

Danielle Magnusson

6 June 2008

Political Spaces: Medieval Marginalia and Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*

In the *Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer places his solitary reference to contemporary social conditions within the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. The reference appears as one name mentioned once: that of Jack Straw. For Chaucer's contemporaries, this immediately links the playfulness of the *Tale* to the seriousness of the details surrounding Straw's life. Straw was one of several leaders in the Peasant's Revolt of 1381. The Revolt essentially marked the beginning of the end of English serfdom. Led by Wat Tyler, John Ball, and Jack Straw, in simplistic terms the Revolt came about as workers from various levels of society protested against the high taxes that supported the Hundred Years' War, and the low wages that came as a result of the Statute of Laborers, which maintained pre-Black Death pay rates. The participants of the revolt eventually gathered in and around London and demanded the attention of a government with which Chaucer was personally involved. In this essay I will reconstruct possible fourteenth century reactions to the *Tale*, concentrating on how it bears conventions of manuscript marginal art that can help to achieve something like the medieval experience of reading the *Tale*.

For many modern critics, the *Tale* appears as a unique window into the fourteenth century. The desire to look to the *Tale* for social artifacts has produced theories that suggest, for example, that Chauntecleer was a specific breed of chicken that Chaucer might have known: the Golden Spangled Hamburg. Other theories are more allegorically inspired. Some critics read the poor widow, the fox, and Chauntecleer as representations of contemporary interactions between the Church, heretics, and the clergy respectively. But there is one crucial area overlooked by modern scholarship, namely, how the *Tale* relates to contemporary aesthetics in forms of visual

art. The character construction is dependent on visual elements and a concern for exacting imagery. The *Tale* opens with a detailed description of the colorless living conditions of a poor widow, and follows with a catalogue of Chauntecleer's rainbow of physical characteristics. It is necessary to note that, in a *Tale* where most characters remain nameless or faceless, the Nun's Priest includes a methodical discussion of the rich vegetation and colors that fill the grounds surrounding the poor cottage. More attention is given to Chauntecleer's little garden kingdom than to character's behavior and actions.

Aside from the abundance of visual details found within the language of the *Tale*, the visual characteristics of specific manuscripts containing the *Nun's Priest's Tale* further complicates our discussion. The most lovely and ornate *Canterbury Tales* manuscript, and also one of the earliest, is the Ellesmere manuscript. The Ellesmere was produced in or around London between the years 1400 and 1410. In his essay, "The Ellesmere Chaucer and Contemporary English Literary Manuscripts," Derek Pearsall argues that the manuscript was probably commissioned by or for a member of the aristocracy or royalty. Evidence for this, as Pearsall notes, can be found in the apparent costliness of its preparation. At this point in the history of manuscript production such elaborate works were not made without a pricey commission or a moneyed prospective buyer in mind.

Leaving aside the societal history of the manuscript for now, let us describe the material document that is the Ellesmere manuscript. The text occupies twenty-nine quires of eight leaves of high-quality parchment. M.B. Parkes points out that the skin used was from uterine, or unweaned, calf, and that the follicle patterns demonstrate that animals of similar size were used and processed in a consistent manner. Pages throughout the manuscript have been carefully ruled for a running title in the top margin and for a single column of forty-eight lines of text. Unlike

the earliest *Canterbury Tale* manuscript, the Hengwrt, the Ellesmere was prepared with room for marginal detailing. Accordingly, space was made for a portrait of a pilgrim to appear at the beginning of each corresponding tale. It is important to note, as Parkes does, that alongside a particularly conscientious and well-read supervisor overseeing the Ellesmere manuscript's production, the "relationship between illustrations and decorations reveals close collaboration between the artists" (45). In other words, both textual and ornamental aspects of the Ellesmere bear literary merit.

Along with the Ellesmere manuscript's consistency of ornamentation, due to the conditions of production mentioned above, further consistency can be located within the text itself. Written in Anglicana Formata, scholars have long argued that the hand that produced the Ellesmere also produced the Hengwrt manuscript. This detail prompted scholar Linne Mooney to seek out the identity of this individual scribe. In a controversial article, she names Adam Pinkhurst as the scribe responsible for both the Hengwrt and the Ellesmere manuscripts and argues that Pinkhurst's enduring professional relationship with Chaucer suggests that these manuscripts represent our closest equivalent to Chaucer's authorial vision. This would imply that the physical composition of the Ellesmere directs us to Chaucer's own reading.

In order to speak to this topic, let us start with the Ellesmere portraits that launch each text. Richard Emmerson indicates that of all the portraits the Nun's Priest is "perhaps the least satisfactory miniature in both discursive and figural terms" (146). The portrait does not merely supply details missing from the textual description found in the *General Prologue*; this image is unique in that it seems to ignore the text altogether. Rather than delivering us a brawny figure with a thick neck and breast, eyes like a hawk, and a horse foul and lean—as the *Prologue* promises—the Ellesmere offers a thin figure, slumped slightly over the neck of a happy and

well-fed ride. In fact, the only thing robust about the Nun's Priest is his abundant, blond hair. There is a profound discrepancy between image and text. In essence, rather than serving to link the *Tale* back to the *General Prologue* and to the other pilgrims—as the other portraits manage to do—the Nun's Priest represents Ellesmere's single confounding portrait. The relationship between image and text is complicated and unorthodox from the start.

Here, it is necessary to place the portrait within the context of manuscript artwork in general. Medieval audiences were as inclined towards reading manuscript imagery, as they were towards reading text. Accordingly, as art historian Michael Camille points out in his book *Image on the Edge: the Margins of Medieval Art*, by the thirteenth century marginalia appears in a wide range of manuscripts. In her description of the evolution of marginalia, Barbara Shailor describes how the medieval world eased itself into the heavily marginalized texts of Gothic manuscripts by way of stepping-stone practices in manuscript production. The earliest decorative elements appeared in the form of ornate initials—only slightly larger than the primary text and usually showing up at the top of each leaf. Eventually these modest details developed into what is known as historiated initials, in which certain letters contain pictures that summarize the main text.

As for Camille, he acknowledges that in the Middle Ages imagery appeared within words themselves, and further argues that marginalia surfaced earlier and developed alongside historiated initials. He writes: “the periphery of the written page had existed in earlier periods and had even been the site of pictures, as in Byzantine and Anglo-Saxon psalters of the tenth century, where the side margins were the locus of often complex text illustrations” (18). Even earlier, in the eighth century, Camille asserts that the monastic scribe-illuminator was held with such reverence that occasionally his hand, which had relayed the Word of God, was preserved as a relic. However, by the fourteenth century scribes and illuminators were professionals whose

work was paid for by the page, and this shift from inspired creators to commercial servants, reflects a change in how the act of reading was approached. As the text evolved from being a cue for speech to a written document, reading practices moved from *meditatio* (in which monks uttered every word carefully for the purpose of memorization) to silent reading. While elaborate letters certainly developed into elaborate borders, the reasons behind this change were more closely tied to social conditions than to the habits of manuscript production. In the world of manuscripts, textual and visual literacies developed parallel to each other.

Aesthetic trends also deserve a place in this discussion. The Ellesmere was produced during, and influenced by, the Gothic art movement. Works known as Gothic appeared from the mid-twelfth to the fifteenth century, where it finally became regarded as the beginnings of Renaissance art. Known for its strong sense of narrative, both Christian and secular, the Gothic movement instigated an increasingly realistic and naturalistic departure from stiff Romanesque styles. Camille points out that “Gothic was the first historical style totally to permeate the world of things. Not just found in architecture, its pointed arches and tracery patterns appeared on everything from spoons to shoes. It is also the first truly international style, spreading throughout Europe” (12).

Just as the text of the *Tale* bears realistic historical and vegetative detail, the structure of the narrative borrows from the realm of manuscript artistry, and, more specifically, medieval marginalia. Medieval audiences read marginalia to relate social and human realities. As Camille points out, the imagery appearing around the outer edges of medieval manuscripts both amplified and satirized what was central to the text, to the church, and to the court. It was not uncommon, for instance, to see scatological imagery, monsters, animals, freakish humans, and copulating figures gracing the margins of religious texts and appearing in sculpture in churches and

monasteries. The prevalence of such imagery hints at the substantial social need for what might appear to modern audiences as inappropriate artistry. For medieval audiences, however, such imagery expresses a fundamental quality of the Gothic imagination. As an anti-model for the values upheld in church architecture, religious art, and, of course, texts, marginalia reflected an intense need for moral balance and for low risk outlets from orthodoxy. Camille writes: “The medieval image-world was, like medieval life itself, rigidly structured and hierarchical. For this reason, resisting, ridiculing, overturning and inverting it was not only possible, it was limitless. Every model had its opposite, inverse anti-model” (26). It is important to note that a firm belief in the order of things alone permitted representations of disorder at its edges. In all, margins became a place to faithfully acknowledge the fallen state of humanity. This is not, of course, to confuse marginal imagery with the carnivalesque. Camille draws a clear distinction between the two, arguing that while the carnivalesque festival took place generally at the center of a town or city, marginal imagery was never allowed within the central and therefore privileged text. In other words, the disorder of marginalia was only suitable for the margins.

The *Nun's Priest's Tale* is not simply a commentary on marginal art but, as I will argue, an inverse model of marginal ornamentation. Occupying the center of the *Tale* are figures that, more often than not, reside in textual and social margins. First, there is the poor widow, a nameless figure whose identifying markers consist of her poverty and marital status. It is the latter that effectively marginalizes her from the rest of medieval society. Lee Patterson explains that the “widow is virtually always a figure of mockery, but she is mocked less in fun than in outrage and even horror. The male fear of visual sexuality appears throughout misogynistic literature and is so profound a part of medieval life that it has left a mark even on the fugitive record of social history” (292). Next there is Chauntecleer, a figure who embodies the often

sexual nature of marginalia. According to bestial literature, such as the *Physiologus*, which is directly referenced in the *Tale*, roosters are strong symbols of overt sexuality. Then, there is Pertelote, who stands for the nagging and occasionally abrasive wife. Lastly, there is daun Russell the fox, an animal who frequently appears in medieval literature in order to symbolize heresy and the demonic. Of course, outside of didactic bestiary tales and epics, animals appear more often in the margins of texts than in the texts themselves. Even when animals are taken to illustrate a certain spiritual truth, as part of sermons that one could expect from a Nun's Priest, the animals are subordinate to the religious message. In this case, however, the animals appear to convey voices of authority instead of simply disappearing beneath them. As with marginal art, the Nun's Priest's audience is asked to consider figures that refuse to be either dismissed or taken too seriously.

Simply, the *Tale* is preoccupied with textual considerations. Within the text of the *Tale*, unlike other *Tales*, the character's actions occupy barely half the narrative. It is almost more appropriate to say that central to the *Tale* is the process of interpreting or reading dreams. For example, when Chauntecleer first awakes from his prophetic nightmare, his wife, Pertelote, diagnoses the dreams as symptomatic of the stomach vapors caused by overeating and recommends treatment by way of laxatives. What is noteworthy about this episode is that Pertelote actually offers an account of current medicinal practices. Her diagnosis and subsequent recommendations are in accord with medical authorities of the fourteenth century. Eventually, and in keeping with an emphasis on traditional voices of authority, the discussion of dreams leads to a debate between Chauntecleer and Pertelote over the validity of Cato's writings. Chauntecleer dismisses Cato's warnings against taking too much stock in dreams, pointing out that "men may in olde bookes rede / Of many a man moore of auctorite" (2974-2975). Not only

is the concept of textual authority being evoked by the very nature of the debate, but the characters also openly acknowledge the significance of textual authorities.

Even in terms of narrative structure, the *Tale* assumes a format that resembles a glossed text wherein the central text, in this case the story of Chauntecleer's capture, is visually encapsulated by authoritative commentary. Suggestively, when the characters do leave the confines of their Edenic yard—the fox drags Chauntecleer to the woods, and the widow and her household chase behind in a rescue effort—the marginal characters enter a marginal space. Chaucer offers the audience an inversion of Chauntecleer's garden kingdom. Essentially, in traveling to the margins (or in this case the forest) the characters cross a boundary between being figuratively marginal and becoming literally and geographically marginalized. In order for this transformation to be possible, however, a physical emptying of the central Edenic space is required. The fall of humanity, as expulsion from the Garden, is unabashedly evoked, and the punitive disruption of social order ensues. During the chase, the foolish Chauntecleer becomes clever; the quiet widow becomes obnoxiously loud; the witty fox makes simple mistakes; and Pertelote loses her voice. What occurs, however, is that narrative balance is restored and the central figures are allowed to remain central, even when they go into the margins. The *Tale* could perhaps be read as antithetical to the position taken by Bernard of Clairvaux, who famously complained that the distraction of grotesque marginal art risked harming the spiritual self.

Not distracting in the least, Chaucer's marginal figures preserve positions of centrality by comedic means. Traditional subjects of marginal Gothic art occupy a centralized position in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. The details of both Chauntecleer and the fox are so carefully drawn—including, for example, the colors of their ears and toenails—that modern critics discuss them in terms of Chaucer's familiarity with local husbandry. However, it is perhaps more useful to read



such information in terms of the increasing mimetic nature of the Gothic style. Other *Tales* offer portraits of pilgrims that either corresponds to that specific pilgrim or caricaturize commonly held assumptions about the profession of the pilgrim. But the Ellesmere manuscript suggests that the relationship between portrait and *Tale* is not that simple. In the Nun's Priest's Tale, the imagery is embedded within the text itself, and accordingly, the portrait is emptied of meaning.

The reference to Jack Straw and the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 is unsurprising in a *Tale* that, more than any other *Canterbury Tale*, embraces the Gothic imagination. What is surprising, however, is that the reference appears in connection to Chauntecleer's chase. In describing the noise the widow and her entourage make, the Nun's Priest adds "Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee / Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille / Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille" (3394-3396). The timing of this reference—Chaucer's marginal characters are traveling towards the spatial margins of their familiar world—suggests that Straw is a figure whose actions belong outside controlled space. More precisely, this political reference connotes chaos and anxiety. Camille establishes that marginalia articulates very real social anxieties, and that, in fact, it embodies man's fallen nature. In the case of Chaucer's reference to Jack Straw, marginalia places Straw at the edge of the narrative activity and allows the fears of the poet and conservative member of the court to surface. As a work that brings the fears of—in this case a privileged—society into a central position, the *Tale* is the unmistakable product of a Gothic imagination that sought the triumph of order, while reserving spaces in the margins for art as a form of visual literacy. For contemporary audience members with access to illuminated manuscripts—as the wealthy patron of the Ellesmere surely would have been—Chaucer is clearly using the conventions of marginalia to achieve an anticipated end by way of an unanticipated route.

Works Cited

- Camille, Michael. *Gothic Art: Glorious Visions*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996.
- Camille, Michael. *Image on the Edge: the Margins of Medieval Art*. Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1992.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. New York: Oxford U Press, 1988.
- Emmerson, Richard K. "Text and Image in the Ellesmere Portraits of the Tale-Tellers." *The Ellesmere Chaucer: Essays in Interpretation*. Ed. Martin Stevens and Daniel Woodward. San Marion: Huntington Library, 1995.
- Hotson, J. L. "Colfax vs. Chauntecleer." *PMLA* 39 (1924): 762-781.
- Parkes, M. B. "The Planning and Construction of the Ellesmere Manuscript." *The Ellesmere Chaucer: Essays in Interpretation*. Ed. Martin Stevens and Daniel Woodward. San Marion: Huntington Library, 1995.
- Patterson, Lee. *Chaucer and the Subject of History*. Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1991.
- Pearsall, Derek. "The Ellesmere Chaucer and Contemporary English Literary Manuscripts." *The Ellesmere Chaucer: Essays in Interpretation*. Ed. Martin Stevens and Daniel Woodward. San Marion: Huntington Library, 1995.
- Sekules, Veronica. *Medieval Art*. Oxford history of art. Oxford: Oxford U Press, 2001.
- Shailor, Barbara. *The Medieval Book*. Medieval Academy reprints for teaching, 28. Toronto: University of Toronto Press in association with the Medieval Academy of America, 1991.

