

- 28 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 59.
- 29 See Slavoj Zizek, *Sublime Object*, pp. 213-15. Reversing the commonly held view that the meaning of a complex text is immanent in an imaginary 'original' moment of response that has been lost through the process of interpretation, Zizek argues for the importance of the 'interpretative tradition' in establishing the 'meaning' in the fullness of its possibilities.
- 30 Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 61.
- 31 For a powerful anti-Freudian case, see Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, pp. 85-112.
- 32 See Sigmund Freud, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVII, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1956).
- 33 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).
- 34 A *kommos* is described in the Liddell and Scott Greek Lexicon as 'a dirge or lamentation sung in turn by one of the actors and the Chorus'. The inclusion of a *kommos* was not a formal requirement for the tragedian, but a variation available for composition. It was thus a recognizable feature of tragedies. That does not exclude the 'estranging' effect I am claiming for this moment in *Oedipus the King*.

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Prime-time Drama: *Canterbury Tales* for the Small Screen

MARGARET ROGERSON

What Chaucer needs is intelligent popularization and a good television adaptation.¹

There have been many attempts to popularize Chaucer in modern times. In his informative study entitled *Chaucer at Large*, Steve Ellis has provided a detailed account of the progress of such efforts over roughly a hundred years to the end of the twentieth century.² But despite his claim that 'Chaucer has not really taken hold of the public in any sustained manner',³ interest in reinventing the poet and, in particular, appropriating his most famous literary undertaking, *The Canterbury Tales*, is so great that further important developments have already occurred in the few years since the publication of Ellis's book, especially in the area of performance.⁴ The Chaucer industry continues to offer its wares in the public market place and within the walls of the academy, but there remains a consensus of opinion, both general and academic, that Chaucer is 'very under-read'.⁵ Peter Mack, reviewing no less than four new books of Chaucerian scholarship in 1996, lamented that the medieval poet 'has the misfortune to be read today mainly by professionals' and called for a 'good television adaptation' to redress the situation.⁶

By the turn of the century the British Broadcasting Corporation had produced no less than three major television versions of Chaucer's best known work, two of these long before Mack was writing (in 1969 and 1975) and the third, shortly afterwards, an educational series of animated *Canterbury Tales* completed over a two year period (1998-2000) that was distinguished by being nominated for an Academy Award in 1999.⁷ Mack may not have been satisfied by this cartoon-style pilgrimage because it was aimed at 'family viewing'⁸ and was, perhaps, somewhat too narrowly focussed to achieve the kind of 'popularization' he had in mind. Not all of the critics were charmed by it, with one feeling he 'ought to be kind to ... a lovingly

animated ... sort of Wallace and Gromit tale' but remaining unable to warm to 'Plasticine pardoners', who seemed 'Czechoslovakian' rather than English.⁹ The question that mainly concerns me in this paper is whether the BBC's most recent engagement with *The Canterbury Tales*, a six-part prime-time drama series that went to air in Britain in September-October 2003, could be the answer to Mack's call.

Initially the context for my discussion extends beyond the small screen to consider other means of popularizing Chaucer outside the academy. Commercialism is one of them. Canterbury, or to be more specific, Chaucer in Canterbury, is a popular tourist destination. Visitors can stay at hotels where the pilgrims slept, for example, or spend an hour in what could be termed Chaucer's own 'theme park' in St Margaret's Church, 'The Canterbury Tales: Medieval Misadventures'. The forced transfer of the great poet of medieval London to modern Canterbury as a tourist attraction was, according to Ellis, 'probably ... the most earnest attempt to bring Chaucer to a wider public' in the twentieth century.¹⁰ Tourism need not be trivializing, nor should it be trivialized. Indeed, such public referencing to *The Canterbury Tales* can be a way of enhancing the prospects for a general recognition of Chaucer's posthumous appointment as 'poet laureate', an honour conferred on him as a salute to his greatness in John Speed's *Historie of Great Britaine* (1611) and in the patent of 1670 that established John Dryden, the first official poet laureate, as Historiographer Royal. Modern translations of the text can also be helpful in this regard, since the language of Chaucer's verse places his work in its original form outside the itinerary of the majority of modern travellers. David Wright's 1985 verse translation of *The Canterbury Tales* was reissued as an Oxford World's Classics paperback edition in 1998, while a revised version of the Nevill Coghill translation that first appeared in 1951 appeared again in Penguin Classics in 2003.¹¹ The interested non-professional reader has easy access to the *Tales*, then, but the question remains as to whether such translations alone, without other stimuli, can make Chaucer truly 'popular' even though, as Ellis argues, they 'constitute ... one of the main channels for the wider dissemination of his work'.¹²

Besides being sidelined as an author read 'mainly by professionals', Chaucer suffers from what may be another 'misfortune' in that he has for

many years been familiar but perhaps not always entirely welcome in secondary schools. Here too, there have been moves to improve his image in recent times. Martin Riley's dramatization of *The Canterbury Tales* for performance by students in the junior years of high school, for example, encourages young readers to revivify the time-honoured Chaucerian jokes for themselves, thus inviting a greater level of engagement with the text:

- Miller** This time Nicholas jammed his arse in the window frame.
Nicholas gets out of the bed, turns his back, and sticks his bottom out of the front of the booth.
- Absolon** Speak, pretty bird, for I know not where thou art!
- Miller** At once, Nicholas let fly a fart – as loud as a thunderclap!
There is an appropriate sound effect.
- Alison** Absolon was half-blinded by the blast!
- Absolon** But I was ready with my red hot poker. I lunged out with it, aiming at the source of the terrible smell.
In slow motion, Absolon charges across the stage to the booth.
[Speaking in slow motion] Ger-on-i-mo!
*The poker makes contact with the bottom. Nicholas turns his head towards the audience, and opens his mouth in a silent scream. They all freeze.*¹³

Chaucer's bawdy is foregrounded as a selling point in Riley's version, although, given the target audience of students, teachers and parents, not as extensively or outrageously as it was in the Pier Paolo Pasolini film of 1972.¹⁴ There are to be no 'real' bared bottoms here because the blinding

blasts and bawdy are politely sanitized for the educational context and teachers are assured by the text that a ‘*joke shop fake bottom will avoid embarrassment*’.¹⁵

In an even more radical move to capture the imagination of the young, Canadian performer, Baba Brinkman, has offered *The Rap Canterbury Tales*, a retelling of four of Chaucer’s stories in the context of a rappers’ bus tour of the United States, ‘translated ... into hip-hop to make them appeal to schoolchildren’.¹⁶ The Brinkman method of supplying Geoffrey Chaucer with the rapper’s dark glasses in an effort to make him look cool in the classroom may not strike all medieval scholars as particularly ‘intelligent’, but audiences at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2004 certainly found it entertaining.¹⁷ There were no less than three Chaucerian offerings in Edinburgh that year, a sure sign that Chaucer was recognisable to a non-academic public, at least on the fringe; and the reviewer for the *Scotsman* declared Brinkman’s one-man show a clear ‘winner’ on the grounds of its fidelity to the ‘original in terms of style, context and humour’ and its strength ‘as a piece of theatre’.¹⁸

If rapping takes Chaucer too far in the direction of popular culture for those of more intellectual tastes, then perhaps the prestigious Royal Shakespeare Company’s first-ever entrance onto the Chaucerian stage might have a greater appeal. This six-hour, two-part adaptation of twenty-one of the twenty-four tales of the Canterbury pilgrimage opened at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon in November 2005, and at the time of writing in 2006 is touring Britain and programmed for the second of the RSC’s five annual engagements scheduled at the Kennedy Centre in Washington.¹⁹ The script weaves the drama of the pilgrimage around the tales and was prepared by Mike Poulton, a writer who is no stranger to medieval texts and already has to his credit a stage adaptation of the fourteenth-century alliterative saint’s legend *St Erkenwald* (dir. David Hunt, RSC, The Other Place, 1997) and a new script for the fifteenth-century York Mystery Plays for the millennium production in York Minster (dir. Gregory Doran, 2000).²⁰ The ‘medieval’ design of the production was informed by the revered Ellesmere manuscript of Chaucer’s great work and reviewers were impressed by the way in which the ‘greensward setting becomes an empty canvas filled with

possibilities’ against which Poulton’s text presents not only the long-admired Chaucerian bawdy but also the darker side of the fourteenth-century, with its unabashed view of the ‘Muslim villainy of the Man of Law’s Tale’ and the ‘child-killing Jews in the Prioress’s Tale’:²¹

PRIORESS.

O little Hugh of Lincoln, slain also
By cursed Jews, as is notorious—
For it is but a little while ago—
Pray, with thy martyred legions glorious,
That God in His great mercy pity us!

...

CHAUCER.

When heard they of this miracle, every man
So sobered was, it wondrous was to see.
Until our Host—

KNIGHT.

What man artow?

CHAUCER (*moves away*).

Oh nobody, you know ...
What was I saying? O yes, it wondrous was, and plain to see
That all believed this nun’s absurditee,
And trudged downcast, in grudging piety.
Until our host, preferring jolitee,
Sets out to break the gloomy mood anon.²²

The dark side is there, but Chaucer the fictional pilgrim and fictionally self-effacing writer is also there on stage to gloss over the horror of the Prioress’s anti-Semitic outburst and quickly move on to the ‘jolitee’ of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. These *Canterbury Tales* remain comfortable in the time-honoured ‘merrie England’ setting.

Rapping in the classroom and striding the RSC ‘greensward’ might win popularity for Chaucer among a new set of friends, but, as Mack implies, a successful television adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales* could potentially reach a far larger and more diverse audience in living- and media-rooms

worldwide. The animated version of 1998-2000, in an effort to 'get more people interested in Chaucer', dressed the puppet pilgrims in recognisably period garb, but turned to the popular medium of the cinema 'for role models'; consequently, the puppets rode like 'John Wayne in *The Searchers* and Clint Eastwood in *Unforgiven*', while Chaucer turning 'to the camera to speak about the others' was 'influenced heavily by Michael Caine in *Alfie*'.²³ This kind of cinematic inspiration and self-aware referencing can be seen at work in a recent 'period' adaptation of Chaucer for the large screen, *A Knight's Tale* (dir. Brian Helgeland, 2001), where, as Nickolas Haydock has argued, '*Gladiator* meets *Shakespeare in Love*'.²⁴ The figure of Chaucer, up front, and, in the case of *A Knight's Tale*, stark naked although not quite full frontal to the camera, is a preoccupation of both the BBC animated *Tales* and the Helgeland film; and the film has prompted academic commentators to engage with what Stephanie Trigg refers to as 'collective and cumulative readings of [Chaucer's] voice, style, and personality, and the cultural formation and institutional force of "Chaucer"'.²⁵ This is particularly evident in a discussion of *A Knight's Tale* by Kathleen Forni, who, although she claims that 'Geoff's nakedness acts as a metaphor' for the stripping of Chaucer of 'all historical fact', is at considerable pains to show how this celluloid poet nonetheless could be made to fit into the clothes of the real Chaucer or at least Chaucer as he has been re-imagined by posterity.²⁶ The film has attracted the attention of the scholarly community and become part of the Chaucer industry, but whether either it or the BBC animation has had any effect in popularizing the poet in the outside world remains problematic.

Like the animated *Tales* and *A Knight's Tale*, the first of the BBC's attempts to revive Chaucer for the small screen took the form of period drama; this was a seven-part abridged version of the whole of *The Canterbury Tales*, complete with the Chaucerian framework of General Prologue and linking passages, shown on BBC2 almost forty years ago in 1969.²⁷ This series had been given excellent free pre-show publicity by the success of the smash hit *Canterbury Tales—The Musical* in London in 1968 and on Broadway early in 1969, a promising basis from which to attract viewers. Both the televised *Tales* and the musical had developed from Nevill Coghill's work on an earlier 'verse-paraphrase' for radio, which had been 'commissioned soon after the beginning of the Third Programme (c. 1946-

7)' with the expectation of 'one or two thousand listeners', but had delighted an astounding actual audience of two million.²⁸ Coghill described this response as a 'fluke',²⁹ but the decision to give Chaucer an airing on radio was well suited to the spirit of the times and its success is not at all surprising. The immediate post-war years had witnessed a rising interest in the past and in medieval English literature as an expression of nationhood and collective self-esteem. This was deliberately fostered by government policies and manifested itself notably in the revival of the Mystery Plays in York, Chester, and Coventry in the Festival of Britain of 1951, the year that Coghill's translation of Chaucer's *Tales* appeared in print. The television actors in 1969 donned medieval costume to play the pilgrims on the road and a character in the tale assigned to them, thus linking the tale and teller in a refraction of the scholarly discourse of the time in which the narrative voice of the teller was used as a pointer to reading the texts.³⁰ Although this version took pains to give an 'overview of the *Tales*', the 'emphasis' was, almost inevitably, on 'hilarity and inebriation'.³¹ The *Tales* themselves were shot in the studio, and the 'linking scenes ... were all filmed on location in as realistic a manner as possible—"tough fourteenth-century stuff, flea-ridden beds and all"'.³² Henry Raynor, writing for *The Times*, noted that there were expansions of the original text to emphasise the 'bawdy', but was also relieved to see that the BBC had 'not turned its back on its reputation for honest and conscientious adaptations of the classics' and, after the first instalment covering 'The General Prologue' and 'The Knight's Tale', predicted that viewers could 'look forward to the prettiness of the pictures, the vigour of speech, the neat colourfulness of John Dankworth's music and the conviction that newcomers to Chaucer should really enjoy what they see'.³³

In the 1960s and 70s, the kind of honesty that was prized tended towards 'historical make-believe', described by Raphael Samuel as 'a trope which shows no sign of exhausting its imaginative appeal'.³⁴ But although the 'imaginative appeal' of the 1969 approach has not diminished, as indicated by the choice of a 'period' look by the 1998 animators and by the RSC stage show, the concept in 2003 was a remaking of Chaucer's fourteenth-century literary masterpiece as a twenty-first century television narrative rather than a period piece. The Chaucerian past is not embraced here as distanced 'prettiness' or 'colourful neatness', rather it is used as a starting point for an

exploration of the present through storytelling. The adaptation of the literary text in this instance did not seek to revive it with the usual trappings of Chaucer the pilgrim/writer and the structural links of the original framework; rather the selected tales were taken up as individual pieces and radically rewritten, an exercise further encouraged in fledgling writers through the BBC websites, particularly in the short story competition mounted by BBC America.³⁵ This is indeed an example of the use of the past as what David Lowenthal has called a 'living force' in which 'the true steward' of the past 'adds his own stamp to those of his predecessors'.³⁶

The transposition of literary 'classics' into 'modern' texts is in itself a 'trope' that has an immense attraction for modern viewers of both the small and big screens. In recent years Jane Austen's most famous work, *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, has been successful through the 'historical make-believe' of Georgian re-enactment (BBC series, dir. Simon Langton, 1995; film, dir. Joe Wright, 2005), and equally delightful when completely dislocated from its original place and timeframe and transposed into modern Bollywood musical format as *Bride and Prejudice* (dir. Gurinder Chadha, 2004). Even more dramatically, perhaps, Austen's *Emma* became the modern teen-chick-flick *Clueless* (dir. Amy Heckerling, 1995); and in another classic transformation, Homer's 'crafty' Odysseus of the ancient Mediterranean became the Coen brothers' somewhat less than crafty 'man of constant sorrow', Ulysses Everett McGill of Mississippi in the 1930s, in *O Brother, Where Art Thou* (dir. Joel Coen, 2000).³⁷ It is with *Clueless* and *O Brother* that *The Canterbury Tales* of 2003 should be classed.

This is not the first time that Chaucer's stories have assumed modern dress for the small screen. In 1975 BBC2 viewers were offered what was billed as 'Alan Plater's *Trinity Tales*', 'a six-part series inspired by Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*', although Plater's name alone, without Chaucer's, appeared on the credits.³⁸ Chaucer's religious pilgrims to the shrine of St Thomas at Canterbury became worshippers of a different kind, a group of football fans travelling by bus to Wembley to see their team, Trinity, play in the Rugby League Cup Final. As with the Coghill version of 1969, there was a good deal of getting 'drunk and singing comic songs'.³⁹ Plater's referencing, like that of the more recent animated *Tales*, was mostly

modern. He took the opportunity to 'parody ... Dylan Thomas', to draw on 'references to the media', and to remind viewers that they were watching television, 'always calling attention to television conventions'.⁴⁰ The characters assumed names like Dave the Joiner, Eric the Actor, and the Landlord (Stan the Fryer), and all acted in the tales as well as appearing in the framework around them; but their performance may owe less to Chaucer and more, perhaps, to Plater's desire to break away from the 'inherited constraints of naturalist drama'.⁴¹ Predictably, some traces of the lineaments of Chaucer's *Tales* can be found in Plater's. In an echo of 'The Knight's Tale', for example, 'The Judy's Tale' hinges on two young men fighting over a girl; they have their energies channelled into 'a gentlemanly contest, which includes darts, dominoes, shove 'apenny, the reciting of poems and the singing of dirty songs'.⁴² This is a far cry from the knightly activities in which Palamon and Arcite engage in the Chaucerian model although it remains an oblique reference to them. But this series did much less, perhaps, to enhance the reading of Chaucer outside the academy and much more to enhance Plater's career, because the comedy series that took him 'to the top of the charts—*Oh No! It's Selwyn Froggitt* ... developed directly out of *Trinity Tales*'.⁴³

One of the disadvantages of the 1969 and 1975 remakes of *The Canterbury Tales* was and still is their inaccessibility.⁴⁴ They went to air in the days when it was not customary to make extra mileage and extra money out of the distribution of such programmes on video and DVD, and while they could have attracted additional viewers through re-runs, they remained essentially ephemeral as far as the general public was concerned. This is true of neither the animated *Tales* nor the 2003 series.⁴⁵ In the case of the more recent series, viewers in Australia, for example, had to wait until August 2005 to see Chaucer on the ABC, but on the day after the broadcast of the last episode in September, the DVD was on sale in the ABC shops. Viewers fresh from the experience of watching the episodes, or perhaps those who had missed some of them, were encouraged to purchase the series for their own use. The more recent televised versions, then, have a greater opportunity to influence potential Chaucerian 'readers' simply by being more accessible and more repeatable. This could be an advantage for educators, who now have some up-to-the-minute visual aids for their teaching of

Chaucer, but it could also encourage others outside the institutions of learning to consider going back to the original text (or a translation of it) to explore the background of the television series, assuming, of course, that at least some of the episodes are strong enough to attract their interest in the first place.

The BBC committed a good deal of money and effort to the making of the 2003 series and the ongoing maintenance of the website associated with it, which includes links to Chaucerian texts on line as an enticement towards engagement with the underlying classic. Top-line actors took part and diversity was sought as different writers and directors were engaged for the individual episodes. The DVD cover bills the series as a ‘modern re-telling of 6 timeless stories’,⁴⁶ thus projecting Chaucer as the great observer of human nature who speaks across the ages, the imagined poet of Chaucerians, who have embraced him from as early as the eighteenth century onwards, to use Dryden’s terminology, as a ‘congenial soul’.⁴⁷

Six of Chaucer’s narratives were chosen: (in order of screening) those he assigned to the Miller; the Wife of Bath (mostly her ‘Prologue’); the Knight; the Sea-Captain (Shipman); the Pardoner; and the Man of Law. Six leading television and/or film writers, who were approached by the BBC and offered a tale suited to their particular talents, authored the individual scripts.⁴⁸ The writers, apparently, jumped at the opportunity. Peter Bowker (‘The Miller’s Tale’) remarked that the *Tales* offered ‘one of the few opportunities you have on TV at present to write pure story that is entirely driven by character—no coppers, no nurses, no doctors’.⁴⁹ In keeping with the emphasis on bawdy seen in so many of the other modern adaptations discussed here, the series did not follow the accepted ‘Chaucerian’ order of the tales, but led out with the well-known sexy story of trickery and adultery assigned to the Miller, rather than with that of the Knight as in Chaucer’s collection. The first four tales in the series are about sex and the female body as a commodity, and there is good sense in the order in which they appear, shading from the comparative lightness of ‘The Miller’s Tale’, to the serious social and interpersonal issues woven through ‘The Knight’s Tale’, to the darkness of the betrayals within the close-knit community of ‘The Sea Captain’s Tale’. The shading process continues, darkening into the madness,

depravity and greed of ‘The Pardoner’s Tale’ and the inhumanity (but also hope) of ‘The Man of Law’s Tale’.

The 2003 series foregrounds modernity and the narrative of the tales themselves rather than antiquity and the framework of the pilgrimage. The general concerns of the tales as told here may be virtually the same as those of the originals but they are firmly placed in present contexts to embrace issues of race, displacement, and social injustices that belong particularly to the twenty-first century. As part of this modernizing trend, ‘Chaucer’ does not appear as one of the characters, contrary to the practice of the two stage texts quoted earlier.⁵⁰ His name appears in the opening credits as tacit acknowledgment of his stature as a recognisable figure whose repute can be used to endorse what follows, but from then on he does not interfere. Nor is the framework of the pilgrimage allowed to intrude on the storytelling since each of the episodes is self-contained. The frame is referred to with the same light touch that is applied in the reference to Chaucer himself. At the beginning of each episode viewers see a motorway, a ‘Canterbury’ sign, and a map to signal the idea of the road to the shrine of St Thomas à Becket as well as images of the main characters from each story sweeping across the screen finally to stand still for a moment as a group before the credits for the particular episode start to roll. Where the previous BBC series of 1969 and 1975 made much of the pilgrim telling the tale also performing in the dramatization of it, the 2003 series restricted the tale-telling reference to a brief voice-over from one of the central figures of the episode as the words sweep by in much the same way as the characters themselves do, offering viewers what could be for some their first ‘reading’ of the original text:

‘The Miller’s Tale’: That Nicholas must hatch some strategy to fool the silly jealous husband, when, if everything went well and turned out right, she’d sleep in the arms of Nicholas all night.

(Compare:

That Nicholas shal shapen hym a wyle
 This sely jalous housbonde to bigyle;
 And if so be the game wente aright,
 She sholde slepen in his arm al nyght.
 Chaucer, ‘The Miller’s Tale’, ll. 3403-6)⁵¹

‘The Wife of Bath’: I mean to give the best years of my life to the acts and satisfactions of a wife. (Compare Chaucer, ‘The Wife of Bath’s Prologue’, ll. 113-4)

‘The Knight’s Tale’: All’s fair in love and war? Love is a mightier law, upon my soul, than any made by any mortal rule. (Compare Chaucer, ‘The Knight’s Tale’, ll. 1163-6)

‘The Sea Captain’s Tale’: By nature, women desire six things. They want a husband to be courageous, intelligent, rich, and what’s more, generous. (Compare Chaucer, ‘The Shipman’s Tale’, ll. 173-6)

‘The Pardoner’s Tale’: There they found gold florins newly minted, fine and round, thenceforth it was no longer death they sought, each of them was so happy at the sight. (Compare Chaucer, ‘The Pardoner’s Tale’, ll. 769-73)

‘The Man of Law’s Tale’: She was driven out into our own ocean and over our fierce seas until the wild caves (*sic*) cast her ship upon the sand. (Compare Chaucer, ‘The Man of Law’s Tale’, ll. 505-9)

I have quoted these lines in full to indicate the nature of the more overt referencing to Chaucer in this series. But, importantly, the effect of the voice-overs is not to bring a ‘teller’ into the tale as a character; it is, rather, to let one of the characters give a hint about the essence of the narrative that is to follow. The absence of the ‘narrator’ in these versions of the tales is something that might appeal to current Chaucer scholarship, in particular to A. C. Spearing, whose recent work on ‘The Man of Law’s Tale’ concludes that ‘to read’ this tale ‘as spoken in the voice of a fictional narrator is usually to avoid reading it at all’.⁵² Constance herself, not a fictional narrator but a fictional character from within the Man of Law’s narrative, provides the voice-over at the opening of this episode, thus highlighting the supremacy of narrative over a supposed ‘speaker’.

Although it could well prove an excellent pedagogical exercise in the classroom, it is not my intention here to pick over the series to make up a

tally of deviations from the original text or examples of ways in which the individual episodes adhere to it. It is however worthy of note that these professional writers, while relocating the Chaucerian narrative into a modern setting and modern television genres, often capture issues that concern scholars and students as they read Chaucer in their own professional capacities. Moreover, the transfer of the narrative from the poetry of Chaucer’s text to acting script highlights the economy and succinctness of the original as well as its moral and intellectual depth. The transformation of ‘The Pardoner’s Tale’, for example, from moral allegory into ghost story reflects the difficulty of reading allegory and the masterfulness of Chaucer’s writing of it. The ghost replaces both the ‘old man’ and the allegory so that the moral can be explicated for the viewing audience. On the small screen the three villains demonstrate their villainy as they work together to rob unsuspecting tourists and prey on the victims of their crimes and the generosity and sympathy of others.⁵³ Ellis has remarked that Pasolini’s similar embellishment of this tale in 1972 with the ‘manifest uncouthness’ of the protagonists and their ‘painful deaths’ suggests ‘a judgment upon them and the degradation they embody’.⁵⁴ But this is not enough in the 2003 version, where we are also shown something of the background to this uncouthness: lack of education, and a disturbed and possibly abused childhood underlying low self-esteem and depraved and irrational behaviour. The introduction of female victims of violent sexual depravity, one of them the ghost seeking retribution before she and her parents can rest, highlights this episode and the Chaucerian tale that lies behind it as psychological investigations of humanity and society.

Similarly the tale told by the Knight shifts from romance, a popular genre of the Middle Ages, to prison drama, an equally popular television genre of modern times. Forni accuses Helgeland’s *A Knight’s Tale* of failure to ‘engage the problematic philosophical issues—divine justice, the nature of human happiness, fate, and free-will—raised in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*’.⁵⁵ Although they may not be precisely the same in the 2003 BBC series, some of the issues that Paul, Ace, and Emily do grapple with—trust, love, and various kinds of human imprisonment—are equally weighty and so can be seen as the equivalent of Chaucer’s concerns. Other highlights of the modern tales are the ways in which the script writers have concerned

themselves with the difficult matter of the medieval genre of the *fabliau*. Chaucer leaves his characters in the *fabliaux* assigned to the Miller and the Shipman with a laugh and moves his original audience on without dwelling on any underlying suffering or the potential for ongoing misery. This is not so in the television versions, which look below the surface narrative that characterises the *fabliau*, and consequently leave their audiences with a much more problematic view of communities, like those in ‘The Sea Captain’s Tale’ and ‘The Miller’s Tale’, that may not heal completely. These are issues that bother professional readers of Chaucer’s texts, perhaps because of the nature of our professional reading itself, one that dwells on the detail and the subtexts of the *fabliau* rather than experiencing it as a ‘dirty joke’ told swiftly by a comedian who then, in the case of Chaucer’s ‘Miller’s Tale’ at least, moves just as swiftly into another one.

Finally the BBC’s ‘Wife of Bath’, so titled because the episode is not based so much on the tale itself but on the ‘autobiographical’ prologue, perhaps the most successful and appealing of all six episodes, demonstrates once again the enduring success of Chaucer’s evocation of the Wife, whose own life is a soap opera even in modern terms, despite her apparent location in the Middle Ages. The episode adroitly captures the (auto)biographical nature of the original prologue by beginning with a ‘news review’ programme on the life of the central female character: her story is a soap opera within a soap opera as life and art blend together. While Chaucer’s Wife’s ‘Prologue’ is the main source of material here, there is clever reference to the tale as well to delight the Chaucerian insider and perhaps also to tempt outsiders to investigate the source. Could a ‘medieval’ author have written this ‘Bold and Beautiful’ narrative? The anachronism itself might be an enticement.

Ellis has spoken of the ‘formidable’ difficulty of ‘performing the *Tales* in anything like a manner that remains faithful to the original’, and lamented that ‘most modern versions involve a complete distortion of that original’.⁵⁶ The 2003 version departs more markedly than previous attempts from the structure of the framed tales; nonetheless, in curious ways, it captures the original even as it distorts it. If this television adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales* is to make the increase in the readership of Chaucer that Mack and

others have looked for, it must first succeed in its own right as prime-time television drama before it can hope to inspire non-specialist viewers to seek to experience Chaucer first-hand. It may perhaps achieve this end because it seeks modernization rather than medievalization, but if you are looking for *Canterbury Tales* that do not deviate from the Chaucerian originals, change the channel now, or as the poet himself put it:

whoso list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef and chese another tale.
(‘The Miller’s Prologue’, ll. 3176-7)

NOTES

- 1 Peter Mack, ‘The Scholars’ Tales’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 April 1996.
- 2 Steve Ellis, *Chaucer at Large: The Poet in the Modern Imagination* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000).
- 3 Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, p. 121.
- 4 For discussion of the *Tales* as adapted for performance on television, stage, film, and radio up to 1998, see Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, pp. 121-40.
- 5 Jonathan Myerson, quoted in Carol Midgley, ‘Chaucer? Not a lot of people know that’, *The Times*, 23 November 1998.
- 6 Peter Mack, ‘The Scholars’ Tales’.
- 7 The early episodes won BAFTA, Welsh BAFTA, and Emmy Awards in 1999.
- 8 Carol Midgley, ‘Chaucer? Not a lot of people know that’. The script was prepared by Jonathan Myerson and produced by BBC Wales and the Welsh independent channel S4C with some additional funding provided by BBC Education. The series is available on DVD and VHS and includes the pilgrimage framework and short adaptations of the tales of the Knight, Miller, Wife of Bath, Merchant, Squire, Franklin, Pardoner, Nun’s Priest, and Canon’s Yeoman. Ellis questions the value of “‘Chaucer made easy’” versions of this kind, *Chaucer at Large*, pp. 139-40.

- 9 A. A. Gill, 'The old, old, story', *Sunday Times*, 27 December 1998. For discussion of this series see Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, pp. 139-40.
- 10 Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, p. 158, limits this remark to the work of Martin Starkie in setting up the Chaucer Heritage Centre, but all Chaucerian tourist activities in the city could be seen to serve the same purpose.
- 11 Ellis argues the relative merits of these verse translations, concluding that the Coghill version is superior: see *Chaucer at Large*, pp. 111-17.
- 12 Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, p. 98.
- 13 Martin Riley, *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), p. 93. Riley's adaptation includes the tales of the Knight, Miller, Wife of Bath, Pardoner, and Nun's Priest. This text is in the Oxford Classic Playscripts series and includes a set of educational activities for Years 7 and 8 devised by Jenny Roberts, pp. 101-25.
- 14 *I racconti di Canterbury* came out in Italian and English as the second of Pasolini's 'Trilogy of Life' series of classic framed tales (*Decameron*, 1971; *Canterbury Tales*, 1972; and *Arabian Nights*, 1974). See discussion by Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, pp. 124-8.
- 15 Stage direction for Alison's earlier foray to the window, Riley, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 91.
- 16 Justin Parkinson, 'Chaucer's tales become rap songs', BBC News website, 28 July 2005, <news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4721073.stm>, accessed on 20 April 2006. Brinkman toured five countries in 2004 and was a hit at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. His work is available on CD, Baba Brinkman, *The Rap Canterbury Tales* (2004). The tales included are those of the Knight, Miller, Wife of Bath, and Pardoner, with the General Prologue and Chaucer's Retraction added for good measure.
- 17 'Chaucer in da house', *Guardian*, 12 August 2004.
- 18 Zoë Green, 'The Chaucerian Lucky Bag', *Scotsman*, 18 August 2004.
- 19 Mike Poulton, *Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales* (London: Nick Hern, 2005). The text includes condensed version of all the tales except Chaucer's 'Tale of Melibee', 'The Second Nun's Tale', and 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale', although the precise order of the Tales is not always preserved. The production was directed by RSC Associate Director, Gregory Doran, assisted by Rebecca Gatward and Jonathan Munby.
- 20 Poulton currently has an adaptation of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (c. 1469-70) under commission from the RSC.
- 21 Michael Billington, 'The Canterbury Tales', *Guardian*, 10 December 2005.
- 22 Poulton, *Canterbury Tales*, pp. 96-7. Poulton explains his method of modernizing the text, pp. xi-xii.
- 23 Carol Midgley, 'Chaucer? Not a lot of people know that'.
- 24 Nickolas Haydock, 'Arthurian Melodrama, Chaucerian Spectacle, and the Waywardness of Cinematic Pastiche in *First Knight* and *A Knight's Tale*', in Tom Shippey and Martin Arnold, eds, *Film and Fiction: Reviewing the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), p. 24.
- 25 Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 21.
- 26 Kathleen Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer: Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale*', *Chaucer Review*, 37.3 (2003), 259. See also Haydock, 'Arthurian Melodrama, Chaucerian Spectacle', pp. 28-33. Chaucer as writer also features in the Pasolini film of 1972, where he was played by the director himself.
- 27 For discussion of this series, see Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, pp. 121-4.
- 28 Douglas Gray, ed. and intro., *The Collected Papers of Nevill Coghill, Shakespearian & Medievalist* (Brighton: Harvester, 1988), p. ix.
- 29 Quoted in Gray ed., *Collected Papers*, p. ix.
- 30 For discussion and refutation of this approach to reading Chaucer, see A. C. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), pp. 101-36.
- 31 Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, p. 122.
- 32 'Chaucer's Bawdy Pantomime', *Radio Times*, 16 October 1969.
- 33 Henry Raynor, 'A Tolerable Compromise', *The Times*, 24 October 1969.
- 34 Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, vol. 1, *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 176-7.
- 35 <http://www.bbcamerica.com/britain/get_writing/get_writing_submission.jsp>, accessed 20 April 2006.
- 36 David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: Free Press, 1996), p. 171.
- 37 For discussion of this film, see Barbara P. Weinlich, "'Odyssey, Where Art Thou?'" Myth and Mythmaking in the Twenty-First Century', *Classical and Modern Literature* 25.2 (2005), 89-108.

- 38 Alan Plater, 'Learning the Facts of Life: Forty Years as a TV Dramatist', *New Theatre Quarterly* 19.3 (2003), 206. Ellis does not discuss this series in *Chaucer at Large*, referring to it only in a note, p. 195.
- 39 Michael Ratcliffe, 'Trinity Tales, BBC 2', *The Times*, 6 December 1975.
- 40 Albert Hunt, 'Alan Plater', in George W. Brandt, ed., *British Television Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), pp. 148-51.
- 41 Hunt, 'Alan Plater', p. 148.
- 42 Hunt, 'Alan Plater', p. 150.
- 43 Hunt, 'Alan Plater', p. 154.
- 44 Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, p. 190, n. 3, states that the 1969 series can be viewed in the BBC Broadcast Archives. At the time of writing I have been unable to ascertain the availability of the 1975 Plater series.
- 45 Both are currently available on DVD and the animated version is also available on video. Video of Baba Brinkman's Rap Canterbury Tales can be viewed via the internet, <<http://www.edfringe.com/area.html?id=62>>, accessed 20 April 2006.
- 46 *Canterbury Tales*, dir. John Mackay, Andy de Emmony, Marc Munden, and Julian Jarrold, BBC Worldwide, 2005.
- 47 For discussion of this aspect of Chaucerian studies, see for example, Trigg, *Congenial Souls*, pp. 145-52.
- 48 'The Miller's Tale': Peter Bowker (whose previous TV-series credits included *Undercover Heart*, *Casualty*, and *Peak Practice*); 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue (and Tale)': Sally Wainwright (whose previous TV-series credits included *At Home with the Braithwaites*, *Children's Ward*, *Emmerdale Farm*, and *Coronation Street*); 'The Knight's Tale': Tony Marchant (whose previous adaptations for TV included *Crime and Punishment* and *Great Expectations*); 'The Sea-Captain's (Shipman's) Tale': Avie Luthra (who had written and directed the film *Cross My Heart*); 'The Pardoner's Tale': Tony Grounds (whose previous TV-series credits included *Bodily Harm*, *Ghostbusters of East Finchley*, *Gone to Seed*, and *Gone to the Dogs*); and 'The Man of Law's Tale': Olivia Hetreed (who had written the screenplay for *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and whose previous TV credits included *What Katy Did* and *The Canterville Ghost*).
- 49 Peter Bowker, quoted in Stephen Pile, 'Tale Spin: Britain's best TV writers give Geoffrey Chaucer's classic a modern makeover', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'The Guide', 8-14 August 2005.
- 50 In Riley's text for high-school actors, 'Chaucer' is to be 'suspended in a strange comatose state between this world and the next; played until the last scene by a mannequin (or a very still person), *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 12.
- 51 References to the original text of *The Canterbury Tales* are from Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987).
- 52 Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity*, p. 136.
- 53 'Arty'/Arthur, the chief villain, uses his public speaking skills, reciting Shakespeare to distract tourists while his mates pick their pockets, and carefully frames his words to extract money from people in the pub, thus reflecting the admissions of deceptive speech made by Chaucer's Pardoner in his 'Prologue'.
- 54 Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, p. 127.
- 55 Forni, 'Reinventing Chaucer', p. 258.
- 56 Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, p. 121.

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