Fun and Comedy in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*

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In "The Canterbury Tales," Chaucer employs humour through satire and irony, frequently mocking societal norms and human vices. By depicting himself as a naive and bumbling character, he critiques others while preserving an appearance of innocence. This dual technique enriches the narrative, making it entertaining, funny and thought-provoking.

One of the first things we learn when studying "The Canterbury Tales" is that its author, Geoffrey Chaucer, is often referred to as "the father of English poetry." He was the first major poet to write in English, as opposed to Italian, Latin, or French, which were the preferred languages of the educated class in the late fourteenth century. Consequently, the entire tradition of English literature traces back to Chaucer. While he is worthy of great respect, this often leads readers to feel they must approach "The Canterbury Tales" with reverence and solemnity.

However, "The Canterbury Tales" is fundamentally about entertaining its audience. The central premise involves a group of pilgrims engaging in a storytelling contest to alleviate the tedium of their journey. They aren't vying to tell the most uplifting or intellectually enriching stories; they aim to be the most entertaining (though some do insert moral tales about spiritual correctness). Featuring performers competing for attention, the book resembles a court jester performing acrobatics for the king's amusement more than it does the serious literature it is often categorized with. Chaucer was a storyteller who did whatever it took to keep his audience engaged.

Like a jester, Chaucer's audience was the royal court. Throughout his adult life, he served in royal households, starting with Elizabeth of Ulster and eventually becoming the valet to the king. Later, he moved from domestic service to political roles better suited to his intellect. By all accounts, including his poetry, Chaucer was incredibly intelligent. His intellect alone could have secured his success in government, but there have always been knowledgeable yet unremarkable functionaries. Chaucer, however, was a true Renaissance man, excelling in multiple areas, each enhancing the other. His stories and poems ensured that England's rulers knew who Geoffrey Chaucer was.

During Chaucer's tenure, the court he served expanded. Historically, the English government was mobile, addressing legal matters across the kingdom when reliable communication systems didn't exist and due to the practical need to support the large number of officials. As Derek Brewer explains in "Chaucer in His Time," "such large gatherings were difficult to feed at a time when communications were slow and almost every household had to be self-sufficient. The court had to move about the country so as to spread the burden of its maintenance." This changed in 1382 when King Richard II married Anne of Bohemia and established a permanent court based on the French court in Paris and the Papal court in Avignon. The court's size grew, with many royals and their numerous attendants. In this crowded environment, Chaucer's reputation as a poet and wit, known even in France and Italy, made him all the more relevant. A wit can become tiresome when they run out of material, but Chaucer's cleverness ensured he always had new stories and methods.

We often view jesters as self-deprecating fools willing to humiliate themselves to amuse the royal family. Modern performers receive more respect if considered artists, while mere entertainers are seen as somewhat embarrassing. What they share with Chaucer's "performance" in "The Canterbury Tales" is the continuous effort to innovate, line after line, sentence after sentence, valuing attention over respect.

It may be difficult for some contemporary readers to accept that the primary purpose of the tales is to entertain, even when the Host focuses on that as the purpose of each narration. Some of the tales seem just too complex, too tied up in learning to fit in with modern standards, which separate learning from entertainment and see them as being mutually exclusive. Still, if the purpose of entertainment is to keep one interested, then some education is bound to become part of the process. And if the main lever of humour is, as many have claimed, the element of surprise, then the most amusing tales are the ones that establish a sense of familiarity that they can eventually disturb.

The characters traveling to Canterbury are an irreverent group, even though many of them belong to religious orders.

Like all great humourists, Chaucer uses hyperbole and exaggeration to elicit laughter. His corrupt clergy are not just slightly evil; they are shockingly bad. Take the Pardoner, for example. This man is shameless in his relentless pursuit of money through the sale of indulgences (pardons for sins), keeping most of the profits for himself instead of giving them to the church. He brazenly admits to weighting a brass cross with stones to make it look like gold and confesses that his supposed saints' relics are actually pig bones. He even attempts to sell indulgences to his fellow travellers, violating the rules of their journey. His audacity and the stark contrast between his supposed holy role and his greedy, deceitful behaviour are so extreme that we can't help but laugh.

Similarly, the Wife of Bath completely subverts the ideal of a wife as loving, submissive, and obedient, to a hilariously exaggerated extent. She openly admits to marrying older men for their money, not for love, and quickly takes control of the relationships in her first four marriages. Instead of being submissive and kind, she is feisty, manipulative, and challenging, psychologically tormenting her husbands until she meets her match with her fifth and final one.

These characters are so blown out of proportions that we inevitably end up laughing.

Chaucer skilfully contrasts the idealized public personas with the true inner identities of his characters, often with humorous results. Generally, the more "noble" a pilgrim appears, the more corrupt they reveal themselves to be, although there are exceptions.

Take the Pardoner, for instance. As an agent of the Church, he sells indulgences to forgive sins and reduce time in purgatory. However, he's portrayed as unscrupulous, keeping the donations meant for the Church and profiting from fake relics sold to peasants. His behavior, including hints of potential homosexuality condemned by the Church, underscores his lack of true devotion.

Similarly, the Friar is supposed to live in poverty and aid the needy. Instead, he's depicted as lecherous, frequently seducing young women whom he then arranges to marry off after impregnating them. Despite his role in collecting alms, he's more interested in accepting bribes.

These examples highlight Chaucer's satirical approach to exposing hypocrisy and human flaws, using irony and wit to critique societal norms and individual behaviours within the context of medieval England.

The tale that uses the broadest humour is undoubtedly the Miller's Tale, which exists solely to depict an unpleasant man, a "riche gnof," getting his comeuppance. It's a straightforward joke about a man who thinks he'll survive a flood while everyone else drowns, unaware that his wife and lodger are sleeping together in his bed. The most noteworthy aspect is its silliness, including an episode of a man breaking wind in another man's face. This flatulence episode is entirely inappropriate for the story but its absurdity is what makes it funny: readers expect the drunken Miller to be tasteless, despite the Host's warnings to mind his manners. This concern fades as the story unfolds into a mild tale of adultery until an unnecessary character suddenly appears. Readers anticipate vulgarity but are still surprised by it.

The Pardoner's Tale uses a similar comedic device, where bad people unwittingly cause their own downfall. The story has a surprise, ironic ending where the man who prepared poisonous drinks is stabbed, and the men who did the stabbing unknowingly drink the poison. There is a deeper layer here: while the Miller delivers the crude story expected of him, the Pardoner tells a tale of conventional morality but is actually a con man selling religious icons. Chaucer doesn't emphasize this contradiction, but it's clear and makes the story more engaging. The same irony is present in "The Prioress's Tale": her introduction suggests a shy, gentle soul, but the tale reveals a bloodthirsty anti-Semite. In both cases, Chaucer provides a text—the tale—and a context—the personality of the teller—that contrast with each other. Modern comedy might achieve similar results with an unscrupulous character posing as a priest or politician or a meek character suddenly displaying ferocity.

Chaucer the Pilgrim appears irresistibly drawn to Prioress, yet he subtly raises doubts about her devotion through several observations. Firstly, her oath to St. Loy (St. Eligius), known for his past as a goldsmith before joining the Church, contrasts with the expected solemnity of saints like St. Jerome. Secondly, a true Prioress would avoid using oaths altogether, even mild ones. Thirdly, she goes by the secular-sounding "Madame Eglantine" rather than a religious name from the Bible, further suggesting her worldly leanings. Chaucer the Poet skilfully presents these details to his audience, inviting them to recognize his gentle satire of a woman whose secular attributes overshadow her religious ones.

Similarly, in the portrait of the Friar, Chaucer the Pilgrim provides a damning assessment while missing the irony and humor embedded in his observations. The Friar, described as "wantowne and a merye" (pleasure-loving and merry), belongs to an affluent order of Friars and has

So much of social graces and elegant language, /He had made very many a marriage/Of young women at his own cost. (General Prologue:211-213)

The Prologue presents a world of worldly values, concerned with appearances, half-knowledge, and subjective criteria. This poem's ethic is worldly, not constituting a definite attitude but an observation. The comic irony ensures readers do not identify with this ethic. Mathew Arnold criticizes Chaucer's poetry for lacking "high seriousness." This is true, but the "lack" is deliberate on Chaucer's part: he doesn't want to make absolute moral judgments, instead letting readers draw their own conclusions. Chaucer's humour, irony, and comedic inventiveness are what make his work modern and successful even today.

Many stories in this book deal with deception—the potential to mislead with words and the resulting consequences. Sometimes decent people use deception, such as Arcite in "The Knight's Tale," who disguises himself to enter Emily's court, or Aurelius in "The Franklin's Tale," who tricks Dorigene to make her leave her husband. Others deceive for greed, like the fox charming Chaunticleer in "The Nun's Priest's Tale," and the three thieves in "The Pardoner's Tale" plotting to kill each other for more gold. Some characters deceive for noble reasons, teaching others a lesson. The "old woman" in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" pretends to be old and ugly until the knight learns to respect women beyond superficial beauty.

The tales hardest to recognize as entertainment don't find humour at the expense of a braggart, poseur, or deluded fool. Some tales, like the Knight's and the Franklin's, celebrate noble behaviour and mourn the tragedy of a good person's death. Though not funny, these tales fit loosely into the definition of humour as surprise. Not all surprises are humorous, but a basic element of gallows humour is nearby, even in serious events. Arcite's fall from his horse in "The Knight's Tale" could be seen as a deadpan punchline contrasting the lengthy battle preparation and combat. Similarly, Arveragus in "The Franklin's Tale" could be seen as a comic buffoon for being so committed to keeping his vow that he's willing to give up his beloved wife. In each case, Chaucer sets up and then demolishes readers' expectations so subtly they don't even notice Chaucer's presence, focusing instead on the characters telling the stories.

The main similarity between contemporary stand-up comedy and "The Canterbury Tales" is the desperation required in both. Comedy, often dismissed as mere entertainment, can make audiences think but only when it has their attention. Some comedians draw attention to themselves but once they have that attention, they have nothing to say; others have serious points but forget to entertain. The best performers can make audiences think while also acknowledging that, in some ways, they are the successors of the court jester, who would do anything—jump, shout, ring bells—to arrest the audience's attention. This tradition of the entertainer is often overlooked by those who read Chaucer as if he were merely an icon. His tales can be vulgar or sentimental, didactic or warm-hearted, but he was unafraid to use any trick at his disposal—and he had many—to ensure they remained interested.

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