment. The point of the work which the Knight seeks to return to is the general frivolity that accompanied the early fabliau of the *Miller and Reeve's Tales*. Of course, this brings up another interesting consideration, the first fabliau were not a site of social harmony, but rather represented a disruption. The laughter which the knight here evokes in the interest of harmony has always been accompanied by internal strife.

The nature of that strife is problematic, it can be viewed as an assault upon bourgeoisie mobility by an author acutely conscious of his own middle-class origins. Alternately it can be understood as the subtle acquisition of aristocratic privilege by the lower orders, against which the "gentils" chafe, but which they are unable to halt. Perhaps the situation can be looked at more profitably by attempting to understand it in light of Chaucer's literary project as a whole. The entirety of *The Canterbury Tales* may be examined as a playing out of the specific issues brought up in regards to Chaucer's use of the fabliau genre, and the tricksters and their tales of inversion and contradiction.

The essential question that Chaucer appears to be addressing through the character of the Pardoner and through his multiple narratives is whether or not trickery can be meaningful in and of – or perhaps in spite of – itself. This is a profound question for Chaucer as it bears upon his entire project in the *Canterbury Tales* in that his fiction is a sort of trick played upon a willing audience who are asked to engage with the various layers of pretense inherent in his fiction. Indeed, fiction itself must always be a form of trick, a potentially edifying one but also a form complicated by its inherent dueling claims to "sentence and solaas," in this form to meaning and enjoyment.

Whether these are mutually exclusive and whether Chaucer's fictions can claim to have an essential meaning is the question taken up in another group of trickster tales that Chaucer deploys, tales which question the very efficacy of language itself to generate meaning and significance. Chaucer's tales of speaking animals, and in particular his tales of birds – who are both capable of speech and incapable of generating meaning – serve as

a corollary on the problems the Pardoner poses, and Chaucer's answer is, as is to be

expected, both complicated and itself a kind of trick.

Chapter 4

Chaucer's *Foules* and Fools: or Chaucer Too Is a Bird

"Dreams gather quickly like Spring crows, and they scatter."

-Simon Ortiz, Pueblo poet, "Returned from California."[91]

Birds figure prominently in a number of Chaucer's works, eponymously in *The Parlement of Foules*, and more sporadically but no less significantly in *The Canterbury Tales*. In three of the most noteworthy invocations of bids in the texts, they play an ambivalent role, at once promising wisdom or insight but eventually denying that impulse. In the *Parlement*, the birds seem to at first to offer the possibility of enlightenment and fulfillment but instead the dreamer's vision results in frustration and confusion. Chanticleer is both fool and trickster in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, himself the recipient of a true vision which is nevertheless ineffectual, and the crow in the *Manciple's Tale* is both loyal and false to his master, punished for telling the truth and transformed into a cautionary symbol displaying the danger of engaging in the exact kind of project in which Chaucer was himself occupied.

Throughout the *Tales* and in the *Parlement*, birds also act as intermediaries between the human and the spiritual world in much the same way as they function in many Native American and First Nation's legends. To be certain, the analogy is not exact, but in each of these three exempla the birds are directly implicated in a visionary experience or are the explicit agents of a supernatural power.

---

[91] From his collection, *Woven Stone (112*-113).

In this chapter I will explore Chaucer's symbolic use of birds in his works by considering their emblematic deployment as liminal agents signifying both meaning and insignificance in light of vexed medieval conceptions of animal consciousness and through contemporary Animal Studies in general and emerging Native American concepts of First Beings in particular. Specifically, and in inverse order, sections of the argument will focus on "The Maunciple's Tale" and Chaucer's use of Ovid and how this parallel some versions of the Haida Gwaii Raven legend cycle, the role of Chanticleer in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" as both fool and trickster, and the more sustained trope of the *Parlement of Foules,* in which the birds figure simultaneously as visionary instruments and indeterminate distraction from the serious work of contemplation. In each of these particular instances, Chaucer's use of birds parallels the complicit role of trickster and revelatory intercessor so familiar from the anthropological structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss and so prevalent in Native American myth.

Birds are essentially liminal creatures, and are also powerfully totemic, generating meaning by their very presence. The bifurcated identity of birds is so implicated in human mythic structures that it was a critical understanding of the symbolic relationships between the figures of divine, bird and human that lead to the central anthropological notion of totemism. Evans-Pritchard's pioneering work in the 1930s, and particularly his study of twins and their symbolic and associative meaning in the Nuer culture of South Sudan, which associatively recognized such a deep link between the sacred nature of twins and of birds, led him to the now famous conclusion that "a twin is not a person, he is a bird" (Evans-Pritchard 236). His statement recognized that, in the complex linguistic

191

and symbolic etiology of the Nuer culture the twin was seen as an intercesionary figure, a sacred being and thus symbolically fluid and associational. [92] To go one step further, the twin was semiotically synonymous with the bird and not only equivalent to it but functionally indistinguishable. This revelation was fundamental to early social anthropology and led to an understanding of the quality of adaptive realism that underpinned an understanding of much mythic metaphor. Claude Lévi–Strauss would later pick up on this notion in his development Durkheim's 'totemism' specifically identifying the Nuer twin's identification with birds as a result of "a series of logical connections uniting mental relations' (*Totemism* 78). This in turn would generate much of his understanding of structural anthropology. The bird is the essential and universal intermediary figure standing between the human and the divine and also betwixt and between any number of binary associative pairings, particularly the central division between being and seeming - largely as a consequence of their ability to reproduce human sounds and make song – and as near to a universal trope as one is likely to encounter.

It is quite clear that Chaucer fundamentally and instinctively understood this concept. From the opening periodic sentence of the *Tales*, Chaucer makes use of birds as a multivalent and transitional symbol. He uses the sleeping yet wide eyed birds as both a symbol of spring and the liminal device by which the poem transforms its motif from

---

[92] For a concise account of this development in the field of anthropological studies see: Viney, William. "Anthropology's Twins," from his often-cited website, The Wonder of Twins.

pastoral to religious, among the first act of authorial trickery in the *Tales*. But birds play perhaps their most prominent and certainly their most eponymous role in his earlier work, *The Parlement of Foules*.

In the *Parlement*, Chaucer reveals an understanding of the symbolic relevance of avians that both an anthropologist and an indigenous reader might well identify as essentially totemic, here creating boundaries not only between representational classes but also between avian and human kind. Chaucer's dream vision uses the birds and their speech within the poem to construct a work that simultaneously does and does not hold meaning and significance. The narrator's eventual frustration in his search for wisdom is stymied by a resolution that is also both meaningful and meaningless to him, powerfully demonstrating the utility of the bird as a representative figure of ambivalence and multivalence.

The *Parliament of Foules* and the Problem of Speech

Chaucer's dream vision significantly begins with a set of oppositional, binary pairs, "The lyf so Short, the craft so long to lerne, / Th'assay so hard, so sharp the conquerrynge,/ The dredful joye alwey that slit so yerne:" (*Parliament* 1-3) that foreshadow a number of other significant dichotomies such as the transition from the static temple of Venus to the bright and vibrant realm of Dame Nature.

The oppositional pairings proliferate in the text with edifying distinctions pointing to divisions between a variety of established categories, particularly those related to class and gender. Susan Crane, in her article "For the Birds" notes the totemic use of birds – with the exact sense that Lévi-Strauss identified that term – in the poem to create

significant distinctions in particular between the elite and the common and between the

male and the female.

> Totemic thought explains lineal and social distinctions among humans by reference to
> species distinctions. The evident difference between sparrows and falcons is recruited
> to make the difference between peasants and princes look natural. The superior merit
> of female falcons, formels, who are larger and bolder than the male tercels, is
> appropriate for an adventure illustrating female excellence. (Crane 28)

The birds serve as a reflective microcosm of the social landscape, each one presumably

identifiable with some particular status or identification. Even the choice of pitting

formels against tercels is socially constructed to reflect the superiority of the female in

this poem's own particular milieu, ruled over by a feminine personification of nature and

where the female "wins" the debate by first claiming a right to choose and then deferring

that choice.

But that deferral is itself a kind of textual failure to signify and to successfully

conclude that is also inherent to the conceit of the birds and their fixed referential

significance. Susan Crane also notes the inherent problem of such symbolism, that it

represents a self-referential closed loop.

> This ''circular loop of symbolic transfer,'' as anthropologist James Howe calls it,
> may begin in subjective judgments about which species have merit, but the circularity
> obscures this founding subjectivity so that it becomes unclear where the assertion of
> merit originates. The catalogue of birds in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* provides a
> condensed example in ''the gentyl faucoun, that with his feet distrayneth / The
> kynges hand'' (lines 337–38). Is the falcon ''gentil'' because it is preferred by kings,
> or is the king's gentility secured by his association with this ''noble'' and ''valiant''
> bird? When we can no longer answer one way or the other, the symbolic loop neatly
> closes. (Crane 28)

The bird both does and does not signify as its meaning is only inherent to its totemic

function. It signifies elite status but perhaps only because it is adopted by the elite.

That Chaucer is conscious of this tautology is tacit in his conclusion of the poem

and its debate. The central duality in this poem may be between its attempt to artfully

construct meaning and its eventual and inevitable failure to essentially signify at the

conclusion. The request of the formel to delay the decision of which mate to choose

among the eagles initiates a cascade of inconclusive utterances. Her decision deferred,

the parliament breaks up in a cacophony of meaningless sounds that disrupt the dream

vision just as the formel's delay breaks up the meeting.

> And with the shoutyng, what the song was do
> That foules maden at here flyte awey,
> I wok, and othere bokes tok me to,
> To reede upon, and yit I rede alwey.
> I hope, ywis to rede so som day
> That I shal mete som thyng for to fare
> The bet, and thus to rede I nyl spare. (*Parliament* 693-697)

The abrupt transition in the poem from dream to wakefulness is not coincidentally linked

to the noise and the song of birds. Indeed, both the song and the speech of birds had long

been both a philosophical conundrum used to explore the essential epistemology behind

the nature of language and also a potent symbol for the paradoxical ability of an utterance

to be both or either meaningful or meaningless.

In fact, there is a great deal of both classical and medieval lore debating the

essential significance of bird song and bird speech. Augustine famously used the song of

birds to argue that imitation was not in fact art, with the further implication that bird song

could not be real music. "Then either you would be forced to say magpies, parrots and

crows are rational, or you have been pretty rash in calling imitation by the name of art.

For we find that these birds sing and make many sounds because of their intercourse with

195

human beings, and that they utter them only by imitation." (Augustine, *On Music*, 178; De *musica*, 16,18) Elizabeth Leach in her book *Sung Birds: Music Nature and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages* argues convincingly that there was a significant body of contemporary literature espousing the view that bird song was not music, but rather just imitation, and that despite their ability to make utterances those speech acts were not in any meaningful way indicative of cognition or meaning (Leach 42). Yet there were also competing views that demonstrated an awareness that the situation might not be so simple. In his essay"Mimicry, Subjectivity, and the Embodied Voice in Anglo-Saxon Bird Riddle," Robert Stanton notes that there was a particularly rich body of Anglo-Saxon bird riddles that indicate a far more nuanced understanding of the possibilities of bird speech. According to Stanton, these "…riddles deploy animal narrators who are aware of their roles within human signifying systems in ways that provoke larger questions about the boundaries between articulate and inarticulate sounds and between rational and irrational animals" (Stanton 30). Here is another way in which birds are liminal subjects. They force us to consider the deep questions about where the divide rests between human and animal.

For many cultures this line is not at all clear, and it is worth pausing to mention that there is a long continuum of debate over this question that stretches across temporal and geographical divides. The increasing awareness of the value of the field of animal studies makes particular note of how animals serve in both philosophic and artistic contexts as a sort of mirror for humanity by which we can evaluate what that term implies. This field is particularly advanced in Native American studies where competing

terms such as "animal beings" and "first beings" imply a much more porous

identification of the animal with the human, but this is not simply a cognitive approach

limited to indigenous cultures. As Brian Hudson points out in his analysis of the

potential significance of the "first beings" concept, it is not at all limited to Native

contexts.

> In thinking about first beings, we might be tempted to center solely on the differences between Indian stories and non- Native narratives about nonhuman animals. But focusing merely on differences risks the possibility of homogenizing many distinct tribal cultures. We also run the risk of romanticizing Indigenous relationships with other animals. Worse still, we might unwittingly reify readings that can be seen as subscribing to notions of savagery (the Indian as animalistic). Therefore, it is important to note that the ethical and ontological inclusion of other animals is not absent before the mid- 1970s, nor is it restricted to tribal cultures. As Norm Phelps shows, as early as 496 bce Pythagoras and his followers argued against killing nonhuman animals on the basis that they had souls. (Hudson 4-5)

The fluidity of the human / animal relationship was arguably as available to Chaucer as it

might have been to Anglo-Saxon poets or to Native American storytellers. At the very

least, Chaucer clearly recognized the potential of this vexed relationship and seems to

have been particularly aware of the centrality of birds in the discussion about the dividing

line between the human and the animal realms.

It also seems quite evident that Chaucer saw the representational value in

recognizing that the speech of birds was able to contain, simultaneously and in

opposition, both meaning and meaninglessness, similarity and difference. Lesley

Kordecki, argues precisely this in her book *Ecofeminist subjectivities: Chaucer's Talking*

Birds. She begins with Irigaray's central question in feminist theory and then applies the

same analysis to Chaucer's birds:

> …Irigaray… asks "but what if the "object" started to speak?" Similarly, what if nonhuman creatures through human literary intervention seriously talked, laughed, and interacted verbally? In Chaucer, they do. The 'father' of English poetry heard voices and projected them onto his text, and I believe some of these voices were not quite human…hence, our interpretive task becomes a balancing act of both seeing birds as ourselves and also, more provocatively, seeing them as constituents of a whole new realm. (Kordecki 2)

This assertion is given some credence by the fact that Chaucer was, apparently, quite an expert on bird lore and took care to make his avian characters as fully realized as his human figures. Nicolai von Kreisler's essay "Bird Lore and the Valentine's Day Tradition in Chaucer's '*Parlement of Foules*'" notes that the *Parliament* in particular is a bit of a *tour de force* in bird lore and that he was concerned with presenting as accurate a depiction of the character of the avians he was presenting as possible.

> But he was certainly no stranger to falconry and to the knowledge of birds that surrounds it, and we can have no doubt of his familiarity with both mythical and factual bird in the epithets he applies to the various species in his bird catalogue in lines 330-64 of the *Parlement*. Chaucer considered the conventional assembly of birds a suitable vehicle for whatever he wanted to achieve in his poem. Regardless of whether he intended to immortalize a royal marriage, compose a *demande d'amour, debat*, or Valentine poem, or write a treatise on love, parallels between his poem and an available, contemporary body of bird lore strongly suggest that Chaucer wished to pattern his avian parliament after real and the observable, even while it conformed to popular tradition literary convention. (Kreisler 64)[93]

If we accept that Chaucer was well versed in both the lore of birds and the continuing

debate over the degree to which animals in general and birds in particular could be

---

[93] Kreisler suggests but does not precisely argue that Chaucer was drawing from the knowledge contained in Frederick II's *De Arte Venandi cum Avibus*, which drew on both classical and Arabic sources and was much copied and translated. "The parallels between Chaucer's birds and the mating habits of their real counterparts are too close and are featured too prominently in the action and setting of the *Parlement* to be entirely accidental. I do not wish to suggest that Chaucer actually borrowed from Frederick, or even that he was acquainted with the *De Arte Venandi cum Avibus*" (Kreisler 64).

understood to have consciousness and agency, then it becomes possible to argue that the

eponymous fowls of the poem serve as a greater symbol of the poem's overall thematic

conceit of the unfulfilled and potentially unfulfillable search for knowledge.

The *Nun's Priests Tale* and the Meaningless Utterance

Moving from the *Parlement* to the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, there are a number of

direct analogues to thematic concerns of meaning and meaninglessness that can be

recognized even in the introduction of the character of Chanticleer in the tale.

> In which she hadde a cok, hight Chauntecleer.
> In al the land, of crowyng nas his peer.
> His voys was murier than the murie orgon
> On messe-dayes that in the chirche gon.
> Wel sikerer was his crowyng in his logge
> Than is a clokke or an abbey orlogge.
> By nature he knew ech ascencioun
> Of the equynoxial in thilke toun;
> For whan degrees fiftene weren ascended,
> Thanne crew he that it myghte nat been amended. (*Parliament* 2849-2858)

Here we see again the focus on the utterances of the bird, which are described as both

"voys" and "crowing", two terms at either terminus of the spectrum of meaningfulness.

Chanticleer' voice is also compared, and favorably at that, to the music of a church organ,

challenging the Augustinian notion that bird song cannot be music while also

constraining that claim through comparison with the mechanical as opposed to the

organic. But it is the following depiction that creates the clearest link between the role of

the birds in the *Parlement* and the figure of Chanticleer in The *Nun's Priest's Tale*. The

rooster's ability to tell time is consciously equated and compared with the scientific

acumen of the human and the mechanical. His precision is as great, but it is clearly

instinctual. In this way, Chaucer again introduces the paradox of simultaneously seeming

and being as this chicken is both as proficient as the most learned and scientific man or machine but is also simply an instrument of nature.

Significantly, Chaucer also displaces this tale into an imagined past where animal speech is not only a possibility, but a given. There is a wonderful parallel between this imagined co-equal past and the origin myths of so many indigenous groups that posit an *a priori* time when animal and human speech were synonymous and equally comprehensible, which also by extension transforms them both into "first beings." For Chaucer, this pre-lapsarian epoch also importantly confers the ability to sing upon the animals. "For thilke tyme, as I have understonde, /Beestes and briddes koude speke and synge" (*Nun's Priest's Tale* 2880-2881). In this way Chaucer, as he so often does, has it both ways, displacing the impossible fantasy of effective bird speech off into a fantastic, imagined past, while also linking those very acts with the obvious awareness that birds - at least - can still perform both of these activities.

The tale is filled with such doublings, each countering and canceling each other out, leading to the final tricking of the trickster that concludes the tale. It is a work full of action, sound and fury, but it too signifies very little in the end and cannot help but appear slightly ridiculous with its talking animals and *fabliaux* inspired plot and counterplot. Yet in the end, it also contains a significant imprecation against foolish utterances. This theme is apparent from very early on, and is particularly potent in the initial dream vision that Chuntecleer recounts to Pertelote. In her dismissal of his soon to be enacted prophecy she explicitly rails against foolishness in her declaration of what all hens, and presumably by analogy, all women look for and avoid in a mate. "We alle

desiren, if it myghte bee, / To han housbondes hardy, wise, and free, /And secree -- and

no nygard, ne no fool," (*Nun's Priest's Tale* 2913-2915). Of course the vision turns out to

be uncannily predictive but also utterly useless. His subsequent defense of dream

visions, citing as it does a variety of classical sources, is itself farcical in that it comes

from the mouth of a rooster and in the fact – despite his many claims to learning–

Chanticleer is as often inventing sources as he is invoking them.[94] Despite his protests, he

is nevertheless dissuaded by a fear of appearing foolish and prompted by his lustful

appreciation of Pertolete's form, he commits one last act of horrendous mistranslation of

a clearly apt Latin phrase, and proceeds to demonstrate his amorous proclivities. Thus,

Chanticleer ignores the very intuition for which he is first praised in the poem, acutely

making fools of both himself and Pertolete. Both his pedantic and misappropriative

scholarship and his base lust reinforce his animal nature. He is, after all a chicken, and

thus we cannot be surprised that his scholarship is circumspect or that his amorous nature

disrupts his argumentative faculties.

Following quickly upon the nun's priest's narratorial intrusion in which he extols

both the veracity of and feminine proclivity for the tale of Lancelot, the fox enters into

the poem, followed by passages alternately contemplating divine providence and another

narratorial interlude simultaneously engaging in and denying a bit of misogyny. The

foolishness of the text here and the internal linguistic doubling and trickery set the stage

---

[94] Benson notes that the specific author here is not entirely obvious, and that Chaucer
may be referring to either Cicero or Valerius Maximus. He also points out that many of
these remarks are not actually contained the works of these authors and, citing Robinson,
that Cahunticleer may himself be deceiving Pertolete (Benson 938).

for Chaucer's Russell, a clear analog of the famed French Reynard, and perhaps even the son of that simultaneously foolish and instructional figure, the quintessential trickster of the European tradition.[95] Russell will play the role of initial trickster in this tale, but he will in turn be tricked by Chanticleer in another perfect Chaucerian doubling. Claude Lévi-Strauss would no doubt find both Chaucer's deployment of the trickster and the poem's thematic tension between meaning and indeterminacy familiar. As he explains in his seminal work "The Structural Study of Myth," the trickster also serves as a mediator between binary opposites.

> Thus, the mediating function of the trickster explains that since its position is half way between two polar terms he must retain something of that duality, namely an ambiguous and equivocal character. But the trickster figure is not the only conceivable form of mediation; some myths seem to devote themselves to the task of exhausting all the possible solutions to the problem of bridging the gap between two and one. ("The Structural Study of Myth" 441-442)

Both the fox, the rooster and arguably the narrator and the authorial Chaucer all take on the role of trickster in this work, developing a tale that at once simultaneously claims and denies significance. The ability to navigate this challenging threading of the needle of motif is inherent in the liminality of the animal characters who are both other and recognizably human in their motivations and foibles.

The fox plays on Chanticleer's pride, flattering him but also challenging him to live up to the reputation of his father and sing as beautifully as that rooster once did. This doubled assault seems to guarantee the foolishness of the rooster who imitates the fox's

---

[95] Charles Dahlberg discusses the possible sources for the name Russell in the article "Chaucer's Cock and Fox" including "Rouisel," the second son of Reynard, and argues that Chaucer's fox derives far more significantly from the French than from the German sources.

depiction of a perfectly singing rooster and is thus caught. "This Chauntecleer stood hye upon his toos, / Strecchynge his nekke, and heeld his eyen cloos, / And gan to crowe loude for the nones" (*Nun's Priest's Tale* 3331- 3333). The verb used here to depict Chanticleer's   utterance is the significant "crowe," a distinctly inhuman and discordant utterance that can perhaps also be associatively linked to the bird of the same name and its less attractive utterances. His song here is explicitly not music, both in that it is an animal's cry and in that it is forestalled before it can begin.

In fact, all of the speech acts that ensue from this first moment of trickery are in some way compromised. The action of the poem concludes with three more speech acts of significance on the part of the animals each of which reveals the limits and liabilities of speech. When Chanticleer in turn tricks Russell by taunting him to taunt the pursuers, another nonsensical speech act is deployed. It is significant that it is not the actual taunt by Russell that frees Chanticleer, which is in fact never uttered, but rather his pledge to make that taunt that frees the rooster. "The fox answerde, "In feith, it shal be don.'/ And as he spak that word, al sodeynly / This cok brak from his mouth delyverly**,**" (*Nun's Priest's Tale* 3414-3416). This is in turn followed by Russell's attempt to re-trick Chanticleer by coaxing him to come closer so he can explain the mistaken impression he has given by absconding with him. "'Com doun, and I shal telle yow what I mente; / I shal seye sooth to yow, God help me so!'" (*Nun's Priest's Tale* 3424-3425). It is a promise to explain, but not an explanation in itself, and so it is another vain speech act on the part of an animal with no essential meaning. His attempt is as ridiculous as is it is futile, except that it generates one final, problematic speech act, a curse. "Nay thanne,"

quod he, "I shrewe us bothe two. / And first I shrewe myself, bothe blood and bones, / If thou bigyle me ofter than ones" (*Nun's Priest's Tale* 3426-3428). Chanticleer pronounces this curse upon the both of them, resorting to a final utterance of linguistic violence, and one intentionally purposeless and simply demonstrative.

In turn Russell's last line is a meditation on the limits of speech and the potential foolishness of all such utterances. "'Nay,' quod the fox, 'but God yeve hym meschaunce, / That is so undiscreet of governaunce / That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees'" (*Nun's Priest's Tale*3422-3435). The fox's moral is an exhortation to avoid foolish and ungoverned speech, and as such it serves as an indictment to the tale itself which has been full of foolishness, and of the animal characters within it who have been, without exception, prideful and foolish themselves.
The conclusion of the tale, as might now be expected, both reinforces and complicates the meaninglessness of the animal speech within it, as the final say is given back to the human narrator of the tale.

The nun's priest's closing appeal to "taketh the moralite" (3440) of this "tale a folye/ As of a fox, or of a cok and hen" (3428-3439) both dismisses and validates the tale. Though the work is an animal tale and one full of foolishness and humor, it is nevertheless potentially meaningful if the audience make it so. This is, of course, exactly the case with all utterances from animals, and even arguably from people as well, which may arguably be essentially meaningless in themselves, but given significance by those who receive them. If it truly does have a moral it must be that meaning is itself uncertain,

and what better device can there be to display this fact than a trickster animal tale filled

with constant indeterminacy. As Charles Muscatine pointed out,

> Though the poem is as complex as the other, it is not confused. Formerly the poet scrambled among his materials; here he sees through them. So the Nun's Priest's Tale not only epitomizes the Canterbury Tales; it fittingly serves to cap all of Chaucer's poetry.… If it is true that Chauntecleer and Pertelote are rounded characters, it is also true that they are chickens. To ask which one of them has the better in their scholarly debate over dreams is to be too solemn; it is to assume that chickens, too, are concerned with scholarship. The serious point is more in the anomalous fact of the chicken debate itself than in its outcome. The tale has recently been welcomed into the Marriage Group, but it says little about marriage that it does not unsay. With what marriage, indeed, can it be said to deal? The marriage of Chauntecleer in the varying lights of the poem is courtly and bourgeois, monogamous and polygamous, incestuous, and unsolemnized, a relationship of paramours. The tale seems to have an irreducible core of antifeminism, but by similar tokens it is feminist too… (Muscatine 238)

Muscatine finds this to be the quintessential Chaucerian work, and both because and in

spite of that to be his most indeterminate. In that most Chaucerian form, the poem's

meaning is as a sort of indeterminate quantum criticism, varying depending upon the

observers own perspective. And this is made manifest by the animal fable nature of the

work which leverages the indeterminacy of the non-human characters to manifest its

ambivalent and multivalent implications.

The *Maunciple's Tale* and the Value of Silence

The final significant bird in Chaucer's canon is the crow of the *Maunciple's Tale*,

and like the rooster and the fox of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, his depiction is pointedly

ambivalent and he serves as a form of cautionary warning to heed the potential danger of

speech acts. However, here, nearing the end of the Tales, this message takes a notably

more sinister and negative turn. There is also a thematic link between the depiction of

the crow in the *Parliament of Foules* and his presence in the *Maunciple's Tale*. Travis

and Richmond connect these two depictive modes in their essay "Black as Crow" from the tellingly titled *Dark Chaucer* collection.

> In Chaucer's hands however, the polysemic possibilities of the crow become narrower and darker. Perched alongside the raven in the *Parliament of Foules*, Chaucer has put the crow in his place. While the crow and the raven may be among the noise of fowls that cry for an end to the argument (491-497), their singular voices are never heard. When Nature Silences the "Murmur of the lewednesse behynde" (520), there is no sense that the crow has spoken out of turn with his "vois of care." In this game of love the crow has but one duty: to watch silently. This impotent voyeurism is often discussed in treatments of the crow in the *Manciple's Tale*, where the crow's silence as he watches the betrayal of Apollo's mistress is contrasted with his bursting forth in speech upon Apollo's return. In these contexts, Apollo's judgment that the crow is a traitor who has spoken a false tale suggests that the crow might be – as the Manciple glosses – an exemplar for proper and tactful speech. (Neel and Richmond 110)

The darkness of the crow, which is an essential element of the tale itself, is also reflected in a darker message both explicitly in the double or even triple betrayal - of Apollo by his mistress, Apollo by the crow, and the crow in turn by Apollo's wrath – and by the betrayal of speech and even potentially the *Tales* themselves, which occurs at the end of the story and is played out through the two remaining works of *The Parson's Tale* and *Chaucer's Retraction*, both of which in distinct ways close off the work and respond to and perform the Maunciple's final caveat to "thenk upon the crowe" (*The Maunciple's Tale* 362).

Before engaging with those concerns it is necessary to address one last and perplexing bit of avian displacement, Chaucer's transformation of the raven of Ovid's myth into the crow of the *Maunciple's Tale*. Jamie Fumo, in "Thinking upon the Crow: The *Manciple's Tale* and Ovidian Mythography," argues that this Chaucerian inversion is

not only intentional, it is central to the work's essential warning against the act of speaking.

> By placing the crow instead of the raven at the center of the tale, Chaucer creatively echoes the exemplum of the crow as delivered to the raven in Ovid, an episode that immediately precedes the central events of the Coronis narrative on which the *Manciple's Tale* is more prominently based. By invoking the Ovidian crow's warning to the raven as the rhetorical – as opposed to literal – model of the *Manciple's Tale*, Chaucer intensifies the onus placed on the reader (who takes the traditional role of the raven) to act as morally instructed. He thus strengthens the tale's exemplary function (by extending its source beyond the raven's actual experience to the crow's thematically related warning). In so doing, he sets the stage for the moral admonition that impels the *Parson's Tale* and, ultimately, its subjective aftermath in the *Retraction*, wherein lies the most profound, and disturbing, legacy of the *Manciple's Tale's* injunction to silence. (Fumo 357)

Fumo goes on to argue that it is highly improbable that Chaucer simply misread the identity of the birds, which are similar in the Latin source (*corvus* and *cornix*) but not in the French version (*corbiaus* and *cornielle*) which he appears to have drawn on and where the distinction between the two species is clearer, and that he was also likely familiar with Gower's version of the story from *Confessio Amantis* and was likely parodying it.

Other scholars have noted that Chaucer's crow makes significant use of an ambivalent associative field with which crows were contemporarily identified. Carolynn Van Dyke, in her book *Chaucer's Agents: Cause and Representation in Chaucerian Narrative* notes that the crow was particularly suited to its role in *The Maunciple's Tale* as its imaginative field spanned both compassion and disgust in equal measure.

> But the crow especially suited Chaucer's purposes because of characteristics attributed to in by natural historians. In *On the Properties of Things*, which Chaucer used for the *Nun's Preist's Tale* and the Parliament of Fowls, Bartholomew the Englishman emphasizes the crow's natural and preternatural intelligence…Bartholomew's raven also performs a kind of "dyuynacioun" and is

> sacred to Apollo, but his crow particularly resembles Chaucer's because it watches over surreptitious human actions, inspiring both respect and antagonism. Ambivalence pervades Bartholomew's account: the "besy and greedy" crow is also merciful and tender toward its aged parents; its caws are truthful but also somehow unworthy *(improba)*, like the warnings of Phebus's pet. Somewhat contemptuously, Bartholomew calls the crow *aues garrula*, which his Middle English translator renders with a word the resounds late in the *Manciple's Tale*, "gangelinge [jangling]." The crow of Bartholomew and Chaucer arouses mingled deference and distaste on account of its autonomy. (Van Dyke 102)

It may be worth noting that the word "jangling" is also used in *The Nun's Preist's Tale* (3435) as part of the fox's instruction to govern one's own speech. The crow's cautionary tale is also similar to that which results from the interplay between Russell and Chanticleer, but without the playful elements. The ambivalence of the crow, and arguably even more so with the raven, is significantly different from that of chickens in intensity and gravity.

I would argue here that regardless of the true reason behind Chaucer's inversion of the crow and raven role, the associative fields belonging to these avians are similar enough that to invoke one is to recall the other. This is even more true as the raven is not elided from the tale but rather recast as the voice of experience, having already suffered the fate that awaits the crow, delivering its Cassandra-like message to an unhearing ear. In fact, the raven becomes even more implicit in the eventual invocation to silence that finishes the tale. It has already experienced the futility of the attempting to relay unwanted information, indeed that is the crux of its message, and yet it still and again insists on advising the crow to follow the advice that the raven itself is ignoring. The raven and the crow double and amplify the tale's thematic injunction, leveraging the ambivalent associative identity of both corvids to augment their individual multivalence.

This characteristic of trickster bird would be clear to many indigenous peoples who understood birds in general and ravens in particular to have a form of supreme ambivalence, and likewise to the anthropologists who attempted to codify their beliefs. Claude Lévi-Strauss asks the fundamental question, of the trickster figure "Why is it that throughout North America his part is assigned practically everywhere to either coyote or raven?" ("The Structural Study of Myth" 440). His essential answer is that "Raven, like coyote acquired its mythological status because it acted as a mediator between the realms of life and death." (*Structural Anthropology* 244) Of course, this oversimplifies the situation to some degree, and later critiques have pointed out that a variety of other figures often also play the role of the trickster in different regions, in particular the rabbit or hare.[96] However, no other figure, not even the coyote so emblematically doubles and complicates its associational field in the folklore of North America. Lévi-Strauss argues that the raven is the ultimate mediator and intercessor, a role it also plays in *The Munciple's Tale*.

> Or, to put it otherwise, Pueblo style: ravens are to gardens as prey animals are to herbivorous ones. But it is also clear that herbivorous animals may be called first to act as mediators on the assumption that they are like collectors and gatherers (vegetal-food eaters) while they can be used as animal food though not themselves hunters. Thus we may have mediators of the first order, of the second order, and soon, where each term gives birth to the next by a double process of opposition and correlation. ("The Structural Study of Myth" 440)

Turning to indigenous sources it is easy to find analogues to what the anthropologist relates. Discussing the traditions of northwestern California in *Spirits of the Earth: a*

---

[96] For a full discussion of the prominence of the hare as a trickster figure, particularly in central and Midwestern regions of America, see Michael P. Carroll's "Lévi-Strauss, Freud, and the Trickster: A New Perspective upon an Old Problem" (301-313).

guide to Native American Nature Symbols, Stories, and Ceremonies, Robert Lake-Thom notes that "The Raven and the Crow are always good signs, but they have distinct, often multiple messages and meanings(Lake-Thom)." I can personally attest to a similar if potentially more ominous attitude toward the raven among the Tongva and other linguistically and culturally affiliated nations of Southern California. For us, the raven, and to a lesser extent the crow, is a messenger of Chingichngish, one of the primary myth figures for the Takik peoples of the region, and is generally seen as sign of spiritual blessing and a potentially powerful personal totem. However, the raven can also carry messages of displeasure and punish with ill fortune or disease those who break the rules set by Chingichngish in his aspect as lawgiver following the death of Wiyot, the first chief and tyrant of the people. Such ambivalence is common in other regions of North America as well. In the American south, there was also a rich tradition among the Cherokee and Creek of ambivalent bird spirits. Shephard Krech, author of *Spirits of the Air,* notes that "Southern Indians widely believed that bird spirits caused and cured sickness" (Krech 157).

The ambivalence of the raven is perhaps most fully developed in the intricate theology of the Northwest Coast Native Nations. In the multiplicity of story cycles related to raven that come from this region there are often multiple competing and mutually irreconcilable origin stories implicating raven. While the stories often differ in significant and reciprocally conflicting manners, there are some features that are frequently apparent and indicative of an understanding of the raven's symbolic function that perhaps would not have seemed unfamiliar to Chaucer.

In one representative legend cycle of the Haida Gwaii, Raven also begins as a snow-white bird who steals the sun, moon and stars as well as fresh water and a brand of fire from the house of Gray Eagle whom he visits while courting his daughter. After placing all the celestial features in the heavens and bringing water to the parched land he becomes singed by the smoke from the brand, dropping it into rocks where it becomes the generative spark that appears whenever two rocks are struck together. His once white plumage is turned forever black. This is but one representative example of the many creation myths where raven takes on the role of accidental creator and is branded by fire or by the sun as he brings these items to the world. Here, as in *The Manciple's Tale* the raven is punished for revealing the truth. Gray eagle is explicitly hiding these essential artifacts that are needed by the people, and raven's role is profoundly promethean, not only bringing fire to the people from the sun, but also bringing the sun and other celestials bodies as well. Like Prometheus, he is likewise punished for this necessary and essential transgression, sacrificing the beauty of his plumage, the very trait which first intrigues Gray Eagle's daughter and makes possible his larcenous courtship.

There are also anciliary, likely intentionally so, versions of the raven in Haida myth that share the voyeuristic trait with Phoebus's crow in *The Maunciple's Tale*. The famed Bill Reid sculpture of *The Raven and the First Men*, depicts the initial episode in that legend where raven frees the first men from the confines of a clam. The story goes on to note that raven grew bored with these creatures and was about to return them when he discovered the first women contained within a chiton and freed them. The interactions between the sexes so amused raven that he became fond of humans and continued to

watch over them.[97] Here too raven pays a price for his generative act, losing his carefree independence, becoming tied to the humans whom he helped by a bond of obligation for that which he initially helped.

Returning to Chaucer's penultimate tale, the crow is presented as a direct instrument of the divine Phebus and also patently a creature capable of both song and speech.

> Now hadde this Phebus in his hous a crowe
> Which in a cage he fostred many a day,
> And taughte it speken, as men teche a jay.
> Whit was this crowe as is a snow-whit swan,
> And countrefete the speche of every man
> He koude, whan he sholde telle a tale.
> Therwith in al this world no nyghtyngale
> Ne koude, by an hondred thousand deel,
> Syngen so wonder myrily and weel. (*The Maunciple's Tale* 130-138)

While he must be taught to speak by Phebus, his linguistic acumen soon becomes exemplary if still imitative. He is also able to sing, and his song is clearly spectacular, though curiously only compared with that of other birds. But it is the characteristic described in the line between these two traits that is critical in that statement that he "koude, what he sholde tell a tale" (135). The double implication here, that Phebus's crow is capable of not only speech but also of constructing stories, and that he can do this when such an act is appropriate is both suggestive and problematic. Of course, the crow's problem is that he precisely doesn't do either of these things. He tells the truth, not a tale and he tells it when he shouldn't. This telling is the central quality of

---

[97] The full tale is found in the collaborative work by Bill Reid, and Robert Bringhurst, *Raven Steals the Light.*

Chaucer's crow and also perhaps the key to understanding Chaucer's use of birds throughout his works.

Chaucer's birds have all had difficulty generating meaning. The birds of *The Parlement of Foules* speak well and wisely, but they ultimately fail to generate any meaningful message for the dreamer. Chanticleer uses multiple forms of verbal trickery in the N*un's Preist's Tale*, but also essentially fails to generate either understanding or wisdom. The bird in Chaucer stands in for the impossibility of speech, and by extension language, to sufficiently signify and generate meaning. Fumo notes that Phebus's crow likewise becomes an emblem of the essential failure of language at the conclusion of the text.

> The first clue that the crow *qua* crow is of central imaginative importance in the *Manciple's Tale* is the iconic force he acquires by the end of the tale, at which point he has also gained the aural and ocular identity familiar to our post-Apollonian world. When the Manciple's mother twice admonishes us to "thenk [up]on the crowe" (IX318, 362) – the final words of the tale – she reduces the crow to a verbal icon, a point of mediation for the reader. (Fumo 357)

The doubled maternal advice to "then on the crow" that the Maunciple passes on (appearing at lines 318 and 362) is expressly glossed in the intervening lines of the tale as a caution to speak as sparingly as possible so as to avoid offense. It is also explicitly a caution against the telling of tales as is evident from the Maunciple's mother's warning that "A janglere speke of perilous mateere" (348).

Chaucer is always playing with his narrative in such self-reflexive and ambivalent fashion, himself a kind of quantum storyteller simultaneously earnest and playful, meaningful and idle, and his use of the inconclusive speech of birds echoes these traits. However, the conclusion of *The Maunciple's Tale* is different because it appears to have

taken hold on the very process of the whole project of *The Canterbury Tales* themselves. The only remaining tale in the sequence is *The Parson's Tale*, which is in fact not a tale at all. The Parson's refusal to tell another fable not only implicates the Maunciple, his assertion that he will not "… tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse. / Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest," (*The Parson's Prologue* 34-35) recalls and critiques the Nun's Priest's recommendation at the end of his tale to "Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille" (*Nun's Priest's Tale* 3443) in order to generate some meaning from his tale. Following *The Parson's Tale*, there is only *Chaucer's Retraction*, and even more direct censure of the work of tale telling.

At the end of Chaucer's work, the speech of birds stands in for what may be the central conceit of his closing métier, the impossibility of fiction to generate meaning, at least for some. Like bird speech and song, Chaucer's tales are mimetic and inventive, simultaneously earnest and game, meaningful and meaningless. Perhaps Chaucer's true brilliance at the end is his recognition that every audience will subjectively relate to his texts in ways no author can control, even unto the point of dismissing them entirely. And so, like Augustine dismissing the speech of birds as nonsense, Chaucer textually even allows for the reader to find within his work the same abjurement generated inside the mind of the reader.

Chapter 5
**Appropriating Arthur, Commandeering Crazy Horse: Examining the Development
of the Matter of Britain as a Model for the Integration of Native American
Resistance Narratives into American Culture**

It may at first seem a bit odd to attempt to link the Matter of Britain with Native

American narratives of resistance to colonization, particularly those centered on the

Battle of Little Big Horn. The events related in the following accounts of those conflicts

happened more than a thousand years apart, on different continents and in drastically

different circumstances. Moreover, the Matter of Britain, particularly the Arthurian

legends, are clearly fictional and quickly evolve from the genre of history into romance,

while tales of Native American resistance are at least based on factual and historical

events, however mediated they may often be.

However, both of these narrative fields have at their cores a heroic stand by an

indigenous population against seemingly impossible odds that result in a temporary but

ultimately unsustainable moment of triumph. Both narratives are also, eventually and

after a suitable temporal distance, incorporated into the descendant cultural mythology of

the dominant hegemony that was originally being resisted. This chapter explores how the

appropriation of the legends of Arthur by the very cultures which are the focus of the

legendary king's struggle provide a useful model for understanding the process by which

later narratives of resistance, particularly those by and about Native Americans, would be

assumed by the very cultures that conquered them.

What can Arthur Teach Crazy Horse, and Vice Versa

While much of post-colonial theory focuses on the last few centuries as the quintessential period of colonization, resistance and response there are many more ancient examples of colonial, and even arguably post-colonial, literature that deal with similar themes and which can, perhaps, provide new perspectives on the literature of resistance and even more insight into the ways that those narratives are often appropriated by the very colonizers themselves.

This is particularly true of the Matter of Britain, and more specifically of the Arthurian cycle, which has a number of potentially useful analogies to the resistance narratives of Native Americans, particularly those developed in the late nineteenth century and recorded, however imperfectly, in the early twentieth century. This most famous English example of resistance narrative appropriation, the story of Arthur, may inform our understanding about how Native American resistance has been and continues to be incorporated into American culture, and may even have influenced that process of appropriation through associative and analogical links.

It may be even more rewarding to reflect on the other side of this equation, specifically to consider what we can learn about the construction of the Arthurian myth, distant to us in both time and culture, by examining how the process of mythologizing and progressively or even simultaneously denigrating and then valorizing the colonized is still occurring in the case of the Native American context. It is notoriously difficult to find new ways to approach medieval texts, which have – to be fair – been undergoing analysis for centuries. One of the main goals of this larger project is to attempt to find a

way to gain much needed perspective on the literature of the medieval period and to examine it comparatively and from an objective position or at least from that of an alternate subject, which is again nearly impossible as the literature of the medieval period, particularly in English, has so deeply influenced all subsequent cultural developments and the very criticism that seeks to explain it.

Medieval as Metaphor, and Analogy

The notion that there might be something valuable in comparing medieval and Native American oral and folkloric traditions is hardly new. This notion is particularly fraught as the end of the medieval period is roughly analogous to the initial moment of colonial contact, at least in the Americas, and in fact colonial theorists have sometimes argued that, "… the encounter between Amerindians living in the Caribbean and the Europeans who laid claim to their lands in the centuries following Columbus's "discovery" represented a clash of two conquering medieval cultures" (Campbell 325). Campbell is essentially arguing that the moment of contact between the Spanish conquistadores and the "natives" in the Caribbean was the transformational moment when two "medieval" cultures clashed and one became "Native" while the other entered a new post medieval era.[98]

There are also significant links between the medieval history of Britain, specifically through the Arthurian tradition, and British territorial claims on North

---

[98] Kofi Campbell's "A Clash of Medieval Cultures: Amerindians and Conquistadores in the Thought of Wilson Harris" in *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of "the Middle Ages" Outside Europe* focuses on the similarities between these two contesting cultures and how the later construction of the medieval period depended upon this seminal moment of contact.

America. The Matter of Britain, along with other appropriated Welsh legends, was eagerly mined by colonial apologists for the English crown. The "Madoc" story of Madog, ab Owain Gwynedd, the Welsh prince who was supposed to have sailed to America in 1170, fleeing internal violence in Wales and – ironically – the colonial incursions of Henry II, to intermarry with local Native Americans and form a tribe of "welsh Indians" is another case in point. In turn, these tales were repurposed in the Elizabethan era to provide for England a claim of discovery of the new territory prior to that of Columbus. Particularly, John Dee vigorously asserted Arthurian claims to North America citing both the legends of Arthur's conquest of Iceland, Greenland, and possible territories beyond, combined with the repurposed legend of Madoc, to claim for the English throne all territory from Florida northward.

The connection between Native American culture and the Middle Ages in Europe is equally powerful as a metaphoric construct. Even early colonials were apt to imagine linkages between their own relatively recent cultural past and the new cultures they were encountering. A particularly striking example of this sort of associative symbolism, and one compelling in its humanizing attempt to find commonality can be seen in the compiled illustrations of the early colonial artist, John White, governor of the ill-fated Roanoke colony. De Bry's 1590 four language publication of Harriot's *Briefe and true report...of Virginia* included engravings based upon White's watercolors showing both natives and comparative illustrations of imagined ancestral Britons, particularly of Pictish warriors. "De Bry says that he had these figures from the artist who drew the Indians, that is to say John white, and that he wanted to show that the ancestors of the British were

once as savage as the inhabitants of 'Virginia'" (Hulton 17). This extraordinary act of comparative ethnography set a very early precedent among the English colonial sphere for imagining the natives of the "new world" as a sort of distorted reflection of their own medieval past.

This comparative simile was particularly useful for later anthropologists who wished to find a roughly analogous associative symbol for the cultures they were attempting to explain and codify. No less a luminary than Claude Lévi-Strauss, made use of such poetic comparisons. "From the start then, I ask the historian to look upon Indian America as a kind of Middle Ages which lacked a Rome: a confused mass that emerged from a long-established, doubtless very loosely textured syncretism, which for many centuries had contained at one and the same time centers of advanced civilization and savage peoples, centralizing tendencies and disruptive forces" (*The Raw and the Cooked* 8). Lévi-Strauss's argument here appears to be informed by the work of Boas, the collector of vast quantities of North American myths, some of which were used by Lévi-Strauss in his analytical project.[99] Boas' argument was essentially that North American folklore was far more heterogeneous than that of Europe, having lacked a centralized common cultural authority, the "Rome" in this equation. As problematic as these assumptions are, the implicit ahistoric comparison between the pre-contact myths of Native Americans and the folklore of Europe in the Middle Ages highlights the powerful associative linkage that can and often has been drawn between these two loci.

---

[99] See Peter Gow's discussion of the debt Lévi-Strauss's work owed to Boas in "Lévi-Strauss's 'double twist' and controlled comparison: transformational relations between neighboring societies."

That associative link has also been employed by authors, perhaps most profoundly and quite problematically in Twain's quintessential mash up of American and Arthurian culture, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, though such connections had been made by earlier luminaries. John Davis's essay "Cowboys and Indians in King Arthur's Court" writing on Twain's associative comparison between the culture of the American West and that of medieval England notes that "…the association of knights and Western horsemen is established long before Twain's novel, Washington Irving connects both Indians and non-Indians to knighthood. Touring the prairies, he mock-heroically calls a young westerner a 'knight-errant of the frontier,' an Osage Indian a squire, and his party 'wild chivalry of the plains'" (Davis 83).[100] Twain follows in this tradition, but more problematically, his main character echoes Twain's own derisive estimation of the Native American. "Though Hank Morgan is a truer cowboy, the resemblance of knights to cowboys is direct, but more frequent are his comparisons of knights, whom the Yankee calls 'white Indians' and treats with contempt and indifference, to American Aborigines…" (Davis 83). His contempt for both the Native and the medieval joins them together in a sort of painful associative dismissal of both the perceived and the imagined past.

Having established the imaginative link between the Native American and the medieval, it remains to consider how and why the Arthurian legend in particular provides an associative model for understanding how other resistance narratives can be and are

---

[100] Also see Kerry Driscoll's "'Man Factories' and the 'White Indians' of Camelot: Re-reading the Native Subtext of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.*"

incorporated into the cultural and national mythologies of those whom they were resisting.

Appropriating Arthur

The legend of Arthur is essentially a story of momentarily heroic but essentially futile resistance to colonization by a hostile invading power. This is, of course, the hallmark of most resistance narratives, and particularly fruitful for comparison to the dominant Native American monument to momentarily successful but essentially failed colonial resistance, the Battle of Little Bighorn. Before delving into that comparison, it is necessary to establish the other key features of the Arthurian legend that are essential to explaining its cross cultural and continuing vitality and particularly the features that make it such fertile ground for colonial and postcolonial theory and thus a useful analog for understanding the Native American experience of resistance and its legacy of trauma.

In brief, some of the key features of the resistance narrative in both the Arthurian and the Native American tradition[101] include six main characteristics. First, they require the failure of the resistance in order to be safely incorporated into the cultural mythology of the succeeding dominant hegemony. They also include depictions of intense brutality against the would-be colonizers, a violence that both answers the savagery of the invaders and problematically reinforces the historical trauma of that violence. There is usually

---

[101] This term may be misleading. There is no singular, monolithic Native American tradition. The wide variety of tribes and nations varied so much that individual tribes, especially ones on the other side of the continent from each other, might be far more dissimilar from each other than they were from the American culture engulfing them. The reference here is to the tradition of how Native American resistance narratives have been treated, which does have clear and broad characteristics.

some element of liminality where the resistance depicted by interlocutors who speak for both the colonizer and the colonized. There are also moments of reverse colonization, where the eventually conquered people invert the paradigm and instead seek to spread their own influence and culture. This is in turn connected to specific and individual charismatic figures who contain the animus of the resistance, both embodying it and making it vulnerable. In turn, this embodiment leads to the fated return of the pre-colonial order, a final hope of redemptive deliverance predicated upon a mystical resumption of the old order.

The older forms of the Arthurian legend, most notably the Geoffrey of Monmouth text, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, make explicit the anti Saxon, pro Celtic nature of the Arthurian myth, and its core message of resistance to invading cultures. Though the accomplishment of Arthur's that is arguably most central to his legend is his defeat of the Saxon invaders, that text is also equally obsessed with the eventual failure of that same project and the attendant trauma and working out of identity that must follow. Geraldine Heng argues in *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* that this is in part accomplished through the use of the genre of romance as a vehicle that allows a form of recovery from that historical trauma.

> Out of exigency, then, the *Historia* performs a dazzling cultural rescue by successively passing historical trauma through stages of memorial transfiguration, so that historical event finally issues, and is commemorated, as triumphant celebration in the form of a romance narrative in which the spoor of history and the track of fantasy creation become one, inextricably conjoined. The specific pattern instituted by the *Hisotria* suggests one impulse driving romance is the discovery (and the making) of a safe harbor out of dangerous waters, in order that a *safe* language of cultural discussion accrues. The impetus of romance, the *Historia's* illustration indicates, is toward *recovery* – not repression or denial –

but surfacing and acknowledgement through stages of transmogrification, and the graduated mutating of exigency into opportunity. (Heng 5)

Heng identifies here a quality that is equally relevant in Native American and certainly in other resistance narratives that must deal in some way with the eventually failure of the implicit anti-colonial aspirations of the text. In fact, the text must incorporate some form of fantasy to make palatable the coming and inevitable trauma of eventual colonization.

Fantasy of Native Resistance

This essential failure to actually stave off the colonial incursion is, of course, an inherent feature of many successful resistance narratives, particularly those appropriated by the colonizing culture or its antecedents. If resistance is to be tolerated, much less celebrated, it has to be sufficiently non-threatening to be acceptable for co-option into the mythology of the dominant culture. It may be worth noting that the *Historia* and its descendant texts find an audience that is at least once removed from the threat of the resistance that Arthur offers. His audience are not the Saxons whom Arthur, however temporarily, cast back into the sea. Instead, they are the Anglo-Normans, who only a century prior had in turn conquered those very same Saxons Arthur fought.

A similar condition exists in the incorporation of Native American figures in the literature of the emerging United States, wherein the Native is only incorporated at a remove, once the threat of his potentially effective resistance has been rendered implausible. Speaking of the period of the early nineteenth century when the "Indian" first became a figure of literary merit in emerging United States, Robert Berkhofer notes, in his seminal text *The White Man's Indian*, that:

The authors of poems, plays, and novels generally conceived of the Indian as noble only before White contact or during the early stages of the encounter between the Red and White cultures. In short, they portrayed the Noble Savage as safely dead and historically past. Thus many famous Indians of the past were revived as noble figures in the literature influenced by cultural nationalism during the first half of the nineteenth century. (Berkhofer 90)

Once the threat of effective resistance is past, as it clearly was in at least the eastern portions of the United States by this point in time, the emphasis on the character of the Native shifts from savage to noble, and he or she becomes an available and imaginatively evocative figure that can be deployed in the effort of constructing a national identity. Thus do Cooper, though ambivalently, Longfellow, poetically, and Thoreau more representationally, begin to incorporate the Native into their literature as a symbol representative of the vast potential and spirit of the new country.

Though it is early to speak of coherent national identities in the case of much of the developmental period of Arthurian literature there is certainly a correlation between when and how the legend is increasingly deployed for political and cultural purposes throughout the medieval period, in essence gaining cachet as the actual threat of resistance by whatever group might identify with the Britons is relegated farther and farther into historical impotence. The colonizer can only make effective use of the native figures of resistance once those figures are constrained to the past tense of historical threat. This is as true of the Arthurian legend of Geoffrey as it is of the noble savage of Cooper.

Liminal Space

Of course, Geoffrey of Monmouth himself and the text he produces exist in a liminal space identifying with both the colonizer and the colonized, and his own personal stake and position are hardly clear. His own Welsh identity is debatable and he is writing from within the Anglo-Norman sphere of Oxford. Michelle Warren, discussing the ambivalent nature of Geoffrey's own identity, writing from both the border and from the center, notes that this quality is expressed through his complicated relationship with the colonial elements of the Arthurian tale.

> These discursive relations empower him to overturn colonial history, yet his narrative returns repeatedly to scenes of colonizing conquest… Each of these encounters establishes domination through spatial, linguistic, and erotic desire; each reconfigures the results of strategic resemblance. The variable consequences of coercive contact demonstrate that no single model can explain patterns of domination: the results only look predictable retrospectively. As Brutus survey the fecund land, or Corineus embraces Goemagog's shoulders, or Vortigern mouths his first Saxon words, or Arthur dons a coat of human beards, we witness exemplary scenes of colonial ambivalence. (Warren 30)

Importantly, the Arthurian cycle is decidedly not an anti-colonial text. Rather, Arthur inverts the colonial paradigm by subsequently reversing the impetus of invasion and himself conquering the very territories from whence the most significant threats to the realm of Britain would originate. Arthur's subjugation of the Gauls and his conquest of Iceland and Norway might be read as an inversion of the Saxon, Viking and Norman conquests of the isle.

Before proceeding with the complex discussion of colonial inversion, it is worth looking at another element of this passage worthy of consideration, the extreme nature of the response to the colonial threat. Resistance seems to require not just simple violence,

but an extreme and even inchoate rage that must be expressed through inversion of the violence committed on the colonized.

Within many resistance narratives there are particular scenes of outrageous anger and expressions of raw physical violence at moments where some vengeance is finally enacted. These brutal acts serve as an in-kind response to the colonial violence they are a reflection of while also standing in for that same unbearable violence that was committed and which cannot be easily recounted due to the traumatic and recent nature of the suffering. In particular, accounts of battles won against the selfsame enemies that will eventually triumph appear to take on an extra dimension of apocalyptic mayhem and revel in the absolute destruction of the enemy who will, nevertheless, eventually re-emerge.

In the Arthurian legend, we witness this in particular where the text turns to Arthur's battle against the Saxons. A Fine example of the hyperbolic violence can be found in Layamon's account of the battle of Lincoln where Arthur first defeats the Saxon invaders in a particularly bloody moment of linguistic violence.

Layamon – The Fight at Lincoln

Arður gon to riden; þa ferde gon gliden.
swulc al þa eorðe; wolde for-bærnen.
and smiten i þa ueldes; i-mong Childriches teldes.
Þæt wes þæ æreste mon; þe þer cleopien agon.
Arður þe heȝe gume; þe wes Vðeres sune.
kenliche & lude; swa bicumeð kinge.
Nu fulste us Marie; Goddes milde moder.
and ich ibidde hire sune; þat he us beon a fultume.
Æfne þan wordes; turnden heo heore ordes.
stikeden & sloȝen; al þat heo neh comen.
And cnihtes ut of burhȝe; buȝen heom to-ȝæines.
ȝif heo fluȝen to burȝen; þer heo for-wur[d]en.

226

ȝif heo floȝen to þa wude. þer hi heom forduden.
comen þer heo comen; æuere heo heom sloȝen.
 Nis hit a nare boc idiht; þat æuere weore æi fiht.
inne þissere Bruttene; þat balu weore swa riue.
for volken him wes ærmest; þat æuere com to ærde.
þer wes muchel blod-gute; balu wes on folke.
dæð þer wes rife; þe eorðe þer dunede.
(Layamon10300-10318)

Then Arthur gan to ride, and the army gan to move,
as if all the earth would be consumed;
and smote in the fields among Childric's tents.
That was the first man, that there gan to shout
Arthur the noble man, who was Uther's son—
keenly and loud, as becometh a king:
"Now aid us, Mary, God's mild mother!
And I pray her son, that he be to us in succour!"
Even with the words they turned their spears;
pierced and slew all that they came nigh.
And the knights out of the burgh marched against them (the enemy);
if they fled to the burgh, there they were destroyed;
if they fled to the wood, there they slaughtered them;
come wherever they might come, ever they them slew.
It is not in any book indited, that ever any fight
were in this Britain, that mischief was so rife;
for folk it was most miserable, that ever came to the land!
There was mickle blood-shed, mischief was among the folk;
death there was rife; the earth there became dun!
 (Layamon and Mason)[102]

The initial charge of Arthur embodies an almost otherworldly threat as the whole world

seems subsumed in the violence of the assault. The enemies are slain regardless of

whether or where they flee. Compellingly, the battle is noted as being textually superior

as well to any other account of lesser slaughters. Finally, the earth itself is transformed

by the violence of the conflict, the brutality of the struggle made physically manifest.

---

[102] The original text is from the EETS version of Layamon's *Brut*, while the translation is
from Eugene Mason's *Arthurian Chronicles, Represented by Wace and Layamon*.

The passage from Layamon's *Brut* captures the anger of the colonized, expressed in a rare moment of reversal where the possibility of avenging the cultural and physical insults of the conqueror is – at least momentarily – manifest in a visceral overturning and replication of the violence that has been inflicted. This form of reciprocal and almost hysterical violence, so powerfully recreated even centuries later is indicative of a kind of historical trauma. A great deal of significant work has been done on the notion of historical trauma in the field of Native American studies, the foundational document of which is the report by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra DeBruyn that coined the phrase "historical unresolved grief" (BraveHeart 56).[103] The concept of historical trauma recognizes that unresolved cultural and generation grief can lead to a significantly increased incident of a wide variety of negative behavioral traits, in particular the expression of violence, directed both internally and externally. It may be useful to look at how similar passages in Native American resistance narratives, particularly that of Black Elk, replicate the form of overwrought and hyper violent expression seen in Layamon's description of the battle at Lincoln.

Comparing this passage to the resistance narrative that is at the center of *Black Elk Speaks*, the account of the Battle of Little Bighorn, we can see a number of mirrored features. There is a striking similarity between the beginning of the battle of Little Bighorn and the account of the battle at Lincoln. Black Elk recounts a very similar charge that transforms the warriors into transcendent avenging beings of pure spirit. "I

---

[103] This report by Brave Heart and DeBruyn, "The American Indian holocaust: Healing historical unresolved grief," is essential in the establishment of the concept of Historical Trauma that significantly informs contemporary Native American discourse.

stayed there in the woods a little while and thought of my vision. It made me feel

stronger, and it seemed that my people were all thunder-beings and that the soldiers

would be rubbed out. Then another great cry went up out in the dust: "Crazy Horse is

coming! Crazy Horse is coming!" Off toward the west and north they were yelling

"Hokahey!" like a big wind roaring, and making the tremolo; and you could hear eagle

bone whistles screaming" (Black Elk 84).

Significantly, this episode is actually tripled in the account Neihardt produces,

being replicated not only from Black Elk's perspective, but also including additional

narratives by Standing Bear and Iron Hawk. The central narrative is in effect tripled, but

its multiplicity rather serves to focus on the central message of fury and anger that

surpass all rational moderation. These accounts are "mad" in both senses of the word,

focusing on the raw anger and emotion that is successfully expressed in this one moment

of triumph.

Standing Bear

I could see warriors flying all around me like shadows, and the noise of all those
hoofs and guns and cries was so loud it seemed quiet in there and the voices
seemed to be on top of the cloud. It was like a bad dream. All at once I saw a
soldier right beside me, and I leaned over and knocked him down with the butt of
the six-shooter. I think I had already shot it empty, but I don't remember when.
The soldier fell off and was under the hoofs. There were so many of us that I think
we did not need guns. Just the hoofs would have been enough.
After this we started down the hillside in formation toward the village, and there
were dead men and horses scattered along there too. They were all rubbed out.
We were all crazy, and I will tell you something to show how crazy we were.
There was a dead Indian lying there on his face, and someone said: "Scalp that
Ree!"A man got off and scalped him; and when they turned the dead man over, it
was a Shyela--one of our friends. We were all crazy. (Black Elk 88)

Iron Hawk

I met a soldier on horseback, and I let him have it. The arrow went through from side to side under his ribs and it stuck out on both sides. He screamed and took hold of his saddle horn and hung on, wobbling, with his head hanging down. I kept along beside him, and I took my heavy bow and struck him across the back of the neck. He fell from his saddle, and I got off and beat him to death with my bow. I kept on beating him awhile after he was dead, and every time I hit him I said "Hownh!" I was mad, because I was thinking of the women and little children running down there, all scared and out of breath. These Wasichus wanted it, and they came to get it, and we gave it to them. (Black Elk 93-4)

In these accounts, we witness the raw anger of the colonized subject. Tellingly, in Standing Bear's account we find an echo of the fury of Arthur's charge at Lincoln, an energy so great it seems to overcome the enemy by sheer force of will before the engagement even occurs. Additionally, we see the utter destruction of the enemy, leaving nothing behind but corpses. Yet even in this moment of victory, there is the discordant note about the accidental scalping of their own dead. The violence is so great, it seems that it must reflect back even on the victors. In Iron Hawk's account we find a more direct account of how individual and personal the conflict was, and of the motivations that engender such anger. This anger is so great it must find an outlet, an expression in violence, and so it is that the resistance narrative often takes on a quality something akin to a revenge tragedy, seeking redress even to the point of self-destruction. In this way, the resistance narrative itself can initiate an inversion of the colonial resistance as the invaded becomes the invader, the colonized the colonizer.

This happens in a very telling manner in the *Historia*, that may shed some useful light on the anxieties of other resistance narratives. At first, Arthur's colonial project is introduced as an inclusive rather than an exclusive act of colonization. He colonizes, initially, by bringing outsiders from other lands within his newly constructed society and

making them a part of his own court. "Arthur then began to increase his personal entourage by inviting very distinguished men from far-distant kingdoms to join it. In this way, he developed such a code of courtliness in his household that he inspired peoples far away to imitate him…" (Geoffrey of Monmouth ix.11, 222-3). Here is an almost perfect fantasy for a people dealing with the trauma of a colonial past. Not only is the inherent violence of the colonial act avoided, but the desire of outsiders to become a part of the culture of Arthur's Britain also valorizes and validates the preeminence of his court and by extension the civilization it rules over. This is Arthurian soft power where the threat of invasion is instead turned into a sort of participatory immigration, based on the personal force of the singular ruler, which only strengthens and bolsters the nation.

Commandeering Crazy Horse

The unique quality of the legendary figure of Arthur serves to simultaneously strengthen and subvert the resistance for which he stands. Arthur is a product of such intensive mythic construction that he seems to acquire new and more complicated origin stories with each successive interpretation. He exists in multiple liminal spaces, between Roman and British identities, between the fantastic and the historical. He is, in every sense, a romantic figure, and it may be the case that such a construction is necessary for appropriation of resistance narratives. Embodiment of resistance makes it possible to contain and subvert it.

Crazy Horse, the central figure in what was to become the Little Bighorn myth, was also a liminal figure, like Arthur, both of an apart from the regular world. We can see echoes of the Arthurian *rex quondam rexque futurus* in Niehardt's rendition of Black

Elk's account of Crazy Horse (a notably mediated account – it is worth mentioning). I will later discuss the return motif at greater length, but here will note the essential quality of Crazy Horse and his centrality to the notion of effective resistance. "He was a queer man. Maybe he was always part way into that world of his vision. He was a very great man, and I think if the Wasichus had not murdered him down there, maybe we should still have the Black Hills and be happy. They could not have killed him in battle. They had to lie to him and murder him. And he was only about thirty years old when he died" (Black Elk 66). As is the case with Arthur, the presence of extraordinary figures like Crazy Horse in the resistance legends of the Plains and Geronimo in those of the Southwest both stand in for the whole of a people and also so embody them as to make their own eventual defeat an essentially totemic act that subverts and ends all effective resistance. The embodiment of resistance in a single figure, while symbolically appealing, appears to be terribly dangerous for those continuing to offer it.

Nevertheless, the identification with a single, individual ruler, also makes imaginatively possible a discreet utopic moment, bordered by the personal history of that individual, that can be called up and made representative of the aspirations of the subjugated culture. It is both advantage and disadvantage combined, but most significantly it renders the entire legend intensely personal and thus more readily identifiable. The singular figure of resistance becomes in effect the representation of and limit to idyllic resistance.

This idyllic construction does not often last long, and in the case of Arthur his personal narrative and sense of importance seems to begin to shift the focus of the text.

Immediately following the textual construction of Arthur's inclusive court the text turns to a different and much darker fantasy of more direct and confrontative use of hard, military power. Arthur's enviable reputation appears to directly lead to his own adoption of the colonial perspective. Geoffrey ascribes to Arthur a new motivation in the immediately following lines that is both aggressive and personally directed, "The fact that he was dreaded by all encouraged him to conceive the idea of conquering the whole of Europe. He fitted out his fleets and sailed first to Norway, for he wished to give kingship of that country to Loth, who was his brother in law." (ix.11, 222-3) Arthur's project is not only colonial, it is dynastic. He goes on to award other bits of his empire to members of his personal household. "It was then that he gave Neustria, now called Normandy, to his Cup-bearer Bedevere, and the province of Anjou to his Seneschal Kay." (ix. 12, 225). Importantly, the most critical French regions for the later Anglo-Norman kings are made even more closely connected with a British heritage. In essence, the Norman and – somewhat prophetically – the Angevin kings are made into the de-facto descendants of Arthur's most important supporters, and the subsequent Norman and Angevin kingships are made retroactively British. It is a brilliant piece of political fantasy, but it is equally revealing of deep anxiety over the legitimacy and continuity of a truly British identity for the realm.

This anxiety is made more immediate by the fact that the territory of Wales was still undergoing a direct colonial annexation. The relationship between the following Angevin kings and their subjects was problematic, to say the least. As Lalla points out in her book, *Postcolonialisms: Caribbean Reading of Medieval English Discourse*, Angevin

use of the Arthurian material in the *Historia* was always an act requiring a degree of cognitive dissonance, validating the continued colonial project by referencing the Arthurian legend. "In addition, Angevin rule plays lip service to its Celtic borders in appropriating Arthurian myth, even as the regime persists in incursions beyond those borders – indeed, as a basis for expansion" (Lalla 143). Lalla goes on to argue that the genres of romance and chronicle blend together in the *Historia* in a fashion that makes possible the identification of the Angevin with the Arthurian.

> Chronicle conspired with romance to identify Angevin power not only with the valorized Arthurian past but also with the prophesied rebirth of Arthurian glory. In the process, territorial boundaries were redefined, bloodlines projected and assembled into genealogies, continuities over time fabricated, and chronological borders stretched or contracted to accommodate a legitimizing racial myth. In identifying with the founding myth of imperial Rome and appropriating Celtic legend elaborated to a myth of Arthurian empire, Angevin rule projected its own imperial identity, textualized through a mesh of tales composed for courtly consumption. (Lalla 18-19)

Through Arthur, the Angevin merge both the broad imperial authority of Rome and the local nativist authority of Celtic legend, a powerful blend that would continue to be of value through the later iterations of the myth as it was transformed into verse and into English.

Within a few decades of Geoffrey of Monmouth's early twelfth century prose composition, Wace had translated it into Norman verse in the *Roman de Brut*. Early in the next century it was translated into Middle English verse by Layamon in his *Brut*, completing the transmission of the Arthurian matter into the emergent English language with which it would later become nationalistically identified. Lalla further argues that the

Brut is, in essence, a postcolonial text that attempts to explicitly valorize the Saxon position.

> Laȝamon's *Brut* is a massive work designed to re-establish the noble ancestry of the English in their own language. It too recounts, as a matter of course, the founding by a hero (Brutus) of classical ancestry traceable to Troy, conflict in a land inhabited by giants, the reign of Arthur and the politics of Merlin, invasions of Saxons and confrontations characterized by the mutual ferocity of Christians and non-Christians. Nevertheless, this *Brut* constitutes a new refashioning of the past in search of a new authority. In engaging both imitatively and contentiously with the colonial history of Monmouth and others, Laȝamon produces what might be considered a postcolonial revision that attempts to rescue local history from Norman rapacity. In revising Geoffrey of Monmouth's version of history, fifty years after Wace's poetic version of *Brut*, Laȝamon portrays the Britons as conquered by superior Saxons and presents the Normans as evil (lines 3547-48). (Lalla 144-145)

Whether or not we accept this interpretation, it is worth noting the plasticity of the text and its availability for identification with a wide range of subject positions. The Arthurian legend can, it seems, be taken up for almost an infinite variety of political, cultural and ethnic justification. The complexity that Lalla notes here can also been seen in the way that other, later resistance narratives are deployed, at different times and in different contexts to other narratives of resistance.

The mutability of the Arthurian matter becomes even more evident when we consider later continental borrowings which effectively colonize the text itself, adding in continental European figures, such as Lancelot, to problematically both reinforce and undermine the work of Arthurian resistance. Simultaneously, the Arthurian legend itself becomes increasingly colonial, as Arthur's Camelot intrudes upon continental Europe, establishing a web of client states and eventually supplanting the post Roman order. The text is both simultaneously one of resistance to and acceptance of colonial practice. This

ambiguous nature produces a subject matter that is amenable to multiple useful cultural

and political modes of discourse, able to be evoked for both defensive resistance and

imperial expansion. The plasticity of the text is arguably one of its greatest and most

appealing features.

The deployment of the Arthurian legend can be seen as intently divisive, isolating

and even reactionary or as potentially subversive and inclusive. Indeed, both possibilities

seem to exist simultaneously within the scope of the legend. Lalla eloquently

encapsulates the insular and ideological interpretation of how the myth continued to work

as it developed throughout the middle ages in England.

> Much of the Anglo-Saxon way of knowing or imagining the world vanishes from
> the discourse even as the Celtic element, so long submerged beneath the Anglo-
> Saxons (or distanced by exile), surfaces to be reinterpreted for colonial purposes.
> This transfer takes place in what amounts to an ideological war to displace Saxons
> and legitimize Anglo-Norman and Angevin rule, by identifying this rule with the
> local and world power in the form of valorized Celtic and Trojan origins. Thus
> the self loses touch with the cultural matrix of its immediate past. The self is
> overtaken by the alien and alienating culture, and survives by both forgetting and
> comparing itself with the foreign presence and present – fractured by double
> alienation. Its fragments co-exist in separate social groups locked off from each
> other through ignorance… In such a context the Saxon dimension of an audience
> to Anglo-Norman literature could be entertained by celebration of Celtic culture
> in favor of their own (Saxon) invading culture that had supplanted the Celts and
> resisted the Normans. (Lalla 140-141)

Here, the legend of Arthur is most potently employed by the successive waves of

colonizers. The Angevin elites make greatest use of it while the Saxon subordinates

seem to relive a relative past glory, the poor Celtic remnants enjoying at least a faded

shred of recalled glory. Again, the resistance narrative becomes plastic, open not simply

to a single appropriation, but to multiple covalent appropriations.

Monuments and Mourning

One of the most painful aspects of colonial appropriation must be the manner in which even the small moments of successful internal resistance are transformed into monuments to the eventual conqueror. Arthur's entire project fades so swiftly upon his demise that figure of Arthur rather than the people he represents takes on the entire glory of his military and political might. The Saxons are made all the greater by their threat to such an already valorized hero, and it can never be far from the mind of any audience that those Saxons conquered and in turn were conquered by Normans. The defeated enemy must be made simultaneously powerful and inevitably doomed to failure to become the right kind of nationalistic metaphor for colonial potency.

A transformation of this nature is even more immediately visible in the handling of the critical events of Native American resistance, perhaps most clearly in the way the battlefield of Little Big Horn and its mythology are handled by the same government responsible for both the defeat and for the eventual monument to it. Richard King, discussing the curious memorial to the Battle of Little Bighorn, notes that Native American visitors often reported being very uncomfortable at the site, even to expressing a concern that they might not supposed to be there, while Euro American visitors found its attempts to be objective and inclusive actually reaffirmed their romantic notions of the site. "'The Fruitless Victory,' presentations, given by some but not all rangers and volunteers, and tourist interpretations perpetuate this doubled last stand: they deny the significance of the Native American victory, transvaluing defeat into victory for the United States and underscoring its domination, while also permitting, validating, efforts

to hold onto romantic renditions of Custer and the 7th Cavalry as well as the Plains

Indians" (King 72).[104] Here again, as was previously noted with the Arthurian material,

the romantic element of the story attempts to make possible a suture that covers over the

inherent cognitive dissonance of the "victory." However, it seems that this is less

successful in the case of the battle sight of Little big Horn than it is in the legend of

Arthur, being perhaps still more immediate historically and less mediated by successive

waves of invasion.

The discomfort experienced by Native Americans visiting the site of the Little

Bighorn battle and Lalla's argument, that the Arthurian material is essentially isolating

and divisive, are compelling reminders that the process of colonization is as much an act

of historical revision and imaginative refashioning as it is a physical act, may belie its

continued appeal to the groups who most directly felt the negative effects of colonial rule.

Patricia Ingham argues in *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the*

Making of Britain that the legend had even greater appeal for the most downtrodden,

offering an imagined escape from subjugation. This is, of course, related to perhaps the

most evocative feature of the Arthurian legend as it develops, the hope that the Arthurian

order will come again and put right all complaints.

> My study suggests that alongside its ability to coordinate a "cultural rescue"
> deployed sometimes in the service of deeply conservative – Eurocentric and
> heterosexist – ideologies, Arthurian romance also encodes subversive possibilities
> and potentialities, utopian visions that gesture to another site of colonization, this

---

[104] Richard King's book*, Colonial Discourses, Collective Memories, and the Exhibition of Native American Cultures and Histories in the Contemporary United States* demonstrates the many ways in which both the suppression of the colonized and the resistance to colonization can be made physically manifest through historical monuments and museums.

time from Europe's western fringe. I wish to account for the ways in which Arthurian fantasy offers utopian rescue and hope for the beleaguered and the conquered. (Ingham 91)

Ingham notes a particularly important aspect of the Arthurian myth, the fact that its redemption is always posited in a utopian future tense. The Arthurian legend is a story of rescue, an eventual hope offered to the despairing survivors of the historical trauma of colonization. That is of particular relevance to its analogical use as a model for understanding Native American resistance Narratives which also likewise often rely on an imagined future re-emergence from a position of abnegating subjugation.

But, if there is a fantasy of hope, it is perhaps a chilling one. There is a similar movement toward a possible recovery in many Native American resistance narratives, but one that is itself complicated both by initial failure and by the extreme if subtle violence implicated in its deployment. The equivalent of Arthur's *rex quondam rexque futures* in the Native tradition may be the ghost dance, an apocalyptic spiritual ceremony meant to bring about both a renewal and return of the Native pre-colonial world and to avenge the colonial act by the utter abnegation of the colonizer.

It is always challenging to discuss the ghost dance, as one of the most central tenants of the movement was – and still is – to avoid the recording of or knowledge about the ghost dance by outsiders. The history of the movement is complex and notable for the fact that it crossed a significant number of tribal and geographic boundaries, originating in Nevada and spreading west into California and moving eventually east of

239

the Rockies where it became part of the tragedy of Wounded Knee.[105] In the narrative of

Black Elk, the final act of failed resistance is his participation in the ghost dance of

Wovoka. This final fantasy of resistance plays out the same tropes that we see in the

Arthurian matter as Black Elk and others join in a final and perfect anti-colonial fantasy.

> He told them that there was another world coming, just like a cloud. It would come in a whirlwind out of the west and would crush out everything on this world, which was old and dying. In that other world there was plenty of meat, just like old times; and in that world all the dead Indians were alive, and all the bison that had ever been killed were roaming around again.
> This sacred man gave some sacred red paint and two eagle feathers to Good Thunder. The people must put this paint on their faces and they must dance a ghost dance that the sacred man taught to Good Thunder, Yellow Breast, and Brave Bear. If they did this, they could get on this other world when it came, and the Wasichus would not be able to get on, and so they would disappear. (Black Elk 179-80)

Not only was the ghost dance meant to snatch victory from defeat, it would implicitly de-

colonialize the Americas, and possibly go even farther, returning the world to a pre-

colonial, pre-lapsarian state and in the process utterly remove all traces of those who had

committed the violence that engendered the ghost dance, the European colonists who had,

it appeared, irrevocably displaced the Native American.

These fantasies, these romances of resistance are both wish fulfillment for the

remnant conquered and fodder for appropriative national imagination, but they are in

their own way as potentially dangerous as the imagined revenge they posit. Lest we

make the mistake of thinking these issues purely academic, it is worth noting how

---

[105] Likely the best recent ethnohistory of the ghost dance movement, covering both its origins and continued importance among a number of Native American tribes is Alice Beck Kehoe's *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization.*

prevalent the concerns and national insecurities related in these appropriated narratives are to this day. The argument has been made that the surprise Brexit vote to leave the European Union was largely driven by an extension of the island's still lingering fear of being colonized by the continent. It was concern over immigration, and specifically immigration from within the EU that drove the referendum and handed the Brexiters their surprise "victory." Likewise, in the United States there are perhaps even more raw and grave concerns and issues where the rights of Native Americans but up against political realities, and an entirely different form of nativism has arisen that seeks redress for real and imagined foreign threats to economic and physical safety.

The fear of colonization, present in these appropriated narratives even as it is elided by the fact of the audience's essential awareness that they are in the victorious position, is the raw stuff of nightmare. Perhaps one reason these narratives have been and remain so compelling is that they give vent to the colonizing cultures own fear of being, in turn colonized itself. Implicit even in the appropriation of resistance narratives is the acknowledgment that this could happen again, with those currently at the heights of power displaced and either relegated to the margins or completely displaced. Appropriation of these troubling narratives then makes a certain amount of perverse sense, displacing the fear of colonization onto an "other," reincorporated and sanitized by temporal distance, and simultaneously providing a fantasy of resistance that can allay such fears.

Chapter 6
Skræling, Viking and the Terms of Savagery

The first substantiated, documented contact between Europeans and the indigenous populations of the Americas happened around the year 1000 between Nordic explorers whom history would identify as Vikings and a surprisingly wide variety of indigenous tribes who would become known as the Indians of the colonial period and the Native Americans or First Nations of today.

The contact was tentative, marked by confusion and misapprehension and marred by violence. It was also ephemeral, a far cry from the apocalyptic transformation that would occur after Columbus's voyages led to wide scale European colonization. Yet, the impulses that drove both pre and post Columbian contact and colonization were significantly similar. The individuals who came to North America in both waves were often outcasts or adventurers forced or drawn to the colonial fringe by desperation or opportunism, prone to and comfortable with the application of violence. They transformed both the cultures they encountered and themselves in the process.

Linked by that early contact, the characterizations of both Indigenous American and Nordic culture have suffered many of the same image problems in popular culture. Historically both cultures have been depicted as primitive, pagan and savage in strikingly similar ways, a tendency reinforced by selective reading of their own textual and recorded oral histories. Skræling has been transformed in nature, but not in substance, replaced by an equally problematic, indeterminate and geographically confused term, Indian. Its etymology is still a controversial topic, as will be discussed presently. The term Viking is no less challenging to unpack. Its origins are possibly Anglo-Frisian,

derived from the English *wíc*, meaning "camp," but also might derive from the Old Norse *vík* designating a "creek, inlet or bay" (OED). Regardless, it has come to be synonymous with the image of a sea roving, raping and pillaging band of Norse warriors antithetical to civilization, Christianity and mercy.

It is curious that these two identities, once nearly antithetical in their contest with each other, have drawn so close in the popular imagination. But there is a strange internal logic to this confluence as well. In encountering each other, the Skræling and the Viking affected each other. For the Skræling, the first incursion into North America by a European culture and the violence that followed presaged the massive colonization and displacement of later centuries. For the Vikings, the Skræling proved an ultimate barrier beyond which further exploration and expansion was impossible. In colliding they both redefined each other and prefigured each other's eventual decline.

Skrælings

The term used in both the *Eiríks saga rauða*, The Saga of Erik the Red, and in *Grœnlendinga saga,* The Saga of the Greenlanders, to refer to the indigenous populations they met in North America was Skræling. The term itself is etymologically problematic. The first recorded use of the term was by Ari Þorgilsson, "the Learned" (or possibly the wise), in the early twelfth century in the pages of the *Íslendingabók.* The use is in reference to signs of earlier human habitation in Greenland, and offhand enough to imply that it was in common usage. Kirsten Seaver notes in, *The Last Vikings*, that even with its casual mention, Ari's use of the term was much more likely at the beginning of a tradition of its use, and that it almost certainly increased in usage as time went on:

Ari did not question or explain his use of the expression 'Skræling', which suggests that he was familiar with the word's origin and meaning and expected the same knowledge from his fellow countrymen. Other early Icelandic writers were evidently also comfortable with the expression, because 'Skræling' is used in the same no-nonsense fashion in other medieval works describing Norse interaction with the people they encountered in North America: the 'Eyrbyggja Saga', the 'Saga of Eirik the Red' and the 'Saga of the Greenlanders'. All three sagas were first committed to parchment in the thirteenth century by men who, like Ari, were educated Christians, and who would have had even better opportunity than Ari to hear stories about Norse encounters with Arctic peoples. (Seaver 62-63)

As the contact was not likely limited to the accounts of the sagas, so neither did the term fall into disuse. It was made widely known again in the early eighteenth century through the work of Carl Christian Rafn, who first argued for a serious, scholarly appreciation of the validity of the saga accounts of contact with Native Americans in his *Antiquitates Americanæ* of 1837. His work reintroduced the term to more widespread modern usage appearing as a synonym for Inuit in the mid eighteenth century in English texts (OED).

Considering this latter usage, it is worth taking a moment to consider whom the Norse settlers of Greenland identified with the term Skræling. In truth, the term was used to designate an extremely wide variety of cultures that the Norse would have encountered in their explorations of the north eastern tip of North America. There were significant differences in culture, technology and likely even in physical appearance between the many groups to whom the term was applied. As Sutherland notes in "the Norse and Native north Americans":

Archaeological evidence indicates the *Skræling* of Vinland, as well as those whom the Norse encountered and fought in Markland, must have been Indians and probably ancestors of the Newfoundland Beothuk and the Labrador Innu. Norse exploration parties probably encountered other groups during voyages around the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. These would have included the ancestral Micmac and Maliseet or even Iroquois encountered during the summer hunting or

trading journeys up to the Straight of Belle Isle and the Gaspe. Indian populations around the Gulf of Saint Lawrence must have been significantly larger than those that would have been met along the subarctic coasts of Labrador and Newfoundland, and the Norse would have been extremely cautious in dealing with such groups. (Sutherland 239) [106]

It seems almost shocking that the same term could be applied to groups as diverse and different from each other as the Dorset Culture Paleo-Eskimos and the Iroquois, but there is ample archeological and textual evidence to attest to both the contact between the Norse and these widely varying groups and the use of the term Skræling to designate all of them.

Returning to the question of the source of the word Skræling, Broch and Jahr cover the complicated, contested and often suppositional etymology of the term. Arguments have been made that it refers to language, particularly shouting or yelling, as a derivation from the Old Norse verb "*skrækja,*" and also that it may be connected with dried skins worn by the Inuit, and thus derived from the Old Norse term for such artifacts, "*skrá.*"[107] Despite a problematic inconsistency of accounting for vowel changes and consonant doubling, there is also a possible connection with the modern Norwegian term "*skral",* signifying people or objects that are in poor condition. Even more intriguingly, Seaver argues, in her article "'Pygmies' of the Far North," that the term has a deep

---

[106] Patricia Sutherland's chapter, "The Norse and Native North Americans" appears in the Smithsonian collection *Vikings: the North Atlantic Saga*,

[107] Ernst Hakon Jahr, and Ingvild Broch exhaustively discuss the surprisingly contested etymology of this term in *Language Contact in the Arctic: Northern Pidgins and Contact Languages.*

connotation related to the small stature of the indigenous inhabitants of North America in comparison to their Norse sensibilities. She argues that the term was a translation of the classical term "*Pygmæi.*"

> *Skræling(j)ar* was a direct Old Norse translation of *Pygmæi* or Pygmies and referred specifically to a member of the monstrous races the authors of antiquity had assigned to the extreme edges of the world. Besides conveying small stature, the expression connoted inferiority such as feebleness and demonstrable "otherness"; like everyone else at the time, the Norse considered themselves the desirable standard by which to judge other people. Their translation of *Pygmæi* as *Skræling(j)ar* is as precise as the vernacular *kringla heimsins,* which the saga writer Snorri Sturluson (1179 –1241) substituted for *orbis terrarium*—the world's orb.24 *Skræling(j)ar* were the small people who constituted the least threatening and most evolved of the monster races in the medieval Christian canon, and they lived on the far northeastern fringes of the *oekumene* as perceived by educated Europeans. ("'Pygmies'" 72)

Her argument rests on an understanding that, while Erik the Red himself may have been born and remained a pagan until his death, there was in fact a rapid penetration of learned Christian concepts of geography, based often on classical sources, which spread with the rapid diffusion of the Christian religion into Greenland.

Whatever the case of its etymology, the term Skræling, even from its earliest literary usage in the sagas, clearly denoted not only a different nationality or culture, but a radicalized otherness that pushed the very boundaries of human identification. This can be seen explicitly in several specific passages of the sagas that emphasize the racial distinctiveness of the Skrælings. The first physical contact with the Skrælings encountered in Erik the Red's Saga embodies a curious mix of features.

> Þeir váru svartir menn ok illiligir ok höfðu illt hár á höfði. Þeir váru mjök eygðir ok breiðir í kinnum. Dvölðust þeir of stund ok undruðust þá, sem fyrir váru, ok reru síðan brott ok suðr fyrir nesit. (*Eiríks saga rauða*)

246

They were short in height with threatening features and tangled hair upon their

heads. Their eyes were large and their cheeks broad. They stayed there awhile,

marveling, then rowed away again to the south around the point. ("Saga of Erik

the Red" 10, 15)[108]

The emphasis here is on their otherness. The focus on their stature confirms the

association between the term Skræling and the term pygmy. Their "threatening features"

are ill defined but clearly pejorative. Their hair is unkempt and tangled, perhaps denoting

a lack of personal care and a certain bestial primitivism. Their large eyes are referred to

frequently and in other saga accounts, and along with their overly broad features depict a

race somewhat less than the Norse who have encountered them.

Annette Kolodny, in her book *In Search of First Contact: The Vikings of Vinland,*

the Peoples of the Dawnland, and the Anglo-American Anxiety of Discovery, curiously

authorizes the initial violence perpetrated against the native inhabitants by arguing that

the Norse invaders may not have, at least initially, recognized them as human.

> The pre-Christian Norse inhabited a world of many different creatures who, like
> trolls and dwarves, could appear to be almost human. One way to distinguish the
> human from the nonhuman was by the use of an iron (or steel) weapon: A spirit or
> supernatural being could not be killed by an iron blade, while a human could. So
> unfamiliar may the Indians have seemed to Thorvald and his crew that the
> anxious explorers felt the need to test the others' humanity with their swords and
> knives. Whatever the motivation behind the carnage – and the saga offers none –
> the killings are followed by more elements that seem at heart folkloric and
> decidedly pre-Chistian. First, there is the mysterious sleep that overwhelms
> Thorvald and his men, and then there is the mysterious voice that warns them of
> danger. (Kolodny 59)

---

[108] Both the original Icelandic and the translation are from the Icelandic Saga Database,
"Saga of Erik the Red" translated by J. Sephton.

Kolodny goes on to note that there are numerous, similar accounts in Scandanavian folklore of mystical slumbers accompanied by prophetic warnings. This reading places much of the action that occurs in Vinalnd in a sort of liminal space, a mystical realm between the real and the mythic. That seems entirely appropriate considering how strange and tenuous the experiences these invaders were recording turned out to be.

But the accounts of contact in the sagas are also more nuanced and open to alternative readings. Just before the account of the battle with between Karlsfeni's men and the Skrælings in the Greenland Saga, there is another curious account of contact that dwells on the racial distinctiveness of the Skræling that makes of them an almost inhuman other, yet simultaneously allows for the possibility of accord and co-recognition. As Gudrid sits with her son, Snorri, the first child of European descent born in North America, while the men begin to trade with the Skrælings, she encounters a woman of the tribe.

> A shadow fell across the doorway and a woman entered, wearing a close-fitting tunic, rather short in stature, with a shawl over her head and light red-brown hair. She was pale and had eyes so large that eyes of such size had never been seen in a single human head.
> She came to where Gudrid was sitting and spoke: "What is your name?" she said.
> "My name is Gudrid, and what is yours?"
> "My name is Gudrid," the other woman said.
> Gudrid, Karlsfeni's wife, then motioned to her with her hand to sit down beside her, but just as she did so a great crash was heard and the woman disappeared. At that moment, one of the natives (Skrælings) had been killed by one of Karlsfeni's servants for trying to take weapons from them, and they quickly ran off, leaving their clothes and trade goods lying behind them. No one but Gudrid had seen the woman. ("The Saga of the Greenlanders" 29)

This fascinating passage calls for close attention, and there is a prodigious amount of nuance to unpack, but the first and most pertinent elements are the simultaneously

familiar and alien qualities of Gudrid's visitor. Her clothing and coloration are described, but do not seem to elicit any sense of unease. It is once again the eyes that are most remarked upon. They are so large as to seem unable to fit in a human head. This echoes the initial meeting described in the saga of Erik the Red, and conveys upon the Skrælings an air of distinct otherness. It may be worth noting that large eyes are also associated with infancy, and could perhaps act as a symbolic depiction of the perceived primitive state of the Skrælings. Eyes, either by their lack - consider the Cyclops - or by their abundance are also a nearly universal sign of monstrosity and otherness. There is no clear and absolute reading of the texts in this regard, which is not entirely surprising as the sagas are notably opaque in their lack of interpretive textual response, and rarely deign to explore the internal reflections of the characters depicted, yet the prevalence of this theme points to a symbolic significance of some form.[109]

The passage is also notable for the act of communication and the invitation to communal activity that it depicts. It is the visitor who speaks first, and asks for Gudrid's name. This shocking moment of connection is then disrupted when the visitor responds to Gudrid's question by echoing her own name again, calling into question the very linguistic facility her initial query seems to suggest. The visitor simultaneously both communicates and calls into question her ability to correspond. The reader is left wondering if the visitor is simply parroting the words she has heard or if she is truly

---

[109] Jesse Byock covers the deep argument over the degree of character development in the sagas and argument over the low or high culture nature of the sagas in "The Sagas and the Twenty First Century."

initiating contact. Even more puzzling is her self-identification, doubling Gudrid's identity. Is she merely echoing Gudrid, failing to truly understand the meaning of the words she has spoken and the cultural exchange she has initiated, or is there some deeper message in this statement? Is the visitor making a claim to kinship, to a shared human identity, or is this simply a misapprehension? These questions cannot be resolved, but the fact that the sparse narrative of the saga records this incident is telling in and of itself. It opens the text up to a multivalent reading that allows simultaneous identification with and dismissal of the Skræling other.

The entire cycle of near rapprochement and subsequent misunderstanding that seems to plague all interactions between the Norse and the Skrælings is made manifest in this singular passage. The ability to communicate is seemingly established, but then undermined. Nevertheless, Gudrid welcomes her with a gesture, but this is in turn disrupted by the external violence that precipitates the eventual ultimate skirmish between the peoples. This particular passage seems to question the humanity of the visitor, even as it confirms her ability to interact and find common accord with Gudrid. The visitor's sudden disappearance at the end also contrasts with the common and earthly scene of domestic welcome that seems first to be on offer. The fact that she was seen by no one else transforms the visitor into a mystery and returns her to the realm of other, different and strange and possibly otherworldly.

Also significant in this passage is the fact that Gudrid is welcoming and generous and seemingly open to contact. Though she is surprised by this visitation, and vulnerable while caring for her infant, nevertheless, she welcomes the visitor. This could be read as

a commentary of the roles of women in the literature if there were not such a striking

counter example in the account of the subsequent battle from the version depicted in the

Saga of Erik the Red.

In that version, a very large group of Skrælings return in great numbers. "There

were so many of them that it looked as if bits of coal had been tossed over the water, and

there was a pole waving from each boat. They signaled with their shields and began

trading with the visitors, who mostly wished to trade for red cloth" ("Saga of Erik the

Red"11, 15). Their numbers serve both to dehumanize them, turning them into an

undifferentiated swarm, and also to present them as a palpable threat. Yet, trading

commences and is successful for a time. In the Erik the Red's Saga version, it is not the

murder of a Skræling for stealing a weapon that upsets the balance, but rather a bellowing

bull which at first frightens them off only to return three weeks later to attack them. In

this account, the Skræling attack is at first quite successful. The Skrælings cause

Karlsfeni and his men to flee, in part by their use of a "catapult," (a large stone throwing

sling that is attested to in the archeological and historical records of the tribes most likely

to be the Skrælings identified in the text.[110] What follows has to be one of the most

bizarre and imaginatively conflicted rallying cries in any tradition.

---

[110] Though contested, there is a lengthy history of the attribution of this weapon to the
Algonquin people. H.R. Schoolcraft has one of the earliest notes on this, dating from
1851, that describes the weapon as, "a large ball, resembling a sheep's paunch and dark-
coloured, which was slung from a pole and made a horrible noise when it descended.
Colonial era Indians used no such weapon, but Algonquin tradition has preserved the
memory of a formidable ballista which was made of a boulder sewn up tight in a skin and
slung at the end of a long rod" (85).

Freydis came out of the camp as they were fleeing. She called, "Why do you flee such miserable opponents, men like you who look to me to be capable of killing them off like sheep? Had I a weapon I'm sure I would fight better than any of you." They paid no attention to what she said. Freydis wanted to go with them, but moved somewhat slowly, as she was with child. She followed them into the forest, but the natives (Skrælings) reached her. She came across a slain man, Thorbrand Snorrason, who had been struck in the head by a slab of stone. His sword lay beside him and this she snatched up and prepared to defend herself with it as the natives (Skrælings) approached her. Freeing one of her breasts from her shift, she smacked the sword with it. This frightened the natives (Skrælings) who turned back to their boats and rowed away. ("Saga of Erik the Red" 11, 16).

Freydis' victory must be one of the most unconventional acts of warfare ever depicted, but it is all the more so imaginatively telling for that. Her exhortation to the men focuses on the pitiful-ness of their opponents, likening them to the most docile of beasts. She dehumanizes the enemy and invokes her own power and agency. What is perhaps most striking here is the "unmanning" of both the Norse men and the Skrælings in this encounter. Freydis', Erik's daughter and Leirf's sister, is indeed a fearsome figure. Pregnant and beset by enemies in a foreign land, she nevertheless upbraids the fleeing men and manages to turn the tide of battle with a symbolic gesture of defiance. But this seeming valor is itself an almost monstrous act, questioning and then usurping the masculine vigor of the male warriors. The savagery of the Skrælings can only be matched by transgressive actions of Freydis who simultaneously performs the role of mother and warrior, who mixes violence with sexual display and transforms motherhood into virility. In effect, Freydis transforms herself into the monster in this encounter, behaving so unexpectedly and savagely that she terrifies the Skrælings into fleeing. She

Schoolcraft H. R. *The Indian Tribes of the United States: Their History, Antiquities, Customs, Religion, Arts, Language, Traditions, Oral Legends, and Myths*, 2 volumes, edited by Francis S. Drake, J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1884.

internalizes and expresses the strangeness and otherness, reversing the trope by appropriating the inherent power of strangeness and savagery.

Freydis' bloodthirstiness and propensity for savagery are further underscored by a latter account in the Greenlander's Saga where she traitorously engineers an attack on Helgi and Finnbogi as she desires their larger ship. She convinces her husband Thorvard to attack them, threatening to divorce him unless he agrees to avenge her - entirely fictitiously - slighted honor. She then has all the men who were captured slain, and then, when the men are unwilling to slay the women of the household, herself takes an axe to the five women. She finishes off by threatening the lives of any of her men if they should spread the tale of what happened. The differing depictions of this seminal character are compelling. Kristen Wolf notes the significant variation between these two depictions in her article "Amazons in Vineland," recognizing that despite the differing portrayals, she is a compelling character in each saga.

> While the two works contradict each other at several keypoints, they nevertheless have in common a deep and lively interest in the personalities of their protagonists as they are tested time and again by environment, situation, and other characters. For instance, the picture we get of Freydis in *Grœnlendinga saga* is of a woman who masterminded a bloody massacre on her own people, whereas in *Eiríks saga rauða*, she is presented as a bold-spirited woman whose resourcefulness or desperation brought about a fortunate turn of events in the Norsemen's clash with the skrælings ar. The respective differences between the sagas may speak to changing literary tastes, or to very different aims on the part of the composers, or to differences between residual oral tales connected with Vinland as opposed to sophisticated literary refashioning. (Wolf 474- 475)

In any case, it is worth noting the agency of this character of Freydis, who in either and both instances is the aggressor. Her violence is in either case fashioned in opposition to men, either as aggressor or as savior, but in either case she is something other than what

is expected. She performs acts that transgress both the expectations of her gender and perhaps her humanity.

She is herself a sort of internal monster, and we are told that she and her descendants will be cursed in a prophecy uttered by Lief. She seems to have brought the monstrous back to the civilized world; her ability to react with bravery in the face of mortal danger transforming her into something terrible and strange. Both groups are continually reacting to the strange and unknown with terror and trepidation. The Skrælings are terrified by the bellowing of a bull. The Norse are afraid of the strange weaponry of the Skrælings. Those Skrælings are in turn routed by the bizarre act of breast swatting that Freydis engages in. But in doing so Freydis seems to take the strangeness within herself and becomes a transgressor of social norms and even of essential humanity. In this way, Freydis also comes to embody the very savagery and mercilessness so often associated with the Viking tradition, but problematically her violence is largely focused inward on her own kin and kind. She alone can frighten off the Skrælings, but it is also she alone who can kill the defenseless women of Helgi and Finnbogi's household. She is the savage within the civilized. Her behavior is strange in both the contemporary and the classical sense, derived from the Latin root "extraneus" or external and associated with things foreign and alien.

This strangeness is critical, because it is the defining characteristic that embodies the final account of interaction between Skrælings and the Norsemen who have impinged upon their territory. Realizing the potential danger of the Skrælings, Karlsfeni's expedition decide to return home. "The party then realized that, despite everything the

land had to offer there, they would be under constant threat of attack from its prior inhabitants" ("Saga of Erik the Red" 11, 16). On their way out they encounter and slay more Skrælings, caught while they are asleep. These Skrælings are identified as "outlaws" by the Norse and carry vessels filled with blood and marrow. There is increasing strangeness and savagery in the world the expedition encounters, and one final encounter stranger than all the rest.

It is at this penultimate moment, leaving Vinland, that Karlsfeni's group encounters the final, most lethal and least human of the threats. Still exploring on their way back to Greenland, the Norse encounter a *Einfoetingar*, a monopod.

> One morning Karlsfeni's men saw something shiny above a clearing in the trees, and they called out. It moved and proved to be a one legged creature which darted down to where the ship lay tied. Thorvald, Erik the Red's son, was at the helm and the one-legged man shot an arrow into his intestine. Thorvald drew the arrow out and spoke: "Fat paunch that was. We've found a land of fine resources, though we'll hardly enjoy much of them." Thorvald died from the wound shortly after. The one-legged man then ran off back north. They pursued him and caught glimpses of him now and again. He then fled into a cover and they turned back.
> > One of the men then spoke this verse:
> > True it was
> > That our men tracked
> > A one-legged creature
> > Down to the shore.
> > The uncanny fellow
> > Fled in a flash,
> > Though rough was his way,
> > hear us, Karlsfeni!
> They soon left to head northwards where they thought they sighted the Land of the One-Legged, but did not want to put their lives in further danger. ("Saga of Erik the Red" 12, 17)

Here the saga lapses into true fantasy. The strangeness of the land and its inhabitants becomes manifest in the final and essentially inhuman encounter with the Skrælings. Even more striking is the fact that this creature has a clear classical analog and a long

established monstrous pedigree which is made manifest in the saga. Pliny mentions a similar monster race of one footed but incredibly swift beings that inhabit the far eastern reaches, known as the Monocoli.[111] Indeed the Norse, through contact with Western medieval culture became familiar enough with the concept to coin their own term for such creatures, the *Einfoetingar* ("'Pygmies'" 76).

This creature is notable in that it completes the transformation of the Skrælings from simply savage to monstrously inhuman. This is accomplished both through depiction of the physical form of the creature, which is diminished to a single leg yet still retains an inhuman dexterity and alacrity, and also through its sheer lethalness. It appears and kills Thorvald, Erik the Red's own son with a single shot to the gut. The *Einfoetingar* is the embodiment of the new land, unspoiled but also savage and filled with threat. This is made manifest by Thorvald's dying testimony that the land, while rich in resources will yield them little profit. Thorvald's fate manifests the fate of the Norse settlement of North America as a whole. The tempting prize has too high a cost and must be abandoned before it destroys those who seek it. This last movement seems to transform the saga into something of an instructive fable, cautioning about the dangers of overreaching and delving too far from the realm of the known and knowable.

Yet, in some way, it is already too late for the Norse settlers, the last Vikings. The incursions into North America occur near the zenith of Viking colonization and exploration. The journeys to Vinland occur at the same point in time when the Viking is

---

[111] Specifically, in Book VII: 2. of Pliny's *Natural History.*

beginning to become civilized. Christianity notably comes to Greenland in the same saga

accounts of the interaction with the Skrælings, and through it Norse culture is made

whole with the wider European society. The expeditions in these saga accounts represent

the territory beyond which the Viking cannot pass. Indeed, even the settlements in

Greenland itself wane over the next few centuries and the Norse are eventually displaced

by the Thule people, the ancestral Inuit (check on that) in an act of reverse colonization.

And so, the expeditions to Vinland represent a barrier, not only geographically, but

imaginatively. On the far side of this history lie the savage Vikings, in part defined by

their own relations with those whom they identify as the savage, the Skrælings and other

lesser peoples upon whom they prey. Yet as the Viking transforms into the Norse and the

Scandinavian, acquiring both regional and European identity, the Viking is left behind,

and becomes a savage echo defined by its brutal, combative and violent encounters with

the others against whom they defined themselves.

Works Cited

Andreas, James. "Newe Science from Olde Bokes: A Bakhtinian Approach to the 'Summoner's Tale.'" The Chaucer Review, vol. 25, no. 2, 1990, pp. 138-151., www.jstor.org/stable/25094160.

Arner, Lynn. *Chaucer, Gower and the Vernacular Rising: Poetry and the Problem of Populace After 1381*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013.

Atkinson, Clarissa W. *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*. Cornell University Press, 1983.

Bale, Anthony. "Richard Salthouse of Norwich and the Scribe of *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2017, pp. 173–187. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/chaucerrev.52.2.0173.

Bedier, Joseph. *Les Fabliau*. Champion, 1893.

Benning, Tony. "Envisioning Deep Collaboration Between Psychiatry and Traditional Ways of Knowing in A British Columbia First Nations Setting: A Personal Reflection." *Fourth World Journal*. vol. 15 Issue 1, Summer 2016, pp. 55-64.

Benson, David C. *Public Piers Plowman: Modern Scholarship and Late Medieval English Culture.* The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003.

Berkhofer, Robert F. Jr. *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*. Vintage books, 1978.

Black Elk, and Neihardt, John Gneisenau. *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*. University of Nebraska Press, 1979.

Bloch, R. Howard. *The Scandal of the Fabliau.* University of Chicago Press, 1986.

The Book of Margery Kempe. Edited by. Lynn. Staley. TEAMS Middle English Texts Series. Medieval Institute Publications, 1996.

The Book of Margery Kempe, 1436, A Modern Version by W. Butler-Bowdon, with an introduction by R.W. Chambers. Jonathan Cape, 1936.

The Book of Margery Kempe. The Text from the Unique MS. Owned by Colonel W. Butler-Bowdon. Vol. I ed. Sanford Brown Meech with notes and appendices by Hope Emily Allen. EETS SO 212. Early English Text Society, 1940.

Boucher, Holly Wallace. "Nominalism: The Difference for Chaucer and Boccaccio." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1986, pp. 213–220., www.jstor.org/stable/25093957.

Bowden, Muriel. *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*. Macmillan Company, 1954.

Bradford, David T. "Emotion in Mystical Experience." *Religion, Brain & Behavior* vol. 3, Iss. 2, 2013. DOI: 10.1080/2153599X.2012.703004

Brave Heart, Maria Yellow Horse and DeBruyn, Lemyra M. "The American Indian holocaust: Healing historical unresolved grief." *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1998, pp. 60-82.

Brinton, Daniel G. *The Myth's of the New World: A Treatise on the Symbolism and mythology of the Red Race of America.* Leypoldt & Holt, 1868.

Brewer, Derek. *Chaucer And His World*. Eyre Methuen, 1978.

Burns, George. "Margery Kempe Reviewed." *The Month,* vol. 171, 1938, pp. 238-44.

Byock, Jesse. "The Sagas and the Twenty First Century." *In Honor of Franz Bäuml*, edited by Ursula Schaefer and Edda Spielman. Dresden, 2001. pp. 71-84.

Campbell, Kofi. "A Clash of Medieval Cultures: Amerindians and Conquistadores in the Thought of Wilson Harris." *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of "the Middle Ages" Outside Europe.* Edited by Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul. John Hopkins University Press, 2009.

Canby, Henry Seidel. "The English Fabliau." *PMLA* vol. 21, 1906, pp. 200-14.

Carroll, Michael P. "Lévi-Strauss, Freud, and the Trickster: A New Perspective upon an Old Problem." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 8, no. 2, May, 1981, pp. 301-313.

Cheyfitz, Eric. "The (Post) Colonial Construction of Indian Country." *The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States Since 1945*. Columbia University Press, 2006.

Coleman, Thomas W. *English Mystics of the Fourteenth Century*. Epworth, 1938.

Chance, J. "'Disfigured is thy face': Chaucer's pardoner and the protean shape-shifter fals-semblant (A response to Britton Harwood)". *Philological Quarterly, vol. 67* no. 4, 1988, 423. Retrieved from https://search.proquest.com/docview/1290774196?accountid=14521

Chaucer, Geoffrey, and Larry D. Benson. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Houghton Mifflin Co, 1987.

Clark, Roy Peter. "Doubting Thomas in Chaucer's 'Summoner's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1976, pp. 164–178., www.jstor.org/stable/25093381.

Cocco, Gabriele." *I Trowe He were a Gelding or a Mare*. A Veiled Description of a Bent Pardoner." *Neophilologus,* vol. 92, iddur 2, 2008, pp. 359-366. doi:10.1007/s11061-007-9077-5

Cooke, Thomas D. *The Old French and Chaucerian Fabliau: A study of their Comic Climax*. University of Missouri Press, 1978.

Copland, M. "THE REEVE'S TALE: HARLOTRIE OR SERMONYNG?" *Medium Ævum*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1962, pp. 14–32., www.jstor.org/stable/43631161.

Crane, Susan. "For the Birds." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer,* vol. 29, 2007, pp. 23-41. doi.org/10.1353/sac.2007.0013.

Crane, Susan. "Medieval Romance and Feminine Difference in the Knight's Tale." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, vol. 12 ,1990, pp. 47-63.

Dahlberg, Charles. "Chaucer's Cock and Fox." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 53, no. 3, July, 1954, pp.277-290.

Daniels, Richard. "Textual Pleasure in the *Miller's Tale*." *The Performance of Middle English Culture: Essays on Chaucer and the Drama in Honor of Martin Stevens.* Edited by James Pazson, Lawrence Clopper and Sylvia Tomasch. D. S. Brewer, 1998, pp 111-124.

David, Alfred. "Noah's Wife's Flood." In *The Performance of Middle English Culture: Essays on Chaucer and the Drama in Honor of Martin Stevens, edited by* James Pazson, Lawrence Clopper and Sylvia Tomasch. D. S. Brewer, 1998, pp 97-110.

Davis, John H. "Cowboys and Indians in King Arthur's Court: Hank Morgan's Version of Manifest Destiny in Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee*." *The Mark Twain Annual*, no. 5, 2007, pp. 83-92. doi:10.1111/j.1756-2597.2007.tb00055.x

Denholm-Young, Noel. *The Country Gentry in the Fourteenth Century: With Special Reference to the Heraldic Rolls of Arms.* Clarendon Press, 1969.

Dinshaw, Carolyn. *How Soon Is Now?* Duke University Press Books, 2012.

Drabble, Margaret. "Margery Kempe." The Oxford Companion to English Literature. 6th ed. Oxford UP, 2000.

Driscoll, Kerry. "'Man Factories' and the 'White Indians' of Camelot: Re-reading the Native Subtext of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*." *Mark Twain Annual* 2, 2004, pp. 7-23. doi:10.1111/j.1756-2597.2004.tb00013.x

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. "Customs and Beliefs Relating to Twins Among the Nilotic Nuer", *The Uganda Journal*, vol. 3, 1936, pp. 230-238.

Finlayson, J. "Chaucer's Summoner's Tale: Flatulence, Blasphemy, and the Emperor's Clothes." *Studies in Philology*, vol. 104 no. 4, 2007, pp. 455-470. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/sip.2007.0017

Friedman, John B. "Nicholas's 'Angelus Ad Virginem' and the Mocking of Noah." *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 22, 1992, pp. 162–180., www.jstor.org/stable/3508383.

Fries, Maureeen. "Margery Kempe." *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, edited by Paul Szarmach, SUNY, 1984, pp. 227-9.

Fumo, J. C. "Thinking Upon the Crow: The Manciple's Tale and Ovidian Mythography." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 38 no. 4, 2004, pp. 355-375. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/cr.2004.0011.

Ganim, John M. *Chaucerian Theatricality.* Princeton University Press, 1990.

Gaylord, Alan T. "Sentence and Solaas in Fragment VII of the Canterbury Tales: Harry Bailly as Horseback Editor." *PMLA*, vol. 82, no. 2, 1967, pp. 226–235., www.jstor.org/stable/461292.

Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Translated by Lewis Thorpe, Penguin Books, 1966.

Glenn, Cheryl "Author, Audience, and Autobiography: Rhetorical Technique in the Book of Margery Kempe." *College English*, vol. 54, no. 5, September, 1992, pp. 540-553.

Glenn, Cheryl. "Popular Literacy in the Middle Ages: *The Book of Margery Kempe*." f *Popular Literacy: Studies in Cultural Practices and Poetics*, edited by John Trimbur, University of Pitsburgh Press, 2001.

Goodman, Anthony. *Margery Kempe and Her World*. London: Longman 2002.

Goodrich, Jean N. "'So I thought as I Stood, To Mirth Us Among': The Function of Laughter in The Second Shepherds' Play." *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, its Meaning, and Consequence,* Edited by Albrecht Classen, De Gruyter, 2010, pp.532-545.

Gow, Peter "Lévi-Strauss's 'double twist' and controlled comparison: transformational relations between neighboring societies." *Anthropology of this Century*. Issue 10, May 2014.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: the Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England.* University of California Press, 1988.

Griffiths, Ralph A. "The Later Middle Ages (1290-1485)." *The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain,* edited by Kenneth O. Morgan, Oxford University Press, 1984.

Gross, Neil and Simmons, Solon. "The Religiosity of American College and University Professors." *Sociology of Religion*. Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 101-129.

Hanna, Ralph III. "Pilate's Voice / Shirley's Case." *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts*. Stanford, 1996, pp. 267-279.

Hansen, Elaine Tuttle. *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender.* University of California Press, 1992.

Happold, H.C. *Mysticism* (3rd edition). Penguin Books, 1970.

Harder, Kelsie B. "Chaucer's Use of the Mystery Plays in the Miller's Tale." *Modern Language Quarterly,* vol. 17 ,1956, pp. 193-98

Hartley, John. "Paradigm Shifters: Tricksters and Cultural Science." *Cultural Science Journal*, vol. 3(1),2010, pp. 1-19.

Heng, Geraldine. *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*. Columbia university Press, 2003.

Hines, John. *The Fabliau in English*. Longman, 1993.

Hinnels, John R. *The Penguin Dictionary of Religions, 2nd ed*. Penguin Books 1997.

Hirsh, John C. "Hope Emily Allen (1883-1960)." Women Medievalists and the Academy, edited by Jane Chance, University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.

Howard, Donald R. "Chaucer the Man." *PMLA*, vol. 80, no. 4, 1965, pp. 337–343., www.jstor.org/stable/460926.

Howard, Donald R. *Writers and Pilgrims: Medieval Pilgrimage Narratives and Their Posterity*. University of California Press 1980.

Hudson, Anne. *The Premature Reformation*. Clarendon 1988.

Hudson, Brian K. "Introduction: First Beings in American Indian Literatures." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, University of Nebraska Press, vol. 25, no. 4, Winter 2013, pp. 3-10.

Hulton, Paul. *America 1585: The Complete Drawings of John White*. University of North Carolina Press and British Museum Publications, 1984.

Hyde, Lewis. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.

Hynes, William. "Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide." M*ythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, edited by William J Hynes and William G Doty, University Alabama Press, 2009, pp. 33-45. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 28 March 2017.

Ingham, Patricia. *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain.* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Jahr, Ernst Hakon and Broch, Ingvild. *Language Contact in the Arctic: Northern Pidgins and Contact Languages.* Walter de Gruyter, 1996.

Jones, Terry. *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980.

Kehoe, Alice Beck. *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization.* Second Edition. Waveland Press, 2006.

Kerényi, Karl. "The Trickster in relation to Greek mythology." Radin, Paul, Jung, C. G. and Kerényi, Karl. *The trickster: a study in American Indian mythology*. Schocken Books, 1956.

King, Richard. *Colonial Discourses, Collective Memories, and the Exhibition of Native American Cultures and Histories in the Contemporary United States.* Garland Publishing, 1998.

Kolodny, Annette. *In Search of First Contact: The Vikings of Vinland, the Peoples of the Dawnland, and the Anglo-American Anxiety of Discovery*. Duke University Press Books, 2012.

Kolve, V.A. *A Play Called Corpus Christi*. Stanford University Press, 1966.

Kordecki, Lesley. *Ecofeminist subjectivities: Chaucer's Talking Birds*. Plagrave Macmillan, 2011.

Knapp, Peggy. *Chaucer and the Social Contest*. Routledge, 1990.

Knowles, David. *The English Mystical Tradition*. Harper & Brothers, 1961.

Krech, Shepard. *Spirits of the Air. University of Georgia Press, 2009.*

Kreisler, Nicolai von. "Bird Lore and the Valentine's Day Tradition in Chaucer's *'Parlement of Foules'*." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 3, no. 1, Summer, 1968, pp. 60-64.

Krupat, Arnold. *All that Remains: Varieties of Indigenous Expression*. University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

Lake-Thom, Robert. *Spirits of the Earth: a guide to Native American Nature Symbols, Stories, and Ceremonies*. Plume 1997.

Lalla, Barbara. *Postcolonialisms: Caribbean rereading of medieval English discourse*. University of the West Indies Press, 2008.

Lambdin, Laura C. and Lambdin Robert T. *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims in The Canterbury Tales*. Praeger, 1996.

Lawton, David. "Chaucer's Two Ways: The Pilgrimage Frame of *The Canterbury Tales*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, vol.9, University of Tennessee, 1987, pp. 3-40.

Layamon. *Brut.* Published for the Early English Text Society by the Oxford University Press, 1993.

Leach, Elizabeth Eva. *Sung Birds: Music Nature and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages*. Cornell University Press, 2006.

Lee, Becky R. "The Medieval Hysteric and the Psychedelic Psychologist: A Revaluation of the Mysticism of Margery Kempe in the Light of the Transpersonal Psychology of Stanislav Grof," *Studia Mysitca* vol. 23, 2002, pp. 102-126.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "Overture." *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques.* Translated by John and Doreen Weightman. University of Chicago Press, 1969.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude, et al. *Structural Anthropology*. Translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. Basic Books, 1963.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "The Structural Study of Myth." *The Journal of American Floklore*, Vo. 68, No. 270, Myth: A Symposium, Oct. – Dec.,1955, pp. 428-444.

Lévi–Strauss, Claude. *Totemism*, translated by Rodney Needham. Merlin Press, 1964.

Levitan, Alan. "The Parody of Pentecost in Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 40, 1971.

Levy, Bernard. "Biblical Parody in the *Summoner's Tale*." *TSL*, 11, 1966, pp. 45-60.

Lewis, Robert E. "The English Fabliau Tradition and Chaucer's 'Miller's Tale.'" *Modern Philology*, vol. 79, no. 3, February 1982, pp. 241-255.

Lochrie, Karma. *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991

Lynn Staley. *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions.* The Pennsylvania Sate University Press, 1994.

Mahoney, Dhira B. "Margery Kempe's Tears and the Power over Language." *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, edited by Sandra J. McEntire. Garland Publishing 1992, pp.37-50.

Mann, Jill. *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*. Cambridge University Press, 1973.

Makarius, Laura. "Le mythe du « Trickster »." *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, tome 175, no.1, 1969. pp. 17-46.

Mason, Eugene, trans.: *Arthurian Chronicles, Represented by Wace and Layamon*, by Wace and Layamon, edited by Lucy Allen Paton. Project Gutenberg. Accessed August 11, 2016. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14305/14305.txt

McColly, William B. "Chaucer's Yeoman and the Rank of His Knight." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1985, pp. 14–27., www.jstor.org/stable/25093936.

McFarlane, K. B. *The Nobility of Later Medieval England.* The Clarendon Press, 1973.

McKisack, May. *The Fourteenth Century, 1307-1399.* Oxford University Press, 1991.

Mc Sheffrey, Shannon. *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities 1420-1530.* University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.

Meider, Wolfgang. *Proverbs: A Handbook (Greenwood Folklore Handbooks).* Greenwood, 2004.

Miller, Robert P. "Chaucer's Pardoner, the Scriptural Eunuch, and the Pardoner's Tale." *Speculum*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1955, pp. 180–199., www.jstor.org/stable/2848465.

Mingay, G. E. *The Gentry: The Rise and Fall of a Ruling Class*. Longman, 1976.

Muscatine, Charles. *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning*, Berkeley, 1957.

NeDeMallie, Raymond. *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt.* Nebraska University Press, 1985.

Neel, Travis and Richmond, Andrew "Black as the Crow." *Dark Chaucer: An Assortment*, edited by Myra Seaman, Eileen Joy and Nicola Masciandaro, Punctum Books, 2012.

Nelson, Elizabeth Hoffman. "The Heyoka of the Sioux". Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History: A Bio-bibliographical Sourcebook (1st ed.). Greenwood Press, 1998. pp. 246–248.

Novelli, Cornelius. "Absolon's 'Freend so deere': A Pivotal Point in The Miller's Tale." Neophilologus, vol.52, 1968, pp. 65-69.

Nykrog, Per. Les *Fabliau: Etude D'histoire Litteraire et de Stylistique Medievale*. Ejnar Munksgaard, 1957.

OED Online. Oxford University Press, December 2016. Web. 16 January 2017.

Olson, G. "Measuring the Immeasurable: Farting, Geometry, and Theology in the *Summoner's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 43 no. 4, 2009, pp. 414-427. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/cr.0.0021

Olson, Paul A., "The *Reeve's Tale*: Chaucer's *Measure for Measure*" (1962). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English.* Paper 143. Originally in *Studies in Philology*, vol. LIX, no. 1. North Carolina Press, 1962.

Ortiz, Simon J. "Returned from California" in *Woven Stone.* University of Arizona Press, 1992, pp.112-113.

Owen, Nancy H. "The Pardoner's Introduction, Prologue, and Tale: Sermon and 'Fabliau.'" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 66, no. 4, 1967, pp. 541–549., www.jstor.org/stable/27705406.

Parker, Roscoe E., " 'Pilates Voys,' " *Speculum*, vol. 25, 1950, pp. 237-44.

Parry, Joseph D. "Interpreting female agency and responsibility in the Miller's Tale and the Merchant's Tale." *Philological Quarterly*. vol. 80, Iss. 2, Spring 2001, pp. 133-167.

Parsons, Ben. "No Laughing Matter: Fraud, the Fabliau and Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*." *Neophilologus, vol.* 96:1, 2012, pp. 121–136.

Patterson, Lee. "'No Man His Reson Herde' Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the Canterbury Tales." *Literary Practice and Social Change*

in Britain, 1380-1530. Edited by Lee Paterson. University of California Press, 1990.

Pearsall, Derek. "Chaucer's Pardoner: The Death of a Salesman." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1983, pp. 358–365., www.jstor.org/stable/25093852.

Pliny, *Natural History,* translated by H. Rackham, ed. in Latin and English, reprinted, Cambridge University Press. 1999.

Plummer, John F. "Hooly Chirches Blood: Simony and Patrimony in Chaucer's 'Reeve's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1983, pp. 49–60. www.jstor.org/stable/25093860.

Rabiee, R. Y. "Rhetoric of Hypocrisy: The Pardoner's Reproduction in His Critics." *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, vol. 43 no. 1, 2012, pp. 79-94. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/cjm.2012.0080

Raybin, D. "'Goddes Instrumentz': Devils and Free Will in the *Friar's* and *Summoner's Tales*." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 46 no. 1, 2011, pp. 93-110. *Project MUSE*, muse.jhu.edu/article/448342.

Reesman, Jeanne Campbell, ed. *Trickster Lives: Culture and Myth in American Fiction*. University of Georgia Press, 2001.

Reid, Bill and Bringhurst, Robert. *Raven Steals the Light.* University of Washington Press, 1984.

Revard, Carter. "French 'fabliau manuscripts' and MS Harley 2253 to the *Decameron* and the *CanterburyTales." Medium Aevum*, vol. 69, January 1, 2000, pp. 261-278.

Ricketts, Mac Linscott. "The North American Indian Trickster." *History of Religions*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1966, pp. 327–350., www.jstor.org/stable/1062118.

Rowland, Beryl B. "The Play of the 'Miller's Tale': A Game within a Game." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1970, pp. 140–146., www.jstor.org/stable/25093151.

Rychner, Jean. *Contribution a l'Etude des Fabliau. Variants, Remaniements, Degradations*. 2 Vols. Universite de Neuchatel, 1960.

"Saga of Erik the Red." Translation by J. Sephton. *Icelandic Saga Database*, sagadb.org/eiriks_saga_rauda.en. Accessed 12 October 2016.

"The Saga of the Greenlanders." *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales*, Vol. 1, editied by Vidar Hreinsson, Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, 1997.

Saul, Nigel. *Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century*. Clarendon Press, 1981.

Seaver, Kirsten A. *The Last Vikings*. I.B.Tauris, 2010.

Seaver, Kirsten A. "'Pygmies' of the Far North." *Journal of World History*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2008.

Schaefer, Ursula. *The Beginnings of Standardization: Language and Culture in Fourteenth-Century England*. Peter Lang, 2006.

Schoolcraft H. R. *The Indian Tribes of the United States: Their History, Antiquities, Customs, Religion, Arts, Language, Traditions, Oral Legends, and Myths*, 2 volumes, edited by Francis S. Drake, J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1884.

"Skraeling, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Accessed 14 May 2017.

Stanton, Robert. "Mimicry, Subjectivity, and the Embodied Voice in Anglo-Saxon Bird Riddles." *Voice and Voicelessness in Medieval Europe*, edited by Irit Ruth Kleiman, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Stifler, Kenneth, et al. "An Empirical Investigation of the Discriminability of Reported Mystical Experiences among Religious Contemplatives, Psychotic Inpatients, and Normal Adults." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 32, no. 4, Dec., 1993, pp. 366-372.

Stokes, Charity. "Margery Kempe: Her Life and the Early History of Her Book." Penn State University Press. *Mystics Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. ½, March/June 1999, pp. 9-68.

Strohm, Paul. *Social Chaucer*. Harvard University Press, 1989.

Sutherland, Patricia D. "The Norse and Native North Americans." *Vikings: the North Atlantic Saga*, edited by William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward. Smithsonian Institution Press in association with the National Museum of Natural History, 2000, pp.238-247.

Szittya, Penn R. "The Friar as False Apostle: Antifraternal Exegesis and the 'Summoner's Tale.'" *Studies in Philology*, vol. 71, no. 1, 1974, pp. 19–46., www.jstor.org/stable/4173830.

Thrupp, Sylvia L. *The Merchant Class of Medieval London [1300-1500]*. The University of Chicago Press, 1948.

Thurston, Robert. "Margery the Astonishing." *Month*, 1936, pp. 446-56.

Tolmie, Jane. "Mrs. Noah and Didactic Abuses." *Early Theater.* Vol. 5.1,2002, pp.11-35.

Torn, Alison. "Margery Kempe: Madwoman or Mystic – A Narrative Approach to the Representation of Madness and Mysticism in Medieval England." *Narrative and Fiction: an Interdisciplinary Approach*, University of Huddersfield, 2008, pp. 79-89.

Turner, Victor and Turner, Edith. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*. Columbia University Press, 1978.

Turner, Victor. "Myth and Symbol," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, edited by David Sills Macmillan and Free Press, 1972.

"U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices." *Pew Religion and Public Life*. June 1, 2008. http://www.pewforum.org/2008/06/01/u-s-religious-landscape-survey-religious-beliefs-and-practices/. Accessed 27 January, 2017.

Van Dyke, Carolynn. *Chaucer's Agents: Cause and Representation in Chaucerian Narrative*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006.

Vaszily, Scott. "Fabliau Plotting Against Romance in Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale.'" *Style*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1997, pp. 523–542., www.jstor.org/stable/42946387.

Viney, William. "Anthropology's Twins." The Wonder of Twins, thewonderoftwins.wordpress.com/2015/03/10/anthropologys-twins/. Accessed 13March 2017.

Vizenor, Gerald. "Trickster Discourse: Comic and Tragic Themes in Native American Literature." *Buried Roots & Indestructible Seeds: The Survival of American Indian Life in Story, History, and Spirit*, edited by Mark A Lindquist and Martin Zanger, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993, pp. 67-84.

Voaden, Rosalynn. "Chapter 23: Mysticism and the Body." *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity,* edited by John H. Arnold. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Wallace, Anthony F. C. *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*. Vintage Books, 1969.

Wallace, David. *Strong Women: Life, Text, and Territory 1347-1645*. The Clarendon Lectures in English, Oxford University Press, 2011.

Warren, Michelle. *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain 1100-1300*. University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Wiesner, Merry E. *Early Modern Europe, 1450-1789*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

William S. *Encyclopedia of Native American Healing*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.

Wolf, Kirsten. "Amazons in Vínland." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 95, no. 4, Oct., 1996, pp. 469-485.

Women in England c. 1275-1525: Documentary Sources. Documentary Sources, edited by Jeremy Goldberg, Manchester UP, 1995.