

The Carnavalesque Elements of the Canterbury Tales

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Abstract: This article explores how Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* seems to embody the carnivalesque in a quite interesting way, where the poet introduces a medieval culture and a medieval popular life that may not be so familiar to modern readers. It is the carnival world of medieval popular life as explored by Mikhail Bakhtin and which reached us in certain survivals of celebrations and images of carnivals, circuses, caricature, and comic spectacles. Carnival imagery is placed before us in *The Canterbury Tales* through the General Prologue and in many of the tales where many characters are put in public squares as wild men and women, mocked, overblown, and turned up-side down from holy figures into clowns. Chaucer portrays in many of his stories such images of comedy and mockery that are associated with the pilgrims themselves, whose behaviour on the pilgrimage is the embodiment of the carnivalesque proper. *The Canterbury Tales* reveals how Chaucer seems to create his heroes from the circus, the carnival, the fair, and the game-shows, the place which is thought of as low, dirty, demonized and extraterritorial. This article reveals how Chaucer actually inverts in a carnivalesque manner most of medieval cultural values in a manner which exhibits his criticism and mockery of most dominated ideological representations of culture.

Keywords: The Carnavalesque, Comedy, Dialogic, Transgression, Medieval Ideology,

I. The Carnavalesque Elements of *The Canterbury Tales*

The carnivalesque is a key element which Chaucer employs in many parts of *The Canterbury Tales* as a side of medieval culture that may not be so familiar to modern readers. It is the carnival world of medieval popular life, which the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin explored as the true context of Rabelais. The tradition is known to us in certain survivals of celebrations and images—carnivals and circuses, clown faces, caricature and comical spectacles. Carnival imagery is quite evident in almost every tale of this poem, especially in *The General Prologue* which prepares us for the whole of the poem's commentary and criticism of late medieval life. Chaucer's tales, or better fabliaux, achieve greatness and distinction through their combination of crude humour associated with the genre with features of "higher" genres, most notably the courtly romance tradition, and the homiletic and scholarly debate traditions. This mixture of crude and serious elements, which characterizes the carnival, actually intensifies the humour present in the fabliau, and raises the style of the fabliau genre itself. Indeed, Geoffrey Chaucer's use of the stereotypical exemplum, with its flat characterizations and predictable plots of transgression, redemption, and damnation, is typical of medieval carnival. This genre is quite close to what Boccaccio or Petrarch did before Chaucer although many critics suggest the latter's originality.¹ Indeed in

¹ See, for example, how John Finlayson re-examines the possible relationship of Chaucer both to Francesco Petrarch and Giovanni Boccaccio in Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*. *The Clerk's Tale* is dominantly a fairly faithful

Boccaccio's *Decameron*, where in his prologue and some of the frame stories he permitted the carnival world of buffoonery and grotesquerie to appear very vividly, although he made his ten young ladies and gentlemen examples of perfect decorum. In these stories Boccaccio gave us wild images of an abbess throwing her lover's trousers over her head thinking they are her wimple, or of a lecherous monk led into the public square on a chain disguised as a wild man and there recognised and apprehended, images of popular medieval folk comedy, mocking and overblown. This is exactly what carnival means in mocking and turning up-side down such holy or religious figures. Indeed Chaucer portrays in many of his stories such images of comedy and mockery that are associated with the pilgrims themselves, whose behaviour on the pilgrimage is the embodiment of the carnivalesque proper.

The carnival or the carnivalesque is a medieval idiom which characterizes the medieval culture as a whole. The carnivalesque is a literary term coined by Bakhtin to refer to a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of hegemony through humour and chaos. In medieval time the carnival was not "theater"; fools and jesters were real idiots, whereas in the modern world clowns and fools and jesters are played by actors. Indeed, the origin of the carnivalesque is the concept of carnival. The *Columbia Encyclopedia* defines the term *carnival* as a:

communal celebration, especially the religious celebration in Catholic countries that takes place just before Lent. Since early times carnivals have been accompanied by parades, masquerades, pageants, and other forms of revelry that had their origins in pre-Christian pagan rites, particularly fertility rites that were connected with the coming of spring and the rebirth of vegetation.... It was during the Roman Empire that carnivals reached an unparalleled peak of civil disorder and licentiousness.... In Europe the tradition of spring fertility celebrations persisted well into Christian times, where carnivals reached their peak during the 14th and 15th cent. Because carnivals are deeply rooted in pagan superstitions and the folklore of Europe, the Roman Catholic Church was unable to stamp them out and finally accepted many of them as part of church activity. The immediate consequence of church influence may be seen in the medieval Feast of Fools, which included a mock Mass and a blasphemous impersonation of church officials. Eventually, however, the power of the church made itself felt, and the carnival was stripped of its most offending elements. The church succeeded in dominating the activities of the carnivals, and eventually they became directly related to the coming of Lent.... In recent times, the term *carnival* has also been loosely applied to include local festivals, traveling circuses, bazaars, and other celebrations of a joyous nature, regardless of their purpose or their season.²

The carnival can be traced to the *feast of fools*, a medieval festival originally of the sub-deacons of the cathedral, held about the time of the feast of the circumcision (1 January), in which the humbler cathedral officials burlesqued and mocked the sacred ceremonies.

In her book, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, the American historian Barbara Tuchman writes of the "Feast of Fools":

In the annual Feast of Fools at Christmastime, every rite and article of the Church no matter how sacred was celebrated in mockery. A dominus festi, or lord of the revels, was elected from the inferior clergy—the curés, subdeacons, vicars, and choir clerks, mostly ill-educated, ill-paid, and ill-disciplined—whose day it was to turn everything topsy-turvy. They installed their lord as Pope or Bishop or Abbot of Fools in

translation of Petrarch's narrative *litalis*, overlaid with an explicit rejection of the Petrarchan moral conclusion that is not simply Boccaccian in tone, but is also derived directly from the *Decameron*. The question of whether or not Chaucer is being influenced by others before him is not the issue here, but it supports my contention that he and others have actually maintained such medieval carnival tradition. John Finlayson, "Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*," *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 97, no. 3 (2000): 255-75. See also Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

² <http://education.yahoo.com/reference/encyclopedia/entry/carnival>

a ceremony of head-shaving accompanied by bawdy talk and lewd acts; dressed him in vestments turned inside out; played dice on the altar and ate black puddings and sausages while mass was celebrated in nonsensical gibberish; swung censers made of old shoes emitting "stinking smoke"; officiated in the various offices of the priest wearing beast masks and dressed as women or minstrels; sang obscene songs in the choir; howled and hooted and jangled bells while the "Pope" recited a doggerel benediction... They rouse the bystanders to laughter with "infamous performances" and parody preachers in scurrilous sermons. Naked men haul carts of manure which they throw at the populace. Drinking bouts and dances accompany the procession. The whole was a burlesque of the too-familiar, tedious, and often meaningless rituals; a release of "the natural lout beneath the cassock."³

The *feast of fools* was chiefly fashionable in the French cathedrals, but there are a few English records of it. But today the carnival is primarily associated with the revelry that immediately precedes the Christian celebration of Lent. It is the time when ordinary life and its rules and regulations are temporarily suspended and reversed, such that the riot of carnival is juxtaposed with the control of the Lenten season. Thus, the concept of the *carnavalesque* came to light through the Medieval pre-Lenten festivities when all social barriers are violated with impunity and social conventions are suspended and everyone is anyone's equal. The most important element here is the laughter that liberates.

The term *carnival* and the *carnavalesque* came to have particular prominence for literary criticism after the publication of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* (1965). Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque is derived from Rabelaisian satirical and parodic representation of society, especially in his great novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1534), with all its bawdy humour and veiled social satire. For Bakhtin, Rabelais's writing is seen as drawing its energies from the historic practices of carnival which preceded and surrounded it in Renaissance Europe. Bakhtin gives an especially benign account of carnival rituals, in which the time of carnival features as a utopian irruption into the workaday world, a time of feasting when normally dominant constraints and hierarchies are temporarily lifted. The subversive and anti-authoritarian aspects of carnival are here emphasised—authority figures are mocked, the joyless routines of everyday life are abrogated, the lower bodily strata are allowed both to degrade and to regenerate those conceptions of the world which seek to exclude them. Rabelais's writings, and those of his near contemporaries Cervantes and Shakespeare, are seen as drawing their energies from such carnival practices. In this specific sense—where there is a direct connection between historically-existing carnival practices and artistic forms which reproduce them—their writing can be described as "carnavalesque".

Indeed Bakhtin likens the carnivalesque in literature to the type of activity that often takes place in the carnivals of popular culture. In the carnival, he argues, social hierarchies of everyday life—their solemnities and pieties and etiquettes, as well as all ready-made truths—are profaned and overturned by normally suppressed voices and energies. Fools become wise, kings become beggars; opposites are mingled (fact and fantasy, heaven and hell and so on). However, for Bakhtin these fools, madmen, dwarfs, and blind men remain fools and clowns always and wherever they make their appearance they remain objects of fascination and mirth. There was a whole world of carnival with its own activities and tastes, its own sensibility and imagery, which survived in some places many centuries after the Middle Ages. Thus, through the carnival the world is turned upside-down, ideas and truths are endlessly tested and contested, and all demand equal dialogic status. The "jolly relativity" of all things is proclaimed by alternative voices within the carnivalised literary text that de-privileged the authoritative voice of the hegemony through their mingling of "high culture" with the profane. For Bakhtin it is within literary forms like the novel that one finds the site of resistance to authority and the place where cultural, and potentially political, change can take place.

Bakhtin extends then the idea of the *carnavalesque* very significantly in the notion of *carnivalised* writing which succeeds such Renaissance models and thus long outlives the actual historical location of the

³ Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1978), pp. 32-33.

practices from which such writing takes its name. *Carnivalised* writing for Bakhtin is that writing which mobilises one form of discourse against another, especially popular against elite forms. And in this usage, the *carnival* tends to lose its historical specificity and comes to resemble a trans-historical generic principle which can be actualised in widely differing periods; it is present in the Menippean satires of the ancient world and also in the novels of Dostoevsky, written in a society having little contact with historic Renaissance carnivals.

Rabelais was one of Bakhtin's favourite authors, and he saw *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, with its strong social satire, as "an encyclopedia of folk culture."⁴ Bakhtin touches on these carnivalistic folk genres in his earlier work on Dostoevsky, but in *Rabelais and his World*, he provides a detailed history of what he calls "grotesque realism" and sees Rabelais and other Renaissance writers consciously drawing from these literary forms as inspiration for their work. Central to grotesque realism is the principle of degradation, "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract... to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity."⁵ In ancient cultures, this degradation found its communal expression in times of carnival, when the people "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" by engaging in feasts "of becoming, change, and renewal."⁶ Especially important in such carnival festivals was the inversion of official hierarchies through the uncrowning of kings and the elevation of fools to regal status. But Bakhtin is quick to point out that the carnival should not be confused with mere parody or subversive anarchy; while the carnival uses degradation to subvert authority temporarily, "it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture."⁷ Indeed, the carnival inversions, the world-turned-up-side-down of these festivities, were clearly not aimed at loosening people's sense of the rightness of the rules which kept the world the right way up, but on the contrary at reinforcing them. For Bakhtin the carnival, as Simon Dentith argues, does not really "invert hierarchies and undermine boundaries, without at the same time recalling that many carnival and carnival-like degradations clearly functioned to reinforce communal and hierarchical norms."⁸ It seems to me that this kind of reinforcement is what Chaucer has achieved in his use of carnivalism in his poem, as we shall see later in this essay, when his narrative poem presents a series of carnivalesque reversals of traditions in order to reformulate them afresh.

Thus, for Bakhtin the Renaissance carnival culture involves the "temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of the prohibitions of usual life."⁹ In medieval times the carnival was "the people's second life, festive, parodic, egalitarian." The carnival spirit, in such medieval traditions as the *feast of fools*, and as what Chaucer did in *The Canterbury Tales*, "mocked and degraded official life: it put laughter temporarily in place of official seriousness. To medieval people official life meant fear, humiliation, submission to the whims of those in power." Indeed the carnival spirit, in reaction, "cultivated the misshapen and incongruous, combining images of birth and life with images of death, disfigurement or dismemberment."¹⁰ The carnival then seems a dialogically theoretical excursion into the world of "other": the "carnival offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things."¹¹ Through the use of such metaphors as abuse and cursing, death, copulation, birth, renewal, dismemberment, and pregnancy, Bakhtin captures the entire imagery of the carnival spirit. Indeed for him Carnivalisation makes it possible to widen the narrow sense of life. The aspiration of carnival, as embodied, for instance in *The Canterbury Tales*, is then to uncover, undermine—even destroy the hegemony of any ideology that seeks to have the final word about the world; it offers a rejection of domination and hierarchy. It also helps to renew, to shed light upon life, the meanings it harbours, to elucidate potentials; projecting as it does an alternate conceptualisation of reality.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973), p. 58.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸ Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An introductory reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 74.

⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p. 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 120-22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

For Bakhtin, the carnival represents a theory of resistance, a theory of freedom from all domination: "carnival is the place for working out a new mode of interrelationship between individuals.... People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free and familiar contact on the carnival square."¹² During the carnival then there is a motivation to create a form of human social configuration that "lies beyond existing social forms."¹³ Bakhtin's carnival theory is not reducible to terms such as anarchic, nor irresponsible; it is, in fact, a diverse tactic, one that may be implemented and sustained wherever there is a dominant regime. It also initiates dialogism between classes, and dialogism is a fundamental aspect of the carnival, each group bringing with them a different point of view, a different way of seeing the world. Thus, for Bakhtin the central core of carnival is dialogue, and dialogue for him means dialogic, and dialogic has radical implications between two social groups and two different ideologies. For Bakhtin, to theorise carnival, to close it off from any dialogue, would be to destroy the meaning of carnival. Theorising the carnival does not mean enclosing it in boundaries; it is always freeing it. Dialogism means opening up to others: "Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence."¹⁴ Dialogism is "multiply enriching"; it is like carnivalism, it opens new possibilities for each culture, promotes "renewal and enrichment" and creates new potentials, new voices that become realisable in such mutual dialogic interaction. The carnival offers an arena of communication between otherwise alienated and marginalised social groups who not only gain a voice during carnival time, but they also say something about the ideology that seeks to silence them. "All were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age."¹⁵

Indeed for Bakhtin, the carnival is always positive; even death in carnival is not death but renewal. No matter how destructive or violent carnival is, it will always produce new voices, new connections, new possibilities and new dialogues. It is therefore necessary to analyse the carnival in terms of what it means as a functioning part of the ongoing nature of life. The carnivalesque then is always a permanent feature of society, and one that can be evoked at any moment of history, and as "a way of life", for example, for the travelling pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales*. It should not be seen as a threatening force on its own, but only as a threat against all that is fixed. Thus, for Bakhtin—and for Chaucer—the carnival enables social stability, social protest and social change and renewal. This idea of renewal is what Chaucer was after in his poem, and what other poets elaborated further, as the English poet, W. H. Auden, describes the carnival in juxtaposition against the eschatological aspects of Christianity:

Carnival celebrates the unity of our human race as mortal creatures, who come into this world and depart from it without our consent, who must eat, drink, defecate, belch and break wind in order to live, and procreate if our species is to survive.... [we must] laugh, for laughter is simultaneously a protest and an acceptance.... The world of Laughter is much more closely related to world of Worship and Prayer than either is to the everyday, secular world of Work, for both are worlds in which we all are equal.¹⁶

Such images of laughter, celebration, and renewal are what we dramatically encounter nearly throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. From *The General Prologue* until the last narrative poem (The Parson's Tale), the *Tales* embody the carnival. We see this in the ways in which Chaucer has outlined in *The General Prologue* a grand design for *The Canterbury Tales* in which each of his twenty-nine pilgrims would tell four tales on the round trip between London and the shrine of St. Thomas in the great cathedral city of Canterbury. Adding the contributions made by Chaucer himself, who accompanies the group as a fictional pilgrim, the total number of tales envisaged in this plan comes to a staggering one hundred and twenty. But Chaucer did not complete the

¹² Ibid., p. 123.

¹³ Ibid., p. 280.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 252.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁶ See Edward Callan, *Auden: A Carnival of Intellect—Auden and his Work, 1923-73* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 18.

project, and for all its enduring acclaim, *The Canterbury Tales* remains an unfinished work with only twenty-four tales, some of them incomplete, that can be retrieved from the surviving manuscripts. Indeed, some of the pilgrims listed in *The General Prologue* do not have a tale assigned to them in the collection, and in this way, only Chaucer, the pilgrim, tells more than one tale: the extravagant rhymed adventures of Sir Topas and the moralistic prose story of Melibeus.

Carnival has almost appeared in every tale, and a great deal of Chaucer's scholarship and criticism (old or modern) have maintained this position and singled out how Chaucer has succeeded in employing carnival as a narrative strategy. For example, Margaret Rogerson, in her essay "The Wife of Bath: standup comic," argues that "Chaucer clearly sets up the Wife of Bath as a comedian in her portrait in *The General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales* when he lists among her attributes her ability to 'laughe and carpe' before an audience 'in felaweshipe' (l. 474)."¹⁷ Mary Godfrey also posits that nearly all the *Tales* consist of carnival spectacles, strange and comical language, and of a series of failed performances ending more or less disastrously in silence, anger, and the need for redirection and reconciliation.¹⁸ Glending Olson, in a startling article, has identified in the *Summoner's Tale* a carnival relationship between farting, theology and geometry, which leads to pure comedy. Indeed "the final episode involves a parody of Pentecost. The scatological substitution of Thomas's fart for the mighty wind accompanying the descent of the Holy Spirit in Acts has religious significance as a satiric image of friars' false claims to apostolic stature."¹⁹ James Andreas also testifies to the final scene's comedy when he reads it as carnivalesque throughout and when he sees the *Summoner's Tale* as being influenced by contemporary liturgical parodies.²⁰ Similarly, Stephen Knight believes that most of these story tellers are actually some kind of performers involved mostly in comical performances.²¹ Speaking about another tale, Cathy Hume also argues towards the same conclusion that comedy and carnivalism mostly dominate Chaucer's *Tales*. For Hume, the *Shipman's Tale* is typical of Chaucer's comedy; much of its "comedy is created by the wife's clever manipulation of her roles: as hostess, social networker, housekeeper, business assistant, and status symbol. These roles appear to reflect late medieval expectations of wives and wives' real behavioral practices, as evidenced by late medieval advice literature for wives and by letter collections." Indeed this "Tale is a social comedy about a bourgeois wife's roles, and that that comedy is generated from contemporary social practices and expectations."²² Finally, the last but not least critic to have addressed this element of carnivalism in the *Tales* is Neil Cartlidge in his essay "The Battle of Shrovetide: Carnival against Lent as a Leitmotif in Late Medieval Culture." Cartlidge argues here that

many medieval writers and artists depicted the imagined conflict between Carnival and Lent—a metaphorical contrast that, as it happens, has often been appropriated by modern critics writing about the Middle Ages, most notably by Mikhail Bakhtin. Such an appropriation is not entirely unjustified, for it is

¹⁷ Margaret Rogerson, "The Wife of Bath: standup comic," *Sydney Studies in English*, Vol. 24 (1998), p. 9. See also how Margaret Hallissy argues the same points in her book, *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows: Chaucer's Women and Medieval Modes of Conduct* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), especially pp. 170-85; also her *A Companion to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Mary Godfrey, "Only Words: Cursing and the Authority of Language in Chaucer's Friar's Tale," *Exemplaria*, Vol. 10, no. 2 (1998): 307-28.

¹⁹ Glending Olson, "Measuring the Immeasurable: Farting, Geometry, and Theology in the *Summoner's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 43, no. 4 (2009), p. 414. See also how Olson has reaffirmed and re-explored the Pentecostal parody in an earlier study "The End of *The Summoner's Tale* and the Uses of Pentecost," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, Vol. 21 (1999): 209-45.

²⁰ James Andreas, "'Newe Science' from 'Olde Bokes': A Bakhtinian Approach to the *Summoner's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 25, no. 2 (1990): 138-51.

²¹ Stephen Knight, "Chaucer's Pardoner in Performance," *Sydney Studies in English*, Vol. 9 (1983): 21-36.

²² Cathy Hume, "Domestic Opportunities: The Social Comedy of the *Shipman's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 41, no. 2 (2006), p. 139.

an idea prominent in medieval culture, and perhaps even more prominent than Bakhtin's work actually demonstrates.²³

Here Cartlidge argues the same points which Bakhtin has picked up in his books about the roles of carnival in society and literature and the richly complex and varied ways in which it appears as a driving leitmotif in late medieval art and literature.

Thus, I would add that the whole of *The Canterbury Tales* seems a vivid exercise in carnival and joke routines for standup comics by giving attention to almost microscopic details of physical life and the body. Springtime, for example, is represented with the microscopic image of sap flowing in twigs and leaves. We are drawn up close to people's faces: the Prioress, though in a nun's habit, displays a graceful nose, gray eyes, a small mouth soft and red, and a broad forehead. Noses and mouth, Bakhtin and other critics tell us, dominated the medieval popular image of the body, whereas in modern times expressive features like the eyes dominate; even with the Lady Prioress the nose is mentioned first. We are also drawn up to their skin and facial hair—the white skin of the Friar's neck, the Merchant's forked beard, the Franklin's red complexion and white beard, the Shipman's browned skin. The Cook's physical appearance is represented with a single grotesque detail, an open sore on his knee. Some physical details, as we move down the social scale, have significance in the light of medieval science: the Wife's being "gat-toothed," it is said, signifies a lascivious character; the Miller's physical traits show him to be of sanguine complexion, the Reeve's of a choleric one. The dominant detail about the Monk as we encounter him is the jingling bells on his horses, for the image of bells always appears among what are termed "popular festive" images, which strongly characterize the carnival as a whole.

Moreover, the Miller, the first of the ill-bred, low, or 'churl' people of the *Tales*, introduced at the end of *The General Prologue*, is a generic image of carnival man, with gaping mouth and prominent nose. The Miller has on the tip of his nose a wart or mole, on which is "a tuft of hairs," "Red as the bristles in an old sow's ears", and his nose has black, wide nostrils. ("Upon the cop right of his nose he hade / A werte, and thereon stood a toft of herys, / Reed as the brustles of a sowes erys; / Hise nosethirles blake were and wyde (lines 556-9). We also learn that "his mouth was like a furnace door for size" (His mouth as greet was as a greet forneys) (line 561)—a conventional carnival image of the great hell-mouth. Of the most suitable carnival description of the pilgrims is the Summoner with his "fiery-red, cherubic face," which mockingly has a form of acne that is possibly associated in the popular mind with leprosy—"boils and pimples white," running sores on his cheeks, and which no ointment could cleanse enough. He has such an ugly face "that little children feared"; "his eyes were narrow / As hot he was, and lecherous, as a sparrow; / With black and scabby brows and scanty beard / (lines 625-30). He is always reeking of garlic, onions, and leeks; he is always drunk: "And drink strong blood red wine until dizzy. / Then would he talk and shout as if he's crazy":

| | |
|---|-----|
| A SOMONOUR was ther with us in that place, | 625 |
| That hadde a fyr-reed cherubynnes face, | |
| For saucefleem he was, with eyen narwe. | |
| As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe, | |
| With scalled browes blake, and piled berd, | |
| Of his visage children were aferd | 630 |
| Ther nas quyk-silver, lytarge, ne brymstoon, | |
| Boras, ceruce, ne oille of tartre noon, | |
| Ne oynement, that wolde clense and byte, | |
| That hym myghte helpen of his whelkes white, | |
| Nor of the knobbes sittynge on his chekes. | 635 |
| Wel loved he garleek, oynons, and eek lekes, | |
| And for to drynken strong wyn, reed as blood; | |

²³ Neil Cartlidge, "The Battle of Shrovetide: Carnival against Lent as a Leitmotif in Late Medieval Culture," *Viator*, Vol. 35 (2004), p. 517.

Thanne wolde he speke and crie as he were wood.

This Summoner has a strange philosophy in life, which always proved him "a noble rascal," a kind man who "would suffer, for a quart of wine", and who has no problems in giving away "his concubine" to "some good fellow"; (He was a gentil harlot and a kynde; / A bettre felawe sholde men noight fynde; / He wolde suffre, for a quart of wyn, / A good felawe to have his concubyn / A twelf-monthe, and excuse hym atte fulle; / Ful prively a finch eek koude he pulle) (lines 649-54). And to hide all that he incongruously wears a large garland of flowers on his head (A gerland hadde he set upon his heed (line 668). And with him rides the Pardoner, who is seen as so much loathsome and sexually abnormal as can be as described by Chaucer. His looks and voice are also quite carnivalesque: he has a "strong bass to his songs; / No horn ever sounded half as so strong"; his hair, "yellow as wax," hangs over his shoulders, in thin locks and in strings dropped one by one:

This Somonour bar to hym a stif burdoun;
Was nevere trompe of half so greet a soun.
This Pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wex,
But smothe it heeng as dooth a strike of flex;
By ounces henge his lokkes that he hadde,
And therwith he hise shuldres overspradde;
But thynne it lay by colpons oon and oon. (lines 675-681)

Chaucer tells us that all this man's existence "was for sport and fun"; his hood "was packed in knapsack all the while" and he always "rode in latest style, / With unbound hair, except his cap, head all bare" (But hood, for jolitee, wered he noon, / For it was trussed up in his wallet. / Hym thoughte he rood al of the newe jet; / Dischevelee, save his cappe, he rood al bare) (lines 682-5). This supposedly religious figure is mocked in a suitable carnival manner when he is also depicted with glaring eyes like a hare's; he has a voice "that sounded like a goat. / No beard had he, nor ever should he have, / For smooth his face as he'd just had a shave; / I think he was a gelding or a mare":

Swiche glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare.
A vernycle hadde he sowed upon his cappe.
His walet lay biforn hym in his lappe
Bretful of pardoun come from Rome al hoot.
A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot,
No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;
As smothe it was as it were late shave,
I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare. (lines 686-93)

Such speculative images mock him as a castrated male or a hermaphrodite as typical carnivalesque images which spread throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. This Pardoner uses such grotesque images to fulfil his job of using and abusing people and in performing many irreligious functions in mocking Jesus Christ himself and Saint Peter by having "a latten cross set full of stones, / And in a bottle had he some pig's bones." Mockingly he uses "these relics" to ridicule parsons and to prove that such "flattery and equal japes, / He made the parson and the rest his apes."

He hadde a croys of latoun ful of stones,
And in a glas he hadde pigges bones.
But with thise relikes, whan that he fond
A povre persoun dwellyng upon lond,
Upon a day he gat hym moore moneye
Than that the person gat in monthes tweye;
And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes,
He made the persoun and the peple his apes. (lines 701-708).

This grotesque element in the imagery of *The General Prologue* is quite typical of the carnival spirit which reverberates throughout the entire tales of the pilgrimage. The pilgrimage itself is set in a tavern in Southwark, a festive banquet setting, a merry-making setting, and proceeds to the shrine of Thomas à Becket, a place of execution, in Canterbury, Kent, and back. We notice that against such menacing background, the Knight is chosen by lot to tell the first tale; the Host then calls on the Monk as the person next highest in rank, but the Miller drunkenly cries out "in Pilate's voice," swearing "By the arms and blood and bones" of Christ that he will tell the next story, and here he begins his *Prologue*, and then his *Tale*:

The Millere that for dronken was al pale,
So that unnethe upon his hors he sat,
He nolde avalen neither hood ne hat,
Ne abyde no man for his curteisie,
But in Pilates voys he gan to crie,
And swoor, "By armes and by blood and bones,
I kan a noble tale for the nones,
With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale." (*The Miller's Prologue*, lines 12-19).

As a carnival man the Miller behaves in a carnivalesque manner and speaks in carnival idioms: his drunkenness, his boisterousness, and his oaths by the parts of Christ's body are all characteristics of his carnivalism. He swears he will tell his tale or go his way, and the Host in resignation says, "Tell on, a devil way! / You are a fool, your wit is overcome" (Oure Hoost answerde, "Tel on, a devel wey! / Thou art a fool, thy wit is overcome!") (lines 26-27). The Miller then speaks in a funny carnival manner and makes it clear that he should not be blamed for anything he says for he is drunk: "I'm quite drunk, I know it by my sound: / And therefore, if I slander or mis-say, / Blame it on ale of Southwark, so I pray; / For I will tell a legend and a life / Both of a carpenter and of his wife" (That I am dronke, I knowe it by my soun; / And therefore, if that I myssspeke or seye, / Wyte it the ale of Southwerk I you prey. / For I wol telle a legende and a lyf / Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf,) (lines 30-34). Chaucer even makes a brief, ironic apology for what and how the Miller tells his story (lines 59-78). Chaucer regrets to say that this miller has "told his churlish tale in his own way", or else in retelling it the author would falsify its "matter" (But tolde his cherles tale in his manere) (line 61). Addressing us directly, Chaucer assures us that he does not speak with evil intention. And if we do not care to hear it, then "Turn over page and choose another tale" with more touching and gentle nature, full of holiness and morality. "And blame not me if you do choose amiss. The miller was a churl, you well know this" (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 nat me if that ye chese amys; / The Millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this, (lines 69-74). For Chaucer the whole thing is a carnival spectacle: "and hold me free from blame; / Men should not be too serious at a game" (Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame, / And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game) (lines 77-78). The whole thing for the Miller and for Chaucer is play and laughter as the words between the Host, the Pardoner and the Knight, in *The Pardoner's Tale*, also explicitly confirm. The Pardoner concludes his tale thus: "And, pardoner, I pray you to draw near, / And as we did before, let's laugh and play / And then they kissed and rode forth on their way." (And Pardoner, I prey thee, drawe thee neer, / And, as we diden lat us laughe and pley." / Anon they kiste, and ryden forth hir weye (lines 680-82).

Indeed for Chaucer, this game in the carnival is a game of communication, a form of dialogue, as we have already seen with Bakhtin. For Bakhtin and for Chaucer the carnivalesque can best be understood in relation to the concept of dialogue and its relationship with the world and consequently be connected to the roots of the polyphonic novel and the discursive nature of poetry as a whole:

Folk-carnival "debates" between life and death, darkness and light, winter and summer, etc., permeated with the pathos of change and the joyful relativity of all things, debates which did not permit thought to

stop and congeal in a one-sided seriousness or in a stupid fetish for definition or singleness of meaning—all this lay at the base of the original core of the genre.²⁴

Polyphony is indeed another term for "dialogism" which, as mentioned above, is a fundamental aspect of the carnival—a plurality of "fully valid consciousnesses" each bringing with them a different point of view, a different way of seeing the world.²⁵

For Bakhtin, and as Chaucer shown throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, the carnival is connected with the *grotesque*. The *grotesque* is the term used by Bakhtin to describe the emphasis on bodily changes through eating, evacuation and sex, and it is used as a measuring device. The collectivity partaking in the carnival is aware of its unity in time as well as its historic immortality, associated with its continual death and renewal. Indeed the carnival atmosphere holds the lower strata of life most important, as opposed to higher functions (thought, speech, soul) which were usually held dear in the signifying order. At carnival time, the unique sense of time and space causes individuals to feel that they are a part of the "collectivity," at which point they cease to be themselves. It is at this point that, through costume and mask, an individual exchanges body and is renewed. At the same time there arises a heightened awareness of one's sensual, material, bodily unity and community, as we can see in many of the tales that are an exact extension of the carnival spirit of turning the holy into unholy, the crowning and uncrowning, the inversion of official hierarchies through the uncrowning of kings and the elevation of fools to regal status. Indeed Chaucer uses the carnival as a form of degradation, and maybe a temporal subversion of authority, which aims at creating a better world. For example, *The Tale of Sir Thopas* parodies the official culture of that time when Thopas wanted to marry an elf-queen since there in no worthy woman for him:

An elf-queene wol I love, ywis,
For in this world no womman is
Worthy to be my make
In towne;
Alle othere wommen I forsake,
And to an elf-queene I me take
By dale and eek by downe!" (lines 100-106)

The games and play in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, for instance, all lead to the enhancement of so many sacred and social elements, as the case throughout the *Tales*: "For he who shuts his eyes when he should see, / And wilfully, God let him ne'er be free!" / Nay," said the fox, "but, God give him mischance / Who is so indiscreet in governance / He chatters when he ought to hold his peace" (For he that wynketh whan he sholde see, / Al wilfully, God lat him nevere thee." / "Nay," quod the fox, "but God yeve hym meschaunce, / That is so indiscreet of governaunce, / That jangleth, whan he sholde holde his pees" (665-69). Indeed the carnival imagery throughout the *Tales* goes far beyond that of *The General Prologue*—we get gross carnival images of excrement, fornication, farting (in the Summoner's, the Reeve's, the Miller's, and the Wife of Bath's tales and others), of great oaths especially by the parts of God's body (as in the Host's speeches or the Pardoner's sermons on gluttony, drunkenness, and swearing), of a comic devil (in the *Friar's Tale*), of dismemberment (in relics, the true ones of Saint Thomas 'a Becket or the Pardoner's false ones), of lechery (in the *Merchant's Tale* and elsewhere), drunkenness (in the Miller's, the Cook's fall from his horse in the *Manciple's Prologue*), and the debasement of sex in the interchangeability of money and sex in *The Shipman's Tale*, especially when the Host comments on the tale saying that one should never trust monks: "Aha, comrades, beware of such a jape! / The monk put into that man's hood an ape, / And in the wife's too, by Saint Augustine! / Invite no more monks to your house or inn" (A ha! felawes, beth ware of swich a jape. / The monk putte in the mannes hood an ape, / And in his wyves eek, by Seint Austyn; / Draweth no monkes moore unto your in) (lines 439-42), and in many

²⁴ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 132.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

others. We have gluttony exaggerated throughout the stories: the banquet image of popular-festive forms, where gluttony triumphs, especially exaggerated later by Rabelais as Bakhtin posits, actually permeates the entire *The Canterbury Tales*. It seems that the prize supper at the Tabard Inn, planned at the beginning of the poem, is the pilgrims' ostensible goal. When the work actually comes near the end just outside Canterbury, the last image in the penultimate tale, the Manciple's, is the key carnivalesque image of the hungry and thirsty gaping mouths of the Cook and the Manciple. They drink heavily on their journey and praise Bacchus for such blessing of wine; and because of it the Manciple then begins his story. It is a very appropriate image to the end of this tale-tell game of the hungry mouth and the wagging tongue that the Manciple is warning against in his tale. For him, a "wicked tongue is worse than any fiend" and that is why he tells that "from devils men themselves may bless", and "high God, of His endless goodness, / Walled up the tongue with teeth and lips and cheeks / That man should speak advisedly when he speaks) (A wikked tonge is worse than a feend. / My sone, from a feend men may hem blesse. / My sone, God of his endeless goodnesse / Walled a tonge with teeth and lippes eke, / For man sholde hym avyse what he speeke (lines 320-24).

In such carnival images one can emphasize that Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* stands out as carnivalesque more than Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, and later Rabelais. When Boccaccio did of course include tales of official culture, of pathos and heroism and patient suffering, Chaucer surpassed him in having a broader spectrum of English culture and society. From Chaucer we can find ample stories of romance, of aristocratic idealism, tales of allegory, and even a prose meditation on penance—he shows more of official life. And while Boccaccio (definitely unlike Rabelais) altogether excludes the carnivalesque from his refined stories, Chaucer seems to have taken pride from infesting his stories with carnival images, and most of his pilgrims employ it as an effective narrative ploy to their stories.

Indeed Chaucer inflates the use of carnival and the grotesque more dramatically than even Rabelais. As Bakhtin argues, the nature of carnival tradition, as expounded by Rabelais, and being involved with the human body, Chaucer exaggerates this element of the material human body even more. He turns the carnival tradition on its head when he vividly depicts, what Bakhtin calls, the "material bodily lower stratum."²⁶ There are many images in the poem which describe the degradation process, when mostly men are seen as fools, idiots, and foolishly blind, the descending from head to bowels, buttocks or genitals, from earth to hell; they also involve fights and beatings, scrubbing of the body, humiliation and debasement. For Bakhtin this is the core of carnival: "Carnival celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new world—the new year, the new spring, the new kingdom."²⁷ In the carnival the material world is always the focus: the future lay in the next generation, not the other world, and death is viewed as the other side of birth, a renewal again and therefore is welcomed, not feared. As shown in many of Chaucer's tales, (the Manciple's, the Miller's, the Friar's, the Summoner's, the Pardoner's, the Parson's, the Canon's Yeoman's, the Wife's, the Prioress's tale when a dead boy comes back from death singing, and some others), the carnival dramatizes the defeat of fear by laughter: the images of she-wolves in the *Manciple's Tale*, the foul and devilish canons in the Canon's Yeoman's, and of devils and hell in *The Friar's Tale*, *The Second Nun's Tale*, and *The Monk's Tale*, where the monk talks about Lucifer and many other great figures in such carnival manner, all prove the positive result of laughter.

All these are grotesque, absurd, and extreme caricature figures which are used by Chaucer to such an effective poetical and narratorial purposes. The use of carnival then has produced gross contradictions in these tales where we have mixtures of praise and abuse of so many things at the same time: the praise and attack of folly, of nuns, monks, wives, husbands, knights, men of laws, millers, reeves, cooks, and so on, so that many images of things are blasphemed, turned upside down, inside out, and bottoms up. In *The Canterbury Tales* thus Chaucer has strongly focused on the material world and the lower stratum of Man as a way of his grotesque employment of carnivalesque criticism. We have "bum-baring" and "bum-kissing" and farting (in *The Summoner's Tale*) where Thomas farts thunderously in the friar's hand: "Into his hand he let the friar a fart. / There is no stallion drawing loaded cart / That might have let a fart of such a sound. / The friar leaped up as with

²⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p. 22.

²⁷ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 12.

wild lion's bound: / 'Ah, treacherous churl,' he cried, 'by God's own bones, / I'll see that he who scorns me thus atones; / You'll suffer for this fart—I'll find a way!"

Amydde his hand he leet the frere a fart,
Ther nys no capul, drawynge in a cart,
That myghte have lete a fart of swich a soun.
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 abyge this fart, if that I may!" (lines 485-91)

The carnivalesque is heightened in how the Host is "puzzled by the intellectual challenge of dividing the indivisible fart" (lines 552-578): And in arithmetic did no man find,/ Before this day, such puzzling question shown./ Who could be able, now, to make it known/ How every man should have an equal part/ Of both the sound and savour of a fart?

In ars-metrike shal ther no man fynde,
Biforn this day, of swich a question.
Who sholde make a demonstracion
That every man sholde have yliche his part
As of the soun or savour of a fart? (lines 558-62)

Thus how later a theory is given "on dividing the indivisible fart" into twelve friar recipients with a scatological satire, even blasphemous and obscene satire of Pentecost and the twelve holy apostles (lines 589-622). In *The Miller's Tale*, moreover, and elsewhere in the *Tales*, we have many carnival images of abuse: the upside-down abuse and caricature of official life, the blasphemous acts against religious men and customs, the comic devils and comic hell in *The Friar's Tale*, the excremental imagery in *The Summoner's Tale*, in its Prologue (the friars' place in hell is in the devil's arse: "Out of the Devil's arse-hole there did drive / Full twenty thousand friars in a rout, / And through all Hell they swarmed and ran about. / And came again, as fast as they could run, / And in his arse they crept back, everyone"

Out of the develes ers ther gone dryve
Twenty thousand freres on a route,
And thurghout helle swarmed al aboute,
And comen agayn as faste as they may gon,
And in his ers they crepten everychon) (lines 30-34),

and finally the Host's praise of Bacchus at the end of *The Manciple's Tale*. The last tales before the Parson's meditation also present carnival images of this type: *The Manciple's Tale*, *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, *The Second Nun's Tale*, and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* all show false and swindling alchemy and how it is impossible to turn base metals into gold.

The Wife of Bath's Tale, for example, is full of such scatological satire and odd bawdy elements—such as sexual intercourse, lust after youthful masculinity, and grossness in general—that might seem to have no significance (other than that they belong in the genre of the carnival) do carry added signification in Chaucer's fabliaux. These crude elements thus provide a justification within the tale for the appearance of language typically associated with one class of people in a context in which it does not usually appear, and the new context of this language in the fabliaux mocks the original, non-fabliau context, intensifies the humour present in the fabliau, and raises the style of the fabliau genre. Therefore, no scholar can tease out such images of sexuality by the Wife of Bath or by the farts mentioned above in *The Summoner's Tale* and claim that Chaucer erred in including bodily functions in his literary art, since even this fart melds the different styles of the tale, provides humour, and paradoxically raises the style. This marriage of the scatology present in fabliaux with the characteristics of literary art is Chaucer's unique achievement and differentiates his tales from their analogues.

Consequently, capturing *The Canterbury Tales* with images of bawdiness, vulgarity, obscenity and dramatic carnivalism is a sign of their aestheticism and poetic value. The *Tales* are in fact unique in such employment of caricature, comical upside-down images, the crowning and uncrowning images of transcendental and eschatological ideas, and even in its ample language debasement, which Chaucer deliberately and self-consciously flaunts as the tricks of his trade and to induce comedy.

Thus, the interesting form of carnivalism and caricature enacted by Chaucer in this poem is how he generally brings out most of his heroes from lower classes, whereas the upper-class characters are dominated by moral faults. In a carnivalesque way *The Canterbury Tales* reveals how Chaucer seems to create his heroes from the circus, the carnival, the fair, and the game-shows, the place which "could be thought of as low, dirty, extraterritorial, it could be demonized (or in time idealized) as the locus of vagabond desires."²⁸ Although Chaucer does not always portray the poor in a positive light, most of his heroes do rise from the ranks of the poor without necessarily rising in social standing. We find, for example, the Manciple, the Miller, the Summoner, the Pardoner, the Parson, the Yeoman, the Nun, the Wife, the Cook, the Reeve, the Plowman, the Haberdasher, and the Prioress all trying to mock their social background in their typical carnival teachings, uncrowning and crowning of each other's' classes. Each of these characters tells a story which represents a site of communal celebration of the values and principles of its own society. Each represents a marketplace where people meet and communicate with other classes and other people. It seems that each story is establishing a centre of its own but with the aim of connecting with other intersections of economic and cultural forces which unite rather than separate. This unification process seems to operate more effectively through the image of the "clownish carnivalesque uncrowning"²⁹ and crowning of such sacred figures and values. Indeed, Chaucer's carnival cycles of uncrowning and crowning reinforce the temporality of historical, personal, cultural, and cosmic cycles, which lead to change as all these stories hope to achieve; it is the carnival promise of change and renewal.

Finally, Chaucer is intelligent enough to let his readers accept lightly such blasphemy or better carnivalisation of Christian culture and Christian symbolism of Canterbury and to what it stands for (religious sanctity) by ending his masterpiece with a symbol of Heavenly Jerusalem. Of course this holy image is the reverse of the carnival and caricature banquet image with which the poem began and its prize supper at the Tabard Inn. This means that through the carnivalesque Chaucer was directing towards another presumed destination with more love, humanity, connection, dialogue, rebirth, renewal, and sanctity than carnivalism may suggest on the surface. The carnival mockery of official culture and the religious grounds of the pilgrims which *The Canterbury Tales* strongly parades then is irretrievably reversed by such a positive conclusion of the poem.

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²⁸ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 31; see also pages, 6-20, 171-190.

²⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p. 79.

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