

‘To demen by interrogaciouns’:
 Accessing the Christian Context
 of the *Canterbury Tales*
 with Enquiry-Based Learning

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THERE WOULD APPEAR to be a need for fresh pedagogic initiatives to assist students in accessing Christian context while continuing to enjoy freedom of interpretation and individual response. Can ecclesiastical and sacramental dimensions only be restored to Chaucer’s work by the delivery of extensive didactic inputs in traditional lecture form? If so, at what point should these be delivered? To present extensive context to students *in advance* of their reading the primary texts risks compounding a sense of the alterity of medieval literature and supplies a further barrier to immediate engagement with Chaucer (alongside the linguistic challenges of reading Middle English).¹ Equally, to present religious context *retrospectively* once students have read the primary texts or even concomitantly with their study of the texts can imply that the process of uncovering Christian allusion is a rather mechanistic process, hardly an organic part of the initial reading experience. What would seem to be required is a supplementary teaching method whereby undergraduate study of Chaucer may include active engagement with Christian context from the outset.

‘To demen by interrogaciouns’

Such a teaching method is available in a pedagogic model that proceeds from a principle of enquiry and discovery. Practised originally in medical disciplines in the 1970s, ‘problem-based learning’ (PBL) or ‘enquiry-based learning’ (EBL) advocates an approach in which students are given an initial impetus to investigate a new field of knowledge by approaching it from an investigative or exploratory aspect. Like Nicholas in Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale* with his astrological investigations, students engaged in an enquiry-based activity proceed by asking questions,

¹ The challenge of the perceived otherness or alterity of medieval literature is famously elaborated by Hans Robert Jauss, ‘The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature’, *New Literary History* 10 (1979), 181–228.

to ‘demen by interrogaciouns’ (I 3194). As defined in one of the most influential anthologies on the teaching method,

Problem-based learning is a way of constructing and teaching courses using problems as the stimulus and focus for student activity. . . . Problem-based courses start with problems rather than with exposition of disciplinary knowledge. They move students towards the acquisition of knowledge through a staged sequence of problems presented in context, together with associated learning materials and support from teachers.²

The present essay explores the value of adapting the EBL format to enable students to access Chaucer’s religious contexts. My case-study, the *Miller’s Tale*, is a central text in Chaucer syllabuses and a fabliau with a surprisingly high quotient of Christian allusion. As early as line 17 of the *Miller’s Prologue* the drunken Miller is interrupting the Host ‘in Pilates voys’ and swearing by the Passion ‘By armes, and by blood and bones’ (3124–5). The tale itself of course, is mischievously advertised as ‘a legende and a lyf / Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf’ (3141–2) and in the ensuing fabliau – the comic denouement of which turns upon a shared knowledge of the biblical story of the Flood – allusions are included to the hymn *Angelus ad Virginem*, the performance of ‘Cristes owne werkes’ (3308) at the parish church, the ecclesiastical duties of parish clerk Absolon, mystery plays, Ss Thomas, Frideswide and Benedict and the singing of lauds by friars.

All these allusions and the wider Christian hinterland of the poem can be illuminated by an enquiry-based approach where students are asked to explore two key literary questions. First, what is the relationship between religion and superstition in the tale, turning as it does upon the beguiling of a ‘lewed man’ by an undergraduate? Second, what is the relationship between sacred and profane in the poem, fond as it is of urging blasphemous juxtapositions of sexuality and spirituality upon us? These questions are designed to draw upon students’ existing (modern) conceptions of piety, superstition and blasphemy so that these may form entry-points into the text, and hopefully take them beyond assuming such conceptions are entirely universal in all respects.

Superstition or Religion?

What is the relationship between devout piety and credulous superstition in the *Miller’s Tale*? Of course, according to fabliau convention, we are not to scrutinize any character too far beyond a functional role in a plot centred upon themes of competition and sexual assertion. However, Chaucer nuances the portrait of John sufficiently that we are justified in exploring how far the character is to be seen as cruelly duped by Nicholas or as culpably gullible and wilfully credulous, courting disaster and wreaking his own undoing even as he avers:

Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee.
Ye, blessed be alwey a lewed man
That noght but oonly his bileve kan! (I 3455–7)

² *The Challenge of Problem-Based Learning*, ed. David Boud and Grahame Feletti (London, 1991), p. 14.

Critical views of John's character have varied. Robertson observes pertinently that when John accepts that a new Flood is imminent he overlooks 'as a "lewed man" that "oonly his bileve kan" the promise of Gen. 9.15' – that promise being that there will be no repeat of the deluge.³ Ellis finds sufficient textual evidence for judging that Chaucer depicts a 'self-deluded fool';⁴ Patterson detects an ominous quality in the silencing of the artisan's voice by his humiliation and cuckolding,⁵ while Pearsall does not see John as 'a special target of ridicule. In fact, he is quite affectionately portrayed'.⁶ An enquiry-based seminar might start with comparison of key passages of the text with contemporaneous Middle English material. For example, for John's 'nyght-spel', students might draw upon such revealing contextual materials as the following fifteenth-century charm against thieves:

I Coniour hem in the name of the ffader, and sone, and holy gost;
 in hem ys vertu al-ther-most!
 In the bygynnyng & in the ending,
 And in the vertu of Al thing
 ys, & was, & euer schal be-
 In the vertu of the holy trinite –
 By the vertu of euery masse,
 that euer was seyde, more & lasse –
 In the vertu or erbe, gras, ston, & tre –
 And in the vertu that euer may be:
 yf here come eny fon
 me to robbe, other me to sclon; they stond as style ass eny ston,
 they haue no powere away to gon,
 By the vertu of the holy trinite,
 Tylle they haue lyve of me.
 lord iesu, Graunte me pys,
 as 3e ben in heuen blys.⁷

Like John's 'white *pater noster*' this prays for divine protection from wrong-doers. Such material attests that, however credulous John may appear, there is a documentary context for his fervent piety. Another example is this charm 'ffor the ny3the-mare':

Take a flynt stone þat hath an hole thorow of hys owene growing, & hange it
 ouer þe stabill dore, or ell ouer, horse, and ell writhe þis charme:

In nomine Patris &c.
 Seynt Iorge, our lady kny3th.
 he walked day, he walked ny3th,
 toll pat he fownde pat fowle wy3th;
 & whan þat he here fownde,
 he here bete & he here bownde,
 till trewly per here trowthe sche ply3th
 þat sche scholde not come be ny3the,

³ D. W. Robertson Jr, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, 1962), p. 385.

⁴ Roger Ellis, *Patterns of Religious Narrative in the Canterbury Tales* (Beckenham, 1981), p. 285.

⁵ "'No man his reson herde": Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the *Canterbury Tales*', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 86 (1987), 457–95.

⁶ Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London and New York, 1985), p. 172.

⁷ *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. Rossell Hope Robbins (Oxford, 1952), p. 58.

With-Inne vij rode of londe space
 þer as Seynt Ieorge i-namyd was.⁸

Eamon Duffy presents such charms within a context, in a way that may give dismissive modern readers pause for thought, and bring Chaucer's text into relationship with more esoteric areas of the corpus of Middle English literature.⁹ But these are written survivals of what, by its nature, was to be spoken: the property of the uneducated as well as those who wrote them down. And Chaucer's text renders John foolish, not just merely 'lewed', by the ironies in what he says, obvious to the reader but not to himself: he is the one who cannot see – who 'woot litel what hym shal bityde' (3450). And Chaucer soon makes explicit his mental blindness: 'Men may dyen of ymaginacioun' (3611). Students also gain from help with seeing not just the existence of such charms in Chaucer's period but from some sense of how to 'place' them in the period: how activities like such garbled prayers and charms may, within the culture, be associated with educationally backward groups or have a specific contemporary political resonance: Alan Fletcher shows how at this period conservative clerics were actually encouraging traditional religious practices and discouraging a questioning attitude.¹⁰

Blasphemy or Bawdry?

A second question students might explore in an enquiry-based seminar on the *Miller's Tale* is how are we to respond to the repeated and startling juxtaposition of sexual and sacred elements in a text, where the 'revel' and 'melodye' of love-making mingle with the strains of devotional song, where Nicholas courts Alison in an apparent parody of the Annunciation, and where parish clerk Absolon sings snatches of love songs at windows in the hope of a midnight tryst?¹¹ Are these to be viewed as blasphemy or cheerful bawdry? Are such juxtapositions characteristic or atypical of the age? Old-fashioned 'dramatic' criticism might attribute this conflation of secular and sacred discourses to the character of the drunken Miller. The text, after all, ends with this final mischievous and unconventional rhymed blessing:

And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.
 This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte! (3853–4)

Within the tale itself there are some similarly startling juxtapositions. Nicholas makes his brash and explicit approach to Alison hard upon his singing of the devotional *Angelus ad Virginem* (a hymn celebrating the Incarnation); shortly after swearing by St Thomas of Kent to keep an adulterous tryst with Nicholas, Alison is making for church 'Cristes owene werkes for to werke' (3308); the clerk who

⁸ Ibid, p. 61

⁹ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven and London, 1992), 266–87.

¹⁰ 'The Faith of a Simple Man: Carpenter John's Creed in the *Miller's Tale*', *Medium Ævum* 61 (1991), 96–105.

¹¹ As Helen Cooper observes, 'motifs of the Flood and the "legende" of a carpenter and his wife are secularized to a point of near-blasphemy', *The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford Guides to Chaucer (Oxford, 1989), p. 101.

officiates at that church is meanwhile sketched as vainglorious and much distracted from spiritual concerns:

This Absolon, that jolif was and gay,
 Gooth with a sencer on the haliday,
 Sensynge the wyves of the parisshe faste;
 And many a lovely look on hem he caste,
 And namely on this carpenteris wyf.
 To looke on hire hym thoughte a myrie lyf,
 She was so propre and sweete and likerous.
 I dar wel seyn, if she hadde been a mous,
 And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon.
 This parissch clerk, this joly absolon,
 Hath in his herte swich a love-longynge
 That of no wyf took he noon offrynge;
 For curteisie, he seyde, he wolde noon. (3339–51)

The juxtaposition of Nicholas and Alison's consummated lust with 'the belle of laudes' and singing of 'freres in the chauncel' (3653–6) has seemed to exegetical critics highly significant while others, such as Pearsall, counsel against taking earnest for game: 'The church and its activities are present in the poem as part of its naturalistic setting, part of the texture of town-life, and not, except in [a] jocular way, as a reminder to us of what the characters ought to be busy about.'¹² Students might draw upon the fifteenth-century lyric preserved in manuscript Sloane 2593, voiced by a girl enamoured of holy water clerk Jankyn. In a set of pronounced juxtapositions, the courtship of the speaker takes place within the context of corporate worship and liturgy; the Yuletide procession, the offering at the Mass, the reading and the ringing of the sanctus bell at the consecration of the host form the reckoning points for the progress of the couple's relationship:

As I went on 30l day in owr prosessyon,
 Knew I Ioly Iankyn be his mery ton.
 [kyrieleyson.]

Iankyn be-gan þe offys on þe 30l day,
 & 3yt me þynkyt ot dos me good, so merie gan he say
 kyrieleyson.

Iankyn red þe pystyl ful fayr & ful wel,
 & 3yt me þinkyt it dos me good, as euere haue I sel.

Iankyn at þe sanctus crakit a merie note,
 & 3yt me þinkyt it dos me good – I payed for his cote.
 [kyrieleyson.]

Iankyn crakit notes an hunderid on a knot,
 & 3yt he hakkyt hem smaller þan wortes to þe pot.
 [kyrieleyson.]

Jankyn begins a game of footsie as the pax bread is solemnly circulated around the church:

¹² Pearsall, *Canterbury Tales*, p. 175.

Iankyn at þe agnus beryt þe pax brede,
 he twynkelid, but sayd nowt, & on myn fot he trede.

Yet the light-hearted tone gives way to a mournful coda:

Benedicamus domino, cryst fro schame me schyld.
 Deo gracias þerto – alas, I go with chyld!¹³

This short lyric both affords students a useful glimpse into medieval liturgy and church ritual and reveals that the currency of fabliau elements is widely spread in late-medieval England: Chaucer's tale's juxtaposition of secular and sacred is not without analogies. When students only read Chaucer it is all too easy for them to jump to the natural conclusion that such a juxtaposition on his part can only be original to him and betoken the deepest condemnation of what is going on, on religious grounds. Instead, the lyric illustrates, such juxtapositions, shocking even to moderns without strong religious beliefs, are more common in medieval humour and culture.

This theme of sacred and profane in the *Miller's Tale* can also be illuminated with reference to the English mystery cycles. The Miller's 'Pilates voys' (3124), and Absolon's involvement in a high-profile role – 'He pleyeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye' (3384) – and the evocation of the cycles' treatment of Noah's Flood with its negative portrayal of Noah's wife.¹⁴ Many extant pageants introduce a fabliau sensibility and apparent irreverence into their treatment of the most sombre and serious biblical episodes. Particularly illustrative for the *Miller's Tale* is the N-Town *Trial of Joseph and Mary*.¹⁵ Here Joseph and Mary put in an anachronistic appearance in a medieval court as they are summoned to appear in the company of an assortment of caricatured names for malefactors apparently drawn from an English city – 'Johan Jurdon', 'Geffrey Gyle', 'Malkyn mylkedoke', 'Thom tynkere' and others. After initial banter by the Summoner, the reverend characters of Joseph and Mary and the miracle of Christ's Incarnation are subjected to a fabliau-like reading, whereby a group of detractors cast Mary as the young faithless wife, the aged Joseph as the old jealous but impotent husband, and the incarnate Christ as the offspring of a local rake.

The detractors' depiction of Joseph as *senex amans*, the lustful old husband of fabliau tradition, is closely akin to the presentation of John the Carpenter:

ijus detractor
 3a þat old schrewe joseph my trowth I plight
 was so Anameryd upon þat mayd
 þat of hyre bewte whan he had sight
 He sesyd nat tyll had here a-sayd. (49–52)

Completing the fabliau picture they are painting, the detractors can only suspect that an intrigue with a young gallant lies behind Mary's pregnancy:

¹³ Robbins, *Secular Lyrics*, pp. 21–2.

¹⁴ Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 97.

¹⁵ *Ludus Coventriae or The Plaie called Corpus Christi*, ed. K. S. Block, EETS ES 120 (London, 1922), pp. 123–35.

Ius detractor

A nay nay wel wers she hath hym payd
 Sum fresch 3onge galaunt she loveth wel more
 þat his leggyis to here hath leyd
 and þat doth greve þe old man sore

ijus detractor

be my trewth al may wel be
 ffor fresch and fayr she is to syght
 And such a mursel as semyth me
 Wolde cause a 3onge man to haue delight.

...

that olde cokolde was evyl be-gyld
 to þat fresche wench whan he was wedde
 now muste he faderyn a-nothyr mannys chylde
 and with his swynke he xal be fedde.

Ius detractor

A 3onge man may do more chere in bedde
 to a 3onge wench þan may an olde
 þat is þe cawse such lawe is ledde
 þat many a man is a kokewolde. (53–125–6)

Material like this can do more than reveal that juxtapositions of the sacred and profane are characteristic of the Gothic sensibility. It also offers the opportunity for students to explore further: looking at the context and range of the mystery cycles, their rationale and close relationship to ecclesiastical and civic drama and procession in the Middle Ages, and their origin in the Corpus Christi ritual at the heart of the liturgy. The mystery cycles are valuable primers of biblical narrative and of medieval Christian culture.

In seeking to restore the Christian context of Chaucer's work for modern readers, enquiry-based learning is a pedagogy with a distinct contribution to make. The author's experience of running enquiry-based sessions themed on these issues of superstition/religion and blasphemy/bawdry has shown that a good deal of context can indeed be explored and fruitfully applied to Chaucer's text, bringing a range of positive outcomes.¹⁶ The present study in no way argues for replacing lectures and seminars but rather advocates the enquiry-based model as a supplementary pedagogy, extra materials, that can aid students in accessing the Christian context of the *Canterbury Tales*. Of course the number of contact hours in a course is always tightly limited, but introduction of some enquiry-based discussion or seminars enables students to engage proactively with the context of Chaucer's work and to study contextual materials first-hand. In the process, canonical and non-canonical texts can be brought into fruitful conversation with one another and it becomes increasingly possible to impart an image of Chaucer's religious contexts as diverse, rich and detailed, with the result that class discussion of context becomes increasingly nuanced and varied, eschewing unitary generalizations

¹⁶ I am grateful to the English cohort of 2003–4 at St Hugh's College, Oxford, the Chaucer cohort of the Exeter College Oxford Summer Programme in English Literature (2004), the AS English 2004/5 cohort and Martin Nichols and Penny Maynard of The College of Richard Collyer, Horsham (2004–5), for their generous collaboration and feedback on EBL-led sessions.

about 'the Church' in the Middle Ages and substituting more particular and precise observations as to how varied dimensions of fourteenth-century Christianity inform Chaucer's work. The introduction of enquiry-based sessions into undergraduate study of Chaucer seems to enhance discussion of the primary texts themselves. The investigative and exploratory aspect of such sessions tends to broaden rather than restrict the range of critical opinions expressed, as Hutchings and O'Rourke remark:

A literary text seldom, if ever, has a single issue or problem as its concern, even when a critic or even the author claims that it does. There will always be a diversity of potential response generated among diverse readers.¹⁷

Such a description of the effect of enquiry-based approaches seems particularly apposite for the *Canterbury Tales*, where the pilgrim audience is of course depicted at the close of the *Miller's Tale* as ranging equally widely in interpretation: 'diverse folk diversely they seyde' (3857). It would seem that in meeting the challenge of recovering Chaucer's Christian context for modern readers, enquiry-based learning has a valuable role to play, illuminating both text and context and enabling us 'to demen by interrogaciouns'.

¹⁷ Bill Hutchings and Karen O'Rourke, 'Problem-Based Learning: Evidencing and Evaluating the Student Experience', at <http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/problearn/problem1.php>, p. 73.