Translating the Canterbury Tales into Contemporary Media
Timothy L. Stinson

In this essay, I describe an assignment that asks students to recast selections from *The Canterbury Tales* into genres and time periods familiar to them (e.g. mafia movies, situational comedies, reality shows) in order to help them to understand the performative nature of the tales and to experience the processes of recomposition and reinterpretation integral to medieval authorship. The performative nature of the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* is widely acknowledged, from Palamon's soliloquies to the theatricality of the Wife of Bath's prologue. The narratives of many of the tales, meanwhile, are borrowed directly from the works of earlier poets, and were often themselves reworked by Chaucer's followers. I use the Nun's Priest's Tale as an example of how such an assignment can enrich student interaction with *The Canterbury Tales*, although the practice works equally well with many other tales.

The Nun's Priest's Tale is a famously deft interweaving of diverse medieval genres and thematic foci. At one level, that of an animal fable that tells the story of a proud, amorous rooster who is tricked by – and in turn tricks – a sly fox, the story has an immediate appeal to students reading it for the first time. But there is much interspersed throughout this tale that is challenging and quite foreign. We have a fox who quotes Boethius, a discussion of the influence of the humors on health, references to medieval rhetoricians and grammarians, classical allusions, dream theory from the fifth-century philosopher Macrobius, and more. While the students' affections for the fable provide a good point of departure, instructors also have quite a bit of work to do in order to bridge the alterities that twenty-first-century readers encounter in this tale, including unfamiliar language, allusions, genres, and literary techniques.

Chaucer was very fond of moving stories from one environment to another, and of combining multiple stories or genres in one work. This can be a difficult concept to demonstrate, however, when students are unfamiliar with any of the genres or narrative conventions in play. Telling students that the Nun's Priest's Tale is a fusion of beast fable and mock heroic tragedy interwoven with courtly romance conventions and encyclopedic traditions means little to them. Thus I prepare my students for the assignment by using source texts that help them to gain familiarity with Chaucer's world. We read short excerpts in translation from Caxton's *Aesop's Fables*, Marie de France's "Cock and the Fox," *Le Roman de Renart*, Macrobius, and others. These provide important context, allowing students to understand Chaucer's processes of composition and helping them to decipher some of the many allusions and casual learned asides that populate this tale. Some student editions contain such source texts in appendices (e.g., the Norton edition of *The Canterbury Tales* edited by Kolve and Olson), or the sources can be supplied as handouts or through online resources.

In addition to providing historicizing texts and documents, I also try to find ways to relate the text to works, genres, and modes of fiction that my students know best and most intuitively, particularly conventions of film and television. Even if they are not versed in the theory of these media or used to thinking and writing critically about them, they are at least

almost invariably consumers of film and television, and this supplies them with expectations and assumptions from which I can build. Thus I often show the Emmy Award-winning animated version of the Nun's Priest's Tale produced by Schlessinger Media. Animation seems a particularly apt medium for the Nun's Priest's Tale. Chaucer's story opens with a brief rendering of the poor widow, her world depicted in stark black and white. We are told that "No wyn ne drank she, neither whit ne reed; / Hir bord was served moost with whit and black" (VII.2831-32), and her humble cottage is sketched similarly – its interior is depicted as sooty. But Chauntecler and his barnyard companions burst suddenly into the poem in bright colors that would be right at home in a Saturday morning cartoon. He has a comb redder than coral, legs like azure, nails whiter than lily flowers, and feathers like burnished gold.[1] What better genre to contain his colorful anthropomorphic antics than an animated short? The familiarity of the genre, meanwhile, facilitates discussions among students on topics as diverse as the medieval and modern uses of anthropomorphism, the significance of authors working within and against genre expectations, and the intended audience of various genres of narrative fiction.

These preliminary steps prepare my students to become participants in the types of authorial roles and acts commonly found in medieval literature, including redaction, synthesis, and transformation. As Mary Hamel has written, "[f]ew if any Middle English texts . . . were 'original' in the sense 'not derived from something else'; the expectation was that any Middle English work would be derivative to a greater or lesser degree" (204). Appropriating, splicing, altering, and adapting narratives are the very acts through which works such as the Nun's Priest's Tale were written, and they are activities at which our students can be surprisingly adept. It is worth noting that the routine integration of text and image that we see daily on computer screens, the recombinant nature of electronic texts, and the idea that anyone may copy, alter, edit, and retransmit a document – all of which most of our students experience daily –have strong parallels in medieval texts and acts of textual transmission. And additionally, many of these features translate well to other media such as video and film.

Students are asked to translate the Nun's Priest's Tale to a new medium and a new genre, and to produce a short skit or video (many university libraries will loan video cameras to students). The results are often inspired, demonstrating thoughtful, creative responses that genuinely grapple with Chaucer's work. For example, one group recast the tale as a *60 Minutes*-style newsmagazine program. The subject of dreams and their problems and treatments thus became the subject of investigative journalism. Are dreams able to tell the future? Do they have physical causes? Do dreams hold a power that we can harness to help ourselves? The skit featured a nervous young man in the role of Chauntecler who could not sleep because of his nighttime dreams and daytime anxieties. An urban dweller, he was fearful of violent crimes and troubled by visions of being mugged on the street. His condition is worsened by a steady diet of violent television programming, junk food, and questionable self-help books (the students slyly worked in a reference to *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, the title of which no doubt might send our hero Chauntecler into another fit of anxiety). The part of Pertelote is transformed into a psychiatrist with an interest in alternative herbal therapies. The nervous young man's dreams prove prophetic when he is approached by a mugger (i.e.,

[1] See Hussey pp. 33-4 for a discussion of this duality between humans and animals in the tale.

the fox) who first convinces him that they know one another from a party and then produces a handgun. But the situation is reversed when the protagonist alleges that the mugger has no pizzazz – he mugs with no style, and handles his weapon ungracefully. Concerned over his image, the mugger hands over the weapon for some style pointers, and the tables are turned.

In this example, the students showed a deep understanding of the medieval work of fiction in their reimagining of it. They were able to deliver conventions of programs like *60 Minutes* to a knowing and appreciative audience, and to weave in other generic conventions as well (the exchange between mugger and would-be victim was more sitcom than news programming). They understood that today's expert on dreams would be a psychiatrist, and the narrator read bits of Freud in the voiceover, for certainly he has taken the place of Macrobius in our minds as a household name concerning the interpretation of dreams. And whereas Chauntecler delivers a series of stories or vignettes related to dreams from Cicero, the Bible, and books on dream theory, the students rendered this as a series of narratives from more familiar sources, including a Lifetime movie, a self-help book, and the evening news. In producing these parallels, the students were engaged critically with the tale: How was it assembled and from what parts? How does it use the knowledge and experiences of its audience for both humor and instruction? What current texts, genres, and medical theories parallel those from Chaucer's day? The assignment provides students with a new model for engaging with medieval texts, a new incentive for close reading that supplements traditional research and writing assignments, and a deeper understanding of both the performative nature of *The Canterbury Tales* and the ways in which medieval authors used their source texts.

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