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'Editing Chaucer'

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British Studies Honors (ID H382H)

Fall 2012

Over the centuries many authors have attempted to re-write or adapt the work of Geoffrey Chaucer, including John Dryden, Alexander Pope, and William Wordsworth. This trend has continued into the 21st century, as Chaucer has been reaffirmed as an English literary icon. Some of these adaptations are faithful renditions, while others are wildly disloyal. The present work seeks to serve as a literary comparison between a traditional rendition of Chaucer's, "The Canterbury Tales" and Peter Ackroyd's "modern retelling," with a specific focus on the General Prologue.

The more traditional text in use here was edited by F. N. Robinson. Robinson's version, though containing a few amendments and explanatory notes, is closely based on a collection of original manuscripts of "The Canterbury Tales". In his preface, Robinson notes that he has "meant to supply the reader, either in the notes or in the glossary, with all the necessary help for the understanding of the text" (Robinson xii). Other than these small differences, Robinson's text serves faithfully as an authentic stand-in for Chaucer's original.

Ackroyd's retelling states in his prefacing note on the text that he believed his "task was essentially to facilitate the experience of the poem—to remove the obstacles to the understanding and enjoyment of the tales, and by various means to intimate or express the true nature of the original" (Ackroyd xxii). This retelling was completed in 2009 and offers many stark contrasts to both Robinson's and Coghill's versions.

Perhaps an acceptable intermediate interpretation can be found in the work of Neville Coghill, whose translation was first published in 1951. The term intermediate here refers to Coghill's authentic verse translation which is nevertheless accessible for a 21st century reader. The Oxford Guide to Chaucer called this version "the best-known and most successful" current retelling of Chaucer (Andrew 556).

The General Prologue alone offers dozens of examples of omission, addition, adaptation, presumption and indeed liberties taken by Ackroyd in his "retelling". Granted, archaic wordings and spellings, such as "bifill" (Line 19 in Robinson), "corage" (in Line 22) and "everichon" (in Line 31), are all but eliminated in Ackroyd's work. He duly removes all that may be potentially unintelligible to an unfamiliar reader. However, Ackroyd goes beyond explanation in the way he exploits Chaucer's narrator and shreds his iconic English writing style.

Conceivably, the shorter version of a text is the more comprehensible one to a reader. However, there are instances where Chaucer says deftly, in a single, brilliant phrase, that which takes Ackroyd several belabored sentences to say. When introducing the Monk, Robinson reports Chaucer to have said "a monk out of his cloystre. But thilke text heeld he nat worth and oystre" (Robinson 19). Coghill translates this to mean that "a monk out of his cloister. That was a text he held not worth an oyster" (Coghill 8). Ackroyd chimes in with a series of ungainly rhetorical questions, exploring themes of clerical corruption of the day. The Squire's "lady grace", as Chaucer termed her (Robinson 18), is a "certain lady of his acquaintance" (Ackroyd 5), according to Ackroyd, who he then dwells on for several sentences, where Chaucer passes over the mysterious lady and moves on to his next subject.

Chaucer maintains a flowing rhyme scheme throughout, as opposed to Ackroyd's blunt, choppy style. "With lokkes cruller as they were leyd in presse. / Of twenty yeer of age he was, I guess" writes Chaucer of the Squire (Robinson 18). By contrast, in typical style, Ackroyd writes, "He wore a short gown, with wide sleeves, as suited his rank. He rode well and easily with the grace of a natural horseman. He was always singing, or playing the lute" (Ackroyd 5). Germaine Greer, book

reviewer for Financial Times magazine wrote on the difference between Chaucer's and Ackroyd's tone:

"Ackroyd jettisons Chaucer's artifice, his delicate coiling and braiding of sense and syntax, and pelts his helpless reader with clattering simple sentences in single file. The charm of Chaucer, the surprises, the myriad gradations of tone, the slyness, the sudden bursts of sweetness, all are sacrificed for a juddering narrative thrust." (Greer)

Further, Ackroyd sacrifices much of Chaucer's compelling metaphor and imagery. The iconic first lines in Robinson's version are richly constructed, and read thusly:

"Whan that Aprill with his shourse soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendered is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breath
Inspired hath in every holt and heath
The tender croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in his Ram his halve course yronne" (Robinson 17)

Ackroyd's prose version is vastly different, as Zephirus is never mentioned and Chaucer's "inspired breath" becomes a plain "west wind" (Ackroyd 1). William Sweet, from the Oxonian Review, has this to say on Ackroyd's handling of Chaucer's flowing rhyme:

"Admittedly, it is a difficult task to fit Chaucer's economical verse into modern prose, but Ackroyd's attempts to improve on Chaucer's language reach too far. Chaucer's pun on "queynt" is famous, but Ackroyd too frequently reduces Chaucer's thesaurus of innuendo to a four-letter-worded monotony. His added puns ("She ripped a bear apart with her 'bear' hands") are clumsily un-Chaucerian." (Sweet)

Thus, Ackroyd's prose does little justice to Chaucer's original intent.

Most notably, the principal difference between a faithful rendition of Chaucer and this modern retelling is Ackroyd's heavy-handed treatment of Chaucer's narrator. Ackroyd's narrator is a different person than Chaucer's. This new narrator takes on a high-minded, tutoring role. There are several occasions when Ackroyd inserts his own details, seemingly to elucidate medieval culture to an ignorant modern reader. These details are nowhere in the original text, and indeed are sidetracks to the flow of the narrative. Ackroyd finishes up his explanation of the Squire's mode of behavior with a pointed "these are good manners" (Ackroyd 5), in case the reader was in any doubt; he then

asks the reader, through the Prioress, “What does it matter if we do not speak the exact language of the French?” (Ackroyd 6), as a subtle hint on medieval xenophobia.

In the Knight’s introduction, Ackroyd takes it upon himself to explain definitions of chivalry. A medieval reader would be fully aware of what being a knight meant, so Chaucer felt no need to further explain. “Courtesie” (Robinson 15) becomes “valor” (Ackroyd 4) and “curtesie” (Robinson 17) becomes “dignity” (Ackroyd 4). Presumably, Ackroyd is pulling from his own research and impressions of knighthood, and, in trying to elucidate Chaucerian language, neglects to leave any portion to the reader’s imagination.

Through these clarifying details, Ackroyd seems just as anxious to display his knowledge of medieval culture as he is to translate Chaucer. In explaining the Doctor of Physic, Ackroyd offers a lengthy astronomy lesson, followed by an explanation on the medieval understanding of the four humors (Ackroyd 14). The Spectator magazine, in a review on Ackroyd’s book, explores this very theme by wondering, “In his preface, Ackroyd writes that Chaucer’s salacious energy can be maintained just by transcribing his words accurately. So why the ‘adaptation’, all that underlining, those constant ‘Geddits?’ ? This drawn-out version sounds like a new curate trying out profanities to ingratiate himself with the local low-life” (Rogers). Perhaps Ackroyd feels the need to thoroughly explain Chaucer’s meaning to his “lay reader.”

Ackroyd takes on the role of narrator and commentator all at once. In line 284 of the Robinson version Chaucer says, in describing the Merchant, “Sooth to seyn, I noot how men hym calle” (Robinson 20). Coghill’s work renders this as “To tell the truth I do not know his name” (Coghill 10) and Ackroyd follows up with “Funnily enough, I did not discover his name. I never bothered to ask him” (Ackroyd 10). This mocking phrase seems to be a sly jab at the narrator’s lack of knowledge about the names of the characters. He does this again several times, both with the Friar’s name and the name of the Shipman’s boat: “Oh, one thing I forgot—this worthy friar was called Hubert” (Ackroyd 10) and “His boat, by the way, was called the Magdelene” (Ackroyd 14). Where Chaucer seems to find this unnecessary information, Ackroyd is quick to point out his omissions.

Chaucer's narrator speaks for himself. His character traits are evident from his tone of voice and style of speaking. He even fits neatly, as if there could be nothing more natural than his recitation of the story. Chaucer's narrator seems almost naïve, eager to praise everyone and show them in their best light. Conversely, Ackroyd's narrator injects himself into the story when and where he can, often criticizing and making snide, even lewd comments. Kirkus Reviews criticizes this habit thusly: "The author's other peculiar choice is to occasionally interject first-person comments by the narrator where none exist in the original...There seems to be no reason for these arbitrary elaborations, which muffle the impact of those rare times in the original when Chaucer directly addresses the reader" (Kirkus Reviews). Ackroyd thus sacrifices a faithful rendition to the assumed ignorance of a modern "lay" audience.

The Financial Times review again adds, "Ackroyd then lards his text with clunking interpolations, mostly by way of developing the character of the narrator more than Chaucer chose to" (Greer). In Ackroyd's own words, "Translation can be a form of liberation, releasing an older work into the contemporary world and thereby infusing it with new life...I thought it best to approach my own task in the manner of Chaucer himself, whose translation...was faithful to the spirit if not always to the letter of the great original" (Ackroyd xxii). The Spectator Review is bewildered: "The mystery of this book is why an accomplished writer like Peter Ackroyd should have attempted such an approach in the first place" (Rogers). From a modern reader's perspective, a translation in tune with Chaucer's original, such as the work of F.N. Robinson or Neville Coghill, is infinitely preferable to that of Ackroyd's "modern retelling".

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