PHILOSOPHICAL SLEAZE? THE 'STROK OF THOUGHT' IN THE MILLER'S TALE AND CHAUCERIAN FABLIAU

It will be the contention of this essay that contrary to general opinion, the fabliau narratives in *The Canterbury Tales* on which Chaucer lavished so much attention do not constitute a detour from the philosophical interests visible in the rest of his poetry. They do not necessitate, as the title of one well-known article on the Miller's Tale self-consciously proposes, an 'UnBoethian Interpretation'.[1] Rather, there is a strong case for saying that the appeal of fabliau for Chaucer lay substantially in a philosophical dimension which he discovered in the structural logic of the genre. We may need to revise the common view that he cultivated fabliau in order to freewheel in a fictional world of 'harlotrie' and 'game', innocent of any philosophical concern whatever.

The ethos of Chaucer's fabliaux has never seemed easy to square with the fact that in his own time, and among his early successors, Chaucer had a reputation as a 'philosophical' poet. The most obvious sense in which that reputation would strike us as accurate derives from his translation of the early sixth-century *Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius.[2] Nothing gets a text into the bloodstream as thickly as translating it. Chaucer returned again and again during his writing life (though not uncritically) to the formulations through which the *Consolation* sought to prove that the concept of an eternal all-seeing providence did not negate the freedom of human will and action; and that a putatively benign providence was not incompatible with the apparently perverse misfortunes of daily life.[3]

[1] Morton W. Bloomfield, '*The Miller's Tale*—An UnBoethian Interpretation', in *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies: Essays in Honor of Francis Lee Utley*, ed. by Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971), pp. 205–11.

[2] For an excellent account of Boethius and his writings, see John Marenbon, *Boethius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). There is an edition and translation of the *Consolation* in *Boethius: The Theological Tractates; 'The Consolation of Philosophy'*, 2nd edn, trans. by H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1973), pp. 130–435. All references to this will identify it as '*Cons.*' and will indicate book, prose or metre number, and line number. I also refer to the translation by Richard Green (New York: Macmillan, 1962). Chaucer's own translation will be identified as '*Boece*' and references are to the text in *The Riverside Chaucer* (henceforth *Riv.*), ed. by Larry Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), from which all Chaucer quotations in the present paper are drawn.

[3] On Chaucer's debt to Boethius, still valuable is Bernard L. Jefferson, *Chaucer and the 'Consolation of Philosophy' of Boethius* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1917). Among other studies see Peter Elbow, *Oppositions in Chaucer* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), and Jane Chance, 'Chaucerian Irony in the Boethian Short Poems', *Chaucer Review*, 20

This was not, of course, an anachronistic or eccentric interest. As Jim Rhodes has reminded us, the 'fierce theological debates of the fourteenth century waged over the omnipotence of God and the contingency of the world' raised questions 'at all levels of society' concerning 'the freedom of human beings and their historical purpose in the scheme of salvation'.[4] A glimpse of a personal link with the professional hub of such debate is Chaucer's naming of Ralph Strode, Oxford philosopher and subsequently a London lawyer, as the joint dedicatee (alongside 'moral Gower') of *Troilus and Criseyde* (*TC*, v. 1856–7).[5] True, to be called a 'philosopher' at that time you did not need to be a Wittgenstein—it was enough to have a scholarly interest in knowledge, ideas, and moral questions. Moreover, we may suspect the effusion of rhetorical encomium in Thomas Hoccleve's tribute to Chaucer as 'heir to Aristotle', or in Eustache Deschamps's *balade* hailing Chaucer 'O Socrates, full of philosophy'.[6] Chaucer certainly was not by our standards a systematic philosopher, in the sense of a dedicated logician.[7] His forte, as P. M. Kean observed, was generally 'to make structural use [. . .] of the ideas he takes from the philosophers, not to explore and develop their meaning for its own sake'.[8] As for the technical terms of philosophy, their chief function in his poetry was to be invoked self-consciously in non-scholastic contexts, with a wittiness designed to tickle the knowledgeable reader.[9] And yet, the large philosophical legacy of Boethius's *Consolation* did keep cropping up in his writing, as a repertoire of emotive questions uttered by confused humanity at moments of acute distress in the face of an often implacable world.[10]

That legacy is certainly articulated in the Knight's Tale, whose 'philosophical generality'—as Kolve puts it—permits the very largest questions to be posed: is humanity at all free, and is any purpose served by humanity's attempts to create order, in a universe governed by the planet-gods and Fortune?[11] But

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(1985–6), 235–45. Sceptical assessment of Chaucer's response to the *Consolation* is exemplified by Richard Utz, 'Philosophy', in *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, ed. by Steve Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 158–64.

[4] Jim Rhodes, *Poetry Does Theology: Chaucer, Grosseteste, and the 'Pearl'-Poet* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), p. 21.

[5] Ralph Strode was 'one with whom Chaucer could discuss the questions of predestination and free will, of fortune and destiny, that began to preoccupy him in the 1380s' according to Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 134. See further Rodney Delasanta, 'Chaucer and Strode', *Chaucer Review*, 26 (1991–2), 205–18.

[6] Hoccleve, *Regiment of Princes*, ll. 2087–8, ed. by Charles R. Blyth (Kalamazoo, MN: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999); Deschamps, in the *balade* 'O Socrates plains de philosophie' heralding Chaucer as 'grant translateur': see *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Derek Brewer, 2 vols (London: Arnold, 1978), I, 40. Thomas Usk called Chaucer 'the noble philosophical poete in Englissh' (*The Testament of Love*, III. 4. 559–60, ed. by R. Allen Shoaf (Kalamazoo, MN: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998). For recent comment on this 'philosophical' reputation, see Kathryn L. Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), pp. 5–9.

[7] Russell A. Peck, 'Chaucer and the Nominalist Questions', *Speculum*, 53 (1978), 745–60 (p. 745).

[8] P. M. Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), II: *The Art of Narrative*, p. 42.

[9] David Burnley, *A Guide to Chaucer's Language* (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 162–76.

[10] In this respect I agree with Mark Miller that Chaucer is 'less interested in the abstract articulation of philosophical problems than he is in the ways persons inhabit them, in what we might call the affective and political life of philosophical problems' (*Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex, and Agency in the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 30–1).

[11] V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five 'Canterbury Tales'* (London: Arnold, 1984), p. 136. However, Kolve goes on to deny (pp. 139–57) that Boethian philosophy

this stretching and decidedly philosophical romance is notoriously followed by the Miller's Tale, a piece of comic wizardry focused on the capacity of heedless youth, armed with cunning imagination, to inflict ingenious sexual and intellectual humiliation on the sentimentally incompetent, the middle-aged, the patriarchal. Illicit sex in the marital bed while the husband sleeps in the roof in a makeshift lifeboat readied for a new World Flood; an incompetent rival made to kiss the heroine's behind in the dark; an explosive fart in the pitch darkness that guides the rival's aim in a revengeful and quasi-sodomitic retaliatory attack; a flood of the imagination brought on by screams for 'water!'; and all this only in the first fabliau of several—small wonder that in modern Western culture, with its considerable relish for irreverence and its relaxation of sexual inhibitions, the stock of Chaucer's fabliaux has risen and the 'philosophical' identity of the poet has been eroded.

The fact is that nearly a third of *The Canterbury Tales* are 'fabliaux'—or so they have generally been designated, since the nineteenth century. The leakiness of this category has recently come under scrutiny. It is probably an artificial means of labelling 'a once eclectic group of tales containing some form of what [in a later period] was called "scurrilitie"'.[12] Nevertheless, unless a categorizing revolution actually takes place in scholarship, it seems to me best to retain 'fabliau' as the understood term for tales self-selected through their focus on 'jape' and 'harlotrie', even if they differ substantially from each other in execution. In fact, an incidental consequence of the present article will be to underline a core structural consistency in the 'fabliau' tales, whatever queries there may be about their conformity with a disputed genre.[13]

Chaucer himself famously draws attention to the presence of tales of naughtiness precisely by his strategic pose of forestalling potential criticism of them within his text.[14] Of course, we can see straight through his pretext of 'having' to report truthfully the tales of each Canterbury pilgrim, however vulgar they were.[15] We know that Chaucer has invented the pilgrims, and the stories remain his responsibility. The further ploy of urging anyone who wants to avoid indecorous material to 'turn the page' and concentrate instead on more edi-

is fully invoked or endorsed in the Knight's Tale in Theseus's final speech, which offers instead 'scraps of philosophy' (p. 142) that do not release the poem from its ambience of pagan determinism (p. 147). This reading runs counter to substantially 'Boethian' interpretations such as that of Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, II, 41–48.

[12] Joseph A. Dane, 'The Wife of Bath's Shipman's Tale and the Invention of Chaucerian Fabliaux', *MLR*, 99 (2004), 287–300 (p. 292). The usual definition of the Old French 'fabliaux' of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is as short stories with a minimum of frills and scant concern for morality, focused especially on appetites, intended to create a laugh by their handling of deception: the crux was how cleverly someone was outwitted.

[13] Critics who accept the concept of a genre of 'fabliau' debate the extent to which particular Chaucerian tales fit the inherited criteria. However, for the purposes of the present discussion the tales of the Miller, Reeve, Cook, Summoner, Merchant, and Shipman will be accepted as either essentially or substantially 'fabliaux'.

[14] See the General Prologue, I. 725–42, and the Miller's Prologue, I. 3167–86. Chaucer probably imitates pretexts offered by Boccaccio in the Introduction to Day Four, and the Epilogue, of the *Decameron*.

[15] However, some critics detect philosophically intricate positioning here; e.g. Barbara Nolan, '"A Poet Ther Was": Chaucer's Voices in the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*', *PMLA*, 101 (1986), 154–69 (esp. pp. 162–63); and Paul Beekman Taylor, *Chaucer Translator* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), pp. 71–79.

fying stories cannot ever have been taken entirely seriously, notwithstanding the sometimes theatrical fulminations against the gross moral turpitude of the fabliaux by certain critics. G. K. Chesterton described the Miller's Tale as a 'cataract of coarse, not to say foul, narrative [. . .] as if the ruffian had thrown a pail of slops over the statelier narrator [the Knight]', but Chesterton presumably paused to read the tale before writing this.[16] The same could be said of the many critics, from John Dryden to Haldeen Braddy, who have adopted a frosty moral tone in relation to these tales (Braddy spoke of Chaucer's facility with fabliau as 'the shallowest aspect of his genius').[17]

Clearly, Chaucer knowingly risks reader embarrassment,[18] even while he means to tease readers over their propensity for erecting a cover of moralistic disdain under which to enjoy stories of 'jape' and 'harlotrie'. But for my purposes here, what is important about the potential embarrassment and the calculated teasing is that it tempts readers to assume that there cannot be any significance—any of the sort of profundity that might be expected of a story of 'moralitee and hoolynesse' (i. 3180)—in a fabliau tale. What kinds of significance, if any, have actually been attributed to these tales? A brief review will be helpful before we consider in what sense the challenge they held for the poet could have been, as was the challenge in his more broadly serious output, partly 'philosophical'.

The simplest rationalization of Chaucer's engagement with fabliaux is that in them he takes a holiday from all kinds of morality and solemnity. Of course there are variations in tone among the fabliaux, some being more sarcastic, some more humorous, some darker. The Merchant's Tale will not strike us as a 'holiday from morality' as readily as the Miller's Tale. Nevertheless, there is prima facie a strong case that they should all, by and large, be viewed as a literature of play: to use Chaucer's own terminology, as narratives of 'jape' or 'game'.[19]

In a refinement of this view, the fabliaux are a form of play which is held to have abounded in the Middle Ages as a flip side to the solemnity of cultural productions sanctioned by church and state, a flip side to Official Culture. 'The point of the form', as Helen Cooper puts it, 'is its amorality: the fabliau is the expression of the non-official culture of carnal irreverence, of all those feelings suppressed by courtly politeness or religious asceticism that break into joyous burlesque'.[20] Fabliaux express carnival licence, they propose a mocking release from moral and social inhibitions of all kinds.[21]

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[16] G. K. Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 2nd edn (London: Faber, 1947), p. 169.

[17] See the quotations and bibliography in Peter G. Beidler, 'Art and Scatology in the *Miller's Tale*', *Chaucer Review*, 12 (1977–78), 90–102 (pp. 90–91).

[18] Paul G. Ruggiers, *The Art of the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 38. Beidler notes that the indecorous episodes of the Miller's Tale are 'more shockingly' developed than any counterparts in the analogues ('Art and Scatology', p. 91).

[19] Derek Brewer describes them as 'fantasies full of fun and enjoyment' ('The Fabliaux', in *A Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. by Beryl Rowland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 296–325 (p. 311)).

[20] Helen Cooper, *'The Canterbury Tales'*, Oxford Guides to Chaucer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 96. For an elaboration of the 'official/unofficial' paradigm as applied to Chaucer, see Derek Brewer, 'Gothic Chaucer', in his *Tradition and Innovation in Chaucer* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 110–36 (esp. pp. 120–32).

[21] Steve Ellis discusses the carnivalesque in some of the fabliaux (alleging 'anti-carnivalesque' in

In a yet further refinement of the same view, critics have seen these tales as exemplifying a general aesthetic predisposition in this epoch for juxtaposing the solemn (for instance, a miniature depicting a scene from the life of Christ) with the informal and the demotic (for instance, a dissonant or mocking peasant scene at the foot of the same manuscript page). By the same strategy of juxtaposition it is suggested that a 'low' literary form can function as the jesting border or *bas de page* that comments on a 'higher' literary form.[22] Oppositional techniques of this kind, embedded in the aesthetic of the time, can certainly make an interesting basis for understanding relationships between fabliaux and narratives that are more explicitly serious in the *Tales* as a whole; or more particularly for understanding the way Chaucer locates the Miller's Tale immediately after the Knight's Tale.[23] The pointed juxtaposition 'makes the very lack of significance [in the Miller's Tale] significant', as Helen Cooper pithily puts it. If the one tale 'seeks endlessly for meaning in the world', the notion 'that there might be any meaning never enters the other'; and if the one tale 'raises questions about the providential ordering of the universe', the other 'refuses to look beyond the individual's immediate interests'.[24]

Whether the Miller's Tale really raises no questions about 'providential ordering' is a matter we shall shortly reopen. Meanwhile, the problem that might be raised concerning the theory that fabliau is a literature of mirth is that it is liable to reduce the fabliau tales to an inefficacious parasitical negative. These tales become defined by their differentiation from more overtly serious types of writing, which concern pieties that they aim to escape. Temporary truancy becomes the function of the fabliaux: they appear as the 'not-solemn', the 'not-moral'; the 'un-official'.[25] Philosophically, their significance therefore inclines towards a void of not-meaning. They constitute what Jürgen Beyer describes as a 'reduced level (*Schwundstufe*), which parodies positive values and allows them to be swallowed by the negative'.[26]

the case of the Merchant's Tale) (*Geoffrey Chaucer* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996), pp. 40–48). Marion Turner reviews 'The Carnivalesque' in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, pp. 384–98, with a helpful bibliography. Brewer speaks of a 'release' from 'moral aspiration' ('The Fabliaux', p. 311); and Paul Ruggiers sees fabliau as cajoling readers into salutary 'indulgence' ('A Vocabulary for Chaucerian Comedy: A Preliminary Sketch', in *Chaucer's Humor: Critical Essays*, ed. by Jean E. Jost (1976; repr. New York: Garland, 1994), pp. 41–77 (p. 59)).

[22] Laura Kendrick, 'Linking the *Canterbury Tales*: Monkey-Business in the Margins', in *Drama, Narrative and Poetry in the 'Canterbury Tales'*, ed. by Wendy Harding (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2003), pp. 83–98 (p. 84).

[23] Laura Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 118.

[24] Cooper, '*Canterbury Tales*', pp. 98, 101.

[25] This is possibly a generic fate of jokes. Thus, while Mary Douglas believes there is characteristically some 'subversive' potential in a joke, she suggests that it remains 'frivolous in that it produces no real alternative' to 'official values', just a brief 'sense of freedom from form in general' ('Jokes', in her *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1975), pp. 90–114 (pp. 96–98)).

[26] Jürgen Beyer, 'The Morality of the Amoral', in *The Humor of the Fabliaux: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), pp. 15–42 (p. 18). Brewer also sees that it is in the nature of 'unofficial counter-cultures' that they 'have few positive qualities of their own', but 'take on meaning largely in opposition to the dynamics of effort, will, and control of the official culture' ('Gothic Chaucer', p. 122).

Something similar is the case even with the seemingly contrary approach whereby critics of a different persuasion apply a theory of *undermined* mirth to Chaucer's fabliaux, maintaining that the tales endorse, rather than negate, the moral, social, and religious ideals of the age. The belief here is that they do this obliquely. They play cheekily with moral or religious norms to pluck the reader's attention towards those norms. The playfulness is consequently undermined by the counter-pull of the very concepts it mimics. According to this logic, for instance, the fantasy of a second Noah's Flood in the Miller's Tale summons from biblical legend an awesome memory of divine wrath retaliating against human lechery, and recalls the standards of chaste virtue (by contrast with the lecherous standards of Oxford youth) necessary to escape nemesis. In a nutshell, to quote one of the theory's key advocates, 'frequent reminders of the Church and the ironic misapplication of religious ideas form the backdrop against which to assess the action'.[27]

Investigation from this point of view has done the comic tales a service by drawing attention to cascades of witty allusion strewn through them. Again, though, it is an approach that leaves us with a sense that the tales somehow do not stand up for themselves—as though they can only signify as frivolous displacements of the higher values of the day.[28]

Actually the only readers who have agreed on something like an autonomous 'philosophy' in Chaucer's fabliaux locate in them an expression of uninhibited naturalism. This theory has had many zealous supporters. Charles Muscatine, studying French fabliaux prior to Chaucer, proposed that we might call the 'philosophy' or 'ethos' of the fabliaux 'a sort of hedonistic materialism'.[29] The idea that this is a naturalistic mode of fiction that champions the fulfilment of natural appetite[30] is quite commonly taken to be the philosophy (if there is any) also driving Chaucer's comic tales, most especially the Miller's Tale.[31] Muscatine, in a celebrated phrase, describes this tale as representing the purest version of the fabliau doctrine of 'the sovereignty of animal nature'.[32] Kolve eloquently elaborates this, urging that the tale celebrates the physical world, a world in which 'man's freedom and accountability are like those of the animals'.[33]

The emphasis on fabliau 'naturalism' would be more convincing if this were

[27] Beryl Rowland, 'Chaucer's Blasphemous Churl: A New Interpretation of the *Miller's Tale*', in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. by Beryl Rowland (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974), pp. 43–55 (p. 43).

[28] So Robert Kaske talks of 'an implied orientation toward a controlling set of values' ('The Canticum Canticorum in the *Miller's Tale*', *Studies in Philology*, 59 (1962), 479–500 (p. 497)).

[29] Charles Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 73.

[30] Norris J. Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux* (1993; repr. Birmingham, AL: Summa, 1999), pp. 35–45.

[31] Greg Walker states that in the Miller's Tale, and 'in fabliaux generally', 'desire, satisfaction, and the pleasure to be gained from sexual activity are all taken as facts of life' ('Rough Girls and Squeamish Boys: The Trouble with Absolon in the Miller's Tale', in *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature*, ed. by Elaine Treharne (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), pp. 62–91 (p. 63)).

[32] Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), p. 224. Miller has attempted to complicate this view in a contorted argument that characters within the tale prove resistant to the Miller's naturalistic programme (*Philosophical Chaucer*, ch. 1).

[33] Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, pp. 215–16. Lee Patterson maintains, less plausibly, that the Miller's Tale champions natural law as a principle of self-regulating order (*Chaucer and the Subject of History* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 246, 258–59, 265–66).

not an anachronistic and programmatic term.[34] It is a moot point whether any single Chaucerian fabliau represents the triumph of nature.[35] If, for example, the women of the comic tales do represent 'natural' objects of desire, then what the tales largely show is that masculine desire to possess them produces mayhem. It is a less coherent championing of an imputed 'philosophy' on behalf of natural drives than some sentimental readers suppose. In any case, the natural drives present do not seem to generate any visions of a new social order, such as we can find, say, in Shakespearian comedy.[36] Chaucer's comic tales yield nothing but short-lived victories of youth over age, one-off sexual conquests—there are no new dawns, no reassuring renovations of society.[37]

Other areas of large meaning that have been explored in Chaucer's fabliaux include the sociological—whether through the possibility that they endorse rebellion by the socially downtrodden, or through the contrary possibility that they endorse repression of the subject classes by their superiors. In the latter view, if the fabliaux say anything about social order, it is largely to present self-destructing images of artisans and peasants whose inadequacies demonstrate the right of the clerical and aristocratic classes to exercise power over them.[38]

For many readers, however, there is no sense in which Chaucerian fabliaux carry substantial meaning: rather, a presupposition that profundity of any sort is not a condition of the genre. Of course, everyone acknowledges that the individual tales tease the mind absorbingly in the resonant focus they achieve on motifs such as flood, theft of flour, marital 'debt'. Chaucer is much admired for perfectly realizing the fabliau potential for tight structures in which strategic preparation leads to deftly organized closure.[39] I should like to quote in particular some observations by Barry Windeatt, who reviews the fabliau tales in the context of—and by contrast with—other extant structures in Chaucer's writings where closure is less integrated, or unfulfilled or problematic, and suggests:

in few narrative poems could closure be more fittingly and climactically achieved than in such fabliaux as the Miller's, Reeve's, or Shipman's tales, where a vigorous plot of 'tricks' is worked through to its resolution. With Nicholas's cry of 'Water!' (I. 3815) or the *double entendre* of 'taille' (VII. 416), the plot 'clicks' satisfyingly shut and completes the reader's expectations of the tale, just as the *Friar's Tale* comparably 'turns' upon the

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[34] On this objection to Muscatine's characterization of OF fabliau, see Paul Theiner, 'Fabliau Settings', in *Humor of the Fabliaux*, ed. by Cooke and Honeycutt, pp. 119–36 (esp. pp. 124–26).

[35] An implied negative valence in Alisoun's 'animalism' is discussed in Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 55–57.

[36] Thomas D. Cooke, *The Old French and Chaucerian Fabliaux: A Study of their Comic Climax* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), pp. 152–55. However, Kathleen A. Bishop argues that it is the Plautine variant of New Comedy, productive of *disordered* outcomes, that most anticipates the outcomes of Chaucerian fabliau ('The Influence of Plautus and Latin Elegiac Comedy on Chaucer's Fabliaux', *Chaucer Review*, 35 (2000–01), 294–317).

[37] Ruggiers rightly detects in Chaucerian comedy a drive towards '*momentary* freedom' from the constraints of an 'old law' typified as 'an enchaining marriage or family order' ('A Vocabulary for Chaucerian Comedy', p. 45, emphasis added).

[38] Stephen Knight, 'Chaucer and the Sociology of Literature', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 11 (1980), 15–51 (p. 33). Patterson detects inconsistent impulses (*Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 244–79). John Hines reflects usefully on pitfalls in sociological interpretation (*The Fabliau in English* (London: Longman, 1993), pp. 147–54).

[39] See especially Cooke, *Comic Climax*, pp. 170–94.

fulfilment of the literally meant force of an oath, which is prepared for and anticipated in the earlier agreement between summoner and devil. With such tales the falling out of sheer plot bulks larger in the reader's pleasure than in most other types of story in the *Canterbury Tales*.[40]

How the plots 'click shut', how substantially they gratify, and how sublimely they position their readers, will be our focus in the next part of this paper.

A good starting-point here will be to recall an Old French fabliau, and a scholar's comment on it. The fabliau in question is known as 'The Priest Who was Crucified' ('Du prestre crucefié').[41] The priest in question has been sleeping with the wife of a woodcarver—a man whose speciality is to make statues and crucifixes. The priest is trapped one day by the deliberate early return home of the suspicious husband. The wife suggests to her priest-lover, who has been sharing a meal with her, that he should try to escape detection by stripping naked and lying down on one of the woodcarver's unfinished crosses, in effect pretending to be a carved body of Jesus. But when the woodcarver catches sight of this cross and, seeing 'the balls and prick hanging down' (l. 63), recognizes the priest's ruse, he tells his wife he must have been drunk to carve the Lord's body like that: he would never normally have incorporated 'that thing there' (l. 67). So, instructing his wife to hold a candle so that he can fix the problem, he cuts off the offending genitals. When the castrated priest races off, the woodcarver creates a hullabaloo and two nearby youths beat up the adulterer before he is obliged to pay a great 'ransom' (l. 90) to the carver, on top of the forfeited genitals.

Roy Pearcy has put his finger on the effect of this comedy of retribution. He suggests that it is almost as if mysterious forces generate an unexpectedly satisfying outcome. Specifically, 'Chance, in the form of the priest's choice of disguise, is suddenly and surprisingly endowed with the quality of fore-ordination by the woodcarver's inspired opportunism'.[42] Pearcy means this as a structural comment without wider philosophical implication—indeed, he declares that in general, fabliaux eschew 'any suggestion of outreach towards mysterious powers [. . .] perceived as controlling man's destiny' (p. 334). Yet I should like to draw out from his own perception of the gratifying structure of 'The Priest Who was Crucified' an argument that what Chaucer especially develops in fabliau is the design—which in his work becomes 'philosophical'— whereby what have seemed disconnected and often spontaneous actions within the plot will eventually and suddenly be perceived by readers as belonging to a providential master plan at that point where the plot 'clicks shut'. This was a *potentially* philosophical dimension present in comic story before Chaucer, but his particular commitment to this dimension of comic story is among his most powerful contributions to the evolution of fabliau.[43]

It is in the Miller's Tale concerning 'this nyce cas' (bizarre eventuality) befalling Absolon and Nicholas—as it is interestingly summed up in the Reeve's Prologue (I. 3855–56)—that the philosophical implications of structure are most apparent, and where source material provides important clues to that philosophical resonance. So we shall concentrate on this tale, even while indicating how its dynamic is shared with Chaucer's other fabliaux. The clue to the philosophical dimension of the 'jape' stories in *The Canterbury Tales* is found, I believe, in the place where Chaucer took some of his inspiration for the 'Second World Flood' fantasy in the Miller's Tale; and beyond that, in the wider background of Chaucer's immersion in the philosophy of Boethius on providence and time.

The Miller's Tale, with its focus on Nicholas's flood-prank, plays out a comic saga of providence. Nicholas is a self-styled student of astrology and a weather-forecaster. He is also a great creator of plans and schemes, as though he were in the driving seat of providence himself. To create a triumphantly piquant context for sex with his landlord's young wife, he sets out to cajole the landlord into believing that makeshift lifeboats must be made ready in the roof and slept in, in anticipation of an immediate second Deluge. But despite the success of this scheme, Nicholas is drastically caught out by participating in an unplanned way in the intervention of Absolon, would-be rival, into his own post-coital euphoria. As we follow the unfolding of plot towards the tale's climax, we are challenged to spot every twist of causation and effect, yet what this process ultimately demonstrates is the difficulty, for humans, of anticipating or matching the secret workings of providence—of what the tale terms 'Goddes pryvetee' (I. 3164, 3454).[44] As Chaucer well knew, this was precisely the difficulty sharply associated with the concept of both flood and lifeboats in the *Roman de la Rose*.

For sure, there is evidence that a prophecy of a flood, and comic consequences of this, were present in some analogues that circulated across Europe, contributing to Chaucer's focus on the notion of the Deluge in the Miller's Tale.[45] Moreover, details available from other, learned sources might have included a tradition that warning of the imminence of Noah's Flood came not just through direct divine communication but also through Noah's astrological insight.[46] But source possibilities of these kinds do not justify us in ignoring (as has been the case) the inspiration Chaucer would also have found in an extraordinarily pertinent passage in the *Roman de la Rose*—another of the central

with 'surprise' (*Comic Climax*, pp. 13, 182) underestimates what I am calling the 'providential' dimension.

[44] Here I diverge sharply from Marsha Siegel, who contends that the Miller's Tale systematically celebrates 'causality' *as against* any recognition of providence ('What the Debate is and Why it Founders in Fragment "A" of *The Canterbury Tales*', *Studies in Philology*, 82 (1985), 1–24).

[45] In date and narrative detail (including a partial 'flood' subplot) the fabliau that comes closest to being a 'source' for the Miller's Tale is the Middle Dutch *Heile van Beersele*, probably in circulation by 1375 if not well before. For a cogent revision of previous scholarship on this issue, accompanied by a new edition and translation of the MD text, see Peter G. Beidler, 'The Miller's Tale', in *Sources and Analogues of the 'Canterbury Tales'*, ed. by Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, 2 vols (Cambridge: Brewer, 2005), II, 249–75.

[46] John J. O'Connor, 'The Astrological Background of the *Miller's Tale*', *Speculum*, 31 (1956), 120–25.

medieval writings that Chaucer comprehensively imbibed by translating it into English. In that poem, the Boethian questions concerning human freedom and responsibility in relation to providence and fate are addressed, at one point, through a discussion of the hypothetical human capacity for predicting destined floods, and hence escaping from them by strategic preparation of survival boats.[47] The passage in question appears a remarkable prompt for Chaucer's elaboration of the flood in the Miller's Tale.[48]

In the *Roman* passage, Nature is in the midst of her great discourse discussing human behaviour, and claiming among other things that humans retain their freedom of will despite the existence of divine foreknowledge.[49] Her argument here draws heavily on Boethius. Then comes a section where she declares that the power of human free will is also not cancelled out by planetary influence over individual behaviour. A person's capacity to override such forces is compared with the human power to prepare for catastrophe generally. 'If we could predict what heaven had in store for us, we could do something about it.' If humans knew there was to be a flood, they could run to higher ground, 'or build ships strong enough to save their lives when the great flood came',[50] like Deucalion and Pyrrha in the Ovidian story. Those two 'acted wisely in thus preparing a ship to escape the flood; in the same way, anyone who was forewarned of such a flood could escape it'.[51] Similarly one could plan to counter the extremities of all sorts of weather.

Jean de Meun attests the perennial human desire to get control of one of nature's great uncontrollables. The prospect of gaining control of it by anticipation persists even now. Thus, while this article was in preparation, a British newspaper feature appeared, headlined 'The Storm Hunters' and announcing that 'Lives and property could be saved if floods, tornados and lightning can be accurately forecast'. It reported the latest efforts of a team of fifty scientists, with sophisticated equipment and weather-tracking aircraft, to deduce weather models that would 'arm forecasters with the means to distinguish a typical downpour from one that will cause a devastating flood'.[52] The Old French poem, meanwhile, indulges a wonderful fantasy of a human population, successfully forecasting an exceptionally vicious winter, making provision to 'mock' the freezing weather by building multiple warm bathhouses and enjoying themselves, dancing naked inside them, in defiance of snowstorms gusting outside.[53]

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[47] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. by Félix Lecoy, 3 vols (Paris: Champion, 1970), III, ll. 17,549–620, trans. by Frances Horgan, *The Romance of the Rose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 271–72. All further references are to this edition and this translation respectively.

[48] The use of a flood forecast to urge the preparation of boats is absent from *Heile van Beersele*. A flood-warning is arbitrarily made by the priest who is one of Heile's clients, and overheard by another client who has hidden in a trough (not hitherto likened to a boat); see the text in Beidler, 'The Miller's Tale', in *Sources and Analogues*, ll. 80–91.

[49] For an account of the speech, contextualizing the free-will argument, see Sarah Kay, *'The Romance of the Rose'* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1995), pp. 96–101.

[50] *RR*, ll. 17,549–51 and 17,565–67 (Horgan, p. 271).

[51] *RR*, ll. 17,616–20 (Horgan, p. 272).

[52] 'The Storm Hunters', *The Daily Telegraph*, 3 August 2005.

[53] *RR*, ll. 17,636–62 (Horgan, pp. 272–73).

However—and here Jean de Meun's Nature retreats from her growing excitement about human powers of anticipation and initiative—there is a catch. 'Without some miraculous vision or oracle sent by God [. . .] no one unfamiliar with astronomy' and with all its multifarious complexities could forecast such natural disasters so accurately as to plan for them.[54] On the one hand, then, Nature projects the exhilarating potential of informed human strategic planning to adjust even to ordained climate emergencies; but on the other hand she admits how this power of human foresight is thwarted by the tantalizingly specialized and unreliable science involved. (The future, as Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale protests, may be written in the stars as in the book of the heavens, 'but mennes wittes ben so dulle | That no wight kan wel rede it atte fulle', II. 190–203.) To anticipate meteorological catastrophe, Nature observes that ideally you would still need a direct communication from God. Some such communication Nicholas pretends to have received in the Miller's Tale.

In fact Chaucer's tale magnificently incorporates and parodies the *Rose*'s reflections on anticipation of flood disaster. The tale confirms the limited foresight of an Oxford student of astrology, even one expert in storm-forecast, whose plans, albeit they are a mischievous fantasy, are precisely to contrive makeshift shipping in which to escape a 'flood', of whose coming he has hypothetically been forewarned by astrology and divine communication. Faking a moon-gazing trance in his room, he has convinced John that he has access to secret information about this flood through the combined resources of 'Cristes conseil' and 'myn astrologye' (I. 3504, 3514).[55] Moreover, Nicholas dignifies the tub-boat plan with a sarcastic but strikingly resonant formula: he calls it 'oure purveiaunce' (I. 3566)—a term which encompasses practical preparation and provisioning at one end of its spectrum of meaning, but designates nothing less than providence at the other end. Nature's speech in the *Roman de la Rose* characterizes divine prescience as 'plaine de toute porveance' (knowing all things in advance), and describes God's ordering of the world as being established 'par sa grant proveance' (in his great providence).[56] Nicholas's use of the word is a reminder that it is one of those 'Boethian' words—as Jill Mann calls them—that Chaucer sometimes enjoys using teasingly, with a somewhat 'shrunken' sense to highlight the gulf between human and divine vision.[57]

The ulterior 'purveiance' in the Miller's Tale, of course, is to enable Nicholas and Alisoun to slip down to bed below while John snores among the rafters in his tub-boat. That is about as far as Nicholas's long-range planning goes. As a model of 'purveiance' of any sort it is palpably near-sighted. The boats are to be

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[54] *RR*, ll. 17,663–72 (Horgan, p. 273).

[55] O'Connor sees in this conjunction of astrology and revelation alleged by Nicholas an allusion to a tradition of Noah as astrologer ('The Astrological Background', p. 125). But the 'Noah' figure should be John, not Nicholas.

[56] *RR*, ll. 17,073–74 (Horgan p. 264) and 17,469–70 (Horgan p. 270). The practical—but not thereby unshadowed—sense of the word is attested in remarks about the 'purveiance' made by Custance's father for her wedding journey ('Man of Law's Tale', II. 247–49), and the 'purveiaunce' of Dorigen's friends for a day of relaxation in a garden ('Franklin's Tale', V. 901–05).

[57] On 'purveiance' as one of three 'Boethian' terms (the others being 'governance' and 'ordinance') stretched by Chaucer in this way, see Jill Mann, 'Parents and Children in the "Canterbury Tales"', in *Literature in Fourteenth-Century England*, ed. by Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Tübingen: Narr; Cambridge: Brewer, 1983), pp. 165–83 (pp. 168–69).

stocked with only twenty-four hours' worth of provisions. The flood (and the sex) will be a one-night wonder: 'fy on the remenant!', as Nicholas airily tells John (1. 3551–54).[58] (Indeed, as Bloomfield points out (p. 208), it is not a scheme that supports the prospect of serial sexual encounters between Nicholas and Alisoun.) Moreover, the last thing in Nicholas's scheming mind is that any sort of flood can possibly happen. What is quite outrageously brilliant is the turn of events whereby the projected fantasy 'flood' is made to occur, if only in John's imagination, in a way that brings everything into a single climactic focus. In the tale's famous finale, Absolon, disgusted at being tricked into kissing Alisoun's 'hole' through the bedroom window, returns with his red-hot implement to take revenge. Amidst the scorching of Nicholas's buttocks and a scream for 'Water!', John awakes to imagine that the flood has arrived, cuts his tub-boat loose from the rafters and crashes down through the house, bringing neighbours rushing to the scene and all the night's plot-work to an end (1. 3816–21).

The cry for water and John's response to it is the moment when accumulated actions and motivations of the tale wonderfully converge. The suddenness of the convergence is, as Tillyard wrote in 1948, sublime: 'as if', he suggested, 'for a fraction of a second, the heavens opened and we saw all the gods watching the [. . .] human comedy below'.[59] The reader is indeed brought to see how everything comes hilariously together, in what has been called 'the wonder of the web of events' (Bloomfield, p. 210). In Chaucer's hands it is not just a matter of 'events', either. The events bring with them in our consciousness all the representational nuances—the patronizing cunning of Nicholas, the fastidious delicacy of Absolon, the ponderous uxorious credulity of John the carpenter—amidst a figuring of 'unnatural' sexual acts such as were thought to have provoked the biblical Deluge. Most of all (to correct somewhat Tillyard's whimsy of gods peeping through at mortals below), we ourselves are elevated as readers into a privileged, godlike position. We can perceive in an instant the whole intricate configuration of this destiny.

It would be tempting, but I think unresponsive to the signals in this fabliau and to the similar modelling of Chaucer's other comic tales, to detect here simply a clever technical experiment in narrative closure. True, Chaucer several times refers in his writing to the importance of closure. 'Th' ende is every tales strenghe', he makes Pandarus point out in *Troilus and Criseyde*, probably thinking of the goal of a 'tale' rather than its essence (though both meanings inhered in *ende*).[60] Again, applying an interesting figure in the Squire's Tale

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[58] In this respect there may be intimations of the flood supposed to herald Doomsday; see M. F. Vaughan, 'Chaucer's Imaginative One-Day Flood', *Philological Quarterly*, 60 (1981), 117–23.

[59] E. M. W. Tillyard, *Poetry: Direct and Oblique* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), p. 90.

[60] Pandarus self-consciously remarks to Criseyde that some people compose what to say with subtle art, yet 'hire tale is al for som conclusioun. | And sithen th' ende is every tales strenghe, | [. . .] | What sholde I peynte or drawen it on lengthe | To yow, that ben my frend so feythfully?' (*TC*, II. 255–63). The only prompt for this appears to be Pandaro's exclamation 'Let's stop bandying words' ('Lasciamo star li motte') in *Filostrato*, II. 39; see *Troilus & Criseyde*, ed. by B. A. Windeatt (London: Longman, 1984), for the parallel ME and Italian texts; and the translation in N. R. Havely, *Chaucer's Boccaccio* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1980). Windeatt cites a proverb, 'the last word binds the tale'; and *Riv.* adds 'Finis coronat opus' ('the end crowns the work'). On *finis* and *ende* meaning 'purpose' or 'chief point' as well as 'terminus', see Burnley, *Guide to Chaucer's Language*, pp. 173–74.

and in the Parson's Prologue, Chaucer emphasizes the importance, first of 'the knotte why that every tale is toold' (v. 401); then, twice, of *knitting up* the 'greet mateere' of *The Canterbury Tales*. The Host addresses the Parson as one fitted to 'knytte up wel a greet mateere'; the Parson accepts the role and undertakes to speak so as to 'knytte up al this feeste, and make an ende' ('Parson's Prologue', x. 28, 47).[61]

In these latter examples Chaucer echoes—but with particular attention to entwining threads together—the medieval rhetorical supposition that the ending of a work was the place for presenting what a speaker is most intent on conveying.[62] Medieval rhetorical prescriptions on proper techniques for achieving conclusions (in the first instance, the conclusion of speeches) assiduously clung to, and amplified, the advice of Cicero in his *De inventione*. Cicero wrote that the 'summing up' (*enumeratio*) is a passage in which matters that have been 'discussed in different places here and there' ('res disperse et diffuse dictae') throughout a speech are brought together and 'arranged so as to be seen at a glance' ('unum sub aspectum subiciuntur'), in order to refresh the audience's memory.[63] Siegfried Wenzel has suggested that the Parson's 'knitting up' of the *Tales* supports the rhetorical expectation that the 'essence' of an argument should appear at the end of a discourse; it also appears that medieval sermons in Chaucer's period were fashioned accordingly, their subdivisions or series of strands being wrought at the end into a 'unity' or 'fastening' (*unitio, colligatio*). One vernacular sermon writer even expresses this as making, in conclusion, 'a schort knotte'.[64] In a sense, Chaucer's fabliau climaxes correspond exactly to most of the rhetorical paradigm—they are moments which focus in one glance what has hitherto been dispersed in different strands, places, and episodes. But they do not do this to 'refresh the memory' as Ciceronian forensic rhetoric has it. Rather, in the vein of prescriptions for sermon-conclusion, they galvanize the segmented memory into a new holistic understanding of where everything has been leading.

In the comic tales the 'knot', the pulling together of threads, assumes a special significance: it has something like the function of the traditional comic punchline. It does not constitute the classical 'knot' or *nodus* of which Horace speaks, which is essentially the 'complication' in a dramatic comedy.[65] That perception of a theatrical knot is what has led to our corresponding inherited notion of an

[61] *Riv.* glosses 'knotte' in the Squire's Tale (v. 401) as 'gist, main point', perhaps because the story has not progressed very far. This is corroborated by *MED*, s.v. 'knotte' 2(b); but it is nevertheless a question of what the tale is driving *at* (*MED* 'conclusion of a story', also s.v. 'knotte' 2(b)). The figure of the 'knotte' is further associated with endings in the Parson's Tale, x. 494.

[62] The *Riv.* note to *TC*, ii. 260, cites Petrarch's observation in *Epistulae seniles*, xvii. 3, that Boccaccio places the tale of Griselda at the end of the *Decameron* 'where, according to the principles of rhetoric, the most effective part of the composition belongs'.

[63] Cicero, *De inventione*, ed. and trans. by H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), i. 52. This, and medieval renditions of it, are discussed by Rosemarie P. McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), pp. 16–20.

[64] Siegfried Wenzel, 'Chaucer and the Language of Contemporary Preaching', *Studies in Philology*, 73 (1976), 138–61 (pp. 156–60), citing a probably fourteenth-century sermon from a fifteenth-century Cambridge manuscript.

[65] Horace writes that dramatists should be wary of introducing a *deus ex machina* unless a 'knot [*nodus*] has occurred' in the play which genuinely warrants such deliverance (*Ars poetica*, ll. 191–

unravelling or 'un-knotting' (the meaning of *denouement*) of plot: that is, the last part—but not necessarily the climax—of a play or novel. There is in fact quite a distinction between this neoclassical conception of a 'denouement' and the medieval and Chaucerian preference for apprehending plot climax as a knot or a knitting-up.[66]

What is particularly striking about the climactic knot of the Miller's Tale is that in a context fraught with attempted human 'purveiance', awe of flood, and mysteries of destiny, it catapults the audience into a position analogous to that of all-seeing providence in Boethius. In the *Consolation*, Philosophy argues that the phenomenon of an all-seeing and eternal foreknowledge (providence or *purveiance*) is compatible with the freedom of human will and with the apparently chaotic occurrences of daily life.[67] The way Philosophy proposes to protect *both* the claim that humans are free to intervene in events (they can therefore exercise moral choice) *and* the claim that there is providential foreknowledge of these freely chosen actions is to distinguish the two types of activity as occurring inside and outside time respectively. Providence comprehends, from outside, all events and the whole of time in an instant, as if from a fantastic height: in effect no 'time' attaches to the events from this perspective. However, what humans can see of providence is temporal and piecemeal. They see certain events strung through time which, for providence, belong within a unified design holistically understood. What humans call 'destiny' is really the spread-out succession of events in time. Philosophy tells her pupil that

purveaunce disponith alle thinges; but, certes, destyne is the disposicioun and ordenance clyvynge to moevable thinges, by the whiche disposicion the purveaunce *knytteth alle thingis* in hir ordres: for purveaunce enbraceth alle thinges to-hepe, althoghe that thei ben diverse and although thei ben infinit. But destyne, certes, departeth and ordeyneth alle thinges singulerly and devyded in moevynges in places, in formes, in tymes, as thus: lat the unfoldynge of temporal ordenaunce, assembled and oonyd in the lokynge of the devyne thought, be cleped purveaunce, and thilke same assemblynge and oonynge, devyded and unfolden by tymes, lat that ben called destyne. (*Boece*, IV, pr. 6. 63–78, emphasis added; *Cons.*, IV, pr. 6. 32–42)

That Philosophy should use an image of 'knitting all things' in her attempt to clarify providence's encompassing role in this distinction attests an interesting continuity between the Boethian *telos* of providence and Chaucer's way of talking about narrative conclusion.[68]

In Philosophy's next discourse we hear that so-called 'coincidence', too,

92, in *Horace: 'Satires', 'Epistles' and 'Ars Poetica'*, trans. by H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1926), pp. 466–67.

[66] Cooke overlooks the different literary figurations of the 'knot' when commenting on an eighteenth-century writer, Caylus, whose claim that fabliaux should have 'un nœud' seems contaminated by the Horatian idea of the dramaturgical knot (*Comic Climax*, p. 115).

[67] For a useful extended analysis see Marenbon, *Boethius*, pp. 117–45; and for an incisive summary, see Jill Mann, 'Chance and Destiny in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, ed. by Boitani and Mann, pp. 93–111.

[68] The Latin verb is *nectit* ('fastens together/connects'). Jean de Meun's OF translation (which Chaucer consulted extensively) uses the verb *lace*—'la pourveance lace chascunes chosez en leurs ordrez'—and Chaucer's ensuing use of 'enbraceth' responds to de Meun's *embrace* in the next sentence; text in V. L. Dedeck-Héry, 'Boethius's *De consolatione* by Jean de Meun', *Mediaeval Studies*, 14 (1952), 165–275.

is consistent with providence. True, one person's actions can intersect with another person's actions to produce a seemingly fortuitous result that neither person would have intended. Someone can hide treasure in the ground and another can plough the ground and unexpectedly find it—this is what we call 'coincidence', or Boethius calls *casus*, 'chance' (or occasionally *fortuitum*). Chance, in Boethius's definition, results simply from the meeting and confluence of causes. In Chaucer's translation this Chance is called 'fortuit hap',[69] or 'aventure of fortune', and it arises from 'causes encontrynge and flowynge togidere to hemself, and nat by the entencioun of the doere' (*Boece*, v, pr. 1. 80–84; *Cons.*, v, pr. 1. 47–50). In sum, *casus* or chance/coincidence or 'hap' is defined as a confluence of causes, unintended by individuals concerned; but it remains nevertheless within the ordering power of providence which is the 'welle' of all such confluence (*Boece*, v, pr. 1. 92–97; *Cons.*, v, pr. 1. 55–58).

The relationship that all this envisages between a temporal perspective which watches strands of intention and activity developing sequentially (and sometimes interacting) through time and a 'providential' perspective which beholds simultaneously the strands and their interaction and the causes and outcomes of their interaction is strikingly analogous to the relationship between a reader's temporal perception of the strands of plot and theme as they evolve during a sequential reading of the Miller's Tale and the moment of a reader's simultaneous appreciation of how all those strands interact when Nicholas screams for water. During the tale we become aware of several human schemes and intentions getting unexpectedly entangled; they are 'causes encontrynge and flowynge togidere to hemself, and nat by the entencioun of the doere'. But the moment when the whole 'fortuitous' convergence of actions and reactions—past and present interlinked—is grasped by us in the twinkling of an eye is the moment when we can see not so much with 'human' perspective as with a comprehensive divine intelligence. So far as the microcosm of the tale is concerned, we approach the perspective of instantaneous knowledge which (as Chaucer puts it in *Boece*, v, m. 2. 11–13) 'seeth in o strok of thought alle thinges that ben, or weren, or schollen comen'; or (in the Loeb translation of the *Consolation*), sees 'in one swift mental stab' (*Cons.*, v, m. 2. 12).[70]

The notion of comprehending all in one stroke (Latin *ictus*) of the mind that is formulated here in the second metre of the fifth book of the *Consolation* is underlined, as Marenbon has noted, by its recurrence in Book v, prose 6, to articulate Philosophy's concluding resolution to the problem of divine prescience of contingent events.[71] The divine perception focuses all future events in the eternal immutable present of its own knowledge and embraces all twists and turns of human choice *uno ictu*, 'at one stroke' (*Cons.*, v, pr. 6. 154–55). Chaucer follows suit and retains the verbal echo in his translation: the 'devyne sighte'

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[69] Burnley notes that *hap* is the preferred word in Chaucer and Gower to designate the notion of what would usually be considered random chance (*Guide to Chaucer's Language*, p. 153).

[70] The Maker of the universe, 'viewing all things from his height, | No mass of earth obstructs, | No night with black clouds thwarts. | What is, what has been, and what is to come, | In one swift mental stab he sees [Uno mentis cernit in ictu]' (*Cons.*, v, m. 2. 7–12). Green's translation weakens the force of *ictu*: 'He sees at once, in a single glance, all things' (p. 104).

[71] Marenbon, *Boethius*, p. 151.

gathers all futures into its presence, and 'enbraseth at o strook' all 'mutaciouns' (*Boece*, v, pr. 6. 266–73).[72]

Of course, what the *strook* or 'mental stab' of our total vision affords us near the end of the Miller's Tale is more strictly the writer's-eye view of the whole plot: but this too, according to the *Consolation*, is a quasi-providential, godlike view. For Boethius, it is the *craftsman* who offers the best analogy for instantaneous providence, on the basis that the craftsman's mind encompasses instantaneously the whole of the made object along with its execution that must take place through time (*Cons.*, IV, pr. 6. 44–51).

Critics have speculated that Chaucer was not afraid to recognize himself as a 'maker' in this ambitious sense. Kolve comments that the building of the amphitheatre within the fiction of the Knight's Tale parallels Chaucer's 'own enterprise in the creation of the poem'. Kolve even speculates more sweepingly that within the privileged context of writing, Chaucer 'knew himself to be, like Jupiter, a "First Mover" from which everything derives'.[73] Both poems allow us to savour that positioning. The Knight's Tale does so by crowning the verbal creation and decoration of the tournament lists ordained by Theseus, with expressions reminiscent of Creation's end in Genesis: 'Now been thise lystes maad'—and when al was done, 'hym liked wonder weel' (I. 2089, 2092). The Miller's Tale does so in two ways: initially, by encouraging us to enjoy Nicholas's role as a creative planner who mimics divine 'purveiance'; and eventually, through our god's-eye view of the plot at the end.

However, and here lies the paradox, what that superior view makes us realize—as Nature makes us realize it in the *Roman de la Rose*—is the *fallibility* of human strategic planning. The climax shows the human schemer hilariously caught out. A Higher Intelligence, namely that of the writer, has arranged for a 'flood' to interfere that clever human scheming within the fiction was counting on not happening. We can say of Nicholas what Jill Mann has said of Pandarus in *Troilus and Criseyde*. He acts like a 'kind of mini-Providence'—but one whose role betrays 'the limitations of human control' because his 'grand design is merely a feeble fragment of a vaster pattern, woven by mightier forces than he'.[74] Indeed Nicholas, ending in the torment of first-degree burns, has been described by Mark Miller (p. 60) as indicating how 'the clever man who thought he could become a little prime mover in the world' finds his rationality humiliated. So, disturbing the self-flattering position of godlike comprehension that the reader, too, inhabits at the climax of the Miller's Tale is a tell-tale implication that genuine providence outdoes human planning by light years. Perhaps in this sense the Miller's Tale rather precisely matches the Knight's Tale. There, Theseus emulates the role of Creator, planning a forum for one of the feuding knights to 'win' Emelye, and constructing the microcosm of the tournament arena in which this will be staged: but he is frustrated by larger forces which can make a mockery of his projections.

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[72] Jean de Meun translates: 'il [. . .] vient au devant et embrace a un coup toutez tes mutacions' (Dedeck-Héry, p. 275).

[73] *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, p. 135, following earlier critics such as Dale Underwood, 'The First of the *Canterbury Tales*', *English Literary History*, 26 (1959), 455–69 (p. 466).

[74] Mann, 'Chance and Destiny', p. 105.

Yet this would be an over-pessimistic note on which to end our discussion. The emphasis should be positive, recognizing the major, generative possibilities that Chaucer found in fabliau tales to fashion structures according to the 'Boethian' model, where sequential perception of plot elements could be gathered up in a single 'strok of thought'.

I would not be the first to speculate that Boethius's philosophy of providence inhered sometimes in Chaucer's organization of narrative and in the reader's grasp of it. Robert apRoberts and Jill Mann have subtly applied this proposition to particular episodes within *Troilus and Criseyde*. ApRoberts focuses on the events leading to Criseyde's departure from Troy and finds that the reader is given a godlike view transcending that of all participants, and substantiating the Boethian concept of a divine foreknowledge which does not cause events. Mann focuses on the narrative 'coincidence' whereby Criseyde twice sees Troilus ride by her house, and infers from this an exploration of chance and destiny.[75] However, what is claimed in the present argument is that the fabliau tales open themselves much more fundamentally to this way of thinking because of their characteristic way of manœuvring towards a startling momentary overview of the entire plot. *Troilus and Criseyde* may seem to provide just such a concluding cosmic vantage-point, as Troilus ascends to the eighth sphere and meditates on love: but what this enables is a philosophical *reinterpretation*—something quite distinct, I believe, from the 'assemblynge and oonynge [unifying]' of narrative patterns achieved in fabliau resolutions.

Was this a guiding principle in Chaucer's fabliaux? As we saw earlier, there is critical precedent for specifically denying a 'Boethian' resonance in the Miller's Tale (which is the strongest witness from my point of view). The tale has been deemed un-Boethian in that it represents a disordered, irrational, amoral world leading to a meaningless and 'unjust' outcome. Yet, whether the outcome is 'unjust' or not, and whether the plot configuration is 'amoral' or even 'immoral', is not relevant to the philosophical dimension pursued in the present argument. The present argument is that Chaucer *structures* fabliau plot around a Boethian concept of the distinction between time-bound comprehension and quasi-providential comprehension. Bloomfield buttresses his 'un-Boethian' interpretation by asserting that 'Fortune is not the servant of providence at all' in the tale (p. 210). On the contrary, this and other fabliau tales are aligned with Chaucer's other fiction precisely in their continuing concern with the transcendence of providence over fortune. The crucial caveat is that Chaucer's writings do not relentlessly configure the *demonstrable benignity* of providence. They highlight, rather, 'oure ignorance' of divinity's 'prudent purveiance' (Man of Law's Tale, II. 482–83). But it takes a certain flash of omniscience to grasp this in the imagination, and that is what the Miller's Tale supplies.

Accordingly, the Miller's Tale should not be regarded as 'addressing no truth beyond itself', 'untouched' by any idea larger than the necessity of instinct (Kolve, pp. 160, 185). Both in its topic of flood-forecasting and in its climax, the tale incorporates the preoccupation of Chaucer and his age with interactions be-

[75] Robert P. apRoberts, 'The Boethian God and the Audience of the *Troilus*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 69 (1970), 425–36; Mann, 'Chance and Destiny', pp. 93–111.

tween human initiative and the phenomenon of inscrutable providence.[76] That is the conundrum which the tale's 'knitting-up' makes us confront. In varying degrees the same is true in all Chaucer's fabliaux. He seems to orchestrate the simple underlying 'jape' so as to develop structures that conclude in moments of splendid realization for the audience, packed with resonance. Other sorts of tale in the Canterbury collection, having presented trials and temptations, may climax in moments of release, safety, resignation, or assertion of justice: only the fabliaux cultivate the 'realization' of which I speak.

While no other fabliau tale focuses its previously distributed elements of plot and theme into a climax as intensely as the Miller's, each of the others does lead up to a moment which positions the reader to comprehend the whole design in a single 'strok of thought' (or failing that, in two such strokes combined). In the Reeve's Tale the moment when Symkyn responds to the information that the daughter on whom his yeoman dynasty's hopes are pinned has been deflowered by a nobody from some remote village called Strother; in the Shipman's Tale the moment when the merchant's wife proposes to pay her monetary 'debt' to her husband on a sexual instalment plan in bed; in the Merchant's Tale, the drama of May's retort to January from her complicated position in a tree; in the Summoner's, primarily the moment of the 'gift' of the fart: in each case, what readers treasure is the convergence of multiple developing plot-strands, and of a gamut of allusive ideas incorporated into those strands, upon the focal incident which we now, with a rush of pleasure and a sharp intuition of what the maker has planned, grasp as the knitting-up which contains all within itself, as within an omniscient present.

Before concluding, the question that naturally suggests itself is this: was there no other prompt for Chaucer that might, for example, connect the climax of this type of tale with structural procedures previously associated with comic narrative, or comic drama?

Some theories of comedy had been passed down from antiquity, and there were medieval imitations of antique comedy. Cooke staunchly maintains that theories of classical comedy as inherited in the Middle Ages and exemplified in extant plays or in discussions of comedy are singularly unhelpful for an understanding of fabliau.[77] His conclusion seems to me to be borne out by two types of intrepid attempt to reconnect Chaucer's fabliaux with antique comedy. One imports Aristotelian formulations concerning the sources of laughter in order to develop 'a vocabulary for Chaucerian comedy'. It has to be said that this succeeds only in giving a puzzling sense of the sheer distance between Aristotelian categories and fabliau material.[78] The other is a self-cancelling attempt to reinstate medievalized antique dramatic comedy as a key to what sets

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[76] Many Chaucerians hold that Chaucer was attracted to empiricist thinking, in the context of late medieval nominalism's suspicion of analogical constructions, and preference for interpreting the world as 'contingent', attributing cause and effect to human action: see Utz, 'Philosophy'; Rhodes, *Poetry Does Theology*; Peck, 'Chaucer and the Nominalist Questions'; Rodney Delasanta, 'Chaucer and the Problem of the Universal', *Mediaevalia*, 9 (1986), 143–63; and William H. Watts and Richard J. Utz, 'Nominalist Perspectives on Chaucer's Poetry: A Bibliographical Essay', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n.s. 20 (1993), 147–73.

[77] *Comic Climax*, pp. 19–20.

[78] Ruggiers, 'A Vocabulary for Chaucerian Comedy', pp. 41–77.

certain Chaucerian fabliaux apart (it is alleged) from Old French predecessors. The Miller's and Shipman's Tales in particular are alleged to derive their structure and ethos from New Comedy, as exemplified in the comedies of twelfth-century scholars in France, and as prescribed in rhetorical commentary. Here again the evidence is thin: in fact it is admitted to be so. The only medieval comedy ever mentioned by Chaucer, the *Pamphilus*, is found 'not particularly relevant' to the claim for a comedic influence on any of Chaucer's fabliaux.[79] And if Chaucer was familiar with medieval rhetorical traditions discussing comedy, this was 'in a superficial and sporadic way'.[80]

The real key to Chaucer's fascination with this type of fabliau design seems to be the Boethian description of *purveiance*. Of course, this is a controversial proposition. In terms of narrative action and ethos, it is true that fabliau in general 'is magnificently disdainful of ultimate causes or, indeed, of any causes other than the most obviously proximate' (Theiner, p. 126). Accordingly, much Chaucer scholarship shows a kind of gritty determination that his fabliaux must be kept clear, almost as a point of honour, of weighty significance. Kolve sums up the fabliau ambience as one in which no one—fictional characters, author, implied reader—'apprehends the action "under the aspect of eternity"' (p. 160).

Kolve's special concern is to disengage the Miller's Tale from moral significance. He will only concede some *prudential* signification. 'The deepest answers returned in this tale are not cosmic but prudential: 'stonde he moste unto his owene harm' (i. 3830)'.[81] The present argument has been that the Miller's Tale patently, but Chaucer's fabliaux generally—and they are not to be dissevered from the Miller's Tale in this respect—are indeed 'prudential', but in a more far-reaching sense than Kolve implies. They lead their readers, hilariously, towards the philosophical form of prudence that apprehends pasts, presents, and futures, and is thereby able to understand differences between myopic perspective and telescopic perspective—the myopic perspective of participants in the plots of Chaucerian comedy, and the telescopic perspective that encompasses those plots in one stroke of thought and thereby renders them devastating and thought-provoking.

In proposing that Nicholas and Absolon's *nyce cas* links their tale and other comic tales to Chaucer's philosophical interest in how occurrences configure providence, I mean in part to account for the power developed in these tales, which is in excess of most attempts to account for it. A. C. Spearing has maintained that if Chaucer is a 'philosophical' poet, whose *Troilus and Criseyde* is a 'philosophical' poem, we would nevertheless be wrong 'to extract a philosophy' from that poem, because poetry's means are distinct from those of philosophy.[82] While that is surely correct, it is a different matter to contemplate how a philosophical schema enabled Chaucer to achieve plot designs that came to such

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[79] Pearcy, 'Genre of Chaucer's Fabliau-Tales', p. 372. Bishop, 'Influence of Plautus and Latin Elegiac Comedy', does her best with so-called 'family resemblances', but admits that finding evidence of (for example) continuity of stock characters requires one to 'dig beneath the surface' (pp. 295, 307).

[80] Pearcy, 'Genre of Chaucer's Fabliau-Tales', p. 372.

[81] Ibid., pp. 215–16.

[82] 'Narrative Closure: The End of *Troilus and Criseyde*', in A. C. Spearing, *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 107–33 (p. 133).

densely wrought ends, giving readers the rewarding illusion of confronting entire creations as if from a vantage-point of supreme comprehension.

Philosophy as an academic pursuit is belittled in one of the fabliaux, when Symkyn the miller in the Reeve's Tale scoffs at the philosophical 'sleighte' of the clerks who have turned up at his mill (1. 4049–54). Symkyn later jests insufferably that their academic learning will make it easy for them to transform the parameters of his cramped lodgings when they are obliged to sleep there (1. 4122–26). However, 'philosophy' eventually has the last laugh even though the power of one of the clerks to alter the spatial configuration of the room depends on mental resources no more esoteric than the spontaneous relocation of the baby's cradle. Genuine 'philosophical' thought seems untouched by Symkyn's vulgar caricature of intellectual pursuit on one hand, and the application of simple spatial logistics on the other.[83] Moreover, it would be my argument that what is truly 'philosophical' about the Reeve's Tale is again the creativity with which so much of the tale's descriptive and narrative subtlety is knit up into one superb moment, when Symkyn responds to Aleyn's misplaced revelations with an outburst against the 'disparagement' of his daughter.

Chaucer's fabliaux, in short, stand informed by a Boethian structure. It is a structure that enables him to arrange for readers a moment of epiphany, holding the rest of the tale in one glance. It answered to—and continues to articulate—humans' enthusiasm for trying to understand their situation in a supposedly providential universe.

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[83] Pearcy writes interestingly about this aspect of the tale in 'Genre of Chaucer's Fabliau-Tales', pp. 352–53.