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Humor and Humor and Humor and Chaucer

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The dull are often overly earnest; the overly earnest are often dull. They deserve to be. Who cannot sparkle with wit cannot laugh at himself; who cannot laugh at himself can neither see nor enjoy himself. He merits whatever lugubrious fate awaits him.

As the Greek dramatists of classical times observed, character is destiny. Tragic heroes, grave and serious and dignified, cannot see themselves or their world squarely because they are blinded by pious self-importance. Their preoccupation with the looming presence of self blocks the light. Their defense against admitting any error is to conceal themselves protectively in a cocoon of pious earnestness, out of or into which no one can see.

A bored student asked, "Why do we have to learn all this stuff if we're just going to die?" He was missing all the fun of living if he couldn't be amused at the irony of this question. Irony is a form of humor, the recognition of which demands a distance from the subject, a perspective furnished by laughter. The student could not recognize irony because he was too near, just as he likely could not recognize his girl friend by an enormous close-up photograph of her left nostril. Humor would say that it is sometimes better to stand back. Judgment, perspective, objectivity, and irony all can function only from a distance which is what humor provides. What is fun about life is the amusing knowledge that we will die. And it

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life does not last long, it should not be taken seriously.

Such insight is over the heads of the serious, who, like cynics, know the price of everything but the value of nothing. A buffoon might more benefit society than a bishop, a clown more than a commandant. Yet it is a tragedy that much of society cannot take humor seriously. Its tragic blind spot overlooks levity and puts great trust in apparent seriousness. Thus it is the fate of the witty whose perspective could save the world to be dismissed as irrelevant and the boor who thinks he speaks for God to be accepted as the voice of authority.

The fate of the clown to be a tragic victim of society is so well known as to need little discussion. Falstaff lards the lean earth as he walks along and replenishes the bareness of existence with his own fat humor. "Banish plump Jack," he says, "and banish all the world." When he visited Civil War hospitals and graveyards, Abraham Lincoln was criticized for being accompanied by a Negro humorist who could disarm the horror of carnage that otherwise might have shocked the president into insensibility. Humorists and humor lovers who are victims of society are often sacrificial figures who die for laughs to keep the serious sane. They give up respect and reputation: who takes a laughing man seriously? They give up social and political position: who wants a quipster for Attorney General? They are often passed by in economic fortune: the smile of the Director of the International Banking System is not easily trusted.

In Shakespeare's plays, clowns often tell truth that heroes cannot see. Rustics speak foolishness far wiser than nobility can comprehend. The fool, as in *King Lear*, is often

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One may compare Mark Twain's destruction of social Victorianism to the reforms of a long list of humorists whose lightheartedness bettered our world. Henry Nash Smith records Twain as being "denounced as a charlatan and buffoon by critics." Smith says that Twain fulfilled the cultural role of

ritual clown ... [whose] function is to violate taboos [and] to become a scapegoat. They take upon themselves the guilt of the community and are therefore despised and hooted at and looked down upon. (Tammeus 13E)

One can see Chaucer in the same light. Horace Walpole reportedly said, "To him who feels, life is a tragedy. To him who thinks, life is a comedy." Chaucer's assumed naiveté, his tongue-in-cheek sobriety, his refusal to bow to the lugubriousness of officialdom mark him as having the wit to be humorous, since the dull despise wit, perhaps the attacks of Chaucer's critics say more about them than they do about the father of English poetry.

Said Emily Dickinson, "Tell the truth, but tell it slant" because she knew that most people misunderstand the directness that wit provides. An eternal coquette flirting with imaginary male figures, she used an arch, piquant, coy wit to disarm the masculine-dominated and threatening universe, much as Chaucer used the humor of incongruity, irony, sarcasm, damning with faint praise, slapstick, buffeting by painful consequences, as well as the guffaw, the droll restraint that marks urbane satire, the hearty belly laugh, the wry joy of self-deprecation, the deft jab at pompousness and authoritarianism to disarm the threatening universe of his day.

Like Falstaff, Mark Twain, Abraham Lincoln, or Emily Dickinson, Geoffrey Chaucer found

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himself (as do most humans) in the jungle that we call civilization. He needed protection, as do many. However, the wise and witty ones just mentioned differed from most. Instead of banding together into serious and self-important enterprises, sober and pietistic patriotic, religious, or economic groups, they retained their individuality. They did not allow themselves to slip into the protective but inhuman institution, even when they worked for and cooperated with it. Like intelligent academicians in the twentieth century they knew that the world of humanity is at odds with the world of bureaucracy. Many administrators fear creativity, wit, humor, personality, and ability because these are personal or academic or intellectual

rather than bureaucratic. Academicism and intellectuality are the enemy of bureaucracy, just as personality is the enemy of uniformity. Tragedy teaches conformity to the status quo. Comedy is revolutionary. Said Herbert Eschliman, "If, in your bathroom, you laugh at a king, you are on your way to deposing him" (personal conversation).

Chaucer's humor has been the butt of many intensely serious critics who consider him at best deserving of recognition only because his humor contains realism. They think him historically irrelevant because of his attitude toward the problems of his day. Those whom Kittredge calls "ignorant revilers of medievalism" point out that Chaucer did not write about the Black Death, the Peasant's Revolt, the labor problems caused by Flemish clothmakers, the Papal Schism, the political and economic and social problems of England, and the specific sorrows of the fourteenth century. Lawlor quotes a contributor "to a recent critical symposium," who says that "the most common denominator in Chaucer's literary personality is a certain air of insouciance"

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(12). Boyd says that Chaucer's treatment of the liturgy

cannot be explained away by his own claim that he must be realistic. His oaths by saints' names are needed more often for rime than for realism, and they are clearly not the product of a mind that had religious devotion or reform as its first purpose. His references to holy days are more often than not to their secular merrymaking, while his references to the sacraments seldom describe ceremony except in social criticism and in fun. (76)

It is time to set the record straight. Chaucer's humor was the healthy expression of a spiritually sound man in a morass of secular and religious degradation. If one recognizes that humor is for rejoicing in happiness, for putting life into perspective, for consolation, for whistling in the graveyard, for freeing wit to achieve skepticism, for the satire that stabs to heal the infections of society, for roistering laughter which will disarm enemies, then he can see how valuable Chaucer's humor is. As Clair Olson concludes,

Chaucer's world was complex. London, the focal point, was a place of paradox; it resounded with the construction of churches and palaces proclaiming the glory of God and of man; it was the arena for ruthless political maneuvers, bitter trade dissensions and wide-scale suffering caused by inhumanity, poverty and disease. If it was, as Dunbar considered it a century later, "the flower of cities," it must also have

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been the place where "the smylere with the knyfe under the cloke" was as real as the sow that "fretten the child right in the cradel." A knowledge of the background enables us to set Chaucer's work in its perspective and, in particular, to appreciate its *Weltanschauung*. In a troubled world, Chaucer's poetic vision and artistic sense remain secure; he contemplates the diversity in life with serenity and understanding, and translates it into art by a genius which we cannot explain. (32)

George Lyman Kittredge says that Chaucer

was endowed at birth with the splendid accident of genius, but it did not poison his cup. He saw the irony of circumstance, or fate, or what you will, pervading human life, as no articulate-speaking man has ever seen it before or since. But he did not mistake himself for the centre of the system.... it was a comedy that Geoffrey Chaucer, prince of poets, should make his living by "controlling" the king's customs and repairing the dykes of Greenwich. This divine gift of humor preserved him from the abject vice of self-pity. (30-31)

Chaucer's laughter had the deep philosophic purpose of all laughter. Its social function is much like that of polite swearing, in which, says Ashley Montagu,

The shafts loosed in this form of verbal assault are often most

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skillfully wrought. Though the target may be discomfited, the wounds they inflict are seldom serious and upon healing frequently leave the victim all the better for having suffered them. The social function of ridicule, persiflage, and invective has not gone altogether unrecognized in its effect upon persons and upon institutions. Even nations may in this manner be taught their most enduring lessons, and precisely at those times when they are preening themselves on those great qualities before which goes the fall. (76)

Laughter, like swearing or weeping, acts as a relief valve for the personality. It acts toward "the reestablishment of the psychophysical equilibrium of the organism," according to Montagu (79). Laughter performs this service, Montagu explains, by

distinctive muscular contractions of the diaphragm, the vocal cords, and the face, by an accelerated flow of the blood, by changes in respiration, and so on, resulting in a general heightening of the psycho-physical tone of the body. (82)

In discussing the relief function of laughter or swearing or letting off steam, Montagu reaffirms the commonsense evaluation that laughter is the best medicine for the ills of mankind and shows the illness of the serious, the dull, and the overly earnest, who have no wit to give objectivity or prospect to themselves:

What poisons circulate in the system of him who hoards his noxious humours!

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For him the complexion of life becomes the color of bile, a world full of unavenged personal wrongs and hated creatures for the announcement of whose death he hunts hopefully in the obituary columns of his daily paper. His biliousness robs him of laughter and the friendly token of a smile. His digestion becomes disordered, a clogging heaviness descends upon him and invades every part of his body, his thoughts and vital processes become bogged in a mire of thickening bile, which is continually being augmented by a new upsurge of venom. (84)

When E. Talbot Donaldson points out that some people insist that Chaucer was not a moralist but a comic writer, he is describing the dull-witted who think these are widely separated positions. Donaldson deftly dashes such separation by an insouciant parenthesis: the moralist and the comic writer make up "a distinction without a difference" (10). If that comment sounds like a superior sniff on the part of Donaldson, it should. Its superiority is as correct as its disdain of those who separate humor from morality.

While it might be difficult to argue why one person in a particular age and culture might become a humorist while another in the same circumstance remains devoid of sensitivity to his own foibles and to the absurdity of the universe, one may conjecture that trauma is a likely necessity for a humorist. Without suffering one has no need to disarm fate. Without undergoing the trial of anguish, one cannot achieve the wisdom which is condensed into wit and enjoy the perspective of sagacity which laughter provides. What constitutes proof

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of trauma, however, is difficult to say. What is trauma to one is a skinned knee to another. Enough evidence, however, can be gained from Chaucer's life to indicate that his resorting to humor was a characteristic influenced by the irony of his own existence.

At surface glance, Chaucer's life seems to have been an easy one, charmed by the fortuitous circumstance of middle-class boyhood, service in the household of a high-ranking noble in his youth, positions of trust and importance in the military, commercial, and political affairs of his day, wide travel, courtly surroundings, munificent positions such as Clerk of the Works, Controller of Customs in the Port of London, Justice of the Peace for Kent, Guardian of Kentish Heirs, Member of Parliament, Commissioner of Walls and Ditches, officer of the Forest of North Petherton, and receiver of Life Annuities from John of Gaunt, from Edward III, from Richard II, and from Henry IV. Not many men of his day coming from a middle-class background and without personal wealth or noble position could enjoy such patronage and good fortune.

But Chaucer describes himself (often ironically or humorously, it is true) as one who has not had success in the most meaningful of human relationships. Whether his complaints and personifications as one luckless in love are valid is difficult to decide. Perhaps he is being self-effacing and self-deprecating merely to be the butt of humor. Such a motive for laughter is well-known.- But it might also be that he is speaking out of the anguish of a heart never completely happy and that his humor is more a therapy to his soul than a benefit to others.

It has long been my suspicion that Chaucer was a cuckold. I believe that he was cuckolded royally. He was cuckolded long. He was

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cuckolded publicly. That is enough trauma for anyone sensitive to his own gifts and deserts. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer the Pilgrim, a rather pathetic figure humorously created by Chaucer the Poet, admits that he knows little about whatever, and in minor poems a similar figure confesses to unhappiness in love, inexperience in the affairs of Venus, and a lack of fulfillment in personal emotions. In *Troilus and Criseyde* he admits more. It is quite likely that Pandarus is an extension of Chaucer's personality. The Cecily Champaigne affair reveals his culpability *de raptus meo*. That he could be roused to violence is attested by evidence from the criminal courts of his day: Inner Temple records show that "Geffrye Chaucer was fined two shillings for beateinge a Franciscane Fryer in flete-streate" (Tatlock 5). The life records of Chaucer, compiled by John Manly and Edith Rickert, edited as *Chaucer Life-Records* (Oxford, 1966) by Martin Crow and Clair Olson, reveal almost five hundred specific records of the personal and professional life of Geoffrey Chaucer. He was a busy man. The records show his status as valet, minor functionary, and civil servant in the household of nobility, advancing from middle-class status to a position of trust and security by his old age. The life records show, also, that he was married to Philippa Pan by 1366, a woman with a much higher position at court than he, and that the husband and wife apparently lived apart from each other after a few years. Philippa's pensions were paid to her and to other males but not to or through Geoffrey Chaucer.

Most chroniclers of Chaucer's life have disregarded his marital record, either because there is no proof of the daily marital life of the poet and they did not dabble in conjecture or because what circumstantial evidence exists shows an ugly possibility of biography being

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swirled down into such a gutter of degradation that they thought oblivion better than memory. Tatlock dismissed the marriage with one line: "About the felicity of the marriage there are only surmises." (7)

More modern scholars, however, face the puzzle head on. Says John Gardner,

Certain evidence suggests (though by no means proves) that John of Gaunt, who had a reputation in his day for amorous adventures, seduced Philippa, got her with child, and persuaded his attendant Geoffrey Chaucer to marry her. (153)

George Guion Williams says much the same thing:

Dark rumors have long hung about Chaucer's marriage. It is hinted that John of Gaunt was Philippa's lover, and that Chaucer married the girl as a favor to Gaunt. (44)

Williams uses the same circumstantial evidence as Gardner, pointing out the numerous passages in which Chaucer

in poem after poem, professes that he has never experienced happy or successful love. His insistence is so emphatic, and apparently so sincere that, as [J. W.] Hales says, 'It seems impossible to put a pleasant construction on these passages. It is incredible that they have no personal significance. The conclusion clearly is that Chaucer was not happy in his matrimonial relations.' (46)

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Both authors use the life records to show that, in Williams' words,

Gaunt had an interest in Philippa that was independent of his interest in Chaucer. In August, 1372, he granted Philippa an annuity of $\frac{1}{2}$ 10

(\$2000).... Since Gaunt had become the lover of Katharine Swynford about four months earlier, this pension to Philippa may have been granted at the behest of Katharine, and to please her; or it may have been granted as a kind of peace offering from Gaunt because he had deserted Philippa for her sister. (47-48)

Unless more records came to light, the speculation about Chaucer's happiness in marriage must remain mere speculation. But the evidence that does exist makes possible a conjecture that Chaucer's marriage was arranged, that he never experienced successful love on his own, and that his success as a court hanger-on was at least partly due to his wife's swyving. While it cannot be proved, neither can it be disproved. If it is true, however, it provides grounds for Chaucer's needs for the philosophic (one is tempted to say Boethian) consolation of humor, for laughter that would offset an existence seemingly designed to provoke and irritate and gall a man who in his own right had genius yet was unlucky enough to have his deepest personal life directed by a dullard. A life of wit spent under the control and at the behest of bureaucrats must have been frustrating indeed. It is no wonder that Chaucer was primarily a humorist. We should be thankful that his gift supplied his need. The wisdom he gained through anguish is with us still. His understanding of the Wife of Bath, his refusal

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to condemn wayward women, and especially his gentle judgment of Criseyde, like Christ's refusal to condemn the woman at the well, can be construed as lessons born out of the pain of love. Chaucer remains the great humorist.

His humor truly is a laughing matter.

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