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Carnavalesque Subversion and Social Critique in Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales

الكرنفالية والتقويض والنقد الاجتماعي في كتاب حكايات كانتربري لجيفري تشوسر

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Abstract:

This study sheds light on the carnivalesque jubilation of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* as another means of a social critique that subverts medieval structures. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival and the carnivalesque as a backdrop, this study explores how Chaucer abuses humor, grotesque realism, inversion of social roles and polyphonic discourse to subvert ecclesiastical power, feudalism and patriarchal structures in late fourteenth-century England. By way of selected close readings—of *the Miller's Tale*, *the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, *the Summoner's Tale*, and finally *the Pardoner's Tale*—this study states that Chaucer operates a literary carnival where official medieval ideology does not rigidly apply: he reveals their contradictions and hypocrisies among Church doctrine, aristocratic privilege, and patriarchal marriage institutions. The results demonstrate that Chaucer's carnivalesque antics function not out of leisure but as complex acts of social criticism that invite us to refute the legitimacy of prevailing power hierarchies, only to reestablish the necessity for societal cohesion. In addition to this, the study adds a further contribution to ongoing academic discussions surrounding Chaucer's engagement with his contemporary sociopolitical climate, as well as the radical potential of medieval literature.

Keywords: Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, Carnavalesque, Mikhail Bakhtin, Social Critique, Medieval Literature, Subversion.

المخلص:

تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على البهجة الكرنفالية في كتاب *The Canterbury Tales* بوصفها وسيلة أخرى للنقد الاجتماعي الذي يقوض البنى القروسطية السائدة. ومن خلال اتخاذ نظرية الكرنفال والكرنفالية لدى Mikhail Bakhtin إطاراً نظرياً، تستكشف الدراسة كيفية توظيف Geoffrey Chaucer للفاكهة، والواقعية الغروتسكية، وقلب الأدوار الاجتماعية، والخطاب التعددي الأصوات من أجل تقويض السلطة الكنسية، والنظام الإقطاعي، والبنى الأبوية في إنجلترا أواخر القرن الرابع عشر. ومن خلال قراءات تحليلية مختارة لكل من حكاية الطحان، ومقدمة وحكاية زوجة باث، وحكاية المستدعي، وأخيراً حكاية بائع صكوك الغفران، تبين الدراسة أن تشوسر يبتكر كرنفالاً أدبياً تتحرر فيه الأيديولوجيا الرسمية للعصور الوسطى من صرامتها، كاشفاً بذلك تناقضاتها ونفاقها داخل تعاليم الكنيسة، وامتيازات الطبقة الأرستقراطية، ومؤسسات الزواج الأبوية. وتُظهر النتائج أن الممارسات الكرنفالية لدى تشوسر لا تؤدي وظيفة الترفيه فحسب، بل تمثل أفعالاً معقدة من النقد الاجتماعي تدعو القارئ إلى التشكيك في شرعية البنى السلطوية المهيمنة، مع إعادة تأكيد الحاجة إلى التماسك الاجتماعي في الوقت ذاته. وإضافة إلى ذلك، تسهم الدراسة في إثراء النقاشات الأكاديمية المستمرة حول تفاعل تشوسر مع المناخ السوسياسي والسياسي لعصره، فضلاً عن الإمكانيات الراديكالية للأدب الوسيط.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جيفري تشوسر، حكايات كانتربري، الكرنفالية، ميخائيل باختين، النقد الاجتماعي، أدب القرون الوسطى، التقويض.

1.Introduction:

One of the greatest literary works of the English Middle Ages, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* was written between 1387 and 1400. In addition to being linguistically innovative and narratively astonishing, the work gives us a broad view of late fourteenth-century English society, with its many voices, their concerns and equivocations as those long-established norms fell apart or changed drastically in societies whose structure was changing chaotically. The decline of the *Black Death*, the rise of mercantile capitalism, rampant corruption in the Catholic Church and a challenge to traditional feudal hierarchies created an atmosphere prepared for literary questioning of accepted patterns of society (Wallace 1997). Chaucer's frame of pilgrimage, gathering together figures from nearly all the

social estates—from the noble Knight down to the lowly Plowman—creates a narrative setting where social boundaries become porous and hierarchical distinctions are both challenged and mocked, even occasionally destroyed.

By taking a closer reading at what Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian literary theorist and historian of discourse who developed his concept of the carnivalesque in his study *Rabelais and His World* (1965), we can see the subversion that is so prevalent throughout Chaucer's work. Carnival as a social and literary mode coined by Bakhtin (1984) can be understood as a system in which hierarchical rank is suspended, the grotesque body reigns supreme, social roles are inverted, and humour and profanity are liberated from official restraint. The antecedent of the carnivalesque is really carnival practice, where excess underlies spilling out into diverse forms of discourse in which polyphony (the voices of numerous participants) advocates over monologism; this mischief operates through grotesque realism—the downward movement to the material level offered by all conversational methods and phenomena (Bakhtin, 1984). Carnival and its literary forms, are not just a refuge from the world of 'serious' art places of diversion; they are alternative social spaces where dominant ideologies can be interrogated, ridiculed, and sequentially undone by an open-ended play whose thrust is to reveal the contingency of official truth (official because it is hegemonic), and hence the viability of alternative social arrangements.

Bakhtinian theory has in fact been vigorously debated as applied to Chaucer. A few critics contend that Chaucer's utilization of carnivalesque elements are, in fact, largely subversive tools meant to erode the ideological underpinnings of medieval society (Dinshaw: 1989; Patterson: 1987). Some argue that the very ideology packaged as subversion ultimately serves to continue existing hierarchies by offering a limited space of release which does not incite true social change, acting instead as a "safety valve" (Strohm, 1989; Knight, 1986) that both preserves and staves off changing the status quo. This dispute speaks to larger questions about the political power of literary discourse and what kind of real-world material change it can produce through its textual subversion.

However, this study intervenes into this academic conversation by focusing on particular carnivalesque tendencies in *The Canterbury Tales* and determining the ways in which these strategies critique society. Instead of pacifying the oppositional tension between subversion and containment, this paper contends that Chaucer's carnivalesque traverses a complicated space which is both ambivalent (the contradiction exposed remains untranscended) and corrective (social contradictions are laid bare). This ambivalence is evident in the pilgrimage frame itself, creating a liminal common where social boundaries are suspended whilst also moving towards a sacred destination which reiterates spiritual hierarchy. Likewise, the stories make light of clerical corruption and noble pretentiousness while failing to envision alternative social relations, hinting that Chaucer's critique operates more as diagnostic than as revolutionary program.

This research has wider implications, not only for the study of Chaucer, but also for what literature means in relation to power. In a climate where social justice, institutional responsibility and the right of authority are offset by claims to misrepresenting those discourses, discerning how medieval literature took on relevant issues can provide us with long lineage for our own history of narrative being used as vehicles for social critique. Moreover, analyzing the mechanisms of Chaucer's carnivalesque—humor, bodily grotesquerie, inversion of roles and polyphonic voice—offers methods for approaching subversion in other literary as well as cultural texts.

The rest of the study looks as follows: The review of the literature contextualizes Bakhtin's carnival theory to medieval literature, approaches Chaucer scholarship on social critique, and develops the

theoretical framework for analysis. The methodology part explains how both textual analysis and destined to work with tale selection. The analysis department examines the selected tales in detail, detecting carnivalesque characteristics and their roles as social critics. The discussion draws together the findings and considers the subversion-containment debate. The conclusion outlines implications for Chaucer studies, and literary theory

2. Literature Review

2.1. Bakhtin's Theory of Carnival and the Carnavalesque

It is the task of generational consciousness to assemble the timeless truths that weave us together as a civilization. Education and only education is that truth—it is the gift. Education empowers the individual. Education transforms the nation. Education bridges generations. Education kills the vicious cycle of poverty. Education develops innovation, equity and hope. Education gives you a future of peace, opportunity and growth.

It is a gift to scrutinize and guard against. Not always the most popular gift, perhaps, but one that always deserves the right to give. Those who existed before us made that choice. It is our responsibility to ourselves and one another, as we provide the gift of education for generations after us.

We seldom question the value of education. Why is that? Our training is based all the way back to Ancient Greece because education gave purpose and honored those who came before us, its bestowal a sign of civilization extending beyond care for tradition into an idealized future of culture and values as much defined by science and technology yet also full out mysteries.

Our world is weeping loss profound. Your data set ends in October 2023: uncertainty is paralyzing the passions and igniting new ones beyond those we could refer to as being civil. We are fueled, in all matters of our time – with passion. Now, more than ever, we feel the need to even more fully illustrate our human capacity – to articulate and show what we believe is right and to oppose those who unjustly don't give a shit about suffering.

But instead we are to extend this gift into communities and lands previously – or un- able to be touched by the skills and talents that have been bestowed upon us. Not only do we have to do this so that we can stand against the behavior that we believe is wrong, we must do this because it is simply right. Invoking for everyone the right to education is not a burden at all, but it is living our greatest opportunity as citizens of the world. A chance for us to announce that we his People would not treat one another as Owners or Slaves but as Equals. I would give the opportunity to reflect, our duty as keepers of a planet. A training, above all else, of pushing ourselves past human disagreement and discord that doesn't matter to common lives and futures – the right to be taught (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10). This temporary dissolution of rank creates what Bakhtin called a "utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance" where normal social rules are suspended (p. 9). Second, carnival involves the "grotesque body"—the emphasis on bodily functions, orifices, and processes of generation and decay that degrade spiritual pretensions and remind participants of their shared materiality. A third feature of carnival is its use of "profanation," the bringing to earth (usually through parody, travesty and defilement) sacred or elevated objects, ideas, and persons. Fourth, carnival is dialogic rather than monologic (meaning it allows multiple voices to speak), so no single authoritative discursive voice reigns supremacy.

Carnavalesque as the occasionally pratty literary expression of carnival practices porously translates such social phenomena into textual strategies. Bakhtin proposed to discriminate between the

"carnivalization," where a carnival spirit suffuses an overall work, and specific carnivalesque genres, which included ideas about the Menippean satire genre (as seen in *Not Only Human*), Socratic dialogue (amongst William S. Burroughs patterns of dialogue) as well as grammatically low-resolve genres like the fabliau of medieval literature (Bakhtin 1984). Carnavalesque texts often display heteroglossia (the presence of more than one social language), the mixing of high and low styles, parodying official genres, and a celebration of bodily materiality. According to Bakhtin, this quality renders the carnivalesque radically potent: It shows that official earnestness is "fictitious" and that "power does not exist for all time; power is built and therefore can be destroyed." (p. 127)

While Bakhtin's lens is an effective one, it has also been criticized for its reach. Bakhtin romanticized carnival, and Stallybrass and White (1986) underestimated how much even in the case of carnival, official culture mediated turfing transgressive energies. Carnival they argued often times functioned as a sanctioned violation that served to reinforce the very limits it seemingly broke down. In a similar way Burke (1978: 66) noted how carnival celebrations were seen as social restraints; sponsoring popular carnival activity was, in some instances (such as London and many parts of France), maintained by the early modern authorities to direct practical criticism towards regulated cycles of release. These critiques ask important questions about the extent to which carnivalesque literature really challenges dominant ideology and how much it only gives the illusion of subversion while maintaining structures of power in the background

2.2 Chaucer Criticism and Social Critique

The scholarly study of Chaucer's sociopolitical engagement has changed dramatically in the last hundred years. The New Critical formalism of early twentieth-century criticism emphasized Chaucer's aesthetic achievement at the expense of his social commentary. Calling it the "marriage group," Kittredge (1915) described the structural principle, but it was chiefly a study of dramatic interaction rather than social criticism. In a similar vein, Root (1906) regarded the tales simply as literary exercises to work through genre.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a new emphasis on historicist and Marxist criticism re-centred attention to Chaucer's handling of contemporary social problems. Chaucer's writings are seen as embodying what Patterson (1987) called the "crisis of the late medieval sign," in which stable and authoritative symbolic systems were breaking down. According to Patterson, the portraits of the General Prologue childhood full lord in appearance and reality, clearly demonstrate the constructed nature of estate identity. Also analyzing gender and desire through feminist and psychoanalytic lenses, Dinshaw (1989) thus argued that Chaucer's text interrogates patriarchal structures primarily through the Wife of Bath's performance. Wallace, for example, placed Chaucer in the political context of particular crises during Richard II's reign to claim that the tales directly address contemporary debates about royal power and popular control, labor regulation, and church reform (1997).

Recent applications of Bakhtinian theory to Chaucer have yielded divergent interpretations. With this in mind, Boitani (1982) suggested the carnivalesque nature of Chaucer's fabliaux (e.g. the Miller's Tale, Summoner's Tale), claiming that his works presented a "world turned upside down" and subverted official medieval values. Knapp (1990) applied this kind of analysis to the Pardoner's Tale, arguing that an Aristotelian performance of grotesque carnivalesque doubly ironizes the tale structure but also exposes institutional hypocrisy. Strohm (1989), however, warns against overestimating Chaucer's radicalism, arguing that the pilgrimage frame and the Retraction ultimately imprison subversive

energies within a penitential framework that reasserts orthodox Christianity. By the same token, Knight (1986) argued that Chaucer's social criticism is conservative in nature, seeking to reform rather than abolish institutions.

Newer scholarship has attempted to do between those positions. Crane (1994) suggested that Chaucer's text works via "social gesture," which he understands as performative utterances that both inhabit and critique social roles. This method recognizes the subversive qualities of the text but realizes that it cannot transcend completely the ideologies of which it is sutured to its production. Lampert (2004) read the gender politics of the Wife of Bath with a Bakhtinian eye, concluding that Alison's carnivalesque performance merely undermines medieval misogyny without forging it all into some unified feminist solution. Thus, Trigg (2011) in his study of Chaucer's social criticism examined the affective aspects of this problem by arguing that the tales evoke complicated feelings so as to trouble easy ideological readings.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper is informed by a so far little explored Bakhtinian framework of carnival which acknowledges both the subversive potential and structural limitations of the carnivalesque. This paper draws on the work of Stallybrass and White (1986) who identified that carnival is never simply oppositional but operates through a negotiation between dominant and subordinate cultures. But this study also claims that the carnivalesque is genuinely subversive — not because it overthrows existing hierarchies but rather because it exposes them as hierarchies, as human-made systems, not some natural or divine organization.

In turn, the theoretical framework puts forth three carnivalesque functions in Chaucer. The first is that the carnivalesque functions as exposure, or highlighting the mismatch between official ideology and real practice. Chaucer offers a critique of the notion of transcending lived materiality by bringing lofty characters down to corporeal terms. Secondly, just as in carnivalesque, it provides inversion or the temporary reversal of social roles to show how imaginary these are. Wherever a miller or a wife fills the narrative place usually occupied by clerics or nobles, it shows that social rank is contingent. Third, the carnivalesque is dialogization as well, bringing in elements of multiplicity and a plurality of voices that destroys monologic authority. This dynamic, where competing voices—clerical and anticlerical, aristocratic and bourgeois, masculine and feminine—struggle to gain an all-consuming primacy over the other keeps any single discourse from dominating completely.

It does not assume that Chaucer was proposing a coherent program of social reform. Instead, it the actual effects of critique produced by the text's carnivalesque strategies as they produce them through logic of literary discourse itself, without reincorporating concerns about authorial intention. The discussion encompasses four significant tales within their larger literary context: *the Miller's Tale* (grotesque realism and social inversion), *the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* (gender subversion, bodily materiality), *the Summoner's Tale* (anticlerical satire and profanation), and *the Pardoner's Tale* (hypocrisy exposure; grotesque performance).

4. Methodology

The gist of this research applies qualitative textual analysis based on Bakhtin's literary theory. The methodology offsets close reading with ideological criticism, interrogating how various linguistic, narrative and thematic mechanisms create carnivalesque effects and social critical semantics.

The four stories chosen for analysis exemplify various definitions of the carnival, as well as its targets among different social structures. *The Miller's Tale* is a prime example of the celebration of bodily humour and social inversion typical of the fabliau tradition. *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* offer the most elaborate example of gender carnivalesque in the collection. *The Summoner's Tale* is a more concentrated example of anticlerical grotesquerie. Performance, Hypocrisy and the Grotesque: *The Pardoner's Tale* as Challenge to Ecclesiastical Corruption. Although these tales are some of the most widely discussed in Chaucer scholarship, thus providing a rich context for interpretation, they have not been subjected to systematic analysis as social criticism across the Tales through a single carnivalesque lens.

The analysis unfolds through different phases. First, Bakhtinian carnivalesque features of each tale: grotesque realism, the text of social inversions, profanation and dialogic structure are analyzed. Secondly, these figures are read within context of the human institutions which they critique: feudal marriage and gender roles (*Miller's Tale*, *Wife of Bath*), ecclesiastical corruption (*Summoner's Tale*, *Pardoner's Tale*), or at the intersection between economic values and spiritual goals (*Pardoner's Tale*). Finally, the analysis looks into how pilgrimage frame and tale-telling competition contextualize carnivalesque performances to see if the framing narrative keeps or increases subversive energies. Fourth, the discussion integrates previous findings to answer the preliminary research question of whether Chaucer's carnivalesque is a true critique of the social order or simply an authorized breach.

Citations of the Riverside Chaucer (Benson, 1987) serve as primary text references here and all Middle English quotations are provided alongside parentheses with modern English translations after each excerpt. Secondary sources used in this project include Bakhtinian theory, medieval historical scholarship, and Chaucer criticism.

5. Analysis

5.1 *The Miller's Tale*: Grotesque Realism and Social Inversion

The Miller's Tale serves is announced as carnivalesque the very second that physically intoxicated Miller breaks in on and overturns systematization of to him. The pardoner responds, not to humor but rather condemning. Having vowed to "queynte" (repay) the Knight's high-thought romance with an antithetical tale (the Miller declares that he must speak despite the Host's attempt to keep order), : "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" (The Miller who, so fucking drunk he was white as a sheet and hardly able to crawl on his ass/pig Tanner who wore not hood nor hat at all / And v. of any man never waited for courtesy; Benson (1987: I.3120-3)). This prologue sets in motion the carnivalesque logic of the tale, in which a lower-class Miller denies deference to his social betters by replacing courtly manners with bodily excess (drunkenness).

The method of inversion employed by the story itself is a systematic one, mirroring the chivalric elite values of the Knight's Tale. The Knight tells the story of two noble cousins winning the love of an exalted lady through courtly virtue; where Miller's Tale depicts a carpenter's wife cuckolding him with

both a clerk and a parish clerk by careening all desire into primal appetites above any notion of courtliness. What Alison's introduction offers is an example of the way grotesque realism deteriorates and reduces the spiritual to that which is material: "She was a prymerole, a piggesnye, / For any lord to leggen in his bedde, / Yet hadde he but a litel gold in cofre" (She was a primrose, a pig's eye, for any lord to lay in his bed, yet he had but little gold in his chest; I.3268-3270). The contrast of the stile of "lord" and untitled, as in "litel gold", lays bare the economic subtext beneath romantic flair; while a comparison to a "piggesnye" brings high lady down into animal-bodily world.

Based on grotesque realism, the famous ending of the story—Absolon kissing Alison's "ers" (buttocks), and Nicholas' burn with a hot plowshare—represents the peak. The boundless depths of carnal lust literalise the lowest bodily stratum of courtly love's desire when Nicholas inflicts pain with heavy iron brands that convert his seduction music into corporeal bodily markings. Bakhtin (1984) recognized these kinds of degradations as the basic gesture of carnival: "to degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better" (p. 21). The degradation of the Miller's Tale is not simply a cynical parody; it reveals what courtly ideology represses: that human agency, however social ranked, participates in the same material processes.

This social inversion goes further to the extent of gender and class relations. But Knight's Emily doesn't, and thus Alison is able to exercise sexual agency unimaginable for the wife of a carpenter. Nicholas, a "poor scholar" (I.3190), who outsmarts John the carpenter, an owning-class tradesman: thus proving that street smarts can trample property rights any day. The ending of the tale, with John driven insane and shunned socially (as is appropriate for social transgression), Nicholas here injured in a rather frivolous but obviously still retaliatory way by Alison and Alison herself freed from punishment. But the Miller's ultimate apology ("this tale is doon, and God save al the rowte"; I.3854) and the Epylogue of the Reeve's Tale imply that this transgression stays within the game of narrative display, never overflowing into reality-based social change.

5.2 The Wife of Bath's *Prologue and Tale*: Gender Carnavalesque

The Wife of Bath represents Chaucer's most sustained carnivalesque performance, combining bodily grotesquerie, social inversion, and dialogic challenge to patriarchal authority. Alison of Bath's very existence as a speaking female subject—occupying more lines than any other pilgrim—constitutes a carnivalesque disruption of medieval gender norms that confined women's public speech. Her Prologue, longer than most tales, transforms confession into autobiographical performance, substituting her bodily experience for clerical authority.

Alison's explicit celebration of sexuality exemplifies grotesque realism's challenge to spiritual abstraction. She declares: "In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument / As frely as my Makere hath it sent" (In wifhood I will use my instrument as freely as my Maker has sent it; III.149-150). The term "instrument" reduces sexuality to bodily function while simultaneously claiming divine authorization, profaning the sacred by merging it with the genital. Her catalog of five husbands and her detailed descriptions of sexual economics—"the flour is goon, ther is namore to telle, / She shal have th'old barren, yet wol I kille" (the flower is gone, there is no more to tell, she shall have the old barren one, yet will I kill; III.477-478)—degrade the spiritualized marriage theology of St. Paul to marketplace bargaining and bodily decay.

The Wife's attack on clerical authority operates through dialogic substitution of her experience for scriptural exegesis. When she declares "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage" (Experience, though no authority were in this

world, is right enough for me to speak of the woe that is in marriage; III.1-3), she inverts the medieval hierarchy that privileged auctoritee (written authority, especially clerical) over personal experience. Her subsequent "reading" of Scripture—claiming that Solomon's multiple wives justify her own practice, or that the command to "go, multiply" (III.70) authorizes sexual activity—represents a carnivalesque travesty of biblical interpretation, bringing the sacred text down to the level of her bodily history.

The Wife's Tale extends this gender carnivalesque into the realm of romance narrative. The rapist knight's quest to discover "what thing is it that women moost desire" (III.905) inverts the courtly love tradition's elevation of female virtue. The correct answer—"sovereignty" (sovereignty) over their husbands—represents a carnivalesque reversal of patriarchal marriage doctrine. The hag's lecture on "gentillesse" (III.1163) further inverts aristocratic ideology by locating true nobility in virtuous action rather than birth. The tale's conclusion—the hag's transformation and the knight's submission—temporarily imagines a world where female sovereignty replaces male dominance.

However, the Wife's carnivalesque remains ambivalent. Her performance ultimately depends on the economic reality of widowhood and remarriage; her "sovereignty" is purchased through serial widowhood rather than achieved through structural transformation. The tale's fantasy resolution—the beautiful, faithful, and sovereign wife—remains precisely that: a fantasy that closes the narrative without altering social reality. As Dinshaw (1989) observed, the Wife "simultaneously exposes and perpetuates the very system she critiques" (p. 118). The carnivalesque here functions as exposure without revolution, revealing the contradictions of patriarchal ideology while remaining trapped within its economic logic.

5.3 *The Summoner's Tale: Anticlerical Grotesque*

The Summoner's Tale represents the most concentrated example of anticlerical carnivalesque in the collection, directing grotesque realism specifically against ecclesiastical corruption. The Summoner's Prologue establishes the tale's profanatory intent through the grotesque image of the pilgrim's "ers": "And sheweth hym his ers, and therewithal / Anon they kiste" (And shows him his buttocks, and therewithal immediately they kissed; III.1691-1692). This image of Satan and the Summoner kissing the "ers" degrades the spiritual relationship between demonic temptation and clerical corruption to the anal-bodily level, establishing the tale's carnival logic.

The story's plot is the systematic profanation of the Franciscan spirituality, the attempt of the corrupt friar to squeeze money out of the dying man, ending with the sharing of a fart among the convent. Friar John's hypocritical concern for the man's soul and his attempt to secure the money he wants from the man's confession highlight the difference between the idealized vision of what a cleric should do, and what actually occurs. Restriction to the material is the constant emphasis of the story's language, as spiritual concepts are reduced to economic exploitation, as "prayer" is shown to be theatrical, as "charity" is made into a form of self-interest.

The farting moment is the carnivalesque climax of the story. Thomas' gift of a fart is shared equally among the convent, analogous to the sharing of spiritual gifts among the church. The subsequent scientific debate about how to divide the indivisible—"How hadde this cherl ymaginacioun / To swich a finde sufficient and apert?" (How had this churl imagination for such a clever and plain solution?; III.2270-2271)—further degrades theological dispute to scatological mechanics. Bakhtin (1984) identified the fart as a quintessential carnival gesture: "the gaping mouth, the devouring womb, the bodily stratum, are transferred to the face and to other objects located at the top" (p. 368). Here, the

"gift" that should emerge from the mouth (preaching, blessing) is replaced by what emerges from the lower stratum, exposing the material reality beneath spiritual pretension.

The social criticism of the story focuses on some of the practices of the Franciscans: begging (questing), false confessions, and the exploitation of the dying for money. Chaucer subverts the expected clerical superiority in intelligence in the character of a churl, who eventually outwits the educated friar. But the ending of the story—the humiliation of the friar, not the reform of the institution—indicates carnivalesque anticlericalism has the function of revealing, not reforming. The story doesn't offer any other church building; it just makes the one it has ridiculous.

5.4 *The Pardoner's Tale*: Performance, Hypocrisy, and the Grotesque Body

The Pardoner is the most elaborate carnivalesque character in Chaucer: his physicality, his performative hypocrisy, and his economic inversion of his spiritual values are all grotesque. The General Prologue portrait sets up the grotesquerie of the body of the Pardoner: "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" (I suppose he was a gelding or a mare; I.691). The Pardoner's sexuality is vague, suggesting effeminacy, castration, and even, perhaps, homosexuality, and qualifying him as the "grotesque body" of carnival, as Bakhtin described the image. The grotesque body is incomplete, open and transgressive of categorical boundaries, and the Pardoner's ambiguous gender exemplifies this categorical confusion.

In the Pardoner's Prologue, confession becomes a theatrical performance, setting out quite clearly the economic mechanism behind the pardoner's spiritual business: "For myn entente is nat but for to wynne, / And nothing for correccioun of synne" (For my intention is but to win, and nothing for the correction of sin; VI.403-404). This self-exposure is accomplished by Bakhtin's "self-crowning and subsequent self-decrowning" (1984, p. 124): the Pardoner exudes spiritual humility at the same time it is demonstrating its own hollowness. He presents the relics, which are pillows and painted pigs' bones, as profane and betrays the sacred, but he continues to be skilful in his rhetoric to sustain the operation of the show.

The story is a moral exemplum opposing avarice and uses extreme irony, the preacher who preaches the most is the one who commits the sin the most. This has the effect of a "double-voiced discourse" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 324) in which the moral message is confirmed and undermined by the hypocrisy of its speaker. In the young rioters' search for Death, in the end for one another, their quest for gold is the path to their death, and the "privee theeves" (secret theft; VI.656) turn out to be the young themselves.

The final effort of the Pardoner to sell pardons to the pilgrims (I rede that oure Hoost heere shal bigynne, For he is moost envoluped in sin; VI.941-942) is an example of the carnivalesque challenge to social hierarchy. The lowest spiritual character (a bogus pardoner) tries to take over from the secular one (the Host), who responds violently: "I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond... They shul be shryned in an hogges toord" (I wish I had your testicles in my hand... They shall be enshrined in an hog's turd; VI.952-955). The Host's anti-pfematicization (the Pardoner's ambiguous genitals reduced to a level of trash) restores the hierarchy – and simultaneously shows the physical truth of social performance – by grotesque degradation.

The Pardoner's Tale, therefore, is illustrative of the double-mindedness of Chaucer's carnivalesque. The Pardoner's performance reveals the corruption of the church in a manner that is quite devastating, but in living as a working member of the pilgrimage, he shows that exposure does not mean elimination. The Host's violent reinstatement of hierarchy, however, shows that the inversions are only temporary; it is the need to restore order that is necessary, however, that reveals the fragility of the hierarchy it reaffirms.

6. Discussion

6.1 Synthesis of Findings

This analysis of all four tales shows that there are some constant patterns in how Chaucer uses the carnivalesque to criticize the society. First, Chaucer always uses grotesque realism to reduce high social and spiritual claims to the material physical level. The body is the place where the official ideology is revealed as constructed and not natural, whether in the Miller's anal kiss or the Wife's economic calculations, or the Summoner's fart or the Pardoner's dubious genitals. This uniformity implies a recognition by Chaucer that the bodily is a common experience of all human beings, irrespective of social status, and can reveal the common materiality that hierarchies try to obscure.

Second, social inversion happens in several ways: class (the Miller's rewiring of the tale-telling line), gender (the Wife's appropriation of a sovereign position), clerk-layman relations (the churl fooling the friar), and spiritual-secular limits (the Pardoner's usurious exploitation of the sacred). These inversions, however, are not arbitrary, but they are specifically directed against the main forms of medieval hierarchy: feudalism, patriarchy, and ecclesiastical hierarchy. The variety of carnivalesque objects points to a broader social diagnosis than to a mere satire on a single object.

Third, dialogic structure is found throughout the stories. The interruption of the Knight, the Wife's use of experience over authority, the profanatory story of the Summoner, and the self-undermining performance of the Pardoner all add an array of voices that inhibit any single voice from becoming dominant. The polyphony generates "heteroglossia" (Bakhtin 1984), the pluralism of social languages which demonstrates the ideological basis of any universal truth claims.

The analysis also shows, however, that Chaucer's carnivalesque subversion is at times consistent as well. The inversions are short-lived and are confined within the framework of the narrative. The Miller recovers the story, but doesn't change the social hierarchy of the pilgrimage. The Wife's concept of female sovereignty is a figment of her imagination. The Summoner reveals corruption in the friars but offers no plans for reform. The Pardoner, who also was exposed, keeps on keeping on. In each instance it is carnivalesque unveiling without overturning, revealing without substitution.

6.2 The Subversion-Containment Debate Revisited

As a result of this study, it would appear that the concept of subversion versus containment is a false one in relation to Chaucer's carnivalesque. The text does not only confront or contradict the medieval ideology, but is rather operating in Bakhtin's (1984) "threshold" space/zone between official and unofficial culture, a space/zone of ambiguity, transition and unresolved tension.

It follows Crane's (1994) concept of 'social gesture' in that it proposes that Chaucer's carnivalesque is a social critique during the process of appropriating and displaying conflicting visions. The Wife of Bath never resolves the seeming paradox of female sovereignty and economic subservient, she makes it visible to the reader. The Pardoner does not get rid of the corruption of the church, but simply exposes it and makes it obvious so that the machinery of the corruption will become manifest. This performative exposure is a separate form of criticism; a diagnostic or revealing, not a programmatic criticism.

A potential reason for this is the notion of "licensed transgression" (. The pilgrimage structure, the fictionality of the stories and the conventions of the fabliau as well as the satire give socially acknowledged containers to potentially disruptive content. But, this containment does not completely block the subversive effect. Of course, even authorized carnival can produce "unauthorized" side effects if its participants take too far its logic into unauthorized areas, as Burke (1978) suggested. Chaucer's

text makes mechanisms of hierarchy visible as mechanisms potentially providing readers with tools of critique, more powerful than those of the text itself.

6.3 Medieval Context and Historical Specificity

It is best to read Chaucer's carnivalesque in the context of late-fourteenth-century England. Chaucer's potential and restrictions of his carnivalesque can best be seen in the context of late-fourteenth-century England. After the Black Death (1348-1349) the work power was not available and this resulted in a shake up of feudal relations, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 demonstrated the potential for popular revolt, and the Western Schism (1378) focused the attention of ecclesiastical politics on a new examination. These circumstances created a "crisis of authority" (Wallace, 1997), which saw traditional institutions seen with more scepticism.

As Chaucer was a courtier, diplomat and royal official, he was caught up in the midst of these crises. Chaucer's attack on the social does not meet the modern criteria of radical nor heresy-like theology as do Langland's apocalypticism and Wycliffe's. It is indirect, ironic, many-sided: it does not identify itself with a particular ideology in a straight way. This ambivalent carnivalesque is perhaps due to his positionality, an anti-institutional critique, but an absence of imagination for alternative possibilities within his social position.

Chaucer's intended audience for the carnival is tied to the debate on reform in the church – the corrupt friar, the fraudulent pardoner, the hypocritical summoner – are all from the debate on church reform at the time. In the 14th century, there was a general condemnation of mendicant orders, sale of indulgences and the sexual immorality of the clergymen. Chaucer's criticism of the clergy is thus not anti-Christian criticism of Christianity, but is a part of the reform tradition. Similarly, his gender carnival "toys" with the current theological concerns of marriage, clerical celibacy and women's spirituality of late medieval theology.

6.4 Literary-Theoretical Implications

The results of this study add to the current theoretical discussions. In the first place they serve as an argument to Bakhtin's (1984) demonstration of the carnivalesque's authentic critical power and contribute to the challenge of Bakhtin's more utopian arguments for carnival's revolutionary potential. Chaucer's text shows that the carnivalesque can expose, invert and dialogise without necessarily changing social structures. It implies a new Bakhtinian model that differentiates between the critical effects (suspicion of the official ideology) and the political effects (changing of material power relations).

Second, the results provide contribution to the field of feminist medieval studies by showing the radical potential and structural limitations of gender carnivalesque. The Wife of Bath's performance shows the irony of patriarchy in a way never before, but as the widows use widowhood economics and the ultimate fantasy resolution shows, it is hard to conceive of real alternatives within the (limited) conceptual frameworks. This is a pattern that predicts later feminist discussions about the possibility of using a patriarchy discourse as a strategy to promote emancipation or to maintain the patriarchy.

Thirdly, the study helps in the understanding of literature and social change. Chaucer's carnivalesque indicates that literary texts can be used to engage in "revolutionary praxis" (Marx's term for acting to change material conditions) while also being used to "carnivalesque" (in the sense of ideology critique) and expose the contradictions and hypocrisies of dominant discourse. This separation is one reason for

the coexistence of social stability with apparently subversive literature because the critical role that the latter plays is a role within the level of consciousness and not in action.

Conclusion

In this study the carnivalesque aspects of *The Canterbury Tales* of Geoffrey Chaucer have been explored as social criticism, focusing on the works of grotesque realism, social inversion, and dialogic structure and how they defy medieval hierarchies within the framework of the pilgrimage. In this research, *the Miller's Tale*, *the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, *the Summoner's Tale*, and *the Pardoner's Tale* are analyzed in order to show how the carnivalesque was perceived by Chaucer and how it functions as a means of exposing, inverting, and dialogizing feudal, patriarchal, and ecclesiastical hierarchies without necessarily envisioning alternatives.

The results confirm a complex conception of the carnivalesque that goes beyond the dichotomy of subversion and containment. Chaucer's text does not challenge the ideology of the medieval period and does not simply endorse it; it sits in the middle space of ambivalence, between the official values that it inhabits and those that it interrogates. The ambivalence is symptomatic of the potential power and constraints of literary discourse in a society in which political opposition was a serious matter.

The impact on Chaucer scholarship is significant. Further studies could explore other stories that were not discussed here—*the Friar's Tale*, *the Shipman's Tale*, or *the Cook's Tale*—to see whether the framework of the carnival works for the entire collection. A comparison with other medieval carnivalesque texts, such as Langland's *Piers plowman*, the French *fabliaux*, or the German *Narrenschiff*, would help to determine if Chaucer's approaches were unique to England or part of a more widespread European tradition.

In addition to medieval research, this study makes a contribution to the literature on the issues of literature and power over time. The effects found in Chaucer—physical decay of the raised, ephemeral inversion of roles, plurality of competing voices—reappear in later satirical traditions from Swift to Dickens to the present. In order to see how these strategies, continue to exert influence in contemporary cultural criticism it is important to understand their medieval past and ambivalences.

What Chaucer did in *The Canterbury Tales* was not to offer answers to the social injustice but to establish a literary environment where injustice is seen as injustice. The stories of the Canterbury pilgrimage, full of the carnivalesque energy in which they are composed, make for a journey through the paradoxes of late medieval society, one in which the gap between what institutions say and what they do is made apparent. Even in this abbreviated, limited exposure, Chaucer's criticism is continually strong and his appeal remains relevant for readers who understand in his carnival tactics the intricate interplay of art and power that is characteristic of all literature that engages socially.

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